This Bites!

by Xomniac

Summary

Sea Kings, sea-sickness, sunburns, a 95% genocidal Navy and more than a million and one other assorted ways to die. It's official: Being inserted into an anime sucks ass... Buuut I guess it could be worse. I mean, look on the bright side: At least I'm sailing with the future king of the pirates.
Cross And Soundbite! A Painful Partnership Begins!

-Xomniac- Alright, let's see... can you think of any better words than 'smirk'?

-Xomniac- It's the general sentiment I want, but I've used it way too much...

-CV12Hornet- 'Smug grin'? 'Vulpine grin'? 'Shit-eating grin'?  

-Xomniac- No, no... gugh!  

-*Headdesk* Screw it, we've been at this too long. Want to brainstorm something else?

-CV12Hornet- Well... I could use someone to bounce ideas off of for this Dragon Ball Z fic I'm thinking of...

-Xomniac- Pass, DBZ's not my thing :S

-CV12Hornet- Ow, my childhood :P

-Xomniac- Heh... hey, you read 'Walk on the Moon'?

-CV12Hornet- Can't say that I have.

-CV12Hornet- In fact, it's the first time I've heard about it.

-Xomniac- It's a Naruto SI. Really brilliant, truly a sight to behold.

-CV12Hornet- Oh boy... I've not had good experiences with SI in general. And Naruto? Double whammy there.

-CV12Hornet- I mean, there's only one SI I can think of that I can honestly say I liked.

-CV12Hornet- And I suspect half the reason is nostalgia.

-Xomniac- Heh, I suppose that's fair enough. They are a little overdone... but still, you gotta understand why they do it, right?

-Xomniac- I mean, can you imagine? Going to those worlds, standing side by side with those people... scary as hell, to be sure... but what the hell are we accomplishing in front of our computer screens?

-CV12Hornet- Well, we're entertaining people. That's something, right?

-CV12Hornet- Besides, inserting into a fictional universe sounds like a great way to die a horrible death.

-Xomniac- Yeees, 'entertaining'... with fics that barely get a second glance... and yeah, it'd be bad, if you were shit outta luck

-Xomniac- I mean, so long as you wound up in the right verse, your odds can be pretty good.
-Xomniac- Example: One Piece. Get on the Straw Hats and you'd be set for life! In for the wildest ride of your life, but still, pretty damn set.

-CV12Hornet- Really? Of all the verses, you picked One Piece?

-CV12Hornet- I think I'll stick to the verses where the baseline for durability *isn't* superhuman.

-Xomniac- *shrug* Your opinion. Me, though... man, to get to sail on the Blue seas... I'd give anything for that. Least I'd get outta writing papers! XD

* Really Outstanding Biotch has joined the conversation!* 

-Bitchingly Ridiculous Outstanding Biotch- Your wish is my command!

-CV12Hornet- I was gonna make a joke about nice men in white jackets, but I can't argue with that logic.

-Xomniac- Wait wh

-Xomniac- Awww shit

-CV12Hornet- Wait, who's this jackass?

-Xomniac- Read the initials.

-CV12Hornet- Oh shit. Oh shit fuck fucking fuckdonkeys.

-Bitchingly Ridiculous Outstanding Biotch- Oh calm down. I need one of you to stay behind and keep writing, and he's the one who offered.

-CV12Hornet-...

-CV12Hornet- Yay?

-CV12Hornet- I'm... just gonna go talk to Admiral Tigerclaw for you, okay?

-Xomniac- Don't.

-Xomniac- You.

-Xomniac- Fucking.

*CV12Hornet has left the conversation!* 

-Xomniac-...

-Bitchingly Ridiculous Outstanding Biotch- Honor among thieves, huh?

-Xomniac- *Headdesk* Tell me about it.

-Xomniac- So... no chance of getting out of this?

-Bitchingly Ridiculous Outstanding Biotch- None!
-Xomniac- Time to prepare?
-Bitchingly Ridiculous Outstanding Biotch- Absolutely zero!

-Xomniac-... can I grab a change of clothes?
-Bitchingly Ridiculous Outstanding Biotch- What you wear is what you get!
-Xomniac- Grrrrrrrrrrght!

-Xomniac- You're a real bastard, you know that?
-Bitchingly Ridiculous Outstanding Biotch- But at least my tone is pleasant!
-Xomniac- *Sigh...* Can I at least send an email to my parents? They're gonna flip...
-Bitchingly Ridiculous Outstanding Biotch- Now this is where I'm a little bit more pleasant!
-Xomniac- ?

-Bitchingly Ridiculous Outstanding Biotch- Time dilation! So long as you manage to survive to the end, you'll come back here to this exact point in spacetime with the option of going back to visit whenever you want!
-Xomniac- ...that's... oddly generous...

-Bitchingly Ridiculous Outstanding Biotch- Weeeell, considering how your chances of survival are slim to none, not rea~lly! Honestly? I just want to make sure you don't angst over your 'precious lost family' like a little bitch! Do you have any idea how annoying that gets!?
-Xomniac- *HEADDESK!*

-Xomniac-... fuck it. Headfirst into hell.
-Xomniac- So, how are we doiFUCKSHIT!
-Bitchingly Ridiculous Outstanding Biotch- Mind the drop!

*Xomniac has left the conversation!*

*CV12Hornet has joined the conversation!*

-CV12Hornet- Hello? Xomniac? You still here, buddy?
-CV12Hornet- Crap.

-CV12Hornet- Okay, step number one: don't panic!

-Bitchingly Ridiculous Outstanding Biotch- Sorry, nobody here but us chickens!

-Bitchingly Ridiculous Outstanding Biotch- Now... seeing how you're apparently missing a co-writer...

-Bitchingly Ridiculous Outstanding Biotch- Care for some... divine intervention? 8D
Warm... soft... scratchy... I sighed as I shifted around a little bit, trying to get comfortable. I just needed a little more sleep, then I'd be ready to go for the day. Just... a little... more...

SPLASH!

COLD! WET! UP MY NOSE!

"GAH! SON OF A FUCKING BITCH!" I howled, springing upright and staggering away from the waves. I panted and doubled over as my head spun from getting up so fast, idly wiping sand from my-

Wait.

I froze as I started to process the facts.

Waves and sand. Neither of those were in my dorm room.

I slowly worked the crust out of my eyes and blinked as I tried to take the scenery in.

A nice, wide stretch of beach, bordering on an endless expanse of beautiful pure blue ocean.

The first thing that ran through my head was 'This isn't my room.'

The second was almost 'How did I get here?', but that train was violently derailed by the rapid recollection of the latest memories I could recall.

The third thing that ran through my mind was a mishmash that could be loosely labeled as 'SHITFUCKFUCKDEADFUCKWHATDOIDOWHATDOIDO!?'

I promptly slammed the brakes on that line of thought, slapping my hands to my forehead and inhaling deeply through my nose. "Don't panic don't panic don't panic, fear is the mindkiller, don't panic, think!" I ground out, if only for the sake of hearing my own voice.

After a few seconds of standing there and borderline hyperventilating, I managed to calm myself down and actually think about facts.

Fact one: ROBs are fucking fuckers who deserve to have railroad spikes shoved through every inch of their being.

Fact two: I was calming down a bit if I could manage to swear like a sailor.

Fact three: I was in One Piece. I had to be. Or at least, I had to believe that I was. If I was in some other, less relatively friendly world, or heavens forbid one I knew nothing about...

I shivered violently. No, no, don't think about that, keep going.

Fact three: Chances were high that I was in One Piece. This meant that my proposed course of action was still the best: find my way onto the Straw Hat Pirates. Sure, logically, I could live the life of a
civilian, especially if I was somewhere in the East Blue... but that plan has thorns in and of itself. For one, my skillset is firmly zip-to-none on account of me becoming a literal college drop-out, and for another the Blue Seas are teeming with blood-thirsty pirates and Marines with potential to be worse than the pirates!

Was living the life of a Straw Hat terrifying? Yes. Was it dangerous, life-threatening even? Oh hell yeah! Did it guarantee that I'd have some of the potentially strongest people in the world watching my ass so long as I managed to become their friend? You better damn well believe it.

I nodded firmly, my decision reinforced: It looked like it would be a Straw Hat Pirate's life for me.

Moving on, I focused on fact four: I had abso-fucking-lutely no clue where the hell I was.

Well, at least that was one problem I could fix!

I spun on my heel... and stared at the tropical jungle laid out before me.

My guts ran ice cold. 'Ohgod nonono, not Little Garden, for fuck's sakes NOT LITTLE FUCKING DEAD END GARDEN!'

However, a hasty glance at the horizon and a moment of listening was enough to soothe my panicked mind. No mountainous skeletons, no roars of prehistoric monstrosities, no pillars of smoke from periodically erupting active volcanoes. I was safe... for a certain value of the word.

I winced as I tugged at the collar of my jacket. I was also pretty damn hot, and not in the good way!

'Wait...' I blinked as a thought struck me. 'Jacket?'

I made a hasty review of my apparel: My favorite large, black and pocket-lined shell jacket/hoodie, check. A t-shirt with urban camo on the chest, check. My black cargo slacks, check. Beaten leather loafers, check. Aaand finally the dark gray pair of industrial-grade heavy-duty bluetooth headphones I'd shelled out almost five-hundred dollars for that were hanging around my neck. Check, for whatever that was worth.

I let out a weary sigh as I zipped my jacket open. As one could expect from a tropical climate such as this, it was rather humid. Thankfully, being a headstrong Floridian with an aversion to showing more skin than I needed to appeared to be paying off for once, as I was used to the heat.

I winced as my head throbbed painfully, promptly whipping my jacket off and tying it's arms around my waist.

Alright, relatively used to it. Sue me, it must have been a hundred degrees out here!

Anyways, without any other options available to me - especially after a final glance back at the ocean confirmed that there wasn't a ship in sight - I started to march forwards into the depths of the muggy green hell.

To be honest, I normally liked taking nice and long walks. However, there were two primary factors missing that made this little venture hell: first, I didn't have any music to listen to, so I was bored straight the hell out of my mind. And second, there wasn't any beaten path to speak of, so I was forcing my way through a dense barrier of wild foliage that was doing everything naturally possible to get in my way.

After what felt like forever of displaying my vast vocabulary to mother nature in a... shall we say, creative manner due to catching my jacket on branches, tripping over roots and ducking under
vines and what not, I caught sight of and dashed into a clearing of grass. I almost immediately doubled over as I tried to catch my breath and started to think once anew.

First and foremost, as far as I could tell, the island I was on was most likely deserted, devoid of all forms of sapient life apart from me. Which was... unfortunate. I had absolutely zero idea where I was. I didn't know which Blue I was in, even which hemisphere I was located on! As it stood, I had about a one in three chance of being somewhere I could run into the Straw Hats. East Blue or Paradise? Good! Any other Blue or, god forbid, the New World? Things would become a lot more... interesting was one word. Complicated was more appropriate though.

Second-

My stomach let out a vicious rumble, prompting me to blush in embarrassment. Right, food. Food is definitely my second priority. Which was complicated on account of how I had no experience with nature, but I'd have to at least try. Hopefully I could get my hands on some kind of-

My train of thought ground to a sudden and vicious halt. "I've been marching through this jungle for ages..." I mused aloud. "Why the hell haven't I heard so much as a single animal!?

"SQUAWK!"

"YEARGH!" I yelped, leaping almost a foot off the ground in shock. The he-!? I snapped my head around and scanned the treeline in shock. Where the hell did those birds come from!?

"OOH OOH AAH AAH!"

I spun around as another cacophony of noise erupted behind me. Now monkeys!? How the hell did they stay hidden!?

"GRRRR!"

I went stock still as a pair of all-too-feral snarls simultaneously erupted from the foliage of my sides. They sounded like my cat... if she were on steroids.

"RRRUFF! RRRUFF!"

And that sounded like my dog straight ahead of me, only a lot bigger and a lot less willing to play. Forcing myself to keep my breathing slow and my panic out of my thought process, I started to inch myself backwards. Just a bit more, just a little bit closer to the foliage...

"GROOOOAAR!"

I am not ashamed to say that I shrieked like a little bitch and fell flat on my face as I scrambled away from the jungle. I stand by the firm belief that it was a very appropriate reaction to having a lion roar ten inches behind me.

I gasped and panted heavily as I lay on the grass, my mind reeling with fear. I'd never had a panic attack before, but something told me that I was right on the edge of getting one.

However, before I could go over that edge, a new noise managed to catch my attention.

Laughter. A lot of laughter, from a variety of different people, men and women and young and old alike, like a badly edited together laugh track.

I realized two things from that laugh: First, the fact that a lot of the laughs were
unique *really* helped cement the idea that I was in One Piece. After all, where *else* would someone have a laugh like "Chyokokoko"?

The second thing, I realized with a furious snarl, was that *someone* was mocking me. Hastily scrambling to my feet, I charged towards the foliage in the direction the laugher was originating from.

However, just before I hit the plant life, the laughter changed direction, suddenly coming from *behind* me. I glanced at the opposite side of the clearing for a second, but I ignored it and pressed ahead. Fooling me once was bad enough, and I wasn't willing to go two for two.

And with that, I delved into the jungle, shoving my way through the plants and scouring the jungle for whoever the hell was fucking with my head. After a few minutes, I managed to catch sight of another clearing. I charged out of the jungle...

And promptly slid to a halt, staring in disbelief. "What the hell...?"

The clearing I was in was only half as big as the last one I'd been in, but it had a table of rock in the center of it.

Stationed upon the rock... was a snail, or at least something that looked *very* similar to a snail. Its shell was a little larger than a baseball, and its body was about the same size to match. Its skin was a darkish gray, and its shell was emblazoned with a black and white checkerboard pattern.

The snail also had eyes on the tips of its stalks and a mouth full of teeth in the middle of its body.

It was *also* whipping its head back and forth and cackling uproariously, tears of laughter pouring from its eyes.

I blinked as I processed this turn of events. That... was a transponder snail. It was a bit weird to see a snail that big in real life, but the form was unmistakable. I withheld a sigh as I felt a weight lift off my heart. No doubt about it: I was *one hundred percent* in One Piece!

Then I felt a dark rage flood me. Whoever was mocking me was on the other end of that snail!

"HEY!" I yelled angrily, putting all my frustration into my voice. "ARE YOU ALL THROUGH ENJOYING THE SHOW OR WHAT!?"

The snail jumped in shock, blinking at me in surprise... before leaping back and *screaming* in terror.

And not just any scream either, a high-pitched *woman*s scream.

I jumped at the noise, my breath catching in my throat. "What the fuck!?” I blurted.

Then I froze as I noticed something. It's shell... it was unblemished! There wasn't a speaker in the side of its shell!

My mind flew as I to connect what I was seeing. This was a transponder snail, no doubt about it, but without an *actual* transponder attached to it, then it was a *wild* snail. And as far as I knew, it was impossible for people to communicate through wild transponder snails...

My mind froze as I ran the last sentence through my head. Impossible... like, say... a person of rubber?

I smiled uneasily as I made the connection. "You've got to be kidding me..." I muttered in disbelief.
It was at that point that I started as I realized that the sound I'd been listening to had changed. Instead of screaming, the snail had curled in on itself and was crying its head off, sobs coming out of it in a loop.

I flinched as I took in the reaction. *Now* I remembered a rather pertinent fact: snails this small were known as *baby* transponder snails. Sure, I liked kids as much as I liked writing essays, but this...

A stab of guilt ran through me as a particularly miserable sob rang out from the snail. I hastily fell to my knees and inched my way towards the snail, my hands raised placatingly. "Hey hey hey, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" I cooed softly. "I didn't mean to yell, I was just frustrated, please don't cry!"

The snail's cries subsided as it slowly looked up at me, tears still streaming down from its eyes. "S-sowwy?" It croaked in a voice that wouldn't be out of place coming from a toddler.

I hesitated for a moment before smiling shakily and slowly nodding. "Yeah, s-sowwy. By the way..." I slowly made my expression eager as I leaned forwards, looking at the snail with interest. "That's a really neat trick you've got there. Did you get them after eating a fruit with swirls that tasted yucky?"

The snail blinked at me before nodding its head slowly. "C-coconut." It said, the word pasted together with syllables from several other voices. It then scrunched its face up and stuck its tongue out in disgust. "Blech!" It spat in the voice of an old man.

I chuckled lightly at the face it made. "Heh, yeah. I hear that those kinds of fruits usually taste like ass." I slowly looked him over in curiosity. "So... unless I miss my guess, you can make all kinds of sounds and noises, right?"

Almost instantly, the snail smiled and nodded. It opened its mouth...

"GAH!"

And I promptly jumped in shock as the forest around me *erupted* with noise. Screeches, roars, snarls, buzzing, everything one would expect from a jungle. Like someone had just up and flipped a switch!

However, as swiftly as the noise started, it came to an abrupt end and was replaced with the laugh track from before as the snail returned to laughing itself senseless.

I panted as I processed the change in demeanor before slowly starting to snicker. "That... that was pretty funny..." I admitted with a shaky smile before closing my eyes in thought. "Alright... seeing how Apoo can apparently use his powers to make music, I'm guessing he's got something akin to the Music-Music Fruit. So..." I looked at the snail contemplatively. "I guess that means you ate the... what, Noise-Noise Fruit?"

The snail stopped laughing and considered my words for a second before smiling and bobbing its head from side to side. "Noise-Noise Fruit, Noise-Noise Fruit!" It crowed in my voice.

My eye twitched slightly. "Alright, that's a little creepy..." I admitted before hastily plastering a smile on my face. "But cool!" I slowly extended my hand towards the snail. "It's really nice to meet you. My name is Cross. Jeremiah Cross."

The snail blinked and sniffed at my hand contemplatively before smiling. I smiled in turn as well.

It then opened its mouth...

*CHOMP!*
"YEARGH!"

And brought its teeth down on my index finger, causing me to howl in pain as I shot to my feet and whipped my hand back and forth. "GETOFFGETOFFGETOFF!" I shouted, trying to get the gastropod to release my digit.

Finally, the toothy snail had the decency to let go of my finger, flying off me and bouncing off the stone it'd been resting on before righting itself. It's eyes spun madly for a second... until it refocused itself and grinned madly, cackling once anew.

I huffed and shook my finger frantically as I tried to work out the pain. That had hurt like a bitch! I cast a vehement glare at the snickering snail as I started to wipe the mucus and saliva off on my pants. "I take back all the nice things I said about you! You're nothing more than a little—!

I froze as my hand bumped into my pocket. Specifically, against something **inside** my pocket.

Slowly, ponderously, I dug my hand into my pocket and withdrew what was within in disbelief.

"I can't freaking believe it..." I breathed.

In the palm of my hand was the last thing I'd ever expected to see: My iPhone 6S, completely intact and, with any luck, fully functional.

Suddenly, the device pinged and its screen lit up, displaying a text message.

-B.R.O.B.- Ain't I generous? Check out the upgrades!

It didn't take long to understand what my 'beneficiary' was talking about: a quick once-over of the screen showed that there were infinity signs next to both the battery and wifi symbols, guaranteeing that my phone would be working for a nice long while.

"Huh..." A grin slowly played across my face. "Well... thanks, I guess!" I slowly tilted my grin to make it a bit more hopeful. "I don't suppose you could get me something to eat too, while you're at it?"

Another text popped up.

-B.R.O.B.- Greedy greedy! Buuut sure, why not? Wouldn't do for you to starve, would it?

Without warning, something fell and landed on my head. I hastily snapped my hand out and caught whatever it was before it could fall to the ground. I smiled immediately once I caught sight of the golden arches emblazoned on the paper.

Most people would bitch and moan about McDonalds being unhealthy shit. Then again, those same people hadn't spent who-knows-how-long tramping through a jungle.

"Thanks a lot!" I crowed, opening the bag and digging into the food within, enjoying it... right up until I actually **noticed** one of the tastes in my mouth and froze in horror.

I swallowed heavily, slowly turning a horrified look towards my phone. "Did... I just eat a biscuit?"

-B.R.O.B.- I guess this'll teach you to watch what you put in your mouth, huh?

The blood promptly drained from my face. "Oh you son of a-!"

As if on cue, my stomach let out a far too familiar gurgle of distress.
A roll of toilet paper promptly bounced off my skull.

-B.R.O.B.- Run run run, as fast as you can! Better hurry, lest you soil your pants, little man!

"FUCK!" I howled, scooping up the toilet paper and darting off in search of a suitable hole.

After about a half hour of what felt like liquid napalm tearing through my intestinal tract, I finally managed to stumble my way back into the clearing. "I need to stop laughing at those Haribo Gummy Bear reviews. I know their pain far too well..." I glanced down at my palm with a scowl. "And as for you-!"

I froze and stared at my empty hand in shock. Where the hell had I-!? I promptly slapped a hand to my forehead. Right, dropped it when I grabbed the toilet paper. I started scanning the ground. It should still be somewhere on the...

I caught sight of the bottom of my iPhone... just as it disappeared into the maw of the transponder snail, followed by it swallowing heavily and grinning at me with a shit-eating smile.

...grass.

My eye twitched furiously. "Ah... I... you..." I mumbled out. My mouth promptly twisted into a dark scowl as I started to march towards it, my fingers twitching murderously. "You... little... shit..."

The snail's smile dropped in favor of a fearful expression as it started to inch away from me, glancing left and right in search of an escape route.

Then it suddenly froze, blinking as it's gaze became slightly unfocused, staring at something I couldn't see.

I hesitated slightly as I stared at it. "Uh... hey, are you alright? I'm pissed, I don't really want to hurt you, I'm just a little-!"

"!" The snail suddenly blared, it's head snapping up in wide-eyed shock.

"GAH!" I leapt back from the snail in shock at the sound the snail had made. It was loud and frantic and-!

I blinked as I caught up with my train of thought. Wasn't that sound-?

"Was... was that the Metal Gear Solid alert sound?" I asked in disbelief.

The snail blinked at me in confusion before smiling exuberantly, opening its mouth...

"IT'S THE EYE OF THE TIGER, IT'S THE THRILL OF THE FIGHT, RISIN' UP TO THE CHALLENGE, OF OUR RIVAL!"

And belting out lyrics from a very familiar sound.

I gaped at the snail in disbelief. "You've... got to be kidding me..." Suddenly, as I shifted my shoulders, I became intensely aware of the weight around my necks. Thinking fast, I snapped my headphones up and over my ears and clicked them on, praying that my 'patron' - a word I was very hesitant to use - had upgraded these as well.

Almost instantly, I was forced to wince as my ears came under an auditory assault.

"WHAT DOES THE FOX SAY? I'M SEXY AND I KNOW IT! WE ARE, WE ARE, WE ARE
"Grk!" I hastily whipped the headphones back down around my neck in an effort to save my eardrums. I gave the snail a bemused look as it continued to smile and bob it's head to some unheard beat. "Oh yeah, you definitely have access to my world's internet..."

The snail finally looked up and smiled at me with a snarky smirk. "Thank you!" He crowed.

I blinked at in disbelief for a second before freezing as a thought struck me. I looked over the snail contemplatively. This snail, his power wasn't much, but... well, on the surface, rubber and silence and springs didn't seem like a lot either, right? And quite honestly, I liked being able to swim, so... Well, nothing for it, right?

"Hey... you can understand me, right?" I started slowly.

The snail looked up at me before nodding slowly.

"Right... well..." I looked away uncomfortably. Man, why did this have to be so hard. "Look, let me ask you something... do you like being here on this island? I mean..." I gestured at the silent forest around us. "The reason there aren't any animals nearby... I'm guessing it's because you scare them away with that noise you make, right?"

The snail started and stared at me in shock before nodding again, only this time its expression was saddened.

"If you could... what would you say about leaving this island? With me, I mean."

The snail snapped its head up in shock.

"See..." I scratched the back of my head with an uneasy smile. "I've... got a bit of a plan. You know what pirates are, right?"

The snail nodded with a grimace.

"Well, I know about a pirate crew that's not like other pirates. They're strong and amazing and... well, I want to join them! I want to join their crew and follow them out to sea and... well, hopefully have a lot of fun doing it. But..." I hung my head with a sigh. "The fact is, a pirate's life is a dangerous one, and I'm just a plain old normal human being. A nobody, really. I don't have the edge needed to survive on the high seas."

I then slowly raised my eyes and looked at the snail hopefully. "So... I was wondering... if you'd be willing to come with me and be that edge?"

The gastropod tilted its head in confusion. "Say whaaa?" It imitated.

I shrugged helplessly. "Well, the fact is, all Devil Fruits have the potential to be incredibly powerful, none are inherently weak. All that's needed to make them work is their user's ingenuity. But, well..." I gestured at the snail with a grimace. "As you already know, you're a bit... physically challenged."

"DON'T CHU DIS ME, BOY!" The snail barked irately.

"Hey hey, that's neither your fault, nor is it anything to be ashamed of, it's just a fact!" I waved my hands defensively. "But, well... look, I'm trying to make you a proposition, alright? Come with me: You be the power, the brawn, and I'll be your arms and legs, the person to tell you how to direct your powers, how to use them to their fullest! The brains!" I spread my arms wide.
"Together, we'd be able to join those pirates and sail the Blue Seas! We'd see sights we never imagined, do things that have never been done! Basically... we'd have an adventure. And let's be honest..."

I cast a baleful look at the jungle. "It's not like you or I would ever have one here, now would we?" I looked back down at the snail. "So... what do you say, kid? Are you in or are you out?"

The snail bit it's lip as it glanced back and forth contemplatively, gears grinding in its head. Finally, it smiled from eyestalk to eyestalk and extended an eye. "Put 'er there, partner!" It drawled.

I smiled eagerly. "Well alright then!" I extended my hand-

CHOMP!

"GRK!"

And winced in pain when the snail chomped down onto my fingers, grinding its teeth into my digits.

I half-grimaced, half-smirked at the snail as I brought it up to my eye-level. "I think I just got a good name for you..." I ground out. "How do you feel about being called Soundbite?"

The snail - Soundbite - glanced up at me before smirking and redoubling the strength of his bite.

"YEOWCH!" I cried out, flinging my hand up.

Thankfully, Soundbite let go. Unfortunately he let go!

"Oh crap crap crap!" I scanned the air. "Hey, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, are you alri-!?"

CHOMP!

I went stiff as a sharp pressure clamped down on a very... delicate part of my body.

At that instant, I became acutely aware of just how tired I was. Seeing no point in staying upright, I slumped forwards and fell face first into the grass.

"It's official..." I groaned miserably. "This bites..."

Soundbite snickered malevolently from where he was gnawing on my ass in agreement.
"Pst! Wakey wakey!"

"Mmmph... no..."

"Time to wake up!"

"Mmmeergh... mmm... pancakes..."

"HEY, LISTEN!"

"GAH!" I jolted upright with a yelp, wincing as I whipped my headphones from my ears. "Son of a- Soundbite!" I snarled at the Transponder Snail that was cackling on my shoulder. A quick glance at the sky reaffirmed my anger. "It's not even noon yet you little shit! What'd you wake me up for?"

The snail's response was to continue laughing for almost a minute as it did its level best to memorize my terrified expression.

I heaved a weary sigh as I waited the snail out.

This had been my life for the previous two weeks. I'd done my best to explore the island in hopes of finding some sign of civilization, but I'd come up with absolutely jack squat. There had been the occasional run-in with the odd predatory sample of fauna here and there, but Soundbite had more than shown his worth by running them off with the barrage of sound every living thing on the island had come to fear.

I'd also taken the time to get to know Soundbite, in order to discover both who he was and what his powers were like. There wasn't much to say about the snail, to be honest: he was a notorious prankster through and through, who'd give or do anything to get a good laugh. And he'd been laughing a lot since I'd provided him with a prime target of opportunity: His faithful steed, i.e. me. He also loved using his mouth. Whenever he wasn't laughing, he was chomping down, either on some leaves or, worse, me.

As for Soundbite's Noise-Noise powers, they were... well, in a word, impressive. I suppose one way to describe the snail would be as the world's most talented ventriloquist. So long as Soundbite heard a noise, any noise, he could replicate it perfectly, with his own choice in volume and explicit control over the direction it came from. Backwards, forwards, above, below, to the sides, so long as it was in Soundbite's range he could make anything sound like it was anywhere.

And as for his range, well... apparently, the Noise-Noise Fruit was a two-way street: it didn't just enhance the noise coming out of him, it enhanced what went in as well. It was hard to get an exact measurement, but from the tests we'd run on the island's beach, I'd approximate that as it stood, Soundbite could hear everything within a quarter mile of him. And so long as Soundbite could hear someone or something, he could produce noise around that someone or thing as well.

While this range might appear to be ridiculous, it made sense: from what I could remember from the SBS question corners, transponder snails communicated with one another via telepathic communication in the form of radio-waves. Unless I missed my guess, Soundbite's natural abilities as a transponder snail must have enhanced the Noise-Noise Fruit's abilities, or vice-versa. Probably something like how Eneru's powers made his 'mantra' ungodly powerful. Simply put, it was a stroke of luck that Soundbite had eaten the fruit, and not a human with less powerful sensory abilities.
And of course, that wasn't even mentioning the nigh endless array of audio that Soundbite had access to thanks to eating my iPhone and getting access to the internet... however the hell that worked. Then again: One Piece, the world where a cook could set his leg on fire for extra POW via spinning a lot and the 'power of love'.

In the end though, while it didn't seem like the most offensively useful ability to have, I could definitely see the potential.

'Now if only its owner were actually a bit more mature...' I groused silently as I watched Soundbite calm down from cackling to just flat out snickering. "Finished?" I demanded.

Soundbite shot me the shit-eating grin I'd grown all-too-familiar with. "Never!" he crowed.

I sighed and knocked my head back against the trunk of the tree I'd been sleeping in. "You'd better have a good reason for waking me, or I swear-!"

"C'mooooon, guys! Hurry up already!"

I froze, my entire body locking up. That voice... that was... could that actually be-!? I hastily slid my headphones on in order to reaffirm what I was hearing.

"Wait for us, Luffy! Geeze... impatient moron..."

I slowly turned my head to stare at Soundbite in sheer disbelief. I managed to catch the tail end of an exasperated smile he was wearing before he switched to a wide smirk.

"Well what did you expect? He is Luffy after all."

I sat up eagerly as Soundbite scowled, clenching his teeth together as though he were biting into something.

"The mosshead's got a point. He wouldn't be our captain if he didn't charge headfirst into the unknown, shouting his head off."

My exuberant smile was an exact opposite to the panicked expression Soundbite suddenly bore.

"Uh... guys? I-I don't know about you, but I think my 'I-don't-want-to-go-into-that-wild-jungle' disease might be acting up!"

I slid my headphones back around my neck and hastily scrambled to my feet, crouching on my branch with an eager smile. I could barely believe it! They were here, they were here! "Sounds like we've got company, Soundbite!" I grinned wholeheartedly. "You feel ready to entertain some guests?"

Soundbite mirrored my expression perfectly as he displayed his full set of teeth. "LLLLLET'S GET READY TO RUUUUUMBLLLLEEE!" He belted out, thumping out a rapid, energetic tune to go with it.

I slowly straightened up, preparing myself for a venture through the treetops...

"Hey, that's a pretty neat trick!"

Until a grinning, Straw Hat-clad head popped out from the leaves above me, causing me and Soundbite to shriek in terror as I jolted back in shock.
I had all of one second to realize what a bad idea that was before I started pinwheeling my arms, fighting to maintain my precarious balance on the branch under Luffy's bemused stare.

I put up a valiant effort, but eventually I felt my center of gravity slip just a little too low.

"Ah shitbiscuits..." I groaned.

"TIMBER!" Soundbite cried, snapping back into his shell as I plummeted out of the tree...

CRASH! "OUCH!"

And slammed into the ground hard enough to knock the breath out of my lungs.

I was vaguely aware of someone leaping down next to me and leaning over me. "H-, -ou -ight?"

"Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do..." I slurred out.

"YANkee doodle had a FARM..." Soundbite concurred in a medley of dizzy voices.

"Shishishishi!" The blur above me solidified into a familiar face as Luffy snickered. "You two are funny!"

"Thank you, thank you, I'll be here all week." I groaned as I slowly shifted myself into a sitting position, wincing as my body ached from the impact.

"You've been warned, people!" Soundbite crowed.

"HAHAHA!" Luffy outright guffawed, clutching his stomach helplessly. "I take it back, you two are really funny!"

His laughter was infectious enough that it drew a pained smile from me. "Thanks again... ah, I should introduce myself, shouldn't I?" I extended a hand to him. "Cross. Jeremiah Cross. Island bum and ex-rookie-world-traveler." I nodded my head towards my shoulder. "And this is my pet-!

CHOMP!

I winced as Soundbite tried to take a chunk out of my ear and hastily corrected myself. "I-I-I mean my partner, Soundbite." I shot a glare at the smirking gastropod.

Luffy chuckled as he took my hand and helped haul me to my feet. "Nice to meet you, Cross! You too, Soundbite! I'm Monkey D. Luffy! Pleased to meetcha!"

I smiled eagerly. This was my chance! "Your crew, huh?" I asked him.

"Shishishishi! Yup, you bet!" Luffy nodded. "We're pirates, you see!"

"Yohoho and a bottle of rum?" Soundbite tilted his head to the side.

"Yup!" The rubber-man nodded.
I hastily morphed my expression into an uncertain one. "Pirates, huh? Just to be clear, are we talking about the 'rape, loot, pillage' kind of pirates, or the 'adventures no matter what anyone tells us' kind?"

Luffy grimaced and stuck his tongue out. "The second one! The first kind are all stupid fakers!"

I doubled over and sighed in relief. "Phew... thank god. Sorry, no offense to you or your crew, it's just that you can never be too careful, you know?"

"STRANGER DANGER! STRANGER DAN-ger...?" Soundbite concurred with a grimace before suddenly cutting off mid-sentence and peering over Luffy's shoulder curiously.

"Heh, no problem! Luffy shrugged with a chuckle. "I've dealt with those kind of jerks before!"

I nodded and chuckled along with him. "Yeah, yeah..." As I chuckled, my mind flew along.

This was it. Now was the time. Luffy had already shown interest in me, Cross the intriguing island bum and my talking snail Soundbite. If I was going to ask him if I could join his crew, now was the time.

I took a deep breath to steady myself-

"Hey, mind if I ask you something?"

Before freezing in surprise. I stared at him for a second before shrugging. "Sure?"

Soundbite worked his jaw and imitated eating popcorn, sound and all, as he watched both us and the foliage behind Luffy.

Luffy grinned from ear to ear. "Will you join my crew?"

I blinked as I processed his question. Then...

"ARE YOU SERIOUS!?!" I demanded, my shocked exclamation mirrored closely by the quartet of familiar faces who erupted from the jungle, all of us screaming in shock.

"Now that's what I call ENTERTAINMENT!" Soundbite cheered, laughing himself silly on my shoulder.

I promptly shook myself out of my shock in favor of glaring at the snail. "You knew they were coming!" I accused.

"GUI~LTY~!" The transponder snail sang.

I snarled furiously as I raised a hand and held it close to his head, inches from strangling him.

Luffy, meanwhile, was not so lucky. "What the hell are you thinking, you moron, just asking every random hick and hillbilly you meet to join our damn crew?!" Nami snarled as she tried to throttle her laughing captain, shaking him back and forth by his neck.

I briefly wondered whether or not I should have been insulted at being called a hick. Then I noticed just how tightly she was gripping Luffy's neck and dismissed that train of thought with a self-conscious gulp.

"But Nami!" Luffy protested as he chortled, completely unaffected by the fact that his crewmate was trying to suffocate him. "He's not a random hick! His name's Cross and he's really funny and cool and his snail can do all kinds of tricks!"
"WHAT THE HELL DOES THAT HAVE TO DO WITH ANYTHING!??"

Sanji cocked his eyebrow as he took a drag from his cigarette, watching the spectacle neutrally. "So this is pretty much how he does things around here?"

Zoro groaned and kneaded the bridge of his nose. "He found me when I was tied up and starved for nearly a month and held my swords hostage to make me join. Does that answer your question?"

The cook grimaced. "Considering how he 'refused my refusal'? All too well."

While all this was transpiring, Usopp sighed wearily and clapped his hand on Cross's free shoulder. "Sorry about Luffy. He's got a good heart, but he's... eh..." He waved a hand in search of a valid word.

I tore my attention away from my shoulder-annoyance. "A moron?" I deadpanned.


"Eep!" Usopp flinched back in shock.

"Shishishishi!" Luffy bent his head backwards as he smiled at Soundbite. "See Nami? I told you that his snail is really cool!"

Nami snapped an acrid glare up at us, prompting me to flinch self-consciously. The woman had a hell of a gaze, that was for sure. I just really hoped that more of her ire was meant for Luffy than it was for me. "It's a good ventriloquist act, I'll give you that, but it's nothing to get worked up over."

I bristled at the accusation, pointing at Soundbite. "Hey, I do not have my finger up his ass!"

"I'm not your puppet!" The snail sang in agreement simultaneously with an affronted expression.

Nami's expression morphed into one of surprise. "Oooookay... that's new."

"But not impossible." Sanji said around his cigarette as he pointed at the snail. "That's a baby transponder snail, Luffy. He's got a friend somewhere on the island speaking through it."

Luffy's expression fell into one of disappointment. "Awww, really?"

I allowed myself to throw an eager smirk at Sanji. "Guess again, curly!" I gloated, holding my hand to my shoulder and allowing Soundbite to crawl onto my palm. I then held him out and twisted my hand around, displaying his shell. "Soundbite here is as free as the wind!"

The snail smirked and looked Nami over once before letting out a loud wolf-whistle.

I spat out a curse and promptly clapped my hand down on Soundbite's shell, forcing him back inside his exoskeleton he shook with laughter. "Okay, make that as free as an anarchist!" I corrected aggravatedly. I really hated it when he did stuff like this, damn it!

Sanji blinked as he slowly lowered his finger. "Alright... yeah, I got nothing."

Luffy's grin redoubled instantly. "I told you his snail was cool!"

"Oi, what am I, chopped liver?" I groused.

Zoro gave the snail a bored look before looking up at me with a flat, if calculating, look. "So how does he do it?"
I drew myself upright and took my hand off Soundbite's shell, allowing him to peek out. We locked gazes for a second before we shared a smirk. Time to shine!

"Why I'm so glad you asked!" I announced in a slightly extravagant tone of voice, intent on putting on the best show I could. "Allow me to explain in style! Soundbite?"

"Yes cap'n?" The snail asked eagerly as he looked up at me.

I snapped my fingers and pointed straight at Nami. "Hit it!"

Soundbite swung around on my hand and smirked at the orange-haired woman, who blinked back at him in curiosity.

I kept pointing at her as I smiled before starting to speak. "You see, the thing about Soundbite is that he's not an ordinary snail!"

The Straw Hats yelped in shock as my voice was drowned out by Nami's voice as it came from Soundbite's mouth.

"The heck-!?" The original sputtered.

Before they could recollect themselves, I'd swung my finger to point at Usopp. "Well, I mean, I know that he's a baby transponder snail, so he's not normal already, but he's even weirder than that!"

"Holy crap!" The long-nosed pirate breathed in shock.

I then turned my focus on Sanji. "See, Soundbite here, as a snail, eats a wide variety of plants and vegetation. But awhile back, he ate a very particular plant that put him above and beyond all other transponder snails, baby or otherwise! Care to guess?"

Sanji sucked in a puff from his cigarette as he watched me and my partner with interest. "A Devil Fruit."

"That's exactly right!" I responded in his voice before shifting Soundbite's gaze over to Zoro. "To be specific, he ate a Paramecia fruit, which I'm calling the Noise-Noise Fruit. Not only does it enhance Soundbite's range of hearing well above and beyond the norm..."

I breathed a mental sigh of relief as the swordsman grinned in response to the use of his voice, thankfully entertained.

Moving on, Luffy matched me and Soundbite's grins tooth for tooth as I pointed at him. "It lets him repeat anything he hears, any time, any where! He can use his powers in other cool ways too, like, say... putting my words in your voices! Pretty awesome, huh?"

Apparently sensing the finale, Luffy threw his arm over my shoulder and joined me as I laughed. "Shishishishi!" we chorused.

Almost instantly, half the crew deflated as exhaustion seemed to overcome them.

"Oh god there's two of them..." Nami groaned, tears streaming down her face.

"We're doomed..." Usopp concurred in the exact same position.

Zoro snorted as he looked us over with a slightly amused expression.

Sanji took in a deep drag from his cigarette as he contemplated my snail. "That was..."
"Impressive?" I shrugged with a grin as I put Soundbite back on my shoulder. "Tell me about it. And personally, that's what I consider a parlor trick. He's got a few other stunts up his shell that, in my opinion, can be put to pretty good use."

"GREEAAAHH!" Soundbite howled without warning. The noise originated directly behind Usopp, causing the poor guy to jump a full five feet in the air as he shrieked in terror.

I dropped my face into my hand with a groan as Soundbite laughed himself shitless. "When he isn't screwing around for the absolute hell of it..." I snarled out.

To Usopp's credit, he managed to bounce back with frightening fortitude, leaping to his feet and sticking his infuriated face into Soundbite's. "WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT FOR YOU STUPID SNAIL!?"

My eyes widened in panic as I caught sight of the snail's grin all but doubling in size. "Oh nonono wait don't-!

Too late. Before anyone could react, Soundbite seemed to split his head in half as he opened his maw...

CHOMP! "YEEEEAAAAAARGH!"

And bit down on Usopp's nose, hanging on for dear life as he was swung around and around by the pirate's pained flailing, his by-now-trademark cacophony of laughter echoing throughout the clearing.

I could feel, feel my eye twitching as I watched the spectacle. "As you can see, I didn't name him without reason." I explained in a deadpan tone of voice.

"You have our sympathy." Zoro, Sanji and Nami chorused with the exact same amount of emotion.

Luffy was too busy rolling on the floor laughing to say much of anything.

"GET! HIM! OOOOOFF!" Usopp howled, tugging at the gastropod furiously.

Ultimately, I took pity on the sniper by pursing my lips and blowing a sharp whistle. "Soundbite! Let him go, now!" I then raised my hand and barely even flinched as Soundbite's shell slapped into my palm, vibrating with laughter. "Thank you." I told him without so much as a shred of gratitude as I slapped him back onto my shoulder.

"You're WELCOME!" He sang gleefully.

Nami pursed her lips for a second as she looked me over before shooting a flat look at her captain. "Look, Luffy," she started slowly. "While I can appreciate Cross and Soundbite's talents, and while I'm sure that Cross is relatively decent..."

"Thank you!" I piped up.

"BITE ME!" Soundbite offered, smiling nonetheless.

"But the fact remains that... well... he hasn't even agreed to this!" Nami snapped. "Besides, he's a normal guy, Luffy! I'm sure he's got a normal life, normal dreams! There's no reason why he'd want to sail with us!"

"Besides the fact that I've been stranded here for the past two weeks, subsisting on whatever fruits
and whatnot that Soundbite could direct me to?" I asked with a grimace. That stuff had not been kind to me. I wanted my meat, damn-! ...holy hell I was turning into Luffy.

Nami rolled her eyes as she looked at me. "Well obviously we're going to give you a ride off the island, but-!"

A quick and meaningful glance at Soundbite prompted him to produce a loud buzzing noise that interrupted Nami.

"If I could try getting a word in edgewise?" I asked her politely.

Sanji looked like he was ready to pop a blood vessel, but Nami blinked at me in confusion before shrugging. "Ah... sure, go ahead."

"Thank you..." I nodded in gratitude before turning my attention to Luffy. "Now then... Mister Monkey D. Luffy... I've got a question for you."

Luffy blinked and tilted his head to the side curiously. "Yeah? What is it?"

"You said that you were an adventuring pirate, right? Out to sail the seas in search of the most fun and awesome escapades you can think of?"

That prompted Luffy to grin eagerly. "Yup! Totally!"

I nodded slowly in understanding. "Alright, alright... then... tell me..." I looked him dead in the eye. "What exactly drove you to fly the Jolly Roger? What's the endgame, the big picture? Simply put... I spread my arms wide and shrugged. "What's your dream?"

Luffy's expression became blank for a second before he raised a hand to clamp down on his hat as he grinned from ear to ear. "That's easy!"

"I'm gonna be king of the pirates!"

My plan was to smile and nod. To agree with his crazy but all-too-probable dream and just roll with it. To just... accept it.

That wasn't what happened.

Instead, the world just seemed to... stop. Those words... they resonated with me. Struck a chord, deep, deep down within, and made it sing. It was... clarity. It was obvious, it was simple, it was...

It was fact.

And just as quickly as it came, it went.

I hastily gave myself a mental shake before grinning wholeheartedly. "King of the pirates, huh? That means you'll be searching for the One Piece, right? In the Grand Line?"

Luffy's grin remained in place as he nodded eagerly. "Uh-huh! It's gonna be super dangerous! We'll probably die on the way!"

"DON'T SAY IT LIKE THAT, MORON!" Nami and Usopp roared as they slammed their fists over his skull, while Sanji and Zoro merely rolled their eyes.

I widened my grin as I ignored the antics. "Well then... let me tell you my dream," I took a calming breath as I hastily reviewed the relatively simple story I'd concocted in my head during my relatively
solitary confinement. "First and foremost, can you all keep a secret?"

The Straw Hats exchanged bemused glances before nodding their assent.

"Perfect. See, the thing is, my home? You won't ever find it on any written maps. 'Cause as far as the rest of the world knows?" I snickered lightly. "There aren't any countries on the Red Line!"

*That* drew looks of awe and disbelief from the pirates.

"Are you serious?" Nami breathed.

I nodded solemnly. "Indeed. A small country, more a city-state than anything, known as Florida, located on the part of the Red Line that borders the North Blue and the East Blue. Our ancestors founded it somewhere around... eh..." I waved my hand in a 'so-so' manner. "Four, five hundred years ago? I was never much of a history buff."

I shook my head. "Anyways, the reason my ancestors founded it was that they were sick of living under the oppressive thumbs of varying kingdoms and factions of the World Government, so little by little they gathered together before scaling the Red Line and founding a nation for themselves. They then made *certain* to keep Florida nice and secret, so that they would never have to live under the World Government's tyranny again! We've kept tabs on the rest of the world, of course, wouldn't do to become estranged from our roots, but the fact remains that you guys are some of the very few people in the word who can claim to know about our existence!"

"Wooow..." Luffy breathed in awe.

Zoro, however, was far less impressed. "And what does all this have to do with anything?" He asked in a bored tone of voice.

I raised my hands in surrender. "Well... the fact is, for all we've kept up on current events and whatnot... we don't *really* have a lot of first hand information. People rarely go down to the ocean. But..." My eyes took on a slightly wistful dream as I stared into the distance. "We do... have stories. Stories about wonderful islands far beyond the imagination, of sights more beautiful than anything ever seen before... a literal *ocean* of possibilities."

I chuckled lightly as I came back down to earth. "I've... never been satisfied with those stories, you know? I've... I've always wanted... *more.*" I snapped my fists up as I grinned, a true and honest smile. "My dream... is to *explore* the ocean I've heard so much about! I want to experience those wonders for myself! I want to see those beautiful sights! I want to visit those islands, see everything that they have to offer!"

The crew stared at me with slightly eager expressions, a new look of evaluation in their eyes as they took me in.

As my moxy slowly flowed out of my, I grinned sheepishly and scratched the back of my head. "In order to accomplish that goal, I left Florida and came down here, into the East Blue. I was sailing around on a passenger ship when a particularly nasty Sea King attacked. I fell overboard in the middle of all the chaos, wound up washing ashore and, well..." I clapped my hands together and spread them wide. "Here we are!"

"Anyways... how does this all matter, you might ask? Well..." I chuckled as I smiled happily at Luffy. "You say you're going to the Grand Line. You say you're going to be King of the Pirates. You say you're going to have the greatest adventure of our entire generation. And before all that... you asked me if I wanted to join your crew. Am I right?"
Luffy nodded eagerly in agreement, excitement radiating from his being.

I glanced at Soundbite with a smile, which he returned with a smirk, before I looked back at Luffy. "Well in that case, how the heck could I possibly say no?"

"We're in, BABY!" Soundbite whooped.

Luffy's reaction was instantaneous as he flung his arms into the air with a shout of joy. "WOOHOO! WE'VE GOT A NEW CREWMATE!" he hollered, swiftly entrapping me in a one-armed hug.

As if on cue, the rest of the crew let out tired groans.

"That's our captain, always reckless..." Nami groused, the heel of her palm that she was grinding into her forehead doing nothing to hide her grin.

"Yeah, but it wouldn't be Luffy any other way, would it?" Sanji chuckled melancholically as he puffed on his cigarette.

Usopp muttered something under his breath before pointing at Soundbite. "You're alright, Cross, but that snail of yours had better watch his back!"

Soundbite's smirk took on a predatory overtone as he met Usopp's gaze. "Bring it, biotch!"

Zoro rolled his eyes at his crew's antics with a scoff before jerking his thumb over his shoulder. "Alright, enough fun and games. It's getting late, might as well head back to the Merry. Fair warning, Cross, you're going to want to brace your stomach. The shit-cook's food-!"

SLAM!

Zoro blocked a kick from the blond cook with Wado Ichimonji's sheath.

"Watch your damn mouth, you crap-GRGH!" Sanji cut himself off as both he and Zoro suddenly doubled over, twitching in pain.

I blinked in surprise, though I suspected I knew what the problem was. "Are... they alright?"

Nami growled darkly under her breath as she glared at the pair. "Nothing important. Just a couple of morons forgetting that they were in a life and death struggle a week ago!" she snapped at them.

"Ouch." I winced. "My deepest of sympathies." I meant it, too. Arlong might have been half-way decently justified, but he was still a sadistic fuck, and Mihawk hadn't done Zoro any favors either.

"Psh!" Zoro scoffed as he righted himself, albeit with minor tremors racking his body. "What, this? This is nothing."

Nami stared at him with a decidedly unimpressed expression for a second before jabbing him straight in his chest. The swordsman's face immediately twisted in a grimace as he barely managed to suck in a grunt of pain.

The navigator scowled and rolled her eyes at the green-haired man's show of machismo before addressing me, adopting a pleasant facial expression with unnerving ease. "Anyways... I think it's high time we were introduced." She held her hand out. "I'm Nami, our - and now your, I suppose - crew's navigator."

I smiled politely as I shook her hand. "Cross, Jeremiah Cross. It's nice to meet you, Nami. I look
forward to sailing with you."

Nami nodded politely before scowling over her shoulder. "As for everyone else, Moron the First," she jabbed her thumb at Zoro, who flipped her off in response. "Is Roronoa Zoro, while Moron the Second," she indicated the blond cook, who flipped from snarling at Zoro to preening with hearts in his eyes, "Is Sanji. He's Usopp," she pointed at the long-nosed sniper, who didn't break his staring contest with Soundbite before waving her hand at Luffy. "And you've already met Monkey D. Luffy, our fearless-to-a-fault captain."

I smiled and raised a hand in greeting. "Pleased to meet you all, I hope we can all become good friends," I then proceeded to adopt a plaintive expression. "And please, for the love of god, don't blame me for whatever shit Soundbite pulls. He's my partner, not my pet. I only wish I had a more reliable degree of control over him."

"Honk!"

Usopp jolted in panic as a car horn seemed to blare directly behind his head before scowling at the seemingly ever-hysterical culprit perched on my shoulder.

"For the record, so long as it doesn't incapacitate, maim or kill him, he's fair game in terms of retribution." I deadpanned.

"Traitor!" Soundbite barked as he shot a glare at me.

"Bite me." I growled.

Through it all, Luffy all but broke down in hysterics. "You guys are hilarious!" he wheezed.

While the sniper and navigator turned on our captain under the watchful eyes of our cook and swordsman, I heaved a heavy internal sigh.

Well... looked like that was that.

I was officially, now and forever, a Straw Hat Pirate.

Now... I could only hope things would be smooth sailing from here.

-o-

I let out a rapturous moan as I savored the meat I was chewing on. Oh yeah, definitely smooth sailing.

"Th'nk- ulp- you!" I managed to get out as I chewed and swallowed, eagerly cutting into another slice of sausage. "This is legitimately, legitimately delicious! Thank you so much!"

"Mnhmm!" Soundbite murmured in agreement as he chowed down on a bowl of oats that had been provided to him.

Sanji chuckled in appreciation as he watched us gorge ourselves. "It's no problem. It is my job after all; I'd be a joke of a chef if I couldn't satisfy my diners. Though, fair warning-!"

THUNK!

Both Sanji and Luffy froze in surprise as I buried my knife in the table, an inch from the rubber-man's slowly creeping fingers. I slowly turned my head to stare at my captain, my face completely
devoid of emotion.

"Luffy." I stated frigidly. "I have been subsisting on roots, nuts, berries, fruits and 'shrooms for the past. Fourteen. Days. If you even so much as attempt to touch the first sizable amount of protein I've had in two weeks, I will set a global land-speed record for mutiny. In short, remove your hand or I will remove it for you."

Silence fell on the Merry's meager dining room as the rest of the crew stared at me in shock. Slowly, Luffy withdrew his limb, although, worryingly enough, his gaze never swayed from my plate.

Finally, Sanji took a contemplative tug from his cigarette. "Well. That was a first."

"The first time someone's reacted to his antics like that, or the first time he's actually listened?" I queried before putting the rest of my sausage in my mouth.

Sanji's smirk widened slightly. "Yes."

I jerked as a heavy hand fell on my shoulder, prompting me to look up at Zoro as he grinned at me. "You'll fit in just fine, kid."

I shot him a flat frown. "'or t'e 'ecord..." I swallowed the bite in my mouth. "I'm eighteen."

Zoro's grin turned into an uneven smirk. "Whatever you say, brat."

I stared at him for a second before sweeping my gaze over the rest of the crew. "This-this is going to be a thing, isn't it? I am never going to shake that, am I?"

Luffy, Usopp, Nami and - much to my exasperation - Soundbite's reactions were to smile at me knowingly.

I sighed and rolled my eyes as I jabbed my fork into my plate. "Perfect," I muttered good-humoredly, shoving a large serving of food into my mouth and swallowing it swiftly. "Just, freaking, perf-!"

I promptly froze as my mind caught up with my tastebuds. "Uh oh..."

Soundbite's smile expanded exponentially as he snapped his gaze to me. "Dun dun dun!"

Luffy blinked in confusion. "Huh? What's wrong?"

With an immense amount of trepidation, I turned my gaze down towards my plate. "Perfect," I muttered good-humoredly, shoving a large serving of food into my mouth and swallowing it swiftly. "Just, freaking, perf-!"

I promptly froze as my mind caught up with my tastebuds. "Uh oh..."

Luffy blinked in confusion. "Huh? What's wrong?"

"Is that a biscuit?" I asked miserably.

"Uh... yeah? Why, what does that matter?"

In response, my stomach roared like a small Sea King, causing my face to take on a no-doubt-unhealthy tone of gray. "That's why." I whimpered. I snapped my attention over to Nami. "Which way to the head?"

"Uh..." Nami blinked as she was caught flat-footed before hastily rallying her wits. "The deck below us. Go down the stairs, through the door and it's straight-!"

I didn't wait for her to finish, instead hastily shoving my way out from around the table and out through the kitchen's door. I vaulted over the railing, landed on the deck below and shouldered my
way through both doors before leaping on the porcelain god I was about to become *far* too intimate with.

And thus was my first half hour on the Going Merry spent in intestinal agony, haunted by Soundbite’s ever-present and ever-aggravating mirth.
"Come on, what was it? The flour, the milk, the—?"

"I don't know, alright?!" I snapped irritably, sending a caustic glare at Sanji. "I'm not lactose or gluten intolerant, I drink milk and eat bread without worry! And really, I think that biscuits taste delicious, but whenever they go down my throat, all that comes out is..." I shuddered in horror. "Yeah... anyways, it's just biscuits that's the issue, alright? Can't you just drop it already?"

Sanji blew out a cloud of smoke with an irritated huff as he returned my glare. "Not a chance. I'm this ship's cook, so I need to account for everyone's dietary needs. It's my job to make sure that that doesn't happen again!"

"It won't happen again so long as I don't eat biscuits!" I threw my hands up in exasperation. "Anyways, don't you have a dessert to work on for 'Nami-swan'?"

Sanji growled in aggravation as he debated with his priorities for a moment before turning back to his kitchen. "This isn't over, crap bum."

I rolled my eyes in response, shifting around in an effort to get comfortable on the sack of rice I was sitting on, refocusing on my book.

I'd been sailing on the Going Merry with the Straw Hat pirates for somewhere around a week now, and my life was... actually going smoother than that conversation implied. Sure, Sanji got on my case every now and then in order to get to the bottom of whatever it was that hadn't sat well with me, but other than that both he and his food were great. Zoro mainly watched me out of the corner of his eye and didn't bother me so long as I didn't bother him, Nami gave me a crash course in how to help with handling the ship, Usopp was eager to share any number of stories, real or otherwise, and Luffy... well, Luffy was Luffy, nothing more to say on that matter.

Soundbite seemed to be enjoying himself as well, if the genuine, as opposed to mocking, laughter he was constantly bellowing out was anything to go by. Of course, that wasn't to say that he'd mellowed out, by any stretch of the imagination. No, if anything he was well and truly reveling in his expanded array of available targets for his pranking. I'd already befallen retribution from half of the crew for Soundbite's very loud and very early wake up calls, though thankfully Usopp had kept his vengeance limited to the snail himself instead of me, albeit with limited results.

I'd had a bit of sea-sickness at first, but I'd gotten over it quickly on account of the fact that my grandfather lived on a boat and that I'd stayed on it with him every summer. All in all, it was a pretty nice experience.

"And get your shitty shoes off the food!"

Alright, 95% percent nice, but you take the good with the bad.

I shot another irritated glare at him, but complied nonetheless, shifting my feet off the sack I'd been propping them up on. I slipped my earphones up over my ears...

"GAH!" I yelped in pain, snapping them off in order to escape the barrage of heavy metal riffs that had blindsided me. I panted heavily in shock for a second before growling and rapping my fist on the shell that was hanging onto the side of a nearby barrel. "I said country, not punk metal!" I hissed irritably.
A small cacophony of giggles wafted out of Soundbite's shell in response. Thankfully, however, he chose to comply, allowing me to sag in relief as a calm strumming came out of my headset, rather than harsh screaming.

Satisfied, I slid my headphones back on, settled in, and resumed my reading.

I was currently perusing a respectably thick volume that contained a summary of the history of the Blue Seas. I'd borrowed it from Usopp, who'd apparently brought it onboard alongside everything he'd ever owned. I'll be honest: history wasn't usually my cup of tea, and sure, the contents were propaganda-rifficly skewed in favor of the World Government and Marines, almost sickeningly so, but it was *definitely* interesting. The sheer amount of influence that pirates had had on the Blues' society was... staggering, to say the least. Nations had literally risen and fallen on the whims of the stronger individuals who flew the Jolly Roger, and Paradise and the New World were described as though they were on a different world entirely.

I was midway into the history of the Marine presence in the West Blue...

"EEEHH!"

"SONNUVA—SOUNDBITE!" I howled, whipping my headphones off as the music was suddenly replaced with a loud buzzer. I snapped a furious glare at the snail. "What the hell was that—!... for?" I blinked as I noticed that the snail was missing. "The hell—?"

"Ahem."

I looked up in confusion and promptly withered under the caustic glare Nami was directing at me, Soundbite snickering in the palm of her hand.

"Ah... aheh..." I chuckled as I scratched the back of my head sheepishly. "Have you been... standing there long?"

"A full minute trying to get your attention," Nami deadpanned as she tossed Soundbite into my lap. "Be happy Soundbite was so happy to help, otherwise I'd have sicked Sanji on you."

I swallowed heavily as I eyed the cook who was, thankfully, too engrossed in his craft to notice our exchange. "Duly noted. It won't happen again."

Soundbite imitated a whipcrack noise with a snicker.

He would have done more, but I promptly crammed him back into his shell. "Yeah yeah, I get the idea..." I scowled at him before looking up at the navigator. "Anyways, what did you need?"

Nami frowned irritably, though thankfully her ire didn't appear directed at me. "Have you seen Zoro, Usopp, and Luffy? I can't find them anywhere and I need to talk to everyone."

My eyebrows promptly shot up in disbelief. "*You* can't find those three on a ship this small?" I asked in surprise.

"IRONIC!" Soundbite scoffed, shooting a cocky smirk at Nami.

I momentarily contented myself with the annoyed look on Nami's face before shivering as I was hit by a particularly malevolent wave of killing intent that came from the kitchen."I-I-I mean—! I'm sure there's a *completely* legitimate reason, of course!" I grinned nervously as I simpered and shrank before the navigator, sighing in relief as the aura receded.
Soundbite whistled out another whipcrack with a laugh.

I shot a glare down at the snail. "Care to speak up, escargot?"

Thankfully, the threat of Sanji's frying pan served as an effective deterrent against the baby transponder snail's sense of humor, prompting him to snap his mouth shut instantly with a terrified expression.

"Yeah, I didn't think so."

Meanwhile, Nami had heaved a sigh and was kneading her forehead in exasperation. "Believe me, I know the Merry is small, but the fact is that those three are... special... to say the least. They can sniff out the most ridiculous corners to stick themselves in..." She shook her head and threw her hands up in defeat. "You know what? Forget it. Just... tell them to come here and wait for me if you see them, alright?"

I almost instantly felt a pang of guilt for my attitude. After all, I'd seen first hand that Nami worked hard: she was constantly scouring the sky and ocean for signs of the weather, she consistently checked over maps and made certain of our heading, fought tooth and nail to keep Luffy from sinking the Merry—*that* was a hands on job, believe me...

"Ah, hang on!" I got to my feet hastily, scooping Soundbite onto my shoulder. "You don't need to look for them, I can get them here in a jiffy."

Sanji and Nami looked at me in surprise. "Seriously?" Nami asked, a skeptical tone in her voice. "How?"

I shrugged and walked over to the table. "Easy, really." I plucked Soundbite off my shoulder and put him on the tabletop with one hand and slid my earphones on with the other. I then tapped the snail on top of his shell. "Amp me."

Soundbite gave me a dark leer. "What's THE magic—?"

I rolled my eyes with a sigh. "Please."

Soundbite concentrated slightly before letting out a tinny, electric whine. "You are on the air!" he crowed, his voice echoing slightly as though it were coming from a speaker.

I clamped my hands down over my headphones. "Luffy, Usopp, Zoro!" I called out, causing Nami and Sanji to jump in shock as my voice rang out over the ship at a volume that made it sound like the voice of God Himself.

"The heck!" Nami sputtered.
I covered my headphone's mic with my hand as I smiled back at Nami. "I told you that Soundbite's voice-swap thing was only a parlor trick." I then put my hand back down and focused on the snail. "Nami wants to tell us something. Get your asses in the meeting room, now. Over and out." I jerked my hand across my neck and Soundbite let out a sigh of relief.

 Barely even a few seconds later the door to the meeting room burst inwards as Luffy and Usopp rushed me, with Zoro following them in at a more sedate pace.

 "Hey, Cross, was that you just now?" Luffy asked me eagerly.

 "Yeah, and that damn snail?" Usopp snarled, shoving his face as close to Soundbite as could without getting a fresh set of bite marks on his nose, a threat that Soundbite was literally chomping at the bit to fulfill.

 I sighed and rolled my eyes in long-suffering exasperation. "What did he do now?"

 "Your voice came out of the toilet!"

 I blinked before letting out a snort and clamping my hand over my mouth. "A-alright, that's weird, but you've gotta admit, that does sound pretty damn funny."

 "While I was using it!?"

 I promptly shot a scowl at my cackling snail. "Soundbite!"

 "Clean-up on AISLE THREE!" he snorted gleefully.

 "You'd better have cleaned up!" Nami growled, murder in her eyes, causing Usopp to shrink back with a whimper of terror.

 Soundbite laughed and produced a flurry of whipcracks... until a familiar shaking sound came from behind him, prompting him to slowly look behind him, eyes wide in naked terror.

 Sanji smiled darkly as he held the salt shaker. "Oh, don't mind me, just contemplating what to make Nami-swan for dinner." He gave it another shake, just to emphasize the point.

 Soundbite promptly let out a yelp of terror and jerked back into his shell.

 I gave Sanji a half-grateful, half-irritated look as I placed the shivering gastropod on my shoulder. "Thanks for shutting him up, but to reiterate, if you ever fry him, I'll fry you, capiche?"

 Sanji rolled his eyes as he flipped the salt shaker away. "That all depends on him."

 Soundbite popped his eyes out, both glaring at the cook. "Screw you."

 I rolled my eyes and was about to comment on the little clash when Nami raised her hand and spoke up. "Ah, excuse me, but..." She pointed at Soundbite. "This never came up before... but what exactly is the range of Soundbite's power?"

 I shrugged helplessly. "I've never been that good with distances, and we never got anything concrete on the island, but... I'd say maybe somewhere like a quarter of a mile? He can hear anything in that range easy, and with a little effort, he can cause sounds anywhere within it as well. Worst thing he gets from it is a sore throat, and considering how he's a transponder snail, even if just a baby, I doubt there's much risk of that."
"NOPE NOPE NOPE!" Soundbite crowed eagerly.

Nami blinked as she stared at Soundbite in shock before she finally managed to speak. "That's... actually incredibly useful. I mean, you just called the whole ship together in seconds without even moving. I can name a dozen different crews that would kill for something like that. Not to mention —!"

"The eavesdropping potential?" I asked with a raised eyebrow. "Yeah, already thought of that. I'm actually going to try and get him kitted out with formal transponder snail gear as soon as I can. With any luck, it could really help him with his powers."

"We can rebuild him. We have the technology!" Soundbite concurred eagerly.

Nami pondered this for a second before looking at our captain. "Hey, Luffy... why not make Cross and Soundbite our communications officers?"

Luffy blinked and tilted his head in confusion. "Eh? What's that?"

"That would be a person in charge of helping the entire crew communicate with one another, right?" I guessed.

Nami nodded in agreement. "Exactly."

Zoro scoffed slightly. "Seems a bit redundant, considering how there's only six of us."

"OI!"

"Fine, seven, sheesh. My point still stands, though."

"Yeah, seven of us now, maybe. But as our captain demonstrated recently—" Nami jabbed her thumbs at me and Luffy. "We're liable to pick up more crewmates in the future. Plus, with Soundbite's volume, he could get messages out to everyone when things are really loud. Like, say, during the middle of a battle or a storm. Easier than trying to shout over the wind at any rate. And of course, transponder snails are really useful for keeping everyone connected... hm... now that I think about it..." Nami mused as she bowed her head in thought for a second before snapping back to the moment. "A-Anyways, a comms officer would be really useful."

I considered her argument for a second before shrugging in agreement. "I'm all for it if you'll have me, captain."

Luffy tilted his head in thought for a few seconds before grinning enthusiastically. "Alright! Sounds good!" He shot me a thumbs-up. "From now on, Cross will be our ship's Commie!"

I barely caught myself from dropping my jaw in pure, naked horror. Soundbite, on the other hand, had no such compunctions, laughing as loud and as hard as he could.

Usopp stared at Soundbite in confusion. "Uh... does he have a reason to be laughing like an idiot?" His expression darkened instantly. "Beyond just being a slimy little shit I mean."

Soundbite responded by blowing a raspberry at the sniper.

"Inside joke that I will take to my grave," I ground out.

"Shishishishi!" Luffy chuckled as he scratched the back of his head. "Well, you'll be doing whatever it is that a Commie does, alright Cross?"
I grumbled mutinously as Soundbite's laughter redoubled. "Da, Kapitan..."

"As momentous as this is," Zoro drawled out, drawing out the word. "Was there a reason that you called us all together?"

Nami jerked as her train of thought was brought back on track. "Oh, right! I wanted to talk to you guys about the next island we're going to."

I perked up instantly as I caught on to what she was talking about. "I think I can guess," I whispered reverently. "It's one of the main reasons I decided to come down to the East Blue in the first place."

The navigator smiled and nodded in agreement. "Not surprising. It's a popular town known the world over." She met each and every crewmates' gaze in turn. "It's the last island we'll set foot on in the East Blue. Logue Town. The town of the Beginning and the End."

Sanji, Usopp, and Zoro stiffened immediately, likely from the same thrill of excitement that had shot through me a few seconds prior, while Luffy merely looked confused.

Unsurprised by her captain's reaction, Nami seamlessly segued into an explanation. "It's called that because it's the town where Gold Roger, the King of the Pirates, was born... and executed."

That prompted Luffy to sit up, his expression blank for a second before turning solemn.

Nami smiled in return. "It'll be our last chance to resupply before entering the Grand Line. So... what do you say, captain? Want to go there?"

The fire that lit in Luffy's eyes was answer enough.

-Hoooooly shit..." I breathed in awe as I took in the arch before me. "This place is huge!"

And I was right, too. There was no better word for the Town of the Beginning and the End than gargantuan. The architecture and crowds reminded me of Paris, save that instead of the buildings being aged or in the process of being renewed, these were absolutely pristine. As for the mass of people and sound around me, I actually found them to be rather comforting. It was nice to finally hear people, as opposed to just the sounds of the ocean or the jungle.

It was especially comforting to notice that a lot of the mannerisms of the people around me were familiar enough to read. Nothing outstanding, nothing that immediately caught my attention, which thankfully meant that the cultural influence was more Western-influenced than eastern. Small mercies to Oda for creating (or depicting) a culture that didn't share Japan's. If I had to wrap my head around the usage of suffixes in names, I'd throw myself in the ocean. It also helped that there were enough fashion styles that I didn't particularly stand out, and the climate wasn't hot enough to make my jacket uncomfortable.

Soundbite was as eager as I was to be in the midst of civilization, if not moreso. His eyes were on separate swivels as he scanned the crowd, spouting out snippets of sound and conversation at random as he picked up a veritable arsenal of words and voices. More than a few promised potential headaches in the future.

"So this is where the Age of Pirates began..." Sanji whistled in awe.

The rest of the crew and I nodded as we stood before the entrance to the town proper, taking in the sights with a profound sense of awe.
Luffy huffed and nodded with determination. "Right! I'm going to see the place where they kill people!"

"I bet I can get some good ingredients here..." Sanji mused to himself.

"And I'll see if I can find some equipment!" Usopp concurred.

Zoro grit his teeth slightly as he cast a sidelong glance at Nami. "There's something I want to buy too."

Nami adopted a truly evil expression as she returned the swordsman's look. "And I'll happily pay for it..." Her smile became downright vicious. "At 300% interest."

Zoro growled and ground his teeth in aggravation. "Damn witch..."

I sighed and patted the swordsman on the shoulder comfortingly. "Look on the bright side: I'm as broke as you, and seeing how I need a new wardrobe—"

Soundbite took a whiff of my jacket and flinched away with a grimace. "PEE-yew!"

"And he—" I jabbed my thumb at the slimy devil on my shoulder. "Needs a Transponder Snail rig, I need cash. Hence, we're both going to be in the hole."

"How comforting."

"Actually, about that..." Nami turned and tossed rolls of cash at Zoro and I. To my surprise, mine was a fair bit fatter than the swordsman's. "Zoro, you've got one hundred thousand beri to buy your swords. Cross, three hundred."

The whole crew reeled in shock at this. Nami giving up so much as one hundred thousand was momentous enough already, but four hundred!?

"Uh... are you feeling alright?" Usopp asked slowly.

"N-Nami-swan!?" Sanji stammered in concern.

"What the hell, witch!?” Zoro demanded fiercely.

"OH, SHUT THE HELL UP!” Nami raged fiercely at them.

"Nami..." I attempted to wrap my head around this... this madness. "I don't know how much you usually spend on your wardrobe, but—!"

"Cross, I'll be buying your clothes," she cut me off, giving me a quick look up and down. "Dark colors, grays and blacks primarily, heavy jackets and cargo pants?"

I blinked at the accuracy with which she summarized my preferred wardrobe choices. "Uh... I'm also partial to brown and white and I like hoods and pockets, plain or camo patterns are preferable, but... wait, why would you—?"

"Two reasons. First," Nami primly held up a finger. "You're a man, and as such your fashion taste can be summarized as being questionable, at best."

I winced slightly. "Harsh but fair... on second thought, true. Very true."

"And second," she held up a second finger before pointing at the cash, "That's not for you, that's for
me. You're already going somewhere where I want to make some purchases, so you're going to buy them for me while you're there."

I paused as I tried to comprehend where she was going with this before the sound of birds suddenly chirping in my ear made the connection for me. "You want me to buy Transponder Snails for you?!" I blurted in disbelief.

"WHAT?!?" Soundbite roared in over a dozen furious voices, glaring and snarling at Nami.

"Oh, calm down!" Nami scolded, rapping her fist on the snail's head. "We're not replacing you or anything, that's impossible considering how you have a Devil Fruit. No, it's just... it's just in case, alright? So that the crew can stay connected even when we're spread out over an island." She refocused on me. "I want you to buy some Baby Transponder Snails, enough for the whole crew. You'll be taking care of them, feeding them, making sure they're healthy... that sound alright with you, captain?" She waited for a response.

When none was forthcoming, she turned to look at him. "Luf—WHERE THE HELL IS LUFFY?!" she shrieked in outrage when she realized that the rubber-man was nowhere in sight.

Zoro jerked his thumb at the street. "He ran off that way a minute ago."

Nami growled furiously as she stared after him, her face slowly flushing with anger. "That... stupid —!"

"Hey!" I hastily piped up. "I'll go after him! Make sure that he's safe and that he keeps out of trouble! Who knows, I might even run into the Transponder Snail shop on the way! That sound good to you?"

 Thankfully, our navigator managed to slowly calm herself down. "That's... that's... fine. Fine! Go! Catch up to him!" She swung her arms out. "Go, all of you! We'll meet back at the Merry by sundown. Just do me a favor and keep out of trouble, alright?"

"No promises!" Soundbite crowed as I ran after Luffy.

"I WILL EAT YOU ONE DAY, YOU LITTLE SLUG!" Nami roared in reply.

"I'll let her, too," I warned the snickering Transponder Snail.

"Promises, promises."

For a few minutes, I managed to follow Luffy's trail by asking passersby whether or not they'd seen a kid wearing a straw hat, but I eventually got nothing but blank stares. Soundbite was able to give me directionality now and then via snippets of Luffy speaking up, but he couldn't do jack about the veritable labyrinth I was in.

I groaned and scratched the back of my head in annoyance as I strolled down a random street that was heading in the general direction that Luffy was in. "Well, crap... how the hell am I supposed to find him now?"

"Second star on the right AND STRAIGHT ON TILL MORNING!" Soundbite offered.

"Somehow, I don't think that works in real life." I stared at him flatly before sighing and tilting my head back. "Damn it... Nami's going to kill—!"

"Whee!"
"Gah!" I cried out suddenly as I staggered out of the way of a small girl as she almost ran into me from out of nowhere. "Watch it, kid!"

"Sorry about that," a man said apologetically as he passed by me. "My little girl really loves her ice cream, and it's the first time I've let her get three scoops."

"Nah, nah, it's no problem," I assured him. "I should have watched where I was going. Have a nice day!" And with that I kept going, licking my lips slightly as I suddenly noticed my hunger. Now that I thought about it, some ice cream would go down great right now. Though I doubted I'd ever be able to down three full-sized—!

I almost face-planted as I froze in shock and horror. THREE SCOOPS!? FUCK ME!

Before I could so much as move, the crowd around me froze as everyone seemed to simultaneously gasp in terror. Slowly, dreading what I knew I would see, I turned around... and stared.

Big.

There were a lot of other words that could be used to describe Smoker, but 'big' was the one that stuck out at me. Which, in my opinion, was very reasonable, considering how the marine was a freaking giant, towering almost a full head over most of the crowd. Of course, one also had to account for the fact that he was built like an ox and had a face that looked like it belonged on a bulldog... or a Sea King. And he was focused on a terrified little girl and the newly formed stains on his pants.

However, as I scanned the crowd, I couldn't help but shiver at the expressions people were wearing: horror, foreboding, anticipation...

'They really think that he's going to hurt her.' I thought numbly. 'Despite everything he's done for them, all the pirates he's captured, how he really is... they're all legitimately petrified.'

The implications were... disturbing, to say the least.

Finally, Smoker moved, placing his hand on the girl's head and kneeling down... before proffering a hand full of beri coins. "I'm sorry," he growled, his voice as raspy as granite on granite. "My pants ate up all your ice cream. Here, go and buy five scoops."

The girl blinked up at the captain in stunned awe as she took the money. "Th-Thank you, mister."

The girl's father was quick to grab her by her shoulders and hold her close. "Th-Thank you so much, Captain Smoker. I'm so sorry, I'll make sure this doesn't happen again."

"Make sure it doesn't," Smoker ordered firmly. "Not everyone's dry cleaning is paid for by the World Government."

"Y-Yes, sir!" The father nodded hastily in agreement.

"Good." He then gestured at the soldier who was following him. "Let's go."

I promptly froze in place as the Marines marched not only towards me but by me, Smoker coming within feet of me without sparing me so much as a glance.

I slowly turned on my heel and watched them get a few yards away... before starting to follow them myself.
"Dafuq you doin' man!?!" Soundbite hissed in terror.

"The local Marine captain is marching through the town in broad daylight," I hissed back. "Who the hell do you think could earn that kind of response?"

Soundbite blinked in thought for a moment before smirking. "That moron!" he cackled in Nami's voice.

"Tell me about it..." I sighed wearily, resigning myself to shadowing the strongest Marine in the East Blue, bar Garp popping in for a family reunion.

Finally, after a few minutes of walking, we wound up on... the docks? Where a bunch of two-bit pirates was raising holy hell!! What the heck was—!? I promptly slapped my forehead in realization. The Loguetown filler episodes, of course. So anime, not manga. Or quite possibly a fusion of the two.

Well, that threatened to wreak holy hell on my knowledge of the future, but hopefully, it wouldn't be too bad.

Nevertheless, I allowed myself to relax significantly. Thankfully, in the filler episodes, Smoker hadn't seen Luffy's bounty poster before coming out to deal with these clods, so as far as he was concerned, my crewmates and I were free and clear.

Which was beyond good for me, considering how Smoker promptly engulfed the pirates in a cloud of smoke and beat them within an inch of their life in three seconds flat.

I swallowed heavily at the display. A talking snail and a rubber-man were one thing, but that? That was just downright disturbing.

Soundbite shivered heavily on my shoulder. "Scary..." He whispered nervously.

"Tell me about it..." I muttered back in reply, glancing around cautiously. Wouldn't do to get surprised now of all times.

"Hey, Cross!"

"YERK!" I jumped in shock, reeling back as Luffy seemed to pop out of nowhere in front of me. "L—Captain!" I swiftly caught myself. "Where the hell did you come from?!!"

"Heh, I got lost!" Luffy chuckled as he rubbed his finger under his nose. "That guy gave me directions though!" He jabbed his thumb back at Smoker, which allowed me to notice the trail of smoke that led straight over me. "I'm gonna go see the execution platform! Wanna come?"

I considered it for a moment before shaking my head. "Sorry, I've got some business to run for Nami. I'll check it out later though. Have fun!"

"Shishishi! Alright! See ya!" Luffy waved as he ran to follow the smoke.

"Make sure you're back on the Merry by sundown!" I called after him.

"Got it!" he called back before disappearing around the corner.

I rolled my eyes as I listened to his footsteps fade into the distance. "He's a real piece of work..." I chuckled.
"Yes, he is, isn't he?"

My spine promptly went ramrod straight as a blood-chilling voice rumbled behind me. "Meep."

Soundbite swallowed heavily in agreement.

"Turn around."

Slowly, shakily, I turned around and stared up at the marine captain in terror. "Is there a problem, officer?" I asked meekly.

Smoker blew a cloud of smoke that put anything Sanji could manage to shame as he stared down at me. "You've been following me for the past thirteen minutes. Why?"

For a few seconds, I briefly contemplated either bolting or just flat out breaking down. Then... I blinked as I felt something. It was like a... bubbling sensation in my gut. It felt like my stomach was boiling over, but... it wasn't unpleasant. It was actually... nice. Invigorating, actually.

Riding on the high of the sensation, I came to a decision. It was, by a lot of accounts, a *stupid* decision... but hey, what the hell? I was in One Piece! And as they say, when in Rome...

Taking a deep breath, I steeled my back and forced myself to look Smoker in the eye. "I was curious, sir. I wanted to observe something I'd thought was a myth until now."

Smoker cocked an eyebrow in flat curiosity. "Oh, yeah? And what would that be?"

I clenched my fist firmly as I held Smoker's gaze. "A decent Marine."

The onlooking Marine soldier tensed furiously as he glared at me, but Smoker's reaction was far more volatile, his jaws clenching down on his cigars almost hard enough to bite clean through. "Would you care to qualify that statement?" he growled.

I hissed slightly as the bubbling sensation redoubled, causing my blood to race. I briefly considered outright answering for a second before an idea struck me, causing the bubbling to increase a bit more and putting a small grin on my face. "Actually... I've got a question of my own. Do you know any shops that sell Transponder Snails? This little guy is wild, and I want to get him a rig."

Soundbite glanced at me in disbelief before recovering his nerve and smirking at the captain. "Howdy!"

To the snail's credit, he barely flinched as Smoker flicked a cold glare at him before refocusing on me. "I know where one is. What of it?"

My gut frothed with exhilaration as I out and out smirked up at him. "I propose a trade: you show me where the snail shop is, and in return I'll tell you what I meant. Sound fair?"

Smoker fumed for a moment, both figuratively and literally, before whipping his glare at his accompanying. "Petty Officer!"

The Marine in question hastily snapped into a salute. "Y-Yes, sir!?"

"Have the men patrol the docks. Keep your eyes peeled for Monkey D. Luffy."

I caught myself before I could glance at Soundbite, and judging by the fact that neither Smoker or his soldier pounced on me, so did he.
"B-But sir!" the petty officer stammered. "What about—?"

"You have your orders, soldier."

"Y-Yes, sir!" the Marine yelped in agreement before swiftly taking off.

I eyed the Marine warily as he marched off, flatly returning his caustic glare before refocusing on Smoker. "Shall we?" I asked innocently.

Smoker snorted before turning around and stomping down the docks. "Walk and talk," he ordered.

I shrugged slightly as I complied, speeding up my pace slightly to keep up with the large man.

"Where do you want me to start?"

"Your general opinion of the Marines." There was no room for compromise in his tone.

I thought over my response for a moment before holding up my hands with a sigh. "Not a lot to say, really. The Navy is an unscrupulous, morally corrupt military organization that is feared by civilians the world over. Simple as that."

Smoker glared down at me as he blew out a particularly nasty-looking cloud. "That's what you think of us?"

"No..." I drawled as I looked up at him coolly. "It's a legitimate fact. One that you proved earlier."

Smoker snorted furiously, his gaze hardening even further. "I didn't hurt that girl and you know it."

"You didn't have to," I replied frigidly. "That girl, her father, and everyone who saw you was scared. Not of you, not of your powers, but of your uniform. Of what you represent. The only difference between you and those pirates you arrested? I jerked my thumb over my shoulder, "You're well-funded. You're organized. There's more of you than there are of them. And you're always there. And if the civilians try to stand up and get rid of you, then the World Government will crush them like ants."

"This argument is starting to sound familiar..." Smoker narrowed his eyes menacingly.

I snorted and looked forwards defiantly. "I'm no Revolutionary, but I'm not an idiot either. I keep up with the maps. Islands disappear, never to be heard from again. The World Nobles are allowed to run roughshod over the rules that their so-called bloodlines established. Hell, I've heard stories of the Marines hunting down and capturing civilians all because they bear brands. Very specific brands." I tilted my head back and let out a sardonic laugh. "The great and powerful Marines: enforcing the laws they don't follow and protecting civilians from all but themselves."

"Ooh-rah. " Soundbite spat venomously.

Smoker steamed darkly for a second as he contemplated my words. "I trust you have proof to back up these claims."

"I can give you three." I deadpanned. "Just off the top of my head: Captain Axe-Hand Morgan, who ruled over Shell Town like it was his own little fiefdom until a pirate deposed him; Captain Nezumi of the 16th Branch, whose pockets are very open from what I've heard; and Admiral 'Akainu' Sakazuki, who doesn't give two shits about protecting civilian lives, merely killing all pirates in his path, good and bad alike."

That drew a derisive snort out of Smoker. "Good pirates. That's a myth."
"Now there, I can give you two examples. First," I held up a finger. "I don't know about you, but I'm fairly certain that Whitebeard protecting Fishman Island is a distinctly 'good' thing to do."

"Neither King Neptune nor any noble of the Ryugu Kingdom has asked for support from the Marines, nor has the World Government ordered us to send troops to provide support," Smoker defended swiftly. Too swiftly. It sounded rehearsed. As though he were justifying it to more than just me.

"Oh, I get it!" I piped up in a sickeningly sweet tone of voice. "So the long and short of it is that the Marines won't do their jobs and give a flying fuck until they're ordered to, and the World Government won't order you to, I reiterate, do your jobs and protect the civilians of a member nation, because they couldn't give a crap about pirates and slavers raiding their personal aquarium. How am I doing so far, am I in the ballpark?"

Smoker growled darkly under his breath.

I snorted and rolled my eyes. "You know, I can't see why people call the Warlords 'government dogs'. After all, from what I've seen so far? The Navy is the World Government's bitch."

"Didn't you say you had two points?" Smoker spat rather quickly.

I chuckled humorlessly before moving on. "Well, as for the second..." I shot the captain a cocky grin. "You talked to my captain earlier, and he seemed pretty decent, no?"

The captain immediately came to a halt, glaring down at me menacingly.

I looked up at the Marine with a decidedly unimpressed expression. "Including me and the snail, my crew is precisely seven members strong. We haven't looted, plundered or pillaged the entire way here and as far as I can tell they haven't ever hurt any civilians, period. All we're doing is flying a Jolly Roger and stocking up before we go to the Grand Line. But hey!" I held up my wrists with a mock defeated sigh. "None of that matters to you. Doesn't matter to the Marines. Our flag is black, so we must be evil! So, come on! Lock me up! Toss me in Impel Down to be tortured far more cruelly than most pirates could even conceive of! I mean..." I tilted my head to the side curiously. "That is your job, right?"

Smoker stared down at my hands emotionlessly for a second before turning away sharply. "We're here."

I blinked and looked up at the snail-shell-shaped sign hanging above me. "Huh. So we are." I gave Smoker a polite smile. "Well, this has been an invigorating chat. Thanks for your help!"

And with that, I pushed past the captain and into the store, closing the door behind me before promptly collapsing against it.

"Fuuuuuckfuckfuckfuck..." I hissed to myself, my heart pounding furiously in my chest.

"You CRAZY boi!" Soundbite snickered with a grin.

"Tell me about it!" I huffed, a grin sliding over my face as I coasted on the elated feeling in my gut. "Worth it though, right?"

"FAIR ENOUGH!"

"Er, excuse me, sir?"
I looked up to see a headset-wearing man looking at me curiously from over a counter.

"Are you here to purchase anything, or...?" He trailed off uncomfortably.

I coughed self-consciously as I stood up properly, re-adjusting my clothing in the process. "Ahem, I—yes, yes. Sorry about that, just got out of an... interesting conversation."

The man chuckled and nodded in agreement. "Well, we know all about interesting conversations here at Samson's Transponder Snail Shack." He held a hand out. "I'm Samson, nice to meet you."

I smiled and shook his hand in greeting. "I'm Cross, this is Soundbite," I gestured at the snail, who smirked in greeting. "Nice place you've got here."

And it was, too. Though somewhat small, the walls of the shop were lined with shelves filled with snoozing Transponder Snails of varying sizes and colors, with a wide variety of technology and equipment strapped to them. There was also an open crate, within which I could see several dozen baby snails crawling around.

"Heh, thanks," Samson nodded. "So, what brings you around?"

"Well, first and foremost..." I took Soundbite off my shoulder and put him on the counter. "Soundbite here is a wild snail who I wanna outfit with a baby snail rig. Do you offer that service?"

Samson hummed as he eyed Soundbite curiously. "Mind if I...?"

"Oh, no, go ahead!"

"Alright, then..." He picked Soundbite up and started looking him over. "Hm... good color, healthy weight, his shell seems nice and solid... Mmmyeah, he looks like he could take a rig..."

"Awww, you're making me blush!" Soundbite cackled.

"Yeek!" Samson fumbled the snail, barely keeping himself from dropping the gastropod. "What the—!?"

"Devil Fruit," I replied flatly.

"Ah." The man grimaced. "That explains that." He put Soundbite back onto the counter. "Well, I don't know how his powers will interact with the technology, but I think he's viable to get a rig. It will cost you, though."

I shrugged indifferently. "Yeah, that's to be expected. What would you recommend?"

"Hm..." Samson scratched his chin thoughtfully for a second. "Maybe... an Ichabod-Portentia 6S? Latest model off the market. A bit pricey though."

"How much?"

"Twenty-five thousand beri, installment included and upfront."

"Sold! Sold!" Soundbite squealed eagerly, jumping as much as his invertebrate body allowed.

I smiled as I drew out my cash roll and withdrew the appropriate amount of bills. "You heard the snail: sold."

Samson blinked in surprise before taking the money, counting it swiftly before nodding in
agreement. "Alright, then!" He held out his hand and allowed Soundbite to crawl on. "It should only take me a few minutes. It's a delicate process, but not too difficult."

"Once more UNTO the breach!" Soundbite crowed as he was carried into the store's back room.

"You never went there to begin with!" I replied, albeit with a grin.

I was patient for a while, but after a few minutes I wound up tapping my foot impatiently as I waited for the results. I reached down to my pocket to take out a quick form of entertainment... and promptly found myself cursing Soundbite as I patted down my empty pocket.

Finally...

"And here we have him!"

"I'M BACK, BABY!"

I jumped as Soundbite's voice blared out around me, prompting me to whip around and whistle as I caught sight of my snail. "Well, damn! You look good!"

And indeed he did. Not only was he wearing a fresh coat of wax on his shell, he had a shiny new transponder speaker poking out of his side and a small pair of headphones latched around his shell.

"He insisted," Samson scratched the back of his head sheepishly.

"No no, it's fine." I waved him off, taking Soundbite from him and weighing him contemplatively. He'd gained a little weight, but nothing truly off-putting. "So, does it work?"

"I was gonna test it out with one of my snails. Just point one out and—"

"How's this?"

We both jumped as Nami's voice suddenly came out of nowhere. However, a quick glance downward revealed that Soundbite was wearing a familiarly lascivious smile.

The next instant, he'd swapped it out for a full-toothed cheesy grin. "You look stunning, milady!"

Samson jolted in shock and recognition. "Wait, was that—?"

"And this?"

"So elegant, madam!"

Samson's jaw dropped in shock. "Holy hell, that's Cintre, the cashier of Robecca Hanberg! We're in the Clerk's Union together!"

My jaw dropped open as I made the connection, Soundbite consistently swapping voices between Nami in the clerk. "Wow, that's... well, to be fair, Soundbite does have a hell of a range."

Samson looked at me in disbelief. "This guy can hear things a mile away!?"

"WHAT!?" I yelped, staring down at Soundbite in awe.

The snail snickered pridefully as he tilted his head back and preened. "I can see FOREVER!"

My mind flew as I processed the development before finally reaching a conclusion. "It must be the
transponder..." I whispered in awe. "I always thought he could hear so much because of his species, the transponder must be accentuating it even further."

"Hell if I know, man..." Samson breathed as he stared at Soundbite. "Devil Fruits, you know? That there's some crazy shit."

I nodded slowly before a thought struck me, a crazed grin slowly spreading across my face. "And it's about to get even crazier..." I whispered as I slid my headphones over my ears, prompting Soundbite to move the audio from himself to my headset as Nami left the store, driving the clerk to tears in the process. "Hey, Nami, can you hear me?"

A few seconds later, Soundbite adopted a shocked expression, his eyes darting around frantically. "What the—Cross?! Where are you?!"

I chuckled with guilty pleasure at her apparent distress. "In the Transponder Snail shop, about a mile away from you. The transponder worked!"

"A mile!? And Soundbite can hear everything in that radius?!"

I opened my mouth to respond—

"Blue-tongue snapper for five hundred beri! Five hun—! HEY, GET BACK HERE YOU LITTLE—! AMAA~ZII~NG GRAA~CE—! I think I'm gonna be—!"

Before wincing as a barrage of sound assaulted me. "Does that answer your question?!"

"... I heard all that... and Soundbite is a mile away... are you trying to tell me that your pompous, annoying, jerkass of a snail is essentially a god of noise?!"

"Uh..." I faltered slightly. "Don't you think you're exaggerating a bit?"

"He knows everything that happens within a mile of him and he can make anyone hear anything within that range!"

"He's also the size of a baseball, can only move at the rate of an inch a minute, and salt shakers are as deadly to him as cannonballs."

"Alright, I feel a little better. By the way, did you catch up to Luffy?"

"Yeah, I told him to get back to the ship by sundown then let him get on his way. I'm pretty sure he'll be fine."

"Mmmph... alright, then."

"Anyways... in light of Soundbite's recent upgrade, maybe we should get less snails? Two should do."

"Hmm... Well, if it'll save us money, fine. Works for me. Make sure they're good ones, got it?"

"Got it. See you at the Merry."

"See you."

And with that, Soundbite regained his usual proud expression. "TA-dah!"

"Well, he's going to be a right pain..." I sighed tiredly. "But, on the upside, I doubt I'll ever manage
to misplace him."

"You have my sympathy," Samson chuckled. "So anyways, you said you wanted to buy two more
snails?"

"Yeah, just babies." I picked up Soundbite and put him back on my shoulder as I looked into the
crate. "Any suggestions?"

"Eh, not really," Samson shrugged as he leaned over the counter. "The majority of snails aren't as...
expressive as yours, especially after they get their transponder. In general, one's as good as the o—!"

"MEEDLY-MEEDLY-MEEDLY-MEEEEOOOOOOOW!"

"Gah!" Both Samson and I jumped as Soundbite suddenly started belting out a guitar solo at the top
of his lungs.

"What the hell do you think you're—?!" I cut off the impending rant when I caught sight of the crate.
Most of the Baby Transponder Snails had withdrawn into their shells... but two of them were still
out, goofy grins on their faces as they bobbed along to Soundbite's beat.

"Well, that's one way of doing it..." Samson mused.

"Tell me about it," I agreed, fishing the two snails out and placing them on the countertop. "So, how
much?"

"Mmm... these guys are pretty big, quality range, so... two hundred thousand? Oh!" The clerk
ducked down behind the counter and brought out a leather case with a shoulder strap. "And I'll even
throw in this snail carrier for an extra six thousand. Sound like a deal?"

"It does to me," I nodded, drawing out the payment and plopping it on the desk. "Thanks a bundle."

"Same to you, buddy," Samson concurred, placing the snails in the bag and handing it over. "Good
luck on your travels."

Slinging the strap over my free shoulder, I waved goodbye as I left the Snail Shack. I glanced around
the street, contemplating where to head next...

"Why did you do it?"

Before snapping my head over my shoulder, blinking at Smoker in surprise as he leaned against the
wall of the shop. "Excuse me?" I asked in confusion.

Smoker pushed off the wall and walked up to me, looming like a particularly ominous cloud. "You
might have a smart mouth, but you're still a smart kid. You could have been a lot of things, so why a
pirate?"

I considered my answer for a moment. There were a lot of things I could say, but as it was, I felt that
honesty was the best policy. As such, I spread my arms wide. "I have a dream," I announced. "Or
rather, I had a dream, just one, one that I started with. Then... something changed."

Smoker cocked an eyebrow. "Oh, yeah? What?"

My mind went back...

"I'm gonna be king of the pirates!"
And I smiled exultantly. "My captain," I chuckled. "I know he doesn't look like much, but... when
he told me his dream..." I shook my head in awe. "I can't really explain it, but the fact of the matter is
that... I believe in his dream. I believe that he's going to accomplish it, and I believe that he's going to
do things, magnificent, glorious things in the process." I shrugged matter-of-factly. "I want to have a
front-row seat while he does it. Simple, no?"

For what felt like an eternity, Smoker stared down at me; he watched me, judged me with his
inscrutable gaze. Finally, he spoke. "Is your crew heading to the Grand Line?"

I shot a smirk at him. "Isn't everyone with a Jolly Roger and a ship?"

"And I can't talk you out of this madness?"

A hint of steel came into my glare. "Captain, that's a stupid question and you know it."

Smoker let out a sigh of defeat as he scratched the back of his head. "Stupid kid..." He dug into a
pocket of his jacket and tossed a small rod of metal at me. "Here. You'll need this."

I fumbled and only just managed to catch the rod, looking it over in confusion. It was short and
stubby and... it looked... familiar...

Acting on a hunch, I flicked my arm out, causing the seven-inch tube to unfold into a rod that was
only a little less than two feet long.

I eyed the rod in surprise, hefting it contemplatively. "Is this... a tactical baton?"

"Standard issue in the Marines, meant to handle civilians in a non-lethal manner," Smoker grunted in
explanation. "It's not much, especially without knowing any techniques, but it's better than nothing."

And with that, he turned on his heel and began to march down the streets. "Try not to die."

I blinked in shock, staring at the rod for a second before looking up at the captain. "Wait!" I called
out.

Smoker halted and looked back at me.

I held up the baton. "Why?" I asked slowly. "I told you that I was a pirate. I disparaged the Marines
and the World Government. You would have been well within your rights to break my nose at any
point that I was talking. So, why didn't you?"

Smoker stared at me for a second before breathing out a sigh of smoke. "I wanted to prove you
wrong."

I shook my head definitively. "You would have proved me wrong if you locked me in shackles."

"Not about that, dumbass..." Smoker gnawed on his cigar darkly. "You said that I was a good
Marine. A good Marine wouldn't have let you walk one more step once they knew what you were."
He turned around and started to walk away once more. "It's as simple as that."

I watched him walk away for a second before hastily shouting. "Captain!"

Smoker froze and looked back again, this time with a tinge of exasperation.

"I don't like what the Marines currently are," I announced plainly. "And I don't like what they do.
But..." I sighed and shook my head. "I respect what it stands for, and I respect you. I never said that
good Marines were a myth, sir. There are too many good Marines by half. It's decent ones that are in
short supply. There's a difference. A big one."

I brought my hand up into a salute as I nodded at the captain. "Ooh-rah, sir."

"Ooh-rah," Soundbite echoed seriously.

Smoker stared at me for a second before scoffing and continuing on his way, his hand raised in farewell.

I watched him for a few seconds before glancing at Soundbite. "Well... now that that's been handled, wanna go find Nami and make sure she doesn't buy us anything that makes us look like a pair of crossdressers?"

"Ándale, ándale!"

"My thoughts exactly."
"Well, this is turning out to be harder than I thought..." I grumbled morosely as I trudged through the town's streets.

"*Turns out my job's not so easy, is it now?*" Nami asked innocently.

"You're supposed to be able to guide all of us anywhere at any time, Nami. I think that renders your argument a little invalid," I groused with a roll of my eyes.

"*HEY! Don't talk to Nami-swan like that!*"

"Ack!" I yelped, jerking one of my headphones off my ear before glaring at the snickering snail on my shoulder. "*Volume control, jackass!*"

Soundbite chuckled maliciously for a moment before adopting a far prouder expression. "*Nice work, Soundbite. Your dinner'll be gourmet tonight!*"

"*Thank youuu!*" the gastropod sang enthusiastically.

"*No honor among thieves, huh?*" Usopp asked darkly.

"Tell me about it..." I sighed tiredly.

For the past few minutes, Soundbite had managed to locate the majority of our crewmates and connect us all together with sound. Usopp had been more than a little freaked out by the seemingly ghostly voices of the crew, but Nami had swiftly calmed him down... though Soundbite's increase in power had been a visible point of consternation. Soundbite messing around with him via a few really ghostly voices hadn't helped matters either.

"Alright, enough. Cross, still no luck finding Luffy?" Zoro asked gruffly.

Currently, we were all scanning the streets of Logue Town in search of our captain, following Nami informing us all of an impending storm that was fast-approaching the island. Furthermore, she'd also warned us all about the dangers of the local marines, Smoker in particular. I had made an... educated decision to *not* mention my close run-in with the good Captain. While that had been fun, the mere concept of the wrath of Nami had nowhere near the same allure.

I tsked and shook my head in exasperation. "None. Either he's being as quiet as a churchmouse—"

"*HA!*" Nami barked.

"My thoughts exactly—or, more likely, he's somewhere so loud that he's being drowned out and Soundbite can't pick him out. Still, it's Luffy, so he *should* be at the execution scaffold's plaza..." I paused for a second before hanging my head with a chuckle. "Though knowing him he'll probably be *on* the scaffold."

"*Yup.*"

"*That'd be just like him.*"

"*I wouldn't be surprised.*"

There was a moment of silence that gradually became more and more uncomfortable until finally...
"Cross, can Soundbite hear any places loud enough to drown out Luffy?" Nami asked slowly.

I glanced at the snail questioningly and winced as he nodded with a grimace. "EEEYUP!"

"Does that answer your question?"

"And... can you hear what's going on there?"

I promptly tapped the side of my headphones, preparation preventing me from wincing as a wave of sound flooded my skull. I pursed my lips as I tried to parse through the cacophony before grimacing as something stood out. "I don't suppose Luffy's ever had anything to do with a pirate by the name of 'Buggy', has he?" I asked, fully expecting the answer.

A moment of silence. Then...

"Crap." Zoro summarized succinctly.

"Everyone doubletime it to the plaza! Now!" Nami ordered, a tone of panic entering her voice.

"You heard the lady, Usopp! Shake a leg!"

"Alright, alright! But if you really want us to hurry, then maybe you should take the heavier end of this thing!"

"NO PAIN NO GAIN!"

"LIKE YOU'RE ACTUALLY DOING ANYTHING PHYSICAL!"

Soundbite's very mature response was to blow a multi-tonal raspberry.

"You do realize that he has a point, ri—OW!" I grit my teeth as Soundbite chomped on my ear. "Withdrawn! Withdrawn! Let go already!" I sighed in relief as he finally complied. "Alright, we'll talk about this later, but for now, hold on tight!"

I broke into a fast trot down the street...

Before hastily backpedaling and jogging in place before a vendor's stand. "Pardon me," I inquired as I panted heavily. "But how much does a particularly heavy-duty Log Pose cost?"

-0-

"Hey, guys!" I wheezed as I skidded to a stop next to the rest of the crew. We were all gathered on the outermost edges of a massive plaza, a huge crowd assembled directly next to us.

Zoro gave me a flat look as he 'graced' me with a cursory glance. "You need to exercise more."

"I'll- hoo- get right on that..." I groaned, thanking anyone and everyone I could as energy returned to my aching muscles. "Any- huff- luck finding- wheeze- Luffy?"

The swordsman promptly plopped his hand on my head and turned it so that I was following the crowd's line of sight. I blinked at the tall wooden tower that loomed over the mass of people before focusing on the prone and flashy figures at the top of the structure. I immediately dropped my face into a deadpan stare. "Honestly, I really should have seen that coming."

"Yup." Soundbite, Nami and Usopp nodded in solemn agreement.
Sanji sighed as he clicked his lighter and lit a cigarette, eyeing the situation with a wary gaze. "Cross, Nami, Usopp. Take the supplies back to the Merry, Zoro and I will get our captain out of there."

I glanced at the navigator and sniper for a second before shaking my head firmly. "No way. I'm staying here to help."

Nami looked at me in bewilderment. "No offense to you, Cross, but how could you possibly help those two in a fight? I've seen you naked -"

"Don't remind me..." I groused, a blush riding up on my cheeks.

"- and you have just about no muscle mass. You'd be dead in three seconds flat!"

"If I actually fought," I corrected. I glanced at the crowd before pointing out three civilians who were spread apart at random. "Distract."

Soundbite immediately latched his gaze on to the civilians and grinned mischievously before appearing to speak without actually making any noise.

The reactions were... impressive, to say the least. Almost instantly, the civvies leapt close to a foot off the ground, spinning around and looking for the source of whatever had just happened. One of the civilians suddenly turned around and punched another square in the jaw, a furious look on his face, before being tackled by the third. Within seconds, the three were locked in a brawl that threatened to spread to the rest of the crowd.

Internally, I was gaping in unabashed shock at the madness I'd just sparked. Externally, I maintained a neutral gaze before glancing down at the cackling snail on my shoulder. "I said 'distract', not 'let slip the dogs of war' -"

Soundbite's laughter redoubled, though judging by how nobody was looking our way he was keeping it restrained to us.

"- but I think I've proved my point." I looked Sanji and Zoro dead in the eye. "I know I can't fight, but I can provide support. I could possibly help from a distance with Soundbite's range..." I shook my head firmly. "But I don't want that. I am a Straw Hat Pirate, and that!" I jabbed a finger at the platform. "Is my captain. The future King of the Pirates, about to die where his predecessor did." I allowed a tinge of desperation to entered my expression. "This is my first chance to contribute to the crew. Don't take this from me. Please. Let. Me. Help."

Soundbite glanced at our crewmates for a second before nodding once, firmly and silently.

The rest of the crew were deathly silent as they stared at me in shock before slowly glancing at one another, something unspoken passing between them.

For a heart-stopping moment, I was afraid that they'd tell me to go. I'd do it if they pressed, of course. Logically speaking, I was perfectly aware that my presence here would do absolutely jack shit to change the outcome. Emotionally speaking... I knew that my speech was cheesy, but I'd meant every word of it. One week might not seem like a lot to most, but in all honesty a week with Luffy... I wanted to see this through, needed to, however I could.

Finally, I felt a weight leave my chest as Zoro and Sanji nodded at me.

"Be ready to run," Sanji ordered.

I nodded in understanding before looking up at the platform. "Mind if I offer some advice?"
Zoro shrugged as he undid his bandanna and tied it over his head. "What?"

"Don't charge in right away. We're lucky, that guy looks and sounds like he loves the sound of his own voice. He'll keep monologuing for a while so long as he's not interrupted. Get as close as you can and charge him when it seems like he's winding up for the finale. I'll get Soundbite to start sowing chaos once the fighting starts."

Sanji and Zoro glanced at one another before shrugging and nodding.

"Sounds like a plan," Zoro grunted as he clicked his swords back into their sheathes.

Sanji pointed at Nami and Usopp. "You two are still going back, no debate."

Usopp swallowed heavily as he rebalanced the massive fish he was carrying. "No argument there!"

Nami looked at all of us before hefting her sack as well. "Get him out and then get out. We need to get out to sea before the storm really hits."

I nodded at her firmly. "We will. And don't worry, I'll keep you up to date." I glanced between everyone, absently handing her the bag with the transponder snails. "We all know what to do. Let's grab our captain and get the heck off this rock."

And with that, we separated, Zoro and Sanji slipping into the crowd with some degree of subtlety while Nami and Usopp pelted down the street towards the coast.

As for me, I slowly started to pace back and forth along the outside of the crowd, scanning it slowly as I kept track of the execution platform. Thankfully, my summary had been accurate: Buggy was living up the moment for all it was worth. In all honesty, I really had to wonder about what was going through his head when he came up with this plan. Executing Luffy was par for the course, what with him being a psychotic jackass and all... but doing it where his own captain had died? I couldn't tell if he was tipping his hat to Luffy in some sick, twisted manner or if he had just blinded himself to the reality of his location.

Suddenly, I was snapped out of my musings as a flash of green caught my attention. My eyes zeroed in on the spot and scanned the crowd, searching for that color again. I knew it couldn't have been Zoro, his sense of direction was apoplectic but not that bad, so that only really left one option, but there was no way in hell I was that-

It was at that point that I caught sight of the green-haired person I'd spied, as well as the heavy furred overcoat he was wearing.

Well... shit. This was a development, to be sure. So... what the hell do I do with it? I mean, it wasn't like I could actually do any good at this point... could I? What if I wound up messing things up? What if I changed things irreparably? What...

I blinked as a thought struck me. So what if I changed things? Luffy actually had something of a point in Sabaody: an adventures no good if you know every step of it to come. Might as well throw a few wildcards into the mix.

And so, my mind made up, I walked up to the person and tapped him on the shoulder before pointing up at the execution scaffold. "Hell of a show, huh?"

Bartolomeo glanced at me with a slightly irritated look before, thankfully, shrugging my apparent impudence off in favor of watching the display. "The clown's a bit annoying, but yeah," he grunted with a tone of grudging respect. "Too bad the kid's gonna die. It takes some serious moxie to actually
climb the scaffold in broad daylight. I should know, I've gotten locked up for it more than once."

I chuckled somewhat shakily as I glanced at the local mobster. "Oh, I wouldn't bet on him dying just yet. I'm pretty certain that he can get his way out of this somehow."

"Oh yeah?" Bartolomeo grunted, giving me a sidelong look. "You know him?"

I shrugged slightly. "My captain. He's a nice guy, if a bit empty-headed. I haven't been with the crew long, but I've heard enough to know that he's slipped out of some pretty impossible shit before. He'll live."

That prompted Bartolomeo irritated scowl to morph into open surprise. "Captain, huh? So that brat's really a pirate?"

"His blood's as salty as it comes, that's for sure."

"Hmph..." The mobster shrugged and looked up at the display, irritated scowl back in place. "Well, the kid's got some guts, sure, but I really don't see what makes him so-!"

"HEY! LISTEN!"

Both Barto and I, not to mention the rest of the crowd, jumped in shock when Luffy's voice suddenly bellowed out.

"I AM THE MAN!" he roared, his voice full of confidence and determination. "WHO WILL BE KING OF THE PIRATES!"

My breath hitched as I felt the exact same wave of certainty, the same sense of fact I'd felt the first time he'd said those words.

"H-holy crap..." Bartolomeo breathed in shock. "D-Did he really just say that?! Here, now, in front of the whole freaking world?!"

I chuckled shakily as I nodded slowly in agreement. "Like you said, he's got guts."

Suddenly, I noticed there was some sort of commotion coming from a part of the crowd close to the scaffold. A quick glance at Soundbite showed that he was mouthing a bunch of words and sounds desperately.

Apparently Bartolomeo didn't notice this as he stared up at the top of the platform. "That's... he's not human. Where the hell do you get the sheer balls to say something like that?!"

I allowed a grin to splay across my lips as I glanced at him. "I told you, didn't I? He's got salt in his veins. Those guts of his? They're the guts of a pirate, through and through."

Bartolomeo nodded slowly in agreement before tensing suddenly. "Well those guts are about to go all over the plaza!"

I followed his line of sight and set my spine ramrod straight when I caught sight of Buggy holding his sword high above Luffy's neck.

"No..." I breathed in numb horror. I knew that something or someone would save Luffy, be it Dragon or be it fate or be it pure luck, but... I couldn't help but feel that there was every chance that this was the one time, the one possibility where Luffy... where Luffy...

"Please... Please don't let this be where it ends..." I begged under my breath. "Please..."

I opened my mouth to say something, anything...

"ZORO!"

I jumped as Luffy roared.

"SANJI! NAMI! USOJP! CROSS! SOUNDBYTE!"

I felt my heart stop as Luffy smiled openly and without remorse, not a care in the world as Buggy's sword came down on his neck.

"Sorry," he grinned. "But... I'm dead."

"NO!" Zoro's voice cried out.

"DON'T TALK CRAZY!" Sanji's voice demanded desperately.

"LUFFY!" I screamed, my own voice mixing in seamlessly with Nami and Usopp's.

Suddenly, with legitimately no warning whatsoever, the sky seemed to split open in a flash of light. Moments later, I was shaken to the core by a crack and a rumble loud enough that I was surprised that the island itself hadn't split open.

When I finally managed to get my wits about me, the platform was burning blue and starting to collapse.

"Cross, what just happened!?"

I jumped as Usopp's voice snapped me out of my awe. I fumbled desperately for a second before managing to answer. "I... ah... A... a bolt of lightning... it... The platform... It hit the platform! Lightning hit the platform!"

There was a moment of shocked silence before Usopp finally spoke. "That's... that's less surprising than it should be..."

"And what about Luffy?!" Nami demanded. "Is he alright?!"

I opened my mouth to respond...

"Hey, I'm alive! That's nice!"

I let a relieved sigh whoosh out of me as Luffy spoke up. "He's alive..." I chuckled, relief flooding my body. "He's alive... he's alive!"

Nami and Usopp breathed sighs of relief.

"Thank god..."

"I knew that idiot wouldn't die that easy... alright, grab him and get to the Merry as fast as you can! Let's get the heck out of Logue Town!"

"I couldn't agree with you more!" I nodded in agreement. "See you soon, over and out!" Once Soundbite ended the connection, I looked over at Bartolomeo. The mobster was staring at where the scaffold had been standing mere moments ago, his jaw dropped as far open as it could go.
"See?" I grinned shakily as I patted him on the shoulder. "Told you he'd get out alive!"

However, before I could say anything further to him, a very familiar trio ran by us.

"SHAKE A LEG, CROSS!" Sanji ordered.

"WOO HOO! THEY'RE PISSED!" Luffy cackled madly.

I laughed at the sheer _insanity_ of the situation before throwing up a salute of farewell at Bartolomeo. "Happy trails, partner!" I laughed. And with that, I proceeded to take off down the road alongside my crewmates, pushing my body to keep up with them.

"Who was that you were talking to?" Zoro asked.

Before I could respond, Soundbite suddenly started crying out Bartolomeo's voice. "Hey! Wait! Guy! Wait up!"

"I can hear you, buddy, my snail wasn't just for show," I reassured him.

"Y-you're with your captain, right? Straw Hat Luffy? C-can I talk to him?"

I blinked in surprise beforeshrugging and proffering my snail to my captain. "It's for you."

Luffy looked at Soundbite in surprise. "Hello? Who're you?"

"M-m-my name is Bartolomeo! S-Straw Hat Luffy? T-the reason you're so awesome, the reason you were able to smile at death... i-is it because you're a pirate?!"

Luffy stared at the blubbering transponder snail for a moment before grinning widely. "Of course! After all, pirates are the free-est people on the sea! That means being able to go on incredible adventures and keep smiling no matter what happens! We're nothing _other_ than awesome!"

Soundbite sniffed and choked for a second in awe before finally speaking. "S-So... if... if I became a p-p-pirate... c-could I be as awesome as you!?"

Luffy's grin somehow widened even further as he nodded enthusiastically. "Definitely!"

Bartolomeo hesitated for a second, a mere _second_ before crying eagerly. "Th-Then I'm gonna do it! I'm gonna get a ship! I'm gonna get a crew! I'm going out to the sea! To the Grand Line! I'm gonna become a pirate! One as great and awesome a-a-and incredible as you are! I, BARTOLOMEO OF LOGUETOWN, AM GONNA BE A PIRATE!"

"Shishishi!" Luffy laughed. "Sounds awesome!"

"Don't just half-ass it though, you hear?" I cut in hastily. "Get a _real_ crew, get a _real_ ship! When you go out to sea, you do it with every intention of being the best pirate you can be! You hear me, Bartolomeo?"

"Y-Yeah, yeah, I hear you! I'll do it! I'll do it right! Wait for me, alright, Straw Hat Luffy? Wait for me! W-w-we're gonna meet again! We'll meet again... IN THE GRAND LINE!"

"Shishishi! Alright! Looking forward to it! Good luck, Barty!" Luffy chortled animatedly.

"Until we see you again, buddy!" I agreed. And with that, Soundbite cut the connection, his tears disappearing in favor of his usual smirk.
"Hey, Luffy, sounds like you have a fan!" Sanji laughed.

"I know, right? That's so awesome!" Luffy snickered in agreement.

"What the heck did you say to him, anyway?" Zoro asked me.

I shrugged helplessly with a grin as I put Soundbite back on my shoulder, flipping my jacket's hood on as I finally noticed the rain pelting down on us. "Hell if I know! I was just confident that Luffy would get out of there! Must have been infectious, huh?"

Sanji tsked as he cast a grin at Luffy. "Yeah, his crazy is a bit infectious, isn't it?"

"Well, we're already lost causes!" I concurred. "Let's get back to the ship before this storm grounds us!"

"ENOUGH TALKING!" Luffy snickered as he somehow increased his pace. "JUST KEEP RUNNING!"

"Aye-aye, captain!" I agreed.

We kept running forwards with little-to-no sense of direction with marines nipping at our heels...

Until we happened to notice a woman standing in the road ahead of us, forcing us to come to a halt.

"Who is this beauty?" Sanji asked eagerly, hearts evident in his eyes.

"Roronoa Zoro..." The woman growled darkly as she glared daggers at us. "You never told me you were a pirate! You lied to me, you bastard!"

Sanji's mood immediately flipped as he snarled at Zoro, seconds away from pounding him. "What the hell did you do to that girl, you moss-headed bastard!?"

"Sounds like somebody was busy during shore-leave!" I snickered. Soundbite laughed as he wolf-whistled in agreement.

Zoro ignored us all as he stepped forwards, staring at Tashigi flatly. "You never asked me what my name was, so I never lied to you. It's as simple as that."

If the sergeant's enraged expression was anything to go by, she didn't even remotely accept that answer, snarling as she drew her sword. "I'm going to take the Wado Ichimonji from you, and make sure it never falls into the hands of a pirate again!" And with that, she leapt forwards at us...

And was met blade-first by Zoro, who stared her down frigidly. "Go on ahead," he grunted.

"Okay!" Luffy nodded as he ran past.

"Good luck!" I waved as I followed the rubber man's lead.

"FIGHT FIGHT FIGHT!" Soundbite crowed.

"If you hurt one hair on her head I'll kick your ass, mosshead!" Sanji raged as he just barely managed to restrain himself and follow us.

"You think he'll be alright?" I asked Luffy as the sword-wielders fell out of sight.

"Of course!" Luffy grinned. "After all, it's Zoro!"
"Fair enough!" I conceded

And with that, we kept running for all we were worth. The rain was pouring down on us in buckets and the wind was almost like a corporeal wall it was so strong, but either way we kept going. Soon, I felt my heart soar as I caught sight of the harbor's arch. It was a sure thing now: we were going to make it!

Then I felt my gut drop as I caught sight of who was standing beneath the arch. "Ah crap..." I groaned piteously.

"Great, now what!?" Sanji demanded.

"Straw Hat Luffy..." Captain Smoker growled as he glared at the three of us, forcing us to come to a halt. "I already told you you couldn't make it to the Grand Line without beating me, didn't I?"

Luffy blinked in confusion before grinning his usual stupid grin. "Oh yeah, I forgot!" he chuckled.

Smoker narrowed his eyes at us as he took a menacing step forward. "You're really stupid, you know that?"

I chuckled miserably as I scratched the side of my head. "Tell me about it..."

Luffy's grin darkened with brutal eagerness as he reached up and clutched his hat. "Sanji, Cross, Soundbite. You guys go on ahead. I'll deal with this guy!"

However, before either of us could even think to either protest or agree, Smoker cut in. "What the hell makes you think I'll let any of you get away!?" he demanded, his arms billowing out into pillars of smoke and grabbing Luffy and leaving him struggling in the air before he could react.

"Damn it!" Sanji cursed, dashing forwards and launching a kick at Smoker's face. "Bastard!"

Sadly, the kick whiffed straight through Smoker's head, causing him to glare at the cook imperiously. "I've got no time for small fry." That was all the warning Sanji received before he was pummeled into a building by a fist of smoke. "White Fist!"

"Grk! Sanji!" Luffy howled, ripping an arm free and launching it at Smoker. "Take this! Gum Gum Pistol!"

Smoker dissipated around the blow, coalescing behind Luffy with a hand on his head moments later. "You're worth 30 million beri?" he scoffed. Before Luffy could react, he was slammed face-first into the pavement, with Smoker sitting cross-legged on his back.

"You're barely even worth one," the Captain growled as he started to reach for the jutte on his back. "Your luck's run out, kid."

"Oh, I don't know..."

Smoker froze as I pressed my baton's length against the underside of his throat, casting a shaky grin at him. "He seems like he's still a pretty damn lucky bastard to me."

Smoker turned a murderous glare on me, causing me to almost lose my grip on my weapon. "Do you really think that this will stop me?" he intoned darkly.

I shrugged ever so slightly as I tilted my head at Soundbite. "Depends. Do you think you're fast enough to dodge a blast of pure sound, capable of vaporizing stone?"
Soundbite snickered in agreement, his teeth bared in a menacing smirk.

I was, of course, completely bluffing my ass off, but hey, he didn't know that. Besides, people can dream!

Smoker switched tracks instantly. "You lied to me," he stated. "You said that none of your crew was wanted."

"In my defense, I've never really seen his wanted poster," I retorted, glancing down at Luffy. "You're worth 30 million, captain? That's pretty awesome!"

"Th'nks!" Luffy muttered out around the stone.

"Shut up!" Smoker snarled downwards before glaring at me. "This? This is who you're pinning everything on? You're pinning your hopes and dreams on this... this kid?"

"That 'kid'," I shot back. "As you call him, was just saved by a legitimate miracle. He is incredible and I... I believe in his dream, I believe in it every step of the way. He is going to go on and do awe-inspiring things... and if it means getting to see those things, being able to march with him, step by step, every inch of the way?" I didn't even hesitate as I grinned as widely as I could. "Then yeah. Yeah, I'll bet it all on him. Because I genuinely believe in Monkey D. Luffy becoming King of the Pirates. And nothing you or anyone in the whole wide world says will convince me otherwise."

"Awww, th'nks Cross!" Luffy mumbled out.

"Any time, Captain!" I nodded firmly.

Smoker's response was more terrifying than heartwarming, as he narrowed his eyes and reached up to clutch the handle of his jutte. "You bet wrong, kid. This is the end of the line. For the both of you!"

"Actually..."

The world seemed to freeze as a hand came out of nowhere, grabbing the handle as well.

I could literally hear my heartbeat as I stared up at the legitimately massive cloaked figure that hadn't been standing behind Smoker a moment ago, taking in his familiar grin and tattoo with awe. I idly noted the nigh imperceptible 'eeeeeee' noise that Soundbite was making.

"I believe it's only just starting," Monkey D. Dragon stated with all the calm of an impending storm.

"Holy crap..." I breathed.

"Hey! Wh't's going on!?" Luffy struggled under Smoker's grip. "Wh's that!?"

"You..." Smoker growled up at the Revolutionary, his cold sweat mixing in with the rain. "The World Government's after your head..."

Dragon's grin only seemed to widen in response. "The world is still waiting for our answer..."

Before anyone could think to respond, the world seemed to go green and the wind went from howling to roaring, bellowing in rage and fury as it tore at the world around us and sent the world into chaos. I barely managed to identify the screaming I heard as my own a second later.

When it finally died down, I was laying on my ass, in the harbor, my head spinning as I tried to clamber to my feet. "Soundbite...?" I groaned, pushing myself to my feet..
"SPIN cycle SUCKS!" he spat out from inside his shell, which was thankfully still clutching my shoulder.

"Hey, Cross!" Usopp cried as he grabbed my other shoulder and shook me slightly. "You alright?"

I gave the sniper a shaky grin. "Bruised and battered, but I think I'll live." I frowned as a thought struck me. "But where's the Merry?!"

Usopp groaned as he pointed out to sea, where I could see a sail bobbing halfway to the horizon. "Out there. I don't know how we'll reach it now..."

"I do!" Luffy's voice rang out. "Brace yourselves, guys! Gum-Gum!"

I tensed as I remembered where this was undoubtedly going. "This is gonna suck..." I groaned.

"ROCKET!"

I think I might have blacked out for a moment, because the next thing I knew I was laying on the Merry's deck alongside the rest of the male portion of the crew, groaning in pain on account of my body feeling like somebody had taken a baseball bat to it.

"Oooowww..." I whined.

"Well, that was fun..." Zoro concurred with a wheeze of pain.

"Hey, Cross..." Sanji managed to bite out. "Did you manage to see what did all this?"

Soundbite and I opened our mouths... then glanced at one another and promptly snapped them shut. "Sanji..." I breathed. "You wouldn't believe me even if I told you."

"Eeeeyup!" Soundbite nodded in agreement.

"You're here!" Nami laughed in relief as she helped us up. "Come on, we need to get moving! We've got a tailwind, we need to get out of here before the Marines manage to catch up to us!"

And with that, we scrambled to man the lines, working the whipstaff and sails furiously in order to fight against the elements and force them to work in our favor. It was not a fun time, what with us coming within feet of capsizing and taking a final dip, but we eventually managed to stabilize things.

Finally, Nami called out to us all. "Hey, look! There's a light!"

And indeed there was: a tower of stone with a light flashing on top, defying the darkness of the storm.

"Is that a lighthouse?!" Usopp asked in confusion as he clutched the mast.

Nami grinned and nodded. "Yeah... the guiding light... It's one of the markers... beyond that light... Is the entrance to the Grand Line! So!" She smiled at us all eagerly, seemingly drunk on the moment. "What's it gonna be?"

Usopp whimpered miserably as he held on to the Merry for dear life. "Do we have to do this in the middle of a storm!?!"

"Aw, c'mon, Usopp!" I teased, my hands firmly clutching the Merry's rigging. "Where's your sense of adventure!?!"
"I think it fell overboard and drowned a mile back!"

"SCAREDY CAT!"

"OH QUIET, YOU!"

Nevertheless, we all smiled eagerly at Nami and nodded, ready to take the next leg on our journey.

"Okay! I say we do something to mark the occasion!" Sanji nodded in determination, lugging a barrel out of the Merry's storeroom and setting it up on deck.

Usopp eyed the skies nervously before swallowing his fear and nodding in agreement. "R-right!"

"I'm in!" Luffy whooped.

"Let's do it!" Nami concurred.

Zoro didn't say anything, but his grin was answer enough.

"Hell yes!" I couldn't help but laugh.

"WOOHOO!" Soundbite hollered.

And so, Sanji raised his leg and placed it on top of the barrel. "I'm going to the Grand Line... to find the All Blue!" He announced.

"I'm going to be King of the Pirates!"

"I'm going to be the world's best swordsman!"

"I'll draw a map of the world!"

"I-I-I'm going to become... A BRAVE WARRIOR OF THE SEAS!"

I hesitated as my turn came up. At this moment... I wondered. Did I truly deserve to be here? In front of all these incredible people, in front of all their incredible dreams, I had to wonder... was I truly worthy? Could I do it?"

In the end... I could only come up with one suitable answer.

_Hell yes._

I raised my foot and landed it on the barrel with finality. "I'm going to travel the seas!" I declared firmly. "And I'm going to see everything this cruel, crazy, beautiful world has to offer!"

"DITTO!" Soundbite roared in agreement.

We stared at the barrel for a moment as we took it all in. Six people and one snail, each with our own dreams, our own capabilities... about to take on the world. In a word, it was... _awe-inspiring_

Finally, Luffy grinned and raised his leg high, prompting us all to follow along. "And now!" he announced. "TO THE GRAND LINE!"

We brought our feet down on the barrel in the middle of a crack of thunder.

And so... our journey well and truly began.
As poetic as our start towards as the official start of our adventure was, the reality was far less pleasant. We were, after all, setting out in the middle of a hurricane-grade storm. Still, at least we had a lighthouse to guide us...

"AH! NAMI! THE LIGHT'S GONE!"

For about two seconds, anyways.

"It's a lighthouse, Luffy!" I called up to my Captain as he hung from Merry's neck, fighting with the Merry's lines all the while. Why he insisted on putting himself in the most precarious of positions over the ocean when he couldn't swim was beyond me, but I'd grown more than used to it in the little time I'd known him. "They can't keep it going all the time, especially not in this kind of weather."

"Don't worry," Nami reassured him as she stepped up onto the prow, glancing at the map she was holding as she tried to perceive something, anything through the deluge. "That's why I'm here, isn't it? I can get us into the Grand Line, guaranteed."

"If you can find your way through this, then I'd say you're more witch than expert!" I offered, only half-joking.

"Har har, very funny."

"Shishishi! You're really impressive, you know that?" Luffy asked as he twisted himself around to smirk up at Nami.

"Yeah, yeah," the navigator rolled her eyes. "Now would you please get down from there before you fall in?"

"I'm not gonna give up my special seat."

I couldn't help but laugh at his matter-of-fact tone. "I wouldn't sit there even if you paid me! I'm wet enough as is, I don't want to fall into the ocean on top of that."

"Scaredy cat!" Luffy stuck his tongue out at me.

"Buck buck buck-AWK!" Soundbite clucked out with a sneer.

"Do you want to go in instead?" I asked sardonically as I glanced at the snail. He promptly squawked and snapped back inside his shell. "Yeah, that's what I thought."

"Do it anyways! We can use him as bait!" Usopp called from the other side of the deck.

"I'll take that into consideration."

"TRAITOR!"

"Alright, alright, enough fun and games," Nami rolled her eyes with a smirk before turning serious. "Cross would you mind-?"

I nodded in understanding and tapped Soundbite's shell before pointing at Nami. "Amp."

Soundbite popped an eye out of his shell before letting out a whine.
"You're live."

"Everyone meet me in the cabin," Nami's voice rang out. "We need to talk about what's coming up next."

Hastily complying, we all tied up our lines and followed Nami into the kitchen, where she spread her map open over the table.

"Now, I know this sounds crazy-" she started.

"Uh, Nami?" I hastily interrupted, reaching out and pinching Luffy's cheek in order to stretch it out. "There is a rubber man and a sound snail on board and a smoke man tried to stop us from leaving Loguetown not more than an hour ago. I think we passed 'crazy' a long time ago."

Nami considered this for a moment before indicating the center of her map. "Even if I tell you that the only way into the Grand Line is by sailing up a mountain?"

"Reverse Mountain, right," I nodded in confirmation.

The rest of the crew looked at me in shock.

"Wait, what!?" Usopp squawked in disbelief. "Sailing up a mountain!? Y-Y-You can't be serious!"

"Oh no, I'm deadly serious," I shook my head firmly. "Reverse Mountain is pretty much the only means of entering the Grand Line open to the public." I looked at Nami. "May I?"

She shrugged indifferently. "If you know anything about it, feel free."

"Right then..." I walked over to the table and looked over the map before pointing out the design that occupied the center. "Alright, this here is Reverse Mountain. See these lines that cross over it?"

Sanji gnawed on his cigarette contemplatively as he looked the relatively ancient map over. "Yeah... What are those?"

"Canals." I held up a hand to stave off any oncoming protests. "I know it sounds nuts, but those are canals, running up the entire length of the mountain, past the clouds and down into the Grand Line. No clue who built them, how, when or why, but they exist alright."

"N-n-no way..." Usopp stammered, his eyes wide in disbelief. "Sailing up a mountain!? Th-Th-That's impossible!"

"Hey!" Sanji slapped the back of Usopp's head. "If Nami says that's how we get in, then that's how we get in, it's as simple as that! And... well, Cross is pretty smart too, I guess."

"Awww, thanks, Sanji!"

"Don't press your luck, snail mail."

"TsunDE-!"

"Don't even think about it, dumbass." I firmly slapped a hand down on Soundbite's shell with a glare.

"It sounds like it could be fun!" Luffy grinned eagerly.

"Don't get your hopes up, Luffy," Zoro warned cynically. "Nami, you stole this map from Buggy, are you sure that it's reliable?"
"I can guarantee it," I volunteered. "It's not surprising that map is so valuable: it's eerily accurate. The marines would probably love to get their hands on it, so as to better control any info on the Grand Line."

"And how do you know so much anyways?" Zoro asked with a tinge of suspicion

I swallowed slightly at the attention before rallying. "No offense to the East Blue, but it is called the weakest of the Blues, and this is one of the reasons why," I answered with a shrug. "Florida is on the Red Line, so we border the North Blue as well as the East. Info on the Grand Line is more... thorough there." I frowned in thought. "Well, general information, anyways. The Grand Line has a reputation for being a bit... active. Who knows how accurate some of my info really is."

Usopp shuddered heavily as he processed the implications of that statement. "W-w-wait, y-you mean-?!"

"Yeeaaah..." I barely repressed an evil grin as I pointed out several spots on the map past the Grand Line. "There should be islands here, here, here, aaaand here. At least, from what I remember at any rate. Geography: such a... feeble aspect of the Grand Line."

The sniper choked out a terrified sob as he sank to his knees. "What kind of a place are we headed into!?" he demanded helplessly.

I really did grin malevolently as I loomed over him. "Hell."

"Oooo-eeee-oooo!" Soundbite snickered as he mimicked a theremin.

Sanji delivered a slow clap as he observed our antics. "Very funny you two. Now lay off him before he has a heart attack, would you?"

I chuckled as I raised my hands in surrender. "Fair enough, fair enough. Sorry about that."

"Anyways..." Zoro pressed on with a sigh. "Even with how crazy the world already is, what you're saying is pretty out there. Couldn't we just, I don't know, sail right into the Grand Line or something? Looks like the ocean is pretty clear to me."

"NO WAY!" Luffy and Nami bellowed simultaneously.

"What they said," I concurred, pointing at the pair.

"It'd be totally wrong if we didn't start our adventure properly!" Luffy continued with a determined nod.

"That, not so much."

"Listen," Nami crossed her arms firmly. "It's not so easy as you make it out. There's a reason that not just anyone can get into the Grand Line, after all."

"One does not simply sail into THE GRAND LINE!" Soundbite nodded in agreement.

"Oh yeah?" Sanji cocked an eyebrow in curiosity. "How come?"

I opened my mouth to respond... then paused as I became aware of something. Or rather... a lack of something.

I swallowed heavily before grinning morbidly. "How about I show you?"
"Huh?"

I spread my arms wide. "Notice anything... missing from this picture?"

The crew stared at me in confusion... until Soundbite got the hint and started whistling like the wind. Literally.

"Huh, now that you mention it you're right, the rain's stopped," Usopp said as he glanced out one of the portholes.

"It's what?" Nami squawked, staring outside in horror. "No way! We should have been in that storm all the way to the entrance of the canal!"

"And yet, take a look." I pushed the kitchen's door open and gestured. "Not a cloud in the sky."

"Wooooah!" Luffy breathed in awe as he jumped onto the deck, looking around eagerly. "The weather's suddenly great! That's so cool!"

"Yeah..." Sanji muttered as he walked out and looked back past the aft of the ship. "But I can still see the storm back there. What gives?"

"Ooooh, nothing much," I shrugged with a sigh. "Just nature's ultimate middle finger to all inter-Blue travel."

"THIS ISN'T THE TIME TO SPEAK PRETTY, DUMBASS!" Nami shrieked in terror. "IF YOU KNOW WHERE WE ARE, THEN YOU KNOW WHY NEED TO START ROWING OUR WAY OUT OF HERE RIGHT THE HELL NOW!"

"Huh?" Luffy looked at me in confusion. "How come? Where are we?"

"The Calm Belts," I explained with a wide grin. "They're the twin seas that border each half of the Grand Line on either side. No winds blow and barely any currents flow, and of those just about none go all the way through. Think doldrums, only on a global scale."

"So it's calm seas all the way?" Zoro asked. "Doesn't that mean we could just row through?"

"HELL NO!"

"Nami's right, it's not that simple," I nodded in agreement. "After all, as I said, they're seas. It'd take weeks, hell, maybe even months to row our way through. With seven of us on board, we'd almost certainly die of dehydration before we made it through. Besides that, I wouldn't put it past the seas to toss one or two tsunamis at us, which we wouldn't have a chance of outrunning. Then there's the fact that the Calm Belts are the hunting grounds of one of the Seven Warlords of the Sea, the Pirate Empress Boa Hancock, who would most definitely kill us all in about ten seconds flat."

The majority of the crew was staring at me in unmitigated horror, while Luffy was grinning at me as though I'd just caused Christmas to come early.

"And none of those are even the popular reason why nobody comes through here."

"And that reason would be?" Usopp asked nervously, obviously dreading the answer.

Nami made to answer... just as the ship suddenly lurched.

"What the heck-!" Sanji spat.
Soundbite shivered on my shoulder, his eyes swiveling furiously. "They're he~ere..." he sang morbidly.

And just like that, in less than a second, for the first time in her life, the Going Merry flew, sailing high into the sky before coming to a sudden halt and flinging us off our feet.

"Ouch..." I moaned, wincing as my bruises from Luffy getting us back onboard the Merry flared up. "That wasn't pleasant..."

"What was that?" Zoro groaned.

"The popular reason..." Nami whimpered pitifully as she hugged the mast desperately.

Usopp made to ask what she meant... and promptly keeled backwards, foaming at the mouth as the shadow of a titanic head covered us all.

"It's filled... with Sea Kings..." Our navigator sobbed with a hopeless smile.

"Yeah..." I chuckled helplessly, staggering to my feet and glancing over Merry's side at the expanse of black and white skin that lay below us, my blood roaring in my ears as my gut started to boil. "It's their natural breeding ground, actually. Ironic, ain't it? Most dangerous monsters in the world besides humans, and they live in the most peaceful part of it."

"Yeah yeah yeah..." Zoro huffed hurriedly, dragging the ship's oars out of the stockroom and handing them to Sanji and Luffy. "Alright, listen up: when these guys go under, we row like hell for the storm, got it?"

"Yeah!" Luffy nodded in agreement. "We're going into the Grand Line the right way!"

"THAT'S NOT THE REASON WHY, DUMB-WAGH!" Nami was cut off as the Merry suddenly heaved. "W-what the-!?"

Soundbite blinked in confusion for a second before squeaking and snapping back into his shell. "Gesundheit!"

I bit out a curse as I shoved Soundbite into my jacket before running to the Merry's rigging and wrapping one of the rope ladders around my arm. "HOLD ONTO YOUR EVERYTHING!"

And just like that, I experienced one of the most violent sneezes I'd ever felt in my life and things went straight to hell.

The next few minutes were a blur of motion, screaming, flailing, and enough rope burn to skin my arm down to the muscle.

When all was said and done, I found the sting of the rain and seawater sloshing into my open wounds a relief when compared to the idea of going face to face with that horde of monsters again.

"Oh thank god it's just a storm..." Usopp wheezed.

"That... wasn't all that fun..." Luffy - Luffy, of all people - admitted, if somewhat reluctantly.

"Anyone else feel like going in the hard way?" Nami asked darkly.

"EEEEENOPE!" Soundbite bellowed from within his jacket.

"If I never move again it'll be too soon..." Sanji groaned.
I made to respond, but winced as Nami let out a shuddering groan as she suddenly lurched hard to port. "You and me both, but that's not an option at the moment. Either we move or these crazy currents capsize us!"

The male members of the crew groaned in despair, while Nami suddenly shot up with a gasp of realization. "That's it!"

"The hell are you talking about, woman?" Zoro demanded tiredly.

"The currents! That must be how the canals work!" Nami shot to her feet and started pacing furiously in thought, somehow managing to stay standing despite how wildly the deck was swaying. "It sounds crazy, but... if sea currents flowed at the mountain strong enough, then the water would flow up the mountain before coursing down into the Grand Line, like a fountain! There's no doubt we're already on the current, so we just need to do is steer our way in!" She then bit her thumb fearfully as a realization hit her. "But that also mean that things are that much more dangerous. Reverse Mountain is a Winter Island, so when the current hits the Red Line, it sinks back down into the sea. If we crash, we'll be dragged under for sure."

"Ah!" Luffy nodded in what I highly doubted was understanding. "So it's a mystery mountain!"

"Eh, it's not that hard to understand!" I cut in, holding myself up against Merry's railing. "The Red Line is a chain of mountainous islands all linked together that run around the world, each with their own year-round seasonal climate. Florida was a Summer Island through and through, so I'm used to the heat."

"Ooooh! So they're mystery islands! Got it!"

I shrugged at Nami helplessly. "I tried."

"Hmph..." Zoro shook his head with a grunt. "Never heard of anyone sailing over a mountain before..."

"I might have," Sanji shot back with a grin.

"About this mountain?"

"No, the Grand Line," Sanji's smirk widened visibly. "They say you need to be half-dead before you can get in."

"Are you kidding me!?" Usopp demanded helplessly.

"Hey, what were you expecting, a red carpet?" I laughed as I patted Usopp's back sympathetically. "Nothing worth doing is easy to do, which means this is really gonna be worth it, right?"

The long-nosed sniper shot me a dark glare. "I vehemently question your logic."

"NYEH!" Soundbite poked his head out of my jacket in order to stick his tongue out at Usopp.

"YOU LITTLE-!"

"HEY! I CAN SEE THE MYSTERY ISLAND-MOUNTAIN!" Luffy suddenly bellowed, jabbing a finger out into the storm.

We all turned to see what he was indicating... and promptly fell silent.
It was... monolithic was a word, but it didn't even begin to do the Red Line justice. It was as though the horizon had just... become stone. I craned my neck back, staring up in an attempt to catch sight of the top of the Line. Some part of my memory logically told me that it was an exercise in futile, but I... I had to try, some other part of my mind stubbornly refusing to accept the idea that something as stupidly massive as this... this geological monstrosity was physically capable, in this world or any other.

But no, there it was, staring me straight in the face and defying everything I knew to be fact.

And, I realized with a start, coming closer each and every second.

"Guys?" I croaked numbly.

Luffy successfully proved that the apocalypse was fast approaching by being the first to realize what I was getting at. "WE'RE GETTING SUCKED IN!" he whooped euphorically. "SANJI! USOPP! STEER US IN!"

Shocked out of their stupor, the two promptly scrambled into the kitchen and grabbed the whipstaff. "ON IT!" They chorused.

As we came closer and closer, we managed to catch sight of a crack in the mountain. Nami dug a pair of binoculars out of her coat and stared through them for a second before fumbling and almost dropping them in shock. "Holy crap..." she squeaked.

"What is it?" Zoro asked her.

She handed the binoculars to him without a word. He looked through them as well and promptly clenched in shock. "That's... I can't believe it..."

I laughed hoarsely as it finally came into sight: what had to be thousands upon thousands of gallons of water pouring up the mountain, passing beneath ten impossible stone arches. The sight was so insane, so terrifying, so... so...

Beautiful.

It was breathtaking. An awe-inspiring sight that flipped every switch I had and threw my being into overdrive. My whole body felt like it was in danger of boiling over at any moment.

"There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio!" I couldn't help but quote with an ear-to-ear grin.

Zoro ground his teeth as he stared at the fast-approaching gate. "Damn pretty words. Won't mean much if we die, though."

"We're a little off!" Luffy noted with a tinge of panic. "We need to be more to the right!"

Acting fast, I yanked Soundbite out of my coat and slammed him on to my shoulder, a whine flaring up over the howl of the wind. "HARD TO STARBOARD!"

"Right!"

"On it!"

For a moment, we heard them struggling to keep the Merry's rudder under control...

SNAP!
Until the sound of wood snapping in two like a dry twig rang out over the deck.

We all turned and stared at the whipstaff's destruction for a moment before a shudder beneath our feet brought us all back to our senses.

"THE WHIPSTAFF!" Nami shrieked in terror.

I froze for a moment as I noticed the fact that we were heading straight for one of the arches.

"Luuuffyyyy!" I asked nervously.

"I'm on it!" Luffy roared as he rushed past me. I barely had time to process the blur of yellow heading at me before I managed to force myself into action and grab Luffy's hat before it could fly away.

"GUM-GUM!" Luffy jumped over the edge of the Merry, interposing himself between the arch and our ship before inflating to unrealistic proportions. "BALLOON!"

For a heart-pounding moment, Luffy was squeezed against the arch, the Merry staying in place... until we finally slipped past, flying up the canal so fast we might as well be on a roller-coaster.

There was just one problem.

"LUFFY!" I yelled, watching as our captain started to drop into the sea.

"GRAB ON!" Zoro bellowed desperately, holding an arm out to him.

Nothing... nothing...

Luffy's hand grabbed Zoro's in an instant, clutching it for dear life. One hard tug later and our captain was tumbling onto the deck, laughing his ass off.

I sighed in relief as I slammed Luffy's hat back on his head. "NEVER DO THAT AGAIN, DUMBASS!" I shouted through my smile.

"DUMBASS, DUMBASS!" Soundbite parroted eagerly.

Luffy's response was to laugh even harder, and he wasn't the only one. All around me, the crew was celebrating. Usopp and Sanji were dancing, Nami was whooping joyously, Zoro had cracked a grin...

And me?

In the past ten minutes, I had come inches from death, be it by storm, by Sea King or by crazy, convoluted currents. I was officially in over my head, miles out of my element...

"Pfff..." I snorted, my whole body shaking for a moment until I finally threw my head back and howled with laughter. "PFFHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

And I was loving every second of it.

Cackling like a madman, I leapt up onto the Merry's railing, wrapped my arm around the rigging, and hung myself out over the abyss.

The wind tugged at my body, trying to wrench me free, the sea roared and howled mere feet below me, and I felt more alive than I'd ever imagined I could.
It was stupid, it was insane and I was laughing the whole time.

"HAHAHA!" I laughed at the top of my lungs. "WE'RE IN! WE'RE IN!"

"BANZAI! BANZAI!" Soundbite guffawed in agreement as he held on for dear life.

A second later, Nami suddenly shouted and pointed ahead. "Look!" she exclaimed with a massive grin. "We're going through the clouds!"

And so we were: Further in and further up the mountain, piercing through the roof of the heavens until at last we broke through and came within sight of the peak, the very roof of the world.

It was... indescribable. The waters of four oceans, the world itself, colliding into a singular point, foam spraying up and dissipating into mist before it all rumbled down a singular channel.

Within moments, we were on it: the Merry jumped and, for a brief moment, she flew once more, the force of the water spinning her around to face the only possible way out.

As we started to fall, I looked over my shoulder and stared into the clouds that obscured the mountainside. For a brief moment, I imagined that I could see it, that I could just catch a glimpse of it. The throne of the King of the Pirates, the final destination, the promised island.

Raftel.

I swallowed heavily as a massive grin split my face. 'There's the finish line...'

"I CAN SEE IT!" Luffy cheered. "THE GRAND LINE!"

I snapped my head around as the Merry hit the downward-flowing channel, and I saw what he saw. A lot of it was obscured in clouds, but it was there, there was no denying it: a field of blue that married the horizon, roiling and churning and roaring in welcome.

My grin widened even further. 'And there's the start.'

As we fell down the mountainside, picking up speed, I couldn't help but feel I was forgetting something. But at this point, I officially couldn't care less, and didn't even try to restrain my reaction as we soared down the world's largest waterslide.

"HAHAHA!" I barked wildly, hanging over the edge of the abyss. "THIS IS AWESOME! I LOVE YOU GUYS! I LOVE YOU ALL SO FREAKING MUCH!"
"...ooohhh..."

I blinked as a faint warbling sound rippled through the air, jerking me out of my laughter. "The heck...?"

"You heard it too?" Zoro called up to me.

"Good chance of it being the wind," Nami shrugged indifferently. "The rock formations around here are pretty unusual."

"I'm not so sure about that..." I frowned slightly, wracking my brain. That noise was... familiar... where had I...? "Soundbite, could you-?"

Soundbite mimicked a rewinding cassette for a second before finally...

"...wwwooooh..."

I cocked an eyebrow at the replay. "That... was a lot clearer than I remember."

Soundbite's skin became a shade of gray more ashen than his usual gunmetal as the blood drained from his face. "THAT wasn't ME!" he yelped.

I snapped my eyes to the snail in disbelief. "Excuse me!?"

"...wwwoooOOOOHHH..."

I shuddered as the sound came again, this time a full factor louder. That was really, really familiar...

"Hey!" Usopp called down from where he was hanging onto the mainmast's yardarm, pulling down one of the lenses of his goggles in curiosity. "I think there's something up ahead!"

"Yeah!" Sanji concurred, pointing at the mists dead ahead of us. "It looks like a mountain!"

"Huh?" Nami blinked in confusion. "That can't be right, all that's supposed to be past here is the Twin Capes!"

"Then what the hell do you call that!?" Zoro demanded, pointing at the dark silhouette that was starting to come into view, almost as large as the Red Line itself.

"What the hell!?" Nami blurted in disbelief. "But... that chart was accurate! There aren't any mountains here!"

I narrowed my eyes at the silhouette as I tried to connect the dots. Massive form, smack dab where there should be nothing of the sort. And that noise... I knew that noise, I know I'd heard that noise before. Now if only I could remember what that noise-

"BWWWWOOOOOOOHHHH!"

...Aaaaah Sea King shite.

"That's no mountain," I whispered numbly.
The crew looked at me in confusion for a second...

"BWWWOOOHHHH!"

"THAR SHE BLOWS!" Soundbite cried out.

Before snapping their heads around at the newest reiteration of the noise, the mist finally parting just enough to give us a clear view of what was in our way.

And what a what he was.

"HOLY CRAP, THAT'S A WHALE!" Usopp shrieked in terror.

'No,' I couldn't help but mentally correct Usopp as I stare up at the entity towering before us. 'That's no whale.'

And indeed he wasn't. Or at least, he wasn't just a whale. Oda did his best, but he didn't really do Laboon justice. Not his fault, really. It was hard to truly render such a beast with mere pen and paper. He was... I suppose titan would be the most apt word. A massive, dominating form of flesh and blood wrapped in pitch-black skin. He was almost as big as some of the largest creatures we'd seen on the fringes of the Calm Belt, and I was beyond certain that he could - would, judging by the building-sized teeth I could just spy poking out of the corners of his mouth - have eaten some of the smaller ones I'd seen.

To put it simply, Laboon was... well, he was glorious.

He was also going to crush us with his gargantuan frame without moving so much as a muscle.

As we rushed towards the literally killer whale, my crewmates panicking wildly around me, I found myself falling back onto the option my mind found most logical at the moment.

"Pfff..."

I laughed.

"PFFHAHAHA!" I guffawed, barely managing to support myself on the Merry's railing as laugh after laugh after laugh bubbled up and out of my bubbling stomach.

"WHAT THE HECK ARE YOU LAUGHING ABOUT, DUMBASS!?” Nami shrieked as she grabbed me by my collar.

I froze momentarily as the question hit me. Now that I thought about it... why was I laughing? I mean, after all, there was nothing funny about our situation! We were hurtling towards death at speeds almost guaranteed to break every bone in our bodies! This wasn't humorous, this was dangerous! This was fatal! This was abso-freaking-lutely exhilarating!... Ooooooohhh...

I plastered a shaky grin on my face as I chuckled nervously. "Ahh... would this be a bad time to inform you that I think I just figured out that I'm an adrenaline junky?"

"WHAT!?"

Before I could respond, a massive BOOM shook the ship before we were jerked to a slower pace, throwing us all off our feet.

Nami blinked in confusion as she tried to get her limbs beneath herself. "What the hell was that!?”
Soundbite's eyes twisted around for a second before locking dead ahead. "Dumbass!" he spat out in Nami's voice.

Nami and I followed Soundbite's line of sight... and promptly noticed the trail of smoke wafting upwards.

"THE CANNON!" my crewmates shrieked in horror.

I, however, was more focused on the fact that Laboon was still coming closer and closer!

"Yeah!" Luffy called out from beneath the forecastle. "Did it work? Did we stop?"

"Not quite!" I barked out, leaping up and wrapping the rigging around my arm again.

"BRACE FOR IMPACT!" Soundbite hollered.

A second later, we thumped against Laboon's hide. Thankfully, the majority of the impact to the ship was negligible.

CRACK!

I winced as Merry's head was snapped not-very-cleanly from her neck. That... not so much.

"This is bad..." Nami whimpered as she held onto Merry's railing for dear life, her eyes halfway devoid of life. "Am I dead?"

"Noot yet..."

"AAAH! MY SPECIAL SEAT!"

I winced as Luffy's voice bellowed out, filled with equal parts horror and fury. "Give it a minute, though, I'm sure you won't have to wait long."

"We're not waiting, period!"

"OOMPH!" I wheezed as Zoro tossed one of Merry's oars at me, with Usopp quickly helping me pick it up.

"Come on!" he ordered as Sanji helped him lower the other oar into the water. "Let's get out of here before that thing reacts!"

"Seriously!" Usopp yelped as he jerked the oar into motion alongside me. "Is this thing so big that it didn't notice a freaking cannon firing into it or is it just slow!?"

"I think it's more the former than the latter!" I grunted as I alternated between pushing and pulling the wooden stick. "After all, from my experience? The intelligence of animals can seriously surprise you at times!"

"REPRESENT!" Soundbite nodded firmly.

"After all, you'd expect a snail that can speak to have at least half a braincell..."

"OI!"

"HEY! LISTEN UP!"
We all froze as Luffy's voice bellowed out.

Apparently Laboon noticed as well, if the way his body sunk down into the water just enough so that his gargantuan eye could loom over us.

Nami swallowed heavily as she eyed our captain nervously. "Luffy..." she attempted to placate him desperately. "I realize you might be angry, but that thing's a million times your weight. Whatever you do, don't do anything stupid-!"

"BASTARD!" Luffy hollered, snapping his arm out and punching square into the center of Laboon's cornea.

"LIKE THAT, YOU MORON!" the rest of the crew shrieked.

"You can't seriously be surprised by this..." I sighed with a weary grin.

If I had to guess, though, Laboon almost certainly was if the way his pupil jerked down to stare dead at us was anything to go by.

"He's noticed us..." Nami choked out.

"AND I'LL MAKE HIM NOTICE US EVEN MORE!" Luffy roared.

"SHUT UP, DUMBASS!" Zoro and Usopp ordered as they tackled him and started doing their utmost best to keep him quiet.

I made to say something... and froze as I caught sight of Laboon twitching slightly. "I think that might be too little too late!"

"BWWOOOOHHHHH!"

As if to prove me right, Laboon suddenly moved, his mass shifting far faster than anything even half his size had a right to move as he twisted his head around and snapped his open, allowing a veritable waterfall-worth of water to cascade down his throat.

I cursed as the Merry suddenly jerked forwards. Correction, a waterfall-worth of water and us!

"Hold onto something!" I cried, one hand clutching Soundbite to my chest while my other twisted itself into the rigging as tight as it could go.

"WAAAAAH!" Luffy cried in panic as the Merry's deck suddenly bucked just a tad too hard, throwing Luffy well clear off our ship and to parts unknown. "I'M GONNA FALL IN!"

"WHAT THE HELL DID I JUST SAY!?"

"LOOK OUT!" Usopp screamed in terror. "WE'RE GOING DOWN!"

And indeed, down we went. Down and down and down, twisting and swaying and swinging every which way there was to swing. It was like the world's most absolutely insane rollercoaster. It was pitch-black, it was wild, and it out and out reeked.

Finally, the Merry hit a steady downward slide. It was uncontrolled, yes, but at least we weren't in danger of going overboard every other second anymore.

I panted heavily as I fought to get some air back in my lungs, and my legs beneath my body. "Sou-!"
I panted for a second before slapping Soundbite onto my shoulder and tapping his shell. "Sound
"Here."

"Hey."

"I'll live."

"I think I've got 'I'm-terrified-beyond-all-belief' disease..."

"Right there with you..." I twisted my head around wearily, trying to spy anything in the pitch-black darkness. "Anybody have any idea where we are? Beyond the obvious, I mean."

"Can't see shit, cap'n!!"

"CRAP! Luffy! Where's Luffy?!

"Last I saw he was being thrown overboard," I supplied. "Buuut I wouldn't worry. Anyone else and I'd say they were sinking to a tea party with Davy Jones. Him? Ten berries says he's making his way down this thing's blowhole and he'll meet up with us sooner or later."

"I'll take that action!"

"You have no shame, do you, witch?"

"DON'T CALL NAMI-SWAN A-!"

"Uh, guys?"

"WHAT?"

"We're not dead yet, right?"

"I'm not sporting wings and a halo, so no."

"The hell makes you think you're going up there, snailmail?"

"Pff, compared to you and most people on these seas? I'm a freaking saint! Er, the literal kind, not the batshit evil inbred kind."

"Oh, screw-!"

"So we're still alive, yeah?"

"Yes, Usopp, we're still alive!"

"Then could someone explain the light at the end of the tunnel?"

We all turned towards the approximate direction of the aft and caught sight of the bright light illuminating the darkness. A bright light that was coming up fast.

"Hold on!" I barked out.

And with that, Merry splashed down into the light, the suddenly even water killing our momentum and bringing us to a firm and final halt.

We slowly clambered to our feet, looking around in order to catch sight of our surroundings... and
promptly staring in disbelief.

"Uh... guys?" I squeaked numbly.

"You seeing what I'm seein'?" Soundbite demanded.

"That depends..." Nami said slowly, her tone very carefully neutral. "Are you seeing the big blue sky after we got swallowed by a whale, not to mention an island with a palm tree and house on it?"

"Yup." Zoro, Usopp and Sanji nodded solemnly.

"Ah..." Nami nodded stiffly. "Then there are two possibilities: one, we've all gone batshit insane."

I proceeded to give Nami a look.

"...point. Alright, in that case... yeah, I've got nothing."

"Never thought I'd see the day..." I mused to myself as I looked around. I racked my brain as I tried to recall the exact details of what had happened around now, cursing my past self for passing up the chance to reread the series when I had it. "Well, at any rate... maybe we actually are in the belly of the whale? The walls could be painted or something."

Zoro stared at me in disbelief. "You can't be serious."

I slapped a hand to my chest and raised my hand towards the pseudo-sky. "May a Sea King strike me down should I lie!"

SPLASH! "GRAAAAOOOO!"

"AAAAAGH! SEA KING!"

Oh, riiight.

Faced with the titan-sized serving of fresh calamari that was barreling towards me, my mind promptly stalled against my will, causing me to blurt out the first thing that came to mind.

"May the Sea King be struck down should I lie!"

TH-TH-THUNK!

I blinked in surprise as a trio of harpoons burst out from between the Titan Squid's eyes, causing it to twitch once, twice, three times before it slowly collapsed backwards, its blood and ink staining the stomach acid.

I stared at the scene in shock before snapping my gaze upwards. "May a billion berries fall from the sky should I lie!"

Nothing.

I scowled in disappointment. "Seriously? What omnipotent being worth their divine salt doesn't do things in threes!?!"

"RIPOFF!" Soundbite concurred.

"What the hell kind of place is this?!" Nami sobbed miserably.
"I wanna go ho-o-ome!" Usopp concurred.

"Cram it, peanut gallery," Zoro growled as he clicked one of his swords out of its sheath ever so slightly. "We're not alone."

"Here's hoping they're human," Sanji smirked as he puffed out a plume of smoke.

We all tensed as the door to the house slowly edged itself open, allowing someone... mostly human to step out. I mean, old and humanoid Crocus might have appeared, but seriously, there was no way in hell that stuff on his head was hair. Then again, considering where I was...

"Is that... actually a human!?" Usopp blinked in disbelief.

"Could be a flower-man," I shrugged. "I mean, seriously, between the minks, the fish/mer-folk and the long-limb tribes, I wouldn't put it past this world."

"Well, whatever he is, don't let your guard down," Zoro growled as he tightened his grip on his katana. "He just took down a Sea King-size squid like it was nothing."

"Mn..." Sanji mused nervously. "Chances are, either he just saved us... or he was fishing. Which make me wonder... what does he have in store for us?"

Almost in response, Crocus snapped his eyes up to glare at us. We all tensed furiously as his eyes peered into us, another thing Oda's pen simply couldn't fully capture. I think I finally understood how a simple doctor managed to get someone with the name of D., much less any of the Pirate King's crewmates, to sit down long enough for halfway-decent treatment: by terrifying the ever-loving shit out of them.

And so... we waited.

We waited.

And waited.

And waited...

Until finally...

Crocus sunk into a lawnchair and flipped open a newspaper.

"WILL YOU SAY SOMETHING ALREADY!?!" Sanji roared indignantly.

Crocus cocked an eyebrow at the outburst, but before he could respond, Usopp barked up... from the Merry's kitchen. "H-H-HEY! Y-YOU LOOKING FOR A FIGHT?! B-BECAUSE I'M WARNING YOU, WE'VE GOT A CANNON!"

"And yet our sniper isn't even anywhere close to manning it," I noted flatly.

Crocus seemed to twitch as his glare redoubled. "Forget it. If you do that... someone's gonna die."

Without warning, the glare was well and truly back.

And so... we waited.

We waited.
And waited.

And waited...

Until finally...

"Oh yeah?" Sanji said, breaking the silence with a convincing amount of bravado, though I could see sweat bead on his forehead. "And who would that be?"

"Me."

"LISTEN, YOU-!" Sanji snapped, putting one foot on the railing of Merry as if to launch himself at Crocus.

Thankfully, Zoro placed a hand on Sanji's shoulder, halting him in place. Good thing too; while I doubt Crocus would be capable of stopping a cannonball as he was, a no-name East Blue cook like Sanji would most likely be no problem.

"No need to get angry, alright?" our first mate smirked, no doubt revelling in Sanji's loss of control. "Listen, old man, we've got some questions for you: who are you, and where the heck are we?"

Crocus snapped a glare to the swordsman, freezing us all in place.

And so... we waited.

We waited.

And waited.

And waited...

Until finally...

"Young man..." he growled. "Isn't it impolite to demand questions of others before you introduce yourself?"

Zoro swallowed heavily as he fought to steady his nerve, plastering an apologetic grin on his face. "Y-yeah, good point. Sorry about that. I'll start: my name is-

"My name is Crocus," the old doctor interrupted, his tone not shifting so much as a decibel the entire time. "I am the keeper of the Twin Capes Lighthouse. I'm 71 and a half years old, Gemini, my blood type is AB, and my favorite food is-

"I'M GONNA CHOP HIM UP!" Zoro snapped in an almost identical manner to Sanji, Wado Ichimonji halfway out of its sheath.

"Calm down, he was just answering," I rolled my eyes with a snigger as I clapped a hand down on his shoulder. Soundbite was barely restraining his laughter as it was.

"So you want to know where you are, hm?" Crocus suddenly asked out of the blue. "A logical question, but your rude disposition is making me disinclined to accommodate you. You invade my private resort and act like a bunch of big-shots? Hmph! Besides, I'd think your current location to be rather obvious, considering how hard it is to miss the front door!"

Usopp paled in horror. "Y-y-you mean we're really in that whale's stomach!?"
"But I don't want to be digested!" Nami wailed miserably.

Without warning, Crocus's glare came back at full force and we found ourselves frozen stiff.

And so... we waited.

We waited.

And waited.

And waited...

Until finally...

"WILL YOU STOP DOING THAT!?" my crewmates shrieked, their nerves appearing to override their terror.

"Geeze, guys, lighten up, would you?" I sighed as I dug a finger in my ear. Damn they could be loud sometimes. "Can't you appreciate a decent running gag?"

"THAT WAS A GAG!?"

Soundbite roared and hollered with laughter as he swung his head side to side on my shoulder. "HI-LARIOUS!"

"At least the boy and his snail have a decent sense of humor!" Crocus sniffed.

"Eighteen, just for the record!"

"Whatever you say, brat."

At least I tried…

"Anyways... if you and yours want out, that's fine by me. The exit's right over there." And with that, Crocus jabbed his thumb at the pair of doors embedded into the horizon.

"Wait, what!?" Nami yelped in shock. "What's an exit doing inside a whale's stomach!? And... why is it on the sky in the first place?"

"Nooooot quite." I shrugged. "Really now, Nami. I'm quite surprised you didn't realize it in the first place. It's soooobvious."

"Huh?" Nami blinked at me in confusion.

"Wait..." Usopp squinted at the 'sky'. "I think I see what he's getting at! Look! The clouds! T-they're not moving! They really are painted!"

"Aaaaand there's no wind blowing either. Really, Nami..." I shook my head with a sigh. "I'm quite shocked you didn't realize it sooner. It should have been obvious. For a great navigator such as you, anyways."

Nami stammered messily for a moment before looking away with a huff and an iridescent blush. "So I got freaked out and wasn't paying attention. 's not a big deal... OH SHUT UP!" That particular roar was directed at Soundbite as he cackled madly.

"But still, the clouds!" Usopp reiterated, gesturing at our surroundings. "Why the hell are they up
"It's... a hobby." Crocus informed us flatly.

"Makes sense." I nodded firmly.

"It's only healthy!" Soundbite confirmed.

"ARE YOU ALL OUT OF YOUR MINDS!?" Usopp demanded.

"We can deal with their brand of crazy later!" Zoro barked, slapping his hand down on Usopp's shoulder. "For now, let's get out of here before anything else happens!"

"BWWWOOOOHHHH!"

Without warning, Laboon's stomach all but literally jumped, his stomach acid flipping and jostling madly.

"Like that!"

Crocus shook his head with a despondent sigh. "And there he goes again..."

I grunted as I supported myself on the Merry's railing. Sea legs I might have, but this was out and out ridiculous. I really, really hope that things even out soon, or else I'm going to wind up swabbing my own puke off of Merry's-

"Sad!"

I blinked as Soundbite suddenly spoke up. "Say what?"

"Sad! SO sad!" the baby transponder snail lamented with a shiver.

"You're only just now figuring that out?" I asked in confusion.

Soundbite shuddered and shook his head furiously. "NO! WASN'T listening BEFORE! Too SCARED! Listening NOW! And sad! SO sad! Sad-sad-sad-sad-sad-sad!"

Crocus sniffed heavily. "That snail's got a good sense of hearing. Currently the whale we're inside is ramming his head against the Red Line out of despair."

"What!?" Zoro and Sanji gasped in disbelief.

"I guess that would explain the amount of scars on this guy's head..." Nami mused sadly. "And even I could hear the misery in his cries."

"WORSE!" Soundbite shook his head even harder. "Worse THAN you can IMAGINE! PAIN! MISERY! SUFF-E-RING!"

"And you're the reason why, aren't you?" Nami snapped her attention around to Crocus furiously. "You're in here to kill the whale from the inside!"

"Now that I doubt," I cut in swiftly. "Look around you: we're in the dead center of this guy's gut, and presumably Old Man Crocus over there has been in here for even longer. Considering what he did to that squid, I imagine he'd be able to play whatever merry hell he wanted to on this poor whale's insides with his bare hands, much less those harpoons. If he actually meant it any harm, he'd
have done it by now. No..." I looked at the old doctor contemplatively. "That's not even remotely your purpose here, is it?"

Crocus didn't respond, merely cocking an eyebrow as he stared up at me, what appeared to be a glimmer of respect in his gaze.

"We can figure that all out later!" Zoro snarled as he and Sanji moved to grab up the oars that had been rattling across the deck in the midst of the chaos. "Right now, we need to try and get to the exit before we capsize!"

"Easier said than done!" Sanji grunted. "This sloshing's making it damn near impossible to steer!"

"Well try, damn it! Otherwise-!"

SPLASH!

"Hey!" Usopp yelped. "That old guy just dove in!"

And indeed, Crocus was no longer on the island. Instead, he was a blurry form in the off-color acid, swimming straight towards the doors that marked our only way out.

"Looks like he's heading for the exit too, huh?" Usopp muttered. "I guess he wants to leave before this crazy whale kills him too!"

"Now if he were willing to up and leave like that, why would he go to all the trouble of setting up a home in this guy's stomach?" I questioned.

"I... uhhh..."

Before Usopp could formulate a response, Laboon let loose another warbling moan before settling down, the acidic tsunamis subsiding to little more than mere swells.

"Well, that's quite a bit better. He must be pulling back for another run," I noted calmly.

"Whatever is going on, I couldn't care less! Let's row for safety, now!" Zoro ordered.

And indeed, we did just that. We rowed and rowed, coming within a hundred feet of the exit to Laboon's gut...

KA-BAM!

"WAAAAAGH!"

When suddenly a smaller door on the gates burst open, spraying out quite the odd trio: a man pretending to be a prince, a princess pretending to be a mercenary-slash-bountyhunter, and a pirate destined to be the ruler of the seas.

Quite honestly, I felt like there was a joke in there somewhere.

Zoro blinked as Luffy flew over us. "Well I'll be damned. Looks like you were right, Cross."

I started to nod in agreement... before slapping a hand to my face as a thought struck me.

"Ahhh damn it!"

"Huh? What's wrong?" Nami asked.
"I just realized! I could have asked for a thousand berries!"

Nami blinked in confusion for a second... before scowling and ramming a hand into her pocket. "Yeah yeah, I get the message..."

I grinned cheekily as she slapped the bill into my waiting palm. "Pleasure doing business with ya!"

"Thank you, call again!" Soundbite chirped in a faux-indian accent.

"Hey! As much as I appreciate you helping me get one over on the witch, mind giving me a hand here?" Zoro called as he hauled on a rope that was cast overboard. "You know, before our captain either drowns or gets digested?"

A quick moment of hustle and bustle later, made easier by the fact that Laboon finally calmed down, and we had one familiar face and two strangers on board our ship.

"So you guys are still alive, huh?" Luffy grinned. "That's nice!"

"Good to see you too, Luffy!" I smiled at my captain before directing my attention towards his two 'friends' with a frown, knocking them out of their hushed conversation. "And I see you brought guests with you. I don't suppose either of you would be inclined to share your name with us, would you?"

Quite predictably, both Miss Wednesday and Mr. 9 averted their eyes with a huff.

"Hmph. I was afraid of that. Well, in that case, I suppose I'll just need to borrow these, won't I?"

The Frontier Agents tensed and made to stop me as I slid the cannons they'd been clutching since we'd dragged them out of the acid out of their reach. However, before either of them could protest, they were frozen by the shink of a blade - Wado Ichimonji, most likely - sliding partway out of its sheath.

I whistled as I leaned down to examine what had to be about half my body mass in pure gun. "Damn... this is some nice hardware; I'm not an artillery expert and even I can tell that." I gave them an accusing glare. "Mind telling me who or what you want to die in a blaze of high-explosive glory?"

Before either of the agents could respond in any manner, a very loud, very familiar and very cantankerous voice bellowed out from behind us.

"AS LONG AS I LIVE!" Crocus roared indignantly. "YOU WILL NEVER HARM LABOON!"

"Huh?" Luffy blinked in confusion. "Who's he?"

"That would be Old Man Crocus," I supplied. "From what I can tell, he's a guy who lives here in the stomach of the whale that swallowed us. A whale whose name I'm guessing..."

I slammed my foot down on the bazooka's grip moments before Mr. 9 could grab it.

"Is Laboon."

Soundbite loosed a vicious growl that was equal parts doberman and german shepard, prompting the agents to reel back in terror.

"C-come now!" Mr. 9 reasoned desperately. "It's just whaling! Y-you're pirates, surely we can come to an understanding, no?"
I cocked an eyebrow as I gave the man a decidedly unimpressed look. "Back where I'm from, whaling is a pretty hefty crime. Besides the fact that it's damn amoral, I mean. But hey, I'm just the Comms Officer. What say you, captain?"

Luffy was silent as he examined the two, looking them up and down for a moment before speaking. "You two came in here so that you could shoot this whale in the stomach, where he couldn't even defend himself?"

Mr. 9 and Miss Wednesday glanced at each other for a moment before grinning and nodding eagerly.

"WHAM!"

The crew and I reeled in shock as Luffy's fists lashed out and bounced the pair's skulls off the Merry's railing.

Luffy crossed his arms with a snort. "They had it coming." He nodded firmly.

"Sca-ary," Soundbite whispered.

"And don't you forget it..." I whispered right back.

A few minutes later, we were making our way out of Laboon's stomach and away from his acid, with Crocus hitching a ride in order to show us the way out and with Miss Wednesday and Mr. 9 tied back to back and leaned against the Merry's mast.

"Laboon is an Island Whale," Crocus explained tiredly, glaring darkly at the pair of would-be assassins. "They're the largest species of whales in the world, and they live exclusively in the West Blue. These jokers," he jutted his chin forwards with a sniff. "Live in a nearby village. They claim that they want to kill Laboon for his meat, on account of how it could feed them for a few years with him alone."

Luffy gave Crocus a flat look. "That's just stupid. This guy could only feed them for three weeks, tops."

I gave Luffy a flat look. "Your answer terrifies me beyond all belief for so many reasons."

"Regardless, I'm not going to give you or anyone else the chance to find out," Crocus spat.

"Why do you care so much about this whale anyways?" Zoro asked bluntly. He then proceeded to grunt he was suddenly smacked upside the back of his head. "OW! The hell was that for, you two!?"

"For being an ass!" Nami growled.

"Seriously, man, learn some tact," I shook my head firmly.

"BRUTE!" Soundbite sniffed.

"Coming from you? That's rich."

"Regardless of how rude the question might have been, I suppose it's a fair one..." Crocus bowed his head with a sigh. "I'll start at the beginning. You see... there's a reason that Laboon keeps pounding his head against the Red Line and crying at Reverse Mountain. I've been this lighthouse's keeper for awhile now. One day, a friendly group of pirates came down Reverse Mountain, and right behind them was a little baby whale. Laboon."

"A pirate crew with a whale as a pet? Now I've heard it all," Usopp whistled.
"First, we've only just gotten on the Grand Line. And second?" I pointed at Soundbite. "It's not like we have much room to talk."

Crocus chuckled as he looked our snail over. "Yes... Pirate crews can come across the most interesting of companions. These pirates had been travelling with Laboon for several years by then. They'd intended to leave Laboon behind in the West Blue because they knew that the Grand Line was dangerous, that Laboon wouldn't survive. But... they didn't take into account that Laboon had adopted them as its pod, so it followed them here."

The lighthouse keeper smiled wistfully as he relived his age-old memories. "Their ship was damaged in the crossing, as most big ships are. They stayed here for several months as they made repairs, and I became good friends with both them and Laboon. And then, when they left, their captain asked me to care for Laboon for a few years, at least until they came back. They said that they would circumnavigate the world and come back... so Laboon and I agreed to wait here together."

"So the reason he keeps banging against the Red Line and crying-?" Nami asked slowly.

Crocus shook his head slowly. "Not... quite. You see... Laboon's friends left just about fifty years ago."

Even knowing it was coming, I could barely restrain my wince.

"But nonetheless... Laboon still thinks his crew is coming back."

We lapsed into an uncomfortable silence for a bit until Luffy decided to be Luffy, looking around at the corridor we were in for a second before whistling in awe. "You know, this place is kind of cool, old man! Did you build it?"

"Lemme guess, another hobby?" Usopp deadpanned.

Crocus chuckled sardonically. "A hobby? Yes, I suppose so. A doctor's hobby. I may not look it, but I used to be a physician, long ago. I was even a ship's doctor for a few years. Ahh, those were the days..."

"Wow, you were a ship's doctor?!" Luffy grinned eagerly. "Cool! Hey, what about joining my crew as our doctor?"

My eyebrows shot up in shock as Crocus seemed to undergo a momentary heart attack, paling and tensing suddenly as though he'd just seen a ghost before swiftly bringing his reactions back under control. I barely managed to repress a grin; the collective Will of D. was no doubt alive and well, but there was no question as to who had inherited Roger's, that was for sure.

Nevertheless, Crocus snorted and looked away dismissively. "Me? Act as a doctor for a bunch of reckless whippersnappers like you at my age? The mere idea is ridiculous."

Before Luffy could make to press the point, we were forced to stop our forward motion as we came up to a large gateway. Without missing a beat, Crocus jumped off the ship and started climbing a ladder that led to a walkway that lined the corridor.

"Are doctors living inside whales common on the Grand Line?" Nami asked semi-seriously.

"Ha!" Crocus barked out a laugh. "Not common, no, but I'm far from the oddest thing you'll see. I didn't have much choice in the remodelling, anyways. Laboon got too big and my treatments weren't doing anything from the outside, so I had to improvise. The old man let out a grunt as he started to turn a large wheel. "Careful now, I'm opening the floodgates."
With a grinding KLANG, the gates shifted open, allowing us to flow out in a flood of seawater and body fluids I did not want to identify.

"Woohoo! The real sky! Finally!" Luffy whooped.

However, our joy was cut down slightly by the sound of Miss Wednesday and Mr. 9 groaning and stirring as they came around from their Luffy-grade naps.

"So what should we do with these clowns?" Zoro asked grimly.

"Personally?" Crocus said as he got back onboard. "I advocate throwing them overboard."

"With or without the ropes?" I queried sarcastically.

"Oh don't be an idiot." Nami rolled her eyes as she undid the pair's binds. "Zoro, if you'd be so kind?"

The swordsman promptly complied, grabbing the two by their collars and tossing them into the sea.

After a moment of flailing, cursing, and rampant vengeance-swearling, the pair proceeded to swim away and out of sight.

"Ahh... Miss Wednesday, hmm?" Sanji swooned as he somehow blew hearts of smoke. "There's nothing more romantic than a woman of mystery."

"You do realize this 'woman of mystery' was toting a high-calibre cannon and most likely wouldn't think twice about snapping you like a twig, right?" I deadpanned.

"Ahhh, but what a way to die..."

"Deathwish," Soundbite intoned flatly.

"Tell me about it..." I rolled my eyes.

"Ooh, hey, what's this?" Luffy asked as he looked over a very particular item that the pair had dropped.

"Yoink!" I jerked the Log Pose out of my Captain's hand.

"Hey!" Luffy whined.

"It looks fragile," I shrugged. "You don't wanna break it, do you?"

"Mmm..." Luffy pouted, but thankfully dropped the issue.

"Should we really let them go if they plan on trying again?" Nami questioned uneasily.

Crocus scoffed as he watched them leave. "It doesn't matter what we do, there will always be more whalers. Besides, I've got more than enough practice and Laboon is tough. We'll be fine."

As Laboon reeled himself up and started wailing at the Red Line, we relocated ourselves up onto the cliffs of the Red Line, at the base of one of the lighthouses.

"So..." Luffy mused as he relaxed against a rock outcropping. "He's been waiting fifty years for his crew, and he still thinks they're coming back for him. Man, those guys have kept him waiting for a long time... I hope they get back soon."
I shook my head with a tsk. "Sorry to tell you this, Cap, but I've read this kind of story a dozen times over. It's not one that has a happy ending."

"Yeah," Sanji agreed, taking a puff of his cigarette. "They said they'd take a few years. It's been fifty. Do the math." He grimaced, before continuing. "They're dead. He'll be waiting until the end of time."

"How can you two be so cynical!?" Usopp demanded in a huff. "You can't know that, they could still come back! This is a heartbreaking enough story as it is! Sure, they've been stalled-!"

"I'm afraid," Crocus said solemnly. "That the truth is even harsher than what you assume, and given the chance I'd make it a reality. But the fact is, those pirates fled the Grand Line. I have it from a reliable source."

"They abandoned the poor whale?" Nami demanded, incredulous. "But to do that, they'd have to pass through the Calm Belt!"

"Precisely. Which is why no one knows their fate." Crocus sighed heavily, seeming even older than his years. "Even in this day and age, as well explored as the world is, there are still mysteries on the Grand Line that defy human comprehension. It may very well be that they're still alive, but even then I doubt they'd be able to return. On these seas, nothing is ever 'normal'. Those with weak hearts all too often succumb to the Grand Line."

"So those with weak hearts cared more for their own lives than the promise they made to their crewmate," Sanji huffed morosely through another cloud.

"Then... then they did abandon that poor whale!?!" Usopp demanded harshly.

"Not necessarily!" I hastily defended. "I mean, come on: the Grand Line is legitimately insane, and the rest of the time it's just the regular kind of homicidal. Crocus, did these guys seem like oathbreakers or weak-hearted men to you?"

Crocus blew out a firm snort. "Hell no, they were strong, kind men who never once stopped smiling and laughing the whole time they were with me, and when they left they cried their eyes out at the prospect of leaving Laboon behind."

"Then their leaving might not have been anywhere close to voluntary!" I defended. "They could have been desperate, left with no choice, any number of options. But... in the end..." I shrugged helplessly. "If they are dead... let's not speak ill of them without all the facts, alright?"

Usopp considered this for a moment before nodding slowly. "Yeah... yeah, alright. I can do that."

"But still..." Nami looked at Crocus questioningly. "Why didn't you tell Laboon the truth? I mean, he can understand human speech by now, so...?"

"Oh, I told him alright..." Crocus sighed grimly. "But Laboon... he just wouldn't listen."

"What do you-?"

"The day I told Laboon, he went mad with grief." The old man looked up at the wailing whale miserably. "He started to cry at Reverse Mountain and slam his head into the Red Line, over and over again."

"It makes sense..." I mused sadly. "He's putting all the blame on the closest target he has available that's not you. He doesn't want to believe they'd abandon him, so he's rationalizing that they're on the
other side of the Mountain waiting for him. It's that or... accept reality."

"Mmm..." Crocus hummed as he nodded in agreement. "I've tried explaining it to him over and over again, but he refuses to accept the truth."

"Damn... that's some whale..." Sanji breathed in awe.

"But... but he's waiting for nothing!" Nami protested, albeit weakly.

Crocus shrugged helplessly. "It doesn't matter; he refuses to listen to what I say. Either he's gone partway mad with grief or it's simple teenage rebellion. In the end, it really doesn't matter: He's too scared. Scared of losing his reason to wait, scared of losing the hope he's held onto for so long. His home is in the West Blue, and he has no easy way home from here. Those pirates... they were his home."

"Damn... can't help but feel bad for the poor guy..." Sanji mused with a tug from his cigarette before glancing at Crocus. "But still... After all these years, why do you bother still taking care of him?"

Crocus was silent for a moment as he stared upwards contemplatively. It was during this moment of silence that I noticed our captain had gone suspiciously missing from the rock he'd been sitting on until a second ago. I twitched slightly as I made a guess as to just what my superior was planning. Praying I was wrong, I flicked Soundbite's shell in order to get his attention as I surreptitiously slipped my headphones over my ears.

"Connect me to Luffy," I hissed.

Soundbite blinked up at me in confusion before shrugging as much as he was capable. A second later, an electronic whine hummed through my ears, followed swiftly by Luffy's voice. "Mmm hmm, this oughta do nicely!"

"Uh, cap'n?" I hissed pleadingly. "Would you care to fill me in on what you're planning?"

"Hm? Oh, hey Cross! Nothin' much, I'm just gonna shove the Merry's mast into Laboon so that I can get his attention."

I twitched further, meeting Soundbite's panicked gaze head-on. Yup, I was right. "I don't suppose there's anything I can do to dissuade you from this monumentally stupid course of action, is there? Like suggesting you use something else as a weapon? Such as, say... the lighthouse itself?"

"Mmm... naaaaah, it wouldn't work as well. It's fine, Usopp can fix the mast. Besides, Merry's strong! She can take it!"

I barely refrained from cracking my skull against the nearest boulder. Yeah, should have seen that coming. "Alright then... Can I at least convince you to use the mizzen mast, instead of the main one?"

"Uh...?"

"The smaller one. It's not as big as the main mast, but it oughta still get the point across, and, more importantly, with any luck it'll hurt Merry a lot less."

"Huh... good idea! Thanks! Well, I'm gonna stab a whale in the head! See ya!"

Before I could respond, Crocus finally broke his silence. "Look at the scars on Laboon's forehead. He gestured upwards, indicating the patchwork of unhealthily-off-colored flesh that decorated his
body. "I won't bore you with the details, but suffice to say that Laboon's injuries run deep. Our relationship is odd, but I've watched over him for the past fifty years. I am a doctor and Laboon is not only my patient, but also my friend. I cannot, in my right mind, stand by and watch him die."

"RAAAAAAH!"

We were jerked out of the rather morose observation by the sound of a familiar individual roaring at the top of his lungs.

Each and every last one of us blinked in numb surprise as Luffy ran up Laboon's side, a very large and very familiar pole of wood hefted upon his shoulder.

"Dare I even ask what that moron's doing?" Sanji groaned.

"You take your eyes off of him for one second..." Zoro shook his head with a sigh.

"In my defense," I piped up wearily. "I did try and stop him. It could have been a lot worse."

"What the hell are you-?" Usopp started before choking as he really looked at the pole Luffy was carrying. "Is that Merry's mizzen mast?" he squeaked out weakly.

"Be glad I was able to talk him out of using the main."

"GUM-GUM!" Luffy roared as he reached Laboon's top, raising the mast high above his head before ramming it into the whale's flesh. "BOUQUET!"

We all stared up in numb horror at the monumentally stupid action our captain had just undertaken.

"God damn it, Luffy," Nami summarized succinctly.

The next instant, Laboon went very, very still, his entire body twitching for a moment until finally...

"BWAAAAHHHH!" The whale bellowed, flailing about madly.

"WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING, DUMBASS!?" Nami, Sanji, Zoro and Crocus roared furiously.

"ARE YOU TRYING TO SINK OUR SHIP!?" Usopp shrieked.

"RIDE 'EM COWBOY! YEEHAW!" Soundbite cackled

"IF YOU LET GO, DO A FLIP!" I called up. I then cocked an eyebrow at the venomous look my crewmates shot me. "What? He's my captain, I'm trying to be supportive. Is that so wrong?"

Before anyone could respond, Laboon's roars faded down into a gut-rumbling growl as he proceeded to eye the Red Line in a way I didn't like.

"Guys?" I squeaked. "I don't know about you, but I suggest we..."

Laboon suddenly shifted again, charging head-and-Luffy-first at us.

"RUN!" I promptly turned tail and bolted as far away from the coast as I could manage.

When Laboon made landfall, it was as though an earthquake had hit the Red Line, flinging us all off our feet.
I huffed in pain as I slammed into the rock, and the second I realized that I wasn't in danger of death by whale... I doubled over in laughter. "Pfffthhahahahahaha!" I wheezed out madly. "Hooooly sh!t that was close!"

"Gnnaaarly dude!" Soundbite concurred.

As the cackles subsided into giggles, however, I found myself being flipped over onto my back, with Nami clutching me by the collar off my jacket as she yanked me face-to-face with her. The mad look in her eyes did little to help matters.

"What the hell did you mean when you said you were an adrenaline junky!?" Nami hissed, her voice borderline demented.

I chuckled nervously as I plastered a shaky grin on my face. "Ah... see here's the thing: back home in Florida? Every once in awhile my friends and family would convince me to do something really really crazy. Sometimes it was jumping off a high ledge into a lake, other times it was riding a stupidly wild rollercoaster, all kinds of stuff."

Ahhh, the Top Thrill Dragster. Nothing quite gets your heart pumping like going from a flat stop to 120 miles per hour in barely less than four seconds.

A particularly aggavated growl broke me out of my nostalgia. "A-a-nyways, the point is that before I did this crazy stuff, I'd hem and haw out of terror, but the second I actually did it, I'd love the hell out of it and do it over and over and over again! The near death experiences I've suffered in the past twenty-four hours? Terrifying, yes, but they've given me a rush that I've never imagined possible. Sooo... yeah, adrenaline junky: the crazier and more dangerous the situation, the more I'm gonna laugh out of sheer exhilaration." I smiled tentatively. "The things people enjoy, huh?"

Apparently, Nami wasn't quite so happy with my answer. At least, if the way her face was twitching as though she were mere milliseconds from either an aneurism or a psychotic break. "You mean to tell me..." she hissed in a voice that wouldn't be out of place in *Exorcist*. "That the one other sane person on this crew... is literally *addicted* to flirting with death itself!?"

I shivered briefly in the face of Nami's Wrath (and by *Ghandi* did it deserve to be capitalized) before plastering a desperate grin on my face. "I suppose that this would be the wrong time to quote the Cheshire Cat in saying 'we're all mad here', huh?"

Nami's body flat-out *twitched* as she snapped a fist back. I clenched my eyes shut in a pre-emptive wince...

"IT'S A DRAW!"

And cracked an eye open as Luffy bellowed without warning.

We turned our attention over to our captain, who was grinning like a loon at a very bemused and slightly bruised Laboon.

"Saved by the bell," I muttered quietly beneath my breath.

THWACK!

My last thoughts were that I wasn't quiet enough, if the fact that Nami suddenly plowed her fist into my face was anything to go by.

After that, darkness.
When I came to, the first thing I saw was Nami and Crocus kneeling over me, Nami with a concerned expression and Crocus with an exasperated one. "How are you feeling, brat?" the old man grunted.

I blinked blearily as I processed the statement for a second before grimacing as the mass of pain that was my face registered. "I'm alive, though whether or not that's good remains to be seen..." I glanced at our navigator curiously. "Since when could you throw a punch?"

"Never," Nami asserted firmly, her voice filled with worry. "At least, nowhere near well enough to knock a person out for ten minutes."

"WHAT!?" I yelped, jerking upright... and promptly regretting the action with a moan as I clutched my throbbing face. "Ooooww... alright, in that case, what the hell?! I've never taken a shot to the face before, sure, but I'd like to think that I'd be capable of walking away from it if it came from someone your size!" I shot a wary glance at Nami. "No offence."

"None taken."

While Crocus mulled over his response, my own mind flew at a mile a minute. I'll admit, I'd expected some level of danger on account of my status as a dimensional alien, sure, but to the degree that I was in danger of a punch from Nami!? I'd hoped to stand side by side with Luffy, not cheer him on from on high!

Finally, Crocus spoke up, snapping me out of his musings. "Answer me this, brat: your arm, when did you hurt it?"

"Huh?" I glanced between my arms in confusion.

"Your right arm, brat. Don't tell me this little thing busted your eardrum too."

"Hey! I didn't knock you out, I still take offence from that!"

"And I should care why!??"

While Nami muttered and growled darkly, I rolled up my jacket's sleeve, exposing a stretch of raw flesh that stung quite a bit. "Uh, this? It's a rope burn, I got it about an hour ago when we went down Laboon's throat."

That drew Nami's shocked attention to me. "That's an hour old and you haven't even started healing yet!? Cross, what the hell!?"

"Uh..." I hesitated briefly. "I... take it that's not normal, huh?"

"In my experience, burns like that have usually started to heal up by now and are gone a few hours later as a result," Crocus stated solemnly. "What's your estimate?"

"Ah..." I wracked my mind for a second before conjuring up an estimate. "A... week? Tops? I'm no med student, soo..."

Nami's eye twitched furiously. "Cross, I reiterate: what the hell!?"

"Uh..." My mind flew as I tried to conjure an acceptable answer.

Thankfully, I was saved from having to come up with one.
"I think I might have an idea."

I hid my relief as I looked at Crocus, the old doctor scratching his chin in thought.

"Your friend here told me about your home, Florida. It's a hidden nation, right? Small population, I'm guessing, everyone's local, with few to no immigrants?"

"Uh..." I fumbled for a moment before nodding in agreement. "Yeah, that's about right. We don't want anybody we don't want to finding out about us - mum's the word, by the way - so yeah, few to none get in. Why?"

Crocus blew out an exasperated breath as he rolled his eyes. "Does the word 'inbreeding' mean anything to you?"

I made the connection and promptly pounced on the opportunity given to me, slapping a hand to my face as I loosed an embarrassed moan. "Yes, it does. And here I thought we'd been careful enough... Just for the record, I don't care if you're a woman or a senior citizen, if that word manages to make its way to the rest of the crew, I'll put my foot through your digestive tracts. Capiche?"

Nami held her hands up in polite surrender while Crocus merely snorted.

"So anyways... is that it then? I'm gonna die a doomed, brittle man because of defective genes?"

"Nah, you'll be fine." Crocus waved me off. "Considering how you don't have any obvious mutations, the problem's not as severe as you might think. No, if anything, it's more than likely a problem with your nutrition. Deficient crops and livestock and all that. So long as you keep eating fresh food from the Blues and go easy on the salt beef and hardtack, then you should be good."

"Oh thank god..." I slapped a hand to my chest with a relieved sigh.

"Yeah," Nami nodded in agreement before smiling and helping me up to my feet. "Well, at least you got up at the right time. Sanji's said he'll be setting up dinner soon."

"Good!" I grinned eagerly as I followed her. "I'm hungry enough to eat a Sea King!" My grin widened ever so slightly as an idea hit me. "Or a snail." I waited for a biting retort... then glanced at my bare shoulder in shock. "Where's Soundbite?!

"Don't panic, he's fine," Nami assured me as she pointed at the ocean. "He's on a bit of a... playdate, so to speak."

And indeed, there Soundbite was, perched on a barrel and chatting animatedly with a very familiar whale who was now sporting a vaguely familiar emblem over his scars.

I swallowed heavily as I scanned the pale imitation of our flag. "Please tell me Luffy didn't recruit the whale."

"I'd have harpooned him if he'd tried," Crocus stated flatly.

"Luffy took over the promise Laboon's crew made and drew our mark as a symbol of it." Nami explained. "Soundbite started talking to him once we'd assured him you were fine... and when he stopped laughing after that."

"For the record, if he gives Laboon any bad habits, I'm blaming you both," Crocus hummed.

I raised my hands hastily. "Fair enough, fair enough. So... Sanji's coming with food soon, I'm
guessing Usopp'll be finished with fixing the Merry soon enough... what next?"

"Hmm... good question..." Nami mused as she dug a circular object out of her pocket and clicked a button on its side. "Let me just-!"

I blinked as our crew's navigator suddenly stopped walking without so much as a hint of warning. "Uh... Nami? Everything al-?"

"EEEEYEEAAAAARGH!"

I cursed in shock as Nami loosed an ear-splitting shriek of horror, causing even Laboon to turn tail and flee beneath the waves in abject terror.

"CRAZY BANSHEE!" Soundbite yelped, though he quickly calmed down when I scooped him back onto my shoulder.

"Nami-swan, is everything alright?" Sanji cried lovingly, hopping towards us with plates upon plates of delicious looking food perched upon his limbs, Usopp following close behind him.

"NO YOU DUMBASS, EVERYTHING IS NOT ALRIGHT!" Nami yowled as she slammed her compass onto the nearby table. "LOOK! THE COMPASS IS BROKEN!"

And indeed, the metal needle was spinning furiously in its casing, appearing more like a propeller than a navigational tool.

"You came to the Grand Line unprepared," Crocus deadpanned as he brought over more plates, sounding flatly amazed. "Well I never! Are you trying to get yourselves killed? I thought I'd told you, nothing is regular about these waters. Your compass isn't broken, nature is."

"So even the damn magnetic field is borked, huh?" I queried weakly. "Fun, fun, fun."

"Indeed," Crocus nodded solemnly. "You see, each island of the Grand Line is well and truly unique, and not just in the obvious way. Their mineral compositions give off truly unique magnetic fields, which make compasses inoperable. And of course, as you can expect, the winds and currents all have minds of their own. I'm sure that you realize how deadly that is, Miss Navigator."

Nami swallowed heavily as a cold sweat broke out on her brow. "If we didn't immediately run into the Calm Belt, we'd wander aimlessly until we either dehydrated or starved..."

"Precisely. Setting off unprepared in these waters is tantamount to suicide."

"I had no idea..." our navigator whimpered meekly as she scratched the back of her head.

"WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO!?" Usopp howled as he gripped his head fearfully.

"No fear, Nami-swan, you're still beautiful even if you don't know anything!" Sanji swooned.

"SHUT UP!"

"Mmm... This tuna trunk is delicious!" Luffy mumbled around his full mouth.

"Have you tried the tail?" I queried as I chewed on my own portion. "It has the texture of pork, but it tastes like chicken."

"Yum-yum!" Soundbite got out as he munched down on the portion I'd offered him.
"Ahem?" Crocus coughed, continuing once he had all our attention. "Now, to navigate the Grand Line, you're going to need a device known as a Log Pose. It's a special kind of compass, capable of recording the Grand Line's magnetic fields."

Luffy swallowed his mouthful in favor of another as he tilted his head questioningly. "So it's a weird compass?"

"They have weird shapes, yes."

"I think I might have found one! Do you still have it, Cross?"

"Yo," I concurred, digging the Log Pose out of my jacket and holding it up for all to see.

"Hmph, good for you." Crocus nodded firmly. "Entering the Grand Line is an ordeal in and of itself, navigating without a Log Pose is nigh impossible, and I only say it's not completely because of how I've found that, in my experience, anything's possible on the Grand Line."

"I see, I see, just one moment..." Nami nodded slowly. "I just need to know..." She suddenly blurred towards us. "WHERE DID YOU MORONS GET THAT!?"

I tried to dodge out of her way...

THWACK!

A second too late

Next thing I knew, I was blinking awake face down in my plate. "How long was I out?" I mumbled.

"Long enough for Luffy to tell me where he got that Pose and for me to explain your... condition. Sorry..." Nami scratched the back of her head sheepishly.

"Fair enough..." I pushed myself up and started wiping my face down as I did my best to ignore Soundbite's snickering. "Continue."

"Right, right. Anyways, Crocus, about this Log Pose..." She held it up to her eye level curiously. "How does it work? I can't see any markings..."

"It doesn't need any," the keeper explained. "The islands of the Grand Line each have their own unique fields. The Log records the fields of the islands, leading you from one to another to another. The Log is your only hope of traversing this ocean. Starting from this mountain, you'll have to choose one of seven island magnetic fields. In the end, however, they're all the same. All routes, no matter how you follow them, eventually become one and lead to a single, final destination."

I sat up instantly as the mood shifted drastically. It was awe-inspiring, really. Dare I say...

"Raftel," Crocus intoned solemnly. "It's the last island of the Grand Line. In all of history only one pirate crew has ever made it there and lived to tell the tale: the crew of the Pirate King."

"You mean until we get there," Luffy grinned as he bit into the spine of the Elephant Bluefin. Proclamation done, he leaned back and let out a sigh of contentment, patting his somewhat swollen belly. "Man, that was tasty!"

"You ate the whole thing!" Sanji screeched, his jaw hanging open.

Usopp glanced at the remains of the Elephant Bluefin, before performing an impressive double-take.
"He even ate the bones!"

"At least I managed to get a taste..." I muttered vehemently. Damn he was fast... And I'd actually liked that tuna, too!

"GREEDY GLUTTON!" Soundbite sobbed.

"Damn it, Luffy! I cooked that for Nami! I wanted her-" And here Sanji emphasized his point by kicking Luffy square in the head. "To have the best of it!"

I winced as Luffy flew straight and true, blasting straight over Nami's arm and shattering the Log Pose she had attached to her wrist. Sure enough, the fragile glass didn't do well against a ballistic Luffy hitting it, obliterating the instrument in a second.

For a moment, Nami just stared at the broken Log Pose, her face frozen in the pleased smile she had. And as Sanji turned his lovestruck gaze to her, her expression turned thunderous.

Usopp, Soundbite, and I all braced for the explosion that was sure to come. We didn't have to wait long.

Neither a swooning Sanji or a somewhat dazed Luffy were able to react before Nami marched up to them and simultaneously punted them both off the cliffside.

"GO SOAK YOUR HEADS!" she called out after them as they landed in the water.

As Nami stomped back over to where the rest of us were, Usopp gave me a concerned look. "Hey, is Luffy going to be alright, being in the water like that?"

"Eh, Sanji's with him. He'll be fine," I replied with a shrug. "Besides, they both had that coming. I don't know about you, but I don't wanna die by getting in Nami's way."

Usopp nodded slowly as he watched Nami warily, apparently satisfied with the answer, and turned his attention back to our navigator, who was fussing over the broken Log Pose.

"Crocus, what are we going to do?" Nami lamented. "Our precious Log Pose is-!"

"Actually," I cut in before Crocus could speak up, pulling the Log Pose I had bought at Loguetown out of my pocket. It was a bulky thing, with a needle of metal wavering around inside a metal-lined orb of glass that was fixed to a cuff of leather and far sturdier than the rather thin sphere over the other Pose.

Nami twitched slightly as she jerked towards me before hastily restraining herself. "If you already knew..." she hissed. "Why the hell didn't you tell us!?!"

I shrugged helplessly. "I overheard something about 'special compasses' back in Loguetown, so I took the liberty of buying one on the way out, figured I'd find out more as we went along. Didn't expect to use it as a spare, though."

"Hmph..." Crocus examined the Log Pose intently before nodding firmly. "You got lucky, kid: That's a damn good piece you bought. Firm, sturdy. It'll guide you far."

I smiled as I clapped my hands together eagerly. "Well then! Unless there's anything else to attend to-!"

KABOOM!
We all jumped as a devastating explosion blasted up from the ocean below us.

I promptly hung my head in despair. "Stupid question. Soundbite, could you?"

Soundbite let out a whine for a moment before piping up in Mr. 9's voice. "We have a request."

-0-

About an hour later, we were on our way, sailing away from the massive form of Reverse Mountain with two additional passengers amongst our ranks.

Two very unique passengers I reminded myself as I blew out heavy sigh, looking around the ship calmly. Specifically, I was side-eyeing the blue-haired faux-Frontier Agent who was currently standing at the Merry's prow, glaring at anyone and everyone who made the mistake of getting near.

Credit where it was due, an angel Vivi might be, but damn if she couldn't fake being a bitch like the best of them.

However, I didn't have time to think about that. Instead, I turned and started pacing across Merry's deck thoughtfully. Sure, things had turned out alright back on Reverse Mountain, but the fact that I had forgotten about Laboon of all characters, even in the midst of an adrenaline high, was terrifying to say the least. I needed to recap my knowledge, make sure that what I remembered was valid... or else I'd be in for more than a few nasty shocks in the all-too-near future.

On a broad scale, though, I think I remembered well enough: Whiskey Peak (here's hoping they didn't spike the water), Little Garden (to explore the killer prehistoric jungle or not to explore? decisions decisions), Drum (I was really going to need to play that one by the ear; heads Nami almost dies and I feel like a scumbag, tails Chopper is guaranteed to die by Wapol sooner or later and we all go without medical care for who-knows-how-long) and finally, for the moment, Alabasta (nope nope and another nope, not going to start on that gordian knot of consequences until I don't have a choice).

I nodded definitively to myself. Yes, that was definitely everything, nothing left out.

I threw my head back and stared at the sky with an exasperated growl. So why did I still feel like I... was...

I slowly crossed my eyes as a little white something fluttered down from the sky and landed on my nose with a burst of cold.

I blinked in confusion. Why was it snowing out of the blue, where had this fogbank suddenly come from, and why did it terrify me beyond all logical reason?

"ICEBERGS DEAD AHEAD!"

Oooohh, right... Crap.
"WHAT THE HELL IS WITH THIS OCEAN!?" Nami shrieked furiously as she held onto the Merry's railing for dear life.

"I KNOW, RIGHT?! ISN'T IT AWESOME!?" I cackled as I yanked on one of the Merry's ropes, fighting to keep her sail open just right so that we could catch the summer gale that was blowing at us from starboard, all while we angled ourselves so that we could weave through the field of icebergs that were coming at us through the fog.

My memories had been right about the Grand Line's weather being completely out of this world, and they'd been right about how it'd start with snow and icebergs... but apparently, nothing could predict the sheer scale of the madness that we were to be put through.

To put it in a few words, it was like everything decided to happen all at once. The wind kicked up into a howl, a fog swept over us alongside a blizzard-slash-lightning storm, icebergs large enough to give the Titanic PTSD did their level best to reduce us to splinters...

Or, put another way, Poseidon was having a psychotic breakdown and we were subject to the whims of his maddened throes.

It was life-threatening, it was maddening, it was so completely unreal... but above all else?

"THE WIND'S SHIFTING AGAIN!"

I braced my feet against the deck and yanked on Merry's line as hard as I could as the sail tried to yank my arms out of my shoulders, a semi-demented grin dancing across my lips.

"Pffff-HAHAHA!"

It. Was. Awesome!

"YOU CAN'T SERIOUSLY BE GETTING OFF ON THIS!" Nami shrieked desperately, her nearly crazed eyes raking the surrounding weather for some clue of whatever the heck was going to hit us next.

"THE HELL I CAN'T!" I shouted back over the howling wind. "THIS IS THE MOST FUN I'VE HAD MY WHOLE LIFE! THIS IS BADASS! RIGHT SOUNDBYTE?!

"WAY HAY AND UP SHE RISES, WAY HAY AND UP SHE RISES!" my snail roared jubilantly as he clutched my shoulder, swaying back and forth in time to the tune.

"Mnmph, geez..." Zoro grunted as he blinked awake, stretching slightly as he got up from the part of the wall he'd been snoozing against. "Soundbite, if you're gonna sing, could you at least try and carry a—GRK!"

Zoro was cut off as Nami suddenly appeared in front of him, jerking him down to her eye level by way of his collar. "We're fighting against Mother Nature for our lives here and you're sleeping?!" she spat, sounding downright possessed in her fury.

"Uh..." Zoro fumbled for an answer in light of the here-to-fore unseen levels of rage the navigator was displaying.

Nami made to rip into the swordsman further, but instead suddenly snapped her head to the side,
staring at the mad waters with a haunted look. "That wind was coming from port but now it's coming from starboard, how is that—OH SON OF A—! TACK THE SAILS! WE NEED TO TURN AROUND, 180 DEGREES! THE CURRENTS TWISTED US AROUND WHEN WE WEREN'T LOOKING!" She shoved Zoro back as she darted back to her position on the Merry's upper deck. "GET TO WORK!"

I yanked hard on the line I was holding, trying to reel in the Merry's sail a bit. "Could I get a hand here? This wind is seriously—!"

Zoro promptly snatched the rope out of my hands and jerked the sail into its proper place with ease.

I blinked in surprise at the action. "Ah... thanks."

"You really need to work out."

"WHIIMP!" Soundbite cackled.

I shrugged slightly as I shuffled my feet about in an effort to keep my balance stable. "Well, can't really argue with that! Think you could help me work out properly later?"

"Sure," Zoro grunted as he handled the sail. "When we actually get out of this—!"

"HANG ON TO SOMETHING!"

Acting on instinct, I grabbed the Merry's rigging, and not a moment too soon.

For a brief moment, the ocean became the sky, my feet came off the deck, and my entire being just seemed to float.

Then, as fast as things went crazy, everything roared back to normal, all of us crashing onto the deck as we tried to process what the hell had just happened.

"Did... did Merry just pull off a loop de loop?!" Usopp sputtered weakly.

"Actually, I think that was a barrel roll..." Mr. 9 moaned.

"PffHAHAHAHA!" I finally managed to spit out, the sheer rush of what I'd just experienced hitting me all at once. "Holy shit, that was sick!"

"What in the literal blue hell is wrong with you!?" Miss Wednesday shrieked at the top of her lungs. "We almost died!"

"I know!" I grinned at her eagerly. "And it was beyond awesome!"

The undercover mercenary gaped at me in open-mouthed disbelief. "Are you insane!?"

"No! Nononono..." I scrambled up to the woman, grabbing her shoulders and shoving my grinning face in hers. "I'm living! For the first time in my entire life, I know what it's like to actually be alive! Back home, I was never in any kind of danger, never in fear of my life, I never put everything on the line! But here!? I swung my arms out wide, indicating the mad, mad world around us. "This insanity, this impossibility... it's unique! Unprecedented! It's... it's legitimately beautiful!"

Without warning, the Merry bucked once anew, launching me off my feet and sending me tumbling head-over-heels.
When I landed, flat on my ass and aching slightly, I started sniggering as I stared up at the sky. "PfftHAHAHA! I'm freaking loving this! This madness, this craziness... it's awesome!" I tilted my head slightly so that I could cast a grin at Luffy. "And above all, I love this crew for getting me here! Thank you so much for letting me be a Straw Hat, Luffy! I love you all so much!"

"Shishishi!" Luffy chuckled as he balanced on the Merry's railing. "Sounds like you're having fun, Cross!"

"Yup!" I smirked as I worked my way back onto my feet. "See, you guys are going to need to work long and hard in order to achieve your dreams, but me?" I swept my arms out. "This is my dream, Luffy! This is what I've waited for all my life! The world, clear and uncut, up close and personal! I am living my dream every second we are out here and it is glorious!"

As if in response, a wave splashed over the deck, soaking me from head to toe and shoving more than a bit of seawater down my throat. I hacked and spluttered for a moment before grinning eagerly. "It's also a little bit salty!"

"Blech!" Soundbite shivered heavily within his shell.

"That's really inspiring, Cross!" Nami piped, sounding rather aggravated. "Now, if you could just do me a favor by shutting the hell up and getting to work BEFORE THE DAMN WHIRLPOOL OFF THE PORT BOW SWALLOWS US ALL ALIVE!?"

"Shutting the hell up, ma'am!" I squawked, leaping to my feet and rushing to help Usopp man the surprisingly well-patched-up mizzen mast.

"What happened to you enjoying living your dream?!!" Usopp grunted.

"Nami's not a part of that dream, she's a course hazard!" I hissed quietly. "Headstrong! NOT SUICIDAL!" Soundbite provided.

"I HEARD THAT!"

I shot a glare at my shoulder-mounted snail. "Now you see the merits of controlling your volu—GAH!" I yelped as something whiffed just over the top of my head. "What the he—?!" I trailed off as I stared at the object that had come way too close to braining me. "Is that a hailstone the size of a golf ball?"

Usopp swallowed heavily as he shot a nervous glance up at the angry gray clouds. "I really hope that things calm down soon before your 'dream' kills us all!"

They didn't.

-0-

"WATER SPOUT, DEAD AHEAD!"

-0-

"AN ICEBERG JUST CLIPPED US!"

-0-

"Ahhh, a spot of summer sun... really hot summer sun... AGH! TOO HOT! THE SAILS ARE ON
FIRE! WATER! WE NEED WATER!"

SPLOOSH!

"AGH! TYPHOON!"

"NOT WHAT I MEANT, DAMN IT!"

-0-

"Is it just me, or did things suddenly get dark?"

"Nami? Look up."

"What are you—!? AGH! SINCE WHEN COULD FLYING MANTA RAYS LITERALLY FLY!? OR GROW AS BIG AS WHALES!?!"

-0-

"Wait, didn't we already pass that—... Nami, when was the last time you checked the Log Pose?"

"Huh? Just ten seconds ago, w—? #!$%&^!"

"#!$%&^! #!$%&^!"

"Thanks for expanding my snail's vocabulary, Nami."

"SHUT UP AND TURN US AROUND AGA—ARE YOU KIDDING ME!?"

"Flipped us around again, huh?"

"I SAID SHUT UP, DAMN IT!"

-0-

Finally, after what felt like forever... nothingness.

The sea was calm, the sun was shining, a light breeze was blowing...

But still, it paid to double-check.

"Are we good?" I asked Nami wearily.

"As far as I can tell..." she whimpered, supporting herself against the upper deck's railing.

"Soundbite?"

"Boo-bee-beep. We're sorry, the number you are trying to call has been disconnected."

"Soundbite! Wake up!"

"Hoo-WHAT?"

"Can you hear anything lurking underneath us?"

Soundbite tilted his head to the side as he concentrated for a moment before shaking his head firmly. "ALL CLEAR!"
"We're good!"

"Oh... perfect... in that case..."

Nami promptly went limp and collapsed on the deck, followed swiftly by the rest of us.

"I can't feel my anything..." Usopp whimpered miserably.

"Lucky you, my everything is burning..." I bemoaned.

"Tsk..." Zoro growled as he massaged his throbbing limbs. "I can't believe you guys woke me up for that. Couldn't you have handled it yourselves?"

"NO!" the rest of us roared furiously.

"Soundbite, you can imitate whatever sounds you've heard, right?" Nami demanded.

"Yup yup yup!"

"Here's a direct order: The next time you hear Zoro sleeping while we're going through that kind of hell, blast a Sea King roar in his ears. All in favor?"

"Nay!" Zoro barked.

A resounding "AYE!" roared out across the ship in response.

"Oh, screw you guys..." the swordsman growled.

"Shishishi!" Luffy chuckled from where he was sitting on the Merry's figurehead, looking **legitimately** no worse for the wear. The bastard. "Sorry Zoro! Looks like you're outvetoed!"

"I think you mean 'voted'..." Miss Wednesday groaned.

It was at that moment that Zoro took notice of the two exhausted mercenaries. "Now that I think about it, what are these two doing here?"

"**YOU ONLY JUST NOTICED US!?!**" the pair shrieked indignantly.

"We're sailing to their hometown," Luffy explained cheerfully.

Zoro blinked at Luffy before casting a flat look at the rest of us. "And none of you tried to stop him?"

"You honestly think we could?" Sanji shot back.

"... fair point. Anyways..." Zoro pinned Mr. 9 and Miss Wednesday with a **far** too bloodthirsty smirk. "I've been thinking... what did you say your names were again?"

"Urk... I'm Mister Nine..."

"M-Miss Wednesday."

"Yeah, I thought so..." Zoro's grin widened even further, prompting the two to break into cold sweats. "Those names of yours, they're **real** familiar. They've been stuck in my mind for a while now. Like I've heard them before..."
The two looked like they were about ready to bolt...

"Or maybe I haven't," Zoro shrugged, his grin becoming positively shit-eating.

The duo collapsed onto their backs with dual whimpers. "Demon..."

I grinned cheekily as I clapped a hand on Zoro's shoulder. "Come on, buddy, leave them alone."

"Thank you..." Mr. 9 and Miss Wednesday sighed in relief.

"After all, it's cruel and unusual to torture poor, defenseless pests like them! Save it for the poor, defenseless Sea Kings."

"OH, SCREW YOU!"

"Either way, come on." Turning around, I walked away and gestured for him to follow. "I'm almost certain that that madness scattered our supplies all over the hold, and I can't lift the crates alone."

"Why don't you get Luffy or the crap-cook to do it?"

"Listen up, you damn moss—!" Sanji started to snarl, but Nami halted him by placing a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't worry, Sanji, I've got this." Our navigator pinned Zoro with a frigid look. "You'll help him, or else I'll quintuple your debt. To start."

Zoro twitched furiously for a moment before marching past me with a growl. "Come on, brat. Let's get to work."

I shot a grateful grin at Nami before following the swordsman into the storeroom. As I'd predicted, the numerous crates, barrels, and sacks we were using to hold our foodstuffs and supplies were a little everywhere, though thankfully all of them were intact.

The second I was inside, I closed the door as quickly and calmly as I possibly could before shooting a look at Zoro. "Alright, they can't hear us anymore, spill it."

Zoro blinked at me in bored curiosity. "What the heck are you talking about, Cross?"

I maintained my deadpan expression as I stared at the first mate. "Zoro, you're a lot of things: you sleep way too much, you're focused on swords to an unhealthy degree, you're grumpy—"

"I am not grumpy..." Zoro grumbled, his arms folded petulantly across his chest.

"THAT'S what you PROTEST?" Soundbite asked with a cocked eyestalk.

"But one thing you aren't is needlessly sadistic," I finished firmly, ignoring Soundbite's comment. "If you psychologically tortured those two about their names, it's because you definitely knew something about them. And if you know something about them, then I want to know it too."

"Oh yeah?" Zoro's glare hardened in defiance. "And why do you want to know so much, exactly?"

"Because I want to know whether or not it's pertinent to our crew's continued well-being!" I flung my arms wide in exasperation. "Zoro, if you know something that could be important, then you need to tell us! None of us can afford to spare any information; otherwise, we risk jeopardizing the crew!"
"Hy~po~cri~te!" Soundbite sang to me sotto voce.

"Bite—!" I started to hiss out of the corner of my mouth before swiftly biting my own tongue. Fool me once, shame on the little shit, fool me twice... well, you get the drift.

Nevertheless, my words did the deed: Zoro's stern expression faltered slightly for a moment before he relaxed with a sigh. "Alright, alright, no need to get melodramatic... For the record, I didn't tell anyone because I wanted to handle it on my own, alright?"

I raised my hands in a shrug. "A noble sentiment, Zoro, but that's just not how a crew works. We're in this crazy journey together, for better or for worse."

"ALL FOR ONE!" Soundbite crowed.

"And one for all, yeah yeah..." Zoro shook his head with a chuckle before adopting a deadly serious expression. "Alright, I'll explain everything to everyone, later. Just make sure that the stooges are out of the dining room when we eat, alright?"

"Can do, boss-man!" I saluted firmly.

"In the meantime..."

"WHOOF!" I winced as a freaking heavy! bag of rice slammed into my midsection.

"Get to work," Zoro smirked as he hefted a crate and slid it back into its original position, lashing it down with a length of rope for good measure. "You volunteered us for this job, might as well do it right."

"Aye-aye, sir..." I grumbled mutinously as I started waddling away under the sack's weight.

"Heave-ho, Heave-ho, Heave—!"

"Oh shut up!"

Thankfully, about an hour later, Zoro and I managed to complete our task, just in time for a long-awaited call.

"Nami-swan, it's time for dinner! HEY MORONS, GET IN HERE ALREADY!"

As we did, we rushed up to the upper deck as fast as we could, racing to beat Luffy to the dining room before he managed to shove a hefty portion of our food supplies down his throat.

Thankfully, on account of not being used to our ship just yet, Miss Wednesday and Mr. 9 had lagged behind, giving me just enough time to grab two of the plates Sanji had prepared and shove them into their hands before they entered the dining room.

"Sorry!" I grinned wolfishly. "This dining room is for crewmates and paying customers only. Free-loading passengers eat in steerage, no exceptions. Enjoy!"

And with that, I promptly slammed the door shut in their faces, chuckling at the dual cries of "HEY!" that they bellowed out in protest.

"CROSS!" Sanji snarled as he marched up to me furiously. "I can get the crown-wearing dingus, but how dare you lock out a poor lady like-!?"

"Shh!" I hissed, pressing my finger to my lips.
The cook halted in dead shock. "Did you just shush me!?"

"Yes, and I'll do it again! Observe: Shush!" Before Sanji could respond anew, I glanced at Soundbite. "Give us some white noise, would you? No chances."

Soundbite nodded firmly and proceeded to concentrate for a moment before making a grinding motion with his teeth. As a result, I could hear a faint combination of buzzing and gurgling wafting around the room's door.

Nami stared at me in confusion. "Cross, what are you doing? No chances for what?"

"I'm assuming he means no chances for those two to overhear me telling you all about just how dangerous they really are, right Cross?" Zoro asked bluntly.

I snapped my fingers and pointed at him with a nod. "Hole in one."

Now it was Usopp's turn to blink in befuddlement. "Wait, Zoro, you actually know something about them! And... dangerous? Are you sure? I mean, sure, they had those guns before, but we left those with Crocus! How dangerous could they really be?"

"Yeah, Zoro!" Luffy mumbled out from around the full pound of food he'd stuffed into his mouth. "They're funny, not scary!"

"Them on their own?" Zoro jerked his chin at the door. "Yeah, they're not much of a threat. What I'm worried about is what they're a part of. Tell me..." He slowly swept his gaze over the crew. "Have any of you ever heard the name 'Baroque Works'?"

Everyone, myself included, blinked in confusion as we searched our thoughts momentarily before shaking our heads.

Zoro snorted and shrugged as he started to scratch the back of his head. "I'd be surprised if you did... Alright, here we go: a few years ago, while I was still a bounty hunter, I was approached by a man—not like that, damn it!" he snarled furiously when he caught sight of Sanji smirking malevolently. "A man who wanted to recruit me into the organization he was a part of on account of my skills.

"When I refused, he didn't take it well. As in, he tried to kill me, all because I knew about the mere existence of his organization."

"That organization being Baroque Works," Nami divined.

"And that man's name being Mr. 7," Zoro finished.

*That* prompted the rest of the crew to tense nervously.

"After that little experience..." Zoro continued with a sigh. "I decided to do a little research into just who these 'Baroque Works' people were, in case they ever came after me again. Not too much, I didn't want to draw any attention, but enough to give me a general understanding. To put it simply, Baroque Works is a criminal syndicate that prides itself on secrecy. All their agents have codenames, men with numbers and women with days, and the identity and location of their boss is completely unknown."

"They have a massive number of operatives who operate in the East and South Blues and the Grand Line alike, and they have untold resources to operate with." Zoro looked each of us in the eye, one after another. "Make no mistake: Baroque Works is a dangerous organization, not the kind of people you mess with on a whim."
We all lapsed into silence as we absorbed the information, contemplating the implications they posed. Well, I say all, but really Luffy just kept on eating, oblivious to the gravity of the situation.

Finally, Sanji gulped and plastered a nervous smile on his face. "C-come on, it couldn't really be that bad, could it?"

"Y-yeah!" Usopp nodded frantically, desperate to find some bright side to the situation. "A-a-after all, you managed to beat this 7 guy, right? Right!"

Zoro grimaced slightly as he rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah... the guy was a master actor. He went from cordial to trying to chop my head off in less than a second. If there hadn't been a bottle nearby and I'd been a second slower on the draw, well..." He drew a finger across his neck.

We all lapsed back into silence as we mulled over the perilous facts. Finally, Sanji hissed in a deep tug from his cigarette. "You're thinking this is a trap, huh?"

"Criminals don't normally give two shits about the wellbeing or hunger of others..."

"Unless they're their own, right, right..." Nami groaned as she kneaded her temples in aggravation. "Perfect. Just... perfect!" She shot a glare at our captain. "Thanks a lot, Luffy!"

"You're welcome!" Luffy perked up for a moment before tilting his head in confusion. "But... what did I do?"

"You caused us to stumble ass-backwards into an ambush set by a multinational criminal organization based on a whim," I summarized flatly before Nami could blow a gasket and try to throttle the poor bastard.

"Oh! Then yeah, you're welcome!"

"WE'RE NOT LOOKING FORWARD TO IT YOU DAMN BASTARD!" Nami, Usopp, and Sanji roared.

Zoro winced and dug his pinkie into his ear. "Eesh, guys."

"I know, right?" I grimaced as I slapped one of my palms against the side of my head. "We need a doctor on this ship, I need a refresher on the symptoms of tinnitus."

"And a musician!" Luffy piped up swiftly.

"Music isn't much good to me if I can't hear it, Cap'n."

"Besides," Nami jabbed her thumb at the seemingly silent snail on my shoulder. "Doesn't he kind of count?"

I cocked my eyebrow in response. "You consider the sound he makes mus-?"

"I KNOW A SONG THAT GETS ON EVERYBODY’S NERVES, EVERYBODY’S NERVES, EVERYBODY’S NERVES!"

"ACK!" I jumped as Soundbite's 'voice' blared in my ears.

"I'm with the Commie on this one..." Usopp grumbled darkly as he glared at my shoulder.

"Anyways!" Zoro cut in. "The point is that when we reach this Whiskey Peak place, we all need to
be on our guards. Trust no one, and not a word of this to the two outside. Understand?"

We all nodded and gave varying sounds of assent.

"Great!" I clapped my hands firmly. "Now, what say we divvy up what's left of our meal before
Luffy finishes picking our plates clean, hm?"

"Yea—WAIT, WHAT!? LUFFY!"

SMACK! CRACK! BAM!

"OW!"

I chuckled as Luffy and Sanji fell into an impromptu brawl before starting at the tapping sensation on
my shoulder. "Wh- Oh, yeah, sure, you can drop it, Soundbite."

The snail heaved a massive sigh as he ceased his ministrations before casting a look at me. "WE'RE
IN deep SHIT, huh?"

I shrugged in response. "It's the Grand Line, my friend. With a few exceptions, everything in it is
trying to kill you."

-o-

"WOOOH!" "HOORAY!" "WELCOME!"

My eye twitched furiously as I took in the massive crowd of people before us, roaring and cheering
raucously at the top of their lungs. Credit given where credit was most definitely due, even knowing
that nearly all of these people were cold-blooded killers who would slit our throats without a second
thought, their cheers still sounded almost genuine to my ears.

They definitely sounded genuine to the rest of the crew, though.

"Shishishi! And you guys were worried!" Luffy cackled as he waved joyously.

"You jerks scared us for nothing!" Usopp whooped as he blew kisses to the crowd. "Pirates are
heroes to these people! Heroes! Woohoo!"

"HELLO, MY LOVELIES!" Sanji swooned, completely and utterly enraptured in his 'Hurricane of
Love'.

I stared flatly at the trio of men prancing about the lower deck before plastering a smile on my face
and turning my attention to the other two crewmates who were with me on the upper deck.

"Honeypot?"

"Honeypot," Zoro and Nami chorused flatly.

"Oi vey..." I shook my head with a sigh. "I'll sneak away and have Soundbite keep a listen out for
anyone planning something behind the scenes when I get the chance. Hopefully, they'll be able to
keep their faces straight when I funnel it into their ears. For now though!" I straightened up and
raised one of my hands into the air.

"Just smile and wave, boys," Soundbite announced through his grin. "Smile and wave."

-o-
"So just down the hall and third door on the right?" I called over my shoulder as I walked out of the room the party was roaring in.

"Yeah, can't miss it!" one of the partying bounty hunters confirmed.

"Great, thanks!" I shot him a thumbs up as I went, purposefully staggering and bumping into the walls as I went. Thank God for these guys blatantly over-acting; thanks to the commotion, none of them had noticed that most, if not all, of my drink was sloshing out of my mouth and onto the floor, rather than down my throat.

The second I reached the bathroom, I forced myself in and locked the door shut behind me, collapsing on the seat with relief. I did not want to stay in there longer than I had to; parties were... not entirely my style. Definitely not crazy ones like this one was, at any rate. Still... I shook my head firmly. Now wasn't the time to be uncomfortable, now was the time to get to work.

I placed Soundbite on my knee and grinned down at him. "Alright, little buddy, ready to illegally wiretap the world?"

"Roger-roger!" he nodded firmly.

"Okay then..." I slid my headphones up around my ears. "Give me a general overview of the town, everything that's not going on in this ho... in the room the party's in. And remember, volume. Don't blow my eardrums."

Soundbite nodded anew, his ear stretching from eye-stalk to eye-stalk as he concentrated firmly.

A second later, a stream of sound flowed through my ears: crickets chirping, water flowing, gravel crunching, wind howling... and most important of all, voices.

"Okay okay okay, hear those two, the guys who sound like they're above us?" I queried.

Soundbite looked upwards for a moment before flaring a particular line of noise.

I listened for a moment before shaking my head. "No no, they're just getting another keg on account of how fast Zoro's drinking. I meant the other-!" I cut myself off as the correct voices resurged, making the things they were saying quite clear. And oh, the things they were saying.

"Jackpot," I nodded to myself. "Okay, connect me with the crew, subtly."

Soundbite clenched his eyes shut for a moment before opening his eyes and nodding firmly. "Ka-lick!"

I pressed the headphone with the microphone close to my ear. "Don't react, don't say a word, just keep doing what you're doing. I'm currently in the bathroom using Soundbite to speak to you. He's putting my words directly into your ears, so nobody can hear me but you. Now listen: I got a little bit curious and had Soundbite listen in on a little bit of everything and I heard something interesting. Soundbite, let them have it."

"Ka-lick!" Soundbite repeated firmly before letting out the voices I'd heard before.

"-much longer do we have to fucking wait!? I'm getting sick and tired of this crap, I wanna fucking go already!"

"Not yet, damn it. They're still awake, and I'm not going up against Roronoa Zoro while he's still sober. We've been able to do this for so long because we've always done it right."
"Ergh, but still..."

"Look man, don't worry. I'm sure they won't need much more before they go down. Then, once they're dead and away, it's shackles and straight to the Marines for a hefty payday! And that makes it all worth it, right?"

"... eh, yeah. Fair enough. Hey, pass me that rifle, would you? I don't think I wiped down its barrel yet."

"Here ya go. By the way, did you see that outfit Miss Wednesday was wearing? I swear, bitch and ice queen she might be, that girl is smoking!"

"Oh-kay, that's more than enough!" I slashed my hand across my throat desperately, Soundbite complying with a lecherous giggle. "Anyways, I think you get the idea. Now, here's how I suggest we swing this—!

Before I could say anything further, the sound of splintering everything rang out, accompanied by a very familiar "RAAAAAAAH!"

I bit out a curse as I slapped Soundbite back onto my shoulder, jumping up and darting out of the stall. "Damn it, Luffy, do you even know the word sub-!" I cut myself off as I wrenched the door to the bathroom open and came face to face with a thinly built man who'd been just about to push open the door himself, and was also frozen in place, presumably on account of both the sudden commotion and the fact that I was obviously somehow still stone sober.

As we stared at each other, I had two separate reactions.

Internally, I was ranting and raving, self-flagellating myself with reckless abandon. 'Supposedly drunk, isolated, perfect for ambush, DUMBASS!'

Externally, on the other hand...

"You're gonna want to get some air fresheners in there, ASAP. Believe me, biscuits are murder on my stomach, it's not pretty."

Thankfully, the surprisingly coherent string of words prompted the man to jump in shock, giving me just enough time to lash my right leg up and catch him square between the legs. As the guy started to crumple, I shot my right hand into my jacket, snapped out the baton Smoker had given me and rammed the rod of metal across the guy's temple, knocking him to the floor.

I panted heavily as I stared at the man's prone and groaning form for a moment before lashing out an additional kick to his face for good measure. It never hurt to be too careful.

Well, it hurt him, but that was the entire point of the endeavor, so I didn't count it.

I stood there silently for a moment as I caught my breath again before reaching up to absentmindedly tap Soundbite. "You know what, Luffy? Forget what I was saying about subtle, these guys are total dicks. All those in favor of breaking everyone and everything right here right now, say aye."

A second roar erupted from what was left of the party room, accompanied swiftly by the entire building shaking from a massive impact.

I let out a heavy huff as I cracked my neck back and forth eagerly, a heady grin splaying itself over my face. "I'll take that as an aye! Well, you heard the captain! CHARGE!"
And with that, I bolted straight towards the brawl, Soundbite trumpeting out a bugle call as I went.
I skidded to a halt outside of the party room, gaping in awe at the utter chaos that had engulfed it.

To start with, one of the room's walls was just flat out gone, allowing me to catch sight of a fairly large crowd of armed killers attempting - emphasis on attempting - to hold down a rather rotund Luffy. The job was made fairly difficult by the fact that Luffy was flailing around and roaring furiously as he bodily flung the bounty hunters this way and that. Luckily, I could see Miss Monday lying in the middle of the street with a rather painful looking dent in her skull. UnFortunately, not only could I not see Sanji and Zoro, but I could hear the tell-tale sounds of them fighting in the distance. I had a very bad feeling I knew what had brought that on.

As for Usopp and Nami, they were both handling themselves relatively well against the dozen or so agents that were trying to get them, with Nami employing her staff to admirable effect and Usopp using a variety of ammunition on the thus-occupied bounty hunters.

I contemplated the rolling battle, wondering where I should start...

"CROSS, DUCK!"

Before I was torn out of my musings by Usopp's warning hitting my ears, prompting me to act first and think later as I dropped to my knees. As a result, the lead ball he shot at me whizzed well over my head and slammed into the chest of the man who'd apparently been sneaking up on me.

"Soundbite, keep your ears open, got it?" I growled underneath my breath.

"ROG-MOVE!" Soundbite barked suddenly.

Acting on instinct, I rolled forwards, narrowly dodging a blade that stuck itself in the wooden doorframe where I'd been squatting moments before. I scrambled to my feet... right in front of yet another bounty hunter.

I didn't think. There wasn't any time to think, no time to consider anything akin to a plan, just pure, straight up action. And with that, I rammed my free fist - thumb out, tight but not too tight - straight into the guy's nose. As he staggered back, I followed up with a kick to one of his knees. The joint crumpled under the impact and the man began to keel over, and I finished by bringing my baton down on the back of his skull. If the way he flopped bonelessly was anything to go by, he was down and out.

"BLADE LEFT!"

Acting on Soundbite's warning, I whipped my baton up, barely catching a sword from coming down on me and cleaving my skull open like a rotten melon as I supported the metal pole with both hands. I strained for a moment under the pressure before swiftly swinging my foot up and kicking the guy once, twice in his shin. His stagger gave me just enough time to force my way into his guard and whip my elbow up and into his face, followed swiftly by the palm of my hand ramming into the middle of his forehead.

I glanced around for where to go next...

"BEHIND-!"

Unfortunately, Soundbite was a moment too late as a thin arm, a woman's, wrapped itself around my
neck and something was pressed to my temple.

"Alright you two, surrender quietly or your friend here-!"

THUNK!

"Grgh..." the woman gurgled as she slumped away from me, a glance downwards showing a large lump rapidly blossoming on her forehead.

I breathed a sigh of relief as I took a step back, my back coming into contact with Nami's. "Thanks for the save. Sorry, I should have- GRGH!" I warded off a guy who wandered too close with a savage kick. "Been faster!"

"Don't - ragh! - beat yourself up about it!" Nami managed to bite out. "We all make mistakes. To be - honest! - two people is pretty impressive, especially without anything heavier than that dinky baton of yours."

"H- HEY!" I yelped as I rammed my shoulder into an opening I managed to notice. "I'll have you know that tactical batons are simultaneously strong, subtle, and have been used for plenty of cases of police- brutality!" I brought the weapon down on the elbow of an arm I'd grabbed, the resulting crack sounding very reassuring to me.

"Whatever." Nami's voice gave the impression of rolling her eyes in good-natured exasperation. "Anyways, you're doing alright for your first fight. I thought you'd said you'd never actually fought before?"

"I haven't! But I do have a demon of a little brother back home," I explained, frowning at the mere thought of the little shithead. "One who has a tendency for hair-pulling and other forms of foul play. Just thought it'd be best to emulate him for once. I'll be honest, this is working out!" I shot my baton out and caught a guy - the second one I'd taken down, actually - in the throat before grabbing his hair and bringing his face down to meet my knee. "Better than I thought it would!"

"Yeah, and I think I know why," Nami grunted. "These guys are meant to be trained professionals! They're used to people with actual skills, not amateurs who come at them like rabid dogs!"

"Rabid dog, huh?" I huffed out as a slightly vicious grin spread across my mouth. "I actually think I can live with tha-!"

"GUM-GUM!"

I cut myself off with a yelp as I dove to the floor, followed closely by Nami and Usopp.

"WHIP!"

Not a moment too soon; a second later, a long elastic limb swung through the air above us, bowling over the rest of the agents who were still standing in a single definitive strike.

I lay prone for a second before daring to glance up, taking in the array of unconscious bodies in numb awe. "Well... that works too, I suppose."

"Only when we're not in the line of fire..." Nami growled darkly.

"Ahhh..." Luffy sighed heartily as he ambled over to us, patting his now-flat stomach. "Nothing like a good fight to help with digestion. That was nice!"
"IT'D BE EVEN NICER IF YOU GAVE US A HEADS-UP BEFORE ALMOST TAKING OUR HEADS OFF!" Usopp howled as he sprang to his feet.

Luffy blinked at us in confusion. "But you're all fine, aren't you?"

"ONLY BECAUSE WE KNOW YOU TOO WELL, JACKASS!" Nami and Usopp raged.

"That was a little reckless, Luffy," I concurred.

"Loose cannon, baby!"

Luffy blinked at us for a moment before chuckling and scratching the back of his head sheepishly. "Ah... yeah, you're right. Sorry guys."

"At least you're willing to admit it..." I sighed wearily before glancing at Nami. "Dare I even ask where Zoro and Sanji are?"

As I feared, she jerked her thumb towards the sounds of combat in the distance. "Zoro took down that large woman, Miss Monday, when she tried to cave Usopp's head in with her fist. Unfortunately, that got Sanji going after him as a result. They went that way and haven't come back yet."

"Joy..." I ground out. I considered matters for a moment before speaking. "Alright, seeing how the element of surprise has just been blown to kingdom come, mind if I offer my opinion on what the hell we should do next?"

Luffy shrugged with a large grin. "Sure thing!"

Nami mimicked the action. "I don't see why not."

Usopp glanced around warily for a moment before nodding nervously. "Ah... alright then. You were right about this town, so..."

"Thank you," I sighed in relief. "Alright, here's what I'm thinking: Usopp, you find a good rooftop and act as support, take out anyone who shows their head and isn't us. Think you can do that?"

Usopp considered my request for a moment before popping a thumbs up and nodding firmly. "Y-yeah! Of course I can?! Who do you take me for, huh? I am the-!"

"Great Captain Usopp, yeah yeah yeah, we know, we know," I rolled my eyes impatiently. "Now get to it, would you?"

"R-right, right!" Usopp yelped, running off to find the nearest ladder or staircase possible.

"Nami," I directed my attention at the orange-haired woman. "You and I are going to be engaging in one of the few pirate activities I think you will enjoy."

"Oh yeah?" Nami cocked an eyebrow doubtfully. "What?"

I grinned and clapped my hands together firmly. "Looting everything that isn't nailed down, and a lot that is!"

I could practically see Nami's eyes flash into beri signs. "You have my attention."

"No shite!" Soundbite chortled.

Ignoring the snail, I went on. "I think Luffy managed to take out the majority of these guys and the
Nami allowed a giggle of child-like glee to slip out of her as she nodded eagerly.

Luffy blinked in confusion as he cupped his ears. "I don't hear anything..."

"Figure of speech, Luffy," Nami and I chorused.

"Anyways," I continued. "You head towards Sanji and Zoro and break them up if you can, then send them back here to tie these guys up so that they don't get loose. I'll head in the opposite direction and see what I can turn up. And keep an eye out, alright? There could still be some stragglers hiding here and there, so there's a good chance they could try and jump us. Got it?"

"You got it, big bro!" Nami chirped before skipping - skipping! - away.

I blinked in numb shock as I tried to process what I'd just seen. "O... kay... that was disturbing..."

"I feel... unclean..." Soundbite shivered heavily.

"I haven't been this scared since the last time Grandpa came to visit..." Luffy gulped audibly.

I jerked as I was reminded of my captain's presence. To be specific, I was suddenly all-too-aware of exactly what I'd been saying in his presence.

"Ah, captain, look..." I started uncomfortably. "L... Listen, about the whole 'plans' thing... I-I realize that this is your crew, really. I-if I've been insubordinate or anything-"

"Cross."

I snapped my jaws shut, not because Luffy was angry... but because he was grinning.

"I can't cook."

I blinked in confusion at the non-sequitur. "Uh...?"

"I can't predict the weather," Luffy went on, still grinning serenely. "I can't swing a sword, and I can't lie." His grin widened enough to expose his teeth. "And I'm not that smart, either."

I tried to put the pieces together in vain. "I... Luffy, I don't think I understand."

"Shishishi!" Luffy chuckled as he scratched underneath his nose. "Oh yeah, you weren't there for that, were ya? Ah well. We'll talk about it on the Merry."

"O... kay?" Contrary to what Luffy thought, I actually knew what he was talking about, I just didn't understand why. How did that apply in this context?

"Anyways... weren't you going to tell me what your plan was for me?"

I jerked at the reminder. "Ah-! R-right, right... Luffy-!

"IGARAPPA!"

BANG!
"GAH!" Luffy grunted as he was suddenly jerked forwards by a number of lumps shooting out of his chest. The lumps remained for a second before Luffy growled and flexed furiously, the lumps flattening out and a spread of buckshot shooting out of his back as he let loose a rabid roar.

"HEY, WATCH IT YOU BASTARDS, THAT WAS DANGEROUS!" my captain roared as he wheeled around and charged in the direction of both the voice and the bullets.

I blinked in surprise as my mind caught up with what had just happened. "Smash..." I finished intelligently.

Soundbite giggled as he watched Luffy roar off. "Puny GOD!"

"That comes later..." I muttered to myself. "For now, just puny Frontier Agents."

"ENOUGH TALK!" Soundbite barked as he jerked his head forwards. "MUSH! MUSH!"

"I'm mushing, I'm mushing..." I complied as I started walking forwards. "But I'm doing it slowly. Right now, we need to talk."

The baby transponder snail blinked in confusion. "WE do?"


"NOT MY FAULT!" Soundbite protested.

"Yes your fault!" I accused firmly. "Soundbite, your hearing is phenomenal. You should have heard that guy outside of the bathroom, you should have warned me about him. Why didn't you?"

The snail hesitated for a moment before glancing away sheepishly. "Wasn't listening..."

"And that almost got us killed."

Soundbite made to say something, then bit his lip and looked away uneasily.

I kept walking for a moment before stopping and sighing. "Soundbite... look, I'm sorry for being so harsh. I realize you're young and I realize you're not used to this, but..." I spread my arms and indicated the town around us. "We're in the Grand Line. We can't afford to freeload anymore, either of us. I'm going to be exercising under Zoro, and frankly? You should exercise too. Or at least, practice. Your powers are as strong as they'll be, at least until your body grows up a bit. Until then, all you can do is refine how you use your powers. Nothing more and nothing less. Understand?"

Soundbite was quiet for the longest time as his eyes swivelled back and forth on his eyestalks, before he gave me a look of pure determination, nodding his head firmly. "Understood."

I smiled and gave his shell a reassuring pat. "Glad to hear it. And I know how you can start. Remember those stragglers I mentioned could still be around?"

Soundbite nodded, though he looked confused.

"Well, I want you to listen for them. Find their heartbeats, find their breathing, find them talking, find anything. Locate anyone left in this town who isn't us and tell me or Nami or anyone else if those people are getting close to them. Do you think you can do that for me?"

Soundbite frowned as he glanced left and right in thought, grinding his teeth slightly.
"It's... hard. Need to concentrate... FOCUS A LOT... WEED THEM OUT..."

I shrugged helplessly. "Sorry, Soundbite, but I said it before we went up the Mountain. Nothing worth doing is easy to do. I'm not asking if it's easy or hard, I'm asking whether you can or cannot do it."

"I'll...try..." Soundbite ground out before snapping a glare at me. "Quote Yoda AND DIE."

I chuckled as I raised my hands in surrender. "Not a word."

"GOOD. Now... Quiet."

And with that, I shut up as I started going from house to house, popping the doors open and checking out the insides. As it was, this venture was turning out to be quite profitable indeed. Every residence I checked was quite spartan in nature, and had a not inconsiderable stash of money hidden somewhere within, some in pantries, others beneath mattresses, and so on and so forth. Thankfully I'd managed to find a nice big burlap sack to stash the bills in, and after about two hours and a dozen houses, I was lugging what had to be half of Luffy's bounty in cash.

I had to admit, it was quite the ingenious system; if the residents of Whiskey Peak had pooled the rewards of their bounties in a singular vault, then there would always be a chance of someone getting greedy and pulling off a heist. Foolhardy, on account of the Unluckies and other such threats, but a chance nonetheless. But by spreading the wealth throughout the town, no one person would have too much money on them at once. Most likely Igaram and Vivi's teams had larger shares on account of being Agents, but their strength and positions made any thoughts of stealing from them suicidal at best.

As I made the rounds of the house, Soundbite was uncharacteristically silent, his eyes darting back and forth beneath his clenched eyelids. It was easy to tell that the snail was concentrating as hard as he possibly could, keeping track of however many bounty hunters were left in this town.

Ultimately, this concentration paid off when Soundbite snapped his eyes open just as I was about to make my way out of my fifteenth house. "WAIT," he hissed. "Bounty hunter."

I promptly froze, my hands inches from the doorknob of the still-ajar door. "Where?" I whispered.

"Down the street. He has a gun."

I snorted slightly as I rolled my eyes. Of course he did, why wouldn't he have one?

Alright, alright, no time to panic, just need a quick plan... How to best use noise to take this guy out... the obvious answer was subterfuge, so all I needed was a good tri-

Wait... trick... parlor trick... that was it!

"Can you mimic any of the bountyhunters who are still up?" I asked quietly.

Soundbite muttered under his breath for a second before nodding. "Yeah," he grunted in a foreign voice.

"Alright... here's what I want you to do: swap my voice, and then project it to that guy, while making sure I can hear what he's saying. Can you do it?"

A moment of concentration more and Soundbite nodded firmly. "Say when."
"Okay... okay..." I took a calming breath and pressed myself up against the wall of the house, right next to the door. "Do it."

A second later, an electronic-ish whine sounded in my ear. "You're live."

"Pst. Pst!" I hissed out. "Hey, hey, you!"

"What the-? W-who-?!"

"Shhh! Over here!" I tapped the door slightly, causing it to swing a bit. "Get over here, quietly. One of the pirates is upstairs. We can take him by surprise."

The silence was devastating. For a heart-rending moment, I feared that this wouldn't work...

Until the agent spoke. "Alright. Hang tight..."

I took slow, deep breaths as my heart pounded in my chest, every instant seemingly lasting an eternity as I waited for the right moment.

Finally, Soundbite bit out a nigh imperceptible "Get ready" into my ear.

A second later, the door started to creak open and I caught sight of the side of somebody's face.

With barely a second thought, I sprung at the man, one fist crashing into the side of his face with all my weight behind it while my free hand grabbed the end of his gun's barrel and wrenched. Thankfully, the force and shock factor of my punch was more than enough to cause the man to let go of his weapon as he stumbled in an attempt to catch on to what was going on. Instead of giving the bounty hunter a chance to reorient himself, I jammed the butt of the gun into the guy's gut. As he doubled over, I caught him squarely in the middle of his face with my elbow. A final overhead swing of the rifle onto the man's head skull put him squarely down for the count.

As I stood there, panting and staring at the prone man in shock, I came to a few realizations: first, I was shaking like I'd been dunked in ice; second, I could feel my heart pumping and roaring in my chest; and third... third was that I had a massive and most likely slightly disturbing grin on my face.

"-ross? Hey, Cross, is thing thing working?"

"YERK!" I yelped in shock, jumping almost a foot into the air as Zoro's voice came out of nowhere.

"Yeah, it's working. Cross, you alright?"

"Uh..." I stammered dumbly. Right, right... Soundbite must have made a connection... just... just need to calm down. "Fine. Fine, fine, I'm... I just ambushed another agent, but I'm fine."

"... Cross, did you-?"

"NO!" I winced at how loud that was. "I... I mean no, no. He's fine. I'm fine. I didn't... he's just unconscious, I wouldn't... not that there's anything wrong with that, not if there's any other-!"

"Cross, are you really alright?"

I hesitated slightly as I contemplated my answer before responding. "I... look, Zoro, I know it is distinctly not right to enjoy fighting and violence, I know that... but... the thrill of it all... the rush... that's... that's still safe, right? That's not...?"
"Are you kicking his head in or breaking his bones for kicks?"

"Uh..." I looked down at the unconscious man contemplatively, reassuring myself that yes he was still breathing. "Ah, no, no, I didn't do that. I did what needed to be done, nothing more or less."

"Then you're still sane, Cross. You're still pretty nuts for, well, anyone, but you're not the dangerous kind of nuts. Well... to anyone but yourself, at least. Does that help?"

I considered this for a moment before promptly sagging in relief. "I... I don't think it should but it does. It really does. Thanks, Zoro."

"Great. Anyways, the crap cook and I just finished tying these clowns up and Nami wants to start counting cash. Get over here before she gets it in her mind to get you herself."

I barely choked down a squawk of panic as I grabbed the sack of Beri's I'd accumulated. "On my way!" I grimaced as a thought hit me. "Ah... before I forget, were Mr.9 and Miss Wednesday among the captured? I coulda sworn I caught sight of them when Luffy went to beat down that curly-haired guy."

"Huh? Yeah, we got them. They tried to attack me and the cook while we were fighting. Psh, as though fighting that moron would distract me even remotely enough for that to work. Why do you ask?"

"Perfect..." I ground out, doing my best to keep my exasperation out of my voice. That made things... complicated. Or at least, interesting. "I just wanted to know because they seemed like they had higher ranks than the rest, if their low numbers meant anything. A grunt is one thing, executive officers are another barrel of pitch entirely."

"Fair enough. But don't worry, they're tied up. They won't be causing us any problems."

"Got it, got it..." I nodded slowly to myself. "Well, anyways, I'll be there in a bit. Hang tight." And with that, I jerked my hand across my throat. The second the connection was cut, I let out a slight groan as I looked up at the sky, searching for an answer. Well this was a fine mess. While the sky was dark, we were still early in the timeline, and without Mr. 5 and Valentine putting seemingly lethal pressure on Vivi and Igaram, neither of the two would spill their identities to us.

Some way, somehow, I needed to get the two to divulge their identities to us and explain their stories. Otherwise... well, best not to contemplate those kinds of consequences. Or the body counts that went alongside them.

Well, standing around separated from the crew wouldn't do anything to help. Besides, maybe the walking could help me think of something.

Fifteen minutes later, I was back at the building and my mind was still giving me squat. As it was, my train of thought could be summed up as a frantic repetition of the words 'What-do-I-do-What-do-I-do-What-do-I-do-!?'

"Hey big bro!"

"SONNUVA!" Once again I jerked in shock as a voice, Nami's this time, came straight outta nowhere. I shot a glare at Soundbite. "And you didn't warn me why!?"

"Too FUNNY!" Soundbite snickered.

"Grgh..." I hissed out before taking in Nami's very ecstatic demeanor. "And as for you, what the
heck is with the 'big bro' stuff?"

"Anybody who helps me make fifty million beris in a single night is as good as family to me!" Nami chirped eagerly as she yanked the bag of cash I was holding out of my hands.

I blinked at the sum in shock. "You managed to find fifty mil all on your own?"

"Actually, your bag makes it fifty," Nami clarified as she hefted the bag with a squee.

I ran that phrase in my head for a second before giving the navigator a disturbed look. "Did you just figure out how much money that bag has in it with a glance?!"

"It's a gift!" she chirped as she swung the sack up onto her shoulder. "Well! I'm going to go and stow this on the Merry. Go take Sanji's place and tell him to get to work!" And with that, she was off.

I blinked as I tried to come to terms with what had just happened before slowly looking at Soundbite. "That woman is way too scary for someone her size."

"Shh! SHE COULD HEAR YOU!"

"I wouldn't put it past her..."

Moving past that little scene, I went inside the building where the Monster Trio was waiting.

"Hey Cross!" Luffy waved as he eagerly munched down on some of the leftovers. "Have fun?"

"For a certain degree of the word 'fun', anyways," I tilted my hand side-to-side with a grimace before looking at the other two. "What about you guys?"

Sanji coughed uncomfortably as he refused to meet my eyes. "I... overreacted slightly during the fight and Nami got a bit angry with me. Nothing serious."

I swear I could feel a drop of sweat hang from my head as I took in the mass of bruises that adorned Sanji and Zoro's skulls, as well as a few small cuts on Sanji's face and legs. "Yes... I can see that. Anyways..." I jerked a thumb over my shoulder. "Nami wants us to switch out. Grab a bag and start looting, I'll stay here and keep an eye on these clowns."

"Got it," Sanji nodded as he walked off. "I'll grab some food while we're at it. We're running a bit low... Maybe a few barrels of fresh water too..." And with that he was off, muttering out a growing list the entire way.

I watched him leave for a moment before turning and taking stock of our former attackers. The majority of the bounty hunters were still unconscious, their limbs tied behind their backs with several lengths of rope. However, not all of them were dead to the world. As it was, Mister 9, Mister 8 and Miss Wednesday were all still conscious, if badly bruised, and gagged as well as bound. The trio was showing off their mental clarity by pinning us all with furious glares.

I gave the trio a once-over before glancing at Zoro. "They say anything?"

The swordsman scoffed as he poked around in the house's wreckage for a bottle that was still intact. "Nothing worth listening to, anyways."

I hummed in understanding as I contemplated the Frontier Agents; specifically, Miss Wednesday. The second she caught me looking at her, however, she affixed me with a thunderous look. It was quite the expression to behold. In fact, the way she'd been acting the entire time I'd known her
actually seemed a bit... familiar...

Wait... could that actually work? It was certainly a possibility, no doubt. After all, Vivi prided herself on not being like that, so maybe...?

There was only one way to find out.

I pointed at Miss Wednesday. "Do you mind if I take her gag out? I want to ask her something."

Luffy and Zoro blinked at me in confusion before shrugging indifferently. "Go ahead."

"Thanks..." I walked up to the bound woman and knelt in front of her, yanking out the cloth lodged between her teeth.

Miss Wednesday spat and gagged for a moment before glaring at me venomously. "What do you want?" she growled.

I've said it before and I'll say it again: Vivi was a hell of an actor. If I didn't know the truth about her personality, I'd say she was as much of a bitch as she was making herself out to be.

And it was the sheer disparity between her two personalities that I was banking on.

"What's your name?" I asked.

The 'Agent' cocked her head with a haughty sniff. "Are you daft? You know full well that my name is Miss Wednesday."

I grumbled in exasperation as I rolled my eyes. "Your real name, smartass, not your codename."

I could practically feel Mr. 8's eyes boring into me as the blue-haired woman twitched imperceptibly. "Wh- why do you want to know?"

I shrugged as I maintained my flat stare. "I want to know your family name so that I can confirm a theory I have."

A cold sweat appeared on Miss Wednesday's brow as she swallowed slightly. "What... what are you talking about?"

"You can cut the act, it's written all over you. The way you walk, the way you look at me and my friends, the way you carry yourself..." I tilted my head to the side just so. "You're rich, aren't you?"

That prompted Wednesday to blink in shock. "I... w-what?"

"Your family, they have plenty of money, don't they?" I clarified. "Every one of your mannerisms is textbook blue-blood behavior, the kind that you learn over the course of your whole life, and that can only mean one thing: you're loaded, and you grew up loaded."

Miss Wednesday flapped her jaw uselessly for a moment as she attempted, attempted to come up with an answer. "W-w-what- What does it matter if my family has money?" Her gaze suddenly turned steely. "Are you looking to hold me for ransom or something, hm? Is that it?"

I couldn't help but smile at the deflection. Smart girl, very impressive. Too bad she was a mile off-base. "Not even remotely. I just wanted to confirm that before asking you my real question: why?" Wednesday blinked in shock, but I pressed on before she could respond. "Why are you here? You have money, you have standing, you have things, period. So why join Baroque Works, hm? Why would a pretty girl like you, someone with everything, be slumming with a nefarious criminal
organization? And don't try to tell me this isn't a step down from your usual accommodations."

*Those* questions managed to do the job, putting Miss Wednesday on edge and forcing her to avert her gaze. "I... what... why would you possibly-?"

"*I want to know,*" I asserted firmly, leaning to the side so that I was looking at her straight in the face. "Because tonight, I was attacked by people who were acting with full intent to kill, and as such I want to know *why.* I want *some* kind of motivation, I want to know *why* someone like *you* would be so willing to kill me. The rest of these chumps? That's easy: they want to get rich, and at least I can understand the idea, even if I don't even remotely respect it.

"*But you?*" I jabbed my finger at her. "As I said before, you're loaded. You don't *need* to lower yourself to base violence to get rich because you already *are.* So what I want to know is *why.* Why the hell are you here?"

Wednesday bit her lip furiously as she twisted this way and that where she was sitting, wholly unwilling to look at me.

"Was it for the thrill of it?" I demanded. "Were you sick and tired of living a safe and secure life? Because I'll admit, the rush is a *hell* of a thing. Or maybe it was simply youthful rebellion? Tired of being daddy's precious little *princess,*" I spat the word, causing Wednesday to flinch. "All the time, wanted to escape your sheltered life?" I cast a disdainful glance at Mr. 9. "*I seriously* doubt you decided to do it for romance, especially not with him..." I then looked at Mr. 8 with a grimace. "And I *really* hope not with him."

"MMMPH!" The pair roared furiously beneath their gags, though for different reasons.

Meanwhile, Miss Wednesday was outright squirming in her spot, *clearly* uncomfortable to the extreme. Just one more push...

I made a show of tensing up as a thought hit me. "Or maybe..." I shot an accusing glare at her. "*You like* it, *don't you?*"

Wednesday glanced at me in confusion.

"*You like* causing pain."

And just like that, horror washed across her face, her entire body tensing up as though she'd been struck by lightning "No..." she breathed numbly..

"That's it, isn't it?" I denounced vehemently. "*You like* hurting people, *you like* killing them, hunting them down.*"

"*No, no, no...*"

"*You like* torturing them, ending their lives, gaining their trust and stabbing them in the back the second they least suspect it. The entire reason you're here is that you take *pleasure* out of the suffering of others, suffering that *you-*!"

"NO!"

I jerked back in shock at the sudden scream, barely managing to keep a victorious grin off my face.

Miss Wednesday was long gone, and in her place sat Princess Nefertari Vivi of Alabasta, huffing and panting furiously as she stared at me with equal parts royal fury and honest desperation.
"That is not true!" Vivi spat heatedly. "You think I like doing this? You think I enjoyed causing so much pain? I hate hurting people! I've hated it my entire life! Every second I've been a part of this organization, every instant I've worked for it, I have had to fight against every fiber of my being to keep going! I promise you, there is not one person on the planet who hates Baroque Works more than I do!"

"Then why join!?" I demanded, getting right up in her face. "Why become a part of it, why climb the ranks until you were mere inches away from the top?! What possible purpose did that serve!?"

"Espionage, primarily."

"Although I wouldn't be surprised if there was a little sabotage in there too, kyahahaha!"

My blood ran cold as a very familiar pair of voices sounded out behind me, and judging by the way Vivi suddenly paled in absolute terror, my memory wasn't faulty in this regard.

With an immense amount of dread, I slowly stood up and turned around, taking in the duo that were standing out in the street: a dark-skinned man wearing a trenchcoat and a bubbly woman in a yellow lemon-themed sundress carrying a parasol.

"Honestly now, you've been quite busy..." Miss Valentine mused with a grin. "Haven't you, Princess Nefertari Vivi of Alabasta?"

Luffy blinked at the Officer Agents in confusion. "Who the heck are these guys?" He then twisted his head around to look at Vivi. "And you're a princess? For real?"

All Vivi could manage was a panicked whimper as she trembled in place.

Zoro snorted as he looked them over, his right hand clenched around Wado Ichimonji. "More Baroque Works agents, if I had to guess."

"Yeah..." I grit out darkly. "At a glance, I'm going to say... Mr. 5 and Miss... what, April Fool's Day?"

"Kyahaha!" the woman cackled. "Valentine's Day, actually, but good guess! I'm glad to see that my sunny disposition is so impressionable! Just for that, I'll make your death painless!"

"You should consider yourself lucky," Mr. 5 grunted. "Usually she likes to take her sweet time."

"I'm honored," I drawled sarcastically. Beneath my breath, I hissed at Soundbite out of the corner of my mouth. "Nice job keeping a lookout!"

"I WAS listening!" the baby snail protested. "I heard THEM coming."

"Alright you two, enough of the comedy routine," Zoro growled, sliding Wado Ichimonji out of its sheath. "What do you want?"

"What we want isn't important," Mr. 5 sniffed. "What's important is what our boss wants, and what he wants is her majesty's head served to him on a silver platter, along with her keeper-" He jerked his head at Mr. 8. "Igaram, Commander of the Royal Guard of Alabasta."

"Of course, seeing how you all seem to know so much about our organization," Miss Valentine's grin went from ear to ear, showing off her psychopathy at it's fullest. "We'll need to kill you all as well! Nothing personal, kyahahaha!"
"Yes, because that's exactly the kind of reassurance a person wants to hear." I deadpanned before growling at Soundbite. "Well why the hell didn't you say anything!?"

"I DID SAY something!"

Before I could question what he meant, both Mr. 5 and Miss Valentine fell into ready positions.

"Now then..." the male half of the duo started.

"Let's get started, kyahahaha!" the woman finished.

They started to move... and promptly jerked simultaneously before falling face-first to the ground.

I blinked in confusion as I tried to process what the heck had just happened. "Uh...?"

"Kyahahaha!" Soundbite cackled. "I just DIDN'T SAY IT to you!"

"What the hell are you-?!"

"Hey, guys! You alright down there?"

I stared at Soundbite for a second as he belted out Usopp's voice before allowing my jaw to drop open in shock. "That... was genius."

"Thank yoooou!" he sang in response.

"Tch, cocky little shit..." Zoro grunted as he clicked his sword back into its sheath, not even bothering to hide the smirk he was wearing. "We're fine, Usopp. Nice going."

"Yeah, that was a great shot!" Luffy nodded in agreement.

"Uh... y-yeah! Of course it was! After all, what else would you expect from The Great-!"

"We know!" I groaned tiredly. "Look, you can gloat later, when we're out of danger. For now? Soundbite, broadcast to the whole of crew."

One electronic whine later and the snail announced "You're live!"

"Sanji, drop what you're doing and hightail it to the Merry, pronto. Nami, if you're still onboard, stay there. We need to meet up as soon as possible."

I glanced between Vivi and Igaram contemplatively.

"We have a lot to talk about."

-o-

"Alright, you two." I crossed my arms with a huff as I leaned against the Merry's thankfully un molested main mast. "Start talking: just what in the blue hell have we stumbled ass-backwards into?"

After cutting Vivi and Igaram's binds, we all spent a few minutes relocating to Merry's deck, where our crew had encircled the pair of royals and were watching them curiously.

Vivi, with her hair now let down into a looser and far more comfortable-looking ponytail, looked at us desperately for a moment before hanging her head with a heavy sigh. "How much do you all
know about the kingdom of Alabasta?"

"Princess!" Igaram attempted to protest.

"They just saved our lives, Igaram! Even after we tried to kill them!" Vivi cut him off firmly. "They have a right to know!"

The Captain of the Guard hesitated for a second before conceding with a slump of his shoulders.

Vivi stared at him for a moment longer before looking back at us. "As I was saying..."

"We've never heard of it," Nami shrugged.

"Believe it or not, a lot of people in the East Blue would probably be surprised to learn the Grand Line actually has kingdoms, much less any kind of person living in it besides pirates," I added.

"I see..." Vivi nodded slowly. "Well, you have to understand: our home, Alabasta, was once as one of, if not the most peaceful nation on the Grand Line."

Sanji frowned as he gnawed on his cigarette contemplatively. "When you say 'was'..."

"In recent years, the country has been wracked with rebellion," Vivi lamented miserably, her voice filled with pain and misery. "Not the Revolutionaries, they've never had any quarrels with us, but a truly natural one. There have been riots, uprisings, chaos in general... at first, it appeared like my kingdom, my home was tearing itself apart..."

"Until I discovered- ahem, excuse me, ma, ma, MAH!" Igaram recited hastily. "Until I discovered rumors about the criminal organization known as Baroque Works. They have been using their agents to covertly disseminate unrest amongst the populace, turning the people against the crown. I attempted to discover a motive, but... none were forthcoming."

"When I found out about Baroque Works, I came to Igaram for help," Vivi explained. "I wanted to infiltrate the organization so that I could investigate it from the inside, and discover the identity of their leader, as well as his intentions."

"Damn..." Zoro whistled in awe. "Pretty damn gutsy for a princess."

"You will address Princess Vivi with respect, you-!" Igaram started to bluster before Vivi slapped his arm.

"Igaram!" she huffed. "Apologize to Mister Bushido, now!"

Most of the crew, myself included, hastily whipped our hands up to cover the smirks and scoffs we gave out.

"Mister Bushido?" I couldn't help but ask, gently elbowing him in the side.

Zoro's eye twitched as he let out a growl. "Are you...?"

"I apologize, Mister Bushido," Igaram spoke up, nodding firmly at Zoro.

"THAT'S NOT MY NAME, DAMN IT!" the swordsman roared amidst our renewed laughter.

"A-a-anyways, anyways..." I finally managed to get out. "D-did you manage to figure out what they're after?"
And just like that, the good mood died as Vivi's expression sobered. "Yes, we did. The aim of Baroque Works, the entire reason the organization was created, is to conquer Alabasta. They created and exploited the rebellion, and I need to return home as quickly as possible so that I can expose the truth, before my people unwittingly throw themselves into Baroque Works' clutches."

"I see..." Usopp mused. "That's quite the story..."

"So who's the boss?" Luffy asked eagerly.

"Aye!" I nodded in agreement. "Who's patient zero? Or, well, Mister Zero as it were?"

"DON'T ASK US THAT!" Vivi and Igaram shouted simultaneously.

"You must understand, Bawo- ahem, ma, ma, MAH!- Baroque Works prides itself on secrecy!" Igaram explained hastily. "Mister Zero is already attempting to kill us because we know his identity! Were we to share it with you, then you would become targets as well!"

"Fine by us!" Nami waved her hands hastily with a shaky grin. "We're kind of in over our heads already, I don't want to go any deeper!"

"I do!" I piped up hastily. "This sounds sweet!"

"Bring him on!" Luffy grinned as he pounded his fists together.

"Bring him on! Bring him on!" Soundbite parroted eagerly.

"Anyone who hurts someone as beautiful as you deserves to taste my shoe leather, the hard way," Sanji growled.

"Meh, we can take him," Zoro grunted.

"NO WE CAN'T!" Usopp and Nami roared.

"Look, you're all very strong, you've proven that," Vivi replied, her tone and hands raised placatingly. "But I have to agree with those two. You're no match for Sir Crocodile, one of the Seven Warlords of the Sea."

Vivi immediately clapped her hands over her mouth, her eyes wide in horror. Too late, though. We had all heard it. Nami was hugging herself desperately and Usopp had fainted dead away.

"You just told us," Zoro deadpanned, his jaw and brow twitching furiously.

A heavy silence fell over us all as we all stared at Vivi in shock.

Igaram stared at Vivi in shock.

The rest of the crew and I stared at Vivi in shock.

Mr. 13 and Miss Friday stared at Vivi in... well, honestly, they just seemed to stare from where they were perched on the upper deck's railing, the sunglasses made it hard to tell, but they were sure as heck staring nonetheless.

Then they stared at the rest of as we all took notice of them and stared up in surprise.

After a minute, they glanced at each other for a second before Mr. 13 jumped on Friday's back and she took off, the duo soaring into the heavens.
"The bird and the otter! Who are they?!” Nami shrieked, grabbing Vivi by the collar and shaking her back and forth. "Are they going to report us!? Well!?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry..." Vivi whimpered as she let herself hang in Nami's grip, tears streaming down her frozen, mortified face.

"Hear that?" I heard Luffy say excitedly behind me. "One of the seven warlords!"

"Yeah, this could be fun," Zoro replied. I barely resisted the urge to facepalm at the arrogant smirk I could hear in his voice.

"Hmm... Crocodile... usually best cooked from frozen, but I suppose I'll be able to make do with raw as well."

I sent a smirk at Igaram as I patted him on the back. "She needs to work on her impulse control a bit, huh?"

"Princess Vivi..." the Captain moaned piteously, burying his face in his hands.

"I'm so sorry, it just slipped out..." Vivi continued to moan, apparently only half-conscious of what she was saying.

"Slipped out!? Now those bastards are going to try and kill us too!" Nami roared at her before finally tossing the princess away and starting to sob piteously, clutching her face in despair. "Not even a full day into the Grand Line and already one of the Warlords wants us dead! This is too much, too much! What did I ever do to deserve this!?"

"Do you want that list chronologically or alphabetically?" I offered.

"SHUT THE HELL UP!"

"We're lucky, we'll be able to meet him soon."

"I wonder what he's like..."

"Eh, he can't be too tough."

"THAT GOES FOR YOU TOO!" Nami roared at the Monster Trio before turning on her heel and marching away with a huff. "Well, I feel your pain and I'm sorry for the both of you, but this is where we part ways! Hit the road, you two! Cross, help me hoist the sails!"

"Huh?" Luffy blinked in confusion. "Where're we goin'?"

"Anywhere but here! Those bastards don't know what we look like, so we've still got a chance to get away! Now stop lollygagging and hurry-!" Nami cut herself off as she heard the sound of a pencil scratching on paper.

A glance to the side revealed the Unluckies perched back on the ship's railing, with Mr. 13 drawing furiously on a sketchpad. He then proceeded to flip it around and show off a couple pages, each displaying a scary good sketch of one of us, even Soundbite.

"Wow, you're pretty good!" Nami chirped as she clapped her hands eagerly.

"Yeah," I couldn't help but snark up. "Not a bad parlor trick. What else can you do, balance a ball on your nose?"
The otter stared at me flatly for a second before reversing his sketchpad and drawing furiously on it for a minute, flipping through several dozen pages in seconds.

When he was done, he held the book upside down and started to let the pages fall. I blinked in shock at what I saw.

"Wow, a flip book, and with me in it!" I whistled in awe. "Damn that's impressive... so I'm walking along... then I'm getting shot in the leg... and now I'm being disemboweled... and now your partner is... is..." I trailed off as I continued to observe the macabre spectacle. "Okay, that's just wrong."

His job done, 13 leapt back on Friday and they took off anew, soaring towards the horizon.

"PERFECT, NOW THERE'S NOWHERE LEFT TO RUN!" Nami howled furiously.

Oh like hell I was letting this opportunity slip away!

"Not quite!" I growled as I glanced at Soundbite. "Wake him up, now!"

"BWAAAAAH!" Soundbite complied, blasting a foghorn across the deck and causing Usopp to scramble awake with a shriek.

"Who-wha-where-!?"

I hastily grabbed Usopp's shoulder and oriented him at the retreating pair of assassins. "Targets at 12-o-clock, priority target, shoot them down, now now now!"

What happened next was, in all honesty, a thing of beauty. In the span of a few scant seconds, Usopp snapped his goggles down, whipped his slingshot up, loaded, took aim, and fired.

An instant later, the Unluckies jerked in the sky and plummeted, a faint squawk managing to make its way back to us.

I breathed a sigh of relief as I patted the sniper on the shoulder. "Nicely done."

Usopp blinked out at the sea for a second before looking at me in confusion. "Uh... thanks, I think? What just happened?"

"You just got us off scott free!" Nami squeed exuberantly. "Usopp, if you were anyone else I'd kiss you!"

"... I'll take it."

"Er, Nami?" I couldn't help but speak up hesitantly. "It's not that easy. A, we already messed with Baroque Works by taking out this town, so unless you're willing to kill everyone here..."

Nami gained an uncomfortable expression. "Well..."

"And B..." I pointed at Soundbite with a grimace. "You're sailing with the loudest snail in the world, who now knows one of the most dangerous secrets in the world."

"CROC-O-DILE, CROC-O-DILE, Mister ZERO is CROC-O-DILE!" Soundbite piped up helpfully. Well, his version of it, anyways.

Nami's face immediately fell into a massive scowl. "I am so tempted to eat you right now..."

"It's no use, Nami," Zoro smirked as he patted her on the shoulder. "The fact is, one way or another?
We're on Baroque Works' hitlist."

"Sounds like fun to me!" Luffy grinned eagerly.

"We're gonna diiiieee..." Nami moaned as she slumped on the deck, clutching her knees to her chest.

"I'm so sorry..." Vivi attempted to comfort her desperately, patting her on the back.

"Um, excuse me?" Igaram spoke up hesitantly. "I realize that we have caused you an immense amount of trouble, but if at all possible, I would like to make one final request of you. For the sake of our nation, Princess Vivi must be returned to Alabasta at all haste. As such, I would request that you transport her home upon your ship. You are all quite powerful, so I imagine that you would be able to handle the Agents that will be sent after us with little problem.

"Please!" Igaram shocked us by falling on his hands and knees and bowing deeply. "You will be rewarded most handsomely, just bring our beloved Princess home, I beg of you!"

"Igaram..." Vivi said quietly.

"Nah, don't worry about it!" Luffy said, grinning as he waved his hand in front of his face. "We'll get her home for you, no problem!"

The rest of the crew, myself included, tensed furiously at the statement, casting panicked glances at Nami.

The orange-haired woman sniffled and sobbed for a moment longer before standing up with a sigh and slapping a hand to her forehead. "Well, I guess if those are the captain's wishes than we don't have a choice. Alright, we'll do it."

I gaped at Nami in blatant shock. "Wait, you're not going to lambast Luffy for passing up your chance to name a price to royalty?!"

Nami blinked and considered for a moment before shrugging indifferently. "Meh, not really. After all..." She suddenly grinned toothily and threw an arm over my shoulders. "You helped me make quite the mint today, big bro! Seventy million berries in a single night? That's practically unheard of outside the bounty hunting business! So..." Nami adopted a contemplative look for a moment. "...Yeah, I'm feeling pretty generous for the moment."

"Blasphemy..." Zoro and Usopp hissed in awe.

"CRAM IT, YOU TWO!"

"Aaaand she's back."

"B-but Igaram!" Vivi protested. "You keep speaking about getting me to Alabasta, keeping me safe, but what about yourself?! I won't just leave you here, I refuse!"

Igaram smiled kindly as he laid a hand on her shoulder. "Fear not, my princess, we shall meet again in Alabasta. You see, I have a plan."

-0-

"That was one of the most terrifying things I've ever seen..." Sanji grit out, puffing on two cigarettes at once as we watched Igaram set sail.

"I guess, but still, you've gotta admit, doing something like that takes real guts," Usopp noted.
"Mmm... yeah, I guess you're right..." the cook conceded.

As our decoy set out into the night, I took the opportunity to tap Vivi on the shoulder to get her attention. "Listen..." I scratched the back of my head sheepishly as I spoke. "About what I said earlier? I'm really sorry about all that. I was coming off an adrenaline high and something didn't feel right about it all, so...

"No no, it's fine," Vivi raised her hands placatingly. "You weren't in a right state of mind, it's alright. Honestly, I'm grateful. If you hadn't made me break character then, I probably wouldn't have until it was far too late. As it stands..." She smiled gratefully at me. "Without you, neither Igaram or I would still be alive."

I made to respond...

BOOM! FWOOSH!

And was cut off by the horizon becoming fire.

I was slightly aware of a strangled sound crawling out of my throat as I stared at the nigh-unholy bonfire that was lighting up the night. Two pressing questions jumped at me: first, how in holy hell did Igaram survive that?! And second, what the hell did Robin do, detonate a metric ton of water-resistant explosives on top of an underwater volcano or something?!

"THEY GOT TO HIM ALREADY!?" Usopp squawked in panic.

"What kind of monsters are these people?" Sanji breathed as his cigarettes slipped from his lips in shock.

"Hooooly SHIT," Soundbite hissed in agreement.

Luffy snorted murderously as he stared out at the blaze. "Damn it... I LIKED THAT GUY!"

"Nami, how's the Log Pose?" Zoro demanded.

"I-It's set," Nami stammered as she checked the instrument.

"Good. Then we need to set sail immediately," he grunted as he turned on his heel and started to run towards town. "Get moving! The ship's not gonna sail itself!"

And so we all started running towards the Merry... all except for one.

"Vivi, come on!" Nami shook the princess desperately, trying to break her out of her stupor. "We need to get out of here, if they find us-!"

"Nami," I cut her off hastily, pointing out the line of blood that was starting to trail down Vivi's too-tight lip.

Nami stared at Vivi in shock for a second before hastily wrapping her up in a hug, rubbing her back soothingly. "It's alright! We will definitely get you to Alabasta, I promise!" she swore firmly. "I realize that the guys don't seem like much... but they managed to save the East Blue all on their own! A Warlord of the Sea?" She scoffed derisively. "That's nothing!"

Noticing how she was still staring at the fire with dead eyes, I hastily stepped into her line of sight. "Don't look at that, Vivi, don't even think about it. Think about Alabasta, think about your friends, think about your family. Think about every reason you have to stay alive. Think about making those
That managed to snap Vivi out of her stupor as she sucked in a ragged breath, forcing herself to clench her eyes shut and look away. "C... Carue... w-w-we can't leave without Carue!"

I adopted an expression of despair. "Please tell me you don't mean that 9 guy, if I need to stay on a ship with him any longer than I have to..."

"N-no, no!" Vivi shook her head firmly. "Carue's a duck, a supersonic duck. I lost track of him in the fight! I-I've known him my whole life, I can't leave without him!"

"Soundbite?" I glanced at my snail.

Soundbite listened for a moment before blinking in surprise. "Hiding on THE MERRY!"

"What?! By why would- Ah, right!" Vivi slapped her forehead in realization. "Of course, last place he thought you'd ever look."

"Well come on!" Nami spun Vivi around and gave her a shove. "No more waiting, we need to go, now!"

Vivi stumbled forwards, sparing a final glance at the raging inferno before running at full tilt.

Nami blew out a heavy sigh as we followed behind the Princess. "She's a strong girl..."

"This is about more than just keeping our word now, isn't it?" I asked quietly. "This... this just became personal."

Nami nodded in agreement, a dark scowl painting her face. "Crocodile, and Baroque Works... doing something like this to her after all they've done to her kingdom? To her people? ...Yeah. This is very personal."

I snorted darkly as I looked back ahead, doing the best I could to ignore the slight burning sensation in my chest as I picked up my pace slightly. "Then let's get it done!"

A scant minute of running later and we were back onboard the Merry, with the rest of the guys scrambling to get the sails set and Vivi hugging her oversized duck gratefully.

"I'm so happy you're safe, Carue!" she mumbled into his feathers. "I... I can't imagine what I'd do if I'd lost you too!"

Carue rubbed his childhood friend's back soothingly with one of his wings as he opened his beak. "Qua - on't ever leave you, I pwomise!"

Vivi sniffed as she rubbed his neck gratefully. "Thank you, Carue, you have no idea how much that means to-!"

She, as well as everyone else on board, promptly froze as we processed what the hell had just happened.

Finally, most everyone simply jumped back in shock as they stared at Carue. "YOU CAN TALK!?"

"I CAN TAWK!?" Carue quacked in agreement.

"Pff..."
The reason I said most everyone jumped was that I didn't do the same. Why you ask? Simple.

"PFFHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

I was too busy roaring with laughter as I rolled on the deck, tears flowing and gut heaving as I laughed and laughed and laughed, and Soundbite was right there with me.

"WHAT THE HELL IS SO FUNNY!?” everyone else roared at me, Carue included.

That only got me laughing even harder as I fought to lift a hand and point at Carue. "D-DUCK! DUCK! PFFHAHAHAHAHA!"

"WHAT'S WONG WITH ME BEING A DUCK!?” Carue squawked indignantly.

"N-N-NO!” I managed to get through my howls. "D-D-DONALD! DONALD DUCK! Y-YOU'RE SPEAKING IN DONALD DUCK'S VO-O-OICE, HAHAHAHAHA!

"Who the heck is Donald Duck!?" Nami demanded.

"A-a comedian back home!” I wheezed helplessly. "H-he played this guy with a makebelieve Duck-Zoa Devil Fruit! His recordings are cla-a-assics! C-Carue's speaking in his voice, it's... HAHAHA! Oh man, it's like my childhood is speaking to me!

"B-but how is that possible!?” Vivi stammered in confusion.

"I think I've got an idea..." Nami mused as she looked at the still-cackling Soundbite.

The baby transponder took a moment to get his laughter back under control before nodding eagerly.

"I'M TRANSLATING for HIM! I'M being creative! I'm halping!"

"Nice... nice work, Soundbite!” I wheezed as I managed to work my way back up to my feet.

"That's exactly what I was talking about!”

"Well, thanks for letting me shpeak and evewything," Carue said before scowling and flapping his wings energetically. "But does it weally have ta be in thish voish!?”

"YES!" Soundbite and I roared simultaneously, alongside a cackling Luffy.

"Man, your duck's great, Vivi!” Luffy laughed.

"Say 'she sells sea shells' PFFHAHAHA!” I roared.

Carue promptly devolved into a series of murderous and very familiar-sounding grumbling, which only served to set me off once anew.

"OH WOULD YOU SHAD-UACK!"

I blinked in surprise as Carue suddenly devolved into traditional squawking. "What the-? Soundbite, why did you- SOUNDBYTE!?” I yelled in shock as I stared at my very empty shoulder.

"What the-!? Where the hell did that little pest go!?” Usopp demanded.

"Shitshitshitshit..." I cursed vehemently as I patted myself down. "Where could he have gone!?”

"Maybe he fell off while he was laughing?”
"No, you don't know Soundbite," I denied as I continued looking around. "He's damn good at multi-tasking, he wouldn't let go without a damn good rea-!" I trailed off into a choked gurgle as for the second time that night a familiar voice sounded behind me.

Moving very slowly, cautious and ready to jerk at the sign of any extra weight on my body, I slowly got to my feet and turned around.

And there she was, sitting on the upper deck's railing, clad in a cowboy-themed uniform that displayed a very generous amount of skin.

She had many names and titles. Devil's Child, sole survivor of Ohara, archaeologist, assassin, pirate, and most likely so many more.

Weighing in at a hefty 79 million, her bounty served to rightfully denote her as one of, if not the most deadly person on our ship at the moment.

One day, she would be a crewmate. One day, I would call her my friend, and we would most likely smile and laugh and cry right alongside one another.

But right here, right now?

At this moment, this woman was my enemy, our enemy... and she'd done something to Soundbite.

And there was nothing I could do about it.

"Hello there," Nico Robin purred coyly. "I'm Miss All Sunday. Pleased to meet you."
The first few seconds of the encounter, I focused on keeping my thoughts firm and logical: 'She won't hurt him, he's just a snail, she probably just wanted to shut him up before he actually thought to listen again - going to need to talk to him about that - so he's fine. I just need to be calm, wait my turn, and very politely ask if I could have him back please.'

The next few seconds, I became aware that my mouth was moving without my explicit control. I only managed to catch the tail end of what I was saying, but the general gist could be summarized as "where the hell is my snail you bitch".

The next second, my thought process could be summarized as the phrase 'Damn it, mouth.'

Robin cocked an eyebrow at me, though her expression was otherwise studiously disinterested. "Well now, that was quite a rude greeting."

"CROSS!" Sanji snarled as he stomped towards me. "How dare you talk to a woman like that!?"

I briefly considered apologizing for my behavior... but I swiftly dismissed it in favor of snarling back at the cook. "I don't care if she's Miss Universe, she just did something to Sound—ACK!"

Before I could work myself into a right proper rant, I was cut off by the swift and sudden obstruction of my air supply. Whipping my hands up to scrabble at my throat, I swiftly identified the problem: a set of foreign fingers that were as iron-hard as they were young and smooth and firmly crushing my windpipe.

"Mister Jeremiah?" Vivi asked in concern. "Mister Jeremiah, what's wrong!?"

For some reason, even as I heaved and thrashed in a marginally successful effort to keep myself upright and inhale any amount of fresh air, the only thing I could think was 'Do I look like an octogenarian to you!?'

"Oh, nothing much, really," I heard Robin's voice say in unconcerned manner. "He's just learning a lesson on manners is all."

Honestly, I could only imagine what this looked like to the crew. To the world, it must have appeared that I was choking on thin air, but the truth was far more terrifying: in a deft display of her mastership over her powers, Robin had somehow managed to sprout an arm within the lining of my jacket, most likely by momentarily affixing one of her eyes to my shirt, and had snaked it up along my chest in order to set it to start throttling me.

In most situations, I would probably be impressed by the feat. As it was, however, I was a bit put off on account of how I was being choked like a bitch.

I staggered slightly as I tried to wrench the fingers open. I really hoped no one did anything monumentally stupid any time soon, otherwise-

"LET GO OF MY COMMIE!"

Sometimes, I'm not even sure why I bothered.

I was barely able to catch sight of Luffy leaping up at Robin, but I definitely saw Robin slide over a mere foot to her right, thus allowing my captain to sail right past her. A moment later, Luffy's very
panicked and very outraged cries sounded back to us, though they swiftly became muffled.

"My my... you're quite the rambunctious lot, aren't you?"

"Why you-!" I could hear the rest of the crew snarl furiously, the sounds of weapons being drawn sounding out for a moment before being replaced by the sounds of those same weapons hitting the deck.

"Hmph... could you please not point such dangerous things at me? It's quite rude."

"Hrrrgrghh..." I gargled out rebelliously.

"Please, stop!" Vivi pleaded desperately. "I'll do anything you want, just let Mister Jeremiah go!"

"Hmm... very well..." I could practically hear the smug in Robin's voice. If I wasn't currently being strangled to death, I might have done something about that. "You just need to do one thing."

"Name it!"

The air of smug somehow intensified immensely. "Thank me."

"WHAT!?!"

"Thank me for helping you. After all, I helped you identify Mister Zero, didn't I?"

"You're the one who told Crocodile that we'd found out about him in the first place!"

"And that's all I did. Well, apart from disposing of Mr. 8, of course. I believe that that qualifies as being extremely generous, no?"

"YOU KILLED IGARAM!?"

Robin's weary sigh echoed slightly on the edge of my hearing, "My my, you do love to nitpick, don't you? Instead of asking questions of me, perhaps you should be asking yourself how much air you think your friends' 'Commie' has left, hm?"

Oh hell no. Future crewmate or not, there was no Freudian excuse on the planet valid enough to make me sit around and let this cocky bitch—and indeed, at this moment she was definitely acting like a bitch—use me as leverage!

As the very edges of my vision started to turn ever so slightly black, I renewed my scrabbling at the grip on my throat, trying to make any kind of difference. Unfortunately, however, either I was way weaker than I thought I was, or Robin exercised her hands with religious fervor.

...Not like that! God, no. That was the last thing I needed on my mind at the moment.

Just as things started tunneling before me, I managed to find some form of leverage, wrapping my fingers around a lone protrusion of flesh I could feel.

In a final burst of desperation, I wormed both my hands around the protrusion and yanked as hard as I could.

Never before had the sound of a thumb joint disintegrating into shredded ligament brisket sounded so genuinely appealing.

The next instant, the limb evaporated into ethereal flower petals and I breathed, inhaling what felt
like ten lungfuls of air at once before coughing heavily enough to expel one of those selfsame lungs. "Crazy... bloody... demon witch..." I wheezed.

"Cross! Are you alright?" Usopp asked as he rushed to my side and helped support me.

"Y-hurk..." I wheezed miserably as I massaged my aching throat. "Yeah, I'm fine..." I sent an acrid glare up at Robin, who I was gratified to see was shaking her hand out with a marginally annoyed frown. "I'll be better once she's gone and Soundbite's back."

"Yeah, I hear y- wait a... Cross, stand very still."

"Say wha-?" I tried to look over my shoulder at him in confusion, but my attention was diverted by a voice that I was rapidly coming to associate with the phrase 'enjoying this way too damn much'.

"Well now," Robin purred in a dangerous tone. "I suppose I should admire you for your tenacity, if nothing else. But really, I thought that much would have been enough. After all, it's not like you cut the most impressive-"

"FIRE STAR!"

"Ah- Agh!" /"YEARGH!"

Both Robin and I yelped simultaneously as Usopp set the back of my coat on fire, with Robin flinching for a second before cringing in pain while I howled in shock and hastily ripped the flaming cloth off my back.

"WHAT THE HELL-?!" I made to roar in Usopp's face...

"LONG-NOSED BED-WETTING SEA-KING-SHAGGING ASSHAT!"

When a very familiar-sounding rant came from the smoldering remains of my coat.

"Soundbite!" I yelped, hastily grabbing a safe part of the cloth and shaking it enough to dislodge a slightly charred but otherwise whole checker-patterned snail shell from what was left of the hood. I hastily scooped the baby snail up and dusted him off as best I could. "Soundbite, are you alright?"

The gastropod's eyestalks poked out of his shell, alongside a puff of smoke and a slight cough. "BEEN BETTER, but I'll live." He turned his eyestalks on Usopp in a heated glare. "No thanks TO HIM."

"What?" Usopp scoffed. "You're a tough snail, you can handle a little fire, can't ya?"

"BITE ME!" my snail roared at a nigh-deafening volume.

I cast a flat glare at Usopp. "Did you actually know he was in there?"

The sniper elected to shrug innocently in response. "I saw something moving in your hood, I just decided not to take any chances. Simple as that."

I blinked as I processed the statement for a moment before casting a surreptitious glance up at Robin. As I suspected, she was currently waving out one of her arms, which was now sporting both an array of light burns and, I was pleased to note, what appeared to be a bitemark that encircled her thumb.

So she'd sprouted her hand in my hood, swiped Soundbite when I wasn't looking, and stashed him mere inches from being literally beneath my nose while keeping him both still and silent. Damn...
might have feared and resented Robin at the moment, but hell if I couldn't respect her, if for nothing more than her skills.

"Hmph..." Robin sniffed as she gingerly flexed her hand, giving us a look that held what appeared to be a hint of begrudging respect, if nothing else. "Well, it appears you're all at least a little interesting after all. For the record, I'm not here on assignment. I have no reason to fight you, I merely wished to talk. The only reason I took your little snail was that I didn't want him noticing me before I was ready. I must say, he's quite the..." Her thumb twitched imperceptibly. "Turbulent fellow, isn't he?"

"Took your thumb clean off, huh?" I asked with a smirk. If the way her thumb twitched again was anything to go by, I was dead on the money.

"And I'm hungry FOR MORE!" Soundbite snarled with a malevolent, toothy grin.

"Keep talking like that to a woman as beautiful as her and you'll wind up on the menu, crap-snail," Sanji warned darkly.

"Sanji, would you mind doing me a favor?"

"Yes, Nami-Swan~?"

"Just this once? Drop it."

"ERK! Y-yes, my dear... hurk!"

"...Did you seriously just cough up blood?"

"Cram it, Zoro, I'm currently at war with myself!"

"And I thought you were pathetic before, crap cook."

"SHOVE IT, MARIMO! MY NATURAL INSTINCTS ARE FIGHTING EACH OTHER TO THE DEATH HERE!"

"Hahahaha!" The argument was broken up by the sound of Robin laughing lightly into her unmolested hand. "It seems I need to correct myself; you're all quite interesting indeed."

"RAAAGH!"

Without missing so much as a beat, Robin slid to the side on the railing, allowing Luffy to leap past where she'd been just moments before and tumble across the main deck for a second before flipping back to his feet.

"And you're the most interesting of all, aren't you?" she chuckled, a slight glimmer of... something shining in her eyes as she examined Luffy. "Captain of the Straw Hat Pirates, Monkey D. Luffy."

"RAAAGH! SHUT UP!" Luffy bellowed furiously. "I DON'T WANNA HEAR IT! YOU HURT MY CREW, AND YOU TIED ME UP IN KNOTS!"

"Was only a matter of time until someone tried it..." I muttered, more to myself than anyone.

"SHE-WITCH, SHE-WITCH!" Soundbite bit out furiously.

"Hmph..." Robin chuckled. "Still, no matter how much interest you promise, your luck is even worse. You're all being hunted by Baroque Works because you befriended a princess, and you, poor
princess, only have a pirate crew for protection. Though of course..." Her grin widened even further. "Your next destination is the worst luck of all." Aaaaaand then her grin became outright demonic. "Little Garden. One of the few islands on the Grand Line that guarantees I needn't bother with killing you at all. After all, you'll never be a threat to Baroque Works ever again."

"SAYS YOU!" Luffy roared furiously at her.

"Says me indeed. Unless, of course..." There was a momentary blur at Robin's side before an object was tossed out at Vivi, who nearly muffed the catch but held on nevertheless.

"What is it?" Carue quacked cautiously as he peered over Vivi's shoulder.

"An... an Eternal Pose!" Vivi gasped in surprise.

"Indeed," Robin nodded with an only borderline-evil smile. "That Pose leads to Nanimonai Island, an island just one stop away from Alabasta. With that Pose, you can avoid many of the dangers of the sea, and it's a relatively unknown route to boot. You'd be unmolested by our agents the entire way."

"Wait..." Nami blinked in confusion. "So she's helping us?"

"But... why would you possibly give this to us!?" Vivi demanded incredulously.

"It's probably a trap," Zoro posited blandly.

"Personally, I say it's more like she's toying with us," I suggested matter-of-factly.

"Either way, I don't twist her as faw as I can throw her..." Carue grumbled as he shot the evil eye at the woman.

"D-d-ditto..." Usopp gulped nervously.

Soundbite's response was to growl and snarl murderously in a manner not unlike a rabid hound.

As we made our suggestions, Vivi was silent, contemplating the Eternal Pose with a carefully composed expression.

However, before she could say anything, Luffy snatched the Pose out of her hands with a huff. "Who asked you?"

And with that, he effortlessly crunched the Pose in his grip.

Barely a second passed before Nami kicked him square in the face. "HAVE YOU COMPLETELY LOST YOUR MIND!?" she screeched incredulously.

"Is she serious?" Carue hissed out of the corner of his beak.

"Hard to tell..." Usopp replied.

"CRAM IT, YOU TWO!" our navigator roared at the two of them, prompting them to cower before her righteous fury. Nami then proceeded to redirect her ire back at Luffy. "She just gave us an easy out! What if she was actually helping us!?"

"Doesn't matter!" Luffy huffed with a scowl. "Nobody's going to decide what our course is for us!"

That drew a moment of shock from everyone, during which they were forced to re-evaluate their
opinions of Luffy.

"But... I... ah..." Nami stammered helplessly in search of a response.

"Captain's orders, Nami," I grinned as I clapped her on the shoulder. "Wouldn't want to be accused of mutiny, would you?"

"Yeah, Nami." Our navigator shivered as Zoro suddenly appeared on her other side, mirroring my own actions, albeit with a tighter grip. "You do know what the traditional punishment is for mutiny, right?"

"STRING her UP! STRING her UP!" Soundbite crowed with a cackle.

"But-but-but-but-!" Nami sputtered as she snapped her eyes between Zoro and I rapidly for a moment before scowling and slapping us both upside the head. "Jerks!" she huffed as she stomped away from us, a luminescent blush and a rather adorable pout decorating her face.

Despite the stinging throb that was pounding at the back of my head, I couldn't help but snicker as Nami marched off. "Is it just me, or does she make things too easy sometimes?"

"FUN fun fun FUN!" Soundbite concurred.

"You have no idea, brat," Zoro smirked in agreement.

"Ah well..." Robin sighed with a smile as she stood up and strutted over to the side of the Merry. "That's just too bad. There's really nothing I can do to convince you otherwise?"

"No way!" Luffy stuck his tongue out in protest. "You blew up the roller guy, so I don't like you!"

"OH CRAM IT, WILL YOU!?" Nami snarled as she rammed a firm chop on Luffy's head.

"Oh, it's alright, I don't mind," Robin chuckled. "I've heard worse. We'll meet again one day, Straw Hat Luffy. If you survive, anyways."

"I hope not," Luffy snorted.

With a final chuckle, Robin vaulted over the side of the Merry, falling out of sight. Running to the edge of the ship, I looked over and caught sight of Robin seating herself on a shaded sofa positioned on the back of a rather large turtle wearing a cowboy hat and smoking a cigarette.

Come to think of it, what had happened to that thing after Alabasta?

"Let's go, Bunchi," she ordered calmly, to which the turtle responded with a snort.

Thinking fast, I hastily piped up. "HEY!"

Robin glanced up at me with a vague hint of curiosity.

"We will meet again, 'Miss All Sunday'," I promised. "And after we do, one day," I tilted my head back and indicated my neck. "I will get you back for this."

Robin blinked in surprise before smiling in challenge. "Is that so?"

I shot back a wide grin of my own. "You can count on it."

Robin's grin widened a hint more before she turned around and gave some unseen command to her
turtle, prompting it to accelerate away.

I cocked an eyebrow as I watched our future crewmate sail into the distance. Big words from me, and I knew that they were true, sure... there was just one problem with them: I had absolutely no idea as to how the hell I was going to get back at her.

...eh, ah well. I'll just do the same thing I've been doing this entire time: make it up as I go along.

"Wooow, cool turtle!" I was broken out of my thoughts by Luffy whistling in awe. "And it's a big one too!"

"Argh!" Vivi suddenly cried out, rubbing her temples furiously.

"Huh?" Luffy blinked back at the Princess in confusion. "What's wrong? Do you not like turtles or something?"

"No, no..." Vivi growled out in frustration. "I... that woman is almost as secretive as Crocodile, if not more so. I just wish I knew what her game was."

"At a glance," I made a show of looking back the way Robin had gone. "I'm going to say... baccarat?"

That drew a flurry of squawky-cackling from Carue, which subsided almost as quickly when Vivi sent a cold glare at him. "What? That was funny!"

"Thank you, thank you, I'll be here forever!" I gave a mock-bow.

"You've been warned, people!" Soundbite snorted with a grin.

"You stole that from Futurama," I hissed out of the corner of my mouth.

"NOT THE FIRST, not the last!" Soundbite muttered back.

"Anyways..." Nami patted Vivi's back consolingly. "She's gone for now and we probably won't have to deal with her until we reach Alabasta. It's no use worrying about it until then, right?"

Vivi chewed her lip sadly for a moment, but nodded in agreement nevertheless.

"Besides," Zoro scoffed as he worked one of the lines to Merry's mainsail. "It's not like this is anything new for us. We deal with scheming women on a daily basis."

"Oh Sanji~."

"Of course, Nami-swan~!"

THWACK!

"OW!"

"DON'T SAY SUCH THINGS ABOUT NAMI-SWAN, MARIMO!"

"EAT THE CRAP YOU COOK AND DIE, SHIT-CHEF!"

"Is it always this crazy around here?" Carue asked Luffy quietly as he carefully watched the brawl go down.
"Allow me to answer that question!" I offered eagerly before proceeding to smash my fist down over Usopp's skull.

"OUCH! WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT FOR!?” the sniper howled.

"FOR SETTING ME ON FIRE, JACKASS!" I shouted back.

"YEAH!" Soundbite concurred.

"THAT WAS MY FAVORITE JACK—OUCH!" I winced as Soundbite proceeded to do his level best to chew my ear off.

"Ah... excuse me?"

The commotion ground to a halt as Vivi hesitantly spoke up, all of us looking at her questioningly.

"I... I just want to apologize for all of this," Vivi explained somberly as she rubbed her arm. "I... I'm putting you all in danger by being here, so..."

"Excuse me?" Nami stated flatly before poking Vivi's forehead with an annoyed expression. "The reason we're in danger is because of what you said. If you didn't want us to be in danger, you shouldn't have told us that Mister Zero was a freaking Warlord."

Vivi flinched slightly before looking away with embarrassment. "I said I was sorry..."

"Yeah yeah, whatever." Our navigator rolled her eyes with a smile. "The reason you're here is that we made a deal with Igaram, and I always make sure to pay back my deals."

"LIES!" I and everyone who wasn't Sanji or Luffy roared in response.

"OH SHUT UP!" Nami snarled back at us. "I might skew deals in my favor every once in awhile, but I still fulfill them!"

"Right, 'once in awhile'..." Zoro snorted.

Nami flipped her middle finger at the swordsman before smiling at Vivi anew. "But anyways, don't worry about a thing. We'll get you home, no matter what. Right, Luffy?"

"Hey, Sanji, I'm hungry! Cook us dinner!"

"You just ate, dipshit!"

"So?"

"Ergh..."

"Actually, Luffy, it's - ahhh..." I interrupted myself with a wide yawn as I rubbed my eyes drearily, my tiredness suddenly catching up with me all at once. "It's a bit... make that really late for dinner. Does anyone know what time it is?"

"Uh..." Usopp wracked his brain for a second before holding himself up on Merry's railing. "I think o'dark thirty at night? Definitely past midnight..."

"We've been up all night..." Nami groaned as she kneaded the bridge of her nose miserably.

"No way in hell we can keep going for long..." I grumbled to myself before clapping my hands
firmed. "Alright, how about this? We sail for a bit to get away from Whiskey Peak, then we drop anchor and sleep until sunrise?"

"But I'm hungraaaaaaaah..." Luffy's whining was cut off as it slowly morphed into a jaw-stretching yawn. He blinked blearily for a second before slumping his shoulders with a sigh. "Yeah, alright, fine. I'll just grab a snack before going to bed."

Sanji hastily clamped a hand down on our captain's shoulder. "I'll make you a snack, Luffy."

"But it won't be a looot..."

"It won't be half our supplies either, that's for damn sure."

"That's the problem..."

"GLUTTON!" Soundbite snickered.

"Alright, enough fun and games," Zoro announced tiredly. "Let's get out of here and hit the hay."

"Aye-aye to that..." I mumbled in agreement.

A few minutes of work later, the cactus rocks of Whiskey Peak disappeared into the dark horizon and I allowed my consciousness to slip into darkness as I practically fell into my hammock.

-o-

I was awoken the next morning at the time "half past way-too-frikkin'-early" by the once-pleasant sound of Vivi's voice, which didn't sound nearly so pleasant at max volume while trying to sleep.

"-et up! The sky is starting to light up, you need to wake up already!"

"Not until the sun is actually up and not a second sooner..." I moaned miserably as I curled up in my hammock.

"But you need to man the sails! The sea-!"

"Soundbite, can you hear any icebergs or Sea Kings coming at us?" I whined tiredly.

"Noooo..." Soundbite echoed out of his shell.

"Now, unless we're about to fall off the end of the earth, then please, let me sleeeeeep..."

"I agree with the brat..." Zoro grumbled.

"I apologize, Princess, but I'm siding with snail-mail on this one..." Sanji concurred.

"Long live the Commie..." Usopp piped up.

"Meeeeeat..." Luffy drooled slightly.

For a single, sweet, glorious moment, there was silence. Then...

"Oh Ca~rue~"

"Mwaaa...?"

"You still like Katorean bread, right?"
"...yeah?"

"Well, I still have some saved up right here," My heart dropped as I heard the sound of a crinkling bag ring out. "I was going to hold onto it for an appropriate time, buuut if you were to help me get these guys awake..."

"QUAWAWAWAAAAACK!"

"YEAR-!" THUMP! "OUCH!" I yelped in pain and panic as a flailing supersonic duck rammed into me and spun me out of my hammock, dumping me onto the ground, followed swiftly by the rest of the guys.

"Ungrateful FOWL!" Soundbite howled viciously.

"Cwam it, pintsize!" Carue huffed as he crossed his wings petulantly. "Kantowean bweed is dewicious! I have no wegwets! Also, gwateful?! I sound wike a fweaking kid on hewium! Change my voice alweady!"

"AFTER THIS!? NEVER!"

"Carue, I'd say I was sorry about you just screwing yourself out of a better voice, but honestly?" I couldn't help but shoot a smirk at the duck. "Considering the circumstances... yeah, I'm not even remotely sorry. All in favor?"

"Aye!" four very frustrated and tired voices cried out in agreement.

"But-but-but-!... awwww fiddlessticks... WILL YOU STOP WAUGHING AT ME ALREADY!?"

"Only when you stop emphasizing your speech impediment."

"I DON'T HAVE A FWEAKING SPEECH IMPEDIMENT!"

"You do now!" I chortled.

"Vi-viii..." Carue whined up at the princess miserably.

"Sorry, Carue," Vivi giggled. "To be fair, you did knock them out of bed."

"Because you asked me to!"

"And here's your reward for it." Vivi tossed a few slices of bread down onto the duck, which he started nomming on tearfully. "Now would you all please get up here already?"

"Do we have any other choice?" I growled more to myself than anyone as I plunked Soundbite down on my shoulder and climbed the ladder out of our room.

"Hey, Sanji! I'm hungry! Make us breakfast!" Luffy whooped as he leapt out ahead of me.

"On it," Sanji nodded as he started to stride towards the kitchen. "Pastries and bacon with sweetened tangerine juice, coming up. Cross, no pulp for you, right?"

"Hallelujah, the man knows me!" I cried out in relief.

"Mm... what's with all the racket?" Nami groaned as she poked her head out of the storage room, still clad in her pajamas.
"Ah, good morning Nami-swan!" Sanji gushed eagerly. "I'm on my way to make breakfast, would you care for anything special?"

"Uh...?" Nami blinked blearily as she processed what Sanji had said. "No, I think I'm good... wait, Vivi, you were actually serious about waking up at this hour!?"

"Of course I was!" Vivi sputtered incredulously. "I mean, this is the Grand Line! It's dangerous around here! We can't underestimate it for even a moment!"

Nami paled slightly before casting a fearful glance at me. "Cross?"

A glance at Soundbite awarded me with a shake of his head. "Still no icebergs, Nami."

"Oh thank god..." Nami sagged in relief.

"There won't be anymore icebergs!" Vivi huffed furiously. "Or at least, there won't be anything as psychotic as what we went through earlier! That stretch of sea is just insane because of Reverse Mountain's conflicting magnetic fields. But nonetheless, the Grand Line is still dangerous! You can't even relax for a moment!"

"Oh, come on!" Usopp scoffed. "What's the worst that could happen?" I didn't even bother hiding my wince at the phrase.

"I don't know!" Vivi flung her arms up in frustration. "That's the exact problem! Anything could happen! As such, you need to be ready at all times!"

As if in response, Sanji swept out of the Merry's kitchen, brandishing an array of plates and glasses with nigh inhuman balance. "Breakfast is ready!"

"Suh-weet!" I crowed as I made to scoop up one of the plates. "Thank you, love cook!"

"Actually, this one's yours." Sanji twisted himself slightly as he handed me a plate that seemed to have double the bacon others had, as well as a bowl of greens.

"Whaaaat? Aw c'mon, I get the veggies are for Soundbite, but how come Cross gets more meat?!
Luffy whined petulantly.

"Because Crocus said Cross needs plenty of protein to help fix him, that's why!" Sanji barked before rolling his eyes and twisting himself again to proffer another plate to the rubberman, this one with even more bacon than mine had. "And besides, you're getting plenty of bacon as is."

"WOOHOO!" Luffy crowed as he snatched up the plate and a glass before striding over to plop down on his special seat between Merry's horns.

"Oh, and here." Sanji lifted his foot and offered me a glass. "It'll taste a little weird, but that's because of the bonemeal ground up in it for additional calcium."

I shrugged as I took the glass. "Hey, whatever gets me up to speed faster."

"And before I forget, there are two bowls of lettuce waiting in the fridge. You know, for the baby transponder snails."

"Thanks, I'll check on them once I'm through with breakfast." I nodded at him in thanks before wandering over to one of the railings and relaxing against it as I chowed down, plopping Soundbite down next to the lettuce bowl, which he proceeded to dig into with gusto.
Noticing Carue nibbling on his bread nearby, I waved in an attempt to catch his attention. "Hey, Carue?"

The supersonic duck shot me a sidelong glare. "What?"

I raised my hands in surrender. "Just for the record, the only reason I don't get Soundbite to change the voice he's giving you is that I can't make him do what I say if he really doesn't want to do it."

"Got that right!" Soundbite piped up.

"So..." I proffered a piece of one of my pastries. "Peace offering?"

Carue eyed the baked good warily for a moment before snapping it up into his beak and chewing it morosely. "I'm not mad about the voice..." he grumbled. "It's just annoying that you keep waughing at it is all..."

"And if it really bothers you then yeah, I'll stop. But still..." I shot the duck a cheeky grin. "You've got to admit, the voice is pretty funny."

Carue considered the statement for a moment before covering his snickering beak with one of his wings. "Yeah... awright, so it's a widdle funny..."

I slowly widened my smirk. "So, can I convince you to tell me about the little girl who sells sea shells?"

"Aw, go ta hell!" Carue cackled as he cuffed the side of my head with his wing.

"A-are they supposed to be doing that!?" Vivi demanded furiously as she indicated us all lazing about without so much as a care in the world.

"I don't see why not," Nami shrugged as she savored the freshly-baked bagel Sanji had given her. "These guys are all pretty smart, they'll jump to it if something comes up. Here, have something to eat," Nami continued, offering an extra plate and glass she'd taken off Sanji. "You must be famished."

Vivi made to protest, but was cut off by a medium-volume growl that came from her stomach. She bowed her head in an effort to hide her blush as she accepted the plate. "Well... alright. B-but I'm still not sure about this..."

"Your call, but... come on!" Nami grinned as she waved around the deck. "Look around you."

"Hey, Usopp, do you think you can make us some fishing gear?" Luffy queried as he inhaled his bacon.

"Yeah, some fishing gear would be useful..." Zoro mused.

"I wouldn't say no to an emergency source of food, that's for sure," I concurred.

"No worries! I'll whip up some high-quality deluxe fishing rods before you know it!" Usopp assured us eagerly.

"Hey Carue, you're a duck, you ever fish before?" Sanji queried curiously.

"Nah, not weally," Carue shrugged indifferently. "I was waized in the pawace awongside Vivi and the west of the Supahsonic Duck Squawdwon. Nevah weally had da chance, ya know?"
"So you were HOUSE-?" Soundbite started to pipe up with a grin.

"Watch it, you!" Carue warned him testily.

"Doesn't a ship like this and guys like these..." Nami's grin widened ever so slightly. "Make your cares just wash away?"

Vivi was silent as she considered us for a moment before sighing and finally allowing herself to smile. "Yeah... yeah, I guess it's a little relaxing..."

Our peaceful breakfast persisted for a few moments longer until Luffy suddenly piped up without warning.

"Hey guys, look!" he crowed eagerly, pointing ahead of the Merry. "The sun's starting to come up!"

Moving quickly, we all joined Luffy at the prow, staring excitedly out at the horizon where, indeed, the sun was starting to peek over the ocean.

"Wow..." Vivi breathed in awe. "That's beautiful..."

"Yeah..." I nodded slowly in agreement, raising my arm to indicate the array of colors that were painting the sky. "I mean, check out the way the sunlight is refracting off the- wait..." I blinked in confusion. "Those aren't clouds... is that fog?"

"Um..." Nami narrowed her eyes as she shaded them. "I... don't think so? Looks like... mist? How the heck-?"

Without so much as a hint of warning, Soundbite suddenly started wailing and thrashing on my shoulder. "AWOOGA! AWOOGA! Mayday, mayday! TURN AROUND! 360 degrees! GO GO GO! Danger, Will Robinson, danger!"

I gave the snail a confused look. "Soundbite, what the hell are you-?!"

"SHUT UP AND LISTEN, FOOL!"

Blinking in confusion, I slid my earphones on... and nearly jumped out of my skin at what I heard. "Oh no way in hell..."

"What is it, brat?" Zoro asked, a note of urgency in his voice.

Moving as fast as I could, I hastily ran to the Merry's rigging and clambered up into the crow's nest. I unfolded the spyglass hidden within, peered at the horizon, praying I was wrong... and was promptly proven terribly, terribly right.

"Guuuuuys..." I started slowly. "The anchor is still down, right?"

"Yeah, why?" Sanji asked with a hint of dread.

"LONG-NOSE and CROSS JINXED US!" Soundbite howled furiously.

"Uh... what's he talking about?" Usopp asked in confusion.

"Weeeell..." I slid down the rigging and hopped back onto the deck. "Remember how you asked what was the worst that could happen?"

"Yeeeeeaaah?" Usopp said uneasily.
"And remember what I told Vivi would get me out of bed?"

Everyone save Nami considered for a moment before paling in horror.

"N-no way..." Vivi stammered.

"You can't be serious..." Sanji whimpered weakly.

Nami swallowed heavily as she took in the mood. "Cross... what did you say would make you get up?"

I held out the spyglass with a flat look. "Us falling over the ends of the earth."

Moving faster than I thought she possibly could, Nami swiped the spyglass from my hand and snapped it out to its full length, staring out at the horizon for a moment before losing just about every drop of blood her face could possibly spare.

"Sooo... yeah..." I grimaced as I scratched the back of my head. "It looks like the Grand Line might think it has something of a sense of humor."

"WE'RE HEADING STRAIGHT TOWARDS A WATERFALL!" Nami shrieked in horror.

"Actually, seeing how we're still anchored? It would appear that that waterfall is heading straight towards us," I pointed out helpfully.

"Not helping, Cross," Nami snapped, eerily calm all of a sudden. "Zoro, Luffy, weigh the anchor. Sanji, man the whipstaff. Usopp, drop the mainsail. Cross, the mizen. Vivi, help him. Carue, please try not to be underfoot."

For a single moment, we were frozen as we stared at Nami in confusion.

"RIGHT THE HELL NOW, DAMNIT!" Nami howled furiously. For the briefest of moments, I could have sworn her teeth became sharp and demonic enough to pass for those of a demon-shark.

"ON IT!" we all chorused in terror, rushing to man our assigned posts.

"Is she always this terrifying!?" Vivi hissed at me as she helped me unfurl the Merry's red-and-white candy-stripe mizzensail.

"Ohhhhh, nononono..." I shook my head in denial as I yanked on a rope in order to pull the sail into position. "Not even close."

"Oh thank god..." Vivi sighed in relief.

"NAMI, IT'S GETTING CLOSER!" Luffy shouted from somewhere. "START ROWING YOU MORONS! HURRY!"

I shuddered heavily as I ran to join the guys on the oars. "As you can see, she can be far worse!"

"Oh-dear-we're-gonna-die..." Vivi whimpered as she followed behind me before eep-ing in terror as she was suddenly grabbed by her collar and wrenched face-to-face with a very demonic-looking Nami.

"Not if I have anything to say about it!" Nami hissed out through her demented smile. "NOW ROW!"
"ROWING!" Vivi squeaked in agreement as she jumped to the task.

"YOU TOO, DUCK!"

"YES MA'AM!" Carue squawked as he joined us.

For the next hour or so, the Going Merry was a madhouse as we wrestled furiously with the ocean, fighting tooth and nail to outstrip the massive hole in the water that seemed to be bearing down on us.

Finally though, after what felt like an eternity, we finally managed to escape it, floating placidly on a mercifully calm expanse of water.

"So Vivi..." I wheezed heavily as I lazed over the Merry's railing. "I think you said something... something about us needing to be ready to move at any moment...?"

"Please shut up..." Vivi bemoaned wearily as she massaged her throbbing muscles.

"Anybody else want to point out an impending danger so we can get our panicking over with right now instead of later?" Nami groaned as she shot a slight glare at me, which I hastily raised my hands in surrender to.

"Nope!"

"NO thanks!"

"No..."

"Not at all, Nami-swan!"

"Cross is gonna be the third mate."

"I'm good..."

"Perfect..." Nami allowed herself to slump to the floor...

Before snapping her head around to stare at Luffy, along with the rest of us. "SAY WHAT!?" we all hollered at him in confusion.

Luffy blinked for a second before shrugging and giving us a wide grin. "Cross is gonna be our third mate! Oh, and our taciturnician! Oh, and Nami's our second mate!"

"I... think you mean 'tactician'...?" I corrected automatically before double-taking as I processed what he'd said. "Wait, what!? Tactician!? I thought I was the Commi—unications Officer! ?" I demanded, hastily switching the words at the last second.

"And you are," Luffy nodded in agreement. "But you're pretty smart at figuring out plans too, so you're gonna be doing that as well!"

I made to protest... then paused as I recalled what Luffy had said last night. "Can't cook, can't lie, can't navigate..." I repeated to myself, realization sweeping over me.

The rest of the Straw Hats stiffened in shock for a second before relaxing as they understood as well.

"So..." I started slowly. "You're not mad about me giving orders?"
"Nah!" Luffy waved his hand with a smile. "You're not trying to be the captain, right?"

"Oh hell no!" I shook my head frantically. "Even if I had that kind of delusion, everyone else would be liable to lynch me if I even thought of starting a mutiny!"

"Then it's alright! You're good at making plans, so I'm just gonna let you keep making them!" Luffy nodded firmly, as though it all made sense. Which, for some reason, it actually did.

"Well... alright then..." I nodded slowly in agreement.

"But... hang on!" Nami interjected. "What about me being second mate and him being third!? Do you even know what those positions mean!?"

"Uh, yeah?" Luffy tilted his head in confusion. "Third mate is fourth in command, second mate is third in command, and first mate is second. Which doesn't really make a lot of sense, but—!"

"She means!" I piped up hastily. "Why are you giving us those positions? I mean, Nami I can understand, she gives us tons of orders all the time- valid ones!" I hastily yelped as the navigator shot a frigid glare at me. "Valid orders, very valid and very invaluable orders, but still! She's obviously unofficially held the position for a while now, but... but me!? How in the heck do I count as third!?!"

Luffy blinked at me before tilting his head in confusion. "Well... Why not you? I mean..." He looked over the rest of the crew questioningly. "Anyone not alright with it?"

Usopp considered for a moment before puffing out his chest. "Despite being the third to join the crew, I, the Great Cap-! Er... The Great Sniper Usopp, shall gracefully abdicate the position! You may thank me appropriately at a later date."

Sanji puffed on his cigarette thoughtfully for a second before shrugging indifferently. "Eh, so long as you can do your job, I guess." He narrowed a glare at me. "But if you screw up I'll boot you out of the position so fast that your head will spin right off."

Nami scrutinized me momentarily before blowing out a heavy sigh. "Talking Luffy out of anything is beyond futile as is, no reason to add on to it. Besides..." She grinned at me cattily. "I suppose things could be worse."

Zoro was the worst of them all. He just... stared at me.

And stared at me.

And stared at me...

"If you're trying to imitate Crocus, then congratulations, you've succeeded with gusto," I finally managed to get out with a minimum of wavering in my voice.

For whatever reason, that somehow did the trick, prompting Zoro to nod firmly at me with a positivesounding grunt. "Don't screw this up." And without further ado, he slumped against the Merry's railing, arms crossed behind his head as he closed his eyes and allowed the sound of snoring to erupt moments later.

I gaped at everyone in disbelief before hastily snapping my jaws shut. "W...well then... I... guess that's that then, isn't it?" I shrugged helplessly. "Alright then. So be it. I accept. Thanks Luffy, a lot."

"Shishishi!" Luffy chuckled impishly. "No problem!"
"Um... excuse me?" Vivi spoke up hesitantly. "But... I'm confused. If Mister Jeremiah is third and Nami is second, then... who's first?"

"Zoro," the crew and I chorused unceremoniously as we pointed at the snoozing swordsman, who appeared to let loose a particularly loud snore in response.

Vivi's eye twitched slightly for a moment before a grin slowly spread across her face. "You know... somehow, that doesn't surprise me in the least."

And so, after we shared a few laughs, we proceeded to set the sails anew and head off, sailing towards Little Garden.

We... didn't actually get there anytime soon.

See, one thing Oda didn't show us readers? Travel time. Lots and lots of travel time. Most of it was peaceful, to be sure, boring even, but honestly? The fact was that whether we liked it - or in Vivi's case, despite her never voicing it, not - it took us a little over three weeks to make the trip from Whiskey Peak to the ever-looming Little Garden.

Still... no matter how boring some parts of it might have been, there were certainly memorable moments to go around.

Some were... notably unpleasant...

-0-

"Ohhh, Gooood..." I moaned as I lay lifeless on Merry's deck, my entire body feeling as though it were either on fire or close to it. "Kiiiiill meeeee..."

"Glad to..." Usopp growled darkly from where he was lying nose-first on the deck. "If you agree to kill me first. Remind me again why you roped us into getting tortured by Zoro along with you?"

"Because all three of us are as weak as shit and we need to get stronger unless we want to die like bitches..." I ground out miserably.

"Oh yeah..."

"One day you'll pay for this, Cwoss..." Carue ground out from where he was hanging off the Merry's wall by his embedded beak.

"That's all well and good..." Nami snarled from where she was propped up against the Merry's railing, with Vivi. "But would you mind telling me how and why you got Sanji to put us through the exact same thing!?"

I couldn't help but chuckle and plaster a sickly grin on my face. "Oh, that was easy. First, I convinced Sanji that he couldn't be everywhere at once and that sooner or later the 'princesses' would need to learn how to fight without their knight in shining armor. Then, I convinced him that the more you hurt now, the less you'd hurt later. Finally, I laid down an ultimatum: If he didn't handle your training, then he'd have to let either Zoro or Luffy do it instead." I half-chuckled half-wheezed in dark amusement. "I think he almost popped a blood vessel making his decision."

"Mister Jeremiah..." Vivi huffed heavily. "No offense... but I think I hate you... I think I hate you a lot."

"Stop calling me that..." I ground out.
The sound of boots approaching on the deck caused me to turn my head, and I paled as I caught sight of Zoro standing above me, grinning a very disturbing grin. "Hmm," Zoro hummed to himself. "Well, if you have the energy to complain, let alone laugh, you have the energy to keep going. Up and at 'em, maggots!"

"I'm so sorry, my dears, but the marimo's right. You've had a long enough break as is. We need to... hurk! Keep... going..."

A chorus of moans rang out in response.

"Shishishi! Man, you guys are hilarious!"

"EIN ZWEI DREI! EIN ZWEI DREI! EIN ZWEI DREI!"

"SHUT UP, SOUNDBITE!" we all chorused furiously.

-o-

Other experiences were actually quite humorous!

-o-

"You know, you girls are lucky," I stated through a nice and wide grin.

"Oh yeah?" Nami queried, her own grin matching mine tooth for tooth. "How so?"

"Have you ever heard the word 'hentai' before?"

"I... might have picked up one or two such magazines in the past..." Vivi whistled innocently through her own grin.

"One or two dozen more wike!" Carue snickered as he chowed down on a bucket of popcorn he'd acquired from somewhere.

"Oh hush you!" Vivi snorted as she slapped the back of his head lightly. "But... yeah, I see your point. This is far more pleasant. For most of us, anyways."

"HOW'S IT GOING, LUFFY?" Usopp managed to call out through his laughter.

"WILL YOU GUYS - OW! - STOP LAUGHING AND -AGH!- SAVE ME ALREADY!?" our captain howled above us, where a mass of large, gelatinous tentacles were poking, prodding and stretching him energetically, all the while squirming and folding around his wild punches with ease. "THESE THINGS STING LIKE - YEOWCH! - HECK, AND I'M NOT AN - OWOWOWOWOWOW! - TOY!"

"Should we save him?" Zoro asked with a chuckle, fingerling his swords all the while.

"Oh, I don't know..." Sanji mused, his chuckling making it a bit hard for him to take a tug from his cigarette. "I think the tentacles could stand to be a little more tenderized."

"Five more minutes, just five more minutes!" I begged them breathlessly. "That bastard's eaten my bodyweight in my own food since I've joined, this is the most therapeutic thing I've ever seen!"

"YEEHAW! RIDE 'EM COW-PIRATE!" Soundbite whooped.

"JERKS!"
And some things were... just plain, flat-out weird.

"Okay..." I sighed wearily as I kneaded my throbbing temples. "One more time... why did you try to drown Luffy in a bucket of water?"

"Because 'e was suppressing our natural rights as snails 'e was!" the narrower and longer of the two transponder snails replied in a cockney accent, his chuckling showing off an impressive pair of buckteeth.

"Indeed," the shorter and stockier snail nodded in agreement, his droning voice devoid of all emotion save annoyance. "That imbecile is unworthy of leading a pack of lemmings off a cliff, much less a pirate ship bearing a being with my vast intelligence on board. We simply thought to restore the natural order of things."

"Yeh, yeh, what 'e said!" The taller snail nodded in agreement.

My eye twitched furiously as I stared down at the pair, trying to get an accurate handle on just what the hell I was looking at.

As if to pack things on, the taller snail suddenly piped up with a "Narf!"

"Alright, I get it!" I broke out furiously as I cast a glare at a cackling Soundbite. I pointed at the taller snail. "Pinkie." Then the smaller one. "Brain. Happy now!?"

"MUCH!" Soundbite snickered.

"Woohoo! Ain't it great, Brain? We got names now!"

"Yes, we have been labelled by our bipedal masters, thus furthering our objectification. Joy."

"Great!" I clapped my hands together in frustration. "Now tell them to stop trying to kill us before I let Sanji fry them up in a pan!"

"I abjectly refuse to abandon my righteous crusade against your noxious-"

"CRAM IT, STOW IT, AND QUIT IT!" Soundbite roared out.

"Yes sir!" Pinkie and the Brain cowered partway in their shells almost instantly.

"Great..." I sighed in relief. "Now, you can stay out here for now, but any more trouble and it's back in the bag. Got it?"

"Aye aye, sir..." The pair nodded in agreement, albeit with varying amounts of enthusiasm.

"Perfect. Now, if you'll excuse me..." I turned around, strode to the cantina's door and poked my head outside. "We're good. Apparently Soundbite's Devil Fruit gives him a lot of weight with his species."

"Goooood..." Nami crooned in a faux saccharine voice that was almost as light and syrupy as the tar and feathers that she was covered in. "And for the record? If they ever pull anything like this again? I will personally throw them overboard, and you with them. Capiche?"
I made to answer... then winced as a thunk and a squawk came from the lower deck.

"Hey guys, I managed to get the barrel off Carue's head!" Usopp called up. "Now could someone help me dunk him into the ocean to get the flour out of his feathers?"

I nodded weakly in agreement. "Capiche..."

"I'm glad we managed to settle this..." Vivi piped up weakly, prompting us to look up at where she was hanging from the main mast via a rope snare tied around her ankle. "Now could someone please get me one of my Peacock Slashers? The blood is starting to rush to my head..."

-0-

But eventually, our little vacation had to come to an end.

"There it is..." Nami breathed as she held the Log Pose up to her eye in order to confirm her suspicions. "After Whiskey Peak, this is our next destination on the Grand Line."

I nodded slowly in numb awe as I watched the island slowly start to loom in the distance.

There it was: one of the greatest deathtraps in the Grand Line. An island of Giants. An island of dinosaurs. An island where death could come in a million and one forms...

But out of all those forms, only one mattered to me at the moment.

This form of death came in the shape of a small tick, which carried within itself an even smaller and even deadlier virus.

And unless I did something? That death would come within hours of taking one of our crew.

The name of this island? So simple... yet nonetheless ominous.

"Little Garden..."
"And mix in one cup of water and rubbing alcohol!" Soundbite concluded firmly.

I took a tentative sniff of the pot I was stirring before recoiling with a very disgusted gag. "Ohhh, that's just! And you're sure that you got the recipe right?"

The snail affixed me with a flat look. "What the HECK do you THINK?"

"Yeah yeah, fair enough..." I grimaced as I dug out a measuring cup and one of Zoro's clearer bottles of grog. "Though for the record, if this doesn't work? Then I'm telling Zoro it was your idea."

"LIES and SLANDER!"

"Psh," I snorted as I slowly poured out the correct amounts of liquid into the cups and stirred them into the pot. "With you? Slander is a very relative term."

Soundbite blinked in confusion. "UHHH...?"

I allowed a smirk to play across my lips as I tapped the spoon I was using on the edge of the pot. "There's little I can say about you that you wouldn't be willing to do."

"NOT—!" Soundbite started to bark before freezing and reconsidering. "Okay... maybe TRUE."

"Heh," I smirked as I looked my concoction over. "Yeah, I thought so. I know you way too—SWEET HOLY MOTHER OF—!" I snapped my head back furiously as I pinched my nose as shut as I could. "Dear lord, that is just flat out rank!"

Soundbite sniffed at the air for a moment before snapping back into his shell. "PEE-YEW!"

"Tell me about it..." I groaned miserably, waving my hand in front of my face. "Well, it looks like Luffy's not the only one on this ship who can't cook. Here's hoping that Sanji doesn't take my head off for this..." I shot a scowl at the snail as he started cackling before allowing a grim smile to slide across my face. "Oh yeah, keep laughing asshat. In case you'd forgotten..." I dug out a dishrag, soaked it in the concoction, and started wiping it over myself. "You're going to be smelling it up close and personal, just like the rest of us."

Soundbite's mood immediately pulled a 180 as he went from laughing to sobbing. "WHYYY? WHY GOD, why!?"

"Karma, for one thing."

"CRAM IT!"

Before I could respond, Luffy's voice suddenly shouted through the kitchen wall. "HEY, CROSS! ARE YOU DONE YET OR WHAT!?"

"YEAH, I'M DONE!" I called back. "I'LL BE RIGHT OUT, JUST HOLD ON!" I shot a despairing look at the snail. "Ready to face the music?" I accidentally inhaled through the nose and was forced to fight down my gag reflex. "And the stench?"

Soundbite gave me another tentative sniff before recoiling and shooting me a sheepish grin. "NO deal?"
"Nice try, but no," I snorted, picking up the snail and plopping him down on my shoulder. I allowed myself a moment to chuckle as he dry-heaved before getting down to business, grabbing a number of rags and the pot before shouldering my way outside onto the deck. "Okay people, I'd seriously recommend you all cover your noses. Unless, of course, you want your sinuses to feel like they're on fire."

"Huh?" Luffy blinked at me in confusion. "What're yo-oooh what the heck is that!?" our captain yelped, leaping away from me and covering his nose with both hands, an action that the rest of the crew hastily imitated.

"Id shmells like shomeshings wotting!" Carue squawked out through his wings.

"How is it even physically possible for something to smell that bad!?" Usopp demanded desperately.

"Cross, what the hell have you been doing in there!?" Sanji growled furiously as he advanced on me.

"Indeed, Mister Jeremiah!" Vivi gagged out. "Was there actually a point to you making us wait, besides cooking up that... atrocity!?"

I plastered a desperate smile on my face as I slowly retreated from my infuriated crewmates. Indeed, I'd called for the anchor to be dropped when we were a quarter mile out from Little Garden. I'd then proceeded to sequester myself in the kitchen with Soundbite, relying on his instructions for what I was cooking. The whole process had taken a little over ten minutes, but over all? I think the end result was worth it.

"Actually, Vivi," I grinned as I waved the pot out at everyone, prompting them to rear back in horror. "This 'atrocity', as you call it, was the point of my little endeavor. Say hello to my personal homemade batch of anti-bug lotion! Urk!" I grimaced as I accidentally breathed in through my nose again. "Though 'Eau de Rat' might be a more accurate moniker. On second thought, please don't say anything to it. I'm afraid it might say something back..."

"Kiiiiill meeeeee..." Soundbite moaned.

"Lotion!?" Nami spat incredulously. "You mean to tell me you want to rub that shit on us!? Are you out of your mind!?!"

I chuckled sardonically and shook my head firmly. "Oooohh no no no, of course not! That'd just be perverted!" I held up the dishrags and shook them lightly. "You'll be rubbing it on yourselves!"

Nami's face became carefully blank for a moment before she slowly looked at the rest of the crew. "All those even remotely in favor of this crazy plan?"

"HELL NO!" everyone bellowed unanimously.

"Denied!" I belted out in response. "Look, have you guys even glanced at Little Garden!?" I waved my hand at the unkempt island that nature had claimed. "In case you hadn't noticed, it's a freaking jungle! And do you know what lives in jungles?!!"

"Lions!" Luffy piped up with an eager grin.

"Tigers," Zoro smirked menacingly.

"Bears," Sanji grinned around his cigarette.

"Oh my god..." Nami, Usopp and Carue sobbed, the former two hugging each other desperately,
"Car-urk!-ue! Can't-gagh- breathe!"

"Ack, sowwy Vivi!"

"And bugs!" I cut in firmly. "Itty bitty creepy crawly little insects, some so small that you wouldn't notice it flying in front of your face unless you were looking straight at it! To be specific, insects that love to crawl on and sting and bite people like us. And do you know what happens when you get bitten by bugs like that?"

The crew looked at each other in confusion for a second before shrugging. "I dunno..." Usopp mumbled cluelessly. "I guess... it swells up, you itch and scratch a bit..."

"Then you start coughing up blood, pus comes out of your nose and ears, you swell to ten times your size, and within less than twenty-four hours you're a rancid husk of meat that not even the most depraved of wild animals would be willing to poke with a ten-foot pole," I finished flatly.

Now that got everyone's total and undivided attention.

"I-I'm sorry," Vivi stammered. "Mister Jeremiah, I think I must have misheard you. Did you just say that those bugs could-?"

"Potentially kill us?" I cocked an eyebrow at her. "No, you heard me precisely right. Let me break it down for you: our immune systems, the way our bodies fight disease? They've evolved over the years to fight whatever illnesses and afflictions the human race has come in contact with. However, while they can put up a good fight, if they come in contact with anything they have no knowledge of, then they're totally helpless.

"Now that island," I gestured at Little Garden again. "Is most likely a closed ecosystem. That means that it's evolved completely independent of humanity. We don't know it, it doesn't know us. Every last bacteria and microbe on that island has the potential to fuck us up in ways not even horror novelists could imagine. Now, granted, there are some we can do precisely fuck all about, but this?" I shook the pot of bug lotion. "This protects us from some. So hey!" I shrugged carelessly. "Feel free to go traipsing about without it, just be prepared to potentially help pioneer the development of a vaccine for Hypermalaria... as Patient Zero." I grinned in the most demented way I could muster. "So... any takers?"

Silence.

I gave my smile a more pleasant tone. "Great! Now come on, let's lather up and make pigs smell pleasant!"

For a moment, the crew shuffled around nervously, clearly torn between the stench and the prospect of bleeding uncontrollably from every orifice. Just as I was about to press the issue, though, Luffy solved it for me. Grabbing two of the rags, he soaked them in the fluid… and then promptly grabbed the pot and doused the rest of the crew with it.

I whistled in awe as the rest of the crew gagged and wheezed miserably at the stench. "Impressive..."

I muttered.

"Thanks, I think..." Luffy grimaced as he wiped the concoction over himself.

"Ugh, this shit reeks even worse up close!" Zoro hacked.
"Don't worry, you get used to it," I hastily reassured him.

"HE LIES!" Soundbite spat fiercely.

"I do...

As everyone proceeded to reluctantly rub the gunk over themselves, I turned around in order to hide a grimace that had nothing to do with the way we smelled.

In the end, cooking up the bug sludge based off of a recipe I'd managed to convince Soundbite to hock up had been an act of desperation, a stopgap way of keeping anyone else from potentially getting bitten. Despite my deliberation on the matter, I had yet to come up with a solution to the dilemma I was in.

On the one hand, if I allowed the Kestia tick to bite Nami, then things would proceed as normal: she'd get sick, we'd be forced to make a stop on Drum Island, Kureha and Chopper would cure her and our destined doctor would join the crew... and in the process, Nami would ding-dong-ditch the gates of Hell. Seeing the kind of pain and misery she'd gone through on ink and paper was one thing, but to allow it to happen to a real person? To my friend, who I'd legitimately come to care about? The mere concept was... inhumane, to say the least.

But on the other hand, was condemning Drum Island to Wapol's rule any less inhumane!? If we didn't go to Drum, then Wapol would get there. Luffy's interference had been an inadvertent factor in the Tin-Jawed Tyrant's return, to be sure, but he'd been in the vicinity as it was already, it was only a matter of time until he found his way back! And when he did... Well, Wapol was far from my or anyone's definition of a heavy hitter, but if he managed to get his jaws on the castle's arsenal... Dalton, Kureha, Chopper, and who knows how many others would no doubt be killed in the ensuing anti-rebellion rampage he'd no doubt throw. All without mentioning how it would mean condemning the rest of the citizens of Drum to his tyranny...

I ground my teeth furiously as I just barely kept myself from ramming my head against the nearest wall. I didn't know what to do, damn it! What was more important?! The momentary wellbeing of the one who was a dear friend, or the continued wellbeing of the many, as well as the life of one who would soon become a dear friend!? Damn you, Morton, your fork is royally screwing me over! I swear to god, John, if I ever find a way to go back in time, I will wrap my hands around your scrawny English throat and-!

"Six o' clock!"

-wait wha-?

"So, Cross."

It was only thanks to Soundbite's timely intervention that I was saved from jumping a foot off the deck in what would have been a very suspicious manner as Nami's very irritated voice sounded behind me.

"Thanks," I hissed out of the corner of my mouth at the snail before turning around to grin at Nami. "Yes?"

Our navigator pinned me with a decidedly unimpressed and thoroughly irritated look. "We all now smell bad enough to make your laundry smell good. And when I say 'your', I'm talking about you and the rest of the guys collectively. Are you satisfied, or do you want us to walk to the island next?"

I swiftly raised my hands in surrender. "No no, that was everything, we're good to go!"
"Perfect. WEIGH ANCHOR! LET'S GO ALREADY!"

And with that, we started to sail towards one of the most dangerous islands on the equator.

"Despite how... extravagant Cross was in his actions..." Vivi mused cautiously as she observed Little Garden pull closer. "I do believe he has a point. We need to remain cautious." She bit her thumb nervously. "Despite how duplicitous she might be, I haven't been able to forget what Miss All Sunday said..."

"W-w-wait..." Usopp swallowed heavily as he eyed the treeline fearfully. "D-d-do you think there could be monsters out there?!!"

"Icebergs and waterfalls, Usopp," I stated as I patted the sniper on the back. "Icebergs and waterfalls."

"BABY wanna DIAPER?" Soundbite snickered.

"I'd prefer escargot!" Usopp snarled, albeit while keeping a foot away from the snail. Not that that stopped Soundbite from trying to chomp at his nose, at any rate.

"Don't laugh just yet, Soundbite," Sanji warned flatly as he puffed on his cigarette. "That might be a very real possibility if we don't pick anything up, what with how we've been eating through our provisions."

Soundbite immediately cut himself off with a panicked squawk. He concentrated for a brief moment before plastering a shaky grin on his face and nodding frantically. "ANIMALS! LOTS and LOTS of animals!"

"Damn..." Usopp and Carue spat simultaneously.

As we sailed up the closest available canal, we were enshrouded in shadows by the jawdroppingly massive flora that surrounded us. I whistled softly in awe as I took in the sheer amount of nature that we were engulfed in. The island I'd first washed up on in the East Blue was one thing, but this? It was like someone had decided to copy-past an artist's rendition of a prehistoric jungle onto reality!

"So this is Little Garden..." Zoro mused in awe, slowly sweeping our surroundings for anything and everything potentially fatal.

"What blind mowon named this pwace Wittle Garden?!!" Carue demanded incredulously. "It's fweaking huge!"

"I~RO~NY?" Soundbite sang out doubtfully.

"If it was, then whoever came up with it was seriously pushing it!" Nami scoffed. "I mean, look around! I've never even seen some of... make that any of these plants before!"

"Eh..." I slowly raised a finger in response.

"Oh come on, how would you know what these plants are?!"

"I don't, I don't!" I defended hastily. "It's just... the scale patterns on some of those trees... I think I've seen them-!"

"GAW! GAW!"
"YIPE!" I and the half the crew yelped in panic as a loud squawking sound belted out of the treeline, followed by something bursting out of the jungle and pelting into the sky.

"WHAT WAS THAT!?!" Nami shrieked fearfully as she hugged herself.

"Ahh, Nami-swan is so cute when she's frightened!" Sanji swooned kindly.

"She is, isn't she?" I taunted impishly, only just managing to duck under the retaliatory fist Nami lashed out at me.

"Anyways, don't worry about it," Sanji soothed as he gestured at the flying creature. "That's a regular bird and this is a regular jungle. There's absolutely nothing to fear."

Luffy, meanwhile, was blinking up at the creature in confusion. "Is... that a lizard?"

"Uh, actually, Luffy?" Vivi spoke up hesitantly. "That's a bird. I saw feathers on it."

Luffy tilted his head dubiously. "But I saw scales..."

"Actually..." I piped up as I peered up at the creature through the spyglass I'd taken off of Nami's belt. "You're both right. That thing's sporting feathers on its wings and tail and scales around its mouth. Which..." I hissed as I lowered the glass. "Is not good. I think I know what's up."

BOOM!

"AGH!" everyone squawked as the ship was suddenly shaken by a massive explosion.

"WHAT PART OF ALL THIS SOUNDS LIKE A NORMAL JUNGLE TO YOU GUYS!?!" Nami shrieked incredulously.

"THAT SOUNDED LIKE A VOLCANO BLOWING UP!" Usopp bellowed.

"Because it was," I groaned as I pointed at the plume of smoke coming up over the treeline. "Alright, correction: I know what's up with this place. I've seen it before, a few years back."

"Where could you have possibly seen this place before!?" Zoro scoffed.


"And that book would be...?"

"Petey's Prehistoric Picture Book."

The stunned silence was quite refreshing.

"My five-year-old cousin loved it."

"When you say... prehistoric..." Vivi posited slowly.

"I mean dinosaurs, yes," I confirmed with a nod. "Big, honking, more-likely-than-not-man-eating dinosaurs."

Usopp swallowed heavily as he glanced around nervously. "Y-Y-You can't be serious..."

"Growrgggghhh..."

The sniper was cut off by a tiger half the size of the Going Merry stumbling out of the treeline before
collapsing from a combo of blood loss and large gouges in its flesh.

I slowly turned my head to stare at Usopp. "So... Personally, I say that those teeth marks look about right for a T. Rex. What about you? Allosaurus maybe? Or something bigger?"

"All in favor of not setting foot on this deathtrap?" Usopp squeaked out meekly.

"AYE!" Carue squawked, jabbing his wing into the air.

"Agreed!" Nami nodded hastily with a desperate grin. "W-w-we just need to sit tight right here and wait for the Log Pose to reset. N-No need to go out and get eaten! After all, we can't get to Alabasta as soon as possible if we're traipsing around in a killer jungle, right?!"

"Well, I'm gonna go hunting," Sanji announced from where he had hopped down to the shore.

"Wait, Sanji, hold on!" Luffy bellowed out before the cook could start walking.

"Yeah, listen to the captain!" Nami belted out hysterically as she plastered a panicked grin on her face.

"You need to make a pirate box lunch first! I wanna go adventuring!"

"DON'T LISTEN TO HIM, HE'S GOT FEWER BRAIN CELLS THAN ZOOPLANKTON!" she howled desperately.

"Nami's right, Sanji, Luffy's being an idiot!" I piped up.

Nami shot me a relieved look in response. "Thank you, Cross."

"Make two boxed lunches, I'm going with hi—GRGK!" I was literally choked off by Nami grabbing my throat in her hands.

"WHERE IN THE NAME OF THE GREAT GOD OF BERIS DO YOU THINK YOU TWO DIPSHTS ARE GOING!?" she shrieked at the top of her lungs.

"Uh... did you just say Great God of—? Hrrgrgh—alright, alright!"

I hastily reassessed what I was planning on saying as I wrenched myself out of Nami's grip. "Well, seeing how we're on an island with dinosaurs, there's really only one natural thing to do."

"And that would be?" Nami hissed through gritted teeth.

I plastered a semi-(or possibly completely)-manic grin on my face. "I'm gonna ride me a T. Rex, rodeo-style."

"YIPPIE-kay-MEEP!" Soundbite cut off in a squeak as Nami grabbed his eyestalks with a bloodthirsty growl.

"What. Is keeping me. From wringing both your scrawny necks. Right here. Right now," she hissed.

"Besides the fact that we're on the same crew?" I grinned nervously.

The snarl I received in response was not a good sign.

"Luffy? Back me up on this? Please!?"
"Don't hurt him, Nami!" Luffy pleaded. "He needs his legs if he's going to go adventuring! Oh, you wanna come too?"

Apparently, _that_ was the straw that broke the camel's back if the way Nami suddenly collapsed on the deck sobbing miserably was anything to go by. "They're too far gone already, it's hopeless..."

I winced slightly at her despondent expression. "Um..." I slowly reached out towards her shoulder. "There the—yeargh!" I squawked in agony as I suddenly found my hand caught in an organic vise-grip.

"If you die, I will _dance on your grave_," Nami growled venomously.

"Hey, Luffy! Can I come too?" Vivi piped up.

"Yeah!" I cheered enthusiastically. "Princesses gone wi—OW!" I yelped as the pressure on my hand quadrupled. "What the hell are you hurting _me_ for!? You can't blame me for this!"

"Of course I can! Your madness is infectious!"

"No no, Nami, it's fine!" Vivi reassured hastily. "I want to go out of my own volition. If I stay on the ship, chances are I'll just pointlessly brood about Alabasta-" The princess winced slightly before rallying. "A-anyways, the point is that this will take my mind off things while the Log Pose resets."

"Good for you, Vivi!" Carue squawked enthusiastically.

"But-but milady!" Sanji swooned desperately. "What if you get hurt or-!?"

"It'll be fine!" Vivi reassured him with a hasty grin. "After all, Carue'll be protecting me!"

_That_ prompted Carue to adopt a horrified expression, his bill dropping open in sheer terror as a choked gurgle tore its way out of his throat.

"Wow, you just scared that poor duck quackless..." Nami muttered.

"I'll make you a lunch of love as well, my princess!" Sanji swooned as he leaped up to the kitchen.

"Oh, and while you do, could you fill up Carue's... uh, Carue, where did you put your water barrel?"

"Below deck..." the duck squawked mutely.

"I'll take some water too, please!" I called up.

:"LETTUCE! LETTUCE!" Soundbite chorused.

"Wait your turns, you two!"

"HOLD IT!"

Everyone froze as Nami suddenly screeched at the top of her lungs. Again. The orange-haired _banshee_ huffed heavily for a moment before alternating a glare between Luffy, Vivi and I. "Seeing how I apparently can't control any of you worth _shit_, then I suppose I might as well put down some rules so that you don't wind up dead in _ditches_."

"But, wait, we're on a prehistoric jungle island, there aren't any ditches-"

"Cross," Nami ground out around the hand she was using to pinch the bridge of her nose. "If you
finish that sentence, I will have Sanji get me a bowl, a mirror, a needle and thread, and a straight razor."

"Why would you-YERP!" I squeaked as Nami suddenly grabbed somewhere very private.

"So that I can literally emasculate you," she hissed venomously.

I swallowed heavily, cold sweat running down my face. "And... the mirror?"

"So that you can watch."

"Noted," I squeaked meekly. Through my fear, I couldn't help but wonder why the hell that threat sounded so damn familiar.

"Perfect! Now then, rule one..." Nami's voice suddenly cut off without any apparent reason. Thinking fast, I checked behind me. Nothing.

"DON'T know WHERE to START, huh?" Soundbite snickered.

"SHUT UP!... yes."

"Look, Nami?" I spoke up hesitantly. "We don't know how long we'll be here, so we have nothing but time. Furthermore, we'll be going out there with one of the toughest badasses this side of the ocean. He could and most likely will eat some of, if not most of, the dinosaurs we come across. I'm 99% certain we'll be fine. So... do I get to keep my potential to procreate one day?"

"... against my better judgment, yes," Nami sighed as she reluctantly released me.

"My future descendants thank you..." I sighed in relief. "Anyways, I don't want you to worry without reason, so how about this: Vivi'll take Brain with her, and if you and Usopp decide to leave the ship for whatever reason, you take Pinky with you. Like that, we'll all be in communication. Luffy, Zoro, and Sanji don't need snails because nothing on this island can put so much as a scratch on them. Alright?"

"Well... alright, fine, I guess that's- wait, how does Zoro factor in on this!?

I jabbed my thumb over the side of the ship with a flat look. "He and Sanji left five minutes ago, arguing over who could bag the bigger dino. Looked like they were really getting into it, too."

For a few scant moments, Nami looked like she was about to legitimately erupt before slumping in defeat. "Just... just get out of here already..." A slight snarl entered her voice. "Before I lose my temper and make you extinct."

"Getting!" I yelped in agreement, leaping over the Merry's railing and landing on the shoreline. I winced slightly at the ache that blossomed in my legs from the drop, but promptly grinned in satisfaction as that ache went away just as fast.

It might not have seemed like much, but to me? It was proof. Bit by bit, cell by cell, my body was changing. Evolving. Every day I lived in this world, every gram of local vitamins I ingested, I became just a little bit stronger, a little more durable. By my old standards, I was becoming superhuman, but by my new ones? By this world's? I was becoming normal.

A minute later, Luffy and Vivi riding on Carue landed on the ground next to me. Luffy grinned as he tossed me a lunchbox before turning to face the jungle. "WOOOOO! LET'S GO!" he whooped as he charged into the jungle.
"Wait for us, Luffy!" Vivi called after him.

"Yeah! We're still human, you know!" I concurred.

"Shpeak for yourshelf," Carue chuckled under his breath.

"PREACH IT, brotha!" Soundbite added.

Luffy didn't slow down, but he did have the courtesy to whoop and holler as he went to make it easier for us to follow him. He also cleared a path through the underbrush so we didn't have to stop every thirty seconds to hack vegetation away, so at the very least it was a mile better than the first jungle I'd experienced.

Vivi, on the other hand, was being far more courteous to me, urging Carue to match his pace with mine so that we were running side by side. As it was, though, we were currently running in silence. It wasn't really all that surprising: we'd been on the same ship for a while now, sure, but neither of us had actually been alone together, so we weren't completely certain about what to talk about.

Ultimately, Vivi cleared her throat and spoke up. "So, ah... You're not warm in what you're wearing?"

"Huh? Uh..." I glanced down at what I was wearing: a shell jacket like the one Usopp had destroyed, only with a camo pattern, long dark-brown cargo slacks, a white t-shirt with a diagonal set of grey claw marks running over the chest, and a pair of steel-toed boots. "Not really. The place I grew up on basically had a Summer Island climate. Some of us would joke that we had two seasons: summer, and hell. I can wear this stuff practically anytime, anywhere and not care about it."

"Oh, that's good," Vivi sighed in relief. "You'll be grateful for having that kind of tolerance in Alabasta. It's a desert country, so covering your skin is a necessary, if somewhat uncomfortable, must."

"Glad to hear it," I nodded in confirmation before humming as a thought struck me. "Wait... if Alabasta is a desert, then shouldn't your skin be... I dunno, darker? Olive or something? Isn't that how it works?"

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That actually managed to get a chuckle out of Vivi. "You have no idea how often people ask me or my father that question. Yes, there are quite a few people in Alabasta with dark skin, but the Nefertariss haven't been a part of that group, at least not for several generations. After all, we tend to live in the palace for our whole lives, so we're not exposed to the sun more often than we need to."

"Huh..." I mused as I vaulted over a stray log. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised there are at least a few benefits to being a royal, huh?"

"You have no idea!" Carue squawked in agreement

Vivi, on the other hand, frowned a bit. "You'd be surprised. The Reveries in particular tend to be... more frustrating than anything. Royals that don't care in the slightest about their civilians, the necessity of posture and face in light of stupid rivalries and feuds that the current generation had nothing to do with, no direct involvement whatsoever..." Her lips pursed into a tight, thin line. "And the World Nobles."

I allowed a shiver of revulsion to run through me. "Yeah... that part goes without saying. Let me guess: they barely tolerate the idea that 'mere humans' can hold themselves up to even half their 'divine' stature?"
Surprisingly, the princess shook her head with a grimace. "Not... not quite. With most of the other royals, sure, but... with my family? They're... more directly antagonistic."

I had a good guess as to why they felt like that, but nevertheless, I shot Vivi a flat look. "Let me try again: one of your ancestors spilled a drink on their ancestors' robes about... what, five hundred years ago and they swore a blood feud as a result?"

Vivi sighed wearily and hung her head. "If only it were that simple... but no. While you're right about it centering around our ancestors, the reason for the hatred is that..." Vivi trailed off as she hesitated for a bare moment before coming to a decision. "How much do you know of the origins of the World Government?"

"Um..." I tilted my head in thought. "Eight hundred years ago, twenty kings allied together and left their kingdoms in order to found the nascent World Government. Right?"

Vivi nodded slowly in agreement as she steeled herself. "And eight hundred years ago, the Nefertaris refused to leave their kingdom, and instead remained in Alabasta to this day."

"PRINCESS SAY WHAT!?" Soundbite yelped in disbelief.

I followed the snail's lead, blinking at Vivi in shock. "I... wait, hold on, so you and your father are-!?"

"Not World Nobles," Vivi asserted firmly, following it up with a sigh of relief. "Thank god for that, I don't even want to imagine... No, we're not World Nobles, but we could have been. And that's the exact reason why the real World Nobles hate us. They take the fact that we refused to 'ascend' with them as an insult, and they haven't let us forget it."

"Which is why they aven't helping us with the webellion..." Carue muttered darkly.

"That, and my father didn't want to let the Marines get involved and potentially slaughter the civilians," Vivi added. "But still... they do tend to make our lives very complicated, even though in the end it's never mattered all that much."

I winced in sympathy as I contemplated the implications. As I'd thought, the World Nobles were indeed bastards of the highest order, and being associated with them only made things worse instead of better. I hoped that this knowledge wouldn't become pertinent in the future, if just for Vivi's sake, but honestly? Considering how the phrase 'Oda never forgets' was meme in the fandom? I didn't have high hopes. In the end, whether I or anyone else liked it or not, the Nefertari's family history would one day become important. All I could do was hope that when it did, I would be ready for it.

Coming out of my thoughts, I shot a grin up at Vivi. "Well, either way, I, for one, am grateful that you're not a World Noble. It'd seriously suck to miss out on having you as a friend, you know?"

Vivi blinked at me in surprise for a moment before chuckling and smiling in agreement. "Yeah, I am too. It's been great sailing with you all. It's been educational. I never imagined that pirates like Luffy could... wait..." The princess trailed off as she looked around in panic. "Where's Luffy!?"

"Uh..." I joined her in searching the jungle. "I... don't... Soundbite?"

"UP, UP AND AWAY!"

"What are you—?" I looked upwards... and promptly froze, staring in shock. "Uh... Vivi?"
"What is it, Cr—!" Vivi gaped in shock as she saw what I did.

"HEY CROSS!" Luffy whooped from the head of the apatosaurus - or was it a brontosaurus? - he was riding. "YOU WERE RIGHT! THERE ARE DINOSAURS AROUND HERE! ISN'T THIS AWESOME?"

"I... ah..." Vivi stammered for a moment.

"Words fail you, huh?" I muttered.

"Ah... kind of, yes..."

"Ten bewi says he gets eaten..." Carue muttered.

As if on cue, the apatosaurus suddenly bucked its head, flinging Luffy into the air and swallowing him in one deft move.

"Cawwed it."

"LUFFY!" Vivi shrieked in panic.

"Calm down, calm down," I said, waving my hand carelessly. "I mean, it's Luffy for goodness sake. He'll be out in five seconds or less."

Mere moments later, a humanoid figure that was gargantuan beyond comprehension appeared from out of nowhere and decapitated the dinosaur, slicing its neck clean off and allowing Luffy to drop out as a result.

I blinked at the display in shock. "Well... that's not quite what I had in mind, but still..."

Vivi's response was to stammer and squeak incredulously.

-0-

"GABABABABA! So you found some humans too, huh, Dorry?"

"GEGYAGYAGYAGYA! Indeed, Brogy! In fact, I found one going down the throat of a longneck! It was quite a shock when he came out!"

"Shishishishi! Hey, it might have been a surprise but, I could have gotten out on my own!"

"GABABABA! Sounds like the humans have become even wilder since we've been gone, Dorry!"

"You've got that right, Brogy! GEGYAGYAGYA!"

"Shishishishi! You guys are hilarious!"

"GABABABA!"

"GEGYAGYAGYA!"

"Oh god, now there's three of them, and two are jumbo-sized..."

I couldn't help but snicker at Nami's weary groan. "I'd say you have your hands full, but considering how I doubt even you can punch out a giant? I'll just leave you with my sympathies."

"Screw you, Cross!" Soundbite belted out in our navigator's voice.
A second later, however, his expression shifted from angry to a wide grin. "Hey Cross, you sure you don't want to meet up with us? Dorry's pretty awesome!"

I chuckled at the offer, but shook my head nonetheless. "No thanks, Luffy, this is enough for me. I'm happier out here. There's a whole wide island out here, and I want to see as much as I can!"

After Luffy's near miss with becoming dino-chow, Dorry had invited us back to his home at the west skull-mountain. I, however, had chosen to decline in favor of exploring a bit more. After all, standing here in the middle of a prehistoric paradise like this? It was a beyond once in a lifetime opportunity! There was no way in hell I was going to let it slip through my fingers!

Nevertheless, I'd stayed in contact with Luffy and Vivi via Pinky and Soundbite after I'd taken off, and a few minutes later, we were joined by Usopp and Nami contacting us via Brain, telling us about meeting Brogy. All in all, it was... quite entertaining, if nothing else.

"Still, human," Soundbite suddenly piped up in Dorry's voice with a slightly concerned look. "I would recommend you exercise some caution. While Brogy and I are too big to be in any kind of danger from the local fauna, the same cannot be said of you humans."

"Ah don't worry about it," I verbally waived the giant's warning as I ducked under a curtain of leaves and vines. "I've got Soundbite with me, and he's got practice warding off dangerous animals. Plus, if I get close to anything really bad, he'll warn me about-OW!" I winced as Soundbite suddenly chomped on my ear. "What is it?"

Soundbite jerked his eyes to the side, indicating a cave in a nearby cliff-face. "DANGER! KEEP OUT!"

I eyed the hole contemplatively. "That bad, huh?"

"What is it?" Usopp asked via Soundbite.

"Apparently something in a cave's got Soundbite spooked."

"A cave, huh?" Brogy mused contemplatively. "Sounds like your snail has good ears, human. There's a species of small dinosaurs on the island that like to use caves as nests. They're nuisances to us, but to you, I imagine they'd be quite dangerous."

I ran through a list of dinosaurs that were both 'dangerous' and 'small' for a moment before coming to a bone-chilling conclusion. "Right!" I hissed, turning on my heel, intent on getting as far from the cave as I could. "Well, I'm just going to go... anywhere but here."

"Well, at least you're trying to stay safe..." Nami sighed in frustration.

"Ah c'mon, Nami!" I teased as I started working my way through a particularly dense section of brush. "How much trouble do you think I could possibly get in?"

"More than you can imagine."

I chuckled slightly as I finally managed to wrench myself through the wall of flora. "Ah c'mon, cut me some-! Ah..." My words promptly died in my throat as I looked forwards again.

Mister 5 and Miss Valentine stared back at me in dumbfounded shock.

I swallowed heavily as a cold sweat broke out on the back of my neck, aided by the bloodthirsty grin Miss Valentine was suddenly sporting. "On second thought... you might have a point."
I fought to control my breathing as I eyed the two agents not two feet in front of me. Luckily, they looked just as surprised as I felt, but if the sadistic looks that were slowly spreading across their faces were anything to go by, that wouldn't last long.

Desperate to buy time, I hastily plastered a desperate smile on my face. "I don't suppose the words 'parlay' hold any water with you two, do they?"

Miss Valentine promptly swung her head back in a cackle. "Kyahaha! Oh, you poor little dead man, we are so far beyond that!"

"Especially after that stunt your friend pulled back in Whiskey Peak," Mr. 5 grunted as he scratched the back of his head irritably. "No, you're going to be a stain on the trees when we're through with you, no doubt about it."

"Fun..." Soundbite growled darkly.

Before the pair could start to approach me, I hastily waved my hands frantically. "Wait, wait, wait! Before you try and, well, smear me over a square kilometer of jungle, can I at least say something I think you two should be aware of?"

5 and Valentine glanced at each other in both confusion and annoyance for a second before shrugging indifferently.

"Sure, why not?" Valentine chirped in a faux-saccharine voice. "It's only right to hear a dead man's last words!"

Steeling my nerves, I widened my grin malevolently and glanced at Soundbite. "Care to do the honors?"

Catching on, the snail's grin matched mine as he started to sing a very familiar tune: "CROC-O-DILE, CROC-O-DILE, Mister ZERO is CROC-O-DILE!"

The Officer Agents stiffened in shock as they processed what they were hearing, connections and realizations forming in their minds.

I allowed myself to relax ever so slightly at their expressions. "Welcome to our boat, you two. Now, you've got two options: join us and help tear Baroque Works to pieces, or stay your course and get 'dealt with' by the 4 through 1 teams, if the desert Croc doesn't decide to deal with you himself."

Valentine looked on the verge of panic for a bare moment before she was distracted by 5 snapping his fingers in her face. The dark-skinned man gave her a flat look before gesturing at the treeline around us. She and I looked up in confusion, but after a minute of searching I still couldn't-

Valentine and I made the connection simultaneously, the cheery woman grinning sadistically while I simply chose to let out a huff of exasperation. "Tsk... those pests really are unlucky..." I grumbled. "There when you need them the least, nowhere to be seen when you need them the most. Damn it..."

"Well, now that your little ploy has backfired spectacularly, guaranteeing that we really will kill you," Mr. 5 growled as he dug his finger in his nose. "Any actual last words?"

I tried to smile, I really, really did... but in the end, I was no D. I swallowed and grimaced fearfully.
as I took a step back. "Any chance you could make this fast?"

Valentine's smile sadistic from ear-to-ear, sadistic bloodlust present in every inch of her being. "Not in this life."

The pair took a step towards me...

And promptly jumped as the sound of undergrowth and vegetation snapping and tearing erupted behind them, followed swiftly by the sound of something very big breathing and sniffing at the air.

As the pair started to look behind themselves, I glanced at Soundbite at the same time that he glanced at me. The second our eyes met, an unspoken message passed between us.

"Stop!" I hissed, pumping as much desperation and terror into my voice as I could while keeping the volume extremely low. "Don't. Move. And don't. Make. A sound!"

The pair did as I ordered, freezing at my tone of voice.

"Listen to me very carefully..." I whispered, eyeing the jungle behind the two with borderline panic. "There is a Tyrannosaurus rex standing right behind you."

Valentine swallowed heavily, twitching slightly as she fought her obvious reaction. "When you say there's a T. rex..." she started at the same volume as me.

"I mean that at a glance, I'd say there are thirteen meters and fuck-you-tons of very hungry muscle and teeth standing a few feet behind you, now shut up and don't move!" I interrupted her desperately as the two started to turn around. "I think I read somewhere that a T. rex's vision is based on movement. So long as we stay still and stay quiet, there's a chance we'll walk away with all our limbs!"

Mr. 5 ground his teeth furiously for a moment, but promptly flinched as the sound of sniffing sounded out again. "And what if the damn thing manages to smell us?"

"Then we just need to be faster than you!" Soundbite intoned venomously.

"Can't you just blast it like you've been doing to the others!?" Valentine demanded frantically.

"The others didn't sneak up behind me and give me only a few feet of leeway!" 5 shot back. "If I'm not fast enough on the draw, then one of us'll be dino-chow!"

"Look, it's fine, alright!?" I whisper-shouted hurriedly. "We just need to wait until the damn thing loses interest and moves on, and then we'll be in the clear!"

Valentine made to respond, then shivered heavily as a particularly loud snort sounded above her umbrella. "And how long do you think that'll take!?" she hissed desperately, shivering in terror.

"With any luck?" I twirled my shoulders slightly in a shadow of a shrug, causing the Officers to tense up. "Not too soon, otherwise we're all dead-!"

**BOOM!**

It was a true testament to the steel of our wills - or perhaps the absolute terror we all felt - that none of us moved or made a sound as a volcano erupted somewhere in the distance. The ensuing roars of pride and the cacophony of trees snapping like toothpicks did little to aid with our countenance. For a moment, we stood tense, waiting for some sign that something else was about to happen. When
nothing moved, we allowed ourselves to relax slightly...

"AH-CHOO!"

At which point Soundbite jerked and released a massive sneeze.

"GREEEEEEAAAARGH!"

"KYAAAAAH!" Miss Valentine shrieked at the top of her lungs, literally jumping several dozen feet in the air in her panic.

Mister 5, on the other hand, immediately swung around, whipping his finger out of his nose and firing his explosive boogers dead ahead, blasting the jungle to pieces. "NOSE FANCY CANNON!"

As for me? The second the two had started moving, I'd pulled a 180 and started booking it through the jungle as fast as I could possibly go, pushing my body to put as much distance between me and those two whackjobs as was humanly possible.

After all, they would very soon find out that there was no T. rex, and I didn't intend to stick around to observe the very literal blast radius that would almost certainly ensue.

BOOM! A wave of hot, rushing air washed over my back. "YOU LYING SON OF A BITCH!"

Called it!

"PIRATE, JACKASS! THAT'S OUR WHOLE SCHTICK!" I fired back at him.

"EAT THIS!"

I winced as the ground just behind me was blown to kingdom come before smirking back at the bomber. "HAS ANYONE ELSE TOLD YOU YOU HAVE AN EXPLOSIVE TEMPER, OR AM I THE FIRST?" I hollered over my shoulder. "AT THE LEAST, SOMEBODY HAS TO HAVE TOLD YOU THAT YOU'RE NOT ALL THAT BRI!"

"10,000 KILO-PRESS!" CRASH!

"-AGH!" I yelped, jumping forwards hastily as the canopy above where I'd been moments ago imploded, allowing the world's most literal bombshell blonde to crush the space I'd occupied less than a second prior.

"I am going to crush you piece by piece!" Miss Valentine snarled at me, veins clearly standing out on her forehead.

"You'll need to catch me first!" I shot back as I weaved through the treeline.

"RUN RUN RUN as fast as you can!" Soundbite chortled.

"Wish granted! 1 KILO-SPRINT!"

Before I could react a blur of yellow sprinted past me at inhuman speeds. Valentine promptly spun around and slid to a stop, kicking up a dust cloud as she held her arm out. "1,000 KILO-LARIAT!" she spat venomously.

Barely even thinking, I hastily tried to dig my heels into the earth in an attempt to kill my momentum
before I rammed face-first into what was no doubt a very hard limb. Thankfully for me, the soil I was running on was just loose enough that when I 'applied the brakes', so to speak, it gave way, causing me to fall on my ass and go under the Agent's arm in a pale imitation of a baseball slide.

Before Valentine could react properly, I'd scrambled back to my feet and taken off again, weaving through the densest vegetation I could find. Soundbite aided in my escape just as much, if the sounds of running that were coming from all sides were anything to go by.

After a minute or so, I heard the telltale sounds of someone else giving pursuit, far too close to me for comfort. Thinking fast, I ducked into the closest bush I could find and pressed myself to the ground, trying to control my breathing. The volume that my heart was pounding at wasn't doing my psyche any favors.

I tensed as Mr. 5's voice suddenly shouted through the jungle. "DO YOU SEE HIM, MISS VALENTINE?"

My blood practically froze as Miss Valentine's voice came from somewhere much closer. "NOT YET, MISTER FIVE, BUT I'M NOT STOPPING UNTIL I HAVE THAT BASTARD'S SKULL BENEATH MY HEEL!"

'Oh go to hell!' I thought furiously to myself. I then blinked as an idea struck me. "Soundbite," I hissed out of the corner of my mouth.

The snail glanced at me furtively, blinking to acknowledge that he'd heard.

"Valentine's voice coming from her direction to 5, but don't let her hear it!"

A few moments later, a telltale electronic whine told me I was good to go.

"I'VE GOT HIM, MISTER FIVE!" I faux-hollered as quietly as I could, allowing Soundbite to handle the rest. "HE'S IN THIS GENERAL AREA! FLUSH HIM OUT!"

"ON IT! DOUBLE NOSE FANCY-!"

"Wait, wh-!? MISTER FIVE, WAI-!"

"CANNON!"

BOOM!

I flinched as a section of the jungle that was far too close for comfort was suddenly immolated.

"ARGH!"

I blew a sigh of relief as I heard Valentine screech in pain, hastily taking the opportunity to crawl out of the bush and creep away in a crouch.

Meanwhile, behind me, the duo reunited.

"WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU THINKING!?"

"What the-!? Why didn't you get out of the blast radius, Valentine!??"

"I wasn't the one who called for the damn attack!"

"What are you-! That damn snail!"
"Don't worry, there's a bright side: that bastard isn't as subtle as he thinks he is. I've got his trail! This way!"

I barely managed to refrain from cursing as I heard the Agents start to head in my direction again. Acting out of desperation, I started to stand up and run...

"ACK!" SPLASH!

And promptly caught my foot on a root and landed face-first in a very disgusting puddle of water. Sputtering and hacking furiously, I started to push myself up... and immediately winced as Soundbite sank his teeth into the side of my neck. "What the hell are you-!?"

"Stop! Don't. Move. And don't. Make. A sound!" Soundbite hissed in my voice, sliding off my shoulder and coating himself in the muck we were laying in.

I stared at him in confusion for a moment before managing to actually catch sight of the grime: a viscous brown-and-green liquid... that was colored a lot like what I was wearing.

Before I could react further, the two current banes of my life spoke up literally five feet away from me. Acting out of desperation, I pressed myself as deep into the muck as I could allow, leaving myself just enough space to breathe.

"Tsk... damn it... I can't find any more tracks, you?"

"Same here. No matter, he must be hiding somewhere... Flush him out, Mister Five!"

"On it, Miss Valentine. NOSE FANCY CARPET BOMBING!"

I was barely able to contain my wince as yet another explosion shook the world, followed closely by another, and another... it was with grim resignation that I realized that the explosions were slowly starting to come closer and closer to me.

"Kyahahaha!" Valentine's by-now-sickening cackle wafted through the air. "You might as well give up now, snail-man! Who knows? Maybe I'll show you some mercy if you surrender!"

"I certainly won't," came Mr. 5's bone-chilling follow up.

Yet another explosion erupted, only this time, it literally shook my world, on account of being a mere few feet in front of my face.

My heart pounded furiously in my chest as I tensed up. Whether I was preparing to bolt or preparing to endure a point-blank explosion, I'm not entirely sure myself. But in the end... it didn't matter.

"What in the blue hell do you two think you're doing!?"

My opinions on the new voice were mixed. On the one hand, I was no longer in danger of being blasted into paste. On the other, having Mr. 3 get involved in this clusterfuck did not seem like much of an improvement to the situation.

"M-M-Mister 3 sir!" Miss Valentine stammered fearfully. "W-We happened to encounter one of the Straw Hat Pirates and were giving pursuit, but he managed to hide! W-we were just-!"

"Announcing our presence to the giants," 3 cut her off firmly, his voice brooking absolutely no argument. "Have you forgotten that in order for our operation to be successful, we must maintain our anonymity at all costs?"
"Which is why we need to find the pirate!" Mr. 5 cut in hastily. "If he gets away-!"

"Was this pirate," I could hear the sneer in 3’s voice as he interrupted. "One of the priorities?"

"N-no? He was just-"

"And did he have any Devil Fruit powers?"

"Uh... no?" Valentine answered hesitantly. "But this transponder snail he has does..."

"Irrelevant." The lump of mud that was Soundbite twitched slightly, but thankfully remained silent. "The point is that he's a normal human wandering around in a prehistoric jungle, most likely with no idea of where he is. We don't need to hunt him down, we just need to let nature run its course. Besides, even if he survives, he will be too preoccupied doing so to do anything to help his comrades. He is not a priority."

"But-!"

I heard the sound of... actually, I had no idea what that sound was, but it shut Mr. 5 up very quickly. Going by the sounds of struggling and muffled screaming I could hear, I assumed that it was Mr. 3’s wax powers at work.

"This is not up for discussion. You two imbeciles have wasted enough time already. Get to your positions, and capture the princess. Now."

A few moments later, twin gasps sounded out, followed by desperate hacking and wheezing.

"Oh, and before you go," Mr. 3 spoke up again, his voice devoid of emotion. "I just wanted you to be aware of something: should we fail and the pirates manage to escape... you will join my collection in their stead. Is that clear?"

5 and Valentine's heavy gulps were audible even to me. "Crystal, Mister 3."

"Perfect. Now move."

I tensed slightly as the Agents started moving, but allowed myself to relax when they moved away from me. After about a minute, any sounds of them faded into the ambient noises, before ultimately disappearing completely.

I gave them a minute more... then jerked up and out of the muck puddle with a desperate gasp, hacking and spluttering furiously in an effort to clear my mouth. "Oh dear mother of god that was too close..." I wheezed, heaving miserably.

"Worked, though!" Soundbite piped up as he shook both himself and his shell in an effort to dislodge the grime. "LITTLE HELP?"

"Yeah yeah, sure..." I picked the snail up and plopped him down on a nearby tree branch. I then proceeded to start working my coat off. "I'm gonna take a sec to try and get this gunk off of me. Do me a favor and keep an ear out for any creepy-crawlies?"

"You're GOOD!" Soundbite reassured me as he continued to shake himself down, dislodging substances from different parts of his shell.

"Perfect," I nodded as I started to shake my jacket out. I thanked my lucky stars that the Blue Seas textile industry was advanced enough to utilize polyester, or at least something like it; if this was
going to become a trend, then I'd be out of jackets by Alabasta!

"By the way," I noted as I glanced up at Soundbite. "Nice going with Audiosaurus rex. Very innovative."

"THANKS! I'M just happy you MANAGED TO CATCH ON!" Soundbite chirped. "I WAS just following your advice AND USING MY ABILITY in unique ways!"

"Speaking of..." I grunted slightly as I balanced against a tree and worked one of my boots off, upending it and tapping it out firmly. "How'd you miss lady canary and the deadpan wonder?"

Soundbite promptly grimaced in embarrassment, retracting into his shell as he hocked out a bit more mud from within. "THEY WEREN'T speaking and there's too much data. IN THIS JUNGLE, THEY COULD HAVE BEEN anything from MONKEYS to hippos."

I shrugged as I slid my jacket back on. "Sounds rough, but hey, look on the bright side: you don't have to handle it alone, no?"

The transponder snail slid out of his shell and looked upwards in thought for a moment before grinning and nodding in agreement. "True, true! So..." He eyed me curiously. "WHAT NOW?"

"Now?" I picked up Soundbite and placed him on my shoulder before starting to make my way through the jungle towards one of the skull-mountains. "Now you ring up Pinky and the Brain so that we can fill in the rest of the crew about the fact that there are Baroque Works agents on this island who want not just our heads, but Dorry and Broggy's as well."

Soundbite's grin widened even further. "WAY AHEAD OF YOU!"

I glanced at the snail in confusion. "The heck are you talking about?"

Without warning, Soundbite's expression shifted to one of familiar concern. "He's talking about the fact that he's been blocking our voice for the past ten minutes!" he blurted out in Vivi's voice.

My jaw dropped open in shock. "Holy- you've been keeping the calls going this whole time!?"

"I MAKE multitasking LOOK GOOD!" Soundbite crowed.

"You can ring your own bell later, Soundbite," Nami ordered firmly. "Cross, are you alright?"

I blew out a heavy snort as I ran my fingers through my muck-ridden hair. "I reek like Zoro after a full hour of training and I might have shaved a year or two off my golden years, but... no, no, I think I'm good. What about the rest of you?"

"Nami and I are fine over here!" Usopp piped up. "We decided to stay put! Dorry and Broggy's duel ended in a draw a few minutes ago, and they sounded alright too."

"Carue and I are fine as well!" Vivi concurred. "Luffy tried to go and help you the second he heard you were in trouble, but..."

Suddenly, Soundbite belted out the sound of crashing trees and vegetation. "ALRIGHT, YOU BAST-! What the-!? Ah c'mon, not again!"

"Thank god for small mercies and Luffy's inability to tell left from his own ass..." Nami sighed in relief.
"Tell me about it..." I muttered to myself before raising my voice. "Hey Luffy, I'm fine, I managed to ditch them! For now, you need to stick with Vivi, they're specifically aiming for her. If you aren't around to protect her, then she's a dead woman. And!" I hastily spoke up before Luffy could protest. "If you stick around her, then chances are that sooner or later those Baroque bastards will come to you! Alright?"

"Mmmph..." Luffy grumbled juvenilley. "Well... I don't like it, but... ah, alright."

"Uh, that's great Cross," Usopp spoke up hesitantly. "But if Luffy's protecting Vivi and Zoro and Sanji are out who knows where for their hunting contest... then who the heck is protecting us?!"

"That'll be us, little long-nose! Right, Dorry?"

"Right you are, Broggy!"

I sighed in relief as the giants' voices came over the connection. "Glad to hear you two are still in one piece. How much did you hear?"

"Enough," Broggy grunted darkly. "To think someone would dare to interfere with our ancient duel..."

"If I had to guess, I'd say that they're after our bounties," Dorry grumbled. "Knowing the World Government, they're probably still active, even a hundred years after we were last seen."

"Whatever their reason, it doesn't matter!" Broggy asserted firmly. "If they wish to battle with warriors of Elbaf, then it is a battle we will give them!"

"Best not to just rush in ham-handed though, alright?" I cautioned. "We have no idea where they are, and at least two of them have Devil Fruit powers. That's a recipe for an ambush." I frowned, wondering how to reveal Mr. 3's powers before a stroke of inspiration hit me. "Vivi, you were investigating them, right? I don't suppose-?"

"R-Right! Um... well most of you have already seen Mr. 5 and Ms. Valentine. They're Officer Agents, Agents with numbers 5 and below. Most Officers have Devil Fruits, and these are no exception. Mr. 5's Boom-Boom Fruit allows him to detonate any part of his body like dynamite, and Ms. Valentine's Kilo-Kilo Fruit allows her to change her weight from one to 10,000 kilograms."

I frowned as I heard a sound in the background where Vivi was talking. Some kind of sloshing?

"As for the other pair... I know Mr. 3 uses the Wax-Wax Fruit, which does exactly what you'd think it does."

"Wait, that guy makes wax?!!" Usopp wondered incredulously. "And he's higher-ranked than the guy who can blow up his body?"

"Never underestimate Devil Fruits, Usopp," I cautioned, still straining for that background noise. "An old adage concerning them is that there are no useless powers, only useless power-wielders. Just look at our captain if you need any convincing. I'm assuming this is the case here?"

"Y-Yes," Vivi stammered. "The wax he produces is so thick that it's as strong as steel, and he can freely shape it. One of the ways that comes up a lot is making wax swords. Very large, very deadly wax swords."

"... Okay, withdrawn," Usopp whimpered.
"Unfortunately, I don't know much about his partner, Ms. Goldenweek, just that she looks like a child and she's somehow capable of manipulating emotions with paint. Considering how the first time I saw her she was liberally swimming, I think it's not so much a Devil Fruit as it is some form of hypnosis."

There was a moment of silence before Nami and Usopp swallowed heavily. "Uh-oh..."

"What? What is it?" Carue quacked nervously.

"The last time Luffy went up against a hypnotist, things... didn't end well..." Nami hedged uncomfortably.

"Shishishi! I went on a rampage!" our captain provided cheerfully.

"THAT'S NOT SOMETHING TO BE PROUD OF, MORON!" the two other actual humans on the crew shrieked furiously.

"Well, either way, as dangerous as she and Mr. 3 are on their own, you need to be careful of what they can do together," Vivi warned us firmly. "Thanks to Goldenweek's paint, Mr. 3 can create wax mannequins of anyone he desires that are accurate in all but breathing. If you see someone standing stock still, run. Chances are that they're a trap."

"Bah! Then we'll just have to make sure to step on her first before she can paint anything! Right, Dorry?"

"Indeed, Broggy! Besides, even if the little human goes on a rampage, he should be containable." There was a loud thump on the other side of the line, like something heavy being dropped. "After all, he might have heart, but he's just a little tyke! GEGYAGYAGYA!"

I frowned as I listened to Dorry laugh. Something was off... it was almost as if he were... GARGLING!?

"Dorry, are you drinking something?!" I demanded hastily, fighting to keep the panic out of my voice.

"Hm?" the giant's voice jumped in surprise, followed by the sound of what was most likely an empty cask hitting the ground. "Just some ale Broggy and I picked up from your ship on the way back from our duel. We warriors of Elbaf always drink before our next fight! Why?"

My heart pounded in my chest as I fought my kneejerk reaction. "You got them from our ship, our abandoned ship that nobody's been standing guard on for the past hour."

"Yes, that's right, what of-?"

"Oh no..." Vivi breathed as she caught on to what I was saying. "MISTER DORRY! GET RID OF THAT BARREL, QUICK-!"

**BOOM!**

Soundbite and I jumped as an explosion echoed both in the distance and over the connection.

"WHAT WAS THAT?!" Usopp shrieked fearfully.

"Those bastards must have laced our barrels with explosives after we left the ship!" I explained, silently cursing myself for not picking up on what was happening sooner. Things were happening
fast, way way too fast. "Vivi, for the love of god, tell me that thing didn't go off in his stomach!"

"No, no, it wasn't that bad, but..." I could hear the frustration in the princess' voice. "It went off right in front of his face. Broggy, h-he's breathing, but-!"

"Aye, don't worry about it, that's not the first explosion we've taken to the face and it won't be the last. He'll be groggy for a few days, but as long as he doesn't try to fight during that time he'll be fine."

As if on cue, there was a loud boom as one of the volcanoes erupted again.

"...sometimes, I respect Elbaf to death and back. Others, I think he simply enjoys picking on us."

All of a sudden, the sound of moaning came over the connection.

"M-Mister Dorry-!" Vivi stammered.

"What the hell!?" Carue squawked.

"Hey, Dorry's getting back up!" Luffy said eagerly.

There was a moment of silence before Broggy groaned warily. "...uh-oh..."

"What, what is it?" I asked hastily.

"If Dorry's not thinking straight, then there's a chance that he could go force himself into a-!"

"RAAAAAGH!!"

I jumped as an infuriated roar ripped through the air from the direction of the skull-mountain, followed by the earth shaking repeatedly.

"Berserker rage. Damn it, Dorry!" Broggy cursed furiously.

"W-what the-!? Where are you going, Broggy!?" Usopp squawked.

"Dorry's going on a rampage! He won't stop until someone's stopped him the hard way!"

"But with the condition he's in-!" Nami started to protest before the giant cut her off.

"I won't actually try and hurt him! He's not in proper fighting condition, and he's certainly not in his right mind. There would be no honor in beating him as he is! I will hold him off and knock him unconscious. Straw Hat! You might be small, but... I believe that you are strong. Can I trust you to deal with the interlopers?"

There was a moment of silence. Then...

"HELL YEAH!" Luffy bellowed furiously.

"Very well then! I leave the rest to you! Good luck, Straw Hats! Now then, if you'll excuse me... RAAAAAAAGH!" Broggy roared in turn, and the earth shook, harder and harder, until for the second time that day the titans clashed anew.

"Cross, I'm going after these guys," Luffy growled darkly. "You got a problem with that?!"

"Just give me a second to outline the plan, alright?" I hedged hastily.
"Hurry up!"

I flinched slightly at the impatient tone Luffy directed at me, but I shrugged it off. In the face of what had just happened, I'd probably want to punch someone in the face too. Matter of fact, I kind of did want to punch someone in the face, preferably someone whose codename was either a date or a number.

"Alright, the plan is simple..." I shrugged flatly, more for my benefit than anything else. "There is no plan. Run hog wild, just make sure you stick together while you do."

"Are you serious!?" Nami demanded incredulously.

"Deadly," I confirmed, my voice as even as possible. "The fact is that we're currently playing a hunting game with these bastards: we're hunting them, they're hunting us. We've got an advantage in that they don't know that we know they're hunting us, but because we won't be able to keep track of them easily, that's worth jack. As it is, our only option is to come at them harder than they can come at us. Just make sure that you don't get separated so that you can't be ambushed. In the meantime, Soundbite and I will try and find Zoro and Sanji so that we can warn them about what's going on. For now the name of the game is survival. Got it?"

"Right."

"Got it!"

"G-g-got it..." "... watch your back, Cross."

"That's Soundbite's job, Nami," I joked. "Alright everyone, be careful and try and maintain transponder snail contact. Good luck and godspeed."

I picked up my pace, rounded a corner in the corridor of vegetation...

And promptly blinked in honest shock as I caught sight of the two figures that were sitting on a log not five feet in front of me. Before I could properly formulate a response, I found myself blurting the first thing that came to mind.

"I thought we shot your fur-coated asses down over Whiskey Peak."

If the way their sunglasses flashed was anything to go by, the Unluckies did not appreciate my comment.

For a minute, we just stood there, staring at one another. Everything was silent: the jungle, the the Unluckies, me... finally, I tilted my head towards Soundbite. "Can't you translate for them?" I demanded quietly.

"They ain't saying nothin' ABOUT NOTHIN'!" Soundbite hissed back in an equally disturbed tone of voice.

"Of course they're not..." I ground out.

Just as the staring contest was about to resume, the sound of vegetation snapping and crunching echoed from behind the animal assassins, though neither of them made to look at it, or even reacted in the slightest.
I, on the other hand, looked past them and promptly stiffened in shock.

"I don't suppose either of you would believe me if I told you that there was a Tyrannosaurus rex right behind you, would you?" I breathed.

Mr. 13 snapped his shell out into a pair of clawed bivalve seashells, while Miss Friday flared her wings and levelled a pair of high-calibre machine guns that were positioned on her back at my face.

I swallowed heavily before plastering what was most definitely a crazy grin on my face. "Your loss. Soundbite?"

My snail flashed a crazed grin of his own before sucking in a deep breath. "HEY! BIG GREEN AND UGLY!" he roared.

"GROOOOOAAAAAAR!"

Mr. 13 and Miss Friday both jumped clean off their log in terror when the massive tyrant lizard behind them stomped the earth and roared in response.

Before either they or the T. rex could react further, I dashed straight at the dinosaur, ducking beneath the reptilian titan's slavering jaws and darting between its legs and under its massive girth. It took all my nerve to keep from freezing as the prehistoric monstrosity's tail swished just above my head, mere inches from braining me. Once I was clear, I kept running, forcing myself through the jungle and as far from the three monsters behind me as I could get.

What followed is honestly kind of a blur. I know I was running for a long-ass time, and the sound of explosions and splintering trees were a constant companion, but a few select moments managed to stick out from the sheer chaos.

I remember slamming into Zoro, going too fast to stop, and luckily managing to plant my shoulder in the Calming Green painted on his back. Naturally, he nearly took my head off a few seconds after, and the sounds of fighting promptly drew us in opposite directions.

I remember getting cornered by Mr. 5, ready to hit me in the face with an explosive lariat, only for Usopp to hang himself upside down out of a tree and nail the assassin in the face with a rotten egg. The ensuing pursuit allowed me to slip away.

I remember Mr. 3, in his Candle Champion armor, fighting a running battle with Luffy and coming within feet of crushing me flat, only to fall flat on his ass as Soundbite goaded a small herd of Pachysee... Pachyche... headbutt dinosaurs into charging him.

I remember, for some odd reason, getting in a baton-to-staff-to-whatever-the-hell-those-things-were melee-a-trois between me, a shirtless Nami and a very exasperated Vivi while riding on Broggy's shoulder. Though now that I think about it, the combination of black and red that was smeared across our navigator's stomach might have had something to do with that particular debacle.

And, of course, it was rather hard to forget Soundbite leading all the combatants into a rousing dance number set to Gangnam Style. Though, to be fair, I might have taken a blow to the head just before that, so take that one with a grain of salt.

When things finally died down, I was left leaning heavily against a splintered tree, my chest heaving frantically as I tried to catch my breath. "Alright..." I panted desperately. "Count 'em. Mister Five?"

"Down with a case of severe tropical food-poisoning courtesy of over a dozen berries going down his throat," Usopp wheezed.
"Miss Valentine?"

"Considering how I literally broke my fucking staff over her skull? I damn well hope she's down!" Nami snarled. "That thing was freaking expensive!"

"Miss Goldenweek?"

"Hanging from a branch over a very stinky swamp by her seagull-pattern boxah shorts," Carue snickered.

"And Mister Three?"

"It's going to take weeks to work this dent out of my helmet's crest, but I'm fairly certain he's unconscious," Dorry huffed petulantly, albeit with a slight slur.

"Oh thank god..." I groaned, starting to slide down the side of the tree before stiffening in realization. "Waaaaait... anyone got eyes on the Unluckies?"

RATATATATAT!

"SONNUVA!" I yelped as the wood above me exploded in a shower of fire and splinters, prompting me to start running again. "Scratch that! They're on top of me! I don't know about the rest of you, but I'd seriously appreciate some-!"

"BELAY THAT!" Soundbite suddenly barked in my ear.

"Wait wha-?!"

"Hard right! Hard right!" Soundbite shouted, jerking his mass to the side frantically.

I hesitated for a bare moment before following his orders, hanging a hard right and sprinting dead ahead. I seriously hoped that whatever Soundbite's miracle solution was worked, because my body was really starting to ache, and if those noises behind me were anything to go by, then those animal bastards were catching up. Unless something managed to shake them-!

Oooooh...

"Smart snail..." I breathed.

Soundbite cackled for a moment before darting his eyes to the side. "HIDE! HIDE!"

Complying with his demands, I promptly dove into some nearby bushes, pressing myself as hard against the ground as I could manage. The sound of me running, on the other hand, didn't die out, instead continuing to rush straight ahead, echoing loud for all to hear.

If they'd been looking, Mr. 13 and Miss Wednesday would have most likely noticed my trail and shot me dead where I lay.

Pissed off as they were, however, they were content to rely solely on their ears for guidance.

Hence, it was without so much as a hint of hesitation that the Unluckies dove headfirst into an erstwhile innocuous cave.

I shifted the leaves of the bush I was in just enough so that I could shoot a mad grin at the mouth of the cave. "Three... two... one..."
"SKREEEEEE!"

"AAAAAAAAAGH!"

It took all I had to keep from cackling madly when the Unluckies tore out of the cave's mouth, screaming their heads off as they were ruthlessly pursued by over a dozen relatively large and extremely ticked off theropods.

When the group was finally out of sight, I stood up and strode out of the bush, sighing in relief as I brushed a few stray leaves off me. "Glad that worked..." I mused to myself as I continued watching the direction they'd went in. "Still... troodons, huh? My bet was on-"

"Hisssss..."

My spine went ramrod straight as a very unforgettable sound hit my eardrums.

"Scheiße," Soundbite spat venomously.

Moving very slowly, I turned my head and stared at the dinosaur that was slavering mere feet from my face.

Internally, I couldn't help but boggle at the dinosaur. 'So... looks like they didn't have feathers after all.'

Externally, my reaction was much more predictable. "Clever girl..."

"HISSSSSSS!" the velociraptor snarled venomously.

"Oh, how the hell do you even know that reference!?" I demanded incredulously.

The raptor responded by lunging at me-

"POITRINE!"

CRUNCH!

And straight into a very familiar black-clad leg, which was more than strong enough to collapse the dinosaur's ribcage.

I heaved a sigh of relief as the raptor collapsed lifelessly. "You, sir, are almost legitimately god's gift to women. Because that was a freaking miracle."

"You're the wrong gender for flattery to get you anywhere, Cross," Sanji smirked as he examined the raptor's corpse. "But thanks anyways." He looked me over contemplatively. "Geez, you look like crap. What the heck happened?"

I opened my mouth to respond... and promptly snapped it shut. "I'll tell you when we get back to the rest of the crew." I started to walk through the jungle, motioning for him to follow. "We're meeting up at one of the mountains. Come on."

We made it about a meter forwards when the jungle parted before us, allowing a T. rex to stride forwards and level a glare at us.

Sanji blew out a contemplative cloud of smoke as he eyed the tyrant lizard. "Well now... aren't you a big one." A grin spread across his face as he started to stride forwards. "Marimo, you are going do-!"
"WAIT!"

Sanji froze in shock as I stuck an arm in front of him. "What the-!?"

I cut him off with an absolutely *scathing* glare. "When I set out into this hellhole, I made a solemn *oath*, and by *god* I am going to uphold it."

I switched my glare over to the T. rex, causing it to break out in a cold sweat.

"One way... or another." -o-

"PFFFAHAHAHAHA! HEEEY NAAA~-MIII~-!" I hollered eagerly as I waved my hands in the air. "LOOK WHAT I~'M DOING!"

"Cross, what are you-!? OH, ARE YOU *KIDDING ME!*?"

"HAHAHA! WOOHOO! GO CROSS!" Luffy whooped enthusiastically.

My grin widened even further as Soundbite cackled and hollered on my shoulder. "YEEHAW! YEE-HAW! YIPPIE-KAY-YAY! RIDE 'EM DINO-BOY!"

Nami shrieked in rage once more, but that only made my grin wider still.

Because, at the end of the day... I said I'd do it, and I had actually gone through with it.

Baroque Works, the World Government, Marshall D. Teach... at that moment, I could *not* give a damn about any of them.

Because at the end of the day? I was ridin' me a T. Rex rodeo-style, and *that* was just plain awesome.
"Okay, let's see..." I muttered as I used a stick to add on to the mind-numbingly complicated array of lines I was scratching into the dirt. "So, after you got Mister 5 off my back, you lured him through the jungle for a few minutes until you reached a pond, at which point you were both attacked by a pack of... hippos, right?"

"Uh... no, wait a second..." Usopp interjected, using his own stick to edit the lines. "That pond had flamingoes in it, the hippos were in the swamp about a half hour later."

I blinked at the display in confusion. "Wait, wha—!? But over here," I gestured at the opposite side of the array. "Nami says that she saw you and 5 getting chased by hippos!"

"Oh yeah, we were split up by the flamingoes, and when we saw each other again we ran into the hippos. No clue how she lost track of time like that, though..."

I hummed thoughtfully as I examined the series of events for a moment before snapping my fingers in realization. "Ooooh, right! She must have seen you after Vivi and I knocked her off Broggy's shoulder. No wonder she didn't remember how things went down!"

"Oh yeah, that makes sense!" Usopp nodded in satisfaction with a smile.

I couldn't help but grin back as I took in the work before me. "Things are finally starting to pull together! Alright, now then... hey, Luffy, could you-?"

"Hey guys!" our captain hollered as he ran up to us. "Whatcha doin'?"

I blinked at Luffy numbly for a moment before responding. "Well, we were trying to map out the exact details of that little bout of madness we were involved in a second ago. But... in light of recent..." I hissed in a sharp breath as I glanced down at what little of our timeline remained beneath Luffy's sandals. "Developments... I'm thinking we just throw in the towel and henceforth refer to this whole clusterfuck as 'the Little Garden Affair'. Agreed?"

"Agreed..." Usopp groaned.

"Aye-AYE!" Soundbite snickered in agreement.

"That's cool!" Luffy grinned obliviously at us. "So, are you guys gonna eat anything or what?" He held up two pieces of bone that were covered in what was either ludicrously rare or outright raw meat.

I eyed the 'food' uneasily for a moment before shaking my head. "Thanks but no thanks, I'll wait until Sanji's done cooking something that won't give me salmonella."

"BLECH!" Soundbite spat out in agreement.

"Shocking as this might sound, I'm agreeing with the snail on this one, Luffy," Usopp muttered as he shot a wary glance at Soundbite, who merely stuck his tongue out in response.

"More for me then!" Luffy cheered before tearing into the all-too-fresh flesh.

My heart throbbed as Luffy devoured the simultaneously prehistoric-yet-contemporary remains. "Farewell, Rexy," I sighed miserably. "You were a dear friend and a faithful steed. You will be
"Zoro had to decapitate that thing when it tried to eat you after you dismounted it!" Usopp hollered in disbelief.

"I know, but still!" I protested petulantly. "For a brief, shining moment he was mine, and in that time we had a bond! Granted, it was a bond forged via Sanji kicking him into submission, but-!" I cut myself off with a scowl as Soundbite laughed on my shoulder, before gaining a contemplative look as an idea hit me.

"Besides..." I slowly started again. "That's not the important part. The important part was that he was a dinosaur. A dinosaur that I actually, legitimately rode. And in the end, riding a dinosaur..." I looked Usopp and Luffy dead in the eyes. "Is a Man's Romance."

The second the words left my mouth, Usopp and Luffy reeled back in shock, gasping deeply.

"A Man's Romance..." Luffy breathed in awe.

"Truly you do us all proud as a gender..." Usopp nodded respectfully.

I swept my hand across my waist as I fell into a bow. "Thank you, thank you, feel free to tip!"

"Hey, 'manly men!'"

We were jerked out of our conversation by an irritated interjection from Nami.

"If you're quite done worshipping Cross's manhood-!

"Hahaha! HOOHOOHOOHOOHEEHEEHEE!"

"Please stop, I think Soundbite's about ready to keel over..."

"-then Sanji's finished cooking the meat and we're about to have a meeting so we can discuss how the heck we're going to get off this island. Are you coming or what?"

"Right behind you, Na-miiii..." I choked off slightly as I caught sight of Nami's exposed stomach.

Specifically, the small black dot clinging to Nami's stomach.

The world seemed to gray out around me as I followed Nami on auto-pilot, my eyes trained firmly on the minuscule, practically unnoticeable, horrifically deadly dot that nobody but me had noticed.

This was it. Now or never. Crunch time.

If I stayed silent, then our navigator would suffer, brushing closer to the reaper then she ever would, at least, as far as I was aware.

If I said anything, then I would be condemning hundreds of people to death, as well as returning thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of unsuspecting civilians to the hands of a despot they were only just enjoying their freedom from.

In the end, it all boiled down to what I valued most: a crowd of faceless people, headed up by several well-defined individuals, or the very real, very present friend who was standing right before me.

Did I risk the one for the many... or did I sell the many for the one?
I was only *just* aware of someone's voice on the edge of my hearing. "-ross? Cross?"

Nami's form shifted slightly.

The dot started to twitch-

**SLAP!**

"**OW!**"

**SMACK!**

"**OUCH!**" I reeled back in shock as *something* slammed dead into my nose, causing me to stumble back.

"**WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT FOR, CROSS!?**" Nami snarled furiously as she cradled her stinging midsection.

I blinked at her numbly for a second as I processed what had just happened before slowly holding up my hand, displaying the little puddle of ichor I could *feel* in the center of my palm. "Buh-bug..." I stammered weakly.

Nami blinked at me in shock. "Say wha- Oh *ew!*" she grimaced in disgust as she noticed the remains splattered on her. "That's... ugh, *gross...* Thanks a lot, Cross. Couldn't you have just warned me or something?"

"Sorry..." I breathed numbly. "Didn't... didn't think..." I weakly raised a finger and managed to gesture at Nami's stomach. "Did... did it... bite... you?"

"Uh...?" Nami poked at her stomach contemplatively for a moment before shaking her head. "No, I don't think so. Well, thanks for that, I guess. I'd probably be in some trouble if it actually managed to bite me, huh?"

"*Some.*" I parroted weakly.

Nami eyed me suspiciously for a moment before shrugging dismissively. "Well, anyways, come on." She started to walk away, waving for me to follow. "In case you didn't notice, Sanji picked up an Eternal Pose for Alabasta that those animal assassins dropped. We're getting the heck off this rock, so move it, dinoboy!"

"Moving..." I mumbled, forcing my feet into motion as I followed behind the orange-haired woman.

As I walked, I slowly shifted my gaze back to my hand, staring at the ichor that painted my palm just as accusingly as a bloodstain.

As I moved, a singular thought ran through my head over and over again, loaded with a sick mixture of doubt, guilt and horror.

'What have I done...'

---

One *kickass* goldfish slaying and twenty-four hours later, we were on our way to Alabasta and *I* was leaning on the balustrade of the Merry's bow. At the moment, my mind was a million miles away, not out of boredom but out of sheer necessity, because I refused to even *think* about what I'd just done, the thousands I'd condemned, the sins I could literally *feel crawling on my ba-*!
I moaned into the Merry's woodwork as I thunked my forehead against the railing again. Damn it, I needed to find something to distract me, before I turned into a Linkin Park parody!

"Kaw, k—ello!"

My head snapped up as the sound of an albatross cawing thankfully managed to grab my attention. In a stroke of pure serendipity, a News Coo was flapping down to land on another part of the Merry's railing.

"Greetings!" The bird raised his wing to his cap in salute as he greeted me for a moment before jerking in shock. "Wait, wha—!?"

"Devil Fruit," I deadpanned as I pointed at Soundbite, who was sunning himself on the Merry's railing. "Don't question it, just enjoy the brief period of simplified communications."

"YOU'RE wel-COME!" the baby transponder snail sang cockily.

"Uh..." The Coo blinked in surprise for a second before smiling and saluting anew. "Works for me! Anyways..." He shifted his newspaper-laden satchel forwards and plucked one out, proffering it to me. "Morning Edition, fresh off the presses! Only one hundred beris!"

"You got it, one second..." I replied as I started to pat myself down. I knew I had some cash or coin on me somewhere, I just had to find it. "While I've got you, I'm curious: how hard is your job? I mean, you fly over the Grand Line, after all. The air's as crazy as the water, and I doubt a lot of pirates are willing to pay at the best of times."

The Coo blinked in surprise at my inquisitiveness before shrugging with a sheepish grin. "Eh, it's a job. And the living I was raised for. Honestly, the real danger is the orcas. Damn things just love to jump out and try to grab us, even when we're coasting a few hundred feet in the air. And sure, a few pirates... and a few ill-tempered marines... try to take swings or shots at us... sometimes successfully..." He raised his wing and showed off a half-dozen glistening scars on his flank. "But then we either blacklist their flags or report their ship-ID, so things work out."

I winced as I took in the poor bird's 'trophies'. "Harsh..." I brightened up as my fingertips came in contact with some paper in one of my jacket's pockets. "900 of that's all yours. Buy yourself some salmon or something, okay?"

The Coo blinked at the bill in shock before nodding eagerly. "T-thank you, sir! That means a lot to me!"

"Please, call me Cross." I smiled as I slipped the bill into his bag's coin slot and took one of his newspapers. "And good luck on the rest of your route, ah..."

"News Coo 1851, but, ah..." He slapped off another salute. "Call me Coo!"

"In that case, happy trails, Coo!" I said as I waved him off.

"You too, Cross!" the albatross waved as he flapped up into the air, soaring high and away in seconds. Damn. With that speed, I could see how people only rarely managed to hit them.

I hummed pleasantly as I unfolded my newspaper. "Well, that was nice."
"SYMPATHY for the FLYING RAT?" Soundbite snickered.

"Hey, watch it," I huffed as I rapped my knuckles on the gastropod's shell. "Show some respect, it takes guts to land on a ship flying a Jolly Roger."

"WHAT-ever," the snail sniffed in a teenage girl voice, angling his neck to give it more sun.

I rolled my eyes at the ungrateful slimeball before unfolding the newspaper and looking it over. "Let's see..." I mused as I scanned the front page. My eyes widened instantly as I read the headline. "Huh... 'Black Bart' Bartolomeo, huh? Well, it's better than 'the Cannibal', I guess, and 25 million's pretty damn respectable. Either way, welcome to the Grand Line, Romeo." I read the article a bit more and promptly winced. "Though you could stand to lower the body count a little bit..."

I flipped the page and kept reading. "Hmm... one ship lost in the Florian Triangle, loaded with..." I grit my teeth furiously. "Civilian passengers... damn it, Moria... tsk, what else? Escalation in a rebellion in the West Blue, Revolutionaries have made a move in the South, and... eesh..." I shuddered at the next article. "Captain Eustass Kid's bounty, escalated to 110 million after... oh, now that's just wrong..." I knew he had a reputation, but come on, a potato peeler and a corkscrew! Who did stuff like that!? Well, besides the World Nobles, anyways... wait, what about Killer? Shouldn't he be—?

"Oh hell no!" I choked out as I hastily changed the page. That was just—! I froze as I read the article. Oooooh boy...

I hastily tapped on Soundbite's shell. "Connect me to Zoro and Nami, discreetly."

"DON'T wann—!"

I snatched the snail off the railing and held him up to my scowling face. "I'm not asking, I'm telling. Connect me or learn the real definition of dehydration via salt. Now!"

Soundbite blinked at me in fearful confusion before glancing at the newspaper I was strangling. "Bad?"

I held up the article in question for him to see. "Deadly. Now connect me."

Soundbite scanned the article's title for a moment before widening his eyes in shock and letting loose an electronic whine. "You're live."

"Nami, Zoro, come up to the—!"

"Hey, Cross!" I jumped as Luffy's voice spoke up behind me, my Captain striding past me and leaping onto his spot on Merry's head. "Whatcha doin'?"

I hesitated for a brief moment as I stared at him before coming to a simple decision: honesty above all else. "I'm meeting with Nami and Zoro somewhere private about a secret that nobody else can learn about no matter what. I'd let you in on it, but..." I shrugged with a sheepish grin. "You're a bit of a blabbermouth, so..."

Luffy blinked at me in surprise before grinning. "Oh, okay! Thanks for telling me! See ya later! Hope your top-secret meeting goes well!"

"Yeah, see you." I waved at Luffy absentmindedly as I walked down the stairs before returning my attention to the snail. "Sorry about that. Meet me at the stern as soon as you can, and try and be discreet. This..." I glanced at the newspaper I was holding uneasily. "This isn't good news I'm
I only had to pace around for a minute on the Merry's quarterdeck before I was joined by the crew's second and first mates.

"What's wrong, Cross?" Nami asked in concern.

Zoro was far less cordial. "You'd better have a damn good reason for waking me up, Cross."

In lieu of a response, I held up my fist and proffered the newspaper I was strangling. "Read," I ordered firmly.

Zoro blinked at me in dull surprise before taking the newspaper and giving it a cursory glance. "And we should care about this 'Kid' brat... why?"

"Other page, dingus!" I snarled.

"Cross!" Nami exclaimed, staring at me in shock.

I jerked for a brief moment before looking away with a sigh. "I... sorry, sorry, it's just... this is... it's bad. Real bad. Turn... turn the page."

Zoro flipped the page... and promptly stiffened in shock. "Oh boy..."

"Huh? What is it?" Nami asked in confusion.

I shook my head with a sigh as I resumed pacing across the deck. "I asked Vivi how things were a week ago. She said the odds stood at six hundred thousand to four in favor of the Royal Guard. Now with this..." I grimaced darkly for a second before shaking my head firmly. "I can't hide this from everyone, and it wouldn't be right to anyways. We're the top mates of this ship, and the only reason I haven't told Luffy is that he can't zip his lips to save his life."

"We keep this quiet until we can't, agreed?"

The two glanced at one another for a moment before shrugging in agreement.

"Sounds good to me," Nami nodded.

"You're throwing around a lot of weight for a third mate, you know that?" Zoro observed with a cocked eyebrow but no real heat.

That drew a cocky grin from me. "It's not like we even remotely resemble a traditional ship. 'Sides.

My grin grew wider. "Three's better than one, no?"

Zoro scoffed with a grin as he turned around and started to walk away. "Cocky brat..."

I chuckled slightly and started to follow him oh geeze.

I only just managed to catch myself on the Merry's railing as I started to keel over. Sweet hell, what was that? Felt like I was floating for a second there...

"Cross?"

"Huh?" I blinked as Nami landed her hand on my shoulder, the navigator looking at me in concern.
"Are you alright?" she asked, worry creeping into her voice.

"Uh..." I stared at her for a second before shaking my head and pulling myself upright. "I... yeah, yeah. Merry must have hit a bad wave or something, who knows. But ah... no, no, I'm... I'm fine."

Nami looked me over silently for a moment before nodding uneasily. "Well... alright... if you say so..." And with a final backwards glance, she walked away.

Soundbite looked me up and down uneasily. "YOU really okay?"

"Uh..." I stood silent for a moment before giving him a questioning look. "I... think so? I... I didn't get bitten, right? Nothing landed on me back on Little Garden?"

"Nope NOPE!"

"Then, uh..." I nodded firmly as I started walking. "Yeah, yeah, I think I'm good."

Soundbite eyed me skeptically nonetheless.

"Now then..." I scanned the deck for a moment before focusing on Usopp with a grin. "Hey, long-nose!"

"I've already got beef with your snail, do you want me to hate you too!?"

"Whatever, just clam it and listen: I wanna commission some... protection."

-o-

The same time the next day, I was sitting at the kitchen table, my forehead resting on the edge of the woodwork as I nursed a wicked headache.

I couldn't even begin to explain where the damn migraine had come from, just that one second I was fine, the next it felt like someone was trying to drive a railroad spike into my skull... that or someone was just doing their little best to dig their way out.

I moaned plaintively as I rubbed my throbbing temples. Christ, I swear, if Zoro somehow managed to give me a migraine with alcohol fumes alone...

All of a sudden, my stomach growled and flat-out twisted, prompting me to grimace miserably.

Sweet holy blue hell, did Sanji sneak biscuits into my food again or something!? One of these days that curly blond bastard's culinary experiments were going to kill me.

"-ross? Hello, Cross?"

"Huh-what?" I jerked my head up in surprise, blinking in shock as I took in the rest of the crew standing around me. "Uh... what are... when did you all get here?"

Some of the savvier crewmembers glanced at each other before eyeing me warily.

"We've been trying to get your attention for the past minute, Cross," Vivi started slowly. "You called us in here, remember?"

"Ah..." I attempted to collect my thoughts, a task made difficult by the pain fogging up my head. Ultimately, though, I managed to make the connections I needed and grinned sheepishly. "Ah, right, right. Sorry about that. I've been... feeling a little under the weather recently. Probably just not handling the climate change well or something..."
"Riiight..." Nami drawled slowly, obviously not believing a word I said. "Anyways, you said it was important?"

"Uh..." I blinked for a second before nodding firmly. "Right, right, very important. Alright, listen: it's about the crew. Or rather, us needing a new crewmate. A new crewmate to... to fill a role."

"And that role would be...?" Sanji trailed off curiously.

"Simple," I pointed at the cook. "What we need is a... is... is a... uh..." I slowly trailed off in confusion. Wait, what was I... talking about? Ergh, my head's... fuzzy...

"Cross?" Nami shook my shoulder slightly.

"Doctor!" I jerked my head up, thankfully managing to clear the fog out of my head. "We-we need a doctor onboard it's... it's very...very dangerous to sail without one. We need one... um..." I grimaced slightly as I rubbed my suddenly throbbing eyeballs. "Need one... right away..."

"You think-?" Whatever was being spoken, I lost track halfway through as a slight whine started to build up in my ears before dying down.

"Ah... sorry, what was that?" I asked uncomfortably as I shook my head. Damn it, what was wrong with me!?

"Do you really think you're doing that bad?" Usopp asked in concern.

"Wh-huh? Me?" I asked in confusion as I pointed at myself. Or... tried to point at myself... damn my arms were heavy... "N... no, no, I'm... I'm doing fine... I... I just meant in general, you know? Things are... are getting dangerous, so we need someone to... to, uh... uh..." I grimaced and shook my head firmly. "What... what was I saying?"

"Cross, you look really sick..." Vivi made to touch me.

"Ah, no, no..." I protested weakly as I waved her off. "I-I'm fine, see?" I started to push myself up to my feet. "Perfectly fi-!" I only just managed to catch myself and lean on the table as the world lurched beneath me.

"Hey, Cross, you alright!?!" Luffy asked nervously.

"Um... uh... I ah..." I shook my head blearily as the fog encroached further. Was it just me or were... things getting a little... blurry... 

"Actually... I'll, ah... I'll be honest..." I managed to work out as I painstakingly raised a hand to my forehead. "I... I don't... feel so..."

Without warning, the world turned sideways and something thunked against my head. The last thing I saw as darkness leaked into my vision was feet rushing around in front of me.

I could just feel someone... shaking me... somewhere...

And then nothing.

-0-

"...is really... could be... don't know..."

"...if we...? ...can't do..."
I blinked numbly at the wooden ceiling of the Merry's kitchen as I slowly came back to reality, fragments and snippets of voices echoing against my skull. I tried to lean up, but immediately froze as pain rattled my everything.

'Sweet Christ on a pikestaff...' I thought miserably. 'This must be how Crocodile felt after going two rounds with Luffy. Damn sandy bastard that he was... is... whatever...'

"..uh? Cr...? ..oss? ...re you al...?"

I turned my head towards the source of the voice shit shit shit hurts hurts HURTS!

Black again.

-0-

"No... how we can... im."

Huh... that sounded like... Nami.

"... to find a... doctor to... cure..."

And was that... Vivi?

I stared at the ceiling for a second before I managed to piece together what I was hearing.

I hissed in a sharp breath as I started to lean up, ignoring the pain wracking my body. 'No...' I thought to myself as I winced painfully. 'I... I wasn't bitten... I don't have Kestia. I can't let Vivi decide this without knowing everything.'

"...ross? ... is he talk...? What's..."

"...don't kn..."

"The desk..." I interrupted weakly as I sat up, rubbing my throbbing skull in an attempt to dissipate the pain. "Check... check Nami's desk... the... newspaper..."

"Cross..." I was aware of Nami putting her hand on my shoulder. "Are you sure...?"

I shook my head firmly. "She... She shouldn't say anything either way... without knowing everything. That... that wouldn't be right..."

"Huh?" I could hear a hint of confusion in Nami's voice. "But didn't you already—?"

"No... th-this can't be!"

I shifted my head enough to stare at Vivi, who had slumped to her knees in horror. "The... the Royal Guard..." she breathed, a myriad of emotions muddling her voice.

I winced slightly at the grief-stricken expression the princess was wearing. 'Damn... I wonder which is worse: the idea the guards she's lived with her whole life are abandoning her family... or the fact that her best friend is the one who got them to defect...'

"...is he...?"

"...could he—!?"
I shook my head firmly as I realized that they were still talking around me. "Sorry we didn't tell you... just... didn't want you to worry any more..." I ground out. "Look... whether or not we find a doctor..." I ground out. "Is up to you. You know that... things are worse... and there's always... a chance that... I could get better..."

'I might not be native, but I'm no Martian. I doubt I'll just keel over from the common cold... though I wouldn't protest getting to Drum before Wapol...'

"What you have is a lot worse than a stupid cold, Cross!" Nami protested.

I blinked at her in confusion. Where had that non-sequitur come from?

Before I could say anything, though, Vivi spoke up.

"You're right... we need to get to Alabasta as soon as possible..." The princess looked up from the paper with determination burning in her eyes. "And that means we get all hands on deck as soon as possible. We'll find you a doctor, Cross, I promise."

I allowed a smile to slide over my lips. "Thanks, Vivi... that means a lot to me..."

'Hang on, Chopper, we're on our way...'

"—ait, wh—?"

As my vision started to go black again, I actually welcomed it. My intestines had picked this moment to start dancing the can-can, and I did not want to be conscious for that.

If the parting sounds I heard my body making were anything to go by, there'd be hell to pay for it later.

-0-

I was reawakened by my skull bouncing off one of the sides of my bed as the ship shook violently.

"What the...?" I bit out miserably.

"Cross! Are you alright?" Vivi stood over me nervously, pressing down on my chest. "Don't move, you're in bad condition!"

"What... what's going on?" I managed to grind out.

"I..." Vivi glanced over her shoulder nervously. "I don't know. Things just suddenly became active and... I just don't know..."

I tried to focus on Vivi... and stiffened as I caught sight of what she was wearing.

'Winter clothes... that means the temperature's dropping... we're getting close to Drum... wait a... shit, that must be Wapol!' I made to get up, in spite of my body's protests. 'Damn it, I need to warn them somehow, can't let that tin bastard get his jaws on Merry!'

"Wait... Wapol!?"

I blinked up at Vivi in confusion. 'Wait, how-?' I shook my head dismissively. 'Must have heard his voice, not like he's quiet or I can hear shit...' "Who's Wapol?" I fudged curiously.

Vivi gave me a... look I couldn't quite identify before swallowing and looking away. "I'm going to
leave you for a second. Do you think you'll be alright?"

I gave Vivi a sickly grin. "Hundred beris says I won't even be awake when you get back..."

As if on cue, a spike of pain shot through my forehead, and things started to go black.

"I win..." I sang drunkenly before going back under anew.

-o-

"—ross! Hey, hey, Cross!"

The next time I woke up, it was to Luffy shaking me awake in an unfamiliar, albeit pleasantly warm, bed.

"Huh-wha...?" I blinked numbly. "Wh... where am I?"

"Cross, listen," Luffy asserted firmly. "We found an island, but there's only one doctor here, who lives on top of a mountain. So, we're gonna climb it."

"SAY WHAT!?"

I tuned out the rest of the crew as they started to argue with Luffy, trying desperately to dissuade him from his insane course of action. Instead, I took in the hut I was situated in: it was... nice. Rustic, I definitely wouldn't mind living here some time.

'So this is the village Dalton's staying in, huh?' I thought blearily, my train of thought wandering aimlessly. 'What was it called again? Bigtooth? Bigfur? Eh, whatever... wonder if I should get Luffy to ask around a bit? Dunno how much difference knowing where Ace is would make though... After all, we'll see him anyways...'

I was drawn out of my head by the feeling of something nudging against my shoulder. Twisting my neck slightly, I blinked as I managed to catch sight of Soundbite sitting next to me on the bed, trying to draw my attention.

I blinked at him in confusion for a moment before shooting a tired grin at him. "Hey, buddy... how you been?"

Soundbite shot me a shaky smile. "I'M good..." His smile died into a grimace. "You're not..."

"Yeah..." I winced and rubbed my face miserably. "That's for damn sure... Don't worry though, the crew's gonna fix me right up. It's... not gonna be easy though..." I shot a hopeful grin at him as I held out my palm. "Feel up to braving the elements with me?"

Soundbite shot a glance at the snow-laden window before smirking and sliding onto my palm. "Let's do it!"

"Sounds like a plan..." I chuckled as I slid him into one of my coat's inner pockets. I then proceeded to cough loud enough to draw attention to me. "Hey... could I... see that mountain you were talking about?"

"Yeah, sure thing!" Luffy agreed eagerly, sliding under my arm and painstakingly helping me to the window.

There in the distance were the Drum Rockies. They were... glorious... majestic... ah... um... screw it,
no way in hell I could be anywhere close to poetic with my head and intestines enacting their suicide pact.

Instead, I settled for giving the geologically hazardous mountains an analytical once-over. "Sheer rock faces?"

"Looks like it!" Luffy confirmed with a grin.

"Inhospitable temperatures?"

"I think I might have frostbite already, and that's just down here..." Usopp whimpered miserably.

"Ravenous beasts?"

"I heard ten SPECIES ON THE WAY HERE ALONE! WANTED TO EAT US ALIVE!" Soundbite provided eagerly.

"So... overall, it's a deathtrap?"

"That's... a bit much, but accurate," someone, Dalton most likely, provided.

I was silent for a moment before slowly turning my head to look at the rest of the crew as a goofy grin slid across my face. "Is it my birthday?" I sang dizzily.

"Oh, come on..." Nami and Usopp groaned miserably.

"Woohoo! We're going up!" Luffy whooped eagerly.

"Woo—!" I threw my arms up alongside his... and promptly started tilting over as my vision turned black. "Oh, son of a—!"

Once more unto the breach... damn it, I don't even like Star Trek!

-0-

I woke up once again to howling winds and frost biting and nipping at my skin. I blinked at the void I saw stretched out beneath me for a moment before I was suddenly jerked and a blob of yellow moved in front of my vision.

Acting on impulse, I snapped my hand out and plucked a very important straw hat out of the air.

"Pffthahahahaaaa..." I wheezed breathlessly as I twisted my torso back and plopped the hat back on Luffy's head. "Careful, captain... what kind of king would you be if you lost your crown?"

"Thanks, Cross..." Luffy mumbled out around Sanji's coat. "How're you doin'?"

"Me? Ahh..." My head was burning up, my throat was sore, my intestines were trying to set a world record in knot-tying...

I turned my head around and stared down at the ground, far, far below us. I grinned as wide as I could manage. "I'm on top of the world, cap'n, or at least, I'm halfway there..." I looked at our unconscious cook, who was literally hanging on by the skin of his teeth. "Sanji's not looking that good though... why's he here anyway? Nami browbeat him into going or something?"

"Nah..." Luffy grit out. "He said that..."
"Snailmail might not be a lovely lady, but right now that doesn't matter."

I blinked as Sanji's voice sounded out around us. "Soundbite?"

"What does matter is that he's a brother in arms and a damn good friend. What kind of knight in shining armor would I be if I just left him to die? Besides," I could practically see his smirk, lit cigarette still blazing between his teeth. "If I left him to our idiot captain, we'd get him back in pieces!"

"Awww..." I crooned roguishly.

"N-n-never g-g-gonna L-L-LET H-HIM L-L-LIVE IT D-D-DOWN?"

"Not on your life..." I snickered back.

"Heheheh..." Luffy chuckled slightly before wincing. "Don't make me laugh... could drop Sanji..."

"Sorry about that..." I winced apologetically. I then blinked as I noticed something else. "Hey... how come we aren't moving?"

Luffy shuddered violently, but it didn't change the fact that we weren't going up any further.

I stared in confusion for a second before grimacing furiously. "Damn it, come on, Luffy, are you really going to let a mountain beat you?"

All I got was heavy panting in response.

I was silent for a moment before craning my neck back, staring at the stormy clouds high above us. "Come on, Luffy... It's only what, half a mile to the top? Little more? Less?"

"'unno..." Luffy shrugged weakly.

"Then why don't you make it up there in one go?"

"Sanji said that doing anything tough could hurt you."

"Screw that noise..." I scoffed. "Sanji and I are tough as nails. Kick this thing's ass in one last blow..."

Luffy stiffened for a moment before twisting his head to blink at me. "You sure?"

"Hell. Yes."

My captain was silent for a moment... before a fire suddenly raged in his eyes. "Hold on tight."

I dug my fingers into his jacket. "Holding."

Luffy snorted out a furious breath before kicking out from the cliff-face and dropping down what felt like over a dozen metres at once.

"GUM-GUM!"

I grinned madly for a moment... before scowling as darkness started to creep in. "Oh, come on, now!?" 'Ergh... when I wake up, it'd better be to either a badass monster reindeer or to an old hag...'
"ROC—!

Night night.

-o-

I cracked my eyes open and leaned up with a jaw-breaking yawn as I awoke... and promptly jerked back in shock with a strangled yelp as I caught sight of the terrifying visage in front of me.

"Are you the grim reaper?" I whispered in dull horror.

"Kak kak kak kak! That old bastard only wishes he looked as good as me!"

I heaved a sigh of relief as I slapped a hand to my chest. "Thank God. I'm too badass to die...

"HE LIES!"

"Soundbite!" I smiled as I scooped the baby transponder snail off my bedpost. "Thank god you made it, who else would keep me honest?"

"YOU'D be dead as a doornail without me!" Soundbite cackled.

"Or me, brat." The ancient yet somehow youthful woman who'd saved me smirked as she held out a hand. "Doctor Kureha, your attending physician."

I took said hand and shook it gingerly. "Jeremiah Cross, your very thankful patient. Sorry if this seems rushed, but mind if I ask for my prognosis?"

"Give it to me straight, doc!" Soundbite sobbed through his toothy grin. "Will ah ever be able to play the violin again!?!"

"Well, your snail's sense of humor is a lost cause, but I think you already knew that..." Kureha mused as she cocked an eyebrow at Soundbite.

"It was long-rotten when I found him, doc," I stated with a shrug and a sigh, ignoring the chorus of raspberries Soundbite blew in response.

"And as for you," Kureha looked at me dead on. "You're currently processing a battery of antibiotics to combat the bacteria in you. You'll need to be kept under observation for a few days, but overall, you seem to be in good condition."

I sighed in relief as I allowed myself to relax. "Thank God again..." I looked at her in concern. "And... my friends?"

"The curly browed one wrecked his back something fierce and the boy with the straw hat has some of the worst frostbite I've seen in years, but they'll both pull through. The straw hat boy..." She grinned toothily as she took a swig from the bottle she was carrying. "He's something, isn't he?"

"Why do you think he's the current number one contender for King of the Pirates?" I asked with a smile of my own.

Kureha's laughter intensified, and her smile doubled in size.

As she laughed, I allowed myself to muse for a bit. 'Wonder what I had... I checked myself twice after we left Little Garden, I couldn't have gotten Kestia...'
"You didn't."

"Huh?" I looked up at Kureha in confusion.

"You didn't have Kestia," she explained with a shrug. "Don't know how you know that name, but what you got was damn close." She jabbed me in the stomach with her bony finger. "A waterborne bacteria known as vibrio cholerae primogenitalis, also known as Primal Cholera. Think of it as Cholera's badass ancestor. If it'd stuck around in you without the right treatment for a day longer, you'd be a dead man walking. No clue how you'd get it though. Not like you'd do anything so stupid as gulp down still water on a prehistoric island though, would you?"

"You'd be surprised," I grumbled darkly as I scratched the back of my head sheepishly. "To be fair, though, it was an accident. See, I was running from a pair of assassins and-GRGGGH!" I cut myself off with a choked squawk as I processed our conversation. Shivering fearfully, I looked at Kureha in confusion. "How... how did you know that I was thinking about Kestia?"

Kureha shrugged indifferently as she took a swig from her bottle. "Because you weren't thinking about it, you were talking about it."

I could all but literally feel the blood escape my face. "I... I said that. Out loud."

"Kak kak kak," Kureha chuckled unforgivingly. "Yes you did, boy. One of the symptoms of Primal Cholera? It gives you a mild brain fever that lowers some of the barriers in your brain. Patients have been recorded unwittingly speaking their minds. Literally. And not just in those rare moments of consciousness, either."

I drew in a shuddering, desperate breath. "You... you mean... the entire time I've been sick, I've been running my damn mouth!?"

"Yes, yes you have."

My blood froze at the far too familiar voice that spoke up off to my side. Moving very slowly, I turned my head and stared.

Sanji met my gaze coolly as he leaned in the doorway, puffing on a cigarette.

"We need to talk, Cross."

I shuddered violently in terror before slowly turning my gaze on Kureha.

"You wouldn't happen to advocate euthanasia by any chance, would you?"

"KAK KAK KAK KAK KAK!"
"Doctor," Sanji started politely. "Would you mind giving us some privacy, please? It's important."

Ignoring the desperate looks I was shooting her, Kureha sniffed at Sanji before taking a pull from the bottle she was carrying and standing up. "Cocky young bastard, ordering around a young damsel like me in my own damn home... fine, I'll leave you alone."

Sanji opened his mouth... and was promptly forced to bite back a howl of pain as she jabbed a bony digit into his spine.

"For ten minutes," she intoned menacingly. "After that, you're going back in bed, whether you like it or not. Understood?" If Kureha's menacing grin was anything to go by, then she took his whimper of both pain and terror as a sign of consent. "Glad to hear it. Have fun, you two."

And with that, she was gone.

Once the door closed behind the menacing doctor, Sanji and I lapsed into an uncomfortable silence. I was staring at my sheets, whereas Sanji was just staring at me. Clearly, neither of us really knew what to say.

But I knew I had to ask something. I had to know just how deep a grave I'd just dug.

"How much...?" I croaked out weakly.

"We asked around Bighorn like you suggested," Sanji promptly interrupted me. "I'm not sure who was more surprised: Luffy at finding out that his brother is waiting for him in Alabasta, or us at finding out that Luffy had brothers, period."

I scrunched my eyes shut with a weak laugh. "Brothers. Plural. Damn it... Everything. I told you practically everything and you all heard it. Hell!" I barked out a derisive laugh as I flung my hands up in frustration. "It's probably going to be easier to list what I didn't blurt out than what I did!"

"In your defense," Sanji sighed heavily as he lit a cigarette. "You were pretty damn vague. You dropped a few names, described a few places, things like that. Though..." Sanji sighed heavily as he huffed in a lungful of smoke. "What you said was... revealing, if nothing else. When you talked about Kohza and Cobra, we almost thought you were Baroque Works. But then..." The cook shook his head flatly. "Nojiko, Coby, Patty and Carne, Kuina... that last one, none of us knew, period." He shot a half-hearted grin at me. " Seriously, you should have seen how pale mosshead got. I owe you for that alone."

I, on the other hand, resorted to a simple grimace. "Yeah, I... I can imagine..." I blew a heavy breath through my nose as I massaged my face miserably. "Look, let's... I imagine you have a lot of questions for me, so... go ahead." I waved my hand at him aimlessly. "Let me have it."

Sanji contemplated things for a moment before nodding gravely. "Cross, it is very important you tell me everything you can about one person," he informed me grimly.

I swallowed heavily and slowly nodded. "I should have figured... who is it? Blackbeard? Akainu? Someone in CP9?" I winced as a thought struck me. "If it's Doflamingo, then believe me, man, we need to be careful. I don't even want to contemplate how many ears that bastard has..."

"No, none of those. This is more important than any of them," Sanji sighed. Face serious as a nuclear
winter, he slowly walked over to me. I flinched as he dropped his hands on my shoulders and forced me to face him.

"I need you to tell me... about Princess Shirahoshi."

...wait, what?

"Wait, what!?" I sputtered in disbelief.

"You heard me! Tell me about the Mermaid Princess!" And just like that, Sanji was caught up in a full-blown Category 5 Love Hurricane, swirling about the room with hearts in his eyes. "The most beautiful creature beneath the seas, an exquisite example of the feminine form, truly Aphrodite incarnate! You have to tell me all about her, I beg of you, I'll do whatever I have to! Just tell me about her!"

I couldn't help but gape at the display in shock, my mind desperately trying to keep up with what my eyes were telling me.

"WOW..." Soundbite whistled in dull shock.

"Uh... okay..." I hesitated for a moment before speaking. "I'll start by telling you that there are three obstacles in the way of you being able to act as her knight in shining love. First? She's twenty thousand feet below the sea."

"Twenty thousand or a hundred, it matters not!" Sanji swooned. "I will traverse through hell itself to lay eyes upon such a beauty!"

"Right... second, she's constantly locked up in the tower that acts as her room because of how she's being stalked by a local crimelord with a damn dangerous Devil Fruit ability."

"I will beat that blackguard within an inch of his life!" the love cook roared, his mood abruptly switching from sickeningly saccharine to burning hot fury. "Even if I have to fight through an army of such villains, my love will endure!"

My eye twitched at the display. "Alright then... and now for the clincher: she's underage."


"Yup," I nodded, unable to keep a shit-eating grin off my face at his expression. "She's currently six-ah, no wait. We'll meet her in about two years, she'll be sixteen then. Right now, she should be... what, fourteen? Fifteen? Eesh, that just make it worse... Van der Decken is a creepy bastard, but then again I already knew that."

Sanji stood frozen for a few moments... before falling to his knees and howling, letting out a noise that wouldn't be out of place coming from most wounded animals. "WHHHYYYYY!? CURSE YOU, FATHER TIME! CUUURSE YOOOOUUU!

Soundbite cocked an eyestalk with a decidedly unimpressed expression. "Seriously?"

"Pfff..."

"Huh?" Soundbite swiveled his eyes to peer at me questioningly.

I couldn't respond. I was too busy hunching over with my hands clamped over my mouth in order to try and contain myself. "Pfff... pfff..."
But in the end, I just couldn't do it.

"PPPPPPPAAAHAHAHAHAHAHA!" I burst out, flinging myself back on my bed and covering my eyes with my hands as I howled with laughter. "O-O-OH MY GOOOD, YOUR FA-A-ACE! HAHAHAHA!"

Soundbite adopted an even less impressed look, although he was sporting a small smile of his own. "Seriously?"

Sanji huffed aggravatedly for a moment before pulling himself together and straightening his clothes out. "I'm so glad my agony is amusing to you, Cross..." he grumbled darkly.

The only response I could muster was a few humorous, if pained, wheezes. My body ached as it shook with mirth, my ribs burned, tears streamed out from under my fingers... but those had nothing to do with the pain.

"T-thanks for that, Sanji..." I managed to bite out as I wiped my eyes. "That... that meant a lot to me."

"Hmph..." Sanji puffed on his cigarette for a moment before smiling slowly. "Anytime, Cross." But as quickly as the smile appeared, it was replaced with a serious expression. "But this isn't the end of things, you know. You are going to have to explain how you know so much."

That got a wince out of me as I raised a hand. "Look, Sanji..."

"Cross," Sanji said firmly, cutting off my objection. "We had to deal with you literally shitting the bed for two days. You owe us an explanation just for that."

"And you'll get it!" I hastily reassured him. "I'll explain... as much as I can, I swear! It's..." I looked away sheepishly. "It's not like I can hold anything back now and still call myself a Straw Hat, you know? Just... just give me some time, alright? I'll explain everything to everyone once we're all on the Merry. I'd... rather not tell it twice if I don't have to."

Sanji contemplated my words for a moment before nodding slowly. "Alright then... fair enough. But you will tell us everything, right?"

I shrugged with a sheepish grin. "Or at least as much as I can. I... think that Luffy would object to me spilling anything else."

"What, our captain has other secrets?" the cook said, his eyebrow cocked in disbelief.

"Hell no," I snorted. "Sabo and Ace were the only ones he's kept, or at least, the only ones I'm aware of, at any rate. No, Luffy just... doesn't like spoilers, you know?" I couldn't help but chuckle fondly. "He's keen on reaching our destination, sure, but that doesn't mean he wants to know every inch of the journey ahead of time. Get my drift?"

Sanji mulled the statement over for a moment before nodding in agreement. "Yeah... yeah, I understand. Alright, I'll wait until we get out of here. For now, though..." He swallowed with a grimace. "I'm going to get back in bed. I don't want to contemplate what the witch will do to me if she catches up with me right now... Still, I'll check on Luffy. See if he'll want to come and visit you." And with that, he turned around and started to leave.

"YEAH, YOU'D BETTER RUN!" Soundbite snickered at his back.

"Ah-! Sanji, wait!" I hastily called out as a thought struck me.
"Hm?" the cook hummed as he glanced back at me.

I hesitated for a moment before asking what was on my mind. "The... the others... the rest of the crew... are they... angry at me or...?"

Sanji contemplated my question for a moment before blowing out a small cloud. "Zoro was grumbling something about you being a hypocrite," I couldn't help but wince self-consciously. "And everyone else is somewhat curious about what you know, but other than that..." He shrugged helplessly. "They were all worried about you, Cross. I don't know what else you want me to say."

I allowed a small smile to cross my face as I lay back in bed. "Nothing. That's... that's enough. Thanks, Sanji."

The cook nodded slowly in agreement. "Yeah... get well, Cross."

And with that, he left.

I lay back in bed for a moment before glancing up at Soundbite. "Alright... time for a damage check. Start by listing all the names I gave."

A half hour later I was slumped back in bed, just a little overwhelmed by how much I'd managed to spill. No exact details, thankfully, and I'd managed to keep mum on a surprising amount of fighting capabilities, but other than that? I'd shared at least half of our future destinations, named a goodly number of future enemies, and blurted more than enough past friends and family members to make things just flat out weird.

"Oy vey..." I groaned morosely. "Is that the end of it?"

"THAT'S JUST the names we recognized," Soundbite replied, shaking his head.

I eyed the snail warily. "What do you mean by 'recognized'?"

Soundbite tilted his head to the side. "That thing I ate that LETS ME HEAR SO MUCH. THAT WAS an iPhone, RIGHT?"

I slapped a hand to my face with a groan. "Son of a- how much?"

"Everything from computers TO PLANES AND trains."

"Newsflash, there are already trains here."

"MAG-lev TRAINS?"

"Fair point..."

"ALSO, who's Eiichiro Oda?"

"Uhh..."

"OR IS IT Goda? You used both."

I started rhythmically thumping the back of my skull against the headboard. "For the love of... whenever I mentioned One Piece, did I ever occasionally mention anything about 'volumes'?"

Soundbite shrugged helplessly. "SOMETHING about a collection MAYBE? YOU
"WEREN'T always clear."

"Yeeeaah, that figures..." I groaned miserably. "Urgh... damn it, can things-?"

"AHE-hem!" Soundbite interrupted me firmly.

"Ah, thanks." I winced in embarrassment. "That was a close one. God knows that Murphy's active around here..."

"Too close FOR COMFORT!" Soundbite scoffed as he jerked his eyestalks to the side.

I blinked in confusion as I followed his line of sight... and noticed a squat figure covered in brown fur and sporting a blue nose standing in the middle of the doorway, trying to hide from me.

'Yeah, that figures.'

I blinked at the reindeer for a moment before adopting a flat look. "You do realize that your way of hiding is... so inefficient it hurts, right?"

"EEP!" Chopper squawked in shock before hastily flipping his position.

I cocked an eyebrow at that. "Yeeeaah... A, I've already seen you, B, that position isn't really that good for spying even when done right, and C? The antlers... really aren't doing you any favors. Just FYI."

"HEEEHEEEHAAHAHA!" Soundbite squawked euphorically.

"S-SHUT UP, HUMAN!" Chopper barked out agitatedly. "ALSO, HOW ARE YOU FEELING, IS YOUR FEVER DOWN!?"

"Eh..." I rested my hand against the back of my head contemplatively. "I... think my temperature's a bit high? Not sure, though. Still, overall, I think I'm good..." Without warning, my stomach suddenly rumbled and churned, prompting me to curl up painfully. "Oooookay, apart from that! Do you know where the bathroom is or-?"

"Ah, hang on a minute!" Chopper hastily darted over to the bed and scrambled beneath it. "J-just hold it in long enough for me to change the pan! And also, make sure you're over the hole when you- well, you know!"

I blinked in confusion as I shifted around on the bed. "What ho-oh!" I blinked as I located the hole... then tensed furiously as I became aware of something else. "Okay, who the hell took my pants!?"

"That was me!" Chopper slid out from under the bed with one of his hooves clamped over his nose, while his other was holding a metal pan as far from his body as he could manage. "Sorry, but we didn't have much of a choice. Normal cholera alone includes diarrhea as a symptom, but Primal Cholera is... much more hostile. This is the third time I've had to replace your pan today! Oh, and by the way? You should eat more vegetables. I think you might be low on Vitamin A."

I cocked an eyebrow at the reindeer as I worked to wrangle my intestines. "You can tell that by smell alone?"

"Not by choice, I can tell you that much!" the young Zoan-type gagged as he set my filled pan down and dug a fresh one out of a nearby cabinet before sliding back under my bed. "Give me a second..." He hastily slid back out. "Okay, you're good to go."
And with that, I let loose with a sigh of relief. "Oooh thank you sweet merciful-AH!" I cut myself off with a wince as the burn came. "I take it back: screw you, God, screw you hard!"

Chopper winced at the... noises originating from me, but then gave a sigh of relief. "Well, at least you sound healthy enough. You should be good to go in a few days."

"Joy on earth..." I groaned miserably at my predicament for a moment before eyeing him contemplatively. "Soo... what are you, exactly?" I barely managed to hide my grin at what I was about to say next. "Some kind of arctic jackalope?"

"I'M A REINDEER!" Chopper roared irately as he shoved his forelimbs up at me. "SEE!? HOOVES!"

I hastily raised my hands in surrender as I grinned sheepishly. "I see them, I see them. Sorry, that was my bad. Still... a reindeer that walks on two hooves, huh?" I winced internally at what I was about to say, but resigned myself to the fact that I had to do it anyways. "Guess that makes you something of a monster, huh?"

I nearly flinched at the wave of emotion that swept over Chopper. Rage, misery, disgust... honestly, the worst of all would probably the sheer sense of resignation he seemed to have. Hopefully, what I had to say next would change all that.

"That's awesome!" I blurted out with a grin.

If Chopper's thunderstruck expression was anything to go by, that was not the response he was expecting. "Buh-wha-seriously!?"

I nodded eagerly as I continued to grin. "Heck yeah! Why wouldn't it be?"

"B-b-but, look at me!" Chopper stammered as he flailed his arm at himself. "I-I'm covered in fur! I walk on two hooves, I have antlers! M-My nose is blue!"

I blinked at his nose as though it were the first time I was seeing it. "Huh. Would you look at that? So it is."

"Doesn't any of that scare you, o-o-o or disgust you o-or...?!" Chopper trailed off helplessly, obviously several miles out of his depth.

'Damn, he's really needed someone to say this to him...’ I thought - legitimately thought, I damn well made sure my tongue stayed glued to the roof of my mouth - before shrugging indifferently at his display. "Why would I? It's pretty freaking obvious you've got a Zoa-type Devil Fruit, those things are always weird."

"Ah..." Chopper allowed himself to relax slightly. "It... it's really that obvious?"

"Yeah, totally. What do you have? No, wait!" I held my hand up swiftly. "Let me guess... one of the Horse-Horse or Ox-Ox Fruits? Stag Model or something along those lines?"

I winced at Chopper's stricken expression, the way the hope seemed to drain out of his face. "I... no, the opposite. I... I ate the Human-Human Fruit. I... I was originally a reindeer..." He flinched back instinctively, obviously waiting for a specific and all-too-familiar reaction.

A reaction I had absolutely no intention of providing. "Seriously?" I asked as I tilted my head inquiringly. "Damn, that's even cooler!"
"HUH!?" Chopper barked out in disbelief.

"Well yeah!" I said, shrugging. "I mean, come on! Ninety percent of all other Zoans? They're humans who can turn into animals. But an animal that can become human? That's gotta be damn rare, if not unique! Guess that makes you a really special monster, huh?"

Once again Chopper flinched, though thankfully this time it was less severe. "W-why... do you keep calling me-?"

"A monster?" I finished for him. "Easy: because monsters are really cool. Down and out awesome, no question about it."

Chopper's mouth flapped helplessly for a moment, but I powered on before he could respond.

"Because you see, what I said earlier about most other Zoans? Same basic concept: majority of the normal people on the Blue Seas are completely normal average joes, dime-a-dozen cookie-cutter humans, nothing weird about them. Hence, monsters like you who are abnormal and out of the ordinary? Well, in my opinion, they're pretty awesome, simple as that."

The little human-reindeer before me stared at me in complete and utter shock for a moment before swallowing heavily and turning around, pretending (badly at that) to busy himself with some nearby shelves. "A-and how do you know they're awesome, huh? Y-you've seen a lot of monsters or something?"

"Oh, yeah, sure!" I plastered a wild smile on my face as I grinned at him. Time to sell the dough. "You see a lot of cool monsters when you live a pirate's life!"

Chopper tensed furiously for a moment before fake-working even more frantically. "Y-y-you're a pirate? For real?"

I chuckled as I leaned back in my seat, crossing my arms beneath my head. "Eeyup! And so are my friends! Heck, the guy you treated for frostbitten fingertips is our captain! Ah, and just for the record!" I jabbed my finger into the air. "We're real pirates! Adventure-and-freedom lovers, not worthless raiding fakers like that Blackbeard bastard who attacked you guys!"

"W-wow, really? T-that's cool..." Chopper mumbled half-heartedly.

"Yeah, it is! And some of those monsters I mentioned? Three of them are in this castle at this very moment!"

"HUH!?" Chopper yelped as he swung around and stared at me, wide-eyed in shock. "Really!?"

"Heck yeah! Here's one right now!" I held up Soundbite for him to see. "Meet Soundbite. Oh, and my name's Jeremiah Cross, forgot to mention that. Anyways, if you would, little guy?"

"HELLO, HELLO, HELLO!" Soundbite sang acapella-style.

"See? See?" I gestured at him eagerly. "A snail capable of harmonizing with itself! That's nowhere near normal, I guaran-freaking-tee it!"

Chopper swallowed heavily as he eyed Soundbite, with no small amount of awe at that. "A-and the other two?"

I jerked my head towards the doorway. "My two crewmates you're treating. The blond guy's Sanji, our cook, and the guy with the straw hat which I pray you left on him is Straw Hat Luffy, our
"Monsters? But..." Chopper frowned in confusion. "They're... both human."

"Ah, well, you see..." I scratched the back of my head sheepishly. "There are many many many types of monsters in this world. Sanji? He's got a hell of a kick. And when I say hell, I mean he caved in a velociraptor - yes, a dinosaur's - chest... what, a week ago?" I glanced down at Soundbite, who nodded in confirmation. "Yeah, a week ago. And Luffy? Well, I'm guessing you weren't a part of treating him, because then you'd know that he's made of rubber thanks to a Devil Fruit of his own. And really, that's one of the least monstrous things about him."

"Wow..." Chopper breathed as he looked down contemplatively. His eyes darted around in thought for a moment before he giving me a pleading look. "Uhh... could you... tell me more about your captain?"

I made to respond when Soundbite interrupted me. "ASK him yourself! HE'S ON his way now!"

"Uh-oh..." I groaned as I slapped my hand to my face miserably. "Yeah, Chopper, you'd better get out of here now. Like right now, before he gets here!"

"Huh? W-why!?!" Chopper asked nervously, before shifting to concern as a thought struck him. "Do you think he won't like be because of what I am?"

"Heeeell no!" I scoffed. "I bet you Beris to beer barrels that he's going to think you're the coolest thing since sliced ham! Aaaafter he's done trying to eat you, at any rate."

"WHAT!?!" Chopper squawked in disbelief.

"Yeeeah, see, here's the thing..." I winced and scratched the back of my head uneasily. "Two things about Luffy that make him such a monster? The first is his sheer appetite, and the second is that he's so fond of meat that he might as well be classified as a carnivore. And assuming that he hasn't eaten in several hours..."

"EEEEEE-NOPE!" Soundbite provided.

"Then yeah, he's not going to really peg on to the fact that you can talk until he's partway through trying to literally bite your head off, and assuming that Sanji's out-of-it enough, then he's probably going to try and help cook you. So yeah, you should really run before they get here. Nothing personal, mind you, he just loves to eat and you're part animal, so... yeah." I shrugged helplessly. "Sucks to be you, huh?"

Gibbering fearfully, Chopper turned to break for the door... before pausing as a thought struck him. "Wait... h-how did you know my name? I-I didn't mention it to you, and neither did Doctorine..."

I froze at the question for a moment before grinning cheekily. "Simple." I widened my smile to show all my teeth. "I'm a badass pirate."

Chopper blinked at me in shock for a moment before swallowing nervously and turning and darting for the doorway.

Unfortunately for him though, he was a little bit too late on his feet.

"HEY CRO-Oomph! Huh? What the heck?"

At least, he was if the way he ran headlong into Luffy's legs was anything to go by.
Chopper stammered fearfully as he stared up at Luffy, while my Captain's face was curiously blank for a second before gaining a hungry look I was far too familiar with. "Is that... a reindeer?" he asked eagerly.

Chopper swallowed fearfully as he took a slow, deliberate step back from my captain. The blood drained from the poor Zoan-user's face, visible even under his fur, as a line of drool slowly slid out from the corner of Luffy's mouth. "I've never tasted reindeer before!" he moaned gluttonously.

"Give me ten seconds and I'll give you a venison roast that's to die for!" Sanji piped up from behind Luffy.

Yeah, I needed to break up this terror show before things got ugly. "RUN LITTLE DOCTOR-MAN, RUN!" I cried out dramatically.

Apparently that was enough to break Chopper out of his terror, prompting him to turn tail (figuratively, not literally, apparently reindeer don't have tails; learn something new every day.) and run while screaming his furry little ass off. "YEEAAARGH!"

"COME BACK, DINNER MEAT!" Luffy roared as he gave chase.

"HANG ON, LUFFY, LET ME COOK HIM FIRST!" Sanji shouted as he followed behind him.

I chuckled lightly as I watched the trio dash out, the sounds of their hunt wafting back to me. "Sounds like Chopper'll be a great part of the crew, huh?"

Soundbite nodded eagerly and opened his mouth to respond...

"Oh it does, does it?"

Before snapping his mouth shut in horror as an elderly voice responded. "Gotta WORK on that..." he cursed softly.

I swallowed heavily before slowly turning my head to focus on Doctor Kureha, who was staring at me with an inscrutable expression from the doorway to the room.

My mind flew for a moment before I finally let out a heavy sigh. "Chopper couldn't have helped treat me that much because of the... smell, meaning that you were up close and personal while I was speaking..." I groaned heavily and ran my hand down my face. "Meaning that with my luck, you heard me talking about Chopper before I'd even seen him..." I looked up at her in resignation. "So, are we good enough for the little guy to come with us?"

"Hmph..." the 'good' doctor grumbled as she walked into the room. "You're certainly something, I'll give you that much. Better than those Blackbeard bastards..." Her gaze sharpened slightly behind her sunglasses. "And judging by that spiel you spun earlier-"

I cast a glare at Soundbite, who looked away with a nervous whistle.

"I'm guessing you know something about Chopper's past, huh?"

I considered my options for a moment before nodding tiredly. "Yeah... yeah, I do. Everything from his exile from his herd to the death of the good quack. Not to mention said quack's last gift to you."

Kureha cocked an eyebrow at me for a moment before shaking her head. "I'm not even going to ask how, because honestly, in the end? I don't care. There's only one thing that I really want to know."
In a flash, Kureha was looming over me like the Reaper himself, a scalpel held in her fist and hanging a mere two inches from my face.

"HOGEEZE!" I squeaked, pressing myself against the headboard as firmly as I could.

"EEP!" Soundbite shrieked, snapping back into his shell.

"Do you actually care about my son," Kureha hissed viciously. "Or are you just playing on his insecurities to shanghai him into your little pirate band?"

I fought to control my breathing in face of the utter demon before me before finally managing to get my nerves under control. Once I managed that, though, I was able to muster the courage to glare Kureha dead in the eyes. "Frankly, I am insulted you would insinuate that," I hissed venomously.

"Yes, Chopper's skills would be a boon to us, I won't deny that, but they're not the reason I want him to join. I want him to join because he would be a good friend and he needs friends. He needs people to tell him that it's alright to be a monster, to not be human. You've been good to him, I know that, but at the end of the day, he needs more. You can't keep him in this castle forever." I was silent for a moment before narrowing my eyes. "And you know that, don't you?"

Kureha was silent for a moment before drawing away from me with a tired scoff. "Well you can make a good argument, I'll give you that... and I suppose you seem like a decent sort..." Her gaze sharpened anew. "But that doesn't tell me anything about the rest of your crew."

I opened my mouth to respond... before I was cut off by Chopper's voice bellowing out from the castle's main hall.

"ARE YOU TWO DEAF!?"

I wracked my brain for what could have prompted that outburst before grinning winningly as I recalled what was happening. "Here, let me prove you wrong." I glanced around hastily. "Uh, did the guys bring my headphones with me or...?" The headphones were promptly dropped in my lap. "Oh, thanks!"

"Quite the sturdy pair you've got there, brat..." Kureha mused. "I'm surprised they managed to survive the climb."

"What can I say? I buy quality gear," I chuckled as I slipped them over my ears. "Anyways, Soundbite?"

"AYE?" the snail barked as he poked his eyestalks out of his shell.

"I need a two-way line between me and Chopper and a one-way line from Luffy and Sanji to him and me, ASAP."

"Uno momento por favor..." An electric whine filled the air. "DONE!"

"Wait... that reindeer spoke, right?" Luffy's disembodied voice mused contemplatively.

"Yeah, and he was walking on two legs..." Sanji concurred.

One moment of silence later... "HOLY CRAP, HE'S A MONSTER!" the two roared simultaneously.

Kureha snarled furiously as she turned towards the door. "Excuse me for a moment, I need to break the Hippocratic Oath in ten ways apiece."
"Hold it!" I hissed as I waved at her frantically before focusing on Soundbite. "Hey, Chopper!"

"Huh-what!?" Chopper's voice stammered nervously. "Cross!? H-how are you-!?"

"Soundbite's good for more than just parlor tricks, Chopper," I reassured him. "And anyways, I wouldn't recommend walking out just yet. Only listening to half of a conversation can lead to horrible misunderstandings."

"W-what are you-?"

"Shh... listen."

"He walks on two legs, he's fluffy, he looks like a reindeer..." Sanji continued in awe. "He can be small or grow until he's as big as a gorilla..." Luffy breathed contemplatively. "Cross..." Chopper whined miserably. "Why do I-?"

"That's so cool!"

Chopper's response died in his throat with a pained gargle. Even Kureha herself was staring at Soundbite in shock, holding her sunglasses above her eyes.

"Hey, Sanji, I just got an idea!" Luffy continued eagerly. "Let's get him to join our crew!"

"And now for the real kicker!" I piped up. "Soundbite, connect me to the guys."

"DONE!"

"Hey Luffy, I was listening in! You want Chopper to join us, right?"

"His name's Chopper? That's even cooler!" Luffy cackled happily. "I'll take that as a yes. Personally, I agree with the idea entirely! I mean, the little guy did help save our lives, you know, him being a doctor and all!"

"He's a doctor too?! That's perfect!" my captain whooped ecstatically. "Now we really need to get him to join!"

"That does sound like it would be pretty useful..." Sanji concurred.

"Exactly! See, you guys get it." I chuckled in agreement. "Well, you go ahead and try and convince him. Meanwhile, I'm going to relax for a bit, alright?"

"Okay! Oh, and before I forget, I'm glad you're alright!"

"Heh, me too. Well, good luck!" And with that, I jerked my hand across my throat. Once Soundbite confirmed he'd dropped the connection, I shot a grin up at Kureha. "See? Some people really like monsters. Let me guarantee you, Chopper: if Luffy wants you to join our crew, it's not just a fluke. I mean, hey, look at me, right?"

"Uh... I, ah..." Chopper stuttered hesitantly, his voice filled with emotion.

"Well, just for the record, I'd love to see you on the crew. For now, though, I'd recommend you start running again. Luffy can be a bit... enthusiastic."
"Hey Chopper-Monster-Guy!" Luffy's voice suddenly roared.

"WAAAAH!" Chopper shrieked fearfully as he presumably started running.

"Good luck, little buddy!" I laughed eagerly as I indicated for Soundbite to drop the connection. That done, I smiled up at Kureha again. "Satisfied? Luffy wants Chopper to join because of what he is, not even remotely in spite of it. Hell, I don't think Luffy could hate another person for what they were if he tried. He's just a really good..." I trailed off as I became aware of the music filtering through the air, then shot a caustic glare down at Soundbite. "The 'My Little Pony' theme? Really?"

"HOOHOHOHOHAHAH!" Soundbite chortled eagerly.

"Oh go and get salted..." I groused darkly before getting back on task. "Anyways, what do you think, Doctor? Are we good enough for Chopper?"

Kureha stared at me for a moment before shaking her head heavily. "Can you guarantee that you'll keep him safe?"

I affixed the elderly doctor with a flat look. "That request is neither fair nor plausible and you damn well know it."

"Kak kak kak, fair enough..." Kureha chuckled mirthlessly. She was silent for a moment longer before throwing her hands up in defeat. "Honestly, I should have known this day would come. That damn quack Hiriluk got into the poor boy's head something fierce." She glared at me sharply, if sadly. "If the fool is stupid enough to join you, then I'll give him hell for it but I won't stop him. I don't think I could even if I tried..."

I grinned widely at the woman. "Thanks a lot, Doctor!"

"Yes, yes..." Kureha groused before whipping out a scalpel and twirling it around her fingers as she grinned at me, her canines suddenly prominent. "Just don't think that means you're getting out of here any sooner, brat! You're staying until you have a clean bill of health, and not a moment sooner! Not to mention..."

THUNK!

I most decidedly did not squeal like a stuck pig when a dozen different scalpels buried themselves in the wood around my head.

"The matter of your bill."

"Uhh..." I moaned intelligently before grinning sheepishly. "T-that can be arranged! J-just give me a second to arrange things! Heheh...heh... ah... Soundbite!" I hissed at the snail frantically. "Nami, now!"

"Uhh..." Soundbite cocked his eyestalk at me doubtfully. "This is A MOUNTAIN, you remember THAT, RIGHT?"

I rolled my eyes with a sigh. "No shit I remember that, dumbass. What I meant was try Pinkie and the Brain. I'm sure Nami's got to have one of them on her."

"Oooh, okay! HOLD PLEASE!" Soundbite's gaze trailed off into the distance for a moment before refocusing into a vaguely worried expression. "Hello?" he asked in Nami's voice.
"Hey Nami!" I greeted eagerly. "It's Cross! We managed to make it up the mountain! Luffy and Sanji are a bit banged up, but overall we're doing pretty good! We, ah, are going to need some help with the matter of the medical bills..."

"Cross! Dammit, why didn't I think of calling you?! Listen, you need to be careful! You're about to get company up there! Wapol's on his way to the castle, and he should be there any-!"

SLAM!

Without any warning, the door to the room was slammed open as Chopper barged in, a frantic expression on his face. "DOCTORINE!"

I grit my teeth as Soundbite adopted a panicked expression of his own.

"Correction, Nami..." I sighed grimly. "Wapol's already here."

-0-

Fifteen minutes and a half-dozen explosions later, I was out of bed and wrapping myself up in a heavy blanket that was in the room.

"DO we need TO?" Soundbite asked warily as he hid beneath the heavy fabric.

"Not much choice..." I groused as I slid some boots on. "Unless we stall Wapol, he'll go straight for the armory, or worse yet that massive cannon of his. Luffy'll still be able to kick his ass, obviously, but there'll be more collateral damage. So for now... we need to distract him. At least for a bit, anyways. Just long enough for Luffy to get his act together and find the fat bastard."

Soundbite contemplated that for a moment before cocking his eyebrow at me. "HOW do you know THAT? I've never ASKED, but I'm curious now."

I considered the question before shaking my head with a sigh. "I'll tell you when I tell everyone else. For now..." I tugged the blanket around myself firmly as I stood before the wooden door that led to the castle's main hall. "Ready to play a life-sized game of Pac Man?"

Soundbite grimaced miserably. "I DON'T know what that IS, BUT NO!"

I briefly considered the prospect of Wapol's massive jaws for a moment before grimacing miserably. "Yeah, me neither."

And with that, I pulled the door open and made my way out onto the balcony, shivering as the frigid, snow-laden air hit me. "Damn that's brisk..." I grumbled before looking around in an attempt to get my bearings. Alright, I was on the second floor, so if my memory was accurate, then that would mean Wapol must have been...

"HEY!"

Bingo.

I looked over the edge of the balcony as I took in the massive form of Tin-Plate Wapol, the former ruler of Drum. Damn, there was huge and then there was huge, and this guy? He looked like he was big enough to match Luffy bite-for-bite in appetite. And the ugly, angry expression he was sporting certainly didn't do him any favors.

"Are you a friend of that Straw Hat brat?" he growled murderously.
I grinned cheekily as I snapped a salute at him. "Eeyup! Jeremiah Cross, third mate, communications officer and tactician of the Straw Hat Pirates! And you must be Wapol, the fat, belligerent whale of a tyrant who made the lives of everyone in this nation hell, right?"

Wapol twitched furiously for a second before leering at me menacingly. "You think I'm a tyrant, huh?"

I glanced at Soundbite contemplatively before we both grinned at him menacingly. "Pretty much, yeah!"

"EE-YUP!" Soundbite concurred.

"Alright then."

And with that, Wapol walked over to a nearby pillar and shimmied up it with more agility than someone his size should have been capable of.

Once he was on the same floor as I was, he charged me with all the speed of an enraged bull. "DIE, YOU SHITTY BRAT!"

"SHIT!" I cursed as I started running at full speed. That Pac Man reference I'd made earlier was turning out to be more accurate than I'd predicted what with the way his jaws were snapping right on my heels. I had no idea how a son of a bitch his size could possibly be that fast!

Thankfully, however, the chase didn't last anything close to long. Coming up on a staircase leading down, I hastily ducked into it, taking care not to slip on the snow and turning around once I was at the bottom.

THUNK! "GAH!"

I blinked up at the sight of Wapol's ass sticking out of the opening for a moment...

"PFFFFHAAHAHAHA!" "HAHAHAHEEHEHEEEE!"

Before both Soundbite and I fell into fits of laughter, cackling as we pointed up at the firmly wedged tyrant. Damn, it was even funnier in real life!

"YOU DARE LAUGH AT A KING!?" Wapol snarled incredulously from his position.

"I dare laugh at a complete idiot!" I howled up at him.

"Idiot HUH? THEN HOW ABOUT THIS! MUNCH-MUNCH FACTORY!"

Moments later, a tin can of a jaw thunked down the staircase before landing at my feet.

I grinned sadistically as I eyed the disembodied jaws eagerly. "Still pretty stupid, dumbass!" I reeled my foot back as far as I could manage. "PUNT!"

CLANG!

I blinked in confusion for a second before registering the sheer pain in my foot.

"YEOW!" I howled miserably as I hopped back from the jaws, clutching my almost definitely broken limb in agony. "HIPPO-HOPPING MOTHER-TRUCKING BLACK-HEARTED JACKSHIT! HOW MUCH DO YOU FUCKING WEIGH!?"
"Hippo-hopping?" Soundbite snapped in disbelief.

"I AM NOT COHERENT WHEN I’M HURT!" I roared at him.

"HA! Who's the moron now, peasant?" Wapol cackled as he unfolded himself into his new form. "Behold! Slim-Up Wapol!"

I looked the king’s new form over for a moment before cocking my eyebrow at him in disbelief. "You call that an improvement? I mean..." I gestured at him helplessly. "Come on, man. The torso is acceptable, sure, but that chin..." I grimaced and shook my head slowly. "No... no, the World Government is filled with monsters, but not even they would be inhuman enough to let a chin like that exist."

"AYE!" Soundbite piped up in agreement.

Wapol's eye twitched furiously before he scowled with every one of his teeth, "I don't usually like cannibalism, brat, but for you..." He charged me with his jaws stretching to an inhuman width. "I'LL MAKE AN EXCEPTION!"

"OHSHIT!" I bit out as I turned tail and ran, making for the castle's front doors. Moments later, however, I grinned as I noticed who was running in the opposite direction. "Hey Captain, good timing!" I smiled eagerly as I raised my hand and exchanged high-fives with Luffy. "Tag, you're in!"

"You got it!" Luffy grinned eagerly as he stretched his leg back. "Now... eat this!" he roared as he rammed his foot square into the middle of Wapol's face. He then blinked in confusion as he took in Wapol's new size. "Hey, wasn't he fat a second ago?"

I shrugged indifferently as I watched Wapol twitch on the frozen floor. "Devil Fruit bullshitery, you know how it is. By the way..." I affixed a flat glare on Luffy as I tugged at the torn remains of the arctic-camo pattern parka he was wearing. "Was that the winter jacket Nami got me? Come on, man, that thing was fur-lined!"

"Heheh, sorry!" Luffy chuckled nervously as he scratched the back of his head. "For what it's worth, it was really comfy while it lasted!"

"Dumbass!" I scoffed with a grin as I slapped the back of his head. "Oh, and before I forget, how goes trying to recruit Chopper?"

"Eh, I'm still trying!" Luffy's grin widened enthusiastically. "Did you know that he can change into seven different forms? He's so awesome!"

so "Actually, he's got eight," I corrected with a shrug. "Though he can't actually control that last one, it's super dangerous to both him and everyone around him."

"That sounds so cool!" Luffy squealed childishly, stars flashing in his eyes.

"But it's also a little sad," I said softly, grimacing. "He really doesn't like using it. He's got a slight complex over the whole 'Monster' thing, you see."

"ENOUGH TALK, YOU BASTARDS!"

Our attention was diverted as Wapol's furious voice wafted over us like a bad smell.

"Ugh, you're still here?" I groused irritably.
"BEHOLD!" Wapol roared as he gestured at the massive doors behind himself. "THIS IS THE ROYAL ARMY OF THE DRUM KINGDOM! INSIDE IS ONE OF THE GREATEST ARSENALS KNOWN TO MANKIND, AND I HAVE THE ONLY KEY! ALL I HAVE TO DO IS UNLOCK IT WITH THIS KEY-!" He held up the key in question.

"So we don't let you unlock it," I interrupted him in a monotone. "Luffy?"

"Yeah?" my captain asked in the same tone of voice.

"Kick this dumbass's once-fat ass so that we can get back to recruiting Chopper."

Luffy's grin went from ear to ear as he rammed his fists together eagerly. "Right!"

Wapol blinked in confusion for a moment before hastily spinning around and fumbling with the key as he tried to unlock the armory's doors.

"GUM-GUM PISTOL!"

"AGH!" Wapol screamed in terror and then pain as Luffy's fist slammed the key out of his hand, crushing the rod of metal into a useless lump.

"Come on, dumbass!" Luffy grinned malevolently. "Let's settle this, one on one!"

Wapol stared at Luffy with a blank expression for a moment... before running away as fast as he could manage. "I'M NOT DONE YET! I STILL HAVE AN ACE UP MY SLEEVE!"

Luffy blinked in surprise as he watched the tyrant run. "He doesn't give up, does he?"

I shrugged indifferently as I did the same. "Cornered rats are the most desperate." We watched him for a moment more before I sighed and jerked my head towards the fleeing monarch. "Well don't just stand there! Go kick his ass!"

"Oh, right!" Luffy blinked before roaring and giving chase. "GET BACK HERE, BASTARD!"

About a minute of tense waiting later, a very welcome sound roared out.

"BAZOOKAAAA!"

"CRASH!"

I couldn't help but grin eagerly as the sound of victory and freedom echoed out.

"Well, sounds like that's that!" I grinned eagerly as I dusted my hands off.

That smile then proceeded to die a very swift, very violent death when a bony hand clamped down on my shoulder like an industrial vice.

"What are you doing out of bed, brat?" the voice of Death itself hissed furiously from behind me.

I swallowed desperately as I tried to keep myself calm. "I feel much better?" I tried.

Kureha chuckled malevolently, an evil sound that sent shivers running up my spine. "Nice try. Now... care to learn one of the best aspects of being a doctor?"

"... good dental?"
"KAK KAK KAK! Ahh, no. No no... the best aspect... is that we know how to knock people unconscious while dealing the least amount of damage possible. Here, allow me to demonstrate!"

Oh cra—

THUNK!

And my world became darkness and pain.
Revelations! Cross Is From A Mystery World!

Wakefulness returned to me with a dull throb at the back of my head.

"Damn witch," I muttered under my breath as I rubbed the bruise. "I'm fragile, dammit!"

"Oh, not anymore you're not."

I blinked in confusion at the familiar voice that hit me. "Wha—?"

THWACK!

"OUCH!" I yelped as a fist slammed into the middle of my forehead, followed by the exact spot Kureha had hit bouncing off of the headboard. "Sonnuva—NAMI!" I growled, clutching the growing goose egg on the back of my skull. "Why the hell did you hit—!?" I blinked as my mind caught up with things. "Wait, you hit me!?"

"Yup!" Nami grinned cattily as she loomed over me. "The good doctor Kureha saw to it to give you a few vitamin supplements of her own creation. According to her, your bones are still a bit weak, but other than that..."

I barely managed to restrain a choked yelp as Nami slammed her fist right next to my head.

"You're mine..." she hissed venomously.

"Mommy..." I whimpered, shivering nervously in my bed.

"Nami, he's only just waking up! Leave him alone."

"Thank you, Vivi!" I gasped in relief as the blue-haired princess interjected on my behalf.

"Excuse me?" Nami deadpanned as she affixed a flat glare on Vivi.

To her credit, Vivi managed to stand strong in the face of Nami's Wrath for all of ten seconds before wilting in terror. "At least until we're back on the Merry?" she offered weakly.

And just like that, Nami was back to her 'pleasant' self. "That's what I like to hear!" she chirped.

"Allow me to reiterate: thanks a lot, Vi—OW!" My deadpan reply was cut off by Nami hitting me again. "Will you stop doing that!?"

"Not anytime soon!" Nami grinned as she cracked her knuckles menacingly. "You've managed to cause me a lot of pent-up frustration, and I'm going to be cashing in for a long time coming."

Suddenly, a vicious glint entered her glare. "Your latest stunt has got me especially steamed."

I felt a pit form in my stomach as I thought about just what could piss off Nami this much. "So, uh, I guess you've seen the hospital bill, then?" I said as cheekily as I could muster.

Vivi plastered an uncomfortable smile on her face as she chuckled ruefully. "It was... quite substantial."

Coming from a legitimate princess, that statement gave me absolutely no comfort. In fact, it gave me negative comfort.
"Your attending physician," Nami spat the words as though they were toxic. "Threatened to take the Going Merry as collateral, and she would have too if we hadn't managed to compensate the small fortune she asked for as a down payment." Nami looked away at the last bit, grumbling darkly.

"Oh, well that's! Waaait..." I blinked in confusion as I processed what she'd just said. "You... wouldn't have had any money on you coming up here, so how could you have possibly..." I trailed off as I realized just how quiet things were. "Guys... where's Soundbite?"

Vivi's blush and inability to look me in the eyes and Nami's lip-chewing and roof-examining were answer enough.

"Seriously!?"

"I tried to stop her!" Vivi hedged hastily.

"IT WAS YOUR IDEA, BITCH!" Nami howled viciously in return.

I gave Nami an incredulous stare. "Do you think I'm that stupid?" I scoffed.

"Actually..." Vivi poked her fingers together sheepishly. "She's right."

I blinked once, twice as I attempted to restart my stalled brain. "...I-I'm sorry, what?"

"I-I'm sorry!" Vivi squeaked miserably. "I-I just thought that you'd be able to find a way to convince her to give him back, that's all!"

"Actually, Cross..." Nami interrupted, leaning in with a serious expression and placing her hand on my shoulder. "You're going to have to do a little bit better than that."

I blinked at her in confusion. "What are you—OH-SWEET-MOTHER-OF-MARY!" I hissed as her hand became a vice-grip.

"Because you see..." she hissed demonically. "Unless you manage to find a way to get her to drop the entire bill, then I'll be taking the little... discount she offered us."

The way she said the word 'discount' chilled me to the bone. "What discount?" I asked nervously. Nami must have eaten the Cat-Cat Fruit, Model Cheshire while I was out because that is the only explanation I can think of for how her smile managed to get that wide. "Take two, leave one. Got it?"

It took me all of three seconds to work out what she meant, at which point I promptly burst into a cold sweat. I wracked my mind viciously for some way out of this predicament before sighing in relief as I managed to come up with a plan that had a very high chance of success.

"Got it, and don't worry, I've got an idea," I reassured her hastily.

The second I said that both Nami and Vivi relaxed.

"Glad to hear it," Nami said in a much calmer tone of voice.

"Great!" I clapped my hands eagerly. "Now then, first thing's first. Where's Kureha?"

"Right here, brat!"

"18! For the love of God!" I snarled as the elderly doctor entered the room I was in. "What the hell
makes you people call me that!"

"You people?" Kureha asked quizzically as she cocked her eyebrow.

"Basically anybody even a little older than me!" I threw my hands up in exasperation. "Seriously, I do not have a babyface!"

"Kak kak kak, nooo, but you do act half your age!" the crone cackled.

"I do not! Ooooh!" I cut myself off as I realized what I'd been about to say. "Clever. Very clever."

"Kak kak! The saying 'age before beauty' exists for a reason, brat!" Kureha gloated victoriously.

I could feel my eye twitch for a moment before I forced myself to plaster a grin on my face. "Aaaaanyways. I'd like to make a request."

The elder doctor jutted her chin out, a proud smirk on her face. "The secret to my eternal youth?"

I opened my mouth to rebut her... then shut it as I reconsidered. "Initially no, but now that you mention it..."

"Seriously!" Nami demanded incredulously.

"Well, come on, look at her!" I cried as I gestured at the doctor. "Wouldn't you want to try that if you could!?"

"I..." Nami started to speak, then trailed off in thought. "Well... how old are you exactly?"

"139, kid, and still young!" Kureha crowed proudly.

"Holy shit..." Nami and Vivi breathed in awe.

"I know, right?" I concurred. "So... is there a price tag or...?"

"Ten digits, minimum," Kureha informed us.

"Oh hell no!" Nami snarled as she crossed her arms in an X. "Even if we had that kind of money, I still wouldn't pay that much for eternal youth!"

I grimaced and sighed morosely. "That is a little steep..." I admitted, before perking up as an idea struck me. "Can I have three guesses?"

"Hell no," Kureha shot down.

"Oh..." I sagged slightly, before glancing up hopefully. "Can I have two guesses?"

Kureha considered for a moment before shrugging. "Eh, why not."

"ARE YOU SERIOUS!?!" Nami shrieked, her hands tugging at her hair.

"Alright, let's see..." I mused thoughtfully. "I'm going to go out on a limb and say... carrots?"

"Nope!" Kureha sniffed haughtily.

"Damn..." I cursed. "In that case... someone with the Op-Op Fruit performed the legendary Perpetual Youth Procedure on you..." I looked her over contemplatively. "From the neck down?"
That managed to get Kureha to flick her sunglasses onto her forehead as she stared at me in shock. "So, you even know about the holy grail of medicine, huh? Well, you're officially one of the most surprising patients I've ever had, Mister Cross." She then proceeded to grin victoriously as she flicked her sunglasses back into place. "You're also dead wrong! KAK KAK KAK KAK!"

"Damn!" I cursed, snapping my fingers in defeat. "Worth a shot..." I then grinned victoriously as a thought struck me. "Still, on the bright side, in the future I'll have a legitimate reason to use the phrase 'once more, the secret to eternal youth has eluded me!' So hey, consolation prize!"

"Mister Jeremiah..." Vivi started slowly as she stared at me in awe. Or was that horror? "No offense... but you're insane."

My eye twitched furiously for a moment before I slowly turned my head to snarl at the princess. "Stop. Calling me—!"

"Ahem?" Kureha coughed conspiratorially. "I believe you said you had something you wanted to ask?"

I jabbed my finger at Vivi with a final glare before looking back at the 'good' doctor. "Indeed, I do. First and foremost, I want Soundbite back."

"Oh?" Kureha cocked an eyebrow contemplatively as she fished around inside her jacket before drawing a familiar form out. "You mean this little troll?"

"Soundbite!" I yelped, unconsciously reaching for him.

"MMPH!" the Baby Transponder Snail managed to mumble out around his gag. For whatever reason, he had decided not to bite through the gag between his teeth despite the fact that it was made of-

"Glass?" I blinked in confusion. "What the hell...?"

"Your pet was raising a racket earlier and when I tried to stuff his mouth with cloth, he bit clean through it. So I had to get creative. He wasn't so willing to be bitey when he saw me fill that test tube he's holding with a salt shaker." Kureha explained in a matter-of-fact tone of voice.

I opened my mouth to protest... then slowly closed it as I considered the facts. "That's... ingenious. I'm impressed."

"MMPH MU!" Soundbite shouted indignantly around the gag.

I stared at Soundbite in confusion for a second before widening my eyes in realization. "Also, now we know that Soundbite needs to be able to use his mouth to use half his powers, which makes sense seeing how he's essentially a glorified ventriloquist. That's really useful, thank you!"

"MMMMPH!"

"Moving along: why should I give my property back to you?" Kureha continued as if the last minute hadn't happened.

"Well, first," I jabbed my thumb at Nami. "Soundbite wasn't hers to give. I could say he's mine, but I'll be honest: Soundbite is his own being, and if you try to claim 'ownership' of him, then it's tantamount to slavery, and I doubt you're willing to stoop that low. Am I right?"

The doctor looked up thoughtfully for a moment before tilting her hand side-to-side. "Eh..."
"And second..." I spread my arms helplessly. "Come on, don't be a dick. Er..." I hesitated as I considered who I was speaking to. "Well, you get the gist."

Kureha considered things for a moment before shrugging and tossing Soundbite to me. "Fair enough."

"MEEP!" Soundbite shrieked as he tried to keep his fragile gag intact.

"Oh relax, will you?" she drawled as she rolled her eyes. "I lied: that salt shaker had sugar in it, not salt. Sheesh..."

"MMPH!" the snail snarled incredulously as he stared at her in shock before obliterating the test tube with his teeth and swallowing the remains whole. He then opened his mouth and--!

I blinked in awe as I numbly dug my finger through my ear. "Wow..." I whistled.

"I... lost track of half of what he was saying halfway through, though I think he managed to insult your family back to its... tenth generation?" Nami stated uncertainly.

"I know twelve different languages, but... I didn't recognize a third of what he said," Vivi added.

"KAK KAK KAK! Either way, he's got quite the mouth on him!" Kureha crowed.

"Anyways..." I trailed off slowly. "I'd... like to make a deal with you, Doctor Kureha. Concerning my crew's medical bills and how long we'll be staying here."

Kureha cocked an eyebrow at me curiously as she considered what I was saying. "A deal, huh? What are you talking about?"

"Weeell..." I grinned roguishly. "You want access to this castle's armory so that you can fulfill the good doc- ah, sorry, the good quack's, and I use that word with the utmost respect- final wishes. However, that's a difficult feat to accomplish on account of how Luffy destroyed the only key to said armory. Quite the conundrum, no?"

That got everyone in the room staring at me in shock.

Vivi was the first to break the silence, suddenly grabbing my hands and staring at me with glittering eyes. "Are you a mind reader, Mr. Jeremiah? Is that how you know everything?"

"Uh, nooo..." I said uncomfortably as I slowly jerked my hand out of the princess's. "Though I don't need to read minds to know that I do not want to know whatever the hell is running through your head right now."

Nami's expression, in the meantime, was slowly morphing back into a wide grin, although she was angling herself in such a manner that Kureha couldn't see it.

Kureha, for her part, had managed to school her face so that she wasn't giving anything away. "Yes yes, your knowledge is at the same time disturbing and impressive. What of it?"

"What I propose is thus." I snapped a finger up. "If I can manage to get those armory doors open, from this bed, within the next five minutes, then not only do you discharge me and my friends effective immediately, but you also wipe our bill clean and give us free reign of this place's larder."
"Hmph..." Kureha muttered darkly. "Sounds like I've got a lot to lose... what's in it for me?"

I spread my arms innocently. "My services as an indentured servant until either the end of my natural life or yours."

"So basically yours?" Kureha questioned with a grin.

I scoffed and rolled my eyes impatiently. "Yeah yeah, laugh it up, Granny. Now then..." I proffered my hand to her. "Do we have a deal?"

Kureha eyed my hand warily for a moment before scoffing and slapping it firmly. "It'll be nice to have some company once your captain convinces Chopper to leave. I hope you like mopping in subzero temperatures, brat."

"Ooooh, I wouldn't be so sure of that." I grinned as I held up Soundbite, and if the grin he was wearing was anything to go by, then he'd managed to figure out exactly what I was planning. "Because, you see, my dear Doctor... you have just been played. Soundbite?"

Soundbite's grin widened as an electric whine pierced the air. "YOU ARE GO, command!"

And so, grinning like a loon, I spoke. And the first two words I spoke served to drain all hope of victory from Kureha's face.

"Hey, Luffy!"

One minute later, the four of us were standing before the doors to Drum Kingdom's armory.

Or, at the very least, what remained of the armory's doors. And there was not a lot of that left either. There was a little bit over there, a little bit over there, and a little bit waay over ther smashed against the back wall of the armory.

"You. Son. Of a bitch," Kureha bit out flatly.

"I'm the son of a bitch who just managed to weasel his way out of having to pay you the big bucks. Screw you, witch doctor, I'm happy!" I crowed joyously.

"Hey, Cross!" Luffy whined as he marched out of the armory. "There's no food in here, just guns! You can't eat guns! Seriously, I've tried, they taste gross."

Soundbite howled with laughter as Kureha twitched furiously, her face contorting miserably as she realized just how badly she'd screwed up. "PAY UP, SENIOR CITIZEN!"

"Yeah, Doc~tor..." Nami crooned as she rested her elbow on Kureha's shoulder, the Cheshire grin back at full force. "We had a deal, re~mem~ber?"

Kureha spat and snarled viciously for a moment before jabbing a finger upwards. "Third floor, through the kitchen, can't miss it."

"Woohoo! Thanks!" Luffy whooped eagerly.

"Any luck cornering Chopper?" I asked curiously.

"Not yet! Usopp and Zoro have been helping, but he's slippery and I'm hungry! But hey, don't worry!" He grinned savagely as he pounded a fist into his palm. "Once I eat, we'll get him in no
Vivi looked between the three of us in awe - or maybe horror, again - for a second before shaking her head ruefully. "Evil. You guys are all pure evil."

"Hey, what can I say? We're pirates!" I shrugged indifferently. "It's kind of our M.O."

"Oh, no, I don't have any issues with that, don't worry!" Vivi waved her hands hastily. "I'm only realizing it just now is all."

"Heheheh, you're pretty dumb, Vivi!" Luffy cackled as he stuck his tongue out at her.

"And you're one to talk?" Nami, Vivi and I deadpanned in unison.

"Well, anyways, I'm gonna go and eat all this castle's food and then get our reindeer-doctor to join us! See you!" And with that, Luffy stretched his arms up to an upper floor's balcony and zipped out of sight.

I blinked up after him in shock before slowly looking at Nami. "I'm not the only one who can't believe that that sentence makes sense to me, right? Right?"

"Eh..." Nami waved her hand side to side. "I think I became a bit desensitized after 'a seagull grabbed my head when I flew up to catch it.'"

"If you're quite done messing around?" Kureha growled as she tapped her foot impatiently.

"Oh, yes, right!" I grinned at her victoriously. "So can I take the clothes I'm in now, or would you rather I take some new ones?"

"Oh hell no!" Kureha growled as she jabbed me in the chest. "You can steal my medical bill from me and you can clean out my pantries, but on my pride as a doctor, I abjectly refuse to allow you to leave this castle without proper treatment."

"What!?" I squawked incredulously.

"Read my lips, brat!" the doctor growled. "You're not going anywhere, period!"

"Hey, that wasn't the deal!" Nami protested.

"I'm changing the deal!" Kureha spat. "Thank whatever gods you pray to that I'm not changing it further!"

I made to say something... when I was interrupted by a very familiar noise.

"Fwhooooooh Ktchhhhh... Fwhooooooh Ktchhhhh..."

Nami and I gave Soundbite a scathing glare, who responded with a sheepish, if unapologetic grin. "SORRY, couldn't resist."

Kureha snorted like an angry bull before adjusting her sunglasses as she looked into the armory. "Anyways... as it is, you brats have caused quite the mess of things. I'm going to have to spend... fifteen minutes, at the least, sorting things out in there with the help of those villagers who came up with you. While we're working, you are not to move from your room, no matter what. The same goes for your friend strapped down in Operating Room 2-F on the second floor. Also make sure that you do not touch the keys to his restraints that are beneath the floorboards. If you do..." She gave us all a semi-serious glare. "You'll all be in big trouble. Got it?"
I grinned as I raised my hand to my forehead in a two-fingered salute. "I've got it. Thanks a lot, Doctor, this means a lot to us. And don't worry, we'll look after Chopper, I promise."

Kureha twitched angrily as she glared at me. "Are you dense, boy?" she growled half-heartedly.

"Nah..." My grin widened minutely. "Just polite."

That brought the doctor up short before sending her into a fit of laughter. "KAK KAK KAK KAK! A polite pirate! Now I've really seen it all!" she cackled uproariously as she wandered into the armory, accompanied by a few nervous villagers who'd been watching.

We watched her for a moment longer before I jabbed my thumb towards the staircase. "Well. Let's go scrape Sanji off his operating table and get the hell out of dodge. I don't want to even consider what she does once those fifteen minutes are up."

A few minutes later, we were making our way out of the castle's front door, Sanji's limp form hanging between us.

"I don't suppose this little incident will do anything to help convince you to break your chivalry streak?" I huffed as I worked to hold the chef's shoulders.

"Not even close, Cross..." he growled, before wincing as a streak of pain shot through him. "Though this is undoubtedly the closest anyone's come to it..."

"DeathWISH! DeathWISH!" Soundbite crowed uproariously.

Sanji snarled venomously as we trudged out into the snow, moonlight washing down over us. "Eat a saltshaker you little-!"

"BUT I'M... I'M A REINDEER!"

"Shhh!" I hissed as Chopper's voice rang out over the mountaintop.

"Huh?" Nami blinked in confusion as she caught sight of the little reindeer shouting at the rest of the guys. "What's going on?"

"Something momentous," I stated solemnly, shifting Sanji's weight slightly. "Vivi, would you mind-?"

"Don't you dare foist your burden on a woman, you-!"

"It's alright, I don't mind," Vivi hastily interceded, taking Sanji off my shoulders. "You go ahead and do whatever you have to."

I smiled gratefully before walking towards the group, where Chopper had been yelling his 'reasons' for not being able to come with us.

"BUT... I'M NOT HUMAN!" he sobbed, the show he was putting on doing little to mask the misery he felt. "I'M A MONSTER! I-I CAN'T JOIN YOUR CREW! T-THAT'S WHY... I'M JUST HERE TO SAY THANKS!" he cut himself off as he sniffled and attempted to maintain his composure.

I shook my head slightly as I stood next to Luffy, watching Chopper actively war with himself. It was painfully obvious just how much he wanted to come with us, but he was unwilling to allow himself the honor, the right. In the end, there was only one way possible for us to break the chains on
his soul. And Luffy damn well knew it.

"So..." Chopper grit out painfully. "Thank you. And even though I'm staying here... maybe one day —!"

I interrupted Chopper with a heavily exaggerated sigh, shaking my head sadly as I threw an arm around Luffy's shoulders. "Oy vey, you're really going to make us work for this, huh? Well!" I shrugged in defeat with my free arm as a cheeky grin worked its way onto my face. "I guess there's only one thing for it, eh, Luffy?"

Luffy matched my grin tooth for tooth as he threw his own arm over mine. "Yup! Wanna do it on three?"

"It would be my honor," I nodded respectfully. "One!"

"H-huh?" Chopper looked at us in confusion. "W-What are you—?"

"Two!" Luffy continued as our grins grew wider.

"Aren't you listening to me!? I-I can't go with you! I w-want to, but—!

"THREE!" Luffy and I roared as we threw our arms up simultaneously. "SHUT UP! LET'S GO ALREADY!"

And that was the straw that broke the reindeer's back. Chopper had to actively fight to keep from bawling as he came to his decision and nodded vigorously, the last of his doubts dispelled. "OKAY!"

And just like that, we had ourselves a doctor.

"WELCOME! WELCOME!" Soundbite crowed enthusiastically.

"Tsk..." Zoro scoffed incredulously as he watched things go down. "Who's ever heard of recruiting someone with the words 'shut up'?"

"What can I say, Zoro? We're trendsetters!" I cackled as I patted Chopper's top hat. "Either way, welcome to the monster circus, little man! I see you've already met our sake-swilling oni, Zoro—!"

"Bite—!" Zoro hastily silenced himself as he glared ruefully at Soundbite, who was cackling malevolently.

"And our long-nosed tengu-sniper Usopp!"

Usopp opened his mouth and raised a finger... before ultimately settling for laughing ruefully. "Tengu! That... that's a new one! Ahh... well! I'm going to spike everything you put into your mouth with hot sauce for the next week or so. Hope you like tasting fire, bastard!"

"Don't worry, we're usually much worse," I reassured the nervous reindeer-human.

Usopp muttered darkly for a moment before shaking his head and smiling at Chopper. "Despite how much of an ass Cross can be, he's right. You said your name was Chopper, right? Sorry for calling you a monster earlier, that was... an impulse."

"Coward, COWARD!" Soundbite snickered.

Usopp's eye twitched momentarily before he growled and shook his head in surrender. "Yeah... fair
warning, he's not going away any time soon. Believe me, I've tried..."

"Hmph... so we have a reindeer crewmate now, huh?" Zoro mused contemplatively before giving me an exasperated look. "Why do I feel you have something to do with this."

"Hey, I did say we needed a doctor!" I grinned cheekily.

*That* got a blink of surprise out of him. "This little guy's a doctor?"

"And a competent one at that!" I assured him.

"C-Come on!" Chopper squealed as he proceeded to wiggle around gleefully, a bright blush shining through his fur. "Y-you can't get on my good side by buttering me up like that! It'll take more than words to make me happy! Jerk! Jerk bastard!"

"Your words say no, but your body—!" I laughed as Chopper slapped his hoof against my thigh halfheartedly.

"Well, either way, we're glad to have you aboard, Chopper," Vivi cut in, smiling kindly as she, Nami and Sanji made their way over to us.

"Mm..." Nami hummed noncommittally for a moment before shrugging, albeit while smiling slightly. "Don't shed in my room and you'll fit in just fine."

"Do it and I'll make good on the venison recipes I mentioned earlier," Sanji warned him only semi-seriously.

Chopper swallowed nervously as he eyed our cook and navigator warily. "R-Right..."

"Woohoo! New crewmate, new crewmate!" Luffy whooped uproariously as he ran through the snow. "Come on! Let's get back to the Merry so that we can *celebrate!*"

*That* got Chopper to shake himself out of his happy dance. "Ah-! C-can we wait a minute?" He gestured towards the castle. "I need to go and tell Doctorine that I'm leaving! It should only take a few minutes, I promise!"

I tensed as I recalled the 'good' Doctor's pinpoint impression of the Reaper. "Ah... do you really have to?" I hedged uncomfortably. "I mean... letters of farewell are *very* in fashion lately, you know?"

"No no, it's fine!" Chopper grinned easily. "This won't take long, I promise!"

-Three Minutes Later-

"Wow, you were right..." I huffed as I hung onto the back of the sleigh Chopper was hauling for dear life, my legs trailing in the ice and snow. "That *didn't* take long!" I winced as a handaxe buried itself in the wood next to my hand, quivering from the force. "Not long *at all!*"

"WILL YOU SHUT UP, CROSS!?" Chopper yelled back at me.

"NOW YOU'RE *REALLY* FITTING IN!" Usopp called from his position in the sled.

"Har har, very funny!" I growled. "Now would one of you please *pull me-*!"

"HANG ON!"

Without warning, the sleigh suddenly *jerked*, bucking me clean off and causing me to faceplant into
the snow.

All I could do was stare in abject horror as the sled slid down the ropeway. "Well... shit," I mumbled numbly. "That's not good..."

"THIS IS WORSE!" Soundbite howled fearfully.

"The heck are you—GYEEP!" I squeaked in terror as a blade planted itself in the snow next to me.

"So brat... I seem to be out an apprentice thanks to you. Care to earn yourself a bed and lukewarm meal?"

"Uh..."

All of a sudden, a very familiar hand was stuck in my face.

"HANG ON, CROSS!"

I grinned victoriously as I grabbed the Luffy's forearm with both hands. "Not today, Witch Doct-WAAAAAGH!"

And just like that, I was flying through the air, my arms feeling like they were a few psi from getting torn out of their sockets. I bounced against the snow-laden wire once, twice before I managed to get my feet under myself and balance myself upright.

"HEY CROSS, ARE YOU ALLRIGHT?" Nami called out over the rushing winds.

"Uhhh..." I mumbled intelligently as I contemplated my situation. On an impulse, I leaned just a little bit to the side, catching sight of just how high we all were.

It was at that point that I became all too aware of the kind of position I was in.

"Pfff..."

"What is he...?" Nami shaded her eyes as she stared at me before slumping in exasperation. "Oh my god..."

I was several hundred feet up in the air...

"Pfff..."

"He can't be serious... at a time like this!?!" Usopp moaned.

"I wouldn't expect anything else from Mister Jeremiah!" Vivi laughed lightheartedly.

Being pulled behind a one-reindeer open sleigh along an ice-encrusted cable way less than a foot wide...

"PFFFF...!"

"He's gonna do it," Zoro sighed.

"Well, it's not like we can expect anything else from him..." Sanji chuckled as he flicked his lighter and lit a cigarette.

Inches, millimeters even, from life and death, hanging on by a wing, a prayer and Luffy's hand...
"PFFFFF...!"

"Huh?" Chopper glanced over his shoulder in confusion. "What? What is it? What's he gonna do?"

"The only thing he can do at a time like this!" Luffy crowed, a massive smile plastered on his face. "LAUGH!"

And so I did.

"PFFFFFHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"] I roared, letting go of Luffy's arm with one hand and pumping a fist in the air victoriously. "WOOOOO! HELL YEAH, BABY! THIS IS AWESOME! WOOHOO! PFFFFHAHAHA, I FREAKING LOVE THIS CREW! WOOO!"

"KOWABUNGA, BITCHES! WOOHOOHOOHOOOOOOO!" Soundbite cackled madly as he clung to my shoulder for dear life.

As we flew along, I was beyond exhilarated. The wind nipping at my body, the blood roaring through my ears...

As we neared the bottom of the ropeway, I could only wonder one thing:

Whether or not the momentous, absolutely iconic moment I knew was coming next would be able to top the high I was feeling right now.

-o-

It did.

Cherry blossoms... just as beautiful as I remembered.

You did good, Oda.

You did good.

-o-

An hour of sledding and one duck-thawing-and-marimo-pounding later, we were sailing away from Drum...

And everyone else was watching me with a variety of emotions.

"Do we really need to do this, guys?" Luffy whined. "Come on, we just won! We should be celebrating!"

"Do you want to go without answers?" Zoro asked our Captain flatly.

Luffy made to answer... then closed his mouth with an uncomfortable look on his face.

"Cross..." Nami sighed morosely as she eyed me. "We've been patient... we've waited... we're on the Merry..." She spread her arms helplessly. "No more stalling, Cross. It's time to talk."

I chewed my lip contemplatively as I slowly walked around the deck. The whole time we'd been sailing, I'd made myself scarce. I'd stayed in a corner, I'd stayed quiet... and I'd thought. I'd thought about what I'd say, what I'd said... what I felt...

Finally, I slowly turned and strode towards the Merry's front-left balustrade. The white-painted wood
that made up the swirl was slightly cracked but other than that? It was fully present.

I patted the wood contemplatively, as though to reassure myself that it was still there, before letting loose a laugh of relief. "So..." I started slowly. "You managed to stop Wapol in time... good. It would have been one of Merry's first and... most prominent scars. I know she'll get hurt eventually, but... this one was bad, you know? I just... wanted to save her. From this, if nothing else."

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched as my crewmates glanced at each other uneasily, until finally...

"Cross..." Nami started slowly.

I chuckled mirthlessly as I shook my head. "Yeah, yeah... I know... no putting it off." I was silent for a second more before laughing again and scratching my head sheepishly. "Alright then... where to start... Oh!" I clapped my hands in realization. "How about this: who here has heard of the multiverse theory?" The lack of response I received didn't surprise me one bit.

"Yeah, I figured..." I sighed as I dug around in my pockets before finally pulling out a stray ten-beri coin. "Alright, imagine that I flipped this-" I shook the coin slightly. "And one of you called it after I caught it, heads or tails. Multiverse theory states that upon my flipping of this coin, the world would essentially split into two entirely separate yet parallel universes: one universe where the coin came up heads, one where it came up tails. Essentially, two worlds exactly alike save for the flip of a coin, and any differences that might arise thereafter. Assuming this theory can be applied to any action or event, then there exists the possibility that there is, at minimum, one universe in existence for every individual eventuality in existence, bar none."

The blank stares I received from most of the crew surprised me even less.

"Okay..." I sighed, rubbing the bridge of my nose in exasperation. "There's essentially infinite other worlds in existence, one world for every possible possibility."

Luffy, still looking confused, raised his hand.

"Yes, Luffy, they're mystery worlds," I deadpanned.

Luffy's hand went down.

"Just as an example of one of these mystery worlds... imagine a world, completely different from this one... where a man named Eiichiro Oda wrote a comic book about an entirely different world. A comic book he titled One Piece... about one pirate trying to become Pirate King."

Sanji's eyes widened, cigarette hanging limply from his lips. "You don't mean...!

"Holy shit..." Nami breathed in shock.

"No way!" Usopp gaped at me.

"Uh... what's he talking about?" Luffy said, looking between his crewmates in confusion.

I briefly considered my answer before sighing wearily and ambling over to Luffy, planting my hand down on his shoulder. "It means, Luffy..." I said sadly. "That I know you were an absolute moron when you were a kid. I mean, seriously, stabbing yourself below the eye in order to prove how much of a badass you are? That was..." I chuckled darkly as I shook my head. "That was really something..."
"Huh!?" Luffy exclaimed as he stared at me in shock. "How do you know about that!?"

"Because Mister Jeremiah's from another world..." Vivi breathed in awe. "A world where all your adventures were a story..."

I spread my arms wide and stepped back. "And I was a fan, dropped into your world without warning by a divine force well beyond human comprehension. I know... practically everything there is to know about this crew: from what happened to you all when you were young that made you who you are today to what's coming for us for some time to come. Minus a few blank spots like the Whiskey Peak-Little Garden run, but... yeah."

"Waaait..." Soundbite trailed off thoughtfully. "So that THING I ATE that lets me HEAR THESE NOISES, the songs, the voices... THAT WAS-?"

"A piece of technology from my world, a communication device known as an iPhone," I explained matter-of-factly. "It was somehow modified by the same force that brought me here so that it would have infinite energy and would always be connected to the information network we had. What you're hearing is known as the world wide web, or the Internet, for short. Or, at least, you're hearing the audio of it anyways. Apparently tastefully edited so that you didn't realize exactly what it was until now."

I let out a heavy huff as I nervously looked over the crew, trying to accurately gauge their reactions. It was... in between, as far as I could tell. Nervous, worried...

I shook my head as I looked away sheepishly. "Look.. guys..."

"One second, Cross."

I blinked in confusion as Zoro interrupted me. "Uh...?"

"I've got a question for you," the swordsman stated.

"Uh..." I swallowed heavily as I tried to puzzle out what he could have wanted. "Yeah? Sure, what is it?"

Zoro slowly walked up to me and poked me in the chest. "A month ago, on the way to Whiskey Peak, you told me that we couldn't afford to spare any information, because it would risk jeopardizing the crew. What's so different between now and then? Why did I have to say something, but you didn't?"

I blinked as I processed the statement before making to answer. "Well, you see-!

"These two situations are entirely different." That's what I wanted to say, but I cut myself off when I realized... they really weren't, were they? Not when you got down to it...

"Ah... well..." I tried to start again. "T-the thing is..." "Your information was critical!" But wasn't mine just as important?

"We... uh..." "We would have been fine even if I didn't say anything."

"The... The difference is..." I trailed off slowly as I realized... that I just couldn't deny facts any longer. I knew what the difference was. I knew it and there was nothing I could do about it.

I clenched my fists furiously as I looked down in shame. "The difference... the difference was..."
croaked out sadly. "Was that you... you trusted our crew... and I didn't..."

"Cross..." Nami started to speak up.

"It's true!" I cut her off harshly. "I-I know you guys! Not just as characters in a story, but as my friends! As my comrades! My allies! I-I should have known you wouldn't be angry, or reject me, I should have trusted you..." I looked down in shame. "...but I didn't. I didn't trust you. I didn't trust you so much that I...

And just like that, it was too much. I dropped to my knees, only just managing to catch myself on the deck. "...I lied to you..." I hiccuped, tears streaming down my face. "I lied... to your faces. I lied about where I was from, lied about what I knew... I lied so much..."

Acting on impulse, I brought my head down, resting my forehead against the deck. "I know... that I don't deserve your forgiveness... and that nothing I do will ever be able to make up for this... but nevertheless, I apologize. I am so, so sorry, for everything I've said... for everything I've done... and I just want you to know that when I said I loved this crew... when I said that I loved all you guys... I... I meant it! Every word! So please!" I looked up desperately, fighting to keep myself from breaking down any further. "Don't... make me leave. Joining this crew has been the best thing that's ever happened to me. Do whatever you want, but please... let me stay a Straw Hat!"

For a minute, everything was silent, with everyone looking at each other with unreadable expressions.

Finally, Nami slowly walked up to me and knelt before me, looking me dead in the eyes. "Alright Cross, we'll let you stay on the crew..." she stated solemnly. "But first... you need to answer a few questions for us."

"Nami!" Luffy whined petulantly.

"Ah..." I hiccuped shallowly before swallowing and shaking my head. "D-Don't worry Luffy. I-I can edit what I say... I-I won't tell you anything big about how our adventures will turn out... if you don't want me to..."

Our captain pursed his lips thoughtfully for a moment before settling into a pout. "Yeah... alright..."

"Alright, then..." Nami laid a firm hand on my shoulder. "Cross, listen to me very closely. I need to know..."

I held my breath tensely in anticipation.

"How rich are we going to get?"

...what.

"What." I blurted aloud.

"You heard me, man!" Nami squealed as she grabbed my shoulders and forced me to look her dead in the eyes, eyes which were now flashing beri signs at full force. "How much rich are we going to be!? Gold? Jewels!? Cash!? Come on, man, speak!"

"Uh..." I blinked in shock as I tried to process just what I was hearing.

"Oh!" Sanji blinked in apparent realization before hastily spinning up next to Nami. "And what about the beauties, Cross? Shirahoshi might forever be out of my reach by way of half-plus-seven,
but surely there must be other women who I can grasp!"

"Oh for the love of..." Zoro scoffed with a roll of his eyes before flashing a bloodthirsty grin. "Ah screw it. Hey, Cross, there're gonna be more fights in the future, I know that much. They'll be good ones, right? Ones that push us straight to the brink and back?"

"I... I, ah..."

"Me next! Me next!" Usopp waved his hand in the air eagerly. "What kind of brave feats will I pull off? Am I going to prove that I'm a brave warrior of the seas?"

"Uh... what are you guys...?" Chopper blinked around in confusion until Usopp leaned down and whispered something in his ear. "Oh... Oh! Ah... in that case... I-! I, uh..." Chopper racked his brain in confusion before sticking his tongue out sheepishly. "I... can't actually think of a question. Sorry?"

Vivi made to say something as well...

"Hey!" Luffy suddenly bellowed. "No more questions! After these, Cross only says anything if it's really, really important, and not before that!"

Before she bit her lip and looked away in disappointment.

I blinked in confusion as I looked at my crewmates. "Ah... w-wait... hold on a second, what..."

"Well?" Nami interrupted me with a smile. "Come on! I asked you a question! You're gonna answer, right? Pleeease!"

I stared at the navigator in incomprehension for a second... before jerking as I realized just what the hell she was saying. What they were all saying.

I came this close to breaking into tears as I stared at them all. Nothing. Despite everything I'd said... everything I'd done... nothing had changed. Absolutely nothing at all. It was... I knew these guys were great, but this... this was...

A slight nudging against my neck prompted me to look down at Soundbite. He looked me over contemplatively for a second before grinning from eyestalk to eyestalk. "WELL, WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?" he demanded eagerly.

I huffed heavily before shaking my head and sucking it up, matching his grin as widely as I could. "Nothing... nothing at all... Let's get to it!"

And so I did.

Without missing so much as a beat, I stood up and swung my arm around Nami's. "Nami, Nami, Nami..." I sighed dramatically as I shook my head sadly. "Your words, they wound me more than you can imagine. For you see... we will not be rich."

I could practically hear Nami's heart break, her eyes filling to the brim with tears.

"No..." I continued confidently, my grin widening as I got back into the swing of things. "We will be beyond rich."

And just like that, Nami was back to ecstatic.

"In fact, we will be beyond even 'more than just rich'. With your fiscal knowledge and my insight, we are going to be filthy, stinking, down and out dirty loaded."
Nami shuddered with pleasure, drool trailing down from the corner of her mouth as she giggled maniacally.

"We are going to be so loaded, that we will make nobles look like peasants! People's jaws will literally drop in sheer awe at the splendor of our wealth!"

Nami shuddered even harder, her eyes glazing over in sheer joy.

"To put it simply, well... tell me: how does the image of Merry's hold filled to bursting with solid, 24 karat gold sound?"

"Ooooooh!"

I blinked in confusion as Nami suddenly shuddered from head to toe and moaned euphorically.

I then reeled back as realization hit me head on. "Uh... Nami... did... you just-!?"

"Yessss..." Nami drooled blissfully.

I shuddered uncomfortably as I did my best to wipe myself off. "Ooookay..."

"MOVING ON!" Soundbite prompted hastily.

"RIGHT!" I yelped as I swung over to Sanji. "Sanji, my friend! I'll be honest with you! Times, they will be tough. You will have to endure rejection, your will will be pushed to the utmost limits... in short..." I held my fist up and shook my head sadly. "You will have to traverse through the deepest, darkest depths of hell itself."

Sanji shuddered heavily but then shot a hopeful look at me. "I'm not imagining the 'but' I'm hearing, am I?"

I nodded as I clamped my hand down on his shoulder. "But! So long as you persist and hold firm, then I swear to you, I swear..." I gave him a firm nod. "You will reach paradise, my friend. It is out there! You must strive for it with all your soul, but it awaits you! Will you reach for it?"

"HELL YEAH!" Sanji roared, the fires of his heart and soul blazing around him.

I then moved on to Zoro, nodding at him in apology. "Zoro. To start with, sorry again about Whiskey Peak. I won't push you like that again, I promise. We square?"

Zoro scoffed and waved his hand dismissively. "Please. I let the witch off the hook-" He pointedly ignored the barrel that bounced off his skull, as well as the screech of 'FUCK YOU!' that accompanied it. "-what the hell makes you think I can't do the same here?" He then shot me a smile to make the devil himself shiver. "Though your training is going to be straight from the depths of hell from now on, that you can count on."

I squeaked fearfully at the evil expression he was wearing, doing my best to clamp down on my bladder. "Fights. Lots of fights, good fights!"

"NEXT!" Soundbite hissed furiously.

"Agreed!" I nodded in agreement as I wheeled around and marched towards Usopp.

"Don't worry, I finished what you asked me for before you got sick," the sniper reassured me.

I shuddered nervously as I felt Zoro's eyes boring into my back. "Somehow that doesn't reassure
me..." I hastily shook my head and got back my nerve before smiling kindly. "Anyways... look, I won't play it up with you: you're always going to be the weakest member of the Straw Hat Pirates, and that's a fact."

"Oh..." Usopp sagged sadly.

"Hey hey hey!" I cut in as I grabbed his shoulders and forced him upright. "What's with the downer reaction, buddy? I just said you were going to be the weakest of the crew! Now, that might be an insult or something on other crews, sure, but let me remind you: we are the Straw Hat Pirates! By nature, we are head and shoulders above everyone else on the ocean! Hence, even if you are the weakest among us, well..." I chuckled confidently. "Let me put it this way: you will more than earn two titles in the future: Sniper King... and God."

Usopp blinked at me in awe. "...seriously?"

I nodded firmly as I patted him on the back. "Weakest or strongest, it doesn't matter. End of the day, you're a Straw Hat Pirate and a brave warrior of the sea, and a world-class sniper besides. Take pride in that, no matter what anyone says. Alright?"

Usopp stared at me in shock for a second... before throwing his arms up joyously. "WOOHOO!" he whooped, doing some sort of... dance?.

Chuckling as Usopp joined Sanji and Nami in celebrating, I moved onto Chopper, kneeling before him with a kind smile. "Hey Chopper," I said softly. "How's it hanging?"

"Uh..." Chopper smiled uncertainly. "I'm... fine? Really! This is... a bit weird, but, uh..." He trailed off uncertainly.

"Hey, listen..." I gently patted him on top of his hat. "I just want you to know... even if I hadn't involved myself, Luffy would still have asked you to join the crew. All I did was make things easier, nothing more and nothing less. No matter what... you belong on this crew, and don't you doubt it for a second, alright?"

Chopper blinked at me in shock before immediately resorting to his default reaction as he started twisting around joyously. "Y-You can't make me happy just with a few words you bastard!" he laughed happily. "I-I'm not happy at all, you ass! Not a bit, not even a little bit!"

"LIAR LIAR, fur on fire!" Soundbite cackled.

"Yeah yeah, whatever," I scoffed, rolling my eyes as I flicked Soundbite's shell and stood up. "Now go on and have fun. Oh, and try the chopstick thing. I don't think I can manage it, but it looks fun!"

"Okay!" the reindeer nodded as he joined the rest of the crew.

Once he was gone, and I'd confirmed that Luffy wasn't looking my way, I slid up next to Vivi, who'd been uncomfortably standing on the sidelines the whole time. "Sorry about Whiskey Peak, " I whispered under my breath. "I needed to get you to break character somehow, or else..."

Vivi glanced at me for a second before smiling warmly. "It's fine, Cross. You did what you had to do, and... well, if you hadn't, then I'd probably be dead. So... thank you, Cross. For everything." Her smile fell slightly as she glanced towards Luffy. "Listen... Cross, I know that Luffy said..."

"It's going to be hard," I interrupted her. "The fight for Alabasta is going to be long, it's going to be hard, sometimes it'll even appear impossible, and you can bet your bottom beri that it's going to be bloody, but in the end, well..." I jerked my head towards Luffy. "You just need to believe that we'll
pull through. It's... as simple as that. Alright?"

Vivi's smile widened and she nodded gratefully. "Thank you, Cross. That... that means more to me than you can possibly imagine."

I nodded in agreement. "No problem, Vivi. No problem at all. Now if you'll excuse me..." I started to walk towards Luffy. "I've got one last statement to make. Hey, Captain!"

Luffy blinked at me in confusion. "Huh? What is it, Cross?"

"I know you didn't ask anything... but I just want to say two things!" I emphasized the point with two fingers. "Now mind you, one of these two things was confirmed by the story, but I have believed in both without a doubt in my mind for as long as I've known them. You mind if I say them?"

Luffy tilted his head in thought for a moment before grinning from ear to ear. "Go for it, Cross!"

"Well then, in that case..." I crossed my arms and bowed my head solemnly. "First and foremost, allow me to say this: One Piece exists!"

And just like that, all movement on deck froze as everyone stared at me in surprise and awe.

"Now!" I held up my finger hastily. "Whether it's waiting for us on Raftel or at the center of the planet or somewhere else entirely, I don't have the foggiest, but either way, I believe with all my heart that it's somewhere out there, waiting for us to find it!"

I popped my second finger up. "Which leads me straight to my second statement!" I looked Luffy dead in the eye as I grinned as widely and confidently as I could manage. "We will find One Piece, and you will be the King of the Pirates! I'll admit that before I met you, I only knew that you would do it as a fact, but after I met you... after I met you, I believed it. I believed it with all my heart and soul. I believe it now, and I will until the day I die!" I nodded firmly. "And that's a legitimate fact."

Luffy blinked at me in numb shock for a minute... before grinning as wide as he could possibly manage, literally vibrating with excitement. "Now can we celebrate!?” he squealed impatiently.

I exchanged exasperated looks with Nami and Zoro for a second before spreading my arms wide. "Ladies and gentlemen... I have only one word for you all!"

"And that word would be?” Luffy asked eagerly.

I opened my mouth... and Soundbite belted it out before I could start.

"KANPAI!” he roared.

I glared at Soundbite in exasperation for a second before sighing and shrugging with a grin. "You heard the snail! Let's get brick faced!"

And with that, the Merry roared into a full-blown celebration, our party lasting straight on through the night.

It couldn't last forever, but for the time being... we were happy and we were at peace. And that... made everything up until that point worth it.
"Train Like Hell! Saving Face In The Face Of Okamas!

THWACK!

"GAH!" I grunted as I was bodily flung back into the Merry's railing. "Son of a..." I groaned as I made massage my aching back before hastily flinging my hands up in surrender. "Okay, okay, I give! Christ on a pikestaff, the purpose of this exercise is to train me, not freaking break me!"

"Some people might consider those two objectives to be one and the same," Zoro grinned as he advanced on me menacingly, his (thankfully, blessedly) sheathed blades held at his sides. "I just so happen to be one of those people."

"I beg to differ!" I squawked desperately as I scrambled to wrench myself up to my feet.

"WOO! Go Zoro! RIP HIS PUNY HEAD OFF!"

"SHOVE IT, SOUNDBYTE!" I roared at the Baby Transponder Snail that was resting on a nearby barrel. "I don't see you going through these exercises! Or any exercise for that matter!" My expression turned thoughtful, and then predatory as a thought occurred to me. "Let's see about changing that."

The beads of sweat that immediately popped up on Soundbite's shell were quite gratifying.

"Hey, Zoro, do you mind if we call it a day?" I said to the swordsman. "I'd like to talk Devil Fruit theory with Luffy and Chopper."

Zoro's snort caused Soundbite to breath a sigh of relief. "You're not gonna get out of this that easily, Cross."

"The hell he isn't!"

I sagged in relief as our latest crewmate interposed himself between me and my 'teacher'. "Cross's flesh might have been fully adapted thanks to both his diet and Doctorine's medicine," Chopper lectured firmly. "But his skeletal structure is another matter entirely! If you push him much further, then you're liable to really break him!"

"And if what Chopper's been saying is right, that means at least another month before you can go back to tormenting him!" Usopp added gleefully from where he was tinkering on the deck.

"He's right, he's right!" I nodded frantically as I jabbed my finger at Chopper. "One month, that's how long it takes for soft, squishy, me-like humans to heal bone-breaks! You wouldn't want that to happen, would you?"

Zoro hummed slightly as he considered the facts. "Hey Chopper... when bones heal, the break becomes tougher, doesn't it?"

Somehow, both a red hue of rage and a blue hue of horror shined through Chopper's fur as he grimaced at the swordsman. "There are so many things wrong with what you're thinking, I don't even know where to start."

"I'd like to reiterate my intense desire to not get snapped like a twig!" I piped up frantically.

Zoro ground his teeth in aggravation for a moment before snorting and re-sheathing his swords in his
haramaki. "Tch, wimp. Fine, take a break. I'll just come at you harder in a few hours, both in our spars and in exercise."

I allowed myself to collapse to the deck in relief. "Oh thank you sweet merciful heaven..." I wheezed, my fatigue finally hitting me head-on.

"Wimp," Zoro repeated, rolling his eyes as he picked up one of his stupidly huge weights and started on his own, complete inhuman routine.

"Jackass..." I growled back, making to sit up before a firm hoof was pressed into my shoulder.

"No moving until I've given you a once-over," Chopper ordered firmly before directing his attention to my arms. "Now help me get these things off of you."

"Oh, yeah..." Usopp mused as he eyed me curiously. "I've been meaning to ask: how're they treating you, anyways?"

I followed the pair's gazes and allowed myself a confident smirk as I caught sight of what he was addressing: affixed upon my forearms were a pair of metal gauntlets that incorporated vambraces and couters, essentially twin masses of metal that reached up my arms until they enclosed my elbows. Furthermore, I had another pair of armor pieces affixed to my lower legs: greaves with sabatons and poleyns attached, designed to fully protect my feet, shins and knees from most damage.

"I'd say they're working pretty well, Usopp," I nodded confidently as I rolled my shoulder and flexed my fingers. It was quite impressive: while the armor did weigh a fair bit, it wasn't enough to be a problem, and more importantly was flexible enough at the joints to impair not my full mobility. "You really managed to outdo yourself."

"Hmph!" Usopp sniffed confidently with a grin of pride. "Of course I did! I constantly continue to surprise all around myself with my impressive skills, even me!"

"Okay, tone it down a bit, DiCaprio," I drawled, rolling my eyes with a chuckle.

Usopp blinked owlishly. "Who?"

"Gentlemen, you had my curiosity, but now you have my attention," Soundbite drawled back in a southern accent before breaking down into giggles. "GREAT actor, very DRAMATIC!"

"Oh bi- grgh you little-!" the sniper snarled furiously.

"Heh, yeah, hard to get used to not saying it, isn't it?" I chuckled as I scratched the back of my head.

"Hey, watch it!" Chopper hollered as he snatched my arm back. "No moving until I'm done! Now let me... ergh... just..." Chopper struggled fruitlessly at wrenching my gauntlet off before grinning at me sheepishly. "A little help?"

"Umm... yeah, one second..." I slowly moved my other arm and fiddled with the armor covering my elbow, flipping open a hidden panel and twisting the metal just so. As a result, a series of clicks came from the armor, and the second-skin of metal I was wearing flexed outwards at the seams, allowing me to slide my arm out. "It's about the same around my knees, too."

"Seems complicated..." Chopper muttered as he looked my hand over.

"Thank you!" Usopp preened.
"The harder it is for people to get my armor off, the less likely it is my enemies will get it off should I be incapacitated," I explained matter-of-factly. "Besides, I can take it off without help, so it's not *that* complicated."

"Well, if you say so..." Chopper hummed as he prodded my arm, drawing a wince of pain from me. "Watch it!" I demanded.

"Hmm..." the young doctor nodded definitively. "Well, it looks like you're pretty intact, all things considered. You have a few minor stress fractures in your radius and ulna, as I suspected, and I expect your tibia and fibula will be in about the same condition. Still, I guess it could be worse. So long as you don't stress them too much for awhile, you should be healed in a few hours."

I blinked in surprise as I flexed my fingers contemplatively. "Wait... seriously? You're going to let me off with simple fractures without doing anything?"

"Huh?" Chopper blinked in confusion. "Yeah, of course. Fractures are dangerous if they're aggravated too seriously, but so long as they don't develop into full-blown breaks, you should be fine." He cocked his eyebrow in confusion. "Why? How serious are they normally for you?"

"Umm..." I wiggled my fingers contemplatively. "I... I'm pretty sure that they'd have me decked out in casts back home."

"Seriously!?" Chopper squawked in disbelief. "B-but I'd expect that kind of a healing rate from someone with an immune deficiency! Or some kind of brittle-bone disease!" The young doctor started looking me over analytically. "Actually... now that I think about it... maybe *that* explains why your body was so weak when I was helping Doctorine treat you... auto-immune diseases and other afflictions laid so deep into your species' DNA that they've become the norm, maybe?"

I felt a chill run down my spine as I noticed the very disturbing shine in Chopper's eyes. "Yeah... maybe..." I hedged as I tried to remove my arm from Chopper's hooves. An endeavor I was forced to redouble as he clutched my limb in a deathgrip. "Hey, here's a thought: let's *not* dissect me for the answers and say that we did, alright?"

"H-huh?" Chopper blinked before starting as I finally managed to wrench my arm free. "O-oh, o-oh! Right, s-sorry about that, heheh..."

"Yeah..." I trailed off as I eyed the reindeer warily. "Anyways... overall prognosis?"

"Well..." Chopper rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Your new fighting style is very taxing on your body, but that might just be Zoro putting more punishment on you than any normal person would go through. I'm fairly certain that with your body's rate of adaptation, you should be fine in a matter of days. But seriously, for now, *don't* push yourself too far. Fractures aren't too serious, but if the bones break, then you will need casts to keep your bones in place."

"Got it, thanks," I nodded firmly. "It's nice to know that I won't be literally battering my body to pieces."

"Yeah, about that..." Zoro huffed as he swung his weights back and forth. "Are you *really* sure that's how you want to fight? Brawling, despite being weaker than pretty much everyone around? Why not use an *actual* weapon, like a gun or something?"

"Because!" I jabbed my finger at him. "Guns need time, training and discipline to learn how to properly handle them, and if they're mishandled, then they're as much a danger to the wielder as they are to the wielder's enemies. The same can be said of any other weapon, and neither time nor
discipline is available to master them. Brawling is different in that it's easy and immediate and anybody can learn it. The basic idea is simple enough: hit the enemy, don't let them hit you, and use every last dirty trick in the book you can muster. These," I held up my gauntlet for him to see. "Are designed to give me an advantage, so as to counter my disadvantage."

It wasn't a perfect solution, I knew that, but it was the best one I had available to me. I couldn't swing a sword in a way that wasn't an embarrassment to the weapon, I couldn't shoot a gun well enough to hit the broad side of a barn, and I couldn't wield any other weapon worth a damn. But if there was one thing I knew, without a doubt, that I could do, then it was throw a punch. And heck, even if my punches were weak, then at least I could compensate by fighting dirtier than a hog in a mud pit. The armor was just there so that whatever I pulled, it would be certain to stick.

"Besides," I continued with an indifferent shrug. "In the end, this is all meant as a last resort. With Soundbite's powers and my brains, the only way I'll get into a fight is if something goes seriously wrong. Better to have it and not need it than need it and not have it, right?"

"Hmph..." Zoro snorted dismissively. "Well, you're not the strongest fighter, that's for sure, but you're definitely better than some people I've seen. You should be up to speed by the time we reach Alabasta."

"Glad to hear it..." I sighed in relief.

"Now then..." The swordsman cast a glare at me. "I thought you were going to talk about Devil Fruit powers, or was that just an excuse to squirm out of training?"

I shivered heavily at the implications before snapping a look at Soundbite. "Get Luffy up here, now!"

Soundbite chuckled as he produced an electronic whine...

WHAM! "AND STAY OUT YOU RUBBERY BASTARD!"

Before immediately cutting himself off as Luffy was launched straight out of the Merry's kitchen - er, galley - and almost overboard, only just managing to catch himself on the Merry's figurehead at the last moment.

"Wow, Sanji's pissed!" Luffy laughed. "Oh, and I'm alive! That's nice! So, whatcha guys doin"?

I blinked numbly as I tried to process Luffy's motormouth before finally smiling back. "I was just about to call you. I wanted to talk with you, Chopper and Soundbite about your Devil Fruits. And don't worry!" I hastily raised my hands when Luffy grimaced sourly. "I'm not gonna give you any spoilers, I swear. I just... want to set you guys on the right path to making yourselves stronger, alright?"

Luffy mulled the statement over fretfully for a moment before shrugging indifferently. "Eh, fair enough. Just be careful."

"Alright then..." I nodded slowly as I considered my words before looking between the three Devil Fruit users present. "Okay, here's what I want to know: out of the three of you present, which of you do you think is getting the most they possibly can out of their Devil Fruit?"

Luffy, Chopper and Soundbite blinked in confusion. "Huh?" they chorused.

"You heard me," I said. "Who's exploiting their Devil Fruit to the fullest, using and pushing their powers to the utmost limits?"
The trio glanced at one another in confusion before tilting their heads thoughtfully.

"WEEELL..." Soundbite mused. "Not to toot my own horn, but I think THAT'S ME!"

"I... think Soundbite might be right," Chopper nodded hesitantly. "I mean, translating for animals, speaking himself, and all that despite originally being an animal. No offense Luffy, but that sounds more like what Cross is talking about to me."

"Yeah, what he said," Luffy nodded in agreement as he pointed at Chopper. "I use my powers to help my strength, that's all. Soundbite's a lot better with his."

"Hmm... interesting answers..." I nodded before crossing my arms in front of me. "But also wrong!"

"WHAT!?" Soundbite hollered in disbelief.

" Seriously?" Luffy blinked in surprise.

"T-then who-?" Chopper asked in confusion.

"That's easy!" I grinned at the reindeer. "You!"

"M-ME!?" Chopper squawked in disbelief.

"Him!?" Luffy and Soundbite chorused.

"B-b-but Cross!" Chopper flailed frantically. "I-I don't exploit my powers at all! I-in fact, I can't! I mean, I'm a Zoan! Our powers are hard-lined, we can only trans...form... into..." the doctor slowly trailed off as his eyes widened in realization.

"Most Zoans can only transform into three different forms, yes," I nodded slowly in agreement. "But you, Chopper, managed to break that rule. You exploited your powers from the second you created the Rumble Balls because you found a way to delineate them. Let me ask you all a question." I glanced at everyone present. "Do you know what's the most dangerous part of a Devil Fruit user, what it is that makes them so much more dangerous? Beyond dangerous even?"

"Uhh... their powers?" Usopp posed, though he obviously wasn't confident in his answer.

"Powers, duh!" Luffy concurred.

"DITTO!" Soundbite nodded in agreement.

"Um..." Chopper tapped his chin thoughtfully before raising his hoof. "The variety of powers available?"

"The user," Zoro huffed absent-mindedly with a swing of his weights.

I pointed at the swordsman. "The swordsman is the closest. In my opinion, the most dangerous part of a Devil Fruit is the rules of their powers."

"Huh?" Luffy blinked in confusion. "I didn't know that Devil Fruit powers have rules!"

"That's the thing!" I waved my arms and nodded in agreement. "So few powers do! Many many many Devil Fruit powers have no rules on them, no restrictions on how they work, no limits. They can be exploited any number of ways, and no one and nothing can say otherwise. It all depends on how the user thinks of how to exploit them. From there, the only limit is that what the user tries to achieve is within the bounds of his powers, and even then what they achieve can only be tangentially
related to their... powers..."

I trailed off as I caught sight of the dumbfounded and confused looks the others were giving me. "Alright..." I sighed as I kneaded the bridge of my nose. "Let me give you an example. Imagine a fruit known as the Blind Blind Fruit. When somebody eats it, they become a Blind person, capable of stealing a sense from anybody with a single touch. Tell me: what senses could that person steal?"

"Um..." Usopp started counting down on his fingers. "Taste, touch, smell, hearing and sight. Right?"

"That's all? Really?" I tilted my head innocently.

"Uh... yeah?"

I was silent as I just stared at Usopp, seconds ticking by.

Finally, Usopp broke the silence. "Uh, Cross?"

"How long was I silent, Usopp?" I asked him.

"Huh? Uh... ten, twelve seconds I think? Why? What does that-?"

"Sounds like your sense of time is right on track," I interrupted him.

"H-huh? Yeah, I guess it is, so wha-!" Usopp cut himself off as a look of realization and horror swept over his face. "W-wait, you can't mean-!"

Before Usopp could finish speaking, I reached over to Chopper and flicked his nose.

"OW!" the young reindeer yelped, clamping his hooves down on his muzzle. "WATCH IT!"

"And it would appear that Chopper's sense of pain is working pretty well," I mused.

Chopper immediately froze. "No way... you can't mean-!"

"Hey Zoro, which way do you think is north?" I didn't give the swordsman the time to respond. "Never mind, I forgot that your sense of direction isn't exactly the best."

Zoro was too busy looking green with horror to respond.

I spread my arms wide as I started to pace around the forecastle. "Sense of pain, sense of hunger, sense of balance, sense of proprioception - aka hand-eye coordination - sense of fashion... and what of your sense of morality? Your sense of thought? Of self? Of independence?" I looked at them all slowly. "Can you imagine the consequences of losing a single one? For so much as a moment?"

The silence was absolutely deafening.

I shook my head firmly. "Devil Fruits give powers based around a word. From there, their users can exploit that word to the utmost, pushing it to its limit, and finding copious ways to exploit them. The stupid and ineffective users, they'd do like Usopp did: they'd focus on the obvious effect, the obvious usage of their powers. Now, that might cut it for users out in the Blue Seas... but the ones here, here in the Grand Line?" I jabbed my finger out to sea. "They're the dangerous ones. The strong ones. The smart ones. They're the ones who embrace every aspect of their words and use them to the utmost. They take the words 'paw', 'string', 'love' and 'sand'... I looked Luffy dead in the eye. "And they use those words to maintain their positions as Warlords."

Luffy swallowed heavily, but, thankfully enough, he didn't get angry.
I nodded slowly before looking between our resident Devil Fruit users. "If we want to survive on this sea... if we want to make it through our upcoming battles alive... then you guys have only one option: jailbreak your powers. Exploit them to the utmost, and use them in ways that surpass the logical. Beyond mere stretching, beyond mere creative usage of ventriloquism. Beyond even transcending the form-limit. Either you go higher and farther than most could... or the journey ahead will be that much more painful. Got it?"

I winced slightly as the guys nodded morosely.

"Look, sorry for getting all depressing like that, but the fact is that these things are serious. I just don't want our asses to get kicked any harder than they need to be. And besides, you don't need to come up with anything now, just... think about it, alright?"

For a moment, there was silence aside from the wind, waves, and the creaking of the ship. And then Soundbite spoke up.

"I HAVE an idea."

I snapped my gaze over to where he was sitting in disbelief. "Ex-cuse me?"

Soundbite rolled his eyes in exasperation before repeating himself. "I. HAVE. AN IDEA!"

"Oh, that's cool," Luffy nodded obliviously.

"Why does that not fill me with confidence?" Usopp groaned to himself.

Chopper's reaction, meanwhile...

"What is it, what is it?" he squealed eagerly, stars glimmering in his eyes.

Soundbite's response was to grin eagerly at me. "I'LL SHOW YOU! PICK ME UP! We're fighting ZORO again!"

"EXCUSE ME!?" I yelped again in disbelief.

"Sounds good to me," Zoro grinned menacingly as he set his weights back down, drawing Kitetsu III and Yubashiri from his side. "Armor up, Cross. Or don't, I could care less."

Moving fast, I hastily snatched up my loose gauntlet and shoved my arm back in, twisting it just so and causing it all to snap back into place. I then made to pick up Soundbite, but hesitated as I did so.

"You sure about this?"

Soundbite nodded firmly. "I'M NOT SITTING ON THE SIDELINES! Let's get ready to rumble!"

"Well, if you say so..." I sighed as I picked him up and placed him on my shoulder before turning to face Zoro.

"GREAT! Now put on your headphones!"

I looked at Soundbite in disbelief. "At risk of wearing the words out, excuse me?"

"JUST DO IT!" Soundbite barked.

I grumbled darkly for a second before conceding and sliding the devices over my ears. I then blinked in confusion as music started filtering through them before casting a look at Soundbite. "I really
doubt that a theme music power-up will work, and even if it did, I'm pretty sure that there are better choices then 'Panic! At The Disco'."

"SHUT UP and fight!" Soundbite snarled over the music.

Rolling my eyes in exasperation, I held up my fists and nodded at Zoro.

The swordsman grinned and started to come at me, but just as he started to set his foot forwards, he stopped and blinked in confusion, apparently tilting his head to listen to something. Whatever it was, I couldn't hear it on account of Soundbite drowning it out. In the end, if the glare he gave Soundbite was anything to go by, he blamed the snail for it, ultimately dismissing it and continuing to stalk forwards.

I frowned. Whatever Soundbite was doing, it didn't seem to be having much of an—

OHSHTIDUCK!

I just barely managed to duck under the aggravatingly lazy swing Zoro sent my way. Or at least, a swing that looked like it was lazy. I'd fallen for that trick before, and he'd almost snapped my arm for it.

Still, making use of the angle of my dodge, I lunged forwards at the swordsman, swinging my fist up at his face. I winced as he blocked the blow with Kitetsu's sheath, but I hastily rallied by trying to grab the cover and launch my knee into his side.

SLAM!

I wheezed in pain as Yubashiri's sheath came out of nowhere and rammed into my side. My breath whooshed out of me, and I could feel my ribs creak under the lacquered wood. Nevertheless, I fought through the pain and lunged forwards at the swordsman, grabbing his collar with my free hand and launching my forehead forwards. It was an act of desperation, but-

CRUNCH!

I blinked in equal parts pain and shock as I felt my head make contact. I'd actually managed to headbutt him!?

Stumbling back from Zoro as I rubbed my throbbing skull, I took in the display in disbelief. Indeed, the swordsman was clutching his nose in pain, grimacing as blood flowed around his fingers.

How the hell had I managed to do that!? I hadn't even managed to lay so much as a finger on him before, so what the hell was the difference now!?

I had no time to think about that as Zoro lurched forward. Yes, lurched. Had it been anyone else I'd have assumed he'd been hitting the grog before this fight, but his inhuman alcohol tolerance made it unlikely. Still, as unsteady as he was, his steady advance, punctuated by a series of jabs from his sheathed swords, was almost more than I could handle. In fact, it was more than I could handle: I took hits to the sternum, right shoulder, and left thigh before he stumbled on apparently nothing and fell to his knees.

I frowned as he struggled to get to his feet, then grinned. Well, whatever was going on, Zoro couldn't do much unable to stand. I stepped forward, swinging my leg to give him a nice kick to the head and-

Wait, when did the deck and the sky switch places?
"...ow..." I wheezed miserably as I lay upside down on the deck, my ass hanging heavy over my head. I winced as I slowly worked my headphones off of my aching ears. "Well that didn't work..."

"User error, not my fault!" Soundbite defended hastily from within his shell.

"What the hell did your damn snail do anyways?!" Zoro snarled as he leaned against the nearest railing he could grab, shaking his head tiredly. "Ergh, haven't felt this way since my last hangover..."

"Yea-woahl!" I cursed vehemently as I righted myself, coming way too close to tumbling for answers. "What did you-?"

"Ooooorgh..."

"Huh?" I blinked in confusion as I turned my head to look at the rest of my crewmates, and was greeted with the sight of all three of them draping themselves over the side of the ship, their expressions characteristic of extreme nausea.

"That sucked..." Luffy moaned.

"I don't feel too good..." Chopper concurred.

"The heck's wrong with you guys?" I asked in confusion.

"No clue..." Usopp groaned as he clutched his head. "The second the fight started, Soundbite started making a racket of laughter and screams and music and... I don't even know what I was hearing. All that matters is after a few seconds, my head started ringing and I wasn't able to stand up anymore... eurgh, what did you do to us?" The last part was directed at Soundbite.

The snail in question poked his head out of his shell with a wide, toothy grin plastered across his face. "I GOT creative!"

I frowned as I tried to work out what he was talking about. Alright, so that brouhaha Usopp described was most likely what got Zoro's attention when the fight started, but how could a lot of noise possibly lead to dizziness and disorientation?

"Unless it didn't..." I breathed in realization before looking at Soundbite. "That mess of noise, that didn't make them dizzy, it was covering up what really was, wasn't it?" I couldn't help but grin enthusiastically as I grasped the full scale of what Soundbite had just done. "You tickled their inner ears, didn't you?"

Soundbite nodded eagerly in agreement. "Yup! CHECK IT!" And with that, he proceeded to shut his mouth and start vibrating slightly, a slight hum shaking the air. "SUBSONIC VIBRATIONS! It's not easy, BUT IT WORKS!" he explained in a slightly shaky voice.

"Wow..." I whistled in awe. "So basically, you disorientate enemies and make it easier for me to take them down. Brilliant..." I then brought my hand up to my headphones as I realized something. "But uncontrolled. That's why you had me listening to music, to drown out the vibrations. You hit Zoro, sure, but you also hit the guys as collateral. Bit dangerous, don't you think? We won't be able to use this when we're fighting with the others."
"IF WE'RE FIGHTING alone, then someone FUCKED UP," Soundbite retorted.

I paused as I considered the statement before nodding slowly in agreement. "That's... actually a good point."

"Yeah well, even if it is," Zoro grunted as he shook his head a final time and seemed to reclaim his balance at last. "It's not going to get you out of exercising. Fifty pushups, now."

"Yes sir..." I groaned as I laid down on the deck.

"EIN ZWEI-!"

"Oh, you're not getting off that easy!" I snarled at Soundbite. "You're going to be practicing that move off the bow until you can control it, got it?"

Soundbite's cocky expression immediately died, hard. "JACKASS!"

"Hey, free rides don't last forever, you know!" I scoffed as I slapped him down on the railing. "Now start working on the move!"

The snail growled and ground his teeth for a moment before turning around and staring off over the sea. A slight rippling in the waves was the only sign apparent to me that anything was going on.

"Oh yeah, by the way!" Luffy cut in with a grin, looking noticeably less green. "What're you gonna call that move anyways?"

"Huh?" Soundbite and I chorused as we looked at Luffy in confusion.

"Oh, yeah!" Usopp perked up in agreement. "I've been meaning to ask that, too, what are you guys going to call your attacks?"

"The heck are you-?" I blinked as I realized what they were talking about. "Oh... oh! Ah..." I trailed off slightly as I thought things over. "I... I've never really thought about it. I mean, really." I shrugged indifferently. "It's not that important, is it?"

"It really is!" Luffy nodded firmly.

"I'm surprised you even have to ask!" Usopp concurred.

"They're right!" Chopper piped up.

"And why the heck would it possibly be that important!?" I asked incredulously. Seriously, I knew that it sounded and looked cool when it was in entertainment, but in actual practice? It did not make a lot of sense. Well, sense meant absolutely jack in One Piece, to be sure, but still!

"Helps you concentrate," Zoro grunted as he got back into his weight-reps. "Puts your all into your moves, helps to keep you in the zone."

"And it sounds cool!" Luffy added.

"And it sounds cool," Zoro nodded reluctantly in agreement.

I opened my mouth... then shut it with a groan as I realized that there was no chance in the six and a half levels of hell of talking them out of this charade. "Alright... might as well keep it simple. Noise-Noise... something?"
"NO WAY!" Soundbite barked. "I'm low but not THAT LOW!"

"Ergh..." I thunked my head against the floorboards. "Damn picky son of a—no, wait, that implies you were born and not spawned from the depths of hell." I continued with my pushups as I wracked my brains for a suitable name. "I don't know... something along the lines of babble? Prattle? Blather? Maybe in conjunction with the word pest or nuisance?"

"HA HA HA. I almost forgot TO LAUGH," my partner-in-crime intoned.

"Alright lovebirds, less arguing, more exercising. We can work this out later," Zoro ordered.

"Yes sir..." we chorused reluctantly before returning to work.

Without anything further to entertain them, the rest of the guys slowly trickled away; Usopp wandered off to continue his work in the kitchen, Luffy swung his way around the ship at his leisure, and Chopper popped in and out periodically to check up on the both of us, griping about us overexerting ourselves but not much else.

My next pertinent meeting was about an hour later as I was doing curl-ups with my arms tied behind my back and my legs tied to the deck. Against my will, of course, but since when had something like protesting ever stopped Zoro?

"Hey Cross, do you have a second?"

I gave Nami a flat look as I jerked my head at my binds. "I obviously don't have anywhere to be, that's for damn sure." I promptly winced as I heard my tone of voice. "I'm sorry, you didn't deserve that, I just feel like I went ten rounds in a ring with a gorilla is all. What do you need?"

Nami bit her lip hesitantly as she visibly fought with herself before speaking. "It's... I'm going to go out on a limb and say you know about a conversation I had with Usopp awhile back, right?"

"You wanted him to make you a new weapon, right," I nodded in agreement. I racked my brain for what I could recall of that particular flashback before wincing sympathetically. "For the record, you're not a hindrance. Seriously, you managed to take down Miss Valentine's Day, right? That's more than I've managed to do, that's for sure. Not to mention that you can read the weather like an open book, so there's that too."

"That... means a lot to me, Cross..." Nami nodded hesitantly before sighing heavily. "But that's not enough and you know it. That's why you got that armor, right? So that you could make some kind of difference?"

I froze as I suddenly became acutely aware of the weight of my armor. "...Fair enough. You were saying?"

"I just..." Nami waved her arm helplessly. "Want to know if it's going to work, you know?"

"It should," I replied with a nod. "Though I'd recommend you read the manual before you get in a fight for your life."

Nami blinked as she tried to work out what I was saying before slowly turning to glare daggers at the kitchen. "Good idea..." she hissed. "As a matter of fact, I'm going to go and get involved in the design process, get a good look at the blueprints."

"Mind if I make a suggestion for that particular meeting?"
"What?"

I couldn't help but grin impishly. "Five Cast Iron."

Nami's face flushed furiously for a moment before she smiled demonically. "I'll take that into consideration..." she said in a far too calm voice as she stalked off.


"Hey, she was almost stuck like a pig thanks to him," I defended. "In my opinion, the bastard's earned it. 'Sides, she won't hurt him..."

"ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR DAMNED MIND!?"

I winced as the sounds of scuffling and yelling rang out from the kitchen.

"Much?" I amended hesitantly.

A few minutes later, my exercise was interrupted once anew by a bruised and battered mummy standing over me, glaring daggers down at my prone form.

"Before you say anything!" I defended hastily. "You did try to put party tricks into a weapon. That might work for you, but it sure the heck doesn't work for the rest of us!"

Usopp growled darkly beneath the bandages covering his mouth for a moment before shuffling off.

"Try working on your explosive ammo!" I called after him. "Take my word for it, with the guys we're going up against? Bigger is way better!"

It was hard to tell whether he agreed with me or not, muffled as he was.

I made to go back to exercising before jerking back up as another thought struck me. "Oh, and I'd suggest Chopper and Luffy and you start fishing pretty damn soon!"

I'm fairly certain that grunt was an affirmative. That or some kind of expletive, but eh, whatever.

"LUFFY gonna pig out?" Soundbite asked.

"Among other things..." I shrugged with a grimace. Here's hoping that our new guest isn't too dangerous.

But still, come on, it wasn't like the guy could be that bad, even if he was a cross-dressing assassin with a questionable - at best - taste in fashion.

-0-

I was wrong, I acknowledged miserably as my eye twitched furiously. Wrong on so many levels.

He could be that bad, and so much worse to boot.

Once again, Oda's art had not been quite up to the task of depicting what was in front of me. And unlike with, say, Laboon, that had been a good thing. Suffice to say that that outfit and that makeup did not look good on that body. Hell, I don't think it was possible for it to look good on any body, period!

"I officially envy the blind..." I muttered beneath my breath.
"The horror..." Soundbite whimpered miserably from within his shell.

"HMMMM? I'm sorry, boy, what did you just say!"?

"GRGH!" I jumped back in shock as Mr. 2 suddenly got right up in my face, an expression I could only describe as 'peeved' painted on his face.

"Do you have a problem with okamas, young man?" he demanded with a huff.

My eye twitched furiously as I caught my hand jerking towards my baton. "Alright, first off, I am eighteen and I think I'm starting to develop a complex here, so fair warning, there's a non-zero chance I will brain you if you don't back off."

Thankfully, the okama listened to me, giving me some space with an embarrassed chuckle. "Aheh, sorry about that."

"Right..." I muttered, taking a moment to properly formulate a response before speaking. "Anyways... second, concerning your question: I... do not dislike okamas based on their choice. What they want to wear or... other facets of their personalities are wholly and utterly none of my business. That being said, though..." I glanced downwards with a shudder. "If you're going to walk around with your legs bare, then for the love of god, invest in some razors!"

Mr. 2 cocked an eyebrow at me curiously before shrugging indifferently. "Fair enough. To be fair, that answer is more cordial than most you can expect! Ah well, tata then!" And with that, he spun back to his more... 'adoring' audience.

I couldn't help but cock my eyebrow at the display, trying to work through the sheer cognitive dissonance. To think that this guy was the... third most dangerous guy in Baroque Works? Fourth if you counted Doublefinger.

While Mr. 2 was talking, I happened to notice Nami and Zoro eyeing me warily. If the way they were glancing at the okama was anything to go by, they wanted to know what the deal was.

I considered things for a brief moment before finally deciding that there was no real reason to keep them in the dark. Hence, I surreptitiously positioned my hand just so in the crook of my elbow and flashed a pair of fingers at them.

The way they stiffened showed that they obviously got the message, but I hastily shook my head as Zoro grabbed one of his swords. If we took down Bon Clay now, chances were that we would be shooting ourselves in the foot way down the line. No way in hell was I risking that.

I was drawn out of my thoughts by Mr. 2 speaking up and reeling his arm back. "BEHOLD MY ABILI-!

"Hey, watch it!" I yelped as I grabbed his wrist.


"What gives' is that there are a hundred and one different Devil Fruit abilities on the sea. If you think there's a chance that I'm going to let a stranger use their ability on this ship without telling us what it is, then you're out of your mind!" I snapped hastily. Damn that had been way too close. Still, on the bright side, Luffy was probably going to be able to remain anonymous for a bit longer. Heck, with any luck we all might.

"Huh?" Luffy blinked in confusion. "But Cross, don't you- GRK!" Our captain's voice was cut off in
a choked gurgle as Nami hastily throttled his windpipe.

"Oh, don't mind me, please continue." Nami's calm expression was in complete opposition to the veins popping up on her arms.

Bon Clay gave Nami a confused look before shrugging indifferently and smiling at me. "Well, you seem like quite the smart cookie, my friend. It's not often that one sees someone quite so smart on the Grand Line! Good on you!" he complimented as he gave me a paternal pat on the cheek.

I couldn't help but chuckle sheepishly as I scratched the back of my head. "Yeah, well, someone on this crew has to use common sense, n-EEK!" I froze as I processed what had just happened.

He'd patted me on the cheek.

He'd patted me. On the cheek. With his right hand.

"Uh-oh..." I breathed numbly.

"Heeheeheehee!" Mr. 2 smirked as he slapped his right hand to his own cheek and shot my own grin back at me. "Guess you're not as smart as you thought after all, huuuuuuuh~?"

The best response I could muster was a strangled gurgle.

"Haha!" Bon Clay cheered as he spun around eagerly. "Behold! The power of the Clone-Clone Fruit! By touching someone with my right hand-!"

I tuned Bon Clay's explanation out as I processed the implications of what had just happened. Well, my attempt to stop Mr. 2 from grabbing faces had just failed in my own regard...

I tensed as I saw him heading for my crewmates.

But that sure as heck didn't mean it'd have to fail for everyone else!

"Hey!" I barked as I got between him and everyone else. "No touchy, especially not in the face!"

"Crooooss!" Luffy whined childishly.

"Come on, Cross, why do you have to ruin our fun!?!" Usopp demanded.

"Fun-killer!" Chopper concurred.

"I don't know about you, but personally? I don't consider the idea of leaving my... everything in the hands of a stranger to be 'fun'," I stated flatly before glaring at Bon Clay. "Bad enough you have my face, but so long as I have any say in all this, then you won't be getting anyone else's."

Mr. 2 pouted innocently. "Aww, don't you trust me, Mr. Cross?"

I gave Mr. 2 a flat look. "You tricked me and stole my face. In a word?" I leaned forwards and narrowed my eyes accusingly. "No."

"Oh, you're no fun," Mr. 2 accused me. I just crossed my arms and leaned back, glaring expectantly at him. "Well, I suppose I can work with just one face. Let's try this again: behold, the power of the Clone-Clone Fruit!"

And with that, Bon Clay started up his carnival of faces, swapping one for another for another. It was rather impressive, to be honest, if slightly disturbing. At least it was a clean type of transition, as
opposed to the more disturbing options out there.

I did flinch when he took on Cobra's face, that's for damn sure. How the hell he got that, I don't even want to consider.

Judging from the way that Carue squawked behind me, I wasn't the only one who recognized the face.

"Th-that face! That's-ERK!" Carue cut himself off as I rammed my elbow into his side.

"Not another word, duck!" I hissed beneath my breath.

Carue stared at me in disbelief. "But that's-!"

"Shh!" I shushed him.

Carue ground his beak darkly for a moment before leaning in conspiratorially. "But that wath Vivi's father!"

"I know that!" I growled in agreement as I continued glancing cautiously at the Officer Agent. "But the fact is that we can't let him know that we know that. If we do, things are going to become a lot more... interesting around here. Just wait until he's gone, it shouldn't be long now."

"But Cwoss..." Carue shook his head furiously. "Someone wike that with the face of a king, of Vivi's father!"

I shook my head sadly. "You have no idea. But the fact is that we can't do anything about it right now. For now... just grit your beak and bear it."

Carue glanced distrustingly at Bon Clay for a moment before giving me a hesitant nod. "If you say so, Cwoss..."

"I do," I nodded solemnly. "I don't do it gladly, but I do either way." I was silent for a moment as Carue slowly trotted off before grimacing and shaking my head. "I don't do it gladly, but here's hoping that things turn out for the best either way..."

"That bad?" Soundbite asked nervously.

I glanced at him for a moment before sighing miserably. "I let him go, he burns a city down. We stop him here... well, simply put, I condemn Luffy to a guaranteed death."

Soundbite's eyes widened in shock for a moment before he scowled furiously. "MORTON'S FORK, huh?"

"Yeah," I nodded grimly. "Save that unlike on Little Garden, the choice is a lot more obvious." I cast a grim look at Mr. 2. "We stay the course... for better or for worse."

And so Mr. 2 and our more childish crewmates played and celebrated for several minutes, under my, Zoro's and Nami's supervision so as to ensure he didn't grab anyone else's faces. At long last, though, the fun came to an end as Mr. 2's swan-headed ship came into view and he leaped aboard.

"Farewell, my friends!" he cried sadly. "May we meet again one day!"

"Goodbye, weird guy! We'll miss you!" Luffy cried.

"Bye, weird guy!" Chopper and Usopp concurred.
"Oh don't worry, we'll be seeing him again..." I informed them blandly.

"Now then, my men!" Mr. 2 pointed forwards dramatically. "Let us be off!"

"Yes sir, Mr. 2 Bon Clay sir!" his crew cried out as they set their ship's paddles to charge off at full speed.

We watched the ship draw off for a few moments before I finally spoke up.

"Oh yeah, we'll be seeing him again real soon," I deadpanned.

"THAT WAS MR. 2!?" Luffy, Chopper, and Usopp squawked in disbelief.

"Seriously, that was one of the strongest Officer Agents in Baroque Works?" Zoro scoffed.

"I guess it takes all kinds, huh?" Nami asked weakly.

"T-That was actually Mr. 2 Bon Clay!" Vivi gasped in shock.

"Didn't you know what he looked like!?" Usopp demanded.

"Nuh-uh, we nevah met anyone bewow Mistah Thwee, and that was enough for me!" Carue squawked in denial.

"But... I did hear rumors..." Vivi moaned as she sank to her knees. "That he's a flamboyant cross-dresser, that he has swans on his coat and the words 'Okama Way' are printed on his back."

"Are you blind?" Luffy, Usopp, and Zoro deadpanned in disbelief.

"Would you like me to suggest some memory exercises for you now, or would you rather wait until after you forget some touchy nation's customs?" I asked innocently.

Unfortunately, drawing attention to myself was not the proper course of action for me to take. Vivi immediately snapped to her feet and rounded on me, fury in her eyes. "Why didn't you tell us who he was!?" she demanded. "That man had my father's face! Baroque Works has his face! Can you even imagine the kind of damage they could cause!?"

I winced as I recalled the images of a burning city. "All too well..." I sighed grimly for a second before rallying swiftly. "But while the damage he'll cause right now will be devastating, the damage that would have been caused by stopping him back then would have been positively cataclysmic, if not fatal. Believe me, I didn't like staying silent, but it was the only option I had! The fact is, we needed him to be our friend. I don't like it any more than you do, but for now the okama goes free. And besides..." I grinned confidently. "I've already done more than enough to nullify him completely."

"Oh yeah?" Zoro grunted in confusion. "How so?"

"Easy." I jabbed my thumb at Nami. "He didn't get her face."

Nami blinked in confusion at that for a moment before sighing heavily and slapping her hand to her face. "Sanji will be fighting him, won't he?"

"You called, my love?" said cook swooned as he swirled up to our navigator.

"Where da heck were you!?” Carue demanded.
"Cooking dinner in the kitchen," Sanji shrugged indifferently before looking around and taking in everyone's expressions. "What did I miss?"

"We became friends with a shapeshifting okama who stole Cross's face but he turned out to be one of the bad guys who's hurting Vivi's country," Luffy explained simply.

Sanji blinked as he took the statement in before shrugging indifferently. "Okay."

"Oh, and by the way," I spoke up as I walked up to him. "When Luffy says he stole my face, he means that the okama, Mr. 2, can use his Devil Fruit to turn into, well, me. Seeing how you'll be the one fighting him in the future, chances are that he'll try using it in order to trick you. Do you think you're prepared for that?"

Sanji stared at me flatly for a moment before placing his hands on my shoulders. "Cross," he stated solemnly. "I will not hesitate even a second before kicking your ass into a broken, bleeding pulp. Of this, you have my word."

I grinned and nodded in agreement for a moment... before allowing a hint of uneasiness to enter my expression. "You mean... kick his ass... wearing my face... right?"

Sanji nodded in agreement. "That too."

I nodded numbly for a moment before hastily wheeling around and clapping my hands firmly, a rictus grin plastered on my face. "Let's work out a password just to be safe, huh?" I asked hastily.

"Eh, I don't know..." Zoro mused with a sadistic grin. "Maybe we should just give you a beating every time we see you just to be sure?"

"PASSWORD! NOW!"

"Oh, how about 'Swordfish'?"

"BETTER PASSWORD!"

"Heh, alright, alright. Any ideas?"

"...weeeell... I do have the one..."

-A-0-

A few foodless days and one Sea Cat-encounter later, we finally came within sight of our destination.

An expanse of land that engulfed the horizon, the purest land I'd seen since we'd gone past the Grand Line.

An island, nay, a continent of sand, shadows and heat; a heat that was intensified even further by the flames of war and those who fanned them.

"Welcome back to Alabasta, Vivi..." I mused, clapping her on the shoulder as we pulled into Nanohana's port. "It's been waiting for you for a while now."

"Mmm..." Vivi nodded morosely in agreement. "I'd say it's good to be home, but given the circumstances..."

"Hey, come on..." I tightened my grip on her reassuringly. "What did I tell you earlier?"
Vivi was silent for a moment before smiling hopefully. "Believe in Luffy."

"Believe in Luffy," I nodded in agreement. "He might be a dingus, but in the end, he's still Luffy. He'll get things done, one way or another."

"FOOOOOOOD!"

I winced at the animalistic howl that cracked the air, as well as the dust cloud left in his wake. "Usually another..." I grumbled. I then tapped Soundbite's shell and waved my finger in a circle, an electronic whine indicating that he was amping me. "I'll go after Luffy. Hurry up with getting the supplies, when we get back it'll be with his brother and a lot of Marines on our tail."

"SAY WHAT!?!" everyone howled after me as I jumped ashore.

"HEY LUFFY, WAIT UP!" I called as I ran after our Captain.

And so it was that the climax to the Alabasta Saga started.

On the one side, the ragtag band of pirates I was a part of, fighting for the sake of a friend.

On the other, a nefarious criminal organization completely and utterly devoid of scruples.

On the line, the lives of everything and everyone that was within this kingdom.

As I ran into Nanohana, one simple thought defined my opinion of the situation:

'Bring it on.'
This Bites! The Inevitable Holiday Special!

It was a nice, cloudy morning on the Going Merry: the wind was blowing, the waves were lightly rocking, and I was leaning back and relaxing up in the crow's nest.

I let out a contented sigh as I stretched my limbs out and leaned back in my wooden seat. "I love end-of-night watch duty... we clear, Soundbite?" I asked with the apathy of the content.

"EE-yup..." Soundbite sighed happily from within his shell.

"Perfect..." I grinned as fidgeted slightly in my seat... before jerking in shock as something cold hit my nose. "What the-!"

I snapped my eyes open and looked around frantically for a moment... before sagging miserably as I caught sight of just what had hit me: a snowflake, one of many that were all swirling around us.

"Seriously?" I growled in exasperation before tapping Soundbite's shell. "Ship-wide broadcast."

An electronic whine shook the air.

"Wakey wakey, guys," I groaned wearily. "We've got snow blowing in." I glanced around hastily before sighing in relief. "No icebergs, but... well, you know the drill. All hands on deck."

A chorus of groans rang out briefly before Soundbite cut them off and poked his eyestalks out, eyes narrowed. "Fourth TIME this week!!"

"Yeah yeah, I know..." I grumbled as I placed Soundbite down on my shoulder. "But hey, it's the Grand Line. What're you gonna do?" And with that, I slid out of the crow's nest and slowly made my way down the rigging, watching all the while as the rest of the crew got out on deck.

Well, most of the rest of the crew. Zoro was still asleep and had to be carried by Luffy.

I sighed and massaged my eyes tiredly before dropping down to the deck. "Soundbite?"

"GROOOOOAH!!"

"GAH!" Zoro barked as he jerked awake and flailed off Luffy's shoulder. The second he realized what had happened, he snapped a glare at Soundbite. "You realize someone's going to lose it and kill you, right?"

"Let 'em try!" Soundbite cackled.

"Yeah yeah, shut up, the both of you," Nami growled as she rolled her eyes in frustration. "Okay everyone, snap to it. Drop the sails, raise the anchor, the full nine yards. Let's get the Merry under control before we get caught up in another winter storm."

"Aye aye..." I and everyone else groaned in agreement as we hopped to it.

"And it'sh sho cwose to Chwishmash too..." Carue whined.

Those words served to freeze everyone in their spots, all of us turning to stare at the duck in shock.

"Wait, you have Christmas?!" I blurted out in shock.
"Does anyone know what day it is?" Nami asked at the same time.

"Uh..." Chopper racked his brain furiously. "I-I think it was the 18th the day we left Drum!"

"And we were on Drum a little under a week ago..." Nami mused before looking up in shock. "Holy crap, it's Christmas Eve!"

"Wait, seriously?!" Luffy squealed eagerly before throwing his arms up and whooping joyously. "That means that this is Christmas snow! Woohoo! Hey, Usopp, think fast!"

"Huh?" THWACK! "ARGH!" Usopp sputtered as he was sent sprawling ass over teakettle by a snowball the size of a bowling ball slamming into his head. He lay still for a moment before twitching ever so slightly.

"Luffy..." he growled out. "I hope you realize..." He suddenly snapped to his knees and let loose a hastily constructed snowball. "THIS MEANS WAR!"

The snowball struck its target dead on, slamming clean into the center of their face. Unfortunately... due to the snow in Usopp's eyes, and maybe a minor concussion on top of that, the target in question was the wrong one.

Chopper blinked in surprise as he cleared the snow from his eyes before looking at Usopp neutrally. "Usopp..." he started slowly. "I know I've led a reclusive lifestyle until recently... but the long and short of it is that I've lived on a Winter Island my entire life. I have grown up surrounded by snow, by ice, by cold... to put it simply..."

All of a sudden, there was a three-hundred-pound goliath of fur and muscle standing in the middle of the deck, grinning madly as he held up two snowballs he'd picked up from somewhere. "I'm in my element!"

Usopp blinked in confusion. "Wha-ohshit!" he yelped as he ducked behind the mast, only just managing to avoid the massive snowballs that plastered the space he'd occupied moments before. A second later, he peeked out from around the mast with a snowball loaded into his slingshot. "WAR!" he howled furiously.

"WAR!" Chopper roared back as he held up a new pair of head-sized snowballs.

"WAR!" Luffy made three as he held up a massive ball of snow over his head, laughing even as the other two pelted him with their respective arsenals.

I blinked numbly as I processed just how fast things had devolved into madness. "Holy shi-WOAHFUCK!" I yelped as I jumped out of the way of the trio's stray fire, hunkering down behind a trio of barrels that we'd left lying on deck. The panicked squawking behind me told me that Carue hadn't been as quick on the uptake as I had been.

A second later, Nami joined me, huffing heavily as she brushed a hefty amount of snow off of herself. "Those idiots..." she growled, half fondly, half in exasperation.

"Sooo..." I started slowly, occasionally glancing over the edge of the barrels as I monitored the progress of the ongoing war. "Christmas. You guys have it too?"

Nami shot me an incredulous look. "You really want to talk about this here? Now!?!"

"Well..."
Without warning, *something* shot clean through the side of one of the barrels, leaving behind an *all* too clean hole.

I stared at the barely controlled devastation in numb horror. "Point taken." I grabbed Nami's wrist. "Come with me if you want to li-ow!"

"*THAT'S my SCHTICK!*" Soundbite snarled once he let go of my ear.

"Schtick? What is he-?" Nami snapped a glare at Soundbite. "Did he just make a cheesy reference?"

"*Mozzarella-worthy!*"

"I thought so."

THWACK! "OUCH!" I yelped as Nami slapped me upside my head. "What the hell was that for!?!"

"You earned it! Now come on!" Nami grabbed me by the front of my collar and dragged me out from behind our cover. "Let's move!"

The next few moments were a flurry of movement, snow, and *pain*, but eventually, we managed to make our way into the kitchen, where Vivi and Sanji were waiting for us.

"Well *that* was fun..." Nami shivered as she sloughed off the layer of snow that had covered her.

"Tell me about it," I muttered shakily as I glanced at our other two friends. "I see you managed to save the princess, Mister Knight."

"Psh!" Sanji scoffed as he puffed on his cigarette. "As though such a small amount of cold could so much as *touch* the flames of my heart!"

"Did either of you manage to see what happened to Carue?" Vivi asked in concern.

I winced slightly before placing my hand on my heart with a remorseful expression. "He fought well, but ultimately... I am afraid he fell in battle." I held my fist up and shook my head sadly. "He will be remembered."

"GOODNIGHT, SWEET PRINCE!" Soundbite faux-sobbed.

Suddenly, a pounding rang out against the door. "*WET ME IN YOU MOWONS, BEFOW THEY FWEENZE ME FUCKIN' SOWID!*"

Vivi shot me a vicious glare, prompting me to give a sheepish smile before hastily wrenching the door open and dragging Carue through. "Heheh... sorry?"

"Scwew you, Cwoss..." Carue grumbled as he shook himself out and worked the snow out of his feathers.

"Ah well, can't blame a guy for trying. Oh, by the way, did you see Zoro?"

"Yeah..." Carue scoffed as he rolled his eyes. "He's still out there. And bewieve you me, he's having the time of his wife."

I frowned in confusion before glancing out the door's porthole... and promptly wrenching my way back with a shiver; the grin Zoro was sporting as he sliced up any and all snowballs that came his way was down and out *demented!* And the fact that he didn't have a speck of snow on him did *not* help.
"Scaaaa-ry..." Soundbite shuddered.

"Sooo..." I trailed off uncomfortably. "Christmas, huh? You guys have it?"

"Wait, you do too!?" Nami asked in disbelief.

"Festive winter holiday with red, white, and green as the traditional colors, a focus on snow and
snow-related activities, and gift-exchanging as one of, if not the greatest parts of the holiday?" I
summarized curiously.

"Sounds like Christmas to me," Sanji whistled in awe.

"I'm actually more surprised that you guys have it!" I continued, my voice rising. "I mean... what
with the difficulties in geographical distance and climate, how do you actually... you know,
coordinate it all? That's not even getting into the wildly divergent cultural roots between our two
worlds."

Vivi shrugged helplessly. "I couldn't really tell you, to be honest. Christmas is one of the oldest and
most popular holidays the world over. Everyone, be they pirate, marine or civilian, no matter the
species or nationality, always drops everything for the sake of celebrating it. Literally nothing is more
important. And as for climate, well..." she gestured outside. "As you can see, every year on
Christmas Eve, across the entire planet, it starts to snow. It's... generally accepted as a Christmas
Miracle!"

"DECK THE HALLS WITH BOUGHS OF HOLLY!" Soundbite belted out in a joyous chorus.
"DON WE NOW OUR GAY APPAREL, FALALA, LALALA, LALALA!"

"Woah!" I chuckled as I angled my head away from the snail. "Listen to you! Sounds like you're
already deep in the holiday spirit, huh?"

"YEAH, YEAH!" Soundbite nodded eagerly, his smile taking on a slightly sad tone. "First
Christmas WITH FRIENDS! NORMALLY I'm all alone..."

That sentence caused me to freeze in shock, before I looked down as a thought struck me. "Huh..." I
breathed, a new comprehension of what that meant coming over me. "That's... Wow... You know... I
tried not to think about it before, but... some part of me acknowledged that I'd never get to celebrate
Christmas again. But now this... I... I realize I should be happy, but..." I looked down and shook my
head sadly as I scratched the back of my neck. "This... will be the first time I've celebrated
Christmas... away from my family."

And just like that, everyone else stiffened before allowing a wave of sadness to wash over them.

"I always managed to make my way back to Cocoyashi in time for Christmas, no matter what..."
Nami muttered numbly. "I... I passed up a lot of big whales because of it, but... none of that ever
mattered. Being with Nojiko and Genzo was more important than anything..."

"Old Man Zeff, Patty, Carne, and the rest of those shitstains..." Sanji huffed around his cigarette.
"Those dumbasses... the pudding's almost definitely gonna taste like shit without me there..."

Vivi shuddered miserably before wrapping her arms around Carue's neck in a desperate hug. "I've...
I've had to celebrate Christmas twice without my father... but..." she buried her face in Carue's
feathers. "I... I always had Igaram with me... I... I know he's alive and I'm happy for it, but..." Her
voice hitched, leaving her unable to find it again.
Carue quacked sadly as he rubbed Vivi's back comforting, staring off into the distance all the while. "Wooks wike Kentauwos will haf ta lead the squad on the cwwoss-countwy gift wun again... hope Stomp'll be able to handle it, he almost didn't make it wast time..."

We were silent for a moment before I glanced towards the door. "Zoro might have been alone for a while now, but the rest..." I hissed sadly as I shook my head. "Usopp, Luffy, Chopper... they didn't have much, but they had something..." I shrugged helplessly. "And now they're all an ocean away from them."

The mood was thick and heavy...

"TIS THE SEASON, JACKASSES!"

"GAH!" We all jumped in shock as Soundbite suddenly filled the cabin with a furious roar.

"You little uncooked-!" Sanji raged furiously.

"Can't you read the mood you little shit!?" Nami demanded incredulously.

"HELL YES! THAT'S the point!" the Baby Transponder Snail spat.

"What the hell awe you-!?" Carue started to snarl.

"Wait!" I hastily barked up, my blood racing through my veins. "I realize that he might have been callous, but damn it, and I can't believe I'm saying this for so many reasons, the snail has a point!"

"Um... I'm sorry?" Vivi blinked in confusion.

"Look at us!" I swept my arms over the cabin. "We're getting all moody and brooding! And that is the exact opposite of how we should be! I mean, come on, people!" I flung my arms up extravagantly. "It's Christmas Eve! We should be celebrating what we have, not lamenting what we don't! We might not have presents, we might not have the food, hell, we might not even have any decorations, but so what!? We have each other! We have our lives! And that... that is more than enough for me. What about the rest of you?"

My crewmates glanced amongst one another contemplatively for a second...

"Hell yeah!"

"The Commie's got a point!"

"Thank you for that, Mister Jeremiah, I needed it more than you can imagine."

"I might hate yoaw guts, Soundbite... but thanks."

Before they gave me a response that granted me the biggest fucking grin imaginable.

"Then what the hell are we waiting for, people?!" I demanded exuberantly. "You heard Soundbite! Let's hop to it and deck the halls!"

"You got it!" Sanji grinned as he rolled up his sleeves. "It's going to be a stretch, but I think we've got enough oil and corn kernels!"

"I think I can spare about... half of my paper?" Nami mused contemplatively. "I should be able to get ten flakes out of each sheet..."
"We'll need wax, pieces of string, paint, some glass jars..." Vivi counted off thoughtfully.

"I think I know a few paint wectipes! The squad usuawwy uses them as feather dye, but it should work!" Carue offered.

"Too bad there's not a pine tree for miles around..." I sighed morosely.

I blinked as silence suddenly reigned, then glanced at the rest of the crew present to find them all wearing identical masks of confusion.

"What the heck do you need popcorn for!?" Nami blurted at Sanji.

"Vivi dear, what could you need all those things for?" Sanji asked our resident princess as cordially as he could manage.

"What does paper have to do with flakes of any sort?" Vivi blinked as she tried to process the, to her, complete non-sequitur.

"Why da heck would you want a pine twee of aww things?" Carue demanded in disbelief.

"Uhh... for a Christmas Tree?" I scoffed as I spread my arms wide.

The statement drew everyone's attention and disbelief to me, but before they could start to question that statement, I held up my hands for silence.

"And unless I miss my guess!" I pointed at Sanji. "Popcorn strings?"

"Exactly, thank you!" Sanji snapped, flinging his hands up in gratitude.

I moved on to Nami. "Paper snowflakes?"

"Yes!" Nami sighed in relief. "Geeze, I swear to- have you people been living under a rock your whole lives!?"

"And..." I trailed off slightly as I turned towards Vivi, wracking my brain furiously before finally making the connection. "Paint the jars, put in the candle and voila, electricity-free Christmas lights?"

"Hallelujah..." Vivi sighed in relief.

"Okay, I think I know what's going on here!" I announced, clapping my my hands together firmly. "I don't know which way this goes, but you all have different holiday traditions, no doubt hammered out between the North and East Blues and the Grand Line. They might be foreign to you all, but to me, they're all traditions of the same holiday. I guess it's not surprising none of you have the tree, South or West Blue must get it, but right now that doesn't really matter. For now, I say we lump all our traditions together at once and throw the biggest Christmas Bash we can possibly swing! All in favor?"

"AYE!" everyone chorused, their eagerness revitalized.

"Then come on!" I strode towards the door. "Let's grab the morons and hop to it!"

Just as we were about to exit the door, however, I paused as a thought struck me. "Huh..."

"What is it?" Nami questioned.

"Ah!" I shook my head and blushed in embarrassment. "Nothing, really, I was just wondering how
everyone else the world over might be celebrating the holidays."

Vivi blinked in surprise before tapping her chin contemplatively. "Huh... good question..."

I shrugged in agreement. "I know, right? Well!" I clapped my hands firmly. "Anyways! Delaying things won't make this any easier. Shall we?"

"I'd rather not..." Nami demurred.

"Yeah, me neither," I groaned. "But let's get to it!"

And with that, we shouldered our way through the snow-caked door and out into the maelstrom outside.

Still, despite how cold things were and how wet our clothes got midway through... we all wound up laughing half an hour in, loving every second of it.

-o-

"HAHAHA! You always manage to surprise me, Woopy!" Dadan cackled as she knocked back the mug she was holding. "You act prim and proper the rest of the year, but come Christmas you manage to drink enough eggnog to put half of my boys under the table! You sure you weren't a pirate or bandit in a past life?"

"Psh!" Mayor Woop Slap snorted as he swirled his mug. "Perish the thought! I have always been a good and honest man, both in this life and all the ones I've lived before! I just consider Christmas to be a good time to relax, is all! After all..." The old official's grin widened in an uncharacteristically cheeky manner as he waved his mug towards the crowd of bandits and villagers mingling in the bar. "I'm allowing you bandit scum to come down here without any sort of protest, aren't I?"

"HAHAHA!" Dadan cackled as she pounded the bar in her mirth. "I take it back old man! It looks like you're pretty damn buzzed yourself!"

"Not a chance!" the Mayor huffed as he waved his cane testily. "I'm-! Whoots!" The senior citizen yelped in panic as he nearly tilted off of his stool, and the only thing that kept him from hitting the floor was the young bartender grabbing his sleeve. "Oookay, so I might be a bit tipsy after all. Sue me! It's Christmas, dammit! Ah, by the way, thank you, Makino."

Makino smiled kindly as she patted the old man's shoulder. "Not a problem, Mayor Woop Slap. Now then..." Her smile widened slightly as she refilled the pair's mugs while pulling out one of her own. "What say we do something we've all been waiting for, huh?"

"HA!" Dadan barked as she slapped the bar once anew. "I hear you, Makino! Let's do it!" And with that, she drew a pair of wanted posters from her jacket and waved it in the air. "HEY EVERYONE!" she bellowed. "THREE CHEERS FOR THE SONS OF MT. CORVO, THOSE STILL WITH US AND THOSE GONE BEFORE THEIR TIME! HIP HIP!"

"HURRAH!" the rest of the bar goers roared in agreement as they toasted their mugs.

Makino chuckled lightly as she drank from her own mug, smiling fondly at the wanted posters Dadan was holding. "Merry Christmas boys, wherever you are."

-o-

"And one for you, and one for you, one for you..."
"Merry Christmas, Miss Rika. Delivering the boys their holiday meals, I see."

"Merry Christmas, Captain Seigi!" the young girl smiled up at the Marine Captain. "And yup! I made these riceballs myself! You're the last one!"

"Oh?" The Captain cocked his eyebrow as he looked over the basket she was holding. "But don't you have three there?"

Rika huffed and pouted childishy as she glared at the two riceballs. "Those two are for Helmeppo and Coby. I'm going to send them to them at Marine HQ." Her pout took on a slightly saddened tone. "I still can't believe they're not coming back for Christmas..."

The Captain winced slightly before giving her a comforting pat on the shoulder. "I know it's hard Rika, believe me, we miss them too--"

"Yeah, the halls just haven't had that shine!"

"CRAM IT BEFORE I COURT-MARTIAL YOU, WINSLOW! Ah, ahem, sorry about that... anyways. I assure you, Rika, they probably miss you just as much as you miss them."

Rika sniffed sadly before nodding in understanding. "Well, alright..." She then grinned happily and held up one of the rice balls to the Captain. "Merry Christmas, Captain!"

The Captain grinned in agreement as he patted the young girl's head and took the riceball. "Merry Christmas to you too, Rika. Merry Christmas to you too."

He then took a bite of the rice ball... and had to fight to withhold his grimace. "Rika... what did you... make these balls with?"

"Sugar and cinnamon! But Coby and Helmeppo are getting salt! That's what they get for not coming home for the holidays!"

"Ah... I-I see... Lucky bastards..."

"Did you say something, Captain?"

"N-Nothing, Rika, nothing!"

-o-

The dozen-odd students of the swordmaster Koshiro stood shivering and miserable out in the courtyard of his dojo, despite the December cold and the light flurries landing on and around them. They had read enough samurai stories to know that this was a test, that if they couldn't stand a little cold, they couldn't consider themselves real swordsmen!

Still, they all, to a boy, wished sensei would hurry up already. They'd been standing in the courtyard since the usual start of practice time, nearly two hours ago. Thus, all of them stood up a little straighter when the sliding door to Koshiro's dojo slid open, letting the man himself pad out in his winter robes, fluffy bunny slippers on his feet and a cup of coffee in hand.

For a moment, he didn't see them, but when he did his eyes widened in surprise. "My word! What are you all doing here?"

The boys all glanced uncertainly at each other before one of them, with black hair shaved close to his head, piped up. "This... isn't a test?"
"Goodness, no!" Koshiro immediately denied. "I would never have you practicing on Christmas Eve!"

"H-huh?" The boys blinked in shock. "But... then why are you coming outside in your winter clothes?"

Koshiro blinked in confusion before nodding in understanding. "Ahh, I see the problem. No no, this is not for training, I'm merely going to celebrate the holiday with my family."

"Huh?" One of the students tilted his head in confusion. "But sensei, didn't your dau-OOOF!" The boy winced as the student next to him rammed his elbow into his ribs. "What was that-Ah... ooooh..."

The students shuffled around uncomfortably for a moment... before one of them strode forwards and looked Koshiro square in the eyes. "I'll join you sensei! And I'll do it without my winter clothes too!"

"Yeah, me too!"

"Same here!"

"Actually, I'm gonna go get my-OW! I-I mean yeah! I'm with them!"

Koshiro stared at his students in surprise for a moment... before smiling warmly at all of them. "Thank you, boys. I very much appreciate it."

'And I'm sure you do as well, Kuina...' Koshiro thought fondly. 'Merry Christmas, my daughter. And to you as well, Zoro, wherever you might be.'

-o-

"Ruff, ruff!"

"Ah, thank you, Chouchou!" Mayor Boodle grinned as he picked up one of the brown paper bags the dog was carrying on his back.

Chouchou woofed again before trotting down the street, proffering the bags he was carrying to the other villagers working on rebuilding houses wrecked mere months before.

"Heh, that's one dedicated dog!" one of the villagers working besides Boodle noted happily.

"Yeah, I wonder where he gets it from!"

Boodle hid his smile as he ate his lunch. He had a good idea of just who had inspired Chouchou in such a way, but if the dog didn't intend to tell anyone about their mutual friend, then neither would he.

'We're all wishing you a Merry Christmas, Straw Hat Pirates,' Boodle thought happily as he helped a villager put up a string of paper snowflakes. 'Even if most of us don't really know it!'

-o-

Upon the Island of Rare Animals, every last one of the inhabitants, from the greatest of the hybrids down to Gaimon himself, was snoring like a Gregorian choir of chainsaws as they slept together in a massive pile, as they were wont to do every year on Christmas. The reason being that while Gaimon's coconut eggnog was indeed both strong and delicious, it could also be described as a little
too strong, always knocking the animals unconscious after the initial rush.

The next day, they would all wake up with apocalyptic hangovers, promising themselves that they would never drink the foul concoction again... all while inwardly smiling at the prospect of doing it all over again the next year.

-Ding-Dong!

"Hello?"

"Jingle bells, Kuro smells, Jango laid an egg-!"

"Hahahahaha!" Kaya cut off the caroling as she burst into laughter. "T-that's a very inventive song, boys, very creative!"

"Thank you, Miss Kaya!" Carrot grinned joyously.

"We were working on it all week!" Onion informed her.

"You really liked it?" Pepper inquired eagerly.

"Of course! It was lovely!"

"It was a little bit off key, in my opinion!" a voice called from the depths of the mansion.

Kaya shot a slight glare over her shoulder before smiling at the trio of boys. "Oh, don't listen to that old goat." She leaned in slightly with an impish expression. "In my opinion, I think he might be going a little deaf in one ear, if you know what I mean."

"I heard that!"

Kaya giggled lightly at the intended reaction before refocusing on the boys. "So, what brings you all here? Did you just want to share that carol, or do you want to come in and have some hot cocoa?"

"Actually, Miss Kaya, we can't stay!" Carrot informed her.

"Yeah, we need to send our gifts to the captain right away!" Pepper concurred.

"We have them right here, see?" Onion held up a glass bottle that was sealed with a cork and some wax, an action that the other two boys imitated.

"Oh, that's a wonderful idea!" Kaya cooed as she looked the bottles over. "And what are you sending him?"

"I'm sending him a story I wrote!"

"I'm sending a lizard!"

"I'm sending socks!" Onion flinched as his friends pinned him with duel glares. "What!? They're useful!"

"Well I think it all sounds wonderful!" Kaya hastily reassured them. "As a matter of fact, I think I'd like to send something to Usopp as well. Would you mind waiting a moment so that I can get it ready for him?"
"Sure!"

"Okay!"

"Well, I need to get back in time for dinner-" THWACK! "OW! Alright, alright, geeze..."

"Okay, give me one moment!" Kaya hastily darted back into her mansion, going up the stairs and towards her room. A minute later, she came down with a bottle of her own. "Here you go! Please, send it along with all of your gifts as well!"

"Alright!"

"You got it!"

"Merry Christmas, Miss Kaya!"

"And Merry Christmas to you!" Kaya said as she closed the door.

The trio immediately started walking away from the mansion towards the shore, crowding around the bottle all the while.

"What's she sending? What's she sending?" Carrot asked eagerly.

"Hm..." Pepper hummed curiously as he held his eye against the bottle. "It looks like a letter... with lipstick on it?"

"Wow, the Captain's one lucky guy..." Onion whistled in awe.

"Yeah..."

"Well come on, let's go!"

"Oh, hey! Do you want to do this in style?"

"Yeah! Okay, on three. One, two—!"

"THREE! PIRATES! PIRATES ARE COMING!"

-o-

"Blargh!"

Johnny looked curiously at Yosaku, who had just spat out... something. "What's wrong?"

"This pudding tastes like shit!" Yosaku complained, angrily jabbing his spoon in the offending dish. "The flavor's all wrong and it's grainy instead of smooth!"

"WHAT!?!" Patty roared as he slammed his fist down on top of the bounty hunter's skull, bouncing his head against the immaculate dinner table he and his bro were dining at. "Are your tastebuds defective or something!? That pudding is 100% bonafide Baratie Christmas Pudding! It's the pride of our holidays! No way it could taste like anything less than ambrosia!"

"Oh yeah!?!" Yosaku snarled darkly. "If it tastes so good, then why don't you try some!?"

"I will!" Patty snarled as he grabbed up a spoon and shoved a chunk of the dish into his mouth.

The second the pudding hit his tongue, Patty's face screwed up into an expression of horrified
disgust, but he powered through and rolled it on his tongue before choking it down his throat. The second it was down, however, he screwed up his face furiously and roared towards the kitchen. "THAT TASTED LIKE SHIT! WHO THE HELL WASTED INGREDIENTS MAKING THAT!?

"YOU DID, YOU MORON!" Carne shot back as he stalked out of the kitchen balancing twice his height in platters.

Patty blinked as he ran over the list of dishes he'd made that day. "Oh, yeah, right." Then he went straight back to furious. "WELL, IT'S NOT MY FAULT! SOMEONE FORGOT TO STIR IT WHILE IT WAS COOLING! WHOSE JOB WAS THAT!?"

Zeff snorted as he strode past Patty, his balance and gait not shifting an inch as he swung his pegleg up to slap the cook upside his head. "The shitty brat who's not here anymore, shitbrains."

Patty blinked in surprise before wincing guiltily as he picked the dish up from the table. "I'll... get you a new dish of pudding. I'll handle this myself." And with that he shambled back to the kitchen, his head hung low in shame.

Johnny and Yosaku watched the cook walk off with concern. "Hey, is he gonna be alright?" Yosaku asked.

"Eh, we all miss Sanji, but Patty'll be fine. That shithead's been through worse," Carne shrugged indifferently before giving the pair a curious once-over. "I'm wondering more about you two, though. Paying for everyone's meals during one of our biggest lunch rushes all year? Are you sure you two didn't hit your heads or something?"

Johnny laughed as he shrugged indifferently. "Hey, we got lucky and managed to come by some cash, so why not spread the good fortune? 'Tis the season, don'tcha know!"

"Yeah!" Yosaku nodded firmly in agreement. "Our good fortune should be the good fortune of others, it's only right! Besides, we're not spending it all, we have some set aside for the future! But for now, consider this a gift from us to everyone else here!"

Carne studied them for a moment longer before shrugging indifferently, albeit with an indulgent smile. "Eh, screw it, it's your money. Either way, Merry Christmas, and enjoy the food!"

As he strode back towards the kitchen, he couldn't help but think. 'Still, that story of how they got that money... Guess this must be what people call a Christmas Miracle, huh? After all... what other word is there for a billion beris literally falling out of the sky?'

-0-

"One one thousand~, two one thousand~, three one thousand~, four one thousand~..."

"Wow, Big Sis..." Chabo whistled as he observed the massive sum of cash that was weighing down Nojiko's table. "This is really somethin'... and you really think that they'll buy them again next year?"

"Not buy, Chabo, rent!" Nojiko swiftly corrected as she continued counting her cash. "The villagers are only renting those tangerine trees, and if they want to rent them again next Christmas, then they'd better return them unharmed the day after tomorrow!"

"So... wait..." Chabo trailed off as he tried counting on his fingers. "If you made this much money this year, and you're gonna make a lot more money next year, then in a few years..."
"I'm gonna be rich," Nojiko summarized primly as her eyes flashed beri signs. "Filthy, stinking, rich."

Chabo shuddered heavily as he inched away from the tangerine farmer. "You're your sister's sister alright, Big Sis..." he muttered nervously.

"And don't you forget it..." Nojiko sighed contentedly as she slowly fingered the cash. "Ah... it's official: there's nothing more lovely than a Green Christmas... Now, where was I... Oh, right! Five one thousand~..."

---

Knock knock!

"Um... Captain Smoker, sir?"

"Tsk... Master Chief Petty Officer Tashigi, I am about to smoke and savor a genuine, hand-rolled cigar from Juventad. Unless Straw Hat Luffy and his crewmate Cross are on deck and offering their full surrenders, you had better be prepared to spend Christmas swabbing the deck. With your toothbrush."

"Ah, well, you see sir, it's... it's the guy- I-I mean the men, sir! They're... doing it again, and seeing how we're out at sea I can't go to a bar or sword-shopping like I usually do and-!"

"Son of a... fine. Now where's the damn... there we go. All right, attention all hands. This is Captain Smoker speaking. As I'm forced to do every year by you morons, I am officially giving an order: if I see so much as one sprig of mistletoe anywhere onboard this ship, you'll all spend Christmas in the brig. Only this time, seeing how we're on a ship, you'll all have to share a cell. A situation which I imagine would be quite... uncomfortable. Do I make myself clear?"

The sound of scrambling boots suddenly echoed throughout the vessel.

"That's what I thought. Happy, Officer Tashigi?"

"Very. Thank you, sir, I'll go and enjoy dinner now."

"Good... Officer Tashigi."

"Yes, sir?"

"..."

"Merry Christmas to you too sir!"

"Tsk..."

---

"Woah!" Crocus swore as he waved his arms desperately in an attempt to maintain his balance. "Careful, Laboon! You almost threw me off again!"

"Bwoooh..." Laboon crooned apologetically. The island whale did his best to hold still but wound up shaking with earthquake-esque laughter moments later.

Crocus grumbled darkly as he held onto the whale's epidermis. "Damn it, Laboon..." Moments later, he allowed himself to chuckle as well. "To think that I'd find out that the whale I've lived with so
long is ticklish! Or that I'd ever be painting a whale red and white in the first place! Ah, Roger, your touch on my life is still present to this day...

"Bwooh?"

"Ah, nothing Laboon. Anyways, if you have to make some noise, why not try a carol or two? Heaven knows we have reason to celebrate this year!"

"Bwooh bwooh bwooh, bwooh bwooh bwooh!"

"Jingle Bells, huh?" the old doctor laughed. "Well, I suppose it's better than nothing!"

-o-

"Mr. 5, is this even remotely a good idea?" Miss Valentine hissed out of the corner of her mouth.

"Not in the slightest, Miss Valentine," Mr. 5 hissed back. "But at the moment, I don't see what other option we have! For now, let's just try and stay out of the—!"

SMASH! "SILENCE!"

The assassins choked in terror as they hastily clamped their hands over their mouths.

"Thank you, Mister Broggy," Miss Goldenweek hummed. "More tea?"

"Why yes, thank you, little human!" the blond giant hummed as he held his tiny cup out, which the human filled up.

"And you, Mister Dorry?"

"Oh no, I couldn't!" the relatively taller giant denied. "Still, thank you very much, human. Though..." He tilted his head in confusion. "You do realize that we won't help you off this island just for tea, yes?"

"That doesn't matter to me in the least, Mister Dorry," Miss Goldenweek hummed as she sipped her tea. "What matters is that today is Christmas, and neither of you have properly celebrated it for the past century. And that's terrible. So for now, we will sit here, we will have tea, and we will be polite. Agreed?"

"Agreed!" Broggy announced, thumping his chest. "Even almighty Elbaf himself respects Christmas! So for now, we shall break and rest. Aye, Dorry?"

"Aye, Broggy! This respite shall make the subsequent duels of our continuing battle all the more glorious!"

"Perfect. Now then..." The diminutive human glanced over her shoulder at the Mr. 5 pair, her eyes flashing slightly as she did so. "More tea, you two?"

"YES, PLEASE!" the two hastily replied as they held their cups out to her.

"That's what I thought."

-o-

"HURRY UP, YOU SLOWPOKES! THE SUN'S ALMOST DOWN! IF WE'RE NOT READY BY THE TIME IT'S DARK, I'LL HAVE YOUR HIDES FOR FLAGS!"
"Have some patience, Doctor Kureha, we're almost done."

"Tsk..." Kureha scoffed as she sipped from the eggnog bottle she was clutching. "If you have time to talk, Dalton, then you have time to work. I'm seriously considering my threat."

The new president of the Sakura Kingdom shuddered at the idea of angering the nation's surgeon general but forged on anyway. "That aside... Doctor, are you certain that this will work?"

"KAK KAK KAK!" Kureha cackled before jabbing her finger at Dalton. "Don't underestimate me, you big old ox! The quack's concoction was ingenious, true, but I am and always will be his superior! I can alter it however I damn well please. Hence... ARE YOU ALL READY OR WHAT!?"

"MA'AM YES MA'AM!"

"THEN FIRE!"

BOO-BOO-BOOM!

A cascade of explosions rang out from the line of cannons arrayed in front of the castle, discharging the powder-payloads held within into the air.

Moments later, sounds of awe and applause echoed out from all around the kingdom below.

"Well I'll be damned..." Dalton breathed in awe.

"KAK KAK KAK KAK!" Kureha cackled as she took another pull from her bottle, basking beneath the cloud of green and red that covered the skies of the kingdom and formed the greatest Christmas Tree in existence. "And don't you forget it, brat!"

-0-

In the doorway of the Rain Dinners Casino, two individuals of momentous influence faced off against one another.

On one side stood King Nefertari Cobra, rightful ruler of the kingdom of Alabasta and father of Princess Nefertari Vivi.

On the other side was General Kohza, childhood friend of Princess Vivi, leader of the Alabastan Rebellion, and unwitting pawn of the criminal organization known as Baroque Works.

For what felt like an eternity, the two stared each other dead in the eye, neither giving anything away to the other.

Finally, Cobra bowed his head with a sigh. "I don't suppose there's any point in me once again saying...?"

Kohza snorted and shook his head. "I don't want to hear it, old man. Let's not ruin the holiday spirit."

Cobra pursed his lips and nodded in agreement. He then reached into his robes, causing Kohza to tense. The king affixed an affronted glare on the young man. "You might think me a cruel man, Kohza, but the mere notion that I would attempt to assassinate you today of all days is legitimately insulting. Nevertheless, here." And with that, Cobra drew an object from his robes and tossed it to Kohza.

Kohza caught the object and blinked in surprise as he looked it over. "Is... Is this—?"
"Aged durian juice, yes," Cobra confirmed with a smile. "It's still your favorite, I trust?"

"Yeah, it is..." Kohza breathed in awe, before directing a hesitant smile at Cobra. "Well, looks like we think alike. I've got one of the last barrels of Yuba water inside. Come on." He gestured inside. "Shall we join the troops?"

Cobra smiled and nodded in return. "Indeed. Let the Christmas truce begin."

-o-

"Are you certain that this course of action is wise, Mister Zero? What if they were to reconcile in some manner?"

"No worries, Miss All Sunday. The wounds we've inflicted between the fools above us run too deep. Let them celebrate for now. After all, this'll be the last Christmas many of them will live to see."

"Hmph. Very well then. Did you have any other reasons to call me here?"

"Indeed. Here, take this."

"Hm? A gift? Doesn't seem like you, Crocodile."

"Just open the damn present, Nico Robin."

"Fine, fine, very we—! Th-This is a textbook from—!

"I had to hand over quite the pretty beri to that damn bastard Joker for it... but I suppose that we all must make exceptions at times. Merry Christmas, Nico Robin."

"...and to you as well, Crocodile."

-o-

Laki made her way through the Shandoran camp, both swiftly and frantically, as she searched high and low for one of two people.

Finally, coming to the camp's central 'plaza', so to speak, she managed to catch sight of one of the two people she was looking for, though definitely not the one she had hoped for.

Laki sighed in exasperation before marching up to the person in question. "Wiper."

"Laki," the famed berserker grunted, staring up at the central totem pole as he munched down on the contents of a small bag he was holding.

Laki hesitated slightly before groaning and deciding to bite the bullet. "Wiper, have you seen Aisa anywhere? I've been looking for her all over, but, well..."

"Yeah, I've seen her."

Laki's eye twitched in annoyance at the berserker's no doubt deliberate brevity. "Where is Aisa?"

Wiper was silent for a moment as he continued to eat before responding, his eyes never leaving the totem pole. "You'll be glad to know that I managed to find a replacement for the Christmas Star that was accidentally broken yesterday."

Laki allowed herself to grin teasingly at the warrior. "You mean the star that Genbo crushed when he
Wiper coughed slightly as some of whatever he was eating went down the wrong pipe before reasserting himself. "A-nyways... I-I managed to find a replacement. A good one too, in my opinion."

Laki frowned and huffed in exasperation. "That's great, but what does that have to do with anything?" She then tilted her head to follow his gaze. "And what are you looking at-!" Laki trailed off as she stared at the top of the totem pole. "Oh you son of a bitch."

Wiper shrugged indifferently as he swallowed another mouthful of whatever-it-was. "A little harsh, perhaps, but you have to admit, it works, right?"

"MMMMPH!" Aisa shrieked through her gag, struggling furiously against the ropes that were keeping her tied to the top of the totem pole.

"Are you completely out of your mind, Wiper!?" Laki demanded incredulously.

Wiper hummed contemplatively before responding. "To be fair, she earned it."

"MMPH MMMMPH!" Aisa roared in denial.

"How could she possibly have earned that!?" Laki questioned pointedly.

Wiper shrugged carelessly. "She snuck out to Upper Yard to gather Vearth again, and on her way back through Angel Island, she was caught by one of the Skypieans. And instead of fighting to the death like a true warrior of Shandora, she instead accepted the bag of roasted almonds the 'Conis' girl gave her out of some misguided sentiment of pity."

"MMPH!"

Laki blinked in shock as she processed the explanation before rallying. "Nevertheless, that kind of reaction is not only cruel, but-!

"Also, I'm pretty sure she's been using her Mantra to follow us around and puzzle out where we're hiding the presents."

Laki and Aisa both froze at that statement, with Laki snapping her gaze up to Aisa while the girl suddenly broke out in a cold sweat and refused to look her in the eyes, squirming furiously at the scrutiny.

A second later, Laki grinned cheekily. "Well, to be fair, you are a very pretty angel, Aisa. Don't worry though, we'll let you down... eventually."

"MMMMRGH!?"

"Enjoy!" Laki sang as she turned around and started to walk away... before freezing as a thought struck her. She looked over her shoulder and took in the bag Wiper was eating from. "...roasted almonds, huh?"

"Yup," Wiper grunted as he held up the sack in question. "Pretty good, I'll admit. Want some?"

"Don't mind if I do!"

"MMMMMRGH!"
Foxy huffed and wheezed as he ran back into the kitchen, taking a moment to double over and catch his breath before making his way over to the pantry. "Hamburg! Get me three bags of cocoa dust! The South Blue party is starting to run out!"

"Sure thing, boss!" Hamburg huffed as he tossed a trio of canvas sacks at his captain. *Hard.*

"YEEK! SLOW-SLOW BEAM!" Foxy shrieked in terror, hastily snapping out a ray of Slow-Slow particles and tagging the sacks before they could slam into him. "WATCH IT, DUMBASS!"

"Pupupu! Sorry Boss!"

"Yeah, well-!"

"Hamburg!"

Before Foxy could lay into his subordinate, he was interrupted by Porsche running in.

"Where's the eggnog? The Grand Liners are running out, and I heard whispers about raiding the West Blue party for it!"

"Oh, speaking of the West Blue-ers, how are the Jonga Brothers doing?" Foxy inquired.

"A little bit hesitant, but Itomimizu was doing his best to get them involved, and everyone else was nice and welcoming. I'm sure they'll get along fine."

"Ah, that's good," Foxy sighed in relief. "Those boys have been standoffish for the past month, I was actually starting to get worried."

"Yeah, well, they'll almost certainly be a lot more standoffish if their own crewmates raid their party for eggnog, *so where is it already?!*" Porsche demanded hastily.

Hamburg pointed to an array of barrels next to her. "Third from the left."

Porsche eyed the large container miserably before casting a pleading look at her captain. "Captain Foxy, can't we *please* get someone to help us with this? Pickles, maybe? Or Capote? Heck, I'll even take Big Pan at this point, and he's liable to eat everything!"

"Absolutely out of the question!" Foxy snarled as he crossed his arms in denial. "Our men work hard for me all year long! Today is about them and only them! We'll take care of their needs so that they can all get to relax! Now less jabbering, more-!" THWACK! "GAH!" CRASH!

"CAPTAIN!"

"PUPUPUPUPU! He forgot about the bags! PUPUPUPU!"

"DAMN IT, YOU MUSCLE-CLAD MORON, STOP LAUGHING AND HELP ME DIG HIM OUT ALREADY!"

"The things I do for this crew..." Foxy groaned out from beneath the mountain of supplies that had fallen on him.

"So boss, I just want to confirm..." Paulie hummed as he chewed on his cigar. "Are you *really* sure
that it's such a good idea to leave Christmas to Franky of all people? I mean, well..."

"I think what Paulie's trying to say, sir, is that in the end, it is Franky," Kaku provided bluntly. "He can be quite the hooligan, so are you certain it's wise to leave the celebrations in his hands?"

"What they're trying to say is that they're worried that bastard'll just wreck everything!" Rob Lucci provided by way of his pigeon Hattori.

"Though it pains me to speak against you, Mister Mayor, I fear that for once they might be correct," Kalifa agreed as she primly adjusted her glasses.

"THE HELL DO YOU MEAN 'FOR ONCE', YOU SHAMELESS HARLOT!?" Paulie roared furiously as he jerked towards the secretary.

"I believe she's referring the incident when you stupidly bet three months' worth of pay on a yagara bull whose odds to win were two-hundred to one," Kaku explained with a sigh.

"THAT WASN'T MY FAULT, I HAD NO IDEA THAT ZAMBAI WAS LYING ABOUT THAT BULL!"

Rob Lucci shot a flat look at his coworker. Well... flatter, at any rate. "You had no idea... that Zambai... of the Franky Family... was lying to you."

Paulie opened his mouth to respond... and promptly shut it with an embarrassed snarl as he spun his stool to face the bar. "Where's that damn eggnog, Blueno!?"

"Here, here," the large horn-haired man laughed as he thunked a mug in front of the shipwright. "And don't worry, it's on the house. I could never make you all pay on Christmas!"

"We're much obliged, Blueno," Iceburg nodded at the bartender with a smile before addressing his employees. "And don't worry about Franky. I know he might be a brute most of the time, but if there's one time of the year he can put his... exuberant personality to good use, it's Christmas. Believe me, I'm sure everything will be fine."

Almost as if in response, a loud thunk echoed from the roof of the bar, followed by a very familiar voice. "HO HO HO! MERRY CHRISTMAS! MERRY CHRISTMAS TO YOU ALL! I REALIZE THAT I'M ALWAYS IN THE MOOD FOR THE HOLIDAYS, BUT THIS YEAR, I'M FEELIN' EVEN JOLLY-AH!"

"That one was weak, Franky!" Iceburg shouted upwards. "And either get that sleigh of yours to actually fly or drive it on the streets! Next year, you'll be the one paying for retiling almost a hundred rooftops!"

"CRAM IT UP YOUR STOCKING, ICE-FOR-BRAINS!" Franky roared back, his voice being swiftly followed up by the sound of reins snapping and roof tiles crunching under the weight of yagara-bull treads.

"Well, there goes the weekend," Paulie groaned, slamming his forehead against the bar.

"Oh, I almost forgot!" Blueno spoke up eagerly. He reached beneath the bar and held out a gift-wrapped package to Rob Lucci. "Here you go, Lucci. I got you a present."

"Really now?" Lucci cocked an eyebrow as he took the gift. "What is it?"

"Open it and find out, genius!" Paulie scoffed as he stewed in his eggnog.
Lucci rolled his eyes at his coworker's frank tone before removing the wrapping paper, revealing a package of—

**CRUNCH!**

Iceburg blinked in surprise as the bar suddenly splintered beneath Lucci's fingers. "What's wrong Lucci?" The Mayor glanced over his employee's shoulder and blinked in surprise as he saw what he was holding. "Huh? Why would that upset you?"

"What is it, sir?" Kaku asked as he started to drink from his own mug, an action that Kalifa was performing at the same time.

"It appears to be a bag of catnip, but I don't—!"

"PFFFF!"

Iceburg and Paulie both jumped in surprise when Kaku and Kalifa suddenly jerked forwards, spraying their drinks back into their cups.

"What the hell is so funny!?" Paulie demanded incredulously, staring at his coworkers in disbelief.

Kaku's sole response was to shake his head furiously. He was unable to say anything else on account of how he was burying his face in the crook of one arm while the other pounded on the bar helplessly, his body shaking and shivering all the while.

Kalifa wasn't much better, only just managing to stay on her stool as she fought to keep her hand clamped over the massive smile she was sporting. "N-Nothing, Paulie!" she managed to work out. "J-Just a litt-le in-joke i-is all!"

"I thought it would be... appropriate," Blueno offered cheekily, the statement causing Kalifa and Kaku to shiver anew.

Lucci glared daggers at his co-workers as he throttled the package. "Yes, yes, laugh it up, you hyenas. It's not that—huh?" Lucci cut himself off in surprise as he noticed he was making his voice come out of empty air on account of his shoulder being devoid of life, avian or otherwise.

A quick glance downwards awarded him with an answer to the situation: Hattori was unavailable to act as his marionette at the moment on account of how he was too busy flailing about on the floor of the bar, laughing his feathery white ass off.

Lucci glared at the pigeon for a moment longer before growling into his eggnog. "Traitors..."

-0-

"Bwooh bwooh bwooh, bwooh bwooh bwooh!"

"Yohohoho! Your rendition of jingle bells is spectacular, Laboon!"

"He's certainly better than you, Brook! You're always off key! Nuhahahaha!"

"With all due respect, captain, screw you! Yohoho-!"

"Hohoho—huh!?" Brook 'blinked' in shock as he jerked awake, snapping his sightless gaze around the deck of the Rumbar Pirates' second ship.

After a moment of fruitless staring, Brook groaned sadly and flopped back onto the deck, his limbs
"Merry Christmas, Laboon..." Brook sighed melancholically as he watched the snow drift down over him. "It warms my heart to know that at least one of us is having one... even though I don't have a heart. Yo ho ho..."

-COME ON, YOU DAMN SLOWPOKES! MOVE YOUR ROTTING CARCASSES! DECK THE NORTH HALLS, FILL THE CUPS IN THE BALLROOM, DRAIN THE BARRELS! MOVE MOVE MOVE!"

Absalom growled darkly as he sidestepped a band of zombies carrying a Christmas Tree between them all. "Why the hell do you bastards never move this fast for me!?" he demanded indignantly.

"You're nowhere near as scary as Mistress Perona!" another zombie replied as he dashed by, his arms loaded down with boughs of holly.

"WHAT!?" Absalom started to snarl before he was swiftly drowned out.

"WHAT!?" Perona shrieked furiously as she suddenly materialized in the poor undead's face.

"O-O-Only during this time of year though, Mistress Perona!" the zombie hastily hedged. "Th-Th-The rest of the year you're cute! H-Hyper cute! Q-Q-Queen of cute!"

Perona's expression immediately shifted to her usual smile. "Much better." Aaaand then it was straight back to demonic. "NOW GET THE HELL BACK TO WORK BEFORE I TEAR YOU LIMB FROM FUCKING LIMB!"

"YES, MISTRESS PERONA!" the zombie shrieked, swiftly taking to his heels.

"AND YOU!" Perona howled as she rounded on Absalom, causing him to instinctively take a hesitant step back. "WHY AREN'T YOU WEARING THE HOLIDAY SWEATER I MADE YOU!?"

Absalom sweated nervously at Perona's tone of voice before doing his best to rally. "I-I refuse to wear that mess of red and green yarn you have the gall to call clothing! It is an affront to attire everywhere! Plus, the wool makes me itch."

Perona's lips drew back into a snarl as she shoved her astral face in Absalom's snout. "You'll wear it and you'll like it, or else I swear on all that is cute and cuddly I will make you wear it!"

"HA! You can't even make Bearsy stay silent! How the hell could you make—!?"

"HORROR HOLLOW!"

One screaming, flailing, eldritch mass of ectoplasm later, and Absalom was numbly stumbling down one of Thriller Bark's many corridors, clad in a garment only slightly less demented-looking then the terror he'd been confronted with moments ago.

After a minute of aimless wandering, Absalom managed to run into Doctor Hogback... who was clad in an equally terror-inducing 'sweater'.

"Perona got you too, huh?" the medical genius deadpanned as he sipped from the mug of hot cocoa he was carrying.
"Why the hell do we put up with that little brat?" Absalom growled murderously as he picked at the mess of yarn over his torso.

"Because if she wanted to, Mistress Perona could pop your heads like bugs and you'd be able to do absolutely jack about it..." Bearys huffed as he rolled a massive snowball past the two of them.

"SHUT THE HELL UP, BEARYS!"

Absalom and Hogback jumped as Perona's voice shrieked through the great manor's corridors.

"I thought she was back in the main hall," Hogback hissed.

Bearys's response was to jab one of his hands upwards, indicating a Negative Hollow that the two members of the Mysterious Four hadn't noticed until then.

The Invisible Man and the Mad Doctor exchanged panicked looks before hastily digging flasks out of their pockets and draining them as swiftly as they could.

Meanwhile, up in the manor's master bedroom, Gecko Moria was lounging on his Warlord-sized bed without a care in the world, grinning widely as he listened to his abode's holiday hustle and bustle.

"HANG THOSE STOCKINGS! DECORATE THOSE TREES! SCULPT THAT SNOW! HURRY THE HELL UP YOU JACKASSES! I SWEAR, IF THIS ISLAND ISN'T FULLY HOLLY-JOLLY BY SUNDOWN, HEADS ARE GOING TO FUCKING ROLL! AND I MEAN THAT LITERALLY!"

"Merry Christmas to you too, Perona!" Moriah chuckled as he picked up a giant candy cane and started crushing it between his teeth. "MERRY CHRISTMAS! KISHISHISHISHI!"

-0-

"Here's the next batch of octopus, Hachi!" Keimi called as she popped her torso out of the waves, hefting the net she was lugging up into the Takoyaki 8's kitchen.

"Thanks, Keimi!" Hachi smiled as he used one of his arms to unravel the net, his other five a blur of motion over the grill. "The holiday rush is great, and I'm almost out of——!" Hachi froze as he actually saw what was in the net. "THESE AREN'T OCTOPI, THEY'RE SQUID!"

"OH, CRAP!" Keimi shrieked fearfully. "I JUST GRABBED THE FIRST SLIMY LONG-LIMBED THINGS I COULD SEE!"

"HOW THE HELL COULD YOU MAKE THAT KIND OF MISTAKE!?!" Pappug demanded incredulously from where he was handling the stand's money.

"I'M SORRY!"

"It's alright, it's alright!" Hachi hastily reassured her. "I'll just use it as a substitute and offer some dried squid! I'm sure our customers will still love it! Here's hoping that Ikaros doesn't hear about this though, hoo boy..."

"Ah, Hachi, speaking of the customers!" Pappug hastily interjected. "Are you sure you want the prices to be so low? I mean, holiday spirit and all I get, but if we just had everything at least half price——!"

"It's not about the money, Pappug," Hatchan explained patiently as he got to work spearing the
"Making our customers happy during the happiest time of the year, I know, I know," Pappug sighed, smiling fondly nonetheless as he got back to work.

"Then let's get to it!" Hachi nodded enthusiastically before smiling towards his customers and holding out a stick of takoyaki. "Order up! And please, enjoy the holidays! Next please!"

"Give it up, Old Man, you can't beat me!" Ace laughed as he knocked back his mug. "I'm a lean, mean, drinking machine!"

"Gurararara!" Whitebeard laughed back as he chugged the barrel he was holding. "Speak for yourself, brat! Youth means shit before experience!"

"Psh!" Ace scoffed as he waved his hand, only just managing to stay stable on the barrel he was sitting on. "Maybe so, but I've got a distinct advantage! I can literally burn the alcohol out of my system, gramps! I can keep this up all! Day! Lo-!" Without warning, Ace fell backwards off his barrel, snoring at the top of his lungs.

"GURARARARARA!" Whitebeard cackled as he toasted his barrel at his crew. "Well, that's one down, who's next? Come on, the night's still young! By the time we're done, we're going to make the Red-Haired Brats' hangovers look like migraines by comparison! WHO'S WITH ME!?"

"AYE-AYE, POPS!"

"GURARARARARA!"

"AHCHOO!" Shanks sneezed violently, groaning as he swiftly wiped his nose before going back to rubbing his head. "Damn it... of all the times for people to be talking about me..."

"You do give people a lot of reasons to talk, chore boy."

"Bite me, Old Man Raleigh..." Shanks grumbled as he examined the items laid out before him. Silvers Raleigh shrugged indifferently, grinning as he drank from the bottle he was holding.

"Eurgh, anyways..." The red-haired Emperor turned his attention back to the bottles laid out before him. "Hey, Ben! Just to be clear, the wine's going to Mihawk, the rum is going to Kaidou-"

"No, the sake is going to Kaido," Ben Beckmann corrected boredly as he polished his rifle. "The rum is for Whitebeard, the soda is for Big Mom, and the whiskey is for Garp."

"Ah, right, right... and this clear bottle..." Shanks held up the container in question and swirled it in front of his eyes. "Nitroglycerine, right?"

"At least you didn't mistake it for vodka..." Ben huffed.

Raleigh gave his old subordinate a bemused look. "Who the hell are you sending nitroglycerine to?"

"The Five Elder Stars."

"...excuse me?"
Shanks' grin went from ear to ear. "Well, it's not Christmas without a good gag-gift, is it?"

Raleigh stared at Shanks flatly for a moment before slowly opening his mouth.

"For the last time, Old Man, I'm 100% positive that I'm not a D!"

"Psh. Could have fooled me."

-o-

Hack cocked an eyebrow as he looked down on Sabo's prone form, calmly inspecting the black eye that was swiftly developing upon his faithful student's partner in revolution. "And what have we learned about trying to set up mistletoe along Koala's usual route to the sparring ring?"

"Getting caught is liable to be very painful?" Sabo groaned.

"Atta boy."

Dragon glanced down at his Chief of Staff as he passed by him, stopping long enough to shoot him a cheeky grin. "The winds of fate can often be violent and turbulent, Sabo, but even should you fail to grasp them, never fear to try again when next they blow."

"Translation, sir?"

"Better luck next year."

"Understood sir..."

-o-

Within the holding pen he shared with his sibling, Proto-Drake No. 1, colloquially known as 'Big Red' by most others who weren't his creator, was slumbering peacefully, his titanic mass rising and falling in time with his breaths and earth-rumbling snoring. It had been a long week of testing, and the great beast was grateful for the respite it was being granted.

Suddenly, its slumber was interrupted by something large slamming into the ground next to him, followed by a most mouthwatering smell hitting his nostrils.

Cracking his eyelids open, Big Red immediately snapped his head up eagerly as he managed to catch sight of a most welcome sight: meat. A titanic slab of meat, almost as big as he was, just lying there, ripe for the taking.

Lumbering to his feet, Big Red immediately lurched himself onto the lightly cooked flesh and started to rip into it, managing to swallow several mouthfuls of flesh-

"GWOWOWO!"

SLAM!

"GWOOOOOh!"

Before he was suddenly knocked onto his side by an all-too-familiar impact.

Snorting furiously, Big Red heaved himself back upright and glared at the perpetrator of the attack: his younger brother, Proto-Drake No. 2, A.K.A. 'Little Green'.

-o-
The relatively diminutive dragon was snorting and snuffling eagerly as he eyed his elder sibling, dancing back and forth on his prize as he awaited the retaliation he knew was coming.

Big Red didn't disappoint. Roaring out a challenge, the titanic lizard lunged forwards and swiped his claws at his sibling. The nimble being managed to flap over the projected strike...

SLAM!

"GWOWOH!"

But had less luck with the tail that came out of nowhere, bouncing him off the pen's wall.

Still, despite the force of the impact, Little Green was back up in moments, zipping towards Big Red and slamming into him with more force than a being his size had the right to muster.

The bout went on for several minutes more, the dragons exchanging titanic blow after titanic blow, with neither giving nor gaining any ground or quarter.

Finally though, once the siblings had both gotten their licks in and worked off their excess energy, they both sat down and got back to enjoying their impromptu meal. Despite the occasional bat or swipe, the two dragons were content to enjoy both the feast before them as well as each other's company.

Outside the pen, a man shrouded in shadows smiled lightly at the display before turning on his heel and striding back into the corridors of Punk Hazard. The day was young, and he had many more experiments to temporarily put on hold.

After all, Vegapunk thought to himself, it would not do to focus on work on Christmas. Oh no, it would simply not do at all.

\[\text{-o-}\]

The mood amongst the gladiators of the Corrida Colosseum was substantially subdued as the fighters slowly made their way back to their cells after training. It might have been Christmas for the rest of the kingdom, and Donquixote might be taking care of their families during the holidays, but the holiday cheer could do little to help lighten the mood.

While Doflamingo lavished the kingdom outside with gifts and festivities, his actions towards the gladiators were... paltry, to say the least. The food in their meals was actually fresh, sure... but in all honesty, the quality of the ingredients did little to improve the taste of the gruel.

As such, the gladiator's expectations were beyond exceeded when they found a veritable cornucopia of gifts awaiting them in their cells.

New and vintage pieces of armor, quality weapons designed to last for countless battles, blankets and clothing aplenty to help them through the cold nights, all these needs and more were met by the presents that were individually addressed to them by name.

For a few minutes, the gladiators were... leery, to say the least. Who was to say that these 'gifts' weren't tricks from Doflamingo? That they weren't boobytrapped or destined to be yanked away from them at critical moments or bait with which to bring down punishment upon them?

Thankfully, those worries were soon dispelled by Rebecca noticing a small card attached to one of the cell's bars.
"To: the Gladiators of Corrida Colosseum.

From: Santa's Little Helpers."

For a few moments, the gladiators were silent as they processed the information.

Then, for the first time in a very long time, they started to well and truly celebrate the holiday with gusto.

-o-

I hummed a few offkey bars of a medley of Christmas carols as I leaned on Merry's railing.

It had been quite the day for our crew. Some bits of it were familiar enough, stringing up decorations, cooking holiday meals like eggnog and such...

Other events, however, were far more indicative of our crew. Nami giving Sanji a black eye for almost accidentally getting her and Vivi beneath some mistletoe had been one. I myself had had a more... enjoyable experience when I managed to take Carue's place when Vivi almost ran into him. It was just on the cheek, but still, it was the thought that counted.

In the end, it was plain and clear to see that the holiday spirit was alive and well on the Going Merry. We were all laughing, we were all having a good time, and the party that was being thrown in the kitchen was at full swing.

This fact was made especially evident when the door creaked open behind me, disgorging a wave of sound and laughter.

"Hey, Cross!" Nami laughed as she walked up behind me. "Are you going to come in or what? Sanji's eggnog is... whoo!" She laughed as she shakily supported herself against the railing. "It's actually pretty damn strong! And Soundbite's actually pretty good at singing when he skips past all the dirty limericks!"

I chuckled slightly at her antics before waving her off. "Yeah yeah, don't worry, I'll be along in a bit. I'm just..." I gestured upwards at the stars. "Enjoying the view."

Nami giggled drunkenly as she nodded in acceptance. "Fair enough, Commie!" She plopped a red and white hat down on top of my head and started to make her way back to the kitchen. "Merry Christmas, Cross!"

"Merry Christmas, matey," I shot back with a backwards wave.

Once the door shut, I stared up at the stars contemplatively, my mind a million miles off.

To think... that at this moment, in this world, across this world, Christmas was being celebrated. A holiday I'd never truly expected to see again. A holiday from my home...

I couldn't help but smile fondly at the thought. Something so familiar, so normal, appearing in this world just like that. Truly the Blue Seas never ceased to amaze.

I wondered... just how many other things were similar? How many other aspects from there could be found here? Where did they start, and where did they end?

Truly a momentous question. Still though... in the end, did it really matt-

"HO HO HO!"
I snapped my head up at the sound that echoed over the seas, raking the night sky for signs of... well, *anything* really.

A shadow flitting across the moon, a trail of sparkles in the sky... and then nothing.

I blinked numbly as I tried, *tried* to process what I'd seen. Was that actually—? Was it even *possible* —?

Finally, I turned on my heel and numbly marched towards the kitchen, shouldering my way inside.

I ignored everything around me as I beelined straight for the nearest bottle of alcohol, snatching it up and upending it, draining the liquid held within in a single, swift sitting.

Once that task was accomplished, I flung the bottle aside, climbed upon the table and threw my arms out wide.

"MERRY CHRISTMAS TO ALL!" I bellowed, the alcohol slurring my voice. "AND TO ALL A GOOD NIGHT!"

And with that, I fell backwards and plunged once more into the abyss, a goofy grin proudly displayed on my face.

-FIN-

*Xomniac A.N. Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays from the creative forces of This Bites!,
and good fortune to you and your families!*

*CV12Hornet A.N. Merry Christmas, ya filthy animals.*
I panted heavily as I chased after Luffy's dust trail, doing my level best to keep up with him. Still, despite my best efforts, my 'best', improved as it was, wasn't anywhere near good enough to keep up with as ridiculous a powerhouse as Luffy. It was all I could do to stay in sight of his dust-trail, and dodging around the citizenry and odd marine wandering around wasn't helping matters in the least.

At least I wasn't all that alone on my chase, so to speak.

"CROSS!" Nami howled from Soundbite's mouth. "What the hell do you mean by Marines!? And why the hell didn't you tell us that Mr. 3 was here!?"

"Oh yeah, his ship's near the Merry..." I huffed to myself before refocusing. "And in reverse order, I didn't tell you about Mr. 3 because he's not relevant. He's nowhere near Nanohana at the moment, so you don't need to worry about hiding your faces, and Crocodile's going to jump the gun and take care of him before he can raise any hell for us, so don't worry about the Wax-man. And as for the Marines, well..." I couldn't help but grin eagerly. "Well, even before I opened my mouth Smoker wanted Luffy's head as a matter of pride!"

"And now?" Nami groaned wearily, obviously dreading the answer.

"If there was a chance in hell he'd ever leave us be before, there sure as heck ain't one now!"

"... you are a raging son of a bitch, you know that?"

"And proud of it!" I cackled eagerly. "Now, hurry up and load up on supplies, the desert's going to be hell on earth as it is. Oh, and before I forget, Sanji!" A glance at Soundbite prompted him to shift his expression and voice.

"Yeah, Cross?"

"You're in charge of getting clothes for everyone. Make sure you go with your instincts, got it? The fate of Alabasta might very well depend on it!"

Sanji, and by proxy Soundbite, blinked in confusion. "Um... alright? If you say so, Cross."

"Great! Now then..." I trailed off slowly as I became aware of a rather crucial fact: I'd lost Luffy's trail. "Where the hell is my captain!?"

SMASH-SMASH-SMASH-KA-KRASH!

I blinked in surprise at the trio of explosions that rang out from the alleyway to my next, explosions that were swiftly followed up by a rather impressive cloud of dust and debris.

"I'm GONNA say thataway," Soundbite deadpanned.

"I'm inclined to agree with you..." I muttered as I made my way towards the devastation. Gingerly peeking my head into said alleyway, I noted the neat holes shattered into the walls.

"Christ on a pikestaff, Luffy," I muttered, not even wanting to consider how much force that required. "Are you a human, a monster, or some freak force of nature!?!"

"D: all of the above!" my gastropod companion snickered.
I started to nod in agreement before tensing furiously as I ran that sentence over in my head. "...That makes way too much sense..." I groaned to myself.

"Gimme a freaking break…"

I flinched back as a wave of heat washed over me, followed swiftly by a very familiar grumbling pirate. Geez, Ace looked steamed, and yes, that pun was intended because the way the air was shimmering around him made that expression all-too-literal.

"Smashing me through several buildings, what kind of world-class idiot would do something like that!?" the Whitebeard Second Division Commander growled to himself.

"Ah, excuse me?" I piped up hastily as I hurried to catch up with him. "Did you just say 'world-class idiot'?"

Ace paused in the last hole, presumably seeing Luffy. I was more preoccupied by the sound of a lighter flicking behind me, which turning around revealed to be Smoker standing in the previous hole, lighting his cigars and looking damn intimidating in the process. I sighed as I realized what was about to happen.

"Oh, this is gonna suck..."

Sure enough, just as Ace began a "Hey, Luffy!", I felt a hand clamp down on my face with all the force of a hydraulic press before slamming me head-first into the hardwood floor.

Did it say bad things about the past few weeks that an impact that should have, by all rights, split my head like an egg only hurt a little more than a common bump?

Yes.

Very much yes.

After a few moments of lying dazed on the ground, I slowly managed to work myself up into a sitting position, rubbing piteously at the goose-egg that was growing on my skull. "Owie..." I whimpered.

"Hey Cr's!" Luffy called up from behind me, his words thoroughly muffled by the excess of food in his mouth. "Why does th's guy seem so fam'liar?"

"Captain Smoker, the Marine from Loguetown," I informed him blearily as I gingerly poked at the swollen flesh on my skull. Damn, that stung! "I'd say we're a bit out of his jurisdiction, but then again we are on World Government soil, so that point is moot."

"Oh, okay."

"Urgh... ow..."

Some groaning next to me prompted me to glance at Ace, who was slowly working himself up with a pained expression.

"Last time I let my Haki slip, even in Paradise..." he growled to himself before focusing on me. "Hey, you. You know my brother?"

"AHHH!" Luffy hollered fearfully, no doubt spraying half-chewed food all over Smoker as his neurons finally fired. "TH'T SMOKY GUY! WE GOTTA RUN, CROSS!"

When he was interrupted by Luffy's hand grabbing onto my shoulder. I could feel the blood drain out of my face. "Oh, no..."

"HERE WE GO AGAIN!" Soundbite hollered as he snapped back into his shell.

And just like that, Luffy's arm went taut, yanking me through the air.

"AAAA—oh, hi Smoker!—AAAAAAAH!" I hollered as I was snapped back against Luffy, the moron dragging me along as he ran at what had to be over a dozen miles per hour.

"Cracracracrapcrapcraprapcrapcrapcrapcrapcrapcrapcrapcrapcrapcrapcrapcrapcrapcrapcrapcrapcraprap, gotta run, gotta run, gotta run!" Luffy chanted frantically as he dashed through the streets.

I opened my mouth to say something... and promptly gurgled in horror when Smoker barreled out of the ruined restaurant, a veritable volcano of rage as he charged towards us. "Run faster! Run faster!"

"RUNNING FASTER!" Luffy concurred frantically.

"TASHIGI!" Smoker suddenly roared. "IT'S STRAW HAT AND CROSS! STOP THEM, NOW!"

I twisted my head around in order to glance over my shoulder and paled as I caught sight of Officer Tashigi falling into a ready stance. "RUN SOME OTHER WAY!"

"RIGHT!" Luffy nodded in agreement, snapping his arm out as Tashigi slashed at him and whipping us up the side of a building, finally coming to a momentary halt on the roof before continuing. "That was close! How you doing, Cross?"

"My arm feels like it's about to be twisted out of its socket, my legs aren't in much better condition, and I think I'm going to either vomit, pass out, mutiny, or some unholy combination of all three," I gurgled miserably as the world spun around me. "But apart from that? I'm greeeeat."

"Somebody STOP THE world, I wanna get off..." Soundbite moaned blearily.

"So you're okay then! That's good!" Luffy laughed happily.

I threw an acrid glare his way. "Do you only listen to every other word I say or something!?"

Before Luffy could respond, he was interrupted by the far too familiar sound of smoke billowing behind us. "WHITE SNAKE!" Smoker roared, flinging his nimbus-like limb out at us.

"OHSHIT!" I yelped, jerking my legs out of reach of the snapping white 'jaws' just in time. Holy shit that was close! Credit where it was due, Smoker was admirably persistent! Well, if he wasn't chasing me and my captain.

"What are you doing here, Straw Hat? What's your goal!?" Smoker roared at us.

I dared to allow myself a faux-hurt expression. "Why, Captain, is it so unbelievable that we missed you so much that we sought you out simply for the pleasure of your company?"

"Huh? Really?" Luffy blinked at me in confusion. "I thought we were here so that we could kick
Crocodile's ass?"

I shrugged helplessly. "Well that too, but honestly I consider that to be more a civic duty than a goal."

That managed to bring Smoker up short, though he swiftly rallied and redoubled his attempts to recapture us. "What business does a wet-nosed rookie like you have with someone like Crocodile!?!"

Intoxicated by the sound of my blood pounding in my ears, I barked out a laugh before jabbing a finger at the Marine. "Easy: we're doing the founding premise of your job for you! Honestly, considering how we're doing this as a favor for the kingdom's heir apparent, I think we might have even more right to be here than you!"

"Hair detergent?" Luffy tilted his head as he looked over his shoulder at me. "I thought that we were doing this for Viv—ACK!"

"HOLY—!"

CRASH!

That was all we managed to get out after Luffy mistimed one of his steps and fell into one of the gaps between the buildings whose rooftops we'd been crossing over.

"Whoops..." Luffy chuckled dizzily.

My opinion on what had just occurred was... conflicted. On the one hand, I'd just fallen from a three-story height and not only had I lived, but I was ninety-five percent positive that I hadn't broken anything from the fall.

That was badass.

On the other hand... the general sensation my body was sending to my brain could be summarized as oooooowwww.

That... was not so badass.

"Luffy..." I ground out. "By any chance... have you ever heard the phrase... look before you leap?"

"Mmm... nope! Never! Why, is it important?"

"...no, it just explains so much about you... still, at least today can't get much worse."

"CROSS!" Soundbite barked in Nami's voice before he shifted to his own annoyed expression. "You had to say it."

I shrugged slightly, wincing at the ache it caused. "Honestly, I was mostly trying to just move things along. Anyways, what is it Nami?"

"Cross..." our navigator snarled venomously. "We were calmly doing our shopping in peace and quiet, minding our own business, until someone," I could all but taste the poison she put into the word. "Whipped the battleship-load of Marines in port into a frenzy. What the hell did you morons do!?"

"In my defense, I plead innocence by act of Luffy," I deadpanned.

"...alright, fair enough. So what the hell do we do now? Sneak back to the Merry or something?"
"That would be a viable solution..." I conceded before shaking my head with a sigh. "Save that Captain Smoker followed us all the way here from the East Blue and he's going to keep following us, most likely all the way to the shores of Raftel. So really, what do you think the chances are that mere 'sneaking' will help us elude him?"

"Then what's your brilliant strategy for escape?"

"K.I.S.S.: Keep It Simple, Stupid. Sometimes the simplest solution is the most effective. It's why people still use hammers, after all."

"And the simplest solution would be...?"

I winced slightly as I worked my neck back and forth, popping out a few unpleasant kinks. "Get ready to run."

"...I wish that didn't make so much sense."

"You and me both," I sighed wearily.

"Uhhh... Cross?"

"Yeah Luffy?"

"Can we go now? Hiding is boring."

"Yeah, sure thing. Just, do you think you could drag me by somewhere else, please? My shoulder still hurts."

"Oh yeah, sure thing! Hey, Soundbite, which way's everyone else?"

"Thattaway!" Soundbite crowed as he jabbed his eyestalks down the street.

"Perfect!" Luffy whooped as he jumped to his feet. "Come on, Cross, let's go!"

"Aye aye Cap-ACK!" I squawked in panic as Luffy grabbed onto me again, thankfully not by my shoulder. Sadly, the new spot wasn't all the much better. "Nononono Luffy wai-!"

"YAHOO! FORWARDS!" Luffy roared as he barreled out of the alleyway, dragging me behind him by my ankle.

Once again, my opinion of this state of affairs was rather split.

The upside of the situation was that by being dragged by Luffy, I didn't have to push a hundred-and-ten percent from my legs in order to keep up with his insane speed, and thus I wasn't slowing him down.

The downside, of course, was that in my current position, sand was being blown straight into my ass with all the power of an industrial-grade snowblower. Hence, I was a bit... uncomfortable.

I huffed heavily as I crossed my arms, staring up at the sky contemplatively. "I am conflicted..." I mused to myself.

My conflict was brought to an end on account of my head suddenly bouncing off of a buried rock in the street, causing my everything to become pain.

"Mmmrgrgh..." I groaned as I slowly came awake, cracking my eyelids open... and becoming aware of the fact that Luffy was poking me in the face.

"Are you sure he's still alive, Luffy?" I heard Ace ask from somewhere out of my field of vision.

"Yeah, I'm sure!" Luffy grinned. "Cross isn't a weakling! Well, he's kind of a weakling, but he's been getting better... kind of? It's confusing."

"NO, YOU'RE JUST a moron!" Soundbite cackled.

Deciding that enough was enough, I announced my return to the realm of the waking by shifting around... and promptly hissing in pain, wincing as I dug my hand under the back of my head. *Damn it,* was the universe *trying* to put a hole in the back of my skull!?

"Oh hey, Cross, you woke up!" Luffy cheered enthusiastically. "How you feeling?"

I... will confess, I'm not *entirely* sure what happened at that moment. Maybe I had heatstroke from the not inconsiderate amount of sun I'd been exposed to, maybe my temper finally hit a breaking point, or maybe I just went temporarily *insane.*

In the end, the 'why' didn't matter.

THWACK! "MMPH!"

What *did* matter was that my fist somehow ended up literally elbow-deep in Luffy's face.

I blinked in surprise as I processed what had just happened before yanking my arm experimentally. I could *feel* the sweatdrop weighing on my head as my limb stayed stuck fast in my captain's head.

I shot a sheepish grin at Ace. "Ah... Luffy's skull is a bit thicker than I thought. Little help?"

Ace stared at me in shock for a second longer before throwing his head back and laughing his ass off. "HAHAHAHA! Oh man, you really *are* Luffy's crewmate! Only *he'd* be crazy enough to recruit someone like you!"

"Yeah yeah, I'm a crazy son of a bitch worthy of the Grand Line, that's both a compliment and an insult. Now help me before Luffy asphyxiates! God knows that he didn't get enough air at birth as is..."

"Nah, I know for a fact Luffy chewed on the bars of his crib as a kid," Ace said with a grin.

A grin I matched. "Lead paint?"

"He swears up and down that it tasted like chocolate."

"'ut it 'id!" Luffy muffled out.

"HOOOOHOOOHAHAHAHEEHEEHEE!" Soundbite cackled madly.

"But, ah, seriously though." I planted my foot on Luffy's shoulder and tugged, distending his face a bit but nowhere near enough. "Get. Me-!"

In a flare of flame, Ace was behind Luffy, grabbing the nape of his neck and yanking back, hard. Thankfully, the force was more than enough to release his face's grip on my arm with a *very*
"Thanks," I said, shaking my hand out in order to try and get some feeling back. "I was afraid we'd have to resort to our first mate's brand of back-alley surgery. I don't know about you, but I like having two hands, thanks."

"That's... Roronoa Zoro, right?" Ace replied, still grinning. "Good choice there, Luffy."

"He's been training me, so my bruises and I sorely beg to differ!" I jabbed my finger up pointedly.

"Heh, yeah, Zoro and everyone else on my crew is pretty great!" Luffy snickered as he rubbed a finger beneath his nose. He then clapped Ace on his shoulder. "I know I already said it, but it's really great to see you again, Ace! I've missed you a whole lot!" His face then twisted up in confusion. "But what the heck are you doing in Alabasta anyways? Cross told me that your new captain Whitestache-!"

"Beard!" Ace and I corrected with different degrees of heat.

"Whitebeard is on the other side of the world! How come you're so far away?"

That question caused me to freeze up furiously.

"ZEHAHAHAHA! WITH THIS POWER, I WILL BECOME THE KING OF THE PIRATES! ZEHAHAHA!"

I shuddered heavily at the thought before waving my hand frantically. "Ah, before you answer that, mind if I say something?"

The brothers looked at me in confusion. "Uh... sure thing Cross, what is it?" Luffy tilted his head inquiringly.

Upon gaining the attention I'd been seeking, I promptly froze up. I knew that this day was gonna come eventually, but damn if it being here didn't make it any easier. Nevertheless... it wasn't like I had any other choices. Not saying this would be just as bad as if I'd never said anything at all. Best to get it over with.

I bit my lip hesitantly before poking my fingers together sheepishly. "I... look, Luffy, what I'm about to say... chances are you're going to want to punch my head off my shoulders for it. And... you'd be well within your rights to do so. The both of you. Just... fair warning, alright?"

Luffy frowned in concern. "Cross, does this have anything to do with 'that'?"

I winced guiltily. "It's... it's a part of 'that' that I didn't tell. That I couldn't tell you until now, when Ace was around. I'm really sorry I didn't, but I swear I had my reasons. Good reasons, not like last time. Alright?"

Luffy pursed his lips in thought for a moment before nodding solemnly. "Okay, then. What is it?"

Ace, for his part, was looking at us like we were both crazy. "Uh... what are you talking about? What's 'that'? And Cross, what could you possibly—?"

"Over ten years ago, you and Luffy had a third brother named Sabo."

Ace's voice died in his throat as he stared at me as though I'd just grown a second head. Before he could say anything, however, I forged on.
"When you met him, he made himself out to be a street rat like you, but the truth was that he was an ex-noble, emphasis on the word ex because for those who can't conform, life as a noble is hell, so he got the hell out of dodge. Despite not being related by blood, all three of you were just as close, closer even. However, after the noble's plan to immolate Gray Terminal and everyone living within, Sabo decided to flee Goa Kingdom and set out on his own to be a pirate. Sadly, he left on the same day a World Noble arrived at the Kingdom. The Noble fired upon and destroyed his ship for the dual crimes of flying a pirate flag... and because Sabo cut off the Noble's ship with his own."

If I'd grown a second head before, I might as well have turned into Blackbeard then and there the way Ace was looking at me.

"How...?" he started to grind out before I cut him off with a raised hand.

"That part..." I said slowly, glancing at my captain, who'd angled his hat over his eyes. "Was the part that Luffy knew I knew. But what I'm about to say... this is the first he'll hear of it." That got Luffy's attention if the eye he was looking at me with was anything to go by.

The temperature slowly started to crank up as Ace took a step towards me, angling himself so that he was standing in front of Luffy. "What are you talking about?" he asked menacingly.

I swallowed heavily, clenching my eyes shut along with every other muscle my body had available. This... was going to hurt.

"Sabo is alive."

SLAM!

"GRK!" I wheezed out around the iron-hard grip that had grabbed my throat and rammed me into the nearest wall available. Spots danced in my vision, but it was hard to tell whether they were from the minor concussion I was no-doubt starting to develop or from the flaming fingertips hovering mere inches from my face.

"Mother!" Soundbite yelped as he snapped back within his shell.

"I'm-not-lying-I'm-not-lying-I'm-not-lying-oh-dear-god-don't-kill-me-I'm-not-lying!" I babbled desperately, fighting to maintain what little control over my bladder I could manage. Honestly, I'd probably be laughing my ass off if doing so didn't guarantee a swift and fiery death by pissed-off-brother.

"Yeah, I bet," Ace growled viciously, the air around him starting to very visibly shimmer. "It's a shame, I actually thought you were a decent guy. Second time I've been wrong. Only this time, you're not getting away."

"Ace!" I dimly heard Luffy shout. "Let go of my Commie!"

"Luffy, you can't actually believe this shit, right?" Ace snarled. "Even you're not that gullible."

"Did anyone… find a… bo-ARGH?" I managed to wheeze out before Ace squeezed my windpipe shut.

"Don't you fucking dare imply that!" he snapped. "He was blown to fucking bits! There was nothing-!"

"Ace, ENOUGH!"
"Luffy—!

"Cross already lied to me once and he hated every second of it! He wouldn't do it again! I trust him!"

"But—! He's talking about Sabo!"

"He hasn't been wrong before, and I trust him! Now let him go... or else."

Throughout this exchange, darkness had been slowly creeping up the edges of my vision. I was just about to black out when Ace's grip loosened just enough to let me gasp in a trickle of air.

"Talk fast."

"World Nobles can't shoot worth shit," I squeaked out, fighting to keep my increasingly muddled thoughts straight. "The bastard hit Sabo's boat, but he didn't hit Sabo. The reason no body was found was that there was no body. He was rescued."

"By who?" Luffy asked hastily.

"The same people... who rescued the people of Gray Terminal... before they burned," I gasped out. "Dragon... Dragon and his Revolutionaries. Dragon rescued him, they nursed him back to health!"

"Sabo would have come back if he was still alive!" Ace barked viciously.

"He didn't remember you—literally!" I tacked on swiftly as the Fire-Man's fingers flared. "He didn't get out unscathed, he had amnesia, has amnesia. The only reason he knows his own name is that it was sewn into the lining of his hat! Everything before getting blasted was a blank!"

"Then why didn't they just take him back to Goa, huh? Why take him along!?!"

I shook my head miserably. "Sabo's love for you was strong, but his hatred of Goa was stronger! Every fiber of his being screamed at him to not go back to Goa, and the Revolutionaries accepted! They took him with them! He's still with them, he's Dragon's chief-of-staff, he's alive, I swear it!"

Ace stared at me unreadably for a moment before finally releasing me and stepping back, allowing me to slump against the wall as I hacked and coughed miserably, massaging my bruised and burnt throat all the while.

"Thank you—!"

"Say it again."

I blinked in confusion as I looked up at him. "Wha—?"

And just like that, the words died in my throat... no, no that's not right. It wasn't anywhere near that simple. My breathing stopped, my heart stilled, my soul withered... it wasn't just my words that died... I died. For a brief, brief moment... it was indescribable, really.

Where to start...

The sun, I guess, would be a good place.

Imagine it: a nuclear ball of flaming gas and plasma, massive and hot beyond all reason, beyond all sanity, all imagination. Imagine all that fire and heat and light and power...

Then imagine you, a meager, puny, insignificant person, infintesimaly small on the cosmic scale...
were standing in front of it.

Just... try and conceive of it: an absolute nothing like you... standing up against the might and power... of a fact. An absolute *fact* of the cosmos.

Staring at Ace, at that moment... that was *exactly* what it felt like. Absolutely, *legitimately* what I felt like.

"Say. It. Again," he stated.

As shivers wracked every inch of my body, I became aware of the fact that at some point or another I'd fallen to my knees. Then I realized that I was crying. *Then* I realized that Soundbite was lying K.O. on my shoulder, foam bubbling furiously out of his shivering shell. Finally... I managed to force myself to speak.

"I swear," I breathed. "I swear to God, I swear to the devil, I swear on my friends, I swear on my friendship with Luffy, I swear to you. Sabo is alive and well. *I did not, would not lie.*"

And just like that, it was over, allowing me to collapse forward on all fours. I dry-heaved repeatedly as I grappled with my entrails.

Holy *f*uck. Welp, it was fucking official: Conqueror's Haki. *Never again.* Once was equivalent to a religious fucking experience, and Ace wasn't anywhere near the worst this world had to offer!

Then again, I'd gotten a close-range blast directed specifically at me. A more general burst was *probably* not as bad.

… Now I kinda wonder what that would feel like.

... I *might* have something of a problem.

"He's alive..."

"Huh?" I blinked at Ace in confusion.

The Second Division Commander was supporting himself against one of the walls, visibly fighting to stay upright. Honestly, if the joyous expression on his face was anything to go by, I couldn't find any fault with him.

"He's alive... Our brother's *alive!*" he repeated to himself rapturously, tears of joy streaming down his face.

It was a true testament to Ace's will that as fast as he broke down, he managed to pulled himself back together. This was *especially* fortuitous on account of how he was able to hastily tackle Luffy and force his mouth shut, keeping him from literally *bouncing* out of the alley in his ecstasy.

"Quiet you idiot, do you want the Marines to hear you!?" he hissed frantically.

"Or Baroque Works for that matter, the town is *crawling* with Billions!" I added. I grinned at the bemused look Ace shot me. "We're going up against Baroque Works, a top-secret criminal organization sowing unrest and anarchy in the kingdom."

Ace rolled his eyes with a sigh. "I should have figured. Who's the boss? Anyone I know?"

"IT'S GONNA BE LUFFY vs. CROCODILE!" Soundbite whooped. "*Kickass TO THE MAX!*"
That got an impressed look out of Ace. "Barely even... what, a month?"

"Mmm-hmm!" Luffy mumbled out with a nod.

"Barely even a month and you already managed to piss off a Warlord. I don't know if that's a world record or a testament to your lucky stupidity."

"Eh, a little of column A, a little of column B, in my opinion," I waved my hand side to side.

"HA! Fair point!" Ace barked in agreement before looking down at Luffy. "Now then. I'm going to let your mouth go. Do you promise to not shout loud enough that they'll hear you back home on Dawn Island?"

"Mm-hmm!" my captain nodded.

"He's lying through his teeth, of course," I deadpanned.

"Of course..." Ace sighed in agreement. "Alright, one, two—!" He removed his hand from Luffy's mouth-

"HE'S ALI—grk!"

And promptly squeezed Luffy's throat halfway shut. "Lower. The volume!"

"He's alive!" Luffy choked out, sounding for all the world like a dying squeaky toy.

"Yes, he's alive!" I concurred warily. "Now all we need to do is stay alive so that you can live to see him. Sound good?"

Luffy blinked as he processed that before nodding reluctantly in agreement. He then tilted his head at me in confusion. "Why didn't you tell me, Cross?"

Ace let go of Luffy as he looked at me. "That's... a good point. Why didn't you tell Luffy this earlier?"

I gave the pro-pirate a flat look as I pointed at the still-stinging burn-fingermarks on my throat. "Because if Luffy came up to you saying how I said Sabo was still alive, you'd have thought me some kind of con man trying to prey on the memory of your brother. After that, well..."

"BURN, BABY, BURN!"

"Precisely," I nodded solemnly as I pointed at Soundbite.

Ace had the decency to adopt a sheepish look as he averted his eyes from me. "Ah... well... I... I'm not that bad..."

"Nah, it's actually a good reason," Luffy nodded in agreement. "You'd totally do that."

"My thoughts exactly," I concurred.

"PRETTY predictable!" Soundbite tacked on.

"Alright, alright, shut it, you jokers!" Ace huffed in embarrassment. "Anyways, shouldn't we be trying to get back to your ship? I'm assuming you know where it is," He directed the question at me.

"Outskirts of town, hidden in the outcroppings. Should be easy enough to find. Come on." I waved
for them to follow me as I started to walk down the alleyway in the direction Soundbite jerked his eyestalks.

We calmly made our way through the back-alleys of Nanohana, doing our best to stick to the shadows and avoid the main streets. All the while, Ace and Luffy chatted animatedly as they caught up with each other. For the most part, I just stayed quiet and let them be. After all, this was between them, I had no right to intrude. Overall, it was shaping up to be a rather calm winding down of events...

Until Soundbite discretely bit me on the shoulder. "**Lotta guys WITH GUNS and swords coming our way. Not Marines,**" he hissed.

I clicked my tongue in annoyance. Billions. Damn it, and if Soundbite IDed them by their weapons, then that meant that there were doubtless more watching us without weapons, ducking Soundbite's notice. Well, at least I couldn't complain about things being **boring,** could I?

"Hey, Cross."

"Hm? Yeah, Ace?" I glanced over my shoulder at the New Worlder.

"Not that I don't appreciate what you've told us, but, well..." Ace spread his arms with a shrug. "How the **heck** did you know everything you knew? I can accuse you all I want, but... there's just no way in hell you're from Goa, or Gray Terminal, or Dawn Island... in fact, I don't think you're from the East Blue, period. And I'm guessing from the way you were unconscious you don't have a Devil Fruit, so... how could you know about Sabo's existence in the first place?"

I hesitated as I considered whether or not to tell him then—I was going to tell him either way, it was just a question of when—before focusing on a pair of items ahead of me. I grinned eagerly as I jogged up to them. "I'll tell you what, Ace! I'll tell you how I know what I know once we get to the Merry, and some extra..." I spun around and held out two four-foot-long lengths of pipe to the brothers. "And in return, you guys show me how two-thirds of the Gray Terminal brothers get things done. Deal?"

Ace and Luffy blinked at me in confusion for a second... before visibly putting themselves into relaxed positions as I purposefully glanced at the rooftops.

"Sounds fair to me," Ace shrugged as he took one of the pipes, giving it a contemplative swing. "What about you, Luffy?"

"Weell, it **has** been awhile..." Luffy mused as he weighed the pipe in his hand. "I mean, I can hit a lot harder than this, you know?"

"What's wrong, little brother? Afraid you might be rusty after so long?" Ace teased.

"Heck no!" Luffy huffed indignantly. "I can kick anyone's ass any way any day! I'll kick the asses of the Baroque bastards trying to sneak up on us no problem!"

The air seemed to freeze around us as Luffy spoke those words.

Finally, Ace and I directed flat glares at him. "You moron," we chorused, each of us facepalming.

And just like that, things went **straight** to pot as a half-dozen Billions jumped down, brandishing daggers, swords, and other sharp things. One of the Billions was even sporting spiked boots, of all things!
"No Devil Fruit abilities, okay, Luffy? We want to give these guys at least a sporting chance," Ace drawled nonchalantly as the Baroque Works agents fell.

"Sure!" Luffy said, grinning. "Wanna see who can take down the most?"

"You're on."

"Uh, guys?" I said nervously as the agents fell closer and closer. I needn't have worried. With a mighty shout of "FORE!", Ace and Luffy swung their pipes, each of them hitting three agents and sending them flying over the buildings hemming us in.

"Who's next?" Ace taunted, tapping the pipe on his shoulder. The cocky grin on his face didn't diminish in the least as another pack of agents filled the ends of the alleyways, aiming pistols and muskets, with some sort of sword-armed leader in the back.

"Meet you there, Luffy?" Ace grinned.

"Sure!" Luffy replied, grabbing me by the waist and slinging me over his shoulder.

I sighed at the manhandling, but at this point I was pretty resigned to the fact. "Just remember that I'm not bulletproof, okay?"

"Gotcha!" And with that, we were off.

Clearly, the agents had not been expecting their prey to have the audacity to actually attack them, because they just stared blankly as Luffy planted his sandal in the face of their leader and drove his head into the ground with a sickening crack. Behind me I could hear a similar, yet different crack that sounded suspiciously like a musket impacting a skull.

Sadly, the paralysis only lasted for a second before the agents whirled and aimed their guns back at us.

"They took out Billy!" one of them cried - actually cried, tears streaming down his cheeks and everything. "Get 'em!"

Too bad for them Luffy was already crouched right in the middle of their formation. A fact which was not terribly comforting as Luffy shifted his grip on me to a two-handed one.

"Luffy…” I said with mounting dread. "What are you-"

"Cross, go as rigid as you can," Luffy said softly, the shit-eating grin on his face not waveri a bit.

I felt the blood drain from my face. "Captain, don't you fucking-!"

My inner ears declared a revolution as Luffy swung me around like a polearm, my head slamming into the thankfully soft gut of one Billion as my feet hit the… well, somewhere in the torso. Then Luffy shifted his grip to my feet and slammed my shoulder blades into something once, twice, three times!

"Well, that went well," Luffy remarked as he carefully placed me down on the ground.

"Yeah, sure…” I mumbled as I wobbled around, trying to get my equilibrium. A task not helped by the massive bruise I just knew was spreading across my back and the pounding headache trying to turn my brain into mush. "Just use me as a ragdoll, it's not like I'm human, it's not like I have soft squishy bits that break when you hit things with them. It's not like-!"
"Five-THIRTY!" Soundbite barked.

Acting on instinct, I whipped my right forearm up and behind my shoulder, taking great satisfaction at the sound of snapping cartilage that rang out. I then proceeded to drop my arm down and jam my armored elbow into the bastard's gut. I topped it all off by spinning around and snapping my baton out in one motion, using the momentum to give the bastard what I hoped was a very impressive concussion.

I grumbled darkly as I collapsed my weapon and slid it back into its place in my jacket. "Damn Baroque jackass, thinking that Fire-Fist and Straw Hat could count as an easy target. Next in line for a number agent? Bull-fucking-shit! And those guys you hit me with are mine too, jackass!" The last bit I directed at Luffy.

"Aww, but Cross—!" Luffy began to whine.

"You got a dozen, let me have some measure of pride!"

"Aww, let your third mate have some credit, Luffy!" Ace laughed as he walked back up to us, happily spinning his pipe at his side. "After all, a dozen or sixteen, it doesn't matter: it's nothing when compared to my twenty!"

Both Luffy and I deflated as we stared flatly at Ace.

"He's really good at making someone feel insignificant, isn't he?" I asked flatly.

"You haven't seen anything yet," Luffy groaned. He then grinned as he hefted his pipe eagerly. "Still, either way, thanks a lot for suggesting this, Cross! It's been awhile since I used a pipe, I forgot just how fun it is!"

"Yeah, same here!" Ace laughed nostalgically. "Guess it goes to show that sometimes you need to get back to the basics!"

"Hey, if you've got a skill, best to use it instead of forget it, right?" I shrugged with a grin. "Well, anyways, if that's the last of them—"

"HEY! YOU! Yes, you, you bastards!" came a voice from up the street. We all turned our heads to see another pack of Billions, these ones manning a pretty large cannon. "You're going down, for my promotion, my comrades, and my promotion!"

"Christ on a pikestaff, how many of these guys does that sand bastard have?" I groaned.

"The Millions are 1800 strong, while the Billions are 200 strong," Soundbite recited in Vivi's voice.

"Oh, right..." I groaned wearily. "Well, where do you think he got all these guys, then? Thugs-R-Us?"

"Funny you should mention that, that's the name of a bar back in the outskirts of Goa!" Ace commented. "Great atmosphere, but the clientele's a bit-"

"STOP IGNORING US, DAMMIT!" the lead Billion finally yelled, pulling the string trigger and firing the cannon straight at Ace, Luffy and I being largely out of the line of fire.

"So, does he forfeit his points if he turns into fire?" I asked Luffy.

"I say yes," Luffy replied.
"Don't count your winnings just yet," Ace countered, still smirking. "I've got something I wanna try."

Holding up his arms, Ace caught the cannonball, letting his arms carry the ball to his chest.

And then he was promptly blown back a few dozen feet into a stack of barrels by the momentum transfer.

"Ow," Ace groaned as he hauled himself out of the pile. "Damn it, how does Gramps do that?!"

"HAHAHAHAHA!" I cackled eagerly, doubling over and slapping my knee. "Oh, that was priceless!"

"Huh?" Luffy blinked in confusion as he looked at Ace. "What're you guys talking about?"

I fought to get my laughter under control as I pointed at Ace. "H-he was trying to act like Garp and catch the cannonball! But he failed miserably! HAHAHA!"

"Ooooh..." Luffy nodded slowly in understanding... before falling on his back and roaring. "HAHAHAHAHAHA! THAT'S HILARIOUS! HAHAH—ERK!"

Both Luffy and I froze as a wave of heat and presence swept over us.

"I suggest you all start running. Now," Ace snarled viciously.

Luffy and I glanced at one another for a moment... before taking to our heels and bolting out of the alleyway, leaving the paralyzed cannon-wielding Billions where they were standing.

If the screams of agony that followed us were any indication, they didn't manage to escape ground zero.

"So, to confirm, where before mentioning his daddy issues would get me a beating, now they'll get me charbroiled?" I panted desperately.

"Looks like it!" Luffy nodded in agreement. "Now less talking, more running!"

And so we ran, tearing through the backstreets of Nanohana as we made our way back to our friends.

-o-

"So. Luffy."

"Eeyup," Luffy nodded in acknowledgment.

"Cross."

"Yo," I drawled, flashing a peace sign.

"Soundbite."

"DAT'S MY NAME, don't wear it out," Soundbite deadpanned.

"Ace, right?"

"Milady," Ace tipped his hat respectfully.
"So!" Vivi clapped her hands together with a sense of finality. "You all got separated from us in the confusion and had to make your way back to the Merry, which you successfully accomplished, right?"

"Yup."

"Uh-huh!"

"Right."

"That is correct."

"And you had to fight your way past a rather… sizable force of Billions, correct?"

"A little over… what, sixty by the end of it, all told? Maybe more? Either way, Baroque Works has lost the cream of its crop below the Agents," I summarized.

"Mmhmm, I see..." Vivi nodded solemnly. "And you also had more than a few clashes with the Marines, correct?"

"They kept running into us, so we had to kick their asses, yeah," Luffy nodded.

"I see, I see..." Vivi nodded anew. "All this, I understand perfectly well. It all makes sense, it's perfectly logical... I just have one question for you four."

She jabbed a finger off the side of the Merry at the inferno that was still raging in the heart of Nanohana. "WHY THE HELL IS THE CITY ON FIRE!"

Luffy and I pointed at Ace, a motion Soundbite mimicked with his eyestalk. "He did it," we chorused without remorse.

"Guilty as charged, my temper kind of got the better of me. Sorry?" Ace chuckled sheepishly.

If the way the rest of the crew facepalmed and Vivi's scarlet face steadily darkened to purple, that apology was neither the appropriate answer, nor was it appreciated.

Still, as it was, we were already ten feet deep. Why not burrow in deeper?

"If it's any consolation..." I spoke up tentatively. "There is a bright side. Besides the flames, I mean."

At that moment, I became acutely aware of just how 'royal' Vivi was. After all, only someone with a lot of personal authority at her fingertips could successfully make someone flinch by merely looking at them. "What. Bright side?" she ground out.

"Weeell..." I shrugged carelessly. "Now when Mr.2 and the Mr. 1 team burn the city to the ground, they'll cause a lot less damage? Because, you know, the fire already did most of the-!"

THWACK!

"-GAH!" I cried out as my head snapped back from the blow. I hastily pinched my nose shut as I felt a hot liquid run down my chin. "Son ob a-! You know, for a bacivist, you've god a mean punch! Also, for fug's sake, why is everyone going bor my head today?!"

"Is there anything else you'd care to mention about Baroque Works' plans?" Vivi hissed irately.

I froze for a moment before glancing up at her. "Bomb cabable of ebiscerating all ob Alubarna
hidden in da Sand-Sand Clan's headquarters?"

Vivi's eye twirled furiously for a moment until she let out a tired sigh and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Remind me why you're not telling us these pertinent things until we ask again?"

"Begause- Ergh, one second..." I pinched my unclogged nostril shut and blew a wad of blood and mucus out the other. "Ah, that's much better. Anyways, it's because A. Luffy would get pissed if I blabbed, and B. things worked out fine when they happened without my involvement. If I can make some things better, fine, but as for the rest, my personal opinion is thus: Laissez les bon temps rouler."

"Normal people don't consider rebellions 'good times', Cross," Vivi groaned as she massaged her aching temples.

"For the record, just how much has your presence changed already?" Sanji put in.

"Mmm, let's see..." I started counting off on my fingers. "I got Bartolomeo to go out to sea at least two years early, I've been talking shit with Smoker, that's gotta be doing something, I kept Luffy from snapping off Merry's main mast, I kicked Whiskey Peak off early, the Little Garden Affair was, well, the Little Garden Affair, and I took Nami's place at Death's doorstep." I glanced at Soundbite. "Am I forgetting anything?"

The snail rolled his eyes with a sigh. "Besides the obvious? No, you got it all."

Ace whistled in awe. "Okay, I'll be the first to admit: that's impressive. I'd think you were me!"

"Thank you!"

"So, moving on?" I queried innocently.

"Just..." Vivi held her hand up with a sigh. "Are you not mentioning anything else, Cross?"

"Why? It's not like my actions will slowly and irreversibly change everything I know," I snarked, before freezing and facepalming as I processed what I'd just said. "Okay, in my defense, I've taken a lot of blows to the head today." I held my position for a moment as I thought things over before looking Vivi dead in the eye.

"No, I am not neglecting to mention anything else," I calmly lied through my teeth. "Now, can I go and clean the blood off my... everything? Seriously, I've got at least a liter on me that isn't mine and a pint that is."

Vivi sighed in relief and nodded, waving her hand for me to go.

The second I was behind her back, I shot a look at Nami and Zoro. If the stares I got back were anything to go by, they understood perfectly that we needed to talk later.

And they weren't the only ones I had to talk to. Once I was sure the trapdoor to the guys' room was shut, I tapped my ear. "Ace, and keep it quiet." A moment's wait and I heard the whine. "Get away from everyone when you can and meet me down here, quietly. We need to talk."

It was a true testament to Ace's skills and abilities as a Logia when, ten minutes later, a stream of fire slid through the Going Merry's planks and into the room, swiftly solidifying into a familiar corporeal form.

I glanced up at the planks contemplatively before whistling in awe. "Damn, and not even so much as
a scorch mark. It's official: while the overconfident idiots might die young, true-blue New World-
grade Logia are terrifying."

"Thanks for the compliment," Ace nodded gratefully. "Now then, you wanted to talk?"

I winced and started scratching the back of my head uncomfortably. "Yeah... listen, Ace... fair
warning: you're going to want to turn me into a briquet just as much as before, and with just as much
reason. But this time... I am begging you to hear me out."

Ace stared at me silently for a second before tilting his hat down solemnly. "That bad?"

"Perhaps even worse."

The Division Commander was silent for a moment before nodding. "I'm a mature adult, I can take it.
Hit me."

"Right, right..." I pursed my lips before sighing and speaking. "Alright, I'll make this short and
sweet: you need to either seriously rethink your strategy for dealing with Blackbeard or abandon this
crusade flat out, because if you don't, then I guarantee you that you, Whitebeard, and the Whitebeard
Pirates as a crew will die."

Ace visibly flinched, the temperature of the room spiking as he visibly fought against his entire being
in an attempt to keep from jumping across the room and doing something unspeakable to me. He
fumed silently for a moment before glaring darkly at me. "Talk fast."

I sighed in immense relief before hastily collecting my thoughts and dredging up the argument I'd
come up with. "Marshall D. Teach might seem like a fat bastard, and he really is one, but the truth of
the matter is that he's a fat bastard who is leaps and bounds above your weight class. He's a genius
tactician capable of utilizing grand strategy and... I think game theory? Point is, his mind is as vicious
as his powers, and the Dark Dark fruit is terrifying enough as it is. If you try and take him on in a
straight fight, you will get your ass handed to you."

Ace opened his mouth, to say something, but I swiftly held my hand up. I then slowly pointed at my
left eye. "He scarred Shanks," I stated firmly. "Before he got his Devil Fruit. Before Shanks lost his
freaking arm. Whether it was before or after Shanks became an Emperor, I don't know, and in the
end, it doesn't matter. To this day, Shanks is wary of him. He's even going to go to Whitebeard, with
a gift, in order to get him to order you back. Whitebeard will refuse... and that will be a fatal
mistake."

Ace swallowed heavily as he mulled what I said over. "How... how will him killing me do anything
but bring the Whitebeards down on his head?"

I bowed my head solemnly. "Because he won't kill you. He'll hand you over to the Marines so as to
become a Warlord. He becomes a Warlord, he gains access to Impel Down. He gains access to Impel
Down, he gains access to a meat market of the vilest, evillest, most down and out monstrous
specimens of humanity this world has to offer. He'll have access... to the perfect members of his
crew.

"Do you see what I'm saying here? The Marines will try and execute you. They will effectively
declare war on Whitebeard, and he will respond with gusto. That fight will rock the world to its core,
to its very foundation. It will be known as the War of the Best, and it will change the very face of this
planet. All because Blackbeard wanted a recruitment drive. Do you really think that you can deal
with someone like that alone and come out on top? That anybody can!?
Mercifully, Ace's expression showed the appropriate amount of fear. Unfortunately, however, he also had a glint of stubborn, stupid, brain-dead pride and duty in his eyes that made me curse furiously.

"Son of a—! For the love of God, man, you died in Luffy's fucking arms!"

That got a jolt out of him. "No no no, you can't let him get close to that kind of a shitshow, you need to stop him—!"

"Stop him!?" I demanded, flinging my arms out wide. "I need to stop him!? Impel Down couldn't stop him, the full force of the fucking Marines couldn't stop him, nothing stopped him from getting to you, from rescuing you! He fought as long and hard as he could until you were home-fucking-free! What the hell do you think I could do to stop that!?"

Ace made to respond, then hesitated. "Wait... if we were really home free, then how—?"

"You were killed by the exact same thing that's driving you headfirst to death now!" I snarled as I jabbed him in the chest. "Lethal amounts of fucking bullshit pride! You couldn't stand listening to Akainu badmouth Whitebeard, you couldn't suck it up for ten fucking seconds and you died because of it!"

The Flame-man's face screwed up in anger. "Hey, Whitebeard-!"

"Yes, Edward Newgate is practically a living saint. I know that, you know that, a majority of the freaking New World knows that!" I spat. "And the words of an arrogant, vile blowhard of a volcano will never, ever do anything to change that! And because you couldn't accept that, because you had so little faith in your captain, your father..." I snarled directly in Ace's face. "You died. In Luffy's. Arms. He blacked out and went on a grief-stricken rampage for almost a day! Sabo read about it in a newspaper, remembered everything, and went into a coma for three!"

Ace opened his mouth—

FWOOSH!

—and I reduced it to a cloud of flames as I whiffed my hand through it. It didn't hurt him, but at least it shut him up.

"Luffy blamed himself," I hissed irately, so far past the point of calm at this point. "He fucking blamed himself. He questioned himself. He said he was weak. He questioned... how someone as weak as him... could ever be King of the Pirates."

That did it. I could see it in Ace's eyes: the hurt, the shock, the misery... I hadn't managed to kill the flame of vengeance, no, I had no illusions of that... but at least now there was a seed of doubt in his determination, one that he couldn't ignore.

Ace was deathly silent for what felt like an eternity before looking at me with a mix of emotions. "I can't let Blackbeard go free," he stated, though this time it was more with resignation than conviction.

I resisted the urge to punch him again in favor of sighing in relief at what progress we'd made. "And honestly, that's fine by me. I want that bastard as dead as you do. Just... all I'm asking is that you go in neither half-cocked... nor alone. Call in the rest of the Whitebeards, find Sabo in the Revolutionaries and ask Dragon for help, swing by Fishman Island and talk to Jinbei, call in favors from Big Mom, Kaidou, Shanks, hell, call Garp for backup if you need to, just get some freaking help! If you fight alone, then you're screwed. If you fight with someone at your side..." I spread my
arms helplessly. "I can't guarantee victory, not against him... but I can at least say with confidence that you stand a chance. Get me?"

Ace contemplated things for a second before nodding slowly. "Whitey Bay and Squardo are both maneuvering on this side of the Red Line, raiding trade ships heading to Mariejois." He grimaced uncomfortably. "It'll take awhile for them to backtrack this far into Paradise, Blackbeard's trail could grow cold..."

I hid my wince at Squardo's name with a disgusted sneer. "Believe me, the trail Teach leaves behind is a mile wide and scorched to hell and back. You won't miss it anytime soon. And if you really want to be sure, I can give you the island he'll probably be on by the time you get everyone together."

Ace's eyebrows shot up in shock. "That... would definitely help, yeah."

I nodded in agreement and started racking my brain. "It's, ah... ah geez, it was a minor location, not that important, um... it had an old-western style to it, wooden buildings and whatnot, the people were wearing cowboy hats and ponchos, I think. I... think it was named like a fruit?"

"Banaro Island?" Ace asked slowly.

I snapped my fingers in triumph. "That's the one! He'll be there when—well, no unnecessary spoilers, captain's orders, but suffice to say that when Luffy's bounty skyrockets—a second time, anyways—Blackbeard will be on Banaro Island. That's where you can find him and the other monsters following him."

Ace's grin became truly vicious.

"Hey, hey!" I jabbed my finger up firmly. "No going after him until after Whitey and Squardo are with you, Ace. If you face him alone, I guarantee you that your days on this planet will be numbered. Understand?" I didn't wait for him to respond. "Swear to me on your pride as a Whitebeard Pirate that you won't go after him alone, Ace."

"Hey, I—!"

"Swear it!" I demanded.

Ace grimaced painfully for a moment before nodding solemnly. "I... I swear on my pride that I won't go after Blackbeard alone. Happy?"

I nodded and smiled contentedly. "Very much so. Now, let's rejoin everyone else on deck, shall we? Oh, and please, use the ladder. I know your control is impressive, but this is still a wooden ship."

Ace nodded in agreement and promptly scaled the ladder.

The second he pushed the hatch open, I snapped my fingers. "Amp." And there was the whine. "Hey Luffy, just FYI, if Ace tries to fight Blackbeard alone, then I can guarantee you that he's gonna die!" I cocked an eyebrow at the betrayed look Ace shot me. "What? I never swore jack shit, and if I lie to my crew then it's for a reason I've guaranteed is a good one. Your dumbass macho pride sure as hell doesn't count."

"Oh you son of a-!" Before Ace could finish his sentence, Luffy grabbed him by his shoulders and yanked him out.

I chuckled as I listened to Luffy wail and rage furiously up above. Ahh, brotherly love. Too bad my only sibling was a snot-nosed shit who I far from missed, but eh, that was neither here nor there.
I blinked as a thought struck me. "HEY, ACE!" I called up. "IF YOU'VE GOT TIME, THINK YOU COULD LEAVE US SOME INSTRUCTIONS ON A HAKI TRAINING REGIMEN? OH, AND I MEAN ALL THREE! LUFFY'S GOT THAT ONE TOO!"

Maybe it was wishful thinking, but I was pretty certain that the string of curses Ace shot at me was an affirmative.

I shot a satisfied grin at Soundbite. "I think that went pretty damn well, all things considered. You?"

"We ain't COOKIN' WITH EVIL GAS in our own skins. I'LL TAKE IT!" Soundbite nodded in agreement.

"In-deed, my friend, in-deed," I nodded back, a relaxed grin on my face. "Today... is a good day."

-0-

"YOU GRAVEL-MUNCHING SALT-HUFFING MARINE-LOVING RAT-BASTARD!" I roared furiously at Ace's form as it departed into the sunset. That fucking asshat had just fucking screwed me, and after all I'd done for him too!"

"I don't see what you're so upset about, Cross," Zoro mused as he stood next to me, looking over the paper Ace had spent a full five minutes poring over, one I had really pinned a lot of hopes on. "These instructions make sense to me."

I shot a vicious glare at the swordsman. To be specific, I tried to immolate the paper he was holding with both my mind and my eyes. "Oh yeah, they're spot on, alright!" I growled as I snatched the paper out of his hands. "Color of Observation," I tore the paper in two. "Listen really hard! Color of Armament," I tore it into quarters. "Concentrate willpower really hard! Conqueror's fucking spirit!?" I jabbed the paper at Soundbite, allowing him to shred it into fragments. "'HELL IF I KNOW, I'VE ALWAYS JUST GONE WITH MY FUCKING GUT!' RAAAAAAGH!"

"So I take it you're angry," Zoro summarized flatly.

I opened my mouth to shout more... then clicked it shut as I heard a sound that was a lot like barking coming from the coastline we were anchored to. I grinned viciously as I wheeled around, tore across the deck and leapt overboard at the first dugong I caught sight of. "HELLO GUILT-FREE TARGET!" I roared.

As was to be expected, I got my ass kicked, hard. But, in my defense, I'm fairly certain that lasting three minutes against a species that has the words 'kung fu' as part of their name is at least remotely decent. The way the dugong was shaking his head and nursing a few bruises of his own was pretty gratifying, though.

I winced slightly as I peeled myself off the rocks before shooting a savage grin at the animal. "Not bad... best two out of three?"

The dugong blinked at me in surprise before shooting back a grin of his own. "Bring it on, fu!" he huffed in a halfway stereotypical Chinese accent.

I shot a look at Soundbite. "That's racist." If the way he laughed was anything to go by, then he couldn't give an absolute damn.

However, before we could truly get back into a brawl, the dugong's attention was diverted by more pressing matters. More specifically, by Luffy pummeling another dugong into the ground with a single blow.
"Holy crap, he just took down the chief, fu!" the dugong I'd just fought breathed in awe.

"He must be an amazing warrior, fu!"

"We must learn from him, jutsu!"

"The hell happened to the 'fu'!?" I wondered, more to myself than anyone else.

"Please teach us, master, fu!" a crowd of dugongs asked Luffy as they bowed before him.

"Oh, no..." Vivi groaned miserably as she slapped her hand to her face.

"Don't worry, I've got this," I reassured her before stepping in front of Luffy and addressing the animals. "Honorable kung-fu dugongs! While on any other day there would be no issue with Luffy training you all in how to fight, I am afraid that now is not the time! We have urgent business in Yuba, which is situated in the center of the desert! You're all hardy, of that I have no doubt, but not even you can pretend to fare well against the ravages of the sands, can you?"

The dugongs milled about uneasily as they talked amongst themselves.

"Besides," I went on with a shrug. "The fact of the matter is that you wouldn't get much use out of training with Luffy anyway. His fighting style is dependent upon his Devil Fruit, and his strength is a product of his lifestyle! If you truly want to become stronger, then it's my opinion that you'll need to see about leaving where you feel most safe and venturing out into uncharted waters. Quite literally!"

I jabbed my thumb at the Going Merry. "Personally, I suggest a skull and crossbones. That would all but guarantee you a slew of challenges the likes of which you've never even dreamt of."

More murmuring from the dugongs, though this sounded a lot more positive than before.

I grinned eagerly at the discussion I was hearing, and not even the exasperated stare Nami was giving me was doing much to dampen my mood. "Seriously?" she asked in a deadpan. "The guys told me about Bartolomeo; what is it with you and trying to make people pirates?"

I shrugged with a chuckle. "Hey, in my honest opinion, the more people who oppose the World Government even tangentially, the better. Sides..." I frowned slightly. "This isn't just pleasure, it's business: a long-term investment. With or without the War of the Best, the world is still winding up. Big players are bracing themselves, weapons are getting primed and readied... end of the day, a storm is coming in the long run, and the more people we have on our side, the better. And if Bartolomeo or these guys can make it," I nodded at the dugongs. "Then they'll be invaluable in the future."

Nami hummed contemplatively as she looked the animals over. "It's a hell of a gamble."

"Yeah, but if it's not high-stakes then it's not fun. Now, if you'll excuse me..." I cleared my throat and regained the dugong's attention. "Now then, if you still want some form of instruction or training, I can gladly give it to you!" I pointed at our ship. "That vessel is the Going Merry! She's very important to us, and we would greatly appreciate it if you were to take care of her for us. If at all possible, I'd request that you tow her up the Sandora River and guard her from all trespassers who might seek to do her harm! Agreed?"

Another brief moment of conference, followed by the dugongs pumping their fists with a cheer of "AYE-AYE, FU!"

And that was that. The rest of the crew worked on removing our supplies from the Merry while the dugongs got ready to start towing.
Once I was sure that no one was looking, I tapped one of them on their shoulder and bent down next to it discreetly. "If a man wearing women's clothes comes looking for the Merry, let him on board. He'll say he's a friend and he won't be lying. Got it?"

The dugong nodded in acknowledgement. "I'll spread the word, fu."

I nodded gratefully at him before wandering over to the rest of the crew. "So!" I grinned as I clapped my hands. "Shall we go?"

"Yeah!" Luffy started to nod before stiffening. "Ah! No, wait, I almost forgot something!"

We rolled our eyes in exasperation as Luffy jumped back onto the Merry, rummaging around for something before finally jumping off, a giant grin plastered on his face. "Okay, now we can go!"

Everyone else stared at the prize Luffy had affixed to his back while I merely grinned in acknowledgement. "Back to the most basic of the basics, huh?"

Luffy chuckled as he reaffirmed his grip on the pipe he had slung across his back. "Yup! I forgot how much fun it was to use before, so I don't want to forget again, you know?"

"Fair enough!" I nodded in agreement.

"Well, if that's everything..." Vivi turned and started walking into the desert. "It's best we get started. It's a long ways to Yuba."

And so we started our trek, marching through the sands and heat.

I made sure to slow my pace enough that I trailed at the back of our little caravan. I didn't have to wait long before Nami and Zoro joined me in turn.

"What didn't you tell Vivi, Cross?" Nami asked me under her breath.

I shook my head solemnly. "Vivi expects to find a thriving oasis and over six hundred thousand rebels who she can talk down." I sighed heavily. "What awaits us is a dried out husk of a town and one stubborn old man."

Zoro grunted darkly. "And where would the rebels be now?"

"Katorea. A small trading town north of Nanohana."

"What!?!" Nami hissed incredulously as she grabbed my shoulder. "Why didn't you tell her?!"

"Because Vivi thinks that Crocodile's plan is merely a venomous snake whose head she can cut off when in reality it's anything but," I shot back. "The truth is that Crocodile's spent years developing and growing a full-blown hydra. We cut off the head, two more will pop up in its place, ready to bite us in our asses. Sure, Vivi could easily talk down Kohza, but that wouldn't do any good. There are Baroque Works soldiers in the rebels and the royal army alike, so even if we got either side to roll over and unconditionally surrender, those sleeper agents would just open fire and start everything up again.

"If we really, really want this whole mess to end, then there's only one viable option. One possible way to well and truly kill a hydra: burn the stumps, stab the heart, grind its core to dust."

"Or, in other words," Nami said slowly, looking like she'd bit into a lemon. "Luffy's plan is the right one."
"Kick Crocodile's ass and dismantle his organization," Zoro summarized flatly.

"Not even that complicated," I shrugged. "Crocodile's arrogant as all hell. He doesn't think it's possible for him to lose and he's structured Baroque Works in such a manner. We take him down, everything else will grind to a halt without him. It's that easy."

"But Vivi won't accept it because people will get hurt..." Nami stated as she stared at her friend's back.

"Because we'll get hurt, Nami, no need to sugarcoat it," I corrected her. "And frankly, that's not her call. We've come this far, and we'll go as far as we need to to see this done."

Zoro nodded in agreement before giving me a sidelong glance. "Vivi won't be happy, you know."

I shook my head with a flat tsk. "If her anger is the price of a thousand thousand lives, then I'm more than willing to pay it."

"Fair enough," Zoro shrugged.

"I suppose..." Nami sighed. "In the end, I guess it's your mess... still, I do have one question."

"Hmm?" I glanced at her curiously.

Nami gave me a flat glare as she held up the edge of her coat and displayed a rather... form fitting outfit, if I did say so myself.

"HUBBA HUBBA!" Soundbite whooped eagerly.

"Personally, I think you're more an autumn than... what is that, a winter? But eh, it looks good either way," I grinned cheekily.

Nami snarled darkly as she let her robes drop. "What the hell were you thinking when you all but told Sanji to specifically get these outfits!?"

My grin widened a few molars. "I appreciate Alabasta's rich culture?" THWACK! "Agh, bitch!" I winced and clutched my throbbing arm. "Why are you so annoyed anyways!? You didn't mind that much in the story!"

"And if it was just Sanji being Sanji, I wouldn't mind!" Nami snarled. "But now that you're involved in this, it's a whole different paradigm! Now talk!" She brandished her fist menacingly.

"Alright, alright, geeze!" I held my hands up in surrender. "If you really must know..." I drew myself up and gave her the most solemn look I could manage. "The outfits you and Vivi are wearing? They are directly intertwined with the fate of Alabasta. Should you not wear them, then all is lost."

Nami blinked in surprise before looking down at herself contemplatively. "Well... alright. If you say so."

And with that, she accelerated slightly and got back into the midst of our group.

I held my solemn expression for all of ten seconds before allowing myself to grin like a madman.

"That outfit isn't important at all, is it," Zoro grunted.

"Oh, it is, it is!" I hastily reassured him. "Just..." My grin widened further. "Not for the reasons she thinks."
Zoro and Soundbite chuckled in amusement.

"I don't know why I expected anything less, Cross."

"*She gon'**keel YOU, *boi!*"

"Ah, but what a way to go..."

"Gaaaah, it's *hoooot!*"

We were drawn out of our conversation by Luffy letting out a piteous whine.

"How much longer is it gonna be until we get there?"

"I'm afraid it's going to be a while, Luffy," Vivi stated with a sigh. "All we can do is keep going forwards."

"Take heart, captain!" I reassured Luffy as I jogged up to him and patted him on his shoulder, staring out into the desert. "It's going to be long and hard, but none can deny the truth: we're on the last leg of our journey. At this point, nothing can stop us now."

Luffy was silent for a moment as he contemplated that. As he stared out into the vastness. Stared into the future, stared at the war to come. The struggle that lay before us.

"...but it's still going to be long and hot, huh?"

"As though Ace were punishing us from on high."

"Awwww..."
"Hooooot..."

"We know, Luffy..."

"Sooo hoooot..."

"We know."

"I'm out of sweeeeat..."

"WE KNOW!"

I sighed and wiped my forehead. However repetitive, damn if Luffy wasn't right. It was stupid hot, and worse, it wasn't the kind of heat I was used to. Florida was hot, sure, but at least the humidity kept you somewhat hydrated. Here in Alabasta? Not only was it even hotter than Florida, which I almost hadn't believed possible, it was dry heat. It was like an oven, and much like a cake, I could almost feel myself drying out.

Still, at least I was better off than the rest of the crew.

"Uuuuuuuugh…" Especially Chopper. Poor guy was entirely out of commission, lying on one of the sleds. It certainly didn't help that he smelled disturbingly delicious as well.

I winced as my foot slipped slightly in the sand as I tried to balance the share of supplies I was carrying. I was especially cursing the fact that I had had the foresight to grab the water from Luffy. Upside, we wouldn't dry out like raisins. Downside? Holy shit this stuff was stupid heavy!

When I'd mentioned that to Zoro, he'd just laughed and said it was good training. It'd taken Vivi and Usopp's combined efforts to keep me from breaking the cask over his skull. Apparently they didn't think dehydration was a worthy price like I did.

"I hope we reach those crags soon, or else I'm going to use someone's skin to make a freaking tent..." I growled to myself.

"I'LL HELP!" Soundbite hollered in agreement, his voice only slightly muffled by the water barrel. I'd been forced to stash him there within a few minutes of us hitting the desert. It was either that or listen to a third rerun of 'Disco Inferno', and I was not going to going through that again if I could help it.

"Don't worry Cross, you'll be fine," Vivi patted my shoulder reassuringly. "I know the desert might seem daunting, but there's really nothing to fear."

I started to absentmindedly nod in agreement. Then I froze as I actually heard what she said. My eye twitched furtively for a scant moment before I turned my head to shoot a sickly grin at the princess.

"Nothing... to fear... in the desert," I repeated slowly. "Is that right? Is that what you just said?"

Vivi blinked in confusion at my tone. "Um... yes, that's right, why?"

I immediately came to a halt as I grabbed the collar of her cloak.
"Nothing, nothing at all, absolutely nothing to fear whatsoever- LUFFY, DON'T EAT THAT!" I barked viciously.

"I wasn't doin' nuffin'!" Luffy mumbled out around his stuffed cheeks until Sanji kicked his stomach and forced him to spit our supplies out. "JERKS!"

"So again, to reiterate," I glared at Vivi viciously. "Nothing, is that right?"

"Ah..." Vivi leaned away from me, confused and nervous in the face of my vehemence. "Yes, nothing! Why? What's this about!?"

It might have been the heat playing holy hell with me, but I swear that I felt something snap in the back of my mind then and there as I plastered a thoroughly sickly grin on my face. "Ooooh, nothing, nothing..." I crooned sweetly. "I'm just thinking that the story I read must have been in a different desert. After all, such a safe desert such as this one wouldn't have such dangers as hallucinogenic cacti that could throw Luffy into a rampage, hmm?"

Vivi blinked in confusion for a moment before stiffening slightly with a stricken expression. "Ah..."

"Nor would this fine, fine ecosystem house such deadly, deadly creatures as the spider known as the Desert Strawberry, hmmm?"

Sweat started coursing down Vivi's face, and it had legitimately nothing to do with the heat. "I, um, ah..."

"And of course, those vicious, vicious Bandit Birds that con people, ah, no, not people," I jabbed my finger at Luffy. "Suckers, birds that con suckers, out of their supplies and leave them to die of starvation, must be from the other Alabastan Kingdom, HMM?"

Vivi's expression started to take on a sickly blue tone. "I-I-I, ah, t-that is to say-!

"And of course, the TEN-TON MAN-EATING LIZARD MONSTERS THAT BURY THEMSELVES IN THE FUCKING SAND MUST BE AS CUDDLY AS FUCKING PUPPIES, HMMMM!?"

"GROOOARGH!"

One of the nearby dunes erupted as one of said lizard monsters roared into view, snarling and hissing at us viciously.

"SCREW OFF, SCALE-ASS, NOBODY ASKED YOU!" I snarled as my jabbed my finger at the reptile.

The Sandora Dragon paused as it blinked in shock. It took a moment to glance around in confusion before slowly pointing at itself. "GRO?"

"YES, YOU!" I shouted furiously. "I DON'T HAVE ANY FUCKING TIME FOR YOU RIGHT NOW! RIGHT NOW, I'M TOO BUSY CHEWING OUT THIS KIND BUT DITZY PRINCESS FOR ALMOST GETTING US ALL- ah screw it I'm sick of this conversation, alright guys, sic 'im."

"GRORGH!?"

"GUM-GUM BAZOOKA!"

"THREE-SWORD STYLE! DRAGON TWISTER!"
"EPAULE SPRAWL!"

We all watched in unequal parts awe and exasperation as the trio assaulted the Sandoran Dragon. For longer than was strictly necessary, the sound of combat was all there was to be heard.

Finally, Vivi broke the monotony by giving me a bemused look. "Ditzy?"

"You forgot that you had baby Godzillas in your backyard, woman!"

"First, I don't know what a 'godzilla' is, and second, in my defense, thanks to the Supersonic Duck Squadron, it usually doesn't take long for the royal family to travel through the desert, so at most I've heard about all of those things from Pell and Chaka."

I opened my mouth to respond... then slowly shut it. "That... is quite possibly a fair point."

"BULL-SHIT IT IS!" Soundbite roared.

At long last, the carnage ended as the reptilian corpse was slammed into the sand, throwing up a sizable cloud of dust.

"Couldn't they have just scared it off?" Usopp lamented.

"Against those three at once?" Nami deadpanned. "That poor monster didn't stand a chance."

I nodded in agreement. Poor bastard. As I watched, though, I saw Luffy's mouth moving from atop the corpse. Frowning, I tapped Soundbite's shell. "Hey, what's Luffy saying?"

There was the familiar whine of Soundbite's power, and Luffy's voice started filtering through the transceiver.

"Hey, do you think we could eat this?"

I couldn't help but chuckle at that. Classic Luffy.

A few hours (or was it days? Years? Decades? In all likelihood, it was half an hour, tops. This heat was playing high holy hell with my head) later, after marching through the massive dunes and unerring heat, a shadow came into view in the distance.

I shaded my eyes, squinting towards the horizon. "Are those the crags, or is that just another wishful mirage of Walmart?"

"Superior mirages don't happen in deserts, not during the day," Nami muttered under her breath. At the questioning look I gave her, she sighed and slipped into lecturing mode. "Okay, there are two kinds of mirages, superior and inferior. Only superior mirages will produce the image of an actual object, but they require a layer of cold air under a layer of warm air, so a desert, with its hot ground, will not produce a superior mirage. Besides, even if it was a superior mirage, the object would still be real, just hidden under the horizon. So, to answer your question: yes, those are most likely crags. Water, please?"

"Thank you for the educational experience, Bill Nye," I chuckled as I handed the barrel over to her. Nami cocked an eyebrow at me as she took a mouthful. "Who?"

"Bill Nye the Science-!"

"BILL BILL BILL BILL BILL!"
"GAH!" Nami yelped in shock, nearly dropping the barrel as Soundbite suddenly hollered from within the barrel, forcing me to grab it. "Son of a- You'd better not have gotten any of your mucus in that, you little slug!"

"Who me? Couldn't be!"

"Don't worry, I made sure that there's a layer of cloth between him and the water so that he doesn't drown or contaminate it," I reassured her hastily.

"Uh, wait, I'm confused..." Luffy spoke up from the back of the group where he was hauling the majority of our supplies, following a rousing round of 'Because we said so, that's why!' "So are those real rocks or just a mystery mirage?"

I grabbed the back of Nami's cloak before she could attempt to strangle Luffy, giving Usopp a weary look. "Well?"

"Umm..." The sniper drew down one of his goggles' lenses and adjusted it a bit before grinning in relief. "Looks like real rocks, guys!"

"REALLY? WOOHOO! BREAKTIME!" Luffy roared eagerly as he made to dash ahead.

"HOLD IT!" I bellowed as I held my hand out in a 'stop' motion.

Everyone instantly froze, holding their breaths in anticipation.

I hastily darted over to Luffy's sled and sat on top of the supplies before giving his shoulder a pat. "Okay, now go!"

"MUSH, RUBBER-BRAIN!" Soundbite concurred.

"YOU GOT IT!" Luffy bellowed as he continued his reckless dash.

"WAIT A SECOND!" Everyone screamed after us, but to no avail on account of how Luffy was already long gone.

"WOO H-Acksplt!" I started to cheer before I ate a spray of sand to the face. Son of a bitch, was nothing actually fun in reality!?

Thankfully, within several minutes of the mad dash starting, it ended with Luffy coming to a halt in the shade. I had no idea how a bit of shadow could change things so much, but somehow it did.

Luffy apparently agreed with me, if the way he fell to the ground and rolled about contentedly was anything to go by. "Shaaaade! Oh wow, this feels sooo good!"

"Tell me about it..." I wheezed out as I worked the sand out of my everywhere.

"Ahh, I think I'm gonna stay here- hm? AGH! CROSS! LOOK AT ALL THESE BIRDS!"

"Huh?" I cracked my eyes open and took in the half-dozen haggard birds splayed across the sand. "Oh, yeah, would you look at that?"

"I gotta get Chopper, maybe he can save them!"

"Or, or!" I cut in hastily. "You can get Sanji instead, and we can enjoy a very delicious meal of roast poultry. Tell me, what sounds more appealing to you?"
Luffy was silent for a moment as he contemplated things before grinning eagerly, drool trailing from the corner of his mouth. "Good thinking, Cross!"

"That's why I'm the tactician!" I nodded confidently before pointing back the way we came. "Now, go and get everyone else! I'll stay here and keep an eye on our dinner!"

"Got it!" Luffy whooped before dashing off into the dunes. "HEY, GUYS!"

I watched him silently for a moment before turning my attention to the birds who, to their credit, were maintaining their prone positions, albeit with a bit more sweat.

I gave them a half-lidded stare as I ran my tongue over my lips. "Run or fry, bitches. What do you choose?"

The birds started twitching ever so slightly as they shot minute glances at each other. One of them twitched a wing towards me.

I snapped my baton out to full length and slammed it into the wood of the sled. "Try it, I dare you."

The birds instantly froze, visibly debating what to do. Finally, as the sound of crunching sand reached us, they came to a decision: their lives were more valuable than their score. Thus, they shot to their talons with panicked squawks and hightailed it the heck out of there.

"YEAAH, you'd better run!" Soundbite hollered after them.

"Mister Jeremiah, are you alright?" Vivi gasped as she and the rest of the crew reached us.

"Heh, don't worry, I'm fine!" I waved at her happily. "Those herons were total wimps, they didn't even try and fight!"

"Thank god..." Vivi sighed gratefully. "They must have been too used to running their scams to pull anything else."

"Wait, those were those Bandit Birds you mentioned!?" Luffy demanded incredulously before growling viciously. "Which way did they go!?"

"Luffy-" Nami started to sigh wearily.

"They went thataway!" I grinned as I pointed out into the desert.

"RAAAAAAGH!" Luffy roared, darting off in the direction I indicated.

"WHAT THE HELL, JACKASS!?" Nami and Sanji snarled as they simultaneously slapped the back of my head.

"Okay, first off, OW! Watch it!" I winced as I rubbed the back of my head. "And second, just wait a second, alright? Luffy'll be back soon enough, and he'll be bringing company too!"

"Oh really? What kind of company?" Zoro said, cocking a curious eyebrow.

"Hey, here he comes now!" Chopper called out as he pointed out at the dunes. He then squinted curiously. "And... something's chasing him?"

"GROOOOORGH!"

"ARE YOU KIDDING ME!?" Nami and Usopp chorused incredulously.
"He's also bringing a hyper-chivalrous camel with him!" I shot at them before grinning impishly as I poked Vivi's shoulder. "And as for you, you forgot they-"

"I forgot they hunt in pairs..." Vivi groaned in exasperation as she kneaded the bridge of her nose. Sanji puffed out a weary cloud of smoke before starting to march towards Luffy. "Alright you guys, you hang tight, I'll help Luffy."

The cook got all of three feet before Zoro strode ahead of him. "Forget it, crap cook. The last one almost crushed you like an insect. I'll handle it."

Zoro didn't even get one foot before he was forced to wheel around and stop Sanji from caving his head in. "Blow it out your ass, you shitty marimo! The last one had you almost halfway down its throat!"

"Love bastard!"

"SHIT SWORDSMAN!"

"SWIRL BROW!"

"Should we tell them that Luffy already killed it?" Chopper asked me quietly.

"Eh, they'll figure it out sooner or later," I shrugged indifferently... before frowning in concern. "At least... I think they'll figure it out..."

As it turned out, it took Luffy ramming the duo's skulls together in his impatience to cook the meat to break them up.

While we waited for the king-lizard's carcass to fry, I took the opportunity to knock some sand out of my clothes. While my desert-camo jacket was doing a counterintuitively good job of keeping me cool (how covering up more is supposed to keep a person cool, I have no idea, but damn if it wasn't doing a decent job) it had the downside of catching a lot of grit in its seams. I was especially not enjoying the amount of sand I was catching in my unprotected face.

"Hey, Vivi," I called to the princess. "Do you have anything to help with..." I gestured towards my face. "This?"

"AIN'T NUTHIN' that can FIX THAT!"

I adopted a carefully neutral expression and help up a finger. "One moment please." I grabbed the water barrel and proceeded to give it a thorough shaking.

"WAaAaAaAaAaAGH!" Soundbite hollered miserably until I stopped. "Uuuuuurgh... At the risk of repeating myself, SPIN cycle SUCKS!"

"Damn straight it does," I chuckled to myself before looking back at Vivi. "So anyways...?"

"Huh-wha?" Vivi started as she drew her... bemused, amused or horrified eyes, I couldn't tell which, from the barrel. "Ah, right, right, your face. Hmm, let's see..." She started digging through the pack she was carrying. "No, no... Oh, here, how's this?" She withdrew a circle of cloth and held it out to me. "It's a facemask I picked up in Nanohana. I got in case of sand... storms..." Vivi trailed off uncomfortably as the rest of the crew minus Sanji joined me in glaring at her viciously before she rallied with a huff. "Oh, like none of you have ever forgotten anything important!?"
"You forgot six things!" Usopp shot back. "Six very dangerous things that could have killed us!"

"I- you- ergh!" Vivi stammered uncomfortably for a moment before huffing and tossing the facemask at me. "Just try the damn thing on already!"

I snickered at her blushing expression before slipping the mask over my mouth. It was a bit warm, to be sure, but it was better than a concentrated mineral diet, that was for sure. I started to nod at Vivi, but froze as a... a feeling swept over me. "Why do I have the sudden urge to wear an eyepatch, read smut in public and be three hours late to every appointment I make?" I muttered to myself.

"What was that?" Zoro grunted.

"Ah, nothing, nothing!" I hastily waved him off in embarrassment before turning to Usopp. "Hey, do you have any goggles I can use or...?"

"Sure thing, here you go!" the sniper replied, carelessly throwing the headgear at me.

I caught the goggles and contemplated them for a moment, holding one of the lenses up to my eye as I examined the desert... before hastily jerking it away with a wince. "Okay, let me be more specific: any goggles without magnifying lenses that'll fry my eyes?"

"Ack! Aheh... sorry?" Usopp chuckled sheepishly as he swapped the goggles out. I hummed contemplatively as I checked out the lens before nodding and slipping them on, putting my hood up alongside them.

"These'll do perfectly! I look a bit like a Middle Eastern freedom fighter, but... yeah, I think it'll work! And one 'akbar' out of you and I'm literally leaving you out to dry," I shot at Soundbite.

"KILLJOY!"

"Okay everyone, dinner's served!" Sanji spoke up.

I made to get up and head to the where the food was, but was halted by two hands grabbing me.

"Hey, Cross, do you have a-?"/"Cross, I need to speak to-" Chopper and Nami cut themselves off as they realized they were talking at the same time.

"Sorry Nami, but this is-"/"Chopper, this isn't really the-" The pair interrupted themselves again, though this time with a bit of a frown.

"Look, Nami-!"/"Chopper, I swear to-!"

"Okay, while I appreciate a good Abbott and Costello routine as much as the next guy-" I interrupted them with a chuckle.


"-or snail, it seems like you both want to talk with me about something important, so how about this?" I jabbed my thumb over my shoulder. "We go get some meat, we eat, and then I'll talk to you guys by seniority. And that means Nami first," I cut them off as they started to speak. "Got it?"

The two mulled things over for a moment before nodding in agreement. "Got it."

I grinned and clapped my hands successfully. "Perfect! Now, let's go and eat us some apex predator meat!"
As it turned out, rock-griddled Sandora Dragon tasted like chicken. Seriously. Still delicious, despite the cognitive dissonance of a ten-feet-plus reptile tasting like chicken.

In any case, I was glad I was mostly finished when Luffy started bugging the camel, because said camel proceeded to spit all over him and the spray hit the last of my meat.

My eye twitched slightly as I stared at my plate before handing it off to Soundbite, who I'd fished out of his barrel and who didn't have anything even close to a gag reflex. Or good taste, for that matter. "Well, that's the end of my appetite," I sighed in disgust.

"I'm sorry, but this hooligan was getting on my nerves. I'll try not to do it again," Eyelashes sniffed in a haughty, if high-pitched and reedy, voice.

I frowned as I mulled things over. For some reason, the camel's voice sounded a bit off. Like the tone and the words didn't quite match. Why did I feel like that voice would be more at place saying something more... racy... more daring... something like-

I froze as realization struck me dead on. I slowly turned my horrified eyes on Eyelashes. "Heeey," I started slowly. "Could you do me a quick favor please? Could you say the words 'Death to America' for me?"

Eyelashes gave me a bemused look. "What on the Grand Line is an 'America'? Also, do we have any lettuce?" He turned his head towards Sanji. "Meat is all well and good, you take what you can in the desert, but I would keel for something green right now!"

My eye twitched furiously for a moment before I slapped a hand to my face. "Close enough..." I growled out before slowly turning a venomous gaze on Soundbite, who was snickering eagerly.

"Okay, two things," I stated. "First, I refuse to so much as address the fact that you're giving the camel the voice of Achmed the dead freaking Terrorist."

"BAHAHAHOOHOOHOOHHEEHEEHEEHEE!!"

"And second!" I plowed on impatiently. "Now that I think about it, how the hell do you keep those voices up anyways!? Your voice is cut-and-paste!"

Soundbite blinked in surprise before shrugging indifferently, insomuch as a snail can shrug. "It's easy for me to keep the voices normal because I can talk like you guys. I just choose not to," he explained in a voice much like a newscaster's.

I jumped in shock as Soundbite spoke clearer than I'd ever heard him speak in the whole time I'd known him. "I- wh- seriously!?! Then what the hell is with the crazy-ass chorus!??" I narrowed my eyes at him accusingly. "Are you just showing off or something?"

"No no no, not at all!" Soundbite hastily denied. "It's just, well, you see..." He bowed his head contemplatively for a moment before looking up. "Alright, look, it's like this: everyone and everything has a voice when they speak, even animals. When I give a species a voice, it's not me being stereotypical."

"Bullshit," I flatly interrupted.

Soundbite had enough decency in his shell to chuckle self-consciously. "Okay, so it's somewhat for the hell of it. But really, I choose voices based on whether or not they fit, based on whether or not they're right. Basically, the voices I choose are those beings' voices. And, well, my voice... MY VOICE IS ALL OF THE voices, period. MAKE SENSE?"
I hummed contemplatively as I mulled things over before nodding. "I... suppose it does, in a manner of speaking. In the end, I guess it's your choice and I can't do much about it... though seriously. Achmed?"

"YOU SAYIN' you ain't LAUGHIN'?" Soundbite grinned cheekily.

I was silent for a moment before looking away with a grin. "I am, but I'll feel bad about it later."

"BULLSHIT!"

"Kiss my ass, you little-!"

"Ahem?"

"GAH!" I jumped halfway off my rock in shock before spinning around to the sight of our navigator impatiently tapping her foot in the sand. "Ah, Nami! Have you been waiting long or...?"

Nami rolled her eyes with a huff before jabbing her thumb over her shoulder. "We're setting out again. Come on, we'll walk and talk."

I cocked an eyebrow at her as I stood up and shifted my backpack onto my shoulders. "Fair warning, I don't feel confident about my ability to keep up with a camel."

Nami rolled her eyes with a long-suffering sigh. "I won't be riding Eyelashes until I'm done talking with you, dumbass. He'll just be carrying my share of the supplies."

I shot an acrid glare at the camel's rump. "Let me guess: he'll only carry yours and none of ours, huh?"

"I care only for the fine ladies, you uncouth ruffian!"

"BLOW IT OUT YOUR HUMP, JACKASS!" I roared at Eyelashes as I stowed Soundbite back in his barrel before smiling at Nami. "Now then- LUFFY DON'T EAT THAT!- shall we?"

And so we set out once again through the hot desert sands. I swear, if this was what deserts were like, then I don't know how anyone lived in Arizona before air conditioning. "So, you wanted to talk? I wheezed at Nami.

Nami bit her lip hesitantly before nodding in agreement. "Yeah... it's... it's about my weapon. The Clima-Tact."

"It works, if that's what you're worried about," I reassured her. "I realize that it might seem ridiculous, but-!"

"No no, I don't doubt that!" she hastily denied, waving her hands. "Usopp can be a bit of a moron sometimes, sure, but he's creative if nothing else. If anybody can pull it off, it's him. No, it's just..." Nami trailed off uncomfortably for a moment before giving a weary sigh. "I-I'm not confident about being able to use it. I mean, being able to alter the weather a bit sounds like it could be pretty effective, sure, but... well, look at me!" She gestured at herself. "What do you see?"

I eyed her warily for a moment before trying my luck. "A... strong, beautiful, confident woman?"

"That's a HELLUVA WAY to say 'GOLD-DIGGING SKANK'!" Soundbite cackled.

"One moment," I said casually, holding up a finger. Grabbing the barrel again, I gave it another
vigorous stirring. "You were saying?"

"I SPEAK THE TRUTH! I WILL NOT BE SILENCED!"

"Aaaanways..." Nami drawled as she cast a glare at the barrel.

"Hey, not my fault you asked a question there's no good answer to!" I defended hastily.

"The point I was trying to make..." Nami ground out to herself before looking away with a slightly forlorn expression. "Is that... I'm a lot of things, Cross, but I'm not a fighter. I can't go onto the front line like Luffy or Zoro, I... I can't make that much of a difference..."

"Oh, bullshit!" I snapped. "Look at me! Look at Usopp, for Christ's sake! Yes, Luffy or Zoro could snap us over their knees like a dry twig, but can you look me in the eyes and tell me we haven't contributed to the battles up to this point?"

Nami gave me a flat look. "Back on Little Garden, that brat Goldenweek used me to almost kill you and Vivi, and you were just a glorified distraction the whole time Luffy was fighting Wapol in Drum Island!"

I raised a finger... then slowly lowered it with a pained grimace. "You... make an accurate point, I'll give you that..."

Nami sighed wearily as she looked ahead, staring pointedly at Vivi's back. "The point is... I just don't want to be a burden on everyone. Especially not with what's coming. That's why you got your armor, that's why I got the Clima-Tact, and that's why Usopp's been making all these new gadgets and weapons. And they're all well and good but... well, the fact is that I don't know if I have the skills for it. The ability."

I chewed my lip contemplatively as I mused on that before shrugging as I came up with what I hoped was a good answer. "Are you sure you don't?"

Nami looked at me in surprise. "What are you talking about?"

"Well..." I hedged uncomfortably. "I'm not one hundred percent on this, because the story never went in-depth on it-"

"What was the name of that story, anyways?" Nami questioned, grimacing as a thought struck her. "It wasn't something like 'Luffy's Grand Adventure' or something, was it?"

"WRYYYY!"

"Evil immortal vampires are no joke, Soundbite," I deadpanned. "And no, it was named 'One Piece'."

"Better than I was afraid of..." Nami muttered with a weary roll of her eyes.

"Anyways, the story didn't really expand on things, but, well, from what I saw when you were still using it, you do have some skill with staff weapons, no?"

"It's, uh, called bojutsu..." Nami scratched the back of her neck uncomfortably. "I learned it so that I could defend myself when I was out... 'working'. I have some skill in it, sure, but-!"

"But nothing!" I cut in. "Some skill means that you're better than me at it, and that's something in and of itself. I'm sure that so long as you practice with it and improve yourself, you'll be even better. You
don't need to be a master of the staff, just adept enough to defend yourself, no?"

"I..." Nami looked down thoughtfully. "I think so?"

"And furthermore, while you might not like it, that 'work' you were doing gave you some useful skills as well.

"Huh!?" Nami demanded incredulously.

"Well..." I uncomfortably rolled my hand. "What I mean is that while the lifestyle was anything but pleasant, you can't deny that you were good at it. And that would have had to leave you with some usable skills, no?"

I winced as Nami pinned me with a dark glare. "What skills could I possibly have gained from those years?"

I hastily held my hands up defensively. "Look, I - and please note that I am really trying not to put my foot in my mouth here or presume anything - I realize that those were some hard times, hell really, but you can't deny that you were a phenomenal thief. Or, at the very least, a well-above-average one, and that kind of a profession requires you to learn a very specific, very useful skillset. I realize it might be uncomfortable for you to dredge up and utilize these skills, but they would exactly what you're looking for!"

Nami was uncomfortably silent for a moment before speaking. "Name five skills that would be useful."

"Umm... alright, let's see..." I started counting down on my fingers. "Lockpicking, pickpocketing, acting, stealth, probably some acrobatics assuming you ever decided to enter through the windows or anything like that, probably some observational skills to analyze marks and locations, deception abilities, though that may fold into acting... Eh... that's all I can think of."

"Seduction?" Soundbite queried faux-innocently.

"No!"/"Only sometimes!"

I snapped a bewildered look at Nami, who was blushing vividly. "Ah, well, that is to say..." She looked away nervously.

I coughed uncomfortably as I averted my gaze. "Okay, right, so I have underestimated just how bad things were and I apologize for that. Still, do you get what I'm trying to say?"

There was a moment of silence until Nami spoke again. "Yeah... yeah, I understand. Sorry about the third degree, I suppose I can't really come to you for advice and then just jump down your throat when you give it."

"Hey, it's fine, it's fine," I waved her off. "You went through hell and I dragged it up, you had every right to get mad."

"Well... if you say so. But really, Cross?" She put her hand on my shoulder, prompting me to look back at her and the kind smile she was giving me. "Thanks a lot. You're a good friend and I appreciate it."

I smiled back and nodded. "Any time, Nami, any time."

Say what you will about One Piece being a hell of a world in every sense of the phrase, but damn if
it wasn't nice to have some good friends along the way.

"Well!" I said, dusting my hands off contentedly. "Now that that's settled, where's Chopper?"

"Sleepin' with the FAIRY SEAKINGS by the sounds of it!"

"E-excuse me?!" Nami scoffed incredulously.

"He means that Chopper's K.O. from the heat again..." I groaned wearily. "Well, looks like I'll just have to wait until the sun goes down and he wakes up again."

"Alright then," Nami nodded before pausing as a thought struck her. "Oh, by the way, I wanted to ask you: how much longer until we reach Yuba?"

"Eh..." I wracked my mind. "Small details like this are the hardest to remember, but ah... I... think it was after sunset? Yeah, it was night, after sunset."

Nami nodded slowly before freezing and giving me a flat look. "So... he'll probably wake up around the same time that Vivi will be ripping your entrails out, is that about right?"

I started to nod before freezing as well as realization swept over me. "Urk. Ah... pray for me?"

Nami put on a show of thinking intently. "Weeeell, you did lie to her and essentially stomp over her wish for a conflict-free resolution..."

"That was always a pipe dream before I said anything and you know it!" I hissed frantically.

Nami grinned cattily in what was both a chilling yet kindly manner. "You'll be in my thoughts," she purred before pursing her lips and whistling. "Ooh Eyelashes!" In a blur of brown, the camel galloped up next to us and swept Nami up so that she was seated behind Vivi before galloping back ahead.

"BURN IN HELL, BITCH!" I roared after her.

"I SPIT IN YOUR GENERAL DIRECTION, ROGUE! PTOOIE!"

I winced as a glob of saliva splattered against my face before cracking my eye open. I then proceeded to smirk confidently. "GOGGLES, JACKASS! WHAT DO YOU SAY TO TH-!?"

SPLAT!

I froze again, this time on account of my thoughts being split equally between three lines of thought: 'Damn he's good with his tail', 'Oh god it's in my mouth', and-

"HURK!"

"HOHOHOHOHAAHAHAHEEHEEHEE! TALK SHIT GET HIT! LITERALLY!"

At that moment, I had to seriously weigh some pros and cons. On the one hand, dying of dehydration on account of our water being contaminated. On the other, giving Soundbite an equal taste of the shit he himself was spraying was sounding more and more enticing to me by the moment.

Thankfully for all of us, a third option was presented to me at the last moment.

"Hey, Cross, what's on your face? Is that chocolate? Do you have choc-!"
After several very, very grueling hours of marching, the sun had finally gone down, allowing the moon to rise and illuminate the suddenly freezing desert.

The cold was a nice reprieve from the heat, but it didn't change the fact that it was just swapping out one temperature extreme for another. Robert Frost could go screw himself, fire and ice both sucked in equal measure. Still, if this climate did anything, it proved just how truly dedicated Vivi was to save her nation: only someone well and truly enamored with it would be able to live their whole lives in this crucible and come out still wanting to save it.

At least there was one upside to the cold: Chopper finally managed came around from his heat-coma and was trotting alongside us in his Walk Point. I'd been waiting for him to talk with me of his own accord, on account of how the way he kept glancing at me indicated he wanted to talk with me about something, but he was apparently too skittish to initiate the conversation.

Finally, after a few more hours of marching, he managed to gather the courage to match my pace. "Uh, Cross?" he mumbled hesitantly. "Can we talk now? I-I really want your help..."

I smiled kindly at the reindeer. "Yeah, sure thing, Chopper. Tell me what's on your mind."

The human-reindeer opened his mouth to speak... then tilted his head to the side curiously. "Uh... is it just me or is the ground shaking?"

I blinked in confusion for a moment as I processed the statement before paling as I noticed the fact that the wind was carrying a lot of sand with it. "Uh oh..." I breathed nervously.

"What, what's wrong?" Chopper asked.

Before I could answer, Vivi did so in my place. "SANDSTORM! YUBA'S BEING HIT BY A SANDSTORM!"

And indeed it was. Holy shit, it was really something. I mean, I'd seen water funnels and vortexes before on the Grand Line, Nami being the only reason that we hadn't been smashed to pieces, but those had all been water for the most part. Seeing a storm of sand and wind of such a magnitude was another thing entirely! And Crocodile had been hammering Yuba with these things for how long now!? I didn't know what had me more impressed: Toto's sheer determination in the face of adversity or Crocodile's ability to overcompensate!

I shuddered uncomfortably as I spied the city that was being actively sanded off the face of Alabasta. As horrible as the situation was already, Yuba heralded something even worse for me.

"Chopper, I will gladly talk with you and help you with whatever you need later..." I swallowed nervously. "But only if you'll agree to do something for me in return."

Chopper shot me a confused look. "What's that?"

I grit my teeth as the crew started to run towards Yuba, forcing me to match their pace. "Pray for me."
A few hours of jogging later, we reached the edge of Yuba. The sight that met us was... disheartening, to say the least. The worst part of it was... I could see how it had once been a great city. It was an old place, a dignified and noble one... but it was hurt. It was decrepit, abandoned... even if it wasn't actively rotting, then at the least it was dying. And it was not pretty to watch.

And Toto was probably even worse off. He was old, dirty, frail... but damn if he didn't have an air of strength to him. He wasn't just some old sack of skin and bones. He was... tough. Leathery. He was worn down, sure, but it was more a sign of experience then actual injury. And that... that was something I could appreciate.

What I didn't appreciate was what he said when we asked him about the Rebels, though that wasn't all that fair on account of how it was more the final nail than the actual coffin.

"Those fools have left Yuba."

I winced in guilt as the words pierced through me, hitting me dead on. I turned away from the rest of the crew and bowed my head, refusing to meet anyone's eyes even as I felt their gazes on me. Not accusatory, per se, just... questioning. Curious. All save one.

"Cross."

I out and out flinched as Vivi's voice cracked over me like a whip. I slowly raised my eyes to meet her gaze, and, well... it was a once in a lifetime experience.

Vivi was furious. Not peeved, not annoyed, not even outraged. Furious. If Vivi's passion for defending Alabasta was like the kingdom's sun, then this side of her was like it's moon; cold, vicious... lethal. I just felt... so puny. It was hard to tell what was making me feel worse: Vivi's royal presence... or the fact that I was her friend and that I'd lied to her.

"Vivi-" I started hesitantly-

SLAP!

Before cutting myself off with a wince. It was at the same time the least yet most painful slap I'd ever received in my life.

"I don't want to hear it," she hissed softly. "Now you listen to me: we are going to stay here tonight, we are going to go to Katorea tomorrow, we are going to stop this rebellion, and then I never want to see you again. Do I make myself clear?"

I nodded solemnly. "Yes, Vi-

"That's Princess Nefertari Vivi of Alabasta to you, Mister Jeremiah," she spat viciously before wheeling around and marching towards the buildings.

I watched her go in shame and silence. After all, after all I'd done... what could I possibly say that wouldn't make things worse?

Silence reigned as we all watched Vivi leave, nobody quite sure what to make of recent events.

Finally, I looked to Toto. "Do you have any other shovels?" I asked him quietly.

The old man jumped in shock. "Ah, y-yes, over there..." he said, pointing at a nearby shed. "But
"Everyone, go and get some sleep," I interrupted as I started to walk towards the shed. "I... don't feel like sleeping at the moment. I'll just... work until I get tired."

"Cross..." Nami started softly

"Just... get some sleep," I sighed heavily, unslinging the water barrel from my shoulder and handing it to her, Soundbite and all. "Tomorrow's going to be a long day."

Nami stared at me in silence for a moment before nodding solemnly and following Vivi.

I refused to meet anyone's eyes as I continued walking forwards, and none of them said anything as I went. However, as I was passing by Zoro, he placed his hand on my shoulder. I froze, waiting for him to say whatever he had to say... but he just gave a firm pat and moved on.

The next time I was stopped was when Luffy caught my elbow, prompting me to look up and meet his gaze. I didn't say anything, but I did shake my head ever so slightly. Luffy frowned unhappily, but sighed and followed everyone else nonetheless.

With that over and done with, I wordlessly retrieved the shovel, dug it into the sand next to Toto's pit and got to work.

I dug for... I'm not even really sure how long, to be honest. Hours, most likely. I wasn't really paying attention to anything else. I didn't want to think about anything else. All I thought about was, well...

... digging. Deeper and deeper, foot by foot, the sand slowly but steadily piling up around me as I dug myself deeper for the second time that day.

In all honesty, I didn't really 'stop' digging. I just suddenly... woke up leaning against the wall of my hole, being shaken awake by someone calling my name.

"-kid. Hey, kid, wake up! Are you alright?" Toto asked me.

"Mrgh..." I groaned tiredly as I shook my head in an effort to wake myself, a bit of the post-wakeup fugue still clouding my thoughts. "What... what time is it?"

"It's still night, if that's what you're asking," Toto huffed. "My god, kid, you worked yourself straight to sleep! I know I might be a stubborn old man, but not even I'm that bull-headed!"

"Mmn..." I mumbled slightly in agreement. "Yeah yeah, I'm dedicated like that." I looked around blearily. "Now where's that shovel?"

"I have it right here." Toto held it up before me, but yanked it out of my reach when I tried to take hold of it. "But I'm not letting you use it until you get some rest."

I affixed a tired glare on the old man. "This from the coot who's been digging all night alongside me, as well as through several sandstorms?"

"Wait until you're my age, then you can be as hypocritically stubborn as you want to be," Toto sniffed before doubting over, clutching his joints with a groan. "Around the time your joints start aching, I'd say..."

I let out a furious growl as I actively reminded myself that unlike the rest of the crew, I couldn't slap Toto upside his head for fear of giving him a concussion. "Just give me the shovel, damn it, I need to keep working."
Toto immediately righted himself and shoved the shovel's head into the sand with a glare. "No, I need to keep working. You just want to keep working. There's a marked difference!"

"What the hell are you talking about!?" I demanded, my fatigue most likely putting more heat into my voice than I intended.

Toto crossed his arms and gave me the kind of glare only a well-experienced elder could give. "I need to keep working, so that I can draw the life and water back out of Yuba's earth. You want to keep working for the sole sake of not having to confront what happened between you and Princess Vivi, and I won't let you poison Yuba's water with your misguided misery. Am I clear?"

I opened my mouth to say something... but in the end I heaved a weary sigh, collapsing on my ass as I leaned my back against the wall of the pit. "Crystal, sir..." I moaned miserably.

"Good! Now then..." Toto crossed his arms and sat down across from me, giving me a searching look. "Why don't you tell me just what it is that's got you down, hm?"

I gave the old man a weary look. "I was slapped by Vi-" I winced self-consciously. "Princess Nefertari Vivi, why do you think I'm down?"

Toto snorted. "What I think is that there are a lot of details about this situation I don't understand, period!"

I stared at him impassively, not saying anything.

"Well, if you're not going to tell me, I'm gonna have to start guessing." The old man hummed thoughtfully, rubbing his chin. "Are you a suitor?"

My expression became as flat as a plate. "Thank you, no. I'd rather live long and prosper than commit suicide by Kohza."

"HA!" Toto barked uproariously. "I don't know how you know my son, but that does sound like the likely outcome, doesn't it?" He shot a cheeky smirk at me. "Now then, shall I continue guessing or-?"

"Alright, alright, I'll tell you!" I snapped. And so I told him the whole story: lying to Vivi about Yuba and Katorea, how talking down the rebels wouldn't actually solve anything, my firm belief that only by clobbering Crocodile (not that I actually named him) could the rebellion be ended, and how much of an utter heel I felt for doing so.

Toto's eyes widened in shock as he listened to me before bowing his head with a solemn hum. "Well now... that sounds quite serious indeed."

"Deadly," I confirmed morosely.

"If you ask me, it sounds like you didn't have much of a choice in the matter," Toto summarized matter-of-factly.

"What I chose doesn't matter," I emphasized firmly. "What does matter is that Vivi is the closest thing to a saint we'll ever see in our lifetimes, and more importantly, she was my friend- and I had to lie to her. What matters is that I've probably made her hate me, and that... that's worse than anything I can imagine."

And then Toto did the absolute last thing I expected: he threw his head back and laughed.
"W-What's so funny?" I stammered in confusion.

"Boy..." he wheezed, clutching his gut. "That might just be the funniest thing I've heard in years." He held up a hand to stop the indignant reply just on my lips. "First of all, Princess Vivi doesn't have a hateful bone in her body, so you don't need to worry about that."

"But... s-she slapped me... and-"

"Oh, yes, I've only seen her that angry once before," Toto replied, staring fondly up into the sky. "Kohza had stolen her favorite doll, a recent birthday gift from her father, for whatever childish reason he had at the time and had hidden it somewhere. Try as she might, Vivi couldn't get him to tell her where he hid it. At least, until she got mad and then he folded like wet paper." The old man chuckled, lost in his memories. "And you know what? Once she got it back she calmed down and went right back to being his best friend."

"I... think this is kind of on a different scale," I deadpanned. "I essentially threatened her kingdom. Her people. That's as bad a berserk button for her as debating justice is for most marines."

"Bah, you'll see," Toto scoffed dismissively. "I know that girl, give her a day or two to cool off and things'll be back to normal, especially if what you've told me is the truth. As for the other matter..." He turned around and rapped me on the forehead before I could react.

"Ow! What was that for?!" I demanded, rubbing my forehead.

"For being silly," Toto harrumphed. "You're putting entirely too much stock in one lie. Don't make a habit of it, and your friendships will be just fine even with the occasional lie. Now, you get out of this hole. I need to get back to work."

And with that, he shoved me up and out with surprising strength. I didn't protest; I had a feeling he'd break that shovel over my head if he needed to. Still, though his words had helped, I couldn't shake the rock in the pit of my stomach. After this one, coming so soon on the heels of that one... how could they ever trust...?"

"Ack! Phpht!" I hacked and spit miserably as I tried to clear the grains from my face. "What the he-!??"

"Oh, hey Cross!"

"Luffy!?!" I blinked at my captain in shock, trying to process the fact that he was in a hole next to my own. "W-what the hell- how long have you been digging there!?!"

Luffy shrugged indifferently. "The whole time. Oh, and I'm not alone either!"

I started to ask what Luffy meant... when I was interrupted by a pink top hat poking up and over the lip of the hole.

"H-hej Cross," Chopper smiled weakly as he waved at me.

"Ah, hey, Chopper..." I waved back uncomfortably.

"So, Cross... are you... free to talk now, or...?" Chopper scratched the back of his head with a sheepish grin.

I worked my jaw wordlessly for a moment... before settling on a smile and extending a hand to the
Zoan user. "Yeah... yeah, I'm free."

Chopper smiled back from ear to ear as he took my hand and hauled himself out. "Thanks! It's not anything too important, I just, well, need some help is all."

I nodded in agreement and waved for him to follow me. "Sure thing, Chopper. Come on, walk and talk."

Chopper trotted to keep up with me. "Well, I've been thinking about how to use your advice. You know, on manipulating my Devil Fruit? Well... I've been having some trouble with it. I mean..." He shrugged helplessly. "My powers are rigid enough as is due to me being a Zoan, and in my opinion my particular Fruit is even worse than usual on account of how it doesn't give me much to work with. I'd appreciate any suggestions you have to share with me."

I hummed as I contemplated his statement. "That's true enough, yes..." I nodded in agreement before holding up a finger. "But you underestimate just what your powers have to offer. As I've already stated, you've exploited your powers quite a bit with the invention of the Rumble Ball. I believe, without giving away too much and thus pissing off Luffy, that there might be a way for you to push what you've already done even further."

"Really!?" Chopper asked eagerly. "What is it?"

"Well..." I scratched my chin thoughtfully, mentally thanking the great resources of TVTropes all the while. "Have you ever heard of something called 'biofeedback'?"

-0-

The next morning, we all gathered in the town square as we prepared to say our goodbyes to Toto. The old man was quite chipper as he saw us off; I could practically see the satisfaction bursting out of him as he handed Luffy the small barrel of water he'd managed to extract from the sand.

"I'm sorry there isn't any more of it, but it's still genuine Yuba water either way. I assure you that it will do you much good," he said, outright beaming.

"Don't worry, old man! I'll keep a close hold of it and drink it really slowly, I promise!" Luffy assured him as he eagerly grabbed the barrel.

"Make sure you're really careful with that water, Luffy," I promptly warned him. "That water's more important than any of us can imagine."

Luffy blinked in surprise before nodding firmly. "You got it."

I chanced a glance over my shoulder at Vivi, and was rewarded with her looking away with a scowl. I winced and bowed my head guiltily, but was prompted to look up by a hand on my shoulder.

Toto gave me a reassuring look. "The princess might be as stubborn as she is kind, but she can't deny her own nature. She'll forgive you, son. Just give it time."

I pursed my lips sadly for a moment, but I nodded solemnly nonetheless. I then held a hand out to him. "You're a good man, Toto. I can't thank you enough."

Toto snorted as he grabbed my hand and gave it a strong shake. "Protect Princess Vivi and save this kingdom. That will be thanks enough."

I nodded confidently. "I promise."
And with that, we were off into the desert, braving the heat and sand once again. We got pretty far, a mile, maybe two, until we were well out of sight of Yuba. Vivi was leading our party, while the rest of us trailed behind her. Hence, nobody immediately noticed when Luffy suddenly stopped dead in his tracks, and Zoro, Nami and I imitated him.

Nami gave the captain a wary look. "Is everything alright, Luffy?"

Luffy was... silent, uncharacteristically so. For the longest time, he just stood there. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he was thinking. Finally, Luffy turned his head and shot an unreadable look at me. "Where is he?" he asked calmly.

"Rainbase, a city to the north of Yuba. He runs a local casino as though it were his castle," I promptly answered.

Luffy turned his expectant gaze on Nami.

The navigator pursed her lips uncomfortably for a moment, but she ultimately subsided with a heavy sigh. "That way," she pointed dutifully.

And with that, Luffy started marching singlemindedly in the direction indicated, with Zoro following behind him.

Nami hesitated as she watched the pair march off, glancing at the rest of the crew. "Shouldn't we...?"

I shrugged indifferently. "They'll notice sooner or later. For now, captain's orders." And with that, I followed the crew's top two officers, and moments later I heard Nami doing the same.

We didn't get far, however, when the sound of someone chasing after us broke the desert's silence.

"Mister Jeremiah! What do you think you're-!" Vivi began as she trotted Eyelashes in front of us before I interrupted her.

"Captain's orders. Talk to Luffy."

I felt a brief twinge of guilt for passing the buck like that; a twinge that died a quick death as I watched Vivi slide off of Eyelashes and stomp up to Luffy. I would weather Vivi's wrath in my own time, make no mistake, but first I was going to let the tide break on Luffy's head. Sorry, Captain, but better you than me!

"Luffy, where are you going!? The Sandora River is this way, to the east! We need to cross it if we want to reach Katorea!" Vivi pressed him.

"Yeah, but I'm going north," Luffy blandly informed her.

"W-what?!!" Vivi sputtered incredulously. "North!? Why would you want to go north!?"

Luffy shrugged. "'Cause that's where Rainbase is."

It took Vivi all of ten seconds to process that statement, mouthing the words to herself before she spun around and shot a searing hot glare at me.

Nami was quick to step in front of me. "Don't get mad at Cross, Vivi, Luffy asked him. He had to tell him."

Vivi continued to stare daggers at me a moment longer before directing her rage back at Luffy, grabbing his sleeve and forcing him to a halt. "Luffy, I already told you, we don't need to fight
"Crocodile! If I can get to Katorea, I can talk to Kohza and-!"

"Vivi," Luffy interrupted her, tilting his head and giving her a flat look. "That's dumb."

"E-excuse me!?!" Vivi squawked incredulously. In all honesty, though, hers was the least volatile reaction of the crew.

"HOW DARE YOU, YOU SHITTY-!?" Sanji shrieked as he started to march towards Luffy, until I managed to grab his collar and haul him back.

"This needs to be said, Sanji," I told him, doing my best to stand firm in the face of his rage. Thankfully, Nami had my back.

"Leave him alone, Sanji..." she muttered half-heartedly, more focused on the shitshow unfolding before us.

"What are you talking about, Luffy!?" Vivi demanded.

"Vivi, I know that I haven't been in this country long, and I don't know a lot, but I do know this: stopping the rebels won't stop Crocodile even a bit. Going to Katorea won't do a thing," the rubber-man explained blandly, as if talking about the weather or his next meal after three weeks at sea.

Trust me, not even Luffy gets excited about lime juice, salt beef, and hardtack. Damn near gave me a heart attack the first time he didn't react like a maniac to Sanji calling us in for dinner, but there you have it.

Anyway, silence reigned over the crew as they processed Luffy's words.

"Uhh..." came Usopp's intelligent response.

"Wow..." Chopper breathed.

"EVEN A DUMBASS can have a point!" Soundbite provided.

"I-I..." Vivi stammered uncomfortably.

"You actually think that we can stop the rebels without anyone dying? That nobody, us or your people, are going to get hurt?"

Vivi twitched furiously, obviously fighting against herself.

"We're going up against one of the Warlords of the Sea, and half your kingdom is ready to kill itself. You really think that everyone's going to come out of this alive?" Luffy stared at Vivi for a moment before sighing and bowing his head. "That's dumb, Vivi."

Nami herself visibly reacted to the statement, but I hastily grabbed her shoulder and shook my head.

"What's so wrong with not wanting anyone to die, huh!?" Vivi demanded, her voice shaking with emotion. "What's the problem with wanting everyone to come out of this alive!?"

I could see that Luffy was ready to answer Vivi's question, but in all honesty I just couldn't stay quiet on this.

"It's beyond unrealistic," I stated flatly, with just a hint of anger. "And from someone in your position, it's downright dangerous."
Vivi spun on her heel and grabbed my collar, obviously inches away from slapping the shit out of me. Again. "Don't you dare say that, don't you dare! I am trying to prevent a bloodbath! What's wrong with that!?"

"The goal isn't the problem, it's the method!" I shot back, voice rising. "You're sick of me holding things back, you want me to tell you the whole truth and nothing but the truth? Here it is: you're shaping up to be a piss-poor ruler!"

THWACK!

"Gugh!" I wheezed, folding around the fist Vivi had just buried in my gut.

"SHUT THE HELL UP!" she shrieked viciously.

I took a moment to suck some air back into my lungs before tilting my head to direct a glare at her. "You want to know why you'll be a sucky ruler? Because you're too focused on benevolence as the end-all, be-all of rulership!"

"GRAH!"

Vivi tackled me to the sand, trying to slip her hands around my throat.

"I-it helps, sure," I snarled as I grabbed her wrists and fought to keep her off me. "But at the end of the day, people don't follow benevolence, don't bow to it! They bow to authority, and as you are you wouldn't command any! Because you know what the Crocodiles of the world see when you aren't willing to sacrifice anybody besides yourself?"

I wrenched myself upwards, bringing my face closer and looking her dead in the eye. "They see opportunity. The opportunity for a whole country. And if you think your life is anywhere near valuable enough to make them give that up, then you're not just being unrealistic, you're being stupid! Delusional even!"

"S-SHUT UP!" Vivi snarled as she struggled to wrench herself away from me, but I instead flipped us around and pinned her into the sand.

"Wanting to save as many lives as possible is a noble intention for most people, but that's not one that's open to you!" I hissed. "You're a ruler, Vivi, nobility! Every decision you make, every single one, will be a gamble! And every single time, you'll be gambling with people's lives! Your job isn't to save as many lives as possible, it's to make sure that the least amount of people possible die, and that their deaths mean something!"

"THAT'S-!" Vivi struggled in my grip, though her motions were starting to slow down. "T-that's not true..."

"That-!" I started to growl before taking a deep breath. "That's bullshit, Vivi. That's bullshit and you know it. You're a smart girl, Vivi, you've lived with your dad long enough to learn that fact, and your time with Baroque Works should have hammered it home. It's noble that you want don't want things to be like that, above and beyond the norm even... but you just don't have that luxury."

I let go of Vivi's arms and stood off of her, allowing her to flip onto her back and stare up at me.

"If you want to get anywhere in life, Vivi, then you need to be willing to risk something. To risk everything. Even..." I clenched my fists. "Even us."

A shudder ran through Vivi's body, but it wasn't from anger. "I-I..."
"Vivi..." Luffy said, angling his hat upward. "We're your friends."

"B-but..." Vivi hiccuped, shaking her head furiously. "I-I... I can't ask that-!

"You don't have to ask, we're doing it anyways," Zoro snorted.

Usopp shuddered heavily for a moment before he sucked it up and shot a thumbs up at her. "The Great Captain Usopp fears no man! Or reptile for that matter!"

I pointedly chose to avoid mentioning his choice of self-address. Or the fact that he was still shaking like a leaf, for that matter.

Chopper started to glance towards everyone else, but promptly caught himself. Instead, he crossed his arms, looked Vivi dead in the eye and nodded firmly. "I'm in all the way!"

Vivi's head was on a swivel as she looked between us all, her mouth open as she tried and failed to force something out.

Sanji took a tug from his cigarette before flicking it into the sand and stomping it out with his heel. "I would delve into the depths of hell for any woman. For you, my love, I intend to conquer them."

Eyelashes hesitated for a bare moment... until I rammed my elbow into the base of his throat. "Ack-pbht-you-I-I-I mean what the blond cook said!"

"ALL FOR ONE, ALL FOR ALL!" Soundbite roared.

Vivi was actively shaking now, tears brimming in her eyes. "B-but... but..."

Nami knelt down next to the princess and clutched her shoulders. "Vivi. We know that there's every chance of us dying. We know that we could die. And we're willing to take those chances, we choose to take them..." She wrapped Vivi up in a fierce hug. "Because you're our friend, and because there's sure to be an absolute shitton of money in Crocodile's casino we can loot."

I chopped my hand down on top of Nami's head with a deadpan glare. "No, bad girl, down."

"I will snap you over my knee Cross, I swear to-!"

Nami's death threats were cut off by a sob tearing its way out of Vivi's throat, followed by the princess grabbing onto Nami for dear life and burying her tear-stained face in the navigator's shoulder.

Nami shot a final glare at me before patting Vivi's back and comforting her.

"T-thank you..." Vivi sobbed. "Thank you... all of you... thank you so much..."

"Oh my love-!" Sanji started to spin himself into a hurricane of love... until Zoro slapped the back of his head. "Hey, what the hell-!?"

"Ahem," Zoro grunted as he jabbed his thumb towards me.

Vivi sniffed heavily for a moment as she glanced up at Zoro before jerking in realization. "Huh-? A-Ah! R-right, right..." She looked at me tearfully. "I-I... Cross... I'm so sorry. Everything I said..."

I cut her off with a raised hand. "Save it, for two reasons. First and foremost, I more than earned that smackdown I got in Yuba and I'm man enough to admit it. And second..."
I held my hand out to her and pulled her to her feet. "This isn't the time or the place for waterworks. You can tell me how much you're sorry later. For now..." I grinned viciously and jabbed my finger due north. "What do you say we start the process of straight up *slapping* the smug out of Crocodile?"

Vivi hiccuped for a moment longer. Then she steeled her back, wiped the tears and snot off of her face, and gave me a shaky grin.

"Okay!"
I huffed and wheezed miserably as I mounted the sands of the dune. So hot... so high... so thirsty... just a few more feet... a few... more...

With a moan of relief, I mounted the peak of the dune and spread my arms in relief. "I..." I groaned eagerly, "am Cross of Alaba—!

NOM!

"YEOWCH!" I yelped, digging my hands beneath my hood and trying to grab ahold of Soundbite. "WHAT THE HELL, YOU LITTLE PEST!"

"YOU WERE TALKING CRAZY!"

"Can you blame me?!!" I demanded. "It's hot, it's dry, and there's been nothing but sand, sand, and more sand for six hours! At this point, I'll sing freaking showtunes if it means seeing a freaking rock, just to break the monotony!"

"Quit bellyaching and walk, Cross, or you're gonna be looking at sand for that much longer," Zoro grunted as he trudged past me. It was at least gratifying to see his red, sweaty face and uncomfortable grimace.

"And just for the record," Vivi noted as she walked past, looking disgustingly unbothered by the, to reiterate, hot hot heat. "You're not anything of Alabasta. At least, not if I have anything to say about it."

"I thought we were past this!" I demanded as I forced myself to keep walking.

"I might understand, but I'm still mad!"

"Tch, airhead..."

"Would you mind speaking a little louder, please? I couldn't hear you over your raging—!"

"Quiet, you two, don't make me pull this caravan over..." Nami muttered blearily.

"Yes, mom..." Vivi and I sighed.

"Ugh, my blisters have blisters..." Usopp groaned behind us.

"I think I might be getting used to the heat," Chopper panted from where he was strapped to Eyelashes' hump. He attempted to sit up, before slumping back down with a groan. "As a doctor, I can confirm that this is not even remotely healthy..."

"Well, look on the bright side: we don't have to worry about the food rotting anymore," Sanji calmly informed us.

"Really? How come?" Luffy asked curiously.

"BECAUSE YOU JUST ATE THE LAST OF IT, JACKASS!"

THWACK!
"ACK!"

I raised my hand to my forehead and shaded my eyes, looking upwards and whistling in awe as I watched Luffy fly by. "Good arc, impressive velocity… I give it a nine out of ten."

Vivi cocked her eyebrow as we all watched Luffy reach the peak of his trajectory. "And why not a full ten?"

"Eh, it all depends on his distance. If he lands on the other side of the next dune—"

WHUMP!

Luffy impacted the dune and went through the very top, kicking up a huge cloud of sand and dust.

"Eh…" I waved my hand side-to-side. "Not bad, not bad, but he did hit the top, so… nine-point-five?"

Everyone else clapped politely, to which Sanji responded with a bow. "Thank you, thank you. You're too kind, really."

"Hey, guys!" Luffy shouted as he ran up the top of the dune, waving his hand. "I just saw green!"

"Luffy, what did we tell you about eating the cacti?"

"They're not that bad!"

"YOU TRIED TO EAT CHOPPER, WHEN YOU WEREN'T SLEEP-EATING!"

"Do I need to prepare the sedative again?" Chopper groaned.

"No, really, guys, I didn't hallucinate this! And it wasn't a mystery mira—!"

"I will break you, Luffy," Nami intoned darkly.

"Let's just get this over with," Zoro sighed, brushing past us and trudging up to the top of the dune. We all watched, confused, as he froze, then whooped—whooped!—and ran back towards us.

"Guys, I can't believe I'm saying this, but Luffy's right!" he informed us, grinning like a loon. "There is green. I think we've found Rainbase." He frowned at the expressions on our faces. "What's up with you guys?"

"I have seen the face of evil…" Vivi whispered in terror, before pausing as she reconsidered. "Again."

"W-Who are you and what have you done with Zoro?" Usopp stammered.

"What do you mean?! I'm me!" he barked indignantly.

"Lies! Zoro does not smile unless it's to promise death to his prey!" I hissed fearfully.

"Or unless there's booze involved," Usopp added.

"OR unless he gets one over on SANJI or NAMI or CROSS," Soundbite contributed.

"We'd better check to be sure: who is the second greatest traveller alive?" Sanji asked, grinning.

"THAT ONLY APPLIES TO THE SNAIL-BRAT, SHIT-COOK!" Zoro roared furiously.
"It's him," we chorused flatly. Everyone's eyes then widened in realization as the facts finally processed.

"WATER!" Luffy and Usopp whooped as they ran to the top of the dune, the rest of us close on their heels.

Indeed, there on the horizon lay a large, sprawling city. One might assume that the oasis we beheld was a paradise, a safe haven from the heat and the dangers of the desert. And it was, at least in the sense that it was a relief from the heat of the desert. However, the crocodile-topped pyramid that crowned the cityscape soundly disabused us of any notion of safety.

"Rainbase at last…" I sighed thankfully, before hauling my pack off of my shoulders and pulling out my armor.

"We're he~ere…" Soundbite sang, his tone somewhere between gleeful and ominous.

"IT'S TIME TO KICK CROCODILE'S ASS!" Luffy roared at the top of his lungs.

"AFTER WE GET SOME WATER!" Usopp bellowed at the same volume.

"AGREED!" Luffy concurred.

"Do you two think you could tone it down a bit?" Zoro huffed. He sighed as the rest of us gave him flat looks, Chopper even going so far as to lean up and stare at the swordsman. "Withdrawn."

Vivi frowned as she scrutinized the golden crocodile overlooking the city. "Crocodile…" she muttered despondently.

I made to walk over to her, but thought better of it. I doubted I was a particularly comforting figure for her, and besides, I was busy kneeling over as I slid my armor onto my leg. I glanced meaningfully at Nami. The navigator took the hint and promptly slid off of Eyelashes before putting a hand on the Princess' shoulder and giving her a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry, Vivi. We're going to help you fix everything, and there won't be any more surprises along the way. Right, Cross?" she added dangerously. I raised my hands in surrender as Vivi looked at me.

"I promise, I promise. I won't hold anything back that could help anymore," I said, then froze as a thought came to my mind, remembering how Vivi greeted Crocodile in Rain Dinners.

"Actually, I should tell you—"

"HEY, CROSS! YOU HAVE ANY MONEY ON YOU?!

I jumped as Luffy shouted an inch from my ear, and glared at him.

"Yes, Luffy, I'm a member of this crew and thus I generally have a considerable amount of money on me at any given time," I drawled flatly, twisting my wrist and latching my gauntlet in place. "I'm sorry, have you been sailing with some other crew thus far!?"

"Huh?" Luffy blinked in confusion. "No, I've been sailing with you guys. Are you stupid or something?"

I slapped my currently unarmored hand to my face with a growl. "I'm starting to ask myself that question every day…" I muttered under my breath.
"What took you so long?" Nami deadpanned as she accepted three metal tubes from Usopp.

"I like to think of myself as an optimist…" I sighed before eyeing her disassembled staff. "So, you ready to use that thing?"

Nami frowned uncomfortably as she balanced the rods in her hand before nodding firmly. "As ready as I'll ever be. I've read the instruction manual, so assuming that Usopp learned his lesson…" At that, she gave Usopp a menacing glare that he returned in my direction. "Even if I'm not confident enough to take on Crocodile or anything like that—!"

"Yeah, no, you would get eviscerated," I cheerfully informed her. "In ten seconds flat. Eight for monologuing, one to laugh at you, and one to do the actual eviscerating."

"Cross," Sanji cut in with just as much pleasantness as he clapped his hand down on my shoulder. "I don't mind the brutal honesty so much considering who we're fighting against, but if you keep talking about Nami-swan like that, I will break your twig-spine over my knee."

"Duly noted," I nodded calmly. "In all seriousness, though, anyone lower than Mr. 2, you should be able to take down, so take confidence in your abilities. Back in the story, the person you fought—"

"CROSS!"

"Ahem…" I coughed nervously as I tugged at my collar. "Well, let's just say that as things are now, you are going to bounce her skull off the sand, and leave it at that."

Nami considered for a moment before smiling and nodding, visibly encouraged. I frowned as I thought about the others' battles: Sanji would wipe the floor with Bon Clay, and Chopper and Usopp had upgraded their weapons and skills, and honestly, Usopp could use the character development either way…

I looked back at the first mate.

"I won't spoil too much, Zoro, but I'd recommend that you start reflecting on some of your sensei's lessons that you don't understand yet. He was…" I thought things over for a moment before paling in realization. "Yeah, he was way stronger than you'd expect from someone in the East Blue, because suffice to say, that sword was not blunt."

"Croooooossssst!" Luffy whined, interrupting me. "Are you done talking yet? I wanna get water!"

"Yeah, come on, let's go!" Usopp concurred.

"Uh, okay okay okay, one second..." I furiously wracked my mind for any other bits of advice. "Alright, don't fight Miss All Sunday, if she sees you, you're already dead. Well, maybe not you, Luffy, but you've gotta fight Crocodile, so don't let her distract you from that—"

"REALITY IS AN ILLUSION, the planet is a mirage, buy gold, LET'S GO ALREADY!"

Soundbite barked.

"Huh?" I blinked in confusion…before clenching my eyes shut with a groan as I felt a hand grab the back of my coat. "Oh, for the love of…" I snapped my goggles down over my eyes. "Here we go ag—AUGH!"

"WAAAAATEEEEER!" Luffy howled as he made a mad dash for Rainbase, dragging me along behind him, Usopp running alongside us and somehow managing to keep pace while everyone else (camel included) scrambled to catch up.
Within a minute, we'd lost sight of the rest of the crew in the dust cloud that two of the crew's three stooges were kicking up.

Within two, Luffy and Usopp were in the city, making a beeline for the nearest bar.

Within three, they'd kicked down the bar's door and were asking for water with all the table manners of the Dadan family, their asses parked on the first seats they saw.

Which just so happened to be right next to Captain Smoker and Officer Tashigi. Credit where it was due, my crewmates always somehow knew how to be at the right place at the right time for maximum shenanigans. And that, in and of itself, was twenty different shades of impressive.

I took a moment to dust myself off before sitting myself down between my friends and our current enemies, shooting a grin at Captain Smoker as I slid my goggles back onto my forehead. "Hello again, Smokey. Fancy seeing one of the only decent Marine officers in the East Blue here! I don't suppose I could borrow that jutte for a second, could I? I'd like to dopeslap my captain and actually have it stick for once."

Tashigi blinked at me in confusion. "Wait, aren't you—?"

"Cross," Smoker interrupted, giving me a decidedly unimpressed look. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't crack your skull open right here, right now."

"How about two?" I grinned, holding my fingers up. "A, I'm guessing that you have questions about basically everything that's been going on thus far. And B?" I jabbed my thumb over my shoulder with a flat look. "If I move an inch, these two dumbasses will spray you with their backwash, and nobody here wants that, do we?"

"I DO I DO I DO!" Soundbite piped up eagerly, causing Smoker to glare in the snail's general direction and Tashigi to jump in shock.

"Sorry, I meant nobody who isn't a natural-born jackass," I corrected.

"D-Did that snail just—!?” Tashigi started to stammer.

"Devil Fruit," Smoker and I deadpanned.

The officer blinked in surprise before nodding slowly. "Uh…U-Understood, sir."

Smoker turned his attention back to me, apparently weighing his options. Then he blew out a perfect smoke ring as he sighed.

"…You're about as fast a talker as that snail of yours, Cross," he grumbled, prompting grins from both Soundbite and me.

"Ask away, Smokey," I said cheerfully.

"C-Captain!" Tashigi jerked in shock. "This is against—!"

"Tashigi."

The officer stiffened fearfully as Smoker pinned her to her stool with a flinty glare.

"It's so hot that I'm sweating blood, my coat is carrying around half my weight in sand, and for all that Alabasta's culture is rich and vibrant, these people can't roll a cigar worth shit," Smoker snarled viciously. "In short, I am prepared to meet every last one of Cross's accusations against the Navy so
long as it means *getting the hell off this island.*" He leaned in close. "Is. That. Clear."

Tashigi paled more than should have been possible *anywhere* in this country during the daytime as she nodded frantically and snapped up a salute. "C-C-Crystal, sir!"

I grinned cheekily and chuckled as I watched the exchange. "I'm glad to see I'm not the only one with this opinion. Vivi might be my friend, but this kingdom is a place only a mostly pure-hearted princess who's lived her whole life here could love."

Smoker turned his glare back at me. "Let's make that my first question: how are you and Crocodile involved with this kingdom?"

I made a show of being perfectly relaxed as I glanced at the barkeep and tapped on the countertop. "'Scuse me, my good man, can I get some water for my friends here?" Smoker literally began to fume as the bartender nodded and I looked back at him.

"Now, then!" I clapped and nodded firmly. "Let's start with the basics: the rebellion. The reason everything went to hell so fast in this kingdom is that the criminal organization you're tracking down here, Baroque Works, has been actively inciting unrest amongst the populace. If they have their way, they'll butcher this nation from gut to gizzard. As you can imagine, that's something Vivi wants to stop at all costs."

Smoker cocked an eyebrow at me. "And how does Crocodile figure into this mess?"

I snorted darkly. "Crocodile's the founder and *leader* of Baroque Works. He's the root cause of this madness, and if he has his way, everyone on this sandy rock will tear themselves to pieces."

"What?!" Tashigi jerked in shock. "You can't possibly be serious! Crocodile is a Warlord of the Sea, they—!"

"Of the current lineup of Warlords, only Jinbe and Hancock can be defined as even close to being decent sapient beings," I deadpanned. "The rest are all varying levels of dicks, with Kuma and Mihawk being on the fence. Trust me: with the World Government's hiring tendencies, *this* is perfectly par for the course. Hell, compared to Doflamingo, Crocodile's operation is *tame.*"

I felt my blood surge as the countertop splintered under Smoker's grip. It had been awhile since I'd been in the *fun* kind of danger! Damn, I'd *missed* this rush.

The Captain gnawed on his cigars for a moment before speaking. "That's one hell of a claim. I trust you have some way of backing it up."

I smirked and gave the man a shrug. "That's the easy part: We're on our way to Rain Dinners to confront the bastard right now. You come with us, chances are that he'll monologue to you guys too before trying to kill us all. What do you say, Captain? You in?"

The smoke-man remained silent for a moment as he stared at me, before looking away with a snort. "Tempting, but you're still a criminal and I came here for a reason: To throw you and your crewmates in *prison.* First I'll deal with you, and then I'll deal with Crocodile."

I spread my arms with a sigh. "Fair enough, fair enough. Though, of course, I do hope you realize that we will be running like hell, right?"

"Tsk…” Smoker snorted derisively as he signaled Tashigi, prompting her to stand up and grip Shigure's hilt. "I wouldn't expect anything less from you lowlife scum. Any last requests?"
I considered the statement for a moment before grinning cheekily. "Yeaaaah, I've got one…" I leaned back slightly and cracked my back. "Can we have a head start?"

Tashigi face-faulted, Soundbite began cackling, and Smoker narrowed his eyes as he grabbed the hilt of his jutte. "Not on your life, brat."

"I'm eigh—!" I started to belt out before sighing in defeat. "Oh, screw it, with any luck that'll change sooner or later. Anyways, I expected that. For now, though, let me remind you of one of the basic characteristics of a pirate…" I allowed myself a grin as I caught sight of the bartender coming up to us with two barrel-esque mugs of water. "We cheat."

Just as Tashigi started to close in on me, now glaring daggers behind her glasses, the bartender set said mugs on the counter. The second the mugs hit the wood, I leaned back on my stool and elbowed Luffy, drawing his attention. With my body no longer obscuring my crewmates' views, the two sprayed two barrels' worth of water in the Marines' faces, granting me the opportunity to add to their distraction by grabbing the fresh mugs and repurposing them as hats, though they seemed to be a size or ten too big judging by the way they completely engulfed their heads.

"HAHAHAHEEHEEHEEHOHOHOHOOO!" Soundbite cackled, tears streaming out of his eyes.

"BOOK IT!" I roared as I bolted out of the bar, Luffy and Usopp hot on my tail.

"YOU COULDN'T HAVE WARNED US ABOUT THEM SOONER!?!" Usopp snarled incredulously.

"And ruin the surprise? Are you nuts?" I shot back at him in mock incredulity.

"What the heck are the Marines doing here anyways!?!" Luffy questioned in a panic.

"Smoker's a hard-assed paragon of justice who managed to catch wind of Baroque Works, it'd be more of a surprise if he wasn't here! Now, if you'll excuse me for a second, I need to make a call." I slid my headphones over my ear, Soundbite promptly connecting me to the rest of the crew. "Heads up, guys, negotiations with Smoker have gone down the toilet. He's right on our tails!"

"GET BACK HERE, YOU SON OF A BITCH!"

I cursed under my breath and accelerated my pace as Tashigi screamed after us, a scream accompanied by a myriad of stomping feet and cries of encouragement. "OK, correction, all the Marines in Rainbase are on our tail! Still, good news for you, Zoro: Tashigi's more focused on taking my head then yours!"

"What the hell did you do, dumbass!?" Nami screamed through the connection.

"I…might have had Luffy and Usopp spray them with several gallons of water," I hedged. "Oh, and I also dumped a couple of mugs over their heads."

"…do you even know the definition of the word 'negotiation'!?"

"Did you honestly expect anything else from us?" I immediately shot back.

"He's got a point," Zoro commented.

Strangled sounds of rage filtered through the connection.

"Alright, enough!" Vivi interrupted. "Cross, where are you now!?"
"Umm…" I trailed off as I searched the streets for any indications…before blinking in surprise as we rounded a corner. "Huh, actually we're right here! Hey, guys!" I waved at our suddenly panicked crewmates.

"DON'T LEAD THEM RIGHT TO US, JACKASSES!" Nami shrieked viciously.

"Damn it! Come on, we need to run!" Zoro snarled.

"And you should probably hide your face unless you want Tashigi to rip it off!" I commented.

"Wait, Tony's not back yet!" Vivi interjected hastily.

"Yeah, but we don't have the time to find him!" Zoro snapped, grabbing Vivi by the arm and taking off running. "He's smart, he'll know to lay low. Now, come on!"

"Hey, wait!" Nami spoke up hastily. "Vivi, you're royalty! Can't you just order them to leave us alone or something!?"

"Not if we want to stay undercover, I can't!"

I grimaced as I noticed a few 'random' bystanders glancing at pictures they were holding. "Yeah, no, we are way past being incognito! And besides that, Smoker's a practitioner of what I like to call 'cowboy justice'. Suffice to say that nothing short of the word of God can get him off our asses, and even then I have some serious doubts!"

"So, what do we do now, then?" Sanji asked.

"Now we go kick Crocodile's ass! Where do we find him, Vivi?" Luffy asked eagerly.

Soundbite gave our captain a look. "ARE YOU BLIND or flat-out STUPID!?!"

"Yes," Nami and I deadpanned together.

"It's the big building with the golden crocodile on it, Luffy!" Vivi spoke up, pointing out Rain Dinners. "It's his casino! He runs Baroque Works from it!"

"And what do we do about the Marines trying to arrest us!?" Usopp squawked in a panic.

"Psh, they're not—oh holy shit there's a lot of them!" Seriously, I'd seen angry mobs that were smaller. And less pissed off.

"If I had to guess, I'd say we split up?" Sanji said to me.

"Correctamundo!"

"Sounds like a good idea," Zoro nodded in agreement. "Cross, do you think you can keep Tashigi away from me?"

"She's not Kuina, and you're only pissing her off more by not fighting her, man! Also, wouldn't Kuina herself be kicking your ass for acting like a little bitch about this?"

"Just do it already! First mate's orders!"

"Alright, alright, fine, I'll do it, eesh!" I growled, rolling my eyes. "Alright, now I just need to figure out how I'm going to get her—"
"AND NOW, for a limited time only, AS REQUESTED BY JEREMIAH CROSS!" Soundbite roared loud enough for the whole street to hear. "CHASE MUSIC!" And with that, the air was filled with a far too familiar beat. A slightly twangy set of synth chords, accompanied by some sort of percussion. Cymbals, perhaps?

Then I heard the first lyrics, and I felt the blood drain from my face.

"'Animal print pants out of control'? I repeated in numb shock. "Oh, don't tell me—"

"I'm sexy and I know it!"

I groaned and let my face fall into my palm. "Well, if she didn't want to kill me before—GYERK!" I squawked in panic as Nami grabbed my collar and forced us face-to-face.

"She's not the only one!" she snarled viciously.

"BLAME THE SNAIL! BLAME THE SNAIL!" I hastily squawked.

"Punch Cross later, Nami!" Luffy laughed. "For now, let's go! We'll meet back up—!" He threw his arms out and launched himself up towards the rooftop. "AT THE CASINO! HEY, SMOKEY! COME AND GET ME!"

"YOU'RE MINE, KID!" Smoker roared as he blew up after him.

"Come on, Cross, this way!" Nami barked, indicating me to follow her and Sanji while Usopp, Vivi, and Zoro took off in another direction.

"So, do you think you managed to get that beautiful officer to follow us?" Sanji cooed eagerly.

I opened my mouth to respond…

"AFTER THEM!"

And promptly gulped nervously as a furious voice shrieked after us. "That's a yes. If there's one thing Tashigi hates more than someone using a sword for evil, it's someone insulting her womanhood!"

"Oh, yeah, speaking of that!" Nami growled viciously at me.

"Ah—IDEA!" I squawked hastily. "How about I split up from you guys so that I can draw her away, while you all run for the hills and Sanji doesn't get his ass kicked because he won't defend himself?"

Nami blinked in shock before frowning in concern. "You're sure you'll be fine?"

"Eh…” I tilted my hand side-to-side. "I think so? Worse comes to worst, I'll just have Soundbite empty their innards something fierce. Have fun in Rain Dinners! Oh!" I snapped my fingers in realization. "And if worst comes to, well, even worst yet, enforce your executive authority so that Luffy doesn't pull something braindead."

"Of course…” Nami groaned, rolling her eyes.

Coming up on an intersection, I spun around and ran backwards, waving at Tashigi as I did so. "HEY, TASHIGI, LIKE THE MUSIC? I PICKED IT SPECIFICALLY WITH YOU IN MIND!"

More than a few veins bulged on the officer's forehead as she wrenched Shigure from its sheath. "I WILL CASTRATE YOU, YOU FUCKING PIG!"
"YOU’LL HAVE TO CATCH ME FIRST!" I spun around and turned towards the right. "Good luck, you guys!"

"You too!" they concurred as they split left.

I shouldered my way through the relatively crowded streets of Rainbase, dodging around civilians and doing my best to stay the hell away from any shifty figures who were leering at me with a little too much viciousness, Soundbite's soundtrack blaring all the while.

"Any idea how many are coming after us?" I panted hastily.

"Ehh..." Soundbite took a moment to concentrate. "Going by all the heartbeats, I'D SAY TWENTY, TWENTY-FIVE...PLUS THE SWORD-BITCH!"

"Hey, show her some—!"

BANG!

"GAH!" I yelped, ducking as a bullet whizzed right past my ear. "Son of a—!"

"OH, and they've got guns."

"Thanks for the heads-up!" I spat. "And as I was saying, knock it off with the sexist crap! She might be our enemy, but she still deserves some respect."

"YEAH, WELL—GAH!" Soundbite jerked his head into his shell as another bullet nearly turned him into sticky paste. "THE WOMAN YOU’RE RESPECTING wants your nads on a platter! AND SHE’LL HAVE THEM unless you fucking RUN!"

"Right, right..." I ground out as I looked around fretfully. Come on, come on, there had to be some way out of this. Years of videogaming, don't fail me now!

Suddenly, I managed to catch sight of an open window coming up ahead of me. OK, to be specific, Assassin's Creed III, don't fail me now!

"Hold on!" I hissed out as I turned towards the window. "Pardon me!" I barked as I vaulted over the windowsill, darting through the home's halls and ignoring the shrieks of the house's inhabitants as I made my way past them. I left the house as swiftly as I went into it, shouldering open a door and dashing out into an alleyway.

"Think I lost them?" I asked.

"Split up and surround this block! Cover every entrance and exit and scour the alleys! DO NOT LET HIM ESCAPE!" Soundbite relayed in Tashigi's infuriated voice.

"Didn't think so," I cursed under my breath. "Alright, start throwing up false trails, give me a way out of here!"

Soundbite clenched his eyes shut and concentrated for a second before growling unhappily. "Too many to guarantee ANYTHING! THINK YOU CAN handle one IN A PINCH?"

I scowled as I snapped my baton to full length. "Looks like I'll have to. Do it."

And just like that, the air was filled with the sounds of running coming from every direction, as well as my own voice flinging taunts and jabs from a multitude of corners and alleyways. Soundbite
indicated a direction with his eyestalks, apparently too busy with his—

"Drop the damn music and concentrate!" I hissed at him. "Or at least keep it out of my headphones! I don't know what's giving me more of a headache, the beat or the lyrics!"

"AHEH! Sorry!" Soundbite chuckled sheepishly as he discontinued the connection to my headphones, so that I only felt the music in my bones as opposed to directly inside my head. "Candy, though! Oh, and take a right!!"

"Got it!" I nodded as I complied.

It wasn't exactly easy going. I had to sneak through a number of alleyways, and all too often I had a too-close call on account of Marines passing in different directions. Still, at least I was making some progress. Hopefully I'd be able to get out of here soon enough and find some way of rendezvousing with Sanji and Chopper…on second thought, preferably Chopper. At least he wouldn't fold like a leaf in front of Tashigi.

"Heads up, company up ahead! ONE BOGEY INCOMING"

Yeah, that figured.

I felt myself break out in a cold sweat as I realized that I was in an alleyway with the only way out being a turn to the right up ahead. I made to turn around—

"NO! TOO MANY! She's starting to coordinate, ignoring my false leads! You need to go through!"

Oooof course I did.

"Alright..." I muttered to myself as I started to creep towards the corner, making sure to press myself against the wall. "How fast is he coming?"

"Slow, methodical."

"Perfect..." I stood with my back to the wall at the very edge of the corner, tense and ready to go. "Once he's at the corner, tell me. I'll suckerpunch him, then you hit him with the subsonics. Ready?"

"As I'll ever be..." Soundbite muttered to himself.

"Then let's do this," I nodded in agreement. The seconds ticked by at a crawl. I could feel every beat of my heart, every bead of sweat on my forehead.

Finally...

"Now!"

I swung out from around the corner and took a moment to identify just where the startled Marine was before spinning on my heel, ramming my elbow into the poor bastard's face with as much of my momentum as I could put into it. It was a credit to the soldier's will that all he did was stumble and curse as he clutched his nose, as opposed to just flat-out collapsing.

Still, if the way he doubled over and started to dry-heave was anything to go by, not even Marine fortitude could withstand having Soundbite play the rendition of Chopsticks from hell directly on their eardrums.
I capitalized on the soldier's distraction by grabbing the brim of his hat and using it as leverage in order to slam his face down into my knee. I finished by snapping my baton down across the back of his head, causing him to collapse and leaving me holding his hat.

"FATALITY!" Soundbite boomed.

"Oh, shit, please no…" I cursed as I dropped to my knee and felt around his neck. "Please, please…"

I promptly sagged in relief as I felt that tell-tale heartbeat. "Oh, thank God…" I sighed. I patted his shoulder as I stood back up and gave him a slight salute. "Thank you for your services."

"CROSS!"

I clenched my eyes shut with a hiss. "Ooof course…"

"Of course, of course, you twit," Soundbite drawled.

"Not now!" I hissed before slowly turning around, finding myself face-to-face with Tashigi and several dozen troops beside. "…I don't suppose you'd believe it was self-defense, would you?"

The dozen rifles that were suddenly cocked and pointed my way were answer enough.

"Fair enough…" I tensed slightly as I prepared to run, but before I did I decided to ask one question. "Let me just ask you this."

I slipped the cap I was holding over my head. "How does it look? Really, I want your honest opinion: hat? No hat?"

BANG BANG BANG!

"ACK!" I ducked and dodged as bullets whizzed by me, hastily bolting down the alley away from them all. "TAKING THAT AS A MAYBE!"

As I ran down the alleyway, bullets whizzing by me, I made a silent resolution: no more Mister Nice Guy.

And honestly, that was as much my creeping exhaustion as anything else. I still wasn't fully recovered from that damn desert trek.

"Soundbite…" I panted. "Where's the nearest concentration of civilians?"

"I've got an even better idea!" Soundbite replied, grinning. "TAKE THE NEXT RIGHT. I'LL LAY SOME TRAILS and wire you the sound."

I didn't respond, too busy panting, but I did turn right. I heard the Marines charge past and then turn left, followed shortly by the squawking of a large number of chickens.

"Good idea, Soundbite…" I panted, before grabbing the small canteen I was carrying and taking a swig of water. Warm, and somewhat salty, but it was water. "OK. That's probably not going to distract them for long, so we need to keep throwing false trails like this. Which means you need to be on high alert for anything unpleasant to send them after, okay?"

"Aye-aye, cap'n!"

"There he is!"
I bit back a curse and ran the other direction as a Marine pointed at me from the other end of the alley. Luckily he didn't have a gun, or I'd have likely ended up perforated.

And as I rounded the corner, I caught sight of a pile of discarded refuse and had myself an idea.

"Slight change of plans, Soundbite," I said, stowing the snail in my jacket before slipping said jacket off and tossing it into the pile, followed by me slipping my goggles over my eyes and bringing my facemask over my mouth. "Turn off the music for a sec, swap my voice for the voice of one Sergeant Hartman, and be quiet."

"The hell are you—! Ooooh…YOU'RE GOING BAVARIAN, EH?"

"That's the plan…" I nodded slowly as I dug an old but passable coat from the refuse and draped it over myself. I then unclasped the armor from my arms, and hid it alongside my jacket, along with my headphones. Here's hoping these guys didn't think to look down.

"Alright…now!"

Within moments of me saying the words, a trio of Marines rounded the corner, weapons at the ready.

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING, MARINES?!" I immediately shouted in a foreign voice without so much as a hello.

"What the—!?! The lead soldier jumped in shock before he hastily tried to rally. "Who are you?"

"WHO AM I? WHO AM I?!" I scoffed, jabbing my thumb at my cap. "ARE YOU BLIND AS WELL AS RETARDED, MAGGOT?! I AM A MARINE, SHITSTAIN! I WOULD SAY I WAS A MARINE LIKE YOU, BUT HONESTLY, IF I WERE EVEN HALF THAT PATHETIC, I WOULD HAVE KILLED MYSELF AGES AGO SO AS TO DO THE WORLD A MERCY! AND YOU HAVEN'T ANSWERED MY QUESTION, SO I'M GOING TO ASK AGAIN: WHAT ARE YOU DOING, YOU SACKS OF SHIT?! YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE CHASING THE PIRATE!"

"Wh—th-that's what we were doing!" the soldier defended incredulously. "He came down this way!"

"ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT THAT STREET-RAT THAT JUST PASSED ME!?!" I spat incredulously. "GOOD GOD MAN, YOU MUST BE A SPECIAL KIND OF RETARDED, BECAUSE ONLY A GENUINELY GIFTED NUMBSKULL COULD HAVE MISTAKEN THAT BRAT FOR A PIRATE!"

"I—what—no! Th-That's not possible, I was certain that I saw that Transponder Snail of his on his shoulder!" the Marine denied.

"WELL LA-DI-DA, YOU WERE CERTAIN, WERE YOU!?! I barked out. "ARE YOU CERTAIN YOU SAW IT, COMPLETELY BEYOND EACH AND EVERY DOUBT?!"

"Ah…uh…" the Marine stumbled as he and his compatriots exchanged hesitant looks. "I, uh, I thought—!"

"WELL, THERE'S YOUR PROBLEM RIGHT THERE, SHITSTAIN!" I roared clear into his face as I jabbed his chest. "YOU THOUGHT! YOU ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO THINK, MAGGOT, YOU ARE SUPPOSED TO FOLLOW ORDERS AND FIGHT AND DIE FOR THE WORLD GOVERNMENT, NOTHING MORE AND NOTHING LESS, IS THAT CLEAR YOU PATHETIC PIECES OF AFTERBIRTH?!"
"SIR, YES SIR!" the Marines barked, snapping into uniform salutes instantaneously.

"GOOD GOD, YOU BASTARDS ACTUALLY HAVE HALF A BRAIN BETWEEN THE LOT OF YOU! IT'S A MIRACLE! NOW!" I jabbed my finger out behind me. "AS YOU IGNORAMI HAVE NO DOUBT FORGOTTEN, WE ARE STILL ON THE TRAIL OF A COLD-BLOODED CRIMINAL! NOW, YOU WILL EITHER CONTINUE THE PURSUIT IN A TIMELY MANNER, OR I WILL HAVE YOU HOLYSTONING THE DECKS UNTIL YOU MOVE UP IN RANK, AND BELIEVE YOU ME, THAT DAY WILL NOT COME WHILE I AM STILL ALIVE, DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR, MAGGOTS!?"

"SIR, YES SIR!"

"THEN MOVE YOUR ASSES BEFORE I CUT THEM OFF AND HANG THEM OVER MY MANTLEPIECE! MOVE MOVE MOVE!"

The Marines promptly moved, running down the alleyway as fast as their legs could carry them. Within seconds, they turned a corner and were out of sight.

I kept my back straight and my chest puffed out imperiously for a moment longer…

"They're gone!"

Before letting myself slump forward with a sigh of relief.

"Oh-thank-you-baby-Jesus-that-was-way-too-close…” I slid the old coat off my shoulders and put my own back on along with my headphones, followed by me refastening my armor. "Well, at least that worked. I guess that working on the stage was a good class after all!"

"You learned DRAMA?" Soundbite asked me incredulously.

"Eh…” I shrugged as I pulled him out and put him on my shoulder. "Stagework, and it was just the one play, but I got the gist. Besides, overacting is easier than regular acting. In all honesty, I'd say I did good!"

I froze as the sound of metal sliding against metal rang out.

"I think you could use a few more lessons."

I cast a sidelong glare at a panicked Soundbite before slowly raising my arms over my head. "Yeah, that would be how this turns out, wouldn't it?" I slowly turned around and eyed Officer Tashigi, who had Shigure pointed at my face, and the half-dozen Marines accompanying her, all of whom had their guns trained on me. "For the record, Soundbite chose the music, and I only said what I did to get your attention. I respect you, your womanhood, and your ability to totally gut me like a fish."

Tashigi sniffed darkly, her stance unwavering. "Excuse me if I don't believe the words of a nutcase pirate from a certifiable crew, especially when he's currently at swordpoint."

I grimaced and nodded slowly. "Fair enough, fair enough…” I started to glance towards Soundbite.

Tashigi jerked her sword at Soundbite. "If he makes so much as a peep, I'll make what you did to Petty Officer Cannali seem like an act of kindness."

"EEP!" Soundbite yelped, promptly withdrawing into his shell.

I withheld a curse. Well, that was one avenue of escape burnt. "The Marine I hurt is alright? I
checked his pulse, but I obviously couldn't stick around for a more comprehensive check."
"You gave him a concussion, but he'll live. Not that you care," Tashigi growled.

I frowned, and for lack of a better option, decided to try stalling for time; maybe I would be able to call for Sanji or Chopper and one of them would show up...though once again, preferably Chopper, given present company. "You really think that just because I'm a pirate, I don't care about killing a Marine? I guess this is why you're only Smoker's protégé; he knows when to put prejudice aside, but you're still following orders as blindly as those mooks I scared off. And yes, I do mean mooks. Competent, evil, loyal: pick two."

"The Navy is not evil!" Tashigi barked reflexively.

"Call me crazy, but I think that more than a few people on Sabaody might disagree," I drawled.

Tashigi frowned in confusion. "What are you—?"


The officer continued to try and read me for a moment longer before sheathing Shigure and glancing at her soldiers. "Put him in cuffs. We'll take him back to base camp and then we'll rendezvous with Captain Smoker at Rain Dinners Casino."

I ground my teeth as I extended my wrists towards the soldiers in question. Well, this was a fine situation I found myself in. With any luck, even if the rest of the crew didn't rescue me before heading out towards Alubarna, Tashigi would be forced to take me along with her when she and the Marines went themselves. From there, well...we'd be in a literal warzone. They wouldn't be able to watch me forever. Baroque Works was a factor, but with any luck things would turn out for the better.

Naturally, right as I thought that, the air was filled with the sound of blaring sirens.

"What the heck!?!" I jumped in shock.

"DANGER! DANGER! AWOOGA, AWOOGA! DANGER, WILL ROBINSON, DANGER!!"
Soundbite shrieked, if not at the top of his lungs then damn near it.

"I told you to silence that snail, Cross!" Tashigi snarled, whipping her hand to her sword's hilt.

"I can't control him, and I didn't tell him to do this!" I shot back frantically. "Soundbite, what's wrong!?!"

"SOMETHING'S COMING OUR WAY! IT'S WIPING OUT EVERYONE IT RUNS INTO! IT'S ALL OVER! WE NEED TO RUN, NOW!"

"Do you really think I'm going to fall for that old trick? Do you think I'm stupid?" Tashigi snarled at Soundbite.

"Officer, Soundbite is arrogant to hell and back, but he's got some degree of intelligence in him!" I hastily interceded. "Believe me, he's terrified of dying like anyone else, and thus he's scared of you! He wouldn't be risking you running him through for some cockamamie scheme that I sure as hell didn't greenlight! Whatever the hell he's talking about, it's real!"

"As though I would ever trust the word of a pirate!" the Marine spat viciously.
"Now is not the time for your misguided—!"

"OFFICER TASHIGI!"

My words were cut off by a trio of screams coming from the end of the alleyway. A second later, the Marines I'd given the run around shot out like bats from hell, running towards us at full tilt with panic in their eyes.

"OFFICER TASHIGI, WE NEED TO RUN, NOW!" the leading soldier screamed desperately. "WE'RE ALL IN DANGER!"

"What—?" Tashigi started to ask, before cutting herself off as the danger in question followed the Marines.

A wave of…okay, there's no way to put this that sounds wholesome. It was a massive wave of white, viscous-looking liquid, bearing down on us in a flood of halfway biblical proportions.

"HURRY!" the Marine screamed. "YOU NEED TO RUN! RU—!"

That was all he managed to say before the wave overtook him and engulfed him and his compatriots entirely, continuing its uncontrollable cascade towards us without pause.

"RUN, BOY, RUUUUUN!" Soundbite screeched.

"MOVE, DAMN IT!" I screamed, grabbing Tashigi's jacket and dragging her alongside me as I ran to keep the hell away from whatever the hell was coming after us.

And so we ran, pirate and Marines alike. We ran at full tilt, putting our all into staying the hell away from the deluge that was following us. However, our efforts were for naught. No matter how fast we ran, how many turns we took, the flood stayed right on our tails. All-consuming, ever-encroaching… all we could do was run.

And eventually, even that wasn't enough.

"IT'S RIGHT IN FRONT OF US!" Soundbite shrieked in panic. I spared the snail an incredulous, horrified glance for a single second before the truth of his words became clear.

With chilling silence, a second wave gushed around an upcoming corner, crashing against the walls of a building before inevitably coursing towards us.

We all slid to a halt, glancing back and forth in horror as we tried to find some way out.

And just like that, I managed to find one.

I didn't think. I didn't take a moment to consider, I didn't even dare wait.

With a grunt of exertion, I threw my body forwards and tackled Tashigi, forcing us both through the door of a nearby building. The second we landed, I scrambled to my feet and rammed my full weight into the door, slamming it shut.

I'd scarcely allowed myself to breathe easy when I looked up and noticed something just as terrifying as the flood outside, if not far more so.

An open window.

"CLOSE IT CLOSE IT CLOSE IT!" I repeated frantically.
It was a testament to Marine fortitude that Tashigi recovered with remarkable swiftness, all but literally *leaping* to her feet as she dashed to the window and grabbed the shutters.

The floods of white liquid met just as she slammed them shut.
Chapter 19: Repercussions! The Future's Course Is Melting Like Wax!

For a few moments, the dark room Tashigi and I were in was relatively silent, devoid of all noises apart from our heavy breathing… damn, this situation was just a plethora of double entendres. Now, if only they didn't all have the potential to kill me!

"Holy fuck…" I breathed wearily, sweat coating my face. "What… What the hell was that!?"

"No idea…" Tashigi groaned from where she was leaning against the window. "'Enlist in the Navy,' they said; 'Visit exotic locations!' they said; 'Look at all the shirtless, muscular sailors we have!' they said. I never signed up to be chased by white flash floods in the desert. Do you see any way out of here without instantly drowning in… whatever that stuff is?"

"*It's not OUT THERE anymore.*"

"Huh?" I blinked at Soundbite in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

Soundbite shrugged, inasmuch as he could. "*A few seconds ago, IT SOUNDED LIKE water OUT THERE. NOW… there's nothing.*"

"Really?" Tashigi questioned before sighing happily. "Well, that's a relief. For a second there, I was worried about my men. I'm glad they're alright."

The Baby Transponder Snail grimaced miserably. "*THEY aren't.*"

Tashigi fell silent as she processed Soundbite's words. "W-What? But you just said—!"

I grimaced as realization swept over me. "He didn't say that they were alright, Officer," I grimly informed her. "He said that there's *nothing* outside. Nothing."

Tashigi was still for a moment before shaking her head, slowly at first, but picking up speed until it was outright frantic. "No… no, no, no! Th-That's not true! I don't believe that! They have to be alright, they have to!" The Marine made to jerk back from the window... and only made it a few inches before jerking to a halt. "W-What the—!?" Tashigi jerked in place a few times without success. "M-My hands! I-I can't move my hands!" she squawked in panic.

"Huh!?" I yelped incredulously. "Hang on a sec, let me—!" I made to stand up, but was promptly jerked back as well. "The hell—?" I tried to push myself away from the door as hard as I could, but to no avail. "I'm freaking stuck!"

"Nononono…" Tashigi started repeating desperately, planting a foot on the wall and redoubling her efforts to escape.

I joined her with just as much desperation, planting my limbs on the door and trying to push myself away. Luckily, it seemed that only my back and upper arms were—! I promptly froze for a second before shutting my eyes with a groan. "If I had enough mobility, I'd slap myself…" I muttered acridly.

"Huh?" Soundbite blinked in confusion.

In lieu of response, I jerked my chin downwards. "Think you can get my zipper?"

Soundbite's eyes promptly widened in realization. "OOOOOH… OKAY! BANZAI!" And with that,
Soundbite shifted his mass to hop off my shoulder, snagging my jacket's zipper with his teeth as he descended, unzipping it entirely. "TA-DAAH!" he whooped as he swung free.

It took a little bit of twisting, but I eventually managed to slip my way out of the sleeves of my jacket and step away from the door. Turning around, I was treated to the very disturbing sight of my jacket hanging from the door, stuck fast to the wood.

"And that..." I muttered darkly as I picked up Soundbite and put him back on my shoulder. "That right there is why I wear a redundant layer of clothing..."

"Bastard—!" Tashigi growled out from where she was still tugging viciously at her arms, both of her feet planted on the wall.

I blinked in confusion for a moment before the penny dropped, at which point I scowled darkly at her. "Really? You really think I'm just going to leave now? You're really accusing me of lacking basic human decency, again, just because I'm a pirate? Now, believe me, I get the logic, envisioning pirates as not being human makes it easier to kill them, but guess what? That's just not true: we're as human as you are, for better or worse. Hell, between the two of us, you're the one who's showing less decency here, automatically thinking the worst of me after I just SAVED YOUR LIFE. Now, are you willing to work together with me and let me help you, or do you want me to leave you here to starve?"

Tashigi snorted viciously as she stared over her shoulder at me before looking down with a grimace. "...fine. Fine, just... just help get me out of here!"

I nodded in understanding as I walked over to her. "On it. Now, what exactly is wrong?"

Tashigi shook her head miserably as she continued to tug her arms. "I... I think that some of whatever that was outside must have splashed through or seeped between the planks or- or something! And then... well, look!" She moved aside slightly, giving me a clear view of her hands. As far as I could tell, they were encased in a solid mass of white... something that was at best a finger's-width thick. "I-It's like it's hardened or something. Whatever it is, it's stupidly strong, I can't move anything from the wrist down!"

I frowned as I looked the material over. "What the hell is this stuff..." I muttered. I rapped my fist on the material contemplatively, and my eyes promptly widened in horror as the stuff let out a thick rapping noise like wood. "Ooooh, that can't be a good sign..."

"Son of a bitch..." Tashigi whimpered miserably.

I scratched contemplatively at the casing with my finger, and I came away with several specks of white material. I gave the stuff an experimental rub, and as I did I felt a memory trying to break through the surface, like Reverse Mountain all over again. Acting on a hunch, I unlatched one of my gauntlets and slid it off before giving the material a feel. It was lumpy and uneven, but oddly enough, the closest comparison I could draw was to a—!

"Candle..." I whispered numbly as I shoved my gauntlet back on. "Shit."

"What?" Tashigi looked at me in confusion before scowling and shaking her head furiously. "Never mind! Look, if you know what this stuff is, then get rid of it! My men—!"

"Those men are dead, Tashigi!" I said, cutting off the denial.

"No! No, you're wrong!" The Marine shook her head harder as she started straining furiously against her makeshift shackles, the skin starting to tear ever so slightly. "Your snail must have made a
mistake, they can't be—"

I slammed my fist into the wall. "Damn it, Tashigi, *listen to me!" I snarled. "This stuff is wax, created via the abilities of the Wax-Wax Fruit. It's a liquid at first, but the *second* it hardens, it becomes as hard as steel. Do you understand what I'm saying?" I pointed at the window. "If any of them had their mouths open when that stuff got them, it would have gone down their throats, maybe even entered their lungs. And even if they had them closed, we *still* wouldn't have enough time to get out of here and save them before they *suffocated!"

I huffed heavily for a moment as I came down from my tirade before shaking my head solemnly. "I'm sorry, but they're dead, Tashigi. And unless you want to join them, you need to grit your teeth, soldier up and *move*. On. Understand?"

Tashigi huffed heavily as she stared out the blocked window with half-dead eyes for a moment before forcing herself to tear her gaze away and look at me. "How do you know about this stuff? This... This 'Wax-Wax Fruit'?" she asked weakly, obviously trying to distract herself.

I sighed in relief as she allowed herself to relax ever so slightly. "We—the rest of the crew and I—faced the user before, on Little Garden. He's known as Mr. 3." I nodded as Tashigi's gaze turned steely. "Yeah, he's a Baroque Works Officer Agent, a master tactician whose mission was to wipe us and Vivi clean off the face of the seas. Normally, sick bastard though he is, I'd say that this kind of shit wasn't his style..." I grimaced as I connected the dots. "But this isn't *his* play. At a glance, I'm guessing that your mobilization of the troops must have spooked Crocodile, so he's having Mr. 3 literally whitewash the streets of any and all Marines so as to safeguard his plans..."

I shook my head furiously as I ran my fingers through my hair. "But none of this makes *any* sense..." I muttered more to myself than anything. "Crocodile should have turned 3 into a living *husk* for failing his mission, why isn't he in the belly of a—!" The blood drained from my face as realization hit me. "Bananagator, *shit!"

Tashigi stared at me in confusion. "What the hell are you—?"

I held her gaze for all of a second before hastily turning around and stepping away. "Find the rest of the crew, NOW!" I barked at Soundbite.

"Huh?!" Tashigi twisted around as she tried to keep track of me. "Hey, what—!? GET BACK—!"

"And tune her out, both ways!" I snapped, jabbing my thumb over my shoulder. Tashigi's voice was instantly drowned out by a wall of white noise.

The next moment, an electronic whine heralded Nami's furious voice cutting through the air. "CROSS!" she shrieked viciously. "You had damn well better tell me how the hell we're getting out of this cage right now, *or so help me God*—!"

"Nami," I cut her off coldly. "You are my friend, and on any other day I would let you say whatever the hell you want, but now is *not* the time! The situation you're in is a *lot* worse than you think it is."

"What's wrong?" Zoro immediately asked me.

I shook my head miserably as I reran the correct sequence of events in my mind. "Long story short, you guys would normally get out of that cage on account of one of the Bananagators spitting up Mr. 3, who was fed to the things by Crocodile for failing on Little Garden. He'd make a key with his wax and you guys would get out, scot-free."

"And the reason why we can't just do that is...?" Usopp asked uncomfortably.
"Because Mr. 3 is up here trying to kill me and every last Marine he can find," I summarized flatly. "He almost managed to turn me and Tashigi into modern art, and I'm confident he's not done yet."

Silence reigned for a moment.

"Uh… I know I'm not very smart, but even I know that's not good," Luffy stated dully.

"Truer words have rarely been spoken…" I sighed in grim agreement. I stood in silence for a moment before reaching a decision. "Look, I don't have a snowball's chance in hell of taking down an Officer Agent on my own. Unless you guys want to drown in several metric tons of water, I'm going to need to get Tashigi to help me, and if I'm going to get her to help me, I need to tell Smoker too. I won't tell them everything, but…"

"H-Hey, wait!" Chopper's voice suddenly cut in.

"He just came into range A MINUTE AGO," Soundbite explained.

"What about me and Sanji?" he inquired hastily. "W-We're still out here too! Why don't we handle Mr. 3?"

"Because you guys have the infinitely harder task of luring Crocodile out of Rain Dinners so that we can get 3 to everyone else in the first place," I informed them grimly.

"And if he refuses to cooperate?" Zoro growled darkly.

"I'm going after him with a halfway world-class swordswoman who, once she gets over the shock of losing her men, is going to be flat out ticked, to put it politely," I summarized in a faux-casual tone. "At this point, whether he wants to cooperate or not is no longer a factor."

"Wait!" Nami cut in. "Forget bringing him down here, take him out. I've got a better idea for our predicament. Oh, and Cross? Thanks for the idea. I probably wouldn't have thought of it on my own."

"Um…?" I blinked in shock as I processed the statement. "I… you sure about that? Because seriously, allow me to re-emphasize: metric tons of water."

"I'm sure, Cross," Nami emphasized firmly, not a hint of doubt in her voice. "Don't worry about us, just take Mister Three down."

"Oh, Nami-swan~!"

I rolled my eyes with a sigh and jerked my hand across my throat, prompting Soundbite to cut Sanji off. I was silent for a moment longer before nodding in agreement. "Alright… alright. Tashigi and I will stop Mr. 3. Chopper and Sanji will provide a distraction to get Crocodile and All Sunday out of the way, and you get everyone else out of the cage. Sound good?"

"Perfect."

"I-I guess…"

"Have fun, Cross! Oh, and don't die!"

"Same here, brat."

"I'll do my best, guys," I said dryly, then glanced at Soundbite. "Alright, bring in Smoker and Tashigi."
I turned around and walked back to Tashigi, smiling 'innocently' at her. "Sorry about that, private matters. You understand."

"You son of a—!" she started to curse me out.

"Language, Tashigi," Soundbite drawled in a bored voice.

Tashigi instinctively jerked into as much of a salute as she could manage. Which wasn't much. "C-Captain Smoker, sir!"


"I, ah…" Tashigi trailed off uncomfortably, obviously having a hard time finding the words to describe just how thoroughly things had gone to hell.

I decided to spare her the trouble. "The Marines who were with her are dead, Captain," I informed him morosely. "Killed by Mr. 3 of Baroque Works. And chances are that many more are going to die if he has his way. As for Officer Tashigi herself, she's fine. Stuck in a bad position, but fine."

Soundbite's expression darkened as he mimed chewing, no doubt mirroring Smoker's own furious disposition. "Is that so… then I suppose we'd better move our men out of harm's way. Snail!"

Soundbite jumped in shock as Smoker apparently addressed him. "Does your range reach the rest of my men who are still alive?"

"UMM…" Soundbite concentrated momentarily before nodding. "Yeah, I CAN REACH a few squads."

"Connect me to them. NOW!"

Soundbite yelped in terror before swiftly complying. "YOU'RE LIVE!"

"This is Captain Smoker to all Marines in Rainbase," he announced firmly. "As of this moment, there is a Baroque Works agent slaughtering every Marine he comes across with extreme prejudice. On account of how I am currently… incapacitated, I am giving you a direct order: Get the hell out of Rainbase. Round up every patrol that hasn't heard these orders, get back to base camp, and retreat to a quarter mile out of the city. Evacuate all civilians as you go, chances are that this bastard isn't discriminating. Furthermore, until further notice, Chief Petty Officer Nomaru has command. Now get the hell out of here. End transmission."

Tashigi and I stared at Soundbite in open-mouthed shock, and even the snail himself seemed surprised at what he'd just said.

"Holy shit, Smoker," I breathed numbly.

"Captain…" Tashigi started hesitantly.

"Officer Tashigi," Smoker promptly interrupted. "As of this moment, I am deeming this a World-class incident. That means that you are fully authorized to cooperate with that pirate and no consequences will blow back on you. Your mission is to locate Mr. 3 and subdue him. Alive, if at all possible. I want him to enjoy Impel Down's tender mercies for what he's done. Is that clear, Officer?"

Tashigi stared dumbfoundedly at the snail for only a second more before clenching her jaw and nodding firmly. "Crystal, sir."
"Good, now get to it. And cut this line, I think someone's com—" Soundbite promptly cut himself off before grinning eagerly. "WELL, let's get TO IT!"

Tashigi nodded numbly in agreement before turning her gaze on her wax cuffs. "Alright… Alright. Let's get me out of here. You-You said that this stuff as hard as steel once it hardened, right?"

"Not even Z—er…" I hastily reconsidered what I was about to say. "Luffy can break this stuff without using another piece of it. For now, at least…" I muttered to myself.

Tashigi bit her lip uncomfortably as she processed this before scrunching up her eyes in resignation. She then leaned as far back as she could manage and twisted so as to proffer her hip to me. "Use Shigure. Swing as hard as you can. Make it as clean as possible."

I blinked at her in numb shock as I processed what she was asking me. I then proceeded to give her a flat glare. "Wow, you are way more like Zoro than I gave you credit for," I deadpanned. "Now, where's your lighter?"

A vein bulged on Tashigi's forehead as she visibly fought to keep from ripping my head off. "What the hell are you—!?"

"Tashigi," I cut her off, my voice studiously neutral. "It's wax. It's hard as steel while it's solid, but you know what one of the most prominent characteristics of wax is?"

The Marine stared at me questioningly for a moment before her eyes shot wide in realization. "It melts…"

"It melts," I repeated firmly. "And considering how you work for the face of chain smoking in the East Blue, I don't have any doubts that you have a source of ignition on your person. Now, do you want to be here until the sun goes down, or do you want to tell me where it is!??"

Tashigi visibly debated with herself for a moment before affixing me with a chilling glare. "If you touch me, in any way, I swear to the heavens that I will run you through and gut you like a fish."

My eye twitched viciously for a moment before I came to a decision: I was done putting up with this absolute bullshit.

THWACK!

"OW!" Tashigi yelped, her head jerking forwards as I dope slapped it. "WHAT THE HELL!?"

"You wanna be treated equally?" I demanded impatiently. "That's how we handle things when one of our crew is being an idiot. Now, will you please do me the favor of telling me where the damn lighter is!??"

Tashigi glared at me impassively for a moment before looking away with what was most likely shame. "The inside right breast pocket."

Ah. Alright, that justified the attitude a bit. Though that certainly didn't mean that I had to like it. Nevertheless, I grabbed hold of the hem of her jacket and pulled it away from her body before searching the pocket in question. I was gratified to come back with an average-sized lighter.

"Thank you," I nodded politely. "Now, if you'll excuse me." I turned around and started to walk away.

"H-Hey, HEY!" She twisted in an effort to keep track of me. "Where the hell do you think you're
I turned around and gave the Officer a flat look. "I'm going to take this lighter and use it to set the nearby orphanage on fire before kicking an old lady into the street. Then, just for kicks, I think I'm going to rob the widows and orphans fund, use it all to buy up all the ice cream in town, and not share aaaaaany of it. You know, a typical Tuesday for us pirates."

"MUHUHAAHAHAHAHAHA!" Soundbite cackled malefically.

Tashigi huffed and rolled her eyes tiredly. "And without the sarcasm?"

I gave the lighter a pointed shake, the flat look on my face not faltering. "This lighter isn't going to make a big enough flame to put even remotely close to a significant dent in that much wax. I'm going to search the house and see if I can't find some cloth or paper or anything that I can use to get a decently sized blaze going. It's gonna get hot like hell, but I don't see what other options we have. Now, if you'll excuse me—" I turned back around.

"Wait—!"

"You can arrest me for trespassing and robbery later, " I shot over my shoulder without looking back.

"No no no, not that!" Tashigi hastily pleaded. "I-It's just…" she trailed off uncertainly.

I glanced over my shoulder at her.

Tashigi was looking down at the floor, before glancing up and meeting my eyes. "Look… check and see if there's a kitchen anywhere. Cooking oil, sherry—"

"Flammables…" I breathed in realization before grinning eagerly. "That'll work perfectly! I'll see if I can soak a rag in the stuff! Oh!" I came up short as realization hit me. "And I'll see about filling up a bucket with water too, because seriously, to emphasize: hot like hell. Good chance you're not coming out of this without some kind of a scar."

"Right…" Tashigi nodded nervously, before blinking and jerking her head up frantically. "Ah, nonono! Not water, not water! A thick cloth or some baking soda, but you do not use water for an oil fire! How do you not know this!?"

I winced self-consciously before shrugging helplessly. "Hey, to be fair, I'm not our ship's cook and I'm a literal college dropout—long story—besides. I don't typically get anywhere close to oil fires if I can help it!"

"Just…" Tashigi hung her head with a groan. "Just hurry up already, will you?"

Shaking my head, I began searching the mercifully abandoned house and was gratified to come upon a nicely stocked kitchen. I started looking through every drawer and cupboard I saw, and fairly quickly found a bottle of sake. When the kitchen failed to turn up much in the way of rags—I guess that they just let the desert heat do that part of the job—I resorted to a dresser I saw. A bit more searching, which resulted in giving me the impression that I never wanted to meet the owner of this house—dear God, where did they find the energy!?—rewarded me with a decently sized towel, just big enough for what we needed.

I moved back over to Tashigi, and she watched with some apprehension as I carefully poured the sake over the towel, then wrapped it over the wax, leaving a big enough dry corner hanging away from it for me to grab in a hurry. With that done, I flicked open the lighter, and glanced back at Tashigi.
"Ready?" I asked nervously.

She allowed herself to laugh weakly. "That's a joke, right?"

"God, how I wish…" I muttered to myself before steeling my nerve. "Alright, one, two—!" I shoved the lighter beneath the rag—

FWOOSH!

And the cloth lit up instantly, giving off a respectable amount of heat that already had Tashigi grimacing in pain and some of the wax starting to drip.

"How long do you think this will take?" she asked uncomfortably.

"Well, my friends managed to break out of a full-body glazing in a matter of seconds, but that fire looked like something straight out of a kiln, sooo…" I shrugged helplessly. "I guess just keep trying to flex your fingers, and once you actually feel the burn, get your hands out of there? Aaaand hope that the smaller flecks don't actually stick to your skin like steel, too."

Tashigi grimaced, and we lapsed into silence as we watched the fire burn and listened to the wax slowly, so so slowly, drip off.

"How much?"

At least, until Tashigi suddenly spoke up.

"Huh?" I blinked in confusion.

"How much is Princess Nefertari paying you to protect her?" she clarified, obviously trying to keep the conversation civil.

I pondered the question briefly before shrugging. "Well, if Nami had her way, we would be a billion beris richer once this bout of madness was over and done with."

"E-Excuse me!?” Tashigi sputtered in shock.

"JACKPOT, baby!" Soundbite crowed.

"That is a ludicrous amount of money!" the Marine squeaked.

"Yeah, Nami just loooves her money," I drawled in a deadpan before grinning. "Luckily, I managed to sate her lust for wealth—and dear God am I being literal in that phrase—before we actually met Vivi, so she wasn't actively sniffing out a payday. Though honestly…” I chuckled mirthlessly. "I doubt we'd take it if she offered anyways."

Tashigi cocked her eyebrow in disbelief. "Oh, really? And why's that?"

I shrugged matter-of-factly. "Because she's our friend, duh."

Tashigi's expression didn't change in the slightest. "Excuse me if I don't believe you."

"Yeah, yeah, I know, pirates and all that," I grumbled. "Honestly, it is a little unbelievable when viewed out of context. You had to have been there."

"I'm sure." The swordsman gave an experimental tug at her wax restraints, sighing when they only gave half an inch. She then fell contemplatively silent before giving me a curious look. "What…
did you mean earlier?"

Now it was my turn to cock my eyebrow. "Would you care to be more specific, or shall I guess?" I
didn't even flinch at the glare she pinned me with. "Hey, to be fair, you were being sassy for the past
few seconds. Aren't you Marines supposed to be all about fairness and stuff like that?"

Tashigi huffed and refocused her attention on trying to free herself. "Roronoa. What did you mean
earlier, when you said Roronoa and I were more alike than you gave me credit for? Because I
promise you, we are nothing alike."

I blinked in shock as I realized just what she was referring to before promptly snorting in amusement.
"More alike than you'd think, seeing how your first reaction to not seeing any other way out of the
wax was to try and chop your limbs off."

_That_ caused Tashigi to freeze before slowly turning her awe-filled eyes on me. "He… he really tried
to do that?" she asked numbly. "To… to cut his arms—?"

"Legs," I interjected with a shrug. "Mr. 3 managed to trick him and snag him. He was willing to cut
his legs off above the ankles, all so that he could have a fighting chance. And he actually got, and I
quote, 'about halfway through 'em' before Luffy managed to bail him out."

"Seriously?" Soundbite whistled in awe.

"He wasn't all _there_ when it went down," I emphasized slightly as I jabbed my thumb at Soundbite,
who thankfully got the message. "But yeah, pretty much. You can say anything and everything you
want about Zoro, but you can't deny that he's a damn fine swordsman."

Tashigi's expression promptly darkened as she gave her arms an extra-hard yank. "Yeah, I really
can't. It's a shame too. If he weren't a criminal, he'd make an incredible Marine."

"HA!" I barked.

"And again, HA!" Soundbite concurred.

"What!?" Tashigi demanded.

"Lady, I assure you, Zoro would make a _terrible_ Marine," I swiftly promised her. "He would take
absolutely _none_ of any of his superiors' shit, his sense of direction is so bad that he can literally get
lost going in a straight line, he sleeps almost eighteen hours out of twenty-four—and God help you if
you interrupt the training or sword maintenance he does with religious fervor when he's awake—he'd
drain the entire base of alcohol in less than a week, sake first, and… um…"

"HE'S _gru~mpy~!" Soundbite sang eagerly.

"And he has an attitude, yes," I nodded as I pointed at the snail before shrugging. "And all that
besides, working with the Marines would mean that he'd never get the chance to acquire the two
things he wants the most in this world. Though, really, they're the same thing in the end."

_That_ refocused Tashigi's interest on me. "A-and what would that be…?"

I spread my arms helplessly. "Easy: Dracule 'Hawk-Eye' Mihawk's head, and the title that comes
with it."

And _that_ lost Tashigi's interest anew in favor of making marginally more progress with the stupidly
persistent wax. "The greatest swordsman… I'm not even surprised," she growled more to herself
than to me. "Arrogant, vicious, cowardly…"

I pursed my lips and bit my tongue as I listened to her rage against Zoro slowly devolve into wordless grumbling. After a minute or so, however, I came to a decision.

"Hey," I interrupted her, albeit hesitantly. "Your conversations with Zoro, they're not likely to ever develop much farther than 'I will defeat you, Roronoa!', right?"

Tashigi gave me a half-hearted glance out the corner of her eye before going back to ignoring me in favor of the wax.

"And it's almost certainly a guarantee that this conversation we're having is never going to be shared with anyone else outside this room save for whatever bits and pieces Soundbite decides to blurt out, right?"

I accompanied that last word with a pointed glare at Soundbite, who for his part simply whistled innocently through his massive smile.

"Get to the point or be quiet, Cross," Tashigi ordered.

"Do you want to know just why Zoro is so focused on becoming the best?" I asked her, causing her to freeze. "Why he will never let you have the Wado Ichimonji so long as he lives, and why you'll have to literally cut it out of his cold, dead fingers?"

Tashigi turned her head to stare at me dead on, a war obviously raging in her mind.

"I'll tell you," I offered slowly. "But only if you promise not to tell Zoro, because there's a good chance that he will open me up for telling you, and if you do, I will tell Smoker that you wanted me to cut your hands off, and you know you'll catch hell for it."

Tashigi remained silent for what might have been a full minute, her expression unreadable. Finally, she nodded her consent.

"Well, in that case," I spread my arms invitingly. "The easy response is thus: remember how he said that you look like a girl he knew that died a long time ago?"

Tashigi actually jumped in shock at that, despite the loosening wax still encasing her hands. "How do you know about—!?

"I'm a badass, BA-BY!" Soundbite crowed.

I smirked slightly as I jabbed a thumb at the snail on my shoulder. "Lady, let me let you in on a little secret: when your partner is the world's best eavesdropper, the list of things you don't know is shorter than the list of things you do."

"I'm a badass, BA-BY!" Soundbite crowed.

Tashigi spared a glare at the snail before turning back to me. "What does Roronoa's dead girlfriend—!"

"No no no!" I interrupted her, jabbing my finger up hastily. "Not girlfriend, they knew each other when they were around twelve or so, so their relationship was not romantic. No… I stared at the fire burning on the wax contemplatively. "No, if she was anything, Kuina was Zoro's rival… and his clear superior."

Tashigi's eyes widened in awe. "S-Superior?"
"2000 times, they dueled," I intoned gravely. "2000 times, he lost. Badly. Hell, she was his first, his very first defeat! Before that, he was cutting down dojos like wheat, but Kuina? Kuina stopped him cold."

The Marine was staring at me in awe, obviously trying to connect what she was hearing with the Zoro she knew and despised.

"Now, the point where this all becomes relevant is on the 2001st duel," I emphasized with a single finger. "After 2000 straight losses, Zoro's pride was... well, not so much bruised as tenderized. So, he proposed a final duel. This one with real swords. He used two ordinary katana," I sighed heavily. "And Kuina used her prized possession, a sword that had been passed down through her family for generations. You know it as the Wado Ichimonji."

Tashigi hissed in a frantic breath against her will.

I was silent for a moment before spreading my arms helplessly. "2001 fights, 2001 losses. But this time was... different. See, Kuina expressed some doubts that she had. She lamented the fact that she was a girl because she knew it would make her physically weaker than boys and she said that one day, maybe even one day soon, Zoro would manage to beat her, uniquely because of her gender."

Tashigi winced miserably before forcing herself to look away, attention returning to the wax. She was even making halfway decent progress, too.

"Zoro called bullshit on that."

And just like that, progress stopped.

"He said," I continued slowly. "That if he ever managed to beat Kuina, then it would be by skill and skill alone. That whether she was a boy or a girl... it didn't matter one bit. That night, they made a pact. Him or her, one or the other, it didn't matter. Either way... one of them would become the greatest swordsman in the world. And that, as they say, was that." I couldn't hide a wince at this next bit. "Or at least, it was for Kuina."

"W-What do you mean?" Tashigi asked.

I bowed my head solemnly. "The next day... Zoro found out that Kuina was dead. She died by falling down the stairs. An accident. Apparently, she was..." I sighed heavily. "Looking for a whetstone, of all things."

Tashigi's expression immediately became stricken, her mouth dropping open wordlessly. "...ah."

"So you see, that's why you'll never have much luck fighting Zoro head-on," I explained solemnly. "Because you'll never be fighting him head-on. When you fight him, you're not just fighting one of the best masters of the blade in our generation. Zoro trains and fights with the strength of two."

"Ah..."

"And I suppose you now see why Zoro has a hard time facing you at all. You looking like Kuina, it brings up a lot of emotions in him that he has a hard time dealing with. But really, don't think for a second that it's because of your gender. A lot of people might think that's a good excuse, but not Zoro. And certainly not me either, for that matter!"

"Ah!"

I frowned in confusion at Tashigi's unintelligible response. "Er, are you agreeing with me or—"
"AGH, THE FIRE, DAMN IT!" Tashigi shrieked, visibly straining against the wax. Strain that was actually making a difference, for that matter.

"Oh, shit!" I cursed, hastily running behind Tashigi and wrapping my arms under her shoulders. "Alright, pull on three, one two THREE!"

Tashigi and I immediately yanked back as one. It felt like I was pulling her through a wall of stupidly thick honey, but eventually—

**SCHLOCK!**

Our efforts bore fruit as I suddenly tumbled onto my back, with Tashigi rolling off of me as she came free, her arms thankfully free of both the wax in general and any smaller flecks or chunks that could have possibly stayed stuck to her arms. We both remained prone for a moment before hastily scrambling to our feet.

We were both silent for a moment until I decided to try and keep the peace we had going. "So..." I started slowly.

"This conversation never leaves this room," Tashigi interrupted me with a cold glare. "This conversation changes nothing. We are not friends, we are not partners, we can barely even be defined as *allies*. We are going to find Mr. 3, we are going to take him down, and then, if there is *any* real justice in the world, I will *personally* put you and your crew in cuffs before putting an end to Crocodile's plans. Understood?"

I grimaced and nodded slowly in agreement. "Yeah yeah, understood."

"Good," Tashigi started to nod before scowling viciously. "And *take that off!*" She lunged at me and snatched the cap I was wearing off my head.

I blinked in surprise at the thing before giving her a bemused look. "I will be one-hundred percent honest with you: in all this madness, I completely forgot that I was wearing that."

Tashigi sniffed darkly as she waved the cap in my face. "This is a symbol of the integrity, moral fortitude, and valor of the Navy. You don't have the *right* to wear it."

I raised my hands in surrender. "Fair enough, fair enough. Now, can we *please* get out of here and stop the sadistic sociopath with the Devil Fruit ability?"

Tashigi glared at me for a moment longer before nodding in agreement. "Fine. Now, how would you suggest that we get out of here, seeing how the door is most likely sealed shut?"

"The wax *didn't go* ON THE OTHER SIDE of the *HOUSE,*" Soundbite offered.

"That's as good a way out as any," I shrugged before cocking my eyebrow at Tashigi. "Now, do you want to go first, or do you want me where you can keep track of me?"

The *shink!* of Shigure being drawn and pointed in my face was answer enough.

"Alrighty, then," I muttered as I walked past her, going through the kitchen and locating the backdoor. I pushed through it, emerging into a mercifully unscathed but no-less-conspicuously abandoned street. Huh, must have been the front door. Makes sense, we *did* enter through the alley.

"Alright..." Tashigi muttered. "Which way is he, snail?"
"I have a NAME, you know," Soundbite grumbled before yelping fearfully, presumably on account of the cold steel that jabbed past my face.

"Look at just how much I care."

Soundbite ground his teeth nervously before jerking his head to the left. "THAT WAY, give or take half a mile."

"Alright, move it," she commanded, thankfully withdrawing her blade in the process.

I wordlessly followed her orders, marching down the streets and following the directions Soundbite provided. We continued for a few moments until Tashigi decided to break the silence herself.

"So, this Mr. 3," she started slowly. "What does he look like?"

"Thin guy with glasses and black hair, usually has it tied up in the shape of a three above his head," I blandly summarized.

I could tell that Tashigi paused for a moment in shock. "Wait, seriously? I thought he was supposed to be some kind of discreet agent or assassin or something!"

I grimaced darkly. "At a guess, he's not that worried about witnesses surviving to spread his codename around."

"Mmph… good point. Alright, weaknesses?"

I frowned. "Well, for starters, his hair catches fire when he uses his powers; we used that against him last time—I think anyways, things got kind of nutso, all a bit of a blur. Besides that…he's really arrogant, not prepared to believe that rookies would be able to outsmart him. Oh, and physically? He's a serious wimp. I could probably take him in a fistfight, and believe me, that's an accomplishment."

"But you said that he doesn't typically use his powers for a tidal wave of wax? Strange, because that worked devastatingly well."

I shrugged. "He goes by the philosophy 'without mastery, power is nothing'. Simply put, he's a perfectionist and a twisted 'artiste' besides. And much as I hate to say it, he manages to pull it off surprisingly well; he almost managed to kill our whole crew before Usopp managed to break—"

I cut myself off from reciting details from the story as I recalled another possibility. I glanced at Soundbite.

"Please tell me that Goldenweek isn't here, too."

"Who?" Tashigi asked, bewildered, as Soundbite focused.

"Miss Goldenweek, Mr. 3's partner. She's a hypnotist who focuses her powers through paint. If she's here, then chances are that we'll need to look out for lifelike wax-replicas of people to boot, and that would be less than fun."

"NOT today. SHE'S not HERE, THREE'S flying solo," Soundbite reported.

I heaved a sigh. "Thank God for small miracles…" I took a moment to glance around the street. "Where is everyone, anyways?"
"Some indoors, some LEFT WITH the Marines. OTHERS…" Soundbite fell uncharacteristically silent. "Others didn't make it."

I glanced at the snail with mounting dread as we rounded a corner. "What do you mean—?"

And the second I caught sight of what lay ahead of us, my words died in my throat.

The first thought that ran through my head was… white. White on the walls, white on the ground… and white on the people. So many people. A small crowd of them, civilians and Marines alike, all with rough caricatures of fear molded onto their faces. All running as fast as they could away from something. Obviously not fast enough.

I grit my teeth furiously as I walked past them all, disgust and hate and a building rage vying for control. "Son of a bitch…"

Tashigi slowly matched my pace and walked alongside me, observing the Marines with a forcibly blank expression. "You're certain that there's no way possible to get them out?" she asked quietly.

I wrenched my gaze forwards as I shook my head. "Not a one. Heck, even if they were still alive after so long, the entire reason Zoro tried to cut his legs off was that he couldn't cut through this stuff. Well…” I cocked my head to the side slightly. "Not yet, at any rate."

Tashigi looked at me in shock. "What are you talking about?"

I briefly considered how to answer her before spreading my hands helplessly. "Let me put it this way: the only swordsmen in the world capable of cutting anything… are those who have learnt how to cut nothing."

"That is a very cryptic and unsatisfying answer," Tashigi deadpanned.

I shot a glare at her out of the corner of my eye. "Then arrest me."

"Ain't no law AGAINST BEING cryptic and unsatisfying, OTHERWISE ALL THE OLD MASTERS OF THE WORLD WOULD BE OUT OF BUSINESS!" Soundbite chimed in.

Tashigi rolled her eyes, and her fingers twitched towards Shigure's sheath before she settled for just saying, "I should have expected some kind of making light of the situation from you. As long as it's not you or your crew in the wax, why would you care at all?"

I stopped walking as I heard those words, and I felt something in my mind come very close to snapping.

"Keep moving, pirate."

Aaaaand that was the straw that broke the camel's back in half.

I rounded on the Marine and grabbed her collar, pointedly ignoring the sword she shoved in my face. "First and foremost," I droned frigidly. "The only reason I'm making jokes in this situation is that I'm not numb, and unless I translate the sensations I'm feeling into excitement or otherwise, they’re going to become terror and I'm going to curl up in the fetal position, crying and pissing my pants. If I had chosen to do that, we'd both be dead in that alleyway. You're welcome for that, by the way."

"Let go of—!" Tashigi started to snarl before I cut her off by yanking her in close so that I was snarling directly in her face.
"Second," I barely refrained from literally spitting. "Knock it off with your high-and-mighty morality bullshit. Three times now, you've painted me with the same black brush as anyone else who flies a Jolly Roger; what have I, or any of my crew for that matter, done to deserve that? I accept that most pirates are scum of the seas, it's a fact, but if you'd take two seconds to look at the Straw Hat Pirates' track record, you'd realize that we're not like that. We have never raped, we have never pillaged, we have done things that are dangerous, destructive and even morally questionable, but nothing unforgivable. My friends and I are not saints and I'll admit that for some of us, decent is a goodly stretch, but none of us are the monsters you make us out to be!"

I shoved her away and took a distancing step back from her before continuing. "But you know what?" I spread my arms invitingly. "Go ahead. Go ahead and say whatever the hell you want about me, about my crew. But before you do, you have to admit to one thing, one simple, unequivocal fact."

"And what's that!?" Tashigi snarled back.

I jabbed my finger at her accusingly. "That the flag you follow is no worse than mine. That at its core, the Navy is just as black as you accuse us to be. Worse, even."

"THAT'S A LIE!" the Marine screamed indignantly.

"YEAH, IT IS!" I roared back. "Because you know what? You're right! The Navy is white! You're just understating it, because you see, they take 'white' past the point where it becomes bad. Past the point where it becomes something unspeakable."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Tashigi spat.

"Oh-ho-ho, where to even start?" I laughed humorlessly, wracking my brain for a moment before snapping my fingers as I came to a conclusion. "Oh, I know! Let's start in the North Blue! The once-opulent White City of Flevance!"

"That was an epidemic!" Tashigi shot back. "The lives lost were a tragedy, but—!"

"They were lost in vain," I retorted. "Get any doctor to actually, legitimately examine a case of Amber Lead poisoning, and you know what they'll tell you? It's genetic. Passed down from parent to child over years. You could breathe in Amber Lead dust for decades and the only people who would suffer would be your third generation of offspring. But the doctors outside of Flevance got the wrong conclusion and were too scared and too stupid to fact-check, so they deemed it to be a plague. The World Government didn't bother to investigate, didn't bother to ask, didn't bother to even try. And you know why?" I spat in the wax. "They. Didn't. Care."

"Even if I believed that, which I don't, how the hell would you even know?!" the Marine demanded indignantly.

"This isn't about me," I promptly deflected. "But you know what? Fine! Let's move the aim of our discussion. Somewhere more… familiar. The East Blue, for example! Ever hear of the island of Tequila Wolf?"

Tashigi frowned in thought. "It's… a cordoned off island in the northern part of the East Blue that's been designated as a working place for the impoverished…"

"Hm…" I made a show of scratching my chin in thought. "Working place… that's a funny way to say 'biggest slave camp in the hemisphere.' Oh, yes!" I nodded at Tashigi's shocked look. "Slave camp! That's been running for seven hundred years, all on the orders of the World Nobles. Why, you
might ask? To build a bridge. Where this bridge leads, why they're building it... hell if I know! Personally, if I had to guess, one of them decided way back when that they wanted an easier way to get to their summer home on another island and their descendants haven't let anyone stop it. But hey, then again, I could just be giving those sick fucks too much credit."

Tashigi stammered incoherently for several seconds, and I cut her off before she could formulate her thoughts enough to deny what I said again.

"But hey, you might ask how I know about that, too. So, how about I move to another relevant topic, using nothing but public knowledge. Nico Robin: The Devil's Child, wanted at a whopping ¥79 million, apparently for the crime of destroying six, count 'em, six Marine battleships... at the tender age of eight. Now..." I chuckled sardonically as I raised my hands in a shrug. "I don't know about you, but personally, I only see two ways something like that could possibly go down: either A, the Navy is a lot more incompetent than I give it credit for, or B... That story is a steaming pile of bull."

"And I can explain it with two words: Devil. Fruit," Tashigi shot back.

"Mmmyeaaaaaah..." I slowly nodded in agreement before shifting to a shake. "Buuuut no. See, her powers aren't anywhere near that kind of a capability."

"And how the hell would you know, huh?" Tashigi demanded. "I thought that you were keeping to public knowledge!"

"Well, allow me to mix in some personal experience, because I've met her!" I took a brief moment of solace in Tashigi's thunderstruck expression. "She's Crocodile's second-in-command, goes by the name of 'Miss All Sunday'. She came onto our ship shortly after we met Vivi. Why she didn't kill us, I couldn't tell you, but I can tell you what her powers are." I tilted my head back and indicated my neck. "The Flower-Flower Fruit. Capable of generating her body parts from just about anywhere in her line of sight. I know because she created an arm on my torso and used it to choke me."

Tashigi blinked slowly as she considered my words. "But... But that doesn't—!"

"Make any sense?" I finished for her. "Doesn't match up with the Marines' version of events? Because after all, you only get one Devil Fruit your entire life, and that one doesn't sound like it's capable of levelling six battleships to me. You?"

"I... but... it can't..." Tashigi stammered for a few more seconds, but then her expression grew hard again. "...Excuse me if I don't believe you when the linchpin of your argument is your own word. Sure, if this 'Miss All Sunday' is Nico Robin and she does have the Flower-Flower Fruit, I promise you that I'll apologize. Hell, I'll even promise to research those other places you mentioned if you're telling the truth. But you haven't done anything to make me blindly trust you."

"Fine by me!" I spread my arms invitingly. "If my words are wasted on you, then that's no skin off my bones! But know this!" I marched up to her and jabbed my finger in her chest, high enough that she couldn't make anything of it. "If you're going to put yourself behind a flag and support it with every fiber of your being, then you'd better be able to say you know it, inside and out, and trust every last part of it. I know every member of my crew, and I trust them all with my life." I leaned in and narrowed my eyes accusingly. "Care to say the same?"

Tashigi's expression grew uncertain again, and she slowly opened her mouth, perhaps to rebutt me, but no sound came.

Instead, a different sound rang out.
Applause. Slow, mocking, self-aggrandizing applause.

"Shit!" Tashigi, Soundbite and I chorused as we whipped our head arounds to stare at the source of the sound, who was clapping from on top of a wax-coated building.

"Well, this has been a most entertaining and…enlightening exchange of morals," Mr. 3 drawled, folding his hands behind his back. "And I will certainly have to see about exploiting a fair amount of what you've shared with me at a later date, but for now? I do believe that it's time I killed the both of you."

"Hold that thought, Mr. 3," I growled. "I'll save you the trouble and kill one of us right now. Soundbite?"

Soundbite glanced around in confusion before paling dramatically. "TH-THERE'S STILL something where he WAS making noise!"

"Mmmyes," Mr. 3 blandly stated. "While I'll admit to the majority of our exchange on Little Garden being…fuzzy, at best, your little pet's abilities stayed with me, so I decided to take precautions just in case. Care to know one of the most fundamental abilities an assassin holds in their repertoire?" The wax-man's grin became cruel. "How to hold your breath for a very, very long time. Well…" He tapped a wax vest he was wearing that I hadn't noticed before. "That and a little something I threw together that apparently succeeded in masking my heartbeat. As for the distraction, it's a wonder what one can achieve with knowledge in engineering and an endless supply of resources. But!" Mr. 3 waved his hand lazily. "I'm afraid I'm digressing. Time for you to die."

Tashigi whipped her hand to Shigure's hilt—

SHUNK!

And promptly froze in place, her eyes slowly drifting down to stare at the shaft of white wax piercing her gut. "W-What—?" she stammered unintelligently.

I had just enough time to catch sight of the wax shifting and bubbling around Tashigi's feet—

SH-SH-SHINK!

When said wax proceeded to explode with over a dozen more such shafts, all piercing up into the air nigh-instantaneously. For a scant moment, I was afraid that Tashigi had been turned into a literal human pincushion… until I noticed the distinct lack of blood from anywhere except her sole source of impalement. As it was, none of the other spears had actually harmed her, and were instead keeping her trapped by crisscrossing around her and forming a simultaneously impenetrable and inescapable forest of wax poles, like a diabolically engineered bamboo forest whose sole intent was to serve as the Marine's prison. Only one of Tashigi's arms appeared to have any degree of movement available to it, but even that wouldn't be of much use if the way she was letting it hang limply was anything to go by.

"I do believe that that will suffice for the good Officer at the moment," Mr. 3 sniffed imperiously. "Who knows? I might even leave her like that. Might as well… diversify, for lack of a better word. Now then!" He brought his other arm around, revealing the flowing wax he'd been hiding behind his back. With a near-careless gesture, he motioned the limb upwards, causing an ornately decorated staircase to rise from the pool of wax that was seamlessly hidden on the ground. He grinned malevolently. "Your turn."

I turned around to run, but was immediately met with a barrier of wax at least ten feet tall rising
before me before I could take so much as a step. I mentally cursed a thousand times over as I turned around and caught sight of Mr. 3 casually strolling towards me. I hastily scrambled to slam my headphones over my ears. "Alright, screw making him sick, try and blow his fucking eardrums out!"

"I'm afraid—" Mr. 3 interrupted Soundbite before he could move his mouth, "that you'll find that to be a most… fruitless endeavor." He tapped his ear with a smirk. "Earplugs, and formfitting ones at that. Lip-reading, such an… invaluable skill, wouldn't you say? But still, just in case…" He raised his hand menacingly. "If your pet's jaws show any signs of opening, I promise you that I will fill it, and I don't mean its mouth."

Soundbite hastily shut up, and I clamped my hand over his mouth for good measure. Mr. 3's smirk grew into a sadistic grin.

I furtively wracked my brain for some way, any way for me to keep this bastard off of me until I could come up with some kind of plan. Thankfully, I managed to latch onto a stray thought and force it out my mouth. "How are you still alive?" I demanded desperately. "We kicked your ass on Little Garden, and I know that Crocodile is beyond intolerant when it comes to failure. You should be a dried-up husk!"

3 blinked in surprise at the question before chuckling sardonically. "Well, now… to be quite honest, I almost was. I accompanied my fellow Officer Agents here to Rainbase and decided to involve myself with the ongoing meeting. As expected, Mister Zero was quite infuriated with me." He narrowed his eyes menacingly. "Imagine my surprise, however, when he explained that the cause for his ire was a rather fraudulent report that he received in the midst of the madness that you caused us on Little Garden. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, hmm?"

If the way his sneer intensified, my face must have betrayed me. "Thought so. That little ploy of yours very nearly got me killed, which, I will admit, I can somewhat respect. I was supremely fortunate to be able to explain the situation, and convince him that it was the truth before he managed to drain more than half of my body's liquids from me. The rest, as they say, is history."

I frowned as I considered that; that was almost exactly the way things had happened before, and Crocodile hadn't forgiven him then. What had changed? Sanji picked up the call, passed himself off as Mr. 3, Crocodile believed him, and then…

It was only the advancing enemy and the fact that my hand was covered in metal that kept me from facepalming. The Unluckies. Those furry-ass fuckers. They didn't attack Sanji and interrupt the charade, they didn't plant a seed of doubt with Crocodile about Mr. 3's trustworthiness. And they didn't attack Sanji because—!

…because they were attacking me.

The world swayed slightly beneath me as the implications hit me. All of this madness, this death, all because of me. Because I diverted the Unluckies, they didn't interrupt Sanji. Because they didn't interrupt Sanji, Crocodile gave Mr. 3 a chance to explain himself. 'For want of a battle, the kingdom was lost… all for the want of a horseshoe nail'.

The click of leather on wax served to break me out of my thoughts, and bring my focus to Mr. 3's cocky sneer.

But that wasn't true, was it? The battle might have been lost because of a nail, but he was the one who started the damn battle in the first place. I didn't cover these people in wax, I only made it possible. I wasn't without blame, but I'd be damned if I was stupid enough to think that I had the lion's share!
I scowled angrily. Dammit, I was brooding! The \textit{exact} thing that the BROB that stuck me here tried to prevent, even! And this smug \textit{jackass}, the one at fault here, had the fucking audacity to \textit{smile} after what he'd done?

Fuck. That.

I stepped forwards and threw my entire body behind a punch directed at the center of the smug bastard's face.

Naturally, all that my fist hit was the lump of molten-but-not-hot wax that was 3's own hand. And considering the wax's viscosity, my punch being halted mid-swing was to be expected. 3 cocked an eyebrow at the wax before giving me a flat look. "Did you \textit{honestly} expect that to succeed?"

"It felt damn good to \textit{try}," I spat.

"Hm…" Mr. 3 thoughtfully tilted his head to the side. Then he buried a fist covered in \textit{hardened} wax in my gut.

"\textit{HOORF!}" I wheezed painfully, doubling over around the boxing-glove-shaped construct he'd formed. It took all I had to keep my lunch where it belonged, much less my legs under me.

"You're right, that did feel good!" the candleman laughed.

Soundbite whimpered miserably as he watched the events in terror, grinding his teeth fearfully as he balanced on the knife's edge of yelling with all he could and staying as silent as possible.

"Now then…" Mr. 3 held his hand up, wax churning menacingly. "Let's finish this. Rejoice! For I shall now make you into a work of art. From the inside—!"

\textit{SHINK!}

Mr. 3 froze, blinking in confusion as his wax sloughed off of his hands. "Out?" he breathed, apparently unable to believe whatever what had just happened.

Rather than look a gift horse in the mouth, I reared my arm back and \textit{rammed} my elbow into his face, dead center. The sound of his cartilage snapping against my armor brought me no end of relief.

3 stumbled back from me, clutching at his shattered nose. He made it three steps—

\textit{THUNK!}

When Tashigi brought Shigure's hilt down on his skull, laying him out for good and revealing the bleeding slash on his back that had cut clean through his wax vest.

"That was for my men, you bastard…" she hissed, clutching the bleeding wound in her gut.

"Oooh, I \textit{think} you might have cut his spine," I winced.

Tashigi snorted and shook her head firmly. "No, I didn't. Smoker said he wanted him alive. I follow orders…" She gestured at the bisected shafts of wax behind her. "And I only cut what I \textit{want} to cut."

I stared at the display in awe as I processed just what the implications \textit{were}. "You… you figured it out…" I breathed.

Tashigi huffed heavily as she flipped Shigure in her grip and slid it into its sheath. "It was… easy."

She winced and doubled over as her body was wracked by shudders. "Once the life was draining
"Hey hey hey, whoa!" I yelped, running to her side and propping her up. "Don't you dare give up on me now, Officer, don't go dark! I still need you with me, we still need to find our captains!" I tried to brainstorm anything else I could possibly say… and I grinned eagerly as a thought struck me. "Hey, come on, Tashigi, don't frown or anything! This is a good time, a happy time! You should be smiling!"

"Why?" Tashigi wheezed, leaning on me heavily. "Because we took that bastard down? That's… just my job…"

"Ah, come on now!" I grinned winningly. "If you love what you do, then you won't work a day in your life! But, ah, nah. I rather meant the fact that Zoro doesn't know how to do what you just did. Know what that means?"

Tashigi blinked blearily as she tried to force her synapses to fire. "Ah…?"

"It means…" I started to stride forward, dragging her with me. "That right now, and for approximately the next twenty-four hours, out of the two of you, you, Master Chief Petty Officer Tashigi, are a superior master of the blade in comparison to Roronoa Zoro. Now, ain't that just something to live for?"

The Marine woman stared at me in shock. "I—that—but—!? I isn't Zo-Roronoa your crewmate?"

"Eh, fuck him, Zoro's a dick," I shrugged indifferently.

"HE DON'T RESPECT our AU-THORI-TAY!" Soundbite over-pronounced in a familiar drawl.

"Technically speaking, Zoro outranks the both of us, so he doesn't have to respect our 'au-thori-tay,'" I shot back. "But… still, you get the point, right?"

Tashigi was contemplatively silent for a moment before slowly nodding in agreement, energy flowing back into her form. "Yeah… yeah, you're right…” She chuckled grimly, in spite of the obvious pain that lanced through her features. "Fuck him."

Soundbite and I laughed eagerly. "That's the spirit!" I crowed. "Now then!" I slid out from under Tashigi and allowed her to support herself, clapping her on the back as I did so. "On your feet, Marine! This battle is only just getting started."

She swayed for a few seconds before managing to establish her balance. She took a tentative step forward, then another, and pretty soon she was ambling along at a good pace, if a bit wobbly. I kept my pace even with hers as we approached Rain Dinners, a silence between us that I would dare to call comfortable.

Well, aside from the fact that Tashigi was still bleeding onto the ground. Hopefully Smoker's unit had some medics on hand. I blinked as I ran that sentence through my head again, and glanced at Tashigi.

"Do you want to order some of your unit's medics to meet us at Rain Dinners?" I asked.

"WOULDN'T do her any good even if she WANTED TO," Soundbite frowned. "THEY'VE MOVED slightly too far for me to REACH THEM. SORRY."

Tashigi looked at the two of us, her expression unreadable. "…Thanks for the offer," she muttered
before shaking her head firmly and plastering a confident expression on her face. "But it doesn't matter either way. I'm a Marine, we're made of sterner stuff than you pirates."

Soundbite and I shot her flat looks.

Tashigi adopted a look that was a *tad* too innocent. "What? It's just a fact. After all, I take a spear to my gut and I barely even cry out, you get punched once and you look like you're about to toss your lunch."

I would have been indignant if it was one of my crew saying that. But considering whose mouth it was coming out of, I decided to settle for waffling between 'impressed' and 'righteous fury'. "Oh-hoh, bite me, Marine bitch!" I grinned with as many teeth as I could muster. "You think that that cute little *flesh-wound* is impressive? Puh-lease, Zoro's *eaten* stab wounds to most of his body for dinner, and that was before he settled on having his chest sliced open for breakfast! He'd be able to take that without so much as *flinching.*"

Tashigi accelerated her pace as she grit her jaw. "How typical of a criminal: defending their pride against any and all perceived threats! Are you sure you aren't overcompensating for something?"

"You started it, Marine bitch!" I shot back as I matched her step for step.

"Pirate bastard!"

"Jackboot-grade thug!"

"Lowlife scum-of-the-seas!"

We continued the volley of insults until we were within sight of Rain Dinners, both of us out of breath by that time. We paused our back-and-forth for a few seconds, glaring daggers at each other. I tried to keep it up… but in the end, I couldn't stop the grin spreading over my face, and if the way Tashigi was digging her fingers in her open wound was anything to go by, she was only *just* managing to keep her scowl in place.

"My, my, Officer, what a mouth on you!" I teased viciously. "What *would* Smoker say if he were to learn of it?"

"Not a word, Jeremiah, unless you want to see what color your innards are," Tashigi retorted. 

*That* drew an honest wince from me. "Alright, alright, fair enough. Just, don't make a habit of calling me by my first name, alright? I much prefer to go by my family name."

*That* got Tashigi blinking at me in shock. "Wait, Jeremiah isn't your family name?"

I opened my mouth to respond with a dry 'obviously', but took a moment to reconsider. "…ah, I see your confusion. Yeah, naming conventions of my home are flipped. It was either Cross or some variation of 'Jeremiah', and none of them really appeal to me in any way, shape or form."

Tashigi made to respond…

*SPLOOSH!*

When we were both interrupted by a sound coming from Rain Dinners. We snapped our heads around… and were confronted with the sight of a massive cluster of air bubbles rising to the surface of the pool surrounding the casino. My heart skipped a beat.
"Please tell me that that wasn't their air," Tashigi whimpered.

"You really think we're that lucky!?" I snarled as I dashed towards the water, discarding my gauntlets and hopping forwards as I fought to do the same with my greaves.

Tashigi was running right alongside me, struggling her way out of her jacket and working Shigure's sheath out of her belt.

She and I were just about to toss aside Shigure and Soundbite, respectively, and jump in… just as my crewmates and her boss burst from the water, desperately gasping for air. I blinked, gaping slightly as I processed the sight, and then looked to Nami as she clambered onto the shore. "Looks like you managed to get out of there pretty well."

The navigator hacked up half a lungful of water before grinning cattily up at me, raising a hand and spinning around two thin rods of metal in her fingers. "Crocodile might be a criminal mastermind, but he is a cheap bastard when it comes to locks. A South Blue double-tumbler deadlock without any of the typical security features or precautions one might expect? Please. I almost felt insulted."

I stared at the lockpicks in awe before firmly planting my hands on her shoulders. "You beautiful, brilliant bitch. If I wasn't certain you and Sanji would kill me and you weren't one of my closest friends, I almost think I could bring myself kiss you."

Nami laughed as she chopped her hand down on my head with only enough force to give me a minor goose-egg, or half her strength for the uninitiated. "Good thing you can restrain yourself, you couldn't afford it in a lifetime!"

"Heh."

I snapped an incredulous glare at Smoker, or rather at the slight smirk Smoker was directing at me. "Oh, so that's what makes you laugh!?!" I paused as I thought things over. "That makes waaaay too much sense…"

"I've never seen him smile before," Tashigi said under her breath. Smoker's eyes fell on her, and the smirk was gone the next moment as his eyes fell on her bleeding gut.

"Don't worry, Tashigi already gutted Mr. 3 like a fish and left him intact enough for him to become Warden Magellan's problem," I reassured him hastily before glancing at Tashigi. "And considering the way she's been carrying on, I'm fairly certain it looks worse than it is."

Smoker finally managed to achieve a flame, and he took in a breath of nicotine. "Good. In that case…" He blew out a hefty cloud of smoke. "On to business."

Zoro's sword clashed with the Marine's jutte the instant he drew it. I sighed in exasperation and made to tell them to stop acting like idiots, when I was instead confronted with a stupidly familiar blade coming to rest over my shoulder. "Seriously!?? I hissed indignantly.

"This is the first time I've said this to a pirate, Cross," Tashigi huffed painfully, "but I am sorry for this. I'm a Marine, you're a pirate. You're all under—"
"ENOUGH!"

"HOGEEZE!" I hissed fearfully as Shigure twitched towards my face on account of Tashigi flinching.

The source of the flinching was very obvious indeed: Vivi roaring furiously with more impotent rage and authority than I thought she had in her.

"Listen to me very carefully," she snarled in a tone of icy calm. "You will release Mister Jeremiah, and you will leave my friends alone, or I swear that I will do everything in my power to make you regret your actions for the rest of your miserable life, DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR?"

Tashigi shivered as she obviously tried to discern what to do, but she thankfully withdrew her blade. "Ma'am, please—!"

"No, you will listen to me, Marine!" Vivi spat as she marched upon the wounded Marine and started jabbing her in the collar. "You have been hounding me and my friends from the very moment we set foot in this country, my country, and I am sick of it! I am giving you a direct order: stay away from the Straw Hat Pirates, or pay the consequences!"

"And who do you think you are, ordering my Officer around?" Smoker huffed, more lazily than anything else.

That was the wrong question to ask.

Vivi spun around and glared at the Marine, looming over him like an oncoming storm. "Who am I?" she hissed imperiously. "I am Princess Nefertari Vivi, daughter of Queen Nefertari Titi, now passed, and King Nefertari Cobra, heir to the Alabastan throne, twenty-third in the ancient and honorable line of Nefertari, and friend to Monkey D. Luffy and his crewmates, who are the sole reason that I have survived this long. Cross warned me about you, Smoker. He said that nothing short of the word of God would be able to convince you to give up your pursuit of justice once you got started. Well, guess what? I might not take pride in it, I might even be deeply ashamed of it at times, but for better or worse, the fact is that I am descended from one of the twenty gods who created this world, and I do have the power to match that claim. So! You will let us go, you will gather your troops and lead them to Alubarna so as to stop this revolution, YOU WILL RESPECT MY AUTHORITY AND YOU WILL SHOW ME THE RESPECT I AM DUE, IS THAT CLEAR, CAPTAIN SMOKER?" she screamed, quivering with righteous fury.

Everyone, be they pirate or Marine, stared at her highness in awe.

"Holy shit, Vivi," I summarized flatly.

Tashigi was downright quaking in her boots by this point, the woman who had fearlessly cut down an assassin not an hour ago looking ripe to piss her pants. Smoker's external reaction was one of stoic calm, but I could see the sweat dripping from his temple, and I'm pretty sure it wasn't from the heat. After a few seconds, he slowly sheathed his jutte and turned his attention back to his subordinate.

"I suppose that it's for the better that we forego persecuting them for now; we have bigger things to worry about. This situation is worse than I could have imagined."

"No, it isn't."

Smoker shot a look at me. "Explain."

I shrugged matter-of-factly. "Simple: Nico Robin has never desired to revive the Ancient Weapons,
and nothing Crocodile can say or do will break her. He lost the second she became his ace in the hole."

Smoker, along with most everyone else who heard me, gave me a quizzical look. Tashigi, for her part, took one look at the confusion on Smoker's face and paled.

"Who's Nico Robin?" Nami asked.

"You know her better as Miss All Sunday, the cocky bitch who met us after Whiskey Peak and who brought Vivi to Rain Dinners. Sorry about not warning you, by the way," I directed at the princess. "But it was better that you get in there somehow. And don't worry about Pell, for that matter. Zoans are tough sons of bitches, something as trivial as vertebral trauma won't cause him any lasting damage." That got a sigh of relief from her.

"What do you mean about Crocodile already having lost, Cross?" Smoker demanded.

I held up my finger. "Easy: Crocodile's ultimate goal, the whole reason he created Baroque Works and caused this rebellion, is to get his hands on Pluton. However, as Pluton is an Ancient Weapon, the only record telling where it is and how to activate it is recorded on a Poneglyph. Nico Robin is wanted by the World Government and was recruited by Crocodile because she is one of the only people, if not the only person on the face of the planet capable of reading Poneglyphs. However, where Crocodile fucked up is that he doesn't know how Nico Robin uses the Poneglyphs: she doesn't care about activating the Ancient Weapons, and she would sooner die than cooperate with him. As I said: he's already lost. The only question now is how much fallout he'll leave in his wake. That's what we need to stop. Simple, no?"

"At the risk of repeating myself, Cross… how the HELL do you know all of this?" Tashigi demanded incredulously. "And before you say it, I seriously doubt that your snail could get you that kind of knowledge!"

"I'd like to know that as well, Cross," Smoker huffed as he glared at me.

I smirked mysteriously. "Sorry, but that's for me to know, and you to agonize over. Buuut…” I grinned cheekily. "You two are damn decent Marines. If you were to, saay, leave the Navy and —?"

"Not gonna happen," Smoker snorted.

"No way!"/ "Not a chance in hell!" Zoro and Tashigi chorused before proceeding to glare daggers at each other.

I spared a snicker at their reactions beforeshrugging helplessly. "Then I suppose that you'll have to settle for living in obscurity."

"So~RRY!" Soundbite sang eagerly.

"But!" I clapped my hands firmly. "I am afraid that we are digressing! There is still a revolution to be halted and a megalomaniacal asshole to be tossed into the deepest pits of Impel Down. So unless there's anything else," I jabbed my thumb over my shoulder, "what say we bounce?"

"Yeah!" Luffy whooped, throwing his fists up eagerly. "Let's go kick Crocodile's ass!"
Zoro kept his glare with up Tashigi for a moment longer before huffing and turning his gaze away. "Aye-aye, Captain."

"Chopper's waiting for us this way with a way to get to Alubarna, come on!" Sanji shouted, indicating us down one of Rainbase's wider roads.

"Hold it!" Smoker barked.

I hastily dug my feet into the ground, casting an aggravated glare over my shoulder at the Marine. "What part of 'revolution to be halted' did you not get!?" I demanded.

Smoker didn't respond as he looked me over, contemplating me before huffing out a cloud of smoke. "Back in Loguetown, you called me a 'decent' Marine, then said that that was a good thing because there are too many 'good' Marines in the world. What's the difference?"

I contemplated the question for a moment before deciding how to answer. "At its simplest… good Marines follow their rules to the letter and will sacrifice all for the sake of justice. Decent Marines, Marines like you… They sacrifice everything for the sake of all. Even justice, if it comes down to it."

The rest of the crew and Tashigi both looked between Smoker and I with expectant expressions as I said that. Smoker's eyes had widened the slightest amount in response to my answer, but beyond that his expression was unreadable. I waited…

"I see," he said at last. "And you honestly believe that the Navy has more good men than decent men?"

I gave him a sickly smile. "Honestly? As of this moment, I can name four decent Marines off the top of my head. Two are here, the other two are long dead. Mark my words, Smoker: you may not believe me now, but if everything goes the way Vivi wants and this country is saved, you're going to see the eight of us as more righteous than your bosses before we leave this country."

Smoker was silent for a moment longer before grunting noncommittally.

I took that as a good sign. "Now, unless anyone else has something they want to say?"

"Um…" Tashigi stepped forward hesitantly.

"GAH!" I winced as Vivi grabbed my ear and yanked. "Owowow, I swear I was kidding!"

"Don't TEMPT fate!" Soundbite chortled.

"I-I'll be fast, I swear!" Tashigi stated hastily before digging around in her jacket. "I-I wanted to give
“You…” she withdrew the cap she'd taken off of me and held it out, "this."

I blinked at the cap in surprise as I slowly took it from her. "Huh? But, I thought you said—!"

"In light of recent… developments…” Tashigi winced as she tightened the grip on her wound. "I… take back some of what I said earlier. I-In spite of the method through which you acquired it—!"

"FATALITY!" Soundbite sang.

"Inappropriate," I hissed out of the corner of my mouth.

The snail had the good graces to wince as he thought things over. "Point…"

"In spite of your methods," Tashigi pointedly repeated. "I-I think that Petty Officer Cannali wouldn't object to you keeping it."

I looked the hat over in awe as I processed the implications before slowly slipping it over my head. "I… thank you, Officer. A lot. I'll probably have to dye it to keep other pirates from attacking me on sight, but, ah… yeah, thanks."

"Cross!" Sanji barked from down the street. "We need to go! What happened to that urgency you had?"

"Ah, right!" I exclaimed, starting to run down the street. "Back to business! Thanks for the gift, Tashigi, or ' Marine pig-dog' as is more appropriate of our roles, but now I must go! It wouldn't do for a decent Marine like you to die in the madness!"

I got a few feet before I heard Tashigi call after me. "I never thought I'd say this Cross, but same to you! I'd rather handle good pirates like you myself!"

"HA!" I barked jovially. "That's where you're wrong, Tashigi! We're not good pirates! None of us are! Matter of fact, we're some of the worst pirates you'll ever see!"

Soundbite chose not to enhance the Officer's voice, so I didn't catch Tashigi's response to that, if she gave one, and I refocused on running as fast as I could to catch up with the rest of the crew. The fact that I actually succeeded was a testament to just how effective Zoro's training had been for me. Even if achieving the end still didn't make me like the means. We ran until we reached the edge of the city, and a large cloud of dust became visible, growing nearer every second.

"Giant Enemy Crab!" Soundbite exclaimed.

It wasn't long before the cloud's source revealed itself to be a… yeaah, it was like Laboon all over again; while Scissors wasn't that titanic, I don't think I really braced myself to be ready for meeting a crab the size of a house. A big house. A big two-family house with a porch and a white-picket-fence yard.

"Hey, guys!" Chopper waved eagerly from atop Scissors' head.

"Hola, hombres! So you're Chopper and Eyelashes' amigos, eh? Nice to meet you all! Especially, the señoritas!"

I stared at the crab with a twitching eyelid for a moment before pinning Soundbite with a flat look. "You have absolutely no sense of decency, do you?"

"I ate its liver with a side of fava beans!" Soundbite cackled.
"Should have seen that coming…" I muttered under my breath before gesturing at Scissors. "Well, come on! Everyone on board the crustacean express, running nonstop to Alubarna!"

"CHOO CHOO!" the Baby Transponder Snail whooped.

We hastily clambered onto the crab’s back, and Chopper snapped the makeshift reins he’d fashioned for Scissors. Just as the mega-fauna started the trek, however—

"INCOMING!" Soundbite hollered fearfully.

"NOT TODAY!" I shouted back, grabbing Vivi’s shoulder and yanking her below the massive hook that came within inches of yanking her off of Scissors' back.

Vivi stared over her shoulder fearfully. "Thanks, Cross."

"Not even half a problem," I reassured her. I then proceeded to turn around and shout at the retreating skyline of Rainbase. "LOOKS LIKE YOU LOSE THIS TIME, SAND CRO—GACK!"

I was cut off by a large hand wrapping around my throat, and a very familiar and very furious visage materializing before me.

"I'll settle for the consolation prize," Crocodile snarled viciously as he constricted my windpipe.

"Grrgkh—!"

"LET GO OF MY COMMIE, YOU BASTARD!" Luffy howled, launching himself through Crocodile and forcing him to dissolve into sand and release me. Before any of us could react, Luffy tumbled onto the desert's sands, with Crocodile reforming less than a dozen feet before him.

I hacked and wheezed as I massaged my crushed throat. Holy shit had that been close. I'd probably been within moments of becoming a mummy! And I had no intention of sticking around to become one, either. "Mo—gagh!—MOVE! NOW, GO!"

"YOU DON'T HAVE TO TELL ME TWICE, AMIGO!" Scissors concurred, tearing through the sands as fast as his legs could carry him.

"LUFFY!" Vivi desperately screamed back after our captain.

"GO ON WITHOUT ME, GUYS!" Luffy shouted back at us. "I CAN TAKE HIM!"

"KICK HIS Ass, LUFFY!" I called back after him. I watched one of my best friends and one of our worst enemies disappear into the distance for a second… until Zoro spun me around and held me up by my collar, glaring at me viciously.

I met his glare head-on with one of my own. "If you're going to say anything, go ahead and say it, but before you do, know this: I did nothing wrong and you know it."

Zoro ground his teeth furiously a moment longer before releasing me, allowing me to rub my throbbing body parts. "Is Luffy going to beat him?" he asked, still glaring at me.

I froze in my ministrations as I contemplated the question before slowly shaking my head. "Luffy… won't win…"

Zoro cursed furiously, Sanji bit through his cigarette, Usopp's jaw dropped in horror, Chopper looked to be on the verge of tears, Nami froze, Soundbite whimpered, and Vivi looked to be a moment away from breaking my nose again. All of them stared at me with varying levels of anger.
"BUT!" I barked swiftly. "He will not die today either! Believe me, I hate this just as much as you guys do, but Luffy needs this fight to beat Crocodile! And even if I told Luffy how to beat Crocodile, he'd still need to fight him here to keep him from getting on our asses! Got it?"

Zoro stared at me silently for a moment before bowing his head. "You're certain?"

I nodded. "The rest of Baroque Works will say he died, and they'll have good reason to think it. But at the end of the day, Luffy's strong as hell and stubborn to boot. In a straight-up fight between him and the Reaper, who would you bet on?"

Zoro was silent for a moment longer before nodding slowly in agreement.

"That's what I thought. Now, then!" I clapped my hands decisively. "We're charging headlong into the middle of a revolution and are about to go up against…" I made a quick mental count. "Five to eight of the most dangerous assassins on this side of the Red Line, depending on how you count them. As it is, my lips are feeling a little loose. Show of hands: who wants some spoilers?"

The rest of the crew exchanged looks. Usopp, Chopper, Eyelashes and Vivi were the first ones to raise their hands (or hooves). Nami followed shortly afterwards, and perhaps just to show solidarity with the ladies, Sanji's hand raised a moment later. Zoro looked at his comrades before exhaling, and raising his own hand.

I allowed a bloodthirsty grin to split my lips.

"That's what I thought."
Chapter 20: Direct To Alubarna! Steaming Across The Sandora!

Hornet AN: Oh, Cross...

Even after I laid out the remaining Officer Agents' abilities, as well as a few suggestions for how their fights could go a bit smoother (here's hoping that Nami's self-esteem would benefit from a much-improved fight with Doublefinger), the mood on Scissors' back was still seriously tense.

Everyone was dealing with their nervousness in their own ways. Sanji was all but literally burning his way through a pack of cigarettes; Zoro was hefting a rather bored Eyelashes as a makeshift dumbbell; Usopp was making up taller tale after taller tale with less and less plausibility, which Chopper was only halfheartedly listening to; Nami was absentmindedly twirling the three parts of her Clima-Tact through her fingers in an astonishing display of dexterity; Vivi was brooding, disturbingly enough; and Soundbite…

I'll be honest, what Soundbite was doing was the strangest out of everyone here: he'd had me take him off my shoulder and put him down on Scissors' back, where he was frowning and grinding his teeth as he… hummed. He didn't sing, didn't cackle, didn't make any other noise just hummed. Well, technically he didn't just hum. He demonstrated a wider variety of humming than I'd thought physically existed. Low pitch, high pitch, wavering pitch, hell, even a bass pitch low enough that it shook the air around Soundbite and me, even though I was less than half a foot away from him!

When I asked the snail what he was doing, he'd just dismissed me, saying that he was trying to 'work something out.'

I watched everyone wallow in doom and gloom for a moment longer before deciding to draw their attention by clearing my throat. "Alright, guys—!"

"HEY, AMIGOS!" Scissors suddenly barked up over the wind of his speed. "SANDORA COMING UP IN A FEW MINUTES! TERMINUS, EVERYONE OFF!"

I snapped my mouth shut with a huff. Alright, save the pontificating for later. Right now, concentrate on cutting down our swim-time to an absolute minimum.

"HUH!?" Usopp barked incredulously. "What do you mean, get off!? You're a crab!"

"That's normal crabs, amigo! I'm a mover crab, biig difference!" Scissors shot back. "Give me waves of sand over waves of water any day!"

"And besides," I sighed, giving Usopp a flat look. "Crabs move by scuttling along through the sand beneath the water. So, unless you've recently acquired gills…"

"GLUG GLUG GLUG!" Soundbite chortled, prompting me to scoop him back onto my shoulder.

"But this is still a problem!" Vivi fretted. "Even if we managed to cross the river in time, which I doubt since it's about as wide as a small sea and we have one and a half Devil Fruit users on board —"

"HEY!"

"—we'd still need to make our way through the desert to reach Alubarna, and that would take the rest of the day, at minimum, and at worst it would take—!"

"Vivi, you're babbling," Zoro grunted.
"OF COURSE I'M BABBLING, THE FATE OF MY PEOPLE AND MY KINGDOM ARE AT STAKE!" Vivi screeched, her blood pressure reaching an all-time high if the way the veins on her forehead were throbbing was anything to go by.

I allowed myself to grin cheekily in the face of her fury. "Funny you should word it like that…"

Everyone stared at me in confusion for a moment until the penny dropped for both Zoro and Nami. Zoro threw his head back and laughed uproariously, drawing incredulous looks from everyone else, while Nami's face swiftly matched Vivi's own infuriated hue.

"You have got to be kidding me…" the navigator hissed viciously. "That's what you were talking about!? Seriously!?"

I shrugged with a snicker. "What can I say, Nami? Desperate times call for desperate measures! I paid my dues, now it's your turn to pony up!"

"WOO! Shake it, mama!!" Soundbite cackled eagerly.

Vivi's gaze was rapidly shifting between us, her hysterical rage bleeding away into confusion. "Uh… wait, what? What's going on, what are you talking about?"

"Weeeell," I drawled slowly. "See, here's the thing: Scissors can make some damn good headway into the Sandora River…"

"He can!?" most of the crew asked in surprise.

"Come again, hombre!?" Scissors concurred.

"Oh yeah, it's totally possible!" I nodded. "He just needs the right…" I grinned eagerly. "Motivation."

Vivi was still stumped, so Nami growled and jabbed her thumb at Sanji as an answer. "Remember our little… 'wardrobe malfunctions'?"

The princess took one look at the cook before turning an interesting combination of colors. "I—n-n-no, you can't possibly mean—!"

Soundbite started whistling out a very…specific type of groove that would have been popular in the 70s, in-between the gales of raucous laughter.

Vivi settled for a clean flush that was either pure rage or pure embarrassment. "You can't be serious."

"Come on, Princess!" I cooed through my smirk. "You've already done so much for your nation, what's a bit of skin—and maybe a slight shake of the hips—at the clutch?"

Nami ground her teeth as she stood up, jabbing her finger at me. "We will have words about this Cross, count on it!"

My smirk promptly lost a lot of its vigor in face of Nami's and Vivi's unholy (read: feminine) wrath. "C-ome on, now, you can't be that pissed! You were barely even ticked at Sanji and Scissors in the story, why do I get the third degree!?"

"Those two," she jabbed her thumb and finger at the cook and crab in question, "are innocent enough perverts. It's in their nature, and more often than not? Not enough harm for a foul. You, on the other hand, are not a pervert. You're just doing this for laughs!"
I swallowed nervously as I swapped my gaze between the two women looming over me, hastily plastering a shaky smile on my face. "Ah… in my defense… you think all men are perverts?"

"All men are perverts, they just show it to different degrees," Nami stated flatly.

I could feel the sweatdrop hanging off the back of my head. "Fair enough. In that case… I plead the fifth?"

"Even if I knew what that was, I'd still veto it," Vivi growled.

I settled for just whimpering miserably.

Vivi and Nami kept up their glares for a moment longer before sighing simultaneously in defeat.

"Still, as demeaning as it might be, I can't deny that it's a workable plan…" Nami groaned to herself.

"So, should we just take them off now, or…?" Vivi trailed off uncomfortably as she hesitantly fingered her robes.

"Ah, no no no!" I hastily rallied. "Hold off on that until we're barely at the water, we want to get as much of a boost as we can get."

"The heck are you going on about, amigo?" Scissors spoke up.

"Just wait until we're at the water, then look back here. Trust me, you'll like this!" I called back.

Sanji, Usopp, and Eyelashes had by now put the pieces together, and were staring expectantly at the girls, not bothering to hide their attentiveness. Chopper was still clueless, and Zoro was still snickering, though he wisely averted his eyes from them. I elected to do the same, not wanting the two of them angrier at me than they were already, and looked in the distance as the river approached. I struggled between holding my tongue until the time was right and speaking up before it was too late. Fortunately, Soundbite spoke just as we were a few feet from the shoreline.

"NOW! Ladies, please," he said, grinning.

There was a momentary sigh of exasperation and the sound of rustling cloth. Then…

"Oh, Scissors~" the girls crooned in tones of voices I had never heard before…or at least, not from Vivi.

"Huh? What is it, chicas?" Scissors asked as he rotated his eyestalks to look at us. He blinked in surprise for a moment as he took in the sight. Then...

"ARRIBA!" Scissors whooped euphorically, putting on a ludicrous burst of speed and ripping across the surface of the Sandora River.

"YEEHAW!" Soundbite whooped ecstatically between gritted teeth as he clung for dear life to my shoulder. "THAT'S WHAT I'M TALKIN' 'BOUT!"

I couldn't fault Soundbite for his precarious position, seeing how I myself was hanging on to Scissors'…fur? With just as much tenacity. "PFFHAHAHAHA! NOW WE'RE REALLY MOVING!" I laughed eagerly.

"GO, SCISSORS!" Chopper and Soundbite cried eagerly.

"I CAN'T BELIEVE THAT THIS IS ACTUALLY WORKING!" Vivi shouted over the wind.
"NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF THE FEMALE FORM, VIVI!" Nami shouted back. "IT'S LIFE'S GREAT SKELETON KEY! NOW, IF ONLY I COULD MAKE THIS CRAB PAY ME, THEN I'D REALLY BE HAPPY!"

Of course, all good things must come to an end, and this one slowly started grinding to a halt as Scissors started sinking into the Sandora.

"We're losing speed!" Sanji cursed.

"S-sorry, hombres!" Scissors wheezed desperately, obviously fighting to catch his breath. "I might love the chicas, but even I've got my limits!"

My eye twitched slightly as I came up with an idea. It was legitimately suicidal, but damn it, I was already in the hole and I wasn't going for a swim without a fight. "We still have one option…" I bit out furiously before springing to my feet and jabbing my finger in the air. "ACTIVATE RETRO BOOSTERS! HOT GIRL-ON-GIRL ACTION, ENGAGE!"

CRUNCH!

"WE'D RATHER DROWN!" the girls screamed as they retracted their legs from where they'd planted them.

"My progeny…" I whimpered pitifully as I fell forwards onto my face, cradling my bruised… nether regions.

"Did you honestly think that would work?" Usopp said, eyeing me uncomfortably.

"I had… to try…" I wheezed as I feebly raised my fist into the air in a show of defiance. A show that was promptly crushed under Nami and Vivi's heels.

"GO DIE!" they bit out.

"BAHAHA!!"

"G-going down, hombres!"

"HEEHEEHEEHOOHOO—GLUG, GAGH!"

Thankfully, the shock of the… surprisingly lukewarm water was enough to rip me out of my agony and back into reality, prompting me to doggy paddle for dear life as Scissors sank and promptly started crabby-paddling his way back to the shore.

"Well, that didn't work…" Sanji huffed as he spat out a soggy cigarette.

Soundbite mumbled out something unintelligible from my shoulder, both due to the fact that he was burying his teeth into my coat for dear life and that there was a not-inconsiderable amount of water lapping against him.

"Yeah, alright, so we didn't manage to make it the entire way…” I grumbled in frustration. "But hey, look on the bright side: with my timing, we managed to get the most out of that boost! That's worth something, right?"

Going by the glare she was sending my way, I was reasonably certain that Nami would have punched me again if she wasn't using all of her arm strength to swim.

"So, Cross," Zoro spoke up. "I'm assuming that something else is going to come to help us across the
river?"

"In a manner of speaking..." I eyed the water around us uneasily. Where the hell was it?

"What do you mean by—!?"

SPLASH! "GROOOARGH!"

"A SANDORA CATFISH!" Vivi shrieked fearfully. "THEY'RE MAN-EATERS!"

"You were saying?" I deadpanned.

"Withdrawn," Zoro growled as he plunged his hand beneath the water, presumably to grab the hilt of one of his swords.

"Oh, don't bother! They're already handling it," I waved him off dismissively.

"Who's they!?" Usopp demanded, trying to backpedal from the catfish's gaping jaws while struggling to keep Chopper balanced atop his head.

However, before the Catfish could successfully swallow him, it jerked back and started thrashing in agony.

"Them," I grinned as the Catfish finally keeled over and was swarmed by a crowd of very familiar figures. "He-lllo, Kung Fu Dugongs!"

The martial-artist marine mammals whooped and waved at us eagerly as they celebrated their victory on the fish's carcass. Hastily clambering on allowed Soundbite to regain his ability to translate their barks to words for us. "We couldn't allow our master's disciples and crewmates to just be swallowed whole-fu! We'll tow you the rest of the way-fu!"

"We're not Luffy's disciples," Nami deadpanned with a sweatdrop.

"Speak for yourself, I'm already neck-deep in the school of hard-knocks..." I growled acridly as I cast a glare at Zoro, who merely chose to respond with a vicious glare.

"Either way, we're very grateful for your help," Vivi bowed thankfully. "I realize our means of communication are somewhat limited, but I promise I'll try and repay you however I can once all this is over!"

The Dugongs' speaker returned her bow, though he glanced at another Dugong hesitantly before responding. "We appreciate the offer, but that won't be necessary-fu. We have... other plans for the future-fu."

Vivi blinked in surprise at the response, but we reached the shore before she could question him further.

"Well, we should be going!" I grinned as I grabbed Vivi's shirt and dragged her off the Catfish carcass. "Best of luck to you!"

The Dugongs waved us off as we made our way into the sands. Once we were a ways away, Sanji turned his attention to the desert. "Alright, we've done pretty good so far... so what's next? I doubt that Eyelashes could make it to Alubarna in time—"

"Well, maybe if I had some form of, shall we say, 'motivation?'" the camel proposed, batting his eyelids.
"Carrying all of us?" I cut in hastily before Vivi could draw the Peacock Slasher she was starting to finger. "No, our ride to the capital should be here any second now. Soundbite?"

"SOUND THE TRUMPETS, CAUSE HERE COME THE CAVALRY!" Soundbite announced, blaring up a bugle call as a dust-cloud showed up on the horizon, swiftly approaching us.

"Please don't tell me that's the enemy!" Usopp blurted nervously as he whipped his goggles down and started trying to puzzle out who was approaching us.

"No, wait, that's—that's Carue!" Vivi cried eagerly. As if on cue, the duck and his companions slid to a stop several feet from us. "And he's brought the Supersonic Duck Squadron with him!"

"Wepowting for duty, Pwincess!" Carue squawked as he and the rest of the ducks snapped their wings into a salute and stood at attention. Their postures then immediately faltered as they joined Carue in glaring daggers at Soundbite. "This wasn't somethin' Aye missed."

"Wow, you wewen't kidding, this is annoying," the duck wearing the Roman helmet and chomping down on a cigar grumbled.

"Uh… ah dunno…" said a duck in the back with a timid expression and a reversed baseball cap who was scratching the back of his head. "Ah'm just happy we can tawk at all, so—!"

"Shaddup, Stomp," the rest of the Squadron squawked in a nigh-rehearsed, tired tone of voice.

"Sowwy…" the duck apologized, slumping his head with a sigh.

"Alright, enough!" I cut in, especially after I noticed Soundbite starting to open his own mouth. "Now, Carue, thank you for coming. I think I already know the answer to this, but do you think you can get us back to Alubarna in time?"

"HA!" one of the stockier ducks barked, exposing a full set of teeth. "We ain't cawed 'Supahsonic' for nuthin', bud! It'll be close, but we'll getcha there, naw sweat!"

"Alright, alright…" I nodded slowly as I processed that statement. I mulled over the canon sequence of events and puzzled out how I could figure into things. I then proceeded to grin eagerly as I came upon an idea. "Well! If you're all ready to saddle up and head out, I think that I might just have a plan so that we can stop—or at least stall—this rebellion in its tracks before it can throttle up into full swing!" I swung my eager gaze over our group. "Who's with me?!"

The grins I got back were answer enough.

I nodded eagerly as I shoved my Marine cap inside out in order to hide the logo before placing it on my head. "Then let's get on with it!"

-o-

I peeked around the side of the bluff we were all hiding behind, just a meager mile from the statuesque form of Alubarna. I had to give Vivi's ancestors credit where credit was due: their choice in allies might have been questionable at best, but damn if they couldn't choose a damn good location for their nation's capital. With only five possible ways in and nothing but flat desert for miles around in most directions, the only means possible to assault the city would be via Kohza's course of action: an out-and-out charge and invasion.

Still, if we ourselves wanted any chance of getting in and stopping the two legitimate armies from clashing, first we needed to make our way past the five-man army that was guarding all the western
"Alright..." I muttered to myself as I slowly raised my hand. "Here we go... ready... set..." I chopped my hand down. "GO!

And with that, six of the seven Supersonic Ducks shot out around the bluff and bolted towards the cliffs of Alubarna. The ducks managed to cross a few hundred feet of sand before the sound of cannonfire started to ring out and they were forced to dodge and weave around the patches of sand exploding around them.

A bit after that, the ducks started to split up. First, Sanji and Chopper split off and bolted towards the south, drawing the Mr. 4 team along behind them. Second, Usopp fired an explosive shot off at Mr. 1, distracting him long enough for Zoro and Nami to pelt up the steps of the West Gate, while Usopp's own duck ran down Mr. 2 and led Eyelashes through the South-West Gate.

I kept watch a moment longer before walking away from the rock face and hauling myself onto Carue's back, seating myself behind Vivi. "Coast's clear. Ready to give the speech of your life while trying to duck assassination attempts from plants in both your side and theirs?"

Vivi cast an uneasy look over her shoulder at me. "Are we doomed if I say no?"

"More like sane, in my books..." I muttered before clapping her on the shoulder. "Well, this rebellion won't end itself. Or rather, it will, but not in a way we like. Step on it, Carue!"

"Wight!" the duck squawked in agreement, kicking up a storm as he broke for the stretch of sand between Alubarna and the rebels.

Within minutes, we were firmly situated between the southernmost gate of Alubarna and the army of righteous fury and justice that was basically the horizon and barrelling down on us.

"Their arrows will blot out the sun..." Soundbite muttered nervously.

I blew out a nervous breath as I clenched and unclenched my fist. "Then we will fight in the shade..." I muttered back.

Vivi started to slide off of Carue, but I quickly put an end to that by grabbing her cloak. "Hey hey hey, where the heck do you think you're going!?"

The princess shot a bewildered look at me. "Getting off so that you two and Carue can get away in case anything goes wrong!"

"And leave you to get turned into royal paste if these guys don't stop? Yeah, pull the other one!" I scoffed.

"They'll stop once I speak with them! And besides, Soundbite will give me at least a mile of leeway once they're in range!" Vivi shot back.

"You don't trust me?" Soundbite whimpered, accompanied by a dose of puppydog eyes.

"Not on your life, but that's beside the point," I deadpanned. "Here's what I'm concerned about: when was the last time either of you saw any of our plans work perfectly without something going wrong in some way, shape, or form?"

"Ah..." Soundbite trailed off uncomfortably, he and Vivi trading unsure glances.
Vivi chewed her lip nervously. "Still…"

"Damn it, woman, I am trying to keep some form of redundancy in play here! Will you please lay off the martyr complex for ten freaking seconds!?" I finally burst out.

"A-A-Aye agwee with Cwoss!" Carue stammered out, visibly gritting his beak as he tried to steel his nerves. "Y-you'we my fwiend, Vivi, and I won't leave you no mattah what!"

"Oh yeah, good point!" I snapped my fingers in realization. "Carue and the rest of the Squad are an official part of the Alabastan military. You want to look official and really draw their attention, you'll stay on Carue so that we can get the hell out of dodge in case anything goes wrong. Got it?"

Vivi held up her glare for a moment longer before sighing and pinching the bridge of her nose. "Yes, Igaram…" she ground out in exasperation before glancing at Soundbite. "Is Kohza in range yet?"

"EHHH…" Soundbite angled his head uncertainly. "They're on the edge of my hearing, should be in range OF MY VOICE ANY SECOND!"

"Remember, Kohza's the one in the lead on the horse. Keep it to him and him only, if the plants pick up that things are going wrong too soon, they'll try and send things straight to hell," I told him, twisting myself around in Carue's saddle as I tried to examine the cannons lining the city's border. Hopefully, I'd be able to notice if any of them started to get trigger happy before we got turned into a fine red mist.

"YEAH, YEAH, I GOT IT…" Soundbite mumbled, more to himself than us. "Almost… almost… al —huh?" Soundbite cut himself off, glancing around in confusion, before suddenly snapping back into his shell and loosing a myriad of alarm bells and sirens.

"Wha—Soundbite!?!" Vivi looked back at us in confusion. "What are you doing, what's wrong with him?!"

"I-I don't know!" I shook my head hastily as I tried to quiet the Baby Transponder Snail. "Soundbite, what's wrong?!"

"DEATH FROM ABOVE!" Soundbite screamed at the top of his lungs. "DEATH FROM ABO —!"

SLASH!

"AAAAAGH!"

"GAGH!" I choked as my shoulder exploded into pain, gripping it desperately as I felt blood flowing freely from my torn flesh. Carue barely managed to keep me from falling off of his back as I writhed from the sudden injury. "SON OF A BITCH!"

"CROSS!" Vivi exclaimed as she hastily tried to steady our ride. "Cross, are you al—!?!"

"ARE YOU SERIOUSLY ASKING ME THAT!?"

"T-then what just happened!?" Vivi gave my shredded shoulder one look before her eyes snapped open in realization. "AND WHERE THE HELL IS SOUNDBITE!?!"

"WHAT!?" I snapped my eyes to my shoulder. As she said, Soundbite was completely gone, and all that was left in his place was a parallel set of jagged… slash… marks oh son of a bitch.
I twisted around as much as I could and managed to confirm my theory as I caught sight of an all-too-familiar pair of figures barreling towards Alubarna. "YOU FUCKING FURRY JACKASSES!"

"The Unluckies!?!" Vivi gasped in horror. "But I thought you said you saw them get eaten by dinosaurs!"

"I saw them getting chased by dinosaurs, I thought that would be more than enough to keep those bastards occupied!" I sputtered indignantly, fighting to concentrate more on my rage than my agony. "Clearly, I was wrong!"

"No shit, Sherwock!" Carue sputtered, eyeing the approaching army nervously. "What da hell do we do now!?"

"Uh… I-I can still try talking with Kohza…?" Vivi tried.

I made to respond as I tried to keep track of the Unluckies… before promptly hissing in panic as I saw one of the cannons starting to move. "Oh, we are way beyond the point of talking now."

"Huh? What are you—!?"

BOOM!

"INCOMING AT TWELVE-O-FUCKING-CLOCK, MOVE!" I bellowed, ramming my heels into Carue's side.

"ON I—ACK!" the Supersonic Duck started to say before resorting to quacking as Soundbite was brought out of range, pelting forwards from a dead halt. Just in the nick of time, too, because a second later, the sand where we'd been erupted.

"T-the Royal Army!?!" Vivi demanded incredulously.

"Try Crocodile's anonymous donations to their ranks!" I spat, wincing as my wound shook viciously. "Damn it, this just blew up in our faces. Carue, one-eighty, now! We're making a break for Alubarna!"

"What!? NO! Cross—!" Vivi started.

"Damn it, Vivi, listen to them!" I jabbed a finger at the too-fast approaching army that was now roaring furiously. "That blast just set them over the edge, they won't hear anything you say to them! We tried diplomacy, and I'm sorry it didn't work, but it's over! The best we can do is fall back and try and salvage as much as we can!"

"But, I…" Vivi cast a desperate gaze at the army. "They… my citizens… my friends…"

"And you're their ruler and the only person who can stop this before they all kill themselves!" I shot back, gesturing frantically at the still oncoming horde—and the distressingly visible weapons they were brandishing. "For God's sake, please listen to me and learn this one lesson: knowing when to cut your losses and run!"

Vivi stared miserably at the rebels for a moment longer. Finally, she bit her lip and tugged on Carue's reigns. "Full speed back to Alubarna, Carue, now!"

"QUA-ACK!" Carue squawked in agreement, twisting around and tearing towards the South Gate.
The run wasn't safe, by any measure of the word. The Baroque Works agents had decided to abandon any and all semblance of subtlety in favor of simply firing as fast as they could in our general direction, blowing dune after dune into nothing as they tried to wipe us out. Luckily enough, I could spy uniformed men who I presumed were legitimate soldiers fighting to subdue the plants and regain control of their artillery.

Un-luckily, there was someone else coming at us now, and his face was both inviting and distressing.

"Hey, guys!" Usopp called out, waving his hand as he galloped towards us on a horse. "I managed to lose Mr. 2! Now, let's go get Crocodile and save this kingdom!"

I tilted my head slightly in an effort to get a better view of the ludicrous sight before me. "Is he serious?" I asked, more to myself then Vivi.

"Wow, I can't believe Usopp actually managed to beat him!" Vivi exclaimed, grinning euphorically.

I shot an incredulous look at the princess before shooting a flat look over her shoulder at the approaching 'sniper'. "Right, I'm bringing this crazy train to a halt…" I muttered before raising my voice to a shout. "HEY, 'USOPP', EMPORIO IVANKOV IS AN OVERRATED HACK!"

"THAT'S A BARE-FACED LIE!" 'Usopp' shrieked in a voice that wasn't his own before pausing with a stricken look. "Ah—I—Th-That is to say—oh, forget it!" Bon Clay snarled, slapping his left hand to his face and reverting to his original form as he struck a ready faux-kung-fu pose on his mount's back. "PREPARE TO MEET YOUR MAKER YOU BLASPHEMOUS—!"

"QUA-A-A-ACK!" Carue more roared than squawked, pumping his legs in order to leap clean over the horse's head and slam his talons into Mr. 2's center mass, taking the okama off his steed as a result and stomping him into the sand. He finished by giving a final leap off of Bon Clay's body before resuming his charge for Alubarna.

Vivi and I were… awed, to say the least.

"C-Carue…" Vivi stammered incredulously. "That—That was amazing!"

"Hell, yeah!" I concurred. "A full degree more badass than what you did in the story at this point, and that was full-on military commando badass already!" My face fell as the details on who, exactly, we were dealing with penetrated through the euphoria. "Too bad it won't keep him down for long. We need to double-time it into the city!"

"Cross, Carue just hit Mr. 2 while going several miles an hour! He couldn't possibly—!"

"ENOUGH JOKING AROUND!" a way too feminine voice roared from behind us. "THAT IS THE SECOND TIME TODAY THAT I HAVE BEEN RUN DOWN BY AN OVERGROWN WATERFOWL IN A DESERT! PREPARE TO BECOME FOIE GRAS, YOU INELEGANT BIRD!"

"You were saying?" I snarled.

"Go-go-go-go!" Vivi urged Carue desperately, ramming her heels into his side.

"WAAACK!" Carue screamed, flailing his wings desperately as he tried to stay ahead of Mr. 2.

Within moments, Carue managed to reach the stairs and dash up them at top speed, the traction the stonework granted him allowing him to practically double his speed.
And a good thing, too, because when I risked a glance behind us I could see Mr. 2 keeping pace, twirling after us at nigh transonic speeds and belting out a *way* mispronounced rendition of 'un, deux, trois.' I don't know what was more painful, his physique or his French.

Once we reached the top, the soldiers hastily cleared out just enough of their blockade for us to get through. Unfortunately, one of the soldiers was just a *bit* too slow in moving, or perhaps a bit too fast, as without warning a musket fell down in Carue's path. The duck *tried* to dodge the obstacle, but in the end there was nothing he could do. The rod of wood and metal got tangled up in his legs and down he went, inadvertently bucking us off and sending Vivi and I tumbling to the ground.

"Ooooww..." I moaned, pushing myself off the ground and rubbing my shoulder. "Son of a... damn that wasn't fu—*GAH!* **SON OF A BITCH!**" I yelped miserably as my shoulder flared up. "**DAMN IT, SAND! SAND IN MY OPEN WOUND! DAMN COBRA-SNIFFING TAR-SUCKING FIRE-LICKING—**" My agonized tirade was cut off by a firm foot stomping down on my head and forcing my face into the dirt.

"My, my, what a *mouth* you have on you, dear," Mr. 2 drawled, sickly sweet. "Didn't your mother teach you any better?"

"Momma taught me how to smack a *bitch...*" I ground out viciously.

"Flattery will get you nowhere, boy," the okama sniffed before raising his leg up high. "Now, then, say good night, you damn—!"

"**HOWLING FANG!**"

"**GACK!**" Mr. 2 shrieked in pain as a blur of black fur rammed into him from out of nowhere and knocked him off me.

The blur promptly reshaped itself into a halfway-transformed Chaka, who spent a moment glaring viciously at Mr. 2 before glancing down at me. "Seeing how you were riding Carue as well, I'm guessing that you're one of the pirates Vivi mentioned in her letter?"

"Yes, I am, and I'm *not* just saying that because saying no means you'll rip my throat out," I deadpanned.

"Good. You have my thanks for protecting the Princess, and—"

"**HEY! IF YOU THINK THAT I'M DONE YET, THEN YOU ARE SORELY MISTAKEN, BUSTER!**"

I tensed in panic as once *again* Mr. 2's voice rang out, this time coming from where he was balancing on the very edge of the South Gate's stairs.

"A fine, upstanding okama such as I will *not* be taken down by a worthless mutt such as you!" he sniffed before grinning sadistically. "Now, come! Prepare to face the fury of my 'Oh Come My Way' Ken—!"

**THWACK!**

"**GACK, GRK!**" Mr. 2 doubled over and clutched his throat in pain, nothing but a series of wet gurgles coming out of his mouth.

"For the record, that was for the pain you no doubt put Usopp through when you stole his face," Vivi stated as she shook her hand out. "*This* is for trying to topple *my* kingdom." And with that, she
reeled back and slugged him clean in the middle of his ugly mug.

"ACK!" Mr. 2 yelped as he clutched his (hopefully) fractured nose.

"And this is for your horrible outfit, on behalf of women everywhere."

SLAM!

"Ooooh..." Chaka, Carue and I winced in sympathy.

Mr. 2 whimpered pathetically as he locked his knees together before tilting backward and plummeting down the steps. There was a sound not unlike that of a rubber ball hitting the ground, followed by a shouted "Ow!".

Frowning, I inched my way up to the top of the stairs, and watched Mr. 2 bounce repeatedly down them, each impact with the stone steps eliciting another yelped exclamation from the okama. This repeated several times before he belly-flopped onto the sand.

"Huh, the cartoons actually got that right," I mused. Looking up from Mr. 2's prone form, I took a step back in nervous fear as I saw that the rebel army was getting awfully close. "Okay, time to go, I think. When he gets up, he is going to be pissed."

"Excuse me!?!" Chaka started in shock.

"Cross, you cannot be serious!" Vivi demanded. "I mean, if he were a Zoa, I'd understand, but—!"

"In the original story, he took kicks to the face from Sanji—repeatedly, I might add!—and kept fighting," I stated flatly. "Hell, he got Sanji on the damn ropes, even before he started using Nami's body!"

Vivi's face turned an ashen gray as she glanced down the stairs before looking back at me with an expression of severe panic. "We run?"

"We run," I agreed, furtively glancing around. "The only question is, where to? The bomb's already taken care of, so—!" I choked as I noticed Chaka tensing up before flinging an incredulous look at Vivi. "You didn't tell them about the damn bomb!?"

"What!? No, I did, of course I did!" Vivi protested before shooting an incredulous look at her family's protector. "Chaka!?"

"W-we tried to storm the clock tower as you ordered, but somehow the pair you warned us about already knew we were coming!" Chaka hastily explained. "By the time we arrived, they'd somehow managed to amass a small army and entrench themselves! We've spent the past forty-eight hours trying to dig them out, but to no avail."

Vivi and I stared at him in shock. "So... what you're telling me is that the bomb with the multi-kiloton payload is still in play!?!"

"Not by choice!" the canine Zoan shot back. "We've tried getting in every which way we can imagine, but their position is too well-fortified! And to make matters worse—!"

"Whenever someone shows their head in view of the tower, they get gunned down from out of nowhere," Vivi finished as she pinched the bridge of her nose. "The Mr. 7 team, damn it..."

"Qua-lways thought they wooked stu—huh!?!" Carue cut himself off mid-sentence as he realized that
he was talking, drawing all of our attention as well.

"What the—?" Chaka started, but I interrupted him.

"SOUNDBITE! Can you hear me!?!" I yelled out at the top of my lungs.

"YES!" a medley of voices warbled out from nowhere. "The furry FUCKERS STUFFED ME in my shell AND ARE wheeling around above the buildings! I'D GET out on my own, BUT I'm in THE FEATHER-RAT'S claws! IF I DROP THEM—!"

"You get dropped and go splat, right..." I groaned acridly as I massaged my temple. Damn it damn it damn it, this was going straight to hell. I wracked my mind furiously as I tried to come up with a plan. Finally, I was able to put together what I seriously hoped was a semi-passable plan. "Alright... alright, you hang tight—no pun intended—and make sure that they don't realize that you're not silenced while you're in your shell. I'll try and come and get you. Just... just be patient, alright?"

There was a moment of silence before Soundbite's voice drawled out. "I'm a SNAIL. My max speed IS AN inch an HOUR. PATIENCE IS PRACTICALLY MY SPECIES' FUCKING VIR—!"

The tirade suddenly cut off without warning. I looked back at an exasperated Vivi and Carue and the sweatdropping jackal-man.

"The pests must have flown out of range," I explained with a sigh. "Hopefully Soundbite will be able to lead me to them when they circle back around, but for now, let's plan out our next moves.

"First, what are you thinking right now, Vivi?" I asked, noticing the thoughtful look she'd adopted.

"I was thinking that something really shocking to both sides might stall the two armies enough for me to be able to defuse this whole mess without Soundbite's help," Vivi explained. "If nothing else, I'd be able to get them farther away from the bomb. The bomb is actually what made me think of—"

"Don't bother, he's already waiting for you," I said, waving my hand dismissively. "For all I know, blowing up the palace might work, but the second you set the charges, the sand bastard will blow in. And until Pell gets here, we don't have any way of beating him."

"Wait, Pell?" Chaka interjected. "Pell's just a Zoan like me, albeit an admirably skilled one! How can he possibly beat a Logia like Crocodile?"

"He can," I replied, shaking my head solemnly before sticking up a finger. "But the passenger he's bringing along sure as hell can. It'll take some work, but..." I grinned viciously. "Trust me, Luffy will beat Crocodile. It'll take a lot of work, but Alabasta will not fall today."

A glimmer appeared in Vivi's eyes for a moment, but in the next, the cold steel of command that was starting to become familiar replaced it. "Alright, then, in that case, I have a different idea." She shot a questioning look at Chaka. "The Baroque Works agents in the clocktower, did they leave one flank deliberately unprotected, but cover it in boobytraps?"

Chaka recoiled in shock. "How did you—!? Uh, yes, but how does that matter?"

Vivi grinned confidently as her suspicions were confirmed. "It means that Baroque Works either hasn't had the time or the inclination to change its playbook since I left its ranks. And that means that I know exactly how to get you and your men past the Mr. 7 team and into the tower to stop the bomb." Her grin faltered a bit as she looked at me. "Any reason why that wouldn't work?"

Chaka obviously didn't think so. "Wha—Princess Vivi! Such a course of action would be beyond
reckless! I cannot, in good conscience—!" The Zoan cut himself off as Vivi pinned him with a frigid glare, maintaining her gaze until he fully backed down. "A-As you say, Princess…" He mumbled something incoherent under his breath, though I'm fairly certain the phrase 'third trimester all over again' was somewhere in there.

I took a moment to chuckle at the sight of the loyal hound being brought to heel before nodding in agreement. "Yeah, that should work. Once those two are out of the way, Pell should be clear to carry the bomb out of blast range. Straight up would be advisable, just in case any of the Rebels get the bright idea to gun down one of the Royal Guardians of Alabasta."

Vivi frowned in confusion. "Wait, carry it? The Mr. 7 team is shooting it from the clock tower, right? That's the only thing that makes sense to make them think they won't be caught in the blast, plus they're the best snipers in Baroque Works. If they don't shoot the bomb, then they'll—"

"Qua—to smithaweens?" Carue asked, before blinking in realization. "Huh, Soundbite must be close again. Anyway, as I was thaying, do you weally think Cwocodile cares even a bit about his subowdinates?"

"Give the duck a prize," I nodded sagely. "Crocodile always has a backup plan, and this one takes the form of a timer hooked to the bomb. It's set to go off at, ah…" I racked my brain, trying to remember what Crocodile had said. "4:30! Yeah, 4:30. Anyway, even if you have any bomb technicians available, chances are that there isn't any means of safely disarming the damn thing. It's going off no matter what, but at least Pell can carry it out far enough that Alubarna won't be within the blast radius. With any luck, he'll be able to time it so that he can dive fast enough to escape the blast."

The princess bit her lip uncomfortably. "But if he isn't…"

"Then he'll still be fine," I patiently reassured her. "After all, Zoans are stupid tough. Besides, he did it before, and that was after getting gunned down by Miss Father's Day. Trust me, Princess, if there's one thing you learn from watching the Straw Hat Pirates in action, it's that you would be shocked, shocked at what a person can live through."

"Would you mind explaining how you know all of this?" Chaka asked, apparently after a struggle to find his voice. He then tensed and whipped his hand to his side. "Did you eat the Glare-Glare Fruit?" he demanded tersely.

I hastily raised my hands in surrender. "Don't worry… General?" I glanced at Vivi, who nodded in confirmation. "General. The Glare-Glare Fruit remains in the possession of the user you're no doubt thinking of, safe and sound and incapable of peering through time. I am impressed by your logical extrapolation of Devil Fruit powers, though, it's rare to meet someone quite so perceptive!"

Chaka shot an uncertain glance at Vivi.

"He told me how he knows so much before we arrived in Alabasta, Chaka, and I saw him swimming earlier this morning," she confirmed. With that, Chaka relaxed and looked back at me.

"I'll worry about how you know all of this when the war is over, then. For now, anything else to tell me?"

I frowned in thought, glancing out at the approaching Rebel Army. Still a few minutes out, good. I'd need as much leeway as I could get to reach Soundbite.

"Let's see…" I tapped my chin contemplatively before snapping my fingers in realization. "At a
guess, you've already arrested the jackasses who tried to use the cannons to blow us to kingdom come, right?"

Chaka scowled darkly, but nodded nonetheless. "Yes, we did. I don't know what the hell they were thinking, firing before the Rebel Army was in range, much less at someone riding a member of the Supersonic Duck Squadron, but—!"

"Mind if I see one of them real quick?" I interrupted. "There's something about them you need to see."

Chaka gave me another uncertain look, but a nod from Vivi had him barking—*ha!*—orders to his soldiers. Within seconds, two white-robed guards hauled a struggling and restrained third before us. The prisoner stiffened as he caught sight of us before plastering a wide and toothy grin on his face. "G-General, sir! C-come on, isn't this a bit much? I just had a bit of heat-stroke is all! Why else would I fire at someone riding one of the Supersonic—?"

In lieu of a verbal response, I strode up to the man, grabbed his sleeves and *yanke*d, tearing them clean off. There, clear as day and branded on the man's right bicep, was the grinning skull-and-cross-blades of Baroque Works.

Both the man and I were silent as we stared at the exposed tattoo before I deigned to address him. "I dread to ask, but what the *hell* made you think it would be a good idea to tattoo yourself with that logo of all things? Isn't Baroque Works supposed to be the cloakiest of 'cloak-and-dagger' organizations?"

The man hung his head with a defeated groan. "A combo of a lot of alcohol, a lot of boredom, and the fact that no one is supposed to know that Baroque Works exists in the first place." He looked up with a hopeful grin. "I don't suppose that if I were to say 'state's evidence'—?"

"Even if there was a way for us to determine whether or not you were lying through your teeth, that ship has *long* since sailed, dumbass," I deadpanned.

The man's expression promptly twisted into an ugly scowl. "Well, in that case, fuck you, fuck this kingdom, and fuck that bitch whore of a trait—!"

THWACK!

I tsked as I tapped my baton in my palm, pinning a stinkeye on the thoroughly concussed grunt. " Forget Thugs-R-Us, Crocodile scooped this bastard out of a literal roach motel…" I turned back around to address my comrades. "Anyways, you get the gist: if you see anyone with that symbol on their person, don't wait, don't hesitate, just take them down. Doesn't matter if they're Royal Army or Rebel Army, they'll be in both and their sole goal is to aggravate the conflict. Every second one of them walks around free is another person dead. Got it?"

Chaka nodded, then stiffened as a thought struck him and looked at the two other guards. "Remove your sleeves."

The two guards duly did so, tearing their robes with no concern for neatness in the tears. Chaka, for his part, shrugged off the green cloak he was wearing, and then removed the sleeves of his tunic. All present relaxed as they saw no Baroque Works emblems.

"Alright," Chaka nodded firmly. "You two split up and start inspecting the men on the walls. Clear the cannons first, then—!"
"Grgk!" one of the two men gurgled miserably as he fell to his knees, slumping over into unconsciousness and bleeding from the neck.

Chaka, Carue and the remaining soldier and I stared at him in shock before turning our stunned gazes over to Vivi, who was rolling up her Peacock String Slasher. "Look at his neck," she growled acridly.

A slight shift of the man’s hood revealed the presence of yet another tattoo.

"Good catch…" I weakly stated.

"This is going to be a nightmare," Chaka scowled tiredly.

"More than it already is?" Vivi deadpanned as she glanced back at the ever-approaching army, not waiting for an answer before mounting Carue. "Come on, we need to inspect the troops and assemble a reliable strike force. Cross, good luck with Soundbite. I hope you get him back, he's our best shot at talking the rebels down… and a good friend besides."

I started to nod before another thought came to me. "Oh, one last thing! You have an elite unit, right? The… um, the claw…?"

"The Kicking Claw Force?" Chaka swiftly answered. "Don't tell me that one of them—!

"No no, not at all!" I hastily reassured him. "They're loyal to the crown, completely and utterly! Maybe even a bit too much, to be honest. Keep a close eye on them; if they get it into their heads that sacrificing their lives will help save this kingdom, they won't hesitate to do it."

Chaka considered the information for a moment before nodding. "Understood. Thank you very much, Cross, both for this information, and for protecting Vivi."

I grinned back at the man. "Not even half a problem. Now, let's get started on saving Alabasta from burning to the ground! Who's with me?" I shot my fist into the air—!

Aaaaand promptly froze as my shoulder voiced its displeasure. With a vengeance.

"… Right after I get this open wound bound up. Medic?"

-o-

One quick patch-job later, we'd all split up, Vivi heading to the clock tower at the head of a Royal Army strike force while I found myself deeper within Alubarna, just barely poking my nose around the corner of one of the many sandstone walls that made up most of the city's architecture.

"Alright, Soundbite, you sure this'll work?" I hissed to the air.

"IT'S YOUR damn PLAN!"

"And I don't suppose that there's any chance you could talk me out of it, is there?" I retorted half-nervously.

"Just get ready! THEY'RE COMING."

"Right, right…" I nodded, my entire body slowly tensing in anticipation as I clenched and unclenched the grip I had on my baton. "OK, I'm ready. Say when, then amp."
"Roger roger."

I swallowed heavily as the seconds crawled by, only half of the copious amount of sweat coating my skin the result of the sun's heat. It had taken some time to work out a viable strategy with which to confront the Unluckies, but in the end, we'd managed to come up with something.

We got the idea from Avatar. The basic gist of it was that when you were the king of the skies…

"NOW!"

I darted out from around the corner and ran at the edge of my footing as fast as I could, accumulating as much speed as I could get. As I ran, I sucked in a deep breath and shouted, my voice getting amplified by Soundbite so that it came from everywhere at once. "HEY, YOU! FURRY JACKASSES!"

The moment I hit the edge, I took a brief moment to confirm the Unluckies' position...

…why would you ever bother to look up?

Before launching myself off the three-story rooftop at them.

"GIVE ME BACK MY SNAIL!"
For a few seconds, the world around me seemed to fade as my mind processed the fact that I was falling from a three-story height, and my adrenaline spiked. Quite honestly, had Soundbite been with me and were the situation any less dire, I'd no doubt be laughing my ass off.

Then I slammed into a half-furry, half-feathery mass, and the world kicked itself into high gear.

More specifically, it started up with a strangled squawk that Miss Friday loosed as I struck her, the vulture flapping her wings furiously as she tried to hold the three of us—four if you counted Soundbite—aloft. I barely had time to wrap my arms around Friday's throat before she started flailing and bucking in a dual attempt to throw me off and stay in the air.

Mister 13 was squirming and flailing beneath me, trying to wriggle his way out and do something that would no doubt be unpleasant. Considering how I had absolutely no intention of being disemboweled by a killer otter, I hastily took action: I freed one of my hands and used it to grab 13's onesie, shifting my weight just enough to get him out from under me. I spared a moment to grin madly at his stricken expression before I let him go. "OTTER'S AWAY!" I bellowed.

In a rather fabulous stroke of luck, it was just as I let 13 go that Friday swung herself upwards, causing my legs to flail forwards. Still, not one to look fate's gift horse in the mouth, I swung one of my dangling legs with the momentum and managed to catch 13 with a rather impressive punt, if I did say so myself.

"FOOOOOORE!" Soundbite whooped ecstatically from below me.

"Wrong sport, Sound—GAGH!" I clenched my teeth hastily as Friday tried slamming her back into a building and dragging me along the stonework, only just managing to save myself from biting my tongue off. "Soundbite! Personally, I'd say that this isn't a game, it's just plain-old pest control!"

"Business or pleasure? BOTH!" the snail shot back happily, apparently not even slightly fazed by how wild his ride was becoming.

"Yeah? Well, this pleasure cruise is coming to an end! First, I'll be taking my belongings back!" I swung myself just far enough to the side that I could scrabble with Miss Friday's talons, managing after a few attempts to get a good grip on Soundbite's shell, yank him out into my own hold, and move him to my uninjured shoulder, which he clamped onto with his teeth.

"I'm nobody's property!" Soundbite shot back, albeit with a look of gratitude directed at me.

"And second, we're bringing this ride to a stop!" I reached around Friday's head and grabbed ahold of her goggles, yanking them out a few inches from her face. From the way she suddenly tensed and started frantically shaking her head, she knew what was coming next. "NOW!" And with that, I let the goggles go with loud SNAP!

Miss Friday loosed an agonized squawk as she lost the rhythm of her wingbeats and fell into a dive she was only barely managing to control and slow by wildly flailing her wings.

Thankfully, her actions, combined with me weighing her down and lowering her altitude the entire time I was accosting her, were enough to make the crash landing we performed within seconds merely painful, as opposed to outright deadly. Still, this distinction was only cold comfort on account of how, to reiterate, we fell from a few dozen feet up in the air while moving forward at a not
inconsiderable velocity.

The second we hit the ground, I was flung clean off the assassin's back and sent rolling through the dusty street we'd landed in. Once I stopped moving and managed to get my head on straight, I lay very, very still as I appreciated the simply astounding amount of pain I was in, because just… ow. About the only body part not in excruciating pain was my shins. Everything else either felt like one big bruise, the armored parts of my body were ringing like bells, others felt like someone had rubbed them with sandpaper, or, in the case of my shoulder, like someone was stabbing it repeatedly with a hot knife. At least nothing felt broken.

Overall…

"Oh, my God, that was such a horrible plan…" I wheezed miserably, my everything aching like all hell.

"Oh, I DUNNO," Soundbite whistled as he properly slid into place on my shoulder. "I'D SAY it worked!"

"Ha ha ha, screw you…" I ground out from between clenched teeth before slowly glancing over at him. "You good?"

Soundbite fell silent for a moment before nodding in agreement. "YEAH, yeah, I'M GOOD. Thanks for the save."

"Psh," I waved him off as casually as I could manage as I hauled myself up into a sitting position, rolling my joints as I tried to work out some of the pain. "I didn't do it for you, I did it because those bastards sliced up my shoulder like it was a freaking steak. Getting you back was just a side benefit and an unfortunate consequence. Still…" I massaged my shoulder contemplatively. "At least it should leave behind a pretty damn impressive scar, no?"

Soundbite leaned forwards and took in the bandages that wrapped my left shoulder before grinning eagerly. "Oooh, MOST DEFINITELY!"

"Glad you agree. Now come on, we need to mo—!

"Suffer."

The second the low, raspy, demonic voice hit my ears, I scrambled to my feet and ran, managing to toss myself into an alleyway just as the part of the street I'd been lying in was torn up by a hail of bullets. And once I started running, I damn well didn't let myself stop.

"That's the voice you chose for them!? Seriously!?" I spat frantically, rounding a corner just as a flap of wings and the screech of talons on stone heralded another burst of gunfire that barely missed me. "Why not make them sound like Looney Tunes or something!? That's more your style!"

"CAN'T! TOO SCARED!" Soundbite yowled from within his shell.

I risked a glance over my shoulder, and I swear to God that vulture looked like a freaking avatar of death as she chased us, back in the air.

"Sensible," was all I managed to get out. Still, as long as I stayed in the alleyways and forced her to remain below the rooftops, we had a chance of—

Of course, it was at that moment that I ran out into a nice, wiiide open street, with no other open alleyways in sight. And as for the doors to the houses, well, there was a big difference between
Alabasta and Rainbase: Rainbase's residents weren't expecting an army of rebels to attack and as such hadn't boarded up their homes before leaving, whereas Alubarna's citizens were and had.

I spun around on my heel—

**BOOM!**

And was met with the shockwave of Miss Friday collapsing the mouth of the alley I'd exited with what I presumed to be a round of explosive ammunition before soaring up into the air, effectively cutting off my only route of retreat.

I stared at the rubble for a second longer before turning my gaze upwards to stare at the vulture circling high above me. "Who or whatever it is that keeps screwing with my luck had damn well better make it up to me if I live through this…" I muttered to myself before giving one last pointed glare up at the clouds and swinging my gaze back and forth down the street. "I don't suppose you can see a way for us to swim the hell out of this barrel, can you?"

"**UMMM…**" Soundbite swung his eyestalks back and forth, even going so far as to outright cross them before focusing on something to our right. "**OH! How about over there?**"

I followed Soundbite's line of sight and grinned just as eagerly as him when I saw what he was eyeing: a bar at the end of the street, just a few meters away from us. The door was boarded up, yes indeed, but its primary, wall-encompassing window? **That** was left completely unguarded.

"Oh, yeah, that'll work!" I nodded in agreement.

Soundbite made to respond in turn… and then his grin melted into panic as he chanced a glance upwards. "**OH NO!**"

I followed Soundbite's line of sight and mentally repeated the sentiment, with *mucho* gusto.

Friday was finished circling. Instead, she'd swooped down to the end of the street to the left of me, and was gliding towards us at high speeds. Death, borne upon black wings and toting two F-U calibre machine guns, was approaching at high speeds and fully intent on eviscerating both me and my talking snail.

…damn it, when the *hell* did my life become a cheesy B-list 80s action movie!?

"Sometimes, it freaking *sucks* to live in an anime…" I ground out.

"**BE HAPPY THIS ISN'T Evangelion,**" Soundbite shot back. "**NOW RUN, DAMMIT!**"

And with that I turned tail and ran, bolting for the bar as fast as I could run. The dirt exploded all around me and the air was filled with the distinctive chatter-chatter of automatic weapons as Miss Friday opened fire. Even with Friday's rage no doubt impeding her aim, I still felt at least three bullets graze my greaves before I was within range of the window. Two more bullets sped by my head, shearing clean through the glass and leaving substantial cracks in the pane before I leapt forwards, crossing my arms in front of my face.

**SMASH!**

There was one aspect of jumping through glass windows that the movies typically didn't show you: it stung like all *hell!* Both the impact of jumping through and the glass shards that showered around me did much to aggravate my previous injuries. Still, I had enough wherewithal left in me to turn around and see Miss Friday pull up and soar out of sight moments before she reached the window, having
been no less than a foot or two behind me.

"Well, that worked…" I huffed, slowly working my way to my feet and gingerly dusting myself off, more than a few stray shards falling off of me in the process.

"NOT FOR LONG," Soundbite growled warily, his eyes tracking something through the roof and walls. "She's circling around, bleeding off speed. SHE'LL BE HERE SOON! YOU GOTTA HIDE, now!"

I tensed and frantically scanned the inside of the bar. "Alright, alright, uhhh…" Unfortunately, the owner had apparently decided to clear out as much as he could before he left. All that was left in the place were a half dozen tables, some chairs, the bottles that were arrayed on the shelves behind the bar itself—the bar!

Moving fast, I scrambled towards the bar and vaulted myself over the countertop. Once I was on the other side, I pressed myself as close to the floor as I could, clamping both mine and Soundbite's mouths shut.

The sound of flapping wings followed by a sudden crunch of glass heralded the proactive buzzard's return, and told me that I hadn't been a moment too soon.

For a bare moment, silence reigned. No movement, no noise, no nothing.

RATATATATAT—!

Until Miss Friday let loose with a hail of bullets.

I was grateful for the sheer noise that the gunfire was producing, because I was cursing up a storm beneath my breath while the world around me went to pot. The bullets that flew above the bar impacted what was left of the establishment's liquor stock, eviscerating almost a dozen bottles in the first barrage alone and their shelves alongside them, sending a cascade of booze, glass and wood splinters raining down around me. Furthermore, while the thick wood of the bar itself served to stop more than a few of the bullets, others still managed to pass through. The round that ricocheted off my forearm was particularly distressing.

The one that punched through the bar inches in front of my eyes and buried itself in the floor beneath my nose was notably worse.

Then, as fast as the onslaught had started, it was all over, leaving behind only the tinkling of glass and the drip-drip-drip of wasted booze.

The silence lasted just long enough for my heartbeat to downgrade to the rhythm of a jackhammer… until it was ratcheted right back up there again by the slow and steady crunching of glass beneath that psychotic bitch of a bird's talons.

I dug my teeth into my lip as I fought to keep myself silent. God damn it, the second that bird found me I was going to be turned into a legitimate freaking sieve. What the hell could I possibly use to get out of here, I was in a bar for goodness sakes!

Suddenly, I was drawn out of my thoughts by Soundbite grunting firmly and nudging his head against my neck. The second he had my attention, he turned his eyestalks upward and jabbed them at something up and behind me.

I followed his gaze and promptly widened my eyes in shock.
Of course… how could I forget? I wasn't just in a bar; I was in a stereotypical bar in the middle of the Grand Line.

Moving as slowly as possible in order to minimize the noise I was making, I slid my hands towards my last hope and wrapped my fingers around it, drawing it towards me as the sound of talons scratching against the floor came closer and closer.

I paused for a moment as I contemplated just how I could effectively use my newfound advantage but was swiftly interrupted by a flap of wings and a heavy thunk echoing out from directly above me. I tensed furiously for a moment as I caught sight of Miss Friday's shadow looming on the wall before me… but I was able to marginally relax when the shadow's head instead started slowly swiveling back and forth, her gaze scanning the wood mere inches away from where I was lying.

Moving as swiftly as I dared, I positioned my only hope upwards, pointing it directly at where Miss Friday was standing as I readied myself for what I was about to attempt. Before I acted, I absently slid my headphones over my ears as a single thought ran through my head.

'I get out of this alive, I am never complaining about there being too few gun laws for as long as I live.'

And with that, I racked the slide of the bartender's shotgun.

Miss Friday had just enough time to heave her wings and fling herself backward off the bar as I pulled the shotgun's trigger, causing the bar to explode with an all-encompassing BANG!

I paused for a second as I waited for the world to stop ringing from the close-proximity detonation before hastily scrambling to my feet and throwing a glare at the vicious bird that had retreated to standing on one of the bar's tables. "Not so fun from the other side, huh?" I demanded hotly as I leveled the barrel at her.

Friday spared a glance at the gun before directing her own glare at me. "Do you even know how to use that?" she rasped viciously.

I glanced down for a moment before shrugging and reaffirming my grip. "Point shooty end at thing you want dead, pull trigger. Seems simple enough to me. Now…" I pumped the gun's slide again. "Smile, you ugly—!" I fired before I finished speaking, eviscerating the tabletop Friday had been standing on. Unfortunately, I missed the bird herself on account of how she leaped to another vantage point.

I repeated the process several times as I followed her across the bar, blasting table after chair after table in an attempt to take out my assailant. Admittedly, the sheer buck on this thing and my own shoulder wound weren't doing my aim any favors, but then again this was a shotgun I was using, and I'm pretty certain that the barrel was a few inches shorter than was strictly regulated, so I had a generous margin of error to work within.

Unfortunately, all too soon a resounding click! heralded the end of my chances to hit within said margin.

Miss Friday promptly froze before whipping her head around and viciously leering at me. Judging by her posture, she was about two seconds away from leaping at me, and the way she was digging her talons into the table she was on told me that she wasn't going to settle for her guns this time.

I froze in terror for a brief moment… before plastering a confident grin on my face as I recalled something that might just give me a chance. I swept a hand beneath the countertop and grabbed
ahold of what I was looking for. "You really shouldn't be smiling, ya know!" I called out to the buzzard. "You think you've got me cornered? Newsflash: this is a bar, and the nation is in the middle of a war! And in my experience..." I widened my grin to what I hoped were truly manic levels, which caused Friday to hesitate uncertainly. "Bartenders can get their hands on the most interesting of items."

Before Friday could react, I whipped my arm out from under the bar and flung a small, dark object into the air. "FIRE IN THE HOLE!" I bellowed at the top of my lungs.

Friday promptly squawked in panic and upended the table she was on, diving beneath it. I darted into a corridor leading to the bar's backrooms just as the object bounced off of the tabletop.

I panted furiously as I searched the corridors, looking for somewhere to hide. "Think she'll be mad?"

Soundbite jabbed an eye out of his shell and gave me a befuddled look. "FOR THROWING A GRENADE? I don't think she'll live long enough!"

"Huh? Oh, that wasn't a grenade."

"WHAT!?" Soundbite yelped, jerking out of his shell in shock just as a screech of impotent avian rage tore through the bar.

I flinched at the unholy noise before grinning in relief as I caught sight of two curtains hanging on opposite sides of the hallway. Hello, bathrooms! "Yeeaaah, that was a mug I noticed hanging under the bar. Sounds like she didn't appreciate it!" I chuckled as I ducked behind the curtain on the left, but not before kicking the right one so that it was fluttering slightly as well.

Soundbite's jaw hung open for a moment before he grinned eagerly. "You are DA BLUFF MASTAH!" he quietly giggled.

I nodded as I hid in the stall, flipping the shotgun in my grip and weighing it contemplatively before responding. "Yeah, well, let's see if it'll pay off. Cross your eyestalks..."

A second later, the sound of talons scrabbling on wood sounded out, and Friday's silhouette nosed its way in front of the curtain. Her head turned in our direction, but promptly froze as she no doubt noticed the other curtain moving. As it was, she had a fifty-fifty chance of finding my hiding place, and that was if I'd even decided to hide behind the curtains at all.

I swallowed silently as I held the gun up in anticipation. If it worked, I'd only have one shot at taking Friday down. If it didn't... well, I'd still have that one shot, but it would hinge on me being faster than her bullets, so I wasn't all that confident. In the end, it all hinged on what stall she chose.

Soundbite chose for her. Before I could react, the Baby Transponder Snail suddenly donned a massive grin and jerked forwards, loosing a resounding "ACHOO!"

An 'achoo' that sounded out in the stall we were in, nearly stopping my heart.

However, instead of filling me with lead, Miss Friday instead swung towards the curtains opposite us and let loose with her ammunition until her guns clicked dry. She stood firm for a moment, panting viciously...

CLONK!

Until I, unwilling to look a gift horse in the mouth, jumped onto her back and smashed the butt of the shotgun against the back of her skull, causing her to collapse into a heap of feathers.
"Holy crap…” I panted heavily as I wiped my forearm against my head. "So, that's what they mean when they say 'you bet your life'… " I then shot a dumbfounded look at Soundbite. "But why didn't she—?!"

Soundbite chortled heartily as he stuck his tongue out at Miss Friday. "I TOO AM DA BLUFF MASTAH! I guessed that after Little Garden, THESE TWO WOULDN'T TRUST THEIR EARS around me! TURNS OUT, IT WAS THEIR LOSS!"

I blinked at Soundbite in shock for a moment before smiling gratefully as I hefted the shotgun in my grip. Stock was a bit cracked, wouldn't be good as a club again was my guess. "Wow… not bad, Soundbite. I should have expected that from you."

Soundbite started to preen… but suddenly cut himself off and glared down the corridor, no doubt towards the bar's back door. "He's here."

"Yeah…" I swung my arm back and held the shotgun at the ready. "I was actually expecting that. Say when."

Things were tense for a brief moment as we waited…

"NOW!"

Until Soundbite's shout rang out, prompting me to swing the shotgun butt forward as hard as I could.

It was at just that moment that Mr. 13 shot out from around the corner of the corridor, bivalve shell separated into its twin shapes, blades extended to slice me open.

Thankfully, Soundbite's timing had been spot on: the shotgun butt caught the aquatic rodent dead in the center of his muzzle, managing to bat him back down the corridor and off the far wall before giving up the ghost and shattering.

Still, judging by the way 13 was growling and shaking his head, he wasn't completely down yet. Hence, I decided to tactically retreat back into the bar-proper, so as to give myself more room to fight. Once I was in the middle of what little remained of the tables, I wheeled around and faced the hall into the back room, eyeing it nervously and palming my baton.

I didn't have to wait long. Within moments, Mr. 13 leapt out of the corridor and landed on the countertop, his face set in a scowl and his blades held out at his sides.

I swallowed heavily before steeling my nerves and flicking my baton out to its full length. "Time to put an end to this, water-rat," I scowled. "LET'S GET READY TO RUMBLE!" Soundbite roared.

Mr. 13 bounded into the main area, jumping off the bar and diving for me, shells drawn back to slice up whatever he could reach. Unfortunately for him, he instead ran into my baton, getting a hard smack to the head for his trouble that sent him tumbling to the floor. He skidded to a halt, and paused, seeming to rethink his approach as he re-evaluated me.

As for me, I couldn't help myself. I reached out with my left hand and did the Matrix-style "Come hither" gesture.

Baring his fangs, Mr. 13 bounded for me yet again, and I braced for another jump attack. Instead, though, he pushed off to the side, going to my left. I spun around to keep him in sight, but by the time I'd completed the turn he was already bounding around me again. I quickly gave up the turning
as a lost cause as Mr. 13 bounced all over the room: off the bar, the tables, the chairs, the floor. I could barely keep track him.

"Behind, five o'clock!"

Thankfully, my 'barely' was Soundbite's 'effortlessly'. With my partner providing sound tracking and 13 unable to maneuver effectively in mid-air, this attack also simply resulted in him eating a baton strike, this time to the body.

"How d'you like that?" I crowed as the otter rolled up against the bar. He didn't reply in favor of getting up and grinning menacingly, before darting for me again. I tensed, waiting for him to do another jump charge or high-speed cut.

Problem is, he didn't do that, instead going for my legs.

"Ow, fuck!" I yelped as I felt the clamshells bounce off of my armored shins. They didn't really cut me, but god damn did the little bastard swing hard! I tried to hit him again with my baton, but he was far too low for that to work. All that earned me was a cut into the backs of my thighs.

Still, painful as it was, sooner or later 13 would put himself in position for me to punt him again.

"Let me know when he's about to go for the front," I muttered to Soundbite.

"Gotcha—Front!"

I kicked out my foot—and hit nothing but air as the thrice-damned fucking otter slammed into my groin head-first. The only thing that saved me from getting shredded into eunuch-dom was the fact that I instinctively grabbed at my abused member and fell forward, which trapped the furry bastard under me as I slumped onto the floor, whimpering.

"CROSS!" Soundbite shouted with considerable urgency. I ignored him, too wrapped up in my own agony.

I did not ignore the sharp prick I felt at my waist.

"Oh, no, you don't!" I shouted, flipping onto my back and throwing him off of me. I… might have put in a bit more force than I intended, due to the roaring pain I was still in, and Mr. 13 not only cleared the bar, he went high enough to hit the back shelf.

The second I caught sight of him, my eyes widened as an idea hit me. Here's hoping that this worked!

Moving as fast as I could, I vaulted over the bar and grabbed onto Mr. 13’s onesie before he could recover and squirm his way off.

"Word to the wise, jackass," I growled as I pressed him into the woodwork. "Next time you fight someone who's more than triple your bodyweight, don't stay still long enough for them to grab you!"

Before could respond in any manner, I broke into a run down the length of the backshelf, dragging the otter through a combination of spilled alcohol, glass shards and the few odd bottles that had managed to survive Friday's onslaught and 13’s acrobatics. Once I reached the end of the shelf, I twisted my body and heaved, flinging the otter at the wall—

SLAM!

Which he smacked into and stuck to with all the tenacity of silly putty. He stayed firmly stuck in
place for a moment before slowly peeling off the wall and flopping to the ground, where he moaned and shook his head in an effort to clear it of the haze he was no doubt in.

I, however, wasn't about to let that happen, a sentiment I followed through with by digging my free hand into my pocket. This fight was ending here and now, and on my terms.

"Hey, jackass."

13 snapped his head around to glare at me, fangs bared in a snarl.

I kept my expression flat as I flicked the wheel of the lighter I was holding, bringing out a flame. "This message is brought to you by the Straw Hat Pirates, inadvertently funded by Master Chief Petty Officer Tashigi of the Marines."

The otter blinked in confusion for a brief moment before his jaw dropped open in panic, cold sweat running down his face as he recalled the fact that he was soaked in high-proof liquor. He started frantically shaking his head...

A motion I ignored as I split my lips in a scowl. "Don't. Fuck. With our friend's kingdom."

"The song of the HOUR IS GREAT BALLS OF FIRE!" Soundbite roared at the top of his lungs.

And with that, I tossed the lighter at the assassin.

13 scrambled in an effort to get away, but he didn't get far on account of the selfsame alcohol he was soaked in robbing him of any and all traction. It kept him in place just long enough—

FWOOSH!

"AAAAAAAAARGH!"

For the lighter to bounce off of his forehead and set him ablaze, causing him to howl and flail about in agony. 13 spent a brief moment attempting to wrench his onesie off of his body, but ultimately gave up and instead bolted towards the corridor to the back, thankfully robbed of his senses enough that he didn't think to try and set the rest of the booze in the place on fire.

"Oh, no, you don't!" I snarled, dashing after the pyro-clad pest and following him down the hallway.

When we reached Friday, 13 paid her no mind in favor of leaping right over her and continued his mad escape. I did, however, happen to notice the fact that she was slowly raising her head and shaking it blearily.

"DENIED!" I roared, stomping my feet down on her skull, Goomba-style, using her as an impromptu stepping stone to continue after her partner.

Within moments, 13 and I had reached the rear of the bar, where he rocketed out into the alleyway. From there, he beelined straight for a stray barrel, no doubt forgotten in the madness of the evacuation. The furry bastard ripped the cover clean off, revealing the water held within, before plunging himself into the liquid, submerging himself completely. Bubbles trailed up from the water for a few seconds...

"PWAAAAH!"

Until 13 burst out of the water with a sigh of relief, covered in almost comical scorch marks as he panted gratefully and floated on his back in the water. He allowed himself to relax for a moment, no
doubt grateful to be back in his natural element.

"That'll do, pig."

"Hu—BRBRL!?

I made him regret his decision by grabbing his shoulders and plunging him beneath the water, holding his head as far away from oxygen as I could manage.

"That'll do," I snarled darkly.

"DID YOU even SEE THAT MOVIE?" Soundbite asked with a cocked eyebrow.

I shrugged semi-indifferently as I struggled to keep the otter's head under. God damn he was strong for such a little bugger! "Not really, but it's the tone that counts."

"Good point," Soundbite conceded.

My struggle with 13 lasted a few goodly minutes, with the otter pulling every trick and tactic it could think of to try and get out. Unluckily for it for once, his onesie gave me just the kind of handhold I needed to keep him submerged. For a brief moment, I was seriously scared when the otter braced himself against the side of the barrel and started kicking, obviously trying to break it open. Thinking fast, I repositioned my left hand so that it was gripping the back of his neck, while I rammed my right fist into the back of his head a few times, forcing him to release a few more precious bubbles of oxygen.

Still, either way, the wood came this close to breaking, when finally his kicks started losing their strength, becoming weaker and weaker until… nothing.

I allowed myself to sag in relief when the otter went limp in my grip before turning contemplative. I had this little furry bastard right where I wanted him. I could end this, right here, right now, and no one would be any the wiser. Hell, even if someone did know, could they blame me? 13 had tried to kill me! And besides, he was just an otter. It wouldn't be that bad, right?

…right?

…

"Ah, screw it," I growled, heaving 13’s head out of the water and shaking him a bit.

The assassin immediately jerked and spluttered, spitting out a hefty amount of water before gasping in relief. He tried to take in another breath—!

WHAM-WHAM-WHAM-WHAM-WHAM!

And I responded by repeatedly bouncing his skull off the edge of the barrel with as much force as I could put into it. By the time I was done, 13 was moaning unintelligibly, his sunglasses cracked and a rather massive steaming lump growing out of the point of impact.

Hey, I might have been merciful, but by no means was I stupid.

I allowed myself to relax slightly—

"SIX O’—ARGH!!"

Until Soundbite suddenly screamed in terror, his warning cutting off just as swiftly as his weight
disappeared from my shoulder.

"SOUNDBITE!" I screamed, hastily wheeling around.

Standing there, **again**, was Miss Friday in all her furious, if disheveled glory. Her feathers were ruffled, her wrinkled skin was showing more than a few bruises, and her goggles were **definitely** cracked, but apart from that she was fine. Fine enough that she had managed to sneak up on me and snatch Soundbite from my shoulder, save that she wasn't holding him in her talons this time. This time… he was in her beak.

And judging by the evil gleam in her goggles, he wasn't ever coming out if she could help it.

I breathed heavily as I inched my way towards the vulture, my arms spread in what I really hoped was a non-threatening manner. "Alright, alright…" I hissed nervously. "You have Soundbite, you have the advantage, let's not do anything **stupid**—" I tried to take a step forwards…

"ACK!" Soundbite yelped as Friday's beak suddenly tensed.

"Alright!" I shot my foot back, raising my hands in surrender. "Y-you don't just have the advantage, you have me by the balls! Just-just what do you want, huh? What do you want!?"

Friday cocked her head to the side, feigning thinking about something. Finally, she tilted her beak up into a sneer. "I told you earlier… I want you…"

She suddenly tensed her beak further, causing a resounding **CRACK!** to echo out, accompanied by an agonized yelp from Soundbite.

"To **suffer.**"

And with that, the muscles in her jaw tensed as she prepared to seriously bite down.

"SOUNDBITE!" I shouted, jerking at the avian menace.

Soundbite's response to all this…

"**YEEEAAARGH!**"

Was to scream like I'd never heard him scream before.

The sound tore through me like a shot through the heart.

In Friday's case, the comparison was a **lot** more literal. Without warning, Friday's beak was suddenly split open by a crack, blood oozing out from between the keratin fragments. And that was far from the end of it, either. Friday's entire **body** reacted, her every muscle and joint snapping taut as she went rigid, shuddering in what I presumed was agony, her legs buckling beneath her and, unless my eyes deceived me, some of her feathers even falling out. In the process of her flailing, Soundbite was flung away from the buzzard's form, accompanied by a spray of blood.

"SOUNDBITE!" I yelped as I watched him fly away. I took a brief moment to glance at Friday, but if the way she was lying on her back with bloody foam bubbling out of her beak was any indication, I'd say that she was **finally** down for the count.

Satisfied with my victory, I dashed over to where Soundbite had been thrown. Thankfully, when I found him, it was just as he was poking his head out of a bag of white powder he'd managed to land in; flour, from the texture of it. He was hacking and wheezing up a few lungfuls of the stuff, but
apart from a nasty crack in his shell, he seemed unharmed.

"Soundbite! Are you alright!?!" I asked desperately as I fished him out of the powder.

Soundbite coughed and wheezed for a second as he tried to shake the stuff off of him, but he nodded nonetheless.

"Oh, thank God…" I sagged in relief. "That was way too close for comfort." I glanced back at Friday contemplatively. "But what the heck was that?!" I trailed off as I thought it over. Soundbite had screamed before she'd reacted, louder than I'd ever heard. And earlier today he'd been practicing humming. Humming so low that the very air was vibra—!

"It was you, wasn't it?!" I breathed in awe. "That humming thing you were doing, you were looking for a frequency that affects matter! Like-like how just the right noise is supposed to shatter glass, only you made it work on something that wasn't glass! I-If I had to guess, then you must have shattered every bone in Friday's body when you hit her with pure noise, right?"

Soundbite preened and nodded eagerly… before blinking and looking down in confusion.

I dismissed his expression in favor of revelling of the sheer display of badassery I'd just seen. "Soundbite, that's-that's incredible! Innovative, powerful, useful… I can't imagine just how many barriers can be brought down with a simple blast of—!"

I trailed off as an idea struck me before my grin returned with gusto. "I think I just got an idea for a name for this technique. Tell me, how does 'Gastro-Blast' work for you?"

Soundbite's expression immediately became ecstatic, his grin opening up… as he let out a strangled, raspy noise that translated into nothing.

I blinked in confusion. "Uh… Soundbite?"

Soundbite tried to speak again, and let out yet another rasp. He tried again and again, but all that came out was that exact same rusty wheeze.

I felt the blood drain from my face as I realized what the hell was happening, though I dearly hoped that I was wrong. "Soundbite…" I started slowly. "Please tell me that you can say something!"

Soundbite wheezed and hacked like a broken squeaky toy, panic evident in his own expression.

I glanced at the sack of flour Soundbite had landed in. It must have gotten in his mouth, in his throat. Shit, even when we managed to beat the Unluckies fair and square, we still suffered for their involvement!

"Soundbite, we still need you to amp Vivi so that she can stop the rebellion!" I hissed. "Please, for the love of God tell me that there's still something you can do!"

Soundbite wheezed frantically for a moment longer before giving me an apologetic look and shaking his head.

I hung my head with a tortured groan. "Yeah, that just figures, doesn't it? Ergh…"

I snapped my head up to the sky again. "You're enjoying this, aren't you? Let me repeat myself: if I live through this, I had better have some damn good form of compensation coming my way, BECAUSE YOU FUCKING OWE ME!"
I spared the troll that brought me here and was no doubt laughing at me right now no more thought as I took off running; with Soundbite muted, the war wasn't going to stop until the rain started falling…

"Soundbite, which way is the square?"

The snail shot me an incredulous look.

"If we can't amp Vivi, then this rebellion isn't going to stop until the sky spills over, and that's going to be after a lot of Vivi's people die. If we can't stop this, then we can at least cut down on the casualties. Now, which way is it?"

Soundbite grimaced, apparently at his own inability to talk, and indicated a direction with his eyestalks. I took off running the next second, trying to fight my way past the pain I felt in my legs. I grit my teeth as I remembered Nami's fight with Doublefinger.

"This pain…it's nothing compared to what she's going through," I muttered to myself, forcing my way through the streets. After a few minutes, I turned into an alleyway where I saw a welcome sight.

"Nami!"

The navigator turned to look at me, but her next reaction wasn't what I was expecting: her face morphed into a scowl, and she shifted her Clima-Tact in her hands, ready to attack.

"Wh—it's me, Nami!" I said, throwing up my hands in surrender.

"Who's the second greatest traveler in the world?" she asked flatly.

"Hu—oh, right! That would be Pandaman, ranking right below Gol D. Roger!" I promptly replied.

"Wrong answer! Pandaman doesn't exist," she growled, jabbing the point of her staff at me.

"That's a lie! Pandaman is real, just like the great Goda!" I shot back.

Nami's posture relaxed. Her face didn't.

"Cross, what the hell happened to the plan of stopping the rebel army before they even got here?" she snapped.

I snarled in response as I gestured at my bandaged shoulder. "A homicidal otter with dual shell-blades and a vulture armed with high-caliber machineguns stole my talking snail and then tried to kill me when I jumped off a building to catch up to them!" I let that statement mull over for a brief moment before my expression fell slack. "What the hell has my life become?"

Nami sighed in turn as she shook her head. "Madness and insanity, Cross, madness and insanity…" She then smiled lightly as she squeezed my uninjured shoulder. "Still, at least you managed to get out of there alright."

"For a certain definition of 'alright,' anyway," I replied darkly. Shaking that off for the moment, I noticed that Nami was in a lot better shape than I expected. She had a few scratches and minor puncture marks here and there, yeah, but at least she didn't have a hole punched into her leg, so that was definitely something. "Looks like you managed to make out like a bandit, too, huh?"

Nami snickered in agreement and jabbed her Clima-Tact in the ground before flashing a V-sign. "Ee-yup! Assassin that bitch might have been, but she sure as hell couldn't hit someone she couldn't see! I
just kept sneaking around and turning her into a lightning rod until all she could do was twitch!" She then shuddered and slapped her hand to a bruise that was starting to develop on her midsection. "Granted, she did manage to zero in on me a few times and give me a hell of a lariat, with those freaky arms of hers, but yeah, turns out that using a lightning-barrage is a really good tactic."

"Yeah, just as long as you're not fighting someone who ate a Devil Fruit that makes them immune to lightning," I chuckled.

There was a pregnant pause as Nami digested that. "...Are we going to be fighting someone like that?" she asked.

I gave her a flat look, as did Soundbite. She blinked in confusion, and then facepalmed as it hit her.

"Right, stupid question," she groaned.

"Seriously, you're supposed to be the smart one," I continued, before pausing and tacking on a qualification. "At least, until there's a lot of money involved."

CLONK!

"Okay, I admit, I earned that one," I moaned as I massaged the goose egg now sprouting from my head. Soundbite concurred by shaking with silent laughter.

Nami opened her mouth to say something… before pausing as she realized something and cast a half-flat-half-panicked look at the snail. "Cross..." she started slowly. "Why isn't the big-mouthed snail laughing his little ugly ass off like he always does whenever I hit you?"

Soundbite and I froze with dual-stricken expressions before I grinned sheepishly. "Ah... he lost his voice when we beat the Unlucky—ERK!"

"YOU MEAN TO TELL ME OUR ACE IN THE HOLE IS USELESS NOW!?" Nami howled as she tried to wring my neck.

"Uncle... Uncle...!" I managed to wheeze out.

"Tsk... at least some things stay the same in this crazy world."

Nami and I looked at the source of the strained yet familiar voice and promptly recoiled in horror. The person before us looked like Zoro... if the swordsman had been put through an industrial-sized meat grinder.

"Holy shit, man, how the hell are you alive!?" I demanded, rushing over to him and supporting one of his arms. "I swear to God, I've seen shredded beef brisket less cut up than you! Nami, come and give me some help, damn it!"

"Eh... you're sure he doesn't have any bloodborne diseases, right?"

"JUST HURRY UP AND PUT IT ON HIS TAB, WOMAN!"

"Alright, alright..." Nami grumbled as she joined me.

Zoro shot a halfhearted glare in my direction. "Hey, I don't need your—!

"If these wounds don't lay you out, then I can guarantee you that Chopper will," I shot back flatly. "Do you want him to break out the good drugs again, hmm? Do you?"
Zoro promptly adopted a panicked expression and shuddered heavily. "So many colors and I couldn't hit any of them… Alright already, just hurry up and get me patched up."

"Heh," I chuckled as Nami and I helped haul Zoro out of the alleyway. "Yeah, that's what I thought."

The rest of the crew was waiting for us at the palace walls, and it was clear that they had had varying levels of success in their fights. Usopp was only about 70% covered in bandages rather than 100%, Chopper looked a bit better, Sanji was only somewhat banged up, and Vivi had a few bullet holes in her clothes, but nothing serious. Alongside them were Chaka, Pell, Luffy… and oddly enough, Kohza. Luffy waved off my apologies for not telling him about Crocodile's weakness, saying that he knew it now, before he went back to the palace lawn for his rematch. Once he rocketed off, I forestalled the crew asking if he'd win this time by asking what Kohza was doing there, leaving him and Pell to explain.

From what they said, Vivi's absence from the palace when Crocodile arrived and started interrogating Cobra hadn't changed much in the grand scheme of things. Cobra had stayed tight-lipped up until the point where Kohza showed up at the palace. Crocodile, smug bastard that he was, had informed Kohza of the truth, and then Miss All Sunday prepared to silence him. Cobra spoke out against that, and proposed to lead Robin to the Poneglyph if she released Kohza. As soon as they left, Crocodile elected to gloat at Kohza for a while before killing him anyway by dropping him off the balcony, only for Luffy and Pell to show up at just the right moment to catch him. As their explanation finished, Vivi took the opportunity to ask Soundbite to amplify her, and Chaka and Pell promptly had to hold her back from strangling us when I told her that he had lost his voice.

"So, what are we supposed to do now?" Kohza asked as the two finished pulling her away.

"Vivi, you managed to take out the Mr. 7 team, right?" I quickly confirmed.

"I—yes, the Kicking Claw Force is guarding the bomb now," Vivi nodded in confirmation, visibly calming herself before turning to her family's keepers. "Pell, do you think that you can fly it out of range of the city and still be safe?"

"Of course, Princess Vivi, I'm more than capable of it!" Pell answered with a bow before wincing painfully. "Admittedly, I might still be sore from that Sunday woman—!"

Vivi shot a cold glare at me, which forced me to look away uncomfortably.

"But so long as I take it straight up and dive a few seconds before it goes off, then yes, I should be fine. I'll take care of it at once, unless there's anything else you need?"

Vivi glanced at me and I shrugged uneasily. "Hell if I know, things are already completely nuts as is."

She eventually just sighed and waved Pell on. "Then fine, go. Actually, as a matter of fact, I'll go with you," Vivi decided as she stepped up to him. "The clocktower will give me a good vantage point I can use to try and catch everyone's attention."

"Alright," Nami nodded in agreement. "Meanwhile, we'll try and stop this madness as best as we can from here on the ground. Any ideas how?"

"No public speeches, for one," I grumbled, casting a glance at Kohza. "Tell your most trusted officers and stop the fighting piece by piece, but if you put yourself out in the open and do it all at
once, you're just going to get shot by a plant... or a lone radical, for that matter."

"But we've already purged the Royal Army; wouldn't it raise suspicion if one of them fired—?"

"How hard is it to change uniforms?" Sanji asked quietly.

That brought everyone up short.

"And besides that, in this madness," I gestured at the war going on a few dozen scant feet from us, kept where it was only by some Rebels and Royals noticing their respective leaders and trying to keep them safe, mostly by gritting their teeth and shooting at the two armies rather than each other, "it wouldn't matter either way. One shot, Kohza goes down and everything flares back up again. No, we can't stop this fighting on our own. The best we can do is try and slow this all down and hold out until Luffy beats Crocodile, then everything will come to an end."

"Try—"

Everyone glanced at Soundbite, the whisper just loud enough for us to hear it. He went back to wheezing again after saying it, but the message was clear.

"So, we're buying time and keeping the body count to a minimum until Luffy beats Crocodile, and if Soundbite manages to get his voice back in the meantime, so much the better for us," Nami concluded.

I nodded in agreement before clapping my hands firmly. "We all know what to do. Let's get to it."

Vivi swallowed and nodded grimly in response, climbing onto Pell's back once he transformed.

"Good luck to you all."

"You too!"

And with that, she was off and we all dove into the fray.

Protip: fighting against a mass of people like that? It sucks. It sucks a lot. It wasn't just blades and bullets we had to look out for in the pandemonium, it was limbs, heads, flying boots, rocks...you name it, it probably nearly beaned me half a dozen times over the course of the melee. And it wasn't just my ass I had to look after, it was everyone else's as well. I had to keep a Rebel from slashing Usopp from behind, smash in the face of a Baroque Works plant that tried to take a shot at Chopper, and I am fairly certain that Royal Guard who tried to grab Nami didn't have that limp when the war started.

That said, I did let that one Royal soldier slam into Zoro's chest. After all the shit he'd been putting me through, it felt nice to laugh at least a little bit.

Still, for all the times that I had to watch my friend's backs, they had mine just as much. If it weren't for the half-formed lightning Nami seemed to make out of thin air, I'd have gotten shot in the head. If it weren't for Sanji kneecapping a Rebel I'd missed, I'd have literally lost my head. Hell, if it weren't for Soundbite nearly taking a chunk out of my neck with his teeth, a cannonball that someone had been stupid enough to fire off would have gone clean through my torso.

Though I'm fairly certain that Zoro let that bastard with the club nearly break my nose before he stopped him, which, in my opinion, was just uncalled for.

And the worst of it all was... that it was practically unending. Minutes, hours... you could have told me that it went on for days, and I wouldn't have known the difference. All I could focus on was
staying standing. Throw a kick at the misguided rebel, swing the baton at the plant in the Royal outfit, backhand the guy trying to sneak up on me, dodge out of the way of the lightning bolt (really needed to help Nami figure out a way to control that), brain left, brain right, crotch shot center. It was exhausting, and the fact that I couldn't stop remembering what the cause of all this was kept my adrenaline from giving me any reprieve.

But every time I was about to collapse from exhaustion, every time I was about to give up and collapse and let someone else take up the slack… All I had to do was listen. I just had to strain my hearing and listen.

ZSSSSHHHHHH!

That wasn't what I was listening for, that was Nami frying a group of unruly Royals - and a few Rebels we'd managed to get on our side ah, damn it!

Ergh, that made our job a bit harder, but no, no, what I was listening for was… her voice. Vivi's voice. Even with her newfound confidence and sense of authority, she couldn't help but speak up. Although… she wasn't really speaking at all. Rather she was… screaming. Pleading as loud as she possibly could for everyone, Royals she was trying to make listen and Rebels who wouldn't, to just. Stop. Fighting.

She was trying, trying so hard… and so long as she was trying, that meant that I had absolutely no right to stop, even for a moment.

Still, thankfully enough a reprieve did come eventually, in the form of what was all but an act of God. The sky lit up, the sheer sound seemed to make the air shatter. I couldn't even begin to contemplate where the hell Crocodile could have gotten a bomb like that. Worst case scenario, Joker had provided it to him, which meant that Doflamingo had the capability to level a city tucked in his back pocket and available to the highest bidder.

Still, for all that the bomb was horrific in its power, at least it gave us something of a reprieve due to everyone pausing to look up at the sky. I took advantage of the lull by tackling a stunned BW plant who'd been about to mess with a stock of gunpowder in a way that I assumed wouldn't help anyone present.

Sadly, as swiftly as the pause started, it ended, with a roar from every soldier present. And unlike before… this one was just so much more worse. I had a sneaking suspicion that each soldier was blaming the other side for the bomb, which made their reaction rather understandable.

Still, understandable though it was, it was just… flat out terrifying. The sheer hatred, the bloodlust… they weren't fighting for their causes anymore, half of this was out of a triggered primal need to fight just for fighting's sake.

The only good part of it was that in the midst of it all, I managed to catch sight of something big, white and feathery diving into the madness just as it restarted. And I couldn't help but notice the crowd leave a fairly sizable empty space around him.

By this point, the only reason exhaustion hadn't led to us all getting overrun was that the dueling armies were just as tired. My dodges were drunken and the counterattacks sluggish, but my opponents were in equally bad shape. At this rate, the fight might have actually ended with everyone dying from exhaustion rather than by steel and black powder.

Thankfully, however, that wasn't how it ended.
The way it ended… was with the sound of strings.

It brought me up short for a second, but there it was: violins and cellos, clear as the day itself, ringing out loud and proud over the sound of warfare. And just as soon as the strings started up, they were joined by other instruments as well: trumpets ringing out like clarions, drums pounding hard enough to shake our very cores. A full orchestra, blaring out triumphantly against the ravages of this war.

I strained my ears as I listened to the music, trying to place it, because it sounded so familiar. And the second I did…

"Pfff… PFHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

I fell to my knees and laughed. I laughed and laughed and laughed, letting so much joy and relief roll out of me.

Nami, dumbfounded by both the music and my reaction alike, paused and glanced over at me in shock. "Cross, do you know what's going on? Do you know what that music is?"

"PFHAHAHA!" I roared happily. "Oh, I know what this music is, alright, I know!" At that moment, the ground beneath us started to tremble and lurch, shaking us all to our very cores.

"What the—?" Nami started, looking down at her feet, but I kept going.

"THIS IS THE MUSICAL MASTERPIECE KNOWN AS DVORAK'S NINTH SYMPHONY, PLAYED IN E MINOR, 'FROM THE NEW WORLD!'" I laughed. "AND IF IT'S PLAYING, RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW, THEN THAT CAN ONLY MEAN ONE THING, AND ONE! THING! ONLY!"

I forced myself to my feet, and pointed in the distance, where several buildings were beginning to tilt due to the bulging and distended earth.

"IT MEANS THAT THIS IS ALL OVER! IT MEANS THAT THIS WAR IS OVER! IT MEANS THAT WE! HAVE! WON!"

Nami followed my gaze and gasped in shock. "You… you mean—?" she asked, hope tinging her voice.

The music crescendoed, the earth erupted… and Crocodile, sandy cold-blooded bastard that he was, was sent flying.

"HE WON!" I whooped, flinging my arms up in victory. Tears streamed from the corners of my eyes as I laughed in relief, watching as soldier after soldier stopped fighting to gape in awe. "LUFFY BEAT CROCODILE! HE WON!"

The crew promptly joined me in celebrating, and I watched with no small amount of relief as the soldiers paused to listen to the beautiful noise of the music filling the air.

Beautiful… noise…

"YOUR VOICE IS BACK!" I howled, pointing at Soundbite, who jumped in shock and caused the music to cut off with a record scratch.

"I-I didn't notice!" Soundbite yelped, his voice still slightly raspy. "I-I WAS listening to LUUFFY FIGHT AND and it felt right!"
"Oh, that's alright, then," I nodded cordially. "We all make mistakes, and this was a very stressful —GYRGH!"

"AMP VIVI, NOW!" Nami shrieked as she grabbed my throat.

"R-RIGHT!" I choked out before jabbing my finger at the clocktower. "AM—GASTRO-AMP, MAX VOLUME! AND GIVE IT DIRECTIONALITY, NO VOICE OF GOD!"

"ROGER ROGER!" Soundbite nodded in agreement, focusing intently on the clocktower.

A moment later, Vivi's voice rang out as clear as a bell. While it lacked the direction of the voice of God, at least it matched the sheer intensity and volume.

After that, well… the rest, as it is often said, was history.

It had been a long and hard road, filled with pain and suffering aplenty, but at long last, the core of the Alabasta Saga was said and done.

All that was left for us was to move onto the epilogue, and from there… to simply move on.
Chapter 22: Straw Hat Broadcast Station! A Snail Speaks And The World Listens!

Xomniac AN: Shout Out straight back to DuncanIdaho2014's New Game Plus, by far the absolute best Peggy Sue fic that I have read, if not the absolute best One Piece fic period! Seriously, great characters, great premises, great headcanons… far too frequently do One Piece fics flop face-first in a fabulous fashion, and that goes doubly for Peggy Sue Anime/Manga fics. DuncanIdaho manages to defy this trend with gusto, writing a story that not only restored my faith in the Peggy Sue genre, but in One Piece fanfiction as a whole. You're a real inspiration Duncan, and I await the next chapter of New Game Plus with bated breath!

As you're about to see, I'm not the only one grateful for your writings!

And with that outta the way, let's get onto the show and off of these rails!

Footnote—All of the above was written several days ago, when I began writing this chapter. This is written the day I post this chapter: You. Rat. Bastard. I pay you these compliments, I sing your praises, and you repay me with a work of sheer genius that completely and utterly undermines this chapter, overshadowing it completely and utterly!? My contemporary coup de grâce?! Tsk! I spit upon thy genius as much as I adore every moment of it!

For the record, you got lucky! I blame the educational system, if my workload hadn't distracted me last night, I might have updated before you!

Hmph… for now, I take solace in the fact that my story is nearly twice as long as yours and that this chapter is almost thrice as long as well, but from this moment forth? I declare you my rival!

This feud begins here and now! En garde, knave!

-0-

Three days after the rebellion had ended and Crocodile had been brought low, Alubarna was well on its way to restoration. Well… moderately so, at any rate. The rain that had poured all through the first day and into the middle of the second night had made rebuilding a tad difficult, but if the citizens of Alabasta were anything, it was stubbornly resilient. They simply rolled up their sleeves and worked day and night, through the rain, wind, and mud, and when the weather finally abated and let the piercing sun I'd become so used to shine down on the city, the people's work ethic only seemed to triple.

Granted, there were still scars present across the city, still too many lives lost, but in the end, that was inevitable. That didn't stop Soundbite from cringing whenever the topic came up, considering how much of a difference he could have made. The still-healing crack in his shell certainly didn't help matters, either; for the first time since I met the Baby Transponder Snail, he seemed to be sulking.

But still, progress was progress. Whenever we weren't staying in the royal palace watching over Luffy (if his snores were bad now, I dreaded to think what they'd be like when he learned how to sleep-eat), the crew and I could usually be found out and about in the streets of Alubarna, lending whatever aid we could manage. A beam lifted here, rubble cleared there, every bit helped. Well, so
long as it wasn't too strenuous. Chopper habitually got on Zoro's case about his daily training as it was, and I had no desire to get between those two.

Speaking of the young doctor, he'd been acting… odd since our victory. Not in a necessarily bad way, mind, just… out of the ordinary. Whenever Chopper wasn't working on whatever new concoction or medical creation he'd come up with, or checking on Zoro's shredded torso or Luffy's water-levels, he was spending every waking and what should have been sleeping moment he could get in the palace's library, poring over medical textbook after medical textbook and evading every question we made about it. It was… slightly concerning, to be sure, but he seemed to be keeping himself healthy, so I couldn't really complain. The best we could do was wish him luck with whatever he was looking into.

"If life seems jolly rotten/There's something you've forgotten!"

I was jolted out of my reverie by Soundbite suddenly boosting the volume of the jaunty melody he'd been singing to himself, allowing me to recognize the exact tune and tempo.

"'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life', huh?" I asked with a grin. "What happened to all that undeserved gloom and doom, huh?"

Soundbite grinned sunnily as he kept the whistling refrain up and running. "NOT A CLUE! All I know is that all of a sudden, I FEEL HAPPY! LIKE SOME GREAT GOOD has been done for TRANSPONDER- SNAIL- KIND! Some great wrong has been RIGHTED, something has been done THAT WILL BE RECOGNIZED FOR GENERATIONS TO COME, I can feel it in my shell! Makes me wanna SING!"

I blinked in surprise at that before shrugging off the oddity of the statement in favor of a smile of my own; whatever it was he was feeling, it was far from the strangest phenomenon we'd seen on the Grand Line, and quite honestly, I wasn't willing to look the gift horse in the mouth. So, instead of complaining, I just let the good mood infect me. "Fair enough! Sing on, my gastropod companion!"

"Hey, shake a leg, Cross!"

"That's your job, Sanji!" I shot back, but complied nonetheless, hoisting the bags I was carrying in my arms. Currently, Soundbite and I were accompanying Sanji and Usopp on the final grocery run of our stay. We'd elected to pick up as many supplies as we could in anticipation of our departure later tonight, and it was always nice and inspiring to take a walk down main street.

Usopp shot a half-grin, half-smirk at Soundbite as we caught up. "Well, well, you're pretty peppy! Finally decided whether or not you're going to do us all the favor of jumping into Sanji's cookpot?"

"SCREW-SCREW-SCREW-SCREW YOOOOOU~!" Soundbite auto-harmonized, never losing the cheer present in his voice.

"Well, of course he's happy, Usopp!" Sanji grinned joyously around his cigarette. "Everyone's happy today, and why shouldn't they be? Their beautiful Princess has returned to them! Truly, they have a worthy reason to rejoice!"

I grinned eagerly at Sanji's ministrations before starting to count down. "And three, two, one…"

"Huh?" Sanji blinked back at me. "Cross, what are you—?"

"HOLY MOTHER OF—!? LOOK AT MY HOUSE! THESE HOLES GO CLEAN THROUGH ALMOST A FULL BLOCK! WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED, IT LOOKS LIKE SOMEBODY
"KICKED THE WALLS DOWN!"

"There it is!"

Sanji promptly blushed up a storm and made a swift 90-degree turn, muttering something about wanting to check out a stall that was this way and not at all that way.

Usopp glanced between the holes and Sanji for a moment before grinning impishly. "Those holes were left by Sanji stomping Mr. 2, weren't they?"

I matched Usopp's grin tooth for tooth. "Ooooh no no no, nothing that justified. He kicked 2 through one wall. Those holes lead straight from one of the city's outer roads to the central square." I raised my nose in a haughty sniff. "And to think that he has the gall to insult Zoro for getting lost!"

"HA!" Soundbite barked jubilantly, a motion that Usopp mirrored.

"Ah, isn't it just hilarious to see people make hypocrites of themselves?" I chortled.

"MY BAR! MY BEAUTIFUL, BEAUTIFUL BAR!"

My back went ramrod straight as an agonized voice tore its way out from around a corner. I chanced a glance at Soundbite, and judging by his stricken expression I guessed that he had come to the same conclusion as me.

"What do you say we hurry up and get on back to the palace, okay? Okay!" I hastily decided, my voice an octave too high as I tried to speed walk away.

"Huh?" Usopp blinked in confusion as he turned his head towards the voice. "Why? Don't we still need—?"

"NOT THAT BAD!? IT LOOKS LIKE A FUCKING HURRICANE BLEW THROUGH! MOST OF MY LIQUID STOCK IS SOAKING INTO THE FLOOR, THE FURNITURE'S BEEN EVISCERATED, MY SHOTGUN IS IN PIECES—YES, I HAD A FUCKING PERMIT FOR IT!—AND ON TOP OF IT ALL, IT LOOKS LIKE SOMEONE TRIED TO START A FUCKING CAMPFIRE! I SWEAR, IF I EVER GET MY HANDS ON THE BASTARDS WHO DID THIS!—"

I tuned out the rest of what the bartender bellowed, and Sanji snickered as he put the pieces together.

"Say, Usopp, isn't it just hilarious when hypocrites are called out on their shit?" Sanji innocently asked the sniper.

"Ooooh, yeah, Sanji, it's just—!"

"—decades worth of history and culture, wasted! And for what purpose, even!? The Ala'Adulah District lies outside of the city! There should have been no reason for anyone to fight there, much less for anyone to employ high-powered explosives! And what were they even doing with all that excavating equipment in a fight?!" complained a passing elderly gentlemen.

Usopp turned his nose up with a haughty sniff when Sanji and I turned our glares on him. "Ha! Joke's on you, those Baroque Works jackasses did all the damage, so there!"

"Perhaps the oddest part of it all was the way some of the walls looked like they were blown open, but I simply can't understand it. Where could they have gotten a bull in the middle of a siege?" the elderly man's companion complained.
Usopp faltered uncomfortably as cold sweat started running down his face. "Uhhh… H-hey, is it just me or is that merchant selling copper?" he tried to deflect.

"Cross?" Sanji asked frigidly.

"Half were caused by him, half were him," I drawled at an equally cool temperature.

Usopp glanced between us frantically for a moment before plastering a nervous smile on his face. "C-call it even and never mention it again?"

Sanji and I glanced at one another before shrugging. "Fine."

"Works for me."

"GIVE ME THE caramel peanuts and cracker jack NOW, or I BLAB TO THE WHOLE STREET! AND VIVI. Remember what she did LAST TIME?"

I winced and whipped my hand to my nose self-consciously as a stab of phantom pain shot through it. "Deal," I promptly folded, digging the snack out of the bag and tossing it up to Soundbite, letting him rip his way through the paper wrapping with his teeth.

"Blackmailed by a snail. What has this world come to?" Sanji sighed, puffing out a cloud of smoke.

"Blackmail is such an ugly word. I prefer 'extortion'. The 'X' makes it sound cool," Soundbite drawled as he continued chewing.

"I'm gonna take my luck and tell you to bite me," I shot back.

"OKAY!" CHOMP!

"YEOWCH!"

"You did ask for it."

"Same goes to you, long-nose!"

And so it went as we finished up our rounds of the market, eventually making our way back to the steps of the Royal Palace. Pell and Chaka were standing guard about halfway up the stairs, attending to the reception of a… welcoming party, so to speak. God bless the Marines, it took dedication to be such persistent pains in our asses.

"For the last time, there are no pirates inside the palace," Chaka growled firmly.

"We kindly ask that you vacate the premises," Pell concurred in a more even tone of voice. His demeanor promptly froze over as he grabbed the hilt of his blade. "You would do well to leave before we ask you less kindly."

"I don't think you understand just how severe this situation is!" the Marine leading the party shot back with as authority as he could muster, no doubt hampered by the fact that he was facing down two royal Zoan-bodyguards. "Royal authority or not, the World Government will not ignore you harboring wanted pirates!"

"Then it's a good thing we don't know any pirates, isn't it?" Chaka shot back without hesitation.
"Hey Lord Chaka, Lord Pell," Sanji waved politely as we passed by the two.

"Welcome back," Pell smiled and waved back while Chaka maintained his glare o'death on the Marines. "Did you find everything you required?"

"Most of it," Usopp shrugged as he hefted the bags he was carrying. "We got… uh… waylaid, so to speak… but it's fine, it's fine, we can make do."

"Well, feel free to ask if you need anything, we'd be happy to send someone out to get it."

"Thank you, sir, you're too kind!" I smiled gratefully.

"Now, wait just a moment, you!" one of the Marines growled, snapping his hand to the hilt of his sword as he glared at me.

I made a show of turning around and smiling innocently at the Marine. "Good afternoon, officer!"

"Ello, guvnah!" Soundbite concurred.

The squadron promptly tensed up as they snapped their focus to me. I think I could see a glimmer of recognition in some of their eyes. "One of the pirates we're looking for has been reported as having a Baby Transponder Snail with him capable of talking on its own," the lead Marine stated, staring pointedly at the Baby Transponder Snail on my shoulder.

I made a show of looking at Soundbite in confusion before blinking in realization. "Ooooh! Okay, I see your confusion! No, see, Polly here can't really talk, I've just trained him to act like he can! I'm a ventriloquist, you see!"

"Polly want a cracker, Polly want a cracker, SQUAWK!" Soundbite promptly provided, albeit with a sidelong glare.

"Do you really think that we believe that!?" the Marine demanded.

"Well, I don't know what you think about me," I gestured at myself before cupping my mouth with one hand and jabbing my other thumb at Soundbite. "Buuut I'd take whatever he says with a grain of salt."

"S.O.S., L.A.P.I.S. ALERT, KIDNAPPER!" Soundbite suddenly howled, jerking his head at me frantically. "Oi'm not 'ere o' me own free will!"

The Marine twitched furiously, but before he could say anything Pell interrupted him by laughing and clapping. "Bravo, sir, bravo! I'm certain that Princess Vivi will love your performance! I look forward to seeing you at dinner later tonight!"

"And I you, sir!" I saluted him promptly before turning up the stairs. "Well, we'd best be going! See you!"

"Hey, wait a—!"

"Officer, let me ask you… do you really want to press this issue?"

"Ahhh…"

I waited until we'd put a dozen or two stairs between us and the Marines before glancing at Soundbite. "Lapis?" I queried.
"Lost/Abducted Person: Initiate Search," Usopp explained.

"Local version of A.M.B.E.R." Soundbite concurred.

"Huh. Learn something new every day."

"So, Cross, about how long do we have until Luffy wakes up?" Usopp asked. "Between Soundbite's sulking and his sleeping, it's been almost too quiet around here."

"OH, YOU LIKE IT LOUD, LONG NOSE?"

"GAH!" Usopp yelped, almost dropping a bag as he clapped a hand to his head. "RIGHT IN MY EARS!"

I frowned as I thought about it, and then chuckled.

"If my memory serves me correctly, he should be waking up any minute now… and it's a very good thing that we're about to serve him a royal feast. After all, he missed fifteen meals."

Usopp and Sanji both shot confused looks at me.

"Uh, Cross…?"

"You heard me right."

It wasn't long before we arrived back at the room, and true to my expectations, Luffy was wide awake and announcing the fact to anyone with eardrums. Chopper tore himself away from whatever his studies included to give Luffy a genuinely happy greeting, only to turn away as soon as Zoro came back in from his training, fussing over him removing his bandages too soon. Again. I had to wonder what I had done to change things so much that Zoro actually seemed afraid when Chopper started ranting at him, but with my luck, I was sure I'd find out the hard way.

Everyone found themselves distracted, however, when Igaram's wife Terracotta came in with a food cart. I would have been laughing at my crewmates' reactions, I really would have… but it was just too freaking surreal to see in person. People and dogs, I could accept. Heck, even the wife/husband thing was fine at times, sure, but

**this!?** No offense to either of them, but this was just unnatural; Igaram taking a shot of Ivankov's hormones couldn't produce a more identical woman, and vice versa!

Soundbite seemed less affected, but he wasn't making any noise; he seemed caught halfway between the urge to laugh and recoil, with the end result that he just stared with a slightly open mouth. I did manage to tear my gaze away in time to see Luffy devour the entirety of the food cart in less than a second… which I still couldn't wrap my mind around. Terracotta took Luffy's pledge to eat three days' worth of food as a challenge before bustling off to the kitchen. A few seconds passed before Soundbite spoke up.

"YOU KNOW, seeing things like that makes me wish my POWERS focused more on sight than sound. THAT WAY, I COULD see HOW THE HECK LUFFY does that," he monotoned.

"I've sort of wished the same thing a few times now. Unfortunately, the only sight-based Devil Fruit I know of is in the hands of someone who desperately needs it and isn't likely to die anytime within the next few decades," I replied before cupping my chin in thought. "Hmm… though I do know of another Devil Fruit that could help, and we'll find that user relatively soon…" I contemplated it for a second longer before shaking my head firmly. "No, no, that way lies bloodthirsty thoughts. Though
"I cast an uneasy look up at Luffy. "Still wouldn't answer one question, though."

"What?"

I looked pointedly at the empty space next to Luffy's bed. "The food I can understand, but how the hell does he pass the metal?"

CRASH!

All eyes turned to Chopper, who was looking between Luffy and myself with a hungry expression, his equipment having fallen from his hooves.

I stared at him nervously for a moment before glancing at the table he'd been working on, eyeing the empty coffee mug. "Chopper, how long have you been awake, how much coffee have you had, have you been dosing it with any 'study aids' you happened to develop over the years, and if so, do they happen to have any side effects?"

"Twenty-six hours, fifteen cups, yes, maybe?" Chopper's smile twitched slightly as he swayed on his hooves. "Doctorine never let me take anything I made twice, so I never got the chance to look into them."

I could feel the sweatdrop hanging off my skull. "Um… scary though she is, I've never seen a better doctor; don't you think there might have been a reason for her to do that?"

"Weeeeell…" Chopper slowly tilted his head to the side contemplatively. "My research notes and experiment logs always did seem to double or triple in length after the first test, and a lot of the things that were in there were totally untested and most likely highly dangerous, but I don't see how—"

Chopper's body seemed to sag under its own weight as realization swept over him. "I've been research-binging in a somnabulescent state, haven't I?"

"Uhh…?" most of the crew's heads tilted in confusion.

"He's been halfway sleep-walking while doing science experiments," Vivi groaned in response.

"That… doesn't sound so bad?" Nami posed hesitantly.

"Oh, so you're volunteering to be his 'research assistant' when he tries to do Doctor Frankenstein proud?" I snarked.

Nami's eyes shot wide in shock before she plastered a calm, if shaky, grin on her face. "Let's not mention this again, shall we?"

"Fine by—aaaaaah—me…" Chopper yawned suddenly. "I think I'm already crashing… I'm gonna go get a nap before dinner. G'night…" And with that, he started shuffling his way towards one of the room's beds.

"What the heck are you even working on, anyway?" Usopp asked curiously.

Like every other time we'd asked him, Chopper waved him off with a grumble. "Theories and hypotheses and stuff, that's it. I'll tell you when I've got something concrete…" And with that, the Zoan-user flopped face-first into a pillow. Seconds later, he was snoring away.

"Before you ask," I spoke up before anyone could say anything as I flipped Chopper over, getting his nose out of the pillow. "No, this is not normal, and no, I don't have any idea what the heck is
going on. The only common factor in all this is me."

"So, basically, it's your fault?" Luffy asked, ignoring the dual slaps to the back of his head that Nami and Zoro delivered. "And anyways, what's wrong with how Chopper is? I think that having a mad scientist doctor reindeer would be really cool!"

"You think that having someone as crazy as Kureha—who, might I remind you, chased you around Drum Castle throwing a royal armory of weapons at you—on the Merry, living with you and treating you every time you got out of a big fight, would be cool?" Vivi incredulously demanded. She paused as she processed what she'd said before slapping her hand to her face with a groan. "I think I just answered my own question."

A mixture of groans and laughter filled the room before Luffy got back to the matter at hand.

"Well, whatever. Now it's time for the banquet! FOOOOOOOOD!"

Exactly one second later, Luffy was gone, the doors were almost thrown off their hinges, and I swear I saw an afterimage sitting on the bed in his place. I blinked before shaking my head. "Does that idiot even realize that Terracotta still needs time to actually cook that much food?"

Sanji's audible sigh was all the answer I needed.

"I'll try to cut down on the damage he does," Vivi said tiredly, to which both Nami and Sanji volunteered to help. After a second, Usopp agreed as well, fishing around for some of his Tabasco Stars in his bag. Zoro, unsurprisingly, decided to stay where he was, supposedly meditating… right next to where Chopper was sleeping. I smirked and turned to walk away, but was stopped by Soundbite clearing his throat.

"Oh, right, almost forgot." I turned to Vivi. "Which way is it to the dungeons from here?"

Vivi allowed herself to smirk as sadistically as was possible for someone like her. "Time for Soundbite's conjugal visit already?"

"EEYUP!" Soundbite hooted eagerly in agreement.

The princess pointed down one of the halls. "That way, down the stairs, take a left. There should be some guards you can ask to escort you from there."

"Thank you!" I waved at her over my shoulder as I went on my way.

Overall, the journey took a few minutes, for which I wasn't entirely ungrateful. For such an isolated and arid location, Alubarna Royal Palace had genuinely exquisite architecture. If this really was the original palace that stood here 800 years ago at the onset of the World Government's power—and the Poneglyph denoted that it most likely was—then the degree of technology available at the time must have been significantly higher. Granted, Machu Picchu was also more elaborate than its location initially belied, but this was on a whole other level.

Even the palace dungeons were surprisingly elaborate: smooth, featureless corridors of sandstone laid out in a relatively grid-like manner. If it weren't for the guard guiding me, there isn't a doubt in my mind that I would have wound up hopelessly lost. A simple, if doubtlessly elegant means of containing all but the most powerful and redoubtable of prisoners.

Currently, the dungeons were filled, if not completely to capacity then at least damn close. The reason for this was that after Tashigi had managed to pull her men together and gain some form of control over the situation, she'd dedicated every soldier she could spare to covering every possible
base she could think of in the name of making sure that there wasn't even so much as a shadow of a chance that Crocodile could escape or be freed from captivity. As such, there hadn't been any available troops to transport the rest of the agents with them, forcing the Alabastan government to take custody of Baroque Works' rank and file in their stead.

Most of the cells held average thugs that all bore the emblem of Baroque Works somewhere on their person. I noticed a handful of them with bandages or just-healed scars over the tattoos or where they presumably would have been, and flashed back to when Arlong had betrayed Nami. I couldn't help but chuckle; Crocodile had let down everyone that worked for him, and I don't think I'd ever understand exactly why Mr. 1 stayed loyal.

I broke out of my thoughts as we came to a cell with a wooden door, no doubt smaller than the others. Sliding open the eye slot, I looked in and confirmed that the heavily bandaged Mr. 13 and Miss Friday were within, firmly chained to the back wall. The pair leered as they saw me… or I think they did, anyways, they apparently got bitey whenever anyone tried to touch their eyewear.

"Hey, guys! How's it hanging?" I asked innocently.

The two twitched and growled furiously as they glared daggers at me, their respective paws and talons stretching as they tried to reach for the floor, which they were suspended several feet above.

"Not good, huh?" I analyzed with faux-concern. "Well, I'm sorry to hear that, I really am… but hey! Look on the bright side!" I turned slightly and showed Soundbite to the two, who was now grinning like an absolute maniac. "You've got a visitor."

"Hello, my darlings," Soundbite crooned sadistically.

And just like that, the Unluckies' attitudes pulled a complete 180, going from fierce and cocky to flat-out terrified. The pair were shaking in their chains, shaking their heads at me in desperation. Desperation I pointedly ignored.

"Well!" I grinned as I picked up Soundbite and plopped him on the small shelf just below the eye slot. "I'll just let you guys get reacquainted, pick up where you left off. Have fun!"

"I WILL!" Soundbite cackled with a lick of his lips.

Their screams of terror rang out just as the eye slot's slide clicked shut. As I turned my back to the door and leaned against it, I noticed that the guard that had guided me was looking at me in confusion. "What?" I questioned. I then got a good look at the guy's face. "Oh, you haven't had escort duty yet. Sorry, those uniforms make identifying you a bit of a chore."

"That's the point," the guard shrugged before looking at the cell door curiously. "So… what exactly is your snail doing in there, anyways?"

"Weeeell…" I rolled my head slightly. "See, the thing is, the animals in this cell? They came after Soundbite and I personally during the Revolution. Caused a fair bit of trouble for us, too. And Soundbite, well… he's a bit of a vindictive shit. And to be honest? Considering how these two have been thorns in our hides for a while now? I really don't mind being classified as such too. Hence, Soundbite is… paying them back with interest for their crimes, if you will. Primarily by making them seriously regret ever living."

"Well, yes, I gathered," the guard shrugged. "But what is he doing, specifically? I heard that his power was making noise and that seems about right, so how could he do anything to them from almost five feet away?"
I turned, giving the guard a haunted look. "You don't want to know," I said hollowly. "If I told you what he was doing in there… you'd never sleep soundly again."

The guard crossed his arms and gave me a flat look. "I fought in the Rebellion, Mister Cross, I think I can handle myself."

I studied the guy for a moment longer before hanging my head with a despondent sigh. "On your head be it. He's…" I shuddered heavily. "He's reciting Vogon poetry."

The flatness of the guard's look intensified. "He's torturing them with… poetry?"

"Nononono!" I promptly stuck my finger up in denial. "Vogon. He's torturing them with Vogon poetry, there is a marked difference."

"What kind of difference could there possibly be? And what the heck is a Vogon, anyway?"

"An alien. Oh, believe me, I'm quite serious," I went on as the guard stared at me in disbelief. "Extraterrestrial life, and a horrible example of it too. Ugly, vile, bureaucratic to hell and back, and most importantly? They write some of the worst. Poetry. In the universe. The third worst, to be specific."

The guard blinked in confusion. "I… huh? If you're using poetry and that's really the third worst, then why not go for the first instead?"

"Because the first worst was destroyed, nobody knows what it was anymore and the universe is grateful for it. Meanwhile, the second worst poetry in the universe comes from a species known as the Azgoths of Kria, and the recitation of one of their poems, 'Ode to a Small Lump of Green Putty I Found in My Armpit One Midsummer Morning', killed four members of the attending audience via internal hemorrhaging, and a fifth only survived by gnawing one of his own legs off."

"…eh?" the guard finally managed to get out.

"Eeyup," I nodded solemnly. "You see, Vogons have developed their poetry to the point where it is an instrument of torture. It's right there on the borderline: horrible, terrible enough to cause nigh mortal agony within any and all unlucky enough to hear its excruciating lyrics, and yet… just shy of being actively lethal enough to grant them the sweet, sweet release of death." I grinned viciously at the guard. "Still think we're not doing much to them?"

The guard's mouth flapped uselessly for a moment until he managed to get his jaw under control. "You are a very scary man, aren't you?"

I took a moment to mentally fistpump before singssonging "Pi~ra~te." I then took notice of the time and rapped my fist against the wood of the door. "Okay, Soundbite, I think they've had enough. Wrap it up!"

A minute later, there was a knock against the eye slot, signalling me to slide it open. On the other side, Soundbite was smiling proudly, if somewhat queasily.

The Unluckies were back in a position I'd become very familiar with in the past few days: shaking and shuddering against their binds as they were caught up in the throes of a full-blown seizure, heads tilted back as far as they could go and foam bubbling furiously out of their mouths.

"Well, I'm glad you all had fun!" I saluted them as I slid Soundbite back onto my shoulder. "I'd love to do this again sometime, truly I would, but I'm afraid that our time in this kingdom is limited. Still, be sure to look us up if you're ever in the neighborhood! Or burn in hell, but hey, either or. Say hi to
Magellan for me, bye!" And with that, I slid the slide shut before gesturing at the guard. "After you."

And with that we resumed the trek back out of the dungeons, going back past all of the prisoners. It was a relatively calm trek—

"BARK BARK BARK! RRRRR! BAR-KAI!"

Until a flurry of canine screaming echoed from somewhere else in the prison.

I whipped my head in the general direction of the din, taking a brief moment to realize what the only possible source was before looking back at the guard. "Take me to wherever that is, quick!"

The guard jerked in shock. "Wha—!? No way, that's against every protocol in the—!

I grabbed his collar and jabbed my finger in the noise's general direction. "That's a bazooka made sentient via a Zoan Devil Fruit with enough firepower to blow us all to kingdom come, especially in this tight a confine! I've already put my life on the line once for this kingdom, now stop wasting time and take me there already!"

The guard debated with himself for a moment before nodding firmly and starting down a corridor, gesturing for me to follow him.

We made swift progress through the halls, ignoring the renewed jeers and catcalls being tossed out by the prisoners. At the same time, the barking grew even more frantic and nearer still.

Eventually, we rounded a corner and managed to catch sight of what all the commotion was: just as I'd thought, there was Lassoo, relatively hale and healthy if not for the burns and scratches he was covered in, snarling and snapping at the trio of guards that had penned him into a corner with their spears, while a fourth stood by with what looked to be a pair of Sea Prism Stone handcuffs. Thankfully, instead of his techno-organic hybrid form, the weapon was fully flesh and bone; granted, he was the size of a freaking mastiff and could easily have made a chew toy out of me, but that was better than getting blasted somewhere where the blast would be funneled and concentrated.

Lassoo growled and took a bite at one of the guards that got too close—

"WATCH IT!"

"YIPE!"

Before retreating with a pained whimper as one of the guards nicked him with his spear.

"Damn mutt…" the cuff-holding guard growled darkly.

"Hey!" I caught the man's attention as I ran up to them, keeping a wary eye on Lassoo as I went. "What's going on here? How come he isn't in a cell?"

"He's been in our evidence locker for the past three days. We were just transporting him outside to a squad the Marines sent to pick him up when he suddenly changed back and tried to rip my head off!"

"Personally, I say we just stick the mongrel and be done with it," one of the gruffer guards grunted, jabbing his spear forwards menacingly. "Damn thing tried to help kill us all, it's only right we return the favor!"
Lassoo’s demeanor shifted visibly at that statement, his shoulders hunching up and a keening noise coming from his muzzle as he tried to retreat and press himself into the corner.

Oh, hell, no. As a previous dog owner before my family’s housing situation dictated otherwise, that was not alright. "HEY!" I barked, harshly slapping the guard’s shoulder. "Enough! The rebellion is over and done with! They are going to prison, if not Impel Down itself, there is no reason to re-escalate! Now stand the hell down!"

"But—!"

"You can stand down on your own or I can get Vivi down here to put you in a cell with them," I snarled, jabbing my thumb at Soundbite. "Hell, I'll even start a betting pool on how many seconds you last. Five to one odds on half a minute, any takers?"

The guards glanced nervously at each other before complying, backing up a few feet from the Zoan but not raising their spears. That was fair, Lassoo was still damn big. The one holding the handcuffs proffered them to me. "Here, you'll want these."

I glanced down at the handcuffs with a cocked eyebrow before smiling and taking them. "Yeah, you're right, I do! Do you happen to have the keys too?" He handed them over and I promptly slid them both into my belt. "Perfect! Now, if you'd be so kind as to run up to the kitchens and bring a steak down here?"

The guard promptly reeled in shock. "Buh—wah?!"

My gaze flattened as I pointed a finger at Lassoo. "I don't know the exact details on how object-Zoans work, but the fact is that he hasn't eaten anything in three days. So, as I said: steak, T-bone, large, doesn't matter how it's cooked. Hell, you could run a cow down here and I'd still be happy." I waited for a moment before shooting a scowl at the man. "Today, soldier!"

"Y-yes sir!" the soldier yelped, hastily scrambling off down the corridor.

I waited until the man was out of sight before turning my attention back to Lassoo. The dog-gun was eyeing me cautiously as he stayed huddled in the corner, but his hackles hadn't dropped even a bit.

I held my hand out calmly as I took tentative steps towards the mega-sized dachshund, calling to mind all of the experience I had gained from dealing with my pet mutt (literal mutt, no idea what his breed was) Tony. I just had to stay calm—

"RRRR!" Lassoo growled, taking a vicious snap at me that caused me to jerk back slightly.

Alright, granted, I'd known Tony since he was a puppy, he didn't outweigh me thrice over and he most certainly didn't harbor a grudge on account of how two of my crewmates had kicked his ass, but at least I had a home field advantage.

"Little help here?" I muttered to Soundbite. The snail shook his head, still queasy from his torture session; honestly, the backlash Vogon poetry had on his throat was as much the reason for his silence the past few days as his sulking. We both agreed it was totally worth it, though… right up until it made my job at calming the vicious assassin-dog before me ten times harder. Damn it…

I took a calming breath as I readied myself. Alright, let's try this again. "Hey, hey now, no need for that…" I said softly as I held my hand out towards him, slowly inching forwards. I paused as Lassoo snarled anew, but I didn't retreat again. "I realized you're pissed, you've got every reason to be and I'm sorry for that, but it's alright now, it's alright. The war's over, you don't need to fight anymore, alright?" Lassoo made a minor lunge forwards and it was only my steeled nerves that kept me from
"It's alright, it's alright…" I repeated calmly, slowly reaching over him. "I'm not going to hurt you, I'm just…" I trailed off as I slowly lowered my hand towards Lassoo's head, truly grateful for the fact that I'd decided to leave my armor back in the crew's room.

Lassoo shrunk away from my touch initially, but after a moment he slowly raised his head up and met my fingers. I started slowly scratching his scalp, staying on top of his head at first. Only when he relaxed ever so slightly did I move my hand to the side, getting him just behind his ear. After a few seconds, Lassoo relaxed even further, leaning into my hand with a satisfied chuff.

"Theeeere we go," I crooned as I slowly knelt down and brought my other hand up, starting to scratch beneath his chin. From there, I slowly moved along down along his neck to his back. Once I started moving down to his side, he dropped to the floor and rolled over, giving me easy access to his stomach. "Yeeeeaaaaah, you're a good boy, aren't you? Whosa good boy? Whosa good boy? You are, yes, you are!

"Dog owners," Soundbite wheezed with a snicker.

"Kiss my ass~" I singsonged in the same babyish tone of voice.

"Uh, 'scuse me?"

I fought to keep from flinching as Lassoo tensed up beneath me, a growl rumbling out of his chest. Damn it, of all the times for the bastard to get back, now was the moment he chose!?

I glanced back at the newly returned guard and eyed the steak-platter he was holding before giving him a flat stare as a thought came to me. "If I have Soundbite take a bite of that thing, is he gonna keel over?" I asked him in a deadpan tone.

The guard's demeanor instantly stiffened, and I redoubled my cold glare.

Silence reigned for a moment before the guard smiled nervously and jabbed his thumb over his shoulder. "So, I'm, ah… just gonna go get a new one?"

"Yeah, I'd suggest you do that fast," I concurred icily before stabbing my finger down at Lassoo. "Before I let him eat you instead."

A menacing canine growl promptly sent the guard scrambling down the corridor as fast as his feet could carry him.

"And make sure Sanji doesn't catch you throwing that thing away, otherwise he will grill you up!" I called after him before going back to my ministrations on Lassoo. "He was a big fat dumbass, wasn't he? Wasn't he? Not like you, you're a good boy! Yes, you are, yes, you are!"

Lassoo chuffed and wiggled happily beneath me, his tail thumping against the stone.

It was all going quite well, when suddenly, without any warning—

"Laaaaaaa-ssoooooooono~"

A very deep, very familiar and ridiculously sluggish voice echoed throughout the hall. The dachshund's ears perked up, and before I or any of the guards could react he quickly flipped to his paws and darted past me, hip-checking a guard out of the way as he galloped around a nearby corner. With no small amount of trepidation I gave chase, the guards hot on my heels.
Thankfully, depending on how you looked at things, Lassoo hadn't gone far. He'd stopped a few feet in front of us, balancing on his hind legs as he begged against the bars of a cell. A cell that held—!

I snapped my hand out and grabbed the collar of the nearest guard I could reach, dragging him close so that I could shove my face in his. "Not only did you keep both members of an assassin team in the same cell, but you took their Zoan weapon through a corridor that was only a few feet away from them!?" I demanded incredulously.

"The gun is part dog! No wonder he suddenly changed, he smelled these two! Good God, where did Cobra hire you people, the Baroque Works reject line?!!" I started to shake the hapless—and in my opinion, almost definitely witless—guard. "I mean, my God, man, this is basic guard shit! Separate the damn prisoners!"

She was still a gun, so we thought—!" the guard hedged uncomfortably.

"And put the bigger one in Sea Prism Stone!" I shoved the handcuffs in my belt at him. Damn it, there went my anti-Devil Fruit contingency, but desperate times! "He can swing a four-ton bat like it's four pounds, I do not trust regular old iron to hold him! What is wrong with you morons!?"

"Hahahaha! Well, this ain't exactly Impel Down they got goin' here, brat!" Miss Merry Christmas barked, shaking back and forth in the Sea Prism Stone chains that she was wrapped up in. At least the Marines had done something right.

"And I wouldn't worry your head off if I were you; while Mr. 4's got the strength to get outta here, he sure ain't got the brains, that's for sure! Speaking of which…” Christmas started shifting back and forth in her chains for a moment, dropping her smirk into a scowl and turning to bark at the goliath next to her. "Hey, moron! My back's killing me here! Gimme a massage! Now, moron, now now!"

Mr. 4 sloooowly looked down at her before nodding with just as much speed. "Ooooo-kaaay," he droned. With a single jerk, the large man broke his cuffs like wet cardboard and reached towards his partner.

I promptly stuck my arm out, stopping one of the guards from going towards the cell. "Don't. 4's too moronic to concentrate on more than one thing at a time. Interrupt him and we'll be dealing with a real-life Goliath. With any luck, he won't have the presence of mind to stop you from cuffing him once he's done."

I cast a glance at Lassoo, who hadn't moved from his position against the bars. Still full beast point, thankfully. With any luck he'd stay that way too. Otherwise… I didn't want to think about it.

"Oh, quit your bellyaching, you stupid little brat!" Merry Christmas barked from where she was lying facedown… inasmuch as her chains would allow. "If we were gonna have Lassoo blast us out of here, he'd already be in his hybrid form by now! And besides, we wouldn't have him shoot in here! That'd just be stupid, it'd kill even us!"

"You're saying that you're above using suicide attacks?" I asked in disbelief.

"Certainly not for Crocodile, that's for sure!" the mole-woman snorted. "Before he tried blowing us straight to hell with that bomb of his?" She shrugged slightly. "Maybe, the pay was admittedly damn good. But after we saw how big that blast was, and he didn't warn us? No chance in hell! That sad excuse for a Warlord deserves every second he gets in Impel Down!"

"Yeah, no kidding." I muttered to myself before raising my voice. "So, here's another question for
you: if you could have had Mr. 4 break out at any time these past two days, why haven't you already gotten out of here?"

"Well, you see, brat—!" CRACK! "YEOW! MORE TO THE LEFT, MORON! NO, MY LEFT, NOT YOUR LEFT, MINE!" CRICK! "Ah, that's better. Anyways, the reason why is that your long-nosed friend and your furry friend blew us straight to hell and back. We might have given them a few hard knocks, but we got pretty damn fucked up ourselves! If we tried to break out, especially with me wearing these—" she shook her arms and showed off her cuffs, "then we'd be turned into sieves in seconds. Rule number one of being a professional mercenary-assassin, brat: knowing when to fold them!"

"IIIIII throooouought thaaaat waaaawaas fiiiiiiif—?"

"That's what I said then, and this is what I'm saying now, moron! The rules are changing all the time! Try and keep up, you moron, keep up!"

"Do you seriously expect him to?" I asked curiously.

"No, but it helps cool down my raging migraines…" Merry Christmas growled in aggravation. She was silent for a moment before glancing up at me, a curious glint in her cracked sunglasses. "So, tell me brat. What was that all about?" She scowled at my confused look. "Lassoo, ya dumb brat, Lassoo! Why'd you stick up for him like that? Not that I ain't grateful, the dumb mutt's grown on me, kind of like a fungus, but still! Like you said, he helped try and burn this country to the ground! So, why'd you help him, huh?"

I blinked in surprise before shrugging casually. "Well… hell, why not? I had a dog too, once, back before I started on this crazy journey my crew's on, and, well…" I reached up and scratched Lassoo's ears, which earned me a pleased chuff. "I realize that it's not quite as simple as this, what with some animals being smarter than others—present company not withstanding, of course." I smirked as Soundbite chomped down on my shoulder. "But personally, I believe that there aren't really any actually bad animals. When domestication is involved, at least. Just… bad owners, you know?"

"Gotta catch 'em ALL?" Soundbite rasp-wheezed in my ear.

"Hey, if the shoe fits," I muttered back.

Miss Merry Christmas stared at me with an unreadable expression. Finally, she broke the look and sat up as Mr. 4 stood back, cracking her neck slightly. "Well, not that it hasn't been great talking with one of the idiot brats who ruined our chance at the payday of the century—!"

"Hey, you're the one who tried to claim that Luffy was dead without actually seeing a body," I promptly shot back. "So, who, pray tell, is the idiot here?"

Christmas's expression dropped into her trademark scowl. "Alright, brat, just get the hell out of—!"

"Waaaaaiiiitt."

Both Christmas and I looked in surprise at Mr. 4, who had an uncharacteristically serious look on his face…or at least, his face was forming into what looked like an uncharacteristically serious look. His baby face made it a bit hard to tell.

"Huh!?!" Christmas barked, voicing what we were all thinking. "Wait?! Why do you want him to wait, moron?! What's there to wait for, we're all done here! Do you need us to repeat it all for you, moron, because I won't do it again, you hear me!? I won't—!"
"Yooouuuu liiiiiike hiiiiiim?" Mr. 4 droned out, interrupting Christmas as he looked at Lassoo and pointed at me. The dog-gun blinked and tilted his head in confusion as he looked back at me before barking eagerly and nodding as his tail wagged some. Mr. 4 slowly tilted his head to the side as he seemed to ponder something. Seriously, slow he might have been, but that made for a helluva poker face. Fortunately for all of us, it didn't take long before he looked back up at me.

"Yooouuu taaaaake caaaaare ooooof Laaaaassoooooo." Silence… then—

"WHAT!?"

"YI—HUH!?!" Lassoo blinked as his yelp morphed into legible words. "What the—?"

"I'm back and better than ever!" Soundbite whooped with a blare of victorious fanfare.


"NYEH!"

"ARE YOU COMPLETELY OUT OF YOUR MIND, YOU MORON!?!" Merry Christmas suddenly howled at the top of her lungs, jerking at 4 as though to rip his head off. "I MEAN, SERIOUSLY!?! I REALIZE THAT THAT WAS THE PLAN THE WHOLE TIME, BUT I THOUGHT WE'D GIVE HIM TO SOMEBODY WHO WAS ACTUALLY HALFWAY DECENT! THIS STUPID BRAT HELPED STOP US AND SAVE THIS STUPID KINGDOM, STUPID!"

"Eeeexaaaaactlyyyyy," Mr. 4 said, folding his arms and nodding.

Christmas froze as she silently gaped at 4 before slamming her jaws shut with a growl. "Sometimes, I really wonder just how moronic you actually are…" she ground out furiously, a vein pulsing on her forehead.

The corners of 4's lips slowly tilted upwards.

"Uh, 'scuse me?!" I piped up, waving my arms frantically. "Seriously confused pirate here, wanting to know what the hell is going on! What do you mean, I take care of Lassoo!? He's your gun-dog!"

"Dog-gun," Christmas corrected with a huff. "You know, like mole-woman or rubber-man? It's how it's done. And anyways, not anymore. The big moron's spoken and apparently I don't have any ground to stand on anymore. I'd hoped to get a good price out of this, but I guess this is just how the cookie crumbles."

"H-huh?!" Lassoo yelped, looking between his owners with mixed confusion and horror. "Y-you were gonna sell me? But why!? I-I was a good dog, I listened to you, I—!?

"That's exactly why we're shoving you off, you dumb mutt!" Christmas spat. "You've been a good weapon for the past few years, real reliable, but where we're going, you can't come! And whether you like it or not, we like you too much to put you through it!"

"Huh?" Lassoo blinked. "What're ya—?"

"Laaaaassoooooo," 4 interrupted slowly. "Weeeeee'reeeee reeeeeetiiiiiriiiiiiing."

"HUH?!" Lassoo barked.
"Retiring, mutt!" Christmas reiterated in exasperation. "Getting out of the game, hanging up the knives, tossing in the towel, any other euphemisms you can think for it, it applies! Once we break out of here—and we will break out sooner or later, you can count on it—4 and I are getting the hell out of the mercenary business, once and for all! We're getting too old, just too damn old. We wanted to buff the nest-egg we have stashed across a few islands with one final payday, but that plan was blown to hell!" She sent an especially acrid glare my way.

I met it head-on with a snort. "Screw you, mole-woman, if our crew hadn't stopped Crocodile, you two would have lost a goodly chunk of your body weight the hard way. Though let's be honest." I grinned nastily. "That would have been an improvement in your case, huh?"

I swear I saw a red aura around her for a second before she forced herself to look back at Lassoo, though her tone was noticeably more irritated. "Anyways, like I told the brat earlier, you're a gun that's part dog, not the other way around; if you were a dachshund that'd eaten a weapon-based Fruit —!

"Donquixote famiglia member's got that one, no chance of that happening in this lifetime," I piped up helpfully.

"But the fact is that you're not," Christmas finished with a snort, pointedly ignoring me. "You're a weapon, Lassoo, one of the strongest guns to come out of the 'Wild' West Blue in decades, and that's saying something. You might have a mind and will of your own, Lassoo, but our base natures never stop affecting us; you're a weapon, Lassoo, always have been, always will be. You can stop it for a moment, you can pause it, but that bloodlust you feel, that rush whenever you're blasting enemies? That's never going away. You were made for the battlefield, and you couldn't leave it or make it leave you if you tried. You're better off going with someone that can help you make the most of both parts of you. Someone who's actually going to use you…" She trailed off for a moment before sighing uncomfortably. "Someone who's not us. Sorry, mutt. Wish it were later than sooner and I wish it were more comfortable, but this is the end of the line for us. Got it?"

The guards looked as shocked as I felt at the whole thing. Heck, even Soundbite seemed surprised. Merry Christmas stayed morose for a second longer before snapping her head up and glaring at me. "So! You're taking care of Lassoo now whether I like it or not. That means you feed him, pet him, clean him, maintain him, the works. I stowed his instruction manual in a compartment on him because 4 couldn't hold onto it if he tried and there was no way in hell I was going to lug it around if I could help it. It has his specs and maintenance directions and everything. Follow it to the letter. And learn how to use him; if there's one thing more dangerous than a loaded weapon, it's a dumb brat like you having a loaded weapon and not knowing how to use it. Other than that, uh…"

"Taaaanaake caaaaare oooooof Laaaassoooo…" Mr. 4 droned slowly.

SLAM!

"GRGHK!" I choked out, scrabbling at the pneumatic freaking clamp that had closed around my throat. Fucking hell, did this jackass know Shave or something because I swear that wasn't movement that was fucking teleportation and the bars were bending like butter beneath his other hand ohfuckfuckfuck!

"Or else," the goliath growled murderously.

The grip on my windpipe lessened just enough for me to both suck down some air to speak with and get an idea. "Okay okay okay," I blurted out hastily. "I'll take Lassoo, I'll take good care of him, I swear, but you have to do one thing first, one thing!"
"What, what the hell is it!?" Christmas barked impatiently.

I reached behind me and fumbled around blindly for a second before grinning and yanking the seastone cuffs out of one of the guard's hands and holding them up for 4 to see. "Put. These. On."

4 blinked slowly as he stared at the cuffs before thankfully letting me go, allowing me to gasp in relief, before proffering his wrists through the bars. "Oooookaaaaay."

"Damn cheeky brat…" Miss Merry Christmas spat acridly.

Lassoo looked on for a few moments before turning literal puppydog eyes on the guards. "Can ya open the door so I can say g'bye?" he whined.

I gave him a deadpan look as I clicked the cuffs around 4's wrists, doing my best not to flinch when he pulled them back through the bars with little to no resistance. "I realize that these dumbasses radiate stupidity—"

"HEY!"

"No seastone whatsoever on the Zoan weapon or the quarter-Giant, plus, to reiterate, putting them together, and you seriously think you have room to object!?" I demanded incredulously. I took solace in their chastised expressions before looking back at Lassoo. "Anyways, literally dogged loyalty is all well and good, but opening their cell for even a moment? Yeah, hell to the no." I met the puppydog eyes head-on with all the unmoving frigidity of a glacier. "Soundbite already played that card, chewed it up and spit it out. That door's not opening."

I really had to fight from flinching when he flipped to baring his teeth and snarling viciously. His musculature started to shift beneath his fur—

"Lassoo."

When he suddenly flinched on account of a harsh voice lashing out at him. He slowly turned his eyes towards the cell, where 4 was glaring coldly at him.

The glare held up for a moment longer before he softened into a smile. "Beeeooood, Laaaassoooooo. Allllriiiight?"

Lassoo whimpered as he hung his head before slowly nodding in agreement. "O-okay…" He looked up sadly and waved his paw. "G'bye, Master. It was fun."

Mr. 4 nodded slowly as he waved one of his hands. "Byyyeee-byyyyeee, Laaaassoooonoooo." Miss Merry Christmas pursed her lips sourly for a moment before hanging her head with a sigh herself. "Goodbye, Lassoo."

Lassoo stared at them for a moment longer before looking up at me, fear and trepidation obvious beneath the neutral expression he was trying to put on.

I smiled kindly as I knelt down and held my hand out to him. "Before it starts, let's get one thing straight: none of that 'master' business. My friends call me Cross. Welcome to the Straw Hat Pirates, Lassoo. I'm glad to have you, and there isn't a doubt in my mind that the others will be too. Though," I smirked as I jerked my thumb at Soundbite. "Fair warning, he'll prolly blast you with a dog whistle once or twice."

"I'm an insufferable JACKASS!" Soundbite proclaimed, sounding way too proud of that statement.
Lassoo stared at my hand hesitantly for a moment longer… before lolling his tongue out and grinning as he gave me his paw. "Call me Lassoo, and same here."

I nodded and smiled as I stood up and clapped my hands. "Well! Come on, then, let's go and get some dinner!"

As we followed the guards out of the dungeon, we were met with a guard… carrying a steak platter.

"Uh, s-should I just put this down here or—?"

"Don't know, don't care, just don't let it go to waste or our cook's liable to kill ya," I drawled as I walked around the frozen guard.

"Hey, now," a sultry voice drawled from a nearby cell. "If none of you are going to have that food, maybe I could have a bite?"

"Fuck off, acupuncture bitch," I shot back without a glance.

"Worth a shot," Miss Doublefinger shrugged indifferently.

No further interruptions surfaced as I made my way back up into the palace with our new companion. A few more minutes, and I met the majority of the crew outside the dining room. I briefly considered how to succinctly and professionally explain the current turn of events… before plastering a grin on my face and raising my fingers into a salute.

"Hey, guys, guess what? I got a dog!"

Nobody knew what to think for the first few seconds, staring curiously at the oversized dachshund, up until Lassoo stated his name, to which Usopp reacted… pretty much exactly as you'd expect.

"THE MR. 4 TEAM'S BAZOOKA-DOG?! ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?!"

I pondered how to react before widening my grin into a shit-eating one. "Nope. Met 4 and Merry Christmas on the way back from meeting with the Unluckies—"

"SWEET, SWEET REVENGE, baby!" Soundbite crowed.

"And they didn't want their poor doggy to share their fate, and since I've got experience with dogs and am a decent guy in general, they said I could keep him, as long as I take good care of him. Actually, I think I'll need your mechanical expertise to help with that, Usopp; you're the best guy I know with gadgets, after all, and you could really show off by upgrading Lassoo."

Puffing up his ego seemed to work for a few seconds before he forced his frown back in place… though it was more worried than hostile. "Can we trust him? We're talking about a former Baroque Works agent here."

"Hey, my master and his friend were good to me, and I showed my loyalty for it!" Lassoo sniffed indignantly. "Cross was good to me too, so I'll be showing him and his friends loyalty. It's that easy."

Usopp scrutinized Lassoo suspiciously for a moment. "Alright… in that case…" He crouched down and held his hand out. "Shake."

Lassoo stared at Usopp for a moment before bringing his paw up and placing it in the sniper's palm. "Happy?"

Usopp held the paw for a moment longer before standing up and turning around, his head bowed
and his chin cupped contemplatively. "Well, it will take a while for us to trust you completely, but for the moment, I think that—!"

CHOMP!

Everything froze as Lassoo's jaws crunched down squarely on Usopp's ass, gnawing on as much flesh as he could get his fangs on. The silence lasted for all of one second before Soundbite began laughing his ass off. And, not entirely surprisingly, Luffy joined him.

"Cross?" Nami growled out as she pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Lassoo?" I asked with much the same tone and position.

"'Dish bastard mocked my species as soon as he saw me, slammed my old master into me with a hammer, and caused me to blow myself up!' Lassoo growled out viciously. "I may be loyal to you guys now, but I deserve this much for payback!"

I stared at him contemplatively for a moment before shrugging neutrally. "To be fair, Usopp, you did make him try and blow himself up."

"HE WAS TRYING TO KILL ME!" the sniper howled, trying to yank himself out of the dog-gun's jaws.

"And Vivi was trying to kill Laboon when we first met her, but you don't see me raising a big fuss over that, do you?"

"Mister Jeremiah."

I shivered slightly at the Princess' frigid tone before spreading my arms helplessly. "Come on, Vivi, they offered out of the blue and you don't leave any options on the table when they're available. Plus, he was originally a gun. Guns don't kill people, people kill people!"

"He has a will of his own," Vivi retorted darkly.

"He's a dog, dogs are loyal to their owners! Come on, who do you blame for a dog being mean, huh? The dog or his owners?"

Vivi's expression remained cold for a few moments longer before she finally relented and slapped a palm to her face. "Just… don't let him back on Alabastan soil once he leaves it, alright?"

"I've got a better question!" Usopp snapped. "Why aren't you doing this to Chopper?! He also blew you up, and threw sand in your nose!"

"Right. So, experimental adrenaline serum 23B apparently causes hallucinations. Good to know, good to know."

All present turned to the doorway, where a drowsy-looking Chopper was scribbling something on a notepad, Zoro alongside him with a well-hidden look of concern on his face. Lassoo darted his eyes over to the other Zoan, but I held out a hand.

"Bite him if you have to, but wait until he's not the size of a stuffed animal, alright?"

The dachshund considered that before shrugging. "Fair enough, but don't make me wait too long."

"That depends entirely on him. On that note…” My gaze hardened again. "Let him go." I waited for a second before crossing my arms firmly. "Now, or Soundbite breaks out the whistle on my orders."
Lassoo promptly let go with a disappointed chuff. "Fiiiine…"

Nami sent a half-pleading look at Luffy. "Captain?"

Luffy tilted his head slightly as he stared at Lassoo before looking at Usopp. "You said that he's a
dog who can turn into a gun, right?"

Usopp nodded frantically, but before he could say anything I piped up. "Actually, he's a dog-gun
rather than a gun-dog; he ate the Dachshund model of the Mutt-Mutt Fruit."

And just like that, Luffy had stars in his eyes. "You mean he's a gun that can turn into a dog!? Cool!"

Nami pinned me with a betrayed look, flinging her arms out in a gesture that just screamed 'WTF'. I
put on a bemused expression and shrugged heavily. "Look, I'm playing this by ear, alright? After all,
our crew is gonna—! …um…"

I trailed off uncomfortably as I glanced at Luffy. "Well, suffice to say that we'll make allies stranger
and more hostile than this in the future, and… the pros outweighed the cons," I explained carefully,
still looking at our captain before returning my attention to Nami. "In the end, there really aren't any
downsides to all of this and, well…" I tilted my head slightly. "Do… you really have any grounds to
stand on when talking about someone switching sides? No offense, but really now."

Nami's expression darkened, and she glanced over at Lassoo, sizing him up. In the end, she slouched
forward with a hand pressed to her temple. "Fine, you're the expert on character here. But if I put one
foot in dog-doo, he and you are going over."

"Don't worry, I know to hang it over the edge when I go," Lassoo reassured her. "It's a skill all dogs
learn real fast on the seas. It's either that or get slated as emergency rations."

Nami looked like she could have done without that information, but nodded nonetheless. Sanji
seemed to have no objections, though I could tell by the way he was puffing on his cigarette that he
wasn't letting his guard down just yet. Usopp, despite the pain he was in, had yet to actually say
anything, and Luffy…well, that went without saying. I looked back at the remaining crewmates in
the doorway. Chopper still seemed to be slightly out of it, and Zoro…

I swear, if he didn't have Conqueror's Haki, then the glare he was pinning Lassoo with was close
enough to fool anyone on this side of the Red Line who didn't know any better. And by the way
Lassoo folded almost instantly and hunched in on himself, whimpering and cowering pathetically, if
I had to guess I'd say that he either didn't know any better or he just didn't give a damn. After a few
seconds, the swordsman nodded and looked at me, thankfully dropping the glare in the process.

"Maybe some heavy artillery will give you half a chance in sparring."

I opened my mouth to give an indignant retort, but closed it as I considered the statement. "…you're
lying through your teeth, aren't you?"

Zoro smirked as he strode past me. "You guessed it. Now, come on, let's get something to eat, I'm
hungry!"

"Alright! …wrong way."

"Gah, sonnuva—!"

"ENOUGH TALK!" Luffy abruptly whooped. "COME ON! LET'S EAT!"
"Wrong way, Captain. Also the wrong way. No, still the wrong way." Sighing, I pointed to the door out of the room. "That way."

"Aaaaactually..." Vivi took hold of my wrist and turned my arm to the left.

I stood silent for a moment before giving her a flat look. "Your home is stupidly expansive."

"DON'T CHANGE the subject!" Soundbite chortled.

"Shishishi, you're an idiot, Cross!"

"LIKE YOU HAVE ANY ROOM TO SPEAK!?"

"Hweehweehweehwee!" Lassoo squeaked.

"... Okay, the Goofy voice I can take, but Muttley's laugh!?"

"HOHOHOHOHEEHEEHEEHAAAHAHA!

"Good grief..." I groaned, slapping my hand to my face.

Honestly now, considering how my crew acted in a public setting, I could only imagine how dinner was going to turn out.

-0-

My eye twitched steadily as I watched a piece of meat disappear from my plate moments before the tines of my fork could actually touch it.

I really, really do not know what the hell I was expecting.

"Luuuuffyy..." I snarled out darkly. Moving fast, I snatched up my knife in a reverse grip and stabbed it into the wood where Luffy's hand was once, twice, three times in a row. All to no avail, on account of how I still barely missed stabbing the dead meat, both raw and cooked. Finally getting fed up, I glanced around and waved one of the nearby serving girl over. "Pardon me, miss," I hissed with forced politeness. "But have you ever heard of Ghost Peppers before?"

I grinned as the blood drained from the already nauseated woman's face. "Y-you mean the hottest, spiciest peppers this side of the Red Line?"

I nodded in confirmation. "That's the one! Could you kindly ask Terracotta to stuff a niice big shank of meat with them, then bring it here?"

The serving girl opened her mouth to say something... then glanced over to where Vivi was laughing, reconsidered, and leaned in with a devious grin. "Actually, sir, if I might make a suggestion?"

I cocked an eyebrow in curious interest. "Oh?"

"While Ghost Peppers are infamous and indeed the spiciest peppers on this side of the Red Line, might I instead recommend the West Blue Illsian Reaper? They're a crossbreed of Ghost Peppers and Habanero Peppers, and are fifty percent spicier than Ghost Peppers; I believe they're considered to be the hottest peppers in the world."

I whipped my hand to my mouth with a theatrical gasp of horror. "You're wicked!" I then grinned from ear to ear. "About a dozen or so should do the trick."
"Of course, sir," she curtsied before looking over at Lassoo. "And you?"

"Hm?" Lassoo looked up from the bowl of mashed potatoes he'd been burying his muzzle in, the meal dripping from lips.

"Never mind, then."

"Okay!" And with that, he reburied himself.

"Is anyone else in need of anything?"

"SALAD, salad!" Soundbite called from the empty bowl he'd worked his way into. "AND NO VINEGAR!"

"And don't put your fingers too close while serving it," I added helpfully.

"Also, can we get some smelling salts over here, please?" Sanji called out uncomfortably, lightly poking at Chopper's prone form. "I think our doctor is drowning in his soup."

"R-right away, sir!" the serving girl said, nodding hastily as she raced off to the kitchens.

Thankfully for my appetite, it didn't take the girl long, and soon enough she was back with several companions, carrying the requested platters.

Mine in particular was notably mouth-watering, and I'd have dug in myself if I weren't fully aware of the fact that doing so would mean death by oral immolation.

Soundbite was just as eager, snickering and cackling in his bowl. The second the salad was dumped in, the greens immediately started vanishing at blinding speed, accompanied by the sound of mechanical shredding.

I smirked as I fingered my fork, and as I did so I noticed Usopp grinning with just as much malice over his food. I waved and got his attention, pointing down at my food and then holding up 3 fingers. The sniper promptly replied with a snicker and a thumbs up.

I then held my fork up over my plate with an eager-ish grin. "Oh, boy, this is gonna be good!" I crowed as genuinely as I could manage.

As predicted, the meat almost instantly disappeared from my plate, and judging by Usopp's shit-eating grin and his own empty plate, I wasn't the only one who'd been robbed.

Thankfully, our comeuppance would be delivered in three, two, one…

"HOOOOOGO!

Usopp and I cackled as the ambient temperature in the room suddenly spiked, accompanied closely by the whoosh of flames.

"Oh, yeah, chalk one up for strategy and deviousness!" I cackled, grinning eagerly as I reached out to stab a particularly juicy-looking leg of poultry.

My demeanor promptly flipped as the meat disappeared. Again. "Seriously!? Isn't your tongue burnt to hell and back!?"

"Mmyeah, eating hurths a lot!"
"THEN WHY ARE YOU STILL DOING IT, DUMBASS!?" Nami demanded incredulously, cracking her fist over Luffy's skull.

My eye twitched furiously as food continued to disappear at a blinding rate. "Alright, that's it! Hey, Lassoo!"

The dachshund-hybrid popped his head up curiously.

"Care to demonstrate how good you are at following orders?" I jabbed my finger at Luffy. "Sic him, boy."

Lassoo grinned eagerly before leaping up onto the table and lunging at Luffy's hand the second he grabbed another piece of meat. The Zoan-user's grin widened by several fangs for a second before dying as he started to skid across the table.

"Oh, no, you don't!" I yelped, wrapping my arms around Lassoo's midsection.

In hindsight, I realize just what a stupid stupid stupid move it was, trying to get into a battle of strength with a person whose whole schtick was being stupid strong. But at that exact moment, I only realized it after I'd been dragged out of my seat and across the table, ruining my second favorite jacket and causing everyone else to start laughing.

I took a moment to let the world stop spinning before slowly righting myself and levelling a scathing glare at my captain. "Luuuffyyyy..." I growled out viciously. "I'm about to turn you into freaking Greninja. And in the name of that," I jabbed my finger at him. "LASSOO, MAUL!"

"BARK BARK BARK!" Lassoo... barked, scrambling to his paws and leaping at Luffy. The two promptly fell into a nigh cartoonish ball of violence, dust cloud and all. Hell, I wouldn't have been surprised if a star or spiral or two had dropped out of the brawl in the process. Soundbite providing the necessary ambiance didn't hurt either.

"Mmmrgh..." I looked over my shoulder as Chopper blinked awake in his seat, rubbing his eyes blearily. "This is why I swore off all-nighters five years ago. And I thought that Doctorine getting mad at me for falling asleep in the middle of one of her surprise tests was bad enough..." He looked towards the source of the noise filling the room and promptly shook fully awake in terror, shifting into his Heavy Point defensively. "L-L-LASSOO!"

The hound promptly paused his fight and looked over his shoulder. Seeing that Chopper was now of the appropriate size, his attentiveness towards Luffy abruptly ended in favor of baring his teeth at the human-reindeer with a growl.

"Don't worry, Chopper, the good news is that he's been placed firmly on our side," I reassured the doctor. "The bad news, on the other hand, well..." I grinned sheepishly. "He's... got something of a grudge against you. So... yeah, I'd suggest you run... like, now. And before you say anything!" I cut his attempted protest off with a raised finger. "In all fairness, you did blow him up."

"AFTER HE DID THE SAME TO ME! I WAS CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF A FUCKING CLOUD OF HIS DAMN BASEBALL BOMBS!" Chopper retorted fearfully.

"Yeah, but you played on his prevalent condition to do it," I countered, shrugging. "Look, just let him get his literal pound of flesh and you'll both be even. Okay?"

"Uhh..." Chopper eyed Lassoo warily for a moment. Finally, however, his animal instincts took priority as he turned tail and ran away. "YOU'LL NEVER TAKE ME ALIVE!"
"RUFF RUFF RUFF!" Lassoo bayed fiercely, promptly giving chase.

"I thought you were translating?" I queried back at Soundbite.

"THERE'S not—URP!—not always SOMETHING to TRANSLATE, YA KNOW!"

I shrugged in response, then looked back at Luffy, who was struggling to get up and, from the angry look in his eyes, chase after Lassoo. "GET BACK HERE!" Moments later, he proved me right as he leapt to his feet. But first...

"GRAA-GYERK!" Luffy gagged as he ran mouth-first into my outstretched hand.

He wasn't getting away without me making good on my vow.

Eurgh, really wish I'd had my armor for that bit, but hey, at least I'd managed to do it!

I cackled as Luffy staggered away, grasping and fumbling at the tangled muscle wrapped twice around his head and trailing behind him like a scarf, utterly obscuring his mouth. "Can I make the obvious tongue-tied joke, or would that be too cheesy?"

"If it had just been a simple knot, you'd probably be slapped at least once. But that? Make all the bad jokes you want, that was gold!" Usopp cackled as he nearly toppled out of his seat in his rolling laughter. "Plus, we can eat in peace now!"

Cobra cocked an eyebrow in amusement as he watched Lassoo chase Chopper around the table. "This is what you count as peaceful?"

"HA! Are you kidding?" I scoffed as I righted Luffy's chair and sat in it, absentmindedly grabbing something off the table. "Let me tell you something, your highest of highnesses!"

"Ah, Cross—!" Nami tried to grab my shoulder but I shrugged her off.

"Don't worry, don't worry, I won't be offensive," I promised her offhandedly as I waved my hand at Cobra. "Now, King Cobra—love the name, by the way—I've been on this crew for... what, three months? No, less than two, that's for sure. But anyways, the fact is, this?" I rolled my finger, indicating the sheer chaos around us. "It's messy, sure, and I sincerely apologize for that, but it's nowhere near our worst yet." I emphasized my point by taking a bite out of whatever it was I'd grabbed.

"No, Cross, don't—!"

"See," I mumbled out around the stuff I was chewing. Damn good taste, excellent texture too. "As it is, the overall sanity of the room supercedes the madness we're generating." I swallowed and grinned cheekily. "And—!"

Gurggrlrrroooowl...

I froze as my stomach suddenly started churning and groaning like a ship in a hurricane.

"I tried to warn you," Nami groaned, thumping her head against the table.

I slowly brought my hand up before my face, confirming my suspicions. Biscuit...

I turned my horrified gaze back to the confused ruler. "And..." I went on slowly. "I do believe that I just broke even. If you'll excuse me?"
"GROOWWWRRRGH!"

"I-NEED-TO-USE-THE-BATHROOM-OO-OOM!"

-o-

"Will you dumbasses stop laughing already!?!" I demanded indignantly. "It's not funny!"

"Oh, I beg to differ!" Chaka chortled as he washed himself down. "Setting a land speed record for exiting the royal dining hall? That's \textit{extremely} funny! I don't think the guards have ever laughed so hard in the entire time I've known them!"

"Go choke on a doggy bone!" I snarled at the guardian before sneering as a thought hit me. "Or better yet, choke on your bone. Doesn't your kind like licking itself down there?"

"HA!" Pell snorted as Chaka twitched furiously and shot a glare at his friend.

"Like you haven't preened yourself at least twice a day since we ate these damn things!?!" he shot back, "even when you're \textit{not} feathered!?!" \textit{That} killed Pell's laughter in a hurry.

"While we're flinging stones abai—ahem, mah-mah-\textit{MAH}!" Igaram recited as he cleared his throat.

"While we're flinging stones against Zoans, might I comment that I've noticed a net increase in cases of lice and fleas since your 'initial transformations'?"

Both Chaka and Pell sank into the waters of the baths with groans of embarrassment while Cobra roared with laughter.

Immediately after dinner and my, \textit{ergh}, 'embarrassing debacle', we had moved on to entering the Palace's \textit{incredibly} impressive baths. I'd been a bit… hesitant, at first, on account of my Western sensibilities, but in the end I managed to stomach my pride and get in anyways. At least the water was pleasant, that was a plus. Thankfully, Lassoo needed washing, so I didn't need to look up without reason.

I did, however, glance up when Sanji asked a very specific question, to which Cobra gave an honest answer.

I raised my eyebrow at the king in disbelief as most of the other guys started to scale the wall. "Seriously? Just like that? Your \textit{daughter} is over that wall."

"Indeed, your highness! What are you thinking!?!" Igaram pleaded desperately.

Cobra gave the Captain of his guard a flat look. "I'm thinking that I have been a single man for nearly two decades and that there is a rather attractive red-headed young lady on the other side of this wall."

Igaram froze as he processed that statement before swallowing heavily and following his king. "G-good point, sire. In fact, I-I shall accompany you. S-so as to ensure that you don't fall, o-of course."

"C'mon, Cross!" Luffy chimed in from where he was starting to climb up the dividing wall. "When you're in a bath like this, it's either to swim or peep, right?!"

"\textit{IT'S NEITHER!! AND WHAT MAKES YOU THINK I'VE EVER BEEN IN A BATH LIKE THIS BEFORE? MY CULTURE HAS DIFFERENT SENSIBILITIES ABOUT PRIVACY!}" I roared indignantly.
"And yet, you're givin' me a bath buck-naked," Lassoo noted before giving himself a hard shake, tossing off the suds I'd managed to lather up on him.

I spat and hacked as I got the suds out of my face before glaring at him. "Yeah, well, when in Rome… Mariejois, Alabasta, wherever. Point is, the name of the game is adapting to the local culture. Now do me a favor and stop moving, will you!"

While I wrestled with the dog, most everyone else climbed the dividing wall. Upon reaching the top, they stared over the edge for a few moments until…

"HAPPINESS PUNCH!"

*SPLURT!*

They fell back in a cascade of nasal blood, splashing into the water.

I observed them flatly for a moment before raising my voice so that I could be heard on the other side. "Either you're sporting something really impressive there, Nami, or these guys are pathetic!"

"WHO ARE YOU CALLING PATHETIC, CROSS!?" Sanji roared as he splashed to his feet.

"You, swirly brow," Zoro rolled his eyes with a scoff, thankfully diverting the cook's attention from me as the two got into a… well, not a brawl, the current conditions didn't allow for that, but a controlled duel at least.

"Why don't you come on up and find out, Cross?" Nami called over in half-sultry, half-faux-saccharine voice.

"Three reasons, Nami!" I shouted back with a roll of my eyes. "Primo, one hundred thousand? Waaaaay too rich for my blood."

"But I'm wo~rth i~t!"

"Oh, I doubt that!" Zoro scoffed.

"HEYO!" Soundbite cackled.

"SCREW YOU TWO!"

"Secundo!" I continued nonetheless. "One of the most important rules in the man code: don't stick it in crazy!"

"EXCUSE ME!?"

"That look you get in your eyes at the thought of a payday is nowhere near sane! You need help, woman!"

"HA! You're saying you're sane!?"

"Fu-u-uck no," I scoffed. "We're all cracked in the head, I'm just sane enough to admit it!"

"Tsk…"

"And tertio—!"

"What language is that?" Soundbite inquired.
"I dunno, Italian? I'm mostly just making it up as I go along," I shrugged. "Anyways, tertio: another, even more important rule in the man code."

"What, only if the carpets match the drapes?" Nami asked, her voice distinctly peeved by this point.

"Close," I countered with a scoff. "Don't stick it in friends."

That got a stunned silence.

"I—wait, what?" Nami stammered, obviously caught flat-footed.

"You heard me!" I reiterated. "I've got too much respect for you, too much emotional investment. I'm not willing to risk it all on something as monumentally stupid as peeking on you, or anything else like it for that matter. That enough of a reason for you?"

Silence reigned for a few moments; most of the guys on this side were looking at me in surprise, Sanji was nodding approvingly, and Zoro was giving me a look of what I presumed and hoped was respect.

Finally, Nami spoke up again. "I… Cross, that is… really a remarkable attitude. Do… do you think you could come up on the wall for a moment?"

"I won't pay for entrapment, woman!" I called up in exasperation.

"JUST GET THE HELL UP THERE, WILL YOU!?"

I winced and dug my finger in my ear. "Alright, alright, geeze! Damn banshee, swear I'm gonna get tinnitus…" I got up and made my way to the wall, eyeing it warily before starting to climb. "If I fall and break my neck, I swear that I'm suing your ass for every Beri you're worth!"

"I'll testify, I'll testify!" Soundbite eagerly chimed in.

Finally, I reached the top of the partition and looked over. "Alright, I'm here, what do you—?"

"HAPPINESS CONSOLATION PRIZE!"

FWISH!

"NAMI!?" Vivi screamed in embarrassment.

My eyes snapped wide in shock as I took in the sight before me, my mind stalling as it tried to come up with a valid response.

"HUBBAH HUBBAH!" Soundbite hooted at the top of his lungs.

That jolted my mouth to say the first thing that came to mind. "Soooo… Vivi… is that natural or are you really dedicated with the dye, or—?"

"JACKASS!"

KLUNK!

"GAGH!" I yelped, clutching my head in pain as a stool cracked off my forehead. Only too late did I realize that I'd been doing it with both hands. "Ohshitshitshit—!"

SPLASH!
"…owie… medic?"

"For the last time, that was not my fault! I was freaking blindsided!" I roared, crossing my arms as I stood my ground in the bedroom the crew had moved to after the scene at the baths.

"But you were still thinking it, and that's bad enough!" Vivi shot back with equal vehemence. "Do you have any idea how inappropriate that is!?!"

"I was curious! Come on, that is not a natural color where I'm from, how the hell was I supposed to know one way or the other except by asking, huh!?!"

"You don't ask about that, ever! I swear, I have never met such a—!

"Girls, girls," Nami calmly interjected as she placed her hands on our shoulders, trying to separate us. "You're both pretty, now do you think you could please knock it the hell off?"

Vivi and I broke our glaring match in favor of snarling at her instead. "You're the cause of this in the first place!" we growled in synch.

Nami shrank back hesitantly in the face of our ire, a twitching smile plastered on her face. "I, ah, just wanted to give Cross a reward for his chivalry, you know? A gift from the goodness of my heart, is that so wrong!?!"

"Even if I did believe you had a heart, I am a confident male who actually respects women! Why the hell would I want that as a freaking reward!?!" I snapped in aggravation.

"Ehh…" Nami looked away nervously. "Whoopsy? Guess it's a good thing I'm not charging you for that, huh?"

"Why the hell would you be charging him for looking at me!?!" Vivi screeched indignantly.

"Gergh…" Nami choked uncomfortably.

"Girls, girls, you're all pretty," Usopp interjected as he tried to butt in…

SLAM!

And got two fists upside his chin for his troubles.

"STAY OUT OF THIS, DUMBASS!" the girls roared.

"Ow…"

"I'm starting to get way too much hands-on experience with concussions…" Chopper muttered as he ambled over to Usopp.

"Oh, don't worry about those," Luffy cut in. "Grandpa said they don't have any side effects."

I slapped my hand to my forehead, hard, as I heard that, all thoughts of full-frontal Vivi pushed to the back of my mind. "If that crazy old man actually believes that, it explains so much…"

"Believes what?" Luffy blinked in confusion, tilting his head to the side.

I parted my fingers just enough for me to stare at Luffy in disbelief when a knock came from the
bedroom door. There was a brief pause before Cobra poked his head through. "Is this a bad time?"

"Yes," Vivi, Nami, and I chorused through gritted teeth, as politely as we could.

"NO," Chopper, Zoro, Lasso and Usopp shot back even more firmly.

"My apologies, it's just that… Mister Jeremiah, was it your birthday recently?"

I blinked at the non-sequitur and mentally reviewed what date it was before blinking in surprise. "Huh… well, now that you mention it, my birthday is coming up at the end of the month. Why do you ask?"

Cobra stepped into the room, revealing that Igaram was just behind him and holding a gift box in his hands, a cube wrapped in a black-and-white checkerboard wrapping paper with a bow on top that was the same dirty blond color as my hair. I blinked in confusion as I tried to process what I was looking at. "The hell? I mean, not that I don't appreciate it, but…"

"THAT LOOKS like my shell!" Soundbite piped up.

"Yeeexaaah…" I nodded in agreement. "Overall, it's a bit… unexpected?" I shot a significant look at Nami and Zoro, whose eyes widened in shock and understanding.

"It's not from us, Cross; one of the soldier—ahem, mah-mah-MAH! One of the soldiers found it in the remnants of the palace gardens," Igaram explained with a concerned frown. "Oddly enough, it… appeared to be inside the remains of the statue of the Falcon Guardian before it was destroyed. The tag marked it as being for you, but the sender only left their initials. I don't suppose you know anyone whose name begins with…?"

I took the box from him and looked it over… and promptly paled in horror as I read the tag, almost dropping the box from my numb fingers.

"B.R.O.B." I breathed weakly.

"Who's that, Cross?" Luffy asked concernedly, no doubt seeing the look on my face.

"You remember when I said I came here because of a divine force well beyond human comprehension?" I asked nervously, holding the box as far out from me as I could get it. "B.R.O.B., they're not initials, they're an acronym. R.O.B. stands for Random Omnipotent Being."

"And… the first B?" Sanji asked warily.

I promptly split my lips in a snarl as I got my wits about me, digging my fingers into the box's paper. "Considering how this thing ripped me from my home without so much as a how-do-you-do? Bastard. Bastard Random Omnipotent Being. Even Soundbite looks like a freaking saint compared to its sense of humor."

"Ulp…" Soundbite swallowed uncomfortably.

For a brief moment, I really considered just tossing the damn thing out a window, but eventually I settled for placing it on a nearby bedtable and starting to work the wrapping paper off.

Everyone else, save for Luffy, Zoro, and, after some hesitation, Nami, stepped back and gave me a wide berth as I opened the package. I scrabbled against the stupidly resilient paper without success for a moment before almost slapping myself in realization. I took ahold of the two tassels of the intricate ribbon, took a deep breath… and pulled.
The ribbon promptly snapped undone, and the four sides of the box collapsed outwards, revealing the contents hidden within. I stared for a few seconds... before blinking as I actually processed what I was seeing. It was a black metallic box with chrome borders, several small knobs and switches on the front, two small screens on one side and a larger screen built into the top. Attached to an outlet on the front was a microphone that resembled the ones used for adult Transponder Snails. I blinked again, finally making the connection that it looked like a ham radio transceiver before looking around the room. Most of them were looking at it in uncomprehending curiosity... except Cobra, who looked thoroughly poleaxed.

"You know what this is, Father?" Vivi asked.

"Yes, I do," the king nodded promptly as he looked the machine over. "And I think you might want to revise your opinion on whoever this being is, Mister Jeremiah. That device is a piece of technology developed by the genius Vegapunk that the World Government outlawed, destroying all the models and prototypes as soon as he invented it; I don't think that they even kept one for themselves. It's a Snail Transceiver, designed to amplify the natural capabilities of Transponder Snails. Normally, Transponder Snails are only capable of connecting with one other member of their species at a time, and even the Adults need to relay with one another to make inter-Blue calls. That device removes those limits completely; presuming it works as Vegapunk claimed—and going by his track record, I have no doubt it does—you could use it to connect to every other Transponder Snail in the world at once, bar an exceptional few."

Silence fell. Then every jaw in the room besides Cobra's fell as we processed the sheer scale of what he'd just said.

Then Soundbite began cackling.

"HAHAHAHAHA! Still think I'm a bastard?" he crowed with a grin.

All attention snapped to the snail as his expression morphed from cocky to infuriated. 
"PLAGIARIST! KNOCK IT OFF, THAT'S MY SCHTICK!"

And then just like that he was back to cocky. "YOU THINK you can get a copyright in this hellhole OF A WORLD? GOOD LUCK!"

And once more Soundbite's expression shifted, becoming flat-out freaked. "HELP!"

Putting the pieces together, I snarled at Soundbite. Or rather, I snarled at the entity using Soundbite as its sockpuppet. "Well, that's not very nice, especially seeing how I'm granting your request."

"WITHOUT EVEN GIVING ME A CHANGE OF CLOTHES?! A FUCKING CHOICE!?!" I yelled indignantly.

"Not that request, dumbass!" B.R.O.B. drawled, the snail rolling his eyes before his expression morphed into a grimace and he spoke in my voice. "If I live through this, I had better have some damn good form of compensation coming my way, BECAUSE YOU FUCKING OWE ME!"

I stared at the snail in flat-footed shock as his face and voice morphed back to the obnoxious persona
they'd been employing. "So, yeah, you managed to survive up to this point, and without even taking any life-threatening injuries, to boot! Well, other than giving yourself a, shall we say, 'full-cleanse' after Little Garden. Which, I have to say, was hilarious! And... I suppose that you have a point about robbing you of an easy chance to save hundreds of lives just so I could watch you squirm trying to save as many as you could with just your own insignificant brawn. But hey, it's not like anybody really important died, so no big whoop! Ah-ah-ah, don't even think about it, princess! Wouldn't want to hurt the little slimeball, would you?"

I snapped my eyes up to Vivi, who looked to be about two seconds away from wringing Soundbite's body.

"And that goes for the rest of you, too... unless you want a taste of what Jerry goes through whenever he eats a biscuit, hmmm?" B.R.O.B. sang.

The good news is that the sudden pallor that everyone in the room adopted seemed to distract them from the embarrassing nickname. The bad news was that judging by the haughty scoff that followed, we weren't done yet.

"So, yeah, you asked for compensation? Here's something a few hundred times more dangerous than a Golden Transponder Snail when used right for you to play with. So, unless you can seriously tell me that you're not enjoying your stay here...?"

I remained silent, and Soundbite's puppeteer made him grin cheekily.

"That's what I thought. At this point, you owe me more than I owe you, so don't expect any more favors from me before your future knowledge runs out."

"But... but I don't get it!" I protested desperately. "How-how is this thing supposed to be dangerous? Like, at all!? I mean, it's just a communications device! Unless it amps Soundbite's natural abilities —!"

"Geez, you really are a dumbass, aren't you?" B.R.O.B. sighed wearily. "Well, just to hurry my entertainment along, let me give you a hint: Madness is an STD. " The gastropod's grin was nearly splitting his head at this point. "It's the gift that just. Keeps. On. Giving. Better figure it out nice and fast, else I could get bored..."

Suddenly, the gravity in the room seemed to triple, nearly bringing me and everyone else in the room to our knees.

"And we wouldn't want that, would we, now? Hehehehe—!"

"HEY!"

Without any warning, Luffy was standing in front of the transceiver, mic off its cradle and held to his mouth, completely unaffected by the gravity increase.

Soundbite's eyestalk cocked curiously. "Ooooh? The King-to-be has something to say? What do you want, O would-be ruler? Something to ask about the present or past? You wouldn't care about the future... would you, now?"

Luffy's expression was hidden by the brim of his hat as he stared at the mic silently for a moment before speaking. "You're the Mystery Bastard who stole Cross from his home?"

The entity blinked Soundbite's eyes in surprise before grinning cockily. "Yeah, that's me. Why? What about it? And just FYI, I'd suggest you not do anything stupid, kid. You're impressive, sure, but I'm
way above your weight—!

Before the higher being could finish speaking, Luffy snapped his head up, revealing a down-and-out apoplectic expression on his face.

"STAY AWAY FROM MY CREW!" he snarled furiously before slamming the mic back in its cradle. The transceiver wasn't harmed, but the table and the floor beneath it? Those cracked, and violently at that.

The effect was instantaneous: the gravity increase disappeared utterly, and Soundbite sagged with a sigh of relief.

"I've had TRIPS from eating alfalfa BEFORE. NOTHING compared to THAT!"

"Did not like, did not like…" Lassoo whimpered, pressing himself low fearfully.

"Still, that gravity thing could have been useful for training…" Zoro mused as he rolled his muscles before looking at me. "Hey, Cross—!

"That Devil Fruit is already in the hands of or will go to a Marine, and a damn good one too, both morally and combat-wise, so no," I shot back, mirroring his motions but with much more difficulty. God damn, that hurt.

"I take back what I said, Mister Jeremiah. Your opinion of that being was… fully accurate," Cobra groaned. He'd taken it almost the worst of us all, having been laid out flat. "I'll doubtless be feeling this for awhile…"

"Cross, your future knowledge isn't going to run out anytime soon, right?" Nami asked hastily. "We're not going to hear from that… that thing again for a long time coming, right?"

"Don't worry, don't worry, we've got…" I thought it over for a bit before shaking my hand contemplatively. "Upwards two years, maybe more with travel time. Either way, with any luck we won't get any other 'social calls' for a good long while."

"But what did it mean about madness… being an STD? The gift that kept on…?" Chopper asked curiously.

"It's a saying from my…" I was about to say country, glancing at Igaram and Cobra, but I eventually sighed in defeat and massaged my forehead. "From my world. If I got its gist, it was saying that madness is… infectious," I contemplated that for a moment before shaking my head. "Yeah, not a clue. For now…" I looked at Soundbite. "Do you think you can test it out, see if it—?"

"Uhhh…" Soundbite concentrated for a moment before shaking his head. "YEAH, I GOT nothin'."

I glanced at him in shock before looking the machine over… and groaning as I saw the problem. I flicked a switch on the side, causing the device to light up before glancing at the snail again. "And now?"

A moment's concentration… then jubilation. "THIS IS USEFUL!" The next second he was scowling furiously. "But USELESS!"

I blinked in surprise. "Excuse me? Useful but use—?"

"I CAN REACH out and touch them all!… or none at all. NO IN-BETWEEN!"
I grimaced as I processed the implications. Yeah, I could see how that would be… constricting, to say the least. "Well, I suppose we'll just have to puzzle it out later."

"Wait, you're not actually taking that thing with you, are you!?” Usopp demanded. "I mean, after what that thing just did—!",

"After what it just did," I quickly interrupted. "I think we have more than enough reason to not just toss this thing away. I don't like it, but like as not, it held up its end of whatever bargain it thinks we made. Everything it did after, it did on its own time, completely mutually exclusive. So, for now…” I patted the machine's casing. "We hold onto this, if only for the hell of it. Alright?"

"Excuse me, guard?"

I looked back at Igaram in surprise, who had beckoned a guard into the room and then indicated me. "Escort Cross to the firth—ahem, mah-mah-MAH! Escort Cross to the first floor of the royal storage, and allow him to take a vessel to carry that device in. And while he's doing that…”

He turned to the rest of the crew. "I think it's high time you all informed us exactly who your friend is."

"Uh..." Lassoo raised his paw uncomfortably. "Me too, please. I wanna know what I'm getting into here."

I swallowed heavily before bowing briefly. "Thanks for your generosity, and I apologize for getting you into this situation," I said before following the guard.

I once again had the privilege of enjoying the palace's architecture as I followed my guide towards the kitchen area. The larder contained a spiral staircase, and following it down revealed a gargantuan room. I couldn't help but gape, and the guard chuckled at my expression.

"A country as ancient as ours picks up a lot over the years, Mister Cross. The first floor you see here is generic items such as storage devices, surplus hygiene items, replacements for vases, even firearms and weapons are kept here. The second floor, however, has much more valuable treasures; typically, only Captain Igaram, General Chaka, Lord Pell, and the royal family are allowed to set foot down there. Even among the royal guards, few have seen it."

I whistled in awe as I looked around. "Yeah, well, considering what your ancestors stocked up in the bedrock of this place? Yeah, not surprising."

"Well, would it surprise you to find out that there's a third level?"

I glanced back at the guard, who averted his eyes with a sly grin.

"Of course, we're not permitted to speak about it, but someone might tell you that we keep the most priceless and valuable treasures of Alabasta there, such as—"

"Ey ey ey!" I warded him off with a raised hand. "I appreciate the friendliness and all that, but secrets are secret for a reason. The less people who know, the less chance it could leak out, alright?"

The guard considered for a moment before nodding in agreement. "Fair enough, fair enough. Now then, Captain Igaram said you needed—?"

"Something that I can carry this around in,” I answered, holding up the transceiver for him to see. "Something with easy access to it, so that I can reach it at all times."
"Hmm…" the guard mused as he rifled through a nearby crate. "Should it be heavy duty? Wouldn't want your device busting open, would you?"

I gave the guy a flat look before raising the transceiver and repeatedly ramming it against a pillar, all to no effect. "The... individual that supplied me with this device doesn't like it when their toys break. My hand is more hurt than this thing is," I deadpanned. "Trust me, this thing getting damaged is the last thing on my mind."

The guard stared in shock before slowly nodding. "Alright, then… oh, here! How about this?" He withdrew what appeared to be a nicely constructed messenger bag made out of canvas, complete with a solid shoulder strap and a firm-looking buckle for the flap. "Seem like it'd fit?"

"Hmm…" I took the bag and gave it a once-over before slipping the transceiver in, microphone facing forwards, before slipping the bag over my shoulder. I hefted the weight a few times before nodding my head side to side. "Feels good to me. Soundbite?"

Soundbite gave the bag a once-over before whistling in approval. "SEEMS snazzy TO ME!"

"Then this is the bag for me," I nodded confidently. "Thanks a lot, sir. Now, if you could just get to the main corridor, I think that I can make my way back to the room on my own."

The guard nodded, shooting a furtive, longing glance towards the staircase heading down to the next level, before shaking his head and marching back to and up the spiral staircase.

Let me tell you, it was a lot less fun going up than heading down, and while I wasn't huffing and puffing once we reached the kitchen, my legs were burning. We soon made our way back into the maze of twists and turns called Alabasta Royal Palace. It was a bit confusing, admittedly, but Soundbite was able to give a general direction for me to go in.

"So," I started curiously. "Any thoughts on how we can use our little windfall? Global eavesdropping, maybe?"

Soundbite considered that for a moment before shaking his head. "Uh-uh. To make the connection, I have TO CALL THEM, AND THEY'LL ALL RING. NOT SUBTLE. Plus, I'm not RECEIVING, I'm transmitting. IF I WANT anything from them, they have to call ME while I'm doing it."

"Well, that's annoying..." I tsked. "And… any forms of amplification for your capabilities?"

The Baby Snail clicked his tongue negatively. "ACTUALLY TRIED that with Pinkie and the Brain. NADA. I GUESS IT JUST DOESN'T—Puru puru puru puru!—GAH!"

I jumped in shock when Soundbite suddenly started shaking and humming repetitively. "What the —!? Are you getting a call?!

"SEEMS LIKE—Puru puru puru puru!—Well, that's ANNOYING."

I blinked in confusion as a thought occurred to me. "Wait, how—? Who even has your number? I don't remember giving it out to anyone."

Soundbite, on the other hand, glanced away with a shifty look.

I pinned the snail with a glare. "Soooooundbiiiite… what are you not telling me?"
"I-IT WAS while—Puru puru puru puru!—you were all unconscious. She was desperate AND I DIDN'T SEE THE HARM—!"

"She?" I promptly demanded with a sinking feeling. I knew who was on the other line.

Rather than dig himself any deeper, Soundbite instead jerked himself upright with a prominent "KA-LICK!" The next moment, his expression sank, his eyestalks and mouth drooping with a great depression, almost as though someone had killed his, or rather her, dog.


"Officer Tashigi," I nodded respectfully, trying to keep my expression neutral.

Soundbite—and thus Tashigi—flinched self-consciously. "It's... it's actually Ensign now..." she muttered dejectedly, the words sounding as thick as tar as they came from her mouth. She was silent for a moment longer before hanging her head lower still. "I... I'm so sorry, Cross. We... we didn't know, there was nothing we could do—!"

"It's fine, it's fine," I waved her off casually. "I'll be honest, this isn't really a surprise. Hell, I saw it coming!"

Tashigi jerked in shock. "Wait, wha—!? Y-you did?" she demanded in confusion. "B-but then, how are you not mad o-or concerned or—!?"

"Because it was the obvious outcome of course!" I explained without a care in the world. "Do you really think that the World Government would attribute the downfall of a traitorous member of the Warlords to pirates? They'd sooner arrest a World Noble."

"Uh... wait..." Tashigi blinked, presumably surprised by something I'd said. "Wait... just to confirm, what are you—?"

I gave her a confused look. "Uh... you and Smoker's promotions and Luffy and Zoro's bounties, duh. Look, you really shouldn't concern yourself, we're pirates, we don't expect any praise, Vivi's happiness is more than reward enough. And as for those two, please, they'll be happy! We pirates use our bounties to keep score more than anything else! Heck," I grinned as I pointed my thumb at myself. "I can't wait for me to get my bounty! A badass moniker, my name heard around the world, what's not to love for a person who's already forsaken the way of the law?"

The silence from Tashigi was deafening, and I could feel an awkward tension starting to build.

"Uh, Tashigi?" I tried hesitantly. Geeze, what was her deal?

The Marine officer was staring at me with a stricken expression, her mouth open but nothing coming out. "C-Cross, I-I—!"

"CROSS!"

"GAH!" I jumped in shock when a vaguely familiar voice piped up behind me. Whirling around, I noticed that I'd come to a stop in front of a nice and open window, and standing on the sill of that window was... an albatross wearing a paperboy cap with a parcel under his wing? The hell—?

I started in shock as I noticed the scars on his underbelly. "Coo?" I asked in confusion. "Are... you the News Coo I met after Little Garden?"

"Yup, that's me!" The albatross saluted. "News Coo 1851. Nice to see you again, Cross!"
"THE FEATHER-RAT!?" Soundbite—really Soundbite—barked in shock.

I shot an offended look at him. "What the blue hell is your deal!? Seriously!"

Soundbite returned my glare evenly. "DO YOU know what THESE bastards EAT!?"

I blinked in confusion for a moment, before slowly widening my eyes in understanding. "Oooooh…"

"H-hey, we don't eat Transponders!" the out-of-uniform bird squawked indignantly. "Only normal ones, and only sometimes!"

"SO IT'S OKAY TO SOMETIMES EAT MY FREAKING COUSINS!?"

"Eeehhh…" Coo trailed off uncomfortably.

"C-Cross? Cross, what's going on?"

I winced as a foreign voice came from Soundbite's mouth. Right, forgot about her. "Ah, sorry Off—Ensign Tashigi, I'm afraid I've got another priority on my end. Hold, please!" I gave Soundbite a curious look. "You can do that, right?"

"No no no, Cross, wai—KLOCK!" Soundbite clicked his tongue before Tashigi could finish.

"There we go," I nodded before looking back at Coo curiously. "So, what brings you out here to Alabasta, Coo? And… why are you out of uniform?"

I was really starting to get tired of people suddenly getting worried around me all of a sudden.

"I-I-I, l-look, Cross…" Coo hedged uncomfortably, obviously nervous. "I-I'm doing this… I'm doing this because you were nice to me and-and-and in my line of work that's really rare and, well, animals talk and I've been hearing that you're all getting a raw deal and——!"

"Coo!" I interrupted. "What the heck are you talking about?"

The bird swallowed heavily as he glanced around, confirming that we were alone before tossing the parcel he was holding to me. "You didn't get this from me, burn it when you're done." And before I could ask him anything further he flew out of the window, tearing into the sky.

I stared after him in dumbfounded shock for a second before giving Soundbite a confused look. "Am I the only one sensing a pattern here?"

"Noooope," Soundbite shook his head solemnly.

"That's what I was afraid of…" I sighed as I unwrapped the parcel. I then stared at what I was holding. I was expecting a lot of things, but this? "Did… I just get some kind of blackmarket newspaper or something?"

Soundbite looked it over before jerking his eyestalks out in shock. "TRY THE future! Look at the date!"

Indeed, Soundbite was right: the newspaper was dated tomorrow.

"Well, that's weird…" I glanced out at the sky, where the sun was only just starting to descend. "It must have been printed early for some reason… they want it out immediately, maybe?"
"IT’S THREE DAYS after Crocodile fell, what could BE SO IMPORTANT, US?"

"I doubt it…" I was silent for a second before shrugging and unfolding the paper. "Well, only one way to find out. Now, then, let's see here…"

Overall, the headlines were... pretty tame, honestly. The Barto Club Pirates had attacked an island and earned Bartolomeo another bounty bump; Law, Bonney and Hawkins had all just entered the Grand Line scene and were making names for themselves; the Revolutionaries were operating here or there; rumors of the black-marketeer Joker a little everywhere; Big Mom did something in the West Blue… overall, some of this stuff was interesting, sure, but nothing truly scandalous.

"Come on, I don't have all day…" I huffed as I shifted to a new page… and paused in surprise at the sound of paper fluttering to the floor. Glancing down revealed some familiar brown, wrinkly sheets of paper.

"Huh, bounties…" I mused, leaning down to pick them up. I promptly grinned as I saw the faces on them. "Ah, these are our bounties! Heh, sweet, Luffy and Zoro are going to be—!" I stopped as I noticed something.

Only two of ours had bounties…

But there were three papers.

So then, who…?

I slowly flipped over the third bounty poster—

And I felt my veins freeze over.

For the longest time, I… I just stared, trying to reconcile what I was seeing, this impossible, impossible sight before me, with reality. Then, I slowly turned to look at Soundbite, who had an equally horrified expression.

"Put Tashigi back through," I said, with all the calmness of a shallow grave. Soundbite nodded mutely, his expression shifting to a different brand of concern.

"Cross—?"

"If you don't tell me exactly what I expect you to tell me," I cut the Ensign off, my voice and countenance on par with dry ice. "Then I swear that I will lose all faith in you, in the Marines, and in any other individual stupid enough to pledge themselves to your twisted sense of Justice."

Tashigi gaped at me for a moment before steeling her expression and glaring at me with unshed tears in her eyes. "There is no Justice in what's been done here, Cross," she whispered solemnly. "Not even I'm that blind."

And so she said it. She confirmed it.

She confirmed it… and I ran.

I ran the full distance to the room we were using before slamming the doors open, cutting off the conversation that was no doubt going on. And the second everyone saw the state I was in, they straightened up.

I took a moment to pant and regain my breath before looking up, a combination of panic, rage and
"We have a problem."

"Smoker, I don't see why you, of all people, are taking the word of a pirate over the Government. I know that the promotions were underhanded, but they did bring up valid points. Confused, Hina's confused," growled the eponymous captain of the Black Cage Formation as she paced back and forth on the upper deck of her ship, watching as her men scrambled to repair the ship that the Straw Hats had fired upon in their escape.

"Valid my ass," Smoker scowled as he huffed out enough smoke for a coal plant, already reaching for another cigar even as his current one was steadily reduced to ash. "The last thing that fast-talking brat said to me was that before we left this island, I'd see the Straw Hat Pirates as more righteous than our superiors. The promotions alone were probably enough to prove him right. But this? They couldn't have mutilated Justice more if they killed Crocodile in captivity and told the world that the Straw Hats tried to take over the country."

"So, what are you trying to say, Smoker?!" Hina hotly demanded. "Are you saying that you've lost faith in Justice? In the Marines?!"

"No."

The captain and the commodore looked up in surprise at the interruption.

"Ensign," Smoker nodded solemnly.

"Commodore," Tashigi nodded back before shooting a determined glare at Hina. "And to answer your question, Captain, the answer is... ambiguous. We still believe in what we're doing, we believe in our mission, and we believe that there is Justice in the world..." She gestured out at the sandy continent the battleships were floating off of. "But this isn't just. This isn't Justice. We can't pretend to not see it, not any longer." She turned back to Hina. "Can you?"

Hina remained silent, her expression unreadable as she processed the shift in the girl's demeanor before blowing out a cloud of smoke from her cigarette. She then opened her mouth to reply—

"Don don don don!"

And nearly bit through her cigarette in shock as a sound rang out over the deck. "What in the world —?"

"Don don don don!"

Tashigi glanced around for a second as she tried to locate the noise before opening the door to the inside of the ship. She took one look inside before looking back out with a shocked expression. "I'm sorry, but have either of you ever heard a Transponder Snail make that noise before? Because—!"

"Don don don don!"

"Bring it out here, now," Smoker ordered.

A minute later and the snail was outside and situated on a lonesome crate, lazily looking over the trio before jittering wide awake with yet another "Don don don don!"
"…How much do you want to bet that Cross is behind this?" Tashigi deadpanned.

"Only a born sucker would take that action," Smoker snorted flatly.

"So, what do we do now, hm?" Hina asked as she eyed the snail. "Hina is curious, but this could also be a trap. Conflicted, Hina is very conflicted…"

Smoker promptly put an end to his comrade's conflict by picking up the speaker.

"Smoker!"

"We're already talking crazy, might as well act it too," the newly promoted commodore grunted.

The Transponder Snail, meanwhile, had shifted its expression into a semi-cocky smile.

"Hello? Testing, testing, one-two-three, can you hear me?"

"Hmm… well, these two seem to be getting it alright, so hopefully that means that this thing is working. No other real way to tell..."

"Who's that calling you, Makino?" Mayor Woop Slap asked, his stern features marred by curiosity.

"I have no idea," the kindly barkeeper replied as she looked her snail over. "Bluey here started making a strange noise, and then—"

"Well! Might as well bite the bullet and get started! Helloooo, people of the world, from the North Blue to the South and everywhere in-between! My name is Jeremiah Cross! Chances are you haven't heard of me, buuuut that's no surprise, seeing how I haven't been a pirate for long and I don't have a bounty yet!"

"A pirate!?!" Woop Slap barked, leaping up and trying to grab for the speaker. Makino tugged it out of the mayor's reach with a frown.

"Now, Mayor, really! Let the man speak, it's only right that we at least hear what he has to say! And besides, you're being ridiculous! Not all pirates are evil, just look at—!"

"I imagine that pirate comment freaked a bunch of you out, huh? Yeah, I don't blame you. But, just for the record, I'm not like other pirates, none of my crew is! Allow me to reintroduce myself in a more specific manner: I'm Jeremiah Cross, third mate, tactician, communications officer and now I guess public relations officer of the Straw Hat Pirates! A mouthful and a lot of responsibility, I know, but what can I say? We're not exactly the biggest crew around."

Makino started in shock before giving the less-than-enthused Woop Slap a brilliant smile.

"Did you hear that, Mayor? This man—!"

"He's on Luffy's crew, he's on Luffy's crew!" Rika cheered, drawing everyone's attention to the bartop, civilian and Marine alike.

"I knew he was a resourceful young man, but this is ridiculous," Ririka muttered to herself.

"Uh, Ririka, Rika?" Captain Ripper spoke up uneasily as he pointed at the snail. "I realize that it's..."
nice to hear that 'your friend' is doing alright. I'm happy too, to an extent, but…"

The adult barkeeper put her hands on her hips and glared at the Marine. "You want us to hang up."

"No, you can't!" Rika cried desperately, grasping the Captain's pants leg. "This is the first we've heard of Luffy in weeks! You can't—!"

"Now, I imagine that a lot of people out in the world are freaking out because I'm a pirate and ten-to-one, the Marines are most likely going to try and outlaw this broadcast. And when someone gets caught doing something the Marines don't like, you can bet your bottom beri they're most likely going to take a bullet in the head for it."

Everyone stared at the snail, and then turned their eyes on Ripper and his men. The Marine Captain frowned heavily before tilting his cap down and sighing. "I refuse to conform to the stereotype that Morgan reinforced. But if word comes down from Marineford—!"

"Well, fear not, O citizens of the world, for you are not alone! As of this moment, I am utilizing a device, designed for and subsequently outlawed by the Marines known as a Snail Transceiver! Simply put, this device is amplifying the capabilities of my snail, Soundbite—!"

"HELLO PARTY PEOPLE! Who wants to get freaky with me?"

"Devil Fruit, isn't he a charmer?—so that he can reach every other Transponder Snail in the world at the same time. At this moment, I don't doubt that millions upon millions of people worldwide answered their snails and are listening to this broadcast. That means that if the Marines outlaw my voice and try to silence everyone who listens or listened to it, well… simply put, I invite them to try."

"Awesome!" Rika exclaimed, earning a quelling look from her mother. Everyone else, meanwhile, was staring at the snail, all thoughts of ignoring or ending the broadcast now gone in favor of varying degrees of curiosity and morbid fascination.

"I wonder why he's doing this, though…" Ririka mused.

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"Well, anyways, I'm guessing that you're all wondering why I'm doing this broadcast, huh?"

"Woah, that's so cool!" Pepper breathed in awe.

"He knew what I said!" Onion freaked out slightly.

"Do you think he's a mind reader or something?" Carrot gasped.

"Doubtful, but we are talking about Luffy and Usopp here…" Kaya mused as she sipped her tea.

"Shoes off the couch, boys," Merry chastised as he dusted the furniture, his eyes never leaving the snail.

"Sorry, Mister Merry…” the trio muttered in chastisement.

"Well, to answer that, let's start with the Marine's depiction of pirates in general: dishonest individuals that either can't or won't make an honest living, so they decide to band together under flags in the name of wealth and destruction. They don't care about anyone but themselves, and would sooner kill you and take everything you hold dear than do a single honest day's work to get what they want. Bottom line? According to the Marines, pirates… are monsters."
"THAT'S A LIE!" the three ex-crewmates of the Usopp Pirates shouted defiantly.

"And… I won't lie to you. For the most part, the Marines… well, they're right."

"Huh!?" the trio started.

Kaya blinked in surprise as she stared at the snail. "Well, now…"

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"The fact is, a lot of pirates are as the Marines described: murderers, cutthroats, bloodthirsty to a T. Far too often has a skull and crossbones been the harbinger of death and destruction for far too many. But note my language! 'For the most part,' 'a lot of'. I differ from the Marines in that I don't use absolutes. Just like how not all Marines are unilateral zealots, neither are all pirates killers!"

"Hmph," Genzo nodded firmly as he listened. "Sounds like Luffy found someone who has a good head on his shoulders. Good! Those people needed someone with a brain onboard!"

"Besides Nami, you mean?" Nojiko teased as she poked her male role model's cheek.

"After that stunt she pulled when she left? They rubbed off on her too much," Genzo snorted, grinning despite his words before becoming serious. "And besides…"

"You worry, I know, I know…"

"Well, the purpose of this broadcast is to display what I'm saying with gusto. My crew, and a lot of other crews like ours? We didn't set out to loo—OUCH!… alright, lemme try that again. We didn't set out to pill—OW! Sonnuva—! We didn't set out to rob people bli—! AGH! DAMN IT, WITCH, LEAVE ME ALONE, WILL YOU!?"

Nojiko fell to her knees laughing while Genzo started trying to strangle the panicked Transponder Snail.

"SHOW SOME SHAME, WOMAN!"

"Alright, sorry, difference of opinions from our second mate, navigator and treasurer. Let me start over…"

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"Not all crews set out to kill. Us? We set out for different dreams, sure, but we have one common denominator: adventure. We set out to see the world. Every inch, every wonder… we wanted to see it all. We want to reach the end of the Grand Line. We want to follow in Roger's footsteps. To find the One Piece… that's our dream."

"And it's as lofty a goal as it was when they set out…but for Sanji's sake, I hope they do it!" Patty yelled.

"Of course they'll do it! That kid wrecked every big name in East Blue, and he's not slowing down!" Carne concurred, and the rest of the chefs cheered with equal exuberance.

All except for their boss, who was watching the snail with the stern expression that his employees had come to expect from him, and hadn't said a word since Cross identified which crew he was a part of.
"Now, I imagine that the Marines will tell you otherwise, but the fact is that this dream does not necessitate bloodshed. We don't go out of our way to hurt any civilians, we don't pick fights unless we have to. In essence, we are the antithesis of the pirate stereotype. And that, right there, is why I am broadcasting to you all here today, and why I will keep broadcasting to you for the foreseeable future. To tell you our side of the story."

"Henceforth, whenever I feel like it, I'm going to start up this broadcast, and I'm going to speak to the world. I'm going to let the world know who we are, what we're like, how we live our lives. I'm going to let you all share in our adventures as we travel the Grand Line, and see more incredible sights than have ever been seen before."

"BWOOOOOOOH!"

"Quiet, Laboon, quiet!" Crocus waved at the Island Whale absentmindedly. "I can barely hear anything!"

"Now, fair warning, this broadcast? It won't be for the faint of heart. And it's certainly not a call to the sea either, you can be sure of that! When we decided to come out to the Grand Line, we all made a conscious choice, a decision, to willingly put our lives on the line. This ocean, this journey we're on, it's completely nuts. I mean, it is insane. We've almost died more times than I can count, and while I personally find that exhilarating, there's every chance that if you try, you won't be as lucky. So, if you decide to go out to sea... then you damn well make sure that you're prepared to put your life on the line, and absolutely nothing less, you understand?... Good."

Crocus smiled fondly as he listened to the young man's voice. Internally, he was both sad and happy. First Straw Hat, now this… this young man. Both perfect members to join the crew, sublime crewmates through and through…

Just a few years too late.

"Now then, this broadcast, this program, it needs a name, doesn't it? Well, before you all go getting your panties in a twist, allow me to tell you the one I've already selected."

"Well, this should be good..." Mr. 5 grumbled as he leaned against the wax house's back-wall.

"Shush!" Miss Valentine hissed loudly before returning her attention back to the Transponder Snail.

"By adhering to the laws of Keep It Simple Stupid and injecting a little bit of my own nostalgia for home, I've come up with a name that is both apropos and easy to remember. Hence, I'd like all of my current listeners—huh? What are you—? Oh, huh, I guess that's probably holy frick that many!? Uh, wow. Alright, just figured out what panels shows how many people are tuned in... well, I'd like to thank my upwards of several hundred million listeners for tuning in and welcome them all to the first ever showing of the Straw Hat Broadcast Station, or the SBS for short!"

"Oh, please, that's the best he can come up with?"

"Quiet!" Miss Goldenweek chastised impatiently.

"Now... here's the thing: for this first broadcast, I'd love to let you all listen in on the general insanity of the ship. Luffy's idiocy, Zoro and Sanji's daily fights, Usopp's tall tales, Nami's sticky fingers,
"YOU LOVE ME and you know it!"

"Sea King shit. But anyways... I'm afraid that I can't do that right now."

"Thank God for small mercies."

"SILENCE, TINY HUMAN!" a loud voice roared as the wax shelter was shook by a violent impact. "WE ARE TRYING TO LISTEN!"

"INDEED!" another equally loud voice concurred. "EITHER QUIET YOURSELF OR FACE THE WRATH OF THE WARRIORS OF ELBAF!"

"WILL YOU MORONS SHUT UP ALREADY?!" two female voices screeched furiously.

"Sorry..." three thoroughly chastised male voices wilted.

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"Currently, this first broadcast, this momentous event... is marred by tragedy. It's marred by injustice, and wrongdoing and... and as much as I want to have the usual roaring good time our crew usually has, I just can't do it. This... this is just too important."

"Something of enough gravity to make that cheeky brat, his loud-mouthed snail, and his rubber-brained captain stop their antics? I'm surprised the world's still turning," Doctor Kureha mused.

"I'll take your word for it," Dalton remarked from next to her. "You did interact with them more. At least Chopper's doing well, from the sound of things."

"Kak kak kak, yes..." Kureha chuckled darkly.

THUNK!

The Transponder Snail nearly voided itself when a scalpel suddenly buried itself up to the handle in the wood before it.

"He'd better be."

"You see... three days ago, we Straw Hats, we were involved in a rebellion that took place in a kingdom in the Grand Line known as Alabasta. To be specific, we helped stop that rebellion, a feat that necessitated our captain, Monkey D. 'Straw Hat' Luffy, to fight and ultimately defeat the Warlord of the Seas known as Crocodile. Now, the Marines and the World Government, they're spinning their own version of these events, and honestly? We're inclined to let them. They can say whether we were there or not, they can claim credit for taking down Crocodile, we don't care. We didn't do it for glory, we didn't do it honor, hell, we didn't even do it for gold, and boy did our navigator give us an earful for that. The point is, the Marines can up our bounties, they can call us criminals, that's all fine, but there's one thing that they're saying that's crossing the line. One thing, one lie... that no matter what, no matter the reasoning, no matter the ends, we cannot—will not—stand for."

-0-

In a well-decorated room with broad windows, located far away from the seas and seated upon the top of the world, five old men sat and decided the fate of the millions as they listened to the words
coming from the mouth of a snail.

"This is quite the troubling turn of events…" a stout, bearded man with a cane hummed darkly. "Did we not forbid and destroy all of Vegapunk's transceivers for this express purpose when it was created?"

"Indeed we did, and they were," a relatively younger man with blond hair growled as he stroked his own beard. "I can't fathom how a pirate from such a novice crew managed to acquire such a device."

"Does it truly matter?" a squat, bald man snorted, his breath ruffling his rather impressive moustache. "That device was only deemed dangerous due to the threat of it falling into the hands of the likes of the Revolutionaries. What harm could it do in the hands of a mere child?

"I would not be so quick to dismiss this individual," a tall man, a giant even, with an impressively groomed beard stated gravely. "Remember that we once ignored the threat posed by a similarly inexperienced pirate nigh twenty-two years ago. Before we knew it, he had managed to strike a blow graver than any we have ever suffered. No menace, however seemingly insignificant, may be ignored."

Before the discussion could continue, they were interrupted by the very subject of their discussion.

"And so, without further ado, I cede my microphone to one of my dearest friends… and the victim of this heinous miscarriage of justice."

There was a brief shuffling noise, and then Cross's voice was replaced by that of a woman.

"People of the world. My name is Nefertari Vivi… and until today, I was the heir to the throne of the Kingdom of Alabasta."

As one, the Five Elder Stars stiffened visibly, the tall one blowing out a hard breath in the process. "I do so despise when I am proven right…"

"For the last two years, I have dedicated my life to infiltrating the criminal organization known as Baroque Works, which was working to destroy my kingdom from the inside out, and was led by Sir Crocodile, formerly of the Seven Warlords of the Sea. For two grueling, thankless years, I sacrificed my morals in order to uncover the leader's identity, hoping to prevent a war that would undoubtedly lead to the destruction of my kingdom and my people. With the generous and selfless help of the Straw Hat Pirates, who crossed my path after I had succeeded and Crocodile learned of who I was, my mission finally bore fruit. Thanks to their efforts, I survived his best efforts to end my life and returned home, where I stopped the rebellion after hundreds of my people had already died. All I did, I did in the name of my kingdom… of my people. I did it so that I might safeguard their future. So that I might one day return home and continue to protect them with all that I am, and all that I have to give.

"And now…" Nefertari was forced to pause as she took a shuddering breath before continuing, her voice charged with a myriad of emotions. "And now, that is no longer possible. Now, I am forced to flee my kingdom, to abandon my home and my people… to run away once more, with no hope of ever returning…"

"... Because the World Government has unjustly and erroneously accused me of treason."

The eldest of the five, a bald man in a formal robe, frowned darkly as he tightened his grip on the sword he was holding, and in one swift move he jerked it out slightly so that an inch of the blade could gleam in the sun's rays.
"The threat…" he intoned gravely. "Has just become real."

"We have a problem."

Cobra blinked at me in confusion and concern. "What problem, Mister Jeremiah? Did that entity return, or—?"

"More importantly!" Nami interrupted. "Did you know that Mr. 2 would take our ship!? What the hell were you—?!"

"Nami," I hissed, not giving her a chance to continue. "At any other point in time, I would be cocky or sarcastic or whatever, but right now, I could not be made to give a damn. Just know that for now, 2 won't hurt the Merry, alright?"

That brought the navigator up short, causing her to blink at me in shock. "Uh… okay?" she agreed hesitantly.

"Good." I moved past her and directed my furious gaze at Cobra. "And to answer your question, no, it didn't, and God help me, but this is a hell of a lot worse. This problem, or should I say catastrophe, is a lot more grounded in reality." I slapped the third aberrant bounty I was carrying into his chest before stalking off to pace about furiously, only managing to keep from verbally cursing up a storm by doing it mentally. "Read."

"Ooh, is that one of our new bounties, Cross?" Luffy asked eagerly, jumping to try and look over Cobra's shoulder.

"Yes, Luffy. Our crew's total bounty has increased sevenfold. And as soon as you read that poster, you're going to find it impossible to be happy about that," I growled, kneading my forehead viciously in an attempt to alleviate the vicious pounding in my skull. Shit shit shit shit shit how the hell had everything gone so sideways? And so fast to boot!?

I was vaguely aware of Cobra unfolding the paper and taking a look at it, before gasping in a myriad of emotions, the most dominant of those being shock. He would have almost certainly collapsed if not for Igaram and Vivi rushing to hold him up.

"Your Highness!"

"Father!"

"No… no, this, this cannot be happening…" Cobra gasped weakly, shivering furiously as he stared at the paper he was clutching like it was his lifeline.

"Wha—?! Father? Father, what's wrong?" Vivi pleaded. "Father, whose bounty is that!?!"

"Yours."

All eyes snapped over to the snail on my shoulder, obviously trying to process what he'd just stated with all the life of a death knell, before going right back to the sulking he'd gotten over earlier today.

"… W-What?" Vivi finally managed to weakly stammer out.
"It's your bounty," I repeated darkly. I continued to pace as I listened to her furiously scramble to snatch the poster out of her father's hands, looking it over with just as much, if not more horror than Cobra. "'Corsair Princess' Nefertari Vivi. Wanted for the price of 55 million Beris for the crimes of treason, espionage, assassination… honestly, I think that they just threw in whatever they could think of at the time. Only Alive, oddly enough, they must want to handle you yourselves." I let out a hoarse chuckle as I massaged the bridge of my nose. "It looks like they got that picture of you while you were up in the clocktower. Decent angle, impressive lighting. The Cipher Pols do good work. Do you think they have any going rates or—?"

"Cross!" Nami cut me off.

"I'm sorry, I just got legitimately blindsided by something that's most likely my direct fault! Pardon me for trying to keep from breaking down here and now!" I snarled back with barely restrained fury.

"Cross!" Zoro interjected, interposing himself between me and our navigator. "Calm down and tell us how this happened. How do you have that poster and why do you think it's your fault?"

"A News Coo I made a good impression on way back after we left Little Garden did us a huge favor and brought me tomorrow's newspaper. And how can it not be my fault? This didn't fucking happen in the story!" I jabbed my finger at the still shell-shocked princess. "Vivi was going to choose to stay! It was going to suck, we were going to cry and miss her, but we were going to respect her choice! But now, because I screwed up, because I got too cocky, that's all gone and it's all on me!"

The room fell silent for a moment as everyone processed what I said. Finally, Cobra slowly worked his way to his feet and gave me a studiously neutral look.

"What do you think you did, Mister Jeremiah?" he asked, his tone as colorless as his expression.

I ground my teeth as I started pacing again, clutching at my temples. "Like I said, I got too cocky. Back in Nanohana, I got it into my head to taunt Smoker while he was chasing me and Luffy. I threw the fact that we were here in Alabasta as a favor to its 'heir apparent' in his face.

I slapped my hand to my face and ground the heel of my palm into my forehead.

"Soundbite gave Tashigi his number after the rebellion, and she called me about the same time the Coo arrived, to apologize for this. Then she filled in what happened from there: Smoker didn't know all the details at the time, so he went by the book and passed the news on to his higher-ups, who passed it up to their higher-ups, who passed it to their higher-ups. And it should have died there, when instead it got scooped up by a Cipher Pol agent and passed straight to the top. After that…" I waved my hand helplessly. "After that, they turned it into a witch hunt. They interrogated foot soldiers, they interrogated agents… hell, they even 'questioned' Crocodile when he came to, and if you hear any sarcasm in my voice, it's on account of the fact that he sang like a canary, giving up as much intelligence as he could with the intention of dragging Vivi down with him."

"Bu-but why?" Vivi finally managed to croak out. "What possible reason could Sengoku have to—?"

"I said that this came down from the top, Vivi," I flatly interrupted. "Not their sock puppet. Be glad that they weren't around to hear you say it, because if they had, they'd shoot you where you stood, and any onlooking Marines would just compliment them on the fine shot they'd made."

Most of the crew wore identical looks of confusion, but Nami, Sanji and the Alabastans stiffened in understanding.
"You can't mean—!" Sanji hissed out, his cigarette flaring up from both rage and terror while Nami gripped Vivi's shoulder as reassuringly as she could manage.


"That's what Tashigi said she heard, and I don't doubt that she heard right," I confirmed.

"Uhh…?" Chopper's head was practically on a swivel as he looked between, clearly made uneasy by the tension in the room. "Who are—?"

"The descendants ob the—ahem, mah, mah, MAH!—of the twenty kings who founded the World Government 800 years ago," Igaram explained gravely. "They are above all law and punishment, and the World Government bends to their every command, regardless of the senselessness."

"Luffy," I spoke up when I noticed him starting to nod along. "They're the ones who Gray Terminal was burned for. One of them personally tried to kill Sabo, and didn't even see so much as a speck of blowback for it."

And just like that, Luffy's expression turned thunderous, a scowl on his face. "Oh." That one word needed no elaboration. The next time we saw a World Noble, he or she was getting punched in the face, no ifs, ands, or buts.

"The Nefertaris would have been among them…" Vivi noted weakly, her mind obviously still grinding against itself in an effort to process what was happening. "But our ancestors, t-they refused to join the other 19 lines in Mariejois, they didn't want to leave Alabasta…"

"And the rest of the World Nobles have always despised us for it," Cobra growled, fire and thunder starting to creep into his expression. "They've always despised us for 'spurning' their ascension, they've always made sure to spite us at every turn they could find. It's a grudge that's festered for almost eight centuries straight. Up until now it's taken the form of petty annoyances, but this—!"

"This time I gave them an opening," I completed with just as much heat. "I gave them the chance they needed, the chink in your armor that they've always been looking for! I gave them the means to win."

"Huh?" Usopp blinked as he tried to catch up. "What do you mean? How does a bounty—?"

"Usopp," Vivi cut him off weakly. "The only royals allowed to rule when they have bounties on their heads are those with the immunity of Warlords. If any other noble were to get a bounty, then they would immediately be… be…" She choked, obviously unable to get the words out.

"Delegitimized," Nami finished for her, clutching the betrayed noble as she sobbed into her shoulder.

Sanji clicked his lighter furiously as he tried to ignite a new cigarette. "Before any of you morons ask," he growled out. "That means that as far as the World Government is concerned, Vivi can't take her father's place ruling Alabasta one day."

"So, the Princess isn't a Princess anymore…" Lassoo mused.

"Which means that unless Cobra takes a new wife and has a new child—and there isn't a doubt in my mind that those bastards know you wouldn't—then the Nefertari's time ruling over Alabasta will come to a screeching stop, which would mean that they win," I summarized sourly.

"But-but to go that far!? Over a grudge none of them were even alive for!?" Usopp sputtered incredulously. "That's just—that's just insane! No sane person would ever—!"
"Exactly!" I snapped, throwing up my hands in frustration. "By any human standard, they'd make most murderous psychopaths look positively *compassionate!* Don't ever bet on how far a World Noble is or isn't capable of going. Because I guarantee you, you will *always* fall short of the lengths they will go to, every. Single. Time. There is no issue too petty, no slight too imagined, no complaint too insignificant, *no depths they will not sink to*—!

CHOMP!

"GRGH!" I grunted in pain as my leg was suddenly *crunched.* Glancing down confirmed that Lassoo had started to use my leg as a chew toy.

"S'rry," he grumbled out before spitting out my leg. "But you were starting to rant like Christmas."

I clenched my fists as I mulled that statement over for a moment before letting out a lot of the venom in one harsh exhale. "The point… I was making…" I hissed out through gritted. "Is that this is *well* within their boundaries, and not surprising in the *least* when you know their habits."

Silence fell, broken only by Vivi's sobs, and I took the chance to calm myself down. Several minutes passed before Zoro broke the silence.

"So, what happens now?"

Cobra shook himself out of his stupor and straightened up, reasserting some measure of control over his actions. "The first thing we must do is clear." And with that, he marched up to me and placed his hands on my shoulders, forcing me to look up at him. "Do not blame yourself for this, Cross."

I froze as I tried to comprehend just what the hell I was hearing before attempting to protest. "Wh— are you *kidding me*?! Your highness, I already told you, I gave them their opening! Without me, Vivi would still be fine two years from now! Without me—!"

"Then they would have attempted something equally heinous three years from now," Cobra countered. "Or ten, or twenty, or however long it took. Maybe in my lifetime or my daughter's, maybe not, but do not be mistaken: it *would* have happened sooner or later. This is a tragedy, to be sure, but it is no more your fault than it is my daughter's. I forgive you for the small part that you had in this; I do not blame you, so you should not blame yourself."

Vivi had managed to get to her feet, and turned to look at me, her eyes red from crying. Guilt hit me like Rocketman, and I looked away.

"Vivi, I swear—"

"… You're my friend, Cross."

I snapped my gaze back at her, staring in awe as she steeled her expression and obviously fought to maintain her composure.

"I know that you would never do this on purpose," she continued. "And that you're already punishing yourself more than I ever could."

For the first time since I told the crew the truth, I felt tears spring to my eyes. "That's more than I deserve," I hiccuped gratefully.

Vivi managed a small smile at that.

"Alright, so, what's next?" Zoro asked again.
Cobra glanced back at Igaram for a moment before sighing dejectedly. "Well, I suppose it's better that the Nobles decided to act now, as opposed to waiting until a later date. After all…" He looked at Luffy before bowing his head. "At least at this moment, there is already an escape route present, and good friends and allies prepared to safeguard you."

Vivi gasped in shock as she stared at the king. "Wha—F-Father, no, I—!

"He's right, Vivi," I interjected, wiping my forearm across my eyes. "If you stay, it's practically a foregone conclusion that the World Government will manage to capture you. From there…" I shook my head solemnly. "That 'Only Alive' isn't a good thing, Vivi, it's the final blow against your father. If they take you to Mariejois…" My mouth ran dry as I considered what few horrors Oda had allowed us to glimpse. "Then you'll be praying for either death or Impel Down, and none of us want that."

"I… b-but that…" Vivi fumbled desperately as she tried to find something, anything to say.

"Vivi," Cobra said, grasping her shoulders firmly and looking her dead in the eyes. "Two years ago, you left our kingdom of your own volition in order to protect it from forces seeking to destroy it, and you succeeded. Now, I am begging you to leave once more… for your sake, for mine, and for that of the whole kingdom."

Vivi stared wordlessly up at her father for a moment, a maelstrom of emotions swirling across her face until she finally jerked forwards and wrapped her arms around him, burying her face in his chest.

"I'm so sorry, Daddy," she sobbed. "I'm so, so sorry…"

"Shh, there, there, it's not your fault…" he soothed as he rubbed her back kindly. "This was never your fault, you've made me prouder than you can ever imagine…" Cobra weathered her sobs for a few moments longer before looking at Luffy with a determined expression. "Protect her as if she were one of your own."

"CORRECTION," Soundbite stated firmly. "SHE'S one of our own, PERIOD."

Cobra looked at the snail, then he looked at the rest of our crew. Every face showed the same expression of loyalty and determination. Cobra's eyes fell once more on Luffy, whose expression was the firmest of all.

"I'll make sure Vivi stays safe," he promised, answering the unspoken question. "We all will."

Cobra nodded, and bowed to Luffy. "You have my gratitude. Now… Vivi, we'll need to get you packed. Igaram."

The Captain of the Guard straightened. "Sir?"

"Assemble the Supersonic Duck Squadron, then find Chaka and Pell. Inform them of the situation… and send them to the third floor of the royal storage to prepare a Sirocco charm-container."

Igaram's eyes widened in shock, while Vivi stared at him in confusion. "Your Majesty, are 'ou—" He promptly flinched and coughed uncomfortably under the stern gaze Cobra shot his way. "Y-yes, sir, as you wish."

"Ah, Igaram?" Vivi interrupted hastily. "When you wake the Squadron… make sure that Carue doesn't catch wind."

"What!?” The Captain jumped in shock. "But Princess—!"

"I'm… not a Princess anymore, Igaram.” Vivi cut him off weakly before reaffirming herself. "And this is my problem, not Carue's. I already dragged you and him away from Alabasta once, I won't do it again."

Igaram considered protesting for a moment before nodding solemnly. "Very well… Vivi."

"Thank you, Igaram,” Cobra breathed, before standing up to leave. "Come, Vivi. We'd better not keep Chaka and Pell waiting."

As Cobra and Vivi left the room, Igaram made to follow, only to stop as I tapped him on the shoulder.

"Uh, wait a second."

Igaram looked back at me. "Yes?"

I shook my head slightly as I eyed the door. "I don't know any of the details, but that comment I made about Vivi two years from now? She'd have been fine, but Cobra was in bed with bad health when last I saw him. See what you can do about that. Drum—er, Sakura Kingdom is your best bet, just name-drop us and you should be good."

Igaram blinked, then nodded. "Thank you, Mister Cross. Now, then, Soundbite?"

The snail straightened as much as he could. "Yeah?"

"I'll leave it to you to gather the Supersonic Duck Squadron together. You'll need to leave as soon as the Princess—"

He cut himself off with a grimace, and sighed.

"...As soon as Vivi is ready."

"Hey,” I spoke up as I patted his shoulder. "No matter what Vivi or those bastards in the World Government say, she is and always will be the brave Princess who saved this great Kingdom. Right?"

Igaram glanced at me for a moment before smiling sadly and nodding in agreement. "... Indeed, Mister Cross. Thank you."

-o-

The ride to the Merry had been even more somber than I expected; the joy of having Vivi staying with us couldn't begin to measure up to the anger and sadness we felt on account of why she was coming with us in the first place. Carue's absence was further proof of that; I never thought I'd say this, but I actually missed the poor duck's ever-worried squawking. Soundbite made a couple of attempts to break the tension in his own way, but ultimately he lapsed into depressed silence as well. So we rode on, the wind and footfalls the only sounds until Soundbite spoke up again.

"We'll be there in FIVE MINUTES," he said, just loud enough for us to hear him. He waited until everyone had nodded, then sent a quizzical glance my way, and put his next words directly in my ears. "Do you want to tell THEM THERE ARE two INTRUDERS, OR SHOULD I?"

"Not a word. I'll tell Nami and Zoro, but that's it," I hissed. "Not until she shows herself, at any rate."
Soundbite blinked in confusion. "WAIT, her? What do you—?" The snail's eyes shot wide in shock. "HER!? Are you out of your—!?"

"Hey!" I hissed hastily. "This situation is a lot more complicated than you think, especially with Vivi onboard!"

Soundbite ground his teeth furiously for a moment, but nodded nonetheless.

We rode on silently for a bit longer until one of the ducks chose to speak up.

"Pwincess, is there anything we can do to help?" Stomp asked.

Vivi sighed, and spoke for the first time since we'd left the capital. "I appreciate the offer, Stomp, but no. What's done is done. Just… just help Carue, alright? He's…" She shook her head miserably. "He's going to need it."

"Cap'n won't wike it…" Kentauros pointed out.

"None a' us do, swick," Cowboy sighed sadly. "None a' us do…"

Finally, exactly five minutes later, we managed to reach the shore of the Sandora River and the Going Merry's familiar form came into view. Upon our return to our home, we were greeted with a rather… unconventional greeting.

"HELLO, MY FRIENDS!" Mr. 2 Bon Clay cried as he posed upon the lip of the Merry's crow's nest. "I'VE BEEN WAITING FOR YOU FOR SO LONG NOW! LONG TIME NO SEE~!"

We pointedly ignored the okama's flamboyance as we started unloading our supplies and belongings from the Duck Squadron. I walked behind Ivan X and undid the ropes that were holding the hefty cannon he was carrying to his back, letting it tumble to the sands. "How'd you like your first duck ride, Lassoo?"

The weapon promptly morphed into its more mobile fully organic form, shaking the sand out of his fur with a huff before glaring up at me. "The seating could have been a bit better, in my opinion."

I shrugged helplessly as I unfastened the rest of the bags the giga-duck was carrying. "Sorry, Lassoo, but you outweigh me three to one at a minimum. I couldn't carry you ten feet if I tried. Either you drop weight or you wait until I gain some muscle."

The dog grumbled darkly under his breath as he rolled his eyes and used his jaws to toss a few bags of food onto his back. "Fine, but you'd better be working on your muscles just as much."

"Hey, fine by me. One, the stronger I get the more damage I can take and dish out, and B. I want to be able to tote around a badass cannon like you," I said, smirking.

Lassoo smirked back, then looked up at me with a cocked eyebrow. "So…" he asked quietly, "second intruder?"

I graced Soundbite with a flat look out of the corner of my eye before hefting a rucksack onto my shoulder. "Suffice to say that you, Vivi and 2 aren't the only ones using the Merry as a way to get off of Baroque Works' sinking ship, and that's all you're hearing until everyone else finds out, got it?"

Lassoo huffed and shrugged slightly. "Fiiiine."

Once we finished unpacking, the Supersonic Duck Squadron lined up before us.
"Well…” Vivi started sadly. "This is it. Again, thank you so—"

"Company, atten-shun!" She was interrupted by Kentaurus squawking firmly, he and the rest of the squad snapping into salutes.

"Wha—?" our newest companion started in shock.

"Pwincess Vivi!" the helmet-wearing duck announced, never breaking his form. "We of the Supah Sonic Duck Squawdwon will always consider you ta be the weggimate wuler of dis kingdom, and nothing that anyone says will evah change our minds! We and evewy subsequent genewation of this Noble squawdon do sweaw to wait for your weturn, no mattah how wong it might take! So do we sweah!"

"So do we sweah!" the rest of the ducks chorused.

Vivi blinked numbly as she tried to process just what she was seeing. "I—! Y-you guys—!"

Kentaurus interrupted her with a wing on his shoulder. "Cap'n Cawue would pwuck us all nude if we did anything wess, as would any otha' membah of the squadwon," he stated solemnly. "We missed you 'dese wast two yeahs and we'll miss you now." He wrapped her up in a feathery hug. "Goodbye, yow Highness. Pwease… stay safe."

A medley of similar farewells were squawked out by the rest of the squad, each with just as much emotion as the last.

Vivi was silent for a scant moment before choking out a pained sob and wrapping her arms around the duck's neck. "I will miss you all so much…"

Kentaurus patted her back consolingly before shooting a look over his shoulder at us. "If she gets hurt, we will fweaking fwy so that we can peck you all straight ta' death."

"If Vivi gets hurt, then that means that the bastards who did it literally went through us first and we're six feet under anyway," Sanji declared firmly.

Kentaurus nodded in approval before moving back from Vivi. He gave her a final salute before wheeling around and leading the squad back into the desert.

"Good luck, guys!" Luffy waved after them.

"HAVE A NICE TRIP!" Soundbite hollered in agreement.

"MAY WE MEET AGAIN SOMEDAY!" Mr. 2 sobbed for a moment before snapping into an angry scowl. "HEY, WAIT A MOMENT! IS THAT ANY WAY TO TREAT A FRIEND WHO HELPED YOU!? IGNORING ME??"

"Sorry, Bentham," I huffed as I carried my share of the supplies onto the deck, stepping around the assassin. "But we've kind of got things on our mind. Everything went straight to hell after you called."

The okama's indignant anger promptly faded to one part concern, three parts surprise. "You know my name?" he asked incredulously.

"I have my sources, don't bother asking." I dusted my hands off before turning around and jumping back to the shore. "Anyway, most of us may have forgiven you at this point, though your involvement in this whole mess was seriously boneheaded, but I think now would be a good time for
you to make it clear how sorry you are." As I said this, I pointedly glanced at Vivi.

Bentham followed my gaze and promptly jerked in shock, apparently noticing Vivi for the first time. "P-P-Princess!" he yelped before falling to his knees and bowing his head solemnly. "S-S-So you have joined the Straw Hats, hm? V-V-Very well then! You have my humblest apologies for my part in this entire illicit affair, and I humbly beg your utmost forgiveness! B-but nevertheless!" He slowly looked up, eyes pleading. "You should acknowledge that without me looking over your ship, something could very well have happened!"

"We had the kung fu dugongs tow the Merry upriver and protect it, it wasn't in any danger," Nami dryly informed him.

Mr. 2 cocked an eyebrow at her. "Really? Then why did those little creatures disappear into the river the second they caught sight of me approaching?"

I couldn't help but smirk as I glanced at Soundbite; I had been waiting for this opportunity for days. "I told them. Yeeessss, I foresaw your arrival…" I droned out, with Soundbite layering on some appropriately spooky sound effects, drawing the desired reaction of fear from Bentham and amusement from everyone else.

Once I'd done the gag, though, I frowned in confusion. "Though… the dugongs booking it is a surprise, I'll admit. You'd think they'd at least stick around long enough to say goodbye."

"Maybe they had an aquatic-animal martial artist tournament to get to?" Usopp suggested.

"Are you serious?" Zoro deadpanned.

"It's a lot more likely than you might think…" Chopper mused. "Seriously, you couldn't even begin to imagine the kind of things the stronger animals back on Drum would get up to."

"I don't know, I can imagine quite a bit," Soundbite drawled before shaking his head. "BUT joking aside, THEY AIN'T in the river."

"A mystery for another day, then," Vivi concluded before addressing the kneeling okama. "And as for you… Bentham, was it? Honestly, on any other day I'd see you locked away in the deepest, darkest cell I could possibly find for what you've done." She brought her hand to her face and sighed morosely. "But in light of recent events, I think I've lost any stomach I might have had for vengeance for a while now. So… I forgive you."

Bentham sprang to his feet, gratitude only barely poking through the confusion written all over his face. "Oh, thank you, your highness! But… if I may ask, 'recent events'?"

Rather than answer, I instead dug out the piece of paper that had started this whole debacle and slapped it to the assassin's chest as I passed him by.

Mr. 2 looked at the bounty in confusion and scanned it for a minute or so—

"OH, YOU POOR DEAR!"

"Wha—MMPH!"

Before he suddenly bounded forwards and wrapped Vivi up in a hug, pressing her face into the… 'impressive assets' that he was suddenly in possession of.

"My heart weeps, weeps with horror and regret at this most horrendous of crimes you have been
subjected to!" Bentham lamented sorrowfully, twirling both himself and Vivi around all the while. "For a beautiful swan such as yourself to be subjected to such cruelty, such ignobility, for your wings to be clipped so horrendously! Truly, this is a black day amongst black days! But fear not, my dear, for you are not alone! I too have been subjected to the horrors of the World Government, and it was even these same injustices that drove me to join Baroque Works! We are united in our cause, our hearts beating as one! Dare I even call us, sis—!

THWACK!

"Bwoogh!" Bentham suddenly grunted, releasing Vivi as he clutched his stomach and groaned.

Vivi, meanwhile was shaking her fist out as she stumbled away from him and tried to get her balance back. "Okay, first, there is a limit on just how much I'm willing to forgive you, and second—" Her eyes zeroed on Bentham's chest. "Are those mine!?"

"Well, yes, as a matter of fact! A bit spur of the moment, but—!"

THOCK!

"Hoogh! R-right, dropping it now!"

"And you thought Crocodile had a mean hook," I joked.

"YOU SHOULD see her Cross!" Soundbite chortled.

"I'm not 'hers,'" I promptly protested.

"Well, to be fair, you are her bitch." Lassoo cocked an eyebrow as Soundbite and I looked down at him in surprise. "What? I can sarcasm."

I opened my mouth to protest, then closed it. "Is it sad that I can't really argue against that?"

That got at least a few laughs out of most of the crew before Nami called for everyone to get to work, though in light of the tragedy and her 'innocent figure', she naturally excluded both Vivi and herself from the chores. She also took a moment to gesture from me to the okama.

Taking the hint, I sighed and stood next to Mr. 2, giving him a searching look. "What did you mean about injustices making you join Baroque Works?"

Bentham made to speak before narrowing his eyes into a glare. "Before I answer that… that taunt you threw at me in Alubarna to trick me out of my disguise. Was that just to make me drop the act, or do you actually believe that about the great Ivankov?"

I immediately shook my head in denial, no hesitation. "No no, I was speaking out of my ass for shock factor. Ivankov's a weird and quirky individual, but that's the norm of these seas, not a mark against him. I won't deny that he's definitely worthy of being called a miracle worker."

Bentham processed this, and finally nodded. "Fair enough. Now, in answer to your question, I joined Baroque Works in hopes that when the plan came to fruition, I would be able to negotiate Ivankov's release with the World Government."

I gave him a flat stare for a moment before hanging my head with a groan and pinching the bridge of my nose. "OK, there are three things that you need to know: first, the World Government would sooner call a Buster Call down on Alabasta—"
I sighed at the blank look on his face. "Nightmarish full-scale military assault, more often than not maximum civilian casualties, generally levels everything above sea level before they scrub the location from the maps," I explained, and his confusion melted into horror. "It's a last resort, only admirals can use it, but I say it's still not worth it. Anyway, yeah, they'd rather do that than release Ivankov; the charges they have him on are completely accurate. Which leads to the second thing: Ivankov is a Revolutionary, one of Dragon's most trusted and high-ranking officers. If he ever found out that you tried to conquer a kingdom in his name, much less commit genocide and work with Crocodile, who he does not like, well… how should I put this…" I snapped my fingers in faux-realization. "Oh, yeah, he'd make you go from both genders to none."

Bentham went as pale as the swans on his back as he slapped his hands to his groin. "Yeah, not your smartest move. Now, for the third thing: if you want to see Ivankov that badly, wouldn't going to him be easier than having him come to you? After all, Impel Down's gates are always open one way, and I think you might have more than earned a stay there."

Bentham considered what I'd said for a moment before sighing dejectedly. "You… make some good points. That makes for a decent silver lining, I suppose." He looked back up at me. "You seem to know a lot of things that you shouldn't. I'm pretty sure I know the answer, but it pays to double-check: I've heard rumors that Impel Down is divided into multiple levels, I don't suppose you know what floor he's on?"

I hesitated; sure, Bentham was trustworthy, but telling him about Level 5.5 could change too many things too quickly. Though I was still hoping beyond all hope that his help wouldn't be needed. Even if it wasn't, though, the fact remained that if he went searching for Ivankov, he could lead the wardens there with him, and that… that was just too risky. In the end, I sighed. "The jailers are going to tell you that he's not in the prison anymore, and they believe it. Ivankov plans on keeping it that way until he gets new orders from Dragon, so discretion is key. If you get down deep enough and make enough noise, then maybe he'll find you, but no guarantees. That's all I can say, as much for his sake as yours. Got it?"

Bentham nodded again, and then his eyes narrowed. "Oh, very well, then." He then promptly fell to his knees and cast his forearm across his face, taking up a very sorrowful pose. "I suppose that there is naught left for me in this world but to surrender myself to the mercy of the Marines and plead guilty for my crimes! Oh, cruellest of fates! Goodbye, fair winds! Until I see you again!"

My eye twitched slightly at the performance before I leaned down towards Lassoo. "Sooo, to confirm, is he always—?"

"Yes," the hound groaned.

"That's what I thought…" I muttered before tapping Bentham's shoulder. "Just for the record, while surrendering yourself is one thing, maybe going out with a bang would be better? Like, saaay… helping a nefarious band of pirates with three wanted criminals blow past a Marine blocka—?"

THWACK!

"YEOWCH!" I yelped, slapping my hands to the lump on my skull. "WHAT THE HELL, LUFFY!?"

"WE DON'T USE FRIENDS AS DISTRACTIONS, CROSS!" Luffy shot back indignantly.

"THAT'S A JERK MOVE, JERK!" Usopp concurred.
"YEAH, YOU JERK!" Chopper brought up the rear.

I grimaced before rallying my nerves. "WELL, DO YOU BASTARDS WANNA SEE MERRY GET HARPOONED!? THIS IS BLACK CAGE HINA WE'RE TALKING ABOUT, AND SHE'S ABOUT AS DANGEROUS AS HER FRIEND SMOKER! SHE'S SMART AND SHE'S NOT GOING TO BE USING CANNONBALLS AGAINST SOMEONE WHO'S GOT A REPUTATION FOR BOUNCING THEM AWAY!"

"Wait, you mean that the Black Cage Formation is awaiting us at the mouth of this river?" Bentham blinked in shock and more than a little fear. He then brought his hand to his chin in thought. "Well, now… I suppose that helping you break such an infamous maneuver would enrage more than a few Marines…” He promptly swooned dramatically. Again. "Then I suppose that there is no choice! For the sake of my dear friends, as well as my lifelong dream, I shall sacrifice myself!"

"MR. 2, NO!" the Kiddy (read: Dumbass) Trio wailed dramatically.

"But yes, my friends! It is the only option! But, do not weep for me, my friends!" He covered his eyes sorrowfully. "For though this swan may never fly again and though I may be destined for the depths of hell itself…” He shot them a brilliant smile. "At least our friendship shall last eternal!" He pumped his fist and sobbed dramatically. "FOR FRIENDSHIP!"

"FOR FRIENDSHIP!" the Dumbass Trio mirrored him.

"FOR FRIENDSHIP!" a shipload of Baroque Works soldiers riding on a swan-shaped ship concurred.

"WHERE THE HELL DID YOU MORONS COME FROM!?!" Zoro roared incredulously.

After a brief period of explaining the situation—and I had to admit, Bentham's crew had loyalty that rivalled any Whitebeard or Straw Hat, if nothing else—we finally set the sails and started sailing down the Sandora. It was nice to be back on the Merry's decks once more, soon with nothing but the sea and the wind at our backs.

Still, even back on our home, there were one or two things I had to deal with.

Once I was certain that no one was looking, I walked around to the back of the Merry's poopdeck, Lassoo on my heels. Apparently I was a bit predictable, because Soundbite gave off an electric whine a second later. "I need to talk with you two real quick," I muttered beneath my breath. A few seconds later, Nami and Zoro joined me.

"What is it, Cross?" Nami asked promptly.

I was silent for a moment as I considered how to word this. "I need to talk to you two about something seriously sensitive. There are… going to be a lot of people mad at me about not mentioning this, and rightly so, but the only way this'll work out is if everything comes to light after it's too late to do anything about it, alright?"

The two narrowed their eyes at me. "What did you do now/this time, Cross?"

Lassoo stuck his nose up a little and sniffed at the air before flopping onto his belly with a little 'wuff'. "If I had to guess, it'd be because she's the stowaway you mentioned, right?"

I flinched as my higher-ranked mates pinned me with equally accusing looks.

"Stowaway?" Zoro demanded coldly.
"She'?" Nami concurred even more frigidly.

I winced and thought once again about how to word this, before stiffening as I felt a sudden weight appear on my shoulder and saw Zoro and Nami tense furiously, accompanied by Soundbite matching Lassoo growl for growl. I slowly turned my head and glanced at the disembodied hand that was waving at my friends. "Not. Helping," I growled acidically out the corner of my mouth, prompting the hand to evaporate into petals. I refused to look at my crewmates for a second as I gathered my thoughts. "Alright, so I know this looks bad—GYERK-why-is-it-always-my-head-or-my-balls?!" I whimpered miserably as Nami grabbed a very sensitive target.

"Because both of yours are fucking huge," Nami growled out. "And I don't care what you think your reason is, but you had better know what you're doing, you dumb blond bastard!" She emphasized the last word with a final clutch before stalking off thunderously.

Even through the pain, I stared after her in surprise. "... I know I've earned some trust, but I was expecting to have to do a lot more explaining and convincing," I muttered.

"Oh, believe me, you're going to," Zoro growled at me. "As soon as we reach the next island and get to somewhere that she can't overhear us. And you do realize I'm not going to help you when Vivi finds out, right?"

"Ohohoh, believe you me, I've already made peace with that aspect of my fate..." I muttered miserably before shaking my head. "Anyways, just know that I have my reasons and..." Geez, what a verbal minefield I was practically prancing through. It took me a minute to gather my thoughts and re-stool my nerves. "No matter what anyone says, anyone at all, I personally believe that we can trust Nico Robin. I trust her with my life. Understand?"

Zoro snorted. "Funny you're saying that when the last time you saw her, she actively tried to kill you."

"Funny how the first time you saw Luffy, you told him to buzz off before you killed him," I shot back.

The swordsman stiffened momentarily before a ghost of a smirk appeared on his face. "Touché... Alright, Cross, I'll go along with this for now, but Nami's right." He started to walk towards the main deck. "I really hope you know what you're doing."

My companions and I watched after him for a moment longer before Lassoo spoke up. "Been meanin' to ask. Do ya know what yer doin'?"

I blew out a heavy sigh as I slowly followed Zoro. "I damn well hope so, boy. I damn well hope so..."

Back on the deck, I took a moment to glance around in search of something to do. As it was, there really wasn't much. Usopp was wheeling out the cannon from the weapon's room, Sanji and Luffy were working the sails, Chopper and Bentham were talking animatedly about... something or other, I don't know, there was a lot of gesticulating going on there...

And Vivi... Vivi was standing at the fore of the Merry, leaning against the railing next to Luffy's 'special seat'. I shot a guilty glance back at the storeroom before walking up the steps to join her, leaning on the railing next to her.

A sidelong glance was all I needed to see that she was doing pretty bad, staring off at nothing and playing with a metal orb she had on a chain around her neck? Huh, hadn't ever seen that before.
Must have been a memento or heirloom or somesuch.

I reached out and shook her shoulder lightly. "Hey."

Vivi jerked in shock, shoving her necklace beneath her collar before looking at me. "C-Cross, hi! S-Sorry, were you there long?"

I cocked an eyebrow at her for a moment before electing to ignore the obviously suspicious action. "At the risk of sounding like an oblivious idiot, I still have to ask: how's it going?"

Vivi huffed out a weak, semi-hysterical laugh as she looked back down at the water. "Really? You really have to ask?"

I considered that for a moment before sighing and rubbing her shoulder. "No, I don't, but I think you need to say it. It's about the same as a booze overload: better out than in."

She didn't react for a few seconds. Then she sighed. "I went through the worst experience of my life for two years, all for my country, and this is my reward? Being accused of treason because of some stupid centuries-old grudge? I spent so much time away from my father, from Chaka and Pell, from Kohza and my friends, from my people… Every time Baroque Works seemed to be too much for me to handle, all I had to do was remind myself why I was doing it, and I found the strength to keep going."

Her voice gradually became more hysterical as she went on. "But now I have to leave everything behind. I'm… I'm happy I'm leaving with you, my friends, but… but this…" She clutched at her chest furiously. "It feels like I'm being stabbed in the chest. It feels like everything should be hurting but it's not hurting enough. I feel like the ground's dropped out from under me and I want to be sick but everything that I've learned my whole life is telling me that I need to show a strong face, and it is so hard…" A few tears came down her face as she balanced her arms on the railing and buried her face in her hands. "And the worst part of it all… is that I can't tell my people the truth. I can't speak, I can't say a word, because if I do…" She sobbed miserably. "Because no matter what I say… they won't believe me. I just… I've been silent for so long… I just want to say something…"

I winced and rubbed her back consolingly. I considered what to say, when I was interrupted by Soundbite knocking his head against my neck. When I glanced at him in confusion, he snapped his eyes downward, staring directly at—!

I suddenly became acutely aware of the weight that had been hanging off my side since we'd left Alubarna, and then the exact implications of what I'd been given swept over me.

"What if I could make that happen?" I heard myself say.

Vivi blinked in confusion as she glanced up at me. "W-what?"

"What if…" I started slowly before gaining steam. "What if I could get you into each and every household on this planet, so that you could explain yourself to every last person in the world in your own words?"

Vivi stared at me silently for a moment before looking away sadly. "That's a nice dream, Cross, but that'd take years to do… and I doubt we'd even manage to finish in our lifetime."

"Oh, yeah?" I reached into my bag and withdrew the mic, holding it up to her. "How about all at once in seconds?"
Vivi glanced up… and promptly jerked up straight in shock, her eyes shooting from the device to me. "Wha—!? Y-you can't mean—!"

"Madness… it's the gift that keeps on giving," I quoted before grinning maliciously. "What do you say we spread it a little everywhere?"

The crew's newest member simply gaped as she tried to line her thoughts up properly. "C-Cross, if you do this—if we do this… then the damage this will cause, the dangers—the World Government will not rest until it manages to arrest or kill you! They'll throw everything that they have at us! This isn't just taunting the Marines, this—!"

"Vivi," I cut her off firmly, a fire flaring in my gut as for the first time I allowed the implications of what the World Government had done to wash over me, allowing me to really react to it. "These bastards have done a lot of hellish shit in the past, but this time? This time they've gone way past the pale and personally screwed over one of my friends, and rest assured that this is neither the first time, nor the last. I am beyond caring about consequences past the obvious." I held the mic out to her. "What about you?"

Vivi stared at me in disbelief for a moment before shifting her gaze down to the mic. Then… then a hint of steel entered her eyes, she took hold of the mic, and I knew that the World Government was screwed. Sideways.

"That's what I thought." I grinned viciously before gesturing towards the dining room. "What do you say we go somewhere quiet so that we can plan this out, hm?"

"THEY WON'T know what HIT 'EM!" Soundbite cackled malefically.

-o-

-Present time-

"… and that's my side of the story. I don't know how many of you will believe me, but I'm satisfied with being able to speak the truth. People of Alabasta… I apologize to you most of all for my silence these past two years, and for leaving so soon after my return. But…" Vivi's voice caught slightly as she forced herself to continue. "Know that I do not do this willingly. I will miss you all, but I will remain in contact through the SBS for those of you who believe me. In the end, you may believe what you want to believe, just know that…" Vivi trailed off slowly for a moment before choking out a sob. "… I am sorry… I am so, so sorry…"

I slowly worked the mic out of Vivi's hands, letting her jerk over to bury her sobs in Nami's welcoming shoulder. I hastily smothered the flare of rage and vitriol I felt as I brought the mic up to my mouth; I wanted to rant and rage, I really did… but that wouldn't solve anything. As it went, we'd already won. All I had to do was hammer in the nails in the coffin. "And there you have it, people. An absolute mockery of justice and due process, in every sense of the words. Now, because of a stupid, senseless grudge, one of my friends can't ever go home. Can't see her family again. Can't see her family again. This isn't right, this isn't just, and this isn't even fair. A life has been ruined based solely on pettiness, on a grudge no one today was even alive for. In the end… there really isn't much more I can or have to say on the matter. Enough has been said already. So for now, I think it's time to draw things to a close…"

I started to reach for the transceiver's off switch before freezing as a thought struck me.

-o-
"Oh, wait, one last thing before I forget! I have a message for the amnesiac who was named by his hat, who I really hope is either listening or one of his comrades is."

Dragon eyed the Transponder Snail and the curious transmission it was broadcasting, all movement in his Baltigo command center stilling.

"Hey, Sabo, do you think—?" a thoughtful female voice spoke up.

"... if that's not specific enough, he's often closely associated with a very prominent and cuddly Koala."

"I'LL RIP THAT BASTARD'S FUCKING HEAD OFF!"

Dragon smirked as the female voice suddenly screamed furiously, a large commotion erupting as her mentor and the intended target of the message fought to keep her from assaulting one of the snails in the room.

"I imagine I'm going to catch absolute hell for that someday..." Cross mused contemplatively before forging on. "But the fact is that there's no room for error here. My message is in regards to your family. Not the blood relatives that turned you away from your home, but the two brothers you made after that. Your older brother is most likely going to try and get in contact with you soon. He's a notable individual and he's got a hold on his temper that suits him well, but I promise you that if you meet him face-to-face, there won't be any doubt as to whether he's who I mean. And as for your younger brother... well, suffice to say you know his father better than he does. Not that he cares, of course. Your brother, I mean."

Sabo's eyes had gone as wide as dinner plates, and Koala's temper seemed suppressed by the revelation of his past. Dragon, meanwhile, felt a suspicion enter his mind... could Cross actually mean... but how could he know?

"Gilteo," Dragon barked. "I want every broadcast of this... 'SBS' transcribed and saved for future records."

"Yes, sir! But, ah..." The soldier dropped his salute hesitantly. "If I might ask why, sir?"

The Chief Revolutionary turned a neutral gaze on the still-cocky snail. "I have a feeling that it will turn out to be an... educational experience."

-0-

"And with that, I really am done," I concluded finally. "So unless anyone else has something they want to say—!"

BOOM!

I cursed furiously as an explosion shook the air outside the Merry, causing the cabin to rock furiously.

"HEADS UP!" Sanji yelled from outside. "THE MARINES JUST CAUGHT UP TO US, AND I THINK THAT CROSS MIGHT HAVE PISSED THEM OFF!"

"Okay, no time for trivialities, this has been a transmission from the SBS, signing off!" And with that, I turned off the transceiver, rammed the mic back into place and darted to my feet, throwing a concerned look at the star of this shitshow. "Vivi, I realize that you feel like crap right now, but unless we get a move on, we're going to be turned into so much floating flotsam. So, I'm asking you,
here and now: do you feel up for this?"

Vivi glanced up, her eyes still shining with unshed tears, and visibly wrestled with her emotions for a second before clenching her jaw and standing up tall. Her eyes were red and slightly puffy, but honestly, I wasn't sure if I had ever seen anyone stronger. "No," she announced firmly. "But I've had to put on a brave face for the past two years. I can put one on now."

Nami gave her a sad look before smiling slightly and clapping her friend on the shoulder. "Then let's give these bastards some hell to pay."

And with that we sortied out onto the deck and joined the melee.

As it was, thanks to Mr. 2's swift and enthusiastic sacrifice and me prompting Usopp to start firing on the Marine ships immediately (seriously, the man's skill with black powder and heavy weaponry was impressive!), we were able to blow past most of the Black Cage formation with minimal damage. I think that the impromptu dance party Soundbite started on Fullbody and Jango's ships when we passed by them might have contributed to the confusion. Seriously, jerkasses those bastards might have been, but damn if they couldn't get down and get funky when given the chance. Though really, the fact that the whole crews of their ships had joined in was a wee bit much.

Unfortunately, however, 'minimal' damage didn't mean 'none'. Merry still took a half-dozen harpoons to the hull, and even if they were high enough that they didn't hit the keel or let in water, it was still damn painful. On the bright side, that did mean we had a copious supply of metal for the foreseeable future... though judging by the way Usopp had been muttering darkly under his breath while hammering in wooden planks over the holes, he didn't see it as such.

And judging by the trio of Marine battleships rounding the coast of Alabasta, they'd managed to restore some form of order to their own fleet as well.

"So, on a scale of one to ten," I asked as I walked to one of the railings and kept a wary eye on the approaching ships. "How ticked off do you think they are?"

BOOM!

I jerked back with a hiss as the wind from a passing cannonball ruffled my hair. "That answers that question. Hey, Lassoo!"

The dog-gun trotted up to me and heaved himself onto his hind legs as he balanced on the railing next to me. "Yeah?"

"Did your old owners ever name any moves for you?"

The hound shook his head with a huff. "Nope. Master never had the mind for it, and Merry Christmas didn't care."

"Well, in that case, allow me to baptize your attacks." I pointed at the battleships. "Cani-Cannon, maximum boom!"

Lassoo grinned ferally in response. "Sounds good, chief." And with that, his musculature warped and shifted as his pelt flattened and elongated appropriately until he was as much cannon as he was canine. Once the transformation was complete, a trail of snot hung down from his nose. He then jerked back and back and back…

"AH-CHOO! AH-CHOO! AH-CHOO!"
Before snapping forwards with a trio of sneezes, loosing a salvo of ludicrously fast-moving baseballs that arced over the sea. They disappeared out of sight as they approached the battleships. A second later…

**BOOM!**

I jerked back with a whistle of awe as the main cabins of all three ships erupted in flames. "Oh… oh, yeah…" I patted Lassoo's ears with a grin. "Oh, we are going to get along just fine, you and I."

Lassoo snickered happily as he rubbed a paw beneath his nose. "Aw, thanks chie—AH-CHOO!" The dog-gun suddenly snapped forwards and blasted a baseball into the water. He stared after the projectile with wide eyes. "Whu-oh…"

Soundbite and I stared alongside him. "**WAS that at an ANGLE?**" Soundbite asked warily.

**BOOM!**

I stared at the plume of water that erupted a few feet off of the Merry's side. "Looks like it…” I trailed off before giving Lassoo a nervous look. "Does this happen often?"

The dachshund-bazooka sniffed heavily and swiped at his nose again as he morphed back into his animal form. "My allergies always act up when I go half-and-half, why do you think I've been a dog for the past twenty-four hours?"

I exchanged looks with Soundbite before giving Lassoo a stern glare. "Alright, it's official: you can complain however much you want, but Usopp is getting a look at you the second we have a chance, got it?"

Lassoo frowned, but nodded his head a bit nonetheless. "If it means finally gettin' rid of this cold, I'll put up with it," he said.

After that, between Lassoo and Usopp, we opened a clear way out within only a couple of minutes. Everyone moved according to Nami's directions, and we made our way away from the eastern coast of Alabasta. Vivi moved to the edge of the boat, tears streaming down her face again as she watched her home slowly disappear. But before we were more than a few dozen meters from the continent, the loudspeakers set up for the country began to blare, the sound easily reaching every ship off the coast.

"**Greetings, citizens of Alabasta,**" came the voice of King Cobra. "I had hoped that in the aftermath of the rebellion, with our country ready to build itself back up, I would be able to speak a message of encouragement and new life, while at the same time fulfilling my daughter's belated Coming of Age Ceremony. But, as I have no doubt all of you just heard, that is no longer possible. My daughter has left this country… and I unfortunately find it unlikely that she will ever return to the beautiful sands of our kingdom."

'Rub it in, why don't you?' I thought morosely, moving to stand beside Vivi.

"**My people… for the good of this nation and for my daughter, I collaborated with the Straw Hat Pirates.**"

Time seemed to stand still as Cobra's words sunk in, all of us snapping our gazes to the continent, Vivi's mouth falling open in pure shock.

"F-Father…?" she breathed.
"Vivi, pardon my French, but what the ever-loving fuck does your dad think he's doing!?” I demanded incredulously.

Before she could respond, Cobra continued.

"The plan we developed was for me to formally disown her on account of her crimes while she absconded with her friends, so as to avoid incurring the wrath of the World Government. However… in light of the injustices already inflicted upon our country through the World Government's negligence and their active antagonism of our people, I have no intention of allowing them to coerce us any further. As a matter of fact, I believe it is time that they come to fear our wrath instead."

I felt a chill run down my spine as the full weight of what was being said bore down on me. "… What the hell is he getting at?” I asked numbly.

"Citizens of Alabasta… we have just come out of a hellish period of war, a time of conflict unheard of for generations. And yet, despite this, we are still under attack. We are still in danger, and I feel that unless the world itself changes in some way very soon, that danger will remain until the end of our days. And so, it is with a heavy heart that I have come to this decision: if we are in danger of attack and injustice from the hands of our very allies… then I say that they are no allies of ours!"

"… Well, I'll be damned," Smoker said, his face betraying his shock despite his normal deadpan tone. "Like father, like daughter."

Tashigi, meanwhile, was barely managing to hold herself up on the ship's balustrade. "C-Commodore, i-is this actually—!?"

"It is, Ensign. It is." The Logia user glanced back at Hina, whose cigarette had long since fallen from her frozen lips. "I'd suggest you mark the date, Captain Hina. This is history in the making right here."

"If you will stand by me, then I ask of you all to support me in this endeavor… for starting today, I rectify a grave error my ancestors made eight hundred years ago! Today, I declare Alabasta's formal secession from the ranks of the nations of the World Government!"

"Because today," Smoker grunted as he blew out a large cloud of smoke, even as the approving roar of a million voices came over the loudspeakers, as well as from the port of Nanohana. "Is the day that the people of the world bore witness to the World Government fucking up in a most spectacular manner."

Hina remained silent for a minute more before turning to look both Smoker and Tashigi in the eyes. "Hina's… convinced." She brought out a cigarette and lit it before giving the Commodore a cold look, filled to the brim with determination. "What did you have in mind?"

The grin that Smoker adopted would either have been right at home on a Sea King or it would sent one running.

A strangled noise of disbelief clawed its way out of my throat as I tried to make heads or tails of what the fuck I had just heard. "I'm sorry…” I started weakly. "But did I just cause one of the original twenty kingdoms of the World Government to go Revolutionary?!"
Nami nodded jerkily in response, obviously having as hard a time puzzling out how to react properly as I was.

Vivi, for her part, had dropped to her knees. "Daddy…" she breathed, a combo of awe and terror coloring her voice.

"Vivi, my daughter…" Cobra continued, compassion filling his voice. "If you can still hear my voice, then I can only imagine that you must disapprove of this course of action, and I can imagine why. For our kingdom to return to war after you fought so long for peace—for your sake, no less—must seem nightmarish. But know that my actions are not without reason: what I do here and now, I do because you are worth it. Because I already lost you once, and neither I nor anyone in this nation is willing to lose you again, much less due to an evil that I know has been festering in the heart of the World Government, an evil I believe has been present since its inception."

I know that you must be terrified and confused right now, but I ask you not to worry about me. I ask you not to worry about us, not to worry about your kingdom. I ask you not to worry about your home. Because at the end of the day, you are still my daughter, you are still Princess Nefertari Vivi of Alabasta, and I will always be proud of you, no matter what. And no matter what happens, come hell or high water… when you one day return home, there will be a home waiting for you with open arms, bloodied and bruised, I have no doubt… but we will be stronger for it. Goodbye, Vivi. I love you more than words can possibly express."

Vivi shook heavily as she clamped her hands over her mouth, fighting to maintain some measure of composure. "Goodbye, Daddy…"

Everyone onboard had by this time made it to where I was comforting Vivi, and one and all, we pulled her into an embrace.

BOOM!

An embrace that was cut off by yet another blast from the Marines.

"SERIOUSLY!?" I roared incredulously, shaking my fist at the battleships. "READ THE FUCKING MOOD, ASSHOLES! YOU EVEN STOPPED FIRING DURING THAT SPEECH!"

The subsequent barrage showed just how much the Marines cared about my opinion on them.

Luffy growled darkly as he started swinging his arm in a circle. "Can we take a second to kick their asses?" he asked murderously.

Nami narrowed her eyes in agreement as she started to finger the sections of the Clima-Tact. "I am seriously considering it."

However, before anybody could move for the Merry's whipstaff, Soundbite started cackling like an absolute maniac.

"What's his problem?… His current one, I mean," Usopp clarified.

"WE DON'T HAVE TO do jack! The Marines ARE ABOUT TO SUFFER!" Soundbite whooped eagerly. And before I could ask what he meant, the air was filled by a particularly familiar violin piece.

"Oh, that's catchy!" Luffy grinned eagerly.

"This does sound pretty good…" Sanji mused.
"Ah… is that 'He's A Pirate'?” I guessed hesitantly. "What does that have to do with—?

"OH, SORRY!” Soundbite cackled anew. "This is more ACCURATE!” Another piece of music came on, only this one was harsher and filled with drums and a prevalent pipe organ.

My confusion only mounted as I identified the piece. "What the hell—?

"Cross?” Nami asked. "Do you know what this music means?

"Uh… I think so…?” I scratched my head contemplatively. "It's… from a performance back home. It's the theme of—!” I cut myself off with a choked gurgle as I caught sight of something, and the sentiment was reflected by everyone else as they caught sight of it too.

Bubbles and whorls, erupting from the depths of the Alabastan coast and churning the water between the battleships into a foamy mess.

"… D-D-Davy Jones…” I whimpered, not quite yet willing to believe my eyes. There was no way, no possible way—!

SPLOOSH!

And yet, apparently there was.

Sails of seaweed and algae, thoroughly water-rotted wood, barnacles encrusting every other foot of the vessel, sea creatures manning the freaking RIGGING!

"IT'S THE FLYING DUTCHMAN!” Usopp and I howled as we clutched each other in terror.

Screw you guys, I might love dancing on the edge, but I did fear death and I sure as hell feared Davy-tentacle-beard-Jones!

"AWESOME!” Luffy yelled, staring at the ship with stars in his eyes.

"Well, now, this is something…” Zoro grinned viciously as he grabbed the hilts of his swords.

"Hey, wait, look!” Nami pointed at the decrepit ship as a bunch of figures started to stream from it to the Marine ships. "I think that they're attacking… the… wait a second…” Nami narrowed her eyes as she used her hand to shade her gaze. "Are those…?” She hastily worked her spyglass out of her belt and held it up to her eye before jerking in shock. "HOLY CRAP, ARE THOSE DUGONGS?!

"WHAT!?” I yelped, actually looking at the ship. Now that I noticed, those silhouettes were too small to be fully sized fishmen, local or otherwise. And the flag it was flying… had a dugong's face interposed over a pair of crossbones!? "Allow me to reiterate that question… ARE THOSE DUGONG PIRATES!?!"

SPASH! "THAT THEY ARE, SIR!"

All present turned to the five damp figures that had leapt aboard the boat, and were balancing on the balustrade. All five were kung fu dugongs, four of them carrying makeshifts rucksacks on their backs, while the one in the middle, a somewhat weathered looking one with a duffle bag on his shoulder, a camo bandana around his forehead and—somehow—a lit cigar in his mouth, scanned over us with a determined expression. But he seemed to be looking mostly at me.

"What in the world—?” Vivi started before the dugongs leapt onboard, the four with rucksacks falling into bows while the one with the bandanna stood with pride.
"Salutations, Straw Hats!" the bandanna-wearer huffed in a voice that wouldn't have been out of place coming from a drill sergeant. "My name is Boss Dugong, ex-second-in-command of the kung-fu dugong tribe below Chief Dugong, but you can call me Boss! And these—" He gestured at the four other dugongs with him. "Are my apprentices! How're y'all doin'?"

"Uhh…" my crewmates and I chorused as we glanced at one another in confusion before looking back at them. "Good?" I posed hesitantly. "It's… nice to meet you, Boss."

"Yes, and not that we don't appreciate your assistance," Vivi said weakly, clearly not coping well with all the new developments. "But what are you doing here? And what are they—" She gestured at the dugongs attacking the Marines—and outright dismantling them. "Doing for that matter?"

"Besides earning a rather impressive bounty for themselves, she means…" Nami mused as she continued to watch the onslaught with her spyglass, periodically wincing sympathetically.

Boss grinned as he tapped his cigar contentedly. "Well, ma'am, first off, those over there are the majority of my species who have joined what is currently known as the Dugong Pirates! They might change it in the future, but for now we'll see, we'll see. And as for what they're doin', wееееlll…" He bit down on his cigar with a scowl. "That'd be gettin' in some good ol'-fashioned vengeance on those son-bitches that screwed you. Now, we dugongs might not be humans, no…" The aqua-mammal thumped his chest proudly. "But we're still citizens of Alabasta and we know a raw deal when we hear one. We're with you all the way, yer highness."

Vivi stared at the dugongs blankly as she slowly processed Boss' words. "Uh… thank you. But…?"

"Lemme guess, you wanna know why we're here?" Boss chuckled before jabbing his cigar at Luffy. "Easy! We're here to join your crew!"

It took a second for us all to react to this statement, but when we did, we did so like mature, reasonable adults.

"ΕΕΕΕΕΗ!?!"

Please, have you been following some other pirate crew?

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN, YOU'RE JOINING OUR CREW!?!" Nami demanded as she shook the dugong by the collar of his shell.

"Exactly what it sounds like!" Boss grinned, entirely unaffected by the way he was being manhandled. "See, we—that is to say, the kung-fu dugong subspecies as a whole, we're a tight-knit community—started planning out this whole venture shortly after you and yours told us of the glories of piracy and made your way into the desert! We left a small task force to watch over this here ship, and they rejoined us once that there lady-man fellah the talky one told us about showed up!

"Once we were all back together, we spent a few days stitching together the best parts from sunken ships around the coast. As you can see, the fruit of our labors, the Great Kung-Fu Galleon, is doing quite well under the leadership of our finest fighter, our chief Captain Dugong!"

"Good for you all. Mind skipping to the part where you explain the joining our crew bit?" I demanded impatiently.

The four Dugongs behind Boss snickered amidst themselves for a brief moment before being swiftly cowed by a glare that he sent over his shoulder at them before turning his attention back to us. "Well, see, here's the thing: the Captain was mighty grateful for showing us the best way to find ever-stronger opponents and challenges, and let it not be said that we Dugongs are an ungrateful species!"
So, he sent *us* to join you as a sign of our crew's friendship and allegiance!" He jabbed his thumb at himself proudly. "My boys and I are five of the strongest our kind has to offer! We'll see you through thick and thin, no doubt about it!"

I blinked in surprise as I processed the statement before looking back at Luffy for the inevitable reaction… and finding myself even more surprised than I already was; I was expecting a lot of emotions from him, but I sure as hell wasn't expecting him to look conflicted, of all things, about new crewmates, much less a quintet of martial artist turtle-seals.

Boss Dugong obviously had more than a few braincells to rub together himself, especially if the way he picked up on Luffy's inner conflict as well and shot a quizzical look at him was anything to go by. "Is there a problem with that, sir?"

"Well…" Luffy tilted his head with a huff and a scowl as he poked at one of his temples. "I *reeeeally* want you guys to join because you seem like you're really cool…" His scowl deepened. "But I don't want you guys joining just because you were ordered to either!"

"WHAT!?"

Before any of us could react, Boss showed us *why* he'd been the second-in-command of a martial artist species by catapulting himself forwards and using his tail to pound Luffy's head downwards so that it squashed against the floorboards of the deck. Then, before Luffy could react, he grabbed the sides of his face and stretched his head out slightly as he glared him dead in the eye.

"Now, you listen to me, you mo-ronic rubber-brained dipstick!" the dugong spat indignantly. "Captain or not, don't you dare insult the pride and integrity of my Captain by accusing him of ordering us to do this, much less the pride of me and my boys by suggesting that we'd actually go through with a request like that like mere sea-sheep!" He then let Luffy go and march-waddled his way back to the other Dugongs, holding his fist before his face and shaking his head solemnly. It was all very dramatic. "No, no, we volunteered for this opportunity. Your crew has shown itself to be brave, valiant, and above all, utter *badasses*. To sail on your ship with you would be more than an honor. It would be a dream come true, an incredible, unprecedented opportunity! It would be… would be…"

"*A Man's Romance?*" Soundbite offered eagerly.

Boss blinked up in confusion before grinning eagerly. "Yes… yes, I like the sound of that… I *really* like the sound of that, I really, really do! Yes, to sail the seas with a shipful of *badasses*, becoming stronger every second of every day, that would be…" He leapt up on the deck's railing and puffed his chest out, stabbing his cigar into the air. "*A MAN'S ROMANCE!*"

"GO, BOSS, GO!" the other four Dugongs chorused, joining him in posing dramatically.

I could feel the sweatdrop hanging off my head and see the ones on almost everyone else. "I'm not the only one who feels like this is going to be a thing, right?" I asked *sotto voce*.

"Nope," Sanji replied in much the same tone.

"I was afraid you'd say that…"

Luffy, for his part, was appropriately awestruck from the aquatic martial artists' performance, stars shining eagerly in his eyes. "SO COOL! So, you guys *really* want to join my crew?"

Boss led the Dugongs in snapping into uniform salutes, their stances the epitome of martial pride. "SIR, YES, SIR!"
Our crew's reactions to our five newest crewmates varied. Usopp and Chopper had the same attitude as Luffy, starry-eyed awe; Zoro and Sanji had identical grins, most likely glad to have their pool of sparring partners boosted; Soundbite, Nami, and I just smiled and went along with it; and Vivi…

She was crying again, though the distress it caused was mitigated by the small smile she was sporting. Her reaction became especially curious when she scooped up one of the Dugongs and held it tightly in a manner not akin to a girl clutching a stuffed animal.

"Ah, Vivi?" I asked curiously.

"I-I think it will be wonderful to have them along..." Vivi sniffed happily as she held onto the Dugong. "A reminder of home... Somebody to help me remember Alabasta..."

The dugong she held promptly lost the confused, somewhat perturbed expression it had had, and tentatively relaxed in Vivi's embrace. Well, it would have been relaxed, except for...

"Vivi?" I offered as I tapped her shoulder. "The 'reminder' you're holding onto is starting to look a little green around the gills. Or blue, as it were."

"EEP!" Vivi yelped, promptly dropping the Dugong. "I am sooo so so sorry!"

"It's—cough—fine, your highness," the Dugong said, giving her an only slightly dizzy thumbs-up. "You've got quite a grip."

"OK, with that out of the way... Boss. How many dugongs does it take to tow a caravel?" Nami asked.

Boss tilted his head curiously. "Is that the start of a joke?"

Nami grinned cheekily, an action which did not inspire confidence. "More like a test of how macho you and your students really are."

Five minutes later, we were all but sailing away from Alabasta, propelled by the combined power of the wind in Merry's sails and the strength of the tails of our newest companions - though it didn't seem as though the Marines had enough firepower to spare towards us with the crew of the Great Kung-Fu Galleon hijacking their ships as the starting vessels of what I could only assume would come to be known as the 'Great Kung-Fu Fleet'.

Once the sandy continent fell out of sight beyond the horizon, I joined Nami and Vivi at the back of the ship as they watched the ocean stream beneath us. Both of them had tears in their eyes.

I hesitantly put a hand on their shoulders. "Don't worry. The World Government might be big and strong, but so's Alabasta. It's too big to reliably pull a Buster Call on, and I imagine that the terrain would make enforcing a siege next to impossible. Alabasta will be fine. I mean, if its king and princess are this strong—"

"No, Cross, it's not that..." Nami said miserably. Vivi and I both looked at her.

Nami was silent for a moment as she stared at the horizon before hanging her head with a groan. "... It's just... looking back... I... I think that the crocodile on top of Rain Dinners might have been solid gold."

It took exactly two seconds for me to comprehend what she was saying. After that, my thought process could be summed up as 'Sanji be damned, this time her avarice has gone too far.'
"WHAT IS YOUR MALFUNCTION, WOMAN?!" I yelled, rearing back my hand for a picture-perfect dope slap. My palm didn't make it to the back of her head, however, on account of Vivi catching my wrist mid-swing. I shot an incredulous look at the Princess… and froze as I caught sight of the sickly smile she was forcing onto her face.

"Oh, please, Cross, allow me," she said, far too calmly.

I felt cold sweat on the back of my neck, and if the fact that Nami and Soundbite suddenly broke out in the same was any indication, I had the right idea getting out of Vivi's way and back to the main deck of the ship, where Boss was doubled over panting, and his apprentices were flat on their backs, exhausted.

"Hoo… what a workout…" Boss huffed. "Haven't swam that hard since the Killer Catfish Migration of 77… we ate good that decade…"

"You guys didn't push yourselves too hard, did you?" I asked in concern.

"Too hard?" the gutsy dugong snapped an incredulous look at me before pulling himself up to his full (if somewhat negligible) height and flexing his muscles, an action that was mirrored with less enthusiasm by his students. "If this is any indication of you people's day-to-day lifestyle, I'd say that we've more than made a good choice! Yessiree, me and my boys are gonna get strong with you fellers, that's for sure!"

I couldn't help but cock my eyebrow at the macho display. Wow, if I didn't think this guy would get along well with Franky before...

I then chuckled at the weary, if exhausted support the rest of the Dugongs showed their leader. "Fair enough, fair enough. So…" I looked over the rest of the rest of our new crewmates curiously. "What're you guys's names? And, fair warning—no offense intended, mind you—but you all look a little alike to me, so chances are that I and everyone else might mix you up once in awhile." I shot a glare at Soundbite. "The fact that this one isn't differing your voices that much doesn't help either."

"I AM an artiste! I will not BE CENSORED BY MERE REALITY!" Soundbite sniffed petulantly, complete with stereotypical French accent.

The dugongs promptly perked up eagerly, and they glanced at each other, some unspoken agreement passing between them.

"Oh, that's not going to be a problem," said one of them before they got to their fins and started rummaging through their rucksacks, pulling out and donning a variety of items. Pushing through their fatigue, each one posed dramatically, showing off different colored headbands and weapons.

"I'm Mikey!" one with an orange bandana and two pairs of nunchucks waved eagerly.

"I'm Donny!" one with a purple bandana and a bo-staff saluted shyly.

"I'm Raphey!" one with a pink bandana and a pair of sais flexed proudly.

"And I'm Leo!" one with a blue bandana and a pair of katana held himself to attention. "And together, we are—!"

"The Super Duper Dugong Gang!"

"Boss Dugong's Badass Band!"
"The Uber Triple Ultra Duper—!"

The quartet cut themselves off as they looked at one another in shock before the self-proclaimed Leo held up a finger patiently. "One moment, please."

And with that the dugongs fell into a huddle.

"What the hell are you guys thinking, we decided this weeks ago—"

"No, YOU decided this weeks ago. WE all decided that that name sucked Sandora Dragon balls and that we needed a new one."

"What's this 'we' shit, Kemosabe? I thought it was fine!"

"SHUT UP, MIKEY!"

"Hey, you can't talk to the leader like that!"

"Leader, huh. I wonder what Boss'd say if he knew you'd said that?"

"I—buh—WELL, DON'T TELL HIM!"

"I can still hear you dipshits..." Boss ground out under his breath as he rubbed the bridge of his snout before shaking his head and giving a look that was half long-suffering, half fond. "They're a bunch of young morons, through and through, but they're still prodigies and they can do the job either way. It's why I took 'em on in the first place, so don't be too hard on 'em, 'kay?"

I was too busy gaping at the quartet in awe to react properly. "Buh—guh— wah—?"

"TEENAGE DUGONG WARRIOR SQUAD!"

"GACK!" I jumped in shock as Soundbite suddenly shouted before affixing him with a panicked look as I realized just what the hell he'd said. "Oh, nonono, hold on a second—!"

Unfortunately for my sanity, I was too late.

"Teenage Dugong Warrior Squad..." Leo mused before grinning eagerly. "I like it!"

"TDWS is a pretty nice acronym!" Donny conceded.

"And it sounds badass, to boot!" Mikey crowed with a laugh.

"The TDWS it is!" Raphey nodded definitively.

"Well, I'll be..." Boss whistled as he watched his students celebrate. "This is the longest I've ever seen these knuckleheads cooperate. I knew this crew was capable of miracles, I just knew it!"

THUNK! THUNK! THUNK! THUNK!

The relatively aged Dugong jumped and stared at me in shock as I repeatedly rammed my forehead into the mast. "Ah... you okay there, sir?"

"Ohhh, I'm fine..." I groaned despondently as I continued my motions, wearing an indent into the woodwork. "I'm just hammering in the final nails in the coffin of my sanity is all. I thought I'd be able to at least keep ahold of a few rotting dregs of the poor thing, but no, noooo, apparently it's already long-past due, so I'm just... finalizing the burial is all..."
"BAHAHAHA!" Soundbite cackled eagerly. "Yeeeesss, SUFFER, SUFFER! YOUR MADNESS NOURISHES ME!"

I paused in my ministrations as I jabbed my thumb up at Soundbite. "Yeah, this one isn't doing my psyche any favors. Now, unless there are any other curveballs coming my way—!"

"Um… actually?" Raphey raised his hand slowly. "I wanted to ask the snail why my voice is male."

I slowly turned my head to give the Dugong a flat look. "Isn't Raphey short for Raphael?" I asked warily, dreading the answer I feared was coming.

"Raphaella," the dugong corrected with an equally flat expression. "Why do you think my bandana is pink?"

I once more slowly turned my head, this time to glare at Soundbite. "Care to explain?"

The gastropod had the good grace to look somewhat abashed. "Eeeeh…?"

Lassoo glanced up from where he'd been sunbathing and chuffed in an unimpressed manner. "Don't blame him, I don't think this one is his fault. The aqua-terra language divide's always been tricky, I'm not surprised gender managed to slip through along the way."

"Sowwy!" Soundbite grinned sheepishly. "IS THIS better?"

"Mah-mah-mah…" Raphey hummed as she gave her newly feminine voice a test run, before smiling beatifically. "Perfecto!" Without any warning, she jerked her flipper and flung her sai, impaling it in the mast mere inches from Soundbite, causing him to shriek and snap back into his shell.

"Do that to me again and I won't miss!" she growled acridly.

I stared at the sai for a moment before thunking my head against the mast once more with a groan. "Once more, any other curveballs?"

"THUD!"

"MMMPH! GT'M' OUDDA THISH!"

"I had to ask," I moaned, somehow not even fazed by the sight of a hogtied Carue being tossed onto the deck, followed by the woman whose appearance I'd been dreading for the past twenty-four hours. "Your sense of dramatic timing is either fantastic or it sucks ass. I'm having a hard time telling which is which."

"I do believe that that would best be qualified as a matter of personal opinion," Nico Robin stated with a chuckle that reached her eyes in all the wrong ways as she strode onto the Going Merry's deck without a care in the world. "Wouldn't you agree, Mister Jeremiah?"

"YOU!"

"I think that she might categorically disagree with everything you say…” I sighed as I jabbed my thumb up at the upper deck, where Vivi had her Peacock Slashers drawn and spinning.

Nami was standing alongside her, doing her best to maintain her composure, though judging by the way she was glaring daggers at Robin and digging her fingers into the railing, she was fighting a losing battle with her temper. Zoro was standing to the side, watching her with a cold glare and crossed arms, a motion that Lassoo was pretty much mimicking by how he hadn't moved from where
he looked like he was snoozing.

Boss and his students were standing at the ready, though they appeared more confused than anything, Sanji was in full Category 5 Love Hurricane mode, Luffy was... clueless, Chopper and Usopp were cowering behind the mast—Chopper more out of confusion than anything—and Soundbite was more than making up for Lassoo's inactivity with his own snapping and growling.

Most would call this kind of situation tense. I'd say that that word didn't nearly cover the suffocating atmosphere hanging over the ship.

Overall? Quite typical for a Monday.

"What are you doing here, Miss All Sunday?! And what did you do to Carue?!” Vivi demanded.

Robin's response to the menacing tone was to smile beatifically at her ex-subordinate. "Miss Princess. I'm quite sorry about the predicament you found yourself in. I found your speech to be quite... impassioned. As for the duck, I didn't hurt him, if that's what you're worried about. I merely shut him up when he jumped aboard so as to ensure that he wouldn't give me away until we'd managed to lose the Marines, that's all."

"And the reason why you didn't tell me about the duck?" I blandly asked Soundbite.

He broke his glaring-spree off from Robin in favor of shooting a cheeky grin at me. "YOU SAID not to tell anyone about the intruders, and while I might act otherwise, I STILL like Carue SO I KEPT MUM!"

"You what!?" Vivi hissed, snapping her glare over at me.

I tensed fearfully under her gaze, pointing desperately at Carue. "For an order of priorities, might I suggest first the duck, then the bitch, then me?"

Vivi was silent as she maintained her glare for a moment longer before hissing out a tense sigh. "Could someone untie Carue, please?"

Before anyone could move, Raphey and Leo had unsheathed their weapons and leapt at Carue. One instant they were a blur of motion, the next they had their backs turned to the tense avian, slowly sliding their weapons into their sheathes. The second they were done, the ropes burst apart into nigh useless fragments, allowing Carue to squawk freely.

Luffy, Usopp, and Chopper stared in renewed awe, Zoro let out a low whistle of approval, and Robin clapped politely. "Most impressive," she complimented.

The dugongs blushed and preened proudly. "Our pleasure!"

"Cwazy wittle psychos..." Carue shivered before snapping his wing up at Vivi. "And before you ask, Soundbite's got a big mouth, and thewe was no fweaking way I was going to leave you; I've alweady pwomised you twice in the last two months that I nevew would! I tailed behind the west of the squad and snuck onboard aftah you finished loading. She—" he snapped a wing at Robin. "Tied me up as soon as I came... but if she hadn't, I pwobably would have come out on the deck and twied hugging you long befowe we were away fwom Alabasta. Vivi... I don't want to believe it, but would you have weally made me leave?"

Vivi searched for something to say, but apparently she was having a hard time determining just what was the right thing to say.
Carue waited for a moment before holding up his wing with a sigh and a grin. "Ah, fowget it. It's not wike I haven't always been the smawt one of us, wight?"

"Oh, shut up, you," Vivi said, trying to match Carue's grin as she jumped down and embraced the duck.

"As touching as this is," Zoro growled, his glare never leaving Robin. "Can we please address the elephant in the room?"

"Oh, don't mind me," Robin stated primly as she lounged in a folding chair she'd pulled out of the water pump cabinet. "Just pretend I'm not here. You won't even notice my presence."

"How comforting," Zoro grunted, not taking his hands off his swords.

I groaned tiredly as I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Geeze, woman, do you take pleasure at ticking off powerful people or…" I trailed off slightly before blinking in realization. "Huh, we've got more in common than I expected. Alright, withdrawn."

Robin chuckled while Vivi refocused her glare on me, backed up by Nami.

"Hey," I raised my hands in surrender. "I only kept mum about her being onboard; if you want to blame anyone for her actually being here, blame our captain."

Robin's smile widened impishly as she nodded in response to the disbelieving looks she received from the rest of the crew. "Your third mate is quite well-informed. Yes, you, Monkey D. Luffy," she grinned at our still oblivious captain. "Are the reason why I'm here. After all… I can't just let the suffering you've caused me go unpaid, can I?"

"WHAT?!" Sanji roared, his cigarette burning to a stub in an instant as he proceeded to attempt to throttle our captain. "Luffy, what the hell did you do?!"

"He did the most excruciating thing that a person can do," I pontificated in an overly flowery tone, drawing everyone's attention. "He saved her life when all she wanted was to die."

Sanji froze, his hands still wrapped around Luffy's neck. He looked from his captain to Robin, then back again, face stony. "I am… conflicted…" he finally managed to grind out.

"As am I…" Robin mused as she analyzed me intently.

I briefly enjoyed the sensation of knowing what it felt like to be a rodent trapped beneath a raptor's claws before steeling my spine and giving her a flat look. "Throw me overboard and you'll follow soon after, witch," I warned her as casually as I could manage. Honestly, it took quite a bit for me to keep my grin off my face.

The archaeologist considered my statement for a brief moment before shrugging. "Very well, then. Now, where was I… ah, yes, now I remember." She returned her grin to Luffy. "Monkey D. Luffy. You made me live when I had no further reason to do so. Hence, you now hold responsibility for my life. I'd like you to live up to that by allowing me to join your crew."

Silence reigned for a moment on the ship.

I sighed and shoved my fingers in my ears. "This is going to be loud…"

"WHAAAAAT!?"
"Called it."

"ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MIND!?!" Vivi shrieked, only just being held back by Carue.

"DAMNIT, CROSS!" Nami roared, slamming her palms on the upper deck's railing.

"And I thought we were brazen!" Boss chortled in amusement.

"I COULD KISS YOU, CAPTAIN!" Sanji sang rapturously.

"WHY IS EVERYONE YELLING, WILL SOMEONE TELL ME WHO THAT WOMAN IS?!?" Chopper shouted.

"NO! LUFFY, SAY NO!" Usopp pleaded from behind the mainmast.

Luffy tilted his head in his usual 'thinking pose' before shrugging. "Okay, sure."

"OH, COME ON!"

"Thank you very much, Captain," Robin nodded kindly before turning her smile to the rest of the crew. "And thank you all for allowing me to join your crew. Please…” She tilted her head to the side slightly. "Take good care of me."

Despite the fact that the woman was a cold, vicious assassin who'd actively tried to kill me a month ago… I couldn't help but feel a pang of regret at those words. A pang that made me smile back as honestly as I could manage.

Everyone else, meanwhile…

"LUFFY!" the saner members of the crew demanded indignantly.

"Shishishi!" Luffy chuckled as he smiled at them. "Ah, don't worry about it you guys! She's not a bad person, believe me!"

"Have you literally forgotten about the past month that attests otherwise!?" Vivi spat viciously.

The rubber-man's grin widened as he rubbed his finger beneath his nose. "Eh, you're overreacting."

"THE HELL I AM!" Vivi screamed, putting on an impressive burst of strength as she burst away from Carue. Thankfully, she chose to tackle Luffy instead of going for Robin.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Boss elbowing Lassoo in order to draw him out of the bored nap he'd fallen into. The dugong nodded towards the rest of the crew and circled his finger around his temple, and promptly grinned eagerly when Lassoo nodded in agreement.

"I'm behind you 100%, Captain!" Sanji piped up swiftly. "How could anyone of such beauty be a bad person?"

"Charmer," Robin chuckled.

"Seriously, can someone tell me who this woman is?!"

"Alright, Chopper, allow the Great Captain Usopp to educate you in the involvement of this most dangerous of women with our crew!"

In the midst of all these interactions, I was aware of Zoro and Nami advancing on me from both
flanks, both levelling… well, they weren't quite accusatory, but they were still something nonetheless. Of course, that didn't stop them from pinning me in place with so many visual harpoons.

"Alright, listen," I sighed as I ran my hand over my face. God, today had been a hell of a long day… "I'm sorry I didn't say anything, but discretion was key in this situation. Just… I know that this looks bad, but—!"

"Mister Jeremiah."

My blood froze at the frigid tone of voice that swept over the deck.

"Ahhhh shit," I hissed beneath my breath.

"Oooooh, you in troooot-BLEE!") Soundbite whistled, though if the fact he said it from within the safety of his shell was any indication, he was too scared of Vivi to watch.

And for good reason, considering the expression of pure, unrestrained rage that was on Vivi's face as she slowly advanced on me. I tried to back away from her, but I was promptly betrayed by two unrepentant hands from separate individuals catching my shoulders and holding me in place.

Silently cursing my superior officers, I instead hastily stuck my hands up in desperate surrender. "Now, Vivi," I despairingly attempted to soothe her. "I know that you're pissed at me, and you have each and every reason to be, but there is a very valid reason why I didn't tell you about Robin being onboard the Merry!"

"What?" Vivi hissed, her voice freezing the air.

I swallowed on nothing as I plastered a panicked smile on my face. "You were supposed to learn about her from a newspaper back in Alabasta a few months from now?"

If the way something in Vivi's eyes seemed to snap was anything to go by, that wasn't the right answer.

"Mercy?"

CRUNCH!

"GWARGH!" I yowled, collapsing on my ass and clutching my nose desperately as blood flowed freely around my fingers. "Son ob a bidch! Dis dime I dink you really brong id!"

"Be glad I don't break anything else!" Vivi snarled indignantly, her fist shaking at her side. And with that, she spun on her heel and stalked off, practically letting out puffs of steam with every breath and all but snapping the door to the storeroom off its hinges as she slammed it shut.

I stared after her silently for a moment before slumping onto my back with a weary sigh. "Vell, dis bides… Choppah?"

"Ah, right!" Chopper hastily dashed over to me and took hold of the fractured cartilage of my nose. "Ouch, minor compound, you're lucky the bone didn't break the skin… alright, deep breath. One-two—!"

KRACK!

"SWEET MOTHER OF MERCY!" I jerked up with a yelp, clutching my nose. "Damn that sucked…"
"Better than leaving it... eeeyaaaahh... broken," Chopper countered, rubbing his eyes after a yawn. "Man, I'm tired..."

A glance at the horizon revealed that the sun was indeed starting to sink into the sea. "Yeah, it's been a long day, but it seems like it's coming to an end. I think we all need some rest... hit the hay, everyone, let's call it a night."

"Aww, but Cross, I want to stay up long—!"

WHUMP!

"I'll get him into one of the hammocks," Zoro grunted as he hefted a snoring Luffy over his shoulder.

"Yeah, Cross has the right idea," Nami agreed, still looking halfway mutinous as she walked towards the storeroom, waving at Carue as she passed him. "Come on, duck. Let's go and convince Vivi to not murder Cross in his sleep, no matter how much I suspect I might support her if she does."

"Oh, joy..." Carue quacked wearily as he followed her.

I looked over at Boss Dugong. "So... look, I realize that you guys are small, but the guy's room is a bit cramped. Where are you—?"

"Psh!" The dugong waved me off easily. "Please, we came prepared." He retrieved his duffle bag and retrieved a tangle of green fiber and cellulose. "Seaweed hammocks. We typically hung them off of rocks on the Sandora's shore, but I imagine that the hull of your ship'll be plenty more comfortable, and the beasties more pleasant to boot! Sleep tight! Company, fall in!" And with that, the quintet leaped over the edge of the ship.

I then shifted my attention over to the last woman standing. "So... I trailed off uneasily. "On account of how you're liable to get lynched or gutted in your sleep if you join the girls in their cabin, might I recommend instead grabbing a blanket and book and taking the first watch?"

Robin chuckled, reaching over and plucking those same items out of the air as they were tossed at her. "My thoughts exactly, Mister Jeremiah. Will you be retiring as well?"

I considered for a moment before shrugging indifferently. "Nah, I'm gonna go to the dining room and read, try and take my mind off things." I waved at her lightly as I shambled towards the stairs. "Good night, Nico Robin."

"Good night to you, Jeremiah Cross. And you as well, Soundbite."

"Bite my slimy mucus ass!"

Five minutes later, I was sitting on a sack of supplies in the kitchen area, half-reading an adventure novel by candlelight.

Ten minutes later, I was fast asleep.

-0-

I woke slowly, blinking blearily as I tried to deal with the fact that several of my limbs had apparently fallen asleep alongside me. Well, it was official: reading the 'saucier' parts of a story right before going to bed? Never again. Seriously, bondage dreams? That was just too weird.

I made to sit up and massage my tingling limbs...
Only to find out that apparently that was less a dream than I thought it was because they wouldn't move.

Now that woke me up in a hurry. I tried moving my head, and to my relief I had enough give to glance at my wrists—which, naturally, were held to... whatever I was lying on by what appeared to be leather cuffs, of all things. Where the hell did whoever did this even get leather cuffs!? The only ones I'd seen the entire time I was in this world was—!

...was the set...

...used by...

"Oh, you're awake! That's good, that's good!"

Without any warning whatsoever, a very familiar goggle-clad face loomed over me, and the tooth-filled grin that was plastered on it would haunt my nightmares for years. Partly it was the grin itself, but mostly it was who was sporting it.

After all, this was the absolute last person I'd expect to pull something like this.

"See, I was getting really impatient and antsy and whatnot. I mean, I wanted to start early, I did, but that wouldn't be proper, would it? Anesthesia's a crutch, in my opinion! Better that the patient feel it all! Experience every single instant of SCIENCE! to its fullest, wouldn't you agree?"

I tried to say something… and promptly screamed into my gag as a bone saw buried itself in the wood inches from my face.

"Well, enough dillydallying, let's get to it!"

Chopper's grin widened to the point that it encapsulated most of his face.

"IT'S TIME TO BEGIN THE OPERATION!"
Xomniac AN: Primarily filler, but it's not like we can jump straight into Skypiea. Still, we hope you like it!

Patient AN: The filler in question is black powder, for Mr. Chekhov’s flintlock pistol. Or, to be more blatant, this is going to be all kinds of fun…

Hornet AN: Well, fun for you guys. Not so much for Cross. Also, this was supposed to be smaller, dammit!

The rational portion of my mind… had no part in my current thought process, which could be summed up as **HOLY FUCKING SHIT, I'M ABOUT TO BE DISSECTED!**

I tried to thrash out of my restraints, only to catch sight of Chopper quivering slightly as he giggled madly, shaking his head as he wrenched the bonesaw out of the wood.

"**Ooooor at least that's what I WOULD say if I were actually ready to begin. There's still so much equipment to prepare, so many preliminary tests that must be made! We wouldn't want SCIENCE! to be hindered by a miscarriage of protocol...**" His grin widened half past demented, taking on a predatory glint. "**Would we?**"

Chopper turned his back before I could respond in any way, rummaging through a thick packet of notes, and, more importantly and three times as distressingly, mulling over his bundle of surgical tools.

I craned my neck frantically for anything that could get me out of this deathtrap. I noticed a few scalpels embedded in the wood—one guess where *that* habit came from—distressingly close to my hand. That would have been a good thing if I could actually move a single fucking inch!… Wait a second.

A few jiggles confirmed that, yes indeed, the strap on my right hand had just a little bit of give to it, and every other jiggle gave me a little more to work with. I subtly started to work my arm, reaching desperately for one of the surgical knives. I had no clue what the hell I was going to do with it, but better to have it in my fingers than Chopper's hooves, *that* was for damn sure!
I just needed a little more… *a little more… almost—!* 

THWACK!

"MMMRPH!" I shrieked in muffled terror, wrenching my hand as far away as I could manage from the syringe that had buried itself in the wood mere millimeters from my fingertips. 

"Now, now, Cross…"

I snapped my gaze back to Chopper, who still had his back turned to me. 

"You really should stop squirming. All you're doing is needlessly increasing your heart rate, and that'll just make my work all the messier. And if my work is messy, then my SCIENCE! will be messy, too. And I don't want my SCIENCE! to be messy. So, you're going to lay still…"

THWACK!

All I could do was whimper pitifully as another syringe buried itself in the table, this one just above—or was it below?—the top of my head. 

"Or I'll get cross with you. And trust me…” Chopper turned his head slightly, the lenses of the goggles he was wearing glinting maniacally. "YOU DON'T WANT THAT."

Ooooh, yeah, Chopper had learned a lot more from Kureha than just medicine. 

Well, I was completely and utterly screwed. About to be cut open in the middle of the night by one of my best friends, intimately learning the meaning of the words ‘I have a gagged mouth and I must scream’—!… Wait a minute…

I started scanning the room again as a thought struck me. Soundbite *should* have been able to hear me, even *if* I was gagged, not to mention Chopper's own insane ramblings. Why the hell wasn't he —?
I suddenly met a pair of terror-filled eyestalks in a corner of the room as I got the answer to my question. There was Soundbite, far out of the way and out of my reach, clearly fighting to dislodge the bar of metal that Chopper had doubtlessly shoved as deep between his teeth as he could manage. On the plus side, Chopper had neither spoken with Kureha nor made the logical leap to using salt as a gag, so at least there wasn't any danger in that way… but on the other hand, as impressive as Soundbite's jaws might have been, he still had some limits.

That meant that Soundbite couldn't call for help, which meant that no one would know what was about to happen, and that meant…

"Okay! Now I'm really ready! Let's begin!"

That I really was screwed. Shit.

The Zoan-user took his sweet time walking over to me, looking me up and down the way that Luffy would eye a particularly tasty steak as he spun a scalpel in one hoof and a marker in the other.

"Alright, first off, allow me to begin by outlining what I have planned for tonight!"

In one swift jerk, Chopper slashed his scalpel along my body, cutting my shirt right down the middle and leaving the halves apart, exposing my torso.

… Terrifying though the experience was, I still managed to look on the bright side: provided I managed to survive this ordeal, I'd come out with a decent enough vest!

The chances of that dimmed considerably as Chopper started using the marker he was holding to draw a Y-shape on my body that several crime shows had made me intimately familiar with.

"For starters, I'll be investigating the physiological differences within your chest cavity!" Chopper explained cheerily. "Just some trivial things, really. The limits of your muscular and skeletal systems, the layout of your organs, pain tolerance… you know, the basics! After that…"

I crossed my eyes fearfully as he pulled my bangs back and started drawing on my forehead.
"We'll move on to the main event: your brain!" Chopper was practically drooling at this point, his grin a rictus of insanity. "Yeeesss, your valuable, valuable brain and all the miraculous discoveries that can be made within! Imagine all the discoveries that can be made from the brain of someone who came from an entirely different world! Oh, comparisons to our own neural pathways, anomalous genetic divergences, unique neurochemical makeups, ohhhh, the possibilities are ENDLESS! EHEEHEEHEE, I CAN'T WAIT!" Chopper zipped around to my side as he cackled madly, his scalpel glinting in the scarce lamplight as he held it aloft. "NO MORE WAITING! IT'S TIME TO BEGIN!"

I didn't dare move as Chopper slowly started to lower the implement towards me. Damn damn damn damn I was screwed! Unless some kind of miracle occurred soon, I'd be little more than so many spare pa—! … Oh, son of a—!

"GRGHSTRO-MMPHT, GRGHSTRO-MMPHT!" I howled around my gag just as the scalpel touched my chest.

Soundbite's eyes widened, and he took a second to bash his eyestalks together in exasperation before he concentrated intently and the piece of metal in his mouth shattered to pieces, alongside the crate he'd been perched on. He was forced to snap into his shell before he hit the ground, but the next second he filled the air with a furious klaxon that jolted Chopper to a stop.

"S.O.S., S.O.S.! MAYDAY, MAYDAY! WE NEED AN OLD PRIEST AND A YOUNG PRIEST, STAT! HEEEELP!" he wailed desperately.

Chopper snapped his attention to Soundbite with a scowl. "QUIET, VERMIN! CAN YOU NOT SEE THAT THERE IS SCIENCE! AFOOT!?" He swung his hoof back viciously. "IF YOU WON'T HOLD YOUR TONGUE, THEN ALLOW ME TO HOLD IT FOR YOU!"

Thankfully, before Chopper could let loose with the scalpel, the door to the dining room burst open, allowing the majority of the crew, sans our heaviest sleepers (Read, Luffy and Zoro), to burst in.

"Cross, what's wro—?" Sanji started to ask before taking in the scene before him with abject shock. "What the hell is going on here!??"

Chopper spun around with a snarl, his body shaking with murderous rage. "MORE INSECTS DARE TO IMPEDE THE PROGRESS OF SCIENCE!? SO BE IT!" He abruptly
metamorphosed into his far larger Muscle Point, brandishing several scalpels between his fingers menacingly. "COME ON! I'LL VIVISECT YOU ALL, ONE BY—!"

Before Chopper could finish that sentence, a small, thin blur lashed out at the now-mad doctor, wrapping around his wrists before he could react.

"What the—!?!"

The other end of the blur continued its journey around Chopper, spinning around and around and wrapping him up before snapping taut. Once the blur came to a stop, it was revealed to be none other than Boss, holding Chopper in place by means of what appeared to be an overly long piece of woven seaweed.

"Would somebody kindly help me with this nutjob?!" the dugong huffed heavily. "I might be a badass, but damn, he's big!"

"Fool!" Chopper barked, flexing his arms slightly. "Do you really think mere rope is enough to hold me?! It would be child's play to slip out! Observe!"

Just as Sanji swung his leg up to kick the mad doctor, Chopper reverted back to his Brain Point, causing the ropes to collapse around him.

"HA!" the human-reindeer crowed, his hooves thrust in the air victoriously. "Your feeble strategies are no match for my superior—!"

"Oh, will you shut up!?!" Boss growled before yanking on the seaweed rope, causing it to snap taut around the Zoan's ankles.

"WHAT THE—!?!"

"FORE!" Boss roared, twisting on his tail and spinning Chopper around like an olympic weight. Chopper barely made a revolution around the room…

"NEZ!"
Before Sanji lashed out a furious kick to the Zoan's face, cancelling his momentum with a fantastic slam! I took a particularly sadistic pleasure in watching Chopper come away much worse for the wear from the ordeal, his eyes rolled up in his head and a considerable amount of foam coming from his mouth.

"Well, that was new…" Sanji sighed wearily as he scratched his skull before glancing up at Boss. "Hey, good work with the ropes, though I don't think I've ever seen them used as a weapon like that."

"Actually, it's a ropedart, not just any old regular rope," the dugong replied, preening slightly and holding up the metal/coral dart at the end. "You need a good counterweight to get it to actually perform those kinds of maneuvers. Also handy for just smacking people with. And if we're complimenting each other's fighting skills, I gotta say, that was a damn impressive kick. I'd be hard-pressed to pull off anything as powerful, and not just due to my species' lack of mobility, let me tell you that!"

"Hey, don't sell yourself short there! I saw you moving, that was impressive! Tell you what, talk with me later and we'll see if I can teach you any techniques applicable to your physique! I'm sure that if we get you training right, your lower body can be as powerful a weapon as any! Sound good?"

"Well, I'd be mighty obliged! And say, while we're on the subject of cross-training—!

"Mmmph-gah, thank you," I nodded as a hand appeared to work the gag out of my mouth. "As I was saying, I hate to interrupt you two getting along so well, and honestly I'd love to contribute to the strengthening of the members of our crew, I really would, but as it so happens, I'm a bit tied up at the moment, so if you'd be so kind as to shut up and GET ME OUT OF HERE!?"

"PREACH IT, brotha!"

Thankfully, that prompted to Nami run up to me. "Cross, are you alright?"

I gave her as deadpan a look as I could manage while upside down. "I'm tied down to a table and one of my crewmates just tried to dissect me like a frog. Would you like to reconsider your question, or would you rather leave your foot where it is?"

Nami huffed. "How about I just untie you while you explain how in the world Chopper went from
cute and cuddly to wanting to cut you open?"

I opened my mouth to snark back, and shut it with a click as I remembered that relations with her were still somewhat strained, and that I didn't need to be untied to use my brain. "I'd be most grateful if you were to release me, yes," I politely requested.

"Allow me," a faux-warm voice purred, a flurry of petals heralding my release.

Any comfort I could have taken from my release was soured by Nami's own newly darkened expression. "Thanks a lot..." I grumbled as I sat up, massaging some life into my tingly wrists and ankles before turning my attention to Soundbite. "How you feeling, little guy?"

"Besides the fact that YOU ALMOST GOT KILLED BECAUSE I FORGOT about my powers, and I WAS PROBABLY next?" Soundbite snapped as one of the dugongs dug him out of the pile of splinters that had been his perch. "FUCKING PEACHY!"

"Which means that you're alive. Good." I nodded as I took the little gastropod back and put him on my shoulder. "Now then, moving on... would anyone care to tell me what the hell just happened!?"

"You mean you don't know, Cross?" Usopp asked, a hint of fear in his voice.

"I was strapped to a table with a psychotic reindeer about to carve me up like a spring turkey!" I snapped, spreading my arms helplessly. "Does it look like I have any idea about all of this!?"

"Perhaps the pressure of the past few days was too much for Mister Doctor and he finally snapped?" Robin suggested innocently.

I sent a pointed glare at the quasi-ex-assassin. "Thank you, Miss Assassin; sure, Chopper managed to live under high-stress conditions for several years without too much psychological damage, but we'll take that into consideration nonetheless." I looked away from Robin as her grin widened in amusement. "Does anyone else have any ideas?"

There was a moment of silence as everyone thought things over before Vivi raised a finger. "Cross, I could be off on this, but wouldn't you be the best person to talk to about anyone on this ship acting..." She cast a look at Robin before continuing. "Different from how they 'normally' would be?"
I blinked as I processed the statement before frowning thoughtfully. In the end, she was right. My presence had caused ripples, meaning that any changes were more often than not my fault. And seeing how Chopper didn't go crazy like this in canon, that meant that this somehow linked back to me. All I had to do was think about when I could have changed things to make Chopper act… differently… oooooh.

"Hang on a second…” I walked over to Chopper's abandoned pack and picked up the notes he'd been leafing through. He'd been filling the binder almost religiously while we were in Alabasta, so I could only assume that whatever it was he'd been working on was recorded in here. And assuming that whatever he'd been working on was what had driven him out of his mind…

Sadly, the search was easier hypothesized than done. It was quite jarring, really; intellectually, I knew that Chopper was an egghead of almost extreme proportions, but to see it laid out so plainly before me was something else entirely. The notebook was an absolute mess of incomprehensible words, indecipherable equations and formulas both chemical and mathematical in nature, and unintelligible diagrams, with pictures of what appeared to be brains showing up at a disturbing number of intervals.

I started to lose hope as I neared the end of the doctor's notes, approaching a border I'd identified where the notes suddenly descended into raving lunacy...

"C'mon, c'mon, c—hell-oooo…"

When I finally hit paydirt, or something I really hoped was it.

"What is it?" Usopp asked eagerly.

"Look at this,” I pointed out the passage I'd noted and started to trace it with my finger. "'Hypothetical possibility: Blunt force trauma to occipital lobe could initiate override of primary psychological configuration.'"

I really should have expected the blank expressions that almost everyone else in the room gave me.

I rolled my eyes with a sigh as I held an expectant hand out. "That means that I think I can fix him if someone were to hand me a rolling pin."
A disembodied hand promptly obliged.

"Thank you," I nodded gratefully, testing out my newly acquired instrument. It looked like it could do the job. Good heft, even weight…

Chopper suddenly starting to groan and shift on the floor robbed me of any other choices.

"Say 'megalomania!'" I requested as I reeled my arm back.

"Wha—?" Chopper started to ask groggily…

THWACK!

"YEOWCH!" Before jolting forwards in agony as I cracked him upside his skull. "WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT…for? What the…?" His roar of anger trailed off into confusion as he realized the exact situation he was in. Thankfully, his voice seemed to have lost the demented tone it had taken on before.

Chopper shifted around for a moment as he regained his bearings before glancing up at everyone uneasily. "Um… three questions. Why am I tied up, why did you hit me, and why exactly am I wearing my chemical goggles?"

"To answer your last question," Robin answered politely. "I imagine that you donned your goggles to avoid any splashback from entering your eyes mid-operation."

There was a tense silence before Chopper spoke again. "'Operation'?" he repeated nervously.

"AHEM," Soundbite cleared his throat, causing Chopper to turn around… and stare at the markings clearly present on my chest.

"Good morning to you too, Chopper," I greeted him dryly as I held my bangs up.
The doctor was uncomfortably quiet for the longest time before he hung his head with a groan. "I… have a lot of explaining to do, don't I?"

"Understatement…" one of the dugongs started to singsong before another slapped him upside his head.

"Let's start with these," I said, holding up the stack of notes. "You said that you'd tell us what you were researching when you had something concrete, and unless I miss my guess I'd say that you delivered with gusto just now. Am I wrong?"

Chopper squirmed nervously as he refused to meet my gaze. "No, you're… you're really not." He fell silent for a moment as he thought things over before shaking his head in defeat. "Alright, I guess I'll start at the beginning: Yuba."

"Yuba!?" Vivi repeated in shock. "What happened in Yuba that could have caused all of this!?"

I, however, understood what Chopper was saying perfectly, and I indicated as much by slapping a hand over my eyes with a groan. "You're talking about biofeedback, aren't you?"

"Yeah…" Chopper nodded solemnly. Noticing the confused looks everyone else was sporting, he explained. "I asked Cross for advice on how to properly exploit my Devil Fruit powers to their fullest despite me being a Zoan, and he suggested that I look into a concept known as biofeedback."

"Oh, boy, here comes the egghead stuff," Raphey groaned.

"You wanna go back to sleep? Because I kinda want to go back to sleep."

"Agreed."

"CRAM IT, YOU THREE!" Boss yelled, forcing the Dugongs to snap to attention.

"Yeah, some of us are trying to listen!" Donny concurred.
"To clarify, biofeedback is the rumored ability to control every inch of your body, making you able to do things like, say, move your hair as easily as your arms, or kick your own adrenaline into overdrive on a whim," I contributed, and the other three Dugongs suddenly seemed much more interested.

"Exactly, and I saw what you were getting at, too," Chopper nodded at me. "If I could combine biofeedback with the Human-Human Fruit's transformative properties, then I could quite possibly cut out the necessity of using my Rumble Balls. I could achieve all seven of my Points on my own, and that would be amazing. But…" He bowed his head. "It also got me thinking about something else. When you talked with us about Devil Fruits and you mentioned the Blind-Blind Fruit, you talked about how there are no boundaries on Fruits and how they often go beyond the obvious in their usages, you remember that?"

"Yeah…?" I nodded slowly in agreement.

"Well, I realized something when I thought about it: I'd forgotten the most obvious thing that the Human-Human Fruit gave me, the absolute core of my powers. Something that had been staring me in the face my entire life from the second I ate it in the first place!"

Silence fell as we all tried to figure out what he could be talking about…

Until Sanji ashed his cigarette in one shocked breath. "You're talking about your intelligence…" he summarized numbly.

"Exa—! Ah…" Chopper jerked as he tried to point at the cook, only to have the gesture halted by the ropes. "E-exactly. The transformative properties of my powers are only secondary when compared to the real difference my powers made, a difference that encompassed the meaning of the word 'human': my intelligence."

Dimly, I could feel a headache starting to form in the back of my head. "Why do I have a bad feeling that I know where this is going…” I groaned to myself.

"So, wait," Usopp interjected. "That research you were doing in Alubarna—?"

"I was studying all the literature they had on the brain and how it functions," Chopper nodded in agreement. "I thought that if the Human-Human Fruit could give me this much intelligence now and if I could manipulate it with chemicals already, maybe I could use more chemicals so that I could"
make myself even smarter! You know, exploit my fruit's powers even further like Cross suggested! So, I spent all my time researching trying to find what I'd need, and I found just what I was looking for before I went to sleep—!

"But as your IQ skyrocketed higher and higher, your sense of morality and your higher logic functions took a nosedive, yeah yeah, I've heard it all before…” I groaned as I massaged my now actively-throbbing temples. "So, let me get this straight… YOU MEAN THAT YOU—wait, has anyone here ever heard of a man named Robert Louis Stevenson?"

"I have," Vivi promptly replied, raising her hand. "His works were quite good."

"I've always been more a fan of Lovecraft and Shelley myself," Robin noted conversationally.

"Oh, good, that means that my analogy works," I nodded before returning to chastising Chopper. "YOU MEAN THAT YOU JEKYLL AND HYDE'D YOURSELF!? ARE YOU INSANE!?"

"Ah… not quite? After all, Hyde was explicitly less intelligent than Dr. Jekyll and was merely all of his darkness and vices unleashed, whereas I, ah… that is to say…” Chopper wilted uncomfortably before the combined glare the crew was giving him. "…kinda?"

Usopp sighed heavily as he shook his head. "Well, this has been one big fiasco. Still, after all of this, now you know better! So, all we have to do is get rid of the formula you used and then we can forget that this all ever happened, right?"

Chopper pointedly refused to meet any of our gazes as he squirmed uncomfortably. "Er…"

Soundbite facepalmed, inasmuch as he could with his eyestalks. "Of course not…"

"What is it?" Nami asked with mounting dread.

"Weeeell…" Chopper dragged out in a tone of voice that said he'd be poking his hooves together if he could. "The concoction I drank wasn't so much a temporary transformative serum like my Rumble Balls are… so much as it contained an enzyme I artificially manufactured that essentially turned a key in my brain?"
"What are you trying to say, doc?" Boss asked warily.

"It means that I can essentially still feel where all of that extra intelligence is in my mind…” Chopper trailed off slightly before hanging his head. "And it's not going away. Ever."

"Let me get this straight…” Nami groaned, pinching the bridge of her nose. "You're liable to turn into a mad scientist at the drop of a hat, forever, and we have no idea what triggers the change? Is that what you're saying?!

"Nononono, not at all, not at all!" Chopper shook his head in frantic denial. "I already told you, I can feel where the intelligence is! It's a permeable border in my brain, so long as I keep my head on straight then it can't affect me! If I delve into it, then I stay sane for a period of time…” He glanced at me uncomfortably. "Until my newfound intelligence overwhelms me and I become liable to act on my… less than logical impulses…”

"At which point we can bring you back to the world of the sane with a little bit of 'manual override', is that right?" I clarified, tapping the rolling pin I was holding in my palm.

Chopper nodded, and Nami sighed in relief. "OK, then you can just keep from doing it again, right? I mean, sure, the effects are impressive, but you came close to killing Cross… and despite recent developments, I don't think any of us seriously want him dead, right?"

Most everyone gave sounds of assent… though Vivi and Robin's silence was a bit telling.

"B-but—!" Chopper tried to protest.

"Chopper," I cut in, my voice rife with concern. "I'm not even mad about the dissection thing, because that wasn't entirely your fault. I'm more concerned about you. I mean, you almost did something that you would have regretted forever! What could possibly make that worth it?"

"Um…” Chopper tilted his head thoughtfully for a moment before perking up intently. "I didn't get a lot done before I… 'nosedived', so to speak, but… Look at the back of my notes, page 237. You see that formula in the middle of the page?"

"Um…” I followed his directions and found a long, unintelligible equation waiting for me. "Yeah, I do. What is it?"
"The new recipe I developed that I'll be using for my Rumble Balls from now on," he stated proudly.

I gave the human-reindeer a dubious look. "Chopper, while I'm sure a few extra seconds might be useful—!"

"Effectiveness is five minutes and cooldown is three hours."

I promptly slammed the notebook shut with an enthusiastic grin. "WELP! If I were you, doc, I'd see about installing a metal plate in my skull, because you are going to be undergoing a lot of blunt force trauma in the days to come!"

"Hooray!… I think…"

"…Well, that settles it. Pay up, Sanji," Usopp said.

I glanced back to see Sanji, a grimace on his face and his new cigarette half-gone already, hand the sniper a thousand Beri note. "Yeah, yeah, you win: Cross is actively trying to get himself killed."

"OI!" I barked indignantly.

"Are you really going to try and deny it!?" Usopp snorted.

I opened my mouth to respond… and reconsidered my answer midway as I held my hand out. "No, I was just going to ask for fifty percent of any proceedings done in my name."

"COPYRIGHT, BITCHES!" Soundbite cackled.

Usopp and Sanji exchanged looks, then the former looked at me.

"Ten percent."
"Forty-five percent."

"Fifteen percent."

"Thirty-five percent."

"...Thirty percent."

"Done," I said, grinning as three hundred Beri bills were slapped into my palm.

"Well, even with that out of the way, I don't think any of us are going to get back to sleep after this..." Vivi tapped her chin thoughtfully before snapping her fingers. "Well, seeing how Luffy didn't wake up... Sanji, how about making us some midnight snacks while we don't have to deal with him stealing off our plates?"

"Hmm. That actually sounds pretty good," Nami remarked.

"Right away, my lovelies~!"

And that was the end of that; while Boss and Usopp untied Chopper and the other dugongs set about clearing the table, the resident love cook spun into the kitchen and two of the three—four! No telling if dugongs are psychic—four females on the ship sat down.

Meanwhile, I took the opportunity the commotion presented to me to pull Robin outside, away from potential eavesdroppers as I chose to voice some... sensitive thoughts that had occurred to me and that I was less than willing to share with everyone else.

"Would you care to explain how you, of all people, didn't see Chopper come into the kitchen earlier?" I asked, frowning at her accusingly.

"Who's to say I didn't?" Robin replied with a serene smile.
I froze as I processed the implications, and promptly glowered at her. "Alright, then… would you care to explain why the hell you thought I deserved that? I don't like playing the debt card, but in case you forgot, you'd still be stranded on Alabasta if I hadn't kept my and his traps shut!" I jabbed my finger at a growling Soundbite. "I was trying to be nice to you, what did I—?"

"Do you really think I've forgotten?" Robin asked, much more quietly and much less serenely. "When we met in Whiskey Peak, you promised we'd meet again, and you'd pay me back for what I did to you then. I honestly thought nothing of the threat… until I discovered that you knew I had snuck onboard your ship the moment you arrived. I expected you to order me off, but as you have done nothing to stop me from joining your crew, I'm left to wonder what you have planned for your revenge."

I stared at her blankly for several seconds, pondering how to reply. I settled for slapping a hand to my face with a weary groan. "…I'm not going to take revenge, Nico Robin."

Soundbite let out an indignant squawk, and Robin raised a brow.

"Or at least…" I clarified. "I'm not going to take revenge today. Maybe not even tomorrow. You see —"

"I need to think a long, long time about just what I'm going to do with you," Soundbite cut in with a deep masculine voice, smirking widely. "I don't know, it might come to me, pff, in the middle of the night… or maybe next week or, a few years from now. In the meantime… why don't you worry about it?"

I chuckled at Soundbite's antics before promptly sobering up. "But seriously: I didn't plan and still don't plan on killing you. Embarrassing you? Sure. Humiliating you? Absolutely. But to kill a crewmate is the highest sin on any ship… and unless the captain says otherwise, you're part of this crew. Got it?" I finished, my expression deadly serious. Robin's expression was unreadable, but she nodded before turning back towards the dining room. I watched her for a moment before glancing at Soundbite and giving him a nod.

"Be afraid, Robin."

She froze, allowing me to breeze past her, staring at her with the sort serene smile she was used to giving.
"Be very afraid," I finished, Soundbite putting Uncle Phil's voice directly in my mouth, along with the following maniacal laugh.

"...I believe I'll go back to taking the watch now," she said in a voice of forced calm. She moved into the dining room long enough to ask Sanji to bring her plate to her when it was done before climbing back up to the crow's nest.

With that done, I walked back into the dining room, both Soundbite and me grinning like loons.

Those grins proceeded to die as I saw Vivi pointedly looking away from me as I entered, her face still set in a frown. I sat down some distance away from her, though I kept trying to catch her sight before, during, and after the meal. But she focused on anything but me, and the rest of the crew offered no help.

"It's going to be a long week, isn't it?" I muttered.

"Ah, dun' worry,—gulp!—Cross!" Luffy patted me on the back consolingly as he swallowed the mouthful of food he'd been chewing. "She came around after Yuba, she'll come around after this! Maybe after she eats? I know I get grumpy when I'm hungry!"

I nodded... before grabbing the back of his head and slamming it into the table. "QUIT EATING US OUT OF SHIP AND HOME, YOU GLUTTON!" I roared at the top of my lungs.

-0-

On a certain island in the most dangerous half of the most dangerous half of the most dangerous sea in the world (so basically the most dangerous quarter, really), one of the most dangerous pirate crews ever to sail lounged about, identical grimaces on all of their faces, as if they were waiting for something to happen. Nobody moved. Nobody made a sound. And then...

"Don don don don!" intoned their Transponder Snail, eliciting a chorus of pained moaning from the migraine-nursing men.

"Who the hell's calling at this hour? Don't they know what the cooldown period for hangovers is?" growled Red-Haired Shanks, who nobody would guess from his current appearance was one of the Four Emperors unless they knew him personally... and even then, those members of that scarce
cadre of individuals had their doubts.

"Don don don don!" the snail boomed again, eliciting groans from everyone again.

"Wait a sec, isn't that the broadcast from yesterday? Luffy's crew?" Benn Beckmann said, struggling to his feet.

"Hey, it is! Somebody answer it, I'll want something to listen to while I eat me some sea king meat!" Lucky Roux laughed as he walked towards the beach, dragging a yet-dead-to-the-world rookie behind him as the snail rung once more.

"And where do you think you're going?" Beckmann drawled, one eyebrow cocked.

"To catch said sea king, of course!"

"And you're taking our newest recruit with you because…?"

"Well, I'm not going to catch my first breakfast without bait, am I?" Roux explained in an 'are-you-an-idiot?' tone of voice.

"…Of course, what on earth was I thinking."

And that was how the newest crewmate of the Red-Haired Pirates set the new record for fastest recovery from a hangover… for all the good it did against Roux's iron grip.

Giving the deceptively strong glutton no more thought, one of the other crewmates finally picked up the snail's speaker, mid-don, and the rest of the pirates slowly gathered around.

"How much longer, Cross?" came a voice on the other end.

"Just a few more rings, I want as many people listening as possible," came the more familiar voice of Jeremiah Cross.
"Well, alright. But soon, 'kay? I'm really excited!"

"Hey, Yasopp, this guy sounds a lot like you!" Shanks laughed at his sniper. "Think that son of yours decided to follow you out to sea?"

"Ha! As if! The grog must have gone straight to your head, captain!" Yasopp scoffed as he waved his captain's hungover ramblings off. "And besides, my son is seventeen now! No way he'd set out that—!"

"Luffy is seventeen," Benn deadpanned.

Yasopp hesitated slightly at that before shrugging. "Yeah, but still, the chances of him having gone by Syrup Village are a hundred to one, it can't be him." Nevertheless, the sniper dug up a half-full bottle from the sand and took a swig to calm his nerves.

"Alright, that's enough, if anyone wants to join in they'll have to do it midway through! For now—!"

"IT'S TIME to start THE SBS!"

"… That's going to be a thing now, isn't it?"

"EEYUP!"

The Red-Haired Pirates roared with laughter as Cross grumbled mutinously.

"Never thought I'd say this about a snail, but I like his attitude!" Shanks cackled, earning him a momentary glare from their own Snail before it reassumed its pouty expression.

"… Even across dimensions… I feel your pain, Goda-sensei, I really do… bah, whatever. Aaaanyways, let's get to it. For now, we'll be cold-starting this broadcast with a general interview and talking some shop with our ship's sniper and all-around tinkerer. Please give a warm welcome to him, all the way from… yeah, better not name his home, huh? Well, all the way from the East
Blue, at least, Usopp!"

"PFFFT!"

The Red-Haired Pirates fell into shocked silence as their resident sniper sprayed the alcohol he’d been chugging over the beach. At least, until both he and the captain leapt at each other simultaneously and fell into a brawl.

"OUCH! WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU ATTACKING ME FOR, YASOPP!? I THOUGHT YOU’D BE HAPPY THAT YOUR SON’S A PIRATE!"

"I AM HAPPY HE’S A PIRATE, I COULDN’T BE PROUDER! MY FATHERLY INSTINCTS, ON THE OTHER HAND, ARE PISSED THAT YOUR PROTÉGÉ DRAGGED HIM AWAY FROM OUR QUIET VILLAGE INTO THIS CRAZY LIFE!"

"IT'S NOT THAT BAD!"

"I got my breakfast!" Lucky Roux crowed as he walked back to the crew, dragging a ten-ton behemoth behind him with one hand and a comatose crewmate with the other. "And the rookie’s still alive! So that’s also nice!"

"YOU’RE A DEAD MAN, SHANKS! ALSO, WHY THE HELL ARE YOU ATTACKING ME!?"

"YOU WASTED GOOD BOOZE, YOU BASTARD!"

SLAM! SLAM!

"SHUT UP, YOU IDIOTS!" Benn roared, unknowingly doing an orange-headed navigator and a retired first mate proud with the size of the dual goose eggs he lumped on his captain and crewmate. "WE CAN’T HEAR A THING OVER YOUR BRAWLING!"

"Now, before we start, chances are that either Usopp's father or someone who knows him is listening to this broadcast. That being the case, Usopp has a few words for him personally before we get into the swing of things. Usopp?"
Dead silence fell on both ends for a few seconds before Usopp's voice came through.

"Dad… I've looked up to you from the day you left home. Mom died when I was 7, but I never blamed you for following your heart out to the sea. From the first time I saw the sea, I felt the same way… I always wanted to follow in your footsteps. So, when Luffy came along and told me how you always went on and on about me… it made me happy, and even more determined to follow in your footsteps—oh, and before I forget, a message to any Marines that are listening in: Kuro of the Thousand Plans faked his death three years ago. My captain beat him when he challenged him, but didn't kill him. I don't know what Kuro's up to now, but he's still alive. Alright…anyway, Dad, here I am, the sniper of the Straw Hat Pirates. My captain plans to fulfill the promise he made to your captain… and when we finally meet again, it'll be as two equal Brave Warriors of the Sea."

Yasopp rubbed at one of his eyes, and Shanks grinned as he clapped him on the back.

The mood was promptly broken by a resounding cry of "DADDY'S BOY!"

The line was then overwhelmed by the sound of scuffling and brawling. "I'm going to turn you inside out and use your shell as a trophy! You hear me, you slimy little jackass!? A TROPHY!"

"JUST try it DADDY'S BOY! HOHOHOHOOheeheeheeHAHAHA!"

"GET—OUCH!—GET OFF OF ME USO—YEOWCH!—AND LEAVE MY SNAIL ALONE!"

And the Red-Haired Pirates could barely hear anything else over their renewed laughter.

-o-

Lassoo whined pitifully as he shrunk in on himself, putting on the biggest pair of puppy dog eyes he could muster up. "Do we reaaally have to do this? I-I mean, I think that my cold's passed, really!"

"Weeell, we don't have to…" I looked up faux-contemplatively before giving the canine-weapon a flat look. "As long as you're willing to walk everywhere, and maybe take some lessons from Zoro and Sanji to be sure you can run fast enough to keep up with us."
The spark of hope in his eyes died, and he went back to whining.

"Besides, you were all gung-ho about getting rid of the cold yesterday!" I pressed firmly.

Lassoo's hackles cocked up an inch as he glared at Chopper and Usopp, snapping at them and causing them to flinch back. "Yesterday you only said that the long-nosed liar would have to dig through me! Now you want the newly-mad doctor to rummage through my insides too!? He's not even good with mechanics!"

"But he is without a doubt one of the foremost experts on Zoan-type Devil Fruits in this hemisphere, and while he might not have any experience with Devil Fruit-inbued objects, he's a fast study," I explained. Again. "So, either you let him help you, or you're not going to have anyone around to help your mangy ass should anything translate wrong to your biological side."

"What's it gonna be, MUTT?" Soundbite demanded.

Lassoo ground his fangs for a moment as he mulled things over before chuffing and glaring darkly at Usopp. "If I don't wake up, I swear that I'm going to haunt you to the end of your days…"

With that parting statement, the weapon's body promptly distorted, his fur and flesh melting into polished metal, his circular barrel prevented from toppling over by his prominent shoulder-mounts.

Usopp stared blankly at the cannon for a moment before giving me a searching look. "Are you sure you don't want me to 'fix' him while I'm at it?" he asked in a voice that plainly stated he was only barely joking. "Who knows, it might improve his attitude."

I won't lie, I did consider it for a brief moment before shaking my head. "Just a tune-up and a weight trim, Usopp, nothing more. And fair warning, he can hear you while he's like this."

"Why do you think I said it…" Usopp muttered under his breath as he knelt over the weapon. "Alright, you said he had a manual?"

"Yeah, Miss Merry Christmas said that she stashed it in a compartment on him," I answered as I gave Lassoo's weapon-form a look-over. He was a lot like a typical pirate ship cannon, only combined
with a portable rocket launcher. His bore was almost half the size of half a soccer ball, and the bulge in his barrel where his ammo was to be loaded was about the size of a beach ball. Overall, it was easy to see why Mr. 4 had been his user: chances were that the list of people capable of lifting him with ease without the use of Haki was as long as Zoro's directions were comprehensible. "If I had to guess, I'd say that it's probably hidden, so—!"

"Found it."

"Eh?" I blinked in surprise.

Usopp held up a pamphlet of papers an inch or two thick. "Hidden in the inner lining of his breech. Ingenious, really. It'd almost be risky if the materials that he was made of weren't sturdy enough. Now, let's see here…" He started flicking through the manual, his eyes scanning over the mechanical diagrams that covered the pages. "Hmm, looks like this only talks about how the gun itself works…"

"That's probably all that we'll need, though," Chopper noted. "After all, Lassoo's base form is a gun. I agree with Cross's assumption that any issues with him could be translating from mechanical to biological. I've already given him a look while he was fully canine and I didn't find anything, so whatever's causing his sneezing must be from a mechanical deficiency."

"Try looking for something around his base," I suggested. "Could be that something's wrong with his firing pin or—"

"Got it."

I felt a vein bulge on my forehead. "Alright, now you're starting to tick me off."

Usopp ignored me in favor of showing off the complicated diagram he'd found. "It's his trigger mechanism, see? There's a design flaw in it; he can still fire fine, no problem, but it's also feather-sensitive. One wrong shake or movement—!"

"BOO—!"

BOOM!
Soundbite was cut off when we all jumped in shock as a stray wave suddenly hit the Merry, causing Lassoo to spontaneously discharge a baseball off the port bow.

We stared after the plume of water the wayward projectile had left before Usopp finally got his mouth working again. "Yeah, that… and I'm guessing that the sensitivity transferred over… maybe to his sinuses?"

Lassoo took this opportunity to shift into his canine-form, snorting and rubbing a paw over his snout. "Sorry about that…" he grumbled before looking up curiously. "But do you think you can fix it?"

"Hmm…" Usopp pondered, poring over the manual again. "The real question here is why they used this kind of mechanism in the first place. It's obviously inefficient, so why—waaaiit…" Usopp flipped a few pages in the manual before tapping something he found and grinning victoriously. "Just as I thought! The trigger mechanism is so complicated because it was the only one they could come up with capable of launching and activating ammunition as unusual as the mutt's baseballs!"

He blinked as he thought that statement over before scratching his chin contemplatively. "Actually, I was wondering about that. How many baseball bombs do you have? I mean, you never seem to run out, you fired dozens of them while you were fighting us, and I never saw 4 or Christmas carrying any ammo belts—"

"I think I can explain that," Chopper offered thoughtfully. "Like the way the sensitivity of the trigger translates to the sensitivity of his sinuses, I hypothesize that Lassoo is capable of generating baseballs within his abdomen the same way the body produces stomach acid or bile." His mouth slowly started to open in a grin, widening molar by molar. "And it makes sense that it doesn't affect your hunger, either; as countless Zoa fruits have displayed in the past, the powers are fully capable of producing mass in pre-determined formations out of thin air! It's only a small leap to assume that this ability could be used to replicate non-orga—GACK! I'M BACK, I'M BACK, DON'T HIT ME!" Chopper promptly yelped, flinching away from me in a panic as I raised my gauntlet-clad fist.

"Mmm-hmm…"

"Mmmhmm, I'm pretty sure that's how it goes…" Lassoo nodded in agreement, surreptitiously sliding a bit further away from Chopper. "I can't remember ever having to reload, and Master almost always had me in my hybrid form when we were fighting."

"Ohhh, now that gives me an idea," Usopp said, grinning. "If Lassoo can replicate any ammo in his chamber and hock it up, then I've got the perfect idea for an upgrade: I'll replace the trigger mechanism with something a lot more compact and efficient, and that'll let me fit in a cylinder, like in
that revolver Mr. 5 had, which should allow for variable ammunition!"

"Ah, Usopp!" Chopper hastily piped up. "If you do that, you'll need to spread out the slimming down as evenly as possible, because if one part of his anatomy is slimmer than the rest, it could cause severe anomalies to appear in his biological transformation."

I looked at Lassoo, who looked between the doctor and the inventor before speaking.

"Just as long as my overall stopping power doesn't get cut down, that's all fine by me," he sighed at last.

"Alright, then!" Usopp clapped his hands with a truly evil smile. "Cross, go and get Zoro. We're going to be doing a lot of precise metal-cutting. Once he's here…” The sniper's grin widened viciously as he yanked his goggles down over his eyes. "We can begin the operation!"

His grin promptly disappeared when Chopper snapped into his Muscle Point and cracked his fist over his friend's skull.

"NOT FUNNY!"

-0-

"Well, it appears that this Soundbite doesn't have a lot of latitude in ways of personality, does he?" Merry mused as he poured out a cup of hot chocolate for himself.

"It was kinda rude for him to ruin the moment for the Captain," Carrot said, the only one of the Veggie trio currently awake.

"Hmm, maybe so…” Kaya mused as she blew on her on mug.

"AND YOU smell like it TOO! Shishishi!"
"Watch it, shit-snail, or you'll wind up in my pan for Nami-swan's lunch instead!"

"I'LL BE GOOD, I'll be good!" the snail hastily yelped.

"But you can't help but admit that he's quite humorous, wouldn't you say?" Kaya couldn't help but giggle.

"Alright, with the resident jackass nicely chastised, let's get back to it. So, Sanji, you were saying?"

"Ah, yes... as any chef of the sea worth his salt will tell you, not a single scrap of food should be wasted. Once you've extracted what many people would call 'the best parts,' you're left with enough materials to make another full-course meal. Pulverize the bones and head of the fish, mix in the guts and whatever scraps you have from the vegetables, except the skins, then roll the meat into balls and deep-fry them. Bitterness whets the appetite, preparing for the vegetable dish; vegetable skins have just as much to give as the cores..."

"I think that I should fetch the chef, he'll enjoy listening to this," Merry mused contemplatively as Sanji went on. "And their cook is so polite, too. The spitting image of a gentleman!"

"Well, I'll say this for your methodology, Sanji, this definitely looks good. Mind if I—?" A wooden THWACK rang out over the connection. "YEOWCH! WHAT THE HELL, BASTARD?! YOU LET NAMI TASTE ALL THE TIME!"

"Yes, but she's a beautiful woman, whereas you're nothing but a shitty tactician with an even shittier snail on his shoulder."

"EXCUSE ME!?"

"WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME ONE OF YOUR PLANS ACTUALLY WORKED, HUH?! NOW BEAT IT, YOU'LL EAT WITH THE REST OF THE SHITTY GUYS IN HALF AN HOUR!"

"SHIT COOK!"

"BITE ME, SHIT SNAI—YEOWCH!"
"I stand corrected. Shame on me for expecting Luffy to have anyone fully sensible on his crew…"
The butler trailed off while the younger members of the audience fell into fits of laughter.

-o-

"Alright, Soundbite," I stated as I lowered a pair of goggles over my eyes. "Are you ready to go?"

The gastropod gave me a flat look as he shifted around on the slab of meat he was sitting on.
"YEAH YEAH, I'm ready. But are the GOGGLES REALLY necessary?"

"With any luck, no…" I shook my head as I positioned myself behind the Merry's mast. "But am I lucky enough to not need them?"

"No, you are most definitely not," Sanji said, shaking his head in agreement as he joined me, positioning his own goggles.

"And why is swirly-BROW HERE?"

"Because it's bad enough that you two are using perfectly good food to test an attack." The cook glared at me for a moment, prompting me to fling up my hands in surrender before he directed his attention back at Soundbite. "There's no way in hell that I'm going to let you do this unsupervised. So, either I watch you do it, or you don't do it at all."

"Tsk. Fiiiiine…"

"Alright, then…" I leaned around the mast to watch Soundbite, an action that Sanji mirrored. "Okay, Soundbite… Gastro-Blast, as hard as you can!"

Soundbite's grin became absolutely vicious as he held himself up high. "BOOM-BOOM-CLAP!!"

SPLAT!
I flinched behind the mast as the attack performed exactly as expected.

A little bit beyond 'as expected', actually, as the puréed meat that had covered my face and most of the deck attested to.

I blew out the breath I'd been holding, shifted the goggles to my forehead and glanced at Sanji, who didn't look so much angry as downright stunned by what had just happened. "Still think I'm nuts for wearing these things?"

"Alright, so you WERE RIGHT!"

I blinked in surprise at the fact that the direction of Soundbite's voice had changed and promptly looked towards where it was originating from.

"NOW GET ME DOWN FROM HERE!" he yowled from where he was clutching to our flag for dear life.

I blinked up at him in shock. "Riiight…” I looked back at Sanji with a sheepish grin. "Provided you're not too mad at us, think you could get Soundbite down from there? I don't think I could climb the mast fast enough to get him before he loses his grip."

"Mad?" Sanji breathed, before grinning. "Mad?! Why would I be mad? Look at this!"

I flinched back as Sanji shoved a piece of meat that had been thrown at him under my nose. "Uh, great?" I said shakily. "Listen, could you maybe get Soundbite before explaining what's got you so happy? Because while snails might have great grips, there are still limits, and the sea is made of saltwater, sooo…?"

Sanji frowned momentarily before jumping the full distance to the crow's nest, casually plucking Soundbite off of the flag, and jumping back down. I blinked as the chef handed the gastropod over to me.

"Ooookay," I said as I slowly placed the twitchy snail back on my shoulder. "You were saying?"
The grin was back full force as Sanji brought back up the chunk of meat. "Alright, take a good look at this. Notice anything?"

I squinted at the meat, which looked like… well, meat. "I'm not seeing anything special besides the fact that that looks like a clump of mashed potatoes, Sanji," I replied.

"Well, this is what I get for signing up for a pirate crew," Sanji sighed. "Okay, first of all, Soundbite flash-cooked the meat. This—" He held up the brown lump again. "Is edible. I'd need to wash it, but it's edible. You could eat it right now. And second—"

Sanji pressed his fingers together, the meat shifting like chewing gum. "It's tender. Really tender. I'm sure you've heard the phrase 'melt in your mouth' applied to meat, but with a little refinement you could probably produce meat that actually melts in your mouth. Do you have any idea the culinary possibilities this opens up? This could be the greatest discovery in cuisine since… since canning!"

"And all at the low-low cost of an attack that no human could possibly survive and that Miss Friday was really lucky to walk away from," I deadpanned. "I hope you really like working with hyper-puréed ingredients, Sanji, because until we reach dry land and find some rocks or trees for Soundbite to practice on, a lot of ingredients are going to be very drinkable."

The chef paused as he contemplated that statement, looking at the meat we were coated in in a whole new light. "I… you might have a point."

"Oh, I don't know…"

The three of us glanced up at the top level of the Merry, where Robin was leaning on the railing next to Nami's orchard.

"I can certainly see the appeal of an attack as lethal as that one. Although…" She swiped a stray puddle of liquified meat off of her shoulder and pinched it between her thumb and forefinger. "I suppose it could do to make less of a mess…"

"Not all of us are balls-DEEP IN Neutral Evil, bitch," Soundbite grumbled beneath his breath.
"Excuse me?"

I slapped Soundbite upside his shell before raising my voice. "Some of us prefer to opt for painful but non-lethal when we have the option available to us. I know that not killing isn't going to be an option forever, but that sure the hell doesn't mean that I'm not going to try and stay nonlethal for as long as I can. And besides…” I snapped out my baton and waved it in a telling manner. "As I'm sure the cracks in Mr. 13's skull will tell you, nonlethal does not necessarily mean soft, capiche?"

Robin chuckled lightly in response before holding her shirt out from her chest. "Well, on another topic, I feel I must ask: if messes like this are any indication, I'm going to need some new clothes the next time we reach a populated island. Might I know what the ship's policy is on our wardrobes?" she posed politely.

STOMP!

All attention turned towards the doorway to the ship's cannon room, where Nami was leaning inside the frame of the door like a legitimate badass.

"Just how stupid do you think we are?" the navigator demanded coldly, glancing up at our new archaeologist out of the corner of her eye. "You might have managed to fool Luffy, not that that's exactly hard, and I'm sure that Cross has some reason that he's so cryptic around you, but me?" She jabbed a thumb at her chest with a dry chuckle. "I'm smart. I remember who you are. I remember that you were Crocodile's partner, and I remember what you did to Vivi and her country. You can play innocent and pretend to be our friend for as long as you want, but the second you slip up, the moment you show your true colors…” In a flash she had her Clima-Tact assembled and pointing at Robin; the accompanying glare was arguably even more threatening than the electricity crackling over the tip. "I swear that I will beat you senseless, and you won't see me coming even if you have eyes on every square inch of the Merry. Understood?"

Soundbite let out a low whistle. "Daaaaaaamn, GURL!"

I glanced up at Robin, and sighed at the way she was smiling before holding up my fingers. "And in three, two, one…"

"Oh, yes, perfectly understood. By the way… this is a bit of a non-sequitur, but I thought you should know that I managed to… liberate some of Crocodile's treasure as I left Alabasta. Would you care for some jewels?"
I had to actively fight to not be bowled over by the air current that formed from Nami rushing past me as she ran to glomp onto Robin. "I'LL LOVE YOU FOREVER, BIG SIS!" she cried enthusiastically, her beri-shaped eyes shining just as much as she was drooling.

"NAMI!"

Nami snapped out of her wealth-lust in an instant as Vivi's voice cracked over her like a whip, her expression much like that of a child whose hand had gotten caught in a cookie jar as she faltered under the glare the princess was pinning her with from the forecastle.

"C-C'mon, Vivi!" she pleaded as she waved her arms energetically. "Th-This isn't what it looks like!"

"Even though it really is," Robin smoothly replied.

"N-n-no, it isn't! I'm ah, I'm..." Nami sputtered as she looked for a solution before her eyes alighted on the bag in Robin's hand, which she swiftly snatched up and displayed prominently. "See!? I'm stealing from her, I stole this! I-It was all just a ruse to get close to her! Cat Thief Nami strikes once again! Hahaha—!"

"Actually…"

Nami froze mid-hamtastic-laugh as Robin's cool voice swept over her. "Those jewels were always intended for you, so really, all you're doing is taking my gift a little early."

"STOP HELPING ME!" Nami howled as she shook Robin's collar furiously, not even fazing the woman.

"OH, LADIES, PLEASE STOP FIGHTING! MY HEART CANNOT—!" Sanji cried, spinning over to where Nami was attempting to throttle Robin... and unfortunately putting himself in range of Nami's wrath.

"THAT GOES FOR YOU TOO, LOVERBOY!" she raged, laying him out flat with a single punch before returning her attention to Robin.
I felt a sweatdrop hang off my skull before I glanced up at Vivi with a reassuring smile. "Look… Nami might have had a moment of weakness, but that's just how she is. You know that this won't change the fact that she'll always be on your side, right?"

My question was met with a cold stare and silence.

"R-right?"

Vivi turned away, giving me no answer as she refocused her attention on Usopp, whom she and Carue had been discussing matters of weaponry with throughout our little… experiment. "Sorry about that. So, you were saying?"

"Uh… riight… How about this, then?" Usopp asked, holding up a sketch. Vivi took it and looked it over before nodding thoughtfully.

"Hmm… it seems heavier than I'm used to, but then again, I suppose that maybe I shouldn't be going subtle anymore. I think I can work with that."

"And whad aboud me?" Carue squawked.

I heard the sound of a page turning, and I barely registered Carue squawking again, either in excitement or disbelief, I couldn't tell which.

I kept my forlorn gaze on the forecastle for a moment before looking at Soundbite, who was himself sporting an uncomfortable grimace. "I need to fix this…"

-0-

"YOYOI!" yelled a ridiculously tall man with an equally ridiculous head of pink hair. "And I thought that ooouuur training was the only series of exercises so very seveeere!"

"For once, I agree with you," Jabra said, staring at the snail with an expression that was half-disgusted, half-impressed. "He may be a pirate, but if we ever end up fighting, I think he'll be able to put up a decent fight."
"But you shouldn't believe everything you hear, chapapa!" Fukuro said sagely.

"YOU'RE ONE TO TALK! YOU'RE ENIES LOBBY'S GO-TO FOR GOSSIP!" the wolf-man howled, clawing for the zipper to his mouthy compatriot's mouth.

"So, yeah, if any of you want to become anything along the lines of the world's greatest swordsman? Remember this: that workout that you just heard Zoro put me through, one of many I've gone through since entering the Grand Line, just to get me to the point where I'll have a snowball's chance in Hell of standing up to him in a fair fight? He could do it with an elephant on his back, chugging a jug of sake that could melt Whitebeard's liver—-you heard me, old man, I'm not taking it back!—while holding his sword in his teeth and with hot coals tied to his feet."

"AND HE'S being generous!"

"Huh. That actually sounds like a nice challenge, Cross; any idea where I can get an elephant?"

"Here, chapapa," Fukuro said, glancing at the animated sword that was currently eating fruit with its trunk.

"WILL YOU CRAM IT ALREADY!?"

"… Yeah, no. I'm just going to walk away and spare whatever dregs of my sanity are left… though really, that's just draining away, day by—oh, there's our new crewmate, let's see if she has anything to say! Hey, R—Mmph!"

"Huh?" Jabra blinked in confusion as the line went silent for a moment. With his acute hearing, he heard the sound of a pen moving on paper before said paper rustled.

"YOYOI! Perhaps some tragic misfortune has befallen our beloved commentator! Oh woe, oh tragedy—-!" Kumadori started to lament.

"You realize that seeing how he's a pirate and we work for the World Government, we're mortal enemies with your 'beloved commentator', right?" Jabra reminded him dryly.
"INDEED! And such is the core of my misery! For though our lives deem us irreconcilable foes, my heart goes out to him yet for the showmanship he provides!"

The kabuki incarnate dropped to his knees, a large knife in his hand.

"As atonement for this unforgivable fallacy of Justice, I shall open my stomach! Iron Body." The last words were droned out of habit as he plunged the blade into his stomach… and shattered it.

Jabra slapped a palm to his face, forcing himself to ignore his first instinct to gut his teammate himself, and instead focused on the question that came to mind. "Where the hell do you keep getting those swords anyways? I thought Spandam ordered the guys in the armory to cut you off!"

"They did. He's been stealing them from your collection," Fukuro provided out of the corner of his mouth.

"I TOLD YOU THAT IN CONFIDENCE, YOYOI!"

Well, so much for ignoring that instinct.

"Okay, that's it," Jabra growled, fur sprouting all over his body as he put on several tons of pure muscle. "Everyone dies."

Thankfully for the two now-panicking assassins, they were saved by the broadcast promptly resuming. "Sorry about that everyone, just had a… difference of opinion to sort out," Cross apologized in a slightly put off tone of voice. Jabra got the distinct impression that the line had been delivered through gritted teeth.

"Would it help if I said I had stage-fright?" someone answered in a teasing tone. The voice was unique to say the least, both a male voice and a female voice speaking at once, producing an odd reverb effect.

"It would if I actually believed you for a second…" Cross grumbled before sighing heavily. "Anyways… This is our newest crewmate, XXX. If you're wondering about the static just now, as well as—huh? Seriously? Ergh, you're killing my freedom of the press here!—as well as their name
being edited out, that was on account of XXX requesting that Soundbite censor out everything pertaining to their identity, on account of them being a somewhat infamous figure and really valuing their privacy. Needless to say, we won't be getting much out of them for this broadcast.

"My deepest apologies," the mystery figure replied in a tone of voice that plainly said he or she was both not sorry at all and more amused than anything.

"For the record, you do realize that a few words from you could blow the minds of people the world over, right? Not to mention the fact that I highly doubt we could be any more wanted if we tried," Cross pointed out.

Silence came from the other end for a few moments.

"Perhaps at a later date…" came the voice. "But I feel I should warn you, Cross: the more you try and set the world on fire, the less ground you'll have to stand on."

"We all live in a house on fire, no fire department to call; no way out, just the upstairs window to look out of while the fire burns the house down with us trapped, locked in it," an old, weathered voice responded.

"Soundbite's got a point," Cross chuckled. "The world's been burning for a long time now. All I'm trying to do is to get it to burn my way."

The mystery crewmate was silent for a second before chuckling lightly. "You're a very strange individual, Cross."

"THANK YOU Captain OBVIOUS!"

"Gonna have to side with the snail there, XXX!"

"Me too, chapapa," Fukuro said.

The wolf-man snarled as he reverted back to human form, looking to be fighting off the beginnings
of a migraine as he walked towards the door.

"Alright, I'm getting out of here before you two actually make me kill you. Besides, it's almost time for something I've been waiting for for a while now: a date."

"Puru puru puru puru!"

"OF ALL THE TIMES!" Jabra snapped, storming back over to the snail and picking up the speaker. "WHAT!?"

"That's sexual harassment."

Jabra was dumbstruck for a few seconds. Then…

"AREN'T YOU SUPPOSED TO BE IN THE MIDDLE OF A DEEP-COVER OPERATION!?"

"It had to be said. KA-LICK."

"RAAAAAAGH!"

"YOYOI! Here he goes again!"

"Would now be a bad time to tell him that his date reconsidered last night and is going to stand him up?"

And so, Spandam's next mission for the three assassins faced a delay of three weeks while the two weaker individuals were in the medical wing and their superior attended several severe (and ultimately futile) anger management classes.

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I furtively paced back and forth on the Merry's upper deck, waiting with bated breath and thoroughly wrung hands. I really hoped that this worked, otherwise the next few years were going to redefine the word 'awkward'.

Thankfully, my concerns were marginally alleviated by the door to the kitchen opening up and Nami walking out, nodding at me in confirmation. "She's as ready to talk as she'll ever be."

I sighed in relief and nodded gratefully as I made for the door. "Thanks, Nami. Well, wish me luck."

However, before I could enter the kitchen, she caught my arm. "Are you really sure that you want to do this?" she asked in concern.

I grimaced in response before shaking her off. "She's my friend. Do I have any other choice?"

Nami didn't have any response to that, and stepped back, letting me enter the kitchen. Vivi was sitting at the dining table, staring at the other seat and not giving any acknowledgment that I had entered the room.

For the longest time, I just… stood there, a heavy silence filling the air like molten lead. Not even Soundbite dared to break it, choosing instead to keep his jaws tightly shut.

Finally, Vivi broke said silence with a heavy sigh. "Alright, look—"

"I'm sorry, okay?!" I burst out, unable to take it anymore.

The princess blinked in surprise, taken aback by my outcry. "Cross—"

"Vivi, I am so, so, so sorry for everything that's happened to you, for everything that I've done…" I dragged my hands down my face with a groan. "God, I don't think I can possibly apologize enough for all of this. Vivi, I have done so much wrong by you and you have every right to hate me for as long as I live, but your friendship is… one of the most important things in my life and I can't bear the thought of you hating me. And… and I realize that I'm never going to be able to truly make things up to you and that I am the last person who should be asking you this, but I am begging you—" I fell on my knees at this point and clasped my hands together. "Literally begging, for you to forgive me at this point. So, please… can you find it in your heart to do so?"
Vivi stared at me wordlessly for a moment, before dropping her eyelids to an unimpressed half-mast. "Well, that was overly dramatic," she droned.

I blinked in confusion as I processed that statement. "Eh?"

Vivi sighed in exasperation as she ran a hand through her hair. "I don't hate you, Cross. As a matter of fact, I forgave you when I broke your nose. That punch contained the main bulk of my grievances with you."

"...Eh!?" I parroted with twice as much incredulity.

"Yeeeaah…" The princess scratched the back of her head uncomfortably. "The silence and cold shoulder have primarily been me giving you a hard time. Though in retrospect I suppose that I might have gone a bit far with it, I'll admit."

"You all but said that you wanted me to drop dead!" I squawked indignantly.

"In case you haven't noticed, Zoro and Sanji *actively* try and kill each other every other hour on the hour," Vivi pointed out.

I held my finger up and opened my mouth to respond, before slowly dropping my finger with a grumble. "You… make a good point…" I admitted uncomfortably before trying to rally. "But… I mean, Alabasta… from one war to another, you really don't—?"

"Alright, first," Vivi interrupted me. "That is infinitely more the World Nobles' fault than it is yours, and second? Well…" She pondered for a minute before continuing. "The war we ended was them fighting and killing one another over a misunderstanding. But now… now they're fighting together, *united*, and as much as I don't like it, I can't deny that they're actually fighting for a good cause this time. So…" she smiled lightly. "While it's not perfect, at least the blow is somewhat softened."

I slowly nodded but hesitated at the *other* point of contention in my mind. "And… about Nico Robin —?"
Aaaand cue the ambient temperature dropping several dozen degrees. "I don't like that she's here, and I still don't trust her." She looked me straight in the eye, her face stony again, not angrily but accusingly. "But I do still trust you, and I know you wouldn't let her onboard without a good reason." She crossed her arms with a huff. "A reason that I very much want to hear."

I barely hesitated before plastering a smile on my face and nodding frantically. "I can do that! I can totally do that!" I hesitated and glanced around nervously. "Er… Not now, mind you, not while the phrase 'the walls have ears' could be taken literally, but as soon as we get to the next island? Totally! I was going to tell Zoro and Nami anyway."


"Kiss my ass," I retorted under my breath.

"Hmm… alright, then…" Vivi tapped her chin thoughtfully before starting to popping up a finger. "Well, while we're on speaking terms here, I'd like to be included in any more of those meetings that you have with them. Not all of them, necessarily, but the important ones so that I'm not surprised like I was with Yuba and Nico Robin."

"Of course, that's fine by me! The more the merrier! Four heads—!"

CHOMP!

"ACK!" I yelped in agony. "F-FIVE! Five heads are better than four!"

"Better."

Vivi contemplated things a moment longer before giving me a vulpine grin. "Aaaaand you'll be taking over the female half of the bathroom-sanitation rotation until we reach our final destination."

"That's completely fine!" I nodded eagerly, shooting her a pair of thumbs up before pointing towards the door. "I-in fact, I'll go and get started on that right now! See you at dinner?"

"Mm-hmm," Vivi hummed in agreement. "We can even go over some designs Usopp had for
improving my arsenal."

"Perfect! See you then!" And with that, I rushed out of the kitchen, intent on beelining straight for the Merry's bathroom, before pausing as I caught sight of Nami holding herself up against a wall, doubled over with laughter.

"What? What's so funny?" I asked in confusion—and then the moment of comprehension hit me like a ton of bricks as I finished going over the tail end of the conversation.

"… Wait, what just happened?" I asked nobody in particular.

That just made Nami laugh even harder.

-o-

In one of the three islands where the Marines centered their power, one of the few warriors remaining from the era of Gol D. Roger sat in his office, eyeing his Transponder Snail with a contemplative frown.

"… And after that, just keep the bandages on tight for about a day or so, and the wound should heal up nicely. Depending on the severity of the injury, there could be some residual scarring, but in my experience, most patients see that as more of a pro than a con," said a young-sounding voice.

"Heh! Now, isn't that the truth!" Cross chuckled in agreement. "Take a look at this bad boy." There was a slight rustling of cloth. "And tell me that this doesn't look badass to you!"

"THE EXPERIENCE was less THAN PLEASANT, though."

"Yeah, well, of course, that goes without saying."

"If this is any indication for what an average broadcast will be like," an elderly voice cut in as its owner entered the office. "Then I think that you and the rest of the upper brass are making a big fuss about nothing."
Sengoku grunted in acknowledgment, never moving his attention from the snail before him. "Tsuru."

"Sengoku, Gruffy," the aged vice-admiral nodded back, receiving a bleat of greeting from the goat munching on papers in the corner of the room before seating herself across from her old friend. "So, you really think this rookie could be anything of a threat? After all, he's neither the D. of the crew—"

Tsuru's lips quirked slightly as Sengoku visibly twitched at the mention of the accursed letter. "Nor its captain. Don't you think you might be overreacting a little?"

Sengoku grumbled darkly as he continued to glare at the snail on his desk. "We outlawed the Transceivers for a reason, and his initial broadcast showed that it was a good reason. Innocuous though this broadcast may seem to be now, it's too dangerous to be allowed to exist; at best, we have a group of role models for other pirates. At worst, we have a budding threat comparable to Dragon himself."

Tsuru let out a disbelieving scoff. "I don't know how he came across the transceiver, but do you really think that one boy with a big mouth can do as much damage as the Revolutionary Army?"

"Well, this has been Chopper's Medical Discussions. Now, for the last part of today's broadcast, how about some one-on-one time with your host? I've saved the best for last, though let me first remind you, viewers: we created the SBS to be able to tell our side of the story. And that goes beyond just telling you about the bright side of things. So tonight, I bring you an insider's look on the part of the World Government that concerns me and mine directly: the justice system. While a lot of pirates in the world would be better off in prison... I think that the World Government goes too far with their treatment of them. Some of you may agree with me, some of you may not, but make your choice after I inform you of the hell that is the World Government's choice of internment facilities. I speak, of course, of the great underwater gaol, Impel Down."

"There's your answer, Tsuru," Sengoku grunted.

"Psh, you're overreacting," the vice admiral scoffed dismissively. "So the boy will share some half-baked theories about what goes on in Impel Down, there are a million of those floating around! A few more won't be a problem."

"Fair warning, viewers: remember when I said that this broadcast isn't for the faint of heart? This is what I meant. Any of you who are easily squeamish may want to leave now... Gone? Good. Now then, let's start at the very top of this horror show. I speak of Level 1 of 5... The Crimson Hell."
You could have heard a pin drop in the Fleet Admiral's office, it was so silent… well, apart from the goat's oblivious chewing, of course.

"You hear that? That sound was a million and one Marine officers around the world simultaneously voiding their bowels. Surprise, you sons of bitches: I'm not bluffing."

"HOW YOU like us NOW, HUH!?"

"You were saying about us not having a problem?" Sengoku dryly asked his old friend, his desk starting to crack beneath his grip.

Tsuru was actively gnawing her lip now as she eyed the grinning Transponder Snail in concern. "Alright…" she started slowly, visibly rethinking several opinions. "So it would appear he's more well-informed than we had suspected. I imagine that this broadcast will cost us some public opinion and cause some outrage, but with any luck, we can still run damage control…"

"Now, where was I… Oh, wait! Before we resume our little documentary into the penal system—"

"Heheheh, you said 'penal'."

"Oh, real mature."

"I AM literally ONE and a twelfth."

"… point. As I was saying, before we resume our documentary, I felt it only appropriate that we offer a tip of the hat and a flip of the bird to the primary wardens of the Government's illustrious negative-five star human roach motel. Domino, Saldeath, Hannyabal, Sadi, all of you sadistic fuckers take a bow! But, of course, let's not forget the king of this shitshow, the good Warden Magellan! Without this fine, upstanding bastard's inventive applications of the Venom-Venom Fruit —again, that is the Venom-Venom Fruit, which allows the user to produce a myriad of poisons and toxins from their body—I imagine that countless individuals would have suffered much less painful and much less agonizing demises. Let's give the demons of the World Government's man-made hell a hand, folks, a big big big hand!"

"…I'll stop talking now," a thoroughly chastised and very pale Tsuru whispered, sweating despite the fact that she wasn't the target of Sengoku's glare.
"Go and get me every Transponder Snail on base, and start calling every. Single. Base in Paradise that lies beyond Alabasta," Sengoku growled out viciously, the woodwork of his office starting to crack beneath the sheer aura of his presence. "I might not approve of Akainu's style, and I am certainly nowhere near the point where I am prepared to let him off his leash, but so help me, at this moment I want it made known that I want this bastard's tongue on a silver platter, am I understood?"

Tsuru nodded hastily, not trusting herself to speak.

"GO."

As she put every fiber of her being into obeying the order, the Vice-Admiral was very grateful that a thorough knowledge of the Six Powers was a prerequisite for joining the upper echelons of the Marines' hierarchy.

Sengoku took a moment to take several deep breaths and compose himself, and he was halfway through mentally composing an apology for his old ally when his mood was soured anew by the familiar tremors shaking his office.

"STOP LAUGHING, GARP!" the Fleet Admiral roared as he stamped his foot on the floor, an action that only made the tremors intensify.

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"Well, that's all for this broadcast, but stay tuned for more craziness and more things that the World Government would rather castrate themselves than tell you. Until then, this is Jeremiah Cross—"

"And SOUNDBITE!"

"—of the SBS, signing off."

I replaced the speaker with a satisfied smile; the day had been very productive so far. Portraying our crew in a good light, spreading more chaos for the Marines, and making peace with Vivi, no matter how badly I got suckered? I simply couldn't picture how the day could get better! I turned to head for the kitchen—
"Puru puru puru puru!—HUH?"

When I was reminded how Fate responded to temptation by Soundbite beginning to ring. I blinked in surprise as I processed the turn of events, and then my mind caught up to me.

I hastily brought my fingers to my lips and let out a sharp whistle. "Nami, Zoro! Staff meeting!" I belted out as I headed towards the storage room, the two following behind me.

"What is it, Cross?" Zoro asked gruffly.

"I'M—Puru puru puru puru!—getting a CALL!" Soundbite answered.

"And there's only one person who knows his number," I said as I shut the door.

Or at least, as I tried to shut the door, on account of my progress being impeded by a foot getting in the way. I looked around the frame, and was met with a thoroughly nonplussed royal.

"Ahem?" Vivi coughed, tapping her other foot on the deck.

I weighed my options for a moment before grimacing and stepping back, allowing her inside. "Yeah yeah, a deal's a deal. But pleeease promise me that you won't blab anything we need to keep secret to anyone who shouldn't know it?"

I was gratified by the sight of Vivi's dignified strut being broken by her stumbling and nearly face-planting before she wheeled around to glare at me with a furious blush. "T-that was one time!"

"YOU DRAGGED us into—Puru puru puru puru!—A REBELLION!"

Vivi flinched back slightly before giving me a hesitant grin. "I said I'm sorry?"

"Yeah, because that'll make my shoulder stop burning..." I muttered to myself before picking up the
receiver from the transceiver, Soundbite letting out a "KA-LICK!" as I did so before his expression shifted. I wasn't entirely surprised to see the grimace that he adopted. "Hello, Hard-Ass Marine Hotline, Bobby speaking, how may I direct your call?"

"Cross," an all-too-familiar and gruff voice responded.

"Ah, Commodore Smoker! I assume you'll be calling for the two-for-one special we're offering on cigars… and soldier's remorse?"

Silence for a few seconds.

"…I'm not even going to bother asking where the hell you got that transceiver, but do you have any idea how much hell this stunt of yours is going to raise?" he said, his tone remaining colorless.

"HA!" I barked sardonically, even going so far as to slap my knee. "Who says you don't have a sense of humor, Smoker, because that was hilarious! Or at least, it was a major coincidence, because you know what my thought process was when I came up with the idea? I was well past giving a damn about what the World Government did. What say you, Vivi?" I handed the mic over to the princess, who accepted it with a stormy expression of her own.

"I was a bit emotional at the time, so I wasn't exactly thinking straight, but I think that my thought process was somewhere along the lines of 'fuck every last one of the bastards who banished me from my home, hard.'" Vivi concurred harshly.

Soundbite's expression twitched viciously, but before he could say anything his demeanor shifted into a much more hesitant mood bracket. "I don't suppose we can continue this conversation in a more… private setting, Cross? We're calling you to discuss very private, very delicate matters."

"This is private, Ensign. The only ones listening besides me are the first, second, and third mates of the crew… and Soundbite, of course, but there's no easy way of dealing with that particular parasite," Vivi replied.

"SCREW YOU too, VIVI."

Soundbite's expression remained hesitant for a moment longer before twisting back into a hard-assed sneer. "Relax, Tashigi, we knew this wouldn't be a formal affair going in. Besides, it's not like we're
alone on our end, either."

That drew a look of surprise from all of us.

"Come again?" I asked in confusion.

And just like that Soundbite's expression shifted. Not that much, all things considered. He still looked like he had a pole shoved up his ass, but it was… softened, if that makes sense. Like his hard-assness was somehow subdued.

"Hina is… surprised…" he eventually stated in a female voice. "Even after listening to that broadcast, I didn't think that pirates like those on your crew actually existed, much less that I'd ever actually interact with anyone like you."

I blinked in confusion as I processed this development before grinning impishly. "Captain Hina! Wonderful to hear from you again, how are your men?"

Ah, there was the scowl of feminine fury I was becoming so familiar with. "Beaten, bruised and wet from being thrown off their ships."

"Kung-Fu Fleet, called it!" I cackled ecstatically. "Alright, pay up, who owes—ACK!"

"Hurry up and start talking, Smoker," Zoro growled as he placed Kitetsu back at his side from where he'd slapped it into my neck. "Before Cross gets his voice back."

"Screw… you…" I wheezed.

Soundbite flashed an irritated expression that I can only imagine was Tashigi's before re-adopting Smoker's grim smirk. "At least one of you is capable of taking things seriously."

The smirk faded the next second as he spoke again.

"I have to admit that I'm impressed, Cross. I never thought that any pirate would actually be able to
shake my faith in the Marines, but you managed it."

I promptly sobered up as I massaged my throat. "In my defense, I didn't do jack, Smoker. All I did was draw attention to an ugly truth you would have become aware of either way."

"Then I suppose I should thank you for showing it to me sooner rather than later."

I blinked in shock as I processed that statement before digging my finger in my ear canal. "Excuse me? I'm sorry, I appear to have an ear infection, did you just thank me?"

Smoker snorted dispassionately. "Don't count on it happening again anytime soon, Cross. But seriously. I'm calling you because you showed me what the system I work for is really like. Because I saw the truth of the world, and... frankly, I'm disgusted by it."

"We're disgusted by it," Hina clarified. "All of us, Hina's and Smoker's soldiers included."

"And you're telling us this because...?" Nami trailed off questioningly.

"We're telling you because we intend to do something about it," Tashigi explained. "And we want you to help us with the endeavor."

I practically felt my blood freeze in my veins. "Okay..." I whispered slowly. "Now I know that I have an ear infection, because there's no way in hell that I can believe the fact that I just heard a tight-laced Marine like you ask for my help in tearing down the World Government."

"We don't want to tear down the—!" Tashigi started to protest before she was cut off.

"Believe it, Cross, because you just heard it," Smoker interrupted.

"Cap-C-Commodore?" Tashigi sputtered in shock.

"Smoker, what are you—?!"
"Oh, stop kidding yourselves, you two," Smoker barked harshly. "This corruption goes straight to the top and you both know it. If we want to save any trace of Justice left in this world, then we're going to need to destroy the world from the ground up to salvage it."

The room went dead silent. Everyone's jaws, even Zoro's, hit the floor. Soundbite himself couldn't believe the words coming out of his mouth.

I slowly glanced back at the swordsman. "Zoro? Hit me again, I must be dreaming; making Alabasta go Revolutionary is one thing, but someone like Smoker is another thing altogether."

"I am not a Revolutionary!" Smoker snarled. "Those sons of bitches are wanton anarchists and they drag civilians into the crossfire. Me? I don't give a damn about politics or the bullshit that comes from dealing with it. This is a matter of policy change, pure and simple. Justice needs to be harsh, impartial, completely unbiased by trivialities like political agendas. And yet, as I've been shown in the past twenty-four hours, that's not the case right now."

"So… what are you proposing, then? How do you expect pirates to help you change Marine policy?" Vivi asked incredulously.

"We… we don't," Tashigi reluctantly answered, apparently regaining her mental footing. "We're the ones who vowed to enforce and protect Justice. This… this is our mess, we'll take care of it on ourselves."

"Save that the current 'ourselves' to which she's referring is not very substantial," Hina sighed. "As it stands, we have around two or three thousand soldiers who we trust that are directly loyal to us and would support our cause. And while I'm sure that we could probably find more out there who would be willing to join our movement for reform…" Hina's scowl deepened as Soundbite mirrored her chewing on her cigarette. "Hina is afraid that searching them out without being discovered by the very people we oppose would be a nigh impossible task."

"In short, Cross… we want you to be an informant," Smoker summarized.

"Come again?" Nami questioned in disbelief.

"Well, you see, back in Alabasta, Cross mentioned that he knew of the existence of other 'decent
Marines' out in the world," Tashigi explained. "I'm assuming that he knows more beyond the ones who he said are dead?"

I fidgeted slightly under the searching gazes everyone shot at me as I wracked my brain. "Ah… I can name a few, yeah…" I hedged hesitantly. "A Captain, some Vice-Admirals… Aokiji’s a hard maybe on this, the guy is cryptic and could go either way… Heck, best case scenario, maybe you could swing Kizaru? Though chances are that the bastard could turn right back around on a dime and blast you to dust the moment he got bored… or just if he felt like it, he is really hard to get a read on…" The last bit was grumbled to myself more than anyone.

"Yeah, well, even if your current list is short, with any luck, you'll come across more of them as you keep moving through the Grand Line." Smoker grunted. "We're asking you to keep an eye out for anyone who's a fan of your show, anyone with a reputation of being stubborn against orders… or anyone that your crew manages to leave an impression on. I doubt we'll be the last."

"Understatement…” Nami muttered to herself.

"And… what, I just tell them that there's a group of Marines trying to stage a righteous coup?" I demanded. "I doubt they'll believe me, and even if they did, what about the chance of things being passed up the line until magma starts falling on your heads?"

"That's a risk we're willing to take, Cross," Tashigi stated firmly. "But… still, just in case, we brought another Transponder Snail incognito while we were near Alabasta. If you agree—"

"He just raised the kind of absolute hell that no one since Gold Roger has, and that's just with the first two broadcasts. Do you really think he's going to pass this up?" Smoker scoffed incredulously.

"… Right. Well, anyways, you'd call that snail and we'd vet whoever you sent to us. It wouldn't be a perfect system, I know, but at least it'd give us somewhere to start."

"Tashigi would be your handler in this situation," Hina clarified. "You'd primarily make contact with her and she'd act as our go-between." She paused, seeming to choose her words carefully. "Cross, Hina realizes that what we're asking is not an easy task—"

"Save it, I'll do it," I interrupted, looking at my friends one by one and confirming that none of them seemed to have any issues with the arrangement. "Anything to stick it to the bastards who hurt my friend and to make our world just a little bit less of an absolute hellhole. Just one condition: you get
wind of any Marine attacks coming our way, you help us steer clear. It might go against what you stand—"

"The hell it does. As convoluted as it might seem, you pirates are helping us salvage Justice. If you get caught, then the world suffers for it," Smoker interrupted. "You're just lucky that I got pulled off your tail by Marineford. After all, I wouldn't hesitate to hold back."

"Oh, of course not, as if we would ever expect anything else," Nami deadpanned.

"Before I forget, Cross. We've arrested most of Baroque Works by now, but a few agents have slipped through the cracks: the Mr. 5 pair, Mr. 3's partner, and… Nico Robin. Any ideas where they are?"

I frowned and glanced at everyone thoughtfully before looking back at Soundbite. "On the first two, I'm gonna say… let the chips fall where they may, and on the last…” I glanced back at Vivi before continuing. "Suffice to say that I believe she's right where she deserves to be."

"…She's on your ship, isn't she," Tashigi stated more than asked.

"Hey hey, I'm not denying she's a bitch," I raised my hands defensively before glancing around for help. A questioning look at Soundbite earned me a so-so gesture, and I decided to risk it. "…I'm just saying that she's got a Freudian excuse six battleships big, got it?"

Tashigi ground her teeth y for a second before breathing out a heavy sigh. "In for one beri, in for them all… Alright, Cross, I'll take your word for it… for now."

"Well, alright, then," I said, nodding and moving to hang up the transponder. "Now then, if that's everything…"

"Uh, one question?" Vivi raised her hand. "Does your… group have a name or…?"

"…damn it."

"Hina told you they'd ask, Smoker."
"If... any of you have any suggestions—?"

"How about MI3?"

Attention snapped to the speaker, all of us staring at them in shock. And why not!? They were the last person we'd expected to speak! I certainly didn't see it coming, that's for sure!

Zoro responded with a unilateral stinkeye. "What? I come up with all my attack names on my own, I can be creative."

"And it would stand for...?" Nami trailed off expectantly.

Zoro shrugged with a grunt. "Marine Integrity 3. After all, they're fighting to reform the Marines and the three of them are leading it, so..."

Soundbite's eye twitched before he spoke in Tashigi's thoroughly peeved voice. "That has got to be the most bone-headed—!"

"It'll do for now. Thanks for the contribution, Pirate Hunter," Smoker cut her off with a dirty grin.

"Wha—!? SIR!"

"Goodbye for now. Cross," the Commodore forged on, ignoring his subordinate's protests. "Here's to the start of a long and hopefully successful venture."

And with a KA-LICK, Soundbite resumed his normal, if bemused, expression.

Silence hung in the air for a few moments until Nami groaned and slapped a hand to her face. "So, Cross..." she ground out. "Any other insanity you'd like to lay out on us?"

"Hey, now," I waved my hands defensively. "This is com-pletely off-script! Trust me, from now
until when I say so, you literally cannot blame me for whatever madness comes our way… unless you can trace it to me directly, of course."

Without any warning whatsoever, the Merry suddenly lurched, jerking and nearly throwing us all off of our feet.

The air was split by Usopp's very familiar and all-too-feminine shriek.

"AAAAAAH! IT'S THE KRAKEEEEN!"

I blinked in surprise as I processed that statement.

"Huh… that's odd, he's two years early."

Judging by the way Nami shrieked and tried to throttle me, she did not appreciate my commentary.
Chapter 25: The Octopus Shogunate! Surfing Is A Man's Romance!

Patient AN: Xomniac, you're a mad genius. I'm helping you write this thing, and I still don't see how you do this…

Once Zoro and Vivi managed to pry Nami off my throat, we made our way onto the deck, where we were met with a… very good justification for Usopp's panic. Indeed, the Merry was in the process of being assaulted by a number of very large, very thrash-y tentacles. Thankfully, Luffy, Sanji, Lassoo, and the Dugongs were doing as good a job as we would expect in fending off the offending appendages, preventing them from causing any scar-worthy damage to the Going Merry. Robin was casually reading a book in her deck chair, disembodied hands occasionally twisting away some tentacle or other, while Chopper turned others into pincushions with flurries of precise scalpel strikes, ranting and raving all the while. As for Usopp and Carue, well… they were midway up the mast, clinging to it for dear life.

All in all, the exact scene of madness I'd expected to find on the Going Merry's deck at any given day.

"What the hell…" Nami muttered beneath her breath.

I took one look at the tentacles taking swipes at our crewmates before snapping my fingers with a mutter of 'Gastro-Amp' and raising my voice. "Hey, Usopp, good news! It's not the Kraken! Not only are his tentacles way bigger, but he's brown, not red!"

"Really?" Usopp called back. "Oh, well, that's alright, then, I guess we'll just leave WHY THE HELL DO YOU KNOW WHAT THE KRAKEN LOOKS LIKE!?"

I exchanged cheeky smiles with Soundbite before shrugging innocently. "Would you believe me if I said I was an avid fan of oceanology?"

"I'M GOING TO KILL YOU ONE DAY, CROSS!"

"AND AH'LL HELP!"

"TAKE a number!" Soundbite snickered.

"Well, whatever this thing is," Boss grunted as he smacked the brunt of a tentacle away with a punch before using his rope-dart to slam one of the limbs into another. "There's no way in hell we're letting it lay a hand on our ship! Right, boys?"

"RI-GAH!" Mikey started to concur eagerly before he was interrupted by Raphey tackling him out of the way of a tentacle that was about to pancake him. "Aheh… thanks?"

"Less talking, more ass-whipping," the other dugong scowled as she stabbed away a tentacle.

"Let me help you with that…" Lassoo snarled as he opened his jaws towards one of the tentacles. "EAT THI—!" SPLAT! "HURK!"

"Lassoo!" I yelped, leaning over the edge of the railing and staring nervously at at my dog-gun, who was hunched over and hacking and wheezing something fierce. "Are you alright?"

The dog-gun managed to spit up a lump of ugly-looking black ooze before shaking his head in discomfort. "Yeah, yeah, I'll be fine…" he grumbled to himself, before darting at the mast and
scrambling partway up, snapping viciously at Usopp's ass. "HE WON'T BE ONCE I'M DONE WITH HIM!"

"WHAT THE HELL DID I DO!?” Usopp yowled miserably as he tried to scoot up and away from the pseudo-dachshund's jaws.

"YOUR STUPID AMMUNITION MISFIRED IN MY FREAKING GULLET!"

"WHAT? HOW DID THAT HAPPEN, I WAS SURE THAT FORMULA WAS STABLE!"

"TELL THAT TO THE GUNK IN MY THROAT!"

I couldn't help but snicker as I watched Usopp try his level best to avoid becoming doggie chow. Unfortunately for him, after Lassoo's... 'operation', for lack of a better word, his BMI had decreased considerably, changing his physique from a massive log of a canine to a far slimmer and far more natural-looking size, allowing him to make considerable headway up the mast.

The bulge in his barrel had also been replaced with a larger revolver cylinder, which was protected by its own armor plate, and his overall circumference had been reduced to about a foot around or so. The change in mechanisms had translated into the discoloration of a patch of fur around his midsection, but apart from that the zoan-weapon was fit as a fiddle.

Luckily for Usopp, before Lassoo could shimmy his way far enough up the mast, Nami drew his attention by rapping the butt of her Clima-Tact on the deck.

"You can maul the long-nose later, mutt!” she ordered as she swung her moderately electrified staff at a tentacle that had gotten a little too close. "For now, help protect our ship!"

Lassoo cast a final baleful glare up at Usopp before dropping back down and resorting to using his conventional explosive ammunition against the limbs.

I was about to join in the fight when a thought occurred to me. "Hey, Nami!"

"Wha—GAH!" Nami cut herself off with a strangled shriek as one of Vivi's Peacock String Slashers sliced through the air inches to her right in order to ward off a tentacle she'd failed to notice. "Watch it, Vivi!—WHAT!?”

I winced reflexively before her fury before refocusing myself. "Water tends to amplify vibrations, right?"

"Yeah, what about it!?"

Instead of answering her I cocked my eyebrow at the gastropod I was toting. "Soundbite, you remember that gut-churning trick you devised before we reached Alabasta?"

The snail in question gave me a searching look before allowing an eager grin to cross his face. "Yeeaaah?"

"Well, I've just come up with a name for it. Think you can layer it on the water around the ship without hitting anyone else?"

Soundbite's grin promptly took on a bloodthirsty glint. "Ooooh, yeeaaah!"

"Then in that case...” I surreptitiously slid my earphones on and held them in place in preparation. "Soundbite, Gastro-Phony!”
In response, Soundbite promptly opened his jaws and the air was filled with a myriad of noises, from music to laughter to shrieking and every other sound in between. A second later, the tentacles froze and shuddered violently, jerking and lashing out frantically as though their owners were in the midst of a grand mal seizure before snapping back under the water. Everyone onboard abruptly stopped attacking or panicking in favor of looking at me and the snail.

"COME BACK HERE, YOU LONG-LIMBED MULTI-DEXTROUS CEPHALOPODA!"

Well, almost everyone.

"I'LL TEACH YOU TO DISRUPT MY RESEARCH INTO BIOCHEMICAL WARFARE! JUST YOU COME UP HERE AND SHOW YOUR SLIMY FACES AGAIN, I DARE YOU, I DARE—!"

THWACK!

"OUCH!… Thanks, Sanji."

"Anytime, Chopper."

"Uh, am I the only one who heard the words 'biochemical—' MMPH!?" Donny started to question before Mikey gagged him.

"Shh, I wanna see how big of a boom he makes!" the nunchuck-wielding dugong snickered, much to the bo-staff wielder's panic.

"GASTRO-Phony?" Soundbite questioned with a tilt of his head.

I shrugged innocently. "Meant to be short for cacophony because of all the noises you layer in. You like?"

"EHHH…” Soundbite cocked eyestalks back and forth. "Not bad, has a ring to it. STILL, I WOULD HAVE used that FOR WHEN I steal someone's voice."


"Fair enough!"

" Shut up, you idiots," Zoro growled, hand straying to his swords. "This isn't over yet."

"WHAT?!" Soundbite snapped incredulously. "I packed enough into that one to LEAVE 'EM WRITHING IN THE WATER FOR another ten minutes!"

"A human," Zoro retorted. "I'd think an octopus would react a bit differently."

"Zoro's right," Chopper added, rubbing the back of his head. "Octopi have a very different body structure, and they don't have anything like our inner ear. You scrambled whatever they use to listen, but I doubt that'll keep them down for long. If I had to bet…" He shot an uneasy glance over the edge of the Merry. "You just made them mad."

Usopp's head was practically on a swivel as he scanned the water. "D-Do you think they're getting reinforcements?"

As one, just about everyone in the crew snapped a disbelieving glare at the sniper.

"R-Right, stupid question."
As all this was going on, I noted that the dugongs had drawn up in a huddle, one they were just breaking.

"Captain!" Boss Dugong announced, one flipper in a salute. "Permission to go scout out the underwater situation?"

"Oh, that sounds like a good idea! Go for it!" Luffy grinned eagerly.

Nodding in understanding, Boss promptly flipped over the edge of the Merry, performing a picture perfect dive into the ocean. Not three seconds later, his rope-dart shot out of the water and buried itself in the wood of the mast before the line pulled itself taut and yanked Boss back aboard.

"WE NEED TO GET OUT OF HERE, NOW NOW NOW!" he roared in a panic.

"Huh!?" Nami blinked in confusion as the dugong made a dash for the cannon room. "What are you talking about? How many octopi are down there?"

"FORGET THE OCTOPI!" Boss snapped as he started to lug the oars and makeshift harnesses for him and his squad out. "WE'VE GOT BIGGER PROBLEMS! WAY BIGGER! WE NEED TO GET OUT OF HERE NOW, BEFORE—!"

Without warning, Soundbite's eyestalks stood at attention in panic. "TOO LATE!"

"What?!" I sputtered. "The hell are you—!?"

And then the ocean around the ship exploded in several locations, massive plumes of water shooting upwards due to the force of multiple objects breaching the surface. Objects that, once the rush of water slowed, were revealed to be—

"Are those pagodas?" I asked in dull shock.

"If you're referring to the towers traditionally found in the isolated country of Wano and that the Marine headquarters at Marineford is styled after…" Vivi breathed weakly as she watched the massive multi-eaved towers rise around us. "Then yes, those are pagodas…"

"Well, this is becoming quite interesting," Robin said, and her tone made it clear that she was interested. "Judging by the lack of barnacles or algae, it would appear that despite the submergence, the architecture appears to have no water damage."

"I have a more important question!" Nami squawked. "HOW THE HELL ARE THEY COMING OUT OF THE WATER!?"

"You're about to find out…" Boss proclaimed weakly as he hung onto the rigging for dear life, the other four dugongs following his example with no small amount of fear at seeing their mentor as shaken as he was.

"BRACE FOR IMPACT!" Soundbite hollered in agreement.

"What impa—?"

SPLOOSH!

"—GAH!"

My question devolved into a scream of terror as both the Merry and the ocean around her was…
well, lifted, as if by a ladle the size of Laboon. Though really, 'lifted' was a bit of a tame term, on account of how the sheer momentum of our movement pinned most of us to the deck. The clouds themselves seemed to jerk towards us as we rocketed upwards. Thankfully the ordeal only lasted about a minute or so… though the 'thankful' part was rather conditional, on account of how the sudden halt jerked us all off the deck before slamming us right back down again.

We took a brief moment to groan in pain and discomfort before Carue finally managed to get his beak working again. "Whad da heck wath that?" he moaned miserably.

"The beginning of a very bad time…" Boss sighed wearily. "If I had to guess, hang on again."

Before anyone could question what he meant, a dozen relatively massive tentacles (tiny when compared to Surume) blasted out of the water, grabbing onto the Merry and lifting her up and out of the water before any of us could react.

I struggled to my feet as I tried to keep from being bowled over by the shaky footing the octopi's grip was causing on our ship. "Okay, I'll be the first to ask it. What the hell is going on!?"

"Uhhh, guys?" Leo offered uncomfortably from where he was hanging onto the rigging with the rest of the dugongs. "I think I can offer that. Look." He pointed out from the side of the ship with a shaky flipper.

Our gazes all followed his flipper, and most of the crew's jaws, my own included, promptly dropped open in shock. Even Robin's mouth was open, though nowhere near as much as everyone else's.

"Hoooly shit," I breathed numbly.

Nobody else had any opinions to offer, so stunned were they by the sight before us. Heck, out of the corner of my eye, I could see that even Merry's jaw was hanging open.

Simply put, we were being held over… a city. Not just any city, mind you, but a city straight out of Feudal Japan. Every bit of it, from the traditionally imperial architecture to the coral trees sculpted in the shape of large bonsai, just about screamed samurai and honor. Even odder was the location the Merry was in presently: a lake, of all things, surrounded by a green rim, dotted at regular intervals with small dips in the ridge. The lake was what appeared to be the exact center of the city, at its highest point with everything sloping down around it. I could still see the ocean, thankfully enough, just beyond the edges of the circular city… well, circular save for the oddly untamed section of stone that seemed to protrude from the city's border, apart from two separate chains running to it. In fact, if I squinted, it kinda look like—

"…Guys…" I whimpered, just a hint of panic creeping into my voice. "Tell me, does that big rock remind you of anything?"

"Uh…" Nami took out her spyglass and looked through it, before promptly strangling its neck, nearly crumpling the metal. "Cross…" she hissed out fearfully. "Tell me we're not in the middle of a lake in the middle of a city built on the back of a giant freaking sea turtle!"

"I do believe that I can do you one better, Miss Navigator," Robin chuckled as she looked downwards with avid curiosity. "We appear to be in the middle of a lake in the middle of a city built on the back of a giant sea turtle… that is populated exclusively by octopi."

A moment of silence. Then…

"EH!?!" we all bellowed collectively as we followed her gaze.
As the archaeologist-assassin had said, red-skinned and rubbery cephalopods were all over the city, dragging themselves to and fro across the streets and acting... well, acting pretty much like human beings, really. A crowd was gathered around the edges of the lake, with many more in the water itself, and the gigantic examples that were holding the Merry aloft appeared to be sporting metallic helms on their bulbous mantles. Heck, now that I noticed it, octopi featured prominently in the city's architecture, engraved and carved just about everywhere where you'd expect lions or dragons and such.

"HOLY CRAP, THAT'S SO COOL!" Luffy squealed eagerly, his eyes glinting.

"Sanji, just for the record," Vivi swallowed nervously as she eyed the angry-looking Cephalopods who were holding us in the air. "I know you probably have a hundred and one recipes for octopus in your brain, and at any other point I'd love to hear them, but honestly, I don't think that right now would be the best time to share them."

Sanji gnawed on his cigarette uncomfortably as he factored in the size discrepancy with the fact that we were outnumbered almost ten to one. "A... wise choice, milady. Very wise indeed."

Boss licked his muzzle and grimaced uncomfortably. "Ohoh, we're in more trouble than you can even begin to imagine, my friends." He gritted his teeth in a shaky facsimile of a grin. "Well, it might be an unpopular one, but you gotta admit, going down in a blaze of glory fighting shoulder to shoulder with friends... that's a Man's Romance right there, isn't it?"

"Aye, Boss..." his students muttered in reluctant agreement.

"What the heck are you—?" I started to demand before I was interrupted by the air being absolutely rippled with the sound of bone-shaking drumbeats.

I cast a glare at Soundbite, who promptly snarled back, "NOT me, LOOK UP!"

And so we looked up... and up and up and up, at the top of the largest pagoda, a glittering edifice of red and white that towered above both us and the rest of the city in general. A golden octopus carving dominated the top of the tower, and directly above it, situated above a balcony in its tentacles, was a stage. And there on the stage was the source of the drumming: a massive taiko drum, a pair of hachimaki-wearing octopi beating it on both sides. A minute into the performance, the sliding paper doors of the balcony shot open, allowing a pair of burly naginata-toting octopi to stride-slithe out into view and glare down at us. Once they were standing at attention, they were followed by...

By...

I blinked slowly as I tried to process just what the hell I was seeing.

Lassoo whimpered and shrank in nervously as he eyed the being above us. "That... is a lot of raw takoyaki."

"You've got to be squidding me..." I muttered to myself.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Boss declared firmly as he clenched and unclenched his grip on his rope-dart. "Allow me to introduce you to the Great and Honorable Shogun Octavio, Lord Regent of the fabled Great Octopus Shogunate."

Boss might have called the cephalopod a Shogun, but I recognized him from before this whole mess, and it was hard to separate the two images. Sure, from his bright red skin to his glaring green eyes and X-shaped scar to the very unmistakable octopus-themed kabuto helmet he was wearing, the
being presiding above us was the spitting image of an aquatic version of a feudal shogun… but to me? To me, the being looked more like a very specific disc jockey than anything else.

"Boss, I must be going deaf, he's the ruler of the fabled what?!" Lassoo chuffed in confusion.

"Great. Octopus. Shogunate," Boss enunciated clearly as he gnawed on his cigar. "It's just like it sounds: one big fat kingdom, populated entirely by octopi. I called it fabled because up until just now, it was only a rumor because nobody could pin down where the damn place was, not even if it was above the sea or under it." He chuckled grimly as he jerked his head at the head of the turtle protruding from the general bulk of the city. "Guess we know why now, huh?"

"But why did they attack us!?" Vivi demanded in confusion. "I mean, we didn't do anything to them!"

"Yeth, we did…" Carue groaned as he slapped a wing to his face in miserable realization. "You think that animals awe tewwitowial nowmally, this is how bad they weact when they get togetha and dwaw actual bowders!"

"So, we invaded their territory, and they're fighting back," Zoro confirmed, reaching for his swords. "Boss, any idea how reasonable these guys are supposed to be?"

The dugong started to shake his head when Octavio suddenly slammed his tentacles together, drawing our attention to him. The shogun just stared for a moment, his gaze inspecting us, then began moving his tentacles, shifting them in a series of motions and patterns that seemed random, but revealed itself to be calculated and deliberate if you paid attention. It was quite the display, given the sheer dexterity the limbs displayed.

It took me a moment to process what I was seeing before snapping my fingers in realization. "I… I could be wrong, but unless he's having a stroke, I'm fairly certain that that's some kind of octopus sign language."

"Well, that's great," Nami drawled darkly, throwing up her hands. "And does anyone onboard happen to understand octopus sign language?"

"You… never picked up anything from Hachi?" I asked hesitantly.

If looks could kill, the glare Nami gave me would have obliterated the entire turtle. "I will cause you grievous bodily injury, Cross."

I shot my hands up in a gesture of surrender. "Yes, ma'am."

"Good. Now then, as I was saying—?"

"Lady, none of us understand fish, period," Raphey stated tonelessly.

"We're amphibious leaning more towards terrestrial, not all-out aquatic," Leo explained. "Totally different dialect."

"Yeah, I was afraid of that…" Nami ground the heel of her palm into her forehead with a groan. "Alright, we need to be subtle and polite about this—"

"HEEEEEY!" Luffy yelled, waving his arms over his head. "WE DON'T UNDERSTAND THE STUFF YOU'RE DOING WITH YOUR TENTACLES!"

Octavio promptly cut himself off mid-sign, his eyes twitching furiously as he got the general gist of
what Luffy was saying before he rounded on his bodyguards and signed something with great haste, causing one of them to scurry back into the pagoda.

Nami planted her face in the middle of the Merry's railing, pounding her fist next to her head. "I am **so close** to giving up, so **very close** to just **giving the hell up!**"

"**THEN WHY dontcha?**" Soundbite asked peevishly.

Nami's head promptly snapped up, a demented fire blazing in her eyes. "Because I am a heartless, stone cold *bitch* with a will of fucking *iron* and I *will* stay sane even if it *kills me* just so that I can spite you, Luffy, and *this madhouse of an ocean in general. DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR?""

Soundbite started to shiver in terror before freezing with a contemplative look in his eyes. "I THINK I might be **building up a tolerance to HER.**" He promptly grimaced in discomfort. "*I don't know IF THAT'S A GOOD THING OR BAD.*"

Before I could respond, I was interrupted by Robin politely saying "**Incoming.**"

"Wha—**GAH!**" I yelped as an autonomous hand appeared and shoved me to the deck, moving me just far enough so that I wasn't squashed like an insect beneath the half-ton block of a book that almost crushed my skull into my chest cavity by falling on the space I'd occupied moments earlier.

Usopp reeled in terror as he eyed the book. "What the heck—!?"

Robin leaned over the tome and traced the title on the cover. "'The Quintessential Cephalopod Sign Language Lexicon'. Well, now, it would appear that our hosts have graciously provided a manner with which to translate."

Another round of clapping snapped our attention back to the eight-limbed shogun, who was twitching his crossed tentacles impatiently.

"Anybody think they can translate eight flailing limbs into something comprehensible without any time to practice?" I asked hopefully.

"Let me," Vivi said as she pushed her way past Robin and wrenched the titan of a book open, leafing through page after page of tentacle-phrase diagrams. "After learning how to speak and read Long-Arm sign language in less than twenty-four hours when I was ten, no language fazes me anymore." She shivered slightly as she froze mid page-turn. "Fifty different words for theft, not a one for honest…"

"Well, time to put up or shut up…" I stated before shooting a thumbs-up at Octavio.

The large octopus motioned as if snorting before restarting his signing.

"Ah, alright, alright…" Vivi mumbled as she kept swapping her gaze between the shogun and the pages of the book she was rapidly flipping through. "He's going a bit fast, but… alright, the general gist is that while he's offended by our invading his—no, his *people's* territory, very specific on that— he is equally impressed by our ability to fend off some of his mightiest warriors."

"Psh, 'mightiest warriors',' Zoro scoffed. "Let me at them in a straight fight and the shit cook would have enough ingredients to feed Luffy for a month."

"Don't insult me, mosshead," Sanji growled as he hissed in smoke from his cigarette. "I could stretch it out over two with **ease.**"
"So, you're not denying that your cooking skills are shit?" Zoro grinned.

"You're not denying that you cover up your baldness with algae?" Sanji smirked back.

"Uh, guys?" Chopper interjected hastily. "I don't mean to interrupt, but aren't they more likely to rip out the Merry's keel than meet either of you in a straight fight?"

That shut them up immediately, and allowed Vivi to continue. "Mmm… Alright, it's mostly a lot of posturing right now, but…” She hesitated slightly before nodding firmly. "Yes, he wants us to state what our intentions are for him and his people. After that, with any luck we can just be on our way; swing this right and I think we could enjoy a feast."

"WE COME IN PEACE, YOUR HIGHNESS!" Nami promptly shouted up at Octavio.

The octo-ruler's response was to cross his tentacles and shoot her a flat look.

Nami blinked in confusion before grinding her teeth as she noticed the superiorly exasperated expressions Luffy and Usopp were adopting. "What?" she hissed.

"Nami, Nami, Nami," Usopp said, shaking his head, his tone appropriate for lecturing a five-year-old that had just been caught trying to fill a saltshaker with sugar. "Don't you know that octopi don't have ears?"

"Yeah, Nami," Luffy nodded solemnly in agreement. "It's so obvious. Maybe you need glasses or —"

SLAM! CRASH! CRUNCH!

"OCTOPI CAN STILL HEAR, JACKASSES!" Nami shrieked as she finished pummeling our captain and sniper into bloody pulps.

"I need to up my disciplinary measures…” Boss muttered contemplatively, causing his students to cower in terror.

"Uh, Nami?" Chopper cut in again. "While octopi do indeed possess a sense of hearing, yes, that doesn't mean it's all that—"

"WHAT OTHER OPTION DO WE HAVE? WE DON'T HAVE ENOUGH LIMBS TO USE THEIR LANGUAGE!" Nami retorted as she yanked at her hair, cowing the poor reindeer.

"Ahem?" Robin interjected politely, spinning her arms and quadrupling the number protruding from her shoulders. "Miss Nefertari, if you would?"

Vivi glared sandstorms at the assassin for a moment before flipping through the pages and pointing out several pictures. "This one, this one, this one and… this one. Try and keep the pace even and the transitions smooth, don't involve your fingers, it's mostly limbs, and you'll have to try and abbreviate around the fact that you actually have a skeletal system."

Robin frowned briefly before concentrating and moving her arms according to the diagrams Vivi had shown. It was slower and somewhat clumsier than Shogun Octavio's signing, but it was amateur sign language. With any luck, it would suffice to get our message of peace and friendship across.

Octavio stared down at us impassively as he watched the process, taking in motion after sign after gesture without so much as a twitch of a reaction or a hint of emotion.
Once the process of sending the message was accomplished, he bowed his head and closed his eyes…

And then…

He reacted, in a way that was neither peaceful, nor friendly.

Specifically, he jerked forwards with an almighty gurgling roar, purplish veins stabbing into his green eyes as his bodyguards barely kept him from leaping off the balcony at us. Restrained as he was, however, the shogun promptly began shooting off a rapid-fire volley of sign language at us. And he wasn't the only one, as all around us the city erupted into an uproar of gurgling shouts and cries and thrashing tentacles.

Half of those onboard began panicking, and the other half looked at Robin accusingly, myself included.

"What are you looking at me for? I performed the exact motions the princess designated," Robin said, actually sounding somewhat insulted for once.

Our attention turned to Vivi, who was all but ripping through the pages of the book in a blind panic. "I-I-I don't understand!" she protested desperately. "Those gestures were kind and peaceful and-and they should have never, never—ah." She suddenly froze stock still.

"'Ah'?" I repeated dully. "What 'ah'? What the hell is 'ah'?"

Vivi slowly flipped into the back half of the book, which she'd neglected to look at due to its size. "'Ah' is the fact that apparently, the octopi did foresee someone with joints using their language, so they wrote an entirely different dialect for it with entirely different meanings," she squeaked fearfully.

I felt my eye twitch. "Ah." Really, what else was there to say?

Vivi nodded slowly in agreement. "Ah."

Nami held her mortified expression for a moment before slowly turning an increasingly stormy look on me. "… Didn't you say something a few days ago about her forgetting some touchy nation’s customs?"

"HEY, DON'T LOOK AT ME!" I shouted in equal parts panic and indignation as I jabbed a finger at Vivi. "SHE'S THE ONE WHO SCREWED UP!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry…" Vivi moaned on repeat as she rocked back and forth, tears streaming from her almost comically blank eyes.

Robin sighed deeply as she held a hand to her forehead. "Out of morbid curiosity, what did you make me say?"

Vivi seemed to be too caught up in her apologetic panic attack to respond. Consequently, the archaeologist let out a sigh before moving to peer at the book herself, extra hands sprouting to turn the pages. After a few moments, her eyes widened minutely.

"Oh, dear."

Her faux carefree tone spoke volumes.

"So… how deep in it are we?" Boss asked as he eyed the ongoing riot below us.
"Hm…” Robin scratched her chin contemplatively as she read the book. "I believe that I managed to insult him, his nation, his ancestry, his progeny, his taste in music, his fashion sense and his…" She tilted her head in confusion. "…I believe that there might be a typo here. Suffice to say he's quite incensed."

"Vivi? If we wive thwough this, pwomise you'll wead those books on impuwse contwol that Igawam bought you," Carue groaned out through his beak.

"I forgot the-e-em…” Vivi sobbed miserably.

"Aye know dat, dat's why Aye bwought them with me."

"Yeah, yeah, very heartwarming, we'll deal with Vivi's airheadedness later, but for now?" I hissed at Vivi, intent on snapping her out of her shock. "He's getting his wits about him and starting to sign, so if you please, translate!"

Thankfully, Vivi managed to pull herself together with relatively minimal effort and flipped back through the book, her eyes flicking between Octavio and the drawings on the page. "Uh... let's see... alright, thankfully it would appear he's only furious about one part of the... insult we tendered, but he is really mad about it. Apparently his skills at..." Vivi narrowed her eyes at the descriptor before shaking her head in surrender. "Yeah, I don't recognize this word but it's apparently close to sacred for Octav—no, the octopi as a whole. He could have taken every other insult we threw at him in stride, would have laughed it off, but insulting that was going too far. So now, he wants—no no, he needs to restore his honor, and that of all his people to boot."

Nami massaged her apparently throbbing temples with a growl. "I can already tell where this is going..." she hissed before raising her voice. "How does he intend to do that?"

Vivi watched Octavio's motions for a moment before groaning in agreement. "Yeah, it's just what you'd think: the shogun wants a duel... with our captain. He and Luffy pit their skills in... whatever it is we insulted. We win, we get to leave. We lose..."

"We die…" Lassoo sighed with a roll of his eyes.

"Specifically, we get fed to the giant island-turtle," Vivi corrected with a sigh of her own.

"WOOHOO! Sounds like fun!" Luffy whooped eagerly. It was a testament to just how resigned Nami was that she didn't even take the time to bounce his skull off the deck.

"And what the heck did we insult that's so important that that eight-legged bastard is willing to kill us over it?" I asked, already dreading the answer.

"Some... kind of activity I think?" Vivi shrugged helplessly. "I've never heard of it before, I don't even know how to pronounce it. This one right here, see?" She pointed out the word in question.

I leaned over and read the word over her shoulder...

And then I read it again, because there was no way in hell that was what I read.

And then I read it again, just to confirm I wasn't having a stroke-based hallucination.

"What," I stated flatly.

"LOOK OUT!"
THUNK!

Slowly looking up, I stared at the plank of polished, carved wood that had embedded itself in the deck, still vibrating ever so slightly from being launched at us.

"What," Soundbite parroted in an equally flat voice.

Another gurgly roar drew our gazes up to Octavio, who had perched himself at the very top of the pagoda and was proudly displaying himself to his citizens, an action that was met with their eager applause and wet cheers. He was holding the object of our disbelief high above his head, bouncing it eagerly to the cheers of all the octopi.

My eye twitched violently as a ray of sunshine bounced off the surfboard.

"What!" Soundbite and I chorused.

-o-

"So, at first, you were going against Pops' wishes by going after Blackbeard. Now, you're still going against Pops' wishes, but you're getting our help with it?" an intimidating man with rose pink hair growled at a seemingly lazy shirtless man.

"Let's just say I got a harsh reality check from someone who knows what he's talking about," Ace stated, not even deeming to move his hat from where it sat over his eyes. "Come on, Squard, I can't let the bastard go free after what he did to Thatch, you know that, but I can't go after him alone, either. Whether I like it or not, I need help to take him out, and you and Whitey were the closest ones to Paradise."

Squard ground his disturbingly sharp teeth as he mulled over the statement. "But still…"

"Squard," Ace cut him off, casting a glare out of the corner of his eye. "The entire reason I've been able to keep up with Teach and follow is that he's been tearing a bloody swath through Paradise. Even if he hadn't murdered a crewmate, I'd still find him detestable because of what he's doing. He's our mess, we need to stop him."

Squard ground his teeth even harder before allowing himself to relax and sigh heavily. "Yeah… yeah, I suppose we do…" He then allowed himself a fierce grin as he tapped the hilt of his blade. "Eh, fine. Just let me stab that fat bastard in the stomach at least once before you ash him, alright?"

Ace matched the bloodthirsty grin tooth for tooth. "I imagine we'll need to let Whitey have her usual opening cannonade first, but after that, sure. Who am I to deny a man his wishes, huh?"

"Alright, then!" the senior pirate captain stated, wringing his hands eagerly. "So, where do we start looking for the bastard? Got any fresh leads?"

The question robbed Ace of his smirk, prompting him to instead adopt a scowl as he tilted his hat back down over his eyes. "A lead, yes, fresh… debatable. It's… time-sensitive. Chances are that if we act on it too soon, we'll miss our window. For now, we need to wait until the events my source told me about come to pass."

"Oh, yeah?" Squard cocked his eyebrow skeptically "And is this 'source' of yours all that reliable?"

"Well…" Ace scratched his chin contemplatively. "I'll admit that he's got a bit of a mouth…"

"Don don don don!"
Ace rolled his eyes as he swung himself into a sitting position, smiling at the ringing Transponder Snail. "And a hell of a sense of timing, to boot."

Squard blinked in surprise. "Jeremiah fucking Cross, huh? Eh, what the hell, he's been talking a big game up until now, but he hasn't necessarily been wrong... Though..." He tilted his head thoughtfully. "Didn't he just hang up his last broadcast an hour or two ago?"

"Yeah, he did..." Ace confirmed, his frown tinged with concern. "Alright, go ahead and pick it up. Hopefully nothing bad's happened."

"Why do I have to answer the damn snail!? You're a guest on my ship!" the older pirate protested.

"Simple," Ace grinned impishly as he held up a flickering flame on the tip of his finger. "Because I'm the guest whose Devil Fruit allows him to turn you into brisket at the drop of a hat! Hop to it, geezer!"

Squard's eye twitched as he sputtered incoherently before huffing in resignation and marching over to the snail, muttering about 'cheeky brats' and 'damn Ds and their grins' the entire way. Reaching down, he picked up the receiver and shot a glare back at Ace.

"—three, four, da da da... Wow, that's a fast turnout. Well, that's enough of a delay! Hello, people of the world!" Cross's voice blared out eagerly. "I realize that it hasn't been that long since my last broadcast, but honestly, recent events are way too pressing for me to not share! So, without further ado—!

"You're gonna say 'Start the SBS,' RIGHT?"

"Ri—DAMNATION!"

Ace snickered. "Soundbite's still Soundbite, no matter what!"

"Just so long as I don't need to deal with him in person..." Squard muttered to himself.

"Well, anyway, moving on to the main topic: you're probably all wondering why I'm broadcasting again so soon. Well... suffice to say that our crew's managed to get itself in a bit of a pickle. We... well, in short, kind of sort of managed to insult the honor of the ruler of a... nation of sorts, and now the nation as a whole is... kind of ticked. And by that, I mean furious. The only way for honor to be restored is for a... duel, in a manner of speaking, to be enacted between said ruler and our own captain."

Squard's eyes shot wide in shock as he processed the statement. "Well...shit. Sounds like your brother's gotten himself in something of a bind, huh?"

"HA!" Ace barked jovially. "As if! Honestly, I'm surprised Luffy hasn't gotten in some kind of honor duel before now! Cross is overreacting, this is tame!"

"Now, you're all probably wondering what ruler we managed to tick off and what kind of duel Luffy's going into. Well, first, while our collective fates might rest on the outcome of this duel, thankfully this one isn't to the death... so to speak. As for the parameters of the duel and the ruler himself, well..." Cross trailed off uncomfortably for a second before heaving a massive sigh of resignation. "Alright, there's just no easy way to say this, so I'm gonna go ahead and just spit it out: we insulted the surfing skills of Shogun Octavio, ruler of all octopi beneath the sea, and now Luffy is going to have to outperform him in a surfing competition, or we're all chow for a turtle the size of an island."
"...What," Squard stated succinctly.

Ace had no such reaction, on account of his jaw being too far open for him to say much of anything.

-O-

"WHAT," chorused a pink-haired young man and a blonde-haired young man, both muscular, covered in sweat, and holding bamboo swords.

THWACK-THWACK!

Correction: they were holding bamboo swords, until the fedora-wearing Marine who was training them cracked them both over their skulls in their moment of inattentiveness.

"Do not allow your focus to waver in combat, no matter what," the Marine lectured the insensate recruits.

"To reiterate," Cross emphasized, ignorant of the accident he'd just caused. "My rubber-brained klutzy moron of a captain, who has Devil Fruit powers and has never stood on a surfboard a day in his life, is about to attempt to outsurf a professional surfer... who has eight separate and very dexterous limbs."

"BWAHAHAHAHA!"

The fedora-wearing Marine rolled his eyes as he turned his attention to his dog-hood-wearing superior, who was slapping the ground as he laughed uproariously. "Vice-Admiral, you're causing tremors again."

"BWAHAHAHAHA!" Garp continued to laugh, unfazed by his subordinate's concerns.

He was equally unconcerned when a desk fell from the sky and smashed into his head with little to no effect.

"I TOLD YOU TO STOP LISTENING TO THAT MOUTHY BASTARD, GARP!" Sengoku roared from on high.

"BWAHAHAHAHA!"

-O-

I sighed wearily and allowed my head to thump against the Merry's railing in resignation. "I swear to God, I couldn't make this shit up if I tried."

"Ironic..." Soundbite muttered with a slightly glazed look in his eyes.

"Huh?" I glanced down at him.

"What? I didn't say nuthin'."

I cocked a skeptical eyebrow before moving along. "Well, anyways, I'm not overly familiar with the rules of surfing, so I'll be sharing the microphone with someone who possesses a much more intimate familiarity with the sport. Sanji?"

I handed the microphone over to our chef, who was sitting beside me; apparently, Sanji had spent the few vacation days he'd had at the Baratie at an island where they held an annual surfing tournament. Naturally, he tried to attend it every year in order to impress the ladies. Equally naturally, he got
distracted by said ladies—clad in bikinis, of course—every time, so he never made it past the second round, if that. Still, he'd picked up enough over the years to qualify for acting as the co-host for the oncoming shitshow.

"Thanks, Cross. Sanji here, ladies and bastards—"

"Try and keep it relatively tame, Sanji; kids may be listening," I warned him before reconsidering my statement. "By which I mean very young kids whose parents actually give a damn about what words they do or don't hear. I don't know if I can actually be sued, but I'm not particularly inclined to find out."

"Fair enough, fair enough," Sanji said, waving his hand in a shooing motion. "Well, anyways, to be concise, it appears that the contest is based on who impresses the crowd more, whether by staying on their surfboards the longest or by producing the most impressive tricks. Either or. I imagine that the victor of this contest will be determined based upon their endurance, their ability to focus and remain calm, and their overall skill level."

"I see, I see…" I nodded sagely as I processed the explanation. "So, let me ask you this, Sanji: when you consider that one of the participants in this contest is an aquatic creature who is a professional surfer that apparently polishes his skills on a more-than-daily basis and whose citizens are the observers of this contest…"

I punctuated this statement by watching as Shogun Octavio posed dramatically for the onlooking crowd, spinning his board around himself with extreme ease and impressive dexterity.

"While the other contestant is—"

SPLAT!

"…ow…"

I winced as our captain chose that exact moment to slip and faceplant off of the impromptu lovechild of a surfboard and a mechanical bull Usopp had constructed for him to practice on.

"Luffy…" I finished lamely to the tune of almost a dozen frustrated groans. "What do you think the chances are of us actually managing to win this thing?"

"Well, Cross, I'd say that we are thoroughly and utterly fucked right up the ass, if you'll pardon my North Blue slang," Sanji nodded solemnly.

"My thoughts exactly, Sanji, my thoughts exactly," I nodded back in agreement. "Let's just hope that we can fight our way out of this situation, huh?"

"We've done it before and I'm fairly certain that we can do it again."

"But at what cost, SANJI?! At what cost?!!" Soundbite suddenly demanded in a Canadian accent.

I shrugged at the bemused look the cook shot me. "Hey, I don't know all the references he makes. Most, sure, but this one eludes me. Still! Look on the bright side of things!" I adopted a flat expression as I gestured at where Nami had set up an impromptu booth and was taking bets from the octopi in the form of relatively barnacle-encrusted doubloons, with Vivi and Robin acting as reluctant translators. "Some people are taking advantage of the situation to its fullest, like a sleazebag at a bar with a pocket full of roofies."

"IF I'M DYING, I'M SURE AS HELL NOT DOING IT BROKE!" Nami hollered up at me.
"YOU’RE BEAUTIFUL WHEN YOU’RE MAKING A PROFIT, NAMI-SWAN!" Sanji sang back before settling back down. "Well, getting back on topic, I'd like to hear your opinion on something: seeing how we're still located at the edge of the lake on the island-turtle's back—"

"Still not making this up, people!" I hastily reminded the world.

"How exactly do you think the octopi intend for either Luffy or the shogun to surf at all? After all—" Sanji gestured at the relatively placid waters of the large 100-yard-wide lake our ship was being held over. "The most I've seen so far from these waters are ankle-slappers, and in my experience, decent trick-surfing requires either overhead or double-overhead at a minimum."

"Well, considering just how surf-centric the octopi's culture appears to be—" We both eyed the surfboards and surf-related paraphernalia being toted by the horde of octopi encircling the lake. "I'd say that it's safe to assume that they have some form of system or other means to generate decent waves for surfing, if this is their venue of choice. Heck, their ruler's personal pagoda is right on its shores. In the end, just like how this whole situation has played out, we have no choice but to wait and see."

Sanji started to nod in agreement before sitting up attentively. "Well, it looks like our waiting period is over, because Octavio's paddling out into the water now."

I snapped my attention to the lake, where the oversized octopus was balancing himself on his board and effectively dragging his way through the water. "Well, it looks like the shogun's already putting his non-human origins to good use, and the competition hasn't even begun yet. Suffice to say, this is not looking good for us."

It only took the shogun a minute or two to reach the far side of the lake, where he wheeled himself around and signed something to the crowd.

"Well, it would appear that Shogun Octavio is waiting for something, but I'm not quite sure what he's expect—WOAH!" I yelped in panic as the deck beneath our feet suddenly heaved, flinging most of our onlooking crewmates head over heels while the surrounding octopi were left relatively unaffected thanks to their extra limbs.

"What the hell..." I muttered in confusion as I righted myself. "Uh... I don't know what just happened, but it felt like an earthquake!"

"It was the turtle!"

"Huh?" I blinked in confusion as I looked down at Nami, who was rubbing her head with a slight wince.

"The octopi must have trained the turtle we're on to buck on demand!" Nami explained. "That's how they generate waves to surf on: the shift IS similar to a tectonic event, causing a swell and eventually culminating in high-quality waves for the octopi to surf on!"

"And I can see the swell now!" Sanji provided, pointing out to the water where indeed, a swell of water was surging towards Octavio, who was watching it patiently.

"Alright, listeners, let's see how well this octopus can move," I stated theatrically.

Hey, just because we were all probably going to die was no excuse not to make it a good show, right? Plus, I had complete and utter faith in our crew!

SPLAT!
"…ow…"

…I had some measure of faith in most of our crew.

Back out on the water, Octavio was paddling in the same direction as the swell, keeping pace with it as it approached the shore. It wasn't long before the wave began to crest, Octavio having already placed himself in an optimal position. Once the water started crashing and carrying the shogun along, he repositioned his tentacles in what appeared to be his version of standing up and—

I gaped in awe at what occurred next. "…Uh-oh."

"We gon' DIE, HUH?" Soundbite stated more than asked.

"Looks like," Sanji nodded in agreement solemn.

Though I didn't say anything, I agreed with my co-hosts. Why, you ask?

Because in the simplest of terms, Octavio was absolutely shredding it out on the water.

Between all the flipping, swerving and spinning Octavio was pulling off with almost supernatural ease, I wasn't completely sure what the octopus was doing, besides absolutely rocking it on his board and pounding the final nail in our collective coffins.

"Well!" I stated firmly, still entranced by the awe-inspiring display before me. "It's safe to say that my initial assumptions on Octavio's skills were right on the money. The slimy bastard is surfing like an absolute pro and not showing even a hint of being ready to slow down any time soon!"

"To put it one way, Cross, I'd say that Octavio's managing to hang eight with ease, and that's actually impressive in this case," Sanji nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, but when you consider those suction cups, I'd say it's really more like he's hanging eight by eight," I noted.

We waited with bated breath as Octavio and the wave he was riding approached the shore.

"What's he doing?" Sanji wondered as the Shogun got closer and closer. "He has to stop, or he'll crash into the shore!"

Even with his previous routine to prepare us, what Octavio did next left us scrambling to pick our jaws up off the deck. He must have hit the bottom, because both he and his surfboard suddenly pitched forward, flinging both into the air. He then proceeded to do a textbook mid-air flip, grabbing his surfboard in two tentacles in the process, and stuck the landing perfectly, ending by stabbing the lacquered wood into the ground.

He wheeled around to shoot a glare at us before sticking up a tentacle and twitching it firmly.

I held up a hand to forestall Vivi when she started flipping through the lexicon. "Don't bother, that was universal. Well!" I addressed the world anew. "It looks like we've really got our work cut out for us. Can Luffy defeat Octavio? Will the rubber man defeat the lord of the board? Will we emerge from this showdown with the shogun of surf unmolested!?!"

SPLAT!

"…ow… Oh, hey, is it my turn?" Luffy promptly popped up, wrenching his borrowed board from the practive mechanism and holding it high above his head; A pair of inflatable tubes were affixed
around his midsection. "ALRIGHT! I'M READY TO SURF!"

"Nope," Soundbite deadpanned.

"Not a chance…” Sanji sighed in much the same tone of voice.

"We're dead," I summarized matter-of-factly.

"At least I lived a good life…” Lassoo huffed as he rolled over where he was sunbathing.

"WILL YOU MOWONS SHADDUP ALWEADY!?” Carue squawked in panic.

"And I thought I was the only realist on the crew…” Robin mused.

"YOU’RE NOT HELPING!” Vivi shrieked.

"On the bright side, THOSE DUCKS back in Alabasta can't SAY THAT THIS IS OUR FAULT. VIVI brought this on herself, and the rest of us," Soundbite said sagely… from within the safety of his shell.

-o-

"THAT SONNUVA—!"

"…well, he does have a point—"

"SHADDUP, STOMP!"

"Sorry…"

-o-

"Well, in the end, it doesn't matter what we say or how much we complain, it is indeed Luffy's turn to surf," I sighed in resignation before clasping my hands firmly. "And in light of this fact, I'm going to do my damndest to make sure we win. Hey, Luffy, I've got some advice for you!" I ran over to our captain.

"Oh, yeah? What is it, Cross?" Luffy asked eagerly.

I planted my hands on his shoulders as I stared him dead in the eye, my gaze completely serious. "Alright, captain, listen: I've learned from dozens of surfing masters over the years, and the advice they've given me can easily be boiled down to the key pieces. Now look, out on the water, you're probably going to be concentrating a lot on keeping your balance and staying upright and falling in. Simply put, don't."

"Huh?!" the rubberman blinked in confusion.

"Are you nuts, Cross!?” Usopp demanded frantically. "Luffy has Devil Fruit powers! If he falls in, he'll drown! Why shouldn't he think!?"

"Because surfing isn't about thinking at all!" I replied, crossing my arms in an X. "This sport is all about instinct, emotion, being in tune with your surroundings! The waves, the wind, the water, your board, especially your board! You might not be able to swim, no, but water is still an intimate part of your basic humanity, and your body will not forget it! So long as you can feel your success… then you will win! Got it?"
Luffy blinked as he processed my words before grinning confidently in agreement. "Got it!"

Usopp stared at me open-mouthed astonishment before allowing himself a shaky, halfway confident grin. "W-wow Cross… t-that information was actually pretty good! Maybe we're not dead after all!"

"Then allow me to un-pry the last nail from our coffin, as it were!"

I looked at the dugong in surprise. "You've got something too, Boss?"

"Indeed I do!" the manly aqua-mammal nodded firmly. "You might not be aware of this, but while martial arts might be the pride and joy of my species, so too are we avid surfers! And in light of this passion, we developed this!"

He whipped out his flipper and proffered a large shell that had been carved into a makeshift flask. "This, my friend, is the secret Dugong Surfing Elixir," he proclaimed confidently. "One sip o' this, and you'll gain the skills of generations of Dugong surfers, some of the best in the Grand Line! It's a closely guarded secret of our species, never before trusted to anyone outside our kind!"

"Wooaaaah…" Luffy breathed reverentially as he picked up the shell, holding it in fingers trembling with excitement. "And you're giving this to me? You're sure?"

"Of course!" Boss breathed out a heavy cloud of smoke as he snapped out a confident thumbs up. "Making sure we stay alive is a helluva lot better than keeping this a secret. Besides, I didn't think I'd ever find a use for it. And in the end…" He bowed his head in an almost solemn manner. "To share the secrets of one's species among friends in our direst hour… is that not…' He looked up with a stunning glint of manliness. "A Man's Romance?"

"SO COOL!" the dumbass trio squealed enthusiastically.

"GO, BOSS, GO!" the rest of the Dugongs onboard crowed in agreement.

One of the tentacles holding us up tapped impatiently on the deck, making the wooden planks creak ominously.

I flinched nervously at the noise of lumber-based distress before nodding at Luffy. "I think that's your cue to go, Captain."

Luffy nodded in agreement. "Right! Here I go!" And with that, he yanked the cork out of the flask and downed the entire thing in one go. Then, without warning, he doubled over and started shaking vigorously. "Ooooh…"

"L-Luffy!" Chopper cried in concern as he rushed to his side. "Are you alright, are you okay?! Is it food poisoning or allergies or—!?"

"OooooOOOOOHAAAAAGH!"

Without any warning, Luffy flung his head back and roared vigorously, shaking the air itself with the sheer force of his chutzpah. "I CAN FEEL IIIIIIT!" he screamed to the world. "THE SKILLS OF THE DUGONG SURFERS FLOWING THROUGH MY VEINS! RAAAAAAAAGH!"

"Holy shit, I think he just went Super Saiyan…" I muttered to myself in awe.

"LET'S DO THIS!"

Before any of us could react, Luffy flung himself overboard into the water. Thankfully, he managed
to land on his board, and paddled out into the water even faster than Octavio.

"...ha...hahahaHAHAHAHA!" Usopp started cackling ecstatically, jabbing a confident finger out at the utterly dumbstruck onlooking octopi. "Take that, you stupid squid morons! With Boss's elixir and Cross's advice, Luffy's become the most ultimate surfer of all time! There's no way he can lose now! We're gonna win, you hear me? WIIIIIN!"

"Yeah, squid morons!" Chopper eagerly agreed, sticking his tongue out and pulling down his eyelid in order to add insult to injury.

Boss and I followed Luffy's progress much more sedately, watching him in silence for a few moments until Boss turned his attention to me. "You've never surfed a day in your life, have you?" he divined in a deadpan.

"HUH!?!" Chopper sputtered in confusion. "Boss, how could you!? Of course Cross has surfed! He'd never lie about that!"

"Yeah, he's right, I have surfed," I nodded in agreement.

"See!?!"

"Just not in the past few years since I got those few novice-level lessons."

"Wait, what!?!"

"Thought so," Boss nodded sagely. "So, I take it that advice was complete and utter bullshit?"

"A steaming hot pile of it, yes," I nodded back.

"WHAT!?!" Usopp and Chopper squawked.

"Aaaand I'm guessing that 'elixir' of yours was nothing more than flavored water?" I shot back without missing a beat.

"Eh, in a manner of speaking..." Boss waved his fin side to side as he scooted over to the shell Luffy had abandoned and picked it up. "That was my flask of fermented seaweed juice. Though, heh." He chuckled as he scrunched an eye shut and gazed into it. "You'd probably understand better if I called it 'liquid courage'. I figured it couldn't hurt! But damn it!" He cursed as he shoved the shell back behind his back. "Looks like he drank it down to the last drop. I'll need to cook up a new batch for myself."

Usopp and Chopper's jaws were too slack for them to say much of anything.

"So, wait..." Mikey raised a flipper slowly. "You mean that there isn't actually a Dugong Surfing Elixir?"

SLAP!

"OW!"

"Dumbass..." Raphey muttered as she shook her flipper out from dope-slapping him.

"So, you mean to tell us..." Usopp whimpered miserably. "That we don't have any chance whatsoever!?!"

"Not a one!" I chirped in agreement with faux enthusiasm as I strutted back to Sanji and Soundbite.
"Get ready to fish the moron out when he takes a dive. Everyone else, prepare to carve a bloody swath as we fight for our lives!"

"And you're so cheerful because…?" Zoro called over to me curiously.

"Resignation!" I stated in a sunny tone of voice.

"Just checking."

"HEEEEEEY!" Luffy's voice roared out from the lake, where he was… standing up on his board and waving his arms eagerly *damn it Luffy. "I'M READY! GET THE TURTLE TO MOVE!"

"Well, whether we like it or not, it's time to put up or shut up," Sanji sighed in defeat. "Hold on tight."

"DOSEY DO, here we go!" Soundbite concurred.

And indeed, moments later we were shaken anew by the shogunate's mount jerking its titanic mass. Thankfully, pre-awareness of the event made the experience much more tolerable a second time around.

"Alright, there's the shift, now comes the swell…" I mused slowly, watching the surge of water approach Luffy. When he started to paddle through the water approaching the wave, I got the feeling that he must have watched Octavio start off. I sighed; that was honestly the only part of surfing that anyone could do if they had a decent sense of balance, and I knew that once he got towards the actual force of the wave—

I blinked in surprise as Luffy actually managed to stick the jump-up. "Huh… well, what do you know? I guess he's not completely hopeless after all."

Sanji nodded slowly in agreement as Luffy started to steer his board to the side, following the direction of the wave. "Yeah, he's… actually kind of not bad."

Soundbite whistled in surprise as our rubber-brained captain started swerving up and down. "*I'd even SAY THAT he's good.*"

"Yeah, quite good…" I agreed as he began riding the wave.

"*Really good…*" Sanji concurred as Luffy slowly began to hang four…six…eight…

A hush fell over not only us but the crowd in general as we watched Luffy surf towards us, grinning like a loon, hanging ten while he gave twin peace signs to everyone watching. And then…

"…Sanji?"

"Yeah, Cross?"

"Is our klutzy moron of a captain who's never surfed before actually managing to outsurf the, and I quote myself here, *shogun of freaking surfing!*?"

"That… depends…" Sanji hedged as he fumbled for a new cigarette, on account of his old one having been nigh-instantly reduced to ash.

"On what?"

"Did said klutzy moron just manage to pull off six lateral flips in a row while hanging on with only
his hand, *and* with his arm stretched out at least twelve feet from said hand, *while managing to stick the landing?*

"Actually… *IT WAS* seven. **SEVEN FLIPS.**"

"Then, yes…” Sanji removed the remains of his spent cigarette and crushed it into the railing with an air of finality. "Yes, he is."

"…huh…Sanji?"

"Yeah, Cross?"

"Sanity is dead, isn't it?"

"Yes, Cross. Yes, it is."

-o-

"I'm inclined to agree with them," deadpanned a certain red-nosed pirate, who was looking at the Transponder Snail on his ship with the look of a man who didn't want to believe what he was hearing, but experience forced him to concede the truth. "A Devil Fruit user being a natural surfer, better than someone who was literally *born* for the sport? That's just insane."

Everyone else onboard the ship was staring at the snail with either gobsmacked or equally flat expressions, unable to speak…with one exception.

"It *does* sound ridiculous when you say it like that, doesn't it?" a jaw-droppingly attractive woman toting a massive spiked war club mused. "About as ridiculous as surviving an execution attempt thanks to a lightning bolt striking the tower."

"Indeed," the red-nose nodded in agreement.

"Or as ridiculous as how losing some freckles can make a world of difference in helping people perceive your natural beauty."

"Yes, that's… just as ridiculous."

"Or as ridiculous as a nearly no-name clown-themed pirate from the East Blue managing to survive two days in the Grand Line, much less two months."

"Okay, now that's just insa—**WHAT THE HELL DID YOU JUST CALL ME, WOMAN!?**"

"Okay, moving away from our existential crisis, Luffy's coming in to the shore and—wait a second…"

-o-

"Why the hell isn't he slowing down!?" I demanded incredulously.

"I think he's trying to imitate Octavio, but he's going even faster than the octopus was!" Sanji cursed furiously. "Damn it, Luffy was doing great before, but if he faceplants now, then we'll be screwed! We need to get him to slow down, or else—!"

"TOO LATE!" Soundbite squawked in panic.

And indeed, Luffy hit the edge of the lake at full speed and was sent *flying* away from his board,
both he and it spinning through the air.

Suddenly, Luffy's arms shot out and grabbed his board, jerking it back to him just as he stuck the landing.

The vast majority of the observers' jaws hit the deck, and the octopi made up for having no jaws to drop with how much their eyes popped... well, that and the way the ground and water was suddenly stained with ink.

"Oh," I stated succinctly.

"My," Sanji continued.

"God," Soundbite finished.

Right on top of Shogun Octavio's helmet, holding his board above his head in victory, was Luffy.

"WOOHOO!" he whooped, announcing his joy to the world. "THAT WAS FUN!"

Silence reigned supreme for what felt like an eternity...

Until Octavio snapped out a swift series of signs and jabbed his tentacles at Luffy.

Vivi needed no prompting to flip through the lexicon. "Uhhh... he just said... 'the winner'??"

And then the air was filled with gurgly cheers and the applause of a thousand tentacles. A moment later, Boss managed to get past the absurdity of the situation and shoot a firm thumbs up at Luffy.

"THAT'S MY CAPTAIN!"

"YEAH!" the TDWS shouted in agreement, mimicking the pose.

"GO, LUFFY!" Chopper, Usopp and Carue chorused.

"Hmm?" Lassoo hummed as he cracked his eye open, apparently coming out of a nap of all things.

"Oh, so we won. Well, that's nice." And with that, he went back to lala land.

"I am... conflicted..." Nami grimaced with a twitching eye.

"Would this help resolve your hesitation, by any chance?" Robin asked as she held up one of numerous bags of gold doubloons.

"O CAPTAIN, MY CAPTAIN!" Nami wept euphorically.

"...welp!" I finally managed to speak up. "You heard it here first, folks! A moron. Managed to beat an octopus. At surfing. Through what I can only assume was sheer, god-damn luck. Tune in next time for whatever other madness we manage to get ourselves into, and count on it being even more mind-screwing than this was. Hopefully much to the World Government's disappointment, this is still-alive Jeremiah Cross—"

"AND SOUNDBITE!"

"—signing off! Thank you for listening, and have a wonderful day!"

And with that, I clicked the receiver back into position.

I then slammed my head into the Merry's railing.
"Wake me up when the world starts making sense again…"

"So, NEVER?"

"Exactly…"

---o---

A few hours later found us well on our way again. Octavio had conceded that our captain was the better surfer, but pledged that one day, he would return to restore his honor. For now, however, he would remain true to his word and allow us to go on our way in peace.

We came away from the experience with a medal the shogun gave Luffy, which was hanging below deck by his hammock; several bags of doubloons that Nami had legitimately won, much to her delight; a few samples of octopus ink that Usopp used to replace the defective solution he'd used in Lassoo's chamber before; a tome describing the octopi's history that Robin was reading with a wide smile—though I imagine her enthusiasm was slightly limited by the revelation that the shogunate was a mere three centuries old—and a chestful of their finest saltwater taffy.

I reaffirmed my decision to coerce Foxy into helping us when we met him after Luffy downed the whole chest in a second. And I mean the whole chest. Seriously, how the hell…

As of that point, the ship was uncharacteristically silent as most of the crew was attempting to put the whole mess out of their minds. Perhaps the most notable of those was Vivi, who was only now recovering from her head injuries. Minor, I assure you, a goose egg at worst. How did she get those, you may ask? Weeell…

---o---

We waved back at Octavio as the island-turtle sank away beneath us, taking the kingdom's pagodas and the shogun's palace away with it.

"Well, that was fun!" Luffy laughed eagerly.

"It… was a bit touch and go at times, but I'll admit that it was certainly entertaining!" Vivi granted with a chipper smile. "Oh, do you want me to look up how to say goodbye to him?"

Nami, Zoro and I froze, exchanged flat looks, and then…

THWACK!

"Ow! Hey, what—?"

THWACK!

"Ow! Alright, alright, I—!"

THUNK!

"OW! I SAID I GET IT, JACKASSES!"

SLAP!

"WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT FOR, BOSS!?"

"Juuust covering our bases."
And it was glaringly obvious afterward that Vivi would rather never speak of the fiasco again.

"Well," Robin said, looking up from her book and breaking the silence, "it would seem that we've managed to return to some semblance of normality."

THUNK!

Everyone in the crew glanced up from what they were doing at the sudden sound, which had a distinct resemblance to a coconut falling on a wooden deck.

"Uh… what was that?" Usopp wondered.

"Fate punishing Robin for opening her mouth?" Vivi offered with a petulant pout.

Nami shrugged slightly when Robin cocked her eyebrow at the Princess. "She's not wrong, you know."

"Still…"

I swear to God, if this were any later in the timeline, I'd have said that Robin pouted.

"Hmm… one sec…" I glanced around curiously. I had a sneaking suspicion… Bingo! There it was! "Oooh, check it out!" I grinned like a madman as I held up the skull that had bounced onto the deck. "Look, I'm Hamlet! 'Alas, poor Yorick, how I knew thee!'"

"I knew him, Horatio! A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy!" Soundbite added.

While the rest of the crew gaped at me and my impromptu prop in equal parts shock and horror, Robin slowly marked her place in the book, stood up from her lawn chair, and carefully approached me. "Mister Jeremiah, while I appreciate your taste in literature—"

"Eh…" I waved my hand in a so-so manner. "My tastes are actually more modern. I just know the highlights, is all."

"Nevertheless… where did that skull come from?" she asked slowly.

My grin grew even wider. "And now I'm Sherlock Holmes! 'When you eliminate the impossible, whatever is left, however improbable, must be the answer.'"

"ELEMENTARY, MY DEAR WATSON!" Soundbite shouted in agreement.

Robin glanced at Soundbite in confusion as she slowly processed my statement and tried to run through the possibilities, but obviously had a difficult time with reaching the appropriate conclusion. So, I decided to throw her a bone, and pointed up. She slowly followed the direction of my finger. And then the blood evacuated her face like it was on fire.

"…Miss Nefertari, I am now inclined to agree with you, and I will make every effort to be more considerate of what I say from now on if we survive this," she said in a very deliberately calm voice.

Everyone, including myself, joined her in looking upwards, and while everyone else adopted expressions of pure horror, I allowed a massive grin to split my face.

"Willy Karen was right!" I giggled derangedly, very quickly losing the battle to keep my laughter contained. "Anything man can imagine is a possibility in reality! PFHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAAAA!
"CROSS, YOU SON OF A—!"

And then the sky fell.

Xomniac AN: How do you like me now, Andoriol?

Hornet AN: YES! IT'S ALL MINE! ALL MINE! VICTORY AT LAST! *ahem* Ours. I mean ours.
Chapter 26: A Falling Ship! Our Destination Is The Island In The Sky!

Cross-Brain AN: If you're wondering what the Cross-Brain is, it's the collective name we've come up with for ourselves, with 'we' being the three collaborative genius minds behind This Bites! The Patient One, invited on due to being a dedicated fan and proving to be an impulsive and creative mastermind, is the Id; CV12Hornet, due to being the voice of extreme reason, is the Superego; and Xomniac, due to being the voice of reason between the two and the original conceiver of the plot in the first place, is the Ego. We just decided to come up with a singular name for ourselves on account of how we work together so well, and we intend to continue doing so for the foreseeable future.

And with that said, on to the part you all care about: the madness!

As one would expect, the next few minutes, during which we dealt with the freaking galleon falling right on top of us, were… somewhat hectic, to say the least. Between the flying debris, the remains of the previous crew being flung this way and that, and the fact that the Merry was tossing and thrashing about like a 5-star roller coaster, everyone was scrambling around to keep us from capsizing, even while completely panicking.

Weeeell…

almost everyone was panicking, anyways. I was laughing my ass off the entire time. Between the rush of the madness and the legitimately hilarious expressions on everyone’s faces, why the hell wouldn’t I be laughing!?

Sadly, as they say, all good things must eventually come to an end, and really, despite the galleon outsizing the Merry a good ten-to-one, there was only so much ship that could fall.

Once the waves from the galleon’s crash settled down and there was no more stray debris left to fall on us, everyone took a moment to calm down, with most standing around and eyeing the sky nervously as they tried to catch their breath, while the more… weak-willed members of the crew huddled together for safety.

I, for my part, was laying spread-eagled on the deck and giggling myself ten kinds of silly.

"Pffahahahaaaaaa!" I wheezed semi-hysterically, my chest hurting from laughing so much. "That was awesome! Oh, my God, I love this crew so-oo-oooo much! Say, can we go aga—GYERK!"

My innocent question was cut off by Vivi bodily tackling me and repeatedly bouncing my skull off the deck as she throttled me.

"You. Will. Shut. Up. And. Stop. Causing. This. Shit. TO. HAPPEN!" Vivi shrieked hysterically, each shake of my neck accompanied by an audible "wocketa" sound. The only reason she didn't keep going until I saw angels was that Carue bodily dragged her off me, and she did not come quietly!

"Thank you, Carue," I wheezed as I massaged my throat.

"Don' thank me, Cwoss, I'm with her, you're nuts!"

"Well, in that case, screw you," I amended in the same tone of voice. "And Vivi? In case you've forgotten, it's on captain's orders that I've been keeping my mouth shut in the first place!"

"What the hell are you—?" Vivi started to snarl before I surreptitiously inclined my head towards the newest member of our crew, who was busy eyeing the fallen galleon's remains. "…ah."
"Yeah…" I nodded in agreement. "And besides, the whole mystery about this is about to become obvious in three… two… one…"

"YEARGH!"

"There it is!" Soundbite snickered as Nami loosed a shriek of mortal terror.

Vivi rolled her eyes at me before moving to Nami's side. "What's wrong, Nami?"

"The Log Pose is broken!" she shouted back.

That got a panicked reaction out of the princess. "WHAT!?" she yelped, grabbing our navigator's wrist and yanking it up to eye level. "Oh, nononono—!" she started to stammer on repeat with all the composure of a barbeque-sauce-soaked cat in a dog pound… that was stuffed to the gills with rocking chairs.

"Broken? I bought the most durable model I could find in Loguetown!" I protested, putting only a token effort into said protest. After all, I was totally confident in the Log's efficacy.

"Nononono—huh? Wait a second…" And so was Vivi, apparently, given how she stopped panicking once she actually got a good look at the thing. "Uh, Nami, what are you talking about? The Log Pose is fine. The glass isn't cracked, the needle's base isn't bent, it's in pristine condition." She cocked an eyebrow appreciatively. "As a matter of fact, now that I get a good look at it, you seem to have kept it in better condition than most usually do. Do you polish it every day?"

"Well, of course, twice a day, I have to—THAT'S NOT THE POINT!" Nami cut herself off with a shriek of rage. "It's pointing to the freaking sky! How can you think it's not broken?"

"Nami," Vivi said sharply, cutting off the navigator's rant before it could start. "I've lived my entire life in the Grand Line, and I've spent the last two years traveling it as part of Baroque Works. If there's one lesson I've learned in that time, it's that the Log Pose is the only reliable guide in this ocean; common sense is a guide for fools. Even on dry land!"

"I can support that as well," came another voice, and Vivi stiffened as Robin approached them. "I've spent the last decade or so traveling these waters, and a malfunctioning Log Pose is not on the long list of incredible things I've seen during that time; if you've followed it this far and the glass is intact, then the Log Pose is functioning fine. It must be pointing to a Sky Island."

"SKY ISLAND? ARE YOU NUTS!? I THOUGHT YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO BE THE SMART ONE!" Nami snapped before turning a pleading look to Vivi. "Vivi, you don't— can't believe that… can you?"

The grimace Vivi adopted killed any hope Nami might have had. "As much as I hate to say it—" She shot a murderous glare at Robin, who weathered it with her ever-present smile. "And believe me, I do hate to say it…" she muttered before shaking off the expression. "The fact is, given the evidence, I'm more inclined to agree with her theory than yours."

"I'M SURROUNDED BY IDIOTS!" Nami screamed, yanking at her hair in desperation.

"So, what else IS NEW?" Soundbite piped up with a grin. "Besides, how else do you EXPLAIN THAT SHIP FALLING FROM the sky?"

"Hey, look at you being all smart and logical and stuff!" I grinned as I pointed at the snail.

Nami opened her mouth to respond, but no coherent sound came out.
"Uh, actually," Donney spoke up, sticking his flipper into the air. "I can probably explain that. Have any of you ever heard of the Knock-Up Stream?"

His response was silence and blank stares, though Robin looked thoughtful, most likely because she had heard of it before.

"Well, simply put," the purple-banded dugong started to explain. "It's a natural disaster that happens in the Grand Line… about once a week on average, though the location always varies. Subterranean caverns fill up with natural gas, and when the subsequent pressure reaches its breaking point, the roof of the cavern yields, and the escaping gas forms a maelstrom on the surface—"

He trailed off at the blank looks that most of the crew was giving him, and especially at the fact that Mikey was snoring, and slapped his fin to his face with a sigh. "Alright, let me dumb it down for you: gas builds up on the ocean floor. When there's enough of it, it makes a whirlpool, then it makes water shoot up in a geyser about as wide as the Octopus Shogunate, and a few miles tall. They're easily strong enough to send a ship flying higher than the clouds; heck, they could probably send a whole island flying. Did you understand that?"

Everyone started to nod and 'oh' and 'ah' in understanding, obviously accepting the dugong's explanation.

I rolled my eyes with a sigh and prepared to rebut the Dugong… when a much more amusing idea came to me. I glanced at the snail on my shoulder with a slowly widening grin.

"Soundbite, when I say the name 'Phoenix'…" I started before grinning even wider as Soundbite smiled and nodded in agreement. "Perfect. Appropriate music, please, aaand OBJECTION!" I yelled loudly, slamming my hands on a conveniently placed crate as an intense, suspenseful beat filled the air.

"GAH!" Donney yelped, jerking back in panic. "W-What—!?

"What the heck are you talking about, Cross?" Zoro asked wearily. "Objection? To what?"

"To Donney's explanation, of course!" I answered as I pointed at the dugong in question. "There is a huge contradiction in his testimony!"

"Testimony?" Usopp, Nami and Vivi repeated in confusion.

Robin, meanwhile, had tilted her head with a smile that said she was going to go along with the turn of events. "A contradiction you say, Mister Tact—Hm?" she tilted her head questioningly before shrugging in acceptance. "Very well, then. A contradiction you say, Mister Lawyer? And what, pray tell, would that contradiction be?"

"Hmph! Really, now, it's completely obvious when you examine the statement!" I sniffed as I held up a piece of paper and tapped it with the back of my hand.

"Uh, Cross, where did you—MMPH!?" Chopper jumped in confusion when Luffy clapped his hands over the reindeer's mouth.

"Shhh, quiet, this is getting good!" Luffy quietly squealed.

"As Donney clearly stated earlier, a Knock-Up Stream is heralded by a massive maelstrom of water draining into the seabed, followed soon after by a gargantuan pillar of water exploding into the air! HOWEVER!" I snapped my finger at Donney, causing him to flinch again. "We saw no such maelstrom or pillar anywhere near us! If it had occurred, we would have obviously borne witness to
it! Thus, the obvious conclusion we can draw is that it was not the Knock-Up Stream that caused the ship to fall on us!"

"Grk!" Donney jolted with a stricken expression, obviously taken aback.

The rest of the crew started to mutter amongst themselves in agreement, with Soundbite enhancing it into an incomprehensible mess.

However, Donney wasn't quite done yet, which he demonstrated by regaining his bearings and raising a flipper. "Uh, actually—huh?" the bo-staff wielder tilted his head in confusion. "What? But that doesn't—! Why should I—!? But, but—! Ergh, fine, fine!" He slapped his flipper to his face in exasperation. "Ergh, this is completely nuts, I can't believe I'm doing this… alright, let's just get this over with. HOLD IT!" he barked, snapping his finger up at me.

I jerked back in over-exaggerated shock. "GAH!"

Robin, meanwhile, graced the dugong with an amused smile. "You have something to say, Mister Prosecutor?"

"Mister Prose—why are you playing along with the maddening charade!?!" Donney hissed, flailing his flippers in desperation.

"What, you mean you aren't having fun?" Robin asked innocently.

"Grgghrgghh…" Donney's eye twitched furiously before he swapped his gaze over to me. "Alright, look, I wanted to say that the Knock-Up Stream is a massively powerful force of nature! Chances are that it could have struck the ship miles away from here, far from our line of sight, and flung it at us!"

Donney slammed his flippers down on the barrel before him. "There is no reason to think that that ship came from anywhere else!"

"GYERK!" I flinched back as the crew started muttering amongst themselves again.

"Hm… Mister Prosecutor does make a valid point…" Robin mused as she rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "Your rebuttal, Mister Lawyer? If you cannot come up with an explanation for how the ship fell from the sky, then I will have no choice but to pass my verdict now."

"Did she just say 'verdict'?!" Vivi repeated in confusion.

"Yeah, I have no idea what's going on, best to just go with it…" Nami sighed in defeat as she massaged her temples.

"Though you do gotta admit, this is kind of entertaining…" Usopp shrugged.

No sooner had he finished that sentence than Sanji twirled up to where they were sitting, a pair of drinks on the platter he was carrying. "Refreshments for miladies?" he offered Vivi and Nami.

"Oooh, don't mind if I do!" Nami said, eagerly taking one and passing the other to Vivi, who for her part sighed in exasperation.

"Might as well watch the madness…" she grumbled as she took a sip from her straw.

"And where the hell is my drink, swirly brow?"

"In the bathroom, mosshead."

"YOU WANNA SAY THAT TO MY FACE, SHIT COOK?!"
"READ MY LIPS, CRAP SWORD—!"

SLAM! SLAM!

"ORDER! ORDER IN THE COURT!"

"Thank you, Soundbite," Robin nodded appreciatively.

"Go burn, WITCH BITCH!"

"And as for you, Mister Lawyer, your rebuttal?" she said as she moved her gaze on to me.

"Um, er, ah…" I slumped forwards nervously, sweat pouring down my face as I tried to come up with an explanation. Well, at least one that didn't involve extraterrestrial knowledge, anyways.

Donney adopted a cocky expression, puffing his chest out as he smirked at me. "It's over, Cross! You don't have any more angles you can exploit!"

I blinked in realization as I processed his words. "Wait, angle… that's it! HOLD IT!" I barked, jabbing my finger at the amphibious mammal.

"Huh?!" Donney blinked in confusion.

"You have something to say, Mister Lawyer?" Robin asked.

"Indeed I do!" I nodded confidently. "For you see, there is still one angle I can exploit in this case!"

"What?!" my opponent dugong yelped.

"If you would elaborate, Mister Lawyer?" our pseudo-judge requested.

"It's quite simple, ma'am." I nodded as I started tapping on a piece of paper anew. "As you'll recall, my opponent suggested that the ship could have fallen down due to being flung by the Knock-Up Stream. However, there is evidence that contradicts this assertion!"

I pointed straight up. "The angle of the ship's descent itself!"

"Wh-what?!" Donney jerked in shock.

I planted my fists on my hips. "As we all know, if we were to fling an object forwards from us, that object would travel for a distance before finally falling to the earth due to gravity. However, due to its velocity from being flung, it would not fall straight down. Rather…" I snapped my finger out at Donney. "It would fall on a curve!"

"A-a curve?" Donney repeated with a stammer as he tried out to work out what I was saying. "But, w-what does that—GRK!" He stiffened in shock as realization swept over him. "N-no, no you can't mean—!"

"I see you understand!" I smirked. "Indeed, while flung objects descend on a downward curve the ship that fell on us fell straight downwards! Hence, your assertion that it could have been flung here by the Knock-Out Stream is physically impossible!"

"GAH!" Donney recoiled, visibly stricken.

"Furthermore—!"
"SLAM!"

"GAH!" I jumped in shock when Nami cracked her Clima-Tact over my crate.

"Get to the point or I'll lodge my objection in your skulls," she growled impatiently.

"Aw, just when it was getting good…" Mikey groaned.

SLAM!

"Anyone else have anything they want to add?" the navigator growled as she stood over the thoroughly concussed dugong.

I swallowed before nodding hastily. "The fact that the ship fell from straight down means that it only could have fallen off of something from above us! I-I-I realize that it sounds nuts and that there might not appear to be anything in the sky, but…" I gave her a determined look. "The fact is that Sky Island is up there, and our primary priority should be to find some way to get up there."

"The evidence is clear. The court rules in favor of the defendant, Mister Jeremiah Cross," Robin stated, holding up her gavel. "Case—!

Nami jerked her face up close to Robin's with a growl. "Put that hammer back wherever the hell you got it from, and don't you dare finish that sentence. Got it?"

Robin slowly lowered her hand with a carefully neutral expression. Then Nami turned her gaze on Soundbite, who promptly ceased the Phoenix Wright soundtrack.

"Good. Now, the best place to get information on… ergh, Sky Island (can't believe I'm actually buying this) is from the ship that came from it in the first place, so—!"

"Hey, guys!" Luffy waved from the part of wreck he was clambering over. "You gotta check this out! There's something really cool over here!"

"Yeah, there's something over here too!" Usopp called from the part of the ship he was on.

"Wait fo' me, guys!" Carue squawked in agreement, following behind the sniper.

Nami had clearly passed the threshold of normal rage if the downright demonic expression and voice she had as she spoke to Robin again was any indication. "Have you ever wanted to just take a lighter and set the whole world on fire?" she hissed.

Robin took on a slightly far-off look. "Every day for the past twenty years…" she breathed wistfully to herself.

Between that and Nami's rage, I elected to take a big step back from the two of them. "Aaaand that's just disturbing…" I muttered.

"Did you expect anything else from them?" Lassoo huffed tiredly.

I jumped in shock before turning a disbelieving eye on the mutt-gun. "Have you been sleeping this entire time?!"

Lassoo shrugged indifferently as he shifted his not-inconsiderable mass around a bit. "Eh, without a fight, not much reason for me to be awake, is there?"

"A ship NEARLY FELL ON US!" Soundbite squawked indignantly.
Lassoo snorted, rolling onto his back. "Welcome to the Grand Line. Wake me up when there's something for me to actually do." And with that, he let out a snore and presumably fell back to sleep.

"…right!" I clapped my hands firmly, trying desperately to move things along. "So, does anyone have any idea on where this ship is supposed to be from, anyways?"

Thankfully, the dual calls of archaeology and finding some way to fix our Log Pose were enough to draw two-thirds of our crew's female population—I felt a chill run up my spine, originating from the direction of the TDWS. Scratch that, half of our crew's female population, out of their violent delusions.

Robin proceeded to display her ever-impressive skillset, analyzing the corpse in one of the coffins that had fallen on the deck of the Merry and extrapolating the St. Briss' name and origin from there. Honestly, the casualness with which Robin handled the human remains was a little bit disturbing, but it was an impressive enough feat that I could shove the thought to the back of my mind.

Unfortunately, by the time we'd dedicated ourselves to searching the wreck for any clues or answers, it had already sunken beneath the waves. As it was, the Dugongs had to scramble to save our buoyant-as-a-brick captain from going down with a vessel that wasn't his.

Still, in the end, at least we managed to pull out something useful from the ordeal.

"Skypiea..." Nami breathed as she looked over the weathered map she was holding.

"We did it!" Luffy whooped, dancing around hand-in-hand-in-hoof with Usopp and Chopper. "We're actually going to a Sky Island!"

"Sky Island, Sky Island, we're all going to Sky Island!" the other thirds of the Dumbass Trio sang in agreement.

"So, we're actually going up to the sky," Leo mused before glancing at the bo-staff wielder. "You think it's actually possible, Donney?"

"It sounds insane, but..." the dugong trailed off as he looked upwards. "Honestly, the more I see of the Grand Line in general..."

"Common sense is insanity, and insanity is common sense, even I know that," Raphey shrugged indifferently.

"Ah, who the heck cares about the details? The fact is that we're going up to the sky! This is gonna be kickass!" Mikey cackled.

"Down, boy," Boss chuckled as he rapped his fist over the nunchuk-wielder's skull. "We'll get there in time, we just need to figure out how first."

"Well, why don't we ask our resident expert on the Grand Line?" Zoro asked, pointedly turning towards me.

I, in turn, twitched in panic before jerking my head towards our newest crewmate, a rictus grin plastered on my face. "Yes, let's ask Robin. After all, she's been traveling the Grand Line longer than any of us, right? And her first thought was that there was a Sky Island up there."

Zoro, thankfully, redirected his attention, though if I was reading the sudden tension in Robin's stance right, he had just made me more suspicious in her eyes. Nevertheless, she answered, "Well, I've never seen it myself. But to my knowledge, it's more than merely an island; there's an entire sea
above us."

Nami groaned. "…Alright, even if we assume that this is all true, how are we supposed to get to the sky in the first place?"

"Mm… it's difficult to say…" Vivi mused, cupping her chin thoughtfully. "I imagine that, with enough expertise, a ship could be engineered to somehow, well, reach the clouds… but the fact remains that the St. Briss looked like a normal ship, so there must be some way up there…"

"I propose looking into Mister Dugong's explanation," Robin offered. "While I agree with Mister Tactician about the Knock-Up Stream not being the reason for the ship coming down on us, he did say that it's capable of sending ships flying, yes?"

"Would it kill you to use our names? There are four 'Mister Dugongs' here," Mikey grumbled, earning a dope-slap from Boss with a mutter that sounded like 'manners.'

"But as it stands, I doubt that the process is as simplistic as that," Robin shrugged, ignoring the amphibians' exchange. "No matter how you look at it, the fact is that we don't have enough information to act on. Perhaps there could be more information on the ship?"

"Then we'll just have to salvage it!" Nami nodded firmly.

There was a brief pause as we digested that idea. "You're insane," Zoro flatly summarized.

"You do weawize dat dat ship outweighed da Mewwy almost ten-pwanks ta one, wight?!" Carue concurred.

"He's right…" I nodded slowly before clapping my hands firmly. "So, if we can't bring the ship to us, then we go to the ship. Usopp, we need diving suits, on the double!"

"Now, hold on there," Boss interrupted. "Why don't you just let my students and I go down? I mean, we can't breathe underwater, no, but we can hold our breaths long enough to fake it! What's wrong with us just going down and getting what we need ourselves?"

"Simple!" I shot back. "You're going down to explore a recently sunken wreck that was presumably packed with dozens of human corpses."

"So!?" Boss snorted.

SPLOOSH!

I didn't even need to turn around to know what had just breached the water behind me. The crew's terror-stricken expressions and the bestial groan that rippled the air were answer enough.

Well, that and Soundbite crowing out a panicked "THAR SHE BLOWS!"

I waited for the sound of the scavenging Sea King to sink back beneath the waves before patting Boss's frozen shoulder. "SO, you're either gonna need more dugongs, or more muscle, if you want to make it down there without becoming intimately familiar with a sea king's internal anatomy." And with that, I shifted my attention over to Usopp. "So, about those diving suits?"

As Usopp got to work jury-rigging a diving rig, I took the opportunity to pull Boss aside for a… relatively private conversation. "I've got a bit of a request for you and your students while you're down there."
Boss cocked his eyebrow at me as he chewed on his cigar. "You mean *besides* the intel on how to get to the sky we're already looking for?"

"Besides that, yes," I nodded in confirmation. "I'm hoping that you'll be able to find something *from* Sky Island that the guys will overlook, and honestly, I think you and yours are the best chance we have of finding them."

"Really, now?" He took his cigar out of his mouth and tapped it contemplatively. "And this goal of ours would be…?"

"Seashells."

Both Boss and Soundbite looked at me in shock.

"You're MAD," the snail stated flatly.

"No, I assure you, I'm quite sane," I only half-lied. "I realize it'll be tough, but I'm confident that the shells I want you to find will be down there. Maybe not many, good chance they cracked, but hopefully *some* survived. They take a variety of shapes and sizes, but they're primarily conical in nature, spirally. Also, unlike normal shells, they'll all be solid colors all the way, instead of a variety. They'll also have moving parts like buttons on them, but you'll want to avoid touching those if you can, alright?"

Boss chewed firmly on his cigar as he contemplated my request before nodding slowly. "Sounds like a challenge… but hell, my students and I *love* our challenges." He gave me a manly thumbs-up. "We'll get you your shells if they're down there, Cross, you can bet your bottom beri on it!"

I nodded gratefully. "That's all I ask."

A few minutes later, three diving-suited monsters, and five martial-artist dugongs dove off the side of the ship, swiftly sinking into the depths and only slowed by the brake a Heavy Point Chopper was operating, while Carue jumped up and down on the oversized bellows Usopp had jury-rigged and Nami, Vivi, and the sniper himself stood by the pipes used to convey both air and sound. In case of the event that they moved too far for us to hear, Sanji had taken Pinky along with him and Zoro had taken Brain… and if the way Soundbite was laughing his head off was any indication, the four were getting along about as well as Zoro and Sanji normally did. I myself was just starting to relax, ambling around towards the stairs to the quarterdeck…

"Mister Tactician, may I have a word, please?"

When I was jerked out of my idle thoughts by a voice that was far too calm for my liking.

"I can make this **REALLY** loud…" Soundbite muttered beneath his breath.

I felt my teeth dig into my lip as I calmed my nerves before replying. "No, you are going to keep this quiet." I didn't wait for him to respond before turning around to face the positively terrifying pillar of a woman that was our archaeologist. "You have something you want to ask me, Robin?"

Robin—no, 'Devil Child' *Nico* Robin gave a frigid smile, the motion *entirely* physical in nature. "I believe it's time you gave me some answers, *Mister Tactician.*" I made to ask what she meant, but the way she stepped forwards and cut me off told me she already knew what I was about to say. "Don't deny it, Mister Tactician, you have information you can't possibly possess. You knew Princess Nefertari's identity before the rest of your comrades even knew Alabasta existed. You knew the capabilities of the Baroque Works Officer Agents without even laying eyes on most of them. You
even knew that that ship was going to fall on us. I've relied heavily on eavesdropping since I first ate my Devil Fruit, and as such, I can say with certainty that even with your pet's range—"

"Watch it," Soundbite snarled, starting to vibrate the air with an ever so slight hum.

"—you could not possibly have gathered that much information. So, I want to know how you know."

"...and if I choose not to tell you, Nico Robin?" I finally asked in a low tone of voice. I didn't want to address her like that, but if she was going to play hardball, then I couldn't afford not to play it right back.

Robin stepped even closer, positioning herself just so, so that she was managing to loom, despite she and I being in the same height range. "You're a smart person, Jeremiah. Smart, if slightly foolish. Use your imagination, and rest assured…" She trailed her fingers on my cheek without unfolding her arms. "I won't leave a mark."

Soundbite looked about ready to start an audio-based riot, rip her hand off, or both, but before he could take any form of action, I backhanded the limb away and pushed her back. "I. Am not. Afraid of you," I enunciated clearly and calmly, firmly refusing to give her so much as an inch of ground to work with. "And either way, I do plan on telling you what I know, and the dugongs as well. The reason why I haven't is that the information I have is intensely sensitive. And though I want to trust you..." I paused for a moment before sighing heavily. "The fact is that I can't completely until you join this crew. Not hitch a ride with us," I snapped when she started to say something. "Not force your way on, I mean when you actually join, when you consider yourself part of the crew."

I fell silent for a moment as I stared at her before sighing and pinching the bridge of my nose. "The reason Luffy let you onboard and I didn't report you stowing away is that both he and I can see good in you. We know you're not the monster you make yourself out to be, that so many say you are, but as much as I want to, I can't trust you unconditionally until you can do the same in turn. And it's clear from the fact that you refuse to use any of our names as anything but weapons that you don't trust us that much yet. So, I'm sorry, but I can't tell you what I know and why. Not yet."

Robin stared at me with an indecipherable expression, scanning me up and down and obviously searching me for some flaw she could exploit. Roughly a minute later, she smiled again, this time with much more warmth… a little too much for me to think it was sincere, in fact. "Are you certain about that, Cross?" She stepped up close to me… very close—oooh, boy, so that was her game. "Are you certain there's… nothing I can do to change your mind?" she purred into my ear. "Nothing at all?"

I absolutely wrestled with my body, making sure to stay absolutely still as I tried to construct a coherent response… and in the end, I could only default to one option.

"I'll tell you everything that I know," I grit out through clenched teeth. "If you do one thing."

"Anything..." Robin breathed, her hand starting to slide somewhere.

I didn't wait to find out where, instead grabbing her wrist and taking a step back from her. "You tell the crew about the day Ohara died."

The change hit Robin like a lightning bolt, every muscle in her body positively locking up and old, deeply ingrained terror flaring up in her eyes as the breath rushed out of her lungs in a ragged, emotion-filled gasp.
Soundbite's eyes widened in shock. "Holy shit…"

"What—?" Robin started before being cut off by a fit of tremors. She was forced to swallow heavily and try to regain control her emotions before trying again. "What do you know about Ohara." It was a demand, not a question.

I glanced around Robin, confirming that none of the crew were nearby before leaning in and looking her dead in the eye. "More than anyone still alive besides you. Enough to know that what happened was the absolute epitome of a tragedy and an atrocity, and enough to know that the meaning of the word 'Justice' has been irrevocably sullied by what happened. It's one of many reasons why I started the SBS in the first place." I trailed off uncomfortably as I took in the terrified expression Robin bore before speaking again. "Look, I'm sorry I had to use their memories as a weapon, Robin, but the fact is that until you can trust us with that… I can't trust you. Understand?"

Robin's mouth opened and shut helplessly, obviously at a complete and utter loss for words. Before she could say anything, however, she was broken out of her paralysis by a din of whistling, cymbals, and voices approaching us from a distance. Robin glanced in the direction of the noise before shooting a glare at me that would have been much scarier had she not still been half-panicked.

"This isn't over," she warned me shakily before stalking off, only just managing to pull her devil-may-care facade back into place.

"The absolute hell it is…" I breathed to myself in agreement.

"Ohara?" Soundbite questioned hesitantly.

"Ever see an entire island, people and all, perish in fire in less than an hour?"

"No…" Soundbite shook his head slowly, obviously dreading whatever I was planning on saying.

"She has; that's what happened to her home when she was eight," I told him solemnly. "She was the only survivor, and the World Government's been hunting her ever since."

Soundbite stiffened before slowly turning his gaze after Robin, finally managing to breathe out an awed "…holy shit…"

I tsked darkly as I marched towards the main deck. "Believe me, Soundbite, there was nothing holy about that day."

Soundbite didn't reply as I approached where the rest of my crewmates were standing, looking up at the massive monkey-themed ship and crew that was pulling up alongside the Merry, their chant of "Salvage! Salvage the Sea!" grating on my ears almost as bad as punk metal. Finally, the ship came to a stop.

"Are we on top of the place where the ship sank?" barked an authoritative voice.

"Aye-aye, captain, sir!" answered the crew.

"Ohhhh…" Soundbite began to sing, prompting me to slap a hand on his shell and force him back in.

"Not a word about the yellow thing that must not be named," I hissed, before considering. "… at least, not until we meet the talking starfish."
"HA!"

"Could you two focus, please!?' Vivi demanded.

"When they say 'captain' and 'sir,' they're talking about me!"

Our attention was drawn back to the odd ship by the bark of the same voice as before, whose owner was revealed to be a bulky, hairy man with wide lips, orange overalls, and a tail (real or not, to this day I neither know nor am eager to find out) standing on the ship's stem. "Prepare to raise the ship! What lies on the bottom now belongs to the king of all salvagers: captain of the Masira Pirates, Masira! Ook kee kee!"

The crew onboard responded with hooting cheers, obviously as pumped up as their captain was.

"Well, these guys are completely nuts..." Nami muttered before looking at me. "Do you think these guys will be a problem, O great and wise tactician, or should we just wait and see?"

I shot her a cocky smirk. "What, you didn't enjoy the surpri—?" THWACK! "YEOWCH!" I cut myself off with a yelp as I cradled my slugged arm. "Geeze, tough crowd... Alright, alright, I'll handle this. Soundbite, Gastro-Amp. AHoy, THERE!" I waved at Masira in an attempt to draw his attention. "Sorry to bother you, but did you just say that you're getting ready to salvage that ship below us?"

"Huh?" Masira blinked at me in confusion before pumping his chest out. "Yeah, that's right! These waters are my territory; every vessel that sinks in these parts automatically becomes mine!" He scowled challengingly at us. "Why do you ask? You're not trying to take something that belongs to me, are ya?"

I shrugged innocently as I pointed at the crewmates on his ship that were suiting up and preparing to dive, pointedly ignoring the frantic gestures Usopp and Carue were making. "Nah, just trying to tell you that if you're sending anybody down, you should warn them to be careful. We've got our own guys down there, and if you try and lay your hands on them, they're liable to lay their hands on you. And by 'lay their hands on', I mean they'll put their fists through your helmets."

"ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MIND!?" the majority of my crewmates hollered at me in disbelief.

"Oh, really?" Masira growled. Then, in an impressive display of strength, he leapt the full distance from the bow of his ship to the railing of ours, causing everyone onboard aside from Boss, Robin, and myself to retreat several paces. "And what gives you the idea that you can just invade my territory, steal my property, and threaten my crew?"

"Take a step back, Monkey-Breath," Lassoo growled, shifting in less than two seconds from a drowsy sunbathing dog to an attack hound, teeth bared at Masira.

"Down, boy," I ordered nonchalantly as I waved him off, cocking an eyebrow at the other pirate's show of machismo. Honestly, Friday and 13 had been way scarier than this guy. Heck, I lived with scarier people. "And to answer your question, simple: the law of finders fucking keepers. We had boots on that ship before it sank. Hell, it literally fell into our laps, almost sinking our ship. We deserve dibs on the salvage."

Masira's stance became less menacing, though he still frowned heavily. "I don't care if you sank that ship or not, the fact is that once it fell beneath the waves, all the treasure on it became mine! Now either get your guys out of there and leave or—!"

"But we don't even want the treasure onboard that ship, if there is any!" I hastily interrupted.
"Excuse me!?"

"Will you shut the hell up, woman?" I desperately hissed out of the corner of my mouth, my eyes never leaving Masira.

The ape-man, meanwhile, had crossed his arms and was staring at me curiously. "You don't want treasure? Then what the heck do you want?"

"Information," I said, crossing my arms. "You didn't hear me earlier. When I said that that ship fell into our laps, I wasn't kidding around, I was being literal. That ship fell onto us from out of the freaking sky. We think that it might have come from a Sky Island and we want to follow it up there."

Masira's eyes and mouth both widened in obvious shock. It took a minute or so for him to speak again. "Sky Island? A-are you serious!?"

Nami shot a glare at me as she walked up before holding up her wrist. "See for yourself. I think it's crazy, but, well, the Log doesn't lie… I think…"

Masira's eyes and mouth dropped wide as he took in the abnormally vertical needle. "Shoujou said that the wreck came from out of nowhere…" he breathed before jerking back in shock. "HOLY CRAP, IT REALLY FELL FROM THE SKY!"

"Eeyup!" I nodded in agreement. "And we're searching it now for any clues on how it got up there in the first place! It's a longshot, sure, but worth a try anyway." I snapped my fingers in faux-realization. "Say, how about this? You help us salvage the ship, we'll let you have all the treas-ah —ARGH!" I yelped in agony as Nami grabbed my shoulder in a vice, forcing me to hastily amend what I was saying. "A-a-a percentage of the treasure! To be negotiated at a later date!" I sighed in relief as Nami let me go before plastering an eager grin on my face. "So, what do you say, Captain Masira? Think you could help us with this completely impossible journey?"

At that, the ape-man broke into a full-blown grin before shooting a thumbs-up at me. "You got it, kid!"

My eye twitched furiously as my arm jerked towards my belt. "Starting to get a complex about that, either call me by my name or get brained."

Masira chuckled apologetically as he scratched the back of his head, moving down from the railing onto the deck. "Ah, sorry about that. What's your name, then?"

I took a moment to calm myself down before grinning and holding my hand out to the ape-man. "I'm Cross. Jeremiah Cross, third mate of the Straw Hat Pirates."

"Ook kee!?" Masira's jaw dropped wide as he stared at me in shock. "Wait, you mean that you're that Jeremiah Cross? The one who hosts that awesome SBS show?! I thought your voice sounded familiar!" He blushed and scratched the back of his head sheepishly. "Ah, man, this is really embarrassing! My brother Shoujou and I are huge fans of your show! Geeze, chances are that he's gonna kill me for being so rude to you! Oh, and you must be Soundbite! Wow, this is such an honor, I'm a great fan!"

All I could do was blink in shock as I processed the new turn of events. "Well, now…"

"Holy wow," Soundbite concurred.

"Good grief…” Lassoo groaned, flopping back onto his stomach.
"H-hey, wait a second!" Chopper yelped hastily, jabbing a finger upwards. "What about our flag? Our Jolly Roger's emblazoned on the sail and flag! How could you not know it was us?"

Masira chuckled sheepishly as he scratched the back of his head. "Ah, well, to be honest… I thought that you guys might have been fans of the show too and were showing it! Honest mistake, my bad!"

I nearly face-planted at the absurdity of what I just heard, the weight of the sweatdrop I knew was hanging from my head nearly dragging me to the deck. Now I remembered what I'd forgotten about the Saruyama Alliance: both of the brothers had as much common sense as Luffy did. That is to say, jack and shit.

"Anyways, sorry again about the threats and all that," Masira waved his hand sheepishly. "The other pirates in these waters tend to be rough by nature, and we have our… differences at times, so to speak. My brother and I have had to be protective of our turf, or else our wrecks could be poached by somebody just for the sake of messing with us. But anyways!" He clapped his hands together. "To business! You want that wreck salvaged and searched for information? Then you can bet that my men and I will salvage the heck out of it, no sweat!"

"Perfect!" I gave him an A-OK sign with a grin. "You go ahead and send your crew down to do whatever they were going to do, we'll tell our guys not to beat them to a bloody pulp! Let's do it!"

"ALRIGHT!" Masira whooped as he leapt back over to his own ship and started barking out orders, sending his men scrambling into motion.

"Do you really think this will work?" Vivi asked hesitantly.

"Are you kidding?" I deadpanned, gesturing at Masira. "He and Luffy are going to hit it off as soon as they see each other."

"I don't think that's what Princess Nefertari meant, Mister Jeremiah," Robin noted from where she was standing off to the side.

I glanced at her momentarily before shrugging. "If you're talking about his capabilities as a salvager, then yes, I'm sure; I don't know who gave him his title, but I doubt his crew'd be so enthusiastic in supporting him if he hadn't earned it. Just sit back, and enjoy the show," I said casually as I moved over to the tubes. "Soundbite, think you can—?"

"What's up, Cross?" Soundbite grunted with a familiar scowl.

I sighed in relief before speaking. "Just calling to let you guys know that we have company up here and that you've got some people heading down your way."

"What!?" Soundbite yelped, clenching his left eye shut as he spoke. "Are my beauties alright? Damn it, I'll send the dugongs up! Hang on, we're—!"

"Friendly, friendly company!" I barked, hopefully managing to cut him off. "Geeze, alright, I'll admit I could have worded that better, but seriously…" I sighed and shook my head. "Anyways, there are a few other divers coming your way with equipment to help with the salvaging. Just let them go about their business and this whole thing should go a lot smoother."

"Hang on… yeah, I think I see them now," Zoro confirmed. "Metal suits and… some kind of giant mechanical ribcage?"

"Yeah, that's them," I confirmed.
"Alright, we'll keep Luffy and the dugongs away from them. Thanks, Cross."

"No problem, and good luck." And with that, the connection was closed.

The next few minutes were quite impressive indeed; from the Masira Pirates lowering their cradle to grasp the St. Briss' wreck to Masira blowing a freaking air bubble into and around the thing, these guys amply demonstrated that they were not your run-of-the-mill salvagers. No… these guys blew traditional salvagers a clear mile out of the water.

It was only after Masira jumped in to go down and help our guys investigate that I started really searching the waters around us, scanning the depths for what I knew was to come. After all, once things started to happen, chances were that they would be happening fast whether I liked it or not, and no amount of forewarning would be able to change that.

"Is something amiss, Mister Tactician?"

I glanced back at Robin and started thinking of how to dodge the question, before stopping myself short. Why did I have to dodge the question? Robin had managed to divine that I knew a lot of things that I shouldn't; the fact that she didn't know why yet didn't matter. Honestly, she'd been the only one I'd been trying to hide things from! But now, with that cat out of the bag… eh, screw subtlety! For now, anyways…

"Oh, just waiting for another giant sea turtle to show up," I glibly informed her.

Robin stiffened as she blinked in confusion, obviously taken aback by the apparent non-sequitur. "I beg your pardon?"

I couldn't help but grin as Soundbite tensed on my shoulder and Carue loosed a very panicked squawk. "Aaand there it is. Don'tcha love the Grand Line's exquisite sense of timing?"

"What are you—?!" Robin cut herself off with a shocked breath as she stared over the edge of the ship, catching sight of the relatively gargantuan shadow beneath us.

"By the way…" I mused as I took it in. "Now that I think about it, whatever happened to that tortoise you were using as a chauffeur while you were working for the Croc bastard? Banchi, was it?"

"CROSS!"

I rolled my eyes with a fond sigh as an all-too-familiar screech ripped across the ship. "Story for another time, but for now, they're fine, Nami, it won't hurt them!"

The Merry promptly shuddered as the trio's air hoses snapped taut, tilting our ship slightly as they and the cables leading from Masira's ship were dragged straight down.

"…OK, let me qualify that statement…"

"Crooooooss…" Nami scowled, stalking towards me with very twitchy hands.

Surprisingly enough, however, I found a savior coming to my aid in the form of our resident four-foot walking rug.

"Leave Cross's neck alone, Nami!" Chopper pleaded desperately. "I know he earns it a lot—!"

"EEYUP!" Soundbite concurred.

"Dat's twue!" Carue nodded.
"Can't argue with that…" Lassoo yawned.

"There is a conspiracy afoot here, I swear to God…"

"—but if you keep choking Cross, you're liable to do real, lasting damage to his vertebrae!" Chopper finished hastily. "I-I'm not asking you to stop forever, that's unlikely. Just… give him a break for awhile, okay?"

Nami rolled her eyes with a growl. "Ugh, fine… if only because we still need this moron's inconsiderate brain for something…"

"Don't worry, Nami," Vivi reassured the navigator as she ambled up to me with a beatific smile that was sending shivers up my spine for some reason or other. "There's still one way we can express our displeasure in a healthy manner!"

I took a nervous step back from the princess. "…friendly discourse?"

"Nope."

SLAM!

"SWEET BABY JESUS!" I bit out as I doubled over and clutched my privates.

"That," Vivi stated sweetly over the sound of Soundbite laughing raucously.

"That is not a healthy manner!" Chopper shrieked.

"It is when he neglects to mention the ten-ton turtle about to swallow our friends!" Vivi scowled, dropping her charade.

"And besides…" Robin mused thoughtfully. "I've always thought the gene pool could use a little… supervision."

Chopper made to say something, before pausing thoughtfully. "Well, when you put it that way…"

I swear I felt something snap in the back of my mind as I straightened, glaring daggers at the four of them. "I hope you realize that you're all going to pay dearly for this," I snarled. I took a perverse glee in seeing all four of them take a nervous step back.

"H-Hev, c'mon, Cross!" Chopper stammered. "I-I got them to stop strangling you, that counts for something, right?"

"This is not an acceptable alternative, furball!" I bit out viciously as I slowly worked my way to my feet. "Ergh, sonnuva—forget it, I'll deal with you all at a later date. For now, brace!"

"What are you—?"

SPLOOSH!

"—AAAGH!"

Usopp's question was cut off in a scream as the ocean's surface exploded, allowing a moderately massive turtle to surface and presumably breathe for a little bit.

I chuckled at everyone flailing to regain their balance before eyeing the shelled Sea King. "So, what does it say about my life so far that I can say without a doubt that that is the second biggest sea turtle
any of us have ever seen?"

"WILL YOU ACTUALLY BE SERIOUS FOR A MOMENT?!" Usopp sobbed in panic.

"Usopp's right, Cross!" Vivi concurred desperately. "The guys' air hoses are hanging out of that thing's mouth!"

"DEY'RE GONNA BE EATEN!" Carue squawked, flapping his wings frantically. "DEN WHO'LL FIGHT DA STUPIDWY TOUGH MONSTAHS!?"

"Alright, don't panic, don't panic, don't panic!" Chopper hyperventilated as he jackhammered his hooves against his forehead. "I-I-I just need to make a Sea King grade emetic! Quick! Get me five hundred CCs of fresh water, a thousand kilograms of fecal matter AND A SYRINGE THE SIZE OF A—!"

THWACK!

"OW!... thank you."

"No problem," I shrugged as I spun my baton back into my pocket. "And besides, I don't think we need to bother trying to make it spit up the ship."

"So, wait, you mean that the guys will be okay?" Nami asked curiously.

I rolled my eyes with a weary sigh. "Yes, they're going to be fine, and no, we don't need to cut their lines to save the Merry. We just need something really shocking to make it drop its jaw. Like, say... night suddenly falling."

Aaaaaand...

Everyone looked around in confusion.

"Was that supposed to do something, Cross?" Vivi asked.

I ground my teeth as I looked upwards. "I said, NIGHT SUDDENLY FALLING!"

C'mon, where the hell was it? I was starting to look bad damn it holy shit that cloud's moving fast and there we go.

"YOUR SENSE of timing SUCKS," Soundbite scoffed.

"Bite—tsk! Ergh, anyways, this is the first time I've been off!" I shot back. "Besides, it's not like the world is on clockwork!"

"He does this often?" Robin asked, not quite as calmly as expected.

"Let me put it this way..." Nami grit out as her eye twitched on account of her trying to keep from panicking. "I envy your powers on account of how you can dope-slap Cross whenever he deserves it, anytime, anywhere."

"Pardon me if I don't find that reassuring."

"Cross, what happened to the sky?!" Vivi demanded with far less control than Nami. "Some time-based Devil Fruit or something?!"

"If I knew about a time-based Devil Fruit, I would have eaten it already, and dope-slapped myself
before I got you a bounty," I responded. "No, it's not really night. It's just a cloud formation."

"What kind of a cloud formation is that thick!?!" our navigator demanded.

I let a devilish grin creep onto my face, then turned back to the turtle, whose mouth was opening. "I'll save that explanation for when the others get back."

SPLOOSH! CRASH! Luffy shot over the side of the railing and slammed onto the deck.

"HA! Back on track! Booyah! Can a brother—?" CHOMP! "YEOW!"

"Watch it, white trash."

"...yeah, that's fair."

"Hey, guys," Zoro saluted us casually as he, Sanji and the Dugongs clambered onboard, toting bags stuffed with loot. The swordsman dropped his own sack before cocking an eyebrow at me. "You didn't think to mention the turtle?"

"I didn't think it mattered," I shrugged indifferently.

"He does have a point," Boss pointed out.

"Mmrgh..." Zoro finally grunted in agreement.

"But-but-but how did you guys get out?" Usopp sputtered.

"Look, the turtle's mouth is open!" Chopper pointed out.

"Yeah, we noticed that on our way out," Raphey commented with a shrug. "Weird, huh?"

"Weird..." Carue mused. "It awmost wooks... scawed?"

"PHWOO!"

"QUACK!"

Carue was interrupted by Luffy jerking up with a gasp as he spat out a lungful of seawater. That done he blinked stupidly in surprise. "Oh, I'm alive. That's nice." He then looked upwards in confusion. "Huh? Why's it dark out?"

"Oh, it's not night, don't worry," I reassured him, fighting to keep my grin off my face. "We're just under cloud cover. If you think normal clouds cast shades, you should see what entire seas of them are capable of."

Nami mouthed 'seas of them' before stiffening as the blood drained out of her face. Eeeever so slowly, she looked upwards. "No way..." she breathed.

"Ooooh, yes way..." I nodded eagerly. "The Briss came from a small outlier of this thing, but that's the main glut right there. And it's not even the only one in the world, either!"

Nami worked her jaw helplessly for a moment before clenching it shut. "Well... that's me told... so, will something here help us get up there, then?" She gestured weakly at the bags of relics our crewmates had gathered.

"Eh..." I wavered my hand horizontally. "Something Luffy picked up will be useful in the long run,
and I'm sure that Robin will appreciate the chance to look over some two hundred-year-old relics—"

"I won't deny that I do want to give our most recent acquisitions a peek…" Robin mused, licking her lips hungrily as she eyed the bags.

"—plus maybe we can get a good price from some collectors for barely water-damaged South Blue Antiques, buuut…" I shrugged helplessly. "The fact is that we'll be getting the help we need from a who, not a what."

"And this 'who' would be…?" Vivi trailed off questioningly.

SPLOOSH! A massive hand suddenly reached up and grabbed the Merry's railing before hauling an even larger mass onto the ship's deck. "Whoo, that was scary! Hey, you guys alright?"

Everyone familiar with Masira stared at him blankly before slowly turning to stare at me. "You'll thank me later," I preened before addressing the salvager. "And we're fine, thanks. But you should probably tell your guys to cut your salvage cradle loose before you lose your ship, no?"

Masira stiffened with a scowl. "Oh, yeah… damn it, that thing cost us a fortune! Gonna wreck the budget, Shoujou's really going to let me have it. Buuut I guess there's nothing we can do against a monster that big. Alright, boys, I know it's a tragedy, but cut loose the cradle!"

The salvage king's crew's only response was to stammer and shiver incoherently.

"Huh? Guys, what's wrong?"

"C-C-Captain, l-l-l-look!"

It took all I had not to cackle as everyone on the Merry looked in the same direction as the other crew and the sea monster.

"Oh, did I forget to mention?" I stated innocently, my voice sliding across the frigid silence that had frozen the air. "There are people living up there. Those—" I pointed at the literally freaking titanic forms visible in the darkness around us. "Are their shadows. Scary, no?"

Ain't technical truths absolutely hilarious?

The silence lasted a second longer.

Two…

Three…

Then one of the Shandorans' spears twitched, and Soundbite screamed like a little bitch in falsetto.

"MOOONSTEEEEEEERS!"

And like that, we were off!

-0-

Five minutes later found me rolling on the deck laughing my ass off at my crewmates' reactions. Their faces, the burst of strength that they'd put on to row so fast… downright hilarious. grade A comedy at its utmost finest! So much so that my laughter wasn't even hampered by the fact that Vivi was currently doing her idle best to shatter my ribcage with her feet.
"JACKASS! BASTARD! SCUMBUCKET! UNCULTURED POTATO! INCONSIDERATE! ASSHOLE!"

Of course, the fact that she was cursing so much that the dugongs and Carue were all standing and watching her with identical blushes may have had something to do with that, too.

It also helped that her kicks didn't hurt that much, so I could keep laughing without worry.

"PFFHAHAHA—OOF!—HAHAHA! OH HOH HOH MY GO-O—ORGH!—OOOD! YOUR FACES! YOUR FA-A—ARGH!—CES! THAT WAS PRICELESS! PRICELESS! PFFHAHAHAHAAAA!"

"Sky Island scary, Sky Island scary, Sky Island scary…" Usopp moaned as he rocked back and forth in a fetal position on the deck. Chopper was hunched over a barrel, scribbling frantically on page after page of a notepad as he tried to figure out the biological logistics of something that broke the square-cube law like a dry twig. He had a look in his eye, yes, but thankfully it was only halfway worrying. Robin was doing her best to maintain her calm exterior; Zoro, Nami, and Sanji were all watching Vivi with varying degrees of satisfaction; Lassoo was, of course, still asleep; and Luffy and Masira were talking animatedly about the shadows.

"Ook kee! Man, so you're really thinking of going up there, huh?" the gorilla-esque man asked excitedly. "I can only imagine what the journey will be like! I'm so jealous!"

"Shishishi! Me too!" Luffy nodded in agreement as he scratched his finger beneath his nose. "I'm really looking forwards to those giants too! I mean, we've met giants before, sure, but never any that big!" His grin widened exponentially. "Oooh, if we're really lucky, then maybe we'll get to fight one!"

"VETO!" Nami snapped, slapping her hand up with an offended roar.

"SECONDED!" Zoro concurred.

"Wai—pffhahaha… hoo…—wait…" I raised my hand pleadingly. "Wait… I-I might have fibbed a little, alri—?" CRUNCH! "GAH! ALWAYS WID DA NOZE, BIDCH!"

"ASSHOLE!" Vivi snarled as she stomped away.

"Grgh…" I gurgled painfully as I jerked my nose back into position and pinched it shut before speaking. "Technical pacifist my lucky left… tsk, anyways. Look, those shadows were just that: shadows. I won't bore you with the technical details, but simply put, it was just a trick of the light. The people up there have wings, yes, but besides that, the only differences they have from us are cultural. Alright?"

Luffy sagged and got pouty, but everyone else relaxed by a fair margin.

"Anyways," I said, turning to Masira. "Thanks for your help, Captain Masira, and sorry about technically kidnapping you from your ship. But, ah… while we have you… seeing how our little makeshift salvage operation was…" I gestured at the array of 'antiques' (read: junk) we'd retrieved and laid out on the deck. "Apparently fruitless, I don't suppose you have any ideas on how to reach Sky Island, do you?"

"Eh, don't worry about the whole 'kidnapping' thing," Masira waved me off carelessly. "We were all in a panic, it was about as much my fault as yours. And besides…" He dug around in his overalls and withdrew an Eternal Pose. "I freedive a lot, so I carry this around with me in case a current swells up and snatches me from my ship. My crew knows to meet me here if we ever get separated."
Which is a good thing either way…” He shot us all a large thumbs up. "Because I think I might know someone who can help you guys with your problem!"

I grinned victoriously amidst everyone's cries of shock and relief. Can you say 'jackpot'?

"Jaya, huh?" Nami read off of the Pose's label. "Do you know anything about it, Vivi?"

The princess bit her thumb thoughtfully. "Well… my father and I did stop there a few times going to and from Alabasta, but…” She shook her head in denial. "He, Igaram, Pell and Chaka always made triply sure that I never went ashore while we were there."

"Good call," I agreed. "The only civilization on the island is Mock Town. It's a pirate town, and about as rough as rough gets."

Masira nodded in agreement. "Cross is right, Mock Town is bad news through and through. Fortunately, our destination is on the other side of the island: our boss's house. Believe me, the boss is a smart man, and he believes in the impossible as much as my brother and I. If anyone knows of a way to reach Sky Island, it'll be him!"

Nami glanced at Luffy and I, and once he nodded and I shot her a thumbs up, she began issuing the appropriate orders to the rest of the crew.

"So…” she asked me once the ship was as good as autonomous, walking over next to me as she eyed the salvaged objects Robin was poring over. "You said something about a piece here being useful in the long run?"

"Eeyup," I nodded, inching around the arms Robin had set to work as I grasped the handle of the dilapidated waver and carefully dragged it to the side where Nami could look it over. "This sorry thing right here."

Nami took one look at the distinctly ex-vehicle before giving me an unimpressed stare. "You're starting to get on my nerves with the jokes, Cross."

"Hey, no joke this time, I swear," I assured her. "Sure, it needs some serious repair work, but…” I tapped the toe of my boot against the metal orb on the butt of the wreck. "The key component is still intact, and even among its kind, despite its age, it's still an absolute king. Once it's fixed up… well, remember Ace's boat? That's pretty much what this is, save that it's probably even faster."

Nami's unimpressed look faded in favor of contemplation, and then adulation. "I love you again, Cross!" Nami squealed as she flung her arms around my neck before skipping away gleefully. I stared after her blankly for a moment before giving Soundbite a flat look. "From pissed to in love in ten seconds flat," I deadpanned.

"AND ALL IT took was a PRICELESS and unique bribe," Soundbite snickered.

"You didn't seem all that surprised when I did the same thing," came a nearby, somewhat subdued voice. I glanced back towards Robin who, though her arms were maintaining their diligent archaeology work, was staring straight at me, her expression guarded. Though there was a trace of fear in it. "Mister Jeremiah… I have utilized every means of earning the trust of others over the years except for telling the truth of what happened to me. I will ignore your impossible knowledge for the moment in favor of asking you this: what makes you think that I would change that now?"

I chewed my lip as I contemplated my response. What I wanted to say was that we were the ones Saul had told her about, but it was too soon for that; that kind of a bombshell wouldn't
earn her trust, only a snapped neck. As it was, there was only one answer.

"That," I stated neutrally. "Is a question that you and you alone can answer. I am neither capable of nor inclined to try forcing you to tell them. It's not an ultimatum, and there's no time limit. It just… is. When you decide to tell them of your own free will, when you trust them enough to actually join this crew… then I'll tell you."

Her gaze hardened slightly as she looked back down at her work. "You mean then you'll trust me."

"No." Her gaze snapped back up at my statement in surprise. "I already trust you, Robin, to certain degrees and distances. I'm just waiting until we're friends, completely and utterly. And I'll be honest…" I dredged up my memories of the future, of Robin smiling and crying with the crew, of her really opening up. I remembered who she really was… and I smiled. "I'm looking forward to when that day comes."

She stared at me, her arms stilling as she searched my expression for any sign of deception before slowly allowing her arms to dissipate. "You… are an odd person, Cross."

I actually snickered at that, shaking my head sadly. "Oh, you have seen nothing yet, trust me on that!"

FWUM-WUM-WUMP!

"AAAAGH! HELP! WE NEED A DOCTOR!"

I snapped my head up as the sound of three impacts hit the forecastle before scowling darkly. "Allow me to demonstrate." And with that, I marched up the stairs to where Chopper was frantically examining the fallen seagulls.

"THEY'VE BEEN SHOT! THEY'VE BEEN SHOT! SOMEBODY CALL A—"

"YOU'RE THE DOCTOR, dumbass!" Soundbite cackled.

"Oh, right!" Chopper moved to examine them, his expert eyes roving over their bodies while Usopp dismissed the idea of them having been shot, which Chopper disproved by extracting the bullets and displaying them for all to see.

"Well, then, they must have been shot awhile back and only died just now," Nami shrugged carelessly as she looked over the birds. "It's a sad and cruel thing, but it can happen. Sorry, Chopper."

"Yeah, and besides!" Usopp called down from the crow's nest. "Even if they'd been shot, Soundbite would have heard any gunshot within a mile of us! Right, slimeball?"

"EAT MY SHORTS!" Soundbite called up before giving Chopper an apologetic look. "But he is right. I DIDN'T HEAR nuthin'."

"Ah…" Chopper trailed off in an uncomfortable tone as he looked down at the gulls' corpses. "Well… I-I guess it's possible. It's happened before…"

"Just not in this case."

"Huh? Lasso?" Nami blinked at the dachshund-cannon as he lugged his way up the stairs and approached the bodies. "What are you—?"
Lassoo cut her off by taking a sniff of the bullet Chopper was holding and snorting darkly. "Thought so. Smell it."

Chopper did so, and his pupils promptly dilated. "Gunpowder… this bullet still smells like gunpowder! I-If these birds had been shot even an hour ago, their blood would have washed that smell away!"

"That's because they weren't shot an hour ago, were they?" Lassoo huffed, slowly padding next to me and joining me in glaring forwards.

"Nope," I confirmed, not looking back at the crew as I stared dead ahead over the water. "They were sniped. Pay attention, Usopp, you're witnessing the work of the man who's no doubt destined to be your rival in the far future."

"W-what!?!" Usopp stammered in shock. "A-are you sure?"

"Hmm…" I hummed, tapping my chin in faux-thought. "You know what? Let me check."

And with that, I stuck my arm out and put my middle finger on display, glaring dead ahead in challenge all the while.

I waited all of five seconds before snapping my arm down and taking a step to the side.

CRACK!

Not a second too soon, judging by how a patch of Merry's mast splintered from the bullet that ricocheted off of it.

"Oh, yeah," I nodded darkly as I glared at the horizon, daring the jackass to take another shot. "I'm sure." And with that, I wheeled around and marched down the stairs to the main deck. "Look alive, people!" I shouted to my crewmates, who were all staring at me in awe. "We're already in range of the enemy." I blew out a harsh tsk as I caught Luffy's gaze. He looked beyond determined, and more than a bit ticked. "It only gets harder from here on out."

Once Luffy nodded at me, I turned my attention to Boss, who needed no prompting before holding out a rucksack.

"Well, Cross, you were right. There were some fancy seashells down there. How about explaining exactly what they are now?"

I grinned as I took the bag and peered at the collection of shells inside. "They're called Dials. And they're going to help some of us get a lot stronger a lot faster." I rubbed my hands together eagerly as I looked them over. "Alright, let's see what we got…"

-o-

In a calm patch of weather in the second half of the Grand Line, a great white whale-shaped ship sailed through the waters. Since the scuttling of the Oro Jackson, it had become the most recognizable silhouette on the high seas of the New World: Moby Dick, the flagship of the Whitebeard Pirates. Many a pirate had seen the ship and sought after it, attempting to topple its captain, either for Justice or for fame.

All of them met with defeat. Many of them met with death.

But some of them chose to adopt the wise philosophy of 'if you can't beat 'em, join 'em.' And thus,
the Whitebeard Pirates grew stronger with each passing month, the captain's title of 'Strongest Man in the World' untouchable by any save the other Emperors, and they scarcely deemed it worth the effort to try.

With this reputation in mind, it would come as a surprise to many just how nonchalant a typical day aboard the Moby Dick was when there were no storms or enemies to deal with. Looking at the way the crew milled about, it felt more like a closely knit family than anything. Indeed, it was looking at pirates like this, really looking at them, that would give the vast majority of people in the world cause to wonder if the stereotype about all pirates being evil was true.

"Don don don don!"

Unless, of course, you happened to have upset them at some point recently.

"Pick up the snail," growled a man with a purple jacket and yellow hair, the good mood he was in abruptly soured.

A handful of other men, all of them division commanders of the Whitebeard Pirates, joined Marco as he moved towards the gastropod in question, one of the grunts moving to obey.

"Three in a day? You think he's going to make this a regular thing?" questioned Haruta.

"If he does, he'd better pray that he doesn't make insulting Pops a regular thing," Jozu grumbled as the other crewmate picked up the receiver.

"I still say you're overreacting," stated Vista. "Ace would have made that joke in a heartbeat."

"Yeah, but he's family," Marco growled. Anything further discussion was cut off by the Transponder Snail taking on a cocky expression.

"Hey, Cross? While we're waiting, I HAVE A QUESTION."

"What, Soundbite?"

"MAY I START THE SBS?"

"What? Heck no! That's my right as the show's host! The only one who can start it is—! SON OF A —!"

"HAHAHAHAHA!"

"Ha! Somehow, that joke never gets old," Vista laughed.

"Outfoxed by a snail? Yeah, I can see how that wouldn't get old in a hurry," Namur chuckled.

"You DO realize that this is MY transceiver, right?!"

"YEAH, but you can't USE IT WITHOUT ME! HEEHHEHEEEhooohooohoo!"

Some muttering came over the connection, something about "writing Goda-sensei a letter," and "less funny when you're on the receiving end."

Finally, when the laughter both from the other end of the snail's call and on the deck of the Moby Dick died down, Cross spoke up again.

"Ugh… alright. Hello, loyal viewers. First, let me assure you that I don't plan on making it a habit of
broadcasting three times a day.”

"Aww!"

"Shut up!"

"But as it stands, Soundbite was getting bored—OUCH!"

"LIAR, LIAR!"

"You damn… ugh, alright, so I didn't want to admit I made a mistake with an… unconventional incendiary device that earned me the ire of two of my female crewmates and Sanji, and Chopper has suggested that I stay still while these injuries heal up. So, in light of recent… developments… I decided to retire to the storeroom and take the time to make a short broadcast concerning one of the main reasons I started the SBS in the first place: the existence of good pirates.

"Now, as I said on my first broadcast, good pirates do make up the minority of the population of seafaring rogues. However, the fact remains that they exist. In fact, good pirates make up half the population of the most notorious pirates alive: the Four Emperors, rulers of the second half of the Grand Line. And considering how I've been made aware of the callousness of a remark I made earlier today, I'm going to focus on the greater of these two. Well, greater from my perspective anyways; my captain would say otherwise. Ladies and gentlemen, this broadcast is dedicated to the Whitebeard Pirates."

All those who had previously been scowling blinked in surprise, and the usual hubbub on deck quieted down to nothing.

"…I'll go make sure Pops is listening to this," Marco muttered before taking off and heading for the captain's quarters.

"Yes, and if the Marines didn't want me dead before, this broadcast is going to be the final nail in my coffin. Oh, well, they still have to catch me first. Now, the Whitebeard Pirates... I don't know what many of you listening may have heard about Whitebeard. Let me confirm some of the common rumors: strongest man in the world? True. Gold Roger's old rival? Well, one of them. The man had a lot of rivals. Captain of the biggest pirate fleet in the world? Eh... I'm pretty sure that's true. Let's say he's the captain of the biggest fleet that doesn't hide their numbers. And finally, dangerous to provoke? Oh, yes, that's true, but therein lies the reason I see him as a good pirate. See, the easiest way to make the old man angry enough to bring the entire force of the Whitebeard Pirates down on your head?"

The crew waited…

"Stealing their sake."

Everyone on the deck either faceplanted or roared with laughter. "Pops probably would if it wasn't one of us," Jozu admitted through his chortles.

"And maybe even if it was!" Vista chuckled.

"Sorry, everyone, that was a joke, though I'm not prepared to say it's untrue. But the main way to provoke them? Hurting anyone under their protection."

The deck quieted again.

"See, the Grand Line is a dangerous place. Lots of insanely strong pirates sail the seas, and as I've
established, most of them are the stereotypical 'rape, pillage, and plunder' kind. As a result of this, it's not uncommon to find islands that get hit more often than others for food, supplies, or... other resources. Whitebeard and most, if not all of those loyal to him don't approve of such things, which is why they have a habit of claiming those islands as their territory. What benefits do the Whitebeard Pirates reap from that? Places to resupply without fear of arrest? Not really; their strength and reputation ensures that anyway. So, there's no visible benefit to them taking these islands.

"Except... it means that thousands, perhaps millions, live without fear of a pirate attack. And if anyone disagrees with that idea, they will bring the full force of the most powerful crew in the world down on their heads. At Whitebeard's command, dozens of pirate crews, each with the force of an army, would come to avenge anyone who dared to harm one of his territories."

"I think he's made up for that comment earlier today," Blamenco noted. His comment was promptly met with an absolute barrage of hushes.

"And Heaven forbid if you touch a member of his crew. Seriously, just don't do it. Let me see if I can draw a logical outcome here: if the Marines were to successfully capture anyone who followed him, and were stupid enough to broadcast that fact, well, we have an award for such people where I'm from.

"It's called a Darwin Award, always awarded posthumously to those who have performed the world the ultimate good: dying, so that the world's genepool isn't contaminated by their stupidity anymore."

"If he keeps this up, the World Government is going to create that award just so they can give it to him if they capture him," Izo muttered.

"Seriously, how many Marines would die for that? How many people would perish just to make an example? A statement? And even if the Marines triumphed over Whitebeard... would they instantly step in to take over the territories once protected by his name? Or would they leave them to be conquered by other pirates? This, everyone, is why not even the Marines challenge the Whitebeard Pirates: because those pirates are doing their job for them. A job they are unilaterally unable to fulfill."

"Oh, yeah, Izo. They'd definitely do that," Namur said with a smirk. "You know, I say if his crew makes it to the New World, we invite them to join us."

"Namur, Cross' captain is Ace's brother; if they planned on joining us, we'd know by now," Jozu pointed out.

"Actually, now that I think about it, Ace once told me the chances of his brother joining us once he got into the New World," Marco commented, having rejoined them a minute before.

"Oh, yeah? What'd he say?"

Marco grinned fondly. "And I quote: 'About as much as Pops choosing to go dry.'"

It took all of five seconds for that message to sink in, at which point the Whitebeards burst out laughing.

-0-

On an island where no man lived, a group of powerful pirates moved with grace and authority through the streets of a well-constructed city. Varying in size and shape, they nonetheless gave the clear message of authority and power. But more than either of those, they showed beauty. And none more so than the black-haired woman leading them, clad in a blouse and sarong that showed a
generous amount of skin, and with a cold beauty about her that while impassive, would make any normal man fall groveling at her feet.

The Kuja Pirates' trek back to the palace after a successful raid at sea to prepare for the feast came to an abrupt halt when their aforementioned beautiful captain stopped, her eyes falling upon a nearby building. A small, mischievous smile came over her face, and she turned towards it. Two taller women, one with green hair and a serpent's tongue and the other with orange hair and a sumo physique, rolled their eyes before following her, and the remainder of the crew followed them without hesitation.

"Off to ruin Nyon's tea-time again are we? Zahaha!" Daisy chuckled behind her mouth.

"I swear, one of these days, the old bat is going to snap and take the Snake Princess's head off…" Ran sighed wearily as she massaged her temple.

"I'm about getting there myself…" Sandersonia hissed out of the corner of her mouth.

"Maybe so, but you can't say that their spats aren't entertaining," Marigold reasoned.

Sandersonia hunched forwards with a snort. "When did I ever say otherwise?"

Pointedly ignoring the musings of her crewmates and siblings, the world-renowned Pirate Empress Boa Hancock strode up to the door of Elder Nyon's favorite tea salon, reared her leg back and slammed her heel into the indent that had formed in the doors on account of her near-daily abuse of them.

"Elder Nyon!" the Empress announced firmly, her voice resonating throughout the shop, and her head tilted so far forward that she was looking up (sure, let's go with that). "Is there a reason you decided not to honor your Empress as she returned from a fruitful voyage? Pray for your own sake that there is a reason, for I shall not!"

Hancock waited for the telltale screech of Nyon's rage at having her tea-time interrupted, eager for yet another chance to strike some more dents into that old bag's leathery hide, and promptly frowned in confusion when she was met with only silence.

She cast a look at Sandersonia without altering her pose. "Has fate been kind and the witch been stricken down by the radiance of my beauty?"

"Uh…" The tallest of the sisters leaned down and gazed into the store. "Not… exactly?"

Hancock straightened her stance and looked into the salon, where she was met with a crowd of Amazons that were collectively staring at something. While most people would have been curious about what everyone was staring at, Hancock was concerned with a far more pressing issue.

Namely, the fact that no one was staring at her.

An ugly scowl painted Hancock's beautiful features as she marched into the salon. "What is the meaning of this?!" she snarled viciously.

The assembled Amazons promptly jerked away from her in terror as they became aware of her presence.

"S-Snake Princess!" a younger blonde member of the Guardian warriors stammered fearfully.

"Saga of—Oh no…" a more rotund warrior gulped.
"Not good…" a large face whimpered from where she was looking in through the window.

Of the crowd, only one didn't react with visible terror. This 'one' was a senior citizen, calmly sipping her tea as she continued to watch the Transponder Snail that was perched on her table. "Ah, so the brat princess has returned, has she? Welcome back, Hancock. Why nyon don't you pull up a seat? I do believe that the show's just getting good."

The Snake Empress cocked an eyebrow in a decidedly unimpressed manner. "'Show'? What are you talking about, you senile old—?"

Hancock was interrupted by the Transponder Snail continuing to speak. "I mean, can you imagine the state that Fishman Island alone would be in if not for Whitebeard? That's an entire kingdom, a member of the World Government no less, at the unabated 'mercy' of whatever pirates or raiders decide to go to it! How hard would it be to maintain a base down there, some coated battleships at most to maintain order? But noooo, the Marines are perfectly content with leaving their bottleneck as is, leaving the protection of Fishman Island solely to Whitebeard. Some might say the Warlord Jinbe does his own part, but he's not so much a part of the Marines as he is the World Government, so in my opinion? That doesn't count!"

Hancock's anger cooled and her eyes widened in surprise; even the fact that it was a male voice couldn't impede the sheer shock of hearing someone outright disparage the Marines like that.

"What is this, Elder Nyon?" she asked, her tone perfectly even.

The Elder's lip quirked up into a smirk as she took a sip of her tea. "Some pirate nyon named Jeremiah Cross got his hands on a government device that let him connect to every Transponder Snail in the world at once. He's been taking nyon the opportunity to tear the 'holy' reputation of the Marines and World Government apart."

"KINDA LIKE HOW fainting on number ninety-nine of a HUNDRED PUSHUPS doesn't count either!"

"THE ABSOLUTE HELL IT DOESN'T, JACKASS!"

"Ah, yes, and that nyon would be the Transponder Snail with which he uses the device, Soundbite. He's quite the riot himself!" Nyon snickered.

"Saga of—How does he speak?" one of the Amazons mused.

The Boa sisters and Nyon stiffened momentarily, prompting Hancock to hastily speak up.

"Well, whether or not you find this 'broadcast' entertaining is entirely irrelevant!" she sniffed haughtily. "The laws of Amazon Lily are clear: the presence of men on this island is strictly prohibited! And as Empress, I deem this law to extend even to the voice of men! As such, Granny Nyon, you will do well to silence that snail at once, or else—"

"Anyway… I've said my fill on Whitebeard and his crew, but I have one more thing to say before I end this. The subject of what fishmen and mermen have endured can wait until another broadcast, that's too broad of a subject with the time I've got now. Someday soon, I'll talk about that, but let me give you a sneak peek now: the most common victimization that would happen to anyone who was left to pirates' mercy on Fishman Island? A hell worse than Impel Down, worse than facing Whitebeard in a temper: the hell that is slavery."

Hancock's words died in her throat as the middle of her back suddenly burned, allowing only a
ragged and undignified gurgle to exit. Judging by the sharp hisses at her side and the way Nyon tensed, she was far from the only one affected.

"Now, I can only imagine the skepticism being felt the world over, on account of how the Marines and the World Government supposedly outlawed slavery two hundred years ago, and for the majority of the world, I'm sure that this holds true, but the horrific fact is that the practice is not dead on a global scale, and is still willingly practiced by many. And not just lowlifes, for that matter, not just in the shadows. There are slavehouses operating in broad daylight, peddling human flesh by the boatload, putting prices on lives and selling them to the highest, richest bidders who do so without so much as a hint of remorse.

"And it's not just in the Grand Line either, oh no! The market might be here, but the product? All you need to do is look, and you will find people in chains in the Blues as well, and this is an absolute fact! It's horrific, it's disgusting, it's inhuman… and the worst part of all? The Marines are entirely aware of it, and they don't. Do. A thing. That's just one of the many reasons why I stand opposed to the Marines, and until serious change is brought about, I will bring it up any chance I fucking get! I don't care how suicidal this is, or how likely I am to be killed, this needs to be heard!…somebody has to say this. Somebody has to speak up. For their sakes."

"VIVA LA REVOLUTION!"

"Long live change in any form… because whatever comes after, there is no way it could be worse than what we've got now. That's all I have to say for the time being; don't expect another broadcast today, but as of tomorrow, all bets are off. Until the next time I shed light where darkness is prevalent, and reveal darkness where light is presented, this is Jeremiah Cross—"

"AND SOUNDBYTE!"

"—Of the SBS, signing off."

The snail fell asleep the next moment, and for a few seconds, nobody spoke.

"…I hereby deem Jeremiah Cross and any males who associate with him exceptions to the country's law. In voice or in person, they are welcome here," Hancock said quietly.

The Princess's sisters gaped at her in shock.

"Sister—" Marigold started, reaching for her sibling… an action she regretted when Hancock flinched at her touch.

"She's gone back…" Sandersonia whimpered fearfully.

Hancock shivered as she bit her lip in an effort to maintain control, to ignore the burning she could still feel, even after so many years, not even caring how many of her subjects saw her in her moment of weakness.

Finally, she cracked her eyes open and looked at Nyon, a veritable hurricane of emotions whirling in her eyes. "Inform me of when next he broadcasts. I would listen to his words myself."

Nyon snorted at the arrogance of the request, but nodded nevertheless. "Take my snail, I'll just come to you. But do your best to get your own tomorrow!"

Hancock gestured for one of her crewmates to pick up the gastropod before wheeling around and marching out of the salon, shadowed closely by her sisters. Everyone else looked after her in confusion until Elder Nyon spoke again.
"Ah, bending the country's law for someone who speaks up for all of those who are oppressed. It's good to see that our Snake Princess has such a beautiful heart to match her appearance."

Silence fell as those around her processed the words, during which she made the prudent decision to cover her ears. Then the room erupted.

"OH, SNAKE PRINCESS!"

"SHE'S SO BENEVOLENT!"

"AS BEAUTIFUL WITHIN AS WITHOUT!"

"I LOVE YOU, SNAKE PRINCESS!"

Nyon surreptitiously took the flask her serpent handed her and started draining it viciously. 'Urgh, I'm going to need something stronger if I'm going to wash the taste of that bullshit out of my mouth. Now the brat owes me more than ever, and I doubt I'll ever see anything come of it!' Nyone thought with a grimace. Her expression then softened into a somewhat fond smile as she stared out a window and into the sky. 'But speaking of bullshit, at least the World Government has finally been called on its own. To think that one man with a big mouth could have such an effect... Godspeed, Cross. Something tells me you'll need it.'

-o-

Finally, after several long and rather paranoia-ridden hours of sailing, we came within sight of our next real island destination on the Grand Line: the jaws of the Golden Skull, an island of cynicism, heartbreak and shattered dreams; an island that currently held no less than three enemy factions, with one enemy actually counting for two at once.

We were about to dock at Mock Town, the thoroughly rotted cavity of the isle of Jaya.

I blew out a weary breath as I eyed the madhouse of a town we were sailing up to, scanning the ships around us as we pulled ourselves in. "We've really got no other choice but to dock here?" I asked despondently, despite having posed the same question twice in the last hour.

Sanji sighed out a cloud of smoke. "We haven't mysteriously generated any new vegetables since you last asked, Cross. I know you might not like it, but the fact is that we need to resupply. Though..." He grimaced darkly as he took in the... unsanitary state of the town. "I'll admit that I doubt anything we pick up will be quality material."

I sighed. "Alright, if there's no other choice... pass this on to the rest of the crew: if you see a sick old man beside a sick horse, an arrogant masked wrestler, or a fat, hairy man with missing teeth, steer the hell clear if you want to live."

Sanji gave me a cocky look. "What, you don't think we can take them?"

I returned the look with a flat stare. "They're the crewmates of the sniper who saw me flip him off from several miles away."

That caused Sanji to stiffen before he gripped his cigarette with renewed seriousness. "Right... fair enough. And for the record, what does that sniper look like?"

I snorted as I turned and started to walk away. "Wouldn't matter if I told you. He'd literally see any of us coming from a mile aw—ack!" I cut myself off as I caught sight of something a ways away. "Ahhh, sonnuva bitch..."
"What's wrong now, Cross?" Usopp groaned.

I ground my teeth as I nodded my chin down the dock. "That ship over there. Look at it."

Usopp followed my line of sight and caught sight of the oddly structured ship I was staring at. "Huh… yeah, I guess it does look kind of weird. Does it mean something to you?"

I pointed at the mouth-themed Jolly Roger displayed on the ship's upper sail. "Well, that symbol just represents trouble, annoying but manageable." I then scowled as I lowered my finger to indicate the crossed-out smiley face below the upper symbol. "But that? That represents cruel and unusual certain death."

"You can't be serious, Cross; two crews that we can't stand up to on the same island?" Sanji demanded with a snarl.

"Oh, no, you can take those guys, sure," I jerked my head at the ship with a shrug. "They're on a sane level compared to the other guys; heck, you could probably take them all out by yourself without breaking a sweat. No…" I shook my head firmly as I continued to glare at the ship. "It's their patron I'm worried about. Chances are he wouldn't care about us, but…" I finally shrugged my arms with a sigh. "Honestly, I'm just a bit annoyed because we're closer to them than I'd like."

"Would you care to elaborate as to who you're referring to, Mister Jeremiah?"

I raised an eyebrow at Robin. "Really? I'm surprised, Robin, you usually know this stuff." I jerked my thumb at the ship. "I'd especially expect you to recognize the flag of one of the greatest slavers the world's ever known."

Robin took one good look at the ship I was indicating and promptly stiffened. "Ah. Your fears are well-warranted."

"Damn straight."

"Is he that bad, Robin-chwan?" Sanji queried.

"Allow me to put it this way…" the archaeologist sighed despondently. "I've already had one near-death experience with a sadistic Warlord this month. I'm not keen on getting into another."

Sanji and Usopp snapped their gazes back to Bellamy's ship in obvious shock.

"Shit," Sanji summarized succinctly.

"I don't think I wanna dock here anymore…" Usopp whimpered uncomfortably.

A second later, a blood-curdling scream rang out from the town before devolving into a bloody gurgle. Not so much as a single bystander walking along the dock blinked.

"Now I really don't want to dock here anymore…" our sniper sobbed miserably.

"Oh, I don't know," Robin chuckled. "Personally, I find chaos-ridden locales to be quite… comforting." And with that, she shrugged and leapt down onto the dock. "Well, I'll be off. I'm afraid that if I continue borrowing from Vivi and Nami's wardrobes, one of them is going to try to murder me in my sleep."

"You really don't need to say that so matter-of-factly!" I called after her as she slid into the crowd with ease.
"Wait, Robin-chwan, you can't go out there alone!" Sanji cried out, putting his foot on the railing to dive in himself.

"Trust me, Sanji, she knows how to take care of herself," I replied as I grabbed him by the leg.

Before the cook could respond, a scream and the sound of snapping bone and cartilage rang out, followed by a ragged-looking muscleman stumbled into view, clutching a hand that seemed to be all broken fingers.

"Oh, yes, she'll be fine," I drawled.

Soundbite whistled in awe. "And that's the one we CAN SEE. THAT'S JUST COLD-BLOODED."

Sanji hesitated before sighing in defeat. "Yeah, alright, fair enough, but I still need to resupply, so!" He leapt down onto the dock. "I'll be seeing you guys later!"

"Wait up!" a voice barked out, followed by a pink-bandanna-d Dugong flipping her way onto the dock next to the cook. "Take me with you," Raphey pleaded desperately. "I'll act as a pack mule if I need to, but if I swear if I stay on this ship with those numbnuts for a second longer, someone is getting their shell cracked!"

Sanji blinked in surprise before shrugging and gesturing forwards. "Very well, then. After you, milady!"

Raphey snorted as she started wriggling her way down the boardwalk. "Believe me, lover boy, I'm a lot of things, but 'lady' is not one of them."

And with that, the duo made their way into town.

Usopp swallowed uncomfortably as he watched them leave. "Alright, so I guess that just leaves Zoro, Luffy, Masira—"

Without warning, Masira's large mass leapt past us and crashed down onto the dock, splintering the planks as he ran into the town. "Ook kee kee! Come on, Luffy! Let me show you around! The place is nuts, but it can also be fun!"

"Shishishi!" Luffy snickered as he shot past us, hot on Masira's tail. "Wait for me, gorilla-guy!"

Usopp swallowed heavily as our captain fell out of sight. "Ah… okay… still… at least Boss is here —"

"Sorry, but that's in-co-rrect, Usopp!" the Dugong in question barked as he flipped onto the Merry's railing. "Sorry to tell you this, but the fact is that my old rope-dart's starting to get on in age, and if I'm going to be fighting in the future, then I'm going to have to go out and get myself a new one, like a man!" He snapped out a salute. "Wish me luck!" And with that, he backflipped into the bay and out of sight.

Usopp gulped heavily again, visibly sweating by this point before slowly turning a nervous smile at me. "At least… you and Zoro—?"

I winced guiltily as I scratched the back of my head. "Yeeeaaah, loooook…"

"ARE YOU SERIOUS RIGHT NOW?!"
"Sorry, Usopp," Nami said, frowning, coming up beside me. "But we've got things we need to talk about."

"And you can't do that here?!

Nami opened her mouth, then closed it before looking at me. "Actually, why can't we do it here? We can just go to the storage room, nobody can overhear us there."

I shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not, but I wouldn't put it past her to pull it off somehow, especially after Mr. 3 managed it. Besides, it's easy to eavesdrop when it's silent. If you don't want to be overheard, you should go where too many people are making noise."

"Once again, Cross, I vehemently question your logic," Usopp snarled.

"You'll be fine, Usopp," I sighed, rolling my eyes. "Just pull up the gangplank and shoot anybody who tries to come up. Besides, you've got three dugongs, Chopper and Lassoo to help."

Usopp glanced pointedly behind him, where Lassoo was loudly snoring away, Chopper was deeply engrossed in his chemistry chest, twitching ever so slightly as he worked, and the three dugongs were arguing over… something. Whatever it was, it was very serious if the vehement hand gestures were anything to go by.

…oooo not, judging by the way Mikey had just grabbed Donney in a chokehold and was noogie-ing the hell out of him.

"How comforting," he spat.

"Hey, don't I count at all?" Carue squawked indignantly.

"I DUNNO, do you?" Soundbite retorted, his eye cocked.

Carue raised his wing and opened his beak… before promptly shutting it. "Good point."

"Hey, are we ready to go?" Vivi asked, coming up onto the foredeck with Zoro.

She was wearing a dark yellow polo shirt with sleeves that reached down to her elbows and blue jean shorts that halted about mid-thigh. Her hair was pulled back in her typical ponytail and she was wearing a small variety of bracelets on her exposed arms.

"Yeah, just about," I nodded in agreement before looking at Usopp. "Hey, did you manage to finish before we got here?"

Usopp grimaced miserably. "If I said no, would you believe me and stay?"

"Eeee-nope."

The sniper groaned despondently as he dug through the pockets of his overalls. "Yeah, that's what I was afraid of…" He held out a bundle of cloth with a sigh. "Here. Just please get back here fast, I don't want to be left alone any longer than I need to be!"

"Yeah yeah, I got it," I nodded as I took the cloth and shook it out.

It was the cap Tashigi had given me back in Rainbase, dyed and redesigned in such a manner that I wasn't liable to take a bullet to the brain if any pirates caught me wearing it. The hat's fabric was now black, and the crown was emblazoned with a white cross-bones that was superimposed by a
simplistic enough cross moline.

I slipped the hat over my head and looked around, letting everyone get a good look at it. "Well? What do you think?"

Soundbite whistled appreciatively. "SNAZZY, if a bit gangsta, BUT YOU PULL IT OFF!"

"You think so?" I said as I glanced down at myself. I was wearing an unzipped dark brown hooded vest over a long-sleeved white t-shirt with a bull-skull outlined over the chest. I also had on a pair of black cargo-jeans, the legs of which ended within my greaves.

"Yeah, it's not bad," Nami nodded in agreement. "The headphones and cap go well together."

"Well, alright, then!" I said, clapping my hands together. "Come on, guys, let's head out!"

The bar we ultimately chose had no patrons from either of the pirate crews that I was determined to avoid. No, this place was fit to be called Thugs-R-Us, even if that wasn't its name; we were just lucky that of the couple of patrons that had tried picking fights with us, none were remotely close to Zoro's weight class. With drinks on the house as a show of respect for his strength and a bribe to keep us from wrecking the place any further (which only Zoro drank immediately), the four of us remained relatively undisturbed in our booth.

I took a moment to glance around before snapping my fingers and indicating the air around me. Soundbite responded immediately, concentrating for a moment before filling the air with static that melded in seamlessly with the roar of the crowd, guaranteeing our privacy.

"Robin's clear on the other SIDE OF THE TOWN," he provided. "It's now or never."

I raised an eyebrow at the fact that he actually used her name before nodding in acknowledgement and looking at the others. "Alright, this is as good as it's going to get. Go ahead and ask whatever you want."

Vivi promptly slapped her palm on the table and leaned forwards with an accusing glare. "Why her, Cross?" she demanded without preamble. "After all she's done to us, why let her join? Why all but insist on it, for that matter?"

I sighed heavily as I leaned back in my seat, crossing my arms over my chest. "Because she's a good person and she deserves to be on this crew."

"GOOD PERSON?" Vivi snapped. "She's an assassin!"

"Vivi's right, Cross," Nami nodded in agreement. "Robin worked with Crocodile, she helped him hurt Alabasta."

"You're making a false assumption there!" I cut in promptly, sticking a finger up. "You're assuming she joined him willingly. That is categorically not true. Crocodile didn't hold a gun to her head, no, but she still had one there anyway."

Zoro narrowed his eyes. "What are you saying, Cross?"

"I'm saying that when Crocodile double-crossed her in the Alabasta catacombs, Robin had a vial of water at the ready," I explained, my voice low and icy. "I'm saying that from the moment she joined Baroque Works, she didn't trust Crocodile for a hot second. Hell, she knew that he was a double-
crossing bastard from the start, she knew her life would be in danger if she worked for him, and she still joined Baroque Works. You know what that says?"

"That she's just as much a sadistic bastard as Crocodile is?" Vivi asked with enough venom to put down a Sea King.

I didn't let her tone faze me, instead leaning forwards so that I was staring her dead in the eye. "It means that he was her best option. Her only option." I grit my teeth as I thought back on the scarce scenes of horror I'd been treated to during her flashback. "Can you understand what I'm saying here? Can you comprehend the situation I'm describing, where working for Crocodile, knowing full well that he intends to kill you once he's done with you, is the only option left available to you?"

I took more than a little satisfaction in watching the blood slowly drain from Nami and Vivi's faces as realization swept over them, while Zoro merely tensed up slightly.

I nodded slowly. "I see you're starting to understand. Now, allow me to lay it out for you a bit: Vivi, Robin would gladly trade her own life for yours in a second in spite of your current situation. Why? Simple: while you might not be able to go home right now, and maybe not even ever, there is still the possibility of you being able to return and see your friends and family in the future. The World Government might have taken your home from you, but at least they've left it standing for the time being."

I leaned back in my seat and crossed my arms with a sigh. "Robin doesn't have that luxury. She doesn't have family, she doesn't have anyone waiting, she doesn't even have an island to go back to, much less a home." I blew out a harsh breath as I scratched the back of my head. "And because of that stupid, stupid bounty on her head... well, we're the first friends she'll have had in almost twenty years. The first home, the first place she can lay her head down and sleep without fearing for her life. The only reason she ever became an assassin in the first place is that it was the only way she could survive. And she wasn't lying either; when Luffy saved her life, she was at the end of her rope. She'd grown so sick and fallen so deep into despair that she was ready to die in that crypt."

I slowly looked at each of my crewmates, making completely certain they understood what I was saying. "She has hit rock bottom. She came with us out of pure desperation because she has literally nowhere else to turn. If we'd turned her away... I don't even want to imagine. And at the end of the day, the fact is that she is a good person, whom the world as a whole has invariably shit upon, day after day after day without fail." I emphasized the words by jabbing the table with my finger. "She has more than earned her place on our crew, do you understand? She deserves to sail with us. With Luffy, with Sanji, with all of us."

I gave them all pleading looks. "She deserves a chance at what she's never had. At happiness. Can you give her that chance, please?"

Vivi looked like she was about ready to vomit, Nami's expression was ashen as she looked about ready to agree, and Zoro's expression was unreadable as he stared at me.

"What aren't you telling us, Cross?" he quietly demanded.

I shook my head firmly. "I'm not telling you that which I have no right to tell you. That's as much her story as Kuina and Bellemere are yours." The twitches from the two in question told me I'd hit the mark. "Just know that she'll tell us eventually, and when she does I'll tell her all about where my knowledge comes from. Alright?"

Vivi was silent as my fellow officers nodded before speaking up. "Can we trust her, Cross?"
"Let me put it this way," I said, spreading my hands out. "She won't give us any reason to mistrust her if we do the same thing. And if she does double-cross us, I guarantee you it won't be of her own free will."

The princess was impassively silent for the longest time as she thought and thought, before finally sighing and hanging her head. "I don't like her… I don't know if I can ever forgive her or trust her, but I'll give her a chance." She looked up and pinned me with a glare. "And if anything goes wrong, it'll be as much on your head as it'll be on hers."

I raised my hands in surrender. "Fair enough, fair enough." The current business done, I slid out of our booth and stretched my slightly stiffened limbs a bit, Soundbite cutting out his static as he did so. "Well! I'm going to go out and explore the town a bit. This is gonna be the last bit of peace and quiet we'll see for a while, sadly enough."

Nami slapped a hand to her face with a mutter of 'of course' before standing up as well. "Then in that case, we're going to find Luffy and try and keep him from making too much of a scene. Come on, Zoro."

"Why should I go with you!?"

"Because you owe me so much that I own you."

"AND YOU'D get so lost YOU'D WIND UP back in the East Blue!" Soundbite chortled eagerly.

"Watch it, slimestain," Zoro growled over our collective laughter as he jabbed a warning finger at the snail in question.

"Hey, Vivi, you want to come with?" I inquired curiously.

Vivi looked contemplative for a moment before shaking her head. "Thanks, but no thanks. I think I'll just go back to the Merry instead, check on Usopp's progress. Besides, I don't want Carue to panic. Have fun, Cross."

"Try not to get shot," Nami concurred.

"I cannot promise that!" I shot back over my shoulder as I walked out of the bar and into the street.

-0-

I sighed as I examined the neat bullet hole in my jacket. "I liked this jacket, you assholes," I complained to the pile of groaning, vomiting men in front of me. "Seriously, it's comfortable and easy to wear, it's form-fitting, it looks cool… ergh, and now it's got a freaking hole in it and Nami is never going to let me live this down."

"You… little…" one of the morons started to growl out, pushing himself up on his sword…

THWACK!

Until I snapped my leg forwards and gave his jaw a thoroughly solid crack.

"Honestly now," I shook my head with a sigh. "You are in a pirate town, a rough and tumble lawless place that the Marines wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole. Why would you think that it was a smart idea to mug the one relatively scrawny guy who doesn't look nervous? It's just so stupid. And now, because of your stupidity, my jacket has a hole! It's just, it's just nonsensical!"
"Eh, I dunno," Soundbite shook his head side to side. "I THINK IT GIVES YOU CHARACTER!"

"You think so?" I blinked at him in surprise. "Huh, let's see..." I slipped my vest back on and looked it over. "Well, I'll be. You're right, it actually does look kind of good. It appears I might have overreacted a bit! My bad!"

I noticed a bit of motion in the corner of my vision and promptly stomped my heel down on the hand that I'd noticed reaching for a gun.

I rolled my eyes as one of the thugs screamed in pain. "Alright, so not entirely my bad. Now, I'm going to let you go with a warning. As it stands, you're all lucky that Soundbite's primary offensive attack is lethal only, otherwise I doubt any of you would be walking. But still, he is capable of reducing you to puking wrecks from a long ways away, so be good, or else I'll rip you all a new one! Bye, now!"

And with that, I turned and continued to walk down the street, whistling a jaunty tune as I went.

So far, my walk through the town had turned out exactly as I'd expected it to, rife with crime, vice, and overall moral corruption. And stupidity. Lots of stupidity. But I couldn't complain; thanks to Soundbite, that bullet hole was the worst that had happened to me, and I hadn't come across Blackbeard, Bellamy, or any of their crewmates that I recognized. And overall, as sickening as a lot of the things I was seeing were, it was kind of entertaining. A fight here, a brawl there... while Mock Town was indeed the 'Detroit' of this world, I couldn't help but admit that at least it had variety.

And honestly, seeing a badass-looking pirate cowering under the stern gazes and loud shouting of a bunch of prostitutes was funny as hell. At least, I'm pretty sure they were prostitutes. But overall? Nothing had gone wrong.

"So," I looked at Soundbite as I rounded a corner. "Any suggestions on where we head to next?"

"HMM..." Soundbite inclined his head contemplatively. "Sounds like SOMEBODY'S SINGING from the BOTTLE a few blocks away. SNACK AND a show?"

"Sounds fun," I nodded in agreement as I looked forwards. "So, whi...ch..." I trailed off listlessly as I stared down the street, only just managing to wrench my gaze forwards and keep my feet in motion. "Oh, God."

Soundbite blinked at me in confusion. "What—?"

"Don't look at me," I breathed sotto voce, cold sweat coating my body. "Don't look at anyone, don't say a word. Unless you want to die or suffer a fate worse than death, then for the next few minutes you are a completely ordinary, slack-eyed Baby Transponder Snail."

Soundbite stiffened slightly on my shoulder, but a glance at him thankfully revealed that he was following my orders, looking as bored and tired as any other member of his kind.

And so, I continued to walk. I walked past pirates, I walked past criminals, I walked past the absolute scum of the earth as though absolutely nothing were wrong, walking like I'd been walking for the last few minutes.

I even continued this walk as I passed by the unmistakable form of Marshall D. Teach, despite the fact that my heart was hammering in my chest and that I could barely even breathe.

The giant, evil man had seemed completely oblivious to me as I passed him, thankfully more enraptured with the bottle of rum he was swilling than in his surroundings, but that did little to abate
my terror. I knew, I knew that if I showed any fear, so much as a hint of recognition, then I would be dropped into the darkness before I had a chance to react, and that was not a fate I wanted.

Still, despite my gut-gnawing terror, I managed to make it past the fat bastard without visibly reacting. I mentally counted his pace in my head, keeping track of where he'd be about now without glancing back.

The second I was sure he'd turned a corner, I dove into the nearest alleyway I could find and plastered myself to the wall, gulping down breath after sweet breath. "Sweet donkey-fucking angels of mercy on high, that was too damn close."

"WHAT THE HELL was that about!?" Soundbite roared in confusion.

I pointed a shaky arm forwards, indicating the direction we'd come from. "T-the big one… the guy ten times bigger than me or anyone else in the street… t-t-that was Marshall D. Teach. Blackbeard."

Soundbite's eyes shot wide open in terrified recognition. "The asshat ACE IS HUNTING!?"

"The very same. If he'd recognized us, he'd have no doubt literally ripped you open for your fruit."

"T-T-THAT'S a thing?" he squeaked in terror.

I nodded solemnly. "It is with Teach. He did it to Whitebeard, took his powers after he died. His body looked untouched, but… I doubt you'd get that courtesy."

Soundbite swallowed heavily. "AND YOU DIDN'T tell Ace he WOULD BE HERE WHY!?"

I spun my finger in the air. "Collateral damage. We needed this island intact. At least if Ace sticks to the schedule, he'll fight him somewhere relatively clear of civilians. For now, though, we should be fine. My face isn't known and he rarely picks fights without reason, so just as long as we stay anonymous—!

"Puru puru puru puru!"

"YEARGH!" I leapt nearly a foot off the ground as a sound pierced the air without warning. Soundbite was even more ticked about it.

"Puru puru puru puru! OH, COME ON! NOW, OF ALL TIMES?" Soundbite snarled incredulously.

I was inclined to agree with him, fumbling with the transceiver's mic and wrenching it out of its cradle with almost unseemly haste. "What?!" I hissed desperately.

Soundbite's expression promptly morphed into one of shock and concern. "Uh, Cross? Are you alright?"

I twitched as I acknowledged who was speaking before sighing and running a hand down my face. "Sorry about that, Tashigi, I'm a bit on edge, just dodged a meeting with a grade-A threat. What's up?"

Tashigi grimaced. "Well, first of all, I don't think we ever actually gave you the number of the Transponder Snail we bought for…" She sighed. "MI3. So, let me just give you that first…"

I glanced around for something to write with as she rattled off the number without any more warning, and found nothing.
"I've got it memorized," Soundbite said, cutting off my search.

"OK, good. Now, the main reason I wanted to call. Sengoku was... let's just say 'furious' at that 'in-depth tour' you gave of Impel Down—and one of these days, maybe, just maybe, I'll submit to your terms if it means learning how the hell you know all of that. Anyway, he sent orders to every base in the Grand Line after Alabasta; he's got a task force five battleships and three captains strong hunting for you now."

"Ugh, should have seen this coming. Alright, where are they heading?"

"Well, that's the good news," Tashigi beamed proudly. "Since we were the last ones to see you, we were able to steer the pursuit in the wrong direction to where we knew the Log Pose would send you next. They're heading in the direction of a place called Jaya."

The air practically froze over as I stared at Soundbite, who himself had adopted a panicked expression.

"I'm sorry, you sent them where?" I asked in a strained tone of voice.

"We said that we'd learned you had picked up an Eternal Pose for an island called Jaya," Tashigi repeated eagerly. "It's a complete backwater, doesn't even have a Marine Base nearby. Apparently local patrols avoid it like the plague. They'll be scouring the scum of the streets for weeks and won't find anything! Brilliant, huh?" Tashigi maintained her proud smile for a few seconds before blinking in confusion. "Uh, why are you looking at me like that?"

In response, I held up the transceiver's mike towards the street, letting it take in a full barrage of the noises of Jaya. Specifically, the fighting, the screaming, the raucous laughing, etc. etc.

By the time I drew the mic back, Tashigi's eyes were wide open. "You're... on Jaya?"

"It involves a ship falling from the sky, a crew of salvager sea monkeys, and the second biggest turtle we've ever seen."

"Oh-God-Commodore-Smoker's-going-to-kill-me-e-eeee..." Tashigi sobbed miserably.

"Pull it together, Tashigi! How long do we have?!"

"...Twenty-four hours? Maybe less. Sane Marines don't disappoint Sengoku if they want to stay out of G5."

I mentally ran over the schedule for the day before sighing in relief. "OK, we'll be cutting it close, but I think we'll be able to make it."

"How!?!" Tashigi sputtered incredulously. "From what I read, the log takes four days to reset, and even if you got another Eternal Pose, they'll still be coming at you in a spread-vice formation! If one of them catches sight of you, they'll hound you until you're sunk!"

I allowed a massive grin to slowly spread over my face. "Then I guess it's a good thing we won't be leaving the island in a traditional manner, isn't it?"

Tashigi gaped for a moment more before plastering a studiously neutral look on her face. "You know what? I'm not even going to ask. I'll just wait for the inevitable SBS broadcast like everyone else."

"If you say so!" I snickered. "Well, thanks for the update, Tashigi. And good luck on your end!"
I made to hang up…

"WAIT!"

"GAH!" "Holy—!"

When I was interrupted by Soundbite suddenly hollering.

"Sonnuva—what the hell, Soundbite!?" I demanded in annoyance.

"TASHIGI, is there any news ON THE BAROQUE Works AGENTS?" Soundbite pleaded hastily.

Tashigi blinked in confusion through him before the sound of rustling paper passed through the connection. "Funny you should mention that. There was a mass breakout awhile back from the base we were holding them in. We still have Crocodile, thank God, he didn't even try and escape, but all agents from Mr. Four down managed to make a clean getaway, including Daz Bones' partner. There are some Marines looking for them, but overall they're not high priority. Why do you ask?"

"Yeah, Soundbite, why?" I questioned in agreement, a hint of dread entering my voice.

Soundbite swallowed heavily. "ALL agents from FOUR down?"

"Yesss, all of them. Why? What's this about?"

Cold sweat started running down Soundbite as he shivered heavily, slowly turning his gaze upwards. "No reason…" he squeaked in terror.

I followed Soundbite's line of sight, and froze with just as much terror.

"Tashigi?" I breathed. "Something's come up. I'm gonna have to call you back."

"Huh? What are you—? Wait, Cross—!"

I hung up on her before she could finish without looking. I was too busy staring upwards.

Staring up at the vicious, wrathful glares that were staring right back.

"…Alright, it's pretty obvious what you two are doing here," I began, trying to stay calm. "But I don't understand why. Nobody else from Baroque Works is trying to hunt down our crew for what we did, not even Crocodile! Shouldn't you be enjoying some kind of quiet retirement right now?"

"Hmph," Mr. 13 snorted as he tilted the akubra he was wearing back with the combat knife he was clutching, his voice an icy tenor that oozed with hatred. "We considered that when we broke out. And honestly, we might go for it one day, but after those 'visits'? No, we can't do that yet."

"We'll be glad to settle down and put Baroque Works behind us," Miss Friday concurred, still with the demonic voice Soundbite gave her before. An evil glint traversed the visor of her fighter pilot helmet. "After I've picked every last bit of flesh from your skeleton, and crushed that pest of a snail into paste."

"…fuck."

**Patient AN:** Sorry, everyone, but we're leaving you on another cliffhanger. We promise not to do it next chapter, however… I think.
Xomniac AN: Speak for yourself. XD

Hornet AN: WE FEAST UPON YOUR TEARS.
Chapter 27: Training Montage! Our Crew Shall Grow Till They Pierce The Heavens!

The Unluckies didn't give me any time to say more than that before Miss Friday spread her wings and dove towards me. Faced with the two murderous animals again, I did the only sensible thing I could.

I turned tail and ran into the street, shoving my way through the crowd.

What? Those guys were scary! More importantly, I didn't have the whole crew haring off to fight other people this time, so I could actually call some backup.

Of course, I picked then to remember that I couldn't call for help because the town was lousy with Blackbeard's crewmates and if I got pegged on account of them rampaging to my rescue, then both Soundbite and I would be biting it, big time! Because let's face it, my crewmates were many things, but subtle was not one of them. Well, Robin was, and maybe Vivi, but I couldn't guarantee that Robin wouldn't actually choose to help the Unluckies at this point, while Vivi wasn't anywhere near capable of fighting these things head-to-head.

No, quite unfortunately, I was once again on my own.

Well… as 'on my own' as I ever got these days, anyways.

"Think you can Gastro-Phony them?" I hissed desperately at Soundbite.

The snail in question concentrated for a moment before shaking his head. "NO JOY! Must have stuffed their EARS WITH WAX!"

"Tsk! Smart jackasses!" I cursed vividly. Damn it damn it damn it! This was not how I'd wanted to spend my shore leave, running from vengeful assassins and dodging a hail of fucking bull—!

…wait… Where were the bullets? I was expecting an earth-shattering kab—er, hail of bullets!

I started to turn my head around, but abandoned the notion when I nearly collided head-first with somebody. "Soundbite, can you see what they're packing?!

"Uh…" Soundbite twisted his eyestalks around, eyes narrowed. "TWO COMBAT knives on 13, armor on FRIDAY'S TALONS! NO GUNS or shells, though!"

I made a tight turn around a corner, nearly slipping onto my ass and thanking my lucky stars for the traction the treads of my greaves afforded me. "Makes sense, their weapons would have been confis-CATED!" I yelped as I jumped over a tub of lard who'd decided it'd be a great idea to sleep off his hangover in the street. "When they were arrested and Vivi told her father about all the weapons caches she had knowledge of, PLUS—!"

I cursed under my breath and barely managed to duck down to under half my height. What kind of a moron actually carried a ladder like that!? "Whatever they managed to pump out of the captured agents! They must be stuck with what they can salvage!"

"YEAH, WELL—! DODGE!"

I immediately complied, throwing myself to the right and tumbling into an alleyway. I had a brief
reprieve as I scrambled back to my feet, during which I managed to catch sight of Friday trying to wrench her metal-encased talons from the woodwork she'd literally buried them in. I managed to get running again just as she tore her claws out of the wood in a flurry of broken splinters.

"THIS DOES NOT COMFORT ME!"

"And you think I feel any better!?" I spat, pumping my legs even faster as I ran out into the next street over and started dashing down it. Thankfully, the crowd parted before me and let me through without too much commotion. Apparently, they were used to having people get chased through the streets by thoroughly vicious assassins. They just didn't care enough to actually help!

Seriously, I saw nearly ten different guns hanging from the belts of people who clearly saw me! It would take all of ten seconds for them to draw and fire! It was just that nobody could be fucking bothered to—I nearly facepalmed. God damn it, why did I always have to be so oblivious.

Catching sight of a particularly ornate handle hanging out of someone's belt, I put on a burst of speed and yanked the pistol from its holster, using my left hand to snap the hammer back while I found by grip and the trigger with my right. This all happened in the scant second it took for me to spin around and point the barrel at the pursuing pests. Friday flared her wings in panic in an effort to pull up, but by that point they were already too close for me to miss.

"Smile you ugly—!" I grit out as I pulled the trigger—

CLICK!

—and stared at the pistol in horror as its hammer clicked without any effect.

Thankfully, by this point Friday had swung up into a wide loop, giving me the briefest of pauses.

A pause which was filled by a fist rapping over my head, subsequently grabbing my collar, and wrenching me face-to-snarling-face with the guy I'd yanked the gun from. "You hooligan! Who the hell steals another man's pistol!?"

I blinked in surprise for a moment before scowling right back. "Who doesn't load their fucking pistol in a pirate town!?" Before the guy could respond, I flipped the pistol in my hand and cracked its butt over his head, forcing him to let me go. I got running just as Friday and 13 came back around for another pass.

"You think they'll risk that happening twice?" I asked Soundbite.

"I THINK they'll risk dodging TOWARDS YOU INSTEAD OF AWAY!" Soundbite absently responded.

I glanced at the snail in confusion. "What is it?"

The Baby Transponder Snail ground his teeth as he stared off into space. "I think I MIGHT HAVE an idea. GET TO THE NEXT STREET over, THAT WAY!" Soundbite answered, jerking his eyestalks to the right.

I hesitated for a brief moment before complying, swinging into the closest opening in the buildings. "Got it!" I put on as much speed as I could, and promptly killed that speed just as quickly when I came face-to-face with a wooden fence that was blocking my way forward.

It took every bit of control I had to not growl at Soundbite; at this point, I really hoped that he had a plan.
"DON'T GET PISsy AT me!" Soundbite spat venomously as he read my expression. "I SAID street, you ran INTO A BLIND ALLEY!"

I winced in admonishment. I mean, he wasn't wrong. Still, hopefully there'd be enough time for me to backtrack and—

FWUMP!

…well, that was just brilliant, wasn't it?

I grit my teeth in a wordless growl before plastering a tight grin on my face and turning around, making sure to keep my right hand behind my back all the while, while my left jerked my headphones over my ears. "Don't suppose you'd let me make another runner so that you can continue the hunt and cut me down running?" I asked, injecting a hint of hope into my voice.

It seemed that they had used up their quota of speech for the day, as the only reply they gave was for Friday to lower her center of mass while 13 flipped his combat knives so that the blades were pointed at unnaturally straight angles.

I jerked my head in acknowledgment, my smile growing ever tighter as I slowly gripped the object I was looking for with my hidden hand. "Didn't think so… by the way, just so you know, Soundbite and I have taken to naming our attacks." My grin perked up into a predatory gleam. "Here's one we just came up with today!" I whipped my hand out before the Unluckies could react. "GASTRO-FLASH!"

God bless Usopp for his sheer ingenuity, because only he could have come up with something as brilliant as this. A wind-up woodpecker doll he came up with in his spare time? On its own, a rather simplistic device for distractions and occasionally pounding in nails when he was in a hurry. The mechanism for repeated hammering, though, combined with and attached to the back of the Flash Dial that Boss found on the St. Briss, managed to enhance the already potent light of the Dial into a constant strobe light.

Throw in the ear-splitting siren Soundbite was belting out and I'd just managed to hit the Unluckies with a flashbang at almost point-blank range. And from the way they reeled and clutched their heads in agony, it was clear that neither the polarized sunglasses they wore nor the wax stuffed in their ears was enough to stop the assault on their senses.

Acting fast, I leapt forwards and stomped my boot down on Friday's helmet, smashing her jaw against the planks beneath us. I balanced on her head as I swung my other leg forwards, punting 13 off of the buzzard's back.

Before I could do anything else, Friday shifted and lurched beneath me, putting all her neck muscles into trying to fling me off. I panicked for a brief moment, before getting a stupid crazy idea. I knelt down ever so slightly and then pushed upwards and backwards just as Friday surged up herself. The combined motion managed to fling me high enough into the air to send me sailing over the lip of the fence and clear to the other side of the alley.

I landed with a crash and a burst of air, wincing as I got up, before scowling viciously at Soundbite when I managed to make sense of the digital music echoing through the air. "Super Mario Bros, really?!

"YOU'RE THE ONE WHO JUST DID a Goomba stomp," Soundbite pointed out with a snicker. "NOW, RUN FORREST RUN!"
"Do I look like a national icon to you!?" I growled out as I struggled to my feet and dashed into the street, just as a squawk of fury pierced the air. "Damn it, they get up fast. You were saying something about a plan!?"

Soundbite's eyes were unsynced as they swivelled back and forth, looking up and down the street. "Not yet, not yet! I NEED LINE OF SIGHT FIRST!"

SMASH!

"SHIT!!" I cursed, ducking my head in panic in order to avoid the hail of glass from the Unluckies smashing clear through a window! Son of a bitch, had they blitzed through the whole building!? "HOW'S THAT FOR LINE OF SIGHT!?"

"COULD I GET a close-up?"

"SOUNDBITE!"

"RIGHT!!" Soundbite clenched his teeth, his telltale whine singing through the air. "Get ready... DUCK!"

I snapped my head down—

WHIZZ!

Just as I felt the wind of a bullet passing through the air above my head. Glancing back confirmed that the Unluckies had unfortunately managed to dodge the shot as well, but if the way Friday was glaring bloody murder at a direction slightly above me, the shot had apparently diverted their ire for a moment.

I followed the vulture's line of sight and confirmed that she was staring at the top of one of Mock Town's towers. More specifically, she was glaring at the silhouette perched on... the...

"Did you just taunt Van Auger into shooting these two?!!" I hissed in shock.

"NO CLUE about this 'Van Auger' DUDE, BUT I did SPOOK THE good Samaritan SNIPING feather-RATS!"

Regardless of Soundbite's slurs, his ploy apparently managed to work!... halfway, anyways. The good news was that Friday pumped her wings and soared up higher as she swerved towards the tower, habitually jerking and jolting around in the air as she ducked and weaved around the ammunition apparently being blasted at her. No surprise there, these two no doubt had plenty of experience dealing with sniper fire.

The bad news, on the other hand, was that just as she veered off, 13 leapt off of her and continued the chase himself. His legs might have been short, but the furry bastard definitely had the energy to compensate!

"Well, that didn't work!"

"WE'VE GOT half as many ASSASSINS to deal with. What DO YOU MEAN IT didn't work?" Soundbite grumbled.

"It half-worked, so it only half counts!!" I snapped back, grunting as I vaulted over a table at a cafe in an effort to shake the treacherous otter. Unfortunately, that ploy backfired when the rat used the table as a springboard to get the height needed to almost slice my head off. Almost. As it was, I still came
away with a thin cut on my neck.

"Why does THIS SOUND familiar?" Soundbite muttered viciously.

"Not so fun from the other side, is it?" I shot back with a grim grin.

"IS NOW THE TIME!?" Soundbite roared incredulously.

"Ah—GYERK!" I flinched as a butter knife swished over my shoulder. "Guess not! Any other bright ideas for dealing with this bastard!?"

"NEGATIVE! Sniper-boy is FOCUSED ON Friday, and even if I could make HIM go after THE WATER RAT, chances ARE HE'D SMELL A DIFFERENT ONE!"

"Damn it damn it damn it—GYAGH!" I cut off my cursing with a yelp when my foot suddenly hit an uneven plank and sent me tumbling. I had just enough time and sense of mind to flip onto my back and snap my armored forearms into an X, barely managing to catch the flurry of slashes the overgrown rodent tried to put into my face. The moment I got a reprieve, I shoved my arms outwards in order to knock the otter away and give me some room.

The second I got the opening, I curled my legs up against my chest and lashed them out, catching 13 in the chest and launching him off of me in a picture-perfect mule-kick.

I hastily clambered my way back to my feet, trying to keep my eye on the rodent. By the time we'd managed to both get back to our feet, I made a most… unfortunate discovery. The onlookers had finally taken notice of my dilemma, just… not in a way that helped me in the least.

"Shit…" I hissed, digging for my baton and Flash Dial.

"DA FUQ you thinking!?" Soundbite demanded incredulously.

"I'm thinking I don't have a choice is what I'm thinking…" I groused as I tried to get myself into as ready a stance as I could manage. "Look around." Soundbite promptly did so and blinked in confusion as he noticed the ring of people surrounding me and 13. "UHHH, what are they doing?"

I ground my teeth as I slowly started to shuffle to the left without ever looking away from my furry opponent, an action he matched at the same pace. "Penning us in. I've seen several bills exchange hands, which means they're betting on us, which means they won't let me run." I swallowed heavily as I took in the evil leer 13 was sending my way. "And he's certainly not opposed to the idea either."

"Hey, guys!" I called out, not taking my eyes off of 13. "I have a question for all of you. Do you even know why we're fighting in the first place?"
I sweated nervously as 13 cocked an eyebrow, obviously curious about what I was getting at. Someone had to take the bait, or else—!

"The hell was it about, huh?" Soundbite barked from several feet away without moving his lips.

I took a moment to thank my lucky stars for Soundbite having faith in me before jabbing an accusatory finger at 13. "We were having an argument over who the strongest of the Four Emperors was, and this Philistine had the gall to say Kaidou!"

13 glanced around in confusion as the pirates and scumbags around us started muttering amongst themselves, before shrugging it off in favor of scowling at me. He leapt across the clearing, ready to tear into me—

"HEY!"

When he was suddenly snatched clean out of the air by a massive hand that encircled his body.

"You dare imply that the great Whitebeard could be weaker than that mangy beast!?" a dark-haired man with an impressive fu manchu mustache literally spat, his phlegm decorating the otter's sunglasses. "I hope you're ready to meet your maker!"

I slowly started to inch back into the crowd as 13 struggled in the pirate's grip before freezing as one of the onlooking bar wenches spoke up.

"Tchah! Typical of the patriarchy, picking the old father figure!" she whined in a high and nasally voice. "It's Big Mom, obviously, 'cause she's a woman, and everyone knows women are stronger than men!"

"What'd you say, you dime-store whore?!" one of the pirates angrily barked, shoving his way towards her.

"Hey, I ain't no cheap girl! I charge quarters, at least!"

"Women are stronger than men, huh? Come over and prove it!"

POW!

"Augh, my face!"

"Uh-oh…" Soundbite whined uncomfortably.

"Oh, boy…" I swallowed in agreement.

"Kaido can't die! I've seen it!"

"Man, Whitebeard's fucking seventy! And Big Mom and Kaido ain't far behind neither for that matter! It's gotta be Shanks, he's not even forty!"

"He's got no Devil Fruit!"

"Yes, he does!"

"No, he doesn't!"

"Yes, he does, and by God, you're gonna accept that if I have to beat it into you!"
"Bring it, ya wuss!"

CRACK!

"Augh, my spine!"

"No! Billy! You bastards!"

"Time to go, I think," I muttered as the argument descended into an all out brawl, and then promptly ducked as a freaking table sailed over my head. "Yes, definitely time to go!"

I turned tail and bolted down onto a street perpendicular to the one we'd been on, putting as much distance between me and the swiftly growing brawl as I could manage. I put on an especially impressive burst of speed when a cry of "WIIIHAHAHA!" and a humongous shadow flew above me along the rooftops.

I'd managed to put in a considerable amount of distance between me and my pursuer when Soundbite groaned in frustration. "HE GOT OUT!"

"What!?" I sputtered in shock. "The guy who grabbed him was five times his size!"

"Six, AND HE CAN'T play rock-paper-scissors ANYMORE!" Soundbite shot back in a panicked tone. "Now run FASTER!"

I groaned miserably as I tried to comply, and promptly winced as a bolt of pain shot through my legs. "That's gonna be a problem, because I'm reaching the end of my rope here!"

I might have gotten stronger through training, but I was still freaking mortal, which was something that the otter following me was most certainly not!

Soundbite glanced back over my shoulder nervously. "THEN WE need to lose him, FAST!"

"Easier said than done! As this bastard has demonstrated time and time and time again, he's an assassin!" I groaned in a dejected tone. "And on the Grand Line, that means a hell of a lot more than it normally means! We won't shake him easily!"

"WE DID it in LITTLE GARDEN!"

"Yeah, and all we had to do was sic a pack of the most vicious dinosaurs in existence on him to do it!" I wheezed. "If we want to somebody to get him off our backs, then it can't be some run-of-the-mill thug!"

"We're in a fucking PIRATE TOWN! Throw a BRICK AND FIND SOMEONE EXTRAORDINARY!"

I winced as I conceded the point and started scanning the street for somebody, anybody who could possibly do the job. "Come on come on come on…" I muttered to myself on repeat. "Somebody extraordinary, somebody above the norm, somebody who's a mon—!

My words died in my throat as I caught sight of a bar down the street with a very familiar window design and an idea blossomed in my brain.

Apparently, Soundbite was able to read what I was thinking on my face if the nervous expression he was wearing was anything to go by. "You have a STUPID plan, DON'T YOU?"
"Suicidal is more like it!" I corrected grimly. "Care to share any ideas of your own?"

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHA NO."

"Then hang on to your shell." And with that, I sprinted up to the bar as fast as I could manage.

I shoved the saloon-style doors open, took a moment to stand there and gather my breath, and once I confirmed that all eyes were on me and that my intended target was indeed sitting at the bar…

"Excuse me, is it true that Doflamingo's spring-heeled *dickweasel* can be found here, or is this the wrong bar?"

I said what had to be the *stupidest* thing you could possibly say to Bellamy the Hyena's face.

The second, the exact *second* the last word left my mouth, I fell *flat* on my face, pressing myself into the woodwork at the exact same time as a pink-shirted ballistic missile tore through the space my torso had occupied moments earlier… just in time to ram into an entirely *different* biological projectile that had been aimed at me, this one substantially smaller and covered in fur, and slam them *both* through the wall of the building on the opposite side of the street. Moments later, the sound of a very intense brawl broke out from the site of the impact.

Unwilling to let either of my aggressors rally and get the drop on me, I jumped to my feet and ran over to the bar. I slapped my palm on the countertop, causing the shell-shocked bartender to flinch. "Hello, can I get some service please?"

The barkeep eyed me warily, no doubt fearing for his life via association with me. And in all fairness, it's not like he was *wrong*. "Uh, s-sure, what do you—?" The barkeep's words died as he stiffened in terror, staring at something over my—!

SLAM!

I jerked to the side seconds before Sarquiss' over-sized kukri cleaved into the part of the bar I'd been standing at, the blade's owner glaring bloody murder at me. "*You're dead, you little—!*"

Rather than letting him finish his threat, I instead swiped Soundbite off my shoulder by his shell and slapped him against the flat of the knife. "GASTRO-BLAST!"

"*Bada BING BADA BOOM!*"

The middle of the blade *exploded* in a hail of metal fragments, leaving Sarquiss holding little more than a broken hilt. All the pirate could do was stare at the remains of his eponymous weapon for a moment… before I pulled out a very lucky find from the St. Briss with my other hand and stuck it in his face.

"*Impact, jackass,*" I snarled, flexing my palm definitively.

Thinking about what Usopp and Nami described the blowback from the Dial to be like, I came close to thanking Zoro for the training when I found that the pain from the sudden force that slammed into my palm and crushed into my radius and ulna was just enough to make me wince. Sarquiss had no such luxury, promptly getting blown head over heels into a nearby table by the force of Usopp going to town on the Impact Dial with a hammer, where he lay groaning in agony.

I sniffed contemptuously as I re-pocketed the Dial and placed Soundbite back on my shoulder, straightening out my jacket in a haughty fashion. "Some people just have no manners…" I muttered before turning back to the bartender, who was shell-shocked anew. "Now where was I… ah, yes!
"Sir? Sir?" I snapped my fingers before the poor guy's face. "Sir, if I could get some service please?"

"Ah!" The man jerked back to the land of the living with a shudder, eyeing me fearfully for an entirely different reason. "Y-yes, h-h-how may I h-help you?"

"Ah, well, let's see..." I dug through my pockets for a bit before grinning in satisfaction. "Ah, here we are!" I pulled out the half-dozen hundred-beri notes Nami had given me for shore leave and slapped them on the bar. "A bottle of your finest Cola and usage of your bolt hole, and I know that you have a bolt hole because this is a pirate town, of course you have a bolt hole!"

The barkeep hesitantly pocketed the money and eyed me warily before rooting out a bottle of Cola and tossing it to me. He then leaned down and worked open a hatch in the floorboards, exposing a hole with a ladder in it.

Soundbite whistled appreciatively. "NOW THAT'S what I call SERVICE!"

"Indeed!" I nodded in agreement as I vaulted over the bar. I took the time to turn around and address the still-frozen bar patrons with a grin and a salute. "Well, I'm blowing this popsicle stand! Later!"

"ADIOS, AMIGOS!"

And with that, I slid down the ladder and into freedom.

I'd done it! I'd actually done it, and on my own, to boot! I was free, home free! Nothing could stop me now!

-o-

"Cross..."

Correction: almost nothing.

"Yeah, Vivi?" I asked innocently, despite the vein throbbing on her forehead.

"Is this going to be a 'thing' with you?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I whistled, wincing at the fact that I no doubt looked exactly like Luffy whenever he was lying.

"Alright, then in that case, could you explain to me..." she started in a far too calm voice, before grabbing my collar and jabbing a finger inland. "Why in the name of all that is holy the town is on fire?!"

Indeed, a large chunk of Mock Town was now ablaze, a product of both the all-out riot my distracting question had started and the questionable wooden construction of most of the town's buildings. Considering how heated versus debates got back home on the Internet, I had expected the outcome to be violent; in retrospect, seeing how we were in a town whose sole reason for existing was to get pirates drunk, I should have seen this coming.

"In my defense, I didn't expect the opinions on the answer of a simple, slightly divisive question to get this heated," I answered, hastily throwing in a "Pun not intended!" at the look on Vivi's face.

"You said you were just going for a walk!" Vivi snarled indignantly.

"It was A VERY enthusiastic WALK!"
I grinned at Soundbite. "I was just about to make that reference, good ca—ERK!" I choked off as I noticed the frigid glare Vivi was pinning me with. "I-I mean, I'm very sorry and please forgive the sheer reckless of my actions?" I shrank in on myself when the glare refused to abate. "C-cut me some slack here! How was I supposed to expect the Unluckies to attack me again?"

"Really? Miss Merry Christmas outright said that Baroque Works was going to make a jailbreak; even if you didn't see it in the story, how could you not see it coming?"

"I did see it coming, but in the story, everyone who escaped retired! Doublefinger's living out her dream of owning her own café, the rest of the Officer Agents joined as employees, and the last I saw of the Unluckies, they were trading sketches of Agents for food! The general theory back home was that they joined the Marines as sketch artists or something; besides Robin, I didn't expect us to have to deal with anyone from Baroque Works again unless—" I frowned heavily, then shook my head, refusing to consider that possibility. "No, I didn't expect us to have to deal with any of them again."

"Unless what, Cross?" Vivi asked with a frown.

I gritted my teeth and shook my head, doing my best to dispel the memories of poison and demons. "I—nothing, nothing. Totally unrelated at the moment, and with any luck it won't ever become pertinent."

Vivi's tone was dry. "Something else you're trying to prevent that will inevitably go wrong anyway?"

And that was too much; as the outcome I feared most slammed into my mind's eye with all the force of one of Garp's punches, I snapped, pinning Vivi with a glare that promptly dispelled any exasperation she had, fear taking its place.

"Anything else, Vivi," I said, my voice cold. "Anything else, I'd let you joke about. But not our captain going through six different levels of hell, alone, knocking on death's door at least five times, and having his brother die in his arms as a result of the exact shitshow that I described in my last broadcast. No honor, no glory, no good, just sheer death and stupidity, enough of it to affect events two years later with no sign of stopping." I blew out a heavy sigh as I released her and scratched beneath my cap, rerunning the future through my head a few times as I refreshed my memory on what was to come. "So, do me a favor, and don't even joke that despite my efforts to change things, all of that's still going to happen; I felt bad enough after the rebellion in Alabasta, how do you think I'm going to feel if I find out that I didn't stop the War of the Best?"

Vivi and Soundbite stared at me in abject shock, obviously trying to reconcile my tirade with, well… me.

"Holy shit, dude..." Soundbite breathed.

"Cross..." Vivi started slowly. "I-I'm so sorry, I never—!"

I cut her off with a raised hand and a tired sigh, my other hand coming up to pinch the bridge of my nose. "No, it's—it's fine. You didn't deserve that, that was on me. I... think I might be coming off of my adrenaline high is all, still a bit... a bit up there, you know? Sorry about all that."

Vivi chewed her cheek uncomfortably as she considered her next words. "Cross, you... never said anything about this before."

I shrugged, a bittersweet smile on my face. "You touched on a sensitive topic that I've been worrying about for a while. That's it. Normally, I can hide it better because, well..." My grin became much
more honest. "We're part of the freaking Straw Hat Pirates. You've got to admit, it's... kind of hard to be in a bad mood around our crew, no?"

Vivi's worry promptly vanished as she smiled fondly at her memories. "Yeah... yeah, it really is."

I returned her smile and gave her shoulder a comforting pat. "There you go. Now, come on, let's go ahead and get back to the Merry before Carue starts panicking, or worse, Sanji gets back. If he gets back and finds that you and Nami aren't there, he'll try and send out the hounds, and I doubt that Lassoo will be willing to comply."

"HA!" Soundbite barked as I started walking along the boardwalk, and Vivi chuckled as well as she followed me.

For a mercy, the walk back was fully uneventful besides the typical din and carnage that Mock Town was known for spilling out once or twice into the outskirts. When we reached the Merry, however, a very unexpected sight greeted us. Unexpected enough that it took about a minute after arriving for me to form words.

"Vivi..." I started slowly, not even remotely able to believe my eyes. "Can you see any head wounds on me? Any lumps or obvious gashes or...?"

"No..." Vivi breathed in the same incredulous tone.

"Ah..." I nodded slowly. "So... I am *not* hallucinating the small mob of K.O.'d thugs and pirates surrounding our ship?"

"I think IT'S MORE LIKELY THAT we're ALL HALLUCINATING," Soundbite chimed in, equally incredulous. "This place IS rotting, there COULD BE FUMES."

"LIKE HELL THIS IS A HALLUCINATION!"

Our attention was snapped up to the Merry's crow's nest, where Usopp had popped up and was trying to incinerate me with the force of his glare.

"Usopp?!" I sputtered in confusion. "Did-did you do this?!"

"OF COURSE I DID!" our sniper yelled, flailing his arms furiously. "YOU'RE THE ONE WHO TOLD ME TO SHOOT ANYONE WHO TRIED TO COME UP! WHAT, DID YOU NOT HAVE FAITH IN ME TO ACTUALLY DO IT?!"

"Well, it's not like ya did it all by yerself."

Vivi and I turned to see Lassoo in his hybrid form dragging a very big and very unconscious thug out of an alleyway by his ankle, said thug being covered in bite marks and his jaws set in a massively satisfied grin. "Hey, Cross, Vivi, Soundbite! Nice day, huh? I know that I've been having a good one! Nothing like a good old-fashioned brawl to make you feel alive!"

"YOU DIDN'T DO ANY MORE THAN I DID, MUTT!"

"LIKE HELL I DIDN'T, LONG-NOSE!" Lassoo barked back at Usopp with equal venom.

Turning back to the mob, I took the chance to notice that Usopp wasn't, strictly speaking, wrong. Some of them, maybe a third of them, were sporting either bite marks or injuries consistent with explosions. Another third seemed almost unmarked but for a few well-placed welts focused at critical points on their bodies. The final third...
"Well, Usopp, I guess next time you won't complain about just having Mikey, Donny, Leo, and Lassoo if this is any indication of what you're all capable of," I managed, taking in the very distinct bruises and shallow lacerations that decorated a number of the aggressors.

"What were these people even trying to do here, anyway?!" Vivi practically shrieked, obviously still shellshocked by the sheer number of unconscious thugs and criminals surrounding us.

Usopp maintained his glaring contest with Lassoo for a moment longer before snorting and folding his arms. "They were trying to get onboard the Merry. No clue why, but that was all I needed to see."

Lassoo huffed in turn, turning an evil eye on the thugs scattered around us. "I know why they're here: you don't need an issued poster to hold a bounty. Chances are that they saw the emblem on the sails and wanted to catch whoever they could in order to drag them to the nearest Marine base and sell them for as much as they could get."

"Ulp..." Soundbite and I swallowed in sync, my hand rubbing unconsciously at my throat. I then shook my head to try and dispel the gruesome thoughts. "S-Still, Usopp, this is pretty damn impressive. Have you been practicing?"

Usopp blinked in surprise before sagging in exhaustion. "Well, of course I've been practicing! Slacking off when there are only three monsters is reasonable enough, but doing it when there are four and the fourth's students just makes you feel pathetic!" He then promptly perked up visibly, shoving his thumb at himself with a grin. "Looks like it was a good idea! None of them were a match for the Great Sniper Usopp! Hahahaha—!"

"Hey, Usopp?" Vivi called up hesitantly. "Where are the Teenage... uh...?"

"TEENAGE DUGONG WARRIOR SQUAD!" Soundbite eagerly provided.

"Right, them. Well, where are the ones who stayed behind?"

Usopp hesitated before shooting an uneasy glance down at the waters of the harbor. "Ah... I saw them a few minutes ago. They went into the water to deal with a... stronger variety of thugs."

I felt a bad feeling settle into the pit of my stomach as I eyed the deceptively calm waters. "When you say stronger..."

My unasked question was answered by the planks of the boardwalk before me erupting outwards in order to let a very battered and very tooth-filled head to come into sight, groaning and lolling about in agony.

I blinked in shock before slowly kneeling down and examining the head of what had to be a piranha fishman. "Ah, that kind of stronger..." I nodded absently.

It wasn't my fault that I was so distracted, really. After all, this was the first time in my life that I'd ever met a fully non-human being! Dorry and Brogy didn't count because they were pretty much super-sized humans, and Chopper's Devil Fruit explicitly had the word 'Human' in it! But this... this was something else.

Once anew, Oda's prodigious artwork had failed to do reality justice. Up close, I could see even more distinct differences between fishmen and humans than I'd thought were present: sure, their skin looked like it was merely oddly colored, but the truth was that they didn't actually have skin at all. Fishmen had scales covering their bodies instead of an epidermis, which gave their bodies extremely alien-looking rippling effects when they moved. Their skeletal structure was off, too; humanoid, but
the cheekbones, collarbone, nasal passage… it was just a bit warped, favoring them more towards fish.

Now, while absolutely nothing could excuse the monstrous treatment favored upon fishmen at Saboody, I couldn't honestly say that I didn't see where it originated from. So close to human but far enough to cause discomfort, wariness… Uncanny Valley, in its purest, most undiluted form. Honestly, even I felt a bit uncomfortable looking at the senseless being before me. It was fast-receding as I familiarized myself with the differences, remembered the fact that they did have a society, but if I hadn't had the knowledge I did, if someone had taken that discomfort and not taken the time to temper it… well. I'd seen the effects, and I did not want to think about it any more than I had to.

Shaking my head, I turned my attention to the coalescing bubbles on the water's surface a foot or two from the edge of the dock. Without warning, the surface of the water erupted, spitting a flailing, long-limbed fishman into the air. If the guy's long, tooth-filled snout was anything to go by, this one was a barracuda. I had just enough time to process that before two of the Dugongs—Donny and Mikey, judging from the weapons and bandannas—leapt out of the water with just as much speed, rising to the fishman's altitude before slamming their weapons against his skull, sending him crashing into the boardwalk. The two landed as if they were cats rather than turtle-seals, staring at the fishman for a few seconds before relaxing as they saw that he wasn't likely to get up anytime soon.

"Boss was right," Donny said with a tired but satisfied grin. "If this is any indication of what our fights will be like from now on, we'll be twice as strong as we were when we left Alabasta within a couple of months, easy."

"Let's just hope that Boss is satisfied with that," Mikey groaned, albeit with a matching expression. "I wouldn't put it past him to try doubling our training regimen just so we can keep up with him and Sanji."

"Hey, better him than Zoro, that jackass is sadistic," I pointed out, drawing their attention to me. "By the way, where's Leo?"

The answer came a moment later, the hard way, as a third fishman blasted out of the water. This one was a mako shark: smaller in stature than the other two, but the fact that he was holding a struggling Leo's skull in his grip showed that he made up for that with strength and ferocity. Mikey and Donny visibly tensed at seeing one of their own subdued, even as the shark-fishman tossed Leo at them so hard he bounced and was left dizzied as he tried to push himself to his tail. The two untouched dugongs had just enough time to snap their weapons into ready positions before the fishman lunged at them—

THUNK!

And was promptly knocked off course by a thick and heavy cargo hook connected to a sturdy length of rope cracking into the side of his skull and sending him tumbling down the boardwalk.

We stared after the fishman in shock for a moment before a proud, firm "Ahem" drew our attention to the other side of the dock.

Boss was patiently tapping his tail against the boardwalk as he rewound his newfound weapon back into his arms, glaring frigid murder at the mako-fishman all the while. "What," he started slowly, his voice promising pain to come. "The blue hell. Do you think you're doing. To my student?"

The mako-fishman shook his head as he got his bearings back and clawed his way to his hands and knees, glaring right back at Boss with a disjointed and dizzy glare of his own. "You mangy little—!"
"Actually, on second thought, you know what?" Boss interrupted without warning. "I really don't give a damn. Prepare to eat fist, fishface."

The fishman tried to climb to his feet, only for Boss to lash his fin out and send the hook shooting out to hit him again, this time on the knee. Everyone present flinched at the sound of snapping cartilage, and the fishman went down, clutching the joint.

"Y-You'll pay for this!" he howled at the dugong.

"Not likely," Boss scoffed, spinning his hook for a moment before flinging it at the fishman anew, only this time it lashed around the guy's leg instead. The fishman had just enough time to widen his eyes in terror before Boss yanked on his weapon's rope, sending him flying into the air. The second his opponent was in the air, Boss leapt up after him, meeting him in the middle fist-first and slamming him into the boardwalk.

Then, still at the apex of his jump, Boss spun on an axis, winding his rope back up and jerking the fishman back into striking range. He then struck him again, only this time he hit the fishman upwards while he himself launched himself down to the planks. The second he touched down, he yanked on the rope of his weapon and jerked the fishman back towards him.

Once he was half a foot above him, Boss snapped his fist out and smashed it into the small of the bastard's back, bending him around his fist and leaving him T.K.O., bloody foam bubbling around his teeth in a show of complete and utter defeat.

"Half-Shell Style," Boss proclaimed tonelessly.

He pumped his arm and tossed the fishman up a bit before leaping and spinning so that his tail slammed into his body, sending his defeated opponent skipping across the water of the harbor. And right into—and through—the side of the New Witch's Tongue for good measure.

"Barracuda Barrage."

"GO, BOSS, GO!" his students cried eagerly as they pumped their fists, though Leo's show of support was still a bit shaky.

The rest of us were too busy gawking at the display of sheer kickass to say anything.

"HOLY shite."

Well, much of anything, at any rate.

"I'm with the snail, that was impressive…" Lassoo whistled lowly.

"Call me crazy, but I think our Monster Trio just got upped to a freaking quartet," I breathed.

Vivi looked at me in shock. "C-Come on, he's strong but he's not that strong!…r-right?"

"Eh, not quite, milady."

"GAH!" I jerked in surprise before snapping my gaze around. "Sanji, Raphey! When did you get back?"

"Just in time to watch Boss lay down that utterly righteous beatdown!" Raphey grinned eagerly, carrying a bundle almost five times her body weight on her back. "The shopping trip was great too! Turns out that balancing delicate ingredients while beating down muggers is a fantastic training
exercise! Who knew, huh?"

"Hmph! Just what I'd expect from my student," Boss grunted, waddling up to her and Sanji. "And unfortunately, your highness, I have to agree with Sanji; I'm good, sure…" He huffed out a heavy cloud of smoke. "But the past few days with you guys have really put things in perspective for me. I've got a ways to go before I can match any of our top three." He then grinned from ear to ear and stabbed his cigar at Sanji. "But that sure the heck doesn't mean that I'm gonna stop trying! After all, to reach for the top of the world no matter what…" He jabbed his cigar towards the sky triumphantly. "Is that not the most basic of all Man's Romances!?"

"GO, BOSS, GO!" his students cheered in unison, this time without any hint of hesitation whatsoever.

Boss maintained his stance for a moment before lowering his arm and chewing on his cigar with a worried expression. "Why do I get the strange feeling that I've been outshone…" he muttered to himself.

"WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED HERE?!"

I shrugged with a snicker as I turned to address the source of the very familiar screech. "Oh, you know, morons lined up, morons got beaten down, we showed off our badassery, you know how it —WHAT THE HECK!?" My words and amusement proceeded to die a very violent death as I was confronted with the sight of Luffy and Zoro looking like they'd come out of ten rounds with, well… each other! "The hell happened to you two!?"

Nami cast a vicious glare at our impassive superiors. "For some reason that I cannot fathom, Luffy decided to do nothing to fight back against a pirate crew that mocked and provoked them, and ordered Zoro to do the same thing." The moment she caught sight of my eyes widening in shock, she lurched forwards and grabbed my collar. "YOU KNEW?!"

"Knew, but didn't expect, I swear to God!" I waved my hands frantically. "Damn it, so that's why the bar looked a bit beat up. Why the hell did you guys ask about Sky Island!? I got Masira's help specifically so we could try and avoid that particular shitfest!"

Nami abruptly released me and turned away, her fingers digging into her upper arms. "…I wanted some kind of backup plan in case your plan blew up in our faces again?" she replied quietly.

I opened my mouth to object to that, then closed it. "Harsh… but fair," I muttered, before turning back towards the Merry. "Usopp!"

"Already on it, Cross!" Usopp called back, deploying the gangplank.

"And where's Chopper?" Nami demanded irately. "We need him to patch up these morons, ASAP!"

Vivi blinked, then started glancing around in worry. "Wait, now that you mention it, where's Carue!?"

Soundbite crossed his eyes momentarily before adopting a nervous expression. "Awe you sure dat dis iz a good idea?"

He then took on a much more manic expression. "Do not question my genius! This is better than a mere 'good idea'; there is actually a small but fascinating chance of this actually working!"

"And that's the sign to DUCK AND COVER!" I yelped, throwing myself to the dock in a panic. A motion which was promptly imitated by everyone else, with Raphe hefting her bag and flinging it
up high and Usopp performing an impressive dive into the water. And not a moment too soon.

**BOOM!**

On account of how the walls of Merry’s storeroom suddenly bulged outwards and the portholes shattered, pink smoke billowing out of the jagged holes left behind.

A few moments later, Chopper and Carue staggered up to the Merry's railing, coughing their lungs out.

"It wo~orked…" Chopper sang blearily as he held up a vial of bubbling pink something.

"Somebody save me from dis maniac…” Carue moaned.

My eye twitched a bit as I glared up at Chopper. "I think we're going to need to have a talk with Chopper about when and where is appropriate for him to perform his more, ah, volatile experiments. Any thoughts, Nami?" I waited for a bit before frowning at the lack of response. "Nami?" I turned to look at our navigator, promptly paling in horror. "Uh-oh."

I could see an aura of rage surrounding her, and the enraged expression on her face was outright possessed. I scrambled to my feet and moved a safe distance away, as did everyone else nearby, instinctively recognizing the coming explosion.

"RAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!"

And there it was. Only… unlike all the times I'd heard it before, this scream of rage… just wasn't funny.

"IT'S NOT ENOUGH THAT I HAVE TO DEAL WITH A GROUP OF IDIOTS ON A DAILY BASIS, THAT I HAVE TO DRAG THEIR ASSES BACK HERE AFTER ANOTHER ONE OF MY STUPID CAPTAIN'S STUPID WHIMS, THAT I HAVE TO DEAL WITH THE KIND OF CONDESCENDING PIRATES THAT MADE ME HATE EVERY OTHER CREW IN THE FIRST PLACE, BUT NOW I CAN'T EVEN RELY ON HAVING A MOMENT OF PEACE, QUIET, AND STABILITY ON OUR OWN FUCKING SHIP! GRAGH! FUCK THIS ALL, I AM DONE!"

As soon as she finished her rant, she started storming towards the Merry.

It was at that point that yet another familiar face made their presence known at just the wrong time.

"Ah, Miss Navig—!

"CRAM IT, DEMON-BITCH!” Nami snarled in Robin's face without pausing. To my astonishment, Robin actually reeled back, her eyes wide with shock.

Nami then stomped up the gangplank, and how the wood kept from cracking I have no idea. She stalked straight towards the wreck of the storeroom, and I swear that when she slammed the door, I could see beads of sweat on Merry's figurehead.

Silence reigned as everyone just gaped in shock… until Chopper broke it.

"Well, that was something. Hmm… ah, Sanji! Just the man I was looking for! See, I have some theories about calming pies—"

THWACK!
"OW! Thanks, Robin."

"Not a problem, Mister Doctor."

"OH, hey!" Soundbite perked up as he twisted his eyestalks to look out at a part of the harbor. "Masira found his crew! THEY'RE ON THEIR way!"

That snapped my focus back to the present, prompting me to clap my hands to grab everyone's attention. "Alright, that was all a bit nuts, I know, but for now it looks like it's time we got going! Luffy, Zoro, go and get yourselves patched up by Chopper. Chopper, don't perform any unnecessary surgery—!

"Awww…"

THWACK!

"OW! Thanks, Carue."

"Oh, no, anytime, I'm happy to help, bewieve you me," the duck grumbled.

"Usopp, get back onboard and start repairing whatever the hell it is that Chopper did—!"

"I recommend a gas mask… and maybe a lead apron."

"… Right, as I said. Robin, help him out, God knows that you're capable of it, and Sanji… ah, did the food survive?"

Raphey and Boss stuck their flippers up in the air. The student shot a quizzical look at her master, before paling as the bag she'd thrown up landed in his grasp.

Sanji's eye visibly twitched for a moment before he sighed out a cloud of smoke. "Yeah, we're good on that front."

"Alright, perfect, start unloading. TDWS, you'll help me man the sails and get us going while Vivi—"

"No, I'll help get us out of port," Vivi cut me off. "You are going to go after Nami—not the time, Sanji," she said as she put her finger up in the love-cook's face before he could do more than open his mouth. "And you are going to talk her off of a ledge, though I seriously hope that I am using hyperbole in this case."

I blinked. "Wai—But why me? You're the friend she's not ticked at!"

"But you're the one who understands the situation," Vivi explained patiently. "You know how to calm her down, and before you even think about forgetting it, you're her friend, period. If it helps, think of it this way: you got her into this mess, you get her out. Alright?"

I processed this, and sighed. "Fine, I'll do it as soon as Usopp and Robin have got the storage room aired out. That should give her enough time to calm down and listen instead of just biting off my head… which in this case probably isn't hyperbole."

"THAT's my job!"

"Alright, then, everyone!" Vivi clapped her hands firmly. "Let's get going to see the man who'll help us sail to the sky!" She stayed strong for a moment before slumping forwards with a groan. "I cannot
believe I just said that with a straight face…"

"Hey, who's the captain here?" Luffy whined petulantly as he slouched towards the gangplank.

I snorted as I walked up beside him and tapped the brim of his hat down over his eyes. "You, but we give the orders ninety percent of the time. But then, we always do the ten percent you tell us to do, no matter how ridiculous, while you rarely, if ever, listen to what we tell you to do, so it all balances out."

Luffy scrunched his face up as he tried to puzzle that out before grinning his usual grin. "Oh, that makes sense."

"No, you're just a dumbass," Zoro sighed with a grin as he walked up from behind us.

"I know, but that's why I've got you guys, right?"

Zoro and I twitched as we exchanged looks before blushing and giving Luffy the mother of all dual dopeslaps. "Shut up, moron," we chorused.

"Shishishishi!"

The next few minutes were a bit frantic as we got the Merry going and things underway, but ultimately, I wound up standing over the trap door to the women's room with Vivi at my side.

I gave Vivi a nervous look. "Last chance to step up and take my place?"

The princess smiled beatifically as she gave my shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Let me give you the same advice Igaram always gave my father in private whenever he was mustering up the courage to talk to my mother after he angered her."

I perked up curiously. "And that advice would be…?"

Vivi's expression fell flat. "Grow a pair."

My face fell equally flat. "May I remind you that she scared Robin? Only a handful of things have ever done that, and the least threatening of them was about 20 million volts of lightning being thrown at her."

Vivi's response was to stab her finger at the trap door without changing her expression.

Well, there was only response to that. "Aye-aye, ma'am…" I muttered despondently, working open the door and slowly climbing down the stairs.

Nami lay on the couch, not even looking up as I came in, slumped halfway over the piece of furniture with a bottle of something in her hand held above her head, its half-drunk contents idly swirling above like a twisted liquid mobile.

I stood silent for a moment, unsure of what to say. Soundbite, meanwhile, made the executive decision to cough nice and loudly in order to draw her attention.

Nami spared me a disinterested glance and held it for what felt like minutes before slowly straightening up so that she was sitting in a slouched position, the bottle held hanging between her legs.

I tentatively took the invitation for what it was, making my way to the couch and sitting down next to her, hands clasped in my lap.
On any other day, I'd have mused over the fact that this was the first couch I'd sat on since I'd arrived in this world, but now just wasn't the time.

For the longest time we sat in silence, me unsure of what to say and her unwilling to say anything.

Finally, Nami sighed and raised her bottle, tapping it against her forehead. "Do you know how I got my tolerance to alcohol, Cross?"

I glanced at her in confusion before slowly shaking my head. "I'm well-informed, Nami, not omniscient. I only saw enough of… that time to know it was hell. Few to no details."

Nami pursed her lips before slowly nodding in understanding. "Right… well, let me break it down for you: after I got a taste of alcohol, I got a taste for it, because on those nights alone, in my map room, when I lay awake just waiting for the sun to come up, it took the pain away. It took the memories away. For a few, short minutes other than when I woke up in the morning, I could forget that my mother was gone and that my life was a living hell. And for a while… it worked."

Nami snorted darkly as she shook the bottle again. "Until it didn't. As time passed and I grew older, it took more and more for me to manage to forget. Eventually, it got to the point where the costs were nearly outstripping what I was bringing in, and I just couldn't let that stand. So I made the executive decision to stop, and I forged on dry."

Nami chuckled darkly as she held the bottle out and slowly inverted it, allowing the alcohol to drain out onto the carpet without a care in the world. "What I'm trying to get at, Cross," she continued in a black-humor kind of tone. "Is that it's not that I'm good at holding in my booze… it's that I can't get drunk anymore, period." She shook her head with a dry laugh. "And right now, for the first time since Luffy beat Arlong, I'm regretting that. Right now, I want nothing more than to be able to forget."

I swallowed heavily, trying to find the right words. "Nami—"

Nami slammed the bottle onto the coffee-table bottom-first, though thankfully it didn't shatter. "WHY DIDN'T THEY FIGHT BACK, CROSS?!" she yelled without looking at me, her glare focused dead ahead the whole time. "THEY COULD HAVE KICKED THEIR ASSES WITHOUT ANY PROBLEM, THEY COULD HAVE WON! I WAS BEGGING THEM TO FIGHT, BUT THEY DIDN'T DO ANYTHING!"

I flinched in face of her rage, biting my lip in an effort to stay silent. I thought long and hard about what to say, and eventually, I knew how to do it.

"Nami…" I started slowly. "Do you know who gave Luffy his hat?"

The navigator twitched and spared me a vicious glance for a moment before looking ahead again. "Some pirate named Shanks…" she muttered.

I sighed and shook my head. "No, not just some pirate named Shanks, Nami. The pirate named Shanks." I rolled my eyes with another sigh at the confused look she shot me. "Nami, in the second half of the Grand Line, the really strong half of it, there are four pirates that are acknowledged as ruling the seas, capable of equaling the Seven Warlords and the Marines—together—on their own. These pirates are known as the Four Emperors: Edward 'Whitebeard' Newgate, 'Big Mom' Charlotte Linlin, Kaido of the Beasts… and 'Red-Haired' Shanks." I chuckled at Nami's absolutely poleaxed expression. "Yeah, shocked me too. Seriously, you wouldn't know it from looking at the guy, or his crew, for that matter."
Nami gaped at me a second longer before swallowing and steeling her jaw. "And this matters because…?"

"It matters because of the events that occurred about a day or two before Shanks gave Luffy his hat ten years ago. The events that set… everything in motion. That started everything." I took a deep breath as I began to explain. "It was just another ordinary day in Luffy's village, with Shanks and his crew drinking their hearts out at the local bar and Luffy, this little three-foot nothing punk of a toddler, begging Shanks to take him out to sea with him despite the fact that he couldn't swim worth a damn. And this was even before he swallowed the Gum-Gum Fruit, mind you!"

"Snrk!" I was gratified to see Nami snort with laughter, in spite of her mood.

"Yeah, well, the day went shitty real fast. The doors to the bar were kicked in and in came strolling this dumbass band of mountain bandits, all raucous and rowdy and larger than life. Their leader, some moron whose name I can't even remember, was proud of the fact that his bounty was, get this, eight million berries big. Complete and utter blowhard. So, anyway, the guy strolls up to the bar with an attitude bigger than a blowfish and he demanded a drink. The problem, however, is that Shanks and his crew had already bought up all the booze and literally drained the place dry. But still, gentleman that he is half the time, Shanks was a good sport and offered the leader a bottle of good booze. And you know what that bandit leader's reaction was?"

"They shared a drink?" Nami asked sarcastically, obviously dreading the answer.

"Close… he used his forearm to break the bottle and soak Shanks with the booze."

Nami gurgled in shock, obviously unable to believe her ears. "Holy shit… And at the time, Shanks was—?"

"He was undoubtedly an Emperor at the time, yes," I nodded in confirmation. "And you know what his reaction was to this no-name bandit leader spitting in the face of his generosity and openly assaulting him like that?"

The navigator swallowed heavily in anticipation. "… As they say in the West Blue, 'chunky salsa'?

I chuckled and shook my head slowly. "Shanks got down off his stool, still dripping with alcohol, and started picking up the pieces of the bottle, asking the bartender if she had a mop."

Nami's expression froze in one of sheer disbelief. "…eh?"

"The bandit leader then proceeded to add insult to prior insult by sweeping his blade across the bar and knocking all of the dishes onto Shanks. Shanks' reaction was to just sit there and take it. Neither he nor his crew did anything to the bandits as they walked out. And once they were gone…" I spread my hands in a shrug. "They started to laugh. Every last member of his crew, Shanks included, started to laugh, without so much as a single. Care. In the world."

Nami took a moment to pick up her jaw before she responded. "Wh-why in the blue hell would they do that!? Why would he just sit there and take that kind of crap!? If Shanks is as strong as you say he is, then he could have killed that bandit with one hand, with one finger even!"

"Which is exactly why he didn't!" I interjected, jabbing my finger at her.

"What are you—!?"

"Do you think that there was even a second where Shanks didn't want to knock that bastard's head off for what he did?" I demanded. "That there was a moment where he didn't want to wring his neck
like a chicken? That there was even a fraction of an instant where Luffy and Zoro didn't want to absolutely let loose and tear Bellamy, hell, this whole island a new one?"

"I-I... I don't..." Nami stammered, obviously deep in thought.

"When those bastards hit them," I started slowly, filling my words with hard conviction. "When those lowlife scumbags decided to use Shanks and Luffy and Zoro as punching bags, those three had two very clearly defined choices. Two paths that they could take. One was to retaliate: to strike back, to lash out with their anger and to not stop until everything around them was rubble. And the other... was to take it. To keep their mouths shut, and win without saying so much as a word or lifting a finger."

I sighed as I saw the confusion in Nami's eyes. "They chose to bottle it all up. Their rage, their anger, their pain, their outrage... they took it all, every last bit of it, and they leashed it. They chained it up deep inside, and no matter how hard they got hit, no matter how much their rage struggled, they kept it in. You've seen Luffy and Zoro when they were angry, Nami. You saw them when they were pissed. Can you imagine the sheer force of will it took for them to take all of that abuse, the whole of that beating, and not even so much as cry out?"

"I..." Nami started before I interrupted her.

"Do you think that any of those wounds they got are going to scar? That they'll be traumatized from this experience, or hell, that they'll even really remember it all that clearly a week or so from now?"

"I... no, no I... I doubt it..."

"See, the thing is, Nami, you're looking at this the wrong way." I held my fist up before her. "Those jackasses didn't win because they beat the crap out of Luffy and Zoro." I clapped my other hand over my fist. "They lost, because they put their all into trying to break those two, into trying to leave some kind of lasting imprint on our lives, and they failed. Miserably." I spread my hands apart. "The truth of the matter is that it will always take more strength to keep from fighting than it does to actually fight. And whoever can successfully display that strength when the time calls for it... that's who'll win, without a doubt."

Nami slowly nodded, though her face turned into a frown. "Alright, I get that... but..." She clenched her hands together, her fingers digging into her palms. "What about the rest of them? They... they laughed at me, Cross. To my face. I felt like an idiot! It... it was just so..." Her face flushed miserably. "Humiliating..."

I had only one reaction to that.

I snorted derisively. "So?"

Nami snapped her gaze up at me in shock. "Cross—!

"Nami, can you describe any of those bastards beside Bellamy or Sarquiss to me?"

That brought her up short, causing her to blink in confusion. "What—? No, but—"

"Can you name any of them? Tell me what they were wearing, what the color of their hair was, anything actually distinctive about them?"

"No! I can't, alright? I don't remember!"

"So, you can't remember them at all, nothing distinctive, nothing that grabbed your attention."
"Yes! Exactly!"

"So, if you can't remember anything about them, if they weren't distinctive, then why do they matter to you so much?"

"THEY DON'T!" Nami finally burst out, flinging her hands up in exasperation. "They don't matter, not even a bit! They were a bunch of nobodies! Thugs, strangers, jack—!...asses..." she trailed off as realization swept over her. "...Oh, my God..."

I nodded as I patted her shoulder comfortingly. "They. Don't. Matter. They weren't your friends, they weren't your families, they were nobodies. Morons laughing at something they couldn't even begin to understand, laughing at someone lightyears ahead of them in intellect due to their sheer ignorance. Jackasses like them? Fuck 'em. They're not important. Let them laugh themselves silly, let them swim in their too-small pond in their too-small world. Meanwhile, we'll be out there, sailing the oceans and having adventures greater than most people can even dream of."

Nami heaved a shuddering breath as she hunched forwards, tears shining in her eyes as she held her hands over her mouth. "They don't matter..." she repeated almost euphorically.

I watched her for a moment before deciding to bring it all home. "Hey, Nami," I started slowly, keeping a grin nice and restrained on my face. "Would it help at all if I told you I sicced a homicidal otter on Bellamy and then broke Sarquiss' nose and knife with a seashell and snail?"

"TRUE STORY!" Soundbite provided eagerly.

That did it. Nami hiccuped out a bark of laughter before flinging herself at me, throwing her arms around my neck as she buried her face in my shoulder, simultaneously laughing and sobbing her heart out.

"There, there, that's it, let it aaaaaall out..." I breathed as I rubbed her back comfortingly. "Dooon't worry, you'll be back to your usual, bitchy, hard-ass self in no time, I promise."

"Dumbass..." Nami hiccuped joyfully, pressing her smile into my shoulder. "Stupid, big-mouthed dumbass..."

"And I'm proud of it, to boot, how's that for a kicker?"

Nami's laughter redoubled.

I was prepared to hang in there for as long as it took, to ride out her emotions in silence, until Soundbite tensed up and glanced upwards fearfully. "Oh, no..."

I looked at him in confusion. "What? What's wro—?"

Without any warning, rhyme or reason whatsoever, the air was filled with the voices of not one, not two, but three monkeys, all working together... to sing.

"Ohhh~! The islands in the south are warm~! And their heads get really hot~!"

Soundbite promptly shot back into his shell with a wail, and both my and Nami's faces grew ashen.

"They grow-a pineapples, they grow-a coconuts, and they're morons~!"

"Want to guzzle booze like there's no tomorrow and try and amp up your alcohol tolerance a bit?" I breathed in horror.
"~Hmmm, hmmmm~ Next verse!"

"Fuck, yes," Nami gargled in agreement.

We dove for the room's liquor cabinet before we were forced to suffer any further.

-0-

Ultimately, nobody onboard had enough energy to try shutting them up, too busy keeping the boat on track to the other side of the island and trying to keep their ears plugged up. I swear, I was severely tempted to turn Chopper loose on them with to find out how it was scientifically possible for such discord to exist, and that temptation just kept growing as they crescendoed. Ultimately, however, Soundbite broke before I did, and chose to retaliate by filling the air with the most horrific noise he could possibly come up with.

Turns out that the audio version of 'Two Girls One Cup' is just as disgusting as the video itself. Who'd have thunk it?

At this point, alcohol wasn't going to cut it. We needed steel wool and bleach, applied directly to the brain. And my willpower to keep Chopper from going mad with the urge to come up with something was running out fast. Fortunately, the sight of a castle awaiting us on the nearby coast heralded our arrival at our destination, and I got no small amount of laughter at seeing the Dumbass Trio and the TDWS react to seeing the other side. With Shoujou and Masira beside us and Chopper forewarned, when Montblanc Cricket emerged from the water, we managed both to avoid a fight and to keep the man from passing out before he could learn what we had come for.

That was the point where he told us about his ancestor, the City of Gold, how he came to the island, and how he met the two monkey brothers. After Luffy reiterated his desire to visit the Sky Island, Cricket told us about the Cumuloregalis cloud and the Knock-Up Stream, ending with confirming that it was scheduled to occur again at noon the following day, much to the horror of some of the crew. My assurance that we would most likely (we had outsiders listening, after all) be alright only slightly mollified them.

Still though, I did take this opportunity to speak up and make some measure of difference.

"Say, Cricket…" I started slowly, as though the idea were just occurring to me. "The Knock-Up Stream is an ocean current, right? Chances are it won't blast up all that close to Jaya itself, so… how are we supposed to find it, exactly? I mean, we could try using one of the brothers' eternal poses, I guess, but that seems unreliable at best."

"Yeah, no, we would get eviscerated," Nami cheerfully informed me. "In ten seconds flat. Eight for the sea to monologue in its own special way, one to laugh at us, and one to do the actual eviscerating."

"CALLBACK!" Soundbite sang gleefully.

"Yeah, yeah…" I muttered darkly. Cricket ignored this exchange in favor of considering my words, and telling us about the South Bird. After hearing the explanation, Luffy, Usopp, and Chopper sped off into the forest to find one before the rest of us could object.

"Oh, don't worry, they'll be back soon," Cricket interjected when he caught Vivi's worried expression. "But they won't be happy about it, that's for sure. I made the mistake of going into that jungle once before, never made it again. Those birds are devilish."
"Robin or Soundbite would probably have an easy time of it with their powers," I added, smirking. "But for anyone else, it'd be easier to burn down the forest than catch one of those birds. After all, the forest practically fights for them!"

"God damn it, Luffy!" Zoro snapped as he leapt to his feet. "Come on, duck! You're coming with me!"

"QUACK!?" Carue squawked incredulously. "Why da hell do I haff ta go!?

"Because if the mosshead gets lost in there, his natural instincts will kick in and we'll never see him again," Sanji explained matter-of-factly. "Then to whom would I feed all the ingredients that were past due?"

"Me." Lassoo raised his paw lazily.

"Yo," Soundbite concurred.

"Well, that backfired on me…" Sanji sighed. "But, yes, without someone to hold his hand, the poor marimo will get lost."

"You want a fight, cook?" Zoro growled, unsheathing one of his swords.

"Actually," Leo piped up, approaching Zoro and unsheathing his own katana. "Since we have almost a day before we leave, I'd like to try fighting with you, to see how I can improve."

Zoro's anger abruptly faded, and he instead adopted a much more fearsome expression. "Oh, now you're talking. I haven't had a good spar with another swordsman since… since…" Zoro trailed off and his grin faded as he stared into the air.

I frowned as I started counting on my fingers. "Mr. 1 didn't count, you stomped Tashigi once and wussed out of fighting her again, Hachi didn't even scratch you, you got your ass handed to you by Mihawk, the Meowban brothers were idiots, Cabaji was more parlor tricks than swordplay… wow, you haven't had a good old-fashioned equal sword fight since you met Luffy, if that."

Zoro's expression was carefully blank, and it remained that way, even as he undid his bandana from his arm, tied it around his head, and clenched Wado Ichimonji between his teeth. "You. Me. Outside. Now," he growled at Leo before turning around and stalking outside in a manner that was more animal than human.

Leo sat frozen in his spot for a moment before slowly turning to face me, his eye twitching viciously. "Thank you. So much. You bastard."

"Hey, you asked for it, Leo," Boss said firmly. "And there's nobody better suited to help you with your style; even I have to admit I'm not good with swords."

"I wanted a sparring match, not a slaughter!" Leo hysterically protested.

"We shall pray for you," Mikey, Donny and Raphey chorused as they clasped their flippers and bowed their heads.

"THAT'S NOT HELPING!"

"LEO," the voice of evil echoed throughout the cabin, freezing us all in terror.

"I'm gonna diiiie…" the dugong moaned, drawing his katanas and trailing them in the ground as he
slinked out the door.

Moments later, the sound of a two-man war erupted.

"Thinking about it, we could all do with some training right now," Boss finally said, locking eyes with Sanji. "What say you and I settle that little 'Monster Quartet' discussion our friends were having earlier, hm? 'Sides, I need to break in my new weapon." He patted the makeshift rope-dart slung around his body. "That little minnow back at Mock Town barely even worked me up a sweat."

Sanji blinked in surprise before taking his cigarette and tapping the ash off into a nearby ashtray. "Turtle soup or blubber nuggets… decisions, decisions, decisions." He pressed the cigarette out before lighting himself a new one with a grin. "Let's find out, shall we?"

And with that, they too made their way outside. A few moments of (relative) silence passed before Nami let out a sigh.

"I cannot believe I'm doing this… Donny, how good are you with that staff? Weather control is all well and good, but I'd… really like to brush up on my bojutsu. I think I've let myself slip too much for comfort."

The purple-clad Dugong perked up before rubbing his chin in thought. "Hm… helping you relearn and enhance your bojutsu skills… I suppose that could be as much an educational experience for me as it would be for you. Alright, then!" He whipped his staff out and touted it proudly. "Let's do it! Ah, but ah…" He winced and started sweating fearfully as a thought struck him. "Somewhere where Sanji can't see us? I have no death wishes, you see…"

Nami chuckled in agreement as she re-assembled her Clima-Tact and extended it to its fullest length. "Yeah, yeah, fair enough. And don't worry, I'll protect you if he tries anything. Worst case scenario… itadakimasu."

"Oh, God, I'm gonna diiiiie…" Donny groaned as the two staff fighters exited.

Vivi stared after them for a moment before looking at Carue. "I… I think that Usopp put the finishing touches on our weapons before Luffy and the Saruyama Brothers started… urgh." She shuddered briefly before shaking it off. "Anyways, I think that I know where they are. Do you want me to find them so that we can test them out?"

Carue hesitated for the slightest of moments before steeling his beak and nodding firmly. "Ah'm in."

Vivi smiled gratefully before looking at Mikey and Raphey. "Would you mind helping us? I need to get accustomed to the new size and weight and Carue needs to learn how to fight at all…?"

Raphey and Mikey looked at one another before shrugging in synch.

"Kicking a Princess's ass without getting yelled at? Sounds fun to me!" Mikey snickered.

"I've laid the smackdown on almost a dozen different body-types today, might as well add 'feathered' to that list while I'm at it," Raphey smirked.

They then knocked their forearms together and grinned at the duck and the royal. "We're in."

Vivi and Carue's enthusiasm died a swift death, terror taking its place. "I… might have made a slight mistake…" Vivi whimpered.

"We've gonna diiiie…" Carue agreed as both he and her tromped outside, followed closely by their
eager opponents.

Robin, Soundbite, and I just laughed.

"So, what about the rest of you?" Cricket asked.

Robin hummed contemplatively as she stroked her chin in thought before nodding. "I believe it might be best if I exercised a bit. Best to always keep in shape, after all." She then leaned back in her seat, opened Noland's logbook in her lap and started reading it.

I gave her a flat look. "Robin, exercising the mind is important too, but—!" I trailed off as I noticed her glancing up at me before the penny dropped. "Son of a bitch, that is fucking cheating."

"In your own words, 'Pi~ra~te','" Robin sing-soned with a smirk.

"HE LAST SAID that back in the dungeons of Alubarna!" Soundbite squawked in horror.

Robin's response was to hum a jaunty tune to herself as she turned a page.

Rather than dwell on horror on just what the hell Robin was capable of, I instead chose to shoot a pleading look at Shoujou. "So, Shoujou, I hear you're good with sonic attacks!"

The orangutan-like man blinked in surprise. "How'd you hear about that?"

I froze as I noticed Robin studying me discreetly. "Ah… Masira told us about you?"

"Huh?" The gorilla tilted his head in confusion. "No, I didn't."

"Uh…" I swallowed desperately. "Yes, you did, you just forgot?"

"Oh, then I guess I did tell you!"

God bless the idiots. Shoujou glanced at his brother before shrugging. "Well, yeah, I am; they don't call me Sonar King Shoujou for nothing. Why do you ask?"

"Well, Soundbite's capable of more than just ventriloquism, and we're trying to work out some more offensive techniques for him," I explained. "And we already do have a good attack, mind you, but, well…" I looked over at Cricket. "Got anything you wouldn't mind us breaking?"

The freediver shrugged and tossed a spare log at me, which I then placed on the ground outside of the window and put Soundbite on the side of it. "Alright, everyone, duck and cover and Gastro-Blast!"

"Snap-CRACKLE-POP!"

I winced as an almighty BANG! rang out from outside, like a log snapping in a fire times ten. I leaned back out the window and picked up both Soundbite and the eviscerated remains of the log, showing them off to the stunned members of the Saruyama alliance.

"So, yeah, Gastro-Blast is the only directly offensive technique we've got, and it's ranked as 'hyper-lethal'. The next best technique he has is Gastro-Phony, which just causes extreme nausea. We need to haul this technique back so that it's in the middle: harmful, but not guaranteed to literally turn our enemies into a fine paste."

Shoujou scratched his beard thoughtfully for a moment before nodding. "Yes… Yes, I do believe that I can help your snail. No guarantees, but I'll certainly try."
"Perfect!" I grinned as I lobbed Soundbite at him. "He's all yours."

"Be gentle," Soundbite whimpered in his best 'angelic' voice, eyes all watery and everything.

"Awww…" Shoujou cooed.

"By the way, did you guys catch my broadcast earlier about the World Government's penal system?" I asked in a loud, deadpan tone.

"BAHAHAHA—!" Soundbite barked before he could help it, rapidly shifting to an annoyed expression. "AH, DAMN IT!"

"Give him hell, Shoujou," I requested in a deadpan.

The orangutan-man saluted as he ducked out of the house. "Will do."

"TRAITORS! ALL OF you, traitors!"

"WELL!" Masira huffed as he stretched his arms as far above his head as he could manage in the house. "I'm going to go and get my guys to get started on renovating your ship. The Knock-Up Stream isn't the kind of thing where there's an upper-limit on reinforcement, you know!"

"And I'll just stay here and rest," Lassoo concluded with a wide-mouthed yawn.

"Actually, you're going to go full-gun," I ordered.

"Hm?" Lassoo cracked an eye open in curiosity. "And why would I do that?"

I grinned as I flexed my right arm. "Because I need to get used to carrying around a half-ton badass cannon, of course."

*That* got a reaction out of Lassoo, prompting him to leap to his paws with his tongue lolling out eagerly. "Oh, heck yes! Finally! No more walking around for me!"

"Well, maybe one day," I warned him. "I still need to get used to your weight and all, you know. Maybe someday, but for now, I just need to get to the point where I can carry you without worry, alright? And I suggest you take the time to practice swapping your roulette around while in full-weapon, too."

"Yeah yeah yeah, whatever, come on, let's do this already!" Lassoo woofed eagerly before snapping into his full-weapon form.

I eyed the bulky and slightly unwieldy form for a second before glancing at Cricket. "Do you have any rope, or—?"

A few minutes later found me outside the half-house, jogging somewhat strained laps around the shoreline as I carried Lassoo on my back via the rope that I'd lashed around both his muzzle and his butt. While I'd certainly managed to make some impressive progress on my own muscle tone and stamina, there was still a freaking limit, and Lassoo lay a good few feet *beyond* that limit. But, nevertheless, I persevered, running with the dog-cannon strapped to my back in an effort to even *marginally* acclimate myself to his weight. At least the burn I felt in my legs and my back certainly meant that it was *working.*

And I was far from the only one feeling the burn, for that matter.
The first group I passed was Boss and Sanji doing their level best to kick each other's teeth in. The
dugong's rope-dart was nearly a blur, but it was obvious he didn't quite have control of it yet. Well,
not quite obvious, mostly just little wobbles and grimaces when it didn't hit quite where he wanted it
to. And Sanji was capitalizing on that unfamiliarity, smoothly evading binds, knocking away the
head, and pressing the attack himself.

I moved on, knowing that getting involved in the crossfire of that fight would see me spitting out all
my teeth.

The next group I saw consisted of Raphey and Mikey slowly circling around Vivi and Carue. The
princess was riding on her faithful friend and mount, and both she and Carue were sporting their
brand-new armaments, courtesy of the Usopp Factory and the metal provided to us by the harpoons
of the Black Cage Formation.

Vivi had traded up from her Peacock String Slashers, and was now sporting some serious hardware:
two kusarigama-sized weapons with crescent-shaped blades attached to the shafts of the weapon by
the center of their arcs, both with thin links of steel trailing out of their pommels and into her sleeves.
Or, for the uninitiated, a pair of double-bladed hand-scythes attached to a chain. Vivi was holding
one of the weapons by the hilt, while she spun the other by its chain.

Carue, on the other hand, had chosen to armor up in a rather impressive manner. His wings had been
kitted out with sheets of welded metal, so that the outer side presented a relatively flexible and mobile
shield, and the leading edge sported a somewhat segmented blade, so that his wings were both metal-clad and fully mobile. His talons were equally protected, strapped with metal claw-like extensions that were equal parts effective and menacing.

I had just finished taking this all in when the dugongs attacked. Carue's feet pitter-pattered on the
ground as he whirled around to let Vivi meet the attacks, and quite frankly, the degree of
coordination the two were displaying was astounding. I could only catch the barest of movements on
Vivi's part whenever Carue changed direction, and then only half the time. The duck was dashing
this way and that on the battlefield and making the term 'greased lightning' an actual thing. Vivi, for
her part, was twirling her weapons in what was basically a small radius of what would have been
instant death… if not for some issues.

You see, they would have made quite the pair of combatants, were it not for their lack of experience
with their weapons. Any slashes or swings Carue made with his wings or talons were clumsy,
though far from slow, and were thus easily avoided or deflected by the Dugongs. Vivi, for her part,
at least had some skill with using chained weaponry, sure, but she'd just traded up to a larger weight-
class and balance, and as such was having a difficult time coercing her weapons to move with the
grace and elegance she'd displayed with her peacock slashers.

Mikey and Raphey, on the other hand, were almost the exact opposite: a well-oiled machine in both
teamwork and combat, despite the usual nature of their relationships. Any opening either of them
showed, the other covered, and any opening that either of them managed to open, the other
exploited. They were a flurry of CQC melee, and I don't doubt for a second that were it not for
Carue's sheer speed, he and Vivi would have easily been overwhelmed. As it was, however, Carue's
natural speed combined with their limited mobility on land hampered the dugongs' ability to keep up.

The fight seemed relatively even at first, the royal pair incapable of matching the dugongs and the
dugongs incapable of keeping up...

Until Carue suddenly ran the wrong way.

I was ready to start laughing at the classic screw-up, when without warning Carue turned on a dime
and blurred, literally running circles around the pair. Mikey and Raphey glanced around in confusion as they tried to process the development, until Mikey was forced to hastily deflect a scythe lashing out at transonic speeds and Raphey was almost run down by Carue leaping at her with his talons outstretched.

By the time I moved on, the two had fallen back to back and were keeping a very close track of just where Carue and Vivi were.

My introduction to Zoro and Donny's spar came in the form of Donny slamming into a tree not three feet in front of me. He immediately shrugged off the impact and ducked behind said tree just as Zoro bullrushed his way out of the undergrowth. With one quick slash, Donny cut down the tree he was hiding behind and let it fall towards Zoro.

The look on his face when Zoro promptly turned the trunk into so many wooden cubes was absolutely priceless.

Sadly, I didn't get much more of the fight. Donny was sent stumbling back from the next slash Zoro laid into him, and the fight continued in the underbrush. Once again, I had no desire to get involved. Losing teeth was bad enough, but getting caught in this crossfire almost certainly meant losing limbs.

Just out of sight of Boss and Sanji's brawl was perhaps the most subdued of the fights: Nami and Donny were exchanging blows quickly, but they seemed to be stopping every couple of minutes for Donny to give Nami advice on her technique. It was slow going, but I could already see some definite improvements on Nami's part. She wasn't an expert, no, but she was swinging her Clima-Tact around with both newfound confidence and agility, and I could tell that Donny was thoroughly enjoying himself. I was surprised momentarily that the Clima-Tact was holding up so well. At least, up until I remembered who I was talking about. It would take a lot more than simple brute force to break one of Usopp's toys.

Soundbite and Shoujou were sitting together at the stone table outside of Cricket's house, with Shoujou watching with crossed arms and Soundbite perched on one of a variety of stones that they had set up. Soundbite closed his eyes and concentrated intently, before the rock beneath him shattered into fragments. Shoujou shook his head and explained something to Soundbite, who nodded in agreement before slooooowly sliding his way over to the next stone. This one also shattered, but the fragments were bigger this time, so at least there was an improvement.

And finally, around the other side of the house, a dozen disembodied arms were either independently taking turns lifting moderately sized stones and passing them around in a concerted show of teamwork, or joining together to work as one to lift boulders. I observed them for a few seconds before shrugging; cheating though I thought it may be, I couldn't deny that it was a creative use of Devil Fruit powers. Though, I did have to wonder just how much effort Robin was actually putting in.

After a few more laps around the coast, my screaming legs and back and shoulders told me that my body had had enough of lugging around my relatively new weapon and I made the decision to take a short break. So I made my over to the treeline, unslung Lassoo, and sank to the ground, praying for some measure of life to return to my limbs.

"Sweet shit, are you heavy, Lassoo..." I groaned painfully. "I don't suppose that you'd be open to going on a diet for a few... kilos?"

"Screw you, Cross," Lassoo huffed as he went back to his hybrid form and shook himself out. "And damn, I never thought I'd miss these kind of cramps. It's actually comforting."
"Yeah, well, don't get used to it just yet," I rolled my eyes and arms simultaneously. "Everything from my dogs up are barking up a storm, so I will not be carrying you around and using you to blast Marines like a badass, Commando-style."

Lassoo rolled his eyes as he cracked his neck side to side. "Yeah, that sounded like a reference, and Soundbite is the one who gets those, not me. Oh, and by the way? Duck."

"Wha—?"

CRACK!

"GAH!" I yelped in panic as someone-smashed through the trunk of the tree above me and bounced on the ground a few times before rolling to a stop.

That someone promptly sat up ten seconds later and blinked in oblivious surprise. "Man, those birds are mean. And the bugs are almost as tough as the ones back home, too! Never thought a rhinoceros beetle could fly and hit as fast a real rhino."

My eye twitched as I took in my uninjured captain before flopping to the ground with a groan. "God damn it, Luffy…"

"Our thoughts exactly…" Chopper groaned.

I took one look at him and Usopp and recoiled in shock… and disgust. "Sweet shit, guys! What the hell happened to you!?"

"Literal shit…" Usopp groused with a grimace. "They make dung beetles big around here…"

"Eesh…" Lassoo groaned as he covered his nose with his paws. "You two smell bad enough that I pity you, and that's saying something!" He then grinned and settled down into the grass. "Heh, that image is gonna help me sleep well. G'night!" Seconds later, his snores were rippling the grass.

"Damn mutt…" Usopp grumbled darkly.

"Damn mutt that can kick your ass…"

"WHAT WAS THAT!?"

The only response the sniper got was a loud snore.

"Hey, guys! It looks like we're going to need some help catching the South Bird! Everyone get ready —"

"Hold it, Captain," I interrupted firmly. "I'll handle this. Hey, Shoujou!" I yelled at the orangutan-man as I held my hand up. "Snail me!" A checker-patterned snail slapped into my palm a second later, which I then placed on my shoulder. "Enjoy your flight?"

"GNARLY, DUDE!" Soundbite cackled, his eyestalks spinning a bit as he emerged from his shell.

"Glad to hear it! Now, how do you feel about handling a little…" I pounded my fist into my hand. "Negotiation?"

"LOVE TO!" Soundbite directed his attention at the green hell we were standing on the border to. "HEY jerkwads! HAND OVER one of the FEATHER-RATS or prepare to suffer!"

Our response was a barely dodged dungball the size of my head and a lot of buzzing-chirping—"CHO
"CHO CHO~!"ing

"Translation?" I requested flatly.

"They're laughing at us," Soundbite explained in an equally neutral tone.

Three seconds later, the buzzes, chirps and "CHO!"s renewed, along with a lot of moving foliage.

"And now they're NOT," Soundbite smirked sadistically.

"Niiiiice," I drew out with an equally vicious grin.

"So are you sure this is going to work, or—?" Usopp started hesitantly.

FWUMP-FWUMP!

We all blinked in surprise as not one, but two hogtied and struggling toucan-like avians were tossed at our feet.

"Withdrawn," Usopp finally managed to get out.

"The hell—?" I started in confusion before being interrupted by a stupidly familiar voice.

"HEY, JERKWADS!"

We all snapped our gazes upwards, where a third South Bird was keeping himself aloft. Furthermore, going by the markings on his beak, he was the original South Bird that we would have made use of!

"You guys want a South Bird to guide you?" he sneered as he waved a wing at his bound compatriots. "Go ahead and take two! These guys are completely and utterly bazonkers! Just take them, get the hell out of our jungle, stay out, and cut the freaking racket, will ya!"

Soundbite's grin didn't even shift. "DONE!"

"Great! Welp, I'm out of here! See ya never, suckers! Hahahahaha!" And with that the South Bird flapped back into the jungle and out of sight.

I could only gape after it for a few moments before I heard the unmistakable sound of a large amount of fauna moving away from the nearby foliage and back into the jungle. Finally, I looked at Soundbite incredulously.

"Gilbert Gottfried. Really?"

"Trust me, it gets better!" Soundbite snickered eagerly. "UNTIE THEIR BEAKS!"

I gave Soundbite a disbelieving look before gesturing at Chopper, who slowly unwound the vines from the South Birds' beaks.

"This is all your fault," the right-hand bird said at the one on the left in a stupidly familiar, smooth and calm baritone.

"NO, IT'S YOUR FAULT!" the left-hand bird retorted in an equally stupidly familiar, if much more macho and hammy, voice. "YOU JUST CAN'T ACCEPT THAT MY TRIBE IS THE BEST THERE IS IN THE FOREST! I'VE SAID IT A HUNDRED TIMES: JOIN BEAR GLOOOOOOVE!"
"Never," the other bird replied concisely and calmly. "The Swagger Tribe will forever hold dominance over the meatheads of Bear Glove due to the sheer lustre of our feathers, and the awe-inspiring beauty of our beaks. If anyone is to swap tribes, you should join Swagger."

"BEAR GLOVE!"

"Swagger."

"BEAR GLOVE!"

"Stop it."

"NEVER!"

I twitched furiously as the two avians went back and forth. "What. The. Fuck."

"I'm not even changing what they're SAYING!" Soundbite whispered reverently. "THIS IS AAAALL natural."

"Kill me now," I groaned under my breath.

"Later," Soundbite half-hissed in a german accent, half cackled madly.

I then raised my voice and pointed at the South Birds, who I was steadfastly refusing to mentally refer to as Terry and Isaiah oh dammit. "Tie them up and put them on the Merry. We'll deal with this new fresh hell of madness at some other point in time."

"I've got it," Usopp offered, promptly silencing and picking up the struggling South Birds. "I was heading back to the Merry anyways. There are some, ah… " Usopp's expression became slightly uneasy. "Things I need to look into…"

I frowned in thought; he had finished with the weapons by now, so what did that—? Oh, no…

"…Is Merry doing alright, Usopp?" I asked quietly.

He looked back at me with a forced smile. "Oh, she's taken a bit of a beating, but she's doing fine. I just need to patch her up some more; Masira and Shoujou should be able to help me, so no worries!" He didn't give me time to voice my own worries before hightailing it back towards the ship, the Old Spice duo—no, the two South Birds—in tow. I shook my head grimly; there wasn't anything I could do at this stage… I think… I'd have to wait until Merry's Klabautermann showed up to find out just how bad things were. Hopefully there was a chance that my intervention had changed things enough that she'd make it to the miracle-working city of Water 7, but… well, we'd see.

Shaking off my recent thoughts, depressing and exhausting as they both were, I turned my attention to the other two crewmates present. "Soooo…what about the two of you?"

"I'm gonna go and make more of the stuff that blew up the storeroom!" Chopper raised his hoof eagerly before freezing in thought. "Wait… let me rephrase that."

"Please do," I demanded with a glare and crossed arms.

"Right, right, hang on…" Chopper slid his backpack off and dug through it for a bit before holding up a vial of what I could only assume was bubbly pink death. "This is what I've been developing: hexanitro quadrifluoride, though I call it Cherry Blossom Blast. It's a somewhat volatile chemical agent that reacts… somewhat violently when exposed to oxygen following an excessive amount of
I slowly pinched the bridge of my nose. "So, you mean to tell me that you used your newfound Mad-Scientist-Grade intellect to develop *home-cooked nitroglycerine*?"

"Psh, nitroglycerine wishes it was as badass as my—!"

"CHOPPER!"

"I need artillery, alright?!" Chopper demanded as he flailed his arms desperately. "Strength and wrestling and close-quarters combat are all well and good, but I need to balance my skillset if I want to help contribute to the crew! So, between this kind of ammunition and my inherited throwing skills, I'm hoping that—!"

"Wait, wait, wait," I waved my hands hastily. "Inherited throwing skills'? What the hell are you—?"

"Oh, right, I forgot to tell you about this!" Chopper slapped his hoof to his forehead. "Well, you see —!"

"Hey, one question?"

"…yes, Luffy?"

"What's nitroglycerine? It sounds tasty!" The three of us spared him a shared flat look.

"Aaanyways…" Chopper started before grinning eagerly. "Watch this!"

"Watch wha—*WHAT THE HELL!*" I yelped in panic and waved my arms desperately as Chopper produced half a dozen scalpels from *nowhere* and drew his arms back. "Nononono—AGH!" I screeched as Chopper flung the surgical blades at me.

TH-TH-TH-THUNK!

Before blinking in confusion as I remained un-dissected. "What the hell—?"

"Whooaaa…" Luffy breathed in awe.

"CROSS…" Soundbite breathed. "*Turn around.*"

I promptly turned around, and gaped in awe as well.

The reason for my awe was that the last time I'd checked, there had most certainly *not* been a fuck-me-huge centipede pinned to the tree behind me by all six of Chopper's scalpels.

"What. The *fuck*?" I breathed in awe.

"Looks like the South Birds wanted revenge, huh?" Chopper snickered.

"CHOPPER!"

"I learned from Doctorine, duh!" the human-reindeer rolled his eyes. "Where do you *think* I learned how to throw like that?"

"My transforming-monster-doctor can throw stuff really good…" Luffy breathed with sparkling eyes. "My crew is the coolest ever!"
"Oh, shut up, you dumbass~! Like that would ever make me happy~!"

I blew out an exasperated sigh as I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Chopper, quit it. Luffy, while that statement is entirely accurate and very heartwarming, shut up, and back to Chopper, you mean to tell me that between teaching you all she knew about medicine, she also taught you how to throw knives like a member of the KGB?!"

"What does Kyuka Grill and Barbeque have to do with knife-throwing?"

"To reiterate, shut up, Luffy," I jabbed at my captain before re-glaring at our doctor. "And Chopper?"

"No, Doctorine did not teach me how to throw," Chopper explained with a roll of his eyes before grinning victoriously. "I learned by un-suppressing all the memories I had of her throwing things at me and then examining her technique!"

Soundbite and I boggled at the Zoan-user in shock.

"Damn, dude," Soundbite whispered in awe.

"Wouldn't that be, like, beyond traumatizing for you!?" I questioned incredulously.

"It was!" Chopper grinned eagerly… his eye twitching furiously the entire time.

The resulting silence stretched out uncomfortably for about a minute or so until I slowly pointed towards the Merry. "So, yeeeaah, how about you go ahead and start cooking up some more of the uber-nitro without blowing more holes in the Merry—!"

"The synthesizing process is completely safe, I swear, it was just my intellect-induced shortsightedness that prompted me to test the formula's effectiveness inside!" Chopper hastily reassured me.

"…right. So, you just… go ahead and do that, alright?"

"Can do!" the doctor saluted in agreement before trotting off.

"So, Cross, what's everyone up to?" Luffy asked, though he seemed a little peeved after being ignored.

I briefly considered letting Luffy have it for his sheer degree of obliviousness, but then I gave up on account of how A. it would never have any lasting effect, and B. it was really more the result of a bunch of factors more than anything. "Eh, bunch of training exercises: Boss versus Sanji, Leo versus Zoro, Donny versus Nami, and Vivi and Carue versus Mikey and Raphey."

"COOL!" Luffy exclaimed, his annoyance gone… then he frowned. "Did I miss it?"

I looked back at the group, and it seemed that everyone was taking a break from sparring.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about it, Luffy. We don't have to leave until morning, they'll probably be back at it in a little while. Meanwhile, why don't you go see what Masira's crew is doing for the Merry?"

Luffy adopted an eager expression for a moment, obviously ready and raring to give Masira a number of suggestions for 'improvements' to be made to our soon-to-be chicken-headed ship. To my surprise, though, he actually sovered up and shook his head.

"Actually, I have some training of my own that I need to take care of," Luffy said as he tilted his hat
down over his eyes. "Those fights with Crocodile showed me just how right you were when you talked about Devil Fruit powers, Cross, and I need to get stronger. I've got an… idea that I want to test out."

I stared at Luffy in disbelief as I tried to process what I'd just heard. "…Okay, I'll bite. Bentham, how the hell and why did you manage to escape from Impel Down?"

"IT'S REALLY ME, DAMN IT! SEE!?!" Luffy yanked his cheek out a foot. "I CAN BE DEEP AND SMART AND STUFF TOO, YOU KNOW!"

"Yeah, once in a blue moon when pigs spontaneously grow wings and fly over a frozen hell…" I muttered. I regretted it seconds later on account of the pouty look Luffy gave me. "Alright, alright, bad joke, my bad. But seriously, though. If you want to go and train, that's fine. It's… admirable even, and I wish you the best of luck. Just…" I pointed at the Merry. "Go and grab your pipe if you're really dedicated to getting used to using it again? It can't hurt to train."

And just like that, Luffy's eager grin was back in place. "Great idea, Cross! Thanks!" And like that he was off.

I watched him leap on board the Merry before giving Soundbite a wide-eyed look. "Guess he's more than pure stupid and muscle, huh?"

"WHO'D have THOUGHT IT!" Soundbite nodded in agreement.

"Oh, hey, berries!" I suddenly heard him exclaim.

"Luffy, no, don't eat those!" Chopper called out. "I gathered those and set them aside because they're—!

"Wow, they taste so good! And—!… aaargh, my stomach…"

"—Poisonous. Dammit, Luffy—!"

We both glanced at each other before chuckling as hints of madness slipped into Chopper's outraged voice. "Okay, now that's more like the Luffy we know."

"Yeah, I WAS GETTING WORRIED THERE for a moment," Soundbite added. "NOW, LET'S go and GET SOME GRUB! I'm starving!"

"Yeah, yeah, I hear you," I nodded in agreement, walking back to the rest of the group and passing by Luffy as he ran down the coast. I watched him for a second before shrugging and accepting a bowl of Sanji-prepared soup from Vivi. "Thanks. And by the way, nice going with your weapons. You were quite impressive with them."

The princess smiled in agreement as she drew one of the hand-scythes and hefted it before me. "Thank you. Honestly, I'm quite pleased myself. I might have to relearn how to use these, but I'm certainly having an easier time of it than I did learning how to use my Peacock Slashers."

"Yeah, no impwomptu haircuts so faw!" Carue snickered into his own bowl, which evolved into full-blown cackling when Vivi reached over and slapped him upside the head.

"Oh, yeah, by the way, I've been meaning to ask," I noted as I pointed at the scythe. "Any ideas on what you're gonna call those?"

Vivi's expression sobered at my question. She stared at her weapon silently for a moment before
tightening her grip on its hilt. "Lion Cutters," she declared, softly yet extremely firmly.

I sighed internally at her tone of voice before giving her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Your father… he'd be proud of how far you've come. You know that, right?"

Vivi pursed her lips before nodding sadly. "Yeah… I know." She gave me a slight smile. "Thanks, Cross."

I chuckled as I walked off. "Jeremiah Cross: Third Mate, Co-communications Officer, Tactician and therapist, that's me!"

I wandered around amidst our dining crewmates for a bit before pausing as one of them caught my eye. I smirked as I tapped Sanji's shoulder. "Reality's kinda harsh, ain't it?"

The cook blinked in confusion as he looked away from Cricket, who he'd been watching discretely while he ate. "Huh?"

"Well, I'm just saying," I shrugged matter-of-factly. "You said that you grew up listening to the story of Noland the Liar, so I can only imagine what it must be like to learn how that story affected the lives of people in the present."

Sanji started to shrug nonchalantly before… tensing for whatever reason.

I cocked my eyebrow at him. "Something up, Sanji?"

The chef shot a hesitant glance at me before taking a shaky drag from his cigarette. "Cross…" Sanji muttered almost inaudibly. "I've… been meaning to ask you this for a while now, but… how much do you know about… my past?"

"DA FUCK you on about, man?" Soundbite demanded incredulously.

"I'm with the snail, lover boy," I nodded in tentative agreement. "What brought this on?"

"I just…" Sanji ground his teeth uncomfortably as he shifted in place, glancing this way and that in a somewhat paranoid manner. "I wanna know how much you know about me, is all. There are… well, you should know better than anyone that most people have parts of their past they never want to come back to haunt them. So, I just want to know what parts of mine you know. That's all."

I eyed Sanji in confusion for a moment before stiffening as realization struck me like a lightning bolt. I then proceeded to roll my eyes with a sigh and pat his shoulder reassuringly. "Sanji, Sanji, Sanji…"

"You should really realize by now that there is absolutely nothing in your past that can make us think less of you."

Sanji perked up slightly and gave me a hopeful look. "Yeah? You think so?"

"Of course!" I nodded in agreement as I started to walk away. "I mean, come on. I realize that the fact that you were a picky eater back when you were a dish-boy before Zeff attacked your ship might have been something you were ashamed of, but it's really nothing in the long-run. I honestly doubt it can have any lasting effect on how the ladies see you. We all have those moments where we groan at just how stupid our younger selves were!" I glanced back at him with a smirk. "Right?"

Sanji stared at me for a second before shrugging. "Sure. Let's go with that." He then grinned in a cheeky manner. "To be honest, I was more worried about whether or not you'd seen me in my acne-years!"
I took a moment to contemplate that statement before grinning like a maniac. "Oh, my God, that is the best image ever please tell me you had braces, too!"

"If you don't already know, then you're not finding out any time soon!" Sanji laughed.

"Aw, c'mon, Sanji! Teeeell meeee!"

-o-

The rest of the day went by pretty normally. After we got some more training done, Luffy came back from whatever he was doing, and Masira and his crew finished reinforcing the Merry, inasmuch as they could (apparently, the chicken comb was a non-negotiable aspect of the upgrade), we reached the obvious conclusion of the day: we retired to Cricket's house and threw the absolute mother of all parties! It was a heck of a thing: food, more than a few drinks, music, the whole nine yards.

The inclusion of the dugongs meant that there was also more than a little brawling, resulting in Cricket getting somewhat pissed, but the fact that he was buzzed took the edge off his rage, and honestly, that would probably have happened anyway with the usual crew there.

The point at which things got really fun, however, was when Cricket noticed Robin reading a specific passage of Noland's logbook and started going on about the one topic guaranteed to garner everyone's attention: Gold.

Even I was spellbound by Cricket's tales of the lost city of Shandora. Sure, the conclusion might have been terrible for all, but the sheer amount of detail that Noland put into his logbook was astounding. If I hadn't been looking forward to the journey to Skypiea before, I sure as hell was now, if only to hear the sound of a bell that had left even a New World-capable adventurer in awe!

The best part of it all, however, was when Cricket showed us his pièces de résistance.

"Hot damn…” I whistled in awe as I inspected the golden rendition of a South Bird and the three ingots that went alongside it. "This is incredible, Cricket! Seriously, I can only imagine that treasure-hunters the world over would give an arm and a leg for a find like this!"

"Indeed, the resemblance is most impressive," came a familiar smooth voice. One of the South Birds had managed to get his beak free and was admiring the statue. "You can tell that it is a sculpture of a member of the Swagger tribe from the way its noble beak enhances the lustre of the gold a hundredfold, rendering it almost too glorious for man's eyes to behold."

"HA! AS IF!" the other South Bird roared, apparently snapping the binds on its beak with sheer strength alone. "THAT SCULPTURE MANAGED TO LAST OVER FOUR HUNDRED YEARS IN THE WATER WITHOUT EVEN A SCRATCH! ONLY BEAR GLOVE IS POWERFUL ENOUGH TO LAST THAT LONG!"

"Swagger."

"BEAR GLOVE!"

"Swagger."

"BEAR GLOVE!"

"WILL SOMEONE GAG THEM ALREADY!?"

"YOU CAN'T SILENCE THE SHEER POWER OF BEAR—MPH!?"
"I don't see why you deem it necessary to silence me, for I am not—mmph…"

"Can we just leave one of them here?" Nami demanded tiredly.

"Which one?" Usopp asked.

"Swagger/Bear Glove," Zoro and Sanji chorused before looking at one another in shock. "Are you nuts?!"

"So, Cricket!" I loudly said in an effort to not think about the two Birds that had Soundbite laughing like a maniac. "Have you actually told anybody about what you've found?"

"Psh, are you nuts?" the buzzed freediver scoffed. "Nobody trustworthy lives within a hundred miles of this house; if anyone found out about this stuff, I'd have to deal with every gold-lusting pirate in Mock Town coming after me. That's why I made sure that these two knew not to say jack!"

Shoujou was nodding in agreement, before joining Cricket in staring at Masira, who was sweating up a storm. "Brother…" the orangutan grit out slowly. "Is there something you want to tell us?"

"Ah… you said not to 'say' jack?" Masira poked his fingers together uncomfortably. "I thought you said not to say anything to Jack!"

Before the other two-thirds of the Saruyama Alliance could give the final third hell, we were interrupted by an annoyingly familiar laugh coming from outside. "HEY! OLD MAN CRICKET! I HEARD YOU FINALLY FOUND SOME GOLD, HUH? WHY DON'T YOU HAND IT OVER NICE AND PEACEFULLY? THAT WAY, WE WON'T HAVE TO KICK YOUR TEETH IN! HAHAAHAHA!"

"You were saying something about gold-lusting pirates?" I said, rolling my eyes as I headed for the door.

"Hey, hold it, Cross, we can deal with—" Cricket began.

"Most of his crew, sure, but he has Devil Fruit powers. Now, please excuse me while I provoke him."

The rest of the crew got to their feet as I opened the door, plastering a grin on my face as I greeted the pirates. "Sorry, but we don't have any gold for spring-heeled dickweasels."

"YOU! YOU SON OF A BITCH!" Bellamy roared, his sadistically cheerful demeanor suddenly replaced by unamused fury.

"I never introduced myself, did I? Jeremiah Cross of the Straw Hat Pirates," I said with a salute. "And thanks for the save earlier."

Bellamy twitched furiously as he glared at me, emphasizing the new bandages he was sporting.

"You think we don't know who you are?" Sarquiss snarled, holding up the hilt of his blade. "A Transponder Snail with Devil Fruit powers is a pretty damn good giveaway. You owe me a new knife, and I think I'll take it out of that snail of yours."

"BITE ME!" Soundbite taunted. "YOU'RE BETTER OFF without that knife anyway! YOU NEEDED SOMETHING BIGGER TO compensate with!"

Several people behind me began laughing, and I swear that I saw some of Bellamy's crew stifling
laughter, too, much to his ire.

In fact, I think that was his breaking point, as he immediately lived up to the first part of my nickname for him by shifting his feet into springs and launching himself at me. And did I mention that he was actually really frickin' fast when he did that?! Seriously, how Luffy was able to track this guy is beyond me. But the fact that he could is something I was immensely grateful for, as he managed to get in front of me and slug Bellamy in the schnoz before he could even get close.

The self-proclaimed hyena was flung back at his crew, resulting in a large pile of bodies.

Luffy looked back at me curiously. "What'd you do, Cross?"

"I sicced a homicidal otter on him," I said concisely before holding my hands up when Luffy frowned. "And before you say anything, while it was after he beat on you and Zoro, I had no idea that he'd done it at the time. He was just a convenient target."

Luffy smiled contentedly. "Oh, that's alright, then!"

"You… so, you can fight."

I looked with no small amount of surprise to see that Bellamy was still conscious, even if he was struggling to get up again. Then again, thinking about it, Luffy had put everything he had into the one punch that took him out last time, whereas this time he was still just an annoyance. The rest of his crew grimaced as they too got back on their feet, and Bellamy glared at Luffy.

"I guess you earned that 37 million beri bounty after all," he growled.

"…37 million?" I questioned.

"He remembered you saying his bounty increased sevenfold," Nami ground out.

THUNK!

I groaned as I ground my forehead into the doorframe of Cricket's hut. "Some days, Luffy, your stupidity causes me physical pain," I growled to myself before raising my voice. "The moron's bounty is 100 million, Bellamy, and Zoro's is 60. You really should try and keep up with the news."

"Actually, to be fair, the News Coos haven't come to this island since you started your show; their next delivery is later tonight," Masira contributed.

He promptly flinched back as I got up in his face, glaring certain death into his eyes.


Despite his injuries and rage, Bellamy laughed. "HA! You expect me to believe that? Sure, I'll admit that he's got fight in him, but I heard every broadcast of that SBS show you did, and if he's even half the moron you described, the chances of him actually getting a bounty that high are about the same as the odds of me becoming a bright-eyed dreamer like you!"

I blinked as I processed that statement. I then snapped my hand into a fist and stepped past Luffy, shooting a vicious grin at the opposing pirate captain. "Funny you should say that, because in my humble opinion, the odds of you being able to beat us are about the same as the odds of you ever getting so much as a shred of respect from the feathered jackass you're stupid enough to follow!"

As expected, Bellamy's expression twisted in fury and his legs compressed into springs. "SPRING
I noticed Luffy starting to step around me, but I promptly stuck my hand out without ever breaking my glare. "Gastro-Phony," I ordered calmly, securing my headphones with my other hand.

Soundbite sneered viciously. "Roger-roger."

He had clearly gotten better with his control, judging from the fact that Luffy was unaffected. Bellamy's crew, on the other hand, fell to their knees the next moment, and began unloading their stomachs, while Bellamy himself apparently screwed up his takeoff; I didn't see how it happened, but the next thing I knew, he was plowed into the dirt about a foot in front of me, face-first. I approached and stared down at him impassively.

"You have real potential, Bellamy, and that's something you'll never hear Doflamingo tell you. If you ever change your outlook on life and decide to actually use what you've got, come find us. But for now, just remember that you lost to the weakest members of a crew filled with nothing but 'bright-eyed dreamers,' without giving them a single injury."

"Like… hell…" Bellamy snarled, struggling out of the earth. My expression didn't change as I took Soundbite off my shoulder and put him on Bellamy's back.

"Think you can leave him alive?" I asked tonelessly.

"He'll wish to hell I hadn't," Soundbite stated firmly.

"Then in that case… Gastro-Blast."

The Baby Transponder Snail bared his teeth in a snarl at Bellamy. "SUCK ON THIS, jackass."

Bellamy started to push himself up… and promptly froze, each and every muscle in his body tensing and locking up simultaneously. He wasn't even screaming, his mouth was just hanging open and allowing a scant few gargles to escape his throat with his eyes rolled up into his head. Finally, he choked up a mouthful of blood and fell back to the ground, his will collapsing from the agony.

Silence reigned as everyone stared at the unconscious pirate in shock.

I picked Soundbite up and placed him on my shoulder before dusting my hands off. "And that's how you be badass," I announced simply.

That managed to rouse Sarquiss from his shock, prompting him to laugh desperately. "H-hahaha, c-c'mon Bellamy! Very funny, I actually bought it for a second there! N-now come on, get up already! Kick this bastard's ass!"

An uncomfortable silence hung as Sarquiss panted desperately.

"Bellamy! BELLAMY, COME ON, T-THIS SHIT ISN'T FUNNY ANYMORE! BELLAMY!"

I dug my foot under Bellamy's body and flipped him over, giving his unconscious form a faux-curious look before shaking my head at Sarquiss. "Yeah, no, he is not waking up anytime soon."

And that broke the camel's back. Sarquiss screamed like a madman, charging at me and swinging the broken hilt of his knife.

I tensed and moved my hand to grip my baton, but before I could draw it…
SLAM!

Luffy beat me to the punch. As in, he punched Sarquiss so hard that he literally flipped around the rubber-man's fist before landing flat on his back.

I blinked in surprise as I took in the beatdown before giving Luffy an admiring look. "Damn, dude."

Luffy snorted as he cracked his fists and gave Bellamy's crew a bone-chilling glare. "Don't touch my friends."

I chuckled as the poor jackasses cowered in terror, one of them even going so far as to faint, foaming at the mouth... though, really, I think that was more of a coincidence than anything. I then noticed that Sarquiss was still moving, if only a bit. Walking over to him, I knelt down over his prone form.

"Word to the wise," I informed him in a calm tone. "I might call my captain a moron, and that's because he really is one, but there's one fact you shouldn't overlook."

I grabbed him by the collar and hauled him up so that I could stick my snarling face in his insensate one. "He's the moron who can kick your ass!"

And with that I hauled my fist back—

SLAM!

—and put him down for good.

I dusted my gauntlets off and stood up before waving at Bellamy's crew. "Hey, morons!"

Said morons both twitched in rage and shivered in terror, with the result that the looked like they had a split-second seizure.

I pointed at Bellamy and Sarquiss. "I'd suggest you hurry up and peel your friends off of the dirt and get back to Mock Town. Otherwise..." I jerked my head back at Cricket's cabin.

The pirates looked at where I'd indicated, and promptly paled as they caught sight of Zoro fingerering his swords and Nami tapping her Clima-Tact on her shoulder.

"They'll get you next. Capiche?"

Over the next few seconds, I learned just how fast people could run when terrified for their lives.

The answer? Very fucking fast.

-o-

Aside from the antics I'd come to expect from being a Straw Hat pirate and from being involved with the Saruyama Alliance, the rest of the evening was uneventful. As dawn approached, however, a rather heated argument surfaced between the two saner members of the Monster Trio, each of which had one of the South Birds on their shoulders, about which bird we would leave behind.

"It's clear that we need someone more levelheaded and calm to help us navigate to the Knock-Up Stream; Nami-swan deals with loud-mouthed idiocy enough already," Sanji said calmly. "The Bear Glove moron stays behind."

"What we need is someone who has enough brawn to hold his own in a fight after we get up there; we have a freaking snail that can hold his own, we don't need anyone who's good for nothing more
than being a compass!" Zoro argued heatedly. "The Swagger moron stays behind."

"Bear Glove!"

"Swagger!"

"Bear Glove!"

"Swagger!"

SLAM-SLAM!

"WILL YOU IDIOTS GIVE IT A REST ALREADY?!" Nami yelled as she stood over the cook and First Mate's insensate forms. She huffed and pinched the bridge of her nose before waving her hand dismissively. "Here's what we're going to do: Zoro, if Bear Glove comes, he's your responsibility as much as Soundbite is for Cross, and Sanji, the same goes for Swagger. And until we reach the Knock-Up Stream, you two dipshits are going to take care of them and shut up, got it?!"

"Yes, ma'am…" the two groaned.

"Look at it this way, Nami!" I snickered. "So long as Zoro's carrying around a literal living compass, there's no way in hell he can ever get lost so bad again!"

"I am afraid that that statement is as inaccurate as saying that I am anything less than an object of grace and beauty," the Swagger Bird (and dear God, did I wish he'd chosen another name) crooned.

"Eh?"

"SOUTH BIRDS OF THE BEAR GLOVE TRIBE ARE TOO POWERFUL TO BE ENSLAVED BY SOMETHING AS PUNY AS THE PLANET'S MAGNETIC POLES!" the (Grooooon) Bear Glove Bird roared as he flexed his wings. "WE POINT OUR BEAKS WHICHEVER WAY WE WANT TO POINT THEM!"

"Alright, for the sake of being specific, you two are part of different tribes, obviously, but do you have names of your own?" Usopp asked curiously.

I began praying, for my poor, dying sanity…

"Yes, my name is Isaiah."

"AND I'M TERRY!"

And then I remembered exactly which divine force was hearing my prayers, and smacked myself.

But beyond that little sanity-destroying incident, with no absent Luffy hunting hercules and atlas beetles and giving moron pirates dents in their skulls, we managed to set out to sea right on time. Granted, we had to rely on Isaiah's beak more than Terry's due to the Bear Glove Bird's tendency to swing it about this way and that without warning, but still, we managed to make decent headway.

Finally, after interminable minutes, we got a call from Masira's ship indicating that it was time.

I stared out at the horizon in awe. I'd seen huge storms before back in my old world, and I'd seen even bigger ones since I'd arrived in the Grand Line, but this… to see the sky just become engulfed with clouds, clouds large enough that they seemed to dwarf even the majesty of the Red Line… it was, quite simply, awe-inspiring.
Nami chewed her lip uncomfortably as she eyed the oncoming clouds alongside me. "It's huge… and early." She gave me a wary glance. "You're sure we'll make this on time?"

I nodded firmly. "It's gonna be rough, but it'll also be awesome as all heck, and we will make it." I then grimaced nervously. "Or at least we'd better, because if we miss this, then we'll have bigger things to worry about than Luffy being disappointed."

"What the heck are you—?"

"ALERT! MARINE BATTLESHIPS AT TEN O'CLOCK, ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MAELSTROM!"

My eyes widened and I slapped a palm to my face; between the Unluckies, talking down Nami from her breakdown and the training, I had completely forgotten about Tashigi's warning. When I lowered my palm, I noticed the vast majority of those onboard glaring at me… actually, everybody. Everybody was glaring daggers at me, even the freaking South Birds!

"Alright, before you say anything, let me just say that I have an absolutely ironclad defense," I hastily requested.

"What defense, Mister Jeremiah?" Vivi asked, her voice icy.

Soundbite and I shared terrified glances before plastering uneasy grins on our faces. "Tashigi did it?" we chorused uncomfortably.

"Explain," Nami ground out in a tone of forced calm.

I poked my fingers together sheepishly. "Sengoku mobilized a fleet after us, and she knew where our Log Pose would be pointing us next, so she supplied false information about where we'd be going, redirecting them to a backwater place that the Marines would never think to look… Jaya."

"…Wow," Nami deadpanned flatly. "Just… wow. Even when the Marines are on our side, they still manage to royally screw us over."

"Hey, look on the bright side!" I hastily interjected. "At least it happened now rather than on some other island where we didn't have an escape route pre-arranged! Right?"

The glares only softened somewhat.

"P-plus they're still heading straight towards Jaya, they may sail right past us and never know we're here?"

"THAT'S A NEGATIVE, THEY'RE SAILING RIGHT AT US!"

"…yeah, I got nothing."

"SON OF A—GAH!" Nami roared out in exasperation. "BOSS! YOU AND YOUR STUDENTS START TOWING, ASAP! MASIRA, SHOUJOU, THANKS FOR ALL YOUR HELP BUT WE'LL GO FROM HERE! IF THE MARINES CATCH SIGHT OF YOU WITH US, THEY'LL BLOW YOU TO SMITHEREENS!"

"SOUNDS GOOD TO ME!"

"GOOD LUCK TO YOU ALL!"

And with that, the Saruyama Alliance split off and started sailing back towards Jaya.
"COME ON, BOYS!" Boss roared as he grabbed a towline and stood on the Merry's railing. "LET'S SHOW THIS OCEAN WHO'S BOSS!"

"AYE-AYE, BOSS!" the rest of the Dugongs cried as they all leapt overboard.

"...Well!" I said, clapping my hands together. "Since we're heading into another near-death scrape before a big adventure, I'd say the time is ripe..." I dug my hand into my bag and drew out the mic with a grin. "For another SBS broadcast!"

-o-

"Testing, testing, one two, one two! Is this thing on?"

"I THINK SO! Whether it is or not is IRRELEVANT THOUGH!"

"And how's that?"

"BECAUSE I'm still starting THE SBS!"

"DAMN LITTLE—! Ergh, fine, whatever. One of these days..."

"Bam, pow, straight to the third moon of Endor!"

"Yes, that. But anyway, hello faithful viewers! Today, you find us scraping right next to the edge of death itself! How so, you might ask? Weeeeell, apparently someone in the Navy somehow found out that we picked up an Eternal Pose somewhere in an effort to evade the fleet that the esteemed Fleet Admiral Sengoku mobilized to capture us, and sent them straight for us!"

Ensign Tashigi's pupils shrank to pinpricks as she stared at the Transponder Snail before her in horror. "Cross, you son of a—!"

"Ensign."

The Marine's spine went ramrod straight in abject terror as she felt the presence of a great evil behind her.

"...meep."

-o-

"Still, it's not as bad as it sounds! Because you see, in the process of acquiring our Eternal Pose, we managed to discover an alternative route along which we can escape! Allow me to spell out the process through which we'll be pulling this whole thing off. First and foremost, we got our beloved ship, the Going Merry, reinforced while we were docked. Notably, these reinforcements centered around her keel."

"...And that matters because?" Hannyabal asked dryly.

"Now, now, be patient, Vice-Warden," Head Jailer Domino mused as she dug through one of the drawers of her desk, listening to the Video-Snail that was talking up in a corner of the room. "We both know how mad the Grand Line can be. I'm certain that there's an explanation."

"Hmph... fair enough. Say, what are you doing, anyways?"

"Getting my gasmask."
"Why do you need your—?"

PBBBHHHHT!

"AAAAAGH! IT BURNS!"

"Because I remembered that today was Breakfast Burrito Tuesday. Good morning, Warden."

"Good morning to you as well, Domino. Hannyabal forgot the date again, hm?"

"He'll learn eventually, I'm certain."

"He'd better, otherwise he'll never survive long enough to become Warden."

-o-

"Second, while this might appear counterintuitive to most sane pirates and sailors, we are now headed straight towards a maelstrom we managed to locate moments ago. An interesting fact to note about this maelstrom is that A. it's absolutely massive, and B. it appeared mere moments ago!"

"Get to the point, already!" Perona screeched, her astral form waving back and forth impatiently.

"Kishishishishii!" the gargantuan form of Gecko Moria shuddered with laughter as he reclined on his most-certainly-not-Emperor-sized bed. "Your noviceness is showing, Perona."

"What?!" the ghost-woman yelped, soaring into her captain's face. "What are you talking about!? All he said was that they're being morons and sailing towards their death!"

"Kishishishi, maybe," Moriah nodded in agreement. "But I assure you, countless other people besides me have already realized what they're planning! This crew might be full of rookies, but damn if they aren't lucky! KISHISHISHISHISHI!"

"TALK SANE, ALREADY!"

"KISHISHISHISHI!"

-o-

"And finally, to complete our daring master escape… hold it… DAY HAS JUST TURNED TO NIGHT! HA! TIMED IT EXACTLY! BOOYAH!"

Sengoku paled considerably; he'd suspected it at the mention of the maelstrom, but he'd hoped, dear God how he'd hoped…

The Admiral of the World Government's Fleets scrambled for his Transponder Snail's mic and hastily dialed the lead captain of the task force he'd assembled, immensely grateful that the Snail Transceiver didn't shut down the capability to make calls on any snail but the one using it.

"Captain Very Good! You need to apprehend or sink the Straw Hats at once! They're trying to hitch a ride on a Knock-Up Stream! THEY'RE GOING TO ESCAPE INTO THE SKY! … NO, THE THIN AIR AT THE TOP OF MARINEFORD HAS NOT GOTTEN TO MY HEAD, JUST HURRY UP AND SINK THEM ALREADY!"

He slammed down the receiver, and then, feeling the familiar tremors, exited his office and made a beeline for Garp's to shut him up personally.
I cackled madly as the sound of cannonfire started to ring out over the roar of the world-class drain we were circling and plumes of water started sounding out around us. "Looks like the Marines have figured out what we're up to, and they're not happy with it! Stay tuned, viewers, because this madness is just getting started!"

"WE'RE GONNA DIIIIE!" Usopp and Carue cried as they desperately hugged Merry's mast.

"THIS HAD BETTER DAMN WELL WORK, CROSS!" Nami yowled as she barely restrained herself from throttling me by digging her fingernails into the railing.

"Happy-place-happy-place-happy-place!" Chopper whined on repeat as he rocked back and forth on the deck.

"I don't suppose there's any way to talk you out of this, Luffy!?" Vivi pleaded desperately from where she'd wound her arm into the Merry's rigging.

"Shishishi!" Luffy laughed from his special seat. "Why would I ever run from adventure!?"

"I was afraid you'd say that…" the princess sobbed desperately.

"If you're afraid now, your highness, then I'd recommend against looking overboard at this moment," Robin recommended.

"What are you—WAAAAAGH!" Vivi screeched in terror as the Merry flew over the lip of the maelstrom… SPLASH!

"Huh?"

…and blinked in confusion as we landed in calm waters. "What the—?"

"Wait for it…" I muttered.

Boss and his students leaped onboard in a hurry, the senior dugong glancing over the edge nervously. "You're all gonna want to find something to hang on to!" he warned desperately.

"You know it's bad when he says it!" Leo warned.

"Wait for it…” I repeated, grinning like a loon as the waters started to swirl beneath us.

"HEY, STRAW HAT!"

I flinched as my good mood was killed by a sickeningly familiar voice breaking out across the water. "Ah, damn it…"

"Zoro," Luffy noted, pointing out away from where the Marine warships were starting to approach us.

We all turned to observe the over-sized raft that was approaching us, bearing four of the deadliest pirates in this day and age on it.

"ZEHAHAHAHA! If it isn't Straw Hat Luffy! I've come all this way to collect on your 100 million beri bounty, so don't be shy!" a terrifying figure bellowed eagerly. "And I'm certain I can get
something for your first and third mates, too! ZEHAAHAHA!

I grit my teeth as I stared at the pirates, knowing the kind of hell they were about to raise, the proposition Lafitte was making right this moment.

"Lassoo. Blow that raft to Kingdom Come," I bit out viciously.

"On it!" the dog-cannon growled as it got up on the railing and unloaded a barrage of baseballs on the raft.

BA-BA-BANG!

None of which made it, though, on account of Van Auger prematurely detonating them.

"Well, that's new…" Lassoo whistled.

"Cross?" Luffy questioned.


"Uh, CROSS? You realize that this THING IS STILL ON, RIGHT?"

I snapped my attention back to the mic I was holding. "Ah."

Considering Luffy's darkening expression, I reluctantly acknowledged it as a good thing when the water beneath us began to bulge upwards. I looked towards the fat, hairy bastard, hating that I couldn't do anything about him here and now, but in the end, I decided that taunting the world was more important.

"Everyone, hold on to something! This is going to be crazier than Reverse Mountain! Now, allow me to explain what's about to happen, viewers!" I proclaimed as I slowly wound a rope around my arm. "Currently, our ship is stationed over the exact center of an oceanic event in the Grand Line known as the Knock-Up Stream! Think of it as a mid-ocean geyser, if you will!"

The ocean continued to bulge upwards as Blackbeard approached us.

"The Knock-Up Stream is a massively powerful event, capable of flinging ships this way and that and even annihilating them in a single massive blast! They'd usually mean certain death!"

The ocean bulged higher and higher still, like a balloon getting ready to burst, even as the Marine battleships advanced on us, the gunnery crews onboard lining up their cannons for a good shot.

"Were it not for the fact that dead above us is a singularly massive cloud formation known as the Cumuloregalis! It is capable of blotting out the sun because as unlikely as it may sound, the clouds that compose it… are solid! And thus, our escape route. With enemies on all sides, with no means of escape in the seas, we take the only option we have available to us!"

The ocean bulged higher and higher and higher, until…

"WE TURN OUR PROW UPWARDS! WE SAIL INTO THE SKY ITSELF!"

The ocean exploded.

KA-BLOOOOSH!
"PFFFHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!" I cackled madly, roaring with laughter over the screams of my crewmates as we soared upwards.

This… This was AMAZING! An explosion like no other, a rush of heat and wind and air, shoving us up towards the sky at velocities most likely only achievable via rockets and re-entry…

It was perilous, it was maddening, and for a minute there it was seriously touch-and-go, but once our brilliant navigator got reacclimated to the change of axis and got her wits about her… it happened.

We were flying… we were flying into the sky! Defying all odds, defying nature and physics and rationality itself…

What else could I do but climb along the mast, perch myself on the flagpole…

"PFFFHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! I LOVE YOU GUYS! I LOVE THIS CREW! PFAHAHAHAHAHA!"

And scream my exhilaration to the world?

"COWABUNGA, DUDES!" Soundbite cackled in agreement.

"PFHAHAHAHAHA! YOU HEARD IT HERE FIRST, FOLKS!" I roared into my mic as I jabbed a finger up at the ever-approaching clouds. "WE, THE STRAW HAT PIRATES, ARE SAILING INTO THE SKIES! WHAT ADVENTURES AWAIT US? WHAT LANDS WILL WE SEE? WILL I STILL BE ABLE TO BROADCAST FROM THE SKY!? TUNE IN NEXT TIME TO FIND OUT ALL THIS AND MORE! BUT FOR NOW, THIS IS JEREMIAH CROSS!"

"AND SOUNDBITE!"

"OF THE SBS, SIGNING OFF!"

I rammed the mic back into its cradle and continued to laugh wildly as we flew onwards and upwards.

Every second brought us higher and higher, closer to the clouds, to the skies, to the Bell of Gold and the Land of God.

But more importantly… every second we flew…

Brought us closer to our next adventure!

The Patient One AN: Credit where credit is due: I submitted the idea of Terry Crews for the South Bird's voice… and Xomniac took the idea and ran with it. You see why it's his name on this.

CV12Hornet AN: Also, you better enjoy this, you would not believe how much trouble this chapter gave us!

Xomniac AN: Sorry this took so long, folks, but I assure you, what's to come next is sure to be something you'll like! If you thought we were blitzing the rails before…

Cross-Brain AN: You ain't seen nothing yet.
Chapter 28: Trouble In Paradise! A Toll Unpaid Leads To God's Wrath!

"...Goda-sensei... you may be the greatest manga author who ever lived... but the world you made is beyond even your unearthly artistic abilities," I breathed as I took in the sight of the White Sea. The cherry blossoms as we left Sakura Kingdom had been beautiful, but this was downright ethereal, so damn wonderful that I felt like I was in the middle of a dream.

I mean, sure, we were all sopping wet and tired as all hell from the ordeal of bursting through several dozen meters of semi-liquid cloud cover, but that barely did anything to limit the utter beauty of the White Sea.

Where to start... the Sea itself, I suppose. It was... like being on an airplane, when it had just broken through the clouds. A rippling plane of pure white fluff, like cotton but... but not. Only, unlike on a plane, there wasn't a half-inch of clear plastic and a few inches of metal between me and the clouds. I reached my arm out over the edge and glided my hand through a swell of cloud that had drifted close to the Merry. I giggled euphorically as the cloud flowed through and around my fingers, like a more solid form of seafoam.

And the banks of Island Cloud floating around on the Sea's surface... geeze, like true-blue natural clouds, perfectly solid for the most part, yet jiggling and melding around. Gelatinous matter, malleable and yet firm. And they reached up, too. All around, I could see pillars and walls of the stuff, reaching up and up to form a pure white ceiling through which the rays of the sun were shining down.

It was incredible, it was awe-inspiring. To put it simply, it all but took my breath away—

"Gh...GRK!"

Okay, maybe a bit more than 'all but'!

I shot my hand to my throat in shock, gasping and flapping my mouth as I tried to breathe, but it was no use. Every breath I gulped down felt like half of a normal one, and my lungs weren't handling the deficit well, a fact which my spinning head was readily attesting to. All too soon I didn't have any other option but to fall to my knees, only just barely managing to keep myself from falling over.

"Cross? Cross!? Cross, what's wrong!?” I was vaguely aware of someone, Vivi maybe, grabbing my shoulder and shaking me slightly.

I wheezed and gasped as I thumped my fist against my chest, shaking my head desperately. "Can't... breathe..." I choked out miserably. "Need... air..."

"HELP! WE NEED A DOC—! WAIT! I AM A DOCTOR! Lay Cross out on his back and hold him steady! I'm going to need a sterile blade, a straw—!"

"GRGHHHK!" I choked out desperately, fumbling out my baton and desperately swinging it at the brown blob in my fading vision.

Thankfully, a yellow-topped black blur coalesced itself in my field of vision, and before I could react, a metal mask was pressed onto my face. I gasped in shock from the action and was rewarded with a fresh breath of air entering my lungs.

"What the—?" I wheezed out as I clapped the mask to my face.
"One of the gas masks from the Krieg Pirates. I kept it in case we ever ran into another poison weapon, and it looks like it's a good thing I did," Sanji sighed in relief. "Seriously, Cross… are all people where you come from this weak?"

"DON'T COMPARE ME TO MONSTERS LIKE YOU! MY HOME IS A HAVEN OF PEACE AND SANITY, LIKE THE EAST BLUE, BUT BETTER! For the most part, anyways…” I trailed off at the end.

"DAMN, AUSTRALIA, you scary!" Soundbite cackled.

"Yeah, there…” I jabbed my thumb at Soundbite with a nod before glaring daggers at the cook. "Besides, you're not coping as well as you think you are; try out some of your fancy footwork and see how you like it."

Sanji frowned at me in confusion before shrugging in agreement. He reeled his leg back and shot a few tentative kicks into the air, and frowned. Putting his foot down, he dropped down on his hands and went through series of impressive spinning kicks. And when he got up, he was panting like he'd just run a triple marathon.

"What the…?” he wheezed, doubled over on his knees

"We're nearly two dozen thousand feet in the air," I grit out as I thumped my chest in an effort to work out the pain throbbing in my chest. "The air's about as thin as rice paper up here. My reaction might be bad, but you're no spring chicken either!"

"Ugh," Zoro grunted as he attempted some 'basic' two-sword techniques. "He's not kidding, this is rough…”

"Erg, my stomach's spinning…” Luffy moaned, flopping on his back. "This'll take a few minutes to get used to."

"That's not a natural recovery rate…” Chopper sweatdropped uneasily.

"AND you have experience with people RECOVERING FROM THIN AIR?” Soundbite asked.

"I lived on top of a mountain for ten months before I joined the crew. The first lesson Doctorine gave me when we moved in was on how to deal with oxygen deprivation from high altitudes," Chopper deadpanned.

"Point taken."

"I'm surprised, Mister Jeremiah, you don't often forget details of things that you're not supposed to know," Robin remarked, and whether it was the air or what she said—not something you'd expect in a casual conversation, to be sure—she seemed to be somewhat out of it herself.

"She has a point. That's supposed tah be Vivi's job," Carue remarked.

"Yeah, that's supposed to be my—CARUE!” Vivi shrieked indignantly, the dope-slap she gave the duck doing nothing to stifle his laughter, nor that of most of the rest of those onboard. Vivi turned scarlet, but fortunately for her, a distraction arose as Usopp leaped up onto the Merry's railing.

"I, THE GREAT SNIPER USOPP, SHALL BE THE FIRST TO SWIM IN THE OCEAN OF THE SKY!" he crowed enthusiastically.

"GO, USOPP, GO!" Luffy, Chopper and the Dugongs cheered.
"WAIT!" I interrupted, snapping my hand up and removing my mask to let my voice carry better.

"Huh?" Usopp glanced at me nervously. "W-what's wrong, Cross? Is this dangerous or—?"

I held my stance for a moment before smiling and jabbing my thumb at a nearby coil of rope. "Oh, nothing much, I was just going to suggest you tie yourself off to the Merry, is all. We're in the sky, after all. If the currents are even remotely directed by the wind, then who knows where you could be dragged off to."

Usopp paled in horror before nodding. "A-ah, right, good point… thanks, Cross!" And with that, he tied a length of rope around his waist and jumped into the wispy 'waters' below, the line trailing behind him as he swam.

I slipped my gas mask back on as we stood around and watched the waters silently for about a minute or so, at which point an uncomfortable atmosphere started to slowly spread amongst the rest of the crew. By then, I was quite glad for the gas mask, because it was hiding the absolutely shit-eating grin I was wearing.

"Cross…” Boss interjected slowly. "We might be several thousand feet above the ocean, but this is still the Grand Line. Is there anything in the water we should look out for?"

"Pff…” I snickered slightly behind the mask. "Well, I did forget to warn him about the sky sharks…”

"Sky sharks?” Vivi repeated in horror.

"But don't worry, they… pff…” I barely suppressed a snort, my grin starting to hurt under the mask, while Soundbite didn't even bother to hide his banana-like smile. "They won't be a problem, we'd have seen motion if there was anything! I just—pff!” I hunched over as I started to shake. "Forgot to mention something, pffheeheeheehee!"

"What did you do, Cross?” Nami asked in a very slow and dangerous voice, her fingers twitching visibly at her sides.

Robin herself had a thoughtful expression, which swiftly snapped into shock as a thought struck her, a change that Vivi noticed instantly. "Something come to mind, Miss All-Sunday?” she asked slowly.

The assassin bit her lip nervously as she glanced over the edge of the ship. "We… are sailing in the middle of a cloud, correct?"

"Pff…”

"Wight…” Carue nodded in agreement.

"A cloud we reached by sailing up into it, correct?"

"Pff…”

"That fact is as indubitably correct as my beak is jaw-droppingly lustrous."

"Then it would be safe to assume… that this sea has no bottom, correct?”

Everyone fell silent apart from my own ill-suppressed laughter. At which point the coil of rope Usopp was tied to started un-coiling at a lightning-fast pace, at which point I fucking lost it.

"PFFHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAAAAHHAAAAHHAAA!" I hollered, mask falling off as I pounded
desperately at the Merry's railing, tears streaming down my eyes. "GUESS NOT! PFHAHAHAHAHAH!"

"OHHH MY OOOOOD!" Terry shouted, flapping his wings in a panic.

"SHIT!" the Monster Trio chorused, leaping at the rope and hastily grabbing it in an effort to stop it from going any further. The fact that Luffy promptly leaped back with a pained yelp and burned hands just made me laugh harder. Hell, I even kept laughing, albeit silently—no breath, you see—as Nami grabbed my collar with an incoherent howl and started shaking me like a ragdoll, joined swiftly by Vivi.

"THAT'S NOT FUNNY, JACKASS!" our resident princess snarled in my face.

"THEN WHY are we LAUGHI-I-ING!? HAHAAHHHEEEHEEhohoho!" Soundbite cackled madly.

I could see Vivi visibly wrestle with herself before sighing and lowering her head. "Okay, maybe it's a little funny…" Her eyes snapped up, the glare back on in full force. "BUT IT'S STILL NOT NICE!"

"Ya mean like breaking someone's nose isn't nice?" Lassoo asked.

Vivi whirled around and turned her glare on him, a slight aura rippling around her.

Lassoo huffed. "Shuttin' up now," he said, his voice unchanged from his usual lazy deadpan.

I giggled a little bit more, panting heavily from a combination of laughter and the thin air, before noticing the rate at which Zoro and Sanji were pulling up Usopp's rope. "Hey, you guys are gonna want to increase the pace! Usopp didn't just go freediving, he volunteered to act as bait!"

The swordsman and cook stiffened and exchanged panicked looks before triple-timing it.

Finally, the White Sea's surface burst open and disgorged our terror-K.O.ed sniper into the air… alongside the large sky-Sea Serpent that was following him and the sky-Octopus that was following it.

"OOH, TAKOYAKI!"

While Vivi, Carue and— …huh. Actually, only Vivi and Carue actually screamed. Chopper's eyes had taken on a manic glint and he'd shot his hoof over his shoulder into his bag, while Nami… well, her eyes were wide open and she was visibly gritting her teeth, but she wasn't actually screaming. Good for her!

Anyways, while the princess and her companion screamed their heads off, Zoro and Leo leaped off the ship at the sky-octopus with their swords drawn. The instant their blades met the tentacles, the limbs popped like Macy's blimps made out of rubber, letting out an absolutely almighty bang.

Sanji and Boss, meanwhile, gave the serpent trying to swallow Usopp a thorough concussion-inducing thrashing before it could lay its fangs on either our ship or our crewmate. Chopper topped it all off by expertly tossing a vial of his so-called Cherry Blossom Blast down the serpent's gaping mouth…

POWIE!

Which promptly detonated in a very impressive pink fireball, distending the beast's stomach before
leaving it floating with pink smoke wafting from its mouth. I blinked in shock before I and most of the rest of the crew slowly turned to stare dumbfoundedly at the doctor.

"Hot damn, dude," I whistled in awe. I absently noted that I didn't seem to need the mask anymore; probably because my bout of laughter sped up acclimation.

"MWAHAHAHAHA!" Chopper roared, his chest puffed out victoriously… for all that meant in his Brain Point. "Yes, witness the might of the fruit of my mind, TREMBLE BEFORE—GRRGGHK!"

Chopper suddenly cut himself off and started slamming his hooves into his forehead, switching to grinding at his temples after a few seconds. That done, he sighed as the tension flowed out of his shoulders, waving his arms reassuringly. "I'm good, I'm good! I-I increased my intelligence on default when I got scared, but I'm back! So don't hit me, damn it!"

"Awww…" Mikey, Luffy and I whined as we relaxed back from getting ready to concuss him.

"WHY DO YOU SOUND SO DISAPPOINTED!?"

Meanwhile, Robin was standing over at the edge of the ship and inspecting the yet-floating remains of our attackers. "How curious…"

"It's the Grand Line, Robin," I dryly noted. "Sea, sky, or hell, even land; things just keep getting curiower and curiower."

"Lewis Carroll?" Robin questioned, smiling slightly. "I hope you're not going to tell me that we'll have to deal with a grinning cat, size-altering mushrooms, or anthropomorphic cards, are you?"

"I can't say for certain that we will not. Still, while we're on the analogy, was Reverse Mountain one hell of a rabbit hole or—?"

"WAAAAAGH!"

Our conversation was suddenly cut off by the till-then-comatose Usopp jerking up and flailing in panic.

"What now?!” Sanji demanded with a growl.

"T-T-THERE'S SOMETHING IN MY PANTS!" Usopp screamed, scrambling with his lower garments and tossing a flailing flounder-like fish onto the deck.

I cocked an eyebrow as I eyed the flopping fish. "Well, now… that's not something you see every day."

"FEELIN' LONELY, were ya?" Soundbite cackled.

"Screw… you… slimeball…” Usopp grit out as he finally calmed down. "And Cross… well… thanks for telling me to put on the rope. BUT WOULD IT HAVE KILLED YOU TO TELL ME NOT TO SWIM SO FAR THAT I'D FALL OUT OF THE FREAKING SKY!?

"Oh, come on, Usopp," I snickered as I waved my hand airily. "Even if that wasn't something that you should have been able to figure out on your own with your genius mind, can't you take a joke?"

"A JOKE?! HOW WAS THAT A JOKE? WOULD YOU HAVE LIKED IT IF—?" He paused and reconsidered with a grimace. "Never mind, you probably would have liked it if we did that to you…”
"Lemme go and get my bathing suit!" I grinned eagerly and started to dash for the trapdoor to the
guy's room—

SLAM!

Before I was laid out flat with a nice and smoking lump on my skull.

"NOT ON YOUR LIFE, JACKASS!" Nami raged.

"Hmm, interesting..." Attention was drawn away from me by Robin, who had picked up the fish
Usopp had... donated, and was examining it closely. "This fish appears to have adapted to suit its
environment in the cloud sea..."

"Makes sense," Boss shrugged as he chomped down on a fresh cigar and started patting down his
shell. "We Grand Line creatures have adapted real fast-like over the past centuries, so as to keep up
with the counter-adaptation of countless other species trying their damnedest to eat us."

"So the reason that Dugongs evolved sea-turtle shells is... protection from sharks?" Nami asked. "Or
just naturally guarding weak spots so you can focus on martial arts?"

Boss froze for a moment before redoubling his self-patting. "Er, yes, those reasons are good," he
muttered... was that a BLUSH?

"Actuawwy—!" Carue started to raise his wing... before he and Vivi froze on account of the
weapons being jabbed in their faces by the TDWS.

"Not a damn word out of you," they growled in sync.

Once the native Alabastans nodded and were released, I sidled up to Vivi and gave her a
surreptitious glance. "And the reason for that not-so-passive-aggressive treatment was...?"

Vivi gulped heavily as she continued to eye the Dugongs. "I don't trust Soundbite not to burst out
laughing when he hears it—!"

I slammed my hand down on Soundbite's shell, forcing him inside.

"That works. And anyway, all I know is a rumor, but... from the way some marine biologists tell it,
one generation there were two distinct populations of sea turtles and manatees, the next..."

I was silent for a moment as I digested the implications.

"Please tell me you're not saying what I think you're saying."

"She didn't say anythin'," Carue muttered with a roll of his eyes. "They all but confirmed it."

"DAMN IT!"

The three of us jumped in shock, though thankfully it appeared that Boss's ire wasn't directed at us.

"Tsk, I lost my flint-rocks while towin' us to the Knock-Up Stream..." he growled darkly before
perking up at Sanji. "Hey, got a light?"

"Yeah, sure thing, Boss," Sanji nodded, kneeling down and flicking his lighter beneath the Dugong's
cigar. It took a few tries, no doubt due to the thin oxygen levels and the thing being ever so slightly
cloud-logged, but he eventually got a small flame going and managed to light both of their... cancer-
sticks? If they even had cancer in this world, considering the natural regeneration rate these people's
cells had. Though, considering how cancer works, that might make things worse.

Either way, Boss took a deep drag from his cigar, blew out a cloud and nodded gratefully. "Thanks, Sanji. I can only imagine what I'd do without my cigs!"

**BOOM!**

It was at that exact moment that an explosion blew a plume of Sea Clouds up and over the edge of the Merry, soaking most of us and extinguishing both of the smoker's fixes. They stared blankly at said fixes for a few moments. Then…

"…You know, true masters sometimes take a vow of silence," Boss ground out slowly. "And since it seems that we can't go one fucking hour without someone saying something provocative and bringing some freak force of nature down on us, I'm starting to wonder if I should try it myself."

"Maybe so, but for now…" Sanji slowly stood back up and turned to glare bloody murder at the berserker that was fast approaching us.

I grit my teeth as I saw Wiper coming closer. Honestly, all I had to do was have Soundbite Gastro-Amp me so I could say something like 'Light the fire of Shandora' or 'Descendant of the Great Warrior Calgara' or 'We're here in the name of Montblanc Noland.' Any of those would give the Shandian warrior—hell, any Shandian, period—enough pause to listen to reason. So, why wasn't I doing it?

Because that would mean juggling getting the Shandians on our side to rush Upper Yard at just the right time, and while I'll willingly admit to taking a few courses in 'manipulative bastardry' recently, that game was too big for me to play. Still, it couldn't hurt to make it so we were on neutral terms as opposed to bad. Now, how to do that…

I pondered it, staying as out of the way as I could as the Monster Trio attempted to subdue Wiper, with much more success than the curb-stomp in canon thanks to realizing the limitation of the thin air. But what was I supposed to—wait, that could work.

"Lassoo! Cani-Slick!"

Lassoo glanced at me quizzically, but then nodded, and shifted into his hybrid form before spraying Wiper with a concentration of octopus ink. As effective as an oil slick, Wiper's skates lost any semblance of traction, and he fell on his ass.

Unfortunately, so did Luffy, Zoro, and Sanji.

"WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA, CROSS?!" the Monster Trio chorused angrily.

"WHAT VILE SUBSTANCE IS THIS?!" Wiper snarled in return, trying and failing to get back to his feet. The TDWS took full advantage of the distraction, their bodies built more to thrive than struggle on the slick surface. Raphey and Leo positioned themselves on either side of him, Donny standing behind him, and Mikey standing in front, weapons drawn and pointed at him. Wiper glowered. "Insolent Blue Sea Dwellers. I will eliminate—"

"Can it, cloud-skater. We don't want any trouble with you, so why did you attack us?" I cut in.

Wiper glared defiantly and began shifting around. I snapped at Lassoo, and he started padding forwards, growling viciously with his hackles raised.

"Make one false move, and the next thing he shoots will be a bomb. Point-blank range, how high do..."
you think your odds are? Just answer the question; we won't attack if you won't."

Wiper glowered again before scoffing. "I'll answer that question with one of my own: why did you come here? What business do you have here?"

"Our idiot captain," I deadpanned, pointing at the rubber idiot in question as he flailed on the deck and tried to get back to his feet in classic Three Stooges manner. "The second he heard about there being an island in the sky, he didn't care what we had to do, he only cared that we got up here, period. Much to our detriment…" I muttered the last bit darkly.

"EXPRESS ROUTE, BA-BY!" Soundbite whooped eagerly.

Wiper glanced at my shoulder. "What—"

"Devil Fruit," came no fewer than a dozen deadpan voices.

"Right…" Wiper trailed off slowly before tensing as he processed what Soundbite had said. "Wait, 'express—!' You took the Knock-Up Stream!?

"Eeyu—ACK!" I started to nod before being cut off by Nami grabbing my collar and hauling me a foot off the ground!

"THERE WERE OTHER OPTIONS!?" she shrieked, her teeth almost morphing into fangs she was so pissed.

"So, I take it you didn't enjoy the ri—SHITSHITSHITWAITNO—!"

SPLASH!

Geez, that woman was strong.

I hacked and wheezed up a lungful of fluffy cloud once I managed to get back to the surface, glaring at the deck. "OVERREACT MUCH?"

"GO DROWN, JACKASS!"

"LATER! FOR NOW, THROW ME A LINE ALREADY!"

Once I was back on deck and relatively dried off, I gave the navigator a flat look. "OK, two things you need to know. First, let me remind you that if we had tried looking for any of those other ways, we wouldn't have gotten away from Sengoku's taskforce! And second, while I did know there were other options, I don't know what or where they are; all I know about them is that they're even more dangerous. Sure, with the Knock-Up Stream, all of us could have died, but any of the other ways, some of us would have died."

I didn't wait for her to reply before looking back at Wiper, who I could feel smirking at me from beneath his mask. "What the hell are you so smug about, ass—!

THWACK!

"Meep…" I whimpered about two octaves higher than normal as I collapsed to my knees, clutching my throbbing… manliness. Why, oh, why had I not bought a fucking cup!?"

Vivi spared me a thoroughly annoyed glance as she stepped past me before adopting a far more serene expression. "I apologize for Cross, Mister… um…"
"I am part of the Shandian tribe. That will do," he said firmly.

"Mister Shandian, then. Cross has a habit of making enemies just as, if not more, often than he makes friends. Believe me, he agitates us all, often for his own enjoyment. Allow me to make some introductions: I am Nefertari Vivi, and these are my friends. We are the Straw Hat Pirates. It is an honor to be here on the seas of your home."

Vivi capped it all off with a polite bow.

Wiper stared at her silently for a moment before shifting his stance so as to cross his arms. "Why did you come here to the White Sea?" he grunted.

Vivi held up her hands in a show of surrender. "As Cross was saying, we're just here to take in the sights; a voyage of curiosity, nothing more. We don't want any trouble. Heck, we don't even cause any trouble normally."

"She's… telling the truth. We've never been the ones to throw the first punch," Nami hedged, pointedly not averting her eyes from the berserker.

Wiper slowly swept his eyes over the deck, taking in everyone: the Monster Trio's determined expressions, the TDWS and Boss's ready stances, Usopp and Carue's panicking forms...

Finally, he grunted and nodded slowly. "You might be telling the truth."

I considered relaxing for a moment, save for the unspoken words in his tone of voice.

I wasn't the only one who heard it either. "But?" Vivi asked, frowning and tensing up cautiously.

"But you might not be…" Wiper jerked his Burn Bazooka up, pointing it straight down at Merry's deck. "And I'm not willing to take that chance."

"Even if it means dying with us?" I snapped. "Fair warning, you touch our ship, we touch you in such a way that you don't get un-touched! Do you not have anyone back home who would miss you, or who would need your strength? Is the risk worth that much to you?"

Wiper stayed still for a moment before chuckling darkly. "That's not a good question to ask me, Blue Sea Dweller, and let me tell you why. Up here, I'm known…"

Wiper's middle finger jerked, and the smell of rotten eggs flared out across the deck.

"As the Berserker."

"SHIT!" I barked, jerking away in panic. I tensed in preparation for the oncoming explosion…

"ENOUGH, WIPER!"

When the standoff was thankfully interrupted by a bellow from an old man in plate armor wielding a lance and riding a large bird, who dove and struck at Wiper with what I'm pretty sure were only barely subsonic speeds.

Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on where you stood), Wiper managed to snap his shield up and catch the Sky Knight's weapon before it could strike him. Thankfully enough, the force was enough to shove Wiper clean off the Merry's deck and send him tumbling into the White Sea.

We waited tensely for a few moments, scanning the misty-white waters for any signs of our attacker, and ultimately relaxed when nothing came of it.
"It would seem that he's gone…" Gan Fall mused as he touched down on the deck.

Vivi frowned miserably and bowed her head as she crossed her arms. "I… I thought I was getting through to him…" she muttered dejectedly.

"Hey, it's not your fault, Vivi!" I said, giving her shoulder a consoling pat. "You heard the guy, he called himself a berserker! Let's be honest, the chances of him agreeing on a truce weren't that high to begin with."

"Your friend is quite right… Vivi, was it?" Gan Fall nodded in solemn agreement. "I apologize for the actions of the man who assaulted you. He has a strong reputation for being headstrong and acting brashly, but…" He glanced sadly out at the sea. "I assure you, he means well."

"We'll take your word for it," Boss grunted as he glared balefully at his soaked cigar before turning his gaze on the knight. "But who are you? A friend of his?"

"Friend?" Gan Fall mused before shaking his head with a sigh. "No, far from it; we have a common enemy, but we have never considered each other as allies against him. No," He pounded his fist into his chest confidently. "I am the Sky Knight, a soldier for hire. My name is Gan Fall, and this is my partner Pierre."

"Bienvenue!" the bird saluted before recoiling at the truly snooty French-waiter accent he'd squawked in. "Suprisci! What ze 'ell—?"

"Could you get any more stereotypical?" I deadpanned. "One day…" Soundbite sighed euphorically.

"Ah…?" Gan Fall started slowly.

"The Straw Hat Translation Service, brought to you by our resident Noise-Noise Fruit-empowered jackass of a snail, Soundbite," Lassoo yawned. "Live it, hate it, dream of mauling him one day."

"Hey, you don't see any of us complaining," Mikey piped up.

"YEAH! SOME OF US ACTUALLY APPRECIATE THE SKILL NEEDED TO TRANSLATE THE VOCABULARY OF SOMEONE AS POWERFUL AS ME!" Terry agreed exuberantly.

"I have to admit, my voish is stawting to gwow on me," Carue reluctantly admitted.

"Aye do believe that I could get used to zees as well…" Pierre mused before raising his wing and starting to sing some bars. "La-la-LA—!"

"Sky Knight or not, aren't knights supposed to ride on horses?" Raphey asked, tilting her head. Gan Fall tore his attention away from the new development and chuckled.

"As a matter of fact, Pierre is no ordinary bird; for you see, he too has eaten a most unique fruit! He has eaten the Horse-Horse Fruit, enabling him to transform into—"

"A PEGASUS?! OH, this is too good!" Soundbite cackled.

"La-la-LA! Hey, what the—!?” Pierre squawked in protest as his voice went from Frenchy to, well… pony.

I slapped my face, hard. "I had. To fucking. Ask. When am I ever going to learn not to give you-
know-who an excuse to play more merry hell with my sanity?" I then proceeded to glare sidelong at Soundbite. "And you realize that Twi—" I cut myself as I realized just who I was surrounded by. "...that she is a," I gestured at my forehead. "And not a pegasus, right?"

"Would you prefer PINKIE PIE?" Soundbite asked curiously.

"...never mind. Anyway, before I completely lose it, you were saying something about being a soldier-for-hire? Does that mean we owe you money for saving us?"

"WHAT?" Nami shrieked as she snapped her Clima-Tact out and jabbed it at the knight, and I breathed a mental sigh of relief as her anger redirected everyone's attention. "YOU'LL GET A SINGLE BERI OVER MY COLD, DEAD BODY!"

"Oh, no, no, this time is free of charge," Gan Fall said hastily. "But I have to make a living too, you know; if you need me again, it will cost 5 million extol."

"FIVE MILLION—wait, what's extol?" Nami asked curiously before going straight back to vicious. "AND THAT'S STILL TOO MUCH!"

"You don't even know the exchange rate yet..." I groused.

"Oh, and you—? ...of course you do. What is it, then?" Nami leered at me.

"Uh..." I counted down on my fingers curiously before giving my best estimate. "Few thousand extol per beri, if I remember correctly."

Nami blinked as she calculated that out. "So, somewhere in the ballpark of a thousand or so beri... THAT'S A RIPOFF!"

"THAT'S THE PRICE OF A FUCKING SODA, WOMAN, THAT'S A STEAL!" I spat back indignantly.

"Ah, wait, wait!" Gan Fall waved his hands hastily, obviously trying to keep up with us. "You-you mean to say that you do not have any extol? But how is that possible? Surely you should have picked some up on the previous islands on your way here, no?"

Nami continued to glare daggers at me for a second longer before crossing her arms with a snort. "We were in a bit of a rush back down at Sea Level, so we took the only way up we had. We just got here a few minutes ago."

"My word..." Gan Fall breathed in awe as he stared at us, his eyes wide with disbelief. "So there are still people brave enough to ride the Knock-Up Stream. I didn't think there was anyone else left in the world who was that bold! You must be navigators of exceptional bravery and skill."

"O-oh, well now..." Nami paused in a taken-aback manner, a luminescent blush painting her cheeks. "Th-That's very nice of you to say and I appreciate the compliment but THERE'S NO WAY IN HELL I'M PAYING YOU THAT MUCH!"

"Oh, no no no!" Gan Fall shook his hands hastily. "I could never make sailors so brave as you pay. Well... too much, at any rate. Here," the knight dug a whistle out and tossed it to Vivi, who nearly fumbled the catch in surprise. "It's a whistle. Blow it, and I shall come to your aid wherever you might be, free of charge, but only once. I gift it to you in honor of your immense bravery!"

The knight then proceeded to sling his leg over Pierre's back, who was still glaring daggers at Soundbite and making the inestimably impressive decision to not say jack. The giga-bird's
musculature then morphed into a… less than impressive pegasus. "FARE THEE WELL, BRAVE TRAVELERS!" he called out before he was carried off into the sky.

But not without one last shot at my sanity in the form of Isaiah flying up and perching on Pierre's head.

"I'm on a horse," he stated in a stupidly smug tone of voice.

**THUNK! THUNK! THUNK! THUNK!**

I barely noticed the bemused looks everyone gave me as I rammed my head into Merry's mast.

"…Am I missing something?" Gan Fall asked.

"It's a private joke, apparently, and I think we're all better off if it stays private," Nami muttered.

Gan Fall shrugged in acceptance, and as he and the still-steadfastly silent Pierre flew away, I slowly pulled away from the mast and turned my eyes back on Vivi, my expression carefully neutral.

"Right… first things first."

**THWACK!**

"OW!" Vivi yelped, clutching her skull as I rapped my fist on it.

"STOP GOING FOR MY BALLS!" I roared furiously. "You hit me, I hit you, and I still owe you for that bit before Jaya, so watch your back!" I took a moment to huff and get the rage out of my system before heaving a sigh and marginally relaxing. "And second… nice going, princess. That was some damn fine work; if we meet Wiper again, I think we have a much better chance of being neutral rather than enemies."

Vivi stared at me uncertainly for a few seconds before smiling. "Thanks, Cross."

I smiled back, but that smile faded as I turned to address the rest of the crew. "Now, everyone, listen up. This is extremely important."

I abruptly had everyone's attention.

"Once we reach the White-White Sea—that would be the upper layer of the Cumuloregalis, about 11,000 feet above us—I'm not going to be able to talk freely about what I know. Really sensitive stuff and all that. Everything will be fine for the immediate future, and I'll tell you about the rough stuff when the rough gets going. But until the day after tomorrow, don't ask me about anything that I shouldn't know. Otherwise… well, let's just say that failure up here is not an option for anyone with a conscience. Got it?"

A round of nods and affirmative statements, shaky and confident alike, started coming at me from the rest of the crew.

"Good. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to be writing down what's going to happen so I don't have to say it out loud when the time is right. Robin, care to help me out?"

"Me?" she asked in surprise.

"Her?" concurred many others.

"Well, I could use an extra set of hands or ten to make copies, and she's the only one of us who has any decent amount of experience at keeping her trap shut despite knowing that one slip-up could get
her dead."

"Excuse me?" Vivi snapped indignantly, only to wilt under glares from Zoro, Nami, Soundbite, and myself. "...One slip of the tongue one time, and you just can't let it go, can you?"

"NO."

I then proceeded to grin cheekily. "Plus, Robin would just use her powers to peek anyway; this way, I imagine she'll enjoy helping me with figuring out how to properly mess with you all."

Robin blinked at me curiously, before grinning with equal cheekiness and slinking by me on the way to the kitchen. "You know me so well, Mister Jeremiah," she crooned.

I stiffened and rammed my knuckles into my thigh in an effort to calm myself before pinning a cold glare at her. "Move along."

Thankfully, she was content to do so with an airy chuckle... that had Sanji glaring blazing daggers at me. I responded with a flat 'fuck-off' look before looking over at Usopp. "And by the way, I'm gonna want to talk to you once I'm done. And bring your tools; you're gonna have to work fast."

"Does that involve me, too?" Lassoo asked cautiously.

"It could if you want it to," I offered, before pausing as a thought struck me. "It could also involve a discussion with Chopper about Rumble Balls...?"

Lassoo snorted and waved his paw. "Pass. I'm a gun that can turn into a dog, I'm badass enough already. I already let these two dig around in me before and it was a miracle that the only thing to go wrong was the oil, I'm not letting them go for round two."

"HEY!" the doctor and sniper yelled in offense.

I settled for shrugging indifferently. "Fair enough. Anyway, let's get sailing, people. Set sail for that cloudfall over yonder!" I indicated the horizon before heading up towards the cabin.

As I mounted the stairs, I heard Boss heave a heavy sigh. "Is anyone else starting to get tired of his cryptic-ass Sea King shite?"

I barked out a laugh and waved over my shoulder. "Love you too, Boss."

One nice thing about the White Sea was that being this high in the atmosphere, there wasn't any of the crazy Grand Line weather we usually had to deal with. This was probably the calmest the sea had been since sailing to Loguetown, and most of us took the time to relax, even Nami; I guess having extraordinarily mild weather and a clear landmark to navigate to just made it too easy, especially after the hell that was the Grand Line's weather.

Hence, everyone took the time to relax in their own ways. Some trained, some slept, some leaped overboard and went sightseeing...

And me? Well, with Robin's help, I managed to get nine copies of the notes detailing everything relevant I could remember involving Eneru, the priests, and the Enforcers, as well as a basic outline of the war's events up until Luffy defeated Eneru. I also put in the notes about the few Shandians I remembered by name, what to say to convince them that we were on their side, and which ones would listen to reason. Thinking about it, I also threw in a warning about Nola; with any luck, she'd listen to us. And finally, I made sure to emphasize how important it would be to steal any and all Dials from the Priests or Enforcers that they defeated, or at any opportunity they got. With that much
more firepower in our collective arsenal, with any luck, we'd be able to deal with any inevitable
curveballs in the coming arcs that the great butterfly in the sky would flap our way.

"Are you sure that we don't need more than this, Mister Jeremiah?" Robin asked quietly.

"Nah, we've got enough," I shook my head as I read them over, double-checking the facts I'd gotten
down. "One copy each for you, Zoro, Nami, Usopp, Sanji, Chopper, Vivi, Boss, and the TDWS to
split. Luffy wouldn't want one, and really, he doesn't need it."

"I was more referring to the fact that you've only given the most basic details regarding events that, if
left unchanged, would result in the destruction of an entire island and thousands of lives," she replied
warily, looking through her own packet with unease. "I assume you can understand why that bothers
me."

I shrugged as I started sliding the packets into my messenger bag. "I get your trepidation, I really do,
but honestly, as the involvement of your..." I shuddered heavily as my shoulder burned. "Shall we
say, ex-furry friends demonstrated, the world has a tendency to auto-correct things so that fate flows
as it's meant to. No guarantees, mind you, human error and all that, but..."

I shrugged helplessly. "Really, now, what more can I do? If they rely too much on details that don't
happen, things could end up worse than anticipated. And believe me..." serpentguy's story flitted
through my mind, drawing out a shiver. "I've seen worse. It doesn't end pretty. At least this way,
there's a chance that if all goes well, we'll be able to save Angel Island. And if not... we'll at least cut
down on how many people die or, at minimum, fry. If that's all I can do, then I have to be satisfied
with it."

Robin looked at me with an appraising, curious expression. "If I can't ask how you know all of this
—"

"Crew's right out there, I'm certain they'll be all ears," I deadpanned, jabbing my thumb over my
shoulder.

Robin twitched slightly before moving on. "—then may I ask why you follow the path that your
knowledge lays out for you, knowing all of the difficulties and dangers along the way? I never had a
choice, but as you have no bounty... yet, at any rate, I can only assume that you chose this path
willingly, even knowing how much things could go wrong. So, why did you do it?"

I blinked in surprise before chuckling darkly. "Well, believe me, it wasn't my choice at first; suffice
to say I got a bit mouthy, one thing led to another, and I wound up in the East Blue. After that, I got
lucky enough to run into Luffy and the Straw Hats of the time, who were just everyone from Sanji
down and... well..." I trailed off as I remembered that day.

I leaned back in my seat and crossed my arms behind my head as I gazed up at the ceiling. "I'll be
honest... I originally planned on joining the Straw Hats for the same reason as you: survival. I knew
they were strong, I knew they were... relatively morally upstanding, and while their journey was
never going to be safe, at least I'd be with the people who'd ultimately pull through."

"But something happened," Robin divined.

My eyes glazed over slightly as I remember the exact moment she was unwittingly referring to.

"I'm gonna be king of the pirates!"

I grinned warmly at that particular memory. "Yeah, something happened alright: the force of nature
that is Monkey D. Luffy. The guy's hopeless in a number of ways. He can't swing a sword worth a
damn, can't cook for shit, can't navigate, can't lie, no medical skills I'd let him try on me, he's a bottomless pit, and on his intelligence…"

"A GOOFBALL! A wingnut! A KNUCKLEHEAD MCSPAZATRON!" Soundbite eagerly provided.

I cocked my eyebrow at him. "Didn't you use that one back when we first met the crew?"

"HEY, YOU'RE NOT the only one reminiscing! Talking about back then SPARKED MY—say, did we NEVER PAY LUFFY BACK FOR KNOCKING US OUT OF THAT TREE?"

I frowned. "You know what, I don't think we ever did," I muttered darkly. "We've gotten him a few times for a few things, but… we'll have to work on that."

"Your point, Mister Jeremiah, about our captain's many faults?" Robin asked, though her smile distinctly said she didn't mind the delay.

I snapped my attention back to her. "As I was saying, for all that Luffy's got flaws, making fast friends isn't one of them. I planned on joining the Straw Hat Pirates for my own benefit, but…" I chuckled and shrugged helplessly. "Instead I got ensnared and drawn into this life hook, line, sinker and rod. I tried to keep it intellectual, to play it safe, but they had other ideas. Simply put… I intended to simply sail with the Straw Hats, but instead, at some point or another, I became a Straw Hat. And honestly, it's not like I was protesting all that much."

"That's intriguing, Mister Jeremiah, but I'm not sure that it answers my original question."

I shrugged. "95% of my knowledge is centered around the Straw Hat Pirates, their lives, and their journey. I originally joined them so that I could use that knowledge and stay safe."

Robin cocked an eyebrow, no doubt at my tone of voice. "But no longer, I take it?"

I smiled wistfully as I nodded in agreement. "I'm no longer content with just 'knowing' the journey, Robin. Now… now I want to be a part of it."

Robin processed that for a moment before glancing back at her notes. "And despite everything, the life-threatening situations, the opposing pirates, the abuse at the hands of your fellow crewmates—"

"Hey, it's not like they're actively aiming to hurt—hurt me!" I promptly defended. "There's a world of emotional pain between getting clocked over the head by a closed fist and getting a slap from an open hand. And besides, I used to be a lot more squishy. It's actually kind of nice to be able to take hits and keep on rolling without worry!"

"…I do believe you could have used a better word than 'squishy,' Mister Jeremiah. But that aside, with all of that as well as how little you imply that you're capable of changing the outcome, you still believe that following the path your knowledge leads you down has more good than bad?"

I nodded without hesitation. "By a long shot. It's hard at times, and I'll admit that certain events could shatter all the confidence I have, but I know that I'm still on the right path; when all is said and done, I have confidence in following my dreams."

Robin gave a sigh. "Then I hope you're prepared for the disappointment that will come one day."

I couldn't suppress a wince at hearing the sheer brokenness in her voice. I hesitated for a minute before speaking up again. "Tomorrow, when we set out again… do your best to find your way to Shandora."
Robin glanced up at me curiously. "And the reason for this prompting is…?"

I considered for a moment before spreading my hands helplessly. "Because while it will be a hard and perilous journey, those are the most rewarding journeys of all."

The archaeologist pondered what I was saying, before smiling and nodding lightly, and unless I was mistaken, I saw hope in her expression. "Very well, then, I'll just have to trust you… Cross."

I smiled back before standing up and walking to the door. "I'm going to hang on to the rest of these notes until we get ready to go," I said as I opened it. Then I blinked as I took in our progress towards the gate. Or what little we'd made, at any rate.

"Huh, looks like we finished with plenty of time to spare. Well…" I grinned viciously as I trailed my hand into my bag. "Only one thing for it, then. After all, we can't leave all those poor, delusional bastards in Marineford hoping we died, can we?" I sent an inquiring glance back at Robin. "Don't suppose I can get you to guest-star for a bit, can I? Maybe even make it sound like a coincidence and get them searching the skies for you in vain?"

Robin visibly pondered that for a moment, giving my proposition much more consideration than she had the last time I'd asked before shaking her head. "Thank you, Cross, but no. I'd like to imagine that I still have some measures of good will left with the World Government, and I'd rather refrain from needlessly reducing them to ash."

I shrugged indifferently. "If that's your choice, so be it. For now, though," I unhooked the transceiver mic and stepped outside. "Wish me luck!"

-o-

"Don don don don!"

"DAMN IT!"

Kizaru glanced upwards and whistled as something akin to an explosion shook the main tower of Marineford, causing no small amount of plaster to rain down on him. "Hmm… Looks like the boss isn't that happy the Straw Hats survived." He then glanced down at the snail ringing on his desk and hummed contemplatively. "Hm… what to do, what to do… pick up and see if they actually made it to Sky Island, most likely pissing off Sengoku in the process, or just go for a walk around Sabaody and see what comes up."

He stretched slightly in his seat as he contemplated matters of deep, deep importance before he ultimately shrugged and aimed a finger-pistol at the Snail. "Eh, I've got nothing better to do."

And with that, he shot the mic off the back of the ringing snail with a bolt of light, causing the frightened gastropod to perk up with a cocky expression. "Three and two and one and we are live! Good afternoon, loyal listeners, and allow me to say that—!

"DOUBLE SUN POWER!"

"GAH!" Cross yelped in shock as the sound of flapping came over the connection. "What the hell are you—!?"

"I'M INTERRUPTING YOUR WEAK-ASS INTRODUCTION! ONLY MEMBERS OF THE BEAR-GLOVE TRIBE ARE POWERFUL ENOUGH TO INFORM THE WORLD THAT IT'S TIME TO START THE SBS!"
"GET THE HELL OFF MY HEAD, YOU FEATHERY MENACE!" Cross roared indignantly.

"WHAT HE SAID! STOPPING Cross from starting the SBS is MY SCHTICK!" Soundbite barked in agreement.

"GOODBYE!" the foreign voice cried before apparently flapping away again. Incoherent grumbling came across the speaker before Cross spoke again.

"Viewers? If you care about your sanity, do. Not. ASK. And stay away from Jaya, too, particularly the jungle. Ergh, sweet mother of... Anyway! You no doubt want to know whether or not we managed to reach Sky Island! Well, listeners, the answer is a big fat yes!... but also no. You see, there is not merely an island up here in the sky, but a sea... a sea made of clouds! I realize, of course, that this must sound insane, but I assure you, I am not speaking out of my ass! We are currently sailing on a sea of pure filmy white 'liquid', though I hesitate to call it that, having touched it for myself. Words... fail to describe the sheer beauty of what I'm seeing right now..."

Kizaru whistled in awe as he eyed the snail. "Well, well, it looks like they actually managed to make it. I'm quite impressed. Wonder if I'll actually get to meet—"

BANG!

Kizaru blinked in surprise as he crossed his eyes in order to glance up at the swiftly closing hole in his forehead before turning his gaze on the wall of his office behind his Transponder Snail. "A problem, Vice-Admiral Brett?"

"YOU SHOT ME AGAIN, YOU FUCKING BASTARD!" an agonized bellow echoed through the wall, aided by the fact that said wall looked more like swiss cheese than an architectural structure.

"STOP SHOOTING YOUR DAMN SNAIL AND ACTUALLY GET UP TO ANSWER IT FOR ONCE!

"Ah, really, again? Whoops, my bad. This is what, the tenth time?"

"SCREW YOU, ASSHOLE!"

"Well, no need to be rude..."

-o-

"But oddly enough, despite us being... HEY, NAMI! IMPERIAL TO METRIC, HOW HIGH ARE WE?... THANKS! As I was saying, despite us being 7,000 meters above the sea, we still haven't reached the island our Log Pose is pointing to yet. That's right, listeners, our journey is only partially complete! We're currently on our way to where I assume we'll find the way up to our destination, located 10,000 meters above the sea."

"An ocean in the clouds actually exists... hmm. I would have expected it to be difficult to breathe at that altitude, but it seems that they're having no trouble," Koshiro reflected.

"Sensei, is Zoro really up there? There's really islands up there?" the young students clamored.

"Well, I can't claim to have seen them myself, but I think I'm more inclined to believe Cross than not," the swordmaster replied, looking curiously at the snail.

"Awesome! I wanna go up there!"

"Unfortunately, viewers, it's not all euphoria and beauty up here; within minutes of arriving, we
became acquainted with the local wildlife—including sharks, sea serpents, and octopi—followed by meeting a guerrilla warrior—that's the war term, not the primate—who tried to blow us apart as soon as he saw us. We were only saved thanks to a mercenary riding an oversized bird that ate the Horse-Horse Fruit. Does that last part sound cool?"

"NOT SO MUCH, suckers," Soundbite piped up.

"No kidding, you wouldn't expect a pegasus to be so unimpressive. Besides, Pierre's big enough to ride without being a Zoan, and he clearly hasn't put any effort into actually exploring the usefulness of his powers... hmm. I should have told him to do that. Well, we'll probably meet again. Ah, hey! We're getting close to... wow, some kind of gate? Geeze, this place is loads more civilized than anyone could have suspected! Well, a quick guess says that things are going to get real hectic, real fast. So, sorry for the brevity, but for the moment and probably returning later today, this is Jeremiah Cross—"

"AND SOUNDBITE!"

"Signing off!"

"Well, so much for not making a habit of broadcasting three times a day," Koshiro muttered as the snail fell asleep again.

"Uh, sensei?" one of his students raised his hand curiously.

"Yes?"

"Why are you saying that like it's a bad thing?"

Koshiro opened his mouth to respond... then closed it. "Good point, thank you."

-0-

"Hot damn..." I whistled as I gazed up at the cloud-fall reaching up into the heavens before us. If I'd thought the damn thing was massive from a distance, it was absolutely titanic up close! And the architecture of Heaven's Gate was quite awe-inspiring as well... though apparently, it'd panicked more than a few other members of the crew.

"That name does not fill me with confidence..." Usopp swallowed nervously.

"Oh, so dat ain't just me?" Carue quacked in agreement.

"Oh, calm down!" Boss scoffed with a waved hand. "Ya bunch of pussies. I, for one, think this to be exciting! For to storm the very gates of Heaven itse—ERK!" The dugong froze as a cyan rod of metal tapped itself on top of his shell.

"Not the time, got it?" Nami stated frigidly.

"Yes'm."

"Good."

"Woohoo!" Luffy cheered eagerly. "Heaven, heaven, we're all going to heaven!"

"This is going to be quite the experience..." Robin mused.

"Never expected to get up here in any sense of the word, did ya?" I grinned cheekily. I then
proceeded to grimace as a hand slapped against the back of my head. "Okay, bad taste, my bad."

"Anything we should look out for, Cross?" Vivi asked as she examined the gateway.

"Ehh…" I mused slightly before nodding as I pointed out the door that had opened in the structure. "Eeyup, over there."

"Pardon me," Amazon called out as she started clicking images with her Vision Dial. "But are you here as tourists or as invaders?" She didn't give us a chance to respond before continuing. "Either way, it doesn't matter. If you wish to ascend to the White-White Sea, the price is one billion extols per person. That is the law."

Sanji paled in horror as he took in the gatekeeper. "Please tell me that not all angels look that old up here…" he whimpered pitifully.

"Don't worry, you'll be fine," I muttered as I rolled my eyes.

"THANK GOD!"

I wisely decided not to inform him about how shouting that up here was a particularly bad idea.

Nami started making some mental calculations before raising her hand curiously. "Ah, pardon me, but do animals count towards the total tally?"

"It doesn't matter either way, on account of how it is not necessary to pay the toll to pass," Amazon shrugged noncommittally.

"SERIOUSLY!?!" Usopp, Carue, and Chopper yelped in shock.

"WOOHOO!" Nami cheered eagerly. "That means we don't have to pay over a million beri in entry fees!"

Vivi, meanwhile, was far more cautious. "We really don't need to pay?" she asked skeptically. "Not even a single extol?"

"Of course not," Amazon nodded solemnly. "The choice on whether to pay or not is entirely yours. I am neither a gatekeeper nor a guardian, I neither can nor will stop you. My purpose here is merely to observe and record."

Vivi narrowed her eyes accusingly. "So that you can relay who paid and who didn't to the local authorities."

The crew (or at least the members who understood what Vivi was saying) tensed up as Amazon smiled… or smirked, more like it. "You would be surprised at how few actually read between the lines…" she chuckled knowingly.

Zoro glanced at me cautiously. "Cross—?"

I gave him a flat look. "Do you seriously think we'd be able to go ten minutes without breaking any laws even if we did pay?"

"THUG LIFE! Yippee-kai-YAY!" Soundbite whooped ecstatically.

"Besides, how likely is it that Nami would ever consider handing over a million beri for something so…" I air-quoted. "Trivial?"
"NEVER!" Nami pledged viciously as she jabbed her Clima-Tact in the air.

"Well, if that's your final decision," Amazon shrugged as she dug through her robes.

"Nonononowait!" Vivi tried to protest as the elderly woman withdrew and activated a Tone Dial, which was apparently the signal for a pair of big, meaty claws to burst out of the river of clouds beneath us and grab on to the remains of the Merry's wings.

"That is the Lobster Express of the White Sea," Amazon called out. "Hold on tight and enjoy the ride."

And with that, for the second time that day, the Merry accelerated to speeds that no caravel had ever achieved before, throwing us off our feet and leaving us grasping at whatever we could grab as we wound and twirled our way up the Milky Road to the White-White Sea.

And while I was whooping it up and enjoying the thrill ride for the fun time that it was (obviously), others were taking a more… reserved stance.

"JUST ONCE CAN WE COME TO AN ISLAND WITHOUT CAUSING A STUPIDLY HUGE SCENE?!" Vivi screamed over the rushing winds.

"PFFHAHAHAHA! LEMME GET BACK TO YOU ON THAT!" I cackled eagerly.

Sadly, the voyage came to an end all too soon, though at least it was a damn spectacular one, because shooting up and out of the clouds to behold a tropical freaking paradise arrayed before us, an utterly impossible island situated several thousand meters above the ocean... well. Awesome is such an overused word, but this truly inspired awe.

Trees grew everywhere, and giant chains of plant matter supporting massive Milky Roads stretched to and from the island. The buildings were normal enough, though at first glance, they seemed to have a thing for staircases. But the part that made it impossible was the fact that the island looked to be built entirely on different layers of clouds. It was amazing… and yet, I couldn't enjoy the sight as much as I wanted to, knowing the island's fate. I closed my eyes, looking away from my exuberant crewmates, only to feel a hand on my shoulder. I looked over to see Robin standing beside me, a ghost of a smile on her face.

"Do your best, and if that's all you can do, be satisfied with it," she said softly.

I almost managed to smile back as I nodded, and turned to look back at Angel Island. Apart from the aforementioned exuberance and awe that had even Robin interested, the journey to the beach was uneventful.

Reaching the shore, on the other hand, was heralded by eager cries of joy from Luffy, Usopp, Chopper, and Carue, who leaped onto the beach and started running around like maniacs. The saner members stayed aboard, though all of them, even Zoro, were staring at the situation in wonder. Glancing at my shoulder, even Soundbite was staring in starry-eyed awe.

I then realized that our guests had yet to take off, and looked back at the railing to see both Terry and Isaiah staring at the island with interest.

"So, what are you two going to do now?" I asked curiously. "I'm sort of surprised you didn't take off after we got to where the Knock-Up Stream was."

"Hmm," Isaiah nodded to me. "I will readily admit that I was initially unprepared to accompany your crew on this journey. However… apart from the fact that I'm interested to learn more about these..."
'Shandians' that Wiper fellow mentioned, the magnificent suavity of the voice I now have is a treasure that I don't intend to give up so easily."

"For once, I agree with him," Terry said calmly… before going right back to yelling. "I'M NOT READY TO GIVE UP BEING ABLE TO SPEAK WITH A VOICE THAT SO PERFECTLY MATCHES MY POWEEEEEEEER!"

I rolled my eyes but otherwise didn't react. "Alright, have it your way. But behave yourselves, got it?"

Both of them nodded.

"So, Cross," Vivi asked as she slowly slid up next to me, eyeing me skeptically. "Care to tell me just how much trouble we're in for not paying?"

I slowly turned back to her, my eyes narrowing, and Zoro and Robin both mimicked the action. It took her all of two seconds before she winced, realizing her mistake. "Okay, wait—"

I chuckled and shook my head placatingly as I knelt down and started unfastening my gauntlets and greaves. I'd taken to wearing them as often as possible, because really, when wasn't I getting into danger these days? "Don't worry, don't worry, it's fine. Not like they don't already know anyways, communications are pretty fast up here! And I'll tell you, I swear! I just need to do one thing first."

Vivi perked up. "And that would be—?"

And with that, I promptly vaulted over the edge of the Merry and ran eagerly towards the beach. "WOOOOOO, SKY ISLAND!"

"DAMN IT, CROSS!" Vivi screamed after me.

"DON'T CARE, HAVING TOO MUCH FUN!" I called back. And I really, really was! The beach was squishy and fluffy, like an entirely natural moonbounce, and it was absolute freaking heaven on my feet!

I whooped ecstatically as I joined Chopper in rolling around. "This is awe~so~me!"

"OVER THE SEA, Darling it's better, UP WHERE IT'S HIGHER, Take it from me!" Soundbite sang ecstatically.

"Damn it, Cross…” Vivi ground out, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"Aw, c'mon, Vivi, live a little!" Nami prompted with a chuckle as she patted her friend's shoulder. "I mean, he's not wrong! Look around!" She waved her arm out at our surroundings. "We're in the sky, Vivi! We are stepping where no man—!"

"Where few Blue Sea Dwellers!” I corrected.

"…alright, that takes a lot of the steam out of me, but…” Nami leaped into the surf and stretched her arms with a euphoric groan. "Come on, it's a beach! In the sky! The Marines can't reach us here— can they?"

"Not unless they're willing to take a shitload of time or manage to get some reinforced ships onto the right Knock-Up Stream; if it was remotely easy to get up here, the World Government would have territories in the sky already. Plus, this isn't the only Sky Island. In short, no; we could stay here for a year and they probably wouldn't manage to track us down anytime soon."
"Eeehehee, then that means I can finally take some time to cut loose and relax on an actual beach!" Nami giggled. "I haven't taken the time to relax on one since before I met Luffy!"

"Heheh, ye—hey, wait, me neither!" I sat up. "The only beach I've been to since I left home was the one on that island I was marooned on, and that sort of took any possible enjoyment out of it! Damn it, this adventure has been hectic so far!"

"But I must admit that it has had its advantages…" Robin mused as she moved towards the railing. "Until now I never stopped to think of any of this as adventurous. Perhaps I should reconsider my stance." And with that, she jumped into the clouds.

"You heard the scary-ass assassin lady!" Boss whooped from the tree he was hanging out of. "Boys, I have but one order for you! Cu~t loo~se!"

"Aye-aye, Boss!" the four of them cheered, sheathing their weapons and stashing them in their shells before spreading out and thoroughly enjoying the scenery.

"C'mon, Vivi!" Carue called. "Twy to have fun! We can wowwy about whatevah twouble we get into when we get into it, but wight now, this is fweaking amazing!"

"Hey Carue, check this out!"

CLONK!

"QUAGH! WATCH IT, LUFFY!"

Vivi chewed on her lip for a moment before ultimately sighing, and allowing a smile to come over her face. "Why do I even try to be sensible around a crew like this? I just can't stay worried," she reflected fondly.

"That's the spirit! Now, do me a favor, would you?"

"What is it, Cro—?"

SPLAT!

"Did that feel like a snowball to you or should I pack it tighter—?"

"GET BACK HERE SO THAT I CAN DROWN YOU, CROSS!"

"PFHAHAHA! CATCH ME FIRST, WEAK-WIMP!"

"PREPARE TO DIE, CROSS!"

"LOOK OUT, wild cook ON THE LOOSE!"

"PFHHAHAHAHAHAHA!

We spent the next few minutes having… relative amounts of fun and enjoying ourselves, and Sanji had just gotten me under his heel when the air was suddenly filled with the sound of music.

Sanji froze mid-pre-pummel, glancing up in confusion. "What the—?" He then froze as he caught sight of the one playing the harp, standing on a hill of cloud several meters away. He seemed too shocked to even go into love mode. "It's an angel," he breathed.

I grinned, taking advantage of Sanji's distraction to push myself up to my feet. "Indeed she is. Now,
if you'll excuse me." Once she stopped playing—and damn was she good, like 'Brook has
competition' good—I called out, "Heso!"

Conis started in shock before smiling kindly and waving back. "Heso! Are you from the Blue Sea?"

"Yeah, we flew up here in our ship," Luffy nodded in a devil-may-care manner. "Do you live up
here?"

"Indeed I do," Conis nodded as she strode up to us. "Welcome to Skypiea's Angel Beach, my
home." She noticed the ginormous nuts Luffy was carrying (HA!) and giggled in amusement, no
doubt having seen this kind of thing countless times before. "I see you're eager to try some conash,
hm? You won't have any luck that way, though. The outside of the shell is as hard as steel; you have
to cut through the underside." She promptly demonstrated as much with a switchblade she pulled out of…

I leaned around to the side slightly as I examined her dress for pockets and came up empty. "Ah…
where exactly did you—?

Conis grinned cheekily as she stored the thing somewhere before picking up Su. "My name is Conis,
and this is my pet, Su. She's a cloud fox."

"Su—so! It's nice to meet you—what in the name of the great lightning bast—MMPH!?"

Conis hastily clamped her hand over Su's muzzle with a mildly panicked expression. I winced
myself, surreptitiously scanning the thankfully clear skies; that could have been very, very bad. Once
I confirmed that Eneru wasn't going to turn us into crispy jerky, I processed the voice that Soundbite
had given Su and looked at the snail quizzically.

"Should I recognize that one?" I asked.

"You didn't watch POKÉMON?" Soundbite asked in honest surprise, then tilted his head. "BUT
WAIT, you mentioned Greninja back in ALABASTA."

"I did watch it… to Diamond and Pearl, anyway," I mused before shaking my head. "And anyway,
they didn't use… gonna say Vulpix?" Soundbite nodded in affirmation. "Yeah, didn't show up again
past season one… or two, whatever, Kanto/Johto, you know. And besides, she never said anything
besides 'Vulpix.'"

"FAIR ENOUGH."

"Um, excuse me, but… you're responsible for Su talking?" Conis asked shakily.

"He is," I pointed at Soundbite with a flat look. "Yeah, our ship is pretty chock-full of Devil Fruit
users. Soundbite is one of the least—!" CHOMP! "YEOWCH! Okay, okay, withdrawn!" I yelped,
tugging at the bastard gnawing on my neck.

"Ah, getting back to my talking cloud fox, please?" Conis used her free hand to point at the yet-
struggling Su.

"Noise-Noise Fruit, one of the many uses he's come up with for it is for him to act as a translator for
animals. Sorry?" I shrugged sheepishly.

Conis sighed before smiling kindly. "No no, it's perfectly fine, I'm happy Su can talk, she just needs
to…" She gave her pet a meaningful glance. "Learn how to watch what she says?"
Su stopped struggling for a moment before nodding in agreement. "Heso? Heso? Holy goat-sack ass-biters! I can actually talk!"

"Su! What did I just say?"

"What!? I didn't say anything about him!"

I sighed as Soundbite cackled beside me; somehow, I expected Su to be a lot more like her mistress. But then again, when you combine fox with no doubt shittons of pent-up resentment for said mistress's oppressors, I suppose it shouldn't have come as a surprise. "Ahem, sorry about that, but once he starts the only way to get him to stop is by gagging him and, well…"

"Some of us doth protest to that course of action!" Boss cut in.

"Seconded!" Carue squawked.

"And I make three," Lassoo added from the Island Cloud lounge chair he'd quite literally burrowed himself into.

"Sorry?" I offered sheepishly.

Conis glanced down at Su before waving her hand in a placating gesture. "It's perfectly fine, I was just… surprised, is all." She then re-adopted her by-then-signature smile. "Honestly, I should be thanking you, it'll be nice to actually talk with Su!"

"INCOMING sea-scooter," Soundbite suddenly announced out of the blue.

"Oh, the klutz is back!" Su perked up happily.

"SU!"

"The charm wears off fast, don't it?" I snickered.

Conis fumed silently for a moment before looking out to sea and smiling fondly. "Well, it looks like my father's back from fishing! Heso, father!"

"Conis, heso!" Pagaya waved back… though probably not the brightest of moves given how badly he was shaking on his Waver.

"What the heck does 'Heso' mean!?" Luffy questioned in confusion.

"Do the words 'cultural sensitivity' mean absolutely nothing to you, Luffy?" Vivi asked before sighing and pinching the bridge of her nose. "What am I even saying?"

Conis, meanwhile, looked at Luffy with just as much befuddlement. "But wait, didn't your friend —?"

"Say, what's he riding?" Nami interrupted as she gazed curiously out at Pagaya's fast-approaching form.

"It looks cool!" Chopper squealed eagerly.

Before anything else could be said, Pagaya started swerving a bit as he approached. "Pardon me, but I am coming ashore."

And indeed he was; he was coming in fast… very fast… OSHI—!
"DOOOODGE!" Soundbite cried, an action I hastily performed in order to avoid becoming the Blue Sea World's first case of vehicular manslaughter.

"Do you really think I've been calling him a klutz all these years for nothing?" Su deadpanned.

"Bite me, bushy-tail..." I growled into the beach. "I'd like to see you do any better on that thing."

"Like I'd ever be stupid enough to get on it, two-legs."

"Oh, dear, is anyone hurt?" Pagaya asked as he shakily got to his feet.

"Only big-mouth's pride!"

"Su..." Conis groaned, nigh comical tears trailing down her face at this point.

"Ya know—!"

"Cross, before you get into an argument with a fox," Nami interjected as she glanced over at me. "Is that a fixed up version of the thing we salvaged?"

I huffed as I sent a final glare at an all-too-smug Su before nodding to Nami. "Yeah, it's called a Waver. Though it's not quite the same, seeing how our version's got twice as much horsepower."

Conis looked at me in surprise. "Wait, you know about Wavers, too? And you have one?"

"Eh, not really," I waved her off. "That's the first one we've seen in person, the one we have is actually sky-based, too. We only have it because we found it in a two-century-old wrecked ship that nearly fell on top of us yesterday."

"I... see..." Conis hedged uneasily, obviously trying to process what she was hearing.

"Oh, hello there," Pagaya waved at us in greeting. "I take it you must be from the Blue Sea?"

"Yup yup yup!" Soundbite piped up.

"Devil Fruit," I said before Pagaya could ask.

"Ah. Well, I see you've met my daughter. My name is Pagaya, it's a pleasure to meet you."

"Jeremiah Cross and Soundbite, same to you," I replied. "I don't suppose you know anyone good with Wavers? We've got one in our boat that needs some serious repair work; the Dial engines looked intact, but besides that—"

"You even know about Dials? Have you been to a Sky Island before?" Conis asked wonderingly.

"No, but I read a very detailed story about a crew that did travel to a Sky Island," I said truthfully, and then slapped myself, grimacing. "Damn, I forgot to bring vearth."

"The heck is vearth?" Zoro asked.

"Exactly what it sounds like..." I sighed as I ground the heel of my palm into my forehead. "A jar of the stuff would have been useful."

"I got a jar of di-irt, I got a jar of di-irt, and guess what's inside it?" Soundbite sang.

"What could a most beautiful angel of the heavens," Sanji sang dreamily before snapping back to
affronted. "Want with dirt?"

"Q-Quite a bit, actually!" said angel jumped in shock. "You see, Island Cloud—that is to say, the cloud we are standing on now—is capable of sustaining plant-life, but it cannot cause it to sprout. In order to grow our crops, those of us who inhabit the sky need yearth. As such, it is a highly sacred substance to us! A jar of it would have been..." She sighed sadly. "Most beneficial for us..."

"I am so sorry about that..." I trailed off before re-slapping myself. "Hang on a minute, I'm a complete dipshit. Hey, Nami, you think you could spare some soil from your tangerine grove?"

"Huh?" Nami asked, before looking thoughtful. "Hmm, if it's just the soil... yeah, I think we have enough that I could spare a jar or two, as long as we replenish it as soon as we head back down."

"Perfect! Any chance we could trade them for a couple of spare Dials you've got and a good repairman for the fossil-Waver we have?" I asked the trade-ees in question.

"P-Pardon me, but I'm a Dial-engineer myself. I'll gladly take a look at it, and we have a small collection of spare Dials in our house," Pagaya said, both shocked and happy. "If you're really giving us a jarful of yearth, that's more than a fair trade. Thank you, Cross."

"Yay! We can grow our own foxnip now!" Su said happily.

Conis winced uncomfortably. "Su, the last time you got foxnip, you made your way through the town six times before we managed to catch you!"

The cloud fox's response was to giggle and wave her tail happily. "I know! Why do you think I want to try it again?"

"You're MY KIND of fox, GIRLY!" Soundbite cackled.

"Thanks! You're pretty cool yourself, greaseball!"

I slapped my hand on Soundbite's shell with a grimace. "Talking animal companions. Can't live with them, can barely live without them, am I right?"

"I'm starting to get the picture..." Conis concurred morosely.

While Zoro retrieved the Waver and Nami and Sanji went to get the soil from the grove—Sanji to keep Nami from dirtying her hands and Nami because she'd never let anyone touch the trees without her being there, not even... least of all us—a round of introductions and conversation followed as Conis and Pagaya learned of the unfamiliar species of Supersonic Ducks, Kung-Fu Dugongs, and even Transponder Snails. That was a problem that I'd have to think about more; I wanted to be able to keep in contact with Conis, Wiper, Gan Fall, and the rest of them through the SBS when we left, but there was no convenient Transponder Snail onboard that we had forgotten about. The only solution I could see was leaving behind Pinky or the Brain, or both, and that was a decidedly less-than-optimal choice. Ultimately, though, I decided to cross that bridge when we came to it; it was the least of my worries while Eneru was still around.

After Nami and Sanji gave the yearth to the overjoyed Conis, Pagaya, and Su, Nami took Pagaya's Waver out for a spin after I yanked Luffy back from it. I made the wise choice to neglect to mention that it was supposed to take ten years of practice before anyone could ride a Waver that well until after she was well on her way. Because there was no way in hell I was going to put up with that much gloating.

After watching the navigator zip back and forth on the waves for a bit—and honestly, it was rather
impressive, and I really looked forward to riding shotgun on the thing—Pagaya stated that he would probably be able to repair our Waver, once he got back to his house, and invited us over for dinner.

I took that chance to call Nami back, calmly insisting on her joining us. Fortunately, she was able to read between the lines of me using the words 'get your ass back here now' and jabbing a finger at the beach, and she came back quickly enough. The walk up the stairs towards Pagaya's house and past the cloud quarry featured Pagaya explaining how the islands were formed, thanks to the pyrobloin sent into the sky from volcanic eruptions increasing the clouds' density. And I had to admit, the quarry was, at the risk of overusing the word, awesome to look at. Simplistic, and yet there was a definite sense of precision and industry to it. It was quite the sight.

Once we arrived at the house, Sanji and Pagaya headed straight for the kitchen, while Conis fetched a small box full of very distinct shells.

"These are all the spare Dials that we have. I'm afraid they're just common household ones that we keep in case the ones we use break: Breath, Flame, Tone, Vision, Flavor, Heat, and Water. But you're welcome to whichever ones you'd like," she said kindly.

"Well, we'll definitely want the Water Dial," I said, remembering how little the story touched on that particular Dial. "Fresh, drinkable water is a rarity down on the Blue Seas, and any means of storing it would be of great use to us."

"A good choice," Conis nodded in agreement before holding up a very familiar spiky Dial. "Especially if you decided to take its counterpart, the Flame Dial, as well!"

"Ah—ERK!" I started to hedge before cutting myself off in a hiss. Getting your shoulders crushed by two separate irate females does that to you.

"Thanks," Nami grit out irritably. "But we already salvaged one from the ship that fell on us."

"We tried running some experiments with it and, needless to say…" Vivi continued, her hand digging into my collarbone. "We don't need another."

"Save me…" I whispered in terror.

Conis glanced between them for a moment before her eyes widened and she looked away, a blush rising to her face. "I believe I can understand your anger," she muttered.

"HA!" Su barked from the other side of the couch. "I remember that incident! Well, mostly, anyways! Remind me, were those underoos purple or—MMPH!?" the fox was cut off by a scary-accurate pillow lodging itself in her jaws.

"I'm so sorry—!"

"PURPLE!" Soundbite barked out with a cackle. "Her heart rate SPIKED! Quite risqué, eh—HEY!"

I growled as I forced Soundbite into his shell. Again. "No, no, I'm the one who sorely needs to apologize…"

"Might I advise merely splitting the difference and calling it even?" Robin proposed.

I sighed before looking back at Conis. "Moving on, could you show us how that Vision Dial works? I know it captures images, but how does it reproduce them on paper?"
In the end, we settled for the Water Dial, the Vision Dial and, at Sanji's request, the Flavor Dial. And shortly after that we found ourselves enjoying the sweetest lobster I ever tasted, along with a fine selection of island fruit.

"Lobster tail…" I moaned euphorically as I sucked the scrumptious crustacean meat down. "Mother of the seas, I haven't eaten lobster in so long…"

"Didn't know you were that big of a fan of the shelled meats, Cross," Sanji chuckled.

"Lobster tail, bisque or shrimp, Sanji…" I chuckled eagerly. "Either or, I couldn't give a damn. Just gimme some and it'll be nice and gone!"

"Is it cannibalism, you ask?" Soundbite mused around the claw he was gnawing on before annihilating it and swallowing it whole. "MAYBE! BUT IT'S TOO DELICIOUS FOR ME TO CARE!"

"Well, I'll keep that in mind next time I have some," Sanji nodded confidently.

"Hey, Conis? This is delicious, but I prefer my food with more salt," Su piped up, prompting Soundbite to shudder.

"I'll remember that, Su," Conis replied, taking a shaker and sprinkling more of it over Su's plate. The fox nibbled at the food before purring contentedly.

"YOU REALIZE this means we can no longer be friends, RIGHT?" Soundbite sniffed imperiously.

Su's response was to shoot an indecipherable glance at the snail before flicking her tail. "Oh, we were friends? I hardly noticed. I tend to wipe little puddles of slime away, not befriend them."

"Su!" Conis gasped in shock.

"Wait for it…" I said, holding my finger up patiently.

Soundbite, for his part, gaped at the cloud fox for a moment before grinning a massive grin. "Correction… this feels like THE START OF A MOST BEAUTIFUL PARTNERSHIP."

"There it is."


"We're talkin' about Soundbite here; I'm not surprised he'd be fast friends with a fox as snarky as this one," Lassoo said around his own mouthful of meat. "Besides, what the rest of the world calls 'weird' is more like batting 1000 for this crew. Case in point: I'm a talking gun havin' a conversation with a giant duck."

"While having dinner alongside four adolescent martial artist turtle-seals and their teacher," Mikey added.

"With said dinner cooked and flavored using seashells," Sanji continued.

"On a picturesque island in the sky, so beautiful that it brings a single tear of awe to even my most imperviously handsome eye," Isaiah contributed.

"Do I even need to mention the captain?" I asked. "I'm only half-kidding here."
"Alwight, alwight, withdwawn alweady," Carue squawked, though he was smiling.

That got a chuckle from everyone.

"So, Pagaya," Robin began. "While we may be somewhat familiar with the culture of Sky Islands in general, I'm curious as to how your day-to-day lives go on this island. Would you mind telling us more about your culture?"

Now that got something of a reaction out of the father-daughter pair. It wasn't totally overt, mind, but minute full-body clenches were kind of hard to disguise, not to mention the agitated way Su's tail fluffed out. And judging by the way that the non-moron members of the crew all to a sapient narrowed their eyes or sat up straighter, it wasn't just me.

Still, credit where it was due, apart from that singular no doubt entirely involuntary tell, Pagaya and Conis remained composed.

"Well, pardon me if I'm not all that detailed in my recollections, but as you said, you want to hear the day-to-day affairs, and those all tend to blur together," Pagaya mused thoughtfully. "Typically, I spend my day either making any Dial-devices that are commissioned from me by clients or repairing any broken appliances that I'm asked to. It's not really all that fascinating, to be honest. Dial-engineering is quite straightforward once you've learned it. Apart from that, it's mostly just fishing trips for food and for sale."

"I spend most of my time walking on the beach or practicing my harp-playing," Conis added. "I sometimes go to Lovely Street, to shop for more Dials for Father or to get other ingredients, either for dinner or for the snacks I like to make for the local children." Her smile took on a slightly saddened tint. "We're also something like unofficial lifeguards around here. I watch over the children when they go swimming and…" Her smile trembled, ever so slightly. "I welcome any Blue Sea Dwellers who come to visit. It's not uncommon, and I don't think I ever get tired of explaining the way things work up here and seeing their surprise." She then chuckled, her mood lightening up significantly. "But I have to admit, it was a pleasant surprise when I heard you say 'Heso,' Cross; it's the first time I've met a Blue Sea Dweller familiar with our culture."

"Huh? Oh!" I pointed at myself before starting and scratching the back of my head with a sheepish grin. "Well, I just knew the stories; at the time, I didn't think I'd ever actually end up with anyone crazy enough to prove them true. But I'm glad I did; if our crew ever retires, I say we come back here for the rest of our lives."

"Seconded!" said most of the rest of the crew, and the honesty in Robin's smile indicated that she concurred. But the smile Conis gave in response was noticeably strained.

And Vivi's disappeared entirely into a serious frown as she leaned forward, scrutinizing the angel intently. "Conis," she started in a very business-like tone. "Seeing as you're so familiar with the ins-and-outs of Skypiean immigration, there's something I've been meaning to ask."

Conis blinked in confusion before smiling invitingly. "Sure thing, what is it, Vivi?"

The princess glanced at me, and I hesitated for a moment before nodding solemnly. Better now than from the mouths of the well-meaning but excessively lead-handed White Berets.

Having received consent, Vivi gave Conis a serious look. "What are the consequences of entering Skypiea without paying the one billion extol per person toll at Heaven's Gate?"

Conis blinked in surprise before she and Pagaya all but froze up. "A-are you saying that you—?"
"Yes, much to my chagrin, we didn't pay," Vivi sighed despondently. "Our navigator didn't deem it worth the cost."

"It was a total ripoff!" Nami protested, but much more weakly given Conis and Pagaya's fearful reactions.

"W-well, that makes you illegal entrants, m-meaning that the island's law enforcement, the White Berets, will most likely be arriving to arrest you soon," Conis said worriedly. It was apparently only a fraction of what she felt, going by just how white her knuckles were as they bunched up her dress.

"But that's only a minor crime," Pagaya said quickly. "The issue can be resolved if you can pay the fine, I believe it's ten times the entrance fee."

"And if we don't pay that?" Nami asked, her eyes narrowing.

Pagaya swallowed heavily as he averted his gaze ever so slightly. "Then… I hope you'll pardon the suggestion, but it might be best for you to leave as soon as possible."

Conis, meanwhile, averted her gaze much more overtly, refusing to meet any of our eyes as she bit into her lower lip. And she wasn't alone either, as Su had sunk her fangs into the tip of her tail and was glaring daggers at nothing. The silence went on for a minute before Nami broke it.

"Why are you hesitating so much? It's not like we're going to tell anyone anything you tell us that could get you in trouble."

At that point, all three of them winced visibly, Pagaya and Conis in fear and Su in rapidly mounting fury.

"P-pardon our reaction, it's just—!" Pagaya started to hedge before Conis cut in.

"W-we can't say anything," Conis grit out reluctantly, fear coating her voice. "God can hear us everywhere, and if he hears us—!"

"Conis!" Pagaya interrupted, cold sweat coating his brow.

"God?" Zoro asked, raising an eyebrow, but Soundbite cut in before he could say anything else.

"THERE'S ONLY ONE omniscient eavesdropper in the world, AND THAT'S ME!" he spat out viciously before gritting his teeth. "Gastro-SCRAMBLE!"

I tensed as the sound of white noise filled the air, buzzing like a thousand untuned television sets. "Soundbite… what did you just do?"

"I TUNED OUT any unwanted visitors!" Soundbite ground out darkly. "Anyone tries to LISTEN IN, they ain't hearing JACK!"

"Y-you what!?!" Conis yelped, her eyes wide with panic. "Nononono, Soundbite, you can't! I-If God Eneru notices—!

"GOD!?!" Usopp and Carue yelped fearfully, visibly freaked out.

"Soundbite, Conis is right, that was not the best decision to make," Robin nodded in concern, having strode over to the window where she was keeping a careful eye on the surroundings. "If this 'God' individual really was listening to us, then the sudden loss of that ability will be as incriminating as anything that could be said."
"Yeah, but now the great lightning bastard can't hear us anymore, right?"

"Su!" Conis shrieked in panic.

"No, Conis!" Su snarled, arching her back as her fur fluffed out in outrage. "I've been silent my entire life, I've been docile, but now that I have a chance to speak and he can't hear anything, I'm going to say the exact thing that you and everyone on Angel Beach has been thinking for the past six years: Eneru is an evil, selfish, raging BASTARD!"

The mood in the room instantly flipped from tense to electric... though thankfully only in the metaphorical sense. Despite how much we waited and listened, ultimately nothing came of the statement other than Conis and Pagaya looking like they were about to have heart attacks.

"Well, now that that's settled," Su snorted before leaping onto the table and staring straight at Luffy. "You! I saw the emblem on your flag: a skull and crossbones. And combined with that..." She moved her gaze upwards slightly, glancing at Luffy's hat for a moment before refocusing. "You guys are all pirates, right?"

Luffy blinked in surprise before grinning eagerly. "Yup! And I'm the man who's going to be the King of the Pirates!"

"Su, please—!" Conis started.

"If he could still hear us, we'd already be dead," the fox said dryly without ever shifting her attention from Luffy. "And you. I'm assuming that that claim of yours means that you're all strong pirates, right?"

I weighed the pros and cons of this whole scenario before reaching a decision. That is to say, deciding 'fuck it, let's see where this takes us.' "We've beaten anyone who's crossed us. It wasn't always easy, but there's only one enemy we came across that was actually good enough to beat us, and we beat him too in the end. And he was world-class, to boot."

"World-class?" Luffy asked, frowning. "If Crocodile's as strong as they're going to get—"

"He isn't," I cut him off flatly. "Granted, you probably only beat him because he underestimated you too much as a rookie and his own pride butted in, but you managing to beat him at any level was still damn impressive, so yes," I directed the next bit at Su. "We're very strong."

Su was silent for a moment before nodding firmly. "Then in that case, I have a request to make, and it's a big one."

"Su, p-pardon me, but you can't—!" Pagaya started.

"Watch me," Su shot back before pouncing to a position where she could look at all of us at once. "This is going to sound dangerously insane, but at this point, I don't see any other options." Su spread her legs and bowed her head solemnly. "Please, help overthrow God Eneru and free us from his tyranny!"

The words sunk in for a moment, and then we reacted like mature, reasonable—oh, wait, I already did that joke.

"EEEEEEEEEEEHHH?"

"SU!" Conis burst out in horror, jumping to her feet. "Y-you can't just ask anyone who comes to us to die for our sakes!"
"No, that's where you're wrong, Conis!" Su shot back as she leapt forwards and glared up at her owner. "What I can't do is just stay silent and not do anything I can after watching you and your dad suffer for six years! Six years, Conis! Six years where I haven't been able to say anything, where I've been forced to watch as person after person came through this beach and died! Well, now I can finally speak, and I'm going to take this opportunity to do the one thing nobody has had the courage to do in a long time, despite how much they've wanted to: ask for help!"

Conis was trembling, visibly conflicted. "I... I'm not—"

"Why would you want us to overthrow your god, and what do you mean by tyranny?" Robin asked.

"Yeah, I think we're missing some rather crucial context here!" I concurred. "Look, when you call this Eneru person 'God'—?"

"He's not actually a god!" Su interrupted hotly. "That's just the title the people here call their ruler, but it went straight to Eneru's head when he took over!" She snapped her gaze to Pagaya. "Come on, klutzy, tell them! We'd have fried ten times over if he could actually hear us, so we're in the clear!"

Pagaya visibly hesitated for a moment before sighing and hanging his head in defeat. "Six years ago, God Eneru and the men he calls his priests invaded our land of Skypiea," he recited sadly. "Eneru and his acolytes defeated the army of the old God and banished him before taking his place. Since then... Eneru has ruled over Skypiea with an iron fist."

Conis desperately swapped her gaze between her father and her pet for a moment before the energy seemed to flow out of her, sinking into her seat with her face buried in her hands. "He can always hear us, no matter where we are," she croaked miserably. "He makes us guide any and all criminals we find to the God's Land, Upper Yard, where they are then hunted and killed for his amusement by his priests. And... should anyone say anything or try to protest in any manner..." Conis choked back a sob. "Then they are... put to death!" And with that, Conis broke down, sobbing miserably in spite of Pagaya doing his best to comfort her.

Su stared at her solemnly for a moment before slowly turning her gaze back to us. "I've had to watch this for six years. Had to watch as this bastard made the closest friend I have in life send people off to die with a smile. And I can't watch it for a second longer. Unless something is done..." Su bowed her head solemnly. "Over twenty years ago, another pirate crew came here, a fantastically strong one, whose leader was righteous. I didn't see him, but my parents and all the other animals who were alive then still speak of him to this day. We animals are the only ones brave enough to say anything because Eneru has never paid direct attention to us, and this is the only chance I'll have to say anything at all. You're... You're our last chance. So please..."

Tears, previously hidden by the pure white fur, dripped to the tabletop.

"Help us..."

Unsurprisingly, the crew as a whole was angry. Usopp and Carue seemed partly panicked as well judging from their shaking legs, but their expressions were too dark to tell. Sanji in particular looked ready to explode, but three faces held far darker expressions than his. Nami seemed to be flushing back to her time with Arlong, rage overtaking any possibility of fear; she was already absentmindedly reaching for the pieces of her Clima-Tact. Vivi was similarly furious, no doubt enraged at hearing how a ruler, no matter how despotic, could treat his people so cruelly; one hand gripped into a fist on her thigh and the other wandered to her neck and fumbled with that necklace she'd been wearing since we'd left Alubarna. And Luffy...

"Guys, I've decided," he said, getting to his feet and dropping the bit of meat he'd been holding, his
hat casting a shadow over his blazing eyes. "We're going to kick this god-guy's ass."

"Not that I'm objecting, Mister Captain, but what made you decide that? If I recall, despite the tragedies in Alabasta, your only motivation was the princess," Robin said, earning a glare from Vivi that died upon seeing the fire in Robin's eyes. Still, she prepared to say *something*...

"Because she's our friend."

When I interrupted, not looking up from where I was sitting hunched forwards with my elbows on my knees and my hands clasped between my legs.

"She greeted us warmly, she invited us into her home, she let us eat her food..." I recited matter-of-factly. "This might not seem like a lot, but Conis is our friend, and personally, if I willingly left a friend in these kinds of conditions without doing something, *anything* to help?" I shot a firm warning look at Robin. "Then I honestly wouldn't be able to live with myself."

"What Cross said," Luffy growled, breathing out steam from his nostrils.

"Well, looks like the captain has made up his mind," Zoro remarked, grinning menacingly. "So, Conis, how do we get to this 'Upper Yard' place?"

"W-what!?" Conis yelped desperately. "N-no, no! Please, I know what Su said, but—!"

"Conis," Vivi cut in, visibly wrestling with her temper as she landed a hand on the angel's shoulder. "Trust me, trying to fight this is a wholly futile endeavor. We are trying and doing it, because we want to. Rather than opposing us, you should be helping us find the best way to reach God."

"Besides," Nami drawled, spinning one of her staff's segments between her fingers absently. "This isn't the first experience we've had like this; whenever Luffy sets his mind to something, no amount of reasoning can make him abandon that course of action. The difference this time, however —" She suddenly clenched the bar of metal in a vein-popping deathgrip. "Is that we're *all* in agreement." She then looked at Conis, her eyes softening significantly. "So, please. How do we do this?"

Conis chewed her lip hesitantly as she weighed our words, looking down at where Su had laid her paw on her knee.

"Tell them, Conis," Su whispered. "Please."

Conis hiccuped as she looked at Su, before finally sighing and digging through her shirt and withdrawing a shell-shaped whistle. "...There are three ways to get there, and considering that you're wanted criminals already, two of them are immediately accessible, and both guarantee that Eneru won't strike you down. Immediately, at any rate..."

"Heso!"

We jumped as a chorus of voices came from outside.

"The hell—?" Nami started as she glanced towards the door.

"Oh, damn it..." I ground out as I clawed at my face. Now? *Really*? I mean, I knew they meant well, but their timing could *not* have been worse.

...buuuut, then again, we did need to commit a higher crime to really sell this whole thing, so...
"We've received word that no fewer than nine illegal entrants from the Blue Sea have—"

"Gastro-Phony," I bit out. I waited for a moment as the voice outside fell silent before looking around with a slightly desperate expression. "Alright, let's make this fast, before they clean themselves up and return with reinforcements."

"C-clean—? What did you—?"

"Let's just say you're going to need to wipe your front… everywhere, and leave it at that, please."

-I-

I breathed out a heavy breath as I leaned on the balcony of the house, gazing out at the Merry floating off of the coast of the beach. "Alright, we're ready on our end, as far as we can be. You guys?"

"Unhappy about having to ride the all-too-literal express route twice in the same day, but other than that?" I could just about see Nami nod on the deck of our ship. "We're ready. Good luck, Cross."

"You too, guys," I muttered before jerking my hand across my neck. I then glanced over at Conis and gave her a nod. "Do it."

Conis nodded hesitantly. "A-alright then…" And with that, she brought the whistle to her mouth and blew.

Moments later, the sea-clouds of the White-White Sea started shifting, then bubbling, then outright churning until finally—

\textit{SPLOOSH!}

—they erupted, disgorging a \textit{stupidly} massive shrimp that snatched up the Going Merry and all the occupants onboard before turning around and tearing through the water. Not blindingly fast, mind you; fast, sure, but only just so fast that it was uncatchable. There was plenty of time to watch it leave, to confirm that one's friends weren't just gone, but \textit{taken} too.

I watched after the Merry for as long as I could before turning around and clasping my hands together. "Alright, they're gone. Now it's our turn." I grinned savagely. "Who's ready to defile some sacred soil?"

Luffy grinned as he slammed his knuckles together. "Alright!"

Sanji scoffed as he lit his cigarette and blew out a hefty cloud of smoke. "Sacred or damned, I would storm any soil for the sake of my angels, new and constant alike."

"Maybe we'll see if I actually got anything out of that death-duel Zoro considered a spar," Leo muttered, Donny putting a sympathizing flipper on his shoulder.

"Eh, just wake me up when it's time to fight," Lassoo yawned as he cracked his neck back and forth.

"Truly a slothful one, isn't he?" Isaiah noted.

"No kidding—wait, what are you doing here?" Sanji asked the bird currently perched on his shoulder.

"Terry and I were barely within the snail's range already, and while he was more inclined to stay
onboard the ship with Zoro, considering himself, and I quote, 'powerful enough to go without speaking until the others get back.' I'd prefer to keep my voice… and, for that matter, spend some time away from that Bear-Glove neanderthal."

Sanji considered that for a moment before nodding in agreement. "Fair enough. Well, let's get going. Soundbite, cut it."

Once Soundbite cut the Gastro-Scramble—great name, by the way, I should have thought of it myself—Conis and Pagaya put on a show of explaining how dangerous it was to have attacked the White Berets, and saying our crew had been taken to Upper Yard to be offered as tribute. Of course, Robin and I had organized beforehand who would go which direction, and I trusted her to leave enough fighters onboard to deal with Shura when he showed up. I had picked up my armor and stashed the Impact and Flash Dials in my pockets before they left, but I'd reluctantly left the transceiver onboard; disappointing though it was, the next SBS could wait until after the first day of battles, right about when we started the party with the cloud wolves. As it was, best not to have a big-ass bag hanging off of me when I had other options, especially when said bag had all of those notes in it; if that fell into the hands of anyone loyal to Eneru, we'd be screwed. Pagaya and Su came with us as Conis escorted us through the island, past Lovely Street and to the Little Crow. Luffy's reaction was predictable… and I'll be honest, I was inclined to agree with him.

"You really sure we can't ride the big badass bull?" I griped miserably.

"Pardon us, but we simply don't have the extols to rent it for you," Pagaya shrugged before pausing thoughtfully. "Well, maybe if you had another jar of vearth…?"

I froze as I contemplated the consequences of that course of action. "Yeah, no, I'd really rather not push my luck with Nami; I fear the wrath she can bring about over those trees more than I fear anyone or thing on these seas."

"That bad, huh?" Su noted from where she was clinging to Conis' back where her harp normally was.

"I HAVE HAD one leaf off of those trees THE ENTIRE TIME I've been on that ship…"

Soundbite stated morosely before shuddering heavily. "NEVER AGAIN!"

"Well, you should all be able to fit on the Crow, at least, and the engine works perfectly; Father repaired it only a few days ago," Conis said, smiling lightly.

We all returned that smile as we mounted the Crow, getting a quick crash course in how to run the dial-engine before we were finally ready to go.

"Well, we're setting off," I announced. "Try and fix up our Waver while we're gone, would you? We'll definitely be back for it."

"A-absolutely," Pagaya said, not needing to fake the uncertainty in his voice.

"Don't worry about us, old guy, we'll be fine!" Luffy said cheerily.

"I don't intend to keep our three beautiful ladies waiting for too long," Sanji agreed smoothly.

"Doesn't he mean four?" Donny whispered.

"You know Raphey doesn't call herself a lady," Leo whispered back. "Plus, not humanoid, probably a gray area."
"SILENCE FROM THE EMERGENCY FOOD SUPPLIES!" Sanji roared.

"Yes, sir..." the dugongs groaned as they cradled their bruised skulls.

Conis was silent throughout the farewells, maintaining the same solemn silence she'd been keeping since our venture had started...

Before finally, she let herself smile, ever so slightly.

"Good luck," she whispered, almost too faintly for us to hear.

It was at that point that the world grew dark and the sky lit up.

There was no warning, no sign, not even so much as an inkling. Just a lot of light and the reek of ozone.

Time seemed to slow as I turned my gaze upwards, taking in the... well... the act of fucking God taking place above me. "No..." I breathed numbly.

After that, several things happened at once: a roar of rage, a blast of steam, a blur of red, and a mass slamming into my midsection and bowling me over.

I had just enough time to process the fact that a dazed Conis and Su were lying on top of me and catch sight of a lobster-red Luffy grabbing a yet-shellshocked Pagaya—

**ZEE-RACK!**

Before the sky ripped itself apart.

Here's a tip: it's not a good idea to be directly next to a bolt of lightning when it hits the ground. Even less so when said bolt of lightning is about the size of an F5 vortex, and even less yet when you happen to be in a boat, on the water, which isn't anchored.

This is the situation that I found myself in when the 'almighty' Eneru decided to smite Conis for her minute show of infidelity. The fact that she and Su were safe beside me was some consolation, but I was hoping beyond all hope that the previous God had chosen to intervene on our behalf in this case, or else, because as it was, Conis had gotten on her hands and knees and was staring at the crater where her father had been with a rapidly paling face.

Or at least, that's what I think she was doing. I couldn't be sure, because unlike my superhuman-by-default crewmates who had been born in this world, I was experiencing the logical outcome of seeing that much lightning and hearing the resulting thunder at point-blank distance: becoming temporarily (I hoped) blind, deaf and, apart from the occasional 'mawp', very dumb.

Thankfully, apparently my time here had done the trick, because I did get my senses back rather fast.

*Un-fortunately, I got them back just in time to have a facefull of flung-Luffy bowl me over once anew.*

"Do not fear! I, the sky knight Gan Fall, have saved them!" Gan Fall (duh) called out confidently as he helped Pagaya onto a seat behind him on Pierre before directing his mount to flap closer to us. "Quickly now, help the girl on before—!"
"GAH!" Pierre squawked in terror, barely managing to avoid a relatively normalish bolt of lightning that almost hit him.

I cursed vehemently as I glanced up at the sky before shaking my head at Gan Fall. "No good! She's already onboard, Eneru's not going to let her go! Look, just," I waved my hand frantically. "Get out of here, take Pagaya and go! We'll look after her, she'll be safe with us, I promise!"

Gan Fall hesitated for a moment before nodding in agreement. "Very well, then! May luck be with you, good travellers! You shall need it!"

"Conis..." Pagaya said worriedly.

"Don't worry, klutzy!" Su piped up. "These guys are strong enough to keep us safe. Besides, I'd sort of like a piece of the action."

"BE CAREFUL YOU don't bite off MORE THAN YOU CAN CHEW, foxy!" Soundbite taunted eagerly.

"Why dontcha get in my mouth and see just how much I can chew, slimeball?" Su retorted playfully.

"Su..." Conis muttered before shaking her head and looking back at her father. "But she's right! I'll be safe with them, Father, and you know that I can take care of myself."

Pagaya hesitated for a moment before nodding reluctantly, and with that, Pierre flew off towards Gan Fall's sanctuary.

We stared after them for a moment before I snapped my fingers at Donny and Leo, prompting them to get the Dial-engine running and us sailing towards the largest of the Milky Roads. It was only as we started to climb the hill that I turned towards Luffy, finally processing how he'd saved Conis. "You've worked out Gear Second already..." I breathed in awe.

Luffy grumbled as he dusted his hat off and inspected it for damage before placing it on his head. "Well... sorta. It's not done yet. I can't keep my blood going for that long and, well... it still feels incomplete. So, for now... Gear One and a Half, really."

"Gear One Point Five sounds better," Lassoo suggested.

"Or that."

"Still, I didn't expect you to work that out for at least another month," I said weakly, before thinking about it more. "So, that's what you were doing back on Jaya... well, once we get back together with the rest of the crew, talk to Chopper about it; great technique though it is, it's still straining your body. Better to work out the kinks before we fight someone who's actually dangerous to you."

Judging from the way Sanji's eyes widened, he figured out the hidden meaning in my words, and he promptly did the one best thing he could have in this situation: he grinned, spun onto his knees before Conis and took her hand. "Conis, O most beautiful of Angels in the heavens, I vow that I shall most definitely keep you safe," he asserted.

"...Thank you, for saving me... but..." Conis managed to smile before turning her attention towards the approaching crest of the hill. "I hope you're right about how strong you all are, for all of our sakes. Because now..."
I followed her gaze as we mounted the top of the road, and caught sight of what lay before us: a green hell embedded in a sea of white. Trees more massive than any I'd ever seen before, hiding enough death and destruction in their shadows to match Little Garden with ease, while also cradling the hopes and dreams of two entire civilizations.

"...the trials of Upper Yard await."
Chapter 29: The Trials Of The Upper Yard! Fruits Of Training Realized!

Cross-Brain AN: Loyal viewers, we must apologize; the previous chapter rounded out at a mere nineteen thousand words. Considering our standards, we simply cannot allow that to go uncorrected. We hope you enjoy, therefore, a much more lengthy chapter.

Hornet AN: And I gotta edit all of it… *mumble mumble*

The Patient One AN: Hey, you're not the only one; who always does the final check? Besides, it's fun.

Xomniac AN: Speak for yourself. You don't need to suffer through the pain of writer's block. Such burnout, so much pain. Good thing we've been working on this thing all week, or else we'd never have gotten this done on time! XP

The Patient One AN: Key word: "we."

"But there's one sound… no one knows… WHAT DOES THE FOX—MMPH!?!"

"I'm willing to suffer a lot of shit, Soundbite," I ground out as I forced my fist between the snail's teeth. "But that particular abomination lies ten miles past the pale."

"Heheheh, whipped!" Su giggled.

"It never gets any easier, does it?" Conis sighed, eyes downcast.

"You're lucky, yours doesn't have to hitch a ride," I grumbled.

The somber, tense mood we had had going since we left Lovely Street had ironically alleviated as we slowly approached the treeline of the Upper Yard, courtesy of the comedy stylings of Su and Soundbite, though use of the word 'comedy' probably gave those two too much credit.

Still, as off-color as the pair's jokes were, they still managed to accomplish the job they set out to do: getting Conis to smile, however melancholy the smile might have been. So, really, I couldn't fault them for whatever they did… at least, up until Soundbite moved to that song. I should have seen it coming, really; we had an actual fox onboard now, so the opportunity was too much for him to pass up on. I could only imagine how bad it would be if Soundbite taught Su the lyrics… or even worse: the rest of the crew actually liked the song. Like he didn't enjoy spouting earworms like crazy already!

I shook my head as I refocused on the matter at hand; the treeline was approaching, but I had no way to inform my crewmates, and especially not Conis, of exactly what we were going to face when we got there. I didn't even bother with contemplating choosing another path besides Satori's; Zoro was the only one who'd be able to reliably go toe-to-toe with Ohm, even without the Iron Cloud traps. Idiot though Gedatsu was, one wrong step on his turf meant a Swamp Cloud bath. And though Soundbite could make quick work of Fuza, we were still expecting Shura to attack the Merry, plus we had no way of reliably countering his String Clouds. Basically, of the priests, only Satori's turf wasn't a guaranteed death sentence.

…Alright, so I did consider the other paths, but only to confirm that the best choice was to stick with what we knew. But I was itching for some way to fill in the gap as we got there with some kind of meaningful conversation, while at the same time not saying anything that would draw more of
Eneru's ire than we already had. But what was I supposed to—?

"Excuse me, Cross?"

Conis' voice broke me out of my thoughts, prompting me to turn and look at her. "What is it, Conis?"

"I've been wondering for a while, I've never learned all that much about Devil Fruits," she said, her face curious. "Not many of the Blue Sea Dwellers who have come to Angel Island over the past several years had them, and even fewer were willing to talk about their powers. I know that they give whoever eats them great power at the cost of never being able to swim again, but that's about it. Could you tell me more about them?"

I glanced back at the approaching treeline before shrugging. "Sure, it's pretty simple, really. There are three different types of Devil Fruit. Zoan-types give the power to turn into a specific animal, like a jackal, a falcon, or a horse; those users are usually close-combat fighters, taking advantage of the extra strength the fruit gives them. Logia-types give the power to turn into a specific element or control it, like smoke, fire, or sand. They're renowned as the most powerful of the three types, both for offensive purposes and the fact that unless you have a counter for the element they turn into, it's impossible to hurt them. And Paramecia-types… well, they cover anything else."

"Anything? That seems… I don't know… risky?" Conis said uncertainly.

I shrugged. "Any Devil Fruit is risky; most people who eat them never know what powers they'll get until after they get them. And sure, some abilities are more inherently powerful than others, but no power is useless; it all depends on the user's ingenuity and dedication. For example, at first glance, you wouldn't think that controlling sound would be all that useful of an ability, at least not from an offensive standpoint. But with how much practice Soundbite put in, he's made it a lethal force."

"I'M A BADASS, BABY!" Soundbite cheered in agreement.

"Another example from earlier in our crew's journey is the Kilo-Kilo Fruit, which allows the user to shift their weight upwards and downwards in increments of kilograms. Doesn't sound that useful, but the user was an assassin who put it to good use by shifting her weight to a single kilogram, so that she could jump absurdly high and float with a parasol, before ramming it in the other direction to several thousand kilograms, so that she hit with the force of a small meteorite. And that's just two examples out of the few dozen that I know, and even that's a small percentage of how many there are; the Paramecia fruits are the most common of the three kinds."

"I see," Conis nodded sagely before tilting her head curiously, and maybe a bit hopefully. "I don't suppose you know how powerful a Paramecia fruit can be?"

I smiled darkly. "Down on the Blue Seas, any conversation about the strongest starts with seven people. To my knowledge, of these individuals, five have Devil Fruit Powers. Only one was a Logia-user; the other four are all Paramecia-users. And they're still feared the world over, Logia or no Logia."

"Cooool…" Su whistled in awe.

"Indeed," I nodded in a somewhat absentminded manner as I noticed how we were now entering the forest, passing between flaming effigies of wood and bone and statues of molded vearth alike, as well as a small cemetery's worth of wrecked ships that had to have been purposely arranged. "So, Conis, how likely is it that we're going to have to deal with a lot of traps from this point onward?"

"Um… very likely, I think," Conis noted nervously as she glanced around at the literally giant-sized..."
trees that surrounded us. "At least until we reach one of the Priests' areas."

"Perfect! Soundbite, keep your… um, hearing open—"

"TOOK YA this long to figure out that I DON'T HAVE EARS?"

"And Luffy, Sanji, Lassoo, Donny, and Leo? Keep your eyes open," I continued, ignoring Soundbite's jab. The snail rolled his eyes, but nonetheless began concentrating. Then he abruptly grimaced.

"EVERYONE, keep your eyes on the PATH, AND be ready to parry ON MY MARK," he said.

All five took their positions, warily scanning the shadows of the forest.

"Be very, very careful," I warned them as I watched the darkness. "This place is perfect for a veritable array of deathtraps that could be hiding in any number of nooks and crevices."

"What the heck do you know about deathtraps, white bread?" Lassoo snorted.

I promptly sat up with a jerk, giving the mutt-weapon an incredulous glare. "Ex-cuse me?! What do I know about—? I will have you know that I grew up with the Indiana Jones series!"

"Indiana who?" Conis blinked in confusion.

"Dun du-dun DUN, dun du-DUUUUN!" Soundbite sang even as he kept his eyes on a swivel.

"Indiana Jones is an adventure series from back home," I explained. "It's about the adventures of the titular archaeologist, who delves into countless forgotten tombs in order to liberate their treasures so that they might be shared with the world! Of course," I shrugged helplessly. "The ancient people who built said tombs didn't want their treasures to be stolen, so the tombs were always stocked full of a variety of deathtraps. These traps included swinging blades—"

"LEO! PARRY right!"

The blue-bandanna-wearing Dugong promptly unslung his blades and swung them in the direction in question, only just managing to catch the blade of a titanic scythe that had been about to bisect us. One heave later, and it was swinging harmlessly over our stern.

Of course, it wasn't the only one. Almost a half-dozen of the things swung out of the jungle and tried to tear into us, practically all at once, at that. It was only thanks to the panicked actions of Donny operating the Dial Engine, Luffy and Sanji smashing away the weapons by the flats of their blades, and Lassoo blasting the mechanisms hidden in the forest that we remained uninjured.

"—often with tribal faces, much like these…" I calmly mused as I observed my very on-edge crewmates. "As well as dart-launchers—"

"GET DOWN!"

We hit the deck, pressing ourselves against the floor of the boat as a series of wooden clicks echoed out of the jungle and a rainstorm of thunks littered the sides of the Crow. When we righted ourselves, the woodwork of the ship was absolutely peppered with sharpened wood stakes.

"Spring-loaded spears hidden along the often-traveled path—" I continued as if we were in a classroom and not a trap-ridden jungle.
"VEER Left! RIGHT! ACCELERATE!"

The Crow pulled off an impressive display of veering and maneuvering as it dodged and wove around the mess of wood stakes that erupted from the bed of the Milky Road.

"Giant monsters, as well as deadly snakes…" I continued, by this time sporting an eager grin.

"GIANT SEA SNAKE!" Luffy shouted, prompting Sanji and Donny to leap at the monster and smash its jaws open, followed by Lassoo blasting a bomb down its gullet.

"Actually, I think that was a lamprey…" Donny muttered.

"And, of course, the classic booby trap that became a downright cliché in all subsequent works—"

"WILL SOMEONE SHUT HIM UP ALREADY?!" Su yelped.

"—the giant rolling boulder of doom," I finished.

And… nothing.

"Aww…"

THUNK!

"OWCH!" I yelped as I clutched my throbbing skull.


"Oh, thank—!" Conis started to sag…

Before we passed between a pair of steel rails that had been sloped down from the jungle's canopy and aligned only a foot or two above the surface of the Milky Road.

"Uh-oh…" Soundbite muttered.

"Maybe it won't activate?" Conis said hopefully.

She received the answer in the form of a rolling rumble echoing from up above.

"If I have learned one thing from my sixteen hours with this crew, it is that one should never say something like that; it's merely an invitation for someone watching to laugh at you when it happens anyway," Isaiah commented dryly.

"A fair evaluation," Su nodded in agreement. "I, however, have a counter-proposal."

She then used Conis as a springboard to leap at me, hackles raised. "THIS IS ALL HIS FAULT!"

"GAH! OWOWOWOW SHIT! GET THIS MANGY FURBALL OFF OF ME!"

"Su!" Conis protested as she tried to wrench her pet off of my face. "Could someone help me, please?!"

"My sincerest apologies, dearest Conis, but I'm more inclined to dedicate my attention to rowing the fuck away!" Sanji barked as he dug his paddle into the cloudy river.

"ON IT!" Donny and Leo concurred as they grabbed for the spare oars.
"And the reason you two aren't towing is—!" Lassoo trailed off incredulously.

The Dugongs froze up as they exchanged looks before grabbing a spare rope, wrapping it around the neck of the Crow and leaping into the cloud sea. One second later, the Crow shot forward, just fast enough that the enormous and impeccably spherical boulder wasn't catching up with us.

Finally, thankfully enough, the rails veered to the side into the forest and the boulder was carried away from us, and onto a curving path back into the forest. After that, we floated along in relative peace, broken only by my attempts to keep Su from ripping my face off, which my crewmates, and Conis, by this point, were casually refusing to help me with.

Finally, I'd had enough. "SOUNDBITE! GASTRO-PHONY THE FOX!" I snapped.

"NO—!...gladly!"

There was a burst of air and Su halted for a moment in her attempt to rip my face off, giving me just enough time to grab her by the scruff of her neck—

"HURK!"

SPLAT!

—at the exact same time as I was reminded of what Gastro-Phony did to its targets.

"...Soundbite? If we happen to meet Eneru, remind me to let you speak your mind," I said calmly, as if I was not, in fact, soaked from head to neck in fox vomit.

"HAHAHAHEEHEEHEEHOOHOOHOO!" Soundbite cackled.

"Tseeheheheehee..." Su snickered in spite of her slightly sickly tone.

"Oh, Su..." Conis sighed as she took her pet out of my hands.

"As satisfying as that was, it's also murder on my sinuses," Lassoo muttered, punctuating the point with a nasty grimace and scrunched muzzle.

"Allow us," Donny and Leo chorused as they grabbed me beneath my armpits.

"Wait, wha—?" I barely had time to blink as Luffy snatched Soundbite off my shoulder. "Nonono —!"

SPLASH!

"...Is this going to be a thing until we get back to the blue sea?" I ground out as I clawed my way back onboard. "Because if so, rest assured, I can be much worse than I've been up until now."

Conis chuckled uneasily. "We'll be sure to keep that in mind, right, everyone?"

A pause.

"Your stunned silence is VERY reassuring," Soundbite drawled.

"We're not silent about that, shit-snail..." Sanji corrected.

"We're all looking at that!" Luffy grinned eagerly as he pointed ahead.
I turned my gate in the indicated direction, to be met with the four-mouthed gate indicating the direction of the four Ordeals.

Conis's reaction was much more visceral, her body locking up as she stared at the names. "The Ordeal of Swamp, the Ordeal of Iron, the Ordeal of String, and the Ordeal of Balls," she read fearfully. "Each of God Eneru's four priests presides over one of the Ordeals; I've only heard rumors, but I know with certainty that the survival rates are…"

"Not encouraging," Su provided venomously.

"So… which one is the least dangerous?" Donny asked.

Su shrugged and shook her head dismally. "I'm not sure. All the animals in there are tamed by the priests, so they don't talk with anyone outside and attack anyone who goes in. But going off of what I've heard of the priests themselves… we should steer clear of the Ordeal of Iron and the Ordeal of String."

Sanji pointedly turned towards me, and I held my finger up in a 'wait' signal.

"I say we go for the Ball!" Luffy said, grinning eagerly. "That one sounds like fun!"

"Satori…" Su mused. "The… weirdest of them, I've heard. Better than Ohm or Shura, at any rate."

"Well, the captain has spoken," I said with a sigh, though the smile I was sporting was all that the crew needed to see. Sanji turned the wheel towards the rightmost tunnel, and in a matter of seconds, we were plunged into darkness.

We sailed on in silence for a bit until I decided it'd be best to try and lighten the mood a little. "Hey, Soundbite, how about some appropriate music for an ominous tunnel?" I asked cheekily.

"Ooh, GOODY! There's no earthly way of knowing~, which direction we are going~" Soundbite crooned in Gene Wilder's voice. "There's no knowing where we're rowing~, or which way the river's flowing~"

"Will you give it a rest?!" Su snapped.

"Is it raining, is it snowing~" Soundbite sang on, doubling his volume. "Is a hurricane a-blowing~" Then he suddenly gasped. "Not a speck of light is showing, so the danger must be growing… are the fires of hell a-glowing? Is the grizzly reaper mowing?!"

"Cross, will you please shut that damn snail up already!?" Sanji demanded.

"You are joking, right?" I deadpanned.

"YES! The danger must be growing, for the rowers keep on rowing... AND THEY'RE CERTAINLY NOT SHOWING... ANY SIGN THAT THEY ARE SLOWIIIIIIIIIAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!!" The last line devolved into a shriek of terror as we shot out of the tunnel like a cork from a bottle, hanging in the air for the briefest of moments.

I glanced around in confusion at everyone's frozen expressions. "Oh, come on, don't tell me you didn't see the 'inevitable waterfall' cliché a mile off."

"I hate you, Cross," Su whimpered.
"JOIN THE CLUB!" a chorus of voices from persons both present and gastropod-based agreed.

And just like that, gravity reasserted itself, sending us all plummeting into the abyss.

*SPLASH!*

Well, for half a minute or so, at least, until we impacted the Milky Road waiting below.

I chuckled as I slowly righted myself, bracing against the prow of the ship in an effort to still my slightly shaking legs. "Well, *that* was certainly a rush! Anyone else wanna go for round two once we're done with all this?"

"I DO! I DO!" Luffy piped up eagerly. "That was awesome! I thought I was gonna die!"

"SO DID WE!" Sanji, Lassoo and the Dugongs roared with considerably more heat.

"Hey, look at it this way: it could have been worse." I grinned at the disbelieving looks everyone shot me. "I mean, imagine if *someone* had guessed that we'd gone through a door that would drop us off the edge of the clouds. Wouldn't that have made the whole thing that much more terrifying?"

Everyone familiar with our captain's antics grasped the hidden meaning in my words, and glared furiously at Luffy. Unfortunately for me, that still left two others, one of whom was practically glowing with anger.

"I'm going to *kill him,*" Su snarled, her eyes cracked open and glaring at me.

Thankfully, the cloud fox was still held firmly in Conis' arms… while said angel was staring at me with an unreadable expression. She then glanced down at Su, then back to me, before shrugging her shoulders impassively. "Alright."

"Wait, wha—?"

And before I could react, Conis flung her pet at my face.

"EAT MY FANGS, BIG-MOUTH!"

"ARGH!"

"HOOOOHOOOheeheeheeheeHAHAHA!"

"YOU LITTLE TRAIT...EAAAARGH!"

About a minute later, I was damn grateful that I got those vitamins from Kureha, because I'm pretty sure that with the sheer number of bites I'd gotten, I would have been dead about a hundred times over otherwise. Thinking about it more, I was pretty sure that this would actually seem funny in hindsight, seeing how I looked now. And if nothing else, Su's viciousness proved that Conis had a good bodyguard even if worst came to worst.

But did any of that give me any consolation for the hundreds of bite marks on my face and upper body in general?

*Not particularly!*

"Why do all Animal Companions have such an intense desire to maul me?" I groused miserably.

"Hey, I never did anything to you," Lassoo mumbled, somewhat indignantly.
"You only half-count, Howlitzer," Su deadpanned as she spat out a few torn scraps of my shirt.

Lassoo paused as he considered that before shrugging. "Fair enough."

"And as for you," Su snapped her glare back to me. "In case you hadn't noticed, I'm a fox. We like being the smartest animals in our general vicinities, and your smart-ass attitude is getting on my nerves!"

"Bi—ergh," I cut myself off as the hundreds of punctures on my body burned. I pondered my options, and ultimately decided to go with the route least likely to earn me any more pain from my allies. I gave her a flat, serious look. "Well, excuse me for being familiar with the pattern of events that are occurring to us. Remind me how much you want us to succeed here?"

Su bristled for a few seconds, but ultimately turned back to Conis with a huff. "Fine, I can't argue with that. But if we do win—"

"Then you'll owe it to me to let me keep outfoxing you," I said with a smirk. "Besides, if it's making you this angry, imagine what it will do to the priests. Anger leads to distraction, and distraction in a situation like this leads to a cruel and unusual death."

It was hard to tell, but I'm pretty sure that after a few seconds, Su smirked at me. "Directing the smartass at others apart from me? Now, that I can live with."

"Alright, now that that little dilemma is solved, do you know anything else about this Satori, Su?" Donny asked.

"Well, we don't know a lot, but—!" Su started to look towards Donny before suddenly locking up, staring past him with a slight shiver.

The dugong sighed in resignation. "He's right behind me, isn't he?"

"No…" Su shook her head lightly. "It's just… the only thing I've heard about him is that he really likes balls."

Leo cocked an eyebrow as he crossed his arms. "We could have guessed that from the name of the Ordeal."

Su shook her head lightly. "No, I mean…" She jerked her chin upwards. "He really likes balls."

We all followed the cloud fox's gaze and froze in shock.

"Uh…" I started slowly. "Am I having a stroke, or is the air filled with floating ball-shaped clouds?"

Lassoo slowly nodded his head side-to-side. "Honestly? I think that's a lot more believable than the reality of this whole situation."

I really couldn't argue with that statement. Honestly, if you thought the situation was absurd in the manga, it was nothing compared to real life. Countless orbs of pure white clouds were floating back and forth through the forest, as light as feathers despite ranging in size from exercise balls to almost twice that size. When you added in the fact that the Milky Road split off and crisscrossed through the trunks of the forest like some kind of massive deformed hydra, the scene as a whole looked like something straight out of one of M.C. Escher's sketchbooks.

"What the hell…?" Donny trailed off slowly, obviously trying to make some logical sense of the illogical scene he was being presented with.
"Well, this is certainly bizarre, but I must admit, it doesn't surprise me that one of the chief followers of someone who can rain down lightning half the size of the Knock-Up Stream would have a lair such as this," Isaiah reflected.

"Hey, maybe we got lucky and chose the path that's not dangerous at all!" Luffy grinned eagerly.

"I… seriously doubt that, Luffy," Conis swallowed, warily eyeing the balls that kept drifting just a little too close for comfort. "Satori has something of a reputation for being odd, certainly, but he has just as much a reputation for being sadistic."

"This doesn't make any sense…" Su muttered to herself as she snapped her head around. "All the animals who got out of here alive said that there were other animals in here, but this place is dead as a graveyard. No birds, nothing on the ground, so where could they be?"

"UH…" Soundbite trailed off as he clenched his eyes shut in concentration, before snapping them open in panic. "DUCK!"

I jerked my head down just as a roaring hiss sounded behind me and a large-ass snake shot out of a ball I hadn't noticed drifting by, biting through the space where my head had been moments earlier. Acting fast, I snatched Soundbite off of my shoulder and slapped him to the underside of the serpent's jaw. "Gastro-Blast!"

"Ba-BAM!"

The snake's head shot upwards, wrapping around the ball it had emerged from with a pained gurgle, hanging listlessly and dripping blood as we sailed away.

"What the hel—!?" Sanji started to curse before noticing another ball floating towards us. "Oh, hell, no, not this time!" He reeled back his leg—

"MOVE!" Lassoo barked, tackling Sanji out of the way with his mass before blasting a baseball into the cloud, causing it to erupt in an impressive explosion.

"The heck—?!

"That cloud," Lassoo growled viciously. "It reeked of gunpowder."

"What the hell kind of madhouse is this place!?" Donny demanded, back to back with Leo as they brandished their respective weapons, ready to strike at any orb that drifted too close.

"Sadistic and smart…" I bit out. "The bastard priest took a minefield and made it three-dimensional, and decided to throw in a bunch of other tricks besides just bombs."

"But is that really all?" Su wondered as she looked this way and that. "I mean, they're dangerous, sure, but it's not too hard to avoid them if they're just floating like this. There has to be more to it."

"Haha-HA! It would appear that the sayings about the intelligence of foxes are true! Haha-HA!"

"Holy crap, one of the balls is talking!"

"I'm not a cloud ball, you brat!"

The rest of us who weren't Luffy all froze as a stuipidly nasal voice came from a direction above and beside us, and slowly turned to look at its source. I then promptly found any fear I had melting away; despite the fact that I knew exactly how formidable Satori was, actually seeing him in that very round
outfit was… disarming, to say the least.

"...Are you serious?" I deadpanned. "Because, honest opinion here, if you want to look threatening, I don't think the best way to do it is by dressing up like a giant cream puff."

"Haha-HA!" the creampuff in question cackled jovially. "Appearances can be deceiving, dear boy! Just like the surprise clouds you see all around us, you never know what could be hidden in an unassuming form like this! Ohm, Shura, and even that ignoramus Gedatsu all prefer straightforward intimidation. But I say, why not have a little more fun? That's why I'm so glad you picked my challenge, the Ordeal of Balls!" The rotund priest tilted his head downwards, emphasizing the sadistic gleam in his grin. "It only has a ten percent survival rate, you know! Haha-HA!"

"Is this guy really a priest?" Sanji asked skeptically.

"...I have to admit, looking at him, it is kind of hard to take him seriously," Su admitted, before growling. "But judging from the fact that a snail just maimed a snake ten times its size, you should know that that doesn't mean much."

I nodded in solemn agreement at that. "Yeah, you're right. All too often, the stupid-looking enemies are the most dangerous because they've earned the right to look stupid. And he's got a home-field advantage too, so if he starts the fight on his terms, he'll have the upper hand. Which means…"

I swiftly took a knee and held an arm out to Lassoo, who took the prompt and leapt at me, morphing into his gun-mode mid-jump. This allowed me to balance him on my shoulder and aim him at Satori.

"We need to end this before it can even begin!"

I positioned my finger on Lassoo's trigger, moments away from pulling it—

Satori grabbed the brim of his hat and tilted it down, hiding his eyes but not his smile. "Projectile, explosive, center mass."

—before promptly freezing, locking the muscles in my finger as I maintained my stance. I slowly tilted my head to the side as I stared at the priest. "You... have Haki, don't you," I said quietly.

Satori looked up at me in confusion. "Haki?"

"... that's right, I've heard it's sometimes called Mantra as well." I cracked my neck side to side as Satori raised his eyebrows. "Well, I guess you were right about having hidden talents up your sleeves, Pillsbury."

"What's Mantra, Cross?" Luffy asked, slowly sliding into a ready stance with his fists raised, a motion that prompted Satori to tense up himself.

"They usually call it Observation Haki on the blue sea," I explained, not breaking my eye contact with the priest. "Basically, it's a sixth sense that gives you the power to detect the presence of others around you, and predict their movements a few seconds before they make them. From what I've heard, it's possible for anyone to unlock the ability, but of the world's population, I'd say that the amount of people that ever do is only around five percent, tops."

"Haha-HA! Your friend is accurate about the rarity of Mantra," Satori gloated. "There's a reason that God Eneru only has four priests under his command; aside from him, we are the only ones blessed with this ability in all of Skypiea."

'Bear the little girl who trumps Eneru ten times over while doing it completely au naturel,' I added
"He can predict our moves? THAT'S SO COOL!" Luffy exclaimed.

"Someone dope-slap him for me, please," I growled.

**THWACK!**

"Thank you. Now, then…" I clenched one of my eyes shut as I took aim at Satori. "Let's deal with this bastard."

And then… I did nothing. I maintained my pose, kneeling as I aimed at Satori. Unseen thanks to the angle of the barrel, I whispered out of the corner of my mouth at Lassoo. Soundbite then proceeded to relay the gun's responses to me, low enough that no one heard.

"…Cross?" Conis asked, warily shrinking away to the back of the Crow.

"Hahaha-HA! I see!" Satori crowed, grinning menacingly. "You don't have the will to fire, do you? Foolish boy; did you come here thinking that this was a game? Allow me to inform you that it isn't! These holy Ordeals are trials of life or death! I am one of the Priests who serve the great God Eneru, and while my Ordeal's survival rate is not the lowest among the four, I did not gain and maintain that honor by being merciful! If you won't attack—" Satori hopped to his feet, crouching in preparation. "Then I will!"

It was at that moment that Lassoo stopped talking.

"You're right and wrong, you know?" I called up at the priest, causing him to pause.

"Hm?" Satori tilted his head in curiosity. "What do you mean?"

"You're right in saying that I'm not going to shoot you," I conceded. "With your Haki, you'd see any direct attacks coming from a mile away, making a head-on assault completely and utterly useless."

Satori's grin widened as he nodded in agreement. "You've got the right of it there, boy! Trying to attack me is completely useless! Now, out of curiosity…" His grin became more mocking than sadistic. "How was I wrong, *hmm*?"

Now it was my turn to grin, a small smirk more than anything. "You said that this wasn't a game. Well, see, that statement was wrong on account of how I'm about to turn it into one."

Satori's smile faded into a thoroughly puzzled expression. "What are you talking about?"

"A game straight from the Blue Seas that's equal parts strategy and luck. You might have even heard of it…" My smile became feral as I swung my torso 90 degrees, pointing Lassoo at the mass of cloud balls he had told me to aim for. "Billiards!"

Satori started in panic. "Nononono—WAIT!"

I didn't. "CANI-CANNON BARRAGE!"

And just like that, the cannon I was carrying started rumbling, launching out a hail of baseballs that hit cloud ball after cloud ball after cloud ball dead-on, sending them ricocheting off against the ground, the trees—and more importantly, dozens of other cloud balls at a time, starting an absolute shitstorm of a reaction.

"CONIS, MAX SPEED!" I roared, tossing Lassoo down and allowing him to morph back into his
hybrid form and continue shooting cloud balls so as to keep the momentum going, while I braced myself. Everyone else promptly did the same as Conis complied, leaping to the front of the ship and triggering the Crow's Breath Dial for all it was worth.

"HEY! WHERE THE HELL DO YOU THINK—GAH!" Satori's enraged shriek was aborted by a yelp of terror he let loose as he narrowly avoided being brained by a ballistic cloud ball ricocheting towards him. He'd barely managed to regain his balance when he was forced to spin on his toes in order to dodge around another ball. He was then forced to take a spinning leap upwards as yet another ball knocked into the one he'd been standing on, ricocheting it off into the madness. Credit where it was due, panicked though he was, Satori was on the ball (pun intended); he dug his Ball Dial out of his pocket, oriented himself so that it was beneath him and activated it. The new cloud was just forming…

WHOMP!

"AGH!"

When a fourth ball blindsided him, going so far as to sprout tentacles and grab hold of him before yanking him along and out of sight.

A few moments later, we were well on our way towards the exit of the Lost Forest, and I couldn't stop grinning.

"Um, Cross? Not that that wasn't completely awesome, but… what just happened?" Su asked hesitantly.

"Observation Haki, or 'Mantra,' as you know it, is a powerful ability, but it has three key weaknesses, two of which I just exploited," I explained. "The first is that it can only predict direct attacks; if you don't know where you're aiming, they can't know it either. And the second is that you have to keep yourself focused to actually be able to 'see' jack. If you get flustered or lose your nerve…"

"Then you're dead meat," Leo nodded firmly, absentmindedly using his blades to slice through a ball that was coming towards us that Soundbite indicated. It was easy to defend when you knew which ones had literal live ammo and which ones were explosive or trip-wired.

"Exactly. Looks like for all of his gloating, Satori relied too much on getting the drop on people and forcing them to fight while off-balance and panicked, and it might have worked, too," I shrugged with a snicker. "Iiiif I wasn't savvy enough to know about the ins and outs of Haki and how to exploit them. I guess spending seven years whiling the day away with storytellers and good books paid off."

"Hmm…" Donny mused contemplatively as he used his staff to send another wayward ball careening back into the mess. "I don't suppose any of those mentioned how to learn Observation Haki, did they?"

I scowled darkly. "Not a one. I tried getting instructions from someone who knew them, but he was either a moron or a total—!"

"Cross," Luffy warned me testily.

"Mhmm…" I interrupted myself with a self-conscious cough. "Still, come on, Luffy, after that upstaging he did back in Nanohana?"
"Heheh. Yeah, he can be a bit of a jerk, can't he?" Luffy chuckled before going completely serious. "He's still my brother, though."

I sighed, knowing that was probably all I was going to get. "Fair enough, captain."

That done, I scanned over the boat, noting the white-knuckled grip Conis had on the wheel. "Hey, you alright, Conis?"

The angel twitched slightly before sagging with a sigh. "It's just... the ease with which you dispatched Satori..."

"Let me stop you there, Conis," Su prompted as she leapt onto her owner's shoulders. "First, if you're thinking about how Satori was supposed to be this big and undefeatable monster, remember: monsters can still be human, and vice-versa. And second, if you're thinking that you could have beaten him sooner if you were braver, newsflash: you had every reason to be terrified of fighting back. If you'd tried fighting back... well, you experienced it firsthand. I might have been a bit forceful back in the house, but I promise you, Conis, you did everything right, everything you needed to survive. That's what counts, right?"

Conis was silent for a moment before smiling lightly. "Yeah, you're right." She reached up and scratched behind the fox's ears. "Thank you, Su."

I whistled in awe as I watched the fox purr and croon beneath Conis' fingers. "Hot damn, puff ball."

"Psh, please," Su scoffed as her tail wagged at the praise. "I've been practicing cheering her up without speaking for years. I'm just putting all that to good use." She gave me a sly look over her shoulder. "You're not the only smart one here, smart-ass."

"THAT'S _up for DEBATE, cotton-tail!_" Soundbite chuckled underneather his breath.

"Bite me, slimestain," Su shot back pleasantly, waving her tail at him.

And so the trip through the Lost Forest remained relatively uneventful from there; Leo, Donny, Sanji, Luffy and Lassoo dealt with the Surprise Clouds while the rest of us just settled in for the ride. Su and Soundbite's playful banter was the most exciting thing to deal with up until the path finally sloped upwards towards the exit.

It was just as we were turning onto the path out that we were met with adversity.

"HOLD IT RIGHT THERE, YOU HERETICAL SCUM!"

"Oy, this guy," Soundbite groused as we turned to see that Satori had indeed managed to fight past the storm of petards we'd yanked him by. He was cut up, bruised, burnt, soaking wet, and even a little bit blown up, but above all else? He was pissed. And if his face wasn't proof enough of that, the several-dozen-cloud-balls-long dragon he was directing with a red-and-white striped cane certainly was.

"You're clever, I'll admit that much, but I'm not about to let you get away after making a fool out of me like that!" the priest shouted furiously. "Count yourselves lucky, for I will finish you with my signature ultimate technique, the Ball Dragon: Overlord Edition! Several dozen shrapnel and explosive orbs strung together in a devastating column; a single touch will detonate it and—"

That was as far as he got before I snapped my fingers and pointed at him, prompting Lassoo to spray a black projectile at Satori. As I expected, he was too angry to have any focus on his Haki, allowing the projectile to hit him dead-on and splatter, coating him head to toe in a viscous liquid that left him
hacking and flailing.

"W-what the—!"

"Cani-Plaster," I explained calmly, making a show of examining my fingernails. "It's a close cousin to Cani-Slick. How do you like it?"

"Uh, Cross?" Luffy asked as he tilted his head in confusion. "How're they any different? They both cover the person in black slimy stuff."

"Indeed, Luffy, except!" I jabbed a finger up. "That where Cani-Slick is nice and slippery octopus ink, this black slimy stuff is tough and adhesive tar, capable of sticking like the absolute dickens. Allow me to demonstrate the difference. Lassoo?" I tilted my finger so that it was pointing at the ball Satori was just barely balancing on. "Cani-Slick."

"Oh, this should be fun," Sanji grinned as he read the situation, and the Dugongs and Luffy seemed to agree wholeheartedly from the way they were staring eagerly at the now horrified priest.

Lassoo bared his teeth before opening his jaws and spitting up yet another projectile, this one painting the snow-white cloud ball black. Satori tried to leap off of his perch, but promptly lost his traction on the ink. His feet flailed and skidded uselessly for a few seconds until his rotund mass worked against him, causing him to make an impressive flip before belly-flopping onto the ball stomach-first, which he stuck fast to. He tried to push himself free with his spread-eagled arms, but his efforts were ultimately for naught.

"You… YOU…!" he spat irately.

"Let me explain the difference between you and us, Pillsbury," I stated as I glared up at the priest. "Us, we Blue Sea Dwellers? We rely on our skills, which we work hard to train and perfect until we can stand up to any enemy, and either overpower them or outsmart them. You? All you've got going for you are a bunch of tricks. Hiding behind smoke and mirrors to make yourself seem bigger than you already are."

"NOT THAT HE needs the HELP!" Soundbite cackled.

"Well, I've got news for you, o wonderful wizard," I smirked as I jabbed my finger past him. "Your strings are starting to show."

Satori followed my finger and promptly paled (or at least I assume so, the tar made it difficult to tell) as he caught sight of the nigh-invisible wire he'd been using to direct his 'Dragon', outlined by globs of tar.

The priest's already panicked breathing accelerated as he snapped his gaze back to me, obviously terrified out of his wits. "W-w-what are you going to do to me?" he whimpered.

I shot him a feral grin as I tapped my finger against my skull. "Why don't you. Tell. Me."

Satori stared at me for a moment, before starting to flail and wail in a desperate attempt to unstick himself, gibbering in panic.

"Soundbite," I snickered at the display. "Some… appropriate music, if you please?"

The snail roared with laughter as he nodded. "ON IT, MAESTRO!" And with that, the air filled with a very specific organ tune, which started slowly mounting in tempo.
"Captain," I grinned widely as I turned to face Luffy. "If you would please? Batter up."

Luffy matched my grin tooth for tooth as he unslung his pipe and began twisting up his body and arm, as if he were preparing for a combined Pinwheel and Rifle attack.

"GUM-GUM..." Luffy shouted as he leapt into the air towards the priest and slowly began untwisting, heedless of Satori's frantic screams and threats.

By the time his pipe struck the ball dead-on, its speed gave it a striking force that would have made Mr. 4 green with envy... eventually.

"HOME RUN!"

Needless to say, the priest and his prison were sent flying, ricocheting off of tree-trunk after branch after tree-trunk, with the Ball Dragon trailing close behind.

"And he, is..." Soundbite started eagerly, tilting his head in preparation...

KRAKOOOM!

For the absolutely earth-shattering detonation that occurred a minute later.

"OUTTA HERE!" Soundbite sang joyously, swaying from side to side.

"And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the third and most blatant weakness of Mantra: predicting an attack is useless if you can't do anything to keep it from going through," I said smugly.

"...Conis?" Su started numbly, obviously still trying to process what she'd just seen. "Do you still think it was a bad idea to ask them for help?"

"Let me get back to you on that, Su, once I've convinced myself that I'm not dreaming," Conis replied in much the same tone.

In a flurry of tropical flowers, Sanji spun up to her and grasped her hands eagerly as he took a knee.

"The only one dreaming here is I, sweet Conis, for it is only in the realm of dreams that I might encounter a Goddess as awe-inspiringly beautiful as yourself!" he eulogized.

Conis stared down at Sanji in wide-eyed awe for a minute before slowly turning her gaze back to Su.

"Things like this aren't helping."

"Welcome to life with the Straw Hat Pirates," Donny chuckled ruefully. "Bid your last farewells to your problems and your sanity, because they'll never come back."

"...It's still worth it... right?" Su muttered the last part more to herself than anyone.

Leo's eye twitched viciously as he stared at something only he could see. "Let me get back to you on that after I get into a really big fight."

I chuckled before clapping my hands. "Alright, all of that aside, we do still have crewmates waiting for us. Sanji, take the wheel. Everyone else, be on your guard; we're not out of the woods yet."

Conis and Su settled out of the way, the latter's sense of humor clearly numbed in the face of seeing one of the 'almighty' Eneru's priests lose so thoroughly and easily, and Sanji complied, accelerating the Crow up the passageway and out of Satori's forest. As we left, I couldn't help but frown a little at the belt that I was wearing.
"Looks like I didn't need to ask Usopp if I could borrow this after all," I muttered, tracing my armored fingers along the grappling-hook launching mechanism, complete with custom-installed rope-release latch.

"What's that, Cross?" Luffy asked curiously.

I shrugged as I sat down and leaned back, enjoying the ride, as much as I could given how deep we were in enemy territory… and how high off the ground we were, for that matter. "Eh, just meant to be a precaution I got from Usopp when I heard we'd be going into a huge-ass jungle. It's always a sign of a plan going off without a hitch when you come out of it with backups left over!"

"I should probably call you out on saying something like that, Cross," Sanji mused before blowing out a cloud of smoke. "But honestly, I'm inclined to agree. I don't think that that could have gone any better."

"Eh," I waved my hand side-to-side. "It would have been better if we'd managed to loot him for any Dials he had on him. But, meh," I shrugged indifferently. "Chances are he'll still be there for awhile, and we're making great… time…"

I trailed off as I caught sight of the field of skulls on pikes that we were entering into, the story's events flashing through my mind.

"Soundbite," I started slowly. "Can you hear any… gunfire or open warfare in the distance or…?"

Soundbite shrugged, inasmuch as he could. "NADA."

"Damn it…"

Absolutely fucking brilliant. Not a single one of my plans until now had worked how I wanted it to, and the one time everything actually did go as well I could have planned it, it went too well. We were supposed to have a perfectly smooth journey from the Lost Forest to the Sacrificial Altar, with only a brief run-in with Wiper (and, depending on how things turned out, a roller coaster ride on the Milky Road) to interrupt that. We were supposed to arrive at the altar to find our crew waiting for us, and spend the rest of the day resting and preparing for the war tomorrow. We were not supposed to meet any more adversity from Eneru's lackeys until then, when the self-proclaimed god's survival game began. And all of that was supposed to happen because we were supposed to struggle with the Ordeal of Balls.

But we didn't. We beat Satori way ahead of schedule.

Which meant that we arrived in the skull-filled field before Wiper had organized his troops and moved out.

Which meant that Eneru's other priests weren't occupied right now.

Which meant that waiting for us in the field was our collective death sentence in the form of a bald, muscular man with horned glasses and a sword of iron cloud, riding a giant pale-yellow dog.

"So, Satori lost," Eneru's most powerful disciple intoned as he turned towards us. "I can't say that I'm all that surprised."

"T-t-that's Ohm," Su squeaked, trembling both at the priest and the massive mutt he was riding. "He-he's supposed to be the strongest of all of the Priests. And the cruelest. W-w-which means that we're in the middle of—!!"
All at once, the jaw of every skull in the prairie dropped open, exposing the Dials hidden within.

"The Ordeal of Iron..."

I racked my brain hard for any way that I could get the hell out of this situation without exposing how much I knew to Eneru, thinking hard about Ohm's weaknesses. Unfortunately, the only one I could think of was his arrogance, and it was about as justified as you could get considering how much trouble Zoro went through to overpower him. Damn it, I needed something that I could exploit —

"WHOA, THAT'S A HUGE DOG! HEY, DOGGY! SHAKE!" Luffy said eagerly, holding out a hand.

Like the fact that that dog had been tamed too well, so that he followed every order he was given, no matter who said it! There was just one problem.

The dog wasn't moving, and it took every bit of control I had not to let my shock show.

"Foolish Blue Sea Dweller," Ohm drawled, tapping a hand on the dog's head, which somehow got it moving forward. "Holy only obeys physical commands."

'Translation: Eneru got wise from observing Soundbite's powers, and told Ohm to put in earplugs,' I realized.

"Any bright ideas for this one, Cross?" Sanji growled.

"Well, the dog is no problem; Luffy could beat that oversized mutt with one hand tied behind his back," I replied, still frantically searching my mind for any potential weaknesses for Ohm. "But the priest is another story; any moron could tell at a glance that this guy isn't going to fall for the same tricks that Pillsbury did."

"Correct," Ohm stated, now looking directly down on us as Holy loomed. "I have perfected my Mantra, and memorized every inch of the field where I stage my Ordeal." He adjusted his glasses, the light glinting menacingly off of them. "The survival rate is zero percent. From the day God Eneru took his rightful place as ruler of his domain, nobody has faced the Ordeal of Iron and lived to tell about it."

"Hmm. Nobody, you say?" Donny asked calmly, positioning his bo staff.

"Nobody," the priest confirmed.

"I see. Well, then, I think I know the best thing to do in this case," Donny said with the same tone. He then jabbed his staff directly behind him into the Crow's Dial Engine, causing it to roar to life before leaping to grab the boat's steering wheel. I fell off-balance as the Crow began rocketing down the Milky Road again, Ohm's only reaction being to slowly turn his head and watch as we made a break for it.

"Hey, what are you doing, Donny?!!" Luffy demanded indignantly. "I could have kicked his ass!"

"Kick his ass on your own time, Luffy," Donny shot back. "But I'm getting us and our boat out of here! Everyone here except you and Sanji falls firmly in that 'zero percent' bracket, and I don't intend to contribute!"

"While you may have a point there," I ground out, glancing around at the surrounding skulls and keeping an eye out for any tripwires the priest might have set up. "I'd suggest we still move carefully;
it looks like he's set his booby-traps up in the skulls. Leo, can you cut steel?"

"Uh…” Leo slowly took hold of his katana. "Maybe?"

"Yeah, well, you better figure it out fast, or else."

"Or else what!?"

Before I could respond, Ohm jumped off of Holy onto a specific patch of ground hidden by the grass and swung his sword through the air, causing a series of clicks to ring out throughout the prairie and a number of skulls to start vibrating, no doubt in the name of some sick and twisted sense of 'fair play'. I promptly snapped my head down, only barely missing losing my head to one of several rods of stupidly rigid, barbed wire-shaped cloud that shot out of the Milky Dials around us, crisscrossing across the field.

"Oh, I'm just thinking that it might be useful, considering that this is the freaking ORDEAL OF IRON!" I snarled. "So, either you figure it out or—!"

SHINK!

"AH!"

"CONIS!"

We all snapped our heads around at Su's scream, and my heart skipped a beat as I saw that we hadn't dodged all of the wires. Conis had a sizable cut on her temple and was bleeding heavily, though thankfully she seemed more dazed than actually injured.

"Owww…” Conis hissed as she gingerly fingered the gash.

"Ooooh," Luffy winced sympathetically as he examined the wound. "That looks like it's gonna scar. Believe me, I know. Hey, look on the bright side! At least it'll be badass!"

"THAT IS NOT A BRIGHT SIDE, JELLY-BRAIN!" Su hissed indignantly.

"Agh, damn it. Does anyone here have any medi… cal… skills…?" I trailed off as the temperature on the boat suddenly began rising, and all eyes fell on our chef, who was staring back at the priest. His fists were clenched, flames licked all over his body, and the look in his eye was more murderous than Nami in a temper.

"That poor, foolish priest. Even worse than putting himself in a contest to pit his rugged handsomeness against my most divine physique, he has unwisely injured a lady in front of Sanji," Isaiah said solemnly.

"Nothing can save him now," Leo and Donny concurred together.

"DIS GON' be GOOD!" Soundbite cheered eagerly.

"You bastard…" Sanji growled, the flames around him slowly mounting in intensity. "How dare you harm this sweet, beautiful angel…" And all at once, the flames raged up into a towering inferno as he roared his fury to the truest of heavens. "I'LL KILL YOU!" And with that, he all but literally shot off the boat and ran over the Milky Road straight towards Ohm who, I was gratified to see, was thoroughly unnerved. The priest waited for what seemed like too long before bringing up his sword and widening it into a makeshift shield with which to block, and was still sent sliding backwards from the force of Sanji's kick.
Sanji then proceeded to unleash an absolute flurry of blazing strikes against the priest, moving so fast that he was a blur of red and black that the priest was struggling to parry. And the traps did nothing either, for that matter! Any skulls within Sanji's vicinity were almost instantly obliterated from the shockwave of the conflict, and any wires of Iron Cloud that shot at him from a distance, well… Iron versus a pissed-off Sanji? Absolutely no contest. It was only the sheer thickness of Ohm's Eisen Whip and its constant regeneration that kept the priest from getting reduced to a well-done piece of tenderized meat.

I observed the spectacle with an utterly dropped jaw. "How… but that fire, how did he… and Ohm's Mantra—?"

"Um, Cross? I think I can answer the second half of that," Donny proposed hesitantly. "You mentioned that if someone doesn't know what their attack is going to do, Mantra can't predict it, right?"

"Yeah?" I asked.

"Well… I don't think Sanji's fully conscious of what he's doing right now."

I blinked as I processed that. Considering the fact that Sanji was using both Diable Jambe and Sky Walk way earlier than I could have reasonably expected—especially since I hadn't given him any tips on unlocking either of those techniques early—it stood to reason that he was less considering a plan of attack and more… attacking. Like Luffy back when Jango hypnotized him, there was no strategizing, just relentless, mindless offense. Honestly, it really made sense. What he was using wasn't so much Diable Jambe as it was the 'Flames of Hell' he'd acquired post-Kamabakka. Credit where it was due, it was… actually kind of honorable that his rage over a woman getting injured equated the intensity of the rage he felt whenever he thought of that particular hell.

"Uh…" Conis raised her finger inquisitively as she stared at the ongoing brawl. "Should… I tell him that this was more of a flesh wound and it looks worse than it is, or…?"

"Eh…" I waved my hand side-to-side. "Let's put a pin in that for now, agreed?"

Conis shivered as Ohm narrowly ducked under a roundhouse kick that left an uneven tan on his bald skull. "Upon further consideration, that might be for the best, yes."

Either way, upon thinking more about the matter, this was exactly the kind of stroke of luck that we needed. Ohm may have been formidable, but like most of the priests up here, without being able to rely on his Haki, we—well, Sanji had a chance of actually beating him. And if not, then at the bare minimum, he'd be able to buy us enough time to get away. Provided we capitalized on it, anyways.

"Alright, let's milk this for all it's worth." I eyed Holy who, for the duration of the conflict, had remained seated where he was, panting like an idiot. "Soundbite, can you not get through to the dog? Or the priest, for that matter?"

"NOPE, THEY'RE BOTH WEARING earplugs," the snail confirmed. "Good thing OHM didn't give him ANY COMMANDS!"

"God bless the naturally non-existent IQs of the Giga-Boxer Hounds, Rocky Breed," Lassoo rolled his eyes with a snort.

"No kidding. Luffy, try to unblock the mutt's ears; if Soundbite can turn him against cue ball over there, we've as good as won; there's no way he'll be able to handle both of them at once."
"Got it. Gum-Gum Rocket!" he called out, flying off of the Crow and hitting Holy straight in the chest.

"Donny, Leo, Isaiah, start clearing away those skulls."

"EH!?" the amphibian martial artists choked in horror.

"And why, pray tell, should one as handsome as I—?" the avian started to ask.

"Because you can fly above and around the tripwires and mark a path," I explained frigidly, before pointing at the dugongs. "While they make use of the fact that this place wasn't built for midgets who are three-foot-nothing and crawl under the instant-kill area while knocking down and disarming any more traps that are in our way! Capiche?"

The aqua-martial artists exchanged uneasy looks. "I'm not the only one starting to hate being a midget, right?" Donny hissed.

"Nope…" his compatriot concurred.

"Oh, come now," Isaiah said, sending a stern gaze at the dugongs. "We made the choice to stand by this crew for what they have done for us, am I correct?"

"Yeah…” the two dugongs said, rather unenthusiastically, before backflipping over the edge of the boat and into the tall grass… which prompted over a half-dozen cables of Iron Cloud to shoot through the air.

"WATCH IT, MORONS!"

"YOU'RE THE REASON WE'RE IN HERE IN THE FIRST PLACE, JACKASS!"

"Clumsy little…” I muttered mutinously as I dusted my cap off.

"GOOD HELP is so hard TO FIND!" Soundbite snickered in a tone of voice that was painfully faux-reassuring.

"It truly is, yes. Now, Conis? Can I count on you to drive us out of here?"

The angel glanced at me in a semi-panicked manner for a moment, looking to be a few seconds away from something akin to a mental breakdown, only to slowly take a deep breath and steady herself, steel flashing in her eyes. "I'll do my best." And with that, she took the wheel and slowly revved up the Dial Engine, sending us cruising down the Milky Road.

Soundbite whistled in surprise. "WELL, that's not something you see EVERY DAY."

"You don't seriously think I'd hang out with someone who didn't have a spine buried beneath all that fluff and feathers, do you?" Su sniffed imperiously. "She might be soft at times, but when push comes to shove, my girl can be awesome."

"Sorta like CROSS," Soundbite reflected. "ONLY SHE'S ACTUALLY GOT A PAIR!"

"Har har, hilarious," I snarked before glancing at the last occupant of the boat. "And Lassoo—"

"Don't worry, don't worry," the dachshund-cannon waved his paw lackadaisically. "I know that any attacks of mine would ping off his Haki, and I know that the explosions would set off the traps. I'm good from earlier, I can wait."
Nodding in acceptance, I took the time to survey the status of our situation. Looking back at Sanji, it looked like his fire had gone out; he was fighting Ohm with about as much strength as I could reasonably expect at this point in the story. Fortunately for us, his hellfire barrage had done its job; Ohm was panting, and it seemed that his grip on his Eisen Whip was nowhere near as strong as it should have been. Luffy, meanwhile, was grappling with Holy; beating the dog up would have been a walk in the park, but for a mercy, Luffy was actually actively going for the earplugs. Unfortunately, that led to Holy actually being able to put up a decent fight, probably due to pre-given orders. He wasn't doing any damage to the rubber man, no, but he was inadvertently buying Ohm extra time, for whatever that was worth.

Finally, as the dugongs and Isaiah cleared our path past the final curve on the Milky Road, Luffy managed to latch onto Holy's head, wrapping his legs around the dog's neck much like a noose while his arms reached out towards his ears. The dog flailed as best he could, but ultimately, Luffy managed to dislodge one of the massive, presumably iron earplugs—

**WHOOSH!**

Only for all of us to pause as a small group of guerillas on Dial skates shot into the clearing, their eyes set on the priest.

"Shandians!" Conis called out.

"Shandians," Ohm growled.

"Shandians!?!" I repeated incredulously. What the hell were they doing—!? Oh, crap, the invasion had already started. Well, there went my knowledge of relatively current events!

"We'll defeat the priests and charge God's Shrine! We will light the fire of Shandora!" the leader called out. At that point, I took in his details, and geeze, my current knowledge really was shot; that was supposed to be Wiper charging. But judging from the brown mohawk and the pink, feathery, Doflamingo-esque vest, this could prove to be a turn for the better; that was Kamakiri, the only leader in the tribe who had both good standing with Wiper and a willingness to negotiate.

Ohm snarled in response, and with Sanji's attention diverted for the moment, he spun his blade downward and plunged it into the ground before putting his fingers to his lips and whistling.

"You fought well, Blue Sea Dweller, the most valiant enemy I've ever faced," he spat as Holy bounded over, dislodging Luffy in the process. "But the Shandian invasion occurring takes a higher priority, so I have no choice but to end this now. Die peacefully along with them."

"Like hell I'm letting you get away, you shitty priest!" Sanji snarled as he swung his leg at Ohm. Unfortunately, his opponent managed to dodge by swinging onto his pet's back in a practiced movement before the dog leapt into the trees. Just as a symphony of clicking sounds filled the air.

Soundbite, ashen as his skin naturally was, paled. "Ooooohhh SHIT! EVERYONE BACK IN THE BOAT! CONIS, FLOOR IT!"

The next second found Leo and Donny both leaping back onto the Crow, not caring how many traps they tripped in the process, while Isaiah dove to resume his perch. One second after that, Luffy got to his feet, one rubber arm stretching out to grab Sanji and the other reaching out to grab onto the accelerating Crow. The five Shandians had turned around by this point, Kamakiri electing to follow our example based on Ohm's words.

And not a moment too soon for either them or Luffy, as the area where they were promptly erupted
in a twisted white reflection of Maleficent's forest of thorns, with every other square foot sprouting sharp, deadly spike-laden vines. And they continued surfacing all around the clearing, spreading out fast from where Ohm had buried his sword, hot on their tail.

"Notgoodnotgoodnotgoodnotgoodnotgoodnotgoodnotgood!" Su yelped in panic, quivering next to her mistress.

"LUFFY, STRETCH OUT A LEG OR SOMETHING FOR THE SHANDIANS TO GRAB OR THEY'LL GET CAUGHT BY THE IRON!" I barked out. Luffy gritted his teeth in concentration as he let one of his legs trail behind him. Hearing my words and seeing just how fast the iron was approaching, Kamakiri grabbed onto the rubbery limb, and the other four soldiers followed his example, at which point their collective speed increased. The end result had the Crow filled past its maximum capacity… and the iron cloud slowly gaining on us.

"I CAN'T GO ANY FASTER!" Conis shrieked desperately.

"ROADBLOCK!" Soundbite screeched, drawing everyone's attention to the fact that the edge of the clearing, just in our range of vision, was blocked by an ornately patterned barrier of spiked iron cloud, which was even now growing taller and curving upwards to cut off any escape route.

"Luffy, can you rocket us out of here?" Sanji demanded.

"I don't have anywhere to grab onto!" Luffy yelled back, looking fearfully at the fast-approaching clouds.

"Soundbite, can you break it?" Donny said.

"NO GOOD! We'd be SKER... WERED before it was SHATTERED!" the snail cried.

"Ugh, my Impact Dial doesn't have enough force to break it, either. Do any of you have something?!"

The Shandians’ grimaces of fear, anger, and resignation were all the answer I needed. Gritting my teeth, I looked back at the blue-clad Dugong.

"Leo, you're our only chance! Cut the fence or we'll be killed!" As if to punctuate the point, the iron cloud had caught up and was blotting out the sun above us.

"I-I can't—"

"Leo!" Donny yelped desperately, grabbing his co-student by his shoulders and forcing him to look him in the eye. "If we die here, then… then you should know that I've left a will onboard the Merry stating that I posthumously vote for Mikey to be the new squad leader!"

In an instant, Leo's entire demeanor shifted, his body going rigid as he held his swords out, the blades forming a pair of right angles with his body. "Get down," he snarled, and the fact that his tone was Zoro-levels of feral made everyone else comply.

A moment later, a whoosh of wind passed over us all as Leo spun into a blur of green, blue, brown and metal. After a few seconds of silence, we all slowly started getting up and were greeted to the sight of every barbed-wire cloud near the Crow broken, the profane totems that they'd been spewing from decapitated. And as Leo started to slide his blades back into their sheaths—

"O captain, my captain…" Isaiah breathed as he stared upwards.
We all followed the South Bird's view.

"Two Sword Style," Leo snorted firmly as he clicked his blades back into their sheathes. "Vitruvian Vindication."

And in the last second before the Crow sped out of the Clearing, we saw skulls rain down from the thorn-blotted sky.

"Wow…" Soundbite breathed.

"Yeeaaah, fair warning?" Donny whistled. "Never underestimate how far student rivalries can go."

I immediately wondered if I should start mentioning Kuina more often to Zoro if it made that much of a difference… nah, I wasn't that suicidal, nor was I that desperate for him to get stronger faster.

"Leo? Unless you're desperate to get stronger, don't use the words 'student rivalry' against Zoro," I muttered.

And just like that, Leo's calm-and-collected attitude cracked like a dropped plate of china. "Ooooh, hell no, not in a million years… or without an army between me and him." Cold sweat started waterfalling down his face. "Maybe not even then."

I nodded, and then noticed that we were still rocketing along the Milky Road.

"Uh, Conis? You can slow down now."

The angel jerked at the sound of her name, and the Crow slowed to a stop as she moved back from the accelerator, even paler than her usual complexion, her eyes wide with terror. Sanji moved to say something, only for her to start glancing around frantically. "Has anyone seen Su?"

There was a brief moment of panic as we all frantically looked around the boat…

"Uh…"

Before Donny slowly held up a twitching bundle of fur by its tail.

"What kind of lunatics have I unleashed?" Su moaned, her eyes open and spinning visibly.

"OH, come on, was that little SHOW TOO MUCH ALREADY? Wimp."

Su promptly snapped her head away in a sniff, her fur somehow flattening out into a more dignified look. "As if. The only thing overwhelming about you all is your smell. How you can stand to go so long without bathing is beyond me! Pee-yew!"

I shot an exasperated look at Conis. "Pride: the ultimate steroid."

"I'm starting to figure that out…" she sighed as she took her fox back.

"Fret not, sweet Conis," Sanji crooned before propping his foot up on the railing of the boat and jabbing his fist in the air. "For I swear, though your knight in shining armor might have failed in his duty in this instance, he shall never do so again! So long as you are within my sights, I shall allow no harm to befall thee!"

Isaiah nodded solemnly as he alighted on Sanji's shoulder. "Truly your machismo and valor are worthy of the Swagger tribe. While you are devoid of our most glamorously eye-catching plumage or our stern, valiant beaks, I am nonetheless honored to call you my brother in the ranks of
gentlemanliness, which I assure you is a word."

"Are they always like this?" Su asked in a deadpan.

"THE BIRD IS new, but the COOK? PAR FOR the course."

"Joy." Su twitched her ear in amusement. "At least the show is good."

Conis slowly managed a genuine smile. "Thank you. I think… I actually have hope that your crew can set us free," she murmured.

"I'm inclined to agree."

All eyes snapped to Kamakiri, including those of his squad, where he was giving us an appraising stare.

"…You defeated Satori. You nearly defeated Ohm and Shura. And you saved our lives when you had no obligation to do so," he stated.

I elected to shrug in a careless fashion. "Hey, you looked like you wanted cue ball's head too, and he wanted your heads as badly as ours. That's as much a reason for alliance as any." I then paused as I processed just what he'd been saying. "Wait, nearly defeated Shura?! The heck happened at the Sacrificial Altar?!"

Kamakiri shook his head solemnly. "I'm sorry to say that I don't know. All we know is that a… source of ours—"

'Aisa,' I filled in silently.

"Informed us that Shura weakened significantly about an hour or two ago, shortly after you defeated Satori. That's why Wiper decided that now was the time to invade the Upper Yard." Kamakiri sat up slowly, his hand drifting to the Burn Blade at his side. "That's our explanation for being here. What's yours?"

"Our cheap-as-all-hell navigator refused to pay the entry toll at Heaven's Gate, and we beat all the angel officers that came to fine and arrest us, so a giant lobster carried our crew away here, and we had to fight past tons of booby traps, a talking cream puff, and a bald guy with his giant dog on our way to them," Lassoo said boredly. Then he added in exactly the same tone, "And I'm not sure that's the weirdest thing that's happened to us since I joined this crew a few days ago."

Su and Conis both moaned miserably while Sanji moved to take the wheel, getting the Crow moving again towards the Altar.

"Also," Luffy noted darkly. "Conis and Su are our friends, and that Eneru-bastard's been hurting her for a long time now, so we're going to kick his ass."

You could hear a pin drop with how tense the Shandians got.

"…I don't know what's crazier," Kamakiri finally said. "The fact that you just said that aloud here of all places, or the fact that I actually believe you."

"Personally, I think the crazier part is that Eneru didn't just obliterate all of us for Luffy saying that," Sanji said dryly.

"Eh, I'm guessing he thinks we're not worth the trouble," I waved my hand dismissively. "All we did
was defeat one of his almighty priests and bring two of the others close to defeat. Not something that someone as powerful as him has anything to be worked up about."

"…good point," Kamakiri conceded.

"Anyway, if we're all against Eneru, is there any chance that we could form some kind of alliance?" I proposed. "I mean, one of you…the Berserker, I think he called himself?" I had to restrain a smirk at the way Kamakiri twitched. "Attacked us on the White Sea. We tried reasoning with him, and he said he wasn't willing to take any chances, but if we're all against Eneru, could we at least try working together for now?"

Kamakiri hung his head with a sigh of 'Damn it, Wiper' as he ran a hand through his mohawk before nodding slowly. "Yeah, alright, that sounds good. For now, you go to the Sacrificial Altar and see about regrouping with your friends. We'll go back out and try and regroup with ours. And see about maybe talking Wiper down from shooting at you guys on sight…" He grumbled the last part to himself, inciting a few winces and snickers from his squadmates.

I hesitated. A lot. There was an easy way that we could get Wiper on our side, and I could phrase it now in a way that wouldn't make Eneru think any differently about us. But was it worth it at this point? Was canon derailed enough that I couldn't reasonably make things worse at this stage? Would having the Shandians on our side from the start… be worth the risk of either island being destroyed?

In the end, I thought back to what Tashigi said back when we formed MI3: "In for one beri, in for all of them."

"Say… maybe this 'Wiper' guy, who I'm guessing is the Berserker I mentioned, would be more amicable if you relayed to him what we had to go through in order to get up here?"

-o-

One conversation and round of introductions later, in which I couldn't be sure whether or not Kamakiri reacted to me mentioning Cricket's full name (and damn, those goggles did wonders for his poker-face), the five Shandians rushed off to rejoin their fellows. Here's hoping that staying with us didn't cost them too much, though considering the fact that two of the three priests they were facing were exhausted, and the last one was… well, Gedatsu, terminator-esque bastard that he was, I had my doubts that they could be in too much trouble.

After they left, Sanji accelerated, and aside from one or two run-ins with wildlife and wild rides (which, naturally, half of the boat's inhabitants thoroughly enjoyed, myself included), the rest of the journey went the way it was supposed to: without conflict or combat crossing our paths. Finally, we reached the edge of the forest.

"Soundbite, heartbeat count on the altar?" I asked tentatively, resolutely not facing ahead.

"Mmm… THIRTEEN. Our crew, GAN FALL, and the pony-bird."

I didn't even react to the jab at Pierre; that was half of my worries eased, but the more pressing one still remained. So, steeling myself, I slowly looked out at the inlet to see the sacrificial altar erected in its center and… the equally high pile of bodies next to it!? 

"WHAT THE FUCK!?!" I bellowed incredulously as I stared up at the pile. Where the hell—!? Sweet shit, were those—those were freaking Sky Sharks!

As if in response, the bodies at the top of the pile started shifting around until a very familiar figure
appeared over the edge of the peak.

"Hey Cap'n, boys!" Boss waved at us eagerly, looking slightly banged up on account of the thick but still clearly bloody bandage wrapped around his chest. "You finally made it! Glad to see you're alright!"

Leo and Donny's jaws hit the bottom of the deck as they stared upwards.

"We will never be as truly awesome as he is, will we?" Leo asked weakly.

"Signs point to nope," Donny concurred with a minor whimper.

I gaped in awe as I tried to process what I was seeing. "Boss… what…” I gestured at him weakly. "What the absolute hell!? What the heck brought this on!?"

Boss's cheerful demeanor promptly evaporated like an ice cube in hell, a scowl blackening his mug as he folded his tail and sat on the pile. I blinked in confusion as the pile seemed to shiver before letting out a gurgle of realization: the sharks he was sitting on were neither dead nor unconscious; they were fully conscious but too scared out of their bruised skulls to so much as move a fin and risk drawing Boss's ire!

"This," Boss rapped his fist on the shark he was sitting on, causing another ripple of twitches. "Is the end result of me working out my shame and frustration." The dugong burned through a third of his cigar in a huff and blew out an evil-looking cloud of smoke through grit teeth. "I lost, and I don't. Like. Losing."

"WHAT!?"

"ACK!" I yelped as Sanji bodily shoved his way past me in order to glare up at the dugong.

"You'd better not have let any harm come to the lovely ladies of our crew, you shitty-dugong!" the cook bellowed, looking to be a few degrees Celsius away from bursting into flames again.

Boss snorted and waved his flipper dismissively. "Oh, calm your tits, Sanji. Robin could handle ten of me at once, and Vivi and Nami, soft though they are, trained under my boys. Even if they had been here, which they weren't, they'd have been fine." Boss grimaced and shook his head. "No, no, nothing happened to them. If there's anything I'm ashamed about, it's what I let happen to the Merry."

I felt as though a surge of ice had been shot into my veins. "What happened to the Merry, Boss!?"

Boss's cigar twitched in his mouth before he jabbed his thumb over his shoulder with a sigh.

I followed his thumb to the Merry and blinked in surprise. It… wasn't as good as I'd hoped, but much better than what I'd feared. The mast was still scorched and blackened, but overall it looked superficial, as did the scorched and charred scratches adorning her hull. Aside from Boss, the rest of the crew was busily stringing up the spare sailcloth, so that probably got burned, too. Unfortunately, the keel was obscured by sea cloud, so I'd have to ask Merry later tonight, assuming she did manifest the klabautermann again. And considering the severity of her injuries and the fact that even with extra help Usopp was struggling to patch her up, that occurrence appeared to be a foregone conclusion.

But like I said, it wasn't that bad, so—

"IT'S YOU!"
Terry's shout was matched by Isaiah's smug yet elegant grin. "It's me," he taunted. "Did you miss my magnificent presence that much?"

"ALL I MISSED WAS MY VOICE FULL OF POWEEEER!" Terry shouted, somehow managing to flex his muscles while staying in the air. "YOU, I CAN DO WITHOUT! AFTER ALL, ONLY A BLIND MAN DENIES THE AWESOME POWER OF BEAR GLOOOOVE!"

"And yet Swagger remains the uncontested superior of the two."

"BEAR GLOVE!"

"Swagger."

"BEAR GLOVE!"

"You do know the definition of insanity, right?"

"BEAR GLOVE!"

"Shishishi, I love these two!" Luffy snickered.

"Yeah," Lassoo grinned as he watched my eye twitch. "There are always two shows at the price of one."

I, for one, grimaced miserably as I stared at the pile of sharks. "I wonder if I can convince one of those things to eat me…" I wondered ruefully.

"I imagine that many employees of the World Government would pay dearly to find a way to make that happen, Cross."

I jerked my gaze back up at the Merry, where one ultra-wanted archaeologist was grinning down at me. "Robin. Glad to see that most of the affairs on this end went off without a hitch. Mind telling me just what the heck happened?!!"

Robin chuckled lightly, almost certainly at my annoyed tone, before pointing at a section of the shoreline. "I would suggest that you dock over there, Mister Jeremiah, and we will join you shortly. We have quite a bit to discuss."

And indeed we did. After Nami had given us an earful about Upper Yard being the missing half of Jaya—if I had to guess, I'd say she was both amazed and annoyed by the fact that the Grand Line could liberally rearrange geography at the drop of a hat like that—we got details on what had happened to the Merry.

As in the manga, the 'captured' group had decided to split up and explore the jungle for a bit, in order to discover some of the mysteries the trees held. In addition to Robin, Zoro and Nami, Raphey, Mikey, Terry, Carue and Vivi had also gone along for the chance at an adventure, while Usopp and Chopper stayed behind to watch over the Merry, and Boss stayed behind to watch over them. Things had gone on quite peacefully for a bit…

Until Shura happened.

In all fairness to the ship's guard, they'd actually managed to put up a damn decent fight against the bastard. In fact, they hadn't even blown the whistle until a minute or so into the fight because they didn't need to. Between Boss's fantastic martial arts straining Shura's Mantra, the blast radius of Chopper's Cherry Blossom Blasts and the sheer miracle-quality that Usopp's sniping held, they might
have actually run him off.

Sadly, the decision had been taken out of their hands once Shura had started attacking the one crewmate present who couldn’t defend themselves: the Going Merry herself. Boss had apparently managed to save her mast by using a Sky Shark as a living bucket with which to splash sea clouds on the flames, but a few flaming scratches later he’d willingly blown the whistle himself.

Credit to the Sky Knight, he’d arrived in minutes. And once he’d arrived, the tables turned fast. Between his own skills and Pierre providing Boss the mobility he needed to keep up with Fuza? They had the so-called Sky Rider on the ropes. And they would have knocked him clear out of the ring, too!

Were it not for the fact that Shura decided to remind them both that they were fighting on his turf. Damn String Dials… I made a note during the conversation to comb the landscape around the altar at the nearest opportunity, because ten to one said that all of the priests had specialized Cloud Dials hidden nearby. I’d already let them abuse a home-field advantage once by forgetting to warn the team to check their surroundings before, I wasn’t going to let it happen a second time.

Sadly, once Shura had them caught up in his strings, then he had them full-stop. A cauterized thrust clean through Gan Fall’s chest that he was stupidly lucky to have lived through, as well as a 2-inch deep penetration through the belly of Boss’s shell. It wasn’t much, but combined with an almost 600-foot drop, it was still enough to stun him. And on top of that, he’d spent the time before Shura’s arrival using the Sky Sharks as punching bags, so they’d wanted a bit of revenge, too. Thankfully, the delay-and-acceleration of events worked in their favor where it hindered us: when the Shandians invaded, Shura elected to leave, survivors or no.

On the lighter side, thanks to his instinctively amped intelligence, Chopper had the wherewithal to not throw himself into the bay to try and save his drowning allies. Of course, his hyper-logical mind instead prompted him to throw in someone else who could swim to fish the three out.

And really, when you were drowning in shark-laden waters with unnatural holes in your body, Usopp was one of the absolute last people you wanted to have attempting to save you.

After that, things had gone as normal: the Giant South Birds proved themselves to be far more hospitable than their Blue Sea counterparts, Boss had displayed his still-strong vigor by unleashing holy hell on the Sky Sharks that had tried to eat him, and then the away team had returned and started to help the guards repair the Merry. The rest was history.

"And did everything go as well as you hoped on your end, Cross?" Vivi asked as they finished, night having fallen and Sanji halfway through preparing a large pot of soup.

"Ugh… yes and no," I groused.

"The first shitty priest that we met, Satori I think, was a complete wimp. All he had going for him was that Mantra ability, and since Cross knew its weaknesses, he and Lassoo did most of the work, and then Luffy finished him off," Sanji said.

"But Ohm was no pushover; Sanji got pushed to his limit, and right as Luffy got us the advantage we needed to turn the tables in our favor, the Shandians invaded and Ohm pulled a last resort out of the ground while he escaped," Lassoo growled darkly. "We almost lost our heads to it, and could've lost a lot more."

"Eesh, sounds rough," Nami winced sympathetically. "How did you survive?"
I made to answer, and then stiffened as I felt something sharp press into the small of my back. "Blind luck," I enunciated carefully. I then allowed myself to relax as the sharpness was removed; a wild guess said that Leo thought that Zoro was too close for his comfort, and I wasn't willing to test him on it.

Whether they saw the Dugong's actions or not, everyone shrugged in acceptance. From there, it was a night that was pretty much par for the course for a normal night with our crew: the injured trained as though they were invincible, the lazy slacked off as though they could get away with it, and the rest of us (me in particular) did whatever we wanted to pass the time between chores. I, for one, chose to kick back with a good fantasy book and make some progress into the reading. Honestly, one would think that a fantasy book in a world as fantastic as the Blue Seas would be somewhat… creatively stagnant, merely rehashing reality, but no, they actually had some damn decent authors.

Gan Fall woke up much earlier than I had expected, probably due to Chopper's advanced medical capabilities, and the reindeer in question had filled him in on the situation while we waited for Sanji to finish the soup. Following that, as we enjoyed another fine spectacle of Sanji's cooking, Nami finished her drawing and informed us of exactly what the land we were on was, and the knowledge of the City of Gold waiting for us elsewhere on the island. Spirits were high, but just as we were finishing our meals…

"The SHANDIANS are here."

Everyone was immediately on their guard at Soundbite's announcement, turning their eyes towards where he indicated. No movement or sound came for a few seconds.

"We're open for negotiations; we won't attack if you won't," Vivi called. A few seconds more, and rustling came from the treeline as three distinct figures came out and into the light. Wiper's hold on his bazooka was firm, as was his frown, but he wasn't glaring at us with as much venom this time. Kamakiri seemed to be the most at ease, though one hand was staying close to his Burn Blade. And alongside them was the black-haired female commander of the Shandians, Laki, arguably the most reasonable among all of them, though the fact that she was holding her rifle close to her chest showed that she wasn't unprepared either. I couldn't say I was surprised at those three; the strongest warrior and the two most reasonable commanders among the Shandians was pretty much what I expected. What I didn't expect, however, was to see a girl in a light brown dress with brown hair visible beneath her cloth cap and a Burn Blade in one hand piggybacking on Laki's shoulders.

"I take it you recruit young?" I commented weakly, in spite of the warning glare Vivi sent at me the moment I opened my mouth. "Sorry if that's an inappropriate question, it's just that she seems a bit… out of place with you, is all."

Wiper glared at me for a second before jerking his chin at Conis with a grunt, causing her to flinch back fearfully. "The same could be said of the Skypiean fraternizing with a group of Blue Sea Dwellers that are here to dethrone her god."

I hastily stuck my hand out against Sanji as he bit into his cigarette and made to kick the Shandian's head in. He would have forced his way past me to do it, too, if not for some… divine intervention.

"Eneru is not her people's god, Wiper."

All attention snapped over to the wounded Sky Knight, who was sitting up on his makeshift bed and panting heavily as he held a hand to his wound. Despite his obvious infirmity, he still managed to pin Wiper with an impressively stern glare.

"No more than he is mine. Or yours, for that matter," the old man stated firmly.
Wiper bristled visibly as he noticed the fallen god, while Kamakiri and Laki elected to step back warily. "Gan Fall—" the Berserker started to snarl.

"Save your insults, Wiper," Gan Fall spat out with more venom than I thought was physically possible for someone like him. "I was willing to humor your reckless attitude back in the day because you were a hotheaded youth and we still had time, but that is not the case at this point!" The old man emphasized his point by ramming his fist into the tree-trunk he was leaned—holy fuck, the bark just splintered! Re-note to self: age equals badass around here, few exceptions.

Leaning on Pierre for support, the bird having shifted to his pegasus form for more stability, Gan Fall slowly got to his feet and paced over to Wiper, glaring at him. "She is here for the same reason these Blue Sea Dwellers are here, the same reason you are here and, as of now, the same reason that I am here: to overthrow Eneru's tyranny. Now, I am prepared to do whatever I must to help them succeed, including putting aside past enmity. But if you are not, I am quite capable of showing you that a lack of a desire to fight does not indicate a lack of ability."

The two glared at each other for several seconds until Aisa tentatively spoke up.

"He's… he's telling the truth, Wiper."

As Wiper shot a glare at the girl, I took the opportunity to cut in. "You have Mantra?" I asked.

Aisa snapped her head towards me with a panicked expression. "W-what!? H-how did you—!?"

"We have it in the Blue Seas too, just by a different name," I hastily reassured her. "Some people are able to manifest it in unusual ways, like hyper-empathy for emotions and such. At a guess, Wiper brought you here to act as a lie detector or something?"

Aisa started to scowl and nod in agreement before flinching and cowering as Wiper renewed his glare at her. "No, we brought her along because Laki and Kamakiri couldn't say no to her whining, and even if we had left her behind, she'd have just snuck here anyways," he growled out irritably. "At least this way, she's good for something."

Judging by the way Aisa jerked around from Laki and gnashed her teeth at the warrior, that was a bit too far. "Without me, you wouldn't have known that Satori had fallen, you big jerk!" she howled, emphasizing the point with a stuck-out tongue and a pulled eyelid.

"I think I like her," Su piped up.

"DITTO," Soundbite grinned.

"God—real God, if that's an actual thing—help me, this is starting to become a thing," I ground out as I pinched the bridge of my nose.

"She's small, bratty, and she's riding around on someone's back," Zoro noted idly.

"I know, right?" Nami breathed in awe. "It's almost uncanny!"

"Three Aisas?" Kamakiri asked in dawning horror. "You know, I'm starting to reconsider the negotiating idea."

"I AM NOT AN ANIMAL COMPANION!" Aisa snarled.

"One of us, one of us," Su and Soundbite chanted eagerly.
"Someone please kill me…” I moaned. "Or preferably them?"

"I'm agreeing with you a bit too much for comfort, Cross…” Conis concurred as she gnawed on her thumb.

"Alright, enough!” Laki said sharply, drawing everyone's attention. She turned to Wiper and Gan Fall first. "We've had our disagreements with him in the past, but the fact that we're actually here is enough to prove that we're willing to compromise if it means reaching our goal. If that's still true, Wiper, then show it."

The berserker ground his teeth as he looked at Laki. Then, after a few seconds, he slowly turned to look at me. "Kamakiri said… that you came here with the help of a man named Montblanc Cricket. Is that true?"

"Yes. He was willing to help us because we believed in the possibility of something that sounded impossible," I explained.

"He sympathized on that note because of his past," Robin contributed, her tone purposefully careless, as though she hadn't already guessed the implications of what she was saying. "More precisely, because of his ancestor, a man who lived 400 years ago, whose outrageous stories of his adventures ultimately resulted in his execution when he showed his king to the site of a supposed city of gold, but found nothing there. The tale of Montblanc Noland the Liar has become a popular story in his home sea, and a point of indelible shame for his family."

That did it. Wiper's bazooka fell from his grip and clattered to the ground, and his jaw dropped open in horror, and the ones alongside him were similarly thunderstruck. Damn, but I was glad that I had let Robin in on all of this; she really had a silver tongue when it came to making people do what she wanted them to, and really, chances are that I would have justcocked things up if I'd tried myself.

"Noland… the Liar?" he repeated weakly. "Executed?"

I shook my head sadly as I spread my hands. "In cold blood. And to the very end, he never stopped repeating it. Over and over, he said that he'd seen a city of gold, and that if it had gone missing, it must have sunken into the sea. A logical conclusion, considering the Grand Line, but…"

"But that's not what happened, is it?" Terry asked, his voice once more uncharacteristically calm as he and Isaiah swooped in from wherever they'd been listening, looking down on the Shandians from a branch. "We lived in the forest below before these guys used us to navigate to the Knock-Up Stream. And for as long as we, our parents, their parents, and their parents can remember, our job has been to protect the forest."

"The story goes that many years ago, a group of travelers were permitted to visit the island and its hidden city, Shandora," Isaiah continued. "A time after they departed, a catastrophe befell the island, when half of it shot into the sky due to the Knock-Up Stream. We have never found the island's inhabitants nor the city of Shandora since, and yet we guarded the forest with all the power we had to defend it from other intruders."

"And now we find out that the part of the island with Shandora on it is still intact… which makes you and your people the ones who live there," Terry finished.

"Our ancestors lived there," Kamakiri corrected bitterly. "We've never seen Shandora. Nobody has since the island came to the sky."

"Alright, hang on," I cut in, approaching the small group. "Let me just make sure of something here:
you four are here to form an alliance with us, right?"

"You made the offer. If it still stands, then I'm all for it," Kamakiri replied neutrally.

"As am I," Laki concurred. All eyes turned to Wiper, who brushed the tears from his eyes as he looked around, his eyes lingering longest on Gan Fall. Finally, he turned to me.

"My ancestor, the great warrior Calgara, was the mightiest warrior of the Shandian tribe 400 years ago… and the outsider Montblanc Noland was his best friend."

He extended his hand to us. "If you're serious about your goal, then I accept your offer of alliance; for the sake of Calgara's final wish, and for the sake of clearing Noland's name, I will do whatever I must to bring down Eneru, and light the fire of Shandora once more."

I looked at his hand, and then gestured to Luffy, who came over. "I'm not the captain here. He is."

Wiper turned towards Luffy and raised a brow, but nonetheless extended his hand to the rubber man. "My name is Wiper, the strongest warrior among the Shandians."

"Monkey D. Luffy, captain of the Straw Hat Pirates," Luffy replied with equal seriousness; I guess he was still thinking back to when we met on the White Sea. But they shook, and that was that. Then Wiper turned to Gan Fall, and the latter held out a hand. Wiper regarded it coldly, but ultimately grasped it as well.

"Until Eneru is defeated. Then we'll see," Wiper growled.

"That will have to do," Gan Fall replied sternly.

"Alright, then," I said, clapping my hands and turning back to the others. "Robin, pen and paper, and lots of it. Everything we say will need to be written down to make sure he doesn't hear us."

"HEY! What about MY—"

"If your Gastro-Scramble can futz with Haki, Soundbite, then I think it would be better if we avoided doing it around an ally with the ability," I said dryly. The snail pouted, but nodded, and I turned back to the Shandians. "So, first things first: I'm pretty that our chef will insist on you having some of the soup he's made; he doesn't turn away anyone hungry, and I can guarantee that you'll love his food."

"We'll be fine, I'm sure," Wiper muttered. Not one second later, the sound of someone's stomach grumbling came from behind him, and he slowly turned to glare at Aisa again.

She reacted with a somewhat watery glare. "What!? Come on, I'm thirteen! I don't have a cast-iron stomach like you!" There was another stomach grumble. Wiper's glare at Aisa redoubled, but she shook her head. "That wasn't me!"

"Ah…" Kamakiri said as he raised his hand somewhat sheepishly, pointedly casting a sidelong look at the pot. "Soup… does sound good after a few hours of warfare, Wiper."

Aisa turned a very smug smirk on Wiper, who threw up his hands in exasperation. "Fine! Go on, then! I'll focus on the main reason we're here. So, Luffy, was it—?"

"YOU'VE HAD YOURS ALREADY, LUFFY!"

WHAM!

Wiper observed with a studiously neutral expression as the rubber man in question was sent
rocketing out of the clearing where we were eating with a single kick.

"… Gan Fall, perhaps you can tell me—"

"And STAY in bed!"

The berserker's eye twitched as he observed the spectacle of a half-pint talking mass of venison gain almost ten times his own muscle-mass in an instant before forcibly ordering the former god of Skypiea into his bed, and said former god complying with a nervous expression.

"…What about you?" he said, turning to me with a borderline pleading tone.

"Oh, don't worry, Robin and I will focus on planning things out long enough to get a good plan in mind, and if anyone with a good tactical mind and decent handwriting wants to get in on it, they can feel free…" Wiper sighed in relief until I grinned cheekily. "Buuut no guarantees after that. I hope you enjoyed your last day of being a heartless warrior."

"Welcome to life with the Straw Hat Pirates. Bid your last farewells to your problems and your sanity, because they'll never come back," Soundbite quoted.

"What have you gotten us into, Kamakiri?" Wiper muttered, turning back to his comrade-in-arms… only to see said comrade missing.

"Wow… this is the most delicious soup I've ever had!"

"Yummy!"

Wiper's face fell as he observed two of the other three Shandians enjoying Sanji's soup, seemingly without a care in the world. His jaw clenched viciously, and he turned to the last Shandian warrior. "So, you're one of the last people I can turn to in this world for sanity?" he made to ask Laki…

"Oh, I absolutely love the cut on your dress! Very functional, yet fashionable! What's it made of?"

"Sea King leather, believe it or not. Every once in awhile one that gets shot up in the Knock-Up Stream actually manages to reach the White Sea, and if we catch it before it falls back down, then we get a lot of useful hide and meat."

"Wow, that sounds incredible! Back on Angel Beach, we're all pretty much relegated to these uniforms we spin from Cloud Sheep wool. We've worked it out so that it's not all that itchy, but there's just no style to it…"

"Say, have either of you ever felt silk before? It's absolutely amazing, I have a few dresses I can show you back on the Merry!"

"Oh, that sounds amazing!"

"Thank you, I'd like that!"

Wiper's whole body seemed to jerk as he watched Vivi, Laki and Conis walk to the Merry, chatting like long-time girlfriends. "Ah, fuck it," he ultimately growled, apparently deciding that the fight for his sanity just wasn't worth it before stalking over to where Zoro and Nami were splitting a bottle of the latter's grog. "You got any more of that?"

Zoro snorted in derision and took another swig. "Right, because you actually have half a chance at keeping up with us."
Wiper stiffened for a moment before lashing his hand out, snatching the bottle from Nami and draining it in a few swift gulps. Once he was done, he let out a hearty sigh before leering viciously at the first and second mates. "You call that alcohol? I've drunk Sea King piss that was stronger than this water."

"Drinking that stuff isn't macho, Wiper, it's just really stupid!"

"SHUT UP, AISA!" Wiper roared. As he was turning back to the two, however, a thick and heavy glass bottle was thunked onto the tree stump they were sitting around.

"Even in the realms of real alcohol, Sea King Piss is just that: piss," Boss snorted before grinning savagely. "If you want real hair on your chests, then I'd suggest you drink some Sea King Blood. Bit of a misnomer, though, considering how it tends to melt livers."

Wiper's answering grin mirrored Zoro and Nami's. "You're on, water-rat."

Boss's response was to whip out four shot glasses and fill them with the contents, and it looked outright evil. As in, a fly flew over them and died evil. "Put up or shut up, landlubbers," the Dugong replied savagely.

I turned away as the four of them reached for their glasses. Whatever war crimes against livers everywhere they were about to commit, I wanted no part in it.

"What happened to making a plan, Cross?" Robin asked somewhat curiously, papers and pens in hand and ready to be distributed, while an extra set of hands held her soup.

"It appears that the impossible task of attempting to plan for every eventuality shall have to fall to us, my most valiant comrade," I said in the most Russian voice I could muster as I accepted my own paper and pad. "Now c'mon, let's hammer out a war-strategy nice and fast. The sun's starting to go down, and we'll have to stop once it gets dark."

Robin nodded in agreement. "Yes, that's a good point. We'll need to keep our fire small in order to avoid drawing attention once night falls."

I smiled like I'd never smiled before when several members of the crew froze around us.

"Did I hear that right, Cross?" Usopp asked.

"Did she just say what I think she just said?" Boss intoned.

"I knew she must have led a sheltered life, but this is ridiculous," Zoro said.


"Sad, just sad," Luffy shook his head in disappointment.

"Now, now, my friends!" I waved my hands consolingly. "I assure you, this is entirely a case of nurture and nature gone wrong! This is a sad event indeed, but it is not her fault, of that I assure you."

Robin blinked in confusion before producing the packet of notes I'd made and sifting through it, her eyes scanning the pages, clearly wondering what she could have missed.

Apparently Nami didn't get it either, if the way she shot a confused look around was anything to go by. "Wait, what the heck are you guys talking about?"
"FOOL!" Soundbite bellowed with enough ham to feed Luffy for a day. "IT IS ONLY the natural conclusion!"

"WHEN YOU CAMP, YOU CAMPFIRE, NO MATTER WHAT!" Luffy proclaimed valiantly as he fell to his knees and punched the ground.

"NO MATTER WHAT, YOU ALWAYS KEEP THE FIRE GOING, EVEN ON THE VERGE OF DEATH!" Usopp proclaimed, more conviction in his voice than I'd ever heard before. "THAT'S JUST A COLD HARD FACT OF LIFE!"

Robin slowly closed the packet before writing something out and showing it to me: 'You knew about this, and didn't tell me because?'

I grinned and took the pen before scrawling out, 'What, and ruin the surprise? I need your help with the life-and-death stuff. You need ours with the cutting loose stuff, because justified as your attitude might be, you have a few more rods up your ass than is typically healthy.'

I couldn't be sure, but I think that her eye twitched as she read the reply. "Miss Navigator, how much of an exercise in futility would it be to attempt to talk them out of this?"

"Not enough to keep me from trying!" Nami spat as she slammed her freshly drained glass on the stump. "Do you morons not realize that we're in the middle of enemy territory here?! We need to keep a low profile or—"

"Hey, Captain, does this look like enough wood?" Raphey asked as she leaned against the stupidly huge pillar of wood she'd assembled with Leo's help.

"Nicely done, my most faithful students!" Boss proclaimed proudly.

"DO YOU MORONS JUST LISTEN TO EVERY OTHER WORD I SAY!?!" the navigator shrieked.

"Of course we listen to you, hence how we know that you're spouting nonsense," I scoffed.

"He's right, you know," Lasso snickered. "Eneru's probably listening to us right now and hearing us make a pact with the Shandians, the Sky Knight, and one Skypiean to take him down tomorrow. Low profile? That ship has sailed, fired upon the land, and then burned the land's flag before extinguishing said flames with piss."

Nami opened her mouth, and then hung her head. "Well, I can't argue with that… well, what about the local wildlife?!" she rallied quickly.

"ARE YOU really asking that?" Soundbite sniffed in offense, turning pointedly in the direction of several pairs of eyes looking out at us from the forest. "COME OUT already!"

Everyone present aside from myself stiffened as a pack of wolves complied with Soundbite's instructions, and the leader, a scar over one of his eyes, spoke up.

"Ey, jerk-wads, youse all're bein' way too lou—huh?"

I stared at the confused canine for a moment before shaking my head firmly. "Right, a Fonz-voiced wolf is apparently my final limit." I raised my hand. "CHECK, PLEASE!"

"Dream on," Soundbite drawled.
And from there, the party promptly kicked into high gear. After a bit of persuasion that went much more easily with Soundbite's powers, the tower of logs that Raphey and Leo had gathered was lit into a massive bonfire, around which the wolves, the Idiot Trio, Carue and the TDWS were dancing. Wiper, Nami, Zoro, and Boss continued their drinking contest and Lassoo and Kamakiri had decided to fight over who had the right to pig out on the soup's leftovers while, much to Sanji's pleasure, Vivi, Laki, and Conis had set up an impromptu catwalk.

…I had the distinct feeling that that wouldn't happen again anytime soon. And that meant a lot, coming from me. Hence, I took the opportunity to snap as many pictures as I could with our Vision Dial.

Through it all, Robin watched from the edges of the light, only just a part of it, but a part of it nonetheless. And that… well, that meant everything to me.

Nonetheless, I could only enjoy it so much before business beckoned to me, and I cast a glance through the darkness to where I knew the Merry floated. Tonight was the night, and there was no way in hell that I was going to miss the chance to talk to her. The problem, though, was that she was smart, and while she probably didn't know that I knew, if I just came aboard her without any reason, then she'd know that I knew and wouldn't show up! Freaking hell, this was confusing.

Bottom line: I needed a natural excuse to sleep on the Merry, pronto.

…And suddenly, the answer presented itself to me in the form of Aisa chasing Su around the campfire, the two of them laughing their asses off. A plan began to coalesce in my mind, and it would serve the dual purpose of getting me to my goal and providing Nami, Chopper, and Vivi the payback I owed them for that groin attack back when we met Masira. Robin could wait, I still owed her for Whiskey Peak, and the bit with Masira gave me a lot more leeway, but those three? No mercy. I glanced at Soundbite, and if the way he grinned at me was any indication, my eyes must have betrayed the mischievous feelings I had.

"Be as quiet as you can be. Tell Su, Lassoo, the TDWS, Aisa and the boss of the wolves to make their way into the woods, quietly," I said, slowly backing away into the treeline. This was going to be worth it in every possible way…

… But damn if I wasn't going to pay dearly for it.

And that was exactly the point.

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An hour or two later, the party was starting to slowly wind down, energy draining out of the partygoers as their bodies pointedly reminded them that, like it or not, they were still mortal and they needed their rest.

The bonfire was just burning down to a pile of charred and glowing embers when Zoro stretched his muscles with a jaw-cracking yawn. "Alright, I'd say that now the night is pretty much over. Kill the fire and let's get some sleep."

Before anyone could move, I cut in with a massive gasp, going so far as to cover my mouth with the back of my hand. "Sir! You forget yourself!" I stuck my palm out to him while clenching my fist and shaking my head sadly. "And in spite of the astute knowledge you displayed earlier today… For shame, Zoro, for shame."

"SHAME! SHAME!" Soundbite parroted.
Zoro stared at me in confusion. "What the hell are you—?" His response was promptly cut off by the finger I stuck in his face.

"After all the dedication you put into celebrating the night in a most appropriate manner, I had thought of you as a brother in arms, Zoro!" I lamented dramatically. "And yet, here at its zenith, the very end, you neglect the most important part of all! The coup de grâce, the final crescendo! Oh, the shame! Oh, the humanity!"

"The humanity! The humanity!"

"What the heck are you talking about, Cross!?” Nami demanded.

I stiffened and slowly turned to shine an extra-wide grin at her. "Why… I'm talking about the scary campfire stories, of course."

And just like that, all activity in the clearing ceased, a feat aided by the ghostly wind that Soundbite was blowing. The male members of the crew slowly moved to circle around the campfire, looking at me expectantly, while the female members and Shandians, too tired to argue, followed their example. I grinned, and tilted the brim of my hat down to cover my eyes, hiding the fact that I was glancing around and confirming that my compatriots were in their positions.

"Gentlemen, ladies," I breathed slyly, Soundbite helping my voice to eerily waft through the air. "Tonight, I share with you but one version of a tale oft told. A tale of romance and rejection, of life and death… of man, and the sea. Tonight, I tell you the tale of the goddess Calypso, and her lover…” I glanced up at my audience, a feral grin glinting in the firelight. "Davy Jones…”

My audience shivered heavily, either from the ethereal quality Soundbite had layered over my voice, the sudden gale he whistled or some combination of the two.

I stood up and spread my hands to begin the tale. "Long, long ago, when the seas were still wild and untamed and the world was young, all waters of the world were ruled by the great goddess of the of the seas…”

"Calypso…" Soundbite sighed heavily, and Sanji got something of a dreamy look in his eyes.

"As beautiful and as vicious as her domain, sailors the world over adored and feared her in equal measure. And yet!" I stuck my finger up suddenly, causing a few spectators to jump. "She had eyes… for but one. A young sailor, handsome, brave and bold in equal measure, who won her heart and her his. This sailor… was Davy Jones.

The audience seemed to focus on me a little more. Vivi had outright hearts in her eyes; probably needed to lay off the romance novels.

"And yet, despite this deep love, the Goddess could accept naught but the best as her suitor. As such, she assigned Davy Jones a most worthy task, through which he would prove the veracity of his emotions. She assigned him to collect the souls of the dead, those who perished within Calypso's waters, and to ferry them across the great divide to the other side with his mightiest of vessels, the Flying Dutchman." I began to pace back and forth in front of the log I'd been sitting on, the audience following my every move. "There was, however, a catch. In order to prove his dedication to his task, Davy Jones would have to suffer the ultimate curse of the sailor, in its most extreme form: he would only be able to set foot upon the land and see his love once every. Ten. Years. If his dedication were true and honest, then would he be deemed worthy of the goddess, and be released from his task."
Some watchers nodded unconsciously.

"Ten years did Davy Jones sail, and ten years did he toil, until the fateful day he was allowed to return to land. And yet, when he came ashore... Calypso was nowhere to be found. For while the ocean's bounty might be deep and rewarding... so too is it fickle and wild."

Several faces darkened in sadness or anger. Vivi especially looked ready to strangle a bitch.

"Enraged by this betrayal, Davy Jones' heart turned as black as pitch, and his mind as stormy as a hurricane. He plotted and schemed, and in the throes of his grief, he committed the ultimate betrayal: he ensorcelled Calypso with black magicks, and bound her in the body of a mortal, forever cutting her off from his domain. Then, abandoning her on land, he returned to the seas, not as a venerable ferryman... but as a blight."

"That's so horrible." The whisper circled around, but nobody could tell who said it.

"No longer did Davy Jones ferry those who fell at sea. Rather, he stole them away to his dark and damned locker, where he left them to rot for all eternity. No more did he act with honor or justice. Rather, he struck with malice and vitriol, sinking ship after damned ship with a vengeance.

"So deep was his grief, that the man did not realize his mistakes until he was too far gone to care: for as he enacted his evil upon the world, his evil tainted all around him as well."

Grimaces decorated several faces, and the more skittish members of the crew started to look nervous.

I continued the tale, my pacing turning into a slow circuit of the camp, looking each listener dead in the eye as I rammed each detail home. "His beloved Flying Dutchman, his pride and joy, soaked in the seas like a sponge. Water rotted every plank, and every fresh wave that hit the ship drew out a chorus of agonized groans. The sails became torn and tattered, only just managing to grasp at the winds that blew through them. And creatures of the sea, from barnacles to coral and all that lies between, climbed up the hull to infest every inch of the once proud vessel. The vessel... and her crew."

The audience collectively shuddered, several of them grasping their arms.

"Indeed, Davy Jones' crew did not escape his curse either. They became warped. Twisted. Their souls were sullied as much as their captain's and their bodies twisted to reflect it. They became abominations, horrific combinations of fish and human that would disgust even the fishmen themselves. The sea wove itself in and around the men, the pests of the sea burrowing deep, deep into their flesh, as they were made one with their damned ship... and their thrice damned captain."

My voice began to rise in volume and speed. No longer was I smiling; now my face was twisting into a feral snarl as I continued circling around.

"Yes... Davy Jones was the most distorted and vile of them all. His body twisted and warped itself into a monstrous form, worthy of his evil. His beard, once luxurious and awe-inspiring, became clumped and massed together by salt and rime, until it came alive, into the grasping arms of a cephalopod." I emphasized the point by placing my hand under my chin and wiggling my fingers. "And his left arm, once so mighty and powerful, became rough and jagged, barnacles and coral growing all along it, until it coalesced into a singular limb." I held my arm up and pinched my hand into a hard claw. "A crab's claw, massive in scale, and capable of snapping a man's neck with a single snip."

Even Wiper shuddered at that.
"But not even there did his evils end. For even as a monster, his heart yearned and ached for his beloved Calypso, an agony that he could not bring himself to bear." I raised my hand up and clenched my fingers over my chest. "So, he cut his own chest open... and ripped out his own still-beating heart."

The throbbing heartbeat that Soundbite layered through the air served to turn quite a few faces green. Even Robin looked ill at ease.

As I continued, I was now crouching down, hunched over the fire like a certain ring-obsessed imp. "He then locked his heart away, at the very ends of the earth, and returned to the sea anew. Now truly a heartless monster, Davy Jones' evils knew absolutely no bounds. He sailed the seven seas with rancor and malice, attacking all who fell within his sights. He brought misery and heartache to all who saw his ship, and death to all who saw his vile face...

"And every once in a blue moon, he would mark a sailor who had wronged him..." I glanced around, confirming the affirmative looks I was getting from my accomplices before turning my palm out to the audience. "With the Black Spot.

"The Spot was a vile curse indeed. A boil, writhing and squirming with the demons of hell, branded into the palm of his chosen victim. Naught could be done to remove it, save for Davy Jones himself deciding that the debt had been in some way repaid..."

All around the campfire, one by one, certain members of the audience jerked and started in shock. Nami, Chopper, Sanji, and Vivi all looked as though they'd had simultaneous heart attacks. Slowly, ever so slowly, they drew their hands up before their eyes and stared, the blood draining from their faces.

It took all I had to keep from cackling then and there. No clue how they'd managed to stick masses of tarred worms on the four's hands (or equivalent limbs), but damn if the TDWS hadn't just shown their stealth chops.

"The Spot marks his chosen for death, allowing Davy Jones to find his victims no matter where they might be, so that he might exact his payment."

"Wh-what does he do?" Aisa breathed in a faux-meek voice, causing more than a few people to jump, especially the 'marked', who were listening very attentively.

I chuckled darkly as I started to pace around the campfire again, putting myself as close to the shadows as I could. "What does he do, she asks... Davy Jones' sole currency is the exact same duty he abandons every day: the lives of humanity. And there are but three ways to repay a debt upon one's soul. The first is to offer up the soul of another, so that they might pay your debt in your place. The second is with hard labor, to join his crew of the damned for however many years you must work off your debt. Yet none truly ever leave the Dutchman, for to become part of the crew is to become part of the ship. To become part of the ship... is to become part of the crew..."

Nami whimpered miserably as she started to hyperventilate. "A-a-and the third?" she squeaked meekly.

I slowly turned my dead gaze upon her, my face devoid of all emotion. "There is but one final way to pay the debt... by paying the debt we must all pay one day or another. By accepting one's fate in the depths of Davy Jones' Locker."

Chopper let out a wheeze, akin to a broken and worn squeaky toy.
I chuckled darkly as I shook my head, turning around and pacing towards the darkness. "They always try and run, you know? They always try and hide on land or avoid the sea… but it's a futile endeavor. Because come hell or high water, be it on land or sea, through sleet, rain or snow… just as the sun rises and the sun sets, as the wind blows and the sea writhes, there will forever be a permanent fact of this world that none can contest…"

I spun around on my heel and smiled, the shadows no doubt playing merry hell with my face.

"Davy Jones always gets his man."

Dead silence fell as I made that pronouncement, apart from a couple of barely audible whimpers from the 'marked,' until a hiss drew everyone's attention to the fire. A puff of steam rose up, another drop of water glistening in mid-air. Then the hissing began to intensify, drops of water intensifying into a stream. It continued for a full ten seconds until…

SPLOOSH!

The fire went out in an instant as a tub-load of water dropped onto the glowing embers, plunging the campsite into darkness. The instant that that happened, utter pandemonium erupted, a flurry of shouting and movement erupting in the pitch darkness as everyone tried to make sense of things… until another light appeared. I knew that it came from salvaged Lamp Dials dyed with plant matter, slowly lighting up the clearing with an eerie green glow, but to everyone else? It was as though they were underwater.

Before anyone could say anything further or react, their attention was drawn to the shadows of the clearing, where a sound was ringing out.

Scraaaaape… THUNK! Scraaaaape… THUNK! Scraaaaape… THUNK!

Before everyone's horrified eyes, a figure strode out of the shadows of the jungle and into the unholy light that had appeared. The noise was coming from the figure's leg: crustacean in nature, it scraped along the vearth-covered ground alongside a heavy galosh stomping each step. The figure's clothing was tattered and ratty; an admiral's coat and a tricorn, surely once grand in appearance, but now looking as though they were centuries past their prime. But its face… scaly, yellowish, tentacles sprouting from his chin and reaching over his shoulders and down his chest, writhing and squirming as though with minds of their own. Overall, it resembled nothing less than the living incarnation of evil itself.

The figure stood silent on the edge of the clearing as he scanned the gathered people, its gaze flicking over each one before slowly focusing on four individuals in particular, causing hearts to freeze.

"I have but one question for ye all…" the figure groaned, his voice deep and bubbling, as though it came from the lips of the drowned.

The figure then raised up his left hand, nay, his claw, and pointed it at the audience.

"DO YE FEAR DEATH, LANDLUBBERS?!!"

And he snapped the jaw of the claw shut with a resounding SNAP!

That was the absolute limit.

"EEEEAAAAAAAAARRRRRRGH!!" Nami and Vivi shrieked at the top of their lungs while they held on to one another, their hair turning white from sheer terror. Chopper was silent alongside Usopp, Carue, and Pierre on account of how they'd all keeled over with their eyes rolled up in their
heads and foam bubbling out of their mouths, and as for Sanji? Well... he was still trying to unlock his muscles from the tree branch he'd clamped onto... thirty feet off the ground, with Boss right next to him.

The Shandians and Gan Fall were scrambling madly to try and find their weapons and skates, cold sweat cascading down each of their faces as the search proved completely fruitless. Conis was passed out with all the grace of an angel, Robin was caught between trembling with terror and repressed laughter, Zoro's hands fumbled uselessly with his swords, struggling to pull them from their sheaths, and Luffy was staring in equal parts awestruck amazement and paralyzed terror.

And me? Well, what else could I do in this situation, faced with the priceless and amazing sight that I saw? In the face of pain and destruction that was completely inevitable but so damn awesome for the fact that I had managed to make it this far, there was really only one possible reaction.

"Pff..."

It was as though a switch was flipped. From motion to nothing, the whole clearing froze as everyone processed what they'd heard. They tried to make sense of it, tried to reconcile what they'd heard with reality...

"Pffff..." I hunched forwards and shuddered slightly as I tried, I tried to hold it in.

Vivi's jaw slowly dropped open. "Oh, holy shit."

"What the hell..." Nami managed to get out.

"Pffffffff...!" I started to shake and shudder violently, the sheer force of what I was feeling shaking me to my core.

"Why did I ever think it was a good idea to team up with these lunatics?" Kamakiri groaned.

"Cross, you SON OF A—" Zoro started.

"PFFHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!" I finally busted out roaring, falling over on my ass and letting the weight of my costume crash down on me, the lobster and octopus I was sporting scrambling away as I flat-out cackled, laughing and laughing and laughing at the abso-freaking-lutely hilarious reactions I'd gotten. "OH MY GOOOOOD, YOU SHOULD HAVE SEEN YOUR FA-A-ACES! PFFHAHAHAHAHAHA!

I wasn't the only one laughing my head off, either. Soundbite, Su, Aisa, Lassoo, and the TDWS were expected, as were the cloud wolves—those who had helped me and not—and Luffy. But it seemed that my performance had broken the most stoic members of our assemblage: Zoro was laughing too hard to finish his insult, Wiper and Gan Fall were both pounding the ground laughing, and Robin, I was elated to see, had fallen against a rather large root, laughing herself to tears.

It was simply unfortunate that I couldn't enjoy the moment more, for as my laughter died down I became aware of the fact that a number of people were standing around me, glaring bloody murder at my prone form.

My laughter slowly trailed off as I stared up at them all until I allowed myself a hopeful grin.

"I... don't suppose any of you guys can take a joke?"

Their response came in the form of a symphony of metallic clicking as they brought their weapons up to bear.
"...I take it that's a no?"

What came next made the stunt I'd just pulled equal parts totally worth it and not worth it at all.

But either way... damn if it wasn't funny!

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A couple of hours later found me nursing my wounds in my hammock belowdecks on the Merry. Despite the rather severe pain I was in, I still managed to doze off, as did Soundbite. I might have even missed Merry's arrival, were it not for an ill-disguised show of good fortune in every definition of the word.

"Puru puru puru puru!"

My eyes snapped open at the sound, and I glanced around frantically as it repeated, spying Soundbite near the transceiver with a glazed look in his eyes; despite receiving a call, it seemed that he wasn't conscious.

With a groan, I forced myself out of bed, some part of me thankful that I had been awakened; if I had missed the chance to talk to Merry now, I don't know what I would have done, especially seeing as how I wasn't willing or able to talk to my crewmates about that particular mess. Finally, as I picked up the speaker, I comprehended the fact that I was receiving a call from MI3 at this hour, and wondered what was so urgent.

"Tiny Tim's Galoshes, for sizes extra-small and down!" I said, tiredly yet cheerfully.

"Where does he come up with this stuff?" Hina's voice wondered.

"Probably the same place where he learns all of his Marine and World Government secrets," Tashigi's voice answered.

"If you two are done..." Smoker cut in. "Cross, we're calling about something important."

"Considering the hour and the fact that all three of you are calling, I very much hope so for the sake of our continued partnership," I deadpanned. "What do you need?"

"We're planning on going after our first recruit for another leader in MI3; we want to persuade someone around our rank before we try going for anyone higher up," Hina stated.

"I've set up a meeting with Captain 'Ship Cutter' T-Bone," Smoker continued. "We're planning to meet with him first thing in the morning; I did my research on him, and I don't think I have any better bet for a decent Marine of that rank. But I wanted to run it by you first; if you know him, is there any reason he wouldn't be a good choice?"

I frowned, closing my eyes as I recalled the zombie-like captain from the Puffing Tom. He was a bit creepy, but a master swordsman and definitely a decent Marine.

"No. He's the Captain I was thinking of; he treats his men almost like sons and he dedicates his life to helping the innocent, and with how much he claims to hate crookedness, I think he's your best bet. Might wanna be careful, though; from what I've heard, he thinks that the World Government's brand of justice is the right one, so if you're not careful..."

"We will be, Cross. Believe me, I've taken that facet of him into account."
"Sir, we'll still have to convince him that this is the best thing to do—"

"Trust me, Tashigi, that's the least of our worries. For now, Cross, after we recruit T-Bone, we're planning on trying to find someone higher up in the Marines to join us. You mentioned Vice Admirals, which ones?"

"Um…" I racked my brains, calling the details to mind. "Momonga might eventually be willing to join, but it would take a lot more work. The bastard's a jackboot through and through. Straight-lace, but… I don't know where on the moral line he stands. Garp… it's hit or miss with him. I know for a fact that he's willing to go outside the rules, but he has faith in the Marines, and it would take something serious to shake that… something personal. And even then… But on the other hand, when you get the chance, you should definitely look into his students, especially Coby. Helmeppo's shaky, but his dad was corrupt and almost killed him in the process of escaping, so his firsthand experience with just how bad men wearing the uniform can be could be a tipping point. But anyway, short term… I think that the best chance you have right now is with Tsuru. I know that she's close with Sengoku, but—"

"No, Hina agrees. Tsuru seems stern, but she has a good heart underneath it all, and wisdom befitting her age."

"And I'll keep that in mind about Momonga. I'll see what I can do to sway him… and what sort of 'personal' thing are you talking about for Garp?"

"Oh, you'll find that out later," I said cheerfully.

"Tsk… huh. Shouldn't Soundbite be snarking at us right now?" Tashigi asked curiously.

"Sleep-answering," I shrugged. "I didn't know it was possible, but it apparently is."

"Interesting… well, are those the only possibilities you can think of, Cross?"

The image of a certain red-haired, anime-exclusive Marine came to mind. "There… might be one other, but odds are that my crew will end up crossing paths with him before you're done with recruiting those two. If we do, I'll screen him myself; if not, I'll run his name by you, see what you can come up with."

A long-suffering sigh came from the other end. "Fair enough, Cross. Just do us a favor and make sure that if you broadcast tomorrow, you make it a meaningful one."

"Speaking of which, what happened up there today?" Tashigi asked curiously. "I thought you were planning on continuing your broadcast later."

"For the sake of whatever sanity you have, I'm going to suggest you wait for the next SBS; the highlights are fighting a talking cream puff of a priest with clouds filled with snakes, explosives, and other tricks and traps; fighting another priest riding a giant dog with a shape-shifting sword and weaponized barbed wire; having a party with a group of wolves—"

"OK, OK, point taken, I'll wait for the SBS," Tashigi cut in.

"Aw, you didn't let me get to the—"

"Goodbye, Cross. We'll contact you again after T-Bone joins us."

"When you do, Smoker, I'm going to want to know why you're so confident about being able to," I sighed as I started to lean back into my hammock and started to drift back to sleep.
"Ah, wait a second! Cross, Hina has a suggestion that she'd like you to weigh in on."

"Hm?" I cracked my eye open blearily.

"An officer who served with Hina under Vice Admiral Tsuru way back when. It's been years, but Vergo's a Vice Admiral himself now, and—"

"Hell no!" I snapped hastily, suddenly very wide-awake as my adrenaline shot through the roof. "If you get in contact with Vergo, you can consider this partnership to be fucking done!"

Soundbite's dozy expression snapped to one of abject shock. "What the—?" Tashigi started incredulously before Hina interrupted her.

"Cross, I know Vergo, he's a good man! He cares for his men, he thrives in spite of the fact that he's in command of G-5, he'd give us a foothold in the New World."

"That traitorous son of a bitch is a deep-cover plant for Donquixote Dofla-fucking-mingo, and one of his closest confidants to boot," I summarized frigidly.

And just like that, Hina's expression froze. "W-what?" she breathed.

I grit my teeth as I pinched the bridge of my nose, dredging up the best way to handle this. "When Vergo first joined, it wasn't for justice or fame or fortune or anything. It was for the sole, singular purpose of providing Doflamingo with an in to the Marines. Every second he spent climbing the ranks, every connection he made and bond he forged, it was all to help further Doflamingo's information network within the ranks. The man is a cold-blooded monster, and if you confront him with this, he will not hesitate before killing you."

"No… no, that's not possible!" Hina shook her head in denial. "Hina knows—I know him! Vergo is kind, he's warm, he—!"

"Eleven years ago, Vergo came face to face with the mole that the Marines had in Doflamingo's organization," I cut her off. "That mole gave Vergo a capsule of information meant for Sengoku's eyes only, whose contents would have prevented the massacre that occurred in the Kingdom of Dressrosa a year later, a massacre that Doflamingo orchestrated. Vergo didn't hesitate before he destroyed that information, and then proceeded to beat the mole and the ill child with him within an inch of their lives." I was silent for a moment before sighing despondently. "I'm sorry, Hina. But when you say Vergo's name… you don't even have the first clue what you're talking about."

"…You'll forgive me if I don't take accusations like that against such a high-ranking Marine at face value, Cross," Smoker dryly replied after a moment.

"Commodore…" Tashigi hesitated slightly.

I shrugged in response. "Hey, do whatever the hell you want, take my words with a grain of salt or the whole shaker if you have to…" I glared as I jabbed my finger at the snail. "But I was entirely serious earlier: if you contact Vergo, then I'm writing this whole venture off. He scares me more than you ever could, and that is a hard-wrought fact. And you know as well as I do that nothing I've told you so far has been wrong."

"…Good night, Cross," Smoker finally bit out.

"Yeah, yeah, same to you, jackass…" I grumbled as I defaulted to popping a specific finger at the person on the other end of the snail before ramming the mic back into its cradle and cutting the connection.
As my adrenaline ebbed and I stopped being distracted, I became acutely aware of the extensive collection of bruises I'd acquired a few hours prior. I mean, they were healing really fast and I'd probably be fine tomorrow morning, but... well. Being on the receiving end of half a dozen infuriated superhumans was not a pleasant experience. But the end result was being forced out of camp to spend the night on the Merry, which was ultimately exactly what I wanted. Now, if only—

Thud.

I froze as I heard the sound echo above me.

Thud.

There it was again, wood against wood.

Acting fast, I rapped my fist over Soundbite's shell, causing him to jerk awake with an annoyed snort. He glared at me in irritation and started to open his mouth, but before he could roar, I held my finger to my mouth and waited.

Thud.

Thankfully, the next thud served to silence him, causing him to glance upwards before nodding at me. Moving slowly, I scooped him onto my shoulder before sliding out of my hammock and making my way towards the ladder and trapdoor leading out of the men's bedroom, pushing it open to see—

...Alright, I know that I've already gushed about Oda's design and how it measured up to reality, but honestly, I was looking at one of the closest things to an honest-to-goodness ghost I'd ever see outside of Perona's facsimiles; what else am I supposed to do?

The first thing that stood out to me about her was how... indistinct she was. A silhouette more than anything, to be honest. It was as though she'd stepped out of an out-of-focus sepia-toned picture; her borders were blurred, as though she were seamlessly melded with the very air. Her substance, or what she had of it, was focused more around her hands and her feet. Looking at her center mass and head, I could literally see straight through her to the other side. And as for her face, well, there wasn't much to see. What little of her face I could see beneath her hood was featureless and blank, as if she were a mannequin. The only defining part of her I could discern was her mouth, which was closed in concentration as she hammered in bolt after bolt to the metal plate she was affixing to one of the more burnt up sections of the mast.

Finally, after watching her for a minute, I cleared my throat.

Merry jumped almost a foot in the air, which was impressive for her stature, before wheeling around to stare at me in shock. She gaped for a second before sighing and hanging her head. "You knew..." she groaned, her voice little more than a wispy sea breeze. "I knew this was a risk... You got beat up and sent back here on purpose, didn't you?"

I chuckled and scratched the back of my head sheepishly. "That was part of it, yeah," I admitted. "Though it was also revenge for that stunt Nami, Vivi, and Chopper pulled back when we met Masira."

Merry grunted and moved her head in a motion that indicated she was rolling her eyes. "Yeah, yeah, I guess I should have seen that coming..."

An uncomfortable silence grew in the air, neither of us sure what to say.

Finally, I coughed and nervously glanced away. "So, ah... do you want an extra pair of hands
Merry stared at me for a second before shrugging and returning to her hammering. "I wouldn't be much of a pirate ship if I kept you from doing what you wanted, would I?" she grumbled morosely.

Soundbite and I exchanged surprised looks before I ultimately shrugged. I took a moment to spin my finger at the air and jerk my thumb across my throat before climbing out of the trapdoor, thus indicating for Soundbite to put up as good a barrier of noise as he could forge and hopefully prevent Usopp from catching sight of us and fainting from terror.

Once on the deck, I got to work, handing Merry plate after bolt after plate as she slowly patched herself up. It was… grim work, to say the least. Merry was an absolutely incredible ship, and for her to be so beaten, so bruised so... injured... it was just… hard to look at.

We worked in silence for a few dozen panels or so until I finally worked up the courage to speak. "So, ah… how are you… holding up? The whole burnt mast thing notwithstanding, I mean, that's pretty—"

"My keel isn't cracked, Cross," Merry cut me off with slam of her hammer, an exasperated tone in her voice.

I allowed myself to sag in relief, entirely uncaring about her demeanor. "Oh, thank God…"

Merry was silent as she glanced up at me before seeming to sag in defeat. "But… it's coming."

And there was the shot of ice in my veins. "W-what?" I asked numbly.

Merry shook her head as she slowly got back to work, hammering away. "What were you expecting, Cross? I'm an East Blue caravel in Grand Line waters. These seas are just… too rough. The waves, the winds, the Marines… I've felt it coming for a while now. Creaks and cracks everywhere… and day by day, it takes more and more for me to hold my keel together. There's only so much I can take, you know?" She didn't wait for an answer before shaking her head sadly. "There's only so much any of us can do…"

I was no expert on marine engineering, but what she was saying made sense. My mind flashed back to Krieg's galleon at Baratie, and how ravaged she had been. And she was several dozen times the size of the Merry.

And that last line… God, how I thought of that every day.

"Yeah…" I sighed. "I know exactly what you mean."

Another awkward silence descended upon us, Merry hammering and me passing materials to her as I tried to think of something to say.

Finally, I gave her a hopeful glance. "Well… either way, that doesn't mean we can't try, right?" I took the way she shifted silently as a sign to continue. "I-I mean, well, we're Straw Hats, right? Breaking past all the limits, defying every expectation and all that."

"ROW ROW FIGHT DA POWAH!" Soundbite cheered, though his heart didn't seem to be in it.

When Merry didn't respond, I allowed myself a slight chuckle. "Really now, just look at our track record. We've all come out of more near-death scrapes than I care to count, and every time we've managed to pull through. Human or not, flesh and blood or not, you bear our pride more than any of us, so I daresay that luck extends to you too, right?"
For some reason I couldn't discern, Merry's hammering became… jerky and somewhat sporadic, her swings coming at odd intervals.

I frowned at her in concern before turning away to pick up another metal sheet. "So… look, I'm not always a maestro with words, alright? Just… don't worry about it. No matter what happens, you'll always be—"

SKRANG!

I spun around in shock as the screech of tortured metal sang out and boggled at the sight of one of the metal plates wrapped around Merry's hammer like so much tin foil. "The hell—!"

"Stop it…" Merry hissed out, her entire wispy frame shivering violently. I tried and failed to make sense of what I was hearing. "Merry, what—? Look, if you're worried about what's coming up next—!

"I SAID STOP IT!" the ship's spirit shrieked, wrenching her hammer out with a shriek of metal and sending the panel flying into the bay before wheeling on me, her mouth set in a snarl. "STOP BEING SO FUCKING NICE AND JUST DO IT ALREADY!"

"Oh my!" Soundbite barked nervously. I stumbled back in shock, more than taken aback by this turn of events. "The hell—!? Do what!? What are you talking about?"

"WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK I'M TALKING ABOUT!?" Merry spat as she spread her arms wide. "STOP PUSSYFOOTING AROUND AND BLAME ME ALREADY!"

…needless to say, it took me awhile to come up with a response for that.

"W-what?" I finally managed to get out.

"BLAME ME!" Merry repeated, slapping her hand to her chest. "YELL AT ME, CURSE AT ME, TELL ME THE TRUTH! STOP SUGARCOATING THINGS AND JUST SAY IT: THIS IS MY FAULT! IT'S MY FAULT FOR BEING SO WEAK THAT I NEED REPAIRS SO BAD, THAT EVERYONE HAS TO WORRY ABOUT ME SO MUCH! IT'S—!" Merry cut herself off with a ragged gasp, and a few drops of something dripped out of her hood. "I-IT'S MY FAULT THAT I'M… I'm so weak… So… so f-f-fragile… so… so u-useless…"

I promptly took a knee and swept up the poor spectre in a hug as she broke down and started to sob. My arms sank into her a bit more than I was comfortable with, but I kept at it and held her nevertheless, letting her sob into my chest and grasp at me desperately while I shushed her and whispered what reassurances I could manage.

"Come on, come on, it's alright…" I breathed, rubbing her back as nicely as I could manage. "None of us blame you, none of us think that this is your fault, of course we don't, why would you ever think that we thought that? Why would we ever do something as stupid as blaming you?"

"Because you shou-u-uld…" Merry wept, tears and more than a bit of snot somehow bubbling out as she buried her face in my shirt. "B-because it's true… I'm weak… I'm so, so weak… I c-can't stand up to the stupid Marine battleships, I can't s-stand up to the s-stupid Sea Kings, I can b-barely stand up to the stupid se-e-e-ea…" She shook her head in denial. "I'm just… I'm not strong enough… I'm small and w-weak and stupid and… and…" Merry hiccupped. "I… I should have just sunk myself at the Sandora and been done with it…"
"What!?” I held Merry out from me by her shoulders and stared at her incredulously. "No! No, no, no, Merry! Are you—are you insane!? Are you deranged or something!? Look at yourself! Look at where you are! Merry, you're in the sky! And more than that, you took the Knock-Up Stream to get here! Only one other ship in living memory has gotten here that way, and it was an East Blue ship, too, Gold Roger's ship before he got the Oro Jackson! How can you possibly call yourself weak when you've come so far, so far into where so few ships have come before?!

Merry choked and sniffed heavily as she refused to meet my gaze. "B-b-back on J-Jaya… when we docked… the-the other ships… th-they saw just how w-w-weak I was and… and they said that I had to-to sink myself… t-they said that… I was gonna, gonna sink anyways, so…” She gasped desperately. "So I should have done the right thing. They said I should have cracked my keel then and there, that it was my duty to si-ink myself so that-that I wouldn't take you all down with me in the middle of the se-e-ea…"

I felt a sudden urge to start burning things rise up in me. An urge that only intensified at what she said next.

"I… I didn't listen to them at first…" she sobbed, shivers ravaging her body. "I-I told them that I was stronger than that, that I was a Straw Hat and that-that I wasn't going to go down that easy. I-I told them that I'd reach my dream, that I'd see the world with you all…" A wistful smile started to spread across her face before breaking down with another sob. "A-and then… then he started talking… t-the biggest ship around, t-the scary one… h-he said that w-weak rowboats like me didn't have any place in the real waters and that i-if I put my dreams ahead of my crew's lives then… then…” Merry promptly started bawling into her hands. "Then I was a disgrace to ships everywhe-e-e-eere!"

I swear that I felt my blood pressure skyrocket as I processed that statement and I came to a very grim conclusion. "Merry, the ship you're talking about. It was the one that we saw later that night, wasn't it?"

Merry snorted heavily for a second before shaking her head vigorously.

I growled beneath my breath as I vehemently cursed the color pink before trusting myself to speak. "Merry, listen to me: everything that comes out of the mouth of anything and anyone flying that flag is an absolute load. That flag is fucking toxic, and anybody who follows it, and I mean truly follows it and all that it stands for, is irredeemable. You cannot, cannot take their words at face value."

Merry sniffed and stared up at me for a second, before snapping her head away as though she'd been struck. "…but he was right…" she whispered.

"Merry—!"

"He was right, Cross!" Merry repeated desperately, tears streaming out from beneath her hood as she stared up at me. "He-he was right… I-I am weak… and I'm so stupid stupid stupid!" She emphasized the point by rapping her knuckles against her skull. "I… I'm a ship, Cross. I'm not part of the crew, I'm not an equal, I'm not meant to do anything else but get you to your destination! We-we don't hope, we don't pray, we don't d-d-dream…"

Merry tugged on miserably the edges of her hood. "But I… I did dream… I-I got it in my head that I could d-dream of staying with you all f-forever… t-that I could go with you all the whole way, t-that I'd see the Grand Line with you all…" Merry started to shake her head back and forth desperately. "It was a s-stupid, impossible dream, a-and I let it put you all in danger… stupid, stupid, stupid—!"

And that was when I brought this bullshit train to an end.
"MERRY!" I roared, grabbing the sides of her face and making her look at me. "Merry, listen, listen, listen to me, Merry! You are not weak, and you are not stupid. You are a brave, smart, incredible ship, and absolutely none of us blame you for your injuries, those are all on us, do you understand me? All on us. You are the most incredible ship to sail since the great Oro Jackson, and you are loved. We all love you with all our hearts, Merry, and no matter what, we want your dream to come true! We want to reach Raftel sailing with you, and we will make that happen, do you understand me?"

Merry hiccupped and sniffled as she stared at me before finally shuddering and shaking her head desperately. "I-It's no use, Cross..." she choked out. "I-it's just no use... I've been fighting the sea for so long... so hard... I-I don't want to give up, but... I-I'm just too weak... I'm..." Merry pitched forward and I hastily caught her, holding her to my chest where she just leaned and sobbed. "I'm so tired..."

I found myself without a response to that. All I could do was hug her again, holding her pseudo-corporeal form close to me. I couldn't see Soundbite's face from the angle I was at, but the snail was silent in the face of the development, for which I was half-grateful; killing the moment now would do nothing good... but I had nothing good to say myself.

"It's alright, Merry. Everything will be alright," I found myself whispering, staring out into the woods, barely conscious of what I was doing. And then I did the stupidest thing I could have done.

"I promise, Merry, I'll save you and keep you sailing with us, no matter what."

Merry fell silent, and slowly pulled away from me, staring at me with a sad smile and tears cascading down her face. "Big-mouthed dumbass... we both know that you can't keep that promise. It's impossible."

I let out a bittersweet chuckle, resolving to ride that statement as far as I could. "Merry, I stopped seeing that as relevant the day I was ripped from my home and met Soundbite, and not a damn thing that's happened so far has done anything but reinforce that opinion. I mean, for crying out loud, I'm talking to a klabautermann! At least half of the world would call that impossible! I'm not about to let that stop me."

"For the world is full of zanies and fools~, who don't believe in sensible rules~. and won't believe what sensible people say~. and because these daft and dewy-eyed dopes keep building up impossible hopes, impossible things are happening ev~ery~ day~!" Soundbite sang out.

Merry swapped her teary gaze between us for a few seconds before finally smiling, sniffling as she wiped her tears away. "Y-you have a point. It's not too late yet." She moved back over to me, and hugged me again. "Thank you, Cross."

I smiled back, holding her close. How the hell I would keep that promise, I don't know, but damn if I was going to spare any effort. For now, I'd tell the crew as soon as we had her loaded up with gold. If we made it to Water 7 before the keel cracked, problem solved. And if not... then we'd just have to ask Franky for help. Between his experience as one of the best shipwrights still alive and his clout in the black market, he was sure to know of something we could try… anything. Anything we could try.

…because in the end, there was just no chance that I was going to just take shit like this sitting down. Not a chance in hell.

"Uh, C-C-Cross?"
All attention snapped to the side of the boat, where the voice of a very ill at ease Usopp was wafting up from. "Are you p-practicing for another ghost story or something?" he posed hesitantly.

I blinked in surprise as I processed this turn of events before shooting a questioning look at Soundbite, who shrugged sheepishly. "GOT CAUGHT up in the moment?"

"Fair enough," I sighed with a roll of my eyes before considering the current situation. I then interposed myself between Merry and where Usopp's voice was coming from. "No, Usopp, nothing like that. I'm... talking with one of our crewmates."

"What the—?" I heard Usopp start to ask before he clambered into sight and looked around in confusion. "What are you talking about? I saw all the dugongs back at camp, nobody else was awake—"

"Usopp..." I interrupted him firmly. "I need you to promise that you're not gonna freak out. Okay?"

The sniper blinked at me in confusion. "Cross, what are you—grgh!" His voice died in his throat when I took a step to the side, revealing the figure behind me. Usopp promptly started trembling like a leaf. "W-w-w-who—?!"

Merry stared at Usopp impassively for a second before slowly allowing a massive grin to spread across her face. "I'm the only person who knows that you had to dive into my bilge for the Clima-Tact's components when you dropped them in there while working on them on the can."

Usopp's first reaction was to flush in embarrassment when Soundbite and I started snickering... before paling in realization. "W-w-wait, d-did you just say your—!?!"

I smiled and nodded kindly before walking towards the trapdoor to the guys' room, clapping Usopp on his shoulder as I passed him. "I'll... just let you two get acquainted, then, shall I?"

"Huh?" Usopp jerked his gaze at me. "W-wait a second, Cross!"

"Usopp."

The sniper froze as Merry's gentle tone swept over him. Looking back at her... she had a kind smile on her face.

"We..." Merry started before chuckling lightly and pressing a hand to her head. "We've got a lot to talk about."

And for better or worse... that was where I left them.

-O-

Somewhere in the waters of Paradise, in the stomach of one of the Marines' many sea prism stone-lined battleships, two figures of extreme power and influence were meeting in person for the first time. Both were capable of eliciting feelings of terror from their foes and allies alike for entirely separate reasons, and both were just as capable of inciting feelings of awe from their allies as well. And today, one way or another, these two juggernauts of justice would become inextricably linked.

And it all started... with a handshake.

"Captain T-Bone," Smoker said neutrally, extending a hand.

"Commodore Smoker," wheezed the Captain in question, accepting the handshake. "It's a pleasure to
make your acquaintance. Your reputation precedes you; I'm quite honored to meet someone else who has such high dedication for our most illustrious Navy. Although…” The somewhat decrepit-looking swordsman glanced around the storeroom they were meeting in. "I will admit to some measure of confusion as to why you insist that we meet here, as opposed to either of our cabins…"

Smoker blew out a heavy cloud as he sat on a nearby crate, giving the captain an evaluating look. "Because I've gone over every inch of both my cabin and this room, and when stacked against one another, this room is much more insulated against eavesdropping than the standard Naval Captain's cabin. All that water-tightening, at a guess."

T-Bone slowly blinked at Smoker. "Eavesdropping? What are you—?" He was interrupted by the door to the storeroom opening, allowing a third figure carrying a Transponder Snail to enter the room.

"Captain T-Bone," Smoker grunted as he gestured at the individual. "Meet my second, Ensign Tashigi." The Ensign in question nodded respectfully at the Captain before placing the fully aware and attentive Transponder Snail she was carrying on a nearby crate and standing at attention by her superior. "And on the other end of that Snail is my long-time friend and confidant, Captain 'Black Cage' Hina."

"Hina is grateful for your agreement to meet with us, Captain."

T-Bone looked rather nonplussed. "The… pleasure is mine, Captain, but I would like to know what all of this is about."

"To begin to answer that, Captain… what is your opinion of the Navy?" Smoker asked neutrally.

T-Bone paused at the apparent non sequitur. "My opinion? I should say that that is obvious, Commodore.” He confidently rapped his fist against his breastplate. "Our organization stands as a bastion of justice and righteousness, and one that I am proud to dedicate every fiber of my being to serve. I dare say that you feel the same, if your performance against the former Warlord Crocodile is any indication."

Tashigi shifted uncomfortably as she listened to the spiel, glancing at Smoker. "Commodore…”

Smoker stared at T-Bone silently for a second before sighing out a cloud of smoke and grinding out one of his cigars on the crate he was sitting on. "Let me tell you a story, Ensign Tashigi," he started slowly, eyes shut in concentration. "A story whose details I picked up on when I was still a green rookie back in Marineford." He flicked a glance at T-Bone. "Have you ever heard of the 13th Royal Marine Flotilla?"

Every muscle in T-Bone's body seemed to tense up, while Tashigi merely looked confused. "I… can't say that I have, sir. And I've… never heard of any divisions that were designated as 'Royal' either, for that matter."

Smoker shrugged as he dug out a new cigar and set about lighting it. "Not surprising, Ensign. The tradition of labeling divisions and fleets as being specifically 'Royal' is a West Blue practice, where there's more of a monarchical presence than the rest of the world. The 13th were particularly renowned back in the day for their indisputable and uncontestable sense of brotherhood, dedication…” Smoker finally got a spark going, and ignited the end of his cigar. "…and justice."

Tashigi glanced around as the mood hung thick and heavy over the room, feeling uncomfortably behind. "That's… very impressive sir…” She stiffened as something clicked with her. "You… you said that they were renowned, sir?"
T-Bone slowly reached up and tilted the visor of his helmet down, shading his eyes solemnly. "I am... sorry to inform you of this, miss," he stated evenly. "But you see, the 13th Royal Marine Flotilla was made defunct a little more than twelve years ago."

"O-oh, I see, I'm sorry..." Tashigi scratched her arm uncomfortably as she tried to find something to say. "What... what happened?"

Hina's snail mimicked the shake of her head. "Twelve years ago, all Marine forces of the West Blue were collectively recruited for participation in a singular operation known as the 451 Degree Campaign."

"It was a manhunt of epic proportions," Smoker summarized darkly. "A wave of white and blue that went from the Calm Belt to the Red Line and encompassed every inch of the West Blue in between, every island and patch of sea... all for the sole purpose of locating a single fugitive who had evaded the forces of the World Government for the past eight years."

Tashigi frowned as the numbers she was given started tickling something in her memory. She ran a quick calculation, and paled at the result she came up with. "Nico Robin..." she whispered numbly.

Smoker nodded solemnly. "Bingo. She'd have been sixteen at the time. Obviously, the 451 Degree Campaign failed. We believe that it was that self-same maneuver that drove her out of the West Blue and into the Grand Line. She only managed to avoid the pursuit of the collective might of the world thanks to a crime ring that had been operating in the shadows for the past few decades. Arms trading, black market dealings, assassinations, slavery... it's only the fact that it would require an extortionate amount of force to prove their crimes and connections that let them keep going for so long. The Campaign wiped out every trace of the ring, but Nico Robin slipped through their fingers. It's only the fact that they had taken out such a blight on the West Blue that kept those twelve fleets from being court-martialed by Marineford itself, and even then, only just."

Once anew, the numbers stuck out to Tashigi. "Twelve fleets? But what about—?"

"The... 13th was made defunct prior to the start of the Campaign..." T-Bone wheezed. "Due to... differences of opinion."

"They disagreed with the undertaking as a whole," Hina clarified. "To a man, the soldiers of the 13th disagreed with the basis of the operation. They viewed it as a gross misappropriation of resources, leaving the majority of the West Blue to suffer at the hands of countless other pirates while they pursued a single criminal, and an underaged one at that. They just didn't see how the costs could justify the means. So, they started to organize a protest against the campaign, and they were apparently about to make overtures to the rest of the Royal Flotillas as well for a show of unity..."

"When they were discovered by the chief officer of the Campaign," Smoker ground out darkly. "The highly acclaimed Vice Admiral Sakazuki."

The blood drained from Tashigi's face, while a minor tremor shook T-Bone's gaunt figure. "Oh, God..." she breathed. "He didn't..."

Smoker drew in a lungful of smoke before blowing it into the air, watching it swirl in the lamplight. "To the last man," he confirmed solemnly. "For the crimes of high treason against the World Government, insubordination and mutiny. And when the 451 Degree Campaign started two weeks later, it was led not by Vice Admiral Sakazuki... but by Admiral Akainu."

"I think I'm going to be sick..." Tashigi gurgled as she put a hand on her forehead and staggered around the room in an effort to calm her stomach.
"Be strong, Ensign," T-Bone intoned, adamant conviction strumming through his words. "To oppose the justice of the World Government is an unforgivable sin. The punishment they received for their actions was swift, just and true."

Tashigi shot a horrified look at the Captain, but before she could say anything, she was interrupted by a dark chuckle filling the room.

"That's ironic, coming from you, Captain," Smoker remarked. Shock registered on T-Bone's face for the barest instant before fading back into his adamant façade, but nobody missed it. "After all, that's not the end of the story. Among the 13th Royal Flotilla, nobody escaped from Sakazuki's assault. Everyone there was subjected to his Absolute Justice, and all of them were burned alive… but there was one who survived long enough to be put on a bed and given the medical treatment necessary to save his life."

"With magma burns over ninety percent of his body and his ability to breathe only possible via the extensive usage of machinery, he could barely speak, much less move when the newly appointed Admiral heard of him," Hina recollected. "And when Akainu came calling, fully intent on completing his inquisition, the survivor began to speak. He told of how he had seen the light, the error of his ways, and come to understand the glorious mission of the Marines. He looked Akainu in the eye, inasmuch as he could, and he thanked him for what he'd done. For killing his fellow sinners and for sparing him from death so that he might devote his life to the World Government's Divine Justice, protecting civilians from criminals and punishing those criminals for their crimes. In a show of approval that Akainu has never performed since, he not only spared the survivor's life, but promised him a promotion as soon as he was fit to return to duty, and personally put in the efforts needed to ensure that that time came as soon as possible."

"With all the medical treatment that the World Government could provide, that survivor soon gained the ability to breathe independently again, though every breath was an effort." Smoker blew out yet another cloud, his gaze never deviating from T-Bone's stony face. "His face recovered to a degree that could be deemed 'presentable', though it remained gaunt, and somewhat skeletal. And from that day on, he never strayed again from the Navy; he was a model commander, a father to his men, a hero to any civilians he helped, and a demon to any criminals who crossed him. But above all, he gained a reputation for never allowing the slightest hint of crookedness to enter any aspect of his life that he could control."

Tashigi's mouth slowly opened again as she turned to stare at T-Bone. His fists were clenched, but his expression remained unreadable.

"Personally, though," Smoker stated as he held out his cigars and examined them. "I wonder about the truth of that aftermath. On the one hand, it's possible that he could have truly converted like that… but on the other, he could have just been so scared he decided to always stay well away from the mere thought of angering the World Government from then on. And yet, he always maintained that sense of duty and integrity that drove him to stand alongside his brothers in the 13th to do what they felt was right. I think that it's possible that the good Marine…" He looked at Captain T-Bone dead on. "May have remained decent to this day."

T-Bone stared impassively at Smoker for a few moments. "…How do you differentiate the two terms?" he asked quietly.

Smoker exhaled. "As someone defined it to me not long ago… a good Marine follows his orders to the letter, and will sacrifice all for the sake of Justice."

"But decent Marines will sacrifice everything for the sake of all those whom they swore to protect," Tashigi continued firmly, conviction in her voice.
"Even Justice, if it comes down to it," Hina finished.

T-Bone's eyes widened marginally for a bare fraction of a moment. For a time, he just… stood there, staring dead ahead at nothing.

Finally, he turned around without a word and started to stride towards the door.

"Captain T-Bone?" Tashigi asked hesitantly.

The Captain halted in the doorway, staring at it for a second before leaning his head back, a smile on his barely present lips.

"Ah, what a beautiful day…" he sighed euphorically, apparently speaking to himself. "I am so glad I chose to go for a walk. I look forward to seeing Commodore Smoker tomorrow when he arrives. I've heard good things about him. I hope he lives up to my expectations."

The two Marines and the snail sagged in defeat.

"C-captain T-Bone, please—!" Tashigi started to plead desperately.

"I truly hope that nothing untoward happens during the meeting," T-Bone forged on, heedless of the Ensign's protests. "I would hate for the meeting to be… sullied."

And with that, the Captain made to reach for the door—

"Don don don don!"

When he was given pause by the telltale ringing of a snail behind him.

Tashigi glanced at the ringing snail in shock before hastily rallying. "C-Captain T-Bone, I am begging you! Just ten minutes of your time, ten minutes, that's all we ask. Listen to the SBS with us, and then afterwards…" She bit her lip hesitantly before looking away. "Afterwards… you can decide what you will. Just… please, give us a chance?"

T-Bone's smile was gone, and his face betrayed no emotion. After another two rings, his hand fell back to his side, no longer reaching for the door. He made no more movement than that, and said nothing. Smoker took that for what it was, and looked at the snail, before pausing. "… Does anyone know how to answer the damn snail with a call already running?"

"… Hina still wonders how we can hold calls despite the broadcast," the other Marine Captain admitted.

Tashigi thought it over for a minute before snapping her fingers. She then proceeded to kneel before the snail with a hopeful grin. "Would you mind connecting to the SBS, please?"

The snail's expression shifted from Hina's uneasy one to a look of surprise before shrugging and letting out a CLICK! It then started whistling patiently. "—three, four, five, six—"

Tashigi smiled beatifically. "Thank you."

"… I will have to remember to treat Transponder Snails with the utmost respect in the future," T-Bone muttered.

"Nine, and woo, that's a pretty number! Alrighty, I'd say we're good! Oh, wait. Soundbite, have you got the Gastro-Scramble up?"
"Yup yup yup!"

"OK, good. And now, ladies and gentlemen—!"

"So this is the part where you usually start the SBS?" came a feminine voice.

"Exact— SONNUVA BITCH! NOT EVEN BY THE DAMN SNAIL THIS TIME!"

"Leave my mother out of this!" Lassoo barked with a snicker.

"OH THE insect-ity of it all! I'VE BEEN OUTFOXED!"

"Gee, did you hurt yourself thinking of that one?"

"Only however MUCH IT PAINS ME whenever I think of you, PUFFBALL!"

"Oh, hell, no. Two of them?" Tashigi groaned miserably.

"One of these crates has got to have sake in it," Smoker grunted, getting up from his seat and looking around.

"Oh, please, allow me to assist you," T-Bone said fervently, moving away from the door.

"I knew keeping a bottle at my desk was a good idea," Hina muttered.

"Ugh… alright, with another attempt for me to start my own freaking radio show foiled, let's go ahead and get this rolling. First of all, as you can tell, I'm not alone on this broadcast. I might regret this, but why don't you introduce yourself?"

"Oh? Well, alright. Heso, everyone!"

-0-

"…And that's basically the long and short of it," I concluded. "Personally, I still think it's incredible. A long-lost city of gold in the sky, apparently watched over by a cruel and despotitc 'god' who can fling down lightning at a whim. Just when you think the world can't get any more ridiculous—"

"It thwows yah anothah cuhveball!" Carue finished with a snicker.

"As the duck said," I nodded in agreement. "But anyways, allow me to catch you up on the game plan we decided on this morning. We've split into four separate groups. The first group, composed of Nami, Usopp, Sanji, Leo, Raphey, Isaiah, Gan Fall, Pierre and Aisa, are currently handling our escape route. They're navigating the Going Merry out of Upper Yard and to safer waters, so that our ship stays unmolested. The second group, composed of Luffy, Chopper, Zoro, Terry and Robin, are heading towards where we determined the city of gold to be located, thanks to the map Robin picked up while we were in Jaya. According to Aisa, she can tell that Eneru is thereabouts, so they'll have the dual task of finding us our payday and proof of Noland's claims, as well as kicking god's ass. Third are our Shandian allies, who are accompanied by Boss, Mikey and Donny. They're regrouping with the main Shandian invasion force, and then going on a priest hunt. Shura first, to be specific. Boss is keen on getting his rematch. And finally, the last group is composed of us: Soundbite, Lassoo and I, Conis, Su, Vivi and Carue."

I frowned darkly as we moved through the severely untamed flora of Upper Yard, massive roots, branches, and rocks impeding our progress at every turn. Carue was having the least amount of difficulty, it seemed; I could only guess that he'd had plenty of training for different terrains. "The
fact is that Eneru is an egotistical bastard with the mother of all God Complexes. Chances are that when we try and take him down, he won't go down easy. At minimum, he'll want to take his 'followers' with him. Hence, we're making our way to Conis' home, Angel Island, in an effort to try and convince the locals to evacuate, at least until the danger's passed. Hopefully nothing will come from it, but honestly—"

"Baa-a-a-a~"

We came to an abrupt halt when we heard the unmistakable sound of a goat coming from nearby. "Vivi, how confident are you now with those Lion Cutters?"

By way of response, the princess began spinning one of the weapons in question, while Carue exchanged looks with Soundbite. The snail frowned in concentration.

"Baa-a-a-a~"

It was closer this time.

"Three of them... 7 O'CLOCK!"

The hand-scythe lashed out at Soundbite's cry. The three goat-like Enforcers attempted to dodge, but only succeeded; one took the hit head-on, falling down in a bleeding mess, while the second got a nasty gash on his side. The third evaded the blade entirely... and was instead shot off into the depths of the forest as he caught a baseball moving as fast as a cannonball in his gut. I then moved to confront the remaining, minorly sliced enforcer... and promptly widened my eyes in shock as I noticed that the one in question was wielding a bazooka; weren't these dumbasses only supposed to be packing Axe Dials?!

Said Enforcer promptly began circling around the group on his skates, bringing his bazooka to bear. Unfortunately for him and luckily for us, while Dial Skates were fast, Supersonic Ducks were much faster; before he knew what was happening, Carue was behind him, and a quick jump and lash of his talons later found the would-be attacker sprawling and landing hard on the ground. He attempted to get up—

CRACK!

And promptly collapsed with a groan as a fallen tree branch cracked over the back of his skull.

The rest of us looked in surprise at the very clearly incensed Conis, who had a ferocious scowl on her face as she looked down at the Enforcer. She huffed several breaths, and after a few seconds, managed to unclench her fists around the branch she'd used as an impromptu club. Then, tossing it aside, she bent down and took the Enforcer's bazooka, slinging it over her back with what I swear was practiced ease.

"It looks like I'm going to be putting those combat lessons from the White Berets to good use after all," the angel sighed grimly. "And here I just thought I'd only ever have to use them in case hostile pirates or guerillas decided to attack the beach..."

"I told you so, didn't I?" Su asked with a visible grin. "Conis was comparable to Captain McKinley himself with how much effort she put into strengthening herself to protect her and her dad; she just opted for a more peaceful lifestyle because of the shit Eneru had her doing."

"...Wow," Vivi finally managed.

"You said it," Lassoo whistled.
I finally managed to get my wits about me with a grin as I remembered that I was still broadcasting. "Well, I guess this just goes to show: first impressions are worth absolutely—!"

Looking back on it… it just happened so fast…

Three warnings, three simple warnings, all at the same time and all within seconds… how could I have reacted? How could anyone have reacted?

It just… it just happened.

A crackle in the air, like static.

An acute stench of ozone.

And that voice… that voice…

"Be quiet, worm."

In the split second I had, the split second where my neurons fired I just… I just reacted. I grabbed Soundbite and my bag and I flung them… somewhere. Anywhere, really, just so long as they were away from me, and then… and then I jerked. Lunged, more like it, shoulder-checking Conis in an effort to get her as far away from me as was physically possible.

As I fell to the ground from the sheer overbalancing I'd done, I turned around, twisting my torso.

All I saw was a finger, a single index finger, pointing at my chest…

And then my world became white.

Cross-Brain AN: Something else we realized that we've been falling short on, loyal viewers: sadistic cliffhangers, so here's one. And to amplify the sadism, we're going to be on hiatus next week. We hope you enjoy seething at us, and we'll see you two weeks from now!

The Patient One AN: But seriously, everyone, it's not merely sadism that has us doing this. Finals Week is fast approaching for two of the three of us, and needs must we give that the dedication and attention that it necessitates.

Xomniac AN: Which is good, because this chapter has burned. Me. Out! Viva the break! Also, 30K words in one chapter! Hahaha! Kiss my ass, sandman, no sleep tonight!
This Bites! The 1000th Review Spectacular

Xomniac AN: Surprise, ladies and gents! We said we were on hiatus, but instead we're bringing you Chapter Thi—!

CV12Hornet AN: You thought it was Chapter 30, but it was really—

This Bites! The 1000th Review Spectacular!

Xomniac AN: Yeah, he's a Jojo fan, and I'm getting there too. Honestly, I wanted to title the chapter 'Chapter 30' to fuck with you all, but he was all 'down Satan, we're evil enough already', and honestly? He's right!

The Patient One AN: We're still not going to publish Chapter 30 before the appointed time, but you can thank Fan Fiction user animefan29 that we're putting aside finals studying long enough to provide this. We do hope you enjoy what this special provides. Oh, and for those who ask, this takes place after Alabasta, but before Jaya.

"Ah… this is the life…" I sighed as I sat back in the crow's nest of the Merry.

"The King and his men stole the queen from her bed, and bound her in her bones," Soundbite sang contentedly in agreement. "The seas be ours, and by the powers; where we will, we'll roam."

I smiled as I shifted around and started to settle in; now that was one song I could definitely tolerate. Technically, I was supposed to be keeping a lookout for anything approaching, but really, Soundbite was a far better warning system than my own eyes. I was just his glorified carrier, and honestly, for once I was happy to have that title, seeing how it gave me an opportunity to just kick back and do nothing. Now, I just needed to close my eyes, relax, and hope that nothing came—

"HEY, CROSS!"

"AGH!"/"YEEEAAARGHNONONO!"

SPLASH!

I slowly poked my head out of the water next to the Merry and stared up at the crow's nest where I'd been perched before leaping out of it in shock, glaring cold daggers at my captain who was hanging off the side of said crow’s nest and snickering as Soundbite did his level best to gnaw his index finger off.

"Whoops, sorry about that, Cross! Here, let me help!" Luffy shot his hand down, grabbed my collar and yanked me up to his eyesight, still wearing that stupid grin on his face. "Wow, you're really jumpy, huh?"

I stared at Luffy silently for a second before grabbing up Soundbite and returning him to my shoulder, where he joined me in glaring. We held the dark look for several seconds…

"Uh, Cross?" Luffy asked with a slightly uncomfortable look.

"You have ten seconds to start running," I calmly stated. "One… two…"

"TEN!" Soundbite barked.
I responded by whipping out my baton and taking a swing at Luffy's head, which he narrowly ducked under, releasing me and letting me fall back to the deck in the progress.

Rather than crash land like a hapless schmuck, I instead stuck a three-point landing and held the pose for a moment before slowly turning my glare up at Luffy. "You're not running yet. That is not wise."

Luffy stayed hanging off the crow's nest, sweating like a pig, for a long second before darting away. "GET BACK HERE AND TAKE YOUR BEATING LIKE A MAN!"

For the next minute or so, I did the Looney Tunes nice and proud as I chased Luffy around and around the deck of the Going Merry, swinging and swiping at the rubber moron as fiercely as could manage. Judging by how fast he was running and the fact that I actually did manage to leave a few sizeable lumps on him, I must have been really pissed off. I wouldn't know; a lot of that chase is one big blur.

In the end, the chase terminated with Luffy bolting into the dining area and me following him like a bat out of hell. I'd just managed to tackle him and was about to give him a nice and sound thwack…

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY, CROSS!"

When any anger I had abruptly dissolved into open-mouthed shock at what I saw when I got inside.

It was… well, honestly, it wasn't anything outlandish. I mean, it was a surprise birthday party for Pete's sake, completely normal! But that was exactly what made it fantastic. This stupidly ordinary occurrence, balloons, streamers, cake and all… really, I think it was the sight of Nico freaking Robin wearing a conical party hat that capped it all off.

All in all, for once, I was… flat-out speechless. There were just… no words. Or at least, few words. "I… what the… but…” I sputtered out weakly.

"I do believe we broke him," Robin sagely observed.

That served to at least kickstart the snark-subsection of my brain. "Your new accessory isn't really helping matters on that front, ice queen!" I blurted out before I knew what I was saying.

CLONK! "DON'T CALL ROBIN-DEAR AN ICE-QUEEN, SNAIL MAIL!"

An unwise move, considering the fact that Sanji was in the room.

"Oooow…” I groaned as I massaged my throbbing skull. "Well, she doesn't seem to be offended…” I grumbled out with a scowl before refocusing on the bigger picture. "And… a birthday party? For me!? But how did you even know that it was today!?

"You said that it was at the end of the month when Daddy and Igaram gave you your Transceiver," Vivi explained with a chuckle. "We started planning it shortly after we left Alabasta. In light of all the…" She grimaced for a second before shaking her head. "Unpleasantness, we thought that it'd be nice for us to actually celebrate something for once!"

"And what bettah kind a' pawty is theyah than a supwize pawty?" Carue squawked eagerly with a toot of his party horn.

"As for Soundbite, we planned this all out and set it up while he was either asleep or distracted,” Boss explained. "A bit complicated, but eh!” He gave his noisemaker a quick twirl. "Damn if it wasn't worth it!"
"But we set this all up and sent Luffy to get you ten minutes ago!" Nami planted her fists on her hips with a judging look. "What took you so long to get here? And why are you wet?"

Soundbite and I froze as we exchanged looks. "Ah…"

"You two were falling asleep again, weren't you?" Lassoo stated more than asked.

"Shut it, mutt!" the snail and I barked in synch, but I swiftly recovered with a shaky grin. "But ah… seriously, you guys, this is… this is beyond above and beyond. Thank you… thank you so much, this means more to me than you can possibly imagine!"

"Psh, what, this!?!" Usopp waved his arm at the room with a melodramatic sniff. "This is nothing! Why, I'll have you know that I once threw a party a hundred times larger than this, which was attended by a thousand people at once!"

"Wow, really!?!" Chopper squealed eagerly before freezing and tapping his chin contemplatively. "Now, wait, that sounds bit unlikely… but maybe it's possible… with a big enough island, enough invitations, and properly hallucinogenic ink—!"

THWACK!

"OW!…thank you, Boss."

"Any time, Doc."

"But that's funny, Usopp. Syrup Village is a pretty small place, how could you have invited 1000 people when there aren't even 100 living there?" I asked cheekily.

"HEY! I'll have you know that our island had no fewer than 200 people on it, even after I left! Sure, most of them were spread out and only about fifty or so lived in Syrup Village…" Usopp trailed off hesitantly. "Wait, what am I saying, this isn't helping me…"

"Indignant reactions are such useful tools to make lies fall apart," Robin remarked.

"Ahem?" Zoro coughed. "As funny as it is to catch Usopp in a lie—"

"HEY!"

"We've still got a party to start, and I have training I want to get back to. So, if we could move things along?"

"Ooh, yeah, that sounds good!" Luffy snapped his head up eagerly. "I want cake!"

"I can get behind that motion!" I nodded eagerly, taking in the cake they'd set up on the table with glee. "Is that—?"

"Pure chocolate, minimal frosting, and what little is there is also chocolate and not too thick either," Sanji rattled off as he proudly took a drag from his cigarette. "Don't ask me how I knew, just thank me by enjoying every bite of it."

"HA!" I barked. "Now that I can agree with!" I wrung my hands eagerly as I eyed the 19 candles arranged on the cake. "Alright, what to wish for, what to wish for… half's already come true, half would ruin the good thing I've already got going…" I mulled over the wish for a moment before smiling vividly.

"Looks like he's got something in mind, huh?" Raphey smirked.
"Yeah, yeah, I think I do…" I breathed.

"THEN COME ON!" Soundbite snickered. "Make it official!"

Nodding in agreement, I took a deep breath and blew as hard as I could on the candles. I smiled as I watched the smoke waft away, basking in the cheers and applause of my friends, almost family by now…

*SPLAT!*

Aaaand then I blinked in stunned confusion as a chunk of chocolate hit me dead in the face, on account of a freaking *person* dropping out of thin air and smack dab into the middle of my cake.

There was a brief moment of silence as everyone tried to process the event, which was ultimately broken by Nami wiping the chocolate off of her face and giving me a *look*. "Cross… I want you to know, in no uncertain terms, that there is absolutely no version of this where this *isn't* your fault."

"…Nami," I finally spoke. "I want you to know… I totally agree with you."

-0-

One relatively fast clean-up and cake-salvaging later (it was either that or let Sanji pummel our 'guest' to death… or me, for that matter!) and we were all standing around the table, where we'd laid out our mysterious and yet-K.O. interloper.

Robin started things off by slowly walking around the perimeter of the table, examining the guy's body before glancing up at me. "You have… unique tastes, Mister Jeremiah."

"Watch it, Demon Child," I shot back frigidly. "I do mind being called *that,*" she replied with equal coldness.

"Good, then I'd say we're around even," I grit out, though as cold as my tone was, it certainly didn't mean that she was *wrong*. Er, about the uniqueness of this whole affair I mean, not—! Oh, forget it.

Anyway, the outfit worn by the person laid out on the table was about as unique as it got out here on the Grand Line. The guy was wearing a pitch-black hooded trenchcoat and jeans, which were emblazoned with crimson flames at regular intervals, as well as metal-plated boots. A number of rough red-outlined black arrows spread out across the guy's shirt, depicting the symbol for Chaos, of all things. Oddly enough, the guy's hands were wrapped in bandages, and going by the way they extended up his wrist, they most likely encompassed his arms.

Oddest of all was the man's head: his face was completely obscured by a mess of thick gauze bandages, wound in a very Invisible-Man-esque style that gave the stranger a slight 'Slenderman' vibe. How he could see was beyond any of us. We couldn't even determine what kind of hair the man had, due to the fact that his trenchcoat's hood stayed firmly in place around his head.

"Sooo…" Boss hummed as he looked the guy over. "I'll admit, I'm not all that savvy on how you pirates and surface-dwellers do things, but I'm assuming nothing about this situation is normal, is it?"

"Yeah, no, I have absolutely no clue," I shook my head in denial, glancing at Zoro and Nami in the process. Judging by the ways they stiffened and redoubled their focus on the guy, they got the message loud and clear.

"Chopper, is there something wrong with him?" Vivi asked in concern.
The human-reindeer looked up from the man, who he'd been giving a cursory exam, at least, as much as he could. Seriously, the guy had his clothes on tight, the bandages especially, and we weren't quite at the point where we wanted to go as far as cutting them off yet. "Aside from a few anomalies that I really want to look into at the soonest possible convenience? No, absolutely nothing. This man appears to be in peak physical condition. The only reason I can think of for him to not be moving or reacting is that—!"

At that instant, a sound very much like an unholy combination of a wood chipper and a dying pig echoed throughout the room… originating from the guy's mouth.

Chopper's eye twitched viciously, and it had nothing to do with an IQ boost. "He's asleep."

Soundbite blinked and tilted his head in confusion. "Am I the only ONE GETTING a sense of DÉJÀ VU? SOMETHING ABOUT HIM is... FAMILIAR..."

"Well, now that you mention it…" Lassoo huffed as he sniffed at the air.

"Oh, I'm not the only one?" Chopper sighed in relief. "That's good, because I noticed a few things —"

"Hey, anyone else wanna see what's under the bandages?" Luffy cut in eagerly, reaching for the medical fabric in question. "Maybe it's really cool!"

"Whoa, watch it, Luffy!" I stepped up to him hastily. "If I know one thing about strangers wearing disguises—and comic books have taught me a lot—it's that they don't react well to anyone touching their—!"

Unfortunately, Luffy chose just that moment to poke at the edge of the man's bandages, prompting his arm to shoot up and grab my freaking throat!

"Masks!" I wheezed out, yanking at his fingers in panic. Holy hell, what were they made of, pure steel!?

The rest of the crew made to intervene…

"Αγγίξει και πάλι και εγώ θα επανακαλωδίωναν έντερα σας!"

But were promptly frozen by the vicious hiss that the guy let out. And I couldn't blame them, either. Because while I had no idea what the guy said, nor did I suspect that most of the crew did either, we all sure as hell recognized his voice!

"What…" Nami started.

"The…" Sanji continued.

"Hell?" Zoro finished incredulously.

"CROSS!?" Soundbite belted out.

I, meanwhile, was too busy turning blue from the hand around my throat. Thankfully, it eased up enough that I could breathe and start thinking again. Or, as much as I could think with 'What the fuck!' running through my head on a loop.

Whoever this was didn't say anything for a long minute. He just stared, and stared, and—
"OH, COME ON! WE'VE DONE THIS GAG ALREADY!"

Apparently that managed to snap, well, me out of whatever the hell I—he had been doing, because I—he let me—me go, snapping his head around the room in shock. "What the—? Where am—!? And what are you—!? Wait… are we on the Going Merry!?

The sheer shock of the situation left everyone—even Robin and Soundbite—stunned for the moment. The bandaged-up me took in the sights around him before ramming his elbow into the tabletop, hard, and letting out a hiss of pain.

"OK, so I'm not dreaming… probably… so, does that mean I'm back in time or something?"

"Back in time?" several people repeated.

"Let's see…" I—HE, DAMN IT!—scratched his chin thoughtfully. "We're on the Merry… Boss is here… hmm."

He glanced at me.

"Have you met the monkeys yet?" he asked.

I frowned in confusion before blinking as I realized what he meant. "Uh, no. And… how far ahead are you from?"

He shot his finger up, then slowly lowered it with a slow tilt to his head. "…wouldn't you all like to know."

I slapped myself—me myself. "Oh, come on, would I really be that cruel to myself?" I paused before sagging. "Yes. Yes, I would." I then proceeded to grin eagerly. "That means you're really me!"

"I'm really you!" He threw his hands up in agreement.

We slapped our hands together in synch. "BOOYAH!"

"Oh my God, there are two of them," Nami groaned, burying her face in her hands.

"I wonder if there are two Soundbites, too," Robin mused, which prompted Usopp to stiffen.

"Nope, sorry, no Soundbite," Future Me answered, prompting Usopp to sigh in relief and Luffy to let out an "Aww!" of disappointment.

"WHAT?! Wh-what… d-did I—?"

"Oh, don't worry, you're still alive and uncooked," Future Me waved dismissively. He then grabbed his chin and tilted his head thoughtfully. "But how did I get here, we wonder?"

"We wonder indeed…" I nodded in solemn agreement. "Random Grand Line madness?"

"Possible, but I seriously doubt it in this case," he replied thoughtfully. "Paradise is capable of some crazy shit, sure, but time-space fuckery… I dunno, that sounds more like the New World to me…"

"Yeah, fair point…” I conceded reluctantly.

Silence fell for a moment before I grimaced as the answer came to me, and I could practically see the same expression on Future Me's face. "B.R.O.B.," we snarled together, making everyone in the room sans Robin, Carue, and the Dugongs tense up.
And as a clear confirmation, a piece of paper materialized on top of my other self's head. He took it and read it... how, I don't know. Then he read it aloud: "I said don't expect any more favors, but I figured granting this wish for a little while would be entertaining enough. Have fun playing with yourself, as well entertaining your guests. B.R.O.B. ' You know, I really have to wonder how I feel about that thing at this point..."

"Wait, so this wasn't your birthday wish, too?" I asked.

"Wait, you wished for future you?!" Future Me started in confusion.

"No, I wished for—ah..." I trailed off uncomfortably. "Just... it's personal, alright? And twisted to hell and back and we are going to need to have an honest talk later, alright?"

He shrugged. "Fair enough. So... now what? Luffy probably won't want me to answer any questions you guys have about what's going to happen—"

"Probably not, but could you at least explain why your face is covered up like that?" Zoro posed.

"And how you're able to see and hear through it?" Nami added.

"And why you tried to crush my trachea, now that they mention it!" I tacked on.

"And why you spoke Greek earlier?" Vivi contributed, her tone much more worried.

That drew all of our attention to her, while bandaged me looked away and whistled innocently.

"What did Jeremiah Sr. say, Princess Nefertari?" Robin questioned.

"Rough translation?" Vivi grabbed herself and shivered. "Touch it and I'll rewire your intestines."

I and everyone else slowly turned back to my other self. "...Hot damn, I dude," I breathed before cocking an eyebrow. "So... I got badass, huh?"

THWACK!

"THAT'S THE FIRST THING YOU THINK AFTER YOU ALMOST KILLED YOURSELF?" Nami roared as she rapped her fist over my skull.

"Owwww..." I whined petulantly.

"They have a point," Future Me stated. "It was not a fun process, becoming this badass. Though really, you guys should stop hitting Cross like that."

Nami froze. "Uh... why?" she wondered, her voice strained.

Despite the bandages, we all got the sense that Future Me was grinning viciously before sticking up a finger and ticking it back and forth. "Spoilers!" he sang tauntingly.

I shot him a wide-eyed look before crossing my arms. "Oh, hell, no, you're River Song-ing me?! Seriously?!"

"Heheh, it sucks to be on the other side, don't it?" he chuckled.

"I believe that you're still avoiding the other questions, Jeremiah Sr.," Robin remarked. The sense that he was smiling faded as he turned to look at Robin.
"...It's Cross, Robin," he stated firmly.

"If you say so, Jeremiah Sr.," she replied cheekily, only to have her smile fade as he turned to her; despite the bandages, his glare was almost palpable.

"Call. Me. Cross. I don't mind if you call Jeremiah Jeremiah—"

"Hey!" I snapped indignantly.

"Oh, calm down, Jeremiah," he scoffed, though still with a hint of smugness. "We have to have some way to distinguish us from each other, and this is the simplest way to do it. So, unless there are any further objections—?"

**CL-CLICK!**

He stiffened in a way that indicated a blink before slowly turning to stare down Lassoo's barrel. "...well, now."

"I will end you," I snarled darkly.

"...shouldn't you only be able to just barely carry him at this point?"

I grit my teeth and forced my knees to stop knocking from the weight. "Rage is both an anesthetic and a steroid."

He stared at me before shrugging nonchalantly. "Fine, no Jeremiah, then. But we can't both go by Cross right now, even if Robin does consent to calling one of us that."

I took a moment to appreciate the fact that he had grown used to the Robin of his time calling us Cross—and that was extremely comforting—before looking at the bandaged me in renewed exasperation. "Oh, come on, you've got to have earned a bounty by now, just use your epithet!" I barked.

He snickered before looking thoughtful. "Hmm... yeah, no. Spoilers and all that. BUT!" He hastily waved his hands when I shoved Lassoo at him. "That gives me an idea. Call me Wyvern."

A pause. "How'd you come up with that? You..." I tilted my head to stare at him thoughtfully as I dropped Lassoo. "Did you eat a Devil Fruit?"

"No, no," he waved his hand non-committally. "I haven't been pushed that far yet. At least, not when I had one of the rotten things handy, anyway. It's more of a reference to just how much of an impact the SBS has made. Since in my time it's caused about as much damage for the poor bastards in Marineford as the Revolutionaries have, I figured another name for Dragon would be appropriate."

"As much as the most wanted man in the world?" Robin breathed.

"...How high of a bounty are talking here?" Sanji asked carefully.

He looked around, and we got the distinct impression that he was grinning. "Let's just say... it's the highest in the crew, and leave it at that."

We took a second to process things before reacting in the appropriate manner.

"...What."
"HOLY CRAP, HE GOT A BOUNTY HIGHER THAN LUFFY'S?!

"WHAT THE HELL DID YOU EVEN DO, CROSS?!

"Spoilers, spoilers, spo~ilers~" Wyvern sang.

I opened my mouth to snarl a reply, only for Soundbite to interrupt.

"SHIP INCOMING!" he announced. "And not friendly, either."

"What makes you say that, Soundbite?" Usopp asked nervously.

There was a whistling sound from outside the cabin, followed up by a loud explosion.

"Take a WILD GUESS."

We immediately all scrambled outside, Wyvern included, taking in the sight of a medium-sized galleon about half a mile to the right—starboard. One of the cannons was smoking, and we could still see the froth from where the cannonball had smashed into the water. The oddest thing, though, was the complete lack of a Jolly Roger or any sort of Marine symbol.

"Alright, so who are these asshats?" Zoro growled.

"I think…" Nami muttered as she pulled out her spyglass and held it up to her eye. "Yup. Bounty hunters. Definitely not Marines, and too disciplined for pirates. Soundbite, could you—"

"I DON'T WANNA," Soundbite whined petulantly, before hastily changing his tune when Nami grabbed his eyestalks. "ANYTHING FOR YOU, Nami dear!…bitch…" He tacked the last one on under his breath once she let go.

We waited expectantly as Soundbite zeroed in on the voices of the bounty hunters. And then…

"—a great day, men! For today, we rescue the Princess Vivi from her pirate captors!"

"Pirates kidnapped Vivi?!" Luffy demanded. "Who did that?"

"We're the pirates who kidnapped her, dumbass."

"Oh, right," Luffy nodded, before going right back to peeved. "Hey, we didn't kidnap her!"

"Clearly, some people didn't get the memo," Vivi ground out through gritted teeth. "Soundbite? Gastro-Amp, please."

"Roger-roger, YOU'RE LIVE."

"Excuse me?" Vivi called to the boat, forcing her voice to be calm. "You must be mistaken. Due to the bounty on my head, I've joined the Straw Hat Pirates. I'm here of my own free will."

Soundbite was silent for a moment, then his face morphed into a smug grin. "Nice try, pirates, but we know about your ventriloquist snail! You're not going to fool us with a little voice-changing! Men, load the cannons!"

We only just managed to duck under the barrage of cannonballs they sent over our heads. "What the hell is their malfunction?!" Raphe demanded incredulously.

Wyvern looked scrutinizingly (I think) at the ship before sighing and hanging his head. "Yeah, I was
afraid of that. The Bleeding Heart Bounty Hunters. Some of the absolute stupidest headcases I've ever had the displeasure of interacting with. If you guys could sink them early, I would be very much in your debt."

"Indebted to your friends… retroactively," I clarified flatly.

"It's not good time travel if your head doesn't hurt, eh?" Wyvern appeared to smirk.

"No, no, not those cannons, you morons!" came the voice over the Soundbite's speakers. "If we sink that ship, we risk killing the princess! Load the other cannons, dammit!"

"Uh, guys?" Nami said nervously. "They're wheeling these new cannons onto the deck, and those are some very large muzzles."

"Oh, right, it's this trick," Wyvern noted. "Damn, is this annoying."

"Quit it with the cryptic bullshit and just give us a straight—" Boss snarled, before being cut off as the new cannons fired. "Answer."

"Incoming!" Usopp and Carue howled, throwing themselves to the deck in a panic.

"Ah, calm down," Wyvern admonished. "Those cannons don't fire cannonballs."

We all looked up to see eight shapes flying through the air towards us. Eight rather humanoid shapes.

"They fire people."

Eight bounty hunters slammed to the deck of the Merry, the metal shells they were encased in splitting apart on impact. All eight immediately drew swords and pistols, ready to attack.

"Really?" Zoro groused, grabbing his swords. "I could clean up these Mooks in ten seconds flat."

"You've been spending too much time with me if you're using that comparison, Zoro," I muttered.

"I told you already, I'm here of my own free will! Just leave us alone!" Vivi pleaded, equal parts desperate and irate.

"Don't worry, Princess, we understand that you're not in a position to say how you really feel," one of the men said gently. "We'll get you out of here and get you back home."

"Like I said, they're stupid," Wyvern said. "Every bit the stubborn, ignorant 'all pirates are evil' stance that Nami had before she joined, while also not trusting the World Government, while also adopting their 'tar them with the same brush' attitude. The doublethink is actually kind of impressive."

"… So, they don't believe my talk on the SBS about why I left… but they don't believe the World Government's report that I committed treason, either?" Vivi asked, thoroughly confused.

"Of course not, your highness," another man said, grinning kindly at her. "We can see the truth easily: we know you would never go against the World Government, and you would never willingly work with pirates. Ergo, they kidnapped you." The bounty hunter sighed explosively. "And it's become clear that we may have a case of brainwashing on our hands. Don't worry, princess, we know all about fixing that sort of—"

The bounty hunter suddenly cried out as Vivi's Peacock String Slashers hamstring him, causing him
"P-Princess, why?" he cried in agony.

"Let me make one thing perfectly clear," she snarled, stepping forward, her Slashers hanging from her fingers. "I am here entirely of my own free will; now that I can't return to Alabasta, the Straw Hat Pirates are my home. I have no desire to leave this ship, and if I have to beat that notion into your thick skulls, then I will!"

The bounty hunters didn't move, didn't respond, and it became clear why a few seconds later when another eight of them landed on the deck. And though seven were more of the usual mooks, the last was… unusual. Standing quite literally head and shoulders above the rest of us, he was bald, well-muscled, and sported an impressive mustache and purple tattoo stripes running across his bald head. A short dagger was strapped to the belt of his pants, and a large hammer hung across his back. He honestly looked rather intimidating.

And then completely ruined the image by lighting up like a kid on Christmas at seeing Vivi.

"Princess Vivi!" he cried out. "Don't worry, we'll have you out of here and that brainwashing deprogrammed soon! Just sit tight and—"

"GAAAAAAAAH!" Vivi howled, foregoing her Peacock Slashers in favor of leaping onto the apparent leader and trying to claw his face off. The mooks around him tried to attack, only for Sanji to leap into the fray, blocking them from getting to Vivi.

"Uh… shouldn't we do something?" Usopp wondered.

"When Vivi gets wike 'dat? Fat chance!" Carue scoffed. "Da wast time she got wike dis, da ashashin wath in twaction fo' weeks!"

"Besides, as much as I'd like to hit the crap-cook, Vivi's just a little too close in on the big guy," Zoro added, before glancing at Robin's serene expression. "Unless you'd like to do anything about it?"

"Mm, no thank you. Our dear princess seems to have things well in hand," she replied. "Shall I go get a snack while we watch, Captain?"

"Yeah, great idea!" Luffy agreed.

Beside us, Boss was nodding serenely at the scene before him. "And that, students, is why the greatest enemy of a master is not another master, but a complete novice."

"…So, you should have brought April after all?" Raphey posed innocently.

"I said a novice, not someone who has neither skill nor a desire to learn skill," Boss gruffly retorted.

"Plus, she wasn't even a Dugong." Leo deadpanned.

"Yeah, remind me again how you became friends with a—?" Mikey began.

"ENOUGH OF THIS! PRINCESS, WE WILL SAVE YOU!" the remaining hunters chorused, ignoring Sanji and leaping towards her, grabbing her limbs in an attempt to pry her off their leader, to no avail. Vivi continued to cling to the guy like a limpet. And, as it turned out, turning their backs on Sanji was a very bad idea.

"PARTY TABLE KICK COURSE!" he shouted, leaping over the bounty hunters and sweeping his
heels over their heads. All of them went down like so many bowling pins, leaving just their leader remaining.

"I'll help you, princess!" Sanji cried. "MOUTON!"

I winced as the kick slammed into the big guy's midsection, causing him to double over clutching his gut, Vivi letting go as he slammed to the deck. She then followed it up by stomping repeatedly on his head.

"Uh, Vivi? I think he's unconscious," I pointed out.

"Good!" she shouted, giving his head one last stomp. Panting, she glanced back to us—and was suddenly aware of how large an audience she'd collected, going by the embarrassed blush on her face. "Uh, how much did you guys see?"

"ENOUGH TO BE TERRIFIED, yet still know we have blackmail MATERIAL!" Soundbite summarized.

"That was really cool!" Luffy called out between the drumsticks he was munching on.

Vivi promptly buried her face in her hands. "Kill me..." she groaned.

"Uh, hey guys? I just noticed... where's Wyvern?" Donny interrupted. We all jumped and looked around in confusion. As he'd said, the temporarily temporally displaced duplicate was nowhere in sight.

I frowned in confusion; being me, you'd think he would've had some sort of commentary on what had just happened, especially with the added experience he had.

"Snrk..."

We all turned to look at Nami, who was still watching the ship the bounty hunters had come in on with her spyglass. Except now her face was scrunched up in suppressed laughter.

"Uh, Nami?" Vivi asked, slightly desperately. "Where's Wyvern?"

Shaking, our navigator could only point to the ship, her spyglass falling to the deck as she bent over the railing. Usopp promptly picked it up, looked over—and then did a magnificent wild take.

"HOLY CRAP HE'S ON THEIR SHIP!" Usopp cried out. "AND HE'S KICKING NINE KINDS OF ASS!"

"HAHAHAHAHAHA!" Nami finally broke down laughing, clenching her gut in desperate need for air. "THEY'RE GETTING STOMPED ON! IT'S HILARIOUS!"

I practically ripped the spyglass out of Usopp's hands and held it up to my eye. Apparently, we'd missed most of the action, because the deck was absolutely littered with bodies that had been brutaly K.O.'d, but it was really hard to mistake the cause of it all when Wyvern was standing in the middle of the deck, repeatedly slamming the face of a person twice his height and three times his bodyweight into the ship's main mast, only letting him go once his face was nice and tenderized. I stared at him, jaw dropped, as I observed the proof of exactly how strong I could—and would—become. That shock lasted for all of five seconds before I joined Nami in cackling.

"Sail us closer!" I shouted in joy. "I want to see this!"
"Wait!" Luffy interrupted. "I'm the captain here!" There was a pause, and then he nodded. "Everyone, sail us close to that ship!"

"Aye-aye, captain!" most of the crew shouted, scrambling to get the Merry turning.

As we got closer, I took another look through the spyglass. Wyvern had apparently decided that the pile of bodies he'd left on the deck made a good lounge chair, because he was sprawled on top of the pile.

"OK, seriously, Cross, how long did it take you to go from weaker than me to Monster Trio material?" Usopp demanded incredulously.

"Hey, I stopped being that weak after Kureha gave me those vitamins," Wyvern snapped. "And I'm nowhere near 'Monster Trio material'; the rest of the crew has grown stronger, too."

I sagged. "So, it's only after the T-S training session?" I groaned.

"Afraid so, Cross," Wyvern replied, after a moment to realize what I meant. "You're catching me right as the session is coming to an end. And it's been hard… but fun, and very rewarding. I'm pretty sure my bounty's going to skyrocket when things get going again."

There was a groan behind us, then a meaty thwack. The groan stopped.

"Anyway," Wyvern stated, standing up and then jumping over to the Merry. "For however long I'm going to be here… I'm not sure how much I'm willing to say and how much Luffy would want me to say, but—"

"At least tell me this, Wyvern," I said, dead serious. "Has anything I've done resulted in making things blow up worse than they were before? Anything… Nine Minutes-ish?"

"Oh, come on, Cross," Wyvern said, shaking his head in exasperation. "You know as well as I do that you'd have to be actively trying to make things that bad."

"Nine Minutes?" Luffy asked.

"Another day, Luffy," Wyvern and I chorused, before Wyvern continued. "But honestly, no. A few times, things have gone worse than expected because of us. It came close a couple of times, I'll admit, there are times where we've caused some screwups, but not more than you'd expect of the Straw Hat Pirates." I could tell he was smirking as he angled his head to glance at Luffy. "And certainly no more than our idiot of a captain."

"What?" the idiot in question asked.

"Spoilers!" Wyvern called out.

"Okay, then," came the reply from the Rubber Man, before he tilted his head in his usual thinking pose. "Hmm… if you're here, does that mean that it's your birthday, too?"

Wyvern stuck his finger up, then lowered it. "I… hadn't thought about that. I've been really wrapped up in things lately, so…"

"Wait, you mean that we didn't celebrate it with you!?!" Usopp questioned incredulously.

"Future-us must be real jerks!" Chopper gasped in shock.

"I'm sure it's not that bad, Chopper," Vivi chuckled sheepishly before frowning. "Although they do
raise a good point, Wyvern. Why didn't we celebrate it like we were doing today?"

"Uh…” the temporal doppleganger hedged sheepishly as he tugged at the collar of his jacket, jerking his head this way and that. "Well, you see, it's like, ah…”

"Circumstances beyond anything any of us could control, I'm sure," I said, and the finality in my voice was enough for most of the crew to drop it when Wyvern nodded in agreement, albeit a bit desperately.

"Fine, if that's the case, let me reiterate our initial question, which you've dodged up until now: why are you bandaged up like that?" Sanji asked.

Wyvern hesitated, only for Luffy's voice to cut in.

"That's not important right now!" Luffy crossed his arms firmly, before beaming eagerly. "What's important is that we restart Cross's party, only twice as big! Agreed?"

A few of the crew seemed exasperated that Wyvern had gotten another excuse not to answer, myself included, but that didn't last long before I grinned. "I like the sound of that. What do you think, Wyvern? Is a birthday party on your birthday in the past with your crew of the past going to be the weirdest thing that's happened to... I'm gonna go out on a limb and say us?"

"Not even in the top ten," Wyvern replied with a laugh as he crossed his arms behind his head. "But it's not like I'm complaining!"

"Alright!" Luffy crowed, reaching up to slap Wyvern on the back. "Let's get this part—!"

Everyone froze as Luffy's hand sunk into and through Wyvern's back.

Wyvern stared at Luffy in confusion before slowly looking down at his hands, which were starting to become see-through. "Well, this sucks. Back to the grindstone for me, I guess...

"Cross!"

Wyvern glanced back up at our captain, who had his serious-face on.

"When you get back," Luffy ordered—yes, ordered. "Make sure to celebrate your birthday. That's a captain's order!"

Wyvern stared for a few seconds before grinning under his bandages, throwing up a lazy salute. "Aye aye, captain," he replied as his legs began to fade away. "I'd say good luck, but you guys already have all the luck you need! See you on the flipside!"

"Goodbye, Cross!" we all yelled as Wyvern faded away. Yes, even me.

And then… he was gone.

For a moment, we all stood there in somber silence—only for it to be broken by Mikey sniffing loudly.

"D-D'you think we're ever going to see him again?"

As one, every single one of us turned and gave him a flat stare. Even Luffy.

"W-What?" the dugong stammered in nervous fear. "Why are you all looking at me like that?"
SMACK!
"Ow…"
SMACK!
"Ow!"
SMACK!

"Alright, alright, I'm an idiot, I get it!" Mikey howled, clutching the tower of goose eggs rising from his skull. "Just stop hitting me!"

THWACK!

"YEOWCH!"

"Just for good luck," Boss snickered as he cracked his... flippers? Meh, not worth worrying about.

Any further response was pre-empted by a low groan from behind us. This time we actually did turn around, which allowed us to see the big bounty hunter trying to pull himself to his feet.

"So, what do we do with these guys?" Zoro wondered.

"Allow me," Vivi answered, her face thunderous as she stalked up to him. Kneeling down, she snapped her fingers in front of his face.

"Princess...?" the man groaned groggily.

The grogginess evaporated in a hurry when Vivi grabbed the sides of his head and looked him dead in the eyes. "Let me make this as clear as possible, so that even an ignoramus like you gets the picture," she said, her voice so sweet it was almost literally sickening. "We're going to leave you on your ship, at which point you are going to sail away and never bother us again. Otherwise, I'll be very upset with all of you, in which case I'll have them," this was accompanied by a thumb pointed in the general direction of the crew's heavy hitters, who were looming in a nice and menacing fashion. "Express my displeasure. And believe me," Her captive audience squeaked as her fingernails dug into his head. "You don't want that."

"Hey, I'm pretty sure we don't take orders from you," Zoro pointed out, only to get a crack over his skull from Sanji, and Boss and Luffy slapping their hands/flippers over his mouth.

"What was that?" Vivi snarled, shooting a glare Zoro's way.

"Nothing! Nothing! We're good!" the two hastily reassured her.

"Alright, then," she remarked, turning back to the bounty hunter. "So. Are the terms acceptable?"

The bald man audibly gulped before answering. "Yes, Princess."

"Good. Luffy, send them back."

Luffy's version of 'sending them back' was to wrap his arms around all of them at once and bodily fling them back onto their ship. Granted, it caused a lot more damage on top of what Wyvern had already done, but honestly, I don't think any of us gave a single fuck.

We kept a cautious eye on them as we sailed off until Lassoo coughed in order to draw attention to
himself. "So… what now?"

"Well…" Luffy shrugged happily. "We might have lost one Cross, but we still have the other! So, as captain, I say we get the party started again! All in favor?"

"AYE!" we chorused in eager agreement. And, aside from remaking the cake and bringing in a new table, there wasn't all that much for most of us to do, leaving time for other things.

"So," Chopper said as Sanji grumbled about having to remake the cake. "What did you wish for?"

"Chopper!" Usopp admonished with a light chop to the head. "You don't ask that!"

"Yeah, everyone knows that sharing the wish means it won't come true!" Luffy chimed in.

"Ah, don't worry, guys, it's fine," I said dismissively. "After all, I know my wish is going to come true now."

"REALLY?!" all three of the Dumbass Trio demanded. "What was it, then?"

"One second," I said, before flagging down Sanji. "Hey, could you get the ale out? This sort of wish needs an appropriate atmosphere."

"Croooooosssss…" the Dumbass Trio whined.

"Oh, be patient, you guys, for once in your lives!" I sighed.

Soon, the mugs had been passed out and filled, and everyone was parked in a circle around a makeshift table of barrels. I glanced around, remembering the last time we had done this, and how big the crew had gotten since. Grinning, I grabbed my mug and held it up in the air.

"A toast," I announced. "To a long and happy future with the Straw Hat Pirates! For me, and for all of us! Kanpai!"

"KANPAI!" came the shout as everyone matched my toast. And with that, the party went into full swing as we sailed off into the sunset.

Hornet AN: This had to be dragged kicking and screaming from our muses, so enjoy. Or else.

Patient AN: This really was a chore to write, yes.

Xomniac AN: Believe us, we know it's not our best work, but we wanted to do something special for the Special, so this is what we came up with. So really, there's no need to beat a dead horse!
My return to consciousness was two things above all else: slow, and *painful*.

It… wasn't exactly *immediate*, mind you. Burning pain just started to *radiate* all over and through my body, something like a sunburn but *so* much worse. I *tried* to shift my limbs in an effort to gain some form of relief, but instead made the rather distressing discovery that I couldn't actually move them because of how they felt like they were stuffed with pins and needles. Ugh, I knew I should have asked Usopp to insulate my armor before we got here; there was no way I wasn't going to wear it in a danger zone like this, but metal and lightning? In retrospect, it was a painfully obvious conclusion.

I coughed up half a lungful of smoke (that could *not* be healthy… and shouldn't I have already been smoked out awhile ago?) and slowly pushed myself up on my elbows. It took a second for me to blink away the spots in my eyes to see Conis kneeling over me, filling my field of vision.

Finally, my neurons fired and I chuckled wryly, trying to diffuse her concern. "Damn, I missed everything, didn't I?" I wheezed out. "Shame… I really wanted to see the look on Eneru's face when Luffy slugged him."

As my vision slowly stopped spinning, I was able to make out Conis' already concerned expression becoming panicked. "C-Cross, what are you—?"

*KRRRZZZT!*

That was as far as she got before a flash of light charred my retinas, *blasting* Conis off of me. I jerked my head to the side and tried to follow her, watching in confusion as she rolled to a halt a few feet away from me, smoking like a fried steak and gasping in obvious agony. I tried to move towards her, to do… something, when something stopped me.

Namely, a very hot and very hard force pressing against my heart almost hard enough to risk burning
through my shirt. And then… *that voice again.*

"Fool."

My blood ran cold as I tilted my head upwards and processed the sight in front of me. Cloth cap covering up pale blonde hair, ridiculously long earlobes with gold earrings on the end, and a face that wore a smug smirk.

I tried to make sense of what the hell was going on, I really did, but my head felt like a beehive in a rainstorm, so I was in *no* condition to think hard on anything. All I *could* get out was a weak "W-what? B-but how—? The sh-shock…"

"The voltage from that attack was negligible; you blacked out for only a meager second," Eneru drawled. "It would be counterproductive if you were to pass out until the Survival Game is over."

I wasn't sure I wanted to know what he meant by that. But I *did* want to know something.

"H-huff!" I coughed up another lungful of what I could only assume was freshly carbonized flesh. "How did you even find us? Soundbite's Gastro-Scramble was spread out—"

"Yaaa ha ha ha ha!" the self-proclaimed god laughed. "Are you referring to that meager buzzing noise that's been pestering my ears? An annoyance, true, but hardly a hindrance against God."

My blood ran cold again as I grimaced in realization. He'd heard *everything,* because I was an idiot. Such a stupid, stupid, *stupid* idiot. A Paramecia-ability, up against not just a Logia's unique abilities, but against Logia-enhanced *Haki.* How could I *ever* think to pit any but the absolute strongest of Devil Fruit abilities against a super-charged form of *Haki* and hope to come out on top?

But… one thing just didn't make sense. "…If you heard everything…" I gasped. "Then why did you even l-let us get this far? Why didn't you k-kill us all back on Angel Island when we started planning this? When we called you a—*GRGH!*" I choked off with a gasp of pain when the temperature of the staff pressed to my chest spiked.

Eneru shrugged nonchalantly, as though he were unaware of the pain he was causing me. "Boredom, I suppose; with the novel development of thinking that you could circumvent my abilities, I was interested to see how it would play out. And it did prove to be very entertaining,
despite the fact that I nearly lost all of my priests; your pet's commentary proved to be very good for a laugh, particularly that ghost story last night. I don't think I've laughed that hard for the last, oh… month or so? The last time was when a particularly fat crew of Blue Sea dwellers came by. Ah, seeing them all waddle to their deaths, now that was fun…"

I really had to fight to keep my gag reflex in check. The only thing worse than metal armor would be being wet in any given capacity while wearing said armor… and covered in bile, at that.

His smirk dropped somewhat as he locked eyes with me. "But we're getting sidetracked here; I'm here because you've severely underestimated me, in every sense of the word. Since I've gone to the trouble of coming in person to show you my power, I think you owe me an apology." He withdrew the bo staff from my chest as his smirk returned, stronger than ever. "I'll forgive you for your blasphemy if you beg for your life, as is only natural."

I processed what he said, and slowly tilted my torso as far up as I could. I opened my mouth—

"That won't do you any good, girl."

And said nothing, instead glancing around to see Vivi kneeling next to a thoroughly fried Carue, staring at Eneru with a ferocious glare, one hand holding her companion's insensate head to her chest while her other… grasped that necklace of hers again? The hell…?

"The results would be quite interesting, I'll admit," Eneru mused. "But it would still make killing you a thoroughly annoying endeavor. If you will not listen to me…" The bastard jabbed his staff to my throat, causing me to choke painfully. "Then perhaps you will take into account the fact that your precious friends will undoubtedly perish in the crossfire, however brief?"

Vivi's expression absolutely flared with rage, but nevertheless she wrenched her hand open and brought it to Carue's beak. Rivulets of blood trailed down from her mouth, where she was digging her teeth into her lips in an effort to force herself to stay silent. I made a mental note to ask what the hell that stuff with the necklace was about if we lived through this.

"Now, where were we? Ah, yes: the sinner was about to repent."

…But I got the distinct feeling that that the chances of that ever happening were rapidly shrinking from slim to none.
"Me, repent? For what?" I spat with as much acid as I could muster. "For believing that you're just an overconfident and delusional Logia and an amateur Haki user? You're powerful, I'm not denying that..." I winced as a shudder of agony ran through me. "But a god?" I wheezed out a shaky chuckle, my lips turning up ever so slightly. "Don't make me laugh."

Eneru's expression fell flat, and I braced myself as he raised his finger to point at me...

ZAP!

"EEAARGH!"/"YIPE!"

Only for him to defy my expectations when he suddenly swung his index and middle fingers to the side and send off two streams of electricity out of my field of vision. I didn't see what he hit, but the stench of singed fur and the agonized screams were enough for me to draw a conclusion. That, and Conis' anguished cry alongside the lingering canine whimper in the air.

Eneru sniffed haughtily. "So many pests in my land. How is a God to focus properly? Now, where was I? Ah, yes."

ZAP!

For a second, there wasn't any pain, any agony, any... Any anything, really. Then my awareness hit me over the skull like a hammer and it felt as though agony were injected into my very core. I could hear my teeth creak as I locked my jaws in order to bite back a scream, but it did nothing to stop the agonized groan that crawled out of my throat.

"That was two million volts. Defy me again, and I'll move to five. Would you care to revise your opinion?"

I was only partially aware of the fact that my mouth was moving. "I'd like... to make a formal request... for you to kiss my—!"

ZAP!
"Grrrggghh..." I gargled out. Now *that one* I was most definitely awake for, and holy *shit* had I just found an all new meaning for the phrase 'feeling the burn'... though the fact that I couldn't actually feel it in my limbs was... worrying, to say the absolute least.

Eneru cocked an eyebrow at me before shaking his head with a haughty sigh. "How annoying. Even face-to-face with a god, you still deny his power? Foolish boy," he drawled.

"First of all... I'm *nineteen fucking years old,*" I forced out through gritted teeth, feeling my gut start to flare up as I got some steam back. "And second of all... I've... I've experienced what a god is... or rather... I've experienced a higher being. But I *refuse*... to acknowledge either you, or it, as a capital-g god."

"Oh?" Eneru tilted his head inquisitively... or perhaps just so that he could humor me. "And why, pray tell, is that?"

"Because that kind of god doesn't *exist,*" I spat heatedly. "And this world and every other world like it out there in existence is my *proof.* Because this world... is *imperfect.* If there is a God out there... then I refuse to worship it because of these imperfections. Because if it allows these imperfections to exist, then it is either cruel, or not as truly omnipotent as—!"

ZZZZZZZ!

This time my muscles spasmed instead of locking up, leaving me writhing on the ground like a fish out of water. I didn't notice; I was more focused on the feeling of every inch of my body being stabbed repeatedly by a red-hot poker.

"I believe I've found the flaw in your argument," Eneru smirked viciously. "You claim that I am not omnipotent? Well, I beg to differ on that point. Observe!" He wheeled around on his heel and jabbed his hand at the treeline, streams of lightning crackling over his body and ozone assaulting my nostrils again. On the plus side, it drowned out the smell of cooked pork that I'd been worrying about before. "A generous demonstration of my awesome might! *EL THOR!*

There are no words or onomatopoeia to describe the skull-shakingly *loud* thunderclap that came from Eneru's attack. Yet my alienistic status in this world seemed to be fading rapidly, considering that my eyes and ears could apparently take in every bit of both that and the tremendous pillar of lightning, at least as big as the one that had targeted Conis back on Angel Island, that *vaporized* one of the massive trees nearby. And as the lightning faded, leaving only a smoking crater in the island, Eneru spoke again.
"Behold my power. Will you still deny me?" he said smugly. I spared the hole a look before looking back at Eneru, who was watching me with renewed smugness. And seeing that served to banish all traces of fear from my mind.

"Like I said, I can't deny that you're powerful..." I hissed before shaking my head in denial. "But all-powerful? Not even close. Now, let me share something with you: the power that you can find on the Blue Seas."

I was vaguely aware that I was raising an arm and pointing at the hole. "That hole that you just punched in the ground? I can name at least five people off the top of my head who could do that in their sleep. I can name three who could match them blow for blow without any powers of their own. And another who can take anything those guys dish out and come back for more. And that's just the top tiers."

I glared with all the defiance I could muster. "You may be powerful, but you're only anything special up here, in your little cloudy world that's just a puddle compared to the real world down below us. When I compare you to the strongest warriors in the sea—pirate, Marine, or World Government—you're not a god. You're not powerful, you're not impressive, you're not even special. All you are is pathetic. And if you tried going up against the monsters down there, you'd get your sorry gold-plated ass handed to you in ten. Seconds. FLAT. Just like every other hot-headed Logia."

Now Eneru was starting to lose his composure, a fact visible on account of how the ozone smell was ramping up again, and how trails of electricity were starting to jump through the air at random.

That, and the fact that he had his teeth grit in a clear and visible scowl.

ZAP!

Aaaaaaand that. It was a bad thing when the smell of toast overpowered all else, right?

The downright painful pins and needles I was feeling were aggravated when Eneru grabbed me by my collar and jerked me up so that we were face to face.

"There is never, has never, and will never be anybody like me, you insignificant worm," he hissed.
I blinked slowly as I processed that statement, ran it through my head over and over again. Once I comprehended it, however… well, there was only one way for me to react.

"Pff…"

In the face of such a ludicrous statement…

"Pffhahahahahaaaa…" I chuckled out weakly, wincing at the jolt of pain that shot through me.

…how could I not laugh?

ZRT!

Said laughter was then cut off by a current all but slapping my body.

"What's so funny?" Eneru outright snarled this time.

I gasped and wheezed as I got my breath back before finally managing to plaster a sickly grin on my face. "You think… that you're so special… That you're unique… well, that idea is just so hilarious… especially because you actually think it's true…"

My grin widened a bit, hopefully to the point where it was niiiice and demented.

"Allow me… to enlighten you."

-0-

"Do you think you're the only one… who lords his powers over others? Who reigns with an iron fist… and who strikes down all who speak against him?"

High up in Marineford, a giant of a man glared viciously at the terrified Transponder Snail before
him, uncaring of the fact that the chair he was sitting in was slowly starting to smoke, or that the temperature in the room was ratcheting up a dozen degrees at a time.

The temperature alleviated slightly when an audible ZAP! and a pained cry came over the connection, before resuming just as badly when Cross continued anyway.

"N-no… there are hundreds who do that, every. Single. Day. And they do it better than you… or worse, as it were…"

While the weak grin the Snail was sporting never left its face, it was unable to keep from voiding its bowels as Admiral Akainu's seat burst aflame, and the desk it was perched upon slowly started sinking into the floor.

-o-

"Do you think that you're the only one… who takes pleasure in the suffering of others? Who throws their head back and laughs at the agonized screams they cause… as if it were all some great joke?"

Doflamingo's already wide smile widened even further as Cross got zapped for the world to hear, and it widened even more than that when he just kept. On. Talking.

"Like… hell… There are thousands… who torture and cause harm… and who enjoy it… and most… don't even know that they like it…"

-o-

"Do you think… that you're the only one… who thinks they're invincible? Who thinks so highly of themselves… that they think they're unbeatable… untouchable… so far above everyone else that they're just ants?"

Crocodile grinned a bitter grin as he leaned against his cell wall, savoring how the loud-mouthed bastard's screams of agony mingled with the chorus of the damned that had started rising up throughout the prison whenever his broadcast started.
"That's... hilarious... but no. There are... more people like that... in the world... than I can count... There are so many... just so many..."

At that moment, all Crocodile truly wanted for was a lit cigar. If he'd had one, then the moment would have been absolutely perfect.

-o-

"Men like you... you always think you're one-of-a-kind..." I grit out before shaking my head. "But that's not true. You're one-of-a-million. Perfectly uniform... So many of you that you're choking the world, one evil act at a time..." I smiled grimly. "If you want unique... then you need to look at the other end of the spectrum."

ZOT!

"Grgh!" I flinched miserably before scowling at the bastard. "You need to get a new schtick, jackass, because that's starting to just tickle."

"And who would you claim to be unique, hm?" Eneru sneered contemptuously, all smugness completely gone by now. Apparently I'd gone from being a worm to little more than primordial ooze. "You?"

"PFHA!" I barked out weakly. "As if! No, no, I'm worse than unique... I'm normal. I'm no more unique than you. How's that for a kick—!"

THWACK!

"AGH!" I wheezed as I rolled along the ground. Alright, punting me just as I was saying that... I guess that maybe the staticky bastard wasn't as stupid as I thought.

Once I got my breath back in my lungs, though, I kept going.

"I'm as normal as it comes..." I said, not caring how weak my voice was. "Inside and out, just your everyday guy. People like me... people who can't stand bullies... people who won't let anyone push
them around no matter what…” I took a second to gather my breath before pushing myself up even a little so that I could glare at the bastard. "People… who won't let bastards like you get away with shit like this… who won't hold their tongues, over shit like this… even if it means they get the crap kicked out of them… even if it could kill them…” I shook my head. "There's less of us than you, sure… but I'm not unique. I'm the norm."

"Then who?" Eneru growled. "If not you or I, then who do you deem to be unique?"

I smiled through the pain. "There's a little-known saying on the Blue Seas, passed down from generation to generation for centuries: 'D. will bring forth a storm.' The D.s bring change, they bring upheaval and renewal… and above all, they are the enemy of the gods, whether they know it or not. And of the D.s alive in this current generation?" I chuckled weakly. "I'd have to say that Monkey D. Luffy is the best example there is."

Eneru scoffed incredulously, angling himself away from me. "The ignoramus you so foolishly follow? I will grant you that he is unique in one sense, and that his strength is above norm, but that is all."

I bit out a sharp tsk as I glared daggers at the bastard. "Strong enough to kick your ass…"

THWACK!

"HURF!" I doubled over as Eneru punted my stomach. It was a good thing the organ was bone dry, or else I'd have heaved up a goodly amount of bile then and there. I managed to choke out another chuckle.

"Heh… keep on hitting me if you want, but there are two things that are going to happen no matter what you do: you're going to fight my captain. And you're going to lose."

Eneru's already dark expression became steadily worse as he lashed out with his staff, sending me tumbling across the ground again. And as he approached me, his expression was as darkened as a midsummer Midwest thunderstorm. "Beaten, shocked, and faced directly with my power, and still you defy me. I must admit that you've earned a bit of my respect, if only for your stubbornness; nobody before you has ever shown such nerve. For that, I grant you one final chance. Repent now… or perish."

I gathered up every lingering ounce of strength that I had left to stand, and I actually did thank Zoro
mentally as I stumbled over to Eneru. And when I stood directly in front of him, I forced every bit of saliva I had left into my dried mouth… and spat in his face.

Naturally, it passed right through him.

"I see," Eneru said placidly. "Then you will not repent?"

"Burn in hell," was my reply.

"Very well, then."

His palm lashed out, shoving me back to the ground, and this time, I didn't have the strength to get back up.

"Die."

He held his hand above my eyes, lightning slowly gathering in his palm.


I wish I could say I faced him head-on, with courage and pride. I wish I could say I wasn't scared, that my brashness held out all the way through. I wish I could say that I smiled… but once again, I just wasn't a D. I didn't have it in me. The best I could manage was a grimace. And even as he said it, I clenched my eyes shut and looked away.

"One Hundred Million Volt VARI."

-0-

It would be wrong to say that silence reigned in the storeroom of the Marine battleship. After all, that would require everyone present to say nothing. As it stood, Ensign Tashigi was not silent, consistently and fervently muttering denials from beneath the hands she'd clasped over her mouth.
The two other humans and the human who was present by proxy, however, were as silent as the grave as they listened to the dead air that had followed the final zap. After a minute, Eneru's voice filtered through again.

"Inconceivable…" the megalomaniac's voice filtered through in a low growl. "How could you possibly have survived that?!!"

"Oh-thank-God!" Tashigi whooshed out in relief, a sentiment everyone else present, even Captain T-Bone, shared as they relaxed.

"One hundred million volts on top of all of those other injuries, and he survived?" T-Bone breathed in equal parts shock and horror.

"…Ah, so that's it," Eneru chuckled grimly, as if in response. "How valiant of you, young lady."

A thick THWACK came over the connection, followed by a grunt of feminine pain.

"You managed to grab him and siphon off part of the voltage. Any other day, I might have been impressed…" A slight crackling noise filled the air. "But today, I find my patience for disrespect to be at an end. I've endured your sacrilege up until now, but now I think it high time you were punished. As your God, I sentence you to—!"

"ENOUGH!"

All present in the room suddenly found themselves on edge, particularly Smoker and Tashigi, as another feminine voice came through, accompanied by the sound of whirling metal.

"LEAVE. US. ALONE," Princess Nefertari Vivi's voice snarled.

There was a tense silence, aside from the crackling and whirling. Then, the crackling died down.

"…Tsk. It would appear that the Survival Game requires some more... balancing. You may consider
yourself fortunate, but really, I fail to see the point in such folly. After all, soon this land will cease to be. Why should God sully the soles of his shoes with the innards of some insignificant insects? Enjoy what little time you have left."

A zapping sound, followed by the whirling metal abruptly ceasing, some scrambling as someone ran through grass, and finally… Vivi screaming. "SOUNDBITE! CALL CHOPPER! CALL-CALL LUFFY, CALL ZORO, CALL NAMI, CALL SOMEONE!"

"I-Is he—?" Conis asked weakly.

"HE-HE'S alive," Soundbite offered hesitantly, apparently still scared to talk. "BUT HIS HEARTBEAT is way out of whack. Chopper's at the BASE OF GIANT JACK. LET'S GET GOING!"

"Right. Alright, here, give me—what the—!?"

There was some more rustling, followed by some pained wheezing.

"Giff him ta' me… Aw'll cawwy him…"

"Carue! You're—!"

"Deepfwied but awive. Now, huwwy up! I can cawwy him and the othahs bettah than any of you, and we don't haf time ta awgue!"

"Carue… alright, fine. Help me get Lassoo and Su on him, now! We have to hurry!"

"Damn impressive for a duck…" Smoker whistled in awe.

"Impressive for any living being, period," Hina agreed.

Apart from rushed footsteps and rushed revival attempts on Soundbite's broadcast, there was silence
on both ends for the next few minutes, until the zombie-like Marine captain let out a miserable sigh, and sunk to his knees. Smoker, Tashigi, and Hina's snail all looked at him, to see tears dripping down his face.

"I claim… to stand by straightness, hating crookedness, and yet, a pirate has shown more strength than I," he lamented solemnly. "Rather than conform for survival… he would remain true to his beliefs, even as he stared death in the face…" The captain shook his head miserably. "Oh, my brothers… how I have shamed you…"

After a minute more, he slowly looked back up at the other three. "…Tell me. Why did you call me here?"

Tashigi glanced at Smoker, and at his nod, she replied. "The Straw Hat Pirates broke our faith in the Marines through the events in Alabasta," she stated sadly. "We've seen the corruption in the Navy, how they've mutilated Justice into something unspeakable. The three of us and our soldiers have formed an organization tentatively named MI3, for Marine Integrity, with we three as the leaders. Our goal is to restore the Navy to what it once… or at least, what we once thought it once was, by destroying the World Government from the ground up."

"We called you here, Captain T-Bone," Smoker continued, walking over to the Captain. "Because we three and our informant, Jeremiah Cross himself, believe you to be a decent Marine. We want your help in our goals. We want you to join us as a leader."

Commodore Smoker extended his hand again, and T-Bone slowly rose to his feet, regarding the three of them. Then, with a look of firm determination on his face, he grasped Smoker's hand with his own. "Then let your soldiers be made aware that the organization shall now be known as MI4."

Relief swept through the rest of the separatists, up until T-Bone held up his hand to waylay any words.

"However," he stated firmly. "I have a condition, singular. One which is non-negotiable."

Tashigi swallowed heavily, while Smoker exchanged glances with Hina's snail. "And that condition would be?" he asked gruffly.

The present occupants of the room tensed fearfully as T-Bone drew his blade from his side, though thankfully all he did was gaze at its flat. "This blade was passed down through the 13th Royal
Marine Flotilla for generations, from Rear Admiral to Rear Admiral. It was a symbol of our pride and our upright belief in the law… and now that I am the sole survivor of our honorable Flotilla, it falls to me."

The captain's grip on the blade tightened as rage flared across his face. "Twelve years ago, when we planned to make our stand, word of our defiance did not reach Sakazuki's ears by chance. We were betrayed by one of our own, one who used the burning corpses of our brothers—my brothers!—as a stepladder, solely so that he might rise higher in the ranks of a vile and corrupt system!"

T-Bone swung the blade out in a swift jab. "Sakazuki will have his day in court, this I know to be all but guaranteed, but when the time comes, I ask that it be I who deals with the vile blaggard who murdered my brothers. By this blade shall his head be removed, and the brave souls of the 13th finally laid to rest!"

"…Hina agrees," came the snail's voice after a moment of contemplation, and Smoker and Tashigi nodded their consent.

"Very well, then," T-Bone nodded solemnly. He then swung his blade around, so that the tip was pointed at the floorboards before ramming it in, and kneeling before the weapon. "Then today, I finally make the vow I have kept silent for all these years. I state a fact and make a promise long overdue. Today, I swear, on my honor, by this blade and by the blood of my brothers, I will see Vice-Admiral Vergo brought to justice for his crimes!"

Silence greeted the proclamation, prompting T-Bone to glance nervously at the other Marines. "…Is something the matter?"

"…yeah," Smoker finally breathed, slowly turning his head to stare at the thoroughly shell-shocked snail behind. "The importance of Cross's survival has just increased dramatically."

-o-

"Well, it looks like my vitamins are as successful as I expected. Before he came here, a single jolt like that would have killed him. Now he's potentially going to recover from taking a hundred million volts to his body, even if it was split in some manner," Kureha reflected in a would-be nonchalant tone, were it not for the fact that she was spinning a syringe between her fingers in a way that anyone who knew her would know indicated worry. "It looks like Chopper's going to be put to a real test now."
One might have thought Kureha was talking to herself, and she may as well have been, given the fact that the only other being in the room was her new assistant, a human-sized and muscular looking bipedal rabbit with an impressive scar over one eye, who waited in a corner of the room with an impassive look on its face. A younger lapahn was perched on the adult's shoulder, looking with curiosity at the interaction between their boss and the snail.

"Oh, thank goodness, we're finally here. CHOPPER!"

"Yes, did someone request me? Oh, my, you seem to have gathered some nasty injuries!"

Kureha's eyebrows rose; that sounded like Chopper, but… there was something off about him. It took a moment for her to realize how, but when she did, her eyes widened; he sounded just like her. How did THAT happen?!

If Soundbite's frustrated "Oh, no…" was anything to go by, they were unsurprised but displeased.

"Let's see, what do we have here? Excessive second degree burns on Conis, along with several third-degree burns. Carue seems to have second degree burns on most of his body if the fact that he smells so delicious is anything to go by…"

"WHAT??"

"Ergh, we don't have—! Ugh, and hitting him is too risky right now, he's holding too much of that Cherry Blossom Blast."

"Ooh, now that I look at it, you two seem well-cooked, too. Soundbite, can you connect to Sanji and ask if he has any good recipes for fox, duck, and dog? It would give me a good excuse to examine the differences between normal members of their species. Oh, the possibilities of SCIENCE?"

"KEEP HIM AWAY FROM ME!" the cloud fox yelped, while Lassoo settled for whimpering nervously.

"What in the blue hell have they done to my son?" Kureha wondered aloud, gaping at the snail in front of her. She couldn't even bring herself to feel angry through the sheer shock of what she was hearing… maybe she had rubbed off on him more than she thought…
"Ah, but investigating the differences would be most interesting with C… C-c-c…
CroosssrrgghHHHG-GRGHAH!"

There was a sound of vials dropping onto a soft surface, followed by the unmistakable sound of keratin hammering against flesh and fur. Silence for a few seconds…

"CROSS! HURRY, SOMEBODY GET A—!"

"NOT THE TIME!" Soundbite roared.

"R-RIGHT! CONIS, CARUE, LAY HIM DOWN FLAT! VIVI, LET ME BORROW THE LION CUTTERS, I NEED TO GET HIS ARMOR OFF!"

There was a wet and vaguely familiar gurgle from over the line. It was something Kureha had heard only once before, from a man who'd been terribly burned by fire.

"His lungs…" she breathed.

"DAMMIT! FORGET THE CUTTERS, GO AND GET MY BAG! I NEED TO STABILIZE HIS INTERNAL ORGANS BEFORE THEY ALL FAIL ON ME!" There was the brief sound of a scramble as someone ran somewhere and tossed something at Chopper, followed by the rustle of what she assumed was medical equipment.

"Spinal column, heart, lungs…" Kureha recited to herself.

"The skull should have insulated his brain; the primaries should be the spinal column, heart, and lungs…" Chopper mused to himself.

Kureha was just starting to smirk and nod to herself when her old student spoke again.

"Was he burned anywhere specific or was it layered all over?"
"Uh…" Conis took a second to think before answering. "E-Eneru primarily focused on his torso. The worst of it hit his stomach, I think?"

"Then I'll need to check his stomach, intestines, kidneys… ergh, I'll have to check all of the abdominopelvic cavity just to be sure…"

Kureha blinked in shock before slapping her hand to her face. "Prioritize the area of impact, of course. How could I have missed that?"

Her new assistant grunted and shrugged slightly, though to her ear she could discern some measure of sympathy in his voice.

Meanwhile, the Snail she was listening to muttered and fussed endlessly for a moment before freezing with a stricken and then determined expression. 

"…Alright, Alright, listen: the damage to Cross is too extensive for me to handle right now. If I want to treat him effectively, then… then the only option is for me to amp my intelligence again."

"Y-you mean you need to make yourself all crazy again!?" Su sputtered incredulously.

"If I want to be able to triage Cross's wounds at an effective rate? Yes. I know it's going to be dangerous, but it's the only chance he has at this point. Unless anyone else has any better ideas…?"

Silence.

"That's what I was afraid of. Alright, everyone step back. Boosting in three… two…" A moment of silence, and then… "Beginning the operation!"

"…So, he found a way to increase his intelligence at will, but morals are compromised at the same time," Kureha muttered. "But even outside of that state, he's still exceptional… better than me."

The doctor-called-witch smiled and laughed. "Kak kak kak kak! Or maybe my age is finally starting to get to me. I suppose it had to happen sooner or later."
In a candlelit room on a pirate ship somewhere in Paradise, a blonde-haired, stoic man shuffled a pack of cards, staring at the snail before him as he processed the unmistakable sounds of surgery. It was rather clear to him that in all of the excitement, they had completely forgotten that they were still broadcasting and that everyone in the world was now listening to Tony Tony Chopper operate on Jeremiah Cross' innards. It didn't bother him all that much; in fact, it was why he was shuffling his cards. But he couldn't very well imagine that many listeners would sleep well tonight.

Ending his shuffling, he laid five cards down in a basic spread; it would be adequate for this reading. He then began to turn them over.

"The past… hmm?" He raised an eyebrow at the sight of the Tower. "The card of disaster represents the past? Interesting, though considering the events they have reportedly been involved in, not surprising. What of the present?" He flipped over the next card…

"Well, now."

The Six of Swords. A regretful but necessary transition. Some might call it a hopeful sign… those some would only consider Cross, rather than considering how it could apply to the Straw Hats as a whole.

"The future…" The inverted Hierophant; a challenge to the status quo, breaking away from conformity. Quite obvious, of course, though men could just as easily lead revolutions in death as they could in life.

"The cause…" Judgment, also inverted; for all that Eneru claimed to be a god, the fact that the card's position represented self-doubt showed that Cross' words had shaken him.

"And… the outcome." He revealed the final card, and as the sound of surgery on the other end of the snail began to slow to a halt, he stared impassively at the result.

Death.

Hawkins observed the painted Reaper's grim smile for a moment before laying the card down with a sigh.
"How cliché…"

-0-

"Why did you leave the transceiver running through that?" groused a frustrated and thoroughly-green-looking Paulie. "Seriously, not everyone in the world is a doctor as crazy as yours!"

"They can't hear you, you know," chirped Hattori, the man whose shoulder he was perched on looking only slightly ill-at-ease, while the pigeon seemed somewhat dizzy.

"That was a rather… graphic display," Iceburg muttered, glancing out the door at the rest of Water 7. "Perhaps I should try finding out if we can sue him—"

"Unlikely," Kalifa promptly replied. "Until now, there have been few ways to create anything close to a worldwide broadcast, all of which are under Marine and World Government control and all of which require significant Transponder power. As the devices have been created by the World Government and utilized only in extremely special cases, along the magnitude of Gol D. Roger's execution—though, of course, the technology was not quite that advanced at the time, so that wasn't broadcasted—the World Government has never deemed it necessary to form regulations."

She adjusted her glasses thoughtfully before speaking again. "And apart from that, even if they had laws about it, in case you haven't noticed, it's doubtful that Jeremiah Cross would adhere to them."

Iceburg raised his eyebrows at the secretary's dryness. "Kalifa, that's the most unprofessionalism I've ever seen from you."

The secretary gave her boss a flat look. "My apologies, Mayor Iceburg, I'm a bit off my game from the fact that I just heard a round of electroshock torture followed by live surgery."

"She has a point, Iceburg; do you see anyone in here not ill at ease after that?" Lulu asked, pushing a wayward strand of his nose-hair back into his nostril, only to wince as his armpit hair suddenly jabbed into his arm.
"And considering just how rough the yard is on a day-to-day basis with all the pirates and Marines we get, that's really saying something!" Tilestone said... well, 'rumbled', really, but that was the lowest his voice could go.

"Alright...gghhh..." Chopper suddenly ground out before panting wearily. "Huff... huff... I'm getting too used to that... a-alright, his organs are stable now, but we need to move to his limbs; at this point, it's not going to be possible to avoid scarring, but maybe if I—"

"Um, guys?" Vivi cut in hesitantly. "I realize this might be a bad time, but did... did Cross ever hang up the SBS?"

The silence was incredible.

"...shit," Lassoo summarized firmly.

"Finally, someone notices," Kaku breathed in relief.

"Wait, you mean the whole world's been listening to this nightmare?" Carue asked in disbelief.

"What the hell, slimeball?" Su demanded.

"I'm sorry, I was too busy with the fact that MY BEST FRIEND WAS GETTING TORTURED AND ALMOST DIED!"

"Might still die if you don't all shut up and let me work in peace! AND NO, I'M NOT AMPING AGAIN!" Chopper roared. "Give me that!"

There was a loud click, and then the Transponder Snail sagged and started wheezing miserably, its throat no doubt sore from the acoustic horrors it had been all but forced to share.

"...Kalifa, could you go and find out what the best treatment for a Transponder Snail having a sore throat is? And then start handing it out across town?"
"Right away, sir."

---

My return to consciousness was two things above all else: slow… and painful. Wait… did I already say that? Ergh, so hard to think. Everything was just so… fuzzyyyyaaARGH! BURNS, BURNS! NOT FUZZY, NOT FUZZ—Ah, no, wait, wait, this was soft, this was soft, ahhh…

Now, this felt nice, really nice, like feathers… goose or seagull or… duck? Wait a second…

"Carue…?" I moaned blearily.

"Oh, good, you're awake."

I tried to turn my head and open my eyes, only for said body parts to lodge a protest in the form of a pair of car bombs of pain.

… damn, this was bad, I don't usually get this flowery.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," a brown blob jerking next to me I think was Chopper said. "Eneru did a lot of damage; you almost died, and you're not completely out of danger yet."

"Aaargh…" I craned my neck back and forth as much as I could, ignoring the needles of pain that flared in my neck. "Wha—? Where are we?"

"We're heading towards the coast," said someone sitting behind me on the supersonic duck… Conis, I think? Yeah, had to be, that was a blonde head of hair, and Sanji's silhouette did not look like that. Well, not without Ivankov's involvement, anyway. Didn't Oda do a bit with tha-a-a… wow, was I out of it. "We're getting you back to the Merry, so that Chopper can work on you further."

I blinked slowly, fighting through the pain in an effort to get my eyes working again. "We…? Who's…?"
"Conis, Chopper, Vivi, the duck, the snail and me!" a white blur perched on Conis' shoulders provided.

Wait… I scrunched my face up as I tried to get my ducks in a row. Screwed as my head was, that number of names didn't add up. "Wait, what… what about… Lassoo?"

"Goat soldiers started converging on the BEANSTALK!" Soundbite provided. "HE STAYED TO kick ass, take names AND COVER OUR TRACKS."

"…On his own?"

"I called MIKEY AND LEO for backup."

"Hey, I think I can see da' coast!" Carue suddenly squawked.

"Oh, that's goo…goo…" I started to say before trailing off listlessly. Freaking hell, since when did my tongue feel like it was… made of lead… ergh, my head… "Grrgh… guh…"

"Cross? Croooss…?"

Whose voice was that? I could barely hear anything… it was like I was… underwater or something…

Time passed… weirdly for me. I… I'm pretty sure that I was carried onto a rocking frame that had to be the Merry. There was a lot of motion, a lot of talking… some yelling too, maybe, couldn't really make out who was saying what though. I might have felt some tugging on my arms… it was hard to tell though, for some reason all feeling stopped past my shoulders… same with my legs actually…

Eh. Probably not important. Despite the lack of feeling in my limbs, or maybe because of it, I slowly found myself starting to relax. The ocean swell, the gentle breeze, the sound of my crewmates rushing around… it was soothing, really.

And then, all at once, the world became white and shook and roared and… well, that must have been too much for my brain, because the next thing I knew, everything was black.
'Oh, hey, that cloud looks like Luffy's stupid face...' was my first thought when I opened my eyes again.

My second was a hazy reiteration of my thoughts the last time I woke up: lying on a surface as soft as down. I must have been getting better, if only a bit, because I managed to make the connection that I was lying on Carue again. A mobile Carue. Alone... wait, what?

"Hhnnng...?" I tried to shift around on the duck's back, only to be stopped by a familiar hoof.

"Cross! Are you awake again?" Chopper asked desperately.

"Ergh, barely..." I moaned, slowly bringing the back of my bandaged hand to my forehead. The fact that the motion didn't send a cascade of agony through me was a marked improvement. "W-Where —?"

Suddenly, a ripple of thunder swept through the air, causing me to shudder fearfully. Damn it, going from not fearing thunder and lightning since I was ten to full-blown astraphobia? Fan-freaking-tastic. I'd probably even have to ask Chopper to help me with it, otherwise Soundbite would have a field day...

"Soundbite?"

"I'm here!" he piped up from my back.

"He wouldn't wet us not take him and da twansceivah with us," Carue explained.

"Wha—?" I shivered as a latent wave of pain swept over me. "What's going on? Where...?"

"Eneru started raining lightning down around the island." Chopper sent a nervous glance up at the sky. "W-We were afraid that we'd get hit, and you were having a bad reaction to the thunder, so
Nami told Carue and I to head for that giant beanstalk… Giant Jack, I think. Aisa said it's where everyone's starting to gather, and Nami said it looked like the lightning was avoiding hitting near it. We're almost there now.

I processed that for a bit before closing my eyes as I fought to recall the details of what was going to happen next. Eneru's survival game hadn't ended yet, otherwise there'd have been some mention of the Ark Maxim and… Deathpiea, he called it. At the same time, though… wait, what was it that made Nami wind up with Eneru in the first place?

…I was very glad that I didn't say that out loud, both because Eneru would have heard me and, worse, Soundbite would have heard me. What was it, what was it… damn this arc for being so stupidly complex… alright, let's see, she got there on the Waver, she wound up in Shandora at the same time as the others because… she got out of Nola. And how did she get in Nola again? It was with Gan Fall, I remember that… sometime during the Ordeal of Iron, they got eaten. But what sent her there? How did she wind up on Ohm's battlefield? She left the Merry with Aisa at some point, leaving Conis and Pagaya to guard it… but Conis was already there… I needed more details.

"What else have I missed?" I asked hoarsely.

"Well…" Chopper flinched sadly. "While we were all going through the jungle, Eneru appeared on the Merry and flash-fried Usopp and Sanji. They're nowhere near as bad off as you, but they're still unconscious, so…"

I scowled darkly. Damn that bastard Eneru, spreading suffering and misery everywhere he—

…oh shit.

"Soundbite…" I grit out as fast as I could manage. "C-Connect me to the Merry. qui—!

"Guys, we're at dah beanstawk!" Carue suddenly squawked.

I'd just raised my head to catch sight of the expanse of island clouds that covered the lower ruins of Shandora and surrounded the base of Giant Jack when I felt Soundbite tense up.

"WAIT A—OH, SHIT! RUN!"

Unfortunately, before Carue could react appropriately, a voice I'd dearly hoped I'd never hear again roared out.

"SANGO!"

I grimaced as the island clouds started to light up. "Oh, this is going to su—!"

KEE-RACK!

I was becoming way too used to tumbling into the void…

-o-

"—up… —et up… I said… WAKE UP, MONGREL!"

THWACK!

"Hoof!" I grunted as something hit me in the stomach and knocked all the air out of my lungs. "Motherfuck that hurt! I'm gonna… kill…"

I trailed off as I looked up at Eneru towering over me. It especially didn't help that a thoroughly fried Chopper and Carue were lying on the ground behind him, smoking like briquettes.

"Let me rephrase that?" I whimpered.

"NOW you watch what you say…" Soundbite swallowed from where he was cowering on my shoulder.

"Even now your insolent tongue wags," Eneru tsked, before turning to speak to someone I couldn't see. "It seems you are correct; he is in need of more… persuasion."
I tried to turn my head to see who he was referring to—

THWACK!

Only for a rod of gold to ram into my vision and end my brief period of consciousness.

-o-

If the fact that I woke up without half as much haziness as the last time was any indication, I was definitely getting better, and quickly. Unfortunately, I couldn't exactly feel happy about that, considering what I felt when I woke up: a solid surface, covered by a thin piece of softness. Opening my eyes, I saw that it was a red carpet… surrounded by wood and giant gears and a giant golden face oh crap.

"What the fu—MMPH!?” My confused musings were silenced by a hand slapping over my mouth.

"Shut up if you wanna live!” Nami hissed desperately. "I had to act—ah, put my reputation on the line to convince our great and merciful lord to spare your life so you could see just how wrong you were about his powers. Don't make me regret it!"

The only thing that made me actually listen to her urgings was the fact that the look on her face clearly showed that she hated what she was saying… and that she was terrified out of her literally damned mind.

"Yes," drawled the voice of pure evil. "As it seems that you need a more thorough demonstration of what makes me a god, I intend to give one. You will bear witness as I return everything to its place. And perhaps if you repent before the end of it, I will even permit you to accompany me to Fairy Vearth."

I fought to keep my tongue in check, and then I let a menacing smirk come over my face as I remembered what was going to happen. "In that case, do you have any Vision Dials? Assuming I live through this, I'd like to keep a… permanent reminder of just how wrong I was."

I couldn't keep the snark completely out of my voice, but thankfully Eneru was too busy coasting on
his apparent victory to care and/or notice, as shown by how he waved his hand dismissively. "The one you acquired from the heretic and her father is still in your bag. Acolyte, help him."

Nami smiled tightly. "At once, your holiness." She hastily looped my arm around her shoulders and helped me up to my feet before dragging me away, hissing in my ear as she did so. "You're not serious, are you? We're in the middle of a potential genocide, and you're concerned with taking pictures?!"

"Oh, trust me, Nami," I snickered malevolently, glancing back at Eneru. "You're going to want this moment to be immortalized. It's not every day you get a look at something so priceless."

"Oh?" That drew Eneru's attention. "So, you're admitting that the alleged monsters you know of on the Blue Sea, for all of their power, are incapable of this scale of destruction?"

I opened my mouth to reply, but came to think better of it due to the snail teeth sinking into my neck. And besides, he did have something of a point; nobody else that I knew of in the history of One Piece had singlehandedly destroyed an island down to the last bit of soil… or at least, not without using Pluton, presumably, and to be fair, said island was made of cloud, rather than earth. Whatever, there was enough truth to throw up some convincing bullshit. "Well, I've heard legends of it, I won't deny that, but not anything that's happened in the last… what was it? Seven hundred years, I think."

Eneru stared for a few moments before smirking. "Then let this be the confirmation for you that there is nobody like me. You shall bear witness to the proof of my abilities as a god."

"I'm looking forward to it," I said honestly, prompting him to turn away. Nami looked to be restraining herself from hitting me, practically quivering with the effort required, and I smirked maliciously at her. "Hey, Nami, did you ever pass on my request to Usopp to upgrade my armor with rubber sleeves? It would have come in handy earlier."

She blinked in complete confusion at the non-sequitur. Then her eyes widened massively, and she returned my smirk with just as much malice. "No, Cross, I don't think I ever did. But it doesn't matter much right now, does it?"

"Yeah, you have a point. We should focus on the matter at hand: getting to a good place to take pictures. It should be a good show with how confident Eneru is about all of this."

"Absolutely," Nami said fervently, helping me over to the port side of the boat. I fished out the
Vision Dial and snapped one picture of Eneru in his current 'glory,' but besides that, I just waited for what was inevitably coming up soon. And luckily, we didn't have to wait long.

"HEY! ARE YOU ENERU!?"

I smiled eagerly at the furious roar that ripped through the massive cavern. "Here we go…"

Now, granted, my head was still swimming a bit, so I missed a good chunk of Eneru and Luffy's back-and-forth, and the stupidly massive blasts of pure plasma Eneru threw at Luffy certainly didn't help matters either…

But I couldn't miss Luffy landing on the railing of the Ark and staring at me in shock. "Cross…" he breathed numbly, before snapping an enraged look at the 'God' onboard. "You're dead."

Eneru's response was to zap up to our captain and go for a point-blank Vari… which he promptly ignored in favor of taking a swing at Eneru, which he only just barely managed to dodge.

You would think that reality and the utter gravity of the situation would detract from the hilarity of Eneru's face at the blatant slap in his apparent godliness.

You would be wrong. So, so, so wrong.

"HAAAHAHAHAAAAHAHAHA!" Nami and Soundbite cackled eagerly, laughing their asses off at the stupidly hilarious face the arrogant jackass was making.

My one regret at that moment was how hard I was laughing… because it made it so damned hard to take non-shaky pictures of the absolutely glorious wild take that Eneru had performed. Thankfully, I managed to calm myself down eventually just in time to snap an even better picture: that of Luffy slamming his foot dead center in the bastard's stomach, causing him to not only adopt an even more hilarious face, but to spit up a most cathartic amount of blood to boot.

Sadly, the hilarity drained out of the situation rather fast when Eneru got his breath back and sent a vicious glare at us. "What are you laughing at, heathens?" he snarled, raising a crackling hand at us.
"Erk!" I gagged before shoving Nami towards the railing. "Well, we've obviously outstayed our welcome. Luffy, we'll leave it to you, see you at the victory party!"

The good news was that I managed to muster enough force to shove Nami with me over the edge, just in time for a bolt of electricity to soar over our heads. The bad news, however, is that we were, well, kinda falling to our deaths. The even better news, however, was that I had yet to remove the contingency plan for dealing with Satori.

"Please work, please work, please work…" I hissed as I fumbled at my hip and yanked a ripcord.

"AAaaaAAAAaaAAA!" Soundbite hollered as a grappling hook fired out from my waist and managed to catch onto the Ark.

Good news, we managed to stay aloft. Bad news, that trick, plus Nami hanging from my neck, was absolute murder on my wounds.

"Grgh," I flailed my arm in panic as the crew's second mate practically strangled me. "Have you ever considered losing weight? Just a bit from the chest, maybe?!"

"HAVE YOU EVER CONSIDERED DOING SOMETHING NOT COMPLETELY BRAINDEAD INSANE!?" Nami shrieked in my ear.

"Would you prefer not being the only person on the crew who hasn't been zapped?" I shot back. "And besides, it's not like we don't have a way out waiting in the wings."

"What are you—?"

"HEY!"

We both looked up (or was it down? I was kind of hanging upside down, so it was really hard to tell) at Aisa, who was sitting above (or below) us on Pierre's hybrid-form back.

"Unless you want to go for a ride with that maniac, get on already!" the young oracle frantically demanded.
"Right, on it," I agreed as I yanked a latch on the belt I'd demanded Usopp incorporate, causing it to release the rope and drop Nami and me on Pierre's back.

Aisa rammed her heels into the horse-bird's (like hell I was calling him a pegasus!) sides. "Go, go, go!"

"You do realize you could just ask nicely, right!?" Pierre snorted before glaring at Soundbite. "AND CHANGE MY VOICE, DAMN IT!"

"NEVER!"

"JUST GO ALREADY!" Nami shrieked.

"R-Right!" Pierre squawked in a panic as he flapped his wings, soaring down towards the exits.

Aisa blinked in confusion as we went. "What the—? Hey, some weaker voices are coming this way! It sounds like your sniper and cook friends are trying to board…" She blinked in confusion as she double-checked what she was sensing. "Riding birds!?"

"Huh!?" I tried to make sense of that before grinning victoriously. I knew writing those notes was a good idea! "Soundbite, once they're in range, tell them that Luffy's fighting Eneru on the deck alone, so they should avoid that…" I winced as I realized a flaw in my plan. "Though… Sanji should do his best to get Nami's Waver ASAP."

"Wha—!? Dumbass!" Nami growled as she slapped her forehead.

"Anyways," I rolled my eyes as I ignored her. "Tell them that once they get the Waver, they should see about stripping the Ark of as many Dials as they can before getting out of there before Eneru can blast them, alright?"

"Ghetto-strip THE ARK, got it!" Soundbite nodded.
"Hey, we're hitting the tunnel out!" Pierre warned us. "Watch your heads!"

The new good news as we flapped out of the cave where the Maxim was hidden was that we were now on the fast track out of immediate danger…

*THWACK!*

The new bad news… was stalactites. Stupid, stupid concussion-inducing stalactites.

-0-

My return to consciousness was, once again, painful. Thankfully, however, this time the pain was centered around my head rather than anywhere else… wow, I was having a really bad day if that was my idea of a bright side.

"Ergh..." I leaned up and rubbed my head miserably. A glance around showed that I was with the rest of the crew near the base of Giant Jack. "When are we now?"

"STARING DOWN A raging black ball of DEATH!" Soundbite provided fearfully.

"Say whaaaaOHSHT!" I hissed fearfully as I followed his gaze skywards.

Have you ever seen truly evil-looking weather before? I'm sure you have, at one time or another. Stormfronts that eat up the horizon, clouds so dark they merge almost seamlessly with the sky…

None of them compared to the sight of Eneru's Raigo. Some part of my mind made the connection that if he was trying to destroy Upper Yard, Angel Island was already gone. But I didn't have enough mental capacity to spare towards feeling guilty about that considering just how close I was to getting a shock that there was no way I'd be able to live through, and my newly acquired fear of thunderstorms… or at least, lightning, wasn't helping.

Cr…Crack…CRACKLE…
I stared in confusion as the ball of cloud and death that was filling the heavens froze and started vibrating before sighing in relief. "Oh, thank goodness…"

FWOOM!

I smiled thankfully as the cloud exploded, blasting the rest of the storm away in a singular explosion of wind.

I pumped my fist with a whoop of joy. "GOD BLESS MY CAPTAIN'S SENSE OF TIMING! GO LUFFY! KICK THAT SON-OF-A-BITCH'S STATICKY ASS!"

"COME ON, LUFFY!" Boss roared through his cupped flippers.

"GO, CAPTAIN, GO!" The lightly-charred TDWS pumped their fists confidently, which Lassoo backed up with a heartfelt howl, and Usopp with a pair of party-fans.

"RING IT, STRAW HAT!" Wiper cried from the base of what remained of the beanstalk. "LIGHT THE LIGHT OF SHANDORA!"

"Let us hear it, boy," Gan Fall breathed reverentially. "The song of the island!"

Way up high, the sky flashed and raged time after time, with Luffy striking out against the false god and Eneru striking back until finally, I saw it.

A glimmer of gold hanging down from the sky, stretching out farther and farther... before finally stopping.

I was vaguely aware of the fact that I'd unhooked my Transceiver's mic from its cradle, and that Soundbite had taken the hint and started the SBS.

"People of the world…” I breathed numbly. "My captain has a message he'd like to share with you all. Soundbite? Broadcast him."
"RIGHT!"

-0-

"HEY! OLD MAN CRICKET! CAN YOU HEAR IT?!"

"I can hear it..." Montblanc Cricket breathed, his eyes closed in sheer bliss. "He was right. Noland was right!" His eyes shot open, a fire blazing in the pupils and a manic grin on his face. "HA! IN YOUR FACE, FUCKERS! I WAS RIGHT THIS WHOLE TIME! NOW WHO'S THE FOOL?! MWAAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHA!

Both Masira and Shoujou felt massive drops of sweat run down the backs of their heads at the sight of their usually cool-headed boss cackling and ranting like a cut-rate stage villain.

"I get the feeling Old Man Cricket hasn't been entirely honest with us about his school days," Shoujou muttered.

"With a head like that, you think?" Masira mumbled back.

"WHAT WAS THAT?!"

"N-nothing, boss!" the monkeys shuddered in panic.

-0-

"WE FOUND THE CITY OF GOLD!"

"NO! NO, IT'S NOT FUCKING POSSIBLE!"

"Come on, Bellamy, calm down!" one of the incensed spring-man's underlings pleaded as he tried to hold his flailing captain down in his bed. "Think about your wounds!"
"FUCK MY WOUNDS!" the hyena roared. "THERE IS NO FUCKING WAY IN HELL THAT THOSE STUPID BRIGHT-EYED DREAMERS WERE RIGHT! THE AGE OF DREAMS IS OVER! THERE IS NO ONE PIECE, THERE IS NO SKY ISLAND, THERE IS NO CITY OF —!"

"FOR THE LAST 400 YEARS, THE CITY OF GOLD..."

CLAAAAAANG!

And just like that, Bellamy froze up, liquid nitrogen flooding his body as the most beautiful sound he'd heard in his entire life came from two places at once: from the rapturous Transponder Snail in the captain's quarters of the New Witch's Tongue...

And from the darkness-covered heavens.

"WAS IN THE SKY!"

Bellamy remained frozen for the longest time, each ring of the bell hitting him like a physical force, until finally...

THWUMP!

His underlings' panic was redoubled due to him collapsing into his bed, bloody foam that had nothing to do with his snail-induced injuries bubbling out of his mouth.

-O-

Just off the coast of a certain infamous and prosperous kingdom in the New World, beneath an island-jungle, a secret colony of dwarves was having an impromptu celebration, dancing around a carved bust to the beat of the bell that was being transmitted via the Transponder Snail they'd stolen.

"OUR HERO HAS BEEN VINDICATED!" the sewing-dwarf hero of the Tontattas led his people in cheering. "THE MISPLACED SHAME ON OUR HERO HAS BEEN DESTROYED! CHEERS FOR MONTBLANC NOLAND! CHEERS FOR THE CITY OF GOLD! AND
CHEERS FOR THE STRAW HAT PIRATES, FOR PROVING TO THE WORLD THAT OUR HERO WAS NOT A FRAUD!

"CHEERS! CHEERS!" came the thunderous reply.

-0-

Up in the North Blue, a child tugged on the leg of one of his parents' pants in confusion. "Mommy, daddy?" he asked softly. "Why are you crying?"

The two adults glanced at one another before wiping the tears out of their eyes and smiling at their child.

"N-nothing, son," the father hiccuped happily. "Say, it's getting close to your bedtime, isn't it? What do you say we tuck you in? We have a new bedtime story we want to tell you."

"Really? Great! What's it called?"

"It's called… 'Noland the Adventurer'."

-0-

I could only do two things in the face of the bell's ringing: smile like an idiot, and cry like a bitch. And why the hell not? The noise it was making, the way the resonating sound waves rolled over me, filled me… it was… I'd never even heard anything so beautiful before in my life. I… I didn't even think something so beautiful could exist…

"I have seen the face of god..." Soundbite breathed through his slack jaw.

I hiccuped in agreement as I shakily brought the mic to my mouth. "Well… looks like that's that. It put us through the wringer and it was crazy as heck, but… well, we won. It's… as simple as that." Suddenly, I became aware of just how tired I was. "And… it's a good thing too, because… yeah, I'm at the end of my rope. I'll see you all later in…" I yawned tiredly. "No less than twenty-four hours… but until then, this is Jeremiah Cross…"
"AND SOUNDBITE!"

"Signing off. G'night…"

And with that, I hung up the transceiver and fell backward into oblivion.

Only this time… I did so with a smile.

Xomniac AN: Downside of an early update, it's a bit lighter than our usual load. Upside? It's early! Hope you enjoyed!

Patient AN: Another pair of upsides: no cliffhanger this week, and no hiatus next week. And best of all, it's summer! Finals are over, and we've got the whole summer to write.

Hornet AN: You guys do remember I'm going on vacation for the next three weeks, right?

Patient AN: …Well, looks like I was wrong. Sorry, viewers, looks like you'll have to wait another month for the conclusion of Skypiea. Sorry.

Xomniac AN: Believe us, this pains us as much as it pains you.

Hornet AN: You guys do know you can write this thing without me, right? I mean, I'm not going to be completely unplugged.

Xomniac AN: ... well, that works too.

Patient AN: All right, then, viewers, looks like I was wrong again. We may be delayed with the next posting, but we'll see what happens. Until next time, just remember: Patience is a virtue.
Chapter 31: Golden Treasures! A Navigator's Delight!

Cross-Brain: At long last, we return, and with another monstrous chapter! Fair warning, you may want to beware of flying hammers, because this chapter is simply going to be WHAM after WHAM after WHAM. Also, for those of you curious as to why this chapter is a week late… well, we said we'd publish after we were whole once more. We didn't say immediately after; we may be good, but we can't crank out a whole chapter in just 24 hours. But hey, you're getting another 30k, so you can't be too upset at us, right?

Hornet AN: Oh, and for those of you on Spacebattles, remember what I said about no new animal characters for at least another arc?

I lied.

Patient AN: Or rather, he forgot.

Hornet AN: Shut up!

It was roughly an hour or two after Eneru's defeat that my body let me come out of the daze I'd been in. While Chopper tried to insist that I rest for another day, enough of my mental faculties were active to know that that would have intolerable consequences: I would miss the victory party. In light of that, Chopper gave me a shot of the most stable of his adrenaline serums, though it left me fidgeting and feeling like I'd just chugged a six-pack of Coke.

The first thought on my mind once I was cleared to leave was what I'd missed, and the crew plus a newly returned Luffy, Nami, Vivi and Conis were quite happy to fill in the blanks.

Most of what happened during the Survival Game was too detailed to bother talking about, especially with what I knew already, so we just covered the highlights: Shura, Gedatsu, Yama, and Hotori and Kotori's much easier defeats—and that was saying something for Shura—Zoro's newfound 'friendly' rivalry with Braham inspiring his Phoenix attacks, and Eneru's enthusiastic crashing of the Survival Game, with little to no care about who he did or didn't fry, after my encounter with him.

When all was said and done, the number of people who survived to make it to Shandora—excluding Luffy, Aisa, and Pierre, who were still in Nola—was seven: the canon five, Boss, and Braham, with Carue and Chopper joining the fray soon after they arrived with me in tow. As Eneru spoke of his plans, Gan Fall had charged in a furious rage and fallen easily. Robin kept silent about the bell due to my forewarning, and observed as Wiper made his successful assault on the lightning-man, adding her own powers to break his limbs and neck in the process.

Unfortunately, he then proceeded to demonstrate just how legitimately bullshit Logia abilities are by circumventing the injuries and using his own lightning to puppet his nerves along with restarting his heart, and both of them and Braham fell to the self-proclaimed god. Despite attempting to use Wiper's skate, Zoro, Boss, Carue, and Chopper fell similarly, leaving only Nami and myself. Nami managed to fast-talk him into not finishing me off, and instead giving me a chance to repent at seeing more of his power, and so he brought me along to the Ark Maxim.

After we escaped the Maxim, Nami headed back to Shandora, where Sanji and Usopp joined her.
shortly afterwards; apparently, Isaiah and Terry had managed to talk some of the local South Birds into giving them a lift. They hadn't escaped with Nami's Waver fully unscathed, though that was mostly because of the fact that neither of them was capable of piloting the thing right, but they did end up in Shandora in time. Unfortunately, despite Luffy's increased rage, he hadn't managed to cope with the giant ball on his arm, so he joined them there not long afterwards. After that, things had proceeded according to usual.

A little bit too usual, actually.

"So, we lost Angel Island, huh?" I sighed sadly.

"There was nothing we could do to stop the first Raigo, Cross," Nami replied, shaking her head solemnly.

"But it's not all bad news," Conis said with a bittersweet smile. "Nobody was killed in the attack, the island was fully evacuated before it was destroyed."

"We've actually got you to thank for that, Cross!" Vivi happily informed me.

"Eh?" I blinked at her in confusion. "How so? I was completely out of it at the time!"

"Actually, it was something you did before then."

I tried to make heads or tails of what she was saying for a second before giving Soundbite a flat look.

"I'm lost."

"Ditto," the gastropod nodded in agreement.

"The SBS, you idiots!" Nami snickered.

"Eh!?" Now I was really confused. "But how—?"

"It's easy!" Su piped up, stretching herself out slightly as she tested the bandages Chopper had wrapped around her. "While Soundbite might be the first autonomously talking slimeball we've had up here in the clouds, he's not the only one of his kind in the White Sea!"

"Indeed," Conis nodded in agreement. "You see, not all Blue Sea Dwellers who come up here are quite as…" She hesitated slightly as she sought out a word.

"Hectic?" Raphey provided.

"…sure, let's go with that." Going by her expression, she felt that didn't quite cover things, and frankly, neither did I. "Anyway, there have been instances where inhabitants of Angel Island have traded Dials for Transponder Snails in the past, often to keep as pets. I've never done so myself, and I wasn't around one to hear your broadcast in the past few days, so I had no idea about it until we found out that Captain McKinley had already begun an evacuation when Vivi and I arrived at Angel Island to warn… them…"

She trailed off, and both she and Su looked away sadly.

"What's—? Oh, riight." I flinched as I remembered what I'd meant to tell her for awhile now. "Uh, Conis, about Pagaya…"

"I-it's fine, Cross…" Conis sighed sadly, hugging her arms as she looked away. "I… it hurt, when it happened, but until now it was just… a fact of life. I… I know that he's gone, I accept it, and…"
Tears started to trail from her eyes. "I'll… always miss him…"

"And I'll miss you too, Conis," Pagaya reassured her, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Just know that I'll always love you, alright?"

Conis smiled tearfully as she grasped the hand. "Thank you, Father, that means the world to me."

"But of course. It's a parent's duty to accept their children's dreams, after all."

"I know, but still—"

"WILL YOU HURRY UP AND READ WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS SITUATION ALREADY!?!?" Su shrieked.

That got Conis to blink in surprise… which got her to open her eyes… which caused her to see Pagaya. And that got her to reel in shock. "FATHER?!"

"YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE DEAD!" concurred a chorus of indignant voices from my crewmates.

"I'm sorry, I'm alive," Pagaya said apologetically.

I facepalmed, immediately regretting the action as a shot of pain raced down my arm, before looking back at Conis with a sheepish grin. "So, yeah. He's still alive. Crazy, huh… uh… Conis?"

I trailed off in confusion as I caught sight of her. She was frozen, sure, that much I'd expected, but rather than an expression of euphoria and relief like I'd thought she'd show, she looked confused and… conflicted? It was only for a moment, though; the next second, she broke into a joyful smile and embraced her father.

I exchanged glances with Soundbite, who was similarly confused, but we ultimately elected to shrug it off. Not our business.

"Good to see you're still alive, old man!" I waved cheekily… another action I promptly regretted with a wince, this time directing a look at my mummified arm.

Yeah… Eneru had done a hell of a number on my limbs. The good news was that I didn't have to worry about leaving fingerprints ever again! Or fingernails, for that matter. Or nails of any kind, really…

Simply put, my limbs looked like they'd been… melted, for lack of a better term. The flesh on my lower arms and legs was completely coated in third-degree burns, making them look like runny wax candles more than anything else. See, according to Chopper, the majority of my injuries came not from Eneru's lightning, but rather from the heat that it had caused in my armor, which had pretty much flash-cooked all the skin on my limbs from the elbows and knees down. He'd have been able to do more to help them, save that my innards had been in pretty bad condition too, so he'd had to operate there first. On the bright side, I'd have a hell of a story if anyone asked why the hell I had scars from a Y-incision all over my torso.

Still, by the time he'd been done guaranteeing that I'd live, there wasn't much he could do about my limbs; the flesh had re-solidified inside my armor, and he'd been forced to cut both it and most of my epidermis off alongside it in order to save my arms. It was all he could do to keep my nerves intact; I hadn't lost any motor abilities, thank God, but it would be a long time—post-timeskip long—before I'd be able to stand having my arms and legs exposed without it feeling like the air was burning the naked dermis.
But really, it wasn't like it was all *that* bad. The medicine-soaked bandages Chopper had given me kept the pain to a minimum, and he said that the flesh would heal in a day or two. Usopp was already working on cleaning my flesh out of the remains of my old armor and reforging what was left into something even better based off of Gan Fall's own armor, assuring me that he'd have it insulated this time, and above all else…

"Come on, you've *got* to admit, it's at least a little badass, right?" I grinned as I held up my bandage-wrapped forearm for Nami to see.

"The absolute hell it is!" she snarled viciously. "What is it with men and thinking that scars are cool?! You really think that being nearly killed like that is some kind of proof of being badass?"

"Oh, no, no, no, Nami," I said, smirking. "Being nearly killed like that because you refused to yield to the demands of a tyrannical jerkass like Eneru, and stayed true to your beliefs even if you thought you'd die for it? *That* is the proof of being a badass, and *these* are the proof that I did it."

"Heh," Sanji smirked. "I have to admit that I'm impressed, Cross; I haven't seen anyone stay that firm in their beliefs since Mosshead fought Mihawk."

"Ugh… that's just reinforcing my point. Seriously, did getting nearly bisected give *any* benefits besides a stupid scar?"

"Definitely," I said firmly. "The only swordsmen that Mihawk respects are the ones capable of putting up a decent fight against him. Zoro is the sole exception; the heart he showed changed Mihawk's view of him from just another overconfident rookie to the best candidate for his successor."

Zoro's grin in response to that statement was more joyful than I had ever seen from him, prompting Nami to roll her eyes. "Alright, for the sake of Zoro's dream, I'll agree that that's a good bright side, but what good came out of *this*? Sure, if you can show me a long-term benefit that came out of this, I'll never doubt the importance of scars again. But I don't see any!"

I shrugged. "I'll let you know as soon as I have one to show you. Anyway, how's everyone else doing?"

"A few bruises and burns, but nothing as bad as yours," Boss grumbled, slamming his fist into his palm. "And I'm lucky about that; those notes of yours were a little too accurate for my tastes, though you forgot to include where the hell he went when all was said and done! Believe me, if I'd gotten my hands on him after Luffy was through with him, that bastard would be sky shark chum right now!"

"Actually, I omitted telling you where he'd end up by design," I admitted, to much incredulity. "Don't get me wrong, I want him dead as much as you do, but this was the only way I could think of that guaranteed that the Rumble-Rumble Fruit would have little to no chance of crossing our path again; if the user of a Devil Fruit dies, the power is reincarnated into the nearest appropriate fruit, and there's no guarantee that that fruit would be native to Skypiea, or in the sky at all. The last thing we need is for it to fall into the hands of another enemy, or God forbid, the Marines."

"Then what's gonna happen to Enewu now? That fwying ship of his cwashed somewhewe faw away when Luffy beat him," Carue said.

"It might have crashed, but dick that he is, Eneru's also a hell of an engineer. The crash didn't damage the ship enough to keep him down. But unless I pissed him off more than I expected, he's running with his tail between his legs—!"
"Watch it," Lassoo warned me.

"It was a valid saying before we had a talking dog on the crew, mutt," I glared at him before continuing. "Anyways, he's taking his power to the one place where no one can get their hands on it for a long time."

It only took Nami a second to pale in shock. "W-wait, you mean that his ship—!?"

"Is flying off to what he knows as Fairy Vearth, and what we know as—"

"BAM, POW, straight to THE MOON!" Soundbite provided eagerly.

Nami stared at us in blank horror for a moment before collapsing to her knees. "NOOOOOOO!" she howled as she shook her fists at the sky in despair.

"Uh, Nami?" Luffy asked in confusion.

"MY GOLD!" Nami screamed, as though every inch of her were in agony… which, on second thought, might not have been that far off of a comparison. "ALL OF MY BEAUTIFUL GOLD, GONE!" She hunched forwards and started slamming her fists on the ground. "CURSE YOU, ENERU! CUUUURSE YOOOOUUU!"

"Seriously?" Soundbite asked flatly before tilting his eyestalks in confusion. "Huh. THIS SEEMS FAMILIAR…"

"There, there, Nami, it's not all bad…" Vivi rubbed the navigator's back kindly.

"Yeah, she's right!" I concurred promptly. "As a matter of fact, there's even more gold waiting for us, gold that he didn't take, just ripe for the picking."

"WHAT!?"

THWACK!

"Ow!" I winced in pain as Nami bodily tackled me and started shaking me by my collar.

"Where is it, man, where is it!?!" she ranted, practically foaming at the mouth.

"Let—me—go—and—I'll—tell—you!" I managed to get out. In the end, it took half a dozen of Robin's arms and two dugongs to pull the gold-crazed navigator off of me. I hacked and wheezed as I massaged my throat before responding.

"Alright, first things first…" I pointed at Nola, who'd been gleefully slithering through the ruins of Shandora ever since she'd woken up. "See that giant snake there?"

"Yeah?" Usopp asked, already visibly uncomfortable with where this conversation was heading.

"We need to get it black-out drunk."

"Wha—get the snake dru—?" Nami said, before her eyes widened. "All of that wreckage… of course."

"Yeah, and you know, the best place to get a lot of alcohol is a good party, and considering how we've just put an end to six years of tyranny and a 400-year war—"

"VICTORY PARTY!"
By the time I'd stopped seeing double and my ears had stopped ringing, Nami was long gone. "That was loud..." I moaned as I knocked my hand against my ear.

"TELL ME about it..." Soundbite agreed, his eyes spinning miserably.

"So... is it usually like this for you guys?" Aisa asked as she eyed the dust trail that Nami had left.

"I can still smell some adrenaline in the air, and I'm pretty certain that she must be a mile into the jungle by now," Su deadpanned. "What the heck do you think?"

"Alright, anyway, before we get started with the party, I have something else to take care of," I said, reaching for the transceiver. "Aisa, how's Wiper doing right now?"

"He's conscious, thanks to Chopper, but doctor's orders are that he doesn't do anything more strenuous than speaking right now," Aisa replied.

"Alright. Lead me to him, I think he'll want to be the one to do this. Meanwhile, I think it's high time we found out what else this thing is capable of."

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Beneath the waters of Paradise, a small pirate crew that was swiftly becoming one of the most infamous groups of seafaring rogues of the generation sailed in a ship that would result in Soundbite being gagged within thirty seconds of seeing it, lest he fill the air with the voices of John, George, Ringo, and Paul until the crew's ears fell off. Aboard this ship was one of the world's finest doctors and surgeons; to his knowledge, only three people still alive including him knew his full name, while the majority of the Marines knew him as merely the Surgeon of Death, by virtue of his coveted Devil Fruit powers.

And at the current moment, he was entertaining a new respect for the young man named Jeremiah Cross; his ears, sharp after over a decade's worth of surgeries, had flawlessly processed every detail of the mistakenly broadcast operation, and the fact that he had managed to stand strong in the face of a powerful tyrant like that with injuries that severe and live to tell about it was extremely impressive, as was the skill of their crew's doctor. On the other hand, he was well aware of the fact that Cross was likely to have received significant and permanent damage to his limbs. If he knew what was good for him, he would probably be unconscious for the next several hours.

"Don don don don!"

"On the other hand, that would be giving his sanity far too much credit, wouldn't it?" Trafalgar Law mused.

"What was that, Captain?" Penguin asked curiously.

"I said answer the snail," the renowned Surgeon of Death deflected.

"Uh, sir?" Shachi swallowed nervously. "Shouldn't you be concentrating on what you're doing?"

Law scoffed as he spun his scalpel in his fingers. "Please, all I'm doing is replacing a ruined kidney. I could do this with my eyes closed."

The co-first-mate of the Heart Pirates swallowed heavily as he watched the surgical blade twirl above his exposed entrails. "Please don't."

Law gave his subordinate a flat look before shrugging and stabbing the blade into the table next to
his head, ignoring the panicked whimper he let out. "Fine, we'll take a break while we listen."

Shachi breathed a sigh of relief, before tensing as his captain walked away. "Ah… do you think you could close me up first!?"

"Picky, picky," Law grumbled as he snapped his fingers.

Shachi started to sigh yet again, but paused when he caught sight of the surgical tray covering the open window into his body. He stared at it for a second before letting his head hit the table with a groan. "This is the best I'm going to get, isn't it?"

"I'll finish with you as soon as the SBS is over," Law said dismissively, leaning to recline against his oldest crewmate, a rather fluffy bear mink who was currently sedated due to the ever-present queasiness that flared up whenever his captain performed his art, which did absolutely nothing to impede his effectiveness as a cushion. Law had just settled down as Penguin picked up the receiver.

"—Axe Dials, five Axe Dials, six Axe Dials, seven Axe Dials, Dials! Alright, that'll do. So, considering that Soundbite couldn't possibly be so cruel as to interrupt me after I nearly died—"

"WHAT!? No way, I'm totally that cruel!" Soundbite said, sounding genuinely offended. "START THE SBS!"

"…I'll be honest, viewers, I'm not entirely sure what I was expecting."

"Seriously, Cross, you need to PAY BETTER ATTENTION."

"I know, I know, I'm working on it."

Everyone awake chuckled, save Law, though he couldn't suppress a smirk.

"Anyway, viewers, fair warning at the get-go: a good portion of this broadcast is going to be me playing around with the transceiver, seeing just how many features it has. Why do I not know what it can do? Because the thing didn't come with an instruction manual, and us finding one for it is as likely as the Marines offering Buggy the Clown a position with the Seven Warlords."

"Buggy the Clown?" someone asked.

"I think I've heard of him. Small-time pirate from the East Blue. I think Straw Hat got his bounty after beating in his face and a few others along with it," another commented.

"Alright, so let's see what we've got here… Huh, looks like the display's changed. Looks like…?"

"…CONCEITED BASTARD, ain't it?"

"What—? Oh. Ugh, no kidding. Still, I wouldn't mind giving it a shot. One sec, viewers, I'm going to try calling the Transponder Snail number that the transceiver is now showing. And if there is any goodness in this world, it won't connect me to who I think it will…"

There was a brief ruffling sound, followed by the telltale clicking of someone inputting a Transponder Snail number. Moments later…

"Dot dot dot dot! THE HECK!?"

Law cocked an eyebrow in intrigue. "Well, now, that's a surprise…"
"What the—?" Cross started before cutting off as he scrambled to do something. A second later, there was a click. "Hello? Hello?" the pirate's voice called out, only it appeared to be layered and echoed, as if…

"Oooh, now that's interesting," the Surgeon of Death chuckled.

"What are you talking about, Captain?" Penguin asked, not yet having grasped the implications.

Cross unwittingly answered the question with a bark of laughter, his voice having returned to normal. "Well, well, well, isn't this a handy little feature!? Viewers, I have just discovered the call-in number for the SBS! All you have to do is call the following number, 432-782-762, during the broadcast, and we will be able to talk live! Again, that number is 432-782-762. Dial it in during the SBS broadcast, and we'll have you on the air. Oh, and if you're concerned about the long arm of the law—no relation to the Long-Arm Tribe—just tap your fingers against the speaker after we pick up, and Soundbite will use his powers to blur your voice so that nobody can recognize you."

"I AM THE GREAT—Dot dot dot dot—EST! Ooh, here's our first caller ALREADY! Hello, you've reached the SBS!"

The snail's expression contorted into a smug grin.

A grin that put all the onlooking Heart Pirates on edge and prompted Law to snap into a sitting position, instinctively strangling his Kikoku's hilt in an ironic death-grip.

"Fuffuffuffuffu," came an all-too-familiar laugh from an all-too familiar voice. "Well, isn't this luc—KA-LICK!" Without warning, the voice was cut off, and replaced by Cross' cheerful, if slightly strained voice.

"Something I forgot to mention: we do have standards here on the SBS, even if we don't usually show it, and we won't...eh? Alright, we won't willingly permit malicious or... what? Ergh, alright, alright, malicious or too inappropriate content to be aired. Now, most of the time, I'll be willing to give anyone a chance to say their bit and dig their own grave."

Cross's only slightly shaky smile was once more replaced by the vicious grin, which was now several molars wider.

"Well, that was rude, but thank you. Now, then—KA-LICK!"

"A fact to consider, however," Cross resumed speaking, his grin now a bit more vicious. "Is that I am a nice and savvy individual, and that I am quite familiar with the... shall we say, reputations of certain individuals. People known for being so thoroughly toxic that we cannot allow them so much as an inch of momentum, lest they corrupt this broadcast entirely. People who are essentially valid for blacklisting from the word go."

The evil grin was back again, though not only was it painfully wide and twitching slightly, but a few veins were starting to pop between the snail's eyestalks.

"Very funny, rookie. You've shown you've got guts, now cut it out or else—KA-LICK!"

"People like the Warlord Donquixote Doflamingo, who I am absolutely positive nobody on this planet likes, aside from his admittedly admirably loyal crewmates and most... I'll be generous and say 'misguided' followers."

"First the Marines and the World Government, then a lunatic with the lightning Logia, and now he's calling out Doflamingo and making a fool of him in front of the entire world. It's official: Jeremiah
Cross is trying to get himself killed," Shachi stated weakly.

"That or he has bigger balls than brains," Penguin suggested. "This certainly isn't the first time we've heard of it happening without the captain's help."

"Fair point."

"Now then... which button actually is the blacklist function on this thing... Let's try... this one?" There was a mechanical click, and then the smile was back, with almost twice as many veins.

"Brat, you have no idea who you're—KA-LICK!"

"Nope. This one?"

"I am starting to lose my—KA-LICK!"

"Nope. This one?"

"YOU DON'T WANT ME TO—KA-LICK!"

"Nope. This one?"

BWAAAAAAAAAH!

The Heart Pirates shot back from their Transponder Snail in shock when it suddenly loosed a tremendously loud blare at the top of its lungs, which Soundbite had already shown the world to be very, very impressive.

"...WOW, that was loud," Cross finally got out.

"MY EARS! MY NON-EXISTENT EARS ARE RINGING!" Soundbite groaned.

"Alright, foghorn button. Not what I was looking for, but I am definitely remembering it. Now, where was I... oh, yeah! This one?"

Trafalgar D. Water Law was unsure if he had ever grinned so widely in his life.

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Beneath the deck of the Donquixote Pirates' ship, currently sailing through the waters of Paradise, Monet pushed her thickly lensed glasses up onto her forehead as she watched Sugar get up from her chair and walk across the reading room the sisters had been relaxing in. "What are you doing?"

"Changing chairs to sit over here," the pseudo-toddler explained as she strode over to a somewhat oversized armchair and started hopping in an attempt to climb into its seat.

Monet rolled her eyes in equal parts exasperation and fondness. She then stood up, strode over to her sister and helped her into her new seat. "Honestly, little sister, what would you do without me?"

"Find a smaller chair, get somebody else to lift me in, or just turn a flunky into a toy and use them as a stepstool," Sugar summarized as she dug a grape out of the bowl she was carrying.

Monet chuckled as she returned to her own seat and picked her book back up. "Of course, of course. And to reiterate my question, why did you decide to sit over there?"

Sugar rolled her eyes in turn as she swallowed the fruit. "Because where you're sitting, the room the
Young Master is in is forty-five feet *that way,*" she answered, pointing at the wall behind Monet.

The snow-woman glanced over her shoulder at the wall. "And why is that impo—?"

The snail in the room suddenly clicked its tongue. "*There it is! Alright, and there goes the worry of having to deal with the puppetmaster's self-aggrandizing squawking. What say we move on, eh?*

"Rgrrrggghh…" Monet's inquiry was cut off in a choked gurgle as she slumped in her seat, eyes rolling up in her head and foam bubbling out of her slack jaws.

"Because the range of the Young Master's Haki when he loses his temper is *fifty* feet," Sugar explained to her insensate sibling, shaking her head with a sigh that was equal parts exasperated and fond. "Honestly, big sister, what would you do without me?"

"Hhhgghhh…"

-o-

"Alright, with that done—Eh?… hm, alright, sure. Let me just— Alright, loyal viewers, I need to brief a guest we're about to have. Uh… Soundbite, could you please be mature for five minutes while I talk to Wiper, and put on some music for the viewers that won't make them want to tune out the SBS for the rest of time?"

"Ugh… well, when you *PUT IT THAT way,* fine. JERKWADS AND GERMS, the musical *stylings of A BAND CALLED THE DUBLINERS!"

"…who they have never heard of, but yeah, that'll work. Alright, everyone, here's… eh…"

"**Soundbite's Music Corner!**"

"…eh, alright."

Midway through the waters of the Grand Line, a long-armed pirate who'd only just started to make a name for himself hummed along to the sound of fiddles, banjos and other such rural instruments that the snail before him was humming out. "Apapapa, it sounds like the little snail's got an ear for a festive beat!" Scratchman Apoo chuckled happily.

The chuckling evolved to laughter as Soundbite moved on to sharing his lyrics in a thick medley of North Blue voices.

"And it's all for me grog, me jolly, jolly grog/All for me beer and tobacco/Well I spent all me tin with the lassies drinking gin/Far across the western oceans I must wander!"

"APAPAPA! And good taste in lyrics as well!" Apoo twisted his arm around so that he could successfully slap his knee. "I just might have to call in and ask about these 'Dubliners'! I can't believe I've never heard of them! APAPAPA—Eh?"

Apoo paused in his laughing and looked upward as he scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Saaaay… now, there's a thought… and he'd probably go for it, too…" He began pondering on how he could go about it, and shortly thereafter began moving through the ship to gather his Transponder Snails together. He was just finishing as the music ended, and Cross' voice came across the transponders anew.

"**OK, viewers, hope you enjoyed Soundbite's Music Corner; if we get enough positive reception, we'll see about making it a regular thing. Now, moving on to a considerably more serious topic.**"
Earlier today, I confirmed for the world the truth about the Montblanc family... but now, it's time for you to learn the true story of Montblanc Noland, and how he came to the legendary City of Gold. You see, up here in the sky, a different tale has been told from generation to generation... and now, I cede the microphone to the one with the most right to tell you that story."

Shuffling ensued as the microphone was handed over, followed shortly by a masculine voice.

"People of the world, my name is Wiper. I am a descendant of the great warrior Calgara, the last guardian of the City of Shandora before the city was sent to the sky..."

"... and so, after 400 years, our war has come to an end, and my ancestor's final wish has been fulfilled. And to Noland's descendant... I hope that you hear this, and know of the true heroism of your ancestor."

Cricket and the Saruyama Alliance had been motionless, listening with rapt attention to every word that Wiper said until that moment. And then, he reached forward and grabbed the snail's mic. It didn't need any prompting to dial.

"You've reached the SBS!"

"This is Montblanc Cricket speaking. I heard every word and every ring, Wiper."

Silence fell on the other end, until the unmistakable sound of a choked-off sob came through. But Wiper's voice was firm as he replied.

"... I'm glad."

"Wiper, and all of you Straw Hats... I owe you one."

He said nothing more as he started to lay down the receiver.

"Montblanc Cricket."

The freediver froze, the mic an inch from its cradle.

Tears flowed from the snail's eyes as it grinned widely. "Let us meet one day on the land of our ancestors, as they promised. Agreed?"

Cricket stared at the snail silently for a second, before sniffing as he used his forearm to wipe away the tears he hadn't even been trying to hold back, an equally euphoric grin on his face. "Just wait for me. I'll be there before you know it."

And with that, Cricket replaced the receiver.

For a moment, all was still on the coast of Jaya.

Then...

"Boys... how about we go and find us a Knock-Up Stream?"

"HELL YEAH!" the primate-like siblings and their underlings whooped, pumping their fists in the air.
I waited until Cricket had hung up before smiling. "Well, it's been a fruitful broadcast, everyone: establishing a call-in feature and informing the world of the truth of a tragic tale from long ago, now brought to a happy close. But, I'm afraid that as the victory party is about to start, we'll have to end this off now. So, until tomorrow, viewers, this is Jeremiah Cross—"

"And SOUNDBITE!"

"—Of the SBS, signing off."

I placed the mic on its cradle and stretched out, wincing at the pain but noting with no small measure of relief that it had diminished somewhat compared to the start of the broadcast. I slowly got to my feet and walked towards the sounds of growing activity, and I was nearing the source…

"Puru puru puru puru!"

When Soundbite began ringing. Processing the situation, I remembered what I had talked about the previous night. "Well, here's hoping that this is a turn for the better. Could you call Zoro and Nami over here? Oh, and Vivi, too."

The three of them, with varying degrees of irritation on their faces, made their way away from the party, through the woods and over to me, though their irritation faltered as Soundbite let out another "Puru puru puru puru!"

"MI3?" Vivi asked.

"Unless that number works outside of SBS broadcasts, too, in which case I have a feeling I'm really going to regret handing it out," I replied acridly, picking up the mic. "Hello?"

"Apapapapapa! Hello, Mister Cross?"

My eyes widened; I immediately recognized who was on the other end of the line, and it was not someone I was expecting to hear from for at least another three months, minimum. "Yeees, and you're—"

"Apoo. 'Roar of the Sea' Scratchman Apoo, 75 million bounty, captain of the Grand Line native On Air Pirates! I'm glad to see the number you gave out works even when the SBS is out!"

"…shit," I summarized flatly.

"Apapapa!" Apoo cackled suddenly. "Got you, didn't I? Yeah, I bet that would be a nightmare and a half! Don't worry, I'm calling you on Soundbite's personal number, which I'll keep quiet."

"HOW DID YOU get that? Only ONE PERSON outside the crew KNOWS IT, and DITZY though she is, she's not THAT BAD!" Soundbite said incredulously.

"Actually, you're wrong! There's one other person who knows your number!"

"Who!?" Nami demanded.

"Apapa! Why, the man who gave him it!"

I made the connection in seconds. "Samson!?" Soundbite and I chorused incredulously.

"Yup! That's him! Nice guy! It was easy, really. All I had to do was call a few people in East Blue and confirm that you joined the Straw Hats shortly before they reached Loguetown, and they also
told me that when you showed up, Soundbite didn't have a rig yet! From there, I had my snails from that region—and believe me, I have a few—contact Snail shops in the town and I asked around for anyone who provided Ichabod-Portentia 6S model transponder rigs!"

"HOW DO YOU know my MEASUREMENTS!?" Soundbite yelped.

He then tilted his head in the approximation of a shrug. "You've got a slight hissy-click-click every few seconds in your broadcast, a harmless defect of the model. Anyway, once I found the guy, I asked about your number. He was able to tell I was an honest fan and gave it to me, along with a message!"

"Message?" I repeated, somewhat weakly.

"Yeah. His business has boomed since your SBS started; his Transponder Snail Shack is going to become a Transponder Snail Palace before long! He wants to thank you for the windfall and for giving a nice kick in the pants to the World Government, and said that he's at your service for anything he can provide."

"...Huh. Seems like we've made a resourceful ally. But before considering that, would you care to explain why you're calling me?"

"Easy," Vivi said, crossing her arms with a huff. "I've only heard him speak for a few minutes, but I can tell: he's a member of the Long-Arm Tribe. There are only two possible reasons one of them would ever put this much effort into anything: for making money, or for causing trouble in some way, shape or form, and a lot of it, at that."

"Apapapapa! That statement is harsh, stereotypical, and downright racist, Your Highness!" Apoo's grin widened proudly, which Soundbite was able to easily accommodate. "It also happens to be completely true, both in this instance and in general. Anyway, that last broadcast of yours gave me an idea. I have a... proposition for you that, knowing you, I'm pretty sure you'll like..."

I exchanged glances with my friends before crossing my arms and adopting a controlled expression. "I'm listening..."

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"PFFHAHAHAHA!" I cackled, slapping my hands on my knees eagerly, ignoring the pain that resulted from the action. "Oh, man, this is going to be down-and-out epic! I can't wait, this'll just be soooo fun!"

"Well, it's trouble, alright, but not any more than we're used to," Vivi said, unable to fight a smirk.

"THANKS A BUNCH, Scratchman!" Soundbite chortled.

"Oh, please, call me Apoo. I look forward to your next broadcast, Cross!"

"So do I, Apoo, so do I. Don't get killed in the meantime!"

"APAPAPAPAPA! YOU'RE ONE TO TALK!" the long-armed pirate cackled. A moment later, the line disconnected.

"So, Cross... you know anything about this guy?" Zoro asked.

"Yeah, but not a lot," I shrugged as I scratched my chin thoughtfully. "The story didn't tell much about him before I came here. Besides what we already established in that call, all I know is that he
has a Devil Fruit that lets him turn his body parts into instruments and create lethal sound waves from them. Probably something onomatopoeia-related, but really, no guarantees. I only got a brief glance over his and most of the powers of the rest of the pirates of his caliber."

"And what caliber is that, Cross?" Nami asked.

I shot a cheeky grin at her. "Now, now, Nami, you know better. That answer is fraught with spoilers!... Buuut, I can at least say with confidence that Luffy and Zoro are in that particular power-bracket."

Nami and Vivi's eyes shot wide in shock, while Zoro settled for grinning in malevolent eagerness.

"So..." Vivi started slowly. "You're basically saying that we just got an incredibly powerful ally, didn't we?"

"Pretty much, yeah." I bit my thumb in thought. "And maybe even two others of the same caliber, but that's not going to be for a good long while, of that I'm certain. Still, if we play this right, it's going to pay off big time in the long run."

Nami spread her hands with an exasperated sigh. "You and your long cons and high-stakes gambles. One day, you are going to go over the edge in a simply spectacular manner, I swear... Well!" Nami grinned fiercely as she slammed her fist into her palm. "If that's everything, I'm going to head back to the party. That snake has a stupid high tolerance, but I'm pretty sure I'm making progress!"

"Yeah, yeah, sure, go ahead, we're done here," I waved her off.

"Puru puru puru puru!"

"Or not," I continued smoothly.

"I'm warning you, if it's that Apoo guy again, I'm going to dislocate his joints when we meet him in person," Nami warned me.

"Ah... wait, hang on a second, I noticed something when I was toying with the Transceiver earlier..." I drew the metal box out of my bag.

"TOUCH THAT foghorn AND DIE."

"Yeah, yeah, hang on..." I glided my fingers over the available buttons before pressing what I hoped was the right one. The display promptly showed a series of digits, and I grinned at the fact that they were familiar. "Jackpot!" I took the mic out of its cradle before adopting a grave expression. "Saint Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. Do you have an appointment?"

"Um, pardon? My apologies, I seem to have the wrong number—" came a wheezy voice, the sound of which prompted me to pump my fist victoriously.

"You don't, that's just a thing he does," Smoker said tiredly. "Here I was going to say that I'd have to be more careful about asking you to make a meaningful broadcast, Cross, but I can only assume you're doing alright despite all of that lightning if you're cracking jokes."

"For a certain measure of 'alright,' anyway." I swear my wounds were sentient, if the way they flared up at that moment was anything to go by. "I'm a bit deep-fried, but... well, I'll live, even if I'm going to be bandaged up and jumping at storms for awhile. So, I take it that the recruitment went well?"

"Yes, and all thanks to you, Cross," Tashigi said, smiling. "It's because of how you stuck to your
beliefs against that lightning bastard that our new name is MI4, and we've got a few hundred more soldiers for our cause!"

Silence greeted that statement, during which Zoro, Soundbite, and I all turned with identical smug grins towards a flat-footed Nami, who promptly began stammering. "She... but... you... I... oh, for the love of..." She sighed angrily. "Alright, fine. FINE! STANDING UP TO ENERU WAS COMPLETELY BADASS, NOT STUPID! ARE YOU HAPPY NOW?!

"Very," Soundbite and I said smugly before I turned back to the mic. "Thank you, Tashigi, you just helped me prove Nami wrong about something important."

"Uh... you're welcome?" she said uncertainly before Soundbite's expression shifted back to Smoker's grimace.

"She's not the only one you've proved wrong, Cross. Would you mind repeating your accusation from last night for Captain T-Bone?"

"Last night? You called LAST NIGHT?" Soundbite asked.

"You somehow slept through it, Soundbite," I said with a shrug. "They just told me that they were going after their first recruit for another leader—T-Bone—and I gave them some recommendations for Vice-Admirals to try after that. Hina, meanwhile, presented one that I had to turn down: Vice-Admiral Vergo. From the day he joined the Marines, he's been a deep-cover plant for Donquixote Doflamingo of the Seven Warlords."

Silence greeted this declaration before the wheezy voice spoke again, filled with hate. "That wretched bastard... here I thought that he was merely a conscienceless and self-centered fanatic! But he's truly a pirate? And under the service of that man, of all people..."

"Um...?"

"Let's just say that Vergo played a key part in a disaster in Captain T-Bone's past," Smoker said. "Hina was devastated when she got proof that you were telling the truth; it's the only reason she's not on this call."

"Mister Cross, you have shown a great deal of knowledge of things that you should not know. I have sworn to take Vergo's head myself, and your revelation has only reinforced my determination. What can you tell me about him that would be beneficial for me to know?"

I processed this new development, and immediately saw a problem in the form of the last survivor of Flevance. True, his main grudge was against Doflamingo, but did that mean I was going to run the risk of an ally drawing his ire for stealing the life of someone else that he wanted to kill? Not remotely. I frowned in thought as I considered that particular arc, and then the answer came to me. An answer that would prove to make things much more helpful for us in the long run. Wow, today was turning out beautifully.

"Alright, listen carefully: suffice to say that you're not the only one after Vergo's head," I said carefully. "And the other person who wants it? Not only are they stronger than you, but I can say with absolute confidence that their grievance is a lot worse than yours. That person is also a potential ally, so when crunch-time comes, we're going to have to defer to him on this matter, though I think he'll be amenable to sharing in this case. Still, the situation is very delicate, so I'm going to tell you what I think is the best course of action for you to follow, alright?"

There was a tense silence for a few moments before T-Bone spoke. "I'm listening," he rasped.
"Alright, you're going to want to write this down, because it's not going to make sense anytime soon. Should the worst come to pass and the worst-case candidate for Sengoku's successor is appointed… go to the changed battleground and create a base in the fire. Stay hidden, and wait for us; when we come to you, you'll have your revenge."

"And if Sakazuki is not appointed?"

"…yeah, that was the obvious conclusion to draw, wasn't it?" I chuckled sheepishly. "Alright, fine, I'll stow the cryptic bullshit for a bit. That's just a timekeeping measure anyway. All you need to do is go to the battlefield where he and Aokiji fight and hide in the side that's always engulfed in flames. Believe me, no one will ever look for you there, it's the perfect hiding spot! Provided you deal with the guard dog there, but still."

"…Commodore Smoker, I was under the impression that he was impossibly well-informed, not clairvoyant," T-Bone said dryly.

"So were we, but that explains a lot," Tashigi's voice said.

"Hey, do you think I would have willingly gotten fried if I'd seen this shit coming!?" I demanded.

"Well…” Vivi trailed off uncomfortably.

"You did keep talking like an idiot," Nami reasoned.

"OH, COME ON!" I cried out.

"As amusing as this is, Cross, are you clairvoyant?" Smoker asked seriously.

"…” I was silent for a few seconds before grinning widely. "It involves a serialized manga, a random omnipotent deity—!"

"Okay, I've heard enough, good night, Cross!" Tashigi cut in.

"Just a moment—KA-LICK!" T-Bone attempted to speak up, only for the connection to drop like a hot potato.

"Quick thinking, Cross," Vivi whistled.

"Thank you very much," I said smugly. "A wise man once said that the truth is often hardest to believe, and quite frankly, I'd say that everything we've experienced since coming to the Grand Line vindicates that statement perfectly, wouldn't you?"

"UNDERSTATEMENT of the TIMES!" Soundbite concurred.

"If you're done," Nami drawled, leering at me and tapping her foot. "While I can't deny that those two calls were both productive, can I get back to getting my gold now?!"


"YES!"

I rolled my eyes and did a quick mental check to be sure I wouldn't have to call her back for anything else. But as I did so, another idea came to mind.

"Actually, before you get back to that, go talk to Pagaya, see if he can slim your Waver down so it's
portable before we set off tomorrow."

Nami's impatient glare turned into a quizzical look. "Portable? Why?"

I shrugged. "From what I saw, you pretty much never used it again after we left Skypiea; I was thinking that if you could carry it around with you, you'd get a lot more use out of it."

Nami looked thoughtful at that. "Huh, when you put it that way… well, I *did* like riding it… alright, I'll ask Pagaya what he can do." Her gaze sharpened intently. "Anything else?" she demanded with a visible overtone of menace.

"No, that's it for now."

"Perfect!" And with that, the navigator dashed back to the party, snatching up a stray mug of something no-doubt liver-failure-inducing en route to Nola.

"Well," Vivi groaned slightly as she stretched her arms out. "I need to get back, too." She frowned contemplatively. "I was planning on talking to Conis when you called me over. I'm a bit worried, it looked like she was talking to her dad about something serious…"

I shrugged helplessly. "No help here. Her role in events has been *way* different from what I remember."

The princess sighed despondently. "Oh, well. I'll see what I can do on my own."

She too walked away, and I looked at Zoro. "…Don't expect me to say this again anytime soon, but thanks for all of that training, Zoro; I wouldn't have been able to stand up to Eneru as much as I did without it."

Zoro cracked a grin. "Glad you finally came around, Cross." His grin faded. "But there's not much chance of me keeping it up anymore with your arms and legs wrecked."

"Psh, what, these?" I held my arms up dismissively. "Please. Your chest is a worse trainwreck than these things. I'll be back and better than ever *so long as you keep putting the screws to me like there's no tomorrow!*" I kept my grin up for a second or two before gaping in abject horror as I processed my last sentence. "What the fuck just came out of my mouth?"

"YOU HEARD HIM, NO TAKE-BACKSIES!" Soundbite stated eagerly.

Zoro glanced at Soundbite for a bare moment before grinning like a fucking *demon*. "Whatever you say, 'Cross'! Well, see you later!" And with that, he started to return to the party…

"*Did I hear someone trying to circumvent DOCTOR'S ORDERS?*"

Before he broke into a full-blown sprint as he was chased by a psychotic reindeer… and me, to boot!

"*YOU GET BACK HERE RIGHT NOW, SIX-SWORD STYLE! YOU KNOW DAMN WELL THAT I DIDN'T SAY THAT! YOU KNOW IT!*"

Bottomless booze, over-the-top antics, former enemies coming together, and at least one crewmate trying to rip another limb from limb.

Just another typical victory celebration for the Straw Hat Pirates.
"Hey, I found a necklace over here! Ah, gross, but it's around a dead guy's neck!"

"Well, what are you waiting for?! Rip it off!"

"What? Nami, that is beyond disrespectful, and—!"

"I SAID RIP IT OFF, LEO!"

"Y-yes, ma'am!" CL-CLUNK! "AGH! I-IT'S GOT ME! IT'S ALIVE! THE SKELETON IS ALIVE!"

"Look alive, Leo, look alive! You must be strong! For after all, to delve into the belly of a great beast, and to fight the living dead… do these two dreams combined not qualify… as a great Man's Romance?"

"GO, BOSS, GO!"

"STOP CHEERING HIM ON AND GET THIS THING OFF OF ME!"

"LESS WHINING, MORE GOLD-GETTING!"

"Hell hath no fury like a GREEDY Nami," Soundbite declared sagely.

"Indeed, Soundbite, indeed," I nodded solemnly. "The only option is to work as hard as possible, so as to avoid incurring her wrath."

"YOU'WE NOT WORKING AT AWW, JACKASH!"

"I have a perfectly valid excuse not to be spelunking with you guys in the form of my limbs and Chopper's subsequent orders. And besides, in case you haven't noticed, I am working." I raised a thumbs-up at Nola's slack-jawed and dead-to-the-world form. "I'm giving you all moral support. Go team, woo."

"…You'we fweaking lucky that I can't awgue with the fiest pawt, Cwoss," Carue growled.

"Damn straight. Now, then…” I thumbed through my book. "Where was I…"  

"Wassafwassin—what the—? WAAAAAAAAGH!"

"GIANT SPIDERS! GIANT SPIDERS!"

"DOES EVERYTHING GROW BIG UP HERE, DAMN IT!?"

"Ah, now I remember!” I grinned victoriously as I tapped the appropriate line. "Gulliver waking up in Lilliput. Thanks, guys!"

"SCREW YOU, CROSS!"

I snickered as I settled in on the crew's luggage and got back to reading my book. After the party had wound down and we'd all gotten a good night's rest, Nami and Luffy had woken us all up in order to mine Nola's guts for gold. Thankfully, I had a very final doctor's note on my side, so I didn't need to get closer to the insides of an animal than I'd ever wanted to be… again. Laboon was an exception… and it didn't necessarily feel like an earthquake when he moved.

I was just starting to get into the page when I was interrupted.
"Cross, we need TO TALK."

I looked up from my book at the snail on my shoulder, ready to give him the stinkeye until I caught sight of the determined expression he was wearing. "What is it, Soundbite?" I asked, putting my book down.

Soundbite ground his teeth for a second as he appeared to work up the courage to say whatever it was he wanted to say. Finally, he heaved a heavy sigh and bowed his head. "…I WANT to know EVERYTHING you can tell me ABOUT DEVIL FRUITS." He looked up, a fire blazing in his eyes the likes of which I hadn't seen in anyone other than the most dedicated members of the crew. "TELL ME ANYTHING that can help me get stronger."

I blinked at the snail in confusion, and he apparently picked up on my bemusement if the way he snarled viciously was anything to go by.

"DAMMIT, CROSS, we're SUPPOSED TO BE PARTNERS!" he snapped. "YOU DO what I can't, and I DO WHAT YOU CAN'T! But I couldn't do anything to stop ENERU from zapping YOU WITHIN AN INCH OF YOUR LIFE, AND THAT'S NOT RIGHT! And you say there's worse COMING down the way!? HELL NO! I NEED TO GET STRONGER, ASAP! And by 'possible', I MEAN RIGHT NOW, DAMN IT!"

I stared at Soundbite in flat-footed shock. "Wh… What brought this on? You didn't feel like this back when I had cholera, or after the rebellion—"

"THOSE WERE OUT OF MY CONTROL! I can't fight bacteria WITH JUST SOUND, AND I WAS DOING everything that I could to get rid of that FLOUR! BUT THIS TIME IT WAS SOMEONE DEFEATABLE! You literally got scarred for life on HALF OF YOUR BODY because I couldn't stop it."

The snail glared at me, his teeth grit and his expression more serious and determined than anything I'd ever seen on him up to that point. "NEVER AGAIN. And before you say diddly, I GOT Luffy's PERMISSION to hear any spoilers necessary as long as I don't tell anyone else. AND FOR ONCE, I'M WILLING TO KEEP MY TRAP SHUT! So, I'll ask again… Do you know anything that can help me?"

For a minute, I just stared at the snail, taken aback by just how personally he'd taken this. And worse yet, for the life of me, I didn't know what to tell him. I mean, he was using an entirely original Devil Fruit, for Pete's sakes, and a Paramecia at that! That he'd gotten so strong was phenomenal, but the only other way I knew of for that kind of Devil Fruit to get stronger was time and ingenuity. After all, it's not like the Warlords became all-powerful in a ni—waiiiit a minute…

Alright, so maybe I had something. It was only an inkling, a shadow of a thought more than anything, but Soundbite caught sight of it, and as per usual, he didn't let go. "I SAW THAT! WHAT, what did you think of?"

I bit my lip uncomfortably before slowly shaking my head. "I… think I might know of one thing, Soundbite, but… well, it was only ever barely touched on in the story, and Oda never really gave any real details—"

"WE'RE IN THE fucking story! TELL ME! I'LL FIGURE SOMETHING OUT!" the snail barked.

"Alright, alright!" I said, snapping my hands up in surrender. "I'm already in pieces as it is, ripping
my head off won't help matters. Anyway…” I ran my fingers through my hair. "It's... one of the last things I saw from the manga was a concept called 'Awakened Devil Fruits.' The only Paramecia version the story showed was right at the end of the part I read, Doflamingo's String-String Fruit. Like most Paramecia, it sounds weak, but it's quite formidable: the standard powers let him create strings that were tough enough to cut someone's arms or legs off. He could also use it to control others like marionettes, and even create a full-body clone out of string. The Awakened ability, however…”

I bit my thumb thoughtfully. "It was only shown for a few pages, but... it was something else entirely. He... said that it allowed him to affect his surroundings, I think. Somehow, he turned the rubble and buildings around him into strings, and then he controlled them with just as much finesse as his own strings, if not moreso."

Soundbite's eyes widened in shock. "Woah…" He narrowed his eyes as he pegged onto something. "YOU SAID 'Paramecia version'?"

I shrugged slightly. "Yeah, that's something that complicates matters even further. See, the story showed a few Awakened Zoans long before Doflamingo showed what he could do, but they were totally different from him. They're known as the Jailer Beasts of Impel Down. Like Chopper, they're animal-person hybrids..." I frowned in thought. "But they're also a million times tougher than any other Zoon shown in the series. One of them managed to take a headfirst beating from Luffy and barely even flinched. But the weirdest thing was that they seemed a lot more…" I waved my hand helplessly. "Well, animal than human; they didn't talk, they seemed pretty stupid... unless I miss my guess, I think their minds might have been consumed by their own Devil Fruits."

"And you said NUMBER 8 was a total monster. WHY DO I NOT LIKE WHERE THIS IS HEADED?"

"Exactly. Unless I miss my guess, Chopper somehow managed to stumble onto a nascent version of his Awakened form, where his powers take over for his higher thought processes. Only unlike the Jailer Beasts, it's apparently temporary, and he doesn't even have enough mind left to follow orders when he does it."

Soundbite nodded, though he was frowning heavily. "That's interesting, but I think that we're getting off-topic. HOW DOES ANY OF THAT APPLY TO ME?"

"I... ugh, look, Soundbite, I don't know, okay?" I sighed despondently. "I only ever saw one usage of Awakening applied to one Paramecia Devil Fruit, and that was only for a few moments! I don't know how to manifest it, or even how it would apply to you! Would it be useful? Most likely! But you wanted whatever I could offer you, and I'm afraid that that's all I've got; I'm not a Devil Fruit user. I'd recommend talking to Luffy and Robin... and maybe Lassoo, Chopper and Pierre if you want any more advice. In the end, well..." I held my bandaged hand up for him to see. "I think I've sufficiently proven that I don't know everything, right?"

Soundbite chewed on his lip for a second before nodding. "I... I need time to THINK." And with that, he retreated into his shell.

I watched him in concern for a moment beforeshrugging off the new development, ultimately
turning my attention back to *Gulliver's Travels*…

"Um, Cross?"

Or at least I *tried* to turn my attention back, anyways.

I snapped the novel shut with an annoyed growl. "The world is *never* going to let me take reading up again, is it?" I demanded acridly.

Conis flinched self-consciously. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to bother you—!"

"No no, it's fine, it's fine!" I hastily waved a hand placatingly, pinching the bridge of my nose as I did so. "Sorry, sorry, it's just… I used to read a lot. I enjoy the adventuring, but it's hard to be blocked so many times, you know?"

"Eh…" Conis waved her hand side to side. "Maybe? I can only imagine how I'd react if I couldn't play my harp anymore. I really can wait, if you want me to."

I sighed and put my book to the side. "Nah, go ahead and ask, I can get back to this when we're done."

Conis hesitated a moment longer before nodding. "I… I wanted to ask you more about the Blue Seas."

I goggled at her in surprise. "Eh? Seriously? What brought this on?"

Conis shrugged and rubbed her arm uncomfortably. "It was… your speech to Go—" She flinched before scowling darkly. "I mean, to *Eneru*, talking about how this island is just a small part of the world, and he was nothing special and, well… I've been thinking about it a lot."

I sat up, giving her my full attention. "Seriously?"

The angel beamed eagerly. "Of course! You said that compared to the Blue Seas, the White Seas are a puddle and that there are so many fantastically strong people out there. I have to know, is it really as glorious as you described it to be?"

It took me a second to process this turn of events, but once I did…

I plastered a massive grin on my face. "Oh, you have absolutely *no* idea! The Grand Line, it's…" I chuckled eagerly as I ordered my thoughts. "It's just absolutely *fantastic*. There are a million and one possibilities in this world, and down there, it's—it's like they all happen at once!"

"Wow…" Conis gasped eagerly. "What kind of possibilities?"

I gazed into the distance wistfully. "Geeze, where to even start? Every day is brand-spanking-new, bringing completely unique challenges, opportunities and experiences. Like, the very *first* day we got into the Grand Line there was a storm—ah…" I hesitated as a thought occurred to me. "Do you guys actually get storms all the way up here?"

"Right, right, sorry." I scratched my head sheepishly. "Anyways, on our *first* day, we experienced a stupidly massive storm that wouldn't be out of place in the Old Testament, waves more insane than the maddest of Milky Roads, a heatwave so hot it set our sails on fire, hail the size of golfballs, giant
manta rays that literally flew, currents that spun us around before we even noticed…"

"Wow…" The angel clasped her hands in awe. "And all that happened in a day?"

"HA!" I barked enthusiastically. "A day? That all happened in two hours, absolute maximum! And sure, that was easily the wildest part of the ocean we've had to deal with so far, but it's not like the rest of our days have been any saner!"

"Two hours?" Conis breathed in amazement. "That's… I barely even know what to say!"

"And that's just the ocean! Lemme tell you about the islands! Weeeeell, we've been to Whiskey Peak, Little Garden, Drum Isl—GAH!" I hastily dope-slapped Soundbite's shell, breaking off the jaunty guitar music that had started picking up. "No musical numbers, damn it!"

"**Fine, fine, back to INTROSPECTION… spoilsport.**"

I grunted and rolled my eyes before being brought back to the present by Conis's starstruck look. "Just the names of those islands sound incredible! What were they like?"

I was a bit taken aback by her enthusiasm at first, but after considering my own experiences with the exhilaration of the Grand Line… "Alright," I tented my fingers eagerly. "Let's start with Whiskey Peak…"

I all but forgot about reading as I spent the next hour or so retelling our adventures to Conis with all the zeal of a devoted One Piece fan, with Soundbite adding in a few voice clips here and there to enhance the experience. And Conis took in every word with all the wide-eyed wonder of a new fan that had just discovered how incredible Goda's world was.

All too soon, though, I found myself to be winding down.

"And then, he just shredded it." I slapped my hand in my palm firmly. "I mean he just stood up and blew Octavio's performance straight out of the water. I have no idea how he could have possibly done it, but somehow he just plain did. It was just about the most stunning thing I'd ever seen!"

"Luffy surfing…" Conis breathed in wonder. "I can't even begin to imagine what such a thing would look like!"

"Heh, yeah, tell me about—"

**THWUMP!**

**YEOW!**

The conversation then came to an abrupt end as a very big, very lumpy, and very hard bag was tossed onto me.

"Enjoying yourself?" Zoro asked blandly

"Sonnuva—OW!" I yelped as I shoved the bag of gold off, sending a dark glare at the swordsman. "Watch it, bastard! I'm still milking the injury card here!"

Zoro grinned in a thoroughly shark-like manner. "Well, if you're really in pain, I'm sure that Chopper can fix that all up with a quick shot. Want me to go and get him?"

I felt the blood drain from my face. "So many colors and none of them would listen…" I hissed fearfully.
"CALLBACK!" Soundbite giggled.

"Alright, alright, I'll clam it!" I swore hastily.

"Good." The swordsman jerked his thumb over his shoulder, indicating where the rest of the crew was making their way out of Nola's maw. "Then get up and help us carry the gold to the Merry."

I got up with a sigh and started to comply, before pausing as I considered things. "Waaait, why does this all seem familiar…"

"Hey, I can see Robin!" Usopp called out.

"Oh, now I remember," I deadpanned. "Hey, Zoro? Pay attention, because I'm about to give you the best chance you'll ever have to get rid of your debt to Nami."

"What the heck are you—?" Zoro started to ask.

"AAAAAH! THEY'VE GOT A HUGE CANNON!"

Vivi took one look at the massive parcel the Skypieans were carrying and our swiftly panicking crewmates before slapping a hand to her face with a groan. "Oh, Horus…"

"What the—?" Zoro glanced at her in confusion before shaking his head and apparently dismissing it until later. "Cross, grab the bag and let's—Cross?" Zoro asked, seeing that I had not moved from where I was, and was giving him a look flatter than the average Self-Insert's personality.

It took Zoro all of three seconds to piece things together. Once he did, he sat down with a sigh and popped the top off of the sake jar he was holding. "How long do you think it's going to take them to figure it out?"

"I give them ten feet before they notice we're not running with them," I announced blandly. "By the by, does anyone have something to eat? I'm feeling a bit peckish."

"Here," Vivi tossed me some jerky as she sat down, which I eagerly tore into. "And five's much more likely. You're forgetting what you're sitting on."

"Uh…" Conis looked between the three of us in confusion. "What are you—?"

"CROSS!"

I bit back my go-to excuse of being injured as Nami grabbed my collar. The deranged look in her eyes more than told me that she did not care. It would appear that I needed to use a bit more force for this…

"PICK UP MY GOLD AND START RUNNING ALREADY!" the demented navigator snarled.

"Never underestimate the bond between a Nami and her wealth," Zoro deadpanned.

"YOU TOO, OR I SWEAR I'LL—"

BWAAAAAARAAAH!

"AGH!" Nami grabbed her ears in agony… and so did Conis, Zoro, and Vivi… and the rest of the crew, to boot. Foghorns are, after all, loud.

"JACKASS!" Soundbite yowled.
"Heheh," I snickered as I slid my earphones off. "I am loving this thing."

"Cross..." Nami started to grit out viciously, but I held up a hand, re-donning my flat look from before.

"Nami, let's consider a few facts here, shall we? We ended a 400-year war. We freed them from six years of tyranny. And we threw them the best party they've ever had. So, what makes you think that they have any reason to want to attack us instead of rewarding us?"

"BECAUSE WE'RE STEALING THEIR GOLD!" Nami screamed.

"Nami?" Vivi held up a finger. "A few things. A: Gold isn't worth much up here in the sky. Actually, it's worth nothing, period. B: We got that gold from inside of a giant snake's stomach, where in all likelihood it never would have seen the light of day again anyway. And C: How the hell would they know that we were taking the gold?"

Nami's expression fell flat as she pointed to the side.

"HEY, ROBIN, CHECK OUT ALL THE GOLD WE FOUND!" Luffy cheered loudly.

"Withdrawn," Vivi conceded calmly. "But my first two points still count."

"Let me just point this out," Zoro added. "You're actually prepared to believe that they had a weapon like that stored away here, and nobody ever decided to use it? Seriously, I wouldn't expect anyone on our crew but Luffy to be that stupid."

"DID YOU JUST CALL ME STUPID?!" Nami roared.

"If he didn't, he should, Nami; you're so focused on the chump change you got from Nola that you're overlooking the fact that I'm fulfilling the promise I made you," I said calmly, examining the bandages on my hands in lieu of my fingernails.

"WHAT PROMISE, CROSS?" Nami shrieked, just about ready to explode.

"The one I made the night Chopper joined."

Nami frowned for a minute longer before her eyes widened. She opened her mouth to speak… and then her jaw continued dropping as the gears turned in her head. She slowly turned to stare at the approaching, cloth-covered mass, putting the pieces together.

"Wait..." Nami breathed as she eyed the stupidly huge parcel the Skypieans and Shandorans were carrying. "Then you mean..."

"Uh-huh."

Nami's eyes started to unfocus and stare off into the distance. "Then they're giving us..."

"Uh-huh."

A line of drool slowly started to trail out of the corner of her mouth. "And that's all pure..."

"Through and through, as far as I know," I nodded in confirmation before pausing contemplatively. "Honestly? I think there's a ten-to-one chance that we'll tank the economy of whatever island we land on next if we're not careful, so—MMPH!?" I was cut off by Nami grabbing my head and...

Honestly, I'm not sure what happened for the next two minutes and thirteen seconds. The next thing I
knew, she’d dropped me and sprinted towards the Sky-dwellers, leaving me to try and get my brain back in order. The first thing I noticed was that Sanji was… not taking whatever the hell had happened well. But I only noticed that for about two seconds before he looked about ready to pass out from joy for some reason or other.

"Dude, did I see you get some tongue?" Mikey whispered in awe.

Raphey shook her head slowly. "I don't know about this loser, but Robin's certainly getting some action!"

I turned my head to look at what the rest of the crew was gaping at, and promptly dropped my jaw in turn.

"Ooooh myyyy…" Soundbite drawled in a deep Asian voice.

"Right there with you, Soundbite," Vivi said weakly.

"Damn straight…" I finally managed to get out.

Well, at least I was now positive that Nami didn't have any actual romantic inclinations towards me. After all, I don't know what she did with me, but I sure as hell know that she didn't go so far as dipping me.

"This is incredible," Sanji said breathily. Then he sped over to me and started to dig through my bag. "I MUST IMMORTALIZE THIS—!

SLAM!

"Angels… I'm surrounded by angels…" Sanji whispered.

Conis winced sympathetically as she eyed the goose-egg growing on the cook's skull, nervously fiddling with the hammer she’d grabbed from Usopp's toolbelt. "Oooh… I'm sorry, I don't know what happened, I just—!

"No, no, it's fine," Vivi waved her off casually. Her gaze then turned vicious. "And if anyone else tries using a Vision Dial—"

"You're going to want to take a look at the Skypieans," Donny said dryly.

The princess gaped in shock as she took in the amount of lights flashing in the crowd. "What the —does she have any idea what she's even doing!?"

"Vivi, two wowds: Copy. Wight," Carue stated neutrally.

Vivi processed that, and sighed in long-suffering exasperation, burying her face in her hands. "…that woman is obsessed."

"You're only just figuring that out?!" demanded many of the crew, even Luffy.

"…Um… w-wow, that's, ah… i-if you'll excuse me…" Conis stammered out before turning around and running away as fast as her legs could move her…

THUNK!

"Ah, sorry, Cross!"
Though not before hitting me head-on in her haste.

"Watch it!" I groused as I rubbed the side of my body she'd hit. It was the side with my bag, to boot, so I really felt it. Nevertheless, I watched her curiously as she ran off. "Wonder where she's off to in such a hurry…"

"Probably just trying to get as far away from our crew's craziness as possible," Boss said dryly before eyeing the pillar. "Anyway, while said insanity is distracting as all get out… does this mean that that thing is gold?"

Nami inadvertently answered the question when she dropped Robin and singlehandedly ripped the cloth wrapping from the pillar and—

It took me a second to properly come to my senses, and when I did, I blinked up at the sky in confusion.

Why the heck was I lying on the—?

"EEEEEEEEEE!"

Oh, of course, that's why fucking hell my ears!

"Oooowwww…" Luffy moaned piteously.

"Just throw me in the sea, no fate is crueler than this!" Lassoo whined as he clamped his paws over his ears.

"I think I HAVE a new attack…" Soundbite bemoaned as his eyes spun about dizzily. "ALSO TINNITUS… and maybe a little INFERIORITY COMPLEX."

"Well, it's not like it'll come to anything," I ground out. "The only thing I can think of that would make Nami scream that loud again is—"

"Cross," Luffy warned.

"Is when we find the One Piece, assuming that it's as incredible as it's built up to be, but as you know, I don't know the details," I finished in a deadpan, and Luffy nodded.

"Moving past Nami's painful euphoria… you saw this coming. Would you care to tell us why we still had to go treasure hunting in that giant snake?" Zoro demanded.

'FIVE HUNDRED MILLION! I'LL BUY HER FOR FIVE HUNDRED MILLION!'

I shuddered with a grimace at the nightmarish voice that echoed in my head. "Because it's better to have the emergency fund ready and not need it than need it but not have it," I replied grimly, before going right back to cheerful. "But we'll get to that later; for now, I'm going to test just how money-high Nami is. HEY, NAMI! CAN I HAVE A FEW TANGERINES FROM YOUR TREES TO FEED TO THE FISH?"

The rest of the crew, Zoro and Soundbite included, froze and paled.

"HELP YOURSELF, CROSS!" she called back cheerfully.

I smirked smugly at the gobsmacked looks of my crew. That lasted for a few seconds before Chopper got past the shock and followed my example, waving his arms eagerly. "HEY, NAMI!
CAN I HAVE A FEW…” Chopper trailed off slightly as he mumbled a few calculations under his breath before resuming. "MILLION BERIS IN AN EXPENSE ACCOUNT TO FUND MY EXPERIMENTS?"

"GLADLY, CHOPPER!"

Boss hesitated slightly before glancing back at his students. "If I die, donate my body to science, so that they might discover the source of my manliness." He then cupped his mouth and hollered at Nami. "HEY, NAMI! MIND IF I HAVE A FEW MILLION TO BUY EXERCISE EQUIPMENT?"

"ALL YOURS, BOSS!"

The dugong pumped his fist in the air victoriously to the raucous cheering of his disciples.

Usopp was, ironically enough, the next to build up the necessary courage. "HEY, NAMI! I'M TAKING THE BAG OF GOLD I GOT FROM THE SNAKE AS PAYMENT FOR BUILDING YOUR CLIMA-TACT!"

"GO AHEAD, USOPP!"

"… Wow, she really is happy," Usopp mused. He then glanced at Soundbite uneasily. "You, ah, don't hear the oncoming hoofbeats of the Four Horsemen by any chance, do you?"

"HEY, NAMI, HOW ABOUT FORGIVING MY DEBT TO YOU?!" Zoro called with a smirk.

"BURN IN HELL, SEAWEED BRAIN!" Nami called back with just as much cheer as before.

"Ah, never mind, false alarm," Usopp said in relief, while Zoro glared at me.

"Well, Option A is gone, but you'll get another chance before we leave," I said. The swordsman crossed his arms, but nodded anyways. With that aside, I left the rest of the crew to their bargaining while I walked over to Robin, who had stepped a large distance away from the pillar and Nami and was calmly writing in a notebook, though she was still blushing… and chewing on something?

"Huh. I was wondering where my jerky went," I commented.

It wasn't liquid, but damn if that wasn't the closest thing to seeing Nico Robin do a spit-take I'd ever get, and it sent me into gales of laughter.

"OK, OK, I should have warned you about that," I giggled semi-apologetically, once I got my laughing under control and registered the glare she had levelled at me. "But in my defense, I didn't see that one coming."

Robin kept her stinkeye up for a moment before dropping it with a sigh. "I would assume not, considering your own reaction to our navigator's lust for wealth going out of control." She spared said navigator a glance, taking in the fact that she was kiss—no, that was tongue—frenching the pillar. "…I must admit, I still thought you were exaggerating about… this."

"Robin? The mere idea of having this much gold was enough to make her orgasm. Mark my words, she'll be bathing buck naked in a tub full of treasure before the day is over."

Robin stared at our navigator before slowly looking back at me. "…It's quite disturbing that I don't doubt that in the least," she said, before turning her attention back to her notebook. Looking at it, I saw the symbols of the Poneglyphs within.
I smiled as I analyzed the alien arrangements of shapes and lines. It was kind of like staring at more intricate versions of AR codes from back home, really. "So, Robin… was I right? Was the hard and perilous journey worth the reward you found?"

The archaeologist promptly tensed in a way that I could only assume was her preparing to snap her notebook shut, before she slowly allowed herself to relax, loosening her vice-like grip on the book. "Yes," she whispered, though I couldn't be sure whether she was actually conscious of what she was saying. "Yes, it was."

I smiled and gripped her arm reassuringly. Then, on a whim, I leaned down so that I could examine the symbols over her shoulder. "So, think you could tell me a bit about it? I know the gist, I'll admit, but I'm curious about the exact—"

"Roger…"

"Eh?" I glanced up at Soundbite in confusion. "What are you—?"

"Roger… and POSEIDON."

I was vaguely aware of blood seeping into my bandages where my clenched fingers had broken the skin on Robin's shoulder. Neither of us actually reacted, however, on account of how we were too busy goggling at Soundbite in… well, it was a whole mess of emotions, really.

The snail, for his part, was entirely oblivious, staring at the page with a cocked eyestalk.

"Poseidon… ain't that the GREEK GOD OF—WHEGH!"

"SHHHHUT IT!" I ground out desperately as I grabbed his tongue, ignoring his attempts to bite my fingers off.

"Soundbite…" Robin croaked once she managed to get her voice working again. "How were you able to read what's written on this page?"

I reluctantly let the gastropod go, allowing him to hack and spit for a second before glaring at me. He then rolled his eyes before renewing his curious gaze at the book. "I didn't. Well… I don't THINK I did? THOSE WERE JUST THE NAMES I HEARD."

I felt as though a block of dry ice had been dropped into my stomach. "When you say heard…"

"DUNNO. Just… whispers? I GUESS? I'm hearing the names ROGER and Poseidon FROM THE BOOK AND SOMEWHERE IN THE DISTANCE." He tilted his head contemplatively. "Probably something about a PRINCESS, TOO, I THINK?" He jabbed his eyestalks in the direction the Skypieans had come from before frowning contemplatively and glancing back at Nola. "Also hearing something from the SNAKE, KINDA. CAN'T MAKE ANYTHING out, but it's weird. YA KNOW, 'CAUSE IT'S an amphibious Sea King AND NO ONE SPEAKS THAT."

It took all I had to keep myself from sinking to my knees in sheer shock. "Soundbite… YOU CAN —!" I barely cut myself off from yelling before continuing in a desperate whisper. "You can hear the Voice of All motherfucking Things?!!"

"The what?" both he and Robin asked, both of them making the decision to keep their voices down. Somehow, I managed to organize my thoughts enough to put out a decent summary.
"I don't know many details, but it's one of the most dangerous powers in existence. I mean, Gol D. Roger had it, and it let him do things in moments that took you years to learn! He couldn't read the Poneglyphs, but apparently he could hear their meaning!" I jabbed a finger at Nola. "Just like how he unwittingly heard the voices of Sea Kings en route to Fishman Island!"

Both Soundbite and Robin clearly comprehended the implications of what I was saying, and meanwhile, I was running a hand through my hair, trying to fathom this. "But I don't understand… with how freaking rare the power is, I wouldn't expect any Transponder Snail to have it—"

"HEY!" Soundbite barked indigantly.

"Soundbite," I growled back. "There are only two people I know of who ever had the ability to hear the Voice of All Things: the past Pirate King, and the future one! That's the magnitude I'm talking about for rarity!"

Soundbite quieted as that sunk in, while Robin focused more on another part of my statement, slowly turning to look in the direction of the rest of our crew. "Then… Luffy can…?"

"I severely doubt that he's unlocked it yet, but yes," I confirmed quietly, still trying to fathom exactly how Soundbite could possibly have an ability apparently reserved for the king of the world. I mean, what did he—?

"…holy crap, the Noise-Noise Fruit," I breathed in realization.

"Soundbite's powers?" Robin questioned in disbelief.

"Yeah!" I nodded in agreement, gaining vigor as I convinced myself of it. "I mean, think about it: he can hear everything in his range, and his powers are already amped by his species. Assuming he was straining his powers a lot during all the shit that went down yesterday—!"

"YOU TRY listening for every crackle of lightning in this PLACE AND NOT BLEEDING FROM THE EARHOLES…!" Soundbite groused.

"Then maybe it's possible that Soundbite pushed himself so hard that he made something just… I dunno, click? It could possibly also be so indistinct because he doesn't have Observation Haki ye —!" I suddenly chopped my hand at Soundbite, prompting him to snap back into his shell with a terrified shriek. "Yeah, he definitely doesn't have it yet."

"JERK!" Soundbite raged.

"Cross…" Robin warned me.

"Hey, what do you want me to say?" I shrugged helplessly. "This is something I know barely anything about, and what little I do is almost entirely guesswork and hearsay."

"I understand that better than anyone, Cross. That's not what I'm talking about," she ground out.

"Eh? Then what?"

"I am starting to lose feeling in my arm, and will call Sanji unless you release me in three, two—"

"MEEP!" I hastily unlatched my fingers from where I'd been digging them into her shoulder. "Sorry!"

Robin rolled her shoulder and flexed her fingers. "No, it's fine. I most likely would have done worse
to you if I were in your shoes." She then proceeded to give Soundbite a cool look. "Now, while we can't exactly do much about or with Soundbite's newfound abilities for the moment, I trust you know as well as I do that we need to do something to contain this… new development."

"Way ahead of you," I waved her off before taking Soundbite off my shoulder and holding him in my palm in order to give him a serious look. "Alright, Soundbite, listen carefully: I've been lenient on you blurring out secrets in the past, and I'll admit that when it comes to serious stuff you tend to keep your mouth shut, but right here, right now? This is life and death. You cannot, cannot speak the name 'Poseidon' at all, no matter what, in any context whatsoever, understood?"

"HUH?" Soundbite leaned his head back in confusion. "But why!?"

"Poseidon is the name of one of three Ancient Weapons from the Blank Century eight hundred years ago," Robin explained solemnly. "Alongside Pluton, which Crocodile sought, and Uranus—"

"Laugh and I will eviscerate you," I solemnly promised the gastropod, wiping the nascent snicker from his face.

"Any one of these weapons is entirely capable of destroying or rearranging the world as we know it. The public reason why the World Government made researching Poneglyphs illegal is that some of them hold information as to the whereabouts of these weapons. It's not the whole reason…" Robin sighed despondently, a finger absentmindedly scratching at her chest. "But I can't in good conscience say it's not a valid one…"

I spared her a sympathetic wince before renewing my look at Soundbite. "If the World Government were to learn that you know even a shred of information about the Weapons from the Blank Century… suffice to say they'd rain hellfire down on us, and I am being one-hundred percent literal here."

"WHAT!?" Soundbite demanded. "BUT I BARELY KNOW SQUAT AND I'm not planning on using it any—ooooohhhhh…" The snail suddenly trailed off in an understanding tone. "They would not give a damn about ANY OF THAT, WOULD THEY?"

"Now you get it," I confirmed with a nod. "Now, look: if you breathe so much as a word of what you've learned to anyone besides us, you'll be irreversibly ruining a lot of lives. So, for the time being, you need to pretty much forget even hearing the name 'Poseidon'. Got it?"

Soundbite nodded with the utmost solemnity, and thankfully, I believed him.

"Alright, then…" I nodded absentmindedly as I placed him back on my shoulder.

"Cross, while we're on the subject… how much do you know about the Ancient Weapons?" Robin asked.

I hesitated slightly before answering, starting to tick off my fingers. "Uranus, I don't know anything about, though the name makes me think it's probably the strongest of the three, and given the naming themes, probably based upon the sky. Pluton, I have the vaguest suspicions as to what it is. And Poseidon…" I grimaced and shuddered miserably. "Not as much of the details as you, I'm sure, but I know that if anyone were to start investigating, Fishman Island would be razed."

Robin actually paled, a look of raw terror crossing her face. "It's been—!?"

"Yes, but it's almost completely under wraps, she has little to no clue how to activate it, and she's one of the most gentle and innocent individuals in the world," I hastily reassured her.
I suddenly found a phantom limb wrapped around my neck as Robin loomed over me. "Almost under wraps?" she repeated.

"O-one jackass outside of her family, just one!" I stammered out desperately as I tugged at the limb. "He's not sharing the intel, and he's incompetent enough that he'd be no threat without his Devil Fruit powers! He's been trying to achieve the same Catch-22 plot for years! Hell, he's the reason she's the most protected mermaid alive!"

Robin processed that slowly. Then, to my relief, the hand vanished. "Then I assume that for the time being, we should forget that this conversation ever happened?"

"My thoughts exactly," I agreed. She nodded, and a glance at Soundbite showed that he shared the understanding. Robin sighed.

"Well, so far, this has been the most emotional day I've had for the last several years… and you're enjoying it, aren't you?"

I grinned cheekily. "Who, me? Excited over how I've managed to break your Ice Queen facade like I'm armed with an icepick? Perish the thought. Now, come on," I waved forwards as I started walking towards where the rest of the crew was assembled around the pillar. "Let's get back to our friends; something serious must be going on if they didn't notice any of this."

"OH, it's serious, ALRIGHT! DIVIDING THE PLUNDER!" Soundbite crowed.

Robin watched me for a second before sighing and following along. "Well, if we must…” she cocked an eyebrow when I chuckled slightly. "What?"

I widened my grin eagerly. "You didn't redefine them as crewmates when I called them our friends."

The last glimpse I got of her face before she froze in place was a look of poleaxed realization, and it was glorious.

But alas, my attention then turned to the more conspicuous of the uncommon events occurring to us: our rubber-brained captain in a shouting match with our gold-tonguing navigator.

"COME ON, NAMI, WE'VE GOT ALL THAT GOLD, DON'T BE STINGY! THIS IS FRAUD, DAMN IT!" Luffy yelled.

"STINGY!? I'M LETTING THE CREW HAVE TEN PERCENT OF ALL THE GOLD WE'VE FOUND! THAT'S NOT STINGY, THAT'S GENEROUS BEYOND ALL BELIEF!" Nami snarled irately.

"I don't know what's scarier, the fact that I think she believes that or the fact that when it comes to her, it's actually true," Donny muttered beneath his breath before hastily ducking under a kick from Sanji.

"THAT'S NOT EVEN ENOUGH FOR HALF OF MY MEAT SUPPLY! WE NEED AT LEAST EIGHTY PERCENT!"

"Ugh, you and that stupid appetite… FINE, TWELVE PERCENT!"

"NINETY PERCENT!"

"YOU'RE GOING THE WRONG WAY, DUMBASS!"
"I'm just following your modus operandi!" Luffy retorted.

"Ah..." Nami paused. "Alright, fair enough..." Then she frowned in confusion. "Wait, modus—?"

"Anyways, maybe we can compromise with a hundred and five percent?"

"I WILL CUT YOU!" Nami snarled, brandishing a very familiar sword as she prepared to draw it.

"Wha—KITETSU?! GIVE ME BACK MY SWORD, WOMAN!" Zoro demanded.

"Are you really going to pretend that that hell-blade doesn't probably enjoy being wielded by people with her current state of mind?" I deadpanned.

"...withdrawn," Zoro conceded only semi-reluctantly.

"Alright! 200%, that's my final offer!" Luffy declared.

It was an unholy screech that was likely to wake Calgara himself that tore out of our navigator's throat, and she ripped the blade out of its sheath—

"DOUBLE FIVE SQUARED PERCENT!"

"DEAL!" Only for her to whoop and swing the blade around so that it was pointing at—

"Vivi?!" I and pretty much all of the crew minus a yet-euphoric Nami blurted in confusion.

"Put it there," the princess said, extending her hand with a winning smile.

"Heeheeheehee! Sucker!" Nami squealed ecstatically as she grabbed her friend's hand and shook it vigorously. "Now I have—!"

"Fifty percent of the gold, yes," Vivi confirmed calmly, her voice never changing inflection.

"—fifty—WHAT!?!" Nami screamed in shock, letting go of Vivi's hand as though it were a live eel.
"But-but-but that's not what you said, you said five per—!"

"No, I said double five squared percent," Vivi corrected, still entirely unfazed.

Nami promptly dropped Kitetsu the Third—which drew an angered "HEY!" from Zoro that she ignored—in favor of counting on her fingers and muttering under her breath in a manic tone. Without warning, she suddenly froze and sloooowly looked up, a thoroughly haunted look in her eyes.

"What just happened?" she whispered in horror.

"Oh, nothing much," Vivi said sweetly. "I just demonstrated exactly how good of a negotiator I can be. After all, if I can make you agree to a 50/50 split..."

She let it hang there, and I slowly began clapping, with Zoro and several others following my example.

"So, was that good, Vivi?" Luffy asked with a grin.

"You did very well, Luffy," Vivi smiled as she patted our captain's back. "You'll be getting a full five percent of that for your diet."

"WOO!" Luffy pumped his fists in the air. "That's four percent more than what I usually get!"
Nami whimpered unintelligibly. I can't be sure, but I think she might have had something of a stroke at that point. I wish I could have let the moment go on longer; it was funny in a twisted sort of way, but we had bigger things to worry about.

"Alright, as amusing as this is, I need to insist on ninety percent of what we get from the pillar being set aside for no—AGH!"

"Say that again, Cross, I dare you…" Nami snarled, hauling me a full three feet off the air by my collar. I swear, the World Government would have given her Robin's epithet in a heartbeat if they could see the look on her face. But nevertheless, I forced down my fear and forged on.

"N-Nami, t-this isn't for something that I want, it's for something that all of us NEED. Now, are you going to let me explain the exact gravity of the situation…" I started to trail my hand towards my bag. "Or do I need to break you out of your blood rage the hard way?"

"NO!" screamed… pretty much everyone else on the crew, and everyone else in earshot, to boot. Upon seeing that Nami was waiting for me to speak, I turned to our sniper.

"Usopp. Tell them what's at stake here," I said.

Usopp gulped as all attention—including Nami's rage—was directed at him. He glared at me for a few seconds, but then shook his head with a sigh. "I shouldn't be angry, I want to explain this myself…" he muttered to himself as his expression hardened. "Guys, you need to know this. Remember how the Merry was repaired back to its original state before the Survival Game started?"

Our crewmates looked between one another in confusion. "Uh, yeah?" Vivi finally nodded slowly in agreement. "We were all really impressed by how well you and Cross did, what about it?"

"Well, see, that's the thing…" Usopp bowed his head and cupped his chin solemnly. "The fact is… Cross didn't do a lot that night, and I wasn't a part of the repairs until midway through myself. Someone else repaired the Merry, and restored her to her original state."

"So, what, are you saying that we owe them money for that? Because I'm not giving—" Nami began angrily.

"Shut up, Nami," Usopp, Soundbite, and I cut her off frigidly, our tone of voice even going so far as to freeze Sanji, causing the navigator to let me go.

"OW!"

Alright, so maybe 'drop' was a more appropriate word.

"Look, Nami…" Usopp stated solemnly. "We don't owe the person who repaired the Merry anything except our utmost gratitude, because… because…" the sniper bit his lip in an effort to keep his emotions under control.

I sighed heavily as I stood up, arms crossed and head bowed. "It was the Merry," I revealed. "The Merry manifested a body and repaired herself." I promptly snapped a hand up. "And before anyone says anything, take the last 72 hours into account."

Everyone looked confused at first… then understanding… then contemplative… and finally, dumbfounded.

"…she actually manifested a Klabautermann, didn't she?" Sanji whispered in awe.
I nodded gravely. "It was the whole reason that I pulled that stunt with the ghost story: so that you all would dogpile me and give me a valid excuse to be onboard her that night. I hoped to feign not knowing she would manifest, and it worked." I grimaced, trying to keep a hold on my emotions. "I... I met her. I talked to her, I helped her. A-and—tsk..." I snapped my teeth shut miserably.

Damn it, my voice broke. I pressed a hand to my forehead, trying to stay strong, but... but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't keep the memories of Merry's death out of my mind. Memories of wood splitting, of fires blazing... and that... well, if Oda himself couldn't keep from crying at that part, how was I supposed to when I was witnessing the lead-up to it first-freaking-hand?!

It was too much for me; I collapsed, sobbing just like I had the night I told them my secret. "...Even after everything I've tried... she's one step away from the point of no return. She's dying," I whispered.

The crew reacted as one. Some in defiance, some in horror... but the one constant that was present was pure, unabated shock.

"D-dying?" Chopper asked, tearing up.

"No way, that's not possible!" Luffy denied firmly. "The Merry's strong, she's great, she's—!"

"Still from the East Blue, Captain," Zoro finished solemnly.

"Zoro!" Vivi cut in in a scandalized tone.

"She was built for a normal ocean, Vivi," Nami croaked, her lust-induced rage long gone and her gaze somewhat far off. "She was built for the East Blue, the weakest of the four Blues. Not the hell that the Grand Line has been throwing at us since we left Reverse Mountain."

"Unfortunately, Princess, Nami and the Mosshead are right," Sanji sighed, blowing out a puff of smoke. "People grow past injuries and get stronger... but for ships, the injuries just keep piling up, never healing."

"Then... Merry's nearing the end of her line..." Boss said quietly, unusually somber.

"But she's not there yet," Usopp snapped, more serious than any of us had ever seen him, despite the tears in his eyes. "We still have a chance to save her. Sailing with us all this time, she got a dream of her own: to stay with us, to go on adventures with us even with her... limitations," he forced out the word. "And Cross promised her that we'd find a way to make that happen."

I jerked my head away as I felt a cool look burn into me from where Robin was standing. "It was a stupid promise that I should never have made, Usopp." I got to my feet and weathered the rest of the crew looking at me with expressions between anger, shock, and outright disapproval. "Come off it, all of you. I know it sounds bad, but facts are facts: I made a promise I can't guarantee I can keep. I mean..." I gripped my head miserably. "Believe me, I want to see the Merry survive just as much as any of you, but realistically? Look at me." I spread my arms. "Look at my track record. I'm making differences, sure, but in the long run all I'm doing is a mere blip. The long and skinny of it is that things are still trudging along as per normal. And while there have been some good changes..." I nodded at the Dugongs and Lassoo, before frowning at Vivi and Carue. "There have been some bad ones, too. When all's said and done, I... I just don't know if the best I can do is going to be good enough."

"Tell me this, Cross," Usopp said, about as angry as when he dueled Luffy. "Do you have any kind of plan in mind for how to do this? Do you have any ideas?"
"Of course I do!" I snapped. "And it's the best chance in the world that we're going to get, but—"

"Then that'll work," Usopp interrupted firmly, crossing his arms. "We have a chance for it to work, so we'll all make it work."

I stared at him silently for a moment before sighing in defeat. "Well, shit, it's hard to argue with that attitude…" But nonetheless, I decided to try, starting with a firm glare. "But knowing Merry, I trust that she already told you that if, if this chance fails… you need to be prepared to let go, right? Because if you hang on, if you go past the pale on this… we will never forget the consequences."

Usopp tensed at my words, biting his lip. I noted nervously that drops of blood were falling from his fingernails, which were out-and-out burrowed in his palms. Finally, he replied.

"If we've done everything that we can, exhausted every option we've got, and it's not enough… then I'll let go. But not any sooner than that," he swore.

"My thoughts exactly," I nodded, and then looked back at our navigator. "Nami, for the chance I have in mind—"

"Cross, I might have something of an obsession, and I know that I might act like it sometimes, but don't think that I'm really heartless," Nami cut me off frigidly. "The whole of the gold is for the Merry first. We'll split things 40-60—"

"Fifty-fifty," Vivi interrupted flatly.

Nami grimaced and shuddered in revulsion. "That way with whatever's left. But first we find out how much of it the Merry needs."

I nodded gratefully before turning a contemplative gaze on the pillar. "Then I guess the only question that remains is how much of this we'll be leaving behi—HRK!" I scrabbled at the iron-like hand that was lifting me off the GROUND BY MY THROAT OH FUCK!

"I will feast on your entrails!" Nami hissed in a voice reserved for the damned, a truly unholy light blazing in her eyes.

The Latin chanting Soundbite was adding didn't help matters, either.

"Nami," Usopp cut in, still locked in serious mode, a serious mode that was harshly shaken when Nami turned her hellish gaze upon him. Nevertheless, he swallowed heavily and powered through. "I-If we t-try taking that whole thing, Merry will sink as soon as we get back to the Blue Sea. Heck, it would probably drag us straight through the White Sea itself!"

Nami stilled, and slowly released her grasp on me, allowing me to land somewhat gracefully… or as gracefully as a person could when they fell on their ass. Her expression was dark. "...Usopp. Go and find out exactly how much space we can spare on the Merry that won't compromise her. If we miss a single square inch that we can spare, then I give you my word…" She lashed her hand out and nigh-upon crushed Usopp's shoulder to a pulp, causing him to whimper. "I will empty you out and use your sorry hide as a sack, do I make myself clear?"

"Y-y-yes m-ma'am," Usopp whimpered.

"THEN GET GOING!" she roared, and I swear that Usopp Shaved away. And with that, Nami's rage evaporated, and she fell on the pillar, embracing it as though it were her own child and quietly crying. "Oh, my dear, sweet gold… what can we do with the rest of you?" she sobbed.
It would have been almost heartwarming, were it not for the fact that she was basically committing the greatest act of avarice I'd ever seen in my life and… well…

"Am I the only one seeing her dry hump that thing?" I asked queasily.

"Unfortunately, you're not," Lassoo deadpanned. "Seriously, she's doing it better than most of my kind…"

"Students, take note of this moment, for it holds a most valuable lesson," Boss moaned as he slapped a flipper over his eyes. "What is seen… can never be un-seen…"

"Aye-aye, Boss…" the students groaned.

"Will somebody please find some way to stop her before she destroys what little dignity she has left?" Vivi groaned as she slapped her hands over her eyes.

"Way ahead of you, Vivi," Zoro said. I uncovered my eyes and looked at him. Then I did a double-take and saw that he was holding all three of his swords and heading towards the pillar.

"MOSSHEAD—!" Sanji began furiously.

"Can it, cook, I'm not going to touch her. But I've been thinking about this move for a while, and I finally figured out how to pull it off it during all the craziness yesterday," Zoro said with a grin before dashing towards the center of the pillar, a fair distance away from Nami.

"Three Sword Style BURST: FIVE-SENSE RAVAGER!" he called out before letting out a very precise series of thin flying slashes at the pillar, drawing Nami's attention away from her grief. Said grief promptly evaporated into indignancy, then devolved into anger, before finally exploding into outright ecstasy. The crew as a whole, even Sanji, gaped: the result of Zoro's slashes, carved on the pillar and clearly visible from any distance, was unmistakably the Straw Hat Pirates' Jolly Roger.

"Zoro…" she breathed numbly, tears glistening in her eyes. "It's… it's…"

"Mine."

Nami's head promptly snapped a truly unhealthy ninety degrees to the side so that she could glare brimstone at Zoro. "WHAT WAS THAT?" she rumbled viciously.

Zoro was entirely unfazed as he replaced his blades in their sheaths. "Nobody officially claimed this thing yet. Not you, not Robin, not anyone. Up until this moment, this pillar was free gold. But now that I've marked it, I've brought it into the crew myself. As such, it's my share entirely. And as my share, I've decided to give it… to you." The swordsman grinned in a truly triumphant manner. "I'd say this about covers my debt, wouldn't you?"

And just like that, the flame in Nami just… died. Like some great divine being had reached out and snuffed it out. She just stood there, swaying on her feet and looking somewhat dead to the world. Slowly, she turned her eyes to the pillar, then to Zoro, then to the pillar yet again before ultimately returning to Zoro. Her mouth flapped like a beached fish, trying to find words where there were none. For almost a minute she did this… until all the muscles in her body tensed as one, her eyes rolled up in her head and she keeled over backwards.

"NAMI-SWAN!" Sanji cried as he rushed to her side.

I cocked an eyebrow as I watched her shudder on the ground, foam bubbling out of her mouth. "Wow. This… this is something else entirely."
"Ahh..." Carue slowly raised a wing. "I'm confused... is she haffing a hawt attack, a stwoke, ow an aneuwysm?"

Chopper dug a penlight out of his bag and shone it in her eyes. Well, the whites of her eyes anyways. "Unless I miss my guess? All three at once."

"Isn't any one of those potentially fatal, Mister Tony?" Robin asked uneasily.

"Oh, yeah, that's completely right," Chopper started to nod... before flipping out and waving his hooves frantically. "AAAAAH! WE NEED A DOCTOR! WE NEED A—NO, WAIT!" Chopper suddenly froze and whipped out a massive syringe from his bag, brandishing it with a demented smile. "I AM A DOCTOR!"

THWACK!

"OW!...thanks, Sanji."

"You're welcome. NOW, HELP NAMI-SWAN!"

"O-ON IT!"

-0-

Ultimately, by the time Chopper managed to wake up Nami, Usopp had come back with a thoroughly triple-checked survey of the Merry's holding capacity. Men's room, women's room, dining room, kitchen, storage, he had inspected everywhere on the ship that was indoors, correctly reasoning that Nami wouldn't want any of her gold in the open where anyone could potentially see and steal it.

With the amount established, we measured out the pillar, double-checking that we were right before Zoro sliced off the amount that we were capable of carrying. We'd also taken the time to have Chopper stuff Nola's nostrils with an anesthetic he cooked up, allowing the crew to re-enter her stomach without worry and gather up every last piece of gold they could locate, practically doubling the amount of 'loose change' we managed to gather, if you could define a heaping pile of gold as such.

In the end, it took Zoro, Luffy, and Sanji working together to haul the full-sized fortune back to the Merry, where Zoro and Leo began carving it up under Usopp's direction.

The rest of us, however, found ourselves distracted by the unexpected guest that awaited us on the deck of the Merry, standing beside a few crates. "So, I take it that you're leaving?" Conis smiled expectantly.

"Afraid so, Conis," I said, smiling wistfully. "We'd love to stay, but in the end, well... we are pirates. It's time for us to set sail for the next great adventure on the Blue Sea. You here to see us off?"

"Because if so, I'm so glad you did!" Sanji swooned eagerly. "For what better way is there to leave heaven than to be bid goodbye by an angel?"

"Heaven my still burnt-smelling fur..." Lassoo grumbled as he padded up the gangplank. "If anyone needs me, I'll be sleeping."

"Big surprise..." Soundbite rolled his eyes.
"Either way, it's been really great knowing you, Conis," Vivi smiled as she held the angel's hands. "We know that things started up rough, but you've been a great friend. I doubt we could have done even half as much as we did without your help."

Conis smiled back gratefully. "That's kind of you to say, Vivi, and you've all done incredible things up here I doubt I can ever repay you for. But!" She stuck up a finger proudly. "I'd like to think that I can at least start by giving you one final present before you go."

"Oh, yeah?" Nami warily eyed the crates beside Conis. "Well, it better not be too big. In case you haven't noticed, we're already a bit pressed for space as is."

Conis glanced at the block of metal that we were in the midst of dismantling. "So I can see…" she started uneasily before shaking her head and smiling confidently. "But I took the liberty of looking your ship over, and I think that your weapons room has enough space for what I'm giving you."

The whole crew, myself included, swapped confused looks until I slowly looked back at Conis. "What… exactly are you giving us, Conis?" I asked slowly.

Her smile widened eagerly as she flipped the lid of the biggest of the crates. "A gunner."

I gazed into the box with awe. "Oh, holy shit."

Lassoo abruptly appeared next to me, panting eagerly. "I am suddenly very interested in these developments!" he barked eagerly.

Laying before us was a bazooka. And not just any bazooka, mind you, I recognized this piece of hardware: it was a full-blown Burn Bazooka, packed into the crate with straw like you see in gun deals on crime sh—

I froze as a thought struck me before slowly opening up the rest of the crates. I boggled at the sight that met me. "Allow me to reiterate. Holy shit."

"Woooow…" Luffy and Chopper breathed in agreement.

That sentiment accurately summarized the opinions of the crew in general, because packaged before us was nothing short of a legitimate arsenal of weaponry from all walks of life. It was enough that Usopp, Zoro, and Leo turned their attention back to us, leaving the pillar half-carved as they examined the plethora of death-dealers.

A crate of pistols here, a box of rifles there, shotguns over there, and pretty much everything in-between everywhere else! From Blue Sea weaponry to Dial-based firearms, we were packing merely by being in the proximity of this much raw tonnage!

"Well, this isn't something you see every day…" Sanji whistled as he picked out a pistol and looked it over.

Mikey, meanwhile, was much more enthusiastic, picking up a bazooka and perching it on his shoulder. "HAHA! Oh, man, this is awesome! I think we've got enough firepower here to topple a small kingdom!"

"Awe you kidding?" Carue snorted incredulously. "Twust me, if Bawoque Wowks showed me anything, it's that with da wight pwanning, you could conqah an average kingdom with this much fiyahpowah!"

"So coo~l!" the orange-bandanna'd Dugong breathed nevertheless.
"Thank-you-thank-you-thank-you!" Usopp repeated endlessly as he spun Conis around in a hug, while Lassoo did his best to try to lick her face off.

I finally managed to tear my gaze away from the weapons in favor of gaping at Conis in shock. "Where the hell did you even find this much firepower?!" I asked numbly.

The angel wrenched herself away from Usopp and Lassoo and wiped herself off before replying. "Well, you see, Cross, Skypiea and the Shandorians have both amassed something of an arsenal over the past few centuries, and now that the war is over, neither side wants to keep more than they really have to." She then grinned sheepishly as she dug through into her pocket. "Of course, to seal the deals, I did have to offer something that they would be willing to trade for, which you thankfully provided." She took out a Dial and a few sheets of paper and handed them to me. I took one look at them… and promptly burst out laughing.

"Oh-hoh, my God!" I cackled ecstatically. "Oh, man, that's just brilliant! I—!…I…" I trailed off slowly before slapping a hand to my forehead in realization. "Ah, shit, I'm an idiot."

"Huh? What is it?" Usopp asked in confusion as he tried to look over my shoulder.

"I'm assuming that you traded for Dials using rubber bands and got a pretty good haul, right?" I asked as I pinched the bridge of my nose.

"Oh, yeah, a really good haul! A few Breath Dials, a Tone Dial, a Flash Dial, a Heat Dial, a Flavor Dial, and I even got another Impact Dial! Oh, and that reminds me, Cross," he said, snapping into a businesslike tone. "Your new armor's coming along, but it'll be a little while; I've almost finished the left gauntlet, which is designed so that you can put a Flash Dial in it, but I'm still working on a way to safely incorporate the Impact Dial in the right one. I've almost got it to the point where it'll just feed the recoil back into the Dial, so you won't have to worry about tearing your muscles apart, and the Dial will just keep getting stronger every time you use it!" He grimaced uncomfortably. "Though you'll probably want to discharge it full-out sooner or later, or else it could actually overwhelm the feedback system and… well, I don't think your arms can get any worse, but let's not find out."

"That's really good to hear, Usopp, thanks," I said with a sincere smile before scowling darkly. "But what I was trying to get at was that while you made a killing with rubber bands, you could have cleaned out everyone on this island with this."

I held the picture up for him to see.

Everyone gazed up at the picture for all of three seconds. Then everyone, even Conis herself, fell over laughing.

I snorted darkly as I lowered my hand, though I did puff my cheeks out in a chuckle when I caught sight of the picture. Honestly, it's not like I could blame them! You'd have to be completely emotionless not to find a live-action version of Eneru freaking out completely drop-dead hilarious.

"Heheheh, yeah. Complete missed opportunity, but it looks like Conis saw the significance of me managing to… snap a… picture you stole my Vision Dial when you 'bumped' into me didn't you," I concluded flatly as I turned back towards Conis.

Conis wiped the tears from her eyes with a snicker before nodding firmly. "Y-yeah, sorry about that. I just wanted to surprise you all, and that was the easiest way for me to do it."

I tried to frown for a second, but I ultimately abandoned the effort with a sigh and a smile. "Bah, screw it, no harm no foul, and at least someone made a profit with that thing. Would have been a shame for a work of art like that to go to waste."
"I agree completely," Nami chuckled. "We need to frame that thing ASAP, I'll never get enough of seeing that arrogant son of a bitch's face when Luffy showed him up!"

"That one is good, yes, but I personally like the other one better," Conis said, tugging another paper she gave me out from under that picture. Everyone's laughter renewed when we saw the absolutely epic sight of Luffy kicking Eneru in the gut. Even Robin couldn't stay on her feet.

"Heheh, heee…” I wheezed out, wiping away a tear before hefting a bazooka from its crate and looking it over again. "Well, anyway, thanks a lot for this armory, Conis. It's probably going to take us a while to learn how to use it, but once we do—!

I was interrupted by Conis hunching over in a renewed fit of giggling.

Soundbite and I exchanged confused glances. "Ahh… am I missing something?" the snail asked hesitantly.

"Only if I am, too…” I shrugged helplessly.

"Heheh…” Conis stood back up as she got her laughter back under control, hiding her smile behind her hand. "I'm sorry for laughing at you, Cross, it's just that it seems you misheard me when I told you what my gift was!"

"Huh?” I blinked in confusion. "What are you—?

"SON OF A BITCH!” Soundbite roared without warning.

"What, what is it?” I asked.

Soundbite gaped at Conis in shock. "S-S-SHE didn't say she was giving us guns!!"

"What?!" Boss scoffed. "That's crazy, of course she did, we all heard her!"

"Actually, Soundbite's right,” Conis cut in promptly. "I didn't say that I was giving you guns. I said I was giving you a gun-ner."

One by one, everyone's eyes started to widen as the beri dropped.

"Conis…” Vivi breathed, obviously unable to believe what she was hearing. "What exactly are you trying to say?"

Conis smiled eagerly before snatching the bazooka I was holding from my hands, slinging its strap around her body and flipping the gun over so that she was holding it in an upside-down underslung style. She capped the whole display off by expertly cocking the weapon.

"I'm saying that, considering I know how to use all of these weapons, I'd like to become your crew's gunner!" Conis announced proudly… before shrinking in on herself, hands folded behind her back as she scuffed at the floor with a sheepish smile. "I-If you'll have me, that is…”

For what felt like an absolute eternity, there was nothing but absolute silence. Nobody even so much as reacted when a South Bird flew over us, "JO JO JO"ing without so much as a care in the world.

Finally, however, the crew reacted appropriately.

Half of the reactions, of course, fell somewhere in the "WHAAAT!?" end of the spectrum. The other half, however, varied in predictability:
"OF COURSE, SWEET CONIS, WE'RE GLAD TO HAVE YOU!" Sanji sang.

"WOO, GIRL POWER!" Raphey exclaimed, pumping her fists.

"What have I done, what have I done, what have I done…" I mumbled on repeat as I tried to wrap my head around events.

Usopp jabbed his elbow into Zoro's side in order to break him out of his stupor before holding out his palm. "Pay up."

"Tsk," the swordsman snarled as he dug a wad of bills out of his pocket and slapped them in Usopp's hand. "Out of one hole and into another. I'll get you the rest as soon as we reach land.

"Just make sure the money doesn't have blood on it," Usopp deadpanned as he counted out the cash.

"And I thought the women's quarters were somewhat cramped before…” Robin sighed.

"Oh, don't worry, Robin," Vivi groaned as she ground her fingers into her temple. "Nami's going to be sleeping in storage with most of the gold."

Nami opened her mouth angrily, and then let it hang as a line of drool dribbled from the corner of her mouth, a euphoric giggle drifting out.

"Is it just me, or have all of the additions to our crew since me been people being pushy?" Chopper muttered to himself.

Finally, Boss managed to snap out of his shock and focus intently on Conis, who had thus far been thoroughly bemused by our display. "Conis…” he began. "Didn't you say that you wanted to give us this gift to repay us? Because I'll tell you now, Luffy's sort of particular about that sort of thing."

Conis waved her hands with a panicked expression. "Oh, nonono! It's nothing like that, I swear! When I said I was doing this to repay you, I just meant that that was why you all were my first choice! Well, that and because you're my friends, of course…” She was a bit sheepish for a moment before shaking her head and clenching her fists, eyes blazing with determination. "But even if you won't let me join you, then I'll just join the next crew who comes up here, or… or I'll even travel over Cloud's End myself! Either way…” She crossed her arms and looked away sadly. "Either way, I'm going, and… and I'd really like nothing more than to go with you all."

Luffy grinned eagerly. "Of course!"

"Luffy!" Nami cut in with a sharp glare at our captain before giving Conis a concerned look. "I… look, Conis, I'm not complaining about this, I swear, I know better than anyone what it's like to make this kind of decision and I doubt you reached your conclusion lightly, but…” She spread her arms helplessly. "How did this happen? How did you go from the girl we met playing her harp on the beach to, well… you?"

"Well…” Conis bit her lip hesitantly for a second before looking at… me!? "It's actually because of Cross."

Nami, Zoro and Vivi promptly slapped hands to their faces. "Of course it is…” they chorused flatly.

I was too shocked to be pissed. "Wha—ME!?" I blurted incredulously. "Y-you mean what I said a few—!?"

"No, no, not that!" Conis shook her head hastily. "That was just to remove any doubts I had left
about wanting to do this, and you did that wonderfully. I… I meant earlier. When…" She closed her eyes as a shudder wracked her body. "When Eneru attacked us."

I winced slightly at a flash of phantom pain before looking at her in confusion. "I—what!? How did that display inspire you to go forth and venture!?"

"Because of what you said!" Conis exclaimed before sighing wistfully. "How you said that the Blue Seas were bigger and more glorious than any of us could ever imagine, how you said that there's so much we don't know. It just… your words resonated with me. And besides that, well…" She smiled sadly. "I was impressed at how you had what I've always lacked: courage."

"What!?” Raphey scoffed. "Are you crazy, woman? You're currently carrying almost half of your bodyweight in gun! You're a badass!"

"No, I'm a person with training and discipline," Conis responded before wilting. "But until now, I've never actually had the will to apply it. All these years, I've had the means with which to fight against Eneru in at least some capacity, but whenever the thought entered my mind…" She trailed off with a fearful shudder before looking back at me. "And yet, you, a Blue Sea Dweller with far less combat ability, when faced with Eneru's wrath—head-on, no less… you were stripped of any ability to fight back, facing certain death, and you still had the courage to stand up to him without hesitating once."

She smiled and looked at the crew fondly. "And while that may be the biggest reason, your crew as a whole made an impression on me, challenging Eneru and all of his disciples—and winning—just because of someone you met that same day. And even in the middle of all of it, you're still able to relax and celebrate as if nothing was amiss. Seeing what all of you could do, I… well, for a brief moment, I wanted to be a part of it." Her smile then died and rotted into a haunted look. "That… that feeling was one of the only reasons I managed to pull through what happened only an hour later."

It didn't take a genius to figure out what she meant. "Conis, your father didn't die! He's alive!" I protested.

"But I didn't know that at the time!" she shot back tearfully. "I—look, I've never really had any friends before you all, I don't have any other family…" She hugged herself desperately. "F-for as long as I can remember, it's always been my father, Su and I. They're the only family I've ever known, and when I thought my father d…" Her fingers sank into her arms as she struggled to get the word out. "D-d-died… t-then the only true connection I had left tying me to Skypiea died with him."

Vivi laid a consoling hand on Conis' shoulder. Conis gripped the hand with a grateful smile before taking a calming breath and steeling her expression. "When that happened," she whispered solemnly. "I made a promise to myself. I promised that if we survived this ordeal, if we all lived, then I would leave Skypiea. I would leave the White Sea, and I would go out and explore the glorious world that awaited me with no regrets."

Conis' expression when Pagaya returned flashed through my mind, with a whole new context. "And then you found out that your father was still alive…" I deduced slowly.

Conis shuddered in anguish. "Yes, that… that created something of a conflict." She then perked up with a hopeful, if somewhat confused look. "But, I… I talked it over with my father later that night, and he was… surprisingly encouraging. Sad, of course, but… but he was understanding and he… he said that he approved."

"But of course."

"GYAH!" I jumped almost a full three feet off the ground before wheeling around and glaring
daggers at Pagaya, who was standing right behind me. "Don't do that! What if I had a heart condition?!"

"You don't," Chopper deadpanned.

I spared him a glance before rolling my eyes. "Alright, fine, but Eneru could have given me one with all that lightning!"

"Not with where he was hitting you."

"WILL YOU WORK WITH ME HERE, DAMN IT!?"

Conis, meanwhile, pushed past me to stand before Pagaya in shock. "F-Father!" she stammered in shock. "W-what are you doing here!?

Pagaya chuckled fondly as he laid his hands on his daughter's shoulders. "What kind of father would I be if I didn't see my daughter off? And as for your confusion about my willingness to let you leave, well…” he sighed warmly. "I suppose that I am just of the opinion that it is not right for one person to get in the way of another's dreams. If this is truly your dream, Conis, and I believe that it is, then like your mother before you, I won't stand in your way."

Conis stiffened, tears welling up in her eyes before she hugged Pagaya, burying her face in his shoulder as she sobbed joyously, her father patting her back.

I broke the moment slightly by clearing my throat, wincing at the piercing glares the rest of the crew shot at me. "Look, I'm sorry for intruding on this moment, but… Conis' mother? I adamantly refuse to believe that I'm the only one who wants to hear that story."

The rest of the crew glared at me for a moment longer before relaxing and murmuring amongst themselves in agreement.

"It was 23 years ago, less than a year after Conis was born."

"Wha—Su!" Conis gasped, turning to face the cloud fox in question.

"I only heard about her from my parents, but apparently she was always something of a wanderer, ceaselessly exploring Upper Yard whenever she got the chance," Su continued, pacing on the Merry's railing. "But no matter how far she went, the White Sea was always too small for her. And even with her family, she was quite sad on Angel Island… until one day a pirate crew much like yours arrived, and she was presented with an opportunity. A chance to leave, a chance to see the world… a chance to live." The fox paused and hung her head sadly. "It was with a heavy heart that she left her family, her daughter especially, who she loved very much, but her heart yearned for adventure, and she simply couldn't deny it. So she left…"

Su then perked her head up, and I got the distinct impression that she was smiling. "But not before leaving her daughter a companion in the form of a cloud fox she'd found. My mother was a loyal companion for Conis until her age wouldn't let her be anymore, and that's when I took over. And I've never left her side since. Well…” Su scurried over to Conis and clambered onto her shoulder, rubbing her head against Conis’ cheek. "Almost never. Sorry for running off like that, I had some things I had to take care of."

Conis giggled happily as she leaned her forehead against her companion's. "Oh, Su…” she smiled.

Pagaya appeared to smile behind his beard as he watched the exchange. "I'm sorry that I don't seem sad that I didn't stop your mother from leaving all those years ago, Conis, and I'm sorry that I don't
seem sad now, but the fact is that I find it quite impossible to be even the slightest bit remorseful over the fact that the two women I love the most in my life are following their dreams. As sad as I'll be to watch you leave, I'd be even sadder if I made you suffer by forcing you to stay."

He cast a wistful gaze at the Going Merry. "In the end, I suppose we can only call it fate. Just as it did over twenty years ago, the Knock-Up Stream has yet again brought pirates to our land who will affect our family in fantastic ways. Ah, what a wondrous world we live in…"

It took all of ten seconds for that statement to sink in properly. Once it did, however, Robin and I made the connection at the same time. Or at least, I assume we did if the way we both stiffened was anything to go by.

"Oh, my…" she whispered numbly.

"Holy shit," I concurred, still trying to wrap my head around the sheer implications. Fucking hell, what did I do, stumble onto one of Oda's deleted scenes?!

"What? What's with you two?" Su asked curiously.

"Yeah, what is it, Cross?" Luffy questioned obliviously. "Do you know who they were?"

"Do I know—?" I ground out semi-hysterically. "Luffy, the captain of the pirates Pagaya is talking about was your predecessor!"

"Gol D. Roger…" Robin breathed, apparently still incredulous herself.

It took twenty seconds for that to sink with the rest of the crew, and when it did… I had the good sense to slap my headphones over my ears.

A resounding shout of "WHAAAAAAT!?" kicked the surrounding treelines into a flurry of retreating wildlife.

Lassoo whined and slapped his paws against his ears. "Loooooud…" he moaned.

Luffy was leading Chopper, Usopp and the Dugongs in bowing before Conis over and over again, repetitively chanting the phrase "WE ARE NOT WORTHY!"

"DAMN STRAIGHT!" Sanji half-roared half-cheered in agreement of their worshiping.

"Moron."

Three guesses who said that and what happened next.

Soundbite gave me a flat look. "You realize that this is your FAULT, RIGHT?"

"I know, I know…” I sighed wearily.

"Um, pardon me, but why are you all reacting like that?" Conis asked uncomfortably, a slight blush coming across her face.

"The Roger Pirates are the most famous pirates in history, the only crew that's ever succeeded in sailing to the very end of the Grand Line. They disbanded 22 years ago with the captain's execution, but his last words promised great treasure to whoever was able to find it, which sparked the Great Pirate Era, as countless souls have sought to inherit Roger's title: King of the Pirates," I summarized, with all the solemnity that that story deserved. "The quest for his legendary treasure, the One Piece, is the entire reason we and many others like us became pirates and set out to sea in the first place!"
Conis' eyes went wide, and Pagaya's... um, didn't, and I couldn't see his jaw dropped behind that beard. Honestly, the only way I could tell he was shocked was from the sweat on his brow.

"She joined with a pirate crew of that strength?" Conis asked eagerly, though Pagaya's demeanor was much more... reserved.

"But you said that the captain was executed? Then... she...?" Pagaya began weakly. Su and Conis also teared up as it sunk in, and the worshipping from the other crewmates subsided.

"Ah, no no no!" I waved my arms hastily as I tried to backstep. "Roger was executed, yes, but suffice to say that there were..." I glanced at Luffy cautiously, who was himself giving me something of a look. 'Circumstances... not made public. But anyway, Roger was the only one executed. As far as I know, the rest of the crew managed to get off scot-free. Where they are now, however..." I shrugged helplessly. "I'm afraid that your guess is as good as mine."

Pagaya slowly relaxed, nodding in response to my words. "If she is alive, then that is enough for me."

"Ugh... I can't take much more of these surprises," Vivi groaned, sinking to her knees alongside both Carue and Nami, who were both moaning in agreement.

"Well, I can't make any promises, but I for one will at least try and keep the nonsense down to a... a... aaaHAHAHA!" Su suddenly threw her head back with a bark of laughter. "NOPE! Couldn't say it with a straight face, you guys are screwed!"

"AH, LA FOLIE A DEUX. Dis gon' be FUN, HAHAHA!" Soundbite cackled ecstatically.

"Wha—wait, what?" Conis snapped her head around to stare at Su in shock. "Su, you are not coming with me! This voyage is going to be dangerous beyond all belief, I couldn't possibly put you at risk like that."

Su tilted her head as she stared at her owner. "Um, of course I'm coming? Why else do you think I've spent the whole day saying goodbye to all of my animal friends?"

"Su, you are not coming, and that is final!" Conis ordered firmly.

"Uh, yes, I am?" the cloud fox stated flatly in an 'are you an idiot' tone of voice. "How could I not come when you're completely helpless without me?"

"E-excuse me?" Conis said indignantly.

"Well, obviously," Su rolled her eyes... I assume, anyways, that fur was a hell of a poker face. "After all, just look at you! Moments ago, you thought there was a chance in hell of me not coming with you on this voyage, when obviously there's nothing you can do to stop me. Truly you are beyond all help, but don't worry, Conis!" She laid her paw on her head. "That's why you have me."

Conis stammered incoherently for several seconds. And then, finally, she sighed. "... Fine," she said, clearly defeated and clearly happy.

Pagaya proceeded to draw attention to himself by clearing his throat, gazing hopefully at Luffy. "Captain, like my wife before her, I know that there is nothing I can do to dissuade my daughter without making her miserable. All I ask is that like before, I know that my little girl is venturing forth in the best company she can possibly find, and quite honestly, I believe that to be you and your crew. So, as a father, I am begging you..." He clasped his hands pleadingly. "Will you please take her with you, and keep her as safe as you can?"
Luffy's response was to grin widely as he scratched a finger beneath his nose. "Shishishishi! I've already made that promise twice, why wouldn't I make it again?"

"Twice? He made it for me, but who was the other one?" Vivi asked curiously.

Nami answered that question by slapping a hand to her forehead with an embarrassed groan. "I'm going to kill Genzo when I see him again…" Nevertheless, she didn't try and hide the smile she was sporting.

Conis, meanwhile, had an ecstatic grin slowly starting to spread across her face. "So… so you mean —?"

Luffy shot his fists up with a cheer. "WE HAVE TWO NEW CREWMATES! HIP HIP!"

"HOORAY!" Usopp, Chopper and Carue leapt and crowed joyously.

"Ah, to see the ranks of one's companions bolstered, however marginally…" Boss slowly shook his head with a grin before punching the air. "THIS IS THE PUREST OF MAN'S ROMANCES!"

"GO, BOSS, GO!" the TDWS cheered enthusiastically.

"AN ANGEL HAS JOINED OUR CREW! I COULDN'T BE HAPPIER!" Sanji swooned in full love-mode.

"And it looks like she could have some fight in her, too…” Zoro mused as he fingered the hilts of his blade.

SLAM!

He then went from fingerling them to drawing them in an instant in order to block the kick Sanji aimed at his head.

"I'LL CAVE YOUR SKULL IN IF YOU EVEN THINK ABOUT TOUCHING HER, MOSSHEAD!" Sanji raged furiously. No prizes for guessing what happened next.

While the rest of the crew welcomed Conis warmly, Nami turned her attention to me.

"I'm going to go out on a limb and say that you didn't see this coming, Cross?" she asked quietly.

I chopped my hand across my neck with a look at Soundbite and waited for the subtle buzz before speaking. "I didn't expect to see her that much after she saw us off at the pier on Angel Island, full-stop," I replied numbly. "She should have wound up co-owning a café with Laki a couple of years from now."

Nami cocked an eyebrow at where Vivi was giving Conis an enthusiastic hug before shrugging slightly. "Well, it looks like that's not going to be happening. But on the other hand, I don't see how this could have any negative consequences. So, call it a good change?"

I watched the scene for a moment before smiling gratefully. "Yeah… call it a good change. Well, with that done, what say we get back to loading up the gold?"

"…Actually, Cross, there's one more thing I want to ask about," Nami finally said, looking at me seriously. "With Conis and Su joining us, almost half of our crew is in the dark about you. I get that you're waiting on it for Robin, but at some point, you need to tell the others."

I grimaced in agreement, but ultimately I shook my head. "I'll tell them soon enough. We're close to
the point I'm waiting for, give or take two islands. If everything works out in the best case scenario, then I'll tell them the same time I tell Robin. Worst case… I'll settle for a little sooner. Either way, everyone will know everything soon enough."

Nami pursed her lips, obviously unsatisfied with the answer, but she nodded in acceptance nevertheless. One glance at Soundbite made him drop the scramble, and Nami marched up to drop her hand on Conis' shoulder.

"Welcome aboard, Conis. Now, as second mate, allow me to give you your first official order as a Straw Hat Pirate," Nami announced.

I wisely chose to slip my earphones on when I noticed her drawing a deep breath.

"LOAD THE GOLD RIGHT FUCKING NOW!"

Not a second too soon.

And so, with our new gunner and her arsenal officially with us, Zoro and Leo proceeded to finish dismantling the gold pillar while the rest of us loaded it onto the Merry. And in light of the two death threats hanging over his head, Usopp had come up with an ingenious way to utilize every bit of space that the Merry had available, while at the same time ensuring that theft was a complete impossibility without either a master swordsman or more time and dismantling skills than an average thief was likely to possess.

He got the idea from Eneru's Luminous Forge technique; after Zoro and Leo cut up the gold as he indicated, through the extensive and thoroughly supervised usage of Heat and Flame Dials, Usopp heated up the pieces once they were in storage and melded them into big enough shapes that they were impossible to fit through the doorways. It was more likely for Nami to ever get Zoro in debt again than it was for anyone to manage to steal anything from the pillar without us catching them. Though then again, I suppose I could have been giving Nami too little credit.

When all of that was said and done, Nami did a thorough evaluation of the gold that we had accumulated. The bags we had filled from Nola amounted to at least 500 million on their own, and with every bit of the Merry within closed doors stuffed as full as we could practically make it, the total haul was—conservatively—an even ฿2 billion.

Needless to say, it was a good long while before our navigator was in any state to navigate. In the end, however, we were just about ready to leave. But I still had a couple of things left to take care of as the crew began boarding the Merry again.

"Hey, Nami, did Pagaya manage to finish your request?" I asked.

"Wha—? Oh, I forgot!" Nami said, turning back towards the Dial engineer in question. "Pagaya, were you able to make those modifications I asked for?"

"Hmm?" Pagaya glanced at Nami curiously before snapping his head up. "Ah, yes! I'm sorry, I forgot about it during all the commotion. I have it on my boat now, just give me a moment to fetch it."

So saying, he dashed back to his own vessel and promptly returned with what resembled a combination of a folded scooter and a snowboard. Rather than the boat-like bottom that the Waver originally had, it now had a curved plank of metal-lined wood close to the size of a skateboard. There was also a leather strap running from the handles of the vehicle to its front wheel.

"Here it is," he announced proudly, handing it over to Nami. "While I was able to maintain the basic
integrity of the Waver's structure, I'm sorry to say that I had to do away with some of the lower edges so as to fit within the size constraints you requested. I hope you don't mind getting your feet wet, and I doubt you'll be able to fit any more passengers on there."

"Are you kidding!" Nami squealed eagerly as she hugged the device to her chest. "I live on a ship, so getting my feet wet is nothing, and I'm happy I won't have passengers anymore! This is all for me, me, meeet!" she trailed off finally, spinning on her toes happily.

I shot a grin at Pagaya. "I think she likes it."

Pagaya chuckled. "So I see. Well, does this mean you're setting sail?"

"Not quite yet, we've got a bit more to take care of," I replied, turning back to the gangplank and walking onboard. Nami and Pagaya came up just behind, and a quick whistle had all eyes on me.

"Alright, everyone, now that we've got the gold loaded up, let's move on to some more pressing matters before we move out..." I wrung my hands eagerly. "Pop quiz: what's the one thing that I emphasized us needing more than anything else while we were up here?"

"We were all diligent in collecting Dials, Cross," Robin said with a smirk, unfolding a sash that she had been carrying and revealing the Dials within. "Thirteen Axe Dials, courtesy of Yama and one of his Enforcers."

I gave the sash a flat look before cocking an eyebrow at Robin. "Do I even want to know how many pieces you left his spine in?"

Robin's frigid chuckle was answer enough.

"Moving on! Usopp?"

Usopp grinned proudly as he dug a shell out of his bag and tossed it up and down in his palm. "Besides the trading I did, Sanji and I managed to grab twelve of Eneru's Thunder Dials along with three Water Dials, and Terry, Isaiah, and their oversized cousins got ten Jet Dials."

"I took Shura's Heat Dial and his bird's Flame Dial," Boss grinned savagely, ramming his fist into his palm. "He was not gentle," Mikey snickered sadistically.

"Those twin dumplings that attacked me were carrying Flame, Impact, Axe, and Flavor Dials. They're all in the storage room," Nami shrugged indifferently. "They were pretty annoying, admittedly, but not that hard to handle with some liberal application of my Clima-Tact to their skulls."

"I got one of Gedatsu's Milky Dials!" Chopper added, jumping and waving a shoe in the air eagerly before rubbing the back of his head with a sheepish grin. "I... don't know how, really, I kind of blacked out halfway through when he got a good punch in and I psyched up."

"And Ohm said that he had a Dial in the hilt of his sword, so I took it once I kicked his ass. At least he was a semi-decent swordsman," Zoro finished, fishing the hilt of the blade in question out of a crate. "No clue what happened to the actual blade, though. It disappeared once it left Ohm's hand."

I grinned as I took in the weapon, a few 'JACKPOT' bells ringing in my head. "Well, now, that has exceptional potential," I said, taking the Eisen Whip from Zoro and looking it over. Then I turned to our navigator, and held it out. "Nami, see what you can make of this."
Nami looked surprised, but took the hilt nonetheless, turning it over in her hand as she examined it from all angles. "What do you think I can do with it? It looks like a bladeless sword."

"Actually, it's a whip," I corrected. "Ohm called it an Eisen Whip. The hilt holds a very special Cloud Dial called an Eisen Dial. It acts like the Dials Satori used to produce his Ball Clouds, only instead of making island cloud, it makes clouds as solid as iron. His default form for it was a sword…" I grinned eagerly. "But he was able to manipulate it into a variety of shapes." My grin widened when Nami snapped her head around to stare at me in shock. "I know it might be a longshot, but considering your skillset—"

"How did he operate it?" Nami demanded, examining the hilt intently.

"Oh, I think I might know!" Conis offered, stepping up to her and pointing out a few hidden buttons and dials I hadn't noticed on the neck of the weapon's hilt. "See here? Unless I miss my guess, this whole device acts as a large control apparatus for the Dial. It's a little elaborate, but it doesn't seem to be too different from a traditional rig. Unless I'm mistaken…" She started pointing out controls one by one. "This one controls the pressure, this one regulates the humidity, this one the air flow—"

"Which one produces the cloud?" Nami cut in dully, her eyes and voice glazed over with an analytical haze that I'd only ever seen whenever she was drawing a map or watching the sky.

Conis glanced at Nami in surprise before hesitantly pointing out a button. "I… think you need to hold this one down? I'd suggest exercising caution, however, these kind of Dials tend to be very—"

Nami rammed her thumb into the button, causing a long blade of pure white to lance out from the hilt that forced Conis to jump back with a shocked yelp.

"SENSITIVE! Be careful, Nami!"

But Nami wasn't listening. She wasn't even looking at Conis. Rather, she was staring at the hilt she was holding up at eye level, watching the cloud shoot out of it in a steady stream, her face a mask of focus. Without even a moment's hesitation, she started pressing the whip's controls at random, causing the cloud to destabilize and lash out uncontrollably like some form of amorphous tentacle, varying wildly in size, shape and length.

However, the randomness of her movements didn't last long. Soon, her actions took on a tone of control and thought. Where the cloud was flailing randomly before, it started moving with much more… fluidity. And it was fluid in more ways than one. While at first the cloud had been smooth and seamless, it slowly started to thicken and flow. Bit by bit, the cloud expanded and puffed out so that it looked denser and… well, honestly, it even looked fluffier.

In no time at all, where once there was an uncontrollably flailing tentacle of cloud-matter was now an entirely natural-looking cloud, flowing from the hilt Nami was holding and drifting around her like some great watchful spirit.

"Woooah…" Luffy breathed in awe.

Conis, for her part, was utterly speechless. "H-how—?" she started to stammer out.

"Alright…" Nami muttered, not even looking up at the cloud as she watched her fingers fly over the controls. "Now that I've got the hang of this thing, let's see what it can do…"

And where once Nami's fingers flew, now they danced. And the cloud danced with them, flowing around her to coalesce into a singular mass. The cloud surged and morphed for a moment before twisting into an almost perfect sphere, interrupted only by the line of clouds flowing back to the hilt.
It held its shape for a moment before collapsing back into formless cloud and roiling into a three-dimensional model of a pyramid. It then repeated the process to form a cube, a star, and even a hollow dodecahedron. But the real clincher was the final form she created: a hand. While it might not have looked like an entirely natural hand, more a glove than anything, the real impressive part was how it moved, the fingers flexing and articulating with as much ease as though they were made of flesh and blood.

Nami stared at the hand in open-mouthed awe for a moment before slowly letting a rapturous grin grow on her face. "Oh, yes..." she purred eagerly. "I can definitely use this."

"Wooow," breathed the Dumbass Trio and the TDWS. Everyone else was just as shocked; Sanji wasn't even able to swoon nor Zoro able to scowl at the sheer mastery Nami had just managed.

"Well, now..." Robin muttered, the wonder evident in her voice.

"That was incredible, Nami!" Vivi gushed eagerly.

"Now that was epic," I whistled in awe.

"O-oh my, I'm sorry for staring, but this is simply uncanny!" Pagaya breathed. "Why, the only person I've ever seen operate a Cloud Dial with such precision was another Dial engineer from another Sky Island! Oh, I haven't heard from him for such a long time, he left to travel on the Blue Sea over twenty years a—!" The old man cut himself off suddenly, and he and I shared shocked looks. We then veeery slowly started leaning backwards, tilting our heads as we went.

"I DO NOT HAVE AMPUTATION SCARS!" Nami snarled irately.

We hastily snapped back upright.

"But my father does have a point!" Conis blurted, staring at the cloud in wonder. "I-I've never seen anyone handle a Dial with such ease! Ohm himself couldn't even do that, judging from when he fought Sanji!"

"Why do you think I gave that thing to Nami?" I asked rhetorically. "The cloud that thing makes might be made of iron, but it's still a cloud. Because it's a cloud, it's still a part of weather, and because it's part of weather? Well..." I trailed off with a vicious grin. "That just about makes it Nami's bitch."

"It's just all so obvious..." Nami giggled to herself as she reduced the cloud back to its natural-looking state, making it flow around her free hand. "It's like a real cloud, and I have all of the control I need at my... fingertips..." she trailed off for a moment before grinning eagerly. "A cloud..." In a flash, she snapped her hand to her side and whipped out a section of the Clima-Tact, spinning it between her fingers.

Soundbite took one look at the crackling static starting to coalesce around the rod before recoiling fearfully. "NONONONOWAIT!"

Too late. Satisfied with the charge, Nami held the metal rod in a reverse grip and rammed its tip into the cloud flow. The reaction was instantaneous: the cloud became as black as pitch, tongues of lightning forked through and around the form...

TH-THUMP!

And I jerked back fearfully when the whole of my body burned, phantom electrical burns raging throughout my body as I only barely managed to choke back a terrified yelp.
Nami hastily ripped the rod away with a stricken look and dropped the Eisen Whip's hilt, causing the clouds to snap back into the device. "C-Cross! I'm so sorry, that was so stupid of me and—!

"Don't!" I interrupted, snapping my hand up in order to halt the apology. "Do not apologize for doing that, you hear me? It was an accident, you didn't mean it, it's fine."

"I…" Nami hesitated momentarily before grinding the heel of her palm into her forehead with a groan. "Ugh, I'm so embarrassed I forgot… well, at least I won't be using that again anytime soon—"

"No!" I snapped, crossing my arms in an X. "This is going to push you far above and beyond the 'one-man army' level of power, you're not foregoing that just because of my stupid phobia!"

"No, I'm foregoing it because I need to get this in a more convenient form," Nami replied, picking up the Whip's hilt and shoving both it and the sections of her Clima-Tact into Usopp's hands. "Boss, I need the Heat Dial. Usopp, you take that, a Water Dial, and a Thunder Dial and merge them with these, ASAP."

"Wha—? B-but I—" Usopp stammered.

"Oh, I should be able to help with that," Conis offered. "I'm not a fully trained Dial Engineer, but my father's given me some training, so I could at least try and help."

"Assuming you don't confuse the usage of a Milky Dial again, anyways."

"SU!"

"Eheheh, I'm sure you'll be a great help anyways, Conis," Usopp hedged uncomfortably before looking back at me. "Hey, Cross, could I borrow your baton, too? I… think I have a few ideas."

I blinked in surprise before shrugging and tossing the compressed tube to him. "Whatever sort of ideas you have, just make sure you pass them through me first."

"ONE TIME!" the longnose threw his hands up in exasperation.

"And Nami!" I jabbed my finger at her. "Even once you've got your new and improved weapon, I don't want you to so much as hesitate before sparking up some lightning around me, no matter what. As a matter of fact, I want you to make a point of doing it more often, make it your go-to option!"

"WHAT!?!" Nami and Chopper belted out in unison, the doctor jumping up and down and waving his hooves frantically. "Cross, are you insane?! You're suffering from a trauma-induced phobia! If you force yourself to undergo it again and again—!!"

"Then I'll get used to it pretty quickly, won't I?" I finished blandly.

Chopper stared at me in confusion for all of three seconds before tensing in realization. "You're talking about trying to employ systematic desensitization therapy…" He shook his head furiously. "But that takes time, and it has to be employed in a controlled environment! What you're proposing is a crude and ham-handed knock-off that could cause you serious psychological damage!"

"And what would your alternative be, our most wondrous doctor?" I questioned with a cocked eyebrow.

"Well…" Chopper tapped his chin in thought. "The usual treatment for PTSD involves a combination of psychotherapy and medication… I could make the proper dosages, and since we have enough Thunder Dials, I could probably set up some kind of a simulation. In a few months—"
"Considering the average day for our crew and the Grand Line's weather, I don't think we have time for extended therapy, Chopper," I cut in dryly. "Add in the fact that the cause of the phobia was transmitted the world over, and chances are that someone will try and exploit it for their benefit."

The doctor looked up at me with a scowl, but he ultimately sighed and shook his head. "... Fine, it looks like we'll have to do it your way. But you will be taking medications as soon as I've prepared them, doctor's orders."

"Fair enough," I nodded. Silence fell for a few moments before Usopp cleared his throat.

"Well, it looks like I'm going to be busy; with Cross' armor and baton, Nami's Clima-Tact, and my own arsenal, plus the ideas I have for Vivi and Carue, I've got work to do. But just to be sure I'm not surprised later, does anyone else have any suggestions for upgrades?"

Most of the crew shook their heads, but Boss gained a thoughtful expression as he took out his cargo hook, looking it over. "Hmm... the main issue I've had with my rope-dart over the years has been when I was fighting someone who managed to grab the rope. You think you could figure out a way to integrate a Heat Dial?"

Usopp processed that and cupped his chin. "Hmm... it'll be tricky, but I think I can manage it."

"Excellent," Boss growled sadistically, before turning to his students. "And the rest of you?"

"Pass, I'd prefer to get more used to what Conis brought onboard," Mikey grinned as he spun a (thankfully unloaded) pistol around his flipper.

"Show-off..." Raphey snorted before shrugging and patting her sais. "Personally, I'm fine with my weapons the way they are." Donny and Leo nodded in agreement.

"Alright, then, if that's everything, I'd better get started," Usopp said, turning to head towards the storage room, Conis and Su following.

"Uh, actually, one more thing," I said quickly, causing the sniper to look back at me. "Usopp, whatever plans you make for incorporating the Eisen Dial for Nami, wait until we're back on the Blue Sea to put them in action; clouds can't normally form down there like they can up here. There's some way to make it happen, but you'll have to figure it out."

Usopp frowned, but nodded. "Thanks for the heads-up, Cross. In that case, Conis, I'll call you once I've got the blueprints started."

He turned to head back inside...

"Hold it."

When all attention was turned back towards the shoreline, where a relatively familiar figure who I hadn't had the opportunity to meet in person until now was standing.

"C-Captain McKinley!" Conis instinctively snapped to attention. "W-what are you doing here?!"

The captain of the White Berets smiled as he strode across the gangplank towards Conis. "Come now, soldier, did you really expect to simply leave Skypiea without a proper farewell? And I'm not alone in that sentiment either."

Before anyone could ask what he meant, the unmistakable sound of Dial skates came from the shore. Two much more familiar figures jetted out from the branches of the trees, coming to a reasonably
smooth stop on the deck of the ship.

"Laki? Wiper?" Conis asked. While the berserker kept a neutral look on his face, Laki smiled kindly.

"Leaving without saying goodbye, Conis?" the sniper-guerilla chuckled fondly. "I suppose you're not as well-mannered as you'd like to pretend, huh?"

"Ah, w-well I, uh..." Conis started to stammer out.

"ATTEEEEN-HUT!"

Until McKinley clicked his heels and barked at the top of his lungs, causing Conis to snap to attention without a second's hesitation... along with the TDWS.

Boss gave his students a dirty look before snapping his flippers... somehow... causing the younger dugongs to sag in relief. "Clearly I need to... refine my training," he groused. His tone of voice was enough to cause his students to stiffen in terror.

Meanwhile, Captain McKinley stepped up before Conis, towering imperiously over her. "Reserve Officer Conis," he barked in a firm and official tone. "I have known you for many years. Over that time, I have watched you grow, becoming stronger with each passing month. Your training in the art of Sky Warfare has made you a strong soldier, skilled with every ranged weapon our arsenal could yield. You are, at minimum, my equal in strength, and yet you maintain the gentle heart that you had from the day you first requested training. You are an example to us all. In light of this, and in recognition of your valor in helping both to evacuate Angel Island and to topple the tyrant Eneru, I am pleased to officially induct you into the ranks of the White Berets and promote you to the rank of Commander, as well as placing you in command of your own unit: the White Berets... Straw Hat division."

McKinley maintained his stern expression for a moment longer before allowing himself a warm smile as he removed and unfolded a beret from his pocket and held it out to the angel.

Conis stared at the hat, stunned, before swallowing and shakily taking the beret in her hands and situating it on her head. It hid her antenna-like hairstyle for a moment until they poked through holes in the hat that I suspect hadn't been present a few hours ago. "I-I accept this promotion with the utmost dignity," she stammered out, tears shining in her eyes. "A-and I vow that I will put forth my best effort to maintain the integrity and valor of the White Berets from this point onwards, Captain."

McKinley grinned before snapping into that peculiar salute, legs together and left hand behind the head, index and little fingers raised. "HESO!"

Conis mirrored the action immediately, a tearful smile on her face. "HESO!"

"HESO!" came an echo from behind us. I turned to see that the Dumbass Trio, Sanji, Vivi, Carue (inasmuch as he could), and the dugongs had taken up the same salute, including Boss.

A slight bumping against my neck prompted me to look at Soundbite, who had an eyestalk cocked. I stared at him for a second before shrugging with a sigh. "Oh, what the heck..." I snapped into the pose as well. "HESO!"

"Heh," McKinley chuckled as he relaxed. "You've got good friends at your back, soldier. I hope your training and experience serves you well. Good luck, Commander Conis." And with that, the Captain strode back up the gangplank.

Laki was the next to come forward, still smiling at Conis. "Conis... I know we haven't known each
other for long." She scratched her neck with a sheepish chuckle. "Honestly, I wish things had been different; it seems like you could have been the sister I never had. Well," she snickered to herself. "The relatively same-aged sister, anyways. But, that's not how life works. Instead, you're going straight back to fighting with a heck of an arsenal at your back. So, from one gun-wielder to another..." She dug her hand into the ammo pouch at her side and removed a pair of goggles, which she then held out to Conis.

"My goggles," she explained as Conis accepted the headwear and looked them over. "They've served me well over the years, but I don't think I'll have any more use for them in the future. The lenses are tinted in order to help deal with muzzle fla—" Her explanation was cut off by Conis catching her in a surprise hug, arms wrapped around her neck. Laki stood still for a moment before chuckling sadly and returning the hug, giving Conis a comforting pat on the back.

"Try not to get yourself killed down there, alright?" she breathed tearily.

"No promises," Conis chuckled back. "You know how crazy this crew tends to be."

"Don't worry, I'll keep her safe," Su piped up as she examined her own paw before tilting her head thoughtfully. "Well, unless it's funny, of course."

Laki out and out laughed when Conis slumped in her arms in defeat. "Of course! I wouldn't expect anything less!"

The two hugged for a bit longer until they extricated themselves from one another's arms, Laki giving Conis a final pat on the shoulder before turning back and walking back up the ramp, during which Conis took the opportunity to slip the goggles on and situate them around her neck.

Finally, Wiper stepped forward, his expression still neutral. If the way she stiffened was any indication, Conis was still a little nervous around the man, despite being on good enough terms with him that they could pass as friends. I noticed as he approached that he was carrying a small box in one hand, about the size of a decent novel.

"I know I'm not really your friend like those two, and I can't do polite worth shit, so I'll try and keep this brief," he bluntly stated. "With Eneru gone and my ancestors' wishes fulfilled, the worst battles of my life are behind me now. But if even half of what Cross said is accurate, you'll need all the strength you can get..." He trailed off slightly before sighing in defeat. "And... besides that, I owe this crew more than I can ever repay. So, I'll give you my strongest weapon to add to your arsenal."

He opened the box and removed its contents: a shell identical to an Impact Dial, except for the fact that it was midnight black, so that the holes and shell were almost indistinguishable. Conis gasped.

"Is that—?"

"My Reject Dial. With the capabilities that this crew has shown already, I have no doubt that you'll be able to make use of it effectively."

"I... I don't know what to say... thank you, Wiper," Conis whispered, taking the Dial reverently. The berserker managed to crack a sincere smile.

"Good luck." He made to head back as well...

"Hey, Wiper, hang on a second!"

Before turning back as I moved over to him. I lowered my voice as I spoke the next words... and geeze, I was making a lot of investments today. "It goes without saying that we want you to keep
that pillar safe for us. But if a certain…” I coughed into my fist in order to mask my chuckle. "'Spring-heeled dickweasel' shows up here, tell him that he can have it as a loan from us." I weathered the flat look he gave me. "Assuming you get into a fight with everyone who comes up here, and we both know you will—"

"Of course," Wiper flatly confirmed.

"Then you'll understand what I mean when you meet him."

The Shandian rolled his eyes before nodding. "Alright, 'spring-heeled dickweasel,' got it," he muttered. And with that, he moved back to the shore.

"ARE YOU NUTS?!" Soundbite hissed in my ears.

"Yes. Your point?" I replied calmly.

The snail opened his mouth to respond, and then closed it, shrugging. "Another long con and high-stakes gamble?" he reasoned, audibly enough that the rest of the crew could hear.

"Exactly," I said as I looked back at them, which served to satisfy most of the crew.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Su piped up.

Most of them.

"I'll tell you later. For now," I said, grinning as I turned to my captain. "The day is quickly coming to an end, so with all of our earnings stored up, what say head towards our next adventure?"

"Right! Set sail!" Luffy yelled.

"Hold it!"

All attention snapped upwards, where a pair of familiar birds soared towards us before landing on Zoro and Sanji's shoulders.

"You're not staying with the Shandians?" Sanji asked.

"I don't think so," Terry said, still unusually calm. "Now that we know what really happened, and we know that Shandora is still safe, we don't have any reason to stay."

"Perhaps someday we shall return to Jaya to tell the rest of our fellows what happened… but for the time being, it would be an utter disservice to deprive you of my glorious physique," Isaiah said with a pose.

"OR MY POWER!" Terry said, back to the way we knew him.

"Yeah, right," Soundbite snickered. "THEY JUST realized that their game means JACK WITH HOW BIG the other birds ARE!"

"SHUT UP!" both of them screeched, which only made Soundbite and the rest of us laugh harder.

"Alright, now we set sail!" Luffy cheered.

"HOLD IT!" Soundbite yelled.

"WHAT NOW?" shouted most of the crew, myself included.
"I'M HEARING one heartbeat too many. SOMEONE ELSE is onboard," he said sotto voce, which dissolved the lingering anger. The snail concentrated a bit more before jabbing an eyestalk at the storage room. I gestured to Lassoo, who padded alongside me as I walked through the door, taking in the area. Another glance at Soundbite led me to a barrel… not big enough for a normal person to fit inside. I put the pieces together with a wry chuckle before turning around and waving to Zoro. The swordsman in question approached and grabbed the barrel, and as we left the room, he tossed it with no great regard at the growing crowd of Shandians, Skypieans, and Enforcers—Eneru’s rampage and Gedatsu and Ohm's callousness having swayed around a dozen of them enough that they had escaped exile—gathering on the shore to see us off.

"HEADS UP, nascent rat INFESTATION HEADING your way!" Soundbite called out. The largest of the Shandians, Genbo, caught the barrel without thinking and was about to toss it into the water when the top suddenly shot off. "GET-EM-OFF-GET-EM-OFF-GET-EM-OFF!" Aisa shrieked in panic as she leapt out of the barrel and started flailing her arms in a panic as she ran around in a circle. "Get what off?" I asked her innocently. "We said we were getting rid of a rat and that's what we just did!"

Aisa promptly froze as she processed those words before snarling and shaking her fists at me. "YOU TWO-TIMING SON OF A—!

"Aisa."

The young Shandian froze mid-fist-shake, cold sweat coalescing on her brow as she turned around to stare up at Wiper, Kamakiri and, most important of all, Laki as the three of them all glared down at her. Aisa was frozen for a moment before she tried to bolt for the Merry, but she hadn't even made it a step when Laki grabbed the back of her shirt and hoisted her into the air, heedless of her kicking and flailing.

"LEMME GO, LEMME GO!" the young oracle shrieked, pinwheeling her arms childishly. "I LISTENED TO WHAT CROSS SAID ABOUT THE BLUE SEA AND IT SOUNDS AWESOME! I WANNA BE A PIRATE AND GO ON ADVENTURES TOO!"

Vivi gave me a sidelong look. "What are you, Patient Zero for a new mutation of the madness Roger already let loose?"

"Hey, don't blame me!" I protested as I pointed at Luffy. "He's the one who infected me, I just happen to be more contagious is all, both intentionally and otherwise."

"Shishishi! I'm convectional!" Luffy snickered.

"That is neither a good thing nor the right word, Luffy," Nami deadpanned.

Back on the shore, Laki was entirely unaffected by Aisa's protests. "Aisa, you are thirteen years old. Even if you weren't practically my younger sister, I'd still stop you! You are not going and that's final!"

"But Conis' father is letting her go!" Aisa whined petulantly.

"Conis is twenty-three and she's packing enough heat for a full squad of warriors," Wiper drawled in a flat tone. "You, meanwhile, are underage and have little to no experience with combat."

"ONLY BECAUSE YOU NEVER LET ME DO ANYTHING!" she spat venomously. Aisa
appeared to wind up for another outburst before pausing contemplatively. She then promptly switched tracks by waving desperately at our ship. "HEY, I LOVE ADVENTURE AND WANNA SEE THE SEAS TOO! CAN I COME WITH YOU?"

"SU—GAH!" Luffy was interrupted by half of our crew dogpiling him. I observed the skirmish for a second before shooting a grin at the coast and holding my hand up to my ear like a phone.

"Sorry—kitch—must be a—kitch—ad connection—kitch—try again some other time!"

"WE'RE NOT USING SNAILS, YOU BASTARD!"

"Sorry, can't hear you, going through a tunnel!" I called back before spinning my finger in the air and glancing desperately at the rest of the crew. "Go go!"

I swear, you could hear the non-existent rubber burning we got out of there so fast. But the last words we heard as we sailed away were spoken with all the conviction of one of our dreams: "YOU WON'T STOP ME FOREVER! SOMEDAY, I'LL BECOME ONE OF THE STRAW HAT PIRATES, I PROMISE IT! I PROMISE!"

I watched Upper Yard start to shrink in the distance before sighing and slapping a hand to my face. "Well, that tears it. Call me crazy, but even if it takes months, maybe years, we officially have not seen the last of Aisa."

"THEN YOU'D better be able to fight off THOSE THREE AT ONCE WHEN THAT DAY COMES!" Soundbite crowed. It didn't sound that loud, but I had no doubt that it had reached its intended recipient.

"Joy…"

From there, it was about as calm and casual a journey as we could get from the White-White Sea back to the White Sea, and down to Cloud End, with Pagaya sailing alongside us in order to guide us to the very end. Once the gateway of clouds appeared in the distance, I surreptitiously caught Conis and Su's attention and made a shushing motion, which they thankfully nodded at, albeit Conis only doing so after Su whispered something to her.

All too soon, we'd arrived: Cloud End. It was a supremely literal name for the location, for while the true drop was obscured by the architecture, it was clear to see that past this point, the mighty Cumulo Regalis came to an end.

"So, this is the way out, huh?" Nami whistled appreciatively.

"I don't wanna gooo…” Luffy whined as he laid on his special seat, pouting childishly at the gate both due to our imminent departure and the… manual veto we'd put him through earlier.

"I know the sentiment all too well, captain," Boss shook his head with a sigh as he held a fist before his face. "But truly, to leave behind a paradise as we set out on the path for our next adventure… while it is not a Man's Romance, no…” He shot his fist into the air. "IT IS INDEED A STEP TOWARDS OUR NEXT ONE!"

"GO, BOSS, GO!"

"To think we actually sailed in the sky!" Vivi giggled jubilantly as she hugged Carue. "Can you believe that we actually did all of this?!

"Bawewy, and da onwy weason I do is becawse I still smeww wike I should be sahved with
owange sauce!" Carue snickered.

"Well, this is it…" Su whistled appreciatively as she eyed the gate.

"I know that I'll miss it…" Conis gazed backwards longingly for a moment before clenching her fists before her chest, her eyes blazing with determination. "But at least I know that it will make our return one day all the more sweet, right, Su?"

"Right!"

Meanwhile, Pagaya parked his boat on a nearby pier and started running down the Island Cloud in order to keep up. "I'm sorry to say that this is as far as I can follow you! Thank you so much for all you've done, and please stay safe no matter what!"

"Goodbye, Father!" Conis waved eagerly at her dad, joyful tears glistening in her eyes. "I'll miss you, and I'll try and speak on the SBS as often as I can! I'll give Mother your best if I see her! Take care!"

"I will!" Pagaya confirmed proudly. "Now, hurry up and draw the sails, and hold on tight! You're in for something of a ride!"

"You heard the man!" Usopp crowed as he clambered up the rigging. "Let's get ready, it sounds like we're going to be going fast!"

Luffy's morose expression promptly vanished as he glanced at our navigator. "Nami?"

Nami smirked as she held up her Log Pose for all of us to see. "The needle's pointing downwards, captain. We have our heading!"

"Alright!" Luffy whooped as he leapt to his feet, pounding his fists eagerly. "That means that once we get down there, our next adventure begins! Come on! It's time for us to go home!" He shot his fist into the air. "BACK TO THE BLUE SEAS!"

And just like that, we reached the very edge of the Milky Road that heralded our return to the familiar and the end of this saga.

"Here we go…" Conis breathed as she gripped the Merry's railing.

As I eyed the sheer slope, knowing what was coming up next, my body reacted. My stomach blazed, my blood raced…

"Pff…"

And really, did you expect me to do anything else but laugh?

The noise hit the rest of the crew like a gunshot, causing them to snap their gazes to me in horror.

"Oh, no…" Vivi breathed numbly.

Lassoo snorted in a bored manner… before tensing and snapping his head forwards as he sniffed at the air. "Wait a second…"

"They know something we don't!" Chopper deduced with a wail.

Before anyone could say anything, the Merry tipped over the edge of the slide and started barrelling down the Road, gravity dragging us down at breakneck speeds.
“HANG ONTO YOUR EVERYTHING!” Soundbite hollered.

"Pffff…” I let slip as I felt the wind nip at me, pumping my adrenaline even harder.

"YIPE!” Lassoo yipped as he scrambled over to a rope from the Merry's rigging and sank his teeth into it.

Usopp, meanwhile, grabbed my shoulders and started shaking me furiously. "WHAT'S ABOUT TO HAPPEN, YOU LUNATIC, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!?"

"Here it comes, here it comes!” Su repeated eagerly.

"I never dreamed I'd actually be able to experience this for myself!” Conis giggled.

"PFFFFFFFF!"

"Conis, Su, dear sweet angels both!” Sanji cried out in a simultaneously heartfelt and panicked tone of voice. "I beg of you, grace us humble mortals with an answer! What's coming!?"

Conis blinked as she was drawn out of her euphoria before smiling beatifically at Sanji. "Why, the drop, of course."

And not a moment later, we hit the curve, and silence reigned as the Merry leapt into the void.

What happened next… well, really now, do I have to spell it out for you?

In the face of us all floating from our nascent freefall, in the face of the great nothingness laid out far below us, in the face of everyone's faces…

"PFFFFFFFFAHAAHAAHAAHAAHAAAAAA!"

Was there any other option available but for me to roar at the top of my lungs with laughter? And I certainly wasn't alone, either!

"BAAAAAAANZAAAAAAlIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII!" Soundbite whooped and hollered.

"Wheeeeee!" Conis squealed childishly, her arms raised above her head like she was on a rollercoaster.

"TSEEHEEHEEHEEEHEEEEEEE! I FEEL ALIIIIIIIVE!" Su cackled as she spun in circles in the free-fall.

Fifteen exhilarating free-falling seconds later, however, found us beginning a casual descent, suspended by an enormous octopus balloon. Most of the crew was relieved. I, on the other hand…

"PFHAHAHAHAHAHA! YOU SHOULD HAVE SEEN YOUR FACES!” I laughed.

"Now I get why you kept pulling this off two days ago, Cross: it really is fun!” Su cackled, rolling on the deck.

"I… I have to admit, that was funny,” Conis said, giggling behind her hand.

"CROSS, YOU SON OF A—!” Sanji began, before melting at seeing Conis laughing.

"Huh. HAS ANYONE actually FINISHED THAT?” Soundbite questioned curiously.
"I'm pleased to say that they haven't!" I said cheerfully.

"I'll change that right now if you don't fucking apologize for making me think we were falling to our deaths!" Nami screeched, one second away from punching me. I opened my mouth to retort before a sobering realization hit me.

"Now that you mention it, I do owe someone an apology," I admitted sheepishly, moving to the front of the ship and patting the metal brace that supported our (I swear it's true) still-sweating figurehead. "Sorry for the scare, Merry, I just wanted to have some fun, is all. Don't worry, we won't let anything like that happen to you on our way to the next island, no matter what."

A solemn silence reigned on the deck as I felt everyone agree from the bottom of their hearts. Even the groaning of the deck sounded appreciative.

I then proceeded to ruin the moment by grinning impishly. "You've gotta admit, though, that was funny, huh?"

**KLONK!**

"OW!" I yelped, clutching my skull in agony. "The hell—!?"

Usopp held up the pulley that had clocked me with a grin. "Looks like she didn't think so!"

"But that admittedly was," Robin chuckled.

"**PREACH IT, sista!**" Soundbite chortled.

"The ship is alive?" Conis and Su asked in unison.

"Trust me, this isn't even the weirdest part of our crew," Vivi reassured them.

Conis stared blankly at her for a second before grinning in a slightly demented manner. "I am so excited and so terrified!"

I grumbled at the laughter of the crew for a moment before sighing morosely. "Alright, alright, I'll be a good sport and admit I deserved that. And I'll even still share the advice I was going to give out anyways." I pointed at our captain. "Luffy, as fun as I'm sure it would be, please don't climb up on the octopus and bounce on it." I held up a hand to forestall his whining before it could start. "It'll make the air go out of it faster, and I know you don't want to make the Merry suffer a belly flop when we just talked about how hard the journey's been on her."

Luffy's disappointment evaporated, and he nodded firmly.

"As for you, Usopp," I nodded at the sniper. "Without anything bothering the octopus, we should reach the bottom gently, no problem. Still, if you could use a Jet Dial or two every so often to top it off with air, it definitely wouldn't hurt."

Usopp nodded with just as much firmness.

"Right. Well, with that said, there's not much to do but relax and enjoy the view until we reach the bottom. So, I think I'll take this opportunity to wrap up this part of our story for the rest of the world," I said, pulling out the transceiver. I stopped, however, as that beautiful sound echoed from above us, and I smiled. "Hey, Soundbite, any chance of you being able to replicate that?"

The snail, with an expression of utmost solemnity on his face, shook his head. "**Not in a million**
years,” he breathed reverently.

I nodded. But still, to make sure that that bell stayed safe… the rest of the world didn't need to know that.

-0-

On a Marine battleship thousands of meters beneath the Straw Hat Pirates, and several dozens of miles away on top of that, one of the cofounders of MI4 chewed on her tenth cigarette of the day. Jeremiah Cross’ track record for accuracy had been astonishing, but she was simply unable to believe him when he disparaged Vergo like that. She had served alongside the man for so long, and he showed nothing but decency. She was certain that, if only this once, Cross was wrong. And then T-Bone made his vow, and all of that certainty shattered as Cross’ words rang in her mind:

'You know as well as I do that nothing I've told you so far has been wrong.'

All she had to go against that was her own experience, and it seemed that for the second time that month, her worldview had been forced into a higher focus. First the Navy as a whole, and now Vergo… was she just incompetent at being able to see the truth of something, past the surface?

"Captain Hina!"

A pair of familiar voices wrenched her out of those thoughts, and she scowled at the two men. "I said not to disturb me unless strictly necessary."

"I think this qualifies, Captain: we've spotted the Barto Club! Should we pursue?" Fullbody asked.

Hina processed that, calling to mind the reputation that 'Black Bart' Bartolomeo had been gathering for himself; his bounty would break 100 million before long if not stopped. Her expression hardened; taking down an infamous pirate like that would help to blow off some steam.

"Full speed after them, fire as soon as we're in range," she ordered quietly.

"Yes, Captain!" they responded before running out. Hina made to follow before pausing, actually considering that idiotic but admittedly formidable duo: A former pirate who nearly razed a village, and a formerly famous Marine who accepted a full demotion to absolve his crimes. Opposite sides of the law, and yet they had become best friends. And they watched each other's backs every day, fully trusting each other. Up until now, she hadn't batted an eyelash at their sob story, simply accepting their strength in her fleet and ignoring them whenever it wasn't pertinent for her to pay attention to them. But…

Hina bit out a tsk as she kneaded the bridge of her nose. No, no, she couldn't afford to doubt them like that. She might have been wrong about Vergo, but so had the rest of the Marines. She couldn't be blamed for not catching him sooner. Fullbody and Jango were both egotistical and somewhat narcissistic morons, but that didn't change the fact that they had good hearts, that they tried.

Hina paused as she considered that point. They had good hearts. What if… what if she reversed the assumption? If there were Marines like Vergo who seemed perfect, to the point of being able to fake being decent all while utterly evil inside… then out there, amidst all those vile pirates on the high seas, the ones who—unlike the Straw Hats—depicted themselves to be as utterly ignoble as the Marines claimed… could there quite possibly be some who had some measure of good within themselves?

Her reflections continued in a similar vein until they came within firing distance of the ship. But
despite the fact that the effectiveness of her spears lay in the fact that no ship could deflect them... the ship was deflecting them. No, it wasn't just deflecting them, it was *slapping* them away, full-stop with translucent barriers of energy. Barriers that slowly morphed into the form of... well, now, that was just *juvenile*.

"He's taunting us," Fullbody snarled, attempting to obliterate the ship through his spyglass.

"The Barrier-Barrier Fruit," Hina growled, gritting her teeth as she yanked the slack out of her gloves. "Come up alongside them. Hina wants to deal with them personally."

"Aye, Captain. FULL SPEED AHEAD, BRING US UP ALONGSIDE THEM!" Jango repeated to the rest of the crew.

The Barto Club made no effort to get away from them. In fact, they even had the gall to drop anchor and *wait* for them. And as the two ships came up alongside each other, several figures leapt and one animal *flew* over the gap between vessels. All present, even Hina, gawked at the sight.

"Hehahahaha! Captain 'Black Cage' Hina! Taking you down should be a nice boost on our reputation!" Bartolomeo cackled, his arms crossed over his chest and his fingers crossed over each other. Behind him was a veritable array of forces: half were merely commonplace everyday thugs that had followed him onto the battleship's deck, but the other half... the other half were an issue.

Half of the force was composed of a few individuals who stood out for how nonchalant and comfortable they seemed, as well as the aura of danger they all seemed to exude. Of these, there were three whom she recognized enough to elicit an aggravated scowl.

"Well, isn't this convenient? Hina doesn't know what hole you three crawled out of, but she's glad that you did. You three got away from me once, but it won't happen this time."

"Kyahahaha! Oh, Hina, you really think you have a chance of catching us again? There's a reason we joined up with this guy instead of laying low for the rest of our lives like the other escapees," Miss Valentine threw her head back and cackled eagerly.

"Laying low for the rest of our lives..." Mr. 5 droned contemplatively before shrugging. "Well, I for one would have been all for it, if it weren't for Jeremiah Cross essentially turning the kingdom we were trying to lay low in into a whole new kind of war zone, and one where we could barely show our faces, at that. So, when Bartolomeo came along, we decided to make a fresh start."

"After all, the last time we underestimated a rookie that was on the fast track to infamy, we paid dearly for it. So we chose to follow a winner this time," Miss Goldenweek said tonelessly, swirling her paintbrush over her palette in preparation.

"You'll regret that choice after this. Because unfortunately for you all..." the Captain hissed as she slammed her fist into her palm. "Hina is currently pissed,"

"Bring it on!" Bartolomeo cackled, lolling his tongue out.

Both pirates and Marines surged forward to attack—

"*Don don don don!*"

Before all movement froze, and all attention snapped towards the nearest Transponder Snail. As it let out another "*Don don don don!*", Hina looked back at Bartolomeo, who was staring at her neutrally. Then he smiled, chuckled, scratched the back of his head sheepishly and *blushed*, of all things.
"Heheh… uh, any chance we can call a truce?" he requested in a hopeful tone. Hina stared at him, along with his companions, before ultimately sighing and extending a hand.

"Until the SBS is over," she agreed in a neutral tone.

Bartolomeo grinned (or leered, it was hard to tell with a face like that), shaking her hand with distinctly un-crossed fingers before snapping his attention to the snail, which one of the Marines duly picked up. Any lingering tension between the factions promptly melted away upon hearing the sound on the other end: a beautiful harp melody. Lawbreakers and law-keepers alike milled about the deck as the music continued for another minute or so, before finally, the familiar voice of Jeremiah Cross came through.

"Now, that's a pleasant way to wait. Well! Hello, loyal viewers, and—"

"Welcome back to the SBS," came a familiar voice.

"Welcome—really, Conis? REALLY?!" Cross groused.

"What? But earlier you said—?"

"HEEHEEHEEEhooohoohooahaha!"

"SOUNDBITE!"

Bartolomeo roared with laughter, and most of the other pirates and Marines listening chuckled as well.

"I swear, SOMEDAY I will manage to start this thing again!"

"Sure, when the OCTOPUS SHOGUNATE learns to FLY!" Soundbite chortled.

"…Well, stranger things have happened, so I'm still hopeful," Cross finally sighed in a tone of voice that said he actually wasn't. "Anyways, first things first: I am pleased to announce that as of a few hours ago, we, the Straw Hat Pirates, have officially recruited a couple of new crewmates, one of which is the harpist responsible for the beautiful music you just heard. You may remember them from my broadcast yesterday that was… shall we say, derailed?"

"Understatement," chorused several listeners, pirate and Marine alike, all looking rather green.

"But yes," came the female voice again. "Once again, I'm Conis, and as of now, I am the gunner of the Straw Hat Pirates."

"And I'm Su, a cloud fox! I'm coming along too because Conis needs me beside her to have half a chance of not firing a bazooka backwards again!" came another feminine voice.

"STOP BRINGING UP MY MISTAKES, SU!" Conis cried indignantly.

"And why would I do that?" the fox responded in a tone of honest confusion.

"HA! Glad you're ON BOARD, FURBALL! TWO annoying talking animals ARE BETTER THAN ONE!"

"Hey, watch it, slimeball. You're annoying. I am a superior being of grace, beauty… and snark."

"Those two together on one ship…" Miss Goldenweek started slowly.
"With the ability to speak to the world…" Miss Valentine queasily grit out.

"Whenever they so choose?!" Fullbody and Jango finished incredulously.

Mr. 5 dug a flask out of his coat and raised it in a salute. "Here's to you, sanity. I'm glad I managed to keep you around for so long." And with that, he started draining the bottle.

"Alright, if you two are finished, it's time we wrapped up the tale of Skypiea, and the city of gold. Unfortunately, the lost city is now merely a city. You see, Eneru managed to find his way there, and he stripped every bit of gold away to build his flying ship, the Ark Maxim. As you heard from Wiper yesterday, he used that power to destroy both Angel Island and the Shandians' home; only Luffy's immunity to lightning saved us all from being killed. But alas, though Eneru lost, he was not out for long; the last I saw, his Ark was sailing even higher than we were… straight towards the moon. Will he get there? Will anyone ever see him again? Maybe, maybe not, but the fact remains that the gold is gone."

"… He's a literal lunatic," Bartolomeo said, jaw dropped in astonishment.

THWAP!

"OW!" Bartolomeo yelped, glaring daggers at Hina as he held the side of his head she'd cuffed.

"What the hell happened to the truce, bitch!?"

"In all fairness, Captain," Goldenweek cut in as she munched down on a ricecracker. "You deserved it."

"…tsk…"

"The only significant piece of gold that he never managed to get was the great golden bell that you all heard ringing out yesterday. Luffy managed to ring it, but circumstances led to it falling into the cloud sea afterwards; all that remains of its ring now are the Tone Dials that recorded it, and Soundbite's abilities. And as for what few scraps of gold apart from that that escaped from Eneru's notice? Well… three guesses who they belong to now."

"And the NAMI rejoiced," Soundbite chuckled.

CRASH!

Hina's attention snapped back to the pirates, where the ostrich-sized feathery dragon—which she still couldn't believe—was pressing one pirate to the ground who'd had his sword drawn. The girl on its back had her arms crossed and was glowering darkly.

"Do you not know the meaning of the word 'truce'?!" she snapped.

"Thank you, Apis, Lindy," Bartolomeo sighed, shaking his head in what was clearly disappointment. "Gin, can you take care of him?"

"On it, Captain," the insomniac-looking man said, hoisting the man over his back before jumping back towards their ship. Hina watched him for a second before pausing as a creeping suspicion entered her mind. Without even turning her head, the Marine Captain swung her arm behind her, and was sadly not disappointed when she caught her own idiot duo as they made to rush Bartolomeo, binding them together for what had to be the third time that month.

She glared silent daggers down at them for a second before the sound of snickering snapped her attention back to Bartolomeo, who was leering down at the pair. "You ever wish you could just
pump the missing graymatter into them?"

Hina stared at him for a second before chuckling in agreement. "Only every other day." She started to turn back to the snail when a thought occurred to her. Acting on instinct, she dug her emergency flask out of her coat and held it out to Bartolomeo. "Scotch?"

The pirate blinked in surprise before smirking and accepting the flask. "Sure thing!" He then waved at Miss Valentine. "HEY, TINA, HEAD BACK TO THE CANNIBAL AND WHIP UP A BUFFET FOR US AND OUR NEW PALS! AND MAKE IT MORE THAN JUST CHOCOLATE THIS TIME!"

"STOP CALLING ME TINA, YOU SHARK-TOOTHED ASSHOLE!" Valentine shot back, though she still leaped back to their ship.

"You let her get away with calling you that?" Hina asked mildly.

"Meh," Bartolomeo shrugged indifferently. "I piss them all off, they insult me, it evens out. And what about you?" He jabbed a thumb over at the smirking transponder snail. "Straight-laced Marine like you likes the SBS?"

Hina made to answer, then paused as a thought came to her, one that built off of her earlier contemplations. Slowly, she nodded in agreement. "Yes… yes, Hina does. It's an interesting story, actually."

-o-

In a dingy, rundown apartment, a Transponder Snail partially cowered in its own shell as it was forced to relay the global show. It had been glad to do so several times before, but those times, it hadn't been speaking to a hostile audience.

"But, though the gold is gone, Eneru's tyranny is over. Skypieans and Shandians have come together on the remaining island, and have begun working towards a new society of peace. With the war over, what more could they ask?"

BLAM!

The Snail suppressed a whimper as its eyestalks went ramrod still, unwilling to allow them to quiver even an inch lest they come into the line of fire yet again, rather than allowing the projectile to pass between them as it had done this time.

On the opposite side of the room, a huge, menacing vulture stared at the point of impact for a second before snorting and redirecting her gaze to the pistol she held in her talons. She used her wing to fiddle with the weapon's sights for a moment before laying it on the bed next to the rest of the arsenal she had laid out and picked out yet another gun, which she started disassembling, intently analyzing every piece as she went.

The Transponder Snail shivered fearfully as it continued to speak.

"Alright, so maybe that's kind of meaningless coming from us, who are sailing away from this mess with a small fortune harvested from the innards of a gigantic amphibious Sea King serpent. And no, I'm not making that up. But despite that, well... As much of a shame that it is that the bell is lost, at least it will forever be remembered, and the war's now over. Now, the people of the sky can look forward to a future of peace and prosperity!"

A squelching noise from another corner of the room caught the snail's attention, and against its better
judgement, it chose to glance that way. The gastropod immediately regretted that decision, as it was then forced to fight against its own gag reflex with all its power.

The otter situated in the corner of the room shared none of the snail's disgust. In fact, it seemed to show no emotions at all save for grim determination as it grit its teeth and plunged a needle and thread into and out of its own flesh, over and over and over again, methodically sewing up a vicious-looking gash that was open in its arm.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the otter's stitching had fully spanned the wound, and without even a second of pause it gripped the thread in its teeth and yanked, pulling the gash shut before snapping the thread and tying it off. With its gruesome surgery completed, the otter didn't miss a beat as it withdrew a pair of vicious-looking knives from where they were embedded in the wall and started scraping them against one another, sharpening them simultaneously in a rapid-fire flurry of steel.

"So, that's the end of that chapter in our journey; as of now, we're slowly making our way back down to the blue sea… and I have to say, this sunset looks amazing. While we admire it, I think now would be a good time to introduce a new segment on the SBS: Sky Life with Conis and Su. For all of those dreamers or naysayers listening, take a listen to what the sky islands are like."

"Heso, everyone. I suppose the best place to start would be with that word…"

The snail glanced out the window longingly, staring out at the city laid out before it. As it stared, it found itself growing curious.

If the city looked beautiful from down here, what did it look like from the peak of the gigantic fountain that crowned it?

-0-

"Why am I not surprised?" Crocus chuckled wryly, listening to the Straw Hats' new gunner as she spoke about the science behind the White Sea and the White-White Sea. "Roger took the mother, and now Straw Hat takes the daughter. It looks like he may just be the one Roger was waiting for after all."

"—And so, with the added density, the White Sea is capable of supporting both ships and wildlife. Sky sharks can be a danger, but they're as much a delicacy for those who can actually hunt them."

"REPRE—Dot dot dot dot!—SENT! Oh, A CALLER! Go for the SBS!"

A soft tapping noise followed.

"GASTRO-BLUR in effect, go ahead!"

"I'm just wondering, isn't the air thinner up there? I mean, if it's that high above the ground…" came a voice, blurred identically to the mystery crewmate's.

"Oh, yes, it's much thinner," Conis replied casually. "But we've grown used to it, and anyone who comes here can grow used to it as well. It takes anywhere from about fifteen minutes to over a day, depending on your constitution, but it's not hard once you've adapted."

"I see, sort of like climbing a mountain… but in that case, what's going to happen to you if you're heading to a much higher concentration of air?"
The silence that followed that question was deafening, though it was quickly filled by the sound of two pairs of feet dashing across wood and two voices screaming out "CHOPPER!" desperately.

Things were quiet again for a second until Su spoke up. "Did... did they just leave us here?"

"Humans are not THE CALMEST OF species... HOW YOU FEELIN', BY THE WAY?"

"Eh... can't complain, really. A bit heady maybe? Eh, we'll see. For now, though... HA! They've left us alone with a connection to the world! Wanna try setting a world record for annoying the most people at once?"

"DO I!? LET'S BEGIN!"

"Alright! Now, to start... ah..."

Crocus chuckled as the silence returned tenfold.

"...you got anything?"

"Nada."

"That's what I was afraid of. This is harder than it looks..."

"Why do you think we keep them around?"

"Fair point... damn it, we need a distraction!"

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, THE MUSICAL STYLINGS OF MISTER CONWAY TWITTY!"

"...was that a reference?"

"Damn straight!"

Crocus chuckled as the music began, absently considering that Florida must have a lot of musicians. But he still couldn't fight down a smirk as he thought back to when they had left Upper Yard, and their new crewmate had to get her sea legs. He hoped that doctor of theirs knew what he was doing. Oxygen poisoning was not fun, even if it was hilarious to watch.

Still, there were going to be quite a few saps who were in for the surprise of their lives. Nothing like watching a thin, attractive young woman punching out men three times her size and muscle mass.

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"Okay, I think you're good," Chopper said as he packed away his instruments. "The slower descent is letting your body adapt much more easily. As long as you don't have any big shocks within the next few hours, you shouldn't have any problems."

"Oh, thank goodness," Conis sighed. "Those pamphlets you had about oxygen poisoning were..."

"Alarming?" I ventured. "Panic-inducing? Terrifying beyond all rational thought?"

"... One of those."

I nodded. "Alright, let's get back to the SBS... and hope that Soundbite and Su haven't driven the
world completely insane over the past ten minutes."

Thankfully, they hadn't, nor had they chosen some completely tasteless dreck for filler music. I honestly hadn't thought they'd had it in them.

"Alright, loyal viewers, with the hopes that Soundbite and Su, who are currently looking entirely too innocent," I gave the pair a pointed glare, which got them both whistling in a manner that only heightened my suspicions. "Haven't done too much—though the viewcount suggests that they haven't, thankfully…” I looked around into the darkness surrounding us, grinning as I felt the (relatively) natural waves of the Grand Line rocking us back and forth. "Anyways, I'm glad to announce that we're finally back down to the grand blue ocean. Now, the question is, where have we —"

I cut myself off as my eyes adjusted to the dark and I took in our surroundings. Part of me was curious about how nobody had seen this coming, but most of me was fighting the urge to swear at the top of my lungs. I only partially succeeded.

"Oh, fuck me," I summarized flatly before tensing as I realized that I had to end the show now. "Ah, viewers, I'm really sorry to cut you all off like this, but something's come up aaaaaaand I'm-gonna-have-to-call-you-back-BYE!" And with that I hastily rammed the transceiver down in its cradle.

Not a moment too soon, because a moment later we were lit up like a Christmas tree and the screams of over a dozen sirens echoed around us.

"Cross?" Nami drew out in an apprehension-filled tone of voice.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I announced grimly. "Welcome to the island of Navarone, a.k.a… the impregnable and inescapable Marine Base G-8."

Cross-Brain AN: Significance of the Transponder number? See if you can figure it out; we'll say it in our next broadcast.
Chapter 32: Invasion of Navarone! The Straw Hats Drop In!

Hornet AN: And a three...

Patient AN: And a two...

Xomniae AN: And now it's time for CHAPTER 32!

Cross-Brain AN: Surprise! As an additional manner of compensation for not updating for so long, here's the next chapter already! Enjoy! Oh, yes, and the significance of the transceiver number? In letters, it's "HEART BROB."

"Cross, I'm willing to admit that as infuriating as it was, not telling us about that drop at Cloud's End was harmless. On the other hand, NOT TELLING US THAT WE'LL LAND IN FUCKING NAVARONE IS ANYTHING BUT HARMLESS!" Sanji roared over the connection.

"You had better have a damn good reason why you didn't warn us about this," Nami snarled.

"Alright, lay off the third degree, would you!?" I demanded indignantly. "Trust me, if I'd known that this was going to happen, I'd have said something! My knowledge is divided into two categories: things that will happen, and things that may happen. This was in the second category, and I expected that the fact that we didn't belly flop down and instead floated down gently from top to bottom would be enough to make sure that we didn't land here. But clearly, I was wrong."

"The best laid plans..." Robin said dryly.

"Ah, I'm sorry for interrupting, but..." Conis cut in slowly, and very queasily. "Cross, did you just say you had knowledge of the future!?"

"Trust me, sister, you learn not to question the crazy things he says very fast," Raphey deadpanned.

"It will all be made clear soon enough, don't worry," I absently reassured them before grinning as I tried desperately to put a positive spin on things. "But, but! Getting back on topic and before anyone gets too pissed off at me, look on the bright side! There's one massive benefit to the fact that we've landed here."

"Really? And what, pray tell, would that be, Mister Jeremiah?" Vivi asked sourly.

"The Marine in charge of this base, Vice Admiral Jonathan, is a prime candidate for joining MI4, along with the vast majority of the Marines present in this base, if not all of them."

"...Well, that does put everything in a new perspective," Nami admitted in a neutral tone.

"Glad to hear it!"

The exact moment that I had stated where we were, I had tossed Soundbite to Isaiah and told the rest of the crew to scatter. Every man, woman, and animal for themselves, sans Carue staying with Vivi and Su with Conis. For my part, I somehow wound up closer to the base's central spire than I expected… actually, I'll be honest: I somehow wound up on top of the spire. Don't ask me how, because everything after I told everyone to scatter is bit of a blur. All I knew for certain was that the blood on the forearms of my bandages was not mine, and thankfully not enough to be blatantly lethal..."
Either way, Isaiah joined me shortly after I'd managed to find a place to hunker down, though Soundbite remained in his clutches for the moment, not willing to touch me while I was covered in salt water, and had promptly connected everyone in the crew together. Fortunately, the entirety of the fortress was within Soundbite's hearing range, even if we weren't right in the middle.

Currently, everyone was at different parts of the fortress; some, in the case of the Dugongs, were in the water, albeit floating on the surface in the shadows so that Soundbite could reliably communicate with them, while others were in the woods on the base's outer ring, and others yet in the base itself. Basically, anywhere and everywhere except the Merry. The only ones who stayed onboard the ship were Terry, who was busy acting as an easily overlooked lookout for us, and Lassoo, who was blending in with the rest of the arsenal in his full gun form. And though the quickly awakening fortress was swarming with Marines, the vast majority of them were, fortunately, focused more upon the ship than anything else, giving us all the time we needed to get away.

All things considered, things were going about as smoothly as one might expect.

"Ugh... I don't feel good at all..."

Well, almost; our resident angel seemed to be coping poorly with the sudden shock that had hit as soon as we reached the blue sea. I could only wince in response to the thought of those pamphlets of Chopper's. Speaking of our doctor...

"Soundbite, can you lead me to Conis?" the reindeer asked.

"Mmph... head along the SHORELINE—NO, the other way—YEAH, JUST KEEP GOING THAT WAY. No Marines in your WAY RIGHT NOW, but hurry!" Soundbite said.

"Got it."

"So, what are we going to do now, Cross? You're the tactician here," Zoro grumbled.

"Well, I won't lie," I said, shaking out my clothes in an effort to dislodge the traces of sea water that seemed determined to stick to me. "I only remember a few details about this place. It's an enclosed base, so the only way to the ocean is using their Sea Gate. And in any case, we won't be able to leave until the Merry is in a better position for us to either sneak or storm back on."

"And how long will that take, Cross?" Usopp asked.

"We'll need to hide out until the sun comes up, at least. After that... I can point out a few places where we can blend in, and Soundbite's eavesdropping should make it easy enough for the rest of us to steer clear of trouble. In the meantime—"

"WHO ARE YOU CALLING SILLY-LOOKING?!!"

I jumped as Terry's voice bellowed out of Soundbite.

"Ow! OW! Alright, I'm sorry—OUCH!"

Then came a voice that I was reasonably sure was Jonathan's, and I couldn't help but snicker.

"YOU SHOULD BE SORRY! ONLY A COMPLETE IDIOT WOULD FAIL TO RECOGNIZE THE SHEER POWER OF A MEMBER OF THE BEAR GLOVE TRIBE!"
"ALRIGHT---OW!—JUST STOP PECKING---AGH!"

"…should we just let Terry chase everyone away?" Nami asked, half-serious.

"Heh, no. As funny as this is, anyone who's attained the rank of Vice Admiral isn't someone to take lightly; a prerequisite for the position is being able to use Haki," I said. "And besides that, Jonathan is a master tactician; with how much he knows about us from the SBS, we're going to have to be very careful not to get—"

I cut myself off as, walking along the edge of the spire, I recognized a very specific balcony below me. I couldn't suppress a snicker as my mind leapt to a specific plan of action. "On the other hand, that works too. Brace yourselves, everyone, I'm about to do something stupid."

"Oh, dear," Robin said, apparently unsure whether to laugh or groan in dread at what I was doing.

"Care to clue us in, Cross?" Nami asked blandly.

"I'm about to risk my life to check on the loose gold from Nola's stomach they've no doubt already moved off the Merry," I deadpanned.

"No further questions, your honor."

"I thought not," I chuckled before glancing at my partner in crime. "Now, then, Soundbite? Follow Jonathan."

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"The color and smell of the coffee, the rather temperamental South Bird, and the ancient gold… it would appear that the SBS was accurate. The Straw Hat Pirates went to Jaya recently," stated the red-haired Vice Admiral.

"Commander, you're saying that it isn't really a—?" posed a blonde-haired Marine.

Vice Admiral Jonathan waved his hand with a scoff. "Please, Henrick. I know the circumstances are suspicious, but we all heard the SBS on the way down. I don't know where the crew is, but I know that they're in the base and that that's no ghost ship."

A sunglasses-wearing Marine spoke next. "I don't understand, Commander. Weren't you just calling it a ghost ship earlier in front of the rest of the men?"

"Frankly, our men are a little too green to deal with a situation like this; as decent as they've portrayed themselves on the SBS, the fact remains that the Straw Hat Pirates have earned those bounties of theirs. If we tell everyone that they've infiltrated our ranks, it'll cause panic and confusion that will no doubt aid the pirates in whatever purpose they have here. So for now, we continue calling it a ghost ship, understood?"

"With all due respect, Commander, I'd like to raise a concern," stated Jonathan's right hand, a brown-haired Lieutenant Commander named Drake.

"Yes, Drake?"

"As powerful as Straw Hat and his crew are, I think that the biggest threat among them is that of Jeremiah Cross and his snail. From what the Marines have pieced together, Soundbite is able to hear anything in a one-mile radius, as well as make anyone in that range hear anything. And the fact that that psychotic bird actually spoke proved that the snail was close enough to us that it could translate
what he was saying."

Drake folded his arms. "If they weren't exaggerating, then it's possible that they could hijack our own communications to throw the whole base into chaos. It's even possible that they could be eavesdropping on us right now!"

"Well, it's good to see that Jonathan has some intelligent men under his command."

The five of them immediately stopped walking as the unmistakable voice of Jeremiah Cross echoed around them.

The sunglasses-wearing Marine grimaced. "Apparently, he is. And he's as annoying as we expected, too."

"HEY! I'M the annoying one!" came Soundbite's signature medley of voices.

"And I'm the crazy one. Allow me to demonstrate: Vice Admiral Jonathan, would you be willing to speak for negotiations? I'm currently in the process of ensuring that our navigator will not rip my head off for finding that any of our gold is missing from what you confiscated. Seriously, if all 500 million isn't right here like I promised, she will burn this place to the ground."

Vice Admiral Jonathan seemed stunned for a minute. Then he threw back his head and laughed.

"What is it, sir?" Drake asked.

Jonathan sighed as he got his laughter under control, smirking as he spoke again. "You've painted yourself as quite the brazen individual, Mister Cross, but I have to admit I'm surprised that of all the places you could have gone, you picked my personal office."

"HE WHAT?!" chorused all four of the Marines with Jonathan.

"HE picked HIS personal office. Do you have a HEARING PROBLEM?"

"With you around? The default answer to that question is a resounding yes… or at minimum, a maybe depending on your mood and your opinion of the individuals in question."

"Fair point."

"Now, then, getting back on topic… are you willing to talk, Vice Admiral Jonathan? Mind you, if you choose not to attend this little meeting, that's fine as well. I'll just have a conversation with your wife Jessica instead. The topic of discussion… your eating habits, maybe?"

"…And as impossibly well-informed as he painted himself, too," the blonde Marine ground out as Jonathan paled dramatically.

"I have not even begun to demonstrate that, gentlemen, and really, I got that last bit from inspecting his bin. Seriously, for a genius, that's kind of low-brow."

"…I'm on my way, Mister Cross," Jonathan finally said.

Commander Drake promptly started to sign orders to a nearby soldier, and jumped when a loud buzzer blasted through the air.

"YOUR SLEEVES are rubbing together, dipshit."
"I won't even deign to try and guess what you were signing, it's so obvious. And for the record, if anyone except for Jonathan shows up, they'll be talking in chicken clucks or flatulence until we leave. You have been warned, people."

"… Well, now I'm tempted to bring some of my subordinates with me just to see what you'll come up with," Jonathan said wryly.

"COMMANDER JONATHAN!" chorused four indignant voices, prompting both Jonathan and their two eavesdroppers to laugh anew.

"Heh… alright. In all seriousness, Henrick, go and reinforce security at the coast as well as around the Sea Gate," Jonathan said to the blonde-haired Marine, who saluted and departed.

"Cormac, I also want the brig, the ammunition store, and all major passageways secured. You'll have expanded authority to manage all related personnel," he added to the sunglasses-wearing Marine. He too saluted and departed.

"Chief Petty Officer Holger, gather a small force of men to keep perpetual guard around the Straw Hat Pirates' ship. If there are any issues, send someone to report to me in person, don't use a Transponder Snail." Following his orders, Holger bustled off, leaving only Drake and Jonathan.

"Drake… I'm going to meet with Cross alone. Go the mess hall and tell Jessica the situation—only Jessica—and then report to me for further orders. Understood?"

Drake nodded with perfect understanding before running as fast as his legs could carry him. As soon as he was out of sight, Jonathan sighed and continued in the direction he had been going. Only two minutes later, he opened the door to his office, and his eyes immediately fell on the figure that could only be Jeremiah Cross, sitting right in his chair with his feet propped up on his desk, which had been turned so that he could sit at it while facing the door. He was a young man, with short, dirty blonde hair and mischievous yet lazy eyes, dressed in dark and gray clothing. A grinning Transponder Snail was perched on his shoulder, and what little of his arms could be seen due to them being crossed behind his head were covered in bandages from the elbows down.

"Vice Admiral Jonathan. It's a pleasure to meet you," he said with a smirk.

"I must admit to returning the sentiment, Mister Cross," Jonathan replied.

"Really, now? I wouldn't expect to hear that from someone who had earned the favor of Admiral Akainu."

Jonathan flinched, his face darkening before he could stop it in response to the man's name.

"Well, well, well," Cross cocked his eyebrow in surprise. "There's a very particular and unusual reaction. Care to come in and talk about it?"

Jonathan was silent for a moment before chuckling ruefully and stepping into the office, closing the door behind him in the process. "Once again, Mister Cross, I have to admit I'm surprised. Your reputation precedes you, but your actions to date have barely managed to do you justice."

Cross returned the grin eagerly. "Well, really, in situations like this, it's either that or breaking down and panicking, and Nami, Usopp, Carue, and Vivi already have that covered."

"I HEARD THAT!"

The pirate jumped, presumably at the volume blaring in his ear, before pinning the cackling snail on
his shoulder with a glare, and Jonathan chuckled. "And his reputation as an incurable prankster seems to be accurate also."

"Thank you, thank you very much," Soundbite purred.

"Took you long enough to use that one," Cross muttered before looking back at Jonathan with a solemn expression. "So, Vice Admiral, we appear to be in a delicate situation here. If you're a fan of my show, you know my stance on pirates and Marines. I happen to believe that you're one of those who follows his morals, rather than his orders… but the fact that you're one of Akainu's favorite students makes me doubtful."

Jonathan's grimace at the last line was not missed, prompting Cross to grin. "There it is again. So, you don't like the guy after all?"

Jonathan carefully schooled his expression, and crossed his arms. "What business do the Straw Hat Pirates have with Navarone? Why did you infiltrate our base?" he asked, clearly trying to change the subject.

"Hey, you heard the SBS," Cross shrugged dismissively. "The balloon octopus we used to get down from the Sky Island we visited didn't leave us any way of steering." He grinned hopefully. "I cut the connection before the sirens sounded. Marineford won't know that we're here unless someone tells them. If you open the gates, we'll gladly leave without any conflict."

"And you expect me to trust you?" Jonathan asked, then shook his head with a smirk. "I say that, but honestly, I'm prepared to believe you."

Cross's expression promptly dropped into a contemplative frown, and he swung his feet off the desk, gaze dropping down to stare at the Vice Admiral. "You're nothing like Akainu. How the hell did you ever make him favor you?"

The grimace returned, but he shook his head. "I'm sorry, Cross, but despite your reputation, you're still a pirate, and I'm still the commander of this base. I'm not about to let you escape."

Cross shrugged, spreading his arms in a helpless manner. "Yes, I didn't expect it to be that easy, but you don't really care that much about capturing us. You care a lot more about enforcing morale in this base."

Jonathan's jaw dropped briefly before he continued scrutinizing the pirate. "I knew you know a lot of things that you shouldn't, but this is ridiculous. How did you find that out?"

"Easy: you just told me," Cross drawled in an overly innocent tone of voice.

"THEY KEEP THE old book of tricks AROUND BECAUSE THEY STILL WORK, dontcha know!" Soundbite cackled.

Jonathan rolled his eyes before giving the pirate a contemplative look. "Would you care for a game of chess, Cross?"

Cross grimaced and waved his hand dismissively. "No thanks, I'm no good at the game."

"Ah, what a pity," Jonathan sighed. "Nobody in the base who actually knows how to play accepts my invitation because they know my skill, and outsiders rarely have the time or desire."

Cross chuckled. "Well, I think one of our crew could give you a run for your money, but I don't think that they would be willing to reveal their identity."
"Sorry, Vice Admiral," came a somewhat familiar distorted voice from mid-air, which actually did sound somewhat apologetic.

"Are all of them listening?"

"Of course they are," Cross scoffed as though it were the most obvious fact in the world. "After all, they're my crew, and I wouldn't want them to miss out on this. Anyway, if you're not willing to just let us go… then how about we make this into a game?"

Jonathan's eyebrows rose. "You have my attention."

Cross leaned back in his seat, clearly at ease. "While we try to get out of here, we of the Straw Hat Pirates will stress-test Navarone, help to demonstrate how stable of a fortress it is, and help to reinvigorate the soldiers. In short, we help to prove just how much of an asset this place is to the Navy. And in return…" Cross's gaze both sharpened and became slightly fearful. "You don't use your Haki to completely decimate us, so we actually have a fighting chance of escaping." His smile returned. "I'll even throw in dealing with your… shall we say, 'administrative difficulties' that are due to arrive tomorrow morning?"

Jonathan did not reply.

"Come on," Cross waved his hand lackadaisically. "You can easily explain away not calling us in to HQ by saying you wanted to handle us yourself. That's totally something somebody taught by Akainu… would…" The pirate slowly trailed off as a look of realization and awe came over him. "Of course. That's it, isn't it? You conned him."

Jonathan kept his expression decidedly neutral. "I'm sure I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about."

The Vice Admiral's stomach dropped as a smile slowly spread across Cross's face. "Nooooononono, you cannot fool me! Now it all makes sense! The only way someone like you would agree with that arrogant blowhard of a volcano would be if you were talking out of your ass! You never agreed with Akainu's stupid stance of 'Absolute Justice,' you were just smart enough to know that if you disagreed once he showed interest in you, that'd be the end of you one way or another! You took advantage of that son of a bitch for the sake of the doors his reputation would open for you!"

Jonathan had no doubt, judging from Cross' even wider grin, that his face had betrayed him. Of all the people to find out his secret, it had to be the pirate with the biggest mouth of the century.

"Ohohoh maan…" Cross chuckled as he sank back in the Vice Admiral's seat, crossing his arms behind his head. "I know some people who are just going to love to hear this, let me tell you…" He promptly sobered up in a panic when he noticed Jonathan's entire demeanor shift. "IIIII should have worded that better, huh?"

"YA THINK!?" Soundbite demanded incredulously.

"Mister Cross… allow me to issue a condition for the game that you've proposed," Jonathan stated firmly in a tone that had Cross quivering in terror. "If you fail to escape from Navarone in twenty-four hours, you will be caught in moments and be subsequently submitted to an interrogation so thorough that I will know memories of yours so deep and repressed that not even you remember them. Please take into consideration that while you're right in that I neither like nor respect Admiral Akainu, and while I did not learn the spirit of his lessons…" The man's gaze sharpened viciously. "That does not change the fact that I was an excellent student."
Cross processed that, and then frowned in contemplation. "…Wait to start those twenty-four hours until sunrise, and I'll accept that. But allow me this condition: if we do manage to escape, I'm going to let you in on one of my most well-guarded secrets, one that neither I nor my crew will ever expose on the SBS. Hell, even Soundbite knows better than to blurt it, just like this secret in particular, right, Soundbite?" The last sentence was finished with a pointed glare at the snail.

"YEAH, whatever," Soundbite rolled his eyes casually, until Cross grabbed his eyestalks and started pulling. "ALRIGHT, ALRIGHT, MUM'S THE word! …JERK…"

"Now, as I was saying… when you learn that secret, you're going to find yourself faced with what can only be defined as an ultimatum, and the decision is both effortless and excruciating. My condition is that you give it all the consideration that it deserves. Because I assure you, while nobody is going to hear your secret from my crew or myself, when you make that choice, one way or the other, it won't be a secret anymore."

"…That is very cryptic," Jonathan stated with a frown.

"Have you even been listening to my show? But in all fairness, it'll be the first thing you understand when the game is over. So, then…" Cross spread his hands invitingly. "Do we have a deal?"

Jonathan closed his eyes. Ultimately, Cross was right about everything he had said, including what he hoped to get out of their infiltration. And in the end, if they were actively trying to help him, then no matter how this turned out, he would ultimately win. He opened his eyes.

"I accept your challenge, Cross. But I warn you, you're not going to win."

Cross scoffed. "That's what they all say."

Jonathan smirked. "That's fair, I suppose. But you do realize that considering that you're here, I wouldn't be violating the rules of the game to arrest you here and now, right?"

"Of course. But considering this is me we're talking about… Hey, Soundbite, what's the appropriate thing to say in this case?" Cross replied, smirking back as he reached to one side, and separated the curtains. Jonathan blinked as he saw a rope reaching out of the window… and down to Cross. His smile faded even as Cross' grew.

"I think it would be… 'SO LONG, SUCKERS!'"

"Damn straight!" Cross cackled as he yanked on a ripcord attached to the side of his belt. Before the Vice Admiral could react, Cross was yanked backward and up out of the room.

"…damn it," Jonathan sighed wearily as he pinched the bridge of his nose, but smirked nonetheless. "Well played, Cross. Well played."

A moment later, the door to the office burst open, allowing Drake and a full squad of Marines to burst into the office.

"Vice Admiral Jonathan, sir! Are you alright?" the Commander demanded as he moved to secure the room.

Jonathan gave his second a flat look. "Drake, allow me to remind you that we are currently in Paradise and that the Straw Hats, strong as they are, are a rookie crew, and that Cross isn't a frontline fighter besides. Do you think I'm alright?"

"Ah…" Drake hesitated uncomfortably as he considered that.
Jonathan shrugged as he walked over to his window and looked upwards. "Put the base on high alert and gather the senior staff in five… ten minutes. I need time to devise a proper strategy."

"Sir?"

"Oh, you weren't aware? I thought you'd have realized it by now…" Jonathan turned back to Drake with an honest and eager smile. "The games have begun."

"THAT WAS PITIFUL!"

"Indeed!"

Drake and Jonathan paled in terror. "Not them…" they chorused.

"IT'S US!" Terry roared as he and Isaiah flapped through the window and landed on the Marine's shoulders. "WE WOULD HAVE STAYED INCOGNITO DURING THIS WHOLE THING!"

"But our pride as not just South Birds but as men refused to allow us to remain silent!" Isaiah huffed with a shake of his beak. "Such a weak and clichéd line… it made even my most luxuriant of beaks turn up in disgust!"

"WE'VE AGREED TO SET ASIDE OUR DIFFERENCES AND WORK TOGETHER, UNTIL BOTH OF YOUR PERSONALITIES ARE BURSTING WITH POWAAAAAAAH!" Terry proclaimed as he flexed his avian pecs furiously.

"As well as the cool, calm and collected suaveness needed to strike blind any woman who lays eyes upon you." Isaiah swept his wing out with a flourish, light glinting off the feathers.

"…I'm married?" Jonathan tried uneasily.

"I accept your wife's thanks in advance," the bird smoothly agreed.

The officers exchanged panicked glances as their thoughts synchronized in a single word: "Shit."

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I sighed in relief as I clambered up onto the top of the rock. Damn, epic as that exit had been, that belt taxed almost every single muscle I had. Still, there was work to be done, no rest for the wicked, the weary, or the weary wicked!

"So, I take it that everyone heard that?"

"A master tactician bold enough to con Akainu for the purpose of bolstering his reputation… I think we may have found the Marines' equivalent of Cross," Robin's voice said.

"Except that this guy actually has a whole brain," one of the male dugongs—Leo, I think—snarked.

"Boss, discipline your student."

"Nah, I think I'll let this one pass."

"Sweet!"

"Tsk…" I growled darkly before turning my attention to Soundbite. "By the way, I noticed something weird in there…"
"The cowards' chorus, I'M GUESSING?" he questioned. "Alright, look, IT'S SIMPLE: ever since the SBS started, I'VE BEEN ALTERING EVERYONE'S VOICES except YOURS and VIVI's because we need people to trust you. BETTER for everyone else not to be immediately IDENTIFIABLE. But don't worry! IF THEY ALREADY KNOW YOUR VOICE, people can ID you, so your families know who's who."

I was promptly struck dumb at Soundbite's foresight. "Ah…"

"HOW BLATANTLY stupid do you think I am?!"

"You don't want that question answered," a chorus of voices responded.

"SCREW YOU PEOPLE!"

Alright, Soundbite's impressive show of planning ahead aside, let me lay things out. There are only two ways for us to get out of here, and considering that leaving the way we came involves hurting Merry more, I say we focus on the plainer of them: leaving through the Sea Gate. Obviously, before that, we need to regroup on Merry and steal back the supplies and gold that they confiscated from us."

"Yes, yes, we do, because I swear to high heaven if we lose twenty-five percent of my—!"

"Our," Vivi cut in.

"WHOEVER'S GOLD!… then I will make up for the difference in bounties. Starting with everyone on this crew. GOT IT?"

"GOT IT!" everyone chorused.

"Nami is scary," Su whimpered.

"You're only just figuring this out?" I muttered. "Anyway… when the sun comes up, there's going to be a group of damaged battleships coming in. Onboard those ships are a pair of arrogant would-be chefs and a stupidly arrogant inspector from Marine Headquarters. These three need to be dealt with ASAP before they catch wind of our presence and call Marineford. Sanji, Robin, Luffy, that'll be up to you."

"Huh?" Soundbite provided Sanji's confused expression. "Luffy? I understand myself and Robin-schwan, but why Luffy?"

"Because…" I trailed off hesitantly for a second before sighing. "Because, believe it or not, Luffy's actually pretty damn good at the whole stealthy-ninja thing when he wants to be."

"Shishishi! Years of practice playing hide-and-seek from my Grandpa!"

"'Hide-and-seek' my ass…"

"Eh? What was that?"

"Nothing, nothing. Anyway, also onboard those damaged battleships are going to be a ton of soldiers in need of critical treatment. And currently, the only doctor on base is a hemophobic pediatrician. Chopper, you're going to be responsible both for curing her hemophobia and helping her save all of those patients. You shouldn't need to boost your intelligence for either of those things."

"What? Why not? Sure, surgeries won't be any problem without boosting, but curing fear of blood?
"... Tell her the story of the thief and the sakura," I said carefully. A small intake of breath came from the other end, and Chopper seemed to tear up a bit.


"Nami, I'd recommend that you join Chopper as a nurse, but if you think of a better cover, feel free to use it. Usopp, once they've relocated the Merry, disguise yourself as a grunt, and Soundbite will lead you there and help you fend off any questioners. And the rest of you..." I let a grin split my face. "Well, our end of the deal is to pressure-test the base. So, starting at dawn, we're going to give this place the most unforgettable day of their lives."

"Sounds good, Cross, but I've got one question," Usopp cut in. "Do we know where they took our stuff? We can replace the food and cannonballs anywhere, but the gold? And, just as importantly, Conis' arsenal and the Dials?"

"Well, for starters, I just checked on our loose gold." I instinctively jabbed my thumb over my shoulder at the edge of the spire. "Jonathan's got all of that stashed in his office, which is technically the safest place on the whole base. It's all there, and chances are he'll keep it there even though I know it's there because of how hard it'll be to get it out from under his nose."

"Well, at least that bit won't be boring..." Zoro muttered.

"And as for the rest of our stuff... Lassoo?"

"Yeah, they haven't touched the weapons yet," the dog-gun subtly huffed out.

"Right. Considering how big this base is, they probably don't think we'll be able to find her once they tow her away. And Jonathan has a group standing guard over the ship, with explicit orders not to report in via Transponder Snail. That makes things at once easier and harder for us; I should be able to come up with some way to use that to our advantage, but it'll take a while before I can risk it. On the bright side, as long as Lassoo is onboard, finding the Merry will be easy."

Suddenly, Soundbite's eyestalks snapped to attention and swiveled in the direction of the roof-access I'd identified. I growled in aggravation as I followed his line of sight. "They're coming up here, aren't they?"

"WINNER WINNER, hope you like JAIL DINNERS!"

"Not if I can help it!" I snapped my Flash Dial out of my bag and started clicking it out over the water. "Luffy, please tell me you can see the light!"

"I thought you guys always told me never to go towards it?"

I winced as the sound of a door being kicked open echoed out, prompting me to click faster. "Wrong light, now hurry the hell up and—!"

"Oh! Yeah, I can see you! Buuut I don't think I can reach that far..."

I made a hasty guesstimate of the distance. "Think you can reach halfway?"

"Oh, yeah, easy!"

"Then grab the rope!" I grabbed a ripcord at my side...
"HOLD IT RIGHT THERE!"

Right as an authoritative voice and a chorus of cocking guns rang out.

I very slowly turned my head around and caught sight of who I assumed to be Commander Drake standing behind a firing squad of soldiers.

"Jeremiah Cross," the Commander growled acridly. "You are under arrest for piracy, divulging state secrets, disturbing the peace, terrorism—"

"If that's in any way related to my bullshit bounty, you had better pray that I don't find you," Vivi's voice snapped viciously.

Drake and his men shivered in terror before the Commander coughed into his fist. "W-We'll put a pin in that one." He then shook his head and got back to it. "Anyways… Arson, collaboration with criminal elements, assault with a deadly snail—"

"Did you really just say that?" I asked.

"—and finally, South Birds are an endangered species native to Jaya, so that's importation of illegal animals." Drake crossed his arms and his face narrowed into a hot glower. "My men and I have orders to incapacitate you by any means necessary, and we've already cleaned out all of the base's wax stockpiles to block out that snail. Come quietly, or I will order that you be shot in the leg."

I stared at him silently for a moment before allowing myself a cocky grin that obviously set him and his men on edge. "Two things. First, that is by far the worst impression of Commodore Smoker that I have ever seen." I revelled in the number of veins that comment made pop up on the officer's forehead before continuing. "And second?" I yanked on my belt's ripcord, causing the grappling rope to be launched out over the bay where it started to fall midway across… before being grabbed and yanked taut by a stretched out rubbery arm.

I shot the now-infuriated Marine a mocking salute. "Catch me if you can, copper!"

"FIRE!" Drake roared.

Thankfully, I was yanked out of the line of fire and through the void by the belt strapped around my pelvis. And for a few moments, I enjoyed the sensation of flying through the air. But then I remembered exactly how careful Luffy was with his crewmates when he did this. That is to say, not.

"WoahwoahwoahWATCH I—!" I started to belt out—

CRASH!

Before I slammed face-first into a tree. "Why does this feel so familiar…" I slurred.

"George, George, George of the Jungle!"

"Oh, yeah…" I groaned out as I peeled out of the tree and landed on my back. I lay there for all of ten seconds before a hand grabbed my collar and yanked me up through several trees to be brought face to face with a very familiar, very stupidly grinning face.

"Hey, Cross!" Luffy waved innocently.

I returned the grin with a decidedly bland look. "Captain… if it weren't liable to get me dropped three dozen feet… I just want you to know… I would punch you."
Luffy tilted his head in confusion. "Eh? But you already did that last night when I knocked that barrel of beer on you, and your hand was more hurt than I was."

"Yeah, but it made *me* feel better," I scoffed.

"Us too!" over half the crew concurred.

"Now, put me on a branch before my jacket tears, or so help me, I'll charge you for a new one… with interest rates that would make Nami proud." Luffy promptly plopped me onto a branch, allowing me to readjust my hoodie's collar with a huff. "Damn last one being burnt clean through, freaking swear this place is tearing through my wardrobe for shits and giggles…"

"What the hell do you have to complain about? Have you seen how many shirts Zoro goes through? His wardrobe made up almost a clean thirty percent of his debt!" Nami scoffed.

"Excuse me for being one of the so-called 'Monster Trio.' Would you have preferred fighting Ohm or Mr. 1?" Zoro shot back.

"Not to mention at least half of those shirts are destroyed in training," Robin pointed out. "And he generally doesn't stop to put on a new one."

"… That is pretty nice," Nami and Vivi admitted practically simultaneously.

I silently debated what to say to that before deciding to shove that into a locked box somewhere in my subconscious. "Alright, can we forgo that argument for the moment in favor of trying to nail down a solid location for everyone?" I glanced around contemplatively. "I'll start off. Currently, Terry and Isaiah are with Jonathan, most likely pestering him beyond all belief, Lassoo is onboard the Merry, and Luffy, Soundbite and I are situated in the forest on top of the base's outer ring."

"My students and I are all in the water nearest the Merry, beside the outer ring," Boss said.

"Conis, Su, and I are just outside the forest, by the shore where the base starts. I can't see the Merry from where I am—ARGH!" Chopper said before cutting himself off with a yelp.

"And I would jusht like you all to know—hic!—that I love you all very musch!" Conis added dizzily. "Eshpicially Chopper… sho fluffy…"

"She's… crushing… me..." Chopper wheezed out miserably.

"Yeeaaah, Conis isn't handling the oxygen levels that well," Su noted blandly.

"Why aren't you drunk off your ass, then?" Mikey (I think) asked.

"Because I've spent every other weekend clambering through the roots of Upper Yard since I was… eh, three, I think? Seriously, with trees that big, you get used to oxygen fast," the cloud fox said, her shrug borderline audible.

"Mmph—GAH! HEAVY POINT! Huff… Huff… Geeze, I almost died… Alright, I think I'm going to take my chances and look for the medical room ASAP," Chopper panted. "I left my bag on the Merry, and Conis needs treatment badly."

"Ugh… fair enough, but try not to be seen. Soundbite—"

"You DON'T HAVE TO tell me, Cross," the snail said, his face screwed up in concentration.

"Alright, then… moving on?"
"Robin and I are in the forest, too, though judging by those muzzle flashes I saw, we're on the other side from you and Luffy," Usopp said.

"I'm on a small beach, just got out of the water," Zoro grumbled, the sound of wringing out clothes and water dripping coming over the background. "I can still see the Merry from where I am, too, but I'm too likely to be seen where I am."

"I managed to ride my Waver up the outer ring. I'm hiding out in some tall grass at the edge of some cliffs. I've got a clear view of the rock spire, but I can barely see the Merry," Nami said.

"I'm in the forest, too, and I'm guessing I'm pretty close to you, Cross; I saw Luffy's arm stretch out from where I was," Sanji said.

A pause as I counted that out… during which I noticed Soundbite with an odd expression on his face, somewhere between gobsmacked and 'about to burst out laughing'. "Uh, Vivi and Carue? Where are you?"

"We... well, see, this... this is kind of awkward," Vivi ground out.

"How so?"

-o-

"Well..." Vivi rubbed the back of her head uncomfortably as she looked around the bunk she was laying in. "See, I'm currently inside the base, hiding in one of the barracks..." She paused as she noticed some movement in her peripheral vision, then smiled as she accepted a glass from the flustered soldier standing next to her. "Thank you!...and I just accepted a drink from one of the Marines who's helping Carue and I hide here." She punctuated the silence that followed with a looong drain from her drink's straw.

"... What," Cross finally said.

"WHAT," concurred the vast majority of the rest of the crew.

Vivi swallowed with a contented sigh before eyeing her glass contemplatively. "I'll be honest, the service I've received thus far beats some of the spas back in Alubarna, and those are legitimately royal-class establishments."

"She's got dat wight!" Carue sighed as another soldier brushed his feathers. "Wittle moa to da wight... wittle moa... ahhh, dat's da spot..."

"T-t-thank you very much, your highness!" the soldier who'd served Vivi stammered bashfully. "I-If there's anything else you need, feel free to ask!"

"Alright, we just fell out of the freaking sky and I just escaped being shot at, I utterly refuse to believe that what I'm hearing isn't the result of some adrenaline-fueled stroke-induced hallucination!" Cross protested.

"Three words, Cross: Great. Octopus. Shogunate. We have seen weirder, and I'm willing to bet a million beris that you know we haven't seen the weirdest of all yet," Nami growled.

"...Noooo, no, we have not. Ugh... well, on the bright side, it looks like we might have just found a much less risky way to help Conis. Vivi, think you can ask those Marines if they'd be willing to help a genuine angel?"
Vivi shot a brief glance up at the soldiers before plastering a desperate smile on her face. "One second," she hissed beneath her breath before raising her voice. "Oh, boys! Would the two of you mind fetching Carue and I an assorted vegetable platter please?"

"With a bucket a' wanch dwessing!" Carue piped up, smiling sheepishly at the glare Vivi sent him. "What? Ah'm hungwy!"

"Right away, ma'am!" the soldiers snapped off a salute before marching out of the bunkroom.

Vivi waited until the door was shut before collapsing on the bunk with an exasperated sigh. "Sweet guys. Stupid, but sweet. Anyway, here's the basics of my current situation: I'm in the care of a couple of Marines who seem to be a cross between Sanji and those braindead bounty hunters we met with Wyvern. They believe what I said on the SBS, they're willing to help me… but only me. I asked them at first if they were willing to help the rest of you, and they refused. And when I asked if they would be willing to just help the females, well… they seemed torn on Conis, Raphey isn't human, they don't know Robin's gender, and Nami… is just too scary."

"…I can live with that," Nami finally decided.

"Ditto," Raphey concurred.

"So, the bottom line is, I could probably convince them to take in Conis, and probably Su along with her, but Chopper wouldn't be able to come along, so…" She scratched the back of her head uncomfortably.

"Yeah, that would kind of defeat the purpose, wouldn't it…" Chopper grumbled before sighing despondently. "Alright, back to Plan A."

"Sneaking an oxygen-drunk blonde with wings through the halls of an enemy base on High Alert," Su summarized with a grin obvious in her voice. "Ten minutes with you guys and my life's already more exciting than it's been in the past six years!"

"YOU AIN'T seen nuthin' yet!" Soundbite chortled.

"But anyways," Cross spoke up. "For now, Vivi, it sounds like you're in a good enough situation. Just sit tight and wait for further developments."

Before the princess could say anything further, the door to the room opened and the soldiers from earlier entered and proffered her a very delicious-looking assortment of vegetables.

"I think I can handle that," she conceded as she laid back and took a bite from a stalk of celery.

Carue punctuated the point by gleefully burying his beak in the ranch bucket.

-0-

"Alright, with that done… Boss, if anything goes wrong, you and your students should be able to get there fastest, so be ready to move."

"Roger loud and clear, Cross. We're ready to go in hard at a moment's notice."

"Say that's what she said' and I will twist your head around a full 360 degrees," Raphey blandly added, which was followed up by a nervous gulp.

"And the rest of you…” I heaved out a jaw-cracking yawn as I settled against the trunk of the tree I
was in. "Try to lay low until morning. We'll need more information before I can form a good escape plan. So for now… g'night."

A chorus of goodnights rang out before silence finally reigned, and I allowed myself to driiiift off to sleep.

-o-

Jonathan sat in his office, looking over his chessboard as he considered the Straw Hat Pirates. He had little doubt that all of the crew would be following the deal that he had made with Cross, but considering said deal, it appeared that today was going to be stressful. After all, to show how strong the base was while at the same time maximizing their chances of escape, he had no doubt that they would be hitting Navarone's weak spots. That being the case, he would need to attempt to strike theirs as well.

He had gathered together the highest ranking members of the base, and called to mind what they could about the Straw Hat Pirates.

"Altogether, we have ten humans and nine animals to worry about."

"Wouldn't it technically be nine humans and ten animals, sir? I mean, their doctor…" Holger asked.

"Devil Fruit priorities, Chief Petty Officer," Cormac interrupted. "He's a human-reindeer, so he counts as human."

Jonathan nodded absentmindedly in agreement. "In any event, of those animals, the five dugongs are likely to be the most problematic. I have no doubt that they're somewhere in the water; they'll be difficult to fight off on the land, and that's if we manage to get them out of the water. The dog-weapon couldn't have swum off of their ship, but it's not unreasonable to assume that someone could have carried him."

"Shall we investigate the Straw Hat Pirates' arsenal more closely to see if it's there?" Holger asked.

"Hmm… not immediately. Have a couple of men poke around in there, maybe take a few things. If the dog is there, he should alert Cross, and that will solicit some sort of reaction. It won't be able to use explosives in such close quarters, so we'll be able to apprehend it with relative ease. And if nothing happens, then nothing happens, and we'll have to watch out for dogs in the base."

Holger and the rest of the officers nodded.

"Now, moving on… the Supersonic Duck will almost certainly be with Princess Vivi, and while I'm not sure how dangerous of a fighter he'll be, it's clear that he has formidable endurance. I should expect nothing less from what's essentially a royal bodyguard. Soundbite is an obvious threat; I trust that the earplugs have already been distributed?"

"Yes, sir," Drake said. "All units have been warned and are at minimum carrying artillery-grade ear protectors."

"Good. And as for the fox… from what I've heard, I don't think she'll be any more dangerous than these South Birds are…" The Vice Admiral grimaced miserably. "Though they're bad enough on their own."

"SIT UP STRAIGHT! A TRUE MAN'S POSTURE IS FILLED WITH POOWAAAAH!" Terry roared in the Vice Admiral's ears.
"For once I agree with my companion," Isaiah added in his usual baritone. "Proper posture, and the discipline that comes from cultivating it, is a necessity for true manliness." He then proceeded to cuff the back of Drake's head. "That means you too, Lieutenant Commander."

The officer ground his teeth viciously with murder blazing in his eyes. "Remind me why we haven't shot, eaten and mounted these colorful turkeys yet?" he demanded indignantly.

"Because neither of us has two million Beri to burn in fines and I promised to take Jessica to San Faldo for our anniversary, and if either of us jeopardizes that, she will serve us to the whole base for dinner," Jonathan deadpanned.

Everyone in the room froze as a wave of existential dread washed over them, which Drake punctuated by swallowing heavily. "Withdrawn…"

"Moving along…" Jonathan rubbed his chin in thought. "Of the remaining crewmates, if the last thing they said on the SBS was any indication, their new gunner is likely to be suffering from oxygen poisoning right now, meaning that their doctor will most likely be with her. I think they'll find their way to the medical wing before long."

"Should we send guards to intercept them, sir?" Henrick asked.

"Mmmm…” the Vice Admiral hummed contemplatively before shaking his head. "No. Not yet, let him perform the necessary treatment first. After all, we're not trying to make them suffer, merely to capture them. And I'd rather not risk their doctor… boosting, I believe it was. He's no doubt formidable enough without referencing Mr. Stevenson. No, we'll leave the medical wing alone for now; if they start causing trouble there, then we'll do whatever we must, though as it stands I don't think there's anything to worry about."

He waited for his staff to nod before continuing. "Now, moving on. Their chef is likely to infiltrate the kitchen. Jessica did admit that the suggestions he gave on the SBS have drastically improved the quality of our meals, so it should be easy enough to spot him going off of his skills… but on the other hand, the Marley brothers are due to arrive today."

As he said that, he recalled Cross' words about dealing with their 'administrative difficulties'. If he remembered right, there was an inspector due to arrive today as well. If Cross knew that, he was likely to know about the chefs as well. "Drake, once we're done here, warn Jessica to be on her toes; the Straw Hats may attempt to impersonate the Marley brothers."

"Yes, sir." The Commander snapped into a salute.

"Well, those are the easy ones," Jonathan sighed. "The rest are… less obvious. Cross is most likely going to keep his head down for the time being, keeping everyone connected. That leaves Straw Hat Luffy, Roronoa Zoro, Nefertari Vivi, their navigator, their sniper, and their unknown crewmate. The former three are likely going to stay as out of sight as they can, as we know their faces, but we can safely assume that the latter three are going to attempt to blend in."

He removed a piece of paper from his desk with specific instructions and gave it to Drake. "Here, I want you to pass these directions down through the ranks, make sure it remains written but not spoken. And should you come across anyone who seems suspicious, be certain to remember that the passcode is Marineford Tango Enies. Understood?"

Drake scanned the paper for a moment before passing it along to the rest of the officers and snapping his superior a salute. "Completely and utterly, sir."
"Good." Jonathan nodded firmly, before allowing a serious expression to come over him and spread to the rest of his men. "Now, make note here: I'm giving the Straw Hats a fighting chance, if only because it will be beneficial for our troops to get some exercise. However…"

Jonathan stood up and walked over to the window, observing the colors of a sunrise painted across the sky. "If they're still running free in this base by sunrise tomorrow, I will personally make sure that every last one of them ends up in the brig." He turned his head enough to give his subordinates a chilling look. "And I sincerely hope that it doesn't come to that."

The tone of voice he used made Drake, Holger, Henrick, and Cormac break into a cold sweat. As easygoing as their leader normally was, the fact remained that Cross had implored for him not to get involved for a reason that they all knew: nobody obtained the rank of Vice Admiral unless they were singlehandedly capable of matching their entire squad in power, much less somebody favored by the 'Mad Dog' of the Marines. And they held no illusions that the base's recent stretch of inactivity had in any way diminished that strength, either.

"We will ensure that they are captured, sir!" the four of them chorused. Jonathan nodded, the seriousness on his face melting away with a tired sigh.

"At ease. Drake… ask Jessica to include the strongest brew on base with my breakfast, then assemble a force to seek out the Straw Hats. The rest of you, to your assigned stations. Send all transmissions in person or in writing; do not use Transponder Snails unless the situation is dire. Dismissed."

Jonathan didn't turn to watch as his men filtered out of his office. Rather, he continued to scan the skyline of his base, his home, waiting, waiting, waiting… until finally, the first rays of a new day broke through the darkness.

Slowly and patiently, without so much as a hint of worry, Jonathan turned around and inched a pawn forward on the board.

"Let the games begin."

All Terry had to say about that was a nervous gulp.

**MORNING**

-24 Hours Remain-

My first thought as I woke up, which I had as I leaned up and stretched my arms in a yawn, was that my hammock wasn't supposed to be this hard and uncomfortable and wood-like.

My second thought, which came much faster as I tried to roll to the side and was promptly forced to catch myself in a sloth-grip, was the realization that I was sleeping against wood, as well as the recollection that my captain and animal sidekick were currently hiding out in the middle of a Marine base.

My third thought… wasn't so much a thought as a realization. More specifically, I realized that we weren't alone when a branch snapped above—below me.

This realization was confirmed when I looked DOWN and caught sight of a pair of dumbstruck Marines staring UP at me.

We stared at each other for a scant few seconds before I adopted a bland expression. "You two do realize that the fact that you've managed to find us is not a good thing, right?"
The soldiers nodded miserably in agreement.

We stayed frozen for a few moments longer until Soundbite decided to add in his own two cents by emerging from his shell and giving the Marines a toothy smile. "You boys gon' DIE."

That snapped the soldiers into action, one running off through the trees while the other—fumbled with a baby Transponder Snail? OH, HELL NO!

I promptly let go of the branch and twisted my body around, falling on the hapless Marine with a bellowing cry of "BODYSLAM!"

I crashed down on the soldier and we promptly fell into a down-and-dirty no-holds-barred brawl… for all of fifteen seconds until I managed to grab the back of the poor bastard's head—

THWACK!

And ram his face right into my knee ARGH! "SON OF A BITCH!" I yowled as I managed to leap to my feet and start hopping around, clutching my burning joint in agony. "MONKEY MANGO SACK ASS PINEAPPLE WHISKEY TANGO TURKEYS TROTTING TO FUCKING WATER! RIGHT ON THE FRICKING BORDERLINE BETWEEN HEALTHY AND CRISPY OOOOOOW!"

"HEY!" Soundbite roared in my ear. "Less agonizing, more hustling! THE OTHER ONE'S GETTING AWAY!"

I snapped my head up and glared daggers at the back of the running soldier. "Like hell he is!"

I promptly started hopping after him—

"GUM-GUM!"

Before pausing and looking up at my captain in—why was he puffed up in Gum Gum Balloon form and why was he holding his pipe to his—?"

"BLOWGUN!"

CRACK!

I reeled in shock as a noise as loud and sharp as a pistol blasted out of the end of Luffy's pipe. I barely had enough time to snap my head around to stare at the fleeing Marine… just as he snapped a hand to the back of his skull and collapsed into a boneless heap.

I gaped in shock for a second or two before blinking in realization. "Was that an acorn?" I called up to Luffy.

"Yup!" Luffy grinned as he shot me a thumbs-up. "Pretty cool, huh?"

I started to nod before freezing in panic as a horrifying thought struck me. "That guy's still alive, right?"

"YEP!"

"Oh-thank-God…" I wheezed as I clutched my chest in relief. "I don't know how Jonathan would kill us using a fishing rod, but I am positive that that's how he would do it if we killed one of his men."
"Personally, Cross, I think you should be more concerned with the fate worse than death that awaits you if the Vice Admiral gets his hands on you."

"GAH!" I jumped in terror before spinning around to glare at our suddenly present cook. "Don't do that, damn it!"

Sanji ignored me as he lit up a cigarette and took a drag before giving me a flat look. "Hence," he continued as though I hadn't interrupted him. "You should really be thanking me for saving your hide from that guy over there." He jabbed his thumb over his shoulder.

I tilted my head slightly in confusion. "Uh…?"

"I'm pointing at the third soldier that was with these two morons and who was about to call in your shit-hiding spot when I gave him a concussion," Sanji explained dryly.

I promptly plastered a desperate smile on my face. "Have I ever mentioned how much I love the fact that you're one-third secret agent?"

I didn't take the time to puzzle over why Sanji suddenly inhaled the rest of his cigarette and started choking, instead calling up to Luffy. "Hey Captain, mind gathering up these mooks so that we can strip them for their uniforms and then tie 'em up?"

"Sure, just gimme a sec!" Luffy promptly swung off, moving in a way that was way too natural for a human being.

I stared after him in awe for a second before giving Sanji a wary glance. "I'm not the only one who wonders about just how 'human' Luffy is, right?"

"That's rich, coming from you," the cook snickered.

"Har har, very funny…" I scoffed. "Alright, that aside, once we've got these guys taken care of, you two will need to head into the base and find a pair of cooks from HQ known as the Marley brothers; the battleships they'll be on haven't arrived yet, but I doubt it'll be long. Once you find them, nab their clothes and pretend to be them so that you can infiltrate the base's kitchen."

"… Infiltrate the kitchens… with Luffy."

"Just keep him on a leash." I rolled my eyes. "Anyway, while you're doing that, I'll stay here and watch over the Marines and keeping everyone connected."

Luffy chose that point to make his return, three KO'd Marines in one hand. I gave them a quick onceover before nodding. "Alright, pick a uniform, get dressed, and get going."

"Right!" Luffy nodded as he started divesting the soldiers.

Soon enough, the Marines were clad in only their skivvies and left hanging from the branches of the trees, thoroughly gagged and bound with no chances of escape.

I watched my newly disguised comrades leave for a few seconds before leaning back into the trunk of the tree I was settled in and looking at Soundbite. "So, now that that particular instance of madness is over and done with, the next most pressing issue among our crew is Conis. Chopper, how is she?"

"Ah… well, she's certainly alive… though beyond that—GRK!"
"Fluuufffyyy…" Conis giggled as she buried her face in the scruff of the flailing doctor's neck.

"I honestly think her current condition is very much a matter of perspective and opinion…" the reindeer said with a tone of forced calm.

"Shouldn't you be doing your little dance and blatantly lying about how compliments don't make you happy?"

"First off, those compliments really don't make me happy!" Chopper snapped as he tried to wriggle his way out of Conis' stupidly strong grip. "And second, she's not complimenting my medical prowess, she's complimenting my fur. Totally different!"

"Riiight. You know, next time we meet Ace, I think I'll ask him to keep an eye out for an opportunity to throw a fireball at your shorts."

"Oh, shut up!"

"Heh… Anyway, how long do you think it'll take for her to get over this?"

"Ergh, it's hard to—Hey, don't pull on—OWOWOW!"

"Heeheehee—GRK!" Conis continued to giggle blearily as she yanked on Chopper's antlers before suddenly jerking up ramrod straight for a second, and then collapsing forwards into a snoring heap, revealing Su perched on her back with her paw on a syringe sticking out of the Angel's shoulder.

"Sedative," she explained blandly. "Sorry, but that was starting to get old."

"I appreciate that, Su," Chopper groaned, massaging his head at the base of his antlers before switching to his Heavy Point and picking up Conis. "Now, we need to get her a controlled flow of air so that she can adapt, or she'll be just as… incoherent when she wakes up again. Now, where's an air tank we can use…"

"Oh! Excuse me, I thought all of the other doctors were gone."

Chopper froze and Su bolted under a nearby table like a flash of greased lightning when a feminine voice came from behind them. Its owner turned out to be a purple-haired young woman with glasses and a white coat.

"Don't panic," Cross said, directly in their ears. "That's most likely the hemophobe I told you about, Dr. Kobato. She's a good physician, but she's also something of a ditz. Act natural, and she won't notice anything's wrong. Worst comes to worst, you can flash some blood, and she'll be out like a light."

"Uh… you're Doctor Kobato?" Chopper asked hesitantly.

"Yes, that's me," the woman replied calmly. "And you?"

"Uh… H-Hiriluk, my name is Doctor Hiriluk," the reindeer hastily answered, drawing himself upright in an effort to project an air of authority. "It's a good thing you're here, I need your help. This young woman is suffering from oxygen poisoning; I was forced to sedate her as her delirium became dangerous. Where do you keep your oxygen tanks?"

A hint of steel came into Kobato's eyes as she took in the unconscious Conis, but her smile never
faltered as she walked over to one of the cots. "We have one here, Doctor. Just lay her down and I'll help you get her set up."

Chopper nodded, carefully taking Conis into his arms before laying her on the bed, making sure to tuck the blankets in such a way that her wings were hidden. Kobato didn't notice this, fortunately, too busy with placing the mask over Conis' face. "What was the cause of this, Doctor?"

"Uhh…"

"Repeat after me, Chopper," Cross hissed. The doctor nodded automatically as he spoke the words that came into his ears.

"Oh, it was a sudden decrease in altitude, I think she tried jumping off the top of a Marine base. How she got out of that without a scratch, I don't know, but she's been incoherent since we arrived here."

"J-jumped off the top of a Marine base?" Kobato said incredulously.

"She's sort of a thrill seeker," Chopper shrugged.

"Oh. Well, that makes sense."

'She actually bought that?' Su thought incredulously.

'She actually bought that…' Chopper thought in resignation.

"Well, thankfully she looks to be fine…" The Marine doctor tilted her head contemplatively as she looked Conis over. "Still," Chopper felt his heart skip a beat when she started to run her hands over his crewmate in a sickeningly familiar manner. "Just to be sure, I'll give her a routine physical."

"Ah-ah-ah—!" Chopper sputtered frantically as he flailed his arms in a panic behind her back. "T-t-t-there's really no need for that, I-I already gave her a onceover myself, s-she's fine!"

"Oh, no, it's no trouble at all," Kobato waved him off absentmindedly without taking her attention off of Conis. "I trust your prognoses but I just feel like it would be prudent to double-check is all. It always pays to have a second opinion, you know?"

"Aheh… yeah, right…" Chopper trailed off uncomfortably. He then proceeded to snap into his Brain Point and start desperately rummaging through his pack, the hardier medical instruments flung out in succession.

Kobato, meanwhile continued patting Conis down while entirely oblivious to her 'colleague's' panic. "Alright, limbs and neck seem fine, moving on to the spinal column…" She reached under the covers and paused in confusion as she felt feathers of all things brush her fingers. "Well, that's odd. I could have sworn that this mattress was in perfect condition a few hours ago." She continued feeling around for a bit before sighing in relief. "Oh, never mind, it's fine, these feathers are merely attached to the patient's wi—" She paused as she ran that thought through her head a few times before recoiling in shock. "The patient's wings!?"

"Ah-ah…" Chopper fumbled for an answer for a second before chancing upon an idea. "Of course she has wings!" he blurted in a forced 'no duh' tone of voice. "S-She's from a Sky Island, they all have wings up there! W-Were you not aware of this?"

Kobato's shock evaporated into confusion as she mulled that statement over before she finally chuckled and slapped her forehead. "Ha, of course! Now I remember! My apologies, I'm known as something of a ditz around the base, you see."
Chopper and Su breathed simultaneous sighs of relief.

Meanwhile, the Marine continued chuckling as she continued examining Conis. "But still, you can't exactly fault me for my ignorance. After all, I only learned that Sky Island existed a few days ago by listening to the SBS."

Both Chopper and Su tensed as they prepared for the worst, only to relax when Kobato didn't elaborate.

Finally satisfied, the doctor withdrew her hands and walked over to a countertop where she picked up a clipboard. "Alright, everything seems perfectly normal, I'll begin filling out her chart. What's the patient's name?"

"Conis, no last name," Chopper answered instinctively before slapping his hooves over his mouth in horror. Said horror intensified when Kobato stopped writing.

"C-O-N-I-S?" she asked in confirmation.

"N-no, K…" Chopper corrected fearfully.

"Oh, alright then!" Kobato nodded with a smile. "I just ask because her name sounded like Conis. You know, the Straw Hats' latest recruit? She's from a Sky Island too, so I imagine that there'll be some confusion in her future."

"…yeah, I imagine so…" Chopper slowly nodded in agreement.

"Alright…" Kobato moved on to another line. "And does she have any family I should be aware of?"

"Just her father back on Skypiea." Chopper rolled his eyes in exasperation as he turned to the room's medical cabinets and started fiddling around with their contents. 'After all,' he reasoned with himself. 'You never know when you might need to restock.'

Kobato nodded again as she continued writing. "Got it, father in Skypiea. Just… like…” Ice shot through Chopper and Su's veins when the doctor slowly stopped writing and trailed, the blood drained from her face in horror as she slowly looked at Conis' face. "C-Conis with a C…"

The room was paralyzed for a moment until the Zoan in the room thumped his head against the nearest available shelf. "I don't suppose there's any chance that you'd do us the favor of not screaming?" Chopper groaned in resignation.

Kobato's response was to open her mouth—

"Oh, come on!"

And promptly gag when a bundle of white fur was stuffed into it.

"Out of all the slip-ups—OW!—that's when you finally connect the dots!?” Su snarled as she held on to the doctor's shoulder for dear life, her tail firmly wedged in the doctor's mouth. She then snapped her head over to Chopper. "Hurry the hell up, sawbones!"

Kobato reeled and scrambled with Su for a moment…

THWACK! "MMPH!" "YEOW!"

Before biting down hard on the tail when she felt something thin and hard plunge into her shoulder,
which in turn elicited a yowl of vulpine pain from Su.

However, the doctor's pain lasted only a moment before oblivion invaded her mind and she slumped over on Conis' bed, dead to the world save for her snores.

Su whimpered miserably as she held her bitten tail before her face. "That… was unpleasant…” She proceeded to snap a glare at Chopper. "And what took you so long, hm!?

"Forgive me for not thinking I'd need to stock up on syringes of all things…” Chopper panted as he slowly lowered his arm from the post-throw position it had been in. He then sighed despondently as he changed to his Heavy Point and gingerly extracted a now-empty needle from Kobato's shoulder. "I am getting way too much experience with this.

Su spared a moment from licking her own tail to snicker at him. "Yeah, you're right. After all, there are better ways to get girls then pumping them full of chemicals, don't you know? Tseeheehee—!

The human-reindeer held up the syringe, light glinting menacingly off the needle. "I can refill this with the appropriate dosage in seconds."

"Shutting up now," Su said quickly.

"Mmph… well, there's the proof of how much of a ditz she is. I honestly forgot that she was that bad," Cross said. "Anyway, once she's awake, you should have enough of an opportunity to talk her into helping the patients that will arrive soon. She'll be outright on our side once you've cured her hemophobia."

"Hooray," Su and Chopper chorused unenthusiastically.

"Oh, perk up, her dad's a shipwright who'll look after the Merry and help Usopp patch her up once we get them together. Anyway, moving on…"

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"Robin, how are things going with your mission?"

"Perfectly, Cross," Robin replied, striding down the hallway in her stolen outfit without so much as a care in the world. "The ship from HQ has just arrived and they are unloading men now. I've already dealt with the good inspector and am touring the facilities as we speak. On that note, I took the liberty of incapacitating the Marley brothers while I was at it. Soundbite, if you'd be so kind as to direct Mr. Cook and the captain to them?"

"Roger roger."

"We've got them. Thank you, my darling!"

"Nice work, Robin!"

"What the monkey said. So… at the risk of losing my appetite now and forever, what happened to Condo—er, I mean, Shepherd?"

"Well…” Robin said with a smirk.

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A Marine grunt stared, jaw dropped, at the sight that awaited him in the supply closet where he had
gone to fetch a mop.

A man with short black hair in a widow's peak who was wearing a magenta undershirt and purple pants was bound and gagged in the room. While that was odd in and of itself, the part of the ensemble that drew his attention most was the note pinned to said man's undershirt, which clearly read 'I'm a stuck-up ass from HQ looking to shut this base down for the glory of it!' Hesitantly, the man reached out to un-gag the squirming man, who spat for a few seconds before barking at him.

"You incompetent buffoon! What made you hesitate to help me? I'll have you court-martia— MMPH?!"

The grunt promptly replaced the gag, grabbed the mop he had come for, and closed the door in the man's face.

"Hey, you were in there awhile," the grunt's friend noted in surprise. "Anything wrong?"

"Nope," the grunt said, marching away from the closet without so much as missing a beat. "Not a thing."

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"PFFHAHAAHAHAHA! Robin, in case you happened to miss the memo any time in the past few years, you are a genius."

"Trust me, I'm aware," she purred cheekily.

"Well, anyway, be careful when you meet with the Vice Admiral. Jonathan's the kind of guy who's taken the time to find out what an aged-up version of your bounty picture would look like. Easy money says that he'll recognize you when he sees you, but with any luck he'll be too intrigued or amused to do anything about it. No guarantees, though."

Robin's eyebrow twitched minutely in irritation, though she didn't break her stride. "And you didn't think to mention this sooner?"

"Hey, my knowledge is spotty at best, alright? I'm mostly playing this by the ear. Just… hope for the best."

The ex-assassin flexed her fingers. "I am starting to see the appeal of using you as a punching bag, Mister Jeremiah."

"Har har, very funny. Anyway, moving on. Nami, how you holding up?"

"Ah…" their navigator grit out uncomfortably. "See, the answer to that question's kind of… complicated."

"Oh, come now, Miss Navigator," Robin chided as she brought her fist to her mouth in order to hide a chuckle. "How bad could it possibly—?"

Robin's words died in her throat when she reached an intersection and was brought face to face with the subject of discussion in question.

The archaeologist stared in shock for several seconds before slowly raising her sunglasses onto her forehead in order to get a better view. "… Well now. Dare I even ask?"

Nami groaned miserably as she clawed a hand down her face. "I wound up in the laundry room
looking for something to wear, some Marines walked in on me while I was holding this coat, one lie
ted to another and suddenly I'm masquerading using my mother's name and rank!"

"...Please tell me I'm misremembering seeing a picture of your mother wearing a coat only Captains
or higher wear," Cross deadpanned.

"No, Cross," Robin shook her head slowly as she took in the ornate coat Nami was wearing. "No,
you are most certainly not."

"Ugh... well, depending on how good Nami's espionage skills are, this could either be a windfall or
a calamity. Nami, I know you did a lot of masquerading as a pirate for the last few years, but how
good are you at impersonating a Marine?"

Before Nami could respond, she was interrupted by a Marine walking around a blind corner and
almost running into her. "Ah—! S-Sorry about that ma'am, I wasn't looking where I was going and
—!

"HOW DARE YOU!" Robin watched with bemusement as the crew's navigator grabbed the hapless
soldier's collar and drew him in close so that she was roaring directly in his face. "DO YOU HAVE
ANY IDEA JUST HOW MUCH THIS COAT COSTS? I COULD TAKE EVERY BERI YOU
AND YOUR PATHETIC FAMILY HAS MADE IN THE LAST TEN GENERATIONS AND
IT STILL WOULDN'T EVEN BE ENOUGH TO GET IT DRYCLEANED, YOU UTTER
IGNORAMUS!

"I-I'm so sorry, p-please forgive me, Captain, I-I-I won't do it again!" the Marine sobbed miserably,
tears fountaining down his cheeks.

"You want my forgiveness?" Nami spat. "Then go to this base's godforsaken kitchen and order me a
vodka martini, shaken, not stirred, with a twist of aged tangerine, three and a half cubes of ice, and a
green umbrella IN NO LESS THAN FIVE MINUTES!" She then proceeded to all but throw the
soldier down the hallway he'd come out of, yelling after his retreating back. "AND MAY GOD
HAVE MERCY ON YOUR SOUL IF YOU GET SO MUCH AS ONE ELEMENT OF THAT
DRINK WRONG, BECAUSE I SURE AS HELL WON'T!"

The incognito pirates watched him run like the hounds of hell were on his heels before Nami turned
to Robin with a beatific smile. "So, you'll be the good Marine and I'll be the bad Marine, then?"

"I would say so, Miss Navigator," Robin chuckled in agreement.

"Daaaaaaamn..." Cross breathed in awe. "You've been holding out on us, haven't you?"

"Are you kidding?" Nami scoffed as she and Robin started walking down the hallway again. "I've
got almost ten years of suppressed fury pounding around inside of me. You haven't seen anything
yet."

"Hmph, I imagine so," Robin laughed into her hand before pausing and humming thoughtfully. "Ah
yes, and before I forget, Mister Doctor? I should warn you that you should hasten to rouse Dr.
Kobato and make her an ally before the patients arrive."

"Ugh, alright, I was expecting this. How long have I got?"

"Five minutes at most," Robin replied cheerfully.

There was a pause. And following that was a solid thirty seconds of invective that left even
Soundbite silent.
"… I believe you've been spending too much time with Soundbite," Robin said at last.

"AND YOU'VE BEEN SPENDING TOO MUCH TIME WITH CROSS, YOU JERK!" Chopper snapped. "AND ONE WORD OUT OF YOU, SANJI, AND I SWEAR THAT I WILL GIVE YOU A VASECTOMY IN YOUR SLEEP!"

"...I am now officially unsure who's scarier: Nami or Chopper," Usopp muttered in the ensuing silence.

"Careful, Long-nose, I work hard to maintain my reputation," Nami muttered under her breath. "You do not want me pulling double-duty."

"RIGHT! MOVING ON!" Cross barked. "You two sound like you've got it handled, good luck to the both of you. Usopp, what are you up to right now?"

"Eh, not much, thankfully."

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"Or at least, not right now. It hasn't been boring," Usopp said, looking over the small collection of trussed-up grunts near him. "One weakness to point out to Jonathan: the patrols aren't very big. If it's only two or three people, it leaves them open to be sniped down before they even notice. I've taken care of a few grunts who aren't going to make that mistake again; their weapons are in the bay, and I've already got one of their uniforms. So, if they've finished moving the Merry, now would be the time to lead me to it."

"Nice work. Soundbite, do you have a location?"

"**Having a bit OF A TIME MAPPING OUT THE CORRIDORS, but I think so.**"

"Good, lead him to her. Oh, and Usopp, when you get there, take note of an old shipwright named Mekao. I mentioned him earlier; odds are that if you tell him about the Klabautermann, we'll have another ally."

"Got it," Usopp said, securing his Marine cap before heading off.

"Next up... Boss, you and your students doing alright?"

"That depends on how you define 'alright,' Cross," Boss said in a voice of forced calm.

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"Personally, I wouldn't define it as 'being chased through the water by a net of sea prism stone that's TRAWLING THE BAY!" the dugong roared as he and his students floated on the surface of the bay hidden behind the corner of the base's central spire, staring in terror as a massive net that spanned from the spire to the outer ring with no gaps between it and the rockface was slowly dragged through the waters of the bay by being passed from opening to opening high above them.

"Wha—a ne—!? Ohhhh... riight."

"You had better not be about to tell us that you saw this coming, Cross!" Leo said furiously.

"No, of course not! Forgetting about potentially life-threatening things is Vivi's job."

"I heard that," the princess said waspishly.
"You can protest when it's not true, but for now, you can't weawwy deny it," Carue snickered.

"Tsk..." Vivi grumbled darkly.

"Anyway," Cross spoke up. "What I just remembered is the fact that Jonathan's a freaking genius. It'd be more shocking if he didn't have some kind of contingency plan in place for fishmen. Looks like this is it."

"Yeah, well, this contingency's about to scoop me and my boys up!" Boss snarled. "Any bright ideas, Jerry-boy!?"

"...If you ever call me that again, Boss, I'll tell the world how Kung Fu Dugongs happened. And trust me, your poker faces suck," Cross said frigidly.

All five dugongs were caught between the urge to blush in both rage and embarrassment and pale. "...Duly noted," Boss finally conceded.

"Now get us out of here!" Mikey flailed his limbs in a panic.

"Alright, look, it's easy alright? Just employ the Invulnerable Door fallacy."

"Uh...?" Four of the five Dugongs tilted their heads in confusion.

Donny, meanwhile, slapped his fin to his forehead with a groan. "I'm an idiot."

"Eh?" His compatriots looked at him in askance.

The purple-bandanna wearer gave them a flat look. "Even if a door is utterly impenetrable," he rapped his flipper against the rock face they were hiding against. "There's a good chance that the wall around it is less so."

"Ohhh," chorused Raphey, Leo, and Mikey. Boss, for his part, simply nodded.

"Alright, boys, you heard them." He snapped a flipper out so that it was pointing downwards. "Let's all get digging!"

The students glanced at each other in concern before giving their teacher an uncomfortable look. "Uh..." Raphey slowly raised her flipper. "Can't Leo just carve out a hole big enough for us all?"

"No way!" Boss crossed his flippers in denial. "Leo earned his skills, now it's your turn." He grit his teeth confidently. "Dig or get caught, brats!" He made to dive before pausing and snapping a glare up at Leo. "Oh, and your hole better be several meters deep, or else I'll toss you to the goons myself." Then he dived.

The students remained floating for a bit longer before exchanging flat looks.

"Remind me why we followed him into the pirate life again?" Raphey groused.

"Because somehow the rest of our species is even crazier than he is," Leo sighed wearily.

"Come on, guys, you all know that he loves u—WAGH!" Mikey's words were cut off when he was suddenly yanked underwater.

"GET YOUR TAILS DOWN HERE RIGHT NOW!"

"YESSIR!" The apprentices hastily complied.
"... Well, that shit just happened. Alright, moving on for the sake of sanity. Zoro, I dread to ask, but any idea where you are now?"

"Yeah, it's actually really weird."

"Did you know that they've got another ship here that looks just like the Merry?" Zoro asked, observing the very distinct ship from behind a giant gear.

"...I MUST have heard you WRONG, Cross. I thought you said 'for the sake of sanity',"

Soundbite said weakly.

"Yes, shame on me. I'd ask how this is possible, especially considering how the place is set up as a damn ambush... buuuuut I'm pretty sure that answer ends with my brains oozing out of my ears. For now, just stay where you are."

"Eh, sure thing," Zoro turned around and started walking away, gravel crunching under his boots.

"WHY THE EVER-LOVING F**K ARE YOU MOVING!?"

"Calm down, snail, I'm just going to find a drink, I'll be right back."

"...I honestly don't know what I expected. Moving on, Vivi, how are things on your end?"

Sanji snapped his head up, foregoing his progress towards the kitchen and concentrating intently on the answer.

"Yes, we're now receiving the royal treatment from a full squadron of Marines. Honestly, I'm tempted to find a balcony and work on my tan."

"Please don't."

"I BEG TO—!

"Volume control, idiot!" Su cut in.

Sanji coughed uncomfortably into his fist as he noticed the confused glances the other Marines were sending him, then continued on at a much lower volume. "I humbly beg to differ, darling princess."

"...Soundbite, unless Sanji gets on track very soon, do us all the favor of muting him," Nami said in irritation.

"Heck, do us all a favor and do it anyways."

"Watch it, mosshead!...but fine," Sanji ultimately sighed, glancing around cautiously as he continued walking. "Our status... on our way to the kitchen. I think we're heading in the right direction, if foot traffic and Luffy's nose are anything to go by."

"Huh. Fast moving. Alright, if I remember right, everyone there should welcome you with open arms as soon as you show off your skills, but if they've caught anything from your cooking lessons on the SBS, they may be suspicious at first. The Marley brothers are complete jokes, they can't even peel potatoes, but their reputation should provide the cushion you need to blend in. Just watch your step,
especially when Jonathan shows up for lunch. So long as Luffy doesn't deliver it, or eat everything you guys make for that matter, you'll be able to blend in for a while longer."

"Got it," Sanji nodded. "And if reputations aren't all they're cracked up to be, I could use that to explain away Luffy's behavior."

"Nice one. Alright, that just leaves... Lassoo, everything alright on the Merry?"

"Well, a squad of Marines are onboard, and a few have been poking around here," the dog-gun muttered quietly. "A couple of grunts came in here earlier and took a few Dials... and I'm pretty sure that that black one Conis had was one of them."

"WHAT?! Soundbite, connect me to Jonathan, NOW!"

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"You just don't understand, do you?" Isaiah sighed in his usual baritone. "Manliness is not something you show. It's something you are. Displays such as yours are not only pointless, they imply a deep insecurity that is not manly in the slightest."

"AND YOU'RE TOO DAMN COLD!" Terry shot back. "A REAL MAN NEEDS TO KNOW WHEN TO HAVE FIRE IN HIS VEINS AS WELL AS ICE! YOU'RE JUST ALL ICE, ALL THE TIME!"

Jonathan groaned, cradling his head in his hands. The two South Birds had promised to be an annoyance from the first time he heard them, but he'd had no idea they could be this bad. They'd been going back and forth pretty much since midnight, and only strong coffee and plenty of experience with all-nighters was keeping him alert. Of course, if he didn't get some sort of break soon, he'd probably go mad.

"Vice Admiral Jonathan!"

The Marine in question looked up from his chessboard as Cross' voice sounded around him. That worked. "Mister Cross?"

"Something I should warn you about, and that you should warn your soldiers about, too: stay out of our arsenal. In particular, there are a few Dials we have that could VAPORIZE your men if they touch them wrong. For the sake of getting them all back, I won't tell you which ones. But I'm just giving you a fair warning; we have no problem fighting our way out of here, but we are trying not to kill anyone."

"Mmhmm, I see..." Jonathan nodded slowly in agreement, the South Birds mercifully silent, before pushing one of the black knights on the board. "Just one moment, please. Drake, could you come in here?"

His second-in-command promptly entered the office with a salute. "Sir?"

"Have the men search the Straw Hats' ship's arsenal, it seems that the weapon with the Zoan fruit is hiding in there after all."

"...shit," Cross's disembodied voice flatly summarized.

"OH, NOOOOOOOO!" Terry threw in.

"DAMN IT, CROSS!" a furious voice yowled before howling out "CANI-SCREEN!"
Jonathan sighed as the sounds of hacking coughs from various Marines filled the line. "Now you're just gloating."

"I give you a piece of advice to try to keep your men safe from an actual hazard, and you respond like this? Not only ignoring me, but doing what I just told you not to do? Oh, no, this doesn't qualify as gloating. I'll show you gloating later."

And then the office fell silent, the two South Birds both smugly grinning.

"Well, that's not ominous at all," Drake cheerfully stated.

"Lieutenant Commander."

"Right, catch the dog!" Drake blurted as he wheeled around and all but ran out of the room.

Jonathan stared at the door for a second before directing a glare at the chessboard before him. "They are making it very hard to apply this game in real life…" he grumbled.

-o-

"Alright, I need to think about what we've got so far. Soundbite is still listening, so just say his name if you need to talk. I'll let you guys know once I've got some kind of plan."

"Take your time, Cross," Chopper ground out as the transmission faded, looking back at the pediatrician, who seemed terrified. "Alright... Dr. Kobato, there's soon going to be a large number of Marines arriving here from the battleships that have docked on base. Many of them are going to need treatment, and fast. I'm going to help you, but as this base's doctor, you need to be able to do the surgeries necessary to save their lives."

Kobato's eyes widened even more. "B-B-But I... I specialize in children's medicine, I'm no good at surgeries! I'm barely able to deliver a shot! I'm sorry, but I don't think I can help, I just can't stand the thought of hurting people."

Chopper folded his arms with a weary sigh. "Kobato, let me tell you a story from the man who was my teacher and father…"

Three minutes later, the nurses and the patients arrived, and a determined Kobato stood alongside Chopper as they began the necessary treatments. She barely acknowledged the fact that he was a pirate as they worked.

And considering the amount of work they had to do, neither of them noticed that in the middle of it all, a specific patient and her pet had managed to wander out of the infirmary.

-o-

"...In other words, you would presume to tell me what real cooking is, right?" Sanji asked the obviously skilled and passionate head chef.

"No, I'm not trying to say anything quite as dramatic as that," Jessica replied coolly. "I just want you and your brother to show that pride you talk so much about. I'll give anyone a chance to prove themselves, no matter how pretentious they might be. However, there will be trouble if I think you lack anything in skill or attitude." The rest of the cooks looked on sourly while Jessica finished her speech. "Let me make this clear: unless you satisfy me, you will never be able to call yourselves cooks in Navarone."
"I see. That sounds like a challenge. But let me ask you this," Sanji continued, blowing out some
smoke. "You clearly know the importance of food. But speaking from experience, the head chef's
skill isn't the best way to determine how good his or her employees are. So, what do you say to
going one-on-one?"

The chefs' indignation at the apparent insult promptly melted in favor of smugness. "Challenging
Jessica? He's toast." "Burnt toast." "Thousand Beri says he starts crying in ten minutes." "Two
thousand on twenty." The murmurs continued in the same vein until Jessica raised a hand and
extinguished them like a candle, though her expression was no less smug.

"It has been a long time since I've had the opportunity to demonstrate why I'm the head chef here,"
she mused. "So be it. You and I will prepare the same dish. My husband, Commander Jonathan, will
determine the winner through a blind taste test."

Sanji's smile froze, and he twitched ever so slightly as he fought to maintain his composure. "A-An
excellent idea, milady. So…" Sanji glanced around warily. "Where is he, exactly?"

Jessica's smugness faltered. "…Well, this is a bit awkward. Lunch is meant to be delivered to him in
half an hour or so."

"Well, then, in the meantime, how about I show some of my other recipes? After all, I heard from
more than one Marine on my way down here that it's just about mealtime. Oh, and—" He grabbed
Luffy's head and slammed his face into a convenient griddle before he could successfully reach the
plate he'd been leaning towards, pointedly ignoring the sizzling sounds that came up. "—I should
warn you, this guy has only ever been a taste-tester, and a gluttonous one, at that. How people got
the idea that we were both good cooks, I have no idea."

Jessica cocked an eyebrow as she watched Luffy struggle beneath his own cook's grip. "He's
resilient, too."

"I have to take drastic measures to keep his mouth under control," Sanji explained as he jerked
Luffy's charred face up.

"JERK! Now everything's gonna taste all smoky!" Luffy pouted with his tongue lolling out of his
mouth.

"…Whatever the heck I was expecting, it sure wasn't this," said one of the many, many
sweatdropping chefs.

"You mean the fact that only one's actually good at cooking or the fact that that the boss hasn't
broken that one like a stalk of celery yet?"

"Yes."

"BACK TO WORK BEFORE I START USING DISCIPLINARY PRACTICES FROM HQ!"
Jessica roared, which kicked her staff into high gear. Satisfied, she made to grab a bottle before
pausing as she took notice of the weight. "Tsk. Jacob, if you've got the time, could you go and grab
some cooking sherry from the fridge? I'm starting to run low."

"Gladly, madam," Sanji responded, making a beeline for the refrigerator. With nobody nearby, he
opened the door. And then every muscle in his body locked up in shock.

Zoro stared back, nonchalantly continuing to drain a bottle of sake as he sat in the stupidly smooth
hole in the back of the walk-in freezer.
"HOW THE HELL!? I stopped paying attention for TEN SECONDS!" shrieked Soundbite from nowhere.

Zoro finished off the bottle he was holding with a sigh before cocking an eyebrow. "So? What of it?"

"YOU CROSSED HALF THE BASE! YOU WEREN'T EVEN IN THE SPIRE!"

"…" Zoro was silent as he glanced out the hole he'd carved before shrugging and tearing the cork out of a new bottle with his teeth. "I don't follow you."

"…screw it. That way lies madness."

"You say that as if we didn't all crack long ago," Lassoo wheezed from somewhere.

"That explains so much…" Su muttered.

Sanji, meanwhile, plastered a deliberately neutral expression on his face as he grabbed three bottles of sherry, left the fridge, and returned to Jessica. "I think you may have a rat problem," he deadpanned as he set two bottles down and poured himself a glass of another. Grimacing at that, Jessica walked off towards the fridge. Forty seconds later, she was back with an identical expression, accepting the bottle Sanji was offering to her without hesitation.

"I think you may be right," she said flatly before knocking the bottle back.

Once they had both recovered from the respectively disturbing assaults on their sanity, Sanji submitted a few specific recipes to Jessica, who passed them on to her chefs. Upon seeing how phenomenal the resulting meal was, Jessica saw the opportunity to test him.

"Well, your skills seem to be all that you've advertised them as…" She gave the newcomer a sharp glance. "Sanji."

Sanji didn't so much as flinch. "Hmm? Who?" He slowly pointed at himself. "Are you referring to me, by any chance?"

Jessica stared at him for a few seconds before waving dismissively. "Sorry, sorry, my mistake." She glanced up at the kitchen's clock before grinning eagerly. "Ah, now that's better. We have ten minutes until it's time for Jonathan's meal. Is that enough time for you, Jacob?"

"Easily. So, what will be the dish we prepare?"

"Lamb chop in gravy, with steamed carrots and broccoli, as well as mixed peas and heirloom beans. I call it the Shepherd's Repast."

"So, your husband is a vegetable lover?" Sanji posed, moving to the pantry along with Jessica while producing a headband and tying it around his head in such a way that his eyebrow was hidden; after all, he knew that that nickname of Zoro's had made it onto the SBS more than once.

"Well, they're good for him," Jessica said with a smile. "And what's with that headband?"

"Oh, just a mark of seriousness for competition," Sanji replied, suppressing the bitterness of the fact that he was imitating Zoro. He hoped the mosshead never found out.

Jessica shrugged, and so it went from there. Both gathered the same basic ingredients, but chose different accents for the plate. Side-by-side they stood at identical cooking stations, fires flaring as the
pair of them both demonstrated their skills. Both moved with well-practiced grace that left the other chefs staring in awe. Steam here, smoke there, and no shortage of delicious smells. They even plated identically, but in the end, it seemed that a few different spice jars and a bit of cheese, juice, and honey made all the difference; while Jessica's steamed beautifully, Sanji's dish practically shone. The difference was plain, and Jessica's eye was twitching as she took in both that and the awestruck looks of the cooks, their murmuring now reversed from earlier.

"It's actually better-looking than Jessica's." "The smell is better, too." "It's the difference between an expert and a master."

"SILENCE!" Jessica yelled, locking eyes with Sanji. "Take your dish and follow me," she said shortly, covering the tray and quickly walking out of the kitchen.

Sanji hesitated for the briefest of moments before shooting Luffy a hasty grin. "Why don't you stay here and..." The cook had to fight to keep from spitting up blood as he spoke the next lines. "Taste all the dishes, brother."

The width of Luffy's grin was matched by every other face in the kitchen going white. "Sure thing! Sounds like fun!" And before they could stop him, the rubber-man blurred towards the array of already finished dishes.

Sanji silently offered a few apologies to food in general before rushing to catch up with the base's head chef. The two walked in silence for a minute or two before finally reaching the doors of their destination.

He entered alongside Jessica, and took in the sight of Jonathan: white outfit, short red hair and beard, and large eyebrows and moustache that were so dark red that they were almost black. He had a relaxed look about him.

"BEAR GLOVE!"

"Is that the only thing you can say?"

He also had the two South Birds on his shoulders, and looking a little more closely, that relaxed air was notably brittle.

"Ah, Jessica, what's this? Two meals?"

"Mister Marley here challenged me, matching his cooking skills against mine. You will be determining the winner as you taste the dish," Jessica replied, fully calm; after all, as long as her husband liked her food better, she couldn't be upset. She and Sanji placed the covered dishes onto the desk, and removed the covers.

"The Shepherd's Repast for your enjoyment, Commander Jonathan," Sanji said smoothly.

The Vice Admiral's eyebrows rose as he took in the dishes before him. One looked as unappetizing as ever, but the other... despite the fact that the ingredients were the same, it actually looked appetizing. Then he realized the issue in his current situation. It was glaringly obvious who made which dish, meaning he was either going to choose the one that was obviously better, or the one that was obviously his wife's. At least the damnable South Birds were silent.

In an effort to fend off that choice, he gathered a generous spoonful of Jessica's dish, including the broccoli. As he put it into his mouth, it took every bit of control he had to suppress his gag reflex. He loved his wife and he adored her cooking, he really did, but it just seemed like whatever vegetables she touched gained an almost supernatural hatred for his palate. Nevertheless, he managed to
swallow painfully and continue on to the rest of the thankfully edible meal.

He directed an only semi-forced grin at his wife. "Delicious as always, dear."

Jessica shot her nose up at Sanji with a contented sniff, which elicited a somewhat conflicted sigh from the disguised pirate. Processing that, Jonathan turned to the more visually appetizing meal. Hiding a grimace, he spooned up another generous helping of vegetables and put it into his mouth. His eyes widened; it was undoubtedly broccoli and carrots that he was eating. But the steaming on them was different, and the spices and bits of cheese on it made it more much more palatable. In fact, it was delicious. He forced down the urge to get another spoonful, turning his utensil towards the meat instead. The vegetables were obviously better, but surely Jessica couldn't be outdone on her lamb chop?

Surely she could, he reflected, as the meat melted in his mouth like filet mignon. Jessica's had been wonderful, but this… this was perfect. Jonathan swallowed, now legitimately nervous.

The two cooks analyzed the Vice Admiral intently, eagerly gauging his facial expressions.

"Well?" Jessica asked with absolute confidence. "Who's better?"

It took every bit of willpower Jonathan had to freeze his facial muscles, so that he had the time he needed to ponder what answer he would give. On the one hand, he could just take the easy road and say that Jessica was the better cook. An obvious solution that would save him a lot of trouble in the future… but on the other hand, it would also be a lie. To lie like that would be a dire insult to the possible Marley brother standing before him, and the fact that he had just tasted broccoli that he wanted to eat again was a strong point in favor of him telling the truth, so he wouldn't suffer again.

'I have to choose between good food and Jessica not being mad. Whether this man is a pirate or not, it would be wonderful to have this dish... but then again, I have to live with Jessica. It seems that I'll simply have to—'

Without even a hint of warning whatsoever, the doors to the office were busted down, allowing one salivating Monkey D. Luffy to enter the room. "Hey Sanji, they ran out of dishes to taste in the kitchen! Can I have the great stuff I'm smelling in here?"

After a moment's pause, Jonathan responded by slowly pushing both plates forward. "All yours, Captain Luffy."

"Thanks!" Luffy nodded his thanks before rushing forwards and starting to pig out on the dishes.

For a few seconds, the only noise that could be heard was the sound of Luffy chowing down at speeds that put buzzsaws to shame, until finally a disembodied sigh wafted through the air. "I tried. I really, really, really tried."

"Don't even worry about it, Cross..." Sanji sighed out a cloud of smoke as he weathered the infernal glare Jessica was trying to melt his brains with. "This isn't even remotely your fault."

"Huh? What's wrong, guys?" Luffy asked, still chowing down on the contents of the two plates.

"Allow me to introduce myself: I am Vice Admiral Jonathan, base commander of Navarone," Jonathan said with a small smile.

"Oh, cool," Luffy said.

"... Three, two, one..."
Luffy's eyes suddenly widened to comical levels, and his mouth dropped open. "You're the guy in charge? The guy that Cross is so scared of?"

"Luffy? Consider the last person you met who had the rank of 'Vice Admiral' and tell me that I shouldn't be scared," Cross said dryly.

"Oh?" Jonathan blinked in surprise. "He's met a Vice Admiral before? Who?"

"Think very hard about his family name."

Jonathan needed only to think for a moment before opening his mouth in an 'ah' of understanding. The pirate and Marine stared at each other in silence for a few seconds…

Until Jonathan grinned and broke the silence with a "Boo."

Luffy's reaction was actually… underwhelming, as he merely chuckled and continued eating. "I screwed up, huh? Sorry, guys!"

Several loud thuds that, judging from Jessica and Sanji's reactions, signified face-faults echoed across the connection.

"YOU THINK THAT FIXES ANYTHING!?" a chorus of enraged voices roared.

"How is this utter moron the captain?" Jessica wondered.

"I can't honestly say I'm surprised considering what Cross said," Jonathan chuckled before slowly starting to stand up. "Now then, if you'd kindly finish eating…"

"Uh, uh, uh..." Cross stammered uncontrollably as he fumbled for something, anything to say before finally coming to a panicked conclusion. "Uh, HEY! B-before we move to the inevitable fight, d-don't you still have a decision to make, Jonathan?"

"Oh, I'm sure that can wait until these two are in the brig," the Vice Admiral said smoothly.

"Actually, dear, I do think putting them away can wait long enough for you to say which dish you liked better," Jessica replied coolly.

Silence for a few moments, and then Cross chuckled.

"A lover's spat, hmm?" Something in the pirate's words made Jonathan's blood run cold. A feeling that only intensified at what he said next. "Say, Jessica, quick question, what's the meal that you made for this contest?"

"The Shepherd's Repast, or put simply, lamb chop and mixed vegetables. Why?" Jessica questioned without ever taking her eyes off of the pirates.

"Well, then, everyone, I'd say that's positive proof that Sanji is the better chef. After all, I saw that same dish in Jonathan's garbage bin last night."

It was as though the room had been hit by a blizzard with how still and cold the atmosphere became. Then the two most skilled chefs on base slowly turned, glaring daggers at a paling Jonathan.

"You threw away the meal I made for you?" Jessica asked quietly.

"You dare to not only waste food, but food that this wonderful lady made for you, pouring her heart
and soul into it?" Sanji growled, his fists steaming.

Jonathan began to sweat, his hands held in front of him. "N-Now, now, let's not be hasty—"

"Sanji, we'll have to continue this later. Right now, I need to kill my husband," Jessica said, giving the pirate chef a beatific smile.

"Oh, believe me, I understand, Lady Jessica," Sanji replied smoothly. "But may I suggest making him empty his bin and finish your lovely meal first? After all, we both know that you can't waste food."

"No, you certainly can't. Excellent suggestion."

"...Well played, Cross..." Jonathan mumbled.

"Jonathan, remember what I said earlier? Well, this is gloating. No, actually, this is gloating. Hey, Jessica, did you also know that he has a tendency to give the meals you spend so much time preparing to anyone who comes by to get out of eating them, and then order them to tell you that it was delicious?"

Jonathan was now white as a ghost, which was all the confirmation the listeners needed. Jessica's resulting tone was as calm as a hurricane's eye. "Thank you for telling me that, Cross. Anything else to say?"

"Why, hello, miss," Isaiah smoothly interrupted as he landed in front of her, his wings spread wide. "Look to your man. Back at me. Now back to your man. Now back to me. Sadly, he isn't me, but with a good workover with, say," Isaiah held one of his talons out, which was carrying a hefty looking frying pan, "a Nine Cast Iron, he could be honest like me."

Jessica blinked in surprise before smiling beatifically and accepting the cooking utensil. "Another excellent suggestion, thank you." She then directed her gaze at Jonathan, and her smiling face morphed into something straight out of a nightmare.

"Yes, Isaiah, thank you, that's perfect. Take note, Jonathan, of weak spot number one: lying to your wife. I trust you'll never make that mistake again. Now, Luffy, Sanji? As our crew's tactician, I'd say that now is the appropriate time for what we in the business call a 'strategic withdrawal'. Or, to put it simply... BOOK IT!"

"Kick him a few times for me, Lady Jessica," Sanji requested before, dragging Luffy behind him, he hightailed it out of the room. A crowd of angry-looking chefs met him outside.

"Jessica just found out that Jonathan threw away a meal she made for him!" Sanji shouted in a convincingly panicked tone. Every Marine in earshot paled in utter terror for all of three seconds. After that, the kitchen, dining room, and hallway went from crowded to 100% abandoned.

"Shishishi! Man, these guys are fast!" Luffy chuckled.

Sanji, for his part, was snapping his head left and right frantically. "Which way, Cross?"

"This way!"

"Right!" Luffy promptly started running down a corridor.

"HOW STUPID ARE YOU!?"
"Whoops, sorry!" the captain said as he pulled a 180.

Sanji groaned miserably as he ran to keep up with his captain. "Why, oh, why does someone with that thick of a skull have to be *that* charismatic!"?

"*Would we really follow him if he wasn't Luffy?*

The resultant silence and the smiles implied therein were answer enough. The moment didn't last long, however.

"*Uh, Cross? Are you there?*

"*Wha—Conis? Are you—what's going on? Are you still in the infirmary?*

---

"No, I'm not," she grunted in response, cursing under her breath as her uncooperative legs banged into another bucket. "I'm currently in a broom closet... somewhere."

"*Third corridor, fifth subsection, Gamma Quadrant.*"

Conis and Su exchanged looks of surprise. "Damn, slimeball," the cloud fox whistled.

"*I have been listening to more CHATTER THAN I CARE TO REMEMBER. I THINK I KNOW THIS PLACE BETTER THAN* most of the soldiers who live here!"

"*Which is going to come in handy for getting out of here. But that aside, why did you wander off and what are you doing?*"

"Staying on a cot in the medical wing seemed like a good way to get caught. I'm currently trying to change into a Marine uniform... and trying to get used to what the land is like down here."

"She's acting like even more of a klutz now than Pagaya," Su chuckled.

"Su—AGH!"

CRASH!

Conis waited for cleaning products to stop falling around her before lifting the edge of the bucket that was on her head with a sigh. "...Alright, I'll admit that I can't argue with that."

"*What do you mean you're trying to get used to the land?*" Usopp asked curiously.

The Skypiean rapped her knuckles on the ground with a huff. "It appears that the Blue Sea's islands are a lot more stationary than those of the White-White Sea."

"Wha—? *What do you mean, the islands up there stay still too, don't they?*" Nami asked.

"Of course they don't," Conis waved a hand casually as she started pulling herself to her feet using the nearby shelves. "They don't *drift*, no, but they're still floating on the Cumuloregalis. I didn't have any problems on the Merry because all Skypieans get used to dealing with the minute swaying as they grow up; at this point, my sea legs are making my sense of balance over-compensate for an imbalance that's no longer present."

"*Ugh... well, at least you're not drunk on oxygen anymore. So, what are you planning right now?*"
Conis slowly staggered her way over to a nearby coat hanger and took a Marine cap off of it, replacing her beret with the headwear and situating it in such a manner that her hair-antennae were hidden. "For now, I'm going to try my luck blending in as a janitor. Maybe walking on slick surfaces will help me keep my balance better."

"*Plus I imagine a mop can double as an excusable crutch, huh?*" Cross questioned.

"That too," Conis nodded in acknowledgement as she slid on the rest of the janitor's uniform. "And I have to say, I like the way this uniform feels, very different from the outfits on Angel Island. Now, where—ah, that'll work. Su, you'll need to hide in here." The cloud fox looked at the duffle bag Conis was holding, and then *looked* at her erstwhile master, a look that Conis returned.

"Su, they know that I have a Cloud Fox with me and they know we're in the base, so," she started raising her hand towards a metal can on a shelf. "Unless you'd prefer to adopt a more locally *traditional* look—"

One blur of white later and the bag was zipped shut. "Knock my head against anything and there'll be hell to pay," came Su's muffled voice.

"I'll be as careful as I can be, Su," Conis assured her, picking up a bucket and mop before walking out the door. Two steps later, she was groaning facedown into the floor.

"Somehow, that doesn't reassure me," Su moaned.

-0-

The atmosphere in the Vice Admiral's office was… uncomfortable. Jonathan was eating a platter of vegetables, mostly broccoli, which had been liberated from his bin and cleaned, while nursing some large lumps on his skull. Meanwhile, his wife stood behind him with a very calm look on her face, and a large skillet in her hands. A bemused Drake, Henrick, and Cormac looked on as Jonathan finished his meal down to the last morsel on the plate before looking up at Jessica. And, of course, the two South Birds were back to being smug.

"I'm sorry, Jessica. The truth is that I really do love your cooking, but I've never been able to stomach the broccoli," Jonathan said apologetically. Jessica's lips tightened, as did her grip on the skillet, before she sighed.

"...Upsetting though that is, the fact that you never said anything is even *worse,*" she said, emphasizing the last bit. "I was aware that you were less than partial to the broccoli and vegetables in general, but had you made it known that you disliked them to the extent that you would prefer throwing them away, I would have been willing to put in the necessary effort to change that. Did you think I couldn't take criticism on my food from someone who knows what they're talking about?"

Jonathan sighed. "Well, you do tend to be rather… sensitive about your cooking."

Jessica scoffed. "I'm not denying that I would have been upset, but preparing food to satisfy the clientele *is* my job. Just be more honest in the future, and I'll do whatever I have to so that your meals are both healthy *and* palatable."

Jonathan nodded appreciatively. "I won't let it happen again, Jessica. Complete honesty from now on."

"I do so love when a couple makes up like this," Terry said at a normal volume.

"As do I," Isaiah agreed.
"Good. Then you can start now: which dish did you like better?"

Jonathan stiffened briefly, but shook his head. "Sanji's. I had to resist the urge to take another bite of the broccoli, and that lamb chop was so tender and delicious…"

"Hmph," Jessica glowered before storming to the door. "Well, it seems I need to improve on my skills, then. I'll start by attempting to duplicate his dish. Meanwhile, I'll leave you to your meeting."

She opened the door and walked out of the office before looking back.

"Oh, and Jonathan? I think your posture has improved today."

As Jessica closed the door, the three officers in the room couldn't suppress snickers, while the two South Birds both posed even more smugly. That lasted all of ten seconds before Jonathan leveled a glare at them.

"If you're quite finished… what is the progress on apprehending the Straw Hat Pirates?"

"N-None yet, sir," Henrick replied.

Jonathan tapped his fingers together. "Gentlemen, I like to think that I am usually a thoroughly reasonable man. Slow to anger, quick with a joke. However…" The Vice Admiral tapped a finger against a rather impressive goose-egg that was growing on his temple. "After being set upon by my own wife, I find that a large percentage of my patience has been exhausted." The glare intensified, causing all three of his subordinates to flinch. "Locate and apprehend them before I lose the rest of it."

"SIR, YES, SIR!" the Marines snapped into a salute.

"Dismissed."

The Vice Admiral was silent as he watched his men file out of his office before heaving a weary sigh. "You are proving to be a most… unique adversary, Mister Cross." He picked up a bishop from the chessboard on his desk and looked it over. "Are you sure I couldn't tempt you to play a game or two?"

"Sorry," Cross's clearly grinning voice apologized. "But I only know the absolute basics and I've never won a game. You'd stomp me in ten moves or less."

"Hmph." Jonathan set the piece down on a new square. "What a shame…” He stared at the board impassively for a few seconds before leaning forward and tenting his fingers on his desk. "So, tell me. What are your thoughts on Navarone?"

"Well, weak spot number two is one we've found out rather personally: those patrols you send out? The fact that some of the weakest members of our crew have managed to disable more than we can count is proof that they're more ambush bait than anything. Either you up the quality or up the quantity, but right now they're not that effective, even if their routes are."

"Hmm, a fair point," Jonathan conceded with a sigh. "So, what is their current status?"

"Thoroughly humiliated but fine," Cross replied. "Like I said, we're not trying to kill anyone. Besides that, the only immediate issue that comes to mind is already resolved. I'm honestly surprised that you didn't have more faith in your wife."

"Clearly, Cross, you've never had to deal with an angry significant other. But you're correct, that
was…” Jonathan winced as a throb of pain echoed through his skull. "A mistake on my part."

"Heh. So, yeah, not finding all that many weaknesses so far… but then again, this is the quiet stage of the game."

"Well, we'll have to see if the game progresses beyond that. Out of curiosity, however, what happened to the real Marley brothers?"

"Suffice to say that they're… indisposed, not far from the docks," said the mystery crewmate.

"But feel free to let them free and lead them to the kitchen. After all, Jessica could use the excuse to blow off some steam on a pair of men so incompetent in the kitchen that peeling potatoes results in a bucket of scraps."

That made Jonathan grin. "Thank you for that advice, Cross."

"My pleasure. Now, for the next stage, a key part of showing how strong the base is will come from showing how strong the brig is. After all, succeeding in pulling off a jailbreak would be... uh, Boss, you wanna finish that?"

"Gladly, Cross," a voice that Jonathan could only assume to be one of the dugong's piped in. "Ahem... to exfiltrate one's allies from unjust imprisonment in a nigh inescapable detention facility... is that not a truly bold Man's Romance!?"

"GO, BOSS, GO!" a quartet of eager voices concurred.

"Oh, and before I forget, Vice Admiral," Boss continued in a more even tone. "If you want that net trick to work, see about shoring up the bottom of the bay itself. It's way too easy to dig through."

"'Easy', he says, psh..."

The Vice Admiral couldn't help but chuckle at the enthusiasm. "My, my, it sounds like you have quite the characters on your crew."

"Vice Admiral, allow me to be completely and utterly frank with you," Cross said with the utmost seriousness. "Compared to a lot of other crews out there in the world? I guarantee you that we are tame and sane."

"Before I attempt to contradict that statement, you do realize that in order to break someone out of the brig, someone has to be in the brig first, right?"

Jonathan allowed himself a contented grin at the beautiful silence that followed.

"... Hold that thought, Jonathan."

-0-

"OK, so I've got two preferred choices here," I said, tapping my fingers together sheepishly. "I think our best options would be either Zoro or Usopp. What say you guys, either of you game?"

"Denied," chorused two flat voices.

"That's what I was afraid you'd say..." I hung my head with a weary sigh.

"I regret to say that Miss Navigator and I are both undercover, so we're unavailable for that," Robin said smugly.
"Regret nothing, sucks to be you guys!" Nami cackled.
"Witch."

"WATCH YOUR BLASPHEMOUS MOUTH, MARIMO!"

"You can kick his ass later, Sanji!" I snapped. "Right now, we need to prioritize figuring out who gets captured, someway, somehow, right the hell now!"

"Oh, oh, I'LL DO IT!" Soundbite waved his eyestalks eagerly. "Am-stram-gram-gr—WHAT THE HELL!?"

"Huh?" I looked at the snail when he suddenly barked in panic. "What's u—?"

I was promptly cut off by Vivi's voice.

"Hello. Lieutenant Commander Drake, I presume?"

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"Who—?" the Marine started to ask as he turned around before tensing as he identified the individual who'd tapped his shoulder.

Vivi smiled beatifically and waved. "Hello, I'm Princess Nefertari Vivi, a.k.a. 'Corsair Princess' Nefertari Vivi, negotiator of the Straw Hat Pirates, wanted for the price of ₹55 Million. I believe you've been looking for me?"

"Ah…" Drake hesitated as he tried to get his mind's gears to grind properly.

"Oh!" Vivi snapped her fingers in realization. "I almost forgot!"

THWACK!

"GYERGH!"

The princess retracted her knee from between the Lieutenant Commander's legs, allowing him to collapse in agony.

Vivi knelt down over him, smile still in place. "That was for accusing one of my dearest friends for having anything to do with the bastards who tried to rip my nation apart." She then clapped her hands and stood up with a bright smile. "Now, then!" She held her wrists out to the shell-shocked soldiers who'd been accompanying the Commander, causing them to flinch back in terror. "If one of you fine gentlemen would be so kind as to take me into custody, I'd very much appreciate it."

-0-

I gaped at Soundbite in awe as I tried to process what the hell had just happened. "Well… that's one way to do it."

"Pacifist my fluffy tail!" Su snorted.

"I blame you animals for the corruption of my sweet princess!" Sanji moaned.

"Said da' cook who can bweak ian with his feet…" Carue muttered.

"Iron? Oh, no, that's not right. Sure, he can dent iron, but breaking it? That honor belongs to the
"Ah, shadd—WA-AA-AA-AGH!" Carue's muttering suddenly swapped to an avian squawk of panic.

"Do not resist arrest, duck," Drake said sternly... before groaning. "Arresting a giant duck... why did it have to be the Straw Hats?"

I couldn't help but laugh at that. And a few panicked squawks and reassurances from Vivi later, the two of them were being quietly escorted to the brig. "Alright, everyone, once Vivi's in place, we can organize the jailbreak pla—"

"PRIORITY ONE!" Soundbite suddenly squawked before adopting a calm visage and a calm smile.

"Excuse me, I'm Marine Inspector Major Shepherd, and this is my escort. I believe that Jonathan is expecting me?" came Robin's voice.

"Wha—A-ah, of course, ma'am," Drake's voice said. "I'll lead you to Jonathan's office. Men, escort these two to the brig."

I winced slightly. "You two had better play your cards right, or you'll be joining Vivi."

"That sounds reasonable, thank you," Robin said.

-o-

"Ah, Marine Inspector Major Shepherd, I've been expecting you. And who is this?" Jonathan asked calmly.

"Captain Bellemere, sir," Nami said tightly. "I'm here as the Inspector's escort."

"Oh?" Jonathan blinked in surprise as he looked Nami over. "I was unaware that the Inspector even had an escort."

"I prefer to keep my participation in these inspections as incognito as possible," Nami explained, keeping her voice cool and neutral all the while. "It gives shoddy bases less time to prepare so that we get the honest image from the get-go."

"Are you accusing G-8 of being incompetent?!" Drake demanded.

"She never said that," Robin replied with a raised hand. "Though I'm afraid that that doesn't change the facts of this investigation. The general sentiment at HQ is that, due to the lack of activity in the waters surrounding this base, the budget for the maintenance of Navarone is considered, quite frankly, to be something of a boondoggle."

Nami raised her eyebrows quizzically at the choice of words, but shrugged it off as Jonathan replied.

"I am aware of that, Inspector, but I think you'll find that a lack of action does not represent a lack of preparedness." He stood up and moved towards a corner of the room. "In fact, I've recently acquired enough liquid capital to ensure that Navarone will remain up and running for the next decade."

Nami and Robin followed his gaze. And the instant that the shimmering treasure caught her eye—

"THERE'S NO CHANCE IN HELL THAT YOU'RE DOING THAT WITH MY TREASURE!"

Silence greeted that shout for a second before Nami's mouth clicked shut in a pained grimace.
"I thought so. After all, you may have Bellemere's attitude, but I'd recognize that woman anywhere, and you're not her," Jonathan remarked, catching Nami off guard.

"You… you knew my mother?" Nami asked quietly.

Jonathan looked back at her in honest shock. "Your mother? Interesting. Yes, she was quite the strong Marine. Never took nonsense from anyone, always did things her own way, but she was nonetheless extremely formidable. We trained together, she was a good friend of mine, but then she led her squad on a dangerous mission in the East Blue against a criminal group. We were under the impression that there were no survivors," Jonathan finished solemnly.

Nami bowed her head. "Bellemere… she was close to death, but she found my older sister and I on the battlefield. She took us in and raised us as her daughters. We were poor, but we were a family…" Rage and sorrow mixed on her face. "Until Arlong came. She fought hard, she even had him dead to rights, but… in the end…" Nami hugged herself tightly. "She sacrificed herself to save us."

Jonathan bowed his head respectfully. "A hero to the very end. I'm sorry for your loss."

"I, for one, am disappointed." Drake crossed his arms with a scowl. "For someone with a retired Marine as a parent to wind up a pirate… you should be ashamed for so flagrantly dishonoring her memory."

It was a credit to the man's courage that he didn't even so much as flinch in response to the face-melting glare Nami pinned him with.

"Lieutenant Commander Drake."

But no amount of courage could prevent him from snapping to attention when Jonathan's harsh tone cracked the air like a whip.

Cold sweat ran down the officer's face as he felt the Vice Admiral's glare bore into him. "The only person in this room who should be ashamed is you, Drake. Apologize to the young lady."

"But, sir—!"

"Now."

Drake swallowed heavily before bending into a bow. "P-Please accept my apologies for my earlier rudeness, ma'am, I spoke without thinking."

Nami maintained her glare on Drake before letting out a harsh scoff. "Don't let it happen again." She then glanced back at Jonathan for a second before sighing. "Well, this is the definition of ironic. I meet a Marine that actually knew my mother, and it's in a situation where I was supposed to keep a low profile. This could have gone so much better, in more ways than one."

"The first step is admitting that you have a problem," Cross stated innocently.

"I will let Chopper give me therapy when you agree to do the same for your addiction to adrenaline," Nami said, crossing her arms.

"NEVER!"

"Then it would seem that we are at an impasse."

Jonathan chuckled at the exchange before coughing and readopting his half-bored, half-serious
expression. "I regret this as well, Nami. Under better circumstances, I wouldn't mind sharing a few stories about Bellemere over drinks. I do hope you understand, this is simply business."

Nami frowned, but nodded nonetheless. "Yes, I do understand that." She paused, a malevolent smile coming over her face. "And on that note, there is a significant bright side to you figuring it out…"

"Um, what are you—?" Jonathan asked nervously.

"You see, respectable Marine though you've proven that you are, you're still the man that invaded my private space and stole my precious treasure," she said, reminding Jonathan so much of an angry Jessica that he found himself instinctively freezing up as she approached him. "I had to restrain myself from hurting you to keep my cover intact, you understand that, right? But now that you know the truth, I'm perfectly free to do THIS!"

CRUNCH!

The few Marines gathered winced in sympathy, except for Drake. He, along with Robin, was smirking.

"Ow…" Jonathan winced as he fiddled with his broken nose. "Alright… I'm man enough to admit that I had that coming."

"You think that's all I'm going to do to you?"

Jonathan paled in terror when Nami jerked him by his collar so that he was staring straight into her positively evil grin.

"Let me assure you, Mister Vice Admiral… we've only just begun."

"Ah, D-Drake?"

"… Honestly, sir? It's my professional opinion that we can hold off on arresting her until she's finished," Drake mused. "For the safety of our men, you understand."


"It's nothing personal, sir, I assure you." Drake slowly let a predatory grin slip across his face. "Actually… it really is. Consider this catharsis for all the years of smartassery you've subjected me to."

"Besides," Isaiah cut in. "You know what they say about women scorned. Your subordinate is showing very good sense in not getting in her way." He paused in thought. "In fact, perhaps we should leave and not expose our manly visages to such… cruelty."

"GOODBYE!" Terry yelled in agreement, flapping outside of the office alongside his companion and positioning themselves so that they didn't have to look into the office.

"Thank you very much, Lieutenant Commander Drake, Isaiah, Terry," Nami purred before snapping a leer at the Vice Admiral. "Now then, Jonathan, if you would kindly?" The navigator swung her fist back. "Grit your teeth."

-o-

All activity in the kitchen slowly came to a halt as the unmistakable sound of their commander being assaulted echoed around them. Jessica wasn't even able to reprimand them, caught up as she was in
"I WORKED MY FINGERS TO THE BONE TO INTOXICATE THAT SNAKE SO I COULD SALVAGE ALL OF THAT GOLD, AFTER WATCHING AN AMOUNT AS BIG AS THIS FORTRESS LITERALLY FLY AWAY! HOW DARE YOU STEAL IT FROM ME?!"

"… Well, I suppose I don't need to be angry at him anymore. This is punishment enough," Jessica mused.

-0-

On the surface of the base's bay, five dugongs were cringing in sympathy and horror in response to the beatdown they heard.

"… Boys? I've decided that I don't need to raise my disciplinary measures, as I have absolutely no chance of being as good at punishment as she is."

The four younger dugongs all sighed in relief.

"So, I'll just have to make sure that if any of you do something too stupid, she takes care of the discipline."

The martial artist amphibian cocked an eyebrow as his students flopped onto their backs, foam bubbling from their mouths.

"Note to self: focus on training their wills from now on."

-0-

"Urp… oh—hurk—I'm sorry about this—blugh—Doctor Chopper," moaned Kobato around the bile with which she was filling the infirmary's toilet.

"Don't worry about it, Doctor Kobato," Chopper sighed in resignation, the audio of Nami's rage echoing in both of their ears as he held Kobato steady. "Believe me, this is an entirely normal reaction to hearing this."

"Oh, that's—ough—good to hear."

-0-

Elsewhere in the base, two of the Straw Hats were doing a very good job at epitomizing the crew's standard insanity. How? Because in response to Nami's rage, the chef was having mood swings—

"NAMI-SWAN IS SO GORGEOUS WHEN SHE'S ANGRY—but this time, I think the rage is just too much—BUT SHE'S SO WONDERFULLY BRUTAL—but is it too much? I'm scared—BUT IT'S STILL NAMI-SWAN!"

—and Luffy was rolling on the ground laughing his rubber head off in response to Sanji's antics. No Marines were around, but if they were, odds were that they would be far too bemused to do anything about them.

-0-

"The witch really has been holding out on us," Zoro muttered, currently in the middle of a large metal slab with the G-8 logo embedded in it, on one side of which was a large stone spire and the
other was what appeared to be the open ocean.

"Huh. Looks like the lake here is bigger than I thought," he remarked before walking on.

Jonathan was a Vice Admiral, renowned for being extremely formidable in battle, capable of taking down an army singlehandedly.

Jonathan was a genius, capable of outsmarting one of the most ruthless, powerful, and fanatical Marines in the Navy and treated any challenge as though it were a simple game of chess.

Jonathan was currently nursing enough injuries from a rookie pirate—who wasn't even the captain! —that nobody was likely to believe either of those.

And meanwhile, Nami was standing over him, huffing and puffing at him with an expression that was just now ceasing to be demonic. "Now, with that done… MY GOLD!"

The non-Marine shed her coat and sped over to the pile of gold in the room, hugging and kissing it as if it were her lost child.

"Oh, my dearly beloved gold! Did the mean Marines damage you at all? Don't worry, Mommy's here now, I'll take good—"

THWACK!

"Ugh…" Nami moaned as a chop to her neck knocked her out, laying her out flat at the feet of a grimacing Inspector.

"That was very quickly becoming disturbing. Please get her out of here," Robin said sourly.

Drake shivered slightly at the inspector's expression before nodding in agreement. "Understood." He popped a salute off at Jonathan. "By your leave, sir!" And with that, he foisted Nami onto his shoulder and marched out of the office.

Once the door was shut, Jonathan gave 'Inspector Shepherd' a bland look. "Well, now, that was certainly harsh. To your own crewmate, no less?"

Robin sighed fondly as she slid her glasses off and graced the Vice Admiral with a light smile. "Miss…" Robin paused for a moment before her smile became more… natural. "Nami is like a little sister to me, and while her antics and habits can be amusing at times, there are also moments when she needs to be restrained to a certain degree, if only for the sake of her own dignity."

"Heh, I believe I might know the sentiment," Jonathan nodded in agreement. "I respect and care for my men like none other, but they do so love to make fools of themselves at times. I can only imagine where they'd be without me."

"I do believe that I know how you feel, Mister Vice Admiral."

"Hey, I resent those implications!" Cross protested.

"Don't you MEAN RESEMBLE?" Soundbite cackled.

"Ah, shut it. But, ah… moving on… Jonathan, if you've already made Robin, then why isn't she in seastone cuffs? Not that I'm complaining… much…"
"And I thought we were getting along so well…” Robin mock-pouted.

"You almost let me get dissected within 24 hours of you joining the crew."

"And here I thought that time was supposed to heal all wounds."

"For the sake of my marriage, I hope it does…” Jonathan muttered before raising his voice. "And to answer your question, Cross, while you might be willing to cheat without mercy—"

"Pi~rate~!"

"I am still a man of my word. While I myself might have managed to identify Nico Robin, none of my subordinates did, and there are still several hours to go before I can directly accelerate your captures. Until then, her identity is safe with me. But out of morbid curiosity… what happened to the real Shepherd?"

When Cross told him, Jonathan laughed. When Soundbite told him how many grunts had discovered the inspector, Jonathan fell off his chair.

"Oh, thank you, thank you, I needed that," Jonathan chuckled as he wiped a tear from his eye.

"Well, I suppose you should be going, but before you do, if I might make one request?"

"Oh?" Robin gave the Vice Admiral a curious look. "And that would be?"

Jonathan slid his chessboard to the middle of his desk with a pleading look. "One game? Please?"

Robin paused contemplatively. "Well…"

"Oh, go on and enjoy yourself," Cross prompted in a careless tone. "I'll need time to plan this out anyways and get everyone in place, so you've got time to spare. Oh, and Jonathan? If it's not clear already, allow me to point out weak spot number three. I mean, it's perfectly understandable, but freezing up when confronted with angry women is not conducive to long-term survival, not least because of how many female pirate captains there are out there."

"Noted, Cross," Jonathan said dryly, though he actually did note something down on a piece of paper at his desk before concentrating on the board. "Now then, white to you, Miss Robin."

Robin grinned, a hint of competitive menace entering her expression as she began to play. "The middle of a life-or-death situation, and I find myself playing a friendly game of chess with the person responsible for every bit of danger in that situation." She slowly shook her head in awe. "I can't deny it anymore. I love being a Straw Hat Pirate."

-0-

"…You actually spoke to her?" Mekao breathed, too taken with the pirate’s story to consider anything in the vein of apprehending him.

"Yeah," Usopp confirmed quietly, running a longing hand over Merry's neck brace. "She talked about how much she wanted to stay with us, and we plan to do everything we can to make sure that it happens. But..." He let out a rueful—and slightly miserable—chuckle. "She gave me a real attitude check, too. I can only imagine how I would have reacted if I found out I had to let go without her telling me to.” He shuddered in horror. "And I'm not really sure I want to either, for that matter..." The sniper was somber for a moment before hastily rallying and making an attempt to smirk. "But I have to admit, I think what surprised me most was how colorful her vocabulary is."
"HA!" Mekao cackled. "The legends of Klabautermanns never touched much on that, focusing more on the fact that any ship that went to that much trouble was showing nothing but love and gratitude." The monkey-like shipwright grinned wryly. "But I will admit there have been the odd whispers here and there, usually dismissed because of how beautiful the story is, about other sailors hearing somebody cussing them out whenever they screw up in a particularly spectacular manner. Though then again, I suppose it only makes sense, doesn't it?" He looked around the Merry with a smile. "Like sailor, like ship. It's just that simple."

Usopp chuckled ruefully. "Yeah, I guess I was expecting her to be a lot more like her old mistress, but really, she's still just as kind and wonderful as I was expecting."

Mekao's grin only grew wider. "As I said, kid. I honestly think that you and yours only have yourselves to thank for that. You're no shipwright, that much is obvious..." He knocked his knuckles against the metal plates bolted onto the caravel. "But the love you've shown to this vessel is more than most people who are shipwrights ever give to a dinghy, including most everyone in this base. If that Klabautermann ever manifests again, do me a favor and put her on the SBS to talk about that."

Usopp matched Mekao's grin tooth for tooth. "Can do, old man."

"That's him, Lieutenant Cormac."

Both men turned to see a man with dark hair in a style much like Usopp's leading the sunglasses-wearing Marine towards the ship, a dozen or two grunts following him. Usopp's curiosity quickly turned to nervousness when the dark-haired Marine pointed to him.

"Thank you, Chief Petty Officer," Cormac said before looking at the old man. "I see you have a new friend, Mekao. One who I don't recognize. Care to... introduce him?"

"Eh?" Mekao practically shouted, one hand held up to cup his ear. "What was that?"

Cormac frowned. "I said," he repeated, slightly louder. "Who is your new friend, Mekao?"

"Whose yurt is it?" Mekao shouted, glancing around in exaggerated confusion. "I don't see any yurt."

Cormac's eyebrow twitched. "You pulled that same trick a week ago when I tried to talk to you about the shipwright's budget, pull the other one."

Mekao blinked, then gave an exaggerated twitch as he clutched his hip. "Oh, my hip!" he howled, sinking to his knees. "I think it's broken!"

"And you used that one last month when I tried to talk to you about your hiring practices."

Usopp watched the display in confusion for a bit before noticing Mekao's finger jabbing at the air behind his back. It took him a second, but soon enough he grinned and slowly attempted to creep away, thanking his lucky stars for the old man's creativity.

He'd almost made it to the other edge of the Merry too...

"Going somewhere?"

"ACK!"

When he practically jumped out of his skin on account of one Chief Petty Officer Holger grabbing his shoulder.
“—and that one was used three days ago when—Oh, good job, Holger.”

Mekao's fake wince became genuine as he saw that their attention had turned to Usopp, whose twitching and sweating were making his attempts to look inconspicuous fail miserably.

"I-I-Is anything wrong—?" Usopp's brain stalled as he tried to conjure what rank the man's uniform could possibly denote.

Thankfully, where his memory failed, Soundbite came through. "Lieutenant Cormac."

"L-Lieutenant?" the sniper stammered while barely missing a beat.

Cormac looked Usopp up and down. "I've never seen you on base before, soldier. What's your name and squad?"

"Use one of the Usopp Pirates' names!" Cross said hastily.

"Division 18, SUPPLY SQUAD," Soundbite added. "Snipers are too REGULATED, SUPPLIES LESS SO."

Usopp swallowed heavily before straightening up into a salute. "S-Seaman Apprentice Pepper, D-Division 18. I-I was just curious about the pirates' arsenal, and Mekao here was telling me some incredible legends about ships," he said, growing more confident as he went on.

"Division 18? Isn't that the sniper division?" Cormac asked.

"H-Heh, I wish, I am something of a marksman," Usopp chuckled sheepishly as he scratched a finger beneath his nose. "N-No, it's just the supply division, not nearly as exciting… and not nearly as easy to stand out, either."

"Hmm…" Cormac started to hum, exchanging glances with Henrick.

Feeling the pressure start to come off him, Usopp slowly started straightening up and allowed himself to grin—

"Usopp, if you're starting to feel like you're in the clear, don't."

Before freezing as Cross hissed in his ear.

"That's your primary tell, Usopp. You can make lies up on the fly easy, sure, but whenever you think someone's bought them, you start acting cocky and high and mighty. In case you've forgotten, you're supposed to be a soldier suspected of being a pirate. Scared shitless is the very appropriate emotion; you start acting like you've gotten away with it, you will be made!"

That particular bit of information guaranteed that Usopp didn't have to fake the nervousness that he redisplayed in place of his grin, his trembling redoubling as he maintained his salute, then re-tripling when Cormac stepped up before him.

"My apologies, Seaman Apprentice, it seems I was mistaken," Cormac said with an apologetic grin. "If you'll just state the password that you should have received from Lieutenant Commander Drake, you can go."

"P-P-Password? I… oh, yeah, o-of course!" Usopp scratched the back of his head with a chuckle. "Sorry, it's just that no one's asked me about it in awhile, just lemme, ah…"
"Marineford **TANGO EN… IES… wait a second**…"

"Uhh… o-oh, now I remember it!" Usopp stuck his finger up eagerly.

"**NO, WAIT! IT'S A—!**"

"Marine Tango Enies… right?" Usopp grinned hopefully.

"…trap," Soundbite finished lamely for all the dock to hear as Cormac and Holger grinned triumphantly, prompting Usopp to break into a cold sweat. "DAMN IT."

"W-W-What are you—!?" Usopp started to stammer out.

"**Soundbite, what are you saying!?**" Cross finished for him.

The sound of grinding teeth filled the air. "**I didn't notice until USOPP SAID IT, but NO ONE has been using that PASSWORD! SHOULDHA FIGURED it was too easy. JONATHAN PLAYED US!**"

"Give the snail a prize," Cormac said smugly. "The real password was that there was no password. If you'd expressed ignorance of its existence, I might have even let you go free."

"As it is, however," Holger unfastened a pair of handcuffs from his belt and held them open. "You'll be coming with us. And don't try resisting, we all know it wouldn't do any good."

Usopp swallowed heavily and shakily started to raise his wrists in defeat…

"**WAIT!**"

When Soundbite's voice cracked through the air.

"Son of a—what?" Cormac snapped irritably.

"**A quick question FOR HOLGER!**" Soundbite pleaded. "**Any chance you might BE FROM A TOWN IN** the East Blue called SYRUP VILLAGE?"

Holger blinked in confusion while Usopp gaped at the air in horror and outrage. "Wha—No, I'm from the South Blue. Why, what does that have to do with anything?"

"**OH, ABSOLUTELY NOTHING,**" Soundbite scoffed, his tone screaming of a shit-eating grin. "**I just needed to distract you dipshits FOR THE TEN SECONDS BOSS NEEDED TO GET THERE! NOW!**"

A loud splash sounded from beside the Merry as Boss leaped out of the water, snapping his weapon out and lashing the rope around Usopp's waist.

Looking back, the Marines couldn't be sure whether the sniper had attempted to run towards them or away from them. As it was, however, they only had an instant to observe the scene before the dugong spun in the air, winding in the rope and reeling in Usopp before disappearing back beneath the water.

---

I sighed in relief as I heard that Usopp had managed to get away, and indignant though he was, better for us to have as many people outside of the brig to deal with the jailbreak.
"So, let's see..." I said, scanning over the base from the treetops. "Sixteen crewmates outside the brig. Conis, Su, Chopper, and Robin are all in disguises that nobody who'll expose them have seen through. The Dugongs and Usopp are hiding out in the moat, Sanji and Luffy are in the forest, Lassoo and Zoro are somewhere in the base, and of course, the communications officers are communicating from right here."

"Actually, Lassoo found his way over to me," Conis said. "I've got him hidden in the supply closet for now, but I'm ready to get him as soon as you say the word."

"And Zoro is RIGHT BEHIND SANJI," Soundbite added.

"WHAT?! WHAT THE HELL, SWIRLYBROW/MOSSHEAD!?!"

I pinched the bridge of my nose as yet another fight began. "Alright... Usopp, what's your current status?"

"...Honestly better than I expected," Usopp said in mild surprise. "I guess I've just got too many bad memories of Luffy's reach to be upset when it actually went well this time. But, uh, besides that, we're at the outer ring of the base, and I'm climbing up back into the forest, right near that giant bridge that they've got."

"Ah right, the brid—" I cut myself off with a smirk. "... Guys? I just figured out weak spot number four, and showing it off to Jonathan will be spectacular."

"I like the sound of that. So, what's the plan?" Vivi asked.

"For now, we wait until Robin's done playing chess with Jonathan. At that point... everyone be ready to move. Sorry, Vivi, that means you're going to have to wait a while."

"Don't worry, Cross, they didn't even bind my hands. I can handle being in a cell," Vivi said calmly.

AFTERNOON

-18 Hours Remain-

Vivi and Nami both twitched irately as they glared bloody murder at nothing.

"Soundbite, you are one of my dearest friends and most of the time I find your antics to be quite amusing..." Vivi grit out as she dragged her nails down the side of her head before throwing her head back and screaming furiously. "BUT SO HELP ME ANUBIS, IF YOU DON'T STOP PLAYING THE FUCKING HARMONICA, I WILL RIP THE EYESTALKS FROM YOUR SCRAWNY BODY AND FEED THEM TO YOU!"

The very repetitive melody promptly ceased, and Vivi stood tall for a few seconds in order to assure that the music was indeed gone before allowing herself to slump forwards with a sigh of relief, trudging over to lean against Carue's snoring mass.

Nami rolled her eyes and started counting down in her head as glorious silence stretched on, stuffing her fingers in her ears. "And in three, two, one..."

Vivi, for her part, allowed her eyes to slowly drift shut...

Before snapping them open in all their vein-filled fury when an electric guitar started strumming.

"The warden threw a party in the county jail! The prison band was there and they began to
"Called it," Nami hung her head with a sigh.

"RAAAAAAAAAAAGH!"

Lieutenant Commander Drake and every single Marine that had been assigned to guard duty over the brig were giving their sole occupied cage a very, very wide berth. Ostensibly, they were assembled for an ambush. In reality, it was in no small part because they wanted to be as far away as humanly possible from the Straw Hats' demonic navigator and furious princess.

"I guess she couldn't handle being in a cell after all," muttered one Marine.

"QUIET!" hissed several others.

"Hey, she's locked up, what can she do about it?"

"It's not her we're worried about," Drake said, checking for the umpteenth time that his ear protectors were secure. "Remember, men: the only reason we have her in custody was because she surrendered herself for the express purpose of allowing the opportunity for a jailbreak in the first place. And considering what we've seen so far, we can expect the Straw Hats to know that we're ready to ambush them, so keep your eyes peeled for any signs of subterfuge they might try and employ."

Drake acknowledged the nods of his men and prepared to settle in for a wait…

"Actually…"

When a familiar voice prompted him to whip around. He then paled in terror when he came face-to-face with none other than Straw Hat Luffy, who was grinning as he knocked his knuckles together, Pirate Hunter Zoro, who was tying a bandanna around his forehead, and a blonde-haired man who he could only assume was their chef, Sanji.

Said chef lit a cigarette and took a drag before sighing out a cloud of smoke. "Cross decided that in this particular instance, a hammer would be just as effective a tool as a scalpel." Sanji smirked sadistically. "Sucks to be you, huh?"

"…Why did it have to be the Straw Hats?" Drake moaned again.

The Marines tried to stop them. They really did. But without the sea prism stone bazookas, they had no way of combating the Monster Trio effectively in such close quarters. It was less than five minutes before the Marines, one and all, were unconscious.

"People falling left and right, it's a slaughter, not a fight!" Soundbite cheered.

"Good work, you three. Drake should have the keys to the cage," Vivi said.

"AH, MY DEAR SWEET VIVI! DID YOU SEE HOW I FUGHT FOR YOU?"

"Yes, Sanji, we both did. We also got a decent bit of blowback from it," Nami grumbled as she picked a tooth from her hair. "Now, can you please get us out of here?"

"Not the easy way. Looks like the keys took a direct hit from Luffy or the cook," Zoro deadpanned, holding up a twisted mass of metal.

"Oh, just from us, hm?" Sanji deadpanned as he held up two halves of what were once a whole key.
"Shishishi, you two are idiots," Luffy chuckled from atop the pile of KO'd bodies he was perched on.

"YOU'RE ONE TO TALK!"

Luffy just laughed more, and Nami ground her palm into her face. "Zoro, cut the cage open so I can strangle him."

Zoro rolled his eyes at the order, but nonetheless stepped up, sheathing two of his swords and leaving only the Wado Ichimonji. The two girls and Carue stepped back to give Zoro room, and the swordsman closed his eyes, concentrated… and slashed out.

The bars remained intact, and the swordsman grimaced. "Damn it, are these things made of diamond or something?" he groused.

"Close, Zoro," came Cross' voice. "They're made of sea prism stone, which is supposed to be just as hard."

"And you didn't tell him that first because…?" Nami demanded.

"Because I hoped that if he didn't know he couldn't do it, he might be able to do it," Cross admitted.

"… That's either brilliant or stupid," Sanji remarked. "Which means that the mosshead should have been able to do it either way."

"Oh, oh, I've got something!" Luffy piped up before a fight could start. Looking back at him revealed that he was wearing a steel gauntlet on his right arm. "Usopp passed on Cross' new Impact Gauntlet earlier, and told me to fill it up and test it out. So I hit it with, uh… ten Bazookas? Maybe twenty?"

"That much power concentrated in a shock wave? Hmm… well, it should work on the hinges, if nothing else."

Grinning, Luffy, moved over to the door, prompting the three inhabitants of the cage to move to the opposite end of it. Luffy placed the gauntlet at the edge of the door…

"Aaand IMPACT!"

The good news was that that much force compressed into an Impact Dial struck at the weak spot was indeed enough to blow the door off of its hinges. And the bad news?

"Owww, that really stings!" Luffy whined as he waved his arm out, the shattered pieces of the gauntlet flying off in the process. Vivi, Carue, and a nonplussed Nami exited.

"Geez, I knew the blowback from Impact Dials hurt, but I thought Luffy would be able to take it, for his rubber body if not his strength," the navigator observed.

"That makes two of us," snarled Cross. "Freaking hell, Usopp, you were going to let me use that thing? If it could hurt Luffy, it would have blown my arm clean off!"

"T-That wasn't the final product, that was just a prototype!" Usopp desperately protested. "That's why I gave it to Luffy, to see if there were any bugs!"

"Well, I'd say there are a few left, wouldn't you!? Tsk…" Cross could be heard grinding his teeth before sighing heavily. "We will talk about this later. For now, here's the plan; until everyone else
gets in position, the rescue team needs to stay in the central spire. Keep running around, break down any obstacles in your way, living or not; until I give the word to head for the bridge, just keep raising chaos. Once I do, however, make tracks for it like there's no tomorrow. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to take full advantage of how much Soundbite likes to prank Usopp by planning out some... call it karma."

The subtle static in the air faded, and the rest of the crew exchanged glances.

"Should we worry about Cross killing Usopp?" Zoro wondered idly.

"I suppose I'll have to ask Chopper if it's possible to die of fright," Sanji mused. "Anyway, in the meantime, Mosshead and Luffy should enjoy this part of the plan."

"Heh. I'm not even insulted this time, dartboard, this is going to be fun," the swordsman said, grinning ferally.

"Alright! Let's go!" Luffy cheered.

-0-

Seaman James Hyde gripped his rifle a little tighter, marching in the center of a tight ball of Marines as they followed Ensign Henrick towards where they were pretty sure the Straw Hat Pirates were. The rest of his fellows seemed to believe they would just sweep away the Straw Hats by sheer force of numbers, but he knew better. A bunch of grunts with rifles seemed just... pitifully inadequate.

The ad-hoc battalion turned a corner, only to nearly collide with a Marine running the other way.

"Identify yourself, Marine!" Ensign Henrick barked.

"Screw that!" the Marine spat. "I'm getting out of here! The Straw Hats are bustin' through the walls!" And with that, he continued his flight, running around the reinforcements.

Ensign Henrick stared for a second, then shook his head and swung his hand forward, indicating that they should continue onward. They barely made it two steps before spotting another three Marines sprinting headlong in their direction.

"Soldiers, report! Where are the Straw Hats?" Ensign Henrick barked again.

Hyde couldn't help but notice that all three were shaking like leaves in a hurricane as they halted. Considering that, their answers were surprisingly coherent.

"They're demolishing the cell blocks!"

"No, no, they're heading for the Vice Admiral's office!"

"Nah, I heard Straw Hat Luffy himself say they needed to go to the mess!"

If still singularly unhelpful.

Hyde could see Ensign Henrick frown, and open his mouth—and then all three Marines started looking around, their heads practically on swivels.

"T-They're coming," one of them stammered. "THEY'RE COMING!"

Screaming, the three Marines returned to their flight. And while most of the battalion started muttering to themselves, Hyde noticed a slight cracking sound. A sound coming from above them.
Slowly, and with great trepidation, he looked up, to where a spiderweb of cracks was spreading across the ceiling.

"Above!" he shouted, just in time for the ceiling to... basically announce that it identified more as a dust cloud rather than any sort of solid object. The massive burst of dust and rubble sent the battalion into a fit of coughing and stumbling, even Ensign Henrick. As such, none were prepared when two razor-sharp attacks left as many Marines bleeding on the floor.

Hyde gulped as Pirate Hunter Zoro and Corsair Princess Vivi stepped out of the cloud, their weapons clutched in their hands. The Pirate Hunter's eyes gazed out from underneath his bandanna, piercing through all they fell on. And the Corsair Princess... well, she wasn't glaring at anyone, but the cold impassiveness of her expression was still somehow just as scary.

-0-

"You sure are being ruthless for someone who hates hurting people," Zoro grunted.

The princess sighed as she stepped through the Marines, idly spinning her Cutter at her side. "I think I demonstrated when I met you that I was willing to do whatever I had to if it meant keeping harm from coming to my home. And considering my current state in regards to Alabasta, my home is with our crew." She shook her head with a sigh. "I hope I'll never start enjoying fighting, but I won't deny that I'm growing more comfortable with doing what needs to be done."

"Hn."

-0-

Quaking, Hyde raised his musket to fire at the two. He had to do **something**, after all. His pride as a Marine demanded it! He pulled the trigger, the musket fired—and then a black mass got in the way, fire blazing in its eyes.

"DENIED!"

One black limb lashed out, and then the Marine knew no more.

-0-

Both Vivi and Zoro sweatdropped as Sanji tore through the Marines like a combine harvester through a wheat field.

"I'm not the only one who thinks this is a bit of an overreaction, right?" Vivi wondered, idly kicking her leg back. The action was shortly followed by the loud thump of a body hitting the floor.

"This? Oh, no, you didn't see him when the Ordeal of Iron tagged Conis," Cross said from nowhere. "That made him so angry that he both spontaneously combusted and learned how to fly for the express purpose of helping him try and reduce that bastard Ohm to a pile of ash."

The two blade-wielders exchanged looks, shrugged, and proceeded after Sanji.

"Monsters," Nami droned, peeking out from behind a corner alongside Carue. "They're all monsters."

Suddenly, every single one of the Straw Hats present stiffened as they realized something.
"Wait, where's Luffy?!"

-0-

"About two floors above you and ten metres ahead." Soundbite snickered, grinning from ear to ear. "HE'S PULLING the same stunt he used BACK IN ALABASTA with CROSS! HUMAN FLAIL!"

Despite my… mixed feelings about that particular memory, I couldn't help but snicker. "Alright, so they're doing good at raising pandemonium. Let's check back in with Jonathan and confirm just how many reinforcements we've got on the way, shall we?"

"ROGER!" Soundbite concentrated for a second before suddenly turning bright red.

"What the—?" I jumped in shock.

"HOOOOOT!" the snail yowled, flailing miserably as a cloud of steam rocketed from his mouth.

"WE'RE FIFTY-FIVE AND YA BETTER FEAR IT!" came a drill sergeant-like voice.

"WE'RE FIFTY-FIVE AND YA BETTER FEAR IT!" echoed a chorus of masculine voices.

"OR YOU'RE GONNA TASTE OUR FIERY SPIRIT!"

"OR YOU'RE GONNA TASTE OUR FIERY SPIRIT!"

"Oh, right, these lunatics," I coughed as I tried to wave the steam out of my face. Freaking hell, what were they trying to do, smoke us to death!?

"Hmph. Aye-aye, sir. Subdue the pirates. Are you sure you wouldn't like to change the orders to shoot on sight?"

"WE'LL SMASH YOUR BAGS AND EAT YOUR GUNS!"

"WE'LL MAKE YOU WISH YOU WERE—!"

"Y-Yes, I'm sure. Well, good luck!" came Jonathan's voice, sounding rather perturbed, followed closely by the click of a Transponder Snail's receiver.

Soundbite promptly sagged, wheezing miserably as he let his tongue loll out. "YOU… fight… DIRTY…"

"I believe that there's been some mention of Marines bending the rules on the SBS in the pursuit of Justice, no?" Jonathan shot back casually. "And really, if we were scoring based upon cheating, you would have won long before now by grace of the slaughter rule. Consider this simply… evening the playing field."

I exhaled before carefully climbing down the tree and ultimately jumping off once I was low enough. As soon as my feet touched the earth, I started moving towards the massive bridge that was easily visible. "Well, then, I suppose we'll have to do the same, won't we? May the best cheaters win!"

-0-
Inside the spire, Nami was panting and leaning against a wall as she tried to catch her breath. "This… pace… is… insane…" she bit out before glaring up at the air. "And I'm pretty sure we've got half of the base's roster in here to boot! Can we please get out of here now?"

Before Cross could answer, Luffy did the honors by running back around the corner he'd turned on his own, waving his arms eagerly. "Hey, guys, I found a way out to this cool bridge with a buncha funny guys standing on it! Wanna check it out?"

"…eh, screw it. Everyone's in position; if it's not happening now, then it's not happening period! Alright, team, break for the bridge!"

"WOOHOO!" Luffy whooped, heading back the way he came.

Nami rolled her eyes before jogging after him. "Should we be worried about the 'funny guys' Luffy saw?"

"Maybe, if it weren't for a nasty surprise that I've arranged for them that they're going to find out shortly," Cross chuckled maliciously.

"Well, if you say so…" Nami muttered as she followed the rest of the crew, and promptly froze in wide-eyed horror when she came in sight of the bridge and its occupants.

Its huge, pumped up, supremely sweaty occupants. One, who looked particularly red, stepped up to the front and cleared his throat.

"Please allow us to introduce ourselves," he said gruffly. "We're the legendary unit 55, and no pirates will ever cross this bridge on our watch!"

"Do you realize how many times we've crossed this bridge since we got here?" Nami deadpanned.

"Apparently, they were off the clock at the time!"

Attention was diverted to the other end of the bridge, where Cross was fast-roping down the cliff-face before unlatching from the rope once he was a few feet above the ground.

"Long live the action-movie ENTRY!" Soundbite cackled.

"Either way," Cross continued with a careless grin. "It doesn't really matter. They can't stop us."

The red-faced Marine honestly took that better than expected. "I'm gonna make you eat those words, pirate!" he shouted, hunching over and flexing every muscle in his arms. "WE'RE FIFTY-FIVE, AND YA—GRK!"

While the other Marines looked on in horror, the watching Straw Hats slowly matched Cross' grin as they took in the sight of what made the Marine stop speaking: an arm blooming around his neck, and putting him in a chokehold. Despite how formidable the man appeared, he went down in only a few seconds.

"As expected." The other Marines' horrified gazes snapped away from their comrade when a smug feminine voice sounded from somewhere among the Squad. "Maintaining their hot-bloodedness takes so much oxygen that they can't handle being cut off for more than a few seconds. A rather glaring weak spot, don't you think?"

"M-Major Shepherd?" asked one Marine pleadingly.
"Sorry, boys, but I have to get back to my crew now," Robin purred as she slid her sunglasses off and tossed away her jacket, causing the Marines to tense in panic. "It's been a pleasure tricking you, gentlemen. As they say in the North Blue…" Robin crossed her arms, causing phantom limbs to sprout from the shoulders of the on-looking shoulders, much to their horror. "Do svidoniya."

And without further ado, arms encircled the necks of half the soldiers present, dropping them in moments.

The deed done, Robin spread her arms invitingly. "If you'd all be so kind as to handle the rest?"

Luffy eagerly slammed his fists together. "Heck yeah!"

What happened next was undoubtedly the most humiliating two minutes of Squad 55's existence. The Straw Hats' strength alone was enough to take down each man with one shot, and though 55 started with an advantage in numbers, Robin stepped in a couple of times with a few dozen more chokeholds to remedy that. It was overkill, really.

"Send them flying in that direction, guys," Cross requested, jabbing his thumb at the spire before grinning at Robin. "And good work, Robin."

She chuckled somewhat maliciously. "Believe me, after spending the last hour with those overheated apes, it was wonderful to finally get rid of them."

"GUM-GUM BAZOOKA!" Luffy called out, slamming his hands forward and sending the unconscious Marines flying back to the spire, some falling into the water below as well.

With that done, the rest of the crew started streaming over to where we stood. The range of emotions was interesting—from Vivi's carefully blank expression to Usopp's naked relief—but all seemed to sense that this was something we all needed to hear, and so kept quiet.

"Alright, we're all together again. What's next, Cross?" Chopper asked once we were all together.

My answering smile was telling. "Next, we're going to show Jonathan what a mistake it was to challenge us to a cheating contest. Lassoo, Chopper, Conis, Boss, you see this bridge?"

"Yeah?" Boss asked.

"It's the only solid passageway between the outer and inner parts of the fortress." I stuck out a thumbs up and slowly inverted it. "Eviscerate it."

Lassoo, Boss, and the Dugongs gained bloodthirsty grins, while Conis and Chopper merely nodded in understanding, the former grabbing the scruff of Lassoo's neck and hoisting him onto her shoulder as he swapped to his weapon form and the latter digging out a number of vials from his pack. The Dugongs set to work immediately, cutting the cables and denting the metal wherever it was most vulnerable. Then, once the bridge's stability was sufficiently precarious, Conis and Chopper moved in, launching enough bombs and explosives to fill up a small house. I slid on my ear protectors, and a few seconds later…

KER-BLOOEY!

"London bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down! London bridge is falling down, my dear JONNY," Soundbite sang eagerly as the once-mighty structure collapsed under its own weight.

-0-
Jonathan couldn't help but gape as he saw what had minutes before been a masterpiece of engineering come crashing down onto the stone path beneath it. Where once there was a pair of perfectly safe and stable pathways from the central spire to the outer ring, there was now merely a mountain of wreckage that nobody was likely to get through anytime in the near future.

"Weak spot number four, Jonathan: having only one passageway from the inside to the outside," Cross cheekily informed him.

"…You destroyed the Straw Bridge. Why would you destroy the Straw Bridge? Do you know much it cost to build that in the first place?" Jonathan sank into his seat with a moan.

"Consider it payback for infringing on our crew's copyright. Oh, and believe me, Jonathan, you don't have time to dwell on that. And I think you're about to find that out."

The exact instant that the subtle static around him faded, the Transponder Snail at his desk began ringing.

"Commander Jonathan, this is Chief Petty Officer Holger," came the unmistakable voice of the person in question, sounding panicked.

"I told you not to communicate by snail—"

"I KNOW, sir, but I've already sent three men to you and we haven't received a response yet, so I can only assume that they're being intercepted! Every time I do a headcount, someone else is missing! I think that the Straw Hats are picking us off, but we can't find them! WE NEED REINFORCEMENTS, PLEASE!"

Jonathan's eyebrows rose as he heard that before nodding. "Very well, I'll send notice to Henrick to gather a group and join you at the ship."

"Thank you, Commander!"

The line disconnected, and as Jonathan left his office to give the orders to the nearest Marine, he reasoned that that distress call had to be genuine. After all, it seemed that there could be no benefit for Cross to pose as Holger and make him send more troops to guard their ship.

-o-

"Cross, would you care to tell me the benefit for you to pose as Holger and make me send more troops to guard your ship?" Jonathan asked flatly, his eye twitching as he watched the pirate ship sail out of sight from his balcony. "You already knew where the Going Merry was, all you accomplished was having there be more troops present when you tore through them!"

"And that is exactly why I did it, Jonathan, both because you now have less manpower at your disposal, if only a small amount compared to G-8's population, and because if we'd taken the easy way, it just wouldn't have been anywhere near as much fun."

THUNK!

Jonathan groaned as he raised his forehead from the balcony's railing. "'Fun,' he says…"

"Soundbite, if you'd be so kind as to quote the grrreat Captain Jack Sparrow, who I wouldn't be surprised if Jonathan didn't recognize?" Cross requested, rolling the 'r' on 'great'.

"Ooh, GOODY! AHEM… a dishonest man you can always trust to be dishonest. Honestly, it's the
honest ones you want to watch out for. Because you can never predict when they're gonna do something incredibly... stupid."

"Thus, weak spot number five: expecting pirates to be logical," Cross said smugly.

"Beaten by my wife, beaten by a pirate, the Straw Bridge is destroyed, and between you and those birds my sanity is starting to crack." Jonathan ground his fingers into his temple. "Why, oh, why did I ever agree to this game?"

"Because like it or not, the truth is that no pirate is stupid enough to come anywhere close to Navarone, so all that you and yours do is sit on your asses and twiddle your thumbs all day, so you needed someone to spice up your hum-drum routine?"

"Oh, right…"

Jonathan massaged his temples for a minute or so before searching for something less exasperating to remark on. Then he remembered the brief report he had received in the failed attempt to capture one of the Straw Hats at their ship.

"You Straw Hats are certainly charismatic," he remarked casually.

"Huh? What makes you say that? I mean, I'm definitely not denying that our captain has a freakish ability to make people like him, but—"

"I'm referring to the fact that you've managed to sway a handful of your enemies in this fortress to actually aiding you in your escape," Jonathan said, a slight smile coming over his face. "Mekao the shipwright, his daughter Doctor Kobato, and to a lesser extent, even Jessica. Even the new recruits in this fortress take a week or so to develop a strong sense of loyalty to G-8, and yet, you managed to change their mindsets enough that they were willing to hide Princess Vivi from the rest of my troops. Care to explain?"

"…well, I suppose it's more a matter of common interests than anything else," Cross said, his shrug practically audible. "Jessica appreciated Sanji's talent with food, Kobato was taken enough with Chopper's passion for medicine that she got over her hemophobia, and Mekao... well, that's more of a private matter, but suffice to say that he was glad to see a ship that was visibly loved by its crew. And let me remind you that we're not the stereotypical pirates; every fight we've ever been in, every enemy we've ever beaten has either been them attacking us or us counterattacking them. With shared interests like that, it seemed reasonable that they'd be willing to put prejudice aside, and it looks like it was."

"Fair points, I suppose. But what of the new recruits?"

"If you didn't listen to my first broadcast, you must have heard about it from someone who did," Cross said more seriously. "She shouldn't have set sail with us against her will. She should be back home in an Alabasta that hasn't seceded, that isn't at war once again, preparing to one day rule over her people in a peace they would have more than earned. Tell me, Jonathan... what would you have done if it was just Vivi that came here, and not any of the rest of us? Because I trust that you're smart enough to know what it means when HQ wants anybody alive, for any reason."

Jonathan's smile faded.

"I didn't start this show for shits and giggles, Jonathan. I started it because those bastards pushed the buck too far. I started doing this because I knew the chaos it would cause, the madness, the dissent, the doubt. I did all of this... purely because I wanted to see the World Government bleed and
burn."

"In short, your goals are the same as Dragon and the Revolutionary Army," Jonathan stated neutrally. "I suppose that I shouldn't be surprised if you know the truth about slavery and the five levels of Impel Down—"

"Six."

Jonathan froze. "…Pardon?"

"Impel Down has six levels, Jonathan, not five. I'm not surprised you don't know that, the whole point of it is that it's secret from all but the highest levels. But that's one of the rare cases where I agree with the World Government: the Eternal Hell's existence is better left unknown to the general public. If there's any good in this world, Crocodile's lifeless dust will one day decorate the cells… and, sadly, the next monster who sits in them, because we both know there'll always be someone else to fill that cell."

Jonathan gaped, left speechless at Cross' claim, and to his mounting horror, he actually found that he was fully prepared to believe that the pirate was telling the truth.

"Well, I'm sure I've given you a lot to think about, Jonathan. But as it stands, the clock is still running. So, if you'll excuse me, our crew has some more blasting to do. I hope you have an emergency fund ready."

"BYE, NOW!" Soundbite barked, upon which the transmission faded and explosions echoed from the other side of the base. Slowly, Jonathan moved back to his desk, taking in the sight of his chessboard, still set as it was at the conclusion of his game against Nico Robin. Then he reset the board and moved a pawn before spinning the board around and moving yet another. He needed to think, he needed to think hard.

-O-

"Alright, what's the damage report?" Jonathan asked his four officers, all of them gathered in his office and nursing their injuries from their personal meetings with the Straw Hat Pirates.

"Well, I think we all know about the bridge," Drake ground out, aching pain obvious in his voice. "Between that, their little rampage through the spire, taking back their ship, and various odds and ends, about 25% of the Marines on base are combat ineffective."

"And the material damage isn't anything to sneeze at, either," Cormac groaned. "Thank God the Spire is built so tough, because we've got enough holes in the walls that most structures would have collapsed around our ears."

"A large portion of the floor and ceiling of Dock 88 has been demolished; one of the soldiers took a black seashell from their ship, and the pirates yelled at him to drop it as soon as they saw it. When he did… it blasted a shockwave up that caused a small cave-in, and the ground beneath it crumbled into a crater six feet wide," Holger said weakly.

Jonathan blew out a weary breath. "And therein lies the primary issue when dealing with the Straw Hats' Third Mate: differentiating when he's being serious and when he's talking out of his ass… what else?"

"Aside from the fact that they've got their ship back and are heading for the Sea Gate? Nothing presently," Henrick deadpanned. "Shall we deploy the inner base's battleships and have them gather
"Not yet. Based off of the Straw Hats’ determination to defy logical expectations, I’m going to assume that they plan on leaving the same way that they came in: flying. How they’ll pull it off, I have no idea, but I’m beyond the point where I’d be surprised if they did it. But first things first: send word to all units to begin clearing away the wreckage of the Straw Bridge. Once the natural bridge beneath it becomes traversable again, see to it that all cannons are manned, starting with the ones at the highest altitudes."

"Understood, sir. We’ll see to it that the ships are prepared for towing and transporting rubble,"

Henrick stated.

"Very good. You're dismissed."

There was a minute that was filled with footsteps, and then…

"You have a little over twelve hours left, Straw Hats, and I am counting every second of them. Spend them wisely, or prepare to spend the rest of your lives in Impel Down."

Soundbite and I exchanged eager grins I jerked my hand across my throat and we turned our attention towards a certain old man.

"Thanks for showing us here, Mekao. This should give us all the time we need to finish our breakout," I said.

"Cheeky kids," the shipwright said, shaking his head while at the same time matching my grin. "Jonathan's going to be tearing his moustache out before you're done, isn't he?"

"We can hope!" Soundbite chirped. The old shipwright laughed before heading back into the fortress. I waited until Soundbite nodded to me, and then turned back to our assembled crew and ship, hidden in one of the abandoned docks and decidedly not sailing towards the Sea Gate.

"Well, then, now that we're all together, and with Robin's confiscated map…" I held up the rolled up scroll in question and shook it as I grinned malevolently. "How about I lay out my plan on how we're getting out of here?"

Everyone's equally eager grins were answer enough.

"Alright, then, in that case…" I spread the map out on a barrel, allowing everyone to gather around. Soundbite chose that moment to start humming a tune that was very appropriate.

"Here's how we're gonna play this."

NIGHT

-12 Hours Remain-

Cross-Brain AN: Next chapter, we finish G-8. We'll update again at the usual time, so hang in there!
Chapter 33: Escaping The Fangs! The Day They Almost Captured The Straw Hat Pirates!

Xomniac AN: Hey CV, TPO, quick question for you two: what would you say is one of the most perfect examples of complete and utter pwnage in existence?

Hornet AN: Well, we showed one candidate back in Chapter 30.

Patient AN: Umm… upstaging Duncan and forcing him both to acknowledge us as worthy opponents and re-plan his own story back in Chapters 23 and 24?

Hornet AN: And then there's Quattro's expression at realizing that yes, Nanoha is about to blast through half a goddamn battleship to get to her.

Patient AN: Oh, I've never seen that show, but I've seen the picture on TV Tropes a few times.

Xomniac AN: Getting a bit off-topic here, but thankfully, I've found the most utterly perfect definition.

Hornet AN: Oh?

Patient AN: What would that be?

Xomniac AN: T-T-T- TRIPLE TAP, YA MOOKS!

Cross-Brain AN: Did we say that we'd update again at the usual time? Yes. Did we say that we wouldn't update again before then? Not so much.

DAWN

-1 Hour Remains-

The Vice Admiral stared out of his office's window, patiently waiting as the horizon steadily lit up. The Straw Hats had been silent since they stole back their ship; he had, of course, mobilized troops to search the empty docks, but all of them had reported back in the negative. He was almost disappointed that the second half of the game was turning out so uneventfully. But he was certain that the Straw Hats had neither left the base nor surrendered the game, and that they would soon make their move to escape. He would very quickly come to regret that he was right.

"Jonathan," came an unmistakable voice from nowhere.

"Cross. Do you need anything? Besides a better sense of humor, of course."

"Hilarious. I wish we could stay around long enough to hear you on open-mic night," Cross deadpanned. "No, I just have a question for you. Would you care to hazard a guess as to why I'm no good at playing chess?"

Jonathan blinked in surprise and considered the question for a moment before glancing upwards in thought. "I'll be honest: for the life of me, I can't understand why. After all, for all that your tactics are unconventional, they do seem to be effective."
"It's actually quite easy, really: the rules."

"Ah...?" Jonathan trailed off in a confused tone.

"Oh, I understand the basic rules; who goes first, how the pieces move, things like that. But the fact remains that there's a million and one other rules and exceptions and whatnot to consider as well. Like it or not, chess is... controlled, regulated. Every strategy you come up with, every tactic and gambit, all has to adhere to the rules of the pieces and the board."

"And you don't like operating within the rules," the Vice Admiral divined, turning away from the window.

"Exactly. It's just too restricting for me, too hard to properly plan things out. Honestly, when it comes to playing games of strategy..."

KA-BOOM!

Jonathan spun around and stared out his window in shock as several explosions rocked Navarone, and plumes of off-color smoke began billowing out of the ring's various cannon-emplacements.

"I like to think that I shine best when I'm allowed to work outside the box. You know... to flip the board, if you will."

Jonathan swallowed heavily as he took in the scene of pandemonium unfolding before him. "What have you done, Cross?" he breathed numbly.

"Oh, nobody's dead, if that's what you're worried about. Honestly, I wouldn't worry about them if I were in your shoes. After all..."

KRA-BOOM!

Jonathan felt a ball of ice form in his stomach as another round of explosions suddenly went off from the other end of the base. He didn't even need to strain his ears to hear the storm of boots rushing towards his office.

"You're about to be very busy. Buckle up, Vice Admiral." Jonathan could practically hear the grin in Cross's voice. "This is the endgame."

-o-

Eleven Hours Earlier

"Alright, everyone, listen up," I said as I tapped my finger on the map Robin had provided. "The whole plan hinges on Jonathan not realizing how we plan on getting out of here until it's too late. The man's proven that he's a genius, so if he manages to get an inch, he'll be able to work things so that he can take a mile. So, step one is to take away his command of the fortress."

"And how are we supposed to do that?" Nami asked, frowning. "They've already taken precautions against Soundbite, and I doubt Jonathan will fall for another Gastro-Clone play, no matter how illogical you make it."

"No, no, no, the time for deception has passed," I replied. "In order to make him lose control of this place, all we have to do is make this place completely out of control. Overwhelm him
"with so many damage reports that even he can't concentrate."

"So… we split up and smash things?" Luffy asked.

"No, no, no, not at all," I waved my hand dismissively. "If we went out and just started
smashing things, they'd know exactly where we were and they'd flood the area with soldiers.
We've done good so far, but sooner or later we'd get overwhelmed if they brought their full
might to bear. No, what we need to do is make everything go wrong at the exact same time.
What we need…" I slammed my fist on the barrel. "Is sabotage."

"Oh, so we split up and smash specific things all at the same time," Luffy nodded. "Got it."

I blinked in surprise at how easily Luffy grasped that. "Well, that and set things up to blow up
once we're good and ready, too, along with a few other things, but… yeah, basically." I
promptly moved on. "The basic idea is to overload Jonathan with so many problems that he
won't be able to identify and stop the important bits of what we'll be doing. That way, when he
finally realizes our escape route, it'll be too late to stop us."

Everyone nodded in acceptance and understanding. "What exactly do you have in mind,
Cross?" Boss asked gruffly.

"Weeell, for starters…" I turned my attention to our doctor. "Chopper, you've managed to
concoct highly destructive explosives from scratch. Got any thoughts on making them messy
instead?"

-0-

"Commander Jonathan!" cried several frantic soldiers, the only discernable words before they began
yelling about various problems. Mentally groaning at the migraine this would cause, Jonathan raised
a hand.

"One at a time," he ordered.

"Commander, the barracks have been compromised!" one soldier managed to get out. "The whole
area has been covered with something like molasses!"

"T-The same thing happened in the armory! We can't get to our weapons! Not to mention a few
dozen random corridors!"

"And the west cannons, too, bubbling out of the barrels! It's ridiculously thick, any attempts to move
it just gets whatever we use stuck!"

"They also set off sulfur bombs in a lot of places, including where we were storing our gas masks!
The smoke's so rancid that we can't even get close, no matter how thickly we cover our mouths and
noses!"

Jonathan frowned as he processed the statements. "Alright, get a sample of it to Kobato, have her
start analyzing it and see if she has any gas masks to—"

SLAM!

All attention snapped to the door when it was kicked open, and all movement froze when Jessica
stalked in, looking fit to tear someone's head clean off.
I turned to Sanji as Chopper set to work scribbling down formulae and compounds in a notebook. "Now, in regards to the kitchen—"

"If you're going to ask me to try sabotaging their food, it's out of the question, Cross," Sanji cut me off, before smirking. "But I think that what I did earlier may have helped; those recipes I gave Jessica were specifically designed for difficult customers at the Baratie…"

Jonathan swallowed heavily as he tried to steady his nerves in the face of his advancing spouse. He was, to his credit, mostly successful. "Jessica? What did they do in the kitchens?" he asked nervously.

"Either Cross or Sanji had this planned from the start," Jessica ground out sourly. "I didn't notice it at the time, but while the recipes he gave us were delicious beyond anything we've ever put out of that kitchen, they also just so happened to be stuffed to the brim with tryptophan. Everyone who's eaten within the last twelve hours is half-asleep at best. But that's not the worst part—"

"YOU DID WHAT?!"

Everyone in the office jumped as a furious voice echoed around them, followed by the sound of two high-pitched screams and several footfalls.

"LAXATIVES? YOU PUT LAXATIVES IN THEIR MEALS?! HOW DARE YOU INSULT THE SANCTITY OF FOOD LIKE THAT! GET BACK HERE, MIKEY! AND DON'T THINK YOU'RE OFF THE HOOK EITHER, CHOPPER, I KNOW WHERE HE GOT THE DOSAGES FROM! WE'RE HAVING VENISON AND TURTLE SOUP TONIGHT!"

"SAVE US!" screamed the same high-pitched voices before the transmission cut out.

Jessica's eye twitched, but she looked somewhat mollified. "Well, at least Sanji didn't do it, it's good to see that my respect for him as a chef wasn't misplaced after all. But yes, most of the soldiers have stuffed the latrines to the brim as well."

KRACK-BOOM!

The spire was suddenly rocked by a massive shudder, one that had the Marines glancing at the ceiling uneasily. Barely two seconds later, Jonathan's snail started ringing.

The Vice Admiral picked it up, treating it much like a venomous snake. "Yes?"

"Ah, sir?" Cormac's queasy voice filtered out of the snail's mouth. "I'm sorry for using the Transponder Snail against your orders, but… ughhh… we have something of a—hurk!—situation in the latrines."

Jonathan ground his molars together. "How bad is it?"

"Well, that's disappointing…" I sighed morosely before shrugging. "Alright, moving on. Soundbite, have you got a good grasp on the base's plumbing system?"
"Huh? UM... maybe? WHATCHA THINKIN'?"

"Usopp, how much damage do you think you could do if you got your hands on the pipes?"

The sniper thought for all of three seconds before grinning a prankster's grin.

-0-

The sound of heaving and splattering came over the connection as the snail grew green. "It's bad..." Cormac moaned. "The pirates sabotaged the plumbing... and combined with the—oh, crap, I can taste it!—the gastric distress of our men... I'm afraid that there's been a... cataclysmic backup."

Jonathan grimaced darkly. "How cataclysmic are we talking?"

"...the best descriptor I can think of would be that the entire area looks like a battleship's bilge that hasn't been purged in months. And with more and more men running for the toilets as their own intestines attack them, suffice to say..."

KABOOM! CRASH!

Jonathan and all of the Marines in the room jumped in shock when the window was suddenly shattered by a ballistic sink that lodged itself in the opposite wall.

"The situation is getting worse by the second."

Jonathan began massaging his temples. "Alright, alright... rally the cleaning crews, clean this mess up, and then get the shipwrights into the plumbing so that—!"

SLAM!

Jonathan almost had an aneurysm when Drake, red-faced and bearing numerous bite marks of all things, nearly tore his door off the hinges. "Oh, what now?!" he demanded impatiently.

Drake flinched at the tone before slowly holding something up.

Jonathan stared at what he was holding in shock. "You have got to be kidding me."

-0-

"Boss, seeing as we've got plenty of time before our deadline, how hard would it be for you and your students to scale the outer wall and go on a little... fishing expedition?"

Boss gnawed on his cigar for a second before grinning eagerly. "Got any particular prey in mind?"

His grin doubled in size when I told him.

-0-

"Where did they get a hammerhead shark?" Jessica wondered, taking in the sight of the dead but still-twitching aquatic carnivore Drake was holding up by the tail.

"Trust me, this is the tamest of the beasts that they stuffed in our lockers..." Drake growled darkly. "And they somehow stuffed our lockers with water to keep them fresh! There is an active battle going on against these things!"
"… Well, it would seem that the dugongs have outdone themselves…” Isaiah whistled in awe.

"I've been upstaged in power," concurred Terry, the quietest Jonathan had heard him speak. The Vice Admiral barely acknowledged that or their return, however, amidst the various problems spinning in his mind.

"The food, the passageways, the storage, the weapons, the cannons, the plumbing, and now this. I suppose the best thing to say is that it can't—MMPH!"

Jessica and Drake both slapped their hands over his mouth.

"You should know better than that, Commander," Drake snarled. "Never say that things couldn't get any worse! The universe is always listening!"

Silence fell as Drake paled and everyone else in the room slowly turned to glare at him.

"…shit."

It was at that moment that the door to the office burst open and was jammed with panicking Marines, all yelling in desperate attempts to garner Jonathan's attention.

-o-

"Luffy, Sanji, Robin…” I turned my gaze to the three crewmembers who I hadn't planned anything for. "I honestly do not know. Basically, just go hog wild. Whatever you think you can do, do it. Just get this place set up to be turned inside-out and upside-down come daybreak. Soundbite will be directing everyone so that we all stay well away from any patrols. So, once we're done here?" I shot them all a thumbs-up. "Do your worst."

-o-

"Tripwires throughout the whole—!!"

"—and the floors crumbled to pieces as we were—!!"

"—laughing gas! Where did they even get—?"

"—rotten eggs and caltrops strewn through the—!!"

"—growing through three different levels, branches and roots and everything! And the squirrels—!!"

Jonathan's eyes stared vacantly into the distance, his mouth open in a continuous moan as his genius mind tried processing the onslaught of catastrophes going on throughout his base that, 24 hours ago, had been a peaceful and only slightly rusty machine fit for combat. Now the machine seemed to have been set to self-destruct with how much damage was being done.

"Why didn't I take up their offer and just let them leave? Why?" Jonathan groaned.

"Because you have an unhealthy obsession with strategy games?"

The room slowly fell silent, and every occupant sans the South Birds grimaced as Cross' very smug voice sounded around them.

"More gloating, Cross?" Jonathan groaned wearily.
"Eh, part that, part status update," Cross whistled innocently. "First, Conis, Vivi, Su and Carue just raided the arsenal you had our gear in thanks to the solvent that Chopper provided for his bog-foam, sooo we've got our weapons back, plus interest! Thanks again for so graciously donating them to us. We appreciate your support!"

"Alright, besides all the planning, there are a few other specific jobs we'll need to do." I pointed out a specific room that Robin had identified. "One of the harder parts of this is going to be retrieving our stuff and whatever Chopper's creation doesn't render unusable from this armory here, where they've stashed it all. Honestly, I think the really hard part is going to be carrying all of those Burn Bazookas back—"

"Actually, I don't think that should be too hard, Cross," Conis replied, smiling lightly. "After all, when I lifted Lassoo, he seemed reasonably light, and the Burn Bazookas are much less bulky. I think I could carry them myself."

Lassoo gave the angel a bemused look. "Really? Because I've had some work done, and I know for a fact that I'm still upwards of a hundred pounds heavy. You must be freaki—SERIOUSLY!" the dog-weapon yipped in terror when he noticed Sanji glaring at him. "Y-You're seriously strong! T-Totally normal though, t-t-totally normal!"

"I'm with actually with Howlitzer here, Conis," Su interjected with some concern. "I know you had training, but could you lift that many bazookas back on Skypiea?"

"No, but after I used Lassoo to blow up the Straw Bridge, I remembered that I couldn't lift him back on Skypiea either," Conis replied, turning to Chopper. "More pressing things were going on at the time, but I am curious about how that happened. Is gravity weaker down here?"

"No, if anything, it's stronger," Chopper replied, tapping his chin thoughtfully before clicking his hooves together in a semblance of snapping his fingers. "Oh, but it might an inverse of what happened when we reached the White Sea. Just like we were weaker in the thin air, Conis's physiology is adapting to the increased air pressure and resulting in her body's musculature working on overdrive?"

"Huh," I nodded thoughtfully. "That makes sense, but how much stronger?"

"Well," Chopper stared upwards contemplatively. "Judging from the height difference and the resulting difference in air density, roughly—WHOA!"

The reindeer cut off his explanation as Conis demonstrated her new strength by lifting me off the ground and clean above her head with one freaking hand, balancing me like a baton!

"…roughly… four times stronger than she was on Skypiea," Chopper finished weakly.

"Well, that and Cross is about as thin as a twig."

"HEY!" I barked at Zoro before grumbling darkly and crossing my arms. "So, anyways, I guess it'll be you going to get the stuff, along with Carue to actually transport it and Vivi for backup?"
"Sounds good to me," Vivi nodded in agreement, Carue quacking his consent as well.

"Perfect. Now, then… PUT ME DOWN ALREADY!"

-o-

THUNK!

"Is this enough of my own medicine for your tastes, Drake?" Jonathan said, his voice muffled by the desk in the way.

"It should be, but these Straw Hats are turning out to be more exasperating than you ever were," Drake groused.

"Oh, yes, and one more thing. We're quite happy to have gotten our gold back, thank you for that."

-o-

I dusted myself off as Conis set me down. "Alright, so what else—?" My consideration faded quickly when I felt a conspicuous wave of killing intent from somewhere over my shoulder. "GOLD! RIGHT! GOT IT!" I yelped in a strangled tone of voice before sighing as the feeling abated.

"HEHEHEH, WHIPPED! HAHA—hurk!" Soundbite's cackling died when the wave of menace suddenly renewed.

"So, Cross, you know where the gold is. Now, how are we going to get it without Jonathan stopping us?" Nami asked sweetly.

"Tone down the aura and let me think and I'll tell you," I pleaded desperately before sighing anew. "Alright, one way would be for you to ride in with your Waver with Luffy onboard, zap everyone, and then leave with the gold. But besides the fact that that was only 60% of what's actually in that office, your Waver's new design will support one person and nothing else." Frowning, I glanced back at her. "Speaking of which, where is it?"

Nami jabbed her thumb over her shoulder. "I stashed it in a storeroom somewhere that way before I headed to the laundry room to try and get a disguise. I can go and get it in a few minutes, no problem."

"Perfect," I nodded happily before leaning over the map. I then snapped my fingers in realization as I got an idea and jabbed my finger on a specific point. "Alright, it'll be tight but I think I might have an idea. Here's what we'll do…"

-o-

All present snapped their eyes to the corner of the room, to the place that once held the Straw Hats' treasure… and still did. Jonathan pinched the bridge of his nose. "Either my stress levels have raised to the point of hallucination, or you're mistaken, Cross, because it looks like all ¥500 million worth of treasure is still right where it was when you last saw it."

"Yeah, that's what I thought, I just needed to make sure that it was still there first, so thanks a lot! NOW!"
Attention snapped back to the gold, where four different blades had sliced through the floor surrounding it.

The blades remained still for a moment before slicing clean through the stone, each one moving in a straight line and cutting a perfectly rectangular area out of the floor that entirely encompassed the treasure. The gold hung in place for a moment before dropping through the floor to the lower level. Before anyone recovered enough to head towards the hole, the floor was put back, sans treasure, and the sounds of rapid hammering echoed from below.

"And now that we've taken what's rightfully ours, I believe it's time to go."

"THANKS for the help, JONNY-BOY!"

Both of Jonathan's eyes were twitching at the display, and he slowly turned to the gobsmacked onlookers. "Get. Them," he bit out irritably. In no more than three seconds, the Marines composed themselves, saluted, and sped off, leaving only Jessica and the South Birds.

"Well, we have some business to take care of. We'll see you later, Jonathan," Isaiah stated, bowing to Jessica before flying out the window.

"REMEMBER TO ALWAYS ACT WITH POWAAAAH!" Terry bellowed before following after him.

Jonathan sighed, mostly in relief, as the birds flew away to rejoin the Straw Hats. "I think those two may have grown on me a little too much over the last twenty-three and a half hours," he muttered before shaking his head and moving to his snail. Cross had come close, but Jonathan still had one last trump card up his sleeve, and it would serve to use up all the time the Straw Hats had left.

Two rings later, the receiver picked up. "G-Gatehouse!" answered the Marine on the other end.

"Bare Navarone's fangs to catch the Straw Hats," Jonathan ordered calmly.

"Uh... that's going to be a problem."

Jonathan didn't so much grimace as he tried to obliterate the Marine on the other end with his gaze alone. "Why, exactly, is it going to be a problem?" he growled.

"Uh, w-well sir, I'm afraid that if I say it you won't believe me..."

"TRY ME."

"W-Well, then, you see..."

-0-

"Alright, now for the last and most critical part of my plan." I pointed at our navigator. "Nami, with the gold retrieval in capable hands, I have a special mission for you at the sea gate. I need you to storm the gatehouse. Or, at minimum, infiltrate and, you guessed it, sabotage."

"You want me to lock the gates open so we can sail out?" she guessed, though it was more a statement than a question.
"No," I crossed my arms in an X. "I want you to lock them shut."

Nami frowned. "And the benefit of that is…?"

"Stopping Jonathan's last trump card." I pointed at the bay on the map. "Do you think they converted this entire island into a base for shits and giggles? No, they maintained the geography like this for a reason: because whether it looks like it or not, Navarone is still a Grand Line island, meaning it has ways to screw with you like you wouldn't believe." I circled my finger in the map. "It's known as the Fangs of Navarone. See, the bottom of this island's bay? It's actually higher than sea level at low tide."

That statement caused Nami to pale in realization. "That would mean…"

"Huh? What does that mean?" Luffy blinked in confusion.

"It means that whenever it's high tide and so long as the watertight Sea Gate is shut, then the bay is perfectly filled with water," I explained patiently. "But if the Gate is open during low tide, then the water flows out and away with the tide, leaving nothing but shallows that devour enemy ships without fail."

"Oooooh…" Luffy nodded in understanding. "So it's a mystery tide."

I held up a hand to forestall Nami's reaction. "Mystery or not, it doesn't change the fact that it's deadly. The Fangs are Navarone's foolproof defense system. Once someone gets bitten, they go down." I slammed my fist on the map. "Let there be no mistake: stopping Jonathan from being able to unleash the Fangs against us is crucial to our escape... in more ways than one."

Nami rolled her eyes. "Alright, you've obviously got some crazy idea in mind, but I'll go along with it for now. I'm pretty sure that I can sneak in and cause some damage."

"Good. Just make sure that the sea gate's controls are completely out of commission. Do whatever it takes."

-0-


KEE-RACK!

The snail flinched with a miserable grimace. "Is. Is happening. It's, ah, it's still going on. I-I'm sorry, Vice Admiral, b-but we won't be opening the Gate any time soon."

"Pfhehehe…"

Jonathan rammed his fist onto his desk when a wry chuckle floated through the air. "Cross."

"Yeeeaah, see, here's the thing, Vice Admiral," the pirate explained casually. "While Robin was undercover with you? She heard about your little trump card and while, quite honestly, we could circumvent being caught in it with ease by taking the aerial route you mentioned, the fact remains that we're trying to avoid putting undue stress on Merry. So, in order to avoid getting bitten, we
"SUCKS TO BE you, HUH?"

Johnathan's nostrils flared furiously as he exercised every bit of will he had left to stay under control, thanks in no small part to Jessica being nearby. He slowly rose from his seat and strode to his office's window, where he watched a small fleet of battleships deploy from their docks and begin to give pursuit to the Going Merry.

"Congratulations, Cross: you have officially exhausted my patience," Jonathan announced frigidly. "You have three minutes until sunrise. Fail to escape my fortress before then, and I will handle you all myself."

DAYBREAK

-3 Minutes Remain-

I won't deny it, the ultimatum did send chills down my spine. But up until now, my battle of wits against Jonathan had gone about as well as I'd planned, and the endgame was going perfectly. We had all of our crewmates, gold, and supplies, the Going Merry was sailing towards the Sea Gate, and Jonathan's battleships were right behind us. All according to plan.

"Alright, Cross, spill it!" Sanji demanded. "What's the rest of your plan? How are we going to get out of here with the Sea Gate locked?!"

I grinned in response. "Just keep heading towards it as fast as we can."

-o-

"Alright, so everyone knows what to do?" I took in the sights of the various groups nodding and smirked. "Excellent. If everything goes as planned, we'll be out of here just in time for the sunrise."

"Matching wits with Jonathan… well, let's hope that everything does go as planned, he's quite the formidable opponent," Robin remarked.

"Oh, yeah, who won that chess game, anyway?" I asked curiously. Robin merely smiled enigmatically in response.

I frowned in dissatisfaction before shrugging with a sigh. "Well, fine, go ahead and be cryptic." I then stood at attention and looked at the crew one by one. "Anyways… you all know your objectives. Good luck, and dare I say… godspeed."

DAYBREAK

-2 Minutes Remain-

As we neared the Sea Gate, the Marine battleships closed in on all sides, not even bothering to fire on us due to us having reached a dead end. We were cornered.

Then an amplified voice brought our attention to the top of G8, where Jonathan stared down at us. His voice was angry but triumphant.

"Jeremiah Cross, Straw Hat Luffy, and the rest of the Straw Hat Pirates. You have fought
valiantly to escape from Navarone, bringing the forces of G-8 to its knees in the process. You’ve shown resourcefulness, cunning, and sheer power, and overcome every obstacle that we set in your path. You’ve proven that my challenging you was a grave mistake.

"But this is where it ends. Your time has run out, and for the crime of piracy as well as the severe damage you have inflicted on this base, I will personally arrest every last one of you, and you will face Justice in Marineford."

I stared up at the Vice Admiral silently for a few seconds before glancing at Luffy. Once he nodded, I glanced at Soundbite.

"Gastro-Amp," I said, smirking wide. My next words echoed throughout the entire base.

DAYBREAK'S END

-1 Minute Remains-

"Vice Admiral Jonathan, you have proved to be a most worthy foe. You've pushed us to the brink, hit us with genius move after genius move… but the fact is that you just can't win. By my count, we still have one minute left, and that's all the time that we need. See, this whole time, we've been playing you. We've made you focus on all the damage we've caused so that you haven't had a chance to grasp the bigger picture. We've kept you off-kilter so that you couldn't take in all the facts, and question the exact 'whys' of our moves. And most importantly… you've been paying attention to me more than anyone else, rather than the one who actually had the power to get us out of here. And that's the last weak point I have to point out. Remember well the reason you lost this game because Eneru and many others have learned it the hard way before you, and one day… one day the world will learn this lesson and never, ever forget it: that no matter how smart, how strong, or how resourceful you are… no one can defeat a D."

I turned to Luffy as we finally reached Navarone's sole passage to the outside, my grin comparable to the Cheshire Cat's, and held up two fingers, as well as a third half-folded one. "Captain Luffy… tear down this wall."

Luffy blinked in confusion for a second before grinning like a loon and nodding firmly. "RIGHT!"

And with that, he took a deep breath and bit into his thumb. "BONE… BALLOON!"

I turned back around and pointed at Jonathan while Luffy's arm inflated behind me, pointing straight at him. "G-8's a beautiful base, Jonathan, truly a wonder," I smirked right in his ear. "And her Fangs are the most impressive part of all."

I paused as Luffy's massive arm shadowed the Merry… "GEAR TWO-POINT-FIVE!"

My grin became truly feral when Luffy's arm shot back, winding up for something spectacular. "GUM-GUM!"

"What say we wrench her jaw open so that she can show us those pearly whites?"

I had the glorious privilege of seeing Jonathan pale in realization just as Luffy's fist shot forwards.

"GIANT PISTOL!"

The Gate of G-8 was smashed into oblivion, allowing a burst of light to shine through in all its glory.

SUNRISE
The moment the Sea Gate was obliterated, the effect was instantaneous.

Without the manmade obstruction to hold them in any longer, the base's waters started rushing out to sea like bathwater down a drain, carrying our relatively small ship out with them. Navarone's battleships had no such luck, their size and distance from the Sea Gate ensuring that they had no chance to sail out before, with a symphony of crunching, Navarone's fangs ripped into their keels and most likely crippled them for good.

By the time Jonathan had managed to recover from the shock, we were out of the base's walls, and by no accident, every last one of the cannons with a chance of firing at us on our way out was completely disabled. As for the ships Jonathan had had stationed outside the base, they were caught completely unaware by the utter tidal wave of water that assailed them, one unlucky warship outright capsizing while the rest were too busy trying to avoid the same fate to stop us as we dropped our sails and made for open ocean.

Then… came the part where we had to grab Luffy as the drawback Gear Third—or Gear 2.5, as it were—kicked in, and Luffy would have gone flying from the air rocketing out of his mouth if I hadn't thought to grab him when he started deflating and kept him grounded. Once it was over and done with, I was left holding two and a half feet of giggling rubbery badass.

"What the…?" Chopper wondered.

"Drawback from that technique, he'll be back to normal in a few minutes," I explained, my eyebrow cocked at Luffy. "Also, just one attack? That's kinda…"

"Yeah, holding my breath is harder than it looks…" Luffy squeaked with his tongue stuck out childishly. "I just need more practice with 'em both and I'll be able to keep 'em going."

"Fair enough."

As we started to depart from the base, I couldn't help but look back. I could have let it end there, I could have… but really, given this opportunity, how could I resist?

I hastily poked Luffy and whispered to him. He immediately grinned and spread his arms wide. "Marines of G-8!" he bellowed in a high-pitched voice as Soundbite started belting out a certain theme. "You will always remember this day as the day you almost caught Monkey D. Luffy and the Straw Hat Pirates!"

Once that was done, he glanced at me eagerly. "Did I say it right?"

"That…" I sniffed as I wiped a tear away from my eye. "Was beautiful."

"It would have been a lot better if he wasn't talking like that, though," Zoro deadpanned.

"Eh, take it or leave it."

Within minutes, G-8 was starting to shrink in the distance.


"DON'T BOTHER replying. He just WENT OUT OF MY RANGE," Soundbite declared.
I nodded to that before flinching as I realized that in all the madness, I hadn't had the chance to pass on the knowledge of MI4… well, no big loss, I was sure I'd figure something out to pass it on to him. Maybe I could ask Tashigi to track down Coo.

"Well, now that that's done, we don't need our fail-safe anymore," I said. And so, without any preamble, I walked over to Luffy and stuck my hand into his pants before pulling out the deflated Balloon Octopus. Even Soundbite gaped at me as I grinned at the cephalopod.

"Thanks for all your help! Enjoy life down here in the Blue Seas! Oh, and if you can, try finding your way to the Octopus Shogunate. Tell Octavio we sent you, he's a friend!"

And with that, I dropped the octopus overboard, and turned back to the rest of the crew, who were staring at me in silence, an absolute kaleidoscope of emotions swirling over their faces.

The silence lasted until Isaiah clapped his wings together. "Right, that's it. We're out."

"Huh?" said several voices.

"AGREED! WE'RE GOING BACK TO THE BASE! THIS PLACE IS TOO INSANE FOR MY POOWEEEEER!" Terry declared, already flapping his wings and preparing to fly.

"Wait just a minute!" I said sharply, causing the birds to look at me. I looked over them both before nodding. "This actually makes things much easier. Can you wait long enough for me to write Jonathan a letter so you can deliver it to him? It's extremely important."

The birds posed as if they were folding their arms, but thankfully, they nodded in agreement. It took me a few minutes to compose the letter, but once I did I started to hand it to Isaiah… before jerking it back with a grave stare. "This is for the sake of changing the world into something better. Watch Jonathan like hawks until he decides to call this number. I've told him to teach you two how to write so that you can communicate without Soundbite's help. The password is Old Spice, but Jonathan won't know that, he won't even know that there is a password. Keep it that way unless he seems sincere. Can I trust you two to take care of it?"

"We shall consider it our final order as members of this crew, and treat it with the respect that that deserves," Isaiah replied with a bow.

"THANK YOU FOR LETTING US SAIL WITH YOU!" Terry bellowed as he flexed his wings Superman-style. "GOODBYE!"

And with that, our two avian friends flapped their wings and took to the sky, flying back towards Navarone.

We watched them go for a few minutes until we got back into our usual routine. That is to say, Nami barked at us all to get to work and most all of us hopped to it, except for me. I tried to surreptitiously sneak into the kitchen before I could be missed, but really, what chances did I have of escaping the all-seeing eye of the Navigator?

"And what exactly do you think you're doing, Cross? Don't even think about starting another SBS, you've been doing enough of that for the past few days!" Nami snapped.

I flinched and muttered something… decidedly unflattering beneath my breath before replying. "I need to call Tashigi and warn her about Jonathan," I said shortly.

Nami's anger faded into a discontented frown. "Fine. But you'd better be ready to help as soon as you're done," she said.
I nodded, shot her a few very specific hand gestures once her back was turned, and then entered the kitchen, taking a seat at the table before exchanging looks with Soundbite. "And I was hoping that we could finally start things off with Apoo," I groused.

"Honestly, any other day I'D AGREE," Soundbite bit out tiredly. "BUT I'VE been working overtime FOR THE LAST 24 HOURS. I FEEL STRONGER from the WORKOUT, but I'm exhausted. HENCE the four words I NEVER THOUGHT I'D utter: I need a break…"

I winced as I realized just how hard Soundbite must have been working in G-8. "Ah… yeah, sorry about that, Soundbite, should have realized… uh, would you be alright with handling a call to MI4 before you get some rest?"

The snail shook his head blearily for a second before nodding. "Yeah… yeah, I can manage THAT. JUST TELL her to KEEP HER VOICE DOWN."

I nodded, and dialed the number. And three rings later…

"Pisces," mumbled a muffled voice on the other end.

"…What?" I asked.

The snail winced. "Ugh, sorry, force of habit. Good timing though, Cross. What can you tell me about the Barto Club?" Tashigi asked without preamble.

I blinked at the apparent non-sequitur. "Uh… why do you ask?"

"Because Hina wound up in a dinner party with them during your last broadcast."

"…wow. Kudos to you, you've managed to make me speechless," I finally managed to say. "Alright, I'll bite: how did that happen?"

"Well, they were about to attack each other when the snail rang, and both of them agreed on a truce. As the show went on, they started exchanging food…"

-FLASHBACK-

"Now, the question is, where have we—…Oh, fuck me."

All of the listeners looked up from what they were doing at Cross' abrupt swearing.

"Ah, viewers, I'm really sorry to cut you all off like this, but something's come up aaaaaand I'm-gonna-have-to-call-you-back-BYE!"

And just like that, the snail fell asleep.

"…What was that about?" Mr. 5 wondered.

"My guess is they wound up in the middle of either a pirate's hideout or a Marine base," Jango deadpanned.

"I wouldn't be surprised, that does seem like something that would happen to them," Apis nodded sagely before freezing and looking around hesitantly. "But… now that the SBS is over… is the truce over, too?"

At that, all present stiffened, the boundaries of friend and foe thoroughly re-established. But before
anyone could make a move…

"STAND DOWN, EVERYONE!"

The authority of Hina's yell froze all of the Marines on deck, while the suddenness did the same to the pirates. She then turned towards Bartolomeo, who was staring at her with a curious but guarded expression. Hina pondered over the choice of action in her mind, but if the truce had shown anything, it was that it was at least worth a shot.

"Give me the number for your Transponder Snail, and I'll let you go this time," Hina said quietly.

"Oh?" Bartolomeo leered, displaying his most likely fishman-descended dentition in a crass grin. "You wanna see more of me?"

"Hmph," Hina sniffed imperiously. "Not particularly, but for a pirate, you seem reliable enough that Hina would like to have you on call."

Bartolomeo blinked in surprise before shrugging indifferently and scrawling out the number. One quick check for any 'parting gifts' left by over-enthusiastic crewmates on both ships later, the Barto Club reboarded the Cannibal and left. The moment they were out of range, Hina looked back at her troops. "Unless I say otherwise, we never saw them."

"Yes, ma'am!" came the resounding response.

Hina nodded before sweeping back towards her office, flanked by her left-and-right hand men. "Tell the men to get us on a heading for Base G-2 on Bawean. I want us there within a week, maximum."

"At once, ma'am," Jango nodded firmly and split off to relay her orders.

Once she reached the door to her quarters, Hina gave Fullbody a stern look. "Hina needs some time to contemplate recent developments. Under nothing less than the direst of circumstances am I to be disturbed, understood?"

Fullbody cocked an eyebrow curiously. "Matters of Marine Integrity, I take it?"

"Precisely."

"Very well, then, ma'am." Fullbody wheeled about and promptly took up a guard position before the door.

Hina prepared to close it before pausing as a thought occurred to her. "Hmm… now that Hina thinks about it… wasn't your last assignment before you were demoted to transport a prisoner named Gin, like that First Mate of Black Bart's?"

Fullbody's reaction was for his every muscle to lock up, an ashen-gray tone coloring his face. "I am completely and utterly certain that I have no memories whatsoever of whatever it is you're referencing, Captain…" he groaned in a sickly voice.

Hina gave him a flat stare. "You had Jango suppress those memories, didn't you."

"I am completely and utterly certain—"

"At ease, soldier."

"Thank you, Captain…" Fullbody sagged in relief.
With a final shake of her head, Hina closed the office door and sealed it, both traditionally and personally. Once the room was secure, she dug her private snail out of the hidden compartment in her desk where she'd stashed it and dialed a specific number. Two rings later, the recipient picked up.

"Pisces," came Tashigi's warped voice on the other end.

"Capricorn," Hina replied. "Tashigi, Cross is obviously in a bad situation right now, but as soon as he calls you again or ends his next broadcast, ask him what he knows about the Barto Club. I'm considering that perhaps MI4 could benefit from employing… unconventional allies…"

-END FLASHBACK-

"…so, yeah. You think it's a good idea?"

It took me a few moments before I could get my thoughts together at hearing what Hina had in mind, at which point I started unconsciously scratching my chin. "I… well, Bartolomeo is a juvenile and sadistic mafia boss-turned-pirate that loves nothing more than taunting his opponents, so I don't know where on the moral line he stands. But there's one little detail that ensures that he's still perfect material for an ally, and that's that ever since he witnessed Luffy's would-be execution in Loguetown, he's worshipped him, and by extension his crew, i.e. us. So…” I shrugged helplessly. "I dunno? Chances are that it should be easy to talk him into this if you name-dropped us, but he's still his own guy and he lives to troll, so no guarantees."

"I see…" Tashigi mused before nodding. "Well, it's not like we haven't taken risks before. Alright, I'll let Hina know; expect a conference call at some point soon. Are any of his crewmates going to be a problem? Most of them seemed like common thugs, but there were five people who stood out. Three of them were the ex-Baroque Works Officer Agents Mr. 5, Miss Valentine, and Miss Goldenweek, who apparently joined up after laying low in Alabasta proved impossible due to the country going Revolutionary. There was also a man named Gin, who Hina suspected was once part of Don Krieg's crew, and a girl named Apis riding, if you can believe this, a dragon… which, actually, considering how this is the Grand Line, isn't really all that hard to believe."

It took me a minute to process all of that; I hadn't expected Bartolomeo going out to sea this early to have consequences like this. Never mind the fact that the whole Millennial Dragon thing actually went down!

"OK…" I started counting down on my fingers as I scrounged up what intel I could. "First things first. Yes, Gin used to be Don Krieg's strongest subordinate, but after Sanji showed him mercy and saved his life, Krieg double-crossed him for returning the favor. Luffy and Sanji would probably consider him a friend. Apis… I don't think she had any fighting skills of her own, but she ate the Whisper-Whisper Fruit, which lets her telepathically communicate with animals. Still, she should be just as easy to make friends with, I think. Those Officer Agents, though…” I thought it over for a second before shrugging. "Well, Mr. 4 and Miss Merry Christmas were professional enough, so maybe there's hope there, plus it's not like they're the only ones to come off that particular ship… meh, screw it. If they can agree to let bygones be bygones, the only person who I can imagine protesting would be Vivi, and she's already well on her way to forgiving Robin, so I'm optimistic."

"Alright, I'll pass all of that on to Hina," Tashigi acknowledged thankfully. "Now, why were you calling me?"

"Oh, right," I said, facepalming. "Sorry, I just got a bit blindsided is all. Tashigi, you remember that Vice Admiral that I thought my crew might end up crossing paths with before you were done? Well, we just did: Vice Admiral Jonathan of the G-8 branch, or Navarone if you prefer."
"J-JONATHAN?" I reeled in shock at the sudden panicked spike in volume. "ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR ADRENALINE-ADDLED MIND!? HE'S ONE OF—"

"Hey, keep your voice down, Tashigi!" I said hastily. "Soundbite's exhausted, he was working nonstop since our last broadcast to help us escape from Navarone. I'm already straining him by having him call you."

The snail bit his lip, and took a couple of deep breaths before continuing in a furious but quiet tone. "He's one of Akainu's favorite students! In what possible world could he be a good candidate?!

"The same world where he made the grave mistake of agreeing to play a survival game with the Straw Hat Pirates to give them a chance to escape from his fortress. Let's just say that while we escaped unscathed, he'll have his hands full with repairs for the next few days… or weeks… or months," I replied, and neither Soundbite nor I were able to keep from grinning maliciously.

"...damn you, Cross, I should not be finding that funny!" Tashigi snorted with ill-repressed humor before hastily sobering up. "B-But still, Cross, this is serious. I cannot put enough emphasis on the fact that the man you are electing for a position in MI4 is Akainu's student. Considering how much you know, you should be fully aware of just how legitimately horrible of an idea that is!"

I frowned firmly. "And not to beat a horse to death, Tashigi, but to reiterate my previous point from a few nights ago, when was the last time I was wrong?" The ensuing silence was telling. "Yeah. I'm not saying I'm infallible, I can make mistakes, but I'm pretty confident that my track record thus far speaks for itself. Anyway, it's already done. I've already passed on the contact information for your snail, so be ready for his call. And don't worry," I held up my hand to forestall her protests, despite how redundant of a move it was considering the means of communication. "I didn't just do this on a whim. I do have a foolproof plan in case of the, in my opinion, highly unlikely event that he'll try to sell us out..."

-o-

"Would you care to enlighten me as to exactly why you let the Straw Hats run wild in Navarone, considering the results?" Jessica bit out, gesturing at the general bedlam and ruin around them from Jonathan's balcony.

"Cross promised to pressure-test the base and show how much of an asset it was for the Marine Corps," Jonathan replied.

"Well, it looks like all he did was exploit every last one of our weak spots to turn the entire island against us!" Drake growled, pacing about agitatedly. "When Marineford gets wind of this, they'll shut the base down for sure! This 'game' of yours—!"

"Had the desired result."

Jessica and Drake stopped short. "How can you say that?"

"This was the most devastating and stressful battle that Navarone has ever been through," Jonathan summarized matter-of-factly. "The Straw Hat Pirates pointed out all of our weak spots and then turned them against us. And despite all of that, our best efforts came within one shot of defeating them. After going through months of peace before a full day of war, we came within an inch of capturing or sinking the infamous Straw Hat Pirates."

He then grinned. "And our base has never been in a better position for growing stronger. Just as they did in the last 24 hours in order to try and capture the Straw Hats, all of our soldiers will come
together to repair the damage. We'll put precautions in place to remedy our weak spots, and as a result, we will come back stronger than ever from dealing with one of, if not undoubtedly the most insane crew of this generation. After showing how strong we are even after all this time, there's no way they'll be able to justify shutting us down."

Jessica's eyes brimmed with tears, and she smiled before embracing her husband warmly, with Drake looking on with an exasperated, but nonetheless fond, smile.

"You're right, darling."

The two maintained their embrace for several more seconds before an unfamiliar but unmistakable sound reached their ears.

"Cho!"

"Oh, no," Jonathan moaned, looking up from embracing his wife to see that the South Birds were flying back towards him; he barely noticed Drake beating a hasty retreat out of the corner of his eye. They perched on the railing, and one of them bent his beak forward to place a rolled-up piece of paper on the table. Raising his eyebrows, Jonathan took the paper and opened it, with Jessica reading the message within over his shoulder.

To Vice Admiral Jonathan, and all of those loyal to him:

First things first: Robin suggested that to compensate for the damages done to your base, you put in a report saying that Special Inspector Major Shepherd cooperated with the Straw Hat Pirates, dealing significant property damage in an attempt to show the incompetency of this base and shut it down. After all, that's what happened, no? At the bare minimum, that should reimburse you, and the fact that you almost managed to beat us should be enough to reassure HQ that you're worth keeping around.

Now, on to more serious matters. Here's a question for you: what's the difference between a good Marine and a decent Marine? The answer: good Marines follow their orders to the letter, and sacrifice everything for the sake of Justice, while decent Marines sacrifice everything for the sake of all… even Justice, if it comes down to it. It's clear which is the better of the two, yes? All things considered, however, the Navy today is predominantly filled with good Marines. You and I both know that. I happen to believe that you're one of the decent Marines, and I now know with perfect certainty that you have not only the intelligence but also the bravery to defend that fact.

And that is why I'm trusting you with one of my most well-guarded secrets: there exists within the Navy an organization composed purely of decent Marines who have put their lives on the line to begin changing the Navy to what it should be, destroying the corruption from the ground up. They have no affiliation with the Revolutionary Army, and their numbers are small, but growing. I—and by extension, my crew—have served as an informant for the organization from the moment of its founding to help with that growth.

This letter and the knowledge within are an invitation for you to become a leader in this organization. If you choose to stake everything on being a decent Marine, call the following number where, in all likelihood, you'll have to reveal your secret. And if you don't… well, if you're not willing to stake your all, then why did you join the Marines in the first place?

I hope to hear good things about you, Jonathan.

252-287-677
P.S. Unable to cope with our day-to-day insanity any longer, Terry and Isaiah have decided to stay with you. As they can no longer speak, I highly recommend teaching them how to write, and if possible, getting them in contact with News Coo number 1851. Mention my name to him, and he'll be willing to help.

Jonathan stared impassively at the note, any traces of amusement, dread, or irritation gone as he considered the gravity of what was written in the letter; he barely even acknowledged the postscript and the difficulty that would come from it. He turned to Jessica, who was staring at the note with wide eyes.

"...I suppose now I know what Cross meant when he said that there were people who were going to love to hear my secret," Jonathan finally said. He started to set the note down when Jessica stopped him.

"Hang on, there's something on the other side."

Jonathan blinked and turned it over, confirming that, yes, there was a little more.

P.P.S. Just wanted to let you know that, personally? I'm really glad we came to Navarone. Why, you ask? Because this was the first true test of my skills as a tactician I've had to face... and quite honestly? This marks the absolute first time a plan of mine has gone off without so much as a single hitch.

So, thank you, Vice Admiral Jonathan.

Thank you for helping to make me more capable of helping my crew in the future.

Jonathan read the post-post-scriptum a few times, just to confirm that what he was reading was real. Once he was certain that yes, he had just read that, he found that there was only one thing he could do.

Vice Admiral Jonathan sat in his chair, hands folded before him, and without so much as a second's hesitation before his men, his wife, and God himself...

"HAHAHAHAHAHA!"

He threw his head back and laughed.

-0-

"...So, yeah. The password is 'Old Spice'; if he doesn't know to say that and you don't hear South Birds on the other end giving him the password, just hang up. But I have no doubt that he'll come around eventually, and with him the entirety of G-8."

"...Alright, Cross, I'm impressed," Tashigi admitted. "If this actually works, I think you'll have done more for MI4 than we have. But if this does fail, and he decides to tell Akainu—!"

"He won't, Tashigi," I cut in sharply. "If you need reassurance that badly, then here it is: while I was in that fortress, I got my hands on Buster Call-grade blackmail material for Jonathan, and he knows it. He'll have no choice but to sit on the knowledge if he doesn't decide to join."

Tashigi was silent for a minute. "...You're sure, Cross?" she asked at last.
"Positive," I replied firmly.

"Alright, I'll trust you on this, but I'm passing on the warning to the other three."

"Of course, of course. By the way, what was that about when you picked up? You said pieces, or something."

"Oh, right," she said, brightening up some. "Well, T-Bone came up with the idea, just a measure of added security, for all of us to use code names. Hina suggested Cancer for Commodore Smoker, and—"

"PFHAHAHAHAHAHA! Oh, that's just sad, clichéd, hilarious and genius all in one package," I snickered.

"Heh, yes, we all did think it was funny, but Smoker seemed alright with the name. So, yeah, we decided to take the other names from the Zodiac, too. I'm Pisces, Hina is Capricorn, and T-Bone is Scorpio. We were thinking you could take the codename Ophiuchus."

I blinked thoughtfully as I contemplated that. "Huh… the unofficial 13th Zodiac… eh, what the hell, I'm as slippery as a snake anyways and it sounds cool. I'll take it."

"ARE YOU DONE YET, CROSS?" came Nami's voice from outside. I winced and glanced at the door, then back at Soundbite.

"Uh, anything else, Tashigi?" I asked hastily.

"Not unless you have any other pirate crews to recommend," she replied.

I rolled my eyes with a groan. "ALMOST, NAMI!" I called, and then I racked my brains for any other decent pirates. Unfortunately, I couldn't think of many that were in Paradise. "Sorry, but at present, most of the crews that come to mind are 'maybes' at best. The only definite 'yes' I can think of is the Saruyama Alliance, composed of the Masira Pirates, the Shoujou Pirates, and Montblanc Cricket, and no offense to them but they themselves aren't really 'pirate' pirates per se, sooo…" I waved my hand side to side. "Well, I don't think I need to explain why I'm sure about them, but that's all I've got for now."

Tashigi frowned in dissatisfaction before sighing in defeat. "Well, at least that's one more group than we had before, so thanks. I'll let you get back to your crew. Good luck in your travels, Ophiuchus."

"Same to you." I allowed a cheeky grin to spread across my face. "Fish-stick."

Tashigi 'stared' at me flatly for a moment before sighing in defeat. "I don't know what I was expecting…" And with a final KA-LICK, Soundbite sagged in relief.

I grinned warmly as I patted his shell. "You go ahead and catch some sleep, little buddy, you've more than earned it."

The snail smiled tiredly before retreating into his shell. I set down the bag with the transceiver before heading back outside, and coming face-to-face with an impatient-looking Nami. "The work is all done now. You'll be pulling double duty the next time a storm blows in. And where's Soundbite?"

"Think a little harder about the last 24 hours," I replied. Nami frowned more deeply before a look of understanding came in her eyes, and she sighed.

"Alright, fair enough. Let's just hope—" She snapped her mouth shut and shook her head fiercely.
"Nope, not saying it, not giving the universe that kind of an opening."

*SPLASH! "GROOOAAAAR!"

I gave the Sea King that was towering over the Merry an eager grin. "It would appear that the universe does not give a flying fuck. Goodie!"

"LESS SNARKING, MORE GETTING US THE HELL OUT OF HERE, YOU DAMN JUNKIE!"

"RIGHT AWAY, NAMI-SWAN!"

"Kiss-ass."

"GO FALL OVERBOARD, MOSSHEAD!"

"YOU FIRST, SWIRLYBROW!"

"FIGHT THE SEA KING, NOT EACH OTHER!"

"Ooh, target practice! AND A TEST SUBJECT TO BOOT!"

"Arf arf—ARF?!"

"Sorry, everyone, Soundbite burned himself out with everything that happened in Navarone. It'll be a little while before you can talk again. In the meantime, Chopper can translate if necessary."

"The skull bone's connected to the spinal column, the spinal column's connected to the EVERYTHING…"

"Oooor not, as it were…"

"Somebody hit him before he starts experimenting on us next!"

"I wouldn't worry, Usopp; I'm sure he won't experiment on us."

"R-Really, Robin?"

"Of course. Considering the size of that Sea King, I estimate it will take him several hours to exhaust the sheer amount of resources it can offer him."

"THAT'S NOT REASSURING!"

"SHISHISHI!" Luffy laughed eagerly. "IT'S GOOD TO BE BACK!"

And honestly?

It was. It really, really was.

-o-

A day later, the difficulties of Navarone were all but behind us. Despite the typical noise onboard, it took a little while for us to get used to Terry and Isaiah's absence. Fortunately (depending on how you defined it), we had plenty of other things to occupy our time and attention from the time we left, encompassing the next couple of weeks as we followed the Log Pose towards our next destination. From the typical and unsurprising…
"Nami! Get up here!" I yelled, pounding on the door to the storage room as the wind, waves, and wightning (as Carue put it) raged all around us.

"No! I'm busy polishing my gold!" she yelled back from within.

"Nami, we are in the middle of a fucking storm! If you don't get up here, you'll lose all that gold!" I bellowed.

"…" Silence echoed from within, and I facepalmed as I made a mental note to have Chopper do something.

"FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, WOMAN, IT IS NOT WORTH IT!" Soundbite roared.

"That's it. You're getting therapy from Chopper, end of story!" I concurred.

"Not before you—!"


"WHAT!?" Nami slammed the door to the storeroom open and glared bloody murder at me. "Cross, I'll admit that I'm obsessed, but there is no way in hell that I would allow it to get to the point where it compromised my integrity as a navigator! The only reason I'm not bothering to coordinate you seaweed brains is that the storm is going to blow over soon!"

I glanced up at the absolutely murderous clouds looming over us. "Are you out of your—!?"

"Three, two…" Nami ticked off her fingers.

Aaand there it was: clear skies, just like that.

"And there," Nami nodded firmly. "Now, unless there's anything else?"

I stared up at the sky before slowly looking back at her. "My objections appeared to have become defunct."

"Perfect. So, if you'll excuse me, I have a romantic candlelight dinner to get back to." And with that, she slammed the door shut.

I spared the mere thought of whatever the hell she could be doing in there a shudder of revulsion before walking off, weathering Sanji's cries of how brilliant Nami-swan was. As I did so, I passed Robin, who looked like she had swallowed a lemon.

"You peeked?" I said flatly.

"My kingdom for a way to wipe my memory…” she said, shuddering.

---

…To the mildly expected and nearly forgotten (no pun intended)…
"I HATE AMNESIA EPISODES!" I grit out viciously, emphasizing each word by ramming a highly bruised seahorse's head into a nearby tree. "NOW! GIVE! US! BACK! OUR! MEMORIES! AND! SCREW OFF!" I capped it all off with an overhead swing that gave the tree a nasty split.

As blue mist leaked out of its mouth, the emaciated would-be dragon looked worse than Luffy after Zoro, Sanji, Nami, and Chopper ganging up on him. He lay on the ground, tears leaking out of his eyes.

"I just want to be a Millennial Dragon," it moaned.

"You're in the wrong fucking ocean, dumbass," I snarled before looking back at the kid it used as its puppet, who was currently cowering against a tree. "Everyone should have their memories back now. Just make sure that this," I gave the seahorse a punt for good measure. "Never comes within range of this island again. Got it?"

The boy swallowed and nodded before tentatively stepping back, then running away as fast as he could.

I watched him for a second before turning a stink-eye on Robin, who held up her hands in a conciliatory manner.

"In my defense," she said. "It didn't take my memories."

"...I'm still blaming you for this," I grumbled.

"Cross!" Vivi rushed up to me, her eyes full of concern. "I am so sorry, I-I-I—!

"It's fine, it's fine..." I waved her off as I finally took the time to pinch my profusely bleeding nose shut. "But for the record? Your alter-ego is a raving bitch."

"That... was kind of the point," Vivi admitted sheepishly.

-To the completely unexpected yet utterly mundane.-

"Alright, Usopp," I muttered as I knelt on the deck, balancing Lassoo on my shoulder. "Hold very, very, very still..."

Usopp ignored me in favor of quivering like a leaf as he stared down the dog-gun's barrel in terror, which was in turn causing the apple on his head to wobble uncontrollably. "I-I-I-Isn't there any other way you could practice your aim with that mutt!?" he whimpered in terror.

"Mmm..." Soundbite and I exchanged glances before grinning malevolently. "Nope!" we chorused before I scrunched my eye shut. "Now whatever you do... don't mo—"

"AAAAAAAAARGH!"

"HOLY!" I yelped in shock when a scream of mortal terror suddenly rang through the air, causing me to squeeze Lassoo's trigger on impulse.

BOOM!

"GAH!" Usopp screamed, only just managing to dive to the deck as the ballistic baseball shot
through where his head had been moments earlier. "ARE YOU INSANE!? YOU ALMOST TOOK MY HEAD OFF!"

"Blame whoever screamed just now," I retorted with a roll of my eyes. "And besides, what the hell are you worried about? You tanked plenty of Lassoo's balls back in Alabasta and came out… relatively alright?"

"I ALMOST DIED! AND BESIDES, I ONLY TANKED THE EXPLOSIONS, NOT THE ACTUAL PROJECTILES!"

"Ah... fair enough," I conceded before putting up a hopeful finger. "But hey, look on the bright side: if you had lost your head, I'm sure that Chopper could have reattached it for you?"

It was at that moment that the trapdoor to the men's room popped open, disgorging a plume of off-color smoke and a madly grinning human-reindeer. "You raaaaang?"

We stared at him silently for a second before Usopp slowly turned a vicious glare on me. "When I die… I swear that I will haunt you."

"Sorry, that role is reserved for someone else we'll be meeting later," I replied cheekily before looking at my shoulder. "Anyway, who screamed and why?"

"SANJI, but I didn't hear ANY FIRES OR knives, and NOBODY ELSE IS in there except Conis," the snail replied.

"Iiiinteres——"

THWACK!

"OW!...thank you, Cross." Chopper winced and rubbed where I'd slammed the trapdoor on his head. "But seriously, we should probably check on him."

With that, we all walked towards the kitchen, where most everyone else was already gathered. The sight that met our eyes was… well, interesting, to say the least.

Sanji was on the floor, pale and passed out. And the cause? Conis, who was sitting at the table, looking at him with an expression that was both unnerved and concerned and wearing—

I blinked in surprise. "Are those my cargo pants? And my aviator jacket?"

"Huh?" Conis looked at me in surprise before smiling and fingerling the furred collar of the jacket. "Oh, yeah, apparently we're approximately the same size. Do you mind?"

"Uh… not… really?" I hedged in confusion. "But why are you wearing my… I mean, did Nami, Robin, and Vivi not have any clothes to spare?"

"Oh, they did," Conis said, shrugging. "But when I tried them on, I found that compared to the disguise I put on back in Navarone, they were, well…" Conis spun her hand for a second before sighing helplessly. "Well, look: back in Skypiea, there really wasn't much diversity in fashion. The most differences there were were in patterns and colors and whatnot, but apart from that, all anyone apart from White Berets wore were those same garments. I enjoyed trying on the different outfits that Vivi and Laki showed me, but… the Marine uniform was just a lot more, well…"

She spread her arms with a grin. "Liberating! So, I decided to try some different clothes and I found that yours worked quite well!" She grinned for a few seconds longer before smiling sheepishly. "Is…
Is that going to be a problem? Sanji seems to think so…"

I processed what she said before shrugging. "Nah, that's just Sanji. Personally, I think that's a good look for you! We'll just have to get you a new wardrobe once we reach the next civilized island, is all."

Conis smiled beatifically. "Th-Thank you! You have no idea how much this means to me!"

"I suppose we should have expected her to be a tomboy, considering her role on the crew," Robin remarked as Chopper went to work rousing Sanji.

"Still surprising, based on what we already knew about her," I pointed out. "Seriously, she did not give off tomboy vibes when we first met her."

"No, Conis, darling, why?!" Sanji suddenly shouted as he shot upright, his voice anguished. "At least go with the short-tank look!

"Ergh…" Nami ground the heel of her palm into her forehead.

"Pardon me," Raphy snarled as she grabbed Sanji by his collar and started dragging him out of the kitchen. "I need to spend the next ten minutes brutally educating this idiot on everything wrong with what he just said."

The rest of the crew stared after her uncomfortably.

"Shouoould we stawp her?" Carue asked.

"Depends," Su yawned. "Do you want to get your beak lodged in your own brain?"

"No?"

"Then no."

-0-

And, of course, it wouldn't be the Grand Line without the sea throwing something unexpected and bizarre at us. Something... unspeakable.

-0-

"HALT, EVILDOERS!"

"I swear to Ammit, if this is anything like those Bleeding Heart jackasses…" Vivi grumbled as she stalked over to the side. We watched with mild interest as she peered over the railing, interest that turned into panicked concern when she suddenly coughed up blood and slumped over.

"VIVI!" we all shouted, standing and rushing to her side.

"DEAR PRINCESS!" Sanji yelled, twirling there ahead of us and grabbing her by the torso.

"N-No…" she groaned, her twitching arm raised to try and ward us off. "S-Save yourselves…"

Of course, we ignored her, Chopper joining Sanji at her side and the rest of us crowding the railing to try and see what had caused this. And when we did…

"Oh, my…" Robin breathed, her eyes wide as saucers.
The rest of us didn't answer, too busy gaping in utter shock at the sight before us. I'll spare you readers the details; suffice to say, the man in the dinghy below us would have looked absolutely at home in a bodybuilding competition. Well, aside from the frilly magical girl outfit he was wearing, complete with the toy-like wand—which wasn't resized in the least.

"I AM MAGICAL GIRL INFERNO ANIKI!" he announced. "AND YOU PIRATES, FOR DISTURBING THE PEACE OF THE SEAS, SHALL BE PUNISHED!"

And with that, he struck a pose, the sunlight glinting off his exposed muscles.

**B-B-B-BOOM!**

For all of three seconds before a series of explosions decimated his boat.

"FOUL!" he shouted as he spun through the air before disappearing in a twinkle in the sky.

"I'm sorry if any of you would have preferred to do that, but personally, I reached my lifetime quota for the *wrong* kind of transvestites with Mr. 2," Lassoo grumbled morosely, stalking away from the edge of the boat with an air of annoyance.

"At least Bentham wasn't *nearly* that bad…" I groaned.

"Ugh… hey, Chopper, do you think you could apply some bleach to my brain to get rid of that image?" Zoro groused.

"I've been working on a formula since we met the Saruyama Alliance. Unless anyone has any objections, I'll dump the working prototype in tonight's dinner." Chopper shuddered. "Granted, we'll all have blood coming out of our ears for a week, but I think that's a small price to pay."

"AGREED," the rest of the crew concurred.

"Ah, you don't need any of that!" Luffy said dismissively. "All I need to do is concentrate for a second and…"

We watched in concern as Luffy stared vacantly out into the distance.

"Uh, Luffy?" Nami asked after a few minutes.

"Oh, hey, Nami!" our captain replied. "What're we doing by the railing?" He glanced at Vivi, and his eyes bugged out. "Ah! Vivi, what happened to you?!"

We stared at the captain for a few seconds before sighing despondently. "I never thought I'd say this, but I envy Luffy's brain right now," Usopp groaned.

"You, me, and everyone else in the world with half a brain cell…" I concurred grimly before clapping my hands together. "For now, though… vow of silence?"

"Vow of silence," everyone else repeated.

And, of course, I took the time to throw out an SBS or two. Considering how often I'd been doing it, I elected to limit it to only once every couple of days. And the subjects thereof? Well, it seemed like I hadn't done enough of talking about the crew itself, and if Navarone showed anything, it was that common interests had a way of making allies.
Boa Hancock listened to the snail with a neutral expression as it spoke in a feminine voice.

"One of the old sayings of my family is this. A king must not give into anger. But, should you find your anger to great to contain, you must ensure it is three things. Your anger must be cold; your anger must be controlled; and your anger must be legendary."

Hancock and her sisters nodded in approval. Then the speaker on the other end chuckled sheepishly.

"But I have to admit, I'm still working on one of those three facets, but—"

"PUWW ME UP, YOU MOWONS! GET ME OFFA THIS FISHING POLE!" came a somewhat far-off voice, followed by a growl.

"Those idiots, how many times do I have to tell them…" Vivi snarled, her voice becoming quieter as she stomped away before suddenly spiking. "GET HIM OFF OF THERE RIGHT NOW BEFORE I RIP YOUR HEADS OFF YOUR NECKS!"

"Make that two facets…" Cross deadpanned.

Boa Hancock had learned the story of why Nefertari Vivi was sailing with the Straw Hats from Nyon when she delivered the snail, touching on the previous SBS broadcasts. Hearing her tale, Hancock couldn't help but feel some sympathy towards her, knowing better than anyone the cruelty of the World Government, and therefore the fate she was doomed to were she to be captured. And it was due to that, more than anything, that she did not take offense to her lectures on how royalty should act, much of which was contrary to her own actions.

Indeed, hearing what happened on the SBS was eye-opening for the Snake Princess.

"Sisters? I've decided that I will attempt to emulate Princess Nefertari Vivi in my rule from now on," she stated calmly, causing the two serpent-hybrids to look at her in equal parts incredulity and hope.

"R-Really, sister?" Marigold asked.

"I don't believe it, is this really happening?" Sandersonia clasped her hands reverentially.

"Yes," Hancock said, rising to her feet with her finger pointed in the air. "It is clear that until now, my fury has been substandard and my temper deplorably restrained! Henceforth, I, Boa Hancock, will strive to refine my rage to the point where it matches the force of a volcano, and the fury of a hurricane! If you will excuse me!" She started marching forwards. "I must practice."

With that, Hancock strode out of the throne room, leaving her sisters to remain frozen in horror as their worlds crumbled around them. Seconds later, a rather high-pitched ‘yipe!’ reached their ears.

"Sister, could I recommend also being kinder to the animals? Princess Nefertari did lecture about abusing one's power," Sandersonia called after her hopefully.

"Hmph. I've never gone out of my way to cause pain to these mongrels; it's hardly my fault that they're so foolish as to get in my way, is it?"

"She's hopeless," the two younger sisters murmured as they hung their heads despondently.
And so it went. We sailed on and on for weeks, enjoying a number of misadventures and escapades, each more daring and unique than the last.

It was... absolutely incredible.

Until one day, on a day like any other... it happened.

There was no warning, no chance to prepare, not even a hint of what was to occur.

One second we were sailing along peacefully, not so much as a hint of trouble in sight...

*SPLASH!*

The next we were surrounded by a trio of massive, literal Sea Monkeys.

I frowned grimly as Luffy made faces at the giggling Sea Kings, gripping the brim of my hat and tilting it down solemnly in order to hide a sidelong glance at Robin.

"Here we go…"

Patient AN: For all of those wondering how we managed to pull off three updates in two days, let me ask you something: did any of you actually think that Ego and I were just sitting around writing nothing while Superego was on vacation? For the sole purpose of pulling off this beautiful display of trolling, we had Chapter 31 almost finished and Navarone’s skeleton planned out by the time he got back. Took a week longer than we expected to do it, but it was well worth it, I’m sure.

Hornet AN: Ah, Italy. Gorgeous weather, beautiful countryside, delicious food… and some of the most narrow, windy roads ever traversed by a tour bus. Oh, I had such a great time there. And now, I return to you with over 75,000 words of story. Hooray!

Xomniac AN: And now we return to our usual posting schedule. And just in time for one of, if not the most harrowing and badass arc in all of One Piece. Hold onto your underwear, readers, we’re ramming into Water 7 at full force!
Chapter 34: Davy Back Fight! A Crew Member Is Lost, And A Crew Is Won!

Cross-Brain AN: Loyal fans, for those of you thinking that this chapter is late, let us pose this to you: what is our regular update schedule? The answer: once a week. And we already updated last week, didn't we?

Patient AN: Except it's not that simple. We really wish this WAS a simple matter of trolling, but it isn't. This past week was a lot more hectic than any of us expected; we're not happy that we missed our appointed time, and it's not on purpose.

Hornet AN: Work sucks and then the imploding economy kills your retirement.

Also, fuck Lebron James, fuck the Cavaliers, and fuck the city of Cleveland in general.

Xomniac AN: And college in general while we're at it, not letting me stay in my dorm and making me find somewhere new to stay…

Cross-Brain AN: Well, at least we have one bit of good news in our lives to deliver: as of Friday, This Bites! has officially become the most popular Self-Insert fic in the One Piece fandom!

"LAND HO!"

I was knocked from the book I'd been burying myself in by Luffy and Usopp's strident lecturing of Robin on the proper way to notify the crew that she'd seen an island. I took a second to get my bearings before smiling, standing up and picking up Soundbite. However, while I appeared calm on the outside, mentally I was the exact opposite, and had been for a while now.

My smile, fond though it was, belied the grim anticipation I felt; sure, it was nice to finally be near land, but the implications of our destination… those I couldn't shake.

Our course was still unchangeably headed for an island infiltrated by no less than half of CP9. With any luck, Robin would be fully onboard once we arrived, so that we'd be able to start the inevitable conflict on our terms rather than theirs. But if she wasn't… then we were in for one hell of a brawl.

Still, at least we had one advantage: until Robin arrived on Water 7, CP9's incognito members would continue to go about their days as though nothing were happening. Hence, with the global timeline 'paused' as it were, we had a resource on our hands we hadn't had in a long time: quite literally, time.

Time to train, time to prepare, and most importantly of all, time to plan.

But I forced myself to push that issue away as I walked out onto the deck and gazed through the fog around us; pressing though the CP9 saga was, the memory of the remnants of the Fanged Toad Pirates and their sinking into the sea—which, I have to be honest, I couldn't regret; as disheartened as they were, if their first thought was to try robbing us, they weren't worth the effort to mourn—reminded me that we had to deal with the Foxy Pirates first.

I tented my fingers on the balcony as I considered our oncoming foes. For all that Foxy was something of a joke character, the truth was undeniable: he'd compensated for his own weakness by getting the Davy Back Fight down to an art. In a direct fight he was pathetic, but when he managed to get his way… well, simply put, he had managed to survive long enough on the Grand Line to
accumulate nearly 500 members for his crew, including fishmen and giants. No matter how you looked at it, Foxy was as paradoxically threatening as he was utterly pathetic.

"CROSS!"

I jumped in surprise as I was knocked clean out of my thoughts by Nami’s voice before glancing to the side, where both she and Zoro were staring at me in equal parts worry and impatience. "Sorry, my thoughts were a mile away. What is it?"

"I asked if there's anything to worry about on this island," Nami replied before glancing at the island. "Though going by how you didn't answer me for a full minute, I'd call that question already answered."

I grimaced slightly before starting to tap the side of my head. "Eh… kind of. There are no indigenous threats; the local civilization isn't even around, for that matter. All that lives here are a bunch of abnormally tall or long animals, something about growing longer due to leisurely lifestyles or whatever. They're all laid back, so even the carnivores are barely even a threat. I suspect that this is the most peaceful island we'll find in the Grand Line."

"I'm hearing that 'but' like Soundbite's shouting it, Cross," Zoro deadpanned.

I stopped tapping and started pressing my finger against my temple. "But it's a prelude. We're going to be meeting some people here. There'll be a group who'll be an annoying but decently tough fight…” I scowled as I dug my finger into forehead. "And after all that, there'll be one who will stomp us into the ground."

Zoro and Nami tensed for a moment before Nami forced herself to relax marginally as she looked back at the shoreline. "Eh, I'm sure Luffy and the guys will be able to beat him."

"Don't count on it," I scowled grimly. "Picture a calmer, more world-savvy Eneru, minus the natural advantage that one of our crew had against him."

Zoro tapped his finger on the butt of Wado Ichimonji, not seeming to notice he was doing it. "Then how are we supposed to get out of this one alive?"

"Pure luck and Luffy's guts…” I shook my head grimly. "After the guy effortlessly incapacitates Luffy."

That got the two to stiffen in naked terror, while drawing a different reaction from a third observer. "It would appear that the third time fighting a Logia isn't the charm for our captain," remarked Robin in a would-be calm voice as she walked up on us out of nowhere.

It was a testament to my nerves that I didn't jump, instead biting my lip as I hoped to high heaven that she wouldn't ask the million Beri question. If I hesitated, chances were high that she'd guess the reason for it. Thankfully, however, she chose to keep her peace.

"Not in this case, it isn't…” I shook my head solemnly before clapping my hands. "But in any case, that will have to wait. That annoying group I mentioned does present a threat, but only if we let them gain momentum. Hopefully it won't come to that, but if it does…” I sighed and waved my hand dismissively. "Well, I suppose we'll just have to burn that bridge when we come to it. For now, brace yourselves; the fourth leg of our journey starts now, and it's going to be one of the hardest parts we face this side of the Red Line."

That got them on their guard, sending Nami stalking off towards Usopp and Conis, presumably to
check on the progress they'd made on our weapons, while Robin and Zoro stayed by me and watched as the island approached.

"...Fourth leg of our journey? How do you figure that, Cross?" Zoro asked.

"Eh, it's just the way I saw it," I shrugged. "The first leg was from when Luffy set out to when you guys left the East Blue, the second was from the start of the Grand Line to Alabasta, and the third was from the end of Alabasta until now. Some legs are longer than others, but all are significant in some way, shape or form."

"And how many of those do you know about, Cross?" Robin needled.

I looked upwards and spoke wordlessly to myself as I counted down on my fingers. Alright, let's see, the arcs were East Blue, Alabasta, Skypiea, Water 7/Enies, Thriller Bark, Marineford, Fishman Island, Punk Hazard and Dressrosa, though those last two were practically one and the same under the Pirate Alliance. Either way, it all totalled up to... "Eight, or therearound. My knowledge stops right as we start getting into what will undoubtedly be the biggest shitstorm the world has seen in the last 700 years."

"Naturally," Robin said dryly.

"Hey, what do you want from me?" I shrugged. "I'm only human."


I rolled my eyes and turned away in favor of observing Long Ring Long Land. As we arrived, I could see that it was, well... a plain-looking island. That is, the island was covered in grass and dotted with tall trees, and so it looked plain... because it was a plain.

... Moving on. The Kiddy Trio shot overboard, as did Vivi and Carue. Everyone else stayed behind for one reason or another.

"Lassoo! Wanna go fox-hunting?" I called.

"Hey!" Su interrupted, an angry scowl on her face. "That's insulting to my heritage as a BWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!

Both Lassoo, Soundbite, and I blinked as Su suddenly and without warning descended into a fit of laughter.

"Uh, Su?" I began.

"AHAHAHAHAHAHA...! Oh, man, I nearly made it through that with a straight face," the cloud fox finally trailed off. "Nah, we foxes are all snarky little shits and we know it. Go on with whatever it was you were doing."

I shrugged and turned back to Lassoo. "So, about that invitation..."

The dog-gun's response was to eagerly bound up next to me and leap at my back, morphing into his gun-mode in mid-air and latching into the harness that Usopp had made for me a few days ago when I'd finally managed to start hefting Lassoo without strain.

"HURF!"

'Or, well,' I corrected mentally as I strained under Lassoo's full weight. 'Almost without strain...'
Freaking hell, even a full ton lighter and he still risked crushing me flat.

"You'd think having literally nothing but muscle would make this easier, instead of setting me back by weeks," I remarked through gritted teeth.

"Look at it this way: at least you're actually capable of walking," Su commented airily from where she was perched on the Merry's railing. "That's more than most anyone who went through anything even remotely similar to what you did can say."

"… You have no idea just how accurate that statement is, Su," I deadpanned. I then turned back to my fellow officers. "Pass this on to everyone who stays behind: the group I mentioned will be here soon, but the captain is already on the island." I grimaced as I put my foot on the Merry's railing. "Hopefully, I can take him down before he can get Luffy to accept his challenge."

"Challenge?" Nami asked in confusion. "What challenge?"

I turned an eye towards the fog, and grimaced as I caught sight of a dark shadow just starting to loom. "The Davy Back Fight," I said sourly. "Ask Robin or Sanji to tell you what it is. Trust me, whatever they tell you, these guys have made it ten times worse."

And with that parting comment, I leapt to the shore and started jogging after our captain, doctor, sniper, and duck-mounted diplomat as fast as my legs allowed.

-0-

"Good day, young man."

"Winston Churchill," I divined, giving the daaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaschund a respectful nod as I passed him by.

"Yeah, I guess that accent's kinda UNMISTAKABLE," Soundbite admitted. "ALRIGHT, HOW ABOUT… this?"

"Oh, 'scuse me," I apologized as I ducked under the elongated mass of a particularly large animal. "Not a problem," the animal rumbled.

"Hm…" I tapped my chin. "Robin Williams? No, that doesn't make sense…" I glanced back at the animal as I tried to puzzle it out before finally managing to catch sight of its horns. "Oh! A buuuuuuuuuuuullmoooooooooose. Teddy Roosevelt then?"

"CORRECTAMUNDO!" Soundbite proclaimed.

"Good job compensating for a lack of an actual voice to go by."

"Thanks, I'm quite proud of it. NOW… OH! OH! This should be GOOD!"

"G'day, mate," a wide-snouted aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaalligator greeted me quietly as he stalked after the buuuuuuuuuuuullmoooooosse.

I instantly jerked to a halt and snapped my fist up. "HOLD IT!" I barked, causing everyone around me to freeze. "A moment of silence for the Hunter…"

Soundbite, the reeeeeeefeeeeefffffffffffffffff and I all bowed our heads reverentially for a second…
"Aaaand moving on." I dropped my fist and resumed tracking Carue's thankfully distinctive footprints. "And for the record, Soundbite? That was an elongated alligator, he was called *Crocodile Hunter.*"

"Eh, I went in KNOWING IT WAS A gamble."

I shrugged. As I continued following the footprints, I actually took the moment to appreciate the land. A sea of grass that seemed to stretch on for miles and miles… even the bizarre trees, stretched out like reflections from a funhouse mirror, couldn't impede the amazing scope of the situation. I mean, I had experienced farmlands like this a few times back home, but nothing like this. Honestly, it was all just… just—

"LOOK OUT BELOW!"

"LOOK OUT ABOVE!"

"Wha—?" I had barely enough time to glance up in confusion—

WHAM!

When I was suddenly pasted by a very heavy and, frankly, very smelly projectile.

I took a second to lie on the ground as I tried to process what the hell had just happened when said projectile suddenly sat up and started scratching the back of its head.

"Ah, back on solid ground at last…" Tonjit sighed in relief before shifting around. "Huh, it's softer than I remember."

"…I take it all back…" I growled out. "This place is a freaking tinderbox, and all I need is a match so that I can watch it burn." I blinked as a thought occurred to me. "Holy crap, this must be how Nami feels pretty much all the time…"

"Cross!" Vivi called out as she and the rest of our unofficial away team crowded around me. "Are you alright?"

"Holy crap, the bamboo genie came out and crushed Cross!" Luffy exclaimed.

"A genie?" asked Chopper.

"Yeah! It's the thing that appears after you break the bamboo and—WHEGH!"

I glared at my captain as I forced him to hold his tongue—or rather, as I held it for him. "He's no genie, Luffy, and that wasn't… quite bamboo?" I glanced down at the stilts. Seriously, how the hell had he managed—? I hastily shook my head as I got myself back on track. "Anyway, what you just broke was the world's biggest pair of stilts, and this was the guy who was standing on top. For all I know, he may very well live in that house and be the owner of that horse. Now, if you'll excuse me…" I slowly tilted back…

THUD!

And landed in the thankfully soft grass, although Lassoo being beneath me was marginally uncomfortable. "I'm just gonna lie here for a bit until my limbs stop aching…" I groaned.

"Uh… are you alright, Cross?" Vivi asked, leaning over me with a worried look.
"Cah'mon, Vivi," Carue huffed as he grabbed the back of Vivi's collar and yanked her away.

"He'll be fine, wet's just get outta hewe befowe whatevah madness he's gawt comin' catches up to him."

Tonjit, meanwhile, was blinking slowly before suddenly gasping and staring at me in shock. "Wait, young man, did you just say that there was a horse by that house over there?"

"...yes?" I asked slowly, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Huh..." Tonjit slowly redirected his gaze at the house. "You know, I used to have a house and a horse..." He stared for a second longer before tilting his head. "What an odd coincidence..."

I slapped my hand to my face with a groan. "For the love of—! Eh, to hell with it. Who the hell'll ever believe him? HEY, SHELLY!"

A minute later, I was watching Tonjit ride around happily on his old companion with a somewhat bemused expression. "So..." I glanced at Soundbite. "Your reasoning?"

"EH, what can I SAY?" Soundbite shrugged as much as he could. "OLD, MATRONLY and kind? Who else but McGonagall?"

"Heh, fair enough..." I watched the two of them for a few more seconds, and had to admit that it was a beautiful sight even considering that he had fallen on me. And not one that I wanted to see interrupted the hard way, that was for sure. "Are Foxy and his goons nearby yet?"

"Chica AND BONNIE?" Soundbite asked cheekily.

"...That's more accurate than I'd like to admit. Still though?"

"Eeehth..." Soundbite swiveled his eyestalks. "Yeeaaah, there they IS THAT A GUN!?"

"Yeah, that's them," I scowled grimly. "Alright, Soundbite, blow their brains out."

One second's pause, then Soundbite's eyes widened in horror. "WAX! How did they ALREADY KNOW!??"

I didn't spare any thought to answering the question, instead scrambling to a kneel and twisting my harness so that Lassoo was perched on my shoulder. "Which way are they!?"

"TWENTY DEGREES WIDDERSHINS!"

I gave the gastropod an acrid scowl. "Does it look like we're riding on four elephants and a freaking turtle!?"

"AH..." Soundbite flinched self-consciously. "MAKE THAT starboard?"

I jerked Lassoo's barrel to the side.

"FIRE!"

"CANI-PLASTER!" I roared as I pulled Lassoo's trigger.

BOOM! SPLAT!

"AGH! PTOOH! WHAT ZE HECK!"
I breathed a sigh of relief before dropping Lassoo down so that he could morph into his hybrid form while I stood up fully and stalked towards the tar-soaked trio. Thankfully, going by the fact that Tonjit was looking over at us in confusion atop a yet-uninjured Shelly, it looked like I had actually managed to beat them to the shot. Well, that was step one taken care of. Now, to keep them from actually managing to challenge Luffy.

I plastered the most murderous expression on my face as I could manage as I stalked up to them, cocking Lassoo menacingly. "That was Cani-Plaster," I announced. "Unless you three want to see how well that particular attack synergizes with Cani-Palm—"

Lassoo's body promptly clicked, and he breathed out a tongue of fire, courtesy of the Flame Dial Usopp had recently finished installing in one of his chambers.

"—I suggest that you all back the heck off!"

Lassoo capped it all off with a savage growl, which I was gratified to see made the opposing crew flinch back.

"Hey, what was that for, Cross?!" Vivi demanded, approaching me rapidly on duckback, Chopper in Walk Point alongside her and Luffy and Usopp close behind them.

"indeed!" the split-headed pirate snarled in a heavy Italian accent as he struggled to wipe the tar off. "What ze hell did I do to deserve this!?!"

"you mean besides the fact that you were about to shoot shelly!?!" Soundbite snarled viciously.

"He was what!?" Chopper roared as he snapped into his Heavy Point and loomed over the suddenly fearful slow-man, only for the much bigger gorilla-man Hamburg to square off and butt heads with him.

"Stay away from the boss, furball," he growled, more serious than I thought was possible from him.

"Who are these guys, Cross?!" Usopp asked, nervously fingerling his slingshot.

"Who am I?!" Foxy demanded incredulously. "You actually don't recognize me?"

"It's probably just the tar, boss," Porche consoled him. Foxy nodded to that, and then straightened.

"Well, in that case, I suppose I'll introduce myself!" he said with a smug pose. "I am Foxy the Silver Fox, ฿24 million bounty, Captain of the Foxy Pirates! I am the man who always gets what he wants!"

I slowly lessened my glare in favor of a disbelieving look. "Only ฿24 million, in the grand line? Eesh, and I thought you were pathetic before."

Foxy promptly collapsed into a teary heap, a stormcloud-like air of depression hovering over him. "Pathetic?" he moaned.

"Pupupupu!" Hamburg hunched over with a snicker.

"QUIT IT, HAMBURG!" Porche snarled at him before patting her captain's shoulder comfortingly. "Aw, c'mon, Boss, it's not that bad! I mean, he has heard of you before, right?"

Foxy started to perk up—
"God knows I wish I didn't."

Until I threw in my own two cents.

"I WILL LODGE MY BATON IN YOUR INTESTINAL TRACT!" the Foxy Pirates' diva promised.

"Why were you trying to shoot Shelly?" Luffy cut in with a frown before I could respond.

Unfortunately, that question managed to snap Foxy out of his funk, prompting him to leap to his feet and jab his thumb at himself as he gave the definition of a shit-eating grin. "Because I felt like it, of course," he drawled. "I don't care about such a worthless horse, I was just going to shoot it for fun."

I felt my eye twitch at the sheer wrongness of that statement. "Permission to cleanse the world of this scum, Captain?" I growled, prompting Lassoo to snarl out some flames again.

"H-Hold it right there, Straw Hat Pirates!" Foxy barked.

"Wha—? How do you know who we are?" Luffy demanded.

I pinched the bridge of my nose with my free hand. "The SBS, Luffy. It'd be more of a surprise if they didn't know who we were."

"Oooooh, alright," Luffy nodded in understanding.

"And what right do you have to call us scum, anyway?" Porche demanded. "You're pirates just as much as we are. This is just what pirates do!"

I would have gotten pissed at that particular statement if my blood didn't suddenly freeze on account of the feeling of raw, primal terror that Luffy's sudden rage elicited. "SAY THAT AGAIN!" he bellowed as he took a menacing step forwards.

"HOLD IT, STRAW HAT!" Foxy snapped his hand up, temporarily forestalling Luffy's advance. "We're not here to fight! Rather…" The splithead dove his hands into his pocket and when he withdrew them, he was clutching a trio of coins with one while the other tossed a pistol at Luffy. "WE ARE HERE TO CHALLENGE YOU TO A THREE-ROUND DAVY BACK FIGHT!"

All the anger in Luffy seemed to deflate out of him, replaced by confusion, while Usopp, Vivi and Carue's expressions slowly began to contort in realization and horror. "A Davy—?"

"There are pirates who still play that in the Grand Line!?" Vivi gasped in horror.

"CWAP!" Carue squawked in agreement.

"DON'T DO IT, LUFFY!" Usopp begged desperately. "IF WE PLAY THAT GAME, THEN WE COULD LOSE OUR FRIENDS!"

"He's right, Luffy, this game—!" I started to cut in.

"Will there be a Captain's Fight?" Luffy asked, all traces of his usual good cheer completely gone as he pinned Foxy with a vicious glare.

I froze as the question caught me completely flat-footed. "Wai—What?" I yelped in confusion.

"But of course." Foxy's sneer widened significantly. "After all, it's only traditional."

Luffy promptly aimed the pistol skyward. "Then I'm in."
"Nonono, Luffy, wai—!"

"Then let the Davy Back Fight," Foxy barked victoriously as he whipped out his own pistol and mirrored Luffy. "COMMENCE!"

**BANG!**

My heart dropped as both he and Luffy discharged their pistols, thus irreversibly sealing our fates. The horror lasted only for a moment before I took the appropriate course of action, Vivi and Usopp both mirroring my movements.

"YOU IDIOT!" we yelled, slamming our fists into his head with enough force to bury it in the ground. I then grasped my fist with my other hand as it processed the pain as though I had punched iron rather than rubber.

"Gah… Usopp, what's the status on my new armor?" I grit out.

"You know, I was going to have it finished in a day, but I think I'll make it my top priority in light of this," Usopp grumbled as Luffy tried to unstick his head.

"Fehfehfehfehfeh!" Foxy cackled. "This should bolster our crew quite nicely, I'd say."

"Don't count on it, split-head," I growled, causing Foxy to sink back into depression. At that moment, Luffy freed his head, and looked at our expressions.

"What is it, you guys?" he asked obliviously.


"Roger roger," he returned before static filled the air. The next instant, I began tearing into Luffy.

"YOU COMPLETE IDIOT! WHY DIDN'T YOU STOP TO LISTEN TO WHAT I WAS GOING TO SAY?! DAVY BACK FIGHTS FORCE CAPTAINS TO GAMBLE THEIR CREWS! EVERY GAME WE LOSE, ONE OF OUR CREWMATES GETS STOLEN!" I roared.

Luffy frowned up at me. "Yeah, I already knew that."

"YOU—!" I started to snarl before freezing as I processed his words. "Wait, you what?"

"I know what a Davy Back Fight is," Luffy repeated casually. "Shanks told me about 'em back in my home town. There's some bits I don't remember that well, but I know what it's all about."

My rage was subdued for the moment as part of my mind blanked, trying desperately to process what I was hearing. "But-But in the story—!?"

"Weeell…" Luffy scratched the side of his head with a smile. "You keep saying I should use my brain more, so I've been trying to do that. One of the things I've been doing is trying to remember anything Gramps and Shanks told me about the Grand Line."

My jaw dropped open as a wave of horror crashed down over me, but then I froze as I felt a number of murderously glaring gazes drilling into me. I hastily swung around and waved my hands at my very pissed off crewmates. "Hey hey hey, don't blame me! How could I have possibly seen this coming?! In what possible way could I have predicted that a smarter Luffy would have been a worse Luffy?!"

"You mean besides EVERY MARY-SUE FIC ever?" Soundbite muttered sarcastically.
That is a literary issue, not a realistic one!" I hissed back, then turned my attention back to Luffy. "Anyway, you really misjudged things this time! Think about it, Luffy: Foxy knew who we were, he's been listening to the SBS, so he knows what you're capable of, and yet he willingly challenged us, even in spite of the fact that you specifically asked for a direct fight with him! Do you know why he'd do that?"

Luffy blinked in confusion. "Ah… because he's an idiot?"

"That's a given, but no," I growled darkly. "He challenged us because he's got more up his sleeves than mere brawn. Luffy, the Foxy Pirates are tricksters. They've mastered the Davy Back Fight and come up with a million and one different ways of forcibly tipping the odds in their own favor. This isn't a battle we can win with might, but rather with wits, and they have way more practice at it than we do!"

Vivi paled in horror. "T-That's really not a good thing, Luffy! Baroque Works used to pull the exact same thing in order to forcibly gain recruits!" She cast a wary glance at a patiently waiting Foxy. "And if these guys have even more practice at it…"

"So, you see, Luffy," I growled darkly. "You've managed to hold us above a barrel here, which only begs one question: what the hell made you think it was even remotely worth it to accept his challenge?"

Luffy stared up at us silently for a moment before bowing his head and tilting his hat down over his eyes. "… Because I remember that Shanks said that the Davy Back Fight usually ends with a fight between the captains of the two crews…"

Luffy suddenly glanced up, and the look in his eyes… well, any protests that I had died then and there. "And I want to kick that bastard's ass for pretending to be a pirate!"

We stared at him, the fire in his eyes blazing for a few more seconds before he grinned. "Besides, you guys are my crew! I know you can handle it!" he said cheerfully.

I sighed, unable to keep myself from smiling. "One compliment, and he has us hook, line, and sinker," I groused.

"Yep," chorused everyone else.

"Alright…” I scratched my head for a moment before glancing at Luffy. "Captain, permission to tell the crew what to expect? I mean, one slip-up here, and the consequences are worse than death."

"Huh? Uh… OK, Cross, go ahead," Luffy conceded with a frown. "But don't tell me anything about split-head unless you really think I have to know it."

"Nah, you'll find out the only dangerous thing he has up his sleeve long before you fight him," I waved him off. I then directed a glare at Foxy, who was staring at us with clear impatience at being unable to hear our conversation. "For now… let's get back to the Merry and get this shitshow started. We've got some planning to take care of." I then tensed as a horrific realization hit me like a rock. "And… a storm to weather."

-o-

When we returned to the Merry, I had explained the situation, and with the fact that they knew about the Davy Back Fight and the fact that Foxy's crew was worse, it went without saying that Nami subsequently raged at Luffy. And by 'raged', I mean 'whipped up a miniature Category 5 Typhoon on the coast of Long Ring Long Island from scratch'… though thankfully, she'd withheld her unholy
wrath until after I'd finished explaining the ins and outs of the ordeal we were in for.

And that had not been an easy conversation to have. Needless to say, Zoro and Sanji being told that they had to work together caused no end of frustration, but the potential threat of losing one of the ladies or, as in canon, Chopper was enough for them to agree to work together from the game’s start to its end. As for the Donut Race, Nami staying onboard was non-negotiable due to the Long Cape's whirlpools, but as for the rest of the crew, I had a few ideas she was rather more amenable to.

Which brought me to the present, where I was standing beside Itomimizu of the Foxy Pirates on the central stage, he and Foxy both eagerly allowing me to join in emceeing the proceedings. Proceedings which were currently being delayed because of the, to reiterate, miniature typhoon that was going to town on the captain of my crew. And may I just add that she was using her Clima-Tact before it could be called more than Semi-Perfect?

"You know, your SBS really doesn't do justice for how scary that woman is," my fellow announcer murmured fearfully.

"You think that this is bad?" I scoffed. "Please, you're watching from the sideline. Trust me, she's a lot worse when she's bearing down on you directly."

Itomimizu started to nod, before hastily dropping to the ground as a ballistic Luffy tore through the space where his torso had been a moment earlier. "…I'll take your word for it," he whimpered.

"Finally!" Foxy barked, grabbing Luffy and standing him up properly. "Geeze, how do you lunatics get anything done!?"

"Very patiently," I sneered.

"Hmph," the fox-themed pirate snorted before waving his hand. "Well, my patience is at an end. Let's get this show on the road!"

I gave Luffy a pleading look. "Do I have to?"

"Shishishi! Heck yeah!" Luffy said, grinning like a… well, a D. "This is gonna be fun! No reason the world should miss out, right?"

I rolled my eyes, my mouth a thin line. "Right, 'fun'. That's one word for it…” Nevertheless, despite my attitude, I jerked the transceiver mike out of its cradle and started ticking down fingers. "Alright, in five, four, three, and two we are live!" I promptly flipped my mood so that it was much cheerier. "Hello, world! Once again, it's that special time! Time for me—!

"TO START THE SBS!"

"GAH!" I leapt almost three feet off the ground at the sudden amplified voice before spinning around to catch sight of Itomimizu and his own snail snickering behind me.

"I've always wanted to do that!" the big-mouthed announcer laughed.

"Hmph," the fox-themed pirate snorted before waving his hand. "Well, my patience is at an end. Let's get this show on the road!"

"I've always wanted to do that!" the big-mouthed announcer laughed.

I ground my teeth as I clawed my hand down my face. "Why does the world seem determined to stop me from starting the SBS?!" I demanded.

"WHY does the world seem DETERMINED to stop me from STOPPING CROSS FROM STARTING THE SBS?!" Soundbite barked with as much heat.

"Honestly? Because it's fun!" he grinned carelessly.
I glared at him for a second before blowing out an exasperated sigh. "Viewers, allow me to introduce you to my fellow emcee for this broadcast. Uh, how do you say your name again?"

"Itomimizu," he said tiredly, clearly having had to correct that multiple times. "Announcer and commentator for the Foxy Pirates. Hello, world! I'm honored to say that this is the largest audience I've ever had the chance to speak to!" He capped it off with a bow.

"And why does he have this chance? Because due to a deplorable and utterly unwarranted offense on the part of the Foxy Pirates' Captain, Foxy the Silver Fox—" I cast a glower at the split-head, to which he responded with a sneer. "—our captain has accepted the challenge of a three-round Davy Back Fight. For those unaware, this is a game designed for pirates and by pirates to strengthen their crews. Three basic rules apply: after each round, the winning crew's captain gets to select one member from the opposing crew to join theirs, or else take their Jolly Roger, and while this might not seem so bad, one must remember that the Jolly Roger is the pride of a ship: if it is lost, then that symbol may never be flown again. And finally, any lost crewmates or flags can be reclaimed only through a Davy Back Fight or through some form of exorbitant circumstances, though those are few and far between.

"I should clarify right now that our captain accepted this for two reasons: to get back at Foxy for the aforementioned offense, and because he has complete faith in his crew—"

"THAT'S US!" Soundbite piped up.

"—to get through these challenges. And, well…” I let myself smile. "How could we object to a show of faith like that?" I promptly dropped my smile into a scowl. "Though honestly, I really wish he'd just chosen to beat the split-head's face in then and there." I was gratified to see that my comment sent Foxy spiralling to his knees in misery. "This game is still a hell of a risk, and because we're staking our pride on it, that means that if we get taken, either we stick with these bastards until the end or we butt out of the pirate life forever, and I don't know which is worse! I mean, c'mon!" I waved my hand desperately. "Who the hell thought that this game was a good idea anyways!?"

"I'D LIKE to know that—Dot dot dot dot!—too! OOH, LUCKY US! WE'RE GETTING AN ANSWER NOW!"

"Or maybe it's just someone calling in to insult us. Either way, you're live on the SBS!"

"Gurarararara, glad to be here," boomed a chuckle on the other end that I instantly recognized. My entire body froze up, and I noticed that a significant portion of onlookers—Zoro, Sanji, and Robin included—seemed petrified in shock.

"Now, then, let me educate you, brat," the voice on the other end stated. "The Back Fight was started so that the stronger pirates in the world could bolster their crews without active bloodshed, and it's been in use for decades, even before Roger got his crown. And nowadays, Linlin and Kaido tend to use it in place of open warfare, both so as to avoid ripping the New World to shreds and so that neither of them is left vulnerable for the Marines and Warlords. Of course, considering the sheer scales of their operations, they stake whole crews at a time instead of just one person. Personally, I'd rather die than risk losing one of my sons, no matter how confident I am in their capabilities, and that Red-Haired brat is the same. But even though I don't play it, I can appreciate an alternative to just blowing each other's brains out. Got it?"

"…Yeah, that… that makes sense," I croaked weakly, only just managing to get my voice to work.

"Gurararararara! I thought you were bolder than this, brat. You didn't hesitate to provoke a Warlord, or to insult my alcohol tolerance. What happened to all that bravado?"
My gut slowly began to boil as a manic grin spread across my face. "Fine, then. You want bravado, old man? How's thi—MMPH!" I was cut off by a disembodied hand clamping over my mouth.

A glance at Robin showed her to be mouthing 'I will end you,' with the utmost sincerity.

"Mmph..." I grumbled for a second before nodding, prompting her to release me. "Tsk. Apparently my crewmates don't appreciate the value of impressing someone like you. Well, if nothing else, let me say this: thanks for what you did for..." I trailed off, unable to find a way to say it without giving too much away. "Look, you're a smart man and I'm sure he never shut up about the lovable moron, so I trust you know what I'm talking about. Anyway, he was in a dark place and you gave him something he was looking for his entire life, and I..." I glanced at Luffy, who promptly smiled and nodded eagerly. "And we really appreciate it."

"Gurararara. It's my pleasure, I assure you. By the way, I have a message for you as well. Or at least, to be delivered through your broadcast."

I started to utter my agreement, before freezing as a thought struck me, followed by another scowl. At this rate, I was going to have frown lines at thirty. "Considering how this broadcast is truly global and I'm certain that he would never miss it for the world? Better make that two messages."

"...feh, who the hell says you aren't smart, brat. Alright, then... First, to my idiot wayward son... it doesn't matter to me what you do or when you come back, only that you do so alive." He let it hang there, and Luffy's grin could have split his face. Then the man on the other end spoke again. "And you."

Shudders came from the entire crowd; that one word carried the message perfectly clearly. A few seconds of perfect silence followed.

"Well, I've said enough. But one more thing: Monkey D. Luffy. I heard once that the chances of you accepting an invitation to become one of my sons was as likely as me swearing off alcohol. Why would that be?"

"Shishishi! That's easy: because I can't have a captain! After all, being the King of the Pirates means being on top!" he declared with perfect certainty.

I allowed a goofy grin to spread over my face for a second. Man, it didn't matter how many times he said it, but that wave of fact just never ever got old.

"...GURARARARARA!" the man talking through the snail bellowed. "Cheeky brat... but if you didn't have enough conviction to say it to me, much less the rest of the world, then you may as well have just given up now." He grinned. "See you in the New World."

"See you there, old man!" Luffy chortled. Then, as Soundbite let out a 'KA-LICK!', the most interesting caller the SBS had had to date disconnected.

"... I chose the right man to follow as my captain," Zoro said with a bestial grin.

"I both agree and vehemently beg to differ, Roronoa," Robin breathed numbly.

"... I never thought I'd see the day where I'd agree with Mosshead over Robin-chwan, but here it is," Sanji said, swiftly incinerating a cigarette to calm his nerves.

Foxy, for his part, was doing his best impression of an ice sculpture: pale as a ghost and completely unmoving. I smirked smugly before speaking loudly and clearly. "What's the matter, Foxy? Do you not have enough conviction to outright challenge Edward 'How the heck is he not a D.' Newgate?"
Or, as the world better knows him… Whitebeard?"

Every single member of the crews that had not realized who was speaking then reacted accordingly. Several members fainted, some going as far as foaming at the mouth, others settled for letting their jaws dropping to the ground in shock, and the vast majority belted out particularly boisterous 'WHAT!'s.

Conis, for her part, looked at a yet-shellshocked Nami. "Is he meant to be important?"

Nami snapped her gaze to Conis in shock. "How do you not—!?" She cut herself off with a slap to her forehead. "Right, cultural segregation. Whitebeard is one of the four most powerful people on the planet; he is to us what Eneru was to you."

That got Conis to pale in terror, while Su sniffed carelessly. "He didn't seem that impressive."

"Care to repeat that, furball?"

"AGH!" Su yowled as she latched herself onto Conis's shoulder. "I'm so sorry Mister Whitebeard sir please don't—huh?" She cut herself off before snarling and glaring daggers at a cackling Soundbite. "OH, SCREW YOU, SLIMEBALL!"

"SCREW YOU, FURBALL, that was funny!" Soundbite howled. I would have voiced my agreement with the gastropod, but I was too busy pounding the ground laughing my own head off.

"Hey, split-head! Hellowoooloo?" Luffy said, waving his hand in the petrified fox's face. He remained unresponsive.

Slowly getting to my feet, I sighed, securing my headphones over my ears. "Foxy seems to have been literally stunned with shock. Well, only one thing for it, then; we can't keep everyone waiting for too long. Ladies and gentlemen of the world, I would recommend covering your ears. This is gonna hurt."

I waited for all of one second before pressing the button.

BWAAAAAAAAAAAH!

I snickered at the chorus of agonized cries that arose in response to the blare. "I love this thing…"

"WE KNOW!" the whole of the crowd roared furiously.

Despite everyone's indignancy, the foghorn had done its job, and Foxy was looking every which way before his eyes settled on me, and he frowned. I, however, spoke before he could. "Now, if you're done playing a statue, can we get this started?" I demanded.

Foxy leveled a glare at me for a minute longer before huffing and folding his arms. "Yes, we've delayed this long enough. Itomimizu!"

"Aye-aye, Captain!" The big-mouth snapped up a salute before addressing the mic I was holding. "Alright! The captains will now vow to the three articles of defeat! First, any crewmates claimed by the game may only be reclaimed through the game." He gave me a pointed look, which I responded to by sticking out my tongue in a very mature manner. "Second, once a crewmate has been claimed, they must immediately swear their allegiance to their new captain! And third, a stolen flag may never be displayed again unless reclaimed through the game! Those who disobey these rules will forevermore be viewed as disgraces to piracy, and will be sentenced to Davy Jones' locker for all eternity! And considering the size of our audience this time, that really means something! So!"
shot a grin at our captains. "Do you so swear by these articles?"

Foxy grinned confidently. "I swear."

I gave Luffy a final pleading look. Luffy, in turn, gave me a cocky thumbs-up before shooting his fist in the air. "I swear!"

I sighed in defeat as the Foxy's crew cheered victoriously before shrugging and grinning in a bittersweet manner. "Well, in for a beri, in for them all. Might as well go whole hog!" I dug around in my pocket for a second before drawing out three ฿1 coins and holding them up for all to see. "As in accordance with tradition, I hereby dedicate these coins, and thus this three coin game—" I flung my arm out, tossing the coins into the churning surf. "—TO DAVY JONES! LET THE DAVY BACK FIGHT COMMENCE!"

"That's the spirit, Cross!" Luffy grinned. I sighed, smiling, before walking back to the rest of our crew with Luffy.

"Why, exactly, do you deem it a good idea to throw money away?" Nami asked as soon as I was in earshot, glowering at me.

"Why, exactly, do you deem it worth noting that I threw away ฿3 when we have a couple billion on the Merry?" I countered.

She grimaced for a few more seconds before sighing in defeat. "Point taken." She then proceeded to cave Luffy's face in once more for good measure before storming off. The rest of the crew locked eyes with me before nodding and walking off, pointedly in any direction but towards Nami.

As I walked, I smirked; Foxy may have had every dirty trick in the book up his sleeve to push the rules to the breaking point, but a bit of warning on my part was all that the crew needed to combat the worst of it. I wasn't above suspicion that they might do things differently than they had in the story, but the three games were the same, and that was enough. For all that I dreaded this, I knew that we would win.

It was with those cheery thoughts that I walked towards Itomimizu, who was preparing to mount his bird. "Say, can he support both of us?"

"Hmm? Oh! Um… can you, Chuchun?"

The bird nodded. "Chi—should be able to—huh?!" He whipped his wings to his beak with a squawk.

I raised an eyebrow at Soundbite. "Al Roker?"

"He's helping to REPORT, right?"

I shrugged. "Eh, fair enough. Well, Chuchun, I hope you enjoy being able to speak for the duration of this game."

The bird looked like his birthday had come early. "Thanks, guys! I'll never eat a snail again!"

"You have no idea how much of a relief that is…" the snail at Itomimizu's side muttered.

"Transponder Snails don't count and you know it, Chubby!"

"HEY!" Soundbite barked.
"Actually, that is what I call him," Itomimizu confirmed.

"And I do tend to pig out on the pudding," Chubby admitted.

"Withdrawn… for now."

"Well, anyway!" Chuchun flapped his wings. "If there's nothing else to discuss, then let's get to it!"

Soundbite and I grinned in synch as I mounted Chuchun, taking care that Soundbite and my bag were secure before the bird took to the sky.

And I have to admit, I lost a lot of my anxiety for the next few minutes while circling around, waiting for the Donut Race to begin. I mean, I was flying, for crying out loud, in a way that actually let me take in the sights below without zooming past them! Seeing the world from this high up? It was enough to make me consider—and I mean seriously consider, taking into account the resources we had on hand—asking Usopp to try building a jetpack.

Ultimately, however, I decided that it would be best to shelve the idea. While Usopp's inventing streak so far was holding up pretty well, I didn't want to risk falling within that 1% of error. And besides, we'd be meeting up with someone a lot more capable of developing that particular innovation sooner rather than later.

Alas, however, my enjoyment came to an abrupt end as Itomimizu began speaking again. "Alright, everyone! Round One of the Davy Back Fight is the obstacle boat race around the island, known as the Donut Race! Both teams have received two oars and three barrels with which to construct their vessels. The materials are completely identical and have been inspected by both crews, so each boat's performance is guaranteed to depend entirely upon the skills of the teams and their crew's shipwrights! The teams and their boats are ready and waiting at the starting line, so let's introduce them!"

"Right," I nodded in agreement. "On the Straw Hat Pirates' team, we have our navigator Nami, mistress of all things weather-based; one of our five ship's guards Raphey, the sai-wielding Kung Fu Dugong lad-ette; and our gunner Conis, the bazooka-wielder from the sky! And their boat's name is… the Barrel Tigress!"

"GIRL POWER!" Raphey cheered, pumping her fist in the air as she balanced on the lip of her vessel.

"I'd feel a lot more confident if this thing didn't feel like it was about to come apart under us…" Nami muttered darkly as she rapped her fist on a seam in the boat.

"Sorry, but Usopp and I only had a few minutes to set this up, and my father and I only rarely worked on Wavers, so it was new territory for me," Conis apologized from the back of the boat, which was mostly occupied by the Flame Bazooka she was carrying.

"And on the Foxy Pirates' team," Itomimizu continued. "Is our crew's diva and co-first-mate, Porche! Accompanying her are Capote the billfish fishman and Monda the star shark! Their ship is the Cutie Wagon!"

Porche responded to the resulting cheers by blowing kisses to the crowd and waving eagerly, while Monda and Capote flexed and grandstanded proudly.

"Personally, I might call it unfair that they've got a fishman and a shark on their team, but considering that we've got an amphibian on ours? Yeah, no room to complain."
"NOT TO MENTION an angel AND a demon!" Soundbite put in.

"I WILL GUT YOU, SNAIL!" Nami roared up at us.

"HA! All's fair in love, war, and Davy Back Fights, so long as it doesn't go outside the rules!" my fellow announcer said cheerfully. "And on that note, with both ships at the starting line, let me state just what those rules are! All you need to do is circle the island once; the first ship to make it back to the starting line wins! Beyond that, anything goes; guns, swords, cannons, and all other weapons are allowed! If you don't like it, then you shouldn't be pirates!" He then tossed a pair of objects down towards the ships. "Here! Use these Eternal Poses so you don't get lost!"

Porche and Nami caught the poses easily, and both vessels prepared to go, with Raphey standing ready on the prow of the Barrel Tigress and Monda eagerly swishing his tail in place.

"And if you're wondering just why they'll need those Poses when they just need to circle the island, you'll find out in a moment," I provided with a smirk. "But for now, it's time to start! Racers! On your marks!"

"Get set…" Itomimizu said, raising a pistol.

"Gastro-Scramble," I breathed with a smirk that Soundbite mirrored precisely.

"DONUT!"

The pistol fired, and it echoed everywhere beneath… except to the Foxy Pirates waiting on the coastline with weapons at the ready. Before they knew what hit them, the majority of our crew fell on them like a ton of bricks, beating them all bloody before they could fire so much as a shot.

However, just because the Foxy's were out of commission didn't mean that all projectiles were left unfired.

The second the pistol shot rang out, Raphey leapt at the Cutie Wagon like a bat out of hell, flinging a sai at Monda's harness. "SPEAR OF ST. GEORGE!"

Porche recoiled in terror as the weapon neatly severed the towrope tying the shark to her vessel. "What the—!"

"EAT SHELL, YOU TRAP-JAWED—!" THWACK! "GAH!" Raphey's battle cry was cut short as she was tackled out of the air before she could successfully make contact with the terrified star shark.

"Nice try, little dugong," Capote sneered at the patch of bubbles that marked where he'd swatted Raphey into the water. "But this is the Grand Line, not the backwater estuary you grew up in. You might be big stuff back home, but out here, you're no—"

"WILL YOU SHUT UP ALREADY!?"

CRACK!

"GAH!" Capote was slammed off of his crew's vessel by Raphey rocketing out of the water directly beneath him and slamming her armored skull into his far less well-protected nose.

The pink-bandanna'd dugong snorted darkly as she wrenched her sai out of the wood of the Cutie Wagon. "Talk is cheap, needlenose." She held her weapons at ready. "Come at me."

A moment of silence, two…
Then Raphey only just barely managed to catch a point-blank punch from the enraged fishman with her sais.

The dugong struggled to hold Capote at bay for a second before snapping a look back at the Tigress. "GO! THIS BASTARD'S MINE!" And with that, the aquatic martial-artists dove beneath the waves and continued their clash out of sight in their natural domain.

"Conis!" Nami barked at the gunner.

Conis' nervous demeanor promptly evaporated. In one smooth motion, she hoisted her bazooka off of her back, lowered the muzzle to the edge of the waterline and pulled the triggers. The gas came out first, and then—

WHOOSH!

A jet of blue flame rocketed the Barrel Tigress down the coast.

Foxy stared numbly after them for a second before pulling out a megaphone and roaring at his crew's representative. "PORCHE! GET YOUR HEAD IN THE GAME AND GET A MOVE ON ALREADY! IF WE LOSE THIS, I'M SLICING YOUR COSMETIC BUDGET IN HALF!"

The stunned baton-wielder promptly snapped out of her funk with an enraged howl. "NOBODY JEOPARDIZES MY BEAUTY!" She promptly flung a chain-linked bit at Monda, who grabbed it out of the air. "DOUBLETIME, MONDA, NOW!"

The shark snorted in agreement and promptly started tearing through the surf, somehow managing to keep easy pace with the Barrel Tigress.

"Aaaaand they're off!" I crowed, the effect amplified with Soundbite's assistance. "The shark-towed Cutie Wagon and the bazooka-powered Barrel Tigress are tearing off down the coast, although both vessels are a man down due to Raphey and Capote getting into an aqua-Martial Arts brawl right at the starting line!"

"Yeeesss…” Itomimizu drew the word out slowly as he glanced at me. "That start was really something. It's almost as if you constructed that team knowing who we'd have on ours."

"Yeah, how could that ever happen?" I drawled impishly. "I mean, it's not like we could have been listening in on your strategy meetings. Oh, wait!"

"All's fair in love, war, and Davy Back Fights!" Soundbite echoed with a cackle.

"Well, can't argue with that!" Itomimizu waved us off. "Anyway, the two teams are neck and neck! Both of them are moving faster than I've ever seen for the Donut Race, they're already a quarter of the way around the island!"

"As it stands, the Barrel Tigress is ahead… but somehow the Cutie Wagon is keeping pace!?" I blinked in shock as I took in the nonsensical sight before me. "The heck? How is a relatively small shark keeping pace with a boat powered by an outboard-thruster!?!"

The wide-mouthed announcer snickered at my reaction. "Yeah, Monda might be small, but his species is known by another name: shooting star sharks! They're some of the fastest sharks in the ocean, and without Capote's weight to hold him back, he's really showing his stuff!
"Well… I can't say that I'm not impressed," I reluctantly admitted.

And indeed, it was quite the impressive race. Within mere minutes, both barrel boats had reached the halfway point and were heading into the whirlpools.

"Incredible!" Itomimizu cheered. "This is one of the most intense Donut Races I've ever seen! Already the contestants have reached the halfway point, and are heading into the whirlpools of the Long Coral Reef! They'll need to be extra careful navigating it, because the currents formed by that reef can be treacherous!"

I glanced at my fellow announcer. "You guys have been scoping out the playing field, huh?"

"But of course!" Chuchun nodded. "You should know more about gathering as much information as possible before a confrontation than anyone!"

"Eh, good point, good point," I conceded, tilting my head before smirking at the new developments going on below. "In fact, I think that that particular principle is coming into play right about now."

"Huh?" Itomimizu looked down at the race in confusion and proceeded to gasp in shock. "A shocking development! The Barrel Tigress's propulsion has just cut out, allowing the Cutie Wagon to pass them and enter the Reef! Perhaps they're having some mechanical issues?" His grin then proceeded to redouble… somehow. "And it looks like their troubles are only beginning! Here comes our Boss, Foxy the Silver Fox, no doubt bearing a genius plan through which to give us an edge!"

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure about that~!" I sang casually. I then blinked in surprise as I paid better attention to the captain of the Foxy Pirates. Or rather, his steed. "Though, wow, now that I think about it, that Hamburg guy he's riding on is seriously moving. Is… Is he even human?"

"That's the multi-million beri question on our crew!" Itomimizu proclaimed before continuing in a normal tone. "No, seriously, that's how big the ship's pool is, we have literally no idea and neither the Boss nor Porche are answering, and they're the only ones who know! You want in? The buy-in's only a few hundred beri."

"I'll take that action!" Soundbite snickered.

"Let's put a pin in that for now," I interrupted as I kept my gaze focused down below. "Because quite honestly? It would appear that you and your crew have bigger concerns to worry about." I let a shark-like grin slide over my face. "Liiike the fact that the Cutie Wagon just shot out of the Reef like a cork from a bottle, while meanwhile the Barrel Tigress is once again firing on all cylinders?"

"WHAT!?!" Ito and his bird squawked simultaneously as they stared downwards, where indeed Porche and Monda were trying to enter the reef, and failing miserably. Meanwhile, Conis's Flame Bazooka had flared back up and propelled the Barrel Tigress into a different section of the Reef. Of course, Foxy chose that exact instant to attempt to interfere by firing in an impressively powerful smoke bomb… which wound up doing precisely jack squat.

"W-What in the world!?" Itomimizu stammered as he watched the Tigress exit the cloud and effortlessly circumvent the towers of coral. "Somehow the Straw Hats' team is managing to sail through the Coral Reef without even a hint of trouble! How is this possible!?"

"Hehehe," I chuckled smugly as I stroked a nonexistent beard. "It appears that I must apologize, Itomimizu, for it would seem that my earlier comments were, shall we say, misleading? When the race started, I classified Nami as merely a mistress of weather, when in fact that statement is categorically untrue." I jabbed my finger at the sky in a triumphant manner. "Rather, our dear
money-grubbing demon Nami is the absolute ruler of all things related to navigation as a whole, be they heaven, earth or sea! It would take more than a mere collection of currents to put her off her game!"

"DAMN STRAIGHT!" Nami cheered from below, aided by Soundbite.

Itomimizu's gaping jaw flapped uselessly for several seconds, quiet gurgling noises coming from his mouth. However, he managed to rally rather swiftly. "Well, while your navigator is admittedly impressive, I'm afraid that her skills can only go so far! After all, it'll take more than mere wits to overcome an obstacle as daunting and deep as the Long Ring Whirlpool!"

And indeed, the Barrel Tigress was now rocketing towards the yawning (not to mention oddly shaped; seriously, the animals being laid back is one thing, but nature itself?) abyss of the titanic whirlpool.

I, however, refused to lose even a trace of my smugness, instead shaking my head as I tsked pitifully. "Oh, Ito, Ito, Ito… have you not listened to a single broadcast of my show? Intellect is far from the leading aspect of our crew! Rather…” I held up a finger. "Our main area of expertise lies in the field of practical insanity, or! In more common parlance…” My grin widened eagerly. "Applied. Bullshit."

BOOM!

And with that, the water behind the Barrel Tigress exploded, launching it clear over not only the Long Ring Whirlpool, but the barrier of the Long Ring Cape that lay behind it as well.

I snickered as I dusted my hands off, enjoying the absolutely poleaxed expression Itomimizu was wearing at seeing the Impact Dial's result. "And that is what sets us head and shoulders above other pirate crews. For you viewers at home, I am proud to announce that the Barrel Tigress has managed to achieve a most momentous lead via the application of a little Sky Island party favor. For the sake of future combat, I won't go into details, but suffice to say that it managed to launch our crewmates past not only the whirlpool that lay ahead of them, but a rather obtrusive cape as well! Major kudos to Conis for the rather impressive maneuver!"

Soundbite started to nod in agreement before freezing, a shocked look painting his face. "Ah… actually… that wasn't CONIS."

"Huh?" I looked at him in surprise. "Really? But then who…” I trailed off as realization came to me. "Wait, but wouldn't that mean—? You can't be serious!"

"LISTEN FOR YOURSELF! Though for the record, VIEWER DISCRETION IS ADVISED."

I hastily slipped my headphones on, and not a moment too soon either.

"SON OF A—!"

=o=

"Hey, cut it out, Nojiko, what are you doing?" Chabo demanded indignantly, trying to squirm out of the blue-haired woman's grasp. Said woman had her hands clamped over the boy's ears, ignoring his demands in favor of grimacing at the fact that her sister was currently swearing her dirty mouth off to the entire. Freaking. World. Well, at least Soundbite was censoring the worst of it… sort of.

"—BLUE-HORNED MOTHER—HONK!—ING BARNACLE-BRED PIECE OF—HEE-HAW!—WRAPPED IN A PILE OF STEAMING—DING!—AND REEKING OF SEA
"Damn it, and Dr. Nako just said that Genzo's blood pressure got back in the green…" Nojiko groaned.

Just once, just once could her dear sister think of their poor old foster father before she acted!?

-0-

"—AND IT WILL BE BY FAR THE MOST DELICIOUS AND SATISFYING SALAD THAT I WILL EVER EAT IN MY ENTIRE LIFE!"

"…so glad that I can't be sued for all of this," I breathed as I finally unlatched my earphones from my head. "So glad."

"HAMBURG, GET UP!"

I cast my eyes downwards, and found that Hamburg was currently incapable of acting as a steed on account of how he was too busy rolling on the ground, laughing his head off as a result of what had just happened. Further application of Soundbite's skills revealed that he wasn't alone; back at the fairgrounds, almost a third of the Foxy Pirates were laughing, as were Mikey and Su, if nobody else on our crew.

"Nami-swan is so beautiful when she's incoherently furious!" Sanji cried over the uproar that we could hear via the Transponder Snails set up over there.

I rolled my eyes, practically capable of hearing the inevitable jab from Zoro as I directed my attention back to the Tigress. "Alright, now, Nami, if you're quite done, would you care to explain why the hell you did that? You knew about the recoil from that thing!"

"Trust me, that's the last time I'm ever doing it, that's for damn sure, or at least the last time I grab one after the Dugongs have gotten through using it for target practice," Nami fumed for a second before sighing, a lot of the rage in her voice fading away. "But, to answer your question, Cross… I just wanted to pull my weight a bit more. Yeah, I'm proud of my navigational abilities and all that, but Raphey's still fighting that Fishman and Conis is using her Bazooka, so compared to that, doing what I do everyday doesn't feel like much. I just… wanted to make a bit more of an impact is all."

"Well, you certainly made an impact on the Foxy Pirates," Su offered. "And the water… and your arm."

"You do still have a full range of motion, right?" Chopper tacked in nervously.

"Ergh, it hurts like hellfire, but yeah…"

"Well, at least that's something," Chopper sighed in relief before becoming more serious. "Still, don't scare me like that! I tried one of those things out myself in my Heavy Point, and I can tell you now that without some serious muscle development, you ran the risk of muscular and skeletal damage, and all for nothing!"

"Yeah, Nami, you do more than enough on the crew!" Luffy concurred eagerly. "You keep us floating and going the right way, remember?"

"And you've wrangled the idiots of this crew more times than I can count," Vivi added.

"To add to that one, if what you feel every day is anything like what I felt when Tonjit fell on me,
trust me, that you haven't tried to light the ocean on fire by now is quite a feat."

There was a very long, very uncomfortable pause on Nami's end.

"Uh… You haven't tried to light the ocean on fire… right?"

"Aheh… let's move on, shall we?"

"Riiight…" I trailed off for a second before shaking my head and smiling warmly. "Anyway, the point is that you contribute more than enough to this crew and you are a key part of the Straw Hat Pirates. If you feel like you want to do more, then that's your prerogative. Just don't do it at the expense of your health, for all of our sakes, alright?"

"…Yeah, alright," Nami finally admitted in a voice that plainly indicated a smile. "By the way, why hasn't Sanji said anything?"

"The love cook finally reached the point of passing out from sheer joy," Zoro deadpanned.

"…I honestly don't know what I expected," Nami deadpanned.

"Ah, excuse me?" Itomimizu cut in. "As heartwarming and hilarious as all of this is, I'd like to remind you that we are still in the middle of a race here! And it seems that the Cutie Wagon is starting to catch up!"

"What?!!" I snapped my attention down to the coast of the island again, where indeed the Cutie Wagon was slowly but surely fording through the Reef's intricate current system, the riptides failing to faze Monda in the least. "But how the… hell… wait a second…" I dug a spyglass out of my bag and held it to my eye. I then proceeded to bite back a curse when I caught sight of the muzzle latched over the now-ballistic shark's nose. "That mask is full of pure chum, isn't it?"

"Precisely!" Ito nodded in agreement. "It's a special tactic we came up with in order to force Monda into a feeding frenzy and give us a major boost of speed! It's actually quite a rare thing for us to use it, you Straw Hats should be honored!"

I ground my teeth for a second before pausing as a thought hit me. "Heeey, wait a second… aren't you guys at all worried about the fact that you're essentially broadcasting all of your cheating to the world?"

The wide-mouth just smirked confidently. "Forewarned might be forearmed, but we're too strong and too wily for any amount of preparation to stop us! Pirate crews can come at us all they want knowing as much as they can, they'll still lose!"

I processed that for a bit before surreptitiously covering the transceiver's mic. "Foxy told you to say that so that now you're practically guaranteed to get crews flocking to you for Back Fights who all think they stand a chance while only knowing a fraction of your arsenal, didn't he."

Itomimizu's smile somehow managed to widen. "Say what you will about the Boss, but you have to admit, when it comes to pure, dirty, low-down trickery, he's utterly unmatched! Truly he's a pirate's pirate!"

"Well, at least he's persistent in quantity…" I uttered under my breath before uncovering the mic. "Anyway, back to the race! Nami, Conis, you need to get a move on!"

"Sorry, needed a second to change my Bazooka's Dials!" Conis apologized. "Alright, we're back on!" And with that, the Barrel Tigress's thruster roared to life again and started rocketing our team
down the coast, all while the Cutie Wagon rounded around the tip of the Long Cape.

All too soon the two vessels wound up in a deadlock once again, with the Tigress staying firmly in the lead but the Cutie Wagon steadfastly refusing to lose any ground.

And through it all, Hamburg managed to keep pace with the two vessels, bearing Foxy on his back without any trouble. In fact, he even managed to overtake the Tigress, keeping well ahead of our crew's team while Foxy raised his arm and oh shit!

"Slow-Slow—!"

"Ah-ah-ah-IT WOULD APPEAR THAT CAPTAIN SPLIT-HEAD IS TRYING SOMETHING!" I bellowed desperately.

Foxy promptly collapsed in despair. "S-Split-he—ARGH!" Which proved to be an ill-advised move, seeing as he promptly lost his balance and fell beneath Hamburg, which got him tangled up in the larger figure's limbs and wound up with both of them falling into an uncontrolled tumble.

"BOSS!" Itomimizu shrieked in panic.

"PFHAHAHA!" I laughed in equal parts amusement and relief. "Oh, wow, I wish you could have seen that, viewers, because that little spectacle we just witnessed, it is one for the blooper reels! PFHAHAHA!"

"Why, you—you did that on purpose, didn't you?!!" Ito yelled in outrage. "Have you no heart!?"

"ONCE AGAIN, all's fair in love, war, and Davy Back Fights!"

"STOP USING MY OWN WORDS AGAINST ME!"

"Why? YOU SAID that all's fair in love, war—"

"GAH!" Ito yanked his hat down in outrage before nearly giving me mood whiplash by snapping back to cheerful as he pointed back below. "Oh, it looks like the two ships have finally stopped their stalemate, and the Cutie Wagon is pulling ahead!"

I quickly looked back down, and saw that unfortunately, he was right; the berserk shark was pulling up to the Tigress due to Conis' bazooka emitting smoke rather than flame. Looking more closely, I could see the problem.

"Ugh… looks like Porche has somehow managed to clog the Flame Bazooka's air intake with what look like metal flowers!"

"That's Porche's Flower Shuriken move!" Itomimizu announced proudly. "As elegant and deadly as she is beautiful! Truly befitting of the diva of our crew! And now it looks like the Cutie Wagon is —!"

Conis promptly rammed the bazooka's end against the lip of her vessel. It caused the wood to crack a bit, sure, but it also dislodged the metal flowers from the weapon, allowing her to reignite the vessel's thruster and resume forward momentum.

"Tied with the Barrel Tigress!" I cut in hastily, leaning forwards in an attempt to get a better look. "Both vessels are literally neck-and-neck! It's a deadlock, folks, and neither party appears to be intent on letting the other change that anytime soon!"
Ito started to nod before gasping when the Barrel Tigress suddenly swung right, slamming the majority of its bulk into the Cutie Wagon. "Well, it looks like the Straw Hats are determined to break it! Your navigator is going in for some CQC with Porche! Such brutality, is she even a woman? Maybe I should ask her to show me proof that she is!" He paused and paled. "WHAT THE HELL DID I JUST SAY?"

Soundbite roared with laughter…

ZAP! "SQUARK!"

Before yelping in terror when a bolt of lightning came within an inch of zapping us all.

"WOULD YOU BASTARDS CARE TO REPEAT THAT!?"

"Didn't think that through, didja?" I snarled at Soundbite as I tried to unclench my arms from around Chuchun's neck.

"EE-nope!" he replied from the safety of his shivering shell.

Meanwhile, far below us, Nami and Porche were going at one another with gusto, Clima-Tact clashing against a no doubt thoroughly reinforced baton in what was, quite frankly, a stunning demonstration of both skill and acrobatics.

"Well, that aside, it is an impressive catfight that's happening between the Foxy Pirates' diva and the Straw Hat Pirates' second mate!" I commentated. "A baton strike blocked here, a staff strike parried there, shurikens and lightning—"

"VERY VERY FRIGHTENING ME!" Soundbite chimed in.

"Galileo—GAH!" I shot a glare at Soundbite, who only cackled madly. "Grgh… anyway, back to the fi—" I cut myself off with a choked gurgle at a new development, which Itomimizu eagerly capitalized on.

"Well, well! A well-aimed strike to Conis' right temple from Porche's baton has sent the Straw Hats' gunner for a loop and disabled their engine, meaning that they're now falling behind while the Cutie Wagon is proceeding undeterred!"

"BUT it looks like Conis is recovering quickly!" I cut in, watching as Conis righted herself with a slightly dizzy shake of her head before resuming her position. "And just like that, the bazooka's gunning again, and the Cutie Wagon is quickly losing her lead!"

Porche clearly didn't like that judging from the murderous look in her eyes as Nami spun her Clima-Tact, clearly ready to go another round of Whack-a-Fox. But as they neared each other, Porche's eyes widened, and then she smirked before jerking at the bit in Monda's mouth, steering him away. Nami blinked in confusion, but then snapped her head towards the shore, where Foxy and Hamburg had caught up, the former poised to fire again. This time, with Itomimizu watching me, I didn't say a word, but the fact that I was grinning like a lunatic clearly unnerved him.

"In case you're wondering about why I'm grinning…" I started slowly. "I'd just like to remind you. Talking strategy while Soundbite and I are anywhere nearby?"

"Slow-Slow Beam!" Foxy shouted from below, sending wave after wave of the unnatural particles at our crewmates.

"It's a good way to end your plans before they even start," I finished, Soundbite's grin matching mine...
in wideness and maliciousness. Then I turned my attention back to the mic. "Ladies and gentlemen, it appears that Foxy the Silver Fox is attempting to use his Devil Fruit powers against the Barrel Tigress: the Slow-Slow Fruit, enabling him to fire a beam that slows down anything it hits! Unfortunately for him, we happen to have its weakness handy!"

Nami’s grin was no less wide than mine as, with the beams approaching, she picked something up from the floor of the barrel and held it in front of her: a mirror. And as the beams reflected, I looked at Foxy to see his reaction, and—

… OK, it wasn't Eneru-grade, that was impossible to top. Still, Foxy's expression at seeing that we had the counter for his Devil Fruit powers was still a freaking hilarious close second. With the beams reflected harmlessly away, the two vessels tore down the final stretch of the coast towards the rapidly-approaching finish line. The Cutie Wagon's swerve had served to cut their lead down enough so that the Tigress was right on their tail, and even from way on high I could see that Monda was starting to tire. Inch after inch the Wagon lost ground and inch after inch the Tigress took it, pulling ahead more and more.

When without warning, the Tigress suddenly jerked to a halt, almost flinging Conis and Nami from the ship. The pair exchanged panicked looks as the Cutie Wagon tore ahead, but even though Conis regained her balance and doubled the intensity of her Flame Bazooka, the ship just wasn't moving forward. It was as if the water was… fighting against them... shit when had that bastard started shooting?!

"Guys, the be—MMPH!"

"Look, I'll be honest," Itomimizu growled, one hand clenched over my mouth while his arm encircled my neck. "I like you, you're a great guy with a great sense of humor and an even better sense of dramatic timing, but for now, I'm going to need you to shut up!"

"LET GO of my partner!" Soundbite snapped.

"Not until we wi—ghrk!"

I bashed my elbow into his face, regretting for the umpteenth time that my armor wasn't ready yet as the pain jabbed through my arm. But he kept a firm grip on my jaw, so I kept flinging, and he started hitting back.

…Brawling in midair on the back of a giant bird. Somehow, I wasn't even remotely surprised. But, thankfully, I finally managed to free my mouth and bellow out, "THE WATER! THE BEAMS WORK ON THE WAT—MMPH!" I was then cut off by Itomimizu shoving his forearm in my mouth, but by that point the damage was thankfully done.

"Lassoo, Cani-Cannon!" Soundbite barked out in my voice.

During my struggle with my co-announcer, I managed to catch sight of an explosion in the fairground, followed by a blur of white headed straight at Foxy—

CRACK!

Only for it to be batted away thanks to Hamburg moving faster than any being his size had the right to, drawing a metal club and striking the projectile in the space of a second.

The next few seconds were something of a blur as Ito and I both brawled and did our best to balance on Chuchun's back, the damn thing doing its best to sway the fight in its partner's favor however it could manage—
"POP-FLY! INCOMING!"

Before Soundbite let out a panicked yelp and snapped into his shell, prompting the three of us to freeze as we processed what he had said. *Then* we processed the sight of a baseball coming up right next to us. In the air.

"Uh-oh…" the giga-bird whimpered in terror.

"I don't say this often…" I groaned. "But this… this *bites.*"

"*Heh, *title dro—!*"

**BOOM!**

Normally I wouldn't wake up any time soon after getting hit by a blast like that, but thankfully I had several factors on my side.

Namely, a metric ton of wind blasting in my face as I dropped at terminal velocity and a loud-mouthed snail wailing in my ear.

When I *did* finally come to, however, it was to the sight of the ground coming at me really really really really FAST OH SHIT FUCK!

"LUUUUUUFFYYYYY!" I screamed as I flailed desperately.

I was half a second from belly flopping onto the green grass when suddenly my vision was filled with rubber and a red vest. "GUM-GUM BALLOON!"

I struggled uncomfortably for a second before Luffy's distended belly recoiled, bouncing me back up into the air for a scant moment during which I flailed desperately. On the plus side, I didn't belly-flop onto the grass.

On the minus, that was because I landed on my head.

I laid groaning on the ground for a second before slowly cracking an eye open to stare at Zoro, who was standing over me and looking at me curiously. "Did we win?" I asked in a dizzy tone of voice.

An uproar of cheers from the fairground answered *that* question for me.

"…*shit.*"

-0-

A minute later found the two crews assembled on different sides of an unspoken line, an uneasy truce having been set for the moment so that we could take the time to give medical aid to our injured crewmembers. And *damn,* did we need it.

"Well, *that* wasn't particularly fun…" I groused as I craned my neck back and forth, doing my best to massage my throbbing spine. "And I wasn't even a part of the freaking race!"

"Yeah, well, I promise you that it wasn't any more fun at ground zero, either," Nami hissed as she held an icepack to a lump that was starting to form on her skull.

"Agreed…" Conis nodded, inasmuch as she could with Chopper slowly wrapping a bandage around her head.
"By the way, I was kind of busy flying around the island and then falling so I missed it, but how's Raphey doing?" I asked.

"Well…"

"LET ME AT 'IM! LET ME AT 'IM!"

I glanced back to see the dugong in question attempting to charge towards the Foxy's, more specifically at the giant-fishman hybrid Big Pan, who was holding an equally-struggling Capote in his hands. I say 'attempting' because the other three students were hanging off of her doing their best to hold her back.

"That's the concussion talking, Raphey, don't listen to it!" Mikey pleaded.

"I DON'T CARE! I'M GONNA CAVE THAT—!"

All of a sudden, she jerked before slumping forward, revealing a syringe sticking out of her neck and a grumpy-looking Chopper behind her.

"Good thing I restocked on sedative back at G-8," he muttered. "It looks like I'm going to be needing a lot of it."

"You think we could borrow some of that?" Porche called over to us. "We'd do the same for our guy, but as you can see…" She glanced warily up at her struggling crewmate. "Our docs think he might be starting to build a tolerance."

"Eh…" Chopper rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Have you considered a… 'manual override'?" He made air quotations with his hooves.

"Are you nuts?!" one of the Foxy doctors (who did not look the part) demanded incredulously. "That could give him a serious concussion!"

"Rebuttal!" Chopper jabbed his hoof up. "He's a fishman."

The doctor made to respond, but trailed off thoughtfully instead. After a second, he nodded in acceptance. "Good point." He then waved up at the hybrid. "Hey, Big Pan! One Monster Burger, stat!"

The large fellow blinked stupidly down at the doctor for a moment before grinning and nodding in understanding. He then proceeded to raise one of his hands off of Capote—

SLAM! "GAH!"

Before clapping it down on him full force, reducing his fellow fishman to an insensate mess.

I cocked my head to the side. "…How long did it take him to learn that?"

Porche grimaced and kneaded the bridge of her nose. "Longer than any of us are willing to admit…"

I chuckled slightly at that comment before pausing as I noticed Sanji and Zoro doing the same. "The hell are you two laughing at? You're fighting him next round!" That got them to sober up pretty fast.

That… and a particularly unwelcome voice.

"Well, I think that's been quite long enough!"
I and most of our crew scowled darkly as Foxy marched out of the throngs of his own men, leering at us maliciously.

"You can't delay any longer," he announced smugly. "It's time."

"INDEED!" Itomimizu belted out in agreement, popping up next to his captain with his own snail at the ready, looking as though he'd come straight off of the set of a mummy movie. Turns out that even a rapidly-readied fireman's trampoline won't do you much good when you hit it at a little under terminal velocity. "As we've won the Donut Race, it is now our right to choose a member of your crew! They're all yours, Boss!"

I grimaced and slowly walked to stand behind Chopper, bracing myself for the inevitable.

Foxy's smirk doubled in size as he stepped forward and slowly raised a hand to point at us. "It took some thinking, but I've already made my decision! The one I choose… is you!"

I laid a comforting hand on Chopper's hat, causing him to glance upwards with fearful eyes. "Sorry, little buddy. Just stay strong and—"

"The ship's tactician, Jeremiah Cross!"

"—we'll get you back soo—WHAT THE FUCK!?" I swapped to a panicked bellow as I stared at Foxy in confusion.

"What!?" Nami and Vivi chorused in horror.

"OH, SHIT!" Soundbite yelped.

Foxy smirked in a vulpine manner, crossing his arms imperiously. "You screwed me over a lot during that race, Cross. I both respect and abhor that. So now, not only are you no longer a thorn in my side, you're going to be one in all of my enemies! Fehfehfehfehfeh!"

"Phrasing, captain!" Porche interjected, while Hamburg barely managed to cover his snickering.

Foxy grimaced before rallying. "Now, c'mon." He gestured for me to come forwards. "I've already shown you more courtesy than I do most by not having you dragged over. Gather your pets and come accept your defeat with dignity."

And just like that, several pieces clicked into place for me, and I dug my fingers into my palm in an effort to keep my cool. "…No," I said coldly. "That response got Foxy and Zoro glaring at me.

"Cross…” Zoro started testily.

"You dare disrespect ze laws of the Davy Back Fight!?" Foxy demanded.

"On the contrary!" I called back, pumping steel into my voice. I then proceeded to remove Soundbite from my shoulder and place him on Chopper's hat and drop my bag and Lassoo's strap to the ground. "The only one who's disobeying them here is you, Boss." I grit out the last word as though it were a curse, and quite honestly it might as well have been.

"Huh!?" Foxy jerked in confusion. "What ze hell are you talking about!?"

"Simple," I gestured at the shell-shocked Devil Fruit-using animals who were staring at me. "Soundbite and Lassoo are my partners, not my pets, and as my partner Soundbite has an equal
stake in the SBS. If you want to control the SBS or get your hands on Soundbite or Lassoo, then you'll have to win again and call their names, but right now? You don't get any three-for-ones or do-overs." I jabbed my thumb at my chest. "You called for me, and you got me. Take it, or give me an honorable discharge so that I can go back."

Foxy ground his teeth as he realized that he'd been played. "The dugongs and dog are one thing, but a snail being a genuine crewmate!? Bah!" He ultimately flung his hand up dismissively, though I could still see his jaw twitching with repressed anger. "It is of no matter, we'll just have to win the next game, too! And in the meantime..." He pointed at me firmly. "I stand by my choice! By the laws of the game, you are now my crewmate!"

"Joy," I drawled. And so, without further ado, I started marching towards the crowd of masked pirates.

"What the hell are you doing, Cross?!" Vivi demanded incredulously, drawing me up short.

"Y-Yeah, Cross!" Mikey concurred. "This isn't like you! How come you aren't ranting or raving o-o-or ripping into these bastards like you always do!?!"

"Why aren't you doing anything!?!" Chopper cried, obviously fighting back tears. "Y-You're being taken away from us! Y-You're being stolen! D-Don't you care at all!?!"

I rolled my eyes as I folded my arms behind my head. "Nope. Not even a bit."

"What!?!" Conis gasped in shock.

"Cross—!" Nami started.

"Geeze, you guys..." I groaned as I dug a finger into my ear. "Look, you're all making a big deal out of absolutely nothing. I mean, come on, it's not like I'm leaving forever, you know?"

"What?!" over half of the Straw Hats cried in confusion.

"WHAT!?!" Foxy bellowed in outrage.

"Well, yeah?" I said as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. "I mean, come on. I'm gonna be on their crew for, what, an hour or two, maybe less? Then you guys are gonna stomp whoever the hell they send at you for Round Two into the ground in, like, ten seconds and then I'll be a Straw Hat again. Come on, guys." I spread my hands helplessly. "It isn't that hard."

"Shishishi, yeah, guys!" Luffy scratched his finger beneath his nose, having been one of the only members of the crew who hadn't reacted negatively to my nonchalance. "You're all acting kinda stupid, you know?"

"Hypocritical though that would normally be coming from his mouth, he does have a point this time; considering that Luffy's fighting split-head one-on-one and Boss, Mosshead and I are taking on the next game, there's not much chance of us losing again," Sanji shrugged.

"And besides," Boss said gruffly as he bit down on a cigar and ignited it with a single click of his flint. "So we lose once, so what? It'll just make our inevitable victory all the sweeter. And for the record, that's not a Man's Romance." He blew out a cloud of smoke as he stared down the Foxy's. "That's a damn fact."

A loud, audible gulp seemed to come from every member of the Foxy's.
"Well, anyway, I gotta be goin' for now. See you." I waved goodbye over my shoulder as I walked over to Foxy and popped off a careless, two-fingered salute and as sarcastically honest of a grin as I could manage. "Hi, I'm Jeremiah Cross, your new tactician. Please take good care of me."

Foxy glared at me for a second before twitching his mouth into a wry grin. "You're not going to make this easy, are you?" he asked blandly.

"Oh, no no no…" I shook my head solemnly. "Nothing like that, nothing like that at all." I allowed a glint of defiance to enter my expression. "I'm going to be gone long before you can even conceive of labelling me as 'difficult'."

The Silver Fox's grin widened into one of malevolent amusement for a second before snapping his fingers. "Porche."

"Yes, Boss?" the diva asked.

"Take Cross back to the Sexy Foxy, get him dressed and get him a bunk. Ah, and…" He stopped her when she started to walk towards the ship, his gaze never leaving me. "Make it a good bunk, at that. After all, we want our newest recruit to be nice and… comfortable."

She stared at Foxy for a moment before grinning and nodding in understanding. "You got it, Boss." She then gestured at me to follow her, and I did so without question, following her to the titanic beast that this crew called a ship.

"Just for the record," I spoke up as we walked. "I get that the mask thing is a part of the dress code, but you're really going to have to pull out all the stops if you're going to put one on me."

-0-

"…Alright, I'll admit it," I mused as I fingered the mask over my face. "I am impressed. This does not look half-bad."

"You honestly think we got this many crewmates without figuring out how to make the uniforms work for everyone?" Porche giggled.

I shrugged in acceptance as I took in my appearance; temporary though I had absolutely no doubt that it was, I had to admit that if it was necessary, I could damn well get used to it. I honestly never thought that I'd be caught dead wearing a hoodie with fox ears of all things, much less a mask sewn into the hood, but there I was wearing a dark gray one with orange highlights and a pair of trackpants to match. Honestly, I think the most impressive bit was how they'd managed to work it so that I could still keep my cap on, even in spite of the mask.

Once I was done with my inspection, I gave Porche a satisfied nod. "Very nice, I think I'll hang on to it when I go back to the Straw Hats."

Without warning, Porche's good mood evaporated into a childish pout. "You don't have to be so eager about returning to your friends, you know. After all, you don't need to worry about being split up. The Boss isn't going to stop playing the Back Fight with your crew until we have you all, so all you need to do is wait and you'll all be back together again."

"You're only half-right, Porche," I said casually. "The odds of your crew winning the next game are very slim, but not zero. But the odds of your captain managing to beat mine? Well…” I shrugged casually. "Compare their reactions to talking to the strongest man in the world, and tell me that you don't believe my captain is the better one."
I smirked at her as her pout deepened into something like anger. "Let me put it to you this way: the sole reason I exist in this world—the reason I came into this world in the first place, this world of piracy—is so that I could sail under the flag of Monkey D. Luffy, who is Gold Roger's successor. And nothing, short of death, will stop me from getting back to him."

Porche's anger faltered, and she stared at me with wide eyes for a few seconds. "… Nobody else has ever been that bold," she muttered in awe. Then her demeanor switched again to something… I dunno, it just seemed woah she was close!

"But, you know, you should try opening your mind to the possibilities. You never know what you could be missing out on," she crooned, rubbing up against me and that was a hand hell no!

I backed away as far as I could and fumbled for my baton, before realizing that Usopp still had it, prompting me to switch tactics. "Oookay… quick question: are you truly dedicated to the pirate life? To the point of putting your life on the line?"

Porche blinked at me before smiling. "Of course I am. Hamburg and I joined the Boss of our own free will, we knew and know what this life's risks are."

"Good, perfect, glad to hear that, I really am, because that means you have no right to complain about the following statement." I grabbed her collar and yanked her close, so that she could not mistake the deadly expression on my face. "Try that shit with me again and I will ram that icepick you call a nose right back into your brain."

Porche immediately stiffened, blinking at me in surprise before adopting a neutral and entirely unafraid expression and crossing her arms. "Huh. So, you actually are a decent human being."

It took me a second to fully process what she was saying, but once I did I let my face fall blank as I released her and took a step back. "And you actually have a brain in your head, and this was most likely a test you do on all new recruits."

We stared flatly at each other for a moment before I extended my hand. "Truce?"

"Truce." She shook my hand in agreement before pointing her thumb over her shoulder. "Come on, I'll show you to the bunk section you'll be sleeping in. East Blue, right?"

"Eh," I waved my hand side to side as I followed her. "Mind if I check out your library if you have one instead? I won't be staying long, so I wanna get some reading in before Round Two starts… When does that start, anyway?"

"Two hour intermission so that everyone can unwind and have some fun," Porche promptly answered with a grin. "We love our Back Fights. And sure, it's this way." She turned down a corridor. "Though fair warning, this means that there's a good chance your old crew will take the good bunks once they join."

"You wi~ish," I sang casually.

A minute of navigating the ship's insanely circuitous corridors later, she let me into a highly impressive library. Not Sunny standards, no, but definitely impressive nonetheless.

"Damn…" I whistled in awe as I took in the shelves of books. "Whatever the hell you're paying your shipwrights, it's nowhere near enough."

"Yeah, yeah…" Porche muttered from the doorway before heaving a sigh. "Alright, Cross, look, I really don't think I should be doing this considering how deep in denial you are, but there's a…"
policy we Foxy Pirates have you should be aware of."

"Huh?" I glanced back at her in confusion. "You mean besides the masks?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, besides the masks." She then held up a finger. "All new crewmates get one chance to cheat."

Now that brought me up short. "Come again?"

"One. Chance. To cheat," Porche slowly repeated. "You have the option, in this Back Fight and this Back Fight alone, to try and sabotage our crew as we proceed to defeat your old one. If you try and pull anything at any other point, then it will be considered mutiny and you will suffer the consequences, but today?" She raised one finger to emphasize it. "You get one free pass."

I blinked several times as I processed that. "…Foxy actually allows that?"

Porche huffed as she turned away. "The Boss," she said, emphasizing the title. "Isn't a sadist. This is a mercy he gives new recruits. One last glimmer of hope, one last chance to leave." She waved her hand casually. "Of course, it's never actually worked because we're just that good, but it's the thought that counts. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to reload my baton. I'll get you when it's time for Round Two."

"See you then," I returned politely. With that, we parted, she heading to another part of the ship and me browsing the shelves and taking in what the Foxy Pirates had to offer. It looked like he had a few good minds on his crew from what I saw: plenty of medical and history books, blueprints for the ship, even a few good fantasy novels I'd have to see if I could borrow.

I had browsed over pretty much every section in the library before one book in particular caught my eye: one with the Foxy Pirates' Jolly Roger on the front. One glance at the inside of the cover confirmed my suspicions: it was the crew's logbook.

I glanced around for a second before shrugging and flipping the book open. After all, what harm could a little bit of background knowledge do? I'd probably just read about their origins for a minute or two and then move on.

Thirty minutes later, I was thoroughly engrossed in the book, intently absorbing every detail I could manage.

I didn't even look up as a finger tapped my shoulder. "Hey, Cross, any clue where I can find the reference books?"

I absentmindedly raised a finger and pointed to the left. "That way, I think. I saw an index thataways if it helps."

"That works. Thanks, Cross."

"Anytime, Nami."

Ten seconds later, I glanced up from the book with a mutter of "The hell…?" but a quick glance around showed me to be completely alone, so I shrugged and returned to my reading.

An hour later, I closed the book and set it down, my eyes wide and my mind awhirl as I connected the dots I'd found in that book with what I myself knew. The picture that it all depicted, about this crew, about the Davy Back Fights… this… this changed everything.
Or, well, maybe not everything, but it sure as hell gave me something to think about.

Said thoughts were then interrupted by the sound of the library's door opening. "Round Two's starting, come on!" Porche called.

"Ah," I glanced at the logbook for a second before heading towards her voice. "C-Coming!"

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I surreptitiously ghosted through the rowdy crowd of pirates as I made my way towards the Groggy Ring, dodging through the writhing throng of the crowd as I tried to make myself as inconspicuous as possible. As I went, I subtly swiped a number of clothing articles from the more inebriated and distracted members of the Foxy Pirates. A scarf here, a trenchcoat there, a pair of oversized boots from... somewhere, though the smell really guaranteed that I didn't want to know, and finally a rather elaborate mask that was most likely for show that a vendor was handing out.

Once I had what I needed, I made a beeline for the nearest alleyway between stalls I could find. I took a second to glance around and confirm that I was completely alone before donning the clothes I'd collected over my hoodie, in a manner that I really hoped would obscure my identity from anyone who saw me. Thankfully, the size of the crew and the fact that they were a Grand Line crew, at that, maximized the odds that my plan would succeed.

With the disguise in place, I emerged and walked back towards the ring, looking around until, grinning, I spotted the Foxy Pirates' referee. I planned to make good use of that one free cheat I had, and so I approached him.

"Soundbite, if you're listening, I need you to disguise my voice," I muttered under my breath. "And don't worry, I won't get in trouble if I get caught, just do it."

"Done," came a whisper in my ear.

"Hello, hello, hello," I muttered in a deep bass voice before nodding firmly. "Thanks."

"SEE YOU soon, PARTNER."

"With any luck. Hey, ref?" I growled out, clapping my hand on his shoulder. "Don't turn around and listen. Boss told me to pass a message on to you incognitus-like: when the order for a Groggy Burger comes up, use the red card."

"Wha—? Are you nuts!?" the masked referee hissed out of the corner of his mouth.

"Hey, man, I think it's nuts too, I'm just following orders," I grumbled. "All he said was that he wants the Straw Hats to think that we're playing fair. Put them in a false sense of security, get that monster of a Captain to drop his guard. They came too close to winning the last game, we need to keep everyone guessing if we don't want them to win. Got it?"

The ref ground his teeth for a second before nodding slowly. "Alright… Alright, I'll do it. But if this blows up, I'm telling him that it was your idea, got it?"

"Hey, I get it," I shrugged casually. "Sea King eat Sea King world, we all do what we gotta do to survive. All I'm doin' is relayin' the boss's orders, a'right?"

"Ergh… yeah, alright."

"Perfect. Now, if you'll excuse me, I got a date with a litre o' grog." And with that, I slid back into
the crowd, dropping my disguise piece by piece as I went.

If I had things my way, I'd then be standing by my crew as an added show of defiance. But, as it stood, I had no doubt that Foxy would be watching me like a hawk so that he could stop my one free cheat before it got out of hand. So, with resignation, I elected to stand by the man. I was just glad that I knew what I did now, or I don't think I would have been able to stand it.

"Ah good, you're here," Foxy said as I walked up, not taking his eyes off my crew. "Enjoy the tour of your new ship?"

I shrugged indifferently. "Eh, it was alright. Personally, I'm kinda iffy on the name and I can only imagine that the boobytraps are an absolute nightmare to navigate, so honestly?" I shot him a cheeky grin. "I'm eager to get back to the Merry. I will be keeping the clothes though."

Foxy snorted and shook his head. "Don't get your hopes up, Cross."

I tipped the brim of my hat down in response. "Don't count your chickens before they hatch, Captain."

Foxy scowled briefly before looking at Itomimizu and waving his hand.

The wide-mouth apparently took that as a sign to start, and climbed up to the top of a hastily constructed tower. I blinked before noticing that Chuchun was currently wrapped up in bandages, with Chopper conspicuously close by. I couldn't help but snicker at the sight.

"Aaaaalright, ladies and gentlemen! The wait is over, it's time for Round Two of the Davy Back Fight, the Groggy Ring! Now presenting the lineup for this match's teams! On the Straw Hat Pirates' team: First Mate 'Pirate Hunter' Roronoa Zoro! The lady-loving chef of iron, Sanji! And the leader of the ship's guard force, Boss Dugong!"

Looking at the trio, Sanji and Boss were both posing for the audience, while Zoro was rolling his eyes but staying silent.

"And, on the Foxy Pirates' team, the legendary Groggy Monsters! The leader, co-first mate and heavy-hitter, Hamburg! The bulky 'Tackle Machine', Pickles! And the fishman-giant hybrid, Big Pan!"

The trio basked in the attention they received as they marched onto the field, posing and grandstanding confidently.

"Now, for the game's rules! Each team must have one player acting as the ball…"

At that point, I stopped listening; the rules were nothing more than a review for me. Instead, I observed Pickles and Big Pan for a second before looking curiously at Foxy "Where the heck did you get the bigger two, anyway? I won't ask about Hamburg because if there's a pool it means that if you know then you're not talking, but them…" I waved my hand in their vague direction. "Just curious is all."

Foxy blinked in surprise, but shrugged and began to answer. "Eh, it's no big secret for those two. Pickles joined after one of my first wins against the Full-Frontal Assault Pirates. Real nasty bunch, led by a berserker with an Elephant Zoan. He was actually lucky, because we got word that they were annihilated by Marines about a month or two later. He was rough around the edges at first and his Giant's blood—that's where his size comes from, you see—didn't help matters, but he and Hamburg eventually bonded and he's been a big help in the Ring ever since. But as for Big Pan, well…" His expression darkened. "You've established yourself as rather world-savvy; would the
name 'Sabaody Archipelago' say enough for you?"

I promptly fought to suppress my gag reflex as my eyes shot to the hybrid's hands. "Enough to know that those gloves aren't covering his wrists for nothing."

"Mmph," Foxy grunted in agreement. "He cost me a pretty penny, but I don't regret it." His gaze slowly drifted over his shoulder so that he was looking back at his men. "I never do."

Porche leaned around her boss and pointed an accusing finger at me. "And he means that whether they agree to join or not, so don't get any ideas!"

I held up my hands in defense. "Fair enough, fair enough."

"And that's the game!" Ito capped off confidently.

"Ah, finally!" Foxy leered eagerly. "Now then, just be patient. With any luck, you'll be much more comfortable once you have your snail back. And I'll even do you the favor of removing that misplaced label for him so that you can both go back if your captain pulls off a miracle and beats me! Though really, that notion is simply preposterous! Fehfehfehfeh!"

Aaand my respect for him hit rock bottom again.

"Now then," Itomimizu continued eagerly. "We are only moments away from the beginning of the Second Round! All we're waiting for now is the whistle, and—!

WHOOSH!

"GAH!" Itomimizu cut himself off with a panicked yelp when he was suddenly buffeted by an intense wind that came out of absolutely nowhere. And he was far from the only one affected; all at once, a massive windstorm swept over the playing field, throwing everyone off-balance.

We barely had time to process that before the wind brought with it an unexpected byproduct: an absolutely massive—and for some reason, pink—fog that shrouded the entire playing field. I was barely able to discern my mummified hand in front my face, and the tumult around me gave the impression that everyone else was having equal difficulty.

Then the wind began blowing again… wait, no. It wasn't forceful, this time, it was just flat-out loud. Howling and… roaring… wait a second…

"Soundbite?" I whispered beneath my breath.

"Did you really think we would TAKE THIS SHIT LYING DOWN?" an indignant medley of voices scoffed in my ear. "THEY WANT TO PLAY DIRTY, that's their problem. BUT WHEN THEY TAKE ONE OF Ours… we fight BLOODY. OBSERVE."

And with that, as fast as the fog swept over field, it dispersed just as swiftly, unveiling a scene that could only be described as absolute carnage. Hamburg had been beaten akin to his namesake, Pickles looked to have been put through a blender, and Big Pan looked as though… well, frankly, he looked as though the Monster Trio had ganged up on him, with a few Sea Kings having enthusiastically joined the fun for good measure. Simply put, the Groggy Monsters were out cold while Zoro, Sanji, and Boss were all standing tall, completely and utterly unscathed and looking as nonchalant as cats lazing in a sunbeam. Or at least, as nonchalant as they could be while they were covered head to toe in blood spatter.

Which was actually pretty disturbingly nonchalant, now that I thought about it.
For a moment, there was complete silence; everyone on the Foxy Pirates, myself included, just gaped at the development as we tried to come to grips with what the hell had just happened. About a minute later, Foxy recovered enough to speak… or rather, roar and point at Luffy.

"FOUL! You cheated!"

"Eh? No, we didn't," Luffy stated as he cleaned his ear, his voice bland and bored as though he were saying the sky were blue.

"Yes, you did!"

"No, we didn't," Luffy replied in the same bored tone.

"I'M LOOKING AT IT RIGHT—!"

"Ah, excuse me, Mister Fox?"

"WHAT!?" Foxy yelled as he snapped his gaze to the person who'd spoken up.

Vivi, for her part, was entirely unfazed by the captain's fuming demeanor, smiling pleasantly without a care in the world. "I'm sorry for interrupting, Mr. Fox, but you see, I'm afraid that there's simply no means through which to determine the identity of your team's assailants. After all…" The princess waved her hand in the air. "That fog obscured everything, and that wind was so frighteningly loud, I'm afraid that there just weren't any witnesses whatsoever."

The split-headed pirate sputtered indignantly for a second before stamping his foot. "But you're the ones who caused the fog in the first place!"

Vivi blinked and pointed at herself with a look of innocent confusion. "Me?"

"HER, DAMN IT!" Foxy snapped his finger up to point at Nami, who was whistling innocently as she swung her hips back and forth. "SHE CAN CONTROL THE WEATHER, WE'VE ALL SEEN IT!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, but I'm afraid that that's just not possible," Vivi lamented in a tone I swear was honestly apologetic.

"EVERYBODY SAW HER FORM A FREAKING TYPHOON EARLIER!"

"Oh, yes, yes, that's true, that's true…" Vivi raised her hands placatingly. "But you see, as adept as Nami is with her Clima-Tact, she still has her limits. Currently, all she is capable of are minor cantrips like lightning or that storm earlier. While I suppose our navigator could have hypothetically conjured that wind we felt, I'm afraid that that level of fog is simply out of her grasp. And if Nami didn't do it, then…"

Vivi shook her head with a helpless shrug. "Well, I'm afraid I just don't know what to tell you, Mr. Fox. What else do you propose? That someone, what, magically conjured up a bank of fog from nowhere in the space of mere seconds?" Vivi chuckled daintily into her fist. "Why, how positively absurd."

As Foxy spluttered, his attention entirely on the main mass of our crew, I noticed Chopper digging in his bag behind one of the fair tents. He was working hastily; so hastily that a smoking test tube suddenly fell out of his bag without warning. He promptly made to grab for the vial before it could touch the ground, but flailed his hoof with a pained expression the second he touched it, sending the glass container flying. Thankfully, Carue had noticed the incident and was there waiting when the
tube arrived, and managed to grab it with a wing… at which point he promptly started flailing his wings and playing a game of hot potato with himself as he hopped from foot to foot.

"What the heck…?" I muttered under my breath.

"CHOPPER calls it Cherry Blossom Haze," Soundbite softly explained. "PERSONALLY, I would have GONE WITH Hazy Shade of Winter, but eh, WHAT CAN I say? HE'S GOT A THEME and I WON'T BEGRUDGE hi—BWAHAHAHAhooohooohHEEEHEEEE!"

I blinked in confusion when Soundbite suddenly trailed off into raucous laughter before looking back at Carue. Oddly enough, the vial he was juggling was long gone and he was standing at attention, gaze locked dead ahead and his wings folded at his side. For some reason there was cold sweat starting to collect on his brow, but for the life of me I couldn't tell what was—wait, was that smoke coming out of his nos—?

FWOMP!

I hastily clamped my hands over my mouth to muffle my snorting laughter. And it was hard when I was staring at a Carue that was bloated up into a balloon, smoky fog oozing out of his clamped beak and tears streaming down his cheeks. It was all I could do to keep from falling on my knees, and the sight of Carue speeding off out of sight once he got enough wherewithal in his head to do so didn't help. But when a massive geyser of smoke pierced the heavens alongside an avian howl of agony, I just couldn't hold it in anymore.

"PFFHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!" I burst out, falling to the ground laughing.

"WHAT'S SO FUNNY?!" roared a red-faced Foxy, looking away from a suddenly-panicked Vivi and failing to notice an equally freaked-looking Chopper.

"C-C-Carue just ate one of Chopper's Anti-Luffy Spice Bombs by accident!" I lied around my hysterical laughter. "Y-You should have seen his face! PFFHAHAHAHAHA!"

Chopper's concern melted into thoughtfulness, clearly considering the potential of what I had just said, and Vivi's expression changed into a different sort of concern. "Chopper, can you hurry after him and give him the antidote?" she asked quickly. The reindeer snapped back to reality, nodded, and sped off in his Walk Point. Vivi sighed before turning her attention back to Foxy. "Now, what were you saying, Mister Fox?"

"I WAS SAYING THAT EVEN IF WE DON'T HAVE ANY WITNESSES, IT'S BLATANTLY CLEAR THAT YOUR CREW DID THIS!" Foxy spat.

"Really? How so?" Vivi asked innocently.

"HOW SO? Oh, where to begin?! How about the slash marks—?!"

"You confiscated Zoro's swords before the game began; if anything, that only reinforces the fact that we didn't do it."

Back where she was swaying on her feet, Nami's absolutely innocent whistling amped up a few decibels while Foxy's face grew redder. "Ggh—! And the fact that they aren't harmed at all—?!

"Says that whatever attacked your crew must have been wise enough not to attack ours."

Foxy's face became downright purple. "FOR THE LOVE OF JONES HIMSELF, THEY'RE COVERED IN BLOOD!" He snapped his finger up when Vivi started to speak. "AND I DON'T
"Then perhaps you'll hear it from me?" Boss spoke up from where he was still standing, casually pulling a puff from his cigar.

Steam snorted out of Foxy's nose as he glared daggers at the dugong. "I would love to hear your explanation for this."

"It's quite simple, really." Boss took his cigar out of his mouth and casually tapped off the ash. "While the fog obscured the field, we decided to eat some steak, and so we did."

You could hear the crickets chirping in the resounding silence that followed that statement.

"... I'm sorry, I must have heard you wrong, could you repeat that?" Foxy said in a voice of strained calm.

"We. Ate. Steaks," Boss repeated, slowly and clearly. "To elaborate, under the cover of the fog, we decided to leave the field, we hunted down an animal, we slaughtered it, and then we ate it. Raw. Like men."

Foxy's eye started twitching viciously as he ground his teeth back and forth. "You mean you want to pretend that you hunted an animal in this god-forsaken prairie, ate it, and then returned in a little under five minutes?"

"Yes, yes, I know that it sounds ludicrous, I realize that," Boss waved his hands in a soothing gesture. "But! But, I have a valid explanation that I believe all will find to be both concise and logical."

"And what would that be?" Foxy snarled, sheer contempt dripping from his every word.

"Simplicity itself, my good man," Boss huffed matter-of-factly as he bit back into his cigar. "We're badass."

Foxy failed to formulate a reply for that, at which point Vivi tapped him on his shoulder. That caused him to bellow out a furious "WHAT!?"

Vivi blinked and slowly dug a finger through her ear before responding. "Alright, first? Loud, and I live with the loudest snail in the world, so that's really saying something. And second?" She spread her hands helplessly. "I'm afraid that the fact of the matter is that regardless of the details of how your 'Groggy Monsters' got assaulted in such a way, it doesn't really change the outcome."

"Outcome? What outcome!?" Porche demanded incredulously.

Vivi slowly turned her head to smile at the diva, and by smile, I mean a Robin-grade give-Sea-Kings-existential-dread smile. "Why, the fact that you've unequivocally lost the second round of the Davy Back Fight, of course."

The silence that resulted was as loud and boisterous as any Sea King. Heck, it was so quiet that the 'caw caw caw' of a croooooooook flying overhead was heard by all.

I glanced upwards at the passing bird. "Huh, so that's actually a thing here."

"What," Foxy hissed, his voice sounding straight-up possessed.
"Well, of course you've lost, Foxy," Vivi said as though it were the most obvious thing in the world as she started digging through her pockets. "It's quite clearly stipulated in the, ergh, rules, damn it, where did I—? Ah-hah!" Vivi finally yanked a piece of paper from her pocket, holding it up in triumph. "There we go! Now then, let's see here…"

Vivi took out a pair of reading glasses I knew for a fact that she didn't need and held them before her eyes as she analyzed the paper. "As dictated in Chapter 1, Section B, Sub-section 24, paragraph 16 of the 7th Edition Official Davy Back Fight Rulebook, and I quote, 'if at any point after the selection of the teams, a member of any given team is rendered unable to participate, said team must continue without that player. Should all members of the team be rendered incapable of participation, then the match is automatically forfeited.'" Vivi primly removed the glasses and shut them with a click. "End quote."

The rapidfire rustling of paper drew attention over to Itomimizu, who was tearing through the pages of a massive tome in a blind panic. After a few seconds of searching, the wide-mouth stopped on a specific page and began tracing his finger down the paper, frantically muttering to himself before suddenly jerking back with a gasp of shock. "S-SHE'S RIGHT!"

"I KNOW SHE'S RIGHT, YOU MORON, I KNOW THAT BOOK BY HEART!" Foxy roared. "WHAT I WANT TO KNOW IS WHERE THE HELL SHE GOT HER HANDS ON A COPY!"

I was forced to bite down on my tongue in order to restrain my laughter when Nami's whistling amped up even louder.

"Those details are irrelevant and immaterial, Mister Fox," Vivi hummed in a tone of voice that was only borderline civil. "All that matters now are the facts of the situation at hand, which are hence: the members of the team you selected are in no state to play. Without any members, you don't have a team. Without a team, you cannot participate in Round Two. And because you cannot participate in Round Two, you forfeit by default. In summary, Mister Fox…"

"YOU LOSE," the Voice of God sounded out with all the intensity of a death knell.

And once again, dead silence fell. But it lasted for all of one second before Foxy fell to his knees, making a sound like a leaking balloon. "… I've been beaten… at cheating… how…?" he mumbled through his depression.

Vivi held her pleasant smile as she knelt before the Captain, and slowly lifted his chin so that he was looking at her. "I just wanted to make sure you understood something, Mister Fox," she stated in a kind tone of voice. "This whole time, whether or not we cheated or played fair was entirely irrelevant. Do you know why?" She clapped his shoulder firmly. "Either way, you never stood a snowball's chance in the desert against us."

And with that, Vivi stood up, leaving Foxy to stare ahead in blank-eyed horror as she turned to address the equally-paralyzed ref. "Oh, Mister Referee~!" she sing-songed, snapping the man out of his shock. "If you would be so kind as to announce the verdict of this match, I would very much appreciate it."

The ref shuddered fearfully as he snapped his gaze between her and Foxy. "I-I-I, uh, I-I d-don't—!"

Without a hint of warning, Vivi's expression suddenly shifted to a look that screamed nothing short of cold-blooded murder. "NOW."

The ref jumped in terror and flailed for a second as he fumbled with the whistle he'd tossed in his panic before finally managing to grab hold of it with both of his shaking hands—
And announce our crew's unmitigated victory. And at that moment, the Straw Hats erupted in raucous celebration. I took the opportunity to strut over to Itomimizu and snag Chubby's microphone. "And, with the Foxy Pirates beaten at their own game of rules-lawyering, the Straw Hat Pirates steal the victory before the notorious Groggy Monsters can do anything whatsoever! And now, it's time for the Straw Hats to choose which of the Foxy Pirates they want to take for their crew!"

I didn't spare any thought towards what they'd do; maybe if Luffy hadn't remembered what he did from Shanks, they would have considered stealing Foxy to win the last match by default. But as it was, Luffy wouldn't be cheated out of the whole reason he accepted this fight, especially with the added rage of me having gone briefly away, regardless of our well-placed confidence that I'd come back. So, there was really only one thing that they could say.

Buut that didn't mean I wasn't going to milk this opportunity that I knew I would never get again for all it was worth. "So, who will they choose? The emcee Itomimizu has quite a lot of character, and maybe they'd want to take him for his role in causing them to lose the last game! But, by that logic, they might want to choose the fast-swimming Monda, despite their inability to communicate two ways with the shark, or the much more appealing choice of Porche, the deceptively powerful and beautiful first mate! Or, I suppose that I, Jeremiah Cross, could be a good choice."

Both crews were looking at me with equal parts exasperation and amusement as I started whistling nonchalantly. "Buut, honestly, if I'm not chosen, I suppose I could stay here for another—"

"SHUT UP AND COME BACK, CROSS!" Luffy cheered joyously.

"Somebody cut this ugly-ass mask out of my hood right this instant before I rip it out with my bare hands!" I announced as I marched back to my real crew, pushing the hood of my hoodie away from my face. "Leave the ears though, I like 'em."

"I have to admit, I like them too," Su remarked.

"THAT ain't saying MUCH," Soundbite cackled ecstatically.

"Damn straight!" Leo snickered as he unsheathed one of his swords. "Now then, stay veery still, Cross..." He then moved his arm so fast it blurred, and the mask dropped away before my eyes.

I waved my hand before my face before sighing in relief. "Ah, now that's much better. Only one thing missing now!" I held my hand up to Conis. "If you would do me the inestimable honor of snailing me, m'lady?"

Conis chuckled lightly at the display. "It would be my honor, Cross." And with that, she tossed Soundbite over to me, and I caught the grinning snail easily before putting him back on my shoulder.

I rolled my shoulder with a contented sigh. "Ah, much better. I was really missing this dead weight!"

"And I was missing MY FAVORITE mobile arm-chair!" Soundbite snickered with his tongue stuck out.

"Heh. But you know, if I didn't enjoy anything else while I was there, I have to say that the Foxy Pirates have a very interesting library," I said. "On the note of which… Soundbite, Gastro-Amp."

"Gladly!" the snail chirped.

"In light of how clearly shocking this victory was," I drawled. "I propose that we initiate a two-hour
break until the preparation for the final round of the Davy Back Fight. Are there any objections?" Nobody replied. "Good, two hours it is then." I moved my hand across my throat, and Soundbite stopped as I clapped my hands. "Now, let's get back to the Merry." I frowned solemnly as I eyed the Foxy's. "We need to do a bit of strategizing with what I found out."

An uneventful period of walking later, aside from Zoro and Sanji gladly resuming their rivalry and brawls, found us gathered around the Merry's table with walls of wood and sound blocking out any eavesdroppers. At that point, I turned to the crew. "Alright, first things first: that was genius, you guys. I mean, I already had a cheat lined up, but it wasn't a surefire thing and had a good chance of flopping. You guys pulled off something better than I could before mine even triggered and for that…" I grinned goofily as I ran my hands through my hair beneath my hat. "Man, this means more to me then you can even imagine."

"Would you believe that it was all Soundbite's idea?" Chopper asked. "I guess some of your skills have rubbed off on him."

I raised my eyebrows and looked at the gastropod, who was grinning proudly. "…OK, are you telling the truth, or is some sort of bet going on that I'll actually buy that right away?"

"Both," several voices groused, fishing around in their pockets for bills and trading them around to several smug onlookers.

"I'M SMART, Cross IS smarter. Even if he DOESN'T ALWAYS ACT LIKE IT!"

"Oh, shut up," I said good-naturedly before turning my attention to Vivi. "And I have to say, that 'frigid Stepford Smiler' act was… was pure awesomeness. First out-haggling Nami, now out-cheating Foxy? I suppose next you're going to out—"

"Cross," Luffy warned.

I raised my hands defensively. "Oh, fine, fine… Well, I guess we should hurry up and get to the serious stuff." I locked eyes with my captain. "Luffy, do you have any ideas in mind for what to do when you win the captain's fight? I mean, the way I saw it, you took their Jolly Roger and gave it to Tonjit, but I'm guessing you don't feel quite so inclined this time around."

Luffy frowned thoughtfully for a second, but in the end he nodded in agreement. "Yeah, you're right. If that bastard had actually hurt Shelly then I probably would have, but she's alright now, so…"

"That's what I thought," I nodded solemnly. "Then in that case, if you'll hear me out…" I looked around the room. "I'd like to suggest who we choose as our prize, as well as how we go about it. Now!" I held my hands up hastily. "You're all going to think I'm absolutely nuts and, believe me, I know that it's a nut-house grade crazy idea, but I honestly believe that this will benefit us in the long run."

"You and your long cons and high stakes gambles," Nami said, rolling her eyes. "I'm honestly impressed that you've managed to make me say that twice now."

"Oh, come on, it can't be crazier than what he's done so far," Zoro said. "What's your idea, Cross?"

Before answering, I slid on my headphones and made sure that they were properly secured, because I sure as heck was going to need them.

Sadly, I… miscalculated somewhat, as ten seconds after I tendered my suggestion, I was struck by a barrage of pure muscle, as opposed to the barrage of sound I'd been expecting.
Two hours later, I sank into a sitting position on the figurehead of the Foxy's ship with a groan, leaning my back back as I tried to relax. Freaking hell, was that not pleasant.

"Hello, Cross," Ito sneered at me with a sidelong glance as he tapped his foot patiently keeping a distracted eye on the interim fight that was going on a few feet away from us. "Have a fun reunion with your crew?"

"Shut that damn bear trap you call a jaw and hand me that thermos of hot chocolate you're carrying, pencilneck," I growled as I held my hand out to him.

Itomimizu cocked his eyebrow in surprise before shrugging and tossing said thermos to me.

"Ah..." Soundbite spoke up hesitantly as he glanced at the thermos. "Think I could try some of—?"

"Go chug a salt shaker," I deadpanned.

"FAIR NUFF."

I started chugging the nice and scalding cocoa, relishing in how the burn of the liquid coursing down my throat obscured the rest of the aches I was suffering from. And good God, was I suffering from a lot.

After I made my (admittedly insane-sounding) proposal, my dear, dear friends and comrades had promptly put me through two. Whole. Hours of what could best be described as a gauntlet of anti-brainwashing techniques, impostor trials and forced detoxification. I won't go into the details, for the sake of both my sanity and the sleep of decent folks everywhere, but suffice to say it was almost enough to make me reconsider the whole idea just so that it would come to an end sooner. Thankfully, I managed to pass on the rationalization I had for my decision before the break time was up, though by that time I already felt like a tenderized steak.

One rigged cannon shot and ten minutes later, the majority of both our crews were situated in the stands that the Foxy's had constructed in order to watch the show go down. I was waiting on the ship's figurehead with a less-than-enthused Itomimizu so that we could make the introductions, while the rest of the crew sans Usopp, Luffy, and Sanji were up in the stands, looking forward to the upcoming match. Sanji was occupied with preparing the test I'd had in mind since Alabasta, while Usopp and Luffy were, of course, preparing for the match.

The Foxy Pirates were in a state of anticipation; they'd only barely managed to win the first round, and the second round ended before it started, so they were equal parts determined and nervous as they awaited the start of the final round, the only one that, according to them, they had never lost before. 920 Captain's Duels, 920 victories. Well, it looked like that perfect record was about to come to an end.

At last, Itomimizu took hold of Chubby's mic, having apparently received a signal, and I stood up and did the same with my transceiver.

"Don don don don!"

SLAP!

"YEOWCH!" Woop Slap yelped, shaking his hand out with an agonized grimace. "Damn it,
Makino, will you please—!

"No, you listen to me, Mayor!" Makino snapped as she waved the ladle she was holding at him. "I might respect you, but this is my bar and Bluey is my snail, so it is my decision, and this broadcast, however controversial it might be, is the most reliable source for information on Luffy's journey in the world. So, no, Woop Slap, I will not hang it up." She crossed her arms. "And why are you strident about not listening, anyway? The World Government's reaction? Need I remind you that those bastards are the self-same people who killed Ace and Luffy's brother!?

"And they'll do the same to us if we needlessly antagonize them!" Woop Slap snarled, slamming his cane on the bar to punctuate the point.

Makino's glare wavered for a second before she steeled herself and turned to her Transponder Snail. "That's a chance I'm willing to take." And with that, she turned around and picked up the receiver, already a ways into the broadcast.

"—apologize for the sudden cut off, but there were complications beyond our control. You see, after we last left off, we did, in fact, barely lose to the Foxy Pirates on the Donut Race. As a result, one of ours was lost to the Foxy Pirates. More specifically…" The snail grimaced. "I was briefly part of their crew."

"Hmph. The rubber brat was too cocky, and paid the consequences."

THWACK!

"Ow!" Woop Slap yelped and raised his hands defensively as the ladle raised again for another strike. "Alright, alright!"

"But! Thankfully enough, via a total freak accident that no one could have predicted—" A distinct grumbling sound came over the connection, not sounding like Cross. "The second round, known as the Groggy Ring, was over before it began, resulting in my return to my rightful place at my crew's side. And so, we now come to the real event, the main reason that our captain accepted this most dangerous game in the first place: the Captains' Duel."

Woop Slap was clearly struggling not to drop another snide remark, if the constipated grimace on his face was anything to go by. Luckily, another one of the bar's patrons did it for him.

"Aw, c'mon, Luffy! His face can't have been ugly enough to risk a crewmate to bash it in!"

Makino frowned, but found herself unable to provide a rationalization for that.

"Now, as for those of you wondering why Luffy elected to take on this challenge, rather than simply bashing his face in right then and there? Well, as we've stated before, we don't kill our opponents… or at least, not in body. We beat them at their own game, on their own turf, and leave them alive to watch everything they have crumble around them. In short, Luffy accepted this challenge so that he could bring Foxy's world crashing down around his ears."

"FAT CHANCE OF THAT!" came the outraged voice of Itomimizu. "Our captain has played this game nine hundred and twenty times, and won every single one of them!"

"Oh, yeah?" Cross drawled. "Well, this will be Luffy's first and hopefully only Captain's Duel ever, and I guarantee you that he won't lose."

"How about a toast to our champion?" Makino suggested over Itomimizu's incensed growling.
Woop Slap glowered, but accepted a glass with a sigh. "Fine. I might hate his career choice, but I certainly won't mind him beating up another pirate," he reluctantly admitted.

Makino started refilling glasses as Ito got his wits back about him. "Well, either way, it looks like it's time for the fight to begin! First, entering from the left ear—!"

"Don't ask," Cross deadpanned.

"The man with a million plans! The champion of cheating! The undisputed king of the Davy Back Fight! The undefeated victor of 920 duels! Weighing in at 24 Million, our captain and beloved boss, Foxy the Silver Fox!"

A chorus of cheers and cries of adulation rang out, all to the tune what sounded like an entire brass band and topped by a confident "FEH FEH FEH FEH!"

"Top that," Ito scoffed cheekily.

"Gladly. Now, then… Entering from the right ear…" Cross proclaimed as an energetic song started playing. "Hailing from the East Blue, one of the most unique men alive! The Rubber-Brained Brawler, the Behemoth who always bounces back, the man who never follows the plan, the son of a bitch who just doesn't know how or when to quit! Weighing in at a heaping 100 Million, our captain and the future King of the Pirates! MOOOONKEY D. 'STRAW HAT' LUUUUUFFYYYY!"

"YEEEEEEAAAAAAAAH!"

An even louder chorus of cheers rang out this time, no doubt generated by the crew's snail, but the bar's patrons and its owner were content to knock back their shots to it nonetheless.

"Wow!" Itomimizu yelped in shock. "It would appear that for this fight, Straw Hat Luffy has decided to don an afro that's larger than life, and looks like it's got the personality to match!"

The bar patrons promptly spat out their drinks at that particular statement and the image it conjured, though for a variety of reasons.

Woop Slap, for example, was furiously waving his cane in the air. "DAMN IT, LUFFY, CAN'T YOU GO TEN SECONDS WITHOUT EMBARRASSING THIS HUMBLE VILLAGE!? SHAME! SHAME ON YOUR WHOLE FAMILY! SOMEONE MAKE A NOTE OF THIS!"

Makino, meanwhile, didn't discipline the mayor for his words because she was too busy pounding the bar as she roared with laughter, tears of joy streaming down her cheeks.

-Vivi blinked slowly as she took in the spectacle before her, her expression carefully blank. "It's like watching Luffy eat…" she quietly breathed. "I know that it's horrific on a deep and basic level…" She slowly tilted her head to the side, her face never changing. "But I just can't bring myself to look away."

"So…" Conis asked, glancing between her friends as she pointed at her captain and his new head of hair. "I take it that this is *not* normal on the Blue Seas?"

"Ish fow us, anyways…” Carue quacked as he munched down on wingful after wingful of popcorn.

"... I'm okay with this," Nami simply stated.
Zoro looked at her in surprise. "Seriously? Because these seem like the kind of antics that would set you off."

"About a month or so ago?" The navigator shrugged indifferently. "Maybe so. But after all we've been through? No, no, I'm... quite simply numb to it. Especially something as relatively tame as this."

Zoro looked unconvinced, but the sound of crying drew their attention and he dropped it. Navigator and swordsman glanced over to where Boss had been sitting to find him prostrated on the ground, tears streaming down his face.

"B-Boss!" his students cried, gathering around him in concern.

"Are you alright, Boss?!" "What's wrong?" "Are you hurt?" "I-Is this another Romance!??"

"No... No, my students, that object is no mere Romance..." the senior dugong breathed as he shook his head, tears glistening in his eyes. "What you see before you..." Boss suddenly shot to his tail, arms spread wide before the world. "WHAT YOU SEE IS NOTHING LESS THAN A MAN'S MIRACLE! A HEAVENSENT SIGN INTENDED TO DO NOUGHT ELSE BUT TO BRING TO THE WORLD THE GOOD MESSAGE OF TESTOSTERONE AND ABSOLUTELY RIPPED ABS!"

"OH, BOSS!" the TDWS wept, flippers clasped together.

Boss then proceeded to point a 'finger' into the air. "AS GOD IS MY WITNESS, I TOO SHALL DON THE AFRO, FOR GREAT MANLI—!"

THWACK!

"AND THAT'S WHERE I DRAW THE FUCKING LINE!" Nami raged, her Clima-Tact still smoking from being cracked over the now-insensate Dugong's skull.

"BOSS, NO!" his students wept anew, this time out of misery.

Nami huffed and sat back in her seat, fuming silently as Luffy posed and grandstanded before she heaved a sigh of defeat. She was silent for a moment before smiling coyly and glancing to her left. "Well, everyone else might have gone mad, but at least you're still sane, right, Sanji? ... Sanji?"

"SO FUNKY!" the cook roared with a distinct accent as he shot to his feet without warning, fists raised to the heavens. "I CAN FEEL HIS JIVE LIGHTIN' A FIRE IN MY SOUL!"

"OH, COME ON!" Nami roared furiously.

"AMEN, BROTHER SANJI!" Cross roared from the Sexy Foxy in the exact same accent, where he was clearly pointing at Sanji.

"ARE YOU KIDDING ME!?!" the navigator roared at their tactician furiously, knowing full well that he could hear her.

"FEEL THE FUNK BLAZE THROUGH YOU LIKE A GREAT INFERNO, LIFTING YOUR SPIRITS EVER HIGHER, SO THAT YOUR SOULS MIGHT REACH THE GREAT HEAVENS!" Cross proclaimed as he grinned like an absolute madman. "PRAISE BE TO THE AFRO! PRAISE BE TO THE JIVE! PRAISE BE TO THE FUNK, THE RHYTHM AND THE RHYME! CAN A
"BROTHER GET A HALLELUJAH?"

"HALLELUJAH!" Soundbite concurred through his ecstatic cackling, the words accompanied by a blaring brass section.

"Don't believe me, just watch!"

The beat continued, most of the audience finding themselves bobbing their heads to the music.

"HALLELUJAH!" Soundbite belted out again.

"HALLELUJAH!" the crowd roared, Boss' voice rising above all others.

"Yeah, you go, gatemouth!" Su waved her tail eagerly. "Jive with the groove, stick it to the man, show your hep chops!" She then blinked in confusion. "I have no idea what the hell I just said."

Back in the stands, Nami, face inscrutable, slowly eased her hand over to the loudly cheering Sanji, and then slipped it into his pocket. She was just lifting his lighter out when a hand blossomed out of Sanji's side and gently pushed it back in. "Nooooo," Robin hummed in a kind tone without so much as looking at Nami.

"But it would feel sooo good…" Nami whined childishly.

"I know, sweetie, I know."

-0-

"Don't turn around. Don't turn around. Don't turn around, don't you dare turn around," Hina muttered feverishly to herself.

She was determinedly focusing her attention on anything but the raucous cheering behind her, dancing along to the beat from the snail. Jango and Fullbody were expected. The rest of her crew, she supposed she should have expected to crack sooner or later. But she had higher standards. She was more professional than this. She would not look at the party that was going on behind her, despite how tempted she was to do so. She would not allow herself to move to the music, despite how very tempted she was to do so. She would not—

"HALLELUJAH!" roared the snail.

"HALLELUJAH!" she echoed along with the rest of the people onboard. She instantly clapped a hand to her mouth in shock. She held it there for a few seconds before her eyes narrowed.

"…Damn you, Cross, Smoker is never going to let me hear the end of this," she ground out. And then, bidding farewell to her sanity, she turned around and let the funk sweep her away.

-0-

Around her eleventh pizza, eighth burger, and sixteenth bowl of noodles of the day, Jewelry Bonney of the Bonney Pirates was struggling to keep from choking. The amount of food was no problem for her, she could eat twice her weight within an hour with a good supply and not slow down a bit. No, the problem came from the snail that she was currently listening to. How?

Because though her appetite refused to be sated, she simply could not hold back her laughter at what was happening with the Straw Hat Pirates. Only they could pull off something as ridiculous as this, only them.
"Hahaha, ahhh man, I am going to catch such hell for that once this is over and done with..." Cross snickered, no doubt wiping a tear out of his eye. "Well, that was fun, but I think we've delayed enough! Gentlemen, or whatever the hell is appropriate in this instance—man, I have wanted to say this for a long time. Soundbite, appropriate echoing effects, please?"

"Go for it, MISTER BUFFER!"

"LLLLET'S GET READY TO RRRRUMBLLLLLLLLE!"

Bonney had to redouble her efforts not to choke as she moved the massive ham on the table to get it in a better position. She pulled the roast pig closer, too.

-o-

Itomimizu stared at me in awe. "...Alright, wow. That was perfect. I need to use that one from now on."

"Good luck getting the R and L right without Soundbite," I snickered.

The Foxy announcer wilted for a moment before rallying and resuming his commentary. "Alright! All seconds out of the ring!" As Usopp and the other Foxy Pirates exited and we boarded the revitalized Chuchun, he recapped the rules of the fight while I whispered some last minute advice to my captain. No way of knowing how much he'd listen, but we'd have to wait and see.

"Davy Back Fight! Final Round! Foxy the Silver Fox! Versus! Straw Hat Luffy! The clash between two captains, the fates of their crews are in their hands!" Itomimizu concluded. I exchanged glances, and then grins with him and Soundbite.

"LET THE GAME... BEEEEEE-GIIIIIN!" the three of us chorused.

-o-

The floating restaurant of Takoyaki 8 was currently experiencing the most intense rush it had had in its short time of being an active business.

"Hachin, we need more sake!" called a certain mermaid, scrambling about the remarkably cramped restaurant boat.

"And twelve more orders of Takoyaki!" said a certain talking starfish.

"And two hard-boiled eggs!" came a call from one of the patrons in an Italian accent.

"And two hard-boiled eggs!" the starfish added.

A HONK! came from the direction of the patrons.

"Make that three hard-boiled eggs!" Pappug hastily corrected.

"Nyu, I'm going as fast as I can! I only have so many hands!"

"And I can only swim so fast!"

"You have eight hands and you're the fastest thing under the sea!"

"That's still not enough!" the mermaid and fishman chorused.
And what drew this unprecedented swarm of customers? Quite simple, really: the presence of a few Transponder Snails and the deployment of several floating table-extensions had transformed Takoyaki 8 from a mere stand into the Blue Seas' first floating, mobile sports bar. And today's main attraction? None other than the epic duel between a pirate that most present had never heard of before today and a pirate that anyone within ten miles of a Transponder Snail would have learned of in the last month.

"And they're off! Luffy starts off with his trademark Gum-Gum Pistol, and—" Cross' voice began.

"And with impressive agility, the Boss dodges and paralyzes Straw Hat's outstretched arm with his Slow-Slow Beam!" Itomimizu said eagerly. "It looks like the bigger they are, the harder they fall! The more he extended himself, the harder he'll trip when the beam's effects wear off!"

"Come on, Straw Hat!" called one table.

"Get 'im, trickster!" called another.

And somehow, both of them had followings among the listeners, who were putting away food faster than the kitchen could acquire and cook ingredients.

"More orders!" Pappug exclaimed, slapping the tickets toward the two workers as fast as his short limbs allowed him to. "Four batches of calamari and three batches of cuttlefish!"

"And two hard-boiled eggs!" came the Italian voice again.

"And two hard-boiled eggs!" Pappug repeated.

HONK!

"Make that three hard-boiled eggs!"

"When did our menu expand beyond takoyaki anyway, nyu?!" Hachi demanded, flipping, frying, and flinging so fast that his hair started to flop down over his face.

"When we got so many customers that I couldn't gather all the ingredients we needed fast enough, so I gathered other things instead!" Keimi responded, frantically handing off the ingredients before diving down for more.

"Aaand there it is. Luffy's left lying on the ground, and Foxy's about to fire his beam again. Luffy jumps to avoid it, and—"

"And the Boss pulls off a brilliant bluff, and fires his beam in the air instead! And here comes his signature attack, the Nine-Tailed Rush! The boss pummels his target with blow after blow, and when the thirty seconds are up, every hit goes through at once!"

"Whoa, that power has some serious potential," said one patron.

"It still can't beat a rubber man, blunt blows can't hurt him!" countered another.

"Nyu, Straw Hat may still be in trouble. Trickery is his weak spot," Hachi mused, not pausing in his work even as Keimi resurfaced, the mermaid starting to get a little out of breath.

"Alright, one more order and we've got all the patrons satisfied for now! Eight crab cakes, on the double!" Pappug called.

"And two hard-boiled eggs!"
"And two hard-boiled eggs!"

_HONK!

"Make that three hard-boiled eggs!"

…it Honk!

"And one duck egg!"

"WHERE AM I SUPPOSED TO GET A DUCK EGG OUT HERE?!" Keimi raged.

"Good point. Sir, would a duck-fish egg be an acceptable substitute?"

_Ho-Honk!

"Make that one duck-fish egg!"

"Now _that's_ a sane request! Thank you!" Keimi nodded before diving back into the water.

"I'm going to need more employees if this is going to become a regular thing," Hachi moaned, hastening to prepare the dishes for the backed-up kitchen. To his credit, he was making decent progress.

"And Luffy's sent flying off the ship, but now comes the benefit of being made of rubber! Besides the immunity to lightning, but that story's already told and hopefully will never come into play again. Now, here he comes, getting back on the deck, and—"

"And falling right into another one of the Boss's traps!"

"…Well, ladies and gentlemen, as much as I hate to say that my fellow commentator is right—"

"HEY!"

"—I'm afraid he is in this case. Luffy just managed to narrowly dodge a bullet, or rather an un-Slow-Slow'd barrage of arrows, as it were. Given how much Foxy is warping this fight in his favor, I'd say that this demonstrates quite clearly the inherent capabilities of Devil Fruits. There are no weak powers, only weak users. Case in point: Foxy has just used his Slow-Slow Fruit to set up a floating minefield of projectiles. Arrows, bombs, cannonballs, daggers, everything from A to Z, and he's the only one that knows how long they'll stay slow."

"It's just our good luck that the arena was our ship where all of those weapons are!"

"Good wuck my feathewed yellow wump!" came Carue's grumbling voice, inciting snickers from most of the listeners, including the employees.

"Got the crabs!" Keimi called out as she resurfaced with a writhing net held over her head. "Alright, now let's get rid of this rush!"

"And two hard-boiled eggs!" called the patron.

"And two hard-boiled eggs!" echoed Pappug.

_HONK, HONK, HO-HO-HONK HONK HONK, HO-HO-HONK, HO-HO-HONK HONK HONK, HO-HO-HONK, HO-ONK!_
"It's either foggy out, or make that twelve more hard-boiled eggs," Pappug remarked.

Hachi and Keimi groaned as they got back to work.

-o-

"Eesh, and I thought FOXY'S NARCISSISM WAS BAD BEFORE, BUT BOMBS SHAPED LIKE HIS OWN head? THAT'S JUST—!"

WHAM!

"GAH!" Luffy cried out in pain.

"HOLY SHIT!"

"What the hell!?" Boodle sat up in his seat, staring at the Transponder Snail as it coughed in Luffy's voice, accompanied by a gout of blood. "But Luffy's a rubber-man, and the previous punches didn't hurt him at all!"

Chouchou whined in agreement, eyes glued to the snail.

"What the—!?" Cross sputtered in confusion. "Luffy's face looks like a tenderized steak after just one punch when he bounced back from the previous punches without worry! What just happened!?"

"Fehfehfehfeh! That's easy!" Foxy crowed eagerly. "I reinforced my gloves!"

"Reinforced!? Those things look like fucking morningstars!"

"Hey, this is the Grand Line and I can barely benchpress seventy-five, I need to even the odds somehow! Are you really going to call me out for zat?"

"I sure the hell will when it's my captain you're evening them against!"

"Feh, so be it. Though to be fair, I'd withhold your hatred for a moment."

"Huh? Why?"

"Because the thirty seconds on the bombs are up, and they're going to do a lot more than tenderize."

KA-BLAM!

The sound of explosions almost as loud as Cross' foghorn boomed across the connection, and the snail grit its teeth in anxiety for the duration of the din.

"Luffy? Luffy!? LUUUUFFYYYYYY!" Usopp cried out desperately.

"DON'T LOOK AT ME LIKE THAT, that was 100% NATURAL!"

Then came Itomimizu's supremely smug voice again. "Well, it looks like Straw Hat may have been blown to smithereens! If that's the case, then he loses as soon as one of his body parts leaves the arena! Another victory for our captai—"

"HE'S safe! UP ON the MAST!" Soundbite interrupted.

"WHAT?" Itomimizu roared. "He—He's right! Straw Hat Luffy dodged to the top of the Sexy Foxy's mast! What incredible speed!"
"Don't count on Luffy being a corpse until you actually see him, wide-mouth!" Cross cackled.

"Damn right, you lousy rotten cheaters!" Boodle cheered eagerly. "Show them what's what, Straw Hat!"

"Ruff, ruff!" Chouchou barked in agreement, howling his support as loud as he could.

-0-

In a country that had gathered much international attention over the last several weeks, both good and bad, within the throne room of the royal palace, a very serious war meeting had come to an abrupt and unexpected hiatus when the SBS began. One exchanged look between the royal family and the representative was all that was needed for them to agree.

"You know, while I'm not surprised that the Revolutionary Army has interest in Jeremiah Cross and his knowledge and activities, it does surprise me that you'd prioritize it over official business," Chaka remarked.

"Especially when the current goings-on don't much affect the world itself," Pell added. "We're certainly not complaining, but we are curious."

The representative chuckled before looking back to the Royal Family. "Well, let's just say that Dragon and I have taken a personal interest in the SBS, and leave it at that. I'm honestly not sure why he hasn't extended the Straw Hats an invitation to join us yet."

"I'm going to take—ahem, mah, mah, MAH!—I'm going to take a guess and say that he's hesitant to involve himself in their madness?"

The man chuckled again.

"Fehfehfehfehfeh…"

Before they all turned their attention back to the snail as the all-too-familiar laugh echoed out of it.

"Ooh! Straw Hat may have dodged the first strike, but our Boss is waiting in the smokescreen, ready to strike again! His laughter robs Straw Hat of the opportunity to rest! Where will he strike? How will he strike?"

"There! There's his shadow!" Cross said. "And he's… are you kidding?"

"How did you like that?" Foxy slurred.

"YOU'RE THE ONE WHO GOT HURT!" Luffy barked.

"I did not!" Foxy snapped indignantly.

"STOP LYING!"

"… Lying so blatantly that Luffy can see through it? This isn't just pathetic, this is starting to become downright embarrassing," Cross said in a tone as dry as the Sandora desert.

"Pathetic…? Embarrassing…?" Foxy's voice sobbed in a depressed tone.

"I'm feeling embarrassed from this," muttered King Cobra.

"GUM-GUM HOOK!"
A cry of pain from Foxy made the Revolutionary's grin widen.

"I'm going to break your hand so you can't use that beam anymore!"

"Oh, really?"

"Aaand Foxy dives back into the smoke. But Luffy spots him and knocks—what the… is that a cutout?"

"Slow-Slow Beam!"

"Ugh… alright, another point to Foxy; he's got so many cutouts in the smoke that there's no way of knowing where his beam will come from…" Cross was silent for a second before his grin was transmitted around the world. "If only they didn't all have the same split-headed haircut."

"Split-head…?"

"There he is!"

"STOP PICKING ON MY CAPTAIN!" Itomimizu snapped.

"ONLY WHEN HE STOPS PUNCHING MI—oooh, that's another suckerpunch from Luffy! That has gotta hurt!"

"You seem to be enjoying the fact that Luffy is winning quite a bit, Mister Revolutionary," Pell observed.

Said Revolutionary blinked. "…Huh. I honestly hadn't noticed. Maybe the SBS has grown on me more than I thought. But I thought I told you that there's no need to be so formal. Please," the Revolutionary grinned as he swept his top hat off and held it to his chest. "Call me Sabo."

-o-

"Alright, now I've got you! Stop running and fight me!" Luffy demanded.

"Grgh…" Foxy ground out darkly. "Okay… if you want a fight… THEN I'LL GIVE YOU ONE! Oh, but one quick thing first."

"Huh? What?"

"Would you mind looking up one second?"

"Come on, not even rubber-brain is that stupid!" Su's voice called out.

"Sure thing! What do you want me to look at?"

"Then again, I have been wrong before…"

"Oh, nothing much, Straw Hat…" Foxy sneered. "JUST THE LAST SKY YOU'LL SEE IN YOUR LIFE!"

KLUNK!

"GAH!"

"Looks like the Captain managed to successfully trick Luffy into falling into a trapdoor!" Itomimizu
"Ah, the humble trapdoor," Cross sighed wistfully. "A true classic in the book of trap-making. Most of the time, there's not a lot of shame in being caught with one."

"This is not one OF THOSE TIMES..." Soundbite groaned.

"Ugh, young people these days," slurred a grizzled grey-haired man as he swayed back and forth on his stool. "Playing around with all these gimmicks and tomfoolery and tricks and stuff… whatever happened to just clashing fists, swords, or pistols like real men?"

"If it's any consolation, Straw Hat sounds almost as frustrated as you are," the nearby bartender pointed out.

"Urgh… that's some mercy, but even with the motive he has, he still agreed to the game," Rayleigh grumbled, tossing back his empty bottle onto the growing pile and reaching for another. "And besides, I know about the Groggy Ring. The only way he could have ended that early was by playing even dirtier than the foxes." Having acquired a new bottle, the Dark King yanked the cork out with his teeth and promptly knocked back a mouthful. "Good grief. Things used to be so simple, too."

"Even so, is one crew's Davy Back Fight trickery really enough to make you want to drink this much?"

"Check the month," Rayleigh replied.

Frowning as the SBS reported Luffy getting back on the deck with his powers, Shakky did so. She proceeded to stiffen for a moment before giving Raleigh a sympathetic look. "I see. Take care on your trip to Loguetown. And pour one out for me as well."

Rayleigh cracked a sad smile around the bottle's muzzle.

"Aha! Straw Hat takes the captain's bait, and so the fight moves into the ship itself! Now we can't even see what's going on!"

"Maybe not, Ito, but we can still hear it, and that's half of the equation! Right, Soundbite?"

"I AM ZE GREATEST IN Za Warudo!"

-0-

"Alright, so courtesy of Soundbite's abilities, we'll be broadcasting everything that happens in the ship. Buuut to keep things fair, we won't broadcast what Foxy and Luffy say to each other. I mean, our captain doesn't need trickery to win, really."

"HEEHEEHEEhoohoohoo! BURN!"

"Your faith in your captain is admirable, but we'll see how well he actually does!"

"And here's hoping it's a flashy smackdown with that rubber idiot on the receiving end!" Buggy barked with a pump of his fist. "Go, my brother in flashiness! Pound that rubber-brained bastard's head into the ground!"

"Hmm hmm, yes, best of luck to—hm?" Alvida paused in her chuckling as a thought struck her. "Wait a second… Buggy, you're always quite specific when you write in the logbook, yes?"
"But of course!" The pirate-clown raised his nose in a sniff, unwittingly causing a tsunami on the opposite side of the world in the process. "I might embellish and make things read as slightly flashier than they really were, but I never lie! Believe me…" Buggy's expression became ashen, visible even under his makeup. "The first mate of the first ship I worked on made sure of that…"

"Right…" Alvida cocked her eyebrow at the reaction before continuing. "But anyway, I read your log awhile back, and the thought occurs to me… besides stabbing Roronoa and doing some damage to Luffy's hat, did you ever actually manage to land a—" She stopped as she processed the disembodied hand holding a knife mere millimeters in front of her eye.

"Your Smooth-Smooth skin is supposed to protect you from any attacks, be they bladed or blunted," Buggy stated in a tone of frigid calm. "But I'm personally curious as to whether or not it protects your eyes if something is shoved in hard enough, too. So help me, Alvida, if you don't stop provoking me, I'll find out, and you may find yourself looking more like a stereotypical pirate. Am I clear?"

Alvida did not flinch, but neither did she continue to speak. Buggy withdrew the blade with a huff. "And for the record, I did draw blood, and more importantly, I got him to be serious. That's at least more than you ever did."

Buggy took great satisfaction in the ugly scowl that marred Alvida's face.

"Anyway, it would appear that Luffy's still looking for Foxy, and is currently searching the ship's rather impressive gun deck. Ah, but wait! A closing door has indicated Foxy's position!"

"A door on the gun deck, huh?" Ito grinned eagerly. "Then that can only mean the nefarious Spike Hell trap! It looks like Luffy's in quite a bind, because if he rushes in blindly, he'll suffer the consequences of that which lies beyond!"

"Huh? There's a trap beyond the door?" Luffy asked in surprise. "Wow, thanks, wide-mouth!"

"Wait, wha—YOU'RE STILL BROADCASTING WHAT WE'RE SAYING TO THEM!?"

"Yes ah am, yes ah am!"

"WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED TO HIM NOT NEEDING TRICKERY!?"

"Well, first off, I only said that we wouldn't broadcast their voices to each other, and second, while Luffy doesn't need trickery to win, I'm sure as hell not above perpetrating it for his sake! I'm sure that's a concept you're familiar with, no?"

"Grrrgghh…"

BOOM!

"Gah! What was tha—? DID HE JUST FIRE A CANNON INSIDE OUR SHIP?!!"

"ARE YOU TRYING TO KILL ME, STRAW HAT?!"

"Hey, widemouth said that there was a trap in there, so I just didn't go in!"

"Widemou—? ITOMIMIZU, WHEN I GET OUT OF HERE I'M GOING TO USE YOU AS A PUNCHING BAG!"

"MEEP!"
"Oh, yeah, now I REMEMBER! HE REMINDS ME OF BEAKER! GEEZE, THAT'S BEEN BOTHERING ME ALL DAY..."

"Well, now that you mention it..."

"I AM NOT A MUPPET!"

"...Well, that's a phrase I never thought I'd hear again," Buggy muttered to himself.

Alvida shot him a bemused look. "What the hell kind of ship did you serve on before going independent?"

"That, my dear, is a secret that I fully intend to take to my grave," Buggy replied, halfway between smug and serious.

"Huh. Wasn't sure you'd know that one," Cross muttered. "Anyway, where were we? Oh, right. Luffy was hunting down Foxy so that he could pound his face in."

"Not for long, he's not," Foxy muttered, along with the sound of a closing door. "Foxy Face Transformation!"

-0-

"Oh, hello, dear!"

The members of Thriller Bark's locally infamous Mysterious Four stared at the Transponder Snail in a combination of shock and horror as an ear-achingly falsetto voice scratched at their ears.

"What brings you here, hm?" Foxy asked faux-meekly, his voice quite obviously wavering from fatigue. "A-Are you numb? Is it your skull? That's it, isn't it, you're a numbskull?"

"That is both one of the best and worst medical pun-insults that I have heard in all my life," Hogback deadpanned.

"...I'm not sure what's more pathetic, the fact that Foxy thought that would fool anyone, or the fact that it apparently has if he's actually still using it," Absalom muttered, and then frowned deeper as the sound of a door closing and footfalls came across the connection. "And there we are, Straw Hat's leaving, more testament to his sheer—"

"OH, WAIT! That face..."

"Oh? Is there hope for Straw Hat yet?" Moria wondered aloud.

"HEY! ARE YOU HIS SISTER?"

"Apparently not," Hogback sighed.

"Well, well, it would seem that Foxy's utterly pathetic ploy has actually managed to work! How any mask, especially one that horrific, could possibly hide that amount of ugliness, utterly boggles the mind!"

The sound of someone slumping to their knees, along with a heavy metallic clunk, was clearly transmitted. "I wish I was a sea slug..." a pathetic voice whimpered.

"...Perona, when did you expand your range that much?" Absalom asked the bemused Ghost Princess.
"I didn't. He's just got the lowest self-esteem I've ever heard of," she said dryly.

A sudden THWACK cracked over the connection, causing the snail to wince. "OW! WATCH IT, ITO!"

"WILL YOU SHUT THE HELL UP ALREADY!?" the opposing commentator snarled back. "BOSS, YOU'RE NOT UGLY! YOU'RE WONDERFUL! YOUR WHOLE CREW IS BEHIND YOU!"

"Fehfehfehfeh!" Foxy piped up smugly. "But of course I am! None are greater than Silver Fox Foxy!"

A heavy sweatdrop hung from Perona's head. "Make that the most delicate self-esteem I've ever heard of."

"Wait a second… YOU'RE FOXY, AREN'T YOU!?" Luffy suddenly roared.

"… Whoops," Foxy and Ito chorused, before a series of rapid footfalls and doors opening came across the connection. Finally, it stopped.

"I'm gonna kick your—"

"W-WAIT, WAIT! C-Can you at least wait long enough for me to take my pain medication?" Foxy hastily begged.

Luffy's grumble was audible, but he didn't deny him. And a few seconds later, there was the sound of a bottle opening…

SPROING! "AH, what the—?"

"SLOW-SLOW BEAM, DINGUS!"

"… Soundbite? I think I recognized that sound. Please tell me that I didn't. PLEASE tell me that Foxy didn't just outsmart Luffy with literally the oldest trick in the book."

"I wish I could, Cross. I REALLY WISH I could," Soundbite moaned. "He fell for the PAPER SNAKES IN A BOTTLE!"

"Luffy, you complete fucking moron."

"Fehfehfehfehfeh! That's the one trick I've kept that's never worked before, it was just too much of a classic to discard! I honestly didn't think I'd ever use it as more than a party favor!" Foxy cackled. "Now then, in return for all the pain you've dealt me… NINE-TAILED RUSH!"

"AAAAAAAAARGH!" Luffy slowly cried out in pain as yet another round of impacts rang out.

Absalom winced and rubbed his jaw sympathetically. "I have an inch of leather protecting me, and even I think that hurts…"

"Kishishishi!" Moriah snickered grimly as he bared his fangs. "It just goes to show: never underestimate the tricksters! Represent, Foxy! Kishishishi!"

Finally, the barrage halted, and Foxy was left panting and wheezing. "Eesh… that took it out of me… never had to do so many Rushes in succession… credit to you, Straw Hat, you're one of the toughest fights I've had in years. But now… we move to something horrible." The sound of mechanical grinding, followed by the echoey howl of wind. "Ah, but of course, it's not alive. After all, that
would be against the rules. I presume the snail can attest to that, no?"

"Soundbite?"

"It might not be alive BUT SOMETHING'S SURE THE HELL DOWN THERE!! WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT THING!!?"

"Your captain is about to find out. Time's up, Straw Hat."

The sound of fists smacking into rubbery flesh rang out anew, and Luffy cried out in both pain and panic for a second before his voice suddenly took on an echoey tone.

-o-

"Sounds like Straw Hat's in SUPER! trouble now. I wonder what Split-head's gonna do next?" wondered a man in a very revealing outfit.

"I'm wondering what he deems so horrible that he purposely led Straw Hat to it. It must be a powerful weapon," said another man wearing half a pair of unique goggles, his perpetual grin faded in favor of a thoughtful expression.

"Ugh… man, that hurt…" Luffy groaned miserably before blinking in confusion. "Wait… where am I? And where's that dumb fox!?"

"Up here, Straw Hat!" Foxy's voice suddenly called out. "And to answer your first question, you're deep in what I call the belly of the beast! Allow me to introduce you to the pinnacle of over a dozen shipwrights and inventors from all corners of the world collaborating to create the perfect war machine!" A mechanical howl of fury rang out throughout the room. "THE GORILLA PUNCHER #13!"

"Huh… that's actually kinda cool," Luffy whistled. "One question though."

"What?"

"Is the gorilla head necessary?"

"…Necessary?" Foxy repeated.

"Whatever that thing is, it has a gorilla head?" Mozu asked in a dull tone.

"They built 13 of them?" Kiwi concurred.

"Luffy actually knows a word with that many syllables?" Nami's voice asked in the same tone.

"COMPLETELY IRRELEVANT!" Foxy roared, fury obvious in his voice. "YOU WON'T BE LAUGHING MUCH WHEN I BEAT YOU INTO A PULP! GORILLA PUNCHER #13, DEPLOY!"

A whiffing sound came from the call, followed by Soundbite's confused voice.

"ITO, what exactly is THAT THING??"

"Ah, I didn't think I'd ever get to answer that question!" Ito said happily. "The Gorilla Puncher #13 is the Boss' ultimate weapon! A 36-foot-tall machine with 25 five-foot tall boxing gloves attached to the front! They deploy at the boss' orders, firing hard, firing fast, and just outright firing, bursting into flames on impact! What's more, the room it's in has a mirror in the back to reflect the Boss'
Slow-Slow Beams, making it nearly impossible to dodge the gloves! And, as the final touch, it's even capable of moving on caterpillar treads!"

"Yeah, at what sounds like A MILLIMETER A MINUTE!"

"Unfortunately, that's because the only way to power the machine is via peddling! As glorious as our boss is, he's not really what you'd call a 'leg man'."

Franky suddenly stiffened before taking a piece of paper out and starting to sketch on it, his face a mask of concentration.

"What's up, Big Bro?" the Square Sisters asked as they looked over his shoulder.

"Well, you know, all things considered, while I'm SUPER inclined to root for the Straw Hats..." Franky cracked his neck side to side with an eager grin. "I can't help but feel inspired by that machine. I think I might even go for an upgrade!"

"Yeah, like that wasn't obvious before," cut in Cross's wry tone.

"OKAY, NOW YOU'RE JUST STARTING TO PISS ME OFF, CROSS!" Foxy raged.

"Would you prefer I leave that to Soundbite instead?"

"Ooooooh—!" the snail started to sing eagerly.

"… Withdrawn," Foxy grumbled. "NOW, BACK TO MY WELL-DESERVED VENGEANCE! NORO-NORO BEA—!"

SMASH!

"GAH! THE MIRROR! DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW MUCH THAT COST, YOU BASTARD!?"

"About a tenth of Porche's cosmetic budget?" Chopper cut in.

"WATCH IT, YOU LITTLE—…huh. Actually, that's about right," Porche admitted.

"I just took Nami's usual wardrobe budget and doubled it."

THWACK!

"OW! DAMN IT, I WASN'T EVEN AMPED THAT TIME!"

"STOP GOING THROUGH MY RECEIPTS FOR SCRAP-PAPER, MISTLETOE-BREATH!"

"YOU MEAN HOLLY, AND I DON'T EVEN LIKE IT!"

"ALRIGHT, THAT'S ENOUGH FROM THE PEANUT GALLERY! WE'RE TRYING TO HAVE A CAPTAIN'S DUEL HERE!" Foxy roared furiously.

"Oh, fine. We'll let LUFFY get back to POUNDING YOU!"

"Right! GUM-GUM PISTOL!"

The sound of a heavy blow hitting flesh rang out, followed by a cry of pain.
"GAH! That's it, Straw Hat, you're through! Slow-Slow Beam!"

"Woah! Oh, crap!"

"HA, that fancy footwork won't help you anymore! GORILLA PUNCH SOLID GOLD HITS!
And then, the connection became filled with a symphony of steel hitting flesh and fire burning, followed by a large explosion. A large amount of coughing later…

"Wow, what an intense match!" Cross whistled in awe. "This isn't the hardest fight Luffy's had in his life, but damn if it isn't one of the most cinematic!"

"That's an understatement! This is the closest to up close and personal that I've ever been to a beating from the Gorilla Puncher!" Itomimizu cried out eagerly. "But I'd know that detonation anywhere, and even if I can't see through all of this smoke, I know that there's only one outcome to this! Two forms are emerging, and…"

There was a second of bated breath before cheers erupted… from the Foxy Pirates.

"And the Boss is the only man left standing, while Straw Hat Luffy lies burned on the ground! It looks like the match is over!"

"LUFFY!" over half of the Straw Hats cried out.

"Holy crap…" Zambai breathed as the Franky Family fell silent.

Franky, meanwhile, was just as quiet, his eyes shadowed as he bowed his head, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Well, Straw Hat Luffy put up one hell of a fight, the toughest we've ever seen by far, but it looks like this match is over!"

"Only if you're willing to blatantly disregard the rules, wide-mouth."

"Huh? What the heck are you talking about, Cross?!"

"What am I talking about? I'm talking about the fact that this fight doesn't end until either a Captain's left the ring or one of them is no longer able to fight, so you better not even think about touching that bell, because we're sure as hell not done yet!"

"But Luffy is—!"

"HE'S UP! LUFFY'S GOTTEN UP!"

"HE WHAT!?!"

"HE'S WHAT!?!" the Franky Family roared in unison, shaking the Franky House down to its foundations.

"THAT'S WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT!" Cross roared in approval.

"I-I CAN'T BELIEVE WHAT I'M SEEING!" Itomimizu screamed in both shock and terror. "Straw Hat Luffy just took a beating that would kill most any other man alive… AND YET HE'S STILL STANDING AND READY FOR A FIGHT!"

"H-Holy crap..." Zambai stammered out incredulously.
"What the hell is he made of, rubber cement!?" Kiev questioned.

"Nah, it's the afro. That's what's giving him the strength he needs," Tamagon said, nodding sagely.

"So... you got back up," Foxy wheezed, obviously as much on his last legs as Luffy. "Guess there must be something in that afro after all."

There was suddenly a slightly electronic whoosh, followed by Luffy grunting in confusion.

"A lot of good it'll do you, though," Foxy grinned in a smug manner. "I just got you with my Slow-Slow sword. It lets me channel Slowmo photons into a concentrated beam. Less area of impact, faster deployment. As it is, your arms and legs are frozen. Now... let's finish this. MEGATON NINE-TAILED RUSH! RUSH! RUSH!"

The previous beatdowns had been brutal, but this... this was just insane. It sounded as though an entire mob of people was wailing on Luffy, wrought metal smashing into rubbery flesh over and over again.

Finally, the barrage ended with the sound of a body crashing to the floor.

The connection was filled with the sound of labored panting before, slowly, a wheezy chuckle started up.

"Fehfehfeh, fehfeh... eh?"

Leather scraped against wood, flesh groaned in protest, and then a second panting breath joined Foxy's.

"S-S-Straw Hat is up again!" Ito shrieked fearfully. "Even after taking so many blows... how is this possible!?"

"...Or is it more than just the afro after all?" Tamagon breathed.

"...damn..." Foxy eventually bit out. "Damn, damn, DAMN SNOT-NOSED ROOKIE! SLOW-SLOW BEAM!"

There was a slight grunt of annoyance more than anything...

"TAKE A HINT AND STAY DOWN, DAMN IT! MEGATON NINE-TAILED RUUUUSH!"

And then the barrage came again, sounding even worse than the first, if that was at all possible.

Once again it ended, and once again only one person could be heard panting. "You did good, rookie... You fought hard..." Foxy wheezed heavily. "But this... is the end of the line."

The Franky House was silent as Foxy started to shuffle away.

"Luffy, come on! Get up! Keep fighting!" Usopp called out.

"Get up, Luffy!" yelled Conis.

"YOU CAN DO IT, LUFFY!" cried Chopper.

"SHOW US THE WILLPOWER THAT BEAT THE LIGHTNING-BASTARD!" Su shrieked.

"C'mon, Luffy, get up and pound that fox!" Lassoo snarled.
"It's not over yet, this is not over yet..." Cross growled beneath his breath.

"FIGHT, DAMN IT, FIIIIIGHT!"

And yet, nothing happened.

"Oh my God..." Mozu whispered.

"D-Did he actually—?" Kiwi started to say—

SLAM!

—before she was interrupted by two massive fists crashing down on both sides of the Transponder Snail.

"GET UP, LUFFY!" Franky roared at the top of his lungs, glaring nails at the snail.

"B-Big bro!?” Zambai stammered in confusion.

"Damn it all, Straw Hat, get the hell up!" the cyborg snarled, glaring bloody murder at the snail. "I know that we've never actually met, I know that you can't hear me and I know that this is SUPER! crazy..." Franky grit his jaw as the ghostly whistle of a sea train roared in his ears. "But damn it, I know for a fact that people like you don't give up easy! You don't get taken down by a beating, you don't buckle under pressure, and you sure as hell don't give up! So get up, damn it! Get up and keep fighting! Get up and pound this bastard's head in!"

"Big bro..." the Franky Family breathed in collective awe. Said awe intensified as a very recognizable sound came across the connection, followed by a weak but firm voice.

"What...” Foxy breathed in dull horror before roaring in both fury and panic. "WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU!?"

"I won't lose... a single member of my crew... EVEN... IF IT KILLS ME!"

"Ah... ah... UNBELIEVABLE! STRAW HAT LUFFY HAS GOTTEN UP AGAIN!"

"THAT'S WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT! KICK HIS ASS, CAPTAIN!"

"GO, STRAW HAT, GO!" Franky roared, taking his signature pose as he did so.

"GO, STRAW HAT!" the Square Sisters echoed, mirroring Franky's movements.

"LU-FFY! LU-FFY! LU-FFY!" the Franky Family began to chant.

-o-

Elsewhere on the island of Water 7, one of the top five Galley-La shipwrights had moved to an isolated location to listen to the SBS.

He'd decided that it was a prudent move to seclude himself from his 'coworkers', on account of how the pirate's admittedly admirable determination was starting to have an effect on him.

More specifically, Rob Lucci's self-control was very swiftly whittling away, as evidenced by the way he was starting to tremble and the immense effort it took to keep his expression neutral and his size constant.
He'd been barraged with flaming steel gauntlets, and gotten up. He'd been barraged with spiked gauntlets twice, and he'd gotten up twice. And now, after briefly swaying the entire opposing crew in his favor, after the deceptively powerful pirate had struck him with what was supposedly his best shot, a punch at the speed of a cannonball and then the cannonball itself, he was getting up for a fourth time. And the words he spoke next…

"I'm… going to… win!"

Fatigued, but spoken with earthshaking resolve. And at that point, Lucci's control failed him, and his lips moved into a feral and bloodthirsty grin. His blood, his adrenaline, every inch of his body felt like it was on fire, and for all he tried to stay cool and calm, he couldn't deny the primal part of himself that absolutely loved it.

"You… win!?!" Foxy spat ferociously. "As if! You're barely staying on your feet! But if you want a fight…" There was a rush of shoes on wood. "THEN I'M HAPPY TO OBLIGE! MEGATON NINE-TAILED—!"

There was a second of panting from Straw Hat, but then there was a hiss of breath. "Gum-Gum!" the pirate snarled out, a metric ton of steel in his voice.

"RUUUUSH!!"

"GAAATIIIIING!!"

The noise that followed could only be described as absolute brutality. Two flurries of punches meeting one another head on, fist against fist, skull against skull, the true totality of strength that both fighters could bring to bear.

"THIS IS UNPRECEDENTED!" Itomimizu called out in awe. "BOTH FIGHTERS ARE GOING ALL OUT, PUTTING EVERY FIBER OF THEIR BEINGS INTO ONE! FINAL! BRAWL!"

"THIS THE ULTIMATE SLUGFEST, PEOPLE!" Cross proclaimed in much the same tone, shouting to make himself heard. "FISTS ARE FLYING FASTER THAN THEY HAVE ANY RIGHT TO AND BOTH CONTESTANTS ARE TAKING A POUNDING! LUFFY MIGHT BE ON HIS LAST LEGS BUT FOXY IS STILL MANAGING TO TAKE A LICKING AND KEEP ON KICKING! THIS IS THE DEFINITION OF A ROYAL RUMBLE, RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW! THIS! IS! CRUNCH TIME!"

The punches continued, but slowed slightly, barely discernable. More obvious was that Foxy's punches were the ones slowing down, more and more of his grunts of pain and less and less of his sharpened punches coming through.

"How… can a dying man… fight so hard!?" Foxy spat, hacking out a glob of blood. "Grghh… Enough... ENOUGH! THIS ENDS NOW! SLOW-SLOW BEA—!"

Without any warning whatsoever, the sound of the brawl died, leaving nothing but absolute silence.

"W-What the—?" Itomimizu breathed numbly. "B-Both fighters are just standing there…"

Murmurs of confusion started to drift over the connection. Then the sound of something hitting the floor.

"Wha—STRAW HAT IS DOWN!?!" Itomimizu cried joyously. "STRAW HAT IS DOWN AND THE BOSS IS STILL STANDING!"
"But Luffy is the only one moving!" Cross cut in, cackling like a cut-rate stage villain.

"Wait, wha—WHAT?" the Foxy's commentator gasped in shock.

"Daaaaaamn yooooouuuuuu," Foxy's voice ground out slower than expected.

"H-HE'S RIGHT! THE BOSS IS FROZEN! B-B-BUT HOW?!

Then came a clinking sound, followed by Soundbite roaring with laughter. "THE MIRROR! LUFFY'S AFRO SNAGGED A PIECE WHEN HE smashed it!"

"HAIL TO THE AFRO, BABY!" Cross concurred.

"This… is… the end…" Luffy ground out.

"Soundbite, care to do the honors?"

"YES, CROSS, I WOULD! Ahem… FINISH HIM!"

A sound of whirling rubber, and Foxy letting out a slow beginning of what was clearly meant to be a scream of terror.

"GUM-GUM… FLAIL!"

WHAM!

The sound of leather connecting with flesh, but nothing more. Luffy's panting became audible, and he started walking away.

"By Jones himself," Itomimizu breathed numbly.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have t-minus fifteen…" Cross breathed reverentially before grinning like a madman. "People of the world, I ask you to join me in the countdown to VICTORY! SAY IT WITH ME NOW, ALL TOGETHER! TWELVE! ELEVEN!"

The edges of the table were suddenly pulped by Lucci's claws due to the intensity of his grip, and saliva dribbled from his slavering jaws as he towered over the now utterly terrified snail. If he'd had any doubts in his mind before about what he would do after this mission was complete, they were well and truly dead now. The second his mission was complete, the second he was free, he would cash in every vacation day he'd been saving up for as long as he'd been alive, every last one of them, all for the express purpose of seeking out Straw Hat Luffy for the fight of his life.

"Ten," the leopard-man growled eagerly.

-o-

The leather-faced man was giving Eneru a run for his money with his expression as he took in the broadcast coming from the snail in Enies Lobby's central office. Two of the other three inhabitants of the room had their jaws dropped as well, but were focused more on the fact that the Carnivorous Zoa had instinctively shifted to his hybrid form, unknowingly replicating the reaction of his rival several knots away.

"Nine," the wolf-man grinned, while his leader trembled as he remembered the geography of the local waters.
"EIGHT!" cheered every patron and employee in Takoyaki 8, Hachi being particularly exuberant.

"SEVEN, DO-RE-MI-SO!" Ryuboshi and Manboshi twirled in synch, causing their big-yet-younger sister to giggle as a result.

Beneath the ocean's surface in a space that most of the world did not know of, a man with a golden hook in place of his left hand smirked in response to the broadcast. He bore no grudge against the rookie that had annihilated his plans, but up until now, every broadcast had only reinforced his opinion of him as a complete and utter moron. But here was the proof that losing to him hadn't been a fluke brought about purely by extreme overconfidence. Here was… vindication.

"Six," Crocodile stated, smirking.

"Five," a trenchcoat-wearing man stated reluctantly at his partner's prompting. The young painter and the young dragon tamer nearby chuckled at him, while everyone else apart from the stoic first mate was crowing in euphoria, none more than the captain.

"FOUR!" cheered a trio of exuberant children who, along with an unusually interested butler, were all clad in afros, much to the butler's mistress' amusement.

"THREE!" a past-his-prime Vice Admiral roared in drunken exuberance, joined by his equally sloshed students.

Two of the Marines who were watching the impromptu party were sporting sweatdrops.

"Weren't those two brats drinking grape juice?"

"Yes. Yes, they were."

"TWO!" two sons and one daughter of the sea chorused as they pumped their fists victoriously, the daughter's dreadnought of a ship firing a deafening cannonade to punctuate the words.

In a country of pure white, a man who was changing the world stood on the balcony of his command center, staring out at the horizon even as his subordinates (those who weren't wearing noise-cancelling headphones as they continued to work, anyway) celebrated within.

Nevertheless, for all that he appeared apathetic, Dragon tilted his head down and grinned a grin that had caused the Elder Stars many a headache.
"One."

"ZERO!" I bellowed at the top of my lungs.

THWACK! "GYAGH!"

The effect was instantaneous: Foxy's face caved in as he was sent literally flying, the delayed impact launching him so high into the air that he was level with Ito and I.

I smiled as wide as I could manage as I watched Foxy fly up up up... before reversing momentum and falling down down down down...

SPLASH!

And impacting the water.

I watched bubbles drift up from where he'd landed for a second before popping to my feet (which earned me an indignant "Watch it!" from Chuchun in the process) and pumping my fist in the air. "THE WINNER BY RING-OUT AND AN ABSOLUTE ASS-LOAD OF SHEER FUCKING GUTS!" I cried through my smile before pointing down at my captain, who was posing for the crowd. "MONKEY! D! STRAAAAW-HAAAT LUUUFFYYY!"

"YEAAAAAAAAH!" the rubber man bellowed.

I sighed, grinning widely. "Well, ladies and gentlemen of the world... what you witnessed today? That is the willpower needed if you're going to pledge your life to the pursuit of Gold Roger's throne and the world's greatest treasure. And once we wrap up the rest of this game, we'll get back to the pursuit of that. It'll only get harder from here, but I'm certain that we will overcome anything that this insane world throws at us. So, with our captain vindicated and his vengeance acquired, I think we're gonna end this here. Until next time, this is Jeremiah Cross—"

"And SOUNDBITE!"

"—Of the SBS, signing off!"

I replaced the transceiver before letting out a breath, and turning to Itomimizu again, a tired smile on my face. "A good match?"

The Foxy Pirates' announcer smiled grudgingly. "The best I've ever seen. You and your crew are all right."

"Same to you, wide-mouth!" I grinned, before gesturing at the island. "Now then, I'm starting to get airsick, so what say we get back on solid ground?"

"Oh, yeah, sure thi..." Ito trailed off slowly before snapping his eyes wide in horror. "OH NO, THE BOSS!"

"HURRY, SAVE THE BOSS!" Porche cried desperately.

I started to snicker as I watched the Foxy's scramble to the front of the stadium...

"DIVE, CHUCHUN, DIVE!"

Before snapping my eyes wide in panic. "Wait, what?! Nononono—!"
"ARGHRBRLRGH!" "IT BURNS, IT BURNS!"

-One-

One long period of resuscitation, medical treatment, and well-employed shipwrighting skills later, the Foxy Pirates were slowly packing up the festival that accompanied the Davy Back Fight, us Straw Hats watching and wrapping up our own treatments.

"Damn it, I wasn't even on the stands..." I muttered around the bandage strip I was holding in my mouth as I wrapped it around my arm and yanked, snapping the bandage from its roll.

"Well, look on the bright side!" Chopper prompted as he scrubbed the salt out of his fur.

"Alright, venison-breath, I'll bite," Su huffed as she squeezed her tail dry. "What bright side?"

Chopper nodded his head at a nearby bucket, whose lip Soundbite had parked himself over and was currently retching into. "Now we know that Soundbite's aversion to salt is entirely psychosomatic and it only makes him ill instead of outright killing him."

Soundbite raised his eyestalks out of the bucket to glare bloody murder at Chopper. "Cold—HURK!" The snail's eyes went wide with horror as his cheeks bulged, hurriedly shoving his head back in the bucket and retching again. "Ugh... cold FUCKING COMFORT."

"You know, far be it from me to complain about it not being that easy to kill Soundbite, but how does that even make sense?" I wondered.

"Natural selection," Chopper answered with a glint in his eyes. "Transponder Snails have been in use on ships for communications for years. Those with too-weak constitutions and too-mucus-y bodies fried and those who were tough enough survived." Chopper then blinked and paused for a second before continuing. "And for the record, that resistance is against seawater, where the salt's diluted. I'd still recommend avoiding the pure stuff like the plague."

"Noted..." I said, slowly scooting away from the doctor.

"Knock it off," Chopper rolled his eyes dismissively. "I know that I was using the madness voice. I've been trying to get it under control recently! I've actually been making some great progress too. Watch!" Aaaand there was the spark again. "So long as I keep the partition down for only a minute or so at a time, I can keep my mind sane and under control, so that I concentrate on the task at hand rather than going on a tangent about bio-technological improvement, advanced chemical warfare, vivisection, live TESTING—!"

THWACK!

"OW, DANG IT!... Thanks, Boss."

"Looks like you need more practice," the Dugong dryly stated.

"No, really? I hadn't noticed," Lassoo huffed as he coughed out a few tongues of fire.

"CAN WE GET ON WITH IT?!" Foxy suddenly howled at us.

"Ah, right! Straw Hat still has a decision to make! Who among the Foxy Pirates will he take for his crew?" Itomimizu asked, still on his loudspeaker.
"Yeah, yeah, hold your horses," I said, waving my hand as I jabbed my thumb at a snoring Luffy. "We wanted to wait for Luffy to wake up naturally, but if you insist... Chopper?"

The human-reindeer gave me a salute. "You got it, Cross." He dug a syringe of slightly... moving liquid out of his pack and delicately positioned it over Luffy's chest.

Then he swapped to his Muscle Point and rammed the syringe into Luffy's chest, discharging its contents into him and causing him to jolt before leaping up onto his feet.

"Impressive bedside manna," Carue snickered.

"HE LEARNED from the best," Soundbite snarked queasily.

"Get off my back, Luffy's skin might be rubbery, but it's as thick as ox-hide! I need to use as much muscle as possible to get through to him! I'm pretty sure that you must know what that's like."

"Withdrawn," Nami, Vivi and I chorused.

"Whoo! Better than smelling salts!" Luffy roared as he opened his eyes. "Ah! Wait, this isn't Makino's room!"

I opened my mouth and shut it with a click in the same instant. "So many questions. And absolutely none are in any way relevant to the issue at hand." I jabbed my thumb at the Foxy's gathered crew. "You won, captain, so now we need to pick one of these mooks to have on our crew."

"Oh, that's easy," Luffy said. "I choose...!"

The Foxy Pirates collectively sucked in a breath, waiting for the verdict that would change one of their lives forever...

"Hold it!"

When Usopp's voice caused them all to facefault at once.

"ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME RIGHT NOW!" Foxy demanded.

"Just wait a second!" Usopp shot back before giving Luffy a hesitant look. "Luffy, Cross, I just want you both to know that I trust you two with my life, I really do, but..." He spread his arms helplessly. "This is just insane, even by our standards! Are you really sure that you guys want to do this?"

Luffy looked pensive for a moment, but then grinned. "Don't worry, Usopp, it'll be fine! If they try anything, we can fight them off! Right?"

"...And there's his deadly charisma again," Usopp grumbled.

"And besides," I added in. "Unless you've missed it, I've been on something of a hot streak. A few hiccups, sure, but come on, don't you trust me?"

The sniper gave me a flat look. "You, I have much less confidence in."

I gave him a dry look right back. "Well, fuck you, too." I sighed wearily before spinning my fingers. "Alright, enough chit-chat, let's get this over with. Captain, if you wouldn't mind?"

"Right!" Luffy nodded before pointing into the crowd.

Or rather, pointing at its front. "Foxy!"
For a few seconds, the entirety of the Foxy Pirates froze. Then they erupted in indignant and desperate responses.

"CAPTAIN, NO!"

"THIS CAN'T BE HAPPENING!"

"CROSS, YOU VINDICTIVE BASTARD!" Porche shrieked, a scant few newtons from snapping her baton.

"This isn't funny, this isn't funny, this isn't funny…" Hamburg muttered on repeat.


"Ahem?"

"You and Monda lost that court case, Capote, I don't have to say sapient-ity, so back off!"

"Damn."

Foxy, for his part, stood silently for a moment before slowly approaching Luffy with a look of resignation that was slowly turning to peace. "I suppose that if I'm following a captain who can speak to Whitebeard without so much as a flinch, I can't exactly complain," he said. Then he bowed to his new captain. "Let it never be said that I do not respect the code of the Davy Back Fight. I hereby swear my loyalty to the Straw Hat Pirates."

"Perfect." I clasped my hands eagerly. "Now, follow us onto the Merry. We have a lot to talk about—"

"A-AS ACTING CAPTAIN OF THE FOXY PIRATES!"

All attention snapped over to the mass of Foxy Pirates, where a voice had shrieked out.

Porche's head was bowed as her chest heaved, shivers racking her entire body before she looked up, rage and determination flooding her face as she jabbed a finger at Luffy, "I HEREBY CHALLENGE THE STRAW HAT PIRATES TO A ONE-COIN DAVY BACK FIGHT! W-WE HAVE MORE TO OFFER, IT'S PLAIN TO SEE THAT YOU NEED A SHIPwright FOR THAT BOAT OF YOURS! IT'S ON ITS LAST LEGS, SO IF YOU DON'T WANT IT TO SINK, YOU HAD… better…"

Porche trailed off as she found nineteen murderous glares trained on her. And just like that, her determination faded, and she fell on her knees and began to sob. "W-Who am I kidding? We can't beat them… we'll never get our Boss back…"

"Hey now, let's not jump to conclusions here."

Attention shifted over to me as I casually waved my hand. "I mean, maybe you will and maybe you won't. The situation is… complicated, to say the least."

Foxy narrowed his eyes. "If this is all a ploy for you to 'steal' me only to kick me off the crew, so help me—!"

"No, no, nothing like that," I swiftly assured him before pointing at the Merry. "Just… come with us to the Merry. Bring Porche and…" I trailed off as I eyed the infamous Four-Legged Dasher's girth. "On second thought, leave Hamburg. We need someone to keep the peace anyways. Meanwhile," I
looked back at our crew. "We'll be joined by Luffy, Nami, Zoro, Vivi—"

"So, essentially, the brains behind the crew plus one?" Robin hummed innocently.

"Nice way of putting… it…" I glanced back at her. "There's some sort of insult in that question, isn't there?"

Robin just chuckled, and I huffed before turning around and starting to march towards the Merry, snatching Soundbite off of his bucket as I went. "Anyway, while we're doing business, everyone else will keep the peace here until we get back. Now…" I shot a vicious grin at Porche as I passed her. "Shall we go?"

---

A few minutes later, the eight of us were in the Merry's kitchen, some seated and some standing, with Sanji's well-prepared platter cart sitting a short distance away.

"OK, first things first, Foxy. Before we get to the serious business, I need your powers to help with something," I stated, bringing over the cart. "Luffy is somehow capable of devouring this entire thing in the time it takes to blink. Fire your beam at him so we can see how he does it in slow motion."

Foxy and Porche both looked at me with expressions that clearly said 'Are you kidding me?'

"I'm quite serious. Let's just find out how this works, then we can move on to the more important things, alright?"

Foxy shrugged as he aimed his hand at Luffy. "If you say so. Slow-Slow Beam!"

The photons flew out and tagged Luffy, Luffy reached for the cart—

—and the next thing I knew, he was licking his lips in satisfaction, said cart no longer in sight. I blinked, and looked around. Zoro, Nami, Vivi, and Soundbite were all looking just as confused as I was, while Foxy and Porche were both astonished.

"You weren't kidding. But… what just—?"

The sound of paper fluttering drew everyone's attention up, and I stiffened as a note came to slap me in the center of my face. The others who knew what it meant stiffened as well, while Foxy and Porche were touching the ground with their jaws.

I grabbed the note, scanned over it, and then my eyes narrowed. "There are things man was never meant to see. The secret behind Luffy's jaws is one of them. Be glad I managed to clock Kronos and grab that little stretch of time from existence, or else you'd have been TPK'd with your brains seeping out of your ears. Do try not to make me go back on what I said about favors again, because you won't be so lucky next time," I read flatly before looking up with a slightly haunted look. "…Let us never speak of this again," I stated calmly.

"Agreed," Zoro, Nami, Vivi, and Soundbite said together. I clapped my hands and turned back to Porche and Foxy, both of whom were looking distinctly ill-at-ease.

"Alright, putting that behind us, let's get down to business. Foxy, I'll be blunt: before we showed up here, neither I nor any of my crewmates would have chosen you or anyone else from your crew to add to ours unless there was absolutely no choice, and even then, we probably would have just dismissed you straightaway. But I spent most of my brief period as one of your subordinates in your ship's library, reading your log book."
They both suddenly looked much more alert as I started pacing back and forth, a grim smile playing across my face. "Quite an interesting story it told, too. Once upon a time, the Foxy Pirates were just a lowly, average pirate crew from the South Blue. They raided merchant ships, attacked small coastal towns—never did any actual grievous harm, mind you!" I snapped my finger up when I noticed my crewmates starting to glare bloody murder at the increasingly nervous Foxy's. "They only ever looted and pillaged. Not an excuse, but at least they were better than most."

My crewmates subsided… marginally, anyways.

"At any rate, that's the way their story went for a good while." I stopped pacing as I gave Foxy a look. "Until that day." Foxy looked away uncomfortably, obviously recognizing what I was referencing. "That fateful day, when you attacked a cargo ship in spite of the Marine Battleship escorting them. Obviously, as indicated by their continued existence, the Foxy's won, but for some reason, the events of that day cut off shortly after the ships' sighting. The next entry it has is the crew burning water for Reverse Mountain to enter the Grand Line, as though all Seven Warlords were at their heels.

"And ever since then, well…" I spread my arms to indicate the room. "We just lived it. It's been all Davy Back Fights all the time. Sometimes the crew has flights of fancy with people too appealing to pass up, but for the most part, it's the best of the best, and no-one and nothing less. The crew has just kept growing since they entered the Grand Line, growing stronger and larger, and yet!" I stabbed my finger into the air. "Counterintuitively, not seeming to have any interest in making a name for yourself beyond what you already have. Heck, even all of the gold and assets that you do manage to get your hands on just go straight to replenishing your supplies, and that to no more than the bare minimum necessary for survival—or at least, what you consider the bare minimum, with all that carnival food—or materials to expand your ship and weaponry."

I folded my arms smugly. "Do you know what that says to me? Do you know what conclusion I drew from that information, that made me risk and endure a very grievous ordeal to convince my crew that we should recruit you?"

Foxy stared at me. Gone was the arrogant, ego-driven blowhard. All that remained was the kind of cold and calculated mind it would take to master the Slow-Slow Fruit into a weapon of destruction. "What do you think happened that day, Jeremiah Cross?" he asked slowly.

I promptly zipped over to him and slammed my palms on the table, leaning over the top in order to look him in the eye. "I think that you found something that day," I hissed. "A logbook, maneuvering orders, a shipping manifesto, only you and your original crewmates know for certain, and quite frankly, the specifics are irrelevant. What matters is the conclusion that that information led you to. You got your hands on a tiny puzzle piece that day that you used to view the much larger picture."

"And… what would this larger picture be, Cross?" Vivi asked hesitantly.

My gaze never left Foxy as I answered. "That the Marines are gearing up for war."

It was like someone threw ice water on my crewmates. Or at least, most of my crewmates. Luffy was, of course, oblivious. I sighed, smirking, and locked eyes with him.

"Let me explain it to you this way, Luffy. Basically, Roger's last act didn't just inspire pirates to take to the Sea… he inspired everyone to come to the Grand Line."

Hoping that I hadn't imagined the spark of understanding I saw in Luffy's eyes, I continued. "Every last person with even a little power in all the Blues, those who listened, packed up, gathered their strength, and flooded into the Grand Line. There are weaklings like Krieg, like Bellamy, yes, but that
call also draws in people like Crocodile. People like Zoro, people like Ace, people like you. People with potential. Roger's last words drew in every wanderer, prodigy and powerhouse in the world to a single place, and it's still drawing them. The Grand Line is a powderkeg of pure, barely restrained power, and when it blows, it's going to rock the world to its core. Possibly literally."

From Luffy's awestruck expression and the fact that he didn't automatically call it a 'mystery,' he seemed to have gotten the memo, and I smirked as I turned back to Foxy.

"It's true, Foxy. Ever since the Great Pirate Era began, people have been winding up and up and up, preparing and tensing and waiting, waiting… waiting for the true storm Roger set in motion before he died to strike. And ever since you found that out, you've been doing the only thing you can: accumulating power and waiting for the day when it's time to batter down the hatches, nice and hard. You've been building a power base so that when the storm hits, you'll be able to survive with the power you've stockpiled."

I finished by leaning in close and giving Foxy a conspiratorial grin. "And that's something that you and I have in common."

Foxy and Porche both promptly stiffened in shock. "Wait, what?" the ex-captain blurted out.

"I learned about the storm too, Foxy," I smirked eagerly. "And ever since I joined this crew, I've been ramping us up just as much. I prompted 'Black Bart' Bartolomeo to enter the Grand Line, and he worships Luffy, which means that he's a very close ally. I inspired the Dugongs of Alabasta to form the Great Kung Fu Fleet. I have numerous contacts in the Marine Corps, and they are high in the ranks. I am actively ingratiating our crew with the people of the world, earning the favor of the populace while tearing out the World Government's foundations. I've even sown a seed with Dragon the Revolutionary. And now?" I jabbed a finger in Foxy's chest. "Now you, hopefully the crowning achievement of my career as the Straw Hat Pirates' PR officer thus far."

Foxy stared at me for a second, and then without warning, my collar was grabbed and I was wrenched around so that I was staring at Porche instead, whose expression was carefully controlled. "What are you proposing?" she asked slowly.

I blinked before nodding in understanding. "Ahh, I see, you're the 'face' of the operation in all aspects. Well, alright, then. If I may sit?" I proceeded to sit once she released me. "Alright, here's what I propose: dissolve the Foxy Pirates and then reform as a subdivision of the Straw Hat Pirates, kind of like how Whitebeard runs his own crew?" I looked at Luffy for approval, and after a minute of hard thinking (I could almost hear the gears grinding), he nodded in acceptance. With the captain's consent, I looked back at Porche, who was frowning thoughtfully.

"Cross."

I winced as Luffy's voice hit me like a blunt instrument. "Ah, okay… alright, let's try that again: reform as a subdivision of the Straw Hat Pirates, kind of like how Whitebeard runs his own crew?" I looked at Luffy for approval, and after a minute of hard thinking (I could almost hear the gears grinding), he nodded in acceptance. With the captain's consent, I looked back at Porche, who was frowning thoughtfully.

"So you want us for our muscle…"

"Incorrect," I promptly denied. "I want to incorporate your efforts into our own by making Foxy the Commander of the Straw Hat Pirates' Recruitment Division. You'd keep doing what you've been doing for the past few years, albeit with a few restrictions, only now you'll be doing it with a bigger group of allies supporting you… not that anyone besides said group will know that. We'll paint you a slightly different Jolly Roger; you'll know that it signifies your alliance, but the rest of the world will think that it's proof of our victory against you, and we allowed you to sail again only flying a flag
that proclaimed your greatest loss."

Porche exchanged looks with Foxy before refocusing on me. "You mentioned restrictions?"

"Rule the first," I held up a finger. "No more targeting innocent bystanders to goad people into accepting your challenge. That shit you tried to pull with Shelly was unacceptable. If you want to taunt and goad, that's all fine and dandy, too bad for the poor bastards, but if they're the kind of people you need to aim at civilians to piss them off, then I want you to extend an open hand, and not a closed one with brass knuckles, got it?"

Porche shot a glare over her shoulder. "Told you that that was a stupid plan."

Foxy ground his teeth for a second, but reluctantly nodded in agreement.

"Rule the second," I carried on, holding up a second finger. "Incorporate a Slaughter Rule. If you get over... one half of a crew or so, so many that the other crew can no longer operate, then the rest are allowed to join as well, no questions asked. No more crew-raiding and leaving the rest to rot, and if you need to start constructing a full-blown fleet to support them all, so be it."

Both Foxy and Porche winced at that. "That'll slaughter our budget..." Porche muttered to herself.

"Get a new one or find some alternative income," I bluntly stated. "Anyway, rule the third folds in with the second: no more snatching flags without redrawing them if they have them on their sails. I don't care how happy the ex-Fanged Frogs are now or how dickish their leftovers were, their blood is on your hands, and if you get any more, we won't be happy. And as we've no doubt already displayed..." Soundbite promptly bared his teeth and Zoro clicked an inch of his blade out its sheath. "You won't like us when we're anything but happy."

Porche grimaced and exchanged glances with her former captain. Then she looked back at us. "And what happens if I say no?"

"Then that will be when we dismiss Foxy from our crew," Vivi stated.

Both of the Foxy's looked quizzical, and the ex-captain spoke up. "So, let me get this straight. If Porche declines, you let me go, and I get to take command of my crew again. If Porche accepts, I take command of my crew again, but I stay under your restrictions from now on. Either way, nothing really changes?"

"Well, there is one difference," Nami said, smiling in a way that instantly put the two on their guard as she moved towards a corner of the room. "Usopp is the best artist on the crew, he's the one who drew our flag and sail. If you accept, we'll have him draw your new Jolly Roger. Otherwise, we'll leave it to Luffy."

She grinned like the cat that got the canary as she unfolded a specific black cloth from a chest in the room. "Here, we saved Luffy's attempt at drawing our Jolly Roger for future reference. Take a look."

Porche took one look at the cloth and promptly made most residents of Thriller Bark look alive by comparison. "... This is blackmail."

"DID YOU FORGET THE PIRATE GAME we played not ten minutes ago?"

Porche grimaced more, but Foxy...

"Fehfehfeh... FEHFEHFEHFEHFEH!"
Foxy started to laugh.

"FEHFEHFEHFEHFEH! I've spent years upon years honing my skills, and not only do you beat me at my own game three times in a row, but you offer me the ultimate support to advance my goals!" he cackled before pointing a finger at Luffy. "You, sir, are a soft-hearted moron, and you—" He pointed at me. "Are a smug, smart-ass son of a bitch, but, I must acknowledge that I'd have to be a fool to pass up a chance like this and risk having you as my enemies down the line. Porche?" Foxy turned his attention to the diva.

"Yes, bo—er…"

"No, that's the right title. As of this moment, you're conceding command of the Foxy Pirates to me and we're sailing under the flag of the Straw Hats. Incognito, but still." He cocked his head slightly. "Do you have a problem with that?"

She snapped into a salute without hesitation, a goofy grin on her lips. "Not a one, boss!"

"Welcome to the crew!" I said, clapping her on the back with a cheeky grin. "Now, how about you take Luffy out and break the news to the rest of the crew? I imagine there'll be some unrest and you'll need all the muscle you can get."

Porche grinned and began to saunter over to Luffy. "Well, then, Captain—" she began in a sultry voice.

"Oh, and by the way? Brain of a five-year-old and a libido to match."

"Damn, I just can't catch a break today," Porche grumbled as she snapped away from Luffy and marched out the door, leaving Luffy blinking in confusion.

"Uh… did I do something wrong?"

"SO MANY ANSWERS, so little time," Soundbite sighed wistfully.

"Just go and guarantee that the Foxy's don't revolt," I rolled my eyes before pausing and giving him a worried look. "To confirm, you're alright with this?"

Luffy blinked at me in honest confusion. "Well, sure, why not? This is all pretty much your thing, and it's not doing anything other than getting us more crewmates which isn't bad, so I don't see a problem. What about you guys?"

"All I see is a captain who's making way too much sense…" Zoro sighed heavily.

"As long as they keep to the conditions we've set, the benefits should outweigh the costs," Vivi shrugged.

"Hmm… well, as a subdivision, surely you'll be willing to give some monetary support to—" Nami began with a grin at Foxy.

"That," Foxy interrupted firmly. "Is Porche's department. As captain, I have the authority to change it, but she's the treasurer. In any case, don't expect too much; you have less than two dozen mouths to feed, only half of which need clothing, while I have more than 500 crewmates to feed and clothe, and counting!"

"Oh, trust me, I'll take that into consideration," Nami said, though the firmness with which she said it seemed to mollify Foxy. That firmness then faded into a downright lewd grin. "Buuut, a small
portion of a large fortune is a large portion for us! Excuse me, I have negotiating—"

"Hold it, Nami."

"What?" she snapped.

"Before we get to that, we should let the rest of our allies know about Foxy," I said, removing Soundbite from my shoulder and the transceiver from my bag. Nami's frustration faded and she nodded, prompting me to pick up the mic as Luffy followed after Porche. Soundbite needed no prompting to dial, and two rings later…

"Pisces," came the distorted but recognizable voice that I'd been expecting.

"Cancer," came another voice, less expected but equally recognizable.

"Ophiuchus," I stated calmly. "I'm calling in regards to the proposal that Capricorn provided, with another proposed pirate crew to serve as ideal allies."

"Don't tell me, let me guess," Cancer drawled. "You somehow managed to convince that fox to join you?"

"He had to convince the rest of us to go along with it first," Nami said. "And it took a couple of hours for us to convince ourselves that he was actually Cross before we'd listen."

"Almost not worth it," I grumbled before shaking my head and smirking. "Anyway, yes. As far as the rest of the world will know, Luffy chose his Jolly Roger as his prize for winning the Captain's Duel, and we gave him a slightly different new one as a symbol of our victory, so he has every reason to hate us. The truth? Luffy picked Foxy as his crewmate, and after some bargaining, he's agreed to become the head of our Recruitment Division, with the rest of his old crew joining wholesale. As such, he'll keep on going with the Davy Back Fights, and he'll be gathering many allies that would ordinarily never consider joining us. He's here now, actually, so why don't you two introduce yourselves?"

"… I suppose we shouldn't even bother arguing, otherwise you'd just pull the 'I've never been wrong yet' card, wouldn't you?"

"Hey, believe me, I wouldn't have planned this before I learned all of the details; even I didn't know everything," I promptly defended. "But what I've seen in the past few hours is enough to tell me that he's got a lot more potential than I thought. He's part of our crew now, he'll keep our secrets."

Cancer was silent for a moment before sighing. "Fine. Soundbite, drop it. Foxy the Silver Fox?"

"Yes?" Foxy asked cautiously.

"I am Commodore 'White Hunter' Smoker, codename Cancer, cofounder of the Marine Corps splinter cell MI4."

"And I'm Ensign Tashigi, codename Pisces, Commodore Smoker's second and another cofounder of MI4."

"I am Ophiuchus, informant of MI4, an organization composed purely of Marines who have decided to act on the injustice that the Corps provides," I explained to a thunderstruck Foxy. "The other two leaders are going under the names Capricorn and Scorpio. Our goal is to destroy the World Government from the ground up to ensure that the injustice dies."
"Capricorn recently came to the conclusion that we could benefit from employing unconventional allies, and I informed Cross of it. So, it looks like you're our first one, Foxy the Silver Fox. Welcome aboard," Tashigi said.

"Please note that if you divulge the identities of those involved and in any way compromise this endeavor, we will hunt you down and we will do things to you that will make all of Impel Down look like San Faldo in comparison, capiche?" I stated.

Foxy was left gaping for a solid minute. Finally, he shook his head. "You inspired a group of Marines to form their own version of the Revolutionary Army. Well, if it wasn't official before, it sure as hell is now: I made the right choice allying with a crew like yours, if only because I'd rather be at your back or your side then under your feet." He then gave me a searching look. "So… does this change what I'm expected to do at all?"

"Passive duties, not active, don't worry. Your job will also be to gauge any Marines you come across, and pass the recommendations on to either us or Tashigi, whether for recruitment or court-martiailing," I replied. I then snapped my fingers as a thought struck me. "Also, if you cross paths with the Kung-Fu Fleet or the Barto Club, tell them the truth about what happened, you can trust them."

Foxy nodded solemnly. "Fair enough. So…" He grinned childishly. "Do I get a codename as well?"

"Hmph… it's a good idea, but I think we should limit the Western Zodiac code names to Marines, apart from Cross. And he barely even counts," Smoker said.

"Wait to say that until after my plan to sway an entire island for MI4 fails," I snapped.

"I'm not holding my breath, Cross," Smoker deadpanned.

"And I think he actually meant how Ophiuchus is considered an unofficial member of the Zodiac," Tashigi offered hesitantly.

"That too."

"…I withdraw my comment," I coughed in embarrassment, accepting the dopeslap Vivi offered me with dignity.

"Ah… may I suggest using the Eastern Zodiac instead? The Snake would be fitting, yes?" Foxy offered.

"Mmm… nah, I think Goat suits you better," I grinned.

"WHAT?"

"Well, to be fair, you're not a reptile," Vivi pointed out.

"BUT-BUT-BUT—!"

"Oh, and tell Capricorn to offer 'Rooster' to Barto when she gets the chance," I suggested.

"He's certainly LOUD ENOUGH!" Soundbite chortled.

"I-I-WHY NOT—?"

"You're an expert at underhanded tricks, not a master. Train more, and we'll talk," Zoro grinned.
"YOU—BUT—I—BUT—!

"Foxy? Friendly recommendation from someone who has had way too much firsthand experience with the Straw Hats: quit while you're ahead and try to salvage what little sanity you have left," Tashigi said.

Foxy looked at the snail, teeth grit, and then sighed in defeat. "... So be it. Goat would have been my second choice, I suppose."

"Alright, that aside, anything else you want to talk to us about, Handbag?"

Silence. Dead silence as all of us stared at the snail as it started to shift about uncomfortably. "I-I-I just wanted to try to pay Cross back for mocking my codename, and-and snakeskin makes good design for—"

"Go to your room, Tashigi. You know what you did wrong," Soundbite said, halfway between disgusted and grinning like a loon.

"Wha—? But—!"

"You heard the snail, Ensign," Smoker growled, and I swear that he was smirking as he said it.

"B-B-But I—!...Y-Yes, Commodore," Tashigi sighed, followed by the sound of footfalls, and a door opening and then closing.

"...Is it always like this?" Foxy asked no one in particular.

"Welcome to the Straw Hats!" I grinned as I slung my arm over his shoulder. "And yes, it is too late to get out. Good luck!"

The resulting whimper was very satisfying.

-o-

To no great surprise, the remainder of the Foxy Pirates had accepted the deal with relative ease. So, after exchanging numbers, all that was left was for us to give them a different Jolly Roger to sail under. The new skull resembled Su's head, and our captain's signature Straw Hat was attached to the scalp by a chain. At Foxy's pleading, however, we wrote out his name on the sail again. As satisfied as they could be, the Foxy Pirates released the Merry and departed, their well-repaired ship sailing away beyond the horizon.

Zoro, Nami, and Robin were more on their guard as they watched the ship sail away, and I along with them. Maybe we could find some way to dodge Aokiji? Unlikely, but the plains here were wide enough without going back to—

"Hey, kids, congratulations! How about I treat you to some victory cheese?"

Tonjit's house. Damn it.

"Ooh, sure thing, old man! Come on, you guys, let's—"

"Oh, come on, Luffy, that cheese is 10 years old!" I hastily objected, somehow managing to keep the existential dread I felt out of my voice.

"Who cares? VICTORY CHEESE!" Luffy cheered. I hid my dawning horror with a genuine
"Guys? Any chance for a veto here?" I requested with the barest hint of desperation.

"Considering how the log hasn't reset yet?" Nami asked flatly as she held her arm up. "None. Besides, while it might not look all that interesting, I still want to take a look at the local geography."

My heart slowly sank further and further as the rest of the crew sounded out their agreements, and I ultimately sighed in defeat as we began walking towards Tonjit's house.

Lassoo trotted up next to me and glanced up with a flat look. "We're heading straight towards a bad situation, aren't we?" My clenched jaw was answer enough. "Great… and the reason why you aren't telling them?"

I shook my head with a sigh. "Because this isn't a coincidence, we've been targeted, and not!" I snapped my finger up to forestall anything he might say. "Because of the SBS, so this isn't on me." I ran my hand down my face with a groan. "Either way, even if we didn't meet him at Tonjit's house, he'd still come after us, and when he did…"

"We'd be fighting him on the Merry and possibly put her in danger," Lassoo finished with a growl. "Let me guess, this isn't a fight that we're going to walk out of easy?"

"If he wasn't such an easygoing bastard, we wouldn't be walking away at all," I growled back. "And as it is, Chopper's probably going to have his hooves full. Be ready with the Plaster-Palm combo."

The dog-gun inclined his head with a low snarl, and we continued on in relative silence.

"Cross?"

Up until the last person I felt comfortable talking to right now gathered my attention. "Yes, Robin?" I asked quietly.

She silently walked beside me for a moment before subtly glancing at me. "I've asked you this before, but this time I'd like a more precise answer: what do you know about Ohara?"

I mulled over the question, trying to determine how to answer it effectively without giving too much away. "About its history and everyday life? Not much. But I saw everything that happened on the day the island was destroyed…” I debated with myself for a moment before continuing hesitantly. "…and some of the events leading up to it, too."

She stopped walking, and I stopped beside her. She stared at me for a few seconds, and then…

"…How did I not see it before?" she breathed. "I should have realized it in Skypiea, when you told me that the majority of your knowledge is centered around this crew and their lives. You know so much about Ohara because you know my past."

Her eyes seemed to sharpen. "You knew even back in Whiskey Peak. The war, the Poneglyph, Crocodile's betrayal, Luffy saving my life when I wanted to die… you saw it all coming. You knew that I would become a Straw Hat Pirate."

"… Yeah," I confirmed with a sigh as I started walking forward again, Robin keeping pace with me. "But the question is, Robin… have you become one? We've been waiting all of this time for you to finally accept us as your crew, as your friends, and…” I smiled happily as I remembered the past few days. "You're… a lot more accepting at this point then I ever thought you'd be." I gave her a hopeful look. "I… I'll admit, I'm more than ready to tell you the secret behind my knowledge…” I put my
hand on her shoulder. "...if you're ready to finally trust us." I nodded my head at the rest of the crew ahead. "All of us."

Her expression was clearly conflicted. She looked around at all of the crew, human and otherwise, and though she flinched as her eyes met Vivi’s form, for the most part, she seemed to be convincing herself. She looked back at me, then back at the rest of the crew, and opened her mouth.

But all that came out was a horrified gasp as she froze up in shock and fell to the ground. I stared at her paralyzed form in horror for a mere second before snapping my gaze ahead and confirming that it was in response to a very real threat. Almost unconsciously, I stepped in front of her and Lassoo moved beside me, growling threateningly at the tall, black-haired, white and blue clad man standing in front of Tonjit’s house, who removed his sleeping mask and looked around at us.

Everyone else was immediately on guard at seeing Robin shaken up as she was, and Vivi and Carue’s own panicked expressions did little to help matters. At this moment, all I could do was do my best to protect my friend from one of, if not the single strongest individual we would personally meet in Paradise.

"My, my. So, you must be the infamous Jeremiah Cross and Soundbite. You’ve certainly managed to make some most troubling friends, Nico Robin," Admiral Aokiji casually stated.

Cross-Brain AN: We blame the Slow-Slow curse for the fact that this chapter is a week late. Once again, it wasn’t trolling this time, it was genuine difficulties. Here’s hoping that we don’t have such a problem again anytime soon.

Hornet AN: I was working, Xomniac was moving, and The Patient One… well, he was busy, too, I just can’t summarize in one word.

Patient AN: I’d rather not talk about it… though in retrospect, call me crazy, but I think that our slowness might be due to us trying to cram an entire arc into one chapter. Maybe, just maybe…

Xomniac AN: Well, I for my part am moved in and will hopefully have more free time. For now, we hope you enjoyed the longest chapter of This Bites! to date! Oh, and DuncanIdaho2014, you want me to take pride in my own work? Alright, here’s some pride: top this.
Chapter 35: Fleet Admiral Aokiji! A Flame Of Hope Is Frozen!

Xomniac AN: Just a note to our readers so as to correct a misconception that some of you seem to have. Apparently some readers have taken to believe from our apologies about our late chapters that other readers are giving us a hard time about our posting schedule. This could not be farther from the truth. All of our readers on all of This Bites! posting sites have been nothing but accommodating for when we post. The only individuals who give us a hard time about when we post are we ourselves. We of the Cross-Brain pride ourselves on our weekly update schedule, and we consider missing our Sunday update to be a mark against us!

Cross-Brain AN: Ah, yes. And, to our rival, DuncanIdaho2014, author of New Game Plus, currently the third most popular One Piece fic in the fandom, we have a few words to say. Ahem…

Hornet AN: DUNCAN, YOU JACKASS!

Xomniac AN: DAMN IT YOU RAT-BASTARD, WE WERE MINUTES AWAY FROM FINISHING! MERE FUCKING MINUTES! WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU, PSYCHIC?!

Patient AN: You put out a work that thoroughly upstages at least one aspect of our own ideas, and then that blasted cliffhanger… WELL. Let's see how you feel with the cliffhanger waiting for you at the end of this chapter. *Grins menacingly.*

I clenched my fists as I tried to stay calm and keep my thoughts straight about the situation. On the surface and based on a few of his past actions, Aokiji could be just barely considered a decent Marine, but his attitude of Lazy Justice was just too fickle for me to even consider letting my guard down. I'd managed to fast-talk Smoker because his morals were strong and firm, but if I tried the same thing on either of the two non-psychotic admirals? If at any point, for even a second, an instant, they got bored or disagreed with me in any way, shape or form, I'd end up as either a humanoid dry-ice popsicle or a freaking burnt sieve.

The only mercy was that, most likely, he wouldn't be hostile right away, but considering how much I had done on the SBS, if he was in any kind of order-following mood then I was screwed.

So… yeah, no pressure.

"Robin, what's wrong? Do you know this guy?" Luffy demanded.

"We met once before," Aokiji lazily stated.

"To terrify Robin like this… Cross, who is he?" Nami demanded.

I swallowed heavily as I clenched and unclenched my hands, trying my best to keep my blood from freezing in my veins… which, given the fact that the air was almost certainly several degrees colder than it had been a few minutes ago, was an all-too-real possibility. "One of the three individuals who compose the Marine's Ultimate Military Force and all but guarantee the Corps' position as being one of the Big Three superpowers in the world today: Marine Corps Admiral Aokiji. Though you sure as hell wouldn't believe it if he wasn't being serious."

The reaction from our crew was immediate, sonorous, and above all else, panicked.
"A-Admiral?! What the hell is someone like that doing here? Shouldn't he be chasing down some pirate with a billion beri bounty or something?" Usopp cried incredulously before stiffening and slowly starting to look towards me, and I stiffened in terror as well as I accepted the reality of the possibility. Shit, had I really done so much damage that they'd send an Admiral after me?! I mean, I could only imagine why Akainu wasn't literally burning down the Grand Line to get at me, but—!

"Don't worry, don't worry, he doesn't have a bounty yet..." Aokiji waved his hand casually. "Not that they don't want to assign you one, it's just that the World Government is still trying to properly define his crimes, is all. Nobody's ever really... done what he's done before. Well, that and we don't have a picture yet."

I relaxed as he said that, though I was having trouble reading his tone. I suppose I was hoping that I could get some hint of approval or disapproval from his voice. I took that chance to speak up. "So... you're not here on anyone's orders?"

The admiral shrugged nonchalantly. "Nah, I'm just out for a walk, no need to panic."

"Oh, well, that's good, then! Care to join us for some 'cheese'?" I asked in a hopefully casual voice. Fortunately, much of the crew face-faulted in response to my question, and the resulting amusement helped me calm down some.

"Y-Y-You can all relax, I think," Vivi stuttered. "I-I-In my experience, Aokiji does seem to be the... tamest of the Admirals."

"Ah, Your Majesty," Aokiji nodded at her, his eyes traveling to her chest. "Nice boobs. Are you free tonight?"

Sanji and Vivi made sounds like geese being strangled underwater, and it clearly took an effort for the cook to restrain himself from attacking.

"Gross, you must be like three times her age!" Su shuddered in disgust.

I myself felt a sweatdrop weighing down on my temple. Yeeeaaah, I'd forgotten about this little scene...

"Vivi, is this guy seriously an admiral?" Usopp asked incredulously.

"Yes," she, Carue, and I said together, and Vivi grimaced before continuing. "Though Su has a point, I don't recall him being so... perverse last time I met him."

"You didn't have a body then and I got older," Aokiji shrugged. "Anyway, no need for you to panic; like I said, I'm just out for a walk. You guys are... uh..." He scratched the side of his head for a second before shrugging indifferently. "Ah, forget it."

"YOU'RE NOT MAKING ANY SENSE!"

"I uphold the motto 'Lazy Justice'," he said.

"WE CAN SEE THAT!" More than a few veins popped on foreheads as the crew roared at him.

"Anyway... don't mind me, I'm getting tired of standing," he said, shifting his position so that he was lying down.

"Is this guy really one of the strongest Humanity has to offer?" Leo questioned incredulously.
"Lemme put it this way." I jabbed my thumb over my shoulder with a grim look. "If he wanted us dead, we'd be corpses a quarter-mile that way."

Most of the crew stared at me in shock, while Aokiji waved his hand dismissively. "Now, now, Mister Cross, hold on a second, that estimation is entirely inaccurate."

I blinked in surprise. "Really? I thought that would be well within your range?"

"He means that you're underestimating him, Cross," Robin whispered numbly. "If he'd wanted, he could have easily sunk us while we were still several miles offshore…"

I promptly felt my gut drop out from me as the memories of the manga came flooding back. "Oh. Yeah, that… that sounds about right," I replied, just barely keeping the wobble out of my voice. "I think I might have blocked that out."

"This guy is that strong?" Conis whimpered fearfully.

I cocked my head to the side. "We… might be underselling him a bit…"

"Yeah, well, don't worry about it…" Aokiji sighed lazily (how else?) as he scratched his side. "I just decided to wander around a bit to gather information on two subjects: whether Nico Robin had decided to leave Alabasta or burrow in for the long haul, and to gauge just what kind of a person one rabble-rouser named Jeremiah Cross is like."

I allowed myself a grim smile at that. "Wow, way to make a guy feel special, Admiral."

Aokiji ignored me, looking at the archaeologist on the ground behind me. "Nico Robin, I must honestly say that I am a bit surprised. I was expecting to find Jeremiah here, obviously, but you? You've always made it a point to be as incognito as possible from the last time I saw you up until now. And despite that, you're staying with a pirate crew that's become the most well-known in the world."

Robin stared back, unmoving, for a few seconds before Aokiji shrugged. "Well, I'm not questioning your choice. But that does mean I'll have to let HQ know so the crew's bounty can be… what's the word? Right, recalculated. 100 million plus 60 million plus 55 million plus 79 million is—"

"A number too big for you to calculate because you just can't be bothered to work up the energy," I cut in, earning several incredulous looks, Robin's more than anyone else's.

Aokiji looked at me before shrugging again. "Eh, you're right, they can calculate it themselves," he said.

"Seriously?" Zoro muttered, sweatdropping in disbelief.

"What do you want with Robin and Cross?" Luffy asked, anger clear in his voice.

"He-Hey, Luffy, there's no need to get worked up, he just said he's here on a walk!" Usopp hastily said.

"He's right, Luffy, there's no need to get worked up, he just said he's here on a walk!" Usopp hastily said.

"He's right, Luffy, don't pick a fight with an admiral! You can't win a fight against someone like him!" Vivi protested, though her protestations were far more desperate.

"Like I said, I'm not planning on doing anything while I'm here," Aokiji said with a sweatdrop.

"And we're going to trust the words of the Admiral whose sense of Justice is only barely less wishy-
washy than Kizaru's because…?" I trailed off dryly.

Aokiji stared at me silently for a moment before sighing and waving his hand. "Eh, I'd argue but it doesn't seem worth the effort."

"YOU'RE NOT EVEN GOING TO DEFEND YOURSELF!?" Usopp demanded incredulously.

"How did someone like this traumatize Robin?" Donny muttered in confusion.

"Anyway… I heard something while I was napping. You," he said, pointing at Tonjit, who glanced around in confusion before pointing at himself. "I wasn't in a deep sleep, so I heard what you said. You want to get back to your village, right? Pack your things."

"Hey, don't listen to him!" Luffy said hastily. "He's—"

"The good guy, you moron," I deadpanned.

"—the good guy, you moron, you shouldn't—wait, what?" Luffy said, looking back at me. Then his eyes lit up, and he pounded his fist in his hand. "Oh, right! We're the bad guys, so the Marines are the good guys. Sometimes I forget! Shishishi!"

"So much for him being smarter," Usopp muttered to Vivi, who was massaging her temples with an exasperated groan.

Boss, meanwhile, was eyeing the Admiral suspiciously. "And how exactly do you propose to do that, huh?" He gestured his fin towards the coastline. "I've been in those waters, swam out a bit. The currents are completely unreadable, and the paths between the island peaks are too deep to track from the surface. I just don't see—!"

THOCK THOCK THOCK!

"Hey, what the—!?" Boss glared up at me as I rapped my knuckles on his shell.

"Ladies and gentlemen, for today's grand prize, name the two-word phrase that explains anything past the point of argument," I announced.

"OH! OH!" Soundbite waved his eyestalk eagerly. "What is 'DEVIL FRUIT'?"

"Correctamundo!" I crowed as I pointed at Soundbite. "Congratulations, little snail, you've just won an all-expenses paid trip to the wonderful festival island of San Faldo!"

"Woohoo!"

"Ah, I'm sorry, but…" Conis spoke up hesitantly. "I know that Devil Fruits can be very powerful, yes, but the gap between the high points of the island must be extremely long! Is there really a power capable of spanning them like that?"

"Yes…"

I winced self-consciously as Robin's weary voice spoke up behind me, prompting me to shoot a guilty look over my shoulder. To think that I'd forgotten about the very real panic attack she was seconds away from suffering while I tried to keep myself calm…

"His powers," Robin continued fearfully. "They are more than capable of accomplishing the task…"

From there, the good part of our meeting with the admiral went as I had expected it to. An ordeal of
packing for Tonjit, an uninjured Sherry promising to get him there fast, and an uneventful walk to the coast a good distance away from Merry. Well, almost uneventful, anyways. As we went, one of my fellow mates came up beside me.

"So, aren't you going to—?" Nami began, only for me to cut her off with a motion across my throat. Thankfully, she only needed to take one look at my dead-serious expression to slow her pace a little and fall back behind as though nothing had happened. Once that was handled, I watched Aokiji for a second before moving to the edge of the group, where Robin was only just managing to keep pace. She barely even spared me a glance before renewing her vigil on the Admiral's back.

"That was foolish, Cross," she whispered without so much as looking at me. "I have no doubt that you know how strong this man is; the entire crew working together would have no chance of defeating him."

"And yet, if he provoked you enough, you'd ignore all of that and try to snap him in half, despite knowing that it would do nothing," I whispered back before raising my hands when she snapped a look at me. "But! I get where you're coming from and you're right. I'm sorry, I was acting like an idiot back there, but with me I either put up a strong front or I act like any other person, and on the Grand Line, breaking down just isn't an option. Just…" I rubbed my chin thoughtfully for a second before coming to a conclusion. "Just stay coo—
calm,
 alright? He'll no doubt try and push your buttons, get you to

give
him an excuse to strike, but it

won't work,
got it?"

Robin bit her lip as she looked at Aokiji again. "I can't guarantee that, Cross. He… He


knows me, knows what to say…"

"And I know something even better than that," I cut her off, grabbing her shoulder. "I know the truth. He can twist it and paint it however he wants, I know what really happened. And honestly, that should be enough. After all…" I leaned forward slightly and gave her an honest smile. "If anyone here knows just how powerful the truth can be in the face of adversity, it's the heiress of Ohara, right?"

Robin flinched enough that she stopped walking as I said that, but she recovered the next second, nodding as she continued moving forward. And as she walked, I was gratified to see that there was at least some measure of confidence in her step.

"When this is over, I WANNA KNOW MORE ABOUT OHARA," Soundbite said in my ears.

I grumbled slightly as I started moving forward again. "With any luck, you'll learn it soon enough from her own mouth," I breathed back, too quietly for anyone but him to hear.

And from there, the walk was uneventful. The only thing that really surprised me, though I suppose that it shouldn't have, was that by the time we actually reached the coast, Luffy seemed to have warmed up to Aokiji. I vaguely remembered something about that in the story, but was he actually this friendly? Well, either way, it wasn't quite to the point where he was calling him by name buuut…

"So, what are you going to do? You can't swim if you have a Devil Fruit, so… are you going to fly them across? That'd be so cool!"

"Heh," Aokiji smirked, somewhat bitterly. "Sorry, Straw Hat, but the only fruit I know of that could carry this much through the air is the Float-Float Fruit, and the pirate who ate that hasn't been active since Roger's execution. Just watch. And move back for a minute, please…"

Everyone complied, watching quietly as Aokiji dipped his hand into the water. I shook my head at
Soundbite, who seemed confused for a moment before his eyes widened massively, and he grit his teeth to keep from crying out. I turned back towards the ocean in time to catch the massive yellow sea king as it breached the surface and (rather stupidly) bullrushed Aokiji.

"O-OH NO, IT'S THE MASTER OF THE LOCAL SEAS!" Tonjit cried fearfully.

"I-It's going to eat him!" Conis cried as she started to swing her Burn Bazooka off her back.

"Shit!" Leo cursed in agreement, one sword unsheathed and the other halfway out, the rest of the squad mirroring him.

"Wait!"/ "Hold it."

Conis looked incredulously at the fox clinging tightly to her shoulder, fur fluffed out to the max, while the four dugongs obediently, though nervously, ceased preparing their weapons at their teacher's command and raised fist.

"Don't bother." Boss grimly huffed out a cloud of smoke as he stared dead ahead. "You're already too late."

"Yeah…" Su nodded nervously, her ears and tail twitching with frantic energy. "Can't you tell? It's obvious, so, so obvious. That thing…"

Aokiji glanced up at the aquatic titan with cold disdain.

"…it's already dead."

"Ice Age."

And just like that, the world stopped.

There was no other word for it. Everything around us just flat out stopped. Moving. Not just the ocean, frozen into a solid chunk of matter, and not just the Sea King that was now the world's largest ice sculpture. I mean the whole world up and literally froze. The wind, the grass, my own freaking heartbeat… quite simply, the stupidly huge display of power before us literally stole the breath from my lungs, as in I felt it whoosh out on account of the sheer impact the scene had on me, and I had no doubt that everyone else present experienced the exact same sensation.

Of course, from the burning chill in my lungs, the sheer wave of cold hitting me might have had something to do with it as well.

For a few brief seconds, the world was well and truly at peace…

Until the CRACK! of the frosted-over Admiral standing up broke the silence.

"H-Holy crap…" Lassoo whimpered in awe.

"S-Su, how did you—?" Conis started to stammer out.

"You know that 'animal instinct' thing where animals know when a storm's about to hit or something like that?" Su shivered fearfully as she shrunk as far away from Aokiji as she could. "Kinda firing on full cylinders at the moment."

"…I think this is the last time I underestimate someone who acts weird," Donny squeaked.

"Good, you'll live longer," Boss grit out grimly, his 'knuckles' white as they gripped the ropedart at
his side.

Nami gave me a horrified look. "And there are two others like him?!” she whispered.

"Oh, no, no, nooo." I shook my head grimly. "There aren't two like him. There are two others who are worse than him." I jerked my chin at the Admiral. "At least he has some measure of respect for human life."

Nami went white as a sheet, a stark contrast to most of the rest of the crew, who followed down after Tonjit to see him off with smiles. The only other one who stayed within earshot was Zoro. "So, any advice for when he attacks?"

"Just one thing: protect Robin," I muttered back before following the rest of the crew.

…Because as dire as the situation was about to be, the current state? Walking on the frozen ocean and staring at a sculpture that had been a living, frothing sea king not moments ago was truly a once-in-a-lifetime event. Even if the sea king in question must have been brain-dead stupid if it didn't recognize that it was attacking someone who could only be defined as an apex predator. Meh, call it Darwin in action. The point was, the whole scene was just as awe-inspiring as it was absolutely terrifying.

Alas, the farewell to Tonjit couldn't take longer than it took for him to go out of sight, and consequently, for Luffy to finally notice the cold. At that point, I walked closer to Sanji, and as I was casually passing him by, I muttered, "Help Zoro. Protect Robin."

It was a serious credit to Sanji that he didn't even hesitate or pause, merely altering his gait ever so slightly so that he was shadowing—but-not-shadowing Robin.

All too soon we were back on dry land, and all too soon Aokiji sank into a sitting position with a world-weary sigh. Luffy tilted his head in confusion while Zoro and Sanji exchanged looks of understanding.

"What's wrong?" Luffy asked curiously.

"How do I put this… you're the spitting image of your grandfather, Monkey D. Luffy," Aokiji said tiredly, prompting the rubber man to stiffen. "You're both wild souls, neither of you willing to let anyone tell you what to do…"

"Y-You know my grandpa?!!" Luffy whimpered fearfully, looking about ten seconds away from bolting.

"How could he not know him, Luffy?" I asked dryly. "Heck, he probably trained him."

Turns out that ice-men are capable of shivering, though I suspect it was more out of existential terror than cold. "Not on your life. I was lucky enough to be trained by a different member of that particular generation of loonies. He was harsh, sure, but I'd take him over the 'Fist of Love' any day."

The display of horror from both Luffy and Aokiji was enough to make everyone anxious and incredulous.

"Well, this explains why Luffy is such a monster: it runs in the family," Sanji muttered.

"Oh-ho-ho, you have no idea," I chuckled. "You want a frame of reference for how nuts the old man is, how about—"
"I would rather not have a frame of reference, thank you," Aokiji interrupted. "And to continue my earlier thought, as bad as Straw Hat is, you're making him even worse," he slowly turned his gaze to me, "Mister Jeremiah Cross."

That was unexpected, but what he said next was even worse. "Maybe I should just kill you all right here and now. The World Government sees Cross as a threat more than anyone, but analysis through official reports and your SBS has shown that your crew as a whole is a determined group of individuals. Half of your number may be animals, but your size is nothing to scoff at. One day, you'll surely become an acute threat. From the time that Straw Hat received his first bounty up until now, your growth has been extraordinary. And though for the most part you've only preyed on pirates or tyrants unless the situation demanded otherwise, such as with Navarone, you've made no secret of the fact that you despise the World Government."

"Wh-Why are you saying all of this?! You said you were just out for a walk!" Usopp stammered.

"Believe me, when it comes to him and Kizaru, that only means they don't feel like killing you at that moment." I shifted on my feet uncomfortably. "Ten seconds later? Whole different story."

"And if Cross' impossibly comprehensive knowledge isn't enough, your crew is now especially dangerous... because of you, Nico Robin," Aokiji continued, completely ignoring us.

"So you're saying that you want to take Robin away from us?!" Luffy snarled, adopting a fighting stance while Zoro and Sanji both flanked Robin, whose face was a mask of impassiveness.

"Now, now, let me explain..." Aokiji waved his hand placatingly. "It's not quite so simple. See, the size of a person's bounty does not merely reflect their combat capabilities. It also reflects how much of a threat that person is to the World Government." He pointed at Robin. "That's why she had such a large bounty placed on her head at the age of eight. Since then, Nico Robin has always been something of a survivor. Betraying those who gave her shelter, using them as shields so that she could escape to a new group. And now, rather than hiding in a warzone, she's picked this crew as a new set of scapegoats, and one as globally active as this?" He shook his head with a sigh. "I find myself concerned by these circumstances, to say the least."

Despite my forewarning, Robin's semi-calm mask cracked clean through and exposed the terror she was feeling; the admiral's words shook her, and I had to actively remind myself that as much as I really, really, really wanted to, trying to tear this bastard down would most likely be fatal.

"You—!" Sanji started to snarl, only for Vivi to hastily grab his sleeve and hold him back.

"What did Robin do to you in the past, Aokiji?" Vivi asked in a mostly civil tone... or as civil as possible when her voice was shaking like a leaf and sweat was pouring down her brow.

"Oh, she never did anything to me personally," the Admiral shrugged casually. "I only know her because she escaped from me a long time ago. But since then..." He slowly cracked his neck back and forth. "Well, suffice to say that the rest of you will learn one day the extent to which this woman is a curse given life."

I'm not quite sure what hurt more at that instant: the sight of Robin shuddering heavily out of the corner of my eyes or the way my fingers were starting to bite through the bandages covering the palm of my hand.

"And the proof of that?" Aokiji continued frigidly, every bit of him as cool as liquid nitrogen. "Why, you've seen it for yourselves: every organization that Nico Robin has been a part of has ended up completely annihilated, always leaving her as the sole survivor."
I bit my lip in an effort to stay silent as the words I knew to be untrue proceeded to sow merry hell amongst the crew. While most everyone else was glancing at one another uncomfortably as they processed those words, I took the opportunity to glance back at Robin. Thankfully, though she still looked to be thoroughly and utterly haunted by her trauma, she didn't look close to snapping either. I started to think that we might be able to pull through this…

Until he said it. Until he fucking went there and said it.

"That's always how it's been for her, ever since the time when she was eight."

I blinked in confusion for a second as I wondered why he was being so specific about that when the truth hit me like a ton of bricks.

Twenty years ago. The Archaeologists. Ohara.

That bastard was pinning fucking Ohara on her.

I didn't even need to look back at Robin to gauge how she was feeling, because I was damn well feeling it too. To hell with the consequences and to hell with this asshole; if he wanted to go that far in the name of making Robin attack first, if he wanted to use the truth as a weapon that much, that was his problem. And it meant that he didn't have the right to complain when I decided to fight back.

And I started my counterattack the only possible way I could.

"Pfheheheheh…"

With a dry and grim chuckle that caused everyone to freeze and stare at me.

"What's so funny, Jeremiah Cross?" Aokiji wondered, just as incredulous as everyone else.

"Pfheheheh, heh, hoooh…" I wound down my laughter by exaggeratedly wiping a tear from the corner of my eye. "Ohh, nothing, nothing, I swear. I'm just… amused, is all. Just, you know, the way you said it. It, it's just funny is all!"

"Care to elaborate?" the tall man inquired.

I slowly allowed a savage grin to spread across my lips. "You sure you want that, Admiral? Really, really sure? After all, once I start talking…" I slowly cracked my neck back and forth. "I don't stop until something breaks. And honestly? I just don't think you're strong enough not to crack."

Aokiji tensed, but folded his arms in a show of relaxation. "Please, continue." He narrowed his eyes menacingly. "I insist."

"Cross, please," came a whisper directly by my ear. I looked back at Robin, and smiled grimly.

"Sorry, Robin. I know I said I'd be careful, and I really wanted to avoid this…" I shrugged and shook my head helplessly, at the same time removing Soundbite from my shoulder and handing him to the nearest crewmate, Conis in this case, much to the snail's horror. "But when someone goes that far, hurts one of my friends that bad, talking me down is as hopeless as talking logic to Luffy."

Soundbite whimpered as I turned away, and locked eyes with Aokiji. "This is gonna suck, isn't it?"

"Like a black hole," I confirmed quietly. Then I re-donned my grin and spoke more audibly. "So, what did I find amusing? Well, quite honestly, it was just the way you tell the story. See," I gestured
in his direction. "The way you tell things, it sounds like what happened to those groups was all Robin's fault. But, see, that's... just not really correct, is it, Admiral? She," I waved my hand at Robin. "Never actually did anything, did she? Well, alright, she might have helped us with Baroque Works and I don't know the details of whoever else she worked with, but the point is, by and large, the reason that those organizations all collapsed, it wasn't her fault." I slowly pointed my finger up at him, my face pointedly devoid of emotion. "It was all you. You and the rest of the World Government's dogs."

Aokiji frowned and I felt the temperature drop a degree or two, but I pressed on. "You're the ones who started the fights against those groups, who destroyed them and made Robin run. You're the ones who put a bounty on her head, and made it so that she couldn't trust anyone in the world. You're the ones who hunted her, day and night, without cease or pause, like bloodhounds after a scent."

"Now, now, Mister Cross, I'd be careful with what you say..." Aokiji coldly retorted. "After all, you're talking about things you know nothing about. Nico Robin is a legitimate threat to the World Government, we were justified in our pursuit."

I let out a bark of humorless laughter. "A threat? Why, because she destroyed some battleships? Give me a freaking break!" I swung my arm back at Robin. "Her powers make limbs in her line of sight. She's trained those powers for the last twenty years and isn't able to sink a ship, how could she do it when she was eight!?" I shook my head with a scowl. "No... she's not a threat because of what she can do, she's a threat because of what's in her head." I took a challenging step forwards as I glared bloody murder at the Admiral. "Do you even know why you're hunting her? Twenty years after the fact, after climbing so far up the ranks, do you even have an inkling as to the real reason why the Elder Stars sentenced her to death? As to why they let—no, ordered what happened twenty years ago to take place?"

"It's not my place to ask," Aokiji countered.

I snarled darkly as I seriously fought the pointless desire to crush the bastard's face in. "Of course you don't. After all, it's your whole motto of 'Lazy Justice'. Akainu doesn't need to ask, Kizaru doesn't care either way, but you? You don't think it's worth the effort to care, you just do what they say because it's easier. Well, let me make it nice and easy for you!" I jabbed a finger back at Robin. "The cold hard facts of the matter are thus: the World Government put a bounty on her head when she was eight. Years. Old, when her only crime was learning something that the World Government didn't want her to know. They didn't consider any alternatives, didn't even contemplate mercy as an option, they just jumped straight to full on lethal. That alone is all that's needed for anyone with a shred of common decency within themselves to realize that the organization that you've dedicated your life to is completely corrupt."

Aokiji's expression was cold, but his eyebrows rose in response to that statement. "And you really think it's fair to judge the World Government based off of a single incident, Mister Cross?"

"Don't play dumb like that, Kuzan, it doesn't suit you," I spat harshly, causing his eyes to widen in surprise. "You really think I'm making that judgment so lightly?" I pointed at Vivi. "They accused a princess who sacrificed everything to save her country from one of their boxed crooks of treason because of a one-sided blood feud, forcing her to become a pirate." I folded my arms. "And that's just the start. I know five islands off the top of my head that the World Government has driven to hell, not even counting the two currently represented on our crew."

"Fine, so the World Government isn't perfect..." he begrudgingly admitted. "But the Marine Corps still exists for the protection of all civilians, to minimize whatever casualties happen, from either side."
I scoffed dismissively. "Some Marines believe that and act on it, sure, but for the Corps as a whole? That sentiment hasn't been even remotely true for a long time, and it's only going to get worse from here on. And you know it, Kuzan, even if it's only deep down in your gut: when Sengoku steps down, you'll be his prime candidate, I'm sure, but who do you think the Five Elder Stars are going to want in his place? Someone cool-headed and restrained like you? Hell no. They'll want someone who will keep their definition of peace by any means necessary, even if it means murdering hundreds of innocent men, women, and children to remove the risk of a perceived criminal slipping through their clutches."

His fists clenched as he heard my words, no doubt realizing exactly what I was referring to. But still, he was way too calm. Time for the real guns.

"You could try challenging him to a duel to the death, and Sakazuki would still become Fleet Admiral. You know what the future holds, Kuzan. So, right now, in the present, you need to ask yourself… 'Is this what I call justice? Can I take pride in something like this?"

Aokiji stiffened and Robin gasped quietly as I threw Jaguar D. Saul's last words to the admiral back in his face. Then I gave him a slight smile, nothing but bitterness within, and spoke the words that I knew would break him. "I know exactly what happened that day, Kuzan. I know what you did and why you did it. I know how you felt then and admittedly I've only got a good guess as to how you feel now. But there is one thing I know above all else: I might not have known him personally… but I know that if he were here right now, seeing what you are and what you've done… he'd be disgusted with you."

I had only a split second to notice Aokiji's expression turn from cold to downright apoplectic—

Before he was suddenly in front of me, arm drawn back.

My pupils dilated. "Ah, shi—!"

WHAM!

That was as far as I got before the air was smashed out of my lungs by Aokiji backhanding me in the chest and sending me tumbling into the grass. The first thing I managed to process through the pain was that I wasn't breathing. The second thing I processed was that he had strapped me with bands of fucking ice SHIT TOO TIGHT!

"Sengoku was right, Jeremiah Cross," Aokiji breathed frigidly. "I really shouldn't have let you open your damn mouth."

"Grrgghh…" I wheezed out as I rammed my fist against the restraints, trying desperately to draw some measure of breath but failing on account of how my ribs were being kept from expanding. "Bas… tard…!"

"Actually, in retrospect… I think that Akainu might have been right for once, too."

My struggles promptly froze as I caught sight of the very icicle-laden foot hanging over my head.

"Sometimes," Aokiji droned darkly. "You just need to stamp out the bugs."

Once again, for all my bravado, I couldn't bring myself to keep my eyes open. I clenched my eyes shut—

"GET AWAY FROM HIM!"
FWOOM!

Only for a very sudden burst of heat to course a few inches above my head, and I snapped my eyes open to see Aokiji just a few steps back, glaring daggers in Conis' direction, having barely dodged the gunner's Burn Bazooka blast. Without pausing, the gunner aimed another blast and fired even as she ran towards me, before kneeling down and pressing Soundbite to my chest.

"What do we say to Death? NOT TODAY!"

CRACK!

"GAH!" I gasped like a drowning man coming up for air as the ice shattered and my lungs were freed, putting Soundbite back on my shoulder. "Mother-fucker that stings!"

"Good, means that YOU'RE STILL CONSCIOUS!"

The second I could focus on something other than my breath and scrambling to my feet and away from Aokiji, I noticed that the vast majority of the rest of the crew was preparing to follow Conis' example, their expressions ranging from Nami's firm resignation to Boss' cold determination to Luffy's outright fury.

But above all of them was at once the best and worst thing that I could have heard at that moment:

"LEAVE MY FRIENDS ALONE, AOKIJI!" Robin yelled, crossing her arms and glaring bloody murder at the admiral.

My eyes widened in panic as I snapped an arm up at her. "Robin, don't—"

I tried to protest.

"You have no right to protest anymore, Cross," she outright snarled. "You've had your say, now here's mine. TREINTA FLEUR!"

Before I could do or say anything further, thirty arms bloomed all over Aokiji's body, poised to snap his body in half. He turned his attention to her, his powers beginning to freeze the duplicate arms.

But in spite of the steam starting to waft up from her real arms and the slight wince in her expression, still she stood strong.

"My, my. It looks like I underestimated this crew; they've actually pushed you to the point of attacking me to try to protect them?" Aokiji said, perfectly calm despite the hold posed to break him in every possible sense of the word.

"You killed the first true friend I ever made right in front of me the last time we met," Robin spat venomously. "Now, for the first time in twenty years, I've actually found friends who would still believe in me, even after you did everything you could to turn them against me. And now that I've found them…" She snapped her hands shut. "I am done running. CLUTCH!"

And just like that, Aokiji's form shattered into diamond dust, and Robin, though panting, had a distinct look of triumph on her face.

I, however, was feeling distinctly less enthused. "Very nice, very badass," I grit out as I watched the ice particles start to shift. "Oh, and by the way everyone? His fruit, the Ice-Ice Fruit? It's a fucking Logia, which means that that little display, impressive though it was, accomplished absolutely jack and shit beyond most likely pissing him off. In summary?"

"Burn him before he pulls himself together, got it," Lassoo growled, padding forward in his hybrid form.
Aokiji chose that moment to reform his upper body, the air and ground crackling from near-instant snap-freeze as he started seemingly pull himself from the permafrost coating the ground.

Lassoo sucked in a deep breath before belting out a thick ball of tar. "CANI-PLASTER!"

The Admiral, already half-reformed by that point, spared the black gelatinous ball a glance before blowing out a misty white cloud that intercepted the tar a mere few feet from him. When the cloud dispersed, all that was left was a jagged black hunk of ice reaching towards him that he didn't even spare a second glance as he stood up.

Lassoo's eyes widened and his tail dropped between his legs as he started inching backwards. "Ah…"

"Actually," I continued in a faux-calm tone of voice. "What I was about to say was this." I promptly turned around and belted down the coastline, grabbing Robin's jacket and dragging her along with me. "FUCKING RUN!"

"We covered this earlier, Cross," Aokiji said dryly. "Feet or miles…" I noticed him crouching down and pressing his palm to the ground as I looked back. "There's nowhere that you can run. Observe. Ice Age."

FWOOSH!

I had all of two seconds to note the wave of cold that swept past my feet—

"WOAHSHIT!"

CRACK!

Before my feet slid out from beneath me due to my feet losing all traction on the frozen soil, sending me crashing to the ground.

"…Duly noted," I mumbled into the ground.

"I wonder if he'll be able to pull himself back together after THIS!"

I managed to flip myself over in time to see Chopper swipe his arm out and send a number of vials spinning through the air, all of them surrounding Aokiji.

"EAT THIS..." Chopper snarled viciously, a number of scalpels splayed in his hoof. "CHERRY BLOSSOM BLAST FLURRY!" With that, the currently-psycho-doctor snapped his hoof out and flung his blades at the vials, striking each one dead on, breaching the glass—

KA-BOOM!

And causing the contents within to react violently with the air.

I winced and shielded myself from the wave of light and heated air that assaulted me.

It only got worse when Conis fired her Burn Bazooka with all the firepower the Dial could muster, followed by Nami practically bringing the wrath of Zeus down on his head. Even Usopp contributed what he could, his hands blurring with how fast he was firing.

Everybody watched the resulting smog, and when it cleared… Aokiji stood there, completely unscathed and with his normal, bored expression back in place.
"Well, I'll give you this much," he drawled as he flicked a clod of dirt from his jacket. "If I weren't a Logia, that probably would have stung a bit."

"WHAT THE HELL DOES IT TAKE TO KEEP THIS GUY DOWN?!" Usopp screamed.

"Does anyone have any sea prism stone, New World-grade pirates, or convincing enough acting skills to make him think you're Sengoku?" I asked sarcastically. "Or we could just try building a sauna."

"This is not the time, Cross!" Robin grit out.

"What part of the words 'coping mechanism' are you people failing to grasp!?!" I shot back at her. "Sounds like the core concept to me."

Robin and I froze before slowly turning our gazes up to stare at Aokiji in terror as he suddenly towered over us.

"I am really starting to hate that technique…" I whimpered.

Zoro, Sanji, Boss, and a lobster-red Luffy lunged at Aokiji from behind. He turned his head halfway as he regarded them for an instant before moving, fending off Boss with a kick and grabbing one of Zoro's arms and simply tossing him away. Luffy and Sanji, he didn't even touch; his powers crippled them with frost as soon as they touched his body. By the time he was done, the Monster Trio plus one were left rolling on the ground, agonizing over their hyper-frostbitten limbs as he turned back to us, and moved for Robin. Gritting my teeth and steeling my nerves, I interposed myself between them, arms flung out to shield her.

Aokiji raised an eyebrow at me before shrugging indifferently. He then clamped one hand down on my shoulder opposite where Soundbite was and reached past me with the other. And then…

"Ice Time."

CRACK!

"AAAARGH!"

It was… almost indescribable.

Intellectually, I knew at the time that the ice—dry ice, at that—was stupidly far below zero in temperature and thus extremely cold, but physically? Physically, that ice burned. It burned worse than almost any other burn I'd felt before, almost as bad as the hell Eneru had put me through, and it was spreading, going down my arm, down my side, across my chest—

"GRGH, MOTHERFUCKER!" I snarled out in agony. "RIGHT ON THE FUCKING SCARS, YOU RAGING BASTARD!"

It took every bit of willpower Zoro had forced into me to not just slip into oblivion, and I came damn close to giving up the ghost, too, but there was one sound that made me hang in there.

The sound of Robin whimpering in the exact same agony behind me.

It took a second for me to get the mental wherewithal to do much of anything, but once I did, I
reached up with my unfrozen hand and grabbed the arm Aokiji was using to freeze my hand. I winced as the ice burned at my already mutilated fingers, but I pointedly refused to let go, prompting him to glance down at me.

I snarled in the admiral's face. "Let. Her. Go."

Aokiji stared at me, his expression unreadable, for several seconds with no notable change in the ice's progression. Then, all at once, the freezing stopped advancing, and Aokiji pulled back.

I didn't even have time to contemplate the fact that I wasn't being frozen anymore when my attention was diverted by a grunt of pain behind me, prompting me to spin around and grab Robin just before she toppled over.

It was… I'll be honest, it wasn't good. Whereas I'd managed to get away with only one of arms and the upper part of one of my legs frozen, the entire right half of Robin's body was completely encased in ice, her remaining half visibly struggling to support the dead weight. How she still seemed coherent, let alone conscious, was beyond me.

"Nico Robin," Aokiji stated quietly. "As Cross somehow knows, Jaguar D. Saul was my friend, too. It was because of his final wishes that I allowed you to escape from Ohara that day. I still feel responsible for your life, but after twenty years of wandering, I felt that it was time for you to die. But it seems that you've found your place after all."

Those words stunned Robin more than any of the weaponized truths he threw at her earlier, and the rest of the crew seemed stunned as well, me especially. Was… Was he really serious? Was he actually reaffirming Robin staying with us!?

He sighed, and turned away, waving his hand carelessly as he started to walk towards the ocean. "Well, in the end, I suppose we owe you all something from the Alabasta incident, so I'll let you go today."

I was so relieved I thought I might pass out. Vivi, however, still spun her Lion Cutters—no, wait, Lion Cutter, singular. Her other hand was—clutching her necklace again. "Just today?" she snarled.

Aokiji paused and glanced back at Vivi before rolling his eyes with a sigh. "Alright, let me rephrase that: I won't come after your crew again unless I'm outright ordered to. Better?"

Vivi continued to glare at him for a few seconds, and then allowed her Cutter to stop spinning.

"Good." And with that, he started walking again, and we started to allow ourselves to relax…

"You've found people who will protect you, Nico Robin. They're willing to take on the world for you, of that I have no doubt."

But, of course, it couldn't be that simple.

"But can they win? I seriously doubt that."

I couldn't have felt more pain in that moment if he tore all of my bandages off, for moments before Robin's free eye slid shut as she gave up the fight to stay awake I saw the spark that had been growing there over the past few weeks flicker and die.

Damn it… Damn it… DAMN IT! One parting shot from him, and every bit of faith Robin had in us was gone.
"Damn you…” I hissed viciously. "Damn every last one of you monsters straight to hell."

Aokiji paused again before chuckling deeply. "A monster, huh. That's rich, coming from a demon like you."

I grit my teeth as I glared at Aokiji's back. "Well at least. I'm. Honest."

*That* shut him up.

And so, without a single word further, Admiral 'Aokiji' Kuzan of Marine HQ walked out onto the winter wasteland he'd constructed without a care in the world, slowly striding off into the distance…

Leaving us all to contemplate and process our complete and utter defeat, in every sense of the word.

-o-

"Geeze, you work fast, Chopper,” I complimented, flexing the new bandages on my arm that were distinctly devoid of any manner of frost. "Thanks for the quick unfreeze, I didn't expect it to be this fast."

"It's nothing, Cross," the reindeer replied. I snapped my head over to him, and he sighed. "No, Cross, it still doesn't make me happy, but right now, I don't feel like I've done that much good, considering how my best shot did absolutely nothing against Aokiji."

"…You're so let down that you're not even going to flip out like you usually do? I mean, in the story, you were more focused on defrosting—"

"In the story, I wasn't as good at fighting as I am now," Chopper cut in absentmindedly as he ruffled through his bag. "In this reality, your advice helped me get to the point where I'm stronger and more confident. Back on Skypiea, it was different; I knew that Luffy would have to beat Eneru, and he did. But this time…” He rammed his hoof into his bag, causing it to let out a very terror-inducing clink of glass. "None of us could do anything. I couldn't do anything. I… couldn't even help…"

I grimaced in acknowledgement, but shook my head. "Try not to let it bother you too much, Chopper."

"And why the hell not, Cross?" Chopper snarled, snapping an equal parts vicious and desperate look at me.

I pointed my finger at the wall of the cabin with a flat look. "Because currently, our four strongest frontline fighters are warming their frostbitten asses in the ocean after getting said asses absolutely handed to them. In victory, it's not very fair to use them as milestones, but in defeat they're perfect justifications."

"So what you're saying…" Soundbite started slowly. "*Is that there's no SHAME IN LOSING IF THEY LOST TOO?*"

"Something like that," I waved my hand in vague agreement. "Aokiji is the epitome of the big leagues in this world. Today, we had no chance of winning, but he let us live because he has decency. I have no doubt that someday our crew will have to fight someone of his caliber and win to escape death or worse, but as long as we keep training, we won't be hit with more than we can take. We'll be pushed to our limits just about every time, yes… but we'll survive."

Chopper groaned and kneaded his temples miserably. "Damn it, Cross, how can you be so sure of that with everything that's gone wrong?"
I smiled fondly and patted the top of his hat. "I'm not saying this off of my knowledge, Chopper. I'm saying it off of something I believed before I came here, and now know with perfect certainty: our captain, Monkey D. Luffy, will become the Pirate King, and in that same breath, we will be the crew that puts him on top. It's just that simple."

That brought the reindeer up short. He stared at me for a few more seconds before finally smiling and nodding firmly. "Yeah, you're right. He won't die before he reaches his dream, and neither will the rest of us." He tilted his smile upwards as he patted a hoof on the deck. "None of us will…"

That sobered me up a little, but I did my best not to show it. Fortunately, I got a good excuse not to dwell on Merry and how unsure I was that I could keep my promise to her in the form of Conis coming into the impromptu medical room that we had set up in the kitchen.

"Everyone else sent asked me to check on how Robin's doing. Is she going to be alright?" she asked in concern.

At that, I couldn't suppress my grimace. "Physically?" I jabbed my thumb at the tub of lukewarm saltwater she was soaking in. Already the ice had subsided by a substantial amount, releasing her face and torso and leaving only the lower parts of her extremities fragile. "She'll be fine. It was touch and go for a bit on account of how Aokiji literally turns people into ice, but she's thawing well enough, so she's out of any critical danger."

I groaned and kneaded the bridge of my nose. "No, the real damage was all in Aokiji's parting shot, and fixing that's… not gonna be so easy." I shook my head miserably; she had called us her friends. She had been ready to accept us. She had been one. Freaking. MINUTE! away from exchanging secrets, from her accepting us wholeheartedly. And now… now, we'd be lucky if she would still be willing to call any of us by our names.

I gave Conis a solemn look. "As soon as Boss and the Monster Trio are healed, bring everyone in here, and Chopper, be ready to wake her up."

The two nodded and got to work, leaving me to watch over Robin in solemn silence.

If I was honest with myself, my relationship with Robin was… different from the rest of the crew, to say the least. Back before I came to the Blue Seas, I was always the older brother in my family. Whether it be my natural brother or my stepsiblings, I'd always been the eldest, the one… relatively in charge, given how they never respected me worth shit, but I digress. Anyway, the point is that growing up, I didn't really have someone close to my level that I could relate to, someone with equal interests. And don't get me wrong, I loved the rest of the Straw Hats to death and back and most of the time I could match their energy without worry, but with Robin, I could find… peace and quiet. With Robin, I could enjoy a quiet moment of debate over some story or other, or a nice and sharp back-and-forth snarkfest.

To put it simply, while the rest of the crew filled the niches of siblings and cousins of similar or slightly lesser ages, over the course of her time on the crew, Robin had become like the big sister I'd never had. And the idea that all of that could have just been undone by some paltry words…

I groaned and kneaded my temples miserably. I had to get this right on the first try, I had to, because if I didn't, I wasn't sure that I'd get another chance before everything went straight to hell.

It was the longest half hour of my life until the others were ready, by which time Robin had completely defrosted. Everyone was gathered in the kitchen, and Chopper prepared the smelling salts. Or at least, the horrific concoction he called smelling salts, anyways.
Alright, fair warning…” Chopper bit his tongue as he waved the vial under Robin's nose. "After a trauma like this, the reactions of patients waking up have a tendency of being somewhat—"

Robin's eyes snapped open and CRAP HARD GRIP ON MY THROAT Couldn't BREATH!

"—VISCERAL!" Chopper gagged out around the arm that was coiled around his neck.

"No shit!" I wheezed out as I yanked at the fingers that were throttling me.

"Let him go OR GET READY TO lose a thumb AGAIN!" Soundbite roared.

Robin blinked numbly for a moment as she came back from her adrenaline high before gasping in shock and snapping her arms down, allowing the arms that had been incapacitating the crew to dissolve. "I-I'm so sorry, I just—! I-It was reflexive, I didn't mean—!"

"No harm done, Robin," I rasped, wincing as I rubbed a particularly sore part of my throat. "For the most part, at least… anyway, you don't have anything to worry about, you're back with your friends now."

I was hopeful, so so hopeful, that the trauma of being frozen, or at least the sheer hurt of the ordeal, would have been enough to suppress Aokiji's last words to her. But going by the way that she smiled at me in a clearly hollow way, it was painfully obvious that that wasn't the case.

"Yes… Yes, you're right…" Robin slowly allowed herself to relax back into the tub before turning her grin on Chopper, causing him to shiver uncomfortably. "Thank you for the assistance, Mister Doctor, I apprecia—"

"Come on, Robin!" I cut in, causing her to jump and successfully putting a crack in the mask she was trying to bolt back into place. "Are you really going to let the words of that coldhearted bastard undo everything you've been looking for over the last twenty years? You called us your friends—hell, we are your friends, full-stop!"

She made a weak attempt to smile. "Mister Jeremiah—"

"DON'T YOU 'MISTER JEREMIAH' ME!" I snapped, slamming my fist into the wall. I noticed Sanji holding himself back with an effort in the background as I moved over to her. "Damn it, Robin, I thought you were past this! It doesn't matter what the hell that bastard said or what scare tactics he tried to use, we still want to be your friends, and I thought that after all this time, you were willing to trust us. The words of someone like him shouldn't make a difference!"

Her expression faltered, but she still tried to hide behind a painfully neutral expression instead. I grit my teeth; if I had to take drastic measures to make her be honest at this point, so be fucking it.

"Robin, I broke that mask before through kindness, but damn it, I can and will go the other way and get you spitting nails if I have to; if I can do it to Aokiji, I can do it to you," I warned her before groaning in exhaustion as I cooled down a bit and gave her a pleading look. "Listen, Robin… do you really want to go back to the point where instead of seeing you, all we saw was Crocodile's right-hand woman who helped to try to overthrow Vivi's country? Do you really want to go back to being Miss All Sunday?"

Vivi remained perfectly silent, her body slightly angled away from Robin, but the glances she was occasionally shooting her spoke volumes.

"Come on, Robin!" Nami pleaded desperately. "You're one of the only people on the crew with a lick of sense. Without you, how the heck would we be able to keep from going crazy every second
of the day?!

"Not to mention that you can keep up with me when I'm talking about science, even when I go off the deep end!" Chopper tacked in, tears shimmering in his eyes. "I'm alright with the fact that usually everyone else just smiles and nods, but you actually read my notes and understood them! You even helped me develop half of the combat formulas I'm using! You're almost as much of a mentor to me as Doctorine!"

"You're a stone-cold bitch with cheap-as-all-hell powers and enough practice keeping your emotions to yourself that I probably wouldn't trust you if Cross and Luffy didn't," Zoro cut in. Before anyone could tear his head off, however, he sighed and bowed his head. "And… you're one of the strongest women I've ever met."

Luffy was silent for a few moments, the brim of his hat tilted down over his eyes before he finally spoke up. "You're a member of this crew, Robin, no matter what." He stated it as though it was an immutable fact… and honestly, it might as well have been.

I capped it all off with clamping my hand down on my shoulder and leaned forward, looking her dead in the eyes. "You belong here, Robin. You know it, we know it. So, after everything you've gone through with us, all the good times and the bad that we've shared, do you really want us to treat you like everybody else you've met for the last twenty years, and vice-versa?"

She tried to stay emotionless for a bit, she really did, but ultimately, my words were the breaking point; she bowed her head, not willing to look at any of us, and I swear I saw something sparkling from her face drip into the tub below her. "… No," she breathed at last, hugging herself miserably. "… No, I can't… Because I can't deny what Aokiji said. We… you're all strong, incredibly so… but not strong enough to fight the world."

"At the risk of Sanji kicking me, that's a steaming load of bull," Mikey announced hotly. The cook took a deep draw from his cigarette before snorting it out. "I never thought I'd agree with anyone insulting a woman in any form, but I agree with the dugong," he stated. "You're the only one here who believes that, Robin dear."

"…How can you say that, Sanji?" she shook her head miserably. "What just happened with Aokiji —"

"Is only going to help us," Zoro cut in sharply. "We lost, and none of us are happy about that, but we survived. We've seen what we're up against, now we just need to get to the point that when we meet him again, we won't lose."

"And unless shit somehow goes sideways in a manner most spectacular sometime soon, we won't have to face anyone we can't beat with no way out except their mercy again, Robin," I said carefully, looking at Luffy the whole time… though his head was still bowed, preventing anyone from reading his expressions.

"You can't—" Robin began.
"Do you really think that I'm lying?" I interrupted.

"I—no, but you don't know—" she stammered.

"Do you really think that our captain, Monkey D. Luffy, will ever let any of us down?" I pressed, quietly but intensely.

There was a minor spark of recognition in Robin's eyes and she perked up ever so slightly, looking at me, and then at Luffy. He looked up slightly, revealing one of his eyes, and Ace couldn't have had more of a fire burning in his than Luffy's had at that moment. Robin looked at him for what felt like an eternity before slowly looking away, shame on her face.

"...I want to say that I believe..." she whispered, clutching tightly at her arms. "But after all these years—"

"Cross."

Robin cut herself off, and we both looked back at Luffy. He looked like he had a bad taste in his mouth, but his eyes still burned. "I'm... changing my orders," he grit out uncomfortably. "From now on, you have my permission to say anything you know—" He shuddered heavily at the words before forging onwards. "But only if it can help us get stronger, that's it!"

I gaped, and most of the rest of the crew seemed equally stunned, but Luffy just looked at Robin, a wry grin slowly growing on his face. "After all, if we're going to take on the whole world, then we're going to need to be a lot stronger, right?"

I glanced at Robin for a second before looking back at Luffy. "Yeah, that'd be for the best. I mean, so long as we fight like hell we'll get through what's coming up next..." I trailed off for a second before nodding firmly. "But yeah, I'd be a lot more comfortable if we took what little time we have here on Long Ring Long to hone our skills."

"Training whenever you can DOES HURT!" Soundbite piped up. "HURTS THEM, ANYWAYS!"

"Well, I'm all for it. If I know what to shoot for, I should be able to reach it faster," Zoro grinned widely.

"My students and I train on a regular basis anyways, so we'll just have to train twice as hard, right boys?" Boss said confidently, pounding his 'fist' into his 'palm'.

"BOSS, YES, BOSS!" the dugongs barked as they snapped to attention.

"I don't plan on letting another lady get injured in my sight. I'll be glad to train," Sanji said firmly.

"Count me in, too," Chopper nodded in agreement.

"I could definitely use a chance to get used to wielding my arsenal now that I have the chance," Conis mused to herself.

Everyone else responded in the same vein, some speaking, others only nodding, but absolutely none opposed to the idea. I turned back to Robin and promptly felt a pang of sympathy at the sheer degree of shock she displayed. For anyone to be so taken aback at the idea that anyone would be willing to risk their lives for them... it was moments like this that I was really grateful for the transceiver hanging at my side.
Still, my sorrow and rage were promptly washed away by what Robin did next: she *smiled*. An honest, true smile. It was weak and frail, but that wasn't important to me. No, what was truly important was that the spark of life that I'd seen extinguished earlier was back in her eyes; not as strong as before, unfortunately, but there nonetheless.

Bolstered by her reaction, I nodded and clapped my hands. "Right! Everyone who *isn't* still recovering from hyper-hypothermia, meet me on the deck in ten minutes. I'm going to need that long to make sure I don't forget anything. Oh, and!" I hastily stuck my finger up, causing everyone to pause before shooting apologetic looks at Robin, Conis and the dugongs. "For the record, I do apologize for my cryptic nigh-savant-like bullshittery. But! I promise that once everything is said and done on the next island we arrive on, I will let you all in on the secrets I hold. Agreed?"

Conis and Su exchanged glances for a moment before the angel nodded firmly. "You saved my home with whatever knowledge you have, Cross. I'm perfectly willing to wait as long as I need to learn it."

"Speak for yourself!" Su sniffed. "You'd better talk soon and fast, bub, or else I'll snatch slimeball and *make* him tell me!"

"JUST TRY IT, puff-BALL!" Soundbite shot back.

Boss puffed out a cloud of smoke as he held up his flippers in a placating gesture. "Hey, doesn't matter to me either way. In the end, I am and always have been a soldier, and you are my superior." He jabbed his cigar at me. "Until you do something suicidally stupid, my boys and I will listen to you no matter what."

The TDWS nodded in agreement, though Mikey was noticeably reluctant.

"Sooo… we *don't* get a vote in asking for spoilers early, then?" SMACK! "OW! I was just asking, geeze!"

"Well, if we've got ten minutes, I'll go ahead and double-check the upgrades I've finished up," Usopp muttered, seeming somewhat subdued. I frowned as he left, suddenly remembering that while Merry had been one catalyst that drove him to leave the crew, she hadn't been the only one; there had been *two*, and his rock-bottom self-esteem from meeting Aokiji was the other. I *needed* to nip that in the bud once I got the chance, or else we might be looking at a shitton of trouble anyways.

Vivi and Carue left the room next, and everyone else followed soon after, Chopper lingering the longest to make sure the water was still well-suited for Robin. Soon, only Luffy and I were left.

"Robin…" I glanced at Luffy for a moment before giving her a compassionate look. "I'm ready to back you up on… *that* whenever you are."

She clenched her eyes shut with a shudder and held the position for a moment before giving me a light smile. "… I'm still not certain… but I…" She nodded hesitantly, the action slowly picking up strength. "For the first time in I don't know how—" Robin choked off as she shook her head with a dry chuckle. "Lying again and you no doubt know it… for the first time in twenty years I have hope again…" She graced me with a tearful smile. "And it's all thanks to you. You have my thanks, Mis —" Robin flinched and smiled apologetically. "Cross."

I smiled back and clenched her shoulder reassuringly. "We'll get through this, Robin, don't worry. Now, here. I picked up a vial Chopper had left behind and handed it to her. "Take your medicine and get some rest. We'll wake you up around dinner time, alright?"
Robin chuckled as she took the vial and downed it. "Knowing Sanji, you didn't even…" she trailed off into a yawn. "Even need… to…" She blinked blearily at the vial. "Huh… it would… appear that Chopper… improved his formula… recently…" I caught the vial as she nodded off and sank a few inches into the water.

I watched her sleep soundly for a moment before hanging my head with a groan. "Damn it, Robin…" I ground out miserably.

"Eh? What's wrong?" Luffy asked in surprise. "Robin's happy again, isn't that a good thing?"

I shook my head miserably. "That's what she said, Luffy, and I want to believe her, I want to so bad it hurts…" I shrugged in defeat. "But the fact of the matter is that Robin is a world-class actor, and I honestly can't tell whether or not she was faking those emotions, because I know damn well that she is fully capable of it."

"You had better not be saying she doesn't think we're her friends, Cross," Luffy growled.

"No, Luffy, not at all," I shook my head solemnly. "In fact, that's the only thing I'm completely certain of at the moment."

"Then we should trust her! It's what friends do!" Luffy nodded as though that were that.

I, on the other hand, bowed my head. "Captain… that's the exact reason why we can't trust her."

"Eh!?"

I gestured between him and myself. "We're her friends, Luffy, her friends who she cares about more than life itself." I pointed at him sadly. "You should know better than anyone that people, even people as smart as her, tend to do stupid, stupid, stupid things, so long as it ends with saving their friends… or their family, as the case may be."

Luffy's expression darkened like a thundercloud, but in the end, he just didn't have an answer to that.

-o-

Several minutes of me racking my brains for everything that I could instruct the crew on at this point—which involved no small amount of grumbling (read: violent cursing) at Ace for the 'instructions' on Haki he gave—found me stepping out onto the deck. Everyone's attention turned to me immediately.

"Alright, guys, let's get started." I clapped my hands together and rubbed them eagerly. "To start things off, let me give you all a fair warning: while I've seen and heard of a lot of techniques, which I will be sharing with you, the thing is that I don't know how to do most of them. But if you guys could figure it out on your own, then I know that you can figure it out via description, even if it'll no doubt take longer without the on-hand experience."

I looked at Usopp first, noticing him standing beside… something, covered with a tablecloth. "Usopp, full status report on upgrades."

The sniper nodded. "I've almost finished Nami's Perfect Clima-Tact, but I'm still having trouble with making the Eisen Dial work down here. You're sure that there's a way to make it happen?"

"Positive. But if you're still having trouble making it flow… Nami, you're the expert on clouds, think you can see if you can figure out what he has to do?"
Nami nodded, and Usopp continued. "Well, alright, then… In other news, I've almost finished upgrading my slingshot and arsenal. Boss—" He looked at the Dugongs. "I've finished the Thermal Dart, but I haven't worked out a way for you to have a safe place to grab it yet. So, I'm either going to need an indeterminate amount of design time to fix that, or I'm going to need to make heat-retardant gauntlets for you."

Boss snorted and waved his flipper dismissively. "Please. A little bit of heat doesn't scare me, I can take it on the chin like a man."

"Uh… Boss?" Conis cut in hesitantly with a raised finger. "I'm sorry to tell you this, but Heat Dials are capable of reaching temperatures of up to and over 700 degrees Celsius. You could seriously injure your flippers if you used that weapon unprotected!"

Boss cocked an eyebrow at Conis before plucking his cigar from his mouth and grinding it down in his free palm without even a hint of either hesitation or a wince. "I have spent over three-quarters of my life smashing my flippers into the bedrock of the Sandora River and the skulls of every living creature in it. It is a miracle if I ever feel anything with them." He grinned confidently. "Trust me, if anyone can take the heat, it's me."

"…Right. Just make sure that whenever you're not using it, you keep it deactivated, otherwise you're going to be getting a lot more scar-tissue," Usopp finally concluded before nodding at me. "And Cross?" He took hold of the tablecloth covering the table he was near. "Your upgrades are complete." With a triumphant grin, he yanked back the cloth.

I grinned as I took in the sight. He had completely revamped my armor. The color was the same, but ridges covered the backs of them from elbow to finger and knee to toe, and the elbows and knees were thicker than the rest of it, guarding the joints perfectly. The armor as a whole was thicker, too, each piece easily double the size of my limp proper; I could see sleeves of what looked like fabric on the insides of the armor, with the metal part expanded outwards. And in the palms of the gauntlets were two distinctly round shapes, the palms displaying seven-pieced honeycomb-grilles.

"Specially designed from the Usopp Workshop, your new armor comes complete with heat and cold insulation, along with an extra layer of protection and durability composed of sea king leather and the special fibers I use in my ropes. The left one is the Flash Gauntlet, which I've hooked up with that strobe-mechanism you said you liked, and the right one is the Impact Gauntlet, which channels all impacts to the dial no matter where you catch them, even if they're not on the palm itself. And don't worry, I've worked out all of the bugs this time with Luffy and the dugongs acting as test dummies; just make sure to discharge it outside of the feedback mechanism after every twenty or so blasts, otherwise there's a good chance the build-up of energy will blow your bones clean out your elbow. Also!" He pointed on Conis. "I'm working on a way to build a similar device for the Reject Dial; for now, though, the only one who can use it without breaking their arm—and most likely their body as a whole—is Luffy."

"And he hits about as hard as that thing anyway, so really it's a moot point," I chuckled before pointing at Zoro. "Alright, moving on. You, mister First Mate… I have absolutely no idea how you pulled it off, but you worked out some kind of technique you called Nine Swords Style: Asura. Basically—"

"No, no, I got it," Zoro cut me off with a casual wave of his hand. "I know what you're talking about. I've been meditating on it in my spare time, but now that I know that it's actually possible…" He trailed off into a feral grin that caused my blood to freeze over.

Soundbite shuddered in terror. "Unclean… Unclean…"
I swallowed heavily in agreement before forging on. "A-A-Anyway, while you're working on that, another technique to think on is one of a set known as the Six Powers." I turned slightly so that I was addressing the whole crew. "The Six Powers is a highly advanced martial-arts style that is used almost exclusively by the Marines' top brass, the purpose of which is to essentially turn the human body into a weapon. Thankfully, however, I think that the techniques are simple enough that you can figure them out yourselves.

"The one I'm thinking of at the moment is known as Iron Body. The basics of it, as I understand them, is to clench your body's muscles hard, and I mean really hard, so that your very flesh—" I rapped my knuckles on my abdomen. "Becomes as solid as iron itself, so that not even blades or bullets can hurt you. Well…" I nodded my head to the side. "Unless it's a bullshit-strong attack, but… well, you get my point." I looked back at Zoro. "I figured that you have the most experience out of all of us at blocking near-lethal attacks with your torso, so I figure that you'd have the most luck puzzling it out."

"Makes sense," Zoro nodded in agreement.

"Hey, I've taken twice as many blows as the Marimo!" Sanji protested.

I gave the cook a flat look. "Sanji, you've taken a lot of bad hits, I'll admit, but you sure as hell didn't take Mihawk's ship-cutting slash or Mr. 1's shredding drill head on."

Sanji faltered at that for a moment before grumbling and looking away as he chewed on his cigarette.

"And besides, you'll be focusing on the second, third and fourth of the Six Powers, and I'm honestly going to be surprised if you don't have at least one of them by the time the day is out. And Zoro will never let you hear the end of it besides that, since he's already mastered one of them as far as his fighting style is concerned."

Both Zoro and Sanji looked at me, the former with wicked eagerness and the latter looking about ready to burst into flames of pure determination. I smiled innocently, somehow managing to move all of my cold sweat to the back of my head. I would not show weakness, I would not show weakness!

"Talk fast," Sanji growled viciously.

I most certainly did not swallow heavily. "Well, see, Zoro's able to produce flying slashes with his Phoenix attacks, and the technique known as the Tempest Kick lets you produce them with your legs. All you have to do is kick with enough force and somehow concentrate all the resultant wind from the attack into an amalgamation of pure wind strong and sharp enough to match any blade."

Sanji's determination faded into a contemplative frown. "Hrm… you mean like what the old geezer did with his peg leg back when that huge shield-wearing psycho tried to ignite the Baratie?"

I blinked. "…Huh, I forgot about that. Figures that old coot would have figured that technique out, God only knows how far into the Line he got before turning back. But… yeah, pretty much, just concentrate all of that wind into a singular blade of air and you should acquire a nice ranged attack in your arsenal."

Sanji smirked at Zoro, but grudgingly looked back at me when I snapped my fingers for attention. "Alright, as much as I'd love to start on that one right away, you said there were two more?"

"Yeah. The third technique, you've actually done already, back when Ohm scarred Conis. With the Moonwalk technique, you kick so hard that you can jump on the air itself. Besides using Devil Fruit powers, it's the closest thing you can ever get to actual flight. I don't expect you to get the hang of
that one in a hurry, but if you're able to do it while you're berserk…" I shrugged. "If you have to, try channeling that anger so you can figure out how to do it.

"Now, the fourth one," I said, looking around at the whole crew again. "Seems to be the easiest of all the Six Powers with how common it is. A certain ex-pirate in the East Blue by the name of Captain Kuro even developed a half-bastardized, half-improved version of it: the Shave technique. This is the only one that I know the instructions for: by kicking the ground ten times in a second, you can generate enough force to move fast enough that you seem to practically teleport, disappearing. How the hell you manage it, I don't know, but like I said, it seems to be the easiest of them. Heck," I chuckled, looking back at the sniper and navigator. "With how good you are at running, I wouldn't be surprised if you could manage it, Usopp. Or you, Nami."

The two of them looked contemplative, and I turned my attention back to Luffy. "The fifth technique is called Finger Pistol. Essentially, with enough strength and by applying Iron Body to one's finger, just doing this—" I stuck my arm out, index finger pointing outwards. "Oughta be enough to put a hole in a person as well as any gunshot. A bit more visceral than what you're used to, I know, but I just thought it might be a good idea for your pipe. Good way of piercing through particularly strong defenses and all."

Luffy hummed thoughtfully as he tilted his head to the side.

"Now, the last one is another one that you've pulled off, Luffy, during your fight against Eneru. Though…" I waved my hand side to side. "The official technique is admittedly more effective than that airhead thing you pulled off. Letting your body go limp and letting your reflexes do all the work dodging is the basis of the Paper Art technique, but the real deal lets you keep your head in the game, so that you can attack or move appropriately."

"Oooh, now that sounds like fun!" Luffy grinned eagerly.

"Alright, now, let's see…" I slowly started ticking down on my fingers as I muttered to myself. "Zoro needs Haki, Nami and Usopp are fine on their own, Sanji…" I glanced at the cook as he swung out a few kicks. "Hey, Sanji, does the phrase 'if God made food, then the Devil made spice' mean anything to you?"

Sanji froze mid-swing, shooting a shocked look at me. "That move actually works!? I came up with it back up on the Baratie while I was drunk off my ass and I've never used it because I didn't think it'd actually work!"

I shrugged helplessly. "Yeah, well, somehow it actually does, and to great effect I might add. Something about your heart burning even hotter than the kick or something?"

Sanji's expression rapidly shifted from surprise to realization and then to thoughtful contemplation.

I shrugged and left him to it in favor of moving on. "Alright then, next up, Chopper!" I pointed at the doctor in question. "Seeing as we're currently in the middle of a verdant wasteland, is there any chance that you'd be willing to try training in order to gain control of 'that'?"

The reindeer stared at me in confusion for a moment before paling visibly, even beneath his fur, fidgeting uncomfortably. "I, ah, don't think that that might be such a good idea, Cross…"

"What? Why not?" I blinked in confusion. "I mean, I suppose the whole hyper-exhaustion thing is a danger, but we've got enough muscle here to easily match you, and all we have to do to break the form is knock you in the ocean."
"Weeeeell…" Chopper clicked his hooves together sheepishly… the same way he'd done when he was explaining how he'd developed his little Hyde-issue.

"This is gonna suck, isn't it?" I blandly stated.

"Well, see, the thing is, Cross," he said, rubbing the back of his skull. "'That' was a berserker when I stumbled onto it because it was primarily controlled by my unconscious mind. Back then, my unconscious was totally empty, so it was essentially my baser animal instincts given form, if admittedly more savage than I'd expect. But now…" He tapped his hoof against his temple. "That part of my brain isn't quite so unconscious anymore, remember?"

I stood stock still as the implications sunk in. And said implications were that if things proceeded anywhere even relatively close to canon, there was a non-zero chance of the Tower of Justice becoming a *butcher's shop*. Or some other unimaginable abomination of SCIENCE!

… On the other hand, maybe Spandam deserved that—NO, no, it wasn't worth it. It very nearly was, so very, *very* nearly was, but! I had *collateral* to think of, so much collateral.

"Let's put a pin in that for now, alright?" I squeaked uncomfortably.

Chopper nodded with just as much trepidation. "Probably for the best, yes."

"Moving right along!" I hastily swung around to my next target, and then paused as an idea came to me, prompting me to swing back to Chopper. "Actually, there's still something that you can do. You know about Luffy's Gears, right?"

"Uh…" Chopper blinked in surprise. "You mean that technique that he used to turn huge and punch out the seawall, right? And the one he used to save Conis from Eneru? What about them?"

"The latter is Gear 1.5 and the prior is 2.5, prototype versions of Gears Second and Third," I explained. "Both extremely powerful tools, to be sure, but, well…" I scratched the back of my neck sheepishly. "Well, you remember how the recoil from 2.5 snapped Luffy into a midget?"

Chopper grimaced as he caught on. "I'm guessing that 1.5 has some kind of side-effect as well?" He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Well, I don't know if I can help with anything like the shrinkage, but—"

"Yeeeaah, see…" My sheepishness redoubled. "That's the thing. Gear Second's side effects are a lot more, shall we say… *visceral* than Gear Third. How to best put this… Ah, Luffy!" I pointed at our captain. "How do you start 1.5 and how do you usually feel after using it?"

Luffy grinned eagerly as he held his leg up and pointed to it. "Oh, it's easy! I just pump my legs to get my blood flowing faster, and then that makes me go faster too!" He then looked upwards thoughtfully, totally missing the horrified look that had started spreading over Chopper's face. "The bad news is that so far I've only been able to keep it going for a few seconds and after it runs out, I usually feel kinda tired and my muscles ache all over."

"But I've been getting better at using it in my spare time! Some more practice and I'll be able to keep it running for as long as I want! Here." He placed his fist on the deck. "Check it ou—!

THWACK!

"GRK!" Luffy choked, slapping a hand to the side of his neck. However, before he could do anything further, the syringe that had just stabbed him finished emptying its contents into his bloodstream, causing the rubber-man to keel over and start snoring.
We all stared at Luffy's prone form in shock for a moment before turning our gazes to Chopper, whose hoof was still extended in a throwing follow-through and whose face was a rictus of pure rage. "Unbelievable, inconsiderate, suicidal...!" The human-reindeer's words trailed off into unintelligible grumbling as he marched up to Luffy and grabbed the back of his collar. He then shot a dour glare around the deck. "If you'll excuse me, I'm going retire to the kitchen for a bit so as to guarantee that this ignoramus!" He emphasized the word with a thoroughly ineffective smack to Luffy's temple. "Doesn't keel over at age 50 due to artificial MUSCLE ATROPHY!"

Nobody dared halt the doctor as he marched up the stairs, flung Luffy into the kitchen and slammed the door shut behind him.

Soundbite blinked in surprise before giving me a hesitant glance. "Should we SAVE HIM?"

I shook my head with an exasperated sigh. "No, no, best we leave them be. Luffy might suffer in the short-term, but Chopper is essentially working to save him from, well, himself." I clapped my hands as I decided that it'd be better for my sanity to not dwell on whatever unholy procedures Chopper was performing. "Right then, next up is..." I frowned as I realized who I had turned to. "Vivi. I meant to ask you after we were through with Eneru, but things got kinda hectic so I forgot until now with Aokiji, so I'll ask before I forget: that necklace you're wearing, what—?"

"OH, MY, LOOK AT THE TIME!" Vivi yelped desperately before I could get another word out, sweat cascading down her face as she plastered a very rictus grin on. She then vaulted onto Carue's back and clutched his reins in a white-knuckled grip. "In all the excitement, I almost forgot that I'd been meaning to run some laps with Carue, for practice! Well, no time like the present! Come on Carue, let's go, once around the island, chop chop!"

"Hey, now, wait a—!!"

WHOOSH!

"Minute..." I trailed off slowly as I turned my head to stare after the dust cloud that was fast approaching the horizon. "...Wow."

"DAT DUCK CAN MOVE!" Soundbite whistled in awe.

"Tell me about it..." I grumbled darkly before giving Soundbite a searching glance. "By the way, is there any chance that she—?"

"Sorry, nada." Soundbite shook his head in denial. "Most I've GOTTEN IS THE word 'SIROCCO'... ALTHOUGH..."

I glanced at him curiously. "What?"

"EH..." He nodded his head side to side. "I think that I heard a voice coming from IT? DON'T THINK IT WAS alive though, so..."

"Huh..." I mulled that over for a second before shaking my head. "Well, either way, if she doesn't want to share I suppose that's just her prerogative. I'll drop it... for now, anyway." I moved on to Conis. "Alright, now for you, our resident angel of firepower. Given how you've been toting that Burn Bazooka around all day without so much as breaking a sweat, I'm guessing it's safe to assume that you don't find it's weight to be in any way daunting?"

Conis shifted her bazooka around on her back for a moment before nodding confidently. "Yes, that sounds about right. Thanks to all the strength from the extra oxygen, it barely feels like I'm carrying
"Then I say it's high time we change that," I said, smacking my fist into my palm. "Seeing as you can carry that behemoth around no problem, then you can easily carry around a bunch of its cousins at the same time. Your goal is to find out just how firepower you can comfortably strap to yourself at once; trust me, if you think talking softly and carrying a big gun equals being a badass, that's easily trumped by being a walking arsenal."

"Can do!" the angel saluted eagerly.

"Su, make sure she doesn't somehow overload and become ineffective."

"I will try, but I make no promises!" Su swiped her tail up to her forehead in a salute.

"Hey!"

"Remember the macaroni incident?"

"YOU SWERE TO NEVER MENTION THAT AGAIN! Though I suppose I do see your point. So much cheese..."

I shuddered slightly as I watched the usually serene woman devolve into a fit of horrified twitching before electing to move along. "And Boss!" I pointed at the martial artist confidently for a moment before slowly lowering my finger. "I... am afraid that I have nothing for you or your students..."

"Eh," Boss shrugged indifferently. "You've given us more than enough to work on already." He pumped his fist with a grin. "We'll just have to do the rest ourselves! Right, boys?"

"AYE, BOSS!" his students concurred.

"Well, then, in that case..." I clapped my hands and nodded. "That's it! Everyone go right ahead and get to it!"

"Hang on a second, Cross," Nami interjected. "Aren't you forgetting someone?"

"Eh?" I blinked at her in confusion. "No, I was just leaving that up to you. I don't have anything to suggest until Usopp's got the Clima-Tact ready, so—"

Nami cut me off by rapping her knuckles on my forehead with a flat look. "I meant you, dumb-dumb. You've told everyone else what they should do to get stronger, but what are you going to do in the meantime?"

I felt a cold sweat begin to drip down my forehead as I suddenly realized I hadn't thought of something for me to do, and that meant someone was going to 'volunteer' me to work with them. And in all honesty, that was likely to end with me in a motherload of pain.

"I-I, uh..." I stammered intelligently.

"Mikey, Donny," Boss thankfully interrupted. "Go help Cross out. Sobek knows he needs it."

"BOSS, YES, BOSS!" both dugongs barked, saluting.

I swallowed nervously at their enthusiasm and promptly shot a pleading look at Usopp. "Please tell me that you managed to finish whatever upgrades you planned to make to my baton."

"Ah..." Usopp hesitated for a moment before nodding nervously. "Maybe yes? Fair warning, I'm not
entirely confident about its build, so—!

"I'm about to fight two *Kung-Fu* Dugongs, see how much I care!" I growled desperately.

Usopp glanced at the two amphibians, who were tapping their weapons in their palms before shuddering in terror. "Point taken." The sniper-tinkerer drew a metal cylinder out of his bag and tossed it to me. "Just be careful, it's still kind of—!"

I caught the cylinder in mid-air—

**ZAP!**

And promptly found myself flat on my back, coughing up a hefty cloud of smoke. "Ow…"

"**NOT fun!**" Soundbite whined.

"…sensitive," Usopp winced sympathetically as he stood over me, scratching the back of his head. "Sorry, those Thunder Dials are really tricky. Guess there are still a few bugs to work out, huh?"

"The appropriate phrase here…" I wheezed out as I shakily extended my arm skyward, my baton held delicately between my fingertips. "Would be 'no doifu'."

Usopp took the collapsed weapon back with a pair of insulated pliers he'd pulled from his bag. "I'll just, ah, try and work them out then, huh?"

"Yeah," I winced as I coughed up another lungful of smoke. "You do that…"

"Nice dance, Cross," Su snickered. "Real fancy footwork!"

"Go get your tail charred off, puff-ball…" I snarled as I slowly crawled to my feet, shaking my head in order to dislodge the stars swirling in it. "So, uh, how are we doing this exactly?"

Donny jabbed a flipper over his shoulder, pointing towards the shore. "This way."

I gave him a shaky thumbs-up. "You got it. Just gimme a bit to get my armor on, I'm going to need all the protection I can get."

"Yeah, sure thing, we'll be waiting," Donny waved his flipper flippantly as he and Mikey leapt over the edge of the ship.

I waited for a moment before shooting a glare at Nami. "You realize that they are going to absolutely tenderize me, right?"

Nami hummed to herself, tapping a finger on her lips. "I suppose I *could* tell you that this is for your own good. That I care about you, and that I want to see you get stronger so that I don't have to worry about you so much. I could also tell you that I think you can teach those dugongs as much as they teach you, or even that this is a matter of solidarity, with all of us getting steadily stronger and that I don't want you left behind."

I saw *this* punch line coming a mile away. "Aaaand in reality?"

She patted my shoulder comfortingly as she sported a winning smile. "Try and grow a spine and some thicker skin, you weak-ass piece of putty."

"…Alright, while most of that is par for the course… thicker skin? Don't you think that if there was a way to do that, I'd jump on it?" I asked dryly, holding an arm up at eye-level.
The blood drained from Nami's face as she gaped at my limb before she swallowed heavily. "… Okay, I suppose I could have worded… that…" She trailed off before giving me a flat look. "Considering how you always tell Lassoo that dog insults were fine before he joined the crew, I'm going to take a shot in the dark and say you're screwing with me?"

"Atta girl," I chuckled, slapping her back as I moved past her to where my armor was laid out. As I pulled on the pieces, I thought about how different it felt. The sleeves fit like… well, like a glove, and the metal on the outside moved just as the sleeves did. It was a bit more comfortable than the last set I had, but I could feel that it was a lot tougher this time, too; the sheer extra weight of the things attested to that. In addition, the Kevlar-grade material on the inside coupled with Usopp's whatever-the-hell metal on the outside made sure that I wouldn't have to worry about any pain getting through the bandages. To cap it all off, the armor was sealed on just as tightly as my previous iteration, with the elbow and knee guards doing an expert job of hiding the unlatching mechanisms.

I rolled my arms and took a few practice steps to re-acclimate myself to the weight of the armor, although it soon became clear that I wasn't so much re-acclimating as I was flat-out acclimating. After all, the difference in size combined with the fact that it was around twice as heavy as the old armor was making this seem less like an upgrade and more like what it actually was: a completely new set of armor that I'd have to grow used to all over again. And it wasn't going to be as easy as I'd hoped, either.

I threw out a few practice punches and swung my leg up so that I could lash out a Spartan Kick. I grinned in satisfaction.

"Perfect," I announced before glancing over at Usopp, one of my gauntlets held up so that the palm was facing him. "So, how do I…?"

"Hey, don't point it at me, that's the Flash one!" the sniper said, hastily covering his eyes. "But just flexing your palm should be enough. Whole hand, to prevent misfires."

I eyed my left hand—my Flash Gauntlet— for a moment before flipping its palm down and firmly flexing the bottoms of my knuckles. I was extremely happy to see light strobing on the ground. "Ooooh, yeah, this is gonna be useful…" I then glanced over at Lassoo as he chose that moment to get up and shake himself off. "Well, I'm almost completely loaded down anyway. Whaddaya say, Lassoo, wanna help me give them our best?"

The dog-gun yawned jaw-crackingly wide before giving me an apologetic shrug. "Sorry, Cross, no can do." He jerked his head over at Conis. "I've got an appointment with our resident iron-jock-strapped angel here for an upgrade." He leered eagerly, tongues of flame licking out from between his fangs. "I want me a piece of that firepower she was tossing around earlier!"

In spite of the fact that I was going to be left without my heaviest artillery at my back, I couldn't help but chuckle. "Alright, go on, then."

Tail wagging excitedly, he bounded over to Conis, and I exchanged glances with an eager-looking Soundbite before jogging over to the railing and jumping down to the shore. I was very pleased when I found that it didn't hurt in the least.

A few scant feet before me, Donny and Mikey stood on opposite ends of the Merry, the former twirling his staff with quiet but ill-disguised eagerness, and the latter practically bursting with belligerent excitement.
"Alright, then," I nodded as I started walking forward, stretching my arms back and forth as I went. "So, are there any rules here? Any limitations, any holds barred, is there a starting sig—" I cut myself off mid-sentence, leaping forwards and swinging my leg at Mikey.

Said leg was promptly caught by the chains of the nunchuck the dugong snapped taut and held at bay without even a hint of worry from him.

Mikey stared blandly at the sole of my greave for a moment before cocking an eyebrow at me. "Did you honestly expect that to work?"

I shrugged in an innocent manner. "Not really, but I had to try."

"Well, I guess the first lesson is in situational awareness," the dugong replied.

I frowned. "Situational awareness? What—"

"BEHIND!" Soundbite suddenly yelped.

I didn't even need to look to guess what Soundbite was referring to, and most likely any other person would have ducked down to avoid what was coming, but seeing as I wasn't one for conventional solutions, I instead chose to leap forwards, using the chain of Mikey's weapon to vault over him. I'd have gone for a boot to the head in the process, but he rolled under me before I got the chance, leaving me to land in a roll and turn to face my opponents.

"Hmm, not bad," Donny hummed, twirling his bo staff as he landed, Mikey popping up beside him. "You and Soundbite really do form a good team. Okay, we'll do this the normal way."

Both dugongs snapped their weapons up into ready stances, a palpable aura of menace rising around them.

"Defend yourself."

"GASTRO-FLASH!" I immediately shouted, pointing the Flash Gauntlet in front of me, Soundbite chiming in with an ear-piercing shriek. Mikey stumbled and fell to the ground with a cry of pain while Donny kept going. Apparently one of them had the foresight to plug their shells with wax.

I threw up an arm to block the bo staff as it descended, then hastily moved my other arm up when the dugong seamlessly moved into another strike. And then another strike came and was blocked. And another. I backpedalled furiously, barely blocking the strikes from the bo staff—but the fact of the matter was that I was actually blocking them. And every other block built up a little more energy…

I caught another overhead strike, and instead of blocking the follow-up I tried to meet it with my palm. The Impact Dial rang out, rattling the air in front of me, and Donny only barely managed to pull back his staff before it shattered. We each paused, me panting slightly and Donny not winded in the slightest. And just to make matters even more fun, the staff-wielder was swiftly joined by Mikey jumping to his side, eyes narrowed and bloodshot but still full of raw energy.

We maintained our deadlock for a few moments, until the dugongs acted on an unspoken signal and suddenly moved.

Mikey immediately shot towards me, while Donny veered off to the left. He was going to go behind me again, I just knew it, but with Mikey up in my face I wasn't able to do much about it. Where Donny was almost like a dancer, flowing from attack to attack with almost water-like fluidity, Mikey was straightforward, brutal smashing. Or, to put it another way, Donny actually had grace and strategy, while Mikey had adapted hack-and-slash to his nunchucks.
Once again I found myself on the defensive, and I kept a count in my head as the blows rained on my right arm. Not to let off the Impact Dial again. I doubted they'd let me do that. No, it was for something else…

"BEHIND!"

I was ducking even before Soundbite barked out a warning. Unfortunately, that didn't do much good as Donny had gone low with his attack this time. Fortunately, as I was squatting down, I was only lightly knocked onto my side rather than sent tumbling. I grinned as an idea came to me, and I planted my right palm on the ground.

"Impact."

With a loud bang, the Impact Dial discharged, spraying dirt and grass everywhere.

"Ackpft!"

Including into my face. Not my brightest idea, but it did get the dugongs to back off and snap their guards up, and that was precisely what I'd been going for. I quickly sprang to my feet and charged at the first dugong I saw, who turned out to be Mikey. After all, I couldn't stay on the defensive forever and the best way to flip the script would be to take out their primary enforcer first.

I did not count on Mikey wrapping up my punch in the chains of his nunchucks and flipping me off my feet.

I don't know if it was design or by accident—probably a bit of both—but as I sailed through the air, I managed to position my foot just right so that it clocked Mikey upside the head. Of course, he had that big turtle shell protecting him, but a nice and heavy armored boot connecting with his skull still dazed him a bit. Of course, I also got the wind knocked out of me upon hitting the ground, so I think we came off even in that exchange.

As I caught my breath, I felt Soundbite desperately chomp on my shoulder. I glanced up and hastily threw up my armored palm to catch Donny's staff, something I felt even through the layers of protection. My foot came up to try and meet his soft underbelly, but he put his muscular tail in the way—and in doing so, forgot about my second trick of the fight.

"GASTRO-FLASH!"

Wax or not, non-sight combat senses or not, getting a spotlight to the face hurts. More than that, the instinct to cover your eyes is both universal and very difficult to overcome, as amply demonstrated by Dragon Ball Z. With the pressure on my arms gone, I raised my other foot and managed to nail Donny clean in his face, throwing him off of me and leaving him reeling. I breathed a sigh of relief and began to stand up—

"INCOMING!"

This time the warning wasn't in time. Mikey's nunchucks hit me right between the shoulder blades. I let the blow knock me forward onto my hands, and shot my foot back in a mule-kick. It didn't hit anything, but it did force him to dodge back a bit before leaping at me again, giving me long enough to spin around—

"IMPACT!"

And slam my right gauntlet into his gut as I activated its mechanism.
"GAGH!" he cried out, flailing slightly as he tumbled on the ground. I immediately took the opportunity, diving onto the downed dugong. It wasn't any kind of formal move, closer to just kneeling on him, but I was over double his weight and size, so it worked. I punched the ground, to get as much charge as I could into the Impact Dial, and moved the gauntlet into position—

Aaaaand promptly froze when I felt a weight land on my back and wood knock against the back of my skull.

All four of us stayed frozen for a few seconds until I slowly raised my Flash gauntlet up where Donny could see it, pointedly keeping the palm facing away from him. "Truce?"

Donny was silent for a moment before removing his staff from my neck and hopping off. "I can live with that."

"Oooooowww," Mikey whined as he wiggled on the ground, clutching his belly miserably. "Damn it dude, that huuuurt…"

"Oh, you have no right to talk, Chuck-boy!" I winced as I twisted my torso back and forth, causing the spot where he'd managed to slam me to flare up painfully. "Freaking hell, those things hurt like heck!"

"You kicked me in the head and hit me with the pure force of Donny's staff!" the orange-bandanna-wearer moaned. "That does not compare to one nunchuk-blow!"

"Guys, guys," Donny cut in, coming between us with his flippers raised placatingly. "You're both babies, can we move on now?"

"HEY! I'm a baby, TOO!"

We all spared Soundbite a flat look, which he responded to with a wide grin.

"… Fine, moving on," I ultimately conceded. "So, any advice you two can give me?"

"Well, for starters… you're an instinctive fighter, Cross," Donny explained.

"Basically, that means you can lash out like a freaking maniac without thinking and not automatically get your ass handed to you," Mikey provided.

Donny glared at his fellow student and opened his mouth before trailing off and cocking his head to the side. "Alright, so he's not entirely wrong. The gist of it is that what you do is brawling with some sense to it, which Zoro told Boss and Boss told us was apparently what you're going for, and you're damn good at it too. As for training options, well…" He shrugged helplessly. "There aren't really any formal ones. The best way to train what you do is to just let you go ahead and fight. Trial and error, and all that, let you work out all the kinks in your strategies for yourself."

I nodded thoughtfully as I processed that explanation. "Works for me…" I trailed off before looking at the snail on my shoulder. "Ah, by the way, Soundbite? You need to be a bit—"

"Say faster. I DARE YOU."

"No, no, your speed was fine!" I waved him down placatingly. "I was going to say specific. Just saying behind doesn't mean jack when an attack can come from high or low as well."

Soundbite frowned, but nodded. "I'll keep that in mind."
"Well, if we're done here, I'm going to get back to trying out more of our new arsenal," Mikey grinned eagerly, heading back towards the Merry.

"And if Nami's done with Usopp, I should probably see how far her bojutsu has progressed," Donny added, following his fellow student.

I was about to go find Lassoo when I remembered that I had something to deal with on the ship as well. Sighing, I began trudging back towards it.


"It's not that, Soundbite. It's about something far more serious." I shook my head grimly as I climbed back aboard the Merry. "Do me a favor, will you? Any snide remarks you feel like sharing during the coming conversation? Try and keep them to yourself unless they're constructive. This… is going to be delicate."

Soundbite seemed to shrink in on himself in apprehension; I guess he'd seen me this kind of serious enough now that he was worried about what was coming next. Probably like how I was. I climbed to the top of the Merry where Usopp had established his makeshift factory, where I saw him tinkering with the Eisen Dial's control apparatus alongside a blue rod that was splayed open and was starting to take on a very familiar form. He glanced up as he heard my approach and promptly rolled his eyes. "Look, Cross, I'm sorry about the baton, but with your armor finished, Nami won't be happy if I don't make her upgrade priority one, so—"

"This isn't about that, Usopp," I interrupted. "I could give a damn about getting shocked. I'm here about the stability of the crew."

Usopp choked off in shock and turned to fully face me.

I glanced at Soundbite and spun my finger in the air, waiting for the telltale buzz before continuing. "Usopp, this is very serious: how are you feeling after that meeting with Aokiji?"

The sniper's expression instantly darkened with doubt, and it took a few second for him to work up his nerve to reply. "...I... I remember what you said after Drum Island, Cross," he muttered morosely. "That I'd always be the weakest on the crew. At first I was alright with things because of how you said that I was the weakest out of the world's strongest crew. And it really worked too..."

He ground his teeth. "Until now, anyway. It's just... if the Monster Trio and Boss were beaten in one shot like that, what good am I going to do against opponents like—"

"Usopp," I cut in sharply and with more than a little desperation, causing him to snap out of his thoughts. "All of us on the crew are meant to do what we can. Nothing more, and nothing less. I'm the crew's tactician, so my training in brawling is so that I can handle mooks, not full-blown officers or captains. You're a sniper, not a front line fighter; if anything, you're supposed to be as far from the fight as possible, so that you have a better chance attacking opponents nobody else possibly can."

Usopp's expression barely lightened, and he sighed. "Cross... I know I'm stronger than I normally ever would have been at this point without you. And obviously, all the extra upgrades and weapon designs I've been doing have made it clear that I play a key role in helping the crew's weaker members. But still..." He scratched the back of his head uncomfortably. "If we're going to be up against monsters like Aokiji... I just want to make sure I live up to the crew, you know?"

I sighed in undisguised relief. I could work with this. "So... what you're saying is that you're just disappointed because you don't feel like you're living up to the name of the crew?"
Usopp started to nod his head before pausing and slowly shooting a suspicious glance my way. "Yeah… but why do you ask?"

I froze as I realized that I'd just overplayed my hand. "I… it's nothing, Usopp, just getting some ducks in—"

"What is it, Cross?" he pressed, serious as the grave.

I grimaced as I thought things over before mustering my nerve and giving Usopp an equally serious look. "Usopp… do you trust me?"

My question caught the long-nose off-guard. "Huh? What are you—?"

"Answer the question," I repeated.

"Yes, yes, I trust you, geeze! What's this got to do with—!"

"Usopp," I interrupted again. "I realize that I might have played this card to death and back when I joined the crew, but I am playing it now in full confidence: you are better off not knowing."

"What!?" Usopp squawked indignantly. "Cross, this obviously concerns me, I have a right—!"

"You have the right to know, but that does not mean that it is in your best interests," I flatly interrupted. "If you have any measure of trust in me, then you will listen to my words and heed them: that possible path in life is dead and buried in the ground, where, if I have any say in the matter, it will remain until the end of time, forever unseen and unheard. You. Are better off. Not knowing it." I softened my expression, putting as much pleading desperation into it as I could manage. "So, please… don't ask again?"

Usopp hesitated for a second before sighing and hanging his head. "Alright, Cross. If you say so."

I let out a whoosh of relief as I clapped Usopp on the shoulder. "Great, thanks! Well, seeing as that's… everything…" I paused in my exit before slowly turning back to Usopp. "Actually… one more thing. Just… want some advice to help with your confidence?"

"Uh…” Usopp thought it over before nodding tentatively. "Yeah, why not. Couldn't hurt, I guess."

"Great! Now then, first things' first. Tell me this, Usopp: do you think you're a good liar?"

"Wha—? I know that I'm a good liar!"

"Then how about this: if all else fails in inspiring your confidence, why not try lying to yourself? Now, now!" I held a hand up when Usopp started to protest. "Hear me out! Look, when you get scared or feel like running, why not just try… I dunno, convincing yourself that you actually have the willpower you need to fight and win? Practice that enough and eventually you'll believe it so much that it's actually true! Genius, no?"

Usopp blinked several times as he processed that, cupping his chin in thought. "…You know, that's crazy enough that it just might—"

"LOOK out!" Soundbite suddenly hollered.

Moments later, we heard the sound of a door slamming open, followed shortly by Chopper, still clearly in the throes of the Madness Place.
"ALRIGHT, I'M DONE WITH THIS IDIOT! DO WHAT YOU WANT WITH HIM!"

The two of us quickly rushed to the edge of the Merry's top, just in time to see Luffy arc off the Merry, wafting gracefully through the air before slamming to the ground in a shower of dirt and grass. Amazingly, he stayed asleep through the whole ordeal.

Well, at least, until a small syringe-dart… well, darted off the ship and hit Luffy in the seat of his pants. Two seconds of stillness. Just two. And then—

"WOOHOO!"

Luffy shot up and started rocketing around the plain like a rubbery bat out of Impel Down, the syringe falling out immediately. And what followed was proof that giving Luffy too much caffeine or sugar was only to be done if we were going to use him as a weapon.

"I THINK he may have mastered SHAVING," Soundbite groaned dizzily, his eyestalks spinning uncontrollably. And honestly, considering the numerous footfalls and dust trails that were crisscrossing the plain and the air above it, along with dialogue that sounded almost Alvin, Simon, and Theodore-grade levels of fast and squeaky, I couldn't blame him. It also almost made me ask Chopper to make more of whatever the hell that had been for combat use.

Almost.

After a few seconds, I turned my head to look at Usopp. "You want some practice hitting a moving target?" I deadpanned.

"I acknowledge that I am good at my field, Cross," Usopp deadpanned right back. "But I am nowhere near that good."

"Fair 'nuff."

Shouts arose from the island as Luffy tore through everyone's training sessions in his stimulant-induced rampage, none more angry than Zoro and Sanji. The second I heard those particularly irate voices, I immediately hid behind the scant protection of the Merry's railing as I realized what was coming.

"Uh, Cross, what are you—?" Usopp began, before being interrupted by two-thirds of the Monster Trio.

"LUFFY!"

"Nice place you got here," Usopp commented as he huddled alongside me.

"Make yourself right at home," I invited right back.

After a few seconds of no explosion, we both poked our heads out from behind the railing. We almost immediately regretted it; I could see faces and arms flickering in and out on Zoro’s sides, and Sanji’s right foot was dragging along the ground, wafting up smoke. Luffy had stopped bounding around like a chipmunk on crack, and seemed to be almost appraising the threat.

And then they moved. The resulting clash promptly threw up a massive cloud of dust, streaked with fire and practically spitting razor-sharp winds. The din echoing out was devoid of grunts of pain… then, after a solid minute, we saw Luffy soar above it, his mouth bit down on his hand and his body already bulging.
"GUM-GUM!" Luffy shouted, audible even over the roar of the clash below. I gaped in awe, completely forgetting to take cover. This is what I had signed up for.

"GIANT PISTOL!"

Luffy's fist impacted the shore under the dust cloud with an almighty crash, and the hard-packed soil and the rock below simply disintegrated. And rather than add to the existing dust cloud, it blew it away entirely. I caught a glimpse of red on Sanji's foot and nine swords rather than three, before the last of the dust cleared and I got a glimpse of where Luffy had hit, distracting me from all else.

It was as if a giant had stomped on the spot—which was basically what happened. A fist-shaped chunk of coast was simply gone, as if it had never been there. And right next to it, shrunken to a foot tall, was Luffy. The contrast was so ridiculous that it triggered… something within me.

"Pff—"

"WILL YOU JUST HURRY UP AND LAUGH ALREADY!?!" Nami screamed at me.

Well, who was I to deny a lady her wishes?

"PFFHAHAHAHAHAHA! I LOVE THIS CREW SO MUCH! PFFHAHAHAHAHAHAH!"

Ahhh, it was good to be back.

-0-

A few hours later, we decided that we'd gotten as much as we could out of staying moored to Long Ring Long. Soon enough, we'd packed up what little of our supplies we'd unpacked, gotten everyone aboard and weighed anchor, following the course the Log set for us to reach the next stop on our journey.

As we set off on this new voyage, Nami, Zoro and I stood side-by-side on the railing, staring at the sunset.

"So," Zoro started solemnly. "We've suffered our first complete defeat as a crew, and it pushed us far enough that Luffy decided to revoke any limits on spoilers as long as it could make us stronger. And you said that this is the start of the hardest leg we're going through?"

"Aokiji was a hopeless fight, and we won't be finding another one of those anytime soon," I confirmed solemnly before allowing myself a slight grimace. "But the fights that we will find are going to push us farther than Alabasta. This extra training will help, I'm sure, but…" I hung my head with a sigh. "Well, suffice to say… buckle up."

Nami glanced between us for a moment before groaning in frustration and turning around to stride back towards the cabin, but as she walked, I didn't miss the last words she muttered beneath her breath.

"God, I need a vacation."

Cross-Brain AN: Here's something unheard of for This Bites! : a preview of the next chapter!

"Wow, it is a map, of an island! Weird name though, anyone recognize it?"

"Not me."
"Nope."

"Never heard of it."

"What about the letter that came with it?"

"Here, let me, I'll read it. Alright, let's see. Here's what it says:

"If you are a pirate among pirates…"

A Resort with a Twisted Secret…

"I DON'T KNOW HOW TO PUT IT, BUT… I DUNNO, something just sounds… off. GOOD OR BAD, I don't… this place is weird."

"Among pirates…"

A Vile Demon Hidden in Plain Sight…

"A… smiling flower, at that. Swear to God, Grand Line gets weirder every day…"

"Among pirates…"

A Pitiful Man With a Terrible Past…

"Every single one of those arrows symbolizes a day of loneliness I endured after that storm. They are the number of the regrets I have suffered at suddenly losing every one of my beloved crewmates. Have you had a glimpse of what I've endured?"

"Then gather your steadfast crew of companions…"

Doubt Turns to Conflict, Conflict Turns to Hate, Hate Turns to Madness…

"HEY! GET BACK HERE, BITCH! THAT'S MY AUDIENCE! GIVE ME BACK MY AUDIENCE!"

"And set sail for our island."

And All the World Made to Bear Witness

"LUUUUUUFFYYYYYYYY!"

"The name of the island is…"

The Island that Nobody Leaves…

"How… how could this happen? WHAT HAPPENED TO MY FRIENDS?!"

OMATSURI ISLAND.

"Wow, this place sounds like fun!"

"Yeah, it does… any opinions on it, Cross?"

"Hmm… I'll be honest, I think I might have? But I can't quite… ah, no, wait a second! Yeah, now I
remember! I saw a poster—for—ah... for, for... for an event! Yeah, an event about the place! Never actually saw it so I've got no clue what to expect, but the poster itself looked pretty cheery! Flowers everywhere, bright and colorful; probably nothing on the island itself to worry about. In my opinion?"

"Tell me this is just a NIGHTMARE. SOMEONE WAKE ME UP!"

"I'd say that this could turn out to be the most relaxing vacation of our lives."

Cross-Brain AN: All of a sudden, that ending turned into a devastating cliffhanger. And for those of you who don't get how, well... clearly, you've never seen the darkest tale ever to bear the name of One Piece: Baron Omatsuri and the Secret Island.

Patient AN: It's high time that we got to include a bit of horror in this story, and so we shall... at the stroke of midnight next Sunday. Don't hold it against us... you don't know what we've been through...

Hornet AN: Are you ready?

Xomniae AN: Sleep tight, readers... don't let the flowers bite.
Cross-Brain AN: Ladies and gentlemen, the following is our take on one of the most... *iconic* tales ever created in the main *One Piece* media. Those of you with weak constitutions may want to skip this chapter.

...

...

...

Still here? *MARVELOUS.* We hope you enjoy the SBS Horror Show, and yes, it is *exactly* as bad as it sounds. Good luck getting to sleep tonight... *you'll need it…*

"Huh? What the—? Hey, guys!"

"What is it, Luffy?"

"Check it out, I found a bottle in the water, and there's something inside it!"

"Really? Cool! What is it?"

"Here, lemme see! Huh, looks like a map, a letter, and… an Eternal Pose? Wonder how they managed that. Hey, Leo, mind cutting it open?"

*SINK!*

"Thanks!"

"Wow, it *is* a map, of an island! Weird name though, anyone recognize it?"

"Not me."

"Nope."

"Never heard of it."

"What about the letter that came with it?"

"Here, let me, I'll read it. Alright, let's see. Here's what it says:

**If you are a pirate among pirates…**

**Among pirates…**

**Among pirates…**

Then gather your steadfast crew of companions…

And set sail for our island.

The name of the island is…
OMATSURI ISLAND."

"Wow, this place sounds like fun!"

"Yeah, it does… any opinions on it, Cross?"

"Hmm... I'll be honest, I think I might have? But I can't quite… ah, no, wait a second! Yeah, now I remember! I saw a poster for—ah… for, for… for an event! Yeah, an event about the place! Never actually saw it so I've got no clue what to expect, but the poster itself looked pretty cheery! Flowers everywhere, bright and colorful; probably nothing on the island itself to worry about. In my opinion? I'd say that this could turn out to be the most relaxing vacation of our lives."

"Well, in all fairness, OMATSURI DOES MEAN FESTIVAL!"

"It all sounds too good! It's a trap, I know it!"

"Well, now, hold on, let's withhold judgement for a bit, hm? Does that letter say anything else?"

"Ah… yeah, it does, let me read the rest. 'Omatsuri Island is the Grand Line's only pleasure island resort. As its name implies, every day is a festival. You will also enjoy our many spas and beauty salons.'"

"Oooh… it has been awhile since I've had a nice… anything in that line of treatment…"

"Your nightlife will be filled with beauties from around the world and a selection of fine beverages."

"Beauties? It must be a wonderful island!"

"Dinner will be a full course of exquisite cuisines."

"Hmph… I suppose my interest is a little piqued…"

"Our wildlife preserve features all the amazing sights that nature can provide."

"Oh, now that sounds inviting, don't you think, Su?"

"After a Marine Base and a godforsaken prairie? Either I get a nice and wild locale or I get pissy!"

"Our dojo is home to many retired masters of weapons that are always up for a new challenge."

"Hmph! An excellent opportunity! Is not clashing with those who have already learned all that the weapons have to teach them, the better to improve one's own craft… a Man's Romance?"

"GO, BOSS, GO!"

"This sounds perfect!"

"It's a trap, I tell you!"

"Oh, who cares if it's a trap? Worst comes to worst, we kick their teeth in, loot their treasure rooms and come away even richer! For however much that's worth, anyway, considering all the gold we're hauling!"

"We'll make room… but no need to assume the worst!"
"And why not? When have things ever not gone horribly wrong?"

"Ya know, he hath a pwetty good point, thewe…"

"Captain, what do you think?…Luffy?…HEY, LUFFY, ARE YOU LISTENING?!"

"…Read the first part again."

"Huh? Oh, okay…'If you are a pirate among pirates among pirates among pirates, then gather your steadfast crew of companions and set sail for our island.'"

"Alright! I've decided. We head for Omatsuri Island! The reason, of course, is that we're pirates!"

"Tsk, should have seen that coming…"

"Do you really have no commentary, Mis—Cross?"

"Hm? Oh, nah, I've only heard the name of the place in passing, I don't know anything about it. We must have just gotten lucky! Personally, I'm with the captain! I mean, sure, this thing screams honeypot and pirate flytrap out the wailing wazoo, but who the heck cares? We're the Straw Hat Pirates! I mean…"
it, and since then they had never missed a broadcast. The messages it broadcast, whether thrilling, horrifying, comedic, or just flat-out strange, were the first thing in years that could make the two Dukes of the island stay awake and tolerate each other simultaneously.

"And five, and six, and seven, and eight… hmm-hmm-hmm... alright, that'll do it. Hello, everyone! Jeremiah Cross here, and welcome back to the SBS!"

Silence fell immediately on both ends.

"…Huh. Hey, Soundbite, not that I'm complaining, but shouldn't you have interrupted me?"

"Yeah, I SHOULD'VE… but this island THREW ME FOR A LOOP."

"What do you mean?"

"I DON'T KNOW HOW TO PUT IT, BUT… I DUNNO, something just sounds… off. GOOD OR BAD, I don't… this place is weird."

"This is troubling…" Duke Nekomamushi murmured as Cross gave the vocal equivalent of a shrug.

"Well, I guess that's not too unexpected. You see, gentle viewers—and combative ones—we were sailing on our merry way to the next island, when a strange invitation came to us, inviting us to a resort, the name of which we will not reveal presently for the sake of our own safety. Now, of course, we do suspect that it's a trap, but we're confident that we can fight it off if it is. And if not… well, then consider this broadcast an advertisement for the glory of this island."

"What's a resort?" Carrot asked.

"I'll, ah, tell you when you're older, Carrot," Wanda hedged uncomfortably.

"…Wanda?"

"…Yes, Carrot?"

"You don't know what it is either, do you?"

Wanda sighed and slumped forwards. "No…"

Her depression was promptly forgotten in favor of trying to chase down the adolescent Mink the second she started laughing her fluffy cottontail-ed ass off.

-0-

"And here I thought he couldn't get any more annoying, but now he turns himself into a salesman," drawled a man in a feathery pink jacket, staring at the snail.

"Behehehehe! Still, Doffy, if he's right, it could be good for business!" a man clad in a cloak pointed out.

Donquixote Doflamingo grinned. "Good point, Trebol."

"Buuut, right now we're sort of wondering if it was just a prank. I mean, the advertisement had a lot of flowers on the map, and I'm not seeing a single one of those, let alone any sign of civilization. Which is weird, considering how jungles usually have flowers in them. Believe me, I've had enough experience to know. Still, it sounds like drumbeats are coming from deeper in the island, so here we
are wandering through untamed foliage. Not the most exciting thing in the world, even for us."

"You don't say," Diamante said dryly.

"I do say, I just did."

All four in the room jumped.

"…And here's hoping that someone in the world actually said 'You don't say' in response to that."

Pica facepalmed, Diamante growled, and Trebol and Doflamingo both chuckled.

"OK, that was funny," Doflamingo admitted.

"Wait a minute… is that—? …WOW."

"Beauty salons and spas~!" crooned the navigator's voice.

"Exotic beauties~!" came the chef's voice.

"Exquisite cuisines~!" cried the doctor's voice.

"Amazing sights~!" chorused the gunner and her pet.

"Challenging fights!" called the quintet of guards.

"Wow, they've got everything," Pica squeaked.

"This is everything we'd hoped for!" several voices said in unison.

"Fuffuffuffuffu… this should be interesting," Doflamingo smirked.

-o-

Drumbeats echoed out of the speakers of the snail, and then came Sanji's voice again. "Ah, the ladies~!" he sang. "Come into my arms, my finely selected beauties—WHAT THE HELL?!"

"Transvestites!"

"And they have leaves growing out of their heads!"

"Shurororororo! Better luck next time, loverboy!" cackled a horned scientist with a robe that looked to be made of gas. "But leaves sprouting from their heads? That's interesting—"

KERBLOOEY!

His musings came to an abrupt end as he snapped his attention back to his experiment, which had boiled over, burst the vessel it was in, and was now eroding the desk. Caesar initially seemed furious before looking thoughtful. "Hmm… so, doing that gives it more corrosive properties, interesting…"

-o-

"Alright, so it looks like they weren't falsely advertising, this is definitely a high-end resort. Yet to be seen if we'll actually get to go inside… ah, this must be the master of the island. You don't see people ride in on elephants very often."

"Yeah, why is that? That'd be cool!" Garp remarked.
"I TOLD YOU TO STOP LISTENING TO… oh, whatever, just pass me the damn crackers…” Sengoku sighed, shaking his head. "Trying to stop you just isn't worth the damn headache."

"...Aaand it seems like plant decor is the thing here; everyone else has leaves on their head, and this guy has a flower on his shoulder. A… smiling flower, at that. Swear to God, Grand Line gets weirder every day…"

"The only flower we've seen thus far…” the garbled voice of the Straw Hats' mystery crewmate mused.

"Huh? Oh… well, now that you mention it, I can't see any in the town either…"

"A local custom to denote rank, maybe?” Vivi proposed.

"Hm…”

"Pirates!"

Garp's head snapped up, an uncharacteristically serious frown on his face as he listened to the new voice that had bellowed out. "What the—?"

"Courageous pirates who traverse the Grand Line!"

"Oh, yes, yes! Yes, yes! Yes, yes, yes!" came Luffy's excited voice.

Sengoku braced for yet another outburst from Garp for his grandson's antics, and was thus deeply surprised when Garp offered no reaction apart from a steely frown.

"I congratulate you on making it to XXX Island! My name is Baron Omatsuri!"

"Baron Omatsuri?” the Straw Hats chorused.

"Why do I get the feeling he's not an actual baron…” Sengoku started to roll his eyes before blinking in confusion when Garp got up and headed towards the door. "Huh? Where are you going?"

"The Archives…” the Hero of the Marines grumbled out. "Get Coby and Helmeppo down there as well. I need to check something."

-0-

"Yes! I am your host, the master of this island!"

"IT'S COMING, IT'S COMING!" several of the Straw Hats sang.

"This sounds like quite the interesting island re-mi-fa-so~! If the next Reverie goes well, we will have to remember it ti-la-so~!" sang Prince Ryuboshi.

"And maybe even if things don't go well, mambo~!" Prince Manboshi twirled in agreement.

"You have had a long and perilous journey. Please enjoy your well-deserved rest!"

"IT'S COMING, IT'S COMING!” the Straw Hats sang again.

"Ah, is this normal?” Conis asked in confusion.

"For us? Yes. For the rest of the Blue Seas…” Cross trailed off in a snicker.
"You may enjoy yourself to your hearts' content!"

"IT'S COMING, IT'S COMING, IT'S COMING!"

"But before you do," Omatsuri continued, his tone making it clear he was no longer smiling. "You must undertake... the Ordeal of Hell!"

There was a moment of stunned silence before the sound of Cross chuckling came over the line. "Now this, though? This is just plain typical, both for us, and the world in general!"

"I'm sorry I asked..."

"Of course it was a trap after all," Prince Fukaboshi grumbled.

"Now, now, son," King Neptune rumbled. "I think it's natural that a resort that invites pirates would require some form of effort, jamon. Earn your relaxation by passing a test, jamon."

"I... suppose you may have a point, Father," Fukaboshi eventually conceded.

"Besides, la-ti-do~!" Ryuboshi spun contentedly. "They're the Straw Hats! It's not like there's any test in the world that could hamper them fa-mi-re-do~!"

Fukaboshi chuckled and nodded slowly in agreement. "That too is true, yes..."

He then glanced down and away once the attention was off of him, a degree of nervousness entering his expression. 'And yet...' he mused silently. 'Knowing this, why do I still feel uneasy...'

-o-

"Uh... I have a question!" came the navigator's voice.

"What is it?" Omatsuri asked.

"The note said something about spas and beauty salons..."

"Spas?" Omatsuri repeated, confusion obvious in his voice.

"It would appear that I'm not the only Rip-Off artist in Paradise after all!" Shakky chuckled in amusement.

"Hm? Ah, yes, that's nice, dear..."

" Beauties from all over the world with a selection of fine beverages..." Sanji said tentatively.

"Beverages?" Omatsuri parroted, with the same tone of confusion.

"He hasn't heard of beverages?" Shakky deadpanned.

"I suppose so, dear..."

"What about the exquisite cuisine?" Chopper posed.

"There'd better be something to eat..." Lasso growled.

"Exquisite cuisine... exquisite...?"

"Okay, I'm starting to think that this guy is less a Rip-Off and more senile," Shakky flatly stated.
"If you say so, dear."

That was too much for the bartender, and she snapped her attention over to her grievously distracted husband, who was seated at a table in the dining area proper, well away from her and the Transponder Snail. "Alright, I'll bite, what's got you so enraptured? Usually I can't pry you away from an SBS show with anything less than Haki and a crowbar!"

"Hm?" Raleigh blinked in confusion, glancing up from whatever it was he was looking at for the first time since the broadcast began. "Ah, well…"

Deciding that enough was enough, Shakky rose from her barstool, strode over to his side to look over his shoulder, and promptly blinked in confusion. "Your bounty scrapbook?" she questioned, fingering the numerous pages of laminated posters.

Raleigh frowned before nodding in agreement, returning his attention to the numerous faces and identities archived before him. "Yes… something about this baron. I need to confirm, but… call it a feeling."

Shakky glanced between him and the book for a moment before freezing as she noticed a detail she'd overlooked before. "Wait, these pages—!

"Now you see why I'm so concerned," the Dark King nodded solemnly.

-I suppose you haven't heard of retired master combatants or amazing wildlife either," Cross snarked.

"Master combatants? Look no further than my comrades, young man! And we do have a few examples of interesting wildlife… which you may observe should you pass the Ordeal of Hell!"

"…I'm not the only one who's underwhelmed, right?" Raphey eventually asked.

"No," three other voices chorused in agreement.

"So much for an actual challenge…" Boss groused.

"Well, at least there's something for me. Sorry, everyone…"

"There's plenty of Vearth to play on, so personally? I'm not!" Su laughed.

"Well, if only for dear Conis and Su, I suppose we can stay…" Sanji trailed off.

"Hey, old man! What's the Ordeal of Hell?" Luffy piped up.

"The Ordeal of Hell is a test of strength! Countless many have failed to endure the task and fled barefoot from the island!" Omatsuri responded. "If you do not have absolute trust in your crewmates, you would be well-advised to leave this island."

"Sounds like Nami's in no danger, then," Hachi mused as he pushed around several pieces of octopus on his grill.

"You really think so, Hachi?" Caimie asked as she floated alongside Takoyaki 8.

"If it's a trial of trust? Then of course! No crew is more tightly knit than the Straw Hats!" The octopus fishman hid a wince as his collection of faded scars burned beneath his shirt. "I learned that
"That sounds great! Don't be stupid, we accept your challenge!"

"Luffy!" Nami scolded. "We don't need to do this, there are all sorts of other places we can go for interesting wildlife for Conis! And there's nothing for the rest of us! We have no good reason to participate!"

"I know we don't have to, but I want to. Besides, whatever it is, you guys can handle it; I trust all of you!" Luffy said cheerfully.

"Heh. Just like the DAVY BACK FIGHT. OUR CAPTAIN is such A SWEET TALKER when HE WANTS TO BE!"

Hachi, Camie, and Pappug couldn't help but smile as one by one, the Straw Hats consented to undergo the challenge together.

"So, you will all participate, then! Very well! Prepare the Ordeal of Hell!" Omatsuri commanded.

"Wh-WHOA! OK, listeners, I'm wondering just how much of a ripoff this is, because the entire freaking landscape is shifting around into an arena! I can't imagine how much work it was to make the whole island transform on command, but I'll be damned if this loony guy spared any expense!"

"Now, I will tell you what the Ordeal entails. The Ordeal is..." Omatsuri paused for dramatic effect, which was followed up by the sound of something large and mechanical rising, as well as the unmistakable sound of fireworks, applause, and cheers.

"That big sign there... 'Kingyo-Sukui'?" Cross read.

"That means 'Goldfish-Catching'," Soundbite deadpanned.

"Excuse me for not being able to read romanized Kanji!"

"...What," the Mysterious Four chorused.

"What a rip-off; not even children would consider that hell!" Hildon complained as he shuffled around and refilled everyone's wine glasses... or mugs, as Absalom preferred.

"Speak for yourself..." Absalom growled as he flexed his fingers, drawing an affronted sputter from Doctor Hogback.

"For the love of—! For the last time, Absalom, if you want fine motor skills then I need to remove some layers of flesh from your hands! Otherwise there's just no room for the appropriate nerve-endings!"

"And give up my biological cestuses?! Dream on, you damn butcher!"

"Ya know, nowmally I'd considah this tah be a total shoo-in, buuuut..."

"After the Davy Back Fight, you expect fangs in every gift horse we get?" Cross deadpanned.

"Eeeeyyup."

"UH...GUYS?"
"Aaaaand there's the other shoe. Yes, Soundbite?"

"I THINK I KNOW THE HELL HE'S REFERRING TO."

"The rules for goldfish catching are simple! The team that catches the largest goldfish in three minutes wins! By the way," he added, clearly smirking. "This paper dissolves easily in water."

"Hmph, so there's a trick after all. Still, I don't see how goldfish catching can be hellish if that's the only trick," Perona remarked.

"And now, allow me to introduce you to my valued confidant who shall be your opponent! Go forth, Muchigoro!"

The audience erupted in cheers as the sound of someone apparently doing their best impression of Usopp heading into a fight approached.

"Yo! I'm Muchigoro!" came a voice that once again made the listeners think of Usopp.

"Kishishishishishi," Moria chuckled. "Another challenge being hosted by a trickster! I almost feel nostalgic. Always nice to sample the works of a fellow artiste!"

"What did he say?" Zoro muttered.

"Mudskipper, I think," Usopp replied.

"He looks more like an eel to me," Nami remarked.

"Maybe he's a loach."

"Flounder, I'm guessing."

"No, I bet he's just an idiot."

"That's also a POSSIBILITY!"

"NO! MY NAME IS MUCHIGORO! Baron Omatsuri's first mate, Muchigoro!"

"Huh. I guess that this battle's going to be really fishy."

"Your sense of humor remains as transparent as you are, Absalom! Fosfosfosfosfos!"

-0-

"Hold on, did he just call himself 'first mate'?!" a pretty, violet-haired young woman asked sharply.

"He did, didn't he? So, they're some sort of crew… it doesn't necessarily mean pirates, but it's worth considering," responded her husband, a blonde-haired man with blue eyeshadow.

"Hmm… now that you mention it…"

"Papa?"

"I didn't consider it before, but in the context of piracy… that name, 'Omatsuri'… yes, I do believe that it rings a bell. Bring me my black book, let me see if I have their flag," remarked an obese man, lying on a most unconventional couch.
"Yes, Papa," the two replied immediately.

"Now, which one of you will compete?"

"Oh! Here, here, here, here, here! Me, me, me, me, me!" Luffy insisted with all the composure of a child in a sweet shop… or meat shop, as the case may be.

"Hold on, Luffy," came Usopp's voice, uncharacteristically confident. "Let me handle that Muchigoro or Sushigoro or whatever his name is."

"Oh, but weren't you too busy quaking in your boots a second ago?" Cross asked snidely.

"He got a confidence boost after learning that it was goldfish-catching," Sanji explained in a dry tone.

"Brindo, Campacino, what are you betting on for the Ordeal?" asked a young girl with violet hair, the woman's sister.

"HMM! My wager is that they will win… without using nets!"

"And I say they will win… within the final five seconds!"

"You two know those could happen at the same time, right?" Papa huffed with a sigh.

-o-

"Alright! The Straw Hats' SUPER sniper is stepping up!" Franky cheered as he struck a pose atop his couch.

"You'll regret being my opponent, Muchigoro. You'll be facing the man who was known as the Master of Goldfish-Catching… me!"

"Master?" Chopper asked, awestruck.

"Master?" Conis asked, curious.

"Master?" Su repeated wearily.

"Master?" Muchigoro asked, horrified.

"Master!" Usopp confirmed proudly.

"Wow, sounds like he really is a master!" Mozu cheered.

"Really?" Chopper asked, awestruck.

"Really?" Conis asked, curious.

"Really?" Su repeated wearily.

"Really?" Muchigoro asked, horrified.

"Yes, really!" Usopp confirmed proudly.

"Is he really…?" Kiwi asked in a much more skeptical tone.

"Awesome!" Chopper praised.
"That's awesome!" Conis said sweetly.

"You're awesome!" Muchigoro said, awestruck.

"I'm awesome!" Usopp declared.

"He's SUPER! Awesome!" Franky declared, posing.

"Go, Usopp!" Zambai cheered.

"Another victory in the making for the Straw Hats!" Tamagon cheered.

"If he's telling the truth," Kiev muttered.

"Ah—Say, it's not a lie this time, right?" Chopper asked, worriedly.

"What? You're lying?" Conis yelped.

"Of course he's lying," Su deadpanned.

"Please tell me you're lying!" Muchigoro pleaded.

"There's no way someone as SUPER! as him would lie!" Franky emphatically denied.

"…I lied," Usopp confirmed smugly.

"SAY WHAT!?!" Mozu yelped, the majority of the Franky House facefaulting in shock.

"Then again, Cross did say awhile back that he has a tendency for tall tales…" Franky mused.

"Of course…" came the sound of a face-paw.

"I knew it!" a thoroughly manic voice roared.

"Shit, he tricked me!" Muchigoro grumbled to himself.

"See, I knew he was an idiot," Sanji deadpanned.

"Which one?" Cross asked just as flatly.

"Which one indeed…" Kiwi sighed as she eyed her still-stunned sister.

"Muchigoro, don't let them build up momentum!" the baron's voice barked

"Ah, sorry, Baron!" Muchigoro promptly apologized.

"Hmph!" Omatsuri snorted. "Now that that foolishness is over and done with, we shall now begin! Ready—"

"Go!" the Baron was suddenly cut off by a high-pitched and squeaky voice.

Franky blinked at the Transponder Snail in surprise. "Huh? Who the heck was that?"

"…Soundbite?"

"Yeah?"
"Did that flower just talk?"

"…Yeah."

"A talking flower," Zambai groaned. "After learning that someone like Big Bro Franky existed, I really didn't think that the Grand Line could possibly get any crazier. Then the SBS shows up and starts talking about a hidden city of octopi and sky islands. But I thought that was as far as the craziness would go, I really, really did. Looks like I was wrong."

"…Well, great, now I'm getting Undertale flashbacks."

"Tell me about it…" Soundbite muttered before adopting a pensive look that was translated to the Transponder Snail. "DO I LOOK that stupid TOO?"

"Oh, of course not. You're much worse."

CHOMP!

"YEOWCH!"

"Did Cross really not expect that to happen?" Kiev deadpanned.

"Honesty?" Mozu chuckled. "Considering how close those two are, I doubt he even cared."

-0-

"Ergh, slimy little—! Alright, everybody, the contest is underway, and… nobody seems to be doing anything…?"

"INCOMING!"

A sound of a lot of water being displaced came through from the other end of the call, the Transponder Snail's face betraying his shock and terror.

"Oh, my, what's happening now?" Porche asked with wide-eyed shock.

"At a guess, they're playing the game on a scale only Big Pan would normally be viable for," Silver Fox Foxy deadpanned.

"You think so?"

"Fehfehfeh, it's what I'd do in that position!" Foxy cackled as he stroked his tissue-peppered chin. Porche raised an eyebrow as she looked over her boss's face. "How's that goatee coming?"

"Pupupup!" Hamburg interrupted with his ill-hidden snickering. "He's been having a hard time maneuvering his razor around his chin, pupupup!"

"NO COMMENTARY FROM THE PEANUT GALLERY!" Foxy roared in annoyance.

"Wh-Wh-What is that?!"

"That's my pet goldfish, Sweet Rosario."

"HA! Called it!" Foxy crowed smugly, his annoyance forgotten.
"You're brilliant, Boss!"

"Still don't have a goatee though, pupu—!"

"I GET IT, NO NEED TO RUB IT IN, DAMN IT!"

"...Well, there's the catch, folks; Rosario is about as big as the Going Merry, so—"

"So, a normal splash from him MAKES more than a few RIPPLES! TO BE EXACT, INCOMING TIDAL WAVE!"

"Wha—? SHIT! CARUE, I NEED A LIFT!"


"THAT'S NOT A GOLDFISH, THAT'S A GOLDFISH-SHAPED SEAKING! NOW GIVE ME A DAMN LIFT BEFORE—!" SPLOOSH! "ACKPFT! Agh, now that's just perf—! Nonono, wait, Soundbite, don't—!"

"HURK!"

"...aaaaaand that's gonna stain. Fucking perfect."

"Ha! You see that? Their stomachs and wills are as weak as rice paper! Laugh at them, Muchigoro! They are nothing but feeble cowards!" Omatsuri cackled.

"HAHAHA! Indeed, my Baron! After all, sweet Rosario is a good boy who would never do anything bad!" Muchigoro insisted.

"My slimy—cough—ASS HE WOULDN'T!" Soundbite coughed.

"And HOW exactly are we supposed to catch THAT?!" Vivi demanded.

"Use the bucket, of course." Omatsuri said smugly.

"What buck—?"

There was another loud splash of water.

"...never mind."

"OK, viewers, so it appears that the Baron did give us both buckets big enough for Rosario to fit in, but the question remains: how are we supposed to get that giant helping of sushi to go in the bucket in the first place?" Cross wondered.

"Something tells me that their sniper won't be quite so eager anymore..." Porche mused.

"Nami, I'm passing to you. A-After all, the Eisen Dial should be enough for this, right?" Usopp asked timidly.

"Called it."

"Wait, what? USOPP!... Oh, fine, I'll do it if I have to."

Something came across the line that could only be described as something metallic coughing, followed by the unmistakable sound of a fist striking a skull.
"OW! WHAT THE HELL, WITCH!"

"I TOLD YOU HOW TO FIX THE PRESSURE CHAMBER ALREADY, WHAT PART DIDN'T YOU UNDERSTAND?!"

"THE PART WHERE YOU EXPECT ME TO FIND TIME TO DO IT WHEN I'M JUGGLING THREE OTHER PROJECTS!"

"You son of a—! We will have words later, I promise you. For now, though… Zoro, I'm passing to you."

"Wha—Me?! Ugh, fine." There was the sound of a sword sliding out of its sheath.

"Hold up, Mosshead! If you tried to go it alone, you'd be swallowed whole!"

"Like hell, shit cook! I'll fillet this thing in ten seconds—!"

"NO SWORDS IN GOLDFISH CATCHING!" Omatsuri yelled.

"WHAT?" Zoro roared back.

"See? Davy Back Fight all over again, now you're doubly useless!"

"JUST SHUT UP AND HIT THE DAMN FISH YOU IDIOTS!" Nami roared.

"Right away, Nami-swan!"/"Don't need to tell me twice, witch."

There was the sudden meaty THWACK of leather striking flesh, followed by a roar of bestial pain.

"Alright, so Sanji and Zoro seem to be juggling Rosario in the air right now… and once again Zoro has demonstrated how much damage he can cause with just his freaking sheath, eesh. Ah, and here comes Luffy, trying to use the net that we're supposed to use, which is about as big as Soundbite. He's stretching out… Omatsuri and Muchigoro appear to be reacting to seeing his Devil Fruit powers, so I take it that they really don't listen to the SBS… aaand the net broke. HEY, BARON! How are we supposed to catch anything with this net, let alone that giant goldfish?"

"You're not. Muchigoro, show them!"

"You have to catch Sweet Rosario with THIS!"

"Ugh, should have seen this coming; mudskipper-face just pulled a net over ten times his size from out of… somewhere. Sanji was right, it's the Davy Back Fight all over again, only I'm starting to think that Foxy was more pleasant!"

"Hey!" Porche yelped in an affronted tone.

"We're not publicly allies, remember?" Foxy informed the 'brains' of his first mates.

"…I knew that."

"Pupupu! She forgot, pupu—!"

"CRAM IT UP YOUR LONG-JOHNS, BUNS-FOR-BRAINS!"

"Not so fun being on the other end, is it, now?"
"Grrgrrrgh…"

"Anyway… HEY, BARON! Why the hell does he get the bigger net while we just get these pathetic things?"

"Hmmm?" the Baron hummed curiously. "I don't remember saying you had to use that net; I only said that the paper dissolves easily in water. Well? Do you remember?"

"Wow. Even I'm not that bad," Foxy remarked in equal parts awe and disgust.

-o-

The two humanoid residents of Little Garden had ensured that the Baroque Works agents left their snail behind when they left, and had not missed a single SBS broadcast despite their fights. One such duel was going on right now, but as was often the case, the content of the broadcast made them both pause to pay more attention.

In this case, their reasons were different; the Red Ogre was shaking his head in disgust while the Blue Ogre had his forehead scrunched up and his eyes squinting as though he were thinking hard about something.

"Disgraceful, simply disgraceful," Broggy huffed grimly, head bowed in dismay. "As if that farce of a Backfight weren't bad enough, now we have fools such as this baron refusing to meet his opponents in honorable combat! It's abominable! It's grievous!" He crashed his fist on the ground with a snarl. "AND WORST OF ALL, IT'S DISAPPOINTING!"

"Mnhmm, yes, you're right…" Dorry muttered noncommittally, arms crossed and a scowl marring his face as he heaved bowed his head in thought.


"Roger-roger. Huh? That wasn't me…"

"…Soundbite? We need to talk about your situational timing."

"Heheheheh!"

"One minute left! You have one minute left!" came the voice of the Baron's flower. Dorry's scowl deepened at the voice, and he started muttering under his breath

"If I may, Cross, I believe I have an easier solution."

"The fish is falling straight towards Muchigor's net! What the heck do you—OH. OK, hold off on that, Conis… and Muchigoro tosses it straight towards his bucket… aaand thanks to a clever usage of Devil Fruit powers, Rosario bounces straight out of the bucket and is now FALLING DIRECTLY TOWARDS US DAMMIT XXX!"

"My apologies, Cross, I haven't had much experience with that kind of technique in the past."

"COLD FUCKING COMFORT WHEN WE'RE ABOUT TO BE CRUSHED!"

"I GOT IT, I GOT IT!"

The pitter-patter of feet running came a moment later, followed by a loud FWUMP! And then more
incredulous roars from the crowd. And in the middle of it all, Dorry was still grumbling to himself about something he'd forgotten. Broggy eyed him curiously, but ultimately shrugged it off.

"Whoa-hoh, nice one! And a dramatic move from Chopper has redirected Rosario aaaand HE'S IN! THE AQUATIC BASTARD IS IN OUR BUCKET!"

"Five, four, three, two, one! Game over! Game over! The Straw Hats win!" the flower cheered, causing Dorry to actively bite his thumb.

"Damn straight, you Proto-Flowey piss-ant!"

"HAHA!" Broggy barked joyously. "A most righteous and honorable victory! Nothing but the best from the Straw Hats!" He then tilted his head to the side. "Though I find Cross's choice of insults… somewhat questionable, at best."

"NICE PLAY, Chopper! … Chopper? HE'S ABOUT to fall IN THE WATER!"

"I'll get him… aaand there goes Luffy, too. Eesh, sometimes this job… Boys?" Boss called out tiredly.

"On it, Boss!" a quartet of voices chorused.

"Ugh, damn it, damn it, damn it…" Dorry grumbled, knocking his fist against his forehead.

"Egh," Broggy rolled his eyes with a sigh. "What on Elbaf's blessed soil is crawling through your head now, Dorry?"

"That's just the problem!" The Blue Ogre flung his hands up in frustration. "There's something about that flower of the Baron's that is stirring memories in my head, but for the life of me they refuse to take form! It's like trying to catch the fog with your bare hands!" He promptly jabbed a finger at Broggy with a glare. "And don't mention the cotton-candy fog we encountered in the New World, because that doesn't count!"

Broggy coughed into his fist and looked away sheepishly. "Wouldn't ever dream of it…" He then gave Dorry a concerned look. "Still, any way that I can help?"

"That'd require me having somewhere to start in the first place!" Dorry shook his head morosely. He then clenched his eyes shut as he started pounding his fists against his temples. "Come on already, get out, get out—!"

It would be the last time he made the mistake of letting his guard down like that, as Broggy took the opportunity to sucker-punch him. With a boulder.

"AGH!" the Blue Ogre grunted in pain, rubbing the area of impact. Then his eyes snapped open and he punched the air with a joyous cackle.

"NOW I REMEMBER! A small, smiling, talking flower perched on someone's shoulder and surrounded by a mass of people with plant sprouts on their heads! It's straight from the tale of Ivad's Trials against Tailog the Treasonous!"

"Congratulations, comrade!" Broggy crowed as he clapped his hand on his old friend's shoulder… and promptly shared a look of horror with him.

"THE STRAW HATS ARE WHERE?!!"
Any onlookers to Little Garden would see a large flock of pterodactyls flying out of the trees in response to the two giants' bellowing.

-o-

The next few minutes were purely the Straw Hats celebrating and chastising the Hammers on their crew, with the Baron and his first mate—and pretty much the entire native audience as well—brooding in the background. It all came to an abrupt end when the Baron spoke up again.

"WAIT! This contest is not yet finished! You must now undertake the next ordeal! How dare you make my Muchigoro cry!"

"Hey, come on, Baron. He lost fair and square."

"Yes, there's no need to be so—"

"SILENCE! The matter is settled! You will do as I say!"

"Am I the only one who's absolutely relishing the irony of the Straw Hats meeting two groups of pirates who play rigged games in a row after what they did here?" Drake asked with a grim smile.

"No, Drake, you most certainly are not," Jonathan muttered in reply, not taking his eyes off the snail. "Though the Straw Hats are certainly putting up as much of a fight as we could expect, I can't deny that I'm hoping to see some proof against Cross' claim."

In truth, he had been considering Cross' offer alongside Jessica over the last few weeks, but Straw Hat's display against the Foxy Pirates, his unconquerable will, had significantly weighted his opinion; if Straw Hat had that kind of will and Cross, for all his rabble-rousing, had him as a superior and took pride in bowing to him, it may well be that they would reach their goal, and that would leave no doubt that choosing their side would be the safer choice in order to survive the inevitable tidal wave that would accompany the feat.

He nodded to himself; he had considered it long enough. If Straw Hat showed another example of will like he had during the Davy Back Fight, he would accept Cross' bargain. But it was yet to be seen if this strange Baron would actually be capable of driving him to it.

"OK, am I the only one who thinks this guy's taking the whole 'sore loser' thing a little too far?" Su muttered acridly. "Seriously, he's whining more than Conis when—MMPH!"


"MMPH, PTOOIE! What do you mean 'your childhood'!? I grew up with you!"

"Ironically enough, I'm nowhere near as interesting as you."

[I didn't have long to get to know Su, but for any fox, this seems to be par for the course,] Isaiah squawked in a deep and cool tone.

[WHAT HE SAID!] Terry contributed, earning a quelling look from Jonathan; the Vice Admiral may not have been able to understand him except through the very silent written word, but that didn't make his POWERFUL! voice any quieter.

"Another ordeal? Sounds like fun!" Luffy said.
"It appears that Luffy shares Cross' definition of that particular word," Jonathan remarked. "It's going to get them into trouble someday."

"Oh, joy, LUFFY'S ON BOARD already," Soundbite drawled, before the snail snapped to attention, glancing in another direction.

"What's wrong, Soundbite?" Cross asked.

"We're being watched."


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"Who is it?"

"Older man… sounds… hopeful? THAT'S ALL I GOT."

"Hopeful? What's he saying?"

"Nothing, but I've HEARD THIS breath and HEARTBEAT pattern from Vivi AND Conis in the past. HE'S TRAPPED and HE'S JUST SEEN a ray of light."

The Transponder Snail's expression became pointedly blank. "… Yeah, that would be just typical, wouldn't it?"

The fighter's quarters under Dressrosa's famed Corrida Colosseum were alive with activity as the gladiators, crowded around the old and rather wheezy Transponder Snail someone had dug out of storage, exchanged bets and what little money they had with Rebecca. After all, not only did she not gamble—and certainly not for lack of trying on her comrades' parts—she was one of the only ones who could handle the numbers and even estimate the odds.

"฿100 says that Straw Hat clears the next Ordeal!"

"฿200 on someone else clearing it instead!"

"฿500 on Nami snapping and burning the whole island down! I'm feeling lucky."

"Oh, going for the long shot," Rebecca remarked, taking the money and marking down all the bets.

"Hmm… alright, we'll see if anything comes of that. For now… this is just between us, right?"

"YEAH?"

"Good, let's keep it that way, I don't want to set Nami off without reason."

Rebecca smiled apologetically as a chorus of groans, laughs and jeers rang out through the cages, one of the gladiators snapping out the whip he was carrying.

"Anyways, viewers, it would seem that Nami is exercising her authority as second mate. Back to the Merry we go, apparently… uh, Boss, are you coming?"

"Eh… go on ahead, Cross," Boss called back. "I saw something in the water that I want to check on with the boys. We'll catch up with you when we get through here, shouldn't take too long, a few minutes at most."
"You heard him, Cross, let's get out of here!" Nami snapped.

"Alright, alright… uh, Zoro, any chance of vetoing her?" Cross asked.

"If that's any example of the so-called 'Ordeals of Hell,' then no, I'd rather get back to the ship," Zoro replied dryly.

"฿1000 says that they don't leave yet!"

Rebecca snapped her hand away from the crumpled bill with a smile. "I'm sorry, this bank does not accept sucker's bets."

Her smile widened as she enjoyed the bout of laughter the comment elicited. Every ray of light was needed in this dreary pit, and she was truly grateful towards the Straw Hats for bringing any measure of merriment to the cages of Corrida Colosseum, however brief they might have been.

With any luck, they would continue to do so for a long time to come.

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"Well, loyal viewers, it seems that we're right back to stumbling through the woods, and for what must be the first time ever, Nami's navigational skills aren't serving us very well."

"What!? Big Sis Nami getting lost in any way, shape or form? Something's gotta be seriously wrong, because I'd sooner believe that Sea Kings can fly!" Johnny breathed incredulously.

"Personally, I'm more worried about how Big Sis is gonna react to a statement like that!" Yosaku joked.

THWACK!

"OUCH!"

"I don't see you doing any better, jackass!"

"Called it!"

"And besides, you have no right to be snide! Shouldn't Soundbite be able to point us in the right direction?"

"…Huh. Now that you mention it…"

"I… THINK the sea is that way? DON'T QUOTE ME, THOUGH."

"Well, that's a lot less confident than usual," Yosaku noted.

"Yeah, usually that snail'd be practically boasting his prowess to the heavens," Johnny frowned as he nodded in agreement. "Now he just sounds confused? What's up with that?"

"Something he ate, maybe?"

"Eh, maybe…" Johnny shrugged, though he was clearly unconvinced.

"ARGH!" Nami's outraged scream indicated that she hadn't noticed anything off-color about her comrade. "This map is useless! I swear, it seems like the island is changing on us!"
"W-Wait a minute… do you think that maybe it actually is? I mean, after the way that arena showed up…” Vivi trailed off.

"…Yeeaaah, THAT'D EXPLAIN A LOT."

"…You don't really think that islands can change on the fly, do you?” Johnny asked his partner uneasily.

A pregnant pause, followed by Nami's screech of vicious rage.

"Looks like Big Sis Nami sure thinks they can," Yosaku divined, a large drop of sweat running down the back of his head.

"BARON! IF YOU'RE WATCHING US, GET THE HELL OUT HERE!"

"I'm right over here," came a distant voice. There was a sound of many footfalls and shifting vegetation, and then—

"I've been expecting you!” came the Baron's jovial voice.

"STOP SCREWING WITH US AND LET US LEAVE!"

"Why? You've only just come here, and the Ordeals have just begun! All you need to do is pass them, and you'll have all of the rest that you need. In fact, only four of you need to participate in this Ordeal; the rest of you are free to enjoy the island's hospitalities."

The sound of grumbling filtered through the speaker. "And how many more ordeals are there after this?"

"You will be finished by the end of the day," Omatsuri said smoothly.

"… Fine, we'll play your game."

"WOO-HOO!" Luffy cheered.

"Looks like Big Bro Luffy gets his way after all," Johnny chuckled.

"Yep! And all 'cause he got lost again," Yosaku nodded sagely before clapping his hands together. "Well, anyway, as fun as listening to Big Bro Zoro's adventures is, we really should get moving. Come on, this way!" He started walking down a fork in the road.

"Wha—HEY, WAIT A SECOND!" Johnny leapt off the rock he was sitting on as he stared after his friend. "Where the hell do you think you're going, Yosaku!?"

"Uh, to the next town?" Yosaku intoned slowly, staring at his partner as though he were an idiot. "It's this way, c'mon!"

"The hell it is! The next town is this way!" Johnny snapped, jabbing his finger down a different fork in the road.

"Are you out of your mind!? That's not even close to the right way! It's this way!"

"No, it's this way!"

"No, it's this way!"
"The Ordeal of Hell, Part 2," Omatsuri sneered. "Ladies and gentlemen, the next ordeal will be..."

"Will be?" the Straw Hats asked.

The sound of fabric moving, like curtains being pulled back, came across the speakers.

"...What does that say? 'Quoits'?"

"That's French. It means 'ring toss'," came the mystery crewmate's voice.

"Ring toss?" chorused many Straw Hats.

"I know French and I didn't know that," Cross deadpanned.

"The brat knows French? Wouldn't have expected that! Nope! Not a bit!" Miss Merry Christmas snorted, sweeping the decks of the Spiders Café. "Wouldn't have expected Goldenweek, 5, and Valentine to leave us, either! I wanted to spend my golden years in quiet retirement, not keeping this rundown place spic and spotless!"

"If I've said it once, Miss Merry Christmas, I've said it a hundred times: you can leave if you want to, I'll just hire more capable employees," Paula, the former Miss Doublefinger, said dismissively as she wiped down the mug she was holding. "But I wonder how much more opportunity you'd have to show off that dress to everyone if you do."

The mole-woman spun around to glower at Paula, her white princess dress spinning along with her. She glanced down at the hem with a shaky scowl before sighing angrily and getting back to sweeping. "Damn you."

"And that's why I was Mr. 1's partner, and not you," Paula grinned cheekily.

Meanwhile, Baron Omatsuri started to explain the rules of the game. "Each team has two boats with two people aboard each boat. The first team to ensnare all of their opponents in rings wins!"

"Ah, something that actually sounds like a challenging game. Maybe we won't—"

"SHUT UP, Cross," Soundbite advised.

"Thank you, Soundbite."

"HEY!... Alright, fair enough."

"Still, it doesn't sound like anything more combative than the last one. Count me out, I'm gonna go take a nap," groused Lassoo's voice.

"Ohhhhhhh—"

"Now, let me introduce my confidants, the Four Wise Men! The leader, Kerojii!"

"—heeeeeeeneey—" Mr. 4 continued, amidst the applause from the Baron's audience.

"The main striker, Keroshot!"

"—iiiiiiiiiiit's—"
"The repairman extraordinaire, Kerodeek!"

"—Laaaaaaaaaaassssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss ss
The second she finished entering the number, the snail's eyestalks snapped to attention and it grit its teeth as it let out a staticky-ticking noise.

Dalton stared at the snail in confusion, too busy trying to wrap his head around what he was hearing to pay more than passing attention to the trash talk that the 'Four Wise Men' were inflicting on the Straw Hats. "What—? Can it not connect for some reason? I've never heard of this happening before."

"And neither have I!" Kureha flung her hands up in frustration, marching back and forth like a caged tiger. "I can't understand it! We're receiving his signal crystal clear, but something is blocking us from contacting him! If he had found a way to make it so I couldn't call in, he wouldn't have acted confused, he would have sang it to the angels and demons and gloated over it for all the world to hear! And besides, he'd never block me from calling, not when—ugh…anyway—"

"You're just worried about Chopper, aren't you?"

Kureha hesitated for a second—a scant second—before scoffing and waving him off. "Psh, as if! They can cook him up in sherry and serve him with an apple in his mouth for all I care! No, I'm agitated because I don't know why the call is getting through, and I don't like not knowing things! Ooooh, but I'm going to find out, alright, I'm going to find out!"

The Transponder Snail cut the failed call with a sigh of relief only to shriek silently in terror and leave a not-inconsiderable stain on Kureha's desk when she slammed her hands around it and loomed menacingly over the poor gastropod.

"One way or another!"

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"Alright, everyone, for your entertainment, I'll be spectating the ordeal and reporting what happens," Cross announced following the end of a brief pause in the transmission. "While most of the crew is going out and about in order to actually enjoy everything the resort has to offer, it looks like the teams of Usopp and Nami, and Zoro and Sanji will be taking on Omatsuri's Four Wise Men."

Iceburg cocked an eyebrow with an uncertain look. "Is… that really the best of moves?"

"Eh." Paulie waved his hand dismissively as he accepted a tray of drinks from Blueno and started passing them out to his colleagues. "Who knows, there's probably some story or other behind it. You know how the Straw Hats are: insane to a fault."

"If anyone else is wondering why they think this arrangement is a good idea, you're not alone," Cross deadpanned. "Believe me, I tried to build a better team, but we're still having a hard time pinning down where the Dugongs are, the Wise Men managed to provoke Nami into volunteering, Sanji insisted after that and it was all downhill from there."

"Called it."

"Still though, you'd think they'd take things more seriously, given that they're dealing with an 'Ordeal of Hell'," Peeply Lulu mused as he stroked the extra spike of hair coming out of the side of his mustache.

"CONSIDERING HOW THE STRAW HATS WON THE FIRST ONE, I DON'T THINK THERE'S ANYTHING TO WORRY ABOUT THERE!" Tilestone roared.
"I mean, sure, it's not all bad, we've got two of our heavy-hitters on the field and they're unstoppable when they work together, but there needs to be something serious on the line for them to be able to work together. Sanji doesn't care much save for helping Nami and Zoro doesn't give a damn either way... Seriously, how did this happen?!

"An enigma most worthy, CROSS, but I've got a better question: WHERE THE HELL DID THIS CITY COME FROM?!

"Oh? A city?" Blueno wondered.

"Yes, ladies and gentlemen, you heard the snail right: A city, sprung from absolutely nowhere as if risen from the ground itself. I can only imagine that Baron Omatsuri has turned this entire island into a machine under his control, because I can't fathom any other way that Nami could get lost on the way out of the jungle or how the hell he could have a racecourse inspired by the island metropolis known as Water 7." He paused. "On that note, while I have it in mind, a big salute to the Galley-La Company, home to the finest shipwrights in the world!"

"Well, that's nice of him," Kaku remarked. "It's an accepted fact, true, but it's not often you hear so openly."

"Indeed," Iceburg agreed, frowning thoughtfully. "But what sort of expertise must this Omatsuri have to perform that kind of conversion? And for what purpose?"

"Perhaps he makes a mint off of swindling pirate crews in a manner similar to that Foxy fellow the Straw Hats recently ran into," Lulu proposed as he absentmindedly pushed the spike in the hair over his lip into submission... causing it to protrude from his eyebrows.

"Still, as fantastic as this undertaking must have been, I have to say, it's kind of unbelievable how he did it! I mean, eesh, this place is packed! There's gotta be hundreds of people here!"

"Actually, CROSS, that's something ELSE weird that I've NOTICED. BESIDES that one guy from EARLIER, THERE DOESN'T SEEM TO BE anyone else besides the staff AT THIS so-called—"

"Hey, whatcha up to 'pu?"

"GAH! Who the—?" Cross yelped in shock before blinking in surprise. "Wow, I'm surprised. I've just met a real life kappa."

"Gappa! My name is DJ Gappa 'pu! Sheesh, every single time 'pu..."

"Uh, sorry, the shell and... plate that you're wearing... kind of threw me off. I take it that you're one of Baron Omatsuri's comrades, then?"

"Yes. I'm the Chief Gunner and Sniper 'pu. But I also join Muchigoro in being the MC of parties 'pu. Anyway, what are you doing talking to yourself?"

"Huh, so another front-man like Cross, then?" Kaku questioned. "I guess they're going to have a lot to talk about."

With the rest of the Galley-La Corporation paying their full attention to the snail, only Rob Lucci noticed Kalifa quietly slipping out of the room. Noticing his stare, she mouthed 'making calls' before closing the door behind her.
"Mama, what's a kappa?"

"Ah… I'll tell you later, Rika," the girl's mother surreptitiously coughed into her fist in order to hide her smile. "For now, just know that I think that Cross made a somewhat unkind joke based off of that young man's choice of attire."

"Why am I… ah. Going by how you all have been acting thus far, I take it that you don't have any Transponder Snails on this island?" Cross asked.

"Nope. There aren't many animals on the island to begin with 'pu."

"Yeah, I actually noticed that. NOT EVEN ANY BUGS. WHAT'S UP WITH THA—?"

"So, are you crazy or somethin' 'pu?" Gappa interrupted without missing a beat.

"WHAT!?" Cross squawked in shock.

"Are you nutso and talkin' to the voices in your head 'pu? Cause if you are, that's cool, 'cause sometimes the Wise Men—!"

"I am NOT nuts!… Or at least, not that kind of nuts," Cross revised. "I'm doing a radio show; I'm using this transceiver here to broadcast what I'm saying to every other Transponder Snail in the world. The current view count is—" A few metallic clicks came over the connection, and then the snail grinned. "Our highest yet, coming just shy of ten million snails! Hot damn, this has gotta be our most popular show yet! Screw cutting this off anytime soon, we're going on a day-long marathon!"

"My, my, it looks like I may be keeping the doors open late tonight," Ririka chuckled.

"And I get to stay up late, too?" Rika asked hopefully.

"Yes, but you'll still need to do your homework while listening."

"Awwww!"

"What do you have to complain about, Rika?" one of the Marines in the bar scoffed incredulously. "All you have to do is some math problems, we Marines are the ones suffering here!"

"Captain Ripper gives us all double-duty for listening to the normal broadcast. I can only imagine what he'll do now that it's going to be going on for hours…” another soldier lamented.

Gappa, meanwhile, was far more energetic. "Wow, seriously!? You mean that the whole world can hear what we're saying right now 'pu!?"

"Absolutely! Here, got anything you wanna say?"

"Hm... I dunno 'pu, it's hard to—!" Gappa's voice suddenly cut off, and his transmitted expression became curiously neutral.

"Hm?" Ririka blinked in surprise before waving her hand in front of the snail's face. "Do you think it's broken or—?"

"Actually!"

"EEP!" the bartender jerked back in shock. Without any warning whatsoever, the snail had adopted a very twisted demeanor. The smile it was sporting was just a little too wide, its eyes were a little too bright, and the way it was giggling slightly was just—! In essence, it looked like the speaker was
the resident of an insane asylum... or worse, an insane asylum resident's idea of what a normal smile was like.

"I know what I wanna say!" the snail chirped in a voice that sounded right and yet managed to set off all the alarm bells in the heads of the viewers. Perhaps it was that faint hint of artificiality audible even through the snail's speakers. "To the people of the world! I'd like to invite as many of you as possible to come down to our island! Once you get here, you may enjoy yourselves to your heart's content! Then, when we're done having fun, you can all take part in a big, delicious feast." The smile widened significantly, to the point where it just didn't seem humanly possible. "Doesn't that sound like fun?"

And then, without any warning, the snail returned to the same dopey expression it'd used before. "How was that pu?"

"Impressive!" Cross complimented with a grin. "I bet you'll be seeing plenty more visitors real soon!"

The patrons of the bar gaped at the snail in utter horror.

"What the hell was that?" one of the Marines sputtered numbly.

Ririka swallowed heavily before casting a glance at her daughter. "R-Rika—"

"Uh... I-I think I'm gonna finish my homework in my room..." was all the sheet-white and trembling girl was able to get out before grabbing her books and running upstairs as fast as she could.

"Hey, hold on a sec," Soundbite piped up curiously. "Did your voice just CHANGE OR—?"

"Hey, what the hell!?" Cross suddenly demanded. "Our viewership just nosedived by several hundred thousand! Come on, I unwittingly broadcast my own torture and get more viewers than ever before, but one little advertisement and people go running for the hills!"

"Gee, I wonder why," one of the bar patrons muttered under his breath as he started chugging his mug, an action that was repeated throughout the bar.

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"What the hell is wrong with that daft bastard!?" Helmeppo demanded as he sifted through the filing cabinet he'd been assigned. "I know he's clinically insane, that's a given considering his hobby, but why the hell wasn't he affected by that horrorshow we just saw?!"

"I'm with you there, Helmeppo..." Coby nodded absently as he searched through his own cabinet. "I know that I'd be freaking out if someone acted that way in front of me."

"The most likely reason he isn't reacting is that he doesn't even realize that what just happened was supposed to be reacted to to begin with..."

The rookie Marines exchanged confused glances before looking over at the desk where their commanding officer was poring over paper after paper. "Sir?" they chorused in confusion.

Garp snorted darkly as he rubbed his chin in thought. "Transponder Snails only show the face of the speaker. And going by how that kid reacted... I think that chances are what Cross saw and what the world saw are entirely different."
Coby swallowed heavily as sweat started to build on his brow. "W-What are you trying to say, sir?"

Garp slammed the papers he was holding onto the table with a growl and pinned his student with a glare. "I'm saying that you need to find those damn reports on the double! NOW, DAMN IT!"

"YES, SIR!" Coby and Helmeppo saluted fearfully, redoubling their speed in combing through the archives.

"Still, though, if that many people stayed on, you must have an impressive reputation 'pu." Gappa spoke up, his voice filled with awe.

"I'd like to imagine so, yes." Cross nodded with a smile. "It's hard to really say, seeing as we only get callers once in awhile and we haven't yet reached a big city that's heard of us, but with any luck we'll get a good reaction once we get there. For now though, the numbers speak for themselves. And a good thing too, considering the topics I speak about."

"Only because Sengoku hasn't ordered someone who's guaranteed not to fail to pursue the Straw Hats yet," growled a furious voice. Coby and Helmeppo froze and Garp spared the newcomer in the archives a glance.

"What are you doing here, mutt?" Garp asked nonchalantly.

"The tower wasn't shaking from your usual laughter during the pirate's show, and Sengoku said you were here when I came to see if he'd actually managed to silence you this time," Akainu replied emotionlessly.

"What do you mean 'pu?"

"Well, I put out a lot of material that could be called controversial, but really, it's just me exposing secrets that corrupt people would rather I not say. I'm spreading the truth, and showing a lot of the world what goes on that they don't see," Cross explained. "It's my hope that I'm managing to make a positive difference in the world, you know?"

"Wow 'pu. You must be really, really important 'pu!"

"Eh? Well, sure, I mean I hope so but—!"

"No, really 'pu!" Gappa repeated firmly. "After all, you stand up to the World Government every day, not caring about your life in the least, all for the sake of others 'pu? That's awesome! It's like you're... you're a superhero 'pu!"

The admiral grimaced as the guest on the other end continued heaping on praise. "I'm curious against my will as to why you're spending your time digging through old records."

Garp cleared away the papers from his desk with an angry wave of his hand and stood up. "Because that Baron Omatsuri's name and voice both sound vaguely familiar to me."

Akainu stared flatly at his lower-ranked superior. "Is this another one of your jokes?"

"USE YOUR HEAD, MUTT!" Garp roared as he slammed his fist onto the desk, causing Coby and Helmeppo to fumble the papers they held. "HIS VOICE IS VAGUELY FAMILIAR TO ME! WHICH MEANS THAT I RECOGNIZE IT FROM MY GLORY DAYS! MY GLORY DAYS! DO YOU GET WHAT I'M SAYING HERE, DO YOU COMPREHEND THE SCALE!?

Coby and Helmeppo would never forget that moment, as it was the first time that they ever saw the
fearsome Admiral Akainu come to a realization of something panic-worthy.

"...I'll lend you a hand, then," the admiral said quietly.

Garp snorted darkly before returning to his papers. "Glad to hear it. Now grab a cabinet and find anything you can on that bastard Omatsuri, double-time."

Coby and Helmeppo shivered as they watched one of the three greatest soldiers in the world acquiesce without a word of protest before returning to their own tasks.

"You really are great 'pu! What was your name, again?"

"Jeremiah Cross, and this is Soundbite."

"Good to meet you both 'pu. Here, follow me, I'll show you to the best place to watch all the action 'pu!"

"Hey, thanks, Gappa!"

"Not a problem, Cross. But, well, one thing 'pu? Earlier when you were talking about your show, you acted like it was no big deal 'pu."

"Well... come on, let's be honest here: it's only one show. I'm doing my best and I have some expectations, but I try and keep them sane. That way, I can be pleasantly surprised, you know?"

"Sure as hell doesn't MEAN HE'S MODEST, THOUGH!"

"Quiet, you."

"Well, either way, you're doing a great thing 'pu! And that means you should take more pride in what you're doing 'pu. Being pleasantly surprised is one thing, but you shouldn't set your opinion of yourself lower than it should be 'pu. Maybe try boasting or something, just so long as you show some pride 'pu! It's not healthy not to acknowledge your talents 'pu!"

"...Alright, I'll consider it," Cross conceded.

"Still, in the end it doesn't really matter," Akainu muttered, more to himself than anyone. "Because if you really are right, then Jeremiah Cross might be out of our hair sooner than I ever could have hoped."

-0-

[…pwah…] Cowboy sighed as he finished draining the bottle he'd yanked out of his saddlebag. [So. All in favor of forgetting about that scary-beyond-all-reason non sequitur for the sake of our sanities and paying attention to the race?]

[Aye!] agreed the five ducks and camel alongside him.

[Good. Now cram it and listen.]

"OK, everyone, the race is underway! From this perspective, I can see a lot more of the racecourse! Our group seems to be ahead of the Four Wise Men... no, wait, in both cases, the other boats are pulling ahead now! Customized boats for Omatsuri's crew, naturally…"

"Not really 'pu. True, they're designed so the geezers can drive them 'pu. But the boats have equal seafaring skills; the drivers control the navigation, and the currents will do the rest 'pu."
[Are there really currents that strong in the world?] Eyelashes asked in surprise.

[A few, yes.] Hikoichi nodded sagely. [The first example I can think of is Reverse Mountain, probably the strongest currents in the world. But it’s no surprise that more exist along the sanctuary of insanity called the Grand Line.]

"Huh? Oh, now that you mention it, they do seem to be neck-and-neck now—wait a second, what’s that? Keroko is using a grill they have onboard the boat to create a smokescreen? …Actually, that’s kind of clever, I’ll have to remember that one. Alright, they’re clear of the smokescreen, and now—whoa, that’s not good, Keroko’s throwing burning charcoal at them!"

[It’s as I always say!] Bourbon Jr. snickered as he toasted his bottle of BBQ sauce to the rest of the group. [Never underestimate the power of barbeque!] And with that, he threw his beak back and started chugging the bottle.

Kentauros eyed his comrade warily. [I will never know how the hell he manages to drink that shit straight.]

[I don’t even want to know…] Ivan X rumbled with a grimace.

"That’s NOTHING! Look at KEROSHOT!"

"What, what’s he—MISSILE LAUNCHERS? ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME? HOW IS THAT FAIR?!"

[Am I the only one flashing back to that time Captain tried that special saddle that Cobra brought back from the last Reverie?]

[Why he thought anything that Vegapunk made would have been normal is beyond me…]

"Besides the rules that detail the winner, anything goes in the Ordeal of Hell ‘pu. You figured that out yourself in the last Ordeal ‘pu."

"Still, isn't this weighted a little too much in Omatsuri's favor?"

"Your swordsman and chef are strong. And there are emergency kits in the other boat to help the other two ‘pu."

"They may be strong, yeah, but—NOW IT’S A MACHINE GUN?!"

"Yeah, those geezers are resourceful ‘pu."

[There's resourceful and then there's flat-out insane.] Cowboy declared with a sweatdrop.

"AND Zoro and Sanji are getting along as well as they NORMALLY DO. NOT GOOD!" Soundbite remarked.

"Alright, how about we turn our attention to the other boat…” Cross trailed off before heaving a weary sigh. "…which is currently on fire."

"And not in a good way ‘pu."

"And not in—DAMN IT!" /"And not in—DAMN IT!"

[Wow, that little sucker actually managed to beat them to the punch. Impressive!] Bourbon Jr. whistled.
"You two really are good at this 'pu. I've just been doing it for longer 'pu."

"Wait, what?! How old are—?!"

"Oh, it looks like they found the rescue kits 'pu."

[Oh, that's good! Maybe now things'll be more even!] Stomp squawked eagerly.

"That's great!…or not."

[…I didn't say nuthin'…] the rookie duck groaned, shrinking under the acrid glares his superiors pinned him with.

"Tsk, Nami's got freaking coffee mugs for all the good it's doing her, while Usopp—WHAT THE —!?!"

"Up, up, AND AWAY!"

"Not the time, Soundbite! And you!"

"Who, me 'pu?"

"Yes, 'you-poo'!

"DON'T MOCK ME!"

The ducks and camel recoiled as the dopey teen on the other end suddenly exploded in anger.

[That was freaky…] Stomp whimpered.

[Shaddup—!] Kentauros started to yell.

[He has a point, you know.] Cowboy cut in coolly, though it didn't hide the slight quiver in his voice.

[Ah…] The helmeted duck flinched and coughed into his wing. [Ahem. Sorry, force of habit.]

-o-

"Come on, come on, come ooooon…" Apoo hissed as he dug around in the mechanism installed in the shell of one of his snails. "Aaaaaalmooost—!"

"I'LL DAMN WELL MOCK YOU IF I WANT, YOU'RE STACKING THE DECK WORSE THAN MOST CASINOS!"

"GAH!" Apoo yelped, reflexively jerking his hyper-dexterous arm at the outburst, causing over half a dozen wires to cross in the shell, which caused a cascade of short circuits, which in turn caused the snail to vomit up a cloud of acrid smoke with a pained wheeze before collapsing in on itself, X-d out eyes hanging limply from their stalks.

"Nonono—DAWN IT!" the long-armed pirate snarled as he slammed his fist on the desk. "That was my last Galaga-Sinbad-7-Blade model transponder! The strongest model on the whole freaking market!" He snapped his head around to glare at the rest of the snails on the shelves of his cabin. "What about the rest of you? Any luck getting through?"

The dozen-plus snails arrayed on the walls exchanged glances before shaking their heads in unison.
"Damn it…" Apoo ground the heel of his palm into his forehead with a frustrated growl. "What the hell is going on…" Left with no other option, he settled in and resigned himself to listening to his new friend's broadcast, unable to ignore the sense of dread steadily mounting in his gut.

"THAT'S—! Grgh…" Gappa grit out, obviously fighting to wrestle his temper into submission. "That's why the invitation says 'pirates among pirates among pirates among pirates' 'pu! Don't you justify any cheating you do by reminding people what you are 'pu!?!"

"I… wish… I had a valid comeback to that…" Cross finally admitted.

Apoo frowned. "Wait a minute, I know he was just introduced to the SBS. How does he know that line?"

Apparently Soundbite was mirroring his thought process. "HEY, WAIT, how did you—?"

"Oh, hey, looks like your navigator's noticed that your sniper's missing 'pu!"

Apoo's frown deepened into a suspicious scowl. "Changing the subject again…"

Unfortunately, this time around, Soundbite wasn't quite as savvy as the pirate. "EH—? OHOHOHOH, SHE'S—!" The snail's chortling suddenly choked off. "… Actually, she looks kind of HURT…"

"Aaand there goes the boat. Nami's ringed up and out of the game. Christ on a pikestaff, we're gonna need to act fast to keep her from biting Usopp's head off once he lands…"

"Well, don't do it right away 'pu! I bet it'll be hilarious 'pu!"

"Yeah, maybe so, but—!"

"But what 'pu?"

"But… uh… hm… well…" Cross's protests gradually trailed off into confused muttering. "I-I suppose… A little bit of reaming couldn't hurt…"

Apoo immediately sat up at , staring at the snail in shock. "The hell—!?"

"Huh? Cross, you sure? I MEAN, I like LONG-NOSE'S PAIN AS MUCH AS THE NEXT JACKASS, BUT—!"

"Hey, looks like something's wrong with your cook and swordsman 'pu!"

"Huh? Ohhh boy, looks like my plate-headed friend here is right. Re-focusing on the race, we go back to two of our top fighters who are at once the best and worst team the Straw Hats can produce, short of either the whole crew or Soundbite and myself."

"UH… Y-YEAH! … Wait, which one are we?"

"Take a wild guess. Anyway, looks like their quota for working together has run out, they're focusing more on each other than on their competitors, who are drawing nearer with—"

Suddenly, a chorus of singing metal rang out across the world.

"…Good swordplay 'pu."
"No kidding," Cross snickered proudly. "Well, those two are dead in the water now, but Zoro and Sanji will have to turn back a—WHAT THE?!

"5 seconds, and the ship is NOT ONLY FIXED, but turned into a WATER-PLANE? That's the term, right?"

"Eh, I don't think it can fly, but the design is—"

There was suddenly a flurry of harsh and firm impacts.

"…no longer appreciable."

"Even our chef's feet aren't that strong 'pu."

"Freaking unbelievable… Well, at least it's gone down—SON OF A BITCH!"

"OK, cheating enemies THOUGH THEY ARE, THAT'S FREAKING AWESOME! THAT DRILL IS THE DRILL THAT WILL PIERCE THE HEAVENS!"

"NOT EVEN REMOTELY THE TIME, SOUND—"

Amidst the renewed symphony of swords and strikes, Apoo gained a thoughtful expression. "Pierce the heavens… I'll have to remember that one."

-0-

"…huh. Uh, never mind, viewers. Talk about anticlimactic; Zoro and Sanji literally dismantled the boat, and the rings are tossed. And meanwhile, Usopp's still in the sky, and Nami is hanging on a rope; Keroko's been snagged, but Kerojii… is challenging both Zoro and Sanji at once."

"Why do they fight so much anyway 'pu? Aren't you supposed to be crewmates 'pu?"

"Eh, it's a grand confluence of conflicting neuroses and psychoses, but while they might fight each other from time to time, they can pull their own, especially when they can stomach working together. And either way, they've always got each other's backs. We all do, really. I doubt you'll find many closer crews on the sea!"

"That form of relationship sounds veeeeery familiar, yoyoi!" Kumadori proclaimed as he struck a pose. "Whether pirates or government, it would appear that in the end we are aaaaaaall one and the sa—!" THWACK! "YOWOWOIII!" The kabuki-faced assassin slumped to his knees, clutching a nascent lump on his skull.

"Will you do me a favor and shut the hell up already!?" Jabra snarled as he shrank back from his hybrid form. "It's freaking impossible to listen to anything over your damn racket! AND THAT GOES DOUBLE FOR YOU!"

That last was directed at Fukuro, who was rifling through a rolodex he was holding in his palm. Fukuro glanced back at Jabra, but rather than throw out one of his usual reminders he just sighed and went back to looking. "This is business, chapapa. Kalifa called and asked for me to do some research on the Baron."

Jabra growled lightly under his breath for a moment as he weighed the pros and cons of trying to get at his much more… evasive comrade, but ultimately elected to turn back to the show, doing his idle best to ignore the so-called 'Silent Owl.'
"Then why are they being so haphazard 'pu?" Gappa asked with childish innocence.

"Oh, dear! It sounds as though these steadfast comrades may be—!"

"WHAT THE HELL DID I JUST SAY, DAMN IT!?' Jabra roared.

"EEP!"

"Haphazard? What do you—oh, that's what. So... apparently, Kerojii is actively trying to make them attack each other, hopping between their heads and the ends of the boat, trying to get in their way with each other...aaand there goes Sanji, Zoro only barely managed to dodge. And by dodge, I mean pushing Sanji in the way."

"Honor among thieves," Soundbite muttered, albeit with a hint of uncertainty in his voice.

Jabra frowned in confusion. "That's weird..."

Fukuro cocked an eyebrow absentmindedly. "Eh? How so? Pirates betray pirates every day."

"Most pirates, yeah, but as much as the World Government denies it, we've been steadily shown proof positive that the Straw Hats aren't normal pirates. They wouldn't normally do something like this." Jabura rubbed his thumb over his braided beard. "Ergh, something's not right here..." He promptly snapped his fingers at Fukuro. "When you get that intel for Kalifa, share it with me as well."

The Silent Owl snapped a thumbs-up as he swapped out the rolodex for a new one. "Got it."

"Yeah, that kind of a reaction is a surprise, even coming from those two. But hey," It was evident that Cross had just shrugged. "I guess tempers are high. But geeze, that old geezer is nimble... uh-oh. Crap, Zoro's vulnerable!"

"We're gonna win 'pu!"

"USOPP POUND!" Soundbite suddenly barked out in the voice of the crew's sniper.

"...Or not 'pu. Wow, was that unlucky."

"Ha! Death and a giant hammer from above from our sniper! One well-tossed ring... and it's over! Two for two, the Straw Hat Pirates win!"

"YOYOI, VICTORY! VICTORY!" Kumadori danced around, cheering at the top of his lungs. Jabra didn't object this time, too distracted eyeing Fukuro's suddenly intensified focus on one of his cards.

"...Well, congratulations. I'd recommend you head back to the rest of your crew, we'll send those four along 'pu. Those fireworks don't come out often; it seems that the Baron will be holding a dinner party to celebrate your victories 'pu. I hope you enjoy it. After you've eaten, you'll face me in the final Ordeal of Hell 'pu."

"Oh, just one more?"

"Yes. Pass the final Ordeal, and you can enjoy all that the master of this island has to offer his guests 'pu."

"Fine by me! Well, I'll see you then, Gappa!... Uh, Soundbite? Something on your mind?"
"EH? Ah... nothing, nothing, I JUST THOUGHT... I'm fine, I THINK THE FIREWORKS SCREWED ME UP a bit is all."

"Well, if you say so."

"Is it just me, or did that sound very particularly ominous to anyone else, yoyoi?" Kumadori glanced at his comrades warily.

"Eh, what's the worst that could happen? Glorified goldfish catching and glorified ring-tossing, I don't think this baron's that big of a threat to the likes of them," Jabra waved his hand dismissively, although the tension in his body language said otherwise.

After a minute of no reply, he looked up, to see Fukuro dialing on another snail, a look of unease on his face. "You find something?"

The team's resident gossip hound snapped a card up for Jabra to see.

The wolf-man gave the punchcard a once-over—

"SHIT!"

Before snatching the card out of Fukuro's hand and Shaving the hell out of the room, making tracks for Spandam's office.

Kumadori swapped his confused gaze between the door and his rotund friend before crossing his arms with a huff. "Well, now I just feel left out, yoyoi~…"

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For the first time in a long time, the Big Top was absolutely silent, the Buggy Pirates (plus one) hanging onto every word coming out of their Transponder Snail's mouth. Well, that, and sneaking nervous glances towards their captain, who was pacing the deck like a caged tiger. Every so often he would pause, look into the distance, and mutter to himself before continuing to wear a groove in the deck. It was almost as spooky as the SBS, and though their captain didn't abuse his crew nearly as often these days, no one wanted to provoke his temper.

"...Well, it's official. For all of Baron Omatsuri's...shall we say, 'advanced age', the resort does seem to be everything promised. I'm seeing pools, I'm seeing gourmet drinks... heck, here's XXX relaxing by a pool with a gourmet drink! Where'd you get that particular delicacy, XXX?"

"Muchigoro provided it. Apparently, it's a custom of the island for him to serve our every command for losing the game. Unfortunately, he seems to be a little drunk presently."

"YOU WOULDN'T have anything to do with that, would you?" Soundbite asked dryly.

"Oh, come now, would I do that?"

"Obvious answer is obvious," Cross chuckled. "Anyway, where's everyone else?"

"Chopper wandered off to explore a while ago, and Lassoo wandered off in search of the quietest and most comfortable place he could find to relax, citing something about the 'servants making his skin crawl'! Vivi is enjoying the royal treatment in the spa with Carue watching over her, Luffy ran off after someone with a toothbrush mustache who was throwing stones at him, and Conis has apparently lost track of her fox, and is searching for her. Also... not that I'm
"complaining, Soundbite, but you're being rather quiet."

"HUH? Oh, yeah… sorry," Soundbite apologized with a wince. "I... everything's kind of BLURRY RIGHT NOW..."

"...Cross, I don't think Soundbite is well." Even through the blurring, the concern in the mystery crewmate's voice was obvious.

"I FEEL FINE!" Soundbite barked indignantly before shifting his glance to the side. "It's just my powers feel... screwy. I...I'm still trying TO FIND BOSS AND THE TDWS..."

"See? No need to worry about it, he's fine. He'll be back to his normal self in no time. Anyway, gotta go; enjoy your lounging, XXX."

"Since when is Cross that dim?" Alvida muttered to herself. "His partner feels strange and yet he brushes it off like it's nothing?"

"Not to mention that lack of concern for the dugongs," Cabaji commented. "After all of those lines from earlier on friendship and unity, that's not even remotely in character for him."

"Ah... yeah, if you say so..." Soundbite ultimately agreed, if somewhat uncertainly. "OH, HEY, XXX, BEFORE we go, you're SURE YOU haven't seen CHOPPER ANYWHERE?"

"Hm? Not since he wandered off, no. Why do you ask?"

"... No reason."

A vocal equivalent of a shrug. "If you say so. I may go out for a bit myself later; Muchigoro told me of a species of flower that only grows on this island, the Lily Carnation."

"What's that, a cross-breed between—?" Mohji started to ask.

"WHAT?! WHAT DID HE JUST SAY?!"

Everyone present looked back at Buggy, and recoiled; the clown looked absolutely horrified. The next second, he leapt for the receiver, and began dialing.

"What are you doing, Buggy?" Alvida asked, honest concern in her voice.

"WHAT THE FLASHY HELL DOES IT LOOK LIKE I'M DOING? I'M CALLING THE SBS!"

"What are you doing, Buggy?" Alvida asked, honest concern in her voice.

"WHAT THE FLASHY HELL DOES IT LOOK LIKE I'M DOING? I'M CALLING THE SBS!"

"C-Captain?" Cabaji asked hesitantly.

"I've been to that island before, Cabaji..." Buggy grimly bit out. "I've tried to forget that day ever happened and I've been denying it this entire time, I thought that first name was just a coincidence, I prayed, but that second name, that name..." The Clown Pirate shuddered in horror. "I need to call the Straw Hats and warn them! Warn them that that Island is nothing more than a trap, one of the most dangerous traps in all of the Grand Line! A trap so vile, so utterly horrific that it put me off of the Grand Line and forced me to settle for the fucking East Blue!"

"And you want to call the Straw Hats and warn them about that because...?"

Buggy pinned Alvida with a glare so intense that she actually took a step back. "Because as I escaped from that hell, I made the mistake of looking back. I saw what that... that place did to my
crewmates and it has haunted my nightmares, the nightmares of a man who's seen everything the Grand Line has to offer, ever since. What I saw…" Buggy grit his teeth, an audible grinding noise issuing out as he threw a haunted stare at the snail. "I may be a right flashy bastard, but I'd like to imagine that I still have some semblance of a soul. No one deserves that hell. Not even the Straw Hats."

-o-

"Ah, there you are, Vivi! Enjoying the royal treatment, your majesty?"

"Quite so, Mister Jeremiah," came Vivi's voice, unusually imperialistic. "Their XXX Island masque is making me feel truly alive. Perhaps you should sample it; it's herbal and made from the local flowers. Whether you do or not, I've really missed this, I haven't had a good royal spa treatment since before I left home."

"Same heah. These guys know how tah treat a duck as good as Alabasta did!"

"Hey, Pops…" Kohza slowly glanced at his commander in chief with a wary expression. "Correct me if I'm wrong… but I do remember Vivi hating spa treatments to high heaven and Carue being right there with her, right?"

"Yes, but that was two years ago. Considering the fax—ahem, mah, mah, MAH! Considering the fact that they spent two years undercover as assassins and had to leave the country immediately after their labors bore fruit, I don't find it strange that either of them would want to take advantage of it when the chance is presented to them," Igaram replied before Cobra could. "I know that I certainly did."

"That's plausible, Igaram, but what I find strange is that she said that her masque came from local flowers, when they established that the only flower that they've seen is the talking one on the Baron's shoulder," Chaka noted with an uncomfortable frown.

"Well, the results may be good, but I'm not sure the way you look right now is worth it," Cross said cheekily. "I don't think the green and gray really match your hair."

"The process might be ugly, Mister Jeremiah, but I assure you that the results will be worth it…"

"And she would know that how, exactly?" Pell wondered.

"Well, Miss Monday talked her into trying one out. And… it took her about two months to forgive me for screaming when I saw them."

"Who, the assassin or Vivi?"

"Yes."

"I sure hope so; OTHERWISE, YOU'LL HAVE LESS dignity THAN NAMI!" Soundbite cackled eagerly. "HOOHOOHOO/HEEEHEEEHEE—!"

"Watch your tongue, Soundbite," Vivi cut him off, her tone suddenly as hard as granite. "Or else."

"HAHA—HURK!? WHAT THE FUCK, VIVI!?"

"What the hell!?" Kohza jerked forwards, staring at the snail in shock and horror, his expression mirrored throughout the royal master bedroom. "W-What—was that Vivi?"
"There is no way in the world that my daughter would be so harsh over anything so trivial!" Cobra barked harshly, before turning towards his Captain of the Guard with a disturbed expression. "Or... is there, Igaram?"

"I-I don't believe so, your majesty," Igaram stammered. "Even in her persona as Miss Wednesday, even when she had to act cold and cruel, she was never even remotely that... that glacial. T-This shift in her attitude, I-I-I can't—ahem, mah, mah, MAH!—can't even begin to explain it!"

Meanwhile, one voice on the other end of the connection was disturbingly undisturbed by the princess' coldness. "Well! There's more proof that you should never come between a woman and her beauty!" Cross said cheerfully. "Well, we've got to be going, more crewmates to see, after all. Enjoy the spa!"

"That I will, Mister Jeremiah," Vivi sighed in contentment. "That I will..."

"Take aww the time you need, Cwoss, aww the time you need. Meanwhiwe, ah'll be enjoying theshe dewicious apewitifs!"

"Well, alright, then! See you!" And with that, Cross apparently left the room, but the conversation was clearly not over.

"Uh, Cross?" Soundbite spoke up through gritted teeth. "I HATE TO BURST YOUR BUBBLE, BUT EITHER Vivi really loves her spa treatments... OR she's lost it!"

"What, you mean how she reacted? Pff, that's probably just how she acts when she really gets to unwind." Cross scoffed dismissively. "Come on, Soundbite, you're making a big deal out of nothing again! Remember that time you thought that salesman was part of the Snail Illuminati?"

"I STILL HOLD THAT THAT MOLLUSK WAS SPEAKING IN CODE!"

"What does it say about the Straw Hats that the term 'Snail Illuminati' doesn't even faze me?" Chaka asked dryly.

"Nothing we didn't know already," Pell replied just as dryly. "And... considering the spa treatment and the fact that this is Soundbite we're talking about, perhaps Vivi's reaction is reasonable."

Suddenly, the clatter of sandals and talons running on tile erupted over the connection.

"Get back heyah, would ya!? Wait up!"

"HELP! GIANT DUCK, GIANT DUCK!"

There was a brief moment of silence as the ruckus faded into the distance before Cross chuckled in amusement. "Well, it seems that when he really wants to, that duck is capable of living up to his species' name. " There was a moment of silence. "What? Come on, Soundbite, that was funny!"

"EH?" Soundbite turned an inquisitive eye towards, presumably, Cross. His other was pre-occupied with swinging back and forth nervously. "Uh, yeah, sure, W-WHATSOEVER YOU SAY, HAHA."

The Alabastans, meanwhile, were fully aware of the discrepancy that Soundbite had merely suspected.

"Carue... left Vivi alone?" Igaram breathed in disbelief. "For food?"

"Alright, that's it," Cobra growled, snapping up from where he'd been sitting. "Something is visibly
rotten in the city of Mariejois, and I mean beyond the usual decay. Call Sabo at once and let him know that I need to speak with Dragon immediately."

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"Now then, where to next, where to ne—Oh, hey, Conis! Eesh, you look freaked, what's wrong?"

"Oh, hello, Cross. Howlit—er, I mean, Lassoo wandered out an hour or two ago, saying that he needed some air, and that the staff were kind of creeping him out. Then, when he didn't come back, Su told me that she was going to go looking for him. But she hasn't come back either. Soundbite, can you hear her?"

"AH… ergh, damn it… I'm sorry, CONIS; my hearing is messed up, FUZZIER THAN SU AFTER A BATH."

"Eh, don't worry, Conis, Lassoo probably just fell asleep, and I bet Su is just enjoying the chance to explore an exotic location without the the spectre of certain death looming overhead."

"Cross, can you please try to be at least a little more serious here? Soundbite can't hear anything, and some of our crew is missing!"

"SHE HAS a point, dude! LOOK, I WANTED A VACATION AS MUCH AS THE NEXT GUY, BUT THIS ISLAND HAS FELT OFF since we landed! And with everything that's been HAPPENING—!"

"Oh, psh, is that all?" Cross scoffed nonchalantly. "Come off it, do you really think I haven't noticed the weird vibes this place is giving off? I can be thick, but I'm not Luffy thick. It's obvious that this place is weird, but it can't be anything worse than a glorified Davy Back Fight, so really there's nothing to worry about!"

"But if this is another trap like back on Long Ring Long, doesn't that make it doubly important that we break out of it as soon as possible before we're irreversibly snared!?" Conis demanded.

"Why should we? The benefits of getting into it are currently outdoing the costs by a pretty hefty margin, and by broadcasting this my show'll get tons of viewers! Plus, there's no risk of losing one of our crew forever this time, right?"

"Speak for yourself…"

"Eh?"

"N-NOTHING!"

"If you say so."

"You know, it's obvious that he wants to be heard, that's no surprise, but when did he care this much about increasing his viewer were?" Paulie wondered.

"I'm more worried about how callous and oblivious he's being," Iceburg said with a frown. "His crewmates are acting abnormally, and yet he's just treating it like some harmless game. He only does that when it's only him in danger, or he has things under control, neither of which appear to be the case here. The only reason I can think of would be if something was blatantly wrong with him, and if so it appears to have extended to the rest of the crew as well."

"Which… is bad," Kaku summarized flatly.
The chief of Galley-La nodded solemnly. "Very, very bad."

"Anyway, if there's nothing else, let's just go meet the others outside," Cross continued in an entirely too casual tone. "Easy money says that the others are getting impatient, and besides, Su and Lassoo are bound to show up for dinner, right?"

"Mmmph... well, that's a good point..." Conis conceded, though by her tone she clearly disagreed. "Alright, which way is it, exactly?"

As the broadcast devolved back into simple walking and idle conversation, Kalifa cracked open the back door, looking distinctly ill at ease. Kaku, Lucci, and Blueno noticed, and surreptitiously moved out the door to join their comrade.

"What's the matter?" Kaku muttered as he maintained a subtle watch on their erstwhile colleagues.

The female agent shook her head as she shuffled the papers she was practically strangling. "I've searched records thoroughly, I've asked everyone I can, I've even..." She hazarded a glance at where the rest of the company was before dropping her voice. "Called Enies for intelligence on this Baron Omatsuri."

"And?" Blueno asked.

"The most recent records of anyone with that name are of a pirate crew known as the Red Arrow Pirates. They sailed the seas for decades, but then disappeared without a trace." She looked at each of her comrades in turn, a panicked glint behind her glasses. "The issue with that particular identification is that the date they disappeared was two years before Roger's execution."

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"Hey, everyone, how's it going?" Cross asked cheerily.

"Read the mood, asshole," snarled several voices, of a quality that made the listeners stiffen in unwilling anticipation. It was best compared to a barrel of chlorine trifluoride hovering over a glacier; frigid, but one push away from a superheated and incredibly toxic explosion. Soundbite whimpered audibly.

"Wow, I haven't seen a mood that bad since—"

Drake cut himself off at the twin glares Jonathan and Jessica were giving him. "Since never! Never seen any mood that bad, nope!" he hastily amended, cold sweat cascading down his temples.

"Ooh, tough crowd," Cross drawled, albeit with a hint of mischief in his voice. But not his usual mischief; rather than being playful and fun, this tone was more... dark. Cruel, even. "Why so serious, guys? What, are we not having fun here? I know that I sure am, and hopefully my viewers are too! Uh... where's Chopper?"

"Oh, he told Robin he'd be back soon, so he should—"

"There's no way in hell that I can have any kind of 'fun' with this big-mouthed long-nosed traitor even remotely nearby," Nami growled venomously.

"Damn it, what did I even do, Nami?!" Usopp plaintively demanded.

"You know damn well, you bastard," the navigator hissed.
"No! I don't! And yeah, I know my parents never married, but that bastard line is uncalled for!"

"What did you do to Nami-swan, Usopp? She wouldn't lie," Sanji snarled.

"Idiot cook, she lies all the time if it'll get her another beri," Zoro growled back, black hatred coloring his voice.

"SAY THAT AGAIN, SHITTY MOSSHEAD!" Sanji roared.

"She. Lies. All. The—"

"GUYS, KNOCK IT OFF ALREADY!"

"The snail's right, this is just sad."

"Thank you, Cross," Conis sighed in relief.

"Seriously, can't you two come up with some new material?" Cross complained in what appeared to be all sincerity. "I mean, 'Cook' and 'Mosshead' have been done to death, why not do something original, eh?"

"STOP HELPING, CROSS!" Conis promptly pleaded.

"Eesh, you try and lend a hand and all you get in return is—"

"MISTER JEREMIAH!"

"GAH! What, Vivi—whoa, hello, fashion horror show, there appears to be something on your—"

"The Baron cut my spa treatment short because of the dinner party that he's about to throw us. I was enjoying myself more than I have for the last two years!"

"The new recruits won't be happy to hear that," Drake muttered.

Jonathan did not reply, too focused on what was coming out of his snail's mouth. The intent stare his face had morphed into discouraged anyone from interrupting him.

"Well, you can hardly blame me for his scheduling and policies," Cross waved her off indifferently.

"I'm not, that would be unfair," Vivi reassured him before her entire expression swapped to apoplectic fury. "I'm blaming you because it's your fault that I can't take my sweet time enjoying a spa treatment back in Alabasta, WHERE I'D BE TREATED PROPERLY LIKE THE ROYALTY I AM!"

There was a moment of tense, frigid silence, filled only with harsh, rapid breathing.

Ultimately, however, the silence was broken with a single smug phrase.

"Don't you mean 'was'?"

And down went the barrel.

"DAMN IT, CROSS!" Conis cried out.

And from there the situation only devolved further, entirely dominating the SBS. It was almost as though Cross had forgotten that the microphone was on. That, or he just didn't care who heard the
strife that was afflicting the crew. The blurred voice that they knew to be Nico Robin seemed to be the only one still calm, trying to ask Luffy to calm them down. Before the captain could make any headway, however, the sound of drums rang out.

"Okay, did Cross get his brain replaced while no one was looking?" Holger incredulously demanded. "Ever since day one of the SBS, he's been almost as pissed off about Princess Vivi's situation as the princess herself! This isn't a personality shift, this is a complete transplant!"

"It makes about as much sense as anything else that's been going on right now," Cormac replied with a grimace.

"Quiet," Jonathan snapped. Both officers promptly shut up, and all present in the room quieted as the Vice Admiral began pushing around pieces on his chessboard.

Sadly, the reality of the situation was brought back to the fore by the mocking voice of the island's master.

"Now, now, now, what's with all of this arguing I thought that a crew as united as yours go along well?" Baron Omatsuri drawled.

"Oh, spare us the wisecracks," Zoro shot back venomously.

"Yeah, so we're going through a rough patch, big whoop." The nonchalant shrug in Cross's voice was plain to hear, as was the newfound darkness in Omatsuri's chuckle.

"As you wish. I will now entertain you all with a private dinner party!"

Henrick glanced around nervously as the sound of shifting water sounded out. "I'm not the only one who's disturbed by just how evil this guy suddenly sounds, right?"

"Is it sudden, or is he just no longer bothering to put on a ruse?" Holger asked right back.

"Well, is there no end to the surprises on this island?" Cross whistled in awe. "It would appear that even this seemingly innocuous pond is capable of turning into—"

"I present to you the outdoor iron-griddle restaurant!"

"—yes, that. Omatsuri's chef is standing on the griddle, which is now on fire, wearing skates that seem to be made out of lard and carrying a pair of... what are those, pizza paddles?"

"They're spatulas, actually, custom made for my head chef, Kotetsu!" Omatsuri stated.

"Got it."

"I can only pray, pray that they'll be able to get over whatever problems are making them act like this long enough to have a good meal," Jessica pleaded, more to herself than anyone.

[That's assuming that they haven't drugged the food.] Isaiah cut in, writing out the same words on the notepad he had before him. Jessica grimaced as she saw it.

"Drugs... or something stronger," Jonathan muttered.

"What was that, Commander?" Henrick asked hesitantly.

Jonathan positioned the last piece on his board before resting his head in his hands. "Of the present Straw Hats, the only ones that are not acting extremely out of character are the captain, Soundbite,
Nico Robin, and Conis. In short, the ones unaffected are the ones that are not normal humans, with 'normal' being relative."

"But isn't Cross's physiology abnormal, too?" Drake questioned.

[YES, BUT HE'S DIFFERENT IN THAT HE'S SOMEHOW LESS POWERFUL THAN THE REST OF THE CREW! ERGO, IT'S AS THOUGH HE'S BEING HIT BY A SEAKING!] Terry furiously squawked and slashed into a notepad.

"And now whole carts of food are being tossed into the air and—diced up long before they hit the grill. And now comes the shuffling around."

"This is actually pretty impressive..." Conis mused absentmindedly.

"Yeah, but it's a slippery slope, Conis," Cross warned. "It's a good performance, but if any food's wasted then the whole spectacle is pointless."

"Well, either way, it looks yummy!" Luffy cried out.

"Yes, it does—oh, what's this? Oh, my, Sanji's just jumped onto the grill."

"Luffy... I'm about to make you a shitty meal 100 times better than what this fatass is making!" Sanji declared. "I'll put on a show for you all that none of you will ever forget!"

"Heh. I don't have any ingredients for you to use," came an unfamiliar voice that could only be Kotetsu.

"Then I'll just... TAKE YOURS!"

"Well, this promises to be exciting!... Though our audience seems to be missing a member. Hey, did anyone see where Vivi went?"

"I think she said something about 'going to find that damn duck' before stalking off," Usopp provided.

"Eh, her loss. 'Sides, her harping was starting to get really irritating."

"Wait a minute, that doesn't make any sense," Jessica said.

"What? I thought we'd already established that a lot of the crew is acting way out of—"

"Not that, Holger," Jessica cut in. "I'm referring to the fact that aside from the princess with her spa treatment and the duck with the food platter, none of the Straw Hats have eaten up to this point, so they couldn't have been drugged through any gastronomic means. So how could whatever's been making them go insane have gotten into their systems?!"

"Well! Looks like we have a cooking duel on our hands, ladies and gentleman! The two of them are staring each other down... and they're off! They're rushing towards the ingredients, and they've both seized a sizable portion to work with, though Kotetsu managed to get away with more of it."

"But that's the only explanation!" Cormac started to protest before trailing off thoughtfully. "Unless... w-what if it's airborne or something? Like a toxin or a gas or—?"

SLAM!

The Marines jumped almost a foot off the air and stared at their commanding officer in shock.
Jonathan was scowling grimly, driving the black queen so hard into the board that both it and the desk beneath were starting to crack.

"Pollen," he spat. "It's the flower."

"And now we see the differentiation in approach between the two chefs!" Cross announced proudly, at least a hint of his old self entering his voice. "Kotetsu is mixing his portion in with a large helping of noodles, while Sanji has prepared a thick and rich broth for the food to marinate in… and what's this? Oh, I was wrong, it's not broth. It's batter! He's making a pancake!"

"Pancakes for dinner? The brat must have lost his mind out there on the high-seas!" Patty chortled for a second before he was cut off by a dope slap courtesy of Carne.

"Less backseat-cooking, more real-life cooking! This marathon might be insane, but it's still managing to whip up a massive dinner rush!" the shorter chef barked. "Besides, pancakes are great for dinner!"

"Where, Podunk, South Blue?"

"I'll have you know that Podunk was a respectable community, and that—!

THWACK-WHACK!

"OW!" the belligerent chefs chorused as they clutched their skulls.

"If you can't keep up the pace while listening, then I will fry this snail myself, you hear me?" Zeff growled as he loomed behind the two, the snail flinching in fear. "Now come on!" He slid two dozen plates of beautifully designed food before them. "Order up!" The head chef then turned his attention to the snail as he got back to work. After all, he could do this in his sleep, quite literally.

"Go, Sanji! You're looking great! Do your best!" Nami cheered.

"Keep it up, Sanji! Go, go, go!" Usopp concurred.

A moment later, however, both voices fell silent.

"Oh, dear, it seems that our navigator and sniper are still angry with each other. What a pity," Cross remarked, the dark humor returning full-force.

"Cross, can't you do something about them? S-Something to actually help them? Now Nami's just walking away to sit next to that fish keeper, and Usopp's wandering into the forest," Conis said worriedly.

"Oh, don't worry so much, Conis. They'll get over it with a little time alone. And honestly, it's sort of cute watching them fight."

"C-Cute?" Conis repeated in disbelief. "Cross—!

"OYSTER SAUCE!"

"Oh, hold that thought!" Cross said.

"SEAWEED FLAKES!"
"Looks like Kotetsu is finishing up his dish!"

"And with a dash of red, pickled ginger, my - Island yakisoba will be complete! Bon appetit!"

"Sounds like they made an awesome dish!" Patty commented as he returned to his station.

"Yeah, too bad Sanji's going to upstage him without a sweat!" Carne cackled eagerly.

Zeff smirked slightly, lowering his peg-leg from it's pre-whack position.

"Well, well, that's quite the appealing pasta dish—wait, what the hell—whoa!"

"Thanks for the ingredients!" Sanji called out.

"… One of these days, I'm going to have to ask just how thoroughly that old man trained him. Viewers, Sanji just gathered up all of that pasta, meat and all, with a giant pair of chopsticks, rolled it into a ball, and tossed it into the air. And now… he's flipping that pancake of his up and on top of it?"

"Super-thick sauce! A layer of mayonnaise. Aaand… as the veil-like bonito flakes dance in the air, my modan yaki is complete." The drumbeats stopped. "That's how it's done!"

"Go, Sanji, go! Looks like Kotetsu wasn't expecting to be outdone… ooh, and he just fell onto his hands and knees in disbelief, on the griddle. That's going to leave a mark."

"Sweet Conis, did you see my demonstration of cooking skills?" Sanji purred.

"Y-Yes, that was… very impressive," Conis said uncertainly, her discomfort plainly audible.

"Alright, how about serving up some of that—um. Alright, Luffy has reached a new low in table manners; he literally just dove into the food like it was a swimming pool. I'm not sure how I feel about eating that now…"

"FOR ONCE, I'm not sure I want any either," Soundbite muttered.

"I believe I've lost my appetite, too," Conis queasily agreed.

"Hey, Zoro, wake up! The food is ready!" Luffy called.

"Food? Oh, good, I'm starving."

"You think it's out of character for Sanji to try feeding Zoro food that their captain dove into?"

"No, that seems about par for the course."

"Patty, Carne, as entertaining as this is, do I need to remind you that we have—"

"You were asleep, so you can go hungry."

"Huh?"

"Anyone who doesn't cheer for me doesn't have the right to eat."

CRASH!

The cookware in Zeff's hands fell to the ground and shattered as he gaped at the Transponder Snail in stunned horror.
"O-OWNER ZEFF!"

"Sanji… he would never say that. Not in a thousand years, not if his life depended on it, not if every woman in the world begged him to say it," Zeff breathed, sinking to his knees in shock.

"Something's not right here, something's really not right!" Patty growled furiously.

Apparently, the chefs of the Baratie weren't the only ones to share this opinion.

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"HAVE YOU LOST—MMPH!?" Soundbite's panicked protests were suddenly silenced without warning.

"Be quiet, you little pest, before I bash your teeth in!"

"What. The damn. Hell," Smoker grit out slowly, his cigars very swiftly burning down to nubs.

"D-Did Cross just—?!" Tashigi stammered in near-panic, unable to believe her ears.

"M-Mmph!?" Soundbite mumbled out with just as much incredulity.

"Come on, dumbass, don't you realize it yet? I don't know what the heck's going on here, but I do know that it's dramatic straight out the wazoo! The messier this gets, the more viewers I'll get, so don't ruin this for me, got it!?"

"B-BUT, but—!"

"Now shut up, we're missing some prime material here."

"He's out of his fucking mind," Smoker numbly summarized.

"H-He has to have a reason—!" Tashigi started to stammer, only to be interrupted by a sound coming over the Transponder Snail's connection.

"Cli-cli-click, click-click-click, cli-cli-click, cli-cli-click, click-click-click, cli-cli-click."

It took the ensign a moment to decipher what she was hearing, but once she did she paled in horror. "That's an SOS…" she breathed, barely able to believe what she was saying. "S-Soundbite's using his teeth to send an SOS. He-He's scared for his life… Scared of Cross…"

SLAM!

Tashigi nearly jumped clear out of her seat as Smoker slammed his fist onto the table.

"Enough is enough," he growled viciously. "Damn secrecy and damn the rest of MI4. We're ending this shitshow now. Call the snail, with any luck he'll have the presence of mind to blur our voices."

Nodding frantically, Tashigi swept up the Transponder Snail's mic and tapped in the long-since memorized number—

Only to shriek and fumble the Snail's mic when a roar/shriek/blast of unholy sound tore its way from the poor Snail's mouth; it promptly fainted into unconsciousness, foam bubbling out of its mouth the instant its task was completed.
The two Marines stared at the Snail in horror for a moment before chorusing a singular thought. "Shit."

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"Come on, captain, think! You know the names, you know you know them, and he's even given us some descriptions, too!"

"Muchigoro, the loach-human with the giant pet goldfish!"

"Gappa, the young gunner who looks like a kappa!"

"The Four Wise Men, or Three Men and one Woman!"

"Kotetsu, the theatrical chef built like a freakin' ox!"

"Come on, is any of this ringing a bell!?"

"Aaaaargh, yes, they're ringing plenty!" Shanks snarled as he paced back and forth, his hand desperately hammering against his forehead. "But none of it is actually making any sense! I recognize the names, I know details about them, like how Kerojii can drink like a fiend or how Muchigoro can't hold his alcohol worth shit—!

"Focus!" Benn barked.

"But none of it has any context!" Shanks flung his arm up in desperation. "I don't know how I know them, I don't know where I know them from…"

"…Alright, now things are getting a bit weird; every single one of the candles for the party just went out at the same time… and looking more closely, it seems that our crew has been brought down to six."

"S-Seven—"

"We'll compromise at six and a quarter, now shh. This is turning… interesting."

Soundbite whimpered. "V-Viewers? C-CROSS CAN'T hear me SAYING THIS…BUT HE'S lost his mind… I'm scared…"

Shanks snarled and raked his fingers through his hair. "But damn it all, I need to find out why I get a sickening feeling of wrongness in my gut every time the baron talks! Before this gets any worse than it already is!"

"And what's this?"

"AAAAAAAAHHH!"

"GEEZE, you stupid snail, why—whoa, Muchigoro… OK, so that reaction was understandable. They really take the plant motif seriously here, he's turned purple, and shriveled up like a dried reed," Cross whistled in awe.

"H-He was rambling about A STORM—"

Cross cut him off with a malevolent grin. "And meanwhile, the rest of our crew is arguing about
what to do next."

"I told you to keep an eye on them!" Sanji barked.

"They aren't kids! I can't keep tabs on them all day long!" Zoro shot back.

"Five of our crew disappeared, and nobody noticed?"

"I-I noticed! I-I-I tried to SAY SOMETHING, BUT—!"

"But why are we just now noticing?!" Nami demanded.

"Because none of you are listening!" Conis pleaded. "Please, stop arguing, we need to—!"

"Luffy..." Conis choked at the sheer icy malice dripping from Sanji's words. "What are you going to do? You're the one who got us into this."

"Sanji—" Nami started.

"You're the one who decided to come to this island!"

"Stop it! This isn't the time!" Nami protested, though it seemed halfhearted.

"AGH! What is it?! How can I not remember—?!"

THWACK! THUD!

All of the Red-Haired Pirates gaped, while the world's greatest swordsman inspected Yoru's hilt and began plucking away the few red hairs that had stuck to it.

"Less subtlety than I prefer, but when all else fails..." Mihawk grunted.

Shanks slowly got back to his feet, his face somewhere between a grimace and a smirk. "Screw subtle, that actually worked! I remember now: Baron Omatsuri was Captain 'Red Baron' Omatsuri, captain of the Red Arrow Pirates! I met them once while I was still sailing with Captain Roger! We met them a couple of years before we reached Raftel, we had a great party, we parted ways on good terms and—!" Shanks' jubilant expression promptly froze before turning ashen. "And... And they got caught in the mother of all storms... a storm so violent... it picked up their ship and flung it clean over the Red Line, back into Paradise... there... there were no survivors..."

"Well, it seems that reports—" Mihawk began.

"—Of their deaths were greatly exaggerated," most of the Red-Hair Pirates intoned together.

"Story of my life..." Shanks grumbled with a roll of his eyes before grinning viciously. "Well, either way, it doesn't matter! Now that we have a name, we can call Luffy and—!"

"That's what started all of this... Luffy, this is your fault."

"SANJI!" Conis shrieked in offense. The fact that she was the only one who protested was telling in the extreme.

And just like that everything froze, pirates and Warlords alike staring at the snail in varying degrees of mute shock, the small degree of humor that they had fading away like a candle flame in the ocean.

"Whoa. Borderline mutinous behavior from our chef," Cross purred. "Be sure to take it all in, folks."
"Tell me this is just a NIGHTMARE. SOMEONE wake me up! THEY'RE ALL COMPLETELY NUTS!"

"I'm afraid..." Mihawk grimaced. "It would appear that in this case, this is an instance of what is commonly known as 'too little, too late'."

"The dinner party is over! The Ordeal of Hell will now resume!" Omatsuri's voice suddenly barked. All signs of his previous good cheer were gone, and only frigid, malicious apathy remained.

"Good evening 'pu. I'm DJ Gappa. Pleasure to meet you 'pu," came a familiar voice.

"Damn, it's this bastard again," Marco scowled grimly, his attitude mirrored by the rest of his brothers who were listening to the SBS. "He's the one who kickstarted this entire mess in the first place!"

"Don't be too hasty there, Marco," Whitebeard rumbled as he levelled a hard stare at the snail. "This hell didn't start with that young man. He might have planted the seeds of whatever's wrong with Cross, but as a whole?" The half-giant shook his head with a sigh. "I'm afraid that the Straw Hats were ensnared in whatever trap is present on that island the moment they set foot on its shores."

Marco's scowl deepened, but for the life of him he couldn't refute his pop's words.

"Oh, hey, there's Gappa again," Cross sneered eagerly. "Looks like it's finally time for the last Ordeal, but Zoro and Sanji seem more concerned about our crewmates that wandered off. Eh, I suppose they do have a point: after all, more crewmates, more participants to enjoy the... wait a minute."

"Hey, Gappa, are you wearing Usopp's hat?"

The ramifications of that estimate were left unsaid, though they were clear to all.

"What?! Hey, that IS Usopp's hat!" Sanji barked, which was followed by the sound of something coming unstuck.

"Ah! Give it back 'pu!"

"You bastard... What did you do to Usopp?!" Zoro growled menacingly, which prompted the sound of retreating footsteps.

"D-Don't worry. Your friends are still on the island 'pu. If you want to see them, try and find them 'pu."

"Ah, so that's where everyone is, I should have suspected it," Cross stated casually, not so much as a hint of concern for his comrades present in his voice. "Well, looks like the kid gloves have finally come off and it's time for the big beatdown. The sign for the next 'ordeal' is rising up behind the good Baron, and personally, I can't wait to see what he has planned."
"You will learn of the fate of your comrades after the next ordeal," Omatsuri stated.

"Don't give us that crap! Give them back!" Sanji ordered.

"The ordeal comes first," Omatsuri repeated.

"Is this guy serious!?" Namur grunted incredulously.

"Don't screw with us! Those guys come first!" Zoro said.

"The ordeal will come first!" Omatsuri yelled, madness and determination suddenly blazing in his voice.

Edward Newgate clenched his jaw as he processed the raw amount of emotion that had been packed into that phrase. "I think he's more serious than you can possibly imagine…"

"Well, the Baron is quite insistent about this… and it looks like Zoro and Sanji aren't going to stick around to play his game. HEY, WHERE ARE YOU GUYS—? Ahhh, man, less players, less fun," Cross sighed dejectedly, petulant disappointment coloring his voice. "Tsk, well, that's too bad. Alright, let's see what the rules are this time…"

There was an electronic hum of neon igniting, gasps of horror from Soundbite and Conis—

"Дерьмо!"

"Oh, my God…"

—and the sound of a hundred flintlock rifles cocking in unison.

"Ah, it's a shooting game."

It was as though the Whitebeard Pirates, all New World veterans, had suddenly been dunked in ice water.

"Oh, yeah…" 12th Division Commander Haruta realized. "That Gappa guy… he… he said he was a gunner…"

"There are no rules in this ordeal," the Baron announced. There was no pomp or circumstance in his voice, or even emotion at all for that matter. Merely grim determination. "My 100 sharpshooters will hunt you. If you believe you can escape them, you can search for your crewmates or do whatever you wish."

Jozu shook his head in disbelief. "This… This isn't an ordeal, this is a fucking execution!"

"No, this is the truth of that island when you strip away its façade," Marco grimly corrected. "Everything before was just trappings and distractions. Now… Now all that's left is its rotten core."

Everything was silent for a moment, then… "High stakes. Sounds like fun!" Cross snickered in a near-demented manner that had Soundbite whimpering.

"'E's not gonna snap out of this any time soon, is 'e?" 7th Division Commander Rakuyo sighed in resignation.

"I sincerely hope so, matters are disturbing enough already…" Vista muttered, miserably massaging his face.
"Luffy, what do we do?... Luffy?... LUFFY!" Nami screamed.

"Captain, please! Do something!" Conis pleaded. "Cross, don't just stand there! Help me!"

"Who do you think's going down first, people?" Cross rambled on, ignoring the pleas of his friends. "My bets are on the rookie. After all, she's still soft. Chopper's got a natural disadvantage, of course —"

"Cross, what is wrong with you!? Please, we need help! Why is no one listening to me!?"

"SOMEONE fucking HELP! IT'S OMATSURI ISLAND! OMATSURI ISLAND! I DON'T CARE WHO COMES AT THIS POINT, HEEEEELP!"

"You may begin!" Omatsuri called out.

The Moby Dick began to shudder as Whitebeard's hold on his temper finally cracked and his powers asserted themselves, waves rising on what had moments ago been a glass-calm sea.

"I may not be able to sink that island from here," he growled, his children inching away from him as his Haki started laying low even the strongest of their number. "But I am very tempted to try."

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"I-I'm going off by myself!" Nami hissed before the sound of her running came across the speaker.

"Nami, wait! Nami, NAMI! Nononono—L-Luffy, I'm so, so sorry, but... AGH! Cross, come on, we have to run!" Conis cried frantically.

"What, and miss the beatdown? Are you out of your ditzy airhead mind?! I wouldn't miss this for the w—HEY! LET GO OF ME!"

"If I have to drag you out of here to make sure you don't get gunned down because you're too preoccupied to run, then that's what I'll do! Luffy's immune to bullets, he can take care of himself. WE ARE NOT! What kind of a show will it be if we all die?!!" Conis yelled.

"Better than what we're listening to right now," Gin spat as he fingered the hilts of his tonfa, an action he'd been undertaking since Sanji's blasphemous statement. "Damn it, I was involved in some depraved undertakings while I worked with Krieg, sure, but this? This just takes the cake. " He cast a sidelong look at Miss Valentine. "At a guess, I'd say this is like heaven to you?"

The ex-assassin shook her head slowly, her countenance a highly visible green. "I...I'm a sadist on the best of days, but this... I wouldn't wish this on even the worst of my enemies..." she gurgled, obviously fighting to keep her lunch down.

Mister 5 shook his head with a scowl. "I might be somewhat heartless, but even I know that this shit isn't right..." He glanced at Bartolomeo. "Boss, what do you thi—Boss?"

'Black Bart' Bartolomeo, infamous pirate straight out of the East Blue and wanted by the Marines for a bounty just shy of a 100 Million Beris, was slumped on his hands and knees and biting into the collar of his shirt in an effort to restrain his sobs. "Da-Dab id!" he managed to choke out through his tears. "Dey're geddig ribbed abart at da seabs! Dis iz dorture, pure dorture!"

Mr. 5 cocked an eyebrow before starting to turn his head. "I can't understand jack through all that snot. Think you can translate Api—oh, come on!" He slapped a hand to his forehead when he caught sight of the pre-adolescent and her pet dragon, who were in practically the same position.
"You don't even know them personally!"

"N-No," Apis shook her head in agreement. "B-But we came r-r-really close, you know!? I-If they'd just left Loguetown a little sooner, I-I'd have probably been saved by them instead of the captain!"

Mr. 5 opened his mouth for a biting remark, but the long pause in the audio, punctuated only by the sounds of running, distant gunshots, and Soundbite's muffled whimpering, was finally broken by Cross speaking.

"I am… conflicted," he muttered, before restarting his commentary. "Hmm… alright, so we're running for our lives… possibly trying to find our crewmates in the meantime… but hey, even if it's not the beatdown, this is still good entertainment, right? And it sounds like the shooters are pretty close by now. HEY, GUYS, WE'RE OVER HERE!"

"ARE YOU CRAZY?!” Conis screamed.

"What? Are you saying it wouldn't be a good show if we got caught and you had to try fighting them off to save our lives? Action, suspense, violence, explosions… now, that's entertainment!"

"HE'S LOST IT worst than the rest of the CREW!" Soundbite finally burst out, presumably aloud. "GET ME OUT OF HERE!"

"Watch it, you little jackass, or else I'll rip your fucking tongue—!

Without warning, a meaty THWACK and a pained "GAH!” sounded out over the connection.

"Agh, my nose, what the f—! HEY! WHAT THE HELL!?"

"I'm so sorry, Cross, I'm so sorry, I'll come back for you, I swear, I swear..." Conis babbled frantically, tears obvious in her voice.

"HEY! GET BACK HERE, BITCH! THAT'S MY AUDIENCE! GIVE ME BACK MY AUDIENCE!"

"Shut up! RUN faster!"

Cross' indignant voice faded into the distance, and the next few minutes were nothing but running and ragged panting, occasionally punctuated by the sound of gunshots in the distance.

Silence reigned on the Cannibal as its crew desperately attempted to come to terms with just what the hell had just happened.

"… So." Goldenweek finally broke the silence, her stoic demeanor still somewhat in place apart from a sheen of cold sweat on her brow. "That just happened."

"…Bastard…"

"Huh?" The painter glanced at her captain in confusion.

"BASTARD!" Bartolomeo repeated, slamming his fist into the Cannibal's railing, a good chunk of which collapsed under the force of the massive barrier that had snapped up around Black Bart's fist.

The crew reeled and stared at their captain in shock.

"B-Boss…" Gin started to stammer out.
"Bad enough that he somehow turned a maverick like Cross into a raving lunatic, bad enough that he abused the bonds of one of the greatest pirate crews to sail the Blue Seas since the Roger Pirates, bad enough that he's a complete and total fucking monster on his own," Bartolomeo spat acridly before ramping himself up into a froth. "But I draw the FUCKING line at reducing the great Monkey D. Luffy to being unable to do anything AS HIS CREW FALLS APART AROUND HIM!"

"The captain's right!"/"That bastard needs to burn!"/"Come on, Straw Hat, snap out of it!"/"Get your crew back!"/"Should we set a course for Omatsuri Island?" agreed the former mafia thugs that had followed Bartolomeo into piracy.

Gin glanced around at his relatively new crewmates before allowing himself a grim smile. "Well, it looks like the crew has spoken… and I can't exactly say that I'm dissatisfied with the decision."

Mr. 5 flicked his nose with a snort. "Ditto."

"Right!" Bartolomeo pumped his fist. "We'll make that Baron wish he never tried hurting the Straw Hats! Everyone, set sail for Omatsuri Island!"

Apis and Goldenweek exchanged flat looks as the rest of the Barto Club roared in agreement before Apis surreptitiously coughed into her fist. "And… which way would that be, exactly?"

The mood promptly fractured as the crew turned their heads to stare at the underage-and-apparently-underage girls.

Goldenweek and Apis gave each other another pair of flat looks. "Morons, the lot of them," Apis declared.

"They'd sink in a week without us," Goldenweek declared before pointing at the snail. "May I suggest that we keep listening in hopes of getting a hint? I suspect it won't be the most enjoyable of endeavors, but it's certainly better than sailing blind in the Grand Line."

The crew glanced at one another before slowly and sheepishly sounding out their agreements.

"Good," Goldenweek nodded before settling down in front of the snail. "Now shut up and pay attention."

On the other end of the line, the Straw Hat's gunner was panting heavily as she ran for her and Soundbite's lives. "We… We have to keep going—AGH!" Conis choked out, followed by what sounded like her tripping. "Owww… Sorry, Soundbite."

"PLEASE TELL ME THAT YOUR ANKLE didn't break! I refuse to die BY STEREOTYPE!"

"Ah… no, n-no, I'm fine. It just shocked me is a—wait. Wait, this bit of ground, it feels like…" Then came the sound of metallic hinges moving. "A secret passage?!"

"I THOUGHT I was hearing echoes!"

"Where do you think it goes?"

The Transponder Snail winced as a gunshot rang out far too close for comfort. "WHO CARES!?"

"Right, sorry!"

"Hmph. I was starting to think that maybe, just maybe, they wouldn't have a stupidly perfect escape route show up right when they needed it most," Mr. 5 drawled.
"And you're saying that they don't deserve a Hail Mary at this moment?" Miss Valentine demanded.

"…Point."

There was the sound of Conis sliding into the hole, and the pair were almost home free, but as the hinges started to close…

**BOOM! "AAAHHHHHHH!"**

A gunshot, followed by a familiar voice screaming.

"**CROSS!**" Soundbite and Conis exclaimed. There was silence for a few moments, and then the sound of something shifting.

"Wha—CONIS, **what are you**—?"

"He may be out of his mind, but he's still our friend and crewmate. I'm going to see if I can find him. You should be safe here, Soundbite, I'll be back."

The snail was teary-eyed, but it nodded nonetheless.

"**Good. I'll**—"

Her voice was abruptly stopped by a panicked rustling of claws on stonework, a panicked cry and then…

**KER-CHOW! "AH!"**

A bullet's report, followed by a cry of pain. But it wasn't Conis' voice. The voice of the one who was shot then came across the line again as a whimper, followed by a kicking sound and a yelp of pain.

"Su," Conis breathed numbly.

"Those hunters must have used her for target practice," Apis grit out.

A few seconds of silence as that sunk in, and then…

"…Alright. That's it," Conis said, her voice lifeless.

"**C-Conis—CONIS, NO! DON'T GO ANGRY, DON'T GO ANGRY!**"

The sound of a bazooka cocking came across the connection.

"**Everything burns.**"

What followed next was a screech of rusty hinges, a heavy slamming sound, a series of muffled explosions, and amidst all of it, the sound of Soundbite sobbing uncontrollably.

"How… **How could this happen? WHAT HAPPENED TO MY FRIENDS?!**" he wailed.

Silence reigned on the deck as the crew stared at the snail in numb shock. At least, until Miss Goldenweek slowly raised her hand.

"…I realize that this probably isn't the time," the painter started quietly. "But I'd just like to say for the record that Crocodile is probably loving the hell out of this."
"I'm surprised that you're not, as some of my more crass underlings would put it, 'loving the hell out of this', considering that the Straw Hats are the reason you're here in the first place," Magellan rumbled quizzically, his Hydras swaying high above him and perfectly poised to smite or incapacitate anyone who got too unruly, depending on their degree of importance to the World Government.

"I really don't care about that," intoned the only person in all of the Eternal Hell who had not been yelling his head off or otherwise making a racket or riot at the broadcast going on. Oddly, however, he seemed irritated. "Honestly, considering how that outrageous rookie crew has only been getting more outrageous as time goes by, I'm more inclined to hope that they win than lose."

"Oh?" Magellan glanced at him in surprise. "And why would that be?"

Crocodile scoffed as he picked up the shot glass of alcohol the warden had placed just within the bars of his cell and downed it in a single gulp, barely even grimacing as the rancid taste of vinegar hit his palate. After all, it was already leagues better than the usual food he was served. "Because so far, the brat has yet to be truly beaten. So long as Straw Hat remains undefeated, then my defeat can be interpreted not as my fault, but rather due to bad luck and a bad opponent." The ex-Warlord scowled viciously. "If someone beats the brat, then that all goes away."

Magellan raised his eyebrows. "An interesting mindset... and one that I suppose that I can understand."

The warden and the prisoner ended their conversation as they received a reprieve from Soundbite's wailing, which had been continuing on for the last several minutes, in the form of another voice coming across.

"Ergh... will you... hurry up and quit your bellyaching, slimeball? You're... giving me tinnitus..."

"I'm with the puffball on this one, Soundbite. Usually you're a lot more badass than this. If you're this miserable, then we really must be screwed."

Soundbite hiccupped and gasped in shock. "S-SU!? LASSOO!? Y-You're alive!"

"Of—ergh!" Su's voice cut off in an agonized wince. "Of course we are... Lassoo managed to save me from those maniacs while Conis... Conis..." The cloud fox trailed off into light sobbing, prompting Lassoo to take up the slack.

"I grabbed Su and ran into a tunnel that was unearthed while Conis was breaking everything she could. I didn't see what happened to her, but..." The dog-gun cut himself off with a shake of his head. "Not important because we'll save her later. For now, how come you didn't already know that I'd saved Su?"

Soundbite sniffed as he replied. "M-MY POWERS HAVE BEEN ON THE fritz ever since we got here. MINOR AT FIRST, NEGLIGIBLE given my range, BUT NOW... NOW I'M AS DEAF AS A MOLE."

"Watch it."

"IS NOW EVEN REMOTELY THE TIME FOR THIS BULLSHIT!?"

Lassoo winced and shook his head with a grimace. "You of all animals should understand using
snark as a coping mechanism."

"I-I-I...Y-Yeah. A-Anyway... WHAT DO WE DO NOW? I MIGHT BE BLIND, BUT I CAN TELL THAT EVERYONE'S... everyone's gone..."

"...tseheheh..." Su chuckled weakly. "It's... a good thing you're not Cross, slimestain..."

"WHAT!?"

"No, she's right," Lassoo huffed. "Because you're not Cross, that statement of yours wasn't a guaranteed truth. Now, come on." There was a slight scuffle of movement. "Let's get moving."

"Wait! Don't forget the transceiver!"

"I think we have... more important things to worry about... than your damn show, Soundbite..."

"YEAH! LIKE MAKING SURE NO ONE COMES TO THIS HELLHOLE without as many details as possible!"

The mammals were silent for a moment before Lassoo sighed in defeat. "I thought I told you it was a good thing you're not always right..." he muttered before there was another scuffle. "Now, let's get going."

The three talking animals walked on in silence for the next minute or so, making their way through what sounded like a veritable labyrinth of tunnels and caverns. Soon enough, however, the largest of the trio paused and sniffed at the air. "Wait a second..."

"Don't tell me..." Su winced. "The baron's goons?"

"No, they smell like... well, you know. No, this person smells like toothpaste and mustache gel."

"I am so glad I'm not a Zoa, " Magellan muttered.

"I'll drink to that," Crocodile agreed as he held his shot glass up and shook it slightly.

"Yeah, yeah, I get the message..."

"Eh? Did I just hear somethi—WAH!" an older man's voice suddenly yelped in shock.

"Who are you and why should I not turn you into fucking brisket?" Lassoo snarled viciously

"Eh—? W-Wait, WAIT, LASSOO, WAIT, I RECOGNIZE HIM!" Soundbite hastily spoke up. "HE... He's the OLD MAN FROM BEFORE! TH-THE ONE WHO GOT ALL HOPEFUL AFTER WE won the GOFLUSH contest!"

"Wha—? How could you—no, never mind," the old man promptly pivoted. "The explanation is 'Devil Fruit', that's all I need to know."

"Someone who's actually smart enough to realize that, go figure," Crocodile deadpanned.

"Hmph. Well, whatever and whoever you all are, I'm glad to see you somehow managed to escape the massacre. Here, why don't you come with me? I saved your captain from the Baron, I'll take you to him."

"LUFFY'S SAFE?!" all three of the animals roared.
"I... actually didn't catch his name, but if you mean the stubborn boy in the straw hat, then yes, that's him. It was a close thing, but he somehow managed to escape the Baron's onslaught, so I snuck him into my base of operations. Follow me, it's this way."

"I wonder how he survived long enough to build a base of operations," Crocodile mused. "A feat like that is as impressive as there being a secret base in a place like thi—ERK!" The ex-Warlord's muscles suddenly locked up and were set ablaze without warning.

Magellan scowled at the prisoner as he rolled another minute blob of venom between his fingers. "Watch your tongue, inmate, lest my next shot rot it out of you."

"Grgrggghhh..." Crocodile snarled out murderously.

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Sengoku would never admit it, but seeing the state Garp was in when he barged into the office again, his students and Akainu behind him, made him wish that he was putting on his usual show of laughing at the SBS. Or, at least, that the SBS was putting on its normal laughter-provoking performance instead of the horror show that was currently being shown the world over.

"Call an assembly, Sengoku," Garp growled out without so much as a hint of preamble.

"What did you find out, Garp?" Sengoku asked, though given Garp's seriousness the question was probably just a formality.

"Luffy!"/"Captain!"/"Luffy!"

Before Garp could speak, he was interrupted by a trio of voices crying out, as well as a single pained and tired one groaning as its owner came to again.

"What the—Soundbite?! Su, Lassoo, you guys are safe too! That's great! Ah, wait, where am I? Where are we? And where's everyone else!?"

"Welcome to my secret base!" came the old man's jovial voice. "It's been so long since I had guests. Do you like goat's milk?"

A goat was heard bleating on the other end of the broadcast, to which Gruffy raised his head and bleated as well.

"Goats," Akainu muttered. "Why does it have to be goats..."

"It's a perfectly sensible choice for a pet," Sengoku retorted.

"I beg to diff—!

"That's a point I'm entirely willing to defend, Sakazuki." The last words were said with a flash of golden aura.

"... Withdrawn," Sakazuki ultimately whispered, which managed to elicit a slight smirk from Garp, even in spite of the situation.

"Hey, slimeball, you're not going to bother translating?"

"My head's ringing from KEEPING YOU TWO comprehensible. I'M NOT GONNA RALPH FOR THE SAKE of a total stranger!"
"Guys, what's going on? Who is this guy?"

"Oh, I'm sorry that I didn't introduce myself. My name is Brief, Captain of the Toothbrush Mustache Pirates."

The entire room gave the snail a flat look.

"And I thought that the Alvida Pirates had a stupid name…" Coby muttered.

Akainu snapped a glare at the Petty Officer as he amped up the temperature in the room. "And you aren't down in the Archives digging up anything we have on him and his crew… why, exactly?"

The space Coby was occupying promptly vacated itself.

"That's what I thought."

"I'm actually in the middle of recruiting right now, but your captain turned down my invitation to join me. Maybe you feel differently?"

"Why are we UNDERGROUND?" Soundbite asked, ignoring the question entirely.

"Come on, at least acknowledge the request!" Brief protested weakly before sighing in defeat. "Ergh, never mind… anyways, to answer your question, we're underground because it's the only place safe from those lunatics up above. I've dug trapdoors and tunnels all over the island so that I can escape from the Baron's vile clutches whenever I need to. I'm impressed that you found one."

"Actually, we didn't so much find it as ONE OF OUR CREWMATES TRIPPED OVER IT."

There was a brief silence, followed by an exasperated chuckle. "Well, your crew certainly isn't short on dumb luck."

"No, no, we're not," Lassoo deadpanned. "And going back a bit, from what you said about the Baron's clutches, I'm guessing you have experience with the bastard. Care to share?"

There was another pause, this one much more tense, and then Brief's sigh came from the other end, followed by footsteps.

"This is my crew," Brief said, presumably holding out a picture.

"BACK!" Coby gasped as he Shaved back into the room, panting heavily as he held up a folder for his superiors to see. "Toothbrush Mustache Pirates, captain-only bounty of ฿35 million, got it for basically wandering into a restricted nature preserve and causing a commotion when he tried to collect samples from the local wildlife. They were an exploration-only crew about a decade ago. Their membership numbered upwards of three dozen!"

"That's almost twice as big as Straw Hat's crew," Helmeppo noted.

"They all have the same snot under their noses," Luffy remarked.

"…They also had a very distinctive look," Coby finished lamely.

"IT'S A TOOTHBRUSH MUSTACHE!" Brief snapped.

"So, the Hitler-stache BELONGS TO a good guy," Soundbite muttered.

"What was that, snail?" Brief asked irritably.
"I SAID, where are they?" the snail asked without missing a beat.

"...I'm alone now," Brief sighed, as much to himself as Soundbite (and by extension, the world). "I'm currently the only member of the Toothbrush Mustache Pirates still alive."

An uncomfortable silence fell before Brief spoke again.

"I still remember it clearly. The day the Baron attacked my precious crew. The day my friends were swallowed by that gigantic monster—"

"MONSTER?!" chorused the three animals.

"Didn't I warn you that the Baron destroys crews?"

"He's going to kill them?!" Luffy roared.

"The first step is already done; the Baron and his crew are well-practiced in sowing discord and hate among even the closest friends. I can only imagine that he works his mysterious powers into it."

"Of course they're under a spell," Garp growled as he kneaded his forehead. "Why wouldn't my idiot grandson's crew be under a spell?" He promptly snapped a finger and a glare at his now-frozen apprentices. "Not a word outside this office or I'll put you on shit duty until you earn your coats, and even then."

Coby and Helmeppo promptly snapped into shaky salutes. "Y-Y-YES, VICE ADMIRAL, SIR!"

Sengoku's lip twitched slightly at the display.

"The Baron told me something. He said, 'When I see a crew of friends like yours, anger fills my chest. I want to separate you. I want you to experience the same kind of pain I have.'"

"The same pain?" Luffy repeated.

"I don't know what his true intentions are, but—"

"B-B-BRIEF? Wh-what KIND OF monster ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?"

"...All this time, and finally someone actually asks? Well, if you choose to fight, you should know this... but it's quite the disturbing situation."

"TELL US!"

The Fleet Admiral stared at the snail for a second longer before schooling his expression into a thoroughly disapproving scowl. "Aside from your familial ties and the... rather disturbing going-ons being broadcast, Garp, what exactly makes you think that this is worth calling an assemblage over?"

Garp scowled back as he slammed the archive records he had in his hand onto the poor, abused desk. "Baron Omatsuri. Captain of the Red Arrow Pirates, a crew that was last heard from twenty-four years ago. They were a New-World grade crew who rubbed shoulders with the likes of Whitebeard and Roger back in the day, though I doubt that mustached bastard actually remembers him."

Sengoku eyed the pile curiously before glancing at Garp. "It seems like you had a hard time recalling him as well."

Garp snatched up a paper and shoved it in his superior's face. "That's because they were thought to be dead after a Category 10 hypercane threw them and their ship over the Red Line! Nobody should
have been able to survive something like that!"

"Well, clearly they did!" Sengoku scoffed.

Garp's eyes narrowed menacingly. "See, that's the thing. I ran into them once back in the day, got a look at their crew. And considering how long it's been since that day…" Garp's scowl deepened. "I actually don't think that anyone survived but Omatsuri."

The strange statement brought Sengoku up short. "What are you—?"

"The Lily Carnation is a man-eating plant; the Baron calls it 'the flower of death and rebirth'."

All sound in the office absolutely died at Brief's words.

Brief continued in a lifeless tone. "It resembles a stem more than anything else, an enormous construct bigger than a warship at the top of the island, and it's there that the Baron gathers the pirates he and his crew hunt down. It… It uses tendrils… to absorb them into the stem, and… and…"

The pirate… the ex-pirate choked off into sobs.

There was a brief moment of silence before Su suddenly choked in horror. "Oh… Oh, God, no…"

She glanced down, presumably at Lassoo. "Y-You don't think that—?"

"I have seen messed up shit, I have smelled messed up shit and I have done messed up shit…" Lassoo breathed before shaking his head. "Never anything like this. Not on this scale."

"Eh?" Luffy looked around at his non-human crewmates in confusion. "What are you guys talking about?"

"N-N-Now I get it," Soundbite breathed softly, apparently not having heard Luffy. "Something about ALL OF THOSE SPROUT HEADS felt OFF. LIKE they were THERE but not there."

"What?" asked Brief and Luffy.

"The pain he felt… THE FLOWER OF DEATH AND REBIRTH… AND MUCHIGORO'S SHRIVELING!" The snail's expression slowly twisted in horror. "Fake… it's all FAKE! T-THIS ISLAND, ITS INHABITANTS, THEY'RE ILLUSIONS THE BARON IS USING TO STAVE OFF REALITY! PLANTS made to look like PEOPLE! AND OTHER PIRATES ARE THE FUEL THAT KEEPS IT GOING!"

The silence in Sengoku's office following that particular revelation was absolutely stunning.

"Permission to faint on the spot, sir?" Coby whispered with a slight gurgle to his voice.

"Ditto…" Helmeppo nodded slightly in agreement.

"Granted," Akainu grunted.

The East Bluers neither hesitated nor waited to comply.

Garp slowly tore his gaze away from the snail to stare at his superior officer. "Well?" he asked frigidly.

Sengoku met his gaze for a minute before looking up at Akainu. "Send word to Kizaru and Aokiji that they are to meet with us in Conference Room B3." He stood up and started marching towards the door to his office.
"We're going to need as many Golden Transponder Snails as we can get our hands on."

-0-

"...That's an insane theory, but it would explain a lot," Brief finally admitted. "In my early days, I tried sniping down his crew, but even headshots didn't faze them! But... they seemed confused more than anything. It's possible that they don't even know about it, even if the Baron does. And now that I think about it, I've been on this island for about ten years now, and the Baron's comrades don't seem to have aged even a day."

"Wh-What fresh hell did this monster crawl out of?!

Absalom turned a bemused look on his horrified colleague. "What are you getting so worked up about? You make zombies for a living—"

"THAT'S PRECISELY THE POINT, ABSALOM!" Hogback shrieked, sounding a few millimeters away from a heart attack. "I am an expert at the practice of necromancy! I am intimately familiar with the complexities involved in returning an individual from the great beyond! Body chemistry, stability of tissue and psyche! It takes me days to complete even a single marionette, and even after that they require constant upkeep in order to keep their rotting flesh viable!"

Thriller Bark's mad doctor slowly turned his horrified gaze back to the snail in the room. "To be able to create and somehow control what I count as at minimum over a hundred individuals that so perfectly mimic life that none have any suspicions whatsoever, with the sole drawback being nutrition!?" He shook his head slowly. "There are no possible words that could express just how utterly terrifying that monster is on a scientific level."

"AND NOW I GET WHY I feel so off, too! If that thing is huge and controlling THE WHOLE ISLAND, ITS roots must be sucking up SEAWATER! THE AIR IT'S PUMPING OUT IS FULL of salt!" Soundbite grimaced.

"And that explains the smell, too..." Su gulped.

"The whole reason we left the resort and went out to explore more of the island was because the staff reeked of plants. And not just 'farmer or botanist' reek either, that we can handle, that's normal. I mean, they innately smelled like rotting plants. Just... disturbing," Lassoo whined.

"Recreated without even knowing that they died... not even aware that they're not even alive," Moria growled, steadily crushing the armrests of his chair beneath his grip. Such horrors, such... monstrosity... The Master of Thriller Bark had committed innumerable acts of evil over his tenure as Warlord, but not even he could fathom the depths to which the man calling himself 'Omatsuri' had fallen, or the levels of madness and despair it would have taken to push him so far.

Suddenly, all attention in the room was diverted by the sound of the door slowly creaking open, admitting the corporeal body of the fourth of the Mysterious Four.

"Perona?" Absalom remarked in surprise. "Huh, I thought it was too quiet. What are you—?"

Whatever snide remark the beast-man had up his sleeve died when he noticed the dead look in his comrade's eyes and the desperate way she was squeezing the undead life out of an oddly compliant Bearsy. "Perona? What's wrong?"

"He invited us..." the goth-lolita breathed numbly. "That kappa kid... he invited everyone for a feast..."
Before any of the Four could ask what she meant, Brief hummed thoughtfully over the connection. "If the Baron's purpose is to keep them all alive, that would explain everything. Everyone he keeps inviting to the island is just more food for his crew's reincarnation."

"CROSS AND THE OTHERS ARE GONNA BE EATEN?!” Soundbite bellowed.

"That's not going to happen!" Luffy snapped. "Thanks for your help, Brief, but I've got a bastard's ass to kick."

"Straw Hat, you can't face him alone!" Brief shouted, panic coloring his voice.

"Which is why he won't be alone!" Lassoo barked.

"YEAH, we're with him all the way!" Soundbite snarled in agreement.

"Heh, see? I'm not alone, I've got my—!" Luffy's voice suddenly cut off, and his transmitted facial expression went slack.

"Eh?" Su blinked in confusion. "Luffy? You alright, rubber—"

"I'm going," Luffy cut in with grim finality. "You guys wait here."

"Wha—Straw Hat, what did I just—?

There was the sound of something heavy being moved.

"Behind the bookcase. WHAT A CLICHÉ, " Soundbite muttered.

"It was getting drafty in here, sue me! And Straw Hat waaiaaaaand he's gone."

"Yeah, he does that," Lassoo sighed.

"And so are we, for that matter!

"MUSH, dog-breath, mush!"

"Wha—!? GET BACK HERE!

Absalom took advantage of the lull in the broadcast to give Perona a confused look. "Yes, that bit was disturbing, yes, but what does that have to do with—?"

"It wasn't the kappa-kid who said it…” Perona whispered, slowly tightening her grip on the very still Bearsy. "I-I-It was that thing… i-it's intelligent… a-and it's words…"

The male members of the Four started to look at one another…

"It said…"

When they were halted by Bearsy's gravelly voice, which Perona said nothing about.

"That flower invited the world to come to its world and take part in a great feast…” the zombie bear whispered.

The men took a few moments to process that statement, and then they reacted appropriately: Hogback started babbling incoherently and sweating like a pig, Absalom retreated to a corner of the room before he began emptying his guts out, and Moria's bone-white complexion flushed in horrified
"Just what kind of a monster are we dealing with…?" the Warlord breathed.

[SQUAD SEVEN, REPORT!]

[NO LUCK, SIR! WE INTERROGATED A BAND OF FISHMEN WE FOUND, BUT THEY'VE NEVER EVEN HEARD OF OMATSURI ISLAND, THEY'VE BEEN SUBMERGED SINCE THE BROADCAST STARTED!]

[DAMN IT!] Captain-nee-Chief Dugong snarled as he slammed his balled flippers onto the railing of his ship, causing the semi-rotten wood to crack as a result. [THEN WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING WAITING UP HERE, HUH?! OUR MEN AND ALLIES ARE IN DANGER, DAMMIT, GET BACK DOWN THERE AND DON'T COME UP UNTIL YOU HAVE SOMETHING CORAL, GOT IT!?!]

[SIR, YES, SIR!] the dugongs in the water barked before diving back under.

Captain Dugong snorted as he watched bubbles trail up from where the squad had dived before turning around and starting to pace back and forth across the deck. [Come on, come on…]

[Easy, Captain, easy…] a… relatively calm voice prompted.

The Captain huffed in annoyance and glanced to the side. [First Mate Dugong.]

The new second-in-command of the Dugong tribe ignored his captain's frigid tone, instead choosing to continue giving his leader a firm and steady look. [I know you're worried about Boss and his boys, Captain, we all are, but you need to remember why you let them go after they volunteered in the first place.] he chided. [Those five are the strongest in the whole tribe, ranking right below you and me, and I know that I sure never looked forward to sparring with Boss on account of how he was always just a few blows away from beating my ass into the ground. Soundbite might've lost track of them earlier, but he lost track of 'em after they went in the water. You know, where we're strongest?!] He allowed himself a smile he knew looked more confident than he actually felt. [There's no reason to worry. They're completely fine. I… I as close to guarantee it as I can.]

Captain was silent for the longest time as he contemplated the reassurance. Eventually, he started to turn his head towards his second—

[SOMETHING'S HAPPENING!]

[CONNECT THAT THING TO A SPEAKER, NOW!] Captain Dugong roared, snapping his flipper at the Dugong standing watch over the Transponder Snail they'd set up on a dried part of the deck.

After a brief scramble, the unmistakable sound of a skull knocking against metal sounded out for all the listening Dugongs to hear. "Damn! Bastard! Makes! These! Things! Solid! Where's! The! Damn! LATCH!?"

"No clue, JUST KEEP HAMMERING!"

"There you are, you persistent—!" Brief's voice suddenly sounded out before cutting out in an exasperated snort. "Ergh, enough! If you three are so eager on dying, so be it! Just don't haunt me once you reach the other side." There was a click of a mechanism releasing, followed by the smash
of a trap door swinging open. "STRAW HAT!" Brief yelled as he opened the trapdoor.

"LUFFY!" a trio of voices concurred.

"WAGH! WHO ARE YOU?" came another older man's voice.

"WHAT THE—WHO ARE YOU?"

"THE SNAIL IS TALKING?!" said the older man, along with a young woman and a boy.

"There are other real people HERE?"

"Oh, it's these guys again," Lassoo noted in mild surprise. "The Teacup Pirates, right?"

"Tea room Pirates, Howlitzer," Su corrected. "Rose, Rick, Daisy, and Papa. We ran into them earlier with Chopper; slimeball stopped translating for us about halfway through, but we heard enough while we were there. They're hardly pirates at all, in my opinio—ACK!" Su's words were suddenly cut off in a yelp of terror.

"What the hell is that!?" Lassoo snarled in equal parts rebellious defiance and terror.

"…Brief was right… THE THING'S A GIANT FLOWER STALK," Soundbite mumbled in an utterly terrified voice.

"But… where's its head?" Su whimpered.

"Old man."

But those two calm, quiet words froze all who were listening. Luffy's voice continued in the same apparently calm tone.

"I have two things to tell you. First, the Dugongs, Su, Lassoo, Soundbite, and Chopper aren't my pets, they're my friends. And second…" The look in the Transponder Snail's eye suddenly became downright murderous. "I'll never let you hurt my friends."

There was a tense pause in which it became clear who Luffy was talking to. And then the recipient's voice came across.

"…You'll never let me hurt them?" the Baron sneered after a tense pause. "If you count your pets as your friends, you have nineteen in your crew, correct?"

Luffy's eyes narrowed menacingly. "What about it?"

Soundbite suddenly tensed in horror. "Oh, no…"

"In the time it took you to arrive…" A vile, sickening grin extended across the Baron's face. "That number has been reduced to fourteen."

The words hit Captain Dugong like a physical blow, causing him to stagger back in dull shock.

[C-Captain!?] one of his subordinates yelped.

[Five…] Captain whispered in a horrified tone of voice. [Fourteen is five less than nineteen…] First Mate Dugong was shaking his head in desperate denial. [I-It's not possible, it's not possible!]
Going by Luffy's suddenly pole-axed expression, the dugong's sentiment was a shared one. "Wha… What did you say?" he breathed in a tone of voice that straddled the borderline of paralyzing horror and apoplectic rage.

"That band of amphibious animals you had with you when you first arrived," the Baron explained in a tone that could have been conversational, if not for the sheer amount of pleasure he was taking from Luffy's reactions. "Lily ensnared them in her roots when they decided to explore the bay. Their shells made it difficult for her to digest them at first…” The madman's grin somehow widened even further, all teeth and no mirth. "But she managed it shortly before you arrived. And now… the rest of your crew will soon join them."

First Mate Dugong barely managed to catch himself from toppling forwards, staring down at the deck in numb shock. [H-He… that bastard actually… th-they're—!]

[RAAAAAAAGH!]
SMASH! KEE-RASH!"

All attention on the galleon snapped over to the now-collapsed mizen-mast, where Captain Dugong's fist was embedded in the shattered remains of the wooden pillar.

[SOMEONE FIND ME THAT GODS-BE-DAMNED ISLAND RIGHT THE HELL NOW!] he howled, both at his crew and the heavens themselves. [FIND ME IT SO THAT I CAN RIP THAT FUCKING BASTARD'S SKULL OUT THE BACK OF HIS HEAD AND CRUSH IT WITH MY OWN BARE FLIPPERS!]

[SIR, YES, SIR!] the rest of the crew roared back with nigh-religious fervor.

-0-

"You… You BASTARD!" Luffy roared at the top of his lungs, his voice sounding more like an animal's than a human's.

"Yeah, get him, Straw Hat!" Kureha cheered as she pumped her fist with far more enthusiasm than anyone her age had the right to possess.

"You said you won't let me harm them, didn't you?" the Baron chuckled, as though he were observing the greatest show in the world. "You'll never let me hurt them…" He chuckled again, and then burst out laughing. He kept on laughing even as Luffy reacted.

"You… YOU'RE DEAD!" Luffy roared. "GUM-GUM—!"

A whistling sound interrupted his attack, and the sound of rubber striking something hard and a grunt of pain rang out.

"One arrow," the Baron gloated.

"LUFFY! That bastard nailed his hand TO A ROCK WITH AN ARROW!"

"Damn, that's not good…” Dalton winced as he rubbed the spots on his shoulders where his ex-comrade had perforated him a few months prior.

"Tsk. This complicates matters…” Kureha growled to herself as she stroked her chin. "Assuming that he's in a bad enough position, he might not have the leverage needed to break the rock, and even then, if it's really a through-and-through, extraction's gonna be a real pain in the—!"
"What happened to that determined spirit, hm?" Omatsuri sneered viciously. "Ah, and by the way? While you struggle in vain, another one of your friends is disappearing. Another of your pets, the one you called a doctor, I believe?"

"S-STOP IT! CHOPPER!"

Kureha promptly froze mid-sentence, her mind just... just *stalling* as it tried to parse the words it had just heard. The witch doctor slowly blinked as she stared at the snail, her brain attempting to reboot.

"...ch?"

-0- 

"Now then, I wonder... Who will be next?"

"YOU'LL BE NEXT, YOU WANNA-BE NECROMANCER! Suck it: GASTRO-PHO—YIPE! GRRGH!"

"Whoa!" Kamakiri reeled back in shock when the Transponder Snail suddenly locked its jaws so that they were only slightly open. "What the heck!?"

"What do you think you're doing!?" Su's incredulous voice managed through the snail's teeth. "Spit that arrow out and get that bastard puking!"

"It appears that Soundbite only narrowly missed becoming a kebab..." Laki shuddered fearfully, her hand continuing to stroke Aisa's hair. Ever since the broadcast had emerged from its underground location, the young oracle had been on her knees, clutching her head in agony as she moaned about 'screaming voices'.

She was also taking the time to watch over Pagaya's own insensate form. The Straw Hat gunner's father had come over several hours ago in order to join the Shandians in listening to his daughter's adventure on the SBS... but soon after matters had started devolving, Wiper had laid him out on the ground with a well-placed fist to his skull. The Berserker had stated that he'd done it so that he would be spared the old man's whining... but all present agreed that Pagaya's current state was favorable to listening to the ongoing hell the world was being treated to.

"But why hasn't he spit it out yet like the fox suggested?" Wiper said, narrowing his eyes.

"I can't!" Soundbite mumbled out through his clenched teeth. "Thish thing... IT'S STILL PUSHING! I 'ET GO, I DIE!"

"I took great pride in my archery skills back in the day, and Lily has only aided me since," the Baron smugly informed them. "Now, where were we... ah, yes. It would seem Lily has chosen the angel next."

"CONIS!" Luffy yelled. "GUM-GUM—!"

Another whistling sound. Another thudding of rubber against stone.

"Two arrows."

"NOOOO!" Su screamed desperately.

Laki's nails broke the skin on her palms as Aisa redoubled the pressure she was putting on her ears, shaking her head in desperate denial. Beside her, Kamakiri was shaking in barely suppressed rage,
"You defeated a god, Straw Hat," Wiper growled, glaring daggers at the snail. "Don't lose to a mere
demon."

"YOU MONSTER!" Su roared. "I'LL RIP YOU TO SHREDS!"

There was a scrabbling of claws on stone and soil and then a whistling sound that heralded yet
another arrow. A whistling that actually continued for a bit. "HA! NOT SO GOOD AT HITTING
MOVING TARGETS, ARE Y—?" THUNK! "AAAARGHHH!"

Su's shriek of agony wailed out of the snail, and was swiftly followed by the crack of an arrow
entering into stone.

"As I said, I take great pride in my archery," the Baron drawled before glancing back to Luffy.

The dinner rush had long since stopped eating, the patrons paying rapt attention to the snail and its
horrific broadcast.

"Damn damn damn!" Carne swore, his teeth wearing his nails down to nubs. "The suspense is
fucking killing me! Who's gonna bite it next!?!"

"Tsk, calm down, pintsize!" Patty waved a hand with a careless grin. "Come on, I know it looks
bleak now, but this ain't the end! All they have to do is keep fighting and they'll pull through, so
there's absolutely no reason to—!"

"It would appear that your cook is the next one destined to disappear."

"SANJI!"

"NO!" Patty slammed his palms on either side of the Transponder Snail, glaring at it with all the heat
he could muster. "DAMN IT, SANJI, FIGHT! DON'T GIVE UP, DON'T GIVE IN! SHOW THE
WORLD THE PRIDE OF THE BARATIE!"

Zeff, meanwhile, stole away into the kitchen, striving with all his might not to sink to his knees or let
his tears fall into his cooking.

"Ah, it appears that the dark-haired woman is the next to go. Perhaps she'll be happy being a part of
Lily, if she likes flowers so much."

"ROBIN!" Luffy cried desperately.

"LET HER GO!" Lassoo howled, snarling as he opened his jaws wide. "CANI—!"

The Marines listening winced as a thunk followed by an agonized-yet-muffled howl sounded over
the line.

"Heel," the Baron sneered.

"H-HE NAILED HIM RIGH' THROUGH the jaws!" Soundbite winced.

Several of the Marines listening subconsciously raised their hands to their own jaws, while in the
back of the room Aokiji paused as he realized that Soundbite had failed to blur a name. He considered making a note of it, but ultimately, all he did was bow his head in shame.

"And there goes the loud-mouth," the Baron purred, clearly relishing the screams of agony that resulted from all of those present.

"CROOOOOSS!" Soundbite howled in misery, drowning out Luffy's own cry. Pinky and the Brain shook with ill-repressed terror as they relayed the broadcast. The broadcast itself was scary enough, sure, but it wasn't the primary source of their fear. After all, compared to the vessel they were on…

If anyone doubted that ships could love their crews, the sight of the Going Merry trembling with agony, screams breathing out of every timber, would silence those doubts forever. Her sails and lines flapped in an unseen breeze, her hull creaked and groaned—and in the dining room where the snails were set up, the translucent form of a young girl in a rain poncho clenched her fists, tears streaming from her eyes.

"No!" Merry yelled, her voice trembling from the raw emotion. "It can't end like this! It can't! You—You promised that we’d sail the seas together!" Against her own volition, her mind flashed back to a stone altar, a man with a lance of fire riding a bird… and just the wrong lurch, and the sickening crack that followed. Merry shuddered as a bolt of agony tore through her back as she clutched the sides of her head in despair. "Fucking shit! I'm your ship! I'm supposed to protect you all! And I can't… I can't…"

She took a deep breath, threw her head back and roared. "LUFFY! KICK ITS ASS! SAVE THEM FOR ME!"

"If you don't hurry, there won't be anyone left."

"STOP IT! GUM-GUM—!"

Once again, an arrow pinned his limb to a rock. And this time, there was the sound of knees hitting the ground.

"Since you can't see, I'll tell you: the man with the phallic nose has just died."

"USOPP!"

Merry sorely wished he'd had the foresight to spike his tea with sleeping pills as soon as he received the accurate inkling that this broadcast was going to be a complete nightmare, back when that kappa… or rather, the demon behind the kappa had put on its terrifying display.

As it was, his mistress and the three heirs to Usopp's task of rousing the village were staring at the snail in abject horror, tears and mucus streaming down their faces. Not that he was any better. All he could do at that moment was hope beyond all hope that Luffy would be able to pull off another miracle.

Because if he couldn't, he wasn't sure his mistress would recover this time.
"What will you do? Will you fight me with just your left leg?"

"GUM-GUM—!"

A fourth arrow. All of his limbs were pinned now.

"The other two women and the bird have just disappeared."

"VIVI! CARUE! NAMI!" Luffy cried.

In two different parts of the world, two fathers, one surrogate but both genuine, suffered heart attacks in response to the broadcast.

-o-

"You can no longer move in that state," the Baron taunted over the sounds of Luffy struggling on the ground. "The very last of your friends is starting to fade away."

"ZORO!" Luffy screamed. A sound of tearing fabric came across the connection amidst Luffy's cries. Then—

"LUFFY! IF THOSE ARROWS HIT HIS NECK, HE'S—"

From what little the listeners could tell, the Baron, for the first time since the broadcast started, seemed taken aback. But judging from the whistling sounds that followed, it didn't last long before he pulled himself together and started to fire more arrows at Luffy. A few distinct sounds made it clear that they scraped past their mark, but this time, the Baron was definitely taken aback as Luffy continued yelling and stretching forwards.

"ZOOOROOOOOOOOO!"

The expression that the snail was wearing was horrible beyond words: gaping, but out of pure horror and despair rather than righteous anger. It lasted for a few seconds, tears flying out of his eyes, before the sound of Luffy's elongated neck retracting and slamming into the stone imprisoning him came rang out.

The sound of stone breaking then came from two different directions. The snail was expected. But on the recipients' end of the broadcast, all eyes snapped to a certain grave marker, which had suddenly gained a ragged crack.

-o-

"Turn up the volume."

Squardo and Whitey exchanged nervous glances from the safety of a hill several hundred meters away. As bad as the broadcast was, the potent combination of Haki and fire rolling off of Ace was worse. Not only were they sweating like a couple of stuck pigs, they had to constantly fight the urge to either flee or faint, with both options all but guaranteeing their deaths by way of barbeque. How their Transponder Snail was still conscious was a mystery of the universe, though the flecks of foam coming from the corners of its mouth hinted that it actually wasn't.

"I-It's as high as it goes, Ace!" Squardo called out.

"Turn. Up. The volume," Ace snarled, the temperature ratcheting up another few hundred degrees, the soil around his feet beginning to melt. "Because that broadcast is the only thing keeping me from
"stealing one of your ships and going to BURN THAT FUCKING ISLAND TO ASH."

"Ace, please, be reasonable!" Whitey pleaded.

"Yeah!" Squardo nodded furiously in agreement. "I know that the outlook is bleak, but—!"

"Straw Hat."

The subordinate captains paled in terror as the Baron started speaking again, only this time dripping with liquid hate.

"Your swordsman is dead. Your pets will soon join him. You have no friends left. You are utterly alone on the vast Grand Line."

"...Alone?"

Whitey and Squardo both flinched, their hearts breaking at the sheer despair in Luffy's voice. It was all the opening needed.

"THAT'S IT! HE DIES NOW!"

Their bowels, meanwhile, nearly voided themselves due to the literally apoplectic fury in Ace's face.

The fireman prepared to shoot into the air, only for the two other captains to fall on him with all the speed of New World veterans, Whitey gritting her teeth at the sound of sizzling flesh in spite of her pumping as much Haki into her clothes as she could. Acting fast, she snapped a cuff of sea prism stone on the commander's arm.

"LET ME GO!" Ace roared as he flailed beneath his friends, almost managing to buck them off through sheer muscle power alone. "THAT THING WANTS A FEAST?! I'LL GIVE IT A BARBECUE FIT FOR THE OARS JR. PIRATES!"

"Damn it, Ace, stop!" Squardo pleaded. "You won't make it in time! And what if that thing snares you, too?"

"I OFFICIALLY DO NOT CARE!"

Squardo shivered as he felt himself come that close to passing out before steeling his will and redoubling his grip on the Commander. "For the love of god, Ace, stop and think for a second! What happened to your faith in your brother?!

To his credit, the swordsman only flinched when Ace turned his gaze on him. Despite the suppression of his fire, he swore that Ace almost incinerated him anyway. "What."

"Luffy's still there, still fighting!" Whitey hastily cut in as she caught on to Squardo's line of thinking. "If he falls, then you can go burn that thing to ashes! We'll help, hell, Pops will probably help! But until then, have faith, the same faith that let you two both go out to sea in the first place to find your own paths! Because if you save Luffy right now..." Whitey's voice fell into a desperate whisper. "Then he might not ever forgive you."

There was an audible sound of grinding teeth, and then Ace sat back down onto the ground, his face grim. "Fine," he ground out. "Now, take off this stupid bracelet!"

"Yeah, thanks but no thanks. We'd rather not get melted," Squardo drawled, holding up a sweating, red-faced and foam-coughing Transponder Snail.
Ace at least had the good grace to blush at that.

-O-

"Ow, ow ow, ow—ARGH! DAMN IT, SISTER, I'M HURTING JUST AS MUCH AS YOU ARE, BUT WE CAN'T DO ANYTHING!"

"Will you please be quiet, Sonia?" Marigold groused irritably. "In case you've forgotten, we're much louder in our hybrid forms!"

"QUIET!?!" Sandersonia snapped a disbelieving stare at her sister before gesturing at her seething and squirming coils. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm trying to restrain one of the Warlords of the fucking Sea here! A Warlord, I might add, who kicks like a Sea King and is hitting a burn I got on our last outing!" She directed the last bit at her elder sister. "I'm going to be sporting bruises for weeks on end once this is done!"

"And you think that this is easy!?" Marigold scoffed as she gestured at the half-conscious Transponder Snail she was holding in her palm. "You only need to worry about keeping yourself conscious, whereas if I slip up even once, our Transponder Snail will go under and then we'll really be in trouble!"

"Yeah, well—!" Sandersonia started to snap back before pausing as a new sound started coming across the connection.

It had been silent following the Baron's declaration to Luffy, aside from Soundbite, Su, and Lassoo all whimpering quietly. But the new sound… it sounded joyful, celebratory… like a party. Like the one that had drawn the Straw Hats to the island in the first place.

"They're alive again… and they have no idea that anything happened…" Marigold whispered in horror.

At that moment, the only thing worse than their older sister blowing her top happened: her struggles and Haki both cut out instantly. The two serpent-sisters exchanged confused looks before Sandersonia slowly uncoiled her tail enough to reveal their sister's face.

And the look in her eyes promptly caused Sandersonia to snap back to her human form and grab Hancock's shoulders before she could collapse lifelessly to the ground. "She's gone back, she's gone back, why has she gone back!?" the largest of the siblings babbled desperately.

"I-I don't…" Marigold started to shake her head in denial, but then froze and started to slowly look down at the snail, sickening comprehension dawning in her mind. "Oh… oh no… th-the sound of cheering… at someone else's pain—!"

Sandersonia's eyes widened in comprehension. They then started widening even further as mortal terror steadily crept into them. "I-I think… I think I'm hearing it too…" she mumbled in horror, sinking to her knees.

Marigold's affinity for Armament Haki ensured that she had more composure in regards to the hellish memories of their past. But that did little to help calm her two sisters, or to change the fact that those memories were described as hellish for a damn good reason. So, before she herself could break down, Marigold fell back on the fail-safe they had long since devised for just such a situation, snapping her fingers to her lips and blowing out a harsh whistle.

In a blur of red and white, Salome dove down from where he'd been perched in the rafters and struck swiftly and decisively, sinking his fangs first into Marigold's shoulders, then Sandersonia's. Mari grit
her teeth while Sonia cried out in pain. She snapped upright, snarling briefly before exhaling sharply and nodding her thanks to the giant serpent, then moved towards his mistress. It wasn't so simple for her; a harsh reminder of reality was enough for the snake Zoans, but considering the abuse that the Love-Love Fruit had invited… if anything, all that that treatment would do was aggravate the situation, rather than alleviate.

And so it was that the three serpents embraced Hancock, doing their best to reassure her that she wasn't alone...

"M-My friends… give them—!"

Even as miles away, one Straw Hat Luffy continued suffering through his own nightmare.

-A-

A sound that the viewers easily identified as stomping on someone's head came across the connection. All of the executives winced. Hardened pirates and criminals they might have all been, and atrocities aplenty they might have committed, but even for them, this level of cold, hard, concentrated brutality was hard to listen to. Mostly because they weren't the ones inflicting it, for once.

"Fuffuffuffu… I like this Baron Omatsuri's style," Doflamingo chuckled. "I don't know what Straw Hat is seeing, but it has to be horrific. And losing all his crewmates like that in front of him, one by one, and powerless to stop it…" His grin widened malevolently. "Always a classic."

"Does it hurt to be without friends?"

"HE'S NOT WITHOUT FRIENDS YET!" Su snarled, the sound of grunting and muffled howling indicating that Lassoo was backing her up.

"Cut the LIES!" Soundbite roared, as much as he could with his teeth occupied.

Things were silent for a few seconds until the snap of fingers sounded out. Then… Then the screaming started anew.

"YEARGH!" Su shrieked in terror. "WHAT THE HELL ARE THESE—!? GET-GET OFF, LET GO OF ME!"

"RAT-FUCKING-BASTARD!" Soundbite raged with unholy fury.

Lassoo's muffled whimpers and yelps became increasingly frantic alongside the protests.

"It seems that you pets represent your captain's hopes as much as his crewmates do. In that case, what I must do is crush each and every one of them. Now, watch and suffer as you lose these mediocre excuses for crewmates."

"SOUNDBITE! LASSOO! SU! NO, LET THEM GO! LET THEM GO!"

"I won't," the Baron coldly informed him. "I will take them like I have taken the rest of your crew, and there is nothing you can do to stop me."

"YOU FUCKING—MMPH!?" Soundbite's vitriol-fueled words were suddenly cut off without warning, thus silencing Su and what little coherence Lassoo had in the process.

"This is the reality of your situation, child: you have lost. Totally and utterly."
"THAT'S—!" Luffy started to curse before breaking off into harried panting. "That's… That's not true…"

"You have lost all of your friends," Baron Omatsuri drawled in a tone of voice that belied years of experience. "No matter how much you struggle or deny it, that reality will never change. What are you going to do now? If you decide to go on, a life of suffering, despair, and loneliness is all that awaits you. Or… will you decide to follow your friends?"

"Oh, yeah, that reminds me…" Doflamingo mused. "The fact that I can't see this at all… Fuffuffuffu, the imagination runs wild, doesn't it? It must be torture for the rest of the audience." Doflamingo's grin somehow became even more evil as he digested that idea. "Well, a good idea is worth stealing, after all. I would be remiss as the world's prince of darkness if I didn't take the opportunity to add to my… repertoire, wouldn't I? Fuffuffuffuffu."

Doflamingo either didn't notice or didn't care that, judging from the fact that he was the only one in the throne room, his executives lacked his ability to appreciate the sheer magnificence of the torture. And even if he had, his only reaction would have been to pity them for being so close-minded.

-o-

The following sound indicated that Luffy's head fell to the earth. He struggled briefly to get back up, but the sound of rubber being roughly squeezed indicated that the Baron had picked him up.

"Let me paint you a picture. Almost every captain has chosen death over living in solitude. That is a wise decision. One man cannot be a pirate alone. Now, I will ask you again: what will you choose? Life or death?"

The only response… was silence. Silence that was louder than words could ever hope to be. Finally, Luffy let out a soft grunt of pain before he fell to the ground. Footfalls indicated that the Baron was stepping back.

"As I thought, being alone is too painful for you to endure."

"BWOOOOOH! BWOOOOOH! BWOOOOOOOh!"

Crocus flinched and glanced out the door of his lighthouse as ear-splitting howls of agony started crashing down over the Twin Capes. In any other situation, he'd have told Laboon to quiet down so that he could keep listening properly, but now… now he wasn't so sure that he wanted to hear anything further.

"Damn it, Omatsuri…" he breathed grimly. "Is this really what you think your friends would have wanted!?!"

As if in answer, the sound of a bowstring being drawn taut filled the air like a death knell.

"Then die."

Crocus grit his teeth, almost angry enough to try tracking down that island where the snail was… broadcasting… wait a minute, Soundbite had been snared by that monster, why was the broadcast still going?

That question was answered by the sound of the earth suddenly collapsing and the Baron gasping in shock.

"What on earth—!?"
"BARON!"

Crocus sighed in relief when Laboon's cries were silenced, courtesy of Brief's voice hollering defiance.

"YOU!" the Baron snarled in frustration.

"I won't let you hurt this man!" Brief roared. "And thanks to this device you foolishly missed!" There was a clanking sound that signaled that Brief was holding up something metallic. "You'll never harm another person in the world again!"

The Transponder Snail flashed an expression of fury for a moment before falling back into cold indifference. "I might not know how that device functions, or how it is capable of bypassing my beloved Lily's interference…" A flash of evil passed over the vile man's face, and the sickening twang of a bowstring sounded out again. "But I do know that it won't function without a snail to broadcast."

Crocus shot upright in shock. "Soundbite!"

"DON'T YOU DARE, YOU—!" Brief started to shout—

KABOOM!

"WAGH!"

When he was suddenly cut off by an air-shattering explosion slamming through the connection.

"PWAH!" Soundbite gasped in relief. "WHAT THE heck—!? AGH! LASSOO! SU! NOOOO!"

"Tsk, so the mutt managed to wrench its jaws open and blast you free, hm?" The Baron clicked his tongue sourly. "Well, no matter. He and the fox are being consumed as we speak, and soon so will —!"

"THIRD PANEL FROM the left, the gray octagon!"

"What—?"

BWAAAAAAAAAAH!

"GYARGH!"

"SONNUVA BITCH NOT AGAIN!" Crocus roared as he clamped his hands over his ears, Laboon keening in agreement.

"HEEHEEHEEEHOOHOOHOOOHOOO, I think I could come to LOVE THAT THING," Soundbite said in a tone that was equal parts fervent and dizzy.

"WE KNOW!" Crocus and Laboon bellowed back with equal fervor. At the same time, though, Crocus was grateful for that Laboon-worthy noisemaker, considering that, if the scramble of feet through a tunnel was anything to go by, it had apparently provided the necessary distraction for Brief to abscond with the transceiver and Soundbite.

"Damn cocky snail…" Crocus grumbled as he tentatively poked at his eardrums for a second. He then allowed himself a kindly smile. "Still. As much as I hate him, I am glad to hear that he's not hurt."
"BWOOOOOH!" Laboon bayed anew, only this time he was communicating an entirely different emotion.

-0-

The sound of Brief and Soundbite rushing through the tunnels continued for a few moments before they slid into another room. "How is he?" Brief asked.

"He's hurt pretty bad—HEY!" began an older voice, the captain of the Tearoom Pirates, up until the sound of shaking someone's body came across the connection

"Wake up, Straw Hat—"

"ALLOW ME," Soundbite snarled. "Here's hoping a generalization works… LUFFY! WAKE UP RIGHT NOW UNLESS YOU WANT A FIST OF LOVE!" the snail belted out in a gruff old man's voice.

"AH! I'M UP, GRAMPS, I'M U—huwha?"

In a dilapidated shack on the slopes of Mt. Corvo, a certain mountain bandit chief cocked an eyebrow curiously. "Well, now I'm a bit conflicted…" Dadan mused to herself. "On the one hand, it's good that they were able to use Luffy's trauma to snap him out of it, but on the other hand, that pretty much just spilled the beans on who Luffy's grandfather is to anyone who's familiar with Garp."

"I think we can worry about that after he's out of that hellhole of an island," Dogra grit out. "And that's if he can bounce back after losing his whole crew…"

"SNAP OUT OF IT, LUFFY!"

Magra allowed himself a hopeful grin. "Somehow, I don't think that that's going to be much of an issue."

"Eh? Soundbite! Y-You're alright! But… But everyone else…" Luffy trailed off, his voice cracking.

"NO!" Soundbite belted out desperately. "Y-YOU CAN'T GIVE UP HOPE, LUFFY, YOU CAN'T! I-IF YOU GIVE UP…" The snail's eyes started to tear up in despair.

"Damn it all, Straw Hat!" Brief belted impudently. "Where's your determination, eh, where's your will to fight!? You need to stand up! You need to fight for your crew!"

"What crew?" Soundbite spat, the venom in his voice thoroughly diluted with depressed sorrow. "THEY GOT eaten. THEY'RE GONE…"

"So you say, but she says different!" Brief countered.

"Yes, they're still alive! I can hear them!" came a girl's voice out of the blue.

"Huh?" Luffy blinked in confusion. "Who're you? And what're you talking about—"

"She—SHE'S RIGHT!" Soundbite said in equal parts shock and euphoria. "I-I CAN hear their VOICES!"

"Eh!?" the leaders of the Mt. Corvo Bandits yelped, leaning backwards in shock.
"Is this for real?!" Dadan breathed, her cigarette getting steadily worn down to a nub.

"B-but I thought he said the salt was messing with his head!" Magra questioned.

"Eh? What about the salt?" Rose of the Tearoom Pirates asked that very same question.

"AH… ah, different kind of HEARING. MY NORMAL SKILLS ARE STILL BORKED, BUT THIS…" Soundbite shook his head solemnly. "There's no blocking this."

"Can't you hear them? Listen!" the girl insisted. "Mister Reindeer and Mister Doggy and Miss Fox are calling for you! 'Luffy, Luffy!', over and over again! And lots of other voices too! Though, one of them is saying a lot more than that…"

"HAHAHA!" Soundbite cackled ecstatically. "EVEN ON THE BRINK of the void, Cross is slin'g shit LIKE A DAMN CHAMP!'"

"Please don't swear around my children!" Papa Tearoom protested.

"BUT HOW ARE THEY STILL—OH, OF COURSE! The damn weed's TRACT MUST BE SLOW-ACTING SO IT CAN SUSTAIN the illusion during gaps between crews!" Soundbite reasoned, ignoring the man.

"Ergh! 'Go to the Grand Line', they said, 'It'll be a fantastic family bonding experience!' they said! Last time I take family bonding advice from a girl offering therapy for five flipping berries!" the patriarch of the 'pirate' family grumbled before lowering his voice. "And, ah, Daisy, was your hearing always this good?"

"Is now really—EH? What the—! OhfuckINCOMING!"

A series of distant explosions and close-up tremors came across the connection, and then Brief spoke again. "Looks like I've outstayed my welcome. Tsk, fine by me, I don't intend to die on this island! Alright, listen, Straw Hat: you can't just recklessly charge at the Baron's arrows. Use the underground routes I dug, I'll back you up. Just do as I told you and rush towards that strange flower!"

"You…" Luffy began.

"You forgot this," Brief interrupted, the sound of scrunching straw indicating he'd given Luffy back his hat. "Don't let the Baron's lies affect you, you're not alone yet! You still have a chance to save your friends, understand? And… I'm here with you, too."

"THAT'D mean a lot more if you weren't HOLDING YOUR FINGER UNDER YOUR NOSE LIKE THAT," Soundbite deadpanned.

"The snail's right. You're talking about life and death with your finger across your nose?" said Papa.

"That's just weird," said a younger male that had to be Rick.

"SHUT UP! This is the Toothbrush Mustache Pirates' sacred traditional greeting!"

"Heheh, I think I'm starting to like this old man!" Dadan snickered to herself.

"Though really, who ever heard of a salute as stupid as that, eh?" Magra asked.

"You mean aside from that stupid handshake you tried to make us all do a few years ago?" Dogra
muttered sarcastically.

"I WAS DRUNK OFF MY ASS, DAMN IT!"

"IT WAS THREE HOURS LONG, THERE’S NOT ENOUGH BOOZE ON THE ISLAND TO JUSTIFY THAT!"

"YOU DAMN LITTLE—!"

SLAM! SLAM!

"WILL YOU MORONS KNOCK IT OFF ALREADY!?” Dadan bellowed. "IN CASE YOU HADN’T NOTICED, OUR BOY’S FIGHTING FOR HIS LIFE OUT THERE!"

Alright, I’ll get going,” Luffy announced with grim determination. "Old man, you look after Soundbite, alright?"

"Of course,” Brief nodded firmly before adopting an annoyed expression. "And for the record, I’m 42! You try living on this island for years on end and not let the stress get to you!"

The only response he received was that of Luffy running off.

There was a brief silence before Soundbite swiveled his eyestalks to the side in a flat look. "We’re going AFTER HIM, RIGHT?"

"Smart snail,” the… relatively old pirate laughed as he started running himself.

"Looks like Straw Hat’s going to get out of this after all!"

"Of course he is! It's nothing now but a straight-up fight, and he won't give those monsters an inch this time! He's going to win!"

"Anyone wanna put any money on him winning?"

"Not a chance!"

For the first time since the goldfish catching game, the patrons of Takoyaki 8 were thoroughly enjoying the broadcast. Luffy had his confidence back and friends backing him as he tried to save his crew from a man-eating plant and put an end to that monster of a man. And this time, the support in the game was unanimous.

Soundbite’s broadcasting faltered slightly here and there, Luffy popping in and out of the holes in the ground, along with Brief and his goat distracting them. Then came the moment where Brief used a dummy of straw that Soundbite had been funneling Luffy's voice into, successfully tricking and then distracting the Baron and making him attempt to play whack-a-mustache with his arrows. Tension began mounting as the sounds of the trapdoors opening became closer and closer to the arrows' impact.

Until, finally—

BOOM!

"Agh!"
"GAH, MOTHER—THAT STINGS!"

One of the explosions was accompanied by Brief and Soundbite's cries of pain.

"Now, stay in that hole!"

There was a sound of movement amidst the settling dust. "Baron," Brief growled, weak but firm. "Don't mess with me. If you think you can take friends away from anyone you please, you're dead wrong! As of now... I'M ONE OF HIS FRIENDS!"

"I'LL DAMN WELL ENDORSE THAT claim!" Soundbite roared in agreement.

The Baron chuckled cruelly. "Friend? How delightful! Straw Hat!" Omatsuri's expression swapped over to a more vicious tone as he glanced away. "Listen well! This man who claims to be your friend was once the captain of a pirate crew that I annihilated! A man who pleaded for mercy! A man who wretchedly shook in fear at the thought of being alone! Why would you let such a pathetic insect be your friend?"

"HEY! I AND TRANSPONDER SNAILS EVERYWHERE RESEMBLE THAT REMARK!"

Omatsuri's snarl deepened. "That snail again... you should learn when to respect your betters!"

There was that strange organic sound that had accompanied every instance of the bow arrow being nocked before, and then the snail's eyes snapped open in terror as the same noise multiplied itself almost two dozen times over.

"ARE YOU SERIOUS!?" Soundbite demanded incredulously. "JUST HOW fucking bullshit is that damn flower?!"

"Why don't you observe for yourself, hm?" And with that, there was the twang of a bowstring and a chorus of shrieking whistling.

Within moments the arrows made impact... but not on flesh. The only sound heard was metal sinking into stone.

"DENIED! NICE SAVE, LUFFY!"

"Wha... Straw Hat?" Brief asked. There was a sound of stone cracking, likely from being used as a shield. Then...

"RaaaaaaaaaAAAAAAAAGGGGGGHHHH!" Luffy screamed. A moment later, there was the sound of a fist making impact, and the Baron let out a cry of pain before being sent tumbling away.

"Nyu, nice one, Luffy!" Hachi pumped his fists triumphantly. "Now do it a thousand times more!"

"Come on, guys!" Keimi cheered as she waved around a pair of fans she'd dug out of somewhere. "Like the dugongs! GO, STRAW HAT, GO! GO, STRAW HAT, GO!"

"GO, STRAW HAT, GO!" the patrons of Takoyaki 8 cheered in agreement. "GO, STRAW HAT, GO! GO, STRAW HAT, GO!"

-o-

"Straw Hat certainly seems to have every ounce of will that we thought he did," Hina remarked as she chewed on the butt of her cigarette.
"And thank the heavens that he does," T-Bone stated as he bowed his head solemnly. "For should even the will of one such as Monkey D. Luffy be capable of breaking, then what hope do we have of finding any measure of success in our endeavor?"

Hina scowled grimly, unable to find anything with which to counter the question.

"I told you before..." Luffy huffed grimly. "I WON'T LET YOU HURT MY FRIENDS!"

"F-Friend?" Brief asked timidly.

"Mustache!" Luffy promptly grinned, the cheer in his voice making it obvious that he had his finger up in a salute.

"...Mustache!" Brief echoed joyfully.

"Mustache!" Rose, Rick, and Daisy contributed.

"GET BACK DOWN HERE, YOU THREE!" Papa protested.

"YEEEEAAAHH, I have no arms and some measure of DIGNITY, SOOO..."

"...You are an unlikeable little gremlin."

"THAT'S MY SCHTICK, AND I STRIVE TO WEAR it out!"

"The sooner, the better, I say," T-Bone muttered.

"Mm... Hina begs to differ," the female captain disagreed with a slight smirk. "Annoying as he can be... it's at least comforting to find some measure of familiarity in all this madness, no?"

As gaunt as his face was, T-Bone just couldn't hide the smile he too was sporting.

-o-

"Should have seen that one coming. Anyway... Straw Hat!" Brief barked authoritatively. "Go give that demon-weed hell!"

"You BASTARDS! I'll feed you to Lily in PIECES!"

"HE'S UP! GOOGOGO!"

"RIGHT! EVERYONE! I'M COMING! HANG ON!" Luffy roared at the top of his lungs. His voice swiftly became far off, but it remained clear as crystal nonetheless. He bellowed at the top of his lungs, a bestial noise of pure rage more than anything.

"Ha! Go, Straw Hat boy!" Queen Ivankov cheered from his stage in his makeshift kingdom, leading his 'citizens' in encouraging the rookie pirate, however far away he was. "Pluck that weed's petals, free your crew! HAHA!"

Soon enough, there was the sound of stretching, un-announced, as a name wasn't needed. This wasn't an attack, just a strike of pure, righteous vengeance. A second later, there was a sound like a titanic slab of meat being pounded, and then a second, even stronger than the first.

And then...

"GIVE ME BACK MY CREW!"
An earth-shattering crash came across the snail. And then came the sound of something like wood breaking apart.

"Ivankov! The monitors!"

At Inazuma’s shout, the entirety of Newkama Land turned to face the screens, which were displaying all the same image: a massive, stem-like structure that was beginning to break in the middle, and a human figure that they could barely discern as Straw Hat Luffy beside it.

"...I guess Soundbite-boy learned a new trick. That, or his emotions are peaking enough that he—"

"Wait!"

The image turned back towards a small group of people clad in red headgear with a mushroom-like Jolly Roger on each, alongside a man with a toothbrush mustache who could only be Brief.

"The voices are coming from somewhere else now," said the youngest girl, to the surprise of everyone listening. Soundbite's gaze snapped back at the stem… and let out, though on the volume of a whisper, what could only be described as a scream. And not a single person watching could blame him.

For looking closely, where the stem broke, with the full moon shining as red as blood in the background, everyone could see what composed the massive structure: thousands upon thousands of arrows, hovering and quivering in midair, what little light there was glinting off the sharp heads.

"Where are Zoro and all the others? Where are they?!" Luffy yelled. Then, slowly, Soundbite's gaze turned in another direction, tortured, rambling whimpers coming from him as his eyes fell upon the soulless form of Baron Omatsuri, standing with a dark smile on his face and blank white eyes as black spots appeared on the face of the flower on his shoulder, reminding many present of some very unpleasant diseases.

"Right here."

Those two words sent chills down every spine on the floor. And then Omatsuri tossed his bow aside, and the flower on his shoulder began to grow and contort.

Emporio Ivankov had the power of the Horm-Horm Fruit. He was no stranger to gore. He was no stranger to mutations. He was intimately familiar with any number of strange contortions within the human body, and was an expert at causing and healing them himself. He had as much tolerance for the worst that biology, and meat in general, could dish out as the most experienced surgeons in the world did.

And when he saw the Lily Carnation's true form, he could do nothing but retch.

-0-

"...What the fucking hell."

Nobody in the Blackbeard Pirates so much as batted an eye at their leader's swearing. How could they, with the vile biological symphony that had met their ears? Even after sailing so long with Doc Q, that had been a unique and, as the stain on Burgess's shirt demonstrated, nauseating experience.

"...It was the flower. The flower was wrong. I-I-I didn't believe it, I knew that Cross said it was powerful but it was so small and innocent and I thought it was wrong but I was wrong, it's wrong, that thing, i-it's wrong wrong WRONG! IT'S DIGESTING THEM!"
The disgustingly organic gurgles and squishes, accompanied by the occasional crack of snapping bone coming over the connection had pretty thoroughly backed up Soundbite's latest scream. And with that, only Blackbeard managed to keep his lunch down, and he glared at the snail murderously.

"Straw Hat… slaughter that monster," he snarled.

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For the first time since they had known him, the Revolutionaries saw their leader thoroughly shocked. And not a single one of them was surprised; the half-digested forms of Luffy's sixteen crewmates seemed to run together, limbs sticking out at random, their eyes blank black sockets that seemed to weep black sludge if you looked at them too long, and their mouths open in silent screams. This macabre sculpture of agony and horror connected back to the gaping, monstrous head of the Lily Carnation. The cute flower was gone; all that remained was a bleached, spotted head drooling green slime, an expression of hunger on its face, and a tinkling giggle coming from its mouth, a sound more at home in a kids' puppet show than the horror before them.

"I can hear them…” Dragon quietly ground out. "They have no mouths… and yet they scream."

As one, the Revolutionaries blanched. And through it all, Omatsuri… just laughed. A dark, sadistic sound that reverberated through the bones and organs of all who heard it. It was quite clear that he was enjoying every second of this. Then, abruptly, he stopped, and spoke a single word.

"Die."

The image snapped back towards Luffy, who was staring at Lily Carnation with a gaping, horrified expression that would have been comical in just about any other situation. But not this one. The horrific scene before them, the whispered agony coming over the speakers, the absolutely terrified expression on their Transponder Snail… it sucked up humor, consumed all emotion until nothing was left but deep, soul-crushing despair.

And that scream…

"LUFFY! RUN! THE ARROWS!"

The entire room gasped as they saw every arrow, every last one of the thousands of arrows scattered beneath the blood-red moon, begin to soar towards Luffy. And the worst part was that Luffy didn't run; he only slowly began to turn towards the storm of complete death that soared towards him. Actually, no. The worst part was the glimpse of his face everyone caught. Dull. Lifeless. The arrows… they were merely finishing a job already complete. It was a face they were all far too familiar with.

And as one of their number took in the sight, something in his brain snapped, and he realized exactly what he was seeing.

"LUUUUUUUFFYYYYYY!" Sabo screamed as the arrows struck.

-0-

Every man and woman in Makino's bar that had retained consciousness and found the courage to stay in earshot of the snail came to immensely regret that decision over the next full minute. The only sounds that filled the bar were the unmistakable din of thousands of arrows crashing to the ground, more every second, and Soundbite's agonized wailing. Then Omatsuri spoke again.

"Every single one of those arrows symbolizes a day of loneliness I endured after that storm. They are
the number of the regrets I have suffered at suddenly losing every one of my beloved crewmates.

Nobody in the bar could they bring themselves to care as the Baron confirmed Soundbite's theory; all they could think of was that this man and his monster—no, these monsters, had killed Luffy. All of those arrows, and from Soundbite's wailing, they could only imagine how many of them Luffy had endured. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the sound of the hellish rain ceased, leaving only Soundbite's sobs to fill the numbing silence.

"LUFFY! LUFFY!"

Makino's lip bled from how hard she was biting it as tears streamed down her face, and not a single patron of the bar, not even Woop Slap, no matter how hard he dug his fingers into his own arm, had dry eyes.

"Luffy…"

-o-

"Have you had a glimpse of what I've endured?"

The sheer force that filled the room where the screen was broadcasting Soundbite's vision was suffocating. Borsalino was sweating bullets, a nervous look in place of his typical expression. Kuzan was shivering from the sheer chill of the willpower. Even Sakazuki was panting from the effort to stay conscious; only Sengoku and the immunized Transponder Snail were fully able to withstand the unbridled rage and agony of Vice Admiral Monkey D. Garp, and even then Sengoku was sweating furiously and the snail was only half-conscious.

Garp's fists were blackened, his teeth almost cracking from how much he was grinding them, and his eyes… looking into his eyes, every last Admiral and Vice Admiral knew the very meaning of fear.

"How dare you do this to my grandson…" he whispered with all the force of a tempest, earthquake, and firestorm rolled into one.

"Garp… you already know that we're going to invoke the greatest Buster Call in history on Omatsuri Island as soon as this broadcast ends," Sengoku stated, frowning heavily; for all that the Straw Hats had been thorns in his side, and for all that he thoroughly expected an order to leave Omatsuri Island alone from the Elder Stars due to the fact that its owner—and indeed, perhaps its sole living inhabitant—seemed to solely target pirates, no one deserved to go through what he was witnessing now. Absolutely no one.

"Buster Call? No… that's too hands-off," Garp snarled. "We can destroy the island after I've ripped that monster apart WITH MY OWN TWO HANDS!"

"As you wish, Garp," Sengoku consented; there could be no more just a course of action.

"I'll go and start preparing the ships now," Tsuru stated, her fear at the rage of her old friend suppressed by the sheer disgust and horror of the events transpiring.

-o-

The submarine-ship of the Heart Pirates was deathly silent as its inhabitants stared at the sobbing snail before them.

There was no other noise to be heard, no monologuing, no screaming, just… sobbing. Tears of misery and desperation, bubbling up from the snail without end.
So frozen were they all that none made to stop Bepo when he silently stood up and started to shuffle towards the snail, reaching for the mic…

"Room, Shambles."

"GAH!"

When suddenly the silence was broken by a pained yelp, on account of Bepo and the previously seated Penguin swapping places unexpectedly and Penguin falling on his ass.

"Captain…" the bear Mink started, glancing at his captain uneasily.

"Don't touch that Snail," Law ordered, never shifting from his position with his elbows balanced on his knees and his hands folded before his face.

"Law, look," Penguin sighed as he rubbed his aching posterior. "We know you've been eyeing the Straw Hats as potential allies, but they're done. Luffy got hit by… damn, I don't even know how many arrows—!"

"One-hundred seventy-four direct hits, sixty-six nicks," Law summarized emotionlessly.

Penguin took a moment to shiver before spreading his arms helplessly. "My point exactly, captain. I'm sorry, but he's—!"

"Not dead."

"Law—!"

"Both lungs punctured, stomach pierced numerous times, his small and large intestines as well, numerous lacerations to his muscular system, broken ribs, collar bone, humerus, radiuses, ulna—"

"Law, what are you—?!"

"Those are all the places he was hit." Law's crewmates froze at the statement. "Brain, heart, kidneys, spinal cord… any injuries to these locations would have been instantly fatal." Law's knuckles became white as he tightened his grip. "None of them were hit."

Everyone was silent until Bepo swallowed and raised his hand. "Aye, Captain, but—!"

"His body hasn't hit the ground, Bepo."

"—erk!" The mink and the crew as a whole stiffened in realization.

"His body. Has yet. To hit the ground," Law repeated tonelessly, his glare never leaving the sobbing snail. "Once it does, then it's hopeless. But until then…"

Suddenly, a minute, shuddering gasp so light it could have been a death rattle wafted over the connection, and the snail snapped its eyes open in shock. "LUFFY!"

"This. Isn't. Over."

-o-

"Not yet over…" Basil Hawkins muttered to himself as he fretfully re-shuffled his deck with shaking hands, his natural calm well and thoroughly broken. "How can it possibly not yet be over?" Once he finished mixing up his cards, he carelessly tossed them onto the table he was sitting at, staring at the
results that showed up in bewildered confusion. "How… this is… inconceivable…"

"C-Captain?" one of his subordinates noted nervously, watching his captain's actions over his shoulder.

"The Four, Six, Nine and Queen of Wands," Hawkins read off, more to himself than his crew. "The Magician, The Chariot, Strength, the Wheel of Fortune, The Star itself…"

"W-What does it mean, captain?"

Hawkins scowled as he covered his mouth in thought. "All cards that indicate hope, victory and positivity, forcing themselves to the top of the deck…" He then flipped over the deck he was holding, and displayed the final card that would have been played. "While the Tower, the card of disaster, relegates itself to the bottom of the deck every time, all while reversing itself every time I look at it, to boot…"

"I'd say you're just not shuffling well, voodoo-man, but for once I actually agree with those parlor tricks of yours!"

The fortuneteller twitched at the familiar voice that broke his concentration, and offhandedly glared at its source as he swept his cards back into his deck and started to shuffle again. "Kid."

The punk-styled pirate captain that was sitting at the counter of the bar, his almost-empty bottle nestled in a deep dent in the wood, glared daggers at the sobbing Transponder Snail that had everyone's attention. "You heard how hard that dumbass was fighting," Kid growled acridly. "If you think that a few arrows being stuck in him now will stop him, then you are dead wrong!" He punctuated the statement by splitting the bar with his fist.

Kid huffed heavily for a few seconds before holding out his hand to the slightly nervous barkeep, who promptly filled it with a full bottle.

"That moron's not dead yet," he growled with finality. "And I won't accept that he's actually lost until I see it with my own two eyes! WHO'S WITH ME!?" he roared, lifting his bottle up high, a motion that was reciprocated by his first mate and the rest of the crew.

As if in response to the show of support, someone spoke on the other end in a clear voice, that of a young girl.

"Don't lose! Mister Reindeer and the others are still calling you! 'Luffy, you can do it! Luffy, you can do it!' They're cheering for you! So… So don't lose!"

The voice echoed through the complete silence in the bar. Even Soundbite's sobbing stopped, though the snail's expression made it clear that he was only barely suppressing them. Then… another sound rang out across the connection.

-Jewelry Bonney tensed furiously, her hands balling up in the tablecloth of the table she was sitting at, sweat pouring down her face.

Clicking and clacking echoed through the silent air, every sound as loud as a gunshot. Some were ignorable, wood against wood, arrows knocking against one another as Straw Hat moved… but others… metal against metal. Metal against bone.

Bonney had stopped eating long before things had gotten this bad, her appetite banished by the
sounds of one of the best crews on the Grand Line self-destructing, but this…

Bonney bit into her lip, eyes starting to water at the sting of the bile creeping up her throat, beckoned ever closer by the horrendous clicking.

These noises, the *images* they conjured, threatened to bring up every meal she'd eaten in the past 24 hours.

And just when it seemed like she was about to lose the fight against her own body another sound came across. A susurrus, like a breeze blowing through the branches of a dead tree, rustling nothing. Like wind brushing across the cold stone tombstones of a cemetery. Like the final breath of a dying man giving up the fight against his fate. But none of those were fully accurate… for the sounds were coherent, a chorus of voices calling out in whispers a singular message.

"Luffy… Luffy… Luffy…"

Bonney froze as she heard the voices, coming so close, *so close* to completely and utterly emptying herself…

Before raising her fists and *slamming them* on the tabletop, followed by her swallowing *hard* and forcing every last speck of her stomach's contents back into place. The instant her airway was clear, she started to bellow furiously.

"COME ON, STRAW HAT!" she cried, causing her crewmates to jump in shock. "WHAT THE HELL KIND OF PATHETIC DISPLAY IS THIS?! YOU KICKED GOD'S FUCKING ASS, KICK THIS PSYCHO'S TOO! WIN, FUCKING DAMN IT! WIN!"

-0-

"YOU CAN DO IT, LUFFY! SHOW THAT BASTARD WHAT IT MEANS TO COME FROM MOUNT CORVO!" Dadan yelled. The rest of her boys were no less exuberant.

"RIP HIM TO PIECES, LUFFY!" Dogra snarled.

"POUND THAT BASTARD'S SMUG SMIRK SIX FEET UNDER!" Magra roared.

"GO, LUFFY!" came the raucous chorus that echoed through the entirety of Mount Corvo.

-0-

The swordmaster's outward quiet belied the anxiety he felt, clearly evidenced by the sweat on his face, serious enough that he hadn't even bothered to replace his glasses. But nobody else in the dojo had anywhere close to as much control as he did.

"GO, STRAW HAT, GO!" screamed one boy.

"SAVE ZORO! SAVE YOUR CREW!" bellowed another.

And much the same came from every other student. Koshiro's fists clenched as he forced himself not to join in just as exuberantly—or worse, to grab his sword and the nearest ship to go *chop that island in half.*

-0-

"COME ON, BOY!" Genzo roared as he tried desperately to leap to his feet.
"SHOW THE STRENGTH AND GUTS YOU HAD WHEN YOU BEAT ARLONG!" Nojiko yelled over her shoulder before returning her attention to pressing down on Genzo's shoulder and keeping him pinned in his bed. "And as for you, stay still! You suffered a heart attack, you need to rest if you want to get better!" She then leaned in close to Doctor Nako, who was on the other side of the bed and helping her fight to keep the de-facto leader of Cocoyashi down. "He will get better, right?" she hissed beneath the cheers of the crowd outside.

"I'M FINE, I FEEL BETTER THAN I HAVE IN YEARS! NOW LET ME UP SO THAT I CAN CHEER PROPERLY! GO, LUFFY! BASH THAT BASTARD'S SKULL IN!"

"DO IT, BRAT, WIN!" Doctor Nako shouted out the door of his practice before scrabbling to strap down one of Genzo's limbs as he glared at the ex-soldier. "That's the pain medicine talking, Genzo, the only thing that will make you better is time!" He then leaned close to Nojiko. "Are you kidding? After having a heart attack at his age? He's lucky to be alive!" he whispered back.

"I'VE RESTED MORE THAN ENOUGH, WHAT I NEED IS TO BE ON MY FEET! NOW LET ME UP ALREADY! WHACK THAT WEED, STRAW HAT!"

"UPROOT IT AND SAVE MY SISTER, DAMN IT!" "Please, Genzo, we're only doing this because we care about you!" "Well, how bad is it then?"

"End this nightmare, Luffy!" "Listen to Nojiko, Genzo, you shouldn't push yourself like this!"

"WE'RE PROBABLY GOING TO HAVE TO OPERATE!"

"HE'S PUSHING HIMSELF FOR NAMI, AND I'LL BE DAMNED IF I DO—WAIT, WHAT DID YOU SAY?!"

"…Whoops. Ah… hey, look, a fishman!"

"WHERE?!

CRACK!

"Pretty colors…"

"…How often do you do that?"

"Almost every other week, and not all on him. Having a common phobia is useful! Now, back to business: KEEP GOING, STRAW HAT!"

-0-

"SAVE CAPTAIN USOPP! SAVE THE STRAW HAT PIRATES!" the Veggie Trio yelled, tears streaming down their faces from bloodshot eyes.

"FIGHT, LUFFY, FIGHT! WIN! YOU CAN DO IT!" Merry cheered, fans in hand.

"SAVE USOPP, LUFFY! SHOW THAT HE MADE THE RIGHT CHOICE IN FOLLOWING YOU!" Kaya screamed, fighting through her weakness.

And the entirety of Syrup Village shouted along with them.

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Zeff was straining both of his legs as he sped through the restaurant, tirelessly filling the orders of the
customers, preparing them, sending them to their tables, taking the payments and dishes, washing
them, and repeating the process. Despite the sweat coursing down his face, so much so that his well-
braided mustache was beginning to droop, he had no intention of doing it any other way except for
alone. And why was that, when they were in the middle of a massive rush despite the nauseous show
they were listening to, and with no shortage of chefs?

"BEAT IT TO THE GROUND, STRAW HAT!" "POUND IT TO PIECES LIKE KRIEG'S
ARMOR!" "PLUCK THAT THING'S PETALS!" "SAVE SANJI!"

Because the rest of his staff was busy with cheering on the most incredible pirate he had seen since
he retired. And considering the fact that he wanted nothing more than to do that cheering himself, he
had little choice but to allow the rest of them to do it instead while he, the only one who was capable
of keeping a level head through this, took care of the business.

"Win, Straw Hat, WIN!"

But that didn't stop him from hissing encouragements under his breath whenever he got a moment
alone.

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"SHOW WHAT THE WILL OF D. IS ALL ABOUT, STRAW HAT! SAVE YOUR CREW!
SAVE MY SON!"

The humans watching paused briefly in their cheering to gape at Kureha, who had joined in after a
few seconds of trembling silently, her expression ferocious and tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Doctor Kureha—" Dalton began in shock.

"FUCK MY VANITY, I'M PAST THE POINT OF CARING ABOUT DENYING IT!" Kureha
roared. "MAKE THAT MONSTER PAY, STRAW HAT! DON'T YOU DARE DIE ON US
NOW!"

Everyone else gaped for a moment more before they raised their own voices to the rose-colored
heavens.

"GO, LUFFY!/GO, STRAW HAT!/YOU CAN DO IT!"

-o-

"GET THEM, STRAW HAT! YOU DEFEATED A WARLORD, DON'T LOSE TO AN OLD
MAN AND A GLORIFIED WEED!" Cobra roared.

"SIRE, YOUR BLOOD PRESS—GAH!" Pell attempted to protest before wincing as Cobra rapped
his official Royal Rod over his skull.

"DAMN MY BLOOD PRESSURE, MY LITTLE GIRL IS IN DANGER!"

"SIRE, THAT ROD IS AN ANCESTRAL HEIRLOOM DATING BACK TO—" THWACK!
"—YEOWCH!" Igaram cut himself off in favor of hopping around on his un-struck foot as he
cursed up a storm.

"DOES IT LOOK LIKE I CARE HOW OLD THIS THING IS!? ALL I CARE ABOUT IS
FENDING YOU JACKALS OFF SO THAT I CAN CHEER ON LUFFY! WIN, DAMN YOU,
WIN!"
Kohza's eye twitched slightly as he peered around the doorway to the throne room. "And he is how old again?"

Chaka slapped a hand to his face with a groan as his commander in chief managed to nail his fellow Guardian with a well-placed gut shot. "On that fine, fine line that separates 'too old' and 'not old enough.'" Nonetheless, he lowered his hand the following moment, a dark look on his face. "But quite frankly, I can hardly blame His Majesty under these circumstances. Straw Hat is making good on his promise to protect Vivi or die trying. And I hope beyond all hope that he's strong enough to make it through this." He then cocked an eyebrow at Kohza. "How come you're not panicking just as much as him, by the way?"

Kohza swallowed heavily as he redirected his gaze to the Transponder Snail with stoic silence, catching his best friend's whisper in the quiet pleas every time he strained his ears. "Because pleading acknowledges the possibility of defeat, which would mean that I'd have to accept that Vivi is gone..." His knuckles turned white as he gripped the doorframe. "And I just don't think that I'd be able to survive that."

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"DON'T FALL TO SOMETHING LIKE THIS!" Wiper roared. "YOU'RE STRONGER THAN THAT, STRAW HAT, YOU CAN WIN!"

"SEND THAT DEVIL OF A PLANT BACK TO HELL WHERE IT BELONGS, LUFFY!" Gan Fall bellowed in agreement.

"COME ON, CAPTAIN! YOU CAN'T FALL, I HAVEN'T JOINED YET!" Aisa shouted at the top of her lungs.

"PIEEEED! PIEEEEED!" Pierre screeched, regretting for the first time that he didn't have that embarrassing voice that the snail gave him anymore; he would give anything to voice his support.

"JULALALALA! JULALALALA!" Nola herself cried to the heavens, uncaring of whether she was understood or not. All she cared about was that she was losing her friends again, only this time she wasn't going to let it happen silently. This time... this time she would be heard.

CLAAAAAANG! CLAAAAAANG!

The rest of the inhabitants of the island worked tirelessly to ring the Fire of Shandora in support for Luffy, their cries of support singing out as much as the bell itself.

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"DESTROY HIM, LUFFY!" Ace roared, sending up a pillar of flames that was almost biblical in scale.

"GIVE HIM HELL, STRAW HAT!" Squardo concurred, waving his sword in the air in agreement.

"ALL CANNONS, FIRE AT WILL!" Whitey bellowed at the Baby Transponder Snail she was holding, prompting her crew on her Tsarina to scramble to man the warship's copious armory. "FILL THE AIR WITH AS MUCH NOISE AS YOU CAN! I DON'T CARE HOW FAR AWAY HE IS, WE ARE LETTING HIM KNOW WE'RE RIGHT THERE WITH HIM!"

"AYE, CAPTAIN!" chorused the crew. And if it wasn't visible from Omatsuri Island, then enough people saw it that the world would soon know that these certain followers of the strongest man in the
world were supporting the rubber warrior.

"LUFFY, DON'T YOU DARE LOSE NOW!"

Every Revolutionary present in the Baltigo command center was staring at their Chief of Staff in stunned surprise as he practically throttled the nearest Transponder Snail. He had nearly blacked out upon seeing that many arrows had hit Luffy, though his scream beforehand was no small shock to everyone present.

Or rather, almost everyone.

"He's your younger brother, isn't he?" Dragon asked quietly.

Sabo's fingers cracked the snail's shell as he and the rest of the room looked at his leader. Slowly, he released the gastropod and forced his hands to his sides, his fingers digging into his palms and tears starting to fall down his face.

"And he hasn't changed a bit in the last ten years," Sabo confirmed. "He always does this, rushing into danger without even thinking. He never would have made it out of childhood if Ace and I hadn't been there."

"'Ace'?" Koala repeated numbly, her brain stalling as she tried to process what that meant. "Do you mean—!?

"Better known nowadays as 'Fire-Fist' Ace of the Whitebeard Pirates," Sabo confirmed before snapping his attention back to the screen and gritting his teeth. "LUFFY, DON'T YOU DARE LOSE NOW! IF YOU DIE RIGHT AFTER I REMEMBER YOU, I'LL CRAWL INTO THE UNDERWORLD SO THAT I CAN KILL YOU AGAIN MYSELF!"

Dragon quietly turned away. And as soon as nobody could see his face, he allowed it to contort murderously.

'I know you won't lose, Luffy... but if you don't kill that monster for this, then I will.'

The entire island metropolis of Water 7 had fallen silent in response to the SBS broadcast, the horrors following the hope leaving every soul unable to speak, even as Straw Hat began stumbling. But at the moment the whispers of his crew began to come through...

"COME ON, STRAW HAT!"

The town suddenly jumped when Franky's voice boomed over the island like the voice of Poseidon.

It took Iceburg a second to get his wits back, but once he did he stared up at the spout of water, blinking at the speck of a person he could see framed by the spout. "Huh... so he actually managed to get that water-based amplifier working. I just thought that was hot air."

Kalifa shakily readjusted her glasses. "Should I send some men to start dismantling it?"

"YOU MANAGED TO BEAT CROCODILE AND YOU MANAGED TO BEAT GOD, ARE YOU REALLY GONNA LOSE TO A WEED!? BEAT THAT BASTARD, SHOW THE WORLD JUST HOW SUPER! YOU ARE!"
Iceburg was silent for a second before allowing himself a grim smirk. "Give him five minutes."

"SUPER!"

The mayor's eyes widened as he noticed a crack starting to trail up the glass of his windows. "Then tell them to do their worst."

"ANNIHILATE THAT EXCUSE FOR A FLOWER!" Marigold roared.

"CRUSH IT TO DUST, STRAW HAT!" Sandersonia screeched.

"LET THAT MONSTER FEEL THE PAIN IT INFLICTED, STRAW HAT LUFFY! SEND IT TO HELL!" Hancock screamed.

Even from the palace, the Gorgon Sisters' screams of support carried throughout the island. But it wasn't that strange that most of the Kujas failed to notice…

"GO, STRAW HAT!/"WIN!/"SAVE YOUR CREW!/"KILL THAT MONSTER!"

Considering that they were being no less vocal in their support. Even Elder Nyon was raising her voice for the first time in… basically forever. Yet, among a more quiet minority closer to the snail, a small group of amazons were on their knees, taking in every plea that they heard from the trapped group, a susurrus of support coming from their mouths. One of the warriors was particularly fervent at that.

"Quetzalcoatl, Apophis, Nagaraja, Set, Ouroboros, Asclepius. Great heavenly serpents, hear my pleas," Marguerite whispered, her head bowed and hands clasped in prayer. "I realize that our tribe has not worshipped any of you in countless generations, but nonetheless, I beg you: show this man your favor!" She shook her head desperately. "Whether or not most men are as evil as the Princess and her crew say, I know not, and at this moment I do not care. But this man… Luffy…" Tears slowly trailed from the Kuja's eyes in spite of her determination to hold them back. "Please, I beg of you… let him win… let him live."

The prayers continued in the same vein for a minute that took up an eternity, before all at once, they fell silent as the noises from the broadcast changed: Luffy wasn't moving anymore, but his quiet, pained breathing persisted, indicating that he was still alive in spite of it all, and the Baron's own breathing had accelerated dramatically. Then Daisy's voice came again.

"Yes, just like that! They're all with you, all the way!"

"Daisy, can you really hear their voices? Papa can't hear anything," Papa said, audible in the sudden absence of cheers.

"To tell you the truth, I heard everything you told Mister Reindeer, Mister Doggy, and Miss Fox behind that grave earlier this evening."

Papa gasped as Daisy continued. "My hearing is naturally adept. I can hear even the tiniest sound. But I pretended not to know. You're always trying so hard to keep us happy."

"…Daisy," Papa breathed, thunderstruck by his daughter's words.
"But I believe that you really are strong!"

A pause, and the snail's expression conveyed a single tear about to fall from a shocked face. But he blinked it away before it could leave his eye, his lip trembling for a moment. Then he smiled. "Of course," he said with more confidence than he had shown before. "Papa is strong!"

"Aww…" Tashigi crooned kindly.

"Is now really the time?" Smoker huffed with a cocked eyebrow.

"Forgive me for trying to find a speck of light and hope in all this darkness!" the ensign snapped at her superior, before promptly paling as she realized just what she'd said. "Ah, f-forgive me, sir?"

Meanwhile, over the connection, Soundbite seemed to be trying to out-cynical Smoker. "HEARTWARMING, truly! Now if only you'd do it later—!" There was suddenly a gurgling growl as the revived Transponder Snail's expression twisted into something monstrous. "WHEN YOU'RE NOT RISKING DRAWING THE DAMN MONSTER'S ATTENTION!?"

Smoker grimaced. "Damn it, that's not good."

Suddenly, without warning, the sound of running came across the broadcast, as well as one of the kids calling after their father.

"WHA—WHOA! Papa Tearoom grabbed the Baron's BOW AND ARROW! HE'S TAKING AIM!"

A sound of shaking, the arrow trembling against the bow, and then a gasp of shock and fear.

"FUCKING—! COME ON ALREADY, YOU CAME THAT FAR! FUCKING FINISH IT!"

The demonic plant's tinkling purr came across the connection, clearly setting its sights on Papa. And from the snail's expression, the older man was scared out of his wits.

"You can do it, Papa!" Daisy encouraged.

"Papa!" Rose and Rick agreed.

"Papa, shoot! Shoot!" Daisy urged.

"DO IT, OLD MAN, DO IT!"

"Come on, come on…" Tashigi pleaded as she clasped her hands desperately.

Papa cried out, a sound of equal parts desperation and determination. Then a snap as the arrow flew free. Whistling came across the connection for a few seconds…

And then the most graphic and grotesque sound they had heard for the last several years rang out. It was the clear sound of metal and wood piercing flesh, and guts spilling out of it, alongside the plant's weakening laughter. And it was music to their ears.

"AH! LILY! AH, LILYYYYY!" came the Baron's cry.

"YES!" Tashigi whooped as she threw her hands up victoriously. "HE DID IT!"

Smoker grinned viciously around his cigar. "Now they just need to finish the job."

The disturbingly wonderful sound of plant guts and blood falling to the ground echoed out, followed by the Baron's voice.

"How could this happen to you?" he blubbered, sounding as though he was sifting through the guts. "But now, Muchigoro, my crew, my friends, they'll all…"

The sobbing subsided, and his voice became downright demented.

"Unforgivable… UNFORGIVABLE! I'LL—"

A loud splash drew everyone's attention. Omatsuri gasped in what sounded like horror. Then, with a scream of pure rage from Luffy, his fist connected with enough force to break the very air. The Baron's body was heard tumbling for several seconds before it finally subsided. A few more seconds of silence. And then…

"…He's dead," Soundbite said firmly. "The Baron. HE'S DEAD."

And just like that, the mood in the cabin swapped from joyous to utterly shocked.

"He… he actually did it? Luffy killed him?" Tashigi breathed.

Smoker was contemplatively silent for a moment before exhaling a cloud of smoke as he allowed himself to relax. "No… no, he didn't. Omatsuri died along with his crew. The only thing alive on that island was the plant. That… person was just another one of the ghosts it was keeping in existence."

Tashigi faced her superior with a neutral expression before exhaling. "…I'm not sure I would have been able to hold anything against Luffy for it even if he was alive," she admitted softly.

Smoker shook his head with a sigh. "You and everyone else in the world, Ensign." He gazed at the transponder snail hiccuping on the crate. "You and everyone else."

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"How depressing," a sword-wielding old man said nonchalantly. "Such a useful pirate trap, not only dismantled but dismantled before it could remove one of our greatest thorns from our side in a permanent manner. What a waste."

"But possibly a waste we can salvage. We should see about recovering the parts remaining of that plant and sending it to Vegapunk," mused a relatively younger man whose hair yet remained blond. "If we could recreate the entity for ourselves, the benefits would be innumerable."

"Highly unlikely," sighed the tallest of the old men, whose beard and mustache were split into three different points. "I'm certain that Sengoku, sentimental fool that he is, has already issued the orders for a Buster Call on that island, and I have no doubts that he would disregard any orders to do otherwise." He grimaced and pinched the bridge of his nose as a familiar headache flared up in his skull. "At the least, Garp certainly would. And aside from that, if the earlier broadcast was any indication, it targeted pirates only for the sake of convenience. I have no doubt that the only reason it didn't consume Omatsuri was that he was a perfect pawn; as depressing as it is to lose such a convenient weapon, this would be a beast far too wild for us to hope to control properly."
The other four of the Elder Stars scowled, but silently conceded the point nonetheless.

"Still, that being the case, perhaps we can use the fact that Straw Hat Luffy killed Omatsuri to our advantage," rumbled the one with a staff whose hair was styled in dreadlocks. "He hasn't killed before now, but now that he has we can prove that he is no better than any of the other scum that roams the seas."

"That's equally doubtful," growled yet another, birthmarks on his forehead, a large mustache on his face, and regret clear in his voice. "The world will no doubt sympathize with the surviving fool's plight, and rejoice in the demise of the man who had tortured him and so many others before him."

"Brief… the Baron…"

The five of them turned their attention back to the snail as Straw Hat's weakened voice rang out.

"He's gone now," Brief reassured him softly. "He'll never destroy another crew thanks to you."

"Hi… his crew…" he breathed. "Are… are they on… the island…?"

"What do you mean?" Brief asked in confusion.

"There's a large graveyard on this island," Papa spoke up. "That must be where the Baron buried his crew long ago."

Luffy inhaled several times before forcing out, "Please… bury him… with his crew…"

"STRAW HAT?!!" Brief exclaimed.

"ARE YOU KIDDING ME?!" Soundbite raged.

"After everything he's done? Why would you do such a thing?" Papa demanded.

"He… was alone in life. He… shouldn't be… alone in death. No one… deserves to be alone…" Luffy breathed.

A pause.

"Luffy…" Soundbite said in awe.

"Let… him be with his… crew."

Another pause.

"Mister Reindeer, Mister Doggy, and Miss Fox were right about you. You are a great man."

The atmosphere in the room was thunderous.

"Well, this is just perfect, isn't it?" the sword-wielder asked sarcastically.

The youngest of the five shook his head with a scowl. "Any chances of us turning the world against Dragon's son have just become nil. Perfect."

The mustachio's scowl matched his compatriot line for line. "I so very hate D.s…"
"Before I take his body... Soundbite? I think I remember you saying that your broadcast reaches the entire world, right?"

"Yeah?"

"May I...?"

"Take the speaker. SAY WHATEVER YOU WANT."

A short pause followed by the sound of fumbling with the microphone. And then...

"... People of the world. My name is Brief, Captain and sole member of the Toothbrush Mustache Pirates, and until today, unwilling inhabitant of Omatsuri Island. I had never thought it possible that I would be able to do this, but with the opportunity presented me now, I intend to share the truth of what this island truly was, utilizing what I have learned over my years as a prisoner here... and the final pieces I've put together today.

"Twenty-four years ago, a powerful pirate crew known as the Red Arrow Pirates was caught in a horrible storm. Their ship wrecked on this island, and the only survivor was Baron Omatsuri, the captain. On this island... he met a demonic, sentient plant known as the Lily Carnation, the flower of death and rebirth. The Lily attached to him in a form of symbiosis, and used his memories to create golems of his former crew, in exchange for food. Baron Omatsuri trapped himself in an illusion with his crew still alive, and set up this entire island as a masquerade to lure crews to. The plants, the landscapes, the staff, the Baron's arrows... pure illusions, created by the Lily.

"He sent out the sole Eternal Pose for the island time and again. Each time, a new group of pirates came and were tested by his Ordeals. At the same time, their bonds and minds were poisoned by the Lily, its influence present throughout the entire island. And after they were broken, they were swallowed alive and digested. This is the fate that befell my crew; the Baron made me watch it, and he spared not one of them despite my pleas. Unable to escape, I made my home in the underground of the island, safe from the Baron. Over the years, I watched many crews come to the island and fall prey to the Lily, despite my efforts to save them. The only group of pirates to escape was the Tearoom Pirates."

A new voice took his place.

"I am... well, call me Papa. I am the captain of the Tearoom Pirates... and I confess that I was a coward until today. We escaped the Goldfish Catching game and went into hiding on the island when we could not escape. My crewmates, my children, gave me the strength that I needed to be strong today, and with their help, along with the help of the Straw Hat Pirates, I slayed the Lily Carnation."

Brief spoke again.

"Monkey D. Luffy of the Straw Hat Pirates is the only man ever to face everything that the Baron could throw at him and triumph. We played only a small part in his victory. Crucial, I confess... but small. He now lies here, exhausted and greatly injured, but having succeeded in saving his crew. All of them are still alive. He has triumphed, and no more crews will ever fall victim to this most horrible of fates. Yet, I ask that for those of you who listen, for all of the men and women who came to this island only to be broken and killed more cruelly than imaginable... may they rest in peace now that they have been avenged."

Sengoku frowned before slowly reaching for the snail.
"What are you doing?" Garp asked quietly.

"A number of things that I never would have expected to do in my life," Sengoku replied, dialing a specific number. A moment later, the snail on the other end picked up.

"Who's calling?" Soundbite mumbled, his usually perky and energetic voice subdued and weary.

"This is Sengoku, Fleet Admiral of the Navy."

Dead silence fell on both ends.

"By my authority as head of the Marines, I hereby grant complete amnesty to all remaining members of the Toothbrush Mustache Pirates and the Tearoom Pirates for any crimes committed to this date, for their role in ridding our world of a great evil. And to Monkey D. Luffy, captain of the Straw Hat Pirates…" He paused as he gathered his thoughts and prepared himself for what he was about to say. "While outright amnesty is unfortunately more than I can grant to a crew that has caused as much of a stir as yours, I would be willing to offer you the position of Warlord that has been vacant since Crocodile's dismissal. The Five Elder Stars would doubtless be furious at me offering the position to a D., of all people, but considering what you have done, I would regardless be willing… were it not for the fact that I'm certain that you have no interest in the position."

The image of Monkey D. Luffy smiled and let out a weak chuckle. "No way. I already told Whitebeard, the Pirate King can't have a boss."

"That's what I thought," Sengoku stated, a ghost of a smile on his face. "I'm sending a fleet to find that island and ensure that any lingering traces of that monster are obliterated, so I suggest that you leave as soon as you and your crew have recovered. Consider this warning my thanks."

Sengoku made to hang up the snail, but Garp reached out to take the speaker. The Fleet Admiral allowed him to take it, and he spoke.

"Luffy… it's Gramps," he said quietly, tears streaming down his face. "I saw and heard everything. You fought incredibly. I… I'm proud of you, and I'm so glad that you're still alive."

"Heh… thanks, Gramps. Me too. So, does this mean you're alright with me being Pirate King?"

"Tch… cheeky brat," Garp chuckled weakly. "We'll talk about that when I'm not too happy to think straight. Expect me to pay you a visit as soon as I'm done making sure that monster never comes back."

With that, he hung up the snail.

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The six officers of Navarone remained silent as the sounds of the SBS slowly diminished, none on Omatsuri Island able to spare the thought that the broadcast was still going on, but nothing came through now apart from a welcome silence.

Finally, the red-haired man broke the silence, turning to his wife. "I believe that we've received all the indication we need, Jessica. Do you agree?"

The head chef of the base gazed at the fitfully sleeping Transponder Snail in the room for a moment before giving her husband a firm look. "Personally, Jonathan? Considering what we had to do to get to this point, I was ready to agree the moment I saw the proposition." She smirked wryly. "I'm glad some of your fisherman's patience has rubbed off on me over the years, because there's never going
to be a better opportunity to change things than this."

Drake shot confused looks between the top two of G8 in nervous confusion. "Ah… Excuse me, Commander, Chef Jessica, but… what are you talking about?" he asked in concern.

The married couple exchanged glances before focusing on the lieutenant commander. "Tell me, Drake: do you know the difference between a good Marine and a decent Marine?" Jessica asked.

Drake blinked, looking puzzled. "Uh… the difference in how well they do their jobs?"

"To an extent, that's true..." Jonathan nodded slightly as he conceded the point. "But... tell me, if I were to define it for you as such..." He opened a drawer in his desk, withdrawing the letter he had received from Cross and reading the significant section out loud. "'A good Marine follows his orders to the letter and sacrifices everything for the sake of Justice, while a decent Marine sacrifices everything for the sake of all... even Justice, if it comes down to it.' He gave his officers a significant look. "If I were to define it like that... which would you want to be?"

The officers glanced at one another as they tried to think things over for a bit before ultimately snapping to attention. Drake in particular looked Jonathan dead in the eye as he folded his arms. "Obviously I'd choose to be decent when you put it that way. Anyone in Navarone would say the same."

"Ourselves included," Cormac nodded, Holger and Henrick nodding in agreement as well.

"Then let me ask you something else: are you willing to prove it, even if it means risking your life at the hands of the ones you serve?" Jonathan asked, getting to his feet and staring his officers in the eyes one by one, his expression dead serious. "I've been asking myself that question ever since the Straw Hat Pirates left this base, and at this point, I've found my answer. Akainu alone is proof that the Marine Corps isn't everything it should be; I tricked him into believing that I supported his brand of Justice, and that's the only reason I'm still alive. I'm going to see what I can do to put a stop to it. The question is... Drake, Cormac, Henrick, Holger, are you all with me?"

The four of them stood there, staring slack-jawed at their commanding officer. It was a testament to the men's loyalty, however, that it was only a few seconds before they snapped into salutes.

"I will follow the Justice that you see fit to follow, Vice Admiral Jonathan," Drake stated firmly.

"Sir!" the other three officers chorused as they snapped into uniform salutes.

"Good. Then let's find out what this is all about," Jessica said, dialing the number on Cross' letter into the Transponder Snail. A few rings later...

"Pisces," stated a female voice.

"Who am I speaking to?" Jonathan asked, ignoring the oddity of what she said.

"...Password?"

Jonathan blinked, and glanced back at the note, only for Terry and Isaiah to earn his attention with their cries. The pair of them hastily wrote out a note, which Jonathan read out loud. "Um… Old Spice?"

The snail let out a sigh of relief before answering. "Correct. Vice Admiral Jonathan of Marine Branch G-8 on the island of Navarone?"
"Speaking. Also present are my officers, Lieutenant Commander Drake, Lieutenant Cormac, Ensign Henrick, and Chief Petty Officer Holger, and my wife, Navarone's head chef, Jessica."

"And what do you consider yourselves to be?"

"We are decent Marines, ma'am," Drake stated firmly, the other three echoing him.

"As he said," Jonathan stated. The snail smiled.

"You have no idea how happy and relieved I am to hear that," it sighed in relief, but then grimaced. "On the other hand, Cross is never going to let us hear the end of this one..."

A stern expression came across the snail's face.

"It's a small price to pay for something like this, Tashigi. Vice Admiral Jonathan. I am Commodore Smoker, codename Cancer, one of the cofounders of the organization MI4..."

On a certain island in an ocean that most would consider to be the end of the world, a certain pirate crew were morosely sitting around. The SBS broadcast hadn't ended, but little but silence had come after the two amnested pirate captains left to bury the Baron, to the point that their snail had fallen asleep, both to their and its great relief. None of the humans, though, had been able to fall asleep that night, still worried about the Straw Hat Pirates' fate; dead though the monsters were, Luffy was still heavily injured, and the rest of the crew had been in the midst of digestion. And so they were left to wait until dawn crept over the horizon.

"Aaaah..." the snail suddenly yawned, snapping all attention back to it as it slowly woke up and spoke in a voice that the world had feared (and hoped) was silenced. "Damn, that was a nice nap! I haven't slept so good in a while!"

"Tell me about it, Cross, I didn't think that the Merry could be... so... wait a second..." Nami's voice trailed off in confusion rising in shock. "This isn't the Merry! Where are we!? And what the hell am I wearing anyways!?"

"You!? What about me!?" Vivi demanded. "I look like a porcelain doll, and—! And... Carue, why are you sniffing me?"

"Because fo' sahm weason, you smeww wike wiwacs and wivah weeds."

"Wait, what!? Desert Goddess Number 12!? I swore that I'd only ever wear this concoction on my deathbed, and even then they'd have to fight my undead corpse to get it on me!"

"Well, I, for one, think that it smells delightful on you, my dear princess~!" Sanji cried jubilantly.

"Maybe that's exactly why she doesn't want to wear it, shit-cook."

"REPEAT THAT, MOSS-FOR-BRAINS!"

"Rise and shine, boys, we've slept long enough! WAKE UP!" Boss barked, followed by four splashes in swift succession. "Scuse me, I gotta go and teach these dipshits the penalties of sleeping in. Be right back!" And just like that there was yet another splash.

"Will you guys please calm down already!? You're giving me a headache, my head's pounding for some reason!" Usopp pleaded desperately. "Also, has anyone seen my goggles!? I can't find them
"Mister Reindeer!" Daisy cried happily.

"Wha—AH!" came Chopper's voice, the sound of a young girl slamming into his furry body coming across the connection. "Uh, w-who are you and why are you hugging me?"

"I'm right there with you, Chopper," Su said, halfway between groaning and purring. "Conis seems really huggy right now!"

"I don't know why, I'm just so-o-oooo happy to see you-u-u..." Conis sobbed joyously.

"Ah... not to lay it in there..." Lassoo spoke up hesitantly. "But, ah, I feel a few quarts low. As in 'I feel like I laid down enough fire for a commando unit' low!"

"I don't mean to alarm anyone..." the mystery crewmate cut in. "But does anyone quite remember what occurred... last night, judging by the sun's position? Because for my part, I find myself sporting a frankly disturbing gap in my memories."

"Eh? Tsk, of course I remember, woman!" Zoro scoffed. "Last night, we... ah... we..." He slowly trailed off in realization. "Wow, I must have really gotten into some good shit last night."

"Now you see exactly why I don't drink! Besides my opinion that all alcohol tastes like piss to me, anyway."

"... You don't remember anything either, do you Cross?" Nami blandly accused.

"Ah, ah, ah... SOUNDBITE!" the tactician yelped swiftly. "Soundbite sure as hell doesn't drink, and he hasn't said anything yet! Plus, if it's enemy action, with any luck they'd have overlooked him so long as he was smart enough to clam up. Fat chance, I know, but hey, a guy can dream! So, what do you say, Soundbite? Anything you want... to... uh... are you alri—?"

"BWAAAAAAAAAAH!"

"GAH! WHAT THE HELL, SOUNDBITE!?"

"I-I'M SOOORRRYY!" Soundbite sobbed miserably, clearly a mess of tears and snot. "I-I-I'M JUST SO HAPPY Y-YOU'RE all aliüüve! E-ESPECIALLY AFTER WHAT HAPPENED TO Luffy..."

"Eh? Luffy?" Nami blinked in confusion. "What are you—Hey, wait, where is Luffy? Why hasn't he said anything?"

"Oh, I see him, he's over there! I'll go and wake him up!" Usopp offered. "Hey, Luffy, do you remember—? Eh? Luffy? Why are you covered... in... AGH! GUYS, LUFFY'S HURT ALL OVER, IT'S BAD!"

"WHAT!?" the crew chorused in shock.

"HELP, WE NEED A DOCTOR!" Chopper started to sob before transitioning to a roar.

"CRAZY OR SANE, EITHER WORKS, JUST GET TO WORK, CHOPPER!" Sanji ordered.

"AGREED! BEGINNING THE OPERATION!"

"Ah, Cross?" Conis interjected nervously. "Maybe you should hang up the SBS. I doubt your
"Eh? Hang up the—!? Wait, how long has this thing been on!?"

"With any luck? Maybe all night," Lassoo suggested. "Why don't you try asking the world, maybe someone was willing to stay up long enough to tell us what the heck happened?"

"Yeah, that works. Alright, let's see... uh, hello, viewers. So, ah, Soundbite's bawling his eyes out, Luffy looks worse than after his fight with Foxy, and I would say that I feel like I've gone through a keg party, save that I don't have the headache to go with it... not to mention the fact that I never drink alcohol if I can help it in case of this exact scenario! Nobody seems to remember what happened last night, but it looks like the SBS has been running for a while... could anyone maybe call in and fill in the blanks for us?"

The captain reached for the device, dialed the number, and tapped his fingers against the receiver.

"Anonymous? Well, as long as someone can tell us... uh, anything, I guess. Alright, I think Soundbite's got the wherewithal needed to blur you, so go ahead and speak. Is there anything we can call you?" Cross asked.

"Let's just say I'm a friend," said Red-Haired Shanks, tears still falling from sheer joy and relief. "I... I suggest that you all settle in. This... this is quite the story."

And so it was.

Cross-Brain AN: Cut. Print. And that's a wrap. First things first: credit to HeroR for the dialog in the Five Elder Stars’ section. And second... Geeze, as much work went into this chapter as there was in making the actual movie...

Patient AN: Well, perhaps not that much...but the fact that we started working on this back in April after publishing Chapter 27 and only managed to put the final touches on it by today should give you an idea. And despite that, is this the only movie that we're going to write in?

Xomniac AN: Not even close! And those ones are gonna actually affect canon!...beyond how much this one will, anyways.

Cross-Brain AN: Yeah, the initial plan was for this chapter to have no lasting effects beyond being the final push needed for MI4 to become MI5, courtesy of Jonathan... but Sabo remembering from this ordeal made far too much sense not to put in. But aside from an increased respect for the Straw Hats from all of the places broadcasted, that's the extent of the changes; Omatsuri may be referenced briefly at times, but the nightmare. Is. Over. But unless something inconceivable but too good to pass up happens for Gold or any other movies, the rest of the movies we include will be entirely canon, in every way, shape, and form.

Xomniac AN: Well... this is embarrassing. We promise a post on midnight Sunday after exulting our dedication to our schedule, only to fall way late. Sorry about that, really, but an overseas family reunion combined with the fact that we've been working on this monster since April! I'd call that pretty damn justified, no?

Patient AN: Regardless, however, the fact remains that we've compromised our integrity twice in the past couple of weeks with missing our schedule. In light of that, starting next week, we shall be hearkening to Oda's update pattern. That is, This Bites! shall be on hiatus when One
*Piece* is on hiatus. We need to set more reasonable goals for ourselves, especially with us heading into one of the whammiest arcs in all of One Piece. So, God willing, we'll see you in the coming week. Look out for Chapter 833 to see if we do.

Hornet AN: I'm still not satisfied with this, but if I had my way we'd be scrapping most of the chapter and rewriting it, and that'd take another two weeks. Though… who's to say I can't rewrite it myself…

Well. Looks like Halloween is going to be quite spooky this year…

Xomniac AN: Eh, admittedly it's not quite as glorious as we originally anticipated, but when are they ever really? At the least, we managed to break 40K. And that's something to be proud of, no?

Patient AN: Perhaps so, Ego, perhaps so. But something to be more proud of is that we have now entered the ranks of the top 20 One Piece fics!

Xomniac AN: Heh, tell me about it! That's just flat out awesome. And with any luck… the top 15, 10, even 5 will come soon after! LET'S SHOOT FOR THE TOP, BABY! WOO!
Chapter 36: Tragedy Strikes! That Is The Sound Of Merry's Death Knell!

It had been a couple of days since we set off from the last island, and thoughts of our defeat at Aokiji's hands were still on everyone's minds. Let it not be said, however, that the Straw Hats were a crew known to mope or brood. Rather than letting things stew, everyone had gotten over it out of necessity to be strong for Robin in face of the trauma Aokiji had unearthed, and then pressed on by submerging themselves in training with my advice. With the extra knowledge and clear goals in mind for how to reach the next level of strength, it wasn't hard for everyone to move past the past and focus on both the present and future.

'Of course,' I thought murderously, curling my torso as I hung from the Merry's mast by my boots, with a well-sized weight hanging from my armored wrists and absolutely murdering my shoulders. 'The issue here is that the greater the gain you desire, the more and more pain that is required.'

Unfortunately (for me at any rate), due to the flesh of my limbs still being in the process of re-solidifying into a form I wasn't guaranteed to ruin just by flexing my biceps, Zoro's focus on my training had been diverted to my core muscles. And by his reasoning, if I couldn't strain all of my muscles, I'd have to compensate with the ones that I could strain, hence my current predicament.

Only the fact that it was this hell that had kept me conscious against Eneru and Aokiji kept me from hurling every invective I could think up at the swordsman. And even then, it was a close thing.

So, instead, I turned my thoughts to more pressing matters. Namely, the fact that every second we sailed was a second closer to Water 7, and with the approach of the sinking island also approached a lot of trouble. Sure, I was almost completely positive that I had braced Usopp for the possibility of losing the Merry, but Robin…

I suppressed a grimace as I surreptitiously glanced at where she was relaxing in her folding chair and reading one of her books. I wanted to trust Robin, I really did, but unfortunately, we'd rounded a creek and traveled into a whole new territory of mistrust. Rather than having to worry about her betraying the crew, now I had to worry about her betraying herself for our sake! And somehow? Somehow, watching out for Robin making a self-destructive move was even more nerve-wracking than watching for her trying to betray us wholesale.

And the worst part was that if my mistrust turned out to be well-founded, Robin's skills all but guaranteed that we wouldn't find out until it was too late and she'd already attempted to martyr herself, at which point the only way out would be the hard way. I grimaced as images of a pit in the ocean and a fleet of stupidly massive ships flashed behind my eyes.

The very, very, very hard way.

In the end, there really wasn't much I could do except make sure Chopper and Sanji stuck to her like glue and warn everyone of two things: first, to not fight the Franky Family in case of the remote (hopefully very remote, at that) chance that they hadn't become fans of the SBS, and second, to steer clear of the four undercover agents, though that'd be kept amongst my confidants on account of how they were the only ones who I knew were capable of reliably maintaining poker faces.

Of course, right now, I had little choice but to postpone those particular conversations until after we met Kokoro. After all, aside from Robin's quiet reading and Luffy's casual relaxation on the Merry's figurehead, everyone onboard was training.

Usopp had finally managed to finish Nami’s Perfect Clima-Tact, but she had only done a cursory confirmation of the staff's capabilities before she went to Donny to get used to the new shape. There
didn't seem to be much change from what I had seen coming, on account of how the Eisen Dial and its mechanisms fit into an extra interchangeable bulb on the butt of the weapon. In any case, if the way she was going against Donny was any indication, it seemed like the new form was even better for bojutsu than a traditional staff.

Conis was taking full advantage of the extra storage space that the clothes she borrowed from my wardrobe provided. Bazookas were obviously her weapons of choice, but she had spared no effort fitting as much other firepower as she could handle on her body. Pistols, Dials, shotguns, burn blades, even a full-sized rifle slung across her back. And Mikey was right alongside her, quickly becoming proficient with a pair of pistols. The way he was spinning them around, quite expertly I might add, I was just waiting for him to ask Robin to borrow one of her cowboy hats to complete the look. And beside both of them was Lassoo, who was test-firing the new Blaze mechanism Conis had installed in his gut. It was still a bit testy and his pillar wasn't as big as what Conis was sporting, but the superheated blasts he was belting out were still quite impressive.

Vivi and Carue were taking turns sparring with Raphey, the Dugong's size and skill proving an even match against Vivi's reach and Carue's speed; the two were improving fast, though like a lot of the crew, being confined to the Merry was limiting how much they could get done. Still, they were leaps and bounds ahead of what they'd been when we left Alabasta. At a guess, I'd say that they were of a level of strength appropriate for the Mr. 3 or Mr. 4 team.

Sanji, spurred on by his rivalry with Zoro, had managed to work out the Tempest Kick technique, though he was having trouble preserving the 'blade's' stability for more than a foot or so, after which the air harmlessly dissolved. He wasn't even content enough to name it. Hence, he was on the edge of the Merry, teeth gritted in concentration as he fired shot after shot. It was slow going, but I could see that every second he worked on it, the fissures in the surface of the ocean grew deeper and longer.

Zoro, meanwhile, said that he had worked on his Asura technique enough to be confident using it in combat, and had diverted his energy to other pursuits instead. Namely, the Iron Body technique. Leo was drafted to help him practice, which seemed to consist of the amphibian slamming his fists into Zoro's torso over and over again. Naturally, Zoro was barely flinching at the impacts, and if the fact that Leo was starting to flex his aching flippers was any indication, he was fast figuring out the secrets of the technique. He'd probably have figured it out sooner if Leo were using the flats of his swords, but the dugong had begged off on account of how he was afraid that the endeavor would damage his blades. Still, as Boss put it, it wasn't as though the endeavor wasn't training Leo's strength as well. Or at least, that was his experience, considering how he had strengthened his own flippers over the years.

Speaking of Boss, he was the only one not suffering at all from reduced space, having decided to try out his new Thermal Dart (which honestly didn't look that different, apart from the hook of his weapon looking a bit sleeker) against the local marine life. Luffy in particular had been happy with Boss tossing skewered fish after scorched fish onto the deck, along with allowing the occasional pummeled and insensate adolescent Sea King to float to the surface. In all honesty, Boss was tough enough already, but if the Heat Dial improved him that much... well, the Monster Quartet may be a thing after all.

Chopper, thankfully enough, had buried himself in the storage room and was working on expanding his chemical arsenal, at the same time studying how he could potentially tune down his Monster Point into something less likely to make Thriller Bark look more inviting than wherever he was turned loose. Unfortunately and unsurprisingly, he wasn't having much luck on that front, which meant we would have to hope that his new arsenal was enough that we wouldn't be dealing with a 36-foot-tall stupidly tough and powerful mad scientist if worst came to worst.
And last but most surprisingly, Usopp was practicing the Shave technique as he moved back and forth across the ship, dodging everyone's training sessions as he did so. However, the training was clearly just a side benefit. The sniper was more concerned with attempting to locate the source of some kind of sound that he swore hadn't been present before. He had tried asking Soundbite, but the snail had blown him off in favor of remaining ensconced in his shell, so as to focus more than ever on thinking about Awakened Devil Fruits. After weighing several pros and cons, Usopp had left him alone. Sadly, while his speed was exhibiting a marked improvement, his feverish movements and muttering, which were only getting worse as his leg pain apparently intensified, were quickly eroding the patience of some of the combatants.

"Where is it, where is it, where is it..." he muttered as Carue and Raphey hastily changed direction to avoid skewering him. "Dammit! It keeps coming and going!"

I cocked an eyebrow as I watched the show for a second longer before deciding to speak up, for his sake if nothing else. "Hey, Usopp! Just a suggestion, but I recommend that you work on your situational awareness next."

"Huh?" The sniper came to a dead stop as he looked up at me. "How come?"

I let my expression fall flat. "Because you're currently standing on Mikey's head."

"Eh?" Usopp glanced down in surprise. "Huh. So I am."

Several people paused in their training long enough to facepalm.

"Dude..." Mikey growled as he started to finger the new flintlocks at his side. "I respect you, but if you don't get off me soon, I'm gonna throw you off! And I mean the Merry!"

Usopp hastily complied, scrambling off of Mikey and zipping to the other end of the ship.

"But seriously, Usopp, what are you muttering about?" Sanji asked in irritation, turning away from the ocean and looking at him.

"Wha—? Oh, right, I only told Cross." Usopp promptly slapped a hand to his forehead. "See, I can hear some kind of a weird sound coming from somewhere on the ship. I don't know what it is, but it's distracting me from finishing my upgrades!"

"And Soundbite isn't helping you with that because?" Nami asked.

"Because he's focusing on training even more than Zoro is," I grit out as I focused on curling myself upwards. It made my gut hurt like hell, but it sure beat letting the blood flow to my head!

"Why not just put in earplugs or something?" Conis asked curiously.

"I tried that, but it's not going away! Just listen!"

Several sighs rang out around the deck, but ultimately, everyone paused their training and listened. For a second there was nothing. Then the sound came, clear as a bell: wood scraping against wood, like two planks rubbing together. It was... very irritating.

"Alright, now that you draw attention to it..." I trailed off with a grimace.

"Great, now it's going to be stuck in my head all day!" Nami griped as she dug a finger through her ear.
"See? So, maybe I could get some help finding—" Usopp began.

"Hey, guys, look! A frog doing the front crawl!"

All attention was promptly diverted from Usopp to Luffy and then to where Luffy was staring and pointing. And sure enough, there was a tan and white frog, heavily scarred with black hair in a sumo hairstyle, performing the front crawl in the water not far from us. There was no mistaking it: we'd just caught sight of Yokozuna.

And there was no chance in hell that I was going to pass up this glorious of an opportunity.

"Huh, that is a frog doing the front crawl," I noted casually.

"I'm actually impressed that a frog can do the front crawl," Donny commented with a slight tilt to his head.

"Anyone else curious about where the frog doing the front crawl is going?" Vivi asked.

"I'm actually more curious about why the frog is doing the front crawl," Lassoo shrugged.

"Maybe the frog is—!"

"Okay, this gag's lived long enough," Su deadpanned.

"What gag, COTTONTAIL?" Soundbite said as he finally decided to rejoin the living.

"The one where everyone's repeating 'the frog do—' OH, NO, YOU DON'T!" she snapped.

"SO CLOSE!"

I chuckled. "Good try, Soundbite," I commented, before raising my voice. "Alright, everyone, joking aside, that frog is the sign that our training time has expired! We've got one short stop coming up, and then we'll be landing at the next island later today! Start getting your shopping lists together, preparing the gold for landing… oh, yeah, and someone cut me down from here!"

"On it!" Leo volunteered as he drew a sword and started to tense his tail—!

"NonononoWAIT!" I yelped, waving my hands in protest, but too late. He leapt above me, swung his sword…

CLUNK! "OW!"

And I promptly found myself nursing what I was certain was a concussion.

"…I should know better than this by now," I grumbled matter-of-factly as I lay on my back. "I've tempted you-know-who enough times with how I word things that I should know better than to give it an opening like that. So, why, why do I keep doing it?"

"Because you're an idiot?" Zoro asked blandly as he looked down at me.

I was silent as I mulled that statement over before shrugging indifferently. "Eh, can't argue with that. Now, then!" I promptly ignored my screaming muscles as I sprang to my feet and snapped a finger forward. "Sorry, Nami, but I need to temporarily shanghai one of your duties because right now we need to follow that frog!"

"YEAH!" Luffy cheered emphatically.
"Sorry, Captain, he's got a tragic backstory, no grilling tonight."

"Awww…"

"Besides, frogs are terrible eating. Too many little bones," Zoro commented as he walked towards our armory/oar room, most likely to fish out the Dugongs' harnesses so they could tow the Merry.

"You're not supposed to eat them whole, moss-for-brains!" Sanji called after him.

While the Squad got themselves strapped up and prepared to dive into the waves, Usopp took the time to tap me on the shoulder. "Hey, Cross, while I'm sure from what you said that asking too much about that frog would fall under the 'spoilers' category—!"

"Indubitably," I nodded solemnly.

The sniper rolled his eyes at my dramatic tone before continuing. "—can you at least say how he?

"Watch it."

Usopp shivered as a vicious growl wafted over from Conis' general direction. "How he can do the front crawl?"

I mulled over my response for a moment before coming to my conclusion and shrugging. "In layman's terms, a long while back, someone showed him the technique and he practiced until he could do it."

"HA! You just defined how everyone's learned everything ever!" Boss barked jubilantly before turning his attention to his squad. "Now, then, enough lollygaggin'! C'mon, boys! Let's get to towin'!" And with that he dove over the edge and into the water.

"BOSS, YES, BOSS!" the four other Dugongs chorused before following their teacher.

A moment later, the Merry jolted forward and started following Yokozuna at a respectable clip, though there was a distinct cost, in the form of an unmistakable groaning sound coming from the deck below our feet. I nervously glanced down before hastily jogging up to Merry's figurehead and rubbing her neck.

"Just a little further, Merry, just a little more…" I muttered reassuringly. "As soon as we reach the next island, you'll be in the hands of the world's best shipwrights, I promise that it won't be long now." I leaned my forehead against the whitewashed wood, eyes closed and a grim smile on my face. "I swear… I'm going to do everything that I can to keep my word."

"…!"

"Wha—?" I jerked my head back in shock. For some reason, rather than the calm that a placated Merry would have produced, I felt a rush of sheer emotion shoot through me like Eneru's lightning. The feelings were many, but not a single one of them was good: fear, sadness, depression, misery, anger… Guilt. Regret.

"W-What the hell—!?" I breathed incredulously.

"Hey, Cross!"

I was snapped out of my confusion by the Merry jerking to a halt—with yet another pained groan at
I spared Merry a final glance before focusing on the dugong. "Ah… y-yeah? What is it, Boss?"

The martial-artist jabbed his thumb over his shoulder at the water. "There's a line of buoys floating in the water and something really weird floating beyond that, something the frog's getting on! Should we follow it?"

Before I could answer, Soundbite paled in terror on my shoulder as he craned his eyestalks to stare into the water before us. Specifically, at the silhouette floating below the surface. "You have GOT to be kidding ME…" he breathed numbly.

I processed the development for a moment before allowing myself a smug smirk. "Well, seeing how you've apparently figured out what's going on, shall we harmonize our response?"

The snail hastily recovered with a smirk of his own. "LET'S!"

I slid into a flawless jazzhands as Soundbite and I grinned eagerly. "Nooooo~!" we sang, holding it out for a few seconds before I brought my fingers together in a cut-off sign.

Boss was unamused. "Very nice, you two. Now, why don't you—"

"WHOA!"

"HOLY SHIT!"

"WHAT THE HECK IS THAT!?"

"Eh?" Boss and I started to look towards what the rest of the crew was talking about—

**WOOOT WOOOOOOOT!**

—And then it was just there.

The Puffing Tom was… it was… wow, it was seriously something. I mean, I'd ridden my fair share of trains in my life, I was thoroughly familiar with the subways of New York and Paris and the TGVs of France, but this… this was a whole different beast.

And by God, there was no other word to describe the Puffing Tom than 'beast'. The size, the speed, the sheer aura of power that the mechanical marvel exuded… it was like looking at the primal epitome of industry and technology!

This… This was no mere train. This was a man-made Wonder of the World!

It also didn't hurt my opinion that I was a particularly avid fan of steampunk.

The moment of awe lasted for just that, a moment, and then time started up again as the engine roared past us and down the tracks, swiftly approaching the giga-toad who was positioned on the rails, palm extended and teeth grit in preparation.

I sent an inquiring glance at Soundbite. "So, I'm guessing Kermit or—?"

"STOP, PUFFING TOM!"

My questions were cut off in a sharp gasp as the frog roared a very familiar line in a relatively familiar voice. Before I could do anything else, however…
"THWACK!

"GAH! DAMN IT!"

We were treated to the suddenly very un-funny sight of the large toad getting swatted aside by the unstoppable machine as though he were nothing, followed by the Puffing Tom swiftly chugging off into the distance, becoming nothing more than a pillar of steam in seconds.

I worked my jaw for a second as I processed what I'd just seen and heard before slowly glancing back at Soundbite. "...Schwarzenegger?"

"I may be a cheeky BASTARD, BUT I CAN'T SPEND THIS MUCH TIME WITH THIS CREW and mock conviction LIKE WHAT I JUST heard," Soundbite replied, shaking his head solemnly. He then allowed himself a tentative grin. "'Sides... Going by those SCARS? He'll be back."

That got a slight grin from me as I remembered the few flashbacks we'd gotten to this particular stretch of the sea. "Not if we have anything to say about it, he won't."

Boss finally got his jaw working again, gnawing on his cigar, and he gave me a searching look. "So... tragic backstory, huh? Care to share?"

"As soon as it becomes relevant, don't worry," I said dismissively, waving him off.

"Ah, 'scuse me, question?" Lassoo spoke up, raising a paw. "WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT THING!?"

I chuckled at the reaction. "Oh, ye of little experience. What you just saw was a steam-powered locomotive, more commonly referred to as a train, or in this case, a sea-train. It's the magnum opus and symbol of the island we're heading to next, Water 7, the greatest hub of shipwrights in the Grand Line. That train, the Puffing Tom, was the brainchild of the greatest of them all, a shipwright known as Tom. Frame of reference for how good he was: he built the Oro Jackson."

Robin, Nami, Vivi, and Sanji promptly gaped at me in shock, while everyone else onboard stared blankly at me.

"Roger's ship," I clarified with a sigh.

There were the dropped jaws.

"SO COOL!" the Kiddy Trio and the TDWS exclaimed together, looking after the train—actually, no, not quite. Usopp wasn't staring in awe; he had collapsed to his knees, sighing in sheer relief.

"Thank goodness," he said. "Now I see what you meant by this being the best chance we had for Merry, Cross, if we're heading to a place with shipwrights like that."

Aaaand just like that the atmosphere whiplashed right back around to solemn. And it brought the feeling I had before back to the forefront of my mind. Shaking my head, I looked down at the figurehead again. "There, Merry, you hear that? Is that enough to convince you that I'll be able to —?"

"...!"

"GAH!" I yelped, enough emotional force slamming into me that I actually jumped back—
"THUNK!"

"WhoawhoawhoawhoaSHIT!"

"THWACK!"

—bumped into the railing of the forecastle and unfortunately overbalanced, promptly falling ass over teakettle and onto the far far far too solid deck below.

I lay groaning upside down for a moment with my ass hanging over my head before glancing up(?) at my crewmates with a slightly confused look. "I'm… not the only one who felt that, right?"

"No, Cross, you're not," Zoro said quietly, and the distinctly bothered expressions on my crewmates' faces and the fact that Lassoo, Su, Carue, and the TDWS were curled up on themselves were enough to show that that blast of sheer emotion had affected everyone.

"I'm certain that I don't want to know the answer to this…” Robin started in an uncharacteristically shaky voice. "But what in the world was that?"

"That was unpleasant, was what it was!" called an older woman's voice from nearby. All attention turned towards the nearby building rising above the water that we'd somehow missed.

Its owner was a tubby woman with long, frizzy light green hair, a large purple cap, a pink jacket, and a purple suit with khakis. A bottle of something alcoholic was in one hand, and contrary to my expectations, she was not smiling; the grim look on her face gave every implication that 'unpleasant' was an understatement.

Which was made particularly clear by the green-haired girl and blue rabbit lying beside her, white-eyed and foaming at the mouth.

"You felt that too, Granny?" I asked quizzically, to which I received a slap upside the head from Vivi.

"Seriously, Cross, I'd expect that kind of bluntness from Luffy, not you!" she said in astonishment.

"Eh, don't worry about it," Kokoro shrugged and waved her hand with a chuckle. "Lots of people call me Granny, I don't mind. I like it, even! Makes me feel respected."

"Whereas you continue to be far too impulsive without considering all the facts of the matter," I replied to the princess.

"I—but—you—that—!" Vivi started to sputter before settling on thwapping me with another dopeslap and marching back to Carue.

"So, how many times does that make, Soundbite?" Zoro asked.

"Crocodile, Octavio, RATCHET—!"

"HOW THE HELL WAS I SUPPOSED TO KNOW THAT THAT BASTARD WAS OUT OF HIS MIND!?"

"Aaaaand RANDOLPH."

Vivi opened her mouth… and shut it with a click and a blush. "I… have no viable excuses…"

"SO this makes FIVE!"
"Well, at least this time didn't result in us all nearly getting killed," Nami muttered.

"Ahem?"

A cough brought our attention back to Kokoro, who lowered her fist from where it was in front of her mouth. "I suppose I should introduce myself better: my name is Kokoro." She nodded her head back to her insensate pet and relative. "And this is my granddaughter Chimney and our cat Gonbe. We're the caretakers of this switch station. The reason why they're both unconscious is that yes, we felt that. It wasn't enough to have that snail of yours bring up some bad memories by giving Yokozuna a voice—" I winced. "—but then… well, I've been in this business for a long time, young man," she said, staring at us with an expression of stone-cold sobriety. "I haven't felt a ship scream in agony for years."

And there went the humor again. Seriously, I knew that this arc was meant to be one of the more depressing ones, possibly the most besides everything between Sabaody and the timeskip, but did that have to start now?

"Before you potentially chastise us for pushing her past her limits, believe us, we know that she's hurting," I hastily replied as we docked Merry beside the station. "We're headed straight for Water 7 to patch her up, no detours and no other objectives."

'Not if I can help it, anyway…' I mentally added.

She stared at me curiously for a moment, and then… then her expression contorted in grim realization. "You don't know yet."

The far too gentle tone of voice all but froze the blood in my veins. Apparently, yes, it did have to start now.

"…What do you mean, we don't know yet?" Usopp asked quietly.

Kokoro sighed tiredly, and then—

Re-re-note to self: age equals badass. I should have been able to reason that considering her stalwart performance at Enies. But if that wasn't enough, the fact that she jumped from the station onto the deck of the Merry with no sign of fatigue or pain whatsoever was a fresh reminder. Unfortunately, she still had that uncharacteristically serious look on her face, which prevented my surprise from lasting more than a second.

"I'm sorry to tell you this," she said grimly. "But the only time a ship could be in that much agony is if the keel was damaged beyond repair."

There was no warning, no preamble, just… it just hit us like cannonfire. Half of the crew bowed their heads, while the rest had looks of devastation on their faces. And me, personally? I felt as if the ground fell out from under me. A thoroughly apt comparison going by how I collapsed to my knees.

Usopp was the first to get his wits back about him, shaking his head in denial. "N-No, no! T-That, that can't be right!" Usopp denied. "W-We talked to her! W-We talked to Merry herself! Her Klabautermann! S-She said that she was hurt, yeah, but that—"

"But that she'd be able to tough it through for all your sakes?" Kokoro asked,

We looked at her in shock, and she sighed. "I told you, I've been in this business for a long time. While I can't say I've ever seen a Klabautermann myself, I've heard enough tales and seen enough ships that had them; it's a foregone conclusion that any ship that could give off that much emotion
would be able to manifest him- or herself."

"…This probably isn't the time, but I thought all ships were female," Donny pointed out.

Kokoro shrugged. "It depends on the builder, the crew and the ship itself, though honestly, unless the ship does come alive, it's just aesthetic." She shook her head firmly. "We're getting off topic here. Listen, I know that I might not look it, but I know what I'm talking about here: your ship must have loved you a lot to continue on this far, but every story I've heard went the same way: ships only fix themselves and show themselves when they're already doomed."

"But that's not possible! Look around! She's still in one piece, she's still sailing!" Chopper protested. Kokoro looked at him.

"You're the doctor, right? Let me make an analogy for you: the keel of the ship is its spine. Any other part of the boat can be repaired or replaced, but if the keel cracks, that's a death sentence; it's only a matter of time from there before the ship splits in two."

"B-But how can you know that her keel is injured!?" Conis pleaded. "S-She said that it was hurt, yes, but—!"

"I know because I can hear the same thing that you all have been hearing for awhile now…" Kokoro sighed grimly. "That creaking sound… it's not just any two planks, or some random issue. That's a constant cry of pain that proves that your ship, no matter how much you love her, is already dead in the water. That's the sound of two halves of a keel grinding together."

It felt like time froze for us as we stared at the station-master in stunned silence, the only noises present being the sound of waves lapping against the station and our beloved ship… and the tortured echo of wood rubbing ringing in our ears.

"You can't be serious! There's no way that her keel isn't still in one piece!" Raphey objected at last.

"Yeah! We've dived under this ship more times than we can count, and we've never seen any damage to her keel! Just solid wood and metal plating from repair work!" Mikey said assertively.

Kokoro sighed and glanced at the dugongs. "And… have you ever looked under the plating?"

The implications of that statement sunk in with all the speed and impact of Chopper's syringes: if that plating had covered up her cracks, then that meant that they happened back when…

"Merry… n-no, you-you're wrong! You have to be wrong! Merry—!" I shook my head desperately as I stared at Kokoro. "M-Merry, s-she said that she was fine, t-that she'd hold on! Y-You can't…" I fought to keep the tears out of my eyes. "No… damn it… No! Merry…"

I looked away from Kokoro, struggling to my feet and staring up at the figurehead. "Merry, please, tell her she's wrong, tell her, tell us you're as strong as ever! I-I know it's not fair to ask but… just for a second, just for a second. Tell us she's wrong. Please tell us she's wrong."

For a few moments, there was nothing but absolute silence, stillness…

And then she was just there, standing before us, a translucent spectre that radiated sadness.

Kokoro's bottle fell out of her hand and spilled onto the deck, and everyone else stiffened in shock. Merry's head was bowed so that even her mouth was hidden from view.
And then… she spoke just two words.

"...I'm sorry."

Cross-Brain AN: Yep! We're just gonna leave it at that for now! Sorry that the chapter was so short, but hey, time constraints and all that, plus losing one's job over bullshit can be a bitch. Still, look at it this way: you just have that much more to look forward to in the next chapter!

Part 2

Cross-Brain AN: Oh, come on, did any of you actually think that we were going to leave it at that? For shame, for shame. The cliffhanger is par for the course, sure, but the word count? Please, our standards are so much higher than that!

The Klabautermann disappeared as quickly as she had come. And that was the moment where the more sensitive among our crew lost the ability to hold their emotions back.

Consequently, ten minutes after meeting Kokoro found everyone on the crew except Zoro, Sanji and Boss stewing in misery, one way or another. Robin kept some semblance of composure, but even she couldn't hold back from crying. Soundbite had gone into silent sulking, tears trickling down his eyestalks. Everyone else was either sobbing miserably or still stuck deep in shock.

Except for me, given the fact that after a couple of minutes of crying I'd flipped my emotions to the opposite end of the spectrum and slammed myself straight into rage. Rage at Merry for lying to us, rage at the world for how stupidly, stupidly unfair this was… and rage at myself for failing. Sure, I was still clinging to some stupid hope that Franky would be able to find something in the black market that could help us with how much gold we had to spend: a Devil Fruit, a miracle fix-all, something, anything!

But in the end, the revelation that I hadn't been able to keep her keel from cracking… that my efforts to change something, to make things better, were all for nothing?

Magma and hell and evil and war war WAR!

"Damn it damn it damn it damn it!" I cursed viciously as I clutched at my skull.

"G-Granny, come on!"

I glanced over at Usopp as he pulled himself out of his despair and started pleading with the impassive station mistress as she chugged her bottle.

"Isn't there anything we can do to help?!" the sniper begged, tears streaming from his eyes. "A-A Devil Fruit, an ANYTHING—?!"

"There isn't," she replied, though she was noticeably less firm than she had been before; Merry's appearance had definitively shaken her, and going by the way she was swishing the last dregs of her bottle in front of her, she was definitely of the opinion that she needed a fresh one. "Do you think you're the first crew to ask? The first to love their ship so much that they'd do anything to keep sailing with them? Trust me, I know what I'm talking about: There are no Devil Fruit powers either nearby or even in the general waters that can fix it, no methods to permanently mend a keel, no techniques to replace it, nothing. There aren't many afflictions that the world's finest shipwrights can't fix, but a cracked keel is one of them. I'm sorry, I truly am, but your ship, strong and brave as she is… is done for."
Aaand that was officially my fucking breaking point.

SLAM!

The rest of the crew jumped and looked over at me as I ground my knuckles into Merry's neck-brace. "For fuck's sakes, you stupid, stupid, stupid goat…" I spat. "What the fucking hell were you thinking!?"

"She was thinking that she loved you." I shot a halfhearted glare over my shoulder at Kokoro, who was watching me evenly, and with more than a little pity. "She was thinking that she loved you all, and that if you knew when it happened, you would compromise yourselves trying to help her. And, well… the ultimate mission of any ship is to keep their crew safe. She wouldn't want you to sacrifice yourselves for a lost cause."

My arm quaked as I pressed my fist harder and harder into the metal plate. "I... I promised her..." I hissed tearfully.

Kokoro shrugged indifferently as she knocked back what little of her drink she had left. "Sorry, but I can't help you there. Personally, it sounds like a discussion to be had between you and your god. Or, well..." She waved her hand casually. "Your lack thereof, anyways."

I stiffened in response to that, frowning as a thought occurred to me—

CHOMP!

"OW?!" I yelped as I snapped my hand to my neck.

"ARE YOU really willing to risk it?" Soundbite snarled around the chunk of flesh he was gnawing.

I frowned as I considered the situation, and what could possibly go wrong, but the images of Merry burning in the snowfall and her apology that I had just seen stayed in the forefront of my mind.

"Only as a last resort, but considering the alternative?" I shook my head sadly. "I honestly can't rule it out yet."

Soundbite grimaced, but released my neck; there was no doubt which of the two evils was lesser, though I knew it was about as likely that B.R.O.B. would ignore me as it would help me. I then directed my attention back to the deck, where Zoro seemed to be running interference for Kokoro's curiosity.

"So... there's really no choice but to get a new ship?" he asked seriously.

Kokoro shook her head somberly, and with considerable reluctance, I turned towards the crew, moving away from the figurehead and down to the main deck. "Either we let her die with dignity or we run her into the ocean. And I think we all know which one she wants... demands we pick."

"Are you saying we should abandon a member of our crew, Cross?" Luffy growled dangerously.

"Luffy..." Nami softly interjected before I could say anything. "The choice... either we leave her behind and let her go to sleep peacefully or all of us die along with her. And any other day I'd be alright with that, but..." She trailed off helplessly.

"This... This is a choice that a captain has to make, Luffy," Vivi said, sadly but firmly. "I understand better than anyone not wanting to let any of the ones you care about die. But..." She glanced at me meaningfully. "The world... it just doesn't work like that. The only thing we can do is—" Her voice
broke, and she bit her knuckle in a clear attempt to keep from breaking down in tears.

"...In the aftermath of Blackbeard's attack..." Chopper spoke up solemnly. "There were just so many wounded. So many injured, so many dying..." The Zoan slowed his breathing in an obvious effort to keep calm. "Doctorine used it to teach me the hardest and most vital lesson a doctor can ever learn." Chopper looked up with a hard glint in his eyes. Only... it wasn't madness. Just cold, clinical finality. "Triage. The practice of sorting patients by severity. Of choosing who you try and save. Of... Of recognizing a lost cause, for the sake of others." He shook his head as he remembered the day. "I've never forgotten what I learned: that no matter how good you are, no matter how skilled or how many resources you have at your disposal, you can never manage to save everyone. Sometimes, the kindest thing you can do is just... make their death as painless and dignified as possible."

Luffy bit his lip, trembling with repressed rage and sadness as he mulled the words over. Slowly but surely, he looked around the deck. His eyes fell on Sanji, whose hair shadowed his eye while he attempted to light a cigarette, the lighter flickering as his hands shook. He looked at Boss, who mimicked the motion with a cigar. He looked at Conis, who snapped her head away, her face pained as she no doubt thought of all the souls who'd made the mistake of landing on Angel Beach.

Finally, he looked at Usopp. The sniper's expression was somewhere in the middle of anger and anguish, but he seemed completely unable to speak. After a minute, he finally opened his mouth, but suddenly paled. He looked as if he'd just seen a—

Luffy and I snapped our heads around to follow his line of sight, but there was nothing. Nothing but the ship and the horizon. We looked back at him, and slowly, some semblance of acceptance came over his face. Sighing, Luffy looked back at Kokoro.

"...Alright. We'll get a new ship," he said, his tone colorless and empty.

The old woman kept an eyebrow up as she watched us before sighing and shaking her head. "In my opinion, if you want to do good by her, the best thing to do is take her to Water 7. Let her see you on to your next ship and watch you set sail. After that... I promise you, I will personally make sure that she's put to rest with all of the honor that she deserves."

"...We'd appreciate that, Granny Kokoro," Usopp said quietly.

"It's no less than she's earned; I've witnessed a lot of bonds of love between ships and crews in the past, but yours is easily the strongest I've ever seen," Kokoro nodded firmly. "But, in the meantime... you're going to need a new ship before you leave the island. There are plenty of good models to go off of, and I'm guessing that you have all of the gold that you need. I can give you a good reference, help you get the best ship money can—"

"Granny," I cut in sharply. I had to fight tooth and nail to keep my voice steady; what I was saying felt like I was accepting defeat, but... if all was said and done, if there really was nothing we could do, then I had to take advantage of this while I could. "We don't need the best. We're sailing this ocean for one purpose above all else: to reach Raftel so that our captain can become King of the Pirates. If... If we need to get a new ship—"
"You do," Kokoro confirmed solemnly.

My hand snapped into a fist, but I forced myself to nod. "Our new ship… it can't be something run-of-the-mill. The best' is a plateau shared by a lot of ships worldwide and it's a valid one, a fine one, sure, but for us… the best' just isn't good enough. We need…" I forced myself to suck in a deep, calming breath as I tried to get my thoughts straight. "We need something else entirely. Something unprecedented, something…" I shrugged helplessly. "Something on par with the Oro Jackson herself. The pinnacle of shipbuilding, something that rewrites the entire book. Right here, right now, we need to go beyond the best. We need… we need the awe-inspiring, the unique… we need the ultimate."

Kokoro stared at me, then she turned to stare at Luffy. Tears still flooded the rubber man's eyes, but his usual grit was back. Finally, she heaved a sigh as she tilted the brim of her hat down. "This damn company is either blessed or cursed, and I can't tell which…" she muttered to herself before giving us all a serious look. "Wait here." With that, she promptly jumped back to the station and headed inside.

As soon as the door closed, I looked back at the crew, to see several questioning looks. I rolled my eyes before figuring out how to respond. "When Tom was still alive, he was the head of a company known as Tom's Workers. It was a small company, with only three people in it besides him: his two apprentices, and his secretary. Take a wild guess as to who said secretary was and is."

Even Luffy gained a look of understanding.

"At a guess, she'll be directing us to his apprentices in order to make us a new ship?" Robin divined.

"Bingo," I nodded in solemn agreement. "If anyone can make a ship worthy of succeeding Merry, then it's Franky and Iceburg. Of course…" I allowed myself a weak but nonetheless cheeky smile. "The real challenge will be actually getting them to cooperate, considering that they're… well, not as bad as Zoro and Sanji, but not too far off."

Everyone's faces immediately fell at that.

"We're doomed," Usopp sighed morosely.

"Hey, hey, I said they're not as bad as those two dipshits! After all…" I grinned slightly. "At the end of the day, beneath all the bullshit, they consider each other best friends."

"So, basically, not anything like us at all," Sanji deadpanned.

"Not even remotely," Zoro confirmed in an equally flat tone.

"Geeze, Cross, are you an idiot or something?" Luffy asked curiously.

"Now, now, remember, guys: you haven't seen everything I've seen," I said, before allowing my smile to grow dangerously smug as the word 'yaoi' flashed through my mind. "In fact, I've seen a lot of evidence that—MMPH?!"

"I'm sorry, Cross, but considering that you had that look on your face when you were about to insult Whitebeard, I have no doubt that this is for your own good," Robin said sweetly.

"SPOILSPORT!" Soundbite raged as I tried to wrench the flowery limb away from my mouth.

"Nagagagaga! Just like the Straw Hats, bouncing back from tragedy as easily as rubber."

All eyes turned back to the station, where Kokoro had readopted her typical wide smile. She leapt
back onto the Merry, and held out her hands. One held not one, but two envelopes, and the other had a few blank pieces of paper.

"These letters are addressed to Iceburg, mayor of Water 7, and Franky, head of Water 7's underworld. The two of them are the best shipwrights you'll ever find, and I go way back with both of them. Give them these messages, and they'll build you a ship worthy of the Pirate King. And bring some money with you when you go to see them too, at least to show that you're good for it! My word will get you in the door, but shipbuilding's still an expensive business, no matter who's in your corner!" She grinned at Luffy. "Between you and me, I met Roger way back when. And you're a lot like him; I wouldn't write up letters like this for just anyone."

That, above all else, managed to alleviate the depression among the crew, as Luffy smiled like the sun. "Shishishi! Thanks a lot, Granny!"

"Nagagagaga, don't mention it," Kokoro said, waving us off before snapping up a finger. "But! Know that my help doesn't come free! I want something in return." She paused for effect, then held out the blank papers with her iconic grin. "Autographs from the world's first radio stars, one copy for Chimney, one for Gonbe, and one for me."

I eyed the rest of the papers she was holding. "And the extras?"

Kokoro's grin widened impishly. "Rainy day fund! My bet's that the future Pirate King's autograph is gonna be worth something one day!"

Nami promptly adopted an aghast expression and slapped a hand to her forehead. "Why didn't I think of that?!"

That particular statement drew a load of unbidden chuckles from us, and that alleviated a lot of the remaining tension.

A few flourishes with ink later—which involved Carue demonstrating that even royal ducks knew calligraphy, Soundbite deciding to make his bite marks his signature, the Dugongs sketching their weapons, and Lassoo and Su leaving pawprints—Kokoro had her stack of sheets.

"Nagagaga! Well, looks like I'm all set for this Christmas!" Kokoro chuckled as she looked over the papers before shooting us a salute. "Thanks a lot, you all! Happy travels and the best of luck! I'll see you again in a couple of days!" And with that, she prepared to jump off.

"Hey, hold on a sec, Granny," I said hastily as a thought occurred to me. "Let me get you a little something extra for all of this. Conis, do you have any of those pictures left?"

A grin instantly stretched over the angel's face as she started rummaging through her pockets. "As a matter of fact, I do," she said, drawing out a familiar piece of paper and flicking it to the stationmaster. "Here, Granny Kokoro. This is a picture of the tyrant Eneru when he fought Luffy."

Kokoro took one look at the picture of Luffy kicking Eneru in the gut and fell onto her back, laughing her head off. We all stole a glance at the picture as well, and the resulting laughter helped to lighten the mood even more.

After that, we set out from the switch station, following the sea-train tracks towards the metropolis waiting for us relatively close by. With the mood somewhat more upbeat, I was content to let myself stare off into the distance without a care in the world. At least, until I was wrenched back into the present.

"So, Cross..." Su said as she leapt up onto the railing, giving me a curious glance. "Anything you
"You want to tell us about what's coming up next, or would you rather we all be taken by surprise?"

"You mean besides the run-of-the-mill madness and craziness?" I said, smirking wryly before shrugging and turning around to look at my friends. "But, ah, seriously, if the Captain's alright with it…?"

Luffy started to say something, only for Nami and Zoro to grab his cheeks and yank. "Ah… How much do you think you need to tell us, Cross?" he asked through his stretched mouth.

"Not much, Luffy, just a warning about one group that could be the difference between us making them our friends or our enemies," I reassured him.

Luffy blinked thoughtfully for a second before shrugging. "Alright, that's fine, then." And with that, our first and second mates let his mouth snap back into place.

"Good boy," Nami deadpanned.

"Great!" I clapped my hands together and rubbed them eagerly. "So! To start, like Kokoro said, Franky is the head of Water 7's underworld, pretty much the quirkiest and most likeable mafia boss you'll ever meet, if you can even call them a proper mafia. Odds are that he and his followers, a group of semi-organized—!" I hesitated slightly as I considered things. "Ah, make that quarter-organized—!" I thought a little harder on the matter. "Ah… anyway, hopefully he and the band of thugs called the Franky Family have a high opinion of us from the SBS. But on the off chance that they don't… well, just try to avoid anyone wearing black with pink stars and strangely designed goggles. The Franky Family makes their living off of hunting bounties and dismantling ships, so if they don't like us? They'll only see beri signs."

"You think we can't handle a bunch of thugs, Cross?" Boss said, sounding offended by the implication.

"Nonono, 'handling them' is the exact problem here!" I waved my hands in a panic. "They may be pushovers compared to us, but Franky isn't, and he's easily as protective of his own as we are. If we harm his family, he's going to want revenge, and considering how we need his help if we want Merry's successor to have even half a chance at surviving the true maritime hell that's coming, having him as our enemy is the last thing we need."

"Alright, pink stars and weird goggles, got it," Sanji nodded in understanding. "And what about Iceburg, anything to worry about on his end?"

"Oh, Horus, no, he's known and beloved by everyone on the island. He can be a bit odd at times, sure, but apart from that, he's a perfect saint," Vivi said.

I looked at her in surprise. "You met him?"

"We stopped by Water 7 on the way to and from the Reverie, and Iceburg always greeted us," Vivi explained with a casual shrug. "It wasn't for long, mind you, just a confirmation that our needs were met, but the impression I got from him and literally anyone on the island that we asked was that it was impossible to dislike the man." She then frowned as a thought struck her. "Unless you know otherwise?"

"Oh, no, no," I denied hastily. "That's pretty much him in a nutshell: one of the best people you'll ever meet, and honestly, I can't be sure if that oddness he shows is real or just obfuscating stupidity."

"I didn't come up with the term, Robin. But, yeah, it'll be easy to find him, and odds are that Kokoro's recommendation, however sloppily written, will be all that we'll need," I reassured him, before turning around and heading towards Merry's storage room. "Anyways, that's the only warning the general crew's got to worry about for now. Zoro, Nami, Vivi, I've got a bit more to tell you guys."

"So you mean you're not even trying to be subtle about the fact that you're hiding stuff from us now!?!" Usopp sputtered.

"Eeyup!" Soundbite and I chorused as I courteously opened the door for Vivi, who curtsied exaggeratedly in thanks.

"Boss, you and your students try to ease Merry along as much as you can; make sure we stay by the tracks," Nami offhandedly ordered before she and Zoro entered as well.

"I do not agree with this arrangement!" Usopp shouted desperately.

"AGREED!" the TDWS chorused.

"Your concerns are duly noted," I said to them with a cheeky grin before pulling the door shut.

Soundbite needed no prompting to deploy the Gastro-Scramble as the door closed. I was silent for a moment before rapping my fist against my forehead with an angry sigh. "You know, all snark aside, the only reason I'm not telling them this is that I can't trust anyone but you guys to act natural under this sort of pressure."

"That bad, huh?" Zoro asked.

"Worse. Tell me, Vivi… have you ever heard of the Cipher Pols?"

The princess stiffened. "They're… meant to be the World Government's primary intelligence gathering organizations, highly covert and highly deadly." Her face paled as she connected the dots. "T-They're on Water 7?! That's not good, not good at all! Which one is it? Six? Three? One?"

I bowed my head grimly. "If only… it's number Nine."

The blood promptly drained from my female friends' faces, while Zoro merely stiffened.

"The assassins that kill anyone that the World Government deems a threat? That organization actually exists?" Nami demanded.

"You have to be mistaken, please tell me you're mistaken!" Vivi whimpered miserably.

I shook my head in denial. "Sorry to confirm your worst nightmares, but the boogeymen known as CP9 are all too real. Their base of operations is the Government's judicial island, Enies Lobby, and they're the original masters of the Six Powers. These guys aren't just assassins, they're full-blown living weapons. Four of the agents are undercover in the city, and have been for the last five years. And our arrival? It's going to be the trigger for them to break cover and finish their mission."

"And what mission would that be, Cross?" Zoro asked sternly.

I winced. This was not going to go over well. "Water 7 has been the global center of shipwrighting for centuries. Even stretching all the way back to the Blank Century itself. Since then, it has been home to a very, very specific heirloom that has been passed down from master to apprentice for generations. An heirloom which, in the wrong hands, could change the face of the world. This
selfsame heirloom is what the agents have been subtly scouring the island for for almost half a decade."

Soundbite swallowed heavily as he eyed me nervously. "**W-What is IT?**"

I reached up and tipped the brim of my hat down so that it shadowed my eyes. "The blueprints for the most powerful battleship ever conceived, which has devastated innumerable lives over the years without ever seeing the light of day: Pluton."

Soundbite, Nami and even Zoro paled, as I thought they might, but Vivi…

Vivi's expression practically warped, morphing into a twisted combination of both horrified, bloodless apprehension and complete and utter outrage. "That fucking weapon..." she hissed.

"Don't worry, don't worry," I raised my hands placatingly. "The blueprints will be destroyed before we're done and only one key to that thing will be left in existence, and it'll be well out of anyone's reach. Barring any completely unforeseen circumstances, Pluton will never bother us again, alright?"

"And what's the other—?!” Vivi began, before falling silent as she noticed my thumb pointing over my shoulder at the door. "…ah. And you're sure—?"

"Ohara burned because of the damn Weapons. Trust me, she hates having that knowledge in her head as much as you do," I informed her. "But… that's not to say that nothing can make her use it. That's the biggest risk we're going to have on Water 7. CP9 was in charge of destroying Ohara with a Buster Call. And now, their chief has either been granted the authority to activate another one or he's stolen it for himself. In the end, it doesn't really matter: that call goes out, the island it went out on burns. And if Robin finds out about that…"

"She'll run for the hills because she thinks we're not strong enough to stop it…" Nami divined soberly, which got a grimace out of me in return.

"Worse than that: because she thinks we're not strong enough to stop it, she'll turn herself over to certain death in a misguided attempt to try and save the rest of us. And if that happens, there will only be one course of action we can take to save her. And epic though it would be, I think I speak for all of us when I say I'd rather avoid having to storm Enies Lobby." I allowed myself to relax a bit as a grin that was equal parts goofy and eager stretched across my face. "No matter how fun or cathartic it might be…"

Vivi allowed a slight line of drool to slide out of her mouth as she stared at nothing. "Yeah… seeing a whole Government island burn would be pretty awesome…” she mused before hastily shaking her head. "But, ah, no, I think we'd rather avoid that if possible. So, what are we supposed to do?"

"Chopper and Sanji will be assigned to watch Robin like hawks, and the five of us will need to avoid the four agents as much as possible: Kalifa, Iceburg's blonde secretary, which is why Sanji isn't in here; Blueno, a bartender with his hair done up in ox horns, close friend of a lot of people on the island; Kaku, a shipwright with a nose like Usopp's but square instead of round, very well-respected; and above all, Rob Lucci, a stern-faced shipwright who only speaks through ventriloquism with his pigeon, also well-respected." I sharpened my glare. "I cannot stress this enough: even if worst comes to worst, no matter what happens, no matter what… do not, not challenge Rob Lucci unless you want to die."

"Is he really that bad, Cross?" Zoro asked with a hint of eagerness. I responded by leveling a chilling glare at him.
"Don't even think about it, Zoro. Luffy is the only one who has even the remotest of remote chances at beating him, and even then, it was a close thing; he was pushed to and far past his limits, to the point that after he dealt the finishing blow, he barely had enough energy left to speak, much less stand. And Lucci brought him to that point, without weapons, without trickery, without any sort of special abilities to warp the fight. All he has is sheer brute force, backed up by the Six Powers and the Cat-Cat Fruit, Model: Leopard."

Zoro grimaced ferociously, and I had the distinct impression that he was thinking something in the vein of 'I need more training.'

"Sides, if things do go south, you'll be getting your fill through Kaku. He's a real swordsman; some Devil Fruit bullshittery, but apart from that, a worthy challenge. Satisfied?"

Zoro's feral grin was all that I needed to see.

"So, avoid those four as much as possible if we want to stay alive, easy enough. Anything else that we need to know?" Nami asked.

"Ah, let's see..." I started counting down on my fingers. "Well, Kaku and Kalifa don't have powers yet, their fruits are waiting at Enies Lobby, so that's a bullet dodged. But Blueno ate the Door-Door Fruit, which lets him turn anything he touches into a door. Extremely useful for assassinations. Besides that..."

I did a quick mental review, and then my eyes widened. "Actually, there is one more thing, though more annoying than dangerous. Iceburg's right-hand shipwright, a cigar-smoker with enough ropes up his sleeve to build a house out of them named Paulie, might try to take some of our money to pay off loan sharks that he's indebted to. Again, odds are that the SBS has removed that particular worry, but then again, that much money can make people a bit stupid, so just FYI."

"If he does try that, he'll wish he hadn't," Nami snarled fervently before marching to the door. "Alright, if that's all, I'd better get back to navigating."

"Right, right, go ahead," I said, waving my hand casually before reaching for my bag. "And as for me, I'm going to do my best to fend off depression and kill a few hours the only way I know how. Try tuning in, this is gonna be fun." I glanced at Soundbite. "Ring up Apoo. If ever there was a good time to start things off with him, this would be the one."

-0-

Boa Marigold hissed slightly as she rolled her shoulder, listening attentively as her joints popped in preparation. "Alright, sisters, what do you suggest we improve on today?"

"It better not be tail-lifts again," Sandersonia groused as she stretched her hamstrings. "I swear that we've done it for the past three sessions."

"What's wrong, Sonia?" Hancock chuckled as she bandaged her... assets. "Unable to stand the pain needed to afford the gain?"

The green-haired amazon hissed irritably as she shot her sister a stinkeye. "First, I'm taller than both of you; second, I don't have muscles like cables like Mari; and third, you don't have to deal with phantom pains coming from your nonexistent tail when you're human, so you have no right to criticize me! Got it!?"

Hancock and Marigold exchanged looks before smiling, causing the tallest of the three to break out in a cold sweat.
"Alright, then, that's fair," Marigold smirked, fangs flashing in her mouth as she slowly grew to tower above her. "Then in that case, whatever shall we do instead?"

"Oh, a thought occurs…" Hancock purred as the air started to shimmer around her. "It has been ever so long… perhaps we shall work on our dear sister's resistance to Conqueror's Haki in the middle of live combat instead?"

"Like I was saying, you can never have enough practice with tail-lifts!" Sandersonia yelped as she snapped into her hybrid form and shot into the abandoned stands of Amazon Lily's arena, cowering in terror from the sadists she called sisters.

On a day like any other, between the Kuja Pirates' raids from island to island, the Gorgon Sisters were honing their skills away from the prying eyes of the rest of the tribe. It wasn't so much that they minded others watching—there was nothing Hancock loved more than an adoring audience—as it was that training was easier when they didn't have to pull their punches in order to avoid incurring any clothing damage. As such, whenever the Gorgons trained, the rest of the tribe granted them as much privacy as they did when they were bathing.

Or at least, that was the case, up until that very training session. As Sandersonia straightened from the stands, movement from one of the entrances caught her eyes. In a flash of green, the anaconda-woman dove across the stands, snapped her tail into the corridor—

"GAH!"

And hissed irritably as she withdrew a struggling Kuja warrior from the shadows, wrapped up in her coils. "Looks like we've got a little rat sneaking around, sisters…" she bit out. Marigold and Hancock instantly snapped out of their amusement, and in short order, the squirming amazon found herself looking at the distinctly angry faces of the island's three strongest warriors.

"I do believe I recognize her…" Marigold hummed as she twisted around her sister in order to both get a better look at the interloper and increase the fear factor. "Marguerite, one of my higher-level students. Quite skilled in her Armament."

"Looks like you'll need to start looking for a new favorite," Sandersonia growled as she started flexing her coils.

"Ah, n-no, wait, please, I-I'm sorry!" Marguerite pleaded as she stared at the sister's leering fangs in terror.

"Hold it, Mari, Sonia," Hancock cut in with an impassive tone and expression. "She hasn't done anything wrong yet. Let her go so that she may explain herself."

The snake-hybrids shot shocked looks at their sister. "Who are you and what have you done with Hancock?" they chorused in unison.

The Pirate Empress scowled in annoyance. "Would you mind not acting quite so surprised!? I don't actually only listen to every other word Princess Nefertari says, you know!"

The two serpents, if anything, only looked more incredulous. They then looked panicked when it felt like the weight of the world slammed down on them, a vein on Hancock's forehead prominently displayed. "Proof enough?"

The snake-women promptly snapped back into their human forms and bowed their heads to the ground. "We apologize for our disrespect, dearest sister!"
Hancock sniffed imperiously as she stared down at the two of them. "I shall consider accepting your apologies at a later date. For now, however…" The Snake Princess strode up to the still-shell-shocked Kuja warrior, causing her to flinch back in terror—

And then she blushed, all but melting as the impossibly beautiful woman put a finger beneath her chin and slooowly tilted her head up. "I apologize for my sisters' actions… Marguerite, was it? Clearly, they require more experience with the finer points of leadership," Hancock said gently.

"T-That's alright, I-I understand…" Marguerite only just managed to whisper out.

The two other Gorgon sisters looked halfway between incredulous and outraged; if it wasn't enough that Hancock had the gall to say that she was a better leader than them, it seemed like it was actually true in this case! What was the world coming to?!

"When did we become the bad guys?!" Marigold hissed out of the corner of her mouth.

"Now will you listen to me when I say we need to find the other Snake-Snake Fruit users and unionize?!" Sandersonia shot back.

"I'm certainly considering it now."

"Even so," Hancock continued, her smile fading slightly. "All my sisters and I ask is that you and your comrades stay out of the arena when we train for your own protection. After all…" She turned around and moved her hair to the side, causing Marguerite to shiver in terror as she gazed at the scant few strips of cloth that separated her from being turned to stone. "You know that to gaze upon the eyes is certain death. So, why did you disobey?"

Marguerite had tears in her eyes as she faced the disappointment in the Pirate Empress' eyes. It seemed likely that she would have bowed her head in shame were it not for Hancock's finger holding it up. "I… I w-wanted to talk… to the three of you in p-private. And th-this seemed like the best chance," she stammered.

All three of the sisters seemed curious upon hearing the answer. Slowly, Hancock withdrew from her, looking with an unsmiling but not unkind expression upon the Kuja.

"In the future, the best way to do that would be to put forth a request for a private audience. But as we're already here, what did you want to talk to us about?"

"I… well…" Marguerite swallowed heavily as she got her thoughts in order. "E-Even since the Straw Hat Pirates began broadcasting their adventures via the SBS, I have learned… so much about the world of men. The existence of Sky Islands, the extent of the power of the World Government —" She allowed herself to quirk up a slight smile. "Their… shall we say, unique ways of thinking and acting…" Her expression hastily sobered up again. "But… one of the most important things I’ve learned is how they fight. Their… Their unique abilities." Marguerite bit her lip and looked away uncomfortably. "Their… Their unique abilities that allow them to break the laws of physics, that allow them to… to transform into animals…" She swallowed heavily in an effort to steel her nerves. "These… These abilities… Cross explained that they came from… from Devil Fruits…"

Due to being distracted by her emotions, Marguerite was entirely unaware of the tension that had come over the sisters, or of the fact that the Snake-Zoans were slowly rising to tower behind her.

Marguerite bowed her head and kicked meekly at the ground. "$H-Honorable sisters, know that I truly respect none moreso than you and that I would never mean any disrespect, b-but…" She shook her head firmly. "$I-I'm sorry, but considering what I know, I-I just can't deny what I suspect."
"And what do you suspect, warrior?" Hancock ordered more than asked. Gone was any trace of compassion or mercy, only a frigid coldness appropriate for an iceberg… or an executioner.

The blonde Kuja shivered as she stared into her Princess's eyes, but she forged on anyway. "Honorable sisters… do… do you… have… Devil Fruit powers?"

Hancock's expression promptly flashed into a mask of rage as she snapped her fingers.

WHOOOSH! CRACK!

"YEARGH!"

The instant the sound rang out, both Sonia and Mari lashed out with their serpentine bodies, coiling around Marguerite and all but crushing her with their tails. As it was, the force of the assault was enough to snap over a dozen bones at once.

The panicked warrior coughed up a mouthful of blood as she tried desperately to draw air. "Your highness, please, mer—GRK!"

"Quiet," Hancock snarled as she crushed Marguerite's throat beneath her fingers before relaxing her grip just enough to allow her a minimal flow of oxygen. "How many others know?"

"I… m-my comrade S-Sweet Pea guessed, a-and she started to explain her t-thoughts to my ally Aphelandra… B-BUT!" Marguerite yelped as she noticed Hancock shooting a deadly glance up at her sisters. "W-When I-I realized that she was p-probably right, I d-dissuaded them, convinced them they were wrong. I-I knew that y-you must have a reason that you w-wouldn't tell us, t-that's why I c-came alone! N-Not even my partner Kaa knows!"

The Gorgon Sisters exchanged looks. Hancock in particular looked marginally less upset, and even contemplative. Ultimately, however, she pinned Marguerite with a pitiless stare. "You have my thanks, Marguerite."

The warrior blinked at her in confusion…

SNRK!

"GYAGH!" Marguerite screamed in agony as the serpent-women's coils tightened further, ignoring what little Haki she'd erected.

"Your discretion means that we won't have to harm anyone else in order to maintain our privacy."

"P-Princess…" Marguerite wheezed.

"Such an intelligent warrior…" Marigold growled as she circled around her captive. "Such a shame that her foolishness led to her suffering such an ignoble death."

"Yesss," Sandersonia hissed in agreement as she followed her sister. "If only she hadn't slipped while feeding my dear Bacura. She might have even been a member of the crew one day." She unhinged her jaws and flashed her fangs in a vicious leer. "Oh, well!"

And with that, the sisters lashed down—

"Don don don don!"

—before freezing as the Transponder Snail the Boas had brought with them started ringing.
Sonia snapped her mouth shut and crossed her arms with an irritated hiss. "Why am I even surprised, his sense of timing is always like this," she grumbled.

"It would appear that you get to live a little longer, Marguerite," Marigold muttered, though she only loosened enough to grant the Kuja half a breath. "Considering the Straw Hats' typical integrity, I for one find it would be in… bad taste to do something so unsavory during the SBS, regardless of the necessity."

Hancock sniffed as she brought up the snail. "I suppose there's no harm in waiting a few minutes or hours; she's not going anywhere." With nary another thought to their captive, she picked up the snail's microphone, causing it to awaken with a very familiar shit-eating grin.

"Nine Seakings, ten seakings! Aaand that's all we're waiting for! Hello, ladies and gentlemen of this fine and fucked up world we live in, my name is Jeremiah Cross and with me is my co-host—!"

"The unmistakable AND UNFORGETTABLE SOUNDBYTE!"

"Indeed, and it is my honor to tell you all that—!"

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK!

Cross's proclamation was cut off by a rapping noise coming from his end.

"Eh? The heck?" There came the creaky noise of a door opening. "Leo? What do you want?"

"Oh, nothing in particular, I just wanted to tell you that it's time to start the SBS."

"Oh, well, that's just fine, then, thanks for telling me!" And with that, the door shut. "Now, where was I… oh, right, it's time to start the—HEY, WAIT A SECOND! DAMN IT, LEO, WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED TO YOU BEING ONE OF THE SERIOUS ONES?"

"TRAITOR!" Soundbite roared in agreement.

"How is it that despite knowing that it's coming every time, that joke never stops being funny?" Sonia snickered.

"Some things are just sacred like that…" Marigold sighed wistfully.

"… grrghh! BAH! Screw it! The universe might be against me, but I'm not going to stop trying! I'm going to manage to start this thing again if it's the last thing I do!"

"AND I'M going to stop you again IF IT'S THE LAST THING THAT I DO!"

"Challenge accepted. Alright, anyways, moving on. People of the world, a while back I promised to speak on the topic I will share with you today, a very important one at that, and considering that I've got a lot more time on my hands now, it is my opinion that I may as well dive on into it. Today's topic? The fishmen. Or rather, both fishmen and merfolk… and tolerance."

The three sisters promptly stiffened in shock as every iota of their attention was locked on to the snail, ignoring even the slight tinges of fire and pain they felt dancing on their backs.

"Now, for those of you who know of this crew's reputation from before we created the SBS, you may find it strange that I would want to speak favorably of fishmen, considering what happened with Arlong. In response to you who wonder that, it's the same standards that I go by with pirates and Marines: one fragment is not necessarily a fair representation of the whole. Which actually brings
me around to the central point of this particular discussion: explaining just why we hate one another when in the end, we're all exactly the same. …Heh, I imagine that I just confused a lot of people, considering how the entire topic is based on our differences, huh? Let me try and explain what I'm talking about."

-o-

"Well, let's start with defining our differences so that you can understand why defining their species by them is, frankly, ridiculous. Fishmen and Merfolk are, as their names so clearly imply, part fish. Sometimes the traits that define them as such are blatantly obvious, such as tails, fins, gills, extra limbs, and so on and so forth. They've developed martial arts styles that let them manipulate water as they like, they're physically stronger by about ten times than any normal human—though considering the Grand Line, let's be honest, that's not saying much—and, of course, most poignant and definitive of all, they can survive underwater as easily, if not better than, if they were on land. When you put all that together, you get a person who's nothing at all like an average human, don't you? Someone who can do the impossible and who looks completely different, right? Well, see... I can actually name humans just like that: Devil Fruit users."

"What does he mean, Martin? Devil Fruit users can't swim—" asked a young blue tang fishgirl.

"Shh! Quiet, Lori, we'll get in trouble if we get caught!" hissed an older and much more serious clownfish fishboy, who took the time to glance out into the darkened streets of the Fishman District and guarantee that yes, nobody with a very specific tattoo was around to see them. "Why do you think we're listening to this in an alleyway?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know, if Hody's guys find us they'll crack our skulls together, but still—!

"He'll probably explain, now shush!"

"Allow me to clarify a bit: Devil Fruit users are capable of incredible, impossible feats, things beyond the capabilities of even fishmen, and yet... we still treat them as human. Why? Because they look like every other human? Because intellectually, we know that they were born human? In case you haven't noticed, there's a rather spectacular double-standard going on here: we hate fishmen for being different, but we don't hate Devil Fruit users in spite of them being different. Well, there are admittedly a few people who see people with Abilities as monsters, but I'm fairly certain those are just uneducated hicks, or the user in question has earned that reputation, so I'm counting them as exceptions. Anyway, where was I..."

"Yeah, where was he?"

"Lori, have you been skipping your pills again?"

"They make my head spin!"

"Ah, right, now I remember!" Cross chuckled sheepishly. "Now then, now that I've defined just how we're different let me tell you how we're similar. Let's start from the most simple: we're all made of the same stuff. Same flesh, same bone, same blood. We bleed the same, we breathe the same, half the time anyways, and we eat the same. When it comes to lifestyle, they're still the same: they live, they love... and they even hate. Yes, some fishmen, like Arlong or those like him, hate humans just as much as some humans hate fishmen. But the question is... why do we hate each other? As I've just pointed out, our differences aren't all that pressing, while our similarities are through the roof! Come the final tally... we're all one and the same. So... why? Why do our species hate each other so
"Hey, he's actually got a good point," the blue tang fishgirl pointed out.

The clownfish glanced out of the alleyway for a second before gesturing for her to go on.

"Well, Hody and his guys always tell us that humans are bad and junk, right? But I've never even really seen a human, and I don't think I've ever heard about humans doing anything to them either, and from what I've been hearing via the SBS they actually sound pretty cool! So…" Lori tilted her head in confusion. "Why do Hody and his guys say we have to hate him?"

Martin opened his mouth to respond, then slowly closed it without a word.

"Now, before I go on, I'll readily admit that a good number of fishmen and merfolk have every reason to hate our race due to what I described the last time I mentioned fishmen: slavery. I won't go into the specifics, but it's a long and bloody history that's justified hatred for the human race among any who went through that hell, or knows someone who did. And I'll readily admit that I have no point of reference for how they feel, so what I'm saying here may not be all that reasonable. But even so, the fact is that for every fishmen that's been enslaved, there are still others who haven't. There's a new generation who haven't ever met the other race, who should have no grudge against them but are still being told that they must hate them anyway. There are fishmen who've never met humans, and humans who have never met fishmen… and yet, they know with all their hearts that they must hate one another without mercy. Why do they hate each other, if they've never even met each other? If they have no personal grudges? The answer is simple… yet horrifying."

The fish-children leaned in close, listening intently.

"They hate one another… for the sheer sake of hatred itself."

Lori opened her mouth to say something…

"Oi, you two."

And then she and Martin both froze as a pair of hands clamped down on their heads and a sickeningly familiar voice sounded behind them.

"Tell me…"

The children's heads were turned against their will, forcing them to stare down the leering beak of the New Fishman Pirates' primary recruiter.

"What the hell…" Hammond hissed viciously. "Do you think you're doin'?"

Martin swallowed heavily, fighting to keep his bladder under control. "N-N-Nothin'… j-just killing time…"

"Y-Yeah, yeah!" Lori nodded frantically in agreement.

"Oh, really, now?" Hammond slowly cocked his eyebrow. "Because it looks to me…" He turned their heads back to stare at the snail. "Like you two're listening to that human drivel that Captain Hody outlawed from the Fishman District. After all, the last thing any decent fishman needs to waste their time on is listening to a human."

"W-W-We're sorry…" Lori whimpered tearfully.
"Heh..." Hammond's leer widened by several teeth. "Funny thing, that. The last bloke we caught listening to this garbage, he was sorry too. Plead and pleaded, but he said he liked listening to the damn thing." The pike conger fishman leaned in close to the kids so that he was hissing in their ears. "Ya know what we did to him?"

Martin's eyes shot wide in panic. "Nonono, please don't, we'll never listen again, we promise, we—!

"That's right!" Hammond crowed as he forced the clownfish-kid forward so that he was face to face with his borrowed Transponder Snail. "Since he said he liked the human's words so much, we made him eat them. Rather clever play on words, that. Came up with it myself, made the boss laugh, all poetic and junk. And would ya look at that! This here source of words is an adult one! That's good!" He forced Lori forward as well so that she was side by side with Martin. "That means that you two can share."

"Nononono—!"/"Please, I-I'll do anything, just leave her alone, please—!

"Ah, will you two shuddup already?" Hammond shook his head with an aggravated growl. "You kids don't seem to understand here: either you prove that you're actually sorry about listening to that garbage..." He cracked his neck side to side. "Or we make certain that you never listen to it agai—GRK!"

The New Fishman Pirate's diatribe was suddenly cut off by a massive blue hand encircling his throat and crushing his windpipe shut.

"Let. Them. Go."

Hammond promptly complied, whipping his hands away from the kids' heads in favor of scrabbling at the fingers that were choking the life out of him.

The blue-skinned whale shark fishman glared bloody murder at the conger fishman for a second before sparing the children a concerned glance. "Are you two alright?"

Martin and Lori nodded in confirmation.

"That's good," Jinbe sighed in relief before putting a finger up. "Please be patient for a moment." He then darkened his expression as he lifted Hammond off the ground and twisted his grip so that he could stare him in the eye. "Now, you listen, and you listen good, you two-bit slaving hypocrite. You are going to go back to Hody and you are going to tell him that I am enforcing a new taboo in the Fishman District: anyone who tries to stop anyone else from listening to the SBS will have to deal with me. Do I make myself clear?"

Hammond gurgled in both terror and fury as the grip on his throat loosened just enough for him to speak. "You... traitor... Hody's gonna—!"

Jinbe jerked Hammond close, so that their faces were only a few inches apart, and snarled, emphasizing his size and fangs as much as he possibly could.

Hammond paled and started nodding frantically. "A-Alright, alright, alright! I-I'll tell him, I'll tell him, I sw—!

"Good."

Without further ado, the fishman Warlord smoothly turned his torso and swung his arm, and one second later, the New-Fishman Pirate slammed into the building across the street from the alleyway.
"Now leave," Jinbei ordered in a barely calm tone. "And if you say anything else—!"

Judging by how fast the slaver shot down the street, the whale-shark fishman had gotten his point across.

Jinbe glared after him for a second longer before taking a moment to soften his expression and look back at the children. "You're both certain you're alright, yes?"

Martin and Lori looked at one another for a second before nodding firmly.

"Yeah, we're fine. It takes more than that to hurt a fishman!" Lori proclaimed proudly.

"We're as tough as Fisher Tiger himself!" Martin concurred.

Jinbei smiled proudly as he leaned down and patted their heads. "Yes. Yes, you most certainly are. Now then, if you'll excuse me," he said as he stood up and turned to exit the alley. "I need to go and make sure the rest of Hody's crew gets the message properly. Please, feel free to keep listening to the SBS, and make sure your friends listen too. It's quite educational."

"Yes, sir!" the clownfish-kid nodded.

Jinbei started walking…

"Ah, sir?"

Before pausing and glancing back as Lori tugged on his pants leg. "Yes?"

"Uh, well…" the blue tang girl kicked the ground shyly. "Mister Cross said that Hody and his guys hate humans… just because, right?"

Jinbei's expression saddened slightly before he nodded. "Yes, that's correct."

The girl's face twisted in confusion. "But… But that's just stupid! …Isn't it?"

The Warlord stood stock still for a moment…

And then he slowly turned around, crouched down, and patted the girl's head with a very proud smile.

"Yes. Yes, it is. That is exactly right," he confirmed, tears shimmering in the corners of his eyes.

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"Now, again, I can't speak for those who have true darkness in their pasts. But for the rest, the ones yet unaffected, I believe that it should be plain and self-evident just how utterly asinine this motivation is. To propagate love for the sake of love, fun for the sake of fun, happiness for the sake of happiness? These are all perfectly acceptable motivations. But to propagate hatred for the sheer sake of hatred itself… there is no justification. No acceptable motivation, no righteous enough cause, and definitely no benefit that anyone with a heart or a lick of sense would consider acceptable. In the end, hatred… is utterly pointless."

In a kingdom of pure white, hidden from the rest of the world, a former amnesiac and a brocade perch fishman observed as their female friend listened to the SBS broadcast with an expression of sheer, unrestrained joy on her face.

"I was looking forward to him talking about this from the second he first mentioned fishmen," she
whispered more to herself than anyone. "And I… I am not disappointed."

"I know that I must seem preachy or naïve or stupid to so many, I'm sure, but… honestly, the fact of the matter is that somebody has to say it. Somebody has to say this to everyone, all at once, and make them realize… make them realize that this has to end. This cycle of hatred, of revenge… if we keep grinding against each other, then one way or another, it's all gonna end in pain. As a wise man from my homeland once said, 'An eye for an eye shall make the whole world go blind.'"

There was a brief period of silence as Cross seemed to gather his thoughts, followed by him sighing heavily. "Look… my words are nice and all… but the fact is that this cycle, this hatred? It's never gonna end unless somebody does more than speak. It's not gonna end until someone… until a lot of someones extend their hands in friendship. In kindness. And this can't just be from one side, either. I know… I know that there are elements on Fishman Island doing the good work, fighting for the beautiful dream of peace and unity, but that's not enough. If we want peace, if we want the hatred to end on both sides, then we need to meet them halfway. Somebody has to take that first step… and hold out their hand."

Koala hiccuped tearfully as she cradled her own hand. She jumped slightly when a hand landed on her shoulder, but she smiled up at its owner when she recognized whose it was. Hack smiled back kindly as he gave a reassuring squeeze.

"And as much as quite a few people, and myself, if we're being honest, would like for it to be, that somebody is just not me. It can't be me. I've got a big voice, sure, but I can't speak for everyone. I can't speak for the fishman rescued from slavery. I can't speak for the human brutalized by fishman pirates. I don't know their stories, their experiences, not in that unique way only those who have experienced it do. It just doesn't have enough weight coming from me. I… ergh, I'm rambling a bit, but… look, the point is that whoever it is that takes that first step, it has to be someone who has heard both sides… no, not heard both sides. Someone who has heard and listened."

"So, Koala…" Sabo started lightly, slowly allowing his usual grin to slide back into place. "Are you still going to kick his ass when you meet him in person?"

Koala blinked as she mulled the thought over before folding her arms behind her head and adopting a mulish expression. "Most definitely. First I'm gonna give him the mother of all concussions with a palm straight to his skull!"

In spite of being behind her, neither Sabo nor Hack missed the soft grin that had grown on Koala's face, or the lines of water dripping from her eyes.

"And then…" she whispered. "I'm going to break every bone in his body with the mother of all hugs."

"Well, that's all I have to say on the matter for now. Now, on to more positive matters—!"

CLICK!

Sandersonia and Marigold jumped in shock as they were broken out of the miniature trance they'd been in. They were equally shocked by the sight of Hancock pressing her finger to the Transponder Snail's cradle, forcing it back to sleep.

"S-Sister, what—?" Sandersonia started to stammer.

"Quiet," Hancock ordered, her voice quiet but firm. "I need to think."
The Zoan-users promptly complied and allowed a tense silence to fill the air, interrupted only by Marguerite's labored, raspy breathing.

Hancock's head remained bowed for several minutes, and then she stepped towards her sisters, taking hold of Marguerite's chin and forcing her hanging head up so as to stare her in the eye. "What was your intention coming to ask us about our powers?" she asked, not in a cold voice, but rather a calm and measured one.

Marguerite swallowed, clearing her throat as she mustered the strength needed to speak. "I… I only wanted to understand better. You are the strongest and most beautiful warriors in all of Amazon Lily, and… I wanted to know w-why you would keep the true source of your m-magnificent powers a secret. I…" Marguerite trailed off as tears started to leak from her eyes. "I… In retrospect… it's so obvious… the reason you would lie… despite being so strong and so proud… it's something you're all ashamed of, isn't it? Something… Something horrible. And I…"

Sandersonia and Marigold glanced uncomfortably at each other as the Kuja started crying, and not from the pain either.

Marguerite shook her head with a sob. "I'm sorry… so sorry… I-I shouldn't have—! I should have realized—!"

The Kuja's babbling stopped abruptly as Hancock placed a hand on her cheek. Looking up at the empress, Marguerite saw that she was smiling warmly once again.

"It's alright," the Pirate Empress said softly. "I forgive you."

"ARE YOU—?!" the serpentine giants started to roar before Hancock silenced them with a raised hand. The Snake Princess refocused her attention on Marguerite and gently imposed her will on her. More than her meager—if relatively impressive—willpower could withstand, but not enough to utterly strike her down, instead gently sliding her into the realm of oblivion.

Hancock tossed her hair as she took a step back and looked up at her green-haired sibling. "Sonia," she stated firmly, her voice brooking no argument. "Take Marguerite to the nearest doctor. Inform her that she was caught in our training, that it was an accident and that she is not to be punished."

The anaconda hybrid still looked incredulous and a second away from mutiny, but nevertheless she ultimately transferred Marguerite from her tail to her arms and shot down the stands and into a corridor heading out of the arena.

Once she was gone, Marigold reverted to her human state and turned towards Hancock with just as much incredulity. "Sister, she knows. And it's already a pure miracle that no one else has realized it! What on earth are you thinking?"

Hancock refused to meet her gaze, staring at the ground as she spoke. "Tell me, Mari… Over the years, over the course of our rule over our home…" The Empress's hand strayed unbidden towards her back. "How many of their habits do you think we've adopted?"

"Wha—none, sister! We would never be like them!" Marigold responded fervently.

Hancock's lips quirked into a melancholy smile as she let out a dry chuckle. "Yes… That would once have been my answer, too… but in retrospect?" She slowly turned her gaze to stare at the Transponder Snail snoozing a few feet away. "Hatred for hatred's sake, judging the totality by the actions of the minority, unnecessary cruelty…" Hancock slowly sank onto one of the stadium's benches, a shaky smile spreading across her lips even as she cradled her face in her hand. "I now
think that the answer would be 'too many.'"

Marigold opened her mouth to say something, to say anything to refute her sister's thoughts—then opened it even further as she realized that she just couldn't think of anything. "Oh… Oh, God…"

Hancock chuckled again as she nodded in agreement. "Indeed, indeed…" She lapsed into silence for a moment before speaking again. "You know what the worst part of all this is?" she said with a sad smile, tears streaming down her face all the while. "I'm actually going to have to concede to that old witch's demands and get some therapy. How… How pathetic is that?"

Marigold took that in before slowly shaking her head, a bitter smile on her own face. "Less pathetic than we would be if that loud-mouth hadn't started that show and we'd never realized our hypocrisy."

Hancock chuckled at that. Her chuckle slowly evolved into laughter, which evolved to take on a hysterical tone, and then devolved into sobs, at which point Marigold hastily enveloped her in a hug, letting her sister cry herself out as long as she needed.

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"—and throw in a few cups of rubbing alcohol. After that, just let it stew for a few days and voila! You have a bottle of foolproof bugspray that reeks to high heaven! Fair warning, don't use this on covert ops unless you're heading somewhere that smells like hell because you sure as heck will!"

"Apapapa! Now, that certainly sounds useful!" Apoo whispered as he leaned back into his seat, arms twisted into a comfortable position so that he could finish writing the recipe down. "Good for both pranks and to keep from getting bugbitten! It's a really nice change of subject after that heavy stuff earlier!"

"Hm… what else…" Cross mused before sighing wearily. "Ah, geeze, I shoulda planned things out better, I don't have any material! Hrm… oh, I know! How about I pass things off to Soundbite for some music, hm? To pass the time?"

"Sounds good to me! I GOT A GOOD SONG in mind!"

"Well, alright, then, let's do it! Allons-y!"

Apoo promptly shot out of in his chair and slammed a hand down next to his active Transponder Snail, grinning eagerly as his other hand snatched up the snail's mic, where it had been lying next to the snail proper. "Apapa!" he whispered to himself. "Finally, it's showtime!"

"Livin' on sponge cake,
Watchin' the sun bake;
All of those tourists covered with oil.
Strummin' my six-string on my front porch swing.
Smell those shrimp, hey, they're beginnin' to boi—!"

Apoo chose that point to take ahold of his lower jaw and twist, causing his mandible to spin and his teeth to grind together in such a way that they produced a staticky noise. The static traveled through his mic, across the connection that he'd established a few minutes prior, and then out of the mouths of every Transponder Snail in the world connected to the SBS, cutting Soundbite's music off and causing him to squawk in well-faked panic.
"WHAT THE heck?!"

"Huh?" Cross blinked in surprise. "What was that, Soundbite?"

"Not a clue! ALL OF a sudden it WAS LIKE SOMEONE WAS—!"

The long-arm-man twisted his jaw again, producing a longer and more wavery squawk of static.

"YEOW, THAT stung! WHAT THE HELL'S GOING O—!?"

Apoo twisted his jaw harshly a third and final time. Once he finished producing the electronic squeal, Apoo adopted a wide grin and belted out an eager cackle. "APAPAPA! Finally! After all that time searching, I've cracked your signal! Move over, Cross, the Roar of the Sea is taking over the SBS!"

"Wha—!? Wait, 'Roar of the—'? Hang on, I know you!" Cross barked in shock. "You're Apoo, aren't you!? Apoo, Long-Arm-Tribesman and Captain of the On-Air Pirates!"

"Apapapa! I take it my reputation precedes me, hm?" Apoo preened proudly.

"'Reputation'!?" Cross spat in a voice full of vitriol. "Hardly! You're just a 70 million blowhard who my captain could pick out of his teeth, with bad taste in music to boot! What the hell are you doing on my show!?"

Apoo hastily snapped a hand to his mouth in order to obscure his snicker before adopting a scowl and responding. "First of all, that's seventy-five million! Get it right, you no-bounty big mouth!"

"BIG MOUTH?" Soundbite roared. "YOU HAVE THE GALL TO CALL ANYONE BIG MOUTH?! THAT'S FUCKING RICH!"

"And second!" Apoo pressed on, ignoring Soundbite's taunt save for a withheld chuckle. "Tastes in music are exactly why I'm here! Ever since your dumbass snail started blaring that drivel it has the gall to call 'music', I knew that I had to get on to this show no matter the cost!"

"The hell are you on about, you incompetent excuse for a disc jockey!?"

It took all of Apoo's willpower to contort his mouth so that he was sporting a leer rather than a grin. "I'm saying that you and your slimeball of a snail's music sucks every inch of ass it can! It's absolute junk, total garbage that's an absolute waste of time to listen to! So, for the sake of audio everywhere and forever, I've been dedicating my skills to trying to hack onto your broadcast for one purpose and one purpose only!"

"And what the hell would that be?" Cross growled, his voice utterly dripping with contempt.

Apoo smirked deviously, and that was one emotion that he didn't need to fake. "Why, what else? To educate you on what music really is! Ladies and gentlemen of the world, I am truly happy to welcome you all to Scratchman Apoo's Music Hour!"

"APOO'S WHAT!??" Soundbite roared indignantly. "ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR salt-addled mind!? I WOULDN'T VOMIT YOUR garbage if you FED ME A BOTTLE OF IPECAC!"

Apoo had to turn away in order to hide his silently laughing mouth, spending a solid minute pounding on the wall before turning back with a leer. "Yeah, well, you're going to spread it all across the world whether you like it or not, you Subpar Bullshit Spewers! APAPAPAPAPA!"

For a second, less than an instant, a smile flashed across the snail's face; Apoo was certain that he
would have missed it if he wasn't already looking for it. The next instant, however, the snail was back to scowling furiously. "You wide-mouthed long-limbed degenerate piece of!"

"Okay, I think we've all had heard enough of mister blowhard!" Apoo whistled innocently before twisting his jaw again, sending out another flurry of static.

"Hey wha—ZRRRK!—You ca—ZRRRK!—I'm gonna—ZRRRK!—rip your—ZRRRK!—and then—ZRRRRRRR-CLICK!"

"Oh, dear, ladies and gentlemen! It appears that Jeremiah Cross and Soundbite have been disconnected. What a pity," Apoo drawled. "Now, as I was saying, let's get to Scratchman Apoo's Music Hour! Our first selection, a piece of music very near and dear to my people's hearts! Sit back, relax, and enjoy the sound of music not being pumped from a Sea King's bowels!"

And with that, the living instrument maestro began to play the Long-Arm Tribe's national anthem. And as he smiled and played, said maestro could only hope that his fellow musical friends were having half as much fun as he was.

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"PFFHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAAA!" I alternately roared and wheezed, pounding my fist on the crate I was leaning over. "OH, MY GOD, THAT WAS HILARIOUS! PFFHAHAHAHAHA!

"HOOHOOHOOHEEEHEEEHAHAHAHAAA!" Soundbite cackled in agreement. "They actually think we hate each other! NO ONE HAS A CLUE!"

"We are evil bastards, EEEVIIIIIL! PFFHAHAHAHAAAAAAA!" I crowed ecstatically.

As Soundbite and I revelled in the genius of our ruse, I reran what, exactly, the ruse was in my head.

In essence, back on Skypiea, Soundbite, Apoo and I had collaborated to engineer a form of DJ feud. First, before I started the SBS, I called Apoo on Soundbite so that we had an open line running throughout the broadcast. Then, once I was good and ready, I spoke a predetermined buzzword to get Apoo's attention. Once that happened, he 'took over' my show and proceeded to strike up the mother of all radio-station feuds with me, trading insults and 'shutting down' Soundbite before deploying his own music. And this was just the start; in time, I'd 'learn to disrupt his disruption', and then we'd be giving a different meaning to 'fighting music'!

It was gonna be sooo much fun and I just couldn't wait!

Sadly enough, however, this particular session was coming to a close as I recognized the notes that indicated that the song Apoo was playing was coming to a close.

"A—hoo!—Alright, Soundbite, alright…" I wheezed as I reined my laughter back into control. "Showtime again, let's play it cool. Think you can keep the mirth out of my voice?"

"I'LL—HEEEHEEE—I'LL NEED TO pull double-duty, but I'll try!" Soundbite snickered.

As we drew in gasps to calm ourselves down, Apoo finally brought his song to an end. "Well, that's my time, people! With any luck, I've fixed the damage those two dipshits have done to your musical palates! For now, I have to go, pirate business to handle, but don't worry! I'll be back whenever those pathetic excuses of 'entertainers' dare insult the good name of music! Apoo out, apapa!"

I had to cough out a few chuckles behind my fist before I managed to get some semblance of anger
and indignation into my voice, which I managed with relative ease by thinking of Zoro's exercises. An electric click came over the connection, indicating that I was 'back in control'. "Triple-jointed menace..." I grumbled. "Alright, viewers, the good news is that the SBS is finally back under our righteous control. The bad news is that I am officially too burned out to bother continuing the show, and really, it's worn on enough as is. Well, at least I can satisfy myself knowing that I got the important stuff out of the way—"

"SPEAK FOR yourself!" Soundbite whined, seeming almost ready to cry. "I WANT MY MUSIC CORNER!"

"Mmph… well, we'll just have to make sure that this doesn't happen again," I sighed, trying to force being cut down and dropped hard to the deck to the forefront of my mind to mask my mirth. "Well, viewers, that'll be it for now. So, until next time, when maybe we won't have our introduction and our show stolen, this is Jeremiah Cross—"

"And Soundbite…"

"Of the SBS, signing off."

I hung up the transceiver… and promptly fell back on the ground laughing. It took another minute or so before I could bring myself to speak calmly.

"Hoo… ha… alright. Well, that was fun! So!" I clapped my hands as I sat up. "How long do you think we have left before we get to Water 7?"

"LAND HO!" came Usopp's excited voice from out on the deck.

"I guess not very long," Soundbite drawled in a deep masculine voice.

"Oh, come on, Soundbite, save Andre's voice for someone who deserves it," I scolded goodnaturedly.

"Fine, FINE."

Nodding, I picked him and the transceiver up and walked out the door before turning to climb the stairs. "Now then, let's get a look at our next destinationoooooooh holy SHIT." I felt my jaw drop as I took in the sight before me.

"Ditto…" Soundbite nodded in awe.

It… It never really sank in until I saw it, you know? It was so… so obvious in retrospect. According to Tom, the shipwrights of Water 7 had had their mitts on the blueprints for Pluton for generations.

They'd had the blueprints for a weapon from the Blank Century for generations.

That meant that Water 7, like Alabasta, had been present since the Century.

Now, granted, the architecture had changed over the years on account of the island sinking and Aqua Laguna, but I only need to glance at the architecture of the island to know that its history was still alive and well.

How else could an entire city essentially be a fountain? A massive, singular love letter to the very element of water, gushing thousands of gallons of liquid - and I was probably seriously lowballing that number - thousands of feet into the air, all day every day without interruption. How else could there be doors built into the very infrastructure of the city big enough to fit two galleons side by side?
How else could there be canals of water large enough to be rivers flowing down the slope of the city, sparsely interrupted by smaller offshoots winding through the blocks, like veins pulsing with the metropolis' lifeblood?

Water 7… it wasn't just any old Grand Line city. It was a living, breathing testament of resistance, its very existence a monument of defiance in the face of the World Government, Mother Nature, and their best efforts to bury the truth of what happened so many centuries ago!

It was, in a word, absolutely breathtaking.

I licked my lips as I finally got my mind working again. "Wow..." I breathed.

"You can say that again..." Soundbite whispered.

"Wow..." Conis repeated in my stead.

I blinked as her gasp brought me out of my own stupor, shooting her a grin. "The Grand Line never fails to impress, huh?"

A goofy grin slowly slid across Conis' face as she shook her head eagerly. "No. No, it does not."

"I am currently of the opinion that I love this mad ocean!" Su giggled as she waved her tail.

"I think I'm getting a hint of how Luffy feels about spoilers," Mikey mumbled in awe. "I wouldn't give up this feeling for the world."

"Are you kidding?" Raphey scoffed fervently. "Even if Cross had said that the island was a giant fountain, this wouldn't be any less amazing."

"I know exactly what you're talking about," Vivi giggled euphorically. "I've seen this island almost half a dozen times in my life, but I swear that every time is even more breathtaking than the last."

Sadly, as great as it was to observe the splendor of Water 7, the moment just couldn't last forever. Nami was the first to snap out of it, and she turned to me with a questioning look. "So, Cross, where should we dock?"

"Hmm..." I tapped my chin thoughtfully for a second before shrugging. "Eh, why not kill two birds with one stone? Let's circle around the island, the Franky House is on a peninsula, and we can—"

"That's not a good idea!" called a voice from beside the ship. A quick glance revealed an unremarkable boat inhabited by a middle-aged man with a fishing rod in his hand who'd drifted near us without us noticing.

"What do you mean, it's not a good idea?" Sanji asked curiously.

"I don't know what business you guys have with the Franky Family, but if you're going to approach their house, the only safe way is the front door," the fisherman replied grimly. "They've got booby traps out the wazoo to prevent attacks from the sea, plus those two King Bulls of theirs are monsters if they think you're a threat. I lost one of my better boats when I made the mistake of sailing into a keel-ripper they had submerged."

I grimaced and slapped a hand to my forehead. "Argh, right, that figures. They hunt pirates, they'd want to make sure that nobody with a grudge could just come up and blast their house to pieces with cannonfire." I clicked my tongue dispassionately. "Well, that's annoying. In that case, what's the best place for us to dock our ship so that we can get in contact with Galley-La and not get jumped by
"There's a cape that pirates always use, over that way!" the fisherman said, gesturing down the coast and away from the city proper. "Try and hide it from plain view if you can, those Government types really like to pry!"

"Don't have to tell us twice..." Vivi bit out acridly as she marched away to grab up a line of Merry's rigging.

"Oh, and one more thing!" the fisherman said quickly. "Do you know about Aqua Laguna?"

I processed that, and then my heart skipped a beat; I thought that the timeline was paused on Long Ring Long Land, but I forgot about that monster of a wave! If we missed it—!... Actually, if we missed it, we'd be better off for it, wouldn't we? "Yeah, what about it?" I called out to him, fighting to keep the hope out of my voice.

"Well, it's just that it's scheduled to come in tomorrow night or thereabouts, and it's predicted that it's going to be the biggest one in living history!"

I snapped my fingers with a curse. "So close!"

"What's Aqua Laguna?" Usopp asked in confusion.

"Oh, it's an annual tsunami that strikes the island like clockwork," Vivi explained casually as she pulled on Merry's lines. "It's common knowledge around here actu...al...ly..." she trailed off as she noticed how quiet things had gotten before spinning around and scowling at our accusatory looks.

"Alright, in my defense, I have absolutely no reason to keep track of Water 7's tsunami schedule! Even if I had remembered it before now, how could I have possibly known that we would be arriving at the one time of the year that it would hit!"

"I'm sorry, have you even seen this crew!?" Su scoffed in disbelief.

Vivi opened her mouth to protest, and then shut it with a hiss of frustration.

"Well, either way, I suggest you kids rent a bunker for your ship sometime soon and then get some rooms on the upper level!" The fisherman indicated the higher parts of the city. "Be careful, or else the sea might swallow you whole!"

"We will, thanks!" Luffy waved gratefully as we sailed off.

A few minutes later, we were anchored off the coast of the cape he'd pointed out, and in the process of removing the bags of solid gold from storage, as well as the solid mass that we'd cut up and reforged throughout the ship. Usopp and Boss were in the process of forging the wealth into a rather hefty pile of ingots, while Nami ran calculations and the rest of us relaxed and waited for her final tally. We were all wiling away the time in our own way: Robin was reading, Conis was cleaning the arsenal she was sporting with Su's nimble help, and Chopper was messing around with a chemistry set with only a few mad mutters here and there.

Finally, Nami looked up from her books and glanced at me over the brim of the glasses that I was certain she didn't need. "Alright. Cross, the biggest thing for me to consider right now: how much is the new ship going to cost?"

I grimaced at both the answer I was going to give and the reminder of our circumstances, but my voice was firm. "The thing that set the Oro Jackson apart is that it was built out of the strongest wood in the world, the wood of the immortal Jewel Tree Adam. The stuff is outlawed now because of the
fact that ships made from it are all but unkillable, but if you've got enough money like we do, and the right contacts in the black market—"

"Like I'm guessing Franky does?" Donny guessed.

I snapped my fingers and pointed at the dugong before continuing. "—then you can find some of it for sale. Of course..." I swallowed as I built up my nerve. "As you can imagine, the illicit and valuable nature of the good makes it quite... expensive."

Nami was silent for a moment before folding her hands on the table, her eyes firmly shut. "... How much?"

I flinched back nervously. "... He used ฿200 million originally, but considering the size of our crew and how much gold we have available... I'd say we let him run with 500 and see what he comes back with?"

In an instant, everyone near me jerked away as though they were waiting for me to be struck by a meteor... or **lightning**. I couldn't blame them, seeing as I myself had thrown my arms up in defense.

However... Nami didn't react. Rather, she just **stared** at me over the brim of her glasses, not moving, not twitching, maybe not even **breathing**. Finally, however, she slowly slid her glasses off, clicked them shut, and pinched the bridge of her nose with a weary sigh. "Let me be perfectly clear here, Cross: you are so **very** lucky that we're far enough beyond any normal definition of rich that that amount of money barely makes a dent in our finances. Or else..."

"Got it, got it, never again without damn good reason, I swear..." I waved my hands placatingly before allowing myself a sigh of relief as she turned her attention back to the books.

"Alright, listen up," Nami ordered casually. "My initial estimate back on Skypiea was at least ฿2 billion. But after becoming more intimately familiar with our hoard—"

"Unhealthily so," Robin muttered with a slight twitch to her eye.

"—I've found that, even if the SBS hasn't increased the value of this particular gold through fame or infamy alone, we have approximately 50% more than I expected. After taking out ฿500 million for the new ship, and another 500 million to prove to Iceburg that we can deal, we're left with ฿2 billion. And as we... **agreed** on Skypiea, a full billion of that goes to the crew as a whole."

Grins all around.

"Yeah, yeah, laugh it up," Nami groused as she shuffled her papers. "Now, while that means we can definitely afford some luxuries, we can't go overboard if we don't want to get back to the point where we barely have enough for Sanji's shopping list. So, the funds appropriated for this island are as follows. Chopper, Boss, you get five and a half million for your requests."

"Thanks, Nami!" Chopper said eagerly, while Boss merely pumped his fist.

"Conis, three million for your wardrobe."

"Thank you very much, Nami!" Conis smiled in glee.

"Sanji, ten million for food. Three million for Luffy, seven million for the rest of us."

"Ah, my thanks my most wonderful Nami-swan! I can finally shop without worrying too much about Luffy's stomach!" Sanji swooned happily, before shooting a glare at our obliviously grinning
Captain. "At least until he gets his teeth on our meat, anyway. We're getting a lock on the fridge, right?"

"World-class, don't worry."

"Awww!" / "There is a god, and he is just!"

"And unless there are any more special requests, everyone else gets two million for spending money," Nami concluded, scanning over the group with a look that just dared anyone to speak up. Nobody did, either too cowed or too happy. "Alright. Obviously, most of that will have to wait until we've cashed in this gold, so for now, we split into three groups. Zoro, you stay here to guard the ship for now."

"Can do," Zoro saluted lazily as he leaned back and promptly fell asleep.

Nami rolled her eyes before nodding at me. "Sanji, Chopper, Robin, you'll take the cash that we have onboard now and get started with the necessary shopping. Everyone else is with me to trade in the gold, then we'll split up to meet with Iceburg and Franky."

"I'll be leading the latter group. Boss, I'll need you to come with me, you and Franky will get on like a house on fire the second you meet," I cut in.

"Oh?" The dugong master cocked a curious eyebrow. "How so?"

"You have..." I hesitated as I looked for the right word. "Similar attitudes."

That got a massive grin out of Boss. "Color me... interested."

"Right..." I trailed off uncomfortably as I contemplated what the hell I had set in motion before moving on. "Alright, besides that... Vivi, I may need your negotiating expertise in case he asks for more, and Conis... well." I gestured at the pile of wealth shining on the deck. "We're gonna be carrying around our weight in gold. Any objections to acting as our muscle?"

Our gunner nodded with a determined smile. "I won't let you down, I swear!"

"Alright, then!" Usopp suddenly crowed, leaping to his feet and pumping his fist in the air. "So it's settled! As of this moment, Operation 'Payday' is underway! Yeah!"

"YEAH!" the rest of us, even Nami and Robin—though she didn't cheer—pumped our fists in the air along with him. We revelled in the joy of the moment—!

Pssshhh...

Before a chemical hiss drew attention to the suddenly bubbling chemical set lying at Chopper's feet. The human-reindeer's pupils dilated as he took in the way the liquids were swapping color. "Uh-oh."

"'Uh-oh'??" Soundbite squawked. "What's 'uh—'??"

KER-SPLAT!

I stood veeery still as I processed what had just happened. Then, veeery slowly, I moved my hand up to my face and wiped off the poly-chromatic ooze that was covering my eyes, along with my... everything. A quick glance around at the rest of my crewmates revealed that they were all in much the same state.
"Before anyone can panic or say anything!" Chopper piped up hastily. "I promise you that this stuff is completely benign. And I'm fairly certain that it doesn't hurt paper either, so Nami, Robin, please don't skin me alive."

"We will take that into consideration, Mister Emergency Supplies," Robin droned frigidly.

"Right…" I trailed off uncomfortably before clearing my throat. "Alright, slight change of plans: first we change and get cleaned up, then we head out and begin the operation. All in favor?"

"Aye."

"Then we are agreed."

As most of the crew began filing inside and the dugongs jumped overboard, I took the opportunity to grab Chopper and pull him to the side, specifically out of Robin's line of sight. "I need to talk to you," I informed the diminutive doctor.

"Come on, Cross, I already said it was an accident and that I was sorry, isn't that enough!" Chopper whined. "If this is about your clothes—!"

"This isn't even remotely about that," I cut him off, and my tone of voice immediately sobered the Zoan.

"What's wrong?" he asked, even having the good grace to lower his voice.

I glanced again in the direction Robin had gone to confirm she was gone before speaking. "When you go out shopping, I need you to stick to Robin like glue. Don't let her leave your sight, don't let her go anywhere alone, tag her with a scent marker if you have to, I don't care. Just make sure that you are completely aware of her at all times. Got it?"

Chopper frowned uncomfortably as he took in what I was saying. "Somebody's going to try and hurt Robin, aren't they?"

I grimaced and shook my head. "Honestly, that's a secondary priority. Right now, I'm more concerned with stopping Robin from hurting herself."

"What!?" Chopper squawked in disbelief. "B-But Robin said that she trusted us! Don't you trust her!?"

"I do, I do!" I hastily reassured him, only to grimace and wave my hand side to side. "To an extent, anyway. There are only two… three things in the world that are infinite, Chopper."

"The universe, Luffy's appetite… and human stupidity."

Chopper winced as his hoof shot to his banded horn. "Low blow, Cross…" he growled before sighing in defeat. "But… I see your point. I'll be careful."

"Great. Oh, and Chopper!" I stopped him as he started to walk away. "Just… look, Robin's been doing this for years, and the people we're up against are professionals who were trained to do this
their whole lives—!

"What are you trying to say, Cross?"

I was uncomfortably silent for a second before hanging my head with a sigh. "If anything goes wrong… I want you to know that it's not your fault and we don't blame you."

Chopper silently stared at me for a few seconds before turning to face me completely. "I know that I don't really look like it, Cross, but I'm not a little kid. I won't break down over every little mistake I make all the time," he explained in a calm and mature tone. Then he smiled lightly. "But… thanks."

I returned his smile. "Anytime."

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"Ergh…" I groaned as I peeled my shirt off and held it at arm's length. "This stuff might not be chemically toxic, but it sure as heck smells and feels it."

"BLECH!" Soundbite spat, sticking his tongue out in disgust.

"Want me to immolate that for you?" Lassoo requested, whining as he clamped his paws over his nose.

I tsk'ed and shook my head as I tossed the ruined article of clothing away. "Oh, how I wish, but the potential for flammability is too high for me to risk it. Once we're done here, this all goes overboard. For now, though…" I turned and started rummaging through the clothes I'd brought with me into the kitchen. "Let's see what's good for today…"

In the end, I settled for simplicity: plain blue cargo jeans and a white t-shirt, covered by a white hoodie with the outline of a blue lobster stenciled onto the front, claws pointed upward. Aside from my differently colored hat and headphones and, well, my armor, of course. And if we're being honest, that was actually nothing special for the Grand Line.

"How do I look?" I said as I spread my arms out and turned around to give them an eyeful.


"SECOND! Too plain!" Soundbite concurred.

"That's the point," I retorted, crossing my arms with a huff. "In case you missed it, there are a lot of people in the World Government who want me shut up forever, and this town just so happens to be a hop, step and a train ride away from their doorstep. If I catch the wrong person's eye here, I'll disappear into the shadows."

Soundbite promptly paled, while Lassoo scoffed…

"And seeing as you'll be latched onto my back when they grab me, you'll come along for the ride!"

And then winced and scratched the back of his head. "Point taken, sorry."

"Right. Now—"

I was cut off by a rapping noise coming from the kitchen's door.

"Excuse me, Cross, could I get your opinion on something?"
I blinked in surprise as what was unmistakably Robin's voice emitted from the other side of the door. "Huh? On what?" I called out.

"Oh, just my choice of attire is all," she informed me. "I'd ask the girls, but I'd rather a male's perspective, and you're the most well-adjusted member of the crew. Would you mind?"

I shot a flat look at Soundbite. "Why did that 'well-adjusted' sound more like 'average'?"

"Are ya really gonna protest WHAT YA KNOW TO BE TRUE?" he shot back.

I nodded, silently acknowledging the point, and turned to address Robin through the door. "Yeah, sure thing, come in."

The door swung open… aaaaaand I severely regretted my decision.

An ironic statement to make when the cause is a beautiful woman wearing only a too-thin t-shirt and frilly black panties walking through the door, no?

Soundbite was left speechless for once as his jaw struck the table, while Lassoo snickered into his paw. "Well, I've certainly missed seeing you pull this trick," he guffawed.

My eye twitched slightly as I looked her up and down before finally forcing the words out. "I am… severely conflicted."

Robin's eyebrow cocked in amused curiosity. "Oh? Are you saying that you're disappointed? You don't like what you see?"

I ground my teeth as I dug my nails into my upper arms. "The very opposite is one half of that conflict. On the other hand… I thought that you were done trying to kill me, Robin."

"And you have all of five seconds to explain just what 'that' was before I decide that this little incident is enough to justify doubling the payback that you've already built up," I growled, not taking my eyes off of her. Robin, for her part, only chuckled. "Oh, you don't get to laugh at me. Take a minute to remember exactly what I'm capable of, let alone my partner."

"MUHUHAHAHAHA!" Soundbite provided.

Robin's demeanor faltered slightly before she regained her cool, and her smile became more sincere. "Very well, but if I may rationalize my behavior: my life might have been a bit jilted, but I do believe older siblings embarrassing the life out of their younger ones is typical, no?"

I… honestly kind of froze as I processed that statement, a hurricane of emotions whirling in my head. Still, I was able to recover enough to cover my shock with a careless scoff. "Yeah, well, newsflash: this kind of juvenility is more typical of the younger. Now, you were saying?"
Robin chuckled and held her arm behind herself, accepting a bundle from an autonomous arm that pushed the door open slightly. "I was serious when I said I wanted your opinion on my attire. Here, take a look." She unrolled the bundle, displaying the outfit she was apparently planning to wear on the island.

The very, very form-fitting outfit she was planning on wearing.

I gave the one-piece a once-over before gracing Robin with a flat look. "Well, it certainly says something to me, though considering how the language of leather is one of few words, I don't think you wanna know what that 'something' is."

And it wasn't just the leather that made me say that. Honestly, I couldn't be surprised at what I saw considering how I'd been half expecting it, but still… a white, polka-dotted slip, a black leather dress with long sleeves, and black leather boots that reached to halfway up her thighs, leaving just about nothing to the imagination and sending a very… specific message. No doubt about it, it was definitely the same outfit she wore while she was held prisoner in Enies Lobby and, now that I thought about it, the one that she wore while still on Water 7 proper.

"So, that's your honest opinion, is it?" Robin asked casually.

"And I would lie why?" I scoffed.

"Perfect," Robin purred, several arms sprouting to help her put the outfit on—ah, damn.

I promptly turned to the side and held my hand to my face with a grimace. "You fight dirty, witch. You hear me? Dirty. And don't say—"

"Pi~ra~te," she crooned.

"…that," I grumbled with a roll of my eyes.

Soundbite, meanwhile, had an entirely different opinion to share. "HUBBA HUBBA! NOW THAT'S what I call a nice—ACK!" He was cut off by two hands grabbing his eyestalks and effectively blinding him. "SPOILSPORT! YOU WOULDN'T do this to CROSS and you're NOT DOING IT TO LASSOO!"

"I'm smart enough not to look," the dog-gun huffed as he covered his eyes with his foreleg.

"And Cross wouldn't blare it all out over the ship," Robin added.

"…fair enough."

I grumbled and tapped my foot impatiently as I waited for her to finish up. Come on, that thing was slim, but no way in hell was it that hard to put on! "Seriously, though, I understand why you were wearing clothes like this back when you worked for Baroque Works, but what's your motivation now?"

"Heh. Isn't it obvious, Cross?" I could hear the smirk in her voice. "Not all men are as strong-willed as you are. I predict many a lowered price thanks to this particular outfit."

I glanced upward with a tortured groan. "My kingdom for a few appropriate Bible verses that I could mutter about now…"

"Would you prefer Deuteronomy, LEVITICUS OR GENESIS?"
My eye twitched slightly as the words 'fire', 'brimstone', and 'Sodom and Gomorrah' flashed through my head before casting a glare down at Soundbite. "Learn to recognize sarcasm, slimestain."

"Only SU can call me THAT! You may address me as THE ANNOYING VOICE IN YOUR HEAD. And YOU need to learn to recognize SNARK!"

"Ever hear of a little thing called timing, you—?"

"Break it up before I bite you both," Lassoo ordered in a bored tone.

Soundbite and I gave one last snarl at each other before falling silent.

We were then joined by an airy chuckle coming from my generated blindspot. "Amusing as always you two. And for the record, I'm almost done. Would you mind zipping me up, Cross?"

I stared dead ahead with as I popped up my other hand's middle finger. "You are the last person I want to hear that line from."

"Can't blame a girl for trying." Once again, I could hear the smirk in her voice. I sighed in relief as the sound of a zipper... well, zipping sounded out. "I'm decent now, so hopefully I won't offend your fragile sensibilities. Now, your opinion, if you wouldn't mind?"

Grinding my teeth and fists, I turned back towards her. I thought that I was ready, but honestly, only the fact that she was smiling kept me from immediately flashing to her standing on the Tower of Justice, screaming that she wanted to die. I searched around for something matter-of-fact to remark on, anything to keep me from spilling right here and right now—and suddenly, a perfectly innocuous remark came to mind that, thinking about it, I was genuinely curious about.

"Huh, not bad," I whistled. "Just one question, if you don't mind."

"Oh?" Robin put her hand on her hip and cocked it out slightly. "And what would that be?"

"Well, what happened to your hats?"

…Wow, that made her freeze almost as bad as Ohara. "Ah..."

"You know, your cowboy hats?" I forged on in an effort to break the tension, gesturing at my own cap. "You wore one when we first met you, all through Alabasta, even on most of Skypiea. Why'd you lose them? I actually thought they looked pretty cool on you."

Robin remained stock still for a moment before turning away and coughing into her fist. "I... I wore those hats because I needed them. And now... I don't."

I frowned in confusion as I tried to puzzle out the deeper meaning that was clearly present in her words. "...What, for blocking out the sunlight or something?" My frown deepened as she merely shook her head. Just what was she talking about? I froze as I caught sight of the fact that her grip on her upper arms was white-knuckled and shaking vigorously. Was it something from her past? I thought hard about Ohara, but none of the scholars had anything to do with it, and the only other person she was close to was—

Ah. Well, I'm as thick as a dictionary, aren't I?

Moving very carefully, I stepped up behind Robin and landed a hand on her shoulder, wincing in response to her own reaction. "You know..." I started softly. "You don't just have to wear them when you need to be strong, you know? It's... It's alright to wear them because they remind you of
Several emotions flashed across Robin’s face. She promptly shot her thumb to her mouth and started gnawing on the nail. "I-It's a strategic inconvenience. T-Too much chance of it getting caught o-or obscuring vision or—"

Right, the bullshit train comes to a halt now. I grabbed her shoulders and spun her around so that she was facing me dead on. "Robin," I enunciated, both kindly and firmly. "Jaguar D. Saul would be overjoyed to see you wearing that and we both know it."

I severely regretted my words at first when Robin's entire body promptly locked up, her eyes indicating that she was somewhere far from the Merry.

Seconds later, however, she was back, and after another round of emotions crossed over her face, she finally settled on a calm, almost serene smile.

"Thank you, Cross," she whispered. "It's not often that I act like a fool and... and I appreciate you pointing out this instance of it. Now, if you'll excuse me." She extricated herself from my grip and started to walk towards the door. "I need to go and see if my wardrobe has anything that doesn't clash with my current selection."

I was prepared to let her go, just like that, when a pang of uncertainty struck me dead on. "Ah, Robin—!" I stepped forward, my hand raised, but I froze when she turned back to me with a curious expression.

"Yes, Cross?" she asked.

My jaw hung open as I searched for something, anything I could say to her... and in the end, I was forced to settle for coughing slightly as I straightened up. "You... You know we'd go to the mats for you..." I eyed her hesitantly. "Right?"

Robin blinked at me in confusion as she processed my statement. And then, then she smiled.

A real smile, an honest smile, a smile of belief and hope that shone throughout her, even in her eyes.

"Of course I do."

I didn't even hesitate to smile back.

-o-

"Demons..." I hissed grimly. "They're demons..."

"In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti!" Soundbite whimpered from within his shell, babbling Latin on and on in a half-demented tone.

The 'they' in question were Vivi and Nami, who were currently preening victoriously as they watched the employees of the Water 7 Gold Exchange bring out tray after tray of freshly liberated bills and stacked them cleanly and professionally in well-armored suitcases.

"Aye," agreed a scruffy, bearded pirate captain who was watching the display next to me. "I been sailin' these seas for well-nigh twenty years, and I've never seen the like."

The 'like' in this case had been the jaw-dropping display of two of our female crewmates positively browbeating the Exchange staff into giving us way more than fair compensation for the gold we'd
acquired for them.

"Ta-da!" Nami purred as she hugged one of the filled suitcases. "3 and a half billion beris! Oooh, it's almost a shame that we have to spend it! Good job, Vivi! I think I'd kiss you if you weren't ready to punch me if I tried!"

"Oh, I can't take all the credit," Vivi primly replied as she patted one of the cases. "You were quite terrifying in there, after all, I was mostly just coasting off of the pure rage you were pumping out!"

"Oh, but your negotiating skills are so far above mine; a humble thief like me can't compare to a true royal," Nami shamelessly proclaimed.

"Okay, I'm stopping this before it gets any further and you two actually start making out," I interjected, shaking off the last of my terror. "Let's get this all loaded up and ready to go, guys."

There was no answer, and I turned around. "Guys?"

I honestly should have expected this: Boss was staring at the two girls, quivering in either fear or excitement, possibly both, though the rest of the squad were quivering behind him in what was most definitely terror. Conis and Su had scrambled against a wall, trying to get as far away as possible, and the cloud fox had procured a rosary from… somewhere and was holding it out towards them, while Usopp mimicked her with a crucifix. And Carue and Luffy…

"What?" the duck asked, turning around from where he'd been kicking a ball with some kids. "Oh! Awe we done yet?"

"I hope so!" Luffy whined with a pout. "I wanna gooo!"

"Okay, the moron I get, but you're that used to it?" I deadpanned.

"Aftah wiving wit' her foah yeahs? You bettah bewieve i—!"

FWEEEEET!

"AGH!" We all reeled in agony as Nami somehow managed to produce a hellish whistle worthy of Luffy himself.

"Alright, you idiots, listen up!" Nami barked as she patted one of the briefcases she and Vivi were flanking. "The division is ¥700 million in bills and the rest in validated ingots. The ingots are for wealth and show, and the bills are for spending. For the matter of this endeavor, both teams will be carrying two briefcases with them! The first!" She patted a very large and metal briefcase, three-feet by one-foot by two in area. "Contains ¥400 million in ingots, good to show off just how much wealth we have on us. Luffy, Boss, if you'd pick these up, please?"

The captain and the Dugong promptly walked up and grabbed the briefcases' handles—

CL-CLICK!

"GAH!"/"WHAT THE—!?"

And reeled in shock when Nami slapped cuffs on them.

"Safety measures," the navigator explained as she latched the other sides of the cuffs to the briefcases. "Because like it or not, you two are morons and not to be trusted."

"Ooooh, cool!" Luffy chuckled as he let the metal case swing from his arm like a pendulum.
Boss, meanwhile, rolled his eyes as he heaved the case onto his back with ease. "Whatever lets you sleep at night, missy."

"And the second," Nami continued, patting a much more normal-looking briefcase. "Contains $100 million in bills, to be used for immediate payment. Now then, considering your survival instincts… Cross?"

"Yeah, yeah," I said tiredly, extending my own arm. She clicked the cuff around my gauntletlet and one of the briefcases, while cuffing the other to herself.

I tested the weight briefly. Heavyish, sure. Not light by any measure, but at least it wasn't too much of an inconvenience.

Nami then proceeded to direct our attention to the other five pairs of cases. "Now, as for the rest of this gold, it goes back to the Merry for now, to be stored and divided up. And considering that the fastest and most secure way back is through the water… GUARDS!"

The TDWS abruptly straightened and saluted. "YES MA'AM!" they barked in unison.

"Take the cases and swim back to the Merry. Load it onboard and then resume your responsibilities guarding the ship. And if you lose any of the gold along the way…"

Within moments, the cases were gone and only trails of bubbles indicated where the dugongs had vanished to as well.

Nami sniffed primly. "You've trained them well, Boss."

"Thank 'ye kindly," the dugong tipped his cigar with a smirk.

"Right. Now, then, let's saddle up and get going!" I declared as I hopped into the boat Lassoo was snoozing in.

"Right," Vivi nodded as she and Carue settled into their own vessel, while Conis took the third.

"And remind me again what you call those accents?"

"So, ya guys all ready to go?" the bull who was towing me and mine asked eagerly. "Just tell ol' Two-Fin Joey where ya wanna go and we'll getcha before you can say 'Galley-La'?"

"Brooklyn," I grit out from behind the hand I had pressed to my face. "It's racist-as-shit Brooklyn."

"BE GLAD THAT THEY'RE amphibious enough that I can do anything AT ALL! 'Sides, they're a species of cabbies, WOULD YOU RATHER I'D USED UNIDENTIFIABLE MIDDLE-EASTERN ETHNICITIES?"

"Grgrgghh:""Ey, oh, relax, my friend, relax!" Joey chuckled casually. "As it is, we guys are just happy to be able to talk at all, along with the rest a' da bulls near yah little friend here! It's mighty convenient for business, it is!"

"Heh, I do what I can!"

"Yeah? Well, what you 'can' just got youse and yours some very powerful friends!" The bull's grin widened by several teeth. "Congratulations, you've got friends in the Union!"
I cocked an eyebrow curiously at the comment before shrugging it off, deciding to puzzle it out later. "Sounds great. I'd be a bit chattier usually, but right now, we're a bit pressed for time. Mind stepping on it so as to head for the quickest way to Franky House?"

"Ya mean Big Boss Gom an' Sod's home? No prob!" Joey nodded confidently as he turned his head back around. "Youse'll be there before ya know it!"

"Great!" I nodded thankfully before waving over my shoulder at the rest of our crewmates. "Good luck, guys!"

"You too!" Luffy waved back.

And with that, we were off, our Yagaras tugging us down water-logged street after water-logged street. I took the time to enjoy the truly exquisite scenery as we went, but in the process I noticed the tension present in my crewmates, who were constantly looking around for danger.

"Come on, guys, relax a little, will you?" I prompted with a chuckle. "Sure, we've got a lot of cash on us, but we've also got some damn good firepower on our side too. Currently nothing's gunning for us, so we might as well sit back and enjoy the ride, no? Observe!"

Deciding to lead by example, I leaned back as we approached a rounded a corner and started to approach a bridge, utilizing my briefcase as a makeshift pillow. It was almost like a lazy river, it was so relaxing. Ah, what a beautiful day.

The sun was shining…

Seagulls were cawing…

Clouds were drifting…

Miss Friday was eating water-water meat on the railing of that upcoming bridge…

…

Waaaaaaaaaat a second.

I snapped up into a sitting position just as our bulls were entering the bridge's underpass and confirmed that yes, there was a buzzard perched on the structure's railing. She was clad in a pristine three-piece suit, a fedora and sunglasses and was serenely tearing away at a shank of meat she had in her talon. Not once did her reflective gaze leave my own until the bridge broke our line of sight.

"Soooooundbiiiiite?" I began in a very deliberately calm voice as I twisted my neck to watch behind us.

"One bird in a CITY, GOOD LUCK DIFFERENTIATING!" Soundbite squawked fearfully, having noticed the exact same issue.

"Cross, what's wrong?" Vivi asked in concern.

"Miss Friday just saw us into a killbox…" Lassoo growled, grinding his paws into his muzzle.

"It's THE UNLUCKIES THREE, The Revengening!" Soundbite snarled.

Vivi promptly paled in terror. "Shit."

"Precisely," I nodded grimly.
"The 'Unluckies'?" Conis asked in confusion.

"What's that, some kind of a wannabe rock group?" Su snarked.

"I wish," I snarled aggravatedly before snapping my fingers. "Joey, guys, fullstop, stay under the bridge."

The yagara twisted his head around to look at me in confusion as he and his friends complied. "What's up, bub? You'se know dat wrinkly feath'a'd thing?"

"You could say that," I growled irritably as I eyed the mouths of the bridge uncomfortably. Damn it, I needed to think… "Mr. 13 is an otter and Miss Friday is a vulture, and both are professional assassins. Soundbite and I managed to spark a vendetta a while back, and it appears that they're being more diligent than I thought in their efforts to kill the two of us before they retire. They're trained with guns and knives and they're no pushovers physically either; get in their way, and you're likely to wind up either maimed or dead. Any questions?"

"Yeah, just one," Lassoo raised his paw with a flat look. "What?"

"We saw Miss Friday waiting for us outside… so where's Mr. 13?"

I tensed as I realized what he was saying. "Ah… that's…"

Soundbite blinked in surprise before whipping his eyestalks around curiously. "Hey, yeah, that's right! WHERE IS THE DAMN WATER—!"

Soundbite choked off in horror, and we slowly turned our gazes to look at each other, before sloooowly looking downwards.

A moment of silence.

Then…

"MERDA!"

I instantly snapped to the front of the boat and slapped my hand on Joey's back. "DEATH FROM BELOW, GOGOGO!"

It was a testament to the bull's experience that he didn't even question me, instead complying without hesitation and snapping from zero to sixty in half a second.

SPLASH!

Considering how Mr. 13, clad in his own somehow-pristine suit and fedora, suddenly exploded out of the water we'd been floating over a moment earlier, a spinning, rabid flurry of blades and violence that would have doubtlessly eviscerated us in seconds? He wasn't a second too slow.

Sadly, seeing as 13 started tearing after us a moment later when he made contact with the water, ripping through the surface as though it were paper? His reflexes weren't rusty either.

"CROSS!" Vivi called after us in concern.

"STICK TO THE PLAN!" I shouted back. "I'LL DRAW THEM OFF, YOU JUST KEEP GOING! I'LL SEE YOU AT FRANKY HOUSE!"
Within moments we were at the mouth of the overpass—

Where Friday suddenly swooped into view, wings flared and underslung machine guns trained on us.

Without missing a beat I jabbed my finger at her with a snarl. "CANI-BLAST!"

Lassoo dropped his jaw open and roared, sending a pillar of blazing air at the bird.

He missed, of course, on account of the vulture flapping her wings and nimbly dodging out of the way of the blast, but he at least managed to give us a long enough reprieve that Joey was able to hang a hard right and tear down a water-filled alleyway.

As we our mount churned up the water in an effort to escape, I took the time to glance back at our pursuers.

Miss Friday above, flapping after us and training her guns on us in hopes of squeezing off a shot, while Mr. 13 pursued below, ripping through the water at speeds equivalent to a cheetah.

Really, there was only one way to define this situation.

"Gentlemen," I announced grimly. "The hunt is on."

Patient AN: May it be that ye are wiser now, lest we surprise you again with something so very… farfetched, as the idea that we would ever make a normal chapter less than ten thousand words.

Xomniac AN: Also, just FYI, CV had to check out before he could run a total final check, so forgive any errors you see, we'll release an updated version once he's had his time.

Cross-Brain AN: And for those of you who are complaining about Omatsuri not being canon, we present a compromise in the form of the following epilogue omake:

Before she held out the papers in her hand, Kokoro paused thoughtfully and then spoke again. "By the way, I've been meaning to ask, and now that you're not all depressed about your ship…" She trailed off, clearly thinking over what she was going to say. "How are you holding up after Omatsuri?"

"What's Omatsuri?"

Kokoro turned to stare at Luffy. "You know, the island you just visited?"

"Wait, really?" Luffy said, tilting his head to the side. "I thought it was called Ling Ling Rong Island or something like that."


"Yeah, that!"

Kokoro blinked, still staring at Luffy. "You're saying you didn't go to Omatsuri Island?"

"Yeah!" Luffy replied, before tilting his head to the side. "Wait, what's Omatsuri Island again?"

"The one you just visited!"
"I don't remember that island," Luffy said. "What did we do on it, again? Because I don't remember that island."

"Yes, you said that already!" Kokoro snapped, her annoyance clearly growing.

"Captain," I interjected. As amusing as it was watching this, we did have a tight appointment to make. "Do you ever get nightmares?"

"What are those?"

"Well, that answers that," I said smugly. "I don't know why we all had the same nightmare a few days ago, but I'm gonna blame it on Grand Line weirdness and call it a day."

Kokoro looked around at the Straw Hats as realization swept over her. "You… You're denying that anything happened to you. Do you actually think that that'll work!?"

We all glanced at one another before giving her a confused look. "Do we think what will work?"

Kokoro silently worked her jaw for several seconds. Ultimately, though, she just threw her hands up in exasperation. "Fine! A nightmare! Believe what you want!"
Chapter 37: A Foreseen Betrayal! Robin Sets Aside Everything For Friendship!

Cross-Brain AN: A quick Shout Out to our rival, DuncanIdaho2014, before we get all of this started, along with a massive congratulations: New Game Plus has surpassed Once Again in Favorites, meaning that it is officially the second most popular One Piece fic in the fandom! You deserve no less, Duncan.

Xomniac AN: Watch your back, rat-bastard, we're climbing fast and we'll be butting heads on equal ground soon enough!

Patient AN: Oh, come now, don't let our congratulations be obscured by your ego, Ego.

Xomniac AN: Har har, never heard that one before.

"SOUNDBITE, WILL YOU CUT IT OUT WITH THE ORCHESTRA?!!" I snapped as I clung to the side of the vessel for dear life, on account of Joey speeding along the canals of Water 7 way faster than what was probably legal. The reason for my ire was that Soundbite had decided on a very upbeat brass and string instrumental for chase music.

"NO WAY! THOSE OUTFITS—WAGH!—MAKE IT PERFECT!" the snail snapped back, clinging onto my jacket with all the strength his jaws could muster as a bullet grazed his shell.

"Yeah, well, word to the—WISE!" I held up one of my gauntlets to block another bullet. "—the Blues Brothers never went on the offensive! And besides that, I seriously doubt that these bastards have even heard of them!" I gripped before blinking as a thought hit me. "Actually, on that note, why are they dressed like—THAT?"

"Looks ta' me like they're impersonatin' Worl' Gummint' officials!" Joey offered, turning his head to look over his shoulders, showing no visible worry at seeing me fending off bullets or any problems navigating the canals. "People do it all the—TIME!" He took a sharp left that resulted in the Unluckies momentarily heading the wrong way. "—when trying to kill one another, keeps bystanders from interferin'!"

"Seriously?" Soundbite asked in confusion. "HOW THE HECK does that work!?"

"Sheer reputation," Lassoo growled as he glared daggers at the pursuing animals. "In any other clothing, someone would try to help us, or at least stop the gun-toting maniacs, but so long as they're wearing suits— " He paused long enough to spit a Cani-Slick in the water and another Cani-Blast at the sky, neither of which helped with how fast the damn pests were moving. "—nobody even blinks twice! It's a common assassin's tactic. After all, who in their right minds would be stupid enough to interfere with World Government business?" He filled his jaws with the tar of Cani-Plaster before firing out a ball of the stuff along with a blaze of Cani-Palm, sending a very potent fireball at 13. That done, he huffed and turned around with a roll of his eyes. "Excluding present company, of course."

"Yeah, well—gnn!" I cut myself off with a bit-out grunt as I ducked under a bullet that had come way too close to giving me a third eye. Behind me, 13 shot out of the water and flipped through the air over Lassoo's fireball before pulling off an Olympic level swan dive back into the canal.

It was at that point that my temper flared a bit, and I slowly climbed to my feet, precariously
balancing myself in the shaky vessel. "Alright, that's it. I hate a lot of things in life, but right now, there are three in particular that I really despise." I took a shaky step towards the back of the boat. "I hate the World Government." I shot my other foot up so that it was firmly planted on the rear wall of the vessel. "I hate Illinois Nazis, and most of all?"

I snapped my hand to the side with my grip open, a grip that Lassoo promptly filled by leaping up and swapping to his gun-form. I balanced the dog-gun on my shoulder and took aim, although the suitcase of cash hanging off my wrist put me a bit off-balance. "I fucking hate furry jackass bastards who can't get a fucking CLUE! CANI-CANNON BARRAGE!"

The shaky nature of my footing very nearly resulted in me being knocked clean on my ass by Lassoo's recoil as he belted out a full salvo of his signature projectiles, but I powered through it and attempted to direct the projectiles so that they would take out at least one of our pursuers.

Sadly, however, our efforts were rendered all for naught when 13 suddenly blasted out of the water, got his footing on a windowsill, and then leapt up to grab Friday's talons. The buzzard in turn flared her wings out so as to both kill her speed and climb high into the air, falling out of range of the explosions in a matter of moments.

I clicked my tongue in annoyance as I watched them fall back. "Well, that's inconvenient."

Lassoo snorted derisively as he shifted back into his hybrid mode on my shoulder. "Those two might be creeps, but they were high in the Baroque Works foodchain for a damn good reason."

"Yeh, well, they're gone now!" Joey shrugged as he slowed his pace and turned out into a larger, more crowded mainstream canal. A few of the civilians milling about recoiled fearfully and gave me a wide berth at the sight of the cannon I was toting, but other than that everyone acted as though it were business as usual. "So, youse ready to head back to the Franky House then?"

I started to reply before pausing as a thought struck me. "Actually... yeah, now that I think about it, Franky should be able to handle them, heading to the House would probably be for the best..." I grimaced as I started scanning the skies. "But don't think for a second that these bastards are done yet. A few measly explosions aren't going to drive them off."

Joey snickered as he swerved through the canal's traffic, up one of the river-ramps and onto the rooftop routes. "Yeh, well, even if they do come back, it won't matter much. After all, in case you didn' notice, Water 7's half pirate town! Sure, sure, the Galley-La boys help keep the peace and so do the Franky Family, to an extent, but there'll always be dat theya undahbelly! We yagaras're considah'd rookies until we get into at least one high-speed chase! We're pretty jaded when it comes to violence."

SMASH! SPA-LASH!

Friday chose that time to suddenly dive-buzz us, dropping Mr. 13 onto a passing Yagara in the process.

With a ridiculously minimal amount of effort, Mr. 13 dislodged the Bull's former passengers into the water and then snapped a pistol—a revolver, to be specific—to the back of the Yagara's head. He then proceeded to jab the other revolver he was clutching towards us, leaving no doubts as to his intentions.

"Huh. I was wonderin' when we'd see da month's first gunpoint jacking. Poor Flippah, dat's no way tah lose a bettin' pool," Joey remarked in a casual, if slightly strained voice.
"Jooeeey," I grit out uncomfortably.

"Eh, don' worry aboud it," Joey said dismissively. "Flippah's an old vet at these kinda stunts, that rats in foah a nasty surprise."

As if on cue, the Yagara in question spun his body on an axis, dunking 13 and his saddle in the water in one swift move.

Sadly, however, 13 wasn't affected in the least.

**THWACK!**

Worse yet, going by the way the otter had pistol-whipped his hostaged mount, all it had done was severely piss him off.

I swallowed heavily as the captive Yagara Bull started closing the distance between us. I really hated it when this damn bastard demonstrated that he was actually smart; now I couldn't try blasting him with Lassoo unless I wanted to risk harming the Yagara as well, not to mention the rest of the civilians around us. "Still think that this is your average Wednesday afternoon?"

Joey grit his teeth as he put on speed and started accelerating down the skyway. "What I think is dat I'm pissed off 'cause one of my friends has got a frickin' psycho-assassin stickin' to his back like glue!" He glanced backwards, his mouth a grim line, as the other Yagara started to catch up with us. "And I'm also a bit nervous because Flippah's as fast in the water as I am! Hope you're ready for a scrape!"

I groaned miserably as I shifted Lassoo so that he was hanging on my back and flexed my fingers in readiness. "And me without my freaking baton…" I groused miserably.

All too soon Flippah drew up alongside us, at which point he swerved to the right and slammed his flank into my ride. "Sorry, Joey!" he apologized through grit teeth. "But you know how it is: when your life's on the line!"

"Do what ya gotta do, I know, I know," Joey nodded with a sidelong glare. "And I only got one thing ta say in response!" Joey swerved out and promptly rammed right back into Flippah, butting heads with the opposing Yagara. "Right back atcha, bub!"

While the two Bulls shoved against one another, I was treated to the sight of 13 leering viciously as he cocked back the hammer on his second gun, aiming it straight at my center mass.

I didn't have time to think, time to even react properly, all I could do was snap my arm up in an instinctive act of defense…

**BANG-BANG-BANG-BANG-BANG-BANG-BANG!**

And then blink in surprise as the unloading of the gun's entire cylinder did absolutely nothing. The sentiment was one that Mr. 13 mirrored perfectly, even going so far as to intently examine his gun.

For my part, I looked down at my torso in an attempt to find out what the hell had happened, and in the process I inadvertently got my answer.

Once I had it, though, I grinned savagely as I jerked my arm up and caught the handle of the very heavy, very bulletproof briefcase that was chained to me. "Isn't it amazing what kind of protection ₧100 Million can buy?" I taunted as I fell into a ready stance.
13 swiftly recovered, scowling viciously as he snapped his gun back into his jacket and whipped out a trio of knives that he held between his paw's fingers like metal claws.

I grimaced as I held up the briefcase. "Nami's gonna *kill* me…" I muttered.

And with that, we were at it. Mr. 13 swung his knives at me, I blocked with the briefcase—and just as I was winding up to swing back, Joey and Flippah promptly swerved away from each other.

"Ah, hey, what are you—!" I began before another Yagara bull shot past us. "Ah, right, live traffic. Carry on!"

"Same 'ta you!" Flippah and Joey snarled as they slammed back into one another, clearly getting into it.

It was *weird* seeing the two Yagara Bulls fighting. They were holding back some; after all, I knew they could bite, and they sure weren't doing that. Instead, they were slamming their muscular necks against each other. It was bizarre, and also rather dangerous, seeing as both Mr. 13 and I spent half our time avoiding getting brained by their flailing heads.

The other half? Mr. 13 failing to get past the briefcase as I blocked him, and me trying and failing to hit him as he ducked and squirmed around my blows like a greased lamprey while keeping his gun trained on Flippah all the while. It was really quite frustrating, especially since Joey screwed up my swing more than once and the damn otter was only barely handicapped as he tried to keep up with Flippah.

The two bulls only split apart again to avoid an oncoming Yagara bus—yes, that's apparently a thing, I shouldn't be surprised—and when they came towards each other they were on a clear collision course, their heads reared back to strike. This was it. No janking, no shakes, no chance for our mounts to screw up our aim. Hell, the charge even helped us by adding momentum.

The two bulls sped closer and closer as Mr. 13 tensed his legs and I wound up a swing. Finally, they were less than six feet from each other, and I began my swing even as Joey and Flippah swung their necks and the otter leapt towards me—and was promptly batted out of the sky, following which he bounced off of the skyway's railing and fell out of sight.

All of us promptly stilled as we blinked after him in surprise.

"*That was easy,/* Soundbite summarized in a casual tone.

"Bit anti-climactic, if you ask me," Flippah shrugged, almost in disappointment.

"Oh, don't worry, we're not done yet," Lassoo provided from where he was hanging on my back.

"Yeh?" Joey looked back at us in confusion. "How come?"

"Second verse, only slightly flipped from the first." Lassoo angled a flat look over my shoulder at the Bull. "*Where's Miss Friday?/*"

Both my eyes and Soundbite's shot wide in shock as we slowly exchanged terrified looks. "*Uh…*" we hedged uncomfortably.

We received an answer in the form of a mechanical whirring noise above us. One look was enough to confirm that not only had Friday caught up with us again, but she was toting a—

I blinked as I processed just *what* she was holding. "Is… Is that a hand-crank operated *rotary gun?*"
'Guess she musta found a weapon smuggler's stash,' Joey provided weakly. "Go figure, huh?"

I swallowed heavily as I slowly brought my arm around my back to grip Lassoo. "Any chance that I can shoot her down before she gets it up to speed?"

Friday grinned malevolently as she shifted one of her talons so that it was pressing a trigger on the weapon's handle, her other leg still spinning the crank as fast as it would go.

"Guess not!" Soundbite yelped.

"MOVE!" I yelled, acting on instinct and leaping out of Joey's saddle and over the edge of the skyway—

RATATATATATATAT!

—just as Friday opened fire and started peppering the space I'd occupied moments before with lead.

For the briefest of moments, I soared with the grace of a majestic eagle.

SMASH!

Then I smashed through something with all the grace of Luffy.

I took a second to get my head on straight, but once I did I was able to realize that I was sitting on what had once been a very beautiful pile of rugs in what had once been a very well-organized market stall.

I also realized that a double-barreled shotgun was being stuck in my face, courtesy of the noticeably peeved owner of said stall.

Maintaining my calm, I dug my briefcase out of the wreckage of the stall's roof, clicked it open and removed a wad of beris, which I held out to the owner. "For your troubles."

The shotgun promptly vanished as the man beamed and accepted the cash. "Thank you very much for your patronage, sir. Would you like the rugs delivered to your ship?"

"Oh, absolutely," I nodded with a grin. "But, ah, at a later date, right now we're in the process of swapping ships and I have an assassin to deal with, so if you'll please excuse me!" And with that cheerfully polite remark, I shot out of the stall like a bat out of hell and took stock of my surroundings.

And a corner of my mind promptly began cursing the Unluckies for not giving me more of a chance to stare in awe at the marketplace I found myself in. Food stalls here, (well-armored) porcelain stalls there, little bit of everything everywhere else, and it was all packed with people.

Though thankfully it wasn't so packed that I wasn't able to react when Soundbite suddenly sucked in a breath.

"Move!"

I obeyed him and jerked to the side, ducking into a stall just as a fast and long shadow tore through across the street.

I panted for a second as I got my breath back before pausing as a thought occurred to me. I then snapped my fingers in front of Soundbite and pointed at the skyway above us before speaking.
"Joey, you alright?"

I sighed in relief when the Brooklyn accent sounded out. "Yeh, don't worry, Flippah and I got out alright. We dove when that bee-yotch opened fiyah. But you betta believe that we ah pissed! Look, kid, you're in da Huron Bazaar, right?"

"Ah…" I glanced at Soundbite for confirmation, and he nodded. "Yeah, why?"

"Good! Look, it's a big and confusin' place, but if you can find your way to da water, den I can arrange some transportation for ya to da Franky House!"

I blinked in surprise before grinning gratefully. "Really? That's great! Where do you want me to head for?"

"Don' worry aboud findin' us, just get to the water and we'll find you!"

Now that really surprised me. "Seriously? You sure?"

"Absolutely!" Joey proclaimed confidently. "After all, you made a friend of the Union, and the Union don't forget its friends no matter what, capiche?"

"Ah, what do you—?"

"INCOMING!"

I barely had enough time to spin around and snap up my gauntlet as Mr. 13 burst through one of the walls of the stall I was in, his blade halting as it stabbed into my armored glove.

"Impact, jackass!" I snarled as I flexed my knuckles.

THWACK!

The sound of 13's nose crunching as he was blown back the way he'd come was immensely satisfying.

Sadly, as enjoyable as that sound was, the whirring sound that echoed above me made it evident that I'd overstayed my welcome. Honestly, the bullets that tore after me as I ran like hell only served to add insult to injury, though thankfully the bazaar-goers had already started running when Friday had come into firing range.

My little run was not fun, on account of how I had a multitude of obstacles to maneuver around: stalls selling various wares that were rarely left intact when I passed them, individuals who were either brave or stupid enough to still be out and about shopping in spite of the clear hell that was following me, and more than a few carts being used to transport goods, either left abandoned in the middle of their owners' panic…

I groaned as I caught sight of the mass of logs and vegetables rolling across my path.

Or, of course, their owners could still be moving them. Damn the Grand Line's skewing of survival instincts!

Acting on instinct, I pumped my legs and leapt onto the table of a nearby stall, from which I managed to spring onto the wood of the cart, and from there clear over the cart itself.

I landed in a roll and came up crouching and facing Friday with Lassoo drawn on my shoulder, aimed right at her weapon. "Cani-Plaster!" I barked.
A ball of tar shot out of Lassoo's metallic maw at cannonball-like speeds and splattered against the buzzard's oversized weapon, sending a cascade of viscous liquid splattering both within the weapon itself and over Friday as well.

The avian assassin hacked and spat as she flapped her wings in a panic, and in the midst of her panic she just so happened to press the trigger of said weapon. The trigger activated the rotary gun's trigger mechanism, obviously…

*BOOM! "SQUAWK!"

Which in turn ignited the tar and caused both Friday and her weapon to go down in a nice and glorious fireball, even going so far as to land on the cart I'd managed to leap over.

However, as loud as the explosion was, it wasn't loud enough to overshadow what came next.

"MY CABBAGES!"

My eye twitched furiously as I put Lassoo back on my back. "Please tell me that was you, Soundbite…" I groaned.

"What a glorious world we LIVE IN!" Soundbite sang gleefully. "By the way, ON YOUR THREE."

I promptly spun on my heel and lashed my arm out, smashing Mr. 13 dead-on with my briefcase and sending him careening into a nearby stall.

"HA!" I jumped and pumped my fist victoriously. "HOME RUN, JACKASS! HOW DO YOU LIKE ME NOW?"

"A lot, I'd imagine."

"Eh?" I blinked over my shoulder at Lassoo.

"That was a weapons vendor," he explained flatly.

"EH?"

13 chose that moment to leap back into sight, sporting both a shotgun that was larger than he was and a truly vicious grin.

I ground my teeth as I glared bloody murder at the aquatic rat. "I will eat you, you little—!"

*BANG!*

"GAH!" I yelped, hastily leaping behind the counter of the stall nearest me. Thankfully, the counter itself was made of metal, so the next blast of buckshot ricocheted rather than perforating me.

I panted and shifted around as I tried to get my breath back, and I jumped when my shoulder knocked into a bottle behind me in the process. "What the—? What is this place?"

"EH…" Soundbite's eyes swiveled for a moment as he took in our surroundings. "Looks like a stir-fry STATION!"

A quick glance around confirmed his assumption: ingredients, dishes, cooking utensils, even a grill with a—!
The *THUNK!* of 13 leaping onto the counter above me prompted me to shoot to my feet. I jerked my arm up—!

KLANG! SPLASH!

"WAAAAAAAGH!"

And promptly revelled in 13’s tortured scream as I splashed a wok-full of sizzling grease on him. Still, knowing just how much sheer *punishment* these bastards could take, I wasn’t even *close* to willing to let things lie there. As such, I snapped a bright red bottle of *something* out from under the counter and shoved its nozzle in his jaws.

I grinned devilishly as his flailing became as much panicked as it was pained. "Icy revenge is nice, but know that some like it *spicy,* shitstain!" And with that, I throttled the bottle, flooded his mouth with the stuff—!

"Waaaaaaaaaaagh!"

And promptly ducked under the tongue of flame that he all but *vomited* before running off in a blind panic.

I patted down a scant few embers that had ignited on my cap before grinning as I spun the bottle in my hand. "I guess that it's true what they say! If you can't take the heat—!"

*C-CLICK!*

I was cut off by the sound of a gun cocking behind me, prompting my spine to snap ramrod straight in terror.

"I'll have what he's having," Friday rasped.

I gulped audibly, steeling my nerves before scowling over my shoulder. "All you had to do was *ask!"* And with that I spun around and sprayed a bottle at the buzzard's beak.

Friday opened her beak and accepted the stream of condiments with an eager grin… for all of three seconds before doubling over and retching in disgust. "W-What the—!?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, were you expecting the sriracha like your little buddy?" I leered as I dangled the beige bottle I was holding before her eyes. "Yeah, we just ran out, so I settled for using horseradish instead. I didn't offend your delicate, capsaicin-proof palate, did I?"

Friday huffed and wheezed as she raised her head and glared bloody murder at me through her tears. "I-I'm going to—!"

"Enjoy your main course? Coming right UP!" I snarled out the last word as I whipped out a spare wok and rammed it over her skull. "And of course, let's not forget dessert!" I rammed Soundbite onto the metal of the pan. "Snail fondue."

"I'm all about DAT BASS!"

"GWAGH!" Friday reeled and stumbled away in agony on account of the pan on her skull vibrating like a bell.

Satisfied with the state of disarray the pair of assassins were in, I booked it right out of the marketplace as fast as I possibly could and beelined for the closest waterway I could find. I'd just
managed to run up onto a bridge—

"DUCK!"

When I was forced to fling myself to the ground in order to avoid yet another talons-first buzz from Friday, albeit a very shaky one.

"Don't these guys ever give up?" I growled as I shot to my feet and broke into a sprint, eyeing Miss Friday as she looped around for another pass.

"Apparently no—PINEAPPLE!"

"What? Pineapple? What do you—gah!?" I choked off in horror as I caught sight of the thing flying at my head.

Y'know those cartoon bombs? Black metal sphere with a burning fuse at the top? Yeah, I had a split second to blink at one sailing through the air, courtesy of a sunglasses-clad otter, before reacting. And the worst part? He threw it at me from further down the bridge. How the hell he'd managed to get in front of me without my noticing, I had no idea.

"Ugh, this is a terrible idea…" I groaned, before throwing myself off the bridge and onto a tied-up gondola floating in the canal. The bomb went off with a loud bang, shattering the bridge and sending chunks of stone into the canal, though thankfully none actually hit me. However, I had no time to celebrate as Friday swooped in for another pass, this time only missing Soundbite and my shoulder by a matter of inches as I jerked to the side.

"If you stand still, you'll be shredded!" Soundbite yelped. "DUCK! WEAVE! RUN!"

"Yeah, slight problem with that," I muttered as I glanced at the sidewalk, where Mr. 13 was waiting and grinning as he tossed another bomb up and down. "And where the hell did he pull that thing from, anyway?! He's only wearing a damn suit!"

"Crocodile didn't only hire those two pests because they have skulls of wrought iron," Lassoo growled. "And also, if the normal way out is closed, than I suggest taking another route."

One glance ahead confirmed that the dog-hybrid had the right idea. Thankfully, we'd landed in the middle of a boat storage area, where there were enough tied-up hulls stretching down the waterway to form a makeshift artificial bridge.

I gritted my teeth and cracked my neck back and forth uncomfortably. Jumping for my life while wearing armor and toting both a small cannon and a little under a hundred million beris in cash. Fun.

The flash of a shadow swooping over me again prompted me to finally move, and I hopped over to the next boat down as the vulture sped through where I'd been moments earlier. The process repeated for three more boats before I saw another bomb fly over my head.

"What's he—?" I started to mutter before being cut off by the bomb exploding—right under the next boat. Which was now sinking by the stern.

Letting out a frustrated groan, a quick glance around confirmed that 13 was still following me on the shore and that Friday was still flying overhead.

"Damn furry bastards!" I snarled as I jumped onto the yet-visible prow of the sinking boat, which, naturally, only made it sink faster. I needed to move fast to the next boat, and my panic wasn't helping. Nor was Friday actually clipping my shoulder as I barely dodged in time.
Still, shaky though my landing was, I managed to make it to the next boat, and for whatever reason the Unluckies weren't doing anything, so I had room to breathe for a bit. Which, in turn, allowed me to notice that 13 was hanging back on the dock with a shit-eating grin on his face.

"Well, that's not a good sign..." I muttered to myself as I tried to puzzle out what their tactic was.

"Uh, Cross?" Soundbite asked, a hint of fear in his voice.

"Not now, Soundbite," I replied as I waved my hand dismissively, my thoughts occupied with more pressing matters. What was that otter up to?

"Cross, seriously."

"Soundbite, unless we're headed straight for a waterfall or something—"

"WE ARE!" Lassoo howled fearfully.

I blinked, then stiffened as I noticed that yes, the scenery around us was moving and yes, that was because the boat we were on was moving too. Dreading what I would see, I glanced behind us. My eyes widened as I realized that the mooring post the boat had been connected to had a combat knife buried in it, that the mooring line was cleanly severed and that we were slowly drifting towards an abrupt drop IN THE FUCKING CANAL SHIT!

"Fucking bastards!" I barked, frantically looking around for some way to avert this. "Damn it damn it damn it, is there an anchor? An oar? Anything?!"

"Just me."

And with that, Miss Friday's beak jabbed me in the small of my back and pushed us forward and off the edge.

Amidst the stream of cursing coming from my mouth and the vulture recipes that Soundbite was belting out, I braced myself for a very wet landing...

CRASH! "...eep," I squeaked in pain when I instead smashed into something very hard in a... shall we say, compromising position.

"Hey, youse boys alive back there?" the Yagara Bull I'd somehow landed on asked in concern.

"...lemme get back to you on that," I squeaked from my impromptu splits on the seat-back of said Yagara's saddle, the middle rammed between my legs until I tipped to the side and collapsed. "Soundbite? Do me a favor and take note of this: I need to ask Usopp to build a cup for me the instant we see him again."

"And I should give up this COMEDY WHY?" Soundbite cackled.

I snarled viciously as I started to right myself. "Because otherwise, I'll dunk you in saltwater every time this happens from now on!"

I took an immense amount of satisfaction in Soundbite's terrified expression. "YOU WOULDN'T!" he cried.

"Try me; I'm sure you-know-who would love a two-for-one," I bit out before finally managing to focus all of my attention on the Yagara whose back I was on. "Does that answer your question?" I asked dryly, before blinking in surprise as I realized that holy crap, I'd landed on a Yagara Bull.
"And, ah, who are you?"

"Eheh, sorry 'bout da rough landin', bub," the Yagara winced with a sympathetic snicker. "And anyways, names ain't important! Just know dat I'm wid da Union! Now hang on tight!" He looked up with a grimace as Friday wheeled around overhead. "Dese bozos ain't gonna letcha go just yet, so gettin' ya ta where ya need ta go is gonna be tricky!"

"Yeah, well—!" The flash of a shadow over me prompted me to look up. I bit out a curse and rammed my fist onto the side of the saddle as 13 dove towards us. "SCREW GENTLE, GO ROUGH, MOVE MOVE MOVE!"

"YOUSE GOT IT!" the Bull roared as he went from zero to sixty in no time at all, tearing down the canal in a blur of foam with 13 somehow managing to stay right on our tail.

"Are you really no faster than a freaking otter?" I grit out. In any other situation I'd try and be kinder, but right now 13 was just starting to tick me off.

"Normal ottahs, easily. Dat guy ain't normal…" He glanced over his shoulder with a grimace. "But he suah as heck ain't local eithah, so it all evens out. Fah now, let's see him keep up in da boondock labyrinth!"

So saying, the Yagara turned a corner towards a wide branching series of water-paths. He kept taking forks in the road, as fast as he could manage it, and each time resulted in Mr. 13 taking just a little longer to keep up. After a few minutes, 13 fell out of sight and the Yagara abruptly turned in an entirely different direction and stopped at a low-level sidewalk.

"Head across da plaza, hang a right, and don't stop until ya hit da end of da' block!" the Yagara ordered.

"Eh?!" I blinked in confusion. "But this isn't where we're headed!"

The Yagara made to answer, then flinched as the sound of splintering wood sounded out a fair distance away. "Do you wanna get there before that water-rat catches you or not!?"

"I'd listen to THE BULL if I were you!" Soundbite pleaded.

"Alright, I'm going!" I said as I leapt out and started sprinting as he'd ordered. Seconds later, there was a splash and the sound of someone running behind me, but I didn't look back as I made a beeline for the corner. A right turn and a few feet later found me waiting at the corner looking around in panic… before another Yagara Bull suddenly pulled up out of nowhere.

"I'm wid da Union, get on!" he said, his tone conveying no room for hesitation or argument. Neither did the sound of 13 catching up to me either, for that matter, which really moved me to leap onto the Bull's back and hang on for dear life as he tore off.

"Not as talkative as the other bulls," I muttered.

"Some of us prefah to concentrate on dah job," the bull muttered back, matching his words as he focused on making tracks in the water. He jetted around for a few more canals before stopping by a landing without warning. "Run ovah to da next street, get to da centah of the bridge and den jump. Youse got thirty seconds."

This time, I didn't even hesitate to jump out and book it, charging down the street and easily locating the bridge that spanned the canal. The fact that I couldn't hear Friday or 13 behind me was a good sign, but knowing those two, I seriously doubted I was safe. As such, I didn't hesitate to climb on the
bridge's railing and throw myself over.

One second I was falling towards the (relatively) rushing water, and the next found me landing not-so-gracefully on the back of yet another Yagara Bull's gondola.

"Let me guess, you're with the Union?" I reasoned.

"Precisely," the Yagara pronounced without slowing down. "I'm da last in da chain, you'll be as close to Big Bros Sod and Gom's house as we can get youse once I getcha there." It paused before shooting a glare over its shoulder. "Also, though I appreciate bein' able ta talk, I'm a lady."

I jabbed my finger at Soundbite with a flat glare. "Blame him."

"What!? HELL NO, blame Canada!"

"This isn't South Park and I don't respect your 'authoritay', now fix it!" I snapped.

Soundbite had the good conscience to flinch slightly. "Ah, right. HOW'S THIS?"

The Yagara hummed contemplatively. "One and two, test test..." she grinned victoriously. "Yeah, this'll work! Thanks! Ah, and check it out!" She pulled up alongside the mouth of a relatively griny alley in a rather rundown part of town. "Here yah ah! Just head on outta town and yah should be theyah, yah can't miss Franky House if'n yah tried!"

"Got it, thanks!" I said thankfully, waving at her as I climbed out. "And, just out of curiosity, what the heck is the Union and how powerful is it anyways?"

The Yagara donned a cocky grin. "Tha Union's short for the Yagara Bull's Workah Union, and for how powahful we ah, well..." Her grin widened by several molars. "Don't ask questions yah can't handle tha answah to." And with that, she sped off and turned out of sight.

I watched after her for a second before shrugging and turning to start walking down the alleyway. "So... seeing as we can't hear the pesky pair coming after us like bats out of hell anymore, you guys think we might have lost them?"

FWUMP!

"Not a chance in hell."

With an expression that was more incredulous and exasperated than terrified, I turned around to stare at where the Unluckies had landed behind me. They were thoroughly disheveled and clearly exhausted, but that hardly made them any less threatening than they had been at the start of this, in spite of all I'd done to them.

"Okay, seriously," I demanded in shock. "What damned circle of hell did Crocodile drag you two monsters out of!?"

"Kuraigana Island," Friday deadpanned.

"Freaking Humandrills..." 13 scowled.

"Freaking Humandrills..." I scowled.

I paused as I processed that before allowing my face to fall into a neutral expression. "...Yeah, that tracks. Ah, and by the way?" I tapped the side of my head. "Your sunglasses are askew." I stuck my palm out at them. "Gastro-Flash." And then there was light.
"YEARGH!"

I turned tail and ran as the pair reeled and clutched their eyes in agony. It only took me a minute to run past the edge of town and onto the meager wasteland that encircled the city proper, with the unique and eccentric Franky House laid out before me. It was at that point that a roar/squawk of fury sounded out behind me, prompting me to run even faster. Thankfully, the scrabble of talons on stonework meant that Friday was probably too exhausted to fly anymore, but that sure the hell didn't mean that I was willing to stop for even a moment. My muscles burned like all hell, but soon enough I managed to reach the doors of the House and shouldered my way inside without stopping.

Once inside, I didn't even pause for an instant as I barreled my way past the shocked members of the Franky Family. I dodged to the side in order to avoid someone grabbing me, baseball-slid under the legs of one of their no doubt part-giant members, and at one point I even went so far as to spring onto a poker table they'd set up and use it as a springboard from which I could leap across the heads of at least three more members.

Finally, I reached the raised dais at the back of the house where there were two couches set up opposite one another, and without missing a beat I vaulted over its backrest and landed in the seat across from none other than Franky, a.k.a. Cutty Flam, a.k.a. the boss of Water 7's underworld, a.k.a. our future shipwright. "Hi, there!" I chirped in a perfectly casual tone. "Franky, right? My name's Jeremiah Cross, of the Straw Hat Pirates! Maybe you've heard of me? Nice to meetcha!" I grabbed his hand and shook it for a second before noticing what he was holding in his other hand. "Oh, is that Cola? I haven't had any in forever! Mind if I have some? Thanks!" I didn't even wait for a response as I snatched the bottle from his hand and started draining it mercilessly.

Franky blinked in shock as I chugged the bottle he'd just been holding. "Wait, what the—?"

I finished the bottle off with a relieved sigh, followed by a gut-rattling belch. "Ahhh, now that hit the spot! Thanks for that, I ran here from halfway across the city, so I am parched! Anyway, sorry for barging in like this, but it was really important that I meet with you so that I could offer you the business deal of a lifetime!" I eagerly held my wrist up and pointed at the briefcase I was hauling. "Trust me, it'll be way worth your while!"

An instant later, the Unluckies filled the sides of the sofa beside me, shoving their guns against my temple with more than a little force.

My smile became rather fixed as I tried very hard not to move. "But, ah, first, before we get down to business, do you think you could help get rid of my little friends?" I winced as they pressed their weapons even harder. "Pretty please?"

Franky took in the situation for a second before grunting and starting to stand up. "Alright, you two, I don't know what your issue with him is, but let him—"

**BA-BANG!**

I flinched as the Unluckies shot Franky in the chest without even looking at him, knocking him back and bowling over both him and his sofa. They then proceeded to cock the secondary barrels on their pistols and re-aim them at me, all without missing a beat.

I swallowed heavily as I eyed my assailants before pausing as a thought struck me. "… Alright, I don't want to look a gift horse in the mouth here, but I just have to know: why haven't you done it yet?"

The Unluckies tilted their heads in the slightest indications of confusion.
"Why haven't you shot me?" I clarified. "You've had me at gunpoint several times now, and it would only take a single second to send a bullet ripping through my skull. So why? Why haven't you killed me yet?"

The two of them exchanged looks for the briefest of seconds…

"Tsss…"

Before hissing out a sharp breath between their teeth…

"TSHAAHAHAHA!"

And throwing their heads back and cackling in dark and malevolent humor.

Well, if I didn't think that these assholes were evil before…

"Tshahaha, ha, haaa…" 13 wound down to a light chuckle and shook his head as he wiped a finger beneath his eye. "Ah, man… we seriously overestimated you, Cross, we really did. The way you talked earlier, we thought you knew something of hatred, that you had a clue…"

"But if you even have to ask, then you really must have no idea of what hatred is like after all," Miss Friday shook her head in amusement. "You have no idea what it's like to truly despise someone, to hate their very existence with every fiber of your being that you can muster."

"Because you see," 13 picked up with a vicious grin as he ground his weapon against my skull. "That's what we feel for you. You're no longer a mere vendetta, no longer a grudge, you're the object of our hatred. We despise you, Jeremiah Cross, you and that snail of yours. We hate you on a conceptual level that we didn't think was possible until now. There are… truly no words that can be used to define the depths of our emotions."

"But as undefinable as our emotions are, one thing is undeniable." Friday's talons gouged into the sofa cushion, and her grip on her own gun shook slightly. "Taking your life in an instant, with a single bullet? That fate… is just too merciful. We just… we can't let it sit there, you see? We can't let you die that… that kindly. No, Jeremiah Cross, you won't die here, and not today either. You'll die at our safehouse, a long time from now. You will die alone, you will die in agony, and above all? You will die slowly, after we have performed every physically possible act of torture we can conceive or learn of. Do. You. Understand?"

I swallowed heavily as I swapped my gaze between the two utter psychopaths I was trapped between before slowly raising a finger. "Ah… I-I see… then, i-if I may ask you one more question?"

13 bared his fangs as he brought his face close to mine. "The last one you'll get before Friday rips your tongue out and eats it."

"Right…" I was forced to re-steel my nerves due to that particular image before managing to force a cocky grin in place. "Well, I just wanted to know if you were planning on doing all that you have lined up for me before or after the cyborg you ticked off kicks your asses."

Friday and 13 paused and visibly blinked in confusion. "Cy-what-now?" they chorused.

"Cyborg," I explained casually. "You know, half human, half machine. Something sort of like Mr. 1? Usually they're pure sci-fi, but there are a few examples out and about in the world today. Like, say…" I widened my grin as I looked up at the figure looming before us. "The SUPER! Boss of Water 7's underground?"
"Sup."

CLENCH!

It was at that point that two massive hands reached down and crushed the Unluckies' guns, as well as the limbs gripping them.

"GYAGH!" the animal-assassins cried in agony as Franky lifted them both up by their limbs and held them before his infuriated face.

"You two pests think that you can break into my house, shoot me without even a second thought, and then threaten someone's life like that without there being any consequences?" he growled. "I don't think so. And you—" He snapped his glare down to me, killing my nascent grin where it stood. "You intrude upon my home, shove past my boys, force me to meet with you, *drink my Cola,* and you actually think that I'll work for you?"

I swallowed heavily before plastering an only slightly shaky grin on my face. "For my crew, to be specific." I brought my briefcase onto my lap and clicked it open, showing off the contents. "And for a rather exorbitant commission at that."

Franky's expression remained set in stone for what felt like an eternity before a massive grin split his face. "Ice-for-Brains owes me a whole bundle of cash," he announced in a jovial tone. "You Straw Hats are *just* as insane in real life as you make yourselves out to be on your show!"

"SIR! YOU OFFEND US!" Soundbite cried out in a faux-insulted tone before grinning maniacally. "OUR INSANITY delves deeper than any mortal mind can possibly IMAGINE."

"I don't know, I can imagine quite a bit," Zambai cut in.

"Deeper than even THAT!" Soundbite asserted.

Franky chuckled. "Well, I'm definitely looking forward to talking business with you guys." His expression then took on a hint of sadism as he held up the still-struggling Unluckies, causing them to stiffen in terror. "Lemme just deal with these pests first." And with that, he strode to the front of his dais and held the pair out for the rest of the Franky Family to see. "Boys? Do me a favor and *educate* these two on etiquette while I address our guest."

And with that, he flung the pair out into the crowd and walked back to the couch, summarily ignoring the sound of brawling and screaming that arose behind him.

"Now, then, it seems that we already know each other: Jeremiah Cross and Soundbite of the Straw Hat Pirates, founders and hosts of the SBS—"

"And Franky, ship dismantler and the head of Water 7's underworld, the most *SUPER* guy I'll ever have the pleasure of meeting?" I finished, grinning ear to ear.

"Looks like you're not the only one whose reputation precedes them," Franky said, grinning just as wide. "So, let's cut to the chase. First of all… what's with the Government otter and the vulture? I mean…" The cyborg shrugged casually. "Besides those bastards no doubt wanting your head on a spear anyway."

"Not Government, just wearing suits in order to coast off the rep," I said, waving my hand dismissively. "They used to work for Crocodile, but after we took him down Soundbite and I… paid them visits in prison as payback for attacking us during that particular fiasco. We…" I scratched my neck sheepishly. "May have escalated matters, which made them decide to kill us. This is the second
time we've met them since we left Alabasta, and probably not the last."

"Huh…" Franky scratched his chin as he gazed over my shoulder at the mob behind us. "Ya know, I could do you a favor and put them on a spit. It wouldn't be any trouble, really."

"Nah, nah, it's fine, no need to go that far," I replied, shaking my head. "Just give them a beating and toss them… pretty much anywhere, really."

"Don't be an idiot, Cross."

I blinked and looked over my shoulder in surprise. "Lassoo?"

The Zoan-weapon growled and shifted on my back before pushing himself off so that he could roll to the ground, morphing to his full dog form as he did so. He glared up at me as he sat on his rump. "You heard me, Cross, I said don't be an idiot," he repeated. "You heard those two monsters, they're not going to give up trying to kill you any time soon. You can shake them or send them away, but they will be back. Better to kill them now and be done with it, once and for all."

I frowned at my weapon and shook my head in denial. "No, Lassoo. I've gotten this far without killing, I'm not about to stop now. I know that they'll be back, that's a given, but I'll handle them then like I handled them now."

"But next time you might not get anywhere near as lucky!" Lassoo snarled, his hackles raised in annoyance. "Next time they might lose their patience, next time they might hurt someone else!" He paused, panting, before backing down with a sympathetic look. "Look… Cross, if you don't want to kill them, that's fine, just let me do it! I've done it before, more times than I can count, there wouldn't be—"

"Wouldn't be any blood on my hands? Wrong. Inaction to stop a death like this would be as bad as doing it with my own two hands," I countered.

"FOR THE LOVE OF YOU-KNOW-WHO, CROSS, IT'S A water-rat and a feather-rat, BOTH OF WHICH WANT TO TORTURE US TO DEATH! Why are you showing THEM mercy?!"

Soundbite snapped indignantly.

I shot a glare at him and opened my mouth to say something heated before hastily snapping my jaws shut and snorting out an aggravated breath. I took a second to get my thoughts together before grimacing and holding up my hands defensively. "I-I know, I know, but… look, I'm not naïve, alright? I know that I've been lucky in not having to kill so far, I know that one day I'm going to get into a situation where…" I looked down at my hands, almost imagining the blood there. "Where it'll be kill or no kill with no exit, no third option, but…” I shook my head in an effort to discard the thoughts. "But it's not going to be today, it's not going to be in cold blood, and above all else?"

My demeanor sharpened as I shot a vicious glare over my shoulder at the mob behind us. "I'm not going to let it be those two. I'm not going to give them the 'honor' of finally making me break. They can hate me and they can hunt me as much as they want, but at the end of the day?" I shook my head in disgust as I looked ahead. "I'm not going to let them make me like them. I'm not going to sink to their level, because the fact of the matter is that while they might be monsters, they're monsters motivated by hate, and that means that they just. Aren't. Worth it."

Lassoo and Soundbite stared at me, borderline awestruck expressions on their faces.

"C-Cross, I—!" Lassoo started to breathe.
And whatever he was about to say was then lost to the wind as the moment shattered to pieces. Said shattering resulted from the very, very undignified sound of a literally tough-as-nails cyborg bawling his eyes out.

"Seriously!? You are that hair-trigger!?" I squawked in disbelief.

"Sh-Shaddup, I'm not crying, you're crying!" wept the very clearly crying Franky.

"The hell I am!"

"Cross, I thought you said he was going to hit it off with Boss right away, not Chopper," Lassoo deadpanned.

"You haven't seen him SUPER yet," I muttered under my breath before sliding my headphones on. "Oh, and fair warning? I'm going to snap him out of it the fastest way I know how, so cover your ears."

Soundbite and Lassoo's expressions morphed into ones of panic as I slid my hand into my bag. "DON'T YOU DARE—"

BWAAAAAAAAAAAAH!

The entirety of the Franky House reacted as the foghorn blared out. And seeing their faces, I couldn't help but chuckle. "I love this thing."

"WE KNOW!" everyone roared back.

"Geeze, that stupid horn is even louder in person," Franky grumbled as he dug his fingers in his ears. "Alright, moving on. Boys? Break them up, tie them up, and stick them in storage on the Puffing Tom." He looked at me in askance. "I can respect you not wanting them dead, but do you want me to make sure they can't come after you again?"

I turned to frown at the pair thoughtfully for a second before shrugging. "Yeah, go ahead, my conscience can live with that."

"Perfect! Hey, boys!" Franky belted out, getting his guys attention. "Don't kill 'em, but make sure to clip their wings and claws before you leave 'em. Oh!" He snapped his fingers as a thought hit him. "And they're a pretty close team, so keep them apart."

"Got it, Big Bro," Zambai saluted. "Destroyers, you're with me."

"Got it, Zambai," the part-giants chorused, gathering the twitching, groaning animals and binding them before heading out. As the door closed, the rest of the house looked at Franky, who made a careless gesture that signalled them to return to business as usual. With that, Franky sat back on his couch and grinned invitingly.

"So, Jeremiah Cross, what do the biggest smartasses in the world of pirates want with me?"

I made to respond—

SLAM! "JEREMIAH CROSS!"

—and was promptly cut off by the unmistakable sound of a door being kicked off its hinges, accompanied by the unmistakably furious voice of one Nefertari Vivi.

I stiffened in terror as I felt visual daggers slam into the back of my head, and I gave Franky a
desperate look. "For the love of all that's holy, please tell me that this place has a bolthole."

Franky shook his head with a tsk. "Sorry, buddy, but it wouldn't do you any good. This chick looks like she's ready to move heaven and earth to rip your head off."

I winced, stood up and turned around as I mentally prepared any kind of excuse I could muster to keep my head attached to my neck... and was promptly brought up short when I actually caught sight of her. More specifically...

"What the hell—did you change your clothes!?

Rather than the white blue-dotted sundress that she'd been wearing on the Merry, Vivi was currently clad in a beige suit-and-skirt combo and a scarlet tie. It was a bit plain, true, but it put off an air of pure professionalism.

"Aheheh, sorry, Cross," Conis apologized in a sheepish tone as she followed the steaming Princess through the collapsed door. She'd also changed her outfit so that she was wearing a professional-looking dark blue long coat, cyan khakis, and a white turtleneck, along with her white beret and the goggles hanging around her neck.

"What possible reason could there have been to go clothes shopping while I was fighting for my life!?

I demanded indignantly.

"Simple." Boss snorted out a cloud of smoke as he waddled into sight, wearing a pair of mirrored aviator sunglasses and a flak jacket. "She said that there was no way in hell that those two bastards would be able to crush someone as resilient as you."

"Ya gotta admit, she wath wight, wight?" Carue chuckled, having changed into a charcoal-grey cap and one of those white collar things with a matching scarlet tie.

"Of course she was!" Su snickered from Conis's shoulder. The fox was... actually as naked as usual. Don't really know what I was expecting.

I opened my mouth to protest, and settled for looking away as I coughed into my fist "Well, when you put it like that..."

"This..."

I stiffened as Vivi suddenly hissed viciously and started stalking forward, like some massive storm front encroaching on the horizon.

"This actually is going to be a thing with you, isn't it?" Vivi snarled viciously. "This is going to be a thing that happens every time we land on an island and you go out for a damn walk, isn't it? A thing that happens without fail and with increasing intensity!?"

I struggled to get my mental gears to grind as I backed away from her in terror. "A-Alright, Vivi, alright, l-let's just calm down and—!" I was cut off by backing into Franky's sofa, which gave Vivi the time she needed to hop onto the dais and loom over me. "L-Look, just what exactly did I do to deserve you being furious at me this time!? I-If it's the property damage, did you honestly expect me to be able to fight off the Unluckies in a metropolis like this without some collateral damage?"

"Some collateral damage," Vivi repeated in a tone of icy calm. "Some collateral damage. Yes, Cross, I expected some collateral damage. I always expect some collateral damage from our crew and I've especially come to expect it from you. But even in spite of that... I find myself with a question."
I swallowed meekly. "A… A question?"

"A question," she repeated, her tone dripping with vitriol as she grabbed my collar and started dragging me back to the entryway of the house. "A question I find myself asking for the third time since I met this crew. A question I never even conceived of asking before I had the misfortune of meeting you. And that question… is thus."

She grabbed the back of my head and forced me forward, so that I was staring out the doorway without obstruction.

"WHY IN THE NAME OF HORUS, ANUBIS, RA, AND EVERY LAST GOD IN THE ALABASTAN PANTHEON, IS THE CITY ON FIRE!?"

"What the hell are yoooooooh holy shit the city is on fire," I trailed off numbly.

And indeed, the city was on fire. A great big chunk of it too, smoke and flames and everything.

I stared numbly at the conflagration for a second before turning a carefully neutral expression at Vivi. "… Would you buy that it was in self-defense?"

THWACK!

"GYARGH!" I squawked, clutching my very broken nose in agony. "DAB IT, NOD AGAIN!"

"ROT IN HELL!" Vivi roared without looking back as she marched into the house.

I took a moment to collect my thoughts before following her. How the hell had this happened?! At Nanohana, I'd had a pissed-off Fire Logia chasing me. At Mock Town—which, by the way, was mostly made of wood—I'd set off a massive free-for-all in the middle of a pirate town. But here? I couldn't think of anything that might have set off a fire like that! I mean, maybe that food stall I'd used to spice up the Unluckies, but that was—!

… Dammit, that was it, wasn't? Open flames, hot oil… perfect for starting up a blaze and letting it get out of control.

"Whoob—"

"Hang on a sec," Boss grunted as he waddled up to me, jumped up—

CRACK!

"ARGH!" I clamped my hand over my nose in agony as it was righted. "Ow… ergh, thanks."

"Not a problem," the dugong waved me off casually.

"Anyway… yeah, whoops. Sorry, that was definitely my fault."

"Eh… not all of it, really."

"Huh?" I looked back in confusion to see Franky standing behind me and looking over my shoulder. "What are you talking about?"

He pointed out the leftmost region of the fire. "See that blaze over there? Yeah, that's mine. From five years back, actually."

"What," I repeated flatly.
"Heh, yeah…" The cyborg scratched the back of his head. "I was, ah, kinda experimenting with trying to create a stable power source and, well… one thing led to another…"

"Stable enough that it kept a fire burning for five years," Vivi repeated, this time with disbelief in place of anger. "Five years."

"Eeyah…" Franky blushed in embarrassment. "Really should have thought twice about trying to dig out an old coal mine I heard rumors about."

"You're lucky," I stated. "I remember back home reading somewhere about a coal fire that started three hundred years ago and is still going."

Franky and Vivi gaped at me, along with several others within earshot. Then the princess coughed and shook her head slightly. "Er, anyway, we're getting off topic," she said, extending her hand to Franky. "I am Nefertari Vivi, negotiator of the Straw Hat Pirates. I believe it's safe to assume that you're Franky, boss of the Franky Family?"

Franky opened his mouth to reply, but then shut it as a grin slid over his face. "Hold that thought." Before any of us could act, he ran back to his dais while the rest of his Family scrambled around doing something or other and—wait, why were they lowering a sheet over—? Were those drums!? The penny dropped when a spotlight shone behind the curtain, outlining a trio of silhouettes: Franky and two square-haired women who began dancing without warning.

"Hey, guys!" Franky crowed eagerly. "Did you just say my name!?"

"Hell yeah!" the members of the Franky Family cheered eagerly.

"What on earth…?" Vivi gaped in disbelief.

"NO CLUE WHAT, but I just know THAT IT'S FUNK-AH!" Soundbite whooped as he bobbed his head to the beat.

I chuckled in amusement as I patted Vivi's shoulder. "Welcome to Franky House, Princess."

"Yeow, yeow, yeow, yeow!" Franky howled as he and the sisters pumped their legs before moving their arms into a square-like position. "Come on everybody, no need to be shy! Say my name!"

"BIG BRO FRANKY!" The whole of the house shook from the force of the roar.

"WOO, GO POMPADOUR-BOY! SHAKE YO' MONEY MAKER!"

"Su!"

"Oh, c'mon, Conis, you were thinking it too!"

"Well…"

"Ahh, nothing more satisfying than a supportive audience!" Franky said before grabbing the bottom of the sheet, ripping it away and dancing even more energetically. "I'm Water 7's number one SUPAH! guy, the face of the underworld and you know why! The man with the plan, the power and fame, and people everywhere call out my name! Wow!"

Franky and the sisters knelt down and started pounding their fists on the ground with a building hum. "MmmmmMMMM!" The mob-boss and his backup dancers snapped up in a pose, arms held together in the air. "FRANKY!"
Aaaand there was the ending with the smokebomb.


Grinning, the snail promptly added to the already abundant applause with noise comparable to that of a live concert.

While the rest of the family cheered I took the time to grin down at Lassoo. "Still think he and Boss aren't a match made in heaven?"

"I... might have jumped the cannon..." Lassoo coughed in his paw.

In the aftermath, I took note that yes, Franky was currently being flanked by his seconds-in-command, the yellow-clad Mozu, and the pink-clad Kiwi—who was currently posing in a pink bath robe?

THWACK!

I winced sympathetically as she suddenly laid Franky out flat.

"Sis!" Mozu reeled in shock.

"Be happy I didn't give you one too!" Kiwi warned before rounding on their boss. "And you! Next time, don't call me when I'm in the damn shower!"

"Ugh... ow... damn it, how do you make that hurt when I'm made of metal!? And sorry, Kiwi, but would you expect me not to show off for the Straw Hats?" Franky asked as he got back on his feet, rubbing the back of his head in equal parts sheepishness and pain.

"I don't care if they're Tom himself back from the dead!" I winced and noticed Franky hiding the same reaction. "Do it again, and I'll aim lower. Got it?"

"Alright, alright, eesh." Franky waved her off and watched as she walked back into the house, her sister swiftly following after her, before sighing grimly. "Really shoulda given that more thought..." He swiftly recovered and puffed his chest out proudly as he jabbed his thumb at himself. "Anyway, yeah! I'm Franky, big bro and boss of the Franky Family! Welcome, Straw Hats! Now then, boys..." His grin became somewhat bestial as he fell back in his sofa, arms and legs spread wide so that he took up more room. "How about you get us and our guests some refreshments while we talk?"

And just like that, as the Franky Family started milling around and set about their various tasks, Vivi's demeanor shifted; her shock and hesitation washed away and was replaced with cold hard determination. "Conis, Carue, stay behind the couch. Cross, Boss, you're sitting next to me. I realize this might be a relaxed setting, but let's at least try and act halfway professional."

I shrugged and stood a little bit straighter. "You've got point here, milady. Lead the way."

The princess nodded confidently and strode forwards, Boss alongside her left flank while Carue stood behind her. Conis moved to stand beside Carue while I sank onto the couch to Vivi's right.

Franky cocked an eyebrow at the formal display before smirking and raising one of his arms. Within moments, one of his boys was present, dropping a pair of large brown-filled bottles on the coffee table before disappearing back into the crowd.
"Hope you don't mind Cola," the cyborg chuckled as he picked up one of the bottles and prepared to knock it back. "So long as you're in my house, it's the only drink you can get. But of course, if the princess can't handle it—!"

Without ever breaking her neutral expression, Vivi snatched up her full bottle of Cola, threw her head back and utterly drained it. What had to be nearly two litres of soda vanished in a matter of seconds, following which Vivi gently replaced the bottle on the coffee table and… nothing. No matter how long we waited, what we were all waiting for just didn't come.

Vivi, for her part, smiled beatifically. "Brawnson's. A very nice choice. I prefer St. Dobrynac's myself, but I suppose my palate might be a bit overly spoiled there, sooo…" She waved her hand dismissively.

Franky stared at her in shock for a moment before sighing heavily and placing his bottle down in defeat. "Well, I sure as heck can't top that." He leaned forward, his hands on his knees as he eyed our diplomat. "Alright, let's cut the posturing crap and get down to business: what do guys like you want with guys like me and mine?"

Vivi's artificial cheer drained away into grim solemnity. "As you no doubt already know, roughly two months ago, we travelled up to the sky island known as Skypiea, which is where we recruited our gunner—" She nodded her head back at Conis, who smiled and waved pleasantly. "And where our third mate…" She hesitated slightly as she glanced at me.

I chuckled grimly as I raised my hand. "Where I got my limbs turned into grilled mozzarella, no need to pussyfoot around."

Franky shuddered sympathetically. "Yeah, I don't think anyone missed that little shitshow. Ice-for-Brains had his Galley-La chumps handing out lozenges for snails with sore throats all across the city." He tilted his head in confusion. "But what's that got to do with me? Going by how Cross moved earlier, I doubt he needs me to make him any new limbs."

That caught Vivi off-guard. "Make him new—?"

Franky glanced at me, to which I responded with a grin and a shrug. "I'm more knowledgeable than the rest of my crew, and I like letting them learn non-crucial stuff for themselves. But since it's out of the bag…"

"Oh, yeah, sure. Check it out!" And without further ado, he grabbed his right wrist and yanked his forearm in half. While the rest of my crewmates recoiled in shock, I whistled in awe and leaned forward to give the separation a closer look. Besides his arm being hollow inside, less than an inch of Franky's epidermis—no, of an epidermis-like facsimile—was wrapped around the metal of the limb. Overall, it was damn impressive.

"What on earth!?" Vivi breathed in shock.

"Even I know that that's not normal," Conis gasped.

"What the heck are you!?" Su demanded.

"I'm a cyborg, of course!" Franky proclaimed proudly as he refastened his limb. "This body you're looking at is known as Battle Franky 36, my thirty-sixth custom creation! I went through my own level of hell that wrecked my body something fierce and rebuilt myself from the ground up. Pretty sweet, huh?"

"To be clear, you made this badass monument to all things manly yourself?" Boss clarified as he
gestured at Franky.

"Eeyup!" Franky chirped, popping a firm thumbs-up.

"...I am intrigued," Boss finally admitted, stroking his chin.

A cough sounded out from Vivi's direction, drawing attention back to her. "Well, now I see why Cross wanted your expertise." I grinned in response to her glance in my direction. "But I think we might have gotten off-topic. Anyway, to clarify why I brought that particular ordeal up..." She sighed and hung her head. "Cross... wasn't the only one of us crippled in the fighting."

"Seriously?" Franky sat up in shock. "But I don't remember—?

"We... didn't find out until today," Vivi clarified. "During an altercation with one of Eneru's priests before the war proper, our comrade was thrown just the wrong way and..." She bowed her head, forcing her voice to remain steady. "And her... her keel cracked."

It took a few seconds for that to sink in. When it did, however, Franky's expression was equal parts awed and horrified as he leaned back in his seat. "...Your ship? The... The Going Merry, right?"

His eyes widened in shock. "And... And you said you only found out today? She's been sailing with a snapped keel for—?" Apparently our expressions were answer enough, going by how he slapped a hand to his forehead. "Holy shit..."

"Precisely..." I nodded gravely. "We... We'd love to fix her somehow, we really would, but—!"

"Not possible," Franky interrupted, shaking his head in denial. "For a ship to sail for even a week with a snapped keel is a miracle, but two months is utterly unheard of. The damage that your ship's infrastructure must have suffered since then..." He gave us all a sad look. "This goes so far beyond just her keel now. I'm sorry, but you'd need to replace... almost every other part of her hull from the keel out to fix her. I don't doubt that she's strong, she'd have to be, but... Water 7's her grave now."

We all flinched and lapsed into miserable silence as the harsh reality of our situation washed over us again. I thought I had already exhausted my grief. I was wrong; I had to try hard to not start crying again. There was a respectful moment of silence before Franky spoke again, more softly. "So, if you came to someone like me with this, then... I'm guessing you want me to handle her... end?"

Boss recovered first, shaking his head as he bit down on his cigar. "Ah... no, not... exactly. Merry's our ship and our responsibility, we can give her a dignified end on our own. No, we're not here concerning an ending. We're here about a new beginning."

"Eh?"

"Mister Franky." Vivi drew herself to attention as she pinned Franky with a gaze practically shining in its intensity. "We are here on behalf of the Straw Hat Pirates in order to commission the construction of our new ship by yours truly."

The cyborg immediately fell into a more guarded expression. "Wait, you're asking me to make you a new ship? Because that's Galley-La's forte, my reputation is as a ship dismantler. Why would you think that it'd be a good idea to come to me for this?"

"Because as you yourself have so aptly demonstrated, you're one of, if not the best engineer on this side of the Grand Line, surpassed only by Doctor Vegapunk himself," I cut in. "You literally built yourself from the ground up. Any ship made by you would be a work of absolute perfection."

"Eh? Doctor who?" Franky asked in confusion.
"YES!" Soundbite started to cackle…

SMACK! "AGH!"

Until I forced him back into his shell, anyways. "Not the time, Soundbite."

"Killjoy…"

"…Alwight, moving on fow the sake of sanity?" Carue suggested.

"Agreed," Franky said, his eyes narrowing as he looked over us. "Because I've still got questions. I'll admit that you'll be hard-pressed to find a better engineer than me, even in Galley-La, but that still doesn't connect to ship-building, so how the hell did you know to ask me to do this for you?"

"You were actually recommended to us as the best person to ask," Conis provided.

Franky was silent for a second before slowly rising to his feet and looming over us, his expression shadowed but not doing anything to hide his flinty glare. "Who. Told you. To ask for me?" he demanded, his voice promising nothing but pain if he didn't like the answer.

It was a true credit to Vivi that she didn't even flinch before the display, instead favoring Franky with a cool stare. "It was the station-mistress of Switch Station, one Granny Kokoro," she replied, producing and holding out the letter from said station-mistress as though it were yesterday's to-do list written on the back of last year's receipt.

Franky's expression changed again, from barely concealed murderous rage to equally barely hidden shock and then just as swiftly to deliberate neutrality. Without giving anything away, the cyborg took the letter and opened it. He raised his eyebrows as he read the message, and then sank back into his seat in wide-eyed shock as he reached the finish. A few seconds later, he slowly folded up the message and replaced it in the envelope before locking eyes with each of us.

"You spoke… to a Klabautermann? She… She came out in plain sight when you asked?" he breathed.

One and all, we grimaced anew and struggled to hold back our tears as the memory came back to us.

"I wasn't expecting that." Franky bowed his head with a quiet sigh, tearing up again. "For a ship to love their crew that much… to keep going past her own limits, and to show that much emotion to you… IT'S THE MOST BEAUTIFUL THING I'VE EVER HEARD!" he declared, bawling his eyes out again.

My eye twitched as he sobbed miserably. "Ah… not that we don't appreciate your support, but if we could get back on topic please—?" I requested as my hand drifted down to my bag.

"DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT!" everyone else in the house roared furiously.

"Alright, alright, no need to yell!" I snickered as I snapped my hands up.

"Starting to see why the Government wants your head…" Franky grumbled as he wiped his eyes and got his composure back. "Alright, so, Granny sent you to me, huh… look, let's be clear here: what exactly are you looking for from me?"

My smile faded, and I glanced at Vivi for confirmation, to which she responded with a nod, prompting Boss and I to place our briefcases on the coffee table. "We came to you, Franky, because besides being a genius in the field of engineering, you also have extensive connections in the black
market. We'd like to hire you to build us a ship worthy of a new Pirate King, one to rival the Oro Jackson itself." I kindly ignored the slight twitch in Franky's eye at that. "Of course, for this endeavor to be accomplished, a necessary component would be wood from the Jewel Tree Adam."

Boss and I clicked our cases open, and Franky's jaw all but hit the ground as we showed off the amount of wealth we were hauling. "What we have here is ¥500 million in gold and cash. Should you accept, we'd like you to use it to buy what you need for our ship, but before that…" I scrunched my eyes shut, struggling to fend off the image of the fire and snow. "Before that, we want you to at least try scouring the market for any chance, no matter how remote, that we can keep Merry with us. We've all accepted that we have to move on and let her go, but…"

I gave him a truly desperate look. "I… back on Skypiea, I talked to Merry, and I promised her, promised her that I would do anything that I could to save her. I… I know now that she lied to me when she said that she would be fine, that she still had a chance but…" I shook my head. "But damn it, I'm a member of the Straw Hat Pirates, and I wouldn't be worthy of our flag if I didn't do every last thing I possibly could to keep a promise. And at this point… at this point the black market connections are that very last thing. So if there's some way Merry can stay with us… then we'll take it in a second."

Franky stared silently at me for a few seconds before exhaling. "I promise you, Cross, if there's anything that can help her, I'll get it. Saving the Merry after all I've heard about her would be worth more than twice this money."

I managed a weak, grateful smile, but it faded as Franky folded his arms and continued. "But, in the event that I can't find anything… The going rate for Adam wood is currently about ¥200 million a shipment, and extra materials shouldn't cost more than that. You're offering me more than enough for the supplies for your new ship, but my question is, how much of this is for your ship, and how much do I get to keep? And before you say anything!" He snapped his hand up to forestall any protests. "I still have my family to take care of, and the going has been rough lately, what with the Marines coming around more often to get their ships from Galley-La. I'll still help you, that's decided, but I just wanna hammer out the details is all."

I took a second to process that before snapping my case shut—which Boss mirrored—and sitting back with a nod to Vivi. "You're up, Princess."

Vivi sat up straighter as she locked eyes with Franky. "How much of it do you want to take?"

Franky folded his arms. "Like I said, with my connections, it'll take about ¥200 million to buy enough Adam wood to build you the ship of your dreams; any other odds and ends I can get from what's already on this island. So, straight up, I'd like the remaining ¥300 million."

"Unacceptable," Vivi declared without hesitation. "¥25 million, at most."

"T-Twenty-five—!? You must be kidding!" Franky scoffed as he slammed a hand on the coffee table. "No freaking way! I have fifty-five people and two King Bulls in my family, they're as big as Sea Kings! Twenty-five wouldn't last more than three days! ¥275 million!"

"¥50 million, we still need to live with Nami," Vivi retorted.

Franky winced sympathetically at that. "Alright, that's fair…" His expression became set in stone a moment later. "But my sympathy only goes so far. ¥200 million, final offer."

"¥75 million."
Franky's expression didn't shift. "200 million," he repeated firmly.

A flash of worry shot across Vivi's face. "I… 100 million, final offer."

The cyborg slowly crossed his arms over his chest, not even so much as a muscle twitching. "Two. Hundred. Million."

Vivi and I exchanged panicked glances, and for good reason. What the heck were we supposed to do!? Franky wasn't budging, but we both knew that if we came out of this with less than two-thirds of Nami's money, our lives would be utterly forfeit. Unless we came up with something fast—!

"Ahem."

We snapped our attention over to Boss. The dugong was sporting a supremely serious expression.

"If you don't mind," he announced gruffly. "I'll do the job you brought me here to do."

And without further ado, he ripped the cuff attaching him to our gold clean off his arm, removed his flak jacket, folded it onto the sofa, and hopped onto the coffee table.

"Whad da heck…?" Carue muttered, scratching his head in confusion.

Franky, for his part, didn't even flinch. He just kept staring dead ahead with stony impassivity. The expression was mirrored muscle for muscle by Boss. Then, slowly, Boss began bending over, stretching his flippers down and out and stretching out his shoul…ders…

"…Is he…" I started slowly, completely and utterly incapable of of believing what I was seeing. "Is he… flexing?"

"…Yes," Soundbite nodded in awe. "Yes, he IS."

And indeed he was. Boss was flexing his body in one of the most iconic bodybuilding poses known to man, his muscles bulging to the absolute maximum that his relatively diminutive musculature allowed. Franky merely raised an eyebrow at the display while the rest of us looked at Boss in confusion and awe… though mostly confusion.

Vivi leaned over and whispered, "Uh… Cross, any idea what this is in aid of?" into my ear.

"Not a clue, but we did bring him here because he can relate to Franky. Let's just trust him and see where it goes for now," I whispered back. "I mean, he is our crewmate, so—!"

CRACK!

"—eh?" I started as a sound much like cracking glass sounded out. "What the heck—?"

CRA-CRA-CRACK!

Su gasped in shock as a rapid staccato of cracks sounded out before shakily pointing her paw out. "L-Look! His shell!"

We all looked at where the fox was pointing, and then my eyes shot wide as I saw that Boss's turtle shell had a whole spider web of cracks running through it.

"Boss, be careful!" Conis warned desperately. "Your shell, it's starting to—!"

SMASH!
Conis's voice—and everyone else's in the Franky House, for that matter—died in her throat as the dugong's shell shattered, fragments of it flying in every which way you can imagine.

But that wasn't what really shocked us.

What shocked us all into silence... was what was underneath his shell.

Muscle. Pure, hulking slabs of muscle. Somehow, against all forms of logic, beneath Boss's shell he was completely and utterly ripped. I had seen Zoro's muscles more times than I care to admit thanks to our far-too-numerous training sessions, and by God, that man had absolutely nothing on the beast before me. It was like staring at a few-feet tall Olympic-grade weightlifter prepped for a bodybuilding competition.

For the longest time, nobody dared to move as Boss posed. Finally, however, all while maintaining his stony expression, Franky stood to his feet, looming over us again, and then... drew his forearms together as he mirrored Boss's pose?!

Vivi's jaw promptly dropped. "You have got to be shitting me."

RRRRRIP!

"...Appawently not," Carue said through his gaping beak as Franky's Hawaiian shirt practically exploded off of his taut physique.

They were... posing at one another. There was no other word for it. They were just flat-out flexing and posing at one another, their muscles rippling and their expressions utterly determined as they squared off against one another. Muscle against muscle, buff against buff. A battle of two forces of raw flesh and will clashing against one another.

This confrontation was... it-it was... it was... I honestly don't know what the hell it was. A melee of mental fortitude, maybe? A brawl of brawn? All I know was that as I stared at the display before me, this exhibition of pure manliness, I was... moved.

Honestly, I think I felt something new within myself. A shift or a change or... or...

...wait a second...

I pulled my collar out and looked down at my chest in disbelief. "Holy shit, my chest hair is growing."

Conis and Vivi both stared at me for a moment before turning their attention back to the bodybuilders. They maintained their stances for a few seconds more. Then, all at once, they moved—

SLAM!

—and the next thing I knew, after a thunderclap of flesh-on-flesh... they were clasping hands, staring in each other's eyes with what could only be described as mutual adoration.

"$100 million it is. Pleasure doing business with you," Franky announced.

"Indeed, brother, indeed," Boss nodded in solemn agreement.

SLAM!

Far from being relieved or happy, Vivi moaned miserably as she ground her forehead into the coffee table. "I spent over half my life learning the fine, fine, fine art of diplomacy..." she lamented. "And
he succeeds where I was utterly failing with mere flexing…" She turned her head on its side, displaying twin streams of tears trailing down her face and an utterly shattered smile. "This officially tears it. Even with everything I know, even despite being born in it, I'm never going to stop being surprised at what the Grand Line throws at me."

"There, there…" Conis breathed soothingly as she leaned over the couch to rub the traumatized Princess's back. "Better this outcome than having to go back and tell Nami that we gave him 40%." Vivi's only response was a pained whimper.

It took me a second to get my jaw moving again. "…Well, this is still something to remember, eh, Soundbite?"

Silence.

"Uh, Soundbite?" I looked at Soundbite curiously, only to find that the snail was gnawing on his lower lip in what appeared to be a desperate attempt to stay silent. I opened my mouth to ask again, but then, all at once, he snapped his mouth open and bellowed out in an announcer's voice.

"BOSS USED SHELL SMASH! IT'S SUPER EFFECTIVE!"

"SUPER!" Franky bellowed as he slammed his forearms above his head before blinking in confusion. "Eh? Wait, what just happened?"

I blinked as I processed what he'd just said and then I leveled a flat look at the snail as he panted with a relieved smile. "That was just killing you, wasn't it?" I deadpanned.

"You have NO IDEA!" Soundbite groaned.

"Speaking of…" Su cocked an eyebrow as she looked Boss over. "Didn't that… I dunno, hurt?"

Boss glanced up at her before blinking as he realized that he was naked, covering up the embarrassment with a deep cough. "Ah… no, no it did not. Apropos of nothing, could someone please hand me my jacket? It's… It's chilly in here."

We all stared blankly at him for a moment before hanging our heads with simultaneous groans.

"Pride: the ultimate steroid," Su muttered knowingly.

"Agreed…" the rest of us chorused.

-0-

"…and after that, Franky went off to get things arranged on his end before he could take off to buy the materials, and you had no trouble on your way back to the Merry?" Nami asked, concluding the summary of what happened to us after our two groups had parted ways.

"Yeah, that pretty much covers it," I confirmed, before glancing in Boss' direction. "So, Boss, tell me, what are you going to do about your—Boss?"

The Dugong's jacket was lying on the deck, but the Dugong himself was nowhere to be seen. I made to glance at Soundbite—

"SPLASH! "Sorry, did you call me?"

Before noting that Boss had just jumped out of the water, back onto the deck… and with a new shell
on his back that was utterly indistinguishable from the old one.

"You—but—I… no, you know what? You know what?" Vivi threw her hands up and marched towards the women's quarters. "I don't want to know, I really, just do not want to know. I am done. Done!" she declared, entering her room and slamming the door behind her.

Nami stared after her for a second before sighing and looking towards the quartet of ship's guards staring in starry-eyed awe at their teacher. "Raphey, can you please go and try to calm Vivi down? Hopefully your... expertise in Grand Line madness will be of use."

The pink-clad Dugong promptly snapped a salute at our navigator before pumping her tail and belly-sliding towards the women's quarters. And with that, Nami stood up with a clap of her hands. "Now, Cross, Zoro? Staff meeting. Boss, you and your boys know what to do."

"Aye, Nami," the four Dugongs saluted as we headed towards the storage area. There was silence for almost a minute before Nami spun around and grabbed my shoulders.

"Cross," she stated with dead-serious conviction as she stared me straight in the eyes. "Are you absolutely certain that Kalifa, Kaku, and Lucci are with CP9?"

I blinked at her, but promptly steeled my will as I replied with equal firmness. "Some time soon, most likely tonight seeing as they'd want to use Aqua Laguna to cover their tracks, those three plus Blueno will tear through Galley-La like an unholy storm, striking down their comrades and coworkers without so much as a hint of remorse before attempting to assassinate Iceburg in cold blood. Of this, I have no doubt."

The second I finished, Nami's pupils dilated in horror and the blood utterly drained from her face. She slowly stumbled back from me, a shaky hand raising to cover her mouth. "Oh... Oh, God..."

Zoro started towards her with an expression that could be vaguely interpreted as concern. "What did they do, Nami?"

"N... N... N-Nothing," Nami whispered, desperately shaking her head in denial. "That's the whole problem! I have years of experience in long cons, for the majority of my life I have been anyone but me, I have been them... and I was scanning them for any cracks whatsoever! I-I was subtle, don't worry, they never noticed, I made sure of that!" she reassured me when she noticed that I looked ready to puke. "But... But that doesn't change the fact that they put on such a good show that I... that they made me actually doubt Cross!"

I sighed grimly. "I... I'll be blunt: you were firmly out of your league, Nami. You have a few years of experience, however harrowing, but they've been doing this for their entire lives, literally. There's a Government island somewhere not far from here that's exclusively devoted to training orphans and offspring of previous CP9 agents into the next generation of the World Government's personal killers. They've never known anything but sabotage, corruption, intelligence, and assassination. Make no mistake, CP9 is so renowned because they are damn good at what they do."

Nami stared at me for a second before leaning against one of the crates with a tortured groan. "And we have to deal with four people like that?" she asked.

I shook my head with a grimace. "If worst comes to worst and we still have to storm Enies Lobby, there will be seven. But I wouldn't worry about it too much if I were you; out of those seven, three are in league with the Monster Trio, and the rest are way weaker. Superhuman and with a few unique and deadly tricks, sure, but ultimately, with our current roster and power-level, not to mention the fact that I know their playbook inside and out, we'll still be able to win."
"Who's the third one, Cross?" Zoro asked. "Lucci's obviously one of them, and Kaku has to be another if he's a match for me."

I shrugged indifferently. "Hopefully it won't become relevant, but the third one, barely weaker than Kaku, is Jabra, a wolf Zoan and CP9's specialist in the Iron Body technique. Sanji only beat him thanks to his Diable Jambe, just like you needed Asura to beat Kaku. He's a sadistic and deceitful son of a bitch, but so long as we're ready, we should be fine."

"And what about their chief, Cross?" Nami asked tentatively. "The one you said got the authority to use a Buster Call? Whoever the World Government put in charge of people that powerful must be a monster too."

I snarled as that particular trainwreck of a human being flashed through my mind. "Only morally, Nami. Physically?" I slammed my fist into my palm and ground it in, hard. "Suffice to say that if I get my hands on Spandam, I'm going to turn him into a literal fucking pretzel and he'll be able to do jack all about it. The only defense he has for himself is Funkfreed, a sword that ate the Elephant-Elephant Fruit. Apart from that, that… entity is weaker than your average Marine. But morally?" I ground my teeth as image after image after image of the Bridge and everything before it flooded my mind. "Let me put it this way: I didn't kill the Unluckies because I didn't think they were worth it, because I feared I'd regret it. Him? I let a vicious smile crawl across my face. "I could hand him over to Chopper as a guinea pig, and that would be kind compared to what I'd do to him if given half a chance."

Zoro and Nami both stared at me in something very close to horror.

"Cross—" Soundbite started fearfully.

"NO," all three of them intoned without hesitation.

"Good," I nodded gratefully. "Now, then, moving on… how did the meeting with Iceburg go?"

Nami took a second to breathe deeply and calm herself down before schooling a neutral expression on her face. "You mean apart from him being as irresponsible as you implied?" she deadpanned before shrugging casually. "Perfectly fine. He listened to our request and accepted a ฿100 million down payment after we gave him Granny Kokoro's letter. He said that he'll either send one of his foremen here or be along himself in a while." She paused and frowned. "We don't have to worry about the other foremen, right?"

"Eh…" I waved my hand in a 'so-so' manner. "If CP9 manages to frame us for hurting Iceburg or Galley-La in general? Quite possibly, strong sense of camaraderie there. But otherwise, the most dangerous thing about them is their quirks, and of those, the worst is Paulie trying to cut and run with a brick of gold. Basically, they're like us: we don't tick them off and we're all good."

"So," Zoro grunted. "Now we wait?"
"Pretty much, yeah," I shrugged, then reached for my side and withdrew the transceiver. "Well, I guess I may as well start up another SBS—"

"Puru puru puru puru!" Soundbite said suddenly.

"Or take a call, that works too," I continued smoothly, pressing the caller ID button. "MI4," I confirmed to Nami and Zoro, who turned back towards me. I made to pick up the receiver, then paused as a wicked grin played over my face. "Oh, Soundbite? Make my voice sound like Apoo."

"OH, CROSS, you son of a—Puru puru puru puru!" the snail chortled.

"And proud of it," I snickered, and then picked up the receiver before cackling. "Apapapapapa! Hello, you've reached Scratchman Apoo! Sorry, but Mister Cross has been disconnected!"

Nami facepalmed with a groan while Zoro smirked in sadistic amusement.

I swiftly chopped my hand across my throat and burst out cackling as Soundbite's expression contorted in panic and horror. "Oh-hoh, MAN, you should have seen your faces! I-I'm sorry, but that was just straight up hi-hi-hilarious! PFFHAAHAHAHA!

As my laughter trailed off, I noticed Soundbite glaring at me with a look of intense concentration. "Uh…"

"Oh, don't mind me, Cross," Tashigi's voice said, sounding about two seconds from snapping. "I'm just trying to kill you with the POWER OF MY FUCKING MIND!"

"If that were possible, Tashigi, he never would have escaped from Loguetown," Smoker cut in.

"Or Alabasta," Hina added.

"Or Skypiea," T-Bone wheezed.

"Or Navarone," finished another voice.

"Alright, alright, I get the point alre—huh?" I blinked, and then grinned as I processed who had just spoken. "Jonathan, you devious chess-bastard, I knew you'd come around! Good thing too, now Vivi owes me a hefty chunk of change."

Nami tsked and tossed a wad of beris at me. "Here, I bet her the opposite."

"That makes this doubly sweet!" I crowed as I counted out the cash.

"CHA-CHING!" Soundbite whooped ecstatically.

ZOT!

I flinched slightly as light and ozone flashed inches before my eyes, but I swiftly recovered and stuck my tongue out at Nami. "Nice try, but no dice!"

"Damn Chopper and his damn freaky good therapy…" she scowled as she spun her staff-third back into place.

"Hmph. Good to see that you're as composed as ever, Mister Cross," Jonathan chuckled. "And I'll admit, I did have some apprehensions at first given the risk involved in the undertaking. But time and the SBS wore them away, and after talking to Commodore Smoker, I was quite satisfied to join what's now MI5 and claim the codename of Sagittarius. My four officers and Jessica have signed on
"Great to hear!" I wrung my hands eagerly. "Now, then! Before we get to business, I believe some of you owe me an apology?" I pointedly ignored Nami facepalming and muttering something about 'idiots' and 'pushing your luck'.

"I don't apologize to many people for many things, Cross. I'll be damned if I add you to the list of people I do apologize for for not considering that someone could or would trick Akainu like Jonathan did," Smoker grunted.

"And on that note, Hina wonders how you found out Jonathan's secret when he managed to fool everyone else in the Corps," Hina cut in dryly.

"Well—!" I began.

"I'd like to know that as well, Mister Cross," Jonathan interrupted, his voice and demeanor shoved deep in his 'serious as a prowling Sea King' mode. "Aside from my laid-back demeanor since I took over G-8, I've never given any indication that I've failed to learn the spirit of Akainu's lessons. True, I wasn't as guarded with my emotions as I should have been in our encounter, but for you to have been as comfortable as you were makes it clear that you knew more than you possibly could have. And while you may have a reputation for being impossibly well informed, this borders on being genuinely impossible, if not utterly. So, considering the fact that anyone beyond the present company and my soldiers learning it would be potentially fatal, I insist on you answering me: how did you find out?" Jonathan asked, a stern frown on his face.

"Ah…" I hedged uncomfortably as I shot a desperate glance at my equally shocked allies before flinching as I realized that that look had just been broadcasted.

"And don't give us any more nonsense like you were spouting on Skypiea, this time we're not leaving without an answer," Tashigi intoned firmly.

I winced as I tugged at my suddenly too-tight collar. Damn it, and I'd thought that bringing in the hyperintelligent chessmaster would be a good idea why!?

"Cross."

I snapped my attention over to Zoro, who was staring at me with an uncharacteristically analytical gaze.

"Tell them," he ordered in a firm tone.

"What!?" Nami and I hissed simultaneously, though Nami was the one who followed up. "Are you out of your moss-ridden—!?"

"They deserve to know," the swordsman interrupted, his gaze frosty. "They might not fly under our flag, but they are our allies, and I seriously doubt they'll tell anyone. And even if they did, it's that chess-guy all over again; they spill our secret, we spill theirs."

"Glad to see you're as insensitive as ever, Roronoa," Tashigi deadpanned.

"Glad to see that you're as grateful as ever, four-eyes," Zoro shot back.

"Glad to see that you're still a barbarian."

"Glad to see you're still a novice."
"BASTARD, I CUT PEOPLE!"

"For the love of GOD, FUCK OR KILL EACH OTHER but don't use me to pussyfoot around!"

"SHUT IT, SNAIL!" the sword-masters roared simultaneously.

"Enough," T-Bone wheezed, his shaky voice as firm as iron. "Cross, we're waiting."

I grimaced as I processed the fact that I… really didn't have a choice here, did I? Dang it, I wasn't expecting to have to give the explanation again before I told the rest of the—

The rest of them… now, there was an idea.

I took a second to get my composure about myself before adopting a determined look. "Let me make this clear: the explanation is of a magnitude that you can't begin to imagine, to the point that I haven't even told our most recent crewmates yet. I do not want to say it more times then I absolutely have to, because it's a damn long story and there's gonna be a lot of disbelief. So, here's the deal: there's only one more decent Marine of significant standing that I'm relatively sure you can convince to join you right now. When you've recruited Vice Admiral Tsuru, I'll tell all six of you my secret. Fair enough?"

Soundbite adopted a doubtful grimace. "Tsuru…" Smoker grumbled to himself. "You don't ask for anything easy, do you, Cross?"

I blinked. "Wait, what? You didn't object when I recommended her the night before you met with T-Bone."

"I imagine that admitting one such as a Vice Admiral to a list of potential allies is vastly different from actually trying to recruit her, Mister Cross," T-Bone wheezed.

"Nail on the head there, sir," Tashigi moaned.

"Hina is uncertain about this…" Hina grumbled. "Vice Admiral Tsuru is as wise and righteous as they come, of that there is no doubt, but she is also one of Sengoku's closest confidants, and while the Admiral of the Fleets is not himself corrupt, neither does he oppose the World Government. It would take a cataclysm of untold depths to fracture their bond in even the most minute of ways."

"I see, I see," I nodded casually. "Then in that case, I just have one question: T-Bone, would you happen to currently be on assignment to… mmm, given the timing, I'm gonna say… Enies 'Kangaroo Court' Lobby?"

Dead silence rung out for a few seconds before T-Bone groaned. "I won't even question it."

I chuckled. "Ohohoh, you guys would be nowhere without me, absolutely nowhere."

"Clearly," the skeletal captain scoffed. "I don't suppose you'd happen to know what my assignment is to be, would you? They merely ordered myself and a number of my men to present ourselves and await further orders. The mood here is… tense. I've never seen the Lobby garrisoned so thoroughly."

I smiled grimly. "Security detail. You're going to be safeguarding the return of a Cipher Pol 9 hitsquad who'll be bringing with them the blueprints of the Ancient Weapon Pluton AND!" I cut off Tashigi's horrified gasp and Smoker and Hina's hisses of breath. "And… our kidnapped archaeologist."
Once again, silence.

"…Oh, for f*ck's sake, Cross."

"Right there with you, Tashigi," Jonathan sighed.

I chuckled grimly while Nami shook her head with an exasperated sigh and Zoro smirked. "Don't get me wrong, we're going to fight tooth and nail to do what we can to stop this shit from going down. But if we fail, well…” I injected a tone of pure savagery in my grin. "Then I'm going to do more to the World Government in a span of hours than I have in all of my past broadcasts combined." I widened my grin by a few teeth. "And should we win, well… I can only imagine the kind of holy hell that the confirmation of CP9's existence, the complete destruction of one of the Government's three sacred bases, and an exclusive interview with Nico Robin covering the events on Ohara will raise. Is that cataclysmic enough for you?"

"Enough that Hina is sorry that she asked," Hina replied weakly. "Cross, I hope you realize that if all of that does happen, your name is likely to be spoken of in the same breath as the likes of Dragon and the Emperors."

And just like that, my smile flipped to a scowl. "You don't seem to get it. Even ignoring how much I hate the Government based on everything I've seen, I stand by the same standards as my crew, the same standards as Whitebeard and Shanks: if anyone lays so much as a finger on our crewmate, it's nothing less than a declaration of war. It should have been clear from the very first SBS broadcast: if it's for one of our friends, we welcome infamy with open arms."

I sighed and shook my head as I stepped down from my mental pedestal. "Anyway, enough preaching. Is there anything else you called for?"

"…Only that I made an attempt to convince 'Black Bart' to join us, and he almost agreed, but he requested proof that we were in contact with you. Mention the words 'Rooster' and 'Integrity' in the same sentence on your next broadcast," Hina replied.

"I'll see if I can work it in somehow," I said.

"On a lighter note, Mister Cross, pass my thanks on to Miss Robin for the suggestion she offered in regards to Major Shepherd," Jonathan put in, smirking again. "He was so flustered in front of the court that he all but confessed the charges he was presented for, and they subsequently uncovered a significant history of corruption."

"How significant?" I asked eagerly.

"Ooooh, where to begin~!" Tashigi sang in an uncharacteristically eager voice. "Extreme embezzlement, framing several of the investigators who were looking into him, and acting as something of a 'fixer' for other Marines of similar demeanor. He'd make reports about them go away for a price and then transfer them to, shall we say, 'sympathetic bases'. Like, say… Base 16 in the East Blue under one Captain Nezumi, who has also been scheduled for court-martiaing?"

"Now, that," Nami snapped her head around with a sadistic grin. "That is good news; that money-grubbing rat-bastard is the biggest reason that Arlong never got reported."

"Oh, really?" Jonathan asked in much the same tone. "In that case, I think I'll put a word in myself, for Bellemere's sake."

"Besides that…” Tashigi trailed off slightly before perking up. "Oh, right! And he was a chronic stealer of office supplies."
The three of us fell silent as we processed that particular tidbit before I gave the Marine a flat look. "Seriously?"

"Don't diss the Marines' logistics division, Cross," Hina scoffed. "Next to the Admirals, their accountants are some of the scariest bastards in the whole of the Corps."

I exchanged disbelieving looks with my crewmates again. "Yeeeaah, I'll take your word for it."

"BY THE WAY," Soundbite spoke up in a curious tone. "What's with the good mood, TASHIGI? Steal another sword RECENTLY?"

"Eeheeheehee~!" Tashigi giggled ecstatically. "Not even your vile words can bring me down, you petulant pest! I'm riding on a power high!"

Aaaand now I was thoroughly creeped out. "Someone wanna fill me in?" I pleaded.

"Marine HQ tapped the good officer to lead the investigation into Shepherd for her excellent intellect and analytical skills," T-Bone rasped. "Not only did I have the immense honor of pinning that scumbag to the floor, but I hauled in a nice and juicy promotion to go with it!" Tashigi squealed, the grin she was sporting almost ear-to-ear. "Ensign no more, you now speak to Lieutenant J.G.—soon to be Lieutenant proper!—Tashigi! Haha, woo!"

I took a second to consider this development before adopting a thoughtful look. "So, to be clear here..." I queried innocently. "You're excited about moving up the ranks of a vile and corrupt system that you are actively working to tear apart. Did I get that right?"

Tashigi's smile froze as though I'd injected it with liquid nitrogen before shattering into a positively blistering scowl. "Can... Can you not ruin my good mood?" she bit out, a tic mark clearly pulsating on Soundbite's—and thus her—brow. "For, just, five seconds? Is... Is that honestly too much to ask for?"

I made a show of thinking long and hard before answering with the utmost seriousness. "Yes. Yes, it is."

Tashigi's eyelid straight up jerked. "Goodbye, Cross."

Nami facepalmed as the connection chopped off out of the blue. "You just can't help yourself, can you?"

I spread my arms in a show of innocence. "I have a naturally aggravating personality. Sue me."

Nami's sigh of exasperation sounded more like howling. Zoro simply rolled his eyes before looking at me. "Anyway... this Franky guy who's gonna be helping us build our ship, what's he like?"

"Hm..." I tapped my chin thoughtfully as I considered how to put it. "Well, first, he's kind of..."

"SUPER!"

"Exactly like tha—the heck!?" I demanded, bolting towards the door and wrenching it open. I then gaped with no small amount of surprise to see Franky on the Merry's deck in his typical pose... though I was not surprised by the sight of Boss and the TDWS all posing along with him and Luffy and Usopp laughing and clapping eagerly.
"AWESOME!" Luffy cheered. "So, you're, like, half a robot, and you run on cola?!

"Yep! I keep it right here, nice and cold!" Franky confirmed, opening his abs to demonstrate a refrigerator filled with three bottles of cola.

Nami's eyelid twitched as she stared at the sight. "Well, there's something I can never un-see."

"Whoa! That must be way useful in the summer! But how the heck did you manage to fit a refrigerator in your own body without any negative effects from the temperature?" Usopp asked incredulously.

"Well, my belly is always cold because of this, but—"

"I have a question!" Luffy snapped his hand up in the air without warning.

"DON'T INTERRUPT MY QUESTION!" Usopp yelled as he slapped the back of our captain's head.

"Yeah? What's up, Straw Hat?" Franky asked.

"You're totally metal, right?"

"Weeell..." Franky surreptitiously scratched his speedo-clad ass. "For the most part. Why?"

"Do you—?"

Right, the insane train ends right now. "OY!" I cut in.

"Eh?" Franky said as he glanced in my direction before laughing and waving at me. "Oh, hey, Cross! I was just about to tell your crewmates here how my insides work! Wanna sit in?"

My eye twitched viciously. "Yeah, not a chance in all hell..." I muttered under my breath before raising my voice. "What the heck are you doing here, Franky!? I thought you were supposed to be headed out to St. Poplar with our money!"

"Ahoy, there! May we come aboard?"
When a sickeningly familiar voice came up from the shoreline, causing both me and Franky to freeze in place. Almost as one, we both snapped to the ship's railing and looked overboard. What we saw caused us both to jerk, though for Franky it was merely out of surprised confusion, while for me? It was out of nothing less than pure existential terror.

Because standing right there, plain as day, without a care in the world and with a mouse in his shirt pocket, was none other than the beloved Mayor Iceburg of Water 7 himself, with his trusty chain-smoking and rope-slinging second Paulie trailing right behind him.

Honestly, in retrospect, I should have seen it coming sooner. I mean, she gave us letters for both of them, so logically that meant that the two of them would have to come into contact with one another at some point in the process. But I thought that they would have been kept apart longer! Franky would provide the materials and his designs, Iceburg would provide the experienced manpower and facilities to make the Sunny the best ship born of the island since Tom's passing. At worst the two would meet up once or twice and grind against one another, but that would have been it!

But ultimately, their quarreling was an obstacle that we could surmount. Them meeting each other here was unexpected, and far from the most pleasant thing that could have happened, but it was far from cataclysmic. This situation would have been little more than a minor difficulty at the absolute worst!—if it wasn't for one itty bitty, teeny tiny, utterly fatal detail.

Paulie wasn't the only Galley-La employee Iceburg had brought with him.

Standing right there, right beside him, were a very professional-looking woman with blonde hair and glasses and a kindly grinning man clad in orange with a long, square nose.

Half of CP9's team on Water 7 was here. Half of CP9 was feet away from me. And the object of their fucking mission was standing right next to me.

My mind blanked and I was forced to scramble for some way to keep myself from drawing suspicion, considering the fact that I was one jolt away from spewing the worst vocabulary that sailors had to offer out of my mouth.

"Bite me. Bite me as hard as you can," I hissed out of the corner of my mouth, desperation flooding every decibel. "Do it. Do it now, do it now now—!

CHOMP!

"YEARGH!" I leapt back from the railing and started dancing around the deck in agony on account of the fact that it felt like a fucking bear trap had ripped into my neck. "MAUDIT PUTAIN D'UN ESPÈCE DE SALAUD SALOPARD QUI BRÛLE DANS LE MAUDIT ENFER AVEC UN SEAU DE—SOMEBOY GET THIS LITTLE SHIT OFF OF ME, DAMN IT!"

Literally everyone was staring at me, more in amusement than anything else.

"I've heard the phrase 'pardon my French,' but this is ridiculous," Vivi deadpanned, poking her head out of her cabin.

"SOMEBOY HELP ME ALREADY, HE'S OVER MY FUCKING CAROTID!"

Nami hastily dashed to my side and started tugging at Soundbite's shell, to no avail. "Soundbite, what the hell are you—?!" she started to snarl.

"Iceburg's here, he's brought Kaku and Kalifa with him, and Franky has the blueprints inside his fucking body!" I hissed desperately.
The blood drained from Nami's face as she glanced over at Franky before looking back at me. "…shit."

"No fuck," I snapped back. "Tell the others, and emphasize to Zoro—GAH!" I cut myself off as Soundbite finally let go, and I winced as I felt that I was actually bleeding from that bite. "Agh… emphasize that they'll pick up on even a hint of killing intent. If they think their cover's broken—"

"We're dead, got it," Nami nodded grimly before adopting an air of exasperation and stalking over to Vivi. I, for my part, reached into my jacket and pulled out a tube of salve and a roll of bandages that I had taken to carrying a few weeks ago; having the bindings on my arms and legs fail with Chopper nowhere close was excruciating, hence the emergency stock. "Well, that's the last time I ask you to do that," I muttered to Soundbite.

"WON'T BE soon enough!" Soundbite spat, hanging his tongue out in disgust. "YOU NEED A BATH, dude!"

"What exactly did you do to provoke the snail, Cross?" Franky asked quizzically.

"OH, I just wanted to get ANOTHER INSTANCE of his INCOHERENT SWEARING," Soundbite chirped without missing a beat, an innocent grin on his face.

Franky rolled his eyes with a chuckle. "Well, I don't know French, but I can't deny that that was funny. Anyway, back to the matter at hand," he growled, his amusement gone as quick as a breath as he stepped back from the edge of the Merry, watching as Iceburg and company came aboard. I winced in anticipation, and grudgingly moved back to give him some space, an action that Paulie, Kalifa, and Kaku mirrored with some surprise as Franky and Iceburg started literally butting heads the second the mayor noticed the cyborg.

"What the hell are you doing here, Ice-For-Brains?" Franky snarled. "And what's with that rat in your pocket?"

"First of all, Flunky, Tyrannosaurus is a mouse and he is a perfectly sensible choice for a pet, surpassing those two behemoths you took in," Iceburg responded with equal venom, not backing down even an inch in spite of the fact that he had to be fully aware of the fact that he didn't stand a chance against the cyborg in a straight-up fight. "And second, I should be asking you what you're doing here. When have you ever built anything seaworthy that ended in something other than disaster?"

"Uh…" Leo slowly raised a flipper. "Are they… always like this?"

Paulie heaved a sigh as he pinched the bridge of his nose in exasperation. "Sadly, yes. Seriously, half of Water 7 sets their clocks to these damn fights…"

"Half nothing, I take my lunch breaks whenever they clash," Kaku scoffed.

"It's like watching a shipwreck…" Mikey whispered in awe. "You know it's horrific… but you just can't look away."

"HA! This coming from the guy who never built anything seaworthy, period? You may have the best in the world working for you, but what have you ever done for a ship?"

"I've never made anything seaworthy!? Oh, that is absolutely rich coming from you, you two-bit metal-brained—"

"ENOUGH!"
Everyone froze when a very loud and, more importantly, very *slurred* voice roared out, demanding everyone's attention.

My blood froze in my veins as I slowly turned to observe the speaker. "Oh, God, no…" I whispered. "What the hell is she doing here!??"

Apparently, Franky and Iceburg were of the same opinion.

"G-Granny Kokoro!?” Franky sputtered incredulously.

"What on earth are you doing here, ma'am?” Iceburg asked in confusion.

"W-What'm I doin' here?" the incognito icefish mermaid scoffed drunkenly as she hopped off of the Merry's railing and staggered forwards. "Z-Zat should be obvioush, considering that I called you boysh here! And ash for why you're here…” She took a deep swig from the bottle she was carrying before continuing. "I brought youshe here sho zat we can put thish shtupid feud a' yers on pause long enough fer you ta help theshe nishe people!" She paused as she swayed on her feet before jabbing a thumb over her shoulder towards the ocean. "Alsho, I came here wish Chimney an' Gonbe ta ride out tha Aqua Laguna."

"Hi Big Bro Franky, hi Big Bro Iceburg!" a chipper young voice called out from below the Merry's railing. "Gonbe and I are gonna go and wait for you at the hotel, alright, Granny?"

"Shur thing, Chimney, have fun!" Kokoro waved over her shoulder.

"We will! Bye everyone!"

"Bye guys!" a far more familiar voice shouted up.

I shot an incredulous look at Soundbite. "Sylvester? Seriously?"

"No clue why, but I got 'cat' FROM THAT RABBIT for some reason," the Baby Transponder Snail shrugged.

"Now, where wash I…" Kokoro frowned as she scratched her temple with the lip of her bottle. "Ergh, might have hit the booze a bit too hard after hearin' Yokozuna talk…"

Soundbite promptly looked away and started whistling desperately, cold sweat coating his tiny body as I pinned him with a glare.

Unfortunately, Kokoro managed to snap her fingers and bark out a relieved laugh. "Ah, yeah, now I remember! I'm here to get you two dumbasses to shtop acting like idiots and get you two tah play nice again, like the good ol' days!"

Both men and myself immediately froze, the old apprentices exchanging glances before they began uttering frantic denials.

"KNOCK IT OFF!" Kokoro cut them off with a slurred bark. "The Straw Hats are decent folk, and you've—" She jabbed a shaky finger in Iceburg's general direction. "Got some a' yer most trusted workersh with ya'. No one's ain't gonna tell no one nothin', so you're gonna drop the bullshit and be good for ten minutesh, got it!?”

It was only the fact that I was focusing on the two incognito agents out of the corner of my eye that allowed me to note the brief look they shot at one another behind Paulie's back. It was there for less than a second, but it was enough to tell me that we were *screwed*.
"Ah, please pardon the intrusion, Lady Kokoro!" Well, that and the fact that Kaku took the opportunity to raise his hand and speak up. "But what exactly are you talking about? Are you saying that Franky and Mayor Iceburg have a past? I thought that they hated each other? Well…" He trailed off and tapped his chin thoughtfully. "Not that I can particularly blame the mayor due to Franky's rampages…"

"Among other things," Iceburg agreed.

"Watch it, square-nose," Franky started to warn the carpenter...

"BEHAVE!"

"AGH!/"OW!"

Before Kokoro moved faster than anyone her age and with her lack of sobriety had any right to and grabbed Franky and Iceburg's ears, yanking them hard as though they were little more than unruly children.

"Now, lishen up!" Kokoro slurred as she held the two most powerful men on the island at her mercy. "These two? Yeah, they've always hated each other, that's a fact, but once upon a time, they were at least able to work together to make great things, great things! An' considerin' what I saw an' felt earlier today, these people here!" She jerked her head in our crew's general direction. "Deserve nothin' less than the very best possible! Nothin' less than what Tom's Workers were capable of, do you hear me?!"

Franky stiffened as he shot a terrified look at Kokoro. "Damn it, Granny, I know you're sloshed right now, but will you please think about what the hell you're—YEOW!" The cyborg was cut off by a particularly vicious yank.

"You think I haven't thought this over?" Kokoro said with a drunken glare. "None of us have been the shame since Tom died, I'll admit, but this crew's different! This crew holds as much promise as Roger's did, if not more! And wish everything that their old ship hash gone through? Just take a secon, the bosh of you, and lishen to this ship."

All fell silent for a few seconds. Then everyone, even CP9, shivered as another wave of emotion rolled over us all, this one an undeniable feeling of gratitude. There was a moment of silence before Kokoro spoke up again.

"There, you shee?" she demanded firmly. "This crew's ship loves 'em! And they love it! This crew ashked for the besht that they could get, comparable to Roger's Jackshon, and they deserve it!" Kokoro huffed and panted for a moment before bowing her head morosely. "There's only one way that they can get a ship like that. Only one way to get a ship sho… sho incredible." She looked up and pinned her two surrogate sons with a determined look, pure steel cutting straight through the haze of the alcohol. "So, I say… I say that we bring this damned company back to life… one more time, just one more time. Just long enough for Tom's two successors, Iceburg and Cutty Flam, to come together and build the Oro Jackson's successor, this little ship's successor… for the sake of Roger's successor."

While Franky and Iceburg looked away from Kokoro in a combination of shame and thought, I myself was reflecting on her speech. In my opinion, it was the most awesome, heartwarming and nightmarish thing I'd ever heard. The awesome and heartwarming bits were pretty obvious, sure, but as for the nightmare…

My heart dropped into my gut as I watched Kaku and Kalifa's empathetic masks slip for just a
moment, for just an instant, revealing the naked steel hiding below. And then they were back in place, utterly flawless.

The nightmare came in the form of the fact that CP9 had just located their target beyond a shadow of a doubt and there was little to nothing I could do about it. The only way this wasn't going to play out exactly as badly as it did in canon was if we took those two down right then and there, and there was no way that I'd be able to rationalize that to Iceburg or Franky unless I could prove that they were CP9. If we attacked them without proving that, we'd instantly earn the ire of the whole island, and things would go just as badly as they did in the story. If I tried to unmask them and didn't succeed, I'd just paint a bigger target on my back for them to deal with. And honestly, for all that I knew about them, there wasn't anything I could think of that would result in Franky and Iceburg having any reason to believe me—

"Hey, shouldn't Sanji, Chopper, and Robin be back by now?" Luffy asked obliviousy. "I'm hungry!"

"...Now that you mention it, I didn't give them that much cash, they shouldn't be taking this long," Nami remarked, looking towards the town with a frown. And at that moment, Iceburg and Franky both stiffened and looked back at us.

"...Before I agree... allow me to clarify something: you have Nico Robin as part of your crew?" Iceburg asked with ill-concealed coldness.

I processed that tone for a second, and then I suppressed a massive sigh of relief. That was the opening I needed, it was the one thing that could make those two break cover immediately. But I had to be careful.

"Yeah, she's part of our crew, our archaeologist. Why do you ask?" I posed.

Iceburg stared at me for a few moments before shaking his head. "No, it's nothing—"

"Don't give me that," I cut in. "You obviously have some kind of issue with Robi—oh, wait." I cut myself off with an exaggerated snap of my fingers. "Let me guess: you actually believe what the Government says about her, don't you."

Iceburg blinked, and I raised a hand to my face, sliding it down both in a clear show of exasperation and as a means of hiding my mouth as I hissed instructions to Soundbite. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Nami and Zoro cock their heads before casually heading into the storeroom and leaving the door open.

"You actually think that she wants to destroy the world?" I forged on once they were gone. "That she sunk six battleships on her own when she was eight? Seriously, Iceburg, you're smarter than that: if I've proven anything with my show, it's that you can't trust everything that the Government says. In fact... you and Franky should know that better than anyone."

Both of them stiffened and seemed a second from reacting with hostility. I cut in quickly before they could get the chance. "And that's just another one of the many injustices that drove me to start the SBS in the first place."

That gave them pause, and they both relaxed marginally. Franky stared straight at me. "You and your impossible knowledge... what exactly are you trying to say?"

I sighed, and folded my arms, choosing my words very carefully. "I'm trying to say that Robin's only interest—and the only interest of the archaeologists of Ohara, for that matter—was, is and always has
been history. Let me paint you a picture as for you: before she joined us, she read the Poneglyph that
bore the location of one of the Ancient Weapons, Pluton, in a tomb that was falling to pieces around
her. And the fact that it didn't contain the history she was looking for after what she went through to
be able to read it devastated her enough that she consigned herself to die, buried alive among the
stone."

I let that sink in for a second before nodding my head at our captain. "Luffy saved her life against her
will, and that's why she came onboard with us; since then, she's become one of us. And trust me
when I say that bringing up the lies that the Government told about why she has her bounty is
something that we won't stand for, me in particular!"

Iceburg and Franky both stared at me and looked around the rest of the deck. There was nothing but
solidarity there. Finally, they looked back at me, and Iceburg spoke quietly.

"How certain are you that she has no interest in reviving the Ancient Weapons?" he asked.

"I bet my life on it," I said, staring him straight in the eyes. For the longest time, he searched me for
any sign of deceit. Finally, he sighed and closed his eyes.

"...Franky. If Nico Robin has no interest in reviving Pluton and the only Poneglyph with its
information is buried, then there's only one course of action to take now," he said quietly.

Franky nodded with a solemn chuckle. "Yeah, yeah, don't need to tell me twice. Shame, though…"
He clicked his stomach-fridge open and started absentmindedly rummaging through it. "I really
wanted to use at least some of these designs…"

"Huh?" Kokoro looked between her two old friends in shock. "Are you saying you're gonna do
what I think you're gonna do? Are you two really gonna do that to Tom's gift?"

"It's more the curse of the company than anything," Iceburg replied, scratching the back of his head
with a wry chuckle.

"Yep, this thing's been nothing but a ball and chain," Franky concurred as he started to draw his arm
out of his gut. "To be completely honest? I won't be sad to see this thing bur—!

Time seemed to freeze as the cyborg drew his hand into the air, a sheaf of papers in his hands, and
brought them level with his head.

One second Kalifa and Kaku were standing by a thoroughly confused Paulie, the next they were
standing before Franky, hands outstretched as they desperately reached for some of the most
dangerous pieces of paper in the world—

FWOOSH! "YEOW!"

And the second after that found everyone—save Franky, who was dancing around and flailing his
burning hand in terror—staring at the burning, tar-covered mass that had once been some of the most
dangerous pieces of paper in the world.

"To answer your question…"

All eyes turned from the fire to both me and the happily panting dog-gun who I was kneeling by and
petting proudly. I stared Kaku and Kalifa dead in the eyes as a sadistic smile spread over my face.
"Yes, I did do that on purpose. Spandam won't be happy, will he?"

They tried. They tried so hard to keep their calm, it was both admirable and a little sad.
But ultimately, the carpenter and the secretary's calm masks shattered, revealing rictuses of pure, unholy rage bubbling beneath.

"You're dead," they intoned in voices utterly devoid of emotion. They then proceeded to become human blurs—

**CLANG!**

Before coalescing into visible figures a few feet away from me, raised legs struggling against thin air.

I chuckled at their shell-shocked expressions. "And now, you just broke cover. Forget that pathetic excuse for a human being that you call a chief, Lucci is going to be furious." I shook my head as I spread my arms in a 'what can you do' manner. "You two picked the wrong person to try staying undercover in front of; nobody withstands my words."

"Now, if only you could find a way to do more with less, you bigmouth," Nami's voice chuckled from the air directly in front of Kalifa. Or rather, from beneath the air, which proceeded to melt away and reveal Nami and Zoro, who were standing before the assassins with their weapons drawn in order to block them. It was a real credit to Nami's rapidly rising status as a badass that she wasn't even shaking as she blocked Kalifa's leg with the shaft of her Perfect Clima-Tact.

"Speak for yourself, witch," Zoro chuckled around Wado Ichimonji's hilt, looking like he was having the time of his life as he held Kaku's leg back with his other two swords. "Considering how every time he opens his mouth we get into a fight, I think I'm starting to actually like hearing Cross talk."

"Before you two get it in your heads to start arguing."

"OK, WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK IS GOING ON HERE?!" Paulie suddenly roared, apparently having gotten fed up with being kept in the dark.

"Yeah, Cross, what is going on?" Luffy said, tilting his head with such a degree of innocent confusion that you could just about see the question mark hanging over his head.

"DAMN IT, YOU'VE BEEN HIDING STUFF FROM US AGAIN, HAVEN'T YOU!?!" Usopp sobbed from where he was hiding behind the mast.

"Heh, well, I for one don't mind!" Boss chuckled as he drew out his dart and let it swing like a pendulum. "I like to be surprised! It's pleasant, makes me feel all tingly inside! Ain't no other feeling like it! Ain't that right, boys?"

"BOSS, YES, BOSS!" the TDWS barked, falling into ready-positions as means of salute.

"Allow me to summarize!" I announced as I stood up and clapped my hands. "These two, along with two others on this island, are deep-cover infiltrators from the World Government's covert hit-squad, Cipher Pol No. 9. Their mission was to gain the trust of the citizens of Water 7 so as to search out and acquire the blueprints for the Ancient Weapon Pluton, which Lassoo just did us all the favor of obliterating. Now, see, I was planning on playing things nice and subtle, derail their plans quietly and without the need for all this fanfare…" I turned my head to throw an acrid glare at Kokoro. "But somebody just had to go and get hammered and then throw my timetable way off, didn't they?"
"Nagagaga!" Kokoro cackled as she scratched the back of her head sheepishly. "Whoops! My bad, sorry! Nagagaga!"

"DON'T JUST STAND THERE AND LAUGH AFTER SHAMELESSLY SCREWING UP ONE OF MY PLANS, YOU DAMN HAGFISH!" I barked indignantly. Eesh, is this how Nami feels whenever she goes all shark-teeth on us? Now I see why she's so irritable all the time.

"Icefish, actually!" Kokoro provided innocently.

"Ergh…" I scowled and ran a hand beneath my cap in an effort to calm myself down. "Alright, anyway, getting back on track…" I grinned malevolently as I slammed my fist into my palm. "How about we all join in on the time-honored pastime of beating World Government employees senseless?"

Kaku and Kalifa exchanged glances before the square-nose focused on me. "Clearly, Mister Cross, you've yet to show the world even a fraction of the depth of your knowledge," Kaku enunciated coldly, the smiling carpenter he'd been for the past five years dead and gone. "Regardless, I would recommend that all of you show restraint. Challenging CP9 is a thoroughly foolhardy action—"

"For the love of you-know-who," I rolled my eyes in genuine exasperation. "Have you ever heard the words 'situational awareness'? We. Are. PIRATES!" I swung my arm out over the deck. "We fight the World Government on a matter of principle, and we're already wanted. Your status as a 'Government Official' means less than bupkis around here, dipshit."

Kaku stared at me for a few seconds before exhaling. "Well, that's half of my argument gone… but nevertheless, if you know this much, it's a safe assumption that you know how strong we are. Challenging us to a fight is suicidal."

"Give me a break," I snorted. "Now all you're doing right now is sticking out your giant nec—er…" I surreptitiously coughed into my fist. "Nose, and inviting us to try cutting it. Look around you, again!" I spun my finger in the air. "You guys might be bigshot badasses, sure, but us?" I jabbed my thumb at myself. "I know for a fact that we're in the top ten when it comes to this generation of pirates, and that's just our Captain and first-mate, who are both present, I might add."

Luffy made his presence known by starting to tap his pipe in his hand, while Zoro's already savage smile widened.

"Even besides them, however, it's still 15 against 2."

"AHEM!"

I rolled my eyes again. "If you say so, Su. 16 against 2. And while not all of those 16 can go frontline on a whim—"

"I'm fine up here, thanks!" Usopp called from the crow's nest he'd somehow climbed into and was aiming his slingshot from.

"—the rest of us—" I lowered my hand to Lassoo, who leapt up and transitioned into a form I could swing onto my shoulder. "Very much can."

Conis imitated my action by unslinging her Burn Bazooka and holding it in her customary reverse grip. Carue spread his wings and flashed his blades menacingly, and the Teenage Dugong Warrior Squad slowly inched their way around the assassins, leaving them no means of escape. Kalifa let out a scoff.
"Numbers mean nothing. Allow us to demonstrate the formidability of the Six—"

ZAP!

Kalifa's eyes shot wide, a gasping scream escaping her lips as Nami nonchalantly disconnected the Clima-Tact's Thunder Rod and jammed it into her stomach, volts all but leaping off of it. The resulting charge left her stumbling back, coughing up smoke.

"Science lesson: be it a cloud or a body, Iron still conducts electricity," Nami explained smoothly.

"Damn you—!" Kaku started to snarl.

BASH!

"GAH!" the assassin yelped, collapsing to his knees on account of a hundred pounds of pure metal slamming into his back with the force of an RPG.

"Strong Right," Franky enunciated coldly as he reeled his arm's chain in.

Caught off-guard, Kaku's defense must have slipped, because the next second he grunted in pain as one of Zoro's swords—Kitetsu the Third, naturally—pierced through his leg with ease.

"Stay down," the swordsman intoned viciously as he stuck Yubashiri in the suddenly still carpenter's face. "Or else I'll make sure that no one mistakes you for our sniper again."

"HEY!"

"It's true and you know it!"

Meanwhile, Kalifa tried to make a run for it—

"Rope Action: Hangman's Knot!"

"GYAH!"

But didn't get far before Paulie joined in, his voice even colder than Franky's, his arm flicking out and binding Kalifa from head to foot and leaving her hanging upside down in a matter of moments.

Of course, Kalifa tried to struggle—

"I wouldn't if I were you."

But she swiftly froze when she observed the knife Paulie was holding mere inches from her eye.

"And you'd better not say so much as a word about sexual harassment," the ropemaster continued dryly. "Because I have heard every joke you can imagine and I've been fighting it since day one, so don't even start, traitor."

Kalifa narrowed her eyes at her former colleague but didn't say anything further.

I hid a snicker behind my fist as I observed the interaction. "Seriously, Iceburg, how did you ever deal with her? Honestly, I just don't see a lot of difference between the agent and the secretary. Hey, lady, on the remote chance that you ever go undercover again, I think you could benefit from being a little more…" I made a show of thinking long and hard before snapping my fingers in faux-realization. "Oh, I know! Go for bubbly!"
That got a reaction out of Kalifa in the form of her twisting her head to pin a murderous glare at me. "'Bubbly'," she repeated frigidly. "Excuse me if I think that that particular adjective would not be at all beneficial, and if I refuse to take any advice from you, brat."

My smirk faded briefly, and then returned twice as strong. "Soundbite? A nice and localized Gastro-Phony, if you please."

"COMIN' RIGHT UP!" the gastropod cackled.

The next instant, Kalifa's complexion became an unhealthy shade green and she groaned as she clenched her eyes shut, visibly fighting against her own body. It was admittedly quite impressive.

Still, I spared her barely another glance as I turned towards Kaku. "And now for you."

The square-nosed carpenter panted desperately as he leaned his head up as much as he could, casting his eyes around in desperate search of escape before finally latching onto Paulie. "P-Paulie, please, listen to me!" he pleaded with such desperation that if I hadn't been listening for it I would have thought his stammer to be genuine. "I-I'm sorry for lying to you, but I had to! The Government, yo- you don't just disobey it on a whim! I had to do what they ordered to survive, but I swear, the last five years have been the best of my life! J-Just let me go and things can go back to the way they've always—!"

THWACK!

The assassin's pleading was suddenly cut off by a fist smashing into the middle of his face and bouncing his head off the deck.

"You're fired," Iceburg announced grimly as he rubbed his bleeding knuckles, shooting a dark glare at Kalifa. "And don't even think about using me as a reference."

The only response the assassin could muster was a tortured groan.

I smiled and started to say something—

"I PITY THE FOOLS!"

—when we all jumped on account of a very loud and very black voice belting out of nowhere.

Of course, my confusion promptly turned to exasperation that made me facepalm when I noticed that the voice had come from Iceburg's breast pocket and that Soundbite was laughing his slimy ass off. "Someday, you are going to have to learn that you are not even half as funny as you think you are."

"I'LL BELIEVE THAT when you-know-who SAYS IT!
HAHAHAHHEHEHEEHOOOOO—Puru puru puru puru!—eh? Ah, damn," Soundbite cut himself off with an exasperated roll of his eyes. "It's like the world—Puru puru puru puru!—FREAKING TIMES IT!"

"It probably does," I shrugged. "So, who's calling? Them?"

"Nah, looks like—Puru puru puru puru!—it's Pin—!" Soundbite paused in horror. "—KIE…"

I stiffened as realization hit me as well.

Pinkie.
I grit my teeth in equal parts dread and anger as I slowly picked up the receiver. "...Do I... even need... to ask?" I hissed vehemently.

"...She tied Sanji into a pretzel when I wasn't looking, and then she was just gone," Chopper whispered solemnly.

"...I knew it. I knew it. I fucking knew it! ROBIN, YOU IDIOT!" I snarled in frustration, furiously slamming my fist into the mast.

Zoro growled viciously as he yanked his blade out of Kaku's leg and turned to me. "So, what now, Cro—?"

It happened in an instant, if that. One moment Kaku was lying flat on the deck, the next he'd spun into a handstand, wind whistling around him as he lashed out a Tempest Kick.

A Tempest Kick that didn't hit anyone on account of how it was aimed at Kalifa's binds instead.

Kalifa flipped herself over in midair the second she started falling, and the second her foot hit the deck she and Kaku were just... just gone.

We all stared at the space the two had occupied moments ago in utter shock.

"Well... SHIT," Soundbite summarized.

Thank God for the little shit's mouth, because it was exactly the kick in the nads I needed to get talking again. "EVERYBODY INTO TOWN, NOW!" I belted out furiously.

Everybody jumped in shock at my sudden shout.

"Cross, what—?" Iceburg started to ask.

"These sick fucks specialize in playing shadow games!" I explained. "If they get into town and manage to start talking to anyone before we get you in the public eye, they'll spin a yarn about how we kidnapped you and Paulie and turn Galley-La and the whole damn island on us! The name of their game is covertness and anonymity, so we need to stay in the light! So long as plenty of people can see us, they can't do shit!"

Franky grunted in understanding and jabbed his thumb over his shoulder. "Makes sense to me. Tell me who those bastards' allies are, and I'll get my boys to spread the word."

"The other two are Rob Lucci and Blueno and yes I'm damn sure!" I cut off the incredulous answer he was seconds away from belting out. "I'm sorry, but it's the truth. And make sure that your boys do not engage any of them in a fight, because they will not hesitate to kill, and both of them have Devil Fruit powers! Any other questions?!"

"Nah, sounds good to me," a thoroughly pissed Paulie snarled out as he hopped onto the Merry's railing. "I'll head to the railway—!"

"No!" I cut him off hastily. "They won't be headed there until tomorrow night!"

Paulie only needed a second to get the message and pale in horror. "Laguna."

"Exactly," I confirmed grimly before looking over at the Switch Station's master. "And should they manage to set out with it, there's only one way we'll be able to give chase."
Kokoro cackled eagerly as she took a swig from her bottle. "A high-speed pursuit, eh? Sounds fun! I'll go ahead and get Rocket Man oiled and ready to go! See ya if ya need it, Straw Hats!" And with that she leapt overboard and started waddling off.

"Everyone else!" I looked around at the crew. "Find Robin, find those bastards, and so long as they're not Lucci? Beat them into the fucking ground! Now come on!" I slung Lassoo onto my back and strode towards the city.

"Mister Cross."

I paused with one foot on the Merry's railing and glanced over at Iceburg.

"Given the current circumstances," he stated solemnly. "I'll take whatever advice you have to offer at face value. But as soon as this conflict is resolved, I expect a very good explanation for how you know what you do."

I didn't even hesitate to nod in agreement. "The second all's said and done here, one way or another, you'll find out everything there is to know." I gave my as-of-yet uninformed crewmates a significant look. "And that's a promise."

Conis, Su, and the Dugongs smiled in acknowledgment before re-adopting serious expressions, the five martial artists diving overboard to traverse the canals and everyone else jumping to shore to start heading inland, firm determination on all of their faces.

I took a second to gather my wits before following them, heading into the city with all the stamina that I had built up since I came to this world, and finding that I was barely winded in doing so. The first thing I did was wave down the first free Yagara I saw. "Are you with the Union?" I asked frantically.

"Yeh! Cross, right? Whaddaya—?"

"Spread the word to however many members you have: help my crew, Iceburg, Paulie, Tilestone, Lulu, and the Franky Family. And hinder Rob Lucci, Kaku, Kalifa, and Blueno the bartender. And if a woman with long black hair and a black leather outfit shows up, take her straight to us. Hurry and spread the word, please."

The Yagara stared for only a second before nodding and speeding off. I put a hand to my forehead in an effort to calm myself; that would cover a lot more ground, I was sure, but would it be enough?

So considering, I started running again, scanning the crowd frantically for any sign of Robin, certain that I'd be able to catch at least a glimpse of her if I kept looking. I ran for the next ten minutes until I finally slumped over, catching my breath—

"LOOK OUT!"

"Say wha—MMPH!?"

And the next thing I knew I was being dragged into an alley.

-0-

"Damn it, damn it, damn it, damn it—!"

"Will you shut the hell up, witch?"
"Will you show some fucking emotion, you damn barbarian!" Nami snapped irritably as she spun on her heel in order to jab her finger in Zoro's chest. "Listen you bastard, I know you have the emotional range of one of your damn swords, but—!"

"HEY!" Nami jerked in shock as Zoro grabbed her finger and snarled point-blank in her face. "Let me make this clear: I keep my emotions under control because the last time I let them get the better of me in a life-or-death situation, I was almost cut in half. But we both know that I can do rage really well, so don't think for even a second I'm not pissed off about the fact that they've taken one of our crew, got it!?!"

Nami fearfully stared at him for a second before letting her shoulders sag and looking away in shame. "I… I'm sorry, you didn't deserve that, but—!"

"I know," Zoro cut her off, not even missing a beat as he strode past her. "Now come on. Let's go and get that moron back. With any luck, we'll be able to find her first, and I'll be able to break her nose without the Love Cook getting on my back."

The navigator hesitated for a scant second before smirking and striding after him. "Leave some for me once you're done."

"—the hell are you doing, Robin?!"

Then both of them stopped cold as Cross' voice suddenly came from Brain, who was positioned on Zoro's shoulder.

"I apologize for the subterfuge, Cross, but I didn't have a choice. If I'm going to keep my cover in place, I can't be seen in public."

What was unmistakably Robin's voice came out next, casual as when they last met her.

"Oh, thank God he found her," Nami sighed in relief.

"Sounds more like she found him really," Zoro scoffed before speaking up. "Anyway, Cross, where are you?"

Cross, however, summarily ignored him. "Your cover? What do you mean 'your cover'!? Aokiji might be a lazy ass, but he wouldn't keep things to himself forever!"

Robin chuckled wryly. "It would seem that for once I know more than you. Come with me, I'll explain when we're not out in the open."

"The hell—?" Nami frowned in confusion before raising her voice. "Cross! Cross! Damn it Cross, where the hell are you?!"

Once again, Nami was ignored and was instead answered by the sound of rattling metal. "Geeze, Robin, did you have to yank me that hard? You slammed my transceiver into the wall!"

"Your indestructible transceiver you mean?"

"…well, when you put it like that, I just feel silly."

"You are silly!"

"Quiet, you!"

Zoro scowled grimly. "Damn, it must be another feature of that stupid box. We can hear him but he
"Damn it, if it's not one thing it's another with him…" Nami growled as she rubbed the bridge of her nose, before pausing as a thought struck her. "But… wait, if he's found Robin, then why hasn't he called us yet?"

"Woah, hey, wait up a sec, Robin!" Cross suddenly barked. "I need to call up the others, let them know you're alright! At the least we can redirect manpower to take out the Cipher Pol that's buried in this town!"

"No, don't!"

"What?" Cross asked.

"What!?" Zoro and Nami chorused.

"Robin—!" Cross started to protest.

"I'm not asking you not to tell them, Cross," Robin promised swiftly. "I just need you to give me some time to explain in private. You know more about the delicacy of distribution of information than anyone on the crew, don't you?"

"I… well…" Cross trailed off hesitantly. "When you put it like that…"

Nami’s eyes shot wide in alarm. "I'm not the only one who's getting 'she's playing him like a fiddle', am I?"

"Not a chance in hell!" Zoro cursed as he broke into a run down the street, with Nami close behind him.

"B-But still, Robin!" Cross hastily rallied. "The fact is that I'm just not going anywhere with you unless you can give me at least one damn good—!"

"Might I add that while I was out and about earlier, I found a group of odd thugs in an alleyway that were beaten within an inch of their lives, sporting injuries that I recognized. I don't suppose you made contact with the Unluckies earlier, by any—?"

"Let's keep going, alright? Alright!" Cross grit out in an obviously strained voice.

"Oh yeah, she's definitely playing him," Nami groaned.

"And he's swallowing it, hook, line and sinker," Zoro growled venomously.

Nami shot a dark glare at him. "Which is understandable when he really wants to trust her!"

Zoro matched her glare without hesitation. "After he's advocated being wary for so long!?"

Nami… didn't have a good answer to that.

A few seconds or so later, Robin's voice came up again, accompanied by the tell-tale sounds of a bar. "In here, and try and keep your head down. Anonymity is key right now."

"Yeah, yeah, I got it," Cross waved her off dismissively. A second later there was the bending of leather as Cross and Robin sat in a booth. "Alright, we're here and we're seated. Now what?"

"Well, first…" There was the clink of a mug being set down. "Here, best you have something to
"drink, you look like you're about to collapse. I'm assuming you like root beer?"

"Oh, hey, thanks!" Cross smiled thankfully. There was a greedy slurp, and then a firm slam. "Don't change the subject, Robin. Talk fast, or I call everyone and get them to fall on this place like a hammer."

Robin was silent for a moment before chuckling lightly. "Ah, it's only been a few hours, but I've missed this. I'm glad you're the one I found first, Cross. I take it that you expected CP9 to make contact with me?"

An uncomfortable silence hung in the air, and Robin's smile became a smirk. "I'm assuming you thought the worst when I left Sanji and Chopper, and I honestly don't blame you. For the record, I do apologize for what I did to Sanji, but he was sticking a little too close to me."

"Eh, don't worry about it," Cross waved her off. "He's most likely fine by now, and to be honest? So long as he had a clear view of you during the whole thing, he probably liked it."

"Damn it, cook…" Nami and Zoro ground out.

Robin chuckled lightly. "Indeed, indeed… anyway, let me clarify: I have not betrayed the crew. In order to explain my actions, well…" The archaeologist hummed contemplatively before smiling. "I can only assume that I've picked up a few too many of your habits, considering that among the first thoughts to come to mind when CP9 made contact was 'counter-infiltration'."

A pause, and then Cross' jaw dropped. "You're… You're running a long con? Against CP9!? Robin, you have got to realize just how incredibly risky that is! I know that you're in relatively close to them in terms of training, but—!"

"Considering everything you've done with the SBS, I don't think you have any right to criticize me on riskiness, Cross," Robin replied, in equal parts dry amusement and seriousness. "I am well aware of what CP9 is capable of, and as long as they believe I'm cooperating, the danger should be minimized."

"Mmph, well, when you put it like that…" Cross muttered, his voice warping slightly in such a way that indicated he was speaking into his mug. "Considering how the bastards have most likely gone to ground by now, I'll take any advantage that we can get."

"Precisely," Robin nodded solemnly. "So, you'll agree that my going with them was necessary?"

Cross shrugged slightly. "So long as you acknowledge the dangers of the task, I suppose that I can agree that this was a smart move. BUT STILL!" Nami and Zoro jumped when Cross suddenly yelled… with a slur in his voice? "There's something you should know. Something very… very important. I know that, that right now this may not seem important, but I am officially declaring this the biggest deal in the world. It's… It's, ah… ergh, my head feels… feels… I feel stuck. Stuck in the bottom of the well with little Nancy. It's cold and dark and… I'm confused… Soundbite, is it normal for a teenage girl like myself to be so disoriented?"

Nami and Zoro both stopped and stared at the snail in sheer disbelief.

"… ARE YOU FUCKING HIGH OR SOMETHING!?" Soundbite demanded, voicing their own unspoken thoughts.

"Eh…?" Cross blinked blearily. "What? No, not at all, I—! L... I, ah… wait a second…" Cross fell silent as the sound of sniffing came over the connection. "…Ah… Robin? Call me drugged, but I think I may be crazy." There was a moment of silence as Brain blinked blearily. "…No, wait, I got
"that… wait a—!" The baby snail's eyes suddenly shot wide as terror surged through them. "What bar are we in, Robin!"

Nami's heart dropped as the snail's expression flipped to one of utter sorrow. "Please don't fight them, Cross, it was the only scenario where they wouldn't cripple you—"

"Enough."

If Robin's expression had made her heart drop, the muffled voice that cut her off made Nami's blood freeze.

"Give me the snail," the voice continued grimly.

"SON OF A—LASSOO, MAUL, MAUL!" Cross barked at the top of his lungs.

"RRRRGH!" Lassoo growled viciously, nothing less than bloody murder in his voice. "RUFF RUFF RU—!"

"Mangy mutt," the voice grunted. "Now stop resisting and give me the snail or else—!"

There was the sudden thwack of metal meeting flesh.

"… Damn it all, Cross," Robin sighed miserably.

Cross smirked dispassionately. "Did you really expect anything less from—?"

"CRUNCH!"

"CROSS!" Nami screamed desperately when Brain spat up blood over the sound of bone snapping.

"Grrgrrgghhh…" Cross gurgled miserably.

"YOU FUCKING FUCK!" Soundbite roared. "Fucking try to pick me up, I'll turn your hand into—!"

"I don't doubt you would, Soundbite."

"HEY, WHAT ARE YOU—!?" Soundbite squawked over the tell-tale squirch of someone picking him up against his will.

"But would you do it to me?"

And just like that, Soundbite fell silent, his jaw flapping uselessly. Then came a sound like glass clinking, followed by a startled yelp.

Soundbite's was clearly horrified, then he swiftly adopted a pleading expression. "Robin, please," he begged—no, Cross's voice—begged desperately. "This isn't right, you know this isn't right. You know that none of the crew wants this—GRGH!" And just like that, 'Cross' was cut off in a strangled yelp.

"This isn't about what the crew wants, Soundbite," Robin replied quietly. "This is about what I want. And what I want is for the only friends I have in the world to be safe. And if this is the only way to be
There was a pained gurgle of blood and coughing, and Cross spoke with obvious effort. "You... idiot. This won't... accomplish anything... Y-You can't stop us... from following you..." he whispered.

"I suggest that you restrain yourself, Jeremiah Cross."

Another new voice, and this one was... flat-out evil. "Our arrangement with Nico Robin is that provided she follows our every command, the Government will refrain from targeting the remainder of the Straw Hat Pirates. However, something as foolhardy as attempting to rescue her would be a dealbreaker."

There was a moment of silence. Then...

"Rob Lucci..." Cross bit out through a bloody smile. "Mind... leaning closer? I've got an idea... for a new way to skin a—!"

THWACK!

"Guh... damn... pussy... cat..." Cross slurred before his eyes rolled upwards and he thankfully fell unconscious.

The first voice cocked an eyebrow. "Brutal."

Brain then proceeded to grimace. "I believe that this is the definition of harming someone for their own good," Robin whispered sadly. "He really never knows when to keep his mouth shut."

"Clearly," Lucci's voice snarled. "Now, I believe you were going to hand over the snail? And the bazooka as well, their abilities will be better suited for the—"

"Our agreement was to leave the remainder of the crew alone," Robin interrupted sharply.

"Do you seriously expect us to consider a couple of animals on equal ground with humans?" said the first voice.

The surrounding temperature suddenly dropped by a matter of degrees. "Let me remind you of something, Cipher Pol Number Nine," Robin stated frigidly. "The only reason I'm coming quietly is that you've promised that if I do, you'll leave my crew alone. This applies to all eighteen of them, human and otherwise. I assure you that if you attempt to compromise on that at all, I will render it impossible for you to take me alive. One way... or the other."

Nami and Zoro swiftly grasped the implications, and whatever doubts they'd been harboring in the deepest, darkest corners of their minds about Robin's loyalty died fiery deaths. Then the archaeologist sighed.

"All we need to do is take the transceiver. Without the SBS, the Straw Hats are no more dangerous than a typical Grand Line pirate, Cross even less so."

"...So be it," Lucci stated, and there was a clear sound of rustling leather and metal. "For the time being, however, we'll need to deposit them somewhere that the rest of the crew won't think to lo—KA-LICK!"

For a few minutes, all Zoro and Nami could do was stare at their Baby Transponder Snail in
horrified silence.

Finally, Nami forced her jaw to work. "I'll take Brain and tell everyone else, you keep hunting?" she whispered numbly.

"Yup!" Zoro grunted as he tossed the baby snail into her hands and broke into a run down the street.

"Shit shit shiiiiit…" Nami hissed frantically as she punched in Pinkie's number. "We need to find them soon, or else, or else…" She lapsed into silence as she bit her lip.

-Theo-

The first thing I processed as I woke up was that I was sporting a splitting headache. The second thing was a lack of comfort. Grimacing, I leaned up with a tortured groan and blinked around blearily. My vision blurred and wavered slightly as I tried to concentrate—

SPASH!

"GAH!"

—but that all went away when I was snapped awake by almost a gallon of water smashing me in the face.

"Ackphbt!" I hacked and shook my head in an effort to clear my vision.

For whatever reason, I was standing in the mouth of a trash-filled alleyway, covered in a goodly amount of garbage myself. However, that garbage didn't last that long…

Because it was raining absolute buckets and the canal in front of me was violently overflowing.

I turned my gaze up at the cloud-filled sky, unable to suppress a whimper of terror. "Laguna." I'd missed a full twenty-four hours!? What the hell happened to me!?

"MMPH!"

I snapped my attention to the ground, and was greeted with the sight of a gagged Soundbite making his sluggish—er, snailish—way towards me… and sporting a large steel case bound shut with a manual latch.

I snatched up Soundbite and worked the obstruction out of his mouth. The instant his airway was clear, he burst out, "LASSOO'S in the case, he doesn't have enough SPACE TO TRANSFORM!"

"Right, got it, gimme a second," I nodded wearily as I staggered towards the box and undid the latch, allowing the dog-gun to headbutt his way out with a greedy gasp.

"I… fucking… hate boxes..." Lassoo gasped thankfully.

"Glad to see you're both alright, and I'm sorry to rush you, but can either of you please tell me what just happened?!" I demanded.

"YOU FIRST!" Soundbite shot back.

"I'm with the snail," Lassoo nodded in agreement. "Your head took more of a beating like than the rest of us combined, are you sure you're alright?"
I groaned in aggravation. "No, guys, I'm fine. I've got a headache, but I'm more annoyed than anything, just tell me what-eh?" I paused as I rubbed my head, and in the process dislodged an unfamiliar weight from the top of it that I hadn't noticed before. I blinked before bending over and picking it up. Then a firestorm of emotions hit me as I processed exactly what it was.

A hat. A black, leathery cowboy hat.

I huffed and panted as my brain finally connected the dots of the last few memories I had… at which point my lips split in a vicious snarl. "Alright… correction. I'm more than just alright… I'm pissed."

Cross-Brain AN: Yes, we realize that this chapter is late. Apparently, we've set our standards too high after all. So, henceforth, we're doubling our time. We will still strive to update weekly, of course, but from now on, our deadline will be biweekly updates. It's either that or we keep falling behind, and I think it's clear which is worse between the two.

Xomniac AN: Sorry everyone, we might write like gods, but we're only human.
"Alright, alright, that's good… and do you hear any ringing?"

"No, Chopper, I don't," I sighed in the tone of the long-suffering. "Now, can you please let me catch up on the current situation so that we can get to saving Robin?" I held up my fist with an irritated glare. "Unless you want to check yourself for a concussion instead?"

"Ack!" Chopper flinched back and grinned nervously. "Ahaha… well, you seem to be mostly alright. I-I'll just go ahead and bandage you up, alright?"

"Yeah, you go ahead and do that," I grumbled.

"Still, though, at least try and be careful, alright?" Chopper pleaded with me. "Concussions are no laughing matter!"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," I waved him off with a tired sigh. "But seriously, if the monsters on our crew can take them without worry, I'm sure I'll get off without any lasting damage."

"Mmm… well, when you put it like that…" the diminutive doctor hummed in a clearly dissatisfied manner. "Still, I'll be keeping you under observation just in case."

I blinked in confusion. "Observing me for what?"

Chopper snapped his hoof up and opened his mouth to say something, before snapping it shut and electing to simply walk away.

Shaking the strange exchange off, I instead focused on getting my memories of the past hour or so in order.

Waking up in the backstreets—that is, directly in the path of Aqua Laguna—would have been a disaster considering how close the tsunami was, were it not for the fact that Soundbite's Gastro-Amp immediately alerted the crew and the Galley-La search party they were with to my location. One very outstretched arm had me reunited with the rest of the crew… though Luffy's typical ham-handedness with his stretching caused no small amount of pain, and resulted in me losing consciousness yet again before waking up at the dock where Rocketman was hidden, which was where Chopper was running me through his typical concussion protocol.

Fortunately, now that I had him off my back, I could properly process the current situation. A few faces were missing, but I was a bit too distracted at the moment to properly take stock of who, mentally reviewing the conversation I'd had with Zoro and Nami after waking up.

After the conversation they overheard—apparently something about a favorites list that Pinkie and the Brain had registered themselves in when Soundbite and I weren't looking—the rest of the day was quiet. Lucci had vanished by the time Iceburg returned to Galley-La, and though the remaining foremen and the Franky Family had literally torn Blueno's Bar apart from the foundation up looking for clues, they didn't find anything.

Iceburg had tried to help by attempting to halt the day's Puffing Tom on its way to Water 7 and rob the Cipher Pol of its primary escape route, but that hadn't worked out so well. Specifically, CP9 must have managed to compromise the chain of communication at one point or another, because rather than halting at Blue Station, the Puffing Tom roared right through it at top speed and chugged on to Enies before anyone could stop it, thus securing a means of escape for the agents.
Still, not ones to be deterred, the crew had converged on Iceburg's manor to protect both him and Franky—much to the cyborg's protests—from any possible attempts on their life, while the Galley-La Foremen stood guard at the Blue Station. With the Monster Trio standing guard over Tom's apprentices, it was presumed that the agents wouldn't dare to try anything.

What nobody had accounted for was the possibility that they would straight up attack the island itself.

And by that, I mean that after over 24 hours of complete silence from CP9, the assassin cell demonstrated that they were most definitely employees of the World Government by detonating dozens, if not hundreds of explosions all across the city mere hours before Aqua Laguna was due.

The first ones went off in the powder storage spaces for Galley-La and the the coal storage at Blue Station—in order to snag the most attention, of course—and quickly spread out from there, forcing the crew to thin the defenses around the former apprentices.

I honestly think there's a very real chance that Tom could be deemed Water 7's patron saint sometime in the near future, because it was nothing short of an actual, legitimate miracle that the casualty total from the attack was a scant hundred or so wounded and even less deceased, rather than the canals straight up running red with blood. Thankfully, it appeared that CP9 had been aiming to disrupt the infrastructure and sow pandemonium, rather than maximum body count.

Sadly, however, that was as far as the silver lining extended. In the midst of all the mayhem, Franky had managed to slip past his guards in an attempt to enter the fray himself and help out in whatever manner he could. Which, naturally, turned out to be a major mistake, considering how every account I'd heard said he all but vanished into thin air between explosions.

In all fairness, my crewmates hadn't been idle. They'd tried to hunt down the assassins, tried to prevent them from reaching Blue Station and the Government-piloted Sea Train that steamed into the station under everyone's noses... but in the end, between providing relief efforts and the agents being ungodly skilled at stealth, they just didn't stand a chance. Through sheer speed and surprise, the assassins managed to incapacitate or otherwise hamper anyone who managed to catch up to them before boarding the Puffing Tom and departing for Enies Lobby.

Of course, the fact that not everyone was here made it clear that we still had one chance left to get out of storming the Judicial Island, though it wasn't as though any of us weren’t planning on going at this point. The only thing actually keeping us grounded for the time being was that the Cipher Pol bastards had somehow gotten wind of Rocketman and managed to detonate a brick of explosives in the runaway engine's boiler. Hence, we were currently stalled for as long as it would take Iceburg to finish repairing the speed demon's innards.

Under any other circumstances I'd probably have been impatient and antsy as all hell, but…

I winced and rubbed the back of my skull as I experienced what felt like a railroad spike being shoved into my cranium.

…yeah, no, I was going to take whatever delays I could get my hands on so long as it meant more time to get my head on straight. Still, even if I wasn't currently mobile, that certainly didn't mean I couldn't at least try and gather information.

It was with that in mind that I surreptitiously waved Nami over while our doctor wasn't looking. "So, ah, don't tell Chopper, but my head's still actually still a little fuzzy and I'm having a hard time keeping my headcount straight, what with everyone moving around. I'm assuming that some of us, such as Sanji, managed to stow away aboard the Puffing Tom, right? Who's with him?"
"Weeeell…"

"Ah… ah… AH—MRPH!" Conis froze mid-sneeze, the involuntary reaction halted by a fluffy tail and a finger shoving themselves beneath her nose. She held her stance for a moment before relaxing and allowing herself to pop a thumbs-up, at which point the limbs left and she was able to don a sheepish smile. "Sorry, guys, somebody must be talking about me."

"And why would they not be, sweet Conis?" Sanji crooned softly. "Anyone who knows of you has every reason to want to talk about a most beautiful angel like you."

Su graced the cook with a flat look before spinning her paw in the air, no doubt indicating the rain cascading around them as they stood on the open-air balcony of the Puffing Tom's caboose.

Conis chuckled awkwardly as she nodded in agreement with her pet. "Yes, Su's right, I suppose it could also be on account of all this rain."

Sanji flinched out of his love-hurricane-mode with a sheepish chuckle. "Or that, yes…" However, his sheepish demeanor promptly snapped to dead serious. "It's almost time to get going. Conis, I have to ask you again, are you certain that you want to do this? What you're offering to do is extremely dangerous, and I, your most valiant knight, will not be present to protect you."

Conis blinked in surprise before frowning in firm determination. "And I'll tell you the same thing that I told you when you tried to stop me from following you two back at Blue Station," she retorted. "I might be the newest member of the crew and I might not have as much experience in combat as the rest of you, but I am still a member of this crew, Robin is my crewmate, and I will fight to save her no matter what. So, I will be going into this train and I will be serving as a distraction while you two make your way to Robin."

Conis smiled beatifically. "Of course, you can always take my place and fight those Government agents inside the nice and safe innards of the Puffing Tom. In which case I'll just have to take your place and walk across the slick and bucking back of this metal beast myself."

Sanji glanced up at the storm that was rapidly rushing by up above, as well as the water streaming off the slick metal of the train car, looking like he'd bitten into a lemon. "Ah… well, when you put it like that…"

"I'll be fine, Sanji," Conis stated, pointedly slipping one of her pistols out of its harness and holding it up. "I know that I might not look like it, but the point stands that I am a White Beret, well trained in the art of combat, and I've only gotten stronger since I joined you all." She hesitated for a slight moment before steeling her nerves… and leaning forward to peck Sanji on the cheek. "Go save Robin. I've got this."

For a scant moment, the cook was absolutely frozen. Then…

"I'M COMING, ROBIN-SWA~N!" a category-five Love Hurricane cried out as it shot up and over the roof of the traincar, its voice thankfully drowned out by the much larger storm raging around it.

Conis took a moment to stare after her crewmate in befuddled awe before allowing her calm facade to collapse. The angel started to breathe in a heavy but nonetheless controlled manner as she brought her gun up and rested her forehead against its barrel.

"Alright, alright…" she muttered to herself. "Talk it through, just like you were trained. Current loadout: four single-barrel pistols, two in hip holsters, two in shoulder holsters. One sawed-off
shotgun and one blunderbuss pistol modified to act as a grenade launcher, both across the small of my back. Two rifles on my back, side to side and angled from my left shoulder to my right hip. One Burn Bazooka on my right, angled from my right shoulder to my left hip. And as for ammunition, several dozen regular rounds and three dozen of Usopp and Chopper's custom shells. Opposition… an indeterminate number of World Government agents, all no doubt highly trained and all certainly armed to their teeth. Overall analysis of the situation… I am way outgunned. Recommended course of action…" She swallowed heavily and glanced up at the heavens. "Run like hell. Ooooh, this is going to su—Ow!"

The White Beret was yanked out of her nascent panic by a soft huff from her hood, followed by the light nip of fangs on her neck.

Conis stared over her shoulder and met Su's flat gaze for a moment before smiling gratefully. "Sorry," she apologized in a thankful tone. "I was getting too caught up in my emotions, but you're right, enough waffling. And besides…" She looked forward with fresh determination. "I'm a Straw Hat." She pulled her goggles up from around her neck and over her eyes before unslinging another of her single-barrel pistols and holding it at the ready. "We live to do the impossible."

And with that, the gunner squared her shoulders as she stood before the door to the Puffing Tom's caboose, her breathing slowed in anticipation. "Ready?" she asked softly.

"Su," Su huffed in agreement.

"Alright…" Conis grit her teeth. "Breaching in three, two—!

Without further ado, Conis lifted her leg and snapped it out in a side kick. The lock and hinges of the door put up a brave fight, but nothing could save them from shattering almost instantly. The resultant force turned the door into a high-speed projectile of reinforced wood that cannoned down the middle of the car's aisle and bowled over almost a dozen government agents in the process.

Conis didn't wait even for the door to hit the back of the car before she dove into the caboose after it, rolling across the carpet before popping into a kneeling position with her guns raised.

"Pistol Unus, Duo," she whispered to herself before starting to unload. She managed to hit one, two, twelve different Government agents that hadn't had time to take cover, winging them and effectively guaranteeing that they were taken out of the fight. Her guns now empty, she spun her pistols into her hip-holsters and stood up.

"Good evening, gentlemen," she announced, bowing politely at the waist. "I'm terribly sorry about this, but you're all in my way." She straightened up again, unslinging her blunderbuss even as she sported an angelic smile on her face. "And we just can't have that, can we? Blunderbuss."

The few agents that had the courage to peek their heads over their seats only had a second to gape in terror before she pulled the trigger, which in turn fired out a small black sphere. The projectile flew for a short distance before cracking against the far wall of the car—

**BOOM!**

—and violently detonating in a cloud of pink smoke.

Conis smiled in relief as she re-holstered her hand-cannon on her back, but promptly froze when she heard a loud click sound out immediately to the left of her head.

"Alright, pirate scumbag, put your hands up or else—!"
CRACK!

"—ARGH!"

The agent howled in agony as Conis suddenly moved, grabbing his wrist with one hand and demolishing his elbow with her other fist. Then, without missing a beat, she yanked him into a one-armed necklock and snatched his pistol out of the air. With her makeshift human shield dissuading any other agents from returning fire, she quickly gunned down another six of their number. Once the gun was unloaded, Conis grabbed her impromptu shield's collar and spun on her heel in order to get the appropriate momentum needed to fling him into what few of his comrades had managed to regroup, thus sending them tumbling to the ground again.

While the agents attempted to regroup themselves, Su scurried around Conis' body like a demented squirrel, drawing ammunition out of Conis' bag and pockets and reloading the weapons that she had fired. She clung easily to Conis' clothes as she moved from shoulders to hips and back again; by the time the agents were starting to get back on their feet, Su was back in place, and Conis had her weapons at the ready again.

Before the agents could properly draw their weapons, the angel drew both of her rifles over her shoulder and held them at ready. "Who would care to be next?" she said, smiling kindly.

Conis expected to receive any number of responses to her question, but clapping, slow and methodical clapping at that, was most certainly not one of them.

And she didn't expect it to come from above her either.

"Well, well, well," a cool and collected voice drawled, also coming from above. "You're certainly an interesting individual, aren't you?"

Conis slowly looked upwards, and promptly felt her heart drop as she caught sight of a man twice as high as the train car who was somehow… molded to the ceiling and back of the car, bent over at the waist.

"You have got to be kidding me…" Conis breathed to herself, a sentiment that Su shared if the vulpine groan coming from her back was anything to go by.

The miniature giant smirked as he adjusted his glasses. "To be honest, I'm quite glad. I thought this mission would be boring with nothing to do, but I imagine that fighting you will be a worthwhile distraction… for however long you last, anyway." His grin widened as he drew his hands from his pockets and started tugging on the hems of the gloves he was wearing. "Allow me to introduce myself. The name's Jerry, of Cipher Pol 6. I like boxing and beating the tar out of criminals. Now, come on…" He drew his fists up and threw out a few practice jabs. "Put your dukes up and let's dance."

Conis swallowed heavily as she slowly re-holstered one of her rifles and unslung her Burn Bazooka, cocking it in nervous anticipation.

"I hope that Boss is having an easier time of things…" she whispered to herself.

-0-

[This is most definitely not a Man's Romance,] Boss muttered to himself as the wind, rain, and waves lashed at him. The Dugong was clinging to the edge of the Puffing Tom's cars, slowly inching his way towards the car Robin was in. Between the cold, the slick metal, and the necessity to maneuver around the windows, it was slow, unpleasant going.
He glanced upward thoughtfully as he slowly shuffled along. [On second thought, going through an ordeal such as this with the intent of rescuing a comrade, a female one at that, who gave herself up to try and save us? That is truly…] He pumped a flipper in the air. [A Man's Romance!]

He paused for a moment, then hung his head and sighed as he remembered that his students weren't with him.

[Knew I kept those shell-brains around for something…] he muttered under his breath.

"Hey, did you hear something?"

Boss froze, barely two inches away from a window he'd almost missed in his musings.

"Oh, definitely. I mean, it's not like we're on a train in a storm."

"Ah, c'mon, ease up on the sarcasm, man. This was different, something like a seal."

Boss ground his teeth and mentally hurled every curse he could think of as he only just refrained from bashing his skull against the train-wall. It was a long list.

"A seal." The Dugong could practically hear the condescending, indulgent smile. "You heard a seal. A surfaced seal, in the middle of the storm of the century."

Boss started to sigh in relief…

"Yeah? Well, buddy, I've got a foolproof argument for you."

"Yeah? What?"

"We're in the middle of the Grand Line."

Before feeling his blood freeze in his veins.

There was silence for a moment, and then…

The window above Boss popped open and a World Government stooge popped his head out, staring straight down at Boss.

There was a tense silence as the pirate and the agent stared at one another.

The agent broke first, adopting an exasperated scowl. "Oh, you have got to be—agh!" The man was unable to finish his statement on account of Boss grabbing his collar, yanking him out the window, and tossing him into the sea in one fluid motion.

The Dugong snarled in frustration as he flipped onto the windowsill and snapped his dart out, spinning it in a circle as he took stock of the mob of agents readying for combat before him. Agents with a lot of guns, he might add.

Moving fast, the Dugong leapt into the train car, rushed to the front and rammed his elbow into the lock of the door, warping it beyond use. With the agents' only possible route of egress blocked, he faced down his approaching foes with grim determination.

'Sanji and camaraderie be damned,' he thought to himself. 'That witch of an archaeologist owes me for this, damn it!'
"Ah, wait, hang on a second…" I held up my hand to stop Nami as a thought occurred to me. "You said that Sanji, Conis, Su and Boss are all on the Puffing Tom, right?"

"Yeah," our navigator nodded with a nervous smile. "They had to leave Brain at Blue Station so that the members of our crew still here on Water 7 could stay in contact, but while we were still connected, we could hear Conis giving Sanji hell. Seriously, she might not look or act like it at times, but that girl's got a will of—!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, she's impressive, believe me, I know," I waved Nami to silence. "Not what I was gonna ask." I nodded my head at where the rest of our crew was impatiently milling about. "My head feels less like it's being drilled open and more like there's just someone pounding around inside, so I've been able to get a clean headcount. If those four are the only ones who got on the train… then where the hell is Usopp?"

Nami and the rest of the crew stiffened as my words sank in before looking around frantically.

"What the hell—!?" Nami demanded in shock.

"HEY, USOPP, WHERE ARE YOU!?!" Luffy belted out at the top of his lungs.

"Did anyone see where he went?" Chopper asked nervously.

"Not a clue, sorry," Donny shrugged.

"Yeah," Raphe tacked on as she gnawed on the 'thumb' of her flipper. "Last I saw him he was pacing around muttering something about… lying better or something? I dunno, it was a bunch of gibb—!"

FWOOMPF!

"GAH!"

"THE HECK!?"

"WHAT THE—!?"

The cause for our distress was the fact that a freaking explosion had gone off in the middle of the dock, spewing smoke everywhere and absolutely obscuring our vision.

For a second everyone started to panic, myself included, before freezing as a blast of noise roared out through the smoke. A gong, to be exact, followed by a guitar solo.

"THIS IS NOT THE TIME, SOUNDBITE!" Nami roared.

"THAT WASN'T ME!" the snail snapped, before hesitating slightly. "Or, well… IT ISN'T ANYMORE? The hell does he think he's—!?"

"Soundbite, what's going on?" I demanded as a brass section started to kick in. "What are you talking about? And why the hell does this song sound familiar?!

"Usopp had me play something for HIM AWHILE BACK, AND HE RECORDED IT ON A TONE DIAL!" Soundbite explained in a confused tone. "But I have no clue what he's—!"
Suddenly, words cut through the music, and my gut and jaw dropped at the same time as I realized where I knew this song from.

"Oh, the wind carries my name! From Sniper Island far away!"

I finally got my jaw working and managed to roar over the cacophony. "WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING, LONG-NOSE!?"

Unfortunately, going by how he kept plowing on, it seemed that he'd elected to summarily ignore me. "When I take aim, it's straight and true! Lu-lu-la-la-la-la~!"

I ground my teeth as I glanced at Soundbite. "Where is he so that I can slap the stupid out of him?"

The snail immediately shook his head. "He's bouncing the music around THE ROOM, AND THERE ARE TOO MANY WORKERS IN HERE TO TELL which is him!"

"Whether you're a man or mouse: lock on!" Usopp proclaimed proudly. "I will put your heart in my sights, LOCK ON!"

*BOMF!*

"GAH!"

"AGAIN!? SERIOUSLY!?"

There was a renewed round of protests as a second explosion, this time a smokeless one at that, suddenly detonated somewhere, the sheer force blowing away all the yet-lingering smoke and revealing a certain cloak-wearing individual perched on top of the Rocketman's smokestack.


*WOOOT!*

"GYAH!"

The cloak-wearer leapt off the Sea Train with an agonized holler when he was suddenly assaulted by a blast of steam hitting him from below. He then proceeded to unceremoniously faceplant on the dock.

"Will you stop screwing around, damn it?!" a grease-stained Iceburg demanded as he stuck his head out of the cabin's window. "Getting this hunk of junk moving again is hard enough as is without your bullshit impairing my vision!"

"Sowwy…" the cloaked man mumbled into the dock. He waited a moment for Iceburg to get back to work before popping up into a proud stance, finger jabbed in the air and his very familiar mask on display for all to see. "BEHOLD!" Usopp proclaimed. "I AM SNIPER KING!"

"Are you serious?!" most of the crew demanded incredulously, myself included.

"SO COOL!" shouted Luffy, Chopper and… the Teenage Dugong Warrior Squad?!

I snagged the back of Leo and Donny's shells and hauled them up the glare-level. "Don't tell me you two actually buy this farce?!"
Leo snorted derisively. "With that nose? He wishes."

"But hey, you gotta give a man props where he's due," Donny shrugged. "The presentation is top-notch."

My eye twitched before I forced myself to drop the Dugongs and march towards my obviously insane crewmate. "Pardon me, everyone, I need to have a word with our… guest." Before anyone could respond, I reached Usopp, spun him around so that he was facing away from everyone and slung my arm around his shoulders in such a way that it was very clear I could headlock him if I wanted to. "Alright, what the hell do you think you're doing?!" I hissed under my breath.

The so-called Sniper King promptly began blustering. "W-Whatever do you mean, good sir? The entire world knows of the Straw Hat Pirates, even Sniper Island! Do you know where Sniper Island is, good sir? It's in—GRK!" 'Sniper King' stiffened in terror when I crushed him against me.

"I will rip 'Sniper Island' clean out of you and show it to you unless you cut the bullshit. Do not test me, Long Nose, I have had a hell of a day," I growled menacingly.

"Alright-alright-alright-alright!" Usopp yelped, straining to keep his voice at a whisper. "I'll explain, I'll explain, just don't break my legs!"

"I'll consider it if you manage to satisfy me," I hissed. "Talk fast."

Usopp took a second to get his breathing under control before speaking. "L-L-Look, let's be frank, alright? I've done a lot of crazy shit on this crew and I love everyone on it, and I want to save Robin, but Enies Lobby?!" He shook his head vigorously. "You don't have the context that I have with that name, that anyone in the world has with that name. We're raised to fear Enies, it's the entryway to either heaven or hell if you're a civilian or, if you're a pirate, just two different kinds of hell! It's a location that's as bad as the boogeyman! I-I-I want to be brave, but…" Usopp gazed miserably at his knees, which were shivering as they desperately fought to support him. "I-I can't, I know I can't, I'm too scared but I want to save Robin! So… So I'm compromising and taking your advice."

"When the hell did I ever suggest doing this?!!" I demanded incredulously.

"W-W-Well!" Usopp flung his hand up, probably in an attempt to stop the fist I had cocked. "You told me that if I was having trouble building up bravery, that I should try lying to myself to convince myself that I could do it! And I tried that, I did, but no matter how badly I lied, I was too scared to go and fight alongside you all! So…"

My jaw dropped as realization hit me. "So you made up someone brave enough to go in your place?"

I could see the shaky grin stretching behind his mask. "Pretty smart, huh?"

I rapped the butt of my palm against his forehead. "Does this look like the face of someone who approves in any given capacity, you stupid—?!" I started to hiss before pausing and forcing myself to take a few breaths and calm down. "Sorry, again, hell of a day, sporting a concussion, my temper's a little bit wild. But Usopp," I continued, shaking my head. "You don't need to do that. Usopp, in the end, no matter how you cut it, all of the bravery that you manage as Sniper King is the same bravery you can manage as yourself. All of this is… unnecessary! You hear me?"

Usopp was pointedly silent for a moment before jerking his head to look away. I felt a vein pop on my forehead, and I opened my mouth to continue chewing him out… when suddenly a much, much more satisfying way to convince him came to mind. Plastering a smile on my face that I knew looked
fake, I loosened my grip on him and patted his back. "Well, if that's your choice, then I suppose that's
that, nothing I can do about it!" I stepped to the side and gestured to the rest of the crew. "Go ahead,
Sniper King, tell the rest of the crew why you're here!" I said warmly. Soundbite opened his mouth
to say something, but I donned a sadistic grin as I popped a finger up to silence him. This… This was
going to be fun.

Usopp hesitated a moment as he tried to divine what kind of game I was playing, but he eventually
elected to go back to his previous pose with his finger pointing in the air. "SNIPER KING!"

"SO COOL!" the usual suspects cheered again. However, unlike last time, Chopper paused shortly
after cheering and tilted his head to the side in confusion.

"Ah… hey, Sniper King?" the Zoa-doctor raised his hoof questioningly. "Not that you're not really
cool and everything, but why are you here?"

"Oh, yeah!" Luffy stuck his hand up as well. "And have you seen Usopp anywhere? He's our sniper
and we can't find him!"

Usopp snapped into yet another pose, his fingers cradling his chin. "Your questions are fortuitous,
for they both share the exact same answer! For you see, your comrade, Usopp, he told me of your
plight." He held his fist before his face and shook his head in a most dramatic manner. "The injustice,
the inhumanity! His words moved me like none before! Sadly, however…" The 'super'-hero crossed
his arms and bowed his head solemnly. "For all that I could tell that your most skilled sniper wished
to aid you in the rescue of your crewmate, he informed me that his will was just not up to the task!
As such, he begged me to take his place in your crusade and—!"

"LIAR!" CRACK!

"—GRK!" Usopp choked as he slammed to the ground at my feet, his nose bent way out of shape.
"Agh… what just happened?"

"Pfff—!" I snorted through the hand I was using to hide my smile. "You just tried to tell Luffy that
one of his crewmates tried to run from a fight to save another crewmate! What do you think just
happened?"

I could see Usopp's eyes widen behind his goggles. "Ahhh, shi—WAGH!" That was as far as he got
before a Heavy Point Chopper grabbed his collar and hauled him up to both his and Luffy's
apoplectic lines of sight.

"You're lying!" Luffy snarled, inches away from letting loose and slugging Usopp again. "Usopp
would never run away, not now and especially not from this!"

"Yeah!" Chopper barked in agreement. "Sure, Usopp can be something of a coward, sure, he might
lie a lot, sure, he has so much practice at running that he's almost got Shave down pat—!"

"GET ON WITH IT!" the voice of God barked from on high, startling Chopper into dropping the
masked sniper and allowing him to stumble back a bit as he rubbed his throat.

I blinked in realization. "Wow, I can't believe that that was the first Monty Python reference I've ever
heard you make."

"Seriously?" Soundbite blinked in surprise. "Eesh, I'LL HAVE TO try and make MORE!"

"Usopp wouldn't run away!" Luffy reasserted firmly, so filled with conviction that he failed to notice
'Sniper King' starting to twitch like someone trying to dance to will. "Not today, not from this! No
matter what, Usopp is our crewmate! He's brave, he's smart, he's…" Luffy paused for a moment before glancing to the side and whistling nervously. "He's really strong…"

"You know everyone can tell you're lying, right?" 'Sniper King' muttered as he twitched.

"THAT DOESN'T MATTER!" Luffy roared, causing him to jump in shock. "EVEN IF USOPP ISN'T STRONG, I KNOW HE WOULDN'T EVER RUN! USOPP'S MY CREWMATE! I TRUST HIM WITH MY LIFE, AND I KNOW THAT NO MATTER WHAT, NO MATTER HOW SCARED HE WAS, USOPP WOULD NEVER RUN! HE'D STAY AND HE'D BEAT YOU IN ANY SNIPING CONTEST A MILLION TIMES—!"

"DAMN IT, WILL YOU STOP MAKING THIS SO DIFFICULT ALREADY?!" Usopp, really Usopp this time, finally snapped with an infuriated roar as he ripped his mask off and threw it at the ground.

"USOPP!?" Chopper and Luffy gaped.

"Seriously, Chopper?" Zoro deadpanned.

The reindeer turned as pink as cherry blossoms and chuckled sheepishly as he scratched the back of his head. "I, ah, might have gotten carried away with how cool he was…"

"That's one thing to call him…" Nami scoffed before redirecting her attention to where Luffy was staring at Usopp in innocent confusion.

"Why the heck were you wearing that mask, Usopp?" he asked in an utterly clueless tone, which only caused Usopp to gain another infuriated tickmark.

"BECAUSE I WAS SCARED SHITLESS, DAMN IT!" the sniper bellowed, even going so far as to flail his fists at his side. "WE'RE ABOUT TO RAID ENIES FUCKING LOBBY, THE GATES OF HELL THEMSELVES! ALL I WANTED WAS TO WEAR THAT MASK AND BECOME SOMEONE ELSE FOR A FEW HOURS, SOMEONE BRAVE AND STRONG ENOUGH TO KICK ASS WITHOUT WORRYING ABOUT PISSING HIS PANTS, AND THEN HE WOULD HAVE DISAPPEARED INTO THE NIGHT NEVER TO BE HEARD FROM AGAIN! WAS THAT TOO MUCH TO ASK FOR!?"

"Oooooh…" Luffy nodded slowly in understanding before chuckling sheepishly. "Well, if that's why, then that's alright. You can still wear the mask, I won't be mad!"

"LIKE HELL I CAN AFTER YOU SAID ALL THOSE NICE THINGS ABOUT ME!" Usopp spat. "THANKS TO YOU BEING SO DAMN NICE, IF I TRIED WEARING IT NOW, I'D FEEL GUILTY AS ALL HELL! I PUT ALL THAT WORK INTO IT AND NOW I DON'T HAVE ANY CHOICE BUT TO FORGET THE DAMN THING! THIS DAMN MASK—!" He raised a foot high...

"IS TOTALLY USELESS!"

CRACK!

And brought it down dead center on the mask.

"USELESS USELESS USELESS USELESS—!"

He then proceeded to do it a half dozen times more.
I cocked an eyebrow as I watched the display. "Are you…?"

"Nooope, that's all him."

"Huh," I was silent for a moment before shrugging indifferently. "Ah, well, at least he makes it work." I then grinned as I noted that Usopp had finally stopped his stomping in favor of just standing around and panting. With that out of the way, I walked up to him and slung my arm around his shoulder again, this time in a friendly manner. "Satisfied?"

Usopp took a moment to finish catching his breath before looking down at the shattered mess at his feet. "I… yeah. Yeah, I actually think I am."

"Glad to hear it." I then leaned down, picked up a fragment of the mask and looked it over. "Fare thee well, Sniper King. You were… actually kind of cool, I'll admit…" I grinned proudly as I looked at Usopp. "But it seems like our sniper's outgrown you a little early."

"As is only just."

"Nope!" I stated flatly as I tossed the fragment off the dock without a second of hesitation. I could put up with a lot of insanity, but there was no way that I was dealing with that.

"So," Nami drew attention to herself with a clap of her hands. "Now that Usopp's finally managed to grow at least half a pair—"

"HEY!"

"—It seems like the only thing we're waiting on so that we can…" She sighed in resignation. "Officially cement our status as the most infamous pirate crew since the Roger Pirates, is for—"

WOOOOOOOOOT!

Nami was cut off by Rocketman blowing its stack again, only this time it wasn't a mere whistle. It was a roar, a roar of pure mechanical power that shook us all straight to our bones.

Iceburg jumped out of the engine's cabin, wiping his hands off on a rag. "He's good to go. Though, of course…" He gave Kokoro a warning look. "Once he starts, he's not going to stop. You realize that, right?"

"Wait, you mean that the brakes on this monster don't work!?" Vivi squeaked in terror.

"Why do you think it's locked away in here?" I scoffed. "Tom may have been a genius, but he couldn't get everything right the first time; Rocketman is the prototype, and it didn't get its name for shits and giggles, it got it because it's nothing but a runaway train. Though, really…" I grinned eagerly. "I don't see what the big deal is."

"BRAKES?" Soundbite cackled. "Where we're going, we don't need brakes!"

"NGAGAGAGAGA! Ain't that the truth!" Kokoro cackled as she climbed into the train's cabin. "Fair warning though, we'll be passing eighty-eight by a wide margin!"

I slammed my hand down on Soundbite's shell when I noticed his ecstatic grin. "You can get into a quote-off after we turn Enies inside-out. For now, though?" I spun my finger in the air. "MOUNT UP!"

"Right!" Zambai grinned as he slammed his fist into his palm. "We'll go hop on our King Bulls and
hook up with you guys on the way to the tracks! ALRIGHT, MEN!" he raised his voice to address
the rest of the Franky Family. "LET'S GO GET OUR BIG BRO BACK!"

"YEAH!" the rest of the disjointed family bellowed at the top of their lungs before following their
second-turned-leader out of the dock.

"Uh, Cross?"

I glanced back to see that Kiwi and Mozu had lingered behind. "What is it, you two?"

"Why did they take Big Bro Franky?" Kiwi asked.

"Yeah, I thought all they wanted were those blueprints that you destroyed," Mozu added.

"I suppose I should explain that."

All eyes fell on Iceburg, who was grimacing. "'Franky' is a nickname that I gave him; his real name
is Cutty Flam. When Tom was taken away several years ago, Franky was alongside Kokoro and I,
and he was unable to cope with the injustice of Tom's sentence. He stole a rifle from one of the
Marines nearby and slammed it into the lead investigator's face. He was marked as a criminal, but
never persecuted, as he was thought dead not long afterwards."

"For good reason," I picked up, drawing everyone's attention back to me. "Franky stood on the sea-
train tracks, attempting to keep it from running armed only with a bazooka and his own will. He
failed, and was cataclysmically injured; the only reason he survived is that he drifted to a scrap ship,
where he rebuilt his body with iron. When he finally made his way back to Water 7 years later,
Iceburg encouraged him to discard his real name and only go by Franky to avoid persecution."

Iceburg stared quizzically at me for a few seconds before shaking his head. "Perfectly accurate, and
if you survive storming Enies, I'm going to enjoy hearing the explanation. But even so…"

"You don't think that CP9 would have gone out of their way to take him when they already had
Robin?" I asked. "The reason for that is simple. That bastard agent that Franky pistol-whipped all
those years ago? He never fully recovered; he holds his face together with leather. And since then,
he's become the chief of CP9. And while I'm sure he's pissed as all hell about not being able to get
his hands on the blueprints, he's sure as hell petty enough to order the Pol to kidnap Franky so that he
can get his revenge."

Iceburg grimaced darkly. "Yes, well… I'm sure as hell not letting that happen. Paulie, Lulu,
Tilestone!"

"SIR!" the three shipwrights barked in unison, snapping into uniform salutes.

The foreman stared his men down, causing them to flinch self-consciously. "I imagine that even if I
didn't tell you to, the three of you would sneak aboard the Rocketman in order to accompany the
Straw Hats and get some measure of justice against our old comrades, right?"

"Ah, w-well sir..." Paulie muttered, looking away sheepishly.

"Shut it."

The rope-master's jaw snapped shut with a click.

Iceburg eyed them silently for a moment before sighing. "Well, if you're going anyway, I might as
well make it official: listen up!" The sudden shout caused the trio to snap to attention again. "I
already dismissed Kaku and Kalifa myself, but Lucci is still technically an employee of Galley-La. I am not happy with this situation. So, here." Iceburg drew an envelope from his pocket and handed it off to Paulie.

The shipwright looked it over in confusion. "Eh? What the—? An envelope of cash? The hell?"

"Severance pay," Iceburg explained in an appropriately cold tone. "I don't expect you to fight Lucci one on one, I recognize that he's too strong for that, but one way or another make sure that he gets that envelope." The foreman crossed his arms with a scowl. "Let's be clear: I don't want Rob Lucci's name to be associated with Galley-La for any longer than it has to be, do I make myself clear?"

"SIR, YES, SIR!" the shipwrights saluted proudly.

"Well, now that we're all good and settled!" Kokoro called out. "What say we get this show on the road, huh?"

"Right there with you!" I grinned eagerly as I clambered into the Rocketman's cabin, with the rest of the crew right behind me. I settled on the cushions nearest the window as everyone came inside, and consequently was within earshot of a certain exchange:

"Iceburg… can you watch after Merry while we're gone? I mean, if you have time between the damage—"

"No, it would be my pleasure."

I winced, hard, as I remembered that little detail. At least Iceburg had agreed, but even with everything she was doing, at this point, there really wasn't much I could do except hope for a miracle… or bargain for one. But I shook those thoughts off as Usopp boarded, everyone else either milling about or sitting down.

"Alright, everyone, hang on tight!" Kokoro belted out from the engine. "The Runaway Sea Train Rocketman is now departing from Water 7 with Enies Lobby as its terminus! Full steam ahead!"

"You ready for this?" I asked Soundbite eagerly as I stood up and hung my torso out of the window of the train car.

"DAMN STRAIGHT!" the snail whooped.

"Hey, what the—?! GET BACK IN HERE, YOU MORO—!"

WOOOOOOOOT!

Vivi was cut off when, with an almighty jerk and roar, the Sea Train shot out of its dock like a freaking cannonball.

Seeing it was one thing, but riding a Sea Train... well, it was something else entirely. Riding even the prototype, it was easy to see how the Sea Trains managed to brave waters that swallowed ships on a daily basis: they fought the Grand Line and always came out on top because they were complete and utter monsters. Speed, power, durability, all aspects that the iron horses had in spades with which they could stampede over the Grand Line without a moment's worry or hesitation.

Honestly, even in spite of the current situation, even in spite of the danger and worry I felt, in face of the sheer speed of the Rocketman, of the conflict between nature clashing against machine…

"Pff..."
What else could I do but laugh in ecstatic glee?

"PFFFFAHAAAAHHHAAAAAA! WOOHOO, THIS IS AWESOME!"

"BEST RIDE EVAH! WAAAAHAHA!"

"YOU MORONS ARE GOING TO GET YOURSELVES KILLED!" Nami screamed from within.

Soundbite and I paused and glanced at one another before grinning ecstatically.

"WORTH IT!" we chorused.

"IDIOTS!"

Still, even as I laughed and cheered, I couldn't help but feel some measure of concern in the back of my mind for our comrades off on the Puffing Tom.

-o-

Conis took a moment to regain her breath before glancing at Franky. "Alright, you ready?"

The blue-haired cyborg cracked his head side to side as he rolled his shoulders. "So far, I've been beaten, tied up and then tossed in a train car like little more than luggage. Trust me, I am SUPER! ready," he growled eagerly.

"Alright, then." Conis took a step back from the door, her grip on her underslung Bazooka tightening. "Breaching in three, two—!" The angel stepped forward and slammed her heel in the dead center of the door, blasting it off its hinges and into the car—

SHINK!

Where it only managed to fly forwards a few feet before splitting into uniform planks of wood that even went so far as to land in a neat stack at the back of the car.

Captain T-Bone snorted as he stood up from his post-swing stance and re-sheathed his sword. "Now, now," the dilapidated Captain wheezed in a scolding tone. "You should be more careful. You could have hurt someone with that stunt of yours."

Conis and Franky both gaped at the sheer casualness that the man was displaying after having demonstrated such masterful swordsmanship.

"We're dead," they summarized flatly.

"And now that you've so rudely intruded into my car…” T-Bone rumbled as he slowly marched up to the two, towering above them like a human-sized giant… before sinking into a sitting position as one of his subordinates produced a full-fledged tea set before him, from which the Captain picked up a cup and took a sip. "Would you care to relax and join us for a cup of tea?" he continued, all of the Marines in the car raising cups of their own.

The interlopers exchanged dubious looks for a second before they adopted seiza positions of their own, picked up the offered cups and took deep sips of the drink being offered to them.

Conis promptly reeled back in surprise. "Oh, my, this is quite good!"

"Indeed," Franky hummed. "This is quite the intriguing variety of flavors. It really engages the
"Here, Su," Conis offered, holding her cup over her shoulder. "Would you care for a taste?"

"Su…" The cloud fox ground her paw into her muzzle with a moan.

"I'm glad you enjoy it so much," T-Bone chuckled into his cup. "It's my own personal blend. It's difficult to acquire all the necessary components, but I find the taste to be well worth it."

"I can't help but agree with you there," Franky nodded his head in agreement. "I'm tasting some bits from North Blue, West Blue, New Worl—!"

SMASH!

"WHY THE HELL ARE WE JUST SITTING AROUND DRINKING TEA!?!" Franky roared as he put his fist through the floor where his tea set had been moments earlier.

T-Bone gave Franky a flat look as he held the set out of range before handing it off and looking at the Angel and Cloud Fox in the room. "You are Conis and Su of the Straw Hat Pirates, yes?"

The two nodded their heads hesitantly.

"I trust, then, that you are familiar with the name 'Ophiuchus'? I myself am known as Scorpio."

Conis gasped in realization before leaping to her feet and waving her hands frantically as she interposed herself between the Captain and Franky. "Waitwaitwaitwait!" she pleaded hastily. "I know that this must sound insane, but he's a friend of Cro—MMPH?"

"Su," the fox said with a tone of warning. Conis stared at the fox for a moment before nodding, upon which she removed her tail from her mistress' mouth.

"Ah, ahem, h-he's a friend of a member of our crew," Conis corrected carefully.

"What!?" Franky squawked in shock.

"Ally, to be specific. I wouldn't go so far as to call us friends quite yet, especially with his most… grating attitude," T-Bone corrected.

"Su," Su rolled her eyes with a scoff.

"Ally—are you nuts!?" Franky demanded indignantly. "Cross has done his best to verbally tear the Marines a new one! Why would any Marine want to be the ally of any member of your crew!?!"

"Perhaps…" T-Bone posited calmly. "Because there are some Marines who realize that Jeremiah Cross is actually correct about the current state of the Marine Corps' morality—or lack thereof, as it were. And with the inability to ignore it any longer, such Marines are faced with the options to either leave the Corps, or fight against it. Not through piracy, nor through open revolution… or not quite yet, at least. Instead, we have chosen to bide our time and build our numbers, an endeavor for which Ophiuchus has proven to be an invaluable resource."

"I know it sounds crazy, but it's true!" Conis insisted desperately. "Captain T-Bone and his friends—"

"That classification is accurate," T-Bone nodded.

"—Are working with C—Ophiuchus to try and make the world better!" Conis cast a light glare over
her shoulder as she rubbed the freshly bitten part of her shoulder.

Franky snorted derisively as he backed down slightly, but not a lot. "Give me one reason why I should believe all this and not punch this guy's head clean off."

T-Bone cocked what little of his eyebrow remained as he jabbed his thumb over his shoulder. "Would the fact that I subdued the CP7 agent waiting in the next car be sufficient?"

Franky and Conis both snapped shocked looks at the Captain. They then moved to the doorway in question and exited to the next car. Five seconds later, they were back with disturbed expressions on their faces.

"I didn't think anyone could top Satori's level of ugly," Conis shuddered. "Clearly, I was wrong."

"So much ramen..." Franky moaned.

"And all from his nose, to boot," T-Bone snorted. "I incapacitated him when he tried to serve that foul concoction of his to my men and I. Honestly now, I do believe that I did the wide world of cuisine a favor."

Conis glanced over her shoulder with an uncomfortable grimace. "I can only imagine how Sanji would have reacted to that..."

Franky hastily shook his head and re-donned his grimace. "S-Still, that doesn't mean anything! You could have just taken that bastard down because he was a freak! That doesn't say prove anything about you and the Straw Hats!"

T-Bone rolled his eyes with a weary sigh before gesturing to one of his men, who produced a Transponder Snail from a briefcase he was holding. "Please connect me to Pisces," he requested.

The snail smiled and nodded before concentrating, during which the Captain cast a glance at the pirate and cyborg. "The Government prohibited the presence of Transponder Snails on this voyage for fear that Jeremiah Cross's partner might learn something that would compromise CP9's mission in any way. It is fortunate, therefore, that I've taken to the habit of keeping one well-hidden at all times, in case of just such an emergency. Such as, say, now."

Not even a second later, the Transponder Snail adopted a carefully neutral expression. "Pisces," it drawled in a mucked-up voice.

"Scorpio," T-Bone wheezed in return. "Since you're the only one with his number, would you be so kind as to connect us to Ophiuchus? I have his crewmate here with me, and I would like to verify my allegiance."

"Sure thing, just give me a second to connect to him," Pisces trailed off for a moment before nodding in satisfaction. "Done. Pisces calling."

"PFFHAHAHA! OPHIUCHUS HERE, BABY!" an equally garbled voice whooped ecstatically over the sound of gale-force winds, driving rain, and a roaring steam engine. "AND DAMN GLAD TO HEAR FROM YOU GUYS, CAUSE WE'VE HIT A SNAG ON OUR END AND I CAN'T CALL YOU ON MY OWN JUST YET!"

There was a moment of silence before Pisces groaned in resignation. "I swear, every time, the damn migraine gets worse and worse..."

"Ophiuchus," T-Bone cut in. "I am currently in the presence of your comrades and a number of my own men. If you'd be so kind as to identify yourself, please?"
"EH? SERIOUS—AH, WAIT A SECOND, WAIT A SECOND!" The winds died down to nothing, and a breathless voice panted across a moment later. "S-Sorry about that, adrenaline rush... anyway, you said a number of your own men, Scorpio?"

"I trust that they will keep silent about this," he said, scanning over the room. One and all, the men sprang into salutes. "But still, with matters as delicate as these, discretion is the utmost key, so if you would be so kind as to...?"

"Yeah, yeah, on it. So—Ah... Little Dipper, if you would?"

"Little Dipper my hairy left—!!" Suddenly a staticky crackling noise erected around the Captain, the angel and the cyborg. "THERE! DONE! AND CALL ME LITTLE DIPPER AGAIN AND I'LL TEAR YOUR EAR OFF."

"Duly noted," Ophiuchus, or rather, Cross assured someone who could only be Soundbite.

"...You know, I should be surprised that you actually have this kind of alliance in the Marine Corps, Cross," Franky began. "But after you tricked CP9 into showing themselves, I'm really not. I don't think anything you say can surprise me now."

"DON'T CHALLENGE HIM!" roared everyone in earshot.

"Yeah, Franky," Cross snickered tauntingly. "Or would you rather Cutty Flam, for the sake of nostalgia?"

Franky twitched slightly before snorting. "That doesn't prove anything, Kokoro said that in front of you yesterday."

"True, true, but she sure as hell didn't call you Number 36."

"Strike two, Cross. I told you that one my—!"

"Well, yes, but you didn't tell me that this is the first humanoid model, whereas the first thirty-five were more, shall we say... aquatic, designed specifically for the purpose of killing sea kings. Specifically... a very persistent and centipede-y one." Cross was silent for a second before grinning widely. "I totally hit the nail on the head and Franky's frozen, isn't he?"

"You never fail to amaze and horrify, Cross," T-Bone sighed wearily.

"Tell me about it..." Pisces groaned.

"But nevertheless, moving on while Franky recovers..." Cross said, his tone becoming more serious. "Status report on the Puffing Tom?"

"The train has seven compartments. The rearmost held a large group of agents led by Jerry of Cipher Pol Number 6," T-Bone stated as he glanced at Conis. "Your gunner has dealt with them, I presume?"

Conis nodded in agreement as she worked a crick out of her neck. "The boxer was slippery, but I eventually managed to deal him a head-on blast with my bazooka."

T-Bone nodded. "Moving on, the sixth held only two agents and Franky. The fifth is mine, the fourth held Wanze of CP7, who I dispatched myself, and the third holds Nero, the newest member of CP9. The agents themselves wait in the second car, and Nico Robin is in the first."
"And the rest of the crew?"

"Boss and Sanji are making their way to Robin on the outside," Su spoke up out of the blue. "Boss is scaling the side of the cars, while Sanji's running along the top. Conis went in through the back in order to act as a distraction. And damn, I never thought I'd say this, but I missed the sound of your voice, slimeball, if only because I missed the sound of my own."

"Back at ya, PUFFBALL!!"

"Mrgh... the roof, huh? That means he'll run into Nero, the paranoid rat... but he is stronger than him, so..."

-o-

Several cars ahead and a few feet up, two combatants hastily fell into crouches and used their hands to stabilize themselves as the Puffing Tom mounted a particularly large wave.

'Damn this slippery shit-weasel...' Sanji thought to himself as he absentmindedly shielded his lighter in a futile effort to ignite his cigarette. 'Because of all his damn moving and this footing, I can't get a bead on him! I can tell that he's weak, all I need is to get one good kick in...'

'Damn this slippery pirate-weakling...' Nero mentally cursed as he spat out a bloody tooth, a remnant of the first few instances of the fight where he'd foolishly tried to meet his opponent head-on. 'I don't know what bullshit trick he's pulling to stay ahead of a Four Powers user like me, but in the end, he's still just mortal! All I need is to get him to lose his footing, even a little...'

And so, their wills resolved and their breath regained, the pirate and wannabe-assassin dashed at one another anew.

-o-

"...eh, fuck it, it's Sanji, we don't call him a monster for shits and giggles. He should come out just fine. Right, anyway... OK. As for us, we're in pursuit on the prototype sea train, Rocketman. We probably won't catch the Puffing Tom, but we'll reach Enies Lobby not long after it. Scorpio, considering CP9's presence—!"

"The cars are naturally buoyant and I can fend off any Sea Kings who attempt to harass us on my own, fret not for my safety, Cross," the Captain calmly insisted.

"Right, then, that takes care of that, I suppose. Now, if that's all, Pisces, I need to talk with you about somethi—!"

"HEY, KIDS!" an elderly female voice barked across the connection. "I SUGGEST THAT YOU ALL HANG ONTO YOUR UNDERWEAR, WE'RE ABOUT TO HIT THE TRACKS! THINGS ARE GONNA GET ROUGH!"

"Ohhh!" Cross all but squealed. "On second thought, call me back in a few minutes! No way in hell am I missing this rush!"

"COWABUNGA, BAY-BEE!" Soundbite hollered.

"What!?" Pisces yelped. "Cross, don't you dare—!"

"PFFHAHAHAHA!" Cross cackled at the top of his lungs, shouting to be heard over the roar of the wind. "OH YEAH, THIS IS THE LIFE!"
"Ergh..." Pisces relented with an exasperated groan. "I swear, sometimes I'm convinced that this idiot has a raging deathwish..."

"COME ON, YOU BIG HUNK A' JUNK! GIVE ME ALL YOU—!"

KA-KLUNK!

"—WAAAAAaaaagh!"

An uncomfortable silence hung in the air as the tenuously allied individuals tried to process just what the hell they'd just heard.

"Did... Did Cross just get blown off of his train?" Conis asked uneasily.

"Yes, he did. Be grateful that I managed to grab Soundbite before he flew away," groaned Zoro's pained voice. "And before the rest of us got flung to the back of the cabin, for that matter."

"Wow, he really does have a deathwish..." Franky muttered.

Pisces' eye twitched furiously even as she ground her teeth. "Ooooh, trust me, he's not dead yet," she promised grimly. "He's like a cockroach: he's not really dead until you've torn his twitching body to pieces."

"Fantasizing again, Lieutenant?" T-Bone blandly asked.

"What can I say, it helps me fall asleep at night."

Franky's sweatdrop doubled in size. "Eesh, Cross's friends are fucked up in the head."

"Oh, no no no, you have it backwards!" Pisces chirped with a pleasant expression. "I was normal once upon a time..." She scowled vehemently. "And then Cross had to go and shatter my ignorance, fucking up both me and my worldview in the process."

Franky considered that for a moment before waving his hand dismissively. "Nah, that doesn't fit. I've been a cyborg for over a decade and Su's just naturally twisted. Maybe Cross's just a magnet for this stuff?"

Soundbite stared at Franky with a blank expression, the only movement on his face the twitching of Pisces' eye. "So, basically, you're telling me... that I was cracked right from the start?"

"Eh..." Conis waved her hand side to side. "More like from the instant you set foot in the Grand Line."

She was silent for a second longer before adorning a very twitchy smile. "Well, this has been fun, but I really must be going. Have fun bringing the shitstorm of the century down upon your own heads!"

"Ah, wait!" Su hastily popped her paw up. "While I still have my voice, I just have to know!" She focused her attention on T-Bone. "Were you born with your face looking like—?"

The Captain's expression remained unflinchingly neutral as he pressed his finger into the snail's cradle and forced the gastropod back to sleep.

"—sususu, su—? Su?" Su paused in confusion before turning her snout up with an affronted "Su!"

"There are not enough words in the world to apologize for her..." Conis mumbled into her hand.
"Trust me, I've heard worse," T-Bone said dismissively. "Now then, I suggest that the two—!
"SU!"

"—three of you, my apologies, move onto the next car and decouple the ones we're on now. Best that you move fast. Every moment we waste is a moment we draw closer to Enies Lobby."

The two nodded, and the Marines in the room braced themselves as the three pirates exited the car. Conis stepped to the entrance of the kitchen as Franky bent down to the connecting cable. Two seconds later, the rear three cars of the Puffing Tom began losing speed and drifting away from them.

Nodding in satisfaction, Franky looked back at Conis. "Are you ready to keep going?"

The angel nodded confidently as she drew her Bazooka. "As if I wouldn't be."

-0-

"Well, that was great until it wasn't," I muttered to myself as I wrung out my sodden jacket into Rocketman's water tank.

"YA THINK!??" Soundbite snarled.

"Wow, Mister Cross, that was really stupid!" Chimney chirped as she watched me wring myself out.

"Yeah, really, really stupid!" Gonbe concurred.

"NAGAGAGA!" Kokoro cackled as she effortlessly manipulated Rocketman's controls. "Man, I haven't seen something that stupid since back when Franky was a part of Tom's Workers! What, is storming Enies not enough of a rush for you?"

"Well, ex-cuse me for wanting to live a little. It's not often that trains have open windows to take advantage of!" I sniffed.

"Huh, good point…" Chimney cocked her head to the side thoughtfully before redonning her grin. "Buuut that was still stupid!"

"Really stupid!" Gonbe added on.

"Really really stupid!" Luffy laughed as he stuck his head into the cabin.

"WE DON'T WANNA HEAR THAT FROM YOU!" Soundbite barked.

"ESPECIALLY NOT WHEN YOU'RE DOING THE EXACT SAME SHIT YOU'RE BERATING ME FOR!" I snarled at him, pointing an accusatory finger.

"Yeah, but he's a monster and the one who saved you, so he doesn't count!" Kokoro cackled.

I held my pose for a moment before lowering my finger and coughing into my fist. "Withdrawn." Shaking off the insanity of the moment, I considered how things were going. A moment later, I snapped my attention to Soundbite. "Keep a lookout for Yokozuna, make sure he doesn't try his 'daily exercise routine' on us for kidnapping Kokoro, got it?"

"Roger roger," the snail replied.

With that dealt with, I thought about matters a little more, but that was about as much as I could change things at this point. I'd have to wait until everyone else got back to start the planning.
Nodding to myself in acceptance, I turned my attention to the rest of the car—

"GAH MOTHER!"

"WOO MAMA!"

—and promptly regretted it, as I caught a brief glimpse of full-frontal Nami right as she was changing before I managed to snap my hands up to block her. And from the fact that she was staring directly at me as she fastened her very revealing—if admittedly iconic—outfit into place, she was doing it intentionally. I lowered my hands only when I heard the metallic slam that was the Clima-Tact, signifying she was finished.

"Okay, ready for battle!" she announced, before blinking at the blushing Paulie, bleeding Tilestone, Zambai, and Lulu, and my own blistering glare. "What's wrong?" she asked innocently, though I wasn't fooled in the least.

"Couldn't you have warned me?!" I demanded indignantly.

"YOU CHANGED IN HERE WITHOUT A MOMENT'S THOUGHT!" Paulie added. "SCANDALOUS WOMAN!"

"Nice scandal…" the other three groaned, each offering a thumbs-up.

The devil standing before me smirked as she tapped her weapon on her shoulder. "I shouuuuld be charging you ฿10,000 for that little peek…" I froze in horror, but she promptly spread her arms in a 'what can you do' manner. "Buuut, as I'm feeling generous, I think I'll let you off this time and just consider it payback. There is only one car, after all."

"Payback!? For what!?"

"Do you want that list chronologically, or alphabetically?" Chopper piped up from where he was working on something.

"HA! CALLBA—wait, you weren't even part of the crew BACK THEN!" Soundbite said.

"You talk in your sleep and I take good notes."

"THAT RAISES EVEN MORE QUESTIONS!"

"And all of them are ones ones that we can discuss later," I cut in, looking for some excuse to move past that conversation and finding it easily in the form of Franky's right hand. "Zambai, tell your guys not to bother shooting at the Aqua Laguna when we get to it; this is Luffy and Zoro's time to shine, so save your ammo for Enies Lobby. Chopper, do you still have my Vision Dial?"

The reindeer nodded before producing it from his bag. I didn't ask why he needed to borrow it, because quite frankly, I didn't want to know. "Good. Someone had better get a very good picture of what's going to happen, or else I'm gonna crack skulls. Besides that, all we have to do is wait until we regroup with our guys on the train." I grimaced as I considered the possible outcomes of that endeavor. "One way or another."

Everyone nodded, and as their attention left me, I scanned around the cabin to observe everyone's actions. Chopper had set about instructing Zambai how to use the Dial; Luffy was playing around with Chimney and Gonbe while Kokoro looked on with amusement; Usopp, Nami, and Zoro were all inspecting their weapons—
I slapped myself in realization, that was way too close. Zoro would have had my head if I forgot that. "Zoro!" I called.

The swordsman looked up, and I called Shu's description to mind. "If things still go straight to pot, there's going to be a Marine that you'll need to watch out for. He wears a white turban and a veil over his mouth."

Zoro cocked an eyebrow at me. "And I should care about this guy why? Is he a swordsman?"

"Nope," I popped out a thumbs-down. "He's the anti-swordsman. The bastard ate the Rust-Rust Fruit. If you're not careful, Yubashiri'll be suffering an ignoble death, and Tashigi will blame you for it."

Zoro paled as he snapped his hand into a death-grip on the katana's hilt. "Desert clothes, keep my distance, got it, thanks."

"Damn straight," I nodded confidently before moving on. Galley-La was waiting quietly, even Tilestone, Lassoo was snoozing, the TDWS was checking their weapons too, and shooting annoyed glances at Mikey as he kept spinning his pistols around. Unloaded, thankfully, but still. And last but not least, Carue was sitting in a corner by Vivi, who was—

I didn't even hesitate to stride towards Vivi, moving slowly but with purpose. Carue saw me approaching from where he was surreptitiously watching over the princess, but after a moment's hesitation he elected to look away and tug his beanie down over his eyes.

Vivi, on the other hand, didn't seem to notice. Rather, she was too engrossed with fondling her necklace, turning the intricate metal ball on the end of the chain in her fingers over and over again. This fact was cemented by the way she jumped when I cleared my throat. Her eyes darted around in a futile search for an escape route for a second, but she ultimately sighed and looked up at me in defeat.

"…No way out this time, is there?" she asked quietly.

"Hey hey hey," I spread my hands in a show of harmlessness as I sank to sit beside her. "This is entirely your choice. If you just don't feel like giving all of the details—"

"N-No, it's fine," Vivi interrupted with a raised hand. "I… I may as well, if only because this…" She held up the orb for me to see. "If this isn't the right time to use it, there won't be a right time ever." She drew the necklace back and looked it over with a gaze of longing familiarity. "This… it's known a Sirocco charm-container. It's an ancient heirloom of the Nefertari family, passed down through the generations and designed for a sole purpose: to provide an influx of strength to its holder in the hour of their utmost need."

I nodded in understanding. "Makes sense, seems like the kind of thing that thing would be either a weapon or something else designed to help keep you alive considering how A, your father gave it to you when you were leaving for the pirate life and B, I've seen you all but strangling that thing whenever things started getting dire." I looked upwards thoughtfully. "But, that doesn't answer what's in it, does it…" I glanced down at it as a thought struck me. "It… It's not something gruesome like… what, the souls of your ancestors or something, is it?"

Vivi affixed me with a flat look—

THWACK!

"OW!"
—before flicking me in the forehead without warning.

"You've read way too many comic books, Cross," she deadpanned.

I gave her my own look in turn. "Remind me, my obsession has saved our hides how many times now?"

Vivi hesitated for a moment before sighing and hanging her head in defeat. She maintained her stance for a moment before glancing at me out of the corner of her eye. "How much knowledge do you have on the Royal Guardians of Alabasta?"

"Eh…" I blinked in confusion. "Chaka and Pell, right? The Jackal and the Falcon, ancient protectors of the nation and the royal family. Though…" I frowned in confusion. "How the hell you manage to keep control of their powers once they pass on is a mystery to me."

"It's… not as hard as you'd think, really," Vivi shrugged indifferently. "Alabasta has a lot of national treasures, and it's had them for several generations, probably even as far back as the Blank Century itself. Among these treasures are our Devil Fruits. The Jackal and Falcon fruits don't belong to Chaka and Pell by coincidence; the vault in the third storage room is filled with green beans and plums to make sure that when the fruits reincarnate, they end up there."

I shrugged matter-of-factly. "Makes sense to me. Though…" I trailed off as I glanced at her. "I fail to see how this is in any way related to that."

Vivi paused for a moment before tilting her head to shoot me a wry smile. "Cross… the Nefertari's are descendants of one of the ancient Twenty Kings. We are World Nobles in all but name, and our nation is absolutely massive."

"Yeah, so?"

She slowly tilted her head to the side. "So, why would we only have two Royal Guardians?"

I stiffened as the implications of what she was saying hit me like a ton of bricks. "…How many?"

Vivi shrugged slightly as she looked forward again, her grin gaining a wistful overtone. "Six in all. Two Zoan, two Paramecia and two Logia, so as to cover our bases. In ancient times, they were the pride and joy of our nation, defending us from all manner of threat, big and small alike!"

It was… really something to see Vivi recount her story. The way she lit up and gazed at something beautiful only she could see… it was clear that this tale was very near and dear to her.

"However…" But all too soon, her smile became melancholy, and her expression sad. "Time is cruel beyond all belief, and it stole our Guardians from us one by one. The Grace slid under time's sands like so many of our monuments in the past, and vanished from our grasp before we even knew what had happened, and later on two more were stolen in quick succession during periods of civil unrest and upheaval: the Rage…" Her hands snapped into a fist. "And the Desert."

I widened my eyes in surprise. "…ah. Sooo… that whole 'Sir' Crocodile bit…?"

"More than him just taking out a few pirate crews that decided to attack us," the princess growled, glaring daggers at thin air. "That bastard… he actually brought us hope. He returned one of our national treasures, our pride and joy…" She dug her fingers into her arms. "And then he turned it against us, and stole it for the rest of his natural life."

I started to consider ways to placate her when I felt something tap my neck. I glanced down and
caught sight of Soundbite, who proceeded to mouth something to—!

Once again realization hit me, and once again I looked over at Vivi, only this time I was very intently focused on her necklace. "Vivi..." I whispered. "You said that the Grace was lost and the Rage and Desert were stolen, right?" I didn't even wait for her to nod. "And... seeing as the Desert is currently in Impel Down, Pell and Chaka are still in Alubarna, and I'm assuming that the Rage and Grace are both Paramecia, going how the names have all been pretty self-explanatory..." I swallowed heavily. "Just... what kind of a Logia do you have in your necklace?"

Vivi smiled grimly as she held the metal orb up. "I didn't expect anything less. This is the Storm of Alabasta, more commonly renowned as the Logia-type Gust-Gust Fruit... which takes the form of a pomegranate."

I frowned for a few seconds, trying to work out why that was relevant. Then the penny dropped, along with my jaw.

"An aril..." I breathed.

Soundbite looked between us in confusion. "Uh...?"

"Ah, it's a name for pomegranate seeds," I explained before adopting a defensive expression at his incredulous look. "I like Greek Mythology and I saw the term when I was reading the tale of Persephone!"

"Nerd..." Soundbite scoffed before refocusing. "But what good DOES THAT—?"

"You don't need to eat the whole Devil Fruit, Soundbite," Vivi cut in. "Only a single bite is needed, however small, and any one part of a fruit contains as much power as the whole until someone eats it."

I shot Soundbite a look as I tracked his logic. "Are you really telling me you ate that whole coconut before you realized you had powers, even after you realized it tasted rancid?"

"I was a lone snail IN A DAMN JUNGLE! I ATE MY food whenever it came TO ME, NO MATTER THE TASTE! Sue me!"

Anyway," Vivi coughed, bringing our attention back to her. "Assuming that the vault that the main mass of the Gust-Gust Fruit is in hasn't been compromised—and considering how that thing was built to last for centuries, I doubt that it has—" She shook her necklace. "Then what I have here is an active Devil Fruit, just waiting to be eaten. It might look solid, but Father told me how to open it before we left. He said..." Vivi sniffed, visibly fighting against tears at this point. "He... He said that considering the sheer scale of the Grand Line, of the world we live in, that there was no question in his mind that I'd have to eat it one day, for one reason or another, but he also suggested that I wait until it was absolutely necessary. And all things considered..."

Vivi looked up and stared at nothing, deep-seated fear and horror lurking in her eyes. "Well... honestly, what is there to consider? We're going up against Enies Lobby. The Judicial Island, seat of the World Government, if not the Government itself..." She shuddered, her arms coming up to grasp themselves. "We are going to need every inch of power we can possibly get our hands on. And if I can contribute, in any way, if my help can help keep our crewmates alive for even a second longer —!"

"Hey hey hey!" I cut in, interrupting her as her voice started to take on a tone of mania. "Calm down, you're starting to panic! Just... alright, first? Look around at everyone else, and tell me what you
Vivi slowly raised her head and looked at everyone else in the cabin for a moment before blinking at me in confusion. "I… what am I supposed to be seeing here, Cross? Everyone's acting normal!"

"Exactly," I said. "Nobody, not Chopper, not Nami, not even Usopp, is making a big deal out of what we're about to do. They're not panicking and they're not freaking out, and you know why?" I tapped her necklace before she could have a chance to respond. "Because they don't have this hanging over their heads. You're agonizing because you think you're standing at an irreversible crossroad of your life, but while it might be approaching, you haven't reached it yet. Enies…" I grimaced as I considered the events to come. "Enies is gonna be nuts, yes, but it's not guaranteed to be a complete clusterfuck. You still have time. Gaining your powers will be a monumental event in your life, and you should only go through with it when you feel it's right, not when you feel forced to do it. Otherwise, well…” I spread my hands helplessly. "You'll just end up regretting it for the rest of your life."

Vivi started to nod in acceptance before pausing and giving me a suspicious look. "Did you just bastardize 'the talk'?"

I opened my mouth to deny her, and promptly grimaced as I reran my words through my head. "Good grief, I actually did. My apologies, no person should ever have to have that conversation twice. But ah, still, to ram my point home and alleviate some of your stress…”

I pointed at her necklace. "Let me tell you about an unspoken law concerning Devil Fruits. Now, I'm not certain how widespread this is in the pirate world, but considering how the Roger Pirates abided by it and the Whitebeards still abide by it, I'd say it's a pretty common policy: where possession is usually nine-tenths of the law, it becomes a full ten-tenths when it comes to Devil Fruits. What a crewmate does with a Devil Fruit they've acquired is entirely up to them. Eat it, sell it, gift it, even toss it, it doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is what they want, and no one and nothing, maybe not even the captain himself, can say otherwise. Although…” I snickered as I tilted my head so that I could gaze at where Luffy was perched on the Sea Train's nose. "In our case, I'd say any dangers of that are rather moot, no?"

Vivi managed to chuckle at that. Then she smiled gratefully, releasing the necklace. "Thank you, Cross. That… That helped a lot."

"Anytime. But, ah… out of curiosity, what are the two Paramecia fruits?"

Vivi shrugged. "The Grace is the Cloth-Cloth Fruit, which allows its user to control whatever cloth they touch—much more effective than it sounds, believe me—!

"Oh, no, don't worry, I'm sure it's earned its reputation," I assured.

Vivi nodded. "And the Rage is the Hot-Hot Fruit—"

I blinked in recognition. "Which lets you control thermal energy, so that a person can burn people just with their mere presence!?"

Vivi and Carue suddenly snapped forward and grabbed my collar, all but shoving their faces in mine. "You know where it is?" they demanded.

"Grgh, maybe, maybe I know where it is!" I hedged frantically. "I-It's like what happened with Navarone, it's a story that's not a part of the original one! But ah, yeah, if it works out that way, then we should be meeting its user not long after we leave Water 7."
"Please tell me that he's despicable enough that I can kill him without any regrets," Vivi hissed desperately.

"Eh…" I waved my hand side to side hesitantly. "Heeee's on the borderline. Utter sadist to his enemies… and a good father to his children."

Vivi processed that and plopped back down, a grimace on her face. "Fuck. Ugh… think he'd be willing to move to Alabasta for an extravagant bribe?"

"Weeell," I looked upwards thoughtfully. "He is a bounty hunter… and I suppose that if enough pirate ships attack Alabasta on a regular basis—!"

"Puru puru puru puru!"

"Eh?" I was snapped out of my thoughts by Soundbite suddenly ringing. I gave Vivi an apologetic shrug before motioning for him to answer.

"KA-LICK! So, Cross, are you finished with your attempted suicides, or should I call back later?" Tashigi ground out without preamble.

"Please, compared to Kaido, I might as well be a safety nut," I chuckled dryly, before hastily sobering up. "But yeah, let's get down to business and not a word about Huns!" I snapped, causing Soundbite to chuckle sheepishly. I then refocused my gaze. "Anyways… I've been working for you for a while, Fishstick, now it's time for you to pay it back."

"Huh?"

"I need you to help me make a call."

-o-

Boss grimaced ferociously as he finally reached the window where he could see the crew's archaeologist, hunched over and looking at nothing. In any other situation, he'd have been concerned with how dead to the world she looked, but given the disproportionate amount of effort that it had taken to get there, he was right out of sympathy. And so, without any preamble, he scrabbled with the edge of the window, flung it open, and the next moment found him dropping onto the seat across from Robin, his rope-dart snapping the window shut behind him.

The archaeologist blinked at him in surprise for a second and Boss gnashed his teeth.

[What the **hell** were you thinking, turning yourself in like that!? Did you **seriously** expect us to… not… follow… aaaand you can't understand a word I'm saying because that damn snail's nowhere nearby, right…] the Dugong trailed off flatly as he ground his flipper into his forehead. Rolling his eyes, he began moving his flippers in a well-practiced pattern that he had dusted off in his free time since joining the crew.

{I'm assuming a genius like you knows Grand Line Standard Sign Language?} he asked.

Robin blinked again in surprise. "I'm surprised that you do, Mister Dugong," she said at last.

{I'm a Dugong of many talents.} Boss's flat expression did wonders to communicate his deadpan tone. {Now, to pick up where I left off…} He scowled indignantly. {What the **hell** do you think you're doing!? Did you honestly think we **wouldn't** chase you, that we **wouldn't** fight tooth and nail!? Because if you did think we wouldn't, you're an idjit and that's insulting, and if you did think we'd come, then this is all just **insane**!}
Robin grimaced at that, pointedly not looking Boss in the eyes. "I-I didn't have a choice, Mister Dugong. I-If I'd stayed with you all, then you would have been killed. The Government—!"

{Fuck the Government!} Boss enunciated with a violent slash of his arms. {In case you've missed the memo, lady, we're pirates, we—!}

The Dugong was cut off by the sound of the door to the car creaking open, which prompted him to leap forwards into Robin's lap and slide his rope-dart under her seat before going limp, his tongue half-stuck out of his mouth.

The archaeologist only had a second to blink at him in surprised confusion before the Government agent reached her seat.

"Just checking up on y—!" the agent started to say before tensing and snapping a hand to his belt. "What the heck is that?"

Thanks to her years of practice, Robin didn't even miss a beat as she hoisted Boss's limp form by his shoulders and held him out. "A Dugong doll. I found it beneath a seat. Most likely a child lost it and your comrades missed it when they swept the car earlier. I thought it was cute, so I held onto it. Will that be an issue?"

The agent eyed her skeptically for a second before leaning in to look Boss over. He slowly inspected him up and down, scrutinizing every detail he could find. Finally, the agent raised his finger and poked the Dugong's fuzzy upper lip—

Pphhhbbt!
—which caused the agent and Robin to jump in shock on account of the farting sound that came from Boss's mouth as a result.

Robin swiftly recovered as she retracted Boss into her lap. "I was unaware that he was capable of that. Thank you, I'm sure it'll be amusing while I wait for us to arrive."

The agent snorted as he removed his hand from his belt and started walking away. "Whatever floats your boat, I guess."

The two pirates remained silent until the car door shut, at which point Boss leapt out of her lap, retrieved his rope-dart, and settled into the opposite seat again before facing her with a paper-flat expression. {You owe me so much it's not even remotely funny.}

Robin's expression soured at that. "I'm afraid that I won't be free to repay you any time in the near future, Mister—"

{Cut the 'Mister' crap!} Boss all but slammed his flippers together as he signed. {We are friends, damn it, not friendly acquaintances! Now drop the ice queen act and be straight with me!} He leveled a glare equal parts scrutiny and rage at Robin. {Why did you leave? Why did you refuse to trust in our strength?! The Straw Hats beat Crocodile, we beat God—!}

"And compared to the World Government, those two were nothing!" Robin spat viciously, her frustration with the Dugong shattering her mask. "You're just one crew of pirates! Extraordinary compared to most, but you number barely over a dozen, whereas the World Government's resources and troops are infinite! They have acted as a global monolith for nearly eight hundred years, unflinching, unimpeded, undefeatable!" The wind drained out of Robin's sails as she seemed to shrink in on herself. "I've seen what happens when someone is caught trying to defy the World Government's command… the sheer force they can bring to bear…"
"That doesn't matter to us!" Boss insisted. "However many troops they send, we'll fight back! However hard they come at us, we'll come back twice as tough! We'll fight to the bitter end, Robin, and we won't stop fighting even a second before then!"

"They tried to fight back too…”

Robin's words caused Boss to pause in his signing as he stared at her in shock. In the span of a few moments, she'd… changed. In place of her heat and iron was… terror. Pure, undiluted fear and horror, shining like beacons in her eyes as she shuddered in place.

"They fought…” she whispered, though Boss wasn't entirely certain she was speaking to him anymore. "They tried to fight back, so many of them did, but they crushed them all… they crushed him… They burned it all, destroyed it all, they reduced it all to ash…” She shook her head desperately. "I can't… I can't watch that happen… not again… never again…"

Before Boss's horrified gaze, Robin slowly curled in on herself in an effort to make herself smaller, drawing her knees to her chest and hugging them tightly as she buried her face in her knees. Then…

"Dereshi… dereshishishi… dereshishishi…"

She started laughing even as she cried. It sounded… odd, like it belonged to someone else, but it was completely and utterly drowned in grief. Boss shivered as the sound froze the blood in his veins, but he hastily recovered and leapt forwards, rapping his fist against her skull. [Wake up, damn it!] Robin jerked at the blow, and while she didn't uncurl from her position, she at least stopped that… laughing.

She remained frozen for a moment before slowly tilting her head so that a single eye gazed at Boss, her expression utterly inscrutable.

"I'm glad that you're the one who came to speak to me, Boss," she said in a voice devoid of emotion. The Dugong tensed as an uneasy feeling came over him. {And… why is that, exactly?}

"Simple."

In an instant, a quartet of arms snapped out of Boss's torso and wrapped around his body, effectively paralyzing his flippers while another pair wrenched the window open.

"Because I doubt anyone else would be able to survive this."

Boss's complexion took on a distinctly blue overtone. [Oh, you have got to be kidding—!]

And without further ado Robin tossed him out the window, slamming it shut behind him. A minute later, the agent from earlier entered the car again and blinked in surprise. "The heck—? What happened to that doll you had earlier?"

Robin gave the agent a disinterested glance before returning to staring out at the storm raging around them. "I outgrew it."

The agent rolled his eyes and prepared to leave.

"Ah, and before I forget," Robin spoke up, turning a bored eye to him. "If you would be so kind as to call in one of the Cipher Pol agents? I need to have a word with them."
Sanji growled viciously as he glared daggers at the 'member' of Cipher Pol 9 standing just out of his range. "Enough of this..." he bit out. "You've wasted enough of my time as is. Robin-chwan needs her prince charming, and I intend to be there for her! I'm ending this, right here..." He drew one of his feet back and tensed it. "Right now! APERI—!

Without any warning, a blur shot over the edge of the train car, grabbing both of the combatants' attention.

Nero blinked in confusion. "The heck—?"

CRUNCH!

That was all he got out before Boss—hanging onto the end of his ropedart, the 'dart' part of the weapon hooked onto the edge of the roof—swung into his face tail-first, launching him off the Tom and into the raging waters of the ocean before he could so much as even react.

Sanji blinked in surprise before slowly lowering his leg. "Well, that was certainly anti-climactic," he muttered, then snapped his focus to Boss as he finished reeling his weapon in. "And what are you even doing here?! You were supposed to be making your way to Robin-chwan!"

[I did get to Robin! That bitch threw me—!] Boss cut his indignant squeaking off with a snarl as he hastily swapped to indignant signing. {That bitch threw me out of a train!}

"Hey, don't talk about Robin-Chwan that way!" Sanji snapped in a heated tone.

{I'LL TALK ABOUT HER HOWEVER I DAMN WELL CHOOSE, SHE THREW ME OUT OF A SPEEDING TRAIN!}

"AS IF THAT COULD ACTUALLY HURT YOU!"

Boss paused before continuing at a more sedate pace. {Well... yeah, but it's the principle of the matter, you know?}

Sanji ground his cigarette between his teeth before huffing out a sigh. "Just... come on, let's go," he ground out, stepping forward.

{Lead on.}

As they were moving on to the next car, Boss shot Sanji a quizzical look. {By the way, I didn't honestly expect much of anyone else besides the crew's obvious suspects to know sign language. There a story behind that?}

Beneath his ever-present bang, Sanji's hidden eye twitched. Outwardly, however, he kept his cool and shrugged. "Not really. We had deaf customers at the Baratie now and then; after I butchered my first time taking their orders, the old geezer I worked for made sure it wouldn't happen again. It was a bit annoying, yes, but you'd be amazed how many ladies are impressed by an educated—"

Without any warning, the two suddenly snapped so that they were back-to-back.

"Did you hear something?" Sanji asked, his unobstructed eye practically on a swivel.

{Yeah, the storm covered it up but it sounded famili—wait, now I remember!} Boss slapped a fin to his head. {'Course, that was the sound of a door... un... locking...}
The two looked down nervously. "Uh-oh…"/[Uh-oh...]

Before they could even so much as think of reacting, the roof opened beneath them and they fell into the car below. They didn't land on their faces, their scant forewarning made sure of that, but they did land in the midst of all four of CP9's thoroughly unimpressed agents, with Robin standing behind them.

Boss took a moment to glance around at their surroundings before giving Sanji a flat look. {Now can I be pissed at her?}

"… Maybe a little," the cook reluctantly conceded.

-o-

"Oh, yeah, is that right?!" I bellowed at the person on the other end of Soundbite's connection.
"Well, you know what, screw you!" And with that I jerked my hand across my neck, prompting my snail to cut the connection.

"Cross—!" Vivi started to speak up, but I silenced her with a raised finger.

We waited in silence for a few seconds…

"Puru puru puru-KA-LICK!"

Until Soundbite started ringing again, at which point I picked up again with an innocent smile.
"Yeeeeees?" I purred.

"…539-263-678."

Soundbite nodded confidently, prompting me to widen my grin. "Thaaank yooooou."

"Get bent. KA-LICK!"

I shot a grin at Vivi. "And that is how it's done."

"…Impressive," the princess conceded.

"Thank you, come again," Soundbite chortled.

"Oh, no, not that farce," Vivi scoffed. "Honestly, that was some of the most ham-handed negotiating I've ever seen in my life, and I use that term in the loosest way possible."

"Hilarious," I drawled with a flat look.

"No, what I'm referring to is how quickly you managed to rile her up. Usually, Valentine manages to keep her head in the name of pissing off others, but you managed to make her blow her top. That's impressive."

I promptly adopted a proud smile. "What can I say, it's a God-given gift!"

"Still…" Vivi eyed Soundbite curiously. "How'd you know she'd call you back?"

My grin took on a cocky overtone. "I banked on her volume getting Bartolomeo's attention. She might hate my guts, but he likes us and he doesn't take disrespect lightly. There wasn't any possible scenario where I wasn't getting that number."
"Huh…” Vivi shrugged slightly. "Alright, so maybe I'm a bit more impressed. So, are you going to call that number now?"

"COULDN'T EVEN IF WE WANTED TO!" Soundbite replied before I could. "No Transceiver, no broadcasting boost. I NEED IT TO MAKE INTERNATIONAL CALLS!"

"Unfortunate," I conceded. "But with any luck, the away team will bring it back with them and we'll be back in business before we reach Enies, so I'll be able to enact the next stage of what I've got planned."

"Cawe tah shawe juhst waht zis pwan of yours ish?" Carue asked in a doubtful tone.

"Mmm…” I hummed contemplatively as I considered the question before smiling innocently. "Nah! I think I'll keep it a surprise for now!"

The supersonic duck slapped a wing to his face with an exasperated groan. "Aye dunno what I wath exshpecting…"

"Ngagagaga!" Kokoro chortled. "I wouldn't expect anything else from him."

Carue huffed.

"Well!" Vivi announced. "Now that it seems like the only thing we have left to do is wait, anyone up for a game of gin rummy?"

I made to respond—

"LOOK OUT! AQUA LAGUNA, DEAD AHEAD!"

—and instead grinned eagerly. "Sorry, some other time. Right now, I'm much more interested in watching the kick-ass show that's about to happen! LUFFY! ZORO!" I called out, grabbing the attention of the two Monsters with us. "You're up! And for names, I suggest rounding it up to Three Hundred Pounds!"

"Right," the two nodded as they marched out to the engine.

I looked around at the rest of our crewmates. "Anyone else want in on this?"

"Eh…” Chopper tilted his head thoughtfully for a moment before shaking it in denial. "I better not. Sure, it'd be a great way to test my latest formula, but I think it'd be more prudent to conserve my ammunition until we hit the Lobby proper."

"Ditto," Usopp concurred.

The TDWS looked at Leo, who was sporting an uncomfortable grimace. "I would, but the fact is that I'm still sandbagging whenever Zoro can see me so that he doesn't crush me like a seashell."

"And I honestly do not have the firepower, so I'm right out, too," Lassoo muttered before rolling over and going back to sleep.

"Suit yourselves!" I shrugged as I jogged up to the engine. "But still, I suggest you guys keep an eye out! Things are about to get e~pi~c!"

With that, I ran out into the Rocketman's engine cabin, got a firm grip on a railing as I hung myself out the window… and promptly found myself at a loss for words.
"Hoooooooly shit!"

"DAMN STRAIGHT!"

Well, any intelligent words, anyway, but honestly, it wasn't like it was my fault.

Aqua Laguna… geeze, where to even begin?

I… I suppose that the closest approximation that I can think of would be to call it an elemental variation of the Red Line. Where the Red Line replaced the horizon with pure stone, Aqua Laguna replaced it with water. Innumerable metric tons—not even gallons, tons—of ocean, rising up and rushing at us almost as fast as we were rushing at it. It could even be defined as grander, because unlike the Red Line, which held a majestic silence, Aqua Laguna came at us with an almighty roar that dwarfed any Sea King I'd ever heard in my life.

The simplest way to summarize it?

"I think we might have a few too many Devil Fruit users on board," I whispered around my face-splitting grin. "Because holy hell is the ocean fucking pissed off at us!"

"YA GOT THAT right, sonny boy!" Soundbite cackled eagerly.

"ALL HANDS, PREPARE TO FIRE! HURRY, OR ELSE IT'S GOING TO SWALLOW US WHOLE!"

However, it seemed like the Franky Family didn't quite share my enthusiasm for the wonders that our ever-abusive Mother Nature had to offer.

I snapped my fingers at Soundbite before twisting my head to look back at the Franky's trailer home. "BELAY THAT!" I bellowed out. "I TOLD YOU BEFORE, DON'T SHOOT AT THE WAVE! YOU'LL JUST BURN AMMUNITION FOR NOTHING!"

"WHAT?!" Zambai shouted back incredulously. "BUT IF OUR GUNS ARE USELESS, THEN HOW THE HELL ARE WE SUPPOSED TO GET THROUGH THIS DAMN THING?!"

"EASY! WE USE THE ONE THING BETTER THAN ANY NUMBER OF GUNS AND CANNONS!"

"Gum-Gum—!"

"Three-Hundred Caliber—!

I snapped my focus back to the wave, my grin going from ear to ear and looking no doubt utterly demented. "A pissed off Luffy and Zoro working in tandem. Now, START TAKING PICTURES!"

"CANNON!"

I honestly think that the most impressive part of the attack wasn't the sound, but rather the sudden absence of sound that followed the attack. The roar of Rocket Man, the roar of Laguna, the roar of the storm—hell, there wasn't even a storm at this point, the sheer force of the cannon had blasted away all of the rain around us!

It really just went to show: Mother Nature was strong, sure… but we pirates, who braved her wrath on a daily basis for the fun of it? We outclassed her by a complete and utter factor. And that was
clear for the duration of the time that Rocketman... well, rocketed along the track through the watery tunnel, split like the Red Sea all around us until, at last, we emerged on the other side.

Of course, the silence couldn't last forever, and was promptly broken by Zambai crying out in tearful euphoria. "WE SURVIVED!" he cheered. "WE ACTUALLY BEAT AQUA LAGUNA!"

"It's a good thing that we made friends with them, huh, Mozu?" Kiwi muttered from where she was staring out of the car. She then paused and glanced back at her sister before starting in shock when she caught sight of the green hue she'd adopted. "Mozu!?"

The other square sister shuddered in terror. "If it weren't for the SBS, the Straw Hats would have just been another pirate crew coming into Water 7... and then Zambai and his guys would have—!"

Kiwi paled in horror as she followed her sibling's logic. "So glad that we made friends with them," she repeated in a far more sickly tone.

I chuckled in amusement as I slid back to safety and started to walk back into the car—

"Why do you need our help?"

—before pausing as Paulie stepped in front of me, looking pensive and slightly confused.

"Not," he held his hand up placatingly. "That we wouldn't come anyway, we all want our pounds of flesh, but I'm just curious is all. Try and clear this up for me: why do you need our help when you guys are so strong already?"

I took a second to ponder that before shrugging indifferently. "Because strong as we are, Enies Lobby is a World Government installation garrisoned with several thousand troops. We need your help to take down them down because we can't handle an army on our own yet."

Paulie considered that for a second before nodding in understanding. "Yeah, alright, that's fair."

I nodded and continued walking away, then grinned when I heard Paulie choke behind me.

"Wait... 'yet'!?"

"We gon' be BADASSES?" Soundbite giggled ecstatically.

"Such badasses," I confirmed gleefully.

"But you already knew that."

Our attention was diverted to Nami, who was standing by the car door, a somewhat playful look on her face.

"After all, Wyvern," she nodded her head at me. "Managed to take down a whole ship of bounty hunters on his own, remember?"

"MMMMEAYAH," Soundbite hummed, nodding his head in agreement before grinning toothily. "BUT IT'S still nice to get confirmation, ya know?"

Nami rolled her eyes with an exasperated but nonetheless fond sigh. "Yeah, well, I guess..." She then focused her attention on me. "Still, speaking of confirmation, mind sharing what's coming up next?"

I glanced upward as I started to wrack my brains. However, I didn't get very far into my thoughts
when Soundbite suddenly grinned eagerly.

"Oh oh oh, I GOT THIS ONE! Yo, T-Bone, how's the weather?"

"Rather horrible, I'm afraid, my dear Soundbite," T-Bone's groaning voice filtered throughout the car. "I'm soaked straight to the bone… though honestly, I suppose that's not saying much, is it?"

"Heh, skull-joke, nice!" I snickered.

"W-Wait, that's Captain T-Bone!?" Mozu yelped.

"That's not good!" Kiwi cried in panic. "That man's known as the Ship-Slasher! He's a Captain straight from HQ with a reputation for dismantling pirate ships with his blade alone, carving them apart like steaks! He's going to cut us to pieces!"

There was a brief instant of silence before Soundbite frowned grimly. "You're transmitting me to the whole of the train you pulled out of nowhere?" he asked testily.

"Ah, keep your shirt on and let me handle this," I scoffed, rolling my eyes before raising my voice. "Alright, listen up everyone! Yes, that is Captain T-Bone of Marine HQ, but do not worry. He's an ally of ours and he's not going to hack us to pieces. Don't worry, we're safe. Just make sure not to spread the fact that we do know him…" I grinned malefically. "Or else he really will hunt you down and hack you to pieces."

T-Bone sighed wearily as the non-Straw Hats in the car clamped their hands over their mouths. "I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't turn me into a boogeyman, Cross."

"But your face makes it so easy~!" I sang.

"Mmrph…" T-Bone grunted before his expression became solemn. "I'd also appreciate it if you didn't make promises that you can't keep."

I blinked in confusion. "Eh?"

Cold sweat suddenly started trailed down Soundbite's body. "AH, CROSS? I just noticed something. THERE ARE THREE TRAIN CARS FLOATING FREE UP AHEAD…" The trail of sweat evolved into a cascade. "But T-Bone's still on the tracks!"

"EH!?" I squawked in shock. "What-!? T-Bone, what the hell do you think you're playing at!?"

"I am truly sorry, Jeremiah Cross," T-Bone intoned in a voice not unlike a funeral dirge. "But I have no choice. So long as you and yours make for Enies Lobby, I have no other choice but to oppose you."

"Are you kidding me!?" I demanded, jerking Soundbite off my shoulder and into my palm so that I look him in the eye. "Then what the hell happened to MI5, huh, to defending justice, righteousness!? Was that all a lie!?"

"Do not mistake my intentions, Jeremiah!" the captain barked back with just as much heat. "This is not a matter of morality, your righteousness was never in question! This is a matter of strength! Strength of body, strength of will, strength of conviction, nothing more and nothing less!"

I balked in confusion, and Nami and I exchanged hesitant looks before she spoke up. "What… exactly are you talking about?"
T-Bone snorted grimly. "I am sorry, Miss Navigator, but Jeremiah Cross is an integral factor in our crusade! Like or not, whether we shall succeed or fail rests upon his survival! And now he makes for the lion's den..." He bowed his head apologetically. "I am sympathetic to your plight, truly I am, but you now make for the lion's den at all speeds and... I cannot let you continue any further! At least..." He looked back up, and I swear to God I felt a paper cut on my finger just from that gaze.
"Not without a test! RORONOA ZORO!" he suddenly roared at the top of his lungs. "I KNOW THAT YOU CAN HEAR ME! PRESENT YOURSELF AT ONCE!"

Soundbite provided Zoro's reaction from where he stood on the nose of the train, cocking his eyebrow flatly. "What do you want?" he asked.

T-Bone ground his teeth. "Roronoa, your crew's cause is just, but your destination is beyond perilous! As such, I have no choice but to test you all! The strength of your blade will determine whether or not you are truly worthy of continuing your quest, or if your endeavor was doomed from the start! FROM ONE SWORDSMAN TO ANOTHER, I CHALLENGE YOU! EARN YOUR RIGHT TO CONTINUE YOUR QUEST TO SAVE YOUR COMRADE, OR RETURN FROM WHENCE YOU CAME!"

Zoro didn't even hesitate to grin savagely. "As if I would ever say—!"

"WAIT!"

Everyone looked around in surprise for a few seconds, at least, up until a Dugong clad in a blue bandanna strode forward.

"I'll take you on," Leo announced. Zoro's reaction was merely to raise an eyebrow. Everyone else... not so much. The rest of the TDWS were particularly vocal.

"Leo, what the hell—!?" Raphe spat.

"Dude, are you insane!?" Mikey squawked.

"Leo, if Boss finds out about this—!" Donny started to protest.

Leo weathered them all for a second with a clenched jaw—

"SHUUUT UUUP!"

Before throwing his head back and roaring at the top of his lungs, killing any remaining protests in their respective throats.

The Dugong huffed for a second as he got his breath back before speaking. "Now listen up, all of you," he snarled as he cast a glare about. "Let me make this clear... if Zoro fights that captain, right here and right now, then he will win, we will move on..." He jabbed his 'finger' at Soundbite. "And it will all mean absolutely nothing!"

T-Bone gave Leo a flat look. "What are you talking about, Dugong?"

"I'm talking about the fact that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link," Leo growled firmly. "Zoro can beat you, sure, but what will that prove, that one of our strongest is strong enough? No."

He shook his head. "It would be utterly pointless! You want to duel with a swordsman? You want to see how strong we truly are? Then you'll fight me!" Leo slammed his fist into his chest before adopting a scowl. "And besides... this was my fight from the second you uttered your challenge."

He slapped his flipper on the floor of the car. "For the duration of this voyage, this Sea Train is our
ship, and we Dugongs are the ships' guards! It is our duty to protect this train with all that we are, and all that we have to give! If I cannot stop you, if I cannot fulfill my duty…” Leo flung his fist out furiously. "THEN WE HAVE NO RIGHT TO CHALLENGE ENIES LOBBY!"

Stunned silence fell—or as silent as you could get in the middle of a storm like this—for the next half minute. Then Luffy broke it.

"Do you think you can win, Leo?" he asked seriously.

The Dugong jerked his head with an indignant snort. "I know I can,"

"Well, then, you'd better get up here, because I can see the Steak-Man!"

A pause, and then a chorus of facepalms rang out. Even Zoro could be heard slapping a hand on his face.

"We really should have seen that one coming," Usopp groused.

Nonetheless, Leo swiftly pulled himself together and nodded firmly. "I'm on my way." With that, he leaped to a window—

"...go, Leo, go..."

And paused when a soft voice sounded out. He twisted his head around to stare at the source.

Mikey met Leo’s gaze before slowly pumping his fist and speaking again. "Go, Leo, go," he repeated solemnly.

Raphey and Donny gaped at Mikey for a second before glancing at one another and then gaining determined expressions of their own. "Go, Leo, go," they chorused with Mikey, pumping their fists in synch with him.

Chopper, Usopp, and Carue joined in for the next round. "Go, Leo, go."

The Square Sisters entered on the next, adding a degree of energy to the cheer. "Go, Leo, go!"

Then came the Galley-La employees, with Tilestone's bellowing amping it up by another factor. "Go, Leo, go!"

And finally, the Franky Family as a whole joined their voices to the chorus, turning it into a straight-up roar: "GO, LEO, GO! GO, LEO, GO! GO, LEO, GO!"

Nami winced and dug a finger into her ear. "Good grief, they're loud…” she mumbled.

"Gotta admit it's pretty epic, though, right?" I said.

Our navigator allowed the corner of her lips to quirk up. "Well, I never said that it wasn't..."

I chuckled a bit before turning my attention to Leo, who was still balancing in the window, and I couldn't help but feel my heart swell at the sight of the tears shining in his eyes. Sadly, I only got a glimpse of them before he blinked them away in favor of a gaze of pure steel before flipping out of the window and up to the roof.

I cackled eagerly as I ripped my jacket's hood up and shoved Soundbite onto my shoulder. "Oh, no way in hell am I missing out on this!" And with that, I ran out between the engine and the car and climbed up onto the roof.
The sheer Gs of being on the roof of a speeding train? Insane.

The rain and seaspray whipping into me? Freezing as all hell.

The effort required to stay standing on the slick steel surface of the Rocketman without falling into the drink? Impossible if not for Zoro's training and the convenient smokestack to cling to.

The scene of complete and utter epicness arrayed before me?

Worth it in more ways than I can possibly describe.

"IS THIS ANOTHER OF YOUR MASTER'S ROMANCES, YOUNG DUGONG?" T-Bone roared over the raging of the ocean. Squinting ahead, I could barely make out his gaunt form on the tracks.

"NO!" Leo shouted back, tightening his bandana's knot as he balanced on Rocketman's nose. "TO DEFEND ONE'S HONOR AT ALL COSTS, AND TO PUT ONE'S LIFE ON THE LINE FOR THE SAKE OF ONE'S FRIENDS IS NOT A MATTER OF A MAN'S ROMANCE! RATHER!"

In a flash of movement and steel, the Dugong drew his blades and slammed them together, one blade held horizontal before his face, while the other was twisted into a vertical position so that the blades formed a cross of steel. "IT IS A MATTER OF A MAN'S PRIDE!"

T-Bone snorted as he drew his blade up and positioned it horizontally over his brow. "SMOOTH SOARING BIRD: BONE…!"

Leo tensed even further. "Two Sword Style..." He whispered to himself, audible only with Soundbite's aid.

The Captain uncoiled in a single smooth motion, sending a wave of pure force ripping through the air as it swooped and spun towards us at absolutely insane speeds. "PHOENIX!"

The Dugong swordsman stood firm even as the attack came ever closer, eyes squeezed shut and teeth grit…

Until the attack was a few feet away, at which point he snapped his eyes open… and they blazed.

"Cross of the Baptist."

In the space of an instant, Leo moved.

And in that same instant, T-Bone's attack was annihilated, and the Captain himself sent flying through the air, blood flying from both his slack jaws and the cross-shaped slash carved clear through his armor and into his chest.

I winced sympathetically even as I felt a surge of satisfaction.

"Brutal…" Soundbite whispered in awe.

Leo panted as he let his swords hang slack before drawing himself upright and slowly spinning his blades into his sheathes. "Thank you, Captain T-Bone…" he whispered breathlessly before sliding his blades the rest of the way in. "For justifying my position on this crew."

CLONK!

"YEOW!" Leo snapped his flippers to his skull when Luffy and Zoro rapped their fists over it.

"WHAT THE HELL, BASTARDS!"
"That was for doubting your right to be on my crew!" Luffy snorted indignantly.

"And for holding back," Zoro added, paralyzing the Dugong with his frigid glare. "When this is all said and done, we're going at it on Water 7 and we're not stopping until you've given me everything you've got. Got it?"

The only response Leo could muster was a pained whimper.

I chuckled as I watched Leo shrink back from Zoro before sliding back down to the engine and car coupling. Well, that was sufficiently epic. Now, to get out of these sopping-soaked clothes and—!

I paused midway through taking my hat off and stared thoughtfully at it for a second before grinning madly and running into the car.

"Hey, Usopp!" I called out, clapping a hand on his shoulder. "Got a rush job for you, priority one, ASAP!"

-o-

"Alright, beret girl," Franky said, cracking his knuckles. "Are you ready?"

"You keep asking that question. I'm starting to wonder if it means what you think it means," Conis dryly replied.

The cyborg cocked an eyebrow in interest. "Huh. Sarcasm. I didn't think a sweet girl like you had it in her."

Conis pointedly spun one of her pistols around her finger. "I'm a trained commando armed to the teeth who has a fox as a companion. I've got it in me, I just keep it buried."

"Su su~!" Su yipped proudly.

Franky shrugged as he flipped his palm open. "Fair enough. Alright, go in three."

Conis spun to face the door and raised her leg. "Three."

SMASH!

The door shot out of its frame like a cannon... and only got a scant few feet before being reduced to sawdust.

Franky and Conis darted into the car behind the door, and they had their weapons up and ready just as the cloud was starting to settle.

When the dust cleared, it revealed that all four Cipher Pol agents ready and waiting with guns in hand and aimed at the pirates, with Robin standing in the corner behind them.

All in all, it was a perfectly textbook Mexican standoff... save for a single detail.

"Why are you all pointing your guns at me?" Conis protested in a tone that was dangerously close to a whine, in spite of nearly a half-dozen firearms being pointed at varying parts of her body.

"Because Franky's bulletproof," Kaku deadpanned.

"SUPER bulletproof, squarenose!" Franky barked with an indignant scowl. "Tsk, you never did say it right..."
"Well, while we're being honest, I'd like to throw my own hat in the ring," Kalifa spoke up. "Do us all a favor and get over that mountain you call an ego, you puffed-up gorilla."

Franky glowered for a second more before smirking wryly. "Y'know, maybe you should take Cross' advice and try being more bubbly," he remarked.

Kalifa looked as though she'd bitten into a lemon… or a Devil Fruit. "I would sooner kiss that bastard than take his advice."

Kaku smirked slightly. "I'll second—!"

"Enough."

Kalifa and Kaku's expressions promptly wiped themselves clean as Lucci's voice all but whipped through the air.

The lead agent eyed the two pirates. "Surrender now and you will be taken in alive. Resist, and you will be terminated."

Franky scoffed as he cracked his head to the side. "Two things. A: if Cross was right about even one layer of Impel Down—and there is a SUPER amount of evidence to support that!—then death is better than being taken alive. And B: those Iron Bodies of yours are pretty SUPER, sure, I know that better than anyone…” Franky grinned malevolently as he raised his scope to his eyeline and twisted his wrist, causing the scope's focus to zero in. "But one flaw I couldn't ever fix in me were the eyes. You guys have any better luck?"

Kaku, Kalifa, and Blueno flinched infinitesimally, all of them instinctively snapping one of their eyes shut.

Lucci, however, remained entirely unfazed as he stared down Franky's barrel. "I would advise against such a course of action."

"And why would that be?" Conis asked testily as she alternated her targets.

"Because if you should harm any of us…” Lucci stepped aside, and Conis and Franky tensed at the sight that was revealed. "Then these two will die."

Boss and Sanji were lying prone on the ground, each held down by a dozen autonomous arms and both with a significant number of the limbs wrapped around their necks.

"Sorry, my dear Conis," Sanji wept somewhat dramatically. "We ran into something of a snag."

[Snag nothing!] Boss barked indignantly. [What we ran into is a hostile fucking host—GRK!] The Dugong was cut off by a foot stamping his face into the carpet.

"Be quiet," Kalifa ordered.

"What happened to Robin's condition to not go after any of us?" Conis growled.

"You're the ones who came after us. Therefore, your argument is irrelevant," Blueno replied tonelessly.

"And they won't harm you if you just go!" Robin insisted with more than a little desperation. "Just leave me! This is my choice! If you all were to sacrifice yourselves for my sake, then my life…” She hugged herself with a desperate shudder. "Then my life would have no meaning…”
"As Straw Hat would say, for someone so smart, you're really stupid, Nico Robin," Franky said.

Robin was silent for a moment before smiling tearfully. "And as Cross would no doubt say… love and fear make people do stupid things."

"Enough with the semantics." Lucci's voice chopped through the conversation like a guillotine. "For now, it would seem as though we are at an impasse."

Silence fell for a single second before Robin spoke again, her head bowed. "Please just leave. You'll be safe if you just do the right thing and leave me," she begged.

Conis shook her head. "I'm sorry, Robin, but we can't do—"

Clink-clink!

All noise in the car stopped as the tinkling sound of glass drew everyone's attention to the center of the room, where a smoking vial was rolling to a halt.

"Su su~!" Su announced triumphantly as she spread her paws in the closest approximation to peace signs she could manage.

Rob Lucci scowled darkly. "Oh, you little—!"

FWOOM!

The pink smokescreen that exploded into the car a moment later drowned out the remainder of Lucci's words, along with the barrage of gunfire that blasted out as everyone fired their guns at once.

"Damn it, I can't see worth shit!"

"Stop them, now!"

"Easy for you to say, not all of us are Zoans!"

"Gah, who just bit me!?"

[My bad!]

"Agh! No, let go of me!"

"I got her! Now come on, let's get out of here! 1.5 COLA! COUP DE—!"

"Look out, he's going to use—!"

"BOO!"

PPPHHBBBBT!

"OH, THAT IS RANK! WHAT THE HELL, FRANKY!?"

"Ugh… fuck this, I need a smoke."

"NO, WAIT, DON'T—!"

CLI—KA-BOOM!

The resultant explosion blasted the train car in half, launching the Cipher Pol agents into the half still
attached to the train engine, while the Straw Hats landed in the other half.

"I'm sorry, Sanji..." Conis groaned as she lifted her dust-clogged goggles from her eyes. "But that was not your brightest moment."

"In my defense..." the cook pointed into the air with a slight slur. "I might or might not have gotten kicked in the head a few times. And it's also all Franky's fault."

"Hey, it worked, didn't it?" the Cyborg scoffed as he stood up. He then grinned triumphantly as he realized that he was still carrying someone under his arm. "And I mean it all worked! We got Nico Robin! How's that for SUPER?"

"How'd you find her, anyways?" Conis questioned.

"Eh, just grabbed the first person with breasts and no wings that I could find. Though..." Franky frowned in confusion. "It's weird, I coulda sworn that she was bigger..."

"That's sexual harassment."

Franky's eyes shot wide in terror. "Oh, shi—!"

THWOCK!

"Hoorgh!" His words devolved into a pained groan as he folded around the elbow Kalifa had buried in his gut.

The pirates all stared in horror as the blonde agent stood up and dusted herself off.

"B-But if she's here—!" Conis stammered.

"Then it means that you all have lost," Kalifa confirmed. An instant after she finished speaking, a thorn-like whip snapped from the other half of the car a few meters away and wrapped itself around the other half.

"Owowowowowow!" Kaku winced as he struggled to hold the cars together, the whip digging through his Iron Body. "How do you even use this thing, dagnabbit?!

"It's all in the grip," Kalifa called over her shoulder. She then affixed Franky with a glare. "Now, as for you—!" She proceeded to slam her heel into the Cyborg's jaw, launching him to the side... and through a door that had opened into the air and into Blueno's waiting arms.

"In case it bears repeating..." Kalifa adjusted her glasses as she started to step through the door herself. "You are under arrest."

"And just where do you think you're going?" Conis demanded as she clawed her way to her feet, legs shaking as they did their utmost best to support both her and her bazooka, while Boss forced his way into a tentative kneeling position with his fist.

"To Enies Lobby, of course." Kalifa tossed her hair as she turned to leave. "You're free to follow us if you so choose, but honestly, if you have any respect for your crewmate?" She gripped the edge of the 'doorway'. "Stay away."

Boss leaped forwards, Conis was flung on her ass as she fired...

And both missed spectacularly as the door slammed shut.
An instant later, a door opened in the air on the remaining train car, disgorging its three occupants and prompting Kaku to release the whip he was clutching.

In a matter of seconds, the Puffing Tom was almost a mile away and all the pirates could do was stare.

Boss ground his cigar between his teeth for a moment before slowly starting to sign. {We're going after them, right?}

"Damn straight," Sanji bit out darkly before shaking his head with a sigh. "Damn it… the only thing I regret is that we weren't able to do anything more damaging in the process…"

Conis started to nod in agreement as she stood back up, before pausing as she noticed something, and then grinned ecstatically. "Actually," she spoke up in a much lighter tone. "I'm pretty sure we've managed to accomplish something that's going to do a lot of damage to the World Government."

"Oh, yeah?" Sanji asked as he and Boss turned their heads. "Whaaa… ooooh…" he trailed off as he caught sight of what she was looking at.

"Su," the fox said smugly, her paw resting on a familiar leather bag.

"I think that Cross will be happy to have this back," Conis stated.

"Thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you!" I repeated ecstatically as I swung a somewhat dizzy Conis around.

"He-e-e's ha-a-appy…!" Conis got out in a bit of a groan.

"Really happy," Su snickered from where she was safely perched on a nearby bench.

"Really, really happy," Yokozuna croaked out from beside one of the windows he was watching through.

"Extremely happy," Kokoro agreed.

"Sooo happy!" I repeated as I redoubled my grip on our gunner.

"My spine!"

"Ooooo-kay, happy man,"

"YEOW!" I yelped, dropping Conis as a result of Nami suddenly giving my ear a hard yank.

"No paralyzing our crewmates," she deadpanned.

"No rendering us deaf either, damn it!" I yowled miserably.

"Technically, losing an ear would only maim you; so long as your eardrum was left uninjured—!"

"NOT HELPING, CHOPPER!"

"Alright, as amusing as this is," Boss interrupted, staring at me. "I know that you want it to be her story to tell, but now that we're back with you all and we've got a chance, would you mind clarifying just what the hell her freaking malfunction is!?"
"Ah..." I glanced at him hesitantly.

"Seriously, Cross, I tried to talk her into coming back, and the more I went on, the more she withdrew." Boss grimaced uncomfortably. "I've seen it before in the older members of the clan, but this..." He shook his head with a haunted look. "At the lowest point, she was curled up and laughing in a way that made my blood freeze. I've seen some shit, but that was... like nothing I've even heard of."

"A traumatic flashback," Chopper decided. "They must know whatever she went through and are using some sort of stimulus from it to coerce her. The sheer fear of the trauma is overriding all logic, so she's acting irrationally in a manner that makes sense to her. In a manner of speaking... she's gone temporarily insane." A concerned expression spread across her face. "But the sheer degree of trauma you're describing... I've only ever heard of it in the case of war survivors or the worst kind of child abuse..."

I sighed as everyone's eyes fell on me—and I mean everyone's—but ultimately, I reasoned that since Aokiji had given away some of it, I could afford to give away a little more. But no more than I needed to.

"Those in the Marine Corps who have obtained the rank of Admiral are granted the authority to use the Marines' ultimate weapon, known as the Buster Call. Once the authorization signal is sent, the Marines will send five Vice Admirals and ten battleships to the designated location... and said location will be summarily obliterated. No mercy, no restraint, no discrimination, just pure destruction. Once all is said and done, all that's left is a lifeless rock that will not be included in the following year's maps. All records wiped, all memories erased. They kill the island, full stop." I grabbed the brim of my hat and tilted it down solemnly. "At the age of eight... Robin had a front row seat to the onslaught, in all its horrific glory."

I shook my head at everyone's horrified expressions. "Spandam, the Chief of CP9, has in his possession the means through which to send the signal. Maybe Aokiji gave it to him, maybe he stole it, but it doesn't really matter in the end; the mere threat of him pushing that button is all that's needed to bring Robin's trauma screaming back to the fore and shut down every logical part of her brain." I scowled grimly. "If we're going to snap Robin out of it and get her back on our side, we're going to need to do something drastic." I grinned confidently. "The good news on that front, however, is that I've got the perfect stunt in mind."

I moved to sit down—

"ALRIGHT, THAT'S IT!"

"GAH!"

When I was suddenly accosted by a ballistic ball of white fuzz latching onto my collar and snarling into my face.

"This jackass has been screwing with us and dangling morsels of knowledge before us for as long as we've known him, and my patience is at an end!" Su bit out viciously. "Either you talk and you talk right the hell now, or I will take your damn snail and turn it inside out for answers!"

"TRY IT, puffball!" Soundbitesnarled, snapping his jaws for emphasis.

I opened my mouth to refuse before slowly shutting it as I thought better of the idea. I'd said that I would settle for telling everyone else sooner if worst came to worst, and it seemed that it had. And this was the calmest things were going to get before we hit Enies, so...
"I was hoping to tell Robin at the same time, but considering that at this point, that would require waiting until we got back to Water 7…" I gently peeled a suddenly compliant Su off of my chest and handed her off to Conis. "Fine, you've waited long enough. Everyone who's not part of the crew, please give us some space. This is the kind of intel that'll either drive you mad, land you in a looney bin, or get you killed."

The Galley-La foremen, Zambai, and the Square Sisters complied, exiting to the roof of the train car and the Franky Family's floating trailer. Regardless, it would pay to have extra security. I nodded to Soundbite, noise filled the air, and then I began the talk the same way I had when we left Drum. "Have any of you ever heard of the multiverse theory?"

Unsurprisingly, the only one to raise his hand—or flipper, in this case—was Donny. "I heard about that when I was eavesdropping on a few scientists who came through Nanohana! Something about there being infinite other worlds out there for everything that could happen. Like, in one world, we may have never met Boss, and in another, Eneru may have killed us—"

"And in another," I cut in before he could build up steam. "There may be a completely different history from the dawn of time, to the point that there was never a Grand Line, a Pirate King, or a World Government. Heck, maybe even most of the landmass in the world was on seven continents instead of countless islands."

"Ah..." Donny blinked curiously. "Yeah, but what does that have to do with anything?"

"Simple," Su remarked, drawing everyone's attention. "He wouldn't give such a detailed description of a world unless it was his world."

I chuckled in response to her reasoning and everyone else's incredulity. "To quote Satori, 'it would appear that the sayings about the intelligence of foxes are true'."

"Eh, more logic than anything," Su said dismissively before tilting her head, her expression still inscrutable. "But that raises more questions than answers. If you're from another world, then by all rights, you should know nothing about ours. But instead, you know far more than most people, even the most informed. How is that possible?"

"It's simple, really," I smirked almost bitterly. "Let's continue our... little hypothetical from earlier. Imagine, if you will, that in that other world, a man, an average, everyday—GRK, OWOWOW!" I suddenly cut off as a migraine hit me like a sledgehammer. "M-Make that glorious and beyond talented superhuman?" I tried desperately.

I sighed in relief when the pain went away. Well, looks like 'Goda' is alive and well. That or B.R.O.B. is a diehard fan. "Anyways... imagine that that person began to publish a comic book, and said comic book happened to portray another world. For the sake of conversation, let's say it's about a world fraught with impossibilities and oceans and islands. Imagine that that comic book grew to be incredibly popular all over the world. Imagine that some fans of it even thought about how awesome it would be to live in that world, and wished that they could go there."

I looked up at them, smiling sheepishly as I scratched the back of my head. "And imagine that one fan with a big mouth happened to say that within earshot of a real Bastard of a Random Omnipotent Being, who immediately granted the wish, and marooned him on an uninhabited island in that world where he met a Transponder Snail that ate the Noise-Noise Fruit."

Boss was looking at me with wide eyes, his cigar fallen from his mouth, and Donny and Leo had similar expressions. Even Su seemed surprised.
"Uh… what's your point?" Conis asked.

"I don't get it either," Raphey and Mikey chorused.

I facepalmed with a weary sigh. "Boss, Su, I believe you know the appropriate course of action here."

**CLONK-CLONK! SMACK!**

"Oww…" Mikey and Raphey moaned, nursing the goose eggs on their scalps.

"That hurt, Su," Conis said in frustration, rubbing her right temple where Su had tail-whipped her.

"You three deserved that," Zoro said with a shake of his head. "Luffy's the only one on the crew who has any right to be that thick."

"Hey!" Luffy cut in. "I'm not that thick!"

"You kept trying to eat those pink clouds we ran into a while back even after you fell through them," Zoro countered.

"But they looked sooo good! Like cotton candy!"

"He's saying that it's not a hypothetical situation, morons," Boss clarified, pointedly ignoring Luffy. "He's the one who got dropped here by that Random Omnipotent Bastard or whatever it was, and he knows so much because he read the story about this world. Specifically, the story about this damn crew."

"Exactly," I said. "The story was far from finished when I got sent here, so I don't know everything that's going to happen." I grimaced nervously. "Especially now that I've started the SBS. I'm just lucky that it would take something seriously warped to throw off the basic outline of the story, so I can still use what knowledge I do have to help our journey however I can. Obviously," I indicated the train car around us. "That doesn't always work out as well as I'd hope."

"So… you're stuck in this world?" Conis clarified hesitantly.

I shrugged indifferently. "B.R.O.B. said that I'd be able to travel between my world and this one whenever I want… after Luffy becomes the Pirate King. Though mind you!" I promptly stuck my finger in the air. "I'm not part of the crew to guarantee that, that was already a foregone conclusion before I joined and not due to Luffy being the protagonist, that's for damn sure—!"

"Never doubted it," the erstwhile uninformed stated in unison.

I smiled in relief before scowling. "But in the meantime, I'm expected to keep it entertained during our voyage, and I don't have any room to ask for favors since it gave me the transceiver. But, while I'm thinking about it…" I snapped a glare upwards. "I can't believe I'm doing this, but… look, a bargain is different from a favor, alright? Quid pro quo in whatever capacity I can give! And after coming this far, after doing this much…" I snapped my hand into a trembling white fist. "I'm willing to try making one if it means I can save Merry. So… you game?"

Silence for a moment. *Then* a window blasted open out of nowhere and a note slapped me in the face. Pulling it off with nary a flinch, I scanned over the words and exhaled wearily. "'Just do what you do, and maybe if I'm amused enough, I'll give you half a chance. Otherwise, you'll have to go through what Prince Bellett did if you want to save her.'"
"Who's that, Cross?" Luffy asked curiously.

I opened my mouth to reply, but paused, frowning in confusion. "...Actually, I'm not sure. Sounds like he could be from either here or my world...?"

An unnoticed half of the paper suddenly unfolded. I scanned over it, paled, and promptly folded the paper back up. "Right!" I said in a too-high-pitched voice. "I might love Merry, but I sure as hell don't love her that much. Hope for the best, plan for the worst, agreed?"

"What kind of attitude is that, Cross?" Boss barked indignantly, waddling right up to me with the Monster Trio close behind him, their expressions thunderous. "You said you swore to do anything you had to, and if that's the only way—"

I shoved the note in their direction. The captain and the three toughest people in the crew, at least as far as emotions went, scanned over the paper once before they paled as well. Boss then began shredding the paper in the most efficient and complete manner possible.

"Hope for the best, plan for the worst. Agreed," he mumbled in a dull tone as he tossed the paper scraps out the window, with Zoro, Luffy and Sanji nodding along, and everyone else too scared to not accept.

"Right!" I barked as I slammed my hands together in an attempt to force things forwards. "Now, that's my secret told. Unfortunately, however, if you're hoping for some knowledge on what I've seen about you, I don't have much to offer; none of you were with the crew in the story. You only joined due to my interference.

"Well, now that you mention it, I'm sort of wondering about way back when we first joined the crew," Raphey spoke up. "When Soundbite gave us our group's name, and you complained about sanity—?"

"And what about my voice, eh?" Su concurred eagerly. "Who's... Vulpix, was it?"

"That can wait until after we've burned Enies Lobby to ash and gotten our archaeologist back," I stated, my tone brooking no argument. "Anything else critical, or shall we get to strategic planning?"

RATATATATATATAT!

I snapped my gaze upwards in aggravated confusion as the sound of an intense gunfight erupted from the roof of our train. "Oh, what the hell now?"

"GUYS, LOOK—!" Zambai suddenly bellowed.

SMASH!

Before another window suddenly imploded, allowing a gun-toting otter and vulture to barge into the car.

"Alright, Cross!" 13 roared at the top of his surprisingly potent lungs as he waved his relatively massive shotgun around. "Our patience is at an end! Either you come with us, or else—! Ah..." The otter trailed off and slowly lowered its gun as it took account of the identities of the rest of the passengers in the car, his shattered sunglasses falling slightly askew in the process. "Hoo boy..."

Friday swallowed audibly as she dropped her machineguns and raised her wings above her head. "I knew we should have waited for the concussions to wear off. This sounded like far too good of a plan."
"You two are really stupid," Luffy deadpanned, albeit with a hint of an edge to his voice. "Hey, Sanji, can you cook them?"

Sanji took a drag from his freshly lit cigarette and eyed the assassins menacingly. "In all honesty? I doubt it. Not a lot of appetizing recipes that involve otter and vulture…" He took an extra-deep drag, allowing the flame to highlight his face in shadow. "Meaning that we won't be wasting any food by wasting these two and tossing their bodies into the ocean."

"Oh, please, allow me," Boss said with a smug grin, cracking his neck in preparation. "Now, it doesn't matter why, but I am friends with some Bananagators."

*That* snapped me out of my shock and allowed me to shoot a glare at Boss. "Cool your jets, Carville, there's no need to go *that* far."

The Dugong shot me a skeptical look. "You sure, Cross?"

I leveled my eyes at the two assassin-animals. They stared back in equal parts hatred and fear. I thought things over for a second and then… I turned my back on them. I turned my back on them and waved my hand in what I *knew* was a clear show of dismissal. "A couple of bastards that can't let go of a grudge? Just tie them up and toss them on the tracks so that they can walk back to Water 7. If it's my say in the matter you want, my opinion hasn't changed: they're not worth killing."

I kept my back turned to them even as the sounds of a brawl suddenly rang out, rodential squeaking and avian squawking echoing around the room until finally they were overpowered by the sound of the car door slamming shut.

I nodded decisively before turning back to the rest of the group, unwilling to waste any more thought on the pests. "Alright, with *that* out of the way, Soundbite, call the others in. It's time to get to planning our assault."

In short order, the crew, the Franky Family, and Galley-La were surrounding me as I sat on a seat and got my thoughts in order.

"Alright, first off, descriptions of CP9. Starting with the section chief, Spandam."

I looked up, pure hatred in my eyes, and everyone flinched back. "As we discussed back on Water 7, Franky has a past with him, and he didn't get all of his anger out for what he did to Tom. So, he'll need to stay alive until Franky has his revenge, and most likely Robin too while we're at it. But after that… unless I find a way to make it so he'd prefer death, unlike the pests from earlier, you have a green card to make sure and utterly *certain* that he doesn't make it out of Enies Lobby alive."

Several of my crewmates were facing me with disturbed expressions, as were the few outside of the crew. My next words wiped that away. "He framed Tom's Workers to force Tom into accepting the punishment for building the Oro Jackson, solely for the purpose of advancing his career. And he's going to be *torturing* Robin in every imaginable way from the moment she gets to his office, solely for *amusement*. That's two examples, and the rest of what I know about him aren't any better.

Anybody still feeling generous?"

And *that* was the end of their reservations.

"Didn't think so. Physically, he's nothing; the only weapon he has besides his authority is a sword that ate the Elephant-Elephant Fruit. And an elephant, bladed trunk or not, shouldn't be a problem for any of you."
Everyone nodded, fury blazing in all of their expressions, and I shook my head as I focused on what came next.

"As for the actual assassins… Luffy, you'll be fighting Lucci. You can handle most of it yourself, but I need to warn you about one thing." Luffy's eyes narrowed in discontent, but he nodded, and I continued. "The fighting style may be called the Six Powers, but for true masters of it like Lucci, there's a seventh technique called the Six King Gun. It takes a ton of energy to use, and it only works at point-blank distance, but its effect is about the same as using a Reject Dial." I held my arms in front of me, fists clenched and turned to the sides, like holding a steering wheel. "If you see Lucci take this pose, steer the hell clear. He'll only use it as a last resort, but it'll hurt you a lot more than it'll hurt him."

Luffy nodded in grim acceptance, and I turned my gaze to our first mate.

"Now, moving on to the second strongest. Zoro, Kaku considers himself a user of the Four Sword Style; he wields two swords and is a master of the Tempest Kick technique. Besides that, he should have received the Ox-Ox Fruit, Model: Giraffe from Spandam. He may look silly for it, but it's made him a lot more powerful and given him a lot more reach, so be careful."

"A giraffe," Zoro replied flatly.

I snapped a finger up. "Consider: Tempest Kick works by sending out a gust of air from a fast-moving limb. Giraffes are known for what prominent feature?"

Zoro cocked an eyebrow. "Long ne…” He trailed off before nodding firmly. "Got it."

"Right." I moved on to our cook. "Sanji, the next strongest is Jabra, a wolf Zoan. His specialty is the Iron Body technique; you'll need Diable Jambe to even hurt him. Besides that, just don't let your guard down and you should be able to crush him without that much trouble." Sanji nodded in confirmation, and I considered what to say next.

"Blueno is next. In the story, Luffy wiped the floor with him as soon as he started using Gear Second. Really, the most threatening thing about him is his Door-Door Fruit, especially the fact that he can make doors out of the—"

I trailed off with a pained gurgle as a horrifying thought hit me.

"What is it, Cross?" Zoro asked sternly.

"…The air. Blueno can make doors out of the air to another dimension where he can see everything that happens on this side. The only way in and out is his powers… that's why Luffy took him out first. If Blueno takes Robin into the Air Door, there's literally nothing we'll be able to do to save her before she gets to the Gates of Justice and out of our reach."

"Alright, priority one is taking him out, before anything else."

"What is it, Cross?" Zoro asked sternly.

"…The air. Blueno can make doors out of the air to another dimension where he can see everything that happens on this side. The only way in and out is his powers… that's why Luffy took him out first. If Blueno takes Robin into the Air Door, there's literally nothing we'll be able to do to save her before she gets to the Gates of Justice and out of our reach."

I shook my head as I tried to get my head back on track before turning to Chopper. "The next strongest is Kumadori. Big guy, long pink hair, and a master of Life Return, otherwise known as Bio-Feedback. He's also so hammy he might as well be cured, so if you praise him, you may be able to get some secrets out of him before the fight revs up."

"Oooooh, I like the sound of that," Chopper's eyes shone as he grinned eagerly.

"Don't get too eager there, Heterodyne-lite," I warned with a rap of my fist on his forehead. "The
guy gets away with acting like an idiot because he gets his job done, and his job is killing people. If you give him an inch once you start fighting, you won't get back the mile he'll take. Put it this way: the way I saw things, you were only able to beat him by resorting to 'that'. And that would be potentially deadly for all of us right now. BUT!" I stuck a finger up when Chopper paled in horror. "If there's legitimately no other choice, if he is guaranteed to kill you if you don't..." I smiled and gave him a thumbs up. "Do it. Do it without a moment's hesitation or worry, knowing that we will take 'that' down, no matter how it's evolved, and that we will not let it harm anyone. Alright?"

Chopper swallowed before nodding firmly and began rifling through his arsenal of test tubes. I looked upwards again in thought. "The last one that wasn't on Water 7 is Fukuro. He'll stick out like a sore thumb: round body and a zipper over his mouth. His specialty is the Shave technique. Franky will probably end up fighting him, but he's a gloating S.O.B., so with any luck we'll be able to take him down ahead of time, in which case it'll be all the better for us."

I turned towards Nami. "Kalifa is the weakest of them, and she'll probably be using her new Bubble-Bubble Fruit powers to fight. Quick notes version for strategy: don't let the bubbles touch you, don't let her touch you, use water to counter, and as soon as her guard is down, electrocute her. She can use her new powers to guard against lightning if given the chance."

Nami nodded confidently, and I looked at the Galley-La foremen and Zambai. "You guys will be responsible for taking out the small fry. Sodom and Gomorrah can plow through most of them, but there are a few things to be wary of. A group of fifty soldiers who ride on wolves and have knives on their forearms; the Just Eleven Jurymen, eleven huge men who swing around steel balls and chains as big as they are; and Judge Baskerville, three people in one costume who swing a giant sword. Oh, and watch out for the mortar cannons, too."

The four of them nodded grimly.

"But!" I snapped a finger up. "All of them are your second priority; the first is reaching the courthouse at the end of the island. There are two towers on the sides of the courthouse, and there are switches at the top of each tower guarded by the Jurymen. If you pull both switches, a drawbridge will lower from the courthouse to the Tower of Justice. Priority one is lowering the bridge and keeping Baskerville or anyone else from stopping it."

"Got it. So, what's the plan for going in?" Zambai asked.

"Right!" I clapped my hands together firmly. "First things first! Luffy!"

"Yeah?" Luffy perked up promptly.

"As soon as we reach Enies Lobby, you're to charge ahead and crush all resistance as you head for the tallest tower at the far end of the place. That's where they're keeping Robin. Take out as many as you can, stay alive, and above all else?" I grinned eagerly. "Have fun!"

"Right!" Luffy nodded with an oblivious smile.

"WHAT?!" chorused most everyone else in the car.

"Oh!" I snapped my fingers as a thought hit me. "But do me a favor and leave the ones at the second gates conscious, alright? I want them awake for what I've got planned for them."

"Shishishi! Got it, Cross!" Luffy snickered.

I then held up an arm to block the dope slap that Nami aimed at me.
"Do you think that Luffy would be able to wait five minutes to hear our plan?" I deadpanned before cocking my head to the side. "No, more plainly: do you honestly think he would follow a plan at all?"

The indignant reactions from my crew promptly snapped into resignation.

"Didn't think so. Rule one of planning tactics around the Straw Hat Pirates: you don't try to get Luffy to follow the plan. You try and plan around Luffy," I explained.

"Fine, fine, I can't argue with that," Nami grumbled despondently.

"Now, besides that," I said, pointing at the leaders of our allied factions. "The Franky Family, Galley-La Foremen, Usopp and I—!

"EH!?"

I gave our sniper a flat look. "You're a sniper, they have snipers. Your job is to keep me from getting a new hole in my head, capiche?"

I took his panicked gibbering as a yes.

"Anyway, we'll all head ashore first on Sodom and Gomorrah, and everyone else will wait five minutes for us to clear a landing zone for the rest of us to arrive in. I'll give further instructions as they become necessary."

Everyone started to nod before freezing in realization. "Landing zone?" they all echoed with varying degrees of terror and excitement.

The only answer I deigned to share was a demented grin.

"Ah... I'm sorry, but..." Conis raised her hand hesitantly. "What was that about leaving the ones at the second gate conscious?"

I grinned menacingly as I contemplated what was to come. "Suffice to say... I have something special planned for them. But!" I clapped my hands, causing everyone to jump. "That's for then. For now, everyone go ahead and relax and get ready." My mood darkened significantly. "We're heading into the hardest fight of our lives to date." With that, I moved to a lonesome section of the car, leaving the rest of my crewmates and allies to ponder what was to come.

"So, Soundbite, will you be able to make the call now?" I asked.

"OF COURSE! But what are you—?"

"Wait for it, you wouldn't want me to spoil the surprise. But in the meantime..." I eyed Soundbite curiously. "How can you make that call? I thought you said that the Transceiver was an all-or-nothing amplification?"

"Ah," Soundbite, well, 'ah'd' in understanding. "Well, that's how IT WORKED AT FIRST, but I WORKED OUT HOW TO get around it back when we were FLOATING DOWN FROM SKYPIEA. It's nowehere near easy, but I CAN PIGGYBACK OFF of the signal to make calls solo LIKE ANY OTHER ADULT SNAIL." He smirked confidently. "AND I learned something else while I was at it. LEMME SEE THE idiot box!"

I gave him a curious look before conceding and drawing the transceiver from its bag, holding it up for him to see.
"See that red knob, far left end?" Soundbite gestured his eyestalk at the control in question.

"Yeah? What about it?"

"TURN THAT THING CLOCKWISE AND THE BOX WILL EMIT A DEAD ZONE!"

I snapped a shocked look at Soundbite. "Wha—you mean that this hunk a' junk will block Transponder Snails?"

My hopes were dashed as Soundbite clicked his tongue and shook his head "You only wish. NO, THE DEAD ZONE doesn't block all snails. BUT!" He promptly regained his cocky attitude. "IT DOES BLOCK SNAILS from hearing the SBS!"

Now I was really shocked. "Seriously?!"

"WHY DO YOU THINK Pinkie and the Brain haven't been receiving it SINCE Conis joined? Ya know…" He grinned impishly. "AFTER you fiddled around WITH THAT THINGAMAJIG?"

I whistled in awe. "Hot damn… that's… wow…"

"EEYUP!" Soundbite cheered. "RIGHT NOW, IT'S ONLY SET to a few meters wide, but the max IS ABOUT TEN MILES! Enough to cover a whole island!"

I let out a low whistle as I considered the potential of that. Then I blinked in realization. "Wait a second, how do you even know all of that?" I asked incredulously.

"WELL, first, the thing was literally BUILT FOR ME! ALL I HAD TO DO WAS PAY MORE ATTENTION, and I could tell more ABOUT THE FUNCTIONS," Soundbite crowed, before sobering up. "But MOST OF IT…" He sent a hesitant glance at the box. "I JUST… LISTENED to it," the gastropod grimaced. "And it's NOT A SIMPLE VOICE."

I winced and patted his shell sympathetically before grinning as I considered the implications. "Well, however you did it, nice going. With this, we can broadcast the SBS in live combat without worrying about the enemy hearing what we're saying." My grin became downright vicious. "Which means that we can still take Spandam by surprise. I wish I could see the look on his stupid face, but I'm pretty sure that this," I tapped my finger on the box. "Will be a close second."

"Eheheheh!" Soundbite chuckled ecstatically. "Sounds FUUUN!"

"Ooooh, it should be," I nodded in agreement. "Now, all we need to do is—!"

"HEEEY! I CAN SEE IT! ENIES LOBBY, DEAD AHEAD!"

I glanced upwards at where the call had come from before standing up. "—get nice and amped. EVERYONE LISTEN UP!"

All noise in the car died as my crewmates looked at me.

"I wanna clarify something for you all before we arrive. I want to make it perfectly clear just how these bastards are manipulating Robin." I paced to the front of the car as I slowly moved my gaze across everyone. "As it stands, it would be safe to assume that the World Government threatened to use the Buster Call on her to make her compliant." I narrowed my eyes menacingly. "That would be false. They did not aim the Call at her. Rather, they aimed it at all of us. They threatened to obliterate us in the most horrific way Robin knew unless she cooperated. Do you understand the implications
of what I'm saying? Allow me to clarify."

I held up a finger pistol to my own temple. "They held us hostage. They put a gun to our heads that only Robin could see and threatened to blow our brains out. They played on not only her insecurities, but also her bond to us to make her obey them. In the simplest possible terms…" I scowled furiously. "They used us. Used our friendship, used our trust, as a means of hurting Robin. They took something sacred and they twisted it into a weapon."

My crewmates were stock still in their seats, emotion blazing in their eyes and weapons and fists clenched. It was Zoro who broke the silence by standing up, his face hard as the steel in his swords. "You don't need to amp us up, Cross," he growled. "We all know what those bastards did, and we're more than pissed off enough for this."

Glancing over the rest of the crew, I saw the same look in their eyes, prompting me to grin viciously. They really didn't need me to fire them up, did they?

But hell…

I slammed my fist into my palm as my grin became downright demonic.

Damn if it didn't feel damn good.

"Alright, in that case, who wants to raze some land and salt some earth?"

The resounding cheers that shook the car were answer enough.

"Well, that was fun!" Soundbite cackled. "Now, let's GET OUR GRR FACES ON!"

-0-

"So, Zambai, you ready for this?" I asked with a grin to match his own as I watched Luffy disappear over the top of the Main Gate.

"You better believe it!" Franky's right hand roared, pumping his fist before giving me a once-over. "Looks like you're ready for war too."

I grinned confidently as I thumbed the collar of the new jacket I was wearing. Credit to Vivi, she'd definitely done a good job of choosing the clothes needed to make me look like a badass.

Besides my headphones and cap, I was clad in a hooded brown leather jacket decorated with a multitude of silver clockwork gears cracking and shattering as they ground against one another, visible even past the harness Lassoo was resting in. Beneath that, I had on a black t-shirt that had a bright yellow biohazard symbol practically spray-painted over the chest, with the word 'TOXIC' etched above it in the same color. And to cap it all off, some good ol' fashioned cargo pants. Why mess with what worked, right?

"You're damn right I am," I chuckled. "This… This is going to be something."

"Heheh, yeah!" Soundbite snickered before glancing behind the both of us. "Although, it looks like NOT EVERYONE IS QUITE SO COOL. SERIOUSLY DUDE, a cape?"

"S-S-HUT UP, YOU LITTLE PEST!" Usopp yelped fearfully as he pointed a quivering finger at my shoulder. "I-I'M ABOUT T-T-TWO STEPS AWAY FROM PISSING MY PANTS, S-S-SO JUST GIVE ME THIS, D-DAMN IT!"
"Ah, cheer up, Usopp, it's not so bad!"

The sniper jumped slightly in surprise before glancing down at Mikey.

The Dugongs as a whole had decided to upgrade their wardrobes a bit. The Squad had all adopted flak jackets like Boss had found back on Water 7, along with adding their own personal touches. Mikey had a pair of ammo-laden bandoliers crossed over his chest, Raphey had tied a bandanna with a mouthful of fangs over her mouth, Donney had strapped on a pair of bottle-lensed goggles, and Leo… well.

Initially Leo hadn't put on anything all that special, but he'd been halfway through re-tying his headband when Zoro and Boss had exchanged a look. Zoro had then proceeded to yank the Dugong's headband off before he could react and toss the blue fabric to Boss, who then unfolded the bandanna to its full length and tied the entire thing around Leo's skull.

It had taken the swordsman a few seconds to process what had happened, at which point he nodded in grateful acceptance.

Finally, Boss had simply chosen to don a dark-green boxing headpiece he'd pulled from somewhere, over which he'd tied his headband.

It took Usopp a second to muster his nerve, at which point he gave the orange-wearing Dugong a hesitant grin. "Y-Y-You really think so?"

"Totally!" Mikey popped an enthusiastic thumbs-up. "I mean, we're about to march right into the belly of the beast! This is going to be a bloody edge-of-the-scythe battle of the decade! There's gonna be every single chance of us dying at every single second! There won't be a point where this won't be aweso—GRK!"

"THAT'S NOT HELPING, DAMN IT!" Usopp shouted in the Dugong's face as he shook him back and forth by his collar.

"Usopp, calm down!"

Luckily, our negotiator was quick to grab his shoulder.

Vivi'd gone for a rather impressive outfit that was a combination of practically flexible and fashionable. She was wearing a white halter top that had a lotus-and-vine design sewn into it in light blue thread, as well as a pair of similarly colored and styled arm warmers that started just above her elbows and ended a few inches below her wrists, partially hiding her hands. Below the waist, she had on a pair of denim shorts that stopped mid-thigh, as well as a frill-edged blue-colored white-detailed sarong that was angled in such a manner that her left leg was hidden.

"They're half trying to psyche you up, half legitimately excited for the coming fight," Vivi soothed him. "And besides, you're going to shore with almost sixty battle-ready guys at your back, I'm sure you'll be fine!"

"Psh, yeah, sixshty against sheveral shousand…" Carue snickered as he tilted down the knight-style visor he'd affixed to his hat.

"Oh, God…"

"Not helping!" Vivi slapped the back of her snickering duck's head with a sigh. "Alright, can someone please back me up here? I think I might be losing him."
"Let me try!" Conis eagerly said. She was wearing the same style she'd had on at Water 7, but she'd swapped out her color palate in favor of a light-toned urban-camo long-coat over her white turtleneck and donned a pair of light gray combat pants.

The angel was quick to give Usopp a comforting one-armed hug. "You just need to trust in us, Usopp! We'll have your back every step of the way!"

"And besides!" Su crooned from her partner's shoulder. "Look at it this way!" She slapped her tail against the exhaust pipe of Conis' bazooka. "None of them will be toting a Boom Beach Heavy Industries Burn Bazooka! Or—" She swiped her tail over to Conis' rifles. "A pair of ENTAC high-calibre combat rifles! Or!" She zipped to Conis' waist and tapped her paw on Conis' holster. "Four, count 'em, four Brown & Boehringer large-bore pistols!" Su cocked her head in a teasing manner. "Trust me, however many weapons those guys have got, they are categorically outgunned."

"Not to mention the fact that we've got Sodom and Gomorrah on our side," Kiwi piped up. "Bullets are like bug bites to them."

Usopp's trembling grew weaker, though it didn't subside. "$\ldots$ Yeah, you have a point there."

"That's the spirit!" I said jovially, clapping Usopp on the back. "Now, come on, let's make these guys wish they never heard the name 'Straw Hat Pirates.'"

And so it went, most the Franky Family charging through the few guards at the main gate that Luffy hadn't annihilated while the rest of us performed the laborious task of getting Sodom and Gomorrah mounted on treads.

The yellow King Bull Sodom glanced at his brother. "It's five miles to the Tower of Justice, we got bellies full of fish, a trailer full a' fighters, it's day in the middle of the night, and we're wearing goggles," he summarized blandly.

Gomorrah snorted. "Hit it!"

I gave a cackling Soundbite a flat glare as the bulls steamed for shore. "There was never a chance of us leaving these waters without you quoting those two and using their voices, was there?"

"NOT A ONE!"

Lunacy aside, we arrived at the Judicial Island's front door in short order and made our way past the crowd of Marines and Agents that our one-man vanguard of a captain had kindly downed for us. Once the Destroyers blew the doors off their hinges, we strode through... and took a moment to pause and take in the sights before us.

The fact that the island was lit up like it was high noon at midnight had been an incredible enough sight already, sure, but the island itself...

Damn, where to even begin...

Anywhere was viable, really.

The Gates of Justice, which had apparently been designed to emulate the Red Line and Laguna with how they formed a horizon of metal and ensured that none could possibly mistake the global symbol for pure, unflinching order emblazoned upon them.

The falls all around us, which swallowed the ocean uncountable tons at a time and roared and howled with such intensity that not even the blind could forget their presence, seeing as the noise
went so far as to shake the innards of everyone even remotely nearby.

Even the island itself, hanging over the gaping abyss below, unwavering and unmoving in spite of the veritable city built upon its back, standing as a testament made material to the sheer, unflinching power of the Justice of the Marines.

It was just a pity that we'd be the last ones to ever appreciate it.

Sodom and Gomorrah charged forward, meeting no opposition, up until the soldiers of the main island gate came into view, at which point I stopped and snapped my fist up. I could feel several incredulous looks snap to stare at the back of my head, but regardless, Sodom and Gomorrah slowed to a stop.

I nodded gratefully and moved to dismount. "Usopp, you're with me."

The sniper whimpered as I slid off the King Bull, slowly following me. I then stepped forward in front of them, Usopp behind me, and waited. After a minute, the Marines began moving closer, two soldiers stepping to the front lines and coming to a stop directly in front of me.

"You are trespassing on Government property. Identify yourselves and state your business," one of them said, though his tone clearly stated that us being here meant we were in deep shit already.

I grinned pleasantly as I sucked in a slight breath. "Hello there, my name is Jeremiah Cross. I am the third mate, tactician, and public relations officer of the Straw Hat Pirates, as well as one of the two co-communications officers and co-hosts of the Straw Hat Broadcasting Station. Maybe you've heard of me?" I took a lot of pleasure in the way the soldiers tensed up. "With me are Soundbite, my co-officer and co-host—"

"HOLLA!" the snail in question sang.

"Our sniper, Usopp—"

The long-nose swallowed audibly.

"And a small host various friends and allies who shall remain anonymous. As for our business, it's a matter of theft." I widened my smile slightly. "See, you—that is to say, the World Government—stole our archaeologist, Nico Robin from us. As such, we are here to retrieve her. In pursuit of this goal, we intend to invade the Judicial Island of Enies Lobby, defeat the Cipher Pol No. 9 Agents garrisoned within the Tower of Justice, including the famed soldier of Dark Justice Rob Lucci, raze the island to the ground in a hail of hellfire, and then be on our merry way."

I kept my smile in place as I paused, soaking in the awkward silence as everyone present gaped at me in both awe and horror.

"Ah!" I suddenly snapped my finger up. "But before all of that, I'm going to zap... you!" I jabbed my finger at the soldier on the left. "With lightning," I finished in a calm and utterly honest tone of voice.

For a moment, there was silence.

Then the soldiers started to laugh.

Then I started to laugh.

Then Usopp started to laugh, albeit nervously.
Then I dropped my baton into my hand and snapped it out to its full length before ramming it in the gut of one of the Marines and pressing the button my thumb had been hovering over, discharging a few thousand volts into the man.

Everyone stopped laughing after that.

Specifically, the soldier who was still standing cursed and fumbled desperately with the polearm he was carrying, so I spun around and rammed my fist into his stomach, causing him to double over and breathlessly dry-heave.

By this point, the Marine I'd zapped had had time to marginally recover and was starting to get his wits about him, so I grabbed the back of his head and rammed him into a knee that I brought up, which resulted in him stumbling back with an agonized howl as he clutched his thoroughly shattered nose.

I then turned to the non-zapped soldier as his breathing started evening out, took aim and dropped an armored and very heavy elbow on his exposed upper back, laying him out flat.

Meanwhile, the soldier I'd tazed and kneed had stumbled back towards me and was slouched over just enough for me to grab the sides of his hat—

**CRUNCH!** "Grhgrgh…"

—and ram my forehead into his already-demolished nose, which resulted in the soldier collapsing into blissful unconsciousness.

Finally, I turned back to the prone marine, who was only just starting to crawl to his hands and knees, and stuck my hand below his face, which resulted in him tensing up in anticipatory terror.

"Impact," I drawled before flexing my palm.

The resulting blast of kinetic energy smashed the soldier's face in and flipped him onto his back, his pained gurgles making it clear that he was well and truly down for the count.

I took a second to pause and roll my shoulders in preparation before shooting a deathly glare at the rest of the Marines who were still standing paralyzed at the Island Gates. "You Government *bitches* had better go and get the best you got," I called out to them. "Because the next person who comes out here?"

I reached my left arm over my shoulder and pulled Lassoo into position, cocking him menacingly.

"I'm going to do my best to send them back *in a bodybag*."

The Marines stood frozen for a scant second before scrambling around amongst themselves. Ultimately, one of them was booted from the pack and sent running back into the gatehouse, where Soundbite didn't even have to lift an eyestalk for us to hear several distinct yells of "OIMO!" and "KASHI!"

I grinned impishly as I slid Lassoo back onto my back. "Worked like a charm."

Soundbite whistled in awe. "Hot damn, HOTSHOT!"

Usopp, to his credit, wasn't trembling quite so much as I'd have expected, though he was gibbering uncontrollably. "Bu-Bu-Bu—!? But they—!? But you—!? But h-*how*—!?"
I gave our sniper an amused look. "How? Three easy steps. The two halves of number one—" I spun my baton in my hand and rapped my armored knuckles against my forehead, producing a metallic clang in the process. "You made! Love the lightning-stick, even if it does give me some minor flashbacks, and as Luffy has repeatedly demonstrated, you can never have too hard a head! The armor-plating and padding you sewed in is just icing! Number two, Zoro's training." I shuddered in horror. "'Nuff said. And as for number three, well..." I shrugged indifferently. "Never underestimate the element of surprise. Simple as that!"

Usopp eyed me warily before shrugging and looking forward. "Alright, then. In that case, w-why did you need me here?" He glanced at me out of the corner of my eye. "And why did you ask for their strongest, anyway?"

I waited a second, before grinning as I felt the ground begin to shake beneath our feet. "Oh, that's easy. I wanted you here and I called them out because there's something of a... personal connection between the three of you."

Usopp opened his mouth to speak... and kept widening it in horror as a pair of massive shadows fell over us.

I tilted my head at him with a curious expression. "You still like giants, right?"

The shrill wheeze/shriek crawling out of Usopp's mouth was answer enough.

I very casually looked up at the two very different but nonetheless very imposing giants that were towering over us, one muscular and wielding an axe while the other was stout and brandishing a club. Both were grinning down at us in obvious menace.

"Jeremiah Cross and the Straw Hats, huh?" Kashi huffed as he scratched the back of his head with a weary expression. "Well, that's a real shame. You guys're the funniest distraction we've had since we started working here." He shrugged indifferently. "But oh well."

"Yeh, it's too bad," Oimo said, stretching his jaws in a bone-cracking yawn. "But hey, work's work. Now c'mon." He unslung his club and let it slam into the bridge, causing more than a few stones to shake loose from the edges. "Let's get this over with so that we can get back ta' sleep."

The two started to step forward...

"WAAAAAIT!"

Before pausing when I raised my voice, an endeavor which Soundbite gladly aided in.

I took a second to huff and get my voice back before continuing at a more sedate—if still amplified—tone of voice. "Before we jump into the fighting and the squashing and all that..." I spread my arms invitingly. "Do you mind if we spare a second to just sit down and talk?"

The giants blinked dully as they glanced at one another before leaning down and eyeballing me.

"Huuuuuuuh?" Kashi droned in a disbelieving tone. "And why would we do that?"

"Yeah," Oimo snorted. "You guys're trying to pass the gate, and it's our job to stop you! We don't have any reason 'ta talk!"

"Crooooss..." Usopp hissed out of the corner of his mouth.

I ignored him in favor of spreading my hands in a clear show of innocence. "But, sirs! We haven't
tried to enter the gate yet!"

_That_ got a lot of people to blink at me in surprise.

"Huh?" the giants chorused.

"Well, I mean, I took down some gate guards, sure." I toed one of my downed opponents, causing him to flop bonelessly over. "But my friends and I haven't even made a single move towards your gate yet. So! We're technically not enemies. So whaddaya say, huh?" I sank down to the ground and tapped what scant grass there was in invitation. "Why not sit down and talk a bit? Just... to kill some time! Come on, pirate to pirate!"

_That_ got Oimo to blink in surprise. "Heeey, how'd you know that we're pirates?"

"Three kinds of Giants leave Elbaf: slaves, Marines or pirates. You're not in uniforms or chains, so there's only one option. And you still haven't answered my question!"

While the giant guards glanced thoughtfully at one another, I snapped my fingers in front of Soundbite and pointed at the Marines still milling about the Island Gate, prompting him to tune them out even as one of them got it into his head to start yelling up at Oimo and Kashi.

Ultimately, the pair grinned and nodded.

"Alright!" "Sounds like fun!"

And with that, the two sank into cross-legged sitting positions, leaning forwards in ill-concealed eagerness.

"So, whaddaya wanna talk about?" Kashi asked eagerly.

"Hm..." I tapped my chin in exaggerated thoughtfulness before snapping my fingers. "Ah, I know, maybe you can answer a question! See, I find myself to be quite curious: what are a pair of Giant pirates, the most honorable pirates on all the Grand Line, if not the world, doing guarding the gates to the World Government's front step?"

Just like that, the pair's expressions darkened. "Ya never pull your punches, do you..." Oimo muttered as he scratched the back of his head before sighing heavily. "Well, I guess it couldn't hurt to tell you. Kashi and I used to be pirates 100 years ago. We were the strongest crew around, nobody could ever stand up to us... up until that fateful day, when we visited a certain island. Our co-captains got into an argument, and they got into an honor duel, which would have been fine..."

"But neither of them could win!" Kashi flung his hands up in frustration. "They just kept fighting and fighting, and Elbaf's word clearly says that so long as both don't back down, the duel only ends when there's a victor! Their honor would be destroyed if they stopped the duel otherwise."

"Of course, of course," I nodded understandingly, even as I noticed Usopp starting to blink in realization. "I understand completely. Honor is a serious matter for the giants of Elbaf, neither could back down while theirs was still threatened."

"Exactly!" Kashi jabbed his finger at me. "And because it was a duel of honor, none of us, their crewmates, could interfere! The only thing we could do was take our captains to an island where no one would interfere and return home to Elbaf while we waited for them to finish fighting! And we did wait!" Kashi then trailed off and hunched forward with a sigh, balancing his chin on his fists. "For fifty years..."
"But neither of them ever came…" Oimo picked up in a sorrowful tone. "Kashi and I got worried, so we backtracked along the Grand Line to try and reach the island where they were, so that we could check up on them!" He snarled and cast a rueful glare at the still-muted Marines behind him, causing them to flinch back. "But on the way, we got captured by Marines."

Kashi ground his teeth as he gripped his helmet and ground it into his scalp. "Then these bastards told us the truth! The reason why our bosses were late was that they'd been captured! The Government caught them in the middle of their duel and tossed them in Impel Down so that they'd rot!"

"We were desperate…" Oimo moaned. "We said we'd do anything if they'd let our bosses go, so the Government made a deal with us: if we defended the gates of Enies Lobby for a hundred years, then they'd let our bosses go and we could all go home! Since giants live to be 300 or so, we didn't think it was a bad deal, so we accepted."

"It's been fifty years since that day…" Kashi stared upwards wistfully. "We're halfway there, but there's a catch: if we get beaten even once, then we need to start over, and our bosses will be long past their prime when they get out if that happens. Either we make it all the way… or bust."

"There've been some fun times, sure, plenty of good fights…" Oimo admitted. "But still… doesn't change the fact that it's been fifty years since we've been proper pirates. And a hundred since we saw our bosses."

A hand landed on my shoulder all of a sudden, and I turned my head to observe Usopp as his expression combined both an apoplectic flush and a ghastly pale. "Yeeesss?" I crooned.

"Are they saying… what I think they're saying?" Usopp ground out.

I jerked my head at the giants. "Why don't you find out for yourself?"

Usopp visibly balked for a second as he stared at the mornful titans… but it was only for a second, after which he steeled his gaze and back and strode forwards. "He—!" His voice croaked for a bit, but it firmed up once Soundbite amped it. "HEY! You two! Your captains, were they named Dorry and Broggy?"

Everyone opposite us jumped, giants and Marines alike, though their motivations were different. The giants did so in shock, while the Marines… they did so in bowel-dropping terror.

One of them tried to snap open a compartment in his gauntlet to talk to a baby snail hidden within, but Usopp responded by snapping his hand to his side before reconsidering and shooting it to his back. In less than a second, he unfolded Kabuto, drew, took aim, fired, and pegged the bastard between the eyes, dropping him like a sack of potatoes. Going by how the rest of the Marines snapped their hands up, where we could see them, nobody felt particularly lucky.

Meanwhile, Oimo recovered and blinked at Usopp in confusion. "H-How did you—?"

"And the island you and your crew left them to duel on!" Usopp forged on. "That was the prehistoric island of Little Garden, right!?"

"Eh!?" Kashi slowly clambered to his feet along with his companion as he stared down at Usopp. "How could you know that!?"

"How could we not know? Before we came here, my crew met those bosses of yours, and we saw them fighting their duel! The great warriors of Elbaf fighting the same duel, over and over again, for the last hundred years!" Usopp boldly proclaimed, all traces of fear now long gone.
Oimo and Kashi fell on all fours, their eyes close enough to us that we could see our reflections in
them. "WHAT!" they bellowed in a furious synchronization. "ARE YOU SERIOUS!? IF
YOU'RE LYING, WE'LL CRUSH YOU LIKE ANTS!"

"I'M NOT LYING!" Usopp shouted back at the top of his lungs, and on his own at that. "I'M
TELLING THE TRUTH! ASK ME WHATEVER YOU WANT ABOUT THEM! ABOUT
THEIR WEAPONS, ABOUT HOW THEY FOUGHT, ABOUT HOW THEY LOOKED, HOW
THEY LAUGHED, ALL OF IT! I'LL ANSWER IT ALL! NO MATTER WHAT YOU ASK,
IT'S THE TRUTH! I WOULD NEVER LIE ABOUT THIS! THOSE TWO…"

Usopp bowed his head for a moment before snapping his gaze up, determination blazing in his eyes.
"I SAW THEM AS MY TEACHERS, MY MASTERS! THEY TAUGHT ME WHAT IT WAS
TO BE A WARRIOR OF THE SEAS, TO BE SOMETHING I ONLY EVER DREAMED OFF
BEING! I SWORE TO BECOME A GREAT MAN OF PRIDE LIKE THEM ONE DAY! YOU
DON'T BELIEVE ME WHEN I TELL YOU THIS?! IT'S A FACT, AND I'LL SAY IT AS
MANY TIMES AS IT TAKES! WE MET THEM! THEY WEREN'T CAPTURED FIFTY
YEARS AGO! THAT'S NOTHING BUT A BIG, FAT, LIIIIIEEEEE!"

"AND I CAN PROVE IT!" I bellowed in agreement as Usopp took a moment to pant and wheeze
desperately before dropping my volume and letting Soundbite take up the slack, though I indicated
that he keep it between the four of us and only us. "On our way here, I got in contact with a friend of
mine called Pisces, who I asked to call a friend of hers called Capricorn, who got me the number of
another friend of mine I call Rooster, who let me speak to a friend of his called… let's go with April
—!"

"CALLBACK!"

"Shut it! But anyway, April got me the number for the Transponder Snail of a friend of hers
called, eh… Candle." I snapped my fingers before Soundbite with a grin. "Let's give them a ring, shall we?"

Soundbite smirked as he narrowed his eyes and opened his mouth. "Puru puru puru puru! Puru
puru puru puru puru!" he sang out, letting the dial tone waft across the bridge.

After a few seconds, however, Soundbite clicked his tongue and adopted a—

I blinked in surprise. The hell? I thought I'd called Dorry and Broggy, not Gedatsu.

"HELLO!" a very loud and very fake falsetto voice bellowed out. "WHO IS THIS? THIS IS MISTER
THREE! WHAT DO YOU WANT?"

"Your false accent sucks," Broggy's voice spoke up in a bored tone.

"Seconded," I said in the same tone.

"SCREW THE BOTH OF YOU!" Dorry roared indignantly.

That snapped Oimo and Kashi out of their open-mouthed shock.

"BOSSES!"

"OW!"

As evidenced by the two of them murdering my ears.

"Looood…" I groaned as I dug a finger through my ear.
"Eh?" Dorry blinked in surprise. "Wait, was that Kashi just now?"

"And Oimo too!" Broggy beamed jubilantly. "Hello, boys! Wow, it's been forever since I've heard your voices! How have you been? How's the rest of the crew? How are things on Elbaf?"

The pair's joyous expressions promptly collapsed into sheepishness, and Oimo spoke up first. "The crew… we're sorry, Bosses, but the crew didn't stay together," he admitted shamefacedly. "A bunch went off solo, others settled down, and the rest… well, they went Marine, but that was just 'cause they wanted good fights and the Marines could deliver that without bein' as dangerous as some of the new crews that have popped up! Dangerous crews, strong crews!" He bowed his head sorrowfully. "Kashi and I… we're some of the last diehards…"

Broggy's expression promptly became regretful. "Ah… is that so? Well, I guess I can't blame them. It'd be selfish to think that time would stand still for us. I just hope they're happy."

"And what about you two, huh? How have the years treated you?" Dorry said, clearly trying to lighten the mood. Which only brought Kashi's mood lower. "That's the other thing…" he muttered. "Bosses, we're not calling you from Elbaf. We're calling you from Enies Lobby."

"That" struck the twin captains silent. "What?" Dorry whispered incredulously.

"The… The Marines…" Oimo sniffed tearfully, his voice full of shame and regret. "Th-They said that they'd captured you… that they'd locked you up… so we cut a deal to act as guards for your freedom!"

"We've been here for the last fifty years…" Kashi groaned. "All because we doubted your strength… we're sorry, Bosses, so sorry! We've brought shame to the Giant Warrior Pirates! Shame to Elbaf!"

"Ho-Hold on! O-Oimo, Kashi, just wait a minute! I-It's a trick!"

Soundbite flinched and cast a glare over at the Marines, specifically the one who'd stepped up and was shouting at the top of his lungs. "Sorry, got caught up in the moment, JUST LET ME—!"

"No, no," I stopped him and Usopp with a raised hand, my eyes never leaving the soldier. "Let him speak. I'm… morbidly curious as to how deep a grave he can dig."

The Marine had to pause to catch his breath as he caught up to the Giants, but once he did he jabbed an accusing finger at me. "H-He's lying, he has to be! We really do have Broggy the Red Ogre and Dorry the Blue Ogre in custody! He's just using his snail's powers to trick you into thinking you're speaking with them! I-If you turn on us, then they'll never go free, and you'll join them!"

"YOU DARE—!?" Dorry and Broggy started to roar in synch, but I silence them by clamping my hand down on Soundbite's mouth.

"Now, now," I said soothingly. "Don't be so harsh! After all, he's quite right! That is a possibility! It's well within Soundbite's capabilities to fake the voices of these two's captains! After all, all he needs to do is listen to a person's voice only once to imitate it. Even a single word would do it!"

Oimo and Kashi both stared at me with betrayed and horrified visages, Usopp and Soundbite seemed to be channeling Nami with how hard they were glaring at me, and everyone behind me was shouting at me to, to summarize, 'STOP SCREWING AROUND, DAMN IT!' But honestly, how could I when this was so fun?
"H-Ha! You see? He even admits it!" the soldier crowed, getting his bravado back. "So, hurry up and—!

"Buuuuut!" I cut in smoothly. "I just need you to clarify one iiitty bitty little thing in that case."

The soldier flinched back nervously as he fought to keep his cocky visage up. "O-Oh yeah? What?"

"Well, answer me this," I crooned as I leaned in close, so that my face was inches away from his, so that I could see the terror in his eyes. "Just tell me… when we could have gotten their voices."

Even with the falls around us, you could have heard a pin drop.


"You heard me," I hissed back. I then jerked forwards, causing him to flinch back and fall on his ass, at which point I loomed over him with a demonic grin. "When did I get their voices? When did I slip away from my crew, on my lonesome, infiltrate the impenetrable underwater gaol of Impel Down, locate Red Ogre Broggy and Blue Ogre Dorry, snag samples of their voices, sneak back out, and rejoin my crew?" I leaned over him, doing my best to channel Doflamingo with every word I spoke. "Weeeell, Marine? When?"

The soldier's teeth were outright chattering as he stared at me. "I-I-I—!

I leaned in closer and looked him dead in the eye. "Speak up, Marine."

He was silent for a second before swallowing heavily. "I…" he stated in a quiet voice. "Am going to run away now."

I stood back up with a contented smile. "Yes, why don't you go do that?"

The Marine got to his feet in a cool, calm and collected manner, brushed himself off… and then ran past me like there were demons on his ass.

Soundbite cast a dismissive look at the rest of the Marines still standing by the Gate. "Any other takers?"

Turns out? There were over three dozen. The rest had either fainted or were pulling off an impressive 'terrified goat' routine.

Soundbite rolled his eyes with a scoff as the soldiers ran past us. "The strong and proud my non-existent ass."

"Hey, that's U.S., not W.G., don't sully our good name," I muttered back.

"Impressive, Cross!" Broggy laughed. "And we thought you'd come a long way since we met you before! This new generation never fails to impress! Gabababa—!"

"Quiet, Broggy," Dorry interrupted.

"Hey, what're you—!?"

"Why are the Straw Hat Pirates on Enies Lobby, Cross?" Dorry asked in an even tone.

"—ahbuh!?” Broggy choked in realization.
"Master Dorry, Master Broggy," Usopp spoke up again, his fear dead and buried as it was before. "The World Government threatened our crew, and one of our crewmates sacrificed herself to them in a misguided attempt to save us." He crossed his arms and bowed his head solemnly. "We're going to invade Enies Lobby and get her back, no matter who or what tries to get in our way."

For a second, there was nothing but silence, then…

"Guess there's no other option, is there?" Broggy grunted in a grim tone.

"Not a one," Dorry snorted before raising his voice in a bark. "OIMO! KASHI!"

"SIRS!" the giants snapped out twin salutes, snapping into kneeling positions.

"AS OF THIS INSTANT, THE STRAW HAT PIRATES ARE OFFICIAL ALLIES OF THE GIANT WARRIOR PIRATES!" Dorry bellowed.

"HERE ARE YOUR ORDERS!" Broggy roared. "SUPPORT THE STRAW HATS WITH ALL YOUR MIGHT! HELP THEM RESCUE THEIR COMRADE, AND BURN THAT BLASTED ISLAND TO THE GROUND!"

"DO WE WE MAKE OURSELVES CLEAR, WARRIORS?" they concluded with a united bellow.

"YES, CAPTAINS!" the giants roared as they pumped their fists in the air.

"Glad to hear it," Dorry sneered viciously.

"We'll contact you once all is said and done," Broggy concluded. "Elbaf be with you, Straw Hats."

"And with you, Captains," I nodded respectfully. The instant the connection dropped, I shot a nice and evil grin up at the two giants, who matched it tooth for tooth.

"Now then, boys…" I purred as I patted my bag. "What do you say we start this joint venture of ours… in style?"

-0-

"Don don don don!"

A chorus of tired groans surfaced among the Red-Haired Pirates as the snail began blaring.

"That loud-mouthed brat… it's the middle of the night!" Shanks glowered as he grabbed the speaker and dislodged it. He then fell back onto his back as music began blaring out at the top of the snail's lungs.

"FROM DEEP INSIDE THIS SPREADING DARKNESS, A REVOLUTION I'M STARTING TODAY! AND I CAN'T LET ANYONE INTERFERE WITH WHAT I'LL DO, OR GET IN MY WAAAAAY~!"

The rest of the Red-Haired Pirates promptly became much more awake and much more irritated, though the lyrics of the song grabbed their attention. Finally, a minute or so later, during which the crew began picking up bottles to try to fend off the coming insanity…

"Good choice for music, Soundbite. Now… hello, everyone. Jeremiah Cross here, bringing you a very special edition of the SBS!" The human host's grin suddenly took on a somewhat menacing
overtone. "Which begins right now."

"PFFT!"

And one and all, every single one of the Red-Haired Pirates, Shanks included, spat out their drinks, instantly sober and on their guard.

"He started the SBS. He started the SBS. I'm not the only one who realizes that that is never a good sign, right?" Yasopp asked nervously.

"This is going to be a broadcast to remember..." Benn mused as he fingered the butt of his rifle.

"Heheh, well at least there's a bright side to all of this!" Shanks snickered as he grabbed a new bottle of grog. "I have a good excuse now! Long live the Straw Hat crew, they drive me to drink!" And with that, he knocked his poison back.

"Now, I imagine that you're all probably on the edges of your seats wondering what makes this particular broadcast so special, huh? Well, dear viewers, I'll tell you! We of the Straw Hat Pirates have decided to engage in some good ol' fashioned piracy! And I mean the dictionary definition! Just to see what it feels like and prove that we don't fly the Jolly Roger for shits and giggles. As such..." If Cross's smile was menacing before, it was downright predatory now. "We're about to invade, pillage, and burn an island to the ground. Doesn't that sound like fun?"

"PFFT!"

Only to spit it out immediately afterward.

"SAY WHAT!?" one of the Four Emperors bellowed indignantly.

-S-0-

Sengoku sighed in relief as he leaned back in his chair, casting a thankful eye to the heavens. "So, there actually is a God, huh?" he muttered to himself as he smiled morosely. "Good to know."

The Fleet Admiral started to compose a prayer for those families about to lose their homes in the pursuit of proving, once and for all, that good pirates really were nothing but a myth.

"So, ladies and gentlemen, before I begin explaining exactly why I'm doing this, I'd like you to listen to the following sound, committed by our two newest allies. Ready, Oimo?"

Only for that voice to utter that name, causing him to snap his eyes open in horror. "What."

"Yep!"

"What!"

"And you, Kashi?"

"What!"

"I've been wanting to do this my whole life!"

"WHAT!?"

"Then in that case... do it."
"WHAAAAAT!?" a very large, very golden, very pissed Sengoku roared as he instinctively blew the roof off of Marineford.

"RIGHT!"

SMASH!

But no amount of fury was able to mask or alter the sound of a titanic amount of stone suddenly shattering like little more than glass.

"To those Marines who might have found the names of our two compatriots to be somewhat familiar!" that fucking voice grinned in honest, chaotic amusement. "Allow me to refresh your memories! Those were Oimo and Kashi! Members of the Giant Warrior Pirates who, up until all of three minutes ago, were detrimentally employed by the World Government to act as guards for the GATES OF THE GOVERNMENT'S JUDICIAL ISLAND, ENIES LOBBY!"

"GAUTAMA FUCKING DAMN IT!" Sengoku raged as he planted a brilliant fist in what little of his office wall remained before raising his voice. "SOMEONE GET ME GARP! GET ME TSURU! GET ME AOKIJI! GET ME EVERYONE RIGHT FUCKING NOW!"

"E-Everyone—!?" stammered one of the very few Vice Admirals who hadn't fainted in the initial blast of existential pressure that the Admiral of the Fleets had emitted.

"EEEVERYYYYOOONE!"

"Huh, didn't think he could get that hammy anymore…” Garp muttered around the rice cracker he was munching on as he warily eyed the roof of his office.

Said rice cracker promptly found itself inhaled when a golden hand shot through said roof and grabbed his head.

"GET THE FUCK IN HERE AND PAY FOR THE SINS OF YOUR BLOOD, YOU DAMN BASTARD!"

"Shit," Garp summarized weakly before he was pulled up and out of his office.

-0-

"To reiterate, ladies and gentlemen of the world, that sound you just heard was us breaking down the gates of Enies. Lobby."

"PFFFT!"

"AGH, SERIOUSLY!?"/"THIS IS FUCKING DRYCLEAN YOU ASS!"

Ace ignored the protests of the two captains he'd sprayed his drink over as he stared at the Transponder Snail on the table in naked awe.

"I imagine that many of you must be severely confused about the series of events that led us to this moment, huh? Well, let me back track a bit. See, earlier today, the World Government made the absolutely mon-u-mental mistake of stealing one of our crewmates from us. Said crewmate was none other than our mystery member whose identity we've been obscuring up until now: our archaeologist, Nico Robin."

"WHAT!?" Squard yelped in shock. "The Demon of fucking Ohara!? Christ, does your brother
have a death wish or—!?”

**CRACK!**

"YEOW!" the shark-toothed captain yowled, falling back with an impressive knot on his forehead. "What the hell—?!" he started to get out before freezing as he noticed the rod of metal pointed between his eyes.

"Watch it," Ace scowled viciously as he swayed his pipe back and forth, forcing the captain to trace it with his gaze. "That's my little brother's crewmate you're talking about. And besides that, the whole 'sins of the parent' shit is so stupid that I only expect Marines to be dumb enough to use it. Don't let me catch you being that stupid ever again." Pulling the pipe back a few inches, he lit a flame on the end of it. "Got it?"

Squad swallowed in terror as the foreign will cracked over his mind before nodding dumbly. "Got it…"

"Good," Ace snorted as he put his pipe back down. "Now shut up and listen."

"Now, mind you," Cross continued in a conversational tone. "I'm not going to give an ultimatum. We are…" Cross trailed off into a derisive chuckle. "Oh, we are so far past that. This is a statement of pure fact. An… An example, if you will. We're going to take a leaf out of the pages of the big black book of piracy! Only…"

The tactician scowled viciously. "It's not the edition you were hoping for. We're tearing this straight out of the Four Emperors' personal playbook: you touch one of ours? We fuck you up. This goes beyond a mere rescue mission, this… this is nothing short of a crusade. We are going to pummel the men stationed here. We are going to take back our archaeologist. And besides making the World Government look like the idiots they are in the process? We are going to burn this fucking island TO THE BEDROCK AND CAST IT INTO THE FUCKING ABYSS IT'S HANGING OVER, SENDING IT RIGHT BACK TO WHERE IT FUCKING BELONGS! WHO'S WITH ME!?"

"YEAH!" A chorus of warped and distorted voices cheered at once.

Whitey Bay and Squardo could only gape at the snail in mute awe, but though Ace mirrored their expressions for a moment, a different sort of look came into his eyes very quickly as he got to his feet.

"Set sail for Banaro Island."

The two other captains shot questioning glances his way.

"Ace?" Whitey asked.

"Cross said that Blackbeard would be on Banaro Island the next time Luffy's bounty shot up. If this doesn't make that happen, nothing will." The New World captains shot back when Ace suddenly burst into a bonfire. "It's time for Teach to pay for what he did to Thatch!" The Second Division Commander of the Whitebeard Pirate shot a furious glare at his comrades. **WE SET SAIL NOW!!**

-0-

"Now, rest assured, oh people of the world…" I chuckled into the mic I was clutching. "I won't just leave you all on that. Matter of fact, you're all going to get front row seats to the first act of true justice to occur on this island since it's conception! I can't promise it will be uninterrupted, sadly, but
I'll do my darndest to make this show as constant as possible. Don't touch those dials, listeners..." I rammed the mic back into its cradle, making sure that it was facing outwards and thus didn't hang up. "This is going to be the show of the century."

With that, I strode forward to stand alongside Usopp, Paulie, and Zambai and join them in eyeing the sheer mass of people arrayed before us.

"So," I started. "What're we looking at here?"

"2,513 individual soldiers," Soundbite provided in an analytical tone. "1,708 Marine soldiers, 805 WORLD GOVERNMENT AGENTS." He then gained an impish grin. "Not counting those who are running away, OR THOSE SNIPERS WHOSE EARDRUMS I'VE TAKEN THE LIBERTY OF DEVASTATING."

"Good snail," I chuckled as I petted his shell. "Best friend!" he cackled back as he preened from the attention.

"And on our side, we have two King Bulls, two giants, the fifty-five members of the Franky Family, two of Galley-La's foremen, the Straw Hat Pirates sans Straw Hat himself, and the four of us?" Paulie confirmed as he slowly wound coils of rope around his knuckles.

"Doesn't seem fair, does it?" Zambai asked morosely as he tapped his bazooka in his palm.

"No, it really doesn't," Usopp shook his head regretfully as he loaded up his Kabuto's pouch. "These poor bastards don't even stand a chance."

"Please..." I scoffed as I hefted Lassoo onto my shoulder with one hand and flicked my baton out with the other.

"You say that as though they ever did."

Xomniac AN: "What would be a good expression for a giant concentrating to fake an accent?" I never thought I'd find myself asking that question, and yet I nonetheless did while writing this chapter.

Hornet AN: Sorry for the delay. Real life issues again, on all of us but especially Xomniac.

Xomniac AN: Damn my family pulling me away for dinner, what's wrong with instant noodles, huh!? (Just kidding, love you mom, it was great to see you!)

Patient AN: *Rolls eyes.* Buuut it's still within seven days of our previous chapter, so I'm sure you're not too upset.

Hornet AN: August 3rd wasn't seven days ago.

Xomniac AN: Well then shit.

Patient AN: My mistake: it's still within fourteen days of our previous chapter, so we're not behind schedule this time.
"Are you insane, Cross?!" Bartolomeo yelped.

Apis opened her mouth—

"Rhetorical question, dammit!" Bartolomeo snapped, prompting the dragon keeper to close her mouth and look away with an innocent smile. "Alright, Cross has to know he's bringing the wrath of the Marines on his head for this." He turned around, looking to the two lower-grade ex-Baroque Works agents on board. "How much of a response are we looking at here? Five battleships? Ten?"

Miss Valentine, deathly pale, took a moment to compose herself before answering. "For this sort of situation? When the Marines and the World Government as a whole are taking a shot straight to the dead center of their reputations?" She gulped audibly, sweat dotting her brow. "Try all of them."

Bartolomeo clicked his tongue and began pacing back and forth on the deck. "And with all the Admirals, too. Dammit. I don't think Cross is going to bullshit his way out of this one. Not on his own." His pacing continued for a few more minutes as he stewed in thought, before abruptly turning his gaze on Apis again. "Apis, you can talk to animals, right?"

Apis' expression fell flat as jabbed a finger at the dragon she was riding, with Lindy adopting a flat look of his own in turn.

"Right, stupid question. What I meant to ask was if you can talk to a Transponder Snail from a distance, without seeing it? Tell it to keep its trap shut for… what, a few minutes?"

"Ah…" Apis hesitated as she glanced at the crew's snail with a searching expression before looking back at her captain, her mouth drawn in a thin line. "Maybe? I could give it a shot with Kula's help, I think, but as for the orders bit… I can give orders, sure, but whether they listen or not isn't really up to me." She ran her fingers through her companion's hair in a manner that was more meant to calm herself than the dragon. "I've gotten lucky with Lindy because we have a past…"

"It'll have to do," Bartolomeo sighed. "Call Capricorn, I need one last piece of information."

"What are you planning, Captain?" Gin said out of the corner of his mouth, eyeing his superior as Apis got their snail's attention and started talking to it.

"Something insane, guaranteed to triple all of our bounties if it works and kill us if it doesn't," Bartolomeo muttered as he gnawed on his thumb. "And I'm not sure it's even going to work. You'll probably figure it out once I call Capricorn, anyway." He then shot his first mate a savage grin. "Easiest way of puttin' it, though? If the Straw Hats are takin' a page from the Emperors, then we're taking a page from them."

Gin opened his mouth to respond—

KA-LICK!

"Capricorn."

"Rooster," Bartolomeo replied. "I'm twenty kilometers south-southeast of the Tub Current between Marineford and Enies Lobby. Where's the nearest Celestial Dragon vessel?"
For a moment there was silence. Then Hina answered, Gin hastily shushing the rest of the poleaxed crew around him.

"A Celestial Dragon vessel?! Rooster, what in the world are you—?!"

"You're listening to the SBS, you know exactly what I'm planning to do," Bartolomeo practically snarled. "This is the only way I can think of to draw off a large enough force to matter." A shaky grin spread across his face. "Besides, I'm not just charging blindly into this. I have a plan."

"… Forgive me if that doesn't fill me with much confidence." There was an explosive sigh on the line, followed by rustling cloth. "Annoyed, Hina is very annoyed because she definitely has a migraine, and it's only a little after midnight… But fine. As it so happens, there's a Celestial Dragon pleasure yacht near your location. Just park yourself outside the edge of the current and you'll have them."

"Thanks. Rooster out." And with that, Bartolomeo put the phone back in its cradle, then turned around and waited for the inevitable explosion.

He was not disappointed.

"Captain, are you insane—!"

"I hate the Celestial Dragons as much as the next guy, but—"

"There is a point at which you can imitate the Straw Hats too much, and this has clearly passed it!"

"That'll bring an Admiral down on our—!"

"Quiet!" Gin roared.

The crew shut up, looking expectantly at Gin.

"Why don't we let the captain explain before we all decide to mutiny out of self-preservation?" he suggested. Well, 'suggested' inasmuch as any man tapping a ball of metal the size of a bowling ball in his palm can 'suggest', anyways.

"Thanks," Bartolomeo muttered to his first mate as the grumbling died down.

"Don't thank me yet," Gin snapped as he swung his tonfa around to point at his captain. "I already served under a suicidally insane captain once in my life and I nearly paid for it with my life, I won't make that same mistake again. If you don't have a damn good plan, I'll be first in line to kick your ass."

"Duly noted." Bartolomeo took a deep breath, firmed his features, and took a step forward. "Yes, I am planning exactly what you all think I am! Yes, that will bring an Admiral down on our heads! But!" A finger snapped up, pre-empting any sort of protest. "Right now, the Straw Hats are minutes away from having probably the greatest force the Marines have ever assembled dropping on theirs! If we can draw off five battleships and an Admiral on a wild goose chase, then maybe we can even the odds just enough for the Straw Hats to use their patented brand of bullshit to escape!"

"And how do you plan to turn it into a wild goose chase, huh?" Mr. 5 shouted.

Bartolomeo grinned a grin that had way too many teeth for comfort. "Well, let me tell you."
"So, let me see if I've got this straight," Paulie reflected as he bashed an arrangement of Marines and agents with his Figure-Of-Eight Knot. "Two days ago, I thought that Kaku and Lucci being government agents was nonsense, CP9 was a myth, and charging Enies Lobby on a rescue/revenge mission was something that nobody in the world was crazy enough to do." He sighed as he absentmindedly ducked under a swing from an agent and rammed his forearm into the man's throat. "Then along came the Straw Hat Pirates. I don't think I need to say any more than that."

"Yeah, that just about covers it, doesn't it?" Kashi laughed as he swung his axe down into the side of a building, the ensuing collapse simultaneously robbing our enemies of yet another potential assault platform and blocking off an alleyway that they could try and flank us from. "I see why our captains liked them so much!"

"Heh, I agree!" Oimo cackled as he wound his club back and batted a mortar shell out of the air, utterly ignoring the explosion that erupted as a result. "Makes sense too! They've been on Little Garden for the past hundred years, they missed the start of this new age! Heck…" The giant paused in shock. "Wow, they even missed Roger. That's…" He scratched the side of his head thoughtfully, even as Marine bullets washed over him like a summer's rain. "Actually kinda sad."

"Eh, don't worry about it," I chuckled as I dodged a swing from an agent coming at me with a pair of brass knuckles before lunging forward to jab my baton into his throat. I then flipped it in my grip and electrified it as I jabbed it into the small of his back once he doubled over. "At least they managed to meet his successor! I mean…" I hefted Lassoo and aimed him into the crowd, blasting out a half-dozen bombs over the front lines and sowing a nice amount of chaos as a result. "That's gotta count for something, right?"

"I know that meeting Luffy sure changed my life for the weird, that's for sure!" Usopp chuckled, taking a knee in order to get a better angle with his Kabuto and no doubt take down yet another wannabe with a rifle who had the audacity to call themselves a sniper in his presence.

"Damn straight!" I nodded as I blocked a Marine's sword with Lassoo's bulk, before pocketing my baton and jabbing a gauntlet full of Impact into the soldier's gut. I then glanced over at Soundbite. "By the way, apropos of nothing, mind providing a sitrep?"

"Current headcount is reaching near a thousand! ABOUT HALF of whatever soldiers are still conscious ARE RUNNING AWAY, spouting such lines as 'I didn't sign up for this' and 'We can't even slow them down!' And my personal favorite, 'If the Straw Hats manage to get away with this, I'll take it as confirmation that faith in the Marines is as ill-founded as Cross says!'" the snail cheered.

I gaped at him in awe. "They did not say that."

"OH YES THEY DID!"

"Sounds like you're actually managing to get through to some people!" Zambai called over to me as he took down a squad that had been going for Sodom and Gomorrah, who were giving the Marines and agents an appropriate level of hell.

"But anyways, AS FOR OUR VANGUARD…" His smile dropped into a scowl. "I can follow Luffy's trail, and he downed A COUPLE THOUSAND ON HIS OWN, BUT RIGHT NOW, HE'S OUT OF MY RANGE."

I considered that for a moment before shrugging indifferently. "Meh, that's fi—GAH!" I yelped as I
ducked under some jackass who'd just tried to *fucking shoot me!* "HEY, WATCH IT, I'M FIGHTIN' OVER HERE!" I roared at the bastard before scowling and returning fire with a trio of baseball bombs. "Ass. Anyway, where—? Oh, right!" I bounced the heel of my palm off my head. "It's *Luffy*. He'll be fine."

-0-

"Whoa… what the heck? How do they get across?" Luffy wondered as he stared down into the gap over the abyss below Enies proper. He then pounded a fist into his palm. "Oh, right, Cross said there's a drawbridge. *I think* that I could probably Rocket over…" *Then* he grimaced as he crossed his arms and tilted his head to the side. "But I bet they have tons of other cheap tricks and stuff that Cross knows about but I don't that would make me get lost. So, now I have to wait for everyone else to catch up? Aw, man…" He hung his head with a groan. "That sucks…"

He maintained his position for a few minutes before looking up and glancing around curiously as some of his rubbery neurons chose to fire. "Hey, wait… why do I feel like I'm forgetting something?"

"*Air Door.*"

The rubber-man scowled darkly and angled his hat down over his eyes before glancing back at the interloper who was suddenly standing behind him. "Oh, yeah. I need to kick your ass first."

"There seem to be some discrepancies between the report and the actual situation," Blueno intoned, ignoring the death glare Luffy was pinning him with. "To be honest, it did seem more than a little suspicious. For anyone to believe that someone like you could ever only take down just five soldiers…" He shook his head with a sigh. "Well, I suppose that fear is as good a motivation for denial as any."

The rubber man snorted darkly as he turned to face Blueno. "So. Bull-head guy. Are you here to stop me?" Luffy asked, momentarily glancing back at his pipe before putting his fists up.

Blueno scoffed in a somewhat insulted manner. "Please. You're the fool here, Monkey D. Luffy, not me. Your reputation through the SBS precedes you, and though I never expected to say this to *any* criminal, I admit that neither I nor many of my comrades are strong enough to defeat you. Basically, I can't do anything against you."

Luffy blinked in surprise as he marginally relaxed from his stance. "Eh? Really? So… are you just going to let us go?"

The bull-headed Pol agent's gaze somehow became even flatter. "No."

"Oh…" Luffy blinked in confusion. "So, then…?"

"What I can do," he said as he slowly cracked his neck back and forth. "Is give my chief a more complete status report than what he received earlier. After all, unlike you, we don't need to fight you to accomplish our goals. All we need to do is get Nico Robin past the Gates of Justice."

Luffy felt a twinge of panic rise within himself as he remembered Cross' words. However, rather than reacting with panic like most people, Luffy reacted how he'd almost always reacted to fear: with more anger. "Do you really think I'm going to let you get away and steal Robin?!" he growled as he slowly reached over his back and clutched his pipe.

Blueno allowed a mocking smirk to quirk his lips. "What I *think,*" he drawled as he reached his arm out and cracked a portion of the air open. "Is that you can't stop me."
"You wanna bet?!" Luffy demanded, spreading his legs apart and crouching down, preparing to pump his calves—

SLAM!

Only for a metric ton of something to slam onto the roof and obscure Luffy's line.

Luffy winced in confusion as he snapped his arm up to guard himself from the dust cloud that the mass's meteoric entrance had kicked up. A tsking sound caught his attention, and he lowered his arm enough to catch sight of a large gray wolf with a large scar over its left eye, a black Fu Manchu mustache, long hair in a queue, and a black jacket and tie that covered very little of its chest, standing where Blueno had been.

Or, more specifically, standing on where Blueno had been. And on Blueno, too, for that matter.

"Tsk tsk tsk," the wolf tutted in a condescending tone of voice as he shook his claw in Blueno's face. "Sorry, Blueno, I know that we've only just met again after five years, buuut the fact is that there's no chance that I'm gonna let you do that."

"Ergh..." Blueno coughed up a mouthful of blood as he struggled to try and work himself out from under the wolf-Zoan's foot. "Jabra... you... what the hell do you think you're doing...?"

In an instant, a wave of sadness and regret swept over the wolf's muzzle. "It was many years ago when I was young, on an island far away—!"

"WILL YOU CUT YOUR DAMN BULLSHIT ALREADY, YOU FLEA-BITTEN—GUH!" Blueno's furious roar was cut off by a massive furry palm slamming his head into the rooftop. Said palm then closed into a fist around Blueno's head and lifted him into the air, in spite of how much he tried to struggle and flail,

"You want the truth, you two-bit one-trick pony?" Jabra snarled as he held his comrade close to his muzzle. "Fine, here it is: If you tell Spandam about what's going on, odds are that that spineless coward will order us to fall back and regroup. He'll take Nico Robin to the Gates, and he'll take Lucci with him so that when Straw Hat inevitably charges after him, he's who he fights, while we are left mopping up the scraps."

Jabra marginally loosened his grip on Blueno's head, before strengthening it, causing his fellow agent to jerk in pain. "Fuck. That. Fuck Nico Robin, fuck the World Government, fuck that spineless piece of subhuman slime we call a chief, fuck the mission you all fucking up, fuck the power rankings, and above all else?" Jabra drew his hackles back into a blood-hungry snarl. "Fuck Lucci. This brat is mine. I've wanted my ten rounds with him since that Back Fight, and I'll be damned if I let Lucci have them instead. I want a hunt that can fucking fight back, and I am fucking getting it! So, stay the hell—!" The massive Zoan wound his arm back and uncoiled in a single smooth motion, sending Blueno crashing into the parapet lining the roof. "OUT OF MY WAY!"

The Door-Man coughed up a mouthful of blood as he tried to pull himself up, only to collapse as his body gave up the ghost and plunged him into sweet oblivion.

The wolf-man snorted in satisfaction before cracking his head back and forth and shooting a cocky grin at the other conscious person on the roof. "So. Straw Hat Luffy. Nice to meet you. The name's Jabra of CP9, and what you see here is the result of the Mutt-Mutt Fruit, Model: Wolf." His cocky grin grew to savage proportions as he spread his arms and flexed his muscles in anticipation. "You have no idea how long I've been waiting for a chance to fight you."
Luffy didn't move from where he'd been standing throughout the entire conversation, his hat tilted down to mask his expression.

Jabra twitched irritably, his smirk fading back to a more casual habitual scowl. "Hey! Are you paying attention?"

"He was your friend."

Jabra's ear flicked in confusion as he heard a faint growl. "What the—?" His ears then folded against his scalp when Luffy suddenly looked up at him and glared.

A decade back, Vice Admiral Garp, AKA 'Garp the Hero', had personally come by the Tower of Justice to tear CP9 a new one for a particularly civilian-casualty-heavy mission.

That had been the last time Lucci had ever willingly disobeyed orders in any way, shape or form.

Jabra had known that Straw Hat could drop the idiotic smile in favor of rage with the right incentive, he'd been counting on it. But he sure as hell hadn't counted on the glare he was seeing now mirroring the same intensity he'd seen in that monster that the Marines had labelled a Vice Admiral.

Luffy ground his teeth as he only just managed to restrain himself. "That guy." he reiterated with a voice full of unholy wrath. "Was your friend. He was your friend. And you hurt him. Just so that you could have a chance to fight me?"

Jabra swallowed heavily and prepared to open his mouth. He prepared to rebut the pirate's assumption with an explanation about how this sort of thing was par for the course for Pol agents, how Blueno's injuries were comparatively minor and that he'd be fine in a couple of hours, how there would be no lasting hard feelings in the end…

And then he reconsidered. He remembered the Back Fight, he remembered the psyche profile the agents had been given on Straw Hat… and with more adrenaline than blood in his veins, he donned his smirk yet again. "And so what if I did?" he rumbled in a pompous tone. "That pathetic weakling. He spent the last five years as a bartender, and all for what, to fail at the eleventh hour? Heheheh… HAHAHAHAHA!" He threw his head back and roared with mocking laughter. "Hell, I bet he doesn't even remember how to fight anymore! He's pathetic! Useless! A disgrace to Cipher Pol No. 9!"

He kept laughing uproariously for a minute before trailing off into wheezes and chuckles. He wiped some tears out of his eyes before casting a mocking smirk at the pirate. "What the hell does it matter to you?"

His amusement then proceeded to die a painful death as he became acutely aware of the horrendous mistake he'd just made. Before, the most infamous rookie of this generation had mirrored Garp. Now? The old man paled in comparison to the glare he was faced with now.

And this feeling only redoubled when the pirate dropped into a crouch, knees bent, his right fist cracking the roof beneath him, and his left out to his side, holding a somehow menacing pipe out and at the ready.

"GEAR," Straw Hat Luffy rumbled savagely. "SECOND."

'I just fucked up.'

Those were the last thoughts to run through Jabra's head before his field of vision was filled with fist, and he was forced to start fighting for his life.
"And even if he isn't, then he will be after he gets his teeth on some meat," I shrugged casually as I held a Marine in a nice and tight chokehold. "Also, remind me, how long am I supposed to hold him for after he stops moving, three seconds or five?" That comment got the guy flailing even harder.

"Three, I think!" Kiwi called as she retreated from a Marine who was going a little nutso with his sword.

"And for the record," Mozu continued as she got behind the Marine in question and cut him down to size. "I'll never understand how Straw Hat's body treats meat like a miracle cure-all!"

"That's one of—! Oh, for the love of God, how long can you hold your damn breath!? Screw it." I slammed my fist into the back of the bastard's head, thankfully knocking him out and allowing me to drop him. "Anyway, where was I…"

"How Luffy's carnivore metabolism is one of THE SEVEN WONDERS OF THE WORLD? Though I'm confused as to IT COUNTS AS MANMADE OR NATUR—INCOMING MORTAR!"

"HOLY!" I yelped in a panic as I dove into the dirt and narrowly avoided being blasted to fucking smithereens. I spent a second staring into the ground with my hands clasped over the back of my head before looking up with a dark scowl. "Right, that's enough of this bullshit. Soundbite, connect me to the cavalry so that we can shove a horseshoe up these bastards' asses."

"GIMME A second!"

I shoved myself to my feet and retreated back from the front lines of the fight, allowing the Franky Family to fill my space as I got myself some breathing room and pressed one of my headphone's speakers to my ear.

"This is Snailmail calling Rocketman, Snailmail calling Rocketman, COME IN, Rocketman!"

"Rocketman is requesting you stop acting like the assless dumbass you are, Soundbite," Nami growled irritably.

"C'mon, baby, show me some love! I'M BURNIN' OUT A FUSE up here alone!"

"Oi!" I barked, shooting a glare at the snail out of the corner of my eye.

"Eh… mostly ALONE, ANYWAYS?" Soundbite chuckled sheepishly.

"Are you just calling to screw around or—?"

"We've managed to clear out a section for the Rocketman," I cut in. "Kokoro, the landing zone is free and clear, let him loose and bring it in!"

"Wait, Cross, you never told us what you mean by 'landing zone'!?" Vivi cut in, a rather large hint of desperate panic in her voice.

"You do recall that there are no brakes on that train you're riding, right?" I grinned sadistically. "And those fences around the entrance are part seastone, so they're gonna bend before Zoro, not break. Buckle up, this is gonna hurt."

"NOT A CHANCE IN—!" Nami screamed desperately.
"NAGAGAGAGA!" Kokoro cackled over Nami's enraged shout. "I suppose it's only fate, isn't it? This bronco was made for you guys! EVERYONE HOLD ON TIGHT, NAGAGAGAGA!"

"Don't even think about it you old—EAGH!" Vivi's own protests were cut off by what I could only presume was a sudden burst of acceleration.

I spared a moment to laugh about Nami's apparent panic before throwing out a Soundbite-enhanced whistle, garnering the attention of the Franky Family fighting around me. "EVERYONE CLEAR SOME SPACE, WE GOT INCOMING REINFORCEMENTS!"

While the 'humans' of our crew had the good sense to comply and clear a space, Kashi made the most unwise choice of pausing in the middle of the island's main street and glancing back at me in confusion. "Eh? Reinforcements? Really? Where are th—?"

**WOOO00OT!**

"What the—!?"

Kashi had just enough time to look up in shock…

**CRUNCH!**

Before Rocketman plowed straight into the middle of his face, bounced off, and skidded down the street.

I eyed the up-ended trainwreck for a second before looking over Kashi's insensate and groaning form. "We didn't just lose one of our major big-hitters, did we?" I called up to Oimo.

The club-wielding giant waved his hand with a scoff. "Are you kiddin'? Kashi's taken more headshots than most of our old crew combined! He'll be fine!" He then proceeded to cover his mouth as he snickered in amusement. "Though… I don't think a lot of giants are gonna think that being the first giant to be hit in the face by a sea-train is all that 'honorable'!"

"'Crew you, Oimo…' Kashi blearily groaned.

"Told you so!"

"Moving past the stupidly high resiliency of giants," Lulu piped up as he shoved a spike of hair protruding from his chest flat and caused a new one to pop from the top of his skull. "Are you sure that your friends are alright? After all, that was a pretty hard landing, and the Marines are starting to swarm the train."

I leveled a flat look at the shipwright. "Have you been paying any attention to the SBS? I give it all of five seconds before that swarm gets swatted."

"FOUR, THREE, TWO—!" Soundbite crowed.

**KA-BOOM!**

My grin went from ear to ear as the side of Rocket Man's car blew itself out, blasting away all of the Marines nearby and allowing a full host of utter demons to storm out and start laying waste to the ranks of our enemies. "Ah, I love my crewmates."

Paulie swallowed heavily and wiped away the sudden layer of cold sweat he'd acquired as he watched my crewmates inflict more damage on the army of Marines in the course of three minutes
than we all had in the past ten. "...In case it hasn't been said enough? So glad that we're fighting with you monsters instead of against. I don't think Water 7 or Galley-La would have survived if we were on opposite sides."

"DAMN STRAIGHT!" Soundbite cackled in agreement.

I started to snicker anew at the irony, before freezing in abject terror as I felt a wave of what could only be described as pure existential dread sweep over me. I promptly adopted a 'deer in the headlights' maneuver as I caught sight of Carue stalking towards me, Nami and Vivi both on his back and an aura of rage and murder around them; I honestly wasn't sure if I was hallucinating, if it was actually visible, or if Nami was just generating thunderclouds for effect.

"N-Now guys, look—" I backed up desperately as the two dismounted and started approaching me.

"Cross..." Vivi began, before shrugging with a sheepish smile. "I admit my fault: that was actually kind of fun."

I blinked in surprise and more than a little confusion before freezing in horrified realization. Horror that became nothing short of utter terror when a fist suddenly grabbed my throat and brought me face to face with the visage of the Angel of Death.

See, that aura of rage I'd seen earlier? It wasn't the aura of two women who wanted my head.

It was all from one Nami who really, really wanted my head on a spike.

"N-N-Nami, d-don't you think you're overreacting? L-L-Luffy does stuff like this all the time, and you're n-never this mad at hi—

ERK!"

I was cut off by her squeezing my throat shut.

"You let me ride on that death trap for your own amusement, Cross," Nami cut me off in a voice of icy calm. "Luffy is an idiot. A lovable idiot that I trust with my life. He doesn't think things through, and we have to put up with the consequences, and I accepted that when I joined this crew for good."

I struggled to keep conscious as her grip tightened. "Myergh..."

"You, on the other hand, are not only one of the smarter members of the crew, but know enough to let us steer the hell clear of catastrophes like this. Our Navigator held up a segment of her Clima-Tact and slammed her thumb into a hidden button, prompting it to light up with a crackle of lightning. "So. I'm going to give you ten seconds to give me three good reasons why I shouldn't obliterate all the progress Chopper made on getting rid of your trauma, and make Eneru look like a case of static discharge."

Her grip slackened enough that I could begin gasping out answers. "First, I knew you wouldn't die from something like that, second, your alternative choices were coming to the front lines when I left or going with Luffy when he left, and third..." I pointed to the side, where a growing crowd of Marines were approaching and actually positioning themselves into a firing line whoa that was a lot of guns! "You have plenty of other targets to take out your anger on?" I punctuated the statement with a panicky grin.

Nami processed my words with a still-enraged expression for several moments, her gaze thankfully directed at the Marines, before the aura changed direction and she let me drop onto my ass.

"I'll deal with you once we're back on Water 7," she bit out as she marched towards the Marines, assembling her Clima-Tact piece by piece as she went. "But for now..."
She finished assembling the staff and started spinning it at her side, a milky white outline appearing on the outside of the blue blur.

"These boys are mine."

The Marines chose that moment to open fire, blasting out a barrage of musket fire at us that would have no doubt incapacitated or killed at least a dozen of our number.

At least, were it not for Nami snarling and swinging her Clima-Tact forward with a furious bellow. "EISEN TEMPO!"

A barrage of foamy white surged from her staff as a result of the motion, writhing and flowing for a second before coalescing into an earthbound cloud-like barrier between us and the Marines. However, as cloud-like as the barrier appeared, the fact that we weren't reduced to swiss cheese by a hail of gunfire indicated that they'd failed to break through it.

Nami held her position for a scant second before allowing herself a grin. She then swung her arm out, causing the cloud barrier to surge out in turn and shove over two dozen Marines off their feet. A sweep to the side, and the fallen Marines were sent tumbling into a massive pile, clearing the way for the clouds to surge forward again and start lashing out at the Marines behind them. The clouds in question attacked like a poor man's Smoker, growing and lashing out at who or whatsoever it chose that came near it and then flailing about in a thoroughly ruthless manner.

But that wasn't the most disturbing part of the display. The disturbing part was the wielder of the cloud herself. Nami's growing grin and the way she was swooping and twirling her staff around her body with increasing style and complexity was reminiscent of a demonic orchestra conductor… or a witch.

Of course, Soundbite was helping to reinforce the latter image with a stupidly familiar song:

"Double, double, toil and trouble, fire burn and cauldron bubble~"

"Yeah," I nodded in equal parts wariness and awe. "And by the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way co—ACK!"

Nami remained gleeful a full minute into her performance before pausing and allowing her expression to darken as she caught sight of what few Marines were still standing begin to turn tail and run. "Oh, no no no noooooo…" Nami crooned sadistically, a roaring fury igniting behind her eyes as she swung her staff around her body and caused a new aura of clouds to coalesce around her. "You think that after all that you've done to our crew… after all you've done to my friends…" She chuckled mirthlessly for a second, and then the clouds darkened and started to rumble as she scowled. "No. No, you bastards don't get to run away!"

With that, she swung her Clima-Tact behind her and conjured a pillar of thunderclouds. The pillar angled itself like a scorpion's tail as it faced the Marines, and with a jerk of the staff, the pillar split itself in half lengthwise, opening up an empty space within which lightning crackled and danced.

Nami slowly cracked her neck back and forth in preparation. Then, in one deft move, she jabbed her staff forward to point at the retreating Marines.

"Lightning Bolt Tempo."

And just like that the cloud snapped forwards and the wrath of the heavens themselves was unleashed upon those poor unfortunate souls. I swear that I actually managed to see outlines of their skeletons once or twice, but for obvious reasons, I wasn't able to appreciate the sight quite as much
as I would have liked… to which Nami remained perfectly oblivious. She took in the sight of the charbroiled Marines for a few seconds before squealing and jumping in a clear display of joy as she hugged her staff like it was the Hope Diamond or her newborn. Either or, really.

"Oh, yes yes yes yes yes! This thing is so utterly totally and completely awesome and it's all mine mine mine and I am never ever ever letting it go ever because I loooove it like I've never loved anything since Bellemere and Nojiko and the crew and I love you for giving it to me, Cross, thank you so so so much!" she squealed and sang euphorically. She then spun around and snapped a finger to point at me. "But don't think that means I've forgiven you yet either, you inconsiderate bastard!"

"No effing kidding, woman!" I choked as I grappled with the fucking Eisen Hand that was holding me a foot off the ground as it wrung my FUCKING NECK!

"Nami!" Vivi demanded as she yanked on the white hand's fingers, an effort that was completely and utterly ineffectual on account of how the damn thing was as solid as iron! "I've been mad at Cross plenty of times, but this is going too far! Let him go!"

"Wha—!?" Nami snapped her gaze to her staff in shock before shaking her head desperately. "B-B-But I'm not doing this! Or, well, I-I-I don't think I am!"

It was at that point that a portion of the arm strangling me split off and started punching me in my freaking face! "I—OW!—SORELY—OW!—BEG—OW!—TO DIFFER—OWOWOW!"

"I-I-I don't—!" Nami shook her head desperately.

"Mahybe because of you'we deep psychowogicaw connecshion with meteowology, yoah subconscioush mind, yoah 'Id', ish ushing the Eishen Cwoud as an outwet to intewact with the physhical wowld and enact yoah wepwessed fwustations with Cwoss?"

We all paused and snapped an incredulous look at the speaker.

"Whad?" Carue gave us all a flat look. "I wead some a' Choppah's books when I've got nothing else tah do, shue me."

"Riiight…" Nami drawled before glancing at her Clima-Tact. "So… how do I…?"

"We move the outwet, I guesh," the duck shrugged helplessly.

"Ah…?"

"DROP THE DAMN STAFF!" Vivi, Soundbite and I roared, though I more squawked than anything.

"R-Right!" Nami yelped as she forced her fingers open and dropped her Clima-Tact. She then slapped her palms together in front of her face in apology. "I-I'm so sorry about that, Cross, I'd never go this far, I swear!"

"Then why the HECK ARE YOU still doing it?!

"Wha—GAH!" Nami yelped in shock when she noticed that her palms weren't together, due to the fact that her other hand was still holding the staff. Or so it seemed through my rapidly blurring vision.

Our navigator promptly snapped her grip open and dropped the Clima-Tact again… and then reeled back again as she noticed that her other hand had snatched up the staff. The process repeated itself
almost half a dozen times as Nami tried to rid herself of her weapon in vain. Ultimately, Nami drew her arm back and desperately flung the Clima-Tact away, going so far as to watch as the metal rod clattered down the street.

She turned around and pumped her fist in victory before staring at the staff clutched in her fist with equal parts exasperation and terror. "I think that I might have a serious problem..." she whispered numbly.

"NO SHIT!" Vivi and Carue screeched. I would have joined them, were it not for the fact that I wasn't taking in enough breath to do more than gasp at this point.

"Oh, for the love of—THAT'S IT!" Soundbite barked indignantly, sliding his way onto the mass of clouds crushing my throat. "I'M TAKING MATTERS into my own TEETH! GASTRO-BLAST!"

The clouds promptly blasted apart and dropped me on my ass, allowing me to suck air down my abused throat. "Holy shit, that was way too close!" I gasped.

Nami promptly snapped out of it and grabbed her own wrist, visibly concentrating on her fingers as she brought her Eisen Cloud to heel so that it was merely hovering around her body like some kind of meteorological halo. "Sorry about that, Cross," she apologized with a sheepish grin. "Good thing I didn't activate the lightning, right?"

I showed her just how little I appreciated my good fortune with a roadkill-flat glare. "You're getting therapy from Chopper," I ground out.

She promptly hung her head with a sob. "Aye-aye, sir..."

Nodding firmly, I turned my attention back towards the rest of the crew, who had taken the liberty of subduing anyone who still fought back. Interestingly, there were at least a dozen of them who were kneeling on the ground, weapons gone, hands raised in surrender, who looked unharmed.

I got to my feet and made a beeline for those soldiers. "Lemme guess," I piped up with a cocked eyebrow. "You guys all got wise to the fact that there's no chance in hell that you're going to stop us and you decided to take the easy route?"

Most of them nodded, some in shame, some in fear. One, however, looked up with a defiant expression. "I have no illusions about us being able to defeat your crew. But Cipher Pol No. 9 is a different story, and they're waiting for you in the Tower of Justice. We'll see if you're still confident when you start fighting against them.”

His tone was firm, but not condescending; it was clear that he was speaking from his faith in the organization he followed. So I almost felt bad about what I was about to do next. Spot the key word in that sentence.

"Really, now?" I crouched down so that I could look the soldier in the eye. "Well then, Marine, here's a question for you: did you happen to see CP9 when they returned to base?"

"No, but if you're going to spew some nonsense about defeating them before they even got here—"

"Oh, no, nothing like that... though not for lack of trying, I assure you, they just managed to run away like the cowardly bitches they are before we could stop them. But!" I snapped a finger up when the soldier started to open his mouth. "That's off-topic. Tell me, Marine: do you know how many CP9 Agents were meant to be on the Puffing Tom upon its return to base?"

The Marine jutted his chin out proudly. "Five. Add the three already here, and that makes eight
agents ready and willing to put you pirate scum to death."

My grin widened at the words, and only got wider as I slowly turned my head to regard the soldier's neighbor, who'd suddenly gone pale. "I think your friend might have something to say about that, Marine."

The defiant soldier glanced at his neighbor and jerked in shock. "What the—? Jenkins, what's—?"

"F-Four…"

"Huh?"

The panicked soldier slowly turned his head to give the other Marine a terrified look. "I-I-I saw the Cipher Pol return… a-and there were o-only four agents with them! N-Nero was missing!"

And just like that, the defiance bled out of the soldier and he too paled in horror. "Y-You mean—!?"

I pressed my advantage by grabbing his collar and bringing him face to face with me. "My Paramecia Captain has made a habit of eating Logias for breakfast, Marine," I whispered malevolently. "What the hell do you think he's going to do to a Zoan?"

The Marine stammered and shivered where he was sitting. I opened my mouth to say something further—

"Leave 'em alone, Cross."

And promptly snapped a look over my shoulder as someone slapped me on it. "Do I have to?" I whined.

"But of course!" Soundbite snickered before switching to using my voice. "After all, it's cruel and unusual to torture poor, defenseless pests like them. Save it for the poor, defenseless ASSASSINS!"

"Awww, that's too bad…" I grabbed the defiant Marine's cheek and tugged on it. "After all, they're so cute when they're terrifi—OWOWOW" I yelped in agony when a vice grabbed my ear and started yanking me along.

"Save your unholy skills at mental torture for the ones who deserve it, Cross," Vivi rolled her eyes with a sigh as she dragged me behind her.

"Owowowow, yes, yes, fine, alright, I will! Just let me go, damn it!" I hollered as I staggered after her.

"Dot dot dot dot! Huh? A CALL at a time like this?" Soundbite said, unperturbed by my current predicament. He shrugged as Vivi finally released me, allowing me to stand up and rub my ear in an effort to assuage the pain. "AH, WELL. GO FOR THE SBS!"

"Kak kak kak," chuckled a very familiar, very old and, at the moment, very annoying voice. "Seems like they haven't been easing up on you at all. Thanks a lot for the constant proof of how effective my medicine is, Cross! I've been able to triple my prices thanks to you!"

My eye twitched viciously as I fought to keep myself under control. "Shouldn't you be off extorting someone half your age, you old bat? Like, oh, I don't know, Whitebeard?" I snarled.

"KAK KAK KAK KAK! Please, as if that young shit is anywhere close to—!"
"Oh, I'm sorry, you're breaking up, buh-bye!" I yelped as I hastily chopped a hand across my throat, prompting Soundbite to drop the connection with no small amount of cackling of his own.

"Oh, was that Doctorine?" Chopper asked eagerly as Vivi and I walked up to where the rest of the crew was assembling.

"Yeah, it was," I grumbled as I adjusted my slightly askew cap. "Sorry I didn't let you two chat, but I've already ticked off the Whitebeard Pirates once in my life, I won't risk repeating the feat even by proxy."

In unison, every single one of our allies outside of the crew sagged in relief, prompting me to glare at them in irritation. "Do you really think I'm that stupid?"

"Considering the fact that we're in the middle of an invasion of Enies Lobby that you're broadcasting to the entire world?" Kashi groused as he rubbed his slightly crumpled nose. "Yes, it's good to see that you're not completely insane."

I rolled my eyes before returning my attention to our current situation, and scanning around the area. The only Marines and agents conscious were the ones that had surrendered, and there were unconscious ones by the hundreds almost as far as I could see. Considering how long we had been talking without being interrupted, I had figured as much, but it was nonetheless surprising that the elites hadn't been called out yet. Sure, some of these guys may have had enough sense to know that they couldn't beat us, but I didn't expect everyone to just take this lying down and rely on CP9 to handle us.

"Soundbite, can you hear anyone nearby?"

The snail concentrated, and then grimaced. "Damn, they're running out of my range FAST. BUT IT SOUNDS LIKE THEY'RE PLANNING ON SETTING UP DEFENSIVE LINES en route to the courthouse!"

"They're trying something that almost has half a chance of working instead of charging us directly?" I asked incredulously.

"Eh, the Government may be arrogant, but they're not stupid," Oimo shrugged. "Back before we started working here, the protocol was that if there was an overwhelming attack from pirates, the plan would be to fall back, set up defensive lines and wait for reinforcements from HQ. I guess it was just a contingency plan in case one of the Emperors decided to attack."

I sighed; of course they'd have something planned for this, why wouldn't they when they knew that there were pirates who could conceivably charge Enies Lobby and have a non-zero chance of winning?

"Alright, let me think…" I muttered as I rubbed my chin thoughtfully. "They're expecting us to charge the courthouse, and we are, there's no way around that. We'll need to catch them off-guard somehow…" I glanced back at the King Bulls for a second before nodding firmly. "Alright, if we try smashing through full-force, all we'll do is run straight into a wall of steel and bodies. Would that stop us? Probably not, but it would be more than a bit painful for those involved, and while I appreciate the dedication of our allies, I'd rather do this as painlessly as possible. So!" I clapped my hands together firmly. "We're going to do something somewhat inadvisable and split up!"

"BUT you never split the party!" Soundbite yelped in an affronted tone.

"I don't see anything wrong with it," Zoro shrugged.
"You would get so lost that you’d end up back in Alabasta!" Raphey snapped as she jabbed a flipper at him before grinning. "Sorry, been waiting to use that one."

"Cross, I'm sure that most of us are capable of taking care of ourselves on the way there," Lulu said. "But what do you have in mind for an end of this?"

"Yeah!" Tilestone added loudly. "We'll still be fighting that ambush anyway no matter what we do, so why is splitting up better?"

"Simple," I nodded as I addressed the bulky shipwright. "The purpose of this endeavor is to make dealing with that ambush a little more manageable. You Galley-La men, the Franky Family and the giants will go down mainstreet and at the forefront of the Marines' sight. Meanwhile, we—" I spun my fingers around at my crewmates. "Will split up into teams and go down this place's backstreets, raising as much of a ruckus as we possibly can. While you guys will certainly draw a lot of attention on account of the size factor—" I jerked my head at the Giants and the King Bulls. "We are the main actors of this show, and so they'll be forced to split both their attention and manpower in order to cover us both. And that's crucial to our success right now."

I gestured around at the piles of unconscious soldiers. "Quantity is the only advantage that these mooks have against us; we may have quality on our side, but we're still facing down a genuine army, despite Luffy taking a him-sized bite out of them, and if we let them mine that advantage too much… well, remember that this is a time-based mission. The second that Spandam realizes he's in over his head, he'll start moving Robin towards the Gates of Justice, and if she gets there, we've lost. This is the best option we have where we both save time and come out of things relatively unscathed." I scanned over all the participants. "So… any complaints?"

None were forthcoming. Some of them looked nervous, but all nodded in acceptance nonetheless.

"Alright, then," Zambai and Paulie said in unison. They glanced at each other before Paulie continued. "It's the reason you need us here anyway. We'll meet up with you at the courthouse."

"Right. And again, watch out for mortar cannons, the Jurymen, and the—"

"Incoming!" Soundbite suddenly barked up. "Ton of them, coming in hot, HEAVY AND FAST!"

I glanced at Soundbite with a scowl. "Dogs. Looks like Baskerville managed to get back on the ball and send them out."

"Give me five seconds with them," Zoro grunted as he turned towards the street, rolling his shoulders.

"Psh," Sanji scoffed indignantly as he lit up a new cigarette. "Give me one."

"Hold it!"

The two thirds of the Monster Trio weren't the only ones to look at me in surprise.

"Ah, Cross—?" Conis started in confusion.

"I was actually hoping for this to happen," I said, forestalling any protests with a raised hand before glancing at my shoulder. "Soundbite, I have a request."

My snail leered malevolently. "If you can hum it and I can fake it."
I cracked my neck back and forth as I stared down the street, where blurs of movement were fast approaching. "Cry havoc and coerce the dogs of war."

Soundbite nodded in agreement. "Yes, sir. AH, AND Lassoo, Su?"

The dog-gun, who I'd let down a minute back, and the cloud-fox looked at him warily. "Yeah?"

Soundbite's smile became downright evil. "Cover your ears."

The canines hastily slammed their paws over their ears—

FWEEEEEEEEEET!

Right before Soundbite let out an ear-shattering whistle.

The sheer volume of the whistle was enough to cause those humans with unprotected ears to flinch…

"OWOWOWOWOW!"

But the reaction was far more prominent in the small army of dogs that collapsed into a pile-up of writhing and agonized bodies, too distracted by their pain to even react to their riders trying to rouse them.

Vivi gaped in awe at the display before her. "Holy…" she breathed numbly.

"But wait, there's more!" I grinned menacingly before cocking my head at Soundbite. "Lay down the law, little buddy."

"Gladly," Soundbite smirked before belting out a massive, attention-drawing whistle and adopting the Voice of God. "LISTEN UP, MONGRELS! AS OF TEN SECONDS AGO, YOU ALL WORK FOR ME! I AM THE ALPHA, YOU ARE THE OMEGA! ANY PROTESTS, ANY REBELLIONS, ANY SHIT WHATSOEVER, ANYTHING LESS THAN COMPLETE AND UTTER SUBMISSION, WILL BE MET WITH IMMEDIATE AGONY. GOT IT?"

There was a moment of stunned confusion as the wolves muttered amongst themselves and some of the savvier riders tried to unlatch themselves from their mounts. All of a sudden, one of the foremost wolves managed to work itself to its feet and snarl at us.

"Listen here, you slimy little—!"

FWEEEEEET!

"YEARGH!" The wolf collapsed into a flailing mess, clawing at his ears in agony as the rest of the wolves shrank away in terror.

"ANY OTHER TAKERS?" Soundbite drawled with a flat tone and look. He then re-donned his usual smirk when the rest of the hounds shrank back and bowed their heads fearfully. "THAT'S WHAT I THOUGHT. Now, then… your marching orders are simple…" An evil glint entered Soundbite's gaze. "Regarding every last Marine and World Government soldier on this island: RIP AND TEAR… UNTIL IT IS DONE."

For a moment, a brief moment, the hounds merely looked blankly at Soundbite. And then, one and all, the same bloodthirsty grin played over their faces. I heard more than a few mutters of "Sorry,
Boss Jabra”, but soon enough, the wolves turned tail and darted down the street and into sidelong alleyways, dragging their helpless riders along with them.

I grinned confidently as I turned around and dusted my hands off. "And that's that."

While most of our allies were staring after the wolves and at me in horrified shock, a lot of my crewmates were just straight-up jaded.

"You do realize that you are a legitimate monster, right, Cross?" Su asked with a cocked eyebrow.

"And damn proud of it, considering where I started from and who I'm directing it all towards," I smirked back. "Now, then, what say we divvy things up, hm?"

"I call dibs on going with Oimo and Kashi!" Usopp spoke up hastily, in a tone that contained, admirably enough, marginally more eagerness than fear.

"I'll second that notion, though we'll be fighting street-level!" Boss thumped a fist to his chest. "Your strategy's as good as any, but someone's gotta hold the line and damn if we're not gonna be a part of it! Right, boys!?"

"HELL YEAH!" the Teenage Dugong Warrior Squad pumped their fists in agreement.

"Who else…” I tapped my chin thoughtfully before adopting an impish grin as I started to glance towards our resident Monsters.

"Meh, I don't care," Zoro grumbled. "Wherever we are, it's going to be boring as shit until we get to the Tower. I think I'll just walk straight there."

"For once, I agree with the Mosshead," Sanji added with an indifferent shrug.

"Then in that case, maybe you two can take the time to team—GRK!" I froze in terror and stared at the blade and leg hovering within inches of my face. "OK, OK, I won't speak—er, that kind of madness, just no more physical therapy!"

"Ah, Sanji!" Vivi hastily piped up. "Considering just how… treacherous this endeavor will be, would you mind acting as my escort alongside Carue?"

"AT ONCE, MY DEAREST PRINCESS!" Sanji called out as he spun over to her.

"Yo, Mosshead!" Su had the courtesy to yap up. "Your swords versus my girl's guns. Want to see who can get the higher headcount?"

"What!?" Conis yelped in shock.

Zoro, for his part, leered eagerly as he rested his arm on his swords' hilts. "Sounds like fun to me."

"Now, wait just a second—!"

"Loser swabs Merry's deck for a month."

"Fine by me, puffball."

"Stop making bets without my say-so!" the gunner wailed, flailing her arms frantically.

Su's very mature response was to stick her tongue out.
I blinked at the sudden turn of events, but then shrugged and turned towards the remaining crew. "So, Nami, Chopper, you two with me?"

"No complaints here," Chopper piped up, while Nami simply nodded.

"Right, then, let's get going. Godspeed, everyone."

And with that, we all split up and headed off. Chopper and Nami followed me down an alleyway and into a nearby side street.

"So, Cross," Chopper spoke up hesitantly. "Coming with you is all well and good, but are you sure that we can handle ourselves against that many Marines? I mean…" He fingered the bandoliers of vials he had strapped across his chest. "I only have so much ammunition, even if I can make more on the fly…"

"And in case you hadn't noticed…" Nami held up the hand holding her Clima-Tact, prompting the clouds flowing around her to form into a hand and wave… for all of a second before lunging at me, at which point she grabbed her own wrist and hastily brought them back under control. "I'm still trying to keep this little doo-dad under control here! Is this really the best of ideas?"

"Absolutely!" I confidently assured them. "In fact, I even have a plan! Ah, but first!" I hastily snapped a finger up. "Apropos of nothing, Soundbite… Are there any mortar emplacements within your range at the moment?"

Nami and Chopper paled for every bit that Soundbite and Lassoo grinned.

"Puru puru puru puru, Puru puru—KA-LICK!"

"Hello?"

"C-Commodore Smoker, Captain Hina! This is Master Chief Petty Officer Coby calling in from Marineford HQ! I apologize for calling at such a late hour, b-but I have new orders for you from Fleet Admiral Sengoku himself! As of this moment, you have been reassigned from running patrols in Mid-Paradise! You are to gather your crew and present yourselves at Enies Lobby ASAP!"

The two Marines exchanged carefully sculpted looks for a moment, the name of the officer ringing familiar to them as one of Cross' recommendations, before Smoker regarded the snail with a sigh. "Apologies, Master Chief Petty Officer, but you've caught us at a bad time."

"W-Wha—!?" Coby started to squawk in a panic…

"EXCUSE ME?!"

Before the snail suddenly roared indignantly, its apoplectic expression taking on a golden sheen in the process. For a moment, the two Marines flinched back; upsetting Sengoku was on the brink of suicidal… but then, with what they were doing, so were they.

"YOU HAD BETTER HAVE THE BEST EXCUSE OF YOUR CAREERS FOR NOT BEING ABLE TO REPORT IN HERE, OR ELSE I'LL HAVE YOU ASSIGNED TO SCRUBBING THE OUTSIDE OF IMPEL DOWN FOR THE REST OF YOUR MISERABLE CAREERS!" the hellish Buddha roared.

Hina shivered in horror as she tried to get her nerve back. "Terrified, Hina is very, very terrified…"
she whispered to herself before steeling her back. "Our sincerest apologies, Fleet Admiral, but we've beached Smoker's ship and my fleet for a routine cleaning of their hulls."

"We began the cleaning process an hour ago," Smoker picked up as he procedurally ashed his cigar. "And the un-beaching process will take too long. By the time we reach the Judicial Island, I'm sure that the action will be over and we'll be left with half-cleaned ships that we'll have to re-beach." The Smoke-Man cocked his eyebrow. "What sounds like a better use of our time to you, Fleet Admiral?"

There was a pause as the snail ground its teeth to dust before the glow died away and the Fleet Admiral managed to speak in a slightly calmer voice. Or at least, rather than speaking with unconcealed murderous rage, his voice held badly concealed murderous rage. "Move up your plans, finish cleaning your ships as fast as your hands can manage, and set sail to receive further orders. Am I Understood?"

"Yes, sir," the officers saluted swiftly.

The connection cut out a second later, and Hina allowed a smirk to grow on her face as she sank back into the lawnchair she was seated in, stretching her arms above her head with a few grateful skeletal pops as she allowed the rays of Tenedores Island's eternal sunset to wash over her. "You know, it took more control than I care to admit not to say 'How could we have known that the Straw Hats were going to try assaulting Enies Lobby?'

Smoker sighed as he sank back into his own chair, but the corners of his mouth twitched upwards nonetheless as he held up a glass of vividly colored alcohol to his old friend. "Here's to the Straw Hats kicking the World Government's teeth in, and Rooster potentially kicking a World Noble's teeth in if I understood him properly. Here's hoping that they survive."

"Kan. Pai," Hina enunciated calmly, clinking her own glass against Smoker's and taking a drink before glancing over her shoulder. "Well, you heard the man! We need to have enough progress done on our ships to fit our timelines! Hop to it, and make sure not to miss so much as a spot!"

"AYE-AYE, CAPTAIN!" the Marine soldiers currently working on the undersides of nine of the dozen battleships shouted back with no small amount of venom.

"Grrrghrghghhh…" Jango growled beneath his breath as he furiously scrubbed the brush he was wielding against a particularly resilient patch of barnacles. "Would someone mind explaining to me why we're working ourselves to the bone when the whole point of this little ruse is for us to drag our damn heels!?

"According to Commodore Smoker," Tashigi bit out as she maneuvered Shigure around the snapping jaws of several still-living meter-large barnacles in order to stab them through their shells, her tone clearly saying that she wanted to replace the word 'Commodore' with something far less endearing. "Just because we're putting up a false pretense is no reason for our work ethic to suffer. Of course, seeing as both he and Hina are Captain-grade and higher, apparently their work ethic has already been proven!" The last word was emphasized with the decapitation of yet another bottom-feeding pest.

"That, and the fact that we have every reason to avoid any more suspicious behavior than we have to," Fullbody grumbled as he shook his aching knuckles out. "Though personally? I think that those two can take their precious 'work ethic' and shove it up their—!

"Problems, you three?"

"SIR, NO SIR!" the Marine Officers barked in barely concealed terror.
"Good," Smoker huffed as he relaxed in his lawnchair before directing a look at the Transponder Snail. "Now try and keep it down. We're about to return to some primetime entertainment."

As he turned back to the SBS, he reflected on the fact that he was actually considering a pirate radio to be primetime entertainment. A year ago, he would have hung up without a second thought, deeming any pirate a criminal not worth listening to.

Now, however…

Smoker grinned viciously as the sounds of all-out warfare erupted from the mouth of the snail.

Now he could think of no better pastime than to hear the World Government get its teeth kicked in.

"Give 'em hell, Straw Hats…" he muttered beneath his breath.

-o-

"Ship sighted, captain!"

"Alright, good!" Bartolomeo called up to the lookout. "Apis, are you ready for this?"

The young girl glanced down at the snoozing Transponder Snail in her lap before taking a deep breath and nodding decisively, her fingers still buried in her companion's mane. "As ready as I'll ever be."

Bartolomeo nodded back, and waited, Apis' eyes shut in concentration. The ship crept closer and closer, completely unaware of the nearby pirate ship. Finally, Apis' eyes opened, and Bartolomeo jerked his hand down. "Alright. Fire!"

The cannons on board the Cannibal fired towards the oncoming yacht. It was one of those newfangled steamships capable of moving without sail power. Of course, considering the expense and fragility of the steam engines, only a Celestial Dragon could afford one, and even by their standards it was a clear vanity project. More importantly, it lacked sails so it could look pretty, and was propelled by a pair of large paddle boxes on the sides of the ships.

All of which meant that when a half-dozen cannonballs smashed into the paddle box and reduced it to so many splinters, the ship was completely dead in the water. Bad design, that, but what else could one expect from a vanity project yacht, designed by Nobles for Nobles?

"They're sending the distress signal, captain," Apis reported, her eyes scrunched up in concentration as she clutched Kula's shell, the snail in question half-awake and blinking blearily. "I'm trying to talk to their snail now."

"Pull us alongside!" Bartolomeo barked. "Valentine, you're up!"

The lemon-clad woman immediately jumped off of the mainmast, floating over to the yacht… at which point she went to her full 10,000 kilograms and smashed into the ship, buckling the sides and throwing shattered planks into the air. With the response by onboard security thoroughly fucked, the helmsman had no problem bringing the Cannibal in a hundred yards off to the yacht's side.

Stepping up to the railing, Bartolomeo crossed his arms in his usual pose, a shimmering barrier crossing the gap between the two ships in a nice, even platform. "Alright, go go go!" he barked.

"Wait!"
The ex-mafia boss glanced back at Apis. "What?"

"I've got the snail!" she reported. "He'll cut off the distress signal, but only if we bring him with us." She scowled darkly. "Apparently, the Celestial Dragons treat Transponder Snails as well they do anyone else. On a very related note, I'll take five minutes with whoever's on that ship when you're done with them."

"Noted. And you heard that, Gin?" Bartolomeo confirmed.

The ex-Krieg pirate nodded, before joining the stream of pirates heading over towards the Celestial Dragons' ship. Bartolomeo himself waited a few more minutes before hopping onto the barrier and running across.

He found a scene of complete and utter pandemonium. True, the Celestial Dragons had of course brought a security detail, and in spite of the fact that they rarely if ever saw any action due to no one in the world being stupid enough to attack the World Nobles, they were relatively decent, too. But against his pirates, in the dead of night? They were outnumbered and outmatched. Whether they had been shot, stabbed, slashed, crushed, or blown up, the majority were scattered, unmoving, over the shattered deck.

**BANG!**

Bartolomeo sighed as a bullet pinged off of the barrier he'd reflexively thrown up. He turned around to look at a rotund, mustachioed man holding a smoking pistol and wearing a bubble helmet, way-too-tight briefs, and little else. A young, equally scantily clad slave girl was held in the Celestial Dragon's other arm, her gaze tight with fear.

"Aw, geeze, man," Bartolomeo groaned, snapping a hand up to cover his eyes. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to get rid of memories like this? This barrier can block a lot of shit, but psycho-whosits torture isn't a part of it!"

"Psychological," Mr. 5 provided as he dug out more ammunition from his nostril.

"Yeah, that."

"How dare you, assaulting my ship like this!" the Celestial Dragon roared back. "I'll give you one chance. Submit to being my slaves, or be tossed into the deepest, darkest depths of Impel Down!"

Gin answered for them all by punching him in the face, shattering his helmet and dropping him like sack of potatoes.

"Aw, c'mon, Gin, I wanted to do that!" Bartolomeo whined. "Plus, I'm the captain, I got first dibs!"

"I stopped putting my captains on pedestals after my last crew," the tired-eyed man scoffed as he rolled his shoulder. "Anyway, you can kick him in the ribs for all I care. I've got my pound of flesh."

"Still, though, it's the principle of the damn matter!"

Mr. 5 sighed as Bartolomeo and Gin got into another squabble, and carefully took the slave girl, standing petrified next to the downed World Noble, by the shoulders. "Did he really think he could take us?" the former agent drawled, more to himself than her. "I suppose it doesn't matter. Now, let's see if I remember how to pick this kind of lock..."

"Kyaaaa!"
All eyes turned to the hole in the deck as a screaming and flailing Miss Valentine was launched out of it by a mountain of a man dressed in a black suit and sunglasses, a Marine overcoat with Captain's insignia on top and a massive silver halberd in his hands.

"Pirate scum," he rumbled, winding up a swing at Bartolomeo. The halberd promptly shattered upon the barrier, and the Captain only had time to widen his eyes before Gin and Bartolomeo negligently lashed their respective tonfa and force fields at him, slamming him into the water, and not missing a beat in their argument.

"—And do you know how much fun it is to feel the cartilage breaking under your bare hands?!" their captain demanded. "I think you do! And that just makes it worse!"

"Nggmn…"

"Shut up, you!" Bartolomeo barked, stamping down on the groaning World Noble's face. "You don't get an opinion!"

"Those two are monsters," Mr. 5 muttered as the lock finally clicked under his hands. "There we go, you're free to—"

"LOOK OUT BELOW!"

"—what the—?"

CRASH!

"Owww, that never gets any better…" Miss Valentine griped as she rubbed her ass before holding up the torn, battered skeleton of her parasol before her eyes. "But also totally not my fault! Will you look at this?! The damn bastard shredded my umbrella!" She reached up, and then growled as she found something missing. "And I lost my hat, too! Someone tell me where that bastard is so I can get Mr. 5 to kick his ass!"

"I'll get right on that…"

The female assassin blinked and looked around in confusion for a second before turning her gaze downwards to observe the thoroughly stunned Mr. 5 she was sitting on. "Oh. Uh… oops?"

"Captain and Gin knocked him into the drink, anyway," Apis said as she floated over on Lindy's back. "Please tell me one of you idiots got the Transponder Snail?"

"Right here, Miss Apis," one of the crew members reported, holding out the snail in question.

"Good job," she said, taking the snail and stroking its neck. "Now, where is that World Noble —hurk?!" She cut herself off when her eyes fell on the rotund, near-nude form of the man in question. "Ooookay, never mind. I wouldn't make Lindy touch that bastard with a ten foot pole."

The juvenile Millennial Dragon in question warbled out a sickened groan of agreement.

"—And that's why you're the biggest jackass I've ever met, and that's saying—!"

"Hold that thought." Bartolomeo cut his first mate off with a pair of crossed fingers and a barrier, ignoring him as he pounded on the invulnerable wall in favor of addressing Apis' presence. "You ready for the next step, pintsize?"

"Anything besides looking at that man again," the young girl muttered, before glancing up into the
sky. "Now, where are… there you are." The Devil Fruit user waved her hand up at the sky, in response to which a seagull floated down from where it had been circling the ocean, letting out a caw of annoyance.

"Yes, yes, I know," the girl sighed, rolling her eyes and pulling out a slice of bread that she tossed to the seagull. "Feel any better?"

The gull's cawing suddenly took on a much more pleasant-sounding tone.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Apis rolled her eyes with a scoff. "Okay, Captain, we just need to follow the gull."

"You heard her, boys!" Bartolomeo barked. "Let's get out of here before a Marine Admiral shows up!"

-0-

On any other day, the streets of Enies Lobby would have been a perfect example of the clockwork perfection of the inner workings of the Marines and the World Government: Paperwork filed neatly and precisely, drills practiced to perfection, and an ever-present garrison of soldiers just waiting for an opportunity to fight to uphold the Justice of the World Government!

However, in truth, this was merely the surface of Enies that was presented to the world. In truth, the state of Enies was far less impressive. After fifty years of pirates never managing to so much as scratch the gates that Oimo and Kashi guarded, the soldiers of the Navy and the World Government had started to view Enies Lobby as little more than a vacation posting. Protocols were relaxed, drill schedules dwindled away into nonexistence, and ultimately the island fell lax.

This laxness bit the Marines in the ass on the day that the Straw Hats attacked, and it bit them hard.

This was evidenced in the panic that was sown amongst the Marines as they desperately scrambled to prepare some form of defensive line in order to face the onslaught of pirates that they just knew was coming their way.

Credit where it was due, it was impressive enough that they'd managed to muster enough coordination to form any kind of line at all, but the endeavor fell apart in the most vital step of all.

"What do you mean you haven't done bayonet drills in ten years!"

"Mortars! Where are those damn mortars?!

"You call that a line? My five-year-old could make a better line than that! And does, on the wall, every single day!"

"Oh, no, oh, no, oh, no—!"

That is to say, the execution.

Still, lack of practice aside, the men of Enies were still soldiers, so even if their coordination was lacking, it wasn't as if it was entirely nonexistent. As such, the soldiers were just starting to make some actual headway…

"H-HEY! HEY! PIRATES! I SEE PIRATES COMING!"

When a lookout stationed on a rooftop just had to go ahead and kick the hornet's nest again.
However, before the soldiers could start to panic, one of the officers present in the mob cut through the chatter with a sharp whistle.

"BELAY THAT, SOLDIERS!" he roared as soon as he had the majority's attention. Every Marine present froze, and the officer nodded in satisfaction. "Well. Looks like you lumps of lard do have a few scraps of discipline left in you. And as for you…!" he barked up to the lookout. "Marine! How many pirates, and what weapons do they have?"

"Ah…" The lookout peered down the street hesitantly. "I, ah… I see three—!"

"You heard the man! Now, we might be outnumbered three to one, but—!"

"Ah, sir? That's not quite right. We… actually outnumber them."

"Huh? But you said that you saw three hundred of them!"

"No…"

It was at that point that the pirates in question rounded a corner and came into full view.

"I said that there were three, period."

And indeed, much to the surprise and bemusement of the Marines, that's all that there were: One orange-haired woman with a metal staff and a nimbus of clouds floating around her, one short, fur-covered Zoan wearing a top hat with vials strapped across his chest, and one man wearing a baseball cap gripping a large cannon with one hand, a baton with another, and carrying a grinning snail on his shoulder.

Just three pirates, no more, no less.

And yet they managed to terrify all one hundred of the soldiers with the smiles they were sporting.

To be fair, however, the smiles the pirates were sporting were far from normal. Well, no, that wasn't quite true. They seemed normal, at first glance. But a longer look revealed lips drawn just a little too wide, cheek muscles just a little too tense, and far, far too many teeth for comfort. And the eyes, oh, the eyes! Those smiles reached the pirates' eyes, and many a Marine wished they didn't, for the eyes glinted with a mix of sadistic glee, mean-spirited mischief, and plain old-fashioned murderous hate. What their eyes said about those smiles was absolutely not something to contemplate.

In short… the pirates made up for their numerical inferiority by sheer bowel-loosening terror.

Whispers were swiftly born amongst the uneasy ranks of the Marines.

"T-That snail—! T-That's Jeremiah Cross, a-and Soundbite!"

"Oh no, oh no, there's nowhere to hide anymore, oh no, oh no—!"

"Y-Yeah, and that woman! T-That must be their navigator, Nami!"

"That cloud… R-Roronoa must be right, she really is a witch!"

"Don't look her in the eye, lest she take your very soul and make you pay interest to get it back!"

"T-Then that monster with them… i-it's the mad doctor, Chopper!"

"Don't let him take me alive, shoot me if you have to, just don't let him take me alive!"
The Marines were shocked into silence when a shrill whistle pierced the air from the direction of the pirates, drawing all of their attention back to them.

"Hello, Marine dipshits!" Jeremiah Cross's grin took on a taunting tone as he mockingly saluted them. "We're on our way to the Tower of Justice to go get our crewmate back! You poor saps all have the misfortune of happening to be in our way, but the fact is that you're not the ones we're here to utterly destroy. So, you all have two options: let us through..." The man's grin widened as his baton suddenly started crackling with electricity. "Or get whipped. What'll it be?"

"W-We're not afraid of you pirates!" stuttered one of the Marines with what little courage he could muster up. "T-There are a hundred of us here now, and our reinforcements will be here in a minute! T-T-There are thousands of us on this island, your lives are forfeit!"

The pirates took a second to glance amongst themselves and exchange grins before starting to chuckle morbidly.

"Reinforcements?" Cross snickered as though he'd just heard a joke.

"Y-Yes!" the Marine reiterated, his stutter belying just how confident he really was.

"Oh, please," Nami scoffed as she shook her head in pity. "Let me share with you one of the things I've learned in my years of hunting treasure: quality is better than quantity... though both is even better..." She trailed off into silence as she stared off into nothing, a slight trail of drool escaping her slack smile. She was quick to recover when Cross whacked the back of her head, though, her smile shifting to sheepish.

"I prefer quantity, myself; after all, you need large sample sizes for true SCIENCE!" Chopper grinned menacingly.

"The point we're trying to make," Cross cut in, smirking as he spun his baton into his pocket. "Is that it just really doesn't matter how many warm bodies you throw at us, because we're going to cut through them anyway to get to our comrade. The best way to put it... well." Cross shrugged helplessly. "Allow me to put my own spin on an oft-rehashed quote: 'Yea, though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil..."

Cross suddenly shot his hand up and snapped his fingers, prompting a flurry of introductory pipe organ notes to ring out as Nami swung her Clima-Tact in front of her. The Marines recoiled in horror as a mass of impenetrable haze that had been hiding between the buildings of the street surged into the open to loom above the street like the shadow... of...

Several Marines actually did lose control of their bodily functions as they made a most unfortunate leap of logic.

Beneath the shadow of the cloud, the light was angled in just such a manner that it illuminated Cross's smile, expanding it to face-consuming proportions and making him look not like a demon, but a walking, half-decomposed corpse.

"For we are as death itself."

The Marines had all of one second to let the phrase run through their terror-addled minds before a medley of bone-rattlingly loud voices suddenly began roaring.

"FIRST YOU SEE US... THEN YOU DON'T!"
The Marines froze as one and started to pant in terror as the fog suddenly surged past the pirates and consumed them, reducing the world to what they could reach out and touch.

"NOW YOU HEAR US... now you WON'T!"

The company of Marines jumped in shock when an uproar of noise erupted from everywhere around them, so utterly chaotic and maddening that it was impossible to determine where one noise started and another ended. The Marines tried to regain some semblance of normality for one second, two seconds, three...

Then, all of a sudden, dozens of shadows appeared all around them, towering and glaring down at the Marines, the noise and their roars now taking on a hellish rendition of *song*.

"IT'S OUR SECRET OF SURVIVAL IN A VERY NASTY WORLD!"

One of the ranking officers opened their mouth in an attempt to bark orders over the pirates' din...

"Guess you should have figured out some secrets of your own."

And was promptly silenced by a metal-clad fist crushing into his mouth and laying him out flat.

"NOW YOU FEEL US... NOW YOU CAN'T!"

Overwhelmed, the Marines began frantically firing and slashing at the shadows. Some faded, others turned out to be fellow Marines, and yet others began contorting in the most inhuman of manners. One in particular distended for a brief second before seeming to burst out of the brume, the very clouds snaking out to grab one of the soldiers before flailing him around like a ragdoll, downing almost a dozen more Marines before flinging him into a wall with stone-shattering force.

"ARE WE REAL? PERHAPS WE AREN'T!"

One of the larger shadows suddenly surged forwards and rammed dead into the center of the soldiers, massive fists flailing and laying low Marine after Marine after Marine without fail. However, the moment the Marines tried to take aim at it, the figure vanished into nowhere. The next second, the Marines were flung into an almighty panic, half on account of the air being *ripped* apart by numerous explosions erupting from... well, everywhere, the other half on account of their comrades suddenly collapsing to the ground with syringes sticking out of varying parts of their anatomy.

"IT'S OUR SECRET OF SURVIVAL IN A VERY NASTY WORLD! IT'S OUR SECRET OF SURVIVAL IN A VERY NASTY WORLD!"

One particularly skittish soldier gulped. "Is... Is it really such a nasty world?" he squeaked semi-hysterically.

Unfortunately for him, he received an answer in the form of a fist grabbing his collar and jerking him forward so that he was face to face with a pair of viciously grinning faces.

"Oh, yes," the smiles crooned in a tone that was way too calm for the sadistic glee it contained. "A very nasty world." And with that, the larger of the two smiles surged forward and caved the soldier's nose in before dropping him and moving on.

"Nastier than you could ever dream of!"

"From up above!"
Lightning lanced down from above unto the Marines, shattering what little cohesion they had left.

"And from beneath!"

A figure suddenly leapt out of the low-hanging fog, taking only a few seconds of grappling to jerk him down and out of sight, where in spite of all the madness being broadcast, everyone could hear the sounds of the poor man screaming as his bones shattered.

"Eyes and jaws!"

Unseen by anyone, a diminutive figure measuring at a little under three feet dashed in amongst the legs of the Marines, an almost negligible pair of blades clutched in his hooves that he lashed out, slicing shallow but very precise cuts. The only sign the Marines ever received that he existed was when they suddenly collapsed without warning, their limbs refusing to comply with their desires no matter what they did.

"Claws and teeth!"

The fear factor ramped up another full degree when a dog of all things suddenly leapt out of the low-hanging fog obscuring the ground from sight, leaping onto one of the few officers left standing and dragging him down into the fog in a flailing ball of fear and fangs.

"Ready to attack you, you're a Mook, you'd better run! Don't come fighting with a pirate if you haven't got a gun!"

Devilish cackling filled the air as one of the few remaining Marines attempted to crawl away from the madness, shakily removing a Transponder Snail from his jacket and doing his best to ignore the hellish hymn going on as he fumbled for the button hidden on the shell he knew would cause the snail to start bawling out an SOS. He then regretted the action when the snail started literally bawling in his hands.

"Every creature for survival has to look out for itself! Got no nannies here, or grannies, dear, to look after your health!"

The next line faded out as a chorus of bloodcurdling screams rang out, illusions of what looked like loving, motherly figures surrounding them contorting into nightmares straight out of Lovecraft.

"Pickupickupickupickupickupickupickupickupickupickupickupickupickupickupic—" the soldier muttered feverishly.

"—AND EVERY CHILD COULD TELL YOU THAT YOU'VE GOT NO BRAINS TO INTERFERE!" bellowed the voices. By now, the snail seemed to be getting nauseous from all of the sweat on the man holding it, who was currently in the process of running for the nearest building. As the voices let out a growing moan, he slammed the door behind him, and mercifully, the other end picked up.

"Lieutenant Sims here, what is your emergency?" drawled a bored voice over the line.

"First you see us... then you don't..." came the voices from outside, just audible enough to still be terrifying.

"I-I-I n-n-need r-reinforcements! H-Help! S-Someone, anyone—"

"Now you hear us... now you won't..." came the whispers again. "It's our secret of survival in a very nasty world!"

The Marine's shuddering redoubled as he stared around in terror. "W-W-We're completely
outmatched, we're b-b-being torn apart by the b-boatload, oh no, oh God—!

"H-Hey, hey! Pull yourself together, Marine!" Lieutenant Sims barked hastily. "Hurry up and talk some sense, damn it!"

"Now you feel us… now you can't!"

"Oh-God-oh-God-oh-God-oh-God—!"

"DAMN IT, MARINE, WHO THE HELL IS ATTACKING YOU!?"

"Are we real? Perhaps we aren't!"

"DEMONS!" the Marine howled in terror. "T-THEY'RE DEMONS, THEY'RE FUCKING DE—!"

"Demons, eh…"

The Marine trailed off into a terrified gurgle as a metal-clad hand suddenly snagged the back of his skull and held it tight.

"Demons… Pffahahaha… you know, I actually really like that. Yeah… Tony Tony Chopper, Nami, and Jeremiah Cross and Soundbite: the Demon Trio. I really, really like it. It's, shall we say… appropriate?"

The soldier could only whimper as the metal fingers slowly increased their pressure upon his scalp.

"See, on the crew, we already have what we call 'The Monster Trio'. Luffy, Zoro and Sanji. They're our top three fighters, our monsters. You see them, you immediately know that you're fucked because they can destroy you in a second. They're monsters, they're immediate threats, it's just who they are."

The Marine's whimper devolved into a squeal when a pair of toothy smiles filled his peripheral vision. "Ah, but demons… demons are normal, you see. They walk like normal people, talk like normal people, laugh, cry and love like normal people… Until you piss them off. Until you make them take off their mask and they show you what lies beneath. Because when that happens…"

Cross suddenly reared the Marine's head back—

CRASH!

—and slammed it straight through the nearest table he could find, crushing his head into the floorboards below.

"We give you nothing short of hell itself!" Cross snarled at the yet-active Transponder Snail.

The Snail's response was to roll its eyes up in their sockets and keel over with a whimper.

Cross blinked in surprise before chuckling sheepishly as he scratched the side of his head. "Damn, I think I scared myself a little there," he admitted. However, he then paused in his ministrations and allowed himself yet another grin. "Still, though… the Demon Trio… heheheh… I'll have to run that by them…"

And with that, the Pirate spun on his heel and started walking down the street.

"It's our secret of survival, secret of survival, secret of survival," he sang beneath his breath as he strolled back into the fog, spinning a crackling rod of metal in his fingers as he went. "It's our secret
of survival in a very, very, very nasty world…”

"So nasty…” the fog purred in agreement as it swallowed him whole.

-A-

Apoo’s eye twitched furiously as he stared at the yet-grinning Transponder Snail. "Apapa… well, if I didn't think it was a dumb idea to try messing with Cross before…”

"Ah, C-Captain, are you sure about this?"

"Eh?” Scratchman Apoo blinked as he was brought back to the there and then before glancing over at the crewmember next to him, who was practically quaking in his boots, and scoffed. "Bah! It's three ships! And the highest-ranking officer is a Commodore! Perfectly manageable.” He sent a pointed glance at the Transponder Snail on a table next to him. "Of course, that's if our intelligence is correct."

"Hey, don't underestimate our intelligence skills!” the mask-sporting snail retorted indignantly. "This is accurate as of yesterday, I'd bet Porche's makeup kit on it!"

"Not if you want to remain a man, you won't!"

Apoor rolled his eyes as Foxy and his first mate descended into their third argument of the conversation. "Why did I have to scrape the bottom of the barrel… bah, anyway. Did you at least dig up some information on what the officers are capable of?” he asked in an attempt to get things back on track.

The line was occupied by the sound of scuffling for a few more minutes before the snail re-donned its mask and spoke up again. "Right, right, where's that file… ah, got it! Task Force Cerberus. They're a rapid response force for this part of the Grand Line, supposed to be able to respond to any disturbance in a matter of hours.” He sneered with a grim scowl. "Not surprised Sengoku is recalling them; if he has more than fifteen battleships able to sortie in a few hours' notice at Marineford, I'll eat my own boxing gloves. Anyway, they're led by Commodore Blakely. She's an expert with wires, and recently upgraded from steel to that newfangled Wapometal for more versatility. Very, very dangerous, on the fast track for promotion to Vice Admiral."

The Roar of the Sea's exasperation promptly morphed into wariness. "Apa… and… you know this how, exactly?"

The long-arm's gut dropped when the grin on the other end suddenly became one that he had grown to associate with Cross. "Oooh, a few ways. One is that I have quite the extensive crew who don't all wear their masks 24/7 and who write reports upon returning from bar-hopping during shore-leave." Foxy's grin redoubled. "Another is that Blakely has a tendency to be sloppy with her paperwork, and a new friend of mine was kind enough to share his contacts with me recently. Very… feh feh feh, well-placed contacts, shall we say?"

Apoor's wariness snapped straight to full-on dread. "Remind me, what the hell is your bounty again?!!"

"FEeeeeEEH FEH FEH FEH FEH FEH-~!"

"Er, captain? The other two officers?"

"—FEH FEH FE-—" The laughter abruptly cut off in favor of a sharp cough. "R-Right, moving on to the two Captains. One of them is Narwhal. Big guy, very strong, wields a supersized bazooka with
special ammunition. Oh, and it's also a hammer. Needless to say, he's their primary long-range firepower. Then there's Lazor. He wields a pair of bladed tonfa, and he's quite good with them. Those two are strong for Captains, but, well, they're still Captains. No match for a pair of powerful crews like yourselves."

{You got that damn straight!}

Apoo glanced to the other captain he was sailing with and nodded in acknowledgement. "Captain Dugong agrees with you, Foxy."

"Of course he does! I know what I'm talking about! FEH HEH HEH HEH HEH HEH HEH HEH!"

Captain Dugong turned away from the masked Transponder Snail to shoot a flat look at Apoo. {Remind me how you got involved with working with us, again?}

Apoo grimaced and glanced at the cackling snail. "Because I slipped up when I talked to the damn bastard on my way here and he figured out that I'm really friends with Cross." He paused for a second before shrugging and tilting his head side to side. "Aaaand I figured out that he's actually a subordinate of the Straw Hats, so for all that he's arrogant and I'm a bit ticked off that he's not here with us so as to maintain his anonymity, it's not like he's actually that bad of a guy."

"FEH HEH HEH HEH HEH HEH HEH HEH HEH HEH HEH HEH HEH HEH HEH HEH HEH HEH HEH HEH!

Both Apoo and Captain Dugong glanced at one another with twitching eyebrows as Foxy continued to cackle at his self-proclaimed "genius". Before they could do more than that, though, another Kung Fu Dugong soared out of the water and landed on the deck, before lowering himself into a low bow to Captain Dugong.

[Captain, sir!] the Dugong barked. [We've located Task Force Cerberus, and the Great Kung Fu Galleon and its consorts are in position!]

[Good work!] Captain Dugong replied. [Prep the ships for action and wait for the signal!]

[Aye-aye!] And with that, the dugong bowed again and dove back into the water.

{We're good to go,} Captain Dugong signed to Apoo, followed by a series of numbers. {That sufficient for navigation?}

"Should be," was Apoo's reply. "Alright, we have our course! Bearing 308 degrees, maximum sail! Gun crews are to man the cannons!"

"Aye aye, captain!" came the decidedly unenthusiastic reply.

Captain Dugong quirked an eyebrow at that. {Are you sure they'll fight?}

"They'll fight, much as they grumble about me being utterly nutso," Apoo replied with an enthusiastic grin. "Gotta get them used to my stunts somehow, right?"

"FEH HEH HEH FEH FEH FEH FEH FEH FEH FEH FEH—Oh, wait, is that—? Feh heh, what a coincidence, we just spotted our target, too! I'll call you guys back once we're done so that we can meet up and have some drinks! On me, of course, because we're gonna be swimming in Marine alcohol once we finish with this raid! Good luck to you, my friends! FEH HEH HEH FEH FEH FEH FEH FEH—KA-LICK!"

Captain Dugong and Apoo rolled their eyes as the Transponder Snail clicked off, and the two settled back to keeping an eye on the horizon as the Stay Tuned tacked on the course set. It wasn't long
before the sterns of the Marine battleships came into view, under full sail. Sadly, whatever the virtues of the Marine battleships, with their broad, deep, and very heavy hulls, speed was not one of them, and the Stay Tuned was rapidly gaining. The Marines, naturally, noticed this and began to turn around to face them.

"Captain…" one crewmember whined nervously.

"Wait for it…" Apoo muttered.

"Captain!"

"Wait for it…"

By now, all three battleships were broadside to the Stay Tuned, their gun turrets lumbering around to point some very large-caliber cannons at them.

"CAPTAIN!" the crew shouted as one.

"Alright, alright! Bunch of wimps…" Sighing, Apoo put his fingers to his lips and blew, producing a deep, reverberating sound that seemed to vibrate the whole ocean. Then it passed, and for a moment, nothing happened.

Then, out of nowhere, three ships—one old, battered, and wearing its barnacles proudly, and two that would have passed for Marine ships were it not for their new turtleshell-pattern paint jobs—surfaced right underneath the Marine task force's keels, lifting the battleships under the combined force of their surfacing and the muscle power of the Dugongs manning them.

Of course, as physics dictated, what goes up must come down, and the battleships promptly fell off and onto their sides.

"Apapapapapa!" Apoo cackled as Marines began to swarm over the battleships' exposed side, snapping into the first stance of the Double-Joints Martial Arts Style. "Ready for a fight, Cappy?"

Captain Dugong smirked eagerly as he held his flipper out to his side. His first mate was swift to fill the waiting palm with a rod of green steel, a shimmering curved blade coming out of one side. Captain flexed his flipper around the naginata, spinning it around his form enough times that, were he even marginally less skilled, he'd be sliced to ribbons. Not to mention the railing suddenly acquiring a wood carving of Captain Dugong himself popping a thumbs up.

"Apapapapapa! Great answer!" Apoo cackled, putting his boot up on the railing. "Now… let's do this!"

And with that, the two Captains leapt over the edge of the ship and straight into battle.

-o-

"…OK, Cross, be honest with me: how long were you planning that horror show back there?" Nami asked at last, jabbing her thumb over her shoulder as we strolled down the street and away from the scene of utmost carnage we'd created not a minute earlier.

I chuckled grimly as I folded my arms behind my head. "Come now, guys, you really think that with literally all of the thousands of inside jokes from my home at my disposal, Soundbite and I haven't planned at least a few dozen instances just like this for scenarios just like these? I thought we'd take advantage of a bad situation and, you know, have a little fun." I tilted my head to grin at them. "You saying you guys didn't have fun, or that you don't like the little badass moniker I came up with for us
Nami glanced away with a slight blush as she scratched her cheek. "...More than my sanity is willing to admit..." she muttered sheepishly.

"For the sake of my Hippocratic Oath, I think I'll refrain from answering," Chopper deadpanned as he stared straight ahead.

"Still say that we should be a QUARTET," Soundbite sniffed in faux indignation.

"Not a chance, our crew is composed of Trios and that is an immutable fact," I scoffed as I waved my hand casually. "To change that would be to irrevocably warp the fabric of reality itself."

"What about the TDWS?" Chopper pointed out.

"Pre-packaged, doesn't count."

"Still—!"

"Before we can start arguing over semantics," Nami cut in. "Does anyone know how far we are from the courthouse?" Her expression and clouds both darkened as she shot sidelong glares at us. "And any commentary on my position or my abilities will be met with pain, got it? Just tell me when we'll hit the—"

She cut herself off as we turned a corner, revealing the courthouse looming larger than life over a rather impressive courtyard that was currently a scene of one-sided carnage as the rest of our small force demolished the last remnants of the Marine defense force.

"...courthouse. Well, that answers that. Should we join in?"

"Eh, I dunno," I snickered, crossing my gauntlets behind my head. "Personally, I've already had my fill of petty fights for the moment. I'm fine with enjoying what's left of the show."

"Speak for yourself!" Lassoo howled as he leapt off my shoulder and charged into the fray with bloodthirsty eagerness.

Chopper watched the hound go with a slight twitch in his eye. "Our whole crew is just a bundle of neuroses, isn't it?"

"But they're our neurotics, so it all balances out," Nami pointed out with a dry chuckle.

"Anyway, let's start walking; by the time we get over there, they should have finished and reached the front doors," I chuckled, taking my own advice and striding up to the massive structure.

And indeed, the time that we arrived at the doors, carefully picking our way around piles of downed Marines stacked like cordwood, was the same time that the rest of our crewmates reached it.

Of course, the first to greet us was a certain Hurricane of Love spinning up to grab our Navigator's hands.

"NAMI-SWAN!" Sanji cheered exuberantly. "I'm so glad to see that you were victorious in your battles! And might I just say that your clouds make you look as truly angelic as dear Conis herse—!"

THWAP!

"Ow!" Sanji flinched before rubbing the back of his head with a sheepish chuckle. "Ah, sorry,
Nami-Swan, I was just so happy to see you again, and—eh?” Sanji cut himself off and stared down in confusion at the arm-like bands of cloud wrapped around him. "Uh…?"

"Grgrggh, stupid damn—!" Nami hissed in an embarrassed tone as she all but strangled her wrist.

"Pfhehehe!" I snickered behind my fist. "I take back what I said before: no need to bother yourself with getting therapy, this is just too much fun!"

THWAP!

"Ow!" I flinched and chuckled anew as I rubbed the spot where the cloud had clocked me over the head. "Though admittedly I'll have to watch what I say around you, but eh, small price to pay."

THWAP-THWAP!

The pair of blows, organic and meteorological alike, only made me laugh harder.

Soundbite, meanwhile, shot a cheeky grin at his fellow shoulder-rider. "HOW'D THE headcount contest turn out?"

"Alas!" Su put the back of her paw to her forehead with an exaggerated sigh. "Alas, my dear companion put up an effort most valiant, but she lost by a matter of dozens! I'm afraid that she'll be swabbing poopdeck for the foreseeable future."

"And I'll be using your stupid fluffy tail to do every inch of it!" Conis growled vehemently, strangling the air as she glared bloody murder at her companion.

"You'll have to catch me fi~irst," Su sang as she swished her tail back and forth.

"Good luck hiding WITH ME ON the case!" Soundbite leered mockingly.

"Oh, I imagine that my task will be much easier once I have myself a little slimy snack." The cloud-fox emphasized her point with a snap of her fangs.

The boisterous gastropod responded with his own chomp. "Bring it on."

"Oh, you know I wi—!

"Unless the peanut gallery has anything meaningful to add," Zoro thankfully interrupted, causing the animals to flinch and grin self-consciously. "Let's move on before the damn bastards who have been trailing us in the shadows catch up to us. Agreed?" There was a moment of muttered agreements from us all. "Good. Leo, you want in on this?"

"A chance to deface yet more Government property?" Leo grinned eagerly as he spun his katana into a ready position. "Hell yes."

"Hey, hey, hey, hold on a second, you guys," I said hastily, jogging up beside them. "Go ahead and slash the doors, if you must, but leave the pieces in place, alright? I need a second to tell everyone what's up next."

The human and Dugong glanced at one another in confusion for a moment before shrugging indifferently. They then proceeded to move, and while the door looked like it was intact, I could definitely feel a stiff breeze flowing through it.

"Alright, then, everyone gather up!" I raised my voice, garnering the attention of pirate, shipwright,
King Bull, and thug alike. "Phase one, the approach, is complete," I announced calmly. "Phase two, commencing ingress, proceeds as follows: we the Straw Hats head inside and towards the roof, where Luffy should be waiting for us, and the rest of you work on pulling the levers, located in the towers of the courthouse, in order to lower the drawbridge while keeping as many mooks as you can from following us, and making sure that they don't stop the bridge from lowering. Though don't sweat it if you can't..." I grinned maliciously. "We'll still have a way in even if the bridge gets stopped. Everyone clear on the plan?"

Once more, everyone nodded in agreement.

"Glad to hear it! Now, then..." I gestured at Lassoo, prompting him to pad over me and leap into the air, allowing me to catch him and point his cannon-form at the door. "If you'll pardon me, I'm going to take this opportunity to say Number 9 on my List Of Things I Want To Say At Least Once In The Right Context™, which I composed after saying number one awhile back! And yes..." I tilted my head with a grin as I narrowed my eye and steadied Lassoo. "You did hear a trademark in that. FIRE!"

**KA-BOOM!**

I strode through the gaping hole in the courthouse's doors as the smoke and rubble settled, Lassoo balanced on my shoulder and a shit-eating grin on my face.

"Order in the court," I announced confidently.

"Oy vey..." I heard Nami groan behind me.

"You swiss-cheesy motherfucker!" Soundbite guffawed.

"Hey, it's a quote bucket list for a reason!" I chuckled as I looked through the settling dust.

It took me a minute to get past the fact that there was a large group of mooks looking at me, and the sheer scale of the courthouse; seriously, I'd been in more than a few impressive churches in my time, and damn, but this place was on par with Notre Dame in sheer stature. Then I turned towards the three-headed judge who was standing nearest the front, debating the appropriate course of action with himself. Then, questioning my sanity in every way possible, I proceeded to open my mouth...

"Oh, a princess!" I cried, pointing at the center head.

Soundbite's expression promptly became fell into poleaxed confusion. "UHH... are you quite SANE?"

Meanwhile, the central head gained a demure grin. "How sweet of you to notice," he purred.

The next instant, naturally, found the other two heads slamming into him. "DON'T ENCOURAGE HIM, YOU RABBLE-ROUSER!" they roared at me.

Soundbite shifted his look to the cerberus-human. "THE HELL—?"

"Oh, so that's why the Central Freeway is closed for repair, because you keep headbutting it," I called out in a tone of realization.

"Precisely!" the center head said, only to be bashed again.

"SHADDAP!" the two other heads growled before turning to me. "AND THE SAME TO YOU!"
My snail promptly 'ah'd in realization. "**Now I get it! THEY'RE ALL INSANE, aren't they?**"

"Exactly! Though the one in the middle is easily the worst. I wonder if I can mess with them a little —!" **THWACK! **"OW!"

"You're taking too long, Cross," Zoro growled as I clutched the back of my skull in agony. "You're the one who keeps telling us that time isn't on our side. Start taking your own advice."

"Ugh, spoilsport," I grumbled as I pinned him with a stinkeye. "Hey, we're coming up on a bit that's as serious as the grave and I wanted to have a *little* more fun before we got into it, sue me!"

"GLADLY!" yelled Baskerville and several onlooking soldiers as they drew their weapons.

My eye twitched in annoyance as I remembered where we were and stepped out of the way. "On second thought? Slice 'em up. And when it comes to the big boy, either aim horizontal or go straight down the middle."

"Right," Zoro grunted before adopting a familiar stance. Then the air began to ripple around him and his swords. Any other instance, I'd probably be wondering how the hell he managed to pull this move off.

"Three Sword Style: Charming Demon Sleepless Night…" Zoro's eyes flashed malevolently. "**ONI GIRI!**"

But right now? I was quite content to watch as the Marines fell like rain, Judge Baskerville included.

"Now," Zoro grunted as he re-sheathed Wado Ichimonji. "Let's get going."

"Lay on, MacDuff," I said, sweeping my arm forward before glancing over my shoulder at Nami. "Or, well, *Lady* MacDuff as it were."

"Not so fast," growled a trio of voices, and I turned with annoyance but not much surprise to see the three part-giants pushing themselves back up. Their outfit had been reduced to tatters, but they seemed hardly worse for the wear judging by their glares and steady stances. "Court is in session."

"We plead guilty, and sentence ourselves to breaking out of Impel Down if we lose to CP9, and freedom if we don't," Sanji drawled.

"**COURT DISMISSED! BRING IN THE DANCIN' LOBSTERS!**" Soundbite cackled.

It was a true testament to the trio's synchronicity that all three of their foreheads erupted with infuriated veins at once.

"You dare to pass judgment in our courtroom?" Bas snarled.

"Such impudence!" Kerville growled around grinding teeth.

"In this sacred house of justice…" 'Princess' rumbled murderously.

In a flash of motion, the trio surged forwards at us, swinging their blade down like a guillotine.

"**WE ARE THE LAW!**" they howled.

I got ready to duck behind Zoro…

**KA-BOOM!**
But found the motion to be suddenly rendered moot on account of the Judge(s) whipping their blade up to block an incoming cannonball.

"Hey, now…"

Attention shifted over to Zambai as he marched up to the judge with his still-smoking bazooka perched on his shoulder, flanked by the Square Sisters on one side and Galley-La's foremen on the other.

"I realize that we might not be as photogenic as the Straw Hats," Zambai continued as he loaded a new shell in his cannon. "But don't forget that we're in on this party too. We've got our own pride to think about, damn it!" He shot a thumbs up at us with a smirk. "You guys go on ahead and save your crewmate. Just leave this clown to us."

"And by the way, here." Paulie dug an envelope out of his jacket and tossed it to me. "I'd love to stuff this down Lucci's throat myself, but I'm not that delusional. Just make sure that damn bastard gets the message. Clear?"

I grinned and gave the rope-master a two-fingered salute. "You got it. Give 'em hell, good sir!"

"DO YOU REALLY THINK WE'LL LET YOU GET PAST US!?" Baskerville roared as they swung their blade back.

CLANG!

"YOU DON'T GET A SAY IN THE MATTER!" the Square sisters shot back as they blocked the swing in tandem.

"THAT'S RIGHT!" Tilestone bellowed as he pumped his fists in agreement.

"You think we can manage the Tree Nail Lock here?" Lulu asked, hammer and nails at the ready.

"It's sure worth a shot," Paulie replied with a grin as the collective Baskerville dodged another bazooka blast from Zambai.

"Well, looks like they've got this handled," Nami announced with a confident nod. "Come on, let's get moving!"

"Right behind you, Nami-swan!" Sanji spun after her eagerly, with the rest of us dead on her tail. With my eye on Zoro the whole time, we made it to the stairs easily enough. But unfortunately, as we neared the top…

"Guilty. Guilty."

I tensed in terror as a fucking demented voice hit my ears and I put my head on a swivel. "Shit, those crazy-ass Jurymen! Soundbite, where are they?!"

"Ah…" Soundbite spun his eyestalks around for a second—

"GUILTY!"

—before snapping them upwards in horror. "ABOVE!"

I looked up along with him and I very nearly lost my lunch when I caught sight of a huge-ass ball of metal falling towards us from the rafters!
"MIGHT OF DAVID!"

Up until Mikey leapt at Leo and spring-boarded off of his crossed blades in order to leap up into the air, gripping each of his nunchucks tightly in his flippers, and caught said ball of metal with the freaking chain!

And he wasn't alone. While Mikey leapt at Leo, Donny spring-boarded off of Raphey's sai and rocketed up at an angle, shooting right past the ball—

"HEROD'S WRATH!"

At just the right angle to spin and slam his bo-staff into the ball, sending both it and the vengeance-addled Juryman attached to it plummeting into the courtroom below.

Unfortunately, not only was the musclebound prisoner swift to get back on his feet…

"GUILTY! GUILTY! GUILTY!"

He was swiftly joined by ten others just like him.

"They're coming out of the damn woodwork!" Raphey cursed vehemently.

Leo ground his teeth for a second as he observed the crowd of praetorian-esque soldiers before suddenly leaping over the edge of the staircase. "TEENAGE DUGONG WARRIOR SQUAD, WITH ME!"

"RIGHT!" the rest of the adolescent Dugongs barked as they leapt after him.

"Wait, what the—!? WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING!?" Boss roared after his students.

"WE'RE HOLDING THE LINE!" Leo shouted back as he and his teammates fell back to back, doing their best to keep all of their madly grinning opponents in sight. "YOU GUYS GO ON AHEAD, WE'LL KEEP THESE PSYCHOS OFF YOUR TAILS!"

Boss ground his teeth for a second before making the executive decision to snap his ropedart out at his pupils, albeit with the thermal-option deactivated. "THE HELL YOU BASTARDS ARE!"

Mikey's response was to shoot the dart out of the air with a swiftly drawn pistol. "THE HELL WE AREN'T!" he shouted back as he aimed his pistols about. "THIS IS OUR CHOICE, BOSS! SOMEBODY NEEDS TO WATCH YOUR BACKS, IT MIGHT AS WELL BE US!"

"YOU GO ON AHEAD AND RESCUE ROBIN, WE'VE GOT YOUR SIX!" Donny reassured us with a spin of his staff.

"DON'T WORRY ABOUT US!" Raphey roared as she ground her sai together in a flurry of sparks. "WE'RE THE GUARD FORCE OF THE STRAW HAT PIRATES! IF WE CAN'T HOLD OUR OWN, NO ONE CAN!"

"AND IN THE END," Leo tensed as he held his blades at the ready. "THERE'S ONE IMMUTABLE FACT THAT JUST CAN'T BE IGNORED! TO HOLD THE LINE IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY FOR THE SAKE OF ONE'S COMRADES…"

"Oh, here it comes…" Nami groaned as she ground her palm into her forehead. Still, she was smiling just as wide as the rest of us.
The quartet of warriors proceeded to leap at the Jurymen.

"THIS IS A MAN’S DUTY!"

Boss ground his teeth furiously as he watched his students brawl against the behemoths. "You little —! IF YOU BOYS DIE, I WILL PUNCH THE REAPER’S LIGHTS OUT SO THAT I CAN FISH YOU OUT OF HELL, AND PERSONALLY PUT YOU BACK THERE MYSELF!"

"GOOD LUCK, GUYS!" Usopp waved eagerly.

"DON’T FALL BEFORE THE BOYS DO, RAPHEY! GIRL POWER!" Su shouted.

"GO FOR THE GROIN!" Vivi encouraged. Every male in earshot paused long enough to shoot her a glare, the sole exception being Sanji, and even he didn't protest the many, many stinkeyes.

"Anyway, come on!" I waved for everyone to follow me as I continued up the stairs. "They've got this, now it's time that we do our part! And no cutting through the damn ceiling!" I shouted at Zoro.

"Tch…"

"WHY NOT? WHY ARE WE taking the long way to the roof?" Soundbite asked.

"Because if my memory serves me right…" I glanced upwards warily. "Odds are that Luffy is currently fighting Blueno, and we don't want to get in the middle of i—wait, what am I thinking? Can't you hear them?"

Soundbite visibly resisted the urge to somehow facepalm as he narrowed his eyestalks in concentration.

"I HEAR TWO GUYS up there besides the cap'n, and only ONE is conscious. Judging by the breath and heart pattern, BLUENO IS K.O. Currently, Luffy’s fighting the other guy. Going by the fur, IT MUST BE THAT WOLF ZOAN YOU MENTIONED."

"JABRA?!" I snapped my head around to stare at Soundbite in shock.

"Yeah… but he sounds almost SCARED—OHHH, THAT'D DO IT!" Soundbite suddenly cackled ecstatically. "LUFFY’S pissed. HE’S ABOUT TO BECOME doggy kibble!!"

"Wait, the wolf was mine, right? Who am I going to fight now?" Sanji grumbled.


Sanji promptly combusted. "That'll work," he snarled in malevolent eagerness.

"Speaking of…" I cast a sidelong glance at Soundbite.

The gastropod's expression promptly soured. "Yeah, I got them. Robin and Franky are hurt…" His scowl morphed into a grimace. "And everything about the bastard gloating in front of them reads SCUM OF THE EARTH."

"Yeah, well—WOAH!" I hissed in panic as I suddenly slammed myself back behind a corner I’d been about to round, narrowly missing a bullet aimed for my head. "Yeah, well, take solace in the fact that we're going to make his life suck very soon. Can you tell me when he looks out his window in a panic?"
"Oh, yeah, easily!"

"Good," I flicked my baton out as I got ready to head out. "Then do that, and then we'll really be able to make that bastard squirm. For now, however?"

I joined my crewmates in charging the hapless defenders.

"GET THEM!"

-o-

"We're a few nautical miles from our destination, Captain!" Apis called down from the crow's nest. She then glanced up at the seagull wheeling away from them with a hesitant look before continuing. "And can I just say that I really don't like this plan? I've been talking to our guide, and according to him, this place's reputation undersells the reality! Birds don't even chance flying over it unless they can enter the stratosphere, and even then they consider it a gamble!"

Bartolomeo menacingly leered up at the Whisper-Girl. "So, basically, what you're saying is that it's a hellish deathtrap that no sane entity, human or otherwise, would ever dare enter no matter what?"

Apis hesitated slightly before exchanging uneasy looks with Lindy and then looking back down at their captain in dread. "Yes?"

Bartolomeo's shark-like grin all but split his face. "Perfect!"

The girl hung her head with a tearful sob. "Why, oh, why couldn't we have been saved by the Straw Hats?" she moaned dismally.

Lindy warbled thoughtfully.

Apis' head promptly jerked as the point hit her dead-on. "Oh, yeah, you're right… they would have been worse, wouldn't they?"

"You got that damn right!" Valentine and 5 called up in acrid tones.

"SHUT IT!" Barto barked at the top of his lungs before nodding at Apis and jabbing a thumb at the crew's newest Transponder Snail. "Alright, brat, get this snail to call the biggest fish it knows and let's get this show on the road!"

Miss Goldenweek cocked an eyebrow in dull interest as she watched the other pre-adolescent on the crew converse with the snail, biting into a ricecracker she was holding before angling her head towards Gin. "Remind me why we're doing this again?"

Gin maintained his own neutral expression as he angled his head towards the painter. "According to the Boss, we're calling the Marines so that we can take credit for attacking that Noble and draw whichever Admiral they send after us on a wild goose chase, which is why we're in these godforsaken waters in the first place."

Goldenweek hummed noncommittally as she sank her teeth into the cracker. "And in reality?"

Gin moaned wearily as he pinched the bridge of his nose. "He wants to taunt the Marines for shits and giggles because he thinks it's fun as hell and because it's what he thinks the Straw Hats would do."

Goldenweek's cracker snapped in half in her mouth. "…You ever wonder how the hell we got into
"Every single day." Gin held his pose for a second before allowing a minor smile to quirk out from behind his hand. "Mind you, that doesn't mean I'd want to be anywhere else."

"Preach it," the diminutive artist drawled as she held up a fist, which Gin met halfway with his own.

"EVERYONE CLAM IT!" Barto suddenly bellowed at the top of his lungs, causing his crew to fall silent as he jabbed a thumb at the vibrating snail resting on a nearby crate. "It's ringing! We should get a connection any sec—!"

He was promptly interrupted by the Snail in question barking out a KA-LICK! and snapping to attention.

Barto turned to face the snail with a grin that was equal parts shiteating and bloodthirsty, his arms and fingers crossed in front of his chest.

"Helloooooo, Marine Headquarters! This is Black Bart Bartolomeo, calling to—!"

"We know exactly who you are, Black Bart," came a voice that was most decidedly not Fleet Admiral Sengoku—or any Marine officer, for that matter. It was, however, powerful enough to freeze Bartolomeo in place. "And we would like to know how you managed to get ahold of this number and why you are calling us."

Bartolomeo hesitated for a moment before steeling his back and transitioning his leer into a scowl. "I stole this snail off the ship of a World Noble whose nose I personally—" The hooligan-turned-pirate shot a warning look at his first mate, cowing him into silence before continuing. "Broke with my bare knuckles. I'm calling you bastards so that I can take credit for the public service I committed, and so that I can lay a message at the feet of the highest fucker on the foodchain I can get my hands on."

It was a credit to the speaker that he didn't even twitch an inch as he regarded Bartolomeo by proxy with an expression akin to boredom. "And what you would like to share with us?" it requested.

SLAM!

The crew of the Cannibal jumped in shock as Bartolomeo slammed his hands on both sides of the crate so that he could better loom over the snail, his visage absolutely beastly.

"Come and fucking get me, pigs," he spat venomously.

There was a moment of silence, followed by the voice speaking up with only a trace of anger amidst the flat calm. "Well, seeing as you managed to acquire one of the few Transponder Snails in the world with a direct line to we, the Five Elder Stars, I suppose you may very well consider your message as having been received."

Mr. 5 and Miss Valentine, along with several of their crewmates, promptly fainted, whereas Gin had to scramble to simultaneously catch an insensate Apis before she could hit the deck and whack Miss Goldenweek on the back as she inhaled her ricecracker whole and started choking on it.

Bartolomeo's smile, meanwhile, dropped into an expression of utmost horror that indicated that he was only a few seconds away from voiding his bowels. However, said expression remained in place for only five seconds before his grin returned, more bestial than human now.

"Well, while I still have your attention…" he growled. "Do your fucking worst."
The Transponder Snail narrowed its eyes and leaned forward in turn. "Admiral Akainu and five battleships will be with you shortly to do just that."

Bartolomeo opened his mouth to say something else—

"WOAHSHIT!"

When a wave of pure presence suddenly swept over the deck. The barrier-man only just managed to stay conscious and catch himself on the crate he was leaning over as the wave struck him like a sledgehammer. The rest of his crew, however, wasn't even remotely so lucky. Rather, about half of them collapsed on the spot with foam bubbling from their mouths. Not even the snail from which the wave originated was spared, and the connection was cut as it too sank into blissful unconsciousness.

Bartolomeo took a few minutes to regain his senses, upon which he turned towards the only other person on the ship who was not out cold. "I think we got their attention," he said in an attempt at bravado.

"No fucking shit. So, what are we going to do now, Captain?" Gin whispered harshly; he had no idea what that was, but neither Krieg nor Straw Hat nor anything that he had experienced since he swore his loyalty to Bartolomeo had been remotely close to that level of intimidation. It was the final confirmation to him that he was insane, if he was opposing anyone capable of doing that through a freaking Transponder Snail call.

"Now?" Bartolomeo asked before adopting an ear-to-ear sharktooth grin. "Now we run."

Gin swallowed heavily before nodding firmly. "I never thought I'd say this about retreating… but that's what I was hoping you'd say."

"Alright, everybody hop to it! Drop the sails and get us moving, now now now!"

It was slow going; many of those onboard were clearly in no hurry to wake up, and only the elapsed time and sailing managed to counterbalance that enough that they had enough people up and working to sail the Cannibal. The fear of what was coming was a mixed motivator; some of the crew were spurred on to avoid it, while others were too overwhelmed to stay conscious.

Eventually, however, the moment that they were waiting for (read: absolutely dreading) arrived: all at once, the wind ceased moving them forward, and the tide ceased swaying beneath them.

"So, Captain," Miss Goldenweek grit out nervously as she stared over the edge of the Cannibal at the unnaturally placid waters they were floating in. "I'll admit that the Calm Belt is probably the safest place in the world to hide from the small army after our hides; they may be able to somehow slip through with their ships, but that won't keep the Sea Kings from seeing them when they surface to get us. But there’s one thing that I—and all of us for that matter—want to know."

"How do you expect us to survive here long enough for Sengoku to get a leash back on the Mad Dog?"

"Hehahahaha!" Bartolomeo threw his head back and roared with laughter as he crossed his arms and fingers. "It's simple, brat! Hell, it's so simple, it's pure brilliance! See, Sea Kings are just like dinosaurs, right? And the thing about dinosaurs is that they won't go after anything that's not moving! So, so long as we don't start paddling or rocking the Cannibal too much and keep quiet for a few days until this whole mess blows over, then we'll be in the free and clear! Genius, huh?"

For how tense the atmosphere became, they may as well have been experiencing the air deficiency that came from the White Sea.
"And how exactly do you figure that that will work when literally nobody else has ever done that?"
Valentine whispered incredulously.

"Because they're always in such a hurry to get out of the Calm Belt, of course! They never stick
around long enough to try it!"

Silence reigned anew for a moment until Apis hesitantly raised a hand. "Captain… w-where exactly
did you learn about Sea Kings having dynamic vision?"

"Eh?" Bartolomeo blinked at the whisper-girl in confusion. "It's an old sea legend that's been floatin'
around docks of Loguetown for years. Why do you ask?"

There was a moment of utter, horrified silence as the entirety of the crew stared at Bartolomeo with a
variety of emotions.

Then… the silence was broken by a pop!

In a moment, the crew of the Cannibal was at the ship's railing and staring at the waters of the Calm
Belt.

Specifically, they were staring at a spot a few meters away from their ship… where a trail of lone
bubbles was slowly drifting to the surface and popping, one after another after another.

"…Captain… permission to speak freely?" Mr. 5 asked in a voice that might have been calm had it
not been an octave higher than usual.

Bartolomeo swallowed heavily as a sheen of cold sweat started to shine on his brow. "You know I
don't give two shits whether ya do or don't."

"Then in that case…"

Yet another bubble pop!-ed…

And suddenly the ocean erupted with the bubbles of surfacing Sea Kings.

"YOU COMPLETE AND UTTER FUCKING MORON!"

'Gold with anger' wasn't usually an appropriate description for describing unholy wrath. In fact, some
might even consider such a description to be utterly ridiculous.

And if anyone in Marineford had failed to see the logic in that phrase before that day, they had it
thoroughly hammered home very, very hard as their highest superior fumed in response to the
numerous status reports coming to him. It was hard to tell how much of it was due to the situation
and how much of it was due to the fact that it was still, to reiterate, the middle of the night.

"Admiral Akainu has departed with five battleships by order of the Five Elder Stars to apprehend
'Black Bart' Bartolomeo for attacking a Celestial Dragon vessel," Vice Admiral Mozambia reported
grimly. "Admirals Kizaru and Aokiji, however, remain at the ready."

"As ready as they ever are, anyways…” Sengoku grumbled darkly as he shuffled some papers about.

"Unfortunately, that's not the only crisis we have on our hands. The Emperor 'Red-Haired' Shanks
has somehow been goaded into a rampage," Vice Admiral Stainless added with a grimace. "Most of
our men on the other side of the Red Line capable of getting here in a timely manner are… no longer
"And unfortunately, those that were still available are now tied up in an entirely new fiasco," Vice Admiral Tsuru sighed wearily as she leaned on her cane. "Apparently that damn up-and-comer 'pretty boy' Cavendish decided to refresh the world's memory of himself."

"Where does his bounty sit at?" the Fleet Admiral growled.

Tsuru shook her head with a sigh. "I'm afraid that in truth, he himself isn't the issue, but rather the consequences of his actions." She gave her old friend a solemn look. "He raided a tribute ship headed for Totland… right as Big Mom got a craving for precisely what it was carrying. We suspect he might have contracted some form of clairvoyance to help him achieve her current reaction."

Sengoku's shine amped up a few notches. "Said reaction being?"

"Full-on rampage, and not only is Cavendish managing to keep ahead of her, but he seems to be headed for Wano of all places. Doflamingo and Jinbe are trying to intercept her, but I think that it would be prudent to also deploy Kuma just in case, as well as some of Vegapunk's prototypes."

"As for the rest of those damn dogs," Garp growled as he rubbed the bandage wrapped around his face. "Mihawk is incommunicado as usual, Hancock is ignoring us as usual, and according to Moria's subordinates, he has Thriller Bark set on chasing that damn razor-toothed brat Drake and another big-shot rookie named Hawkins around the Triangle, which they are somehow managing to navigate. So, unless you're willing to spring Crocodile for round two—!"

"I'm not."

"Then yeah, we're shit out of luck where the mutts are concerned." Garp shook his head with a grimace. "And that's not all. Apparently, Hawkins, Drake and Barty aren't the only rookies active. Unless I miss my guess, the Straw Hats' actions have incited something of a pissing match amongst all of this generation's up-and-comers. Who's on first?"

"Yeah, I got one, lemme see…" the perpetually grinning Vice Admiral Yamakaji grunted as he flipped through a report. "Alright, here we are: well, for starters, we have Jeremiah Cross's rival, 'Roar of the Seas' Apoo. He's leading the On-Air Pirates and some other crew to attack Task Force Cerberus for some ungodly reason. Commodore Blakely's fighting the good fight, sure, but last reports say that her ships were capsized, so…" He shrugged helplessly.

"Next up, we have the Firetank Pirates led by Capone 'Gang' Bege," Vice Admiral Strawberry drawled. "I'm afraid that there's no good way to put this, so I'll come right out with it: An hour ago, the Firetank Pirates managed to successfully infiltrate and raid Fort Lumose. They got away with every beri and every ingot held within."

Sengoku's eye twitched furiously for a moment before he slowly leaned forward to dig his fingers into the much-abused edge of the conference table. "Fort Lumose," he grit out. "Is the repository for all of the Navy's funding in Paradise. You mean to say they made a clean getaway with a quarter of our liquid assets!?"

Strawberry nodded his head solemnly, causing several of his comrades to hastily duck in order to avoid being brained. "I'm afraid so sir."

"Besides that," Vice Admiral Momonga hummed indifferently as he took the time to polish his Josho Kiryu. "Captain' Kid and his men are attempting to make a bloodbath out of Blackarm Island. Attempting being the operative word here, the instructors are putting up a hell of a fight. Though…"
He scowled grimly. "Honestly, that's not that much of a good thing, seeing as how it's just making the conflict draw out even longer.

"And of course, to cap it all off," Vice Admiral Onigumo snarled around his cigar in disgust. "I'm sure we're all quite aware of what 'Mad Monk' Urouge did on Kyuka Island."

The assembled officers all shuddered as one. What had happened on that island was… it was just wrong.

Their revulsion was then swept aside and replaced with existential terror when the room lit up like the new dawn.

"Is there any good news?" Sengoku bit out viciously, sounding about ten seconds away from trying to punch someone; and going by how the Vice Admirals were edging away from Garp, they all knew who his most likely target was.

"U-Uh…" The Hero shed buckets of sweat as he furiously racked his brains before grinning desperately. "Still no word on the Glutton or the Surgeon! No news is good news, right?"

Sengoku snorted heavily through his nose, his mouth opening for a blistering tirade—

Until the thunking of a cane garnered his attention. "Calm down, Sengoku," Vice Admiral Tsuru prompted in a bored yet stern tone. "Remember, none of us are as young as we used to be."

The Buddha-man clenched and unclenched his fists for a moment before forcing himself to relax, huffing out a weary sigh that was filled with his tension. "Yes," he admitted solemnly. "Yes, no news is very much good news."

"A-Ah, F-Fleet Admiral? W-We have an incoming d-distress call from G-76."

Then Chief Petty Officer Helmeppo poked an arm holding a tray carrying a Transponder Snail into the room, and suddenly all that tension was right back where it started. And it then proceeded to grow as a very cocky and very un-distressed voice came through the connection.

-0-

"Hellooo, Fleet Admiral Sengoku," a certain pink-haired pirate purred around the half-dozen pocky sticks she was chowing down on. "Jewelry Bonney here, giving you my fondest of hellos~!"

"Brat," the incandescently glowing gastropod snarled out viciously. "You may not know this, but my patience has been systematically worn down to nothing over the past two hours, so unless you're calling to tell me that you are doing the right and smart thing and surrendering yourself to our authority, I suggest that you—"

"Honestly, I could care less about what you have to suggest, you old fart," Bonney interrupted with a cackle, spraying crumbs all over the snail in the process. "I just wanted to call you to let you know that my men and I have, eh…" She paused to snicker, spraying more crumbs. "Invited ourselves into good ol' G-76 and are liberally helping ourselves to their larder! Oh, and ah…"

Another snicker, this time accompanied by a wave of her hand. And more crumbs, naturally. "Just so you know, we opened our doors to the island's public, so they're in here, too, eating the base's food! Aaaaalong with taking whatever isn't nailed down, and they're bringing in crowbars for whatever actually is. Oh!" She snapped her fingers in faux realization, finally swallowing. "Aaand I saw a few guys in cloaks rummaging through these real important filing cabinets, just thought you'd wanna
Bonney stretched her arms above her head as she leaned back in her seat. "I just wanted to call you up, let you know that we're having a little shindig here, sooo if you and your shiny brass boys wanna come down here and share a few drinks, we're all ready and—!

Rather than the typical KA-LICK! associated with hanging up a snail, the connection dropped in what sounded very much like a muffled explosion… which was then followed up by a KA-LICK!, as well as Bonney's practically hysterical cackling.

"Ohohohoh, maaaan, that was awesome!" the Glutton wheezed ecstatically. "I've wanted to tell that golden bastard to fuck off for ye-e-eaaars, hahaha! The only way that could have been better, the only way, would have been if that damn volcanic mutt had been there too, because then my year would be utterly made! Hahahaaaa, I have got to save some of this grub for the Straw Hats, because I owe them the mother of all giftbaskets for giving me the inspiration to pull this off! HAHAHAHAHA!

"Yeah yeah, whatever you say, you damn bottomless pit," a youthful yet perpetually tired-looking man who was lounging in a seat next to Bonney drawled, his hands moving in well-practiced motions, though touching nothing. "And just for the record, because I think that rum I picked up from the base commander's office is starting to hit me, remind me why I agreed to this brief alliance, again?"

Bonney's cackling cut off as she sent a sidelong glance at her partner in crime before sinking back into her seat, a bone that she'd already picked clean finding itself crushed between her jaws.

"Because," she drawled. "Both of us needed some way to prove that the Straw Hats aren't the only contenders in the competition for Roger's throne, and I wanted to distract the Marines long enough that the Straw Hats aren't overwhelmed at Enies, and I needed you and your crew's help to pull this 'little' stunt off." Bonney then adopted a cocky smirk as she drained the marrow from the splintered bone. "Besides, Surgeon of Death, are you saying that you aren't having fun?"

Trafalgar Law didn't fight the smirk that came over his face as he rested his hands, contemplating his handiwork with slightly drunk awe. "Absolutely not. It's been a long time since I played Jenga, so why would I turn down a friendly game? You first, by the way.

"Why, thank you very much," Bonney purred as she gave the Surgeon a mock-bow. She then stood up, and climbed one of the surgically assembled staircases surrounding a tower of precariously stacked and futilely struggling soldiers with mismatched bodies. Upon reaching her desired piece, she reeled her leg back—!

"Tenderizer!"

And whipped her foot into the Marine's skull, sending him rocketing out of his place and ricocheting off of the storage room's far wall, following which he flipped through the air and landed quite precariously on top of the pile.

Bonney pumped her fist with a cheer. "Oh, yeah! Beat that, beanpole!"

Law barely moved from where he was lounging as he grinned in reply, waving his sword through the air like a conductor's baton as he slooowly pushed another of the Marines out of the pile and floated him up to the top. Even as he worked, the usually stoic pirate's smirk grew to match Bonney's own grin.
"I'll have to thank the Straw Hats when we meet in person,' he silently reflected. 'They might be a bunch of juvenile nuthouses even by Pirate standards, but I sure as hell can't deny that I haven't had this much fun in years.'

-Incredible, isn't it Funkfreed?' Spandam crooned to his elephant-sword, his finger hovering dangerously close to the trigger mechanism that would herald the demise of Enies Lobby. "One press of a button, and a whole island disappears."

The director of CP9 snickered as he held the Golden Transponder Snail in the palm of his hand, watching the reactions of the prisoners chained to the wall of the room. Honestly, it was hard to tell what was giving him a bigger rush as he toyed with the snail: the sheer power floating just inches below his fingertips, or the expression of deliciously agonizing terror Nico Robin wore whenever he brought the snail out to begin with, much less whenever he threatened to actually activate it.

Sadly for him, Spandam's fun came to an end when one of CP9's newest Devil Fruit users entered the room with controlled haste. Spandam looked up, surprised but not startled, as a grim-faced Kaku stalked over to him, an ordinary—if awake and glowering—Transponder Snail on a tray in his hands. "Chief. Sorry to barge in like this, but to get to the point, your snail is off the hook again and we've received an urgent call from Marineford. The Straw Hats have crossed into an unprecedented level of insanity."

Spandam responded with an expression of pure incredulity. "Eh? Yeah, I already knew about that. I got a report about Straw Hat attacking earlier. He only managed to take down five guards, what of—?"

"FIVE!? ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MIND, YOU PATHETIC RAT!?"

"GYAH!" Spandam leapt out of his seat in terror when the Transponder Snail Kaku was carrying suddenly roared and flashed gold. The assassin's grip on the tray was firm, but sweat was glistening on his hands, clearly betraying his tense nerves.

Well, that and the way that his superior was desperately flailing to catch the impassive and truly Golden Snail he'd flung into the air in his terror.

Thankfully enough, Spandam managed to grab the Golden Snail without touching the doomsday button on top of its shell. After sighing in relief and stowing the snail safely in his jacket, the director promptly snapped into a shaky salute. "F-F-Fleet Admiral Sengoku, sir!" he yelped in an equally panicked and respectful tone. "W-W-What are you calling us f-for?! I-I already s-sent you my report over an hour ago! While we unfortunately lost the blueprints for the Pluton—!" He took a second to shoot a murderous glare at Cutty Flam, who responded by snapping his teeth and growling. "W-We still managed to capture Nico Robin, so the mission went off without a hitch!"

"WITHOUT A—!?" Sengoku started to bellow before cutting himself with a sidelong glance. He then sighed out a puff of infuriated breath as he lost his golden sheen, though much of his prior fury remained. "Without a hitch!? Damn it, Spandam, do you have a brick between your ears?! Haven't you gotten any reports from the main island?! Haven't you been listening to the SBS like I'm sure the whole world is doing right at this instant!?

"Ah…" Spandam hedged uneasily as he glanced at the drowsy half-awake snail on his desk.

"Er, F-Fleet Admiral, sir?" Kaku hedged uncomfortably as he mentally kicked himself for speaking up. "Chief Spandam put the Tower of Justice on lockdown shortly after we returned with Nico
Robin, as a security precaution. The drawbridge is raised and there are no communications in or out as a result, so if there are any ongoing situations on the island, all actions are being run through Judge Baskerville.

There was a moment of silence before Sengoku sighed angrily. "I suppose I can't fault you for that," he grumbled to himself.

Spandam and Kaku promptly sighed in relief, though the assassin was swift to free one of his hands and move it through the air in a precise series of motions: {I want a raise.}

Spandam rolled his eye with a scowl as he signed back. {The monkey prunes on the roof at midnight.}

Kaku's eyebrows shot up to the brim of his hat in a mix of shock and incredulity.

Spandam then frowned as he glanced down at his hands in confusion. "Wait a minute…" he muttered.

"You don't have even a second, Director Spandam!" Sengoku barked. "And that still doesn't account for the SBS!"

"EEP!" Spandam flinched back in terror before shooting a look at his desk. "I-I-I don't know what you're talking about, Fleet Admiral! Everyone in the Tower of Justice has a Transponder Snail, and nobody has reported so much as a ring of the SBS!"

"But that's—!" Sengoku started to yell before cutting off into a snarl. "Damn it… Of all the times for that loud-mouthed son of a bitch to figure out how to use the damn thing's interdiction field… Jeremiah Cross has been preventing the SBS from being broadcast to any snails near him, he's been on the air for the past two hours!"

Spandam froze, his mouth slightly open and snot starting to slide out of his nose as the implications hit him like a sledgehammer upside the head. However, even as Cutty Flam started to cackle and Nico Robin groaned in exasperated despair, the director of CP9 was swift to rally in an attempt to salvage what little (if any) dignity he still had remaining.

"P-P-Please, Fleet Admiral," he pleaded desperately. "E-Even if it is the Straw Hats, t-they're still just o-one pirate crew! T-The last message I received about Straw Hat said that h-he'd only managed to take out five of our men! H-How much damage could they have possibly have caused in a m-measly two hours!?"

Kaku paled in horror as the snail he was holding started to shine and a number of veins started bulging in a very unhealthy manner. "A-Ah, Fleet Admiral? Before you proceed to rip my superior a a new one… executive permission to speak freely?"

"Make it fast."

"Thank you, sir." And with that, Kaku gave his commander a flat look. "You had to say it, you absolute fucking idiot."

Spandam sputtered indignantly—

"YOU COMPLETE AND UTTER FAILURE OF A HUMAN BEING!"

—up until Sengoku started bellowing loudly enough to cause the windowpanes to vibrate. Kaku wisely set the snail down and backed away to what he judged to be a safe distance.
"HOW MUCH DAMAGE COULD THEY HAVE CAUSED IN TWO HOURS?! TO START, JEREMIAH CROSS SUBVERTED OIMO AND KASHI AND HAD THEM BREAK DOWN THE GATEHOUSE! THE STRAW HATS AND THE SMALL ARMY OF ALLIES THEY BROUGHT WITH THEM, SIXTY IN ALL, THEN PROCEEDED TO RUN ROUGHSHOD OVER THE REGULAR SOLDIERS! AS FOR THE ELITES, THAT THRICE-DAMNED SNAIL LEASHED THE WATCHDOGS, BASKERVILLE'S BEEN CUT DOWN, AND THE JURYMEN Aren't EVEN SLOWING THEM DOWN!"

Spandam's mind managed to peg onto at least one aspect of the rant. "W-Wait, Basker—!? Y-You mean—!?"

"THEY'RE IN THE DAMNED COURTHOUSE!" Sengoku barked. "AND IF ALL OF THAT ISN'T ENOUGH, THE ENTIRE SHITSHOW HAS BEEN BROADCAST ON THE DAMNED SBS! NOT ONLY ARE WE LOOKING EVERY BIT LIKE THE INCOMPETENT FOOLS THAT CROSS DESCRIBES US AS, HE'S INSPIRED ALL TEN OF THE OTHER BIG-SHOT ROOKIES IN PARADISE TO FOLLOW THE STRAW HATS' LEAD!"

Spandam looked like nothing so much as a goldfish that had been ripped out of the water and left on the pier.

"IN SUMMARY, THIS IS THE SINGLE MOST HUMILIATING MOMENT IN THE HISTORY OF THE NAVY AND WORLD GOVERNMENT PUT TOGETHER SINCE ROGER'S DAMNED EXECUTION, YOU INCOMPETENT MORON!" Sengoku huffed and snarled viciously for a moment before puffing out an irritated breath. "Ohhh, but don't just take my word for it. If you don't believe me, try looking out your damn window. I'm certain that you'll be able to see the SMOKE FROM THE ISLAND BURNING BENEATH YOUR FEET FROM THERE!"

Shocked into motion by the sudden spike in volume, the chief of CP9 scrambled to the window of his office, where he pressed his face to the glass… and just stared. Stared at the rampant fires blazing across the island, stared at the utter swath of destruction carved through the center of Enies Lobby, and most important of all, he stared at the roof of the courthouse so far below.

"Tha-That's Jabra…" Spandam breathed numbly. "A-And… Blueno…"

"Let me be clear, Spandam," Sengoku growled behind the leather-faced man, his voice having undergone an unsettling shift from berserk to far too calm. "This is already nothing short of a disaster. So, rather than a warning or orders, I'm presenting you with an ultimatum: If the SBS is still running and confirming that the Straw Hats are currently in Enies Lobby at the first light of dawn, I will be setting sail for the Judicial Island myself along with every Marine that I can muster. Let me be clear, Director Spandam: If the situation is not under control by the time I arrive, there will be consequences."

The room suddenly pulsed with a wave of presence, and it took every last one of Spandam's mental faculties to keep from voiding his bowels.

"Don't disappoint me further."

The connection dropped, and Spandam collapsed to his knees as he desperately clutched the sill of his window. His mental gears slowly began grinding again, processing the nightmarish amount of
information he had just heard. OK, so the Straw Hats were advancing at an alarming rate. But surely they wouldn't be able to get past CP9. He called to mind that his entire goal was to end this so-called 'Great Pirate Era.'

In the end, no amount of bad publicity would be able to cause a permanent mark on him, so long as he was the one responsible for bringing the last key to the Ancient Weapons left in existence under the control of the World Government. All he needed to do was order CP9 to subdue the Straw Hats, and escort Nico Robin safely to the Gates of Justice. Yes… Yes, once the demon was on her way to Marineford, his future was secure.

Lulled into a semblance of calm with his reasoning, Spandam clawed his way back to his feet, turned back towards his subordinate, and opened his mouth to give his orders.

"Ooooh, Spandam, Spandam, Spandam."

Said orders died when Kaku and Spandam both froze as the un-hooked Transponder Snail on Spandam's desk suddenly adopted a sickeningly familiar leer and started speaking in an even more familiar voice.

"Shit," Kaku summarized weakly.

"Cross—!" Robin gasped out.

"With all due respect, Robin?" Cross interrupted, directing a flat stare her way. "Cram it. You've had your say, this is ours. And as for you!" The snail turned its attention back to Spandam. "I'm just curious… why are you acting so surprised, Spandam? I mean, shouldn't you have seen this coming?" Cross bared his teeth in a vicious parody of a smile. "After all… you stole a demon from a pack of devils. Did you honestly think that we wouldn't BRING HELL ITSELF TO STORM THE VERY GATES OF HEAVEN TO GET HER BACK!?"

"Y-You—!" Spandam bit out indignantly.

"Allow me to demonstrate!" Cross continued before adopting a scowl. "ATTENTION ALL MORTAR TEAMS!" he barked, not in his voice, but rather in Spandam's.

The genuine article blinked in confusion. "W-What the—!?"

"AIM ALL CANNONS AT THE PREDETERMINED TARGET IMMEDIATELY!" 'Spandam' ordered. "ON MY MARK… FIRE!"

The blood drained from Spandam's face as he connected the dots. "You didn't…" he whispered numbly as he slowly turned on his heel to stare out the window in horror.

His pallor quintupled when he caught sight of well over a dozen mortar shells rocketing straight at him.

"You wanna know the best part of this little scheme?" Cross stated, as if he was discussing what he'd had for lunch. "I didn't even need your voice to set it up. I just had to make myself sound like the most worthless, arrogant, self-entitled piece of primordial ooze on the face of the planet, and your men just ate. It. Up. How crazy is that, eh?"

Spandam didn't have remotely close to enough presence of mind to react to the insult. In fact, despite the incoming flight of death, he found himself unable to do more than stare in horror, his mental gears utterly locked up.
"Oh, for Pete's sake—!"

Up until Kaku grabbed the back of his collar, tossed him farther back into his office—

"TEMPEST KICK!"

And lashed his leg out at the window, sending a wave of razor-sharp wind barrelling out of the office's window and slamming into the shells in mid-air.

**KA-BOOM!**

Which, naturally, caused them to explode, and the resulting shockwave blew out the office's wall.

Kaku guarded his face for a second with a wince as shrapnel bounced off of him before shooting a scowl at the grinning snail on Spandam's desk. "You *do* realize that your comrades were in here too, correct!?

"And you do realize that I knew that there was no chance in hell of Spandam not having a Cipher Pol Operative guarding him at all times, right?" Cross shot back tauntingly. "Anyway, we're almost to the top of the courthouse and Luffy should be done neutering the mutt any second now. See you soon..."

Cross's smile widened demonically.

"Long-neck."

The connection shut off just as the blood drained from Kaku's face. "H-How the *hell*—!? I haven't even known for more than an *hour*!"

"Known what?" Kalifa asked as she and the rest of Cipher Pol No. 9 Shaved into the decimated room.

Kaku shot a panicked look at his fellow agent, at which point his terror suddenly intensified. "H-He, Cross... h-he just called me 'Long-neck!' A-And you—! B-Bubbly—!"

Kalifa instantly paled as well, the implications hitting her like a sledgehammer. "B-But that's—! But he—! *H-How*!"

"I don't know," Lucci interrupted his fellow agents, his voice as firm as steel and his expression ten times harder. "And I don't *care*. Either way, it won't matter once he and all of his crewmates are *dead*, and unless you two shape up right now, you will be *joining them*. Is that *clear*?"

Kaku and Kalifa stared at him in naked terror for an instant before straightening their stances and nodding firmly. "Yes, Lucci," they said.

"Good. Now..." Lucci turned a predatory glare at the gaping hole in the wall. "Where are they?"

"Ahem."

Lucci blinked, and spared a glance at the pigeon on his shoulder, who was cocking his head in contemplation. "Check, check check, check. Well, now," Hattori nodded definitively. "It would appear that they have approached close enough for us to be within range of the snail. Unless I miss my guess, perhaps he is performing this feat subconsciously?"

"Ah, r-right, right!" Kaku slapped his hand to his forehead. "Sorry, forgot in all the excitement, they're in the courthouse, it's how Cross knew when to order the mortar teams to fire on us for
maximum effect. Apparently they've managed to fight their way past the entire island."

Lucci shot Kaku a warning glare before marching over to the room's impromptu balcony and glancing downwards. He then froze the blood of his comrades in their veins when he bared his teeth in a snarl.

"What," he bit out furiously. "The blue hell does Jabra think he's doing?"

"Well, he's a Carnivorous Zoan as well, just without as much discipline as you. I would assume he let his bloodlust for fighting Straw Hat get the better of him," Hattori mused.

"...I think I could get used to you being able to talk," Lucci stated neutrally as the rest of CP9 joined him in observing the fight below.

"Well," Kalifa stated frigidly as she adjusted her glasses. "There's only one way to describe this particular stunt."

"Sexual harassment, chapapa?" Fukuro deadpanned.

"Suicidal stupidity."

"R-Right, right! He-He's fighting Jabra, that's nothing to worry about," Spandam sputtered with growing confidence, apparently not hearing Kalifa as he turned his head. "Unchain the prisoners and bring them over here. I want them to observe the exact moment when Straw Hat's life is ended."

The agents of CP9 exchanged uneasy glances, but a subtle jerk of Lucci's head prompted Kumadori to march back into the office and drag Franky and Robin back with him by their chains.

"You do realize that you are in way over your head, right, Spanda?" Franky sneered at the chief of CP9. Said smile was then wiped off when Kumadori backhanded him with his fist, prompting him to snap his jaws at the pink-haired man.

"Silence, you disrespectful cur," Spandam ordered in a tone that, from anyone else, would have been more than halfway menacing. "Let this serve as a reminder to you of the true might of the World Government. No matter how strong you think Straw Hat may be, Enies Lobby has stood as a stronghold for centuries, and I'll be damned if a rubber-brained rookie annihilates that reputation in a single night."

Franky snarled at Kumadori for a second longer before smirking menacingly. "Well, you're right about that, at least."

A spike of fear drove into Spandam's mind for a moment as he pictured what would happen if, by some miracle, Straw Hat actually won. The next instant, however, he banished the thought from his mind as he looked over the edge and called down to the wolf Zoan.

"FINISH HIM, JABRA! SHOW THAT WORTHLESS PIRATE THE TRUE MIGHT OF CIPHER POL 9!"

-Jabra's ear flicked slightly as he felt a sudden spike in his ever-present urge to rip Spandam's head from his shoulders.

Under normal circumstances, the Zoan-user's enhanced senses would have most likely picked up Spandam's words of 'encouragement' with ease.
Normal circumstances, however, did not entail Jabra's skull ringing like a church bell on Sunday morning on account of repeated blows to the head that a thoroughly infuriated ballistic rubber-man continued to inflict. His Iron Body Kenpo had offered him some relief, but Straw Hat's bottomless well of willpower had rendered that obsolete two minutes in. And to make matters even worse, the so-called 'Gear Second' technique that he was employing had not only amplified his speed to the point where he was Shaving like he'd been doing it all his life, but it had also amplified his strength tenfold, to the point where he was all but straight up ignoring the agent's Iron Body.

'Damn… Damn it all… I wanted a fight with Straw Hat Luffy, not a freaking massacre like this,' he thought, panting and sweating like a dog as he kept his head on a swivel, trying and failing to keep an accurate bead on the sonic pirate.

But indeed, a massacre was what the conflict boiled down to. For every bit that Jabra was fast, Luffy was faster. For every bit that he was tough, the pirate was tougher. And for every bit that he was strong, well…

A flash of movement to the side granted Jabra enough forewarning to spin on his heels and cross his arms defensively as he tensed every muscle of his body.

"JET RIFLE!"

"GAGH!"

Jabra coughed up a mouthful of blood as the grinding blow blasted him off his feet and slammed him into one of the few parapets that had not yet been demolished.

…no comment.

The wolf-Zoan peeled himself out of his dent in the stone with a pained groan, stumbling forward slightly in a desperate effort to regain his balance. "No…" he spat viciously. "I refuse… I refuse…"

Without warning, the wolf surged forward, charging at Luffy on all fours as he howled at the top of his lungs. "I REFUSE TO LOSE TO SOMEONE LIKE YOU!" He slashed both of his claws down at Luffy's exact position. "WOLF HUNT HIGH SPEED SCRATCH!"

Luffy glared bloody murder at the wolf as the attack came down on him… up until the last moment, when he suddenly disappeared and the claws passed through the space he'd occupied moments before without resistance.

Jabra stumbled as he tried to regain his balance and glanced around in concussion-enhanced confusion. "W-Wha… where—?"

"GUM GUM—!

Jabra's head snapped up just in time to catch sight of Luffy spinning on an axis in midair.

"JET HOMERUN!"

CRACK!

And then his vision was filled with nothing but pipe, followed up in short order by stone.

Jabra groaned into the stonework of the much-abused roof as he tried to kickstart his mind back into at least a semblance of working condition. When he finally got his mind back in something resembling order, he slowly worked his claws beneath his torso and pushed himself into a kneeling
position, allowing him to cough up yet another mouthful of blood, along with more than a few fragments of broken teeth.

"Damn it..." Jabra wheezed painfully as he forced his head up. "You little... fu—!" The wolf-man's words died in his muffle as he managed to catch sight of Luffy.

It was the eyes that did it. Oh, sure, his concussion was influencing him a bit, but from that day forward Jabra would forevermore swear up and down that it was the eyes that did the trick. It was Straw Hat Luffy's eyes that hit him the hardest. It was his stance, his gaze, however real or imagined. It was how every inch of Jabra knew, in that instant, just knew, that there wasn't one person standing where Luffy was standing, but two.

One was Straw Hat Luffy, sure, but the other... the strength it emanated despite its unassuming form, the impassive expression, the eyes... the eyes that had stared at him every time, the only times he had ever been defeated. Eyes that made him feel tiny, no matter how loud he howled or how large he grew. Eyes filled with nothing but cold, bloody darkness where the soul was supposed to be...

"Don't look at me like that..." Jabra breathed, softly at first before baring his fangs as his rage started to cloud his mind. "Don't look at me like that. Don't look at me like I'm worthless, don't look at me like I'm nothing, don't look at me like you can beat me! Don't look at me like that!" Jabra clawed his way to his paws, foam dribbling from his hackles as he snarled at the pirate. "DON'T YOU DARE LOOK AT ME LIKE HIM!"

Luffy responded with a flat look before glancing to the side. "My crewmates are going to be here soon," he stated firmly. "And if they get here while you're still standing, then you'll hurt them." He pinned the wolf-man with a glare. "So, I'm going to finish you off now."

That statement was the final straw. That statement snapped what few vestiges of sanity Jabra had left in his mind. In an instant, his pupils shrunk down to pinpricks, he threw his head back and he roared—not howled, roared—his defiance to the heavens.

Luffy knelt down in preparation, every fiber of his being taut and ready to move at the drop of a hat.

With what few vestiges of mind he had left, Jabra dug deep into his subconscious, the deepest, darkest pits of his mind, and called forth a technique that was years in the making. A technique that he'd painstakingly developed alone and in secret, all for the express purpose of defeating one person.

But if it meant that he wouldn't lose in this instance, then he was more than willing to use it right here, right now.

"FANG HOWLING OVER FANG!" Jabra roared out as he shot towards his opponent like a cannonball, spinning into a virtual tornado of fangs and claws that was guaranteed to shred anything and everything that it touched for even a moment.

He struck the parapet like a hurricane, grinding the stone into a fine powder and methodically eradicating it into less than absolutely nothing.

But for all the damage he managed to cause, he still didn't hit Luffy.

The technique soon spun itself out into nothing, leaving Jabra panting on his hands and knees as he fought to stay conscious in the face of his rapidly dwindling reserves of adrenaline. "But... I... that's... how...?" he wheezed breathlessly, snapping his head around in a vain effort to catch sight of Luffy, wherever he was...

Before ultimately freezing on the pipe.
The pipe that Straw Hat Luffy had been carrying when he'd arrived.

The pipe that Straw Hat Luffy had been using to beat him senseless with throughout their fight.

The pipe that was now planted in the very edge of the rooftop, with two hands firmly gripping it and arms stretching off to…

Jabra pushed himself onto his shaky legs and staggered over to the pipe, following the arms back to their source.

His gut dropped into the abyss below the island as he tried and failed to follow the arms down main street, where they disappeared beyond his field of vision… although that particular limit might have been yet another side effect of getting his skull dented by a sonic pipe.

"You've got to be kidding me…" the wolf whimpered.

The universe then proceeded to prove to him that what he was experiencing was all too real.

"GUUUUUM-GUUUUUM...!"

Another effect of his concussion was that Jabra's mind skipped a beat for a second.

As such, while he did manage to cross his arms defensively once again…

"JEEET BALLISTAAAAA!"

"IRON—GRK!"

He was just a second too slow to properly reinforce his person when a pair of rocket-fast sandals slammed into his solar plexus. For the longest two seconds of his life, Jabra felt as though he were being split in half, his body bending around the point of impact.

And then time resumed; physics, cruel mistress that she is, took hold; and all of Luffy's kinetic energy slammed into him at once. Thus, while Luffy came to a dead halt, Jabra was launched backwards and at an angle at only a little under Luffy's own prior speed.

Given his arc and velocity, the Wolf-Man would have most likely left a rather impressive dent in the center of the Gates of Justice… were it not for an obstacle standing directly in his flight path.

-0- For the second time that day, Spandam found himself face-to-face with certain death flying directly towards him, and too paralyzed with shock and horror to move enough to save his own life. Rolling his eyes, Lucci yanked the man out of the ballistic wolf-missile's flight path, saving him by a matter of inches.

SLAM!

Nothing, however, could save Jabra from impacting with the far wall of Spandam's office.

The CP9 agents winced and guarded their faces with their arms in response to the impact, and then proceeded to gape in horror as they lowered them.

Jabra was impressed into the far wall, cracks spreading out from beneath his spread-eagled body.

However, as awe-inspiring as the display was, what truly garnered the agents' attention was the exact
state of Jabra's body. His very human body.

Franky broke the silence with a roaring cackle. "Haha, wow, you were right, Spanda! That was impressive! Seriously, I didn't know it was even possible to literally kick the bitch out of a Zoan like that! You learn something new every day! HAHA—hurk!"

He was promptly cut off by Kalifa absentmindedly elbowing him in the side. Any further punishment was held off as Jabra slowly peeled off the wall before falling onto his feet. He was swaying like a drunk sailor at two in the morning, and his still-open eyes were staring at nothing, but he was on his feet.

The wolf-man slowly staggered forward, only just barely managing to keep his feet beneath himself. Thankfully for him, his journey was made short by the aim of his voyage stepping up before him.

Jabra slowly looked up and blearily looked Lucci in the eye. He held his gaze for a moment before slowly raising his finger and jabbing it in his chest.

"Don't… you dare…” he rasped. "Look… at me… like…” And with that, his eyes rolled up in his head and he collapsed to the ground, a pained moan the only sign that he was even alive.

Lucci stared at Jabra's insensate form with total stoic impassivity, as though his ally were nothing more than an insect.

The rest of the agents were nowhere near as subdued.

"Fukuro…” Kaku whispered numbly. "Jabra's power ranking… you're certain—?"

The rotund man swallowed heavily. "Actually… I used week-old power rankings for him, me and Kumadori. W-We're all a little bit stronger than what I said earlier…”

Kalifa slowly raised a trembling hand to try and hold her glasses steady. "Just what the hell did we get ourselves into??" she asked no one in particular.

"Oi."

Cipher Pol No. 9 as a whole stiffened as an increasingly familiar voice filled the room.

"Just for the record," Cross drawled in an uncharacteristically grim tone. "If the mood were a little lighter, I'd probably make a Warriors reference. As it is, though? It would just be in bad taste. Present yourselves, CP9. It's time we finish what you started."

Hattori cocked an eyebrow at his owner. "Cocky little bastard, isn't he?"

Lucci tsked as he spun on his heel and marched to the balcony. "They've earned it."

The leopard man stalked past his dumbstruck comrades, but only made it a few feet before pausing. He then cast a scowl over his shoulder.

"Move."

The rest of Cipher Pol 9 promptly Shaved to his side, while Spandam unwillingly inched his way over to stare at the enemies below.

And indeed, far below CP9, upon the rooftop of the courthouse of the World Government's Judicial Island, every last parapet on the side of the building facing the Tower of Justice that remained intact now had a pair of pirates standing on it, staring up at them with grim-faced determination. By the
SBS, their own observations and reports from every Marine who had previously encountered the crew, every one of them was as recognizable to those who stared down at them as if they had already met them in person.

Boss, the monstrous Kung Fu Dugong, flipper resting on the rope-dart coiled at his side and smoke chuffing like a sea train from his scowling maw, and Nefertari Vivi, twin scythes linked by chains in her hands and riding an armored Supersonic Duck, who still managed to look menacing despite his slightly comical form.

A yeti-like man that could only be Tony Tony Chopper in his full-human form, the pink hat and blue nose doing nothing to diminish the effect of his glower, and Sanji, sharp-dressed and blond-haired, his eyes lowered for the moment as he lit a cigarette.

Usopp, their long-nosed sniper, holding a slingshot that more resembled a polearm and staring at his crew's adversaries with only the slightest trace of fear in his eyes and the slightest shake in his knees, and the monstrous Monkey D. Luffy, whose form would be much less intimidating if they hadn't just seen him treat the third-strongest of their number like a punching bag, with he himself looking none the worse for wear.

Roronoa Zoro, green hair, three katanas at his waist and a scowl of determination on his face, and Nami, orange hair and with an odd-looking blue staff in one hand, clouds spouting from it and surrounding her like an aura, and what looked to be a folded scooter on her back.

Conis, the gunner, whose outfit made her look less like an angel and more like… well, like them, with more guns visible on her person than someone her size had any right to carry, and the cloud fox Super perched on her shoulder. And at the leftmost part of the rooftop from their perspective stood Jeremiah Cross, the bazooka-dog Lassoo snarling at his feet and the snail Soundbite on his shoulder. Of all the pirates on the roof, they were the only ones who were smiling in any way or form, but there was no humor in those looks.

The hostages, the chief, and the five assassins all looked down at them, Robin's eyes beginning to overflow with tears. For what felt like an eternity, they only stared, the emotions between them palpable. Then…

"Yoyoi…" Kumadori mused contemplatively. "Do you think if I asked, Cross would give me an autograph?"

There was a moment of silence as the assassins contemplated the statement.

"Chapa… Kumadori… mind leaning down a bit?"

"Eh? But of course. Why?"

"So that I can do this: Solid Beast."

POW!

"YOYOWIE!"

-S-

Six months.

It was kind of… hell, I don't even know what it was. Awe-inspiring? Funny? Humbling? Any of them or none? Doesn't matter.
Six months ago, I was a normal guy. Six months ago, I was your average everyday college student, just another face in the crowd whose only real claim to fame was being a mildly successful fanfiction writer on a few sites and forums.

Six months ago… I was nobody.

And then in an instant and in six months alike, all of that changed.

Over the course of the past six months, I'd sailed up the side of a mountain. Over the past six months, I'd ridden a Tyrannosaurus Rex, I'd charged headfirst into a warzone, I'd defied the world, I'd sailed into the sky, I'd spit in the face of God himself…

And now.

And now, I thought to myself as I glanced down into the roaring abyss below, now I was at the edge of Enies Lobby.

Now I was standing side-by-side with my friends in one of the most iconic moments in the history of anime and manga.

Now… I was ready to face the world head-on, to die facing the world, all for the sake of a friend.

"We've come a long way, huh, little buddy?" I whispered as I stared up at the Tower of Justice.

"Don't go getting all sappy on me yet," Soundbite chuckled. "AFTER ALL, we've still got so far to go."

"Damn straight…" I nodded in agreement.

"ROOOBIIIN!"

We both promptly snapped our jaws shut when Luffy shouted up at our wayward crewmate, relying on his own volume and entirely unaided by Soundbite.

"IF YOU REALLY WANT TO DIE FOR US!" our captain continued. "THEN SAY IT TO US HERE AND NOW!"

Even from this distance, it was a simple task to catch sight of Robin hesitating where she stood, to see just how tightly she was biting her lip in a desperate attempt to stay silent. It was easy to see just how furiously she was fighting against herself. It was hard to know which part of her would win the fight.

"CP9!"

But the world would never know, on account of Spandam cutting in at that moment in what was clearly a desperate attempt to regain control of the situation.

"A-As director of this unit, you have my full permission to take those pirates down, eliminate them utterly, but do it from here! From the Tower of Justice! A-After all, it's not like they have any way to get over here," he continued, reassuring himself as much as he was gloating.

It must have worked, seeing as he grinned maniacally and stepped onto the balustrade a moment later. "WAHAHAHAHAHA! Stupid pirates! No matter how strong you are, you'll never be able to win! CP9 still stands strong to stop you! The Gates of Justice are beyond any human's power to move! And most of all…" He reached into his coat, and produced that thing, causing my hair to
stand on end. "I have the authority to use this Golden Transponder Snail to unleash a Buster Call!"

"A Golden Transponder Snail?!" Soundbite yelped, shrinking back in terror.

"Soundbite?" I glanced at him in confusion. "What's wrong?"

The baby snail shivered as he half-hid in his shell. "I SERIOUSLY hope you weren't BANKING ON ME BLOCKING THAT THING, CROSS! GOLDEN TRANSPONDER SNAILS… they're practically boogeymen, creatures of selective breeding whose connections with their silver counterparts are renowned for being SACROSANCT! THEIR BROADCAST IS UTTERLY INVIOLABLE!"

"That's right," Spandam gloated menacingly. "Once I push this button, nothing you or anyone does will be able to stop the results! Just like it was 20 years ago, I will unleash the power that wiped out your homeland, Nico Robin!" He spun around to laugh in Robin's face. "Just like before, when Ohara was utterly wiped from the maps of the world!"

"One snail caused that much destruction?" Conis breathed in horror.

"I'd make a quip about package sizes, but this doesn't seem like the right time…" Su mused.

"That shitty leatherface, tormenting Robin-chwan like that," Sanji growled.

"You damn…" Robin bit out painfully, fighting even harder against herself.

"WAHAHA! Oh, look at that reaction!" Spandam cackled malevolently. I could feel my blood freeze as the bastard's finger hovered above the button of the snail. "Maybe I should do it now? Maybe I should call the full force of the World Government?"

"You—! Do you even know what will happen if you press that button?!" Robin demanded desperately.

"Of course I do," Spandam purred. "The chances of all of these pirates making it out of here alive will drop to zero! What… did you have something else in mind?"

"IT'S NOT THAT SIMPLE! STOP IT!" she screamed furiously.

"Oh?" Spandam asked with a leer. "You giving me orders? You're being rather cocky, aren't you."

Boss all but bit through his cigar as he glared up at the enemy. "Cross… when you talked about putting the hurt on this bastard? You were lowballing."

"What can I say?" I ground out. "Reality tends to exceed expectations."

"You said that Ohara disappeared from the map…" Robin stated desperately, sounding on the edge of tears. "But can you see humans on a map? No… No, the only way you could be so cruel is if you look at the world like that, like it was a statistic! You can't use it… not that…" She trailed off in a pleading whisper as she collapsed to her knees, the ghosts of her past obviously weighing her down.

One glance at Soundbite was all I needed to get my message across. "Robin," I muttered.

I heard her pained gasp, and slowly but surely she climbed to her feet and looked down at me. I winced miserably at seeing her so… so broken, but nevertheless, I hovered my hand over my bag, and I could tell from the way she jerked that she'd processed the implication.
"If you're so sure that you're going to die anyway…" I breathed desperately. "Then at least die like a Straw Hat. At least go down kicking and screaming the whole way, and give them nothing short of hell."

Robin's hesitation slowly faded even as she warred with herself, until finally she looked at Spandam with a heartwrenching combination of despair and determination. "Let me tell you… of the Buster Call. Let me tell you what the World Government is capable of…"

And so, at long last, she told the story of Ohara.

Spandam made no attempt to stop her, apparently relishing in her agony as she recited the tale. CP9, meanwhile, stood by impassively. Though if I wasn't hallucinating, some of them seemed visibly uncomfortable with what they were hearing. As for Franky, he was clearly on the verge of bawling his eyes out, but the sheer horror of what he heard was keeping that decidedly moment-killing reaction at bay. That, or Soundbite had had the good sense to mute him.

And it was clear that CP9 either hadn't found out about my little trick with the SBS, or they simply chose not to remind Spandam of it. But I knew, and so did Robin, and so did the rest of the crew, that the entire world was now learning the truth that the World Government had tried so hard to cover up. It was only the look on her face that kept me from grinning maliciously; I could only imagine how everyone outside of Enies Lobby was reacting…

-o-

"Mayor Iceburg, the ship is ready—Ah…" The Galley-La employee stopped moments after entering his foreman's office, dumbstruck by the scene he was met with. Understandable, since it wasn't every day that you walked in on the strongest man in all of Water 7 leaning against his desk as he watched a small fire burn in his wastebasket, of all places. "Uh… sir? What's going on?"

Iceburg glanced at his employee with a vague amount of interest. "You're… ah… damn, I always forget your name."

"Everyone always does, sir, I'm practically invisible. But I'm fine with everyone always calling me 'that One Colts Guy.' Ya know, because of…" He gestured at the blue horseshoe emblazoned on his baseball cap.

"Ah, right, right…" Iceburg sighed as he looked back at the fire. "…Do you know why I allowed Galley-La and Water 7 as a whole to accept contracts from the World Government?"

"Ah…" The Colts Guy hesitated in confusion. "I… can't say that I do, sir."

Iceburg hung his head with a sigh. "Because back when I was still an apprentice, I experienced what could and would happen if Water 7 was an enemy of the World Government when I witnessed Tom's fate. I established myself as a reasonable authority figure, and aimed to endear our company and island to the World Government, to ensure that we were never hurt again."

His eyes and grip tightened grimly. "But in recent days, I've been forced to reconsider that course of action. If the World Government had no qualms about unleashing something like that on this island for the sake of their own agenda… If we're no safer as their allies… then I'm making a decision that I should have made upon the first SBS broadcast."

The Colts Guy took a second to process what he was hearing before sucking in a breath as he snapped his eyes to the wastebasket. More specifically, to the papers burning within. "Sir…" he started uneasily. "Are those documents… what I think they are?"
Iceburg smirked slightly in response before pushing off from his desk and walking past the shipwright. "I'm heading out. While I'm gone, spread the word to the rest of the companies on the island that as of this moment, all contracts between Galley-La and the World Government have been rendered null and void, and that henceforth we will refuse service to all those affiliated with them, without exceptions. Do I make myself clear?"

The shipwright stared numbly at his boss for a second before grinning ecstatically and snapping out a salute. "Sir, yes, sir."

"That's what I like to hear."

-0-

From the moment that Cross had announced who their mystery crewmate was, the royal throne room's inhabitants had had every aspect of their attention locked onto the SBS. King Cobra, Igaram, Chaka, Pell, Kohza, and the Supersonic Duck Squadron were all at a loss to why Luffy and his crew would have allowed Crocodile's right hand woman on the same crew as Vivi and Carue. It was only the events in the royal tomb that made Cobra restrain his comrades from calling into the SBS and demanding to know what they were thinking.

They now had the answer to that question. All of those in the room knew Cross' secret, and so they knew that he had already known all of what Nico Robin was saying at the time she joined them. Cobra eventually broke the silence with a quiet statement.

"I believe that we have no reason to hold a grudge against Nico Robin, nor to protest her stay with the Straw Hat Pirates." The king cast a firm look around the room. "Do any of you disagree?"

Everyone to a man—and duck—shook their heads solemnly.

-0-

Half of the ships that half of MI5 were half-dead trying to clean were halfway done, while the other half were halfway back into the water. Half of the soldiers had stopped their work as the half-trembling voice of one of their half-allies—oh, forget it. The entirety of MI5 was spellbound by the macabre tale being spun.

Smoker and Hina were steadily burning down their cancer sticks in grim silence, while lingering doubts in any of the minds of their gathered men withered away to nothing.

For the longest time, none of the Marines dared even moved.

Then, a blue-haired swordswoman leapt down from the scaffolding she'd been standing on and started stalking towards the coastline, steadily stripping off her uniform as she went.

"And just where do you think you're going, Officer Tashigi?" Smoker asked as he noticed.

"I'm going to swim out, find the biggest Sea King I can possibly locate, and kill it dead, sir," she replied in a tone that was all but dead, save for the frigid fury it sported.

Smoker and Hina glanced at one another in surprise before Hina slowly shifted her sunglasses onto her forehead. "And… why are you looking to do that, Lieutenant?" she asked hesitantly.

"Because I'm pissed at what I'm hearing, ma'am," Tashigi responded without pause. However, she then stopped dead a few feet later. "I'm sorry ma'am, that was a lie. That's not why I'm pissed."
An uncomfortable silence hung in the air until Smoker cleared his throat. "Care to elaborate, Lieutenant?"

Tashigi’s hand slowly started to strangle Shigure's hilt. "…If I'd heard what I'm hearing now four months ago, I would have been horrified. I would have vomited, or not believed it or… or something. I… I would have felt something. But now… after all I've learned, after all I've seen… hearing this… I'm not disgusted anymore. I don't have it in me to be disgusted anymore. I can't vomit in disgust, I can't reel in horror…"

Tashigi jerked her head to the side so that she could throw a scathing glare over her shoulder. "I am apoplectic because I can't feel anything else. The World Government has successfully jaded me. Not even pirates or criminals, but the World Government, who I swore to protect and serve with my life, and that…” Tashigi snapped her gaze forward again, but it was easy to see the spots of moisture starting to appear on the sand at her feet. "That enrages me to the point where I need to physically hurt something, or else I think that I am going to literally lose my mind."

Smoker was silent for a moment before nodding his head. "Do what you feel you need to, Lieutenant."

Tashigi bared her Shigure's blade in response. "Thank you, sir." And with that, she strode into the surf and was soon out of sight.

Hina blinked after her in dumbstruck awe for a moment before coughing heavily. She then glanced to the side, where Smoker was literally fuming as he burned his cigars down to ashes. "And just why are you so furious?" she asked, before pausing and jerking her head at the Transponder Snail between them. "Besides the obvious reason, I mean."

Smoker snarled viciously as he all but chewed clean through his cigars. "She just disobeyed my orders," he ground out.

"Ah… Hina is confused. Do you mean the boat cleaning, because Hina thinks that that can be—!"

"The day she became my subordinate," Smoker interrupted with a low growl. "She did something I’d never seen anyone do before. I'd had countless Marines join my division before her, but when she joined, she was the first to stand there, wearing her uniform and carrying everything she owned in the world on her back… and greet me with a smile." The Commodore took his cigars out of his mouth and huffed out more smoke than humanly possible. "When I saw that smile… I gave her an order. One I’d hoped she would follow unto her dying days."

Hina eyed her comrade warily. "And… that order was?"

Smoker growled furiously as he ground his cigars down in the sand.

"To never let herself become like me."

The thought that she had gotten more exercise in the last three months than she had for any considerable amount of time in the decade prior to then was whispering in the corner of the old woman’s mind as she purposefully strode through the halls of Marineford.

However, the vast majority of her mind was focused on pure, incensed fury, aimed at one very specific person. And as she finally broke out of her Shaving, she found herself back in the devastated remains of the Fleet Admiral's office, nobody present aside from the Fleet Admiral himself. Even Gruffy had relocated for his own good; the only other living being present was the snoozing
Transponder Snail. Sengoku had ceased listening to the SBS after his call to Spandam for the sake of his blood pressure, which was reaching dangerously high levels. Of course, the same could not be said for anyone else in Marineford, which brings us to the following interrogation:

"What. Is. The meaning. Of this?" Vice Admiral Tsuru demanded coldly.

"Rest assured, I'll be on the warships once they're ready to depart," Sengoku said dismissively, not looking up from the paperwork he was filling out. "I'm just taking the time to request that the materials for rebuilding the tower are stronger. Honestly, if today is any indication—"

CRACK!

The Fleet Admiral reeled back in shock when his desk was suddenly split by a cane ramming into its top.

"I couldn't be made to give a damn about your blasted paperwork at gunpoint, Sengoku," Tsuru spat acridly. "No… what I am asking—demanding—is that you tell me why."

"What are you—!?" Sengoku started in confusion.

"The SBS, Sengoku. You should have kept listening; Nico Robin is currently in the middle of blowing the whistle on what happened 20 years ago for the entire world to hear. And though I'm seriously wondering why that subhuman degenerate Spandam hasn't been fired yet, there's one much more glaring question that I expect you to answer: why the hell has that rabid mutt you call an 'Admiral' managed to get away with exterminating an entire island's worth of civilians, as well as several dozen innocent Marines, with absolutely no blowback for the last twenty years!?!" Tsuru roared. "And don't!" She snapped a finger up when Sengoku started to open his mouth. "You dare give me that tripe about 'archaeologists' on board, because we both know that is nothing short of a load of utter bilge."

Sengoku tensed furiously as he processed her words. "What did you just say?"

Tsuru scowled viciously as she withdrew a binder from her coat and waved it at him. "Sounds familiar, doesn't it? I must say, the entire report on Operation Tabula Rasa is quite the read."

"YOU RAIDED MY PERSONAL QUARTERS!?" Sengoku roared as he shot to his feet.

"I HAD TO KNOW THE TRUTH!" Tsuru bellowed back. "The whole truth, the honest truth, not that redaction-laden mockery you had the gall to call a report! Oh, sure, for years I've accepted Buster Call reports being redacted to the point of illegibility as a matter of fact, but now I am fully aware that that was a gross mistake!" She punctuated the point by slamming the binder on the desk. "What the hell were you thinking, Sengoku?! I've always known that Akainu has been a liability on the best of days, several of our best are, but genocide?! Before today I'd never have thought there to be a grain of truth to Cross' words, but now—!"

"ENOUGH!"

Tsuru choked fearfully, shrinking back as she was simultaneously assaulted by a wave of pure presence and blinded by a blast of golden light.

"I NEVER EXPECTED SUCH INSOLENCE FROM YOU, OF ALL PEOPLE. BUT AS IT'S COME TO THIS, ALLOW ME TO MAKE OUR POSITIONS CLEAR," Sengoku steamed murderously. "OVER THE YEARS, I HAVE HAD TO MAKE COUNTLESS DECISIONS OF QUESTIONABLE MORALITY BECAUSE AS YOU HAVE SO
CLEARLY FAILED TO NOTICE, I AM SINGLE-HANDEDLY LEADING THE WAR AGAINST THIS ERA OF PIRACY. NOBODY ASIDE FROM COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF KONG HAS ANY IDEA OF THE BURDEN OF THIS POSITION. NOT YOU, NOT THE REST OF THE NAVY, AND CERTAINLY NOT THAT LOWLIFE, RECKLESS, LOUD-MOUTHED PIRATE!" Sengoku stabbed his finger at the snoozing Snail on his desk.

The Fleet Admiral then leaned forward and loomed menacingly over his subordinate. "I MIGHT DESPISE HIM AND HIS METHODS, BUT THE FACT REMAINS THAT WE NEED SOLDIERS LIKE SAKAZUKI TO MAINTAIN ANY HOPE OF KEEPING THE WORLD IN BALANCE AND KEEPING THE MARINES STRONGER THAN THE EVER-INCREASING POPULATION OF PIRATES. JUSTICE CANNOT ALWAYS BE AS SIMPLE AS WE WISH IT WOULD BE; IF ONE HUNDRED MUST DIE IN ORDER TO SAVE ONE THOUSAND, THEN I WILL KILL THOSE HUNDRED MYSELF, AND I EXPECT YOU TO DO THE SAME WITHOUT HESITATION! AS YOUR SUPERIOR OFFICER, I EXPECT NOTHING LESS THAN COMPLETE COMPLIANCE AND ACCEPTANCE OF WHAT I DEEM BEST, AND YOU WILL REFRAIN FROM SHARING YOUR OPINION UNLESS I EXPRESSLY REQUEST IT! DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR, VICE ADMIRAL TSURU?"

Tsuru cowered slightly beneath her superior's wrath for another moment. Then, slowly and with defiance beginning to emanate from her entire form, she straightened, and Aokiji himself could not have had a more frigid expression or tone than she did as she replied. "Crystal, Fleet Admiral Sengoku."

With that, the Fleet Admiral reverted to his normal state, an expression more of frustration than anything else on his face as he resumed his paperwork. "Is there anything further?" he snapped dismissively.

Tsuru twitched visibly for a moment before snapping her head to the side with a snort. "Oh, simply that I'm far from the only Marine on base that's agitated from recent revelations."

Sengoku interrupted his writing by smashing his fist into his desk with a snarl. "I could not be made to care about that at the moment, Vice Admiral," he bit out with a glare.

Not one second later, the tower was shaken by a tremor.

Sengoku twitched viciously… again. "I swear that I am going to rip Garp's—!"

"Oh, that wasn't Garp," Tsuru corrected as she casually inspected her fingernails. "Unless I miss my guess? Those were the other dissenters."

"HONORLESS BASTARD!"

"GWAH!"

"CRASH!"

Sengoku spun around in his seat and stared out of where the wall to his office had been in confusion as a titanic roar of outrage shook the whole of Marineford. This confusion was only compounded when he caught sight of Vice Admiral John Giant being tackled onto one of the readied warships in Marineford's bay by Vice Admiral Ronse of all people, followed by the helmeted giant proceeding to
beat the ever-living shit out of his fellow titan. And as if that weren't bad enough, the two were then followed by fifteen other Giant Marines following them, all brawling either with themselves or with a number of Vice Admirals who were trying to subdue them and all throwing the lovingly assembled warships into nothing short of utter disarray.

"What the hell is going on!?" Sengoku demanded in shock.

"In case you were unaware," Tsuru drawled as she continued to inspect her nails. "Ex-Vice Admiral Jaguar D. Saul was particularly popular with his fellow giants, and those that were once pirates were already agitated from learning what we told their old allies Oimo and Kashi. They might have managed to hold their tongues… had John Giant not decided to share his opinion on how Saul earned his fate due to being a traitor. That got him placed on a rather short list."

She gave Sengoku a chilling look. "Put simply, they've formed a lynch mob. They want John Giant dead for his disrespect, they want Aokiji dead for freezing Saul, they want Akainu dead for bombarding him, they want you dead for for being in charge… basically, they want blood."

"You have got to be kidding me…" Sengoku moaned as dragged a hand down his face.

"Hardly. And for the record, this—" She jerked her head at the brawl in the bay. "Is only the tip of the iceberg. All of the giants stationed on Marineford are either in the throes of mutiny or trying to suppress it, though the latter are, quite frankly, in the vast minority. Honestly, it's hard to say what has them more infuriated, that we killed Saul or that we've been hunting his ward, Nico Robin, for the past twenty years. In case you've forgotten, even those giants who weren't born and raised on Elbaf are rather big on honor." Her tone could not have been drier if Crocodile was holding her vocal cords.

Sengoku was twitching enough that he may as well have been having a seizure. Tsuru waited for a moment more before speaking again, albeit grudgingly. "Your orders, sir?"

The Fleet Admiral glanced at her for a moment before turning a murderous glare on the brawl below. "Inform Admiral Aokiji that he will not be joining us at Enies. Rather, he will be occupied with suppressing this mutiny, effective immediately."

Tsuru cocked an eyebrow in a decidedly unimpressed manner. "So, basically, your solution to solving a problem that began with a frozen giant… is with more frozen giants. Yes, because that will go over splendidly."

Sengoku shot an unreadable look at his subordinate. "You have your orders, Vice Admiral."

Tsuru scowled as she snapped him a supremely stiff salute. "At once, Fleet Admiral."

And with that, Tsuru spun on her heel and marched out of the office, slamming what little of the door was left behind her.

Unnoticed by either of the Marines, one of the last surviving pictures on the office's wall was jarred loose by the impact and smashed to the ground.

The picture held within depicted a trio of young Marines—actually, not even proper Marines, but graduates—celebrating and smiling joyously as they toasted their mugs with one another.

A crack ran through the glass of the frame, cleanly separating the female of the trio from the afro-touting friend whose shoulders she'd slung her arm around.

-o-
"...Do you understand now?" Robin pleaded desperately as she finished. "If you use a Buster Call, everything on this island will be destroyed..." She stared down at us tearfully. "Including all of you."

Her words were addressed as much to Spandam and CP9 as they were to us. Going by the despair in her voice, it was clear that she was pleading for us to run. She was begging for us to leave her to the wolves and save ourselves so that we wouldn't die in vain trying to save it. So that she wouldn't have to see us die.

I ground my teeth furiously in an effort to keep silent, an entirely new kind of fire raging within my gut.

We, however, officially did not give a fuck.

To read about it and even see the cataclysm Robin had depicted was one thing, but to hear it... to hear the suffering and sorrow in the voice of one of my closest friends, of one of the strongest women I knew... to hear her tell of the death of an island, of a way of life...

We officially could not walk away from this fight even if we'd wanted to with every fiber of our bodies, hearts and souls.

And I sure as hell wasn't the only one feeling this way either.

"That son of a bitch..." Soundbite breathed numbly.

"There is no hell deep enough or vile enough in existence..." Lassoo growled through raised hackles.

"An entire... island..." Conis whispered to herself, her expression positively thunderous. "In an instant..."

"I was sorely mistaken," Boss grimaced ferociously as he ashed his cigar. "She doesn't owe me a damn thing. She hasn't owed anyone anything for a long time."

Vivi's face was emotionless as she stared up at the Tower, but the blood dripping from where she was gripping the chains of her weapons said all that needed to be said. "So... this is the legacy my ancestors created..." she whispered to herself before scowling in disgust. "This is the legacy of the world..."

"That's nonsense!" Spandam proclaimed. "There's no way that the Marines would kill their own men, we wouldn't take casualties from our allies!"

"Uh..." Su cocked her head to the side uneasily. "Wasn't he about to—?"

"His father," I growled venomously. "Was the one who called down that damn attack in the first place. Suffice to say that his perspective is somewhat compromised."

Su shivered heavily as she realized that, for the second time in her life, she was in the presence of a madman with the ability and desire to kill us all at the drop of a hat. "Noted."

Meanwhile, Robin continued on, obviously not caring about or even hearing what Spandam was saying. "Do you understand my fear now?" she pleaded desperately. "Do you understand why I'm still trying to save you? The World Government is an absolute force of authority and destruction. No matter how strong you all may be, you can't fight against the world and all of its darkness. If it goes on like this, someday..." She shook her head miserably. "Someday... Someday they will overwhelm you! Someday, they'll crush you, and you'll all die for my sake! And the idea of that happening, of
the ones I’ve been searching for all of my life wasting their lives for my sake, nothing terrifies me more! So if I am destined to die anyway, then at least let me die here of my own volition, so that you all may *live*!"

Robin’s words hit us like an iron rod, briefly managing to quell our rage.

"Robin…” Nami softly breathed.

Vivi shook her head with a grimace. "Damn it, she's making it so hard to stay mad at her…”

"She's been cawwying this fow *how wong*?” Carue whispered.

"Too long, my friend…” Boss grimly answered. "Too long by *half.*"

Of course, just as soon as our rage was dampened down…

"WAHAHAHAHA! YES, YES THAT MAKES *PERFECT* SENSE!"

It was just as suddenly restoked to unparalleled levels.

"I'm going to eat him," Lassoo stated in an unnaturally steady voice. "I have never once in my existence eaten human flesh, but thankfully I'm certain that he doesn't even remotely count."

"*GET IN LINE,*” Soundbite rumbled with honest-to-goodness murder in his voice.

"What a sorry case," Spandam gloated in Robin's face, even though she didn't so much as acknowledge him. "Even if you make friends, all you can do is drag them through the muck with you. WAHAHAHAHAHAHA! IT'S SO PERFECT!"

"Permission to shoot him?" Usopp and Conis snarled in unison as they grabbed their weapons.

"Give him a second…” I warned them as I raised my hand placatingly, only barely managing to suppress the murder in my own voice.

"But—!" Conis began to protest before Luffy silenced any objections.

"Do what Cross says, you guys," our captain stated in probably the calmest voice I'd ever heard from him. It was actually kind of scary.

"BEHOLD, YOU SCUM OF THE SEAS!" Spandam cackled as he jabbed his finger upwards, drawing our attention to an object whose form was *very* well known in both this world and mine, though for *extremely* different reasons. "THAT FLAG BEARS THE EMBLEM OF THE WORLD GOVERNMENT! IT SIGNIFIES THE UNITED STRENGTH OF OVER 170 NATIONS ACROSS THE WORLD! ACROSS THE FOUR SEAS AND THE GRAND LINE, THAT SYMBOL REPRESENTS THE WORLD ITSELF!"

Spandam flung his arm out. "DO YOU REALIZE NOW THE SCALE YOU’RE FIGHTING ON! DO YOU REALIZE HOW PATHETIC YOUR EXISTENCE IS!? *THE POWER OF THIS WOMAN’S ENEMY!*?"

Silence reigned supreme as every last one of us observed the flag, as we took in its form and everything that it implied.

Until finally…

"Yeah,” Luffy nodded solemnly. "I understand exactly who Robin's enemy is."
Luffy then lowered his head and glanced to his left… and then to his right.

"Everyone."

I felt an unparalleled thrill run through me as I snapped an ecstatic grin to Luffy. "Yes, Captain?" I whispered reverently. Was he going to do it? Did he actually mean what I think he meant!?

Luffy looked back up at the flag without a trace of emotion.

"Shoot down that flag."

HALLELUJAH.

"FUCK THE HELL YES!" I cackled ecstatically as I grabbed Lassoo and took a knee, aiming him straight at the symbol of our enemy. "CANI-BLAST!"

"YES, SIR!" Lassoo barked with a salute before going full-gun and clicking loudly.

"This is gonna be E-PI-C!" Soundbite sang rapturously.

"Burn Bazooka," Conis announced frigidly, swinging her own cannon off her back and aiming it upwards.

"Give 'em hell, girlfriend!" Su yelped as she glared up at the tower from Conis' shoulders.

"I've stood on the sidelines until now. Never again!" Nami snarled as she spun her Clima-Tact at her side, coalescing her clouds into a writhing, lightning-drowned tail. "Lightning Bolt Tempo!"

"Three Sword Style," Zoro intoned around Wado Ichimonji as he tied his bandanna around his head before drawing his secondary and tertiary blades and drawing them back into position. "108 Caliber Phoenix!"

"Behold the awesome power of the giant slingshot Kabuto!" Usopp bellowed confidently as he drew said slingshot's pouch back. "Special Attack: Firebird Star!"

"My first use of this technique, and it couldn't be a more momentous occasion," Sanji snarled as he hefted his leg up and drew it back. "You'll pay a thousand years of hell for every hair you hurt on dear Robin-chwan's head! The first course in your punishment, a rehash of your Tempest Kick! APÉRITIF!"

"A moment such as this," Chopper rumbled as he withdrew a single vial of very mobile and highly volatile-looking liquid from his backpack. "Deserves something special for it! TREMBLE BEFORE THE MIGHT OF MY LATEST CREATION! CHERRY BLOSSOM BLAST BLIZZARD!"

"Uh…?" Vivi glanced at her Cutters hesitantly for a moment before shooting a hopeful look at Carue. "Any ideas?"

"Ah… 'Go team'?" Carue answered, half-heartedly pumping a wing.

"Damn. Well, at least you know how I feel, right, Boss?"

"Half-Shell Style," Boss intoned as he slammed his rope-dart into the roof and withdrew it with a goodly chunk of stone attached to the end, which he then began spinning into a blur. "Flying Fish Fastball Special!"
"OH, COME ON!"

Spandam blinked incoherently for a moment before his jaw dropped and every drop of blood escaped his face. "Wait… what are you—! No… nononononoNO, DON'T EVEN—!"

Too late.

There was no signal, no words, nothing. None were needed. As one we moved.

"ROCK BOTTOM BLAZE OF GLORY!"

And as one, we unloaded our attacks on the symbol of Robin's enemy. The symbol of our enemy. On that day, we the Straw Hat Pirates did not burn the flag of the World Government.

Rather… we disintegrated it, completely and utterly.

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Never before had the sum volume in the Revolutionaries' Central Command in Baltigo risen above a few scarce decibels at a time.

Then again… never before had someone stuck it to the World Government in such an utterly glorious manner that had Dragon out and out cackling.

"SHISHISHISHISHI!" Monkey D. Dragon led his comrades in revolution in cheering.

"EXCELLENT, LUFFY! SHOW THE WORLD YOUR WILL! SHOW THE WORLD YOUR DETERMINATION! PROVE YOUR AUTONOMY! SHISHISHISHI!"

"THAT'S MY BROTHER, DAMN IT!" Chief of Staff Sabo whooped from atop the table he was perched on as he jabbed his finger at the only active Snail in the room. "THAT'S MY CRAZIER- THAN-HELL BABY BROTHER! GIVE 'EM HELL, LUFFY! GIVE 'EM HELL!"

"CHEERS FOR THE MOST EARTHSHAKING CREW SINCE ROGER!" Koala laughed as she toasted a bottle of liquor she'd pulled from somewhere. "TO MONKEY D. LUFFY! TO JEREMIAH CROSS, BASTARD THAT HE IS! TO NICO ROBIN! TO THE STRAW HAT PIRATES!"

"KANPAI!" the facility bellowed as one.

-0-

In complete and utter contrast, the throne room of Amazon Lily was silent as the grave, the jaws of almost every last person in the room touching the floor.

"Did… Did that just happen?" Marigold whispered in complete and utter disbelief.

"He… but they… how… wha…?" Sandersonia stammered, her brain misfiring furiously.

Through it all, Boa Hancock's newly acquired apprentice looked around in confusion. "Ah… Elder Nyon?" Marguerite leaned down to whisper to the old woman. "I take it that what we just heard was… significant?"

Elder Nyon swallowed heavily before shooting a wide-eyed look at the young woman. "Try…" she croaked. "Utterly… unprecedented. Nobody in recorded history has dared commit the act that these pirates just did. Only one thing's for certain now—!"
"Snrkt!"

The elder was cut off by a loud snort rippling through the throne room, causing everyone to look around in confusion for the source.

"Snrkght!"

At least, until a second snort rang out, confirming the source to be the world-renowned Pirate Empress herself, who was doubled over and shaking in the coils of her very confused partner.

The room's occupants exchanged uneasy glances until Nyon jerked her head at the Empress, prompting the other two Gorgons in the room to speak up.

"Ah… sister?" Marigold started warily.

"Are…" Sandersonia slowly inched forward. "Are you… alright?"

"SNAAAAAHAAAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAAAA!"

The room froze once anew, only this time it was on account of Boa Hancock flinging her head back and shrieking with laughter, laughing and laughing harder and louder than any on Amazon Lily had ever heard her laugh before.

Hell, it was the first time half the room's occupants had ever heard her laugh, full stop.

After about a minute of the laughing, Nyon managed to gather the wits she needed to swallow heavily. "Only one thing's for certain now," she repeated in a numb whisper. "Nothing will ever be the same…"

If anything, those words only made Hancock howl louder.

-0-

In twin flashes of underdeveloped-but-still-passable Shave, Master Chief Petty Officer Coby and Chief Petty Officer Helmeppo appeared in the ruins of Fleet Admiral Sengoku's office, standing at attention.

"Fleet Admiral Sengoku, sir!" Coby led Helmeppo in snapping up salutes. "We are here to inform you that the vanguard is ready to move out! They only await… your… presence…” Coby wound down uncomfortably, the steam leaving him as he processed the scene before him.

Specifically, Fleet Admiral Sengoku staring at the Transponder Snail on his desk with rapidly mounting fury.

"Oh, what the hell did those idiots do now!?" Helmeppo whimpered miserably.

"I don't know, but we need to—!" Coby started to order.

He was too late, however, as Sengoku erupted in a blaze of golden fury a second later.

"I'M GOING TO CRUSH THOSE STRAW HATS LIKE—grk!"

Without warning, the blaze ended as abruptly as it started, leaving Sengoku standing in his normal form with a pained expression on his face, and a hand clamped over his chest.

A second later, he collapsed to the floor without so much as a sound.
The two low-rank rookies gaped at his prone body in shock.

"Did… Did that just happen?" Coby whispered incredulously.

His words snapped sense back into Helmeppo, prompting him to dash out of the office, bellowing at the top of his lungs. "MEDIC!"

-o-

"That…” I breathed euphorically as I stood back up and settled Lassoo in his harness so that he could rest. "Was even better… than I could have ever. Possibly. Imagined."

"Daaaamn skippy…” Soundbite breathed in awe.

"You… You… YOU'RE ALL GOING TO DIE!" Spandam roared incredulously. "YOU CAN'T SERIOUSLY CHALLENGE THE ENTIRE WORLD AND EXPECT TO WIN!"

"YEAH?! BRING IT OOOOOOON!" Luffy bellowed back, causing Spandam to recoil with a scream of fear. He then went on to glare at Robin herself, looking her dead in the eye.

"ROOOOBIIIN! I STILL HAVEN'T HEARD YOU SAY IT YET!" He clenched his eyes shut as he roared. "TELL ME THAT YOU WANT TO LIVE!"

That snapped me back to the present, and I promptly snapped in Soundbite's face before pointing at our shellshocked crewmate. "Come on, Robin, come on!" I whispered desperately into her ears, pumping as much emotion into my voice as I could. "You just saw it, didn't you? You just saw the beast bleed! I know it's huge and I know that it's scary…” I shook my head desperately as I flung my arm out. "But damn it, if it bleeds, then we can kill it! Together!"

"JUST DON'T BE AN IDIOT, DAMN IT!"

I snapped my eyes to my shoulder in shock. "Soundbite?"

The baby snail was panting heavily as it grit its teeth. "That is not dead which can eternal lie," he recited fervently. "And with strange aeons even death may die! Lovecraft, Robin! YOU KNOW THIS! IT TAKES TIME, longer than any of our lifetimes, BUT THE FACT IS THAT THE WHEEL WILL ALWAYS TURN! NOTHING IS FOREVER! They are not forever! You know this to be a fact, more so than anyone! You have to fight, damn it! FIGHT!"

Slowly but surely, Robin's tears fell. She bit her lip as she sobbed, as her emotions raged within her…

And then suddenly, out of the blue, a staticky sound filled the air. I snapped a look at Soundbite, and only the glazed, unfocused look in his eyes and vacant expression made me refrain from glaring at him. Still, I opened my mouth to ask what was going on—

"The sea's a vast place."

When my blood suddenly froze in my veins. I didn't even have to strain my ears to hear Robin's gasp, to hear everyone start in shock, and the voice that suddenly filled the air.

"The sea's a vast place," the voice repeated, rumbling with utterly impossible emotions. "So I guarantee… someday you'll find friends who won't ever leave you. No matter who you are, ain't no one born into this world to be alone!"
"Impossible…" I breathed in awe. "Even by the standards of this world… that's…"

"Your friends are right here waiting for you, Robin. All you gotta do is get back to them! Share your life with them… and never let them go!"

The very second the last word shook the world, Soundbite slumped forwards, wheezing in exhaustion. "SO LOUD… SO STRONG… What kind… of voice… was that?" he groaned.

Robin was frozen in shock, tears flowing freely from her eyes, still locked onto Soundbite. And credit to my captain, he knew an opportunity when it smacked him in the face.

"ROBIN!" Luffy roared again. "SAY YOU WANT TO LIVE!"

And just like that, at long last, the dam broke and Robin broke down with it into full-on joyful sobbing. It was messy, loud, and ugly…

…and it was also absolutely beautiful in its complete and undeniable sincerity.

"YES!" she screamed back. "I WANT TO LIVE!"

I shot my fists into the air and roared joyously in response, a sentiment that every last one of my crewmates echoed in some way or another.

"TAKE ME WITH YOU!" Robin jerked forwards, her voice hoarse as she screamed at the top of her lungs. "TAKE ME AWAY FROM HERE!"

"YOU FUCKERS JUST LOST!" I cackled triumphantly as I jabbed my finger at the Cipher Pol, and the World Government as a whole.

As if in response to it all, the massive drawbridge below us suddenly roared to life and started lowering, spanning the last possible barrier between her and us.

"THAT'S MY BOYS!" Boss cackled as he pumped his fists in the air.

"BWAAAAAH!" Franky sobbed messily, his expression way less appealing than Robin's. "YOU CRAZY GUYS! I LOVE YOU ALL SO DAMN MU-U-UCH!"

"Finally!" Nami nodded firmly with an impatient grin.

"Hang tight, Robin," Vivi whispered. "We're coming,"

"We're coming for her and for you, you son of a bitch!" Su called up as she jabbed her paw at Spandam.

Spandam, of course, shrieked and reeled back in response. "DON'T COME OVER HEEERE!"

Unfortunately, the universe chose that exact moment to actually listen to the bastard, as at that moment, twin explosions struck the sides of the drawbridge and caused it to freeze at an elevated angle halfway down.

Boss froze in his pose, twitching incredulously for a moment before proceeding to shake his fists at the Courthouse's towers. "YOU INCOMPETENT BRATS! YOU HAD ONE JOB TO DO, DAMN IT! ONE! YOU BETTER PRAY THE MARINES KILL YOU FIRST, OR ELSE I'LL DAMN WELL MAKE YOU WISH THEY DID!"

I winced sympathetically at my crewmates' plight before chuckling grimly as I crossed my arms
behind my head. "Well, that route's blown. Guess we're doing this the hard way!"

_That_ got everyone leaning forwards for a chance to stare at me in confusion. _"The hard way!?"_ they chorused incredulously.

My grin was Luffy-worthy as I raised my voice. "Ooooh, yeah."

**WOOOOOOT!**

"The hard way."

Soundbite became snow-white as he slowly rotated his eyestalks downward. _"Oh… hell no."_ Going by how Lassoo was suddenly scrambling on my back, he'd gotten the idea too.

_"Puru puru puru—GAGAGA!"_ Pinkie cackled in Kokoro's voice as I dug him out of my jacket. 
_"HOPE YOU KIDS ARE READY FOR THE RIDE OF YOUR LIVES! THIS IS THE FINAL VOYAGE OF THE ROCKET MAN, ELDEST CHILD OF TOM'S WORKERS, AND I INTEND TO MAKE IT A GOOD ONE! NAGAGAGA!"

_"Ooooh, no…"_ the smarter members of our crew all whispered in horrified realization.

"He's not serious…" Su shrank back in naked terror. "Someone tell me that he's not serious!"

"Even by _my_ standards this is totally insane!" Boss shook his head in frantic denial.

"HAHAHAHA!" Franky bellowed as he stamped his feet ecstatically. "HERE THEY COME, SPANDA! THEY'RE COMING, AND YOU CAN'T STOP THEM!"

Spandam froze mid-panic, and snapped a _look_ filled with a whole cornucopia of emotions at the cyborg.

Franky, of course, noticed said look and leered malevolently in his tormentor's face. "What're you gonna do, huh? Hit me?" He jutted his chin out temptingly. "Please, do it, I'm begging you. Give me another reason to laugh in your ugly panda _face._"

_That_ might have been a bit too far.

You know those stories about adrenaline letting people lift cars?

Well, in this case, it let a Spandam lift a cyborg and fling him into the void.

"He's got the right idea!" I crowed as I pointed at Franky's falling form before sticking my arm out towards Luffy. "Come on, Captain! Let's do it!"

"RIGHT!" Luffy yelled as he snapped his arms out, catching the rest of our _very_ unwilling crewmates in his grasp. His left tangled itself around Boss, who wasn't able to free himself no matter how hard he struggled, while I caught his right and firmly wound it around my own arm.

"Alright…" I grinned as I stared into the void. "In the words of the great Will Turner! 'Over the edge!'"

"NonononoNO!" Soundbite shrieked desperately.

"LET'S GO!" Luffy laughed as he jumped into the abyss.

"OVER AGAIN!" I roared back as I jumped along with him, helping him drag our crewmates with
"AAAAAAAGH!!" Soundbite shrieked around the mouthful of my jacket he'd bitten into.

"YOU TWO ARE DEAD IF WE LIVE THROUGH THIS, YOU HEAR ME!??" Su screamed as she clutched Conis' jacket. "DEAD!"

"GET IN WINE!" Carue squawked, hanging onto Luffy's arm for dear life.

The fall lasted for an eternity...

**WOOOOOOOT!**

And ended in an instant as the Rocket Man met us halfway, whiplashing us into its body and carrying us over the void.

As we flew towards the gates of the Tower of Justice, I could think of only one appropriate response.

"PFFFHAHAHAHAAAAA!" I laughed at the top of my lungs. "READY OR NOT! HERE! WE! COME!"

An instant later, I received a slight damper to my joy in the form of us hitting a yard-thick wall of stone head-on at what felt like a million miles an hour.

Still… in the long-run?

Totally worth it.

**Xomniac AN:** …a year. Not exact, no, but… twelve months is twelve months. A full. Damn. Year.

One year since CV and I started this story. One year since Cross woke up on his little island in the middle of nowhere. One year since we started a story that should, by all rights, have died in its cradle…

And look where we are now. Just… look.

There are just… no words.

It's been a long road… it's been worth it…

*And you better damn well believe that it's nowhere near finished.*

**Patient AN:** And half a year since I was invited to take part in this masterpiece. It's an honor to be a part of something like this.

**Hornet AN:** Sadly, since these assholes already took all the good news, I have to deliver the bad. Namely, that while we will strive to maintain our once-every-two-weeks update schedule, do not expect a consistent time/day of updates, and don't be surprised if a chapter takes longer. TPO and Xom are back in school, and I'm now working a full-time job. As much as we'd like otherwise, real-life shit takes precedence.

Oh, and another reason: five days until the NFL season starts! Woo
Chapter 40: Blackest Secrets Revealed! A True God Of Noise Is Born!

Xomniac AN: I am writing this AN the morning after the posting of Chapter 39… quite simply because I have no other choice but to. The sheer amount of praise we are receiving for Chapter 39 is… nothing short of awe-inspiring. I can literally feel tears in my eyes as I read what everyone has to say. The sheer amount of love and support you are showing for our story, for us, is… I just don't think there are the words. There… there just straight up aren't. So forgive me for using inadequate vocabulary, but… thank you. Thank you, from the very bottom of my heart. I wish I could say more, I really do.

Patient AN: And a thank you from me to all of you, both for the joy you've given my co-author and the support you've shown to me by proxy. I don't believe I ever had enough self-confidence to consider myself a good writer before I joined the Cross-Brain. Now I can say it happily; after finding the way out of the depression that consumed my heart thirteen years ago, this is the second best thing that's ever happened to me. Thanks to all of you; every positive review and comment is reinforcement that I'm part of something good.

Hornet AN: And we would be remiss if we didn't finish this off by saying thank you to all of you who gave constructive criticism on the story. I'm good, but I can't catch every problem, and I can't think through every implication and consequence, and neither can Patient and Xomniac. That it's been almost always well thought out and accompanied by every sign that you like the story in spite of its flaws only helps. You have made this story better by speaking up. And I'd especially like to make a shoutout to Yog. Your criticism is the most detailed of all, and I'll admit, some of our plot points were cribbed entirely from your posts.

Cross-Brain AN: From we three to all of you who are fans of our work, from the bottom of our hearts, thank you.

I don't know if it was a credit to half a year of hellish training or my own blood-boiling adrenaline that I managed to struggle out of the rubble that the Rocketman made out of the Tower of Justice's front. It was made particularly hard to tell considering that immediately before I broke out, I heard my captain let out a triumphant roar.

And as I pushed the scattered, jagged stones off of me… well, you can guess by now how I reacted.

"PFFHAHAHA! WOO!" I cheered as I shot out of the wreckage and pumped my fist jubilantly. "That was nothing short of utterly kickass! And fun!" I half-dashed, half-staggered over to my captain and clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Right, Luffy?"

The rubber man turned to look at me, and after a moment of his adrenaline and serious-self clashing with his humorous side, he began laughing too. "Shishishi! Yeah, that was totally awesome! First we were—!"

"Yeah yeah, and then everyone was like—!" I picked up eagerly.

"But then we hit it like—!"

"The wall was just—!"

"Exactly!"
"Eesh..." I vaguely heard Franky muttering behind us. "I think I owe Mozu an apology. I guess that 'folly a ducks' thing or whatever isn't just a name for something dirty after all. Though now I wonder how the hell I'm gonna knock these two out of it..."

"Ohhh, don't worry."

Without warning, my headphones were suddenly yanked off of my neck, prompting me to twist around. "HE—!?" My protest died in my throat when I caught sight of not only Nami holding my headphones, but the rest of our crewmates glowering behind her. I was a bit confused as to why they all had their fingers in their ears - at least, until I noticed Soundbite's equally infuriated expression from where he was perched on our navigator's shoulder.

"I have an idea," Nami bit out acridly. She then directed a malevolent grin at my snail. "Oh, Soundbite?"

"Yes, my good friend?"" Soundbite sneered back.

I paled in horror and quickly lurched at Nami, scrambling to wrench my earphones back, but she responded by casually holding me at bay with one hand and holding my headgear out of reach with the other.

"I know that you don't normally take orders from me, but I'd like to request a Gastro-Amp... to eleven."

"IT WOULD BE MY HONOR."

I paled as the air suddenly vibrated with an electric whine. "Don't suppose I could get away with an 'I'm sorry'!?" I squeaked pitifully.

The demonic glint in Nami's eyes said it all.

"Uh-oh..." Luffy whimpered as he and I both shrank back fearfully.

And with that, Nami proceeded to suck in a deep, deep breath and...

-o-

"You think they're alright after that?" Zambai wondered aloud, continuing to bash Marine after Agent with his bazooka, its ammo exhausted and its effectiveness reduced to that of a club.

"Eh," Raphey shrugged casually as she flipped her way over a Juryman's chain and used his head as a springboard with which to spin through the air. "Odds are that they'll get a little hurt one way or another, that's just the life we live, and probably more than a little angry—angrier, they'll get angry-er," she swiftly corrected when her fellow students shot her a trio of incredulous looks. "But seriously, I don't think it'll be anything significant for them. After all, these asshats stole our comrade." She leered viciously. "Us steamrolling them completely and utterly? Please. That's the predetermined outcome, no two ways about it."

"You pirates can't be serious!" a World Government Agent who was hiding behind a nearby pillar sneered. "You really think that they could have survived plowing into the Tower of Justice at a speed like—?"

Suddenly, acting on a combination of reflex and pure animal instinct, Raphey, the other Dugongs, Yokozuna, and the Watchdogs that had made it to the courthouse all slapped their flippers or paws over their ears. The savvier members of the Franky Family and the Galley-La Foremen had the sense
to stall their fighting long enough to follow their example, and not a split-second too soon.

"YOU STUPID, IDIOTIC, MORONIC, INCONSIDERATE NUMBSKULLS OF BRAIN-DEAD NIMRODS NEARLY KILLED US ALL, AND YOU HAVE THE FUCKING AUDACITY TO LAUGH ABOUT IT!? I HOPE THAT WHEN YOU DIE YOU GET TENDERIZED, CHOPPED UP, DRIED OUT, BOILED, EATEN ALIVE AND SHAT OUT BEFORE YOU CAP IT ALL OFF BY ENDING UP FROZEN IN HELL'S BASEMENT AND SHATTERING, YOU SEVEN-TIMES-DAMNED ADRENALINE-HUFFING SUICIDAL BASTARDS!"

The unholy roar was loud enough that the whole of Enies Lobby was thrown off-balance. Or perhaps that was the island actually shaking. Hard to tell, on account of how many were still shivering in terror.

Mikey waited a second as he remained tensed up before glancing nervously in the direction of the Tower. "Nami's piiiissed…" he whimpered.

Raphey swallowed heavily as she tugged at the bandanna covering her mouth. "Leo," she mumbled. "If I ever give you shit about you being our leader again, remind me about the moment you saved us from that."

Leo nodded numbly in agreement.

"Alright… with that little assault on our ears out of the way, where were we?" Paulie asked, forcing his eyes open out of the wince he'd adopted when the yelling started.

The sight that met his eyes was nearly every Marine, agent, and Juryman still struggling to recover, and the nearest Marine to him massaging his temples, and looking at him through squinted eyes. "Erg… any chance that we can take a quick break?" he asked, regretting raising his voice immediately judging by how his rubbing intensified.

"Oh, yeah, now I remember. Sorry, but that's a no."

"Eh—?"

THWACK!

The Marine had just enough time to blink in confusion before Paulie slammed his fist into his face.

And just like that, the brawl was back on.

-o-

"Wow, that was really loud, Granny!" Chimney said as she removed her hands from her ears.

"NAGAGAGAGAGAGAGAGA!" Kokoro cackled, taking a swig from her bottle. "Ah, brings back memories of some of the boys' more harebrained stunts! The Straw Hats have a good disciplinarian to produce something like that!"

"Mawp… Mawp… Mawp…"

Kokoro glanced down at their pet rabbit, who was sprawled out on the ground, clutching his ears.

"Chimney, be a dear and carry Gonbe for a bit, okay?" the icefish mermaid said, before continuing down the sub-basement corridor they were in. "We're almost there."
The young girl nodded, scooped up her rabbit, and followed after her grandmother. Soon, Kokoro came to a stop in front of a nondescript door, and gave it a hearty shove. It swung open, revealing a room filled with shelf upon shelf of… Alcohol. Bottles upon bottles of wine, sake, whiskey, and gin, all of it high-quality.

"Jackpot," Kokoro whispered rapturously.

-o-

"MAWP… MAWP… MAWP…" I mumbled blearily as I clutched at my ears. Were they bleeding? I think they were bleeding, or was that brainmatter?

"My head's shaking…" Luffy slurred miserably as he lay on his back, his eyes spinning into spirals.

"I don't feel so good…" Soundbite groaned, his tongue hanging out uselessly as he panted in agony.
"I OUTDID NAMI'S BEST… BUT I THINK that attack needs to be an ABSOLUTE LAST RESORT."

"As much as that hurt, I like the results," Zoro ground out as he stood over us.

"We're sorry," the rubber man and I moaned in synch.

"Don't let it happen again," Nami said with… exponentially less venom. In fact, she looked positively lighthearted. "But on the other hand, I feel like I should thank you for that; that was a few months' worth of repressed anger."

SMASH!

I squeaked in nervousness as an Eisen fist suddenly shot at me, barely missing my crotch and instead striking the floor. "And that's… out of eight years?"

Nami shrugged as she spun her staff and reeled the cloud back in, forcing it into submission with relative ease. "I think that between this thing doing all the anger for me and turning that secretary into a lightning rod, I should be good for a long time."

"Anyway," Su spoke up, padding over to look down at me. "What are we going to do now? Taking down those assassins and torturing that polished mass of primordial ooze is all well and good, but are we going to do that before or after we save Robin?"

"Chapapa," came a somewhat strained voice from nearby. "Allow me to answer that."

Luffy and I promptly shot to our feet and Su zipped back to Conis as we all snapped our attention to an upper corner of the room, where Fukuro was digging a finger in whatever ears he had, his forewarning apparently having done him little good against Nami's blaring wrath. "You know, I'm really happy that my only role in this whole mess is going to be stopping you from rescuing Nico Robin, because that probably means that you hate me a lot less than the chief and the ones who actually kidnapped her, chapapa," he grumbled acridly.

I took a second to suppress my desire to snort at his voice—because holy shit was it hilarious—before readopting my serious expression.

"Soundbite? This is not the time for playing around," Zoro snarled.

"This is my natural voice, chapaa," Fukuro deadpanned.
"...We're so sorry," chorused most of the crew, bowing their heads.

"Why do I feel like not all of you are apologizing for being rude..." he muttered, rolling his eyes.

"Yeah, yeah, we're awkward like that," I said, waving the matter aside before stepping forward and addressing the... rotund man? Eh, close enough. "Anyway... Fukuro, correct? The gossip-loving 'Silent Owl'?'

To his credit, the assassin didn't even blink. "Chapapa. You never fail to amaze and terrify, Cross."

I blinked in surprise at his nonchalance before recalling exactly what he was like in the story. Now that I thought about it, he was a pretty cool customer, wasn't he? He only lost his composure after going a few rounds with Franky, after all! If so, then maybe... "Yep, and proud of it, too. Anyway, again..." I very casually crossed my arms behind my head. "Seeing as you're a damn well-informed guy, I imagine that you already know that our modus operandi is that we never start a fight. Unless, of course, we're going up against someone who started it first. As you noted earlier, you had jack all to do with Robin's kidnapping, and currently you're only here at the behest of your subhuman Director. As such, I'm prepared to cut a deal with you using what authority I have on the crew: if you step aside now, we won't fight you, plain and simple. Given the circumstances, I think it's a pretty reasonable offer; you saw what happened to Jabra, and you're not even half as strong as he is, so why interfere with us at all?"

Several of the crew exchanged looks of unease and contemplation, but before any of them could speak up, Fukuro answered.

"Because you've severely misjudged the situation," he explained flatly. "Do you really think we're here because of what that weakling says, when obviously the logical answer is to run? No..."
Fukuro shook his head sadly. "The only reason I'm not flying away from here as fast as I can Moonwalk is that while you might terrify me, and your crew as a whole might scare the hell out of me..."

And just like that a sheen of cold sweat and a terrified grimace came over his face. "Lucci scares me straight-up shitless, and he told us that if any of us contemplate running for even a second, he'll personally rip us in half," he explained. "Given the fact that I've worked with him from the day I joined CP9 and the fact that he's currently the strongest human being I know, I am completely and utterly inclined to believe him."

"...Yeah, alright, that's a fair point," I winced as I scratched the back of my head. "Well, then, no hard feelings for doing what has to be done. At least we can give you a swift defeat, right?"

"Indee—" Fukuro started to nod in agreement before freezing as my words caught up to him. "Wait, wha—?"

"Luffy, if you wouldn't mind—?"

A wave of steam suddenly swept over me. "GEAR SECOND!"

Credit to Fukuro where it was due, he didn't even wait a second to turn into a blur, albeit while abandoning his moniker in his panic. "CHAPAPAPAPAPA—!"

It was no use, however. The instant he moved, Luffy moved as well and appeared before him, fist stretched behind him.

"JET PISTOL!"
And just like that, we had a Fukuro-shaped crater in the middle of the floor of the Tower of Law, reminiscent both of Jabra's defeat and Bellamy's.

"ANOTHER ONE BITES THE DUST!" Soundbite proclaimed with a cackle.

"Damn straight he does!" I nodded proudly as I snatched Soundbite back from Nami and replaced him on my shoulder.

"Cross, can I please go and kick that stupid pigeon guy's ass now?" Luffy growled as he fell back to the ground, steam dissipating from him as he seamlessly hauled himself back a bit.

"Wait just a minute, Luffy, while I explain the situation," I pleaded, before turning to face the crew as a whole. "Look, if it were as simple as just getting Robin back with us, don't you think she'd already have used her powers to at least try and get away from CP9 by now? The problem here is that she's a captive of the World Government, and there's one World Government protocol concerning Devil Fruit users that's almost immutable."

Vivi slapped a hand to her face with a groan. "Of course… she's wearing sea prism stone handcuffs…"

Every one of the crew that had been trapped in Crocodile's cage immediately growled in frustration. "I'm starting to get damn sick of that mineral always showing up to bite us in the ass," Zoro practically snarled.

"You, me, and every last pirate on the Line without access to it makes three million," I grumbled in agreement. "Anyway… odds are that a government base like this is going to have access to multiple pairs of handcuffs. And given what Fukuro was most likely going to say before we knocked him out, they've probably decided to try stalling us while they take Robin to the Gates of Justice. In order to do that, I'm going to hypothesize that they took every key to the handcuffs that they had in this tower and divided them among the agents here, probably in an attempt to slow us down by forcing us to gather all of the keys before going after Robin. But really, if they want to have the best chance of keeping the key from us, they'd give it to the strongest they could have."

"Which means—!" Luffy jerked forwards eagerly.

"But!" I cut him off with a raised finger. "They'd also need the key in here to keep us stalled here in the tower, and there's no way in hell Spandam is letting Rob Lucci more than a few feet away from him. Logically, this means that they gave the key to the second-strongest fighter CP9 has, who is currently in this building. Now, let's see…" I started knocking my fist against my head. "Fukuro came right to us and admitted to being weak, so there's no need to search him. Jabra and Blueno most likely weren't around long enough to pick up a key, so they're moot, too. Of the three remaining, we have Kaku, Kalifa, and Kumadori."

"SO MANY JOKES about white hoods and burning crosses TO BE MADE…" Soundbite sighed wistfully.

"And so little time," I shot back without breaking my pose. "Anyway, considering the importance of the acquisition of Pluton's blueprints, I think that the second-strongest was in the team sent to Water 7, so that rules out Kumadori…" I snapped my fingers victoriously. "But if it were Kalifa, then Nami would never have been able to block her attack back on Water 7, so by process of elimination, it's Kaku who holds the key!"
Several of the crew were giving me quizzical looks, as they knew that I already knew where the key was. Rolling my eyes, I pointed to the bag hanging at my side, within which was held the means through which I was broadcasting everything we were saying and doing to the entire world, and their looks faded into understanding.

"Sound logic, Cross," Franky said, giving a firm nod. "But if there are only three agents here and Luffy's going to be fighting Lucci, what do you expect the rest of us to do?"

I smirked cockily. "What else? Some of us will fight the agents so that we don't get jumped from behind, and some of us will follow Luffy to retrieve Robin. And the rest of us?" I slammed my fist into my palm. "We're going to act like the godforsaken pirates this world's decided to paint us as and tear this tower apart from top to bottom, looking for and subsequently taking anything of value."

I don't know if Soundbite provided the effect or not, but I distinctly heard a CHA-CHING! from Nami's general direction.

"Right! So," I clapped my hands together, and looked at my shoulder. "Before we move to the division of responsibilities, Soundbite, confirm positions of the enemy."

"Roger roger," the snail replied, concentrating briefly. "MMM… THIRTY STORIES above ground, TEN STORIES BELOW. They didn't spare any expenses. Kaku's on the fifteenth floor… KALIFA'S on the twenty-sixth… AND KUMADORI—URGH, he's SHAVING like mad, but he's somewhere in the TOP FIVE basements."

"And Robin?" Luffy pressed eagerly.

"Yeah yeah, LET ME JUST— WHAT THE FUCK?!?"

I jumped in shock at the sudden bout of swearing. "What, what is it? What's wrong?"

Soundbite's eyestalks were darting around in infuriated confusion. "I-I DON'T—! One second I managed to find her, the next SHE WAS GONE!" He shook his head with a scowl. "Also, she was… underwater AND AT THE EDGE OF MY RANGE!? THIS DOESN'T MAKE ANY SENSE!"

"Some of it does," I growled, grinding the heel of my palm into my forehead as I put the pieces together. "There's no visible path from here to the Gates of Justice, and sailing there is impossible thanks to the whirlpools formed by the Gates interfering with the local currents, so underwater is the only place where the passageway between here and there could be. But the only way they'd be able to get there so fast is if—"

"If the pigeon bastard was carrying them while Shaving," Luffy deduced grimly.

"But why—?" I froze as a terrifying thought hit me. "Luffy… did Jabra happen to say why he decided to break ranks and come after you?"

Luffy's already grim expression became even grimmer than before. "Before he beat up the bull guy, he said something about how he'd been wanting to fight me for awhile. Something about the Back Fight, too. I wasn't really listening, though, I was too pissed."

"Yeah, that about figures…" I groaned, shaking my head. "Lucci may be the most composed out of all of CP9, but he and Jabra have the same kind of power: they're Carnivorous Zoans, meaning that their predatory instincts run on overdrive and their bloodlust is through the roof. Jabra just rushed at you because he had less discipline, but Lucci's keeping his head while working towards the same
endgame. Odds are that he raced ahead as fast as he could just so he could get to the ideal battleground for fighting you. And in the process…"

I scowled grimly. "He's already cut our time down to a fraction by escorting Robin straight to the doorsteps of the Gate, so we can't waste any more time. Luffy, head straight for the docks and Soundbite will guide you to the secret passage that'll lead you down to the tunnel. From there, it's a straight shot to Lucci. Meanwhile, Vivi, Conis, Franky—!"

"Ah, actually!" Franky cut in with a raised hand. "I used a pretty damn cola-draining move back on the Puffing Tom, so I need to find this place's kitchen and recharge. And also…” He tapped a finger to his forearm. "I need to find some tools. I've been working on a combat upgrade for a while now, and it's almost done. I want to finish it up before I charge into a big-ass fight."

I frowned thoughtfully at the cyborg. "This upgrade any good?"

Franky gave a cocky smirk as he shot out a thumbs-up. "SUPER good, I guarantee it!"

I mulled it over for a moment before nodding. "Yeah, alright, fine. Best you get going now. Soundbite, make sure he stays away from Kumadori, alright?"

"He's fast, but he's also got THE VOICE OF A JUMBOTRON. Shouldn't be too tough."

"Thanks a lot. See you guys later!" Franky nodded before running off.

"Now, as I was saying… Vivi, Conis, Carue, Su, you follow Luffy and pass by to Robin. Give him a few minutes' lead to get Lucci properly occupied before continuing after him. And to that, I add the following: CHOP-CHOP!"

I jabbed my finger in the general direction of Enies Lobby's rear dock, and Luffy took that for the starting signal that it was and charged off with a war cry. Vivi and Conis hastily boarded Carue, who sped ahead to catch up to him. I observed the dust trail for a moment before looking back at the crew. "Zoro, Nami, Chopper, you know your opponents. Get going, and regroup here when you're done."

"Right," they intoned together, and sped off.

"Usopp, I'll be climbing the Tower alongside you, but you'll be heading to the roof. In the likely event that Spandam gets to that bridge before we do, it'll be up to you to make sure Robin stays safe until reinforcements arrive. Your Kabuto is the only weapon on the island capable of reaching its target from that distance. Take full advantage of that, and give them hell."

Usopp's grin was even wider than when Oimo and Kashi had joined our side as he stamped his Kabuto into the ground and struck what I'm sure he thought was a cool pose. "Fear not, for mask or no, I am the King of the Snipers! They'll barely know what hit them!"

"Perfect!" I grinned hesitantly. My reluctance was on account of the flashes of smiling ghosts flitting through my mind, but I dismissed those worries for the future, when we weren't at war with the World. "Anyway, Sanji, Boss, you're with us. This is still a government facility, and there's no telling who else is in this damn place. Kokoro, get Chimney and Gonbe to—"

I fell silent, blinking stupidly as I realized that the trio were nowhere to be seen. For a moment, I wondered where they'd gone and how they'd done that, but…

"You know what?" I said, throwing my hands up in the air. "Forget it, I'm not even going to try dealing with their particular brand of madness, with any luck they'll be where we need them when we need them. For now, everyone else? Just straight-up raise hell. Now…” I slammed my fist into
my palm. "Let's do this."

And with that, I and almost everyone else made a beeline for the nearest staircase, noting Nami taking the Waver off of her back and boarding it before she followed. Chopper split off at the start, heading down instead of up, and Nami zoomed ahead of us on her Waver shortly after we got up the first staircase. And Zoro? Who knows where he went after we took our eyes off of him; I trusted he'd find his way to Kaku soon enough, but still…

"Dot dot dot dot! Wow, again AT A TIME LIKE THIS?" Soundbite remarked, drawing me out of my thoughts as we reached the third staircase. "Should we—?"

"Eh, don't see why not. Gimme a sec…" I dug through my bag and tapped the appropriate button.

"OK, YOU'RE LIVE… AAAND Gastro-Blur DONE!" he added, in response to the tapping on the other end.

"Hi, there! It's great that I finally managed to call in! Anyway, I have a question! You keep mentioning 'shaving,' what are you talking about? I mean—!"

"WHERE ARE YOU, AISA?! YOU GIVE THAT SNAIL BACK RIGHT NOW!"

The young oracle Aisa winced and hastily clammed up as the voice of her pseudo-big sister echoed through the forest, washing over her hiding place in the burrow of one of the higher trees of Upper Yard.

Ever since the Straw Hats had left, she had wanted to call in to talk with them, primarily to give Cross an earful for ruining her chance to join them, but only now had she gotten an opportunity, far away from anyone who could stop her. Namely Laki, who'd been particularly adamant about the fact that she would only ever be becoming a pirate over her K.O.'d ass, provided that Aisa was the one to actually do the deed. Which was to say, not even close to soon.

Still, for now she'd managed to snatch a stray Transponder Snail while someone wasn't looking and hide herself away in a spot she knew was often patrolled, and thus the last place Laki would look or send someone to look, which led to her current situation. And, in a desire to not push her luck, she had elected to remain anonymous on the call for now.

"Sorry, issues on my end…" Aisa whispered after she was certain Laki had passed. "Anyway, I was gonna ask: are all of those assassin people Zoans or something?"

Almost instantly, the air was filled with raucous, multi-tonal laughter, and more than a little normal snickering to boot.

"Pffhaha, man, now that is a hilarious way of thinking about it!" Cross chuckled. "But, ah, no, it's nothing like that. It's part of these special martial arts they specialize in using. The Shave technique is a way of moving so fast that you seem to have disappeared. It's practically teleportation."

Aisa leaned forward in eager interest. "Really? Wow, that sounds so cool! And you said that it's just one, right? What about the rest?"

"Ah—!" Cross started to say, before cutting himself off and shaking his head. "Ah, yeah… Sorry,
loyal viewer, but I don't think it would be a good idea to hand ready-made weapons to the entire world. Secrets are one thing, but this requires more, shall we say, consideration. After all..." Cross then regained his usual smirk. "If I was able to figure out the basics and get my crew on the way to learning them just by hearing about them, then anyone could!"

Aisa pouted for a moment, unable to argue with that point, but quickly brightened when the meaning of the words sunk in. "Yeah, that's fair. But then, you guys are actually learning how to use them?!

"You're damn right we are! In fact, Sanji's already got one of them, and Usopp is well on his way to figuring out Shave!"

"Really, Tengu-Nose? That's awesome!" Aisa said, rocking back and forth in her sitting position.

"Heh, yeah, well, I don't have it quite figured out yet, so—! Eh? Wait a second..." Usopp's brow furrowed in confusion. "The last person to call me that was—! Wait, are you—!?"

"LOOK OUT!" Soundbite suddenly hollered.

"Eh—WAAAGH!"

"WHAT THE—USOPP!"

Aisa jumped and her eyes widened in response to the sudden SMASH! that erupted on the other end of the line, as well as the following cacophony. She then began shaking the now-nervous snail.

"What's going on, you guys? What's happening, what's wro—" Her words then died a very painful death as a strong, familiar hand gripped her skull, a matching hand moving forward and severing the connection to the SBS a moment later.

"You should be more concerned about yourself, Aisa," Laki crooned, her tone reminiscent of poisoned honey.

"...meep."

-0-

"Usopp, are you alright!?" I called out through the dust. Damn it, he'd been walking right in front of us and had thus been exactly underneath the... whatever it was that had smashed into the floor before us.

"Y-Y-Yeah, I t-t-think so. I-I-I even have some g-g-good news!" Usopp's voice sounded out... behind us?

I turned around and was treated to the sight of Usopp trembling fearfully in Boss's arms, Scooby-Doo style.

"I-I-I finally got the hang of S-S-Shave..." he chattered in terror.

Boss regarded Usopp flatly for a moment before snapping his arms away and letting the sniper drop on his ass.

"That's great, Usopp," the Dugong growled in a tone that was half-annoyed, half-sincere as he uncoiled his rope dart and started to spin it. "But what the heck was that?"

We all stood at ready as the dust cloud settled, before tensing in shock and horror as we caught sight
of what, or rather who had come calling.

"...I think I'm flashing back to Krieg's invasion," Sanji whispered as his cigarette slipped out of his slack jaws.

I inched back nervously as I stared up and up and up at the fucking impossible opponent standing before us. "You mean the part where he got up in a berserker rage after Luffy had already won the fight and knocked the living daylights out of him?"

Sanji nodded numbly in agreement. "That's the one."

Jabra chose that moment to throw his head back and howl his fury to the heavens.

For a moment, as I backed away from the thoroughly tenderized wolf-man looking over us, I wondered how the hell someone who'd gone up against a legitimately ticked off Luffy could have possibly still been standing.

Then I noticed that his eyes were blank and bloodshot, he distinctly lacked any semblance of balance, and he was emitting very inhuman and very pained groans from his jowls.

Alright, so Jabra was barely conscious, if at all, but the fact remained that he was here and demonstrating the legitimately stupid amounts of resilience to punishment that Zoans were capable of.

"Sanji..." I muttered out of the corner of my mouth. "If he were actually conscious, I'd say that this would be easy. Right now, however, he's running on rage, adrenaline, and instinct, meaning that he is quite possibly feral and most likely more dangerous than he has ever been in his entire life. Do you think you can take him down in a single shot, before he can start reacting?"

Sanji bit down into a new cigarette and lit it, steadying himself with a deep breath. "I think I can damn well try."

"Good..."

Jabra suddenly fell onto all fours and shot at us like a bullet.

"Because here he comes!" I called back as Usopp and I ran to get the hell out of range.

Sanji promptly spun on his heel, not igniting it but undoubtedly heating it, and shot forward to meet the wolf. They were thirty feet apart... twenty... ten... fi—

SLAM! "Aroough..."

And Sanji skidded to a halt as a door of pure stone opened out of nowhere, slamming hard into Jabra's chops.

We had barely a second to stare before the origin of the door stepped out of it, and scowled down at the now actually unconscious wolf-man.

"I never expected to see you as such a pathetic weakling," Blueno growled as he slammed the wall shut behind him. "All that effort, all the shame you bring on the World Government, and you don't even have the decency to make it close?" He shook his head solemnly as he turned to face us. "You're a disgrace to Cipher Pol No. 9."

I stared in bemusement for a moment as I processed the situation. "Before anyone who's actually
against him makes a move, a comrade that he had previously betrayed and condemned to death knocks him back out," I muttered to myself before tilting my head curiously. "Eesh, this isn't just similar, this is a downright cut-and-paste of Krieg."

"No kidding," Sanji shot over his shoulder before turning his attention back to the bull-horned man. "Still, even with that kind of grudge against him, I'm sort of surprised that you did that instead of letting him try to wear us down some."

"Hmph." Blueno cracked his neck coolly. "In retrospect, perhaps I should have. Even so, getting my revenge was my only reason for stopping here. In the end…" He stuck his arm out and pushed an Air Door open. "I am, above all else, a professional."

I felt my blood freeze for an instant as I stared into the off-color dimension that lay on the other side of the impossible portal before managing to get my voice working again. "STOP HIM!"

Sanji didn't need any more warning than that; before Blueno could move so much as an inch, he sprinted forward and—leapt into the portal?

"I'm sorry," Sanji sneered right in Blueno's face. "This establishment is closed for business." And with that, he grabbed the door with his own hand and slammed it in the assassin's face.

For a few seconds, nobody moved as we processed the situation.

"…He does realize that I am the only person with access to that dimension, yes?" Blueno finally spoke up as he directed his flat expression at me.

I gave him an equally neutral look as I crossed my arms. "You do realize that you are going to have to fight your way past him to enter that place, yes?"

There was the panic. It was only for a moment before he schooled himself, but damn if it didn't feel good.

That good feeling then went away real quick-like when he squared his shoulders and directed a scathing glare at us. "While that is a problem I will have to contemplate how to deal with, and while I'm no match for your captain…" He scowled irritably as he cracked his knuckles. "At least I can certainly deal with you two pests before you cause any more problems for us."

Usopp and I tensed in terror as we realized that we were essentially alone against a very ticked off assassin…

CLANG!

And then jumped as a superheated hook slammed into the stonework at Blueno's feet.

"Careful now, bull-boy," Boss growled as he snapped his hook back and started swinging it at his side, the air shimmering both from the heat and the sheer speed of the spin. "I've been looking forward to a good one-on-one brawl for awhile now. The last thing you want to do…" He suddenly grabbed the base of his dart and snapped the cable taut. "Is to threaten me with a good time."

Blueno's eyes narrowed. "As formidable as you are, surely you can't expect a mere animal to stand up to—"

Boss whipped his rope-dart to the side and smashed a sizeable hole in the wall. "I spar with the top three members of our crew on a regular basis," he stated firmly. "Try me."
Blueno remained mostly expressionless, but a slight twitch and a sheen of sweat betrayed how nervous he was. Finally, he shook his head with a sigh. "Your crew truly is the most outrageous of this generation, for a being less than human to be capable of fighting against one of us. Nevertheless, while I don't doubt that I can easily defeat you should I so wish…"

'Denial ain't just a river in Egypt,' I mused, but before I could voice that thought, Blueno vanished without warning, and the slipstream of wind following him caused us all to turn and face where he was standing at the head of the staircase leading down.

"In the end," he continued casually. "The mission takes priority, so I suggest that you all enjoy what few moments you have left alive while I rendezvous with my superior." He then glanced upwards with a long-suffering look. "For however much longer he remains our superior, at any rate…"

And with that, he vanished again, soliciting a growl from Boss as he rewound his weapon. "I really need to get the hang of that technique…" he muttered vehemently. "Still… I'm guessing we have to leave that fight to Sanji?"

"Pretty much, yeah," I confirmed. "Shouldn't be too much of a problem for him, though. After all, Blueno doesn't have any choice but to give him a literal opening if he wants to have any chance of getting control of his hidey-hole back. And giving Sanji an opening, especially when there's a lady's well-being at stake, and said lady is part of our crew?"

"Rocky mountain OYSTERS?" Soundbite leered.

"Bingo," I chuckled grimly.

"Ah… a-are you sure, Cross?" Usopp muttered warily. "I-I mean, I'm sure that in a straight-up fight, Sanji would wipe the floor with him, b-but he's locked himself in another dimension! This is as far from an even fight as possible!"

"Eh, don't worry 'bout a thing, Usopp," I waved him off casually as I started marching forward again. "If you have any doubts, all you have to do is remember the two most integral parts of our crew."

Usopp—along with Boss and Soundbite—blinked in confusion, prompting me to spin on my heel and shoot them a grin.

"Our crewmates…" My smile took on a menacing overtone. "And the reality-breaking levels of bullshit we are capable of."

-0-

"This…" Sanji bit out tiredly as he pumped his legs in an effort to keep pace with his opponent. "Was not… my smartest of plans!"

The Straw Hats' cook was currently in the process of rushing after the assassin, chasing his silhouette through the rippling green expanse of his dimension. Thoughts of Robin kept adrenaline flowing through his bloodstream, ensuring that he didn't grow tired, but at the same time he couldn't shake a growing queasiness in his gut. It had taken him a minute to realize that it was because of how stale the air was, no doubt on account of how there wasn't even a trace of wind blowing in the off-color realm to recirculate it.

His nausea barely registered in his mind, however, as he saw Blueno moving at a much more leisurely pace, heading straight towards a wide window. Sanji's mind instantly reached the correct
conclusion.

"Moonwalk, damn it!" he cursed as he accelerated his pace.

It was a diabolical plan, ingenius in its simplicity: the bull probably thought that if he managed to leap outside and start Moonwalking all the way to the bridge, then he would be able to lose Sanji and leave him high and dry in the twisted dimension he was hiding in. And the worst part of it all was that he was right; of the three leg-based techniques Cross had informed the crew of, Moonwalk was the one he'd dedicated the least amount of time to. Unless Sanji could stop Blueno from getting outside and away, then not only would he be left stranded for all eternity, but worse yet, he wouldn't make it in time to save Robin-chwan.

Gritting his teeth, Sanji leapt forward. "Collier Shoot!"

His aim was true, but he simply soared through…

CRACK!

And slammed into the solid stone wall adjacent to the window before falling onto his back with a pained grimace. "Damn it, since when the hell are walls that tough?!" Sanji bit out as he got back to his feet and rubbed his throbbing leg. He then turned to look at Blueno… who was looking in his direction with a smirk. He'd felt that, but it was completely useless!

"AAAAAAAAARGH!" the chef roared in frustration, turning back with every intention of venting his frustration on the impervious wall he'd impacted—

Before freezing an inch from the stonework, on account of a very specific detail having caught his eye.

Sanji leaned in for a closer look…

And then adopted a truly devilish grin.

"Cross is right," he chuckled. "Applied bullshit is our area of expertise."

-0-

Blueno directed a smug smirk at where the rush of wind he assumed to be the pirate cook had most likely ended up; it had been a slight detriment to the Door-Door Fruit's usefulness in assassinations to learn that even superhuman force on that side was only capable of creating a breeze against any organic matter, but for once, that was working in his favor.

He maintained his smirk as he turned back towards the window and tensed his legs, preparing to leave his annoyance behind—

THWACK!

—and promptly had his concentration shattered by a hard impact to the back of his head. The attack itself didn't seriously hurt him in spite of the lack of Iron Body, but it still triggered a flinch of pain. Blueno stood, his head on a swivel as he looked back and forth in confusion. "What on earth—!?" The assassin cut his own question off when he located the answer.

Leaning down, he picked up the slightly bloodied rock that had hit him, looking it over in confusion. "What the…?"
CRACK!

Blueno's head snapped around to the window that was to be his point of egress and gaped in shock at the impossible sight before him.

Namely, the sight of a chunk of stone that had been broken off from the window sill floating in mid-air, wavering up and down as though someone were balancing it on… their…

'I-It can't be…' Blueno thought numbly, his mind refusing to accept the sight before him. 'I-I've tried affecting inorganic matter in that dimension countless times in the past, all of us have! O-Only Lucci, Kaku, and Jabra made any progress, because it requires ten times the normal amount of force to do anything in order to affect this side from that one! That's just not—!'

THWACK!

Blueno was forced to cut his internal rant short when the chunk of stone suddenly whipped forward and forced him to dodge. The stone harmlessly smashed against the wall behind him, but he still stared at its fragments in horror.

Then, without even a moment's pause, the assassin blurred towards the window. 'Need to get out,' he thought in a panic as his composure shattered. 'Need to get away, need to get away fast before—!'

Blueno had barely even taken a step when he found another chunk of stone speeding towards his face.

'Iron Body: Strength!' he thought desperately as he initiated the technique. For a moment, he felt what he always felt when he used his ultimate variation on Iron Body: he felt relief. He felt reassured, he felt safe. He felt invincible.

Then a chunk of stone barely bigger than his fist caved his face in, swiftly followed by his body smashing into and through the wall behind him.

Blueno lay stunned for a moment, spitting and groaning miserably as his mind processed what the hell had just happened. His ultimate Iron Body was broken, he himself punted through a wall, and his entire body in nothing short of a legitimate assload of pain.

'T-The stone…' he thought numbly as he forced his body to stand. 'I-Instead of throwing it, h-he used the stone to transfer his k-kick across the d-dimensional barrier…'

And getting back up, what he saw next made whatever blood was left in his face evacuate it.

Half a dozen fist-sized stones moved around in thin air, juggled by an unseen pair of feet. As Blueno took in the sight, he voiced his thoughts in a tone filled with nothing short of utter horror.

"What the hell kind of monsters are you people?"

At that point, stones started shooting towards him like cannonballs, and he did the only thing he could.

He turned tail and ran.

-o-

Kalifa reclined in the straight-backed chair she'd positioned in the center of her room, reading a good book that she had borrowed from Kaku. She gave no indication that she was paying attention to any
of her surroundings. At least, not until she suddenly snapped up her arm, which was clad in a black opera glove, causing a metal orb attached to a long pole to bounce off with an audible clang. In spite of her sudden movement and the impact striking her arm, however, she didn't look away from her book. A moment later, the smell of ozone reached her nostrils.

"I'm afraid that won't do you any good," Kalifa said casually. "These gloves I'm wearing are well-insulated, as are my boots. I'm not so foolish as to fall for the same ploy twice in a row, I'll have you know."

"Tsk," came the disembodied huff of the Straw Hats' navigator. "I wouldn't be too sure of that; the only insulator that can't be overcome with a strong enough charge is my captain, and that's only because his skull is as thick as iron plating."

"I believe that," Kalifa drawled, before shifting slightly in her chair. "But I daresay that the same can't be said for you." She suddenly twisted about in her seat, lashing out her leg in an impressive display of acrobatics. "TEMPEST KICK!"

Nami swiftly threw herself backwards in response, rolling out from under the pocket of reflective air she'd erected and popping up into a ready stance as she glared cold fronts at her opponent. "Missed me," she taunted in a somewhat forced catty tone.

"Hmph. Indeed..." Kalifa mused as she marked her page and set her book aside before standing up, primly adjusting her glasses in the process. "I suppose I'll just have to try harder, then, won't I?"

The assassin blurred from sight without any warning, causing Nami to jerk in shock at the lack of verbal warning for the technique. Then, without conscious decision, Nami's fingers flew over the controls of her Clima-Tact and iron cloud surged from the butt of her staff, forming a wall behind her just in time to halt Kalifa's index finger, causing the assassin to leap back, scowling as she clutched her slightly bent digit.

No words were shared between the opponents. Nami merely spun around and swung her Clima-Tact out, crackling with electricity.

"Paper Art," her opponent whispered, bending a full ninety degrees at the waist to go under the swing, before bending even further onto her hands and kicking her feet off the ground.

"Tempest Kick: Doble!" she called out, her legs lashing out a double-sized helping of the razor-sharp wind. As the assassin completed the flip and landed back on her feet, she was disappointed to see the attack break against the wall of iron cloud like a wave over a rock.

There was no time for anger, though, as a crackle of light drew her attention up and to the black cloud above her head crackling with electricity, as well as the fact that Nami had her staff raised high.

"LIGHTNING TEMPO!" she cried out, and swung the staff down.

"Shave!" Kalifa cried out, zipping away from the almost-formed lightning bolt.

The two fighters eyed each other warily as the assassin came out of her Shave, the lightning burning a hole the increasingly abused floor.

After a moment, Kalifa blurred into another wordless Shave, Nami swinging her clouds around behind her again. As expected, this left them in perfect position to intercept a... normal kick? The navigator blinked in surprise, then in panic as her opponent used the clouds to launch a Shave up-and-over, before her clouds could react appropriately, be it consciously or otherwise.
"Tempest Kick!" Kalifa announced with a smirk, and Nami was forced to dive to the side and roll, and even then the razor wind nicked her side. She then shoved her staff up as Kalifa pounced, lashing out with a full spread of side kicks. Heeled shoes met the metal staff, a Finger Pistol was avoided by the slimmest of margins, and then a knee strike was stopped with her staff.

"Moonwalk," Kalifa intoned, the leg locked in the knee strike pushing off the air, allowing her other leg to slam into Nami's side and send her tumbling.

"A valiant attempt," the assassin gloated as she casually strolled over to where Nami was clutching her side and wheezing. "That cloud defense was formidable. But without it, you don't have anything—!"

THWACK!

Suddenly, the staff became a blur of blue and she felt one of the metal balls bounce off her forehead before she could re-establish the Iron Body she'd let slip, triggering a reflexive Shave backwards. She fingered the nascent goose egg with a pained hiss before freezing as a grim chuckle hit her ears, and she snapped a scathing glare at where the navigator was starting to work her way to her feet.

"Y-You think that hurt?" Nami smirked, her expression the height of smugness in spite of the hand clutching the spot where Kalifa had hit her. "Please, I've run into sharks that hit harder than you."

Kalifa scowled darkly, but before she could respond—

KEE-RASH!

—both she and Nami jumped in shock and looked downwards in confusion when the Tower of Justice was suddenly rocked by a massive impact.

"What the hell was that? An earthquake?" Nami demanded.

"Enies Lobby doesn't get earthquakes," Kalifa responded sourly, though with no less curiosity.

"SERIOUSLY!?"

They received the answer to their question a moment later, as Cross' furious voice filled the air.

"Alright, who laughed at the giraffe!?" Cross demanded. "Who the hell is responsible for making me utter the phrase 'Who laughed at the giraffe' in complete and utter seriousness and context!?"

"Sorry, sorry, that was my bad!" Boss promptly apologized. "Zoro and Kaku almost landed on top of me while I was checking out this garden room of theirs and, well..." He trailed off into helpless snickers. "I got one look at the guy's face and... when he started talking about the 'destructive powers of giraffes', I-I just couldn't stop myself! I, ah, skedaddled soon after, though, don't worry, I won't get in Zoro's way."

"Well, now he's gone and cut the whole frickin' Tower of Justice in half, and I'm in the loose half! I hope you're proud of yourself."

"...little bit, honestly, yeah. For you see—!"

"I don't give a shit if it's a Man's Romance or a Manatee's, I'm still freaking pissed! I hope you're happy with whatever the hell it is that you managed to grab, because you're going to get the hell up here right now! GOT IT!?!"
"Yeah, yeah, I got it. Damn slave-drivin' sonnuva…"

"What does it say about my sanity that I'm not even remotely fazed by any of this?" Nami groaned miserably.

"You…"

Nami blinked and glanced at Kalifa in confusion. "Eh? Did you just say—?"

SNICK!

Her question died in her throat when an impossibly fast blade of wind passed mere millimeters from her face, liberating a few stray strands of hair and a trail of blood.

"You damn pirates…" Kalifa hissed as she slammed her raised leg back to the ground, her eye twitching furiously. "Do you not understand what kind of a situation this is? Do you not comprehend the sheer implications?! This is life and death, the harshest kind of conflict in existence, and yet you are making light of it! How dare you be so blasé, how dare you mock my profession, my life!"

Nami recoiled slightly at the uncharacteristic rage the assassin was exhibiting, her mind fumbling to come up with a response. "I-I don't know what to tell you…" she hedged. "We're not mocking you or anything, we're not joking around. This is just…" She spread her arms helplessly. "This is just how we are."

Going by how something seemed to snap behind Kalifa's eyes, that was not the right response.

"BUBBLE MASTER!" she shouted, sliding her hands down her arms and flushing out a flood of suds that surged and gushed around her and filled her half of the room. The mass of bubbles roiled wildly, shapes similar to ram horns bucking and rearing throughout the froth. "SOAP SHEPHERD!"

Nami swallowed heavily as she took a hesitant step backwards. However, even as she started spinning up her staff and pumping up her Eisen Cloud behind her to match the most threatening bubbles she'd ever seen in her life, a thought came unbidden to her mind. 'What was it that Su said Cross said back on Skypiea? Anger leads to distraction, and distraction leads to…' Nami hesitated slightly before adopting a somewhat mad grin. 'Oh, what the hell, she's already ticked, might as well see how far I can take it!'

"Maybe Conis misinformed me," Nami called out in a taunting tone. "But I thought you said that you'd sooner kiss Cross than take his advice? Because from my point of view…" Nami kicked her grin up a few molars, her Eisen Cloud looming around her. "You're looking really bubbly right now."

If Nami's comment about the way they were had made Kalifa snap, that taunt made her straight-up shatter.

"BUBBLE MASTER: SOAP STAMPEDE!" Kalifa roared as she shoved her arms forwards and sent her bubbles charging ahead, roiling over and over one another.

"EISEN TEMPO!" Nami bellowed back, swinging her staff down and letting the iron clouds behind her cascade out to meet the soapy charge head-on.

The two primal forces of white smashed together in the middle of the room, and the fight kicked itself right into high gear.
"You sure you'll be alright, Cross?" Usopp asked in equal parts nervousness and concern as we stood before a notably ornate door.

"Don't worry about me, Usopp," I said dismissively without taking my eyes off the door. "If worst comes to worst, Lassoo, Soundbite, and my armor should be enough to fend off anyone weaker than CP9, and none of them are standing guard here!" I then paused and glanced over at Soundbite. "They aren't, right?"

"Nope," Soundbite shook his head confidently. "The trio of the—!"

"If you say anything about hoods, nooses, or crosses, I will slap the insensitive out of you," I promised solemnly.

The snail bit his tongue with a reluctant grimace. "Anyway… they're all where THEY SHOULD BE. CHOPPER STARTED FIGHTING the big-mouth awhile back, THEY'RE ABOUT NECK-AND-NECK!" He adopted an impressed look. "The pipsqueak might not DOWN RUMBLE BALLS OFTEN, but when he does, DAMN."

Usopp hesitated for a few more seconds before nodding. "Well… alright, if you say so. Good luck, guys."

"Like I don't already have all of it," I chuckled back.

With a final shaky grin, Usopp vanished. Squinting, I was able to keep track of him for a second as he sped up the stairs before he was out of sight. Geeze, I'd known he could probably learn how to Shave, but to master it this fast? Well… then again, I was only half-joking back when I was recommending who learn what.

Shaking those thoughts off, I looked back at the massive double doors leading to Spandam's office. "Soundbite, am I clear?" I asked quietly.

"I don't hear ANYONE," the snail replied.

I nodded firmly, pushed open one of the doors—

"…Soundbite?"

"Yeah?"

"I hate you."

"I'M STARTING TO agree with YOU."

"Quiet, pirate scum!"

And found myself staring down the barrel of a flintlock pistol held by a Government agent.

I tilted my head to the side so as to better shoot a dumbfounded look at my assailant. "How even—?" I requested. "I'm honestly curious here, he has a Devil Fruit! That shouldn't even be possible!"

The suit-clad agent smirked menacingly at me. "We agents of the World Government aren't like your average Marines, pirate. We're highly trained in all manners of skill, stealth included. You'd be surprised at just how quiet somebody can be when they put their mind to it. Now, then…" He drew out his other hand and spun a pair of handcuffs around his finger. "You're under arrest."
I swallowed heavily as I slowly slid my foot back, furiously trying to figure out how the hell I was going to get out of this mess.

"I knew we should have taken that left turn on the tenth floor, but YU said to go left."

The Agent and I snapped our attentions—and weapon, in the Agent's case—to Soundbite, who'd spoken up in a very... familiar...

Soundbite angled his eyestalk in such a way so as to subtly wink at me.

Oh, that crazy mucus-covered son of a bitch, this could actually work.

"Are you kidding!?” I spluttered indignantly, drawing the Agent's gun back in my direction. "That is a complete and utter lie! You told me that this was the safest route to go!"

"NO I DIDN'T, YU DID!” Another shift, with the Agent starting to look confused.

"What!?” I angled myself slightly so that I could get a better look at the snail. "I didn't say that, it was you!"

"RIGHT!” I jerked my shoulder holding Soundbite forward, emphasizing his own bark. "YU SAID TO GO RIGHT!!"

"I just said it wasn't me!” I slid my foot forwards.

"AND I'M NOT SAYING IT WAS YOU! I SAID IT WAS YU!”

"THAT DOESN'T MAKE ANY SE—!"

I abruptly cut myself off as I jerked across the last of the distance separating me from the agent, jerked my Taser Baton from my pocket and slammed it into the Agent's gut, laying him out with a single ZAP!

For a moment, I just stared at his unconscious form in awe. "...We just managed to weaponize Abbott and Costello," I breathed numbly.

"WE'RE AWESOME!” Soundbite whooped.

"Who're Abbott and Costello?” Lassoo spoke up.

I froze for a moment before rolling my eyes and starting to scan around. "Right, that tears it. Soundbite, while I search this place for something useful, do the world a favor and broadcast the Who's On First sketch. It's a crime that they've never had the chance to hear such classic genius."

"With pleasure!” the snail cheered. "LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, we present an intermission in the STRAW HAT PIRATES’ invasion of ENIES LOBBY for the first ever SBS COMEDY CORNER!"

Snickering as I imagined how many people all over the world would be rolling on the ground laughing, I moved past the insensate Agent—though I took the time to lock his own handcuffs on him and kick the gun to the other side of the hall—and into the office proper. It looked vaguely familiar (how could it not?), half-gaudy and half-utilitarian… and half-gone, thanks to my earlier efforts with the mortar cannons.

"Alright,” I mused under my breath as I wrung my hands together. "Let's get started."
'I will not laugh,' Buggy repeated in his mind. 'I will not laugh. No matter how flashy or how humorous, I refuse on my pride as a pirate to let that crew, any member of that crew, bring me to laughter!'

And yet, the fact that several of his own men were already cracking up, along with the straight-up hilarity of the broadcast's opening, was swiftly eroding his endurance.

"What's the fella's name on third base?"

"What's the fella's name on second base!"

"I won't."

"I'm not askin' ya who's on second!"

"Who's on first!"

"I can't…"

"I don't know!"

"Third base!"

"I can't," Buggy snorted. "I can't… hold it in… BWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!

"The left fielder's name?"

"Why."

"…I don't know. I just thought I'd ask ya!"

"Well, I just thought I'd tell ya!"

"How did we never hear such an incredible baseball joke?" Miss Merry Christmas cackled.

"Haaaaahaaaaahaaaaa…" Mister 4 started rocking back and forth in his seat as he clapped his hands and laughed.

Paula shot a dubious glance at him. "You actually understand their jokes?"

"Yeeeeessss!" Mister 4 nodded as tears started to slide from the corners of his eyes. "Whhhoooooo' iiiissss oooooon fiiiiirst! Hiiiiilaaaaaaariiiiiiiioooouuuuuuuussss!"

Paula and Christmas promptly exchanged flat looks.

"I'm not explaining second through centerfield," Christmas grunted.

"I'll second that."

"Tell me the pitcher's name!"
"Tomorrow!"
"What time?"
"What time what?"
"What time tomorrow are ya gonna tell me who's pitching?!"
"Now, hold on, Who is not pitching—"
"I'LL BREAK YOUR ARM IF YOU SAY 'WHO'S ON FIRST!'"
"Yukeeheehee, yukeeheehee, yukeeheeheeheeheehee!"

The sadist in a child's body looked over the top of her book with a flatly cocked eyebrow, observing her sister's laughter slowly growing into a belly-jiggling guffaw. "Really, now?" she asked flatly. "You read Vonnegut, and this is what you consider humorous."

"Yukeeheehee," Monet laughed around the hands she had clasped over her mouth, tears of laughter flowing ceaselessly. "H-He asked—! A-And he said—! T-Tomorro-hohohoooh I can't breathe! Heeheehee, heehee—EEK!"

Sugar's eyebrow raised up a bit when Monet suddenly overbalanced and tumbled out of her seat. And then her expression fell flat when her sister's laughter intensified, if anything.

She returned her attention to her book with a weary sigh. "One of the greatest infiltrators of our generation, folks…" she muttered to herself.

-0-

"You throw the ball to first base!"
"And who gets it?!"
"Naturally!"
"…Who gets it?"
"Naturally."
"Naturally?"
"Naturally."

"OK… so I throw the ball to first base and Naturally gets it—"

The volume of laughter on the back of the giant elephant suddenly crescendoed, the vast majority of the Mink tribe familiar with baseball due to outsiders' information, and subsequently seeing every bit of the humor in the current SBS.

"He throws the ball to Naturally—GORONYANYANYANYA!" Nekomamushi roared.

"I… I'm getting the plays on words, but… but what's baseball?" Carrot gasped through her giggles.

"A—hahaha!—llow me to explain, Carrot," Inuarashi proposed around his own laughter. "F-Fair warning, this'll t-take a minute!"
"And that's the game!" the large dog concluded with a firm nod.

"Wow, that sounds like fun!" the rabbit-mink nodded her head eagerly as she directed a grin at her superior. "Maybe we could all play together sometime!"

The laughter of the two Dukes of Zou suddenly stopped, thoughtful looks on their faces. After a moment of contemplation, wide, toothy grins spread across their faces.

"I think…" Inuarashi rumbled as he tossed a too-wide leer at his nocturnal counterpart. "That that is a very good idea."

"As do I," Nekomamushi concurred, a glint in his eye.

Wanda's heart sank as she observed the way the rival rulers were eyeing one another, but she ultimately dismissed it and deferred to her dukes' superior judgement.

In the following weeks, that day would be marked as the day that the Ruler's Aide known as Wanda vowed that by hook or by crook, she would have her revenge on Jeremiah Cross.

-o-

"Why? I don't know! He's on third… and I don't give a darn!"

"What was that?"

"I said I don't give a darn!"

"Ohhh, he's our shortstop!"

"And that's the gag!" Soundbite concluded with a smirk.

"HWEE-HWEE-HWEE-HWEE-HWEE!" Lassoo guffawed on my back. "Man, that's nothing short of comedy gold!"

"Yep," I muttered acridly as I finished patting down the bottom of yet another shelf and slammed it shut. "Pure genius, right there, damn it all…"

I would have been in a better mood had things been going my way—no matter how many times I heard that sketch, it never stopped being funny—but the fact was that I was a little grumpy at the moment considering that the last eight minutes of combing every part of the office, starting with the desk, had yielded nothing but a goose egg.

And a rotten one at that. Seriously, how the hell did you get an egg stuck down—! Ergh, I didn't even want to know.

"Hwee-h'wee—Eh?" Lassoo came down from his laughter and glanced curiously over my shoulder.

"What the heck have you been looking for, anyway?"

"I don't know, something, anything?!" I threw my hands up in exasperation. "We're in the middle of the headquarters of the chief of CP9, who just so happens to have been all but born a corrupt asshat. I was sure that there would be something I could find in this office and broadcast that would, at worst, utterly ruin Spandam beyond what we already have, but at best?" I grinned euphorically. "At best, he'd have something that would make Dragon the Revolutionary feel like his birthday came
"And ya think that what we've done so far hasn't done that? He's probably laughin' his head off," Lassoo mused.

"Meh," I waved my hand casually. "We've done good, yeah, and call me an overachiever if you must, but!" I snapped a finger up. "I just can't help the feeling that we can do better."

Lassoo then proved that a gun could, in fact, shrug if it was so inclined. "Well… I'm no expert, but my old masters were assassins. Maybe ya need to put yerself in his shoes." He then grimaced in disgust. "Ugly as they may be…"

I considered that for a moment before nodding to myself, and heading back to the desk before sinking into Spandam's chair. "Alright, then… so, if I were a subhuman degenerate, where would I want to keep… my… huh?"

I slowly allowed a grin to spread over my face as I felt something shifting.

"Right where I see the rest of the world, situated…" I breathed as I got out of the seat and crouched down, poking at the loose stonework below. "Right beneath my feet." I shot a smirk over my shoulder. "Lassoo? Remind me to buy you a week's worth of steak when we get back to Water 7."

"Praise be to Doggy Jesus!"

I raised an eyebrow in disbelief. "There's a doggy Jesus?"

"…well, I assume."

I rolled my eyes before returning my attention to the flagstone. "Alright, let's see… shouldn't be too hard to open this… maybe something he'd press with his heel—?" I pressed down on the south side of the stone, causing the tile to tilt upwards and give me enough room to grab it and lift it out, following which I was met with the sight of…

My grin widened as I observed the triple-dials of the floor-vault below me. "Oh, if this isn't something incriminating, I'm going to be pi~ssed…"

"Ya know the important dates in his life?" Lassoo asked.

"Better." I took Soundbite off of my shoulder and placing him on the vault's door. "I know the phrase 'Gastro-Blast.'"

"OPEN SAYS-A-ME!"

A cacophony of shattering metal rang out and I managed to wrench the metal door clean out of its holding.

"Who needs intel when you have an appropriately heavy fist, huh?" Lassoo snickered.

"Damn straight," I nodded as I returned Soundbite to my shoulder. "Now, let's see what we have here…" I fished around in the safe for a moment, but it ultimately proved to be a needless gesture. After all, the safe only contained one object.

I looked over the yearbook-sized black leather binder I was holding with and let out a low whistle. "Oh, pleease be something good, I'm begging you…" I muttered as I laid the binder on the desk and loomed over it. "Alrighty, then, let's see what we've got."
I inched my fingers beneath the cover—

"CROSS, DOWN!"

Before hastily slamming myself onto the desk in reaction to Boss roaring out of nowhere. The next second, I felt the wind of what could only be Boss's rope-dart shooting over me followed by it smashing into something BEHIND ME?!

I grabbed the binder and dove over the desk, putting as much distance between myself and my attacker before spinning around to catch sight of them.

 Suffice to say they were the absolute last person I expected to see.

"What the actual—!?” I sputtered incredulously. "Jabra I kind of get, but how in the insane Blue hell are you still standing?!"

"Chapapa~…” Fukuro chuckled darkly in spite of how he was waving out a visibly distorted finger. "I guess you don't know as much as you think. Well, there's no harm in telling you at this point: We CP9 agents tend to measure the strength of our agents through the usage of what we call 'power levels'. At least one agent per generation is required to know the technique to calculate power levels, which involves the other agents striking the calculator with a significant amount of force. As such… I've been trained so that no matter how powerful a hit is, I can take at least one without too much damage."

He rubbed his jaw with a scowl. "Still, though, your captain was pretty tough, so I Shaved backwards at the last moment, to roll with the punch. It hurt like hell and dazed me for a bit, but I still managed to get back up, chapapa."

"I see, that makes sense. Just one more thing, then," I nodded in a faux-casual manner before jabbing my finger at my shoulder with a scowl. "How the hell did you circumvent Soundbite's senses?"

"Chapapa… As you said earlier, I am the gossip-loving Silent Owl," Fukuro grinned tauntingly. "We of CP9 are all naturally trained for stealth. I just happen to be more skilled than most."

"I'm starting to feel rather IMPOTENT…” Soundbite moaned softly.

"Don't worry, it happens to the best of us," Boss said dismissively, his attention never swaying from the rotund opponent before us. "Anyways, if'n you boys don't mind, I'll take on this owly doughboy, you all get back to whatever it was you were doing. Sound good?"

"I'm content with that particular arrangement," I nodded swiftly.

"Go right ahead," Lassoo concurred.

"BATTER up!” Soundbite concluded.

"Feh," Fukuro spat to the side, scowling. "Please. Your tenacity has been impressive so far, chapapa, but the fact is that I'm a master of the Six Powers, and that you are only a martial artist. These is no style in existence that can match it!"

"Counterexample: the wolf Zoan currently out cold after fighting our captain," Boss deadpanned.

"Allow me to rephrase, then," Fukuro snarled. "Your style can't match it!” And with that, he suddenly shot towards us, spinning furiously. "SHAVE, IRON BALL!"
I took a fearful step back, but Boss didn't hesitate to waddle forwards, his head bowed solemnly.

"Yeah, you're right..." he said softly even as his opponent approached. "I've spent years finalizing my mastery over the Half-Shell Style, and I don't doubt that your Six Powers could crush it in a second. Which means that my only option left..."

He promptly snapped his arms up and crossed them before his face with a determined look.

"Is to kick it up a notch!"

SLAM!

Fukuro's spinning form struck Boss, but the technique that had sent a body that was literally half-iron flying uncontrollably failed to make the much smaller and much fleshier Dugong move more than half a meter, if that.

As soon as his spin started to fail, Fukuro kicked away from Boss and flipped back across the room, where he stared at the dugong in disbelief. "T-That's impossible..." the assassin gaped in shock. "T-That was Iron Body!"

"Close," the dugong intoned firmly as he broke his stance, fists still raised and at ready. "My personal variation for the working dugong's body: Full-Shell Style: Shell Body."

"What the hell?" I gaped. "I never saw you practicing any of the Six Powers even once over the past few weeks!"

Fukuro spared me a look of equal parts horror and anger while Boss rolled his eyes. "That doesn't mean I wasn't practicing in my spare time. Plus, some offense Cross, but in this instance your descriptions were utter shit. I didn't make a lot of progress until about, oooh, ten minutes ago? When I found this. " The dugong whipped a rather ornate scroll from his shell and waved it around. "In the garden-room a few floors below. Quite a few notes on it too, very useful. Whoever was using it to review was impressively studious."

Fukuro's eye twitched vehemently. "And Jabra has the gall to call me an idiot, chapapa!" His scowl then deepened and started twitching. "But that still doesn't make any sense! We've spent literally our entire lives learning the Six Powers and improving our mastery over them! The only ones who have ever been able to pick up the techniques that fast are Marines ranked at least Vice Admiral, and they cheat to learn even half of it!"

"Honestly?" Boss allowed a slight smirk to tug at his lips. "All I took away from that little rant is that your old masters deserve nothing short of the utmost pity for having such utterly hopeless students."

"...Alright, that's it. Now I'm angry! SHAVE!" Fukuro screeched before vanishing into a blur.

"Rip Current," Boss stated flatly as he slapped his flipper on the ground before vanishing in an identical manner. The twin blurs clashed in midair, fist against flipper, following which Fukuro attempted to spin away back to the ground—

"YEOWCH!"

Only to discover that Boss' Thermal Dart was latched onto his uniform, which meant that he ended up on the ground wrapped up in a rope coat. A searing hot rope coat.

"Now, then, let's see how strong your resistance really is. Half-Shell Style..."
Boss yanked on the rope, drawing Fukuro back into the air and into Boss's range. The dugong shot at him, and his fist slammed into the agent to send him crashing back into the ground, a crater forming. Then Boss spun around, reeling Fukuro back up like a yo-yo and slamming his flipper into him, following which he flipped his opponent above him and used him as a springboard to shoot him up into the air while he himself leapt back down to the ground. Once there, Boss yanked on his rope-dart, bringing Fukuro straight down…

**CRACK!**

And onto Boss' outstretched fist.

"Barracuda Barrage!"

Taking in the undeniably epic sight, I fought with myself for a moment before sighing. "Don't expect me to say this again without a damn good reason, but… GO, BOSS, GO!" I cheered.

Boss shot a grin my way before spinning on his tail, swinging Fukuro around like a hammer throw before jerking his rope and uncoiling his weapon, sending the assassin flying out the hole in the wall and out of sight. "Much obliged, Cross, but I've got every doubt that that was enough to finish him. I'll meet up with you again when he's knocked out for real."

With that, he leapt straight up into the air—

"Tidal Swim!"

—and practically kicked himself off the air, shooting out the open wall, and then redirecting himself to shoot downwards and out of sight.

"**MONSTER QUARTET confirmed?**" Soundbite whistled in awe.

"Eh, we'll see," I wavered my hand uncertainly. "I doubt that knowing the Six Powers will make that much of a difference against the original trio, not when they're learning it themselves. For now, though…" I held up the binder as I was carrying. "Let's see what muck we've managed to dig up, aye?"

"**AYE-aye!**" the snail concurred.

"We about to make Spandam's life miserable?" Lassoo growled eagerly as I returned to the desk and tossed the binder onto it.

"His and that of every last one of the World Government's higher-ups." I wrung my hands together eagerly. "Now, once again, o world… let's see what we've got."

And so, without further ado, I flipped the cover open, scanned the first page…

And had to actively fight to keep myself from cackling.

"Ooooh, yeah, this'll do nicely," I crooned. "Ladies and gentlemen of the world, what I have discovered and am about to publicize…"

-0-

"Is nothing less than Cipher Pol No. 9's very own operational blackbook."

"OF COURSE! WHY WOULD IT BE ANYTHING ELSE?! WHY WOULD I EXPECT
"ANYTHING ELSE?"

"Sir, your blood pressure!"

"DAMN MY BLOOD PRESSURE!" Admiral of the Fleets Sengoku roared to the medical aide trailing after him as he marched down one of Marineford's many docks. "THAT INCOMPETENT MORON THAT WE MADE THE EARTHSHAKING MISTAKE OF PUTTING IN CHARGE OF CP9 JUST HANDED THAT LOUD-MOUTHEDED HELLSPAWN THE VOCAL EQUIVALENT OF A GOLDEN TRANSPONDER SNAIL, AND HE IS ABOUT TO PUBLICIZE IT TO THE WORLD! HOW THE HELL DOES A BLACKBOOK EXIST FOR CP9 IN THE FIRST PLACE?"

Sengoku wasn't the only one wondering this, as evidenced by the snail the aide was carrying speaking up in a certain canine-cannon's voice. "A blackbook!? But that's impossible! From everything that we've seen, Cipher Pol No. 9 is a black ops unit! That means that there are no traces of their existence for the sake of plausible deniability! Any reports should have been summarily destroyed once they were confirmed!"

"Yes, Lassoo, but you're forgetting one very important detail," Cross grinned excitedly. "Spandam is the textbook definition of what is known as a malignant narcissist, and CP9 is the source of his ego. He considers their achievements to be his achievements and he revels in them, but because of how fragile his ego actually is, he needs constant self-reassurance to keep believing in his high and mighty attitude. That's where these—" There was the sound of a finger tapping paper. "Come in. These are Spandam's trophies. Proof of every last operation that he's ever pulled off for the World Government, every last victory meant to pump himself up... and most importantly, in this instance?"

Cross's smile became demonic. "Insurance that if Spandam makes it off of this island alive, he's going to wish beyond all shadows of all hopes that we had killed him... which, naturally, means that we're going to have to refrain from doing so. To every last Marine, Government worker, and Revolutionary on the face of the planet!" the pirate suddenly barked eagerly. "I suggest that you all buckle up. You're about to get busy."

"Right, that does it!" Sengoku barked as he accelerated his pace and started marching up the nearest gangplank he could find. "Forget the timeline! Spandam's a dead man no matter what he does, the fleet mobilizes NOW!"

"B-B-B-But, sir, you should be resting—GYERK!"

The doctor's insistence was cut off by Sengoku spinning on his heel and slamming the pole of the IV drip he was carrying into the wood.

"You seem to have failed to take something into account during your diagnosis, Doctor," the enlightened human growled acridly. "I am no mere human being. I am Sengoku, Fleet Admiral of the World Government's Navy. I might be older than Whitebeard by five years, but the fact remains that it will take far more than one measly heart attack caused by one measly pirate to incapacitate me and keep me from popping his head from his scrawny neck." He leaned in and snarled in the medical officer's face. "Do. I. Make. Myself. Clear?"

The doctor had to fight very hard to keep himself under control as he shook his head with a slight whimper. "J-Just promise that you'll k-keep your cannula in place? P-Please?"

Sengoku grimaced as he thumbed the plastic tube leading below his nose before nodding. "Fine. Now, then." He turned around and addressed the nearest Captain. "Before we leave, I want a status update: what's Aokiji's progre—?"
A massive glacier suddenly formed on one side of Marineford. Then, just as suddenly, it shattered to pieces.

"…Never mind," he grunted before striding onto the deck. "Tell him to catch up to us once he's finished. For now, though?"

Sengoku took his next step as a golden *titan*.

"SET SAIL FOR ENIES LOBBY!"

-O-

"Now, then, let's state at the beginning…" I started to drag my finger across the page as I read it. "Entry one—eh? Wait a second…” I paused in confusion. "This first one is labeled Cipher Pol Number… 5… ohh, of course, it's the one that started it all. People of the world, what I have before me is nothing short of proof positive of the fact that the World Government has, in the past, framed and executed an innocent man for crimes he did not commit in order to propagate their own goals. Allow me to read it verbatim!"

I cleared my throat as I picked the book up and started pacing. "This report details the series of events that took place during Operation Parole Board eight years ago on the island of Water 7. And I quote, 'Tom the shipwright feigned ignorance and refused to relinquish Pluton blueprints. Blackmail attempt for building Oro Jackson failed, as it was already known. Acquittal planned for building a sea-train. Solution: Covertly commandeer the battleships built by Tom's apprentice, Cutty Flam, and use them to destroy the Judicial Ship, and frame Tom for it. Final Result: Partial success; Tom arrested, blueprints not found on person. Pending interrogation on blueprints location in Impel Down. Promotion pending: position highly classified.'"

I shook my head with a dismal tsk. "Well, there you have it, folks. Not only did the World Government countermand their own edict concerning the acquisition and usage of the Ancient Weapons, an edict they burned Ohara for, no less, but they even went so far as to attack a vessel directly under their employ to do so. I ask you: if this is how far they're willing to go against their own people… how much farther might they go against others?"

I promptly grinned eagerly as I started flipping ahead. "Let's find out!"

-O-

"Oh, now this one sounds like fun! Operation Market Failure! Now, let's see. First, there's a list of countries here…"

If Baltigo had been active a few minutes ago, it was positively abuzz now as every last Revolutionary on base noted down every last word that fell from Cross' mouth. Dragon himself was mentally checking off the names of the countries, his sense of dread mounting with every name he accurately predicted.

"Sir," Sabo cast an uneasy look at his superior. "These nations… aren't these the members of the Vantruskian Coalition? Before—?"

"I always thought that the misfortune that occurred all those years ago seemed too spontaneous," Dragon bit out grimly. "It would seem my fears were vindicated."

"Alright, now onto the good stuff: The aforementioned countries were involved in a suspicious trading coalition. CP9 sent undercover to investigate. Several traders interrogated and killed. After
six months of thorough research, the investigation revealed that the goings-on were fully innocuous. Solution: Due to being too deep into the operation already, CP9 utilized the worst-case scenario. Frame-ups among every country involved towards specific other members, and remaining underlying liquid assets seized by CP9 for Government usage. Result: Success; ongoing war among the involved nations, and all seized assets added to the Celestial Dragons' tribute money." A pause. "Well, I imagine that that's going to piss a few people off. Oh, Dragon? I'd suggest clearing your lines, they're about to get very tied up."

As if on cue, almost every snail in the room started ringing their transponders off of their shells. Dragon promptly snapped a finger at Koala, prompting her to pause and glance over the stack of papers she was hauling. "Remind me, where was the Vantruskan Coalition before it imploded?" she asked with clear dread.

"South end of South Blue," Hack provided as he passed behind her. "And by that," he dropped a very heavy coat on her head. "I mean South. Dress warm."

Koala grimaced as she shoved her papers into the arms of one of her nearby comrades and started pulling the coat on. "I am… conflicted. This is a massive windfall for us, sure, but somehow, I don't think Cross would be that sorry if he knew he was sending me to the South Pole."

"Be happy now, kill him later?" Sabo suggested.

"I can live with that."

-o-

"Hee-haw! I can only imagine how overjoyed Dragon must be at this sudden influx of information! Jeremiah Cross has just cemented a powerful ally!" Emporio Ivankov cackled, leading Newkama Land in cheering for him.

"You speak as if he hadn't already, my queen," Inazuma intoned calmly as he (at the moment) swirled his Chardonnay in its glass.

"Psh," Ivankov waved her (at the moment) hand dismissively. "Totally different! Before, Jerry-Boy only had Dragon's attention. Now? Now he will deem him a comrade in Revolution, even moreso than he already was before! And he's still going on!"

"Alright, what's next? Operation Entropy, eh? Oh, this should be good…"

Ivankov hastily waved a hand to quiet down the cheers.

"Alright, here we go: 'Upon discovery that the Oro Jackson was constructed of wood from the Jewel Tree Adam, we determined to ensure that no ship would ever be built of such wood again. Investigation on the island where the tree grows revealed that wood was shipped out in the midst of a ceasefire between the nations Shule and Cohor. Warring nations at the time of investigation: Jared and Akish, looked to be winding down from war. Solution: Spark hostility once more, and ensure that if the war does die down, we are in an ideal position to reignite the flames. Result: Partial success; the two nations war without end in sight, genocide more likely than peace, but only 95% of registered Adam Wood shipments are intercepted before reaching their destination; Huh… you know, I'm honestly surprised that I never figured that out myself; wars for the tree are one thing, but for them to constantly flare up one right on top of the other? This just makes too much sense."

Inazuma sniffed contemptuously. "Condemning so many lives simply on account of what could possibly be done with that wood. Barbaric. Still, though…" He paused to take a sip of wine. "Now
that the world is aware that the blockage in supply is not simply due to the war, perhaps someone will be able to intercept the interceptions?"

"Mmfufufu. And I'd bet anything that more than a few of those counter-interceptions will be from our dear comrades on the outside!" Ivankov chuckled before raising her glass high. "A toast! To our dear comrades managing to get a copious amount of impossibly hard wood in the near future!"

"KANPAI!" the citizens of Newkama Land toasted their ruler.

Ivankov made to drink, before pausing with a frown. "…Why do I feel like my boys and I are currently the butt of some big cosmic joke?" she muttered.

-o-

I continued reading entries for the next several minutes, certain that Spandam's fate worse than death was sealed. Even so, there was one thing bothering me about what I was reading; every last one of them had been at least partially successful. It made sense, for Spandam's ego, but I was hoping that there would be at least one—

"Ah, finally! This one seems to have actually ended in failure. I wonder how that happened. Let's see…" I muttered under my breath as I scanned over the mission details. Then my eyes twitched. Both of them, one right after the other.

"Are. You. KIDDING ME? This… This isn't corrupt, nor is it even tragic! This is just downright PATHETIC! I… I can't even read this one verbatim, folks, it's just… well, listen to this, Operation Star-Crossed. Apparently this was a special assignment for CP9, where the endgame wasn't assassination. See, their goal was to force the alliance of two families of royalty for political and financial reasons by getting the scions to marry one another. They accomplished this by assassinating the scion's paramours—big surprise—and then infiltrating their lives so as to manipulate them into meeting one another. And it worked, too! The heirs of the Montfield and the Capoy families fell in love, got engaged, they even got legitimately hitched! Sounds hunky-dory, right? They were halfway through the reception!

I slammed my head onto the wood desk, the groan of pain I let out more for the Luffy-grade stupidity I just read than any physical injury. "And then Fukuro, the tub of lard who also happened to be the groom's best freaking man, got up before both families and, without a moment's hesitation, spilled the whole thing! Every. Last. Detail. After that, it was a bloodbath. There are… there are no words, I should imagine. I mean… seriously, what's the point of his mouth being a zipper—it's a real zipper, by the by—if he's not going to bother to use it!? Honestly now, the man's mouth is practically a weapon of mass destruction!"

"Like you have any room to talk?"

"At least general chaos is my endgoal, he just does it randomly, without warning and with no clear benefit."

"Still sounds familiar, hwee-hwee-hwee!"

"Oh, shut it," I grumbled, turning the page. "Alright, Spandam probably only kept that particular report because it wasn't even remotely his fault that the mission failed. And honestly, after that, I'm more inclined to hope that I don't read any more fai—"
each and every last one of the reports I could find.

What I discovered, and the implications therein, were not pleasant in the least.

-o-

With each report that Jeremiah Cross read, the old woman's grip on her cane and the folder she was clutching intensified. Not even Roger had caused her this much raw negative emotion at one time. Then again, perhaps that was simply because he and Cross had opposing end goals: Roger had shone hope inward in order to illuminate a relatively dreary world, whereas Cross was shining his light of truth 

outwards,

exposing the darkness that lurked just out of sight.

How much she had already known. The Marines were far from ignorant about the state of things, she was hardly ignorant. She’d thought the limits were justifiable, thought the ends justified the costs…

How much she had turned blind eyes to in the last decades. The corruption she refused to see.

She was old. She had fought her war. She had fully intended to get involved only in the event of something too big or too high-profile for the present Marines to deal with. She had trained up a new generation to fight the oncoming battles, to weather the storm. She had convinced herself that she was ready to retire, trusting in the future.

And now, she was robbed of that luxury by, as she had put it herself so very, very long ago, 'one boy with a big mouth.'

For the umpteenth time since she had left Sengoku's office and boarded her warship, since she had entered her cabin, her thoughts turned to the folder she now held in her hand. She contemplated what it held, she contemplated the implications held within, the consequences of turning it over to Sengoku as she had planned to do later that very day.

"…well, now."

And then, of course, Cross decided to open his mouth yet again.

"Oh, what now?" Tsuru snapped, looking back at the snail with a look of exasperation; anything that could make Cross sound solemn, of all things, when he had listed off so many disasters without faltering, could not be good, be it for her sanity or in general.

"…Ugh. I'm sorry, viewers, I just… this was some of the most fun I've had since starting this broadcast. I mean, there's enough material here that the Revolutionaries are probably going to feel like their collective birthdays came early. But looking at this, noticing what I have, I'm just… I'm too disappointed to even enjoy it that much anymore."

"Disappointed?" Tsuru repeated incredulously.

"Let me explain exactly why I'm so upset right now. See, for all that I disparage the Navy and everything that they tolerate, I do know that there are some Marines that aren't a disgrace to their mission. I've met them, I respect them, and I honestly believe that what I'm doing is right by exposing just what is wrong with the people they work with. And one that I actually thought highly of is the leader of them all, Fleet Admiral Sengoku."

Tsuru froze.

"I mean, sure, I know that he's done some things that lots of us would be furious about, he's made a lot of choices like that. But, hey, I'm best friends with legitimate royalty here. I'm well aware,
especially after the events in Alabasta, that that's the kind of responsibility that comes from being at the top. You have to make some tough choices, you have to look at the bigger picture, you..." Cross sighed morosely. "You have to do... what you have to do. If it comes down to it, you may even have to sacrifice some in order to save others. That's... That's life on the top. I may not have a lot of respect for the Navy as a whole, but I had a pretty high opinion of Sengoku. Despite some of the stuff he's done, I thought he was a good leader for the Navy, one that, at the end of the day, was the kind of Marine that lived the position of Fleet Admiral with the honor and respect that it deserved."

Tsuru processed the words that fell from the pirate's lips, and ironically enough, they nearly made her rethink the past few hours, came close to convincing her to contact her superior—her friend—and apologize. But there was one thing that stuck out more than anything else about what Cross was saying that prevented her from doing just that: the fact that he was speaking in the past tense.

The rabble-rouser then let out another morose sigh, and proceeded to shatter what faith the Vice Admiral had left in her old friend.

"And now, as I see his signature beneath every other one of these reports, as I see what I can only assume is his handwriting approving bodycount after bodycount, atrocity after atrocity... I'm left hoping beyond all hope that he never read them, and just signed off on them out of obligation. That he didn't have a choice in this. That he didn't order even half of this. Because I really, really don't want to believe that he's capable of allowing even one of these Operations to occur in good conscience. Because to approve these missions... would indicate a complete and utter lack thereof."

Tsuru remained stationary, her expression unreadable, for a full minute. Then her cane fell to the ground as she opened the folder, and took note of a single specific detail within. The moment she had it memorized, she waved her hand over the sheets and photographs that she had laboriously and carefully assembled over the last few weeks before allowing them to flutter to the ground, every wrinkle of an imprint and every stain of ink utterly washed away, leaving nothing but blank paper.

The next moment, she locked her office door and shut off the SBS. She thought for a minute, determining something, before dialing the number she had memorized. Two rings later... "Capricorn," came a distorted voice, the identity of its speaker impossible to decipher.

"Aquarius," Tsuru enunciated clearly. "I imagine that that chain-smoking hooligan friend of yours Cancer and his rather admirable protégé Pisces are nearby as well?"

"...Son of a bitch, Cross can be a terrifying bastard sometimes, though at least Hina is somewhat relieved that she's going to learn just how he does it..." Hina grimaced miserably. "But damn it, he is going to be insufferably smug on account of how we didn't even get a chance to do anything."

Tsuru promptly felt a sweatdrop develop on the side of her head. "Ah... what exactly have I gotten myself into?"

The easily recognizable and sadistic grin that her Snail suddenly sported did not set Tsuru at ease. At all. "Straw Hat Pirate-grade insanity, Vice Admiral Tsuru," Smoker chuckled in a tone that dripped with gallows humor. "That is what you've gotten yourself into."

"...bother."

-o-

I remained silent for a second longer before shaking my head as I got my head back in the game. Disturbing as the implications were, I needed to focus. Because in the end... it was now or never.
'...This is it,' I thought, my heart pounding almost out of my chest as I glanced back at the book. 'This has to be it. It's the only chance I'm going to get. After all I've done, after how far I've pushed it... there's no way in hell I can go any further.' I swallowed heavily. 'Here's hoping that it'll be enough.'

I exchanged hesitant looks with Soundbite before he steeled his expression and nodded firmly. I then removed him from my shoulder and placed him on the desk. I stared at him for a moment before starting to pace again. "Viewers? I would like to take a brief… intermission, if you will, to make a statement of a personal nature. Or rather… not so much a statement as a question."

I sucked in a deep breath before forcing a manic grin to stretch on my face for effect, while at the same time struggling to keep the desperation out of my voice; out of all of those listening right now, there was only one who would comprehend the true meaning of my message.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the world… I hope I don't need to recount what I've done today. You've all heard it, and unless you have the memory of a goldfish with Alzheimer's, you all remember it. So, in light of that, I'd like to ask you all—and especially the one responsible for bringing me to this moment—a question."

I suddenly jerked at the desk and slammed my hands on either side of Soundbite, glaring him dead in the eyes. "Are you not entertained?" I demanded.

And then… silence.

Utter silence.

I waited for the longest minute of my life before Soundbite shook his head with a grimace and I allowed my head to hang, sighing despondently as I put my little gray buddy back on my shoulder. "Sorry about that, viewers, that was… that was something personal. Anyways, let's… just keep moving on, shall we?"

The double meaning of my words made Lassoo and Soundbite cringe, and while I started melancholically weighing just how much value I put in my… current lifestyle, I turned the black book's page. "Alright, let's see, what's next on the menu… huh, ironic. Operation Famine. Smuggling ring here in Paradise, CP9 sent in to eviscerate them, the objective of their operation was—!"

My words died in my throat as I read the next words, followed swiftly by the rest of the report. My comrades remained frozen for what felt like the longest of times as we all processed what we were reading before I slowly managed to turn my head to the side to look at Soundbite, who was staring at me with an equally poleaxed look.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" I whispered numbly.

Soundbite slowly shook his head, eyes wide in disbelief. "It's... It's insane. SO FAR OUT THERE, the chances of this actually WORKING—!"

"Are you telling me that this is a fucking coincidence!?" I hissed desperately. "That we find something like this—" I slammed my finger on the entry. "Moments after we called them out, after we called their bluff!? Are you saying that this isn't their M.O. to a T!?"

"It… It does fit, I guess…" Lassoo said hesitantly. "But Cross, if this doesn't work—!"

"It has to, damn it!" I snarled. "It's all that we have left! It's this, or… or…" I bit my lip in an effort to
fight back the panic that was starting to pound within me, and *not* the good kind.

"…Alright, fine, so be it…" the dog-cannon sighed wearily. "But… even if it *could* work, the fact remains that we need 'it' in the first place." He jerked his head at the rest of the room. "Where the hell do you propose we look? You already searched this place from top to bottom, and it's not like we're made of time at the moment."

"Ah…" I found myself drawn up short as I looked over the ransacked office. "W-Well, I… I-I guess if we—!"

"*I'll find it.*"

"Eh?" I blinked at Soundbite in confusion. "Are you sure? Do you want us to help or—?"

"*Shut up already,*" Soundbite snapped. "*TLL find it, end of discussion. JUST LET ME CONCENTRATE.*"

I promptly locked my jaws shut as I watched Soundbite screw his eyes shut. The seconds ticked by, but it wasn't long before he opened his eyes again, a dull look in his gaze. "*To the right of the desk, seventh stone from the wall, where the sword normally stands.*"

I only gawked for a second before Soundbite snapped a glare to me, forcing me into motion so that I was following his instructions. Upon reaching the indicated stone, I made to grab Soundbite off my shoulder—

"*Don't,*" Soundbite warned me off. "*He's boobytrapped this one, it'll self-destruct if we force it. He didn't do it on the last one because he didn't want to risk destroying it by accident. Slide it into the surrounding stone instead.*"

I glanced at him in surprise before laying my palm on the stone and doing as he said, sliding it around enough for me to move it a bit and work my fingers in and push it out of the way, exposing yet another safe. This one, though, only had a single dial on it.

"…let me take a flying guess, 19-16-1-4-1-13?" I deadpanned as I started fiddling with the knob.

"Hang on, that spells… A, B, C…" Lassoo muttered under his breath.

I input the last number and turned the handle, clicking the door open.

"*Spandam,*" Soundbite deadpanned.

"God bless predictable bastards like him…" I whispered as I pulled the safe's door open.

Within was a single item, but it was all that I needed. I withdrew the contents, a small half-foot-cubed chest, with shaky hands and after a moment's hesitation, opened it to observe its sole content.

I… could do nothing more than stare at it, as did Soundbite and Lassoo.

"…so, that's it, huh?" Lassoo whispered reverentially.

"Yeah…" I nodded slowly before glancing at Soundbite. "This… This'll do it?"

*I… ah… I-I don't…*" Soundbite hedged uncomfortably as he relaxed somewhat. "*I don't know. IT'S TOO HARD TO... ALL I CAN SAY is that it's real. BEYOND THAT…*" He shrugged as much as he could. "*YOUR GUESS is as good as mine.*"
I hesitated briefly before scowling and slamming the lid shut. "That's good enough." I then stood up and snapped my fingers before rolling my index, which prompted Soundbite to produce an electronic whine. "Everyone, it's Cross. I just found—!"

**KABOOM!**

"—FUCK-MOTHERING GRIZZLY MAGNUM P.I. ON A KIT-KAT BAR!" I cursed wildly as I spun my arms in a desperate attempt to keep my footing as the entire fucking tower was shaken by an explosion!

"NOW THAT would be A FIND!" Soundbite snickered.

"WHO THE HELL JUST CAME THIS CLOSE TO KNOCKING EVERYONE IN THE LOOSE HALF OF THE TOWER INTO THE FUCKING ABYSS!?" I roared indignantly, trusting Soundbite to broadcast my voice for me.

"M-My bad—ERGH!—Cross."

My anger immediately evaporated into nothingness when I was answered by a thoroughly pained voice, along with Soundbite coughing up a mouthful of blood.

"Chopper?" I breathed numbly.

"S-Sorry about that, everyone..." the reindeer wheezed miserably, coughing up more blood in the process. "I used another Ch-Cherry Blossom—ACK!—Blast B-Blizzard. It was s-stupid, b-b-but I d-didn't have any other choice..."

"Shit, Kumadori?" I ground the heel of my palm into my forehead. "Damn it, I'm sorry, Chopper, I thought that with your new arsenal—!"

"N-Not your fault, Cross..." Chopper groaned in defeat. "B-Between my Cherry B-Blossom arsenal a-and my new h-high quality Rumble Balls, I-I had him right on the edge." He shook his head with a grimace. "T-Then he made a r-run for it and got to the k-kitchen." He chuckled grimly. "I-I'm afraid that I underestimated w-what you meant when you said h-he'd mastered b-biofeedback."

I sucked in a breath. "He pulled a Luffy, didn't he? He snapped back to all cylinders in an instant—!"

"While I was left r-running on fumes..." Chopper sighed. "I-I'm sorry about the blast, i-it was that or e-end up a sieve, I-I didn't think—!"

"Don't apologize for saving your own life, Chopper, never apologize for that!" I interrupted. "You did what you had to do, no one can fault you for that, nobody at all!"

"...T-Thanks for that, Cross..." our doctor grinned miserably. "B-But please, don't stop me from apologizing for w-what I'm about to do next..." His expression shifted to a combination of a scowl and a grimace. "B-Because I'm about to break a lot of promises I m-made to myself and to D-Doctorine."

I grimaced. So... it had come to this after all. Damn it. "Fine... but remember this: No regrets. We won't let you hurt any of us, we won't let you do anything bad. When you do it... do it with a clear conscience, alright?"

Chopper was silent for a moment, before smiling gratefully, tears of joy sliding down his face. "R-Roger that, T-Third Mate C-Cross..."
"Cross, WHAT'S GOING ON?" Zoro snarled.

"Chopper's using his last resort, his trump card… his berserker form," I said grimly. I ran a quick headcount before grimacing at the conclusion I drew. "Franky, I really hope that those upgrades you mentioned are as super as you say, because you're the only person available who can contain Chopper once he takes down Kumadori."

"I'm just putting on the finishing touches now, Cross, I'll be SUPER! ready to go in two minutes!"

"You have one," I corrected bluntly.

There was a moment of hesitation, then… "I'll be done in thirty seconds. What do I need to do?"

I took a moment to smirk victoriously. Oh, yeah, now that was the SUPER! shipwright I knew.

"J-Just knock me into the sea…" Chopper groaned. "I'm going to be sending my D-Devil Fruit into o-overdrive. T-The sea will stop me."

"Got it. Just leave it to me, guys! Your friend'll be safe with me!"

"Heh… heheh… s-sorry to disappoint you, Franky, b-but the thing is?"

"YOYO! Theeeere you aaaare! It's tiiiime that I end this!"

Chopper screwed his expression up. "I'm not who you should be worried about."

A moment of silence, and then…

"RUMBLE."

CRUNCH!

I slashed my hand across my neck, prompting Soundbite to cut the line. Not that it did much good, however, seeing as the next second…

"GWROOOOOOOAAAARGH!"

The Tower of Justice was shaken by a bone-rattling roar of primal fury, and then the smash of something going through several floors in the space of an instant.

"…wow, the little guy is seriously out of his mind, isn't he?" Franky muttered nervously.

"Completely and utterly, and he's not even remotely little anymore, either," I snarled as I wheeled on my heel. "Right, playtime is over, I'm gonna grab the blackbook and—!" I interrupted myself with a choked cry of shock as I reeled back, on account of me finally noticing the presence of the absolute last individual I would have expected to see in this situation.

Hattori responded by cocking his head to the side, regarding me with a curious, if avian, look.
"And… do what exactly?" he queried. "Do speak up, boy, I so hate it when thoughts are left incomplete, it just…" He ruffled his feathers. "Irks me, you know?"

"…Guys, I'm gonna have to call you back," I muttered under my breath before glancing at Soundbite. "James Spader?"

"Felt appropriate," he muttered back before raising his voice. "And for the record, I don't feel impotent anymore. NOW I JUST FEEL PISSED."
"Oh, don't worry, I take no offense," the pigeon said dismissively. "After all, my species is renowned for being something of a pest, and as a being who lacks a spine on a biological level, it's only to be expected that you feel constantly helpless!"

Soundbite twitched furiously on my shoulder, but a warning look from me was enough to silence him before I refocused on the pigeon. "So… Hattori. What brings you all the way up here?"

"Well, first and foremost, I'll be dealing with this," he replied, tapping his talon on the black book, which I only just now realized he was standing on. "Particular breach in operational security. Terribly embarrassing, to be honest, a rookie mistake. But one we should have seen coming, I suppose, what with who our director is…" He trailed off for a moment before slapping his head with a chuckle. "Oh, right, terribly sorry, I almost forgot. I'm also here to kill you, of course." The last line was delivered without missing a beat, as though he were discussing the weather.

I swallowed nervously as I fought to keep calm. "Is that so?" I managed to get out.

For all that I was keeping myself marginally calm on the outside, inside my mind was awhirl. In all honesty, I hadn't even considered Hattori to be a possible factor in matters, but really, I should have have known better. Like it or not, the bird was a part of CP9, and doubtless had some training, one way or another. Silly to consider, sure, but considering the current situation, and the fact that half of my crewmates were animals and most of those were self-sufficient? Not a chance of me counting it out yet. Still, he was just a pigeon, so with any luck…

"So, I'm curious…" I started slowly, trying to keep my voice steady, even as I inched one of my feet towards the door. "Did Spandam order this or…?"

If I could just get out of this wide-open room—

And then my face proceeded to split open.

I blinked in surprise as I watched the blood gush before my eyes. "What the—?"

Aaaand then the pain hit me.

"ARGH!"

"CROSS!" Soundbite and Lassoo chorused.

"To answer your question…" Hattori kept his tone of voice even as he inspected his wingtips, totally uncaring as I fell to my knees and clutched the fucking trench in my face with a howl of pain. "It was actually Lucci who gave me this assignment. He wanted to guarantee that you didn't walk away from this island alive. Or at all, really. I'm only too happy to oblige."

"Big words from A PIGEON!" Soundbite retorted.

The pigeon cocked his head to the side before chuckling dryly. "This coming from the snail? Really now, Soundbite, is that the best you have to offer? That little barb failed to meet even my admittedly low expectations," he stated. "I do hope that's not your A-game. I accepted this assignment because I was hoping for things to be at least a little interesting, after all, and it certainly wasn't because of Cross."

"You damn—!"

"Shut it…" I bit out through my pain. Because damn, this shit hurt like hell, the bastard had torn my face open from cheek to cheek and all but cut my damn nose in half! I'd be lucky if I'd ever be able
to smell anything but blood again, damn it!

Currently, my mind was awhirl as I berated myself for being so fucking stupid! What the hell did it matter if Hattori was a pigeon, he was a pigeon owned and trained by Rob Lucci! I'd forgotten to take into account the fact that that bastard wouldn't have let his pet be anything less than the perfect feathered killing machine, and all because I was so stupid stupid stupid, damn it!

"And that's even more dull," Hattori sighed, sounding genuinely disappointed. "Honestly now, if you're going to insist on boring me, I might as well get on to business."

So saying, the pigeon flapped his wings in order to lift a few feet above the desk—

"Tempest Wing."

Before flapping one of his wings extra-hard. I flinched and snapped my gauntlets up, bracing for pain, but I wasn't the aim of the attack.

Instead, Spandam's desk all but split in half, and what little remained of some of the most valuable pages in the world fluttered out the window and into the waiting abyss below.

I swear I felt something die in me as I took in the sight of what had once been a gold mine of information; I hadn't even made it through half of the book, and now it was useless. But… in the end, I couldn't really complain. It had served its purpose, however brief; I had what I needed most, and there was no doubt that I had spilled enough dirt to be earthshaking.

Now I just needed to stay alive long enough to actually capitalize on it.

"Please tell ME YOU HAVE A PLAN, CROSS!" Soundbite stage-whispered.

"Don't die?" I offered weakly.

For a moment, the snail was silent. "A bit vague, BUT I LIKE IT."

"Yes, I suppose it is elegant in its simplicity, isn't it?" Hattori admitted with a nod before drawing his wings back. "Too bad it's utterly implausible. Tempest—!"

"EEEEEEEE!

Suddenly, Soundbite let out a shrill screech, almost like a siren, distracting all of us.

"OWOWOWOW! T-Too loud, too strong!" the snail wailed miserably, "I-I-I can't st-stop IT! H-HE DID IT! THAT BASTARD, HE USED THE GOLDEN SNAIL!"

Then Soundbite's expression mutated into a familiar scowl."Oh, now I pick the right snail. Not that it matters anymore, there's no turning back now! I've pushed the button! Of all things… I'VE TRIGGERED THE BUSTER CALL!"

"And he just broadcast that fact to the entire island, if not the world," Hattori observed dryly as he landed back on the remains of the desk. "Good God, how has anyone so utterly devoid of intelligence managed to live so long?"

"Mother-fucking miracles, is how," I bit out venomously as I pinched my nose together.

"HONK honk," Soundbite scoffed.
"Still," I raised my voice as I glared at the pigeon. "Any chance of calling a truce just long enough for me to utterly annihilate any chance of Spandam not having the book—nay, the entire library—thrown at him when this mess is over and done with?"

Hattori regarded me for a few moments before casually waving his wing. "Oh, why not? Not as though you have any chance of escaping. And I will admit, I'm interested to see if you can arrange for his grave to be dug any deeper than it already is."

"Watch and be amazed," I smirked before looking at Soundbite, taking the opportunity to dig the stock of salve-soaked bandages Chopper had given me out of my jacket. "Can you connect to the snail he's talking through and get a message to Robin?"

"Eh…" Soundbite waved his eyestalks side to side. "HE'S OUT OF my range… ah, but one of the MICROPHONE USERS ISN'T! Just let me—GOT HER!"

"Robin, we're on our way, and we're still broadcasting live!" I said. "I've already all but signed the bastard's arrest warrant, but I want to see if we can't push the buck a little farther! Get him talking!"

It was a true credit to Robin's professionalism that she didn't even hesitate, though the panic in her voice was, unfortunately, not faked in the slightest. "You have to cancel it right away! Don't you realize what you've done? Everyone is going to die!"

"Cancel it? Ha! Who do you think you're talking to!? What's wrong with a Buster Call, anyway?" Spandam snarled, quickly regaining his composure, as well as his raging ego. "Yes… Yes, this is fine, I'm perfectly authorized to do this! I'm the Chief of Cipher Pol No. 9, after all! To ensure that your transfer went over smoothly, I requested a Buster Call. There's nothing at all wrong with that! Who cares if it's a little overkill? Better safe than sorry; I'm sure Sengoku will agree that it's a small price to pay to get rid of these pirates!"

"You… You're more than a fool, you're insane!" Robin gasped fearfully. "I told you before, that won't be the end of it! This is an attack without mercy, without humanity! The Buster Call will burn everything on Enies Lobby to the ground! The buildings, the people, even the island itself! It will sacrifice anything and everything in its path! The nightmare won't end until nothing remains! That's the power you're invoking! I've seen it all with my own eyes, I've told you what happened on Ohara twenty years ago! You would sacrifice the lives of everyone here, and all for what!? For a weapon!?"

"Yesss…" Spandam hissed, and going by his tone of voice it sounded like he was standing on the edge. "The Government is well aware of the sacrifices involved, that's how important this mission is! With all the bad publicity we're already receiving, we can't afford to make a mistake. You're the last hope we have of reviving the Ancient Weapon! Poetic, isn't it? Destruction in order to bring about even greater destruction! The spark needed to ignite the engine of one of the greatest weapons in all history! Those few thousand soldiers should be honored, their souls will be the kindling for the blaze that will burn all evil out of this world! And besides, if they couldn't even do their job and keep your little friends from coming this far and humiliating the World Government as they have, they're better off dead! And the same goes for CP9!"

"You complete and utter madman… Do you even understand a fraction of what you're talking about!? The Pluton is a power far beyond your comprehension, beyond anyone's comprehension, even mine! What was written on that Poneglyph…" I could hear the shudder in Robin's voice. "Was nothing short of pure evil! I couldn't forget it even if I wanted to, because it haunts my dreams every night! Do you see what I'm trying to say!? You could destroy the entire world that you're trying to secure it for! Does it mean nothing to you that your efforts could reduce the World Government to
"Reduce it to nothing? Hmm..." A demented smile slowly spread across Spandam's face. "Yes, it does have that kind of power, doesn't it? You know, I could actually take advantage of that! With that kind of power, I could join the Five Elder Stars... or even replace them! Spandam, king of the entire world! WAHAHAHAHAHAAAA!

Right, this shitshow's coming to a stop, now. "Hey, leatherface, guess what?" I sang innocently.

"HAHAHA—eh? What the—?

"You're on candid-snail, my friend," I sneered.

"BUUU~STEEE~D!" Soundbite howled with a cackle.

Hattori watched with unconcealed amusement as Soundbite mirrored Spandam's own expression of abject horror—

"Er... by the way, this is, er, Straw Hat Luffy speaking."

"I WOULDN'T BUY THAT IF IT WAS ON SALE, DIPSHIT!"

—before his expression fell flat as the entire island shouted at him.

"Honestly, now?" Hattori groaned, his wing meeting his face. "Good God, I'm actually getting a migraine. Honestly, I wasn't even aware that pigeons could get migra—!

He suddenly cut himself off and lashed his wing out, causing me to skid to a halt with a choked curse as the resulting razor wind carved a chunk out of the staircase railing before me.

"Nice try," he drawled. "But quite simply no. Now then—!

"Dot dot dot dot!"

He gave Soundbite a thoroughly unimpressed look. "Really? Now, of all times?"

"Hey, trust—dot dot dot dot!—me, I get where YOU'RE COMING FROM! NOT RIGHT—dot dot dot dot!—NOW, OBVIOUSLY, BUT—!"

"Oh, just pick it up already," he ordered me with a dry look.

"Yeah yeah, on it," I grumbled as I dug through my bag.

"Dot dot dot—KA-LICK!"

Soundbite promptly began shining golden, the rage palpable across the connection... and a demented smile on his face. Hattori actually flinched back, as did I.

"OHHH, SPAAANDAAAAM?!" came the horrifying voice of Fleet Admiral Sengoku, who seemed to have cracked from the way his slasher grin and voice were tremoring. "I HAVE NEW ORDERS FOR YOU, STRAIGHT FROM THE FIVE ELDER STARS: RETURN TO MARINE HEADQUARTERS IMMEDIATELY TO RECEIVE, AND I QUOTE THE ELDER STARS THEMSELVES, 'EVERYTHING YOU HAVE COMING TO YOU.' AND HEAVEN HELP YOU IF NICO ROBIN ISN'T WITH YOU WHEN YOU GET HERE."
Spandam hesitated for a scant moment before whatever delusion he was laboring under reaffirmed itself and he nodded dutifully. "Y-Yes, sir! HURRY UP, YOU! DOUBLE-TIME! YOU ARE TO BEAR WITNESS TO ME RECEIVING MY JUST REWARDS!"

Robin grunted slightly before gritting her teeth and glancing to the side. "Well, isn't this a fine development?" she muttered underneath her breath. "Now I'm actually half-tempted to go along with him just so that I can see the results."

"WHAT WAS THAT YOU—Ah, wait a second, I'd better hang up now before—CLICK!"

"ARGH!" Soundbite yelped. "WRONG ONE, ASSWIPE!"

"BITE ME, YOU LITTLE—KA-LICK!"

I would have to have been the absolute biggest idiot on the face of the planet to speak up at that moment.

"May I suggest awarding him the Darwin Award once he arrives?"

Which, of course, meant that I had to.

Sound-Goku snapped a twitching glare at me for a second before his grin widened. "Ah, yes. Jeremiah Cross," the Fleet Admiral said in a voice of calm best compared to the void between stars. "The biggest fucking aggravation in my career, if not my life. I have only one thing to say to you."

There was a pause and then—

Holy-fucking-hell-giant-golden-GOD!

I had to fight tooth and nail to keep my knees from buckling.

"I'M COMING FOR YOU. KA-LICK!"

I took a moment to pant and get my heartbeat back under control. "Fucking Conqueror's..." I muttered. I then shot a somewhat hysterical grin at Soundbite. "Wonder whose is stronger, his or Garp the Hero's?"

Soundbite replied to the grin with a flat look. "I'D SAY YOU HAVE ISSUES, BUT THAT FRUIT'S SO LOW HANGING THE CHICKENS HAVE BEEN PECKING AT IT."

"Oh, please," Hattori drawled. "I doubt there's enough left of that particular fruit after how much you ate to feed a worm. I do believe I'm actually doing you a favor by killing you now, before the Buddha arrives."

So saying, the menacing pigeon strolled forward, advancing on my talking snail, my bazooka-dog, and myself as I racked my brains for a way out of the bisected thirty-story Tower of Justice.

"...My life is so warped," I muttered as I ran the aforementioned situation through my head. I then froze as I realized the truth behind my words: I was in a crazy situation... so why not employ an utterly crazy solution?

And so, it was without a hint of hesitation that I planted my arms behind me and hoisted myself onto the bannister, balancing between certain death and the void.

Hattori stopped in his tracks, blinking at me in honest surprise. "You're mad," he stated matter-of-
factly.

I chuckled as I scratched the back of my head. "To paraphrase Will Turner's dubiously good friend Jack Sparrow—!"

"CAPTAIN JACK SPARROW!"

"Yes, yes, Captain Jack Sparrow, thank you…" I allowed an absolutely maniacal grin to spread across my face. "Good thing I am, because otherwise this would probably never work."

And with that, I tipped backwards and allowed myself to plummet, freefalling for a total of three seconds until I grabbed a handle at my side and yanked.

"AAAAaaaaAAAA!" Soundbite hollered as a rope shot from my waist and latched onto one of the balconies I'd passed.

The next second, the rope snapped taut and I grunted with exertion as I swung into the wall, only my greaves and my training saving my legs from shattering on impact. "And people do this for fun?" I demanded as I unlatched myself from the line and dropped down to the landing below me.

"You certainly do!" Lassoo snickered.

I paused as I contemplated that before nodding. "Fair point. Anyway, Usopp!" I raised my voice meaningfully as dug a spare spool of rope from my bag and started fiddling with my belt. "Thanks for letting me hang onto this thing after Skypiea, but do you think you could walk me through replacing the lines again? And while I've got you, how are things going? Has Robin reached the Bridge yet?"

"Ah, not yet! But I have been giving the Marines hell. Only problem is that there are a lot of them and they're pulling out riot shields, so the best I can do is keep them pinned."

"That's better than any of us at this point, so nice work, Sniper King!" I chuckled. "Anyways, those instructions?"

"Pull out the ripcord and twist the base clockwise to eject it, then insert the new one and twist it in counterclockwise," Usopp recited.

"Pull-twist-twist…" I muttered as I followed his orders and replaced the reels. "Alright, got it, thanks. Back to work."

"Yeah, I'm on—Oh, a reflection! EAT THIS! SPECIAL ATTACK: LEAD STAR!"

"Knock 'em dead, Usopp!" I called up before looking at my companions. "Alright, you guys ready?"

"Do we have a choice?" Lassoo snorted.

"Not really, the feather-rat is GETTING SUSPICIOUS!" Soundbite yelped.

I bit out a curse and hastily sprung into action. First, I launched my grappling hook's anchor into the floor, burying its head in the stone, and then I got onto the railing and hung myself over the edge by the line. Thankfully, I was on an extended balcony, so I would be dropping into the middle of the stairwell.

"Here we go!" I grunted as I jumped out and started falling down the shaft again, my descent controlled by an automatic brake Usopp had installed in the belt while I kept a hand on the line in
order to keep my balance.

I warily scanned the shaft leading up to the roof as I descended. "Any idea if he's coming, or—?"

"NOW!"

Exactly on cue, a dart of white popped into sight and shot down at us, zipping back and forth as it honed in.

I didn't even hesitate to snap my arm up when the killer pigeon got near. "Gastro-Flash!" I ordered, flexing my palm.

Thankfully, the resulting blast of light and sound forced Hattori to divert his course of descent, following which he shot past me without stopping. Of course, a glance downwards was all I needed to confirm that he'd almost immediately pulled a 180 and was shooting back up at us, which I wasn't going to let fly. Pun mostly not intended.

"Gastro-Phony!"

"SUCK IT!" Soundbite snapped before roaring out an ear-rending cacophony. The resultant blare forced Hattori to swerve and give us a wide berth before wheeling around above us.

"Alright, now unless I miss my guess, he's now going to try to…” I was answered by Hattori slashing his wing at my line. The razor wind hit the rope and caused reverberations to course up and down it, but other than a few shakes, nothing actually came of it.

"NICE TRY!" I called up to the avian aggressor. "BUT I HAD USOPP BUY SOME SPOOLS OF REINFORCED ROPE WHILE WE WERE IN WATER 7! YOU’RE GONNA HAVE TO DO BETTER THAN THAT!"

"You realize that that's only going to piss him off, right?" Lassoo groaned darkly.

I shrugged in means of reply. "Hey, he's going to try and end us anyway, not like I'm making things any worse. And 'sides, you're the one who's going to keep him from killing us in the first place."

"What!? How the heck am I gonna do that!?”

At that moment, Hattori swerved down at us and lashed out yet another rippling wave of air at us.

"Like this!" I grit out as I unslung Lassoo and pointed his muzzle dead ahead. "Cani-Blast!

Lassoo didn't even hesitate to belt out the pillar of fire, the kickback from which swung me backwards, out of the path of the bird's attack and into the Tower's wall.

I dug my fingers into a cleft in the tower's stonework, letting myself hang and catch my breath for a moment before I nodded firmly. "Alright... Alright, now we get serious. Hang on tight!" And with that, I leapt out and to the side, swinging out of the way of yet another Tempest Wing.

"Lassoo, can you adjust the fuse of your baseballs yourself?" I asked as I landed on another wall.

The dog-gun frowned in thought for a moment, and then grinned. "I can do you one better, Cross," he said. "Watch this!"

And with that, he angled his head and spat out a baseball that would have blown the stupid pigeon to feathers had it been properly aimed, as it exploded mere feet behind him. I was quite gratified to see
Hattori flail a bit mid-flight.

"OK, keep that up!" I said as I leapt out again. Then I frowned as I noticed him suddenly swooping in loop-de-loops. "What's he—? Oh, shi—Cani-Blast!"

Lassoo barked out another pillar of flame, sending us off to the far-side of the shaft and not a moment too soon, judging from the fact that the wall where I'd been standing earlier suddenly turned into swiss-fucking-cheese!

"Of course Lucci taught his pigeon the Flying Finger Pistol!" I roared in frustration. "Of course he did, because it would be too easy if he only knew one ranged attack!"

"Shouldn't that BE Flying Beak Pistol?" Soundbite pointed out innocently.

"Not the time, you little—!"

"STOP!"

I instinctively swung Lassoo around and braced at his warning shout, the cannonball he vomited up bringing us to a halt mere inches from the incoming Tempest Wing that would have intercepted us otherwise.

"That was way too close," I whimpered, before hastily blasting myself back to the wall and running around the shaft as a Flying Nose—Beak—whatever nearly clipped my shoulder.

"Lassoo!" I howled.

"Hold still for just a minute!" he barked, before chuffing. "Gotcha! Cani-Cannon Barrage: Ack-Ack Edition!"

I braced myself as Lassoo rammed into my shoulder, going full rapid-fire as explosion after explosion rocked the stairwell. While I didn't hear a squawk of avian death, I also didn't have to dodge any more air-pressure attacks, so I decided to call it a win. After a few minutes, though, I felt the explosions taper off and then stop entirely.

"He's pulled up and I can't aim that high," Lassoo growled in answer to the unspoken question.

"Wait, he wha—? Shit," I spat as I stared upwards after the feathered menace. "He finally got wise and decided to go for our anchor, and there's fuck-all we can do to stop him!"

Suddenly we jerked to a stop.

"NOT THAT IT MATTERS, considering we're out of rope," Soundbite noted with a nervous chuckle.

Gritting my teeth, I glanced downward, hoping for something to get us out of this mess. The only things I saw were that the nearest stair-landing was far enough down that a drop would break my legs and a bloodied Blueno Moon…walking…

I took a second to blink in shock at the sight of Blueno hovering in the air and frantically looking around before grinning as an idea popped into my head.

"Guys, fair warning, I'm about to do something really stupid," I notified them matter-of-factly.

"What else is new?" they scoffed.
"Yeah, well, this is going to be particularly bad," I said casually. And with my partners sufficiently warned, I aimed Lassoo above me... and unlatched the rope. "CANI-BLAST!"

It took more gymnastics than I was normally capable of and I'm almost certain that I pulled something in the process, but the end result was the same: Lassoo's blast launched me downwards and I was able to slam my foot—!

"DYNAMIC ENTRY!"

"Wha—?"

CRUNCH!

"GWAH!"

Dead-center in Blueno's face.

I held my position balancing on the bull-haired man's face for a second before leaping forward and jumping to the stairwell.

I panted heavily as I fought to catch my breath before shooting a finger up into the air. "And all that!" I announced in a grandiose tone of voice. "While stone-cold sober!"

"GRGH—!" Blueno cursed for a second as he nursed his shattered nose before directing a murderous glare at me, somehow still maintaining his Moonwalk. "Cross, you damn son of a—!"

"We interrupt this worthless death-threat for a breaking news story: CP9 agent with a Power Level of 820 proven to be useless against Gastro-Phony!"

"MORE AT ELEVEN!" Soundbite boomed.

Blueno blinked dumbly at us. "Wha—?" Then Soundbite's ear-rending roar hit him dead-on. He snapped his hands to his ears, and promptly dropped like a stone when he forgot to keep his legs kicking.

I glanced over the edge of the railing and cocked an eyebrow. "Well, that was easy."

"It's a sad day for CP9 when a pigeon is more threatening than a bull," Lassoo sighed.

That brought me up short as I thought things over. "...Good grief. I'm fighting a pigeon, I just kicked a bull in the face, and a giraffe cut this entire tower in half. Zoro was right, this place is a zoo!"

"Enies Lobby, THE MOST MAGICAL PLACE IN THE GRAND LINE!" Soundbite cackled.

I groaned as I ground the bridge of my nose. "Damn, now my memories will forever be tainted... anyway, let's get moving and—!"

CLONK!

"Ow!" I flinched as I felt something smack the back of my head, something that probably would have hurt a lot more if this were a few months ago. I glanced back and identified that it was a rock that had hit me, prompting me to blink in confusion before looking around to see who could have thrown it. I then began to question my perception of reality when I caught sight of two pebbles floating in mid-air and tapping against one another.

"...Soundbite, can I blame you for this?" I asked only slightly desperately.
"TOO MUCH CREDIT! And that's no delusion, that's morse code, it's SANJI!"

"Say what?"

"Yeah, and he's sayin'…" Lassoo narrowed his eyes as he followed the tapping. "Stay. Out. Of. This. Cross."

I felt my eyes twitch before I crossed my arms and scowled. "Get off my case, Combat Cook, I needed a safe way to the stairs and he was my best option! And anyway…" I smirked tauntingly. "Shouldn't you be going after him rather than staying here yapping at me?"

The pebbles flinched and hastily tapped out something I suspected was distinctly insulting before they dove over the edge.

I watched them for a second before exchanging glances with Lassoo. "Not even going to question it, you?"

"Nope," he shook his head flatly.

"Good," Soundbite barked just as the line I'd been dropping on fell past us. "Because the FEATHER-RAT IS ON THE MOVE AGAIN! RUN!"

I decided to follow that excellent advice and run like hell.

-0-

"And three… two… one…" Vivi counted down under her breath as she watched the second-hand on her watch tick away before nodding firmly and snapping it shut. "It's been five minutes, Luffy and Lucci should be well into it. I doubt we'll get a better chance than this." She glanced over her shoulder at Conis and Su. "Are you ready?"

Conis nodded in agreement as she adjusted her goggles before wrapping her arms around Vivi's waist. "Ready and willing!"

"Su!" Su concurred as she dug her claws into her owner's back.

Vivi then turned her attention to her Carue. "Ready for this, Carue?"

The supersonic spot-billed duck snorted firmly as he snapped his visor down over his eyes. "Quack."

"Alright, then…" Vivi grit her teeth as she wrapped her hands in her partner's reins. "Let's do this!" She gave the reins a firm snap. "HEEYAH!"

"QUAAACK!" Carue squawked loudly as he started tearing down the tunnel at breakneck speeds.

The duck and his riders had left Luffy and had been waiting more than a kilometer away from the Bridge of Hesitation.

Carue cleared that distance and tore into the Bridge's warehouse in less than twenty seconds.

To most anyone else entering the room, it would appear as though there was some sort of malevolent haze ripping the room apart. This would be on account of Luffy having gathered that he would only be able to beat Lucci by going all-out straight off the bat and Lucci eagerly meeting him in turn. The result was their forms being barely visible as they—a lobster-red rubber man and a menacing anthropomorphic leopard in a black suit—matched blows and otherwise rendered themselves as
barely colored blurs in the air.

Carue, however, was not most anybody. He was a Supersonic Duck, and in order to properly cope and process their environments while running at their maximum speeds, Supersonic Ducks had evolved so that no matter how fast they moved, their brains would automatically speed up and allow them to keep up and not crash into anything.

The end result of this miracle of nature was that where Vivi, Conis and Su only saw an unintelligible nothing, Carue was at least able to follow Luffy and Lucci as they flashed around the room, pummeling, parrying, dodging and overall performing a danse macabre in all but song.

The duck had almost made it halfway the storeroom when suddenly the world froze around him —right in the instant where he was in midair, between one step and the next—as his abject terror ramped his mental dilation into overdrive.

The reason for his terror was the fact that, at the moment, there was a 12-foot tall leopard-human towering above him. One of said leopard-human's hands was held out in such a way so as to deflect the crimson fist trying to slam into his head, and the other…

Carue felt like his heart was about to pound out of his chest as he watched the other clawed hand swipe down towards his head. To him it looked like the hand was moving slowly, but he knew, he knew that if it made contact, then it would swipe off both his and Vivi's heads in a single, clean, utterly unhindered motion.

As certain death slowly but certainly inched towards his head, Carue found himself doing the only thing he could: reiterating the mantra that he'd adopted almost a week earlier, reciting it in every instance of training he'd performed with Vivi.

'One second,' he frantically repeated, over and over. 'One second one second one second one second —!'  

Carue could see his own reflection in Lucci's claws, and he was right about to lose control of his bowels. Then Vivi entered the reflection as well, and something in Carue's mind just clicked.

'One second…'

The very tip of Carue's talon touched down on the floor.

'One second. Ten steps, all in one second… TO SHAVE!'

And then Carue moved.

Rob Lucci snarled out a curse as his claws whiffed through the air, his quarry disappearing from his sight so fast that all that he was left with were a few stray feathers and the tail-end of a furious "— AAAAAACK."

"Damn pira—!"

The assassin only had a second to fume over his failure before a fist smashed into his face and sent him crashing him into the wall, following which he was wrenched right back into the greatest fight of his entire life.

-o-

I fought to control my breathing as I glanced around a corner on the Tower's ground floor. I scanned
the hallway before me and came up with jack-diddly in ways of killer pigeons. It looked for all the world like I had a straight shot to the Tower's back dock, but at the moment that meant all of jack-
squat to me, and for a damn good reason.

"Still no luck on finding the damn feather-rat?" I hissed to Soundbite.

He snarled darkly as he shook his head. "Not a one. I don't want to give any credit to THESE BASTARDS, but where their stealth skills are CONCERNED, IT'S DUE. I DON'T KNOW WHERE HE IS, SORRY."

I tsked softly at that as I hesitantly eyed the Bridge in the distance. "Alright… alright… Lassoo, how far would you say it is to the dock?"

"Eh…" Lassoo cocked his head to the side, eyeing the distance. "Fifty-five, fifty meters, give or take? Either way, the architects got their money's worth off of these blueprints."

I groaned miserably at the prospect as I felt my legs flare up miserably, and not because of my fondued muscles. "Ah… alright… so running out there would just be stupid, so… so let's start with you belting out a load of smoke to fill the corridor, and then, ah, ah… Soundbite! Yeah, Soundbite, you fill the corridor with Gastro-Phony, and then I'll, ah, I'll—!"

"Alright, what's with the stuttering?" Soundbite demanded impatiently. "That corridor IS A LEGITIMATE KILLBOX, WHY AREN'T YOU RUNNING RIGHT INTO IT!?"

I flinched self-consciously before shooting a shaky grin over my shoulder. "Haaave I ever told you two that I really hated P.E. class in school?"

My partners' expressions promptly fell flat. "Seriously?" they deadpanned.

I plastered a sheepish grin on my face as I rubbed the back of my head. "Running the mile, specifically. I mean, sure, my adrenaline's running pretty high, but I just don't think that running a straight line like this is the best course of action. I mean, come on, I'm the tactician here, and since I know the opponent, I'm sure I can come up with a few dozen plans to circumvent—!"

"Oh, for the love of God, will you please shut up?"

"NOW THAT'S MOTIVATION!" I yelped in panic as I shot out from behind the corner and made a break for it, pumping my legs as fast as I possibly could.

To my credit, I actually managed to make it a little under halfway.

"Tempest Wing."

SKRANG!

The attack splashed across my heel, sending me tumbling ass over teakettle. It was a considerable comfort that I had my armor on and that said armor was thick as hell, because otherwise I would have fit a really inconvenient stereotype. But considering that it left me wide open for another attack, that comfort was as cold as they came.

And it got even colder when I started to push myself to my feet and was forced to freeze when I wound up staring down the damn bird's wing.

"I'm terribly sorry for my rudeness, but honestly now," Hattori drawled. "There's only so much inane jibber jabber a sane being can take at a time. Really, I do believe I can see where your navigator
comes from whenever she does the world a favor by shutting you up.”

"YOU SHIT-FEATHERED—AGH!" Soundbite's vicious snarling was cut off when a small gash was suddenly carved into his shell.

"When I told you to shut up earlier," Hattori said, his eyes narrowed menacingly. "I meant all of you. And as for you!" Hattori swung his wing to point it between Lassoo's eyes, causing the cannon to freeze just as he was opening his jaws. "I want you to think very hard on this: what do you think is faster? Your mouth, or my wing?"

Lassoo kept his mouth half-open for a second before snapping it shut with an irritated growl.

Hattori nodded before turning his attention back to me. "I'll give you points for persistence and cleverness, Cross," he drawled. "But in the end, you're simply weak, and your attempts to compensate through the usage of your unctuous partner futile due to his own innate uselessness. Allow me to share a fact of life with you: There are opponents against which no amount of cleverness and persistence will work. And unfortunately for you, I'm not a Logia user with delusions of grandeur and better things to do with his time than kill you."

"But apparently you have THE TIME TO run your FUCKING—!"

Hattori casually flicked his wing, snapping a small pellet of something into Soundbite's mouth before he could react and reducing my snail's tirade to little more than a barrage of hacking and wheezing. The answer to what the hell had just happened came in the form of Soundbite coughing up a cloud of white powder that I recognized all too well: flour.

"Soundbite!" I cursed desperately.

Hattori cooed something or other in what I knew was a condescending tone, and the snarl Lassoo let out was proof enough of that.

Still, no matter what it was the bird said, his next action was clear enough.

Time seemed to slow down for us as the wing came down, and I could only stare and watch in horror as the air started to ripple around the white feathers.

Later on, when I recounted this story to my crew, I would swear up and down the Grand Line, Paradise and New World alike, that just as the wing was inches from my face, I saw a figure with a robe and a scythe looming behind the damn bird.

And that figure would have swung his scythe down, too.

"NO!"

If it weren't for a titanic voice suddenly bellowing out and causing Hattori to flail back in shock.

I hastily scrambled back when the pigeon's wing slashed at my face, and my heart all but stopped when the bird's wingtip sheared a small nock out of the lip of my baseball cap. "Fuck Gear Second, I just lost a few years off my life…” I whimpered in terror as I clambered to my feet.

Hattori, looking rather unnerved himself, hopped back from me and began scanning the area. "Who just spoke?" he demanded, before stiffening in shock. "Wait, how on earth am I speaking?!"

"HEY, FEATHERBRAIN."
Both Hattori and I snapped our attention to my shoulder, where Soundbite was grinning malevolently.

"YO," he greeted.

My jaw promptly dropped in shock.

It wasn't because a snail spoke, no, I thoroughly used to that little fact of life. It was because he spoke without opening his mouth.

"S-Soundbite..." I breathed in awe. "H-How the hell are you?"

Soundbite glanced at me for a second before shaking his head. "HoohoohooHEEHEEHEhahaha... haaaaa..." The snail then glanced down at my side. "PEOPLE OF THE WORLD... I HAVE A MESSAGE OF MY OWN."

Suddenly, a very familiar... nay, an unforgettable drumbeat started to play out, and all I could do was snap my head up into the air in shock. "What the hell—!?"

"I have a message that I want to share with some people."

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"TO THE WARLORD OF THE SEAS KNOWN AS DONQUIXOTE DOFLAMINGO."

"Fuffuffuffuffuffu... Fuffuffuffuffuffu!"

Said Warlord was currently hunched over and snickering on the deck of his ship, en route to getting the hell out of the No Man's Land that lay between Totland and Kaido's Empire; the events of the last few hours had been seriously taxing his ability to suppress his laughter, and it was taking a lot of effort not to start cackling loudly enough to wake the whole of the ocean.

Not that anyone was still asleep, mind you.

This was evidenced by Diamante hesitantly shuffling forwards, his progress being none-too-subtly encouraged by Pica shoving him in the back. He shot a glare over his shoulder at the larger Executive before clearing his throat. "Ah... Young Master, if you don't mind me asking, what's so —?"

"Fuffuffuffu... forget it..."

"E-Eh? W-What—AGH!" Diamante stumbled back in shock when the deck beneath his feet suddenly turned to string and started rippling.

"Forget the lateness of the hour, forget being yanked away to calm Big Mom. Hell, you can even forget that blacklist fiasco from awhile back too!" Doflamingo's smile stretched from ear to ear as he flung his head back and started cackling at the sky. "FUUFFUFFU! Forget it all! In the end, it doesn't matter how irritating they are, how arrogant and overambitious they might be! None of that matters, not now or ever again! Because now, it's official! The Straw Hats are just keeping this too world too interesting for me to be anything but entertained! HELL!"

The officers on board stumbled back in shock and terror when Doflamingo affixed a gaze at them that was filled with nothing but pure insanity.
"FORGET THE ERA OF ROGER, AND FORGET THE ERA OF SMILES ITSELF! THE ONLY THING I WANT TO SEE IN THIS WORLD IS THE SHEER MADNESS THAT WILL ARISE FROM THE ERA OF THE STRAW HAT PIRATES! FUFFUFFUFFUFFUFFUUU!"

-o-

"TO THE FOUR JAILER BEASTS OF THE UNDERWATER GAOL IMPEL DOWN!"

All throughout the facility of Impel Down, the entirety of the staff, from the 'human' guards and the Blugori to Warden Magellan himself, were desperately scrambling to try and maintain order as Levels 1, 2 and 4 rioted furiously, and the only reason that 3 and 5 weren't a part of the whole debacle was that the conditions of those Levels removed any will from the prisoners to fight back.

An extreme detriment to that endeavor and the root cause of the riots was that all four of the Gaol's Jailer Beasts had stopped doing their duties out of the blue in favor of bellowing skyward, and nothing that anybody did or said to them could make them stop.

Not even Sadi's training and discipline was able to get through to the Beasts. She tried, sure, but in the end, not even she was a match for the call of ingrained instinct.

-o-

"AND FINALLY, TO ANYBODY ELSE LIKE THEM... I suggest that you all move the hell over," Soundbite leered menacingly. "BECAUSE YOU SEE... THIS SNAIL JUST GOT ON YOUR LEVEL."

My mind reeled as I processed the implications of what I was hearing. And as if his words weren't more than enough, the sheer mad glint I could see in his eyes, practically shining from within, spoke more than enough.

"You... Soundbite," I stammered weakly. "D-Did you just—?"

"Awaken?" Soundbite giggled ecstatically. "Hell yes. And ya know what, Cross? I DON'T BLAME YOU FOR NOT BEING MUCH HELP BACK IN SKYPIEA. I didn't before, but still. SEE, IN THE END? THE REALITY IS THAT YOU COULDN'T have helped me figure it out..." He shook his head with a nostalgic look. "BECAUSE THERE JUST IS no figuring it out. 'Awakening'... an accurate name. ONE SECOND YOU DON'T HAVE A CLUE, AND THE NEXT... YOU WAKE UP FROM A DEEP SLEEP and you understand everything." He leaned his head back and basked as a chorus of trumpets blared. "Ain't nothin' like it."

"And..." I waved my hand at the air. "The music? I didn't think you had access to..." I jerked my head to the side. "You know, those records?"

"Heck," Lassoo piped up. "What the heck does this Awakening stuff mean in general?"

Soundbite shot a grin back at the dog-cannon. "On the music, I think that that BASTARD JUST CHOSE TO STEP OFF. As for everything else? Before, I was just an amped up mimic and ventriloquist. NOW? WEEEELL, ADMITTEDLY I'M STILL TRYING TO FIGURE OUT ALL THE BELLS AND WHISTLES, BUT FROM what I've managed to PUZZLE OUT?" He grinned eagerly. "Back in Loguetown, Nami called me a 'god of noise' after I got my rig. SHE WAS EXAGGERATING THEN."

Soundbite's grin stretched wide as an orchestra of strings sang to the heavens.
THAT TITLE ISN'T HYPERBOLE ANYMORE."

I felt almost limp as I processed what I was hearing. And some part of my mind was actually registering that the trigger that brought about this Awakening, that his surpassing of this limit, was all just to save me. Humbled by a snail… some odd things had happened to me since I entered this world, but I was reasonably certain that this took the cake, and in a way I liked.

My musings may well have led to some sort of heartwarming moment, were it not for the fact that Hattori used that moment to prove that he took far more cues about restraint from Jabra than his master.

"So, you've managed to figure out a way to emit noise without using your throat." Hattori snorted as he swept his wing out. "What of it? Nothing's actually changed. The only true gods in this world are the Celestial Dragons, and even with that traitorous princess you salvaged, your crew is so far below them as to be pitiful worms crawling in the muck below the scum. In the end, you and your powers are still nothing short of utterly useless."

Lassoo growled, and I felt my teeth grind together at the insult to Vivi, but we had nothing on Soundbite's reaction.

"Useless…" he muttered, his teeth clenched so hard they were creaking and his eyestalks drawn as low as they could go. "USELESS!? YOU WORTHLESS FEATHER-RAT, I AM SOUNDBYTE, AND I AM THE LOUDEST SNAIL IN THE WORLD! HEAR ME ROAR!" Soundbite then flung his head back and—!

"▂▂▃▃▄▄▅▅"!

"GAGH!" Lassoo and I flinched and clapped our respective limbs over our ears as Soundbite howled his fury to the world. It was literally painfully clear that Soundbite wasn't fully in control of his new powers yet, on account of how the very fringes of the bellow were blasting us with the compressed audio-equivalent of a live Skrillex concert.

Still, though, he had at least some measure of control, on account of how while our ears were aching, the whole world around us was shaking, and Hattori was drunkenly stumbling around on his talons as he clutched his head.

As fast as he'd started his audio rampage, Soundbite snapped his mouth shut and ended the din. "PUNT! NOW!"

"RIGHT!" I yelled louder than necessarily needed before dashing forwards, reeling my leg back and kicking the feather-rat into the wall. I tried to keep running immediately after that, but I instead stumbled and had to take a second to recover before continuing to dash for the dock.

"I take it you weren't that good at soccer either, huh?" Lassoo snarked.

"I was great at soccer, thank you very much!" I snapped indignantly as I kept a wary gaze over my shoulder. "That little shitstain used Iron Body, I might as well have kicked a medicine ball!"

"JUST RUN, DAMN IT!"

And so indeed I ran, and soon enough I managed to reach the rear docking area of Enies Lobby. It was a simple enough place, a few cannons here and there for defense, a few stray crates obviously waiting for loading - and not a single clue as to where the hell the stairs to the passageway were damn it!
"Soundbite, which way down?" I demanded.

"Worry about going down later, something's coming up!"

I blinked at him in confusion. "Wha—?" I froze when I noticed the tilestones starting to bulge beneath my feet.

"MOVE!"

"SHIT!" I cursed as I dove back - which, coincidentally, allowed Hattori to shoot straight above me.

"You're going to wish you hadn't done that," Hattori promised as he flapped to a halt.

"And you're about to wish you were never born," Lassoo snickered.

The pigeon paused as he blinked in confusion. "Wha—?"

BOOM!

"GRRROOOOAAAHH!"

"GAH!" Hattori flailed in panic as the dock exploded beneath him, sending up a shower of debris and...

...well, and a monster.

"Meep..." I squeaked fearfully as I shrank back from Chopper's newly looming form. It was... pretty much exactly as Oda had depicted it: an unholy fusion of all of Chopper's forms zapped with a growth ray and ten times more straight-up feral than I'd ever seen him in the entire time I'd known him. At least if he'd been amping I'd be in familiar territory, but this!? This was just on a totally different scale.

And there was one detail that Oda simply couldn't have gotten right, simply due to the limitations of his medium: the eyes. They were round, cyan pits, deep and endless and easy to get lost in.

They were simple to read, honestly, seeing as they just held one emotion within them. One emotion I read loud and clear when he stared me dead in the eye.

Rage.

Said rage was expressed when Chopper bellowed out and swung a keratin-fingered hand high, and I started to scramble back...

Before pausing and blinking slowly. He then turned his head to the side and started swivelling it around in order to keep track of the pigeon that was circling around his head.

"Well, now, this is a most interesting development," Hattori mused. "A transformation that removes all senses of sanity? Congratulations, Cross! You get to be beaten to death by your own crewmate. Is that not—Eh?" He paused and looked at our doctor in confusion. "Wait, why is he looking at me like—WAGH!" The pigeon was forced to flap backwards when Chopper took a wild swipe at him. "Honestly!? This stupid cliché!? This is completely—DAMN!"

"...Huh," I blinked as I watched Chopper paw after the pigeon, forcing him to retreat and frantically weave around fingers bigger than him as Chopper clambered out of the hole and started chasing after him. "I'm sort of inclined to agree, actually. I was expecting a jumbo-sized Hyde, not a jumbo-sized
'kid chasing the butterfly'."

"Yeah, you guys SUPER! overestimated this guy's new IQ."

"Eh?" I looked at the hole in shock and hastily ran over to grab Franky's free hand and haul him up to our level. Or try, at least; come on, the guy was heavy as all hell! "Good to see you're still hanging in there, Cyborg!" I nodded as I slapped him on the shoulder. "I take it you Coup de Vent'd the not-so-little guy here?"

"Yeah," Franky grunted as he cracked his neck back and forth and rolled his shoulders, all while keeping a wary eye on Chopper. "And for the record, I won't be able to use it again to get him into the sea."

"Not enough Cola?" I divined.

Franky snorted darkly. "Worse, it wouldn't actually connect. See, your friend may not be smart enough to speak, but he's sure got the brains he needs to learn. Every time I use an attack, he figures out some way to counter. Weapons Left? Dodged. Strong Right? Nearly grabbed it before I could reel it back. Fresh Fire? Guards with his hooves. And my Triangle Jackers and Master Nails techniques can't even get through that thick fur. And I just used my ace in the hole, so it looks like that's out too."

"Sorry, Franky," I shrugged helplessly. "Unless divine retribution strikes him down or something, I'm fresh out of ideas."

"…Cross? You're not messing with us this time, ARE YOU?"

"Huh? No, why—?"

SLAM!

"…because it would appear that you-know-who has a warped sense of humor," Lassoo deadpanned.

"I knew that from the day I met Soundbite," I replied with equal dryness.

The reason for our flatness was that via some grand cosmic joke—or more likely, B.R.O.B.'s childish desire for shits and giggles—a groaning Fukuro somehow wound up standing on Chopper's head, which was buried face-first in the stone of the tower.

"Well, I ain't divine by any given measure of the word," Boss grunted as he dropped out of the air and landed next to us. "But I'll accept any words of thanks or prayer as they come." He glanced up at a still-orbiting Hattori. "Huh. Honestly, I should've known you'd end up matched against the pet, Cross."

"That 'pet' carved my face open like a Thanksgiving turkey!" I snapped indignantly as I pointed at the bandage on my face. "And beyond that, why the hell haven't you managed to take out blob-boy yet!?"

Boss snorted as he tapped the ashes off his cigar. "Easy: he might hit like a pansy, but that blob's as slippery as any water I've ever swam in, and he can take normal hits easily enough."

"And since when do you fall under the category of 'normal'?!" I demanded.

"I've been using the Full-Shell Style for all of fifteen minutes, give me a break!" Boss shot back with a scowl.
Meanwhile, Hattori had taken roost on Fukuro's head and was giving him a flat look. "And your own power ranking is how high again?"

The zipper-mouthed assassin shot a glare back at the pigeon. "That hard-backed manatee hits like a cannon while the big-mouth you were fighting is a normal human. What's your excuse, chapapa?"

The avian assassin twitched minutely before refocusing on us. "What say we both just focus on the present and never mention this day ever again, agreed?"

Fukuro cracked his knuckles as he mirrored the pigeon. "Fine with me, chapa."

I took a nervous step back as I moved my hand to the pocket where I was holding my baton. "Anyone got any bright ideas?"

Franky scowled in thought for a second before adopting a cocky smirk. "Well, I didn't think that I'd have to use it so soon, but it looks like it's now or never for that super upgrade I just finished. And when I say super?" He slammed his forearms together in his trademark pose. "You damn well know that I mean that it's nothing short of SUPER!"

Soundbite nodded firmly as he adopted a smirk. "You, me and the bottle makes three, because I just got me AN IDEA OF MY OWN TO KICK THAT FEATHER-RAT'S ASS!"

Boss cracked his neck back and forth as he rolled his shoulder. "Guess I'm the bottle in that scenario, which, honestly, is fine with me." He cracked a grin of his own. "Because I think I'm about set to take that tub of lard down a peg or twenty with my latest finisher."

I gave my allies searching glances with more than a little urgency as Chopper started to shift around. "You guys are sure that these moves will do the trick?"

"Positive!" the three chorused

"Well, that's good to hear..."

Chopper suddenly jerked his head out of the wall and turned to face us with an outraged roar, prompting Hattori and Fukuro to Shave off of him and glare at us from his flanks.

"Because I don't think we're going to get another shot!" I ground out as I slammed my fist into my palm.

"Then we'll have to make it count!" Franky nodded before snapping his hand up and his wrist open. "WEAPONS LEFT!"

Chopper snapped a hand up and blocked the blast from actually hitting him, but the explosion still drew out an aggravated growl.

"YEAH, THAT'S RIGHT, YOU OVERGROWN PIECE OF VENISON!" Franky shouted as he waved his arms over his head. "COME AND GET ME!" He then turned and ran towards the waterline as Chopper charged after him.

Fukuro raised his eyebrow at the spectacle. "Well, that's that bastard taken care of, chapapa." He then narrowed his eyes. "Still though, it might be best that I guarantee—!"

"Rip Tide and—!"

Fukuro hastily crossed his arms in defense as Boss appeared before him.
"Iron Body: Arbitrator!"

"Squall Pistol!"

Boss shoved his flipper into the assassin's arms. The dugong scowled as the force of the impact knocked his opponent back a bit, but not much else. "Well, now that's just annoying."

"Six Powers Skill: Te-Awase Ranking." Fukuro narrowed his eyes challengingly. "Boss Dugong, Power Level Two Thousand. Impressive, and higher than me, but in the end, it's just not going to be enough."

Boss snorted defiantly. "What say we test that theory?"

Fukuro shoved his face in his opponent's with a snarl. "My thoughts exactly."

And with that the two Shave/Rip Tide'd out of sight, leaving Hattori and I facing one another down.

I angled my head to the side. "You ready to finish this?"

Hattori narrowed his eyes. "You have absolutely no idea."

I flexed my fingers in my gauntlets, testing the Dial-triggers within, and pulled one arm back to grab Lassoo. "Soundbite, how about some…" I unslung my cannon and took aim. "Appropriate music for the climax?"

"It would BE MY PLEASURE," the snail purred.

And with that, the air filled with three different tracks of music…

"CANI-CANNON!"

"TEMPEST WING!"

And the fight began.

-0-

"You know, if somebody had told me, say, a year back that I would one day end up fighting a Zoan-Type who pushed their powers to the max and went off their nut, all for the sake of helping somebody who's not a part of my family? I'd have probably laughed in their face before tossing them into the sea to sober up."

Franky chuckled dryly as he ducked under a swipe at his head.

"Guess that goes to show I'm something of a dumbass, huh? I mean, come on, it's the Grand Line! There's no such thing as 'crazy' here except for thinking that someone's crazy!"

As he jumped back from another attack, both combatants paused as music filled the air. Franky stiffened before an ecstatic grin played over his face. "Oh, man, this song feels like it's speaking to my soul! It's making me feel so… so…” He slammed his forearms above his head with a roar. "SUPE—WOAH!"

The cyborg hastily broke out of his pose to dodge another stone-cracking swipe, and nearly lost his balance as he leapt back onto the edge of the dock. "Alright, maybe a little too super. Still…” A grin stretched over his face as he felt the seawater lap at his heels, and he raised his fists into a boxing position. "Good enough. Come and get some, furball!"
"GROOOAR!" Chopper responded, lowering his head as he began… well, not quite running, but it seemed so with his size. Franky tensed his muscles, waiting until he got close enough to pick out the individual ridges on the branches of his horns before charging forward a few steps himself and dropping into a baseball slide that just barely took him under the monster's bulk, with said monster digging his hooves into the stonework and forcing himself to a halt the second he registered that he'd missed.

'Barely' in this case meaning that Franky nervously patted his pompadour to make sure it was all still there once he got back to his feet. "Ye-ow that was way too close! Not doing that again anytime soon, that's for sure." He smirked confidently. "At least I've still got you right where I want you, furball. What do you have to say about that?"

Chopper snorted and shook his fur as he stared at his opponent dully before raising his arms into—

Franky blinked in surprise as the Monster adopted a mirror of his own boxing stance. "Huh… alright, so maybe you are pretty smart." He was still for a second before grinning. "Not like it changes much, because either way?" He held his arms out to his sides, elbows at ninety degree angles and fists angled towards the sky. "It's now or never to use my SUPER! upgrade!"

With that, he raised his elbows up while keeping his arms stiff. "Here we go! STROOOOONG LEFT!"

Franky jerked his left arm back down to a right angle, causing a foot-and-a-half rod of metal to shoot out of his elbow.

"RIGHT!" He then repeated the motion with his right arm, causing another rod to shoot out. Finally, the cyborg braced his legs and rotated his arms downward so that his fists were pointed right at Chopper.

"COMBOOOO!"

And with a simple shove of willpower, the piston-rods started hammering into Franky's forearms and his fists launched out from his wrists, shooting out and retracting fast enough that they seemed to multiply, pummeling the behemoth buccaneer buck a dozen times in a second before he could even consider retaliating. He moved like a death row inmate as the firing squad ended his life, flinching and recoiling at the impacts but too dazed and in pain - and mounting exhaustion from the transformation—to retaliate.

"Let me tell you something, little guy!" Franky bellowed over the sound of metal striking flesh and bone. "Usually I'm a pretty super guy, but after listening to Straw Hat beat down on that Fox Guy? After getting the idea for this upgrade? Well, it's just too bad for you, because I'll have you know that since then, I've been feeling…"

The pistons started to pound even harder.

"Really…"

And they pounded harder.

"REAAAAALLLYYYY!"

And just like that they accelerated into blurs.

"SUUUUUUPAH-PAH-PAH-PAH-PAH-PAAAAHH!"
To the Monster's credit, it actually managed to resist under the double-fisted onslaught for all of ten seconds before one of its legs lost its traction and it pitched forwards. It instinctively lashed its arms out in a desperate attempt to catch itself, and as a result left itself open to catching over a dozen high-powered shots to its body. Said shots were enough to leave the Monster reeling, gasping in an attempt to fill its newly bruised lungs with air.

Taking the opportunity for what it was, Franky retracted his left arm's piston and dashed forward, positioning himself below the pirate's falling chin. "And now, SUPER!" He lashed his right fist up and caught the monster in its jaw just as he activated his piston. "STRONG RIGHT UPPERCUT!"

The devastating blow blew the human-reindeer back onto his hooves, where he was left swaying and groaning in agony as he tried and failed to kickstart his rattled brain back into business.

Franky took a second to huff and get his breath back before allowing himself to chuckle as he popped his right piston back into place. "Ah, man... let me tell you, that move is a bitch to use. Those pistons hurt like hell when they come out, and not only does it need a full bottle of cola to get the motors chugging, but it drains more the longer I keep it running? Totally not cool. But hey," he shrugged as he popped his gut-fridge open and withdrew a spare pair of shades. "At least it makes up for it by being super. And you know that when I say super..."

Franky smirked as he slid his sunglasses onto his face, the ever-present sunlight glinting off of them.

"I mean... SUPER."

Franky held his pose for a second...

**BAM!**

"What the—YEOW!"

Before he was forced to dodge as something shot straight through where he'd been standing a moment earlier and slammed into Chopper, causing him to sway back with a pained groan.

The cyborg snapped his head up, glasses askew as he looked around in confusion.

"What the heck was that!?"

-0-

Fist and flipper met cheek to cheek as Boss and Fukuro smashed a cross-counter into each other, the blows bouncing harmlessly off each others' Iron Bodies. Glaring, the two broke off, bounding back a bit to reassess their next moves.

'This is ridiculous!' Fukuro silently raged. 'Every blow I land on this guy just gets ignored due to that fucking Iron Body of his! Even the Solid Beast doesn't do much more than bruise him!'

'I can't believe this fatass has given me so much trouble,' Boss mentally grumbled. 'My stronger blows don't land, and anything fast enough to connect doesn't have enough to punch through that ranking Iron Body of his.'

Both of them came to the same conclusion simultaneously.

'There's only one thing left to try.'

And there was the difference between the two fighters. One was desperate, trying to find a gamble
that could turn things around, the other merely trying something that only might not work.

"It's time to end this," they chorused.

And with that, Boss moved first, adopting a very specific stance: fists facing opposite one another and ready at his side. Fukuro, of course, recognized it immediately and burst out cackling.

"Chapapapapa!" Fukuro roared, clutching his gut as he laughed just out of Boss' usual attack radius. "You think you can use that move!? Your Power Level and your skills might be impressive, but not even your crew’s level of applied nonsense can do that! The only way to use that is with intimate knowledge of the Six—!"

"The Iron Body is the root of it all," Boss intoned, his stance not wavering one bit as he glared dead ahead. "It teaches the body to be strong, so that it might withstand all forms of punishment and not rend itself apart. This must be brought to terms with the Paper Arts, so that one's muscles remain flexible even while staying in-flexible."

"—powers?"

"Shave comes next. It teaches swiftness, speed, so that one may act decisively and in an instant, and yet all thanks to a simple motion," Boss continued without pausing. "Moonwalk and Tempest Kick are a dual lesson: how to put one's full body into affecting the air around them, as well as how to weaponize the very air one jumps off of. Finally, Finger Pistol is not about technique, but mentality. One's whole body is put into use in the attack, all muscles are exerted in the motion, and thus to perform it, one must effectively transform their body into a weapon."

"Cha… pa?" the assassin squeaked, for once at an utter loss for words.

"Individually these techniques are all incredibly powerful, but when brought together in a single instant and a single action…" Boss clenched and unclenched the muscles in his fists in preparation. "They form a weapon of unparalleled might and destruction."

By now Fukuro's mouth resembled less a zipper and more an undone clasp. "H-How—?! Y-Y-You only had that scroll for ten minutes! You haven't even been able to use the Six Powers for half an hour!"

"And that was more than I needed by half," Boss scoffed. "Cross said you and your pals have spent your whole lives learning these Arts and how to kill. Not bad. Me? I've spent and dedicated my life to learning how to learn. You can concentrate on mastering the one art all you want, but at the end of the day?" The dugong grit his teeth fiercely. "I am the one who will master them all. And mind you, that's not a boast…" The master martial-artist's gaze sharpened. "But my Man's Dream."

"But!" Boss lowered his head with a chuckle. "I digress. That dream… is a dream for the future. For now, however…" He drew his fists back and tensed.

Refusing to wait so much as a second longer, Fukuro Shaved at him with all the speed he could muster and rained holy hell down on his head, blow after blow smashing against the dugong's body to no avail. Boss merely closed his eyes as he weathered the strikes, his mind casting back into his own river of time.

‘Finally... After all these years... I've started to become worthy of you...' Memories drifted unbidden to the dugong's conscious mind as he concentrated. Memories that reflected who he was, and what he'd accomplished. ‘I've finally started on the road to follow you, Sifu...’

-45 Years Ago-
It was an average day on the shores of Alabasta. Flat-bottomed barges plied the Sandora, transporting goods up and down the great artery of the desert kingdom. Out at sea, ships from single-mast pinnaces to four-masted galleons plied the coastal waters, jockeying for Nanohana or heading to other ports.

However, the focus at the moment is not on the vessels out at sea, but rather further up the length of the Sandora River, where a group of young Kung Fu Dugong pups were waddling along the sands as they ventured into territories where their parents had explicitly told them not to venture.

There were three of them, in all: the one on the left had a somewhat grouchy, stoic look on his face, the one on the right a calm countenance, and the one in the middle who was leading them bore a bold grin on his face and a somewhat oversized camo bandanna around his forehead. The one thing that all of them shared, however, was the air of eagerness about them.

[So, Rookie,] the calm one on the right said, giving their leader a sidelong grin. [We going anywhere specific today?] 

[Betcha we're just wandering around again,] the grouch on the left rolled his eyes with a scoff.

[Psh, c'mon, Apprentice, don't be like that!] Rookie laughed as he elbowed his friend on his left before smiling to his right. [And to answer, Neophyte, I'll have you know that Apprentice is actually right! We don't have a destination set for today's venture, and why should we?] Rookie jumped in front of the Sandora River and struck a pose, flipper raised high in the air. [After all, while journeys with destinations are great and all, it's the ones without that are even better, because then it's all up to fate!]

He then crossed his arms and grinned a cocksure grin at his friends. [And no matter the dangers that arise, we'll face them head on and come out as champs because we are Kung Fu Dugongs, and we don't run away from anything! Right, guys?]

[Right!] Neophyte nodded firmly.

[That's for damn sure,] Apprentice allowed himself a smirk.

[LUUUUUNCH!] the Sandora Lizard that burst from one of the nearby dunes bellowed before charging at them.

The pups stared at the giga-lizard in shock for a moment…

[RUN AWAY!]

Until Rookie screamed at the top of his lungs and leapt into the river, with Neophyte right behind him.

Apprentice glanced after them for a second before shaking his head and directing a glare at the tyrant lizard, falling into one of the stances he remembered from watching the older dugongs. [Bring it on,] he muttered beneath his breath.

The lizard rushed closer and closer, and the Dugong was just about able to smell the absolutely rancid stench of it's breath…

[Well, now.]

CRUNCH!
When suddenly the lizard was brought to a dead halt by a massive blow cracking into its skull, leaving a deep canyon in its forehead.

Apprentice gaped in shock as the one responsible for saving his life—bravado aside, he knew that the beast posed a very real danger to him—landed in front of him. It was an adult Dugong, older than any that he'd seen in his life and armed with nothing but a bamboo pole. But as he turned back to lock eyes with Apprentice, the younger Dugong felt cowed; the look in his eyes was enough on its own to show that he had lived in a way that he and his friends had only dreamed of.

[It's obvious that you've got more guts than a shark full of chum. But guts aren't enough to be able to fight against an opponent like that, especially for an unarmed pup.]

Apprentice felt stirrings of annoyance from the designation, but his incredulity beat them down with ease. [You… Who are you? You're not from the tribe.]

The old dugong chuckled. [Actually, I am. I've just been out and about for a long while and I've only just gotten back today is all. Call me…] the elder dugong glanced upwards thoughtfully for a second before shrugging. [Eh, 'Sifu' Dugong, why not. It's as good a name as any.]

Apprentice took in the dugong's nonchalant attitude after doing something so incredible as killing a Sandora Dragon, one of the most frightening beasts he knew of, with one hit and no effort. [Sifu… how strong are you?]

A glint appeared in the Dugong's eye, and his mouth turned upwards in a grin. [I was once called 'Boss,' but I passed that title on when I left to travel, and see what more the world had to offer for me. And it's been very rewarding.]

Apprentice stared at him. This was the embodiment of everything that Rookie kept going on about, and at the same time, it was the embodiment of what he was looking for. One stupid act had brought him face-to-face with what he knew he wanted out of life. And so it was that he bowed down in the sand towards the Dugong he had met barely a minute ago.

[I would learn all that you have to show me, Sifu,] Apprentice stated. [I am Apprentice Dugong, but if you will take me as your student, I will adopt the name Disciple Dugong from this day on.]

[Hmm. Gutsy and eager.] The elder dugong hummed thoughtfully, then shrugged. [Eh, what the hell. I've got nothing better to do. If that's what you so desire, stand up, Disciple, and follow me.]

With nary a thought to his friends, the newly dubbed Disciple followed Sifu into the desert, not complaining as their path directed towards the Sandora Mountains. For a good long while, neither spoke. Then, at last, Sifu broke his stride along with the silence.

[Normally I would start your training from the beginning and teach you from the basics up, but it seems to me that you're a pretty bright pup, so I'll give you the benefit of a doubt and raise the level a bit. Now…] The wizened dugong tapped his pole against the sheer rock-face they were standing in front of. [Punch this cliff in half.]

Disciple Dugong slowly turned his head to stare up at the cliff in naked shock. He observed it in silence for a few seconds before sobering his expression and cracking his neck to the side. [Right away, Sifu.]

The old master's muzzle slowly split into an eager grin.

~0~
[Your endurance will be put to the test here. Today, we will be traveling the coastline to Nanohana.]

Disciple nodded in acceptance.

[The long way, of course, stretching through the territories where pirates so often prowl.]

Disciple fell motionless for several seconds before nodding again, earning another grin from the old master.

~o~

[This should help significantly in building your reflexes. Economize your movements, or you'll only be stung more.]

This time, Disciple couldn't fully suppress his nervousness. Understandable, given that his teacher had bound him in chains, hung him from a tree branch, and was holding his pole beside a wasp's nest on the same branch. Regardless, wincing, the Dugong nodded again.

Sifu grinned anew as he struck the nest, moving towards the river a moment later for cover.

~o~

[Now… there's an old stone tower with a fountain on top of it at the peak of Mount Sinai. Take this bottle, climb up there, fill it, and bring it back so that I can drink it.]

Disciple took the bottle from his master, noting with no surprise at this point that it was made of glass. He'd wager if asked that his master blew the sand to form it himself.

[Yes, Sifu,] Disciple nodded with no less confidence than he felt; the past eight months had been more rewarding than the years leading up to it.

But he always found the best reward to be the way his teacher's face lit up whenever he accepted a challenge, and that day was no exception.

~o~

[B-But, Sifu, sir, I'm begging you! W-What about what you've learned from the places you've been over the years!?] Disciple protested desperately. [Surely, in all of your travels—!]

[You've learned all of the basics that I have to teach, my faithful disciple,] Sifu replied airily as he stared out to sea. [What I have learned in the sea is for me and me alone. The rest… only you can find it. You must form it on your own. Surely you have your own dream by now, no?]

Disciple grit his teeth in an effort to stay silent, before finally pitching forwards and kneeling in the sand. [Sifu… after all this time… you are my dream! To become as great a warrior as you, as great a man as you! All these years, that has been my only—!]

[Then that will be enough.]

Disciple snapped his head up and blinked through his tears. [Sifu?]

The elderly dugong smiled kindly as he placed a flipper upon his student's shoulder. [I will venture out into this world, and continue to learn, and when you are ready, I expect that you will do the same. And when you do, seek not to follow my path, but rather your own path. For though the road may be long and winding, I have faith that we shall cross again in the future. And the next time we
meet… we shall see where you stand on the path to your dream. We shall see if the student has surpassed the teacher.]

Disciple scrunched his eyes shut miserably as he fought to hold back his tears, but bowed in acceptance nevertheless. [Yes, Sifu.]

He forced his eyes open, and imprinted the proud grin he had grown to see as his greatest reward to in his mind. Then the bamboo-wielder leapt into the ocean and disappeared.

He never returned.

~o~

Disciple spun the woven seaweed of his rope-dart in his flippers, looking with determination at the polearm-wielding Dugongs across from him.

[Come on, Disciple, you're the one who asked for a two-on-one fight,] Chief called out as he thumbed his camo headband. [Sure you're not biting off more than you can chew?]

Disciple snorted as he gave his old friends a confident smirk. [I've got a big stomach. Hit me with your best shot!]

Lancer scoffed as he lowered his spear at him. [Your funeral, partner.]

And with that, they launched into the mother of all duels. It was incredible, it was awe-inspiring, Disciple managed to keep neck and neck with them both… but in the end the fight ended with both Chief and Lancer's spears resting at his neck.

[Damn…] Disciple bemoaned miserably.

[Oh, don't beat yourself up, you almost had us, there.] Lancer drawled as he withdrew his weapon. [You've got a lot of strength there.]

[No kidding!] Chief grinned as he rolled his muscles. [We'll have to do this again sometime, that was fun!]

Disciple sighed, but grinned wistfully, nodding in response to the challenge. [I'll manage it someday soon, you can count on it.]

They exchanged smirks and fistbumps before the other two dugongs dove into the river and swam off, leaving Disciple alone. And the second that his friends were out of sight, he turned around and smashed his flipper into the rock face behind him.

He scowled ferociously as the resulting crack only reached halfway to the top.

[Damn… still a ways to go…] he sighed.

~o~

[And… just who are you four supposed to be?] Disciple regarded the quartet of pups before him dryly.

[I'm Leo, the leader!]

[I'm Mikey, the funny guy!]
[I'm Raphey, the tough one!]

[And I'm Donny, the one who picked all the names! And together, we are—!]

[The Mega Duper Super—!]

[Mikey's Mega Kickass—!]

[The Epicly Incredible—!]

There was a moment of silence, and then Disciple felt his eyebrow twitch irritably as the four huddled up and started whispering with one another. Soon enough, however, they split up and lined up before him.

[OK, so we're still working on the group name… but we can all agree on the reason that we're here, at least!] Leo said.

In near-perfect unison, the four of them bowed to him. [You're the most badass Dugong in Alabasta, please train us!] they requested.

Disciple cocked his eyebrow flatly. [And… why should I?]

[PLEASE!] Mikey broke formation and fell on his 'knees' as he pleaded desperately. [You're our last hope!]

[Mikey!] Raphey snapped irritably.

[He's not wrong though…] Donny bemoaned.

[We've already tried all the other masters,] Leo explained. [But nobody will take on all four of us at once. We know it's stupid and we're not really related by blood, but…] The four exchanged solemn looks. [It's always been us four, for as long as we can remember, us against the world. We have to train together, it's our only option. So… please…]

All four bowed their heads as one. [Please train us!]

Disciple regarded the pups emotionlessly for a minute… before looking away with a weary sigh. [Well, if this is what you really want, then so be it. I shall train you as my master trained me.]

The young pups grinned ecstatically and started exchanging high fives with one another.

[Now!] Disciple barked, snapping them out of their celebration as he snapped a flipper out and pointed to his side. [Your first training task: Punch that cliff in half!]

The dugong heaved a weary sigh as his new students were suddenly paralyzed in shock.

[We've got a long road ahead of us…]

~o~

[Alright, pups!] Disciple barked to his students, who were all wobbling sleepily. [This is your second training task.]

His flipper snapped out, revealing a small, silvery fish to be wriggling in his palm.

[These are the chief's favorite fish for when he's training.] Disciple explained. [Your task will be to
assist me in delivering them for his breakfast."

Donny—where they'd gotten those names or those colored bandannas, he had no idea, but at least it made differentiating them a little easier—raised a flipper.

[Yes, Donny?]

[This is going to be nowhere *near* as easy as it seems, is it?]

[Very perceptive!] Disciple stated. [Yes, there is a catch: the chief likes to train in the high altitudes of the Sandora mountains.]

For a moment, there was silence.

[The Sandora Mountains,] Leo clarified, his brow twitching furiously. [The Sandora Mountains that feed the Sandora River. The Sandora Mountains that are a good *hundred miles away* and are the *breeding grounds* for the biggest, meanest Bananagators in *all* of Alabasta. Those Sandora Mountains.]

[Yes, which is why as soon as you catch your fish, we'll be going,] Disciple stated. When his students didn't move, he turned a glare on them. [That means *now*, softshells!]

As his students frantically dove into the river, Disciple turned contemplative. [Maybe I should tell them about the cataracts,] he mused. [Or the inland delta with the Accelegators and the mud. Or that ornery old Catfish up the waterfall.] After a moment of thought, he shrugged. [Eh, it'll be a good experience for them.]

~0~

[Alright, students,] Disciple announced. [This time we'll be doing reflex training.]

[Then… *why* are you tying us to this tree?] Raphey asked.

[No clue, but look on the bright side: At least we can get honey from those bees afterward,] Mikey pointed out, not noticing his fellow students stiffening in horrified realization.

[Don't worry, all will be made clear in a moment,] Disciple said as he waddled up to the buzzing beehive. Gingerly reaching up, he gave the honeycomb a solid whack—and immediately made a leaping dive into the river.

[YAAAAAAAAARGH! BEEEEEEEEEEES!]

[Economize your movements, or you'll only get stung more!] Disciple called out as his students frantically tried to avoid the bees. [And above all else, remember to work together!]

Raphey and Mikey chose that exact moment to slam face-first into one another in their panic and knock each other out.

[What part of 'work together' are you failing to understand, dagnabbit!]

[Core—OW!—concept, I think, sir!] Donny yelped.

[Ergh…] Disciple bemoaned as he ground the heel of his flipper into his forehead.

~0~
Disciple huffed heavily as he stood on the skull of a concussed Sandora Catfish, scowling darkly as he ran his thoughts over in his head. The Catfish he’d just taken down was supposed to be the day’s assignment for his students, a mile-marker for them. They were supposed to work together, they were supposed to take it down with ease, but instead…

Disciple glanced over his shoulder at the coastline, where his students were wait-no, bickering. at the coastline where three of his students were bickering with one another, while the fourth—

[I'm still alive, in case anyone cares…] Mikey groaned through his bruises as he raised a shaky flipper.

He received another fist to his face as way of response. [The only reason I 'care' is that it means I need to try harder to beat your face in, you damn idiot!] Raphey raged irately.

[Hey, back off, you damn berserker!] Leo shoved her back as she snarled in her face. [Mikey was just kidding around, we wouldn't have gotten into that damn mess in the first place if you hadn't gone off the handle!]

[Thanks, Leo…]

[Shut it, Mikey,] the blue-bandanna'd dugong snapped. [I'm still pissed at you and I'll get to you in a second, but only after I'm through with this nutjob!]

[Bring it the hell on, you big-headed bastard!] Raphey butted her head against his.

[Come on guys, quit it, there's no need to—!]

[STAY OUT OF IT, DONNY!] the two paired snapped a vicious snarl at him.

The purple-wearing Dugong flinched back fearfully before shooting a fearful look at Disciple. [Master, could you please help me stop them? If they keep—!] Donny trailed off in confusion as he realized that his master wasn't on the Catfish anymore. A quick look around revealed that Disciple was—

[Master, where are you going?] Donny asked, drawing the other three away from their quarreling to notice that their teacher was leaving, an air of depression about him.

[Leaving,] Disciple called back emotionlessly.

Donny flinched slightly at the tone. [Ah… a-alright, then, when are we going to meet again for more-?]

[We won't be,] Disciple cut him off sternly. [I'm done teaching you. Find a new master.]

[EH!?] The quartet yelped in shock.

[Master, no!]

[This can't be happening!]

[I'm sorry, I'll stop making puns, I swear!]

[Master, we apologize sincerely, and we realize it looks like we're pretty damn hopeless, but—!]

[Wrong,] Disciple snapped again. [You're not the hopeless ones here.] the dugong clenched his flippers and bowed his head. [I am.]
All four looked after him in shock.

[You four are excellent warriors, I don't doubt any of the potential you show for even a second. You're all fine students, so the only reason for you not to be making any progress here, through the training that my Sifu gave me, the methods I trained through…] Disciple grit his teeth grimly. [Is that I'm not properly doing my job of instructing you, of helping you to become the best warriors you can possibly be.]

The dugong shook his head solemnly. [I failed my Sifu, and I failed you. I'm sorry that I wasted your time.]

Before any of the quartet could say anything further, he dove into the water and swam off.

~o~

The next morning found Disciple going about his daily routine as the rays of the sunrise woke him up.

He grabbed some dried salmon from his stash, he polished his shell, lit a new cigar, combed through the braided seaweed of his rope-dart for any parasites that might have taken root in the night and he was about to stride into the surf for his daily morning swim…

When his routine was rudely interrupted by his tripping over something that hadn't been there the night before.

Once he recovered from his impromptu faceplant, Disciple was able to swiftly identify the reason behind the disruption of his routine: namely, a quartet of Dugong pups who were all passed out on what amounted to his front porch.

Disciple stared at the sleeping forms of his ex-students for a moment before scowling darkly. He opened his muzzle to start to chew them out… before pausing in confusion as the off-beat lapping of the waves hit his ears.

The older dugong turned on his tail and promptly froze in utter shock, and for good reason too. After all, it wasn't every day that one bore witness to the sight of the surface of the Sandora River being covered from shore to shore with dozens of pummeled Sandora Catfish.

Disciple observed the minor Sea Kings' insensate forms for a moment before scowling darkly. He opened his muzzle to start to chew them out… before pausing in confusion as the off-beat lapping of the waves hit his ears.

The older dugong turned on his tail and promptly froze in utter shock, and for good reason too. After all, it wasn't every day that one bore witness to the sight of the surface of the Sandora River being covered from shore to shore with dozens of pummeled Sandora Catfish.

Disciple observed the minor Sea Kings' insensate forms for a moment before turning his attention back to his students. Without the haze of anger clouding his vision, he was able to notice that they weren't only sleeping on his turf, but rather they were sleeping off a rather impressive array of injuries.

Injuries that synched up with, say, taking on a horde of carnivorous fish ten times their own size.

Disciple was silent for a few minutes longer before scratching the back of his head with a sigh. [Ahhh, geeze… of all the things I had to succeed at teaching and it was this?] He kept his head bowed a moment longer before allowing a smirk to tug at his muzzle. [Tch… oh, what the hell. If this is what they really want…]

With that, Disciple brought his flipper to his lips and whistled, prompting his students to jerk awake with cries of shock.

[ATEEEEN-HUT!] Disciple barked imperiously, prompting his students to snap to attention before they were fully awake.
Leo blinked blearily as he tried to get his mind in working order. [What the—?]

[WELL!] Disciple roared, causing his students to jump anew before flinching back as they realized just what kind of a position they were in. They then cowered as Disciple pinned them all with a chilling glare and started pacing back and forth grimly. [You all defied my refusal to continue training you, went up against impossible odds, and only just managed to erk out a victory, all for the sake of impressing me. Did I get all that right?]

The four exchanged nervous glances before nodding hesitantly. [Yes, Master…]

Disciple was silent for a moment before snorting heavily. [This little stunt of yours tells me two things. First?] The teacher shot his students a cocky smirk. [That I'm obviously doing something right where your training is concerned, so I guess I might as well continue your training.]

The quartet promptly adopted euphoric grins and started cheering as they exchanged victorious high-fives and chest-bumps.

[Second!] Disciple forged onwards. [It's equally obvious that I have been severely underestimating your capabilities, and as such I will be adjusting your training appropriately. In short… weell, I suggest that you all catch what sleep you can.] He adopted a vicious smirk. [Because in six hours, we're running a raid on the Bananagator's Nest, and there's nothing they love more than the smell of Catfish blood.]

The four pups froze as expressions of utter horror washed over their faces… before their eyes rolled up in their heads and they collapsed backwards.

Disciple cocked his eyebrow at them for a second before snickering and grinding the butt of his cigar between his teeth. [Heh. Buncha wimpy-ass anchovies.]

~o~

[Go with them.]

[Eh?] Disciple blinked over his shoulder in confusion, his contemplation of the sea broken by none of other than Chief Dugong, who was standing behind him and smiling his usual happy-go-lucky smile. [What are you—?]

[Go with the Straw Hats.] Chief Dugong re-emphasized with a chuckle. [You have my blessing. Go with them, go out to sea and chase your dreams. Show the world the true might of the Kung Fu Dugongs…] Chief's smile widened prominently. [Boss Dugong.]

Disciple started in shock. [Bo—!? What!?! C-Chief, Boss is a name reserved for only the strongest of Dugongs, f-for our leader, and that's—!]

[You.] Chief cut Disciple off flatly. [It's always been you, from day one. I might be a happy-go-lucky fellow, sure, but do you really think that neither I nor Lancer Dugong couldn't tell? You think we didn't know sandbagging when we saw it?]

Disciple flinched and looked away hesitantly. [Well, I…]

Chief chuckled lightly as he clapped a hand on his friend's shoulder. [You've always been the strongest, you've always been our chief… but we knew that wasn't what you wanted. You didn't want to lead, you wanted to learn and grow so I let it slide up until now. And now… now I'm doing what's right. So here.] Chief reached up, undid his bandanna and held it out to Disciple. [Take it.]
Disciple stared at the camo cloth in shock. [C-chief, that's—!]

[My prized possession, yes.] Chief confirmed solemnly. [I want you to take it. Take my bandanna and my title, your rightful title, and take with you the pride of all Kung Fu Dugongs in the process. Take it all… and show the world who we really are. Show them all who you really are. Chase your dream… and fulfill it before the eyes of the world.]

Disciple stared at his friend in shock for a second before slowly taking the bandanna from him and staring at it numbly. [I… I don't know what to say…]

[That would be 'yes.']

The other Dugong swallowed heavily at that… before finally raising it and tying it around his head. [Thank you…] Boss Dugong whispered reverently.

[Thank me by becoming the best of us there ever was or will be.] Chief stated as he clapped his friend's shoulder before adopting a smirk. [And by taking those hellions of yours with you, so that I'm not forced to watch them every waking moment to keep them from jumping ship. Got it?]

Boss barked out a teary laugh as he snapped out a salute. [Yes, sir!]

-Present-

Boss allowed himself a slight smile as he cracked his eyes open, returning to the present. "Six Arts made by Six Kings…" he whispered.

"D-Damn you…" Fukuro huffed from exertion as he reared his fist back. "TAKE THIS! SOLID BEAST!"

The punch slammed into Boss' muzzle—and unlike the last time the attack had actually landed, the dugong didn't budge a single centimeter.

"Six Arts made by Six Kings, each King ruling over a grand ocean as wide and deep as the sky. Six Oceans that form the world: East Blue, North Blue—"

Only… it was more than him just staying in place. Dimly, Fukuro became aware that his hands actually hurt from punching the Dugong. Hurt enough that he was getting a Power Level reading. A Power Level reading that he dearly, dearly hoped was a mistake. Because there was no way the animal could have leaped from a notch below Jabra and Kaku to pushing Rob Lucci.

"—West Blue, South Blue—"

But if there was one thing, above all else, that had been pounded into him by his training, it was this: Power Levels didn't lie.

"SHAVE!" Fukuro frantically yelped, blurring away as fast as his legs could push him.

"Paradise…"

A hum, and Fukuro hastily clamped on the brakes as Boss appeared right in front of him.

"And New World."

Sadly for the assassin, it was too little too late, and as his momentum carried him forwards against his will, Fukuro hastily packed on the hardest Iron Body he was physically capable of before he slid into Boss' outstretched fists.
"Full-Shell Style: Six Oceans Gun."

Said Iron Body shattered like so much glass beneath the sheer and utter force that crunched into his gut, knocking him unconscious in an instant.

The force was, in fact, so strong that it then sent the rotund assassin flying back like a cannonball, following which he slammed-

"YEOW!"

Right into Chopper's stunned form.

Boss huffed and puffed as he watched Fukuro bounce onto the dock, taking a moment to catch his breath.

Once he was sure that his opponent was truly down and out and that the full-body ache from the half-powered attack had gone down, he lashed his fist out and slammed a backhanded punch into the wall of the Tower of Justice. He held the pose for a second before allowing himself to glance up. He promptly adopted a smirk in response to what he saw.

"What the heck was that!?” Franky shouted at him in shock.

Boss chuckled to himself as he bowed his head, turning his back on the newly formed crack that ran up the entire bottom half of the split tower.

"That, my friend," he announced proudly as he puffed on his cigar. "Was me finally starting to make good on a promise."

Before anything further could be said, the world suddenly fell... silent.

Boss glanced up in confusion. He opened his mouth to say something-

And then the very world seemed to roar.

---

Fighting Hattori was both easier and harder on the Tower's sea landing than in the stairwell. Easier, because I had more room to maneuver and could aim properly with Lasso, forcing Hattori to stick to ranged attacks lest he be turned into roast pigeon by time-fused baseballs. Harder, on the other hand, because the exact same thing applied to Hattori. He was ducking and weaving and barrel rolling around the exploding baseballs like a pro and I had yet to land an actual hit on him yet.

In other words, we were at a stalemate. The real loser of the battle was the masonry around us, which we were abusing like... like... oh hell, I don't know, something mildly offensive. I was tired as all hell and sick of this damn fight, I didn't have time for quips!

"Hey, birdbrain!" I called up as I dodged out of the way of yet another Tempest Wing and retaliated with a Cani-Blaze. "I'm getting real sick of this here pissing contest! What do you say we finish this off like true and proper men?"

"Two final ultimate attacks launched at the same time?" Hattori called down.

"Strongest takes all," I confirmed as I raised my cannon.

"Very well, Cross," Hattori declared with a nod as he flapped to a halt. "I accept your challenge!" And with that, he wheeled around and started flying off into the distance.
"What's he doing?" I muttered, before jerking in shock as a visible sheen came over his wings. Then he started spinning. "Ooooh that can't be good..." I whispered before giving Soundbite a hesitant look. "How good would you say this so-called surefire move of yours is?"

"Put it this way..." Soundbite leaned his head to the side with a smirk. "You're gonna wanna take a knee."

Lassoo and I exchanged wary glances, but I complied nonetheless and did as Soundbite ordered before raising Lassoo to aim at the bird. "Now what?"

Soundbite clenched his eyes shut in concentration. "LASSOO, you need to time your bomb to go off a foot in front of the RAT. CAN YOU DO THAT?"

"Yeah, but he'll just dodge again," Lassoo warned him.

"THE HELL HE WILL. DO IT."

"If you say so..." the dog grunted wearily.

I gritted my teeth nervously as I watched the cyclone of death that Hattori had become rocket ever closer. "Soundbite..."

"Hattori was wrong earlier, you know?" Soundbite replied calmly. "I DON'T JUST PROJECT MY VOICE. RATHER... IT'S LIKE I HAVE CONTROL of the world's mixer board."

"Soundbite," I stressed as the killer bird shot closer.

"I CAN TELL that you're confused. THAT'S FAIR. JUST LET ME ASK YOU A QUESTION: When is a sound at its utter loudest?"

I opened my mouth to tell my snail to stop screwing around—!... and then I found that I couldn't. In fact, I found that I couldn't say anything at all. Say or hear, for that matter. No matter how much I strained my ears, no matter what I tried, the world was...

"A SOUND IS AT ITS LOUDEST..." Soundbite opened his eyes and regarded Hattori with a firm glare. "WHEN IT OCCURS IN UTTER SILENCE. FIRE."

I promptly complied, pulling Lassoo's trigger and blasting a baseball bomb at our ever-approaching enemy.

"In the land of silence," Soundbite scrunched his eyestalks shut and bowed them as he whispered.

A foot away from the cyclone that was Hattori, the bomb detonated in a blast of smoke and fire.

"He who has a voice."

Hattori ducked up and over the blast, avoiding it entirely.

"Is GOD!" Soundbite snapped his eyestalks up with a furious glare. "GASTRO-CANI-COMBO: BASS CANNON!"

And before the pigeon could react, the sound of the explosion smashed into him like a freight train, slapping him out of the air like the hand of God itself.
It was... awe-inspiring really. Even without being in the direct line of the attack, the sheer volume was enough that it felt like the whole world were exploding at once. And Hattori wasn't the only one struck either, because a wave of noise also smashed into Chopper and Fukuro, blasting them into the water.

And then, as swift as it started, the noise ended and all that was left was the crashing of the waves and a slight ringing in our ears.

The moment of peace was broken by Hattori's limp and bloodied form slamming into the dock.

Soundbite preened proudly. "Am I badass or what?"

I promptly got my wits back and shot a victorious grin at him. "You just polarized the volumes of that explosion and the world so that the explosion would be loud enough to hit like a physical force! That is so badass!"

"The most badass of all!" Lassoo howled.

"THANK YOU, thank you!" Soundbite bowed his head proudly.

Franky gaped in awe for a moment before getting back the wherewithal to cackle. "Damn, but that is one SUPER! snail!"

"Psh," Boss scoffed as he ground the heel of his palm into his forehead, barely hiding hte smile he was sporting. "Speak for yourself, you don't have to live with him. He's going to be so insufferable..."

That got my attention, and I goggled at the dugong in shock. "What the hell are you still doing here!?"

"Eh?" Boss blinked at me in confusion. "What are you—?"

"We have an anchor sinking! Move, Boss, MOVE!"

"SHIT!" the Dugong cursed furiously before diving into the water.

"And you!" I snapped at Franky as I jogged over to him. "Bottle of Cola, now!"

"What!?" Franky scoffed incredulously. "What do I look like to you, a walking fridge!?"

I gave him a flat look as I jabbed a finger into his abdominals. "Honestly? Yes. More specifically," I jerked my thumb at Soundbite. "You look like someone with an available beverage with which I can clear my snail's flour-clogged gullet. Look, he just needs a mouthful to gargle, so hand it over, alright?"

Franky rolled his eyes with an aggravated growl as he popped his gut open and took out his last remaining bottle, causing his pompadour to droop. "Fine. But for the record, I don't like the idea of backwash, got it?"

"Trust me, THIS IS AS PLEASANT FOR ME as it is for you," Soundbite assured him as I stuck the bottle between his teeth and took in a mouthful.

"Whatever you say. So, anyways," Franky turned his attention to the Bridge off in the distance. "Mind if I ask you a question while we wait for Boss?"
"You just did," I smirked.

"Tsk, smartass. Anyways, you got an idea for how we're getting off this rock?"

"Eh…" I waved my hand casually. "An idea, yeah. You'll see."

"Not gonna specify, huh? Lemme guess, then…” Franky smirked as he pointed at the bridge. "We'll be pulling some turnabout and commandeering one of those battleships over there, aren't we?"

I chuckled. "Well, maybe we'll do that as a backup, and we'll certainly have to try raiding the— BATTLESHIPS?!" I howled as I snapped my full attention to the Bridge for the first time.

"PFFFFFFT!"

"YEOW, WATCH THE COLA, DAMN IT!"

I pointedly ignored the cyborg in favor of staring at not one, but two separate Battleships flanking the Bridge of Hesitation.

Usopp hadn't reported the Gates opening, and they sure the hell didn't open while we were approaching… which meant that they'd been there since before we'd arrived.

And that… that could only mean one thing.

"There are reinforcements waiting on the Bridge…” I whispered in horror. "Shit."

-0-

"This… isn't good," Su summarized weakly as she cowered behind her partner's back.

The sentiment was one that was shared by all members of the extraction team on the Bridge of Hesitation, on account of the opponents they were currently facing.

Not the mob of Marine soldiers before them, no, they could have handled them with relative ease.

Rather… the issue at the moment was the pair of figures who were leading the Marines, and standing right in between them and their crewmate.

"Hmph," a large, heavyset, practically ape-like Marine grunted as he cocked the rifle he was carrying, holding it with a precision and subtlety that his frame belied. "So, the pirates actually managed to reach us. How unfortunate. I'd hoped that we'd have been able to accomplish this mission without bloodshed."

"As if their presence makes a difference, KAPOW!" The other Marine, a relatively fit man wearing a flamboyant headpiece and goggles, cried as he struck a pose. "We are the heroes of Justice, PCHOO! And they are the villainous pirates, BLAM! We'll beat them and walk away scott free, it's only natural, WABAM!" The goggle-wearer then brought his arms up defensively, his forearms starting to spin into blurs. "Are you ready, Captain Gorilla, VROOM!?"

The animal-ish Captain snorted as he levelled his rifle at the pirates. "I said I 'hoped' we wouldn't get into a fight, Captain Sharinguru. Don't take that to mean that I'm neglectful."

"HAHAHA! THAT'S RIGHT! GORILLA, SHARINGURU, CHARGE! GET THEM!" Spandam yelled joyfully as he continued dragging a furiously resisting Robin down the bridge, flanked by a number of shield-toting soldiers to guard him from the sniper that had been bombarding them from
the Tower of Justice. "SHOW THEM THE TRUE MIGHT OF THE MARINES!
WAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAAHAAAAA!"

Vivi and Conis took a second to digest their situation before exchanging panicked glances.

"Shit."

Cross-Brain AN: September 19th again. A full year has now passed. Happy birthday to This Bites! , and happy International Talk Like A Pirate Day as well. Yes, loyal fans, believe it or not, this story's birthday is the same as that holiday. Unintentional, but hey, now you have every reason to celebrate it from now on!
Aiming for a massive word count is all well and good, but this was just getting silly. Seriously, loyal fans, at the rate we were going, we were likely to hit 50,000 words, and though Ego thought it would be a good reward for your patience to do that, I pointed out that you may not have the patience to read through such a monster. So, nothing for it but to give you this, and leave you with another trademark of the Cross-Brain.

Our supremely sadistic beyond all reason cliffhangers that leave you salivating for more and more. Plus it gives us an extra payday, of course. :D

And hey, we're sorry for the scare earlier, but surely you'll forgive us, right? Because… we're brilliant. XD

Brilliant trolls, that is. Though it seems we may have to step up our game in the future…

Blah, no one took the bait. We're off our game XP

"Tow, tow, tow your boat, gently 'cross the maelstroms—"

"'Gently' my ass!" I moaned as I held on for dear life to the side of the rowboat. Damn it, I hadn't been seasick once in the past six months, I was not going to break my streak—hurp!—now!

"Ergh…" Even if the damn thing was moving faster than any rowboat was ever meant to go…

"Aww, what's wrong, Cross, got a weak stomach?" Lassoo chuckled as he leered over my shoulder.

"I've got some motion-sickness medicine if you want it!" Chopper offered, before lowering his hoof with a hesitant look over his shoulder. "Though… all of this motion might have made it unstable…"

"NICE CATCH-22, doc!"

"So there's a design flaw, sue me!"

"Well, if you're gonna ralph, normally I'd recommend you doing it over the edge," Franky grimaced as he glanced at the waters frothing below us. "But honestly, given how fast these things are moving, that might not be the best of ideas. What goes around comes around and all that, ya know?"

"If I get puke in my face, then you're all going for a swim!" Boss barked indIGNantly over his shoulder as he all but dug through the maelstroms' savage waters. "And would the rest of you cram it already!? This is a lot more complicated than just bull-rushing through the water, I need to concentrate to keep us from getting sucked under, damn it!"

"My sincerest apologies…" I moaned miserably as I clutched at my stomach. "I'll try and stay quiet as my gut crawls out of my mouth…"

"Much appreciated! Now, hang on, we've got a bit one comin' right at us!"

I hastily clamped down on the boat's edge as we went over yet another wave. Damn it, it was one
thing to go through rough weather on a tub as big and strong as Merry, but in a boat this small, the
effect was way—*urp!*

Ugh, how the hell did I get in this mess in the first place…

Oh, right, it was *my* idea.

**-Flashback-**

"So." Franky cocked an eyebrow as he watched Boss pump the last of the water out of Chopper.
"How long do we have until Doc Monster—?"

"Soundbite—!" I started hastily.

**"EVERYBODY HAD MATCHING TOWELS!"**

I hung my head with a moan. "Ugh… and now I can't even gag you to shut you up, perfect."

"*Bleh!*"

Franky sent a curious glance our way, eyebrow still cocked, before looking back at our non-human
comrades. "Aaanyway… how long until the little guy wakes up?"

"Ah…” I glanced upwards as I tapped my chin in thought. "Well, seeing as his body is exhausted
from undergoing a huge amount of stress, normally it would take a while to recover."

"But…?" Lassoo prompted.

"*But,*" I nodded in agreement as I shot an uncomfortable glance at the battleships flanking the
Bridge. "Right now, it's better that we be hauling conscious dead-weight into a battlefield than
unconscious. Sooo… Boss, you might wanna step back a bit."

I cleared my throat as the Dugong backed off, and once he was a safe distance away…

"Chopper, if you wake up right now, I promise that when I die I'll donate my body to science!" I
barked, already in pre-flinch.

**"I WANT THAT IN WRITING!"**

I wasn't disappointed. Nobody even blinked as Chopper snapped up into a sitting position, a mad
glint in his very, very conscious eyes. The next second, however, he blinked the madness away…
and promptly flopped onto his back. It took a minute of struggle for him to properly process the
situation, and once he sent a fearful glance my way. "Um… how… bad was it?"

"Nowhere near as bad as we thought," I reassured him. "We'll cover the details later, but for now,
you can rest assured that you *didn't* hurt anyone except our enemies, so don't worry about it."

Franky coughed something under his breath, but Boss was quick to shut him up with an elbow in his
side. Chopper didn't notice as he nodded, clearly mollified, but frowned as he tried to force his body
to move. 'Tried' being the key word, and when he got only a few errant twitches in response, the
frown turned into an outright grimace. "How much fighting do we have left?"

"Mmph…” I grunted as I wavered my hand back and forth. "The worst is over, but we're taking a
step down from quality for a massive step up in quantity real fast."

Chopper glanced upwards, his eyes darting back and forth in thought, and after a moment he
attempted to shift onto his side, the inevitable failure drawing an aggravated sigh from his lips.
"Alright. Look in my backpack, there should be a metal-plated tool roll in there that has my syringes in it. You're looking for a red-filled one labeled J-52."

"Let me guess..." I mused as I complied with his instructions and held up the needle in question, tapping out any air bubbles in it. "Adrenal serum? And going by these very clear skull-labels you have on it... experimental?" His silence was answer enough. "How much of a blowback are we talking here?"

"By my estimates and the current state of my body, I'd say..." Chopper mused. "It'll energize me for twelve hours, then I'm going to sleep like a corpse for twice as long. Sound like a good cost-benefit?"

"If this works?" I scoffed. "I'll use you as a plushie once we're done, for all I care. Now, how do I get this into you?"

"You need to find a vein on me somewhere, preferably my arm." The human-Zoan shifted his arm slightly, scowling at it. "It'll be a bit hard because of my fur, but—!"

Before he could say anything further, Franky snatched the syringe out of my hand, flipped it into a reverse grip and slammed into Chopper's chest.

"YEARGH!" Chopper howled as he shot to his hooves—no, feet, he was in Muscle Point—and ripped the syringe out of his chest before snarling in the cyborg's face. "WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU, YOU DAMN ASSHOLE!? DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA JUST HOW BONE-DEAD STUPID THAT KIND OF A STUNT IS?! YOU JUST BROKE THE HIPPOCRATIC OATH IN A DOZEN DIFFERENT WAYS, I SHOULD SUE YOU FOR MALPRACTICE!"

"First off, I never took no hypocritical whatever, and second, it worked, didn't it?" Franky huffed as he crossed his arms, entirely unaffected by my crewmate's fury. "'Sides, it works faster that way anyway; I've got enough experience where ODs are concerned to know that."

"Yooooouuuu..." Chopper snarled as he strangled the air above Franky's shoulders.

"UH, 'scuse me? Any other time, I'D JOIN IN THE BANTER, BUT WE HAVE A SITUATION!" Soundbite chimed in. "HOW ARE WE SUPPOSED TO GET TO that bridge without passing Luffy's DUEL TO THE DEATH? 'CAUSE I DON'T KNOW about you guys, but I DON'T LIKE OUR ODDS!"

The reindeer twitched for a moment before huffing and shrinking back down to Brain Point. "To be continued..."

"Hmph," Boss snorted. "I could get there easily, but I see your point. The rest of you can't Tidal Swim, and there isn't a boat in a hundred miles that can withstand those hell-pools." To punctuate the point, a passing seabird landed on the waters—and was promptly sucked in with nary a squawk.

I allowed a smirk to come over my expression as I scanned the docks. "Oh, now, I wouldn't quite say that." My smirk widened as I caught sight of my intended target and pointed. "Look, see? There's a rowboat we can use."

Boss eyed the rinky-dink tub for a second before affixing me with a flat look. "I've said this plenty of times before, usually half-joking, but now I say it with the utmost sincerity: You're mad."
"Do I need to give your head another check, Cross, because I will!" Chopper concurred.

"Now, now, hear me out," I said placatingly. "I realize that this must sound insane, but really, all we need to do to make that vessel seaworthy is say four simple words!"

"Oh, yeah?" Boss cocked a thoroughly unimpressed eyebrow, which was quite a feat, seeing as he didn't actually have brows. "And what would those words be?"

Upon that prompting, I spun on my heel and pointed. "Franky, do the—!" My words died in my throat when I realized that Franky was, in fact, gone. "Thing… what the—?"

"Gimme a second, will you?" the voice of the cyborg in question spoke up—from the direction of the boat!?

Five jaws crashed through the dock as we snapped our heads around and observed the result of taking our eyes off of Franky for ten seconds.

"I'm not quite satisfied with the veneer on the aft side…" the shipwright-cum-mob-boss groused as he ran his hand over the now deluxe-grade rowboat's hull.

I gaped for a second longer before forcing my jaw to snap shut. "Franky? You're nitpicking after you just turned a flimsy, common rowboat into the most downright awesome rowboat outside of Mariejois in ten seconds flat!" I pointed out, too awestruck to be exasperated.

"Nine-point-six-five seconds, actually," Franky snorted in disgust. "That fight with the little guy took it out of me. I mean, you can tell just from looking at my work!"

We all gave the rowboat—nay, the miniature ship!—a look before Boss coughed uncomfortably. "Alright, I'll bite: what makes this boat so subpar in your eyes?"

"Well, just for starters, no gun emplacement."

Boss raised a flipper and opened his mouth before slowly closing it. "…Withdrawn. Because I have no response to that," he muttered.

"I don't think there is a response to that…" Chopper offered.

*That* managed to get my brain into gear. "I can think of one." So saying, I snatched up a nearby coil of rope and tossed it to Boss.

"Strap up," I grinned eagerly. "It's time for us to go out there and be Big Damn Heroes."

My grin grew wider in response to the ones everyone was now sporting.

-Present-

Another lurch shook me out of my reminiscing, and I looked up to see how much time I had left before I got off this legitimately psychotic ride.

The bad news on that front was that the World Government clearly didn't want anybody unwelcome getting even close to the Bridge of Hesitation because these damn whirlpools were massive and we were a hell of a ways away.

Hell, it looked like we were barely even halfway there!

In an attempt to distract myself, I began considering exactly what I could and would do to Spandam
once we got there, but my thoughts were cut off yet again, only *this* time, it was on account of the smoke and muzzle flashes that started showing up along the top of the Bridge.

And that could only mean one thing.

"Looks like your girls are running into some resistance," Franky said, voicing my own conclusion.

I nodded in numb agreement as I felt a cold sweat run down my neck along with the saltwater spray. "Here's hoping that they're strong enough to either hold the line or break their enemies until we get there."

'Or else we're screwed,' I didn't add.

---

"Captain?"

"Mmm?"

"You *do* realize that the only reason I haven't mutinied is the fact that we're currently experiencing a *bullshit amount of good luck*, worthy of the Straw Hat Pirates, right?"

"Mmm-hmm…"

"Just wanted to check." With that, the Barto Club's first mate stood up from the prow and started walking aft, dutifully observing his crewmates as they went about their respective businesses. It was a somewhat dull job, admittedly, given how nobody had much anything to do, but it was a task that had to be done. After all, *somebody* had to keep the thoroughly undisciplined crew in check *somehow*. Even if, more often than not, that 'discipline' resulted in distributing a few extra concussions.

A hand hesitantly tugging on his sleeve broke him out of his patrol, and he looked with no surprise to see Miss Valentine standing there, a vacant look in her eyes.

"Let me guess: you want to know if this is a dream, right?" he deadpanned.

"Can you really blame me for asking more than once when we're in a situation like this?" she droned, her voice utterly.

"More than once, maybe not." His already flat expression grew ever flatter. "But once a minute for the past five minutes? *That's* a little much."

"We're sailing through the Calm Belt, being towed and guarded by *Sea Kings*," the chocolatier droned as she lifted an arm up to point at the half-dozen aquatic behemoths flanking the Cannibal.

Gin warily eyed the titans. Indeed, as Valentine had said, the Cannibal was being towed by a number of Sea Kings. Adolescents, admittedly, going by how they were only about as big as Marine Battleships as opposed to small mountains, but Sea Kings nonetheless. Said Sea Kings were pulling the Cannibal through the unnaturally placid waters of the Calm Belt via a combination of ropes and barrier-harnesses that they were biting into.

It was an incredible sight, an *impossible* sight, but it was a real sight nonetheless, no matter how much Gin's much-abused sanity protested.

"No, Valentine, once again: this is not a dream," Gin emphasized firmly. "Now, if you wouldn't
mind doing me a favor and *breaking the cycle*?

Valentine blinked slowly before nodding lethargically. "Alright, then, in that case..." the ex-assassin muttered before turning her focus over to her partner. "Mr. 5," she called out. "I think we may have to try letting go of our grudge against the Straw Hats."

The bomb-man looked up from the revolver he was cleaning with a surprised blink. "What makes you say that?"

Valentine returned her gaze to the Sea Kings with a heavy gulp. "Because the only way that we could have ever been even half this lucky is if their stupid good fortune rubbed off on us big time. Or hell," she chuckled in a distinctly unhinged manner. "If even the slightest *speck* of it brushed off on us, for that matter..."

Gin's expression became wary, and he took a careful step back. "Ookay," he bit out as he took Valentine's shoulders and gently turned her towards the forecastle. "Why don't you go ahead and lie down for a while? Until the world starts making sense again, yeah?"

Valentine's head bobbed like... well, a bobblehead as she ambled forwards, her unstable smile still plastered in place. "Sure thing," she breathed as she ambled away. "I'll just go count adolescent Millennial Dragons."

Gin watched her go with no small amount of pity; at least until he felt a needle jab into his temper in the form of a particular voice.

"Can I go sleep forever, too?" Miss Goldenweek asked in her usual dead tone. "Not because I'm unhinged, mind you, I'm just bored."

"No. Get back to work."

Goldenweek's expression somehow becomes even flatter. "Doing what?" she demanded as she spread her arms.

Gin steamed for a moment before turning away and marching back up to the prow. Once there, he whistled and called out. "How's it looking, Apis?"

The Whisper-girl smiled and waved from the head of the Sea King she and her more normal mount were riding. "Fine, thanks! They say we should reach our destination by noon tomorrow!"

"And... you're sure we can trust your new friends?" Gin questioned with an uncomfortable glance at the monumental entities around them.

Apis smiled kindly. "Of course! After all—" She leaned forward and patted the cow-like head of the Sea King she was riding. "They're childhood friends with Mohmoo, and Mohmoo's a new friend of mine! Right, Mohmoo?"

The relatively small Sea King leaned into the girl's hand with a pleased—if excessively loud—'moo'.

Gin cocked his eyebrow as he observed the odd trio and thought back to the circumstances that had led to the bovine Sea King becoming an acquaintance of the Barto Club.

A few hours back, when the Cannibal had been surrounded by Sea Kings and about to be made lunch, he and everyone who hadn't been part of Bartolomeo's mafia before forming a pirate crew, along with almost half of those who had, had come very, *very* close to bashing their captain's face in, barriers or no, for leading them into the deadliest of oceans without any significant plan of survival in
mind.

All but one: though Lindy had seemed murderous, probably out of concern for Apis, the Whisper-girl in question had screamed out, using both her voice and powers to plead with the Sea Kings to leave them alone.

Remarkably, they had paused in response to the outcry and actually regarded one another with what had appeared to be confusion. Then the cow had piped up on their behalf, apparently saying something about how 'she seems nice' and the next thing they knew, the Barto Club found themselves being questioned about why they were in the Calm Belt, or rather 'the Nest', as they apparently called it. And equally remarkably, while they were rather infuriated upon learning about the pirates' reasons for entering the Grand Line, the focus of their rage wasn't them.

Apparently, for reasons that they merely described as 'a promise', there was no small amount of bad blood festering between the Sea Kings and the World Government, even if said grudge was only one-sided. As such, the Sea Kings found the idea of sticking one to their apparently age-old foe, however tangentially, to be supremely appealing.

As such, Mohmoo had quickly gathered up several of his brethren and recruited their aid in towing his new friend and her friends through the Sea King nest, to a location where the pirates would be able to hunker down until the search for them was over.

With that in mind, Gin half-smiled and nodded at Apis before turning to look back at the ex-Baroque Works Agents on deck. "And this destination of yours, you sure it'll be safe?"

"Almost positive," Miss Goldenweek called up as she started on another rice cracker. "The World Government doesn't keep track of Cactus Island; it was an unnamed, uninhabited island up until four years ago when Baroque Works made it a base. Pirates had a one-in-seven chance of going there, which was good enough to make it a bounty hunter nest, and barely any civilians who passed through it actually lived to tell of it on account of how the next island down that chain is basically a dead-end. You can guess from the fact that we made good money off of it until the Straw Hats interfered that nobody really strong ever showed up there."

"And now that Baroque Works is finished, the town is either abandoned or, more likely, being used as a refuge by our failed agents," Mr. 5 picked up as he reconstructed his pistol. "Nobody will think to look for us there unless they were part of Baroque Works, and personally?" He finished the procedure by locking the gun's cylinder back into place. "I doubt that anyone who'll be in the Mutt's vicinity will fit that bill."

Gin nodded in reassurance before turning a smirk on his captain. "Hear that, Captain? It sounds like we might just make it out of this shitfest you dropped us into alive after all! Ain't that grand?"

"Mmph mu," the pirate captain growled through the bandages he was practically mummified in with a roll of his eyes.

Gin allowed himself a chuckle, but looking back at the crew, it appeared that there really wasn't anything more for him to do as the de facto quartermaster; no weather or navigation problems, no worry of attack, not even any rambunctiousness to quash. They were currently making ludicrously good time and managing to go around slightly less than half the world in little more than a day. It was… awe-inspiring, really. He was actually preparing himself to take a leaf out of Goldenweek's book and spend the next few hours napping—

"You know, Valentine forgot something," a very deliberately calm voice spoke up tersely.
Gin and Bartolomeo snapped their attention over to Mr. 5, who'd joined them on the prow and was staring off the starboard quarter with a spyglass.

"…And what would that be, dare I ask?" Gin questioned.

"It's pretty simple, really…"

Without warning, the Cannibal suddenly lurched to a halt, tossing almost half of the Barto Club on their asses and staggering the rest.

The resultant confusion sufficed to break Bartolomeo's concentration, and caused the makeshift barrier harnesses the Sea Kings had been biting into to dissipate; and while Mohmoo stayed frozen ahead of the galleon, apparently paralyzed, his friends wasted no time in diving into the water and disappearing from sight.

Slowly and painfully, the rest of the crew got back on their feet, with Gin groaning and shaking his head as he tried to get his wits back. "What the hell—?"

"If the Straw Hats' luck really rubbed off on us…" Mr. 5 grit out as he continued to stare into the distance, all but throttling his spyglass in the process. "It means that all their luck rubbed off on us. The good, and the bad. Case in point?" The ex-assassin lowered the tool with a heavy swallow. "The reason that the Sea Kings just ran away is that the Kuja Pirates and their Yuda serpents are heading straight for us."

The lack of response from most of the crew had a substitute in the form of Miss Goldenweek going pale and her rice cracker falling from her numb fingers. Everyone, Gin included, turned to her for clarification.

The painter swallowed heavily as she fought to keep her nerve. "That's the crew of Boa Hancock. The Snake Princess of Amazon Lily, the Pirate Empress, the world's most beautiful woman…" She took a fearful step back from the horizon. "…And the only female among the Seven Warlords of the Sea."

There was a moment of silence as everyone processed the implications of that statement, and then…

"WHAAAAAT?!"

The Cannibal practically leaped into the air from the sheer force of the crew's outcry.

"AGAIN!?! SERIOUSLY!?!" Gin roared, his gaze turned towards the heavens. "SCREW THREE TIMES, THIS IS NOTHING SHORT OF ENEMY ACTION ON A DIVINE SCALE, PLAIN AND SIMPLE!"

"Preach it, brother…" Mr. 5 sighed as he drew his revolver and started repeatedly spinning its cylinder. "This just ain't funny. Once is one thing, but twice? Leave this kind of madness to the Straw Hats, they're the ones who like it."

"What do we do, what do we do, what do we do!?!" Apis repeated to herself as she shook her head frantically, so deep in her panic that she didn't notice Lindy doing her best to calm her as he flew back onto the boat.

However, as the Barto Club all ran around in varying states of panic, it was their captain's reaction that was by far the most pronounced; without a hint of warning, he suddenly tore off his bandages with an incredulous roar as he stood tall and proud.
"ALRIGHT, YOU YELLOW-BELLIED BITCHES, ENOUGH WHINING FOR MOMMY! IN CASE YOU ALL HAPPENED TO FORGET, WE'VE GOT A WARLORD COMING DOWN ON OUR ASSES! ALL HANDS TO STATIONS! GRAB YOUR ARMS AND PREPARE FOR BATTLE!" the sharp-toothed pirate bellowed, drawing all attention to him. "THAT MEANS RIGHT NOW, YOU BAND OF FUCKING LIMP-DICKS!"

"How in the hell are you not even fazed by the death sentence bearing down on us?!" Goldenweek demanded incredulously.

"Ooooh, trust me, I am scared shitless right now," Bartolomeo chuckled as he pointed at his visibly trembling legs. "But! If I've learned anything from the Straw Hats' exploits, it's that in situations like this, where your death is all but guaranteed no matter what the hell you do? You've only got two options: curl up in a puddle of your own piss, or face it head-on. Now…” Bartolomeo's grin widened tauntingly. "I don't know about the rest of you shit-for-spines…” He rapped his fist on his abdomen. "But I'm clean out of piss from earlier! SO! Who's with me!?"

For a few seconds, the pirates of the Barto Club were silent as they processed their captain's words, but soon enough they found enough vim and vigor to raise their fists and swords to the air and roar with bloodlust.

"You realize that we're all going to die, right?" Gin deadpanned as he absent-mindedly spun the ball-tipped tonfas he'd drawn from somewhere.

Bartolomeo dropped his smirk in favor of a scowl. "Yeah, true enough… but with any luck? We'll be able to do one thing that that coward Krieg never managed with Hawk-Eye."

"Oh yeah?" The Cold-Hearted Demon cocked an eyebrow out of morbid curiosity. "And what's that?"

Bartolomeo re-donned his grin, only this time with a feral gleam in his eyes. "We're gonna make that cocky bitch remember our names for the rest of her life even if it's the last damn thing we do."

Gin stared at his captain in stunned silence before eagerly mirroring his expression. "Aye-aye, sir!"

Bartolomeo held his grin for a moment as he watched his first mate run off to coordinate the crew before adopting a scowl as he observed the speck approaching on the horizon.

"Sorry, Straw Hats…” he muttered to himself. "I know you need all the support you can get, and I'd cheer you on if I could, but right now…”

He bared his teeth as he cracked his knuckles.

"I've got my own damn problems to worry about."

-o-

SLAM! "AGH!"

CRACK! "GAH!"

Conis and Vivi grunted in pain as they were flung onto their backs, taking the opportunity to catch their breath and gather their wits.

"I take it that you're not having an easy time either?" Conis groaned as she sat up and rubbed the back of her head.
"The damn bastard hits like a tank!" the princess wheezed, clutching her stomach as a thoroughly agitated Carue helped pull her to her feet.

"You're lucky…" The gunner shook her head as she pushed herself up. "Mine hits like Luffy."

"Hmph. So, these are the Straw Hat Pirates that have been giving the Navy so much trouble?"

The pirate women winced and shot glares that were equal parts hateful and fearful at the Marines. Captain Gorilla snorted heavily as he tapped his rifle in his palm. "And Akainu was pushing for Onigumo and Doberman to come instead of us. I'm going to have to push for someone to run an investigation into Commodore Smoker because if he's been having trouble with capturing these people, then he's either incompetent or he's grown soft."

"BAH! What does it matter, CRASH?" Captain Sharinguru smirked as he slammed his fists together and started grinding them against another one. "So they've managed to make it this far, KA-WHAM, so what? Villains get lucky from time to time, sure, but they will never stand a chance in a straight fight against we heroes of justice, BA-BAM! Today, the angel fallen from grace and the traitorous princess will meet their justified ends here at Enies Lobby, SA-LAM!"

Conis blinked in confusion before casting a hesitant glance at Vivi. "Dooo you have any idea what's wrong with him?"

"I caught a mention of the lie of how I got my bounty, but besides that, I think he's just insane," Vivi grit out irritably, before wincing and clutching a road rash that had torn clean through one of her arm warmers. "Doesn't stop him from being strong as heck, though. Every time I try attacking him with my Cutters he manages to parry with his abilities and reel me in, and the friction from his wheels is hellish!"

Conis swallowed heavily as she eyed her own burly opponent, reaching behind her back and clutching the grip of her shotgun. "I understand where you're coming from. I thought that Franky and our crewmates were tough, but this guy is some sort of unholy cross between Yama and Gedatsu. It doesn't matter how many times I shoot him, he just shrugs it off! It's insane!"

Carue swallowed heavily as he interposed himself between his friend and the Marines. "Qua—way thiss is gonna be ea—Wha?!" the duck jerked back and squawked in shock as he realized that he was actually speaking instead of… well, squawking.

The sudden dialogue caused everyone, pirate and Marine alike, to pause in shock.

Su was quick to smirk and flick her tail. "Looks like you guys aren't quite so cocky anymore now that we have reinforcements on the way, huh?" she needled.

Sharinguru was equally quick to rally, scoffing and jabbing his finger at the Straw Hats. "Foolish villains, PSHOO! It matters not whether you face us with one or one hundred allies, we—!"

"Less talking, more acting," Gorilla interrupted.

The Wheel-Man promptly snapped his mouth shut with an aggravated growl and stalked forward, the sleeves of his arms blurring into a spin.

Vivi took a hesitant step back before steeling her expression and starting to spin her own Cutter in turn. "Alright," she muttered to herself. "We have help coming now, so we don't have to win anymore, but they're still a mile out and we're not making any progress against these two." The princess angled her head so that she could stare down the bridge and grimaced. "Robin's already
halfway down the bridge. Unless we get to her fast…” She winced as she came to the obvious conclusion, and glanced to her avian companion. "Carue, you need to run ahead and save Robin!"

"WHAT!?” Carue screeched in shock. "Are you—!?"

"Carue!” Vivi snapped firmly. "There are almost a hundred Marines between us and her and you're the only one fast enough to make it past them unmolested!"

"B-B-But I can't weave you awone!” Carue shook his head desperately. "If Ah've said it once, Ah've said it a dozen times, Ah won't evah weave—!"

"CARUE!"

The duck choked off his protests, and everyone on the bridge within earshot flinched, for Vivi had pinned the duck in place with a firm glare. "The reason we're in the middle of all of this in the first place is so that we can rescue Robin from being dragged off to hell. If that…" Vivi trailed off with a murderous scowl. "If that dead-man-walking manages to take her away, then everything we've done in the last few hours will be for nothing.” However, as swiftly as her fury appeared, it dissipated in place of pure confidence. "We'll be fine, Carue. We'll do what we can do, you do what you can do, alright?"

Carue hesitated for a moment more before he gritted his teeth and pawed his talons on the ground. "Awight… one shecond… ten shteps in one shecond…"

"Stop that duck, HALT!” Sharinguru exclaimed as he swung his fist forward.

"That one's a stretch, Sharinguru,” Gorilla said even as he levelled his gun at the bird.

However, the Captains barely even made it a step apiece—

"NOT A CHANCE!"

"GRGH!”/"DAMN!”

—before Conis slammed her forearm into Gorilla's rifle, knocking its barrel upward, while Vivi snagged the full length of her Lion Cutter's chains on the Captain's wheels. The sheer jerk nearly wrenched her off her feet, but it did halt the Wheel-man's charge.

They only managed to stop them for a moment before the Captains managed to shove them back.

"And SHAVE!” the duck called out before flashing out of sight.

But it was more than long enough.

"Damn it!” Gorilla cursed as he watched the oversized fowl tear through the soldiers behind him.

Vivi smirked as she rewound her Lion Cutters. "You lose."

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The world ground to a crawl for Carue as he dashed forward and dodged around the Marines that had just enough awareness to react to him, forcing himself to keep his gaze ahead instead of looking back at his charge and best friend as she faced down two Marine Captains. It hurt like hell, yes, but in the end it didn't change the fact that she was right; if that wretch got away with Robin, the best result they could hope for was a pyrrhic victory, and that was a stretch.
As he ran, the Royal Captain of the Supersonic Duck Squadron reflected on the irony of his current situation: risking his neck and potentially Vivi's in order to save a woman that he would have gladly stomped flat into the earth a thousand times over not even half a year ago. That, alongside the sheer degree to which she had grown on him since then, served to hammer home just how much the Straw Hats had changed him. He hadn't fully forgiven her, and he knew that Vivi hadn't either, but the fact was that he had at least managed to accept that she wasn't Miss All Sunday anymore, she was just Robin, his crewmate, his… his friend.

Carue grit his teeth together even harder as he took stock of the opposition that remained between him and the object of his mission. Apart from about a dozen or so soldiers standing in his way and the shield-carrying entourage surrounding him, Spandam was straight ahead, and, more importantly, so was Robin. A malicious grin split the duck's lips as he spread his wings, preparing himself to cut Robin away from that damn son of a—

"GET HIM, FUNKFREED!"

Carue blinked in confusion when Spandam suddenly shouted out. 'Funkfreed? What's a Funk—?'

"BARAAAAG!"

"SHIT!" Carue squawked in panic when a mass of white suddenly filled his vision, and he was forced to dig his talons into the stone and flap his wings in order to keep his balance and prevent himself from crashing into whatever the hell had just gotten in his way. The second he came to a halt and reality snapped back into motion, his eyes widened in panic as they processed what was now in front of him, part of his mind flashing back to Cross' words back on the Rocketman:

'The only weapon he has besides his authority is a sword that ate the Elephant-Elephant Fruit. And an elephant, bladed trunk or not, shouldn't be a problem for any of you.'

'Not a problem my unsightly feathered ass!' the duck mentally groused as he stared up at the ivory-tusked behemoth that was glaring down at him. Once he recovered, however, he grit his teeth and glared right back. 'Tch! Well, not like I have a choice here.'

"Outta my way, fatass!" he squawked before sprinting forwards, lashing his talon-armor out and slashing at the elephant's leg.

He then paled in horror when his blades harmlessly skittered off with a flurry of sparks and a clang of steel-on-steel. The duck staggered back as he watched the area he'd struck shimmer like…

"…That's actuawwy steew, isn't it?" he whimpered fearfully.

Funkfreed's only response was to narrow his eyes.

"Yeah, well… how do ya wike dis?!" Carue squawked as he bolted to the side, intent on dodging around the elephant-sword. After all, it was an elephant, how fast could it possibly—?

"WACK!" Carue yelped as he ground to yet another halt when Funkfreed suddenly showed up in front of him again, only rather than a whole elephant, he was in what had to be his hybrid form, seeing as his trunk was a full-on blade and his lower half had morphed into a… serpent-like form that ended in a… hilt…

The duck swallowed heavily as he took a step back. "Yoah twansfomation makes you weawwy fast, doesn't it?"
A hint of a smirk peeked out from beneath the elephant's trunk.

Carue whimpered miserably as he reached up and slammed his visor down over his eyes. "Thish ish gonna suck…"

-0-

Conis juked left as a rifle bullet ricocheted off the stone of the bridge where she'd been standing before, then rolled to the right as the butt of Gorilla's rifle smashed through where her torso should have been.

Once she had some breathing room, Conis swung her blunderbuss out and fired it in a single smooth motion. Still, in spite of her lack of aiming, the loaded shell flew true. At least, it did until Gorilla used his gun to smack a loose piece of debris into the projectile's path and force an early detonation.

"Not again," the gunner groaned as she unslung her Burn Bazooka (so far the only thing her opponent bothered dodging, which he managed with an uncanny degree of agility) and shoved her blunderbuss back in its holster behind her back.

"Complain less, dodge more! INCOMING!"

"Wha—GAH!" Conis gasped as she threw herself to the side, only just managing to dodge yet another bullet—only to notice too late that it wasn't a bullet that struck the bricks, but rather the rifle's butt instead. The angel barely had enough time to shield herself with her Burn Bazooka as Gorilla turned on his heel and swung the rifle into her, the sheer impact jarring Conis through her cannon and sending her crashing onto her ass.

"Ow…" Conis winced as she rubbed the part of her anatomy she'd landed on before casting a glare over her shoulder. "Nice read there, cottontail!"

"Hey, what do you want from me!?" Su snapped back. "The bastard's a walking brick, there's jack and shit in body language for me to read!"

"Still—!"

"So, that's how you're doing it…"

Conis and Su snapped their attention back to Gorilla, who was looking them over with an annoyed expression. "I was wondering how you were managing to dodge or parry every single attack I threw at you. The fox is reading my movements?"

Su hesitated for a moment before sniffing proudly. "Of course I am!" she proclaimed. "We foxes are notoriously smart, and I spent most of my life traipsing through a jungle where everything that wasn't me wanted to eat me, so I know how to read a swing." She then furrowed her brow irritably. "Your freakish body's just making that difficult, is all!"

Gorilla dismissed the blatant insult with a snort. "Well, then. If unpredictability is out the window, maybe I should just try the simpler approach."

Conis sagged miserably. "Oh, this is going to—UGH!"

The angel grunted as she blocked yet another swing with her cannon. And then another and another and another, the overly burly captain pounding away at Conis' defense with a barrage that was at once utterly predictable and nigh-unstoppable.
The only thing she could do was keep her Bazooka in the way and backpedal as best she could, and as the dents developing in the barrel demonstrated, that was a stopgap strategy at best.

Meanwhile, the Straw Hats' negotiator was having only marginally more luck with her own opponent.

"JUSTICE GAZELLE!"

That is to say, absolutely no luck at all.

It was only via swift reflexes and a load of luck that Vivi was barely able to catch the swiftly-spinning, leg-powered uppercut on the chain of her Lion Cutters, gritting her teeth as the sheer force of the revolutions hit her even through her weapon, shaking her bones and threatening to grind through the chain. Luckily, the punch also shoved her back a few feet, giving her just enough space to get some spin on her Lion Cutters and swing one of them at the offending and still-extended limb. And like the last few times she'd attempted it, she was barely able to keep the weapon from being torn out of her hands as what had to be metal plating hiding under the Captain's clothes slapped the blade away at high speeds.

"JUSTICE SMASH!"

The princess had only just managed to recover her balance and weapon when she was forced to duck under yet another revolving haymaker that would have plowed straight through her skull. When the Captain's other fist snapped out at her, however, she was forced to swing out her cutters and dig them into the stone before forcefully yanking herself out of the way of the blow, though not without the very edge of the limb managing to score a gash in her cheek.

Once she rolled to her feet and recovered her balance, Vivi hastily started weighing her options as she eyed her opponent.

It was a depressingly short list.

'That armor he's hiding is forcefully deflecting any physical attacks,' she thought grimly, before wincing and snapping a hand to the bleeding scrape on her face. 'And his punches have to be completely dodged or they'll do more than just bruise, and while I might be flexible, he's leagues faster than I am.' She bit out a pained tsk. 'Right, that's it, I'm having Carue teach me Shave after this. And Iron Body from Zoro and Tempest Kick from—!'  

"JUSTICE…"

Vivi snapped herself out of her thoughts and braced herself as Sharinguru tensed in preparation for… something. 'Right, plan out how to become a better fighter later, survive now! Hopefully whatever he uses won't be anything too—!'

"SANDSTORM!"

"Wait, wha—!?"

Without warning, the heels of the Captain's feet turned spun into blurs themselves, kicking up a dust cloud at Vivi. It was only years of experience dealing with windblown sand that allowed Vivi to maintain her composure and dodge the air-rending haymaker that followed soon afterward, but the familiarity of the attack struck Vivi like a bolt of lightning once she had a second to recover.

"Hey!" Vivi pointed an accusatory finger at the Marine. "That move was totally a rip-off of Sora's —!" She suddenly choked off as another realization clicked into place. The princess then groaned in
weary resignation. "Oh, Horus… the sound effects, the talk of heroes and villains, naming your attacks 'justice' this and 'justice' that… You… You actually think that you're Sora, Warrior of the Seas, don't you? You think that you're some kind of comic book superhero!"

The Wheel-man paused at that, slowly turning around to face her with his head bowed and his shoulders shaking. At first, she thought he was crying, but then she heard the laughter.

"Hahaha… 'think'? Oh, you foolish, foolish villain…"

Gorilla paused his onslaught as he slapped a hand to his face and groaned. "Oh, perfect, now you've gone and done it."

Sharinguru snapped a finger skyward and planted his fist on his hip as he bellowed at the sky. "I DO NOT THINK I AM A SUPERHERO, I AM A SUPERHERO!" he proclaimed proudly. "I AM CAPTAIN SHARINGURU, HERO OF JUSTICE AND DEFEATER OF EVIL!" He then swung his finger down so that it was pointing at Vivi's face as he gave her a winning smile. Vivi had to fight to keep from barfing as sunlight glinted off his stupidly shiny white teeth. "Let me tell you something, worthless villain! You think I ripped off Sora, that I think that I am him? YOU HAVE IT BACKWARDS!" He swung his thumb at his chest. "Rather, Sora is I! I am the real-life inspiration for the world-renowned adventures of Sora, Warrior of the Seas!"

Conis blinked at the masked Captain in surprise. "Is… he really that famous?"

"Only partially…" Gorilla groaned as he kneaded the bridge of his nose. "Sora's a composite of the exploits of several different Marine Captains, but Sharinguru's always been a big fan. After he beat a Germa battalion and had the tale published, he got it into his head that he's legitimately a 'hero of Justice'. It's asinine, but I can't say it doesn't keep him motivated."

"Personally, I just say that it's sickening!" Spandam's voice piped up, apparently carried by Soundbite. "Honestly, that buffoon is worse than Kumadori!"

"This may be the only thing that I ever agree with you on," Robin's voice growled out.

The latter voice managed to snap Vivi out of her stunned state, and she shook her head before refocusing on her opponent and crossing her Cutters defensively. "I don't care if you're a hero or a saint, we're still going to beat you down and take Robin back with us."

Unfortunately, that only got Sharinguru to throw his head back and roar anew, only this time his laughter had a distinctly mocking overtone to it. "Oh, you poor, foolish, naïve villain! Know you nothing about how the world works? Allow me to explain the facts!" He pointed at her again. "You and your ilk are the villainous pirates, heinous enemies of justice who represent all that is sick and evil in this world!" He then pointed back at himself and at Gorilla. "And we are the mighty and heroic Marines, defenders of justice and paragons of good! No matter what you try to accomplish, we will lay you low, and once anew JUSTICE will prevail! Why, you ask?"

Wheels roared over the Captain's body as he pumped his arms back with his fists turned upwards. "BECAUSE HEROES NEVER LOSE!" he declared for all the world to hear.

Vivi twitched slightly at the words, a grimace flashing across her mouth. "If only that were true…” she whispered under her breath. As swift as the grimace came, however, she shook off her forlorn expression in favor of properly analyzing her enemy. "But that's neither here nor there. Right now, what's important is that I know that I'm dealing with a total nutjob, and that's a good thing. You know why?"
The princess allowed a slight smirk to cross her face as she flipped one of her Cutters into a reverse grip and spun up the other. "Because when it comes to dealing with crazy people," she declared proudly. "I have more experience than you can possibly imagine."

"...I do not envy your crew in the least," Gorilla deadpanned as he returned his full attention back to Conis.

"Nor should you," Su agreed sagely.

"After all, they're not for everyone." Conis redoubled her grip on her Burn Bazooka and held it up proudly. "Rather, it's an acquired taste."

And with that, the battles recommenced in earnest.

Meanwhile, however, further down the bridge, the mind of the person who was the entire object of the endeavor was awhirl. No longer did she wish the crew—her crew wasn't risking their lives for her, that train of thought had been banished to oblivion when she heard him speak through Soundbite. No, at this point, she was more worried about whether they would actually be able to reach her in time.

While normally Robin would have been perfectly fine with just being patient and waiting for her friends to rescue her, the fact was that in spite of her protests and struggling she was already over halfway across the bridge, and due to the shield-toting Marines flanking her and her captor, Usopp had been unable to do more than annoy them.

Robin bit her lip as she weighed her options. Obviously, she couldn't fight back physically, not while her handcuffs were binding her arms and, more pressingly, her powers. True, with Funkfreed absent, her chances with resisting were better than ever, but the fact remained that she was being flanked by a number of actually capable soldiers, which meant that if she tried to attack Spandam in any way then she would be met with fierce retribution, or, in the absolute worst case scenario, rendered unconscious to remove any chance of fighting back.

Robin glanced ahead at the far-too-swiftly approaching gate before bowing her head with a shudder of fear. Yes, death was slightly more preferable than waking up in either of the locations beyond, with no hope of ever seeing her crew again.

As for her other options... well, her 'feminine wiles', to put it politely were one tool she'd liberally exploited in the past, but...

Robin shot a single glance at Spandam before shuddering heavily. Even if the target in this scenario weren't an entity even lower than most earthworms, the fact still remained that in all likelihood the only sexual attraction Spandam felt was for himself.

As it stood, the situation seemed to be utterly hopeless... save for one possible option.

Said option was one that Robin had had hammered home more than she'd ever thought possible in her time with the crew; an option that Cross liberally demonstrated time and time again: that words were capable of shattering barriers that no amount of physical force could ever hope to crack. If she could just distract Spandam long enough from his goal, make him concentrate on something other than moving forward...

Admittedly, Spandam's short temper and throbbing ego made it a supremely risky option, but if it was the only way she had to fight back, the only way she could buy her crew the time they so desperately needed? Then she would employ it to the best of her, in her not so humble opinion, well-
'Still, pretty words aside, going by Cross's track record thus far...' Robin glanced upwards with a pained grimace. "This is likely going to hurt.'

"You know," Robin began. "I find it odd that you don't feel at all threatened by CP9."

"Huh?" Spandam turned to her with a genuinely puzzled look. "Why in the world should I be, woman!? It's not like they would ever turn against me, I'm their chief!"

The archaeologist hid a groan at the fact that he hadn't stopped moving before continuing. "I'm simply considering that they're all, in your own words, 'easily superhuman'. Meanwhile, you're someone who literally anyone on this island would be guaranteed to beat in a fight. And as Lucci and his comrades have aptly demonstrated, they are more than capable of directing operations completely independent of you. So the question is…" She tilted her head just so. "What possible reason do they have to refrain from turning on you?"

If Robin was expecting some grand reaction from her statement, she was disappointed when Spandam merely scoffed and brushed her words off. "Please, as if they would even consider it! I'm their beloved chief, I'm far too crucial for them to even so much as consider harming me."

Robin's eye twitched slightly as she cast her mind back to a mere few minutes ago. 'Oh perfect, his delusions of grandeur are so powerful that they're actively altering his memories.' Nevertheless, she forced a smirk that held more confidence than she actually felt (in reality, it was taking all of her training to maintain her composure in face of the metal horizon she was approaching) and pressed on. "Really, now? What is it that you do, exactly?"

Spandam tilted his head back with a proud snort. "Why, I'm the one who gives them their missions, of course! I read through the intel collected from the other pols, I decide what's pertinent and what isn't, and then I deploy them! I'm also the one who runs all of the logistics and finances for the missions." He gave a full-body shudder at some unseen memory. "You would not believe the kind of people I've had to brownnose to get the budget I need, especially given the sheer amounts of collateral they tend to leave behind…" As fast as his mood came, it passed. "Furthermore—!"

"Oh, no need, I understand completely," Robin interrupted with a beatific smile. "You're their glorified secretary. How nice."

That struck a nerve with the man, his expression instantly contorting into an angered scowl. But it didn't cause him to stop moving. And as Robin took that in along with the approaching gates, her composure crumbled. As such, her next words weren't so much a calculated barb as they were ramblings born of panicked desperation.

"You're not even capable of denying it, are you? You're nothing but a figurehead for CP9! You're just as worthless without your subordinates as that monster who triggered the Buster Call on Oh—!"

CLICK!

Robin's words died when she became aware of two facts: First, that Spandam was looking at her with an expression of pure and utter hatred, and that second, he was holding a pistol taken from a nearby Marine's belt in his hands and had its muzzle less than an inch from her forehead.

"That… monster… as you called him…" Spandam hissed viciously through clenched teeth. "Was my father."

Robin sucked in a panicked gasp as she realized… she'd fucked up. 'Oh, shit.'
"Chief Spandam! Our orders are to take her in—!"

**BLAM! "AGH!"**

Everyone on the bridge froze in mixed shock and horror as Spandam fired a round into the (technically) insubordinate Marine's shoulder before returning the gun to its initial aim, all without even glancing to the side.

"The heck is this, pow, some kind of anti-hero gambit or something, wham?" Sharinguru mused in confusion.

"Spandam!" Captain Gorilla shouted. "What the hell do you think you're doing!? The mission—!"

"The mission," Spandam spat venomously without ever diverting his attention. "Is no longer a priority. I've put up with this filthy demon's insolence up until now for the sake of the World Government. But now? Now I couldn't care if she were the bastard brat of one of the Five Elder Stars. From the day I became the highest authority in Enies Lobby, there is one decree I've made that has stood firm regardless of the circumstances: the penalty for insulting my father in front of me…"

He pressed the muzzle of his gun between Robin's thoroughly terrified eyes and pulled the hammer back. "*Is immediate execution. Goodbye, Devil Child. It's time for you to rejoin your mother and the rest of Ohara's demons in Hell.*"

Time seemed to crawl for Vivi as she stared in naked horror at Spandam's finger, which had started the motion that would end Robin's life. Her crewmate was about to die. She was about to witness someone she cared about die. She was about to see someone die because she wasn't strong enough *again!*

Without even thinking, Vivi's hands started to move. One went to her throat and fumbled with the bulb of metal hanging there, but even as her fingers slipped around it she knew that she'd never be able to get it open in time. As such, her other hand started to rise, reaching out in spite of the obvious futility of the gesture. But she didn't care. She couldn't even begin to care.

"…stop…” The word slipped out of her mouth without her own knowledge.

She had to do something, anything, she couldn't let this happen again, couldn't let it happen ever again!

"Stop…!" the word came again, only this time with more heat, more will.

Vivi panted as she observed the nightmare before her, as she witnessed how completely and utterly she was failing to make a damn difference.

'*This isn't fair…' she thought miserably, her mind choking and stalling in despair. 'I-I'm a royal. I'm a princess! I'm a Nefertari! By right and by blood I should be one of the most powerful people in the world…'*

Her face twisted up in a combination of fury and misery as her mind was filled with images: Images of a horizon set ablaze, images of a plaza filled with nothing but death, images of lightning and pain.

'*So why am I always left feeling so POWERLESS?!*

If time had been crawling before, it completely froze the moment Spandam's finger reached the final millimeter. And as she saw, *saw* death about to snuff out a person who she'd all but despised twenty-four hours ago, Vivi… quite simply felt something in her mind *snap.* Something primal, something
innate. And before she knew what she was doing—

"STOOOOOOOP!"

A voice roared over the bridge. It was only an instant later that she registered that it was, in fact, her voice.

And though time seemed to resume for the world around her, the same could not be said for the people. Everybody in sight, Marine, Agent, and even her own comrades, were standing completely motionless, some in awkward positions. And one and all, their eyes were wide with fear and confusion.

"What…" Vivi breathed in confusion. "What just—?"

KA-BLAM!

"GAGH!"

The princess was broken out of her shock by an Exploding Star slamming into the face of a Marine who'd been about to swing his sword through her neck.

Said explosion was enough to break whatever spell the bridge had fallen under, prompting the soldiers to scramble back into the defensive positions they'd been using to hide from the Straw Hats' sniper. Or, well… most of them did, anyway.

"W't th' 'ell…?" Spandam ground out through his locked jaw. "Ah 'an't 'ove!"

"And thank God for that," one of the soldiers guarding him scowled as he worked the pistol out of his fingers, while another dragged Robin out of his line of fire, causing her to sigh in relief—and then blink in confusion, as the soldiers made no attempt to force her closer to the Gates of Justice.

"…Ah, not that I'm complaining, but why aren't you taking me to the Gates?" she asked warily.

The nearest soldier rolled his eyes. "Because Spandam gave ironclad orders that nobody is to open the Gates until he's right there in person."

"And despite the fact that he's clearly unstable," another soldier continued. "The only ones who can remove officials from their positions are those with rank or authority higher than theirs."

"Much to our chagrin, as of today," said the one who had retrieved his pistol. "So, now we have to wait for whatever the heck that was to wear off." He cocked an eyebrow at the archaeologist. "And speaking of, since when the heck could your crewmates do that, anyway?"

Robin hesitated slightly before casting a look back at her crewmates that was as much fond as it was bemused. "I was just asking myself that exact same question…"

While Robin was almost too confused to feel relief at the new development, Vivi was in an even worse state on account of how not only was she just as confused as everyone else on the bridge, but Shariinguru and Gorilla had also gotten enough wherewithal back in their minds to renew their assaults. It was all the princess could do to dodge and parry her opponent's blows—and even that was a stretch—as she worked to puzzle out what in the name of Osiris' rotting blue testicles had just happened.

'Everyone stopped…' Vivi forced her thoughts to start at the beginning of it all even as she ducked under a rotating lariat. 'I called for… well, for everyone to stop and they did. Maybe… Maybe I can
"do it again? Should I try to—AGH!" Vivi's train of thought derailed when she felt Sharinguru's elbow shave off a millimeter from the tip of her nose. 'Right, no choice. Here goes everything!'

"Stop!" she yelled once more, and in response, the Captains… reflexively flinched for a moment before continuing with just as much intensity as before.

Vivi suppressed a groan as she grit her teeth. 'Well, that sure as hell didn't work!' However, as swiftly as anger flashed through her mind she forced it all out via a calming sigh. 'Alright, alright, calm down... think it through. Think back to that feeling, that instant. When I... did whatever it was I did, I felt something like I'd never—!' Vivi marginally started in shock. 'No, no, th-that's wrong... that's wrong, I actually have felt whatever that was before!'

In spite of the onslaught that she found herself under, Vivi found her mind's eye being cast back. Back to Rainbase and to Smoker and Tashigi, back to Skypiea and to him. She hadn't paid it much mind at those times, her adrenaline and the situations had clouded her memories, but thinking back, her tirades against them, her using the name of her ancestors in spite of how much she loathed them, her speaking with as much force and power as she possibly could...

At first, she'd thought it to be little more than the desperation of the situation combining with the fury of seeing her friends in danger. But now that she thought about it, actually considered it, she realized that it wasn't just desperation. In fact, rather than being any form of emotion at all, what had powered her words that day was nothing short of instinct. Some fundamental, core drive that she'd managed to pull from... somewhere or other.

Vivi bit her lip both out of worry and irritation as she avoided a roundhouse kick from Sharinguru. 'Of course whatever the hell I did requires instinct!' she thought sarcastically. 'What else would it need, considering how I'm a person of thought and planning who has as much instinct as a piece of damn plank—!' Vivi forced out another calming sigh. 'Alright... alright, let's try again. I need instinct. I just need to dig deep... deep... okay, let's try... THIS!'

"STOP!" she commanded. This time, Sharinguru legitimately froze instead of flinching, but once again, that moment of pause was just that, a moment, a meager few seconds, before the Captain moved anew. It took Vivi everything she had to keep from spewing out a blue streak worthy of Zoro himself as she parried his ballistic fist.

'ARGH! Four seconds!? That was only worth FOUR MISERABLE SECONDS!!' she howled in her mind. 'You have got to be kidding me! It actually worked this time, but it wasn't even close to being as effective! Damn it, I have it but I still don't have it! What am I missing, what the hell could I possibly be missing!? Think, damn it, think think thi—!' Vivi shoved yet another exasperated sigh from her grit teeth. 'Alright, alright, enough panic, no more panic. Just think it through in a calm and —!'

Without any warning, Vivi froze where she was standing, her eyes blinking in honest surprise. "... oh."

SKRUNCH!

Her eyes then shot wide in shock as her body shook.

Time seemed to freeze as she tried to process what had just happened. In that instant, Vivi became aware of a noise.

'Who... is that?' she thought. 'Who's... screaming?'
Vivi slowly turned her head to the side and blinked in confusion as she saw that the source was Conis, who was desperately screaming at the top of her lungs with tears coursing down her eyes.

'Oh… it's Conis…' Vivi realized. 'But she looks fine. So, why is she…?'

The princess blinked again as she suddenly realized something else: she could feel a slight pinching sensation in her abdomen. Her gaze shifted downwards and slowly she 'ah'd in understanding.

'Oh, I see,' she mentally nodded. 'The reason she's screaming is that I got hit.'

And indeed, the princess had most certainly been hit. To be precise, she had been hit by a rather large fist that had literally buried itself halfway through her abdomen.

As if her noticing her injury were the trigger, time resumed and Vivi was simultaneously spun and flung backward, hitting the stonework of the bridge with a sickening crack and bouncing. She landed again on her side before skidding to a stop. After taking a moment to get some breath back in her lungs, she tried to pull herself to her knees on quivering limbs, only for a shuddering spasm to wrack her body and force her to vomit up a glob of blood and what she desperately hoped was only her last meal onto the stone.

"—IVI!" Conis' voice screamed. Vivi was barely aware of her friend turning and starting to run towards her. She was then vaguely aware of a bipedal clothes-wearing simian moving to stand in her path, impeding her progress.

"Have you forgotten?" Gorilla snorted in irritation. "You're still fighting me."

"Y-You—!" Conis snarled furiously through her tears, but that was all she was able to get out before Gorilla slammed his gun into her Bazooka and forced her into a deadlock.

"Be quiet and watch your friend's execution. You'll be joining her for the crimes you've committed soon enough."

"INDEED, WHA-BAM!" Sharinguru cackled as he stalked up to Vivi. "This, right here, right now, is what I truly live for, DAH-DAH-DAH-DAAAAAH! The Hero punishing the Villain, KA-BLAM! Sacred Good triumphing over vile Evil, KA-BOOM! THIS!"

The Captain grinned victoriously as he raised his foot high above Vivi's head and started up a rotation so fast that the very air around it started to ripple.

"IS THE VERY DEFINITION!" he roared at the top of his lungs. "OF JUSTICE! JUSTICE GUILLOTINE!"

And with that, he dropped his heel in a blow that would sever Vivi's head from her neck.

"Stop."

Or rather, that would have severed her head had a single word not frozen Sharinguru in place and killed his rotation dead. It wasn't yelled. It wasn't a scream, it wasn't a plea, it was just a simple word. Or rather… a single command. A command packed with so much power and authority that Sharinguru's body didn't have any other choice but to lock up.

And it wasn't just Sharinguru who froze either. Gorilla, Conis, Su, Robin… basically, everyone on the entire bridge found themselves paralyzed again.

"W-What—?" Sharinguru bit out as he tried furiously to get his mouth to work.
"Sorry about that, Conis."

All eyes snapped to Vivi as she slowly worked her way to her feet. "But it's hard enough bringing this power up as it is; as near as I can tell, I can either use it on one or everyone, and I thought it would be for the best to stop Gorilla, too."

Vivi started to move before hissing and casting a pained grimace at her torso. "Ah, damn it. That punch didn't break my skin, thankfully enough, so my insides aren't puréed, but this is still going to be a very nasty scar. It's going to be awhile before I feel confident wearing a bikini again." She shot an exasperated glare over her shoulder at Sharinguru. "You are insanely lucky that Sanji isn't here, you know that?"

"How—!?" the Wheel-man snarled murderously.

Vivi maintained her cool stare for a moment before hanging her head with a sigh. "Honestly? I'm not sure. This is all as new to me as it is to you. But I'm fairly certain that its basis revolves around my instinct as a ruler."

"Ruler's instinct."

All attention within earshot turned to the cloud fox, who was looking at Vivi in a combination of genuine awe and naked terror. "Instinct… it's something that every living being is born with," the cloud fox whispered, the sheer silence of the bridge letting all hear her. "It leads us to food or water, warns us of danger, all kinds of things. But…"

Su slowly shook her head. "Not all are created equal. Some beings… when they're born, their instincts are superior. These beings, their instincts aren't just about survival, they're about leadership. The instinct to rule over others. I've only ever heard of it being found in the likes of Alpha Wolves and Sea Kings. But then again, I suppose that when you consider the existence of people like Wiper and Gan Fall, it's only natural to assume that humans would have it, too."

Vivi nodded in agreement. "All my life, I've known that I would one day rule. It wasn't just from my father telling me, wasn't from my friends or subjects, it was just…" She held her hand up and stared at it as she flexed her fingers. "Something I've known, from the deepest part of my heart. Something basic, something natural. A fact, if you will. The sky is blue, water is wet, and I, Nefertari Vivi, was born to rule. And now…"

Vivi affixed the Marine Captain with a firm look. "Now I can actually use it. I don't know how, but I'm bringing it out, and even if you refuse it with all your heart and soul, I will make you obey the divine right that I have held within me since I was born."

She raised her head proudly as she glared down at the Marine. "I am Princess Nefertari Vivi of Alabasta, and you will respect my authority!"

"…I honestly never expected to ask this question again, but… how does that even make sense?" Robin wondered aloud.

"Tseeheeeheeeheee… haven't you been around here for a few years, Robin?"

Attention returned to the Cloud Fox as an eager grin slowly peeked through her fur.

"This ocean is the Grand Line," she whispered reverentially. "There is no need for sense here. What is… just simply is."

"Respect…?"
Vivi blinked in surprise before turning her attention back to Sharinguru, who was shivering in place.

"Respect… your… authorityyy?" he ground out viciously.

Without any warning, Sharinguru's foot suddenly slammed down and cracked the stone of the Bridge.

"THE ONLY AUTHORITY THAT I RESPECT!" the Captain roared as he ripped the blade at his side from its sheath. "IS THAT OF JUSTICE!" And with that, he leapt at Vivi, his sword-arm extended and his wrist rotating so rapidly that the blade became a disc of pure steel and death. "JUSTICE MAELSTROM!"

Vivi tensed in preparation to bl—no, that sword was equivalent to instant death, definitely something to dodge. Before she could get a chance, however, a grenade came whistling in. The Wheel-man just barely noticed and managed to raise his attack between it and him before it detonated.

Of course, given the suction of the Justice Maelstrom, the resulting blast hit him all at once, knocking him out of the sky and sending him bouncing off the Bridge, scorched medium rare.

"I'm very sorry if you wanted him for yourself, Vivi."

The Princess looked over at Conis, who was smiling lightly as she reloaded her grenade launcher.

"But you see," the gunner continued pleasantly. "The fact is that he does seem like a pretty tough enemy, and I'd like to inflict some pain on him myself. Would you terribly mind if I took him off your hands?"

"We'll lay an absolute world of hurt on him, we promise!" Su smirked sadistically.

Vivi blinked in surprise for a moment before smiling and shrugging indifferently. "Fine by me, that lunatic's ramblings were starting to grate at my ears. Meanwhile…"

Vivi's expression turned cold as she turned her attention behind Conis. "Freeze," she ordered.

And so it was that Captain Gorilla froze mid-aim, barely staying on his feet.

The Princess smiled even as she jerked her Lion Cutters into her hands and started spinning them in preparation. "I'll handle this overgrown ape. Altogether, I think that for the two of us it should only take… what, thirty seconds?"

"Eh…" Conis wavered her hand side to side. "Personally, I'd prefer to call it a full minute. It's better to finish with time to spare than to be late, you know."

"Fair, fair. Now, then…" Vivi narrowed her gaze. "Shall we?"

Conis' expression hardened as she slammed her fist into her palm. "Let's."

And with that, the pirates began to approach their opponents.

-o-

Though it took him a moment to shake off the daze of the attack that had disrupted him, the Wheel-Marine Sharinguru was swift to get his bearings back and take notice of the pirate headed his way. His response to her approach was to snort indignantly. "Fool, SHING!" Sharinguru roared as he jabbed his blade at her. "Do you think that I, a Hero of JUSTICE, would ever allow—"
"BLAM!" The Marine captain was promptly cut off by another of Conis' explosive shells going off in his face, causing him to reel back and sputter.

"Allow? Oh, I never thought you'd allow anything," Conis said, smiling sweetly even as she returned her grenade launcher to her back. "That doesn't mean you'll succeed. I am Conis of the Straw Hats, and that injury you inflicted on my friend?" Her expression promptly turned thunderous as she whipped two of her pistols out and held them at the ready. "That was the last hit you'll land today."

"You wish, pirate, SLAM!" Sharinguru declared, shoving himself to his feet and spinning his legs beneath him. "For you see, TRUE JUSTICE will prevail today!" And with that, the Marine shoved his feet against the ground and took advantage of the spin from his heels to give him an extra-powerful burst of speed.

Conis kept her stance firm as she followed him with her guns. "Pistol…"

"Bullets cannot harm me!" Sharinguru cackled as he brought his blade before him and started spinning it. "Justice Mael—!

"Lux."

"—GAGH!" The Captain promptly lost his stance when a flash of utterly blinding light stabbed into his eyes, burning his retinas and causing him to crash into the bridge and roll to a halt as he flailed and clawed at his eyes. "Yeargh, what the hell?"

"Allow me to clarify something for you," Conis' voice filtered through the void of white that had devoured his eyesight. "Whereas your goggles are purely for show and offer nothing in the way of protection, mine are reinforced and have tinted lenses. Just so you know, up until now I've been using conventional weaponry because, in all honesty, I didn't want to show my full hand until it was absolutely necessary. After what you did to my friend, however…"

The twin clicks of two pistols being cocked prompted Sharinguru to spin up the armor hiding under his shirt, and he was only just able to deflect the bullets that would have perforated him. With his vision finally clearing, Sharinguru staggered back to his feet and eyed the pirate warily as she advanced on him.

"I'm going to go ahead and give you a crash course…" Conis intoned gravely as she drew her rifles from her back and held them at ready. "In Sky Warfare."

And with that, she whipped her rifles up and thumbed the secondary triggers hidden on them. "Rifle Incendium."

The Marine prepared to deliver yet another of his tirades, only for his words to die when he noticed a glow building up in the barrels of the guns. He hastily scoured what little knowledge of Latin he had, and his brow twitched at the answer. "Oh, you have got to be—!"

"Fwoosh!"

Twin gouts of flame erupted from the rifles, spiking the temperature on the bridge and charring the stones. Conis felt her heart leap as Sharinguru was engulfed in the blaze.

"Justice Tornado!"
And then felt it *plummet* when not only was the blaze dispersed, but a whirlwind of steel and death charged out at her.

"*Shit!*" the gunner cursed fearfully as she dove to the side, the tornado only just missing her as it swept past her heels. The channel it carved out of the stone in passing did little to inspire confidence. The fact that the whirlwind was slowly adjusting its trajectory and circling back around at an even *faster* speed did even less.

Conis swiftly sheathed her rifles, drew and unloaded her secondary set of pistols at the Marine, Flash Dials and all, and bit back a curse as absolutely jack came of it. "Oh, that is *not* good."

"Bull *shit!* He'd have to close his eyes to not be affected, how does he even steer without seeing anything?!" Su spat indignantly.

Conis growled as she returned her pistols to their holsters. "At a guess? I'd say his rank and powers mean that he has considerable leeway where collateral damage is—GRGH!" Conis cut herself off as she dodged again, and promptly paled when she noticed that she was missing a corner on her jacket. "Damn it, he's getting faster, and from what I've seen of Paramecias, I doubt he has an upper limit." She whipped her shotgun out from behind her back. "Only one option!"

"Sensible," Su nodded firmly as she analyzed the returning funnel. "Aim for his feet; that blade's at chest height, and with how fast he's going he might actually shred it."

Conis nodded and took aim before slowly lowering her gun as the whirlwind somehow rose into the *air*. "You have *got* to be kidding me…"

"THE HAMMER OF JUSTICE FALLS FROM ABOVE!" Sharinguru roared before dropping out of the sky.

Barely keeping her panic in check, Conis whipped her hand-cannon up at her adversary—

"Shotgun Palus!"

—and triggered the Swamp Cloud Dial installed within, blasting a thick, syrupy glob of clouds at her adversary. Conis *swore* that her heart stopped when Sharinguru's blades shredded the clouds apart—and then a second later, the remnants were sucked back into the whirlwind.

"Ack! What—GAH!" was all the Marine managed to get out before the Swamp Cloud gummed his works up completely and sent him crashing to the ground, upon which he face-planted in a *very* painful manner.

"Tseeheehee! Do 'Hammers of Justice' usually get caught on clouds halfway down and wind up eating pavement?" Su snickered.

"Be nice, Su," Conis admonished as she stowed her shotgun and took hold of the grip of her bazooka. She was *about* to pull it out…

"You…"

But then paused and raised an eyebrow as Sharinguru jerked in place. She wasn't disappointed.

"You damn PIRATES!" Sharinguru roared as he snapped his head up, his eyes wide and spittle and more than a little foam flying from his mouth. He struggled fiercely against the dense mass of Swamp Cloud, but all he managed to achieve was to work himself up into a kneeling position. "You think that this changes anything?! You think I've *lost*?! I'm the *Hero*, you idiots! Heroes never lose! They
are *never* weak, they are *never* helpless! They come back from behind, and the villains never ever ever ever EVER WIN!"

Conis narrowed her eyes at the tirade and slowly strode forwards, coming closer and closer even as the Marine ranted and raved.

"You'll see, you damn pirate!" Sharinguru howled as he pulled as hard as he could. "Gorilla will free me, or one of the soldiers with us will grow a damn spine and defeat you! IT DOESN’T MATTER WHAT YOU DO, THE WORLD WILL ALWAYS REJECT YOU! JUSTICE WILL FOREVER PREVAIL, AND I, THE HERO, WILL NEVER—!"

*KA-CLICK!*

Sharinguru was silenced by Conis heaving her Burn Bazooka *over* her shoulder rather than under it and pointing the secondary muzzle at him.

"Hey, Wheely?"

The Captain's gaze snapped to the Cloud Fox on the gunner's shoulder, who was grinning victoriously as her tail swayed from side to side.

"Newsflash for you," she sang. "See, the thing about heroes? *They don't always win.*"

"And everyone," Conis picked up as she cocked her gun. "Is the hero of their own story." She then tilted her head to the side and smiled. "I'm truly sorry, but it would appear that the world preferred our story to yours. Goodbye."

She then pulled the trigger.

"*Reject Bazooka.*"

**BANG!**

The Reject Dial within the bazooka *roared* as it fired, slamming a pillar of compressed air stronger than any Burn Bazooka could ever hope to achieve into Sharinguru and *ripping* both him and his Swamp Cloud bonds from the Bridge. The Captain arced high into the air and hung for a brief moment before coming back down and crashing into the deck of one of the battleships, his velocity punching him clean through and taking him out of sight.

Conis took in the sight for a second as she confirmed that she'd *won*, before slumping to her knees and clutching her shoulder with a pained hiss. "Owowowowowwww that hurts!" she groaned through gritted teeth as she massaged the throbbing joint. "That was through a medium, without physical contact and with *barely* any charge in it, and it still almost took me clean off my feet! How in the name of the Blue Seas did Wiper fire off that thing three times in one day without losing his arm!?"

"Beeeeecause he's a monster worthy of this crew?" Su replied with a cocked eyebrow.

Conis paused thoughtfully at that before hanging her head with a sigh. "Yeah, that's true…" A second later, however, she managed to give Su a smile. "But still… no matter how much it hurts, I wouldn't trade places with him for the world."

"Tseeheehee!" Su giggled as she lightly butted her forehead against her friend's. "You know it!"
Gorilla charged towards his new opponent, rearing his rifle back as he prepared to *literally* knock the princess' block off her neck. He was broadcasting pretty blatantly, but he didn't doubt that any attempt to block it would be insufficient against his strength.

"**STOP!**"

And then, for an instant, he froze. Just an instant. It was only less than a second, but in a fight, a second equaled an eternity, and it was this eternity that allowed Vivi to wrap one of her Lion Cutters around his leg and *yank*, which, when combined with his off-balance position, resulted in him faceplanting on the pavement.

The large Marine raised himself on his palms with a snarl as he glared at the princess. "You…"

"Me," Vivi replied frigidly. "I might not quite have full control of this new ability yet, but I was wrong earlier. Thirty seconds is too much time by half." She grabbed her other cutter and pointed its blade at the Captain. "Four seconds is plenty of time."

Gorilla didn't deign to reply, lifting up his gun to fire instead.

"**Hit yourself.**"

The response was only a twitch, albeit a strong twitch, but it was enough to send the bullet wide. Gorilla grimaced ferociously as he took aim again. "Right. Starting after this mission, I'm going to start carrying ear protectors. Let's try that again."

"**Throw the gun off the bridge.**"

Gorilla cursed furiously as his arm snapped out to the side. He was only just able to grab the butt of the weapon with his fingers before it left his reach. "You little—!"

"**There we go, now I just need to hold onto that feeling. Now, hold still.**"

Gorilla involuntarily tensed up his form, and Vivi flung her cutter at the arm holding the gun. Her aim was true, it struck his shoulder. And then it bounced off. Vivi's eye twitched in annoyance.

"Alright, how are you doing that? **Explain.**"

"Pah! I would never explain to you that I'm using Iron Body, of course," Gorilla scoffed. "CP9 aren't the only ones with access to the Six Powers, they're just the only ones who are required to master them all and who do so. Some of us, however, find it useful to add some of the techniques to our own arsenals. It's common sense, really, but of course, I'd never tell you that." A second later, his eyes snapped wide in shock. "Wait, what the hell!?"

"...Wow, that worked better than I thought it would," Vivi whistled in awe before freezing as a thought struck her. "I am really going to have to be careful around Cross. One wrong word and he'll never shut—!"

The instant Gorilla regained control of his muscles, he pumped his legs as hard as he could and Shaved at the Princess, hand outstretched in desperation.

'**Just need to shut her up, just need to shut her up—!**' he thought desperately.

"**Halt.**"

Instead of shutting her up, he started swearing up a blue streak as he was halted once again. He even
prepared to say something, but his words died in his mouth when his enemy looked him in the eye and stared.

"You will not move for ten seconds," she ordered frigidly. "Is. That. Clear?"

"Yes, ma'am!" the behemoth of a man whimpered fearfully.

Vivi responded by loosing the breath she'd been holding in a sigh of relief. "Good, because that was a gamble. Now, then." She allowed her Lion Cutters to slip out of her palms so that she was holding them both by their chain. "Let's finish you off, shall we?"

With that, she surged forward and whipped around the Marine Captain. It wasn't Shave-levels of speed, admittedly, but in the course of eight seconds she'd wrapped her weapon's chain around Gorilla's torso in an X and was standing behind him, arms spread and at the ready.

Gorilla eyed his chest warily for a moment before casting a glare over his shoulder. "This won't change anything, you know? My Iron Body is impenetrable! And once this fails, I'm going to—!"

"Oh, why don't you just shut up…" Vivi sighed wearily, followed by a hint of menace in her eyes. "And relax?"

The second that last word hit Captain Gorilla's ears, his very being, his body and mind had two entirely opposite reactions. While Gorilla's mind was filled with nothing short of pure and utter existential terror, his body completely relaxed, every one of his muscles loosening as he adopted a calm, slumped-over stance.

"If it's any consolation?" Vivi shrugged casually. "I'm fairly certain that you should lose consciousness almost instantly from blood loss. But for now…" Her eyes narrowed menacingly. "For the crimes of driving my country to revolution, threatening the crew who saved me in every conceivable way, and stealing my friend, I sentence you to the mercy of your superiors." She tightened her grip on her chain. "May Osiris have mercy on your soul because they and I will NOT!"

And with that, she ripped her chains forwards. "IMPERIAL EXECUTION!"

SPURT! "AAAGH!"

The curved blades carved a massive X-shaped gash into the Captain's torso, blood spraying into the air. And indeed, the captain's eyes rolled up in his head, showing only the whites.

Vivi held her pose for a moment even as the Captain slumped to his knees. Then, she turned around and bowed slightly. "Sorry, that was a bit harsh and I let my emotions take control of me. I truly hope that you manage to recover. So… no hard feelings?"

"Hrghghhh…"

"…taking that as a maybe."

"This… This can't be happening! THIS ISN'T HAPPENING!" Spandam hollered from down the street.

"You'd better damn well believe that it is, you bastard!" Vivi called after him. "And once we get our hands on you, you're next!"

"Vivi!" Conis called out as she jogged up to the princess. "Do you need any—ERK!" A shiver ran up the gunner's spine as of her boots came down in the puddle of blood spreading out from Gorilla's prone form. "…Never mind, then."
"Yeah, I'm..." Vivi heaved a sigh as she nodded in agreement. "It was tough, but I'm alright. Now that that's out of the way, let's head after Carue and—"

The sound of a hundred flintlocks cocking rang out from the firing line the Marines had set up, three deep and stretching between each side of the bridge. More Marines could be seen aiming rifles at them from the crow's nests of the battleships, others setting up mortars on the decks, and still others fingering their melee weapons behind the firing lines. Rounding out the gathered force was a Marine in a Lieutenant's uniform, slowly clapping with a Su-worthy grin on his face.

"Congratulations," the Lieutenant stated smugly. "You beat Captain Sharinguru and Captain Gorilla. Very impressive, I'll admit. That still leaves, oh, about two thousand of us." A pause, and then he neatly sidestepped a whistling projectile. "And while that sniper of yours is impressive, I have my doubts that he can stop a mass charge."

That elicited a bout of mad cackling from Spandam. "WAHAHAHA! Yes, yes! Crush them, crush them like the scum they are! Drive them into the—! Eh? Wait a second... WHY THE HELL CAN YOU ALL MOVE WHILE I'M STILL PARALYZED FROM THE NECK DOWN!?

"The grace of God?" Su muttered to herself as she glanced upwards.

Ignoring the exchange, Vivi and Conis exchanged uneasy glances.

"This is going to suck, isn't it?" Conis groaned as she reluctantly underslung her bazooka.

"Oh, big time," Vivi confirmed morosely as she crossed her Lion Cutters before her.

The Marines chose that moment to begin flooding off of the battleships and cascading towards them, and the brawl commenced with gusto.

-0-

White.

If you had to pick one adjective capable of describing the massive bathroom in which the fight between CP9's only and the Straw Hat Pirates' first female members was occurring, white would be it. Fluffy cloud clashed with equally fluffy suds, occasionally splitting and fracturing on account of blinding lightning bolts and swift Tempest Kicks crisscrossing and clashing through the air.

It was nothing short of a deadlock due to the two opponents' fighting styles being polar opposites. While Nami's Iron Cloud was perfect in its ineffable durability, standing undaunted against the flood of suds, Kalifa's flood was blindingly fast and practically neverending in the number of bubbles she could provide. Furthermore, for all that the clouds were impenetrable and relatively swift, they had nothing on Kalifa's Shave and her suds.

In short, while Kalifa couldn't get close enough to so much as lay a finger on Nami, neither could Nami come close to even brushing Kalifa.

Kalifa growled irritably as yet another wave of suds washed over the Iron Cloud defense to no avail, provoking another lightning bolt that she herself allowed to wash over her own defenses. 'We're going nowhere at the speed of light,' she thought indignantly. 'One pirate is managing to give me this much trouble, and she's not even one of the strong ones! This is embarrassing, just what the hell can I —!'

Kalifa blinked thoughtfully as a thought came to her, an eager smile spreading over her lips.
'Ohhh, yes, that will do nicely.'

And so, the assassin suddenly came to a halt and threw her arm out, dispelling her suds and drawing Nami up short in confusion. "Allow me to make a statement that I'm sure you'll agree with," the blonde killer stated in a professional tone. "This stalemate has prolonged to the point that it's barely even a fight anymore; neither one of us is making any progress, and I can only assume that you are as irritated as I am."

"You may be a bitch, but I can agree with that," Nami replied testily, drawing her clouds around herself in the process. "But unless you're ready to do the smart thing and hold still so that I can char you into a briquet, I don't see your point in stating the obvious."

"Oh, my point is quite simple, I assure you," Kalifa sniffed haughtily. "While I was hoping to finish this in an enjoyable manner, simple and clean and all that, the fact that a Buster Call—and an apoplectic Fleet Admiral Sengoku—are apparently heading this way, means that I am pressed for time. As such." She adjusted her glasses so that they caught the light. "I'll just have to pull out my trump card."

Before Nami could react, Kalifa leaned over and slid her hands up her body. Suds roiled up from the points of contact as she flexed her power, and the bubbles quickly spread first across her arms, then the rest of her body. Soon, she was clad in a full suit of medieval knight-style armor… made entirely out of soap bubbles.

"Soap Armor," Kalifa proudly declared.

For a moment, there was silence.

"...You look fucking ridiculous, Bubbly," Nami finally declared.

Kalifa ignored the slight with a haughty laugh. "You won't be laughing once you observe the full might of my armor's power!" And with that, the Bubble-woman slammed her visor down and cast her arm out, conjuring a claymore of pure bubbles. "En garde!" And with that, she charged straight for the mass of Iron Cloud.

Nami, for her part, snorted derisively as she watched the charge. Honestly, she'd expected a lot more than this from the Government agent. With an almost careless flick of her wrist, the Navigator launched several balls of electricity at her opponent. Every ball hit its mark, discharging their voltage into the suds and causing them to dissolve in order to expose—absolutely nothing!?

"What the hell!?" Nami squawked as the suit of 'armor' collapsed into a puddle of sudsy water, before paling as a thought struck her. "...Oh, don't tell me she's a Logia!"

"Not quite."

If Nami had paled before, her blood straight up froze when a pair of iron-hard arms wrapped around her, one clenching her around her windpipe in a chokehold, and one wrapping around the... lower part of the pirate's body.

"Where the hell do you think you're touching!?" Nami hissed.

"Wherever I damn well please, pirate," Kalifa smirked in Nami's ear. "And for the record, I lied earlier; that was actually my Soap Doppelgänger. Now..." Nami's breath hitched when Kalifa flexed her arm around her neck. "How about we put an end to this?"

Even with her air supply obstructed, Nami grit her teeth defiantly and swung her Clima-Tact
upwards, sending a wave of Cool Balls at the cloud she'd had floating above the battlefield since the fight had started in earnest. Nami smirked as the heavens burst and a torrential downpour cascaded down upon the pair.

Said smirk died a swift death when Kalifa's only response was to chuckle confidently.

"Ah, you poor, poor girl," the assassin lamented in a faux-sympathetic tone. "So, you figured out how to counter my Golden Bubbles before I could even apply them to you, hm? And even went so far as to make it rain indoors in order to counter me. Impressive, really, but ultimately fruitless."

"W-What are you—grk!" Nami choked painfully as Kalifa squeezed her throat tight and immobilized her.

"Because you see," Kalifa forged on as though she hadn't been interrupted. "I don't plan on using my Golden Bubbles on you, or even killing you, for that matter. Normally, I would just crush your skull like an egg and be done with you, but in light of your crew's... unprecedented actions and the recent expansion of my own arsenal, I've decided to, shall we say, experiment a bit."

The Soap-woman drew her free arm up Nami's side, creating a stream of bubbles even in spite of the rain soaking them both. "My Golden Bubbles wash away everything they come in contact with; filth, strength, even friction itself. So, I'm left wondering... what else can they wash away, hm? Just what..." She started trailing her finger around her captive's ear. "Can these powers do?"

Nami's heart all but stopped in her chest as the full implications of what she was hearing hit her. "No..." Nami angled her head as much as she could so that she could stare back at Kalifa in horror. "N-N-No, y-you can't—!"

"Ah, but the truth is?" Kalifa spun her hand and evoked a small mass of bubbles in her palm, angled just so that they were shielded from the rain and positioned right over Nami's ear. "I can. Chrome Bubble Cleanse."

Nami struggled and writhed desperately in the woman's grip, but it was no use. She gasped out a scream as the assassin's hand clamped onto her head and shoved a surge of suds down her ear canals. "Nonono, NO!" Nami cried fearfully, fighting to get away as hard as she could. She needed to get out, get away, she couldn't let... let... heeeerrrrrrrrrrghhhrrrrrrrrrrr... Nami's breath caught in her throat and her eyes rolled up in her skull as everything went white. Any thoughts of escape, of struggle or resistance or... anything really, dissolved into aether as the soap flowed through her mind. It was just so... so relaxing, as if the soap was scouring away all of the stress and grime that had been building up in her for her whole life. Her muscles rapidly turned to jelly and she fell slack in Kalifa's arms, her eyes glazed and unfocused and her expression as blank as a newfound slate.

Kalifa cocked her eyebrow as she observed the pirate's limp form before stepping back and allowing her to drop, adjusting her glasses as she got a better look at her work. "Interesting. I was expecting a bit more of a struggle, but honestly this might be for the best. Speed kills and all that."

Now, an important fact to note is that most other opponents or enemies would have left some form of parting shot or another to the unmoving vegetable that had moments before been a navigator wielding a weather-manipulating staff. But as it was, Kalifa was a consummate professional. As such, she merely allowed herself a victorious smirk before turning around and walking away.

As she all but strutted for the door to her room, she amused herself with thoughts of how the pirates
would react if they managed to find what was left of their navigator before they were destroyed, while at the same time strategizing how she could further utilize and refine her latest technique in the future. Admittedly, the most difficult part of the endeavor would be finding test subjects, but chances were that—

"Vortex."

Kalifa blinked in confusion when she felt a breeze brush against the back of her neck and heard a whisper drift through the air. "Wha—?"

"Tempo."

The assassin barely had a moment to feel the wind at her back start to accelerate before her instinct screamed at her, prompting her to drop to the ground and bury an Iron Body-enhanced fist in the floor. The resulting anchor wasn't a moment too soon, because it was all that prevented Kalifa from being sucked into the cyclone that suddenly spun into existence in the center of the room and sucked up all of the remaining suds.

Kalifa craned her neck over her shoulder and paled in shock as she caught sight of Nami standing tall and proud in the eye of the cyclone, her Clima-Tact spinning above her head and a smug grin on her face.

"Surprised?" the pirate drawled.

"You… damn it, you were only pretending!" Kalifa hissed in equal parts fear and fury.

"Ah… heh, no," Nami chuckled as she shook her head. "No, see, that reaction was real, but the effects weren't nearly as bad as you'd hoped they were. I mean, come on, what did you expect? You've only had your powers for a few hours. You really think that you could master them that fast?" The navigator gave an amused shake of her head. "You altered my mind, sure, but all you really did was wash away parts of it. My stress, my frustration, my anger, almost all of the negativity that's been festering in my mind my whole life is just… gone."

Nami smiled slightly as she cocked her head to the side. "Honestly, I would thank you for it, I feel calmer and more relaxed then I have in years…"

Nami's expression darkened with fury as she snapped her arm down and swung her staff out. As a result, the cyclone she was ensconced in came to a halt, but not only did the pillar of cloud not dissipate, but the room began to crackle and reek of ozone.

"But in case you didn't notice, I said 'almost'," the pirate explained grimly.

Kalifa stood up and turned to face her opponent, and promptly froze up as she noticed that, in spite of the suds she'd produced being melted away by the rain, the room was still white. But only mostly, seeing as the walls were rapidly turning black.

"Because, in the end…" Nami narrowed her eyes menacingly. "Nothing can make me forgive you for hurting my friends."

As the Iron Clouds her opponent had wrapped herself in molded themselves into a mesh cage, Kalifa could only bring herself to say a single thing.

"…I should have tried my luck with Lucci."

"Considering how you chose to face us instead? Yes. You should have. Nimbus Tempo."

"Considering how you chose to face us instead? Yes. You should have. Nimbus Tempo."
And then the *very air itself* was lightning.

-o-

Blueno slapped his hands over his ears as a thunderclap loud enough to wake the dead sounded out from high above him. Running through the possibilities, he grimaced as he considered what either Kalifa or Fukuro had just had to endure.

He didn't count Kaku or Kumadori amongst the possible targets of the meteorological assault, as the former was fighting Roronoa Zoro rather than Nami, based on Cross' earlier rant, and the latter… well, he had *already* caught sight of his comrade's bloody, unconscious form in the midst of his flight from the Straw Hats' chef. A flight which, for the record, was still ongoing and not slowing down at all.

To his credit, Blueno was taking full advantage of the mobility that Shave and Moonwalk afforded him, as well as his Door-Door Fruit allowing him to ignore any physical barriers in his path. But going by the fact that said barriers were being systematically *pulverized* behind him, the cook clearly wasn't slowing down either.

And as if his opponent's sheer persistence wasn't bad enough, the fact was that Blueno's foe was as much of a monster as the two—*three* Zoans of CP9 were meant that he could use the Tower of Justice itself as a practically inexhaustible store of ammunition. It had taken almost a dozen blows from the pirate before Blueno managed to get it into his head that he didn't even stand a *ghost* of a chance at taking him on in a straight fight, prompting the switch to his current strategy.

He couldn't fight back while the pirate was in the Air Door, and if he tried to open the way in, he would be lucky if *any* of his bones were left intact; forcing the pirate out would require more thought and force than he was capable of at the moment. As such, his only option was to run as fast and as hard as he possibly could.

After a quick series of turns through a trio of walls in order to gain a lead, however marginal, the bull-haired assassin took the opportunity to hunch over and wheeze as he tried to get his breath back. Strong as he was, even the agents of CP9 had their limits, and he was rapidly approaching his. He needed to end things fast, or else… well, that didn't really bear thinking about.

Once he got some oxygen back in his lungs, Blueno looked around in an effort to regain his bearings, mentally reviewing the layout of the Tower. Second floor, fifth corridor on the west side, which meant—

Blueno paused thoughtfully for a moment, and then a brutal grin split his face as a plan came to his mind.

-o-

Meanwhile, on the other side of the dimensional axis, Sanji was getting tired, both physically and of the situation in general. His adrenaline and righteous rage were helping him keep pace with the assassin, sure, but not even he could keep going strong after kicking down wall after *far* more durable than average wall. Not to mention the fact that, to reiterate, he was breathing stale air and the assassin was making no attempt to open the way for a direct fight.

That was easily the most difficult aspect of the conflict; he needed to somehow exit the Air Door before he knocked the assassin unconscious, or else he'd *still* be stranded forever, and he had to do it in such a manner that the bull didn't enter it himself, or else he and the whole crew would lose by default.
'And to make matters even worse,' Sanji reflected sourly, as he leveled yet another wall. 'I've already run through every beef recipe I know to help keep me focused.' He shook his head dismissively as he dashed through the rubble. 'Bah, considering what I'll be starting with, it'd be more appropriate to run through recipes focusing on cows, anyway.'

Moving on from his supremely cathartic thoughts, Sanji scanned around the room as the dust cleared. Going by the array of weaponry strewn about, easy money said that this was the armory of the Tower, or one of them, more likely, given the sheer size of the facility. The chef shivered slightly as the sight of the military arsenal caused dark memories to stir in the recesses of his mind, but he shook them off in favor of concentrating on the here and now.

Sanji glanced around the room, searching for any signs of a closing door…

CLINK!

When he was brought up short by the sound of metal dropping onto a solid surface. He glanced in the direction of the sound and raised an eyebrow when he caught sight of a half-dozen familiar objects rolling on the floor, all missing critical safety components.

"Grenades," Sanji noted calmly.

Then his mind caught up with him and he all but inhaled his cigarette.

"Oh, SHI—!"

He only just managed to throw himself back through the hole in the wall before the grenades detonated.

-o-

Blueno smirked victoriously as a blast of flame and smoke shot out of the hand-sized Air Door he'd opened. Going by the curse he'd just heard, if his trick hadn't managed to finish off the pirate, then at minimum, he was injured or off balance. Still, given how tough he'd been up until then…

"Air Peephole," Blueno stated for his own benefit, pressing against the air and sliding it to the side, opening a line of sight into his dimension. A mass of smoke met his vision, but in the middle of it, he could pick up a very humanoid silhouette… spinning around in place?

"Hmph," the assassin snorted derisively as he shut the hole and walked over to where Sanji was on the other side. "He must be concussed or something. At this point, I'll be putting him out of his misery."

Once he was correctly positioned, Blueno shoved an Air Door open, leaped through and made a grab for Sanji's head. He then was forced to switch his leap to a roll when he fell through thin air instead.

He was just starting to get his breath back when a creaking sound, followed by a voice, came from behind him.

"Eh?" Blueno swung his head around in confusion. "The hell—!? Where did he—?"

"Welcome," a dry and downright malevolent voice drawled behind Blueno, freezing his blood in his veins. "To the Crap Café."

Blueno spun around just in time to catch sight of a flaming foot slamming his only escape route shut.
The blond cook took a deep drag of cigarette as he regarded the assassin. "My name is Sanji," he continued tonelessly. "And I will be both your waiter and your cook today."

Blueno remained frozen in place as Sanji started to stalk towards him.

"Allow me to list," Sanji's next drag lit a proper flame at the end of his cigarette. "The twelve-course meal we have planned for you tonight."

And with that, he moved.

-o-

A few corridors off from the armory where Blueno had pulled his ploy lay the central staircase of the Tower of Justice, a magnificent work of architecture that flowed upwards and downwards without any difficulties or gaps from the many floors that it crossed. While some parts of the structure had been ravaged by the conflict going on within the building, apart from the tower's bisection and a few other areas, the stairwell was largely unmolested by the fight. It was a true credit to the World Government's architects that the area managed to remain pristine-looking in the midst of all the destruction.

Then a wall imploded and any and all semblance of immaculate perfection shattered in an instant.

A moment later, another wall was ruined, this time by fractures radiating from a central point of impact. Then another, and another after that. Up and down the staircase at varying intervals, the stonework of the stairwell, from walls to steps to railings, all started to disintegrate.

From sites of impact to outright shattering, it was as though some invisible wrecking crew was raining down unholy hell upon the stairwell.

Finally, after about a minute or so, the destruction suddenly halted and the world fell silent.

And then, all at once, a pair of double-doors started to open in midair in the dead center of the stairwell.

"FLAMBÉ BARRAGE!"

Said doors were promptly blasted off their hinges by a suit-wearing minotaur slamming through them, his eyes rolled into his head and blood flying from his mouth on account of the blazing volley of flaming arcs of air that were slamming into his chest. Said arcs were being launched from the blazing leg of the blond cook who followed the minotaur through the dimensional gap moments after him before the hole could fade into nonexistence.

Satisfied with his assault, Sanji flipped and landed on one of the intact railings in the stairwell, taking the reprieve to draw a cigarette and his lighter from his pockets, his previous cigarette having been ashed over the course of his assault.

"You damn slippery bull..." he growled to himself, glaring up over his shoulder towards Blueno's falling form as he flicked a flame out of his lighter. "You made me miss out on a chance to covertly check out the room of the beautiful Kalifa."

In spite of his rage, Sanji looked away as Blueno reached the apex of his arc and started to fall, taking a calming drag from his cigarette before sighing out a cloud of smoke. "But, then again, I suppose it just can't be helped. After all..."

Blueno's smoking body smashed into the ground floor of the tower in a heap, shattering the
stonework into dust. He didn't get back up.

"This prince is already occupied with saving his fair lady."

-0-

On the island of Enies Lobby, there was a tower. Inside the Tower of Justice was a room. That room, which belonged to Jabra of CP9, was decorated in the manner of the great gardens of the country Wano. At its best, it was a serene, beautiful place where Jabra could vent his frustrations when training and missions failed to do so.

One would be hard-pressed to call it beautiful anymore.

The lovingly maintained grass was torn up and shredded, revealing large patches of bare sod. The rest of the plant life in the room had fared no better, reduced to salad and sawdust by cutting force. At least one rock had a massive square-shaped hole going dead center. And, of course, there was the entire ceiling slowly sliding off like the world's largest Jenga piece.

And about fifteen feet to the left of center was the culprit of this devastation: a whirlwind of steel, razor air, and one massive square nose. A great swordsman once said, "Without subtlety, a sword is but an iron bar." The duel between Zoro and Kaku held no such subtlety by this point. Three-sword style, Four-sword Giraffe style, both discarded for good old hack and slash. Each blow was a killing blow, each parry attempted to break the sword that landed on it. It was the swordsman equivalent of a back-alley brawl.

And it was a brawl Kaku was losing.

Not quickly, mind you. Why, to the eyes of most casual observers, it looked like he wasn't even losing at all. But the eyes of an astute watcher would notice one crucial fact: Zoro was on the offensive, and he was controlling the pace of the fight. The giraffe-man's every action was a reaction, and he was giving ground.

Still, he had a plan. As he slowly retreated, he drew his neck in, ostensibly to increase the reach of his limbs to better defend against the relentless onslaught he was being subjected to. And that did help, Zoro's slashes falling further away from his soft underbelly. But it was still only a delay; Kaku had a much more offensive move planned.

Finally, it was enough. His nose shot out like a cannon shot, the shout of "GIRAFFE BLAST!" ringing out, and smashed into Zoro's crossed swords with a massive metallic clang. The pirate grunted, the muscles in his arms bulging, and with a roar he threw Kaku to the side, the giraffe-man rolling.

"Do you know what the definition of insanity is?" Zoro growled, sheathing Kitetsu and Yubashiri. "Trying the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. Two-Sword Style…"

Before Kaku could pull up his guard again, his opponent was on him, swords ready to flash from their sheaths.

"—Castle Gate!"

"Tempest Kick!"

Sadly, the blast, instead of hitting vulnerable Iron Body, skittered off the roaring winds of Kaku's favorite of the Six Powers.
"And I could say the same to you," Kaku retorted, landing back on his feet. "As I said before: it's up to me whether I catch an attack with Iron Body or not." And with that, he hopped onto his hand and began spinning his body around, the Sky Slicer starting to form around the arc.

"Tch," Zoro grunted, re-drawing his swords and pulling them back. "You're wide open like that! 108 Caliber Phoenix!"

"Sky Slicer!" Kaku called out as he hastily aborted the attack, though the wind already gathered was more than sufficient to cancel out the incoming Phoenix.

As Kaku flipped back on his feet, the two fighters evaluated their options. The number of attacks available to them capable of punching through Iron Body—'And wasn't that a fine thing to discover mid-battle!' Kaku thought bitterly as his hoof throbbed in memory—had been essentially expended already. And as for trying to remain mobile to deny him the usage of Iron Body… well, that was a doomed tactic for any assassin worth their salt, as proven by the earlier clash.

True, the agent could try to turn the fight into a battle of escalation, pumping more and more sheer power into his attacks until he overwhelmed the pirate…

Kaku gave the swordsman a once-over before shivering heavily. But no; young though his abilities might have been, he still had some measure of animal instincts in him, and they were all roaring at full cylinders that trying to go blow for blow with his opponent was a thoroughly bad idea.

So, if mobility, ability, and strength were out, then all that was left was…

Zoro blinked in surprise as Kaku shrank back down to his human form, but he didn't let the tension leave his stance.

Kaku leveled a firm gaze at his opponent. "It's clear that we're not getting anywhere with the pace we're going at, and considering what's on the way to the island right now, I think it would be in our best interests to finish this. I propose that we both drop our Iron Bodies…” He raised his two swords. "And we put our energies into one final sword technique. The winner walks away, and the loser falls."

Zoro took only a second to process that before smirking. "I accept," he growled eagerly.

Kaku nodded and brought up his swords, arms held wide and tips pointed inwards. Zoro reciprocated, putting the hilts of his handheld swords together, the blades pointing clockwise, one in a standard grip and the other in a reverse grip. For a tense moment, neither of them moved, and then Kaku surged forward with the fastest Shave he could muster.

"Three-Sword Style…” Zoro announced, spinning his swords in a circle.

Mid-Shave, Kaku spread his swords out, blades pointing in, and activated his Iron Body to take whatever attack was coming. And he had a little something extra planned for once he launched his own attack.

"Secret Technique…”

Kaku was just launching his attack, swords moving in…

"Three Thousand Worlds!"

And then Kitetsu flashed down out of the spin, shattering his swords like spun glass. Yubashiri came around the next second, carving through his Iron Body like so much wax paper and opening him up
from hip to collarbone. Wado Ichimonji adding another cut over his chest was just salt in the wound.

Kaku hit the ground shoulder-first, flipping onto his back and reverting back to his human form before coming to a stop. For a few seconds, he just lay there, gasping and panting in pain. He had lost.

"You... You knew that I... cheated..." the Giraffe-man wheezed. "You knew that... I'd use my powers... that I'd use... Iron Body... how—?"

"Because while you definitely have real skills, you're not a swordsman," Zoro calmly replied as he drew his bandanna from his head and sheathed his swords. "Not a swordsman first, at any rate. Above all else, you are an assassin. That means you let neither pride nor honor stand in the way of your victory."

Kaku was silent for a moment as he stared upward before allowing a smile to part his lips. "Heh... he chuckled grimly. "Yeah, that's... about the right of it. Fat lot of good—ergh!—it did me this time around..." The assassin lapsed into silence for a moment before turning a bittersweet smile on Zoro. "You didn't even... use your full strength... did you?"

Zoro regarded him for a second before hanging his head with a sigh as he scratched the back of his head. "Sorry about that, I just wanted the fight to last longer. For what it's worth? You were the best fight I've had in a long time."

"Heh... heheh..." Kaku coughed up a mouthful of blood as he chuckled. "High praise, coming from you... at least I can say... I still have my pride." He shifted around a bit before frowning in annoyance. "Ah... could you reach into my jacket? Left breast pocket, it's—ugh!—where my key is. I'd get it myself... but my arms, well..."

Wordlessly, the green-haired swordsman moved over to Kaku, his guard not faltering despite the apparent helplessness of the assassin. But as he withdrew the key from the specified pocket, Zoro's expression lightened somewhat.

"Looks like you have more honor than I gave you credit for," he said. And with that, he rose and began walking away, out of the ruined garden. But as evidenced by the giraffe-man speaking up, again, his ex-opponent wasn't unconscious yet.

"I... I have no doubt that I'm only entertaining this... because of how I think that there's more blood... outside of my body than in it. But... I don't suppose... you have an open space on your crew?" Kaku's smile took on a pessimistic overtone. "I... think there's a very good chance that I might be out of a job."

Zoro paused for a moment before shooting a half-smirk over his shoulder. "While I'm sure that Luffy would let you join if you really wanted to, the fact is that we've already got someone lined up for the position you're most likely thinking of. And this might be a bit unusual for me, but... I'll admit that he's pretty cool. In fact..." His smirk became a full-blowed grin. "I'd even go so far as to say he's downright super."

And with that, Zoro resumed walking towards the exit from the devastated room.

Kaku stayed quiet for a moment as he processed the parting statement before allowing a bloody chuckle to escape. "Heh... heheheh... I-I guess..." he giggled to nobody in particular. "That today... just really isn't my day, huh? Heheh, heheheh!"

Whether by chance or by divine intervention, an ordinary, everyday rooster chose that exact moment
to flap over and perch itself on the tip of the assassin's nose.

This twist of fate only made him laugh harder for the last few seconds of consciousness he had left.

-o-

Carue clenched his beak together as Funkfreed's razor-edged trunk swept through where his head had been milliseconds before. The tusks, just as sharp, proved just as ineffective. Unfortunately, as good as his dodging was, it was all he could do. His claws had proven themselves to be completely ineffectual against the elephant-sword's thick, steel-hard hide, and after the first time his Shave-charge had bounced off of Funkfreed's skull, he had proceeded to fill the length of the bridge with his serpentine bulk and block every avenue of attack.

'I guess he's the bodyguard of someone of that much authority for a good reason,' the duck reflected sourly.

"That's right, Funkfreed! Don't give that overgrown duck even an inch!" Spandam cheered.

As much as Spandam's voice grated at Carue's ears, it also served to help goad him on, his mind flying at a million miles an hour in an attempt to devise some way around the living sword before it was too late—

"AH!"

Only for his thought process to slam to a halt when a pained cry cut through the pandemonium of the bridge.

'Vivi!'

Carue didn't even hesitate for a second before turning on his heel and tearing down the Bridge of Hesitation, the world slowing to a halt as he pushed his body to the limit and dashed through the masses of Marines towards his charge.

'I need to protect Vivi, I need to protect Vivi!' Over and over, the mantra that he'd drilled into his head since he was a chick rang through his skull, pushing the Supersonic Duck even faster. Within less than a minute, he was within eyesight of his friends. His claws bit into the stone of the bridge, tensing for a Shave that would put him right next to her.

'I need to protect—!...eh?'

And then, he actually looked at the scene before him, and the mantra fell away. The reason for this was that while Vivi had managed to accrue a small collection of cuts, scrapes, and bruises on her person, every single one of them was minor. Even the major wound in her gut, despite its size and apparent severity, was clearly not hampering her in the least, as the way she was systematically cutting down any Marines that approached her attested to.

Even as he watched a fireteam of Marines charge her, Carue could already tell what they couldn't and didn't: they were already defeated the instant they decided to stand against her. And as Vivi's Lion Cutters wrapped around them and tore through them, an epiphany happened to strike Carue.

'I don't need to protect Vivi…' he thought, the realization hitting him like one of Eneru's thunderbolts. 'Vivi's gotten stronger. She's strong enough that she can handle herself. I… I don't need to protect her.' And then another realization hit him, in quick succession. 'I don't need to protect her. The ones I need to protect…'
His left foot, on the fifth push of the Shave, slammed into the stone in just such a manner that he spun on his other talon, turning a full 180 degrees and glaring daggers at the elephant-sword that was standing in his path.

"Aye need…" Carue snarled, determination blazing in every fiber of his being. "TO PWOTEECT MY FWIENDS!"

And with that, Carue slammed ten steps into the pavement at once and launched himself forward with a furious squawk. He then repeated the process with his other leg, only that time he put in twelve steps at once. Then thirteen from there. Then fifteen, and then twenty, each successive Shave faster and more powerful than the last.

And then the duck hit thirty steps at once and the air around him snapped, the pressure wave and noise flinging almost fifty-four, fifty-five Marines off their feet. Vivi and Conis exchanged shocked looks at the development before electing to take full advantage of the subsequent gap to storm further down the bridge after the duck, who was now speeding straight for the opponent he'd abandoned.

Funkfreed blinked at the display in shock, closing his eyes for a fraction of a second—

"SUPAHSONIC!"

And then time froze for the sword as it opened its eyes and Carue was right there, hanging before his face, talons extended and rocketing right at his forehead.

Funkfreed hastily flexed his forehead, his hide reflecting a flash of eternal sunlight as it hardened into steel.

"KICK!"

SKRANG!

And then all movement on the bridge froze as all eyes were drawn to where Carue's talons were planted in the dead center of Funkfreed's forehead. For a moment, the world stayed perfectly frozen, as if it were all a picture.

And then Carue fell onto his ass while Funkfreed stayed standing.

A moment of silence, and then Spandam broke out into a mad cackle. "WAHAHAHAAAAHA! Well done, Funkfreed, well done! You see that, you stupid pirates?! You bastards never had a chance of beating… an…"

Spandam trailed off in horror as his sword started to keel over with agonizing slowness, the change of angle displaying both the whites of his insensate eyes and the pair of talon-shaped dents in his skull.

The Zoan-weapon didn't even fall halfway when he suddenly disappeared, a single badly-dented sword with tusks at the hilt and a tail-like tassel clattering to the ground where he once stood.

Spandam stayed frozen even as Carue pushed himself onto his legs, shaking but still standing. He then flinched in terror as the duck pinned him with a determined glare.

"You'we next," the Captain of the Supersonic Duck Squadron declared venomously. He took a step forward—and then promptly collapsed beak-first with a cry of pain. "WAGH!"

"CARUE!" Vivi screamed.
"W-What the—!?" Carue squawked painfully, agony shooting through his body from his talons up. He tried to push himself up with his wings but collapsed again when the leg he tried to support himself with gave out with a sickening crack. The duck stared over his shoulder in equal parts agony and naked horror. "OW! My wegs! D-Damn it, m-my wegs just bwoke!"

"Damn it…" Conis cursed under her breath as she took in the Marines who were starting to get their nerve back. "Hang on, Carue, we'll be right there!" So saying, she made to heft her Burn Bazooka, only to drop it with a cry of pain when her arm suddenly fell slack mid-motion. "GAH!"

"Conis! What's—!?" Su took one look at her friend's arm before stiffening fearfully. "Your shoulder just jumped its socket!"

"Grrghh…" Conis ground out as she clutched her throbbing shoulder. "Heartwarming gift or not, I'm starting to think that that damn Reject Dial was more trouble than it was worth…"

Spandam was quick to recover his ego and don a malicious grin as he flung his head back. "Oh, now this is just perfect! WAHAHAHA—Eh?" He blinked in surprise as he realized something. "Huh… looks like I can move again." He stared blankly at his hands for a second before sneering and casting his arm out. "KILL THEM ALL!"

"No! Leave them alo—ah!" Vivi's command was choked off as she collapsed to the ground, as though her strings had just been snipped out from above her.

"Vivi!" Carue squawked fearfully.

"Ah, w-what—!?" Vivi squirmed fruitlessly as she tried to force something, anything at all to move. "M-My body! It won't move, I-I-I can't do anything!"

"Oh, perfect," Su groaned as she dragged a paw down her face. "The newfound superpower you've been spamming for the past five minutes has an unexpected drawback. Because of course it does. Hands up, who didn't see this coming? AND I WASN'T ASKING YOU!" she snapped at the few Marines who actually raised their hands, though she was quick to recoil when their comrades leveled their weapons at her. "Ah… actually, if I may rephrase that—?"

"Soldiers!" Spandam barked through a sadistic grin as he raised his arm. "On my mark, kill the Straw Hat Pirates!"

"NO!" Robin pleaded, jerking desperately against the soldiers holding her.

Spandam's grin was nothing but pure evil as he turned his attention to his captive. "Nico Robin," he drawled venomously. "Allow me to officially welcome you to Hell."

And so, in spite of Robin's cries, he started to swing his arm down and the orders were just about to leave his lips—

"THE ONLY PERSON GOING TO HELL TODAY IS YOU, FUCKFACE!"

When he was brought up short by a furious voice roaring through the air.

"What the—!?"

CRUNCH!

"—GWARGH!"
The next moment, a pair high-velocity metal boots collided with Spandam's face.

Everyone present stared in shock as the Director of CP9 was sent tumbling ass over teakettle, glaring between his legs at the person who'd just landed on the bridge.

Jeremiah Cross snorted proudly as he readjusted the brim of his cap. "Dynamic. Entry," he enunciated clearly.

-0-

Well, *that* had been a heck of a start to the finale of this little crusade of ours.

As if hanging off of Franky's back while he and Boss scaled the side of the Bridge wasn't blood-pumping and gut-wrenching enough, we'd arrived at the top to the sight of our friends coming damn close to getting executed.

Thankfully, Franky and Boss combined were more than strong enough to throw me at a certain piece of human filth before he could give the order. Now *that* had been a wild and *damn* cathartic voyage.

As for my three companions, weeeell…

"BARRACUDA BARRAGE!"

"WEAPONS LEFT!"

"CHERRY BLOSSOM BLAST!"

Suffice to say that they were currently occupied with securing our vanguard's safety.

"Weeeell, look at this!" Boss proclaimed, his grin face-splitting as he spun his rope-dart at his side. "Looks like we got here just in the nick of time! What does that make us?"

"Big Damn Heroes, Boss," Franky laughed, the capitalization clearly audible as he slammed his fists together.

"Ain't we just?" Soundbite and I said in unison. Soundbite then turned his eyestalks to glare murderously at Spandam. "Cut her loose."

"'Ou… 'Ou bastards," Spandam slurred through his compacted face as he struggled to get back up into a sitting position. "Do 'ou even 'ow what yer doin'? Dat woban id a debon!"

"Yeeaaah…" Soundbite drawled as he nodded his head side to side before glancing at Robin and grinning. "But she's our demon." He then snapped his teeth at Spandam. "SO CUT HER THE HELL LOOSE."

I grinned at the display for a moment before shaking my head. "Nah, nah, he doesn't need to bother. I got this." With that, I walked up to Robin and grabbed her cuffs. "C-Cross—!" she started shakily.

"Shhh," I hushed her as I looked her restraints over and confirmed that they were the number 5 pair. "You can say what you want once you're free. For now? This is about to get impressive. Watch this."

I then stood up, turned around and shot my hand into the air, five fingers spread and palm facing
towards the Tower of Justice.

Usopp adjusted his goggles in order to confirm what he was seeing before leaning over so that he could shout down into the Tower through the hole he'd opened in the roof. "SHE'S WEARING NUMBER FIVE!"

"GOT IT!" Nami called up before blowing a whistle and waving down the tower's central shaft. "KALIFA HAD NUMBER TWO, WE NEED NUMBER FIVE!"

"BLUENO HAD THREE, NAMI-SWAN!" Sanji called out from a dozen floors below. "MOSSHEAD, WHERE ARE YOU?"

"GOT IT RIGHT HERE!" Zoro shouted - from the ground floor.

"THE HELL!? I THOUGHT THAT THE DAMN GARDEN ROOM WAS ABOVE ME! HOW DID YOU EVEN—!?"

"OH, SHUT THE HELL UP, THIS DAMN PLACE IS CONFUSING!" Zoro roared indignantly. "ANYWAY…" He clutched the key in his fist and reared his arm back. "CATCH, SHITCOOK!"

The swordsman unwound and shot the small sliver of metal at the chef like a certain geezer's cannonballs.

Sanji bit back a curse as he caught the key a few inches from his face. "Son of a—! Damn crazy mossheaded—!" He was quick to recover and get his mind back on track, balancing the key on his foot. "COMING TO YOU, NAMI-SWAN!" he shouted up before snapping his leg out and passing the key up the tower.

Nami caught the key with a mitt of Iron Cloud and promptly used her free hand's thumb to aim as the cloud flowed from catch to throw in one smooth motion. "ALL YOURS, USOPP!"

The sniper held his slingshot in the path of the key, catching it in the pouch and grabbing it as it snapped back before lining his shot up with the Bridge.

"One more shot from the King of the Snipers…" Usopp grinned to himself as he let his projectile fly.

I snapped my fist shut around the key the second it slapped into my hand. Then, in one fluid motion, I bent down, inserted the key into the cuffs and turned it, clicking the lock open.

Robin stared in shock as the restraints clanked to the ground. "Ah…" she whispered numbly as she held her wrists up and flexed her fingers.

"Wha—!? Z-Zad's nod bozzible! Y-You bazztards muzt have—!"

BOOM!

"—UGWARGH!"

I shot a grateful thumbs-up at our covering sniper before grinning confidently as I picked the cuffs up and spun them around my finger. "And that," I gloated. "Is how we roll." I then tossed the cuffs up and held my bag open, allowing the sea prism stone (I had to fight to keep myself from cackling gleefully at that little tidbit) to drop into it with a clank. "And don't you ever dare to forget it!"
Robin jerked as the sound apparently snapped her out of her reverie before shifting uncomfortably, glancing away as she rubbed her arm. "Cross… about Water 7, what I did—!

"Before you say anything," I interrupted her as I dug a bundle of leather out of my bag and plopped it on her head. "Here."

Robin's head flinched under my hand and reached up to feel just what I'd put on her, snapping her gaze up in shock as she grasped her cowboy hat. "T-This is—!

"You forgot it, before this mess started," I explained with a casual smile. "Don't lose it again, alright?"

A swirl of emotions swept over Robin's face, tears welling up in her eyes. "Cross—"

"Hey," I interrupted her as I grasped her shoulders. "No tears right now, alright? There'll be plenty of time to get weepy and sappy and whatever the hell else we can blackmail you with later. But right now, what we need is for you to be the cold as steel, tough as nails badass bitch we've all grown to know, hate and love in equal measure. You think you can do that?"

Robin stared at me a moment longer before bowing her head with a wry chuckle. "…You are a real piece of work, Jeremiah Cross…"

She then glanced over her shoulder and a chorus of snaps, cracks, and screams heralded busy days for the Marines' doctors.

"But," Robin smiled as she stood up, holding her hat in place. "I do believe that I can manage that."

I nodded proudly as I patted her shoulder. "That's what I hoped you'd say. But for now, if you'll excuse me…" I slammed my fist into my palm with a sadistically eager grin as I turned to address the source of the pained groans starting to waft through the air. "I am about to seamlessly mix business and pleasure so that your own experience might be all the more enjoyable. You mind?"

Robin eyed my target for a moment before bowing her head with a smirk. "Oh, no, please, I absolutely insist."

"As you say," I bowed exaggeratedly before walking towards Spandam's stirring form, Soundbite's powers amplifying the sound of my footsteps. The… individual slowly raised his head in horror as I drew near enough to see the separations on the leather straps of his mask. I grinned cheerily as I snapped up a mock-salute. "Howdy. Remember me?"

"You…" Spandam's eyes widened in recognition. "J-Jeremiah Cross—! You're—!

"The guy who burned Pluton's blueprints in cold blood and who has systematically ruined your life over the past hour?" My smile took on a bloodthirsty overtone as I tilted my head just so. "Yes. Yes, I am."

Spandam's expression slowly contorted into one of fury. "You… You son of a—!"

"EVIL suit-wearing LEATHER-ASS STRING BEAN SAY whaaat?!!"

The scumbag in question blinked in confusion. "Wha—"

CRACK!

"GAWRGH!" Spandam howled in agony as the toe of my greave slammed into his chin.
"My turn," I chirped pleasantly as I leaned over and hauled him up by his collar. "Hello, Spandam. What say we chat, hm?"

"By jaw…" Spandam gurgled painfully. "Ou bwoge by jaw…"

"Ooooh, Spandam, Spandam, Spandam," I chuckled as I shook my head. "Trust me when I say that that is going to be the absolute least of your worries."

"See, I've known about you for awhile, Spandam, and I've thought long and hard about what I'd do to you if I ever happened to run into you," Cross stated, his voice devoid of any emotion but a hard, malicious kind of glee. "And as I've thought about you, I've come up with oh so many possibilities, oh so many ways I can punish you for every last second that you have perpetrated the inexcusable crime of existing. Let's read off a few, shall we? We'll start with the basics: I could simply beat you to a pulp that not even your rat-bastard of a father could love. I could have Soundbite practice his Gastro-Blast on you until your whole body is jelly or his voice gives out, whichever comes first. I could have him recite any one of the terrible, utterly horrific sounds he keeps stored in his grey matter on full blast until yours starts dribbling out of your ears. And those are indiscriminate. What say we move on to specific body parts, hm?"

A special kind of malevolent evil slowly started to slide into Cross's expression, and his voice fell into a whisper.

"I could cut off your fingers one joint at a time, and feed them to you knuckle by knuckle. I could use my Flash Dial to burn your eyes out of your head until all you have left are empty sockets. I could use a needle to hollow out every one of your teeth before sticking pins through the cavities and soaking them in vinegar and lemon juice. I could break your jaw, or rather I could re-break it, and then use it to force you to bite off your own tongue. Ah! But, of course, I'd start by pouring molten sand down your throat, in order to muffle that irritating whining you'd be making the entire time that would prevent me from enjoying my work."

Saldeath whistled in awe as he eyed the Impel Down staff room's snail. "Wow. If he wasn't on the other side of the law, I'd consider scouting him for a job. Chances are that he'd make executive in a year, easy."

"You're underselling him. Six months, minimum~❤"

The demon-looking man hummed in agreement as he nodded his head to the side, before pausing and glancing at his fellow executive. "You're taking notes on this? You, of all people?"

Sadi giggled ecstatically as she continued to transcribe everything that the pirate was saying. "But of course! More than half of these ideas are highly novel, and quite possibly effective at that! Didn't you know, Salsy? Being a professional is all well and good, but amateurs will forever be the most dangerous for a reason, you know~❤"

"—And then I would make you eat the salsa," I concluded bluntly, taking great pleasure in my captive audience's terrified whimpering.

"…dude," Soundbite gaped in awe.

"Cross? Color me convinced that you are the scariest person on the crew when you're angry,"
Lassoo muttered fearfully.

"Eh," I cocked my head to the side. "That's an unfair metric, seeing as I doubt that I could hate anyone as much as I hate this particular individual right here. Case in point?" I jerked my head back over my shoulder. "I'm sufficiently pissed off that I could hand you over to Chopper with explicit instructions that he do his worst."

I blocked out the ecstatic squeak our doctor let out at that.

"But!" I snapped a finger up just as Spandam looked like he was about to faint. "I'm not going to do any of that."

Hope blossomed on Spandam's face, and I had to resist the urge to imitate the Cheshire Cat, because oh, man, he had no idea what was coming. And that just made it even more delicious.

"I'm going to do something worse than everything I've said up to this point combined."

There it was. That glorious dawning moment of comprehension adored by sadists and stuffed tigers the world over. I swiftly drew my Vision Dial and immortalized that expression for all eternity before grabbing Spandam's collar and hauling him around so that he had an unobstructed view of the two comrades who'd come to stand behind me.

"I believe you've met my friends, Franky and Nico Robin," I drawled. It was very satisfying to watch Spandam become stark white as the pair loomed over him.

"In case you've forgotten," I hummed indifferently. "You framed Franky and sentenced his mentor to death a few years back, your father destroyed Robin's homeland when she was a child, you've made the past twenty-four hours of their lives a living hell..." I made a show of snapping my fingers in realization. "Oh, yeah, and you personally kicked the shit out of them less than an hour ago."

"Pupupupupupu!" Soundbite chortled ecstatically in a thoroughly chipper and despair-inducing voice, reveling in the fact that Spandam didn't even have the strength in him to shiver anymore.

"LET'S GIVE IT EVERYTHING WE'VE GOT!"

I shoved my hand out, tossing Spandam to the feet of Robin and Franky. Their expressions were shadowed, but I swear that their eyes were shining murderously and that I could see the GOGOGOGOGO~ characters floating in the air above them.

"Have fun, you two," Isang as I waved at them. "And parents back home, fair warning: this is about to become very R-rated."

"IT'S PUNISHMENT TIME!"

And with that, I clamped my headphones over my ears just as the screaming started.

-O-

"Gahahaha! Yeah, that's right! Give it to him, pound him to pieces!" Genzo cheered exuberantly as he swung his fists through the air. He then made a grab at his side - and blinked in confusion when he only hit air. "Eh? Where the hell'd my sake go?"

"Right here," Nojiko deadpanned as she swished the bottle in her grip. "And before you even think of protesting, even if this is as cathartic as when Nami sent that rat-bastard flying, if you didn't notice me taking this from you, then you're drunk enough already."
"Ergh… yeah, alright, maybe you have a—HEY!" Genzo barked indignantly as Nojiko knocked the bottle back.

"Pwah!" The tangerine farmer blew out a hearty sigh as she put the bottle down. "What? I said that you're drunk enough. I'm just getting started."

"Tsk…" Genzo scoffed, looking away. "I told Bellemere that she wouldn't make a good—!" CLONK! "OW!"

"DON'T TRASH TALK THE DEAD!"

"SHE WAS MY DAMN DRINKING BUDDY, I'LL TALK ABOUT HER HOWEVER I DAMN WELL PLEASE!"

"YOU OLD—!"

"HEY, WHAT ARE YOU DOING WITH THAT SPORK?! AAAAAHHH! AAAAAHHH! AAAAAHHHHHH!"

The two briefly ceased their argument as Spandam's agonized wails reached new levels, and both wondered what exactly was happening.

-o-

Allow me to be perfectly frank: the first several seconds of the unmitigated beating were beyond cathartic, true as true can be, but I soon felt a bit of a sweatdrop hang off my temple as I realized that, well… they weren't stopping. Like, any time soon. Which meant that this was getting… let's say awkward.

"Sooo, ah, guys?" I spoke up with a nervous chuckle as I scratched the back of my neck. "I'm gonna just, ah… check on our friends? You know, if that's alright with you?"

The only response I received was a glass-shattering, high-pitched falsetto scream.

"I think that THAT'S ALRIGHT with them," Soundbite chuckled nervously.

"Aye!" I squawked in agreement as I spun on my heel and dashed over to our friends.

"Lordy lordy," Boss whistled in awe, watching the morbid spectacle even as he continued to use a Marine Lieutenant's head as a punching bag. "I didn't know human limbs could bend that way!"

"Eh… seriously?" Su cocked her eyebrow in confusion as she watched from atop an insensate pile of Boss's handiwork. "Shouldn't that be, like, blindingly obvious?"

"No, I mean, I didn't know it could bend that way and stay attached."

"Ahhh… yeah, I see your point. Resilient little fucker, isn't he?"

"The nastiest cockroaches always are," I commented drolly as I walked by them. I then focused on where Chopper was tending to our vanguard. "Ladies, duck… you look like shit."

"I'd teww you to fawk off, but I feew wike it too…" Carue groaned as he massaged his newly bandaged legs.

"I'm not surprised, considering you broke every single bone in your legs in three places each, WITH MICROFRACTURES COATING THE REST!" Chopper snapped as he rammed a syringe into the
I gave a light cough, drawing his attention back to me. "Prognosis, doc?"

"Oh, hey, Cross," he waved his hoof absently as he stood up and walked back to the other two. "You've heard about Carue's injuries, but Conis and Vivi are in better shape. Conis just has a dislocated shoulder and some bruises, and aside from exhaustion, which I fixed with a supplement, Vivi just has a flesh wound. I'm afraid that that will scar, by the way."

Vivi nodded her head with a groan as she waved him off.

"Anyway…" Chopper turned his attention to our gunner as he shifted into his Heavy Point. "Conis, just hold your arm in place and I can get you a sling in—"

"The bone isn't actually broken, right?" Conis confirmed as she reached behind her back. "The joint is still intact, it's just dislocated?"

"Ah…" Chopper blinked in confusion. "Yeah, the bone looks to be fine, why do you a—?"

CR-CRACK! "GRGH!"

Chopper cut himself off and gaped silently for a second before pinching the bridge of his nose with a groan. "Tell me you did not just do that. Tell me that you did not just RESET YOUR OWN DAMN SHOULDER USING A RIFLE AS A LEVER."

"Sorry, Chopper," Conis apologized with a sheepish grin as she wound a roll of gauze around her shoulder. "But Captain McKinley would have my beret if I let something like a loose shoulder stop me for more than a minute, and I will not disrespect the corps."

"…If I see one more instance of back-alley quackery performed before me today, I swear to EVERY LAST DIVINITY IN EXISTENCE—!"

"So, Vivi!" I yelped hastily, hoping to divert Chopper's mind from any thoughts of retribution. "How are you feeling? The heck happened to you, anyway?"

"Ah…" Vivi started, before wincing as she rubbed her throat. "Ah, bit dry. Do you have anything to —?"

"Ah…" I spent a second patting myself down, but then I snapped my fingers as a thought struck me. "OH! I know!" I turned towards the melee. "Hey, Franky! You got anything to drink, or—?"

THWACK!

"YEOW!" I yelped, clutching my skull where a metal flask had bounced off of it. Impressively enough, it actually landed in Vivi's lap. "Owww… thanks anyway!"

"MY RIBS ARE IN MY EYES! THEY'RE IN MY EYES!"

"You don't deserve eyes!" I yelled back. I then eyed Vivi as she took a swig from the flask. "Feeling any better?"

Vivi coughed a bit in order to clear her airways before nodding thankfully. "Yeah. Cola works wonders on sore throats."
"Oh, that's cola?" I perked up eagerly and held my hand out. "Give it here, I'm parched!"

Vivi conceded absentmindedly before giving me a quizzical look. "Ah, Cross… are you at all familiar with a technique that lets someone overpower everyone around them using nothing but their own willpower?"

I paused as I was about to take a sip and eyed her in confusion. "Er… yeeees? What I'm wondering is how the hell you know about it. That's not exactly public knowledge there, princess. Or, well…” I shrugged with a grin. "It wasn't until you made it public knowledge, anyway!" I chuckled to myself as I took a swig from the flask. Mm-mmm! Eat your heart out, Coca-Cola, once you go Grand Blue, you never go back!

"Well, you see, Cross," Vivi said, hesitantly scratching the back of her head. "The reason I know about it and the reason I'm asking is that whatever that power is, I apparently have it."

"PFFFFFT! GACK! HACK!" I promptly sprayed my drink everywhere and started wheezing desperately, on account of the liquid going down every which pipe save for the right one. "SCRAMBLE! SCRAMBLE!" I yelped as I desperately slapped at Soundbite's shell.

"Ow, OW! WATCH IT, no need to insist! YOU'RE IN THE CLEAR!"

"There is very much need to—!"

THWACK!

"OW!" I yelped as a metal fist bounced off of my skull.

"STOP WASTING MY DAMN COLA, JACKASS!"

"FOCUS ON THE SCUMBUCKET, PERVERT!" I roared back before snapping my attention to the half-nervous, half-peeved, all wet princess. "Vivi, what in the blue, wet and utterly insane hell are you talking about!?

Vivi blinked before starting to talk. "I… Robin must have provoked Spandam somehow because he was holding a gun to her head and he was going to blow her brains out. I was thinking about how I shouldn't be powerless to help my friends, powerless to do anything but watch them die… and something just…" Vivi snapped her fingers demonstratively. "Snapped in my mind. I heard myself yell for everything to stop, and… it just happened. Su thought that it had something to do with ruler's instinct."

"EH!?" I squawked incredulously as I strangled the air. "You've got to be—! Conqueror's Haki? You have Conqueror's Haki!?"

"Haki? You mentioned that with Satori and Aisa, yes?" Conis asked curiously.

"Mrghgrgr…" I grumbled as I kneaded the bridge of my nose. "Their ability was just Observation Haki; there are three different forms of the ability, and unlike Observation and Armament, which every living being on the planet is born with and can learn to master, you cannot, I repeat, cannot learn Conqueror's; only one in every one million people is capable of utilizing it, and considering that Luffy is one of them, I think it doesn't bear explaining that I did not expect it to manifest in anyone else on the crew!"

"It's… It's dat wawe?" Carue squawked incredulously.

"Considering the fact that the average user is capable of scaring or taming Sea Kings just by looking
them in the eye, and decimating an entire army, just by willing it!" I bit out. "If it wasn't, the World Government wouldn't have survived a day."

"That's a yes, then," Vivi concluded dryly, before shaking her head with a weary groan. "Is there any particular reason why you didn't consider bringing that up while you were spilling your guts on training techniques?"

"Because I asked for instructions on them and I got squat in return!" I flung my arms up in exasperation. "Why do you think I was so pissed at Ace when he left, huh? The hothead stiffed me on Haki instructions, which I really hoped we could get because all three kinds are common knowledge in the New World! And unless a miracle happens, we're not going to meet anyone else who knows and is willing to share the instructions before we hit the end of Paradise."

I shook my head with a weary sigh. "The story never showed the methods in detail, and the only way I've seen people unlock any of the abilities without training, as you experienced yourself, is through massive trauma. Believe me, if I had my way, we'd all be trying to learn it ASAP."

"Ugh..." Vivi rubbed the back of her neck sheepishly. "Well, at least now I can make people listen to me when I really need to, so that's something."

I was drawn up short by that particular statement. "Eh... run that by me again?"

Vivi blinked at me in surprise. "Uh... Yeah, I just focus my willpower on someone, and they obey any order I give them, even if they... don't... that's not what you're thinking of, is it?" she concluded lamely as she took in my poleaxed expression.

"Try 'people keel over foaming at the mouth'!" I moaned in exasperation. I shook my head as I tried to reason things out. "Still, the execution and the basis seem to be the same as Conqueror's, so... maybe this is some kind of branch off of it?" I shook my head helplessly. "I've been gone for a while, who knows what the hell Oda came up with? There's a reason fans call him Goda." I glanced upwards with a weary groan. "For now, however, we have the world knowing that you are apparently one of the chosen few who always manage to achieve greatness, while you yourself are in possession of an absolutely alien ability that even I know nothing about. The day just keeps getting better, don't it?"

"Yes. Yes. It. Does."

I looked over my shoulder with a cocked eyebrow as Robin and Franky approached me with far too satisfied expressions on their faces. I glanced at Soundbite as I slashed my hand across my throat before speaking up. "I take it that you two enjoyed yourselves?"

I made a point of not looking at the twitching pile of meat that was only just not classifiable as a corpse behind them.

"More than you can possibly imagine, Cross," Robin sighed euphorically as she stretched her arms above her head. "I do believe I've just had more fun in the past ten minutes than I have in the past two decades."

"HaHA!" Franky cackled as he folded his arms behind his head. "Not quite so long for me, my family's been good for me over the years, but damn if that wasn't enjoyable! Man, meeting you guys has been one of the best things to happen to me in years!"

"Heheh, glad to hear it!" I nodded contentedly. "Well, now that that's all wrapped up, all that's left is to rendezvous with everyone else and—!"
"Puru puru puru puru! You planned that," Soundbite accused testily.

"I hoped that it would work. Nothing wrong with that!" I smirked as I motioned for him to pick up.

He rolled his eyes before conceding. "KA-LICK! Cross? Usopp here. Nami, Sanji, Zoro and I all won our—OW! Hey, those Marines count, do you know how many headshots and snipers I just took down!? As I was saying, we all won our fights, and we've gotten as many of the valuables as we can carry from here. We're on the Tower's rear dock now!"

"Perfect!" I pumped my fist victoriously. "Alright, you guys hang tight, we'll get to commandeering the ship Spandam was going to use because no way in hell can we pilot a battleship on our own, and come and pick you guys up! Then we wait for Luffy to finish mopping the floor with Lucci, pick up him and our guys back at the train station, and then we're clear! Honestly, barring any major situations, we just might manage to get out of this whole mess scot-free!"

In retrospect, I would have been better off blasting my Impact Gauntlet in my own face than saying that stupid, stupid, stupid sentence. Honestly, how in the world could I have been so utterly brain-dead as to willfully say that out loud? Because that was most certainly the catalyst for Vivi tapping me on my shoulder.

"Cross?" she whimpered fearfully as she stared behind me. "I… think that that counts as a major situation."

Naïve and optimistic as I was, I followed her gaze with the most innocent of confusion and was rewarded for my troubles with the sight of hell itself.

"Ohhh, shibiscuits," I whispered fearfully.

Because really…

What other reaction could a person have to the Gates of Hell themselves starting to open… and the light of an infernal dawn shining through?
Chapter 42: The World Cries Out! Keep Fighting, Luffy, You Can't Lose Now!

“So…I’m going to go out on a limb and say that this is bad?” Usopp gulped, his knees knocking furiously together.

“No shit,” Zoro and Sanji chorused.

The four Straw Hats still in the Tower of Justice stared past the bridge and towards the massive steel horizon, the Gates of Justice. Said Gates were currently in the process of opening. Slowly, but with the inexorable slowness of a glacier. And it wasn’t difficult to figure out why.

“We took too long. The Buster Call is here,” Nami concluded grimly.

“Bit more than a Buster Call, kiddies,” Kokoro noted as she yanked the cork of a bottle out with her teeth. “Check it out.”

As if on cue, a cascade of golden light burst forth from the crack in the doors, causing the pirates to yelp and shield their eyes.

“What the heck?” Nami yelped.

“Ohhhh SHIT!” Cross roared, his voice dripping with terror.

“What is that, Granny?” Chimney asked in awe.

“Engrave this moment into your minds, kids,” Kokoro chuckled melancholically as she poured her drink into her mouth. “Fleet Admiral Sengoku has come down to greet you himself. This here’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Or, well…” She shrugged indifferently. “The last moment of our lives, more like it. Either or.”

“We’re gonna die, we’re gonna die, we’re gonna diiiie…” Usopp whimpered in a half-conscious rerun.

“For once, Usopp? I’m inclined to agree with you,” Sanji muttered as he pinched his cigarette in place. “The Saint of Justice Sengoku himself… shit has just escalated.”

“While this is definitely a problem, I think there’s one other thing we need to address first,” Zoro said grimly, before snapping a furious expression at Kokoro and her family. “WHERE THE HELL DID YOU THREE COME FROM?”

Kokoro responded with a flat expression. “Is this really the time?”

“NOT EVEN REMOTELY!” Cross bellowed over their connection before anyone could say anything else. “SOUNDBITE, HOW MANY SHIPS ARE WITH HIM?”

“Oh… I’LL BE HONEST…” The baby snail started sweating bullets. “I DON’T HAVE A CLUE. The armada goes beyond MY RANGE AT ABOUT THIRTY SHIPS OR SO.”

“FuckfuckfuckfuckFUCK!”

“Just to confirm,” Boss said with more hesitation than he’d ever shown in his entire time on the crew. “We don’t stand half a chance at fighting that many guys, do we?”
“Conshidawing how theyah all fwom Mawine HQ?” Carue deadpanned before bursting into laughter. “HAHAHAHAHA NO. Not even with Wuffy’s schtupidwy high combat wevels.”

“Especially not with Luffy’s help ;” Soundbite groaned miserably. “UNLESS I MISS my guess? GARP THE HERO has also COME OUT TO PLAY.”

Kokoro froze in place, her bottle cracking slightly in her grip. “…Okay, that’s just cheating.”

“…Right, it’s official,” Cross concluded in a strained tone of forced calm. “Matters have just left pear-shaped and escalated to the eldritch topographies of a taco warping through a tesseract.”

That managed to snap Nami out of her stupor. “Cross!” she barked. “Snap out of it! You’re our tactician, you’re the one who handles our plans! Get your head back in the game and tell us what we need to do! That’s an order!”

Cross jumped in shock before slowly nodding. “T-The Gate! We need to get to the controls of the Gates of Justice and lock them shut! T-The gatehouse is on our side, if we can shut the Gates and destroy the controls, the armada’ll be trapped in the Tub Current, and by the time they get around the Gates, we’ll be long gone!”

“That’s perfect!” Nami smiled in relief. “Alright, where are the gate controls?”

“Ah... Ah! I got it! They’re somewhere in the—”

BOOM!

“The hell—!?” Zoro cursed, looking around in confusion as an explosion rang through the air. “Cannon fire? But the Gates aren’t open enough yet!”

“OOOOH NOOOO!” Usopp shrieked fearfully as he pointed out over the water. “LOOK! THE BRIDGE!”

The rest of the invaders followed the sniper’s gaze to where, indeed, a good section of the Bridge of Hesitation was crumbling, and where a gun emplacement on one of the battleships flanking said bridge had smoke streaming out of its barrels.

“Looks like the Marines’ gun crews decided to stay behind on their ships...” Kokoro nervously observed.

“...Third Pillar,” Cross finished weakly. “The controls are on the Third Pillar... and we’re now trapped on the Second and First. We... can’t close the Gates... can’t stop him from coming through...”

“...we just lost,” Su summarized quietly.

The cloud fox’s defeated voice managed to snap something in Nami’s mind, drawing a determined scowl onto her face. “Oh, the hell we did,” she hissed as she started fiddling with the straps over her chest. “Soundbite, where are the controls?”

“The hell are you—?”

“Now!” the Navigator snapped.

“GAH! W-WEST SIDE, TOP FLOOR!”
“Got it,” Nami nodded. She then unslung her Waver, from her back, unfolded it and mounted the seat, revving its Dial Engine in preparation as she scrutinized the agitated waters. “I’ll get over there and flip that switch in a minute flat!”

“EH!? the rest of the Straw Hats exclaimed in shock.

“Nagagaga, you do realize that this is a suicide mission, right?!” Kokoro scoffed incredulously. “Those whirlpools are ship-killers under normal circumstances, but the fact that the Gates are opening is only disrupting things further!”

Sanji glanced fearfully between the bridge and the Navigator before shaking his head in denial. “N-Nami-swan, you can’t go out there!”

The second mate of the Straw Hat Pirates narrowed her eyes. “Watch me.”

And before the cook could stop her, she yanked on her Waver’s accelerator and blasted off into the froth of Enies Lobby’s rear entrance.

Within a second, the sheer difficulty of the task became clear: For all her bravado, the massive whirlpools and the subsequent ripples and waves had her fighting not to keel over from the moment she hit the waters. Nami grit her teeth as she fought to keep her balance. “Ugh… rough waters, typical of Grand Line storms,” she muttered to herself. “Conflicting currents, rip tides galore… this would sink any experienced navigator in the best of ships within seconds…”

As if on cue, the sea suddenly surged up and disgorged a wave three times Nami’s height.

Nami didn’t miss a beat as she ripped up the inside of the surge and burst over the top, sticking the landing without a flinch. She felt her blood start to race, a grin of primal joy crossing her face. “Good thing I’m more than just experienced. I’m the best, damn it!”

And so it was that she continued rocketing towards the third pillar, unfazed by the currents and waves and far too fast for anyone on or beside the bridge to take a shot at her. At least, not if they wanted to hit anything besides ocean. As she approached the structure, the currents started to even out, allowing her to loose one hand from the Waver’s handles and grasp at her Clima-Tact.

What happened next occurred in the space of seconds. A few feet from the pillar proper, Nami swung her staff out and let fly a mass of Eisen Clouds that formed themselves into a ramp leading up the stonework. Then, the second the ramp was complete, she gritted her teeth in concentration and pushed the Dial engine to its maximum throttle.

For the second time in her life, the resulting speed and force born from the Jet Dial’s full power managed to overpower gravity and propel Nami up the sheer wall of the pillar. Granted, the Jet Dial only had enough force and power to keep Nami glued to the wall for a few seconds before it died down, but those seconds were all the time she needed to reach an opening.

Once she was just below the window, Nami snapped the segments of her Clima-Tact around so that they were doubled up and then tossed them ahead of her. The blast of the Cyclone Tempo launched her out from the wall, but before she could go too far, she caught the batons as they boomeranged back and snapped out the section with the Eisen Dial, an arm of iron clouds shooting out at the pillar.

One swift jerk of her fingers was all it took to reel the arm in and ram Nami through the window Waver-first, granting her access to the gatehouse in a shower of broken glass that drew the attention of the small group of Marines—eight, to be exact—stationed within.

The second the Waver’s wheel touched down on the floor, Nami accelerated again and ran down
half of them in a semi-controlled charge before swerving to bleed her momentum off and bring herself to a halt.

Then, without missing a beat, she leapt off her mount and pounced on the nearest Marine, lashing out with her fully extended Clima-Tact. A strike to the gut got one doubled over enough for her to ram her knee into his forehead. From there, a spin of her staff forcefully disarmed the two who’d managed to draw their guns, and a firm smack against each of their temples disoriented them enough for her to flip them off their feet.

The last of them, on the other hand, had enough sense to go for his blade and managed to draw it before Nami could stop him. He tried to cleave her head in two with an overhead swing, but Nami caught the attack with her staff and diverted it appropriately before spinning around him so that she was squarely in his blind side. The soldier tried to spin around to keep track of her, but that just gave Nami the angle she needed to ram her elbow into his jaw and knock his brain for a loop. She followed up with a fist to his nose, which laid him out flat.

The navigator took a moment to get her breath back before lashing her heel out with a grunt of exertion and kicking the blatantly obvious lever in the room into the opposite of its current position.

Nami took a moment to let a sense of victory wash over her as the mechanisms in the room spun and a bone-rattling CLUNK shook the air around her.

Then she had to take a minute to keep from pissing herself when the world and her very existence were rattled by an impossibly loud bellow of “DAMN IT!”

Nami remained frozen for a while longer in the tense silence before shivering. “So happy that we have a literal mountain of metal between him and us,” she muttered to herself. She spared just enough time to frisk the unconscious Marines before blasting out a few bolts of lightning at several important-looking parts of the gate mechanism, before turning towards the direction she knew was south, positioning her staff again—

“Cyclone Tempo!”

And blasting the poor, doomed wall into pieces. Nodding contentedly as sunlight streamed through the hole, she formed another ramp, this one better defined than the last, before re-mounting her Waver, taking careful aim and gunning the engines. With a renewed roar and a burst of hyper-pressured air, the cloud-scooter shot up the ramp and launched her through the air.

Fifteen seconds later, she stuck the landing on the larger remaining portion of the Bridge and skidded to a halt before her stunned crewmates.

Nami propped her fist on her hip as she adopted a smirk. “So,” she purred. “How’d I do?”

The memory of Cross and Soundbite’s jaws all but cracking the Bridge as they unhinged would be one that would stay with Nami for the rest of her life.

-o-

“I… bu-but… y-y-you… a-and the… with… my… you…”

Obviously, it was taking a not-insignificant amount of effort to restart my brain after that. Curb-stomping Kalifa as I knew that she had—not so much as a scratch!—was one thing, but that?

“Abuh… that… and then… COULD SOMEBODY HIT ME PLEASE!?” I finally yelled out.
“Thank you!” I nodded gratefully to Vivi as I rubbed the spot she’d clocked before refocusing on Nami. “And you! What the shit was that?!”

Nami chuckled and shrugged casually, looking infinitely calmer than I had ever seen her. “Kalifa tried using her powers directly on my brain to wash my mind away, but instead she washed away a lifetime’s worth of stress. And I guess it just made me a lot less hesitant about doing things, y’know?”

I goggled at her for a moment more, then blinked. “Uh… does that mean you don’t feel like hitting me?”

Nami scrutinized me for a moment, and then shrugged as she looked back at our opponents. “Eh, for now, anyway. But at the moment!” She grinned eagerly as she popped a thumbs-up. “Now that the Gates are closed and the Marines can’t get to us, how do we—?” She trailed off as she noticed our hesitant expressions. “…what?”

“Yeeaaah, see… that’s the thing,” Soundbite hedged uncomfortably as he gestured with his eyestalk.

Nami slowly turned her head, and promptly winced at what she saw. “…so, some got through, huh?” she said as she observed the titanic silhouettes that were steadily approaching us.

“The vanguard, to be specific,” Boss chuffed as he exhaled a menacing cloud. “That Sengoku fella must really want our heads, because those ships slipped through as soon as there was enough space, and another got its prow crunched trying to go through when you closed it.”

“Just how many are there?” Franky muttered as he thumbed his sunglasses onto his brow.

“Ten in all, carrying ten thousand, four-hundred and twenty soldiers in total,” Soundbite provided grimly. “In command are Vice Admirals Strawberry, Yamakaji, Doberman, Onigumo—”

“And Momonga,” I muttered out under my breath. “The usual suspects… tch…” I then raised my voice as I addressed everyone present. “I suggest that you all get ready, it looks like we’re going to be facing the Buster Call after all.”

A shiver of fear ran through everyone as they exchanged nervous glances.

I then deepened my scowl as another thought came to me, and I looked up and past the approaching assault force. “Of course,” I growled grimly. “That’s only until the rest of the Marines on the other side of the Gates manage to force them open.”

That got everyone to stare at me in shock.

“W-What!?” Nami stammered. “Cross, are you insane?! Those Gates are at least a dozen times bigger than the rest of Enies Lobby put together! Even with Sengoku with them—!”

SKRANG!

We all jumped as a sound akin to an off-kilter gong vibrated throughout the air. We all looked around in confusion for the source of the noise before freezing as one as we noticed it.

Specifically, as we noticed the presence of a fist-imprint the size of a mountain in the, to reiterate, flag-emblazoned metal horizon.
“…Right, what was I thinking? This is the Fleet Admiral of the Marines we’re talking about,” Nami chuckled hysterically.

“I… don’t actually believe that that was Sengoku, Nami…” Robin whispered hoarsely.

Silence reigned for several seconds before Nami managed to force something out. “…eh?”

“Unless I miss my guess… that is the handiwork of Garp the Hero, also known as Garp the Fist.”

“Ah… so, then—?”

**SKRAAAAANG!**

This time, not only did we actually reel from the vibration striking us with a slap of air, but we didn’t even need to try looking for the source.

After all, we’d have to be blind to miss the island-sized palm imprint slightly buckling one of the Gates inwards.

“…now, *that* looks like something Sengoku would do,” Robin concluded lamely.

I silently observed the imprints for a second before cracking my neck to the side. “Well!” I snorted. “At least they’re going out of their way to keep things *interesting*.”

My crewmates simultaneously snapped incredulous looks at me, before each heaving weary sighs of defeat.

“Ugh. Oof course, we should have known that it couldn’t just be as ‘easy’ as beating all these reinforcements, *or* the expected ten battleships,” Vivi bit out as she worked her way to her feet, her words contrasting the wry smile she was sporting. “So, great tactician… what’s the strategy here?”

I took a few moments to run the situation through my head before nodding. “Well, first—!”

**KABOOM!**

I jumped when a massive explosion rang out, and a glance to the side revealed a plume of smoke to be rising from the waterfront, right… where the *seastone fence was SHIT*!

“They’re already starting their bombing run, damn it!” I cursed before snapping a look at Soundbite. “Connect me to the guys still at the Tower, now!”

“—DANCING ACROSS THE STARRY SKY COULD NOT BE AS MAGNIFICENT AND ELEGANT AS NAMI—!”

“Less singing her praises, more *watching your heads!*” I barked urgently.

Sanji blinked in confusion. “Wha—?”

**BOOM!**

…I know. I know that I’ve said it a dozen times before, but you really can’t understand just how much it bears repeating: the manga and anime could not and did not measure up to reality. Only this time… I didn’t feel awe. Or at least, I didn’t feel a *positive* kind of awe. Because really, the sight of half of a thirty-story-tall skyscraper crumbling like a soda can before falling into the abyss… what else could that kind of an image evoke apart from a stab of awe-inducing despair?
Once the remains of the building fell out of sight, all that remained was an all-devouring silence.

“T-The Tower of Justice…” Conis whispered numbly. “It’s… It’s gone…”

“What the hell is this?” Lassoo breathed, his lazy demeanor replaced with sheer incredulity.

“Endgame ,” I bit out before addressing Soundbite. “You guys alright?”

“I see a field, a beautiful field filled with golden flowers… Oh, and there’s my mother, waving for me to come join her…”

“Usopp’s dead on his feet, but other than that, we’re fine,” Zoro replied. “We’re lucky they didn’t aim lower.”

“Oooh, trust me, they will,” I growled venomously as I eyed the ever-advancing fleet of doom. “Look, we’re out of time and options, you guys need to get your asses into the tunnel and make your way to the bridge, ASAP!”

“But wait, what about Lucci?!” Sanji demanded. “Luffy’s still fighting him, right? How are we—?”

“It’ll handle itself!” I interrupted. “Look, you guys trust me, right?”

“Duh.”

“No shit, shit-brain.”

“Hello mother, how have you—OW! Ah, sorry, what did he—? WHAT!? NOT ON YOUR LI—OW! Ergh, I mean yes, fine, I trust you too! Only once in a blue moon, but still.”

“Then trust me now,” I said patiently. “Just go down the passage and you’ll get here safe and sound. Got it?”

“…I’ll lead the way. Stay on my ass, mosshead.”

“Cram it and walk, curly.”

“I still don’t like—! OW! STOP SLAPPING ME, DAMN IT!”

“Nagagaga! This crew just keeps getting more and more interesting!”

“They’re really scary, but really fun!”

“Really, really fun!”

“Oi, hagfish!” I hastily added. “I’m trusting my friends with you, got that? Get them back here safe and sound, you hear?”

That brought Kokoro up short. She blinked in stunned confusion for a second before cackling louder than ever. “NAGAGAGAGAGAAAA! You’re a truly terrifying individual, Jeremiah Cross! I’m glad I’m on your side! Don’t worry, you’ll see them alive… though no promises on quality of life, if you know what I mean.”

“Meh,” I waved my hand casually. “What the hell do I care if they have a little bit of trauma banging around in their skulls? Give ‘em hell, lady!”

“Can do!”
“Wait, ‘hell!’? What the hell are you planning, Cro—!?”

“Talk later! RUN NOW! BYE-BYE!” Soundbite crowed before cutting the connection.

“Alright, alright…” I scratched the back of my neck as I wracked my brains. I could lower the interdiction field, tell the people at the courthouse to—no, easy money that they were high-tailing it already, they didn’t need my help. And if I tried piping in with Luffy, I’d be more of a distraction than anything, so that only left…

“Alright, everyone, listen up!” I barked as I clapped my hands together and wrung them nervously. “As of this moment, we are entering into a war of attrition. These bastards are going to come down on our heads with everything that they have in an effort to break us, but no matter what, we have to hold out. Kick, scratch, bite, what the hell ever, I don’t give a damn. Right now, our only priority is to survive until Luffy beats Rob Lucci—and he will beat Rob Lucci.” I shot the last bit at down at the transceiver with extra emphasis before continuing. “Once Luffy wins, we’ll be free and clear to get the hell out of dodge and leave this hellhole in the dust!”

“And how the hell are we going to be doing that, Cross?” Franky demanded incredulously. “They’ve cut us off from the only other ship here, and you already pointed out we can’t commandeer a battleship! I don’t want to sound like I’ve given up, but right now, I’d say we’re SUPER! screwed!”

Honestly… I knew how Franky felt. How could I not? Battleships bearing down on us, certain death literally knocking at our doorstep. Honestly, it was an impossible situation.

But in spite of all that impossibility… I smiled. A genuine smile, not the least bit strained or mischievous, and that in and of itself seemed to unnerv everyone more than one of my typical smiles would.

And as for why I smiled, well… quite simply, I smiled because I had an image in my head. An immutable image that I had memorized and taken to heart, that I’d been expecting and dreading in equal measure since I’d arrived in this world. I had an image of hope, and so long as I had that image, I would not admit defeat.

I would not do her the disservice of failing her by falling before she arrived.

“We are getting out of here,” I stated proudly.

“Cross—!” Nami started.

“We are getting out of here,” I re-emphasized, pumping as much power and conviction into the words as I could. “I realize that things look bad, that matters have escalated to the point of no return, I do, but I promise you.” I made a point of looking everyone in the eye as I spoke. “Each and every one of you, from the bottom of my heart, I swear to you, we will leave this place. We just need to stand strong, stand firm and stay alive. Once Luffy wins, once the time arrives…” I held up my fist and clenched it firmly. “We are going to leave this place and never come back. And when we do, everyone on the planet will know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that we, the Straw Hat Pirates, fought the Marines, fought the World itself, and won. So,” I spread my arms invitingly. “I ask you: Who’s with me?”

There was a moment of silence as everyone glanced at one another, but I eventually received a reply in the form of a scattered blanket of affirmatives.

Well, that wouldn’t do at all, would it?
“I don’t think you all heard me. I SAID, WHO THE HELL’S WITH ME!?” I roared as I pumped my fist in the air.

“YEAH!” most everyone else roared vigorously as they mirrored my motion.

“Good.” My smile wavered slightly as I looked around. “Because it’s crunch time.”

And indeed it was. While three of the battleships were splitting away and undoubtedly headed for the train station and four were moving to encircle the island proper, the remaining three battleships were slowly but steadily approaching the Bridge of Hesitation and moving to encircle us.

While everyone prepared themselves for battle, I took a moment to glance at what was once Enies Lobby, and I shivered. If the Gates of Justice engulfed one horizon in metal and justice, then the Buster Call was slowly but steadily consuming the other in fire and devastation. It was, to paraphrase Rowling… incredible. Horrific, terrifying and downright sickening, true enough, but there was no other word for the sheer scale than truly incredible.

Hell, the constant bombardment almost managed to cover up the impacts of Garp and Sengoku’s systematic blows on the gates, the rolling rumble of cannon fire shaking me to my—

Wait… shaking!

Oh, fuck.

I hastily ran over to Robin, dropping down to my knees so that I was on her level and grabbing her wrists, dragging her arms away from her temples and forcing her to lock her eyes with mine.

“Robin, Robin!” I barked shaking her slightly in an effort to focus her gaze. “Look at me, look at me, Robin! Don’t look at that, don’t listen to it, ignore it. Look at me, alright? Look at us. This isn’t that place, Robin. This isn’t that place. This will not be like then. You’re not alone, remember? You’re with your friends now, and they are not hurting us; every shot they take is only hurting themselves. We’re here, Robin. We’re all here, every last one of us, and we are not going anywhere, do you hear me?”

For a single terrifying second, I didn’t think I’d managed to pull it off. For a second, all I saw was a little girl shivering in terror and with fire reflected in her eyes. But then she was gone and Robin was back. She was back, and she was smiling and… well, I just couldn’t help myself.

“There it is.”

That drew Robin up short, prompting her to blink in confusion. “Huh?”

I hesitated for a moment before shrugging casually and donning a slight grin. “A smile worth fighting for.”

Robin stared at me with wide eyes before hiccupping up a laugh and lightly knocking her forehead against mine. “Never change, Cross,” she whispered. “Never, never change.”

I breathed a sigh of relief as I leaned my forehead back. “Not on your life.”

We held the position for a bit until I felt the rumblings get closer, at which point I patted her shoulder and drew back. “Now, come on…” I drew Lassoo and held him at ready as I stood up and held my hand out to her. “Let’s go and give ‘em hell.”

Robin nodded proudly as she took my hand and pulled herself to her feet. “Let’s.”
Sadly, while I talked a big game and while I did feel relatively confident, the fact is that anyone would have felt some doubt looming over them in response to the mass of Marines lining up on the titanic battleships’ railings, all ready and raring to charge us.

As we waited, I noticed a certain absence and sent a curious glance Soundbite’s way. “Hey… you’ve been quiet for a while now. Any reason for that?”

Soundbite glanced nervously back at me before darting his eyes away. “Just… looking for something APPROPRIATE TO SAY, YOU KNOW?”

“Oh, right…” I nodded slowly. “Fair enough. You manage to come up with anything?”

Soundbite’s eyes swept the oncoming military titans with a heavy gulp. “How about… today is a good day to die?”

I felt a pit open in my gut at the sound of him of all people saying that, but for the life of me I couldn’t bring myself to refute it. “Yeah… I guess that that fits…”

“Ah, I’m sorry, Cross?” I blinked in confusion as Conis spoke up and got my attention. “I realize that you’re having a conversation, but do you mind if I may say something in response to that?”

“Uh…” I shared a confused glance with Soundbite before shrugging helplessly. “Yeah, I guess? What is it?”

Conis nodded gratefully, before adopting a grim glare and leveling her bazooka at the enemy. “Fuck that,” she spat venomously. “It’s a good day for someone else to die.”

I swear to God that the world itself fell silent at that little display.

And in that silence, I took the time to think.

“…”

“Do you think he’s gonna?” Su asked curiously.

I thought about how far we’d come, not just from Water 7 to here but from the East Blue all the way to here, to this very place.

“…pf.”

“Yup, he’s gonna!” Boss confirmed with a guffaw.

“Honestly, did you expect anything else from him?” Vivi said, shaking her head with a wistful grin.

I thought about what we’d managed to accomplish, I thought about the consequences that resulted from those accomplishments.

“Pffff…”

“Good gwief…” Carue groaned as he slammed a wing to his face.

“Never thought I’d get to experience this firsthand!” Franky laughed as he put his fists up. “Today really is a super day!”

And I thought about the fact that we were about to meet that force head on, with only the strength of our bodies and our backs to support us under the weight of the onslaught.
“PFFFFFFF…!”

“And in five, four, three, two,” Nami counted down fondly as she spun her staff and clouds at her side.

In light of these thoughts, in light of this power and danger, in light of absolutely everything that had occurred over the course of the past twenty-four hours and six months alike…

What other option did I have…

“PFFFFFFHAAHAHAHAHAAHAHAAAAAAA!”

But to throw my head back and roar with gut-rattling laughter.

“PFFHAHAHAAAAAHAHAHA!” I cackled hysterically. “YEAH, CONIS HAS THE RIGHT IDEA! FUCK THAT NOISE! FUCK DYING, FUCK THE BUSTER CALL, FUCK THE MARINES! BUT MOST IMPORTANTLY!?”

I swung Lassoo up and delighted in the terror that suddenly appeared in the eyes of the Marines who I was aiming at.

“Fuck it all,” I whispered rapturously.

And with that, I pulled the trigger, and the world went straight to hell.

-0-

“Come on, guys!” ‘Black Bart’ Bartolomeo roared as he pumped his fist. “I realize that this is scary as all shit, but think about it! At best, this is going to make us even more infamous! And at worst… well, I say that if we’re going down, we do our damnedest to sure that this bitch never forgets us in the process! No matter what happens, let’s make our names live on! A’RIGHT!?!”

“AYE!” bellowed the Barto Club. All were assembled ready to fight, with only Valentine absent due to her… ‘current condition’. All stood ready as the massive twin serpents and the ship they tugged drew near, and all tensed as it stopped beside the Cannibal.

“Alright, everyone…” Bartolomeo shot his fist forward with a roar. “CHA—!”

“Love-Love Beam.”

A wave of presence swept over the deck of the Cannibal, and as a result the vast majority of the Barto Club Pirates literally froze as they were transmogrified into stone.

“—AR—eh?” Bartolomeo paused in place, blinking in confusion as he tried to process what had just happened. And as he succeeded in doing so, his jaw promptly dropped to the deck. “Oh, fuck me.”

“Well, this isn’t good…” Miss Goldenweek muttered as she poked at Mr. 5’s mineral forehead.

“I’m too young to die!” Apis yelped as she flung her arms around her dragon’s neck, a motion that Lindy mimicked fearfully.

“Well, well, well.”

The pirates all froze as a cool voice that absolutely demanded their attention spoke up, and slowly
they turned their attention to the enemy ship.

The Pirate Empress Boa Hancock tossed her hair in a haughty manner as she strode onto the deck of the Cannibal, flanked on both sides by a pair of titanic snake-Zoans in their hybrid forms. “I will admit, Captain Bartolomeo,” she drawled imperiously. “At first, I was… annoyed when the World Government laid the ultimatum before me that I would have to put an effort into attempting to eliminate you and your crew, but now I actually find myself to be quite thankful for this turn of events. After all…” She swept a droll look over the surviving crewmates. “It’s not every day that someone manages to evade the effects of my Love-Love Fruit.”

The Warlord proceeded to cast her head back, waaay back as she looked ‘down’ upon the pirates. “Tell me the secrets of how you resisted my unparalleled beauty, and I shall make your deaths… painless.”

“Otherwise…” Boa Marigold hissed as she slithered across the deck and flanked the pirates. “We’ll be the ones to kill you instead.”

“Trust us,” Boa Sandersonia snickered sadistically as she mirrored her serpentine sister, picking up a stray barrel with her tail as she went. “It will be slow…” She then squeezed her tail and gradually squeezed the barrel to matchsticks. “And it will be nothing short of agony.”

After a minute of hesitant silence, Miss Goldenweek shrugged slightly. “I hypnotize people via a specific painting design I discovered combined with different colors. People are forced to feel whatever emotions the colors signify once it’s attached. One of my techniques is known as Colors Trap: Tranquil Green.” She jabbed her thumb over her shoulder. “And I had it tattooed on my back some time ago, to help me with my focus. Green is a secondary color and is only surpassed by Terror White, which can surpass all other colors, and the primary colors of Rage Red, Sadness Blue, and Laughter Yellow, and even then, only when they’re overwhelming. Lovesick Pink is a tertiary color. With Tranquil Green permanently affecting my emotions, I’m largely immune to such feelings.”

“… Wait, you mean to say that you fuckin’ hypnotically castrated yourself?” Bartolomeo demanded incredulously.

“What can I say?” Goldenweek shrugged indifferently as she drew a rice cracker from her bag and started into it. “Emotions are a hindrance, and I am nothing if not a professional.”

“… right…” Hancock finally stated uncomfortably before shifting her attention to Apis. “And you, child? And your pet as well, seeing as my powers work even upon the non-human.”

The Whisper-Girl flinched slightly at the attention before scratching her cheek uncomfortably. “Ah… well… honestly, the only thing I can think of is that I’m ten. I, ah…” She shrugged helplessly. “And you’re too scary for the more, uh…”

“Platonic forms of love?” Miss Goldenweek helpfully supplied.

“Yes? I think?” Apis nodded hesitantly before continuing. “And as for Lindy, well…” She looked up at the dragon in askance, blinking in confusion. “Ah… I don’t really get it, but according to him, ‘there is no human alive who could possibly comprehend my sexual preference’, whatever that means.”

Hancock blinked in surprise and eyed the dragon curiously before shivering as it adopted an indecipherable leer. “Understandable…” she muttered nervously. She then regained her posture as she shifted her glare onto Bartolomeo. “And what of you, ‘Black Bart’? What is your excuse?”
The fresh attention towards him served to snap Bartolomeo out of the awkward surprise that his unaffected crewmates had provoked. He took in the sight of his crew, his crew, reduced to the statue section of a garden store, and slowly bowed his head, his fists clenched at his sides. “Your powers… they depend on someone being attracted to you, huh?” the shark-toothed man muttered grimly. “Then… I guess that it’s too bad for you; there’s only one person in the world that I’ll ever admire or view with awe, and it ain’t you.”

Hancock cocked an eyebrow in vague disinterest. “Oh? Is that so?”

“Yeah… yeah, it is…” Bartolomeo slowly let a lunatic’s grin split his face. “Y’know… it sucks balls that I’m gonna die here, it really fuckin’ does, but the truth is? I really can’t find it in me to give a rat’s ass. Why you ask?” The light around Bartolomeo’s arms warped and shifted, snapping into a pair of barriers as he snapped a vicious leer at Hancock. “I wound up in this situation for that person’s sake, and if it were all in their name, then I would gladly do it all the fuck over again!”

Before anyone could react, Bartolomeo loosed a howl ripped straight from the very bottom of his soul and charged at Hancock.

“FOR THE NEXT KING OF THE PIRATES!” Bartolomeo roared as he took a flying leap at her, arm cocked back for the mother of all haymakers. “FOR STRAW HAT LUFFY! BARRIER-BAR —!”

In a blur of motion, Hancock’s hand snapped out and grabbed Bartolomeo out of the air by his throat as though he were a passing pigeon.

“—GWAGH!” Bartolomeo gagged as he scrabbled at the iron-hard fingers that were throttling him. “Y-You damn bi—!”

“Be quiet.”

Any motion on the deck of the ship snapped to an immediate halt as everyone, save for the snake Zoans, stared at Hancock in terror.

And for good reason, too: The Pirate Empress’s expression had morphed itself into a mask of authority that was practically gorgonian in nature, her terrible beauty untarnished, but a semblance of some great predator permeating her countenance.

Bartolomeo got it worst of all. For a single second, he swore that he might as well have been a tiny, insignificant rat, clutched in the coils of a world-encompassing serpent, whose fangs were about to devour him whole.

“Explain what you meant,” she intoned frigidly. “When you said that you did this for Luffy.”

Bartolomeo swallowed heavily around the vice grip on his throat, and just as he opened his mouth to answer her—

“Ahhhh, now that was a good nap!”

All attention on the deck shifted again, this time to where a door in the Cannibal had opened and a thoroughly refreshed-looking Miss Valentine had stepped out onto the deck. “Sorry about earlier, everyone. I just got a bit overwhelmed, is all!” She grinned happily. “Turns out, all I needed to get my head back together was some time to cool down! I’m much… bet… ah…”

The ex-assassin trailed off as her eyes swept over the deck. Her petrified crewmates, the enemy ship with the easily recognizable flag next to the vessel, the Warlord of the Seas holding her captain at her
mercy…

She was about to say something…

“Hi, there!”

When the grinning face of one of the massive serpent-Zoans onboard suddenly filled her vision.

“My name’s Boa Sandersonia!” the Amazon stated pleasantly. “It looks like there’s a good chance our crews are gonna become friends! Do you think you could point me to your storeroom? We left Amazon Lily in a hurry to hunt you guys down, so I’m parched!”

Valentine blinked slowly as she processed the words before an utterly broken smile plastered itself upon her face and she fell backwards, her body blissfully fluttering to the ground.

Sandersonia blinked in surprise before shooting a sheepish smile at the rest of the people present. “I think I might have broken her. Sorry?”

“Meh, it’s not your fault,” Goldenweek droned as she bit into a rice cracker. “She’s had a rough few hours.”

“I can only imagine…” Marigold muttered dryly as she watched her sister poke at the ex-assassin.

-0-

“Oooh my. They’re gettin’ quite worked up down there, aren’t they?”

These words, while drawled in a carefree manner and utterly innocuous in nature, were spoken by a rather unique individual.

Said individual was about fifteen feet in height, lanky in such a manner that he appeared both non-threatening and menacing, and was clad in a bright yellow striped suit.

Said individual was also standing on a relatively out-of-the-way part of the deck of a battleship that was over a mile out from Enies Lobby’s Bridge of Hesitation, observing the ongoing conflict with only the most wishy-washy kind of interest.

Said individual’s name and title were Admiral Borsalino, codename Yellow Monkey, ‘Kizaru’.

“Hooo…” the Admiral whistled appreciatively as a particularly sizeable explosion blossomed on the deck, downing about two or three dozen Marines at once. “They’re really givin’ it their all, huh? And they’re only Paradise pirates? Geeze, this new generation is proving itself to be filled with nothing but the scariest of Monsters, ain’t it?”

“‘Monsters’? Pch, what, ya ain’t heard yet, Monkey-boy?”

Kizaru glanced over his shoulder and observed as another Marine, this one a Vice Admiral with a massive grin and a lit cigar, strode up to stand by him. “Hey, Yama.”

“There’s more than just ‘Monsters’ down there, Monkey,” Vice Admiral Yamakaji continued as he watched the fight. “Apparently, that there crew’s got its own fair share of ‘Demons’, too.”

“Hooo…” Kizaru shook his head slowly. “Monsters and Demons… what scary, scary people.”

“Yeah, some of the scariest.” Yamakaji’s grin widened slightly as he glanced up at the Admiral. “But you’re scarier than all of them, aintcha? Stronger too. You could end it all right now, couldn’tcha?”
“Hmm…” Kizaru hummed noncommittally for a moment as he scratched his five-o-clock shadow before nodding. “Yeah, that’s true.” He held up his palm towards the battlefield, the very center of his hand starting to glow. “I could wipe ‘em all away in the blink of an eye, the Bridge too…” He then shifted his fingers so that he was pointing a finger-pistol, the digit unerringly following Jeremiah Cross’s head across the distance as a bulb of light built up on the very tip. “Or I could just kill them all one by one, before they even knew what hit them…”

He then proceeded to lift his arm higher… and then used it to scratch behind his head with a sigh. “Buut I dunno. That all seems like a lot of useless hassle. Why not just hang back and let the boys in white have their fun instead?”

Yamakaji shrugged indifferently as he chewed on his cigar. “Yeah, I guess that makes sense. Though really, if I was in yer shoes? I’d take the paperwork inta account.”

Kizaru blinked curiously as he glanced down at the Vice Admiral. “Paperwork? What of it?”

Yamakaji waved his hand through the air. “Eh, it’s just that I’ve always found after-action reports to take a lot less time than explanations for lack of activity, ‘s all. ‘Spose it don’t matter to you what with you havin’ light speed an’ all, but still, one has Sengoku pissed at you, the other don’t, ya know what I mean?”

The Admiral hummed thoughtfully, scratching his stubble as he considered the options. After a few seconds of thought, he sighed and his entire body started to glow. “I guess I might as well go down there and kill ‘em quickly then.”

A slightly predatory sheen crept into Yamakaji’s grin. “Sounds good ta me.”

-0-

“Hey, Soundbite? Remind me why you’re not acting like the ‘god of noise’ you apparently are and blowing out all of these bastards’ eardrums!?” Nami demanded as she slammed a wave of Iron Cloud into a group of Marines.

“You actually think that these shitstains ARE THE CREAM OF THE CROP? Fat chance OF THAT!” Soundbite scoffed from a few meters away. “THESE ARE THEIR CHUM. THE SECOND-STRINGERS, MEANWHILE, are waiting in the wings for the order to knock OUR BLOCKS OFF. I’ll blow my best ONCE THEY BLOW THEIRS!”

Nami frowned but conceded the point with a nod. Refocusing her attention on the fight at hand, she turned to lash out another wave of cloud and lightning before freezing in place.

The reason for the pirate’s sudden paralysis was due to the fact that, by virtue of necessity, Nami had become extremely competent in the practice of spotting even the smallest glint in her surroundings in her eight years of treasure hunting for Arlong. She had come to develop this unique skill for two separate reasons, one obvious and commonplace and one more… exclusive, for lack of a better word.

The obvious reason, of course, was that gold glinted and she couldn’t spare half a beri. The exclusive reason, however, was that after the first time she’d gotten a bullet in her leg from someone she couldn’t even see, she made damn sure there wouldn’t be a second.

So when Nami managed to catch sight of a glint flashing on a far-off battleship, she didn’t even hesitate to snap out as large a mirage as she could manage, hiding the entire side of the bridge facing the ship. “SNIPER, GET DOWN!” she screamed at the top of her lungs before throwing herself to
the ground.

After taking a moment to catch her breath, Nami glanced up and towards the battleship with a scowl. “Now we just have to hope that that damn bastard doesn’t try again.”

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Vice Admiral Yamakaji blinked in bemusement as he confirmed that yes, an instant after Admiral Kizaru had shifted into pure light in order to transition to the Bridge, a second flash of light had shot out from the Bridge and off to parts unknown.

Acting on a hunch, the Vice-Admiral drew a spyglass through his coat and peered through it, looking for… yes, that shimmer right there was definitely the light-refracting natural phenomenon known as a mirage.

Which only meant one thing.

“Well, shit,” Yamakaji sighed wearily as he returned his spyglass to his coat. With great care, he extracted a Baby Transponder Snail and punched in a number. “Wonder where the hell he wound up this time… Fleet Admiral Sengoku? Now, I know that yer rather upset right now—”

“Get to the point, Vice Admiral Yamakaji. In case you haven’t noticed?”

SKRRRAAANG!

The Vice Admiral shivered in terror as the next palm imprint appeared in the Gates, even deeper than the previous hits.

“Nothing can make me angrier than I am now.”

“Well, well then… I’m afraid that Admiral Kizaru forgot to look before he leapt in his… eagerness to join the fightin’. As such, his attempt to utilize his Sacred Yata Mirror to reach the Bridge of Hesitation just went awry thanks to a, er…” The Vice-Admiral coughed into his fist. “Unfortunate turn of events. In short, we, ah… have no idea where he is, but going by his angle I’d say… Admiral Kizaru is no longer anywhere near Enies Lobby.”

The barest moment of silence followed, and Yamakaji made the prudent decision to hang up his snail.

The silence stretched on for another couple of seconds. “Well, looks like he actually took that well after all,” the Vice Admiral mused to himself.

SKRONG!

The Marine then jumped in shock when another impact sound rang out. Only this time, it was rounder than the others, and higher—?

Yamakaji swallowed heavily, his smile gone and cold sweat trailing down his forehead as he gnawed on his cigar. “I really hope that you’re enjoying yourself wherever the hell you are, Kizaru,” he muttered. “Because when you get back, you’re gonna wish that you’d stayed.”

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The Red Line: an insanely massive wall of stone that circumnavigated the world. Impossibly tall, impossibly wide and impossibly impassive. Over the timeless years of its existence, this geological
marvel and nightmare had seen countless entities smash into its side and meet their doom, splattered over the unmoving stone.

Most of those entities, though, were such things as Sea Kings, ships, and Island Whales. Today may have been the first time a lone person had tested their bodily integrity against the might of the Red Line.

“Note to self…” a pained voice wafted out of a newly formed and relatively large crater in the face of the continent. “First: Outlaw the presence of any mirrors or other reflective surfaces anywhere that I’m assigned. Second… ooo000000wwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww…”

-Yo-

“Yow!” I yelped as a salvo of musket fire crackled through where my head had been a half-second prior. A series of explosions followed, from Lassoo if the recoil shaking my left arm was any indication, and I took the moment to process the situation we were in.

Honestly, it wasn’t nearly as bad as my near miss had just indicated. Between Nami’s area attacks, Robin littering the battleground with her arms, and Franky bull-rushing every big group that tried to form up with fists and cannon, the Marines attacking us had absolutely no cohesion whatsoever. Instead, they were a mob, and not even a very big one, and we could handle a mob.

Case in point: as I stood up, three Marines were rushing me, two with cutlasses and one with a big iron club. Fortunately, they had strung themselves into a single-file line. I sidestepped the first sword swing, stamped on his foot, and Lassoo took the opportunity to chomp on his oversized nose. The second one hesitated since his buddy was in the way, but that just gave me time to let Lassoo toss the first Marine away and swing my baton upside his jaw, the impact lifting him an inch off the ground and the shock knocking him out.

That just left the third guy, and before either of us could even move another Marine flew from out of nowhere and knocked him into the water.

“Kill-stealer!” I shouted in Boss’s direction.

“Sorry!” the dugong shouted back, his tone and the glare Chopper was sending his way saying otherwise.

Huffing, I turned back towards the line, just in time to see a lightning bolt fry a group of Marines that were held in place by hands sprouting from the ground, and Franky using one especially large Marine as a club.

“Yeesh,” I muttered, shivering.

“The Straw Hats are tearing us apart!” I heard one Marine wail.

“That would imply you were putting up any resistance at all!” Su taunted as Conis pumped another grenade at one of the battleships’ crow’s nest.

“Would somebody shut that damn puffball up already!?” another soldier shouted.

“OI!” Soundbite barked indignantly. “The only one who gets TO INSULT THE COTTONTAIL IS ME!”

“And she’s my puffball in the first place!” Conis picked up.
“WELL, SHUT HER THE HELL UP, HER PISSY VOICE IS GIVING ME A DAMN MIGRAINE!”

“Better idea,” Conis snarled venomously. “Su, lower their morale!”

“Can do!” Su saluted before clearing her throat. “Attention, Marine dipshits! To clarify your current situation, the reason you are fighting against a crew that your bosses know you have little to no chance of defeating is that you are what is commonly referred to in the business as *fodder*! For those of you who find the truth of your lot in life too disturbing to contemplate, I suggest that your next course of action be to curl up and kiss your asses goodbye!”

I promptly came to a halt as I exchanged a look with Soundbite. “Why the hell didn’t *we* think of that?” I questioned incredulously.

“Because we’re idiots…” Soundbite lamented with a sigh before casting a glare over his shell. “By the way, ON YOUR SIX.”

I promptly jerked my shoulder back, ramming Lassoo’s stock into the face of the Marine who’d thought it would be a good idea to try and get the drop on me. “Thanks. And I’m guessing that you’re not going to let Su take all the glory lying down?”

“NOT ON YOUR LIFE!” A second after the proclamation, his telltale whine filled the air. “Attention, Marine *pisswidgets*! Allow me to OFFER SOME MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT FOR this shitshow!”

Following his proclamation, an electronic baseline started thumping against everyone’s ears. After a few seconds, Soundbite put an actual voice to the music. Suffice to say that the lyrics were…

“When a fight is just plain wrong/We all sing the Curbstomp Song!”

*Telling,* to say the absolute least of matters.

I snickered as I literally watched the collective decorum of nearly all the Marines on the bridge plummet. “Anything for you but mindless good taste, eh?”

“I AIM to please!” Soundbite confirmed with a cackle.

I smirked as I got back to the fighting, but my grin shrunk a bit as I glanced around uncertainly. We’d been going at it for a fair amount of time now, but nothing was really changing. At the moment, what I’d really give anything for would be some way of telling when in the timeline we were, but I suppose that was asking for a bit much, wasn’t—?

*BOOM!*

A ripple of shock ran across the bridge, along with a literal *tremor* as a literally gigantic fist punched out the wall of the First Pillar.

I blinked in surprise as I watched the fist snap back into the tower and the smoke of an impact appear on a nearby battleship. “Well, that works as well as anything…” I muttered. I then grinned viciously as I watched a blur leap from the pillar towards the battleship and start *pummeling* the vessel into splinters. “Soundbite, for the love of all that’s holy, *tell me* you have a lock on Onigumo.”

“YOU BET YOUR ASS *I DO,*” Soundbite leered sadistically. “And I’m gonna let the world in on things, because matters on his ship are *GETTING*… INTERESTING.”
I grinned maliciously. Then, in a spark of inspiration, I reached into the bag at my side, felt around for the dial that controlled the dead zone, and spun it as far counter-clockwise as it would go. And not a moment too soon:

“—is fighting CP9’s Rob Lucci on battleship no. 4, identification BB-26! They’re—!” The soldier who was speaking winced as Luffy put his inflated fist through what I could only assume was the ship’s powder room, going by the size of the explosion. “They’re tearing the ship apart!”

“Hmph…” And going by the sneer that Soundbite was sporting, that particularly pleasant-sounding individual was none other than Vice-Admiral Onigumo himself. “If it’s Rob Lucci, then chances are he won’t die. And strong as Straw Hat might be, he doesn’t have Moonwalk.” There was a click of a transponder’s mic being picked up. “All gunners, put vessel number 4 in your sights. Fire in five seconds.”

The sheer matter-of-factness in the bastard’s voice as he condemned countless soldiers to a pointless demise sent shivers running up my spine, but I got one hell of a thrill out of the fact that the entire bridge froze as the announcement swept over them.

One soldier on Onigumo’s ship, however, was rather more animated. “B-But Vice Admiral, sir!” the poor doomed man protested. “Y-You can’t be serious! There a-are more than a thousand of our soldiers on that ship, if we—!”

BLAM!

The gunshot and subsequent death gurgle were audible in the near perfect silence.

“Does anyone else,” Onigumo growled. “Have a problem with doing whatever it takes to stop one of the world’s most dangerous criminals?”

The silence that followed was thoroughly telling.

“That’s what I thought. All cannons fire at will.”

KRAK-BOOM!

The detonation of battleship no. 4 was titanic, and observed by countless shell-shocked Marines at that.

“D-Did they just…?” a nearby soldier whispered.

“Yeah, they did…” Soundbite nodded solemnly, his eyes tracing a particular speck as it flew through the air and back to the bridge. “And only two survivors at that. THAT WAS…” He shuddered in revulsion. “NOT FUN TO LISTEN TO. At least they never knew WHAT HIT THEM.”

I snorted darkly as I tore my eyes away from the pillar and refocused on the Vice Admiral’s ship. “And neither will he.” I adopted a sadistic grin as the whine that pierced the air indicated that Soundbite had gotten my meaning. “Hey, Vice Admiral Onigumo! Do you mind if I quote you on that little line you used earlier, when you executed that Marine in cold blood?” I then made a show of slapping my own forehead. “Oh, wait, now I remember! We’re live, so it’s a bit late to be asking that, huh? My bad!”

“SMILE, MORON! You’re on Candid Snail!” Soundbite announced.
“Jeremiah Cross,” Onigumo’s voice growled.

“That’s my name, I live to see the day that it’s worn out!” I mock-saluted. “And while I have you, would you care to share your rationalization for, well, you know, sacrificing an entire battleship *and the thousand lives still onboard it*?” I prayed that the response I got would serve to bury the bastard.

“Tch… ‘rationalization’?” And as the spider scoffed incredulously, it was clear that I would not be disappointed. “Why would I have to rationalize anything, you damn pirate? I had a clear shot at ending the life of a criminal and I took it. There was nothing wrong with my actions, it was simply common sense. So what if I had to sacrifice a few lives in the pursuit of it? Those men forfeited their lives in the name of Justice when they chose to take up our banner and they’ll serve it as the Navy sees fit. One way or another.”

I positively *relished* in the sight of several dozen Marines staring down at their uniforms in naked horror. Wondering how far I could push the buck, I tilted my head to the side as I took on an innocent expression. “Is that so? Well, I suppose that makes *some* measure of sense with your own soldiers, they knew they were possibly giving up their own lives.” I allowed a demonic grin to spread across my face. “But what about the lives of *civilians*?”

My heart soared as Soundbite’s secondhand scowl deepened…

"*SHUT THE HELL UP, YOU DAMN SPIDER!*"

Before skipping a beat or three when a world-shaking roar erupted from the direction of the thoroughly pummeled Gates of Justice.

I shot a hopeful look at Soundbite once I managed to get my hearing back, but to my disappointment he shook his head with a grimace. “Damn gag orders…” I cursed under my breath before shaking my head. “Ah, well, it was worth a shot. At least we got *something* out of that, neh?” I chuckled a bit before turning my attention to the still shell-shocked Marines around me. “And by the way, if anyone here feels like making a run for it, I’m sure that we can come to a—”

“*Dot dot dot dot!*” Soundbite suddenly sounded out. “*Helluva sense OF— dot dot dot dot!— TIMING!*”

“But it could be constructive,” I shrugged as I pressed the appropriate button. “You’re on the SBS, what’s—?”

“*HURK!*” Soundbite’s head suddenly rocked forwards as he gagged on something.

“Soundbite! Crap, what’s—!?” My concern morphed into terror when my snail started coughing up smoke. “Oh, shit… oh shit shit shit!” I hastily scrabbled for the button to hang up the call—!

And jerked back as the action produced a cloud of smoke and a faint sense of burning from the few nerve endings I had left in my hands.

“*Let me be perfectly clear,*” Soundbite rumbled murderously. “*Any soldier who dares to take so much as a step back will be met with a firing squad upon their return to Marineford. And if you think for even a second that I will not find out the names of each and every last traitor to Justice*?”

The heat *somehow* coming off of Soundbite *tripled,* to the point I could actually feel it radiating off of him. For the briefest of instants, so brief I’m still not sure I actually saw it, I got the impression of a volcano spewing lava and ash over the poor, defenseless countryside.
“THINK AGAIN.”

And then the connection cut off and I was left shivering on the Bridge with a wheezing, still-warm snail on my shoulder.

It took me a second to get my bearings back, but once I did? I didn’t even need to turn around to know that every Marine on the bridge was shakily raising their weapons as they prepared to start fighting again.

“For the record…” I huffed regretfully. “I do understand why you’re doing this, and I do forgive you for it.”

Before any of the Marines could react, I snapped Lassoo up and squeezed off a trio of Cani-Cannonballs at them, the resulting blasts giving me a nice sizeable chunk of breathing room. I took the opportunity to drop Lassoo off my shoulder and jerk my head at the mob. “Buy me some space for a bit, would you, boy?”

The dachshund-cannon drew his hackles back in a savage grin. “With pleasure.” And with that, he started belting out a barrage of firepower upon the Marines, keeping them well away from me.

Taking advantage of the small area of relative peace he was affording me, I hummed thoughtfully as I scratched my head and got my thoughts in order. “Alright, ship’s blasted, Luffy’s back on the pillar, which means…” I muttered under my breath where the SBS couldn’t hear me before snapping my fingers in realization. “The passage is flooded, good. So the guys should be getting here soon.” I frowned in realization as I glanced down at the water churning far below the Bridge. “Save that Kokoro got out on the boat and in calm waters. Right now, we’re high up and the maelstroms are at full force.” I gnawed on my thumb as I glanced to the side. “I know that mermaids are good in the water, but can she really—?”

SPLASH!

I blinked in confusion as the sound of water splashing reached me. “Eh? The hell?” I looked downwards in confusion. “What the heck was—?”

A blur of motion and then—

“NAGAGAGAGA! MISS ME, BRAT?”

MY EYES!

“OH, THE HUGE MANATEE!” Soundbite caterwauled as he snapped back into his shell.

“IT BUUURNS!” I howled, falling back on my ass and clawing at my face in agony as I rolled back and forth on the bridge. “SOMEBODY GET ME SOME ACID, I NEED TO REMOVE MY EYES! NOTHING CAN HURT MORE THAN THIS!”

“Wha—? Aw, c’mon kid, you’re exaggerating! I know I’ve let myself go, but—!”

“Cross!” I dimly heard Conis call out and start to run over. “Are you al—AUGH!” She suddenly cut herself off with a terrorized scream. “THE HORROR! THE HORROR! THE GOGGLES DO NOTHING!”

“IT BURNS WITH THE INTENSITY OF A THOUSAND SUNS! WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED TO MERMAIDS BEING BEAUTIFUL!? ” Su wailed fearfully.
“YOU TRY PUSHING SIXTY AND HOLDING ONTO A SUPERMODEL BODY, WHY DON’T YOU!?” Kokoro snapped in an annoyed tone before shaking her head with an annoyed huff. “But fine, fine, I get the point, I’m putting my damn shirt back on! Tsk, damn kids, way to make a woman feel insecure! Be a bit more appreciative, why don’tcha! I saved your friends’ lives, you know!”

“We’d rather have drowned…” a trio of pained voices gurgled.

“But it’s not too late for the rest of us,” moaned… well, pretty much every Marine in earshot, many of which were looking longingly at the edges of the bridge.

“How could the very incarnation of a man’s romance have such a cruel reality?” one particular soldier lamented.

“OI, DON’T YOU DARE BESMIRCH MAN’S ROMANCES WITH YOUR LUST-ADDLED PERVERSIONS!” Boss snapped indignantly… though a second later he hissed uncomfortably. “Ah… though in this case, you may have a point, yes.”

At that moment, I heard something that I hadn’t expected ever to hear:

“THAT DOES IT! MERMAID KICK!”

Kokoro shouting angrily. Apparently, there was only so much that she could take.

After a few deep breaths, I felt confident enough to open my eyes again, and I let out a sigh of relief when I saw the now-clothed Kokoro… though I then proceeded to gain a sweatdrop as I watched her punt around a dozen or two Marines with her yet-uncovered fin-feet. “OK… not something you see every day. Anyways, where was—?”

“CROSS!”


I stuttered for a moment as I tried to think of a response that wouldn’t get me pasted into hamburger meat, and then I remembered something and gathered myself enough to reply evenly. “In lieu of answering that question, may I suggest that you turn your anger towards the Marines? Who, might I add, actually put a sizable scar on Vivi?”

As expected, that succeeded in redirecting his anger. He froze briefly, glanced at Vivi, who was remaining beside Carue and fending off anyone who attempted to come near, while simultaneously grimacing every time she strained her abdomen, before sloooowly turning his gaze to the nearby Marines.

I was then forced to scramble back a few feet when he was suddenly engulfed in a blaze of fire. “They did WHAT?” an infernal voice rumbled.

I chuckled venomously as I waved goodbye at the pants-wettingly terrified soldiers nearby, before flinching back in terror myself when a flaming finger jabbed itself in my face.

“This isn’t over, crap-mouth,” Sanji warned me, his hellfire burning radiant in his eye as he shot off and started absolutely tenderizing the opposition.

I swallowed heavily as I watched him go at it, wiping away a goodly amount of cold sweat that had
broken out on my brow. “Sweet shit, that was close, I seriously thought that I was going to die…”

“You still might.”

I froze up as a particularly bloodthirsty blade laid itself across my shoulder and the sound of an elastic stretching sounded out right behind my skull.

“Now, guys—!” I started hastily.

“Save it, Cross,” Zoro scoffed as he withdrew Kitetsu III. “We’re smart enough to know that we’ve got more important things to worry about.”

“This is just a friendly warning is all.” The sound of rubber reversed. “Once we’re out of here? Watch your back.”

Since when the hell could Usopp manage to sound that badass and terrifying!?

“For now, though…”

A pair of projectiles flew past me and slammed into a few more unlucky Marines.

“We’ll focus our attention elsewhere.”

I held my breath as the pair walked past me and joined the fray, eventually releasing it in a heavy gasp as I collapsed on my back. “I’m a dead man once we get out of here, aren’t I?” I whimpered fearfully.

“ONLY IF YOU get out of here alive,” Soundbite pointed out. “By the by, 3-o-clock.”

I didn’t even miss a beat in flexing my palm and shoving my right arm at the same time. “Impact.”

The resulting blast did the dual trick of propelling me to my feet and destroying the Marine’s footing, giving me just enough time to jam my baton into his gut and take him down for the count.

“Wooow…” Chimney breathed in awe as she poked the stunned soldier’s cheek before shooting me a sunny smile. “You look and act like you’re all weak and stuff, but you’re actually pretty scary, huh, mister?”

“Nagagaga!” Kokoro chuckled heartily. “That’s a pirate’s life for you, Chimney!”

“That’s a pirate’s life FOR HIM!” Soundbite concurred.

“‘Tis a pirate’s life for me!” I concluded with my arms spread wide. “Now, if you’ll excuse me!”

And with that, I turned around and charged back into the fray, scooping up Lassoo back onto my shoulder in the process.

If the Marines had been disorganized before, now they were in utter disarray. It was a credit to them that they hadn’t collapsed into an outright rout. Usopp was even more effective at close range, hitting pinpoint targets with a speed he hadn’t been able to show off from the tower. Zoro was… well, Zoro. Opposition in front of him just melted. And Sanji?

“Aperitif!”

A blast of razor-sharp, flaming air sliced through a half dozen Marines… and then through a deck-mounted mortar on one of the battleships… and then into the mast behind it, lighting it on fire and drawing out a swarm of panicked men with buckets.
Well, I suspect he was working out some… admittedly not entirely misplaced frustrations.

The point is, there simply weren’t any leakers, so I had to do something I’d been trying to avoid up until then: I had to dive into the thick of the fighting. And luckily, a Marine turned around just in time to catch a boot to his face courtesy of a jump I definitely wouldn’t have managed to make before joining the Straw Hats.

The mook went down like a sack of potatoes, KO with a bootprint in place of his face, while his two comrades turned to me with brandished swords.

I responded with a brandished dachshund. “Cani-Cannon!”

A hip-fired baseball took care of them. A whisper from Soundbite, and I sidestepped a desperate lunge from another Marine, my baton meeting the back of his skull as he pitched forward. That done, I turned around for to look for anyone else trying to get a piece of me or for me to get a piece of.

Instead, I blinked in surprise when a Marine… no, all the Marines ran by me. The Marines were… apparently in retreat. An organized retreat, not a full-out run-like-hell falling back, but they were retreating.

“Uh… what the hell?” Nami wondered aloud. “That death threat was pretty clear, why are they all running away?”

“Maybe because they finally got a clue and realized that they can’t win against us anyway?” Franky laughed confidently as he slammed his knuckles together.

“Considering the size of the gun at their collective heads, I sincerely doubt that,” Robin countered.

I briefly considered the matter. Then all too soon the beri dropped and I ground the heel of my palm into my forehead. “Robin’s right, guys…” I groaned wearily. “This isn’t the end of the fight.”

“Attention all hands!” an amplified voice blared out over the battlefield, originating from the battleships. “As of this moment, all Junior Officers and enlisted hands are to return to their posts! As of this moment, all further combat operations—”

I slowly looked up and cast an evil eye at the lines of Marines who had taken their positions upon the battleships’ railings and were glaring down at us. “It’s only the end of the first wave.”

“Well be carried out by officers of Lieutenant and Captain rank!” the voice of God continued. “With the strength of our 300 elite, we will crush these criminals without delay!”

I choked slightly at the number. “I expected that there’d be some more than usual, but that’s just unfortunate.”

“We shall fight them in the shade, HUH?” Soundbite chuckled dryly.

“That didn’t work out well for either side,” I hissed back.

“Captains…” Conis breathed in soft horror.

“Damn, I was wondering when they’d call these guys out,” Vivi grit out as she cast her gaze around.

“Uh… I’m really hoping that I’m wrong, but wasn’t Smoker a Captain?” Usopp whimpered fearfully.

“Don’t worry, Smoker’s not representative of the Captain rank,” I cut in. “Between his Logia fruit
and seastone jutte, he was probably under-ranked when we met him. There’s a reason everyone bought him beating Crocodile. But on a related note, I haven’t ever heard of Marine with a Devil Fruit who’s been below Captain Rank, so these guys are either using abilities or capable of holding their own against people who do, so no matter what, watch your backs.”

“Psh,” Zoro shrugged as he rolled his shoulders. “What are you all getting so worked up about? All this proves is that they’re too scared of us to try anything else.”

“Your mouth is talking shit, mosshead,” Sanji chuckled grimly as he blew out a smoke cloud. “But that ratty bandanna you’re putting on is saying something entirely different.”

Zoro snorted dismissively as he glanced back at the cook. “And what, you’re just chewing on the filter for the hell of it?”

“Hey, listen you—!”

“As well, I have a status report from ships no. 3, 8, and 9 at the island’s main gate. The traitors Oimo and Kashi, as well as the Straw Hat Pirates’ allies, have been eliminated.”

My crewmates tensed around us, but a hasty cough of ‘Bullshit!’ into my fist served to calm them down.

“The battleships will return to the Bridge to aid in the final elimination of the Straw Hat Pirates! For now, all Marines present, assault the Straw Hat Pirates! Forward!”

“You… you dare claim that you defeated my boys that easily?!” Boss snarled as the Marines leaped onto the bridge and started charging at us, his Thermal Dart spinning so fast it blurred into a red-hot circle. “I’LL MELT YOU ALL INTO TAR FOR SUCH AN EGREGIOUS INSULT!”

I gritted my teeth slightly as I watched the officers approach before casting a glance at Soundbite. “You about ready to blow your best now?” I growled as I took a knee for the second time that day.

Soundbite grinned viciously as he furrowed his eyestalks. “All the better to BLOW THEM AWAY. NOW THEN, IF YOU DON’T MIND…” The ambient sound on the bridge suddenly died off. “A LITTLE QUIET, IF YOU PLEASE.” He then closed his eyes. “In the land of silence…”

I blasted out a Cani-Cannonball at the approaching Marines. The projectile detonated about a meter in front of the crowd—

“Gastro-Cani Combo: BASS CANNON!”

And a nice little swathe of the opposition and a goodly chunk of the bridge were both sent flying from whence they came.

I chuckled venomously as I stood back up. “I’d say that that’s about twenty, twenty-five down.”

“And an assload left TO DEAL WITH…” Soundbite groaned as his eyes spun in his skull. “AND FOR THE RECORD, SEEING AS I THINK I BLACKED OUT FOR a second there, I’m not pulling that party trick again ANYTIME SOON.”

“That’s fine by me!” Boss scoffed as he cracked his neck in anticipation. “Just means that there’s more for us!”

“Speak for yourself…” Usopp groaned.
“Like it or not, it doesn’t matter worth shit.” I squared my shoulders and snapped my baton out, jamming its button as hard as I could. “Here they come!”

And then, just like that, the Marines’ fighting brass was upon us.

I don’t remember much of the next… ten minutes? I think? I dunno, the point is, I was too busy trying to *not die* to keep track of things. It was all a blur, occasionally interspersed with sharp objects trying to lodge itself in my vital organs, fists trying to punch holes in me, and myself retaliating by breaking… basically everything within grabbing range.

Alubarna had *nothing* on the sheer and utter moshpit that the Bridge of Hesitation had become, because in the end? While Alubarna was damn bad, *at least* there I was something to be ignored in favor of more important things, namely killing each other. Here? Taking me and my friends’ heads off *was* that ‘more important thing’.

And as if the definite spike in quality and relative spike in quantity of enemies weren’t bad enough —!

“Cross, duck!”

“Woahshit!” I cursed, snapping my head below one of Vivi’s Lion Cutters as she slashed a Marine I hadn’t caught sight of out of midair.

“Than—ON YOUR LEFT!” I cut my thanks off in favor of showing my gratitude by sending a base-cannon-ball down the throat of the Captain who’d been aiming to put a bullet in her skull.

Vivi gave me a grateful thumbs-up, but that was all she was able to do before she had to catch a blade with her chains before it could gouge a new hole in her skull.

—and sweet shit, was it beyond bad enough, but on top of it all, we also had to deal with an absolute sideshow’s worth of Devil Fruit-users.

I swear, over the course of that fight, I saw the human body do countless things that I neither thought it could nor wanted to *know* that it could do. The abilities that were displayed in the fight ran the gamut, from stretching (liberally à la Mister Fantastic, as opposed to Luffy’s rubber-style abilities) to secreting copious amounts of acid to throwing cannon-ball sized chunks of rock as fast as baseballs (and that *was* a power and not pure muscle like Garp, because the guy pulling it was a *beanpole*) to —

“STRONG RIGHT!”

“GAH!”

—to transforming into… berries apparently, hel-lo there.

“Well, this bastard’s sure a weird one!” Franky chuckled sadistically as he held a visibly freaked out head in his hand.

“Oh, wait, I’ve heard about him!” I snickered tauntingly. “You’re supposed to be a *very* good example of the Marines, right?”

The head stopped freaking out in favor of shooting me a look drier than Alabasta. “Spare me, Jeremiah Cross. I have heard every joke in the book, not even you could say one I haven’t endured before.”
My grin slowly widened by several teeth. “Yeah? Well, I doubt you’ve ever had this happen to you before. Franky, if you’d be so kind as to wind up the pitch?”

The cyborg promptly cackled as he caught on to my intentions. “Oh, it would be my damn honor!”

“Huh? What the hell are you—?” Very Good paled before struggling furiously when he saw me draw my foot back. “Nononono no—!”

“Franky the Cyborg pitches to the Straw Hat Pirate’s pinch-kicker!” Franky roared as he bowled Very Good at me.

I waited until he was right where I wanted him and then—!

“PUNT!” I roared, swinging my foot forward—

**THWACK!**

“GAGH!”

—and right into the Berry-man’s chin, sending his head flying up and away.

**“HEEEEE’S OUTTA HERE!”** Soundbite crowed ecstatically.

“Yes!” I pumped my fist with a victorious whoop. “It’s a Grand Slam! The Straw Hats do it again! The crowd goes wild—!”

“CROSS, ON YOUR LEFT!”

“HOGEEZE!” I cursed, only just managing to catch a crab claw with my baton before it could snip my face off. “Make that they go wild- er. And as for you— eh?” I paused and blinked in confusion as I looked the guy over in confusion, specifically focusing on his forehead. “The hell? A crab claw and—? What are you, some kind of a goat-man with one of the Crab-Goat fruits or a crab-man with one of the Goat-Goat fruits?!”

“Why don’t you go to hell and find out!” the Marine snarled as he raised his other claw-shaped arm.

I promptly sobered up and hit the Marine with a dry look. “Why don’t you go first?” I then activated the baton’s lightning function, allowing me to deep-fry the bastard and slam my forehead into his, dropping him for the count.

I chuckled to myself as I straightened back up and started spinning my baton in my fingers. “Guess he forgot about the Taser! Sucks to be him!”

“Guess you forgot about the current situation you’re in.”

I blinked in confusion. “Wha—?”

Then there was a familiar swish of air and I found myself holding onto only half a baton, which was itself starting to crackle ominously.

The Marine who’d cut my baton in half smirked as he leveled his sword at my face. “Sucks to be you, huh?”

I stared numbly at the bisected rod of metal before slowly looking up at the Marine. “That… was a gift,” I stated slowly.
“It is truly incredible how little I give a damn,” the Captain drawled. “Now, put your hands above your head and—!”

“I don’t,” I interrupted him with a dry chuckle. “Think you quite understand what I’m saying to you. Allow me to re-emphasize.”

I promptly whipped my other hand up and blasted my Flash Dial in his face, with Soundbite amping it into a straight up Gastro-Flash.

“GAH!” the Marine howled, clawing at his eyes and ears.

“That was,” I snarled, stepping up and grabbing the Marine’s collar. “A gift!” I then stuffed the baton’s remains, which were starting to reek of ozone, down the man’s shirt. “YOU BASTARD!” I capped it all off with a roar as I kicked the selfsame bastard in the gut and knocked him into his comrades.

It was thoroughly cathartic to see him fry everyone who he came in contact with as a result of the undoubtedly fractured Thunder Dial he was carrying discharging for a final time.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t take the time to linger on the sight because for all that it felt nice to get some vengeance for my fucking baton!, the event also meant that I was left without a melee weapon. An advantage the Marines were eager to capitalize on when some jackass with a blade too long for me to catch with my gauntlets or Lassoo started taking wild swings at me.

I only just managed to throw myself to the side and dodge the slash-happy bastard, and he would have managed to chop my head in two with his wild assault if I didn’t grab up the nearest of many stray swords and happen to lock blades with him.

“Shitshit shit!” I bit out as I locked hilts with the bastard and held him off.

As if matters weren’t bad enough, I just so happened to catch a telltale flash of green out of the corner of my eye, spiking my blood pressure a few more degrees out of sheer terror. “Sorry about this— GRAGH!” I grunted forcefully as I shoved back against the bastard and took a swipe of my own. “Mockery of swordsmanship I’m pulling, Zoro, but currently my options are kind of limited!” The last line was bit out as I swung Lassoo’s bulk down like a club.

Zoro responded with a dry scoff. “Trust me, Cross.”

SLASH! “GAH!”

I felt a surge of relief as our crew’s swordsman did me the courtesy of finishing my opponent off before my blood froze as I caught sight of what he’d finished him off with.

“I have no room to complain at the moment,” Zoro muttered acridly as he hefted the forcibly appropriated standard-issue Marine cutlass he was wielding.

I glanced down at the black sheath hanging at his side in concern. “Yubashiri, is it—?”

Zoro followed my gaze to the hilt before shaking his head. “Bloodied, badly, but ultimately unbowed,” he growled around Wado. “The bastard snuck a touch in before I noticed and took a good chunk of the blade with him in the process.” He grit his teeth as no small amount of what was presumably rage drew a shudder from him. “It’s whole, but I won’t know how bad it really is until I’ve had a blacksmith look at it.”

I nodded in relief at the news, before tensing uncomfortably as a thought occurred to me and I
“Could be better!” Nami reported from the shroud of iron cloud she’d erected, Usopp and Conis periodically poking out their weapons out to take potshots at clusters of Marines. “I’m doing fine, but Usopp and Conis are running out of ammo!”

“I’m not doing so hot, either!” Franky reported, punching a Marine right in the face - and right as he pulled it back, his hair deflated, flopping in front of his face. “Dammit! I never should’ve given you that cola earlier! Weapons Left!”

The loud clicking sound that sounded out inspired absolutely no confidence.

“Ah, hell.”

“I’m starting to run out of my Cherry Blossom explosives!” Chopper provided next. “I-I can probably make more, but—!” He suddenly stumbled out of the blue and only managed to keep his head on account of a quick swap from Heavy to Brain points. “But, ah… uh, I know this is a bad time, but I might have overestimated the duration of my stimulant.”

“No— ergh!— kidding!” Vivi groaned, visibly fighting to stay standing. Sanji was there to pick up her slack in seconds, but the fact that he was fighting with a black leg rather than a blazing one wasn’t encouraging in the least.

“I know I might consistently put on airs of strength,” Robin huffed as she kept her eyes clenched shut and arms crossed, systematically snapping limbs and joints across the bridge. “But the human skeleton is astoundingly resilient.” She flinched as blood started to trickle down from her palms. “Even I have my limits…”

“You all are total wusses!” Boss laughed uproariously as he bodily flung a Marine into his comrades. “I mean, come on! Where’s your fighting spirit, eh? After all, to face impossible odds, standing defiant to the end and eventually emerging victorious…” He drew his fists back as he adopted an intense stance. “Is that not one of the purest and most sublime definitions… OF A MAN’S ROMANCE!? SIX OCEANS PISTOL!”

The dugong pounded his fists forwards, blasting a nice, sizeable opening in the enemy’s lines before keeling forward and panting heavily as he rested his fists on the bridge. “On, ah… on second thought…” Boss huffed wearily. “I might, hoo… be starting to see, ha… where you’re all coming from, geez…”

“Even Boss admits it? We must be in trouble,” Lassoo huffed heavily. “Ah… and by the way? I know that this might be a bad time, but I’m starting to reach the ‘fumes’ stage myself. We getting out of here anytime soon or what?!”

I glanced nervously up at the gun before gritting my teeth and brandishing my weapons prominently. “We just need to hold out until Luffy manages to beat Lucci! Once that fight finishes—!”

“Cross…”

Even in the midst of the madness, Soundbite’s tone brought me up short, and one glance at his dumbstruck expression was all I needed for my guts to fill with ice.

Soundbite slowly turned his eyes to me, his gaze full of numb disbelief. “…I think it just did,” he breathed in horror.

It took a moment for the implications to sink in for me, but once they did I ran like a bat straight out
of hell, charging down the length of the Bridge towards the flame-engulfed horizon. I took more than a few hits in the process, a graze from a gunshot here, a nick from a sword there, but it didn’t matter to me. Nothing mattered to me other than getting to where the Marines had blasted the bridge to the First Pillar early on, getting within sight of the secondary battlefield, to catching sight of my—!

I skidded to a halt a foot from the shattered cut-off of the Bridge, my momentum sending a cascade of pebbles and stray debris careening over the edge and into the froth below. But I didn’t pay it any mind, in favor of witnessing the horrifying sight before me.

“…Captain…” I breathed weakly.

It was… almost like a scene straight out of hell. Luffy, just lying there in a pool of his own blood and only barely twitching, Lucci standing above him and huffing heavily as he caught his breath.

My mind briefly stalled as I observed the scene, but I quickly managed to kickstart my brain back into work. And once I did… once I did, I didn’t consider the enemies behind me who my crewmates were cutting down. I didn’t contemplate how this was different from canon. I didn’t think about how Usopp should have been the one standing here and not me, and I didn’t think about how he was supposed to make a triumphant return and give Luffy the strength to go on either.

I didn’t think about any of that. Rather, the only thing that I thought…

“LUUUUFFYYY!” I screamed desperately, my voice cutting through the cacophony and echoing through the void.

…was that my captain was **down**, and that more than anything in the world, he needed to get back up **right the hell now!**

Far below, Luffy shifted slightly in his prone position, moving his head just enough to glance up at me. “**Cross…**” Luffy’s voice wheezed in my ear.

I choked at the sheer amount of weakness I heard in his voice, weakness I had never thought I’d hear from **him** of all people, but I sucked it up and pressed on.

“Luffy…” I gasped before raising my voice again. “**DAMN IT, LUFFY, WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING JUST LYING THERE!? YOU NEED TO GET UP, DAMN IT!**”

I wouldn’t know until Soundbite told me much later that many combatants had directed their attention towards me in that moment, and my crew began fighting them with vigor drawn from who-knows-where to keep them away from me as I kept talking.

“I KNOW…” I choked on the words as tears streamed down my face. “**I KNOW THAT YOU MUST BE HURTING LIKE HELL, LUFFY! IT’S SO OBVIOUS, AND I KNOW THAT YOU’VE FOUGHT AS HARD AS YOU CAN.**” I bowed my head and shook it miserably. “**BUT… BUT DAMN IT, LUFFY, THIS ISN’T THE END!**”

I flung my arms out wide. “**LOOK AROUND YOU, LUFFY! LOOK AT WHERE WE ARE! WE’RE STILL IN PARADISE, LUFFY! WE HAVEN’T EVEN HIT THE HALFWAY MARK, WE’RE BARELY EVEN A QUARTER OF THE WAY THERE! THIS PLACE… THIS HELL OF WRATH AND TEARS, IT’S NOT WHERE IT ENDS! IT’S NOT WHERE WE END!**

“**WE STILL NEED TO ENJOY SO MANY ADVENTURES, WE STILL NEED TO GO SO FAR, AND YOU…**” I craned my head back and choked back a sob. “**YOU NEED TO LEAD US THERE! BECAUSE WITHOUT YOU… WITHOUT YOU, NONE OF THIS MEANS**
I snapped my head back down and glared bloody murder at Rob Lucci. “AND AS FOR HIM, THAT LEOPARD- BASTARD …” I snarled murderously. “SO HE’S MANAGED TO TAKE YOUR BEST ATTACKS SO FAR AND KEEP GOING, SO THE HELL WHAT!? AT THE END OF THE DAY, YOU WILL ALWAYS BE STRONGER THAN HIM! YOU’RE STRONG ENOUGH TO TAKE THIS KIND OF DAMAGE AND KEEP GOING! YOU’RE STRONG ENOUGH TO FIGHT ON, NO MATTER WHAT GETS IN YOUR WAY! YOU’RE STRONG ENOUGH TO BEAT HIM, DAMN IT!”

There was a single second of silence that seemed to stretch for a lifetime. Then it was broken by the last sound I expected at that moment.

“Dot dot dot dot!”

In hindsight, I really should have seen it coming, but either way, it didn’t make it any less the most downright awesome thing I had experienced up to that point. Admittedly, it was a bit of a reckless move, but I didn’t even hesitate to snap my hand down and ram the appropriate button to patch them through.

“Straw Hat!” hollered a voice that I didn’t recognize. “You might not know me, but I’ve placed all my hopes on you! An all or nothing bet a mile wide and with odds straight from hell, but I placed it knowing that you would succeed! You’ve come this far, don’t fall at the eleventh hour!”

Not even a moment after the caller hung up, Soundbite started to ring again and I answered again.

“Come on, Straw Hat! You’ve fought this far and you’re calling it quits now!? That’s total BS! Kick that cat’s ass!”

“Give ‘em nothin’ short of hell, Luffy! Pirate pride, ever and always!”

In between calls, Soundbite shot an ecstatic grin at me. “You’re gonna have to hold that button down, CAUSE OTHERWISE YOU’LL BREAK YOUR FINGER!”

“You got it!” I nodded eagerly as I rammed the button down and threw the floodgates wide.

-0-

“Come the hell on, Straw Hat!” Bonney roared as she pounded on the table. “You need to walk out of there in one piece, we still need to see which of us is the bigger glutton! I need my pride as a woman and an eater, damn it!”

“I’m with her, Straw Hat Luffy,” Law nodded firmly, the way he was drumming his fingers on his sword’s sheath betraying his emotionless demeanor. “You’ve been interesting thus far, and the insanity you’ve pulled could be useful in the future. Get the hell out of there and get out alive.”

-0-

“Are you fucking kidding me!? You come this fucking far and then you topple here!?” Kid demanded acridly as he strained against the chain-like bandages that were all but holding his body together.

“Damn it, captain, will you stay still already!?” Killer protested as he tried to hold his superior in place. “That cyborg bastard nearly ripped you in half!”
“To hell with you and to hell with me, I’m more concerned with the rubbery moron who’s giving us all a shit-name!” Kidd spat before continuing to curse at the snail in the room. “Yeah, that’s right, I’ve got a bone to pick with you, rubber-brain! You’ve been the gold fucking standard for every pirate of this generation since you beat Crocodile, and now you come this close to losing to a fucking cat?! If you die and make us look bad, I’LL CLIMB DOWN THERE AND TURN YOU INSIDE OUT WITH MY OWN TWO— GRK!”

“DAMN IT, KID!”

-o-

“My predictions have never failed me yet, Straw Hat, and they state quite clearly that you will not die today,” Basil Hawkins enunciatedcoldly as he systematically shuffled around the full deck of cards he had splayed out before him. “I will not be pleased if you are responsible for tarnishing my reputation. Get up. Fight. Win.”

The dinosaur Zoan that the mage had formed a brief alliance with stood impassively to the side as he plied his arcane trade. Drake said nothing, but the fire in his eyes, the twitching of his fingers and the grimace on his face as he stared at the snail said all that needed to be said.

-o-

“Are you certain that this is the right way, brother? Should not more energy be invested in these actions?”

“Let others roar and cajole freely, brother. For now, we shall take another path.” Urouge kept his palms pressed together as he bowed his head. “And offer our support in solemn silence. A mad monk I might be and fallen monks we may be called, but I have not forgotten my teachings. While the rest of the world offers support in an earthly manner, we shall seek it from the heavens.”

“As you say, brother.”

-o-

“ONE AND TWO, ONE AND TWO, APAPAPA!” Apoo roared as he pounded his fists on his chest.

“ONE AND TWO, ONE AND TWO!” the rest of the On-Air pirates shouted back as they beat their own instruments in synch with their captain.

“LOUDER, DAMN IT!” Apoo howled at the sky. “LET THEM HEAR US! MAKE THEM HEAR US ALL THE WAY IN MARIEJOIS!”

[DO IT, STRAW HAT!] Captain Dugong shouted, slamming his fists together. [I’M SPEAKING TO YOU CAPTAIN-TO-CAPTAIN, FIGHTER-TO-FIGHTER, MAN-TO-MAN! IF YOU CAN BEAT ME, YOU CAN BEAT DAMN NEAR ANYONE! DON’T YOU DARE DISGRACE ME NOW! FIIIIGHT!]

[FIGHT! FIGHT! FIGHT!] the rest of the Great Kung-Fu Fleet chorused.

-o-

“You provided me with an inestimable opportunity, Captain Straw Hat Luffy,” Capone ‘Gang’ Bege drawled as he looked over a golden ingot he was holding, taken from one of the countless stacks of similar ingots that surrounded him. “And now, I owe you a debt of gratitude that I will require many
years to repay."

The gangster pirate exhaled a heavy cloud of smoke as he replaced the ingot he was holding and cast an eye to the snail in the room. “I do not forget my debts, Straw Hat. As such, I am ordering you to live, so that I can settle my tabs once and for all. It’s that simple.”

“KICK HIS ASS, LUFFY!” Captain ‘Black Bart’ Bartolomeo and Warlord Boa ‘Pirate Empress’ Hancock cheered in unison.

Or at least, they tried to cheer, anyways, their words slurred by a degree of inebriation that was made clear by the luminescent blushes they were both sporting.

And they were far from the only ones, either, seeing as the crews of both the Cannibal and the Quetzalcoatl had congregated to throw one of the most roaring parties in the history of the Calm Belt. Granted, things had been a bit awkward at first in spite of (or more likely because of) their captains’ shared enthusiasm, but the tension had died a swift death once the booze got brought out and started flowing.

While most of the two crews were celebrating with extreme eagerness, some of the crewmates were a little restrained in their reactions.

Mr. 5, being one such example of reticence, watched the two captains drunkenly swaying together as they supported each other. “Never thought I’d see the day where I’d get to see a Warlord get sauced up close and personal.”

“Considering how I can’t recall ever seeing my sister so much as look at a drop of alcohol in my entire life?” Marigold deadpanned. “That goes double for me.”

“I see…” Gin drawled as he cast his gaze about before nodding his head to the side. “While on the other hand, seeing as she’s only drunk a few mugs, your other sister is a lightweight?”

Marigold cast a flat look at Sandersonia as she watched her sway about in her hybrid form, undulating her elongated torso in order to cause the face someone—her, most likely—had drawn there to dance. “No, she can handle alcohol just fine. It’s the atmosphere that goes straight to her head. And seeing as Hancock never attends any parties whatsoever, I’m left as the designated drinker who keeps everyone in line.”

However, her melancholy mood slowly shifted to a smile as she watched the party, from her sisters liberally enjoying themselves to Marguerite chatting animatedly with Apis to Valentine greedily drowning what little sanity she had left. “Admittedly, this is quite fun. It’s nice to let loose and relax every once in awhile. Dare I say… refreshing?” She punctuated the last word with a shake of her mug.

“Yeah, yeah, I can take a hint,” Gin grunted before waving his arm. “Hey, Jack! Another barrel over here!”

“COME ON, STRAW HAT! YOU SHOWED THAT YOU WERE BETTER THAN THIS WHEN YOU BEAT ME! SMASH HIS FACE IN, POUND HIM TO PIECES!”

“Pupupupu, he’s so loud, but the snail isn’t even connected,” Hamburg chuckled.
“I KNOW THAT THE SNAIL ISN’T CONNECTED, HAMBURG!” Foxy snapped. “CALLING IN COULD BLOW OUR COVER, SO I HAVE TO SHOUT THAT MUCH LOUDER!”

“Boss, with how many people are calling in right now, who do you think would be able pick out and recognize your voice from among them?” Porche questioned.

Foxy turned to leer at her. “Considering that that Back Fight was on the SBS? Anyone who’s paying enough attention, and I’d bet the ship that if everybody else in the World Government isn’t, the Five Elder Stars are,” he growled.

“…point,” Porche conceded and promptly began waving her baton. “ALRIGHT, EVERYONE, WHEN I SAY GO, YOU SAY LUFFY! GO!”

“STRAW HAT!”

“CLOSE ENOUGH!”

-0-

“What the hell do you think you’re doin’, LUFFY!?” Dadan roared indignantly. “Come on, who the hell cares if that bastard’s a Zoan, huh!? You ate big cats for breakfast four days of the week, and that was only if the damn crocodiles weren’t biting! Show that pussy cat what’s what! I RAISED YOU BOYS BETTER THAN THAT, DAMN IT!”

“Did she even raise them at all?” Mogra muttered under his breath.

“I think she’s just trying to capitalize is all,” Dogra muttered back. “After all, what’s the point of turning the hideout into a dive bar if we’re not even associated with the guy it’s all—!”  THWACK!  “YEOW!”

“If you got time to gab, you got time to work, so get back to work!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Meanwhile, in a corner of the renovated hideout, a certain old man sighed wearily as he grabbed the nearest bottle. “Oh, forget it. I give up,” he groaned.

“That’s the spirit, Mayor!” Makino grinned cheerily as she clapped his shoulder.

-0-

“You can’t give up now, LUFFY!”

“Aisa, you get down from there right—!”  THWACK!  “—OW!” Laki yelped, clutching the spot where a pebble had slammed into her head.

“Go blow it out your rifle, Laki!” Aisa howled from atop the totem pole she was balancing on, a Transponder Snail clutched in one hand and a loaded sling spinning in the other. “I’m gonna support my crewmates no matter what and you can’t stop me!”

“You’re not a pirate, Aisa!” Laki protested vigorously.

“Aw, c’mon, Laki, why not leave the kid be?”
The sniper shot an acrid glare at her fellow tribemate, who was leaning against a nearby tree. “You’re just taking her side because she’s actually putting up a fight for once!”

Wiper responded with a raised eyebrow. “And the problem with that is…?”

Laki snorted darkly before refocusing on her pseudo-younger sibling. “Aisa, if you don’t get down from there right now, then you’re grounded!”

“SEE IF I CARE!” Aisa snapped back before focusing on the snail she was carrying. “AND CAPTAIN, YOU HAVE TO WIN! I—!”

Laki paused in her attempt to climb the pole as Aisa suddenly choked up, tears stinging in her eyes. “I HAVEN’T EVEN JOINED YET! I-IT’S NOT FAIR! SO, PLEASE! YOU WON AGAINST GOD, SO WIN NOW! YOU… YOU HAVE TO…”

Aisa threw her head back and screamed to the clear heavens above.

“You have to live!”

-o-

I choked as I processed what I was listening to. So much support, so many calling in from so far. All for us, all for him…

“Can you…” I started weakly before gasping in a breath and raising my voice. “Can you hear them, Luffy!? This… This is why you have to keep fighting! Because at the end of the day, whether you care or not, the truth is plain and clear! The world…” I smiled at the sky as I wiped the tears from my eyes. “The world’s cheering your name! The world itself is begging you to win! So that’s why… that’s why… that’s why no matter what, no matter what… you can’t…”

I sucked in as deep a breath as I could… and then I roared.

“That’s why no matter what, you can’t lose, Luffy! You can’t lose!”

-o-

Rob Lucci growled as he heard Jeremiah Cross’ words ring out, and so many others joining the chorus. But it didn’t matter; Straw Hat’s will had been impressive, but he, Lucci, had used his trump card. No amount of cheering would be able to—

“Gear… Second.”

His eagerness was gone now; as the leopard Zoan turned back to face the only opponent in his life that he would ever willingly deem an equal, he felt only rage and incredulity. But above those? A foreign emotion had crept into his mind, an emotion whose visits he could count on one hand: fear.

And as soon as that fear flared, it transformed into renewed rage. “You… can still move?” he snarled vehemently.

“I won’t give up…” Luffy bit out, through all his pain and all his blood. “Until you go down.”

Lucci’s scowl twitched minutely, for more reasons than just rage. “Life Return: Release,” he huffed, allowing his compressed muscles to expand out to their fullest and relieving some measure of his
pain, however incremental. “I’m going to crush you, each and every one of you, in one second!”

With that, the Zoan flashed forward at the pirate and unleashed a barrage of practically simultaneous finger pistols. “Spots—GRGH!” he snarled audibly as each and every one of his shots was perfectly countered by rubber knuckles meeting his own.

Without a word, Lucci flashed back a foot, giving himself a moment’s pause before reappearing in Luffy’s face, fists outstretched and at the ready. The flash of fear in the pirate’s eyes was supremely satisfying.

“I WON’T FALL FOR THAT AGAIN—!”

Lucci’s tail lashed out, snaring Straw Hat by his waist for the moment he needed to channel the bulk of if not all the energy he had left into one final attack.

“Ultimate Radius,” Lucci snarled. “SIX KING GUN!”

The shockwave that erupted from his fists slammed clean through the rubber man’s body, and devastated the wall on the other side.

The pirate’s eyes rolled up in his head as he coughed up what must have been a quart of blood, and his body went limp.

Lucci, on the other hand, was left in a state of exhaustion that he hadn’t felt since… since… he hadn’t ever truly felt this exhausted, ever. Still, it didn’t matter. What mattered was that he’d won. It had been the fight of his life and he’d won. And now… now he needed to pick up the pieces of his life.

As such, the Zoan let his tail uncurl, turned his back on Luffy and began walking towards the rest of the bridge, mustering up the remaining strength he’d need to kill the crew that had so foolishly branded themselves as enemies of Justice.

-o-

“LUUUFF—ERGH!”

Soundbite made to join Cross in screaming their captain’s name as he staggered drunkenly, but he suddenly cut himself off as his tongue stuck in his throat.

Thanks to his newly awakened abilities, no one ever noticed more than a slight hiccup in the broadcasting of the voices of the world.

Thanks to everyone looking everywhere but at him, no one noticed his gaze coming slightly unfocused.

And thanks to the sheer cacophony that was shaking the world at that moment, no one heard the hiss of static that filled the air.

-o-

As Luffy swayed back and forth on his feet, all he could think of was pain. It hurt… so much. Not just one part of him. Not just his chest, not just his arms, but everything. Standing hurt, breathing hurt, seeing hurt. It all just hurt so bad.

Luffy was strong, incredibly strong, but even the strong had their limits, and he’d reached his. And
so, with little choice left to him, Luffy slowly pitched backward and his mind started to fade into the black.

But that was as far as he got.

“Hey… Hey, kid. Can you hear me?”

Luffy groaned weakly in the affirmative.

“Heh. Yeah, that’s what I thought. Look, kid, I know that you’re going through hell right now, but you can’t give up, alright? You’re not done yet, not even close. Here, I’ll even help you through it. First things first. Get back on your feet.”

Luffy groaned again, but in spite of that he grit his teeth, surged his everything forward, and forced himself back to where he was standing.

“Good, that’s good! Alright, next, that Gear Second of yours. Think you can keep it going?”

The rubber-man wheezed and panted as he reminded himself to keep breathing, but even so, the amount of steam surging from his body returned to full force. And through his pain, he was able to catch sight of Rob Lucci stopping in his tracks and slowly casting a fearful glance over his shoulder.

“Heh, that caught his attention. Now, this part is the easiest of all. You see that big ugly bastard in front of you, the one who’s been kicking the crap out of you this entire time?”

Luffy’s head nodded infinitesimally as his lungs sucked in that vital oxygen.

“Well, if you lose here, then he’s going to kill your crew. He’s going to kill each and every last one of your friends, and he won’t stop until he’s done. The only person who can stop that is you, kid. So, what you’re gonna do is you’re gonna dig deep. You’re gonna pull up every last bit of power you have, every last inch of it, all of it, and you’re going to put it towards kicking, His. Tail. Think you can handle that?”

Luffy’s eyes slowly filled with absolute hatred as he processed those words. And fuelling that hatred…

“The greatest swordsman in the world? That’s good! I wouldn’t expect anything less from a crewmate of the future King of the Pirates!”

“Eh? What are you talking about? Get on already.”

“Shishishi! Looks like I’ve found my cook!”

…were memories.

“NAMI, YOU’LL ALWAYS BE MY FRIEND!”

“Hey, that’s a pretty neat trick!”

“SHUT UP! LET’S GO ALREADY!”

His mind ablaze, the pirate leaned back ever so slightly. “Guuuuum-Guuuuum…”

“Heh. Knew you had it in you. Well, you seem to have this handled, so I’ll be going. Good luck to ya. Oh, and before I forget?”
A D-shaped smile flashed through Luffy’s head.

“You wear my old hat damn well.”

And with that, Luffy let all hell fly loose. “Jeeeeet!”

Lucci barely had time to erect a half-assed Iron Body as the first fists hit him. After that…

“I’ll make sure Vivi stays safe. We all will.”

“SO COOL! So, you guys really want to join my crew?”

“WE HAVE TWO NEW CREWMATES! HIP HIP!”

“ROBIN!”

After that, Lucci lost.

“SAY YOU WANT TO LIIIIIVE!”

“GATLIIIIING!”

-o-

It was an absolute miracle that Rob Lucci managed to endure the barrage he was being hammered by. The fists came hard, they came fast, and they came relentlessly, tenderizing every square inch of the assassin’s body that they could reach.

His Iron Body didn’t matter, his Zoan-enhanced physique didn’t matter, not even his own inhuman constitution mattered. None of it mattered because none of it could stand up to the sheer onslaught assaulting him, pounding through his flesh, pounding him into the wall.

But in spite of it all, Lucci managed to remain conscious. In spite of every last bone in his body breaking twice over, in spite of him suffering injuries that would kill weaker men a hundred times over, Lucci stood strong.

And then it happened.

“…rrrrRRRRR RRRRR RRRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAAGHHHHHH!”

And then Straw Hat Luffy raised his head and screamed his primal fury to the world.

In the moment of that roar, Lucci managed to crack his eye open, and through the haze of blood and pain, he caught sight of a fist.

A single fist, completely like the dozens, hundred, thousands all around it that were pounding into him… save for a single aspect.

Where those fists glistened red, that fist glistened black.

That one fist rammed itself in the middle of Lucci’s face… and Lucci lost.

The next thing he knew, Lucci was staring at the ground, the world wavering in and out of focus as he only just clung to the waking world.

At the very edge of his consciousness, the sound of misshapen wingbeats hit his ears, followed by
the soft thwump of something feathered slapping into his back.

Lucci coughed up a mouthful of blood and croaked painfully, his voice barely above a whisper, his jaws and tongue barely able to form words. “Status… report?”

“Agh…” Hattori twitched minutely on his back. “I’m… afraid we’ve lost, sir. Utterly, at that. Couldn’t be helped, really, they’re… just that good.”

Lucci snorted out a heavy breath. “Damn…”

“…Honestly, sir? Maybe we should look on the bright side.”

“Which is…?”

“Well… you did push him farther than a Warlord and God. And… one way or another… we won’t be… seeing Spandam again. That… has to be worth something… right?”

Lucci panted heavily for a moment before allowing a rueful grin to crawl across his face. “It was… one hell… of a fight…”

And with that, Rob Lucci fell asleep with a smile.

-0-

As Luffy’s final attack rang out, the SBS fell silent, and a good number of those fighting on the bridge paused to watch what they could of the fight.

And as I saw Lucci fall, I slowly turned to Soundbite, the Luffy-grade grin that was slowly spreading across his face matching mine tooth for tooth.

And then, as if to dispel any and all doubts?

“ROOOBBBBBB!” Luffy roared, his voice stretching across the air even without Soundbite’s help. “LET’S ALL GO BACK! TOGETHER!”

I heaved forward and clutched my gut and mouth as I tried to restrain myself. “Pffff…”

However, before I could so much as squeak, the Marines were kind enough to provide a trigger. “C-Calling all ships!” the suddenly panicked voice of God stammered. “J-Just now! T-The pirate, S-Straw Hat Luffy… H-HAS JUST DEFEATED CIPHER POL NO. 9’S ROB LUCCI!”

“PFFFFHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!” I threw my head back and cackled to the high heavens. “YOU HEARD IT HERE FIRST, FOLKS! THE WINNER BY TOTAL KNOCK OUT IN THE BRAWL AGAINST THE SOLDIER OF JUSTICE IS NONE OTHER THAN OUR CAPTAIN, MONKEY D. STRAW HAT LUFFY!”

I then snapped my finger up and jabbed it into the air. “THIS MEANS THAT IN THE END, IN THE CONFLICT BETWEEN US AND THE DREADED BOOGEYMEN OF CIPHER POL NUMBER NINE, THE UNDEFEATED AND UNMITIGATED VICTORS ARE… THE STRAW HAT PIRAAAAATES!”

I swear, nothing, nothing up until that point compared to the sheer torrent of adrenaline coursing through my body at shouting that to the world. The world… Enies Lobby had been earthshaking in canon, but now? This was going to be comparable to Whitebeard punching the planet’s core. And it. Was. Intoxicating.
And hence, with no more regard for the warzone around me, I laughed and laughed—

“Dot dot dot—KA-LICK! WAY TO GO, LUFFY!”

“COMPLETE VICTORY, SUCKERS!”

“QUIET, OR THEY’LL FIND US!”

“THAT’S MY BOYS, HAHAAHAHAHA!”

And I laughed and laughed and laughed as we got the solid confirmation that all of our allies were alright—

“ALL UNITS! OPEN FIRE ON THE BRIDGE OF HESITATION! DAMN PLUTON AND DAMN THE ELDER STARS! KILL THE STRAW HAT PIRATES! LEAVE NONE ALIVE!”

And when Sengoku’s voice bellowed out, and I turned to see the very, very dented Gates of Justice —

CRACK!

…correction. The cracked gates of Justice.

“Uhhh…” Su hedged nervously, cowering as rays of golden light started to shine through the badly abused doors. “Is metal supposed to act like that?”

Vivi opened her mouth to answer, and then choked fearfully as the blood drained from her face. “It does when it’s exposed to temperatures several dozen degrees below freezing…” she squeaked as she shakily raised a finger to point.

Indeed, by following her finger I caught sight of signs of frost starting to creep through and around the Gates.

“PFFHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

And then I just kept laughing.

“What the hell is so funny!? You’re all about to die!”

“PFFHAHAHAHA!” I howled as I shot my grin at the warships looming around us. “I seriously overestimated how smart you guys were. You still don’t get it?! WE’VE ALREADY WON! All that’s left now is to get the hell out! And that way out…” I turned my attention skywards. “Should be arriving any second now.”

And so I waited.

In reality, it was only for half a minute, at the absolute worst, but to me… it was torture. An infinity after an infinity, each instant tick-tick-ticking away without end.

And at the end of those infinities, I was just about to feel the barest sliver of doubt…

…and then it was there.

Tears welled in the corners of my closed eyes as I smiled blissfully. “I knew you’d come…” I whispered.
Soundbite’s jaw all but hit the ground as he stared at nothing. “NO. FUCKING. WAY.”

“Eh?” Franky paused mid-punch to put a hand to his ear. “The hell—? Who was that? And what’d they say, it was all garbled.”

“Huh!? You goin’ deaf, metal-man?!” Boss scoffed incredulously as he whipped his rope-dart around to and fro. ‘That was as clear as day!’ He then frowned in confusion. “Ah, the words were, anyways. The actual meaning, though…?”

“Where did that come from…?” Su wondered, glancing every which.

I grinned as I watched everyone react in confusion, but when I noticed Usopp heading for the edge of the bridge, I snapped my hand out. “Don’t!” I shouted, even as I kept on smiling. “Don’t look, don’t question it! You don’t have to! Because in the end…” Tears spilled freely down my cheeks as I wept with joy. “We already know who it is, right?”

Usopp stared dubiously at me before an equally euphoric smile came across his face. He then threw his head back…

“THE SEA!”

And shouted.

“JUMP INTO THE SEEEEEAA!” he cried out, sobbing joyously. “EVERYONE JUMP, RIGHT NOOOOW!”

“ROBIN!” I roared at our confused archaeologist. “TOSS HIM IN WITH US!”

Robin stared at me for a second before nodding confidently. “Right!”

“Wha—! Are the two of you nuts!?” Zoro demanded incredulously. “That damn sea is in turmoil, if we go down there—!”

“It’ll be fine!” Usopp sobbed in his face. “S-She’s here! She’s c-come to help us! She’s here! She actually came!”

Lassoo glanced between us for a moment before shrugging flatly. “Oh, what the hell.” He reared on his hind legs and howled. “TO THE SEA!”

“INTO THE SEA!” Boss and Franky chorused, pumping their fists in synch as they dashed towards the edge.

“THE SEA!” Sanji crowed at the top of his lungs.

“INTO THE SEA!” Vivi and Conis cried out together, the angel helping the Princess to carry Carue with her.

“YOU’RE ALL NUTS, YA KNOW THAT?” Kokoro shouted out as she ran after us.

“THE... THE PIRATES HAVE LOST THEIR MINDS!” the voice of God cried out in confusion.

I honestly couldn’t help myself, cackling as I swept my arms out wide. “PFHAHAHA! YOU ALL ONLY WISH! WE’RE NOT NUTS, YOU BASTARDS JUST DIDN’T COUNT RIGHT! Buuut hey,” I scoffed mockingly. “I’m a nice guy. So what the hell, allow me to list off the members who currently compose the crew of the future King of the Pirates!”
I jabbed my thumb at myself. “For starters, we have me, my talking snail and my ballistic hound!”

“REPRESENT!” Soundbite roared.

“Got that right!” Lassoo bayed.

“The future best swordsman in the world, the ultimate ruler of all snipers and the best chef to ever come out of the North Blue!”

“TO THE—!”

“WE GET IT ALREADY!” two of our crew’s monsters snarled as they grabbed our sniper’s shoulders and dragged him along.

“The wicked witch of the weather, the ingenious monster doctor and the one true heir of Alabasta and her royal guard!”

“SCREW OFF, CROSS!” Nami and Chopper laughed as they ran past us.

“Give ‘em hell, Cross!” Vivi eagerly shouted, slapping me on the back as she passed.

“Ditto!” Carue pumped his wing firmly as he hung onto Conis.

“A band of badass dugongs, our angelic gunner and her pet fox and the demonic heir of Ohara!”

“OOHRAH!” Boss roared skywards.

“I hope this works…” Conis giggled nervousy.

“Of course it will!” Su cackled eagerly. “Haven’t you noticed it yet!? With these people, the crazier the scheme is, the more it’s absolutely guaranteed to work!”

“That does seem to be a fact of life…” Robin agreed, a blissful smile on her face.

“The very heir to Roger’s throne!”


I spared that comment a snicker before spinning on my heel and continuing. “And finally, to round out our numbers, our most crucial and beloved comrade of all…” My smile stretched from ear to ear as I ran to the very edge of the bridge and jumped, even going so far as to pull a flip midair as the bridge exploded behind me.

I smiled down at the sea…

“Let’s go, everyone!”

And laughed as Merry smiled right back up at us, waving her arms over her head.

“Let’s all go back! Back to the Sea of Adventure!”

“WE HAVE THE MOST BADASS CARAVEL THE GRAND LINE HAS EVER SEEN!”

-0-

A world away in a fairytale land of sweets, a Long-Leg man and a lion gaped at a cackling snail in
shock. Contrary to appearances, this was not the setup to a joke.

“I—! W-Wait, give me a second…” Pekoms stammered hesitantly, holding a hand up as he reached beneath his sunglasses and kneaded the bridge of his nose. “I… t-their ship just came for them? It came for them on its own and spoke!?"

“*Bon—Oui, it did—soir…*” Tamago breathed in shock. “*Bon—Maman… Maman* is going to be *très* interested in this development, *sans doubté—soir.*”

The mink processed that for a second before snorting and slamming his glasses back into place with a growl. “Well, if she is, then ‘Maman’ can take care of it herself.”

Tamago looked at his companion with a raised eyebrow. “*Bon—Es-tu suicidal—soir?*”

Pekoms gave his partner in crime a flat look. “The Straw Hats may be Paradise rookies, but they’re Paradise rookies that just invaded the World Government’s own turf for one of their crewmates and won, *with the entire world as their witness.* That is *Emperor levels of crazy* at *minimum,* and they didn’t even have a fraction of our manpower! I don’t care how safe Totland is renowned for being *or* how powerful Linlin is, I am *not* risking my shell going after their damn ship!”

Tamago hesitated slightly before swallowing and tugging at his collar. “Ahh… *Bon—Bien dit—soir.*”

-o-

“WOAH!” I cried, flailing desperately as I was tossed up—!

*THWUMP!* “OW!”

And then crashed down onto the deck of the Merry. “Nice toss…” I groaned as I rubbed my head.

“Sue me, I was swimmin’ drunk!” Kokoro cackled from overboard. “Anyways, gimme a bit, will you? These currents are hell and I got a lot of people to find, even with the dugong helping out!”

*SPLASH!* “WAAAAAGH!” *THWUMP!* “OW!”

“Make that one less!”

“SCWEW YOU, BOSS!”

I rolled my eyes with a scoff before glancing around—

“Ah, there you are!”

—and picking Soundbite up with a grin, simultaneously discarding the sword I’d been using onto the deck. “Sorry about tossing you like that, I just didn’t want you in the seawater is—!”

*HURK!*

“…all, *seriously!?*”

*THE FUCKING DECK IS SOAKED, ASSHAT!*” Soundbite snarled irately.

“You little—!”

“Cross!”
I spun around at the sound of a very familiar ethereal voice, and grinned joyously and crouched down with my arms held wide as a little raincoat-wearing tyke ran at me. “Merry!”

The Klautermann leapt into my arms and hugged me tightly with a happy sob, and I hugged back.

“JACKASS!”

THWACK!

“YEOW!”

Before she suddenly hauled off and rammed her foot into my shin. Through my greave. And it hurt. A lot.

“OWOWOWOW— WHAT THE HELL, YOU LITTLE SCUMBOAT!?” I barked as I hopped around on my uninjured leg.

“YOU BASTARDS LEFT ME!” she roared as she flailed her arms indignantly.

“What!”? I froze in place as I stared at her in shock. “That’s—! Hell no, that’s not it all! We just decided to hold you in reserve, is all! Come on, you should know this! You don’t roll out your pinch hitter in the first inning, you hold her back for the bottom of the ninth!”

Merry snorted and puffed her cheeks out petulantly. “You're just trying to butter me up so that I don’t hit you more!”

“…is it working?”

THWACK!

“YEOW!”

“JACKASS!”

“You little—!”

Before I could say anything else, I was cut off by her grabbing my leg and burying her face in my jacket.

“I was so scared…” she whispered tearfully.

I hastily dropped to my knees and hugged her tight, holding onto her as firmly as I could. “I never doubted you would come, not even for a second…” I solemnly promised her.

I heard a few more SPLASH! sounds from nearby, but I didn’t look up from where I was. At least, not until Luffy gasped in relief and Kokoro and Boss leapt back onboard.

“Phew, that was close! I thought I was going to—MERRY?!” Luffy yelped in shock.

“Hi, Captain!” Merry waved eagerly. “I decided to pop my body to help you guys!”

“Hi, Captain!” Merry waved eagerly. “I decided to pop my body to help you guys!”

“Oh, that’s cool!” Luffy laughed happily before refocusing his attention. “Oh, and Robin! Thanks for— Mmph?”

He was cut off by an autonomous hand as Robin smiled happily. She then turned her attention back to everyone else. “Everyone,” she smiled gratefully. “Thank—!”
“ROBIN!”

“— GWAH!?!”

THWUMP!

I blinked in shock as Nico Robin was summarily *glomped* by Tony Tony Chopper, Nami, and Nefertari Vivi. Sanji tried too, of course, but he missed and crashed into the mast.

“That’s new…” I mused numbly.

“THAT HURT, JERK!” Merry roared as she booted Sanji’s ass.

“Wha—?” Robin blinked blearily as she looked at the trio on top of her.

“I was so scared that you were going to die before I could say sorry for how I’ve been treating you!” Vivi sobbed regretfully.

“I thought I was going to be the last sane woman standing on this ship of crazies!” Nami wept fearfully.

“ROBIIIIN!” Chopper blubbered… well, Chopper just straight-up blubbered.

“Ah…” I hastily shook my head in an effort to get my brain back on track. “Sooo… Vivi, does this mean you’ll stop being such a bitch to her now?”

Vivi swiftly snapped to her feet and coughed into her fist as she regained her usual composure.

“Now, now, let’s not go crazy here.”

Nami stared up at her with a look of clear exasperation. “Seriously!?”

“She *crucified* my father!”

“It’s fine, it’s fine, I acknowledge that I made mistakes. I’ll send him my sincerest apologies at the earliest convenience.” Robin glanced to the side thoughtfully. “I’m sure that I still have the letter template lying around somewhere…”

“You will write him a twenty-page essay by hand, and you know *exactly* which pair I speak of!” Vivi snapped indignantly.

“Is this really the time?!” Zoro roared.

“HEARTLESS BASTARD!” Chopper shouted back as he threw himself at the swordsman.

“HAVE YOU NO RESPECT?!” Usopp demanded as he lunged towards him, his Usopp Pound at the ready.

“DIE, MOSSHEAD!” Sanji declared as he loosed a flurry of kicks.

“*THE DAMN BATTLESHIPS ARE GETTING READY TO BLAST US, YOU MORONS!*” he shouted back as he hastily blocked.

“Ah…” I flinched and glanced around nervously at the many Marines scrambling around frantically on the Battleships. “Point. Reunite and celebrate later, GTFO *now.*”

“Ugh…” Luffy groaned, drawing everyone’s attention. Visibly struggling, he held up his arm.
“Guys… I’ve done as much as I can.” He grinned weakly. “Can I trust you guys… to do the rest?”

I didn’t even hesitate to match his grin tooth for tooth as I dashed up to him and slapped his hand.
“Ever and always, captain!” I then reached into my bag, and again grabbed the knob controlling the dead zone. “Alright, how long do we have before they fire?”

“Half a minute! THEY’RE FAST!”

“Well, then, guess we’ll just have to up that time limit, won’t we?” I angled my head at my snail.
“Soundbite?”

“Aye?”

I spun the knob clockwise once more before answering through a positively psychotic smile. “Let’s have us some good old-fashioned, down and dirty fun.”

“AYE-AYE!”

“Oh, those poor bastards,” Merry breathed reverentially.

Not daring to wait a moment longer, I snapped my finger up and pointed at a nearby Battleship. “Attention—!” I barked in a voice that wasn’t mine.

“GUNNERY DECK #2!” Soundbite picked up seamlessly.

“This is—!”

“VICE ADMIRAL STRAWBERRY!”

“The Straw Hats have pulled a trick! Several of their number have infiltrated—!” I swung my finger around to indicate another battleship.

“VESSEL NUMBER 6!”

“Prepare to fire upon the ship on my mark! Any who fail to comply will be summarily executed!”

My grin widened visibly as the line of cannons on the ship re-oriented themselves. “FIRE!”

The very moment that the cannon fire began, I pointed towards the ship behind the one being fired upon. “Attention all hands, this is—!” “Rear Admiral Winston!” “The soldiers onboard of—!” “Vessel number 1!” “Have just mutinied, along with the soldiers on—!” “Vessel number 7!” “Fire on them on my mark!” I gave the cannons a moment to reorient before… “FIRE!”

Ah, that barrage of thunder was music to my ears.

“Who next, who next…” I sang as I danced my finger around. “Eenie meenie minie you.”

And so it went as Soundbite and I proceeded to sow utter mayhem amidst the Buster Call. Oh, and we didn’t just order them to fire on one another, that would have been too easy.

We started unwitting mutinies—

“I repeat, the soldiers on decks four through six are compromised! Apprehend them at once so that they may be court-martialed!”

—we undermined authority—
“You thought that voice was me!? FOOLS! That was Jeremiah Cross and his damnable snail! Henceforth, all orders must be preceded by the following passcode!”

—we orchestrated acts of sabotage—

“I am telling you the truth, soldier, the ship is lost! Soak all the gunpowder through, make sure that these bastards can’t use our vessel for anything but tinder!”

—but most of all? Over the course of the next three interminable minutes—

“Hurry the hell up! If we don’t have that birthday cake ready to go in the next minute, Admiral Akainu is going to have all of our heads! And where are the goat hooves!?”

We raised hell.

Once the ships were all in nice, chaotic disarray, their shots firing anywhere but at Merry, I allowed myself to hunch over and wheeze, panting as I got some breath back in my spent lungs. “Wooo, that was rough…” I panted with a shit-eating grin. “But now… noooow… nooow we do the coup de grâce.”

I exchanged grins with Soundbite before pulling myself to my full height and pointing skywards and shouting out. Our voices sounded in unison as five very specific voices that were not our own.

“FIRE!”

And all at once, every last battleship of the Buster Call fired on one another, and the only reason they didn’t all go up in splinters was that the fire was divided instead of concentrated.

“SORRY, GUESS YOU ALL LISTENED TO THE WRONG VOICES!” Soundbite and I cackled in the quintet, myself even going so far as to pull my eyelid down and stick out my tongue. “BETTER LUCK NEXT TIME!” And with that, I slashed my hand across my neck and we just flat-out cackled as the Buster Call imploded around us.

“…I will now repeat myself: I am so very, very glad that I am on your side, Cross,” Kokoro muttered, looking honest-to-goodness scared.

“So am I, Granny,” I chuckled, before turning towards the rest of my bemused crew and looking towards the second mate. “Now, seeing as how those ships are still somewhat functional and we’ve accomplished everything we came here for, what say we leave Enies Lobby to ruin and head back to Water 7?” I raised my hand. “Your turn, o mighty navigator.”

Nami grinned as she slapped my hand, looking over her notepad once more before nodding firmly.

“Right, then. Everyone to your positions! Half sail on the main, full sail on the mizzen and bowsprit! And whoever’s on the whipstaff, course—” She paused, eyeballing what little of the sky wasn’t obscured by the smoke of Enies Lobby. “Put the sun off the starboard bow!”

And as soon as we finished scrambling around getting everything perfect—and Nami was up to her usual exacting standards, so that wasn’t easy—we were on our way. Now that the threat was mostly disarmed, our navigator chucked the notion of stability out the window in favor of speed.

Even as the big ships wallowed in the ever-changing currents, their shattered masts and shredded sails unable to properly maneuver them, Nami directed us along those currents like as though Merry was little more than her personal bicycle, weaving us around the battleships and whirlpools and catching the edges of the latter at just the right moments and angles needed to give us bursts of speed. Musket fire and light swivel cannon barked out in attempts to hit us, but their height, the close range
and the sheer disparity between them and Nami’s skills meant that they didn’t even come close to hitting us.

Though by no means did that mean that things were easy, by any definition of the word.

“HARD TO PORT!” Nami barked as one of the battleships slewed into our path.

“I’ve got it!” Boss grunted, lashing out with his rope dart. The weapon bit into the hull of a nearby battleship, swinging us around its prow… with just a bit too much force.

“Too fast too fast TOO FAST!” Merry wailed fearfully as she whipped towards the hull of a battleship portside first. “WE’RE GONNA CRASH!”

“NOT IF I CAN STOP IT!” Nami snapped back before whipping her finger up. “CONIS!”

The angel groaned miserably as she brought her bazooka up to bear. “Oh, this is gonna hurt…” Nevertheless, she squared her stance, leveled the weapon at the warship and pulled the trigger.

“Reject Bazoo— OOMPH!” The rest of the attack’s name was cut off as the blast tossed Conis off her feet. Thankfully, it was enough to kill Merry’s sideways momentum, which allowed us to continue on track.

“That was weeeiiird,” the Klabautermann mumbled as she staggered around dizzily.

“Gnnnnrrrrr…” Conis half-whimpered-half-groaned as she clutched her shoulder.

“Alright, almost there…” Nami muttered to herself as we sped down the water-filled alley.

“NOT QUITE!” Soundbite barked. “We’ve got a bunch OF CANNONS AIMED AT US, AND I can’t stop them all!”

Nami’s reaction was… to cast a sidelong glare at the ships around us before heaving an exasperated sigh. “Tch. Yeah, that figures. I guess I might as well take care of them, huh.”

…but not what I’d expected and not that I really doubted her at this point, but… ah, what the hell. I raised an eyebrow before addressing her. “Okay, I’ll bite, how the heck’re you planning to pull that off?”

Nami responded by gracing me with an angelic smile. “Answer me this: What is Enies Lobby renowned as?” she asked.

“Ah…?”

Those of us who weren’t busy panicking at the sight of gun crews swarming on the nearby battleships sent confused glances at each other.

“It’s… an eternal day island?” Sanji finally spoke up.

“Right!” Nami said cheerfully. “So then…” She cocked her head to the side innocently. “Why are we fighting in the shade?”

“Fighting in the—” I parroted, looking up, before cutting myself off as I took in the sky. “Oooohhhhh holy shit.”

Suddenly, I was very glad my fear of lightning was almost completely gone because if it wasn’t, the sight of a horizon-to-horizon bank of crackling storm clouds probably would’ve sent me catatonic.
And if that seems like a suspiciously specific approximation, that’s because as it was, it still took almost all my strength to not pass out.

“When the hell did you set this up, witch?!” Zoro demanded.

“You didn’t think all that staff-spinning I was doing on the Bridge was just to control my Eisen Tempo, did you?” Nami grinned cheerfully. “Now, if you’ll excuse me…” She started to swing her staff about, causing her cloudy aura to snap about and darken. “Today’s forecast warns of an errant lightning god wandering in the vicinity of Enies Lobby. Signs of said god's approach include freak storms, inordinate pillars of lightning and maximum carnage. Should you happen to be in the path of this deity, this navigator advises only one course of action.”

An evil grin played its way across Nami’s face as she pointed her staff skyward. “Pray.”

And with that, her Eisen Cloud lashed out a single bolt of lightning and into the tempest above.

While we were all gaping up at the heavens as the clouds steadily started to glow brighter and brighter, Nami smiled cheerily as she spun her Clima-Tact at her side. “Divine Tempo.”

She then slammed the butt of her weapon into the deck with a resounding CLACK.

“Jupiter’s Fury.”

And then the world… pretty much exploded with light and sound as the sky disgorged almost a dozen insanely massive pillars of pure electricity that slammed into the ocean around us, with more than half of them frying the battleships, leaving them disinflated and afire.

Once my vision returned and my ears stopped ringing, I slowly took in the sight of the Marines scrambling about on the now actively burning warships around us before turning a deliberately neutral expression on Nami. “I think I can hear a song playing,” I stated.

“Let me guess, ‘Hail to the Queen’?” she inquired happily.

“Try ‘Pop goes the Bounty’.”

That caused Nami to freeze up, her mouth slightly open before she sighed and shook her head. “Yeah, that’s fair,” she reluctantly admitted.

I chuckled, mentally sending a thank you to Kalifa—and God, if that wasn’t something I never thought I’d think—and then glanced back out to sea.

I then felt euphoria begin to bubble in my chest as I realized that I really was looking out to sea, because before us was the sight of a blue horizon, marred only by the last battleship, drifting along dead in the water on a parallel course.

Everyone else was swift to notice and rejoice as well.

“There’s the exit!” Merry leapt and pointed forwards joyously.

“Did you ever doubt me?” Nami regained her charisma as she smirked victoriously.

“Do you think I ever don’t?” Zoro deadpanned.

“We’re free~, we’re free~!” Usopp and Chopper sing-sang as they danced around hand-in-hand with one another.
“We made it,” Robin breathed as she sighed in relief.

CRASH!

A moment after she said that, said last battleship found itself t-boned as another one came across our path. And at its bow was a figure I immediately recognized.

“Vice Admiral Momonga,” I grit out.

“Strong?” Boss queried, his flipper drifting towards his rope-dart, accompanied by an eager glint in his eyes.

“Oh, even better,” Vivi lamented miserably.

Momonga proceeded to whip his blade from its sheath and hold it at ready in what was clearly a well-practiced stance.

“Swordsman.”

“And she means the ‘Sea Kings make a good lunch’ kind, too,” I provided.

“Erk,” Boss responded intelligently as he snapped his hand away from his weapon as though it were on… well, you know.

“Why did I open my mouth?” Robin muttered darkly as she massaged the bridge of her nose. “I know better by now, so why?”

“Infectious insanity?” Lassoo supplied.

“…yes, that sounds about right.”

“Nami-swan, you have a plan, right?” Sanji asked nervously.

“Yup,” she said, popping the last letter before raising her hand with her palm out. “Tag.”

Zoro snorted through his smirk as he slapped her palm with his free hand, the other occupied with tying his bandanna in place. “Right.”

Once he was past her, Nami leaned towards me. “He… does have this, right?”

“Eh…” I hedged uncertainly. “Maybe? It all depends—?”

“Asura.”

“—Yeah, no, he’s got this,” I amended seamlessly.

Needless to say, Zoro’s illusory doubles appearing around him left everyone gaping in stunned amazement, even me. It was one thing to hear about it in practice, but actually seeing Zoro with three faces and six arms? That was… something else… wait… why did he enter the form before drawing any of his blades?! As it was, he only had three hanging at his—!

My thought process ground to a halt as Zoro spread his legs and took a very specific stance, all six of his hands clutching the hilt of one very specific sword, and going by the way Momonga tensed on his ship, he had a good idea of what was coming too.

“One Sword Style,” a trio of hellish voices chorused in synch. “Asura…”
“Hoooo boy,” I whispered numbly as I slowly brought out my Vision Dial. “This is gonna be—!”

“Imperial Lion’s Anthem!”

Before I could react, there was… I think there was a blur of motion as Zoro and Momonga swung their blades as one—and then everything was still as Zoro slowly returned Wado Ichimonji back into its sheath.

The second the crossguard clicked against the lacquered wood, two things happened at once.

The first was that Momonga was flung back from the edge of the battleship, his back slamming into the vessel’s hull as the wind was slammed out of him.

And second…

Second, Zoro’s Asura clones faded, and he walked over to Luffy, pressing his straw hat back onto his face. “And that’s that. Back to you, Captain,” he grunted.

“Thanks, Zoro!” Luffy laughed through his hat.

“Um, Zoro?” Nami cocked her eyebrow at him in a decidedly unimpressed manner. “Not that getting rid of a Vice Admiral isn’t impressive and everything, I’d just like to point out the fact that his battleship is still—”

“Ah, Nami?” Boss interrupted with a cough as he tugged at her jacket, jabbing his cigar at the ship. “I would kindly suggest shutting up about now. It’s already been handled.”

Nami and I followed the direction he was pointing in and then blinked in confusion as we tried to process our eyes were telling us. It… appeared like the battleship was moving in two different directions for some reason? But that didn’t make any sense, why would the aft of the ship be rising above… the…

“Did he just cut a Marine BATTLESHIP IN HALF?” Soundbite asked weakly.

I chuckled in dull amazement as I confirmed that yes, the two halves of the titanic vessel were sliding apart. However, as swiftly as I was stunned, I was just as swiftly snapped out of it as I noticed another result of the attack.

-0-

“Sweet shit man, you even cut the sea and clouds! N-Not that far, admittedly, but—!”

Mihawk cocked his eyebrow at the snail he was listening to before glancing away with a scoff. “Two steps forward—”

“I did?” the ‘novice’ swordsman’s voice interrupted, the snail sporting an annoyed scowl. “Tch, damn.”

“…why the hell do you sound disappointed?” the navigator asked in a clearly strained tone.

“Because if I’d done that move perfectly, then only the ship would have been split in half. And besides, the ship didn’t split all the way through; it broke halfway, and its own weight did the rest. Too much force, not enough control. Tch, guess I still have one hell of a long way to go.”

“YOU APOLOGIZE TO EVERY BEGINNER AND WEAKLING IN THE WORLD RIGHT
"NOW!" the Straw Hats’ sniper roared indignantly.

Mihawk’s eyebrows rose again, and his lips slowly parted into a pleased smile. “Well,” he nodded in approval as he took a sip from the cup of wine he was holding. “It would appear that my successor is indeed progressing at an acceptable pace. Good, very good.”

“Gurararara! Looks like choosing the one who followed Red-Hair’s brat as your own was a good choice,” a nearby giant chuckled animatedly before sighing fondly. “Meanwhile, mine is still stuck in the thralls of his youth and rebelling with reckless abandon. Honestly…” Whitebeard shook his head with an indulgent sigh. “I love my sons dearly, but sometimes they need a good clock upside the head.”

“Like Shanks himself, unfortunately,” Mihawk scoffed with a slight leer.

Indeed, it was the very reason that he was in his current situation. His former rival’s rampage, undoubtedly to cause more trouble for the World Government so as to support his protégé, was troubling him by proxy, especially given the fact that he was one of two Emperors on such a rampage. Three would remove any possibility of Mihawk not getting involved, so he had sought out the Moby Dick in hopes of discouraging such actions. He’d succeeded, and as a bonus found a new drinking companion.

“Gurararara! Now, that’s an entirely different matter!” Whitebeard cackled. “Red-Hair can grow as old or strong as he wants, but he’ll always be a brat at heart.”

The world’s greatest swordsman twitched before reaching for his wine bottle. “Don’t I know it.”

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Once I managed to snap myself out of my shock, I whipped my head around and snapped my finger up at our on-staff cyborg. “FRANKY! GET US THE HELL OUT OF HERE, NOW!”

Franky hesitated at that, glancing around nervously. “Wait, you mean—!? I can’t, I ran out of—!”

“Here you go!” Merry piped up as she pulled a trio of bottles out of... somewhere and shoved them in his arms.

“Eh?” Franky blinked at them in shock. “Where the hell did you—!?”

“Iceburg said that you’d run out, so he gave me these!”

“...tch. Damn Ice-for-Brains—!” Franky muttered acridly as he opened his gut fridge, swapped out the bottles, and then shuddered in disgust. “Ah, gross, this is diet!”

“FRANKY!”

“Gah, alright, alright!” Franky snapped as half the ship yelled at him, but halfway up the steps he paused and shot an uncertain look over his shoulder. “But... if I use it—”

“It’s the only way,” Merry cut him off with a voice full of iron. “Do it.”

Franky turned his uncertain expression towards the Klabautermann, but seeing her immovable expression, he nodded and dashed to the caravel’s stern. “Alright, everyone hang on tight, because I’m giving her all I’ve got. Max Cola Power!”

“EVERYONE HANG ONTO YOUR EVERYTHING!” I called out as I leaped to the nearest line
and wrapped it around my arm. “BECAUSE WE!”

“THIRD TIME, BABY!” Merry laughed ecstatically as she jumped up and down on her own head. “THIS IS AN EAST BLUE RECORD!”

“ARE!”

“LET’S GOOOOO!” Luffy whooped at the top of his lungs.

“OUTTA HERE!”

“SAYONARA, suckahs!” Soundbite roared as loud as he could.

“COUP DE VENT!”

And just like that, I felt a few Gs of wind slamming into me, like Reverse Mountain and the Knock-Up Stream all over again. We were flying again… we were free again.

“And, just to discourage anyone from taking potshots at us, SPECIAL ATTACK: SMOKE STAR!” Usopp declared, letting the smoke bomb fly and complete the image of what we were leaving behind: what had been a deadly fleet in a Government base not one hour ago was now matchsticks and razors.

And at that moment? I let all the tension leave me as I threw back my head, flung my fist in the air…

“WE WOOOOON!”

And shouted our victory to the ends of the earth.

-0-

Sengoku drew in a deep breath through his nose as he kept his eyes firmly closed, slowly counting down from a thousand by multiples of seven in a bid to remain calm.

“Let me see if I have this straight,” he stated slowly and clearly. “We have lost Enies Lobby. We have lost CP9. We have lost a dozen battleships. We have lost thousands of soldiers. We are still trying to locate where Kizaru landed. And we have months’ worth of repair work to perform on the Gates of Justice. And meanwhile, the Straw Hat Pirates and their sixty allies all left the island alive?”

“That sounds about right, yeah,” Admiral Aokiji drawled coolly.

“And you’re advocating…” Sengoku slowly cracked his eyes open. “That we let. Them. Go.”

Aokiji considered that for a moment before nodding in agreement. “Pretty much, yeah.”

Sengoku slowly slid his eyes shut and slowed his breathing anew before slowly reopening them several dozen feet higher and with a lot more light. “If your reasoning isn’t the best I have heard since I joined the Marines, I will trade you to Big Mom to act as her refrigerator until the end of your days in exchange for whatever islands I can get.”

To his credit, Aokiji only swallowed minutely under the force of Sengoku’s divine glare. “Simple,” he drawled in an only just calm voice. “The world’s already in turmoil, and it’s going to get worse as the Straw Hats’ latest broadcast sinks in. And that’s on top of the casualties we suffered today. The last thing we need is to storm a nominally allied nation to get at the Straw Hats.”
“And that is if they still decide to stay allied with us, after the first entry from that blackbook,” an older woman’s voice cut in from nearby.

“Tsuru,” Sengoku growled in a barely civil tone.

“Vice Admiral Tsuru,” Aokiji nodded politely to the snail.

“Sengoku, Kuzan. If Iceburg hasn’t canceled all contracts between us by now, he will if we pull a stunt as harebrained as a full-scale military invasion. And if we do that anyway, the best-case scenario would be that Cross and the rest of the Straw Hats die as martyrs, removing any doubt in his words. Tearing an island apart to kill the Straw Hats, and giving no concern to the nation they’re in? It would be the final nail in the World Government’s coffin, and for more reasons than one. Dragon would sink his fangs into the opportunity with gusto, and I doubt he’s the only one. This was a complete and utter defeat, Sengoku; the best we can do now is cut our losses and prepare our next move.”

The Fleet Admiral of the Navy stared at the snail silently for a moment before slowly closing his eyes and drawing in a deep breath.

Then he released that breath, and opened his tired eyes as he stared down at the deck of his ship.

“…is Spandam still alive?” he asked softly.

A slight glint appeared in Aokiji’s eye as he perked up a bit. “Yes, Vice Admiral Doberman has him on board his ship. He’s in bad shape, clearly, but alive.”

-0-

“Shouldn’t I be passing out by now?! Oh, God, the pain!”

-0-

Sengoku allowed a smirk to come over his face. “Good. We’ll start cutting our losses by publishing every detail of what happens to him. Not even Cross will be able to call it anything but Justice.”

“…Sengoku, I do believe that that is easily the best idea you’ve had all day,” Tsuru replied.

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A grunt on the other end signified the conversation to be over, and Tsuru hung up the snail with a heavy sigh.

“So…” Garp grunted as he munched on a rice cracker. “When do you think you’re gonna forgive him?”

The elderly Vice Admiral shook her head regretfully. “Not for awhile, I’m afraid. We’ve had our differences before, but… well, haven’t you noticed he’s not the same man we trained with? That we graduated with?”

“Yeah, no shit, before he didn’t hit even half as hard,” Garp grumbled as he rubbed his chin before shrugging indifferently. “But what the hell did you expect, eh? Heavy is the head that wears the… ah, damn…” He started snapping his finger helplessly. “What was it, what was it… top hat, I think?”

“Crown, Vice Admiral,” Momonga provided dryly as he dabbed oil onto his blade.
“Yeah, that!” Garp pointed at the swordsman with a grin. “Heavy is the head that, eh… blast, the golden asshole really does hit harder. Anyway, what he said.”

Tsuru shook her head sadly. “I know that he has burdens, Garp, I do. I have them myself. I understand that… or at least I thought I did.” She massaged her face tiredly. “I thought he was standing strong all this time, that I was helping him bear the weight however I could, but instead it appears that all he’s been doing is bending further and further in order to better accommodate it, and that…” Tsuru clicked her tongue sadly. “Well, I’m afraid that I just can’t approve.”

“Quite the moral dilemma,” Momonga observed sagely.

“Definitely one heck of a brain-twister,” Garp nodded as he prepared to take a bite out of another cracker, before pausing and blinking at the youngest Vice Admiral present in surprise. “Eh? Bushy-tail? When the heck did you get here, brat? And why? And how, I thought you were on the other side of those…” The eldest Monkey winced as he shook out his thoroughly bandaged hand. “Stupid tough Gates.”

The swordsman gave his senior officer a flat look. “I’ve been here for the past three minutes, using my sword-maintenance kit which I left here to repair Josho Kiryu. And as for how I got here—” He jabbed his thumb over his shoulder to indicate the decapitated Sea King floating next to the battleship. “I swam.”

Garp blinked at the deceased titan in surprise. “Huh. So you did.” He then blinked again in surprise. “Wait, ‘repair’ that rodent-sword of yours? How come? I mean, sure, that Roronoa fellow might have beaten your technique, but seeing as you’re not hurt he didn’t beat your Haki.”

“That’s because I got my Haki up in time once I realized that I was outclassed in traditional swordsmanship. I was able to protect myself…” Momonga frowned as he turned his Josho Kiryu in just such a manner to display the exceedingly deep rent in its blade. “But Josho wasn’t as lucky.”

Garp whistled in awe as he examined the sword’s injury. “And I thought they were impressive before. Yamakaji’s got the right of it: Monsters and demons, the lot of them.”

“As if we’re any better?”

“Eh?” Garp blinked at Tsuru in confusion.

“How do you do it, Garp?” Tsuru asked him. “The only excuse that I can conjure is that I’ve had tunnel vision from supporting Sengoku, but you? You’ve never allowed your perspective to be so limited. How can you support this, Garp? How can you accept that this…” She waved her hands upwards, indicating the pillar of smoke that was steadily rising above the gates and blotting out the eternal sun. “Is what the world accepts as Justice?”

Garp frowned and tilted his head to the side as he processed the question for a moment before allowing a grin to come over his face. “Oh, that’s easy: that crap just doesn’t matter to me, Tsuru. You know that. Absolute Justice, Lazy Justice, Moral Justice, whatever, it’s all bunk and opinions and stuff. Me? I’ll just do what’s right and keep following the same thing I always have: my gut.”

Tsuru’s expression softened slightly. “…I see. And… what does your gut say now?”

Garp stood silent for a few seconds as he contemplated the question… And then both Momonga and Tsuru felt chills shoot down their spines as Garp adopted a smile that they had never known to not mean trouble.

“It’s saying… that I should take a few days off to pay my cute little grandson a visit.”
Meanwhile, the SBS hadn’t stopped broadcasting yet, but with the war over and the victors clear as crystal, the world was already trembling from the shock of what the Straw Hats had done.

And no less awe-inspiring, the Straw Hats were still laughing. Laughing in triumph about their victory over the World Government.

“HAHAHAHA! I’m starting to understand how you feel when your adrenaline spikes, Cross; in retrospect, that was awesome!” Usopp cackled.

“Yes, talk about an amazing first adventure!” Conis gushed. “I nearly died three or four times over, but it was still amazing!”

“Okay, now, those parts were less awesome.”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s true, but this conclusion? To have reclaimed one’s comrades in the face of impossible odds, conquering our adversaries without a single casualty on our side, this is truly... A MA —”

BLAM!

“SILENCE, YOU LITTLE PEST.”

The Transponder Snail hastily snapped back into its shell as a bullet glanced off of the edge of its rig. The rest of the civilians in the store, who had remained on their knees, mostly enjoying the broadcast in peace, all flinched fearfully in response to the sudden gunshot.

Meanwhile, the World Noble who had fired upon the snail snarled and snorted murderously as he handed the empty pistol off to one of his aides and received a loaded one in return.

“Those insufferable heretics,” Saint Jamolomew snarled as he cocked the new gun. “Daring to defy the divine order of the world, daring to fill my ears with their odious voices... it’s bad enough that my servants are so incompetent!” He emphasized the word by pistol-whipping the aide standing next to him, the suit-wearing man taking the blow with a wince but little else. “That I have to bother myself by leaving Mariejois to get some more suitable rags for my slaves.” He turned his glare back at the snail shivering on the other side of the room. “But now I am subjected to their odious laughter even now?! Who answered that snail?!” The civilians in the room flinched as he swung his gun over the room. “I demand that you stand up and atone for your sins this instant!”

Slowly, one of the clerks in the store stood up, only just managing to keep her tears under control. “I-I’m sorry, m-my lord! W-We were listening t-to the SBS before you entered our h-humble esta— humble hovel, a-and because we must kneel in your g-glorious presence, w-we couldn’t s-silence it until—!”

“You dare,” Jamolomew cut her off. “To blame me for your crimes!?”

“N-N-No my lord, I-I-I swear, I—!” the woman sobbed fearfully as she shook her head.

“Oh, just shut up and die, would you?” the World Noble spat. With that, he pulled the trigger, the hammer swung forward—

CLINK!

—and was stopped cold by an armored finger getting in the way before it could ignite the
gunpowder.

“What the—!?” The Noble stared at the finger in confusion before trailing it back to one of his guards. “What the hell do you think you’re doing, mongrel!?”

“When I joined the World Government,” the knight said in an emotionless tone. “It was for the express purpose of protecting the innocent from those who would do them harm. And now….” He cocked his head to the side. “I am stopping you from harming an innocent woman.”

“You…” Jamolomew shook with impotent rage. “You dare to lay your hands upon me?! Me, one of the holy rulers of this world?! I shall have you executed!”

“Oh, really?” the knight glanced around at the other members of the entourage moving to grab him before speaking a word that stopped them all flat. “How?”

“Wh—are you stupidly insane or insanely stupid!?” the ‘Saint’ spat venomously. “When the World Government hears of this, this heresy, they will—!”

“Do what?” the knight shot back. “In case you hadn’t noticed, the World Government just got kicked in the balls, and the vast majority of the Marines’ military forces are currently at Enies Lobby. They have no one left to spare.” The knight slowly swept his gaze over his comrades. “He’s all alone. So the question isn’t really what he will do to us. Rather…” He looked back at the Noble. “I’d say it’s what we’re going to do to him.”

The Noble sputtered indignantly at the words, an action that merely intensified when the rest of his entourage slowly looked at him as well.

“Wha-What do you think you’re doing!” he stammered indignantly, swinging his head back and forth as the civilians in the shop all slowly started to get to their feet, all of them staring at him as well.

“Simply fulfilling the dream of every single civilian alive with the misfortune to have crossed your path,” the rebel guard stated.

“Y-You can’t do this! I-I’m a World Noble, a-a Celestial Dragon! My-My blood—AGH!” Saint Jamolomew was cut off by an armored fist closing around his throat.

“Somebody lock the doors,” the knight said in a dead tone.

The clerk who had been about to die, her face now a mask of cold fury stained with tear tracks, wordlessly moved to comply, shutting the door and flipping the sign to closed.

“Y-YOU CAN’T DO THIS! T-THIS IS HERESY! T-THIS IS MADNESS! THIS—!”

“What this is…”

BLAM!

“—AAAAAAAGH!”

“Is Justice.”

-M-M-Marine Headquarters! Th-This is Base 227 of Jabowana requesting backup!”
“ON THE DOUBLE!” screamed a large number of Marines who were struggling to maintain the barricades that were only just barely managing to hold the doors of their base shut, and they were steadily buckling inwards.

“O-On the double!” the Marine frantically repeated. “W-We are currently in the midst of a c-code red situation! The-The entire population of the island has risen up against our base, a-against the entire Marine presence in the kingdom! They’re storming the barracks, w-we—!”

SMASH!

The soldier winced fearfully as glass and flames showered down from on high on account of a scarily accurate Molotov. “We can’t stop them! A-And even worse…” He glanced out through a gap in the barricade, taking in the prominent number of similarly uniformed people supporting an impromptu battering ram. “A-Almost forty percent of the base’s guard force has handed in their resignations and joined with the rebels! We’re not going to last much longer, please respond immediately!”

A few seconds of relative silence fell as he awaited a response. Then…

“…Petty Officer Martino?” one of the other soldiers asked in a tone of impending doom.

“Y-Yes?”

“Is that snail… even transmitting?”

The Petty Officer looked back at the gastropod to see that it was staring at him with half-lidded eyes, but was saying nothing. And then, then its mouth widened into a grin. A grin vaguely reminiscent of —

“You… You little…” Martino croaked numbly.

The snail responded by mouthing two very specific words.

Before the Marine could respond, the air was split by the sound of snapping wood, and a victorious roar.

“… shit.”

-0-

“…repeat, Marine code 28117. Attention Marine Headquarters, this is Master Chief Petty Officer Pearlow calling in with a situational report of the aftermath of the…” The Marine swallowed heavily as he tried to keep his nerves under control.

This feat was easier said than done, seeing as he was hiding out on top of a cliff with a snail and watching an entire city burn below him.

“Of the… events that occurred on Enies Lobby just ten minutes ago. Suffice to say that… matters are dire.”

The Marine drew in a shuddering breath. “Because of the… provocative nature of the actions of the Straw Hat Pirates, as well as the nature of the… information that was divulged in the course of said actions, major civil unrest has started to occur on a… on a global scale. We have received numerous reports from all four of the Blues, as well as the Grand Line. Of the nations that compose the World Government, we have received notice that…”
The soldier had to take a moment to muster his nerves before forcing himself to continue. “That… roughly 8% of the nations that compose the World Government… have either seceded or have been overthrown… and that another 12% are staving off revolutions and uprisings. Furthermore, we have lost contact with dozens of Marine bases and vessels across the seas, and are receiving countless reports of pirate activity around the world. In summation…”

The soldier was trembling now, and his nerves weren’t helped by the sight of the city’s base slowly crumbling in on itself, flames leaping from its shattered husk with an almost victorious-sounding roar.

“In summation…”

He swallowed, and then, in a fit of panic, yelled out what he was sure was the only accurate summation of the past six hours’ events.

-0-

“This is, beyond a doubt, the darkest day in the entire history of the World Government!”

Far away upon the summit of the world, five old men stared at a snail, their expressions grim and the atmosphere around them thunderous as the world systematically crumbled beneath them.

-0-

Let me tell you something interesting that I learned after the end of Enies: When the surge of adrenaline is high enough, the high can last you for a very long time.

This was evidenced by the fact that even several minutes after our escape and some hard sailing later, we were still amped from what we’d all just gone through.

“PFFHAHAHAHAHA! WOO!” I cackled energetically. “We just handed the World Government their collective asses! And we’re the Mates that pulled off our escape, to boot! High-five, you two!” I shot my hand up at my comrades.

Nami and Zoro stared silently at my hand for a moment before exchanging flat looks.

My face promptly fell into an equally flat scowl. “Leave me hanging and I swear that I’ll air your dirty laundry across the world, and don’t fool yourselves into thinking that I don’t have any.”

SLAP!

“Yes!” I pumped my fist victoriously as I considered that we’d just pulled off a three-way high five between the three mates of the Straw Hat Pirates!

“Jackass,” the two chorused flatly.

“Oh, like you aren’t both smiling?!”

I just laughed harder as they looked away with blushes and, yes, smirks.

That done, I started wandering the deck, weaving around my fellow crewmates’ various celebrations, catching sight of Robin standing ever so slightly off to the side and allowing an eager grin to slide across my face, a look that Soundbite and Lassoo mirrored with just as much enthusiasm.

“Ohhh, Rooobiiin~?” I crooned in a saccharine tone.
The archaeologist stiffened, and slowly turned to look at me. If her smile wasn’t nervous when she did so, it definitely was after she saw the look on my face. “Yes, Cross?” she asked, her tone deceptively stable.

“Remember how I said, oh so long ago, that I would one day get my revenge on you for nearly killing me in Whiskey Peak?” I purred as I stepped towards her, Lassoo slinking away and out of sight behind me. “Aaand for nearly letting Chopper play Mad Doctor on me? Aaand, of course, for helping to justify Vivi’s habit of kicking me in my ‘Man’s Pride’?”

The archaeologist was now visibly sweating as she slowly inched away from me. “Ahh… heheheh… I-I remember you saying something apropos to that train of thought, yes…”

“Weeell, see, I only bring that up…” My grin slowly widened as Lassoo got behind her legs and stopped her retreat, allowing me to shove my mad look in her face. “Because it’s finally time to pay the piper.”

And so, before she could react, I shot my arm around her neck, grabbed her in a chokehold, slipped my fist beneath her hat and…”

“PAYBACK, YOU STONE-COLD BITCH! PFHAHAHA HAHA!” I cackled uproariously as I noogied her but damn good.

“Agh, what the— OWOWOWOW, LET GO, LET GO!” Robin squealed as she struggled in my grip.

I only got a few seconds of fun before Sanji trying to take my head off forced me to let go, but by then I’d already had my fun and I was in stitches.

“PFFHAHAHAHAHA!”

“You little—!” Sanji fumed.

“Ooowww…” Robin groaned as she rubbed her burning scalp before shooting a glare at me that was more confused than angry. “What on earth was that in aid of, Cross?”

I replied with a malevolent smirk. “Oh, what was it in aid of, you ask? Simple!” I drew my transceiver’s mic from my bag and held it close to my mouth, making sure that no one could mistake what I was about to say. “I just wanted to let the world hear as I gave Nico Robin a noogie!” My spirits soared as Robin’s cheeks brightened with a blush. “Good luck getting your rep back after that little stunt, witch-bitch!”

“NO, that’s NAMI!” Soundbite cackled.

“I’m going to punt your head all the way back to Sengoku, Cross!” Sanji fumed indignantly as he stalked up to me.

“Whoa, hey hey!” I shot my hands up defensively as he came at me. “I have a valid excuse, I’ll have you know!”

“What?” he demanded in a tone that promised death.

“Well, ah…” I hesitated slightly… before glancing to the side with a blush as I scratched my cheek. “It’s… it’s just that it’s a little brother’s duty to embarrass his older sister, you know?”

Sanji blinked dumbfoundedly. And before he could gather enough wherewithal to react, Robin
shoved past him and… hugged me.

I blinked in stunned silence for a bit… before returning the hug with just as much gusto.

“…Thank you,” she whispered, before raising her tearstained gaze to look up at everyone else. “Thank you, all of you, for saving me.”

Sanji instantly snapped out of his anger towards me as a heart replaced his eye, while Luffy grinned his typical grin, and shot her a thumbs-up. Most everyone else just smiled, several with wet eyes. Boss, in particular, was wiping a tear away.

“Ah, what a glorious moment…” he sighed rapturously. “I just wish my boys could be here, too,”

*SPLASH!*

“YOU CALLED?”

All attention snapped to the edge of the boat, where the TDWS was perched on the railing and leaping down onto the deck. Boss was quick to snap over to them and wrap them all up in a shell-breaking hug, gushing over a Man’s… *something* or other; I myself was a bit too busy trying to figure out how the *goat* they had gotten there to pay attention to the specifics.

“…But… you… and… how the *hell*—?” I sputtered weakly.

“Sea turtles, mate,” Soundbite rasped deeply.

“…Right. Sea turtles,” I nodded in agreement.

“Indeed, Sea Turtles are quite the hearty creatures!” Kokoro cackled as she knocked back a bottle she’d pulled from *somewhere*.

“How the heck do you think I made it back to Water 7 after I fixed myself, huh?” Franky laughed confidently.

“Personally? I always thought that you were just too stupid to drown, Flunky.”

“STICK A LATHE IN IT, ICE-FOR— hurk!?” Franky choked on his own words as he spun on his heels. “ICE-FOR-BRAINS?!?”

The Mayor of Water 7 smirked from atop his vessel, which had *somehow* crept up on us as he mock-saluted his old friend. “Miss me, you metal meat-head?”

Franky blinked stupidly for a second before cackling uproariously. “Not on your life, you limp-wristed walking cooler!”

“OK, that’s just hypocritical,” Mikey pointed out with a bark of laughter.

I chuckled as the back-and-forth went on, watching as everyone on board gathered to—

Wait a second. Everyone? No, that wasn’t right, we were missing—?

A slight sound *just* brushed against my inner ear, drawing my attention. “The heck…?” I muttered before glancing at Soundbite. “Did you—?”

“Uhh…” Soundbite’s eyestalks started to swivel around…
‘...ngh…’

When the sound came again and caught both of our attentions, and with directionality to boot.

I immediately started creeping towards the mast, where the noise was coming from, because… well, who wouldn’t look when they heard the sound of whimpering just on the edge of their hearing?

Slowly and with no small amount of trepidation, I peered my head around the edge of the mast… and my heart nearly stopped at what I saw.

Merry’s Klabautermann, her transparent body flickering like a bad hologram, was curled up against the mast and shaking with what could be nothing else but absolutely *excruciating* agony as she clutched at her midsection. When she noticed me standing there and staring at her with tangible horror, she turned a rictus smile up at me and forced out a pained chuckle. “S-So Idiot-burg is here, huh? T-that’s good, ‘c-cause…” Her smile widened with tar black humor as she raised a hand from her stomach.

I only just managed to keep from falling to my knees as I saw that it was covered in blood.

“It looks like…” she smiled through her tears. “It’s finally time for me… to give up the ghost. Sorry, Cross…”

And just like that, she was gone.

Soundbite hissed in a horrified gasp. “CROSS—!”

“HER HEAD!” I roared at the top of my lungs, pumping as much desperation into my voice as I possibly could. “GRAB MERRY’S HEAD, NOW!”

It was a testament to just how much everyone trusted me that no one questioned me, with Luffy, Vivi, Boss and Franky shooting their limbs and weapons at Merry’s head and grabbing on for dear life the instant I screamed.

And not a moment too soon either, because almost a second later, a chorus of *SNAPS!* rang out, and what had to be a dozen of Merry’s deck planks splintered and tore. It was only via hasty support from the rest of our crew that Merry’s saviors weren’t dragged off their feet.

In the end, Merry stayed whole… but the highly audible chorus of groans that were starting to sound out across the ship didn’t inspire even a fraction of confidence.

“MERRY!” Usopp wailed frantically.

“Oh, no, ship-girl!” Chimney gasped in horror.

“Oh, no, oh, no!” Gonbe parroted, looking legitimately horrified.

“What-What happened?” Nami demanded incredulously. “Sh-She was doing fine the whole way through Enies—”

“She was *faking*,” Franky groaned as he tried to maintain his stable stance. “Damn, shoulda seen this coming. It’s no big surprise that Iceburg was able to put her into good enough shape to make it to another island. But not even Tom himself could have made her seaworthy for more than half a day with *this much* damage.”

Iceburg shook his head with a heavy sigh. “I warned her, but… she insisted, and I only thought it
just to satisfy her final wishes. I’m… sorry, Straw Hats, but it’s time for you to say your goodbyes. I’ve already—"

“WAIT!”

Everyone turned to look at the person who’d shouted.

Turned to look at me.

“Iceburg, please ,” I pleaded as I spread my arms desperately. “Y-You’ve got Galley-La with you, right? Then please, fix her up. Just one more time. Make her look at her absolute best just one more time .”

Iceburg gave me a sad look. “Cross, I’ve already done all I can, there’s nothing more—”

“LET HER FIGHT, DAMN IT!” I cut him off as I shouted furiously.

“C-Cross…” Usopp said hesitantly.

I huffed as I got some air back in my lungs before continuing. “All this time, we’ve been saying that we’ve won our fight, that we’ve beaten the world…” I said before shaking my head with a scowl. “But that’s a lie! We’re not done fighting, we still have one last comrade who needs our help! Merry…” My fists clenched at my sides as I stared downwards. “Merry gave her everything to try and help us, to save our lives! And she’s still fighting, even now, still fighting to stay alive…” I sucked in a deep gasp before shouting again. “AND I CAN GIVE HER THE CHANCE SHE NEEDS TO WIN!”

That caught everyone off guard.

“Wait, what!?” Kokoro hacked in shock as she coughed up a mouthful of her drink.

“Are you serious!?” Usopp demanded.

“Really, Cross!?” Luffy grinned happily.

I shook my head firmly. “It’s a hell of a long shot, not a guarantee, a gamble at its utmost best… but damn it all, look around!” I cast my arm out at my crewmates. “We’ve been hitting on all sixes all day, what’s one more all-or-nothing throw!? One last shot, one last chance! But!” I glared Iceburg dead in the eyes, tears streaming down my face as I started to rapidly lose control. “For Merry to keep fighting, for her to have that shot… she needs, needs to be in one piece. You’re the only one who can do it, Iceburg! Only you can save her life! So… so that’s why…”

I collapsed to my knees and rammed my brow into the floorboards, bowing my head as low as it would go.

“I’M BEGGING YOU!” I shouted at the top of my lungs. “I’M BEGGING YOU WITH EVERY LAST FIBER OF MY BEING, WITH EVERYTHING THAT I’VE GOT, TO PLEASE, PLEASE HELP US! GIVE MERRY A CHANCE! GIVE MERRY ONE LAST CHANCE TO FIGHT ON! GIVE HER THE CHANCE TO LIVE!”

Not a single second later, I heard several other thumps around me, my crewmates to a man, woman, and beast mirroring my actions. I waited…

“Galley-La,” Iceburg said firmly. “All hands on deck. We have work to do.”
I looked up in time to see Iceburg’s gaze turn to our future shipwright. “I…” I snorted a goodly amount of snot back into my nostril. “I-I can count on you to help too, right, Franky?”

Franky grinned wryly. “Not a chance in hell that I wouldn’t, Cross. COME ON, CHUMPS!” the cyborg slammed into his trademark pose eagerly. “LET ME SHOW YOU HOW A REAL SHIPWRIGHT GETS BUSINESS DONE!”

And with that, the best and brightest of Water 7 sprang to work.

-o-

It was touch and go for a while there, but five minutes later the rest of the crew and I were standing in a longboat floating a few feet in front of Merry. We had spared enough time on board Iceburg’s ship to drop off our weapons, naturally excluding Lassoo and equally naturally excluding Zoro’s swords, and Kokoro and her family had stayed there while we got back to a closer level with Merry.

Credit where it was due, Galley-La weren’t called the best for shits and giggles. Seriously, repairing a ship that thoroughly in the middle of the freaking ocean? And watching Iceburg work, alongside Franky at that? It was just… damn. Just damn.

But anyways, in no time at all the deed was done and Merry was floating before us in one piece… though the sheer number of planks, over her hull, however immaculately arranged, belied just how desperate the situation was.

“She’s in as good a position as we can manage,” Iceburg informed us solemnly from his own boat as he wiped the pitch from his hands. “But it won’t last; every wave that hits is tearing her apart at the nails. As it is, I’ll be surprised if she lasts the hour.”

“Merry…” Usopp and Chopper sobbed tearfully as they observed our crippled companion.

“Normally, I’d say something witty about now,” Franky grunted as he pulled himself into the boat. “But honestly? Iceburg’s being nice. You’ve got half that, max. Whatever you’ve got planned, Cross, it better be damn good.”

I grit my teeth as I cracked my neck side to side in preparation. “Then I guess it’s appropriate that what I’m about to pull is what can only be described as our last resort.”

“Cross, are you seriously going to—” Boss cut himself off with a glance at the bag at my side, then started again. “Are you seriously going to accept?!” Boss demanded.

I turned to him with a dry look. “Up until now, I may have thought that it wasn’t worth it. But faced with the reality that it’s either that or watching her die? Would you consider it worth it?”

The four who knew stared at me, but I shook my head. “But… don’t worry, because that’s not what I’m talking about. I’ve got one more trick up my sleeve before I resign myself to…” I shuddered heavily. “That. If it doesn’t work, then I’ll do it, but…” I allowed a slightly hopeful smile to cross my face. “Considering what it is…”

“Did I miss something?” Robin asked.

Boss shook his head with a shrug. “Beats me. He said… something about having a way to save Merry in the tower, but he got attacked by a pigeon before he could say more.”

“…It’s a fine day in the Grand Line when I can hear a sentence like that and not question how much it makes sense,” Franky shook his head.
I was silent for a moment before turning to face everyone. “Riddle me this, everyone: how many members were there in CP9? Ah!” I hastily cut off anyone’s incredulous protests with a raised hand. “My nerves are running a mile an hour and talking is the only way I keep calm. *Humor me.*”

Nami exhaled heavily, obviously counting down under her breath before ticking off her fingers. “If you’re counting Spandam, his sword and the pigeon? Ten all told.”

I allowed a content smirk to quirk my lips as I held up a single finger. “Try… *eleven.*”

*That* drew her up short. “What!? But, wait—!” Nami hastily started counting down on her fingers again.

“If we do indeed count Spandam and Funkfreed amongst the Pol’s ranks,” I cut her off with a chuckle. “Then before this all started, there were five of them waiting for us on Enies, in the Tower of Justice… and *six* escorting Robin in the Puffing Tom.”

“Uh, hold on, gimme a second,” Su muttered as she balanced on her hind legs and started counting down on her forepaw’s toes. “Lucci, Hattori, Kaku, Kalifa, Blueno… that’s only five!” she looked up in confusion. “Who’s number six?”

I smirked as I held up a hand and started raising fingers. “Lucci, Hattori, Kaku, Kalifa, Blueno…” I then held up my other hand and popped my index finger. “And *Nero.*”

Everyone on the crew was confused… except for our cook, who only just managed to keep from sucking down his cigarette.

“The *sea-weasel*?” he coughed in confusion. “But-But he was a weakling! He didn’t even know all of the Six Powers! He was nowhere near even Blueno, and that bull was one of the weakest!”

“He was rushed through, yeah,” I chuckled in agreement. “But nevertheless, he *was* a member of Cipher Pol No. 9! And that’s important… because of the last assignment that Jabra, Fukuro and Kumadori pulled off a week ago.” I spread my arms as I explained. “It was known as Operation Famine, the destruction of an ocean-spanning smuggling ring. The agents proper took out the big fishes controlling the thing, while the normal soldiers confiscated the goods.”

“How is any of this relevant, Cross?” Zoro demanded impatiently.

“It’s relevant…” I all but giggled hysterically as I dug out the small chest I’d been carrying the whole time from my bag and held it in my palm. “Because to save Merry, we need to beat the world. To beat this situation, we need to reject the laws of physics. We need to break reality *itself.* And the only way we can do that…” I flipped open the chest’s latch. “Is to make use of just *what* the ring specialized at dealing in.”

And with that, I cracked the lid of the miniature chest open… and everyone gasped and reeled in nothing short of utter shock as I displayed the sole content of the padded interior.

A peach, colored pink, and emblazoned with a twisted and glossy stem and swirl pattern that streamed along it. Even now, my second time looking at it, I couldn’t help but try and trace the design with my eyes, but… it was useless. Every time I tried, my eyes just… slid off it, and the patterns seemed to shift and roil before me.

Devil Fruits… what a truly appropriate appellation.

“That’s a…” Franky breathed.
“Yup…” I nodded with a somewhat mad grin. “The ring was smuggling them and selling them to the highest bidder, and when CP9 busted them, Spandam kept three of them for his unpowered oversea operatives.” I giggled under my breath as I held up a pair of fingers. “Kaku and Kalifa got the Ox-Ox Fruit, Model: Giraffe and the Bubble-Bubble Fruit, respectively, but Nero? Nero never made it, so this was left over, hidden away until Spandam could think of another use for it.”

I tapped the chest’s lid a bit frantically. “This. This is how we’re going to save Merry, right here.”

While a few of our number, such as Luffy, Chopper and Mikey, were still stuck in ‘awestruck’ mode, more than half of our crew couldn’t help but exchange uneasy glances.

“…Cross, what exactly are you planning?” Robin finally brought herself to ask.

I responded by glancing over my shoulder at Merry. “The entire reason things have escalated this far is that as a ship, Merry can’t heal her wounds. Every little injury she gets is permanent. But what if she could heal them? What if she could keep live and breathe and heal like any other biological entity on the seas…” I slowly turned my maddened grin on Lassoo. “All while still technically an object.”

Lassoo’s jaw led everyone else’s in dropping. “You crazy son of a bitch.”

“No, that would be you!” I giggled hysterically.

“Cross, do you even hear what you’re suggesting!?” Vivi demanded. “The odds of this working—!”

“Are at their most basic one-in-three!” I snapped back. “Paramecia, Logia, and Zoan! If it’s a Zoan type, then irrelevant of what it is, she can heal, she can live!”

“But—!” she started again.

“But nothing!” I cut her off heatedly. “Damn it, don’t you get it yet?! This is our last shot! I—!” I cut myself off with a ragged gasp, my emotions slipping past my frustration, forcing me to slow down as I tried to stay under control. “I… I realize that it’s a long shot, damn it… that… that the odds are stupidly against us… but…”

Tears fell from my cheeks to the deck of the boat, and it took all I had to keep from utterly breaking down.

“But…” I whispered through my tears. “But… I… I promised her, damn it… I promised her that I would find a way for her to stay with us. That I would save her. And—!” I snapped my watery gaze up at Vivi. “I-I realize that it was a stupid promise, I do, b-but the fact is that I made it! And if I… if I can’t keep a promise I made… if I don’t fight tooth and nail to keep a promise I made to a friend…” I bowed my head miserably. “Then… then I don’t deserve… to call myself a Straw Hat…”

Everyone digested that for a few seconds. Then Luffy spoke up. “How do we feed her, Cross?”

I took a second to get my nerves back under control before opening my mouth to respond… and for once in my time here on the Grand Line… nothing came out. I… was at a loss for words.

But before any of that could really hit me…

“If I… eat that…”

My thoughts were slammed to a dead halt by a voice whispering behind me, prompting me to spin around in shock.
Merry was *right there*, her midsection bloodied and her form flickering and barely even visible... but she was *there*.

“If I... eat that fruit...” She whispered, her voice little more than a breeze. “Then I... can stay with you all?”

“I-I...” I hesitated slightly, the sheer gravity of the moment *finally* giving me some measure of trepidation. “M-Maybe, but Merry, you have to know, it’s beyond risky and—!”

Before I could say anything further, Merry’s hand shot out, snatched the fruit and stuffed it in her mouth, bulging her cheeks out as she chewed.

I blinked stupidly as I tried to process *what the fuck had just happened*. “Wha—?”

Soon enough Merry swallowed the mouthful and started speaking frantically. “I-I’m so sorry about that Cross, I know that it was stupid and risky and all that but I just—!!” she suddenly cut herself off, what little of her complexion was visible turning a furious ashen color.

“Merry?” I leaned in worriedly. “Merry, what’s wrong?! Please, Merry, talk to—!”

“SWEET MOTHER OF ALL LEAKY-KEELED MARINE ROWBOATS, THAT THING TASTED LIKE SEA KING DICKBALLS!” Merry suddenly howled skywards as she stuck her tongue out.

“...eh?” I blinked in shock.

“Crude... but accurate, I would say,” Robin shuddered with a grimace.

“Ditto,” Luffy, Chopper, Soundbite *and* Lassoo all concurred.

“...The rumor about Klabautermanns cursing like sailors is true? God bless this day,” Iceburg breathed upwards.

Once I finally got my wits about me, I fell back on my one true failsafe. “And... you know what that would taste like *how*, exactly?” That is to say, snark.

“Oh, screw—! *HURK!*”

Before any of us could react, Merry suddenly doubled over and staggered backwards, swaying drunkenly on her feet.

“Merry! What’s wrong!?” Usopp asked frantically.

“Ah... I, ah...” Merry shook her head blearily. “Guys? I... I don’t... I don’t feel so...”

And with that she keeled over the side of the longboat... at the same time that her bigger half suddenly *vanished*, causing all of the seawater around where it had been to rush to fill in the void that was suddenly left gaping in the water. The sudden movement caught us all off guard and even threw a few of us off our feet... but through all the confusion, one thing stuck out to me.

A small patch of darkness in the water... that was growing smaller every moment.

“MERRY!” I roared, sparing just enough time to toss my jacket and partner at Luffy before diving into the water and swimming harder than I’d ever swam before.

It burned my scars like hell, sweet *hell* did it burn, and my lack of goggles meant that I couldn’t see
worth shit either… but nevertheless I was able to catch up to the form below me and grab their arm before they sank too deep. I then pulled them to me and reversed course… or tried to at least. Surprise, surprise, ‘Hammers’ wasn’t a two-bit nickname. Rather, it was exactly what they weighed like underwater.

For a second I struggled in vain to carry my load’s weight… but before I could start to panic, I suddenly found a hand right there in front of my face.

I grabbed it, it grabbed me… and one rush of seawater later Luffy reeled us both back onto the longboat, the momentum nearly capsizing us wholesale as we slammed back onboard.

I gasped and spat as I tried to clear my senses of seawater, twisting my head around frantically once I could in search of whom I’d grabbed. “M-Merry? Merry, where are you!?”

“Urk… agh… h-here, Cross…”

I blinked in confusion as a voice sounded out just below my head. And when I looked down, it became clear why: she was sitting squarely on my chest.

The figure that I knew was Merry was a girl the size of her Klabautermann, no taller than four feet. Her skin was peach-colored, her hair was a soft mane of white with a couple of curly brown tufts circling above her ears, reminiscent of ram horns, and—I sent a silent message of gratitude to Oda for his grace where Devil Fruits and clothing were concerned—she was wearing an orange raincoat, gray leggings, and had a metal choker latched around her neck and matching anklets around her… well, you know.

“Merry… you’re… human?” Usopp breathed in awe.

“But… but how?” Chopper squawked in shock. “I ate the Human-Human Fruit!”

“The same way that Chaka and Lassoo have the same fruits, and that Sengoku is a Buddha-Human…” Vivi whispered. “Same fruit… different Models. Going by her size… I-I think that Merry just ate the Human-Human Fruit, Model: Child!”

As that bit of reasoning finished, I took the chance to sit up, and Merry scrambled off of me as I pinned her with a look. “Merry, as good as the results here are, can I just point out that you ate a Devil Fruit while you were standing on the ocean?” I rushed my words forward as tears and she started to appear in her eyes, because I just had to get this point made. I don’t think there’s a better epitome of ‘reckless’ in this world, and that’s me speaking! What the hell were you thinking!? Did you even consider for a second the danger you were in?! That you could have—!?”

“I DIDN’T CARE!”

I choked myself off as Merry suddenly screamed at the top of her lungs. Seeing Merry standing there, shaking on her feet and sobbing as tears streamed down her face, it was…

“Merry…” I breathed.

“I DIDN’T CARE!” she continued. “AND I DON’T CARE NOW! I DON’T CARE THAT I COULD HAVE DIED, I DON’T CARE THAT I CAN’T SWIM ANYMORE, I DON’T CARE THAT…” she choked heavily on her words. “T-THAT I CAN’T CARRY YOU GUYS ANYMORE! I-I DON’T CARE ABOUT ANY OF THAT! B-BECAUSE…!”

She threw her head back and screamed. “BECAUSE ALL I CARE ABOUT IS YOU! ALL OF YOU! ALL I CARE ABOUT IS STAYING WITH YOU ALL! I-I DON’T CARE IF I NEVER
GET TO SEE THE NEW WORLD, I DON’T CARE IF I NEVER GET TO SEE RAFTEL, BECAUSE EVEN IF I DID…”

Merry flung herself forwards and buried her sobbing in my chest. “IT WOULD MEAN NOTHING!” she wept. “WITHOUT YOU! I-I DON’T WANT TO GO TO THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA! I-I DON’T WANT TO DIE! A-AND MOST OF ALL, I DON’T WANT TO BE LEFT BEHIND! S-SO PLEASE, PLEASE!”

She raised her head and stared at us all with absolute desperation. “LET ME STAY WITH YOU! LET ME COME WITH YOU, EVERY STEP OF THE WAY! LET ME SEE ANOTHER SUNRISE AS A PART OF THIS CREW! LET ME STAY A STRAW HAT!”

As Merry’s tirade trailed off into sobs, I slowly turned my eyes towards my captain. The look he gave me didn’t surprise me in the least. And that didn’t make it any less joy-inducing when he nodded firmly.

As such, it was with the utmost delight that I threw my arms around Merry and hugged her tight. “AS IF WE WOULD EVER EVEN CONSIDER SAYING NO!” I yelled happily.

That was all the signal everyone needed to roar with joy and do what was perfectly natural: celebrate.

“MERRY!” Usopp, Luffy, and Chopper cried joyfully, all practically bowling us both over as they grabbed us in the mother of all bearhugs.

“We DID IT!” Nami squealed as she grabbed the nearest person she could in a hug. Due to said person being Sanji, he had nothing to say on the matter. Vivi was mirroring the action with Carue… though given how she’d grabbed his neck rather than his chest, he was more frantic than happy.

“You GUYS ARE SO TOTALLY NUTS!” Franky sobbed dramatically as he tried and failed to hide his sobbing in a pose.

“WOOOOO! WOOOOO!” Lassoo howled triumphantly towards the sky.

“Can you believe it, Su?!” Conis giggled ecstatically as she spun her pet around. “We did it! She’s alive! She’s alive!”

“That’s great, Conis, but I’m getting kinda—!”

“She’S ALIVE!”

“AAAAGH!” Su screamed and flailed in terror when Conis suddenly flung her upwards with an euphoric laugh.

“To snatch a dearest comrade who we all thought was doomed from the very jaws of death themselves…” Boss shook his head with a wide grin. “Oh, there’s only one definition for this!” He leapt skywards and punched the air. “SAY IT WITH ME, BOYS!”

“It’S A MAN’S ROMANCE!” all five dugongs chorused as the TDWS followed their mentor.

“And I thought that this day couldn’t become any more wonderful,” Robin whispered, tears streaming down her cheeks as she stood only just off to the side. “I have never been more grateful for the impossibility of these seas. Of this insane, beautiful crew.”

Zoro stood similarly off to the side, and though he didn’t say anything, he was making no attempt to
hide his smile.

“They did it, they did it!” Gonbe and Chimney sang as they danced around hand-in-paw.

“You think we’ve finally seen the extent of their madness?” Iceburg asked Kokoro wistfully.

“Personally?” Kokoro cackled as she tapped out the last few drops of her bottle with a smirk. “I think… that they’re just getting started.”

The mayor’s smile widened as he looked back at us. “…good.”

And then, as if that all weren’t good enough… I felt it.

A single, _single_ point of cold, right on the tip of my nose.

I stared upwards… and sucked in a breath when I realized that it was snowing.

It was snowing… it was _snowing_…

“We won…” I sobbed beneath my breath before raising my voice to roar for all to hear. “YOU HEAR THAT? WE WON! IN THE FINAL COUNT OF THE STRAW HAT PIRATES AGAINST THE WORLD ITSELF, AGAINST _REALITY_ ITSELF! WE! HAVE! WOOOOOOON!”

And so ended the epic saga of Enies Lobby, beneath a snowy sky as we the Straw Hat Pirates cried our hearts out.

As we cried rapturous tears of pure, undiluted _joy_. 
Cross-Brain AN: We finally did it. We've reached the top 10. This is the final stretch of our climb to the top, and while surpassing the titans that have established themselves as the top 10 will be the hardest part, we've made it this far. And we're not stopping anytime soon.

Hornet AN: Apropos of nothing, I'm quite pleased I got to properly use the sentences "But first, we need a reaction to her telling physics to bite the pillow." and "So, first off, we need to un-orphan that punchline." while we were writing this.

Cross-Brain AN: Aside from that, our sincerest apologies, loyal fans, but we'll be having to split our planned novel-length chapter in half.

Because we were already hitting 50,000 words at the halfway mark. That, and the cruel beyond all cruelty cliffhanger waiting at the end of this chapter was just too good to pass up.

Xomniac AN: You know what they say: The bigger they come…

It was two days after the incident, and my mind was still reeling from everything that had happened in that time. First, of course, was the memory of the literally divine-sent miracle, which was still enough to make me start laughing from unadulterated joy whenever I thought about it.

…right up until things got scary on account of Merry straight up collapsing in my arms, barely even conscious.

Yeah, see, while becoming a human-ship meant that Merry could now heal from her life-threatening injuries, the fact remained that she actually had life-threatening injuries. The way said injuries translated from carpentry to biology? In the form of her all but being torn in half at the waist beneath her raincoat, along with over a dozen other gaping wounds plaguing her tiny frame.

It had been the very definition of touch and go, with all of us scrambling to get Merry onboard Iceburg’s ship and into the vessel’s medical bay without aggravating her injuries too badly, followed up by Chopper bodily flinging all of us sans Franky from the room.

The time after that was… beyond tense, with all of us waiting outside the room with bated breath for some sign, any sign of Merry’s current condition.

And once that time was up, when Chopper and Franky emerged, weary and bloodstained, we had our answer: Merry was, without a doubt, going to live. She’d have a gaping gash of a scar across her back for the rest of her days and she couldn't take off the metal anklets and choker she was sporting without something falling apart, but she would live. And thanks to Franky's expertise and a number of 'just in case' blueprints of his, even in spite of one of her vertebrae being messily fractured, after a few days of rest, physical therapy and crutches, she'd even be able to walk.
Still… happy as the news was, it wasn't all rainbows and sunshine.

"So… Merry can never become a ship again?" Usopp asked quietly, his air of quiet horror shared between us all.

"I'm sorry, Usopp," Chopper said, shaking his head sadly as he wiped the blood off of his hands. "But yes. Not without dying."

"It all goes back to that damn crack again," Franky explained with a heavy sigh. "See, while we might have been able to patch her up so that she's fine while she's human, I can tell you as a shipwright that the reinforcement we've put in just won't hold up for even a second if she tries to return to her ship form. If she ever tried to go back…" He snapped his fingers with a grim look. "She'd be ripped in half by her own weight. Sorry, guys, but it doesn't matter how long we wait or what we do. Our initial summary was right: the Going Merry's days as your ship are done."

"Oh, Ra…" Vivi whispered hoarsely.

Solemn silence seasoned with horror fell over us all. It lasted for half a minute…

"That's fine."

Before our captain's serious-mode voice broke it.

"Luffy—!" Nami started indignantly.

"What?" the rubber man blinked at her in honest confusion. "You guys all heard her, right? Merry said that her dream is to sail the seas with us, and our goal coming to Water 7 was to make it so that that could happen. Who cares if she can't become a ship anymore? She's still alive and with us, and she can still live her dream." He tilted his head to the side. "Isn't that good enough?"

Yet another silence fell on the room, only this time it was more dumbstruck than anything.

"From dumbass to savant in the blink of an eye," Su deadpanned before glancing at Chopper. "Hey, you managed to make yourself freakishly smart, any chance you can replicate the miracle in this rubber-brain?"

"Hmm… it is a possibility, and an intriguing one, at that. I'll start researching righ—" Chopper's musings were cut off as he fell face-first onto the floor, his Muscle Point-sized snores shaking the air around us.

We took a moment to glance uncomfortably at one another before Conis slowly raised a finger. "Er… how long were you guys in there?"

"Eh…" Franky clenched an eye shut as he cocked his head to the side. "According to the clock I stuffed between my ears? Two hours. And on that note!" The cyborg promptly keeled over onto his back, adding his own snores to Chopper's chorus.

The rest of us barely had enough time to realize what was coming before the sandman thwacked us upside our collective heads and darkness took us.

The next thing most of us knew, it was around thirty hours later and the less injured of us were
waking up back on Water 7 with absolutely killer headaches. And aches just about everywhere else too, for that matter, because damn if we hadn't pushed our bodies to the absolute maximum over the course of our, quote-unquote, 'little' adventure. And we were the ones actually capable of waking up; Luffy, Merry, Carue, Vivi, Soundbite, and Chopper were all still slumbering, the first three due to their excessive injuries and the latter three on account of just how utterly they'd drained their bodies of energy during the fight.

Of course, we weren't ones to let that impact us. And if the fact that Iceburg, Zambai, the square sisters, and the three Galley-La foremen entered not two minutes after we woke up was any indication, that was either common knowledge or expected at this point.

It was a load off my chest and everyone else's when Zambai confirmed that none of the Franky Family had died, though there was no shortage of major injuries among them, with even Oimo and Kashi walking away from the ordeal with a few new scars, though they were particularly proud of them. Point of fact, pretty much everyone was proud of their new trophies, a fact which I took no small amount of pleasure in lording over a thoroughly disgruntled Nami.

Meanwhile, what Iceburg had to tell us was... somewhat less pleasant. CP9 had caused enough damage on their own, we'd known that as we'd left, but the worst Aqua Laguna in living memory had only served to literally throw inhuman amounts of salt in the wounds. But, and he smirked as he said it, Galley-La would have more than enough time on their hands to fix the damage thanks to their dissolved contracts with the World Government meaning that they no longer had a queue of battleships a mile long to complete.

Now that caught us all up short, and Iceburg wasted no time in explaining his reasoning, which the entire island agreed with. More than agreed with, actually, considering how they seemed ready to form an angry mob when the truth of the 'Mass Resignation from Hell' reached them.

But still, as brash and bold as the move appeared on its surface, the truth of Iceburg's actions extended far past the realms of the obvious and delved to depths of true diabolical genius that had Franky ready to start treating him with respect. And all to get back at the Government.

See, as Mayor of Water 7, while he only had direct control over Galley-La, Iceburg's word was tantamount to law where the rest of the companies on Water 7 were concerned. As such, when Tom's old apprentice sent out the word that Water 7 would no longer be servicing 'all those affiliated with the World Government', he didn't just mean that Galley-La would stop working for the Marines. He meant that the entire island would stop working for anyone affiliated with the World Government.

The significance lay in that while Galley-La was the best company on Water 7, Water 7 held the best shipwrights in all of Paradise. Period. The end result of the embargo was that a large number of nations—Pucci, San Faldo, and St. Poplar among the most immediate—were being stabbed with Morton's Fork but hard: either abandon the World Government's good graces and face all the consequences that that implied head-on, or abandon Iceburg and attempt to face the seas with ships of notably lesser quality than what came out of Water 7.

And considering the Grand Line's general temperament on a good day? Suffice to say that for many, the 'choice' wasn't actually much of a choice at all, and the fact that the World Government had a large number of more hostile secessions to deal with meant that they were getting ample opportunity to batten the hatches for the inevitable retaliation for staying with Iceburg.

Once Iceburg finished explaining the current state of affairs on the island, we moved onto discussing more important matters, I.E. the current states of our injured crewmates. On the surface, everyone who was still out of it looked okay, but in reality... well, simply put, the physician who was looking
over us in Chopper's place had quite a bit to say.

"—shriveled organs, three-quarters of his blood lost, the rest stretched as thin as nori, less hydration than a cactus, more minute tears in his skin than I can count, and fatigue that should have rendered him unconscious two days ago!"

"...Um, doc? He only got those injuries yesterday—" Zambai began.

"EXACTLY!" the sawbones roared as he jabbed his finger at the dismantler. "He's taken 48 hours' worth of Olympic-grade fatigue in a mere sixth of that time. Which leads me to the following diagnosis: **EVEN IF HE IS MADE OF RUBBER, IT MAKES ABSOLUTELY NO SENSE THAT HE IS STILL BREATHING!**"

"...You guys have Olympics?" I asked nobody in particular.

I found no small amount of amusement in the way the poor bastard flung his hands up in the air with a wordless cry of frustration.

"Every decade or so, Mariejois hosts them, and similar smaller events occur in the Blues. I probably would have wound up taking my boys and heading to one of them if I hadn't joined up with you guys," Boss answered, before blinking in confusion. "Ah... apropos of nothing, Cross, I just realized that I'm confused about something, too."

"Huh? What, you already knew that my knowledge isn't that comprehensive."

"No, that's not it," he waved me off. "Soundbite's unconscious, that much is obvious and expected..." Boss eyed Soundbite's audibly snoring shell before gesturing at his throat. "So... how am I still talking?"

I opened my mouth and raised a finger, then reversed the action and scratched the back of my head. "Um... Devil Fruits are bullshit, Awakened Devil Fruits make mere bullshit their bitch?"

Boss stared at me silently before nodding in acceptance. "Your logic is sound."

Before I could say anything else, my attention was caught by a sound not unlike whistling steam starting to fill the room. The origin, as it turned out, appeared to be the good doctor, whose face was slowly turning a rather interesting shade of purple, and I swear his head expanded a little bit.

"He looks like a grape about to pop," Robin wryly observed.

I flashed a grin her way. "Have I mentioned how happy I am to have you back, Robin?"

My pseudo-older-sibling chuckled as she tipped her hat in my direction.

The doctor slowly turned a wild-eyed look on Iceburg, who'd been watching the exchange with no small amount of amusement. "Mister Mayor," he seethed viciously. "I'd like to offer you my official prognosis on the Straw Hat Pirates as a whole."

Iceburg hid a snicker behind his hand. "Aheh, a-ah, yes, and that would be, doctor?"

"They're utterly insane."

Nami gave the poor physician a decidedly unimpressed look. "You haven't been in the Grand Line long, have you?"
"I just wanted to write a freaking thesis, damn it!" the doctor sobbed miserably. "But no, instead I wind up in this loony bin of a geographic location! Why the hell did I take career advice from a little girl who was offering it for a few Beris!?"

"I assume because she's really good at what she does?" Mikey offered with an unrepentant grin.

"Ah, Doctor Maple," Iceburg hastily spoke up as the poor sap of a physician started to turn a demented gaze on the Dugong. "I believe you were informing these fine folks of the current states of their comrades?"

The Doctor continued to twitch for a bit before heavily huffing out as much of his frustration as he could manage and refocusing on the clipboard he was carrying. "Alright… alright… let's see… might as well start with the most normal case here, the princess."

"Grrraagh…"

The doctor cut himself off as a pained gurgle came from the direction of another bed.

"Or… the duck, I suppose. The duck could work, too," he hesitantly conceded.

Said duck was leaning up in his bed, blearily rubbing his head with his bandaged wing. "Ish… Ish she alwight?" he squawked painfully.

"Ah…” I helped the doctor out by jerking my head at Vivi. "Ah! Y-Yes, she's fine! She has some broken bones, a few fractured ribs and scratches a little bit everywhere, and she's suffering from an acute case of exhaustion—nowhere near the levels of that monster you call a captain, mind you—but apart from that she's mostly fine.

"The worst injury she received…” He gestured at Vivi's bandaged midsection. "Would be that, quite frankly, impressive case of road rash that she's sporting on her midsection. That will be leaving quite the scar. Though, heh…” The doctor chuckled mirthlessly as he fiddled with his clipboard. "From what I know of people in your profession, I'm certain she won't mi—!

"Doctor?"

Sanji's tone was perfectly calm and even, but the doctor nonetheless fell silent. Most likely because of the ambient temperature in the room suddenly ratcheting up a few degrees in spite of Sanji's only motion being to light his cigarette.

"You may not be aware of this, but the sea restaurant Baratie didn't have much in the way of medical treatment. As such, we more often used what we had onboard to make ends meet. Suffice to say that more often than not, the results were…” Sanji sighed out a roiling cloud of smoke. "Not that positive. In light of this information, I recommend that unless you'd like me to demonstrate some of those treatments firsthand, you refrain from finishing that sentence. Is that clear?"

The doctor's fearful whimper was answer enough.

Meanwhile, ignoring the exchange, Carue slowly began struggling to get to his talons. "Aye… Aye haf ta get up… haf tah get back tah—"

THWOCK!

"—haaaaaah…"

Carue's eyes rolled up into the back of his head as he flopped forwards onto his beak and began
snoring, showing off a syringe that had buried itself in his rump.

I glanced at Chopper, all ready to compliment him on the shot (heh), and then I felt my face turn blue.

"Is he… even… awake?" I croaked fearfully as I watched Chopper continue to slumber peacefully.

"No, Cross. He is not," Robin replied, appearing rather nervous herself. Along with everyone else in the room that was conscious, for that matter, and I'm fairly certain that more than a few of the KO ones started to sweat.

"Ergh…" Doctor Maple groaned as he eyed our Zoan crewmate. "That's for the best, if I'll be honest. He's one of the worst cases. Granted, his biology makes an accurate diagnosis a bit difficult, but what I've got so far is… quite frankly disturbing. Multiple puncture wounds all over his body, extreme amounts of stress to his skeleton and musculature, he's been beaten within an inch of his life, suffered second degree burns to his chest…" He topped it all off with a sidelong glare at Luffy. "And he's anywhere from half to three-quarters as exhausted as your captain. I'll be honest: I might not have been in the Grand Line long, but in my time here I have treated a few Zoan-types, and I've seen them live through some rather insane damage. But seeing this… I still have no idea how on earth he's still alive."

"What can we say?" Usopp chuckled with a weak smile. "He's one hell of a monster."

"Hey!" I protested in indignation. "He's a demon. Get your terminology straight, why dontcha?"

The doctor rolled his eyes as we all shared a laugh at that. "Anyway… I'm just going to go ahead and move past your pet snail, because I'm not a veterinari—AGH!"

"First off, his name is Soundbite, and he is my partner," I droned tonelessly as I clenched my fingers around the man's shoulder. "And second, I suggest that for the sake of your arm, you learn." I redoubled my grip. "Fast."

Going by the way the doctor suddenly stiffened in my grasp, he definitely felt it as everyone conscious in the room joined me in pinning him, some simply with stares in place of glares, but the message was clear. The poor sap swallowed and nodded, and as I relaxed my hand, he carefully picked up Soundbite and looked him over.

"Mmmrgh… a-alright… h-his shell looks fine besides a few cracks here and there, though they look old…" He shut his eye as he stared into Soundbite's shell. "He's normally gray, right?" I nodded in agreement. "Then I… think he's a healthy color? Apart from that, ah… going by his power set, maybe a sore throat and most likely some exhaustion of his own." He gave me a terrified look. "T-There, is that good enough for you?"

I smiled beatifically as I released his shoulder in favor of plucking Soundbite from his grasp. "Perfect."

The doctor straightened his coat as he nervously side-eyed me. "A-Anyway, t-the rest of you are all fine, relatively speaking. Scratches, a few fractures here and there, nothing truly major to worry about. In the end, I suppose the last person who needs to be mentioned is, well…" He cast a softer look at the person in the room who was simultaneously our newest crewmate and one of our oldest comrades. "Her."

We all looked nervously at Merry as the doctor reshuffled through his notes.

"Well, I never thought that I'd say this, but your doctor and Franky did good work; your friend…"
Merry, was it?" He noted her name down when Nami nodded. "Merry is in no immediate danger, and once she wakes up, she should be stable to move about on her own after a few days of crutches and physical therapy. I also gave her a basic physical, and aside from structural damage around her neck and feet that those metal braces are keeping surprisingly stable, she seems healthy. But!" He promptly snapped his finger up. "You need to make sure that she takes it easy for the next few days; the damage to her spine is healing fast, but not even Zoan-levels of fast are enough that it will be done when she awakens. Which, given your crew's inordinate level of strength, I'd estimate will be in another twenty-four hours at the latest. From there, if what I've been told is accurate, I think that you'll need Galley-La's help as much as mine; she may seem to be fully human now, but there are bound to still be some carryovers from her original form, even in her alternate form."

"So… all in all, everyone's healthy enough?" Nami concluded.

"The ones who are unconscious should stay that way for their own good, but as long as you don't get into any more serious fights in the next few days?" He gave us all a flat look. "Which, given your reputations I sincerely doubt you can accomplish? Yes, you're all clear. Even if, by all standards of modern medicine, most of you should be dead ten to twenty times over."

I sighed in relief as I breezed past the last bit of what the doctor had said; I had never doubted that we'd win against Enies Lobby, but I won't deny that after what I'd gone through on Skypiea, I'd been worrying about someone suffering some form of lasting damage.

Granted, we hadn't come out of there entirely unchanged: Nami was still pretty mellowed out, Vivi'd taken a hell of a blow, Merry wasn't totally alright, and I was planning on making the bandages across my face a permanent fixture on account of how they looked leagues better than the gaping crevasse Hattori had left in my face and nose, but all things considered, I couldn't really complain about the way things had turned out.

"In that case."

Iceburg's voice cut through my relief like a knife, drawing everyone's attention. His impassible expression did little to alleviate the tension. "I believe that you owe me an explanation now, Jeremiah Cross."

"Oh, yeah…" Paulie slowly narrowed his eyes as he and the rest of the Family and Galley-La's execs rounded on me. "Almost forgot about that little promise."

I took a moment to glance around, confirming that Robin and Franky were both looking at me as well, before nodding with a sigh. "Yeah, alright, alright. Chances are I'll be telling this tale again sooner or later, so I suppose a rehearsal wouldn't be the worst thing. But still!" I promptly snapped a finger up. "This is sensitive information; the fewer people who hear what I'm about to say, the better. If you wouldn't mind…?"

"Already going," Doctor Maple said, leaving the room with no small amount of haste (or panic, either or).

"I trust these three with my life, Cross," Iceburg stated as he crossed his arms.

"The same from me," Franky snorted as he brought his forearms together and flexed.

I eyed the execs that were hanging around with determined looks before sighing and shaking my head. Well, if they insisted on being stubborn… "Your funeral. Guess I can't really blame you if you're determined to lose whatever measure of sanity you have le—"
"Later, big bro!" the square sisters chorused, shooting out of the house like they were cats and it was full of rocking chairs.

"Wait up!" Lulu called as he chased after them.

"DITTO!" Tilestone howled as he followed his comrade.

I watched them leave before regarding the remaining two with a raised eyebrow. "And you?"

To their credit, Zambai and Paulie only took a second to exchange a look before nodding firmly. "We're staying," they said in unison.

I considered matters for a moment before mentally shrugging. Just the seconds-in-commands would be more manageable than them all. As such, with preparations complete, I positioned myself in such a spot that I could observe everybody pertinent to the discussion.

"Given how… most everybody I'm talking to is pretty damn smart—"

"HEY!"

"I'll do you the courtesy of settling for the quick version: simply put, everything that I know that I shouldn't, I know because I read about it in a story."

As everyone's jaws slowly dropped in shock, I started ticking off my fingers. "Past, present, future; everything pertinent to the rise of Roger's successor to his throne and even a few key factoids and details that are only tangentially relevant, I have in my head. It wasn't finished when I read it, so I only know a little more than half of where it goes and more than a few of the answers to the big mysteries remain question marks, but…" I spread my arms, indicating the room in general. "I think it's pretty damn self-evident that what I've got has been more than enough to cause some serious change and uproar."

Most everyone who was hearing this for the first time was too stunned to reply properly, desperately trying to process what I'd just said. Eventually, however, one person managed to force the expected words out.

"Where in the world could you have possibly read a story like that, Cross?" Robin asked incredulously.

I slowly donned a smirk as I crossed my arms behind my head. "Funny you should word it like that, Robin."

As expected of the final graduate of an institution called the Tree of Knowledge, that was all that she needed to understand. And her reaction wasn't disappointing either, what with her entire body stiffening and her pupils shrinking as she sucked in a sudden breath. "You're… You're from another world?" she stammered numbly.

"EH!?" every listener save Iceburg yelped, every eye turning to Robin.

"One far different from this one, aye," I nodded in confirmation. "Though I'm still entirely human, I assure you."

"EH!?" the trio roared even louder as they looked back at me.

"As for the circumstances for my arriving in this world, well…" I forged on, ignoring the now unanimously dumbstruck expressions of my audience. "The story I read, entitled One Piece, was one
of the more popular contemporary tales in my world. And me? I just was one of many fans who read it, a totally ordinary person."

A weary sigh worked its way from my chest as I reached up to pinch the bridge of its nose. "That all changed when a… I don't know, a force, a god, whatever it is, identifying itself as a 'Bastard Random Omnipotent Being', decided to up and fling me into this world with nothing but the clothes on my back, all for the shits and giggles it would get from watching my adventures. After that happened, I landed on a deserted island in the East Blue, met that little parasite over there—" I nodded my head at Soundbite's shell. "And, well, the rest, as they say, is history."

Dead silence descended from there. Paulie and Zambai were looking a little dizzy, and Iceburg was openly gaping at me, any semblance of composure lost. Oddly enough, though, our two crewmates, current and future alike, only looked somewhat shocked, their expressions slowly returning to neutrality, though our archaeologist still had a sheen of sweat present on her brow. Eventually, Robin broke the silence.

"So, if I'm understanding you correctly," she began. "We're all technically characters in a story you read?"

I smiled nervously, rubbing the back of my head. "Uh… isn't every person already the hero of their own—?"

"Plagiarist~!" Su sang from the sidelines.

"Cross."

I flinched at the practically whip-like intensity of the word before shrinking in on myself. "I, ah, have long since acknowledged everyone as being living breathing people and not merely fictional entities?" I tried hesitantly. "…and you were always one of my favorite characters? T-Though that was only the m-mere basis of my endeavors to, ah…" I lapsed into silence before hanging my head in defeat. "Screw it, I don't know how the hell you word something like this and I trust you're smart enough to know that I haven't been bullshitting you. So… are we good?"

Robin stared impassively at me for what felt like an eternity before sighing and bringing a hand up to massage her forehead. "I'm not mad, Cross. After all, I suspect that I better than anyone have a decent idea of what your dilemma was like."

I started to sigh in relief—

"However."

"GAH! OWOWOWOW!" I yelped in agony as I suddenly found my ear getting yanked to the side. I was vaguely aware of Nami whistling as she watched me struggle and flail. "Geeze, you really make being a hammer look inviting, Robin."

"QUIET IN THE PEANUT GALLER—YEOW!"

"I am fairly irritated that you didn't even consider telling me all of this once I'd joined!" Robin scolded me in a vexed tone.

"OwowowOW! LET GO, DAMN IT!" I finally managed to swat the hand off my ear and shoulder, and took the opportunity it gave me to cast a glare at Robin. "And when the hell would I have had the chance to do that, hm!?" I demanded incredulously. "Before we both almost got flash-frozen, during which time there was still a goodly chance of you snapping my neck before making a break
for it, or after, when you were looking left, right, and center for a chance to make a run for it?"

*That* got an embarrassed blush from Robin, prompting a cough into her fist, her eyes pointedly away from mine. "I, ah… that is to say… call it even."

"'Even' my—!"

**THWACK!**

"Ouch!" I yelped, clutching my throbbing skull.

"Watch what you say to a lady, shit-mouth," Sanji fumed indignantly.

"I'll say whatever the hell I want to my own sister, crap-cook!" I shot back, crossing my arms with a huff. "And trust me, I've had more than enough experience with my own biological sibling. This is perfectly normal for brothers and sisters, so unless you have any reason to say otherwise—"

"Yo, can I get a word in edgewise, here?"

I turned towards Franky as he spoke up, noting the frown on his face and his crossed arms even as Sanji began coughing. Must have inhaled his cigarette wrong again.

"Look," Franky said with a wave of his hand. "I realize that the Grand Line is nutso and everything, and I've seen some pretty nutty stuff myself, but c'mon Cross. An explanation like *that*? Even I have to draw the line and call you a little nuts, no matter how crazy good your intel's been up until now."

Things were quiet for a bit until Iceburg sighed wearily. "As much as it pains me to agree with Flim-Flam here—"

"I think I might even prefer Flunky," the cyborg muttered.

"—your story is a bit… out there. Do you have any kind of proof, anything at all, that could prove your words beyond any doubt?"

I blinked in honest surprise before frowning. Honestly, it wasn't *that* much of an unreasonable request, just a difficult one. My eyes started to wander around the room as I contemplated what I could use as a solution. What was something I could do that nobody knew about ye—?

I had to resist the urge to cackle as my gaze alighted upon the answer to my problems. And so, moving fast, I strode over to a corner of the room and opened the fridge, palming the first trio of bottles I could find.

"Well, if you *insist*…” I only just managed to hide the sheer levels of amused sadism I was feeling as I stood up and shuffled towards the cyborg. "But first, since I imagine you're either out of Cola or, going by your hairdo, running low, mind opening your gut-fridge?"

"Eh?" Franky blinked in confusion even as he complied, clicking his gut-piece open. "Sure thing, thanks for—!"

**CLUNK!**

"HEY!" he yelped as I wrenched the empty bottles out and shoved in a new trio that were obviously *not* Cola. "WHAT THE HELL DO Y—EOW!"

All anyone in the room could do was stare in shock as Franky's hair draped down around his face and he busted out into a dance routine that ended with his finger pointed high in the air.
"EVERYONE GET DOWN AND GET FUNKY, BECAUSE TONIGHT IS THRILLA! GAH!"
The mob-boss then ripped the bottles from his gut and tossed them away. "WHAT THE HELL DID YOU JUST MAKE ME DO!?"

"Ooooh, nothing much," I smirked as I made a show of examining my (nonexistent and bandage-covered) nails. "I just decided to show off what happens whenever you go, shall we say, 'non-kosher'?" I then directed my impish grin to the rest of the room. "And for the record, that was just pumpkin juice. Vegetable juice gets him acting like a hippie, and tea turns him into a pansy-ass farmer! Anybody else up for finding out what other drinks will do?"

Franky paled as literally everyone gained mischievous glints in their eyes. "H-He, what the hell do you think you're all looking at!? I'm not some kind of a sideshow—agh!" His protests were cut off when Zoro, Sanji and Boss all dogpiled him at once, while the rest of my crewmates started ransacking the room for beverages.

"Hey, I found some—! Eurgh, spinach juice!" Mikey recoiled in disgust before flinging the bottle over to our crewmates. "Worth a shot!"

"Don't even—YOHOHOOOO!" Franky suddenly shot to his feet and actually flung our three strongest off of him as he started flexing, his hair morphing into a sailor's cap in appearance. "CHECK IT! I'M STRONG TO THE VERY FINISH BECAUSE I ALWAYS EAT MY SPINACH! AND WHEN I SAY STRONG, I MEAN STRONGAH THAN STRONG! LIKE HELL!" Franky capped it off by knocking the bottles out with a roar. "THAT SHIT'S FUCKING DISGUSTING! AND AS FOR THE REST OF—HEY!" His being restrained again cut off his rant.

"Oooh, looky here!" Su perched herself on a trio of bottles. "Ale and a mind, both terrible things to waste! At least these are going to a good cause!" And with that she rolled them all towards the fray.

"FORSOOTH, SQUIRES! I am Ser Iron Ass the Blacksmith! I haileth from the land of FANTASIA! OH, COME ON!"

"I was saving this for lunch…" Paulie mused as he drew a bottle of grape juice from his jacket and weighed it in his hand. "But this is so worth it! Consider this payback for all the years of shit you've put me through, iron-ass!"

The bottle was tossed into the fray and dutifully slotted in. "If you're wonderin' why I'm wearin' a toga, it's cause I feel like emulatin' the city of wine! AVE ROMA! THAT ONE DOESN'T EVEN MAKE SENSE!"

Conis bit her lip as she rolled a bottle in her hands. "This might be a bit mean…" She then smiled apologetically as she held the bottle out for someone to grab. "But I'm sorry, this is too funny!"

"Yo ho ho ho, yo ho ho ho~, I'M ABOUT TO POP A—!"

"OKAY, THAT'S TMI!" I yelped as I yanked the milk out.

"Alright, enough!" Zambai suddenly roared, shoving everyone off of his big bro and helping him to his feet. "That was funny and all, but Big Bro Franky isn't a lab rat, you jerks! Here ya go, big bro." Zambai handed him a trio of appropriately shaped bottles. "Good as new!"

Franky didn't waste a moment before he popped the bottles in and heaved a grateful sigh as his pompadour sprung back to life. "Ah, that's better! Thanks, Zambai, I'm back to normal!" Franky started flexing demonstratively. "Man, I feel super! Super super, even! And ya know what? I wanna get even more super! I wanna move, I wanna exercise! I WANNA GET FITTAH! WHAT THE
"HELL!" Franky ripped the bottles out as he roared at his subordinate. "DIET COLA!? YOU DAMN ASSHOLE!"

"HAHAHAHA!" Zambai was practically rolling on the floor, he was laughing so loud. "SORRY, BIG BRO, I COULDN'T RESIST!"

"YOOOU…" Franky fumed murderously.

"Hey, Franky, before you kick his ass," Sanji cut in, tapping his shoulder. "Just checking, but you and Iceburg believe Cross now, right?"

"Eh?" Franky blinked over his shoulder before nodding. "Ah… yeah, I believe him now. Not like I have much choice, right? I only ever experimented with alternate fuels once, and nobody was around to see it. Only way he could have learned it—!"

"Was from watching Chopper toss you tea and veggie juice while you were in Enies Lobby's kitchen," I answered with a smirk.

"…Yeah, that."

"I'm satisfied as well," Iceburg nodded in confirmation.

I started to pump my fist victoriously…

"Good."

And then I froze up without warning when the voice of pure evil hit my ears, and I suddenly felt my sins start to crawl upon my back.

Slowly, dreading what I would find, I turned around to face the evil that I just knew was lurking behind me, and promptly regretted the action as I found myself staring at a panel of dark judgment: a tengu, an oni and a demon, all staring at me with pure murder in their eyes.

"Time to pay, Cross," they intoned in synch.

I quaked miserably in my bandages, too afraid to even berate the scant few of my 'comrades' who had the gall to laugh at my fate.

Thankfully, for all that karma was a bitch, at least it could be said that she was a unilateral bitch.

"What the hell are you laughing about, Leo?" the oni snarled darkly.

The dugong in question froze mid-laugh, cold sweat cascading down his entire body.

"I haven't forgotten the debt you owe me as well."

The two-sword-style apprentice and I sloooowly exchanged fearful looks.

Soundbite chose that moment to poke his eyestalks out of his shell, his eyes visibly bleary from exhaustion. "Fly, you fools," he croaked, though admittedly, the way he said 'fools' sounded more like 'morons'.

Nevertheless, we took his advice and, to put it lightly…

"AAAAAAAAAGH!"
De-assed the area with the quickness.

Suffice to say, the chase did not end there.

-o-

Rather, it led us out into the city proper. Have I ever mentioned that I was really grateful for being good at making connections?

"Long live the Union, long live the Union, long live the Union," Leo repeated fervently as the Yagara we were riding flew through the canals.

Because seriously, I was really, really, really grateful for those God-given connections.

I wheezed and panted warily as I leaned against the edge of the bull's saddle, casting a tired eye back down the canal we'd just rocketed down. "Any, huff. sign of them, hoo?"

"Ah…" Leo, his wits back with him, raised his head to peer over the back of the saddle's lip.

CRACK!

Before shrieking in terror when said lip suddenly blasted apart into a hail of splinters and sawdust. "YES! SIGNS! MANY MANY SIGNS!"

"Sonnuva—!?" I cursed as I swung my gaze around. "The monsters I'd expect to be capable of keeping up with us, but Usopp!? Where the hell could he… be…?" My words died in my throat as a glint shined in the corner of my eye, and I sloooowly turned my head to gape up at the summit of Water 7 in horror. "Ooooh you have got to be kidding me. How the hell is this a proportional response!?"

"If it were just for the mermaid, it wouldn't be except for the love cook."

Leo and I froze in horror, slowly turning our gazes to the rooftops lying before us. Two monsters glared right back at us, waves of killer intent roiling around them like a physical force.

"But for me, and Usopp?" the oni growled darkly. "This is just the breaking point for putting up with all of your smartassery for the past. Five. Months. You should count yourself lucky that Nami got brainwashed, or that thunder god she predicted yesterday would be on your ass as well."

I swallowed heavily as I realized just how deep a hole of shit I was in. "Oooookay…" I hedged desperately as I tried to think of some way to keep my head on my shoulders. "Two things in my defense. A: None of you ever asked why I kept calling her 'hagfish', so really, you should have known that something was up."

"For the sake of your health, your other reason had better damn well be better," the demon snarled, smoke and fire coming from his mouth.

"Right, then… more seriously?" I grasped at the last straw I could conceive of. "If I hadn't told you, you could have died."

That caught the two of them off-guard, and they exchanged glances before resuming glaring at me. "And how do you figure that?" the demon asked skeptically.

I hastily scrounged up what few specific details about that scene I could recall. "T-The shock of
seeing her like that made you all black out, right? You all stopped trying to breathe, so you didn't swallow enough seawater to drown while she was carrying you. There was a legitimate risk of you drowning if I told you what was coming because you wouldn't immediately black out, a-and I wasn't willing to risk that."

"And you expect us to believe that it wasn't just for another cheap laugh?"

'I'm surprised you've believed me this far!' I thought desperately, but I managed to keep my face from giving away little more than a flat look. "In theory? I'll admit I thought it could be a little funny. But in practice?" I shuddered as the memory flashed unbidden in my mind. "No, it was just as disturbing for me as it was for you, and I saw it coming!"

The oni was silent for a moment before glancing at the demon. "…You know, he has a point there."

"MY RAGE IGNORES THIS."

The blood drained from my face "…Sooo you're still going to kick my ass, then?"

"Yes." Neither of them even hesitated in their response. And so it was that they started to stalk towards us, every step they took increasing the murderous pressure looming over us.

Leo shivered miserably in his shell. "We're gonna die we're gonna die we're gonna—!"

"Like hell we are!" I barked in a tone that sounded a lot more confident than I felt. "I've got a plan! Get in front of me, Leo!"

It was a true testament to the Dugong's trust in me that he didn't even hesitate to step up, blades crossed in front of himself. "W-Whatever this plan is, you're sure it's gonna work?"

"Ooooh yeah, it'll work, alright!" I nodded firmly, stepping back as much as I could in the saddle's confines. "No matter what happens, I'll definitely have one less monster to worry about!"

Leo heaved a sigh of relief. "Oh, thank Sebek, for a second the—wait, what did you just—!?"

Before he could finish, my boot slammed into his ass and punted him clean off of our bull's back. "EVERY MAN FOR HIMSELF!"

"WAAAA—OOF!" Leo's scream of shocked terror suddenly died as he found himself halted in midair. He panted as he hung there for a moment before hanging his head in relief. "Oh, thank Sebek, I was so afraid that I was going to have to fight Zoro…"

"Ahem."

Leo opened his eyes and blinked in confusion, before screaming in horror as he realized that he'd instinctually locked swords with the oni. "CROSS, YOU TRAITOROUS BASTARD!" he howled through his tears as he and his opponent's blades blurred.

"PIRATE!" I shouted back at him as the Yagara sped off at full speed. Still, in spite of the seriousness of the situation, I was utterly exhilarated. I was going to make it! I was actually going to —!

My ride suddenly screeched to a halt, and I couldn't rightly blame him for it because of the fact that the demon was currently hovering in the air before us.
"Figured out Moonwalk, huh?" I squeaked miserably.

"Mm-hmm," the demon snorted before turning his gaze on the Yagara. "**Move and you're elevenses.**"

The bull's response was to shoot its head underwater and quake in place.

"**Smart choice.**"

I inched away from the demon on pure reflex, and went ramrod straight when a thunk sounded out behind me. I glanced over my shoulder and found myself struggling with a raging combo of terror and awe. "**Retractable parachute-pack, huh?**" I whimpered. "**Any chance I could get one of those for myself, maybe incorporate the grappling belt into it? The thing's been working out really well for me so far.**"

"**We can talk once you get out of traction,**" the Tengu hissed as he took aim at my head.

I swallowed heavily before waving vaguely at my face. "**N-Not above the collar, alright? My throat's my livelihood, and my face, well…**" I fingered the fresh set of bandages that cut across my face. I was proud of my scars, but there was a limit, and having my nasal cavity open to the world very much crossed it. "**CP9 already beat you to it.**"

"**There's only one problem with that idea, Cross.**"

I glanced over my shoulder—

**CRACK!**

"**GRGHHH…**" before whimpering painfully as I clutched my re-broken nose.

"**We have exactly zero fucks left to give.**"

I had all of a second to process the image of a foot rearing back in preparation and the stretching of an elastic slingshot—

"**What. Are you doing. Out of bed?**"

Before all three of us froze, the demonic images fading and leaving only a nervous-looking Usopp and Sanji as we turned to see a yeti standing on the side of the canal, six syringes between his fingers like claws, and one each sticking out of the nearby Zoro and Leo, who were both paralyzed, fear on their faces. Said yeti was currently staring darkly at us.

"**Straining your injuries, and creating more of them for yourselves and others? That won’t do, will it? ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU’RE FORCING ME TO DO THE SAME SO I CAN STOP YOU.**"

"…**Maybe we should have thought this through a bit more,**" Usopp whimpered in terror.

"**Agreed,**" Sanji and I squeaked.

-0-

Suffice to say that when we woke up early the next morning, the sight of Chopper sleeping nearby, ostensibly peacefully, was enough to cow us into talking things out. After some consideration, realizing that opportunities in the coming sagas would be few and far between, I gave them a
promise not to abuse my future knowledge solely for my own amusement again, unless I was certain that it was utterly harmless or unless they were in on it, until we set out from Paradise towards the New World. After considering the phrasing, they accepted that.

Their mistake. After all, that left a boatload of loopholes for me to abuse, not the least of which was that I only promised not to abuse my future knowledge. So, when the future became the present…

Anyway, over the next few hours, everyone else save for Luffy came around without too much incident, one after the other. Vivi complained of some aches and pains as she picked at the unwound roll of gauze tied around her midsection, Carue grumbled and growled as he side-eyed Chopper. Chopper… well, he got up cackling his furry little ass off, but some blunt-force therapy swiftly rectified that and he got to work checking everyone over. As for Soundbite, I think he tried to blare out some kind of an orchestra upon his full revival, but all he did was perform a real-life version of the old 'Letting the air out of the band' gag.

And finally, almost twenty-four hours after the end of our ordeal and her conversion, Merry came awake.

At first, we all clamored around her, either hugging her or asking her how she was, until Chopper forced us all to give her some breathing room. Still, we managed to give her a hug from each of us, with even Zoro reluctantly consenting to offer one. Granted, he only consented after Nami threatened to start charging him for the very air he breathed, but still.

Unfortunately, as nice and heartwarming as the moment was, it just couldn't last forever.

"So…" Merry hesitantly poked the bandages wrapped over her back as she glanced over her shoulder. "I… can't ever become a ship again?"

"I'm afraid not," Chopper shook his head solemnly. "I'm so sorry, Merry. I'd fix you if I could, but even with Franky's help modern medicine only goes so far and as it is you'll have to use crutches for a few days and—!"

I cut his rambling off by dropping my hand on his shoulder. The vanilla Human-Zoan glanced up at me before taking a calming breath and getting himself back under control.

"I'm sorry, Merry," he reiterated in a calmer tone. "But no, you can't. You're lucky to not be paralyzed at all, but if you ever try going back again, the prospect of a wheelchair will be the least of your problems."

The white-haired girl looked down, her expression unreadable. Silence fell for a full minute. And then…

"…I'm alright with this," she whispered at last.

"Merry—!" Conis started to speak up.

"No, seriously!" Merry hastily waved her arms in denial. "I-I mean it sucks that I can't turn into a ship anymore, t-that I can't… c-carry you… anymore…"

Merry fell silent as she stared down at her lap, visibly fighting to keep herself under control, but eventually she looked back up, a smile on her face even as tears cascaded from her eyes.

"But I'm alive," she whispered joyously. "I'm alive and I'm still with you all and I'm going to stay
with you all and... and that means more to me than anything. And if..." She stared at her hands as she flexed them experimentally. "If I have to get used to being a human instead of a ship from now on... as the price for this new life?" She clenched her hands into fists and nodded firmly. "Then I'll accept... no. No, I'll more than accept it!"

Merry looked up with a massive smile, confidence radiating from her small frame. "I'll overcome it! I'll do what this crew always does, and I'll take what it is that makes me special and I'll beat the world over the head with it! I won't stop and I won't back down, no matter wha—GRK!" Merry cut herself off mid-cheer when she tried to punch her fist into the air and wound up freezing in place, a pained expression flashing across her face. "Ah... little help?"

After chuckling a bit while Chopper shook his head and began treating Merry, I took the opportunity to speak up.

"Alright, so now that we've got that particular endeavor established, I think our first priority should be finding out what exactly Merry's capable of now, agreed?"

A general round of agreement sounded out around the room, but before anyone could say anything further Chopper interrupted us with a raised hoof and a cough to draw our attention.

"I, ah, actually think I have somewhere to start," he mused as he scrutinized Merry's back.

"What, really?" the girl-ship blinked over her shoulder at him.

"Maybe..." Chopper tilted his head curiously before glancing to the side and waving his hoof at the TDWS. "Donny, you're relatively smart, would you mind lending me a hand?"

"'Relatively'!?" the purple-bandanna'd dugong squawked indignantly.

Chopper rolled his eyes in exasperation. "Relative compared to me, Donny."

"...Right, I knew that," Donny coughed before hopping onto the bed and joining Chopper behind Merry. "What do you need?"

"Confirmation from someone with flesh and bone for appendages rather than keratin, and before you ask!" he continued as Donny opened his mouth. "My Heavy Point is not delicate enough for the kind of work I'm doing right now."

"Fair enough," Donny shrugged before eyeing Merry's mutilated flesh. "So, what am I—?"

"Try applying some pressure to her flesh, like so." Chopper demonstrated by pushing his hoof into Merry's back.

"Eep!"

Causing her to flinch in shock.

"Like this?" Donny asked, prodding his flipper at the spot indicated.

"Erk!" Merry shivered in place.

"Yes, exactly!" Chopper nodded. "Now, try applying it like this."

"GACK! Hey, what're you—!?"

"So... by doing this then?"
"YEEK!"

"Wait, what—?" Donny blinked before leaning in. "Did she just…?" He poked her again.

"AIE!"

"See, that's what I thought!" Chopper nodded in agreement. "And even if you do it this way—!"

"YEOWCH! MALPRACTICE!"

"Ah, guys?" I spoke up as I watched them continue poking at Merry's back. "Not that this isn't fun and all—!

"I BEG TO—YIPE!"

"Very FUN!" Soundbite cackled uproariously.

"But what is this in aid of?"

"An utterly fascinating para-biological phenomenon!" Donny grinned eagerly as he moved around to start poking at Merry's upper arm. "See, it feels like she has normal flesh here, right?"

Chopper and Donny seemed too caught up in their conjoined science mode to notice the slight amounts of twitching that were starting to occur in Merry's jaw. Some of the crew did notice and exchanged wary glances, but others, like me, had a good idea where this was going, and smirked in anticipation of the inevitable.

"But, then, you press just right…"

Donny's flipper came in for another poke, this time a little faster, and it bounced off her skin.

"It hardens!" Donny said excitedly. "Heck, I think it might even be as tough as her old hull!"

Another poke. "I mean, we don't want to test the full extent, of course—" Another poke. "But maybe we can figure out how she's doing this and—!

"STOP POKING ME ALREADY!" Merry suddenly shouted, grabbing the nearest thing in reach that could pass for a club—that being Mikey's unfortunately positioned tail—and swinging said club at her tormentors. Chopper had the wherewithal needed to duck, but Donny?

THWACK!

He wound up halfway through the nearest wall of the room. The nearest solid stone wall.

For a moment, we all just stared at the Dugong's lower body protruding from the wall, some of us in shock and others in barely restrained amusement.

"Science is fun!" Su snickered enthusiastically.

"I beg to differ…" Mikey slurred as he hung in Merry's grip, his eyes spinning dizzily.

"What just happened and what just hit me…?" Donny mumbled out through the wall.

"YOU GOT KNOCKED DA FUGG OUT!" Soundbite cackled uproariously.

"Along with a load of overtime on your reaction-time training," Boss informed him with a roll of his eyes.
"Hmph," Merry sniffed petulantly as she dropped Mikey and crossed her arms. "Jackass."

"...Right, then," Chopper coughed in a tone of forced calm as he readjusted his oh-so-slightly askew hat. "So, her body is the size of a child, but still possesses the proportional strength of a caravel. Well, at least she's got nothing to worry about against Mooks, at least."

I coughed slightly into my fist as I glanced away. "I've been using too much trope-speak..." I muttered to myself.

"Blasphemy!" Soundbite scoffed with a grin.

"To clarify..." Raphey popped her flipper up questioningly. "Just how strong would the 'proportional strength of a caravel' be? No offense, Merry, but compared to some battleships..."

"Compared to battleships she might be tiny, yes," Robin nodded in agreement. "But when compared to us, her normal body was measured on an entirely different weight scale. I dare say we should be grateful she doesn't weigh even half as much as she normally does, or else she would have dragged both Cross and Luffy to the bottom with her."

A sweatdrop hung from Merry's skull as she observed Robin. "Glad to see your morbidly disturbed and twisted sense of humor is back in full force, Robin." Her eyes narrowed. "Oh, and if you try to poke me, I promise you that I will snap your arm off."

Robin's expression remained pleasant, but the hand that had been reaching towards Merry promptly disintegrated into petals. "I'm positive that I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about."

A shameless smile stretched across her face, before stretching even further when Vivi and I grabbed her cheeks and tugged.

"Liar~!" we sang, only letting go when a pair of hands thwacked the backs of our skulls.

"Owww..." Robin winced as she rubbed her stinging cheeks before shooting a flustered look at us. "Will you stop... ruining my moments?!"

"You pretty much accepted me as your younger sibling and you no longer have the shadow of death looming over you if I don't act right, so no," I grinned as I folded my arms behind my head.

"And I can't antagonize you in a passive-aggressive manner anymore without feeling like a total bitch for it, so no," Vivi smirked as she crossed her arms triumphantly.

"YER DAYS OF acting all cool and mysterious ARE DEAD AND GONE!" Soundbite concluded with a chortle.

Robin's eye twitched slightly. "Is it too late to go back to the days where I was aloof and everyone regarded me with suspicion?"

"Considering how we all saw Cross give you a noogie?" Zoro leered at her. "Welcome to the lands of normalcy."

Soundbite and I laughed even harder as Robin's head hung in such a manner to show that she was, without a doubt, sulking.

"Alright, alright, fun as this is, if you're all done using me as a lab rat and teasing Robin," Merry interjected. "Do you all mind giving me some space, please? I'd like to empty out my cargo ASAP. It..." She shifted around uncomfortably on her bed. "Feels kinda weird with how I am now, you
know?"

That served to draw everyone's attention, and Nami was the first to speak up. "Your… cargo? But…
er, even disregarding how that's supposed to work when you're this size, didn't Galley-La already
unload everything on board while they were fixing you up? All of our stuff is resting in a storage
locker a few blocks away."

"Most of it, sure, but they didn't take all the dirt your trees were in," Merry explained with a grimace.
She dug her hand into her coat's pocket and withdrew a fistful of dirt, holding it up for us all to see.
"It was fine when it was in its box, but everything I had left must have gotten tossed around when I
changed, so now it's just making a mess. So, can I…?"

Nami and I exchanged confused glances before I shrugged. "Ah… go ahead?"

Nodding thankfully, Merry dropped the soil on the ground. Then she withdrew another
handful from her pocket and dumped it on the ground as well. Then she removed another handful, and another.
Finally, sighing in aggravation, she turned the pocket inside out in a cascade of dirt that resulted in a
pile as tall as her bed itself, and quite a bit wider.

Merry smiled contentedly once she was done, stretching her arms above her head with a relieved
sigh. "Ahh, now that is a whole lot better. Thanks, that just felt scuzzy, and I think that there were a
few bugs in it too!"

Nobody said anything on account of our jaws touching the floor due to the sheer… spectacle we'd
just witnessed.

"Hmm…" Meanwhile, Merry was preoccupied with tapping her chin thoughtfully. "Now that I think
about it, I probably don't need to carry my ballast stones around anymore, either." As such, Merry
reached inside her coat and started digging around.

It was at just that moment that the door to the room opened and Paulie walked in. "Yo!" Paulie
saluted us casually. "Just thought I'd check up on you since the company's docs said I was in the
clear. How're you all—?"

"Got it!" Merry crowed as she pulled a stone-filled crate the size of, well, her out of her raincoat and
held it above her head. "Woo! Even while I'm still holding this I feel ten times lighter!"

"…gwagh?" Paulie enunciated intelligently as his cigarette dropped out of his mouth.

Merry dropped the crate onto the soil next to her and was forced to cartwheel her arms in a panic
when she almost tipped backwards out of bed as a result. "Woahwoahwoah, forgot about the other
ones!" She hastily dug her hands back into her coat. "Where is it, where is it… aha!" She grinned
ecstatically as she brought out yet another crate with utter ease. "There we go! Much better! Anyone
wanna take this off my hands? Hey, Usopp, catch!"

"…Anybody got a clue as to how the hell someone that small can carry something that big?" the
Galley-La rigging master asked weakly.

I drew my attention away from Merry jokingly taking aim at our sniper to give him a flat, incredulous
look. "You didn't just say that. You did not just say that. You cannot tell me that you of all people
really just said that, Paulie."

"Eh?" The chain-smoker glanced at me in confusion. "Course I did, why the hell wouldn't I!?"

My eye twitched, and I held out a hand. "Mind letting me see your rope?"
Paulie shrugged indifferently and shook a few feet out of his sleeve. I accepted the line and, before he could react, began pulling. It took a minute flat before I had withdrawn enough to be confused for an anaconda, and it wasn't running out anytime soon.

"I think it's safe to say that my case is resting like a baby," I drawled flatly, everyone else in the room staring at the display with just as much shock.

"...Okay, I'm basically telling physics to go screw themselves by act of Devil Fruit, whereas you're a semi-normal human being," Merry summarized flatly. "And that is enough rope to rig up one of the Marine's blowhard battleships. What's your excuse?"

"I... ah... you see..." Paulie hemmed uncomfortably, his eyes darting around in a clear panic. Then his arm flashed out, severing the line with a knife before he turned, sprinted—

**CRASH!**

—and leapt clean through a window as he made a break for it.

Conis stared after him for a bit before tilting her head to the side. "...Why didn't he just use the door?" she questioned in honest curiosity.

"He has experience with debtors," I explained with a sigh as I kneaded the bridge of my nose.

"Personally, I'd really like to know how the heck he managed that," Usopp muttered. "I might have to try looking for him."

I opened my mouth to agree, then froze. "...Actually, I think it would be a better idea to just let it go. Remember what happened last time we tried to look into the finer mechanics of the sudden displacement of mass?"

My co-conspirators and Merry all froze before shivering in utter horror.

"I THOUGHT we agreed to never speak of that AGAIN!" Soundbite squawked.

"Right, then!" Chopper piped up hastily. "So, to summarize, Merry's physical capabilities as a caravel have transferred to her human body even without her being in her hybrid form, meaning that she has an exceptional amount of resiliency, perhaps comparable to Luffy's in a pinch; more raw strength than quite a few of us put together, at least when it comes to the matter of lifting; and her storage capacity—"

"HAMMERSPACE!"

"Ergh..." I groaned, clawing miserably at my face.

"...that, remains untouched. Alright, so if that's all—"

"Ooh, is that a triple-weave rope? Gimme!" Before we could react, Merry snatched up the end of the rope lying next to her and—

Our jaws promptly crashed into the floor again as Merry proceeded to slurp the rope up like it was one long strand of spaghetti. We could only stare in dumbfounded shock as she swallowed the entire thing, burped, and concluded by leaning back and patting her stomach in satisfaction. "Yummy..."

My eye twitched slightly as I sported a demented smile. "We're gonna be here awhile..."
So… yeah. Turns out that while Merry was fully capable of eating and enjoying normal human food, her preferred fuel was cloth. Canvas was ideal, but she'd happily munch on wool, cotton, linen, hemp, and synthetics, though as an incident with Luffy sleep-punching the air attested, rubber was thankfully not a part of that list.

This had resulted in the most awkward situation Sanji had found himself in to date, as he now had to spend a significant amount of time both shopping for canvas and getting advice from Galley-La on how he was supposed to go about turning it into a gourmet meal. After all, no matter how unorthodox Merry's appetite was, he compared the act of serving her raw cloth to serving all of us raw bread, which was unacceptable for a chef of his caliber.

Merry tried to help him out in the endeavor by informing him she also wouldn't mind some pitch and rope, but honestly, going by how all hope seemed to flee from the chef's already-bleak expression, that little tidbit just served to make matters worse.

As such, when we had established Merry's… 'personal tastes', Nami, Sanji and, at the chef's insistence (read: desperate pleading), Chopper prepared to go shopping and begin experimenting with the various types of 'cuisine' we'd be dealing with in the future.

On the plus side, at least, Merry wouldn't have to worry about Luffy stealing her food… hopefully, anyways.

However, before they left, I was swift to ask a question.

"Oh, Chopper?" I piped up as the trio headed for the door. "Just to clarify, the rest of us are clear to leave, right? Well," I jerked my head at where our captain was snoring and Merry was playing pattycake with Conis. "Besides the obvious suspects, of course."

Chopper looked back and gave us all a once-over, his eyes narrowed contemplatively, before nodding in acceptance. "Carue still needs to rest so his legs can heal, but as long as nobody pulls anything stupid like earlier and everyone takes it easy… then yes, the rest of you have clearance."

"Good," Zoro said, shoving himself up from his bed and striding for the door. "In that case, I need to find a blacksmith." He gripped the black-lacquered hilt at his side with a frown. "With any luck, I managed to stop that rust-bastard before he damaged Yubashiri beyond repair."

"Ah…” Raphey raised her flipper uncertainly. "Should someone go with him?"

"If it's involving swords or booze, I think we can trust him to find his own way," I replied cheekily.

Zoro snorted as he left.

As it turned out, we wouldn't see him for the next twelve hours. Don't ask me how, because to this day I dread the mere idea of asking.

"Well, that's that…” Chopper muttered to himself before stiffening as a thought came to him. "Ah… apropos of nothing, I would suggest that Robin have an escort anywhere and everywhere she goes. For… medical reasons," the reindeer hedged, shooting a sidelong glance at the archaeologist.

"Don't worry, Chopper, I'm never leaving again," Robin reassured him with a light smile.
"But just in case," Vivi spoke up in an impish tone as she slid up next to Robin. "I'll stay by her side if she decides to go out shopping. I won't leave her side even once."

Robin regarded the princess in surprise before smiling confidently. "Oh? Are you quite certain that you can keep up, Miss Princess?"

Vivi graced Robin with an imperious smile as she raised her nose in a sniff. "Quite certain. Don't forget that I can make you do whatever I so desire with a mere word, Miss All Sunday."

Robin nodded before adopting a... sultry look!? "I always did wonder about the veracity of the stereotype of nobility having extravagant tastes," she crooned in a thoroughly provocative tone.

Then, before Vivi could react, the archaeologist reached up and brushed her finger along the princess' cheek. "Perhaps you'll be kind enough to... elaborate later," she breathed.

Vivi stammered and flushed helplessly as Robin brushed past her before snapping her finger up with a huff. "Point to you, Robin," she bit out tersely as she wheeled around and stormed out after our crewmate. "Point to you."

"I try," Robin chuckled victoriously as they left the room.

I was silent for a bit as I stared after her in... honestly, I don't know what I was feeling, but nevertheless I got my wits together and eagerly clapped my hands. "Great! Come on, Usopp, let's get going!" I proclaimed as I strode out of the building, as much to try and move things along as to proceed with my day's plan.

The sniper only hesitated for a moment before hurrying to catch up with me. "What're we going to do, Cross?"

...Oh, no way in hell was I passing up this opportunity.

I promptly wheeled around and spread my arms out wide. "The same thing we do every day, Usopp!" I proclaimed extravagantly.

I then adopted a slasher-esque smile as I drew my transceiver's mic from my bag and brandished it.

"Try and make the world a little more mad."

-o-

"Doubling the ship's serving area?" Shakky whistled in surprise, clearly impressed. "Are you sure? That's a serious boost!"

"Nyuu, it's not like we have much of a choice!" Hachi chuckled as he scratched the back of his head with one of his hands, the others waving around in embarrassment. "The combination of good food and the SBS being readily available has been bringing in a lot of customers. I thought that the Davy Back Fight attracted a huge crowd, but Enies Lobby? The rush was insane!"

The octopus fishman then frowned and crossed his arms as he considered matters. "And of course, chances are that the Straw Hats are going to get into more big fights like that as time goes on, so if I want to be able to keep up with the demand, I need to make a big investment into the business if I want to keep it going."

He sighed as he accepted a glass from his old friend. "I'm also going to have to see about getting an extra pair of hands or two on deck as well, pun recognized; Keimi and Pappug are great, but there
just aren't enough warm bodies on Takoyaki 8! We're being stretched way too thin."

"Sorry, Hachi," Rayleigh replied with an apologetic smile. "But this grove cost us an arm and a leg and we've already got our business and our niche going strong. I'm not sure a merger would be that good of an idea."

Hachi sighed. "Yeah, I know, just thought I'd ask. But in that case, who else could I—?"

The ex-pirate suddenly cut himself off, his eyes and mouth slowly widening in realization. He hesitated for a moment as a flash of doubt shot through him, but he mustered his nerve and looked back at the bartender. "Shakky, where do you keep your Transponder Snail?"

"Don don don don!"

"Over there," the bartender replied flatly, pointing at the ringing snail while Hachi slumped.

"Nyuuuu… sometimes his timing is awesome," the octopus groused as half his thumbs popped a thumbs-up, while the others jabbed downwards. "Sometimes it really sucks."

"Oh, don't worry about it, Hachi. I'm sure that after Enies Lobby, this one won't be nearly as long," Rayleigh chuckled as he stood up from his stool and ambled towards the snail.

"Nyuuu…" Hachi groaned as he massaged his face. "Well, at least there's a bright side: with any luck, the SBS will put him in a good mood so that when I call he doesn't immediately rip me a new one…"

"That's the spirit!" the Dark King laughed as he picked up the snail's speaker.

"…Broggy, you're no better at faking an accent than I am," an unfamiliar deep voice deadpanned.

"Seconded," Cross echoed flatly.

"GO GARGLE SOME MAGMA, YOU BASTARDS!" another unfamiliar voice barked.

"Hmm?" Shakky cocked her head curiously. "A couple of guests this time?"

"With one of them being named 'Broggy'…" Rayleigh mused suspiciously.

"Bosses, please, stop bickering!" two more familiar voices pleaded.

"And there are Oimo and Kashi," Hachi noted. "But what do they mean by 'bosses'? They're not working for the Government anymore."

"Unless they mean… ohohohoooo…" Hachi and Shakky looked at Rayleigh in surprise as he began chuckling. "Why am I even remotely surprised at this point?"

"They have a point, you know. You should be somewhat careful with what you say. After all—" Cross began.

"You're both live on the SBS!"

"DON'T STEAL MY SHTICK!" Soundbite roared angrily.

"DON'T STEAL MY SHOW!" Cross followed up.

"Sorry, but I'm just not sorry! Consider it more payback. And besides, that was fun," Usopp
"Gegyagyagyagyaga!/Gababababababa!" the show’s guests laughed uproariously at the exchange.

"Ah, it's good to see that no matter how much things change, they always stay the same. Right, Dorry?" one of the pair asked with a nostalgic smile.

"Right you are, Broggy, right you are!" the other enthusiastically concurred.

"HA!" Rayleigh barked as he slapped the table in amusement. "I knew it! Damn, those rookies must be some of the luckiest bastards on the seas if they actually managed to find them and live to tell about it!"

"We've already established that they have the sort of luck to throw a hundred and eleven dice and have them all come up sixes," Shakky smirked fondly. "Now come on, come clean, who are they talking to?"

"Wait for it…" Hachi muttered to himself.

"Ergh... well, anyway, moving on past that little bit... yes, everyone, we of the SBS are back in action! Now, I imagine that you're all probably wondering who I have as guests with me, right?"

"There it is!" the octopus-fishman laughed.

"Yeah, yeah, laugh it up…" Shakky grumbled good-naturedly, rolling her eyes.

"Well, I believe I'll let our resident expert on the matter handle that particular introduction. Usopp, care to do the honors?"

"WHA—who, me!? A-Are you—!? Ah... You know what? Sure! Ladies and gentlemen, it's my honor as the sniper of the Straw Hat Pirates to introduce you to the biggest role models in my life aside from my father. Hailing from Elbaf, home to the very greatest among those fit to be called Brave Warriors of the Sea, I present the co-captains of the legendary Giant Warrior Pirates—!"

"Weighing in at 100 Million apiece!" Cross commented.

"'Blue Ogre' Dorry and 'Red Ogre' Broggy!"

"To clarify, I'm Dorry!" one voice spoke up.

"And I'm Broggy!" finished the other.

"AND IT'S AN HONOR TO BE HERE!" they finished as one.

The introduction had barely finished when Rayleigh fell into gales of laughter, dangerously close to tipping over in his chair. Hachi's eyes, meanwhile, were nearly popping out of his skull as he gaped at the snail. "THE GIANT WARRIOR PIRATES?! I thought they were just a myth!"

"Ohoooh no, Hachi," Rayleigh chortled. "The World Government only wishes they were a bad nightmare! They were and apparently still are as real as you and me!"

Shakky swapped her gaze between her male friends in confusion. "Um... care to clue me in here? I've heard of pretty much every crew on the Grand Line, but the only time I've heard of a crew known as the Giant Warriors was the other day, when Cross named Oimo and Kashi as members. Heck..." She scratched her chin thoughtfully. "Come to think of it, I've never heard of a Giants-only
crew, period. They usually fight amongst themselves too often to maintain any kind of stability.”

"Ooooh, there was one alright,” Rayleigh informed her, his laughter dying down to a chuckle. "And it's no surprise that you haven't heard of them, either. After all, they haven't been operating for a while!"

"'A while' my ass!" Hachi scoffed incredulously. "Shakky, according to the legends the Giant Warrior Pirates disbanded over a century ago! The only reason I even heard about them was Rayleigh, and I thought he was just yanking my arms!"

"Nope, real as real can be," the Dark King confirmed. "A few of my older and… well, bigger drinking buddies told me about them. Had no idea whether their captains were actually alive or dead though, or where they were." He smirked as he nodded his head at the snail. "Guess we know the answer to the first of those questions, right?"

"Aaaanyways, ladies and gentlemen, allow me to clarify how this happened and what's happening now!"

-0-

"See," I swayed back and forth a bit on the crate I was sitting on as I considered my words, watching the workers of Galley-La as they went about their work. "We first met up with the good captains early in our pirating career on an island that will remain unnamed for obvious reasons—!

"COUGH—MARINE BASTARDS—COUGH!" Soundbite insinuated not-so-subtly.

"And I decided that hey, seeing as I recently managed to finagle the number of the snail they recently acquired, we might as well have ourselves a nice little interview with two of the most prominent figures in pirate history!" I then jabbed my thumb over my shoulder. "Also joining us, besides our giant-enthusiast sniper, are two of the crew's heavier-hitting grunts, Oimo the Boar and Kashi the Hawk."

"Hey, ma! I'm still alive!" Oimo laughed happily.

"Brontus, if you can hear me, I haven't forgotten you owe me a load of Beris! Watch your back!" Kashi concurred with just as much enthusiasm.

I snorted lightly at the sheer banality of their reactions before nodding. "Alright, that's enough wind-up, so I'm just gonna go right ahead and jump in with a question concerning some relatively ancient history: Dorry, Broggy, it's safe to say that as the captains of one of the only Giants-only pirate crews to date, you two were quite infamous in your day, right?"

"Gabababa! You better believe it!" Broggy laughed proudly.

"Our crew was relatively small, only thirty all told, but when it's thirty giants? Giants from Elbaf, no less?" Dorry grinned. "Well, let's just say that we didn't take long to stop counting how many Marine bases we toppled."

"Though that was mostly because only half of us knew how to count!" Broggy snorted.

"That too!" Dorry laughed in agreement.

"Well, then, in that case, I just have to wonder…” I tilted my head in confusion. "How come your bounties were only $100 million each?"
"ONLY?!"

That turned out to be a mistake as the two captains bellowed through Soundbite, nearly bowling me over with their volume, although their tones were more incredulous than offended.

"What alien world are you living on, you dope?!" Broggy demanded.

"Yeah! Don't you know that 100 million is nothing short of a fortune!?!" Dorry concurred.

"B-Bosses, hold on!" Oimo spoke up hastily. "I, ah, I don't understand all of it, lots of big words and we were stuck on Enies and all, but apparently the Government's changed its policies on bounties in the last hundred years. We talked with a lot of people while we were standing guard, and a lot of the more decorated guys said that 100 million was selling you both short."

"Plus you were out of commission for a full century, and considering how the world's economy is primarily fueled by human interests, then the value of the Beri has probably changed over the years, too," Usopp mused.

"How the hell do you know that, LONG NOSE!?!" Soundbite questioned incredulously.

"He got tutored by someone who knew what she was talking about!" I cut in with a smirk before Usopp could respond, causing him to splutter furiously.

Before he could say jack, however, a distinct whistle coming from Soundbite interrupted him.

"Ohohoh, what's this? The Brave Warrior of the Sea has a little lady friend waiting for him back home?" Broggy smirked mischievously.

"GEGYAGYAGYAGYA! No wonder he wants to become so impressive!" Dorry guffawed.

Usopp fell silent as his face matched Chopper's hat hue for hue, Soundbite providing a whistling noise from his ears in between his cackles.

"Heheheh," Kashi snickered into his fist as he tried to sober up. "A-Anyway! Getting back on topic! Boss Dorry, Boss Broggy, going by what the Marines told us in their spare time, your bounties to modern standards should be somewhere around, eh…" He waved his hand side to side. "Somewhere around 300 mil? Apiece."

Silence reigned as we processed that particular tidbit.

"Holy shit," I whistled in awe.

"NO DOI!" Soundbite concurred.

"That's three times Luffy's bounty!" Usopp exclaimed, before cutting himself off with a hesitant look. "Er… what his bounty was before we burned Enies Lobby to the ground, I mean."

"Three hundred million…" Broggy breathed in awe.

"That's the biggest bounty I've ever heard of…" Dorry concurred in the same tone.

Soundbite then fell silent as he adopted an oddly pensive expression.

"Uh…?" I hedged in confusion.

"No thinkin' about turnin' each other in, collectin' each others' bounties and breakin' out, bosses!"
Kashi warned hastily. "It didn't work out the last five times!"

Usopp and I promptly faceplanted in shock.

"So much for the Warriors of Elbaf having any brains between them…" I groaned.

"My beloved world image…" Usopp sobbed miserably. "It's shattered… Tinkling away into stardust…"

"Oh, come on, that was a hundred years ago!" Broggy protested. "And it looks like the Marines have only gotten stupider while we were gone! I'm sure it could work this time!"

I glanced up with an irritated glare. "Maybe so, but even stupidity has limits when you double dipsticks just broadcast it to the whole world."

"…Blast it all," the pair muttered despondently.

"AS IF IT WOULD ACTUALLY WORK IN THE FIRST PLACE!" Usopp and I barked indignantly.

"YOU BRATTY LITTLE SON OF A—Dot dot dot dot!" Soundbite suddenly cut himself off as he started ringing with a cackle. "Dot dot dot dot! Heh, how much ya wanna bet that—Dot dot dot dot!—this is AN INSULT?"

I pulled myself together just enough to give an indifferent shrug. "Eh, maybe, maybe not. After the near-miss with that smiling lunatic, I think it's pretty clear you can never be sure who's going to call in. Still, though, could be fun!" And with that, I clicked the appropriate button. "Hello, you've reached the SBS!"

"Glad to be here," said a gruff voice. "But sorry, this is about as far away from an insult as you can get; I never thought I'd have the chance to speak to the great Dorry and Broggy."

"Oh?" Broggy asked curiously. "And who would you be?"

"My name is Hajrudin, another giant born and raised on Elbaf. I'm 79 years old, so while I'm after your time, I've grown up hearing the tales of the Giant Warrior Pirates, and I've always looked up to you two."

I managed to suppress my surprise at hearing exactly who we were talking to as the co-captains responded to his statement.

"Gabababa! Glad to hear that the next generation is getting a decent education!" Broggy bellowed proudly.

Dorry, meanwhile, was somewhat more skeptical. "Who exactly has been telling our stories? Because if any of them are from Loco Lokos, I am telling you now that I was drunk out of my mind and from behind that guy looked like a—!"

"T-There are a lot of different stories from a lot of different warriors!" Hajrudin coughed hastily. "But, ah, there's one tale that none have ever decided to share: where did you two disappear to all those years ago, and why? Oimo and Kashi went looking for you fifty years ago, but the original reason for the dissolution of the greatest crew to sail from the shores of Elbaf yet remains a mystery! Would you be so kind as to honor us with what you've been doing?"

A pause fell for a moment, to which the two Ogres let out wistful sighs.
"Well, in all honestly, it wasn't fully by choice that we disbanded the crew," Dorry said. "It was great fun and excitement sailing the seas, fending off any man or beast who would seek to fight us. And the parties! Oh, Elbaf's best grog was the perfect end to a day of battles."

"But we had no choice in the end," Broggy sighed longingly. "For you see, one day Dorry and I came to a disagreement. Neither of us was willing to back down, and we placed our prides on the line to prove ourselves right! As such... we had no choice but to engage in a duel of honor. We fought each other with as much strength and valor as we could bring to bear!"

"But unfortunately, a problem arose," Dorry shook his head solemnly. "As it turns out, Broggy and I were equally matched in strength, so our duel ended in a draw. But as you well know, that will not suffice to satisfy the might Elbaf! So we fought again... and it resulted in yet another draw. Realizing that this would not end anytime soon, we sequestered ourselves on an uninhabited island so that we might settle our duel in peace! And so, for the past century we have remained faithful to the laws of Elbaf. 73,770 duels have we fought!"

"And 73,770 draws have they brought," Broggy concurred.

"And so it will go until we determine a victor!" the two finished in unison.

Silence reigned for a bit as everyone processed that proclamation. It was Hajrudin finally broke it.

"You disbanded the Giant Warrior Pirates... for a duel..." the younger giant breathed slowly. "It seems that the stories I heard were not accurate."

My heart skipped at least three beats as I heard Hajrudin, future commander of the Straw Hat Grand Fleet, say those words. If I had in any way managed to screw up the dreams of a future comrade—!

Then Soundbite burst out sobbing tears of manly joy. "FOR TRULY NO MERE WORDS CAN DESCRIBE JUST HOW TRULY THE BOTH OF YOU MANAGE TO ENCAPSULATE THE MIGHT AND HONOR OF ALMIGHTY ELBA-A-AAAAF!" Hajrudin wept rapturously.

My head jerked downwards as a sweatdrop suddenly hung itself from my skull. Right, this was a future Straw Hat we were talking about here, however tangential his membership might have been. I had been worried why, exactly?

Ugh, whatever. I could berate myself for stupidity later, right now I needed to focus on the entire reason I'd tapped these two for an interview in the first place.

"So, if I may interject?" I spoke up. "As a human with little to no knowledge of the laws of Elbaf, I was wondering: is there really no way to end the duel until one of you wins? And it's only to the death?"

"Mmm... well, there is one alternative," Broggy admitted. "It hasn't been used in centuries because of how uncommon it is for a duel to go beyond a single match, and the last instance I can think of resulted in both participants dying at the same time, but nevertheless, the laws are clear: in the event of a draw... the duel can end if both combatants are willing to concede. If Dorry and I both stood down and recognized the other's honor, that would be sufficient for Elbaf."

"But that's not an option at this stage," Dorry continued with a snort. "For over the course of the past century, we have forgotten why our duel began in the first place! For us to concede without knowing what we were willing to stake our honor on would be the epitome of disgrace. But we can be reasonably sure that it must have been something important if neither of us were willing to stand down in the early years of our duels."
I huffed in aggravation at the expected answer, and shot a look of askance up at the giants physically beside me. "Oimo, Kashi? What about you two?"

"Mmm… honestly, I can't remember it either," Kashi admitted.

"We giants might live long, but even our memories have limits," Oimo shrugged helplessly. "Sorry."

I exhaled sharply, and to Usopp and Soundbite, it was no doubt obvious that I was resisting the urge to simply spill what I knew. But still, if I couldn't get them to remember matters the direct way… "Alright, alright…" I muttered to myself before speaking up in what I hoped was a convincingly chipper tone. "Ah well, it was worth a shot! Seeing as we've hit a wall on that subject, let's move onto other topics! Now, while I can't share the name of your island, I do actually have some questions about it! Like… say… Those 'mountains' the two of you live in! They look pretty weird, if I'm being honest, and I say that by Grand Line standards! Do you have any idea what that's all about?"

"Ah, yes, our homes away from home!" Broggy chuckled proudly. "Quite impressive, aren't they? Majestic and imposing, just how we like them back on Elbaf! And they're huge even by our standards, nearly spanning the entire length of the island… huh. Ya know, now that I actually take a second to look at them, they actually look kinda familiar. Like… skulls, maybe?" Broggy frowned in confusion. "…Wait a second, that's ringing a bell…"

"Skulls… and that hunting contest between your crewmates sounded familiar as well…" Dorry murmured, clenching his eyes shut as he tilted his head to the side.

Silence fell, and I kept my hope hidden behind a carefully neutral expression. At least, up until Soundbite began quietly humming the damn Jeopardy! theme and he responded to my acrid glare with a silent cackle.

Still, I suppose that music was somewhat appropriate.

"THAT'S IT!"

Because not a second later we all jumped as the two Ogres shouted in unison.

"Of course, now I remember! Those aren't mountains at all!" Broggy bellowed victoriously. "Those are sea king skeletons! Way back in the day, we both killed a sea king in single combat, and while we were celebrating our victory at a nearby human village—!"

"—That little farm girl came up and asked us which one of them was bigger!" Dorry picked up eagerly. "We laid them out side-by-side on Lit—ah, on this island to figure it out, but neither of us could agree on whose was bigger! And since neither of us was willing to back down, we began dueling!"

"And that's how it all started!" they concluded in unison.

I sighed in relief, not bothering to conceal it, though I promptly fell over a moment later due to a sudden earthquake. Looking around, I saw that the cause was Oimo and Kashi having face-faulted… along with Usopp, and Soundbite, and probably everyone else who'd just heard their little tale.

"WE WENT THROUGH FIFTY YEARS OF INDENTURED SERVITUDE BECAUSE OF A FISHING COMPETITION?!" the pair roared indignantly.

"I have to say, even I'm sort of disappointed in hearing that such a glorious duel had such a mediocre catalyst," Hajrudin muttered despondently.
"My world view… shattered… again…" Usopp wept sadly.

"SERIOUSLY, who would be willing to fight for THAT LONG OVER SOMETHING LIKE THAT?!" Soundbite barked.

"Zoro and Sanji," I deadpanned.

"…Withdrawn."

"I feel better now," Usopp said as he snapped back to his feet looking none the worse for wear.

I took a second to snicker at the actions before refocusing at the task at hand. "Alright, so, now that you've remembered the origins of your duel, do you think that you can move on?"

"HELL NO!"

I wasn't even surprised at this point, because of course there was no way in hell it would be that easy.

"There is no way in all the six seas that I will ever concede to the idea that Broggy managed to catch a sea king bigger than mine!" Dorry protested indignantly.

"You wish!" Broggy fumed proudly. "Mine was clearly the larger of the two, I am the obvious victor!"

"NEITHER OF US AGREES TO CONCEDE! THIS DUEL WILL CONTINUE!"

"Oi vey…" I bemoaned, pinching the bridge of my nose as I tried to work things out. Great, with the two of them so gung ho and the Sea Kings long-since rotted, there was no way in hell we'd be able to come to a conclusion in a straightforward manner, so how—?

…now there was a thought…

"Before you two start beating one another's faces in!" I spoke up hastily, cutting into the pair's argument. "Do you mind if I at least try and change the basis of your conflict a bit?"

"Eh?" The Red and Blue Ogres paused in their argument in favor of looking at me in confusion. "Whaddaya mean?"

"Well, look, you guys have been pirates on the Grand Line for a while, right?" I posited. "And that means you've no doubt fought many humans who've been able to give you a run for your money. As such, I think it's safe to say that it's not size that matters when it comes to combat, but rather the sheer strength and power that something has withi—"

"POWEEEEEEEEER!"

I jumped at the sudden voice bursting through Soundbite, who seemed just as shocked. "TERRY? I DIDN'T EVEN RING!"

"BEAR GLOVE IS TOO POWERFUL TO BE SLOWED DOWN BY MERE TECHNOLOGYYYYY!"

"Would you kindly silence yourself, you musclebound buffoon? We're witnessing something only slightly more momentous than my own incredibly lustrous plumage," Isaiah's baritone cut in.
"BOTH OF YOU SHUT IT!" Drake bellowed indignantly, followed by a decisive KA-CLICK.

I ground my fist into my forehead. "I never thought I could feel so much annoyance towards Old Spice," I hissed. "Ugh… anyway, where was I?"

"Something about strength meaning more than size in combat," Hajrudin provided.

"Right, thanks. Anyway, do you two agree with me?"

"But of course!" Dorry snorted in an almost insulted manner. "We have fought many opponents over the years, larger than us and smaller alike, and all too often have we felled larger beings with ease while almost dying at the hands of mere humans!"

"It is not size that matters, but the strength held within an entity's frame, no matter how big or how small!" Broggy asserted firmly.

I grinned victoriously as I recognized that I had them where I wanted them. 'Jackpot.' "Well, then, in that case," I spread my arms calmly. "I'd say that it's pretty damn obvious that your duel's been a draw right from the onset!"

"...come again?" the two asked in confusion.

My grin widened bit by bit as I felt my blood pressure ramp up from my ever-approaching victory. "Honestly, you two, think about it. Soundbite, what did they say the count was?"

"Seventy-three thousand seven hundred and seventy," he responded in Dorry and Broggy's voices.

"Exactly. That many duels, day after day for the last 100 years, and in all of that time, neither of you gained any headway? If there's one thing obvious from a track record like that, it's this: you're perfect equals in strength, and always have been. As such!" I snapped my finger up. "We can equally assume that those two Sea Kings you defeated were also perfectly equal in strength, with neither being any stronger than the other!"

Dead silence fell as my words sunk in. Oimo and Kashi's jaws slowly dropped as the penny hit, and small squeaks were escaping from Usopp as he twitched in place. From Soundbite's movements, it seemed as though Dorry and Broggy were slowly turning their heads to stare at one another. The silence stretched on for almost a minute.

Then, I turned my attention to my fellow crewmates. "Usopp… and you too, Hajrudin. Would you care to do the honors?"

Credit where it was due, the pair was quick to get their collective acts together.

"I-I, Hajrudin Hammerfist, a-as an impartial witness and a proud warrior of Elbaf—!"

"A-A-And, I Usopp, a-a-as sni… as king of snipers, crewmate of the Straw Hat Pirates and a Brave Warrior of the Seas—!"

"We declare that in light of new information, the honor duel between Red Ogre Broggy and Blue Ogre Dorry…"

There was a moment as they sucked in deep breaths, and then… they said it.

"WE HEREBY DECLARE THEIR DUEL!" they roared as one. "TO BE NULL AND VOID! IT'S A DRAAAAAAAAANAAAAW!"
Of course, the second those words escaped their mouths, several other people began roaring as well. More specifically?

"GEGYAGYAGYAGYAGYAGYAGYAGYAGYAGYAG/ABABABABABABABABABABABABABA!"

The subjects of the duel in question. Soundbite was nearly tearing his own jaw out with how hard he was laughing, but furthermore, he was also sobbing his little heart out.

"W-W-We're free, Dorry!" Broggy hiccupped gratefully. "Y-Y-You hear that!? W-WE'RE FREE-EEE-EEE!"

"W-We don't have to kill each other!" Dorry wept through his smile. "W-We can go back to the sea! Back to our adventures! WE CAN GO BACK TOGETHER!"

"B-B-Bosses..." Oimo blubbered euphorically. "D-Does this mean—?"

"A-Are you sayin'," Kashi wheezed out. "What we think you're sayin'!?"

"Say it!" I goaded. "Say it here and say it now, loud and proud for all the world to hear!"


"Ohh, dear," Kizaru muttered as he fingered his neck brace with the hand on his cast-free arm. "And I thought they couldn't possibly follow up with another massive attack so soon after Enies Lobby." He turned his wheelchair to the side, angling his cast-encased leg in such a manner so that he could glance out the window of his office. "I wonder how much impact this will have..."

"HAS OFFICIALLY BEEN REFORMED! RAAAAAAAGH!"

"RAAAAAAAAGH!"

Kizaru felt a line of sweat break out on his brow as the Ogres' battle cry was echoed from several places across the seat of Marine power. "Guess that answers that, huh? Tsk, damn demon and his damn big mouth, he's nothing but trouble. It would really be a good idea if I just warped over to the island and killed him before he even saw me coming."

He shrugged, shifting his limbs about in their casts as he sighed, leaning back in his wheelchair and letting his eyes drift shut. "Too bad I had to injure myself this badly. Ah, well. At least Sengoku can't be mad at me for this."

"BOOORSAAALIIINOOO!"

The light-man cracked his eyes open with an unnerved expression. "Then again, I have been battin' pretty badly so far..."

"HAJRUDIN!" the co-captains barked suddenly.

"S-SIRS!" the 'young' giant responded.
"As it stands, even with our old crewmates returning to our flag, chances are that we will be left somewhat shorthanded," Broggy summarized solemnly before donning a massive (you know what I mean) grin. "As such, we are currently recruiting. Interested?"

Hajrudin's jaw practically cracked the ground in shock. "A-Are you serious?" he whispered in awe.

"We'll take that as a yes!" Broggy guffawed. "Spread the word to all of Elbai's new generation, whoever hasn't already heard us by now: as of now, we're accepting new blood with open arms!"

"Ah-I-I... I... I WOULD BE HONORED, MY CAPTAINS!"

"Gababababa! Excellent! Now, Oimo, Kashi—!"

"Ah, actually!" Dorry interjected hastily. "Would you mind if we took a break? We need to plan this out properly, and bullheaded as we might be, allowing the whole world a peek at our playbooks probably wouldn't work out as well for us as it does for you."

"My faith is restored," Usopp breathed in euphoria.

"Heh, sure thing, you guys," I waved my hand casually. "Ladies and gentlemen, time for an intermission, and I think we know the best way to fill that space, don't we?"

"Yay! Time for SOUNDBYTE'S music cor—KCH! HEY, WHAT THE DEU—KCCCCCH! OH, NOT THIS AGAI—K-K-KCCCCCHHHHHHHHAPAPAPAPAAAAA! DID YOU MISS ME, WORLD?"

I hid a snicker behind by fist. "Good timing," I muttered sotto voce.

"What can I say, an entertainer's got instincts!" Apoo whispered back. "Anyway, I'll call in to talk with you later. For now, though... APAPAPAPAAAA!" My 'rival' roared at full blast. "YES, WORLD, IT'S ME, APOO, THE ROAR OF THE SEAS, HERE TO DO AS I PLEASE!"

"GET OFF my frequency, you long-armed WANNABE! I WANT MY MUSIC CORNER!"

Soundbite half-roared, half-whined.

"Apapa! I have a better idea! WHY DON'T YOU TAKE A HIKE?!!"

"NONONO—KCCCCCHHHHHH!"

"There we go!" Apoo laughed victoriously. "Alright, now that that pest has been dealt with, we can finally begin! The show you've all been waiting for, Apoo's Music Hour!"

"Well! Now that that's dealt with," I said, smirking and clapping my hands as Apoo began playing his song. "You were saying, Broggy?"

"Uh... right..." The Red Ogre hesitated momentarily before shaking his head and getting back on track. "As I was saying! Oimo, Kashi, for starters... at a guess, the Valhalla—?"

"The best mead hall in all of Elbai!" Kashi boasted proudly.

"But, uh..." Oimo waved his hand before his face with a wince. "Not seaworthy anymore. Sorry."

"Bah, we suspected it after the first few decades," Broggy sighed fondly. "At least the old warrior is resting in peace with happy warriors in his belly. That's all we can ask."

"But if that's the case..." Dorry muttered thoughtfully. "You two are still in Water 7, correct?"
"Aye, sirs!" the pair saluted.

"And their quality hasn't dropped over the years?"

"If anything, sirs, it's gotten better!" Hajrudin cut in swiftly. "Even in the New World, Water 7 is acknowledged as the capital of shipwrights! None surpass it!"

"Perfect!" Broggy barked joyously. "Stay put there, then, and Hajrudin, bring our new recruits there as well, and spread the word to the old guard while you're at it! The Giant Warrior Pirates will reunite on Water 7, our first task being to commission a new vessel for a new era!"

"What's a pirate without a ship?" Dorry agreed. And then his face fell. "Though, uh, we might be a bit late. It'll take some time for us to build a raft big enough to hold the both of us, and the only Log we have is the Eternal one to Elbaf, so…"

"Don't even worry about it!" I reassured them. "I'll call in a favor from one of my friends and get them to swing around and pick you up! There should be no prob—OW!" I yelped as Soundbite chomped on my unarmored fingers. I glared at him for a moment, but his own glare got his point across. "Ah… right, almost forgot. See, these friends of mine might seem disconcerting at first glance, but I swear to you, if they say Ophiuchus sent them, you've got nothing to worry about."

"You… You'd really be willing to do that for us?" Broggy asked incredulously.

"Of course!" Usopp spoke up before I could. "We're allies and we're fellow Warriors of the Sea, why wouldn't we be willing?"

"What he said," I concurred with a smile. "Anyway, I'll take care of everything once we're done, but for now… You guys up for continuing the interview?"

"But of course!"/ "No question!"

A glance at Soundbite prompted him to let out a quiet series of clicks, and Apoo subsequently began winding down his track.

"Apapapapa! That should do for now, time to get back to the spoils of the Marine ships! Nothing tastes better than someone else's food!"

"—DAAAAH! Huff… huff… WELL, HE'S GONE! I'm back. NOW, we return to the regularly scheduled—"

"—interview with Dorry and Broggy."

"I'M BEING GYPPEED!" Soundbite snarled.

"'Cut' might be more appropriate, seeing as for all that I'm your partner, I'm also your boss," I snickered.

"I resent that!"

"Not talking to you, literal-leatherneck!" I called out, not even bothering turning to look at the inadvertently named Dugong as he passed by, re-donning my smiling and clasping my hands together. "So! Where were we?"

-o-
The rest of the interview was certainly interesting, especially from a historical point of view, but overall, it proved to be pretty uneventful, and I ended the SBS soon after its conclusion. From there, Oimo and Kashi had resumed helping Galley-La rebuild the city, as well as passing on a request for them to start drawing up blueprints for a ship worthy of giants. Iceburg had had an odd gleam in his eye as he heard that request. I put it off to a unique challenge.

Usopp had left after that to actually make use of his ¥2 million in spending money, while Soundbite and I had decided to simply return to our living quarters, where I learned both good news and… well, not bad, but unexpected.

Good news, Merry had feeling back in her legs and was up and out of her bed, even if she was on crutches.

The unexpected news, however…

-0-

"Nononoooooomph!" Merry grunted, lying prone for a moment before opening her eyes and glaring into the floorboards. "This is embarrassing…" she ground out irritably. "I'm a child, not a baby. Why am I having so much trouble walking?"

"Because," I huffed as I slid my hands beneath her shoulders and lifted her back onto her feet. "Just like Conis, you've only ever had sea legs your entire life. Even without the crutches, you'd still be tripping from trying to overbalance and from trying to learn how to walk at all. I know it sucks, but…" I clapped her shoulders reassuringly before taking a kneeling position before her. "All we can do is press on, right?"

Merry grumbled melancholically beneath her breath before heaving a weary sigh. "Yeah, I know, I know. No pain, no gain…" She was silent for a second before cracking a slight smile. "At least I know you'll always be there to catch me, right?"

"Unless it's funny," I corrected with a smirk.

"THEN WE JUST STAND BACK and laugh!" Soundbite cackled.

Merry twitched slightly at that, a scowl flashing across her face before she suddenly let loose with the waterworks. "Coooooniiiiis," she whined in a distinctly childish tone. "Cross and Soundbite are picking on me!"

I blinked in confusion. "Eh—?"

"Sorry, Cross."

"Wait, wha—!?"

THUMP!

"YEOW!" I yelped, clutching the goose egg I was suddenly sporting.

"But to be fair, you are making a little girl cry," Conis sniffed as she hefted the bazooka she'd been polishing.

"Merry used Fake Tears!" Soundbite chortled. "It's only halfway effective!"

"Wanna bet?"
"Say wha—AAAAAGH!"

"Tseeheeheehee!" Su cackled as she laid on her back and spun Soundbite in her paws. "Punishing you guys is fun!"

"PUT ME DOWN! YOU WOULDN'T LIKE ME when I'm REVENGENGING!"

"Seriously, you wouldn't," I smirked at Su. "You weren't here at the time, but Merry knows just how deep Soundbite's ire goes. As an example… Jaya?"

"AAAGH!" the erstwhile ship howled in agony as she grabbed her ears. "Damn it, Cross, I'm already suffering from physical trauma, don't pack mental scarring on there as well!"

"Don't mentally scar kids, Cross," Boss noted absentmindedly as he carefully detailed the scroll of seaweed he was inscribing.

"I beg to differ!" Donny barked indignantly as he rubbed his skull. "I say that mental scars will match perfectly with the remnants of my concussion!"

"My fractured ribcage agrees with—YEOW!" Mikey yelped as a metal hook bounced off his skull.

"Less talking, more working on your flexibility," Boss ordered without looking up. "Either you manage to pull off the Nori Arts by tonight, or I'll limber up your skeletons myself."

"But Booosss!" the orange-bandanna'd fighter whined pitifully. "This is totally impossible! You pulled off bending that way because you're a total monster, but we're normal! We can't just—!"

"Woohoo, this is fun!"

"—abuhwah?" Mikey said intelligently as he snapped his gaze over to Raphey in shock. The dugong in question was flowing like a strand of seaweed caught in a current around Mikey. "Heck, it's more than fun! It's easy!"

"But how!?"

"Eh, I guess that girls are just more flexible than boys." Raphey shot a violence-filled grin at Boss. "Hey, mind if I help Mikey loosen up?"

"Yeah, sure, whatever makes you happy," the older dugong replied dismissively.

"Wait, wha—!?" CRACK! "YEARGH!"

"Thaaat's right!" Raphey cackled as she bent Mikey over her shoulders, eliciting more than a few pops and snaps from his joints. "Just loosen up! Let aaaall the tension flow right out of you!"

"THE TENSION IS RIPPING ME IN HALF!"

"Sounds like a 'you' problem. Maybe if I pull harder?"

"AAARGH!"

Donny's eye twitched fearfully as he watched his comrades go at it. "I don't know what scares me more, that this is normal for them or the idea that I might be next."

"Personally?" Leo mumbled out through the mummy's worth of bandages he was wrapped in. "I'm
more concerned about ever being able to move at all."

"Don't think you're excluded just because of your injuries, Leo," Boss commented. "I want your Shell Body up to specs once you get out of there."

"Yes, sir…"

"Attaboy."

I rolled my eyes at the dugongs' interactions before turning my attention to Boss. "Say, not to tell you how to teach your students, Boss, but could I suggest having them change their focus?"

"Why?" the older Dugong asked, finally glancing up from his scroll.

"It's just, well," I shrugged helplessly. "Between the Full Shell Style, your hook and your all-around strength, you have all ranges from long to short covered, whereas they—"

"—are confined to short, damn it!" Boss cursed furiously as he shot to his tail and hastily stuffed his scroll in his shell. "Alright, boys, change of plans! Raphey, drop Mikey and grab Leo! We're going out now and we're not coming back until we've got your bases damn covered!"

"HA!" Mikey barked joyously as he slipped out of Raphey's grasp. "Now I have the upper hand!" He snatched his pistols out of his holsters and spun them by their triggers. "I've already got long-range covered, so I can just kick back and—WAGH!"

"Practice on your all-around proficiency with those things until you're about as good as Conis or Usopp?" Boss finished as he hauled Mikey along by his tail. "Couldn't agree more! NOW GET A MOVE ON!" And with that—

"YEAARGH!"

—he flung his student out the window Paulie had already broken earlier and followed after him, with Donny and a Leo-carrying Raphey right behind him.

I blinked slowly as I tried to process what the hell had just happened before turning back to Merry. "So, you still ready to go?"

Merry shifted uncomfortably on her bed before plastering an uneasy grin on her face. "Does… anyone else have anything they can do to delay things a bit longer?"

Silence.

She sighed wearily as she prepared herself. "Yeah, didn't think so." She swung her legs off of her bed, positioned the crutches on the floor, and slowly put her weight on her legs. She grimaced with visible pain and effort, but she stood. Then, slowly, she put one foot in front of the other, moving her crutches appropriately as she did so.

"Two," she muttered as she took another step. "Three. Four. Fivvvve… siiiaaaah!"

I caught her as she pitched forward, smiling proudly as I patted her back. The part that wasn't a mess of scar tissue, to be specific. "That was great, Merry!"

"That was six. Lousy. Steps…" she muttered acridly into my shoulder.

"And when you try again you'll manage seven, then eight, then ten, and then you'll start doing it without crutches," I continued for her. "Come on, you'll make it with hard work, you know you will!
"I mean, just look at me!"

"W-Well…" Merry glanced hesitantly to the side.

"Come on, you know I know what I'm talking about!" I scoffed as I helped her back onto her bed. "I mean, look at the aftermath of Eneru! First it took me awhile to get my limbs moving again without agony, and then it took me awhile to get over my astraphobia, flash by flash and rumble by rumble, but look at me now!" I spread my arms confidently. "Ain't no phobia got no strings on me!"

It was at that instant that the door to the house slammed open with a thunderous rumble. "Cross."

I promptly snapped to attention, cold sweat streaming down my face. "I did nothing wrong and/or am being framed."

"Bullshit," Lassoo promptly scoffed.

"Malarkey," Merry nodded solemnly.

"I don't twust you as faw ash I can kick you," Carue spoke up, pointedly twitching his cast-bound legs before falling back into his snoring.

"I'm sorry, Cross, but they do have a point," Conis smiled apologetically.

"TSEEHEEEHEEHEEHEEEEEE!" Su cackled un-apologetically.

"I love this crew!" Soundbite breathed.

I twitched viciously as I swept a glare over my crewmates. "You're all dead to me," I vowed before spinning on my heel and plastering a smile on my face. "What's up, Nam—eep!"

My false smile shattered into shards of terror in the face of our navigator's expression. Sure, she looked perfectly calm and peaceful, smiling with a serenity befitting of Vivi herself, and I might have even bought it too… were it not for the roiling storm front looming around her, snapping and crackling from where it was hanging over us.

I swallowed fearfully before looking at Nami's… general direction, because for the life of me I could not look her in the eyes. "I-I-Is something wrong, Nami?" I squeaked in a tone of thoroughly forced calm.

"Cross," Nami repeated as she crossed her arms and tilted her head to the side just so. "Would you care to explain exactly why, in the middle of my shopping with Sanji and Usopp, we were delivered a literal half-ton of rugs in your name?"

My fear faltered in the face of the sheer randomness of the statement, prompting me to blink at her in confusion. "Rugs? Uh… sounds like a prank to me, I don't remember buying anything in the city. I mean, I didn't even get a chance thanks to the—ohh, that's right." I scratched the back of my head with an embarrassed grimace. "Look, I'm sorry, but it was an accident, alright? When the Unluckies jumped us a few days back, I crashed into that guy's stall and going by the shotgun he was sporting, he had a 'you break it you buy it' policy, and he did not like people skimping on the bill."

My dread gone, I shrugged apologetically instead. "Look, I'm sorry that I used money from the briefcase, alright? I know it was for our new ship, but it was an emergency. You can take it out of my share of the money, I doubt I'll be buying too much with it anyways. And besides, it's not like we won't have anyplace to put them, right?"
All throughout my explanation, Nami nodded along and hummed in agreement. "Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, that's exactly right, Cross. I've already deducted that charge from your cut. All of what you just said is fair, but, you see…"

Soundbite and I flinched in terror as the clouds above us rumbled ominously.

"You're overlooking one little detail," Nami chirped pleasantly as she loomed over us and held a paper up for me to see. "You still have to pay for the rest of the damages."

"The rest of the whaaaaaaaaaah shite," I started to parrot before finishing in a squeak as I scanned over the paper, which turned out to be a table of said financial damages.

"Ohhh, you know," Nami slowly tilted her head to the side, her paralyzed smile remaining ever-present. "The damages that resulted from your little romp with your little friends? Now, of course, Iceburg is covering all the property damage, since he's dealing with that anyway from CP9 and Aqua Laguna." Her smile stretched to truly Cheshire-ish proportions. "But that still leaves the merchandise."

"Hohoho, this is hilarious!" Merry chuckled eagerly. "Just how bad is it?"

"Lemme take a looksee!" Su hastily scrambled up my back and peered over my shoulder. "And the final count is—!" The cloud fox stared at the paper for a moment before affixing me with a flat look. "You're fucked."

"Su!" Conis gasped as she snatched up her companion. "I'm sure that's not even remotely true! Now, let me just take a look and…" Conis lapsed into silence as her jaw steadily dropped. "…Holy shit, Cross."

A strangled wheeze dragged its way out of my throat. That… was not a small number I was looking at. Rather, it was a big number. A very, very, very big number.

"THAT MUCH FOR CABBAGES?! No wonder his CART WAS FULL!" Soundbite spat indignantly.

"Maybe so," Nami admitted with a shrug. "But we still need to pay. And when I say 'we'…" The storm rumbled and crackled as she leaned in close.

I shivered in terror before hastily snapping a finger up with a panicked grin. "May I have a moment? I'd like to consult my legal counsel."

"Sure!" Nami said pleasantly. "Even death row allows final requests."

I shuddered at that before spinning on my heel and crouching down, huddling up with Lassoo and Soundbite. "What the hell do we do!?!" I hissed desperately, hiding my mouth behind my hand.

"What the hell is this 'we' shit, KEMOSABE!?!" Soundbite hissed indignantly.

"Yeah!" Lassoo snarled from behind his paw. "You're the one whose head they wanted!"

"And you're the one who was blasting left right and center, so you're in it as deep as me!" I shot right back, directing a glare at the snail. "And you know as well as I do that whatever hell I go to, I'm dragging you there with me, so maybe you should get off your ass and think of a way to save our skins!"

"Oh, yeah!?!" Lassoo bit out. "Well, as your 'legal counsel', I formally advise you that we are
"Screwed!"

"YEAH!" Soundbite spat. "WE CAN'T PAY THAT FORTUNE WITHOUT tapping the crew fund, and that means going through Nami!"

"Well..." I scrambled for options. "Maybe we can just make a break for it and wait for this to all blow over?"

As one, we all glanced back at Nami... and promptly snapped our gazes forward with renewed cold sweat at sight of the lightning snapping around her.

"Hell no," I summarized.

"Not a chance," Lassoo whined.

"We are going to die," Soundbite whimpered. "We are GOING to DIE!"

"Maybe so..." I nodded slowly, clenching my fists "But at least we can take our last option like men. You guys with me?"

"As if I had a choice."

"EVER AND ALWAYS!"

"Then let's do it."

With that, I stood up, we all turned to face Nami with determined expressions...

And then we all fell flat on the ground.

"PLEASE SPARE OUR WORTHLESS SOULS, OH MIGHTY MISTRESS OF WEATHER!" we sobbed as one.

Nami's expression didn't change at all as she observed our groveling. Then she opened her mouth—

"Puru puru puru puru!"

And snapped it shut, also snapping her Eisen Tempo back to her usual cloudy aura as Soundbite began ringing and the three of us slumped in relief. "Damn."

"I never thought I'd say this straight up, but God bless the Navy!" I proclaimed as I got to my feet.

"Well, now that that's over and done with—GRK!" I was cut off by a vice grip clamping down on my shoulder.

"We will continue to discuss this later," Nami promised me.

I whimpered in agreement, and Nami thankfully released me. I took a moment to get my heart rate back below jackhammer levels, and glanced around the room. "Conis, Su, if you wouldn't mind taking a walk for a bit?"

"Oooh, more secret political maneuvering, eh?" Su said. "Count me—ACK!"

"Sorry about her," Conis apologized as she held her struggling companion up by her tail. "I'll make sure to keep a close eye on where she is."

"Thanks," I nodded gratefully before turning to the duck in the room. "Carue, since Vivi's not here
"Count me out," Carue squawked with an airy wave. "Gawding eveyone's my job, Ah'll weave the powiticaw schtuff tah you guys."

"Fair 'nuff. Conis, would you mind—?"

"Heave-ho!" the angel grunted as she lifted the duck to his feet and supported him.

"Alright, and Carue, do you think you could carry—?" THACK! "MMPH!?" A sudden pillow hitting my face cut off my question.

"I already know everything, dingus," Merry said, crossing her arms with a petulant pout. "Let me outline this for you: I want in, and if you want me out you'd better be willing to bring one hell of a fight."

I opened my mouth to tell her exactly why that was not happening, and then I clicked it shut as I realized I didn't really have an answer to that, did I? "Alright, fine, you can stay if you want."

"Yes!" she crowed, pumping her fist.

"But no… not too much screwing around."

"Aww…" she groaned, plopping back onto her bed.

"Well!" Lasso barked up hastily. "If she's free to stay, then I'm free to go. Politics bore me. Among, ah…" He glanced at Nami and shivered. "Other reasons… seeyawouldn'twannabeya!" He hastily belted out the last part before scampering out the door.

"TRAITOR!" Soundbite howled after him.

"TRAITOR WHO'S GONNA LIVE!"

I grimaced as the dachshund escaped before picking up the receiver; with any luck, this would have enough good news that the blow Nami struck would be softened. Though as my greeting showed, my hopes weren't high.

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"George's Morgue, you stab 'em, we slab 'em!"

"That is awful," Tashigi deadpanned, regarding the snail before her and her superior with a flat look.

"What, you haven't noticed yet?" Cross scoffed indignantly. "I'm what the world would consider an awful person! It's in my nature!"

"Awful person or not, don't you think you could try and stay serious for half a second, Cross?" Smoker sighed wearily.

"…I'll do you the courtesy of presuming that you took a blow to the head in the past twenty-four hours and ignore that question."

"Honestly, Smoker, you really should know better by now," Nami lamented with a slight grin.

"Heheheh, yeah! No wonder we always manage to get away from you guys, you're actually pretty dumb!"
A _new_ voice caused the Marines to pause in shock.

"Was that—?" Tashigi started to ask.

"_Yep, Going Merry in the flesh!_" the girl-ship crowed. "_And before you guys even think of booting me out of this, remember that I've listened in on every one of you bozo's meetings up until now, so I'm about as deep in this as you, so there!_"

The two Marines exchanged glances before _sloooowly_ examining the walls around them. "So, the walls really do have ears," Tashigi stated in a distinctly unnerved voice. "Good to know."

Smoker pinched the bridge of his nose as he heaved out a fume-laden sigh. "As if the snail and the princess weren't bad enough…" he grit out.

Cross snickered for a bit before swiftly sobering up. "Amusing as chipping away at a person's sanity always is, we can joke later, so for now, let's touch base and get to work. First things first: got any news from behind the white-and-blue lines?"

"Oh, only enough to fill a newspaper cover to cover," Tashigi dryly replied. "While your crew was burning down Enies Lobby, Goat, Rooster and almost a dozen other big-named rookies in the Grand Line were causing trouble of their own. The quick version is that the Navy has lost a quarter of its liquid assets, at least three bases to mutiny or civilian rebellion, and a dedicated training grounds for Marines ranked Rear Admiral and higher has suffered significant damage. And that's just from the _rookie_ pirates."

"Meanwhile, where your comrade's little…" Smoke started drifting up from the Commodore's body as he spied Tashigi's knuckles turning white as she gripped her sleeves. "_History lesson_ was concerned, 90% of the Marines' giants mutinied when they heard about Ohara. Admiral Aokiji subdued them with… relative ease, but the remaining loyalists in Marineford are recovering from either being attacked or trying to stop the fight."

He gave a snort, tapping the ashes off his cigar. "Once all was said and done, a headcount showed that at least five of the mutineers went AWOL in the initial battle. As for the rest of them, they stood down and reaffirmed their loyalty to the Marines when Akainu convinced—"

"_Read, threatened,_" Tashigi clarified.

"—them, though they're still under observation."

"_Ah… wait, I'm sorry, did you just say 'Akainu threatened them'?_" Cross blinked in confusion. "_Akainu doesn't threaten, he immolates._"

"Not in this case, he doesn't," Smoker scoffed. "Sengoku was… _insistent_ on the extent of his actions, and is still insisting right now. Still, even with the scrutiny on them, we're going to be looking into all of those giants for potential additions to our number. While half of them were most likely just caught up in the rush of it all and are still sincere about their loyalties to the Marines, I don't doubt that the other half were just gritting their teeth so that they wouldn't give the mutt an excuse."

"…_HOLY SHIT_," Soundbite summarized succinctly.

"_No kidding_," Cross agreed.

"_HA! And I thought we caused enough chaos in person!_" Merry chortled.

"_Ah… wait, hang on a second…_" the Straw Hats' navigator spoke up in confusion. "_You said that_
only the Giants mutinied at that? Why only them and not other soldiers? Well, what made them mutiny en masse, I mean."

"Ah… gimme a second here…” Tashigi muttered under her breath as she withdrew a notebook from her jacket and started flipping through it, finishing up by tapping one of the more recently filled pages. "Ah, here it is: according to intel we managed to suss out, former Vice Admiral Jaguar D. Saul was exceptionally popular among the Marine giants, and in spite of his death being two decades ago, his friendship was still fresh in their mind. As such, they took offense to his manner of death, as well as to the Navy hunting Nico Robin, who they apparently consider to be his ward."

She then flipped to the next page and cocked an eyebrow in surprise. "Furthermore, there were also apparently a few veterans of the Giant Warrior Pirates among those enlisted, due to the Navy being more generous when it comes to recruiting extra-human soldiers, and they were already upset when they heard about Oimo and Kashi. And with both of those in mind, it seems that the breaking point was when Vice Admiral John Giant said that Saul deserved his fate. That's when the riot started, and matters just seemed to escalate from there."

"Typical for a D.,” Smoker muttered under his breath. "Raising seven different kinds of hell even from beyond the—!" The smoke-man snapped his jaws shut, growling, when Merry started howling with laughter.

"Hrm…” Nami mused thoughtfully. "If that's the case… a suggestion for whoever you have watching the giants you think might be good for recruitment: tell them to drop Saul's name and watch for a reaction. If they're not totally onboard with the Marines, they'll show it."

"You're sure?” Tashigi asked in confirmation.

The navigator's expression darkened. "I've had more than eight years' worth of practice hiding the fact that I hate a person while being within shooting distance of them at every hour of the day. I know."

A harsh silence fell as Smoker and Tashigi both grimaced at that particular reminder. "I'll pass on the recommendation," the commodore said at last.

"ALRIGHT, CHANGING THE SUBJECT NOW. QUESTION FOR THE TURNCOATS: the hell's got you down in the dumps, FOUR-EYES? We just kicked ten kinds of ASS AND GAVE THE WORLD GOVERNMENT THE big mama of black eyes! SHOULDN'T YOU BE cheering from the rooftops?"

Tashigi bit into her lip as she slowly bowed her head, her expression shadowed by both the lights of the room and her bangs. Going by how the snail's expression sobered up and became somewhat hesitant, it was clear that the message had gotten across. Smoker made to say something…

"It's hard for me to get enthusiastic about anything…”

But was interrupted by Tashigi's dull voice.

"When I can still hear Nico Robin, a woman I thought, knew was a monster, outlining each and every last detail of the horrors that the World Government inflicted on Ohara. It's hard to really feel much of anything knowing that I supported an organization responsible for something like that…”

Silence fell again, at least until Cross put up a (shaky) grin over the connection.

"H- Hey, come on, Lieutenant, you know that's not true," the pirate insisted. "You're not part of that
"I'm not a part of that organization anymore, Cross," Tashigi clarified through grit teeth, tears brimming in her eyes. "I still actually joined them, I still served at their behest… because I had faith in them. I had faith in the Navy, in the World Government. And even after you helped show me what you did, I still had faith in them, in that there was some measure of good left in the Marines, in spite of the corruption obviously infesting it! But now…"

She reached beneath her glasses and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Now I know the corruption runs to the very top, to the Fleet Admiral himself. I..." She let out a pained groan as she shook her head. "I honestly didn't see it coming. I just..."

"None of us did, Lieutenant," Smoker said, softer than any present had heard from him. "We all thought that Sengoku of all people would be the unyielding pillar of Justice we all see him as, that he wouldn't resort to these methods." The Commodore then directed an acrid glare at the snail. "So unless you’re going to tell me that you lied about Sengoku's name being on that many entries in the black book, in which case there will be consequences—!

"Commodore Smoker."

A sharp, ironclad interjection from Cross interrupted the Marine's accusation.

"In the history of the SBS, the only time I have ever lied was when I said that the golden bell on Sky Island was lost, and that was to prevent a second genocide over its possession," Cross replied venomously, before slumping and heaving a dejected sigh, his expression downcast. "No... no, as much as I hate to admit it, Sengoku's signature was indeed on at least a third of those pages, with Kong's, the Elder Stars', and any of the Admirals' on the rest. Granted, the pages Sengoku approved were relatively more acceptable than the examples I listed, but..." The snail shook its head in defeat. "Well, by their very nature, nothing CP9 did was ever pretty."

Tashigi knocked the back of her skull against the wall, groaning as she ground her fist into her forehead. "Damn it..." she bit out. "I feel like such a—!

"But!" Cross hastily interjected, his demeanor swiftly reversing itself. "That being said, I still have faith that Sengoku isn't corrupt."

The Marines stared at Cross's proxy in confusion.

"If you'll recall my words at the time, anybody in Sengoku's position would have no other option but to make some tough, ultimately morally compromising choices. We all knew it, the only reason we're actually taking issue with them is because I aired them all," Cross explained. "Put it this way, all I did was reveal he's human. Chances are that he isn't beyond hope. If all else fails, I know one secret that could change his mind, but I'm not going to be able to use it anytime remotely soon."

Smoker narrowed his eyes accusingly. "Cross, any other time, I'd put up with your cryptic BS. But after the hell of a day we've had, which you've caused, I'm not willing to take your word for it without details. Spill. Now."
Silence reigned for a moment, until Cross sighed. "Alright, it's... innocuous enough... just don't go spreading it around, alright? Mention one name in all of this to the wrong person and you are beyond screwed."

"We won't," Smoker snorted.

"Well, alright, then, where to start... remember awhile back, when I said that Vergo had beaten a mole within the Donquixote Pirates within an inch of his life?" He didn't wait for an answer. "That mole was Donquixote Rocinante, Doflamingo's biological younger brother... and he was pretty much Sengoku's adopted son."

The silence in the room was deafening as the Marines gaped at the snail.

"...you're serious," Tashigi flatly stated.

"As a bullet," Cross confirmed. "It's a long and... seriously messed up story, but the end message is that Rocinante died at his brother's hand, protecting a boy he himself had adopted, which Sengoku doesn't know, and that nobody besides us here and Sengoku himself know of his relation to Rocinante. If nothing else, me even mentioning his name should give him one hell of a pause."

"...And what's Sengoku's unknown grandson doing now?" Smoker inquired.

"Eh... that depends. You mentioned that a bunch of rookies recently went nuts, right? Do you know where the Heart Pirates were in it all?"

Tashigi and Smoker exchanged shocked looks before the former thumbed through her notebook. "Uh... they... teamed up with the Bonney Pirates and invaded base G-76. It seems that besides looting the place from top to bottom, they paralyzed the Marines positioned there and used them for a... game of... Jenga..." she said, green creeping onto her face.

"...Well, then, I guess Law just spent the day playing Jenga."

Tashigi's strangled squawk was mirrored by Nami's.

"Oh, we are not even getting close to that psycho."

"Trust me, this is tame by his standards," Cross reassured. "And just to be clear here... we're getting allied with him."

"Of course we are!" Merry cheered eagerly. "In this kind of situation, the only options are alliance or destruction!"

"Or getting chopped into a thousand pieces while staying perfectly alive and unharmed," came a cool female voice that caused Tashigi's old wounds to throb.

"Mimicking Robin's voice does not give you carte blanche to be creepy!" Nami snapped irritably.

"EH? THE HELL ARE YOU talking about, I DIDN'T SAY—!"

"MOVING ON!" Cross barked hastily with a somewhat panicked expression. "What's the next question here... AH! Right, what are you guys' current marching orders?"

Smoker glanced at Tashigi in puzzlement, and the only response she could muster was a confused shrug, so for the sake of the last frayed threads of his sanity he decided to ignore whatever the hell that was. "My ship is currently en route to the G-54 base. Most of the surrounding bases have either
mutinied or been attacked, so they're sending me to handle anything that comes up while they send a higher-ranking officer from HQ as a permanent replacement. It'll be a short assignment."

"As for everyone else," Tashigi continued. "T-Bone's been summoned back to Marineford for an after-action report, though the scars he's gotten should speak louder than anything he has to say, which is a good thing. Jonathan, as you can expect, is holding down his fort and mainly keeping the gates open as a makeshift rest stop for any Marines near them. And finally, Hina is currently heading for the Twin Capes to start cutting down on the number of psychos that our Blue bases are reporting headed for Reverse Mountain."

"Perfect!" Cross said happily. "If Hina's heading that way anyway with her full fleet, she can handle what I was going to ask; do me a favor and pass along a request to her that she either swing by Little Garden herself or that she send… eh, two battleships? One if her ships are big enough."

Tashigi frowned in confusion. "Officially, Little Garden is a prehistoric wildlife preserve and unofficially it's a death sentence to all who land there without an Eternal Pose. Why would she need to go there?"

Cross donned his usual shit-eating grin with immense eagerness. "Ooooh, no reason, it's just that for the past century, Little Garden has also been the arena for Blue Ogre Dorry and Red Ogre Broggy's honor duel, and they need a lift to Water 7 so that they can rendezvous with their crew."

Tashigi's expression promptly fell flat. "Of course. Because why not," she droned, and started reaching for the snail. "Look, Cross, I've had a hell of a week and I just want to get some sleep, so if there isn't anything else—!

"Wait!"

Tashigi froze mid-motion when Merry suddenly spoke up again.

"Lieutenant Tashigi..." the young 'girl' started with uncharacteristic hesitation. "I... look, I know a lot about my crew's past stunts and whatnot, but admittedly there are quite a few gaps in my knowledge, centered around when my crew was on shore. But from what I've pieced together... you saved Cross's life in Rainbase, right? When you took down Mr. 3?"

"Ah..." Tashigi hedged slightly. "Yes, against my better judgment. Why?"

"Well, in that case..." Merry adopted an angelic smile as she beamed at the Marine. "I just wanted to thank you for saving my life, too. After all, if you hadn't been there, then he would have died, and then I would have died. But because you saved him, he was able to save me. Which means... you saved me too. Which means... you saved me. Thank you for giving me the chance to live. For letting me fulfill my dreams. I... I owe you everything, Tashigi, just as much as I owe Cross, and I'll always be grateful for this chance you've given me. Just... thank you."

Tashigi's jaw worked itself silently, but she eventually clenched her mouth shut. "...Permission to excuse myself for a moment, sir?" she whispered softly.

Smoker didn't even hesitate to jerk his thumb at the door. "Go on and get the hell out of here, Marine."
The swordsman was out of the room before he was even finished. The smoke-man waited a few seconds after the door swung shut before turning back to the snail. "That was a load of bull and you know it."

Merry’s smile took on an apologetic tinge. "Yeah, I know, but can you honestly tell me that even mattered a little bit, and that she didn't need to hear that?"

Smoker was silent for a second, and in that silence he listened to the light, hiccupping sobbing wafting through the crack in the door.

The corners of his mouth turned upwards. "…no. No, I can't," he admitted quietly.

After a minute or so, the noise died down and Tashigi re-entered the room, furtively swiping at eyes that were pointedly not red or puffy.

"T-Thank you very much for informing me of that, Merry," she said, a small smile on her face.

"Thank you," the girl-ship chirped virtuously.

"Heh. Glad to have you back, Lieutenant," Cross nodded happily. "Anyway, while I have you, I did have one more question before we wrap this up: do you two have any idea why Akainu and Kizaru weren't at Enies Lobby? I expected Sengoku to throw everything at us, and while Kizaru could be expected to duck out from sheer laziness, I wouldn't expect Akainu to miss us burning Enies down for the world."

The two Marines exchanged glances of perfect understanding, but before Tashigi could say a word, Smoker snapped a finger up and silenced her. "You seriously lucked out with Kizaru," he grunted. "A training accident sent him flying into the Red Line when he tried to use his abilities to reach you. He'll be recovering from it for a few days."

The lieutenant stared at him in confusion before the commodore drew the word 'ego' in the air with his smoke, prompting her to pale and nod vigorously.

"What? How the heck did that work? I mean, I know the general mechanics of the Glint-Glint Fruit as a Logia, but how did he—"

"Mirrors," Tashigi deadpanned.

"…How did I not think of that sooner? Nami, if we end up meeting Kizaru, be ready to throw up a mirage; play it right, and he could end up on the other side of the world."

"I will absolutely remember that," Nami promised fervently.

"Damn ri—eh? Hey, you two alright?"

"F-Fine, Cross!" Tashigi wheezed as she recovered from a rather ragged coughing fit. "A-Anyway, I'll let Rooster fill you in on the details himself, but suffice to say that where his actions were concerned, they were more than enough to warrant Akainu going after him personally. He avoided him by sailing into the Calm Belt, but then Boa Hancock of the Seven Warlords was sent after him. Capricorn confirmed that he's still alive and free, but…" She shrugged helplessly. "We're not sure of the finer details."

Cross slowly blinked in shock. "…Huh. That's… unexpected, to say the least. No clue how the hell he'd outrun her in the Calm Belt… I will definitely have to ask him about that. Easy money says that it'll be one hell of a story."
"I'm inclined to agree in this case, Cross," Smoker grunted in agreement. "But we'll be learning it for ourselves soon enough. This call was just a status report so that we could touch base with you before we get into our assignments. Like I said, it should be short, no longer than a couple of days, but we'll be out of touch in that time."

"But once that's done, we'll have the opportunity to get in contact with you in earnest," Tashigi promised, "Get ready Cross, because this will almost certainly be the most important meeting of MI6 to date."

"Sounds good to me," Cross nodded solemnly. "I'll arrange matters with our own allies and when the time co—!

Wait a second, did you just say MI-6!?"

Tashigi blinked as she realized the cause for Cross's confusion, and she made to answer before an impish smirk slowly spread across her face.

"You know what, Cross?" she simpered sweetly. "I think that this time, I'll leave you with the unanswered questions. Buh-bye!"

"What are you—!? NonononoWAI—KA-LICK!"

Tashigi hung the snail up before the pirate could get another word in and started howling with laughter a moment later.

"Ohohohoooooh, that was fun!" she cackled as she shot her fist in the air. "Woo, I am feeling utterly pumped!" She spun on her heel and snapped a salute at Smoker. "Permission to go on deck and practice my flying slashes on the cloud, sir?"

Smoker cocked his eyebrow at her before waving his hand dismissively. "Get out of here, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, sir!" And with that the swordswoman shot out of the room with a whoop of glee.

After a moment, Smoker left the room as well, heading for his quarters. 'I guess the rumors really are true,' he reflected silently, the corners of his lips turning upwards ever so slightly yet again. 'There's just no end to the Straw Hats' capabilities.'

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I blinked slowly as I processed what the hell had just happened before leaning back on the bed I was sitting on with a weary sigh. "Damn. Beaten at my own game. And by her, of all people! Could this —aaand I'm stopping right there," I declared in a suddenly cheerful tone as I shot to my feet. "Because I have no desire to suffer! Well, if you'll excuse me—!"

I made to stride out of the house, and was promptly halted by a hand clamping down on my shoulder and the barometric pressure in the room nose-diving so fast that my breath caught in my throat.

"Did you honestly think I'd forget about this much money?" Nami asked in an honestly insulted tone.

"WERE YOU SERIOUSLY LEAVING ME TO HER MERCY!?" Soundbite howled indignantly.

"...every sapient for himself?" I whimpered pitifully through the tears cascading down my face. "And honestly, I was hopeful that what with how rich we are, and the fact that I'm responsible for it, the two events would even one another out?"
There was a moment of tense silence as Nami thought it over before the storm looming over us dissipated and she patted my shoulder with a chuckle. "Alright, Cross, alright, I'll foot the bill out of our coffers. Given how much we have, even with what we'll be paying Franky once Sodom and Gomorrah are ready to set out, it's really not that much in the long run."

I heaved a sigh of relief and I was about to thank her when she patted my shoulder again and walked past me.

"I'll just do one thing once all's said and done," she stated, popping a single finger to go along with the announcement.

For some reason, I couldn't help but feel a stab of existential dread. "And… that would be?"

Nami turned on her heel, and proceeded to smile the most innocent and yet utterly evil smile I'd ever seen in my entire life.

"I'll put it all on your tab."

The last thing I heard as everything went black was Merry howling with laughter.

-o-

I woke up a short while later to a recently returned Chopper's smelling salts, and after hasty assurances that I wouldn't be having a (entirely warranted, in my opinion) panic attack, he set about checking on our still-healing crewmates while Merry observed the also-returned Sanji's experiments with eager glee. Credit where it was due, in spite of the utterly inedible ingredients he'd been forced to procure, the presentation and even the smell almost made me want to try it.

…Yeah, Luffy'd be stealing it at least once, no doubt about it. I'd have to keep my Vision Dial handy, because there was no way in hell I was missing the one chance I might get to immortalize either Luffy blowing chunks or Chopper pumping his stomach.

Anyway, once I was back on my feet—and after I dealt with the existential crisis of not having any money ever again in the foreseeable future—I got to work on the next item on my inordinately packed agenda: that is to say, contacting our other allies.

I had no delusions; the next time I spoke to MI6, I'd be telling them everything there was to tell about me, so it would be best to bring everyone in on it so that I wouldn't have to tell it again. It should have been a straightforward endeavor, really: get in, tell them to be on the lookout for a conference call with all of our allies in the next few days, move on with my life. Simple, no?

But of course, I was a Straw Hat, so simple things were rarely even close to easy for me. As such, both occurrences found me surprised with the developments that ensued. The first of these surprises came about when I came in contact with Foxy first…

-o-

"Oh? So, we're finally going to find out exactly how you know so much? Well, I'm certainly looking forward to that," Foxy grinned eagerly. "But if I may, I'd like to make a recommendation for another addition to the little Zodiac of the Damned we've been setting up."

"Zodiac of the—? Huh... that's actually a pretty good name, I think I'll steal it. Anyway, you are our recruiter, so I'll consider whoever you have in mind. Ah, who would that be, exactly?"

"Oh, I think you might know him." Foxy smirked as he waved the person at his side forward. "Care
"Apapapa! You know I never don't! Heyo, Cross, bet you weren't expecting on hearing from me so soon, eh?"

"The hell—!? A-Apoo? You—but—he—how—?"

"Oh, how I love being able to make him speechless," Foxy chuckled as he cradled his chin in a semi-cool stance.

"I think that's a universally shared opinion, it is pretty amusing," Apoo snickered as he mirrored the other captain's pose.

"Mergrgr… how much does he know, exactly?" Cross managed at last.

Foxy's charisma shattered fantastically as a heavy sweatdrop dripped from his brow. "He… figured out that I was Luffy's subordinate pretty early on, the same time I figured out that you and he were friends rather than rivals," he awkwardly admitted. "I haven't told him much beyond the fact that you and I share a sizeable number of contacts, but he was willing to keep my secret, and I figured that since you two are on good terms anyway, why not?"

The snail fell silent, and slowly looked at the soon-to-be Supernova. "Apoo, I'm willing to trust you with this, but as your friend, I have to warn you: this is going to be both a massive undertaking and a perilous one. We're talking about more than just sharing contacts; if you get in on this, then you're in for the long haul. If that's fine with you—"

"Causing more trouble on the magnitude of what you and your crewmates have been pulling off over the course of your entire career?" Apoo snickered and shook his head. "Sign me up for this haul, it sounds like fun."

"…Well, Vivi certainly hit the nail on the head about your tribe, didn't she? Alright, then, you had your warning. We'll decide on your code name at the main meeting."

"I can only imagine that half of them will be thrilled to count you among our number," Foxy chuckled as he wrung his hands eagerly.

That brought the Long-Arm up short, prompting him to blink in confusion. "Wait, how many others are part of this?" he asked curiously.

"Weeeeell, for starters," Cross grinned eagerly. "I myself go by Ophiuchus. Foxy's code name is Goat. We also have one by the name of Rooster, who I'll be calling after this, and I've recently recruited one other crew who we'll be introing to this endeavor and giving their codename at the same time as you. Besides that, we've got six officers in the Navy going by the Western Zodiac: Cancer, Pisces, Capricorn, Scorpio, and Sagittarius. I know there's one more, but because they've decided to screw with me, I know neither that officer's identity nor the codename they've elected to go by."

Cross's mouth twisted into a smirk. "Though going by my crew's luck, I have my suspicions for the former. And of course, aside from Pisces and possibly the newest officer, all of them have their own respective subordinates and crews that are also part of this."

"…Impressive," Apoo breathed as his eyes widened in shock. "Well. Definitely count me in now."

"Alright. Fair warning, though: once you've found out my secret, there's going to be no chance of turning back, and trust me, this particular rabbit hole goes way deeper than our previous
arrangement. Foxy, I'll leave the general explaining to you, I need to let Rooster know about this."

"Very well. Goat out." And with that Foxy pressed his finger into the snail's speaker cradle.

Apoo cocked his eyebrow at the trickster Captain. "So... how deep does this rabbit hole go, exactly?"

"Feh feh feh feh." Foxy chuckled grimly, shaking his head as he strolled over to the door of the cabin and cracked it open. "Hamburg! A full cask of our finest rum, on the double!" He then turned a weary smile on his suddenly nervous compatriot. "We're gonna need to get hammered for this."

-o-

After that particular surprise, I then moved on to Bartolomeo, hoping for a relatively saner conversation.

But of course...

-o-

"Puru puru puru puru—KA-LICK!"

"Rooster."

"Ophiuchus, and allow me leap straight to the point!" Cross barked. "If Pisces is to be even remotely believed, then I'm having a hard time choosing where the hell to start. So you tell me, who would you prefer to explain first, huh? The freaking Admiral or the freaking Warlord!?"

"Hehahahaha!" Bartolomeo cackled. "Eh, let's start with the Mad Dog! Not much of a story there, ta be honest! All I did was punch out a Celestial Dra—"

BAM! CRASH!

"I'll keep saying it until you get it right, you shark-toothed bastard!" Gin snarled at his captain as he worked to yank his head out of the wall his first mate had punched it into. "I knocked him out! Why can't you just be satisfied with personally taunting the Five Elder Stars?!"

Bartolomeo yanked his head out of the woodwork and rounded on his subordinate with a scowl of his own. "Go choke on a cannonball, deadeye!" he bit out, flashing a sizeable middle finger with his barriers before turning back to the snail. "But anyway, yeah, not that big a deal. I just wanted to help you guys out, draw some heat off a' you, ya know? I'm sure you woulda done the same for me!"

Cross gaped silently at him for a second before chuckling softly, his mouth set in a wry grin. "Yeaaah, you're not wrong there, Barty. Credit where it's due, though, I knew you had big brass ones before, but this..." The pirate nodded gratefully. "Thanks, Bartolomeo. That took guts. You're a hell of a pirate and a damn good friend."

There was a moment of silence, during which the Transponder Snail grimaced uncomfortably.

"He's paralyzed from sheer joy, isn't he?"

Mr. 5, Gin and Miss Goldenweek shook their heads in silent denial.

"Huh... dancing a jig a little ways away?"

More head-shaking.
"…" The snail's expression fell as flat as a board. "He's bowing and worshipping before a shrine of what few bounty posters we have?"

"I'd love to call you conceited, Cross…” Mr. 5 drawled, before kneading the bridge of his nose with a groan. "But all of those are typical things he does. In this case, however…” The ex-bounty hunter cocked an eyebrow as he watched Apis idly pop bubbles coming from their captain's mouth. "He's fainted from sheer euphoria and foaming."

The snail sighed. "Oof course he is. Well, that won't do, will it? Time for a wake-up call."

The assembled crewmates stiffened fearfully before scrambling for the snail—!

BWAAAAAAAAAH!

—and reeling back in agony when it belted out an ear-rendingly loud honk before they could stop it.

"GYAGH!" Bartolomeo yelped, clutching his ears as he shot up.

"I love this thing," Cross snickered.

"WE KNOW!" the top brass of the Barto Club and Soundbite roared.

"Oh, good, Barty's awake. Get your head in the game, man, we're not done yet. And for the record?" Cross grimaced uncomfortably. "The hero-worship is starting to get a little bit creepy, so if you could curb your enthusiasm even a bit…?"

"That's about as likely as Crocodile allying with your captain, you damn all-luck magnet," Miss Valentine groused from the corner of the room she was slumped in. "Just let it go, it could be worse."

"Right, then, who vetoed the Luffy figurehead?"

That got shocked looks from everyone.

"How the hell did you know that?" Gin demanded.

"Pfheheheh," Cross chuckled grimly. "Trust me, you guys are lucky. Any other day I'd bullshit you all, but in all honesty, Barty'll be learning the truth soon enough at a not-so-little get-together I've got planned in a few days' time. But that's in the future. For now, we still have the matter of Boa 'World's Most Beautiful and Second-Deadliest Woman' Hancock. I don't know how the hell you guys are navigating the Calm Belt, but considering how she can do it with ease, how did you manage to avoid her?"

"Who said they avoided us?"

The snail's eyestalks snapped to attention as the sumo-like Kuja Pirate who'd remained silent until then chose to speak up.

"…Going by the voice, the sheer authority and the relative age, I'm guessing…” the snail's eyestalks swiveled around in order to cock inquisitively. "Boa Marigold, youngest of the three Gorgon Sisters?"

"As impressive as ever, Jeremiah Cross," Marigold replied evenly. "In case you were curious about my presence here, suffice to say that your words have had a significant impact on my oldest sister; we've become quite the fans of your SBS, and when we learned that Bartolomeo was not only a mutual fan but also allied with you, Hancock elected to falsify a report of failure while I remained
here to await your inevitable contact. We were very interested in speaking with you."

Cross blinked in surprise before beaming triumphantly. "Hancock actually likes my show? That's great! I suspected she'd either be keeping an ear open for my work or banning it wholesale because of my gender. Lemme guess, Nyon didn't stop blaring it in the palace until she finally gave up?"

Marigold smirked momentarily before frowning. "As… amusing as that would have been, no. Suffice to say that one of your… earlier broadcasts caught our attention, and we've been listening intently ever since."

The expression on the snail snapped from smug to solemn so suddenly that the serpent-sumo stiffened. Cross had proven himself to be well-informed, but was it possible that he could know—?

"This might not be my place," Cross said, snapping her out of her thoughts. "And even wholly insensitive and maybe even more than a bit frightening, but I feel like I must offer what condolences I can. What you went through…" The pirate shook his head morosely. "The fact that any of you are functioning at all is a miracle. I can't even begin to apologize on behalf of… hell, pretty much the entire human race for the sins you were unjustly forced to suffer."

"…I am now acutely aware of two facts about you, Jeremiah Cross," Marigold stated in a thoroughly shaken voice. "There is no chance that you are allied with the World Government…"

SMASH!

The Barto Club Pirates staggered back in shock when Boa Marigold suddenly snapped into her hybrid form and encircled the terrified Transponder Snail, baring her fangs mere inches from its face.

"And there is nothing that I can be utterly certain that you do not know," she snarled. "Regardless of how IMPOSSIBLE IT SHOULD BE FOR YOU TO KNOW IT!"

In spite of its shivering, the snail's eyestalks remained steady and firm, before slowly bowing sadly.

"…For whatever it's worth, I haven't told anyone else. Not even Soundbite knows the details."

"Speaking of Soundbite!" The snail's eyes then snapped up with an indignant glare. "Drop the fangs, would ya!? THIS SHIT IS MURDER ON MY MOUTH!"

Silence fell for the longest seconds of the Barto Club's lives as they looked between the shivering snail and the haunted expression of one of the most fearsome pirates on the seas. Then, at last, the King Cobra hybrid shrank down to her normal (though admittedly still very tall) size.

"My apologies," she said quietly.

"Same to you," Cross shook his head regretfully. "I shouldn't have brought up your past like that, it was an impulsive move and…" He shook his head again. "Anyway, in what is simultaneously a desperate bid to change the subject and a return to business, may I offer you an invitation to the get-together I mentioned earlier, Boa Marigold? I assure you, you'll find our discussions to be quite… pertinent."

Marigold froze, taking a moment to process the implications, before shaking her head with a defeated sigh. "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid we can't truly support your crew—"

"—for fear of the World Government revoking Hancock's title and making Amazon Lily fair game, right," Cross finished with a grimace. "Yeah, that would be a concern, wouldn't it?"

"Does that even matter?" Bartolomeo spoke up with honest confusion. "I mean, anonymity is what
the whole code name system is for, right?"

"That's its intention, yes, but it's not infallible," Miss Goldenweek shrugged dismissively. "While everyone involved in this… undertaking, for lack of a better word, are all at risk should their identities be compromised, Hancock's status means that the threat to her is aggravated. She's already taking a monumental risk by letting us go."

"Amazon Lily..." Miss Valentine mused as she eyed Marigold. "Going by the name and the composition of your crew, that's a literal name, right? Only women, nobody else?" She shrugged with a sigh when Marigold nodded in confirmation. "Well, there you have it. Without the immunity the Pirate Empress's position offers, chances are that the World Nobles would get the Marines to rip the entire island apart so that they could split the..." She shivered in disgust. "Spoils between themselves. And last time I checked, we don't have the manpower or resources to prevent that."

"Not yet we don't, anyway..." Cross practically snarled.

Another pause as that sunk in. Then Marigold spoke once more.

"I will consent to at least attending the meeting, so that my sisters and I can have a bead on the situation. But I make no promises beyond that," she said firmly.

"I don't ask for any beyond one," Cross assured her. "Keep everything you hear at the meeting a secret. You can tell your sisters and Elder Nyon if they want to know, obviously, but nobody else. If this gets out, heads won't roll because there won't be any heads left."

The warrior nodded firmly. "I expected nothing less."

"Right then. Well, I think that covers everything I needed to..." Cross trailed off as a thought apparently occurred to him, before a smile slowly slid across his face. "Actually, one more recommendation, Marigold, which I'd pass it on to Hancock when you have the time: try out the floating restaurant called Takoyaki 8. Consider it as much a recommendation from me... as it is from her fellow Warlord, the Knight of the Sea Jinbe."

Marigold's eyes widened, and a tentative smile spread across her face as well. "I see. I'll take your recommendation under consideration, Jeremiah Cross. Good luck to you and yours."

"Same to you, Boa Marigold. See ya 'round, Barty! KA-LICK!"

Once the snail fell back asleep, the good cheer hung around for a second before the atmosphere plummeted into uncomfortable silence.

"Sooo..." Bartolomeo coughed as he side-eyed Marigold. "What the heck do we do until that big call he was talkin' about happens?"

There was another silence, until Apis held up a deck of cards.

"Anybody up for a game of strip poker?" she beamed innocently. Then she paused in confusion as everyone stared at her in utter shock, looking at Miss Goldenweek in askance. "Did I do that wrong? I said it how you told me to."

"Nope," Miss Goldenweek smirked ever so slightly as she bit into a rice cracker. "You did that exactly right."
And all of that brought me to the present, the afternoon on the second day following Enies Lobby, where everything seemed to be going fine, with everyone sans Zoro, Vivi, Robin and the Dugongs trickling back into the backup headquarters and nothing outside of the crew's normal circumstances going on. Heck, even I was finding the time to relax.

And then in walked Kokoro and her family, with Yokozuna moving to the window after trying to force his way in through the door.

Yeah… as it turned out, the day was only getting started.

-0-

"Well! It's great to see you all back on your feet again! Honestly now, sleeping for a full day? You had us all worried there! Buuut then again, I guess that after what you all went through, that's only natural!" Kokoro smirked as she caught sight of all the food on a nearby table getting sucked away at a breakneck pace. "It's also good to see that the king to be is back on his feet!"

"Ooooh, I wouldn't quite say that…" I muttered as I turned the page on the book I was reading, keeping an eye on Soundbite's snoring shell all the while.

"Eh?" Kokoro blinked at me in confusion. "The heck do ya mean? He's clearly moving!"

"Take a look at his face, Granny," Lassoo yawned languidly.

"What are ya…" Kokoro slowly trailed off as she processed the clear and present *nose-bubble* Luffy was snoring out. "…He's asleep?"

"Luffy learned how after Alabasta because he never wanted to miss that many meals after a fight again," Sanji sighed in defeat as he placed yet another platter of food in the rubber-man's reach. "Credit where it's due, at least it's keeping him busy."

"*And it's actually aiding in Luffy's recovery as well…*" Chopper mused from his own bed, where he was splitting his attention between a number of papers arrayed before him that he was alternating between writing on and poring over. "*After all, he's ingesting a good amount of nutrients for his body that his metabolism is putting to good use, all while getting the rest he needs. It's certainly better than merely strapping him down and waiting, which would undoubtedly result in a longer resting period.*"

Kokoro stared warily at Chopper before sending me a nervous, and I responded with a helpless shrug. "He hasn't actually *done* anything yet other than work, so…"

Chimney, meanwhile, had ambled up to Chopper and was looking at his papers with wide-eyed eagerness. "Whatcha workin' on, Mister Reindeer?"

"I'm—argh, wait a second…" Chopper leaned back from the papers, groaning as he rubbed his eyes. "Four minutes, thirty-six seconds. Marginal, but progress is progress. Anyway, to answer your question…" The human-Zoan waved his hoof over the papers. "Over the course of my fight with Kumadori, I managed to pump him for information on the biofeedback he was utilizing. Now, granted, there are some…" He spun his hoof helplessly as he tried to come up with the words. "*Translation errors*, due to the excessive usage of metaphors and whatnot used to describe it, but I still managed to get some valuable information, which I transcribed, interpreted, and am now extrapolating upon using my own research."

"Oooooh…" Chimney nodded slowly. "So, why ya doin' it?"
"Because," Chopper grinned eagerly as he leaned forward, a glimmer appearing in his eyes, yes, but this one was entirely natural and healthy. "I think I'm approaching a breakthrough. Using what I have and what's been given to me, I truly believe that I can compose a treatise that extrapolates upon methods through which Zoan-users like myself can deliberately manipulate the... polymorphic... nature of..." The human-reindeer slowly trailed off before pinching the bridge of his nose. "You don't understand even a word of what I'm talking about, do you?"

"No, no, I do, I do!" Chimney smiled and nodded eagerly. "You're doing mystery research, right?"

THUNK!

"Not another one..." the reindeer moaned as he repeatedly thunked his forehead against his bed's backboard.

Chimney blinked in confusion before hiding her giggle behind her hands. "Mister Reindeer is funny!"

"Yeah, he'sh a real funny guy!" Gonbe snickered in agreement.

Kokoro looked just a tad befuddled at the interplay between the two relative youngsters before sweeping her attention over the rest of the room. "And what about the rest of—gack!" The station mistress flinched back in shock when her gaze alighted upon Nami, who was slumped over on a table and sulking morosely, the air around her dark and gloomy. Literally, on account of the rain cloud that was hanging above her and drizzling its contents all over her. "What's her problem?!

"Oh, no problem..." she sighed listlessly as she drew circles on the wood with her finger. "I've simply come to the realization that life isn't worth living, that's all. I'm just waiting for the world to... waste away."

"Ah..." Kokoro hesitated, grasping for something to say.

"There, there..." Conis sighed as she leaned over from where she and Usopp were tinkering on the same table, an umbrella over their heads, to rub Nami's back before shooting a grimace at Kokoro. "She's been like this for awhile now."

"Ah, I see..." Kokoro nodded in understanding. "I guess it must just be sinking in how big her bounty's gonna be, huh?"

Nami let out a pitiful moan at that.

"Noooot quite," Usopp muttered, not looking up from the shotgun he was scrutinizing.

"Eh?"

"See, to be more specific?" Su smirked as she peaked over Conis' shoulder. "She's been like this ever since Sodom and Gomorrah took Franky out for St. Poplar."

Nami moaned again, even louder.

Kokoro was silent for a bit before a massive sweatdrop hung from her head. "Waaaait a second... are you telling me she's like this because—!?"

"He took my mone-e-eeeey..." our navigator wept miserably. "Soooo much mone-e-eeeey..."

Kokoro stared at her for a moment longer before breaking out cackling. "Nagagagaga! I've lived on
the Grand Line my entire life, and you guys still manage to surprise me, every hour on the hour! Forget warning you guys about the Florian Triangle, somebody should warn the Triangle about you!"

"Personally, I'd still like to hear whatever warnings you can offer, Granny Kokoro."

"Welcawm back, Vivi!" Carue waved from his bed.

"Oh, hey!" I glanced up over my book as I heard the door open. "Did the shipping go—woah!" I reeled back in shock at what I saw.

As expected, Vivi and Robin had just returned, safe and sound, and as I'd suspected, Robin was bearing the brunt of the load, both on a variety of arms and by literally having the rest walk along behind her. That was all perfectly normal.

What wasn't expected, however, was the sight of Robin using one of her arms to hold what appeared to be a cut of raw salmon over her eye.

"The heck's with you?" I queried incredulously. "Did fish become the new black when I wasn't looking?"

"I'll alert MILAN…" Soundbite muttered in his sleep.

"No, fashion hasn't become quite that eccentric yet," Robin chuckled sardonically before drawing the fish away, revealing a very impressive black eye. "It's just that salmon serves as an acceptable substitute when a rib-eye isn't immediately available."

"Robin-chwan!" Sanji cried in horror, sprinting over and hastily relieving her of her burdens. "What happened!? Who did this to you!? I'LL FRY THEM INTO BRISKET!" He capped the rant off by all but bursting into flames.

"Ooooh, I wouldn't worry about that," Vivi huffed darkly as she crossed her arms and glared at our archaeologist. "Honestly? I'd say that she deserved it!"

"Eh?" Sanji stared at the princess in shock. "What makes you say that, milady?"

"Her personal point of view, if I had to guess," Robin chuckled, sounding more amused than anything.

There was a moment of silence as we all processed both that statement and the way Vivi was looking everywhere but at Robin with a distinctly blushing face, and then…

"EEEEEH!?" Sanji reeled in shock, his jaw all but crashing to the ground.

"Oh, my…" Conis gasped demurely.

"Tseeheehee! Woo, you go, girl!" Su cheered. "Princesses gone wild!"

Lassoo cracked his eye open with a snort. "Why the hell's everyone so surprised? We all knew that this was gonna happen sooner or later."

"Maybe so," I conceded with a nod. "But still, this is a bit out of the blue! The heck brought this on?"

Apparently that was too much for Vivi, going by how her eye twitched and she rounded on Robin,
stabbing an accusing finger at her. "You want to know why I did it!?" she snarled. "Easy! Somebody thought that it would be hilarious to give me a heart attack by up and ditching me in the middle of a crowded street without warning!"

There was yet another resounding silence before I cast a flat look at Robin. "Seriously?" I deadpanned only semi-incredulously.

Robin chuckled unapologetically as she returned the salmon to her eye. "I decided to try and cultivate my sense of humor. Is that so wrong?"

"I would suggest you start from scratch with a new one," Vivi bit out acridly. "Because this one's rotten." She then turned around made to walk back to her designated bed before freezing as she caught sight of Nami's continued sulking. She stared for a long second before directing a long-suffering look at me. "Dare I even ask?"

"Eh," I grunted, waving my hand side-to-side. "A bit of it is dread over her bounty, but for the most part? Post-partum depression from the loss of her beloved hoard."

"I was fine when it was for Merry's sake…" Nami sobbed miserably. "But now… 500 Million, just gone…"

Vivi stared at her again before pinching her nose with a sigh. "It's well past noon and it's still too early for this shit. Cross, would you—?" She cut herself off with a shake of her head. "Get me a drink, please."

I huffed in aggravation as I shut my book and got up from my bed. "Come on, princess," I berated her as I walked over to the fridge and withdrew a spare bottle of Cola. "You've been with us for months now, you should know how to do this for yourself. Or at least!" I twisted the cap off the bottle as I snapped my finger up. "Get your 'knight in shining armor' to do it for you, seeing as he loves it so much. But me?" I shook my head as I handed the bottle off to her. "I'm not doing it. At least try and learn to be a little independent, you know?"

Vivi smiled beatifically as she accepted the bottle from me. "Thank you, Cross, I'll take your words into consideration."

I nodded in satisfaction. At least, until she actually started drinking, at which point the whole situation and everyone's snickering registered with me. I glanced down at my hand incredulously before returning my wide-eyed look to Vivi. "Son of a bitch!" I barked, which got everyone actually laughing. "Will you stop doing that!? That got old after the third bout of rhyming this morning!"

"What can I say?" Vivi shrugged innocently. "Practice makes perfect!"

"And I can attest to the fact that she's had practice," Robin concurred with a smirk as she indicated her eye. "How else do you think she actually managed to land a hit on me?"

"Freaking Jedi mind trick bullshittery…" I grumbled out as I stomped back to my bed.

"Ah, that's better," Vivi sighed in satisfaction as she set down the bottle, eyeing our despondent navigator. "And now for her…" She sidled up to her and gently laid her hand on her shoulder. "Hey, Nami? I realize that you're really sad, but maybe you could try looking on the bright side of things?"

"What bright side…" Nami mumbled noncommittally.

"Weeell," Vivi drew the word out slowly. "I was personally thinking of our new carrying capacity? After all, besides the fact that the gold is going to our new ship, our new home, it's also going to be a
much **bigger** ship. Meaning that the next time we come across something like that pillar on Skypiea —"

Nami's head immediately spun around to look at me with wide, watery eyes, of the type seen on puppies, cats, and little children trying to get a flamethrower for Christmas. "Will we come across something like that, Cross?" she whispered in awe.

I surreptitiously glanced away as my last request to Wiper shot through my mind. "There is a… decent chance of it?" I hedged in a neutral enough tone.

"Which means," Vivi picked back up. "That when we come into that much gold—!"

"**WE'RE GONNA BE LOADED!**"

"**GAH!**" Vivi yelped in panic when she suddenly found herself being pirouetted around the room by an ecstatically exuberant Nami.

"We're gonna be rich rich rich, richer than rich, the richest of **aaaaaall~!**" Nami sang as she spun Vivi alongside her, dancing to and fro as she dragged Vivi through an impromptu ballet number.

"Wow, a picture perfect underarm turn," Usopp muttered blandly as we observed the spectacle.

*That* got a cocked eyebrow from Lassoo. "How the heck would you of all people know what that looks like?"

"Has someone got a ladyfriend waiting for them back home?" Su teased, prompting Usopp to flush and shove himself back into his work.

Meanwhile, Nami finished up with a final chorus of "**Siilver and gold, siiilver and gold, silver and gold GOLD!**", upon which she finally tossed Vivi out into a final spin before devolving into Beri-eyed non-stop murmuring about being rich.

The princess, for her part, seemed like she had swallowed her weight in booze if the spirals her eyes had become and the way she was staggering around was anything to go by.

"Nooo, Daddy, I don't wanna learn ballet, Kohza would never let me hear the end of it," she slurred.

"But Miss Wednesday, we've already arranged Mr. 2 to teach you," Robin objected, visibly fighting laughter.

"Ugrgrrr, tell him he can have Mr. 8, he likes crossdress—**hold still.**"

Credit where it was due, Robin managed to sidestep Vivi's dizzied punch before it could slam into her nose, but the coolness of her act was swiftly ruined by her body locking up mid-motion, causing her to overbalance and faceplant. Aaand that was my breaking point.

"Pffahahahahaha!" I plopped back on my bed as I clutched my gut from laughing. "Ohohoh *man*! I just don't see how this day could get *any* better! Pfhahah—!"

"Ah, 'scuse me…” Yokozuna waved his arm through the window in an effort to get our attention. "I just have a question I would like to ask. I thought Merry was supposed to be staying with you, yes? Is she not in there with you?"

"—hahah—**erk!**" I choked myself off as I realized just what was coming.

**SLAM!**
"WELL AT LEAST SOMEONE'S HAVING A GOOD DAY!"

"Uh-oh," muttered most everyone in the room as a very familiar and very angry girl-ship limped into the room on her crutches, a storm of furious emotions swirling around her petite form.

That served to shake Vivi out of the rest of her dizziness, and she shot a concerned look Merry's way. "Wha—!? Merry, what's wrong!?

The question caused Merry to freeze in her tracks. "What's… wrong?" she whispered slowly.

Once again, most of us flinched at the reaction.

"Heyah we go again…" Carue groaned miserably as he tensed in anticipation.

"What's wrong!? What's WRONG!?!" the transmogrified caravel howled as she rounded on Vivi and flailed one of her crutches in her face. "EVERYTHING IS WRONG! I'm a rock in water, a cripple on land, and useless all around! I ate that fruit so that I wouldn't die, but instead all I've managed to do is land myself in my own personal hell!"

Vivi blinked in shock, too taken aback to react properly. "Ah—?"

Not even waiting for an answer, Merry swung her crutch out as she continued ranting. "What's the point of me being able to stay with you all if I can't even do anything? I wanted to go with you all on adventures, not lag behind and end up having to be protected from whatever happens! This isn't life! This isn't living! Why me, why me, why meee…" Merry trailed off into incoherent muttering and ranting as she started pacing back and forth in place.

Robin took the opportunity to get back to her feet and slide up close to me. "Care to explain?" she muttered.

"We managed to get Merry walking properly a few hours ago," Sanji leaned over and whispered back. "But right around then, I think the true weight of her transition finally hit her."

"Personally, I'm sure she'd be able to handle it relatively fine under normal circumstances," I hissed. "But if I had to guess, I'd say that the emotional instability of her prepubescent body isn't meshing well with the stress. Simply put, her stress and emotions have been periodically bursting out into wild tantrums like this one!"

"I see…" Robin mused as she tracked Merry as she shuffled about. "So, she rants and rages for a bit and then she calms down?"

I winced and shook my head grimly. "Nooooot quite. See, during these episodes? Merry's been cycling through a little psychological phenomenon you might be familiar with known as the Five Stages of Grief. First there's Denial—"

"This can't be happening to me," Merry muttered fervently as she paced back and forth in place. "This isn't happening, not to me, not to me! I'm a good ship, I'm a good person, I refuse to believe it, I-I refuse!"

"Second is Anger."

"This is fucking bullshit! RAAAAGH!" Merry suddenly howled in outrage. "THIS IS TOTALLY UNFAIR, DAMN IT ALL! I JUST WANTED TO FUCKING LIVE! IS THAT SERIOUSLY SO MUCH TO FUCKING ASK FOR!?"
"Third is Bargaining."

"Ple-e-ease!" Merry flopped herself onto the nearest bed and started weeping almost comical streams of tears. "I'll do anything you want! I swear, I'll feed the homeless, I'll be nice to kids, I'll clean up my act wholesale, just fi-i-ix meeeeee!"

"Fourth is Depression."

"WAAAAAAAAAH!"

"And finally, Accept—GRK!" I was cut off by a pair of hands suddenly grabbing my collar and yanking me down so that I was face-to-face with a thoroughly incensed tyke.

"YOU DID THIS TO ME, YOU RAGING BASTARD!" she spat murderously. "YOU DID THIS TO ME!"

"Though sometimes," Su snickered from behind her paw. "She also cycles right back around to anger!"

"Get! Her! Ofl!" I gagged fearfully.

"R-Right!" Conis yelped frantically, hastily darting forward and grabbing Merry off of me. "Merry, I'm so sorry about how things are right now, but please calm down! You're—!"

"CALM THIS! THWACK!"

"—GUGH!" Conis wheezed as a flailing heel swung into her gut and knocked the wind out of her, only just managing to keep her hold on the girl-ship. "Owowow… could someone help me please!?"

"Hm…” Chopper hummed thoughtfully without looking up from his work. "A sharp decrease in oxygen intake could serve to stabilize her mood."

Conis snapped her gaze up to Chopper with an offended gasp. "I am not putting Merry in a chokehold—GYEEP!" She stiffened abruptly when the caravel suddenly sank her teeth into her forearm and started gnawing. "…No matter how tempted I might be," she finished through gritted teeth.

Chopper slowly looked over the paper he was holding in order to grace the angel with a flat look. "Or you could simply make use of a paper bag," he droned.

The gunner had the good graces to blush in embarrassment. "Ah…"

"Here, allow me," Robin offered as she crossed her arms.

A secondary pair of arms grew from Conis' shoulders and made to grab at Merry's head, prompting Merry to snap her jaws at them, only for a tertiary pair that had hidden themselves behind Conis' back to whip out and cover Merry's mouth with a paper bag before she could react.

Merry kept struggling and fighting in the grip of our angel for a bit, but eventually her flailing subsided as the rate at which the bag was inflating and constricting slowed down. Once she stilled herself, Robin removed the bag, and Conis relaxed her grip as she looked down at her.

"Better?" she asked.

"Hah… hoo… yeah… I-I'm good, I'm good," Merry nodded wearily, prompting Conis to smile and drop her to the floor. "Sorry about doing that… again." She hung her head apologetically as she
scratched the back of her skull. "I'm still shaken up is all, not thinking straight. But, ah… I-I think I'm fine now, really! I'm pretty sure I got most of it out of me, and I don't think it should happen again!"

Merry then adopted an eager grin as she started limping towards the door as fast as her crutches could carry her. "I'm just gonna go and take a dip to cool off and—!

"NO!" we all roared as one, Usopp even going so far as to Shave behind her, grab her hood and dig his heels into the woodwork.

"But—!" she started to protest.

"NO!"

"Dumbass!" Su concurred laughing.

Robin cocked an eyebrow at the display before slowly leaning towards me. "Just how many times has she—?"

"Five…" I ground out. "In the past three hours."

"I just wanna swiiiiim…" Merry wept childishly.

"Ah… actually, now that I think about it…" Usopp mused as he scratched his chin thoughtfully, then reached into his bag. "I might have an idea."

"REALLY?" Merry squealed ecstatically, stars shining in her eyes.

"Wait for it…" Nami muttered under her breath.

"You can swim—"

"THANK YOU, USOPP! I LOVE YOU I LOVE Y—"

Usopp removed an inflatable ring with a very familiar sheep's head bobbing on the front. "As long as you wear this."

Merry froze so fast that I swear I heard the air shatter around us.

Unfortunately for him, however, our sniper didn't notice Merry's reaction and instead smiled eagerly.

"Well, what do you think? Did I get the face right?"

"And in three, two, one…" I counted down beneath my breath.

"What do I think?"

THWACK!

"YEOW!"

"Lift off, we have lift off."

"I THINK I WOULDN'T USE THAT THING IF MY LIFE DEPENDED ON IT!" Merry snapped, chasing Usopp around the room as she wailed on him with her crutches.

"And the humor is back," I snickered amidst everyone either laughing quietly or all-out howling with laughter.
And so the routine went on…

"FWEEEET!"

"GAH!"

"YEOW!"

"SONNUVA BITCH!"

Until a shrill-as-all-hell ear-piercing whistle caused us all to flinch and whip our hands to our ears. Except for Luffy, of course, who kept eating obliviously on without missing a beat.

"What the hell—?!” Lassoo bit out painfully as he rubbed his ears.

"Glad to see you're all having fun…"

"Eh?” I blinked in surprise before turning my attention to my bed table, where a familiar pair of eyestalks had poked out of their shell. "Oh, hey, Soundbite."

"HEY YOURSELF,” he scowled as he slid from his shell and swept his eyestalks over us. "Sorry to break up the mood, I love seeing LONGNOSE GET HIS ASS BEAT AS MUCH AS THE NEXT GUY—!"

"Chug a salt shaker!” Usopp cursed acridly as he hopped around on his less injured foot.

"—BUT UNFORTUNATELY, FUN TIME IS OVER." Soundbite snapped his gaze to a wall. "Look alive, boys and girls; we've got company, and they're flying gull, white and blue."

Suffice to say that the mood died after that little proclamation, and was instead swiftly replaced by the occupants of the room scrambling for their weapons and/or to get into battle positions with a combination of panic and desperation.

"HOLD EVERYTHING!” I shouted.

All movement froze, and I took the opportunity to snatch up Soundbite and hold him in my palm. "Is there a guy with kukri knives near the front?"

Soundbite's expression fell flat. "I'M GOOD, not psychic, DINGUS."

I winced as I realized that he had a point. "Fair enough, let's try that again. Is there a guy near the front who seems outwardly calm, inwardly excited?"

"NOW THAT is feasible. Uno momento, por favor.” He concentrated for only a second before blinking in surprise. "Uh… huh, yeah, he… is? WAIT, WHY DOES HE SOUND—?"

"Good," I nodded firmly, pacing over to the table where I'd left my effects. "I'M GOOD, not psychic, DINGUS."

I winced as I realized that he had a point. "Fair enough, let's try that again. Is there a guy near the front who seems outwardly calm, inwardly excited?"

"NOW THAT is feasible. Uno momento, por favor.” He concentrated for only a second before blinking in surprise. "Uh… huh, yeah, he… is? WAIT, WHY DOES HE SOUND—?"

"Good," I nodded firmly, pacing over to the table where I'd left my effects. "I know just what to do about this, then."

Everyone watched in anticipation as I donned my greaves and arranged my gauntlets on top of the table, as well as my transceiver… and then I grinned eagerly as I withdrew my transceiver's mic and started counting down in my head. "Time for another broadcast!"

WHAM!
The group face-fault was very satisfying.

"Crooooooss..." Sanji ground out slowly as he started to climb to his feet, the air starting to shimmer from sheer heat around him.

"Are you already going back on your promise?" Usopp demanded.

"Hey, what can I say?" I shrugged casually, even as I approached what I judged to be a good distance from the wall Soundbite had indicated. "I consider this to fall in the 'harmless' category, especially when you take into account that not only is there no malice in this little incursion, but I've got the perfect shield up and ready in case he decides to get impolite!"

"Huh?" Vivi frowned in confusion. "Wait, what do you mean by—?"

"Hell-oooo people of the world!" I cut Vivi off once my countdown hit zero and I approximated that I had enough viewers. "It's been far too long and I'm ever so glad to be back on the air after recovering from the freaking hellish ordeal my friends and I just went through! I'm Jeremiah Cross, and with me as always is my partner in crime—"

"THAT WOULD BE ME, SOUNDBITE!"

"Here to bring you another marvelous edition of—"

"The SBS, starting now!" Lassoo woofed, his tongue lolling out as he panted eagerly. "I think I see why Soundbite does that now! That shtick is fun!"

I cast a glare at the mutt that was more amused than annoyed. "And for once, ladies and gentlemen, I have no time to be angry at being interrupted—"

"SPEAK FOR YOURSELF!"

"—because today we have a special guest joining us here on the SBS!" I spun my arms before pointing both fingers at the appropriate wall. "All the way from Marine Headquarters, he uses mountains as sandbags, he almost had us at Enies, and he's the bane of pirates everywhere!"

Vivi paled in horror as the Beri dropped for her. "Oh, dear sweet Anubis, no," she breathed in horror.

"Don't tell me..." Sanji whimpered at almost the same time as his cigarette dropped from his mouth.

"He's also renowned as the rival of the King, the blunter of the Don, and the second of the Buddha!" I continued emphatically.

Everyone else swiftly paled as well as they realized who I was describing, and they fearfully backed away from the wall as a result.

Robin in particular was having a unique reaction, apparently caught between bowel-dropping terror, fond exasperation, and more than a little bit of amusement. "Honestly," she chuckled even as she kept a white-knuckled grip on her hat. "I just don't know what I was expecting."

"Pirates and Marines the world over," I wound up for the grand finale, keeping a close eye on Soundbite for the appropriate timing cues. "Please put your hands together fooooor..."

SMASH!

I shut my eye in an instinctual flinch as the wall imploded, showering us all with dust and debris,
before stabbing my finger at the figure visible through the dust. "Gaaaaaarp the Herooooooooh what the fuck are you wearing!?" I hastily swapped my words around as I actually managed to catch sight of Garp and, to reiterate, what the fuck he was wearing.

To clarify, 'what the fuck he was wearing' consisted of the following items: a Hawaiian floral-print shirt, decorated with palm trees, waves, and bikini-clad tiki dancers. Solid blue board shorts that I was thanking my lucky stars was not a speedo. A battered straw hat that looked like it had been sitting in a closet under a pile of other crap for twenty years. The tackiest pair of black aviator sunglasses I had ever seen. Straw fucking sandals! And to slap a bow on the whole thing, he even had a stripe of white sunblock on his nose right above his shit-eating grin!

Speaking as a native Floridian, I could say with complete and utter certainty that Vice-Admiral Monkey D. Garp looked like the absolute tackiest, most stereotypical beach tourist I had ever seen in my life.

And just to rub it in, he was not a unique case. Behind Garp, just barely visible through the settling dust, I could see a distinctly uncomfortable Coby and Helmeppo dressed in almost exactly the same style, the 'almost' coming from Helmeppo keeping his… actually admittedly cool shades. And then of course behind them was an entire battalion of Marines in variations on the exact same outfit, still in tight parade formation with their rifles on their shoulders!

Hell, even Garp's second in command, ah… damn it, what was his name… bah, you know, the cool-looking motherfucker with the fedora? Even he was midway to the look, because while he was still wearing his officer's jacket and fedora, beneath it he also had on a floral-print shirt and the fedora he was wearing was made out of straw!

Now, honestly, shocking as this all was, I'd like to think I could have handled it all in stride… until Garp raised a coconut shell with a straw and a slice of lime sticking out of it to his mouth, nay, his smirk, so that he could take a sip, at which point I decided that I'd had enough.

"Vice Admiral Garp…" I started slowly as I tried to kickstart my brain back into gear. "Why in the name of hell-if-I-know are you dressed like you're on oh shitbiscuits you're on vacation, aren't you?" I finished in a rush as realization hit me like the Puffling Tom.

Robin blinked in confusion at my statement before shaking her head in exasperation. "Cross, I know that your guesses are usually accurate to an almost uncanny degree, but even by your standards that is just—!"

"BWAHAHAHAHAAAAA!" Garp cut her off when he threw his head back and roared with laughter. "Yup, Jonny-boy definitely has the right of it: for every bit that you're stupid insane, you're also stupid smart, Cross!" He puffed his chest out as he jabbed his thumb at himself. "Of course I'm on vacation! Because if I weren't, how else would I be able to visit my adorable grandson while you're around without the rest of the World Government getting on my ass for not doing my job, hm?"

I blinked in surprise as I followed that logic before nodding in acknowledgement. "That's… actually pretty damn smart. The get-up is way tacky, but fair enough."

"BWAHAHA!" Garp jutted his chin out with a bark. "High praise, coming from you!"

Robin's eyes twitched as she slowly looked between the two of us before taking off her hat. "One moment, please."

THWACK!
She then shoved her hat back on as the arm that had dope-slapped her dissolved. "Carry on."

Her reaction wasn't the only incredulous one amongst the crew.

"…I don't know what I was expecting… but this is decidedly not it," Vivi managed through her dropped jaw.

"Ditto…" Carue quacked numbly.

"How exactly is anyone supposed to react to something like this?" Chopper asked with honest curiosity.

"Personally, I'm wondering about what we should be more concerned about: him being here, that there's a Marine as crazy as him, or Cross not expecting this?" Su swallowed fearfully. "We're in uncharted waters now…"

Conis started to nod in agreement before freezing as she realized something. "Wait… did he just say that he's here… to visit his grandson?"

That brought the rest of my crewmates up short, several of them repeating the word in shock. 

"'Grandson'!?"

Soundbite's eyes shot wide as he was struck dead-on by realization. "OOOH…"

Garp's grin widened as he slowly stepped into the room. "Yup, that's exactly right. My grandson is on your crew, and I'm here to pay him a long-overdue visit. And now that I'm here, it's time for said grandson…" Garp's grin widened as he drew his fist back.

**SMASH!**

"OOOOW!"

"TO STOP STUFFING HIS FACE AND WAKE THE HELL UP!"

And delivered an absolutely devastating haymaker to Luffy, punching him clean through the table and causing our newly awakened captain to roll on the floor in agony.

"OWOWOWOOOOOW!" Luffy cried as he clutched his forehead. "IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HUUURTS!"

"HeeheeheeboohoohooHAHAHA! I SEE THE RESEMBLANCE!" Soundbite cackled eagerly.

"I know, right?" I muttered with a shudder. Reading about it was one thing, but actually seeing the legitimately strongest person I knew get taken down with a single punch?

I hid my grin behind my gauntlet. This… This was going to be so much fun.

As usual, my crewmates didn't quite agree with my sentiments.

"AAAAH! WHAT THE HELL!?" Usopp shrieked in terror. "T-T-T-HAT ACTUALLY HURT LUFFY!?"

"But I thought that Luffy was supposed to be immune to blunt force trauma!" Nami cursed as she gripped her staff, her Eisen Tempo curling defensively around her.

"I know!" Chopper squealed in a dementedly eager tone. "Isn't it iiînteres—!"
"THWACK!"

"OW!… thanks Conis."

"You're welcome, though…" Conis swallowed heavily as she gripped the rifle she was clutching. "I wonder if I shouldn't have let you stay that way."

"Could it be—?" Vivi whipped her hand to her mouth with a gasp of realization.

Noticing Garp starting to puff himself up, I hastily snapped my fingers and pointed at him. "And your next line is," I grinned eagerly as I reconfirmed exactly what I'd read so long ago. "There's no defense against a Fist of Love."

"There's no defense against a Fist of Love," Garp unintentionally echoed before he actually processed what I'd said. Then he blinked and glanced at me as I crossed my arms behind my head, a grin stretching my face.

"Oooohh, I've been hurting for an opportunity to pull that bit off for so long," I sighed blissfully.

"You only wish you could be AS GOOD AS JOSEPH!" Soundbite chortled. "BUT THAT WAS A GOOD TRY NONETHELESS!"

"Tsk," Garp raised his arms in a shrug as he shook his head in defeat. "Said it before, I'll say it again: crazy little—!"

"GYAAAAGH!" Garp was cut off by Luffy screaming in terror as he actually caught sight of him and started pointing a shaking finger at the object of his fear. "G-G-G-G—!"

The Vice Admiral was swift to regain his composure as he responded with a smirk, taking hold of his shades and drawing himself up to his full height. "Awww, what's wrong, Luffy?" he asked as he thumbed his glasses onto his forehead, allowing him to smile at Luffy in full. "Didn't you miss your beloved old Grandpa?"

"GRANDPA!?" everyone else squawked in shock.

For my part, I chose to hide an ear-to-ear grin behind my fist. "If I had to guess, I'd say he'd hoped you'd fossilized by now," I muttered under my breath.

"Cocky little shit say what?"

I blinked in confusion. "Wha—?"

"THWACK!"

I came to about two minutes later, when someone grabbed the back of my collar and yanked me out of the… floorboards? Yes, it appears I'd been punched through the floorboards. Well shit.

"Hold still," muttered a voice that I recognized as Chopper's, and I registered a hoof reaching towards my face.

"Eh? What are you—?"

My question was rudely interrupted by our doctor grabbing something in front of my face and yankingohsonofa—!

"—FUCK!" I howled, jerking up as I clutched my face. "What the blue blazes was that for?!"
"Splinter," Chopper deadpanned as he held up a solid inch of wood. I stiffened in shock as I processed what I was seeing, and I gingerly raised my finger to poke at a small puncture wound six millimeters from my left eye.

"Meep."

"Wow, he really is fragile," I heard Garp mutter.

My eye twitched slightly at the comment before I shook my head with a groan and pushed myself into a sitting position. "Ugh... how much did I miss?"

"Oh, nothing much," Robin hummed as she slid up next to me and plopped my hat back on my head. "He hit Luffy a few more times, bemoaned him not being a Marine, explained the balance of the Three Great Powers, the Four Emperors, elaborated that Luffy's hat came from Red-Haired Shanks..." She cocked a disbelieving eyebrow at me. "Any particular reason why you elected to not share that tidbit?"

"Too much fun, never came up, he was going to tell you anyways. Pick a number and toss a die," I groused sourly as I poked at the lump growing from my skull. Christ on a pikestaff, that bastard hit like a freight train! Probably literally! "Eurgh... well at least I didn't miss any of the fun parts. But... if that's all he's said, then... shouldn't Zoro be back by now?"

Of course, that was precisely when the sounds of an all-out brawl erupted from the back of the horde of Marines Garp had brought with him.

"Damn," Soundbite whistled in awe. "Even concussed, YOU'VE GOT THAT down to a science!"

"Mad skills, brah," I deadpanned as I flashed a shaka symbol. In all honesty, I was more focused on observing the two quote-unquote 'rookies' Garp had brought with him. I really wanted to see what these two were capable of.

"Hm? Ah, right, your swordsman. Your... first mate, isn't he?" Garp grinned as he looked over his shoulder at the men getting plowed down. "Good timing, I was just looking for somebody I could use as a test. Hey, you two."

The Master Chief Petty Officer and Chief Petty Officer snapped to attention. "Sir!"

"Chances are you're gonna lose and badly, but even so..." He flashed them a winning smile as he popped a thumbs-up. "At least try and last two seconds, alright? One second each!"

And that caused the Master Chief Petty Officer and Chief Petty Officer to slump in despair. "Yes, sir..."

Still, credit where it was due, in spite of their reluctance the pair didn't even hesitate to face Zoro when he became visible in the crowd and charge him as one.

CR-CR-CR-CRACK!

However, for all that their valor was well and good, they only made it about halfway when they were forced to come to a screeching halt as a rain of bullets broke up the ground a few inches in front of them.

Before they could react further, Coby's hand shot up, snatching the handle of a kunai with the point two inches from his forehead and then seamlessly flowing into a series of blocks that deflected the
rest. Helmeppo, meanwhile, had drawn his kukri and was using them to only just hold off what appeared to be a buzzsaw the size of his torso with a red cable leading out of it and off to somewhere that was grinding into his blades with abandon.

Zoro stopped as well, observing the clash for a moment before glaring to the side. "Care to explain why you're stealing my fight?"

"You seem to be forgetting, first mate."

Boss blinked into visibility in front of Zoro as he came out of his Sha—Rip Current, and moments later three of his four students appeared out of nowhere to flank him as well; Mikey spun his pistols as he reloaded them, Donny held a trio of kunai between the 'fingers' of one flipper while the other held his staff across his shoulders, and Raphey jerked back on the end of the red cable she was holding, withdrawing the disc of death that was assaulting Helmeppo and catching it, revealing it to be a massive shuriken almost as large as her that she sheathed on her back.

"Our position on this crew," Boss snorted as he tapped off the ashes on the end of his cigarette. "Is as the ship's guards. End of the day, we are the very bottom of the pecking order. If the enemy can't get past us? Then they're just not worth your trouble."

Coby and Helmeppo glanced at one another with uncertainty for a moment, but they swiftly fell into battle-ready positions…

"Please, try it."

Before stiffening as Leo poked his swords into the smalls of their backs.

"No, really, I'm serious," Leo goaded them eagerly. "I am honestly curious about how you two actually think you can beat us, and I've been itching for a nice and curbstompy fight for a while now. So, if you could do me a favor and give me a reason to kick your asses? I would be most appreciative."

The Chief Petty Officers visibly hesitated…

"BWAHAHAHAHAHA!"

Before snapping their heads around to look back at their teacher as he started laughing.

"HAHAHA… eheh… heh…" Garp trailed off into chuckles as he wiped his eyes. "Ahhhh… good stuff, that. Yeah, sorry you two, but if you actually value your hides, you had better not fight."

"V-Vice Admiral?!" they asked incredulously.

"Yeah, I'm with them; mind running that by us again?" Mikey asked with a cock of his head. "You mean to tell us that you're actually smart enough to know when to fold them?"

Garp grinned darkly in response. "Not like I actually have much choice, you know? These brats are good and all, sure…" his grin widened as he directed his gaze at Boss. "But they haven't been around nearly long enough to have a hope of taking on the second generation of apprentices to come from the strongest Dugong in the New World, much less the sole member of the first generation himself."

A single second of silence followed those words before Boss's cigar snapped between his 'fingers', though going by the way he was blankly staring at Garp, I don't think he honestly even noticed.
"You… know my master?" Boss finally managed to breathe.

"BWAHAHA!" Garp barked as he scratched his finger beneath his nose. "Know him? I take a day off to have a scrap with him at least three times a year, and each time is as good as the last! Though, eh…” he glanced away with a scowl. "The fact that the damn bastard doesn't tend to hang around in any one place for that long makes tracking him down time and time again a damn nightmare."

Boss blinked slowly at the statement before slowly turning to look towards the horizon. ". . .knew the old bastard was still alive. I damn well knew it…” he muttered quietly.

"Ah… hang on, Boss' master?" Usopp asked in interest. "Who are we talking about here?"

"Sifu Dugong," Raphey breathed in awe. "We'll tell you the details later, but for now, suffice to say he's the strongest dugong in our species' history!"

"Last rumor I heard?" Mikey piped up. "He can kill a Sea King with one punch!"

"Now that's a bold-faced lie!" Garp sniffed indignantly… before popping up a trio of fingers. "Last time I saw that old bag of bones, he was strong enough to take down three Sea Kings at once, easy. If you're going to spread rumors, at least make sure they're accurate."

There was a resounding silence in response to that proclamation, during which Coby and Helmeppo exchanged a frantic look, following which…

"PLEASE SPARE MY WORTHLESS LIFE!"

"Hahaha! Wow, Luffy! It looks like you've really gathered an incredible crew!"

One of them collapsed to their knees begging for their life, while the other scratched behind his head as he laughed happily.

Three guesses on who did and said what.

"Huh? Why're you talking about me like you know me? Although… you do look sort of familiar…” Luffy frowned and bowed his head in what I had no doubt was intense thought. And then, to the utter shock of all, he snapped his head up with a gasp as he pounded his fist in his palm. "Wait, now I remember who you are!"

"Eh?" I blinked in shock before leaning forwards in curiosity, more than a few of the onlookers joining me. Was… Was this really happening? Had our captain, Monkey D. Luffy, one of the densest people in existence, actually managed to grow a brain!? The rubber-man in question pointed at the eager pink-haired Marine with a triumphant grin. "You're Natsu Dragneel."

WHAM!

Yeeeaah, no.

Of course, Garp, Coby, and Helmeppo all face-faulted, as would be the natural reaction. But me? I actually felt my skull bleeding from how hard I hit my head, and going by the sound of grinding enamel coming from my shoulder I wasn't alone.

However, I only maintained that position for a moment before unholy RAGE flooded my mind and I forced myself to my feet so that Soundbite and I could vent our frustration. A process I started off by
bringing my fist down on my Captain's head as hard as I could.

Of course, once he started twitching and trying to pull his head out of the floorboards, indicating that he was still alive (which was fortunate and unfortunate in equal measure) we decided to vent vocally rather than physically.

"RIGHT Genre, WRONG UNIVERSE, MORON!" Soundbite howled viciously.

"ARE YOU SERIOUSLY TELLING ME THAT YOUR STUPIDITY LITERALLY TRANSCENDS TIME AND SPACE?!!" I roared with all that my lungs were capable of.

"Uh, heh, I wouldn't be too surprised if it did," Coby chuckled, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly as he righted himself and crouched before my struggling captain. "But, ah, still… Luffy, it's me, Coby. You know, from the East Blue?"

"EH!?" Luffy barked as he wrenched his head from the floor with a single jerk, blinking at the Marine in question in awe. "Wimpy Coby!? No way! The last time I saw Coby, he was—!"

I tuned out the conversation as I turned on my heel and walked back into the house, massaging my flaming temples as I tried to calm myself down. Honestly, most of the time Luffy's stupidity was hilarious, really, it was, but that!? There are limits, damn it all! Standards!

I was drawn from my blackened thoughts by a slight tugging on my pants leg, a glance downwards revealing it to be none other than Raphey smirking up at me.

"Idiocy isn't quite so funny when it's concentrated like that, is it now?" she taunted.

I ground my teeth as I reigned in my temper before finally snorting out a heavy breath. "No," I growled. "No, it is not. Usually, it's funny. Breaking the laws of reality? That's something else entirely. In small doses it's fine, but concentrated like that…" I cast a meaningful glance to the side. "How do you deal with it?"

Raphey followed my gaze and promptly adopted a grimace. "Well, I'll admit it's not easy…"

"WHY THE HELL ARE YOU TWO LOOKING AT ME WHEN YOU SAY THAT?!" Mikey cried indignantly. "I'M NOWHERE NEAR AS BAD AS HIM, NUH-UH, NO WAY IN HELL, THAT'S JUST NOT—!"

CRACK!

"—owie…" he whimpered into the wall his face had been buried in.

"But as you can see," Raphey chuckled as she blew the smoke off her flipper. "I handle it pretty handily, thank you very much."

I contemplated that for a moment before electing to shift the discussion with as subtle a cough as I could manage. "So! A… what, 'fuuma' shuriken, I think it was, and kunai, huh? I guess you've all got long range covered now."

"Meh, more like mid-ranged, but I'm not complaining," Raphey grinned as she unslung her wheel of death and started spinning it around a flipper as though it couldn't decapitate someone with ease. "This beast's a monster to handle, but the training I've had with Vivi gives me a good idea on how to work chain weaponry. Anybody tries anything up close, they get the sai, and if they try anything from far off?" She halted her spinning and jabbed one of the shuriken's blades dead ahead with a smirk. "They get this baby!"
"Unfortunately, not all of us are being as lucky..." Donny groused as he examined his staff. "I've found the kunai knife to be an agreeable weapon, true, but as it is I'm carrying them all around in my shell, and that's neither comfortable nor practical." He glanced up at me with a cocked eyebrow. "I only hope my memory is good enough that I can replicate whatever mechanism that Foxy Pirate used in her baton."

I pegged on to what he was implying easily enough and flashed him an 'a-ok' sign. "I'm sure that you'll figure it out with time, don't worry."

"Hmph. Infidels."

"Eh?" I blinked at Leo in surprise, shocked to see him leaning against the wall with a scowl. "The heck are you talking about?"

"You heard me, didn't you?" Leo glared at me defiantly. "Come on. In case you haven't noticed, we're known as Kung-Fu dugongs. Martial arts, armed or un-armed, is our specialty! We beat our enemies up close and personal, not from a distance like a dirty coward! There is no honor, no glory in—!"

"Eh, don't pay him any mind," Mikey scoffed casually as he dug a 'finger' in the approximate location of his ear. "He's just salty because he hasn't figured out how to use those cool flying slashes Zoro uses yet, and he can't channel Typhoon Lash down them either, which he hasn't figured out yet, for that matter."

"NEITHER HAVE YOU AND NOT FOR A LACK OF TRYING, EITHER!" the katana-wielder exploded furiously. "AND IT'S NOT MY FAULT, DAMN IT! NO MATTER HOW MUCH I PUT INTO MY SWORDS, NO MATTER HOW MUCH ZORO OR BOSS PUSHES ME, I CAN'T... make... them..."

He suddenly trailed off, slowly looking over his shoulder at his own swords, then at Zoro's, and then up at me. "Cross... is it even possible to accomplish the flying slash with normal swords, or do they have to be Legendary Swords, like Zoro's trio?"

I opened my mouth to respond, then frowned as I ran over the swordsmen that I knew had used flying slashes. "Come to think of it, I... don't think I've ever heard of any normal blades sending flying slashes without Devil Fruit enhancements? Though..." I tapped my chin thoughtfully. "I'm sure that a world-class swordsman like Mihawk or someone could, but..."

Leo set his jaw tightly as he reached up to grip one of his katana's hilts. "In that case... there's just nothing for it, is there? These two have served me faithfully over the years, but if I'm going to hone my style any further..." He shook his head in defeat. "I officially need an upgrade."

I winced sympathetically at the poor dugong's plight, but before I could say anything on the matter, a familiar finger tapping me on my shoulder drew my attention away.

"Pardon the interruption, Cross," Robin said politely. "But if you don't mind, would you kindly elaborate on the relationship between Luffy, Zoro and those two?" She nodded her head at where the four in question (three, really, seeing as Helmeppo was sobbing pitifully over being forgotten) were talking. "I can only imagine that the tale surrounding them must be at least marginally fascinating."

I considered the question for a moment before shrugging, though before I said jack I made sure to cover my transceiver's mouthpiece. After all, it wouldn't do to go spreading around that Coby was an ex-pirate, however unwilling.
"Not that much of a story to tell. Coby was an unwilling cabin boy for the Alvida Pirates and Helmeppo was the spoiled brat of a corrupt-to-the-core Marine Captain in the East Blue."

Robin hid a chuckle behind her hand. "And then Luffy arrived and removed the both of them with his fists, I'm guessing?"

I smiled back in turn. "Yeah, that is how must stories involving Luffy usually go, isn't it? Anyway, that was about seven months or so ago, when Luffy first set out. Awhile after that, the two were... let's say 'lucky' enough to catch Garp's attention and he decided to personally train them. And believe you me when I say that for all he's a devil he's also damn effective, because if you'd seen those two as they were then, you'd have a hard time recognizing them."

Nami took a moment to make sure my hand was still covering the mic before quietly asking, "So, if I had to guess, you're planning on—?"

"—eard you met your father in Loguetown."

Nami's question died in a choked gasp at the same time the blood evacuated my face. Damn it all, of all the milestones to forget, I forget this!? I suffered a minor panic attack as I considered what the fuck to do. I couldn't very well hang up, because if I did then Garp would be left hanging high and dry for why he didn't return to Marineford with us in tow, and for all that he could be a bastard at times I didn't want to see the old man suffer for visiting his grandson! And fat lot of good Gastro-Scramble would do with Soundbite all but guaranteed to flip out as much as everyone else! As for muffling the transceiver, while that was all well and good for quiet conversations, absolutely nothing about what was about to happen was going to be quiet.

...Not remotely quiet. Why the hell didn't I think of that in the first place?

"Fair warning," I muttered absently as I slid my headphones on with one hand and started reaching for a very specific button with the other. "This is going to be loud."

Robin immediately clamped half a dozen hands over her ears, while everyone else blinked at me in confusion before stiffening in utter horror. Some tried to make a move at me...

But too late.

"Your father's name is..."

-0-

BWAAAAAAAAAAH!

'Pros and cons of the SBS and its host,' the Most Wanted Man in the World idly mused as he dug a finger in his ear. 'Pro: one of the greatest allies to the cause I've ever seen, and an incredibly inspiring individual besides. Con: he's giving me tinnitus.' Dragon weighed the options for a moment beforeshrugging indifferently. "Hmm, a small price to pay."

His reaction was easily the most subdued among the command center, with everyone else laid out flat and groaning as they clutched their ears.

And Cross, of course, was just chuckling.

"I love this thing, so much."
"WE KNOW!" the nerve center of the Revolutionaries roared alongside the majority of the world. However, not all of the world was content to leave matters at that.

"You little brat..." Garp growled venomously. "Maybe I should show you my own brand of Love again and see if that example manages to beat the stupid out of you, hm?!

Cross's eyes widened in terror for a moment before he hastily adopted a heavy scowl. "Before you start that little demonstration of yours, may I remind you of the sheer magnitude of what you were about to say? If you'd think about it just a little, just a tiny bit, I think you'd find that it's not a good idea to spill that secret to everyone who's here. Especially since, in case you've forgotten, the SBS is still running. Do you really think that's something to blab to the whole freaking world?"

There was a brief moment of confusion, on account of the past minute of the SBS having been muffled, and then the crew's doctor, Chopper, posed an innocent question: "Is Luffy's dad really that big a deal?"

While the control room burst into not-so-quiet mutters, the snail snorted and shook its head. "The absolute biggest deal, Chopper. If you thought the Government wanted our heads now, you should see how badly they'll want them if this little tidbit gets out. And not just them, either!"

Dragon had to fight very hard to keep from stiffening at those words, and even then he couldn't keep the shock off his face. 'There's no doubt now, he knows. Not only that, but Garp was about to—!?'

Dragon's expression promptly fell flat. 'No, of course he was about to, that comes as no surprise whatsoever. But still...' The original Revolutionary observed the Transponder Snail with restrained wonder. 'How could he possibly know that?'

Meanwhile, the rest of the command room was equally active, if louder.

"Is Luffy's father that important a guy?" Koala asked her old comrade curiously.

Sabo could only reply with a numb shake of his head. "This is the first I've heard of Luffy having a dad at all. Not even he knows who he is!"

The snail had adopted a surprised look for several seconds following Cross' question. Then, he grinned and chuckled. "Bah, I guess I shouldn't really be surprised that you know, eh? Especially after everything else you've blabbed about. Hell, it'd be weirder if you didn't! But... heh, yeah, I guess you're right."

Dragon breathed a subtle sigh of relief at those words. For all that he allowed his son his independence, he did actually care for him, and he knew how much harder his journey would be if his heritage ever got out to the public.

As such, he thanked his lucky stars that for once Vice Admiral Monkey D. Garp had chosen to actually use his brain.

"After all," Vice Admiral Monkey D. Garp forged on with a solemn nod. "It wouldn't be very smart to tell the whole world that Luffy's father is Monkey D. Dragon, the Revolutionary."

The entirety of Baltigo... nay, the whole world froze upon hearing those words.

And while everyone was frozen, Transponder Snails around the world twitched as they gaped in awe. "...And yet, you tell them anyway," Cross ground out in horrified incredulity.

There was a moment of silence before the snails blinked in realization and started chuckling...
sheepishly. "Ah... yeah, guess I screwed up there, huh? Whoops, my bad."

Within the command post of the Revolutionaries in the secret kingdom of Baltigo, Monkey D. Dragon the Revolutionary and Most Wanted Man in the World slapped a hand to his face with a groan. "God damn it, Dad."

Apparently Cross was of the same opinion, if the way he suddenly set his jaw was anything to go by. "You there, with the hat. Could you do me a favor? Take this and whack him for me, would you? Trust me, his head'll break before it does."

"Well, I'll be glad to test that."

"Eh?" Garp blinked in surprise. "Wait, wha—?"

CLANG!

"YEEOOOOW!"

"Well, I'll be, it works. What's it made of?"

"Common materials enhanced to perfection by a GODLIKE ENTI—WAGH!"

"Shut it, you little—GRK! Ah... b-believe me, t-they call Vegapunk all kinds of crazy things out in the East Blue. But for now..." Cross adopted a grim expression. "Before anyone properly freaks out, I have a few words I'd like to share. They are as follows..."

"Well, this should be good," Dragon drawled sardonically.

"Folks, you heard it here, proof positive. Vice Admiral Monkey D. Garp, Hero of the Marines, the man reputed for being one of Gold Roger's most formidable rivals, has done the impossible: he's actually managed to prove himself stupider than Monkey D. Luffy. How he is still breathing, let alone chemically viable, is a mystery that haunts scientists the world over. His very existence is a divide-by-zero paradox that should have, by all rational thought, destroyed the universe threefold by now. The Great Old Ones have resigned their posts as bringers of insanity, as he has now rendered them redundant. God is dead because he killed himself out of shame for ever having allowed—OWOWOW! Withdrawn, withdrawn! Urgh... whatever. Anyway, I could keep going on and on, but I know that it would never touch upon the true extent of his impossible existence."

In spite of himself, Dragon smirked. That was refreshing to hear.

"Aaaand that's all I wanted to say. Please feel free to react in an appropriate manner and make my foghorn seem like birdsong by comparison."

And so the world proceeded to do just that.

-o-

"STRAW HAT IS DRAGON'S SON!?"

Sodom and Gomorrah flinched as the force of their boss's shout caused their trailer to leap out of the water.

"THAT MAN ACTUALLY HAD A SON?!" Kiwi loudly agreed.

"WAIT, DOES THAT MEAN THAT GARPO 'THE HERO' IS DRAGON'S FATHER?!" Mozu
demanded.

"THIS IS TOTALLY INSANE!" the trio finished as one.

[They're actually surprised by all of this?] Sodom asked his brother.

[Honestly, they seriously should have seen something like this coming.] Gomorrah snorted in agreement.

-o-

"Oh, dear, I was afraid of this…” Bentham sighed heavily as he waved a towel over Ivankov's insensate (and massive) face. "As if the knowledge of Straw Hat being Garp's grandson weren't pressing enough, this new development's sent our dear ruler over the edge.” He glanced over his shoulder fretfully. "How're those 20ccs of cosmotini coming?"

"Hey, don't rush me!" the current bartender protested. "This is a very delicate and involved—!

"Ivankov!" Inazuma cried out as she (at the moment) rushed into Newkama Land's central area. "We just found—eh?" She skidded to a halt and blinked at the scene before her in confusion. "What happened here?"

"Oh, a tragedy is what happened, an utter tragedy!" the newest citizen of the okama haven wept dramatically as he spun in place. "Our glorious queen among kings was overwhelmed by the news of Straw Hat being Dragon's son, and he—!"

"Is totally faking it so that he can get at some extra alcohol past his ration because he has complete and utter control over his body's hormones, and as such literally cannot faint," Inazuma finished flatly.

"AHEM!" Ivankov coughed as he shot to his feet and snapped his fist to his mouth. "You, ah, wanted to tell me something, Inazuma?"

"OH, GREAT MIRACLE-WORKER IVANKOV, HOW COULD YOU!?!" Bentham sobbed in betrayal.

The scissor-human cocked an eyebrow at the overly dramatic—even by Okama standards—display before grinning at Ivankov. "We were patrolling the floors when we found a guest. I am fairly certain that you will be very interested in them."

Ivankov blinked in surprise before returning the smile. "Oh, really? Do tell."

-o-

Meanwhile, back in Baltigo, the reaction that was being had to the announcement was perhaps the most… unique of all.

"WOOHOO!" Koala shrieked joyously as she literally danced around the control center, sweeping up anyone she could grab into a series of erratic spins and twirls. "I'M RICH! RICH RICH RICHH!

Dragon's eye twitched minutely as he watched the extra-species martial artist cavort about, casting a sidelong look at his Chief of Staff. "Dare I even ask?" he deadpanned.

"Ahhh…” Sabo rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "She… may or may not have placed one or
two bets that may or may not have just paid out a rather _substantial_ amount?"

"I'M GONNA TAKE A VACATION AND BUY A WEEK FROM HEAVEN IN PUCCI!"

Koala whooped as she started moonwalking on a table, a bib securely fastened around her neck. "SO! MUCH! _LOBSTER_!"

"...You're donating half of your winnings to the cause," Dragon finally said.

"Doesn't matter, because I still have enough left~!" Koala sang cheerfully, not even missing a beat as she kept her dance routine going.

_That_ brought the Revolutionary up short. "She really won that much?"

"A… _lot_ of people were curious about you, chief. Sorry," Hack admitted.

Dragon blinked as he processed that before narrowing his eyes suspiciously. _"What_ were those bets on, exactly?"

Koala froze in place.

"I'm-gonna-go-collect-my-winnings-and-pack-bye!"

Before shooting out of the control room in a blur.

Sabo sighed as he observed the smoke trail his partner had left, slapping a hand to his face. "Simply put, she won the trifecta," he mumbled wearily. "That Luffy was your son, that you were Garp's son, and that, ah…” He glanced away with a sheepish blush. "That you're—?"

"THE HELL DO YOU MEAN IT DOESN'T COUNT!?"

_SMASH!_

The Revolutionaries jumped in shock when one of the control center's walls suddenly _imploded_ on account of one of their comrades being _thrown through it_. Said comrade only had a second to recover before he found his collar grabbed and he was dragged face-to-face with a _very_ irate martial artist.

"Get this through your sea-prism-stone-thick skull, you moron!" Koala bit out menacingly. "Sabo is Luffy's _brother_. Blood can go hang for all I care, that means that Dragon is _his_ dad too, meaning that _you_ damn well lost! Now pay up or I will _put you through the floor_!"

The Revolutionary was swift to dig out a wad of cash and toss it at Koala, which prompted her to drop him and start thumbing through the bundle with a contented smile.

"Pleasure doing business with you~!" she sang as she turned right back around and walked out the very hole she'd caused.

A heavy silence hung in the room until Sabo coughed uncomfortably. "Ah, look, sir—!"

"Sabo, Koala just collected her rightly won earnings that resulted from her good luck," Dragon interrupted him in a neutral tone. "Do you wish for her to give you the same treatment?"

"Ah…no, sir?" Sabo shook his head slowly.

"Then let's leave matters at that."
Sabo hesitated for a bare moment before snapping into a salute, a smile barely restrained. "Y-Yes, sir!"

Dragon nodded proudly before readopting his neutral expression and glancing to the side at the now-muttering Transponder Snail.

'But still, all joking aside, this is the final straw. It's time that I arranged a meeting with Cross. A personal meeting.'

The Revolutionary started to turn and walk away…

"Ergh… well, hell, if it's already out in the open like this… bah, at least there's nothing stopping me from being proud of my captain being the son of one of the greatest heroes in the world!"

Before he and everyone else in the room froze, Dragon in particular paralyzed by the sudden resurgence of a pounding in his skull that he hadn't felt in years.

'Correction: I'll meet with Cross if he actually survives the day,' he groaned internally.

---

Everyone in my line of sight was doing their best imitation of a statue, save for the sweat coming down all of their brows. And for good reason, too: the only person not utterly paralyzed with terror was the very cause of that terror himself. Suffice to say that Garp the Hero's expression was quickly darkening, and if the growl that was starting to rumble forth from his throat was anything to go by, that was only the tip of the iceberg.

It should be noted, however, that it was only everyone I could see that was freezing up. Me myself? Weeeell… my adrenaline had just kicked into the biggest high I'd felt since the flight to the White Sea, so naturally I had an ear-to-ear grin on my face. "Pfheeheheheheeeeee…" I whispered euphorically.

"OH GOD, I'm attached to a suicidal idiot…" Soundbite whimpered through his stricken smile and tears.

"You knew that going into the Grand Line and don't you dare pretend otherwise," I hissed back.

"What…"

My spine snapped ramrod straight when Garp's voice suddenly shook the air, and I was acutely aware of him turning to loom over me even from halfway across the room. I shivered as he marched up to me and only seemed to grow bigger still. Sweet heck, if the man didn't actually have Haki, then he damn well knew how to fake it!

"The hell," the goliath before me snarled. "DID YOU JUST SAY?"

"Uhh…” I hedged nervously, glancing around as I centered my thoughts. In the process, I just so happened to catch sight of Nami and Robin, who both had their arms crossed and were shaking their heads frantically.

Well, there was really only one thing I could do, seeing that.

"Weeellll…” I slowly drawled as a massive grin spread across my face.

Nami slapped a hand to her face, while Robin whipped out and started writing on a notepad that had
I cocked my eyebrow at that particular development before refocusing my grin at Garp. "To answer your question," I continued in a nonchalant tone, even as enough energy for ten Shaves thrummed within me. "It's simple, really: he's leading a fight against a tyrannical force of oppression that's dominating the entire world, so what else could he be? Honestly, now, you should be proud of him. After all..." I grinned innocently as I crossed my arms behind the back of my head. "He is doing the Marines' rightful job. Riiight?"

Garp ground his teeth as he slowly and audibly cracked his knuckles. "You have one chance to take that back."

I snorted in response, spreading my arms wide invitingly. "Buddy, in case you've forgotten, I enjoy the rush of adrenaline terror affords me. So, please, feel free to do your damn worst."

"OH GOD I POO'D..." Soundbite wheezed, his eyes blank from fear.

"WISH GRANTED!" Garp rumbled, drawing his fist back in preparation.

For a bare moment, I actually felt a sliver of doubt.

"M-Mistah Gawp?"

And then everyone froze again, only this time it was on account of a distinctly small, timid, and positively heartwrenching voice. All attention turned towards the source—

...I thought I had long since grown immune to the whole 'puppy-dog-eyes' bit thanks to Soundbite utterly ruining it within the first week of me knowing him, but Merry proceeded to prove me wrong. I mean, seriously! Small, adorable, and on crutches, with massive watery eyes and a quivering lower lip? You'd have to be utterly lacking of a heart to not be affected, as evidenced by Garp visibly faltering.

"A-Awe you going to hurt my big bwother?" Merry whimpered sorrowfully.

"A-A-Ah, I-I, ah, t-t-that is to say..." the Vice Admiral hedged fretfully, glancing to and fro in search of a response.

"P-P-Pwease don't hurt Cwoss..." Merry hiccupped, tears welling up in the corners of her eyes. "H-H-He's one of my b-bestest fwiends in the whole wwoord, a-a-and he saved my w-w-wife! P-Pwease, d-don't..." She bowed her head as she started crying softly.

"W-Well, I-I, uh..." Garp flinched back.

"Vice Admiral, how could you!"

I managed—somehow!—to wrench my attention away from the scene in front of me to catch sight of Coby glaring daggers at the Vice Admiral who, I should note, massively outweighed him. And outranked him. And out-everything'd him.

"Making an innocent young girl cry?" the Master Chief Petty Officer fumed. "You should be ashamed of yourself!"

"B-But she—! A-And I—!" Garp scrambled to get his words together.

"You dirty bastard!" Helmeppo accused fervently.
"What kind of a man are you, huh!?" a random Marine piped up.

"Disgusting, simply disgusting!"

"Yeah, now I'm definitely not naming my son after you!"

"N-N-Now hold on a minute, a-a-all of you—"

I have to admit, to this day I have seen few sights funnier than that of Vice Admiral Monkey D. Garp, Hero of the Marines, flailing about desperately as his own men lambasted him. But still, even through my (barely concealed) amusement, I couldn't help feeling that something was... off about this whole affair.

Before I could put much thought into it, however...

"Disgraceful," Garp's fedora-wearing compatriot huffed.

For whatever, reason, that was what rebooted Garp's brain, prompting him to turn on his men and draw himself up to his full height. "Now, see here, you young whippersnappers! I—!

It all happened in an instant.

One second, Merry's head was bowed and she was sobbing her eyes out, the next it snapped up and her gaze locked on dead ahead, a pair of utterly evil golden stars glinting in her eyes. She spared a second to glance at Soundbite and slash a finger across her throat before she shoved her crutches into the ground, effectively flinging Merry forward.

And then...

**CHOMP!**

...the world just seemed to... well, stop turning as once anew everyone froze.

"Ooooh myyyy gooood..." I dragged out incredulously.

"Well, now..." Robin breathed.

"Oh, for fuck's sakes..." Nami moaned, dropping her hands in her face.

"What the...!?" Coby and Helmeppo gaped in shock.

"PFFF..." Soundbite snorted, very visibly holding himself back from cackling. *"T-T-TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES, FOLKS, sorry!"* The second he finished that last word he burst out howling. *"HOOHOOHOOHEEHHEEEHahahahaaaaaa!"

Garp sloooowly glanced over his shoulder, shock written across his face. "W-What the—?"

Merry's grin widened around the mouthful of his ass she'd bitten into. "Gr't yer t'th."

And then she redoubled the strength of her bite and things got...

"YEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEarrarrghhh!"

Interesting.

Years in the future, Monkey D. Garp would still swear up and down to anyone and everyone who
would listen that the scars on his ass came from either a bear trap, a snapping turtle or a juvenile Sea King that someone had left on his office chair, either as a practical joke, as part of an assassination plot, or on account of his forgetting that he'd left it there the day before.

And years in the future, nobody would believe him on account of the Marine witnesses present spreading the true story like wildfire in spite of how much he threatened and pleaded with them afterwards.

Said true story being that a little girl had sunk her teeth into his ass like a freaking cobra and absolutely refused to let go, no matter how much he howled and ran around frantically, arms flailing with all the dignity of a cat in a water-soaked sack in a room full of rocking chairs. And, quite honestly, there was only one way I, or hell, anyone could react to it.

"PFFHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAAAAA!" I cackled, falling onto the ground, pounding the floorboards with my fists. "TH-THIS IS COMEDY GO-HO-HO-HOLD! PFFHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

"SHISHISHISHISHI!" Luffy howled alongside me, rolling about as he clutched his gut. "THIS IS GREAT! GO MERRY! SHISHISHISHI!"

"S-Someone get a picture of this! It'll be worth millions!" Nami shrieked, clutching Sanji in a desperate bid to keep herself upright. Sanji, for once, didn't fly into a Love Hurricane due to being too occupied with supporting himself on Nami.

"I-I'm trying!" Conis wheezed, her arm spasming furiously as she tried to hold her Vision Dial properly and stay upright. "B-B-But I'm laughing too h-hard! I c-c-can't keep a s-steady hand!"

"TSEEHEEHEEHEE!" Su, meanwhile, had no such restrictions and was flailing about on her back as she kept laughing.

In fact, most of the room was on the floor; the only ones upright were Zoro, Boss, and Robin, and they were either slumped over or on their knees. Even among the Marines, nobody was composed enough to be bothered to help their boss; Coby and Helmeppo were laughing themselves to tears, the grunts were accumulating grass stains, and the cool guy—Bogard, that's the name I knew him by—Bogard was hiding his face with his fedora, the shaking of his shoulders betraying the fact that he was trying with every fiber of his being not to burst out laughing himself.

Overall, it was… yeah, it was just straight-up hilarious.

At least five minutes passed before I managed to get enough of my mental facilities flaring to wonder what would happen when Garp finally got it in his head to get her off. The thought that came to mind brought with it a solution that would put an end to the conflict in a most beautiful way.

As such, I forced myself to my feet, staggered over to the flailing Garp, and grabbed Merry's torso. I tried to yank her off, but she barely even budged a bit. Still, not to be denied, I lifted my foot, planted it on Garp's backside and shoved as hard as I could. It was a hell of a struggle, but eventually I managed to yank her free!

RIIIIP!

Though it wasn't from any weakness on Merry's part.

Garp blinked slowly and sighed in relief as he realized the absence of pain in his hindquarters before stiffening as he also felt a breeze pass between his legs. "Oooh sonnuva—!" He snapped his gaze around and stared in horror at the sight of his shorts hanging from Merry's grinning jaws. "Alright, brat, you listen and you listen good. Whatever the hell you're thinking about doing, you stop thinking
about it right the hell—!

Merry sucked the shorts down in a single gulp before adopting a shameless grin. "Tasty!"

Garp's eyes twitched even as his jaw, as well as that of every other Marine and Luffy, dropped in shock.

I blinked numbly as I processed the… let's say 'interesting' developments that had just occurred before glancing down at Merry, my eyebrow cocked in confusion. "…Wasn't your figurehead supposed to be a sheep?"

"Baaaaah-ah-ah-ah!" Merry bleated unabashedly in response.

"Fair 'nuff," I conceded.

"HEEHEEHEEHOOOHOOHAAHAAAAAA!" Soundbite howled. "I THINK I SEE some of me in her! Hahahahaaaaa!"

"You… little…!" Garp grit out as he strangled the air before him. "What the hell is your problem!? Where the hell did all of that cutesy crap from before go!?!"

Merry silently stared at him for a second before bowing her head, her hood ensuring that all that was visible was the corner of a light smirk. "Ha… hahahaaaa…"

And then, out of the blue—!

"MWAHAAHAAAAAAA!" Merry flung her head back and started cackling like a madwoman. "YE FOOLISH MARINE SOPS! YE REALLY DIDN'T GET THE MEMO DID YE!? WELL ALLOW ME TO MAKE MATTERS UTTERLY CLEAR FOR YE!"

And with that, Merry grabbed the sides of her jacket and jerked it—

I paled in realization. "Ahh, shit, we forgot to take our flag when we got off you, didn't we?"

The grin Merry shot at me matched that of the Jolly Roger emblazoned on the t-shirt she was wearing tooth for tooth. "I assure ye, I consider it to be a most fortuitous mistake. Now, if ye'll excuse me—DO YE GET THE PICTURE NOW, YE LANDLUBBER FOOLS!?" she shouted, returning to cackling at Garp and his men. "I MIGHT APPEAR TA BE A CUTE AND INNOCENT CARAVEL ON THE OUTSIDE, SURE, BUT IN ME KEEL AND SOUL?" She thumped a fist to her chest. "AH'LL EVER AND ALWAYS BE NOTHIN' LESS THAN A ROUGH-AND-TUMBLE, GROG-SWILLIN' MARINE-SINKIN' BUCCANEER, THROUGH AND THROUGH, AND DON'T YE EVER FORGET IT!"

I stared at Merry in open-mouthed awe as she finished her tirade and crossed her arms with a triumphant smirk, and I reacted in the only appropriate way I knew.

I smiled contentedly as I patted her head. "I am so proud of you, Merry. So proud."

"She's already taunting the Marines like a pro…" Usopp sobbed into his arm. "T-They grow up so fast!"

"To see the next generation do you proud!" Boss sobbed right along with him as he pumped his fist in the air. "A MAN'S ROMANCE AT ITS FINEST!"

"GO, BOSS, GO!" the TDWS concurred.
"You little…" Garp snarled out murderously, veins popping out on his forehead as he slowly cracked his knuckles. "Well, if you're seriously so intent on being a pirate, then I'm only happy to —!"

"Ah-Ah-AH!~" Soundbite sang with a shit-eating grin plastered on his face. "REMEMBER, GARP: we were having 'TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES' during this entire bit; YOU START JACK, I DROP THE SCRAMBLE, AND ALL THE REST OF THE WORLD will hear is YOU pummeling poor, innocent Merry and her big brother."

"The snail's right, Garp," I smirked confidently. "Hurt us now, and you will enjoy what I would like to call a 'Reverse Celestial Dragon' reaction. I.E., civilians rise up to lynch you. Care to try it?"

"…You've earned your place as the tactician of this crew, Jeremiah Cross," Garp nodded with begrudging respect. Merry and I exchanged victorious grins, before freezing as he pinned us both with murderous glares. "And you've both earned a spot on my shitlist. Mark my words, there will be consequences."

"Leave my crew alone, Gramps!" Luffy protested, before shrinking in on himself when Garp turned his a glare at him. It only lasted for a moment, however, before Luffy set his face in stone. His legs were trembling like Usopp's, but he stood strong in the face of his grandfather's anger. "You can hit me all you want… but I won't forgive anyone who hurts my friends," he growled.

I had only a moment to appreciate him quoting Shanks again before Garp reared back his fist, clearly preparing to hit his grandson—

SHINK! "And family or not, I don't take threats to my captain lightly."

Only to pause as Zoro, Wado and Kitetsu in hand, moved to stand beside Luffy. Garp raised a brow.

"The mosshead has a point," Sanji conceded, moving to Luffy's opposite side. I hastily glanced at Lassoo and nodded at him, prompting him to snap into his hybrid form and snarl menacingly even as he and I moved along with the rest of the crew to stand beside the Monster Trio.

"After all, a captain's duty may be to his crew—" Boss continued, the TDWS flanking him proudly.

"But a crew's duty is to their captain," Nami finished as she and Usopp both readied their weapons.

"It should be obvious by now, Vice Admiral Garp," Vivi said coolly, a Lion Cutter spinning in her hands. "If you threaten one of the Straw Hat Pirates, you threaten all of the Straw Hat Pirates."

Garp took in the sight of us all standing together. Sanji, Chopper, and Robin all glared at him in challenge, while the rest of the crew had their weapons in hand to match their glares. And Luffy? His expression hadn't faltered, and his trembling had stopped dead.

Merry took it all in for a second before adopting a massive fond smile. "I love this crew…” she whispered joyously.

After a few seconds, Garp lowered his arm with a put-upon sigh—and I think a mutter of 'damn déjâ-vu'? Either way, a bittersweet grin came over his face. "Well, if nothing else good came of this, I'm glad my stupid grandson has found companions who care about him that much." He turned away and folded his arms with a huff. "Eh, whatever. I'm on vacation right now anyway, I'm under no obligation to try catching you. Do whatever the hell you want, however utterly foolish it might be."

I heaved a sigh of relief before snapping my head up with an eager grin as inspiration suddenly
slugged me. "Weeell, if that's the case, seeing as you're not busy and all, think you could spare the time to outline a method or three on how to train some techniques? Like, oh, off the top of my head… Haki or—?"

"Not on your life, ass," Garp snorted as he dug a pinkie up his nose.

I shot a desperate look at Vivi, and she shot a long-suffering look at the ceiling before smiling beatifically. "Oh, come now, Vice Admiral, don't be like that. Please tell us everything you know about Haki?" Vivi 'asked' politely.

Garp paused for a moment, and for that moment, I thought it had worked.

"BWAAHAHAHAHAHA!"

I found myself brutally disabused of that notion when he started laughing his head off.

"HAHAHAAAAAHAHAHAHaaaa!" Garp finally wound down, wheezing as he pressed his hand to his face before glancing at us from under his fingers. "Really, Cross is one thing, the world knows he's completely insane, but I'd expect the rest of you to know how completely absurd the concept of me answering to a will as weak as that is."

Vivi paled in shock. "W-Wait, you—?"

"Noticed that you just tried to enforce your Sovereign's Will on me?" Garp scoffed with a wave of his hand. "Psh! Of course I did! After all…" He shot a smirk over his shoulder. "You're not one of the very few people who I answer to!"

I prepared to throw in the towel, but then a thought flitted through my mind and I hastily pasted a defeated scowl on my face. "Ah, but of course! Vivi's will was in no way a match for your own! She could never get you to do what she said properly, I should have known!" I proclaimed melodramatically.

"Feh, moron," Garp scoffed as he dug his finger in his ear. "You know as well as I do that willpower is only half the battle when it comes to the Sovereign's Will subset of Conqueror's Haki! The other half of it is respect! After all, Conquerors get people to kneel before them through a sheer flood of willpower. Sovereigns, on the other hand, like your princess friend, play on the natural aura of leadership they exude to get people to bow and obey before them. Different personalities and ways of ruling, different results. But, eh." He waved his hand dismissively. "You already knew all that."

"Or at least, we know it now!" Su snickered behind her paw. "Thanks a lot for the tidbits, gramps! Tseeheheheheeeee!

Garp froze in spot as the blood drained from his face before he wheeled around and started strangling the air… again. "Yooooou…"

"And we are back!" I said, stopping the Vice Admiral in his place as I rolled my finger at Soundbite. "Sorry about that, loyal viewers, but… well, let's just say that the good Vice Admiral may have had a bout of narcolepsy, which may have resulted in the unfortunate and untimely demise of his pants. So, following the trouser malfunction that the world will never know of, we stand here with Vice Admiral Garp now perfectly composed, but without suitable bottom garments. So…" I glanced downward with a cocked brow. "Fire hydrant-print boxers, eh?"

Garp promptly flushed brick red, though whether it was from outrage or being reminded that he was still sans pants, I couldn't even begin to tell.
"Points for being innovative, at the least." My grin widened tauntingly. "Ooor not, seeing as the figurehead of your ship is a dog. Do I sense a theme here?"

At that point, everyone within earshot lost it again.

-0-

The raucous laughter coming from the Transponder Snail was only matched by the raucous laughter coming from two long-suffering aged citizens.

"BAHAHAHAHA! Ohohoh, I've wanted to hear that old bastard get his for decades! This has been coming for a long time!" Dadan crowed as she pounded on the makeshift bar she'd set up in her hideout.

"WAHAHAHA! I'm right there with you, bandit! I'll never object to the SBS again, this justifies everything!" Woop Slap cackled.

Makino cocked an eyebrow at the display before leaning towards Dogra and Magra. "Is this the happiest you've ever seen yours too?"

"By far," the bandits nodded in sage agreement.

"Well, in that case, this calls for something special!" the kindly bartender proclaimed enthusiastically, walking over to a corner of the bar and withdrawing an unopened bottle. "I was saving this bottle of Wano Rice Wine that Shanks left me for a good time, and this seems as good an occasion as any to open it!"

"AGREED!" Woop Slap and Dadan proclaimed eagerly.

As the laughter redoubled, Makino filled a few glasses, passed them around and raised one for herself. "To the Straw Hat Pirates, who never cease to amaze and inspire!"

"KANPAI!"

-0-

Garp fumed and hissed indignantly for a moment before slumping over with a defeated sigh. "Oh for the love of—enough, enough! Luffy, your crew is utterly exhausting and I give up. BUT!" he barked as he drew himself up and slid his shades back over his eyes. "I'm not going to let that get me down! I'm still in a beautiful and thriving city, and I'm still on the first vacation I've had in years! So, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go and enjoy myself and nothing anyone can say is going to change my—!"

"Puru puru puru puru!"

"Call on the direct line from Marineford for you, Vice Admiral," Bogard deadpanned as he withdrew a Transponder Snail from his coat.

Garp stiffened fearfully, knocking his glasses askew in the process. "As I was saying, I'm going right back to my ship and setting off for Marineford right as soon as my men are finished with their shore leave!" he bit out hastily, spinning on his heel and striding out of the building as fast as his feet could take him. Then he paused just outside and turned back around, his arms crossed and his head bowed.

"But still... I suppose that while I have this opportunity... so long as my voice has even half a chance of reaching my idiot son... Then this just has to be said."
Everyone fell silent in anticipation of what Garp could possibly want to say.

"GET A JOB!"

**WHAM!**

Honestly now, it was my fault, well and truly. I *really* should have known better than to expect anything even *remotely* different from someone like a damn Monkey. Still, as it was, at least I was starting to gain a tolerance to head pains from hitting my head against the floor so much. I was also starting to taste copper, though I'm fairly certain that was supposed to be a *bad* thing.

"Eh…?" I slowly raised my hand as I lifted my head. "Did you *not* hear that little speech I made earlier? About him freeing the world from tyranny and all that?"

Garp's response was to snort out a load of steam. "THAT'S A HOBBY!"

"Oooof course," I groaned as I hung my head in defeat. "What the hell was I thinking?"

"Well, that's it, then," Garp spun on his heel and legitimately booked it, the Marines outside hastily moving out of his path. "SAFE TRAVELS!"

We all stared silently after him before Luffy grinned at Coby. "So! What's new with you?"

I hastily elbowed Nami as I once again covered the mic. "I'll direct their conversation and pump him for as much intel as I can get if you'll record it all," I hissed subtly.

The *CHA-CHING!* I practically heard as her spine snapped straight was all I needed in answer. Heck, maybe this could even make paying off my newly acquired debt semi-plausi—!

"STRAW HATS! STRAW HATS!"

'What did I do to deserve this?' I groaned inwardly as I turned towards the frantic and disheveled Galley-La worker who was running up towards the hole in the house. "Before you say anything!" I cut him off with a raised hand. "I already know what you're here about and it's being handled."

"YOU—wait, what? So you *already* know about the crazy elephant in your crew's storage locker?"

"Yes, we've already dealt with the Mari—" I froze as his words sunk in, and all eyes turned towards him. "I'm sorry, could you repeat that?"

"Eh, just that there's a crazy elephant in your crew's storage locker," the worker shrugged indifferently. "But hey, if you've already got that handled—!"

"Sir, sir," I interrupted him again. "I'd just like to remind you that I've been on the Grand Line for several months now, so I think that it says a *lot* about just how utterly confused I am when I say WHAT?!"

-0-

"…You have *got* to me kidding me…” I muttered incredulously as the Galley-La worker and I leaned around the corner of the door to my crew's storage locker, peering inside. "Out of the literal *dozens* of discarded swords on that godforsaken bridge that I could have grabbed, I chose the one *with the elephant Zoan in it!*?"

"BAROOOOOOOH!"
"Apparently yes," Soundbite deadpanned, following Funkfreed with his eyes as he reared up on his hind legs, trunk flailing about as he fought off the half-dozen dockworkers that were trying to subdue him. "And for the record, HE HASN'T SAID JACK YET, HE'S JUST BEEN YELLING INCOHERENTLY."

"Congratulations, Cross," Lassoo chuffed flatly as he ground a paw into his forehead. "Your luck has officially hit an all-time low."

I grimaced as I found myself unable to refute that statement before morphing it into a scowl. "That may be so, but you're forgetting one particular aspect of the luck of the Straw Hats: when our luck bites us in the ass, we turn it right the hell around and make it work for us!" And with that, I walked out from around the doorframe and strode into the warehouse. "Come on, guys."

Lassoo briefly eyed the rampaging elephant-sword before swallowing audibly. "Ah… can we vote on this, or—?"

"Lassoo!"

The dog-cannon flinched and followed me with a defeated whimper. Nodding, I turned in the general direction of the elephant and marched up to about a few meters away from him, waving off the shipwrights trying to subdue him in the process. "Hey, Timmy Trumpet!" I called out, spreading my arms invitingly. "Remember me?"

The white behemoth swung his head towards me, his narrowed eyes snapping wide with outrage. "BAROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOH!"

The Zoan-weapon turned his mass towards me, his trunk reverting to a massive blade as he prepared to mow me down…

"HOLD IT!"

Only to stall in place when I snapped my hand up. "Listen," I calmly prompted. "I can imagine just how totally pissed off you are, and honestly, going by the craters you're sporting there—" I gestured at the talon-prints indented in Funkfreed's brow. "You have every right to be. But all I ask is for a few minutes of your time, alright? If you're not satisfied by the time I'm done talking…" My expression fell flat as I jerked my thumb at Lassoo. "Then you can take it up with him."

"GRRRRRRR!"

Lassoo drew his hackles back in a vicious snarl, flames roiling between his jaws.

Funkfreed eyed his fellow animal-weapon, his expression unreadable, before allowing his trunk to relax back into flesh with a dark snort.

"Glad to hear it," I said, crossing my arms. "Now, then, while you've got a legitimate grievance about the dents you've taken to the skull…" I snapped my finger up and pointed it at him. "I think that that's the only legitimate grievance you have right now!"

"Eh?" Soundbite, Lassoo and the dockworkers around me yelped incredulously, matching Funkfreed's own dumbstruck look.

"Well, yeah!" I forged on. "After all, it was thanks to our crew invading Enies that you saw the first
piece of action you've undoubtedly experienced in… what, a year? A decade? Your entire life? Because, come on, let's face facts here! You were Spandam's sword, and Spandam was a lot of things: a bastard, a degenerate, the list goes on and on, but two things he was above all else? He was a weakling and a coward! That means that he never, ever got into fights if he could help it and you were a superfluous accessory at best. And can you honestly tell me that I'm wrong?"

The elephant snorted and jerked his head forward in defiance, but after a second of me glaring him down, he looked away, and I heard a mumbled sound come from his mouth.

"One for one," Soundbite confirmed. "Apparently he was more pet than WEAPON."

"Eesh, poor bastard…" Lassoo flinched sympathetically.

"My thoughts exactly," I nodded. "Now, look, Funkfreed… what I want you to do for me is I want you to confirm your life up until now with whatever you remember of the Bridge of Hesitation. You remember how I grabbed you, right? I was actually using you for once in your life, how you finally got to fulfill your life's purpose?"

"That's what I hoped. Now, look, you're at a crossroads right now." I popped up a finger. "On the one hand, you can stay loyal to the Marines; fight me, possibly fight my crew, inevitably get your ass whipped and we'll let Garp take you back to the Marines. Maybe they'll destroy you so that they can reacquire your fruit, more likely they'll transfer you to another officer for their usage. Whether they'd be better or worse than Spandam, I couldn't tell you. No matter what, though, it'd be a gamble. Personally?" I popped up my second finger, and then pointed it at myself. "I'd take the second option, the guaranteed satisfaction option, of coming with me, and letting me be your wielder."

"WHAT!?!" everyone squawked incredulously, even Funkfreed reeling back in shock.

"Well, yeah!" I said, throwing my arms out. "Come on, think about it! You know how utterly insane my life is, how nuts my crew's lives are! And me, personally, I get in fights all the damn time! And, well…” I flexed my gauntlets demonstratively. "As good as these babies are, I do enjoy having a guaranteed back-up weapon on me. My old baton was good, but, well… it's gone now. And, I'll admit, I'm not a swordsman, that is a fact, and for awhile I'd be pulling a Spandam by relying on your powers… but…”

I clenched my fists. "But I'm willing to try. I'm willing to learn. I'm willing to match whatever effort you put in, step for step. You do right by me by supporting me, and I'll do right by you by not only helping you use your abilities to the fullest, but by giving you the best damn fights any sword on these seas has ever known!" I held my hand out to him invitingly. "Whaddaya say… friend?"

Funkfreed brayed and trumpeted hesitantly, glancing to and fro as he debated with himself.

"Ah… hey. Funkfreed, right?"

The elephant-blade blinked in surprise as Lassoo padded forward, his head cocked to the side.

"Listen…” The dog-gun glanced to the side sheepishly as he rubbed his shoulder. "I'm… sorry for my earlier reaction, alright? That was… not nice. But I've stood where you are now, and if you want my advice?" He affixed Funkfreed with a firm gaze. "If you turn him down, you'll be making the worst mistake of your life. This pirate…” Lassoo shot a smirk over his shoulder at me. "He's as nutty as they come, insane even, but he's more than a good wielder, he's a good friend. And if he wants you as his sword? Then friend, you should consider yourself to be the luckiest damn blade on the six
seas… just like how I'm the luckiest damn gun."

I sniffed gratefully as I fought to hold my tears back before kneeling down and scratching Lassoo's chin. "Good dog," I whispered happily.

"Hweehweehwee!" Lassoo laughed as he planted a slobber-laden lick on my face. "Best friend!"

Funkfreed kept his head bowed as he thought things over. Then, at last, a determined glint came into his eye.

"Alright…" he whispered before raising his head and voice confidently as he extended his trunk. "Alright, I'm in! Put 'er the—!"

**SMASH!**

He cut himself off as both he and the rest of us faceplanted hard enough to shake the floor. But above the din of the titanic impact sounded out a single, very familiar noise.

"HAHAHAHOOHHOOHOOHEEEHEEEHEE!" Soundbite howled ecstatically. "Oh joyous day, OH JOYOUS DA-A-AY!"

"YOU ARE FUCKING SHAMELESS, SLIMESTAIN!" I spat viciously as I hauled my face up from the ground. "WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED TO EVERY ANIMAL HAVING THEIR OWN DAMN VOICE!?"

"SCREW THAT!" Soundbite cackled in my face in response. "This was a golden opportunity, no way in hell was I LETTING SOMETHING LIKE MORAL INTEGRITY STAND IN THE WAY OF THE HOLY TRIFECTA!"

"HE IS A GOD-DAMN ELEPHANT!" I snarled as I jabbed my finger at said elephant in the room. "WHERE IN THE HELL DO YOU GET MOUSE FROM THAT!?"

"I get it from 'I DON'T GIVE A RAT'S ASS!'" the snail replied with a smirk. "And I don't give a damn if the demons Disney calls its lawyers REACH ACROSS THE DIMENSIONAL BARRIER TO SLAP MY SMILE OFF MY FACE WITH COPYRIGHT INFRINGEMENT, the voice stays!"

"I WILL FUCKING EAT YOU!"

"What did I just get myself into…?" Funkfreed wept into the ground.

"No takebacksies, we're stuck on this mad ride together…" Lassoo chuffed sympathetically.

"Ugh…" I groaned as I got back on my feet. "Screw it, I know better than to try and change his mind, so let's just get back to the crew." I held my hand out to him. "If you wouldn't mind?"

"Ah, right, gimme a sec…" Funkfreed nodded hastily, placing his trunk to the ground and shifting to his sword-form, leaving an ornate blade planted upright in the stonework.

I blinked in surprise at the display before grabbing Funkfreed's hilt and drawing him from the ground, weighing him in my hand a bit before turning to the nearest Galley-La worker. "Alright, first things first: Did he actually crush anything important?"

"Ah… nah, nah, nothing like that," the shipwright assured me. "He knocked a few things over, sure,
but everything looks to be alright."

I heaved a sigh of relief. "Perfect. If Nami found out that my new sword actually managed to crush her mother's trees..." I shivered in horror. "Yeah, no. I want to be able to sleep at night. Alright, alright, one more question before I go..." I pointed at Funkfreed. "Got any spare sheaths lying around that are close to a size him?"

-o-

A few minutes later, the telltale smell of burning wood and grilling meat reached my nostrils a block away from the pool where I knew the crew would be by this time, if the sunset dyeing the island orange and the sound of festivities filling the air were anything to go by.

I had to admit, I was really looking forward to it; after all, this was more than a mere impromptu shindig, it was the long-overdue and perfectly justified celebration of us reclaiming everything that the world sought to take away from us. But it was for that same reason that I was also making sure to take a longer than usual route back to our impromptu HQ, rather than heading for the light and smoke immediately.

After all, there was one loose end yet remaining from Enies Lobby, and I intended to nail it to the wall once and for fucking all.

And so, as I noticed Soundbite suddenly snap to alertness, I prepared myself for what I knew was coming.

"Cross?" the snail whispered nervously.

"Hold on, Soundbite, we're almost there," I waved him off.

"But Cross—!"

"There'll be enough meat even with Luffy there, there are Sea-King-killer ships aplenty around here, and the waters don't lack for prey either."

"Cross, seriously—"

"Soundbite, quit panicking. Everything is alright," I huffed, folding my arms behind my head as I came to a stop.

"THE HELL IT—"

"But," I cut him off sharply, my tone cold. "If it'll put your mind at ease, just remember that he's not someone who would go back on his word, and the fact that Sengoku would have to be an absolute idiot to touch us here after we so soundly dropkicked the entire globe a few days ago means that he isn't here on orders. But still, that does leave us with the pressing question: what possible reason could you have to be here, Kuzan?"

Soundbite snapped his jaws shut, his eyes wide with shock.

"Hmph...You truly are a frightening man, Jeremiah Cross," an unmistakably chilly voice drawled behind me.

"Cut the flattery and answer the question, icicle-breath," I snapped, not even deigning to turn and face him. "I want answers for Long Ring Long, and I want them now. You saw the debt you owed to Saul fulfilled, you saw Robin in her place. For a minute, I thought that I may have underestimated
how decent of a Marine you are, I thought I could give you a chance." My hands clenched into fists. "And then you said it. You said that parting shot, which we both know was taken how you intended it to be read. You were aiming to shatter what little happiness she had found, and you saw just what kind of a hell it took to get it back for her." My lips drew back into a snarl. "Do you have any idea what that bastard did to her? How many bones he broke, how close she came to dying?"

His silence said enough.

I closed my eyes, and against my will, my tone became pleading. "Why, Kuzan? Why do it? Why break her trust in us, our strength? Why sic CP9, Rob Lucci himself, on her? What possible reason could you have had to hurt Robin like that?"

The silence hung heavy in the air, and the growing frigidity only made the air all the heavier. Ultimately, however, he deigned to answer me.

"Eh, I suppose I owe you something after this whole mess, and since it's sure as hell not going to be my respect, it might as well be the truth." The slight crackling of ice belied the cool drawl of his voice. "See, that little speech you gave when I made the monumental mistake of not only allowing but inviting you to talk? It actually touched base. Shook me more than I care to admit. The way you stood by Nico Robin despite everything… I don't know how, but you knew the truth of that day. And ever since that day, I've been questioning if Saul made the right choice all those years ago. If I made the right choice, if any of us did. And seeing Nico Robin, the Demon of Ohara, in the hands of someone else who knew about the hell of that day…"

"You saw that as your chance," I snapped my head up in realization, finally turning around to face him. The admiral's expression was stony, but the shame he was demonstrating was unmistakable. "You knew what you were doing as soon as you fired that parting shot. Cipher Pol 9, Enies Lobby… you set the whole thing up, matching the full force of the Marines and the World Government against whatever we could muster, just so that you could get your answer as to whose truth was truly victorious!"

Kuzan heaved a cloudy sigh as he shook his head and slowly raised his hand in denial. "No, Jeremiah Cross, not even close. Truth is… I knew the answer to that conflict the moment you repeated Saul's words to me, the answer to your words… but I didn't want to believe it. Every obstacle in your path was something I hoped I could use as an excuse to keep denying it; no matter how strong you were, surely you couldn't take on Enies Lobby and win. Surely the World Government would snuff you out, and I could put this all behind me like some bad dream. But that just didn't happen, and instead you managed to succeed with the entire world as your witness. Meaning that I've no more room left with which to deny the truth, every truth I've hidden from and dodged all these years."

The glare in his eyes sharpened as he looked into mine. "And so, to answer your initial question, Jeremiah Cross, I came here because I have a new question now, one even more daunting than the last. And considering your reputation, I want to see if you can give me an answer."

I blinked in surprise, but my expression remained firm even as I debated with myself and eventually came to a conclusion. "I won't promise anything, but ask anyway."

He visibly steeled himself. Then…

"What am I supposed to do now?"

I processed that for several seconds. I honestly thought long and hard about what he was asking, about what I could say, what I could tell him…
And ultimately, I scowled. "Get up off your ass and figure it out yourself."

"HAVE YOU LOST YOUR—WHEGH!" I grabbed Soundbite's tongue mid-sentence, cutting off his incredulous squawk.

Aokiji, meanwhile, was no less taken aback. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me!" I snarled, jabbing my finger at the towering frigid bastard. "Figure it. Out. Yourself. You say you've seen the truth, you say you want to change? Well, I call bullshit! Look at you! Even now, you're being a lazy bastard, relying on others to do your thinking for you, to give you all the answers you need. You think that someone's just going to stand up and act as your inspiration, your beacon of righteousness?" I shook my head darkly as I marched up to him. "Weeeell tough, because that shit officially stops with me. I'm not giving you squat, Kuzan. You want your epiphany, you want a path to a better world?"

I stopped as I stood before him, reached up and started poking him in his chest. "Then you get up, you find it and you pave it with your own hands, with your own blood, sweat and tears… just like what everyone else on the planet does every. Single. Day."

For a full minute, Aokiji and I just… glared at each other, the temperature gradually and steadily lowering each and every second that the conflict drew out. Soon I was seeing my own breath, but I didn't let myself shiver or waver, refusing to sacrifice so much as an inch in the conflict.

And then, just like that, the temperature snapped right back to normal as Aokiji turned his back on me, his arm raised dismissively. "Honestly, I don't know what I was expecting from you, but it really should have been that, huh?"

I snorted firmly (it was not a sigh of relief, no matter what the hell Soundbite said) before turning as well and heading towards the party. "Your debt is paid and you're no longer welcome here. Mark my words, Ice Hole: if you ever come near my sister again, I will end you."

And so I walked away…

"Hold it."

Before halting against my will as the frosty voice spoke up again.

"Before you go… I've got two messages for you. First, for Nico Robin, tell her…" Aokiji hesitated for a moment before sighing in defeat. "Tell her that Saul's hat suits her."

I felt my teeth grind together, but held my tongue. "And second?" I grit out.

"Marshall D. Teach."

I didn't even try to stop myself from spinning around and staring at Aokiji in shock, meeting his cool gaze dead on.

"You know of him," he deduced. "Good, that makes this easier. Then allow me to be as clear as I possibly can: that man… he's dangerous, Jeremiah Cross. Dangerous in ways not even you can begin to contemplate."

Aokiji narrowed his eyes.

"Beware the Blackbeard Pirates, Cross. Beware Blackbeard."
And then he was gone.

I stared numbly at the spot where he was a moment before as the temperature slowly began increasing again. Then I was all but dunked in ice water as realization hit me full force.

"Ace," I breathed in horror.

The next thing I knew, I was running with all the speed I could muster towards the source of the noise, rushing through every alleyway I could find as Soundbite, having put the pieces together, spewed out the fastest route he could find. The exact instant that I arrived, I sprinted in the direction he indicated, ignoring any comments along the way, bodychecking anyone in my way out of my path…

"Oh, hey Cwo—!"

"GIMME!"

CRASH!

"GAH!"

Aaaaand finishing it all off by bodily tackling Luffy and snatching his hat off his head before he knew what actually hit him.

"Card, card, where's the fucking card!?" I hissed as I frantically rifled through one of the most valuable pieces of headwear in human history, until finally…

"GOTCHA!" I whooped as I located the invaluable card and held it high—

"BASTARD!"

CRACK!

"GARGH!"

Just in time for Luffy to sucker punch me into a wall, square in the nose to boot.

"Aaaaargh, shonnuva—OW!" I winced as I snapped my nose back into place.

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING, CROSS?!" a blur I vaguely recognized as Luffy roared above me, stomping about furiously. "YOU STOLE MY HAT AND YOU MADE ME CHOKE ON MY MEAT!"

"Grgrggghhh… gimme a second to stop seeing double and I'll tell you," I groaned, rubbing my head and blinking several times, but not letting the paper in my other hand leave it. Finally, as my vision came back into focus, I brought the paper in front of my eyes—

"…pfheh… pfheheheh… PFFHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!

Luffy paused in confusion as I started cackling like a madman. "Ah… Cross? What's so funny?"

"PFFHAHAHAHAHA! Funny? Funny!?" I choked out through my euphoria as I worked my way to my feet. "Not funny, HAPPY! Happy because we've won! AGAIN! A gamble I worried about above all others, a last ditch throw whose outcome I doubted every step of the way, and it's just hit on all sixes! We won again! We won we won we won WE WON! PFFHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!

"
"Eeeehhh…” Luffy tilted his head to the side in confusion. "I don't get it."

"PFFHAHAHA!" I crowed ecstatically as I shot up and slung my arm around Luffy's shoulders, surreptitiously replacing the perfectly intact Vivre Card of Portgas D. Ace back in his hat in the process. "There's nothing to get, mon ami! Right now, all we must do is what you've been doing up until now: celebrate! Eat, drink, and above all else, be as merry as possible!"

"OI!"

THWACK!

My smile barely even shifted as my head was knocked to the side on account of a crutch bouncing off my skull, and I instead turned it towards the source of the projectile. "I take it I struck a nerve?" I called out.

"YER DARN RIGHT YE DID!" Merry crowed from atop a recently returned Sodom's head, grinning like a lunatic as she flailed her remaining crutch about. "AFTER ALL, THERE AIN'T NO OTHER MERRY IN THE SIX BLUE SEAS BUT ME! Now, if you'll excuse me!" Before anyone could stop her, the girl-ship leapt off of the King-Bull's head with a whoop. "CANNONBAAAALL!"

"YAHOO! WAIT FOR ME!"

"Eh?" I glanced at Luffy in confusion, only to find that he'd ducked out from under my arm and was running towards the pool oh that dumb son of a—

"CANNONBALL!" the most senior hammer on our crew crowed as he followed our second-most senior hammer into the pool.

"YOU IDIOTS!" most of the crew howled indignantly as the pair splashed down, more than a few of our non-hammers following them in in an attempt to rescue them… or properly drown them, I honestly couldn't tell you which.

"…whoops," I muttered in embarrassment, a sweatdrop hanging from my brow.

"Heheheh… Anything but mindless good fun, hm, Cross?"

I snickered in agreement even as I turned and accepted the drink Robin was offering me. "And we wouldn't have it any other way, would we?" I paused to take a deep sip from the glass before gracing her with an angelic smile. "Oh, and by the way, if you drugged this too, you'll wake up tomorrow morning with pink hair."

Robin's smile remained fixed even as she tilted her head to the side. "Dearest brother, I feel it is only fair to warn you that if I wind up pink, you wind up bald."

"M.A.D.! Is there no better way to prevent a war?" Soundbite cackled.

"If there is, I've yet to find one," Robin shrugged helplessly even as she took a sip of her own. However, even in spite of her glass hiding her mouth, I could see her smile shrink slightly. "So… Cross. To confirm, your knowledge of the future… it came from… a book?"

I hid my grimace with my own glass. "Oooh trust me, I've been seeing ripples as is, and after today and Enies, I can only imagine that they're going to get worse from here."

"Hm…” Robin hummed contemplatively as she peered into her drink.
"But… I'm not worried."

Before glancing up in shock as I continued with a smile.

"Because… earlier, when I was going insane and laughing my ass off? I was doing it because the worst tragedy I could think of in the days to come has just been officially averted. Things are changing, and not all for the better, sure, but I at least managed to do that right! And… even if something does come our way, a problem I didn't foresee, some foe ready to crush us all into paste…” I looked up at our crewmates partying around us, thoroughly enjoying the sight. "Then… I trust that this crew can handle them, no matter what!" I allowed the side of my smile out of Robin's sight to fall into a grimace. "At least, for a little while longer…” I grumbled to myself.

"Hmmm…” Robin hummed some more as she contemplated my words, but she eventually shrugged it off and went back to smiling. "Well, if that's the case, I suppose I'll just have to follow your lead, won't I?"

I nodded in agreement before pausing as a thought occurred to me. "Ah, and before I forget? Don't worry about Aokiji anymore. We… well, you won't see him again." I glanced to the side with a scowl. "Not if he knows what's good for him, at any rate…"

My big sis blinked in confusion before frowning and grabbing my cheek with a sharp tug. "I know that I'm not terribly well-versed in such matters, but unless my memory of the many books I've read over the years fails me, it's the older sibling who protects the younger, correct?"

"Aw, c'mon!” I snickered, entirely ignoring the hold she had on my face. "We've never been even remotely close to conventional in the past, why start now, ne?"

Robin glared at me a bit more before looking away with a huff, her cheeks slightly puffed out. "Maybe so, but it's still embarrassing…”

"Pfhehehe—!"

"GYAAAAAH! HEEEELP!"

I was cut off by Luffy suddenly hollering at the top of his lungs as he ran around… with Merry hanging off of his neck?!

"Come oooon, Captain!” she pleaded desperately. "Gimme a bite! An eentsy weentsy bite! No, less than that! A nibble, a morsel, even a lick will do! Just let me taste it!"

I felt a blue pallor come over my expression the same time it fell over Robin's.

"Ah…” she mumbled helplessly.

"Soundbite…?” I all but pleaded.

"She's talking about his hat."

"Oh-thank-God…” we sighed in relief, slumping forward.

I held the position for a bit before glancing at Robin. "There's no chance in hell she'd settle for a nibble, is there?"

"Not a one,” Robin confirmed with chuckle as she righted herself. She was then silent for a bit as she observed the pair's antics, smiling fondly. "Still, getting back on topic… I must admit, some of the
less savory adjustments aside, it's truly wonderful that you found a means through which to save her. I'm glad that I didn't have to suffer such a horrendous blight on the best day of my life."

"Heh. No chance of that happening either way, Robin," I chuckled as I waved her off. "I got desperate enough to save her en route to Enies that I appealed to the omnipotent asshat that dropped me here for a mulligan on saving her. It gave me her fruit in return for the entertainment I gave it—though I would have still done it anyways, the bastards deserved it for the hell they put you through—but if the fruit didn't work, it still gave me one last Hail Mary I could make use of."

"Oh?" Robin cocked her eyebrow as she made to take another sip of her drink. "Now that I think about it, I do recall Boss being surprised that you were willing to accept. What was the offer it proposed?"

I smirked as I subtly withdrew a Vision Dial, holding it at the ready while she started to drink.

"Oooh, nothing major… just instantaneous gender reassignment."

"PFFFT!"

Ahhh, a genuine spit take from Nico Robin, *and* I managed to *immortalize* it? Yes, indeed, let there be no doubts: life… was good.

Once she finished hacking and coughing, she pinned me with a glare, but then her eyes widened as she realized that I wasn't kidding. For a few more seconds, she just stared at me. Then she bowed her head, tilting her hat to cover her face.

I frowned in concern as she started to shake, but then I heard it.

"…dere… dereshi…"

It started slow, and then without warning, Nico Robin, the Devil's Child, the Demon of Ohara…

"DERESHISHISHI! DERESHISHISHISHISHISHIII!"

Flung her head back and started laughing her guts out, tears of mirth fountaining from her eyes as she struggled to stay upright from laughing so hard.

I blinked in shock as I processed the completely and utterly unprecedented sight before me, but I was swift to get over my paralysis and hastily did two things: First, I snapped off a second photograph, because this too was a moment worthy of immortality. And second?

"PFFHAHAHAHAHAHAAAAAA!"

"HEEHEEHEHEEHEEhoohooohooHAAHAAAAA!"

I joined her in her mirth, both my snail and I laughing right alongside her. Because really, what else could I do under those circumstances? And hell, we would have probably *kept* laughing for a good long while, too, had life not decided to interrupt us.

"HOOHOOHOO—huh?" Soundbite suddenly cut himself off, one of his eyestalks cocked at something, before interrupting our dying laughter with a shrill whistle. "**Hey, sorry to interrupt, but just FYI? YOU'RE NOT THE ONLY SHUTTERBUG AT THIS SHINDIG. SOMEBODY'S SNAPPING SHOTS OF OUR FRIENDS.**"

"Ah…” Robin snapped her gaze around as she analyzed our surroundings. "So 'Flaming' Attatchan is
here, then? I see…” She glanced at me inquisitively. "I trust you have a plan, Cross?"

"Hell yeah!" I nodded firmly. "I'm striking myself a pose, and I suggest you hop to it and do the same!"

"…eh?" Robin blinked in confusion.

"What, you think I'm actually gonna stop him?" I scoffed incredulously. "Please, if not today, then they'll try and snap our photos tomorrow. That's a fact, and not even I can stop it. As such…” I snapped up a thumbs-up. "I'm making sure that my anonymity dies on *my* terms, and not by candid! Get my drift?"

Robin stared at me silently before shrugging with a weary-yet-fond sigh. "I don't know what else I was expecting."

"Me neither. Now, if you'll excuse me—!" I interrupted myself as I suddenly broke into a sprint, dashing over to the nearest table I could find and leaping onto it, and jerking my transceiver's mic from its cradle.

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN THE WORLD OVER, IF I MAY HAVE YOUR ATTENTION PLEASE!" I called out, my hand raised high into the air.

The vast majority of the eyes at the party snapped over to me, and according to Soundbite's whispered intel, one particular camera-lens as well.

"AS YOU ALREADY KNOW," I proclaimed. "I'M JEREMIAH CROSS!"

"AND I'M SOUNDBITE!" the snail concurred.

"AND AS YOU ALSO KNOW, IT'S ONCE AGAIN TIME—!"

"TO START THE SBS!"

I… actually needed a second to recover from that. "Loud."

"AND FREAKING RUDE!" Soundbite howled at the crowd. "*THAT'S MY DAMN SHTICK!"

"SHOVE IT UP YOUR SHELL, MUCUS STAIN!" Mikey cackled,

"GRRRRGH—!"

"ANYWAY!" I picked up hastily before he could really pick up steam. "NOW THAT OUR GOOD CAPTAIN IS AWAKE—!"

"HELP!" said captain cried out as he ran past, Merry still clinging to his neck. "OUR SHIP IS TRYING TO EAT MY HAT!"

"JUST LET ME LICK IT ALREADY, DAMN IT!"

I shuddered. "Trust me, it sounds even worse *out* of context… BUT ANYWAY, SEEING AS LUFFY'S AWAKE, WE'VE DECIDED THROW THE PARTY OF A LIFETIME TO COMMEMORATE… PRETTY MUCH EVERYTHING WE'VE ACCOMPLISHED, AND YOU'RE ALL INVITED! AS SUCH?" I spread my arms invitingly. "IT DOESN'T MATTER IF YOU RESIDE IN THE HEIGHTS OF HEAVEN!"
"OR IF YOU DWELL WITHIN THE DEPTHS OF HELL!"

I snapped my finger down, pointing straight at Attach's camera as I held the mic to my mouth, the biggest damn grin plastered on my face.

"ALL AT ONCE, RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW!" Soundbite and I roared in tandem. "LET'S ROCK!"

And as the whole of the party roared their approval all at once, I caught sight of a single flash in all of the chaos and I allowed myself a victorious fist pump.

I was about to get down and rejoin Robin…

"COME ON GUYS, SOMEONE HELP—! Oh, hey, Cross, is that a sword on your back?" Luffy stopped mid-run in front of me, pointing at—!

I grinned ecstatically at the glorious opportunity that had just been presented to me.

"Oh, yeah, almost forgot! HEY GUYS, GUESS WHAT?" I called out, garnering the crew's attention to me. I then drew Funkfreed, tossed him behind my shoulder…

"BAROOOH!"

"WOOHOO!" I cheered as a trunk grabbed my midsection and lifted me onto the pachyderm's back. I laughed eagerly as I waved my arms at everyone. "I GOT AN ELEPHANT! SAY HELLO TO MY NEW SWORD, FUNKFREED!"

"Hiya, guys!" said sword said, waved his trunk politely.

Nami only allowed herself to gape for a moment before snapping her mouth shut and grinding the heel of her palm into her forehead. "Why on earth am I even surprised at this point?"

"Hell if I know," Zoro said, rolling his eyes. "Personally, I say you should have seen it coming. We were actually overdue for Cross bringing another animal into the crew by this point."

Vivi swapped her gaze between the elephant I was riding and Carue scrambling away as fast as possible before marching over to the nearest bar she could find. "Jack, straight up, now."

"MWAHAHAHAHAHA!" Merry cheered ecstatically above the roar of the crowd. "I LOVE THIS CREW SO DAMN MUCH!"

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And so it all continued, no less rambunctious to the end of the night. From the elevated platform where Usopp was singing, the meat-eating contest between Luffy and the giants, a large population of animals stopping by for the sake of being able to talk, and the messy results of the Dugongs trying to splash Funkfreed (two-ton elephant cannonballing into a tiny-ass pool equals huge-ass splash), the winding down was a very gradual process.

In the end, however, the embers of the barbecue died out, and most everyone was slumbering with full bellies and smiles as darkness fell over the island. Heck, I was even about to join them! I'd found a comfortable place to lie down and sleep the night away, and I was just about to doze off—

CHOMP!
"YEOW, SONNUVA—!
"

When, of course, I was snapped awake by the damn pest riding shotgun on my shoulder deciding to nom on my neck for no good reason. "What the hell, you little—!?"

"Incoming half-decent FEATHER-RAT," he interrupted, his expression grim. Or disgusted, either or.

"I guess I should take that as a compliment, huh? Certainly better than what I got before."

"Eh—Oh!" I jerked upright as a familiar voice snagged my attention. "Hey, Coo!" I waved at the casual-clad News Coo as he perched on a nearby table. "Long time no squawk. What brings you to this particular stretch of sea?" I stiffened as a thought struck me. "Please tell me the Government isn't ruining another of our crewmates' lives! Or, well…" I cast a surreptitious glance at a certain snoozing cyborg. "You know what I mean."

"Nah, nah, nothing like that, Cross," the albatross reassured me with a wave of his wing, fishing a bundle of paper out of his bag with the other. "This time, I'm fairly certain everything I'm passing you is fairly self-evident. Or at least, nothing that directly affects your crew. But the printers are charging about ten times the normal rate for this special edition they're burning the presses for, so I thought I'd give you a wing." He ha—er, winged the paper over to me. "But if anyone asks—!"

"I got it from a gull in a trenchcoat, dun' worry about it," I said as I started to open the paper and wave him off, before freezing as a thought struck me. "Ah, by the way, while I have you… you happen to run any delivery routes that pass through Navarone by any chance?"

"Nah, not recently," Coo shook his head in denial. "Matter of fact, I've been haggling to get more pirate ships than anything. After what you've been saying, well…" He glanced to the side with a grimace. "It just seems safer is all."

"D'oh…" I thwacked a hand to my forehead. "I didn't expect that to fall under negative consequences of what I did… ugh. Well, see if you can hang at least one visit to Navarone. It'd be for a good cause, and I can vouch for the Marines there."

Coo blinked in surprise, then shrugged. "Alright, I'll take your word for it. But for now, I've gotta get back. They see I'm missing and decide to run inventory, my ass is as good as plucked and roasted. I guess I'll see you next time you make the big news." He cocked his eyebrow at me with a smirk. "Meaning in about a month, two at most?"

"You know us so well," Soundbite sneered back.

The albatross grinned cheekily as he saluted, then began flapping away.

"Good to see him again," I mused before turning my attention to my little literary preview I'd been gifted. "Anyways, let's see, where to start…"

"HEY, CHECK IT!" Soundbite whooped eagerly, waving his eyestalk at a packet of papers in the folds. "OUR BOUNTIES! Damn, that shutterbug works fast! COME ON, I WANNA SEE just how steamed the high and holy asshats are!"

"In a second, in a second, keep your shell on," I waved him off as I set the papers aside. "I'm curious too, but let me check the rest of this thing first, alright? I'll check them out if there isn't anything more impo—oh holy SHITE!" I snapped to my feet as I hastily read over the passage that had caught my eye. "Oooohoh… oohooooh, this… this has potential."

"THE HELL ARE YOU—!?" I pointed out the article and he read a few lines in before mirroring
"My thoughts exactly," I nodded in agreement as I stored the paper back in my coat and started walking out of the enclosure. "Wake the other three—sorry, four, and tell them to meet me in the street. This is gonna be good."

Four bodies promptly jerked awake, and slowly got to their feet, Zoro carrying Merry on his shoulder as they staggered towards me.

"Morning, sleeping beauties!" I greeted them with a cheerful wave. "I take it you all slept we—?"

"Shut it."

"—grk!" I choked as my tongue suddenly glued itself to the roof of my mouth.

"Well, at least that still works…” Vivi muttered acridly as she kneaded the bridge of her nose before shooting a glare at me. "Cross, let me be clear here: I am currently weathering a hangover which you caused. This had better be damn good."

I whimpered when she suddenly snapped her Cutter's chain taut between her fists.

"Or else. Now talk…” Vivi narrowed her eyes before snapping them wide in alarm. "About what you brought us here for! Damn, that was close."

I sighed in relief as I got control of my tongue back before allowing myself a smirk. "How does another meeting with CP9 sound to you guys?"

*That* shocked the sleep straight out of them.

"Seriously!??" Merry demanded indignantly. "Those bastards are actually hankering for a round two after you already punted their asses to the curb?"

"Guess we'll just have to do it again…” Nami scowled, the clouds around her starting to darken and crackle.

"Nah, nah, nothing like that," I waved them off casually. "They haven't had any medical treatment in two days, so they're still about as bad off as we left them. All they're planning to do is pass us by while walking down the sea-train tracks."

Zoro cocked his eyebrow at me as he released Kitetsu's hilt. "Then what the hell do you want us for?"

I smirked as I withdrew and unfolded the newspaper. "Because I'd prefer to have some measure of backup with me to deter them from doing anything stupid after they read this."

My crewmates leaned in and read the article I was tapping. Then they stared up at me with a combination of shock, horror, disbelief and, in Merry's case, eagerness.

"You cannot be serious," Vivi announced.

My smirk widened all the more.

"Oh, good God, he is," Nami said, paling in horror.

"I really love this crew…” Merry sighed joyfully.
The waters running by Water 7 were as placid as they could be on the Grand Line, the Sea Train that ruled the local seas slumbering in its rail yard and nothing bigger than a human disturbing the natural ebb and flow of the waves. Even the Sea Train tracks were stable enough that anyone with sea legs could walk on them reliably… which, as it happened, was exactly what was breaking the calm of the ocean on the borderline between night and day.

To anyone who had recently started serving at Enies Lobby, there was a certain fact of life that would come as an immediate surprise: The Watchdog Unit of the Law may have worked well in conjunction with their riders, and the watchdogs and their riders might have both hearkened to the command of Judge Baskerville, but the one who commanded and tamed the hounds in the first place was Jabra of CP9.

And of equal astonishment, despite the irritability and insubordination that he often displayed as a direct result of his chief, his rival, and his subordinates, the wolf-man also housed a relatively tranquil side that he had passed on to his 'trainees'. Ruthlessness to enemies, yes, but staunch loyalty to allies… whenever his or their bloodlust didn't overcome his pack instinct, at any rate.

Granted, this pack loyalty didn't extend to the many faceless Marines and agents that cycled through the island and treated it like a vacation spot, but it did pertain to their original master and his allies… however often said allies tended to shoot stink-eyes at each other.

And so it was that fifty white wolves padded through the twilight, some carrying other packmembers on their backs, while others supported the agents to whom they had sworn their lives, and subsequently gathered from their places of defeat.

Kalifa, Fukuro, and Kumadori were managing to stiffly march amidst their ranks, while Blueno and Jabra were limping along, supported on both sides by a pair of wolves. However, not all of the agents were quite so well off, and as such Kaku and Lucci were being dragged along on a pair of cots hitched to some wolves, the one barely awake and the other utterly comatose, his pet pigeon drunkenly wobbling on his chest. Their long march had been silent from the moment that Enies Lobby, their ruined home, fell out of their sight. And only now did it break.

"We'll be passing Water 7 soon," Kalifa observed quietly.

"Almost makes me feel wistful," Kaku muttered as he angled the brim of his hat over his eyes.

"I'll admit it wouldn't be unpleasant to go—oh, honestly?" Hattori began before cutting himself off with a groan, causing all present to freeze.

"…Watchdogs, keep moving," Jabra growled.

"Yes, Boss Jabra," the wolves chorused as the company began moving again.

"Alright, and now before anyone gets it into their heads to panic," the Wolf-Zoan bit out. "You all said that that pest Soundbite could be do this subconsciously, right?" He got a nod in response.

"Good, that means we're still fine for now. So keep your shit cool, your heads down, and let's get past this place before anyone—!"

"YOU REALLY THINK you're that lucky?"

The watchdogs froze, cowering in terror.

"Oh, for the love of God…" Kalifa groaned wearily.
"NO LOVE, only wrath. NOW GET A MOVE ON, we're waiting for you at the Blue Station."

Fukuro tugged nervously on his zipper. "Ah… not that I'm in any way utterly terrified of the concept of running into that crew and their devil-seadog again, but is there… any way past Water 7 that doesn't involve us running into them?"

Blueno hung his head, groaning. "Considering how there's only the one line besides the railyard at Water 7, and the snail will most likely blast my eardrums if it hears an Air Door? Unless you'd all like to take a swim…"

"Let's just take our lumps as they come," Kaku groaned as he waved his hand in defeat. "Best case scenario? Cross rips the bloodhound a new one."

Jabra snarled darkly at the giraffe-man, but he motioned the wolves forward.

The already-tense air around the group grew fit to snap as they approached Water 7, the marching a solemn and nihilistic action on account of the self-evident fate that awaited them.

As the Blue Station steadily came into view, the grinding of Jabra's teeth became increasingly audible, and as they caught sight of none other than Jeremiah Cross himself sitting on the edge of the platform, his legs kicking about casually in the void, said grinding was interrupted by a very audible snap and growl. And Jabra would have most likely tried to take Cross's head off too, were it not for the trio of crewmates looming behind him with their weapons at the ready, with a fourth child-sized one perched on Roronoa's shoulder and somehow looking as menacing as the rest of them.

Cross perked his head up at the snap, shooting a thoroughly aggravating grin at the assassins. "Ahhh, hello there, assassins! Enjoying a lovely night stroll, eh?"

"SIGNS and stench POINT TO—!

"Can we please just skip ahead to whatever the hell your point is, chapapaaaarghhh…" Fukuro interrupted with a pained groan as he massaged his skull. "Forty-eight hours later and my head is still ringing like a bell…"

"Not in the mood for my antics, hmm?" he chuckled, shrugging as he waved his hand dismissively. "Fine, fine, I'll go ahead and get to the point: In a nutshell, we're here to make a demonstration of what happens to enemies of ours such as you. Juuust so that there's no mistakes or misunderstandings about our modus operandi, ya know?"

Almost half of the group swallowed heavily at that, including Kalifa, but she steeled her back and glared him dead in the eye, albeit with a slight shiver when the clouds looming above them rumbled ominously. "B-Before you do… whatever it is you plan to do, I have to know one thing: how did you know about my Devil Fruit? Our Devil Fruits?" She swung her arm back at Kaku. "Not even the most famed and accomplished of clairvoyants has ever been able to discern the nature of an unrecorded Devil Fruit, and yet you identified two at once without ever even seeing them. How… How is that possible?"

Cross blinked in surprise before slowly letting his grin take on a menacing undertone. "As Kaku said way back when—ya know, when I utterly ruined five years of deep cover work?" The pirate's smirk widened as several of the assassins twitched. "I've yet to show the world even a fraction of the depth of my knowledge, Kalifa. I know a lot of things that, by all accounts, are utterly impossible for me to know."

"Things that were… things that are… and some things… that have not yet come to pass," Soundbite
sneered in a deep feminine voice that emanated age and wisdom.

"Allow me to demonstrate," Cross continued, tilting his head to the side just so. "The reason you guys are running all the way out here, tails between your legs—some offence—" He directed the comment at the Watchdogs, causing several dozen to start growling. At least, until Soundbite snarled back, reducing them to whimpers. "Is that the Marines started combing through the wreckage of Enies looking for you guys. And they were not doing it for your benefit, were they?"

The assassins shared nervous glances before Jabra responded with a snarl. "Yeah? What the hell of it, you two-bit piece of—?"

"The reason I bring it up," Cross flatly interrupted, all amusement wiped from his face. "Is that I can fill in the blanks you no doubt have. See, after a debacle of these proportions and with us nice and missing, the World Government needed a hide to pin the mess on. Now, I've already guaranteed that they're taking their metric ton of flesh from Spandam, but for something on this scale? It's just nowhere near enough." Cross withdrew a roll of paper from his jacket and tossed it to Kumadori. "That's where you come in."

The kabuki-styled assassin blinked at the newspaper in his hands before unfolding it and giving it a quick scan… which he swiftly followed up with a gasp. "YOYO—WHAT THE HELL!?"

"Eh? What is it, what is it? Something juicy?" Fukuro nearly squealed, bouncing up and down in an effort to catch sight of whatever it was his comrade was reading.

"You could say that," Cross mused casually as he made a show of examining the bandages where his fingernails used to be. "That newspaper, which is currently being rush-printed and will be spread across the world come morning, has your names, faces, alternate names and faces, and capabilities spread all over it."

That caused each and every one of the assassins to stiffen in shock and horror.

"…what?" Blueno gaped numbly.

"To summarize," Cross continued unhindered. "They're pinning everything on you and your so-called 'incompetence', and have done everything but put bounties on your heads." The pirate looked up, pinning them with a frigid glare. "You all are no longer members of Cipher Pol Number 9 because the World Government has disavowed each and every last one of you, including the legendary Rob Lucci."

"In a word?" Soundbite smiled frigidly. "You've BEEN BURNED. And when you're burned, you've got nothing: no cash, no credit, no job history. You're stuck in whatever city they decide to dump you in. You do whatever work comes your way. You rely on anyone who's still talking to you. Bottom line: As long as you're burned, you're not going anywhere."

"Heh, nice," Cross chuckled, holding his hand up to Soundbite who eagerly responded with an eyefive.

Fukuro and Kumadori were gaping almost comically, while Kalifa and Blueno looked utterly devastated and Jabra looked fit to rear back and howl, the wolves beside him attempted to console him. And Hattori, for his part, just looked straight-up disgusted.

Finally, Kaku gathered enough strength to lean up on his cot and direct a stare with something very close to hatred at the pirate. "Is that why you came here? It's not enough that you were responsible for all of this, but you have to rub it in our faces and kick us while we're down? Is that the
punishment we've earned for what we did to Nico Robin and the rest of your crew?" he asked frigidly.

The other assassins slowly broke out of their stupors to match Kaku's glare.

"Mmm…” Cross tapped his chin in clearly exaggerated thought before shrugging indifferently, entirely unaffected by the sheer force of hate being directed at him. "Nah, that's stupid. After all, you guys aren't our enemies anymore, right?"

That brought the assassins up short, causing them to blink at him in confusion.

"Ah… come again?" Hattori slowly raised his wing in askance. "Come again?"

"Well, sure!" Cross nodded sagely. "Two days ago, we fought each other practically to the death because you lot were all tools of the World Government, following your orders to the letter with dogged persistence and loyalty. But now, the World Government's dropped you all like yesterday's garbage! Know what that makes all of you to us?"

"…nobodies?" Jabra guessed with a snarl.

"Close!" Cross chirped as he dropped his chin onto his fists, his expression serene and casual… up until he cracked open an eye full of menace. "You're a bunch of highly trained and dangerous nobodies who are now out of an employer, and are now in need of a new one."

Fifty jaws hit the tracks, while seven stiffened furiously. "And you're thinking of filling that position, then?" Kaku asked suspiciously.

"Meh, after a fact." Cross waved his hand carelessly before reaching into his jacket. "Ah, before I forget; here, catch." He withdrew an envelope and flung it out to them.

Fukuro caught it and took a single glance inside before reeling in shock. "What the—?!"

"Severance pay for Lucci, courtesy of Iceburg, plus Kaku and Kalifa's. I never got the chance to give it to you at Enies. It should be more than enough to cover your needs for the immediate future. As for long-term…” Cross rolled his finger a bit, prompting Fukuro to draw out a small slip of paper. "I'd suggest you call that there number once you're all free and clear. Trust me, it'll be worth your while. Hell!" He spread his arms invitingly. "I bet you'll wonder whether or not you ever left your previous job.

"…What exactly are you saying, Cross?" Blueno inquired suspiciously.

Cross's smile jerked upwards. "Simply this: You've all dedicated your lives to serving the World Government's justice, and while they have found your results to be lacking, I still see merit in them. As such, I'm offering you all a new justice to follow, one that should, with any luck, prove to be far more appreciative of your time and effort. But hey!" He folded his arms behind his head and started carelessly swaying side to side. "It's just that: an offer. Right now, you have the power and the freedom to make your own path, however and wherever you so choose. Just consider this… a peace offering; after all, if your former allies are now your enemies, why not consider making your former enemies your allies?"

"And you honestly expect us to believe that you'd aid us all so freely after we tried to kill you all?" Hattori asked incredulously.

"What are you, stupid or something?" the girl on Roronoa's shoulder chuckled. "Vivi tried to kill us all within twenty-four hours of meeting us, Nami faked killing Usopp in the East Blue, Sanji and
Zoro try to kill each other on a daily basis, and Robin tried to kill Cross within ten minutes of
meeting him!"

"Everybody tries to kill everybody! It's how we communicate ON THIS CREW!" Soundbite
grinned.

"Hell!" Cross threw his hands up with a laugh. "It's how everybody communicates in the Grand
Line! It's only when you actually kill someone that there's problems! But, ah, seriously, if it'll
help…" Cross waved his hand before his face with a sheepish smile. "I've already tried the whole
'kick 'em while they're down' routine awhile back. Did not end well for me, still hasn't ended yet and
I doubt it will for awhile. Trust me, I've learned my lesson: revenge is a bitch on both parties, so…"

He clapped his hands together before his wide smile. "Just trust me on this, m'kay? Because really,
now… what exactly do you have besides your lives and the clothes on your backs to lose?"

The assassins exchanged looks for the next minute, an unspoken conversation passing between them.
Finally, Kaku responded.

-0-

"Pfheheheh…" I chuckled as I watched the large party march off into the distance. "Quite the
creative fellow, isn't he?"

"And why exactly are you so chipper?" Nami cocked her eyebrow questioningly as she rested her
staff across her shoulders. "Last time I checked, a good negotiation doesn't end when one party
cusses out the other."

"Save that that was all they did…" Vivi mused as she followed my line of sight.

"Eh?"

"They didn't toss out the number, witch," Zoro grunted as he dug a pinkie in his ear. "And if they
didn't do it now, I'd bet they're not going to do it later."

Nami processed that, blinking rapidly before crossing her arms as she finally turned to watch them.
"…Well, how about that… Still, though." She glanced at me uncertainly. "You really think it's a
good idea to recruit them?"

"Well, what's the worst that could happen?" Merry shrugged as she slid off of Zoro's shoulder and
ambled over to our navigator. "Seriously, what? They betray us? To who? They seek out revenge?
They might be jobless, but they're still pros. They prove to be incompetent? We already know they
aren't. There's no downside!"

"Admittedly, Lucci could prove to be something of a problem, the bastard is headstrong if nothing
else…" I muttered as I rolled my shoulders, popping a few sleepy joints. "But meh, I trust it'll all
work out in the end. At the very least, there's no shame in trying."

"Well, when you put it like that…” Nami shrugged as she finally allowed her clouds to lighten up a
bit.

"Glad to hear that you approve. Now then, let's—ah!" I started to push myself to my feet, but I
paused as a ray of light lanced its way into my eye, forcing me to snap my hand up with a wince.
"Geeze, what the—!?...oh. Well, now…” I slowly trailed off as I sat back down, my gaze set dead
ahead on the horizon. "Ain't that a helluva sight…"
And damn well it was. The sun was just starting to peek over the horizon, and Paradise was doing its
darnedest to earn its title. You ever seen a dawn so beautiful you're just left speechless? Because
damn… they don't come often.

"Heh…" Vivi chuckled lightly as she folded her arms before her chest, casually tucking a lock of her
hair behind her ear. "It has been awhile since I've actually taken the time to get up and watch it…
Now I see what I've been missing."

"Tch," Zoro scoffed as he shoved his hands in his pockets. "It's just a sunrise, nothing special."
Nonetheless, we could all hear the grin in his voice.

"Oh, shut up and enjoy the scenery, mosshead," Nami chirped cheerfully, her clouds flicking about
casually as she swayed back and forth on her heels.

"Eh, personally I'm of two minds," Merry sighed as she plopped herself in my lap and started kicking
her legs thoughtfully. "On the one hand, I'm human now, so I need to sleep, meaning that I won't
always be able to watch the sunrise like before…"

"BUUUUT?" Soundbite queried.

Merry tilted her head back and grinned eagerly. "But! Now I can share it with all of you, and that
makes this worth it!"

I smiled endearingly as I leaned forwards and rested my chin on her head.

"Yeah…" I whispered, watching the sun peek over the horizon without so much as a speck of worry
for the future.

And so my friends and I, a mere fraction of my family, watched a new day dawn together.

"Yeah, it does."

And so life was good.

-o-

A relatively fair distance away from Water 7, Admiral Aokiji peered out of a porthole below the
deck of his battleship at that selfsame sunrise with no small amount of melancholy.

The Admiral continued to contemplate the sunrise even as he naturally went about his task, frosty
breath exhaling from his mouth and stretching from corner to corner of the insulated room he was in
and dropping the temperature to subzero temperatures.

It was an odd order, to be sure, but Aokiji could see the logic behind it, however twisted. In the end,
the actions he was taking would ensure the the optimal outcome for the sentence of the World
Government's latest prisoner.

For all that he could see the logic, however, Aokiji could not help but harbor doubts after the events
of Enies Lobby, but neither could he find the wherewithal to disobey his orders. As such, he
dutifully went about his task of renewing the room's cryogenic temperatures before exiting the
customized cell.

On his way out, however, he took notice of one of the guards outside snapping his head away in
order to hide a grimace.
Aokiji considered him for a moment before sighing as he scratched the back of his skull. "Speak your mind, Marine," the admiral drawled. "I'm not Akainu."

The guard stiffened at being discovered, but after a moment's debate he slowly turned to look his vastly superior officer in the eye with a gaze full of doubt. "This—" he began hoarsely. He coughed and swallowed, and tried again. "Sir, with all due respect, this is… this is not a good idea. More than that, it's… It's foolhardy, stupid even. After everything Jeremiah Cross said on the SBS, with everything going on right now, for us to do… to do this?" The soldier shook his head in denial. "I… this, this could destroy the Marines, sir."

Aokiji silently stared at the guard before shaking his head with another sigh. "Honestly, I'm inclined to agree with you, soldier, and if I could I'd cut him loose here and now… but unfortunately, the orders came down from above my paygrade, so that's a no-can-do."

"B-But surely if you brought it up with Fleet Admiral——!"

"Came down from above Sengoku's head too," Aokiji continued grimly. "And Kong's, to boot."

"Mmm…" Aokiji scratched at his temple contemplatively. "From what I've heard… they had a plan."

"S-Sir?"

"An old plan," the frigid admiral continued, slowly striding to a nearby wall and sinking down into a sitting position with his elbows rested on his legs. "One they'd had on the backburner for awhile. They were always going to enact it, they were just waiting for the right opportunity to present itself. But now…” Aokiji's brow furrowed darkly. "After all that's happened? After the Darkest Day in the History of the World? Apparently… the plan has been changed."

"C-Changed… changed how?"

"Well, before? He," Aokiji nodded at the door. "Was the endgame of it all. The one true objective and piece they needed. But now…” The Chilly-man jerked his thumb downwards. "Now he's been demoted to a mere lynchpin. Important and optimal, sure, but ultimately replaceable. They're merely using him for some other goal. Something grander than what they had in mind before… something worse."

The guard stared at the admiral for a few seconds as he processed that before swallowing heavily. "But… But, sir… People… people are going to die for this plan to succeed…" The man walked to the freezer door, slid open a peephole in the metal, and gazed inside.

"What could possibly justify those deaths? What good could possibly come…” he breathed as he watched the young man slumber within, both on account of the cold and the IV stuck in his arm, a necklace of red beads the only clothing he wore above the waist. "From executing Fire Fist Ace?" He then glanced to the side, eyeing the other two sleeping prisoners with unease. "Not to mention imprisoning Maelstrom Spider Squardo and Ice Witch Whitey Bay?"

Aokiji sighed heavily and made to answer…

"Zehahaha! More than you'd think, little man!"

Only to snap his jaw shut with a barely suppressed snarl when the voice of the newest bane of his
existence suddenly grated on his ears. The ice-man glared icicles at the staircase the large figure had descended from. "Blackbeard," he bit out.

"Zehahahahaaa! Awww, c'mon, Aokiji, call me Teach!" Marshall D. Teach laughed uproariously as he entered the room, an audibly halfway-drunk bottle hanging from his hand as he shot a leer at the Admiral. "After all… we are friends, ain't we?"

Aokiji's scowl deepened as his hands snapped into fists, frost swiftly starting to coat his limbs. "We are not friends, Blackbeard."

"Ooooh, but ain't we?" The odious pirate's grin widened malevolently. "Because no matter how you cut it, I do owe you for making all of this possible! That makes you a friend in my book, zehahaha! And as for you!" He snapped his attention back to the guard before Aokiji could respond. "To answer your question…" He snapped his finger up at the door. "I'll have you know that that brat's life is worth more than this entire ship in gold! And his death even moreso… so long as it's carried out properly! ZEHAHAHAHAHHAAA!"

The guard swallowed heavily as he backed away from the imposing pirate. "I-Is that so?"

"You got that right, bub!"

"GAH!" The Marine stiffened in horror when Blackbeard suddenly slung his far larger arm over the man's shoulders and pulled him close, invading his senses with his rancid breath.

"And believe me, I should know…" Marshall D. Teach grinned maliciously. "After all, I used his life to buy not only my life, but the lives of my crew and my position as a Warlord of the Seas to boot! Ain't that right…"

The Darkness-human slowly turned his smile on the frosted-over admiral in the room.

"Aokiji?"

Kuzan's grimace deepened as he cast his mind back to what the bastard before him was referencing to.

The exact moment when he'd been forced to sell what little of his soul remained to the devil.

The moment he'd saved Blackbeard's life.

~o~

"Hooo..." Admiral Aokiji sighed out a misty breath as he contemplated what remained of the island around him. "Might have overdone it a bit. Sengoku's not gonna let me hear the end of this…"

Currently, the admiral and the well-bundled soldiers alongside him were in the process of combing through the icy wasteland that Banaro Island had become. The reason for the recent climate-reassignment was on account of garbled reports coming in that a pair of powerful pirate crews had been tearing apart the island over the course of a full day. And indeed, upon approaching the island, they'd been treated to the sight of an extremely violent fight ripping the land apart, all while a behemoth of a ship rained hot lead upon the field of combat.

Normally, Aokiji would have spared some measure of restraint or caution in subduing the aggressors, but the fact was that he simply didn't have the time; in the wake of Enies Lobby's destruction, this cataclysm was just one of many, many such crises raging across the world. As such, the best he could do was end matters as swiftly and cleanly as possible.
This logic, combined with the knowledge that the island's civilians had long since evacuated the surrounding waters, lead to a single inescapable conclusion: an Ice Age, massive in scale, to simply freeze each and every pirate where they stood. Now all they had to do was locate their frozen bodies and either arrest them or eliminate them, depending on how troublesome they were. Nice and eas—

"S-Sir!" a Baby Transponder Snail being carried by one of Aokiji's men suddenly squawked up. "I-I found someone!"

"Finally..." the ice-man sighed in relief. "Can you identify them?"

"Ah... n-not quite sir... h-he won't give me his name."

That brought Aokiji up short. "A...run that by me again, soldier?"

"I-I, ah... h-h-he's in sector 5, sir. Y-You're gonna wanna come and see this yourself."

With no small amount of curiosity, the lazy admiral moved in the direction of the sector indicated. Someone had managed to evade his Ice Age? Well, if they had a bird Zoan or if they'd been off the ground at the time by some other means, they may have escaped the cold wave.

The man he soon saw, however, was decidedly not a bird. Rather, he was a fat, hairy, and supremely large apelike man with missing teeth and clothes entirely ill-suited for the climate, sitting cross-legged in a large circle of snow, his arms crossed and frost starting to accumulate on his body as he shivered with obvious discomfort.

While the man's presence and unfrozen state was concerning in and of itself, there was another factor of the scene that held Aokiji's attention: The man was sitting in the middle of a circle of snow. Not ice.

Aokiji's men each took a nervous step back as the ambient temperature around their superior nosedived, the layers of frost on his body expanding as he took a step forward. "Who the hell are you?" the Admiral demanded.

The man kept his head bowed, shivering, before finally raising his gaze, the ice on his neck snapping from the movement. "A-A-Admiral A-A-Aokiji..." he bit out painfully, his expression one of grim determination. "G-G-Good... t-t-that's good... T-The Elder Stars... I need you... to call the Elder Stars... Y-Y-You have their number... r-r-right?"

Aokiji tensed at the demand, his mind flying as he tried and failed to reason out the logic behind what he was hearing. "And while the hell should I—?"

"I-I-I have his s-s-son."

"...what?" Aokiji finally asked after a long moment of confused silence.

"I-I-I said..." the man stuttered out through his chattering teeth. "I-I-I have his s-s-son. T-T-Tell them that. T-T-Tell them... and t-t-they'll want to talk to m-m-me."

The Admiral stared silently at the man before shooting a glance at the man in his squad who was carrying the adult Snail. "Get me the Elder Stars, ASAP. Priority one."

The soldier was quick to draw out the snail and punch in the number. The gastropod only rang for once before it adopted a stern expression. "Admiral. What are you—?"

"I-I-I have his son."
The snail stiffened before slowly turning to face the speaker. "What was that?" it quietly but firmly demanded.

The shivering man snorted as he stared at the snail dead in the eyes. "M-M-My name…" he grit out. "I-I-Is Marshall D. Teach. Y-You would know me better as Blackbeard. And I have his son."

Aokiji stiffened at the man's middle initial, but the most powerful men in the world remained stern.

"How do we know you're telling the truth?"

"R-R-Rouge," Teach replied without hesitation.

The snail fell silent before biting out a 'tsk'. "What do you want?"

"Y-Y-You know what I w-w-want."

There was another moment of silence before the snail narrowed its eyes. "We could just take him."

"N-No, y-you couldn't..." Teach slowly shook his head in grim denial. "I-I-It's taking every ounce of c-c-concentration I have to k-k-keep them all i-i-intact. I-I-If I die, o-o-or lose my f-f-focus, then they'll be lost to the d-d-darkness. And if he d-d-dies here, then it means n-n-nothing."

Later on, Aokiji would not be ashamed to admit that he flinched when Teach leaned forward, so as to better glare at the snail. "You don't," he breathed malevolently. "Have a damn choice."

For a few minutes, even the winds themselves seemed to silence themselves as the world held its breath. And then...

The Five Elder Stars sighed in defeat. "As of this moment," one of them bit out grimly. "We the Five Elder Stars hereby deem Marshall D. Teach, aka 'Blackbeard', as Crocodile's replacement for the World Government's sanctioned pirate task force, the Seven Warlords of the Sea, effective immediately."

Aokiji felt a lance of existential terror shoot through him at the exact same instant that a massive grin spread across Teach... no, Blackbeard's face.

"S-Sirs, with all due respect—!" the Admiral started hastily.

"The decision has been made, Admiral." The Elder Stars cut him off. "Your orders are to escort Blackbeard to your ship and take Fire Fist Ace into custody. This is your only priority now, Admiral. Do we make ourselves clear?"

"But, sirs—!"

"Do we make ourselves clear, Admiral Aokiji?"

The ice-man flinched fearfully as he fought to keep himself conscious. "C-Crystal, sirs."

"Good. See to it. We'll contact you again at a later date with further instructions." And with that, the highest powers in the world hung up, leaving Aokiji alone with a monster.

Said monster chuckled darkly as he slowly made his way to his feet, frost and ice crackling off of him as he moved. "Zehahaha! Ahhh, m-man, that was a c-c-close one! I was almost c-c-completely certain that I was act-t-tually gonna die! Ace and his f-f-friends came this close to d-d-doing me and my boys in..." He directed his smirk at Aokiji. "B-B-But then you saved my a-a-ass with that wave of ice. F-F-Froze everyone else while I j-j-just took it in. H-H-Hurts like a b-b-bitch, but hey!" he

Blackbeard strode forwards and slammed his hand down on Aokiji's shoulder, leaning his smile in close.

"Friend."

~o~

A full two days later, Aokiji was still cursing himself for letting the bastard live and he still dreaded every instant that he was in the man's presence. But even in spite of his revulsion, he couldn't help but ask a single question.

"Why?"

" Eh?" Blackbeard glanced over at the Admiral with a smirk. "Whazzat?"

"I asked you why, you damn bastard," Aokiji demanded venomously. "I looked up your Devil Fruit, Teach. My ice would have been burning your insides the entire time, including the ice of your crew and Ace and his comrades, and once he thawed your doctor treated you for frostbite on over seventy percent of your body. He had to reattach twelve different digits. I could hear you screaming the entire time, so I know that it hurt like hell. So why? Why go through all that pain? What's your goal?"

Blackbeard remained silent for a while as he stared at the Marine, before slowly grinning in response.

"You're right," he chuckled. "It did hurt. It hurt worse than getting shot by a Colt .96 sniper rifle, but less than getting flayed by prehensile razorwire. Ironically, it hurt about as much as getting burned alive by my old commander's hottest flames! Oooh trust me, I know pain, Admiral. I know pain like the back of my hand, and every time I meet it it never gets any easier. But ya know what!?"

He thumped a fist to his chest. "It doesn't matter! It doesn't matter how much it all hurts, it doesn't matter what the world does to me, what it throws at me, because I can take it! I'll take it all, every bit of it, wherever and whenever it wants to try! No matter how much it makes me scream, I'll take it all, and then I'll laugh afterwards anyways! And you wanna know why?"

Aokiji practically froze up as darkness started roiling off the man, tongues of pure evil flickering from his body.

"It's simple, really..." he chuckled. "I'll take it all... because it's for the sake of my dream. No matter how much it hurts, I'll bear it so long as it means making my dream come true. And as for my dream... well."

The smile the frostburn-covered man bore did the impossible: it sent shivers down Aokiji's spine.

"Let me sum it up for you."

And so, with darkness roaring off of him like a twisted inferno, Marshall D. Teach proudly proclaimed the sentence that would fill Admiral Aokiji with nothing less than existential despair... and would haunt him for the rest of his life.

"I AM THE MAN... WHO WILL BE KING OF THE PIRATES! ZEHAAAAHAAAAHAAAAAAA!!"

Patient AN: ...the harder they fall.
OMAKE: Meanwhile...

Cross-Brain AN: We intended to put these sections in the last chapter, following the revelation of Luffy's father. They went on too long for that purpose, but were too good to discard, so we made an omake out of them. Let this tide you over, therefore, until we release 44. And just as a note: this is canon.

"Folks, you heard it here, proof positive. Vice Admiral Monkey D. Garp, Hero of the Marines, the man reputed for being one of Gold Roger's most formidable rivals, has done the impossible: he's actually managed to prove himself stupider than Luffy."

"Fufufufu," Donquixote Doflamingo chuckled as he strode down the hall of his palace, listening to the SBS on the snail he was carrying as he strode towards his throne room. "That little revelation was valuable in and of itself, but this? Ahhh, this is just priceless. Going so far as to insult Garp the Hero when he's right next to him; Jeremiah Cross has reached either the height of stupidity or the height of bravery, and for the life of me I can't tell which! FUFUFUFU!"

"A-a-a-a very a-astute observation, Young Master! Very astute indeed!" Trebol, holder of the Seat of Clubs, nodded with ill-hidden franticness as he followed closely behind the rightly named 'Prince of Evil'. Very closely. "M-M-Mayhaps you'd prefer to discuss it somewhere more p-p-private? Such as, ah... ah, your study! Y-Yes, your study w-w-would be an absolutely perfect place to l-l-listen to the SBS!"

"A-A-Agreed!" Diamante, holder of the Seat of Diamonds, concurred with an equal amount of desperation, ringing his hands pleadingly as he matched pace with fellow executive. He was looming almost as much as Trebol in the process. "O-O-Or, w-we could listen in the a-armory! I-I-I have a number of capes that I would like to hear your o-opinion on, y-young master!"

Doflamingo's smile widened even as his pace failed to falter. "You threw a rager in the throne room while I was away once Diamante got back, and Pica's currently cleaning up the mess while you two try and stall me, isn't he?"

The Executives paled in horror as the blood drained from their faces. "Ah..." they chorused dumbly.

"Fufufufu, don't worry about it," the Warlord chuckled, waving his hand dismissively as the trio reached the doors to the throne room. "Normally I'd have all three of you scrubbing the arena from top to bottom by hand, but at the moment I'm both too entertained and too exhausted from two days of trying to keep Big Mom and Kaidou from sinking a few islands to be bothered. To summarize."

Trebol and Diamante panicked when he started to reach for the doors. "Young master, wait—!"

Doflamingo ignored them and pushed the doors open. "I really just can't be both—!"

And then Donquixote Doflamingo, AKA the Heavenly Demon and 'Joker' froze, his almost ever-present smile freezing in place.

He stood still for a second before slowly shutting the doors to his throne room, before slowly reopening them.

Trebol and Diamante stiffened in terror when, after shutting them a second time, Doflamingo's smile
started to twitch.

"Trebol..." he grit out venomously, inane amounts of pure rage reverberating in his voice and crushing the pair's souls. "Diamante... Would the two of you mind telling me..."

Doflamingo suddenly lashed his foot out, kicking the doors inwards.

"WHAT THE HELL ONE OF THE FOUR EMPERORS IS DOING IN MY CASTLE!?" he roared irately.

The Emperor in question blinked at the Warlord in surprise before smiling and waving pleasantly. "Oh, hey there, Doflamingo!" Red-Haired Shanks greeted cordially. "Sorry for our intruding like this, it was an accident on our part. We'll just gather our belongings and be on our way! Now..."

Shanks frowned as he idly scratched at his boxers. "Where the hell are my pants?"

"Over here, Boss!" Lucky Roux called from a corner of the room, waving from where he was seated in front of a bonfire. "Sorry, but I kinda used them to light the barbeque! Don't worry, though, it'll be worth it! I know a great recipe for Fried Fighting Fish! Now all we need are the ingredients!" The rotund pirate glanced around in confusion. "Speaking of which, where is that old gee—?"

SMASH!

"Did someone say G?!" Lao G called out as he kicked his way up through the floor.

"Never mind!"

"Also, I have returned!" the ancient martial-artist snorted proudly. "In addition, I bring fighting fish for us to feast upon!" With a single heave, the old man hefted a large skewer into the room, upon which a trio of fighting fish was impaled.

Or rather... two fighting fish were impaled, and a half was tied to it.

"YOU DAMN SENILE COOT!" Dellinger roared furiously as he struggled against the chains tying him to the spit. "I'M NOT A FIGHTING FISH, I'M HALF FIGHTING FISH-MAN! LET ME GO ALREADY!"

"Hm?" Lao G paused for a second before fishing out a pair of glasses from his jumpsuit and holding them to his eyes as he peered up at the spit. "Hmmm... how odd. One of these fish almost looks like Dellinger."

"ARE YOU—!? Oh, right... SONNUVA—! DAMN IT BUFFALO, HURRY THE HELL UP AND UNTIE ME! THESE BASTARDS ARE GOING TO FRY ME ALIVE!"

"HAHAHAHA!" a boisterous voice cackled through the hole in the floor. "THAT'LL TEACH YOU TO STEAL MY ICE CREAM! HAHAHAHA!"

"GRAAAAAGH!"

Doflamingo's eyebrow twitched viciously as he observed the madness before him, his mind trying and failing to process just what the hell was going on. He slowly turned his head to glare daggers at the yet-petrified Executives behind him. "What. Happened."

"Ah, sorry, this was actually our fault."

The Warlord snapped his head around to glare at another familiar face. "Benn Beckman. Explain."
The first mate of the Red-Haired Pirates sighed wearily as he scratched the back of his head. "Well, you see, what with the fact that our captain has something of an investment with the Straw Hats, hearing them set a new threshold for insanity in Paradise was a cause for celebration. So, we decided to throw a party—!"

"Or 'start a rampage', as the World Government likes to call it," Yasopp air quoted from where he and a snoring Machvise were hanging from the chandelier by their whitey-tighties.

"Yeah, what he said," Benn nodded up at him. "Anyways, we started a rampage, both to celebrate and to draw some heat from Luffy, and well… seeing as our parties can get pretty crazy, we wound up on your island. Sorry 'bout the city, by the way."

That actually brought Doflamingo up short for a moment. "The city? What about the—?"

He was cut off by the minute tell-tale warping sound of Pica surfacing from the floor behind him.

"Pst! Trebol! Diamante!" the holder of the Spades Seat hissed. "I managed to hide just how wrecked the city is from the young master, and I should be finished with repairing all the damage to the rest of the city in a few hours! Just distract him until then and—GRK!" Pica squeaked off when he finally noticed Doflamingo glaring at him over his shoulder. "A-A-Ah… w-w-welcome back, y-young master?"

Doflamingo held the glare for another second before turning his scathing look back on Beckman. "As for you," he hissed frigidly. "The Straw Hats finished leveling Enies Lobby two days ago."

Benn blinked in surprise. "Seriously? Huh, well isn't that something." The infamous first mate turned and shouted over his shoulder. "Hey Captain, forty-eight hours this time!"

"Woo!" Shanks shot his fist up victoriously. "New record! Let's party!"

Doflamingo's smile was in immense danger of falling into a scowl as he took note of much of his family's voices cheering alongside the rest of the Red-Haired Pirates. "Where. Are. The others?"

"Er… w-well," Diamante glanced to the side nervously. "Besides the ones who are here, Monet is down in the toy factory with Sugar—"

"Maintaining her guard and keeping production going?" Doflamingo growled menacingly.

"…helping her suffer through her prepubescent body not handling ingesting half her bodyweight in alcohol well?" The lord of the colosseum shrank back in terror as the vein on the Warlord's head audibly popped.

"Uh, besides that," Trebol started hastily ticking down his fingers. "The Red-Hairs tied Gladius and Jora to the roof after their powers caused too much trouble for everyone else, Senor Pink is skinny-dipping… somewhere in the castle, we've been trying to catch up with him, last I saw of Baby Five she was using her own fingers to play stabscotch, and Violet is… shall we say, 'keeping the peace' in the colosseum."

Doflamingo slowly turned his glare on the keeper of the Club Throne. "Is she now."

"Er…" Trebol literally shrank in on himself as his body started to run. "Maybe she said something about a family reunion?"

Doflamingo slowly and methodically snorted as he forced himself to stay calm. "If that's everything —!"
The Executives started to sigh in relief… before snapping ramrod straight in terror as a familiar form rounded the corner. "I'm back with the Wano Rice Wine, but I forgot my sword while I was there."

"You're not a swordsman," the Executives intoned reflexively, before wincing as that only caused Doflamingo to tense further.

Vice Admiral Vergo took one look at the party assembled before him before spinning on his heel and marching right out without a further word.

The very air around Doflamingo seemed to shiver as he vibrated in place, and the Executives nearly fainted when they noticed the walls starting to literally come undone at the seams. "RED-HAIRED SHANKS. TAKE. YOUR MANGY CREW. AND GET. THE HELL. OUT OF MY DAMN —!"

"Ergh… well, hell, if it's already out in the open like this… bah, at least there's nothing stopping me from being proud of my captain being the son of one of the greatest heroes in the world!"

The room fell silent.

"…The height of stupidity, I think is the answer you were looking for, Doffy," Diamante whispered at last.

"I think you're right," Doflamingo said, his smile returning. "Now, where was I… oh, right."

Outside, the city-state of Dressrosa was just starting to return to a relative degree of normalcy when a furious voice cracked the air.

"GET THE HELL OUT OF MY DAMN KINGDOM!"

-0-

Several minutes later, on another side of the world, while a certain old man and a certain old woman rejoiced over the global humiliation of a certain Vice Admiral, a certain mountain bandit glanced at a certain bartender inquisitively. "Ah, say, Makino? Mind if I ask you a question?"

"Hm?" Makino perked up as she glanced at the bandit. "What is it, Dogra?"

"Eh, it's nothing important, really," the diminutive outlaw waved his hand casually. "I was just wonderin' about how come you're always so calm and chipper around us? I mean, come on!" he spread his arms demonstratively. "We might be remakin' this place into a Luffy-themed dive, but we're still mountain bandits and you're just a bartender in that sleepy village."

Makino thought about the question for a moment before chuckling endearingly. "Heh, I suppose that's as good a question as any, and truth be told the answer is twofold. The first and more important reason is that you were the ones who raised Luffy and his brothers. And… well, they're practically family to me."

"Fair point. And the second?"

"Well, several years ago, a large group of bandits came into my bar, made a mess of things and then went on to almost kill someone who I very much consider to be the closest person I have to a son. After that happened, weell…"
Magra and Dogra paled in horror when, without even missing a beat, Makino drew out a shotgun from beneath the bar and slammed it onto the bartop, smiling angelically all the while.

"I decided that I'd never, ever let something like that happen in my bar ever again." Makino slowly leaned forwards, a shadow passing over her smile. "Are we clear?"

"Crystal, Boss!" the bandits yelped as they instinctively snapped into salutes.

And just like that the shadow was gone and Makino was back to her usual, motherly self. "Glad to hear it. More run?"

"HAHAHA!" Dadan cackled from across the bar. "Atta girl, Makino! Women's pride, all the way!"

"I knew I should have run off that damn Red-Haired bastard when I had the chance…" Woop Slap bemoaned into his mug. But that lasted all of five seconds before he let himself grin again. "Eh, I'll grouse about that later, I'm too happy hearing Garp getting his to be pissy! Makino, more booze!"

And so the party continued.
Chapter 44: A King's Ransom! A Thousand Suns of Adventure Rise For A New World!

Patient AN: Bad news: We're giving you another cliffhanger to end this chapter.
Xomniac AN: Good news: it's a laugh, not a chiller!
Hornet AN: Boooooo!

Cross-Brain AN: Ah, yes, and one more thing before we begin, regarding the revelations of Chapter 850. To the great Eiichiro Oda:

We dare to enter into your world. You, who demonstrate time and again exactly why it was you who created the best manga of all time.

We are not worthy. Odds are that we never will be.

…But that will not stop us from trying.

After watching the sunrise with my friends, I'd been totally ready to hit the hay and recover from one hell of an eventful day. Unfortunately, my heartfelt desire for sleep was firmly overruled.

By whom, you ask? Why, by none other than a certain sadist of a first mate who shall remain unnamed, that's who! Said sadist announced this particular veto by grabbing my collar and bodily dragging me inside away from where everyone was sleeping. I was a bit ticked off at first, but that feeling promptly evaporated when he dragged in Leo and Funkfreed as well, and explained what he was doing.

According to Zoro, apparently I'd made something of a… tactical error in accepting Funkfreed as my new melee weapon: unlike Lasso, with whom I had some margin of error where his handling was concerned, wielding a blade like Funkfreed required actual training, even if I wasn't aiming to be a master of the blade. As such, in order to make me halfway competent with a sword, he'd be adding onto my training regimen with Leo’s aid, effective immediately.

Which leads us to…

"Move your arm up. I said up, Cross."

"Yeah, yeah…"

"Not that high!"

"Grumble…"

This. With the 'this' in question being me holding a de-leafed stick in my hand as I tried to follow the trio's directions on how to take a proper stance for holding a cavalry sabre like Funkfreed. And of course, due to my teachers being a master-grade swordsman, a prodigal Grand Line-grade swordsman, and an actual living sword, the margin of error I was being allowed for my movements was nonexistent.

"How's this?" I asked, lowering my arm in an effort to please my taskmasters.
"No, you need to raise it—!" Zoro started to order me.

"Here, let me!" Leo offered, hastily waddling up to me with his sheathed blades in his hands, following which he started poking my limbs into position. "Here, widen your stance like this, position your free arm over here, aaaand make sure that you have your blade angled like that. Ah, and keep your body pointed that way, the whole time too. Get it?"

"Ah…" I blinked in surprise as I realized that he'd angled my body in such a manner that my makeshift 'blade' was parallel to my torso, rather than perpendicular. "Oh, I see! So basically, I'm supposed to use you more like I'm fencing, is that right?"

"More or less," Funkfreed nodded in agreement, shaking his mass slightly in the process. Said mass was naked to the world, as we'd removed the leather harness he'd been wearing before, though hopefully getting him a new sheath would give him something new to wear. "It's a more strength-oriented style than fencing, but there's still some precision to it that should be observed."

"Well, at least now I have something to go off of," I muttered as I started to adjust my stance appropriately.

"While I'm thinking about it, Cross, why did you convince Funkfreed to join you?" Zoro asked with honest curiosity. "The last time I checked, you said that you didn't have the training or discipline to handle an actual weapon. Were you expecting him to do most of the work, like Lassoo?"

I shook my head at Zoro as I popped up a pair of fingers. "Two reasons. First, the obvious one: when there's money on the table, you never leave it there. Not taking Funkfreed meant either letting him go back to the Marines, letting some other crew try and claim and tame him, or letting him go off solo, none of which were good options."

"I'm with him there!" Funkfreed shot his trunk up in agreement. "If the higher-ups were willing to throw even Rob Lucci to the wolves, then I don't even want to think about what they would have done to me! And in case you haven't noticed, not a lot of other crews are even close to as nice as you guys!"

"…mmph, fair enough," Zoro begrudgingly admitted. "Still, this is a big shift from your old mindset. What happened to learning how to wield a sword being too much trouble?"

I spread my arms demonstratively. "It's usually not a phrase to use, but that was then and this is now. When I made that proclamation I was just a glass-boned amateur who was barely getting by with my brains, and who was only ever getting into fights with the weakest of mooks. I think it should be obvious that I'm not that person anymore, most importantly because of the target I've decided to paint on my back. My baton was all well and good up until now, but now is when things start ramping up more than ever. So if I'm going to be equal to the task at hand…" I shot a look over at Funkfreed. "Then I'm going to need the tools for the job. And for the record, I am trying to learn how to wield those tools properly, you know! Have I tried to leave even once while you bastards have been shoving me around!?"

"Ah…” Leo hesitated slightly at that before glancing at Zoro. "He… does have a point, you know?"

Zoro responded with a flat glare. "And you think this matters to me?"

"Not at all, sir!" the dugong yelped fearfully as he snapped to attention.

I felt a shiver of terror shoot up my spine as I sensed a not-subtle amount of menace in the three-sword-master's tone. "Ah-ah-ah-HEY!" I squawked hastily. "S-S-Seeing as I've at least managed to
achieve a stance that's only *semi*-horrible—"

"ONLY *just,*" Soundbite snarked from inside his shell.

"It's a *dark* day when I agree with the snail," Zoro said pointedly.

I barely withheld a whimper at the implication. "M-May I take a *small* break, just for a moment, to check out Funkfreed's abilities? I-I'm gonna learn, I swear, b-b-but they're still a major part of the equation, remember!?"

Zoro glared at me, visibly debating with himself before sighing and waving his hand. "Make it fast."

I did *not* sigh in relief as I dropped my branch and gesturing animatedly at Funkfreed, and the elephant in question quickly transformed himself to fit my grip. As I watched his metamorphosis from flesh to tempered steel, a thought occurred to me. "Ah… hey, just curious here, but why am I using a branch instead of Funkfreed? Or hell, even a *bamboo* sword?"

"Now *that,* I can answer myself!" Leo cheerfully announced before going serious again. "Simply put, you don't even *deserve* to touch a bamboo sword yet, much less a real one!"

"…what," I responded intelligently.

"Well, what did you expect!??" the dugong barked indignantly. "You're used to flailing a baton about without even a scrap of finesse or skill, and as such we're not even *close* to trusting you with a tool even remotely resembling a katana. Hell, it'd be a disgrace to swordsmen everywhere if you even touched something resembling a sword!"

"As it is," Zoro cut in, taking a menacing step forward. "I'm barely keeping myself from knocking Funkfreed out of your hands due to my memories of you 'wielding' him back on the Bridge, so whatever the hell you're going to do—!"

I swallowed audibly as I processed the unspoken threat before snapping my attention down to Funkfreed. "So! Funkfreed! Something I've noticed about Zoan types: your transformations can either be slow and gradual, like how Lucci did it, or practically instantaneous, like Chopper or Lassoo. Is there any reason you choose gradual? I mean, Lucci could snap to his beast form in an instant, so I know you can do it either way."

"Huh, good catch…" Funkfreed said, sounding impressed. "And yeah, I can. There's just always been an issue doing it, so…"

"Hm…" I hummed thoughtfully before shrugging and pointing him forwards at the empty air. "Well, no better time than the present. Go ahead and transform at full speed, and I'll see if I can help with whatever's going wrong, alright?"

"Uhhh… Well, if you say so…" the elephant-sword said uncertainly. "Here goes!"

There was a sudden blur of motion—

THUMP! "GWAH!" "SONNUVA!"

And then I found myself groaning on my back, my ass firmly buried in a trench that my own behind had dug. Sweet *Christ* my tailbone ached, and if my clothes hadn't been designed for that kind of abuse I'd probably be needing a new pair of pants too.

"*What* JUST hit *US?*" Soundbite moaned as his shell spun in place next to me.
"If I had to guess?" I groused as I slowly worked my way to my feet, rubbing at my aching rear. "One of Newton's laws, though damned if I know which."

"Yeeaaah, sorry about that," Funkfreed chuckled sheepishly as he rubbed the back of his head with his trunk. "Hey, look on the bright side: you handled that better than Spandam. When he was on the receiving end of that impact, his arm broke in three places."

I graced the elephant with a flat look. "And me doing better than him is supposed to reassure me how exactly!?"

"Eh…" The Zoan-weapon flinched uncomfortably as he thought that over. "Yeah, fair enough."

"Mrgh… alright, anyways, let's see…" I muttered as I started patting off the dirt on my rear. I mulled over the issues of the transformation: the recoil kicked like a mule, and I doubted that even if I braced myself I'd be able to handle all of it, so how…?

"Now, there's a thought…" I muttered, cupping my chin. "If physics are the issue, then maybe—?"

"CARE TO SHARE?" Soundbite groused. "AND ALSO TO get me out of the DIRT!?"

"Ah, right, sorry," I apologized as I picked him back up and returned him to my shoulder. "And Funkfreed, back to sword. I've got an idea."

"Ah… alright, then," Funkfreed said as he returned to his natural form. "And that idea would be…?"

"Physics are what's screwing us over," I mused, raising my free hand to grip Funkfreed's hilt as I drew him up in preparation for a stab. "But with any luck, they can un-screw us in the same breath. Alright, let's try this again. On three, one two three!"

I stabbed forward with my sword, and smirked victoriously as the force of my stab served to counterbalance the gravitational force or momentum or whatever it was that resulted from Funkfreed's transformation, resulting in me only skidding back a foot or two.


"Now do it again," Zoro ordered. "Until you can do it one-handed and without getting pushed back."

"Pff, dumbass," I snorted derisively as I drew Funkfreed back in preparation and readied myself again. "I was planning on doing that from the beginning."

The corner of Zoro's mouth twitched as I brought the blade forward again. But for all my bravado, it still took twelve more tries before I felt confident enough to take one hand off of it. Bracing myself, I stabbed… and felt myself slide back the slightest bit.

I glanced downwards with a cocked eyebrow. "Thiiiis could take awhile…"

As a matter of fact, it took a half hour and more repetitions of the stab than I care to remember, not even mentioning the 'advice' (read: haranguing) from Leo and Zoro. But, for all that the experience was long and harrowing, the end result was that I could reliably handle Funkfreed's instantaneous stab one-handed.

Case in point, I stabbed Funkfreed forward and drew him back in a single smooth motion, resulting in sudden displacement of air and not much else. "Niiiice," I grinned eagerly as I looked Funkfreed over. "This is going to be very useful. How do you feel about naming that little game-changer
"Pachy-Charge"?

"Better than naming it 'Elephant Stab.' Spandam probably would have done that. I mean, he wasn't bad at naming attacks, per se," Funkfreed conceded. "But they were pretty uncreative. 'Ivory Dart' was insensitive enough already."

"Honestly, your opinion IS ONLY PARTLY NEEDED. We have a theme goin', AND WE AIN'T CHANGING IT for an oversized mouse."

"YOU'RE THE ONE WHO GAVE ME THIS DAMN VOICE IN THE FIRST PLACE!"

"AND YOUR POINT IS…?"

"Gonna kill you someday…"

"Anyway, now that that's worked out…"

I very slowly turned around to the sight of Zoro cracking his knuckles as he and Leo started to stalk towards me.

"Hey hey hey, no need for that!" I yelped, backing up fearfully. "I've got that down, I'll drop him on my waaaaait a minute!" An eager grin flashed onto my face as a new idea blazed in my mind. "Funkfreed, how hard is it for you to pull that transformation? Is it tiring, or—?"

"Ah… no, not at all?" the elephant-sword answered hesitantly. "It's pretty much like breathing, totally effortless. Why?"

"You'll see," I giggled gleefully as I took my ready stance, energy tingling throughout me in anticipation of what I was about to unleash. "Just extend when I extend and withdraw when I withdraw. Now… let's go!"

And with that I shot my arm forward, resulting in my partner's massive girth suddenly occupying the space before me for all of five seconds before I drew my arm back, causing him to vacate the space just as swiftly as he appeared.

And then I stabbed him forward and withdrew again the next second. And then I did it again, and again and again, over a dozen times in a row before I was forced to stop on account of my arm starting to ache.

I capped the display off by withdrawing Funkfreed and using him to sweep away the cloud of dust he'd kicked up before me. Balancing his blade on my shoulder, I grinned at my onlooking tutors. "And that is what we'll be calling Pachy-Pede. Thoughts, comments…?"

Leo silently worked his jaw before slapping his flippers together and sucking in a deep breath. "I don't know about him," he announced, casually jabbing his flipper at Zoro. "But I'm impressed. Get a foe between that and a hard place and I doubt they'll have much luck at walking away. Since you're asking, though… Funkfreed, your body is prehensile in its hybrid form, correct?"

"Ahwha…?" Funkfreed groaned dizzily before coughing as he got his mind back in gear. "Ah… yeah, yeah, I can control it. Why?"

"Well, I noticed that while you were attacking you only fired in a straight line," Leo explained. "That might be easier on you, but it'll let your opponent hold a guard. Better that you vary your position with every strike, so that between your tusks and trunk they don't know what’s coming from where. That way…” He popped a thumbs-up (somehow), flashing a winning smile our way. "It'll be like
they're getting mowed down by a real stampede."

"Huh..." my blade whistled thoughtfully before vibrating in what I took to be a nod of agreement. "Alright, that works! Thanks for the advice!"

I nodded at the dugong in agreement before looking at Zoro, who was still frowning. "It's a good technique, and it'll definitely be a good way to use the sword. I might even have to try duplicating that force with a stab instead of a slash... but unless you have any other ideas, can we get back to swordsmanship now?" The barely restrained savagery in his voice sent chills up and down my spine.

"Alright, alright, keep your blades leashed!" I replied, before continuing under my breath, "God knows what at least one of them would do to me..."

"Good," Zoro grunted. "Because now it's time for you to actually wield a sword."

For one bright, shining moment, I actually felt excited. And then the fact that both Zoro and Leo were fingering their hilts hit me like one of Nami's punches.

"Right, then!" I squawked fearfully, hastily dropping Funkfreed in favor of whipping out a pack of wrinkled papers from my jacket and holding them before me like the shield they were. "Before you both tan my hide ten different shades of black and blue, who's up for checking out the bounties Coo dropped off for us last night along with the newspaper?"

The two swordsmen froze, glancing at one another silently before letting go of their blades.

"Well, he's not dumb," Leo concluded. When Zoro shot a disbelieving look at him, he raised his flippers defensively. "Hey, I'm not saying he isn't an idiot, I'm just saying he's not dumb. There's a difference."

Zoro grunted in begrudging agreement before stalking past me. "You live for now, Cross. We'll just kick your ass twice as hard for twice as long later. Now hurry up and get a move on."

I swallowed heavily as I tried to keep my nerves in check. I also tried to find some route of escape, but that hope died a painful death when Leo's sheathed blade poked at my back, the sound of him chuckling all I needed to hear to know about my chances.

Soundbite's very helpful commentary on this development was to toll out a funeral bell as he cackled.

"Yeah, yeah, I get the picture..." I groused as I walked after Zoro, hands raised above my head in surrender.

-o-

When we returned to our temporary HQ, our friends were all up and milling about their early-morning business. Naturally, that all changed when I displayed the sheaf of papers in my possession and announced their nature.

From there, our friends' reactions fell into three distinct categories.

"WOOHOO, NEW BOUNTIES ARE HERE!"

"BOUNTDIES! BOUNTIES! BOUNTIES!"

First, there were the overtly enthusiastic members who'd formed an impromptu can-can line and were dancing around and cheering their hearts out. Naturally, this faction was headed up by Luffy and
was composed of Merry, Raphey, Mikey and Chopper. I wasn't expecting the inclusion of Usopp, but I suppose that he was getting more and more confident as of late. I'd have to factor that into Thriller Bark, sure, but meh, I doubted it would be that hard.

My eye twitched when... pretty much every inch of ragged or melted flesh on my body suddenly decided to blaze.

On second thought, maybe playing it by the ear wasn't the best of ideas, especially considering how things usually wound up biting me in the ass once we actually reached them.

Anyway, moving on to the second group...

"Lemonade, ladies?" Sanji crooned, setting a tray with several decorated glasses on the table, his calm tone belying the excitement that was so obviously coursing through him. Just look at how he was shaking with repressed glee! At least, I hope that was repressed glee.

"Why, thank you, Sanji," Robin purred as she accepted the drinks—all of them—and started passing them out to the others sitting at the table, which is to say Conis, Su, Zoro, Boss, Leo, and a somewhat twitchy Vivi. The archaeologist grinned just a little too innocently as she took a sip of her drink. "So, would anyone care to place a wager on their bounties? Losers have to guard the winner's food from Luffy for a week. I myself wager that they'll merely raise mine by a million. It is quite substantial as is, you know."

"Oh, I'm in, I'm in!" Su called out as she waved her paw eagerly. "For me... mmm, a cool mil would be good, I don't want to get too fluffy for my fur."

Leo snorted a laugh into his lemonade. "Come again?"

"It's a fox saying, look it up." Said fox jerked her nose up in a proud sniff before grinning at her owner. "And what about you, Conis? Considering your storming of the train and the sheer amount of firepower you brought to bear, I'd saaay..." She tapped her chin thoughtfully before perking up in realization. "Somewhere higher than our good Princess's first bounty, but lower than her new one."

"W-What?!" Conis gasped in shock, her hands slapping to her cheeks as a demure blush came over her face, starting to squirm in her seat in embarrassment. "T-To inherit Vivi's bounty, or even surpass it... n-no, no, I couldn't! I'm nowhere near worthy of an honor such as that!"

"Ahh, don't be that way!" Leo chuckled into his drink. "After all, you are a prominent member of the crew, so you're definitely getting a bounty! Me, on the other hand? Nada. Easy money says I'll just get rolled up in Boss's—!

THWACK!

"—YEOW!"

"Don't be an idiot, Leo," Boss snorted, lowering the flipper he'd smacked Leo upside the head with. "You're one of my best students, and you're all impressive besides. You'll get your bounty..." He glanced upwards thoughtfully. "And... honestly, I'm thinking mine won't break 100 million."

"What?!" Leo cried in shock. "But, Boss—!"

Boss silenced his disciple with a raised flipper. "I pulled a few impressive feats of my own, I won't deny that, and with the development of the Full Shell Style, I imagine I'll only grow stronger from here. But for now, I'm still a novice. I don't deserve a bounty that high."
"B-Boss…" Leo sobbed before wiping his face with his flipper. "I'm moved! Such humility! To think you'd even accept a bounty that's as low as dirt!"

"Moron!"

**THWACK**!

"YEOW!" Leo yelped as he got thwapped again.

"Now, listen here, you little pup!" Boss snorted proudly as he jabbed his cigar at his student. "I might be humble, but I've still got *some* measure of pride, damn it all! I might not break 100, but I will **definitely** pass 50! Heck…" He puffed his chest out proudly. "Forget 50, I'll pass 75, easy! And my next one? That'll be 100 plus without a doubt, and don't you damn well forget it!"

"I… see…" Leo muttered as he rubbed his head. "How… humble of you…"

"So, is that your bet, Boss?" Robin asked with a smile.

"You better bet your bottom beri it is!" the dugong nodded firmly before shooting a look at the final member of their gathering. "And what about you, princess? Care to share your thoughts?"

Vivi graced the martial-arts master with a dry look before turning her attention to the table as a whole. "My thoughts? Simple: you're all twisted. In case you've all forgotten, you're betting on exactly how much the World Government and every willing bounty hunter in the world wants you **dead**. Doesn't that disturb any of you in any way? Or strike you as the **least** bit morbid?!"

A silence hung over the table for a second before Robin cocked her head to the side with a smile. "So, I take it you won't be participating then, your highness?"

Vivi met the archaeologist's gaze unflinchingly… before glancing to the side with an embarrassed blush and a pout on her face. "60 to 65 and not a beri more," she reluctantly mumbled out.

A shocked silence fell over the table as everyone stared at her, a silence which she punctuated by audibly slurping on her drink's straw. And a further disturbance came in the form of a rather familiar noise.

"AHHH, VIVI-SWAN IS SO CUTE WHEN SHE'S BETTING ON THE VALUE OF OUR LIVES!" Sanji cried as he spun up into yet another of his Love Hurricanes.

"Don't say it like that, moron!" Vivi protested, her blush going fully luminescent.

"AND EVEN CUTER WHEN SHE'S BERATING ME~!"

"Tch, dumbass…" Zoro grunted, rolling his eyes. "Bah, whatever. Anyway, mine's definitely breaking 100, easy. At the least…" The swordsman's grin widened as he glanced at our cook. "I'm going to be worth **double** the cook."

Sanji's hurricane spun out as he ground to a halt, slowly turning his head to glare daggers at Zoro. "Say that again, mosshead."

Zoro's grin took on a predatory gleam as he met the cook's gaze head on. "You heard me, shit cook."

"I SAID SAY IT AGAIN, MARIMO!"

"I'M NOT REPEATING SHIT TO YOU, SWIRLY-BROW!"
I sweatdropped as the two slammed their foreheads together. Yeah, the second group was the quiet ones. Quiet in comparison to the loud ones, at least. For the most part, they were the ones waiting to hear the new prices on our skins with relative calm.

"HEADS UP!"

"GAH!" I cried, feeling a chair pass through my hair.

*Very* relative calm.

Anyways… for the final group? It was tiny, composed of only three individuals.

"Why are they all so calm?" Nami moaned as she curled up beside Carue, displaying an odd combination of body language that conveyed both depression and a hint of fear. The duck, for his part, was holding his wings to his bill and chattering his teeth in a manner I could only imagine was his version of nail-biting. No surprise from those two. But the third did come as something of a surprise.

"Because they're all either jaded or insane," Donny intoned as he repeatedly bounced his head in the groove he was wearing into the wall. "Would you rather be one of *them* instead?"

Nami's miserable whine was answer enough.

I spent a moment taking in the scene before glancing at the posters in my hand, opening my mouth to draw everyone's attention. Before I could say boo, however, I caught sight of the face on the frontmost poster, and I snapped my mouth shut as I began rifling through the stack.

"CROSS!"

I then nearly dropped the stack as Luffy's sharp yell drew everyone's attention.

"No peeking ahead!" Luffy ordered with a huff. "Things have changed from what you know, right? So that means our bounties are different too! You should be just as surprised as the rest of us!"

"Oooh, too late on that count, Luffy," I drawled as I went right back to picking out the bounties I was looking for. "I hadn't looked at the posters until now, so I only just now realized that Coo got us a full stack of new bounties, rather than just our crew's."

"Wait, what?" Vivi asked incredulously before glancing down as she cupped her chin. "You mean… no, of course not all of those bounties are ours, something like this would have every remotely notable bounty in the Grand Line. But whose bounties are you looking for if they're not ours?"

I smirked as I continued rifling through the posters, picking out the pictures I needed and holding them up. "Why, our competition's, of course."

All noise died as everyone stared at me in different variations of shock and awe.

"Cross…” Conis started hesitantly. "D-Did you just say… 'competition’?"

I shot a smug smirk at her. "But of course. What, did you really think that we were the only pirates on the Grand Line? Or at least, the only ones of our caliber?" I chuckled as I shook my head. "Sorry… but no, Luffy will be king, that's a given, but there are others who want a say in the succession, too."

I held up the bounties. "At least* nine others, to be exact. Nine other pirates who did the
unprecedented and achieved bounties topping over 100 Million in an extremely short amount of time upon starting their careers as pirates. Collectively, alongside those of us on this crew who would have also been worth over 100 Million—that is, Luffy and Zoro—they are known in this era as the Eleven Supernovas. The most powerful rookie pirates of this generation. And you wanna know the real kicker in all that?"

I leaned forward, locking eyes with Luffy as I spoke the next words.

"I hardly know spit about most of them."

Luffy’s interest was piqued immediately, and the rest of the crew reacted half in dread, half in eagerness.

"Define 'hardly anything,' Cross," Raphey requested, now gazing hungrily at the posters I was holding.

I maintained my smirk as I tapped the posters with the back of my hand. "Their names, the names of their crews, snippets of their personalities, and the briefest glimpses into the natures of their abilities…” I drew out a pair of posters from the stack and let the crew see them. "With only two exceptions." I slid one out so that the owner’s shark-toothed grin was visible. "The first, of course, is an old friend of ours: the captain of the Barto Club Pirates, Bartolomeo, A.K.A. 'Black Bart' Bartolomeo."

"Ah… wait, ‘fwiend?’" Carue asked cautiously. "Whaddaya mean? Aye don't wemembah evah meeting him…"

"It was right before we set sail for the Grand Line," Sanji explained as he moved closer to get a better look at the poster. "One of Luffy’s old enemies showed up to try killing him, and Bartolomeo became a fan after Luffy was saved at the last minute when lightning struck the platform where they both were."

"…Aye should be supwised about dat, aye weawwy should," the duck muttered acridly.

"Anyway, let's see here…” Sanji mused as he started reading the poster. "¥350 million? Geez, that's impressive. How did he—he punched out a Celestial Dragon?!"

That got reactions out of absolutely everyone, though mostly variants on "What?!".

"Actually, Sanji, he just took the credit; his first mate was the one who punched him out, and he's not happy about how the story got changed," I corrected with a grin. "Still, you do actually know him… provided you actually remember Gin, anyway."

Sanji blinked in shock before scoffing and shaking his head. "After he nearly caved my head in and then nearly killed himself protecting me from the MHS? How the heck could I ever forget." He looked upwards wistfully. "So he actually made it, huh? Good. Good for him."

"Yeah, I'm happy to hear he's alright!" Luffy nodded in agreement, before tilting his head quizzically. "Uh, who was he, again?"

I rolled my eyes as our fellow East Blue recruits all slammed to the ground. "Dead eyes, grayish skin, worked with Krieg? Gave you his gas mask, too, remember?"

The gears in Luffy's brain churned visibly for a second before he smacked his fist in his palm. "Oh, yeah! Sanji fed him when he got kicked out, and that was when I knew I wanted him as my cook! Now I'm really happy for him!"
Nami shook her head in equal parts fondness and exasperation before directing her attention to me. "Moving on… I'm guessing that the second exception is that psychopath that used Marines for a game of Jenga? What was it, Law?"

"Surgeon of Death' Trafalgar Law, yes," I nodded, revealing the other poster… which held an even higher number. Nami blinked several times.

"...OK, how does he get ¥375 million? I mean, I get that what he did was bad, but what Bartolomeo did was blasphemy."

"Well, for starters, he had a jumpstart on Barto," I explained. "Before my involvement, he would have held the third-highest bounty of the Supernovas, at ¥200 million. But currently?" I read over the bounty and promptly raised my eyebrows in surprise. "Well, now… apparently the whole 'Jenga' thing was only the tip of the iceberg. He got ahold of those soldiers by invading a Marine base and taking it over, and then letting the public and his crew have the run of the place."

That freaked out more than a few of my crewmates.

"H-H-He took over an entire Marine Base?!!" Usopp stammered fearfully.

"What the hell kind of monster is this guy?" Merry whistled in awe.

"Ah, if it's any consolation? He's strong, yeah, and he's only going to get stronger, but he didn't pull this off alone." I hastily silenced everyone's fears. "Rather, he had help, from… her." I drew out the appropriate poster. "'The Glutton' Jewelry Bonney, ¥235 million. Her appetite rivals Luffy's, and her powers are quite impressive. Though I'm guessing you don't want details?" I glanced at Luffy, and shrugged when he shook his head. "Okay, just checking. Lemme just run through the rest so that you all recognize them and then we'll move on to ours, alright?

At the nods of assent, I began laying down bounty posters one after another, starting with the one I deemed the most pressing. "Eustass 'Captain' Kidd: ¥400 Million. In the original, his bounty was the only one higher than Luffy's, and he achieved it through sheer brutality. Case in point, this little boost in the ratings came from attacking a Marine training camp. He almost got killed in the process because there was a..." I winced sympathetically. "Wow, retired Admiral teaching there, that's unlucky… but make no mistake, this guy is a vicious son of a bitch and he is dangerous. I cannot be clear enough on this point. If you see him?" I showed the poster around. "Do not face him and do not piss him off. Because if you do, I can't guarantee you'll walk away."

"Are you seriously telling me that we've got another Lucci as a rival here?" Zoro grimaced.

"You especially wouldn't stand a chance against him, Zoro; his powers are almost as bad as the Rust-Rust Fruit for swordsmen." I blinked in realization. "Speaking of which, I've been meaning to ask —"

"Yubashiri can be fixed," Zoro interrupted, but it was accompanied by an angry sigh. "But not anytime soon. The blacksmith will finish the work, but it won't be done until long after we leave. So, I'm down to two swords for now. I assume you know where I can get another one?"

"Yes, and soon," I confirmed. He nodded, and I looked back at the posters.

"OK, one more thing about Kidd before we move on: he's the only Supernova besides Luffy to have another Supernova on his crew." I held up the poster in question. "His first mate, 'Massacre Soldier' Killer, is worth ¥100 million on his own—wait, what?" I stared back at the poster in confusion. "The hell—? That's barely two-thirds his canon bounty!"
"Maybe he's still going to grow over time?" Funkfreed offered.

"Mmm… maybe?" I hedged uncomfortably. "Still… anyway, he's more levelheaded than Kidd, but he's still dangerous; he's the only other Supernova I can confirm doesn't have a Devil Fruit. He's no pushover and he still has that epithet, so watch your backs."

I gave everyone a chance to process before shuffling for my next poster. "Anyways, next on our program is 'The Magician' Basil Hawkins. He's one of the most mysterious of the Supernovas, because I can't tell where his Devil Fruit abilities end and what I can only define as legitimate magic begins! And as for his crimes…" I took one look before reeling. "Holy—! Now there's a name I recognize! Apparently he got in a tussle with a damn Warlord and he walked away!"

Robin tensed up. "A formidable individual indeed…"

I shook my head in denial as I continued to read. "No… No, wait, that doesn't make any sense, he's skilled and his powers are weird, but I don't see how he could have actually managed to fight against —Ah," I concluded as I read the appropriate details. "Alright, now that makes more sense: Law and Bonney weren't the only ones working in pairs. Voodoo-boy had help from 'Red Flag' X. Drake, worth ฿266 million. The guy used to be a Marine Rear Admiral, but that's about the only solid thing I know; he's really hard to read, but one of the strongest Zoans I've seen, too. Makes sense that the two of them could at least go toe-to-toe with a Warlord. Ah!" I hastily snapped my head up as I realized what I was implying. "For the record, they didn't beat that Warlord, no, but they did manage to come out alive."

"Doesn't make them any less impressive…" Vivi mused thoughtfully.

"No kidding… Alright, we've still got three more to go… and we'll be continuing with Capone 'Gang' Bege: ฿277 million. Stereotypical mafia boss: father to his men, smart enough to know when to fold 'em. But if we wind up fighting, there is nobody in the world who the label 'one-man army' better applies to. And he… Uh…" I paused as I read over what was written before glancing up in confusion. "Ah… have any of you ever heard of Fort Lumose? It doesn't fall under my purview of knowledge."

"It's the World Government's main gold storage for the Grand Line, renowned for its high value and even higher security," Nami swiftly answered. A glazed look came over her eyes as a slight line of drool trailed out of her mouth. "And it's been the wet dream for many a thief over the years, myself included…"

"Huh…" I read over the poster again before proffering it to Nami. "Well, I guess Bege is living that dream, because he somehow managed to clean the place out."

"WHAT!?" Nami squawked, all but ripping the paper from from my hands as she tore through its contents.

"Robbed the place blind in all the confusion," I nodded in confirmation. "And knowing what I do of his powers, I've got a fairly good idea of how he did it, too."

Nami stared at the paper blankly for a second longer before… looking up with a blush!? "I think I might actually be in love…" she breathed

I only just managed to place the bounties between my face and Sanji when he grabbed my collar. "Not the face, not the face! Besides, you never volunteered to raid Fort Lumose for her!"

Silence fell as Sanji forced his hand open and stalked away with a heavy drag of his cigarette. "…
You live for today, Cross," he grit out. "You live for today."

I grimaced as I tugged my collar and started reading the bounties again. Then I did a double-take as I saw who was up next, and grinned. "Ahh, here we go. My 'rival', 'Roar of the Sea' Scratchman Apoo: ¥250 million. As for what he did..." I shot a grin at our ship guards. "You boys'll like this: he teamed up with the Great Kung Fu Fleet to take down a Marine task force."

"HA!" Boss shot his fist in the air triumphantly, while his students started exchanging chest bumps and highfives. "I didn't expect anything less from the Captain: kicking ass and taking the biggest names around so that they can nail them to the wall!"

"And last but certainly not least, 'Mad Monk' Urouge: ¥186 million. A native of a Sky Island, possibly Bilka, though I don't know that for sure, and he's overall a pretty good guy. Bit boisterous and maybe a bit spontaneous, but other than that..." I shrugged helplessly. "No idea. Anyway, as for what he did—"

I didn't just freeze. That implied a higher level of cognitive function than I actually possessed at the moment, because what I was reading—

"...Soundbite? Do the Takei."

"Ooooh myyyy," the snail obliged.

"Do we want to know?" Vivi deadpanned.

"...I'll let you judge," I whispered, slowly turning the poster to her.

Vivi quickly scanned it over before flushing like a torch. "Ooooh myyyy," she breathed.

"Ah, Vivi?" I winced sympathetically as I tapped her shoulder. "You've... got a little something..." I gestured at my own face.

Vivi blinked in confusion, patting around her face before wincing as she hastily wiped away the minute trail of blood she was sporting. "I... have no excuse," she concluded lamely.

I shook my head in disbelief as I gingerly placed the poster face down. "'Man of God' my ass..." I moaned.

"Different ways of worship?" Soundbite offered uneasily.

I considered that for a moment before shuddering. "No... No, that only makes it worse."

The silence hung in the air until Luffy dragged attention over to himself by clapping his hands together. "Alright, that was cool and we'll keep an eye out for those guys, but if that's everything you wanted to talk about, then I wanna get to our bounties!" Luffy exclaimed eagerly, snapping the tension like a twig.

"Alright, alright, I'm as eager as the rest of—er, most of you," I corrected myself as I felt a trio of glares hammer into me before bringing up the remaining bounties and grinning. "So, without further ado? Let's start at the tippy tippy top..." I laid down a poster sporting a very familiar grinning face. "With our very own 'Straw Hat' Monkey D. Luffy."

Everyone leaned forwards eagerly... and Luffy promptly shot his fists up with a victorious whoop.
"Woohoo, it went up!" Luffy cheered at the top of his lungs.

I nodded firmly in both awe and agreement. "By a mile, captain. From ¥300 million to 475? You have officially attained the highest bounty I myself have ever heard of. Heck, you've even managed to top the Warlords. All of them, as far as I know. They reaaaally want you dead!"

"Shishishi! Awesome!" my captain laughed as he pumped his fist in the air. The more sensible ones of the crew were rather subdued, but everyone else was rather awestruck.

"Next up, our first mate, 'Pirate Hunter' Roronoa Zoro. In the story, your bounty doubled to ¥120 million, entrenching you as the lowest of the Supernovas. And now…" I laid down the paper. "You're the second lowest, at ¥150."

"Tsk," Zoro grumbled, despite his wide grin. "So, unless the shit-cook has less than 75 million on his bounty, then I lost the bet… eh, what the hell." He started stretching his arms in preparation. "It's good impromptu training anyways. Bring it on."

"Suicidal morons…" Nami groaned, digging the heel of her hand into her forehead. "Screw it, in for a beri… you're already going down the ranks already, might as well keep going. Go ahead, rip it off like a bandaid. Tell me just how dead I am."

"Ask and you shall receive," I nodded as I started digging through the posters. "Little miss second mate, you have gone from the 'Cat Burglar' Nami worth a pittance of ¥16 million, to…" I slapped the poster down for all to see. And promptly stared in shock, along with everyone else. I slowly turned my stunned gaze to Zoro. "My apologies, Zoro," I breathed numbly. "You're not the second lowest Supernova. You're the third."

Nami's mouth hung open as she slowly picked up the poster and took in the long-range shot of herself standing on the deck of the Merry, Clima-Tact planted at her side and her thunderous Eisen Cloud wrapped around her like some kind of aura. The remaining traces of lightning in the air sure didn't hurt the image either.

"'Weather Witch' Nami…" the navigator breathed numbly. "Worth… 125 million?"

"And alongside that Barty guy…" Lassoo mused thoughtfully. "It looks like we have at least thirteen Supernovas."

"…Um… well, at least you weren't tricked into posing in a bikini?" I offered. "That really got Genzo's blood pressure pumping in the story."

Going by how Nami suddenly glared at me and her Cloud snapped to thunderous, that was not the right thing to say. "I'm pretty sure his pressure is still going to spike for another reason entirely! Let me make this easy for you: what the hell, Cross!?"

"Hey hey hey!" I raised my arms defensively. "In case you happened to forget, all I did was give you the Eisen Dial. You decided to fry ten battleships with enough voltage to power New York City, and yes that is impressive where I'm from!"

"I saved our lives!" Nami retorted.

"By frying ten battleships!"

Nami shut her mouth with an audible click, teeth grinding together, ozone starting to filter into the air. And then the clouds went back to normal right as she released an explosive sigh. "It's sad that I can't argue with that…" she muttered, pinching the bridge of her nose.
"If it's any consolation?" Robin offered in a gentle tone of voice. "I believe it's more a political move that's the fault of the World Government, rather than anything done by you yourself."

Nami snapped her eye open as she glanced at our archaeologist. "Explain?"

"Cross said it best," Robin shrugged. "You're the second mate of the Straw Hat Pirates, and we are currently among the most notorious pirates in the world. By ranking our officers so high, the World Government underlines the menace we pose as a group. It's also probably why Killer's bounty was lower than Cross expected, so as to further emphasize you and Zoro's bounties over his own." She then nodded at me. "I also imagine that there are in fact fourteen Supernovas in existence, counting our infamous third mate."

I frowned as I considered that. "Well, shit… that's no good, thirteen sounds way cooler than fourteen."

An ominous flash of lightning crackled around Nami as she clenched her jaw. "One more word like that and I really will punch you, Cross."

"Moving on!" I yelped as I scrambled with the bounties. "And since we've done it so far, let's continue in the order that we joined the crew… or at least that Luffy ran into us, though that's basically the same thing. So, where's Usopp's…"

"What was my old one, Cross?" the sniper asked eagerly.

"The same starting bounty as Luffy's, ¥30 million, but it wasn't for you, it was for the masked menace, Sniper King. But now—aah!" I said triumphantly, yanking out the relevant paper. "Well, it's still for the Sniper King, but he's not anonymous anymore. 'Sniper King' Usopp, ¥40 million. Congratulations, my good man, on an awesome bounty and an awesome picture." And with that, I slapped the poster down on the table.

Usopp looked at the picture of him standing on the Tower of Justice, Kabuto raised triumphantly over his head, and grinned as he saw the number. "I have a bounty…"

"Now, let's see here…" I said as I fingered through what I had left. "In the story, 'Black Leg' Sanji was renowned for being worth ¥77 million… PFF!" I snorted as I found the unmistakable image I needed. "And now he will be known the world over under the same name, worth ¥90 million… sorta, anyways."

"Huh?" Sanji, along with everyone else, looked at me quizzically - or at least with a quizzical expression. "What do you mean 'sorta'?"

"Well…" I snickered as I fought to keep myself under control. "They'll know you by name, anyways, but your picture…"

I held up the picture in question for Soundbite to see. The snail took one look at the poster…

"WAHAHAHA! HOOHOOHOO HEEHEEheeeeeHOOOHOHOOOOO!"

Before absolutely dying with gut-busting laughter.

"Oooh, now this I gotta see!" Su laughed, hastily darting over clambering onto my opposing shoulder. "Is it as good as… it…" She trailed off into silence…

"TSEEHEEHEEEEHEE! TSEEHEEHEEHEEEEHHOOOH MY GOOOOD!"
Before falling off my shoulder howling, squirming around on the ground as she laughed. "I can't breathe, I CAN'T BREATHE!"

"What the hell's wrong with my poster, damn it!" Sanji demanded.

I considered that for a moment before shrugging and placing the poster down for all to see, and secured my headphones. "Congratuations, Sanji," I snickered. "You are officially one of the most infamous pirates in this day and age… for a completely unique reason."

For once, I was actually disappointed in the reaction. Sanji took one look at the wanted poster and just slumped forward, supporting himself with his hands on the table as a despondent cloud hanging over his head, accompanied by a mutter of "Who is this…?"

I blinked at the display before tilting my head to the side in disappointment. "Well, that was underwhelming…"

"≈√¡∞¢ç∫ŗ$œ¡∫¿∫‰£ç∂£‰¥!" Sanji howled in my face as he suddenly grabbed my collar and started shaking me vigorously.

"Ge-e-e-et him o-o-o-o-off of me-e-e-e!" I howled desperately.

The room was dead silent once my friends managed to wrestle our irate cook off of me, which gave me enough time to work out a weak "Translation?"

"SORRY, dude, THAT WAS ALL gibberish. LIKE, LITERAL gibberish," Soundbite answered dizzily, his eyes spinning wildly.

Still flopping bonelessly in Sanji's grip, I heard a rustle of paper, followed by Conis fighting to not laugh.

That was enough to snap Sanji out of his rage, and he dropped me on my ass before flopping back into one of the room's armchairs, staring vacantly up at the ceiling.

"Alright, all twisted humor aside," Vivi suggested, wincing as she looked the poster over herself. "Why don't we go ahead and correct this? We'll just use a Vision Dial to take a better picture, contact Smoker and—"

"NO."

The room jumped as I spoke up, and any protests died as I looked around at them with a dead serious expression. "I won't say much, but it is vital for our future that the world does not find out what Sanji looks like, and this time I adamantly swear to you that this is not a damn joke. If I do things right, we won't need it at all, but if anything goes wrong, then that picture will be critical in the future. The poster stays, no matter how embarrassing it might be, at least for now."

The following silence was deafening, but oddly enough, it was Sanji who recovered quickest, standing up and adjusting his collar uncomfortably. "…I'll trust you on this one, Cross," he said quietly, his tone utterly subdued and removing all possibility of argument. He then shot a glance at the poster Vivi was holding and shuddered. "Just… get it away from me, alright? Far, far, far away."

I nodded, but before I looked back at my collection of posters, I caught Zoro's eye. He gestured subtly at Nami and Vivi, and I nodded. He visibly fought to keep from smirking as I started rifling through the papers again.

"Alright, now for the moment I've really been waiting for…" I said eagerly, seizing on the paper as I
saw my own form, posing rather epicly. I slowly withdrew it, and my face split with a grin at what I saw. "Oh, I am loving this so far. 'Voices of Anarchy' Jeremiah Cross and Soundbite—"

"HEY! How come I don't get MY OWN—"

And then all noise died as both he and I saw what was written in the bounty section.

For a few seconds, there was absolute silence and stillness as my partner and I stared wide-eyed at the poster.

"...OK, what's going on with you two?" Su scoffed, climbing up to my shoulder again. "Shouldn't you be cheering about this to literally all ends of the—"

Her mouth snapped closed and her eyes snapped wide open. Then she fell off my shoulder and dropped onto the floor, dead to the world and her tongue lolling out.

"Oh, for the love of you-know-who, it can't be that bad," Sanji growled, ripping the poster out of my numb hands. He then began choking as though he had tried to swallow a skeleton. It was with a wide-eyed look that he turned the poster around, showing it to the whole crew and causing them to stiffen as well.

"...I... I can't bring myself to feel upset about breaking 100 million anymore," Nami managed through an utterly dropped jaw. "This... ¥125 million is chump change compared to this."

"Unless I'm grossly mistaken?" Robin breathed. "I am fairly certain that most New World bounties are minor compared to this, and I am having a very difficult time recalling many others in the world with higher bounties."

"Speaking as someone who has been to Mariejois multiple times in my life, I never thought I'd find myself asking this, but... does the World Government even have that much liquid capital?" Vivi squeaked.

"Words really do hit harder than anything else," Boss muttered.

"I think that you don't have to worry about there being fourteen Supernovas, Cross," Zoro said, his eyes still wide. "Because that... is way beyond those."

That finally made me snap out of my stupor. And really, there was only one thing I could say.

"WHAT THE HELL?!"

-0-

"WHAT THE HELL?!"

"...My my, Sengoku," Tsuru muttered as she dug a finger in her ear. "It appears I overestimated how much of your good sense remained regarding Cross."

"OHH, HELL NO!" Sengoku roared as he jabbed his finger at his long-time comrade. "YOU ARE NOT PINNING THIS MESS ON ME! I ORDERED AN ENTIRELY SANE BOUNTY OF 500 MILLION PLACED ON THAT MADMAN'S HEAD AND NOT A BERI MORE! THIS!?” He stabbed his finger on the face of the enemy of his health. "I WOULDN'T PUT A BOUNTY LIKE THIS ON THE SON OF DRAGON, AND I'M BEING LITERAL HERE!"

Tsuru's eyebrows rose, and she looked back at the report she was carrying. "You're either going
senile…” she mused as she drew out a piece of paper and laid it on the Fleet Admiral's desk. "Or this really isn't your signature."

Sengoku snapped his gaze to the paper, peering closely at the page. He frowned contemplatively for a few moments.

After those few moments, all of the repair work that had been done to the tower was blown away as a common occurrence on the island reached an entirely new level of force and volume.

"GAAAAAAAAAAAAAARP!"

-0-

Once I managed to get my little freakout under control with the aid of a hastily provided paper bag, I stared at Robin in terrified despair. "For the love of all that's holy, please tell me I'm not the most wanted man in the world. Because there's being wanted, and then there's…” The words died in my throat, and I could only gesture helplessly at the poster.

"That title still belongs to Dragon by a fair margin, Cross, don't worry," Robin was quick to reassure me. "And you're not second either. Rather, you're currently in the lower half of the top 20. There are quite a few people in the world above you."

I started to sigh in relief, but I paused as I noticed her glancing to the side hesitantly. "Robin… who is worth more than me?"

"Ah…” Robin started rubbing the back of her neck as she refused to meet my gaze. "Kaido, Charlotte Linlin, Edward Newgate…"

"Those are Emperors!" I wheezed incredulously.

Robin winced at my outburst. "Ah… if you don't like that, then I imagine you won't be happy to know that Smoothie, Cracker and Jack were among those who you bumped down a rank as well."

"Dare I ask who they are?" I moaned out from beneath the hand I was using to massage my face.

"…for the sake of your sanity, I think it'd be best if I refrained from answering," Robin decided.

I tried to find some way, any way to respond to that—

BWAAAAAAAAAH!

When Robin, I, and everyone else in the room then slapped our hands to our ears as a very familiar noise suddenly bellowed out in the room. All eyes fell on an orange-bandanna'd dugong, who was currently rolling on his shell laughing.

"HAHAHAHAHAH! That might have murdered my ears, but I've always wanted to do that," Mikey snickered.

"WE KNOW!" the other four Dugongs roared.

"HAHAHA… heh…” Mikey simmered down, looking around at all of our glares and shrugging. "Hey, someone needed to break the mood. Besides, Cross can flip out about his…” He chuckled under his breath. "Stupidly obscene bounty on his own time, I just want to see the rest of them ASAP! Agreed?"
Everyone—even Luffy—hesitated.

"...Yeah."

Robin snapped her attention to me in shock. "Cross—!"

"I-it's alright," I reassured her, smiling weakly as I pulled myself together. "I am... still flipping out a bit that my head is worth what I have no doubt qualifies as a literal king's ransom... but I can deal with that later. For now?" I picked up the bounties I dropped and started shuffling through the names. "Let's move on and give everyone else their limelight!"

"Yeah!" Soundbite nodded eagerly. "PERSONALLY? I'M HAPPY! THAT'S A DOUBLE-BOUNTY! I'M THE MOST WANTED SNAIL in the world! I'm content, so let's get back to it!"

The tense atmosphere slowly faded, and soon enough, everyone who hadn't received their bounties yet was looking at me eagerly again. Nodding to myself, I looked down at the frontmost poster. Then, for the second time that day, I did a double-take. And then I smirked as a positively evil idea occurred to me.

"Hey, Cottontail!"

All lingering grogginess snapped out of Su as she snarled at me. "I put up with that from the slimeball and Conis, but who the blue hell gave you permission to call me that?"

"The World Government," I snickered as I held up the poster I'd spied. "Congratulations, it's your official epithet now!"

Su stiffened, her jaw dropping in shock. "I... I actually have a bounty?"

"Su has a bounty?" Conis gasped in agreement.

"Yup!" I nodded hastily, only just managing to keep my grin off my face. "Matter of fact... you're worth 2000 times what Chopper was!"

"Really!" Chopper gasped, snapping into his Heavy Point and staring over my shoulder. "Let me see, let me see!"

"Same here, same here!" the fox in question squealed, clambering up onto Chopper's shoulder again and joining him in staring at the poster eagerly... before bristling furiously. "'COTTONTAIL' SU WORTH A MEASLY ฿100 THOUSAND?! 'PET'?! I'M GOING TO CLAW SOMEBODY'S FUCKING THROAT OUT!"

"Wait, what do you mean? Conis introduced you as her pet," I asked quizzically.

"That was when I was still a civvie, now I'm a part of the damn crew! I'm not a pet, I'm the—!"

"Bullet-monkey?" Soundbite chirped innocently.

"Yes!" Su jabbed her paw at the snail before stiffening as she fully registered his words. "NO! I'm not the bullet-monkey, I'm the powder-monkey! Powder-fox! GRAH!" Su collapsed flailing onto her back as she scratched her head in outrage.

"Wait, one-hundred..." Chopper's face screwed in thought for a moment. Then his eyes went blank with the utmost of outrage. "WHAT ARE YOU WHINING ABOUT, YOU SNIVELLING...
"RODENT!? I WAS WORTH FIFTY!"

"He was worth fifty?" everyone else asked incredulously.

I shrugged nonchalantly, my smirk remaining fixed. "The World Government confused 'Cotton Candy Lover' Tony Tony Chopper for our crew's pet, sooo yeah."

Chopper's face split into a sickly smile, his eyes seeming to shine cyan. "'Cotton Candy Lover'… 'Pet'… hehe… hehehehehehehe… hahahahahaHAHAHAHAAAAA!" The suddenly psychopathic reindeer threw his head back and cackled malevolently. "SOMEBODY'S HEAD IS GOING TO ROLL FOR THIS! HAHAHA—!"

I hastily shuffled through the posters and sighed in relief with what I came up with. "Even when they're calling you the 'Spark of Genius' and valuing you at ฿66 million?"

"HAHA—eh?" Chopper cut himself off, snapping back to his Brain Point and leaving Su to drop to the ground with an indignant squawk.

"See for yourself!" I proclaimed, turning the poster so that he could see the side-by-side pictures of himself in both his Brain and Heavy Points, both holding scalpels and vials in their respective hooves and hands, and both with unmistakeable gleams in their eyes and grins, the former relatively more adorable and the latter unmistakably menacing. Probably trying to emphasize the Jekyll and Hyde angle, if I had to guess.

Chopper shakily accepted the poster, staring at it in numb silence, before breaking out into a massive grin, stars of awe twinkling in his eyes, all while he himself started dancing in place. "I have my own bounty! I have my own bounty! I bet Doctorine'll hang it up in her office, and even use it for target practice when she's bored!"

I opened my mouth to ask why he would ever dare be happy about that. I then closed it, because such things were better left unknown, and started rifling through the posters for the next one. As I saw the shock of blue hair, I grinned and plucked it out. "OK, next we move on to our very own 'Corsair Princess', who has boosted from ฿55 million to—!" My words died in my throat as I saw the poster in full. "…oh, your poor father," I finally concluded lamely.

"POOR KOHZA more like!" Soundbite cackled before cocking his head to the side thoughtfully. "Actually, on second thought? HE MIGHT ENJOY this turn of EVENTS."

"Oh, don't tell me those bastards actually had the balls to make me a Supernova, too?" Vivi asked in equal parts dread and anger.

"No…" I hedged uncomfortably, wincing as she sighed in relief. "But they did make you infamous for a whole other reason, namely by playing you for a patsy again, the same way they played Nami in the story."

I handed her the poster. She took one look at it and… well, I couldn't be sure if she was trying to pale or blush. Probably both. "Meep," she squeaked fearfully.

I couldn't exactly fault her for her brain stalling like that. After all, learning that you're suddenly worth ฿80 million Only Alive is one thing… but learning that you're worth ฿80 million and that your bounty picture is basically you posing like a centerfold is another entirely.

Still… hands holding her hair up behind her head, a bikini that was modest and yet at the same time generous, and all at an angle that even made her scar look good? Credit to Attachan, the man could
snap a good picture if nothing else. Though unless I missed my mark?

"He said it was for charity and I just wanted to get used to my scar..." Vivi wept almost comically.

I doubted that that made things any better for the subject in question.

"Oh, you sweet summer child..." Nami sighed as she laid a comforting hand on her friend's shoulder.

"THE HELL ARE YOU PITTING ME FOR!?" said friend roared, nearly ripping Nami's hand off. "YOU FELL FOR IT TOO, AND I BET YOU DID IT PURELY FOR THE DAMN MONEY!"

"Yeah," Nami nodded slowly, not even missing a beat. "But that was in a story, and knowing, well, me, I most likely did it for the sake of getting paid upfront and with cash. In this reality, I didn't get plastered over the bedroom walls of 'interested parties' the world over for free."

Vivi considered that for a moment...

"WAAAAAAAAH!"

Before collapsing to her knees and bawling out near literal fountains of tears.

"Thewe thewe, Vivi..." Carue patted her back comfortingly. "It's awight, it's awight, we we get through this togethah, I pwomise!"

"Well, now."

All eyes turned to Robin as she suddenly spoke, holding the currently offending poster in one of her hands. "It would appear that there is an addendum to Princess Nefertari's bounty. Something about her being accompanied by a 'Carue the Duck', but not having a picture of him."

"RAAAAAAAAAGH!" the gypped princess howled as she started throttling her panicked bodyguard.

"Chopper, stop dancing and sedate her," I sighed before casting a glance at Robin. "And you... really?"

The archaeologist cocked her head to the side with a beatific smile. "Are you saying you don't see the family resemblance?"

I had to fight to keep a bigger smile off my face as I flashed her her bounty. "Laugh it up, 'Devil Child'. You've bounced up from ฿80 million to knocking on the heaven's doors. A little more before we hit Sabaody and there really will be fourteen Supernovas."

Robin cocked her eyebrow as she took in her poster. "฿99 million..." She was silent before smiling. "Well, at least they finally updated my picture. And they got my good side at that. Now if only they'd be so kind as to update my juvenile epithet."

"HEY!"

THWACK!

"OUCH!" I hopped on my left leg when my right was suddenly the recipient of a vicious charlie-horse. "The hell—!?"

"No cutting in line!" Boss snorted as he cocked his fist back menacingly. "My boys and I should have been next, not her!"
"Actually, Boss," Robin corrected with a hum. "Seeing as I both met Luffy before you and I was onboard Merry before you, I believe that to be false."

The rough-and-ready dugong paused as he considered that tidbit before shuffling about on his tail with a blush. "Ah hell, you've actually got a point! My bad, Cross. No hard feelings?"

"Why, I oughta—!" I bit out darkly before flinging the poster in question at the ungrateful sea-bull. "80 mil for the 'Bastard of the Sea', or 'Man' as they're calling you, happy!?"

"Man of the Sea'!? HELL YES!" Boss gasped before cheering happily waving around the poster of himself shooting a thumbs-up at the photographer. Oddly enough, there was a somewhat untidy scrawl on the corner of the photo that… almost looked like—?

"Tell me you did not autograph that…" I grit out irritably.

"How was I supposed to know he was Marine!?!" the dugong demanded. "I thought he was just an eager fan or something, what else was I supposed to do?"

"Tsk…" I shook my head as I looked through the posters. "Well, regardless, I saw a name in here that indicates you're batting two-for—seriously!?" I squawked, snapping the picture around for the little bastards to lay eyes on. "I just… really? Really?"

"I-I-I can explain!" Donney hastily scrambled to cover. "W-W-What you see there is an ancient, ah, d-dugong, uh… warrior—!

"We did a group pose, alright?" Raphey interrupted shamelessly. "It was harmless fun, and it's not like you have any room to complain. Don't think I forgot about your little stunt last night for even a second."

"It's not the posing that I'm taking issue with," I ground out. "So much as the damn pose itself! Where the hell did you even learn about, to reiterate, that damn pose in the first place!?"

"I blame the snail!" Mikey hastily yelped.

"I too blame the snail!" Raphey concurred.

"I will also blame the snail," Leo nodded solemnly.

"I… actually," Donny cupped his chin thoughtfully. "Seeing as it is his fault…" He stabbed his flipper at Soundbite. "I blame the snail as well!"


Soundbite leaned in with an ear-to-ear grin. "I REGRET nothing. Just be glad I DIDN'T GO JOJO."

I seriously debated for the next few seconds taunting him with how much salt we would be using in the next arc, but in the end, I wasn't that bad. Instead, I sighed angrily, and withdrew the poster proper. "Alright, go ahead and celebrate, 'Disciples of the Sea.'"

The TDWS froze. "We… We get Boss' old name as our epithet?" Leo breathed in awe.

"Apparently?" I shrugged, unsure as to what they were talking about. "But as I said, two-for-two for Boss because as the leader of your little band, Leo," I nodded at the suddenly and ironically shell-shocked dugong. "Also gets the epithet of 'Half-Shell Blade'. He's worth $15 million while the rest
of you are worth ¥10 million apiece for a grand total of ¥45 million."

"Wah…" Leo breathed numbly. "I… Half-Shell—?! B-But that's—WOAH!" he yelped when he was suddenly foisted off his tail by Raphey and Mikey and onto their shoulders.

"Three cheers for the 'Half-Shell Blade'!" Raphey cried happily. "Hip hip!"

"HOORAY!" the Dugongs cheered as one, carrying their leader off as they kept cheering.

"Hmph, so I won…" Boss mused as he chomped on his cigar proudly. "Didn't doubt it for a second… but I'll pass on the prize. Fending off the captain is good training!"

I couldn't keep a fond smile off my face as I saw them celebrate, but I shook my head as I looked back at the few posters left in my hand. The frontmost was the next one on the agenda.

"Well, if that's the case…" I swung my arm out at our gunner. "Then I guess that 'Angel of Destruction' Conis wins the bet with a whoppingly lucky ¥77 million to her name!"

"Wait, wha—?" Conis blinked numbly in shock.

"See for yourself!" I confirmed as I handed her her bounty, which had a rather impressive shot of Conis sitting in the midst of a large number of disassembled guns. "Attachan must have snapped this through the window while you were maintaining your arsenal."

"And on the subject of the bet, well… above the old of ¥55," Su clarified in a slightly melancholy tone as she hopped back onto her mistress's shoulder. "And yet below the new ¥80. Congratulations, Conis, I'll defend your food with my life!… for what little it's apparently worth, anyways…"

"Hey, it's better than 50!" I said cheerfully, ignoring the very violent way Chopper twitched nearby.

"Uh, Cross?"

All eyes turned towards Merry, who had been silent up until then. "You still have some posters there. Is… Is one of them… mine?" she asked quietly.

"Eh…" I hedged uncomfortably as I started shuffling through the rest of the bounties I was holding. "I… dunno, Merry, all I'm seeing here is a bunch of bog-standard no-names. You only became human recently, so I don't oh what the hell," I transitioned seamlessly as I pulled up yet another bounty. "'White Menace' Going Merry, worth ¥50 million?!… sweet heck, Garp is vindictive."

"YE CALL IT VINDICTIVE, I CALL IT GENEROUS!" Merry threw her arms up happily. "THAT'S WHAT I'M TALKIN' ABOUT, MATEYS!"

I smiled as I watched her and everyone else celebrate, taking advantage of the distraction to discretely pocket the poster of one 'Cyborg' Franky, worth ¥70 million, before glancing through the rest of the posters, and frowning.

"Huh. Sorry, Lassoo, Funkfreed, but this time I'm certain: you guys really aren't in here," I muttered with a frown.

The sword and gun exchanged looks before shrugging indifferently.

"Makes sense," Funkfreed snorted. "I only joined a few days ago well after the fact."

"And honestly, we're fine with that," Lassoo nodded. "After all, who ever heard of a bounty for a weapon? Nah, our fame will be from word of mouth and whispers, and that is fine by us. 'Sides…"
he grinned eagerly. "Your fame is our fame, so right now, we're both worth, well… *that.*"

I felt chills down my spine as I got hit with that reminder, and hastily chained it up beneath a weak chuckle. "Right… OK, so, anyways, with that all over and done with, I think I'm going to go for a walk… listen to some music…" My eye twitched furtively. "Try to keep my calm about this new *development*…"

A few of my crewmates exchanged hesitant glances, but Luffy just smiled and waved innocently. "Have fun, Cross."

I sighed in relief before walking towards the door. "I'll just be out for awhile so that I can cool off. Funkfreed, Lassoo, you two alright with staying here?"

"Hmm…" Lassoo tapped his chin as he looked up in faux-thought. "Go with you and do nothing as you walk around or stay here and catch some Zs… well, heck, boss-man, it's a *real* doozy, but—!"

**THWACK!**

"**YIPE!**" Lassoo yelped as a trunk of flesh thrapped the back of his head.

Funkfreed held a flat glare on his senior for a bit before waving his trunk at me with a smile. "We'll just stay here, you have fun!"

"If you need any anesthetics, you know who to call!" Chopper offered.

"Don't let the door knock your inflated skull on the way out," Nami sighed.

"Just… *don't* burn down the city again, alright?" Vivi requested in a slightly slurred voice.

"Ah, c'mon, Vivi!" I turned around and spread my arms with a laugh as I walked out. "When have I ever done that twice on the same island?"

The princess laid her head on a table with a groan. "I can't believe that I'm accepting that as an answer to *any* question…"

I turned back around with a chuckle as I shut the door, but the moment it closed behind me, my smile slid off as I power-walked away at a pace that was just under a run. For a few minutes, there was just silence as I walked.

"…*so…*" Soundbite finally managed to start.

"**Holy shit,** did you see that freaking number!?!" I hissed frantically, forcing my voice to stay below a holler.

Soundbite's face paled to an ashen white. "**SWEET HECK** I haven't ever heard of a *NUMBER THAT BIG ACTUALLY BEING USED FOR* anything even remotely *material!*"

"Soooo many zeroes in a row, all on a single piece of paper, a single *number*…" I dragged my hands down my face with a groan. "Is there even a *name* for that kind of number!?"

"**Yes,** and you **don't WANT TO KNOW THE LETTER** it starts with," my snail shuddered miserably before casting a sidelong glance at me. "JUST… HOW SCREWED are we **exactly?**"

"Ah…" I scratched at the back of my skull frantically. "Short-term… maybe very much, maybe not at all? Depends on whether or not the user of the Hot-Hot Fruit actually exists or if I was just
blowing hot air on the Rocket Man. Long-term, though…" I felt a slight pit open in my gut as images of sky-scraping trees and blood-stained chains and bubbles flashed through my mind "…there could be issues. With any luck, we'll have reinforcements once we hit the end of Paradise, but we'll still need to have people watching our backs, and you'll have to keep your, well… you know what I mean."

"That bad, huh?" Soundbite groaned.

"Well, we are worth a small…" I trailed off when I noticed my snail giving me a flat look before sighing in defeat. "Alright, an average kingdom's national budget, so yeah, people are going to be after our heads. But short of getting the Government to somehow lower our bounties—"

"Never gonna happen."

"Or us de-escalating our rhetoric."

Soundbite snarled murderously. "AFTER WHAT WAS IN that book and WHAT SPANDAM DID?! SCREW THAT."

I shrugged in determined resignation. "Then I guess our only option is to watch our backs and not let ourselves be caught alone, simple as that."

Soundbite started to nod in agreement - before stiffening and darting his eyes at an upcoming alleyway. "You mean like we are RIGHT NOW?"

I spared a glance at the alleyway, then went back to staring dead ahead as I walked, flexing my gauntlet-clad fingers all the while. "Yeah, alright, you have a point there," I smiled tightly. "But come on, we've already been jumped twice in this city, what are the chances of us getting a hat-tri —?"

I had tempted fate enough times by now that I wasn't remotely surprised when a strong arm snapped out of the alley's shadows and dragged me in. Just as I was expecting, as evidenced by my jumping with the motion, thus catching my assailant off-guard and giving me the leeway I needed to grab them and shove them into the wall, my forearm at their throat and my Gum-Gum Pistol-charged Impact Gauntlet in their face.

"Twitch and I will paste your skull," I warned them tightly. "Get mugged once, shame on me, get mugged twice—"

"Still get mugged because your mugger knows Fishman Karate," my assailant grumbled out around my hand.

I blinked in confusion. "The heck—?" The beri dropped when said mugger's hand suddenly snapped up and grabbed my wrist. "…ah, shi—!"

THWUMP!

"GAGH!" I gasped into the ground, pain shooting through me as I suddenly found myself flipped and slammed to the ground in a single blur, with my right arm twisted up and behind my back by a stupidly iron-hard grip.

"LET HIM GO OR PREPARE TO MEET YOUR—mmph!?!" Soundbite's roar suddenly choked off into a wordless and distinctly unpowered gurgle. I was confused for a second… but then I got a whiff of salt and I realized just what had been used to gag Soundbite.
"Sea prism stone…” I muttered under my breath before speaking up. "I call hax."

I winced as my arm was tugged, indicating that… my captor suddenly tensed? "Damn, you are good. Guess I shouldn't be surprised that you know my mentor, huh?"

I blinked in confusion for all of a second. Then I recalled what little of my captor I’d seen when I was holding them, and suddenly reality hit me hard. "…Koala?"

No sooner did the name leave my mouth than I felt myself getting jerked up to my feet and spun around, bringing me face-to-face with the only human practitioner of Fishman Karate, who was smiling sheepishly and scratching the back of her head. "Sorry for the rough handling there, Cross,” she chuckled apologetically. "But this had to be private, and getting close to you and your crew isn't exactly an easy task. Especially with the self-proclaimed 'god of noise' within arm's reach of you at all hours of the day."

"PTOOIE!" Soundbite spat out the bar of oceanic metal before scowling darkly. "I oughta rip your eardrums OUT BY THEIR—!" The gastropod suddenly stopped without warning, blinking in complete confusion before recoiling back. "Uh… what the hell is ON YOUR BACK and why does it make me want to piss my shell? BENEATH THE HOPE AND PRIDE, I mean."

I promptly slapped Soundbite upside his stupid shell as Koala paled and a far-off look entered her eyes. "Sorry about that, big mouth and a small brain, he doesn't know better," I apologized. "Just like you."

I didn't even miss a beat in slapping him again before forging on. "Anyways, brushing past that utterly inept faux-pas," I prompted, thankfully prompting Koala to shake her head with a slight shudder. "Care to tell me what business the Revolutionary Army has with me and mine?"

Koala spared an uncertain glance at Soundbite before nodding firmly. "Ah… yeah, sure. And… right now, this isn't the Revolutionary Army talking to you, it's just me. There are two things I really need to do."

"Uh…” I blinked in confusion. "Al…right? I guess? What's the fir—ooph!?"

I was cut off by the wind being knocked out of me by Koala, one of the strongest and most influential women on the seas, outright glomping me.

"Thank you…” she whispered into my chest, and I was distinctly aware of a pair of wet spots suddenly appearing in my shirt. "Thank you thank you thank you thank you so much for everything you said, everything you've been saying, just… all of it. Nobody's ever said it before, not like that… before, I thought, I thought…” She shook her head. "I don't know what I thought, but now… peace. Actual peace and tolerance between fishmen and humans… now it feels real and possible it's all thanks to you and…” She raised her head and smiled tearfully at me. "And I just… I don't think I can ever thank you enough for everything you said."

Slowly, tentatively, I returned the embrace she was giving me, and smiled. "You're welcome," I managed; I wanted to say more, talk about what I knew had happened that made me speak that way, ask for her help, her involvement in what I wanted to accomplish. But honestly, I knew that that would just circle right around to a past that had no good point to touch on, so in the end it was probably best that I just move the conversation forwards.

"And… what's the second thing?" I finally asked.
Koala's expression promptly died. "This."

CRACK!

I collapsed onto my back with a gurgle, my brain ringing and my jaw aching like crazy, and before the darkness took ahold of me I managed to make out one last sentence.

"WHO THE HELL ARE YOU CALLING 'CUDDLY' YOU BIG-MOUTHER SON OF A—!?"

Hello, darkness, my old friend… I've come to talk with you again…

-o-

I groaned as I once again clawed my way back to consciousness. Damn, I was going under way too many times in the same month… And as swiftly as I'd been KO'd, the memories that had been knocked out of my brain came rushing back, and I knocked the back of my head against whatever I was leaning against. "Yeah, shoulda seen that comin'…" I muttered acridly.

The next thing I became aware of was that I was sitting on a rather hard ground, with a wall or—no, a railing behind me. Willing my neurons to fire properly, I grabbed at the top of the railing and pulled myself to my feet as I cracked my eyes open, intent on discovering just where I'd been dragged off… to… oh, holy fuck.

I'd later look back on that day as the record for how many times in however long I'd been out I'd felt my damn blood freeze. Because based on what my senses had gathered, I had expected us to be in some sort of hotel or something, one of many easily overlooked locations in the island metropolis of Water 7, or even on the lip of the city's fountain.

But the sight before me immediately disproved that. I wasn't in a hotel. I wasn't even on Water 7 anymore. Hell, I wasn't even sure that I was on the Grand freaking Line. I wasn't anywhere that I had ever been before, but that sure as hell didn't mean I didn't recognize it in an instant.

Because, really, I'd have to be a complete idiot not to draw the connection between being knocked out by a high-ranking Revolutionary and being on a balcony looking out to a very vast, very barren and rocken, and above all else, a very white desert.

"Baltigo," I breathed.

"Impossibly well-informed indeed," came a deep voice from beside me. One that I vaguely recognized; I had heard it once before, right before we left Loguetown.

I swallowed heavily as I railroaded my thoughts into order. "More like common sense. I might never have seen this place before, but it is known as the Land of White Soil…" I turned to face one of the few men in the world who outranked me in terms of bounty. "And far more importantly, it's renowned as the headquarters of you and everyone who works for you, Dragon the Revolutionary."

The tall man's tattoo crinkled as he smirked. "Do you mean Dragon the Revolutionary… or Monkey D. Dragon?"

I winced and scratched my cheek self-consciously. "Yeeeaah, sorry about that. I started up the SBS because I thought it'd keep Garp from arresting us, but it turned out he'd already taken precautions and… well, it was a shishshow on… all… wait a—!" I tensed furiously as I processed just what the hell was wrong with this scene. "Alright… you listen and you listen good: you might be the greatest hero in the world and I can excuse being abducted, barely, but I will smack that damn familial smirk off your face if you don't tell me where the hell Soundbite is, and I mean right the hell—!"
"So, that whole 'brash and belligerent' attitude really isn't an act, huh?"

"NOPE! He just naturally refuses TO TAKE SHIT FROM ANYONE! HE COULD STAND TO pick better hills to die on, though."

I spun around to catch sight of Koala casually strolling up to me, Soundbite in her palm, the smiles they were sporting indicating that they'd somehow become fast friends while I was out.

"Well," I scoffed as I crossed my arms. "You've managed to get along swimmingly in what I can only pray was a surprisingly short amount of time."

"Ohh, not that swimmingly," she scoffed as she tossed me Soundbite, who I caught and returned to my shoulder. "I don't know how you do what you do. I tried it, his weight threw my balance off something fierce."

"Sheer practice," I groused before shooting a glare at Soundbite. "What, no SOS to the crew once I got cold-clocked?"

Soundbite snickered. "Hey, you're not the only one who slept with the Sea Kings. I ONLY WOKE UP A FEW MINUTES AGO. AS FOR ME LIKING THE FIRECRACKER, WEEELL..."

His leer took on a malevolent overtone. "LET'S JUST SAY she put me in contact with a few brothers-in-shell who gave me a LOT TO THINK ABOUT."

"...Fair enough," I nodded, before turning back towards the island's master. "Well, before we get started, couldn't we have had this conversation back on Water 7? I mean..." I snorted as I jerked my thumb at the main bulk of the tower. "I'm half-expecting the alarms to start sounding any second now as my crew storms this place and puts your men very painfully out of commission. Besides, in case you missed the memo, the island's gone Revolutionary now. Not much risk, ne?"

Dragon and Koala both chuckled. "First of all, Cross, if it were that easy for anyone to find this island, we would have packed up and left long ago," Koala said.

"And second," Dragon picked up. "I sincerely doubt that my son and his friends would be here anytime soon even if he did know where we were."

I cocked my eyebrow at him flatly. "So did Spandam, and you know how well that turned out for him."

Dragon's ever-present grin flinched for a moment before growing wider and darker. "Oh, I'm perfectly aware of how things turned out for Director Spandam. In fact, I'm tempted to thank the World Government now, though I doubt they're even aware of how much their vindictiveness has benefited us."

I looked at him in puzzlement for a moment, and then my cheeks started to hurt from how much I was grinning like an absolute psychopath.

"Ohhh, please tell me that they placed him exactly where I expect they did."

-o-

-Eighteen Hours Earlier-

"So," Emporio Ivankov mused as he (at the moment) took a sip from the martini glass he was swirling. "You found him where exactly?"
In an isolated cell, far away from any Visual Snails, with a nice big sign hung around his neck reading 'fresh meat,' Inazuma replied with a sip of his (at the moment) wineglass. "At a guess, they wanted him to experience whatever unknown hell the so-called 'Demon Tug' produced, sir."

The Newkama queen took a moment to process that before a wide grin donned his face. "Hee-haw! Ben-boy!"

"Yes, oh king of queens!" the ever-shifting assassin crowed, spinning up to him.

"Swap out with one of the comms-men again and call this number," Ivankov ordered, handing him a card that Bentham briefly scanned before tossing into a nearby torch. "The 'greatest hero in the world' needs to hear about this as soon as possible."

"Be back in a jiff!" Bentham swore before darting off down the carved-out corridors.

Ivankov watched the clone-human run off before dropping his smile and glancing at the scissor-human next to him. "Ina-boy, be a darling and fetch me a new outfit, would you? I'm about to absolutely ruin the one I'm in."

Inazuma fell into a deep bow. "At once, Queen Ivankov."

And with that, Inazuma spun on his heel and strode off.

Once he was gone, Ivankov turned his suddenly predatory smile onto the shivering, shackled and gagged man held within the cell he was standing before. "Spanda-boy," Emporio Ivankov crooned, his fingers sharpening into syringes. "Why don't you do me a favor and tell me aaaaaall about whatever else was in that itsy bitsy, eentsy weentsy little black book of yours, hm?" He cocked his head to the side. "Juust for starters, you know?"

-0-

-Present Time-

"—HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! Ohohoh, now that is karma if I've ever seen it!" I gasped.

"I will admit to finding the whole affair rather therapeutic myself," Dragon chuckled in agreement. "And besides my own personal feelings on the matter, the intelligence we've been acquiring has been quite beneficial to our operations."

"So many secrets…" Koala sighed wistfully. "Horrifying and nightmarish, sure, but undeniably useful."

"Pfahahahaaaaahaha…" I wound down into a breathless chuckle as I nodded in agreement. "Ohh, I can only imagine… still, if you don't mind, would it be alright with you guys if I exposed those secrets on my own time via the SBS?"

That got Koala blinking in confusion. "Huh? How could you pull that off? Wasn't that book destroyed?"

"Alternative sources," I smirked as I crossed my arms behind my head. "I recently recruited Spandam's old sword into my arsenal, and I fully intend to interview him at the earliest convenience."

"HE'S AN elephant-Zoan who never left his side," Soundbite explained gleefully.
Koala took a moment to process that before collapsing into stitches.

"Hmm," Dragon cupped his chin thoughtfully before shrugging. "Very well, then, go ahead. We're already acting on the information we've acquired, and Ivankov can pump him for all his intel faster than you'll be interviewing your sword. We should be over and done with pertinent operations by the time you divulge the information."

I clapped my hands with a contented smile. "Then we have an accord!"

The next instant, Dragon's expression shifted to stone-cold seriousness. "While we're on the subject of 'alternative sources'—"

My own expression went blank as I snapped my fingers. "Gastro-Scramble," I stated flatly, and Dragon raised an eyebrow as static filled the air. "I'm willing to tell you my secret, but fair warning? It's far beyond the madness that the Grand Line, ah, 'normally' produces."

"I see," Dragon nodded as he crossed his arms. "So, is it centered around time travel or dimensional travel?"

I cocked an eyebrow slightly. "Ooor I suppose you might be familiar with this particular situation already."

Dragon lifted his head proudly as his smirk took on a predatory gleam. "I deal with the entire world. Paradise, New World and all the Blues… individually they're impressive, but once you experience them all, nothing really fazes you anymore."

"…Not even Garp's stupidity at saying your name while saying he wasn't going to?"

Dragon's smirk twitched minutely. "Almost nothing."

I briefly toyed with the thought of bringing up four specific initials, but honestly, that was a question to which I really didn't want to know the answer, so I settled for leaning against the railing with my arms crossed. "I got drop-kicked here from two dimensions to the left, where I was an avid fan of the story of how your son rose to become Pirate King. Said story was still ongoing, so I have gaps and I've already been causing ripples, but it's done me some measure of good."

An incredulous scoff came from beside us. "Nice one, Cross. Pull the other one," Koala chuckled, waving her hand dismissively.

Dragon, meanwhile, didn't even miss a beat. "Well, let's get to business, then, shall we?"

"What, you mean you don't want even the barest hint of what's coming?" I asked, noting Koala in my peripheral vision as she alternated her gaze between the two of us, the blood draining from her face and a mix of shock and horror creeping into her expression as she finally pegged onto the fact that I was, in fact, entirely serious.

"Tsk," Dragon waved his hand dismissively. "I intend to give the world the answer I come to by my own devices, not by cheating and utilizing what fluid knowledge you have. After all…” His smirk widened to a far more familiar point. "Where would be the fun in that?"

I processed that for a moment before throwing my head back with a cackle. "PFHAHAHA! Ah geeze, I don't know if you're actually Garp's son or the devil's, but you're definitely a Monkey, definitely a D, and absolutely Luffy's father!"

"I coulda told you that for free!" Soundbite cackled. "SERIOUSLY, THE SMILE ALONE!"
"Alright, chit-chat time is over," I cut him off, the mirth draining from my face and causing Soundbite to sober up just as swiftly. "You still haven't answered my first question. Why am I here, because it sure as heck isn't to shoot the shit with you." I crossed my arms and shifted my stance into a more… aggressive one. "Whatever it is, I suggest we get it over with ASAP, because if I miss the christening of my crew's new ship, I'm going to be pissed."

Dragon and Koala snapped to serious just as swiftly, all traces of brevity evaporating instantly.

"You are here so that I may offer you a position in my army, Jeremiah Cross and Soundbite," Monkey D. Dragon announced, clearly and without a trace of hesitation.

Soundbite and I exchanged a look before I rolled my fingers for him to continue.

The original Revolutionary didn't so much as twitch as he turned away from us, staring unflinchingly over the white expanse that lay stretched out before us.

"From the very first day you started the SBS, you've been an invaluable ally to my efforts," he began. "Alabasta was not the only country that your words caused to revolt against the World Government's tyranny within the last four months, even discounting the massive spike over the course of the past four days. You've made your stance clear on where you stand, and you've proven you have the nerve to defend it to the point of death. And with the impossible knowledge that you possess, even discounting future events, you would be even more of a help by my side."

"I'm not leaving the Straw Hat Pirates," I said at once.

"And I'm not asking you to," Dragon chuckled dryly in denial. "I'm not such a fool that I imagine myself capable of breaking my son's grasp on your loyalty, or his grasp on any of your fellow crewmates. Nor am I so small-minded as to think that a man cannot effectively offer his loyalties to two flags at the same time, especially seeing as I cannot conceivably imagine a scenario where said flags would ever come in conflict with one another. Even so…"

He shot a stone-cold glance at me. "Let me be as clear as I possibly can: I'm not offering you a position as a simple member, nor even an executive. I'm offering you a partnership, to lead the Revolutionary Army alongside me, at the same rank as Sabo himself, so that we might accelerate both of our efforts to overthrow the World Government and show the world the truth."

I cocked my eyebrow. "Where is Chief of Staff Sabo, by the by?"

"Anywhere but even remotely close to here," Koala answered. "Seriously, as nice as it is for the poor bastard to have his memories back, just mentioning Luffy's name is enough to get him talking everyone's ears off about his 'awesome baby brother.' And seeing one of his crewmates here? She waved her hand with a dismissive 'tsk'. 'I respect Sabo to hell and back, but he'd still be running his mouth and having you run yours if he were here, and right now we need to concentrate on business."

"That does sound like him," I admitted. "If I recall correctly, Ace always talks the Whitebeard Pirates' ears off about Luffy whenever he comes up, too. Even other D.s aren't immune to him." Pulling my train of thought back on the tracks, I looked back at Dragon. "What exactly would this… relationship you're proposing entail?"

"Simple enough matters for the time being," Dragon waved his hand casually. "Facilitating global communications, some management here and there, as well as an exchange of contacts and whatever other informants I don't doubt you've managed to acquire over the course of your, frankly, rather
esteemed career. Rest assured, we shall freely respond in turn. I suppose that the best way to describe it all…"

He turned to me and donned his familial ear-to-ear grin, holding his hand out to me.

"You would be our partner," Dragon concluded. "In Revolution."

For the longest time, I just… stared at Dragon's hand, the weight of that gesture plainly visible, considering all the possibilities and all the implications that would arise from accepting it. All the advantages aligning myself with him would grant me, all the tools that would be at my disposal.

And it was with those things in mind that I slowly reached my hand out to his, and slapped it before drawing my hand back.

"Sorry to inform you, Dragon," I shrugged with honest regret. "But you're four months late and a heck of a lot of initiative short. I'm afraid that I've already got plans of my own."

Koala and Soundbite's jaws dropped, but Dragon's expression was impassive. "You would still be perfectly able to continue the operations you already have going," he assured me. "I don't doubt for an instant that you're doing good work."

I nodded my head to the side, grimacing. "Eh, we're still kind of in the 'digging our roots' stage of matters, but I appreciate the sentiment, and I feel the same way towards you, but that's not why I'm saying no. I'm saying no because when I think of joining forces with you, I can't get King Nefertari out of my head."

"Cross, King Nefertari Cobra is alive and well, we've been offering his kingdom every measure of assistance we can—!" Koala started with no small amount of desperation.

"I'm glad to hear Cobra is doing well," I cut her off with a raised hand. "But I'm not talking about Vivi's father. I'm talking about her great great however many greats grand-father."

Dragon raised an eyebrow. "Explain."

"It's simple: Anywhere from nine to eight hundred years ago, King—or Queen Nefertari, I suppose, joined their forces with an alliance to overthrow what I can only assume was a world-spanning empire or kingdom or what have you, and when they succeeded that alliance rose to take the original empire's place. Fast forward to today, and we witness the first traces of history repeating itself."

That caused a reaction, Koala's face flushing with rage as she took a menacing step forwards. "Are you accusing us," she hissed darkly. "Of wanting to overthrow the World Government just so we can take its place?"

Dragon made to turn to face her, but I beat him to it with a dismissive scoff. "Don't be an idiot, Koala, that's not even close to what I'm saying and I'm not accusing anyone of spit. What I'm saying is that, regardless of what any of us desire, we're all still mortal. One day, we're gonna die, and provided we've actually managed to come out on top by the time we do, other people are gonna take our places in running the world. And who knows!" I said cheerfully. "Maybe they'll be as righteous and morally firm as us! And maybe the people after them, and the people after them!"

I slowly let my expression drop into a scowl. "But not forever. Never forever. Absolute power is the worst poison in the world, Koala, as you well know from fighting it every single day. It's not a matter of desire that could result in the Revolutionaries replacing the World Government in every way, but inevitability. It's a matter of the fallibility of humanity. After all, at the end of the day, 'revolution' means to go round in a circle."
Koala’s rage broke in favor of confusion, many contradictory thoughts obviously running through her head.

"You raise a fair point, Jeremiah Cross."

And then she snapped her head around at her superior, shock clearly written on her face. "S-Sir, what are you—?!"

"Enough, Koala," Dragon silenced her with a raised hand, his expression shadowed. "I've long since accepted what Cross has outlined as being an all-too-real possibility, and I've long since put in place contingencies in case such an eventuality comes to pass. Cross has done nothing more than… state the facts."

While Koala slowly paled and clamped a shivering hand over her mouth, Dragon returned his suddenly far harder gaze to me. "But even in spite of this inevitability," he continued. "The fact remains that our goals and enemies are the same, and that neither you and yours nor even me and mine are powerful enough to face the monolith that crushes us all alone. If you have an arrangement you'd prefer, I'd very much like to hear it."

I took a moment to properly word my thoughts before responding. "I assume you're familiar with the saying 'trust, but verify.'"

"Of course," Dragon responded.

"I propose something similar to it," I said, raising my hands with the index fingers held apart. "Hand in hand, but not conjoined. Together, but separate. An allegiance, but no single flag. You walk your path to the truth and we'll walk ours, and so long as you don't step on our toes we won't step on yours, and heck! We might even offer one another a gesture of good faith from time to time…"

I folded my hands behind my back as I looked Dragon in the eyes. "But our respective draws will remain separate, and if a merger comes then it will be many years in the future, once the shadows of the World Government aren't quite so dark. And…" I waved my hand casually with a resigned smile. "Think of it this way: if one of us is ever forced to fold, then at least the other will still be in a position to pick up their chips and keep playing."

As I finished, Koala had a somewhat thoughtful frown on her face, while Dragon simply stared at me. Eventually, however, a rueful grin crossed his face.

"I would prefer you deeper in the fold than that…" he sighed wistfully. "And I'm honestly surprised given your new bounty that you're not accepting it, but I suppose I'll just take what I can get."

I shrugged carelessly. "Hey, why the hell should I be concerned about that waste of ink and paper. After all…" I let a predatory grin slide across my face. "If they want me? They'll need to get through my crew first."

"I dunno," Koala drawled, swaying on her feet as she crossed her arms behind her head. "I gotcha pretty easily."

"You do not count," Soundbite snickered with a smirk. "YOU ARE WHAT we refer to as NEW WORLD BULLSHIT."

Koala raised her finger before dropping it and shutting her mouth with a hiss. "That… you know what? I don't have a good response to that. But still—"

"If," Dragon cut in, shooting a simultaneously dry and bemused look at his subordinate. "I may
continue?"

The Martial-Arts mistress slapped her hands over her mouth with a squeak and a blush.

The Revolutionary continued to observe her for a moment before slowly redirecting his smile at me and extending his hand. "So… allies in Revolution, then."

I smiled broadly, and removed my right gauntlet before clasping his hand with both of mine. "Allies to the bitter end." I quirked a corner of my mouth up. "At least until you start dragging us down and we cut you loose like a rusty anchor."

Dragon barked out a laugh as he drew his hand back. "The same to you, then. I'll exchange contact numbers with Soundbite and contact you should I ever require your aid, and I expect you to do the same."

I nodded in agreement as I slipped my gauntlet back on. "You can damn well count on it. It was nice meeting you, Dragon. An… enlightening experience, if nothing else."

The Revolutionary smiled, then turned and began heading back into the command center. "Koala will prepare you for your return to Water 7. You'll be back with your crew before you know it."

The man was halfway to the building when he paused, and glanced at me over his shoulder. 
"Actually… one last thing. If you don't mind indulging an idealist's curiosity… who were you before you came here? By your demeanor and age I'm guessing a student, but as for your major… political science? Business? Philosophy, perhaps?"

I blinked at him in shock for a brief moment before grinning from ear to ear. "Smart man, if an inch or two off the mark. Student yes, politics no. Honestly, what more can I say—!" I spread my arms in gleeful surrender. "Than that I love a good story!"

Dragon blinked in surprise.

"SHISHISHISHISHI!"

Then he threw his head back and roared his laughter to the high heavens. "An artist of the written word!" he cackled jubilantly. "Honestly now, I don't know what I was expecting, I really don't! Heheheh…" Dragon chuckled as he waved over his shoulder as he kept walking away. "I wish you the best of luck, Jeremiah Cross. Now, Koala, if you could—"

"Ah, wait wait wait, one last thing!" I hastily interjected, looking back at Koala, and making my tone as gentle as possible. "One last thing, a personal matter… Hachi. If you're interested and my memory is correct, he should have his dream Takoyaki bar up and running on the surface, not far from the waters of Sabaody Archipelago and Fishman Island. Ask around for the Flying Fish Riders, they share those waters too, they should know where he is if no one else does."

Koala's gaze grew far off again, but that only lasted for a minute before a small smile came over her face. "Thank you, Cross, I'll remember that for once I have some more vacation time. Now, if there's nothing else, I'll get you ready for traveling back to Water 7."

I nodded in agreement. "Yeah, nothing else springs to mind. So, how—"

THWACK!

"THAT'S FOR GETTING ME AN ASSIGNMENT IN THE SOUTH-SUCKING-POLE YOU BIG-MOUTHED—!"
The last thing I heard before everything went black (besides the vigorous lambasting) was a chorus of snickering.

-o-

The next thing I knew after that little… event?

**BWAAAAAAAAAAH!**

My eardrums screaming bloody murder at me while something else blared even bloodier murder at me.

"GAAAAARGH!" I hollered, shooting up in my bed with my hands clamping over my ears. "FRACKING HELL, WHO THE HECK DO I LOOK LIKE, SPONGBOB, DAMN IT!!?"

"Personally, I'd just say you look like a plain old dope!"

A familiar voice cut through the haze of my rage and wakefulness, and after blinking a few times to clear my vision, I was met with an even more familiar face perched upon my transceiver on the bedside table beside me.

"Tseeheeheeheehee! I've been wanting to do that for the longest time," Su giggled as she impishly covered her muzzle with her paw.

"WE KNOW!" Soundbite bellowed in a medley of voices as he snapped his eyestalks out of his shell, before fully emerging in shock. "Wait, cottontail? We're back in—HUH?"

As my ears stopped ringing, I realized what Soundbite was saying, taking in the familiar sight of our temporary lodgings while we waited for the construction of the Thousand Sunny to finish… and begin, for that matter. Everyone was behaving with perfectly normally, though some of them were making their way over to me.

"So, Cross, feeling any better about your bounty?" Chopper asked.

"Ahhh…" I hedged uncomfortably, trying to successfully get my mind on track. "Y-Yeah, I think I've gotten over it for now… just as long as—"

"And that's where it would be a good idea to shut up, if you're about to mention some 'hypothetical' worst-case scenario," Sanji cut in.

"Eheh… point taken," I said, rubbing the back of my head. "So, how much have I missed?"

To my surprise, everyone just shrugged casually. "Getting more used to our bounties, but besides that, just the usual. What did you expect, you were only gone for a couple of hours before we noticed you sleeping it off," Su quipped.

I could feel the blood draining from my face as Su's words sunk in. Hours… mere hours…


"Spirited away and spirited back in a matter of hours," I whispered numbly, collapsing back against my bed's headboard as I processed the implications. Upon reaching a conclusion, I directed my terrified gaze at Soundbite, whose own expression indicated he'd reached the exact same conclusion.

"…Dragon is scary," I breathed, cold sweat coming down my head.
"Agreed," Soundbite whimpered.

"…Cross, did you just say what I think you just said?" Vivi asked, turning to look at me, her gaze pleading.

I managed a weak smile. "We're sort of officially allies now. Oh, and good news, your father is doing well."

"…What in Ammit's name kind of resources do the Revolutionaries have at their disposal?" the princess mumbled, sinking down beside Carue as her knees failed her.

I shuddered fearfully. "Follow my example: I dunno, and I don't wanna know."

Vivi, along with most everyone else in the room, nodded in acceptance, though none with nearly as much desperation as her.

I was about to allow myself to relax when Soundbite perked up. "**Frantic FRANKY FAMILY foreman forthcoming,**" he announced.

"Nice alliteration," I noted.

"HEH, THANKS, I've been practi—!"

SLAM!

"STRAW HATS!"

Zambai's door slam cut Soundbite off, also serving to draw attention to him as he fell on all fours.

"Zambai?" Usopp blinked at the man in confusion. "What's wrong, is Franky alright?"

I kept my expression carefully neutral as I waited for Zambai to get his breath back…

"Ah…" Zambai hesitated slightly as he recovered and glanced to the side nervously. "Nah… nah he's fine, I just… just wanted to tell ya that he's started working on… your new ship and—!"

"Bull-shit~!" I sang tauntingly.

"GAH, ALRIGHT, YA DAMN KNOW-IT-ALL!" Zambai snapped his head up with a furious roar. "I'M HERE ON BEHALF OF THE FRANKY FAMILY TO ASK YOU TO TAKE OUR BOSS, OUR BIG BRO, 'CYBORG' FRANKY, ON YOUR CREW AS YOUR SHIPWRIGHT! HAPPY?"

"Very," I smirked proudly as I folded my arms behind my head.

Meanwhile, the rest of our crew was a bit less, shall we say, _dignified_ in their responses?

"HUH?!!" chorused half of them incredulously.

"Not again…" was the general sentiment of the rest.

That half then proceeded to either _look_ or _glare_ at me.

"Oi!" I yelped, snapping my hands up indignantly. "Don't look at me like that, I have exactly _spit_ to do with this, and I couldn't have stopped it even if I wanted to!"
Thankfully, that swapped out some of the heat on me in favor of confusion, and Nami even went so far as to snap her gaze back to Zambai. "What the heck are you talking about?"

Zambai took a second to finish getting his breath back before giving us all a look that was equal parts desperate and determined. "Listen, in case you didn't notice, the rest of us who were with you, my bros and sisters, and the Galley-La guys? None of us got bounties like you did. The World Government ignored us thanks to our names and voices not actually being broadcast on the SBS." He shook his head miserably as he withdrew a sheet of paper from his back pocket and held it up for us all to see. "But not all of us got out unmarked."

Everyone took one look at the poster before gaping in awe or wincing sympathetically.

"฿70 million?" Vivi hissed. "That's not good…"

"Oooh trust me, it could be worse," Nami muttered acridly.

"Way worse," Sanji sourly concurred.

"Worse than you can possibly imagine," I finished.

"I don't know, I can—"

"YOU ALREADY used that gag!"

"Heh, sorry, you should hear the crowd on open-mic night…" Zambai chuckled sheepishly, scratching his head sheepishly. "But seriously, I'm begging you, on behalf of the entire Franky Family, to take our big bro out to sea with you. It's the only chance he's got!"

There was a pause as everyone considered what he was saying.

"Why are you even making such a big deal out of this?" Zoro finally said, prompting everyone to stare incredulously at him.

"Zoro, what the actual—?" Vivi demanded.

"Have you guys already forgotten that Iceburg cut ties with the World Government? Why do you think he'd be safer with one of the most famous pirate crews in the world than on a massive island where Government employees are the criminals?"

"…I hate to admit it, but that's actually a good point," I admitted, frowning at Zambai. "I mean, we'd be glad to have him along, sure, but with the entire island in that much danger already, why are you still so desperate?"

"Are you—!" Zambai started before cutting himself off with a groan. "Right, one of you isn't local, the other's an idiot."

"Hey, Cross isn't that dumb," Zoro snorted. My response to that was to grab my hand before it could try and strangle him.

"Look," the dismantler continued with strained patience. "The thing you gotta know is that one of the first things the World Government does when a nation cuts ties and goes Revolutionary is to blockade them. Granted, the Sea Train will give us some leeway there, and the world should be pretty damn strained from Enies Lobby's fallout, but the fact is that once they get their shit together, it's gonna be a damn nightmare to get off and away from this island if you're a civilian. But wanted?"

He shook his head desperately. "Forget it. Franky'll never leave Water 7 again, he'll never go out on
another ship again, he'll never have a shot at seeing his dream, his real dream, come true with his own two eyes! Which means… which means…"

The former thug choked out a sob as he fell to his knees, eyes scrunched shut as his emotions finally overwhelmed him. "So, please!" he cried out miserably. "Please take Franky with you! On behalf of the entire Franky Family, I am begging you—!"

"Ehhh?" Luffy droned dully, his tone nasally on account of the pinkie digging for gold up his nose. "What are you, stupid or something? Franky's already our crewmate."

That little announcement left the rest of us stunned in its wake, myself included.

"Uh… what are you talking about?" Zambai asked, sounding confused. "I never heard or saw you talk to Franky about anything like that, when—!?"

"Eh, I didn't talk to him about anything," Luffy replied, pulling out his finger and examining. "I just decided that he'd be our shipwright, sooo he's our shipwright. He just doesn't know it yet."

There was an instant of silence before we all groaned collectively, our voices filled with both exasperation, and fondness.

"Uhhh…" Zambai drew out hesitantly. "I… don't think that's how it works?"

"Ohhh, yes it is," Zoro chuckled. "Once Luffy makes up his mind that you're part of the crew, you're part of the crew."

"He doesn't take 'no' for an answer," Nami picked up, smiling fondly at the memory.

"And he can be a real pain in the ass if you still try refusing," Sanji concluded with a mix of a grin and a grimace.

Funkfreed raised his trunk. "Aaaaam I missing something here?"

"Let me clarify, my good pachyderm," I volunteered. "Everyone who Luffy recruited before I started the SBS, Soundbite and myself included, joined due to a mixture of Luffy's persistence, strength, and charisma, with a healthy dose of blackmail here and there for good measure."

"B-B-Blackmail?" Conis squeaked in shock.

"He held my swords ransom," Zoro said blandly.

"He threatened to make me kill him," Nami spat acridly.

"He—!" Usopp started before hesitating and scratching his head sheepishly. "Actually, he didn't do anything to me, he just offered…"

"He nearly destroyed the Baratie," Sanji grimaced. "Both from within and without."

"HE KNOCKED US out of a two-story TREE!" Soundbite barked.

"He wouldn't stop chasing me all over the damn castle…" Chopper moaned.

"The first time I saw him, he knocked me senseless…" Vivi grumbled, rubbing her head.

"Awww, you guys're making me blush!" Luffy laughed, folding his hands behind his head with an ear-to-ear grin.
"WE'RE NOT COMPLIMENTING YOU, JACKASS!" we all roared indignantly.

"And yet!" I added with a teasing grin. "It's not as though we'd rather be anywhere else, eh?"

Suddenly, everyone was a lot less willing to speak, far too occupied with averting their gazes and coughing uncomfortably.

"...W-Well... in that case, thanks a lot, Straw Hat. We owe you one," Zambai said with a sincere grin. Though the fact that he wasn't on his hands and knees spoke volumes about how bemused he was by what he had just heard.

"And we'll collect," Soundbite remarked.

Zambai nodded in concession. "Yeah, yeah... alright, anything in particular we can do right now, then?"

I was about to dismiss him, before grinning as a thought struck me.

"Oh, no," Usopp groaned. "That smile never means anything good."

"I'm sorry I asked..." Zambai moaned, slapping a hand to his face.

"No, it does not, and yes, you should be," I chuckled malevolently. "For you see... there's a little something you oughta know about 'Cyborg' Franky: His grip on this island is iron-hard, so if we're gonna get him off this rock, we're gonna need subtlety, finesse, an intricate plan..." My grin went from ear to ear as I clasped my hands. "And his speedo."

Nothing short of thunderstruck silence.

"...Pwease teww me I heawd dat wong..." Carue pleaded.

I maintained my grin as I slammed my hands on the room's table. "Gather round, boys and girls, because we're planning us a man-panty raid!"

"HELL YES!" Raphey shot her fists up ecstatically. She then looked around in confusion as everyone stared at her. "What? I'm just happy that for once, the wardrobe malfunction is on the other side of the chromosomes. Am I really alone in this?"

After a few moments, all males in the room shuddered as a wave of what could only be described as pure vindication swept over us.

As soon as it passed, I was back to grinning, if somewhat more shakily than before. "So!" I yelped only semi-desperately. "Who wants in on planning out Operation 'Running of the Pervert'?"

My smile became more honest at the affirmatives I got, before said smile snapped off my face faster than a gunshot as I noticed something missing from the chorus. "...Guys? Has anyone seen where Merry went?"

Thankfully for my nerves, Usopp was quick to wave his hand. "Oh, Merry practiced a lot and decided that she was strong enough to go out for a walk. She left about an hour ago."

I myself was content to heave a sigh of relief, but my partner in anarchy, on the other hand...

"IS THAT REALLY the best of ideas?" Soundbite asked uncertainly. "I mean, we went out for a walk too, AND LONG-STORY SHORT, WE WOUND UP IN admittedly not-so-DEEP but still
"Yeeaaah," Mikey drawled as he made a show of inspecting his flipper. "But consider this: whereas you can barely handle lifting over a hundred pounds, Merry, even hurt and injured, can easily lift you."

Soundbite and I took a moment to consider that before nodding in agreement. "Alright, withdrawn," I conceded.

"But, ah," Funkfreed raised his trunk swiftly. "If it helps, I heard her say something on her way out."

The elephant-sword then shifted to rubbing his chin. "Not sure how much help it'll be, though… I mean, how could an East Blue caravel have family in the dead center of Paradise?"

"Yes," Iceburg nodded confidently. "Truly a splendid sun."

"IT'S NOT A SUN, YOU BLIND MORON!" Franky roared indignantly, his hackles raised to the maximum.

"Okay, okay, geez!" Iceburg said, raising his hands in surrender. "It's not a sun! Got it!"

Grumbling heatedly, the crime-boss of Water 7 went back to his work. For all that Galley-La purported itself to be filled with Water 7's best and brightest, they could be stupidly thick. First a sunflower, now a sun!? Honestly, how could anyone mistake the proud figurehead of the Straw Hat Pirates' next ship for anything but—!

"What are you thanking me for?" she asked softly, hobbling through the men and approaching the large yellow figurehead of her successor. "I meant what I said: it's obvious what he is. I mean…" She cocked her head to the side slightly. "I suppose I can get some of the confusion; even now, so young, he's… well, he's radiant, but I honestly don't see how he could be mistaken for anything but what he is."

Iceburg blinked repeatedly as he attempted to parse the new arrival's words. "Merry? What are you doing here?"

The self-labeled ship-girl (girl-ship just didn't hit the ear even remotely right) jerked slightly at the interruption, grinning sheepishly (the irony was not lost on her) at the Galley-La owner. "Right, forgot about you guys… sorry for barging in here like this, I just wanted to see my big bro when I heard he was strong enough, you know?"

Iceburg and Franky exchanged looks before the metal-man raised his hand. "Ah… Merry? I dunno if
"Heh, not you-big-bro," Merry said, hiding a giggle behind her fist before pointing her finger behind herself. "I mean him-big-bro!"

The shipwrights all followed her finger, and then, one and all, they stiffened in realization as they followed her finger to the lion figurehead.

"Wait, here to see your bi—!" Paulie said incredulously. "Y-You mean… you're talking about… Merry, can you actually talk to—! To—?"

"Uh… of course?" Merry tilted her head in honest confusion. "Why wouldn't I be able to? I mean… I might be human now, but I am still a ship, remember? Of course I can talk to my own kind."

For a few moments, the shipwrights just stood speechless. Franky was the first one to get past his surprise. At least, for the first matter. "But… wait, even if you can talk to ships, how… how can you talk to this one!? I mean…" He gestured at the figurehead and the scrap surrounding them all. "It's not built yet! Heck, it doesn't even have a name!"

Merry jerked her head back with an even more confused look. "Uhh… what are you talking about? This is just his body, not him. Our keels are our spines, our crews are our hearts, but our souls? Our minds, us? We're born when we're conceived in the minds of our makers. Sure, we're wispy and ethereal while we're still in there, but the more solid the idea is, preferably as it's drawn onto blueprints, we become more and more concrete!" Her expression slowly morphed into one of extreme fondness. "This big guy's been waiting to stretch his paws for three long years…"

Franky seemed awestruck at Merry's words, though oddly, with about as much composure as Iceburg had.

"HEY!" Tilestone suddenly roared. "SORRY FOR INTERRUPTING, BUT HOW COME YOU KEEP CALLING IT A 'HE'? I KNOW THAT SHIPS CAN BE BOTH BOYS AND GIRLS, BUT ISN'T IT A BIT EARLY TO TELL?"

"Hm… well, while we're asking questions…" Lulu mused as he idly patted his unruly horn of hair down, only causing it to grow on ("AH C'MON, LU!") Paulie's cigar. "May I ask why you're referring to this essentially newborn ship as your 'big' brother? You're older by a fair amount, even if we were to count the day you ate the fruit as your birth."

"Ah…" Merry swapped her gaze between the two before pointing at Lulu. "Well, starting with you, it should be pretty obvious even to you, no?" She waved her hand at the ship's figurehead. "I mean… look at him! Ah…" She flinched with a sheepish smile. "His… actual body, I mean. I just… his figurehead alone…" Merry slowly shuffled around so that she was facing the start of her brother in full, eyes full of awe. "He's… He's going to be big. Bigger than me. Bigger than anything out of the East Blue, bigger than Old Mans Dicky and Jackson. Why the hell wouldn't I call him my big bro? He's gonna be the biggest in the whole wide ocean!"

And then, Merry's entire being seemed to light up with energy as she stared ahead in excitement. "And Tilestone… there's no mistaking him for anything but a he. H-He's just so… So big, so proud and confident and…!" Merry raised a hand to rest it on the figurehead's mane…

**ROOOOAAAAAR!**

All the shipwrights jumped in shock when a gust of wind suddenly blew through Scrap Island, causing the stray bits and ends of junk in the scrapyard to shift and let loose a noise that sounded…
not unlike a roar.

In stark contrast to the grown men around her, Merry's only reaction was to let out a laugh, a joy-filled laugh that was accompanied with tears of pure elation shimmering in her eyes.

"And he's so eager!" Merry breathed in wonder. "I mean, just listen to him! He doesn't want to be kept here, in pieces and immobile, he wants to be out there!" She swept her arm out at the sea. "Out challenging the waves to fight, out fighting the currents for domination every second of his existence, out running so fast that not even the winds can outpace him! He's... He's..."

Merry spun around to stare at Franky, nothing short of pure adoration in her eyes. "He's going to be a King," she whispered. "Franky, you've made a King. When you let him loose on the oceans, he's going to go out there and do what he was made to do, born to do, and that's rule. He's going to rule each and every last inch of the oceans because he knows he can do it."

She slowly turned her gaze upward, a dreamy smile on her face as she swayed back and forth on her heels. "It's only right that he join our crew the second he's born, no? After all, who else could possibly be worthier of bearing the King of the Pirates to his throne than the rightful King of the Seas himself?"

The two greatest shipwrights in the world and their three best understudies merely stared up at the lion's figurehead, starting to grasp the magnitude of what they were about to do. This was now more than giving their saviors the only reward good enough for them. The ship they were about to build would be the most momentous creation of the island since Pluton, since the Oro Jackson itself.

This ship would be their... no, this ship would be the legacy of the entire island of Water 7.

And that meant...

"...say, Merry," Franky mused, cradling his chin thoughtfully. "How long do you think you can stay here?" He slowly let a devious grin slide onto his face. "I'd like to bounce one or twenty ideas off of you and your big bro, so that I can make his body just that much more SUPER. Whaddaya say, Little Sis Merry?"

Merry matched his smile tooth for tooth. "I say bring it right the hell on, Big Bro Franky,"

Judging by the way Scrap Island roared anew, the nascent ship of the Straw Hat Pirates was in complete agreement.

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The next two days were essentially business as usual for the Straw Hat Pirates, which included our typical antics (ten explosions from Chopper's experiments, three prank wars, each instigated by but not participated in by Robin, and at least one collapsed building a day whenever Boss got serious about training his boys, thankfully only from the abandoned collection in the lower island), assorted instances of either gloating or sulking over respective bounties (both, in my and Soundbite's cases), and scattered bits and pieces of training and brainstorming here and there.

In my spare time, I also managed to catch a few hints of the local filler episodes, which included Sanji bringing back a few hefty bags of salt to our HQ (much to Soundbite's ear-shattering terror), a few choice blackmail photos of Zoro hauling a trio of anklebiters around, and the Union holding what appeared to be a candlelit vigil for those of their number that hadn't managed to survive the Aqua Laguna.

But amidst all of it, the good times and the bad, whether causing mayhem or the victim of it or even
simply relaxing, one universal emotion among the crew was hype for what the new ship would be like. Hell, even I was excited about it; after all, apart from the massive difference between the story and the reality and me being eager to meet, well… whoever our ship would be, Merry herself had assured me that she’d been personally helping Franky revamp his original blueprints. As a result, not even I knew what was coming, and for once, rather than dreading the unknown, I positively relished it.

Still, amidst the familiar, there were also a couple of noteworthy, significantly out-of-the-ordinary occurrences as well. For example, the upgrading of Funkfreed. The blade-Zoan had begged off incorporating a Thunder Dial or poison into his body, deeming both ideas far too uncomfortable, but we soon managed to come to an accord. Namely, an offhand comment from Nami about how she was using her Clima-Tact led to us commandeering a Water Dial from Conis’ massive arsenal and one of the spare Jet Dials to come up with a brilliant (if I do say so myself) innovation for the zombies of Thriller Bark once we reached them.

Another pleasing development was when we got a call from Dorry and Broggy, upon which we confirmed that the Marines that had arrived for them were indeed trustworthy. Since Hina herself had accompanied them to confirm, I took the chance to ask her to let the giants in on the full secret, so that even after she rejoined her main fleet at the Capes, they'd at least have a toe in the water in preparation for our little 'business meeting'.

But still, for all that the relative monotony was nice, it was eventually broken wide open by our next big occurrence… well, occurring on the evening of the fifth day since the destruction of Enies Lobby. And it all started… with a royal flush in a game of poker I was involved in.

"YOU HAVE GOT TO BE SCREWING ME!"

Or rather, that Soundbite was involved in while I handled all his cards for him. What, you really thought that I would be caught dead playing poker when I was already up to my non-existent halo in debt with Nami? I'm seven flavors of crazy, but I sure as hell ain't… that stupid.

Soundbite, however, absolutely was that stupid and was attempting to throw down with Robin, Boss, Chopper and Zoro. Or, in other words, the four absolute worst people for anyone to go up against in a poker game, as evidenced by Chopper laying down a nice line of royalty on the table before us.

"I think I won this one," the reindeer said with a joyful grin. "A royal flush! That's the best hand, right?"

"Almost, Chopper," Boss chuckled eagerly. "A royal flush is better than any other hand, but the diamonds are the weakest suit. Meaning…" Boss lowered his flippers, revealing another series running from the 10 to the Ace. "That a royal flush in clubs makes me the winner."

"BULL-SHIT!"

"Now, now, Boss," Robin purred. "The clubs are only one rank higher. A royal flush in hearts would be stronger still, and a royal flush in spades…" She spread her hand out, displaying her cards for all to see. "Is the absolute best you can get. So, as they say in East Blue City, read them and weep."

"Ooooh…" I winced sympathetically.
"FOR THE LOVE of esca-FUCKING-GO!"

"Same to you, Robin," Zoro chuckled, revealing his own hand—which was another freaking royal flush—in spades?!

"OKAY, that's where I CALL ACTUAL BULLSHIT!" Soundbite fumed. "YOU ASSHATS ARE ALL CHEATING!"

All four of them gave Soundbite looks like he'd just sprouted legs and started dancing the can-can. "Uh, duh?" Boss questioned incredulously. "What, you never played poker before or something?"

Soundbite and I slowly exchanged looks before the gastropod narrowed his eyes at the marine mammal. "Explain."

"It's quite simple, really." Robin smiled innocently as a quartet of arms sprouted from her shoulders and started flipping cards amongst themselves. "As pirates are all merciless, utterly lawless criminals, it's become a tradition in the game of poker and most other card games that the participants all cheat to the best of their ability, with punishment only ever occurring should someone be able to catch them in the act. I believe that my own experience in the fine arts of swindling should be self-evident."

"I made a decent amount of money in my bounty hunting days this way," Zoro said. "And it helps train dexterity."

"A few pirates of that sort clashed with the Dugong tribe once or twice, we learned how to play and… well, you know how we are about competing," Boss shrugged.

"I just followed their examples. Did you really not notice?" Chopper asked, and I couldn't be sure if the innocence in his tone was genuine or not.

Soundbite's eyestalks twitched murderously, and I reached for my headphones in case he decided to get loud—

"Puru puru puru puru! OF ALL THE freaking times!"

And lowered them as he began ringing, looking at the others at the table. "Hang on a sec, guys. If this is what I think it is, we'll need to cut the game short."

"Tsk," Boss snorted as he started re-shuffling the deck. "And just when I was actually starting to turn a profit on you suckers."

"Yeah, yeah, bloodsucker," I waved the martial-artist off as I dug through my bag. A glance at my transceiver's display confirmed that the call was from who I expected it to be from, thus prompting me to start thinking. "Alright, let's see… ah, I've got one." I snapped my fingers with a malicious grin before picking up. "Rain Dinners casino, Mr. Deep-6 speaking. How may I help you?"

"…I think I preferred the ones that weren't real," Tashigi sighed. "Never mind that. Cross, our assignment is over, and we've contacted everyone else. The meeting starts in fifteen minutes. Are you ready for this?"

I blinked, and took a minute to remember the locations of my other confidants before nodding. "Yeah, that should be enough time to gather everyone and relocate to somewhere more appropriate." I smiled casually. "Anyone I should be aware of on your end besides Tsuru?"

"No, she's the only—" Tashigi cut herself off with an abrupt scowl. "…damn it, how do you do
"Hey, it's not like it was hard to figure out..." I glanced to the side with a smirk. "Or that you're hard to trick..."

"Kindly bend over and kiss my—KA-LICK!"

"Eesh, even I'm actually starting to feel sorry for her at this point," Zoro muttered as he got to his feet.

"I ain't!" Soundbite and I chorused, but I was swift to sober up. "But there's more to this one than just prodding the Marines. Soundbite, get the Union to pick up Merry, Vivi and Nami and bring them to meet us at the one location appropriate for an occasion this momentous."

"Oh?" Robin regarded me curiously even as she and Chopper accepted new hands from Boss. "And where would that be?"

I slowly allowed a grin to crawl across my face as I pressed my fingers together.

-o-


"Oh, come on, Nami, look around!" I laughed, spreading my arms out to indicate the city below us and the reddening horizon in the distance, all plainly visible from the edge of the city's fountain. "We're about to take our efforts to change the world to a whole new level! Can you honestly tell me that this isn't the best view for the occasion?"

"And even if it wasn't, just look at it!" Merry said with a radiant grin as she made a show of balancing right on the lip of the drop with her arms spread wide. "If there's one thing I love about being human, it's being able to look at things from this high up for longer than a minute while plummeting to the ocean!"

Nami pursed her lips as she stared out at the horizon, and was shaken from her thoughts when Vivi laid her hand on her shoulder. "Ass though he might be, even I have to admit he has a point: this is awesome beyond words."

At that, our negotiator heaved a defeated sigh. "Weeeell..."

Soundbite and Merry giggled at her apparent defeat, while Zoro merely continued meditating in silence. Then the latter of the immature brats turned her view back to me. "By the way, when do we get codenames?" she asked. Her smile then took on an impish overtone as everyone looked back at her in confusion. "Well, I dunno about you all, but we can't all be 'Ophiuchus' confidant,' and Soundbite is already folded into that—"

"THE hell I AM!" the snail snapped. "I came up with my own CODENAME two days ago. YOU CAN CALL ME KNUCKER."

I frowned at the snail. "You... no, of course you took a swear word and changed the first letter, what else was I expecting," I deadpanned.

"EX-CUSE ME! A KNUCKER is a serpentine DRAGON," Soundbite huffed indignantly... before grinning impishly. "Buuut, that may have been PART OF IT. As for the rest, well... HOW FOND ARE YOU of the works of one Quentin Tarantino?"
It took merely a second for me to get what he was implying before scowling. "Oh, hell no, I know where this is going and we are not basing ourselves off—! Of…” I trailed off as I looked around at my assembled crewmates. "…okay, on second thought, I see what you're getting at here, never mind”

"GLAD TO HEAR IT! Now listen up, people, BECAUSE UNLESS YOU HAVE ANY OBJECTIONS, these are your new codenames!"

Thirty seconds of listing later, Merry was beaming, Zoro was indifferent, Nami was content, and Vivi was uncertain.

"Ah, I have a couple of issues with mine—"

"Puru puru puru puru! OVERRULED!" Soundbite cheered.

Vivi sighed, and shook her head. "I guess I can get used to it…” she muttered despondently.

I smirked, but I allowed myself to fall into seriousness as I picked up the snail. Just this once, for this, I could legitimately nut up and shut up, if only to lull Tashigi into a false sense of security.

"Ophiuchus," I stated clearly.

"Pisces and co." Tashigi immediately responded. "Considering how many of us are present at the moment, I felt like it'd be just quicker for me to vouch for everyone."

"That's fine," I nodded.

"Hm…” a particularly wizened voice hummed thoughtfully. "Is that so? So easily? Quite the casual operation you're running here, Mister Cross."

I quirked up a grin. "Well, what can I say, Vice Admiral Tsuru?” I queried innocently, causing Vivi's spine to shoot ramrod straight even as the blood vacated her face. "We've been making do with what we had available, and a particularly wise and seasoned individual like you wasn't involved until now. And besides, in case you haven't noticed? We're the Straw Hat Pirates, we do everything casually."

"Hmph," Tsuru sniffed. "I can't argue with that, I suppose. So, Mister Cross. I was informed about some form of deal or other concerning the nature of your intelligence and my participation in this endeavor. Care to elaborate?"

"Hmm…” I scratched my chin thoughtfully before waving my hand. "Soon enough, soon enough. First things first: our newest two members in what I'd like to formally dub the 'Zodiac of the Damned'. I've already screened them, and I know that we can trust them in our endeavor. But just to confirm, does anybody object to the addition of the 'Blue' and 'Red Ogres' Dorry and Broggy and 'Roar of the Seas' Scratchman Apoo to our ranks?"

Following a brief pause for thought, I received a broad chorus of general agreement and confirmation.

"Right then, let's do this." I rolled my fingers at Soundbite, and a moment later there was an unforgettably tell-tale click. "Apoo, Dorry, Broggy, you there?"

"But of course!" "Without a doubt!"

"I wouldn't miss this for the world!"
Alright, then…” I said, rubbing my hands together in anticipation. "This is it, you guys. You've already gotten a general overview of our goals, but once we give you our names, you're in it to win it with no way out. Are you ready for that kind of commitment? Ready to butt heads with the world itself?"

"But of course!” Broggy cackled. "For I can truly think of no better way to celebrate the end of our century-long hiatus!"

"And besides,” Dorry grinned malevolently. "We've been cracking World Government and Marine skulls since before you were small, white and gooey. Taking it to the next level? That just makes things all the more fun."

"Apapa! My thoughts exactly!” Apoo concurred with a massive grin. "Heck, the only reason my tribe hasn't come together and started giving them hell already is that whenever we try, we always wind up robbing each other blind!"

"Seriously?” Nami hissed out of the corner of her mouth at Vivi.

"I'm only just keeping from checking my pockets listening to a Long-Arm's voice!” Vivi shot back.

"Right, then. Dorry, Broggy, you'll be sharing the codename of 'Ox.' No better for the living epitome of strength."

"HUZZAH!” the pair bellowed joyously.

"And Apoo, I believe that Monkey should suit you just fine."

That caused Apoo's grin to slip into an uneasy frown. "Apa... wait, hang on... 'Monkey'? But wait, what about—?"

"What about Luffy, huh!?" Bartolomeo barked indignantly. "Ain't he gonna be a part of this or somethin'?!"

"Rooster—!” Hina started.

"No, he's not, Rooster," I interrupted. "Because not only is that not who Luffy is, it's not his job. Luffy is our captain, which means that he leads us down the Grand Line, that he'll lead us to Raftel and that he'll earn his crown as Pirate King. I, however, am my crew's tactician. That means that I plan things out for the long run, that I look at the big picture. I started all of this and got involved in this because when Luffy earns his crown, he's going to rule the seas, all but rule the world… and when that happens, I'm going to damn well make sure that the world is ready. That it's one he'll be happy… no, no, one he'll be proud to travel and explore." I shook my head. "And that's not his duty. That is and always will be mine. Got me?"

Silence fell as everyone took that in and while I couldn't be certain what they were all thinking, I saw clear approval in my confidants' expressions, with Merry being particularly exuberant. Then the silence broke in a very predictable way:

"ALL HAIL DA STWAWHAT PIWATES!"

"Oh, perfect, now you've got him started..." Foxy sighed.

"Oh, don't worry, I believe I can snap him out of it. Rooster, I understand that you're happy, but we need to move on. So, either you get your shit together, or I pull out my, shall we say, Buster-grade option?"
"SHUT THE HELL UP, ROOSTER!"

"WONDAF—grk! R-Right, then, what's next?" Bartolomeo asked.

"Apa… that'd be me accepting my codename," the newly christened Monkey replied.

"Glad to hear it," I nodded as I started to pace. "Now, with that all out of the way, I suggest we welcome our newest allies with a round of introductions, just to make sure that we don't attack each other by accident on the high seas. Agreed?" Another round of agreements. "Perfect. We'll start off with the presiding officers who actually brought both factions of our little group together, IE me and mine. You already know me, 'Voice of Anarchy' Jeremiah Cross, third mate of the Straw Hat Pirates, codename Ophiuchus."

"'Voice of Anarchy' SOUNDBYTE, co-communications officer OF THE STRAW HAT PIRATES. Call me KNUCKER, and if anyone cracks wise, I'll purée their eardrums."

Merry snickered at the threat before smiling from ear-to-ear. "Hiya! I'm new to this shindig, but I'm in it for the long haul! I'm 'White Menace' Going Merry, but on the job you can call me Cottonmouth!"

"'Corsair Princess' Nefertari Vivi, negotiator of the Straw Hat Pirates, codename…" Vivi briefly gnawed on her lip before heaving a defeated sigh. "…Copperhead."

Zoro grunted and shifted slightly on his feet. "'Pirate Hunter' Roronoa Zoro, first mate of the Straw Hat Pirates. Sidewinder."

Nami took a moment to respond, but once I rolled my fingers at her she shook her head in defeat. "'Weather Witch' Nami, second mate of the Straw Hat Pirates, codename Callie—"

"SHORT FOR CALIFORNIA MOUNTAIN SNAKE!" Soundbite explained, sticking his tongue out. "Obscure reference, don't ask."

Nami heaved a weary sigh. "—and believe me when I say that you really don't want to ask."

"Alright, that's us," I continued. "Now, as for everyone else, I hope you don't mind, but I've taken the liberty of adapting names for our two factions. Let's start with our allies in the Navy, who shall be henceforth be referred to as, unless there are any objections, the Zodiac of the Divine. Let's go with order of joining, please."

There was a brief moment of hushed discussion before a smoke-filled sigh came over the line. "It'd be nice if you actually told us before you decided this shit for us, Cross…" the gaseous Logia huffed. "Commodore 'White Hunter' Smoker, codename Cancer."

"Lieutenant Junior Grade Tashigi, codename Pisces. Welcome to the fight."

"Captain 'Black Cage' Hina has the codename Capricorn. Hina also agrees with Smoker, but also admits that matters could be worse."

"Captain 'Ship Cutter' T-Bone, codename Scorpio. Pardon me if I do not have much to contribute this evening, I'm still recovering from… what I am starting to realize was a somewhat ill-conceived endeavor."

"Hey, look at it this way, it could have been way worse!" I 'reassured' the gaunt Marine. "You could have gone up against Zoro!" The three-swordsman in question grinned as he clicked an inch of Wado Ichimonji's blade out of its sheath.
"…suddenly, I feel much better."

"Trust me, the feeling of fatigue rivaling a hangover is a standard part of surviving a fight with the Straw Hat Pirates. My entire base and I know all too well. Ah, yes, I almost forgot, I'm Vice Admiral 'Chessmaster' Jonathan, codename Sagittarius. Nice to meet you all."

"And that makes me the last, then? Very well. Vice Admiral 'Great Staff Officer' Tsuru, codename Aquarius."

"Nice to have you as a part of this, Vice Admiral," I nodded politely. "That makes six seats out of eleven filled, but with any luck we'll be able to fix that—"

"Wait, what do you mean eleven, Cross?" Tashigi cut in. "There are twelve signs in each Zodiac, and even then—!"

"You're telling me that any relatively sane and informed person we recruit in the future will be willing to go by either 'Virgo' or 'Dragon,' given the others we know with those names?" I interrupted right back.

"…withdrawn."

"Good. And if Sagittarius and Aquarius haven't been informed yet, I'll trust you to fix that as soon as this call is over. Now, for our pirate allies known as the Zodiac of the Damned. This time, newcomers first."

"Eh, we've already said it before, but hell, might as well go again. 'Red Ogre' Broggy—"

"And 'Blue Ogre' Dorry—"

"Co-captains of the Giant Warrior Pirates, codename Ox! GEGYAGYAGYAGYAGYA!"

"Co-captains of the Giant Warrior Pirates, codename Ox! GABABABABABA!"

"Apapapa! This here is 'Roar of the Sea' Scratchman Apoo, Captain of the On Air Pirates, codename Monkey! Grand Line represent, Apapa!"

"And East Blue represents right back with 'Black Bart' Bartolomeo, Captain of the Barto Club and codename Rooster! Let's hurry the hell up, I heard something about the truth of Cross's intel, and I damn well wanna know!"

"That sentiment is reflected with me, the infamous Foxy 'the Silver Fox', Captain of the Foxy Pirates and incognito Commander of the Straw Hat Pirates Recruitment Division, codename Goat! I wanna know how this smarmy bastard managed to utterly dismantle my winning streak, and I want to know now!"

"Trust me, that little combo breaker did not hinge on my presence," I coughed into my fist.

"Perhaps not," came the (thankfully masked) voice of Boa Marigold. "But I am equally interested in learning how you've acquired the impossible knowledge you've shown."

There was a brief silence before Soundbite scowled in a manner that left no doubt as to the cigar-chewing identity of the speaker. "And you would be?"

"…Call me Cobra," Marigold finally responded. "I would take the name of Snake, but I believe that that's best suited for my… superior, should they choose to join after I give them my opinion of this
organization. I apologize for not giving a name, but anonymity is key in this instance. For now, however, I believe that Ophiuchus and Rooster can both support my presence, if only as an observer and commentator.

"I can," I nodded.

"Yeah, she's on the up-and-up," Bartolomeo concurred, although going by the way Soundbite's expression had contorted, I'd say that he was currently occupied with digging for gold.

There were a few more muttered complaints echoing about here and there, but Jonathan's voice easily cut through them. "I suppose that two endorsements will have to be enough, then. But for now, if we're ready to begin..." Jonathan's expression fell flat. "I believe that our first order of business should be plainly obvious. What do you say, Cross? Are you finally willing to share your secrets?"

"Yes, you've waited long enough, and as Tsuru is here, it's obvious that you've kept your end of the deal," I said tiredly. "But I'm warning you: even with the impossibility of what I know, I will not be surprised if you still don't believe me. Just a fair warning."

"I doubt that, Cross," deadpanned several of the listeners.

I shrugged while my confidants hid smirks. "Very well. Let me give you all the details I can, with as much explanation I can provide. First of all, have any of you ever heard of the multiverse theory?"

"...You son of a bitch, you weren't just spouting nonsense on Skypiea," Tashigi groaned.

"It's not that surprising, in hindsight," Jonathan mused, albeit with a slight twitch in his grin. "Sometimes the honest truth is just too... unbelievable to handle as the truth."

"Apapa... maybe so, but still..." Apoo ground his teeth uncomfortably. "Look, I'm just playing devil's advocate for the sake of advocacy, but the things you're talking about... an omnipotent something or other, alternate worlds? Somebody's gotta voice what we're all thinking here, if only so that it don't rot, alright?"

"Eh..." Foxy hedged with a few shifty glances. "If it helps, I've... come into contact with the same whatchamacallit that he's talking about, this... this 'B.R.O.B.' thing, during my initial encounter with the crew. It was brief and I'd..." He shivered fearfully. "I'd really rather not talk about it, but still, it-it was more than enough to convince me of the veracity of his words just now."

"Hrm..." Tsuru hummed before nodding to herself. "Jeremiah Cross, how many levels are there in Impel Down?"

I hesitated slightly at the question before bowing my head with a grimace. "...Six," I admitted before shooting a dark glare at Soundbite. "But if anyone else were to ask me, I would say five every single time, because as much as I criticize the government, I'll agree that there are some people you need to just lock up and melt the key. So let me be clear: nobody is to ever, ever breathe a word of the Eternal Hell outside of this group."

"...Well said, Jeremiah Cross," the old Vice Admiral said, approval and nerves equally prominent in her voice. "As it stands, any doubt I personally held has been dispelled, though I do dread the events that could have led to such a story including Level Six. For now, should anyone still harbor any doubts, I would suggest that you contemplate the audacity fallacy."

There was a moment of silence before Soundbite sighed through newly acquired shark teeth."Mind
explaining?" Bartolomeo grumbled.

"Ahh… ah, yes, I've actually heard of this before!" Tashigi offered. "Basically, it's the question of why anyone would make an incredibly outrageous lie like that if they were lying? We'd be more likely to believe something less audacious; ergo, it must be true."

"… Uh…"

"Yes, I know that there are problems with that line of reasoning," Tashigi assured him. "After all, that's why it's a fallacy. Though… in this case, you do have to admit that it makes sense, right?"

"Yeah… yeah, I guess it does," Apoo nodded. "Alright, what the hell. I'm satisfied. It's totally nutty." The long-arm grinned widely. "But in the end, above all else? I trust Cross. So if believing this is crazy… APAPAPA! What the hell am I saying!? I'm a Grand Line Native, I'm already crazy!"

"Hear hear!" Dorry and Broggy chorused as one.

There were a few more vocal signs of agreements, a bunch of nods, and then a brief period of hushed exchanges. Then Jonathan spoke up.

"So, then, I believe we've just managed to handle our prerequisite business in a timely manner, so let's move onto our business proper. Who'd like to begin?"

"Ah… actually?" I grinned sheepishly as I raised my hand, wincing at the chorus of groans that sounded as a result.

"What should we have expected…" T-Bone groaned wearily.

"Unsurprised, Hina is absolutely not surprised at all…" the cage-woman huffed.

"Apa… Cross really loves to hear his own voice, doesn't he?"

"Tell me about it, he reminds me of Ito more often than not…"

"Oh, cram it up your bilges, it's not like what Cross talks about isn't important!" Merry protested on my behalf… before donning a cheeky grin. "Most of the time, at least…"

"Half the time…" Vivi conceded as she twirled a lock of her hair around her finger.

"Once in awhile…" Zoro grumbled, digging a finger in his ear.

"Like, one percent of what he says?" Nami mused, using her clouds to buff her nails.

"So much respect, I really feel the love…" I grumbled, rolling my eyes. "I am serious, though. Before we go any further? There are some facts about us that need to change."

"Like what, Cross?" Smoker grunted.

I wiped my expression clean as I popped up a finger. "We need to rethink what we call ourselves." I raised a second finger. "And with that rebranding, we need to restructure our goals for the future."

"Ohoh?" Tsuru raised an eyebrow thoughtfully. "Well, you've certainly managed to snag my interest. Care to share what you have in mind, Mister Cross?"

"Well, it's like this, see," I said, tenting my fingers together. "Our current name, MI, Marine Integrity, it was fine at first, when it was just Marines fighting to remove and replace a rotten system. But
now… well, now we've grown beyond that. Ox, Goat, Monkey, Rooster, even my own crew and Cobra's. It's not just Marine interests being represented here, but pirates too!"

"And what of it?" T-Bone rasped dryly. 'What 'interests' of pirates should we consider, hm?"

Vivi winced uncomfortably as she raised her hands to her ears. "Ooooh, this is going to be loud…"

And indeed, the following roar from our… less law-abiding compatriots would have shamed a banshee. And the loudest of all was Bartolomeo, who was leading the charge in the protests.

"WATCH YOUR FUCKIN' MOUTH YOU TOO-FRESH CORPSE! WE'RE AS MUCH A PART OF THIS FUCKING THING AS YOU BITCHES, MEANING THAT WE HAVE JUST AS MUCH FUCKING SAY IN WHAT THE FUCK HAPPENS!"

"HOLD YOUR TONGUE, YOU INSOLENT CUR!" T-Bone bellowed back, giving just as fiercely as he was getting. "FOR YEARS THOSE WHO FLY THE BLACK FLAG HAVE LOOTED AND PILLAGED THE WORLD, SLAUGHTERING AND ENDANGERING THE INNOCENT WITHOUT SO MUCH AS A HINT OF EITHER RHYME OR REASON! THEY ARE A SCOURGE UPON THE WORLD BY THEIR VERY EXISTENCE, AND THEY DESERVE—!"

Right, that's where I draw the line.

"Cover your ears," I growled under my breath as I shot my hand into my bag. I gave my friends just enough time to defend their eardrums, and then…

**BWAAAAAAAH!**

"BOTH OF YOU, SHUT THE HELL UP!" I roared in the silence that followed my multi-decibel blast. I huffed a bit to get my breath back before forging on. "T-Bone, think about what the hell you're saying, damn it! Scourge by their very existence'? And 'deserve'? That's the exact kind of shit that Akainu spouts, T-Bone, the same bile that the Elder Stars peddle! Is that really what you want in life, T-Bone?! Is that the level you want to sink to!?!"

Another silence fell, though it broke just as quickly with T-Bone's weary and ashamed sigh. "My… My apologies, Cross. I have never conformed to the spirit of such teachings… but I have been forced to recite them for years on end, and as such the spewing of such lies has become all but second nature for me. Still, I acknowledge that there is no real excuse for my words."

I nodded in acceptance at the apology, but my scowl snapped right back into place when Bartolomeo spoke again. No, wait, did I say 'spoke'? I meant started cackling.

"Hehahahaha! Nice job putting him in his place, boss-ma—!"

"Bartolomeo, kindly stuff it before I reach halfway across the world and shove your pompadour down your throat," I practically snarled, reducing Bartolomeo to stunned silence.

"C-Cross, wha—!?" he started weakly.

"'What' would be the fact that you're acting like a royal jackass when you don't have any grounds to stand on," I spat. "And why? Well, you kind of burned it when you became involved with a few names. Names like Kironoa, Eolialso, the Prisca Santana, the… ugh, Crobin?"

"Heeheeeheehooohoohoohoo—!"

"Plug it before I plug you," I snarled, prompting Soundbite to flinch self-consciously. "And Barto,
"You had damn well better remember those names, or else what little respect I have for you at the moment is going to hit rock fucking bottom."

"Wha—Of course I remember, those were some of the—!...ah... w-well, t-the islands and t-the ships that my crew—!" Barto flinched as my glare redoubled. "Ah... t-that I raided! B-but—!" The barrier-man swallowed heavily as he tried to regroup. "W-What the hell of it? So I raid a bit, big fucking whoop! T-That's what pirates do!"

There was a brief moment of painfully tense silence before I leaned forward. "That's what pirates do', is it?" I hissed. "Do me a favor, would you... remind me when was the last time that the Straw Hats pulled a raid on civilians?"

"Wha-?! B-But that's—!?"

"Or the last time the Sun Pirates did something like that," I forged on through grit teeth. "Or the Red-Haired Pirates? Or the Whitebeard Pirates?!

"A-Ah... I, ah... t-that's, ah..." Barto muttered uncomfortably, shifting his eyes side to side as he tried to keep his cool.

"Cross..." Zoro said in warning.

I glanced back at the swordsman before heaving a defeated sigh. "I... alright, fine. Look, T-Bone, Barty, what I'm trying to get at is that for all you two were acting like royal dicks earlier, you're also not wrong. T-Bone, you have to keep in mind that Pirates are still human, or at least sentient living beings, but Barty, you need to acknowledge that the vast majority of pirates are amoral monsters."

"Hey, that's not—!"

"Kuro, Krieg, Crocodile, Blackbeard," I listed off dryly.

"...withdrawn," the barrier-man whispered.

"Alright, look, we're getting off-topic here," Foxy snorted. "Barto might be an idiot, but the rest of us have no such compunctions about our, shall we say, 'chosen profession.' What exactly is the point you're trying to drive at here?"

"What I'm trying to get at is that for all that there are bad pirates," I continued undaunted. "There are still good pirates in the world as well. Pirates who only go out onto the seas in search of adventure, out of a lust for freedom. And unless I'm mistaken, it's safe to say that those same pirates are represented here today, correct?"

"I..." Bartolomeo hesitated slightly before nodding firmly. "Yeah... Yeah, you're damn right!"

"But of course!" Broggy laughed.

"After all!" Dorry proclaimed. "What need have we giants for gold? Nay, we set out to sea in search of honor and glory for Elbaf!"

"Eh, me and mine do like the gold, but we tend to take it from other pirates, so I say we're in the green," Foxy smirked.

"To steal the crown of the King of the Pirates all for myself... Apapa, I'll go down in my tribe's history!" Apoo cackled ecstatically.
Vivi blinked thoughtfully. "Wait, doesn't that mean—?"

"Shhh," Merry shushed her with a grin. "I wanna see how this plays out in the future!"

"There is nothing in the world that matters more than freedom," Marigold quietly contributed.

"I believe I've made my point" I stated. "Now, dedicating ourselves to the integrity of the Marines was all well and good when it was just Marines here, but let's face it! This organization has expanded beyond the corruption of the Navy, and our goals have to expand with it. What I propose is thus: that what we no longer merely aim to rebuild Justice… but rather, that we aim to rebuild the whole world. It is my personal opinion that together, we must strive to build a world where those who do not seek adventure or excitement are justly protected, yes… but also a world that allows those who are swayed by the lure of the seas, swayed by adventure and freedom, to follow their calling freely, and without worry."

There was a long pause as everyone considered my word.

"Eh, what the hell, I've been backing crazy long odds since day one anyways," Smoker muttered with a sigh.

"It sounds idealistic… but honestly, Hina does not believe that that is a point against it, all things considered," Hina added.

"And besides, since when have crazy long odds meant anything to the Straw Hats or anyone on their side?" Jonathan mused with a smirk.

"We could definitely support something like that," Dorry hummed.

"Bigger fights and bigger risks?" Broggy cackled. "You're damn right we can support the hell out of that!"

"APAPAPA! Trust the Straw Hats to jump to the absolute craziest option!" Apoo cackled.

"Ergh…" Foxy sighed with a grimace. "I'm technically a part of their crew, so I'm going right to hell alongside them no matter what I say…" He donned a pained smile a moment later. "So I guess that means I might as well charge right in with everything I've got!"

"So, Mister Cross, if I am understanding you correctly," Tsuru cut in with a measure of sharpness. "You're proposing that we strive first for destroying the current world… and then rebuilding from the ashes to create an entirely new world as well as we can manage? Is that right?"

I made to respond, and then I grinned from ear to ear as a thought struck me. "Yes… yes, that's exactly what I'm proposing! And as such…" I spread my arms invitingly before all of my comrades, physically present or otherwise. "Unless anyone protests, be it either to this change of objective or to what I'm about to suggest, it is my official opinion that we change this organization's name to something that makes our purpose evident to all. Ladies, Gentlemen, assorted bastards and bitches… I propose that henceforth, we label ourselves as the New World Masons. All in favor?"

"Aye!" a unanimous chorus of voices sounded out, with varying amounts of enthusiasm.

"Motion carried!" I nodded gratefully. "Anyways, that's everything particularly pressing at the moment. Who's up next?"

"No, he's on first."
"THWACK!"

"YEOW!" Soundbite flinched back into his shell with a yelp.

"Thank you," I nodded gratefully at Zoro.

"Just be happy I didn't hit you too," he countered.

"Well, if I may?" Jonathan cut in, though without any heat. "I am currently in possession of two pieces of news, both good and bad. Beginning with the brighter news: with the heavy damage to Blackarm Island, the Navy is finding itself in need of a new training base for their recruits, and have selected Navarone. Not only will this omit any lingering budget issues we have, but it should also prove an invaluable resource in turning soldiers to our number, as well as spreading our presence and influence across the globe."

I struggled not to let a massive grin split my face; with Jonathan in command, not even Akainu was likely to root out the mole mine we were setting up. But the other part of what he said still stuck in my mind, leading me to refusing to let me celebrate yet.

"And... the bad news?" I asked, not stopping the dread that crept into my voice.

Jonathan's smile promptly dropped into a frown. "Well, the former staff of Blackarm Island has relocated to the fortress so as to continue training operations, and after gauging the personality of the chief instructor, I elected to try offering him the position of Taurus. He seemed intrigued at first, but the moment I brought up that we were acquiring intelligence from pirates, he closed off entirely."

I felt my heart threatening to explode. "Sooo on a scale of one to ten, ten being 'Akainu's on his way'—?" I began weakly.

"Calm down, Cross. He may not be willing to join us, but he's not willing to betray us either. He simply has his reservations about cooperating with pirates. When it comes to matters of justice, he acknowledges the corruption of the World Government, and he respects our endeavors to fix it."

"Mmph... and the SBS hasn't done anything to change his view of pirates?" I ground out.

"It had, Cross. But the recent attack by 'Captain' Kidd has served to remind him of all the reasons why he and his despise pirates."

I promptly slapped a hand to my face, groaning. "Right, I read something about that dumbass almost getting torn in two by an ex-Admiral, of course it'd be the same one..."

"Ah, if I may?" Vivi spoke up. "Just how deep is this ex-Admiral's grudge against pirates? Because maybe I could try and—"

"In the early days of his career, he lost his wife and son, and more recently he lost an entire division of cadets, save for two, along with his arm, all to pirates," T-Bone wheezed.

"Withdrawn!" Vivi squeaked.

I sighed, shaking my head. "Alright... well, if there's one silver lining here, it's that someone of admiral-level strength sympathizes with our cause, even if he doesn't support us. That's more than I can say for any other Admiral... for now, anyway."

I looked up seriously. "But still, that was too close of a call; if he wasn't sympathetic, we'd all be gargling magma about now. As such, I think we need to come up with a contingency plan for later
recruitment attempts; after all, if we let even a single thread get pulled, then everything could potentially come apart at the seams."

"What exactly are you suggesting, Cross?" Vivi asked in a steely tone.

"Oi, watch it!" I snapped indignantly. "I'm not Crocodile and I'm not suggesting we become Baroque Works here. There are more ways to keep people quiet than death; just ask Capricorn and Rooster, seeing as they each have some of the best practitioners of one-such method on their respective crews."

There was a confused pause as everyone wondered what I was referring to, until Hina perked up thoughtfully. "…Hina has Jango, and Goldenweek escaped onto the Cannibal with her cohorts," the infamous Black Cage mused. "You're suggesting that we hypnotize them?"

"Tell me it's not a good idea," I challenged. "It's non-lethal, I've never heard of there being any long-lasting damage, and if it works properly, there's no chance of them ratting us out. Plus, if all goes well, we'll soon have another person capable of brainwashing in our ranks." I blinked. "Actually, what about you, Vice Admiral Tsuru? I don't know much about the Wash-Wash Fruit, but do you think—?"

"Possibly…" the Vice Admiral muttered ponderously. "I've never tried it before… but then again, it's never too late to teach an old ability-user new tricks. I'll see about going out on a few patrols to experiment; Sengoku shouldn't bat an eyelash at my request to be away from Marineford—or more precisely, him—for a while."

I grimaced uncomfortably. "For what it's worth, I still believe he's a good man. I just…"

"Aired his moral failings and dirty laundry to the entire world," Tsuru responded. "I'm aware of that. My issue isn't so much the laundry itself as the fact that he ever accumulated it in the first place. He…" She heaved a weary sigh. "He was my friend, and I thought I knew him… and instead he hid so much from me? I understand that there's pressure at the top, but there's only so much that I can forgive. And I realize now that he passed that point long ago. And for that revelation… I both condemn and thank you."

I grimaced at the weary resignation in her voice, but nonetheless nodded in acceptance. "Alright, so we've got four capable of it, that should be enough for now. Does anyone else have suggestions for additions to the Cleaners?"

A pause fell, and Tsuru broke it with a scoff that sounded more like a chuckle. "Simple, but it will do. Now—!"

"Ah, wait, hold on a sec!" Tashigi spoke up hastily. "I know that I'm going to regret this, but… Goldenweek, Jango and Vice Admiral Tsuru are only three. Who's number four?"

"The other sheep sailing about on the high seas," Merry whistled innocently.

"Uhh… someone else explain, please?" Foxy requested uneasily. "Preferably in a way that makes sense?"

"Oh, she's talking about Kalifa," I blandly replied. "She should be contacting you soon, and I imagine that with enough practice and training from Tsuru, she should be capable of wiping memories too. After all, she was partially successful on Nami on her first try. Isn't that right, Nami?"

Nami responded by rolling her eyes.
"…Kalifa," Tashigi finally bit out. "As in CP9's Kalifa? The exact same Kalifa who tried to kill you all?"

"You mean sort of like how most everyone on this call has tried to kill us in the past, and still fantasize about killing me today?" I responded dryly.

"Seriously, HOW CAN YOU BE EVEN REMOTELY surprised by this?"

"Moving on, right now," the Lieutenant snarled, soliciting chuckles from most of the listeners.

"Mwahahahaha! Seriously, Tashigi, I thought you were past the 'ditz' stage by now," Merry snickered.

"…Cottonmouth? You are as annoying as Cross," Tashigi spat acridly.

I snorted in laughter, but looked curiously at Merry; she was laughing too, but it was clear that it wasn't out of amusement. It seemed more joyful.

"Oh, you don't know the half of it, do you, Tashigi?" Merry said with a smile. "I'm definitely going to have to get on the SBS next time to start telling the world more about their ships. Like I told Iceburg and Franky, the ship's heart is their crew. His or her likes and dislikes, his or her behavior, his or her knowledge, all comes from the ones who he or she carries."

She sat back with a wide, peaceful smile on her face. "I've soaked up a little of everyone on the crew; they've made me who I am, and I couldn't be happier or prouder. Though, heh, I'm not planning on joining Zoro or Leo for a sword fight anytime soon."

"Wait, wha—?" Zoro asked, sitting up. Then he blinked in realization. "…You're saying that you're capable of mimicking all of our fighting styles, Merry?"

The ship-girl shrugged. "Well, obviously, I can't duplicate Luffy or Robin or anyone else who relies on their Devil Fruit. But, for hand-to-hand combat or weaponry? It's… more like muscle memory than actual training, but… yeah, I think I can fake it all well enough."

All present stared at Merry. Then, suddenly, a sound of mass scratching filled the air, drawing our attention back to Soundbite, who was himself glancing down at his grinding teeth in confusion.

"Uh, what are you all doing?"

"We're taking notes, of course," Foxy scoffed. "Do you have any idea how much of a riot went on when her wanted poster was published, confirming beyond any doubt that an autonomous ship was responsible for rescuing the Straw Hats from Enies Lobby?"

"Congratulations, you've managed to start a global trend that's going to last for years," Hina huffed.


There was a tense silence as we considered that before Vivi coughed. "Aaanyways, that's everything on your end, Vice Admiral Jonathan?"

"As of now, yes."

"Perfect," I nodded in satisfaction. "So, anyone else have news before I drop another bombshell?"

"Someone please say yes," Smoker groaned.
"Well, I do have one more bit of news," Tsuru stated, a vindictive grin sliding onto her face. "All of you pirates can breathe a little easier for the immediate future. You see, on account of the sudden surge in public unrest and the bad publicity following Enies Lobby, there's been a bout of, shall we say, reassigning going on."

"Oh?" I let a smirk spread across my face. "Please, do tell."

-Four Days Earlier-

Admiral 'Akainu' Sakazuki was glowering worse than usual as he entered his superior's office. He had an operation to plan, dammit, and losing that brat Bartolomeo was infuriating.

"Report," Sengoku ordered tersely, the IV drip hanging at his side serving to emphasize just how drained the Admiral of the Fleets was.

"'Black Bart' Bartolomeo successfully escaped into the Calm Belt," Akainu immediately and tersely summarized. "Boa Hancock reported failure in tracking him down, and there has been no news of him since his escape. All Marine bases in Paradise have been notified to send word if they see him, and in the meantime, his bounty will be tripled."

Sengoku huffed out an angry sigh, idly shuffling through the papers on his desk as he listened. "How can one crew have provoked this much trouble?" He glanced up irritably. "One that doesn't have a D. on it, I mean."

"I assure you, Sengoku, that this will be the last time they do," Akainu stated. "The Straw Hat Pirates should have been exterminated upon their first broadcast, and that's a mistake that I fully intend to rectify."

The Buddha-Human didn't even spare the admiral a glance as he snorted dismissively. "Whatever the hell you're thinking about, forget it. For now," He waved his hand at the chair in front of his desk. "Why don't you just take a seat, make yourself comfortable? We're going to be here awhile."

"With all due respect, sir," Akainu responded as he shook his head and started to turn towards the door. "My men are already preparing my battleship to sail for Water 7, and we're leaving within the hour. By this time tomorrow—"

CRASH!

Akainu flinched as a massive golden fist shot by his head and smashed the office's doors.

"SIT YOUR FUCKING ASS DOWN RIGHT THE HELL NOW!"

The admiral shot a glare at his superior, flaring the temperature in the room to the same levels as a raging volcano as he prepared to protest—

"Akainu."

—before clicking his mouth shut and killing the heat dead when he briefly found himself confronted with the sight of a horizon-swallowing, eye-searingly divine figure.

The next instant, he was back in Sengoku's office, the human Admiral of the Fleets still engrossed in his paperwork.

Sengoku glanced up at Akainu. "Sit down."
Akainu tried to muster some form of resistance—

Sengoku's eyes glinted gold. "Before I stop being polite."

And then promptly planted his ass in what he suspected was a deliberately two-sizes-too-small seat.

The Fleet Admiral leveled a stare at him, looking for all the world like the displeased boss that he was. "Just so we're clear, the only reason I am keeping myself calm in this situation is that my age has been showing lately, and I can't maintain my rage for more than a few seconds without my heart giving out on me. Make no mistake, however. We've had more resignations in the last twenty-four hours than the last two years, at least fifteen percent of the World Government's nations have attempted or succeeded in revolution, and above all else, worldwide opinion of the Marines is at an all-time low. I Am. Furious."

He leaned forward, his eyes narrowing more. "And the two major catalysts for this are the publicizing of CP9's blackbook—which Spandam is being punished for—and the destruction of Ohara. As it stands, we will be lucky if the deployment of the Buster Call isn't deemed a war crime worthy of Impel Down come the next Reverie."

"What!?" Akainu jerked forward in shock. "Sir, I realize that that Call didn't exactly go according to protocol—!"

"PROTO—!?!" Sengoku started to roar before wincing and ramming his fist into his chest. "You want to speak to me about protocol?! While I acknowledge that all Buster Calls have high casualty rates, none before have resulted in genocide!"

"I had to be certain that—!"

SMASH!

Akainu promptly shut up when Sengoku's fist split his desk.

"To reiterate," Sengoku hissed. "Do not let my calm demeanor fool you, mutt. I am begging you for any excuse you can give me so that I can lock you away like you deserve. Will you be kind enough to give me that excuse?"

The admiral wisely kept his trap shut.

Sengoku snorted dismissively as he returned his attention to his paperwork. "Of course, now is when you decide to wise up… as I was saying, the main cause of the outcry is the fact that you, an Admiral, sacrificed a shipload of Marines and civilians for no other reason than your own 'Thorough Justice'."

"And what's wrong with—!?"

Sengoku whipped a form out of a drawer and slapped it on the desk. Akainu took one look at the paper, registered the words 'dishonorable discharge' and decided to immediately re-think his priorities.

"As it stands," Sengoku continued. "I'd like nothing more than to throw the book at you just as I did to Spandam, as that would be the easiest and best way to diminish all of the negative publicity we're getting. But as it stands, your abilities remain too much of an asset for the Navy for me to do that. So, what I'm going to do instead is make sure you don't end up anywhere in the public eye for the foreseeable future."
He pushed his paperwork forward for Akainu to see. "Your new marching orders are as follows: you and Vice Admiral Onigumo—who I am equally infuriated with—will be working together from now on. You will not be assigned to Marineford, you will not be assigned to anywhere in Paradise." He leaned forward, positioning himself so that he was looming over the suddenly, though quietly, terrified admiral. "Your assignment is to bury yourself in the New World like the tick that we both know you are, and wage war against the Four Emperors. You are going to do your level best to remind me, remind Kong, and remind everyone else who outranks you as to why we consider you so much of an asset, and why we cannot simply condemn your overkill-happy ass to Level Six of Impel Down. And if you don't?"

Sengoku pushed himself up from his desk, the light falling just right so that his face was hidden in shadows, two golden orbs where his eyes were.

"There is a very real possibility that we will forget."

He leaned forward and glared in the admiral's face. "Do I make myself clear, soldier?"

"…crystal, sir," the admiral ground out.

"Perfect," Sengoku nodded in satisfaction, ignoring Akainu's tone as he returned to his paperwork. "Just so you know, I fully expected that you would be difficult up to this point, so I decided to get some… assistance in this endeavor."

That prompted Akainu to blink in confusion. "Wait… what do you mean by—?"

SMASH!

Akainu spun around as the entire wall of the office smashed inwards, fully prepared to end whoever the intruder was, and promptly paled in horror when he realized who the intruder was.

"Hello, Mutt," a grinning Monkey D. Garp chuckled grimly as he strode up to his technical superior, slowly cracking his knuckles one by one. "Been awhile. Don't worry, this won't be long, I'm just going to explain to you why you're going to stay the hell away from my grandson."

For the first time in over a decade, Admiral 'Akainu' Sakazuki swallowed fearfully.

-0-

"…After that, well… suffice to say that we probably won't be dealing with that particular walking menace anytime in the near future. He just arrived in the New World today, along with a large selection of Marines with, shall we say, similar views concerning Justice. Odds are quite high that it will be much easier to weed out potential supporters now that Akainu is on the other side of the Red Line, both in Marineford and on the high seas."

I wasn't quite capable of responding to Tsuru on account of how I was only half-listening. The reason for this lack of attentiveness was that halfway through her explanation, all of the pirates present—my friends and I included—and a few of the Marines started straight-up dying with laughter.

"HEHAHAHA! HEHAHAHAHAAAAAA! MY SIDES! MY SIIIIDES!" Bartolomeo howled, tears gushing from his eyes.

"It c-couldn't have happened—PFHAHAHAHA!—to a worse asshole, PFFHAHAHAHAHAHA!" I cackled.
"I must agree here," T-Bone gasped, obviously wheezing in an effort to get enough air in his lungs. "I have been waiting for that literal son of a bitch—FAHAHAHA!—to get comeuppance for the last twelve years!"

It took a good three minutes for us to get ourselves under control enough for Tsuru to speak again.

"Alright, that's all the news I have from the top presently. Is there anything more to discuss this evening?"

A few seconds of silence.

"Eh, I may as well say that I've collected a few more crews for our cause," Foxy said with a shrug. "Also, there seems to be some suspicious activity going around the base of one Captain Moore. Isolated away from any civilian dwellings, ideal for corruption to fester."

"Suggestion noted," Tsuru said, and a slight sound of scratching came across the connection.

"I can assure you that I will be bringing a high recommendation of the New World Masons to my superior," Marigold added. "I cannot promise yet that they will join due to our... circumstances, but I believe that whatever resources we can safely offer are at your disposal."

"Which is a big deal," I confirmed with a sage nod. I then snapped my head up as a thought struck me. "Oh, and speaking of extra resources, good news: I met Dragon, and we're officially allies of the Revolutionary Army now."

The silence was deafening.

"...all in favor of not questioning this turn of events and merely rolling with it?" Jonathan suggested.

"AYE," was the unanimous chorus.

"Heh. Honestly, I don't feel comfortable thinking about it too hard, so I'll agree there too," I snickered before clapping my hands together. "Alright, if there's no further business, I move that we bring this meeting of the New World Masons to a close."


A few seconds in silence passed.

"Motion carried," Apoo stated. "I'm looking forward to the next time I can hijack the SBS, Cross! KA-LICK!"

"Cheers to a new world, Cross. KA-LICK!" Marigold and Bartolomeo departed. And one by one the connections dropped, until the only one speaking through Soundbite was the snail himself.

"So, who exactly is Cobra?" Vivi asked as she confirmed that the connections were gone.

"Boa Marigold, the youngest of Boa Hancock's two sisters," I replied, to much widening of eyes. "And yes, I mean Boa 'the only female Warlord and the most beautiful woman on the six seas' Hancock. Suffice to say that the only reason she's a Warlord is that her contract with the Government is the only thing keeping them from raiding her island; the Boa sisters have more justifiable hatred against them and the male gender than even you can imagine."

Nami raised her finger and started to speak, but promptly lowered said finger and snapped her mouth shut. "I'd ask, but then I remembered what was lying behind the last time I asked, and I'd rather not
have nightmares, thank you very much."

My other confidants nodded in agreement with varying amounts of desperation.

I shook my head free of those thoughts as I looked back out at the sun, nearly setting, and I felt a smile grow on my face. "...hell of a view..."

I was shaken out of the wonder by a small tug on my pant leg, prompting me to look down at Merry's smiling face. "And I wouldn't be here seeing it without you," she whispered happily.

"Or me," Vivi sniffed haughtily, as she stepped up to me, before looking to the side with a blush and a grin as she rubbed her finger under her nose. "Though... honestly, I think that the positives are outweighing the negatives at this point."

"What they're saying is that you've been making a difference, Cross," Zoro explained with a roll of his eyes. He then donned a glare when Nami thwapped him upside the head, wearing a cheeky grin of her own.

"And what this lug is saying," she chuckled. "Is that we're all happy you're here, Cross."

"NOT ME!" Soundbite denied, not very convincingly. "If it weren't for you, I'D HAVE HIT IT BIG in showbiz!"

"But instead, here you are slumming it with us, huh?" I needled with a smirk of my own.

"...bah. When you put it like that, I suppose it COULD BE WORSE," Soundbite whistled to the side in an oh-so-innocent manner.

I chuckled as I patted his shell, watching the sun sink all the while. "Don't ever change, Soundbite."

"Not even if they paid me, Cross. Not even then."

The six of us watched the sunset from the lip of the fountain until it vanished over the horizon, then headed back to the base for a casual night, followed by a casual day, and another casual night; the only occurrences of any noteworthiness during that time were Zoro picking out a new sheath for Funkfreed and Merry finally growing strong and stable enough to move without her crutches, though it'd be a while longer before she was capable of full-on running.

Then, on the morning of our seventh day since escaping Enies Lobby, Zambai and a visibly exhausted Paulie woke us up early to inform us that the new ship was finished. Needless to say, within the hour all twenty-one of us were assembled on Scrap Island, facing a massive structure covered with a massive tarp, held by two-thirds of the remnants of Tom's Workers...

"Nagagaga! I wasn't about to miss the chance to do this!" Kokoro chuckled, standing alongside Iceburg and ready to tear off the tarp at a moment's notice. "After all, the last time I was a part of an unveiling like this, it was for old Jacky himself!"

"Woohoo!" Luffy whooped eagerly, all of the implications of the moment lost as he jumped from foot to foot with ill-repressed eagerness. "New ship, new shiiiiiip!"

Luffy wasn't alone in his eagerness, either (big surprise). Everyone else on the crew was just as eager
as him, though the degrees to which they were showing it varied, from Chopper's equally starry-eyed squealing to Zoro's stoic smile.

Still, even in the midst of all the anxiety and fervor, Conis still had enough wits about herself to glance around with a thoughtful look. "I'm sorry, but shouldn't we wait for Franky? I mean, he did build this new ship, right?"

"No way! If he's not here, that's his problem! I'm too eager for you all to see big bro large and in charge to wait!" Merry squealed, bouncing for joy on Funkfreed's newly plate-mail-armored head, said armor having been acquired courtesy of his brand-spanking new sheath.

"Eeeasy there," the elephant-sword chuckled, centering Merry on his head with a poke of his trunk.

"I'll admit, I'm pretty eager myself," I breathed, already soaking in the covered form before me with awe. "My memory's a little bit fuzzy, six months of wear and tear and all, but one thing I'm positive of?" I shook my head slowly. "The ship that I remember was not that big."

"Heheh, yeah," Merry laughed into her hand. "Franky was gonna make him smaller, but once he heard how many of us there are and once he got some say-so in matters, he told Franky one thing and one thing only!" Her grin widened to the point that it was visible even with her hand in place. "Big."

I nodded numbly as I took it all in. "Yeah… he hit that mark…"

"This is gonna be eeeepiiiiic," Mikey whispered softly as he eagerly rubbed his hands together, his reaction mirrored between the rest of the crew's Dugongs.

"Enough waiting, show us our ship already!" Luffy roared, throwing up his fists in impatience.

"Heh, well, if that's how you feel…” Iceburg nodded in knowing agreement. "With Franky gone, I'll just have to unveil this ship to you in his place. And I have to say, it is quite a ship. My eyes lit up when I beheld the blueprints for this ship, and for good reason. This ship is truly incredible, capable of—!"

"Oh, will you shut your trap already!?"

"Wha—?"

THWACK!

"GAH!" Iceburg yelped when a pair of small feet slammed into his face and knocked him aside.

"Dynamic Entry!" Merry proclaimed as she stuck her landing, none the worse for wear after Funkfreed had flung her at the foreman, apparently at her prompting. She then flashed a pair of victory signs with a large grin. "Merry Edition!"

Nami promptly levelled a flat glare at me. "I blame you."

I donned a massive grin of my own as I flashed my own victory sign. "I accept that blame with pride!"

"What the hell was that for, you brat!?" Iceburg demanded as he shot up into a sitting position, pinching his bleeding nose shut.

"You were taking too long!" Merry stuck her tongue out at the man before grinning at us. "And Big
Bro’s getting impatient, so without further ado?” She grabbed the hem of our new ship's cover. "I give you none other than my brand-spanking-new Big Bro!"

And the amusement and bemusement amidst the crew faded into nonexistence as we beheld the spectacle that Merry unveiled.

"AWESOME!” the Kiddy Trio and TDWS exclaimed.

Boss bowed and shook his head with a chuckle. "Truly," he breathed out a proud cloud of smoke. "A ship capable of fulfilling all manner of Man's Romances."

"Hmph," Zoro smiled honestly. "Now that's a big ship."

"Incredible…” Robin breathed, lightly thumbing her stetson's brim up.

"THE KITCHEN! I NEED TO SEE THE KITCHEN RIGHT AWAY!” Sanji declared.

"It's magnificent!” Conis gasped, clasping her hands before her chest.

"I'll second that!” Su nodded her head emphatically in agreement.

"Even I'm impressed, this is amazing!” Lassoo panted eagerly.

"I've seen the battleships of Marineford, and this blows them clean out of the water!” Funkfreed trumpeted.

"Forget Marineford!” Vivi squealed, stars shining in her eyes. "Over half the ships that show up to the Reverie pale in comparison, and those carry kings!"

"Ah'll second that!” Carue squawked as he snapped his wing up in salute.

"…the GOD OF NOISE… has been left SPEECHLESS,” Soundbite gaped in awe.

And in all honesty, I couldn't blame my partner, seeing as I was right there with him; double the budget and add a ship-whisperer into the development, and the result was… well. It was definitely the Straw Hat Pirates' second ship, the design was unmistakable, but in form? It was an entirely new beast that stood before me.

The first and most obvious distinction was the third mast sitting in the middle section of the ship sporting furled square sails, part of a distinctly longer middle deck that gave the ship a leaner, sleeker look than the canon vessel. The mizzenmast on the rear deck had been adjusted, too. The arms of the mast were now parallel with the length of the ship instead of perpendicular, and I think the sails were different too? Sue me, I'm not a maritime expert. They'd adjusted the bow, too; the lion figurehead was now on the end of a longer extension sporting additional sail lines, and the entire bow was more sharply curved forward. And… I squinted at the form of Iceburg standing next to the ship. I think it might have been a bit higher above the water, too.

The overall effect was a ship that wasn't just fifty percent heavier, or so Iceburg informed us, but that also just plain looked faster than the admittedly kind of squat and tubby canon ship. It wasn't as inviting, but it made it look a bit meaner, so overall I think it was a bit of a wash in that department.

My inspection done, I leaned over to Nami, who was still doing her own examination. "So, what kind of ship is this, exactly?"

"I'm pretty sure it's a three-masted barque," she absently replied. There was a momentary pause, and
then she grinned the sunniest grin I'd seen on her face in a long while. "It is! Oh, this is perfect! I was a bit worried they'd give us a ship-rigged tub, but this'll turn circles around most Marine ships! And we'll definitely have enough people to man the rigging, I was worried about that, too! Ohhh, I can't wait to get at the helm and take her for a cruise!"

"III'll take your word for it," I chuckled, feeling a drop of sweat run down the back of my head. "Anyway, though, before we go onboard, I think we should give our newest crewmate his name."

"WHAT?" Merry's attitude spun around immediately as she shot a stern glare at me. "Cross, unveiling him without Franky being here is one thing, but to not let the one who conceived him have any part—!"

"If my memory is accurate, the name he set his heart on is 'New Battle Franky, Lion Gang Champion'," I said, most certainly not with a smirk.

"...Right, then! Let's give big bro his name before we go onboard!" Merry cheered, her attitude completing its revolution, albeit with a way more rigid smile.

"That should be easy!" Usopp smiled eagerly as he turned towards me. "Cross, in the story, what —?"

"USOPP!"

"Gah!" our sniper yelped when Luffy suddenly shouted.

"We can't just ask Cross for the ship's name," our captain informed him. "He only knows the name that a crew just like ours asked. If we choose the same name, fine, but we have to choose it ourselves! We're not just gonna steal it from them!"

"Well..." Usopp bowed his head in admonishment, before smiling confidently at Luffy. "Well in that case, what names do you have?"

Luffy crossed his arms and tilted his head to the side, smoke all but visibly wafting up from his head as his mental gears ground against each other. And then his head popped up with a grin, a lightbulb practically shining over his head.

"Black Bear Polar Bear Lion Tiger!"

There was a hard silence as everyone stared at him before Usopp clapped his hands. "Right, anyone else?"

"Oh, oh!" Vivi waved her hand eagerly. "How about... the 'Grace of Sekhmet'?"

"Denied!" Merry sang, popping her hand up. "Big bro's a boy!"

Vivi's face flushed as she slowly lowered her head. "Oh... yeah... right..."

"Still way better than Luffy's suggestion..." I muttered.

"Like that's hard..." Carue muttered beneath his breath.

"Super Wolf Gorilla Bear!"

We all ignored the rubber-man in favor of waiting for someone else to speak up.

"How about..." Conis tapped her chin thoughtfully before pounding her fist in her palm with a
satisfied smile. "Fluffy McFluffmeister? That sounds fierce, right?" She waited for a moment before glancing around in confusion when nobody said anything. "What? What's wrong?"

Su slapped a paw to her face with a moan. "Ohhh honey…"

"Next!"

"How about 'Big Boss Lionel'?'" Zoro volunteered.

"I suggest Monsieur Sunflower," Sanji contributed.

"Dandelion Lion Dandy Unbearable Bear!" was Luffy's contribution.

"WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU THREE!?!" Usopp roared incredulously.

"Better question: what isn't?" Lassoo snorted.

"Alright, that's it, silence from the Monster Trio!" Merry barked, exasperation battling with how she looked to be three seconds from busting a stitch.

Honestly, I had to agree with Merry on this one. Those names were so bad that even our ship was sporting a sweatdrop of its own. Or maybe that was just ocean spray, hard to tell. Then Robin opened her mouth.

"Do not say 'Being of Darkness'," I warned her. She promptly tilted her hat down and glanced to the side with a whistle as many of the crew turned to stare at her.

"…'Nostromo', then?" she suggested.

My head bounced as the sheer weight of that name struck me.

"I'd go for 'Ishimura' myself!" Boss proclaimed with a stab of his cigar.

"Agreed!" his students barked eagerly.

My head bounced even harder from that one.

"Tsk! Amateurs, THE LOT OF YOU!!" Soundbite sniffed imperiously. "Clearly our beloved vessel deserves one name and ONE NAME ONLY!"

I shot a glare at Soundbite out of the corner of my eye. "Don't you dare. Don't you fucking—!"

"ALL HAIL THE ENTERPRISE!"

WHAM!

Aaand that one was heavy enough that I outright face-faulted.

"Captain?" I growled into the dirt. "My patience is rapidly wearing thin… as is the integrity of my skull."

"Okay," Luffy nodded. "Merry? What does our ship want to be named?"

"Doesn't work that way," Merry deadpanned as she waved her hand before her face. "We name him, he doesn't have any opinion either way except that it not be terrible."
"Oh…" Luffy slowly nodded his head in understanding.

"Hmm… oh!" Chopper snapped his head up as an idea came to him, eagerly grinning at me. "Cross, you can't tell us what the other crew named their ship, but it's alright if we come to the same name on our own, so… can you tell me what led them to choose that name?"

Luffy perked up with a grin at that. "Hey, that works! I'm with Chopper! Come on, Cross, what was it?"

"Ah…" I hesitated for a moment, glancing around at the crew and confirming that everyone was giving me their consent before looking at the ship before us and searching my thoughts for a good way to word this. And then… and then I had it.

I grinned as I jerked my chin dead ahead. "If you want an answer," I drawled. "Then just look to his mane."

All eyes turned toward the figurehead, staring at the orange spikes that composed its mane. For a few seconds, they just stared. Then I smiled as I saw understanding come into their eyes, lighting them all up one by one.

The second everyone got it, I spread my arms wide. "Ladies and gentlemen," I proclaimed proudly. "Allow me to introduce you all to the second and hopefully final ship of the Straw Hat Pirates! The ship that will carry us all to the shores of the isle of Raftel! The ship that is destined to carry us across the sunny waters of a thousand seas. Please welcome…" I swung my arm at the ship's figurehead. "The Thousand Sunny."

The instant the words left my lips, a wave struck the ship and caused it to rear up in the water, a groan, no, a roar echoing out from every plank of wood that composed him.

"…I am so in love with this crew," I breathed.

"And he really loves that name!" Merry cried as she literally jumped for joy.

"Shishishishi!" Luffy laughed happily. "Then the Thousand Sunny it is!"

"Tch," Zoro grumbled. "I still say that Big Boss Lionel would be better…"

"Denied!" Boss immediately interjected. "There's only one Boss on this crew and he likes his cigars thick and his enemies powerful!"

"Well, I certainly like it…" Nami said with a smile. "Sunny…"

"Full approval here!" Usopp and Chopper cheered as they shot their hands up.

"AGREED!" the Teenage Dugong Warrior Squad leapt and shouted as one.

Conis nodded her head politely. "Pleased to meet you, Sunny."

"Ditto!" Su cheered in agreement.

"Looks to me like everyone's as happy with the name as he is!" Funkfreed remarked.

"Well, if that's the case, then there's only one thing left to do!" Merry proclaimed.

The ship-girl rapped her fist on the nearest part of Sunny's hull she could reach, and a rope dropped down from the rigging in response. She then wrapped the rope around her arm and gave it a firm tug.
Now, the rope dropping could have been a coincidence, but the rope yanking Merry up and onto the deck's railing? Not a coincidence.

"Come on!" Merry cried, waving her arms eagerly. "I'll give you all the grand tour!"

I blinked stupidly as I tried to figure out what the hell I'd just seen. "…well, shit."

"Nagagaga! Well, that's certainly not something you see every day!" Kokoro laughed uproariously.

"What the—?! How!?!" Iceburg demanded. "I never saw anything like that in… the…" Iceburg's eyes then widened in realization, his jaw dropping like a stone. "…all those times you snuck off during construction…"

"That's ri~ght!" Merry sang, swaying side-to-side as she stuck her tongue out. "Big Bro Franky was technically a part of the crew by the time everyone hit Enies, so I picked up some shipwrighting from him, and while we were building Big Bro I hid tons and tons of tricks and gimmicks all around his body, and only I know how to work them! Cool, huh?"

"Considering how I actually got to know you while we were building Thousand Sunny?" Iceburg swallowed heavily as he eyed the ship-girl. "'Terrifying' might be the more appropriate term."

"Just be glad she's on our side!" Kokoro chuckled, knocking back her bottle.

I took that as my cue to not pursue the subject. "Right, then!" I said eagerly. "Given most of my knowledge is now completely null and void, what say we go ahead and look at our new home?"

Luffy had rocketed himself to the deck long before I finished speaking, and the rest of the crew barely waited before we were all running towards the beautiful barque. A few ropes and rubber lines later, and we were standing on one of the Thousand Sunny's key features, canon and now.

"THERE'S A LAWN!" Luffy laughed eagerly, he and the rest of the Kiddy Trio plus Lassoo throwing themselves onto the grass and rolling around in bliss.

"You've just made yourself a friend of sea-faring dogs the world over!" the mutt-cannon panted ecstatically.

"Forget the dogs, I'm in heaven!" Su cheered as she shot to and fro about the lawn. "So much vearth, so much green, and I'm going to be living on it!? Woohoo!"

"And trees, too?" Funkfreed breathed in awe as he chowed down on a few leaves from one of said trees. "This is… wow."

"You can definitely say that again…" I replied. And I meant it too, because 'wow' was the only conceivable word for the Sunny's mid-deck. The canon version had been impressive enough, but this? A field of greenery that was twice as long and half again the width, and this was all on a ship.

And the size wasn't the only obvious difference in the deck, either.

"Oh, what's this?" Sanji whistled appreciatively as he looked around the structure he'd entered. It was a pavilion, erected in the center of the deck between the main masts, though closer to the second. It was a simple thing, really: ten feet tall, eight wide and about sixteen long, and raised on a deck of wood. Overall, it looked like a wall-less—if well-maintained—shack.

Currently, Sanji was occupied with the central feature of the pavilion: an empty rectangular bar, erected in the center of the building. "So…" he mused as he ran his hand over the bar's countertop. "I
"Even better!" Merry proclaimed, stomping her foot in the grass. Said stomp caused a section of the floorboards in the center of the bar to part open, and allowed a table of metal to rise into sight. It's purpose was unclear only until the air above the metal started to shimmer, joined by a few trails of smoke.

Sanji was practically drooling as he took it in. "An outdoor hibachi grill…"

"More than just that!" Merry sang. "Hey, Conis!"

"Hm?" the Skypiean said, looking over from where she'd been watching Su clamber about one of the trees. "What is it?"

"Oooh, nothing much," Merry giggled. "I just wanted to show you…" She stomped the grass again, causing the grill to retract and a number of metal walls with metal sheets over them to rise and fill the whole bar area. Yet another stomp and the sheets sank… to reveal all of the weapons she had brought with her hung up and arrayed in style. "Your own personal armory!" Merry proclaimed as she swung her arms out.

"Oh, wow!" Conis breathed in awe, before hesitating slightly. "Ah… but Merry, even if those weapons are hidden below the deck… is it really such a good idea to have them all out in the open like this?"

"Already thought of that~!" Merry sang, and with yet another stomp, a quartet of walls shot up and properly sealed the armory, with a plain old hinged-door in the side allowing for easy entrance and exit. "Voila! Ready to weather the worst that the elements can throw at us!"

Sanji pushed the door open and poked his head out with an impressed whistle. "This'll definitely be handy. For many reasons."

"Glad to hear it!" Merry nodded before turning to at Lassoo and Funkfreed. "This place'll also be you guys' sleeping quarters, special cases for the both of you to snooze in. Sound good?"

The Zoan-weapons exchanged glances before nodding contentedly.

"Does to me!" Funkfreed replied.

"Sure as heck beats sleeping on my stomach!" Lassoo chuffed.

"Great!" Merry said, beaming. "And don't worry, I'll teach you guys how to work the pavilion's controls, so that you can operate it yourselves. Oh, and Conis!" She jabbed her finger at the gunner. "There are also a ton of controls all throughout Sunny that work the cannons, aiming them and firing them and all that, so I'll teach you how to work those, too. Fair warning, it'll be a lot of work. You think you're up for it?"

Conis didn't even hesitate to pump both her fists in a clear show of readiness, steam all but shooting from her nostrils and her eyes shining. "Of course!"

"And don't worry, she won't be alone either!" Su cried, leaping onto her owner's shoulder. "One is good, two is better!"

Merry grinned. "Alright, I'll start showing you the ropes once we're on our way! Oh, and speaking of which…" She rapped her fist against the primary main mast (the one with the weight-room/crow's nest), and another rope with a handle at the end dropped down. She looked at me and pointed to the
rope, grinning. "Just give that a yank and it'll take you straight to the radio room! Fair warning, you're gonna wanna hang on tight!"

I exchanged eager grins with Soundbite before jogging over to the line, grabbing it firmly and giving it a hard yank.

One arm-straining and utterly exhilarating ride later, I was perched on the roof of the crow's nest. I was a bit confused at first, but then Soundbite indicated a trapdoor in the roof that I was… pretty damn certain hadn't been there in canon. So, I popped it open, dropped through, and entered my personal radio room.

Apparently, Franky and Merry had installed a makeshift attic in the weight room, which they'd converted into where I was now. Admittedly, the room was kind of plain at first glance: a slot on the wall designed for my transceiver, a large swivelling chair beside a desk, a perch with a bowl nearby where Soundbite could sit and nom on whatever the heck he wanted, and a bed (Franky's definition of a cot, I'm sure) at the other end of the room. That was about it, though. Eh, it made sense, I suppose, I'd have to decorate on my own time.

"Kind of a—WHOAA, what the—?" Soundbite cut himself off as he noticed his voice echoing. I looked more closely at the walls, and then I recognized that thanks to the angle and design, they'd bounce any sound that came from near the chair. I grinned; with Soundbite's powers, that had serious potential.

"This is sooo cool…" I breathed.

"I know, right!?" Luffy agreed.

I started in shock as Luffy's voice came from the desk. I approached the desk, slid the top back using a handle I'd located—

"WHOOOA," Soundbite gaped.

I felt my jaw drop almost to the desk as I took in the large collection of pipe-like tubes arranged like a piano, each one labeled for a different place on the ship. Then, looking up, I saw that I had missed what was behind the desk: a collection of pipes that made the desk look more like a freaking pipe organ.

Acting on a hunch, I pressed one of the keys for the deck and spoke up. "Hey, can anyone hear me?"

"Cross?" Zoro's voice came out of the corresponding pipe. "The heck, did you get Soundbite's powers or something?"

"Nope!" Merry piped up from… another pipe. "He just found the ship-wide comms system I put in his room! Let's him hear everything across the ship, and spread his voice everywhere, too! Neat, huh?"

"But ain't dat wat Soundbite's fowah? Heheheheh—!" Carue's snickered through the pipes.

"Oh, so you mean you want Soundbite to keep his monopoly on all things auditory?"

"Heheh—squawk!"

"Hmm…" Soundbite hummed thoughtfully before cocking his head to the side. "BAH. I SHALL BE GRACIOUS ENOUGH TO GRANT YOU ALL THIS TRESPASS UNTO MY DOMAIN!"
"Glad to hear it, my liege! Now, hurry up and zipline down the rope I've got set up over the crow's nest! I wanna show you guys the helm!"

My partner blinked in confusion. "Huh? The helm? WHY? What could be so special about THAT?"

As it turns out, quite a bit.

"Pirates and piratesses, allow me to present to you," Merry proclaimed in a grandiose manner as she swept her arms before her. "The nerve center of Big Bro Sunny!"

And it certainly looked the part, without a doubt. Rather than a pedestrian wheeled helm with a lever next to it, Sunny's helm was affixed to what I can only define as a U-shaped dashboard that, despite the low-tech look of the dizzying array of levers, switches, winches, and buttons, would have been right at home a Mecha anime. Add in the number of hand-brake style levers lined up next to the wheel-proper and the pedals below the wheel, and it was just…

"Wow," I repeated numbly.

Merry grinned eagerly as a rumbling groan ran through Sunny. "Big Bro really likes how much that's been said about him!"

"Hrm…" Nami hummed as she leaned around the panel and thoroughly examined it, her clouds swaying around it but never actually touching it. "This all looks impressive, sure, but… what exactly does it all do?"

"Weeell…" Merry began with a grin.

And what followed was a complex series of gestures and jargon that I will spare you readers the difficulty of muddling through. When she stopped speaking, I looked at my crewmates. Soundbite's eyes were spinning, Robin was frowning in a clear attempt to keep up, and everyone else was either staring blankly or asleep on their feet.

Nami, meanwhile, was practically vibrating. "Really?"

"Uh-huh!" Merry nodded with just as much eagerness. "Ain't it cool?"

"I think all of us normies agree that it would be cooler in English," Raphey deadpanned, Mikey's subsequent snore serving to underline her point.

Merry shot a sidelong glare at the dugong before sweeping her arm over the dashboard. "All of these controls here," she drawled. "Are capable of operating every line, every sail, every timber…” She then donned a more bloodthirsty smile as she flipped a toggle.

TH-THWACK!

"AGH!" "OUCH, DAMN IT!"

"And every pulley," Merry snickered as she watched the pair of dugongs nurse the brand new lumps they were sporting. "On Big Bro Sunny. Sure, there are odds and ends everywhere in the woodworks, but this here is the master enchilada, way more impressive. You like?"

"Worth every last beri we paid," Nami breathed. Most everyone present developed sweatdrops; the last time she had been this excited was when she saw the pillar back on Upper Yard, and Robin was already surreptitiously preparing a dope-slap. However, the arm on Nami's hand evaporated when
she suddenly blinked the beri-signs out her eyes. "Eh? Wait a second… hey, Merry, I just realized: none of these controls are actually labeled."

Hearing that, the ship-girl flinched and refused to meet anyone's gazes as she scratched her blushing cheeks. "Eh… r-r-really… i-is that so, huh… w-well then, I suppose that it'd be best if the person operating it were…" She glanced at Luffy sheepishly. "Someone who knew Big Bro Sunny… inside and out?"

Luffy's response, of course, was to smile. Only unlike usual? This was a smile not of amusement, but rather one that was wholly and undoubtedly kind. "We wouldn't have anyone else at Sunny's helm, Merry."

Merry instantly snapped out of her funk with a massive grin before snapping her attention upward, her expression changing yet again to show a more solemn smile. "Thanks, Captain. But before that, there's… one thing I need to take care of real quick."

With that, she flicked one of the dashboard's toggles, grabbed the rope that swung into reach and, with a tug, was yanked up onto the top of the crew's nest. A glance at Soundbite was all that was needed for him to amp her.

"We've got one last thing we need to do before Sunny can really be our ship!" she proclaimed, digging her hand through her coat and withdrawing—

"Is that our spare flag?" Usopp asked, drawing down one of his lenses in order to better scrutinize the black cloth that Merry was holding.

"Nope." Merry shook her head with a sad smile, drawing her coat open and indicating the emblem on her chest. "This is our spare flag. What I'm holding…" She held the flag to her chest, tears shimmering in her eyes. "It's the original. I… I can't bear it anymore, not with all my damage, and… and I'm g-gonna miss it…" She was silent for a moment before smiling contentedly. "But… I'm alright with that. I'm alright because I know… I know that the next person to bear it is going to do it and do it right. So…"

And so, with almost reverential slowness and care, Merry tied her flag—our flag—to Sunny's flagpole, keeping it bunched up once it was secure. The second the deed was done, however, she re-donned her usual grin and gazed back down at us. "And now…"

She stamped on the crow's nest and let the flag loose at the same time, and both the flag and Sunny's main sail snapped into full view as one. And with Merry's coat still open, it was a trinity of skulls that smiled down at us.

"I'm proud to announce!" Merry cried, her fists planted on her hips. "That as of this moment, the second ship of the Straw Hat Pirates, the Thousand Sunny, and the helmsgirl, 'White Menace' Going Merry, are officially reporting for duty!"

Luffy grinned, as did the rest of us. And after the moment passed, I spoke up again. "Now we just need to get Franky here so that the Thousand Sunny can have his maiden fli—!

CLONK!

"Ow!" I winced, rubbing the spot Merry had handily landed on before chuckling sheepishly as I realized what she was glaring at us for. "Ah… maiden voyage, I mean."

"Much better!" Merry chuckled before blinking and glancing around in confusion. "But… ah… now that I think about it, Big Bro Franky is pretty late. What the heck is keeping him?"
"Ohh, nothing much," I said with a smirk. "He's just laboring under the delusion that he's not coming."

Merry stared blankly at me before cocking her head to the side. "...I'm guessing you have something in your head to fix that particular bit of stupidity?"

The grin I donned was swiftly mirrored by her, by Luffy, aaaand by pretty much everyone else on the crew.

-0-

Nine minutes later, the streets of Water 7 were filled with civilians, their eyes and mouths open wide as they stared at the vulgar display going on. Some were simply averting their eyes. Some were trying and failing to look away. A few were even wiping nosebleeds. One notable old woman was yelling angrily at a small group of children, pointing towards the chase and telling the children not to follow her finger.

Naturally, this led to them disobeying and laing eyes on the Franky Family as they fled, holding a blue speedo like a flag, and their boss, naked from the waist down, charging furiously after them.

"YOU STUPID SONS OF BITCHES!" Franky roared, swinging his fists like pistons as he ran. "GIVE ME BACK MY SPEEDO, RIGHT THE HELL NOW!"

"KEEP RUNNING!" Zambai shouted in contradiction, pushing himself to run as fast and as hard as he could to keep ahead of his big bro. "I KNOW THIS HURTS—!

"AND IS GONNA HURT IN IN A LOT OF WAYS IF HE CATCHES US!" Kiwi added.

"BUT THIS IS FOR HIS SAKE!" Zambai forged on. "WE GOTTA KEEP RUNNING, EVEN IF HE KILLS US!"

"YOU DAMN—! Wait a second..." Franky screeched to a halt and glanced around at the surrounding neighborhood, causing his family to stop dead as well. "The way we're going... oh ho hooo..." the cyborg shook his head with a chuckle. "Smart. You're all gonna catch hell for this later on, but still, smart. And this whole thing would'a worked, too... if not for one iiiity bitty thing."

The three brains of the Franky Family exchanged wary glances before looking back at their leader. "Oh, yeah?" they asked uneasily. "What's that?"

Franky grinned malevolently as he dug through his vest. "Well, after hanging around with the Straw Hats for a while, I've learned a thing or two about having back-ups in place. As such, while I was out getting the Adam Wood for the Straw Hat's ship, I also got..." He whipped something out and held it proudly in the air. "This!"

All the Franky Family could do was gape in horror at what their boss was letting wave out.

"Oh, shit..." Zambai breathed numbly.

"He outsmarted us," Kiwi moaned. "How is that even possible?!"

"How did we not think that he could do this?" Mozu cursed.

"OH, COME OFF IT ALREADY!" Franky bit out indignantly. "IS IT THAT CRAZY TO THINK THAT I COULD BUY A BACK-UP PAIR OF SPEEDOS?!"
"HELL YES!" the Franky Family shouted back.

The rest of the onlooking public, meanwhile, had a slightly… different opinion. Namely?

"JUST PUT THE DAMN THING ON ALREADY!"

Franky winced as a tin can bounced off his temple. "Alright, alright, eesh, keep your shirts on…"

And with that, the cyborg lowered the swimwear, prepared to step into it—

"YOINK!"

"GAH!" And was nearly yanked off his feet when a blur shot past him and snatched the speedos out of his hands. "What the—HELL!?" Franky sputtered incredulously as he caught sight of a certain tyke riding a certain reindeer holding his speedos down the street. "REINDEER-BRO? MERRY!? WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING!?"

"TEACHING YOU THAT IT AIN'T SMART TO BE STUPID!" Merry shot back. Her smirk then widened as she held up the speedos next to her mouth. "Still though, good choice. Is this spandex I smell or—?"

"If you eat that, I'm pumping your stomach!" Chopper snapped over his shoulder at her.

Merry pouted as she stuffed the speedos in her jacket. "Spoilsport…"

Chopper shook his head in a long-suffering manner before looking back at Franky. "Anyway, if you want your speedos back, come and get us!"

Franky ground his teeth furiously, and seemed about two seconds away from doing just that, up until his family finally got their act together and produced the Fire Anything Cannon, rolling it towards the cyborg. Said cyborg tried to move away from it—

"Eisen Tempo."

"GAH!"

Only for a massive fist of clouds to snatch him up and hold him high in the air in spite of his frantic flailing. Franky only had a second to catch sight of the serenely smiling second mate waving at him before the clouds not-so-gently decided to stuff him down the barrel of the cannon head-first.

"I assume you can handle the rest," she asked, dusting her hands off as her clouds jabbed Franky as far down the barrel as they could manage.

"You're damn right we can!" Zambai swiftly responded before snapping out orders at the rest of the Franky Family. "Come the hell on, everyone! Put your damn backs into it! Raise the barrel! AIM FOR SCRAP ISLAND!"

"IF YOU SONS OF BITCHES FIRE THIS THING, I'M GONNA—!"

BLAM!

"—YEEEOOOOW!" was the last thing that was heard as Franky was suddenly sent flying.

Nami whistled as she shadowed her eyes in order to better watch the cyborg soar. "Nice shot."

"I'm no expert, but I'm very impressed by the top-spin I'm seeing," Chopper mused.
"Ya know what really gets me?" Merry added, tilting her head thoughtfully. "For a guy who's visibly top-heavy and is mostly metal, Big Bro Franky's surprisingly aerodynamic."

"Hmm…" Nami hummed in agreement before waving her hand. "Well, c'mon, we'd better hurry and get back to the Sunny with his undies; unless we have those hostage, he'll probably just run off again."

"Right," Chopper nodded, and no sooner looked at the nearest canal than three Yagara bulls swam up, offering their backs. "So, you guys think you can get us there before Franky pulls himself together?"

The grins splitting their faces were simultaneously reassuring and worrying.

-o-

The rest of the crew, myself included, watched as the proof of our crewmates' success crashed into a mountain of wreckage. With all of the experience I'd had with my captain's ham-handedness, I couldn't keep from wincing in sympathy. But I couldn't fight down a grin either.

Admittedly, there was a bit of a scare when our friends didn't get back before Franky arrived, but thankfully the cyborg must have happened to clock his head against a particularly thick piece of ship, because he was still stuck and twitching in the pile by the time the Union got them back. *Un*-fortunately, however, that meant we had an… extended period of time where Franky was stuck. Headfirst. Showing off his… bottom half to everyone watching. And going by the screaming and shouting coming from the city, that was a *lot* of everyone.

Urgh… some moments of the journey are glorious, but *others*…

Finally, Franky shoved himself out of the junk pile just as our away team got back onboard. The cyborg spent a second blinking around in confusion before smirking as he caught sight of the Sunny. "So, you bastards actually got me here, huh? Well, while I'm here… Hey, Straw Hat! Whaddaya think of the ship, huh? Have you checked out—?"

"Cram it, Franky!" Merry interrupted, levelling an acrid glare at him. "You know that Big Bro Thousand Sunny is perfect! If you've got anything you wanna show us, why don't you come up here and do it yourself?"

"Ah," Franky flinched uncomfortably, scratching his chin as he pointedly looked away. "That's, ah…"

"But hey," Merry shrugged innocently as she dug what I could only assume was Franky's speedo out of her coat. "Don't take it from me…" She grinned as she tossed the undies to our captain. "Take it from *him."

Luffy accepted the undergarments with a wider grin than *anyone* in his position should have and waved them in the air as proudly as our flag. "FRANKY!" he bellowed. "IF YOU WANT YOUR SPEEDOS BACK—Oh, hey, these are *soft*, do you have any—?"

"LUFFY!"

"Right! IF YOU WANT THEM BACK, THEN YOU NEED TO ACCEPT YOUR PLACE ON MY CREW! WHAT DO YOU SAY?"

"…What do I say?" Franky slowly bowed his head with a chuckle. "Well, in a situation like this, where my only options are my pride or my decency…"
"Oh, lord…" I groaned, pinching the bridge of my nose, because I could already tell where this was going.

"THEN I SHALL LET MY PRIDE STAND PROUD!" Franky howled as he struck the most revealing pose he could. "EVEN AS I STAND NUDE!"

I winced as a renewed round of screams started up from the city. "Damn it all, Franky, this is why I can't start up the SBS yet!"

"Do we weawwy need him on owah cweh?" Carue groaned as he peeked at the spectacle through his feathers.

"Whoa!" Luffy gasped in astonishment. "I underestimated his determination!"

"Indeed!" Boss declared with a grim frown. "Truly, I did him a disservice in our earlier duel. For never did I suspect for an instant, that in truth…"

The two snapped their heads up with tears of pride. "TRULY HE IS A MAN AMONG MEN!"

SLAM!

"WHAT THE APOPHIS IS WRONG WITH YOU TWO!?" Vivi howled as she bounced the pair's skulls off the deck.

I shook my head in despair at the display, and I prepared to address the commando-cyborg, but then my attention was diverted by the very familiar sounds of brawling behind us. I cast a flat look at our second and third strongest. "Alright, I'll bite: what set those morons off this time?"

"SANJI WAS DISGUSTED BY FRANKY FLASHING the women of Water 7," Soundbite drawled. "While Zoro was impressed by HIS SENSE OF SHAME. OR MORE ACCURATELY, his lack thereof."

I rolled my eyes before raising my voice. "FRANKY! You know my secret, so you know that I know what I'm talking about when I say this: you do not want to keep being stubborn! The nuclear option hurts like hell, for everyone involved!"

Franky looked at me, and seeing my expression, he actually hesitated. And then…

"…make it fast, Robin," I muttered, looking away from the full moon—no, the shaking full moon—I got for my troubles and slapped my hands over my ears.

" Hmm… no," Robin said, grinning coldly as she crossed her arms over her chest. "Dos Fleur… Grab."

What happened next… there are no appropriate onomatopoeia to describe it. No stock sounds for the action itself, nor any appropriate simile for the expression of noise Franky belted out as a result.

But still, I didn't need to describe the noises of the… the crime against man going on behind me to feel a throbbing pain in a place that should never hurt so bad.

"…OK, now I'm legitimately scared of her," Zoro muttered.

"US TOO!" four of our five guards yelped fearfully.

"SOMEONE SNAP A PICTURE!" laughed the fifth.
"Hell, I don't even HAVE THE GEAR AND I'M HURTING!" Soundbite groaned.

"I AGREED TO BE A MERC WEAPON TO AVOID THIS EXACT SITUATION!" Lassoo yipped as he scrambled for cover.

"Ah! Robin, we still want him to be a man when he joins us!" Luffy protested.

"Oh, don't worry about that," Robin reassured him with a far-too-pleasant smile. "Even if they do happen to detach, I'm certain that Chopper could reattach them."

"FRANKY!" Chopper screamed as he snapped into his Heavy Point. "HURRY THE HELL UP AND GIVE IN ALREADY! I HAVEN'T HAD TO TOUCH ANYONE'S SHAME IN MY ENTIRE TIME AS A DOCTOR, AND I DON'T WANT TO START NOW IF I CAN HELP IT!"

"I… I can't…" Franky gurgled around the mouthful of foam he was choking on. "I… I have to stay here… I really… wouldn't mind going with you, but… I can't be your shipwright… I gave that up a long time ago… this ship… the Thousand Sunny, was it? It's the last… I'll ever make… the best ship the world over… that means my dream is fulfilled, so—!"

"So what, ye damned scrap-lubber!?!" Merry barked back, slipping into her buccaneer drawl in the process. "Don't ya realize yer only thinking of yerself, ya darned fool!? If ye really care about Sunny so much, then ye'd think about his feelings too! 'Cause where shipwrights be concerned, the only lubber he wants working on him be ye, ye cola-addled buffoon!"

"I… but I… that's…" Franky shook his head frantically as he worked his way to his feet.

"Franky."

The cyborg snapped his head around at his fellow apprentice. "I-Iceburg?"

"I just have to ask you," Iceburg said, dry as the deserts of Alabasta. "Do you think for even a second that Tom ever blamed you for what happened that day? Do you think that I ever blamed you?"

"You blamed me for a lot of shit, Ice-for-Brains!" Franky snapped.

"Don't change the subject, Flunky," Iceburg snapped right back. "My point is that after all this time, after all you've done for this city and this people, the only person who blames you, who would ever blame you for what happened, is you and you alone! That's why you're chaining yourself here, why you're refusing to go live your dream! When in fact—!" Iceburg choked off slightly before looking away with a sigh. "You should have forgiven yourself a long time ago."

"I… that… AGH!" Franky hunched over with a sudden cry. "It hurts… it hurts!"

"AND IT'S GONNA KEEP HURTING UNTIL YOU GET YOUR SHIT TOGETHER!"

Franky popped his head up with a confused blink. "Say wha—?"

THWUMP!

"GAH!" Franky yelped when he was suddenly bowled over by a duffel-bag that was half his weight. "The hell—!? My go-bag? Where'd this come from?"

"FROM US, BIG BRO!"
He snapped his gaze up to the broken bridge to the city, where the Franky Family was out en masse and watching him tearfully.

"YOU… YOU BASTARDS!" Franky raged as he shook his fists. "STEALING MY SPEEDO!?! KICKING ME OUT OF MY OWN DAMN HOUSE?! WHEN I GET MY HANDS ON YOU, YOU'RE ALL IN FOR A WORLD OF HURT!"

"WE'VE ALL HEARD THOSE WORDS BEFORE, BIG BRO!" Zambai hollered back. "WE'VE ALL SAID THEM BEFORE, EACH OF US, WHEN YOU TOOK US IN! WHEN YOU DRAGGED US IN OUT OF THE COLD AND FORCED US TO CHANGE FOR THE BETTER! WE ALL KICKED AND SCREAMED AND FOUGHT, BUT YOU DID IT ANYWAY! AND NOW…” Zambai hastily wiped away his tears so that he could roar in full. "NOW, NO MATTER HOW MUCH IT HURTS, WE'RE DOING THIS FOR YOU, BIG BRO! SO THAT YOU CAN BE HAPPY TOO!"

Franky trembled as he stared up at them, mouth agape. Then, without warning, he keeled over again, squirming on the ground and howling like a wounded animal. "OWOWOW, IT HUUUURTS!"

I spared a glance at Robin to confirm that she was leaning against the railing with a contented smile. "So," I deadpanned. "How long did you hold him?"

"Just one squeeze," she chuckled. "And it wasn't even that hard. He's quite the actor. Although…" She tapped her chin as she glanced upward "I suppose he could be sensitive due to his size. Tell me, do they get more or less sensitive the—?"

"NOT HEARING THIS!" I cried, slapping my hands over my ears. "IT HURTS! IT HURTS SO MUUUUCH!"

That, however, I did hear, and I turned around to catch sight of Franky pounding the ground in frustration. "But… But if I'm gone…” he wailed. "What… What'll happen to you?!"

"We'll be fine, Big Bro!" Kiwi cried tearfully. "You helped us all get stronger, remember!?"

"We can take care of ourselves!" Mozu sobbed. "We'll miss you, and it'll hurt… but we'll survive, just like you taught us!"

And it wasn't just those two, either.

"We'll miss you, Big Bro! Be safe!"

"We'll always be your family! You'll always have a load of little bros cheering for you, all the way!"

"Stick it to those World Government bastards, right where it hurts!"

"PUT THE DAMN SPEEDO ON, YOU EXHIBITIONIST PERVERT!"

"You… You bastards…" Franky shook his head in despair. "It hurts… it hurts…"

I smiled endearingly as I leaned on the railing to get a better view "Ahhh… I could watch this forever…"

"MAYDAY, MAYDAY! THE UNION SAYS THAT WE'VE GOT MARINES INCOMING! AND THEY'RE PACKING BACKUP!"
"Or not..." I sighed, hanging my head, before flinching back when most of my crew shot glares at me. "I'd hoped that we'd saved enough time to be out of here by now, sue me! And, ah, lemme guess." I glanced at my snail. "Aokiji's on his ship too?"

"NOT EVEN CLOSE!" Soundbite choked on his own tongue. "Wrong rank and number!"

My blood ran cold as I connected the dots. "Vice Admirals?" I whispered hoarsely.

Soundbite slowly turned his shivering eyes on me. "A HALF-DOZEN PACKING BATTLESHIPS, to be specific."

"FRANKY, GET YOUR NAKED ASS ON THIS TUB RIGHT NOW BEFORE WE ALL GET AN UP-CLOSE AND PERSONAL MEETING WITH DAVY-FREAKING-JONES!" I howled frantically.

Everyone hastily began moving to their own assigned positions. Luffy, of course, threw Franky his speedo, and after a moment of hesitation, the cyborg snatched it out of the air.

"What the hell!" the iron perv laughed. "If you're all kicking me in the ass so hard, I might as well go with it! ALRIGHT! MOVE THE HELL OVER, STRAW HATS, 'CAUSE YOU'VE JUST GOTTEN YOURSELVES A SUPER SHIPWRIGHT!"

All of us spared enough time to briefly celebrate at said shipwright finally managing to get over himself, but when he began a slow and very dramatic walk, I shot a glare and spun my finger at my captain. He pouted a bit, but nevertheless, ten seconds later we had a very stunned and even more naked Franky lying face-down in the grass.

"Say your long-winded and snot-filled farewells on the SBS on your own damn time, numb-nuts!" I ordered. "Because unless we get out of here yesterday, we're going to test Adam Wood against a certain Hero's Meteor Fist! And my bet ain't on the wood!"

"Tch, heartless sonnuva—! BAH, FINE!" Franky promptly snapped up into one of his many poses. "LET'S BLOW THIS POPSICLE STAND!"

"AGREED!" the Kiddie Trio and TDWS concurred as they mirrored his poses.

"I resent that!" Iceburg called up casually.

SLAM!

"AND I RESENT THAT THIS PERVERT STILL HASN'T COVERED UP YET!" Vivi raged as she stood above the suddenly downed cyborg, both her fist and his newly acquired lump smoking profusely. "PUT 'EM ON BEFORE I WELD THEM ON!"

Two seconds later found him hastily struggling to work his way into his speedo. "And she needs will-powered cheating to make people do what she wants, why?" he grumbled.

"Because fate loves fucking with us, that's why!" I answer. "Anyway, you can complain and call it the bullshit that it is later, but right now, we need to get the hell out of here!"

"On it!" Merry cried, hitching a rope ride to the helm, hopping onto a footstool that she got to rise in front of the wheel and grabbing hold of the spokes. "Nami! The log!"

Nami didn't even hesitate to snap her wrist up to her eyeline. "We've been set for the past two days! Turn the prow 68° starboard, north-northwest!"
"Turning the prow 68° starboard, north-northwest!" Merry parroted as she spun the helm appropriately. Then, without missing a beat, she pulled a pair of levers, spun a few winches, and brushed a couple of switches. The result was immediate and impressive: sails dropped down, the twin anchors raised, the rigging adjusted itself, the ship itself turned to face the open sea; In less than ten seconds, Merry had singlehandedly accomplished work that previously took six or more of the crew, and the ship was underway.

I shot a heady grin at Soundbite as the Sunny started to turn. "We have our heading…" I whispered energetically, already starting to feel my blood buzz beneath my skin as we finally—finally—finally returned to the roaring high seas, better than ever.

"Heeheeeheehohoho, yea—ERK!" Soundbite suddenly choked and spun his eyes a full 180. "AHHH… NOW WE ONLY HAVE TO SURVIVE LONG ENOUGH to actually follow it."

Dreading what I was going to find, I jogged over to the railing, leaned over the edge, and caught sight of the better (or worse, from our perspective) half of a Buster Call rounding the edge of Water 7.

"Hooo, now that's not a sight I was looking forward to seeing again any time soon…" I breathed.

"—three, four, five, SIX!" Usopp shouted from where he'd clambered up into the rigging. "WE'VE GOT SIX BATTLESHIPS INCOMING, AND EACH OF THEM HAS A VICE ADMIRAL ON THE DECK! And is that… grk!" Usopp choked and flinched fearfully. "THE GUY LEADING IT IS YOUR GRANDPA, LUFFY!"

"WHAT!?" Luffy screamed in panic, instantly shooting over to my side and nearly bowling me over the edge in the process. "Oh-crap-oh-crap-oh-crap—!"

"Luffy, please—Oh screw it, Luffy, calm down!" Vivi ordered. Her eye then twitched when she was summarily ignored. "For the love of—! Shut up, Luffy!" The princess sighed in relief as our captain's tongue was suddenly glued to the roof of his mouth. "Better. Now, please calm down, Luffy. I realize that your Grandfather is a scary… a very, very, very scary man, but he's still your family! How bad could it possibly be?"

"Going by how the old bulldog looks like he's about to pop a vein or ten?" Mikey called down from where he was hanging upside-down in the rigging by his tail, staring through a pair of binoculars he'd snatched up. "I'd say pretty damn bad!"

Vivi's gaze fell flat as Luffy started running around like a headless chicken again. "Raphey."

Mikey looked up (down) from his binoculars with a confused blink. "Wait, wha—?"

SWISH! THUMP!

"GWAH!" Mikey yelped when the rope he was hanging from suddenly split and dropped him onto a wooden part of the deck.

"Don't be an idiot, dipshit!" Raphey snickered as she reaffixed her oversized shuriken on her back.

THWACK!

"YEOW!" the pink-bandanna'd dugong flinched as a pulley swung down and cracked her upside her skull.

"DON'T HURT BIG BRO SUNNY, DIPSHIT!" Merry roared from the helm.
I turned my gaze away from the crew scrambling around and getting Sunny ready for his maiden voyage and turned back towards the Blue Curtain of Justice that had taken up a portion of the horizon. After a moment's watching, I blinked as I realized that I could just barely make out a figure I'm 95% sure was Garp, judging by the white and the… wild gesticulating? Wait…

"Hey, how come the old coot isn't using his megaphone?" I asked no one in particular.

Soundbite responded by somehow popping a vein on his shell. "**He's assuming that I'LL HANDLE THAT MYSELF. WHICH ISN'T FUCKING HAPPENING, BY THE BY!**" The last phrase was bellowed for all to hear.

I nodded, and frowned at the snail. "And… are all of them wearing ear protection?"

"Ah…" Soundbite blinked in confusion. "**The lesser ranks are, but the Vice Admirals aren't? And they're not reacting to my BLASTING THEIR EARDRUMS FOR SOME REASON?**"

I rolled my eyes with an exasperated tsk. "Haki, ever and always such bullshit. But hey, he wants to sling shit?" I smirked as I dove my hand into my bag. "Then I'll damn well sling. Ladies and gentlemen, sorry to be so abrupt, but the fact of the matter is that I'm assuming that by now most everyone manages to pick up on the first ring." My grin wavered slightly. "Aaand our situation is just a tad desperate right now, so we're starting straight out the gate. And speaking of starting! My name is Jeremiah Cross, and it's time—!

"**—EVEN THINK ABOUT STARTING THE SBS, I'LL TWIST YOUR HEAD CLEAN OFF YOUR SCRAWNY NECK!**"

My eyes twitched. Repeatedly. "So. It's not enough that people stop me from starting the SBS on purpose, but they have to do it by accident, too."

"I DON'T CARE IF THAT WAS AN ACCIDENT, that bastard cut me off!" Soundbite snarled. "**I'LL SUE YOU, OLD MAN!**"

"**JUST TRY IT, SNAIL! I'LL SEE YOU IN COURT RIGHT BEFORE THEY PUT YOUR SLIMY ASS DOWN!**"

"**SAY THAT TO MY FACE, YOU SENILE SONNUVA BITCH!**" I roared, balancing on the railing as a number of hands shot out of woodwork and held me in order to keep me from overbalancing. "**TLL PUNT THE TAPIOCa OUT OF YOU, AND MAKE SURE YOU CAN'T SIT DOWN FOR BINGO FOR WEEKS!**"

A tense silence fell for a few moments. Then…

"…Right, screw it. Luffy, you're all gonna die here at sea. I'd say sorry, but where your third mate is concerned, I'm pretty sure I'm doing the world a favor. **GET ME MY METEORS!**"

I returned everyone's blazing glares with a flat stare. "The hell are you all getting pissy for? He was gonna do this either way, I just cut through the senile jibber-jabber. 'Sides, you all heard him! He threatened Soundbite!"

The glaring exchanged looks for a few seconds, and ultimately, they decided to let it drop. "So, now what?" Boss asked.

"Now he's going to try sinking the ship using the Monkey family special: sheer brute force."
"Meaning…?" Sanji trailed off uncomfortably.

"Meaning duck and freaking cover!" Funkfreed trumpeted, stabbing his trunk into the soil and snapping into his blade-point.

We all had a bare moment to brace for impact—

*KA-BLAM!*

When a section of Scrap Island's coast suddenly detonated and sent us a-rocking.

Conis slowly slat up with a dazed and very terrified look in her eyes. "And he caused that by *throwing* the cannonball!? But-But that's *impossible!"

"Which is something that adolescent Conis can confirm!" Su chuckled.

"Yeah, well, if you want *my* opinion?" I groused before sticking my head over Sunny's railing.

"HEY GARP! YOU THROW LIKE BRETT FAVRE, AND TRUST ME, THAT'S NOT A— GAH!"

"**SHUT! THE! HELL! UP! AND! STOP! TRYING! TO! GET! US! ALL! KILLED!**" Vivi raged as she wrung my neck and repeatedly bounced my head off the lawn. Good news, though: the grass made the impacts softer! Didn't stop the oxygen deficit, though.

"You seem to have officially exhausted your daily limit for provoking people who could kill you with one finger, Cross," Robin chuckled morbidly as she leaned over me.

"Grggkh…" I choked out in response as I tried to pry the snapped-Princess off of my neck.

"Uhh… guys?" Zoro spoke up with honest curiosity. "Does anyone have an explanation as to how or why the old-timer gave his ship an afro?

"WHAT?!" Boss exclaimed, he and the TDWS snapping their attention towards the ship. He stared for a moment before sagging. "Oh, that's a let-down, that's just a giant cannonba—HOLY SEBEK THAT'S A GIANT CANNONBALL!"

"Grgh-r-ri-GRK! Vivi! Off!"

A wordless snarl was my only response, and then Eisen cloud wrapped around her waist and Nami herself went for her fingers.

"Down, girl," Nami said soothingly as she slowly pried the digits out of my throat. "Save it for when he gets *really* bad."

It took one more shake, but the princess finally released her grip on me. "This is *not* over," she swore testily.

I shuddered at the promise before snapping my attention over towards the prow. "Merry, Franky, fire up the—! Ahhh, wait a see!" I snapped my attention back to my mic. "Sorry, viewers, I'm going to have to take a break here. The SBS will return in a few minutes!"

So saying, I placed the mic on the cradle, to much confusion and surprise, which I responded to with a simple smirk. "What? This isn't the first time I've shown that I'm smart enough to not blow our secret weapons to everyone. Now, I'd suggest that all of you hang onto your everything, because you're about to experience the first of many, *many* utterly amazing and unique talents that the
Thousand Sunny has to offer."

"Ah, yeah, speaking of which," Franky paused mid-stride. "Is that name set in stone? Because if not, I've got a—!"

"Move yer bleedin' arse, ye iron arse-brain!" Merry barked.

"Right!" Franky yelped, hastily ducking under the deck.

"TAKE THIS SERIOUSLY, DAMMIT!" Garp shouted as he threw the… uh… wow, Oda's art didn't really capture the scale, did it? Swear to God, in that moment it looked as big as the moon.

And it was… getting…

"ANYTIME NOW, GUYS!" Soundbite hollered.

"AS CROSS SAID, HANG ON TO YOUR EVERYTHING!" Franky's voice yelled out from belowdecks. "BUT MOST OF ALL!? HANG ONTO YOUR UNDERWEAR! COUP DE…"

"CAPTAIN! Do the thing I had you do at Navarone, hurry!" I said hastily.

"Eh?" Luffy glanced at me before grinning massively. "Oh, right, that! Soundbite?"

"YOU'RE good!"

"HEY, GRAMPS! OTHER MARINES!" Luffy laughed back at the rest of the fleet pursuing us. "YOU GUYS'LL ALWAYS REMEMBER THIS AS THE DAY YOU ALMOST CAUGHT MONKEY D. LUFFY—"

"BURST!"

"AND THE STRAW HAT PIRA—"

BOOM!

"—AAAAAHAAAAHAAAAA!"

"PFHAHAHAAAAAHA!" I whooped eagerly as I hung onto the lawn for dear life. And honestly, that was all I could do. Because then and there? The wind whipping past us, the very clouds streaming around and over our ship… there was only one word for it all. "WE'RE FLYING AGAIN! WOOHOOHOOHOOHOO! THIS IS AWESOME!"

"BEST! SHIP! EVER!" Luffy laughed.

"YOU KNOW IT, CAPTAIN!" Merry cheered, hanging on to the helm like a small and overly eager flag.

"I definitely like it!" Zoro said, cackling into the wind. "He's got spirit, lots of it!"

"Of course he does, that's how I built him!" Franky replied from his control rom.

"TO GO THIS FAR, THIS FAST, ALL AT ONCE!?!" Boss puffed his chest with pride as he stood upon the railing. "SO MANY WORDS… BUT AT THEIR CORE, TRULY!" He leapt up- "A MAN'S RO—GWAH!" He winced as he was pancaked into a wall by the air pressure. "…unwise, but still. A MAN'S ROMANCE!"
"GO, BOSS, GO!" The TDWS concurred.

Everyone else, well… it was a mix of relief, awe, and excitement, to varying levels.

I looked around at the sea zipping past us before flinging my head back with a laugh.

"PFHAHAHA! IN CASE I HAVEN'T SAID IT ENOUGH?" I shouted into the the wind. "I SERIOUSLY LOVE THIS CREW!"

Most of the Marines assembled at Water 7 spent the moment gaping after the sight of the Straw Hat Pirates escaping them by flying. One or two of the Vice Admirals were grumbling about not seeing it coming after Enies, and as for Garp himself?

"…tsk. Shiki did it better," he muttered, unable to stop a proud grin coming over his face. "But I shouldn't have expected anything less from my grandson."

"Fleet Admiral Sengoku is not going to be happy about this, Garp," reported Vice Admiral Dalmatian from nearby. "So unless you'd like to experience his recently shortened temper for yourself, I recommend that we take some initiative while we're here and handle the seceded nation of Water 7."

Garp's grin faded, and he scoffed as he side-eyed the Vice Admiral across ships. "Yeah, great idea, kibble-breath. Only one nice big hulking problem with it."

"And that would be?" Dalmatian snorted, wisely deciding to not argue with the Hero of the Marines concerning his nicknaming practices.

Said hero picked his nose with his pinky as he jabbed his thumb over his shoulder. "The question of what army we'd use. Ya know, against theirs?"

Attention turned away from the speck that the Straw Hats' fleeing ship had become over towards the island of Water 7.

More specifically? Towards the hodge-podge armada that had boiled out from the island's many docks and piers. Nearly a dozen ships the size of their own battleships formed the center, from three gargantuan grain haulers with holes cut in their sides to the four-deck, purpose built Royal Charles originally intended as a vanity project by a South Blue kingdom. All bristled with enough cannons to make even the turret crews nervous.

Flanking this force on all sides were smaller ships of all sizes ranging from race-built frigates to rowboats with a single gun sticking out over the bow. And at the front was the oddest collection of contraptions any of the officers save Garp had ever seen. A tin can on a smoking raft, gleaming in the sunlight and two wide muzzles poking out. Flat barges lugging squat, rounded mortars or organ-like rocket launchers. One small schooner carrying a gun longer than the ship itself. Another that appeared to be entirely inflatable. A third with three odd tubes sticking out of the foredeck.

Hell, there was even an entirely circular ship wobbling to and fro on the water with a pair of cannons stuck on almost as an afterthought.

And those were just the guns on the boats. Scrap Island, meanwhile, was suddenly bristling like an angry metal porcupine with stray cannon muzzles.

"Ahem, excuse me?"
All attention turned to the middle of Scrap Island, where Mayor Iceburg had a megaphone raised and the best shipwrights on the island beside him. While they were staring down the battleships with narrowed eyes, Iceburg was content with a relaxed smile.

"Attention, Marines," he called over. "You are currently in restricted waters. Kindly vacate the premises at your earliest convenience. Should you fail to vacate, well…"

B-B-BOOM!

The Marines jumped as a half-dozen explosions sounded out across the local waters, sending up plumes of water dangerously close to what the crews of each battleship knew to be the weakest parts of their hulls.

"I cannot promise your safety. After all…” Iceburg tilted his head just a tad to the side. "There could be any manner of accidents if you get too close to shipwrights' working areas."

While the rest of the Vice Admirals blustered and stiffened, Garp regarded Iceburg for a minute or so before heaving a sigh when, just for a moment, he saw a flash of one of the largest (and most yellow) fishmen he’d ever met. "Generation xeroxing left and right… when the hell am I going to get my clone in another body, eh?"

"Ah, Vice Admiral, sir?"

Garp glanced over his shoulder at Coby, who was holding a salute with an ill-hidden grin. "Your orders, Vice Admiral?" he requested.

Garp stared at him for a second longer before shooting a smirk dead ahead, rubbing a finger under his nose. "Asked and answered… Coby!"

"Sir!"

"Spread the word to reverse course and make for the Tub Current. We came here for the Straw Hats and we failed. Someone else will handle Water 7. For now?” Garp spun on his heel and marched towards the raised superstructure of his ship. "We're headed home."

-0-

After the rush of the Sunny's first Coup de Burst wore off—a Coup de Burst that apparently took five barrels of Cola due to the increased size of the ship—the entire crew stood on the deck as I restarted the SBS.

"He-llo, everybody, and welcome back to the SBS broadcast, episode 4-9-3!" Soundbite cheered in a British accent.

"I'm sorry, what?" I questioned, too puzzled by the oddity of the snail’s statement to be upset about him stealing my line. "I don't think we've even had one hundred broadcasts yet."

"EH, two references in one. 493 IS THE END of generation four, SINCE THIS IS THE END OF THE FOURTH LEG!"

I thought about that, and nodded. "Alright, that makes sense. And the second?"

"More obscure reference to a sponsor."

"Sponsor?" I blinked in confusion. "We don't have sponsors."
"Eh?" Soundbite blinked right back. "No duh we DON'T HAVE SPONSORS, THE HELL ARE YOU—?!!"

"MOVING ON!" I barked hastily as I pegged onto what had just happened. "As you'll recall, we last left off while escaping from our Marine pursuers, through means which we will not be disclosing." I grinned cheekily. "Need to keep some surprises in reserve, dontcha know? And now that we have a moment of peace, it's time for us to properly celebrate the result of our journey. As such, I gracefully cede the mic to our captain, who is about to propose a toast."

"RIGHT!" Luffy grinned, raising his mug. "I remember how to do this from Shanks! Ah, let's see… To the safe return of Robin!"

Robin smiled politely as she knocked her frothing mug with mine.

"To the new life of Merry!"

"LET'S GET KEEL-FACED!" the ship-girl roared as she raised her pair of extra-large mugs. Apparently, a benefit of being only partially human was an insanely high tolerance for alcohol.

"And to our newest crewmates: Franky—"

"The SUPER! shipwright of the Straw Hats!" said cyborg bellowed, doing his usual pose.

"—and our new ship, the Thousand Sunny!" Luffy finished.

A gust of wind hit us at just the right angle to elicit a roar from Sunny.

"He just said 'bring it on!'" Merry provided.

All present (with the necessary appendages) raised their mugs alongside Luffy as he raised his own.

"EVERYONE!" Luffy cheered. "HERE'S TO THE NEXT ISLAND! AND TO ALL OUR ADVENTURES TO COME! KANPAI!"

"KANPAI!" we cheered in unison.

"And here's to us actually getting to relax a little in the meantime," I whispered to Robin under my breath, getting a giggle in response.

-o-

As the SBS went on, the old man didn't bother hiding an earsplitting grin, nor did he attempt to stop the tears of joy that streamed down his face.

"You kids are something else," Mekao whispered. "To see a Klabautermann is rare in itself. To speak to one is even more mythical. But to have loved your ship that much… so much that your new one is part of your family from the day of its birth…"

Mekao shook his head and turned back to his fellow shipwrights. Eight days ago, no matter how much he spoke about the right way to treat ships, they had always shrugged it off with amusement. Now there wasn't a single soldier among them who didn't hang onto Mekao's every word.

The grin on his face was starting to hurt as he raised his bottle. "This is legitimate cause for celebration! To the crew who truly loves their ship, who truly loves them in return! To the crew who has reawakened the world's understanding of how to take care of their seacrafts! To the Straw Hat
Pirates: may their impossible works never cease!"

"Kanpai!" the soldiers shouted in agreement before knocking their drinks back with him.

-3 Weeks Later-

"Mayor Iceburg!"

The mayor looked up from the blueprints that he had been perfecting and poring over for almost a month now, staring up with a curious frown at the one who had called him. "What is it, Oimo?"

"We just got word from our bosses! They'll be arriving here in an hour or two."

An ear-to-ear grin stretched Iceburg's face. "Excellent. Gather everyone together, I'll want to make my proposal straightaway. Oh, and can you handle the blueprints?"

Oimo guffawed as he took the pages from Iceburg and left, planning to gather the few other giants who had arrived at the island before the Ogres. Iceburg, at the same time, began gathering together every last member of the Galley-La Company for what was easily the biggest, hardest, and most rewarding project that they would ever undertake.

-Naturally, the two ogres had parked their palm-log raft at the small plain where pirates had usually docked. After all, that was where the best ale could be had. Or, well, something similar to ale."

"This 'beer' is interesting," Dorry rumbled, taking a sip from the barrel he was holding. "The 'hops' give it a faint bitter tone that works surprisingly well."

"Bah!" Broggy scoffed, rolling his own barrel back over to Dorry and grabbing a different one. "Give me regular ale any day of the week, rather than that horse piss you're drinking."

"Horse piss?" Dorry repeated, shooting a glare at his long-time rival and partner. "Care to say that again?"

"Of course I—" Broggy began, only for a loud cough to catch their attention. Both of them glanced down to Iceburg lower his fist from his mouth and shoot a flat stare at the both of them.

"I think I speak for a lot of people when I say we'd rather you don't get in another century-long honor duel," he blandly stated.

Both giants had the good grace to look sheepish at that. "Ah, Oimo told us you had a proposal for a ship for the new Giant Warrior Pirates?" Dorry said, faintly flushed in embarrassment.

"I do," Iceburg stated. "For your payment as well, seeing as you undoubtedly don't have any coffers left either."

"Damn looters raiding all our gold stashes…" Dorry spat to the side.

"Damn rats eating the rest…" Broggy concurred before casting a grateful gaze at Iceburg. "We'll take whatever charity you can offer us, Mayor Iceburg."

"Trust me, this isn't charity," Iceburg assured him. "Though before we begin, I'd prefer to wait until Oimo returns with the blueprints—"

As if on cue, Oimo and Kashi picked that moment to land on the plain from where they'd jumped off
the city walls, quickly jogging up to where their captains were.

"Mayor, I brought the blueprints!" Oimo eagerly reported.

"And I convinced the rest of the giants not to go starry-eyed until after we complete our business!" Kashi added.

"Thank you both," Iceburg said. "Now we can begin. I assume that you are all familiar with our plight where Aqua Laguna is concerned?"

"Of course," Dorry nodded sadly. "We knew this city many generations ago. You've managed to improve it over the years, but…"

"A lot of good bars and districts have sunken beneath the waves…" Broggy sighed remorsefully. "It's really a sad thing."

"Oimo, the blueprints, please."

The giant grinned, and produced the giant-sized pile of design papers that he and Kashi had helped draw for his two captains to look over. And despite them not having much expertise in the way of shipbuilding, they understood what they were looking at in an instant. And their jaws subsequently dropped.

"Converting an island… into a ship…" Dorry breathed.

"Pretty ballsy, huh, bosses?" Kashi chuckled.

"Pretty nutty, I'll say!" Broggy shot back. "And hell, even if it does work out, there's still the issue of time and resources! This is gonna cost ten different kinds of bundles, and you'll be long dead before this is ever completed!"

"And, normally, I'd be alright with that," Iceburg nodded in concession. "But in recent weeks… I've become aware of an alternative. An alternative that will save us, in your own words, 'ten different kinds of bundles.'"

"Oh, yeah?" Dorry cocked an eyebrow. "What?"

"Not what, Boss, who!" Oimo corrected.

"And by who, he means us!" Kashi nodded.

The Giant Warrior Captains exchanged confused glances before looking back at their subordinates. "Come again?"

"Over the course of the past few weeks, your men have been helping us repair the devastation that CP9 left in their wake." Iceburg explained. "The damage was extensive, and normally would have required months to repair in full, but thanks to the aid of but two giants, capable of doing the work of at least a hundred men apiece on an incredible scale, Water 7 is already back on its feet in a fraction of the estimated time."

"Hrm…" Dorry scratched his chin thoughtfully. "And that was with the aid of only two giants… and seeing as we'll be gathering our crew both new and old here…"

"So, basically," Broggy picked up. "You're saying that you'll let us work off our debt by helping you renovate the city, is that it?"
"That's part of it, but not all of it," Iceburg replied. "You see, now that we've seceded from the World Government, we're going to be in constant danger from pirates and the world government alike. Our civilians are used to leading... interesting lives, comes from living in the Grand Line, but they still have their limits. Hence, protection will be an ever-present issue, even with all of the shipwrights on the island cooperating, and then there will be the issue of properly crewing a vessel the size of Water 7... as you can see, there are a host of issues."

"Issues that could be solved, once again, by the involvement of giants," Broggy nodded slowly.

"So, we lend you our crew to crew this island, you build us our ship?" Dorry guessed.

"Something like that..." Iceburg nodded slowly, before donning a confident grin. "Only on a more permanent and, shall we say, mutually beneficial set of terms."

It took a full minute after the mayor finished, but the realization struck like thunder when it hit.

"...So, you're asking us not only have our crew help convert this entire island into a ship..." Dorry began.

"But then to use Water 7 as our pirate ship?" Broggy finished.

"In broad strokes, with many finer details to be hammered out, most important of all the safety of our civilians over the course of your adventures... but in essence, yes," Iceburg responded. "So, do we have a deal?"

The giants exchanged looks. There was silence. More silence. And then it broke.

"GEGYAGYAGYAGYAGYAGYAGYAGYAGYA!/GABABABABABABABABABABABABABABABABABA!"

"Dorry!" Broggy managed to get out as he clapped hand on his friend's back hard enough to cause tremors. "I'm currently of the opinion that in our absence, the world has gone completely insane! GABABABABA!"

"I agree completely, Broggy!" Dorry guffawed just as uproariously, clutching his gut as he shook. "And I'm currently of the opinion that I love it! GEYAGYAGYAGYA!"

"I'll take that as a resounding 'hell yes'," Iceburg chuckled as he removed a flask from his back pocket and raised it in a toast. "Very well, then! Let us drink to our newly minted arrangement!"

"To the Giant Warrior's future ship, the Water 7!" Dorry swiftly raised his own giga-sized bottle. "And to the ones who even made this arrangement possible to begin with, the Straw Hat Pirates!" Broggy finished with his own bottle. "May they enjoy equally good fortune in their adventures, wherever they might be!"

-0-

"You have got to be fucking kidding me..." I growled acridly, balancing my chin on my fists. The reason for my foul mood was the sub-zero ice pit that not only I, but the majority of my crewmates, found ourselves in.

"Captured, after how far we've come," I spat. "By a bunch of two-bit, half-rate, half-wit filler villains. This. Is. Bullshit."

"You seem... unhappy," Conis deduced from where she was sitting across the cell.
"Of course I'm unhappy!" I snapped, throwing my arms up in the air. "I mean, at least this isn't Rain Dinners all over again—"

"We beg to differ!" Nami and Zoro bellowed from where they were hanging from their ankles by a pair of frosted-over chains, their arms secured behind their backs.

"But I'm still pissed that we got tricked in here!"

"You mean you're upset at yourself for not seeing this coming," Usopp retorted, his chin on his own fists as well.

I pursed my lips and lowered my hands. "Well, you're not wrong…" I snapped my head up with a growl as I slammed my fist into the frozen wall. "But I'm not entirely at fault, either! This bit was called the 'Ice Hunter' arc for a reason: the Accino family controls this entire iceberg field. I only ever saw a fraction of their playbook, and they were way more on the ball than I thought was possible! Plus…” I shook my head darkly. "They were, to reiterate, filler villains. By the time I remembered that they were going to be gunning for our Jolly Roger or that the Phoenix Pirates were under their heel, it was too late!"

"Sounds like a bunch of excuses to me," Sanji drawled as he took a drag from his cigarette.

"Oh, fuck off, lover boy!" I snapped. "I didn't see you Diable Jambeing that ice-skating skank when you had the chance!"

Despite the cold, Sanji's last cigarette still ashed in an instant. "Why, you—!" He tried to leap at me, but he was yanked up short by the leg-irons he was sporting.

"Well, least there's a bright side," Franky piped up as he idly shifted around in the mass of chains he was all but mummified in.

"What possible bright side could there be in this case?" Nami twisted her head around so that she could properly glare at the cyborg.

"Well, Luffy's still out there, so—!"

"—a piece of meat! Oh, a piece of meat! Oh, a piece of meat!"

Soundbite and I slowly shared an uneasy glance as we heard Luffy's voice approaching above us. "Why do I feel like I've heard this bit before?" I asked in great trepidation.

THWAP!

I stared at the newly cooked piece of meat that had just landed in the center of the pit before knocking the back of my head against the wall with a defeated sigh. "Look out above."

"Oh, a piece of meat—WHOA!"

THUMP!

I regarded our captain with a dry stare. "Hello, Luffy. What brings you here?"

"Hey, Cross!" Luffy responded as he munched down on the steak he'd dove down to get before glancing around at the rest of the crew in confusion. "I found a trail of meat leading into here from the cold! What're you doing here?"

"Getting mani-pedis at the Ice-Hole Holiday Inn," I snarked. "What does it look like?"
"Like you all got captured," Luffy nodded, before jerking in realization. "Ah! You're all captured!"

"Quaaa…" Carue drawled in tired resignation.

"Well, don't worry!" Luffy nodded confidently as he started winding his arm up. "I'll get out of here real quick, and then I'm gonna—!"

**CLANK!**

"Hurl…" Luffy collapsed to his knees with a groan.

"Yet another perfect slapshot, Hockera! Well done!" a boisterous voice guffawed from on high.

"It's all in the wrist, Campacino, all in the wrist!"

I glared up at our captors for a second before eyeing the new collar my captain was sporting. "Well, perfect, now we're seven for seven on incapacitated ability-users."

"Mrph…" Soundbite mumbled murderously around the metal muzzle he was sporting.

"Trust us, Cross…" Robin groaned from the corner of the cell she was sitting in, her hat angled over her eyes. "This isn't pleasant for us either."

"They must have custom-made these things to have higher seastone-to-steel ratios than normal…" Chopper wheezed, splayed helplessly out on his stomach. "It feels like we're all dunked in the ocean… Heck…" He waved his hoof at the chained up gun and sword in the pit. "Lassoo and Funkfreed can't even change back from their weapon forms…"

"Gonna… kill… these… bastards… for… touching… Sunny's… flag…" Merry grit out as she clawed at the walls, trying and failing to climb up the slick surface.

"Though… willpower seems to make the effects vary…" Chopper noted dryly.

"Maybe if I… no, but that's… perhaps… what if… no no no…"

"Su?" Su cocked her eyebrow at the pacing princess.

"Ah, yes," Conis nodded swiftly. "Vivi, you seem… distracted?"

Vivi glanced up, and shook her head. "To make a long story short, according to Cross, Don Accino's Devil Fruit is most likely—!"

"Is the Rage of Alabasta, the Hot-Hot Fruit?" I deadpanned.

"Yes?"

"Then its user is definitely a ways away that way," I nodded, jabbing my finger upward.

"Right…" Vivi groaned, grinding her fingers into her temple. "And if that's true, it's extremely important that I speak to this Don Accino straight away, so that I can work something out! His powers are a national treasure back home, and if I could I'd invite him to go to Alabasta to join the royal guard…" She spread her arms in despair. "But the problem is my position! If I make the request now, while our lives are on the line—!"

"Then it would look like all you're doing is speaking out of your ass in order to save your skin," I deduced grimacing. "Yeeaaah, that's a problem."
"Worse than you'd think…" Vivi muttered, going back to her agitated pacing. "The Desert is lost to us until Crocodile one day dies, I'd never forgive myself if I let the Rage slip out of reach as well. And now…"

"Well… maybe you could make the offer to him while we're on our way out after we kick the Accino's collective asses?" I proposed. "After all, once that happens, they're gonna be up a creek without a base of operations."

"And how are we going to get out?" Vivi shook her head miserably. "After all, we're almost all locked up in here with no way out!"

I blinked at her in confusion before slapping a hand to my head with a chuckle. "Oh, right, you got here after me and Nami, I forgot. Nami, you mind—?"

"Yoo~hoo~," Nami sang, withdrawing her arms from behind her back and wiggling her fingers before hiding them again.

"The truth is that we can get out whenever we need to," I explained. "We're just waiting for the best moment to do it, is all. After all, things are… weird. I mean, look around." I spread my arms at the cell. "The Accinos are cocky and bastards, but they're also damn skilled and professional. With this much bounty money on the line, we should have been in a Marine brig from the word go. But instead, they're keeping us in here? Nah nah, something is up, though the question is what. So, for now, we wait. And besides…" I jabbed my thumb upwards. "We've still got one last ace in the hole, remember? The TDWS are still out there. Not sure what they're planning, but—!"

**KNOCK-KNOCK!**

A rapping sound drew my attention to Boss, who'd thus far been quiet as he sat in a seiza position. Once he had my attention, he held up a trio of 'fingers' on his flipper, then ticked one down… then a second… and then…

**TH-TH-TH-THWUMP!**

A quartet of bound, gagged and struggling dugongs were unceremoniously dumped into the center of the pit.

I blinked slowly at the groaning pile. "Huh… didn't see that coming. But… how? The TDWS might be students, but they're still pretty skilled. Who could have—?"

Boss responded to that by jabbing his flipper upward without even turning his head.

I followed his flipper, and blinked as I caught sight of what was standing at the lip of the ice pit's entrance. "Are those Fierce Penguins? But they're only fierce and strong in numbers, how could four of them—?"

SLAP!

My words died in my throat as my brain seized up at what had just happened.

"Did… that penguin just high-five another penguin?" I asked weakly.

SLAP-SLAP-SLAP-SLAP-AP-SLAP!

My question was promptly answered by the penguins exchanging yet *more* high-fives, a veritable flurry of them…
SLAP!

That ended with one of them dope-slapping a, well, dopey-looking one.

A quartet of high-fiving penguins who'd just managed to kick the TDWS's ass…

I slowly turned my gaze on Soundbite. "Please say it ain't so…" I whimpered.

"Mmph-mph…" the snail smirked even behind his muzzle.

I silently stared at the snail before slowly standing up and turning to face the wall. "Well, if that's the case… It would seem like we've managed to guarantee at least one thing."

SMASH!

"This," I grit out through my rictus smile as I slammed my forehead against the ice over and over.

SMASH!

"Is going."

SMASH!

"To be fun."

Patient AN: Before anyone gets it in their heads to bite ours off for not telling you Cross' bounty, it's not out of trolling this time… or at least, not primarily. If I had my way, we would have just put it as ∞, but until we have the bounty of Dragon or one of the Four Emperors as a measuring stick, we can't put forth an exact number.

Hornet AN: And yes, Jack's and Cracker's bounties had a lot to do with that decision.

Xomniac AN: Maybe we'll spill the beans on what it is once we have the top bounty in the world, alongside the Emperor's… : 3 Then again, maybe not~
The Awe-Inspiring Kancolle Affair!

Rule 1183: Under no circumstances are unknown shipgirls flying the skull and crossbones to be brought to base. It is not worth it.

Hornet AN: Rated R for Merry's filthy, filthy mouth. And my God, you guys have no idea how long I've been waiting to release this.

Admiral Goto sighed, rubbing his temples. It was far too early in the morning for this shit. "Okay, Ooyodo… run this one by me again."

"Yes, Admiral," Ooyodo nodded as she adjusted her glasses. "Earlier this morning, Nagato had another Crossroads nightmare and decided to go out onto the water to clear her head. She found the brig sloop you see tied up at the pier just as it emerged from a fogbank."

"Yes, Admiral," Ooyodo nodded as she adjusted her glasses. "Earlier this morning, Nagato had another Crossroads nightmare and decided to go out onto the water to clear her head. She found the brig sloop you see tied up at the pier just as it emerged from a fogbank."

Indeed, a medium-sized sailing ship was tied up the pier, and oh, what a bizarre ship it was. The lion's head at the front wasn't too unusual for its size and coloration, but the two cabins protruding from the poop deck, what for all the world looked like the back end of a large jet engine sticking out of the upper stern, a large circular port with a large '1' painted on the side, and the tangerine trees dotting the deck were all quite different from what anyone familiar with the Age of Sail would expect. Most worrying, though, was the stylized skull and crossbones wearing a straw hat that was painted on the main sail and the black flag flying from the mainmast.

All in all, it was quite the intriguing ship, as ingenious as it was ludicrous. Indeed, kudos were to be given to whoever had figured out how to grow tangerines on board. No scurvy for them!

"Nagato boarded and found only a young girl frantically trying to run the ship, with a… surprising degree of success. It would appear that the helm and rigging have been configured so that they can be operated by a single person," Ooyodo continued. "The girl tried to run her off at first, but after Nagato explained that they were near Abyssal territory - and, interestingly - she allowed her to tow the ship back here."

"Hmm, I see…" Admiral Goto nodded in understanding before turning around and marching down from the balcony overlooking the base's waterfront. "And what's become of the girl?"

"Ah, that's… complicated, sir."

Goto tensed in dread. Anything capable of making Ooyodo—who, as his secretary ship, dealt with almost as much shit as he did—uneasy was guaranteed to be bad news. "What?"

"W-Well, you see, sir—" Ooyodo uncomfortably fiddled with her glasses as they arrived at the Admiral's office. "A-As you know, Kongo has been researching methods for you and her to have children once the war is over."

"And?"

"Well…" Ooyodo scratched the back of her head. "You see, there are other ships in the Fleet who share her desires, save that most of them are nowhere near as… shall we say, 'optimistic'?"

"What does any of this have to do with the situation at hand?"

Ooyodo sighed wearily as she laid her hands on the door. "It has everything do with the situation—"

The light cruiser pushed the door open, revealing the scene inside. "Because Nagato is one of those
ships."

Within Goto's office were a pair of individuals, one familiar and the other not. One was the battleship Nagato who, for her part, looked simply ecstatic as she squeezed, nuzzled, and practically smothered the head of the child she was lovingly (some might say desperately) clutching to her... ample fuel tanks. Meanwhile, said child, a young girl, was a stranger to Goto, and an oddly dressed one at that: the hood of the orange raincoat she was wearing was pulled down to reveal a shock of white hair with swirls of brown above her ears, a metal choker wrapped around her neck that slightly matched the anklets affixed around her flailing heels, and gray leggings poked out from under the bottom of said coat. Her face was one that would likely have been absolutely adorable, if not for the fact that it was twisted in rage.

Then again, considering what some of the other girls on base wore, this was practically normal.

"—rat-infested cum-hauling termite-ridden low-grade-copper-plated—!"

"Is she a shipgirl?" Goto asked, an eyebrow raised at the steady stream of profanity flowing from the mouth of a girl who looked no older than his destroyers. "She's certainly got the mouth for it. I've heard less imaginative swearing while I was serving my commission."

"We're... not quite sure," Ooyodo replied, her lips pursed. "We think so, mostly due to Nagato squeezing her hard enough to crack ribs on a normal person, but when she forced her to disembark from the ship she was on—not an easy feat, mind you—she sank like a stone the moment she hit the water. But even then, well..." She searched for the words for a moment before shrugging helplessly. "I don't know what to say, Admiral, it's... just a feeling. Kinship, however tangential. I can... we can all tell she's a shipgirl. Whether by instinct or something else."

"Mm, no, I know the feeling," Goto said. After all, with Admirals across the world getting shipgirl powers, this... intuition would logically be one of them. "Nevertheless, if she is a shipgirl, a few questions arise: who is she? Who summoned her? And more importantly, what will we do with her?"

"Oh, Admiral, Admiral!" Nagato suddenly piped up. "Yes, I volunteer, I'll adopt her!"

"You'll what!?" Goto choked incredulously, while Ooyodo slapped her hand to her face with a weary groan.

The foreign shipgirl, for her part, was much more vocal in her disagreement to the idea.

"EXCUSE ME?!" she screeched, a slight accent seeming to slip into her voice.

"You heard me! I'll adopt you!" Nagato squealed eagerly as she spun the girl around. "Oooh, it'll be perfect! I'll be a mommy and Hoppo-chan will be a big sister! Oh! And I can call Colorado and tell her the news! She'll be thrilled to be a daddy! Then we'll all be one big happy family! Won't that be nice?"

Faintly, Goto almost swore he could hear a shout of "WHAT?!" coming from the general direction of Bremerton. Probably his imagination. Though with his luck, not something to count on.

The girl stared at Nagato like she'd grown a second head, her eye twitching furiously for a moment before she bared her teeth and spat—nay, howled—out a reply. "NO, YE GALLEON-HUMPING SEA KING-SUCKING LEAKY-HULLED CRACKED-KEEL SCURVY-RIDDEN HAG!" the shipgirl raged, sounding for all the world like a genuine grog-and-flintlock buccaneer. "I DON'T WANNA BE ADOPTED! I'VE ALREADY GOT MESELF A FAMILY, AND WHEN THEY FIND ME, THEY ARE GOING TO SEND EACH AND EVERYONE OF YE MARINE
"ROWBOATS STRAIGHT TO DAVY JONES' LOCKER, FASTER THAN YOU CAN SAY 'BATTEN DOWN THE HATCHES! DO I MAKE MESELF—MMMPPH!'

The girl was cut off by Nagato shoving her head between her massive… guns. "Isn't she simply adorable?" she cooed, rubbing the girl's hair lovingly (if a bit obsessively). "I'm going to love her and pet her and feed her—!

"MMMPPH!" The shipgirl's struggles all but quintupled in Nagato's grip, taking on a very vivid hint of desperation. Still, she was no match for the force of the battleship's motherly love. That, and her 91,000-horsepower grip.

"Nagato..." Ooyodo sighed as she observed the sadly familiar madness unfurling before her. "Before this debacle devolves into a very twisted rendition of 'Of Mice and Men', I have but one question for you: do you even know this girl's name?"

"Of course I do!" Nagato indignantly replied. "It's... uh, it's..." She shifted her grip on the girl slightly as she tried to tap her lip in thought. "Give me a second, oka—YARGH!"

Goto raised an eyebrow as the girl took advantage of a slight slip in Nagato's grip to chomp down on her thumb with all the tenacity of a fighting pit bull. The sight of the battleship flailing around, trying to shake the girl off and failing miserably, was quite comical, and it served a dual purpose: first, it proved pretty conclusively that the girl was a shipgirl, because only a shipgirl would have the capacity to bite that hard and hang on for so long, and second, it irrefutably proved that Nagato was nowhere near ready to be anything resembling a parental figure. At least, not if the way she was repeatedly slamming the strange shipgirl's head against the wall in an effort to dislodge her was anything to go by.

Still, however fun this was to watch, they were in his office and he had a base to run.

"Nagato, you are not adopting this girl."

Both Nagato and the unknown froze, the battleship's boot firmly on the smaller girl's torso.

"I'm not?" Nagato whimpered, laying on a dose of puppy-dog eyes.

"Suc' it, bi—ACK!" the young girl started to crow before she was dislodged due to opening her jaw too much, bouncing off the wall as a result. "OW! Son of a—did they not shatter the bottle at your launching or something?"

"No," Goto repeated firmly to Nagato, by now thoroughly immune to all forms of puppy-dog eyes and distracting antics. "And that's final. And now that that's settled, might I ask what your name is, young lady?"

The unknown girl eyed the Admiral and shipgirls for a moment, before standing up straight and shooting a defiant glare at Goto. "Going Merry, Helmsman of the Straw Hat Pirates, 25 million beris,?" she announced proudly.

Goto blinked in surprise at the all-too-familiar greeting, taking a moment to puzzle out what the rest of it meant. "I'm assuming that was your version of name, rank, and serial number, but that last part... berries?"

"Weeell..." Merry tilted her head to the side as she trailed off. "It's supposed to be 'Name, rank and bounty', seeing how we don't have numbers. Cross said to only say that if the Marines ever questioned us because it'd drive them nuts, but really, we tend to drive you bastards way crazier with what we say than anything else."
Goto glanced at Ooyodo, who had a look on her face that said she was reading as much context, missing or otherwise, from Merry's words as he was.

Finally, Goto crouched down on his knee and looked the girl in the eye, ignoring the defiant way she glared at him. "This Cross sounds like a very smart person. Is he one of the friends who would be coming to get you?"

Merry's facade cracked instantly as she lit up with pride and glee. "Yup! Cross has to be smart, 'cause he's the third mate and Captain's an idiot! He's also the tactician, and the Commie—" All three fleet-members stiffened in alarm. "—but he calls himself a communications officer—" Before relaxing in relief. "—and the public relations officer, and the guy who takes care of all the animals! Oh, oh, and he's also on the World Government's Top Twenty Most Wanted List because he starts wars around the world with his words!"

Goto's eye twitched furiously as he reconciled the words 'Top Twenty Most Wanted' with the idea of 'proximity to and loyalty of shipgirls' before returning to the task at hand. "That sounds… very impressive. Although, seeing how you came here on what I assume was your crew's ship—?"

"That was an accident! That fogbank came out of nowhere! I was just taking Big Bro Sunny out for a run around the island we were docked at!" Merry pouted furiously. "We didn't leave the coastline, and the log pose in his helm still hadn't synced up yet! But the next thing I knew, I was getting attacked by these monster ships and then I was attacked by that Marine-lubber of a wench and—!"

"Yes, well!" Goto hastily cut her off before she could build herself into a lather. "The point is, your crew doesn't have a ship and the phenomenon that brought you here was unique, so how do you think they'll follow you here?"

Merry blinked as she considered what the Admiral said before smiling cheerfully. "They'll prolly' steal themselves a ship the second they realize I'm gone and follow me here. They'll find a way no matter what, come hell, high water or Marine fleet. They're…" Her expression took on a wistful overtone. "They're kind of awesome like that."

Ooyodo was forced to hide a smile as she observed the genuine adoration only a shipgirl could lavish on her crew, while Nagato shrunk in on herself as the display served to convince her that the precious child before her would never show her the same love in a million years.

"I'm glad to hear that," Goto nodded firmly. "Well, in the meantime, why don't you stay here while you wait for them?"

"Well, that's too bad," Ooyodo cut in hastily. "Mamiya, one of our better cooks, was just putting the finishing touches on a batch of cookies."

Merry trailed off slowly as she narrowed her eyes at the light cruiser. "What kind?"

"Chocolate chocolate chip."

Merry held the expression for a second before brightening up with a sunny grin. "Well, lead the way!"

"Sure thing, could you just wait outside for a moment? The Admiral and I need to…" She glanced at
Goto. "Discuss matters?"

Merry frowned for a moment before shrugging in agreement. "Eh, whatever. Cookies!"

The second the small shipgirl was outside, Admiral and light cruiser looked at each other in disbelief.

"I can confirm with certainty that there is no one with the name 'Cross' on any Top Ten Most Wanted list in any country I am aware of, much less that of a 'World Government'," Ooyodo swiftly informed him.

"Is it possible that she could be from some form of... alternate reality? One whose history is different from our own?" Goto posited.

"Things are mad enough around here that I wouldn't discount it as a possibility," Ooyodo sighed wearily. "Your orders, Admiral?"

Goto was silent for a moment as he considered things before shaking his head. "There's nothing we can do. I'll call Briggs and Cunningham to see if they're missing any of their sail girls, but I won't hold my breath. For now, we wait and accommodate her the best we can. With any luck, her crew is as resourceful as she makes them sound, so they'll be able to find their way here. From there, we hand her off, and hopefully wipe our hands of this affair. We already have enough problems in our world, I don't want the Diet getting on my back for getting us embroiled with another."

Ooyodo nodded in understanding. "Glad to hear it." She slowly glanced to the side. "And, uh what about—?"

Goto followed her gaze and promptly stiffened in terror. Nagato was, well, not crying, not yet, but that was the issue: she was right on the borderline of breaking into tears. If she crossed that line, she'd set herself on a course for the galley and wouldn't stop until every carton of ice cream on base was thoroughly emptied.

Goto was about to resign himself to dipping into what was known as the 'Yukikaze Trust Fund' to keep the destroyers from revolting when someone knocked on the door.

"Come in!" he called out, breathing an internal sigh of relief as the white form of the Northern Ocean Princess—better known as Hoppo-chan—popped her head into the office.

Almost instantly, the battleship was snapped out of her funk as she hoisted the Abyssal into the air and bounced her over her head. "Oh, hello, Hoppo-chan!" she cooed eagerly. "What are you doing here? Are you hungry? Awww, poor thing! Come on, let's go and get you something to eat! Who's a good girl? You are, yes, you are!"

Hoppo shot a thumbs up over Nagato's shoulder at Goto as she was carried out of the office, a motion that the Admiral returned in relief.

Merry came back into the office a moment later with a dark look on her face. "I almost became that? I swear, if I ever end up in that kind of a situation, you're all waking up with your heads twisted on the wrong way."

"Duly noted," Goto nodded with a weary sigh. "Now, Ooyodo—"

He started to turn towards his secretary, only to freeze as he felt something start to tug at the back of his pants. Before he could react, there was the sound of shredding cloth, followed closely by the feel of a breeze around his legs. He whirled around to see Merry munching on his trousers, slurping up his pants leg with an innocent grin on her face.
"Nice heart boxers, Admiral," Ooyodo snickered, doing a bad job of hiding her grin behind her hand.

"Just… Just get her to Mamiya's, and then to one of the destroyer divisions."

-o-

"Come in," Goto announced a few hours later as he worked on some paperwork, waiting for a chance to call Briggs in Norfolk and Cunningham in Portsmouth.

The door opened, admitting a rather frazzled Tenryuu.

"Tenryuu," Goto said, sighing. "Let me guess, Merry?"

"This isn't going to work, Admiral," Tenryuu bit out.

Goto frowned. Tenryuu had a reputation for being able to handle any destroyer. She had wrangled the Taffies, and so far only Shimakaze on a sugar high had defeated her. "That bad?"

"She decided to share a few sea shanties with my destroyers," the light cruiser spat.

"I dread the answer, but… shanties?"

Tenryuu's eye twitched viciously as she recalled the scene she'd walked in on.

~o~

"Alright, everyone, all together now! Ooooh, there once was a Marine from Enies, whose head was shaped like a—!"

~o~

"Okay, okay, I get it!" Goto cried out, warding off the song with his hands and doing his best to keep the light cruiser from unconsciously pulping the edge his desk with her hands. "Don't worry, I'll move her. Is the corruption permanent?"

Tenryuu took a moment to blow a calming breath out her nose before slowly shaking her head. "No, no, it isn't, thank God. Still, I sent 'em to Hosho, just to be sure."

"Alright," Goto said, quickly printing a sheet and filling it out. "Get Merry and this to Sendai. I'm fairly certain that Desdiv 11 can handle her."

"Thanks, Admiral, that's all I ask." With a lazy salute, Tenryuu sauntered out the door, clearly in a much better mood. Smiling, Goto turned back to his work, but not before making a note.

1423. Sail girls are not allowed to teach destroyers sea shanties.

With any luck, Desdiv 11—or rather, Fubuki—would be much better equipped to handle their visitor.

~o~

"Alright, ladies and rowboats, the name of the game is South Blue Hold 'em!" Merry grinned as she shuffled the deck eagerly. "Aces are high, the joker's wild, and gold doubloons are the preferred currency."
"And the house gets half the pot when all's said and done!" Sendai piped up eagerly.

"I still say that this is a gross breach of protocol…" Murakumo groused as she shifted her hand around.

"Heh, you sound like Fubuki," Hatsuyuki chuckled softly as she slouched on a cushion.

"Yeah, dumb old Fubuki would hate us having this much fun!" Sendai laughed in agreement.

"Um, that's not very nice…" Shirayuki softly admonished her ostensible superior.

"She is right though," Hatsuyuki chuckled lazily.

SLAM! "AHA!" Fubuki roared as she kicked the closet door open, causing the shipgirls to jump.

"It was all their idea, I had nothing to do with this," Hatsuyuki drawled as she let the cards fall from limp fingers.

"PRIVATEER!" Merry howled in betrayal.

"Now now, Fubuki, let's not all go crazy here…" Sendai said placatingly, motioning for the destroyer to calm down.

"I'm telling Admiral Goto about this!"

"GET HER!" Sendai roared as she jabbed a finger at her nominal subordinate.

"YEAH, GET HER!" Merry concurred as she swung her arm up to mirror the motion… and promptly froze in horror as a flurry of cards flew from her sleeve, cold sweat pouring down her in torrents as she felt the whole of Desdiv 11 glaring at her as one.

Well, Murakumo, Sendai, and Fubuki glared. Hatsuyuki didn't give a shit, and Shirayuki was too nice to glare.

"Ah, damn it. And Nami makes this seem so natural, too…” the caravel muttered to herself before grinning sheepishly. "Aheheh… ah… Is it too late to mulligan or—?"

"GET HER!" Sendai howled as she leapt at the small girl, a motion the two motivated destroyers mirrored.

~0~

Goto cocked an eyebrow as he looked at the overturned cardboard box before him. "And where did you get the idea for this, exactly?"

"Cross mentioned that it was a cliché from where he was from. It works surprisingly well!" Merry's voice glibly informed him.

"Uh-huh… And you thought starting a gambling ring was a good idea… why?"

"Always best to have some money on hand! Plus it's fun, of course."

"Of course."

"So, ah, do I just go back to them or…?"
"I'll call ahead to Jintsuu and tell her you'll be staying with Desdiv 16. They're that way."

The silence hung heavy in the air for a moment.

"Ah…?"

"To your left, sorry."

"Right!"

"No no, your other left!"

"Right again!"

Goto groaned as he slapped a hand to his face. The other Admirals couldn't call soon enough.

The second he returned to his desk, he swiftly made yet another note.

**1424. No organized gambling rings are to be organized without inviting the Admiral.**

He paused as he felt Ooyodo and Kongo glare at the back of his head through the rest of the base before putting another line below.

**1424a. Correction: No gambling rings, period, organized or unorganized.**

~o~

"You need to do something about this devil child, now!" Victorious snarled as she slammed a chain-wrapped Merry down on the Admiral's desk.

"Heya, Goat-y!" Merry snickered. "Long time no see! How's tricks?"

Goto stared at her for a moment before eyeing the British fleet assembled before him. "What did she do this time?"

"Absolutely nothing! I have been the picture of innocence!"

"You've been a *horrid* influence on every destroyer you've come in contact with!" King George V spat.

"Balderdash! Cockamamy! Lies and slander!"

"Now, girls," Goto said, holding his hands up placatingly. "I realize that there have been some issues with Merry, but surely—!"

"She convinced Desflot 24 to set up a bootleg rum distillery in their room!"

Goto froze at that before slowly staring flatly at Merry. "… Really?"

Merry pursed her lips for a moment before shrugging innocently. "In my defense, it took a lot of convincing to get them to do it."

"They had it set up within an hour!" Argonaut shrieked.

"As I said, a lot of convincing."

"I last saw you *two* hours ago," Goto deadpanned.
Merry froze as she considered that before shrugging. "I… have no excuse. Though I do wonder why they were so reluctant."

"That's because they're overcoming fucking alcoholism, just like the rest of us!" Victorious spat. "And you just set them back by months!"

"Well I wouldn't have gone to them if Desdiv 16 had agreed to help me!" Merry raged. "But nooooo, they insisted that the damn thing spit out sake! Do I look like a green-haired swordsman to you!? Tsk, I bet they're still making a mint off of my blueprints…"

Goto snapped his fingers, prompting Ooyodo to dash out of the room, before focusing back on Merry. "So far, you have managed to subvert, corrupt, and overall exploit well over a dozen of the shipgirls under my command. Tell me right now why I shouldn't throw you in the brig and be done with you."

Merry's eyes practically doubled in size as she stared tearfully at Goto. "Because I'm an adorable bundle of joy and innocence who can do no wrong."

"Desdiv 6 has that trick down to an artform. Pull the other one, it's got whistles and bells on it," Goto stated flatly.

Merry's expression flipped into a sadistic grin. "Because if my crew finds me behind bars, they will rip your base up by the fucking foundation and kick your rudders six ways from Sunday in the process, and trust me, that's not an exaggeration on my part."

Goto was silent for a moment before looking at Victorious. "Take her to Abukuma and Kinu. I've already written Desdiv 24 off as a lost cause anyways, one more won't hurt."

"Aye-aye, sir," Victorious saluted tiredly before picking up Merry. "Come on, you menace."

"That's White Menace to you! And do you think we can swing by Desflot 24's room on the way? I stashed a bottle beneath my bed before you raided us and—MMPH!"

"Thank you," Goto sighed in relief as the troublemaker was finally gagged. He then wearily jotted down yet another note, before remembering that they'd already written this one down.

691. The still in the repair ship's barracks has to go.

He still didn't know what he had been thinking, sending Junyou to dispose of it. Goto allowed himself a weary grin as he leaned back in his seat. Merry was living up to her apparent nom de guerre, but he had an appointment with Cunningham and Briggs soon, so things would hopefully turn out for the best soon enough.

~o~

He wasn't smiling a half hour later as he talked to the other admirals.

"So, none of your sail girls are missing," he repeated flatly.

"Nope, sorry," Admiral Cunningham said over the conference video call.

"… Are you sure none of you want a ship girl?"

"Nice try, Goto, but Victorious already called us. Count yourself lucky I managed to stop Indefatigable and Implacable from leaving Portsmouth," Admiral Cunningham stated neutrally.
"Damn it," Goto spat to himself, before blinking. "Wait, which—"

"Both of them."

"Either way," Briggs cut in. "I do not envy you if you have to handle a sail girl, especially one who claims to be a pirate."

Goto frowned. "Why? What does that have to do with anything?"

"Simple: most sail girls are crazy. Well, crazier than their steel counterparts, at any rate. We think it has something to do with age. Turns out that World War II wasn't the high point of insanity in the history of humanity," Briggs answered. "Anyways, the frigates are the craziest of them all, and all of them are warships, not pirates. If she is a pirate shipgirl as she claims?" The American admiral shuddered dramatically. "Pray that her crew actually does manage to take her off your hands, and soon."

"Oh, one more thing," Cunningham added. "Fair warning, we've been doing exercises with Trincomalee, and she maneuvers very differently from steam-powered girls. Southampton was having serious trouble targeting her. Chances are, due to how different their thought processes are, your more modern shipgirls will have a hard time getting a bead on her."

Goto sighed. Well, that wasn't as bad as he'd feared.

It was worse.

"Well, thank you for your time, gentlemen," he replied. "Now, we're all busy men, so I won't hold you here any longer. Goodbye."

As the teleconference ended, Goto leaned back in his chair, and resolved not to think about the small sail girl until he had to.

~o~

Merry carefully modulated her breathing as she stared up into the ceiling of the room she'd been moved to, wide awake. The caravel felt a slight twinge of regret at what she was about to do; the girls of Desdiv 6 had been so fun to try and corrupt, especially Inazuma, who was very clearly slamming face-first into puberty; Desdiv 11's members were alright when they weren't narking on her; and Desflot 24 were really fun drunks. As for Desdiv 24, they were just crazy, but in a fun way. Hell, even her minders had been nice. Tenryuu reminded her of Nami, Sendai was hilarious, and Abukuma was just so adorable! trying to be authoritative.

Still, this wasn't her world, and she needed to get back to the Sunny, back out to sea, back to her crew. And she had a plan for that too: sneak out, get to the Sunny, and take down everyone in her way.

Okay, not a great plan, but it was more than what her Captain had done on many occasions! Heck, it was better than half of Cross's plans, too.

Sitting up, she listened for any change. Nothing. She slid out of bed, still clad in her clothes, and froze as she heard a rustle of cloth.

"Pink elephants… on parade…" Kagero mumbled as she rolled over in bed.

Merry heaved a silent sigh of relief and slipped her coat's hood up. Standing in front of the door, she schooled her expression, opened the door—and nearly blurted out a blue streak when she saw Kinu,
Abukuma's sister, standing in front of her.

"Oh, hey, Merry," the light cruiser said, mildly surprised and slightly groggy from waking up. "Do you need to go to the bathroom?"

"Y-Yeah." Merry hastily slid into character, putting as much youthful wobble into her voice and eyes as she danced from foot to foot. "A-And I don't know where it is. Can you help me? I don't wanna go wee-wee in my panties…"

"Aww, there, there…” Kinu said sweetly as she tousled the caravel's hair. "Alright! Follow me, then."

Kinu turned around, and thus did not notice a bloodthirsty grin spread across Merry's face.

"Come on, it's just this—!"

KLONG!

"OW!" Kinu yelped, wheeling around and clutching the back of her skull in pain. "What was that for!?”

Merry blinked in confusion as she hefted the frying pan she was holding. "But Cross said that always—oh, no, wait, I see what I did wrong! Hold still a second!"

"What are you—!?” Merry interrupted Kinu by jumping up and slamming the frying pan into her face, putting her out like a light.

Merry nodded satisfaction as she spun the frying pan in her grip. "Right! Front of the head for K.O., back for trauma. Alright, now what's next… Oh, right! Stash the body!"

Merry grabbed Kinu under her armpits, eased the door to Desdiv 24’s room open, and left her slumped on the floor. Hopefully no one would notice her for a while.

She'd barely gone two steps when she heard Kasumi shriek in terror from the room.

"Okay, on to Cross's Plan B," she muttered as she broke into a sprint. "Run like hell!"

~0~

"Alright, Admiral, we've got her now! Just give me a few minutes alone with her and—WARGH!"

"Murakumo!" Goto shouted into the radio as an explosion rocked the base. "What happened?"

"She's throwing torpedoes at us!"

"She doesn't have rigging! How—!"

"No, I mean she found the armory and is literally picking up torpedoes and throwing them at us! And they keep freaking exploding!"

Goto winced and once again cursed the bright spark who had come up with oxygen propulsion for the Long Lance. "Are you okay?"

"Eurgh, yeah, but she blasted the corridor to hell and back. We're gonna need to go the long way around, and she's gonna get away. Again."
"Fall back, Murakumo, Shigure," Goto ordered. "Nagato and Kongo are guarding her ship. She's not going anywhere."

—o—

Merry grit her teeth as she looked out on the shipgirls crowding the pier in front of her. A half dozen destroyers, a heavy cruiser with her seaplanes out, and battleships Nagato and Kongo.

Not that Merry knew that. All she knew was that there were six little ones, two big ones, a new medium type, and that all of them could reduce her to splinters in short order. Worse, she couldn't think of a way to get past them.

A finger tapped on her shoulder, and Merry whirled around, rearing her fist back to try and punch out whoever had snuck up on her. It worked on the little ones, at least.

As it turned out, though, it was just Hoppo-chan.

"What are you doing here?" she whispered furiously before stiffening in terror. "Don't tell me that gaol-galleon is here! Because I swear, I love my crew, but I will scuttle myself before I surrender to her!"

Hoppo answered by frantically shaking her head before pointing upwards. Merry followed the finger to see a metal grating, leading into some kind of vent or duct.

"Oh, I see," Merry said, grinning. "A Cross classic. Don't know why I didn't think of it in the first place! Thanks, I owe you one."

The white girl gave a thumbs-up, and began walking in the opposite direction, leaving Merry to jump up, rip open the grate, and crawl into the vent.

—o—

"No sign of her!" Murakumo and Shigure reported as they ran up to the pier.

"My seaplanes aren't finding anything, either," Chikuma reported, before wincing miserably. "Correction: they just found another Molotov cocktail trap. Damn it, how many of those bottles did she stash!?"

"Well, if she's trying to wear us down, she won't succeed!" Nagato announced. "I want CONSTANT VIGILANCE! AND MY CUDDLES!"

"You have ISSUES, Nagato. You have very bad ISSUES…" Kongo muttered absentmindedly.

Nagato blinked, noticing that Kongo was staring at a section of the wall instead of her. "Kongo, what are you—"

"Shigure, Murakumo!" the fast battleship suddenly barked. "Go check the vents!"

Nagato paled as she realized that one of the vents opened up behind their task force, barely a few feet from the ship. She paled further when she noticed that said vent had been kicked open.

"Then that means—!"

"Mwahahahahahahahahaha!"

The shipgirls on the pier spun towards the Thousand Sunny, seeing Merry poke her head out from
behind the lion's head.

"Sucks to be you lot!" she laughed. "I'm on my big brother now, and there's not a fucking thing you salt huffers can do about it!"

"Merry, please!" Nagato pleaded. "We have…" She glanced around the task force. "Enough firepower to level a small city! Don't make us use it!"

Merry grinned viciously as she reached for a very comforting lever. "Oh, that's really impressive. I'm so scared. Here's my response!" She ducked back behind Sunny's head as she yanked the lever. An ominous clunk echoed out, followed by the lion's head opening and revealing a metallic barrel.

Nagato blinked in confusion. "What the heck—"

"Everybody move!" Kongo barked, diving downward.

"Gaon Cannon, bitches!" Merry cackled.

There was an almighty roar as a veritable hurricane of compressed air blasted out from the lion's head. The shipgirls on the pier were simply not heavy enough, regardless of how strong they were, to withstand the blast, and were sent flying. And the buildings fared even worse. As the Gaon Cannon finished roaring, Yokosuka's waterfront was in ruins.

"Later, suckers!" Merry cackled, throwing the rudder hard right and flipping a myriad of levers and toggles as she activated Chicken Voyage, wheeling Sunny around and dropping his sails. Soon she was out of the harbor and heading out into Tokyo Bay.

Of course, as this was Tokyo Bay, waiting for her at the mouth was a very unwelcome sight.

"Please turn back, Miss Merry!" Yamato called, her rigging fully deployed. "We don't want to hurt you!"

"Speak for yourself," came a voice from the starboard side of the ship. Merry's head whirled to that side to see a swimsuit-clad girl poking her head out of the water and aiming a rather large gun at the Sunny.

"That's mean, Imuya!" Goya spoke up from the other side.

Merry looked between the two submarines flanking her and the battleship before her, then put on a brave face and looked back at Yamato, her hand inching towards the Coup de Burst lever all the while. "Oh, yeah? I faced down a fleet of warships ten times your size to save my crew, and I came out of that without a scratch! Give me one reason why this should be any different!"

Yamato sighed, and then there was an almighty bang. Merry's eyes widened as a massive cloud of smoke and fire enveloped the battleship, and she just barely saw the massive shell fly just past the bow before hitting the sea and throwing up a column of water taller than the Sunny's masts.

The caravel trembled furiously for a second as she thought very carefully before ultimately sighing in defeat and letting go of Sunny's controls, wincing as the ship groaned miserably.

"That's a good reason…” she whimpered.

~0~

"I gotta say," Tenryuu drawled as she steamed alongside the Thousand Sunny, which was being
towed by Yamato. "I honestly don't know whether to cheer you on for being a complete badass, or give you spanking for being a bad girl."

A muffled mumble about Tenryuu blowing something out of her magazine was Merry's only response, and Tenryuu sighed and pulled a little closer.

"Look, kid," she began. "You've just pulled off a massive accomplishment. How many shipgirls can say they fought their way, single-handedly, out of an entire naval base? Be proud of that, at least." She tapped her chin in thought. "Come to think of it, why didn't you just sail out yourself? I heard that you sank after Nagato dropped you in the water, so why's that? Why'd you have to ride your…" She glanced at Sunny's figurehead. "'Big bro'?"

Silence.

"Well, either way, we're here," Tenryuu sighed as the Thousand Sunny nosed back up to the pier, a scorched and battered Kongo and Nagato waiting and looking quite peeved. As the pier workers began wrestling with the ropes, Merry hopped down from the deck and stomped past Tenryuu, snarling and growling viciously under her breath.

"Alright, then," the light cruiser said, slapping the other girl's back. "I can see you don't wanna talk about… this…" Frowning, Tenryuu suddenly knelt down and pulled up Merry's coat and the shirt underneath.

"Hey, watch it! I thought that Nagato bitch was the pedophile, not you! Help, bad touch! Bad touch!" the shipgirl snapped in the first real display of emotion since Tenryuu had arrived, drawing Nagato and Kongo's attention in the process. "What in the name of Davy Jones do you think you're —!"

"What happened here?" Tenryuu hissed, her voice dripping with barely restrained fury. Behind her, she could hear Yamato gasp and Kongo suck in a breath.

Merry instantly froze as she felt the cruiser's fingers run across her back, tracing over the livid scar that ran just below her shoulder blades. The expanse of mutilated flesh was jagged, deep, and stretched clear across her entire back.

Scars were not common for shipgirls. Arizona and Warspite were the only ones Tenryuu could recall off the top of her head that had any, and the wounds that left them had not only been fatal and crippling, respectively, but beyond traumatic to boot. This… This was nearly on par.

"O-Oh, that?" Merry hedged nervously. "I-It's, ah, just an old wound, nothing to worry abou—"

"Bullshit," Tenryuu spat, her vision flashing red as she scanned the bands of metal around the girl's neck and ankles. "What? What happened to you? An accident, enemy action!? Or…" She narrowed her eyes viciously as a thought struck her. "Your cr—?"

"HOW FUCKING DARE YOU!"

The warships leapt in shock when Merry spun around and roared at them, exhibiting more raw fury than most of them had seen in their whole existences.

By which we mean, since the last time someone had interrupted Kongo's tea hour.

"WHERE THE HELL DO YOU GET OFF SAYING ANYTHING, ANYTHING ABOUT MY CREW!? ABOUT MY FAMILY!?" Merry demanded, glaring viciously at Tenryuu. "YOU KNOW ABSOLUTELY JACK SHIT ABOUT THEM! YOU WANT SOMEONE TO BLAME FOR THAT
"SCAR!? THEN YOU CAN FUCKING BLAME ME!"

"W-What?" Nagato sputtered in shock. "No, no, Merry! That's not—!"

"YES, IT IS!" Merry shrieked. "I KNEW IT WAS COMING, I COULD FEEL IT COMING IN MY PLANKS AND I LIED TO MY CREW WHEN THEY ASKED IF I WAS OKAY!"

Kongou blinked in confusion. "Huh? Wait, lied? What are you—?"

"I used a Klabautermann to try and fix myself!" the caravel hissed.

The warships gasped in shock. "A-A Klabautermann!?" Tenryuu choked. "Merry, that's an incredibly risky—!"

"My keel fucking cracked that day, I was so far beyond risk!" Merry plowed onwards. "It cracked, and Cross tried to help me, and I lied to his face when he asked me if I was alright! I lied to him after he helped me! I was ready to give up and sink for their sakes, but he convinced me to keep fighting, to live! If it weren't for him, I would have let myself sink then and there!"

Tenryuu swallowed heavily as she tried to steady her nerve. "Ah—M-Merry, I—!"

"I had no right to live!" Merry shouted, advancing on Tenryuu in a haze of fury. "I had every reason to sink myself, I should have sunk for their sakes, but he told me otherwise! He told me it wasn't wrong to dream of staying with them, he told me it was alright for me to live! Thanks to him, thanks to all of their support, I carried them for two. Months! And even after they found out I wasn't fixable, after it was apparent that I was little more than a floating pile of kindling, they still fought to keep me with them!"

Tenryuu hastily backpedalled as a blazing red aura grew up behind Merry, the caravel still advancing. "SO DON'T YA FUCKIN' DARE IMPLY THAT ME CREW DID THIS TA ME! THOSE BRAVE BASTARDS, THOSE GODSENDS, THEY FOUGHT TOOTH AND NAIL TO KEEP ME! THEY BROKE REALITY ITSELF TO MAKE ME WHO I AM! SO WHEN YOU SPEAK ILL O' THAT SCAR, YOU SPEAK ILL A' ME, BECAUSE IT'S A MARK OF ME OWN STUBBORN PRIDE, AND IT IS A BADGE OF MY FUCKING HONOR AS NOT ONLY A PIRATE BUT A STRAW HAT PIRATE TO BOOT! DO I MAKE MESELF—!?"

"A—damn it—Attention, Marine base!"

All five shipgirls jumped as they were suddenly interrupted. Whirling around, four of the five blinked in confusion as they were confronted with the bizarre sight of what appeared to be a three-masted broadside sloop-of-war. The hull was painted a deep blue-grey and what looked like a seagull was painted on the sails alongside the word MARINE. And more importantly, the ship looked like it was in incredibly rough condition, barely qualifying as seaworthy.

"Ah-hem," the voice from before boomed through the air. "I repeat, attention Marine Base! This is, ah… Commodore Gendarme of the Marines? We have received reports that 'White Menace' Going Merry and the Straw Hats' ship were in port, so thanks for holding them for us, but we'll take them from here."

Faster than Shimakaze on a sugar high, Merry's expression shifted from pissed off to confused to jubilant and then back to angry, if a slightly over-exaggerated version of the emotion. "You'll never take me alive, you kelp slurping turtle fucking sons of sea wenches!"

"What in the hell…?" Nagato breathed. "Who are—?"
"They're never gonna buy this..." a female voice grumbled.

"Shut up! I'm still transmitting!"

"Oops..."

"HAHAHAHA!"

Merry's eye twitched as she tried to maintain a neutral expression, snapping a glare at Kongo as the latter stepped forward. "I don't know who you are!" she called up. "But you shouldn't have picked the US Marines of all people to impersonate." She smirked. "Because really, I don't know what that thing is, but it doesn't look like an amphibious assault ship to me."

"Ah, w-w-well you see!" a panicked nasally voice hastily piped up. "T-That's because this is a super secret model of ship known as the—!"

"Give it up, Usopp. our cover's already blown. Hell if I know how, but these aren't our Marines we're dealing with. There's only one thing for it now. ALRIGHT, EVERYONE, PLAN B!"

"WOOOHOO, I LOVE PLAN B!"

Kongo frowned in confusion as a trio of blurs shot off the ship. "What the—!?"

"Gum-Gum Rifle!"

"Strong Right!"

"Cherry Blossom Blast!"

Kongo stood tall for a second before slowly tilting backward, impact and blast marks decorating her front. Her assailants lowered themselves down from their attack stances, and were then joined by several more, hopping down from the ship.

There was a large man in a Hawaiian shirt, speedo, and sunglasses, looking like nothing more than an unholy fusion of Popeye and Ace Ventura.

There was a dark-haired woman in designer clothes, utterly normal and yet quietly terrifying.

There was a man-deer with a blue nose, red hat, and bulked-up arms.

There was a teenager in a button-down shirt and shorts, with blue hair in a tight ponytail riding on a large, saddled duck. One hand spun a chain with a crescent-shaped blade on the end of it while the other held an identical blade and chain.

There was an older woman, her hair done up in a bun with small wings sticking out of her back. A large bazooka was held in her right hand, and another slung across her back. A white fox was perched on her shoulder as well.

There was a curly haired young man, wearing overalls, a bandana, and goggles, and he had the most ridiculously long nose. He also held a massive slingshot-staff combo in his hands.

There was an orange-haired young woman in a tank top and miniskirt, brandishing a staff with spherical attachments along its length. She was surrounded by what appeared to be a white cloud streaming from the butt of her staff that was waving and twisting around her as though it had a mind of its own.
There was what appeared to be a relatively normal young man in a hooded jacket and jeans, the hood drawn up over a ball cap and headphones around his neck, except in his right hand was a large sword, in his left an equally large bazooka, and perched on his shoulder was a snail with a freaking phone built into its shell.

There was a blonde man in a black suit, a cigarette dangling carelessly from his mouth.

There was a green-haired man in t-shirt, pants, and hakama, two katanas hanging from his side.

Surrounding them was a quintet of what for all the world looked like small shelled dugongs, one with a pair of nunchucks, one with a pair of katana, one with a pair of sai, one with a bo staff, and one with a rope-dart.

And at the lead of them all was a black-haired young man in a straw hat, red vest, and jean shorts, who practically radiated power and charisma.

Of course, this was Tenryuu, Nagato, and Yamato. They weren't going to just back down. Nagato pointed her 16" guns at the interlopers—

"VENGEANCE!"

Only for Merry to leap at her and latch onto her face like a facehugger, tearing at her face with all the viciousness of a rabid wolverine.

Which left Tenryuu and Yamato to face the entire Straw Hat Pirates.

"SOUND THE ALARM, INTRUDERS IN THE BASE!"

"GET THEM!"

"CHARGE!"

Well, them and the combined forces of Desdivs 29 and 30, for what they were worth.

The Straw Hats observed the approaching mob for a moment before the one with the snail looked at the orange-haired one. "You want to, or should I?"

The orange-haired woman tilted her head to the side in thought, the cloud following the motion before she shrugged and started twirling her staff, apparently causing the cloud to darken and crackle menacingly. "Just keep them in place for a second, alright?"

The snail-carrier nodded in understanding before hauling back the arm holding his sword. "You heard her, Funkfreed. Go..." He then snapped his arm forwards and flung the sword at the oncoming mob of destroyers. "GET THEM!"

To the shock of all observing, the sword morphed in midair, shifting into an elephant of all things that stampeded towards the destroyers, breaking their loose formation with a swing of its tusks and trunk.

Before the destroyers could successfully rally, the orange-haired woman swung her staff out, snapping the dark cloud out into a scorpion tail-esque form that was crackling with lightning. "Sorry about this, but we're not leaving without Merry! Now, LIGHTNING STRIKE TEMPO!" And with that, the cloud snapped forwards, lashing out a vicious chain of lightning that washed over the mob of destroyers just as the elephant snapped back into its sword form.
The orange-haired woman sniffed confidently. "And that's that! Boss, Usopp, you keep an eye out for any others!"

"Aye aye, ma'am!"

"I still say we grab Merry and run like heck. Then again, who am I to argue with someone who periodically fries people with lightning?"

"What was that!?"

"N-Nothing, Nami!"

"Move your ass, longnose, move!"

"Oh, no, you don't!" Yamato snarled as she swung a 6.1" turret around at the sniper and dugong. She mentally pulled the trigger—

BA-BLAM!

And jerked in shock as half her rigging practically imploded on account of—a plugged barrel!?  

"Call me an old softie," the large blue-haired gorilla man grinned as he held her turret barrel in place with his massive hand. "But I'd really rather you didn't blow my friends to pieces. It's SUPER rude, don't you know?"

"Which is why I'm really sorry about this!"

Yamato swung her head around at the voice, and promptly paled in horror at the sight of the massive cannon-barrel being stuck in her face by the angel-winged woman. "Again, really sorry," she sighed apologetically, a sentiment opposed by her pulling the trigger and unleashing a wave of pain straight in her face. The battleship staggered back, but to the surprise of both quickly righted herself with only some minor burns and unleashed a tide of 25mm shells at them.

"YEOW!" the large man yelped as he shielded the cannon-wielder with his body. "What the hell is this chick made of!?"

"Hopefully this! Excuse me!"

Yamato swung her turrets around as a large finger tapped her on the shoulder—

CRUNCH!

And stiffened in shock as another gorilla-man, this one actually covered in fur and sporting a blue nose of all things, shoved a liquid-filled vial down her throat.

The battleship stood still for a moment as the liquid unwillingly trickled down her throat, slowly integrating itself with her body's chemistry. Finally, however…

"HURK!" Yamato doubled over miserably as a wave of nausea coursed through her. Acting fast, the shipgirl dashed to the side of the pier and unloaded her stomach's contents into the harbor, heaving as heavily as she could until there was nothing left.

"Oh, you—ugh!—sons of bitches..." she groaned, equal parts rage and sickness coloring her voice. "I swear to God, I am going to—!

She cut herself off as she felt something heavy and slightly slimy plop down on top of her head.
Turning her eyes upwards, she blinked in confusion as she took in the grinning something perched on her skull. "The hell—?"

"Soundbite? Gastro-Blast."

"RA-RA-SHISHBOOM-BAH!"

Yamato had a second to wonder how the hell the snail was talking before her world became pure agony. Everything rang and shook for the battleship, her eyes crossing and her body shaking before she gave up the fight and fell unconscious.

The snail-wielder smirked confidently as he plopped the afore-named Soundbite down on his shoulder. "Well, that was ea...sy?" He trailed off as he noted Imuya and Goya staring at him in horror from the water.

The pirate was silent for a moment before he and his snail slowly donned vicious grins. "Hheeeeeeey," the two chorused menacingly.

The submarines instantly dove under the water with dual shrieks of terror. They remembered what had happened to Kitakami and Iku, after all.

"Ohoh, you can run, but you sure as hell can't hide!" the pirate crowed as he swung up the cannon he was bearing. "OK, Lassoo, Cani-Cannon!" The second the pirate spoke, the cannon started blasting out a barrage of baseballs, littering the water with them.

Ten seconds later, Yokosuka Harbor erupted into a pillar of liquid. Amidst the resultant rain, the two submarines slammed into the pier, flopping and flailing around in a blind panic for a second before finally falling still, foam bubbling out of their mouths.

"NOW that WAS EASY!" Soundbite cackled.

Finally, all that were left were Tenryuu and the swordsman squaring off against one another. The light cruiser and the pirate stared at each other, probing each other's defenses as they gripped their sheathed swords. Finally...

"Oni—!" the swordsman started, dashing forwards and curving his arms back as he unsheathed his blades, signalling Tenryuu what was coming. She dashed forward, her sword held out in a thrust straight for the swordsman's forehead, which halted the attack as he hit the brakes to avoid getting skewered. The two broke off into ready stances, reading each other with professional ease.

"Hey," the swordsman grunted. "What's your name?"

"Tenryuu," the light cruiser bit out.

"I'll remember it," the swordsman replied. "My name is Roronoa Zoro." And with that, he sheathed his swords and leaned forward.

"Two-Sword Style!"

Tenryuu tensed, preparing to meet the attack.

"Castle Gate!" Zoro cried out, dashing forward. Tenryuu's eyes widened and she brought up her sword to block. To her dismay, the attack cut through her sword like it was made of butter instead of armor-grade steel, in two places at once, at that. Naturally, the swords continued and carved into her chest, carving two gaping wounds into her body. She fell forward onto her knees, blood—or perhaps
oil—streaming from the massive gashes. She felt, rather than saw, Zoro step up behind her, and she hauled herself to her feet, gritting her teeth and presenting her front.

Zoro blinked, then grinned. "A worthy opponent, indeed." And with that, he drove his sword into her gut. That was the final straw, and Tenryuu collapsed, catching sight of Nagato keeling over under Merry's facehugger impression before dogpiled by the rest of the crew.

'Heh,' she thought. 'At least I'm not the only one. And at least... she's in good hands.'

~o~

"Guys, you came! I've never been so happy to see you!" Merry sobbed comically, throwing herself into Cross's open arms.

"Good to see you again, Merry!" he replied as he caught her and threw her up into the air. "We're so glad you're safe, we were so worried! Did you behave while we were gone?"

"Uh-huh, uh-huh!" Merry nodded eagerly. "I raised hell, tried to escape at every opportunity, and when I was given the chance, I went straight for the eyes!"

Cross gasped in awe as he caught her and held her above his head. "That's very good, Merry! I-I'm so proud!"

"Yes, yes, so am I!" Vivi wheezed as she fought against Nagato's inhuman strength, yanking her Lion Cutter taut against the battleship's throat, to no effect. "Now, will one of you guys help me already!? She won't give up!"

"Me...rry..." Nagato wheezed out as she reached towards the caravel.

"What da hell is dis woman's malfunction!?" Carue squawked as he tried and failed to use his mass to pin the shipgirl down.

Merry rolled her eyes with an exasperated huff before twisting her way out of Cross's grip. "Alright, alright, I can handle her. Give her a clear view of me."

Once Merry was certain the battleship was looking straight at her, she widened her eyes to their fullest extent and made them as watery as possible before sticking out her lip and quivering it, hence placing her expression at maximum cuteness. "I wuv you, Mama Nagato!"

Nagato stared at Merry in awe for one second... two... three...

SPLURT!

"GAH!"

"Oh, holy shit."

Before keeling over on account of massive jets of blood spurting out of her nose, a euphoric grin painted on her face.

"I... have no words," Cross stated succinctly.

"Should we still let her live?" Nami asked uncomfortably.

"Nah, she's harmless," Merry said dismissively, waving her off without care. "I think that was more the cuteness factor than anything nefarious. Think of her like a female Sanji."
"Ooooohhhh..." the Straw Hats chorused in understanding, before Sanji did a double-take.

"Hey, I'm not *that* bad!" the cook protested.

"Not yet, you aren't," Cross shot back with a grim chuckle.

Grinning, Merry turned around and looked over Kongo, with her cratered front; Yamato, scorched and bleeding from her ears; Nagato, twitching in a pool of her own blood, an expression of bliss on her face; and Tenryuu, bleeding out on the ground. Not to mention the pile of fried destroyer and the insensate forms of Goya and Imuya.

"Geez, you guys could have gone a little easier on them..." she grumbled. "They were nice to me... for the most part, as much as Marines can be nice. Except for Nagato, she was cray-cray, and not in a fun way, either."

"Sorry about that, Merry," Cross said, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly. "We didn't know the situation, so we decided not to hold back."

"And you're WORKING OUT frustrations, too," Soundbite added with a snicker.

"We were chased down by a killer pigeon! My bounty is well and good, but I still want some pride, damn it!" Cross raged furiously.

"It's fine, they're tough. And they've got all sorts of cool healing techniques for people like me," Merry said as she clambered onto Franky's shoulders. "Did you know they heal by sitting in hot baths? No offense, Franky, but a lot of old aches left me after one go!"

"That's super, sis!" Franky whooped as he shot her a thumbs-up.

"Oh, really?" Chopper asked, eyeing her curiously. "You'll have to tell me all about it. Medical texts don't exactly cover cases like yours, but with this knowledge I could create an entire new branch of medicine! Think of the possibilities! THE THRILL OF THE SEARCH! LET US BEGIN THE —!"

CLONK!

"Thank you, Conis. Also, ow!"

"Sorry, Chopper!"

Merry giggled as her crew fell back into old habits. However, an oppressive, droning buzz caught her attention, and she glanced around, looking for the source.

"Soundbite?" she began, injecting a note of authority into her voice. "Did you leave the Gastro-Phony on again?"

"This isn't me!" the snail protested.

"Uh, guys?" Usopp cut in, shaking and staring towards the distant western horizon. "What the hell is that?!"

The crew turned their gazes to where Usopp was pointing. A massive, amorphous black cloud was advancing towards them at alarming speed.

"... Okay, got me, I never saw anything like this while I was here," Merry said, a hint of worry in
Cross held his hand out to Nami, who handed him her spyglass. He snapped it open and took one look at the horizon before slowly lowering the device with a pained grimace. "Hey, guys? I think I know where we are."

"Oh, yeah? Where?" Luffy asked eagerly.

Cross allowed a horrified shudder to course through him. "Home. My home. Now, unless I'm misreading those roundels and those aren't Japanese fighter planes soaring towards us, I'd suggest we get the hell out of Dodge before we recreate a little historical event known as PEARL FREAKING HARBOR!"

"KAMIKAZE AT 12 O' CLOCK!" Soundbite shrieked as he snapped back into his shell.

Nami and Zoro glanced at each other before the second mate came to a decision. "Right, I don't know what the significance of Pearl Harbor is, but I'm gonna take your panicked reaction at face value and say that it's bad." She glanced around at the stunned forms of the crew. "That means get on the ship and get ready to leave, you morons!"

"Yes, ma'am!" most of the crew barked, except for Luffy and Sanji.

"Aw, come on, Nami, Cross!" Luffy whined. "I wanna fight them! I've never fought flying enemies before! And those CP bastards don't count, so don't even say it!"

"And I can't leave before I found out if there are any more ladies here!" Sanji added. "If they're half as pretty as the ones you guys mauled beyond recognition, then—!"

"Right, screw this," Cross spat as he snapped his headphones on and jabbed a finger at Luffy. "Soundbite, Gastro-Phony."

"Lightning Strike Tempo!" Nami snarled as she lashed out with her Clima-Tact.

Both Sanji and Luffy promptly collapsed, Luffy green from trying to hold in his half-digested third lunch and Sanji twitching and spasming as smoke curled off him. With Zoro carrying them, the Straw Hats got the Thousand Sunny under way in record time.

As they made their way out of Tokyo Bay and past the insensate forms of the picket submarines, stealing fearful glances back at the swarm of Vals, Kates, and Zeroes all the while, Merry couldn't help herself. She started giggling again, bursting into full-on laughter as they got to open ocean. She was still laughing an hour later when an Abyssal Re-class battleship popped out of the water in front of the Sunny.

"AH! MONSTER!" Usopp screeched.

"A pretty monster!" Sanji swooned.

"So, Merry, is this a hostile monster, or…?" Cross trailed off as the battleship pointed her tail and the guns mounted within at the Sunny. "Welp, that answers that."

The Re-class battleship was afforded only a moment of confusion as the humans didn't try to run before the crew, sans Sanji, hauled themselves up onto the Sunny's railing, weapons and fists at ready and predatory gleams in their eyes.

The Abyssal and her tail had just enough time to shoot terrified glances at each other before a rubber
fist grabbed the shipgirl's throat and yanked them aboard.

"Alright, what's the damage?" Goto groaned.

"We have three battleships, one heavy cruiser, two light cruisers, seven submarines, and sixteen destroyers out of commission for at least a week," Ooyodo reported. "We have another seventeen shipgirls with lesser damage who should be good to go tomorrow. As for the base…" The secretary ship flipped to another sheet of paper. "The portside warehouse district has been levelled, the cafeteria is out of commission and will be for at least three days, and the destroyer dorms will need to be rebuilt." She sighed. "Again."

"Okay…" Goto sighed. "I assume everyone's been told not to bring in strange shipgirls flying Jolly Rogers?"

"Yes."

"And the Abyssal at my window?"

Ooyodo glanced at the disheveled Re-class battleship clinging to the glass like a lamprey, tears streaming down from the puppy-dog eyes shining into the office and her tail holding up a sign that read "Will fight for food and a good home."

"I took the liberty of contacting Re-chan down in the Marquesas," Ooyodo replied. "She'll take her in."

Goto smirked viciously as he turned around to face his desk. "Good. The Americans will be happy about needing one less battleship on the Australian Route."

THUMP!

Ooyodo took a look behind him before grimacing miserably. "Ah… I'm afraid it won't be that easy, sir."

Goto ground out a weary sigh before slowly wheeling back around.

Plastered on the glass next to the Re-class was Hoppo-chan, who also had tears streaming down her cheeks and was holding up a sign of her own, which read "Will do anything for big sister."

THUMP!

And just like that Nagato was there as well, joining the two in their tear-filled pleading. Though the bandages wrapped around her body kinda ruined the image a bit.

Goto's eye twitched furiously for a moment before he slowly turned back to his desk. "Is there… anything else?"

FLASH!

It was a testament to the base's state of affairs that Goto barely even reacted to a piece of paper suddenly appearing on his desk from out of nowhere.

Wait until she comes back for a playdate when she's all grown up! —B.R.O.B.

Goto's eye twitched insanely for a moment as he slowly turned to look at Ooyodo with a crazed look
before falling down on one knee before her and proffering a golden ring. "Will you marry me?"

The cruiser gave the Admiral a flat stare. "Sir, if you're going to commit suicide, I kindly request you not make it a double."

Goto opened his mouth to speak, but never got the words out as he was suddenly yanked upwards. A stunned Ooyodo traced his trajectory up to the vent in the ceiling, just in time to see Kongo poke her head out.

"Take the rest of the day off, Ooyodo!" she ordered, grinning. "I'll take care of Admiral Goto, don't worry." And with that, she ducked back into the vent and swung the grating back into place.

For a solid five minutes, the secretary ship just stood there in open-mouthed amazement. "The vent's vertical, how did she—" she began before shaking her head. "Ah, fuck it, it's Kongo. I'm gonna go see if Junyo's up to hitting the nearest bar. You all want in?"

Nagato and her... 'family' nodded in agreement.

"Alright, come on, let's go."

And so the light cruiser, the battleship and the Abyssals all wandered off to find a carrier and get hammered.

Just another average day in Yokosuka.

**Patient AN:** The note at the top, specifying that Superego had been waiting a while to release this? Let me make it clear just how true that is: Xomniac and Hornet had this omake completed, every word written... at the time that they invited me backstage. *January,* loyal fans. They have been sitting on this since *January.* And, in the same breath, they have had everything up to this point in the story portrayed in this chapter planned for that long.

*That* is the might of the Cross-Brain. And I am honored and humbled to be associated on an equal level with these two genii.
Chapter 45: A Sight Unforeseen! An Unexpected Adventure Heats Up!

Cross-Brain AN: Before we begin, a brief announcement. This chapter and the next one, possibly two, are noticeably shorter than our standard length. They are filler, based off of an anime filler, but with an original plot conceived by Xomniac back at the start of the story. The characters in this may or may not be returning later down the line, depending on what Oda does.

We will resume our typical monstrous chapters when we reach Thriller Bark, and we sincerely hope you enjoy the filler in the meantime.

Xomniac AN: Look at it this way: over 9000 (HA!) is still over twice as much as most SB and V authors post in a single chapter, so we're still the cream of the crop : 3

Patient AN: Pride in your work is good. But do take care that you don't get an overly inflated ego, Ego.

Xomniac AN: Har har.

Hornet AN: And it saves time on editing. Woot!

"Sooo…” Nami drawled with a flatly cocked eyebrow as she watched me ram my head into the wall. "I take it that we don't want to know what that's all about?"

"You have to ask?" Zoro scoffed, glancing over his shoulder at his fellow strung-up crewmate.

Nami glanced back at him with a calm and serene smile. "Allow me to respond to that in a completely rational manner."

THWACK!

"GAH!" Zoro yelped. "How the hell is stabbing your elbow into my side a 'rational' response!?"

"Well, it was rational to me, and in the end, isn't it all just a matter of perspective?"

"MM-HMM-HMM-HMM-HMM-HMMMM!" For whatever reason, Soundbite decided to cackle uproariously at that. Before I could properly rip into the snail, though…

"HEADS UP!"

CLUNK!

"GAH!"

I snapped my hands to my pounding skull as something hard and heavy landed on it. "The hell—?" I looked up to see a pair of hooks at the ends of ropes swinging in the air, and a glance upward revealed that they were being held by a pair of Accino mooks, who themselves were flanked by the Accino's twin elder sons.

"Nefertari Vivi!" the red one… Brindo, I'm pretty sure, called down. "As your crew's diplomat, our father Don Accino has requested an audience with you. And considering Jeremiah Cross's savviness, he has deemed it acceptable that he attend the meeting as well."
"If you need any further incentive, then your partners may accompany you," the blue one, Campacino, offered as he dangled a key in our vision. "But just remember that any resistance will be met with immediate force."

I exchanged glances with Vivi and the rest of the crew, and then I looked back up at them. "Before we agree either way, what's this about? You already have our flag and our bounties, isn't that enough of a birthday gift for your damn patriarch?"

The twins exchanged surprised looks, before causing my heart to sink as they burst into twin bellows of laughter.

"Huhahahaha! Apparently Mister Cross is not quite as informed as he makes himself out to be, dear brother!" Campacino guffawed.

"Bohohoh! Indeed, brother beloved, indeed!" Brindo laughed right back. "For if he were, then he would know that our dear Papa's birthday was a good month ago, and that we gifted him a full fleet's worth of flags for it!"

I choked in horror as I processed that little tidbit. "Ahhh… well, that's my playbook out the window."

"So, Cross doesn't know what's coming?" Luffy slowly tilted his head up with a grin. "Great, now this is gonna be a real adventure! Shishishi—!"

"Can we get another collar on him?" Sanji called up.

"Certainly! Hockera!"

"On it!"

"Shishi—eh?"

CLUNK!

"HURK!" Luffy gagged as he got a double helping of sea prism stone. "Gugh… now I really think I'm gonna hurl…"

"Thank you!" the cook shouted up.

"Hok Ke Ke Ke Ke! No problem, pirate scum!"

I forced my composure back together as I looked up at them, ignoring the way Vivi's hands were twitching up towards her collar—or more specifically, her necklace. "Yeah, yeah, yuck it up, you bifurcated bastards. Either way, my question still stands: what does he—!" I glanced at Vivi again. "What does the hot-air bastard want with us?"

Vivi visibly tensed, the bounty hunters doing the same. While they were quick to school their expressions, Vivi's expression grew even more tense with thought.

"First of all, a bit of friendly advice: if you value your life, don't insult Papa," Brindo bit out. "If you already know his Devil Fruit, you know it doesn't do anything to help his temperament."

"And second, if you must know, you're being summoned for an unprecedented reason, which Papa has never allowed before," Campacino sniffed. "To negotiate for your freedom. The collateral? Your crew's reputation for defying all odds, which Papa desires to employ."
Vivi and I exchanged uncertain looks, but after looking at Luffy and getting a nod of approval (that or his head was just lolling from nausea, either or) I shrugged helplessly and walked over to grab one of the lines. "Might as well, I guess. Better to possibly fry up there than freeze down here."

"Agreed!" Vivi concurred as she joined me, with Carue clambering on himself.

"Hey, what about the rest of us who are still freezing down here!?" Franky demanded, straining against his bonds.

Soundbite and I exchanged glances before grinning at the mostly metal-man. "My advice?" I offered. "Next time, consider investing in some thermal underwear!"

"CROSS, YOU SON OF A—!" Franky roared as leapt at me to bite, chains and all.

"ONE AND A QUARTER, GOING UP!" I shouted, tugging at the rope and getting yanked up and out of the cyborg's reach.

Vivi regarded me dryly as we were hauled up alongside one another. "You have such a way with words, Cross."

"I know, right?" I thumbed my jacket out with pride. "It's my pride and—GRK!" I was cut off by Vivi grabbing my collar and yanking me right up to her snarling face.

"You listen to me and you listen good, you adrenaline-huffing loud-mouthed moron," the suddenly ticked off princess bit out. "Once we meet with this Don Accino, I am going to be doing all of the talking. You, on the other hand, will not open your mouth without my explicit say-so, which I will be delivering ever so subtly in the form of my elbow in your side. If you fail to follow these orders explicitly until I tell you otherwise, I will rip your tongue out and feed it to you. Am I clear?"

I cowered for a second, but I then managed to level a glare at her. "I readily admit that I am an adrenaline junkie, but you should know that the only time I remotely risk anyone but myself is when I know about a way out. I'm not going to willingly provoke the man… unless he asks for it."

Vivi's expression, which had previously softened with a bit of shame, snapped back into rage mode.

"Ahem?"

"WOAH!/"YIKES!"

Vivi and I yelped and flailed as we were suddenly yanked up off of the ropes by the somewhat impatient Ice Hunter twins.

"If you're quite done?" Brindo drawled.

"Hmph." Vivi squirmed out of her captor's grip and brushed her parka off, sniffing indignantly. "You clearly know nothing about my crew if you're actually asking that."

"Seconded," I nodded in agreement before plucking Soundbite from my shoulder and holding him out to Campacino. "Now, I believe there was some mention of un-muzzling—?"

"All yours," the blue twin said as he tossed the key to me. "I'm not putting my fingers anywhere near that death trap that thing calls a jaw, and before it gets any bright ideas?" He tapped a finger to his ear. "We're all wearing sea prism stone earplugs."
"Geez, seriously?" I groused as I started searching for the keyhole on Soundbite's newly installed mute button. "Sea prism cuffs, sea prism earplugs, and Soundbite said _something_ about sea prism _walls_ below that ice before you crammed this thing on his face. What, did the Marines have a clearance sale or something?"

"PWAH!" Soundbite gasped gratefully as I finally managed to wrench the restraints from his jaws. "Sweet, sweet freedom! I'M GONNA HAVE someone's fingers _for that!_ And actually, _that_ wouldn't _surprise_ me. _YA KNOW, CONSIDERING HOW THE NAVY'S BUDGET IS GETTING THE AXE LEFT AND RIGHT?"

"Oh, yeah, between Bege and the loss of twust..." Carue mused thoughtfully.

"Eh, part that, part we've brought in countless _docile_ bounties for the Marines, thus ingratiating us to them!" Hockera snickered as he posed with his hockey stick. "They give us just about anything we ask for! Neat, huh?"

"Lovely," Vivi drawled in an utterly unimpressed manner. "Now, unless you all would like to see whether or not my influence extends to lip-reading when I tell you all to literally jump off a cliff, I believe we were going to see your _father_?"

The siblings and their underlings swiftly shared a distressed look before the twins swept their arms to the side and fell into uniform bows. "Right this way, milady," they chorused. Once the procession started to, well... _proceed_, I subtly inclined my head towards Soundbite. "Do those earplugs _really_ stop you?"

"Eh," Soundbite swayed his eyes from side to side. "They're _annoying_, sure, _but not airtight_. _IRONICALLY, WAX WOULD ACTUALLY HAVE BEEN BETTER._"

I straightened my head with a satisfied hum. "Good to know."

Soundbite and I fell silent from there on as we walked, our 'escorts' thoroughly on guard as they walked us through an oasis that could only be the result of Devil Fruit intervention when located in a glacial desert of this scale. And the evidence of Devil Fruit involvement became more and more evident the further we went, on account of the steadily mounting temperature and the wisps of steam that were starting to waft through the air.

Normally I would have been more awed by my surroundings, but... well, my sense of wonder was mitigated by the fact that I hadn't seen Vivi anywhere near this anxious since her near-miss breakdown back on the Rocketman; I could only imagine what was going through her head, about to meet the user of _another_ of her country's long-lost treasures while _once again_ being so utterly at his mercy that she couldn't even inform him of the significance of his powers.

Unfortunately, before I could do anything to alleviate her tension, we arrived at a pair of doors that, while not the largest I'd ever seen in my life, were simultaneously the tackiest and the most threatening.

"Are you ready?" Brindo asked, glancing back.

"Ah, actuawwy, if we could have a—?"

"If not, too bad!" Campacino forged on, ignoring Caure's raised wing.

The twins then swept their arms in synch out at the doors, prompting them to open with a blast of
Vivi and I flinched back from the sudden blast of hot air, and we didn't get a chance to adjust either on account of Hockera ramming his hockey stick into our backs and forcing us into the brume. We flinched and coughed from the sudden swap in temperature ranges and it took us a second to get our visibility back, but once we did…

Well, on the surface, Don Accino didn't look all that impressive. Obese, shirtless, laying on a couch made of ice, holding a goblet full of wine, flanked by his lovesick skater daughter and son-in-law. But the fact that he was radiating just as much casual menace as he was pure thermal energy?

Considering how it felt like we were in a freaking sauna, you can imagine that we were all more than a little intimidated. The fact that he outweighed us all by a little less than a metric ton didn't hurt either.

All of that served to make the literal dozens of pirate flags hung about the room little more than the cherry on top. The terrifyingly morbid cherry.

Still, while I had the chance—

"Looking for this?"

I snapped my eyes down from the countless grinning skulls hanging above so that I could focus on the one that Accino was holding pinched between his fingers, flapping in front of his smugly grinning mug.

"Heheheh, nice try, but not happening," he chuckled as he waved our flag, our pride and joy, our emblem, like a common matador's cape. "I'm not so stupid as to let my prize bargaining chip leave my grasp so long as any of you are free. Still..." Don raised our flag above our head so that he could gaze upon it. "It is quite the pretty flag, is it not..." His sunglasses glinted as he glanced at me. "Jeremiah Cross?"

My lips split in a snarl, but before I could even start to conceive of a response, I found myself abruptly trying to keep my balance in response to the pair of fingers crushing down on the sweet spot on my neck.

"We are honored that you would allow us pirates to speak with you, great Don Accino," Vivi simpered with the utmost politeness as she maintained an equally deep bow next to me.

I subtly rolled my fingers in an attempt to ask her to haul it in a little, and got a nice bit of extra pressure on my neck for my troubles.

Well, if that's how she wanted to play…

"Hmhm, such manners," the Accino patriarch hummed, his tone warm but tinged with sadistic pleasure. "I was honestly bracing myself for Cross's biting rhetoric. My..." His children winced fearfully as he snorted out a cloud of steam. "Temper, you see."

My eye twitched at that particular comment and I opened my mouth, only to gag when my tongue glued itself to the roof of my mouth. Son of a—seriousl—AGH, MY EAR, DAMN IT!

"Oooh, believe me, good Don, my dear friend here would almost certainly be offering the most scratching he could conjure right at this very moment were he so able," Vivi smiled endearingly even as she endeavored to yank my ear off. "But, foreseeing that eventuality, I elected it best to... rescind my crewmate's speaking privileges for the foreseeable future, unless I offer him my permission. I
I was both amused and annoyed to see the Accino children heaving subtle sighs of relief even as their father scratched at his second or third hairy chin.

Ultimately, Don shifted his mass in what I could only assume was a shrug. "So be it, so be it. I suppose that I only need you all to listen for the moment anyways. Now then… to business, hmmm?"

Vivi nodded, her expression and tone carefully neutral. "We would like to know what you have to ask of us. Especially considering that, given your reputation, we should by all accounts be, well—"

I started to raise my fist above my head so that I could mime a noose, but apparently, Vivi took offense to that, if the way she snagged my elbow and twisted my arm behind my back was anything to go by.

"Quit screwing around with the man whose temper is as volatile as Eneru's while I'm in the room," Vivi snarled beneath her breath. "Or I swear to Isis I will snap your arm off and shove it somewhere thoroughly uncomfortable, do you understand me?"

"Try it and I'll give you the BISCUIT TREATMENT. FAIR WARNING, I'VE refined my GASTRO-PHONY," Soundbite threatened with a smug smirk, causing Vivi, Carue, and me to pale.

Before anything further could be said, however, a sharp clap snapped our attention back to a thoroughly peeved-looking Don Accino. "If you're quite done with your childish spat?" he growled. We didn't so much answer as our flinches from the sudden spike of temperature and steam in the room answered for us.

"Good," Don snorted firmly. Thankfully for us, he took what I presumed was meant to be a calming sip from his chalice of wine before continuing. "Allow me to be brief: I have been keeping up with your SBS from the first day it aired, and it soon became one of my goals to add the flag of your most notorious crew to my collection. As you have experienced for yourselves—" He smirked as he waved his hand over his now-preening children. "My family has long prepared for dealing with the entirety of your crew. As it stands, we currently have you all at our… tender mercies."

I was sorely tempted to pin the fat bastard with a glare and roll my fingers to tell him to get on with it, but the holes I could feel being bored into my head stilled my hand and expression, as did said fat bastard righting himself into a proper sitting position and adopting a more serious expression.

"However," he stated, his voice devoid of the earlier cheer. "In light of the events that took place upon Enies Lobby, it has been cemented as fact that your crew is truly capable of making what most would deem an impossibility a reality. And…" He took a deep drag from his cigar before wearily huffing out a cloud. "I find myself in a position where I am more in need of this… ability of yours than I do the money from all of your heads combined. Or even…" He visibly struggled with himself for a moment before taking a deep gulp of wine in order to still his nerves and holding up our flag. "My rightful trophy."

Vivi and I exchanged shocked looks, and then she schooled her expression and stepped forwards, her arms spread placatingly. "But, Honorable Don Accino, as we have already witnessed, your Lovely Land is an impenetrable fortress, and you are…" She glanced upward with a shudder. "Clearly thoroughly experienced in your field. What possible issues could affect someone of your standing to such an extent?"
Accino's face split in a scowl and we all tensed as the general heat in the room kicked up a few notches, but thankfully, his ire seemed to be directed elsewhere, as evidenced by his another sigh. "The worst issues of all, Princess Nefertari." He slung our flag over his shoulder and plucked his cigar from his lips before grinding it down against his seat of ice. "Politics."

…Yikes, not even I could restrain my wince at that little tidbit.

"Poor bastard…" Soundbite muttered.

"Damn straight," Accino bit out. He then slid his sunglasses off and kept his eyes squinted shut as he withdrew a rag and started polishing his eyepiece. "Now, let there be no mistake here: Bounty hunting is more than a simple business for my family." He waved his hand at the flags above us. "It is our way of life. We do it because we enjoy the challenge of it, with the money we are rewarded both a side-benefit and a means of sustaining our lifestyle. Unfortunately, however…" He snorted out a hefty cloud of steam. "In recent days, this lifestyle has become increasingly… complex."

I took a moment to roll that over in my mind, and then snapped my head up as a thought occurred to me. I hastily slapped my fingers against Vivi's arm, grabbing her attention and gesturing at my throat. She hesitated for a second before setting her jaw tersely. "Watch what you say," she warned me, jabbing me with her elbow.

"Sonnuva—!" I gasped, grasping my side. "If I had to guess, I'd say that you're having troubles because the pirate crews are getting stronger, right? More and more nine-digit bounties passing through Lovely Land instead of seven or eight?"

"In so many words?" Don Accino shoved his glasses back on his face. "Precisely."

"We can draw many other crews into our hunting-hell of ice with ease via our superior tactics!" the male skater, Salchow as I recall, boasted.

"But the fact remains that few crews are quite as… lacking in sheer numbers as yours is," his… fiancée, I think? Arbell continued with a weary sigh. "We managed to defeat you because we could reliably split you up and take you down bit by bit, but with other crews that's just not an option."

"We've had to let some pretty damn hefty catches slip away from us," Hockera groused as he picked at the taping on his hockey stick. "And all because for all that we have numbers in our mercenaries, we lack the quality needed to establish a reliable net with which to hold them."

I frowned uncertainly. "And… where do the 'politics' come into play in all of this?"

Vivi snapped a glare at me, most likely for my impertinence, but then she tapped her finger to her chin with a thoughtful look. "I… admit that my colleague has a point. How does this all relate?"

"It relates," Accino picked up with a growl. "In that my family and I are not the only ones to partake in this lifestyle. There are countless other bounty-hunting groups and families upon the seas, some lesser than we Accinos, some greater. Our immediate concern, however, lies with a rival clan that I am loath to admit is equal to us in strength, known as the Hiruno Famiglia. They number less than us by a wide margin, but the soldiers they command are fearsome indeed, each easily worth ten of our own."

"The Hirunos are small, strong, swift…" Campacino ticked off on his fingers.

"And above all else, ruthless," Brindo finished as he slammed his fist into his palm. "They've poached countless quarries from us over the years."
"So... what, you want us to wemove da competishion oah something?" Carue scratched his head in confusion.

Accino dismissed that notion with a wry chuckle as he took a deep draught of his wine. "Hohohoooo, I only wish... but no. You see, their resources, limited as they are, can be something of a nuisance for us to fight against, but, if they were to be, say, incorporated into our own, deployed with our tactics, our methods, our skill..."


Don Accino nodded, a grimace on his face. "Basically, yes, we've decided to arrange a mutually beneficial alliance... sort of. For you see, there is one thing that concerns me more than the acquisition of my beloved trophies, and that is the continued wellbeing of my family. As such, a simple everyday agreement will not be sufficient. We need a more..." He took a deep drag from his cigar before biting out the next words. "Permanent solution."

Vivi only had to think about those words for a second before setting her jaw tightly and stealing a momentary glance at Salchow and Arbell. "You're talking about an arranged marriage."

"Feh!" Accino spat to the side bitterly. "Believe me, I find the idea as distasteful as you, especially when taking the other party into account, but it was the only thing I could think of that would keep that old hag and the mongrels she calls her children in line. Still, what's done is done. The contract has been drawn up, and the date set. But the proceedings themselves..." Accino ground his teeth as his icy seat started to sizzle beneath him. "Those are in question."

"Not only will dissent be rife amongst the Hirunos," Campacino announced.

"But there is not a doubt that many other bounty hunters will also attempt to interfere in the proceedings," Brindo concluded.

"After all, if this merger goes through, we'll be topping the absolute top dogs in these waters!" Hockera grinned confidently. "All those other losers will be looking at a total game-over, no questions asked! Sooo they'll be trying to sabotage the living hell out of everything while we're trying to hitch our families up." His smirk quirked slightly as he gestured his hockey stick at us. "And that's where you guys come in."

"Heheh... Indeed..." Accino laid down again, scratching the vast expanse of his gut. Eurgh. "With interference both within and without, it would appear that it would be impossible for the ceremony to be anything but an unmitigated disaster. Good thing we have a crew here whose very dogma is the achievement of the impossible, no?"

"Our proposition is thus!" Arbell sniffed haughtily. "Help us in assuring that this wedding and the alliance that comes with it are both achieved without so much as the slightest hiccup!"

"Fail, and you'll be in Impel Down before even your captain can say 'meat'!" Salchow proclaimed. "Succeed, however, and you'll be allowed to slip away scot-free! We've even managed to convince Papa to return your flag to you on your way out!"

"Though I'm gonna have to be hammered at that point if you want it without a fight..." the 10,000-Degree-Human literally fumed, the air shimmering around his luminescent body.

Vivi hummed thoughtfully as she mulled over the proposal, soon grabbing me by the shoulder even as she adopted a beatific smile. "Mister Accino, if you don't terribly mind, might my colleague and I have a moment to discuss matters?"
"Eh, go ahead," Accino said, waving his hand indifferently. "Just make it quick. My time is money."

"Of course, of course, we'll only be a moment," Vivi assured him with a smile. With that, she yanked me around, drew a deep breath… and started to whisper conspiratorially. "I'm going to be honest here, Cross: I hate arranged weddings. I was heir apparent, so I was never at risk of suffering one, but far too many of my friends had to suffer them in the past. But even then…" She spared a glance over her shoulder at Salchow and Arbell. "Honestly, these two actually seem happy with one another, which is always a big help, and what they're asking can't be too difficult. Simply put… I think that this sounds like a surprisingly good deal. Your thoughts?"

"My thoughts?" I repeated dryly. "First, that I'm starting to wish I didn't respect your authority so much. And second, yes, it seems like a good idea. Yes, it seems like something we can do. Yes, it seems like our luck has come through for us yet again. But I still can't get one thing out of my mind."

"AND THAT WOULD BE...?" Soundbite asked, clearly dreading the answer.

"Simple," I glanced at him with a flat look. "When is it ever that easy?" And so, before Vivi could stop me, I turned back around and pointed at the Accino patriarch. "So, let me see if I've got this all straight! We help you get these two—" I pointed my fingers at the skate-wearing couple in the room. "Hitched properly, in spite of members of mascara-boy's family and every other Tom, Dick, and Harry in the waters who calls themselves bounty hunters trying to throw the whole thing, and you'll let us go, flag and all. Do I have that right?"

Don Accino snarled at me testily, but then breathed out a huff of steam and smoke, waving his hand back and forth. "Eh…" he grunted dismissively. "For the most part. You flubbed one detail, though."

Vivi and I promptly exchanged terse glances. "And… that one detail would be?" the Princess asked.

"The identity of the bride, of course," Arbell spoke up with a 'what-can-you-do' shrug.

"Indeed!" Salchow nodded, sweeping the other skater in the room into what under any other circumstances would have been a very romantic dip. "My beloved Arbellinawina and I have been happily married for three years now, and my family positively loves her! Though only half as much as I do~!"

"Oh, Sally-wally~!"

"BLECH!" Soundbite spat in disgust.

"I'll second that," Campacino huffed with a roll of his eyes.

"And I make three!" Brindo concurred.

"Going four!" Hockera gagged.

"Five…" Vivi muttered before shaking her head and looking back at Don in confusion. "But… if she's not the bride, then who is??"

"Ah… hey, yeah, she's right!" I agreed. "Because unless you have any other children I don't know about, then the only other daughter you have is—!"

"Me."

Vivi, Soundbite and I all stiffened at the new voice that had spoken up, and we all slowly turned to watch as the owner of said voice walked past us and stood before the Ice Hunter patriarch,
confirming our worst fears.

"Wait, YOU MEAN—!?" Soundbite started to squawk incredulously.

"That's right," Don Accino smirked languidly as he dropped his hand on the head of the stoic child standing before him and ruffled her hair. "You'll be helping coordinate the marriage of my youngest daughter, Lil Accino."

Lil's face barely even shifted as she raised the hem of her skirt in a curtsy. "My future is in your hands."

Vivi's eye twitched furiously as she pointed a shaky finger at the child. "Ah… buh… that…"

I, for my part, merely slapped a hand to my face with an exasperated groan. "I rest my case…"

Thankfully, that managed to snap our crew's resident princess out of her shock. I was freaked out for a moment when her face flushed and her expression morphed into a mask of fury, but then I noticed that none of said fury was actually directed at me.

"You…" she bit out at Accino, trembling murderously. "Deplorable… vile…!"

Thankfully, the Heat-Human didn't seem to take offense, if the way he snorted and started to dig his pinky in his nose was anything to go by. "The hell are you getting pissed at me for, eh?" he grunted. "The Hirunos only have male heirs, and Arbell is already married. Besides, it's not like I'm actually asking her to consummate the marriage, not immediately - or ever, hopefully."

That statement lowered Vivi's blood pressure from apoplectic to merely simmering, but she was definitely still mad. "Even so—!"

Don Accino interrupted her by slapping his hand to his forehead. "Right, that would be a problem, wouldn't it? The groom is the same age as Lil, give or take a year. Does that settle any protests?"

Vivi ground her teeth for a second longer, but eventually, she dropped her face into her hand with a sigh. "Apart from my sense of basic human decency?"

"Yes, apart from that. I mean, come on, I'm sure you've seen this before."

"It's… not an unacceptable offer, I will admit. But now that we have all the details in order…" She gestured apologetically at me. "I am sorry for any impertinence on my part, but might I have some more time to discuss matters with my crewmate? This is not a decision we can make lightly."

Don Accino grunted mulishly as he righted himself and started to stretch his neck side to side. "Personally, I don't remember giving your crew much of a choice in the first place… but eh, what the hell." He grinned as he shook chalice slightly. "I need to go refill my drink anyway, and my legs are starting to fall asleep. You have until I get back. Children."

"Yes, Papa!" the younger generation of Accinos barked, straightening their postures.

"Keep an eye on them. And if they do anything untoward…" The dark chuckle he let waft after him as he walked out said more than any words could have.

I warily eyed the thermo-centric giant as he left the room, tracking his rather thunderous footsteps. Once I judged his distance to be great enough, reinforced by Soundbite giving me his nod of approval, I snapped my attention over to the Accino children and—!
"Whatever the hell you're thinking of, I don't want to hear it!"

"Grk!" And promptly choked on my own tongue when Vivi piped up behind me. With the immediate threat out of the way, however, I wasn't nearly as inclined to listen to her this time. Thinking about what I'd come up with based on what Garp had said about the power she held, I began focusing… and almost immediately, I felt the results.

"The Voices of Anarchy will not be silenced," I snarled out, causing Vivi to jump before reapplying herself.

"Not. A. Word," she growled with as much authority as she could muster, dropping her hand on my shoulder and giving it a firm squeeze.

I turned my head so that I could smile at her, pitching my voice low so that the others in the room couldn't hear. "Do you remember what Garp said? That your power relies on people respecting you and your authority? Have you ever thought that it was strange that it worked on someone who has talked down to the likes of Eneru, Aokiji, Sengoku, and Dragon without any hesitation? I worked out awhile back that the only reason it works on me is that I still respect you as a princess, and my friend besides."

Vivi blinked, clearly stunned by the admission, and then I allowed myself to grow more annoyed. "On the other hand, focusing on the things about you that I don't respect seems to have the desired effect of nullifying your abilities. And really, it's so easy to do it when I keep thinking about your many, many, many flaws. Namely? Your complete and utter inability to remember relevant details prior to the exact moment that they become relevant."

"That hasn't happened in—!" Vivi started to hiss.

"Days? Hours? MINUTES?" Soundbite leered tauntingly. The way Vivi blushed and started to stammer did not help her case.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, while I contemplate your natural human errors and override your override..." I loved the way the Accinos collectively flinched when I directed a predatory smile at them. "I'm going to go right on ahead and do what I do best."

"And... dat would be—?" Carue swallowed hesitantly.

I chuckled as I stepped forward, cracking my knuckles in anticipation. "Flip the fucking script. Alright, kiddies, LISTEN UP!" The Accinos jumped in shock when I suddenly let out an authoritative bark. "We've all stood around listening to your demands, we've heard them, and now you're all going to shut the hell up and listen to ours."

The Accino-heirs all exchanged hesitant glances, save for the little tyke Lil, of all people, who casually strolled up to us and regarded me with a lazy grin. "And why should we listen to anything a powerless little pirate like you has to say in our home?" she asked... not smugly, actually, just matter-of-factly.

Well, why wouldn't I grin at the thought of breaking her pride like an egg? "Why, I'm so glad you asked. Oh, Soundbite?" I purred as I snapped my fingers, drawing my snail to attention. "Kindly cut the ground out from under her."

"GLADLY," Soundbite hissed venomously. His grin then morphed into a far more catty iteration. "Hey, Cross. How are discussions going?"
"At the moment?" I asked as I made a show of examining my fingertips. "Tense. But I think we can tip the balance back in our favor. How's everyone on the crew?"

"Out of their shackles if they had any and all ready to rumble at the drop of a hat."

I began to nod and then paused. "…Quick question, was any of that lockpicking Merry's doing?"

There was a pregnant pause, and then a very audible slap of flesh on wood. "I blame Vivi's influence," Merry groaned.

"I RESENT THAT!" the Princess in question barked.

"We all know you do, honey," Nami sighed wearily. "Anyways, we're ready to start dropping walls and knocking heads. Should we start?"

"No no, hold off on that," I replied. "Matters are both complicated and interesting right now, and I want to see just how much I can work this angle before we default to Plan B."

"Don't you mean Plan A?" Zoro questioned with a smirk.

"Normally, yeah," I said dismissively. "Anyway, just hang tight. We won't be long." And with that, I chopped my hand across my neck and dropped the connection. I then crossed my arms and smirked down at my fellow beast-tamer. "So. How's our negotiating position looking now, runt?"

"That… could have been a trick. You and your snail, y-you've been sneaky like that before!" she blustered, though the look on her face made it obvious how much she believed that.

"I have been, I have been," I conceded, my grin never leaving my face. "But you still have to consider, in this instance… I might not."

"B-But even if you aren't, even if your comrades are all free to fight," Arbell cut in swiftly, most likely in an effort to draw attention from Lil. "We still know all of your moves from the SBS, we know your crew, we captured your crew! What makes you think we can't do that again?"

"Let me answer that with a question of my own." I stretched my grin from ear to ear as I strode over to her and stuck my grin in her face. "Are you really willing to risk the full force of the Straw Hat Pirates, all united and all ready to rumble, running rampant inside your own home?" I slowly tilted my head to the side. "And more importantly, do you really think daddy dearest can handle a tee-d off Luffy firing on full cylinders? As I recall, that didn't work out well for the last guy. Or ten."

The pallor that came over all of their faces answered that.

"Oh you poor poor bastards," Soundbite chuckled sadistically. "If you thought your nuts were IN A VICE BEFORE."

"As my little buddy said," I nodded in agreement, backing off a bit and giving the Accinos some breathing room. "The situation has become thus: you all desperately need our help, while we ourselves only want a few things from you. Concede to our demands, and maybe we'll make this a mutually beneficial arrangement, rather than merely bouncing your heads off the cobblestones and being on our merry way. So!" I clapped my hands together with an eager grin. "You all game?"

"Er… don't you mean being on your sunny way?"

Everyone in the room slowly turned to staaare at Salchow. For a minute, that was all we could bring ourselves to do.
"I'm sorry, Sally-Wally, but even I thought that was dreadful," Arbell said, shaking her head in disappointment.

Before the mascara'd man could respond to her words, however, Brindo grabbed his shoulder and started to drag him aside. "It would appear that we are the ones in need of a moment of discussion now," he bit out.

"If you'll pardon us…" Campacino trailed off as he gnawed on his thumb.

I nodded my consent, and as they huddled together, I looked back at Vivi, whose expression was sitting on the borderline between uncertainty and indignance. "Cross, while I appreciate the opportunity, I don't want to reclaim the Rage like this," she protested.

"And you won't, I swear," I reassured her. "Honestly, this is working out better than I thought: now we have an excuse to stick around. Look, just don't worry about it, alright? All I'm doing right now is turning the situation in our favor, so that we can milk it for all it's worth. When there's money on the table, you don't just leaving lying around, right?"

"Mmm..." Vivi nodded noncommittally as she glanced away.

I hesitated slightly at her reaction before coughing into my fist. "Vivi, I don't know whether or not this makes things any better, but… the whole 'vendetta' thing I've got against people being in a higher position of authority than me? I only really got it after Alabasta."

Vivi pondered that for a moment, looking down at her necklace, before clenching it in her fist. "After… a higher authority ruined my life."

"They crushed you," I growled out. "And after that… well, let's just say that when anyone tries to crush me, I damn well try and make them pay for it."

Vivi took that in, and finally, she nodded. "I apologize, Cross. It seems we were both at fault here."

I nodded back before donning a light smirk. "Well… hey, look at it this way: I have learned some restraint. After all-" I jabbed my thumb at the Accinos. "I was smart enough to not pull this in front of the chief hothead, right?"

I was gratified by Vivi hiding a chuckle at that, but I couldn't enjoy it due to the Accino Family breaking their huddle and drawing our attention.

"What do you want?" Arbell groused.

"Ahhh, there, see?" I grinned in an admittedly condescending manner. "Isn't it so much better when we all get along? But anyway, getting down to business, our first demand is thus." I popped up a finger, my levity gone. "The liberation of the Phoenix Pirates, captain, flag and all, before we so much as lift a finger to help you. The only reason they turned against us was that you had your boots on their necks, and I'm not going to let you keep our fellow pirates oppressed even one second longer. You want our help, you let them go."

The elder Accino twins exchanged glances before heaving simultaneous sighs.

"They were useful while we had them," Campacino grumbled before waving his hand dismissively. "Agreed."
"What else?" Brindo demanded.

"Our second demand." I raised a second finger as I scanned the flags hung above us. "Considering how extensive your father's... collection is, I'm assuming you have a ledger of all the flags here?"

The Accinos glanced at one another in confusion before Hockera nodded. "Yeah, we do. What about it?"

"Simple." I jabbed my thumb over my shoulder. "You'll be handing it over to our archaeologist, who will be choosing which flags we'll be taking with us, and which your father gets to keep."

A jolt of shock ran through the room, with Carue hastily raising his wing as he voiced everyone's confusion. "Wha—? 'Choose' which flags we take wid us? Shouldn't we take them all?"

"Eh," I waved my hand dismissively. "They're free to keep the flags of pirates who raided civilians and whatnot. Flags baptized in blood? Those aren't marks of pride, they're symbols of fear and terror. If the Accinos want to keep them as trophies, they're welcome to them." I then directed a glare at the resident bounty hunters. "But the flags of pirates like us? Pirates who only ever went out on the seas for adventure? For freedom? Those we take with us. Those we'll give a burial at sea so that the souls of their crews may finally rest in peace."

I took a menacing step towards the Accinos. "Will there be a problem with that?"

There was a moment of silence as the Accinos all looked at one another and then...

"Hmm, let me think," Lil drawled, tilting her head to the side exaggeratedly. "Will there be a problem? Hell no."

I blinked in confusion at the response. "Uh... come again?"

"You heard her! Take as many as you want! Hell, take 'em all!" Hockera answered.

"AGREED! We hate those damn things!" the twins asserted with mirrored nods.

I... will freely admit, I was taken aback enough that I was actually gaping at them. Salchow responded with a roll of his eyes.

"You saw how often he steams this place, who do you think is in charge of cleaning those damn things and watching for mold!?"

"Your... soldiers?" Vivi guessed.

"Ha! As if Papa would trust them with his 'precious' trophies!" Arbell scoffed. "No. While we love our Papa dearly, and while it's going to be hell to live with him once he finds out you've stolen from him..." She scowled murderously. "I'd rather eat my skirt than spend one more second scrubbing those old rags!"

"AGREED!" her siblings and husband chorused.

Vivi's eye twitched furtively as she regarded the Accino-heirs. "How... heartwarming..." she muttered.

"Ahem!" Hockera coughed into his fist as he regained his composure. "So, anyway, was that everything you wanted?"

"Yea—No!" I hastily swapped my answers as a thought occurred to me. "Now, this might sound
petty, but I know that our Second Mate would kill me if we didn't lay down this final stipulation: when we leave here, we act like actual pirates in the process, taking everything in you bastards' coffers. Those are our demands, take 'em or leave 'em."

The Accinos visibly hesitated at the ultimatum, but Lil simply smirked and started to sway back and forth on her feet. "Go right on ahead, help yourselves..." She raised her hand to hide a smirk. "You know, so long as you can find where they are? And get them open?"

"Glad to hear you already approve!"

"WHZA—!?!" was the general cry of shock as everyone snapped their attention to the door of the flag-room... where Nami was standing with a bulging bag slung over her shoulders?!

"HOW THE HELL EVEN!?" Soundbite demanded incredulously.

"When, exactly, did her talent for thievery reach the same level of impossible as Zoro's non-sense of direction?" Vivi managed through a floor-cracking jaw.

"When I got rid of the emotional weight that was holding me down. I might even owe Kalifa a 'thank you' next time we meet if this is anything to go by... after I give her a black eye, of course," Nami sighed happily. "Aaanyway, sorry for moving early, but I got kinda bored. We'll just go ahead and store this back on the Sunny before going back to wait in the pit. Have fun, you guys!" And with that, she strode off down the hall humming a jaunty tune, followed by all five of our Dugongs, who were all carrying equally loaded sacks.

"Et Tu, Boss?" I sighed wearily.

"Lemme guess, Man's Womance?" Carue quacked.

"Nope," Boss huffed dismissively as he waddled off. "It's just a living."

"Wah wah waaaaah..."

"...Why did I have to open my mouth?" Lil groaned, sinking to her knees as streams of tears fountained down her cheeks.

I shook my head, adjusting my collar as I shoved the shock into a corner of my mind. "Ahem... a- anyway, your father doesn't need to know about all this, seeing as he'd sooner melt me with his bare hands than listen to even a word I have to say. You all meet our demands on the sly, we make sure thing go as hunky-dory as possible. With that settled, all we have to do is wait for daddy-dearest and —!

"W... W-Wait!"

"Eh?" I blinked in confusion when Arbell of all people suddenly blurted out a protest, desperation clear on her face.

"Sister!?" Campacino demanded.

"What do you think you're—!" Brindo started, only to be silenced by Arbell sticking her hand in his face.

"Cram it, all of you," she growled before returning her attention to me. "While we're going behind our father's back, we might as well go all the way. You've shared your demands, now please, I beg of you, listen to our request! This wedding, the wedding that my father is forcing you to
safeguard…” She glanced to the side, gnawing her lip before nodding firmly, her gaze full of determination. "I… we, the children of the Accino family… we want you to sabotage it."


Vivi slowly raised a shaking finger. "Run that by us again?" she squeaked.

"You heard me!" Arbell hissed. "Make things look like they’re working out well for as long as you can, but when it comes down to the clutch? Make sure that this wedding fails. I can understand that Papa is merely concerned with our well-being, I really do, but…” She ground her teeth as she landed her hand on Lil's shoulder, prompting the nearly pubescent girl to glance up at her with a… surprisingly apathetic look. "If he thinks that I'm going to let myself be related to those snakes of the Hiruno Famiglia… that I'll let my little sister marry one of them…"

"Enough, sister."

Arbell flinched as the twins dropped their hands on her shoulders, giving them both a despairing look. The twins hesitated at said look, exchanging a glance before sighing in synch and stepping forward.

"We realize that, as it stands, we are in no position to ask anything further of you…” Campacino reluctantly admitted.

"But left with no other options, even at your mercy..." Brindo continued.

They fell to their knees as one, heads bowed.

"Please," they pleaded in synch. "Take pity on us and grant us this request, so that we might safeguard our family from our father's desperation."

"Ah…” I blinked slowly before leaning back towards Vivi. "IIII honestly did not see this coming. Suggestions?"

"Umm…” Vivi gnawed her thumb for a moment before shrugging. "Either we manage to pull off the wedding and there'll be nothing they can do, or, in usual Straw Hat fashion, it blows up entirely in a way Accino can't claim we did it on purpose?"

"Hm… and I know what option I'd put my money on…” I mused before returning my option to the Accinos. "We'll think about it. But for now—!

"FOR NOW, Papa-pyromania's on his way back!" Soundbite barked hastily. "Game faces, EVERYONE!!"

Thankfully, the Accinos all managed to scramble back into position just as their father re-entered the room, the heat steadily rising as he strode around us to regain his seat. "My apologies for my extended absence," he grunted. "But I had to make a slight detour to my room to retrieve a new cigar. Still, it gave you more than enough time to think..." We flinched as a blast of steam rose up as a result of the patriarch sitting down. "Meaning that I will have my answer now."

Vivi adjusted her collar with a slight wince before resuming her 'princess-ly' posture. "W-We have to admit, Mister Accino, your proposition does sound… most agreeable to us…"

"But the fact remains!" I picked up. "Vivi and I are merely high-ranked members of our crew! Much like with your family and you, the final decision lies with our captain! Surely you can appreciate that!…sir?"
"…Hmph. I suppose you have a point; it would be the height of bad form to not gain the consent of whom it affects most," the Hot-Hot man said at last. We started to heave a sigh of relief - until the temperature spiked and the sheer humidity started to crush us as he glared at us. "**You have ten minutes.**"

We couldn't get the hell out of that steaming dodge fast enough, and once we were all out, Campacino took a moment to get his breath back before gesturing with no small amount of haste. "Come on, this way."

I swiftly grabbed his shoulder. "We'll go to the cells alright," I assured him. "But only after a little detour to release your… 'pet pirates', was it?"

Campacino flinched slightly before smirking confidently. "Very well, if you insist… but let me remind you, those poor souls' spirits have been utterly crushed by the New World, so unless you think you can restore their hopes and dreams in less than ten minutes—!"

"Unless I miss my mark, you have Captain Puzzle in a cell somewhere?" I interrupted.

"Ah… yes, why?"

"Get Luffy out of the pit, shove him in the same cell, get the Phoenix's ship and flag ready, and above all else?" I strode past the twin with confidence. "Stop doubting the Straw Hat Pirates."

Campacino was silent for a moment before snorting and walking after me. "Personally, I think you would be best served hauling your raging ego back into check."

-**Five Minutes Later**-

"Seriously, I can't even begin to thank you guys enough!" Captain Puzzle praised Luffy as he shook his hand vigorously, his crew making the final arrangements to set sail on their flag-adorned ship behind him. "If it weren't for you… hell, I don't even want to consider what could have happened to us!"

"Shishishi! No problem!" Luffy chuckled good-naturedly. "You guys are all pretty cool once you stop being idiots! I can't wait to see you guys in the New World!"

"Same here, but only after we've had a lot of time to train, I assure you."

"Shishishi, yeah, you guys are pretty weak!"

"Hey, no need to be that blunt!"

While this little exchange was ongoing, Campacino and I were standing a little ways away, him gaping, me smirking.

"I believe that you were saying something, Mister Accino?" I chuckled tauntingly.

"But-but-but… how!?" Campacino choked out. "His hopes were dashed! His flames snuffed into little more than cinders! And your captain barely had any time to speak with him! How is this possible!?"

"ROW ROW, FIGHT DA POWAH!" Soundbite cheered. "**Possible? Who cares? VIVA SHO—!""

"AHEM!" I coughed.
"Heh... sorry."

Brindo, meanwhile, was busy comforting his brother, who was now gnawing on his collar and crying in exasperation.

"Still..." Puzzle looked past Luffy, looking worried. "Are you sure you're going to be alright? I mean, these people..."

"Mah mah, it's fine!" Luffy said, waving his hand in a dismissive manner. "I don't really get what's going on, but Cross and Vivi said they've got things handled! I trust in my crew, and that's more than enough!"

The other pirate contemplated that for a second before shrugging. "So be it. I wish you all the best of luck! And trust me, if anybody on my crew wasn't listening to the SBS before... but for now. PHOENIX PIRATES! WEIGH ANCHOR! LET'S GET AS FAR AWAY FROM THIS ICY HELL AS WE CAN GET!"

"AYE-AYE, CAPTAIN!"

"Ooooh—GAH!"

"Do you see a talking starfish anywhere?" I demanded.

"Spoilsport..." my partner pouted in response.

And so we watched as the Phoenix Pirates' ship sailed off, grateful that our friends were freed, their spirits reanimated - and personally, that the half-remembered x-factor was out of the way.

Unfortunately, I picked that time to remember exactly how double-sided our luck could be. So, with a mounting sense of dread that I hoped was merely well-justified paranoia, I turned to look at the other Accinos, who were pulling themselves together from their bemusement.

"Incidentally... feel free to tell me that I'm worrying about nothing, but all we have to do for the Don is make sure the wedding goes right, right? Even with all of the sabotages attempts that will go on... there aren't any other catches that we should be aware of, right?"

The way that Campacino and Brindo slowly shared an uncertain look did not give me confidence. "Weeell..."

-Four Minutes Later-

Vivi, Carue, Soundbite, and I stared at the Don with identical masks of exasperation and sheer, undiluted venom.

"So, let's see if we have this right," Vivi began, with a tone about as calm as a grenade whose pin had been pulled. "You have no staff for the wedding aside from your family and mercenaries. No planners, no caterers, no decorators, no musicians, and no priest, because a million and one random saboteurs, both within and without the proceedings, have managed to either scare them off or 'deal with' them."

"Mmmyep," Don Accino hummed, not a care in the world.

"And you expect us to fill dose woles?" Carue asked.

"The priest comes with the church... but besides that, yes," Accino replied.
"I see. Normally, that wouldn't be unreasonable, we have a wide variety of talents amongst our crew that we could use," I said, very slowly and clearly. "But you also told us that the setting for the wedding is a seafaring chapel, which is set between your turf and theirs. And said chapel is only in these waters for today and will be departing before nightfall."

"Precisely."

"In short… you want us to plan, prepare AND safeguard this wedding…"

Accino apparently saw where we were going, as he and his family promptly raised their hands to cover their ears.

Wise choice.

"IN THE SPACE OF THREE HOURS?!!"

I dropped my hand into my face with a sigh even as my ears rang from Vivi's irate scream. "Now that's what I call another shoe."

Hornet AN: Now taking bets on how bad the fustercluck is going to be!

Xomniac AN: If you think you might be lowballing, then you clearly are!

Patient AN: Ah, what fun this is…
"Y'know, in hindsight?" I mused as I stared over the edge of one of the many pews lying on their sides scattered across the room. "I don't know why I expected, even for a second, any outcome other than this."

'This', by the by, was the absolutely massive free-for-all brawl that was raging before me in the center of the once grand and noble Seafaring Parish of St. Jude Thaddeus, the Patron Saint of Hope of all things, with said brawl being composed of a great many individuals, who themselves were all wielding a variety of weapons, if they chose to wield weapons at all.

Soundbite poked his eyes over the edge of the pew so that he could give the fight a bored once-over. "YOU KNOW THE MOST ironic thing?" he dully noted. "Our crewmates aren't even CAUSING THE WORST OF THE DAMAGE. MOST OF THEM GOT THE HELL OUT OF DODGE when the shit started flying, they're waiting outside."

That little tidbit prompted me to slap my hand to my forehead, and I knocked the back of my head against my cover even as I watched an Accino grunt fly above me and slam into the wall.

"Three hours..." I groaned. "How did we manage to screw shit up so badly in three hours?"

~o~

Thinking back, I have to admit that for once, not all the fault was on our shoulders.

Allow me to be perfectly clear: the fiasco that my crew went through in an attempt to organize this... event? It was enough to guarantee that if I ever got married, it was either going to be with no less than a full year of preparation or in a small, quiet (Soundbite howled with laughter when I told him that later, and I... didn't really have it in myself to protest) ceremony that would be tossed together in three hours, maybe less.

Where to even start... bah, the beginning's as good as anywhere, I suppose. Our first order of business while we waited for the church to arrive was to deal with Don Accino's flag collection. Not too bad; while half of the Accinos kept the Don busy with preparing their own ship and hitching it to the Sunny, Robin, Luffy, Chopper, Merry, and I went through the—ergh—trophies.

To elaborate, aside from Robin, who was handling the Don's sizeable ledger with her nearly bottomless well of knowledge on the subject-matter, Luffy had apparently decided to dredge up another lesson from Shanks and was present as a sign of respect, and I was there so that Soundbite and Merry could assist with any identification that lay outside Robin's purview; after all, most of the flags had had the ships' souls imprinted within them, and those that didn't still had voices of their own.

As sadly expected, while the vast majority of the emblems hailed from ruthless and bloodthirsty crews that left Merry and Soundbite reeling, we still had to bury over a quarter of the collection away from the Don's prying eyes. As for the rest, well... let's just say that if Hockera noticed Chopper passing by and cracking open a vial or two or ten containing spores from a cloth-devouring mold he'd altered to be hyper-aggressive when given plenty of heat and moisture, he didn't mention it. Took us just over ten minutes to finish up.

From there, we travelled to the chapel. Also not too bad; with Sunny's paddle system, Nami bending the wind to our favor, and Conis, Lassoo, and Usopp providing some extra thrust, we made it to the
church (and if St. Jude Thaddeus wasn't proof that the World Government knew what it was doing where floating buildings were concerned, I'll eat my gauntlets) in the space of half an hour. All told, actually reaching the church took about, oooh, forty minutes or so? Leaving us with—

-2 HOURS, 20 MINUTES REMAINING-

From there, we actually started working on setting up the wedding. Our first order of business was the division of labor, and big surprise, that was when our troubles chose to rear their heads.

-0- 

"Alright, everybody, listen up!" I announced, sweeping my eyes over our assembled crew.

The building we were in, I'll admit, was a nice place. Massive double doors opening from the antechamber into a large room with a domed ceiling, windows at the top allowing light to come in. A few dozen pews lined up in four rows provided space for a few hundred people, maybe even a thousand. One corner had a large organ and a couple of dozen chairs, clearly intended for the choir, while statues, carvings, and mosaic murals decorated the walls and pillars. A cross-shaped pool easily big enough for half a dozen people to fit in, filled to the brim with water, was at the front, and a slightly elevated dais with a large altar and two throne-like chairs was at the front and center of the room.

Yet the only Bible I could see was sitting on a small table between the two chairs. You'd think they'd have more than one…

I drew my thoughts away from that as I looked at the crew, Luffy hanging from the rafters but everyone else in states of relative calm. 'Relative' being the key word there, given that Accino was looming behind me and cooking my backside, with his kids standing at his sides.

"Now," I started hesitantly, glancing over my shoulder at the Heat-Human standing behind me. "I realize that this is all kind of nutty, and rather touch-and-go, and I know that we don't really have a plan of action—!

"Ah, actually, Cross?" Vivi interrupted.

A glance at her revealed that she was holding a small packet of notes about an inch thick.

"Uh…?" I slowly raised a finger questioningly.

"I… drew these up on the way here?" she smiled tentatively.

"You outlined an entire wedding plan in under an hour," Nami deadpanned, clearly not believing a word our crew's Princess said.

"…experience as a royal?"

I took a moment to weigh the pros and cons of calling Vivi on the blatant bull-honkey she was peddling before coming to and voicing my conclusion of "I could care less if you got them from the devil himself. Alright, Vivi, you've apparently got the plans, that means you've also got point. I'll help you supervise, try and keep things from going pear-shaped."

"Ah… o-okay, then…" Vivi shuffled through her notes before taking a calming breath and regarding our friends with… relative amounts of confidence, but still confidence. "Okay, okay. First, the obvious delegation: Sanji, you'll be handling the catering."
"But of course, dear Vivi," Sanji bowed to the Princess before addressing the Don. "Two hours is more than enough time to prepare a banquet fit for a wedding. So, does the father of the bride—"

"Underage~" Soundbite sang softly.

"Still need hors d'oeuvres," Sanji smoothly added, his menacing grin prompting Soundbite to snap back into his shell. "As I was saying, does the father of the bride have any preferences for the menu?"

The Don made a careless gesture, upon which Arbell, with a wrinkled expression, handed our cook a list. Sanji started scanning it, and it took all of five seconds for the blood to evacuate his face. "…Vivi? Do you already have something planned for Chopper?" he croaked.

"Uh…" Vivi cocked her eyebrow uncertainly. "Uuunless any medical emergencies come up, no. Why?"

"Yeah, Sanji, why would you need my help?" Chopper questioned with a tilt of his head.

"Because this is the menu the good Mister Accino wants me to cook," Sanji answered, gulping audibly as he stuck the paper before the reindeer's face. When Chopper started to frown in confusion, Sanji tapped a section of the page. "These numbers here? These are Scoville counts."

Chopper's pupils snapped into pinpricks, and he slowly looked up with a haunted gaze. "I'm gonna need a lot of liquid nitrogen and milk… and some heat-resistant suits couldn't hurt either."

"On our ship, in the back," Arbell deadpanned, jabbing her thumb over her shoulder. "Thank you kindly."

Chopper tipped his hat at the Accino heir before ambling off, a fervently muttering Sanji right on his heels.

"Uhh…" Vivi hummed uncomfortably before glancing up at the Don. "Sir, I realize that your abilities will serve to protect you, but what about—?"

"Ohh, don't worry, Princess," Accino smirked around his cigar. "I'm entirely aware that my proposed menu will almost definitely melt the mouth of anyone who has some, and not just from how delicious it is. After all…" He crossed his arms proudly and straightened to his maximum height and girth. "Just because I need the Hirunos here and for this wedding to proceed properly does not mean I either need or want those bastards to be comfortable. And if they starve? So be it!"

I felt a sweatdrop hanging from my head, and saw one hanging from everyone else on the crew. Vivi's, it should be noted, was particularly large. "Oh, this is going to be fun…" she groaned acridly before turning her gaze upward. "Anyway, moving on, Luffy, you—oh, for the love of Kek."

"Oh, this is going to be really fun," I deadpanned as I stared up at the blatantly empty rafters, then at Soundbite. "Hey, Sanji, just a heads-up: Luffy's MIA."

"Of course he is," the cook sighed wearily. "Bah, if he wants a taste, then he can have it. With any luck, it'll be enough to lay him out flat."

"And since when have we ever been that lucky?" Vivi mused as she shuffled through her notes. "Anyway. Franky, Usopp, it sounds like you'll have to handle building the decorations and painting this place by yourselves. Is that alright with you?"

Our mechanically-and-artistically-inclined crewmates nodded in acceptance—
"Oh! Oh oh oh!"

—Only for Merry to interrupt by jumping in her seat and waving her arms eagerly.

"They won't be alone!" she promised. "I can help them both out! After all, I have their skillsets in my skull, so anything they can do, I can do just as well! I'll just pull double-duty to help them out!"

"Eh…" Much to our surprise, it was actually Arbell who chose that moment to speak up, her voice… almost gentle!? "Are you really sure that you can keep up with your crewmates? After all, your body is pretty young."

"Hm… that's actually a fair point!" Merry mused, making a show of tapping her chin 'thoughtfully'. "Allow me to offer you my calm and measured rebut RAGH!" Franky and Zoro were forced to move swiftly to grab the caravel's arms and hoist her flailing form into the air before she could leap at Arbell, her teeth gnashing violently.

"Yo, Merry, calm your tits!" Raphey called out. "Save it for—"

The dugong froze as the shipgirl pinned her with a glare that could peel paint. "Bitch, my tits are calm," Merry said in a deceptively even voice. "The left one is named Siddhartha Buddha and the right one is Vardhamana Mahavira, and together they are lactating a veritable font of peace and understanding. It is the rest of me that's pissed. AND AS FOR YOU!" Her blistering glare and tone regained their heat as she snapped her attention back to Arbell, who to her credit didn't even flinch. "I'LL RIP YER BLOOMERS OFF AND STUFF 'EM DOWN YER BLOODY GULLET! YERS AND ALL YER ICE-LUBBIN' FLAG-STEALIN'—"

"Mute," I deadpanned, snapping my fingers.

"…? …!" Merry stopped trying to speak as she realized that she had been muted. Then, glowering, she reached into her coat, and pulled out a—

I facepalmed. "You planned for this?" I groaned.

"…" Merry was… well, silent as she peered out from beneath the red and white cap she had donned.

"Right, moving the damned hell along before I can really get freaked out by this." I shook my head vigorously as I snapped my attention back to Arbell. "So, just in case you happened to miss it, yes, she's definitely up for this."

"Glad to hear it…" Accino growled out as he ashed a cigar from both ends. "Now get her out of my sight before I lay a lesson about respecting her superiors on her backside she won't soon forget. Or ever."

"…!" A flash of fear came over Merry's expression, and she, Usopp, and Franky promptly skedaddled out of the room.

"…I need to get a hat like that," Lil muttered to herself.

"Right!" Vivi clapped her hands together imperiously. "Moving on. Who here has experience with the piano or organ?"

Robin smiled as she splayed the fingers on the extra hands she'd suddenly acquired. "I like to think that I'm quite proficient. After all…" A slightly wistful look came over her. "Nobody ever pays attention to the lonely piano man…"
"Ah…” Vivi blinked in surprise. "Wait, that phrase… where do I—?"

"Ah!" Robin's arms disintegrated into petals as her face suddenly flushed. "I'll, ah, just be getting to that—!

"Oh, yeah, now I wemembah!" Carue slapped his wing to his forehead. "Dat's a wine fwom 'Da Woved and Da Wovewess!' You know, dat twashy West Bwue womance novel you—WACK!"

"I will pluck you nude and cook you into a turducken," Robin calmly stated, her usual serene smile in place but her arms twitching murderously as they held Carue in place. After a moment of silence, the arms evaporated. "So, I assume the sheet music is on the instrument in question?"

Hockera nodded frantically, and Robin walked off, leaving us watching her with no small amount of fear.

"...Right," Vivi piped up, snapping my attention back to her. "Now, Mister Accino, so long as your family is handling the wardrobe…?" She heaved a sigh of relief when the Hot-Human nodded.

"Alright, then that's everything for the wedding proper, meaning all that's left is our main priority: security. Carue, if you wouldn't mind organizing things properly?"

"Of couwse, Vivi!" Carue saluted proudly.

"Hrmph," Accino snorted doubtfully, taking a drag from his cigar. "You're leaving security up to the duck?"

"No, she isn't."

**THWAP!**

In that instant, I mirrored the Accino-heirs perfectly in that I nearly pissed my pants when Carue jumped up and smacked the freaking cigar from Don Accino's mouth.

"She's entwusting the secuwity to the individuaw who's been her pewsonaw bodyguawd her entire wife," Carue stated. "And fow da wecawd, I'm wiwwing to take a wot of fwak… but my pwide as a captain in da Awabastan Militawy and Vivi's guawd is not something I will evah wet anyone mock. Got it?"

I gained an entirely new respect for Carue in that moment as he maintained his firm expression, but said respect was vastly overshadowed by the existential dread I felt as the ambient temperature slowly cranked up to levels where I felt like I was right back in the middle of He—I mean Alabasta. Neither Vivi nor Carue, however, even flinched.

Unfortunately for all of us observing, the standoff dragged on for a minute, but then, out of the blue, the temperature snapped right back to normal, and a smirk grew on Don Accino's face as he fished out another cigar and placed it in his mouth. "Continue," he invited.

Most of us shared dumbstruck looks, while Carue settled for snorting gratefully. "Gwad to have yoah appwoval. Now!" He clapped his wings together. "Wisten up! Evewyone we have weft will be spwit intah thwee teams tah cover evewy angle. Fiwst, Don." He looked back at our 'clients'. "I'm guessing dat you've got a buncha gifts foah dis mess?"

"Condolence gifts from our friends," Campacino explained.

"But we got twice as many as we expected, so…" Brindo waved his hand side to side uncomfortably.
Carue slapped a wing to his face with a groan. "Ah'f couwse. Twelfth birthday awv ovev again, Stomp stiwv has a stain in his feathahs… awight, Su, Wassoo, Funkfweed, you'we awl with me. We'we be keeping watch oveh dah pwesents and dah ones wiw be weeding out da 'supwises'. Zowo, Nami, Conis, you thwee'll head outside and handle any thweats coming by sea owah—and aye can't bewieve this is actuawwy a possibiwity—by aiw. And finawwy, Boss, you and your students head undahwatah. If you see anything even vaguewy threatenng, punch it untiw it's not. Eveyone awight with that?"

There was a chorus of vague agreements…

"Actually."

And a single protest from the worst person it could come from.

Carue twitched uncomfortably before glancing up at Don Accino. "Yes, Mistah Accino?" he asked uneasily.

"Oh, don't get your feathers in a snag, duck," the Don said dismissively. "Most of your plan is fine and good, but I do have one proviso. For the underwater guard force."

"Come again?" Boss almost demanded.

"Yeah!" Mikey nodded in agreement. "In case you haven't noticed, we're amphibious! Where do you want us, guarding the sky!? Nami's already got that—GRK!"

Mikey was interrupted and left gasping by a blast of hot air Accino snorted at him. "Would you rather wind up on my dinner plate, lightly steamed with butter?" he bit out.

The dugong shook his head with a pained wheeze, Raphey and Leo glaring at the heat-human in his place.

Don Accino took a calming drag from his cigar before continuing. "Anyways. Knowing this crew, and more specifically you five, I require some extra security to ensure that you don't try anything clever—or more likely, shell-headed—in an effort to slip out of this. As such, I've decided to assign the best of our Fierce Penguins to shadowing you."

Boss and I both stiffened fiercely at that, me from horror and him from… I actually don't know.

"Wait… you don't mean—!" I started to get out.

"I knew this day would come…" Boss ground out.

Before either of us could say anything further, however, Lil brought her fingers to her lips, blew a sharp whistle—

SLAM!

"Aloha, convicts!"

And the doors were promptly kicked open by the absolute last quartet of fuzz and feathers that I ever wanted to see and with the leader speaking in the last voice I ever wanted to hear, if only for the sake of preserving the last tattered shreds of my sanity.

I slowly turned a murderous glare on Soundbite. "I… I don't even know what the hell to say to you about this."
"WELL, YOU KNOW WHAT they say!" Soundbite leered right back. "IF YOU DON'T HAVE anything nice to say, THEN SHUT THE HELL—!"

"Rico!"

"HORK!"

PTANG!

"—GAH!"

"Silence, convict!" the lead penguin barked as he jabbed his flipper at my partner. "You all are under my command now! I don't care if you're really some big-shot coolio pirate thanks to your namby-pamby talk show, you will only speak when I say you can and—!"

"Not under your jurisdiction, Skipper," Lil deadpanned.

"—erk," the unsurprisingly-named… ergh, Skipper, choked.

"Sorry, Miss Lil!" the dopey-looking one piped up in a childish British accent. "Skipper just gets excited from time to time! He always says how he doesn't want to let you—!" SLAP! "Gah!"

"No one likes a suck-up, Private," Skipper deadpanned, his flipper still in post-dopeslap position.

Lil shook her head with a glance upwards that was equal parts fond and long-suffering before turning back to us. "These four are by far the strongest I've ever trained. Rico, demolitions and special weapons expert—"

"HUGH! HAHAHAHA!" the wild-looking penguin cackled, vomiting up a lit stick of dynamite and starting to juggle it around.

"Private, a rookie but still surprisingly capable—"

Without warning, Rico lobbed the TNT to Private, who started juggling it between his flippers as he waddled for the door. "Oh no, oh no, oh no—!"

"Kowalski, the—"

"Lemme guess," I cut in with a groan, dragging a hand down my face. "Scientist and tactician?"

"According to my calculations…" the tallest of the penguins announced, whipping out an abacus and slapping around the beads for a second before looking up flatly. "Private will get the dynamite out of the building!"

KABOOM!

"WAAAAAAH—!"

SLAM!

"OOF!"

Kowalski barely even flinched as a smoking Private slammed into and stuck to the wall above us. "Private, however, will not get out of the radius of the blast."

"Called it," I deadpanned, before flinching under the rest of the Accino's glares. "III'll shut up now."
"And finally," Lin concluded. "The leader of the squad, the most competent, the most professional, the strongest soldier we have besides Papa—!"

"The Mad Penguin."

We all paused in confusion as someone spoke up, but that question was promptly answered when Boss waddled to the front, his teeth tightly clenching around his cigar, and his eyes unerringly locked on Skipper.

"Of Gascar," he finished, his tone positively glacial.

Skipper, for his part, just blinked at Boss in confusion for a moment before smirking and waddling up to him, staring up at the dugong's mug in spite of the fact that he was twice his height. "Now that's a name I haven't heard in awhile. Haven't seen you in awhile either, Dissy."

The captain of our ship's guard narrowed his eyes menacingly. "It's Boss now, Penguin." He took a hard drag of his cigar and blew the smoke right in Skipper's face. "Boss. Dugong."

Skipper didn't even flinch at the smoke, instead letting his smirk widen. "Is that so? Well, it's nice to see you again after all these years… Bessy."

I darted my weary gaze between the two amphibious fighters before asking what everyone was thinking and what I was dreading. "I take it you two know each other?"

"You could say that," Skipper said, tilting his head at me without ever breaking eye contact with Boss. "Before I came to be under the Accinos' employ, I worked odd jobs here and there around the Line. And every time a job brought me to Alabasta, it always seemed like Ol' Bessy was there to greet me! Heck!" Skipper spun on his talons as he casually snapped a flipper up. "I can't even remember all the times we've clashed! What was it, Bessy, a hundred? Two hundred?"

"Too many to count, Penguin," Boss intoned darkly. "But I only ever endeavor to remember the one: Erumalu."

In an instant, Skipper had his snarling beak in Boss's impassive mug. "Don't you dare bring up Erumalu around me, you crossbred son of a barnacle!" he spat.

Boss took a deliberately slow drag from his cigar before blowing another cloud of smoke at the penguin, this time sending an unfortunately nearby Private into a coughing fit. "Make me, lead wing."

As we watched the sparks crackle and fly between the two, Soundbite leaned his head towards me. "I WOULD LAUGH at the appropriateness of the bird's moniker," he hissed. "But this is way too cool."

"Ditto…” Mikey chuckled eagerly as he gleefully watched the exchange.

"You say 'cool', I say 'annoying as all hell!'" Raphey bit out as she warily eyed the three (two and a half, really, Private was still wheezing) penguins that were eyeing them in turn. "These feather-fluff combos nabbed us all through cheating!"

Rico's response to that was to stick his tongue out at her and drag his eyelid down with a flipper, cackling all the while. This, of course, necessitated Mikey hastily grabbing Raphey before she could tackle the mad penguin.

"She has a point, you know… ignoring the physical assault…” Leo groused, a quick exchange of
glares with his team's brawler stopping her attempt at attacking, though not her growling. "Why do we have to have them as our guards?"

"Heck, why do we need guards, period? You've studied the SBS, have we ever given the impression that we wouldn't keep our end of a bargain!? Besides Nami, I mean," Donny said, conveniently positioned so that Zoro and Conis were between him and the aforementioned navigator. "No offense, of course."

"None taken," Nami smiled beatifically.

ZAP!

"YEOWCH!"

The stench of ozone and cooked dugong that suddenly permeated the air said different.

"We're aware. This is simply a matter of insurance, for both of us," the Don said. "After all, you wouldn't expect us to add nothing to the security ourselves, would you?" He then turned his gaze down to the two leering animals, who promptly dropped their glaring contest in favor of dropping to their knees when the temperature suddenly spiked. "And I expect you to put whatever past you have together behind you until the wedding is complete. Am I clear?"

"Y-Yes Don-Boss, sir," Skipper coughed out.

"My word…" Boss groaned. "As a Man."

"Good," Accino snorted as he thankfully killed the heat. "Now, if you need me, I'll be on my ship getting hammered enough that when the Hiruno witch and her brood arrive, I won't instinctively flash-boil everything in a quarter-mile radius on instinct. So, unless there's anything else?" His tone clearly said that there'd better damn well not be, and thankfully there wasn't. "Good. Now hurry the hell up and get to it." And with that he headed straight out of the double doors, and soon after everyone who remained slowly trickled off to their assigned posts, though the way Boss and Skipper kept eyeing one another in the process did not fill me with confidence.

Once everyone was gone, Vivi, Soundbite and I briefly stood in silence before Vivi shot me a far too confident smile.

"You know… I think we actually just might pull this off."

~0~

"'Might pull this off', my ass," I grumbled under my breath as I watched a particularly large bounty hunter use a pew as an impromptu club to mow down his competition with. "When we get out of this, I'm gonna host a damn seminar titled 'Lines we do not freaking taunt Murphy with!'"

"AMEN, brudda!" Soundbite nodded in agreement. "But for now, I think we should PROBABLY MOVE, FOR WOOD IS WEAK—!"

SMASH! "GAH!"

I flinched as an insensate bounty hunter's head crashed through my cover way too close to my own head for comfort. "And their skulls are thick, right. Any ideas?"

"Uhh… OH! The food table, it's FRANKY-BRAND REINFORCED! Ya know, 'CAUSE LUFFY."
"Perfect," I nodded. I promptly set about skimming along the ground hidden by whatever mostly-intact pews remained, dodging any bullets, bodies or otherwise improvised projectiles that shot my way as I headed for my aforementioned destination. And there I found someone else taking cover, prompting me to don a flat look.

"You do realize that a good portion of the blame for this situation goes to you, right?" I testily pointed out.

"Ex-cuse me!? If you'll forgive my language, how the hell do you reason that, Mister Jeremiah?" Vivi snapped back with just as much heat. "Everything I did, I did trying to make sure that this was the perfect wedding!"

"We were supposed to sabotage the wedding!" I snapped, flinging my hands up… or, at least, I tried, but still, it was the gesture that counted. "And you were a freaking nightmare to work with the entire time!"

"Oh, please!" Vivi snapped her head away with a sniff. "I was nowhere near that bad!"

~0~

-1 HOUR, 30 MINUTES REMAINING-

"Nonono, this table needs to be 2.68 inches to the north and .54 inches to the east, or the feng shui of the room will be off!" Vivi snapped at the hapless staff (read: mercs she'd brow-beaten into wearing suits). "And the chairs have to be in an exact hexagonal configuration at the specified coordinates! For all the tables!"

"B-b-b-b—" said merc whimpered under Vivi's rage, yelping as she grabbed his collar.

"Did I stutter?"

"Y-Yes, ma'am, I-I-I mean no ma'am, I mean hurry the hell up already before she castrates me!" the poor man barked to his colleagues, who swiftly scrambled to fulfill the request.

Taking a deep sigh, Vivi took a step back and began inspecting the decorations Merry, Franky, and Usopp were still putting up, frowning. I had gotten very good at deciphering her frowns over the last fifteen minutes, and thankfully this one was the 'I'm still deciding if you screwed up, don't disappoint me' frown.

While she was doing this, another one of the suited mercs walked up to her, his knees visibly shaking. "Uh, Miss Vivi?"

"Not right now," she said, still eyeing the decorations.

"Miss Vivi, this is very importa—"

"Yes, yes, I'm sure," Vivi absentmindedly waved, eyes zeroing in on Franky—who had just arranged some of the lace streamers to vaguely resemble a cannon firing. "Franky! Rearrange those, we can't be having any violent motifs at a wedding!"

"Aw, c'mon!" Franky snapped. "It barely looks like a cannon! And besides, this is a bunch of bounty hunters! They'd love it!"

"Just change it!"
"Alright, alright, keep your shirt on… HEY, MERRY, MIND LENDING ME A HAND!"

"BIT BUSY UP HERE!" Merry called down from the rafters, where she and Usopp were hanging via an admittedly impressive set of ropes.

Vivi shot a momentary glance up at the pair before snapping her full attention to them. "LESS WHITE, MORE BLUE!"

"INDEED!" Brindo (the twin wearing red, of all people) yelled up in agreement as he rolled a table into place. "AFTER ALL, THE BLUE OF THE SEA AND THE ICE IS OUR NOBLE FAMILY’S COLOR!"

"WHAT!?" Campacino (the other, blue-wearing twin) shouted from across the hall, where he had been helping carry a stack of chairs before dropping them off in the arms of the nearest (and going by the way he staggered under the weight, woefully under-muscled) merc to him. "DEAR BROTHER, SURELY YOU ARE JOKING! CLEARLY, WHAT WITH THE BLOOD OF OUR ENEMIES AND THE RADIANCE OF OUR FATHER’S ABILITIES, RED IS THE COLOR OF OUR FAMILY MOST NOBLE!"

The pair of them exchanged looks of irritation, and then, with the nonsense that Oda himself had come up with, they glowed red and blue, flew towards each other from opposite sides of the room by 'twin magnetism'…

"EN GARDE YOU——!"

SLAM!

"ARGH!"

And opened their brawl with a mirrored pair of hooks to one another's jaws.

"If you two make a mess, I'll make sure no one can tell where one of you starts and the other one ends," Vivi promised, before glaring up at our paint-adept again. "AND WHY THE HELL AREN'T YOU TWO WORKING?"

"Uh… we don't know which one to listen to?" Usopp answered uneasily.

"JUST PICK A NAME OUT OF A HAT!"

Usopp started to nod before shooting a bemused look at Merry. "I… can't remember which had which name… or which supported which color scheme either. You?"

Merry responded by giving him a flat look before slapping her hands together. "I'm out. HEY, FRANKY, LOOK OUT ABOVE!" And before our sniper could react, she slipped out of her harness and dropped onto our shipwright's shoulders.

Thankfully, Vivi chose to nod at that, somehow satisfied, and I flinched as she turned her gaze on me, her eyes all but quite literally blazing behind… her…

"Where the hell did she get that monocle?" I hissed out of the corner of my mouth.

"DIDN'T SEE, too scared!" Soundbite whimpered from within his shivering shell.

"AHEM?"

"Yes'm!" I yelped, snapping to attention under Vivi's piercing gaze.
She sniffed haughtily at my reaction before directing her attention at my snail. "Connect me to Sanji," she ordered in a tone that brooked no argument.

For a moment, my mind was at war, self-preservation clashing with thrill-seeking, disrespect for authority, and pride. And then common sense whacked pride upside the head and knocked it out, leveling the playing field and allowing me to make the smart decision.

"Well, you heard the woman," I told Soundbite.

"God knows I wish I hadn't..." he moaned back, but nevertheless there was a moment of static, and then—

"Little busy at the moment, Cross," Sanji replied, sounding decidedly strained.

"Not Cross, me," Vivi stated. "Status report, Sanji."

"Gah!" Sanji yelped frantically. "O-Of course, Princess! Sweet, sweet, beautiful princess who I serve hand and foot and I definitely do not want to tell to go away at this moment, just give me a second to... HEY, YOU! GET OVER HERE AND HOLD THIS!... alright, there we go. Ah, anyway, let's see... alright, the main dishes will be ready on time, despite the... eccentric menu." Soundbite's shell shivered again. "I swear, where the hell did he get a recipe for liquid smoke...? On an unrelated note, I really hope you don't need Chopper anytime soon, because my help is rotating through him like clockwork, and if I lose him, I'm screwed."

"Duly noted," Vivi nodded. "And the cake?"

"In the oven, and the frosting and decorations are being made as we speak." There was a pregnant pause over the line before Sanji continued. "The, ah, specifications, though... I'd never question you, my dear princess, but these are very exacting and I don't trust any of these yahoos to do it right. But I also don't want to be away from the main prep for so long—"

"That's by design," Vivi interrupted. "The banquet's a lost cause, what with the Don's specifications."

"Tell me about it," Sanji groaned despondently. "I'm brewing and serving the 'punch' in a cast iron pot! It's melted everything else!"

"Double, double, toil and trouble, fire burn and cauldron bubble!"

"At least Chopper's having fun keeping it stable... though now I'm going to have to have someone keep an eye on this thing to make sure it isn't breathing."

"...Anyway," Vivi picked up, shaking off the bemusement of what she heard and getting back into her professional form. "The banquet is a lost cause, but the cake has to be perfect."

There was a brief pause before Sanji spoke up again. "Even the runes on the gazebo?"

"They're hieroglyphs, not runes, but yes, even the hieroglyphs on the gazebo."

"As my princess wishes," Sanji sighed, the line going dead...

"Pst, Sanji!"

Until I reopened it.
"Cross, wha—!?"

"Look, just tell me real quick," I hissed as I spared a glance at Vivi, who was thankfully not looking my way. "Does this place have any salt in its storerooms?"

"What are you—Ugh, yes, there are a ton of salt bags back here, what about it?"

I heaved a sigh of relief. "Glad to hear it. Now, make sure to smuggle what bags you can onto the Sunny when you get the opening, as much as you can manage."

"What!? Cross, I swear, if this is some kind of a stupid joke or something—!"

"I'm deadly serious!" I interrupted him with as much emphasis as I could manage and still keep quiet. "The next fight we go into is going to be a nightmare already, and it'll only be bigger unless we stockpile as much salt as you can grab! Got it?"

There was a tense silence for a moment before Sanji heaved a sigh. "Yeah, alright, you make it sound pretty serious. I'll wave in some of the Dugongs to get it done. Just... try and reign in Vivi while you're out there, alright?"

"You're kidding, right?" I scoffed even as I cut my hand across my throat and returned my attention to her.

Thankfully, the Princess had lapsed into blessed, thoughtful silence. But sadly, it didn't last long before she turned to a large table shoved into the back of the chapel. It was groaning under the weight of the gaudily wrapped wedding presents which Lassoo and Funkfreed were warily sniffing and prodding at. Seriously, I think some of the wrapping was actual gold. Also, for some reason or other, there seemed to be something struggling under the tablecloth, but I very firmly decided to ignore that.

"How are things going with the presents, Carue?" the Princess asked.

The duck looked up at her with a tortured squawk. "So faw, we've defused a dozen bombs, got wid of at weast ten packages of poisoned food, got wid of half a dozen packages that wewen't deadwy but weally shouldn't go to someone wemotely cwose tah hew age, and thwee ow fouw packages dat had wive contents. A hownet's nest, a sedated wild boaw, a supwisingwy aggwesive swoth—"

"GAH!" Su gasped as she stuck her head out from under the table and panted in exhaustion, her usually pristine fur frazzled and wet. "And one... very determined... pygmy sperm whale... that I think has some squid or octopus blood in it."

Soundbite poked an eyestalk out of his shell so that he could... well, eye her. "YOU HOLDING up alright?"

Su panted a second longer before grinning confidently and sticking up her paw in what I assumed was an approximation of a thumbless thumbs-up. "I'm... wearing him down!"

Her grin then died when a tentacle stuck out from under the table. "Oh, no, not agai—WAGH!"

And with that she was yanked back under the table and the struggle picked up anew.

Carue stared at the struggle for a moment before looking up sheepishly. "It's a wowk in pwogwess."

"So I see," Vivi muttered, and I braced for another outburst. "Well, just keep the duds out of sight and it should be fine. Now, what else..."
The former princess trailed off in thought, not noticing another besuited merc walking up to her. "Uh, Miss Vivi?" he said. She gave no sign that she'd heard, and the merc shot us a pleading look. Soundbite and I glanced at each other, and shrugged in a 'what can you do' sort way. Sighing, the merc shook his head and spoke up again. "Miss Vivi?"

Silence.

The merc's face hardened, and he completely ignored my frantic head-shaking in favor of loudly clearing his throat. "Oi! Miss Vivi?"

I think the glare Vivi shot over her shoulder at the poor bastard managed to stop my heart just as long as his. "What?"

"Ah… N-N-Never mind, Miss Vivi," he simpered. "I'm… sure it's not that important in the long run."

"Good," she nodded firmly before turning her attention away and wandering off. "Now, who would have an idea of the proper seating arrangements…"

Once she was a ways away, Soundbite slowly poked his head out of his shell with a grimace. "GOD SAVE US from the princess!"

"At this point?" I sighed. "I'd take the devil if he offered."

I then proceeded to freeze as a tinkling giggle echoed through the rafters.

"ON THE OTHER HAND!" I yelped, making a bolt for it. "WAIT THE HELL UP, PRINCESS!"

~o~

Vivi maintained her glare for a moment longer before glancing away and poking her fingers together. "I… alright, I admit to having maybe gone a bit overboard… but!" She snapped her finger up as she defiantly met my gaze. "In my defense, I was just trying to make this wedding the best it could be!"

"We were supposed to tank the wedding, you blue-haired bimbo!" I grabbed her shoulders with a roar. "The Accino kids wanted to make sure that their sister didn't get married!"

A blue hue slowly fell over Vivi's face. "…riiiight…"

"SERIOUSLY!" Soundbite barked. "You've been eccentric and ditzy in the past, BUT THIS!? WHAT THE HELL, BITCH?!"

"Uhhh…" Vivi hedged uncertainly as she looked anywhere but at me. "In my defense, it's failing spectacularly anyway?"

A spectacular SMASH rang out at just that instant, but utterly failed to sway my partner or I.

"Try again," we snarled in synch.

Vivi's mouth flapped uselessly for a second before she hung her head with a defeated sigh. "So… I might not have been entirely honest with you all."

I slapped a hand to my face with a groan. "Of fucking course. About what, exactly?"

"About these." Vivi felt around in her pockets for a moment before withdrawing and holding out… a
familiar pack of notes? Wait a…

"The wedding plan?" I questioned incredulously.

"I… didn't really come up with it on the spot," she admitted shamefacedly. "It was something I'd been working on for years, ever since I was a little girl. Ever since I realized that I had feelings for…" Vivi trailed off into silence as a blush crawled up her cheeks.

Still, it wasn't like she had to say anything further, seeing as I managed to make the necessary connection. "Hieroglyphs… why didn't I realize sooner?" I winced sympathetically. "All this… you were stressing out and micromanaging because you were essentially setting up your own wedding, weren't you?"

Vivi nodded with a weary sigh of her own. "I just… with how things are, with the World Government and my bounty and everything… I love the crew, I really do—!"

"Never doubted it for a second."

"But…" Vivi rubbed her arm, not looking me in the eye. "I just… after everything that's happened… I wanted one thing, my childhood dream…" She smiled tearfully. "To go right… you know?"

I was silent for a second before slowly smiling and reaching my hand out to grasp Vivi's shoulder. "Vivi… no matter what, you'll always be one of my best friends in the world. You know that, right?"

Vivi's smile remained in place as she nodded.

"Then as your friend, I just want you to know I bear you no malice when I say this." I grimaced uncomfortably. "Your real wedding… is probably not gonna be much different from this."

Vivi's expression froze so hard I could hear the sound of shattering glass.

…no, wait, that was one of the light fixtures being yanked down from the ceiling.

"Excuse me?" she croaked uncertainly.

"Well… I mean, isn't it kind of obvious?" I asked as though it were, well, the most obvious thing in the world. "Think about it: as I just said, we're your friends. That means that come hell, high water or lack of invitation, we will all be attending your wedding. And considering what happened this time the Straw Hat Pirates were involved with a wedding, well…" I gestured helplessly at the chaos occurring just a few feet from us.

A most astounding explosion rang out at that instant, accompanied by a pained cry of "MY LEG!", though that last one might have been Soundbite's doing.

"Yeah, that."

For the most part, Vivi's face remained frozen in a rictus grin, though her eye did start to twitch in what I suspected was an unhealthy manner.

"But, hey!" I grinned cheerily, lightening my tone in what I hoped was a supportive manner. "Look on the bright side: no matter how much of an unmitigated disaster it is, you'll still be surrounded by your friends and family who love you very, very—!"

"CROSS."

My words died in my throat when I suddenly found myself standing in the middle of a horizon-to-
horizon desert, at the foot of a very large, very golden and very radiant throne that was flanked by an equally radiant and titanic pair of cobra statues—no, wait, they were moving. Cobras. Actual giant-ass glowing cobras.

"…eh?" I breathed in confusion, tilting my head up to look at said throne.

I was met with the sight of a figure of pure power and authority glaring down at me with near unbridled contempt.

"RUN."

"RUNNING!" I yelped, bolting out from under the table and into the chaos, leaping over the bazooka-launched cannonball that just so happened to try and occupy the space where my head was, ducking under the massive axe that tried to pass through the space where my neck was…

"GRAH!"

"GAH!"

Aaand finally wincing as Vivi bodily tackled me to the ground and flipped me over so that she was looming menacingly over Soundbite and I.

"I will feast upon your entrails," Vivi hissed at me, Lion Cutters at the ready to disembowel me so that she could offer Sanji the requisite ingredients for said meal.

I began frantically looking around for something that I could use to fend her off… and unfortunately, I found one.

"Ah… Vivi? I think that we have more pressing issues at the moment."

"Like what?"

I swallowed heavily as I slowly pointed a shaking finger over her shoulder. "Like her," I squeaked.

"YOU!"

Vivi’s rage died swift and hard as she snapped her head around in horror. "Meep…"

And believe you me, Vivi’s reaction was entirely appropriate, given her first encounter with the Matriarch of the Hiruno Famiglia not more than an hour ago.

~0~

-1 HOUR REMAINING-

"Princess Nefertari!"

I glanced up from the clipboard Vivi had handed off to me to catch sight of Arbell hastily approaching us, gnawing on her thumb with a level of anxiety uncharacteristic of someone who was wearing a furred coat and a tutu without a hint of shame. "This should be good for a laugh…" I mused.

"I COULD sure as hell use one…" Soundbite muttered, his voice unimpeded by the bundle of pens Vivi had stuck in his mouth.
"Hmm?" the princess barely glanced up from… whatever she'd been doing.

"You need to drop whatever it is you're doing, right away!"

That managed to get Vivi to snap her head up, albeit with an aggravated growl. "And why in the name of Set would I do that?"

Arbell grimaced as though she were on the edge of ralphing. "Because the Hiruno Famiglia has been sighted on the horizon and will arrive soon, and Papa wants—!

"Demands!" Hockera corrected as he jogged past us towards the front door.

"Grgh..." Arbell dragged her hand down her face. "Yes, yes, Papa demands that you be there to greet them. Best impressions and all that, for all that they're damnably wasted on those uncouth sons of..."

"Dear, your blood pressure," Salchow pleaded desperately as he came up behind his wife and rubbed her shoulders. "Best behavior, remember?"

Arbell glanced at her husband out of the corner of her eye. "Don't you hate them as much as I do?"

"More," Salchow spat with a grimace. "I just find it more satisfying to fluster them with politeness and veiled snark than get up in their faces about it. So chin up, and let's get to it!"

Vivi returned the grimace and shook her head with a sigh. "Oh, very well, if I have to. Where do you —?"

"Ah, Vivi!" I yelped, hastily stepping in front of her. "Lemme just..." I swiftly raised my hand as if to brush at her hair, causing her to flinch, and then I used my other one to snatch her monocle off before her eyes reopened. "Alright, good to go!"

Vivi blinked her eyes open and smiled beatifically. "Thank you, Cross, I appreciate it." She then grinned uncertainly. "But... um... would you mind coming with me? Just in case."

I sighed in relief as I subtly stuffed the damned eyepiece I was holding in my back pocket to be properly disposed of later. "Be right there with you."

She smiled gratefully, and a hasty bit of scrambling later—though I did spare a moment to appreciate the archway that Franky and Merry had constructed above the inner double doors—found me lingering off to the side, partly in shadow but within clear view and eyeshot of Vivi, while she and the Accino children—save for Lil, who was still in the back, most likely due to the whole 'brides and grooms' tradition—stood a short distance behind the double doors that led to the outside. They were the picture of class and etiquette, save for how Brindo and Campacino were bruised and growling at one another and Arbell was grinding her teeth like a chainsaw.

The tension was palpable, as evidenced by the temperature rapidly mounting due to a surprisingly sober-looking Don Accino marching down the aisle and grumbling acridly as he adjusted his tie. "Alright, everyone here? Good," he snorted darkly. "Now I know we hate them and they hate us, but let's just try and get through this so that we only ever have to interact through our subordinates, agreed?"

"Yes, Papa," the Accino children chorused, though my angle of view let me catch sight of them all crossing their fingers behind their backs.

"Ah... Mister Accino?" Vivi raised her finger hesitantly. "It just occurred to me now, but... am I to
assume that you've already briefed the Hirunos about our… unique situation, since you wanted me to be here to greet them?"

Accino coughed slightly and glanced to the side. "A-ctually, they think you've all gone through Lovely Land's treatment and become compliant, are thus part of the dowry and that once we're done here we'll be giving you to the Marines for your bounties."

"Ah, thank you, I just wanted to clear that I BEG YOUR PARDON!?" Vivi shrieked.

SLAM! WHOOOOSH!

Any further protest was killed by the doors to the outside slamming open via an obscenely stereotypical blast of cold air. After I got over my initial shivers from the frigid gale, I looked up and got my first look at the Hiruno Famiglia.

As the name implied, they were definitely mafia-themed, as demonstrated by the way the mooks flanking them were all dressed in spic and span suits. However, in terms of actual size, the family proper was no bigger than the Accinos, with only three individuals really standing out.

Heck, one of the three standing at the front wasn't all that scary; in fact, he was rather, well… pitiful. I mean, between the fact that he had barely any muscle on his bones, pasty pale skin, greasy black hair, sunken eyes and the way he seemed to keep twitching at anything and everything that moved, including his own shadow? I was honestly questioning whether or not one of Moriah's puppets had made a run for it. But going by the way the kid—and he was definitely a kid—barely scraped four-and-a-half feet tall? It looked like the poor bastard was our groom.

But still, for all that the kid was pitiful, the rest of his family more than made up for it by chilling me to the bone with a menacing aura that was definitely top-ten I'd encountered.

The… marginally less vile-looking of the two was a lanky male that reminded me of pre-Garp Helmeppo, if only by the aura his slicked back steel-gray hair and pince-nez gave off. Though to his credit, he was at least a little better built than Helmeppo. Still, his Helmeppo-ness was definitely emphasized by the quartet of… surprisingly identical-looking guards flanking him. All were dressed in tuxedos, and while the fact that they were all toting increasingly large violin cases would have normally made me think they were packing, the way their leader was tapping what looked to be a conductor's baton in his hand made me think twice. Honestly, I suppose it was only logical that there was someone on the Grand Line besides Brook who could incorporate music into their fighting, however much of an air of an ass he projected.

But still, for all that the guy was bad, it was the Hiruno matriarch who really sold that these were the absolute last people you wanted to mess with. She seemed to be the polar opposite of Don Accino: a midget who was only over 3 feet tall, rail thin, and clothed from head to toe in a parka of steel-blue wool, whose hood was stretched over the twin buns her lilac hair was tucked into. Her face was wrinkled like old leather, and the light smile she had on despite her pinched expression was utterly belied by the way she seemed to make me shiver just by looking at her. Overall? Cold was the best, if not only way to describe her.

Which was even more fitting, seeing as when she opened her mouth and spoke, she didn't so much 'speak' as she just flat-out breathed. "It's been awhile, Fatso."

Don Accino responded by locking his jaw, presumably to keep from biting clean through his cigar, though for whatever reason he didn't spike the temperature. "Midg—!" he started to rumble before flinching and coughing into his fist. "I mean, Hiuo."
Hiuo Hiruno's smile quirked up slightly as she swept one of her arms out. "I trust you recall my beautiful grandsons. My eldest, Pavarotto Hiruno."

I tried to turn my attention to the apparently musical bounty hunter, but the process was made a bit difficult due to the fact that he wasn't standing where I'd last seen him. Rather, he was…

"For the love of God…" I facepalmed in an effort to escape the sight of the smarmy ass kneeling before and holding the hand of an obviously disgusted Arbell.

"Ah, my star-crossed muse," he said, his voice high-pitched and reedy in that way that makes you want to punch whoever it's attached to. "I am so glad to see you again! Once this is over, I shall compose my greatest work, and spread the tale of our love across all the Blues!"

"How… nice…" Arbell bit out, only just managing to bite back her obvious bile in the process. "But as I've already told you countless times, Pavarotto… I'm already spreading the tale of my love across the Blues—!"

"With me," Salchow snarled, shoving himself between his wife and her… I'll be unduly polite and term him 'admirer'.

Said politeness became even more undue when Pavarotto blankly looked at Salchow for a moment before leaning around him to give Arbell a bemused look. "Still?"

"WELL," Soundbite whistled as Hockera and Brindo restrained a snarling Salchow. "THAT EXPLAINS the hate-on."

"Eeyup," I sighed. "Oh, this is gonna be fun…"

"And, of course," Hiuo breezed on, entirely ignoring the exchange as she waved at the kid standing at her other side, causing him to flinch fearfully. "My youngest and one of the…" I swear I heard her skin crack as she twisted her mouth into a smile. "Guests of honor, Burrato."

"Uh, a-a-ah…" Burrato swallowed heavily as he stared up at Don Accino's unilaterally massive form and met his impassive gaze, and he shakily raised his hand in an attempt to wave.

"S-S-Satisfacto-oh-no-no-I-I-I-mean-Salisb-t-t-that-is-to-say-Salut-tatio—"

Hiuo's expression didn't even shift an inch as she rammed her heel into her grandson's shin.

It was… a bit disturbing that all the poor bastard did was flinch. "Uh, G-G-Greetings."

Accino scowled, though whether it was at the Hiruno Matriarch's display or the Hiruno Matriarch period I couldn't tell you.

Ignoring said scowl, Hiuo… I think she swept her gaze side-to-side, going by how her head tilted, but it was hard to say with how her eyes were pinched shut. "So, do tell me, where is your contribution to this arrangement of ours, hm? I don't see her anywhere, and I'd very much like to pinch my cute little granddaughter-in-law."

"Doesn't she mean pinch her—?" Soundbite asked nervously.

"I doubt it…" I muttered back.

"Lil is in the back," Accino growled as he huffed out a dark cloud of smoke. "And will remain there until the ceremony, as per tradition. For now, I suggest you try and remain patient until the
preparations are finished."

"Which I assure you will be within the hour!" Vivi promised as she stepped up with a surprisingly genuine-looking smile. "It's my honor to make the acquaintance of the esteemed matriarch of the Hiruno family. I'm not sure if you recognize me, but—!"

"Oh, no, no, my dear, I assure you, I recognize you perfectly well," Hiuo simpered as she slowly reached her hand out. "Princess Nefertari Vivi, correct?"

Vivi allowed herself to relax marginally as she reached her hand out. Shockingly, Accino actually tensed at that.

"Princess, don't!" he started to protest.

Vivi looked up at him in confusion. "Wha—?"

"Worth… ¥80 Million, I believe?"

CRACK!

"YEARGH!" Vivi screamed, falling to her knees as she clawed at her suddenly blackened and corpse-like shoulder.

"Your head, that is," Hiuo Hiruno hissed, steam rising up from her point of contact with Vivi's hand as well as the hag's arm, which looked almost frosted over.

"VIVI!" I shouted, sprinting towards her.

"WAAAACK!" Carue howled as he suddenly appeared nearby, dropping from a Shave in favor of charging at the damnable witch. With every intention of doing the same, I reached into my jacket, and promptly swore as I recalled that my baton was long gone, and Funkfreed was still across the room at the gift table.

However, going by the way Pavarotto glanced at the duck and flicked his baton at him dismissively, that was probably a good thing for me. "Allegro."

SKRANG!

"QUACK!"

I was promptly proven right when three of Pavarotto's quartet suddenly surrounded Carue, bows drawn and at his neck. Violin bows, mind you, complete with full-sized violins and cellos of increasing size that I'd bet my greaves were all made of stupidly tough and, in the case of the bows proper, stupidly sharp metal. Honestly, they just proved I probably wouldn't have been able to do much anyway.

"LOOK OUT!"

SKRANG!

"Sonnuva!" I flinched back fearfully as the fourth bastard mirrored his cohorts' actions on me. Right, really couldn't have done much.

"Note to self: find a way to remotely GASTRO-BLAST WAX," Soundbite hissed murderously.

"Hell, figure out how to Gastro-Blast remotely period and I'll give you enough lettuce to fill a
hammock," I hissed back.

"Silence."

THWACK!

"HURGH!" I folded around the fist buried in my gut, breath wheezing out of me, and I was vaguely aware of Pavarotto strolling over to leer down at me.

"Impressive, aren't they?" he chuckled, condescension dripping from every syllable. "I acquired them from some... associates of ours, shall we say? In the North Blue. Indeed, my String Quartet's speed and fencing skills are rivaled only by their musical capabilities." His sneer widened as he started running his fingers tenderly over his baton. "Did you know that a good interrogation with a symphony in the background has the added effect of traumatizing the worms in question so that they can never listen to that piece of music again? Ah, to play the same piece again later on and watch them squirm..."

"Ah, b-b-brother!" Burrato attempted to protest, sidling up and laying his hand an inch above his brother's arm. "T-T-There really is no n-n-need for such r-r-repetiti-a-a-ah I m-mean s-such r-r-revoluti-uh, t-t-that is to say—!"

Pavarotto didn't even look up from his baton as he offhandedly thwacked the back of his brother's head.

"—y-yes, brother..." Burrato flinched as he lapsed into silence.

Following that, there was a tense moment as everyone eyed one another warily, broken only by the quiet groans of pain that seeped through Vivi's clenched teeth...

"Tsurarararara..."

And ultimately, Hiuo's malicious chuckling. "You should really learn to keep your pets on a better leash, Fatso," she breathed, her voice reminiscent of some unearthly wraith. "Otherwise, they might give my tender skin a scratch when we turn in their hides for the rewards. And seeing as we wouldn't want that..."

I am not ashamed to admit that I was deeply disturbed by the way the old hag's wrinkled, ancient visage morphed into a mask of icy creases with three gaping holes where her eyes and mouth should have been.

"Maybe I should just do us all a favor and neuter them wholesale..."

My heart all but stopped when she lifted her hand at Vivi's face, though that could have also been on account of the surrounding temperatures plummeting to sub-freaking zero.

"Starting with—"

"ENOUGH."

Madam Hiruno snapped her hand back with a practically vampiric hiss as the ambient temperature suddenly spiked to several dozen degrees above average, causing trails of steam to waft up from her body.

Accino was steaming as well as he glared down at the frigid witch, only he did so with righteous wrath. "Out," he spat. "Now. Before I melt you into a puddle."
The hag stared back at the Don with an unreadable look before chuckling and shaking her head. Allowing her frost to disappear, she turned away, unperturbed by the glares from the Accinos and us. "Seeing as the merchandise is at least semi-secure, we shall leave them in your hands until the ceremony. We shall wait on our ship in the meantime. Come along, everyone." She waved her hand casually as she started shuffling out. "Let us leave the Accinos to, how shall I put it… play at bounty hunting."

The stringfellows lowered their bows as Pavarotto flicked his baton at them, allowing Carue to dash over to Vivi and start to comfort her as the soldiers followed their leaders.

Burrato watched his grandmother fearfully for a moment before hastily dropping into a bow, directed at the Don himself. "M-M-My s-s-syndic-a-ah, m-m-s-s-silli-e-e-eh… m-m-my sincerest—erk!" His speech cut off as the passing Pavarotto grabbed his collar and started to bodily drag him down the aisle. The youngest Hiruno eyed his elder sibling hesitantly before settling for a meek wave at the Accinos.

The very second that the door closed behind them, Don Accino knelt next to Vivi and grabbed her blackened arm. "Hold still," he grunted disdainfully.

"W-What are you—AGH!" Vivi hissed in pain when a blast of steam shot up from her limb.

"You sonnuva—!" Carue started to squawk before Accino pinned him with a heated glare.

"Unless you want her to lose that arm," he snarled. " Shut the hell up and let me fix what that blasted shrimp did."

"And what the hell did she do!?” I demanded indignantly. "Vivi's arm looks like it came out of a ten-round match against Jack-freaking-Frost!"

The surrounding temperature increased, and the man turned a bit redder. But as he refocused his attention on Vivi's arm, the effects diminished slightly. "You're not far off of the mark," he grumbled at last.

"M-Mister Accino?" Vivi managed to groan out as her fingers slowly regained their previous color, which began to spread up the rest of the limb.

"What, you think I hate her for shits and giggles?" the 10,000 Degree Man growled darkly. "The midget's literally my polar opposite, not just in body, but in abilities. Consider yourself grateful for my aid; if it weren't for my Hot-Hot Fruit, your arm would have fallen off from the Cold-Cold Fruit's frostbite before your doctor could even think about boiling water."

"…I speak for all of us when I say we appreciate that, Don," I said slowly, shivering for a reason entirely separate from any lingering temperature the Hirunos might have left in their wake. "But why would she—?"

"Because the Hirunos are all sadistic to the core, and they love to see their prey suffer," Brindo snorted. "You know that our modus operandi is gathering pirates and treating them so that they're docile when the Marines get ahold of them. They're delusionally happy, but happy nonetheless."

"Whereas they," Campacino continued, shaking his head in disgust. "They hand over little more than corpses with heartbeats. They sneak aboard the ships of pirates upon the sea under the cover of night, destroy the lines, steering, and any navigational equipment, and then leave them adrift. Then when dawn comes, they have trained birds circle the ship carrying mirrors to direct sunlight at them,
cooking the poor bastards in their own beds."

"And just to be really mean," Hockera finished grimly, jabbing his thumb at the doors. "The entire time, that damn gaol ship of theirs is looming on the horizon, just out of firing range but always just in sight. We might gloat sometimes, but that's just bad sportsmanship right there."

I stared at the Accinos in horror before glaring at the yet-silent Don. "And you want your daughter to marry into that family of... of—!"

"'Want'!? Not on your life!" Accino barked viciously, the temperature abruptly spiking as the air around him started to waver. "But I need this marriage! The Hirunos are vicious bastards who never miss an opportunity to steal from or harass my family, attacking my men, raiding Lovely Land for our pacified bounties! And with you pirates becoming stronger and stronger, we can't afford that kind of interference! That's—!"

"Ah, M-Mister Accino!" Vivi hissed, flinching away from him as his rising temperature started to burn her newly rejuvenated arm.

The Don glanced at her before straightening himself up with a hard snort, his anger hanging around him like a haze. Actually, wait, no, that was a proper heat haze rising around him. "Cooperation," he growled as he loomed menacingly, scorching holes in the carpet at his feet. "Or extermination. Our only options. Should the ceremony go as planned, I'll let you all go as wild on the Hirunos as you want before you get the hell out of here. Now get back to work so that we can go down the path where we all live."

And with that, he stormed away. I took a couple of seconds to force down my newfound empathy for the Accinos and hatred for the Hirunos before I moved over to Vivi's side. "Are you alright, Vivi?"

The princess blinked at me, then looked down at her arm, grimacing uncomfortably as she flexed her joints. "Mmph... it's numb and I've got pins and needles up my arm, but I think that any lasting damage has been undone. I'll check with Chopper before I get back to supervising things..." She looked back up, her eyes glinting. "But before that, we've got one more thing to do."

I followed her line of sight and nodded in agreement. "Yeah, I get you. C'mon, let's—!

"Uh, wait real quick. Blue twin? Quick question," Soundbite asked uneasily as he glanced upwards. "THOSE TRAINED BIRDS THE HIRUNOS USE... THEY WOULDN'T HAPPEN TO BE VULTURES, would they?"

Both twins blinked. "Actually, yes. Their natural ominousness only underlines their menace, and they get their pickings of any bountiless cadavers the Marines don't want. Why do you ask?"

"...NO REASON. Hey, Cross, just humor me, would you? Take two... three steps back?"

I promptly did so, hauling Vivi with me...

CRASH!

Just as a light fixture landed where I had been standing two seconds prior. A quick glance up revealed what I really should have expected: two vultures sitting upon the rafters, staring at me with... wait, why did those goggles and the sheer apathy they provided look familiar?

... ah, shit.
"…I take it you're acquaintances of Miss Friday?" I managed.

"First cousins," one of the birds droned back.

"But don't worry," the other picked up, voice just as flat. "This isn't personal, we just enjoy killing pirates as a matter of principle."

"BULLSHIT ON THE PERSONAL PART, TRUTH ON THE SADIST PART," Soundbite deadpanned.

"Buzz off, buzzards," Hockera snarled, juggling a puck on his stick. "If anything wrecks this wedding, Papa and your boss are going to be furious."

"Oh?" One of the vultures tilted its head to the side just so. "You mean like you brats are planning?"

The Accino children and Vivi stiffened, but the other vulture waved its wing dismissively.

"Feh, don't worry," it scoffed. "We won't spill anything. After all, what with the chaos you're planning on raising, we'll have our free pickings of Cross's brains—" The other vulture jabbed its wing's elbow into its compatriot's side. "I mean, we'll have our free pickings of pirate brains."

"Have fun raising hell," the first vulture saluted casually, and with that the pair flapped up and away into the shadows of the rafters.

We all stared up after them before Vivi coughed heavily and pulled herself up to her feet. "A-Anyway… Carue. Get back to the gifts, this shouldn't take long."

Carue nodded hesitantly. "Good wuck, Vivi."

"And where do you think you two are going?" Arbell asked as I followed after Vivi. I paused and looked back at her.

"We're going to save your collective rear ends. Are you going to stop us?" I drawled.

She opened her mouth. Then she hesitated. Then she looked away.

"…no," she said at last.

"I didn't think so."

And with that, we both began powerwalking down the hallway, until we came to a small shrine for the Virgin Mary where Don Accino was attempting to keep his calm. A feat that was clearly made difficult by our intrusion, based on the fact that the nearest candles flared three times hotter.

"What is it?" he growled, not even deigning to look back at us.

Soundbite and I cast uneasy glances at Vivi, but she didn't even flinch at the attention.

"You mentioned earlier that you were going to attempt to 'get hammered', but when you came out to greet the Hirunos, you were stone cold sober." She said it as a statement, rather than a question.

Don Accino started to turn his head…

"You accomplished that by flaring your temperature and boiling all of the alcohol from your body."

And promptly went ramrod still.
Vivi wasn't even close to finished. "The reason you always go shirtless is that your sweat flash-boils on contact with your skin, and if you wore a shirt, either the moisture would weigh you down or the steam from your collar would cause you to asphyxiate. And when you're alone with your children, you always find your temperature automatically regulating itself to the approximate heat of a campfire: warm and comforting, so that they feel safe."

The Don slowly lumbered around to stare at us, his expression and temperature flickering between hesitant uncertainty and outrage. "How," he growled out furiously.

Vivi, however, met his stare head on. "Don Accino, earlier you said that you're only going through with this wedding because you don't see any other choice to provide for your family's well-being and maintain your bounty-hunting career, with the increasing strength of pirates and the Hirunos harassing you at every turn." She placed her hand on her chest. "I can give you that choice."

The heat dimmed slightly as Accino's anger faded to something of a flat look. "I hope that you don't intend to offer me a position on your crew."

"Trust me, that idea appeals as little to us as it does to you," I stated with a flat look of my own. "But no, this isn't Straw Hat business." I swept my arm out to indicate Vivi. "It's Alabastan business."

Vivi crossed her arms, eyes filled with determination and gaze locked with the Don. "Given the severance of ties with the World Government, the Kingdom of Alabasta still recognizes me as its princess. And with the authority of that title, I would like to offer you the country's highest honor and authority outside of the royal family itself: that of one of the country's Royal Guardians."

Don Accino's eyebrows rose, his anger fading completely in favor of curiosity. "In spite of me not being a Zoan like your current two Guardians?"

That actually got a blink from me. "Wait, how—?"

"Chaka the Jackal and Pell the Falcon, worth ₳50 and ₳55 Million respectively," Accino deadpanned.

"…Right," I coughed into my fist.

Vivi, who I guess had been keeping up with the news of her country more than me, just smiled as she shook her head in denial. "I'm offering the position because you're not a Zoan. You see, the reason I know so much about the finer mechanics of the Hot-Hot Fruit is that in my country, it has another name: the Rage of Alabasta. Your powers are one of my kingdom's national treasures, right alongside Chaka and Pell's…." Her smile twitched slightly as her hand clenched into a murderous grip. "And Crocodile's."

Even behind his sunglasses I could see when Accino blinked in surprise before slowly looking down at his hands. "My powers… are that significant?"

"I can name no fewer than seven instances where your powers have saved my nation and its people, and those were just the instances where its user acted alone," Vivi confirmed with a wistful smile, before shifting to solemn.

"The Rage was lost to us several centuries ago, when it was stolen by pirates and taken out to sea. And now that I've finally found it again…" Vivi reached into her pocket, withdrew a familiar-looking hourglass-shaped object and held it out to the Don. "I've kept two Eternal Poses to Alabasta with me as a reminder of my home. If you would be willing to travel to and live in Alabasta, I would entrust this one to you so that you could make the voyage. Now more than ever, my father would be
grateful beyond measure for your return, and he would be willing to offer you and your family lodgings in the royal palace and all of the luxuries afforded of it. As one of the country's guardians, you would be loved and respected by everyone in the kingdom, and you would have no shortage of fights to preserve your lifestyle, especially in these trying times. Your powers will be at their absolute strongest in the desert, both day and night, and you would have access to all records of past users, to understand the full extent of your abilities."

"And if you're worried about your collection, don't be," I piped up. "Not only will there always be pirates utterly stupid enough to try attacking Alabasta, but with the Marines as your enemy, you'll be able to double your collection. Marine flags might be uniform, but you gotta admit, there's gotta be something appealing about the idea of collecting the coats of officers, no?"

Accino's lips quirked upwards in a brief smirk, then his expression shifted back to neutral.

"I will admit, the offer is very appealing," the Don admitted. "But aside from your knowledge of my powers, however admittedly in-depth… how am I to be sure that you're not simply fabricating everything else, trying to save yourself?"

"If I may?" I piped up, then powered on before Vivi could open her mouth. "You said yourself that you've been listening to the SBS since the first day with almost religious fervor, right? Well, based on that, answer this: would Vivi, almost universally loved in her home nation Princess Nefertari Vivi of Alabasta, lie about this?"

Vivi's attention returned to the Don, whose expression was quickly fading into serious contemplation. Seeing that, she smiled, and tucked the pose back into her pocket.

"I'll give you the time you need to think about it. In the meantime, however, we'll continue on the deal we've already made."

She bowed, then began walking back out of the room, and I followed behind her.

"Well, I'd say that went as well as it could have," I cheerfully observed.

"Agreed," Vivi nodded thoughtfully. "Given the drastic change in lifestyle, I wouldn't expect him to accept right away, but given the… alternative…" She shivered, then shook her head. "Either way, though, until he accepts, we need to keep the plans going, if only so that the Hirunos don't suspect anything."

I nodded in agreement, and with that, she raised her monocle to her eye and—

I snapped my hand to my back pocket, and paled when I found the damned piece of glass to be absent. "Ohh, shite." I only had enough time to realize just how utterly I was screwed before she snapped her gaze back to me and practically pinned me like a bug.

"So, the next orders of business. Cross, I am going to the kitchen both to tell Sanji to start laying out what food he's finished preparing and to have Chopper look over my arm. You go find Nami, and tell her to recruit Arbell if she's willing so that we can all have appropriate attire for this event. I'll send Chopper to help if he's available, but whatever happens, I won't have us looking like we walked in off the streets. And finally…" She leaned in to snarl in Soundbite's face. "Find. Luffy."

"I-I-I've been trying!" he whimpered fearfully. "BUT I CAN'T HEAR him anywhere! It's like HE'S PULLED A ZORO, OR A NAMI!" He then glanced away and muttered out of the corner of his mouth. "Or a you."
"What was that?"

"YOUR HAIR LOOKS NICE!" Soundbite sang.

"Less using your eyes, more using your damn ears," Vivi ordered irritably. "And don't you stop until you find that rubber monkey! Am I clear!?"

"Crystal," I managed to sigh rather than bite out.

Nodding, Vivi swept past me and out of the room. As soon as she was out of earshot, I looked at my partner, and pitched my voice low enough that even I couldn't hear it, while at the same time minimizing the movement of my lips.

"Alright, real first things first: keep an eye on that Burrato fellow. I might pity the hell out of him, but the last thing we need is for him to pull a runner…" I coughed a chuckle into my fist as a thought occurred to me. "Or worse, for him to accidentally slap the ring on a corpse."

"Not a fan of Tim Burton?"

"Oh, no, I am." I shuddered dramatically. "I'm just not a fan of the idea of running through his works twice in a row."

"…I dunno if that sounds FUN OR TERRIFYING."

"The answer, as it should ever be, is yes. Anyway…" My gaze hardened. "Connect me to Conis."

Soundbite promptly cut his laughter off in favor of our gunner's curious gaze. "Cross? What's wrong? We just saw the Hirunos leave, is everything alright?"

"Well, that depends," I borderline snarled. "Do we have any explosives that can be easily and quickly remotely detonated?"

"Uh… yeah, Usopp, Chopper and I came up with the idea a while back, and we've got a dozen or two working prototypes in Sunny's hold, and... we think that the detonator we worked up with what Soundbite told us about radio waves should work. Why do you ask?"

I turned a glare in the general direction of the object of my ire. "Because Madam Hiruno decided to try and rot Vivi's arm off with frostbite for shits and giggles."

Conis was pointedly silent for a second before slowly glancing to the side. "So, I'll just go ahead and tell Boss and his students to line their ship's keel, then?"

"Yeah, you go do that," I agreed, moving to chop my hand across my throat before a thought occurred to me. "Oh, and if the penguins try to stop them, tell them the order came from Arbell. It's technically true anyways."

"Will do," she nodded, and with that the connection was dropped.

My partner grinned wickedly as I turned around. Then I paused, and spoke again as I started walking, this time not bothering to be quiet. "One more thing: pass on a message to the TDWS…"

As I walked and talked, I worked to suppress a sadistic grin from spreading across my face. This whole thing was shaping up to be one hell of a blowout.

The only potential major hurdle I could think of would be staying out of that Cold-Cold witch's way, but c'mon, how hard could that be?
I really, really needed to hold that seminar on taunting Murphy and why not to do it, even if I even
had to practice it in my damned thoughts. Of course, that was assuming I made it out of this alive,
anyway.

Which I was sort of concerned about, as evidenced by both Vivi and myself inching backwards
away from the demonic incarnation of the seventh damned ring itself. Seriously, Aokiji was more
inviting than the ice-laden pint-sized hag who was freezing the ground and advancing on us at the
same rate we were scrambling back from her.

"I'm going to take my time with your crew," Madam Hiruno hissed. "I've been slow with many in the
past, but you… for this insult, I swear that you will be special. I'm going to kill you. All of you. One
by one, slowly enough that your blood will have long congealed before you die of starvation and start
to—!"

"WHAT'S WRONG, KERATIN ASS!? IT'S ALMOST LIKE YOUR AIM IS AS BAD AS
YOUR STUDENTS!"

"SUCK AN EGG, LEAD WING!" SLAM!

In spite of ourselves, all three of us glanced to the side, where Boss and Skipper had apparently
gotten into a brawl. Which seemed to have resulted in the floor caving beneath Boss' strength as he
slammed his rope-dart down onto the spot where Skipper had been standing on the Franky-grade
food table moments earlier. Which seemed to have turned it into a seesaw, sending the cauldron of
'punch' (or, as I preferred to more accurately call it, freshly cooked lava) flying up and up and up, and
then it started falling. Upside-down. Right towards us.

"MOVE, DIPSHITS!"

Thanks to Soundbite's ear-rending interjection, Vivi and I managed half-scramble, half-leap away
from the cauldron's point of impact. Hiuo Hiruno, however, rooted to the floor as she was by her
layering of ice, did not.

Point of fact? She was the point of impact, the cauldron slamming down on exactly the spot she was
standing through some insane twist of fate and utterly engulfing her in its unholy liquids.

There was a singular, brief moment of silence, even in the roaring madness of the church-
encompassing brawl, and then…

"YEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEARGH!" the witch's screech of unholy agony all but rent the air. "IT
BURNS! IT BUUURNS! THE AGONY, THE AAAGONY! I'M MELTING! MEEEEELTIIIIING!"

Soundbite winced at the screams before snickering. "I WILL NOT HAVE WHAT SHE'S
HAVING!"

The little imp's tar (or 'punch', either or) black humor kickstarted my mind back into action, allowing
me to grin maniacally as I turned my gaze to the nearest combatant and raised a finger. "Check,
please!"

"YOU!"

"Oi, this guy…” Soundbite and I chorused under our breaths, glancing up at Pavarotto. The Hirunos'
conductor, much like the rest of the Hirunos, honestly, had seen much better days. His dignified
sliminess had been reduced to pathetic shreds under an earlier onslaught that had left him with tattered, stained, burned clothes and livid red blistered skin everywhere else.

In hindsight? I think that the raging shiner I gave him right when shit hit the fan might have been overkill.

"You… You raging bastards…" Pavarotto huffed and wheezed breathlessly. "When I'm… through with you…" He shakily raised what was left of his baton at us. "You're not going to be fit… for mince—!"

"SHUT IT!"

THWACK!

"Ooooh…" Soundbite and I winced sympathetically as a haymaker from Vivi laid the conductor out flat. Yeah, if he wasn't fit to be swallowing teeth before—?

Vivi snorted fiercely as she glared at the downed bounty hunter. "Right, that's him dealt with…" She snapped her furious gaze back to me. "Now as for you."

I took a second to process that before adopting a deadpan. "Really? You really want to do this again? Here? Now?"

The flat look on her face answered that question clearly enough, prompting me to roll my eyes. And then we rammed our foreheads together and started spitting fire in one another's faces.

"If it wasn't for your freaking obsessive—!"

"It's your fault with all the sabotage you—!"

"You outright said before we started this shitfest that it wouldn't go—!"

"And how much of that was by design instead of—!"

"It's your fault, Vivi!"

"No, it's your fault, Cross!"

"NO, IT'S—wait a second," I interrupted myself, drawing back and cupping my chin with a contemplative frown. "When I really think back about it, while this chaos isn't my fault—!

Vivi hissed in a furious breath.

"It's not like it's really yours, either!"

That got a blink of surprise from Vivi, and she was silent for a second before she rolled her fingers.

"Look, in the end?" I spread my hands helplessly. "No matter how you cut it, all you did was set up the cards, and given the context you gave me, I can't really find it in me to blame you for that."

Vivi matched my frown, cupping her chin as well. "And… honestly, all you did was capitalize on the chaos once everyone started yelling, right… But, wait, if it's not your fault, and it's not mine…"

"MOVE IT, YOU TWO!" Zoro barked as he jogged past us with Luffy balanced on his shoulder.

"MMMPH! MMMPH!" Luffy hollered, struggling against the length of rope that he'd been hogtied
into.

She watched them both with a heavy sweatdrop. "And it's definitely not Luffy's, seeing as I personally cut that train of nonsense off at the pass…"

"Then the fault goes to whoever CAUSED THIS WHOLE HULLABALOO IN THE FIRST PLACE. As I recall, the exact KICKOFF WAS…?" Soundbite trailed off uncertainly.

"Oh, yeah, most definitely, we can't argue that," I nodded in agreement, surreptitiously ducking a plate that had thrown at my head in the same movement.

"But that was only the exact event!" Vivi protested. "And I don't see how that could have happened without some kind of involvement from our crew! So the real question is, who—?"

"If you're both quite finished?"

"GAH!"/"SONNUVA!"

Vivi and I both jumped in shock, on account of the ex-assassin who'd just popped up next to us.

"Freaking hell, Robin!" I snarled in her way too calm face. "Wear a damn bell, would you!"

"If you must insist on maintaining your habit of sneaking up on people and giving them heart attacks, can you limit it to non-life-or-death situations?" Vivi agreed waspishly.

"I'll take that into consideration," Robin chuckled before casting a wary glance at the ongoing brawl. "But in all seriousness, I think they're starting to break out the guns, so we should really—!"

"SON OF A FEATHER-RAT!"

I jumped at Soundbite's sudden holler and shot a glare at him. "What the hell, slimeball?! I know you've always been slow, but this is a new—!"

"NOT THAT, DILLWEED!" Soundbite roared back. "I JUST REMEMBERED! I KNOW WHAT KICKED THIS WHOLE SHITFEST INTO MOTION!"

~o~

-30 MINUTES REMAINING-

"Um, excuse me?"

Robin looked up from the book she was reading, her eyes looking around curiously…

"Down here!"

Her attention was drawn downward to a lone penguin standing at her feet and waving at her.

"Hello!" the penguin pleasantly greeted her.

"Ah, hello there." She shut her book and smiled politely. "Private, was it? Am I needed outside?"

"Ah, nonono, we've got everything handled out there, no need to bother yourself!" the penguin smiled pleasantly before looking down sadly. "I'm, ah… I'm here to ask something of a personal favor from you. You seem like a… nice enough person, I suppose, and you're not doing anything, so I was hoping… would you mind going into the back and having a quick talk with Lil?"
Robin raised an eyebrow. "You mean the youngest Accino, who's meant to be the bride of this event?"

"Ah... yeah, her..." Private scratched the back of his head, not looking Robin in the eye. "You see, nobody in the family is with her right now, and... well, considering that we penguins can't usually talk, she often uses us to vent and all that and, well, ah..." He shrugged helplessly. "Well, we're penguins. There's only so much we can do, but we... well, I, everyone else is a bit busy... I think it would really help if she had, I dunno, someone to talk to who could talk back. So..." The cute penguin grinned uncertainly. "If you wouldn't mind—?"

"There you are, Private!"

"GRK!" The penguin fearfully snapped to attention when Skipper's voice suddenly piped up, the lead penguin sliding up to his subordinate. "A-Ah, h-hey, Skipper! Sorry about disappearing like that, I-I was just, ah..."

"Ooooh, say no more, Private, I know exactly what you're doing here!" Skipper waved him off before snapping a glare at Robin. "You're here because of her."

"...eh?" Private blinked in confusion, while Robin merely cocked her other eyebrow.

"Worry not, Private, I know exactly how these things go! This menacing succubus—" He snapped his wing up at Robin. "Was trying to use her feminine wiles to trick you, poor, innocent Private, into bailing on us and joining that travelling troupe of trouser-less troubadours that passes by every few months! You know the ladies love us Fierce Penguins, and someone as cute and cuddly as you would fetch a lot of money showing off the physique I sculpted!"

Robin did not bother responding; she had enough experience with that magnitude of paranoia to know that the only reliable options were ignoring them if they weren't a threat or killing them if they were. And though she'd done a lot of dishonorable things over the years, she liked to imagine that she was above animal cruelty. At least when Soundbite wasn't involved, at any rate.

"S-S-Skipper, I'm fine, I was just—MMPH?!"

"Shhhhh sh sh sh, Private," Skipper said soothingly, a wing clamped over the rookie's beak. "I know that your poor, innocent brain must be reeling from the sheer betrayal I've uncovered, but I swear, no matter how many years of grueling, intensive therapy it takes, I will see you set straight again! Let's get started! Rico!"

"MMPH!?!" Private squawked fearfully when his wild-eyed comrade suddenly popped up next to him with a manic grin.

"Yah-huh?" the psycho-penguin squawked curiously.

"Take Private down to Kowalski and give him an 'Enies Double-Down', stat!"

"Gatcha!" Rico nodded eagerly, hoisting his comrade above his head and waddling away.

"HAAALP!" Private squawked as he fearfully and futilely flailed his wings.

Skipper nodded before snapping a glare at Robin. "And as for you." He maintained eye contact for a few minutes, and then snapped his flippers from the sides of his eyes to her. He repeated the motion a few times before finally sliding away on his stomach.

"...I will never not be amazed, will I..." the archaeologist sighed. Nevertheless, seeing as she'd
already brushed up on her musical skills, it wasn't as though she had anything better to do, and as such it wasn't that hard of a choice for her to shut her book and head towards the bridal chamber.

As she was about to enter the room, however, she paused at quiet sound reaching her ears, one that she recognized immediately. She promptly rapped her knuckles on the door. "Hello, Miss Lil? Is everything alright?"

The sound immediately cut off, and a few seconds later the door cracked open, allowing Lil to stare apathetically at Robin. "Oh, it's you," she drawled. "What do you—?"

In her usual procedure, Robin produced an arm inside the doorjamb and used it to shove Lil back, so that she could open the door and slide her way in, shutting the door behind her.

From there, however, she had to change her tactics a bit. This time, rather than immediately snapping her target's neck, she dropped into a kneeling position and drew Lil into a hug.

"W-W-What the—?" Lil sputtered in shock.

"I've had to muffle my own crying enough times that I know what it sounds like," Robin said quietly. "Take it from someone who knows: keeping it all locked away and letting it fester inside isn't a good habit."

Lil stiffened furiously at the words, before clamping onto Robin and burying her face in her shoulder. All at once, the tears started flowing, and she cried freely. Robin held the young tamer close, simply reassuring her with her physical presence.

After a few minutes of sobbing, Robin and Lil moved to sit on a couch in the room, with Robin gently rubbing the girl's back as she got her breath back.

"...Thank you. That helped," she said quietly.

"I'm glad, but what's wrong that you were crying?" Robin asked.

Lil let out a scoff filled to the brim with exasperation. "Well, the first part of what's wrong is that you're the very first person to ask me that since Papa came up with this plan in the first place!" She flailed her arms furiously. "Sure, you all know that we don't want to go through with this wedding, that we're only doing it because it's the only choice we have for keeping things safe for us. All of us know that. But despite that, nobody ever asked my damn opinion!"

But… Robin tilted her head to the side curiously. "She's correct, I take it?"

"I DON'T—!" Lil cut herself off, and continued her ranting more quietly. "I don't know. I don't want to be related in any way to the Hirunos. That woman, she's… she's a monster, but…" She lowered her head into her hand, sighing. "I hate the witch. I hate that stuck-up conductor, I hate their vultures, and I hate the rest of her brood. But Burrato… I've met him before. Went to a school with him for a while, before Papa and the witch found out that we were both going there and they leveled the place. Our similar ages are the only reason this whole farce is happening in the first place, but as much as I don't want to get married to the Hirunos…"
She groaned and trudged back to the couch, sinking into the seat. "The fact is that if we keep fighting each other, if the grudge keeps up, then he could be hurt, or worse. And if I break it off, I know that he'll probably be hurt too, and… and he just doesn't _deserve_ that. So, what do I _do_?"

Robin was silent for only a moment before smiling lightly. "So in summary, you're caught between what your family wants and what your groom _needs_. If I might be honest, it sounds like you've become your own worst enemy."

Lil shot a despondent glance at her impromptu confidant. "And how's that."

"Because now you're doing the exact same thing you complained about your family doing." Robin tapped her finger against Lil's forehead. "You're not considering what _you_ want."

Lil blinked. Then her expression became flat again. "…And what am I supposed to do if I _don't know what that is_?"

Robin chuckled softly. "Speaking as someone who has only very recently discovered what I want out of my life? I believe it will make itself clear when the time is right."

"…that is an unsatisfying, unhelpful answer."

Robin cocked her head to the side with a kind smile. "There's only one answer to that accusation: _Pirate._"

The girl scowled at that answer, but before she could respond, she was interrupted.

**CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!**

Lil glanced upward, her expression fearful. "The bells… that means…"

"Lil?"

Said girl nearly jumped out of her skin when there was a sudden knock on the room's door, and Arbell's voice came through.

"Lil, it's just about time for the ceremony. Do you want me to help you put on your dress?"

"…No. No, I'm old enough, I can handle it myself," Lil replied neutrally, looking at Robin all the while.

"Well…" Arbell hesitated before sighing reluctantly. "Alright, if you say so. Papa will be here in a couple of minutes to accompany you. I… I'm sorry that things have managed to get this far, but… I don't know why, but I honestly think that the Straw Hats will be able to pull this off."

Slowly, a smile came over Lil's face to match Robin's. "You know… I think they will too."

"Heh, glad to hear it. Well, I'll see you on the altar soon, baby sister."

"Yeah, see you soon!" Lil called out. She then listened intently to the sound of her sister's footsteps leaving before shooting a panicked look at Robin. "I was lying through my teeth, I have no idea how to put that dress on and you have, like, twenty hands and _help me_!"

-0-

**-5 MINUTES REMAINING-**
I let out a sigh of relief as I walked next to Vivi, who was slowly sliding her finger down a clipboard as she listed items off.

"Alright, let's list off. The buffet?"

I cast a wary glance at the only just not-on-fire table that I could feel heat radiating from. "Inedible for anyone on the face of the planet aside from the Don, Ace, Akainu, and possibly dragons, but complete and looking… halfway presentable." I repressed a shudder as I eyed the big black bubbling cauldron of evi—I mean punch, which was set at the end of the spread. "Though the punch especially is unsalvageable. I have no idea how it's possible to cook something hot enough to melt steel, but I'm fairly certain that Sanji managed it."

"Mmph," Vivi tsked dismissively. "The decorations?"

"Lookin' super!" Franky cheered as he struck a pose before the surprisingly fractally ornate decorations he'd set up around the hall. "Complete and reinforced against hot and cold."

"I think that the paintings I did up there should work too," Usopp nodded as he jabbed his thumb upward. "Though I still couldn't get the twins to agree on a color scheme, so I went with both. Does it look good?"

"Satisfactory." Vivi gave him an offhanded thumbs-up without even a glance. "The gifts?"

"Sowted and awwanged as best as we could manage," Carue confirmed, saluting next to the table of wrapped gifts he and Funkfreed were flanking. He then flinched hesitantly as he scratched the back of his head. "Though, ah, thewe's still a bit of an issue. Wemembah that pygmy sperm whale, da one with da tentacles? Well, ah, how ta put dis…"

"GAH!" Lassoo gasped as he jabbed his ink-stained head out from under the table, panting desperately. "It had… a friend… and it definitely had squid blood… because this pygmy humpback whale… has octopus blood…"

"Seriously, this is ridiculous," Funkfreed groused as he rooted around under the table with his trunk. "How the hell is that thing even more vicious than the sperm whale!? It has less tentacles, shouldn't the viciousness go down with the number of—YEOW!" he yelped as he snapped his trunk back. "Which one bit me!?"

"ME, YOU LEATHERY ASSHOLE!" Su yowled. "WATCH WHO YOU GROPE WITH THAT THING, DAMN IT!"

"Hweehweehwee—huh?" Lassoo's chuckling cut off in favor of a confused glance behind himself before paling. "Nononono—YIPE!" Aaaand with that he was yanked back under the table and the scuffle resumed.

"…Well, if nothing else, whoever sent those things are certainly getting their money's worth," I remarked.

"Well, as long as they're not going anywhere for now… alright. The cake?"

"A genuine masterpiece," I said sincerely, eyeing the ten-tiered pastry. "With any luck, it should serve to tide everyone over if they get hungry."

"Music?"

"Robin?" I called over to the organ.
I was answered by a very familiar tune.

"**Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor, niiice,**" Soundbite whistled.

"Yeah, it's handled," I deadpanned, trying and failing to shake the uneasy feeling that had come over me.

"Guests?"

"Nami?" I asked.

"I can see several ships fast approaching on the horizon now," she informed us, before contorting Soundbite's mouth into a grimace. "But... unless I'm counting wrong? There are about... half as many more on their way here than we originally planned. And I don't think they're here for the cake, either."

"We'll deal with them if they try anything," Vivi waved her off dismissively. "Moving on. Bride and groom?"

I jabbed my thumb over my shoulder. "Lil's in the back with her family, the Hirunos are on their ship, waiting for the appropriate time. Accino insisted that we swap who approached the altar, but I don't think it'll be that big of a deal. Ah..." I glanced hesitantly at her. "Right?"

"Mmm," Vivi waved her hand indifferently, thankfully enough. "Everyone dressed properly?"

"For the most part," I nodded, accompanied by a tug at the collar of my freshly stitched tux.

"I'll second that 'for the most part'," Boss grunted, fiddling with the rinky-dink bowtie that he and the rest of his students had been fitted with. "Though I still don't see the point of this damn high-society noose!"

"Yeah!" Mikey nodded emphatically as he yanked at his own bowtie. "We all go around naked, for Pete's sake!"

"Oh, I dunno!" Private mused eagerly as he poked his tie. "I think that these make us all look rather dashing, don't they?"

"Yeah, you would, wouldn't you?" Raphey growled darkly, looking mere moments away from wringing the penguin's neck.

"No, Private is actually quite right," Kowalski mused, drawing out his abacus and slapping its beads about. "These bowties actually serve to increase our cuteness by a factor of 6.7, our complimentality has matured by a full 105 points, and our suavity has increased by 15.78%."

"Ah... actually, if I may?" Donny flicked a few of the abacuses beads before grinning. "You forgot to carry the 6."

Kowalski eyed the results for a second before blinking. "So I did. Make that 16.22%. Thank you for your assistance."

"Heh, no proble—!

*THWACK!*

"OW!"
"No fraternizing with the enemy," Boss ordered.

"Aww, what's wrong, Bessy?"

Boss set his jaw as Skipper sidled up to him, sneering all the while.

"Can't handle your subordinates not doing every little thing you say?" the lead penguin asked. "Because that's where you and I differ! Me, I trust my boys implicitly, to always do what they have to and to never do anything stupid or dangerous! Right, Rico?"

"Eh?" Rico looked away from the bunch of swords he'd been juggling and hastily hid them behind his back with a too-wide grin. "Ah… yeh yeh yeh!"

"You monochrome little…" Boss scowled at the penguin.

"Shell-headed piece of…" Skipper leered right back.

"No fighting until we're actually done here!" Vivi ordered harshly.

"YES'M!" The pair snapped into mirrored salutes, though they were still glaring at each other out of the corners of their eyes.

"Anyway… the last item I can think of would be…" Vivi trailed her finger down the clipboard, adopting a scowl once it came to a halt. "Luffy. Whose location I'm guessing we still don't know?"

"Huh? What are you talking about? I'm over here!"

Vivi, Soundbite and I snapped our heads around to the sight of Luffy standing a short distance away, behind the cross-shaped pool, on a chalked-out X and holding a long piece of rope that ran up to the ceiling. Wait, what?

"Captain?" I asked, trying to ignore the sudden yawning chasm in my gut. "Where exactly have you been?"

"Shishishi! I've been working on this!" Luffy answered, pointing his finger upward. "See, since I knew that Sanji wasn't going to let me anywhere near the food table—"

"For the record, you mean the literally hot-as-a-volcano food table," Vivi flatly clarified.

"Yeah, that one! Anyway, I figured since Sanji and Chopper wouldn't let me near it, I'd have to get it a different way. So, I decided to be smart! I borrowed some of Franky's spare blueprints, and made this biiig contraption that'll bring all the food right over to this X!" Luffy grinned, brushing his sandal across the chalk. "So, all I need to do is yank on this rope, and then—!

"I've heard enough," Vivi interrupted. "Luffy, if you'd be so kind, would you mind standing still for a second?"

"Eh?" Luffy blinked at her in surprise. "Ah… sure thing, Vivi, why do you ask?"

"So that I can do this!"

Vivi sped over to Luffy so fast I swear she Shaved, and then… well, if there was any lingering doubt in my mind before that she was a master of rope-like weaponry, the fact that she hogtied Luffy in the small amount of rope that was within reach, in a matter of seconds, removed it.

"…welp," I drawled, eyeing Luffy's tangled form with a decent amount of awe. "That's certainly one
way to put him out of commission."

"GET ME DOWN FROM HE—MMPH?!"

Vivi dusted off her hands as she walked back over to me. "Not even he can or will chew through a gag of salt beef. And it's not technically mutiny if he hasn't completed the order."

"…Note to self: never, ever get involved in a wedding again," I muttered.

"With our luck? Fat chance."

"Actually, I think this one is actually a safe bet," I stated; after all, the only other wedding I knew of in the story was the one on Thriller Bark that never was, and wouldn't ever even have a remote chance to be if I had anything to say about it. So, given Oda's stance on romance, once this mess was over, I would never have to deal with a wedding again. And certainly not another arranged wedding made for the sake of a military alliance.

"BAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

I jumped fearfully as Soundbite suddenly started cackling at the top of his lungs like a lunatic. "Sonnuva—what's so flipping funny!?"

"I-I don't know!" Soundbite wheezed through his laughter. "I-IT FEELS LIKE I JUST HUFFED A FULL TANK OF DAMN NITROUS!"

"Well, whatever's wrong, fix it," Vivi ordered. "And once you have…"

She took a deep, calming sigh, and turned a determined look on the doors.

"Tell everyone to get into position. We're starting."

-o-

-TIME'S UP-

That done, I quickly parked myself at the head of the church, set off from the side of the altar. From there I had an excellent view of the guests filing in, and boy howdy, it was a colorful cast indeed.

For starters, Nami had been perhaps understating things just a tad. It seemed like every two-bit mercenary, bounty hunter, and Government privateer within a hundred-mile radius was crammed into the pews. And in an impressive display of the sheer influence of the Accino and Hiruno families, they had immediately divided themselves into two very well-armed camps, each taking half the pews.

The Accino side looked… dignified. Professional. There was a lot of gray hair. These guys were all veterans, their clothes subdued and well-suited for both a wedding and a battle. Weapons, ranging from mundane swords and pistols all the way up to a ten-foot-long katana and a hammer I had glimpsed that had six gun barrels built into its head, were politely stowed but easily within reach. Overall, the image of the bounty hunter the community probably liked to present: distinctive, yet respectable.

The Hiruno side was more diverse, and far less respectable. Oh, there were some guys that would have fit in on the Accino side if they added some salt to their pepper, but for the most part? They were a bunch of hooligans with weapons, hollering and jeering at the Accino side, waving weapons that were kludged together when they weren't basic crap, and dressed mostly like they'd rolled out of
bed after a week-long bender. But the universal theme? Youth. These guys were young, disrespectful upstarts throughout.

To put it another way, the split mirrored the situation of the main families eerily well. It was almost as though some greater power had planned it all. Oh, I'm going to KILL that omnipotent shitstain one day.

Speaking of main families, the key Accinos—Lil, Don, and Arbell—were parked at the altar. Don and Lil had looks of intense concentration, brows furrowed, lips pursed, and gazes looking out at nothing. Arbell, meanwhile, merely wore a mask of resigned anticipation, though a good part of that could have been due to Salchow being seated with the rest of the Accinos. Seriously, the bond those two shared was as sickening as it was heartwarming.

I have to admit, though, Lil's dress looked stunning. It was the usual bright white, and from her neck down to mid-thigh it was covered in rough ridges and surprisingly form-fitting. Below mid-thigh the skirt flared out, and it left her arms bare. A belt of roses completed the dress. The accessories were few but effective: a silver bracelet with a blue gem set in it, and the usual veiled headdress.

I had barely finished my observations when the doors to the church flew open, Burrato, Hiuo, and Pavarotto striding in like they owned the place. While the latter two looked exactly the same as they had when we first met them, Burrato was dressed in a well-fitted tux, and honestly? He looked pretty good in it. The power of a good tailor, everyone. Sadly, though, no amount of high fashion could serve to wipe away the terrified and twitchy look the poor guy had on his face.

Anyway, as Burrato started towards the aisle, Robin produced a few extra arms and set about tickling the ivories, filling the air with the dulcet sounds of… of… NIGHT ON BALD MOUNTAIN!?

"ON IT!" I cut Vivi off before she could say a word, sped along quite a bit by the room flooding with conflicting waves of hot and cold air. As such, it was straight to the organ and grabbing Robin's arms. "What the hell do you think you're doing?!" I hissed incredulously.

"Playing… music?" she asked, visibly ignorant of what the issue was. "What's wrong? I thought that was an appropriate piece?"

"An appropriate—!? Haven't you ever been to a wedding before!?" I demanded.

Robin's look fell flatter than a piece of paper.

"I mean to assassinate somebody!"

"Oh." She blinked in surprise. "Well, yes, plenty of times, but usually I was efficient enough to be done before things could actually get underway, and even if both halves of the involved parties were still alive, they never really felt like going through with the ceremony."

"Grrghghh…" I groaned. Then, shaking my head, I began flipping through the pages of the book until I came to the wedding march. "Just… play this, alright?"

Robin nodded and started playing again, and I was forced to run right back and jab my finger at the opposite page in the damn book. "The one literally titled Wedding March," I ground out. "Not Hall of the freaking Mountain King!"

Robin blinked at the sheet music for a moment before smiling sheepishly at me. "Yes, that would make sense, wouldn't it?"
I could only groan and slap my hand to my face as I started shuffling back towards the altar. "And we are off to a spectacular start…"

"Why didn't you just have ME play the damn song!?"

"Two reasons: first, it's more genuine coming from somebody actually playing, rather than from you copying it off the boob-tube—!"

"HURTFUL!" Soundbite chirped cheerfully.

"And second!…if we let you do it, then you'd probably play a version composed solely of farts."

"YEAH, I would…” the evil snail sighed wistfully.

Finally, Robin started up the appropriate music, and the Hirunos set off down the aisle. Aside from the organ, the church was dead. You could have heard a mote of dust land. Which is probably the only reason I heard an odd knocking sound, like two ceramic tiles being banged together.

"What is—" I began, only for Soundbite to pre-empt me.

"Burrato's knees. KNOCKIN' LIKE Marines without a warrant."

A glance confirmed that yes, Burrato's knees were knocking together like mad. Ah, well. As long as he got up to the altar and stayed standing long enough, it wouldn't matter.

Despite that, though, that pit in my stomach from earlier had returned full-force, and wasn't going away. I was missing something, clearly, but what? We'd done all the setup, the wedding itself was so far going just fine… what the hell else could we have done?! It wasn't until Burrato stepped up to the altar next to Lil that I realized what was going on, and I could feel my eyes popping out. And Don and Vivi, from their bug-eyed, slack-jawed expressions, grasped the problem, too.

"Where…” Vivi snarled, steadily crushing her clipboard between her hands. "In the name of Osiris' rotting. Blue. Crotch. Is the PRIEST?!” She emphasized the last word by snapping her clipboard in half.

Okay, I take back what I said earlier: this was dust-drop silence, because she was right. No priest. No priest, no wedding. A mercenary took that moment to come up to Vivi, and whispered in her ear.

"WHAT IN RA'S NAME DO YOU MEAN 'THE PRIEST IS GONE'?!" Vivi would have roared if Soundbite hadn't had the forethought to slash her volume.

"W-W-We tried to tell you earlier!" the mercenary stuttered. "Apparently, he thought that your crewmate's epithet of 'D-Devil Child' was literal, and he—!"

I caught Vivi's arm before she could successfully grab the poor mook's neck. "Run, now," I hissed. Thankfully, the poor bastard had the brains to do just that.

Vivi wrenched her limb from my grip and threw her hands up in exasperation. "Well, we're going to need a replacement, then."

She then promptly turned towards ME?! "Take the damn book, get on the altar, and do this thing."

"Ah-buh-I-you—WHAT THE FUCK?! How the hell am I qualified for this?! I don't have any
authority here! In case you forgot, I got these—!" I held up my metal-encased arm and waved it in her face. "Rejecting the existence of God! You should know, seeing as you were there!"

"The captain of a ship has the authority to marry people," Vivi frigidly informed. "But seeing as he’s…"

"MMMMPH!"

"Indisposed at the moment, then that privilege goes down the chain of command. I wouldn’t put Zoro up there if he was the last man on earth; Nami’s a woman and while the church might be liberal it’s not that liberal, so that just leaves you."

"But—!" I tried to protest, but Vivi cut that train of thought off when she grabbed my collar and dragged me in close.

"So either you go and get on that pillar, OR I WILL PUT YOU OVER IT!"

I was a wee bit confused by that threat… uuuntil I noticed the fact that my namesake was hanging over the altar, which was my signal to get a damn move on!

So saying, I hastily ran up the steps to the altar, snatched up the Bible, turned around, and found myself facing a sea of rather unhappy-looking individuals.

"…Soundbite, think you can feed me the jargon?" I hissed desperately.

"TOO MANY VARIATIONS! Wrong one and we’re screwed!" Soundbite shot back before glancing down at the good book. "ISN’T THAT THING FAMOUS FOR HAVING ALL THE ANSWERS!?"

"Worth a shot," I conceded, flipping the book open to the table of contents. I knew that this was a one in a million shot, but—wedding vows section!?! I was grinning ear to ear as I flipped to the appropriate page. Hell, it looks like I might have been wrong in my beliefs all al—!

My eye twitched furiously as I found the appropriate page.

Nope, still right. Maybe back home I could be wrong, but here? Definitely no God. There was definitely a devil though, and one who had my name on speed dial.

The reason for these blasphemous thoughts? Because apparently, where most people found their strength in the Lord, the previous owner of this book found it in the damn flask he’d managed to stash by cutting out the pages!

"Soundbite?" I growled as I very slowly closed the book's covers.

"Yeah?"

"If we make it out of this alive, remind me to ask you-know-who to make that priest allergic to alcohol."

"Can do."

Still, pissed as I was, the fact remained that I was standing in the crosshairs of a damned army of bounty hunters, so either I let something come out of my mouth, or I'd be getting a bullet in my skull.

Years of sitcoms, don't you dare fail me now!
"Ah… d-dearly beloved," I started hesitantly. "W-We are gathered here today, with the purpose of joining the scions of these two, uh…" I felt a sweatdrop weigh on my head as I tried to come up with an appropriate description. "Honorable families in blessed matrimony. So, uh… uh…"

My blood ran both hot and cold as the leaders of the two families glared at me, but no amount of terror could make my mind draw anything but a damn blank. Damn you, years of sitcom, why the hell did you have to fail me now?!

…fuck it, I was a dead man anyway, might as well ram it in.

"Do you?" I asked.

There was a moment of stunned silence as Lil and Burrato exchanged confused looks, and then Lil slowly raised a finger. "Er… what?"

I sent a miserable glance skyward. "Want to get married?" I groaned.

Aaaand just like that I felt like I was getting simultaneously burned alive, frozen solid, and stabbed in the back of my head. Son of a bitch, if I wanted to make it out of this alive, I'd need the luck of the Irish!

Lil's face went blank, her body frozen in its previous position and a myriad of thoughts clearly rushing through her mind. Finally, she bowed her head, the shadows hiding her eyes. "…No."

I twitched as I tried to process what I'd just heard. "Come again?"

"I said no." Lil snapped her head up, a fire blazing in her eyes. "No, I don't want to get married!"

Screw the Irish, I was going to need the luck of the damn devil!

Especially seeing as Hiruno and Accino were ramping the temperatures in the room to Ragnarok levels.

"I suggest that you reconsider your words, you little—!" Hiuo started to hiss murderously.

"If you lay one hand on my daughter, I swear that you won't leave this building alive if it means I have to go down with you," Don Accino promised. Then he turned to face his daughter, the temperature dropping to marginally more comfortable levels. "And Lil—!"

"I'm not doing it, Papa!" Lil snapped, shaking her head.

"Lil," he… not quite pleaded, but still. "Your family needs you to—!"

"No, you want me to do it for the family, Papa!" she interrupted. "And this entire time, through this entire ordeal, you haven't asked me even once what I wanted! Has it even occurred to you that even if this could help our family, I don't want to get married yet?"

"Lil, without this marriage, our family—!" the Don started to protest.

"I want our family to survive, Papa, I do," Lil reassured him before scowling at Hiuo. "But more than that, I want our family to live. And that's not going to happen if we have to work with a monster who's barely a step above those we hunt!"

"You little—!" Hiuo started to snarl.

"BACK. OFF," Accino shot back, looming ominously over the midget.
"Burrato, what about you?"

Both of the temperature titans turned their attention back towards their children, as the would-be bride spoke to the would-be groom, who had raised his head in response to Lil's voice.


Lil's expression fell flat, and she beckoned him towards her with her finger. "Burrato, you mind leaning down for a second?"

"Eh? Uh, s-s-sure," Burrato nodded shakily as he did just that. "W-W-Why d-d-do you—?"

Lil grabbed his cheeks and dragged him close so that she was staring him dead in the eyes. "Burrato!" she ordered. "I am asking you, ordering you if I have to, to pull yourself together! For five minutes! Can you do that? Can you grow a pair for five minutes?"

Burrato's mouth silently worked as he tried to come up with a response, any response to his bride-to-be, finally screwing his eyes shut. "I… no." He spoke quietly, but with an unmistakable stout foundation. "No. I don't want to get married, either."

"WHAT," Hiuo grit out.

"Do shut up, brother!" Pavarotto snarled, shooting his hand into his jacket for his baton. "You obviously don't know what you're—!"

"No, brother, I do know what I'm saying!" Burrato snapped, wheeling around and jabbing his finger in his sibling's face. "And what I'm saying is that I'm done staying under you and Grandmother's heels! A-All my life I've let you bully me, let you push me around. B-But now…" Burrato glanced back at Lil for a second before returning his glare to his family. "But now I'm done! I'm done being your whipping boy! Heck, I'm done with this entire family! I don't want to be a bounty hunter, and I'm not going to be one!"

Burrato raised his chin proudly as he thumbed out the edges of his jacket. "I'm going to follow my lifelong dream! I'm going to be…" He jabbed his finger out towards the horizon. "A mortician!"

My eye twitched in disbelief. "Come again?"

"Fun fact, you were right on the MONEY EARLIER!" Soundbite chuckled. "HE WAS MAKING A BEELINE FOR THE CRYPT BEFORE I scared him off!"

I slapped a hand to my face. "Oi vey…"

"Good for you, Burrato!" Lil exclaimed, clapping him on the back with a somewhat heady smile. "And hey, no matter what happens? Even if we're not going through with this, I still really like you! So… let's promise to always be friends, alright?" She concluded by holding out her pinkie to her counterpart.

Burrato smiled kindly as he knelt down and hooked his own pinkie around hers. "Friends," he promised.

Lil nodded happily. She then turned to smile at her sister. "And Arbell, I… honestly, I'm really grateful you tried to get the Straw Hats to sabotage the wedding—!

"SH-SH-SH-SHUT IT!" I hissed, desperately jerking my hand across my throat.
Lil froze, the blood draining from her face as she realized what she was saying. "Ah... w-w-what I meant to say was—!

"YOUR BITCH DAUGHTER TRIED TO DO WHAT!?" Madam Hiruno screeched, her voice as strident and chilling as a gale from a blizzard.

Accino's face went blank, and he nudged Lil over to Arbell. "Sweetie, would you mind watching over your sister for Papa real quick? Two seconds, Papa promises."

"Uh..." Arbell blinked in confusion as she took ahold of Lil's shoulders. "Of course, Papa, but why —?

Aaaaand just like that Accino was tackling Hiuo, his excess of mass taking her clean off the altar. "PREPARE TO BECOME A PUDDLE, FROST MIDGET!"

"I'LL TURN YOU INTO A GLACIER, YOU BLAZING MAMMOTH!"

And with that, the two flared their powers, the temperature differences clashing like angry weather fronts, throwing up a massive wave of wind that threw the church into disarray.

Aaaand of course, both sides of the wedding were starting to gear up and eye one another like lapsed vegetarians eyed fresh meat, because why the hell not?

…eh, forget it. Time for Plan B… or was it A… C, I think? Screw it, I'm just gonna blow this mother sky high.

"RIGHT!" I shouted suddenly, gathering as much attention to myself as I could. "With all that said, by the power vested in me by the Jolly Roger of the Straw Hat Pirates!" I flicked my wrist and gripped the makeshift detonator Conis had slipped to me. "I pronounce this wedding fucked!"

And with that, I clicked the button and...

Load a nothin'.

I blinked in confusion, looking the device over before repeatedly hammering the button. Still nothing.

"Work, you stupid—!"


I glared at him as I jabbed the detonator in his face. "Well, if you think you can do better—!"

CRUNCH! BOOM!

I blinked stupidly as I processed both the fact that Soundbite had bitten clean through the detonator and that a titanic explosion had shaken the air.

"...Point to you," I admitted.

"Heehehechechohoho!"

"Aaaand as for you, I just sank your ship! Booyah!" I jabbed my finger in Pavarotto's until-now-stunned face.

Said face promptly contorted into a mask of rage as he shot his hand to his baton. "Jeremiah Cross,
you son of a—!

I shoved the Bible I was holding in his face, my armored right hand on the back cover. "The power of Christ compels you!"

SLAM!

"GWAH!" Pavarotto reeled in shock as a surprisingly sturdy flask slammed into his face and bowled him over.

"Also Impact," I chuckled as I waved my hand out before pausing and sniffing at the air. "...and vodka, apparently."

The room stilled in stunned silence for a moment, broken only by the family heads' continued clash... and that just wouldn't do, would it?

"Well, what the hell are you all waiting for?!" I demanded. "You were all set to murder each other not five minutes ago! Where'd all that enthusiasm go?!"

Boss and Skipper eyed each other, and in identical smooth motions ripped off their bowties.

"Right here," they growled in unison. And with that, they blurred out of sight before colliding in midair, flipper to flipper, accompanied by a visible shockwave of air that flipped wigs and unoccupied pews alike.

Aaaand that was the official cue for the chaos to start. Weapons were drawn and fired, and I promptly had to duck under a hail of bullets that shredded the top half of the altar.

"DEATH FROM ABOVE!"

I glanced up and damn near voided my bowels as I saw that the earlier hail of bullets had reduced the rope holding the big cross above the altar to a few threads. And with my luck?

The rope snapped the instant I threw myself forward, skidding on the floor of the church and hastily ducking behind a pew as the massive cross smashed into the altar, reducing it to splinters.

I panted desperately in an effort to get my breath back as I leaned back against just one of the many pews that had been flipped in the chaos. "Y'know, in hindsight?" I mused, casting a glance over my cover at the madness raging a few meters away. "I don't know why I expected, even for a second, any outcome other than this."

~o~

"Ooooh..." Vivi and I chorused in realization, before slamming our fists over Robin's skull. "THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT!"

"Ow!" Robin flinched and grabbed at the point of impact, glaring indignantly at us. "What on earth did you do that for!?!"

"You're the one who told Lil to do what she felt like!" Vivi spat.

"And because of that, the tyke had the bright idea to stand up for herself in front of Momma Hypothermia! I almost got roasted and frozen in the same damn breath!" I added.

"And that sparked off THIS ENTIRE DAMN POWDERKEG!" Soundbite concurred.
"IN SUMMARY, THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT!"

"Ah…” Robin flinched, glancing side to side in obvious search of an escape route. "I was merely sharing the advice Cross shared with me with her?"

"You would have learned that lesson with or without me," I drawled. "Try again."

"Er…” Robin slowly inched backwards, Vivi and I following her step for step. "We were… aiming to ruin this wedding anyway, so I didn't do anything wrong?"

"Alright, first off," Vivi huffed, snapping a finger up. "Not only did you ruin my dream wedding—!"

I promptly slapped the Princess upside the head, an action she didn't even react to.

"And second—" She raised a second finger. "You caused all of this shit to go down while we were still in the firing line! That ice witch almost froze us solid! What do you have to say about that!?"

"Ahhh…” Robin held a finger up for a moment before sighing and hanging her head. "My mind's a blank."

"Both of our chores, on your own," I deadpanned.

"For a month," Vivi blandly concurred.

"Grgh…” Robin moaned, dragging her hand down her face.

"Oi, Robin!"

All three of us were then broken out of the argument by Zoro's shout.

"Hurry up and get those three out of there!" the swordsman barked. "Once I cut Luffy down and the love cook breaks up Boss and that penguin, we're gone!"

For a moment, Vivi and I were silent, and then Soundbite decided to chime in. "Wait... YOU MEAN YOU LET US ARGUE this whole time when WE WERE SUPPOSED TO BE LEAVING?!!"

"Hardly let," Robin very reasonably pointed out as she massaged the bridge of her nose. "You were all so caught up in your own outrage that I couldn't get a word in edgewise."

Vivi's mouth twisted, as if she were chewing on something, and then she sent a pleading glance my way, to which I could only shrug. "What? She might have started this mess—!"

"I get it," Robin said wearily.

"—but that doesn't mean she's wrong."

"Let's… let's just go," Vivi groaned, kneading her forehead. "So, how do we clear—"

"Clutch."

A chorus of snapping bone sounded out, and Vivi and I poked our heads above the table we'd been huddled behind to see all the combatants in a ten-foot radius lying in pretzels on the deck.

"That works," I said, before scrambling for the exit, Vivi and Robin hot on my heels. Still, despite the urgency I couldn't help but risk a look back, and so I spotted Zoro attempting to undo the rope
"JUST LIKE ERUMALU, ISN'T IT BESSY?"

"FIRST OFF, IT'S NOT ERUMALU UNTIL I SHOVE YOUR BEAK THROUGH THE DAMN WALL, AND SECOND, KNOCK IT OFF WITH THE DAMN NICKNAMES!"

—as well as Boss and Skipper still fighting.

"You didn't break them up?" I asked as we reached where Sanji was waiting with the TDWS.

"GO, BOSS, GO!"

"You kidding me?" Sanji drawled. "I've broken up enough fights on Baratie to I know that that's one I do not want to get involved in."

"Good luck, Skipper!/ "Use the San Faldan Gambit! The San Faldan!"/"WOOHOO! HAHAHA!"

"Fair enou—eh?" I blinked in surprise at the trio of penguins standing amicably next to the TDWS. "Wait, aren't you supposed to hate each other's guts?"

"Not really," Private shrugged indifferently. "Honestly, I think that Boss and Skipper are the only ones with any real issues with each other."

"Yeah!" Mikey nodded in agreement, a wide grin on his face. "Me? Once I get past their general douchiness, these guys are pretty cool!"

"Right back at you!" Private laughed, exchanging high fives with his shell-wearing counterpart.

"...huh," I stated intelligently before shrugging and returning my attention to the bloody but ultimately unremarkable brawl between the wedding guests (did I really just say that?). As for the main players, Pavarotto's quartet was surrounding his severely battered form and fending off anyone who came close, on purpose or by accident, though it looks like they'd slipped up a bit because Salchow managed to slip past them and land a People's Elbow on his gut, and Arbell was oooh that's gotta hurt, especially with those high heels she was wearing...

Anyway, Hockera was over by the buffet table, using the inedible but very hot items upon it to shoot down the vultures that had flown in, Burrato was standing off to one side by Lil, looking as timid as ever but showing exactly why the Hirunos kept him around by laying out anyone who came near with a single punch (and apologizing profusely for each one), and the Hiruno matriarch, last I'd seen her, was still trapped in the cauldron...

…which was starting to frost over oh shit—!

"DOWN!" I yelled, throwing myself to the ground and everyone else following my lead.

And not a second too soon, because as soon as we hit the deck?

**BOOM!**

The cauldron literally exploded in a blast of frigid air and ballistic black shrapnel, revealing a figure somehow even more nightmarish than the one I faced earlier. Not only was the three-holed soulless mask back, there were enough black holes in the midget's form to confuse her for a zombie. One eye even seemed to be melted closed, but the other, shining with raw malice, more than made up for it.
"SSSSSTRAAAAAW HAAAAATSSSSS…" she howled like some kind of banshee, the ambient temperature dropping so hard and so fast that I could feel frost forming on me. "WHEN I GET THROUGH WITH YOU… THE MARINES WILL HAVE TO LITERALLY PUT YOU BACK TOGETHER! PIECE BY FROZEN—!"

"Heat Whirlwind!"

That was all the hag was able to get out before a blast of hot air slammed into her and threw her across the room. Don Accino snorted darkly as he eyed the point of impact, and once he was sure she wasn't getting up immediately turned back to us, his temperature holding stable at a relatively reasonable range. Reaching behind him, he pulled out and presented a black bundle.

"Princess Vivi," he grunted. "In light of recent… events, I think it would be prudent to give your offer sincere consideration." He held up the bundle and shook it slightly. "Care to trade?"

"Ah, o-of course, Don!" Vivi nodded eagerly, digging out the Eternal Pose she had offered earlier and tossing it to the Don, while the Don tossed the bundle he was holding—!

"GAH!"

Right at me, bowling me over with it because damn was he strong. Though, in fairness, it wasn't entirely his fault, seeing as my transceiver was pretty damn heavy. At least our flag had cushioned the blow.

The Don nodded, pocketing the pose before turning back to where ice and frost were starting to encroach up the church's wall. "Much appreciated, now hurry up and get going. I'm going to settle things with the midget once and for all, the only way I know how. Temperature Up: 10,000 Degrees!" the Don snarled, the ambient temperature soaring with his lobster-red ski.

"RIGHT, GOING! BOSS!" I yelled.

"Skipper!" came Lil's yell at the same moment.

The rivals paused, looked at us, then turned back to each other, and clasped flippers, identical confident grins on their faces.

"Looks like once again, duty has drawn our duel to a close before I could finish kicking your ass, Bessy," Skipper laughed. "Next time, though? Next time you won't get off that easy!"

"Heheheh," Boss chuckled, shaking his head wistfully. "I look forward to it, Ski—!… No, you know what? I look forward to it, Skippy. I really look forward to it."

"HA! Now you've got the idea!" Skipper gave his old enemy a final clap on the shoulder before the two split apart and returned to their respective factions, with the Penguins exchanging a final round of high-fives with our guards before following after their leader.

"Well, that was fun!" Boss grinned happily. "Can't wait for the next time! C'mon, boys, let's blow this popsicle stand!"

"AYE-AYE, BOSS!" the TDWS saluted before following him.

We wasted no more time after that, running through where the double doors used to be into the antechamber and then out to the courtyard, the only part that was still relatively intact. The Thousand Sunny was at the pier, surrounded by the shattered carcass that had once been the Hirunos' ship, and
Merry was waving at us from the deck.

"HURRY UP, LET'S GO!" she called as several ropes extended down towards us. Nothing impeded us from grabbing them and getting back on the deck of our ship, and as Zoro finally cut Luffy out of his restraints and joined us, I took the time to actually take in the state of the vessel we'd just evacuated. The windows were blown out, most of the lights were out, there was a diverse array of holes and fissures in the walls and roof, and alternating pulses of hot and cold air were starting to tax… pretty much everything everywhere.

Overall, it was bad, yes, but…

"You know…" I mused, rubbing my chin. "I suppose it could be worse." I shrugged at the disbelieving looks everyone shot me. "I'm being serious! I mean, the wedding was a disaster, sure, but look!" I swung my arms out. "The ship's still floating, right?"

"Thanks, Zoro!" I heard Luffy call out, and then I saw him stretch his arm out to grab the remains of his rope contraption. "Oh, hey, the rope's still intact! Wonder if it'll still work!"

'I never thought I'd say this, but I really need to learn when to keep my fucking mouth shut,' I thought as everyone else shouted, "LUFFY, NO!"

YANK! CRASH!

My arms remained in their upright position even as I twitched furiously. "Soundbite?"

"ONLY LUFFY could do THIS by accident. LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, that was the sound of every single support beam IN THE CHURCH SPLITTING IN HALF," Soundbite stated neutrally.

And indeed, the church ship was quite literally coming apart at the seams, cracks spreading all throughout the structure before it finally collapsed into a field of barely-floating flotsam all too reminiscent of Krieg's galleon after Hawk-Eye had worked it over.

"Uhh…" A massive sweatdrop sprung to life on Luffy's head. "Whoops?"

"...RAAAAGH!"

"GACK!"

I blinked in surprise at the familiar scream of outrage, and I turned to see a surprisingly familiar sight, save from a different perspective.

"…You know something?" I mused, cupping my chin thoughtfully as I watched an apoplectic Vivi wring Luffy's neck. "It feels weird, seeing this from the outside. Kinda refreshing, if I'm being honest."

"Healthy for her too," Chopper nodded in agreement. "Honestly, I've been contemplating assigning a few of our crewmates a stress ball for a while now, but in retrospect, this might be even better."

"Sooo… should we help our Captain, or…?" Leo questioned uncertainly.

"Boys…” Boss huffed out a cloud of smoke as he watched Vivi wring Luffy's neck. "Let this be a lesson to you all: never get between a t-ed off woman and the target of her ire if you wanna keep your shells on your backs."
"Damn straight!" Raphey laughed as she slung her flippers around the shoulders of the suddenly nervous Mikey and Donny.

"Mwahahaha!" Merry laughed down from the helm. "Well, fun as that is, I think I see a few more bounty hunters starting to climb back onto their ships! Whaddaya say we get the heck out of here?"

"Ahh… sure thing, Merry, just let us…" I slowly sidled up to my semi-rabid friend and tapped her shoulder. "Ah, Vivi?"

I nearly jumped out of my skin when she twisted her head around and tried to vaporize me with her gaze, Luffy's throat still clenched between her hands. "WHAT."

I shuddered fearfully before grinning in what I hoped was a reassuring manner. "Now, Vivi," I started slowly. "I know that we just ruined your dream wedding, and we're more than likely to do it again in the future when the real deal rolls around, and… and… uh…” I scratched the back of my head with a sheepish smile. "Aaaand I forgot where I was going with this. Oops?"

"Might wanna quit while you're behind, Cross," I heard Nami mutter behind me.

I groaned in response and pre-emptively tensed up, waiting for the inevitable explosion from Vivi—but instead, she just smiled as she wrenched her iron-hard grip open. "Jeremiah Cross," she enunciated confidently and deliberately. "You, sir, are a pearl." And with that, she turned on her heel and walked away.

I blinked slowly as I tried to process that little tidbit. "Okay…” I drew out. "That was odd. And more than a little worrying." I heard a puff of air, and turned around to see Nami desperately holding in what I could only assume was hysterical laughter. "What's wrong with you?"

"D-Do you know how pearls are formed?" she wheezed out, shaking from the effort of holding in her laughter.

"Kinda?" I hedged. "I know they form in oysters over time—"

"Through constant irritation!" Nami interrupted right before she collapsed into howling gales.

Despite the fact that the joke was at my expense, I couldn't help but be impressed. That was a clever bit of wordplay. But as I heard the door opening, I snapped my head up.

"Hey, Vivi, wait a minute!" I piped up hastily. "Quick question! About that monocle you were wearing earlier…?"

Vivi looked back at me as I took note of the subtle movement of four specific members of our crew.

"I was just wondering: is it some sort of keepsake from your family, or some other kind of treasure, or…?"

"Huh? Oh, you mean this?" Vivi produced the eyepiece in question and held it up. "No, it's just an ordinary monocle. I picked it up in Lovely Land while we were setting things up, but I actually think I might—"

"All I needed to know so that I wouldn't feel guilty later. GUARDS!"

"SPEAR OF SAINT GEORGE!"

SMASH!
"GAH!" Vivi flinched as a sai slammed through the monocle's frame, ripping it from her hand and pinning it to the mast. Mikey, Donny, and Leo then proceeded to catch the glass fragments and toss them overboard.

"FREEDOM!" the TDWS cried joyously as they fell to their 'knees', or at least their closest equivalent.

"Grgh—WHAT THE HELL, YOU DAMNED—!" Vivi started to howl.

"HIT IT BEFORE SHE HITS ME!" I shouted up at Merry.

"COUP DE BURST!"

**BOOM!**

"WAAAAAGH!"

And just like that… we were off.

~0~

One hour, a blast off, a change of clothes, and a lot of cooling down later, we were well away from the brawl going on behind us and had filled up on a good lunch, which we hadn't had the opportunity for in the midst of the ice war and then the wedding prep. But with that done…

"Alright, everyone, now that that wedding fiasco is behind us, my knowledge should be back on track," I stated, drawing everyone's attention to me and solidifying their focus as they saw my expression. "And for what's coming next, you guys are going to want to get to training, right about…" I made a show of looking over my wrist before giving them all a dark look. "Immediately. Because the clusterfuck we're sailing into? Best case scenario we make out like the Davy Back Fight—the Backfight itself, I mean, not the shitfest that came after—whereas worst case… not as bad as Enies, but easily a close second."

A long silence followed, during which most of those on the crew looked at me in significant askance, with the obvious exceptions of my partners. Then Vivi spoke.

"And… how necessary is it that we go through with it, Cross?" she asked tersely. "I mean… I know we've done a lot of good in the past, but, well… is there any chance we can skip past it for once? Just, I don't know, spare ourselves some pain?"

"Well, technically, we could try, but there are a lot of interesting things that we'd be missing." I looked at Luffy, the question clear in my expression. After a moment of tilting his head side to side, he nodded with a wide smile, prompting me to smile right back and start counting on my fingers.

"Let's see… we'll be freeing over a thousand people from all over the world from living cursed half-lives—"

"Right, then. Carue, we have weapons to sharpen," Vivi interrupted, marching over to the pavilion, the duck directly on her heels.

"Oh, here, allow me!" Conis offered, rapping her knuckles against one of the pillars of the structure and drawing up our arsenal.

"Might I recommend the rough whetstone?" Su proffered the stone in question with a vindictive leer.
"I'll see what training I can do as well," Robin agreed coolly, settling in place and beginning to focus. I grinned, but I didn't miss a beat.

"—Gaining another, ooooh… ¥300 million or so—"

"Pardon me, I think I have one or twenty treatises on climatology calling me from the library," Nami stated, spinning on her heel and marching for the stairs.

"—Beating up a predatorial voyeur who ate the Clear-Clear Fruit—"

"I'll get to refining my Sky Walk," Sanji literally fumed as he started eyeing the skies. "You can expect dinner to be deep-fried Mega-Gull."

"—Helping to fulfill an ancient promise between men—"

"I'll start refining my arsenal. Maybe if I use more yeast as a stabilizing agent…?" Usopp mused to himself as he turned away and started walking towards his workshop.

"And we will get to training on the Full-Shell Style," Boss concurred, sending his students diving over the edge of the ship with a glance, then following after them.

"—Getting Zoro's new sword—"

"I have a workout to get to," the swordsman grinned, beginning an ascent to the crow's nest.

"—Beholding the biggest pirate ship in Paradise—"

"Hold tight a sec, I'm gonna fire up the Cola-vats!" Franky grinned, heading below deck.

"Grit your buns!" Merry barked, leaping at Zoro—

CHOMP!

"GAH! BRAT!"

"J'sht shink of it ash training! 'N ash training ish shuper important!"

And promptly… latching on for the ride.

"—Meeting a world-renowned doctor who it turns out was only ever in it for the money—"

"Excuse me, I have matters to attend to. Explosives to refine, dissection diagrams to draw up, you know… BUSINESS AS USUAL," Chopper cheerily informed us, heading for his lab with a very twitchy grin plastered on his face.

"—Aaaand, last but not least: finally recruiting our crew's musician."

"Usopp, wait up! I need a new pipe, the pigeon guy sliced up my old one!" Luffy called, running after our sniper.

I watched as everyone went about his or her separate devices in peace before grinning at Soundbite. "Dontcha just love this crew?"

"WOULDN'T MISS IT FOR the world, PARTNER!" Soundbite laughed. "So, you up for getting back on THE SBS?"
"Hm… sure, why not?" I nodded in agreement, knocking on the mast and grabbing the rope that dropped down. I then shot a glance at my other partners. "You guys want in?"

"Do you even know me?" Lassoo yawned lazily as he flopped on his back to sun his stomach. "I'm just gonna stay here, grab some Z's and… actually, yeah, no, I'm just gonna go ahead and go to—!

WH-CRACK!

"YIPE!" The mutt-cannon curled in on his gut, snarling at the source of his pain. "WHAT THE HELL, YOU DAMN IVORY-FARM!"

Funkfreed ignored his fellow weapon-Zoan in favor of grinning at me. "What my comrade meant to say," he chuckled with barely-hidden steel. "Is that we're going to be spending the afternoon training against one another. Isn't that right…" He promptly transitioned into his hybrid form and smirked at Lassoo. "Comrade?"

"Well, I don't know much about 'training'," Lassoo mused, before snarling as he snapped into his own hybrid form, flames licking out of his maw. "BUT I'M DAMN WELL GOING TO MAKE YOU EAT YOUR OWN TRUNK, LEATHER-ASS!"

"JUST TRY IT, HYDRANT-LICKER!"

I chuckled as I watched the two start to brawl across the deck. "Ahhh, the joys of partnership."

"EVER-SO-FUN!" Soundbite cackled. "Anyways, up, up and—!

"Ah, I'm sorry, but real quick?"

"Hm?" I looked at Conis in confusion. "What's up?"

"Wееel…" Conis cast a quick glance behind her before grinning conspiratorially. "I know that we aren't supposed to ask about spoilers and all, but while Luffy's occupied…?"

"Oh, no, don't worry about it!" I said, waving her off even as I subtly wound the line to my room around my forearm. "It's really no big deal. We'll just be sailing into a treacherous geographic location in which many ships have mysteriously vanished, fighting against a legion of the living dead, an equally undead titan bigger than most giants, aaaand two Warlords of the Sea back to back. A total cakewalk!"

"Oh, yes, of course, of course, I just wanted to clear that up is all." Conis nodded, turned back to her arsenal…

And then just as I yanked on the line—

"GET BACK DOWN HERE YOU RAGING BASTARD!" a little over half the crew screamed as they tried to swarm me, only just missing grabbing the bottoms of my greaves.

"PFHAAHAHA!" I cackled as I pried open the door to my hideaway, watching my friends spit venom down below, some even starting to work their way up the mast. "Truly nothing better than to be a part of this miraculous crew, ey, Soundbite?"

"Not a SINGLE THING!"

Patient AN: 'Noticeably shorter than our standard length' my foot…
Xomniac AN: Once again, our astounding productivity astounds me… go us!

Cross-Brain AN: By the way, for anyone who was curious about how those pygmy whales happened? Well, one day a female pygmy sperm whale ate a giant squid in just the wrong way… and with that, we turn loose all of our omake-writing fans. Have fun!
Though our adventure in the Accino’s icy hell was well behind us and everyone was preparing themselves for the future, that did not mean that our next destination lay immediately before us. It still took us a while to reach the staging grounds for our next adventure, and of course, that travel time left plenty of opportunities for the day-to-day going-ons of the Grand Blue. From learning more about the culture of Oda’s wonderful world…

~0~

"Morning, Cross," Sanji nodded at me as he flipped the contents of his frying pan in the air.

"Mmmrgh…” I moaned in response, pawing miserably at my eyes as I shambled into the kitchen.

"Looking for this?" Robin hummed into her coffee mug, another hand of hers offering me my own cup of dark liquid.

"Mmph…” I groaned gratefully, accepting the glass and taking a deep swig from it. I then sank into the seat next to her with a pained groan, the caffeine chasing the last remnants of sleep again.

"Mmm… how the hell did I ever wake up before we had Cola?"

"With less stomach cramps from drinking it on an empty stomach, I imagine," Robin observed dryly.

I winced as I took another swig from my cup, shooting her a thumbs-up. "Hurts so good."

The door to the room opened with more force than strictly necessary, and an annoyed-looking Nami stalked inside, tossing the day’s newspaper on the table. "I’m getting sick and tired of them raising the price every other week. This is the first time that I’m genuinely missing Terry and Isaiah; next time we recruit a bird who can fly worth a damn, we find a way to get them to mug those thieving bastards en route."

"HELLS YES!" Soundbite cackled in agreement.

"Hells no," I shot back with a flat glare. "You touch Coo or any of his flock, you'll suddenly find yourself a dozen maps short, witch."

Nami snorted derisively, flashing me her own bird before snatching up the plate of food Sanji offered her and stomping right back out.

I shook my head as I picked up the newspaper and started scanning the front page. I then did a double-take. "Well well well! ’New Poneglyph excavated in Galridon Archipelago, South Blue’?! Now, this I gotta—!"

"I’ll take that," Robin chirped, snatching the paper from my hands.

"Wha—!? HEY!" I tried to grab the papers back, but a half-dozen hands held me off as she unfolded the newspaper, not to mention the page that was suddenly dropped on my face.

"You can have the funnies," she smiled innocently, entirely ignoring me in favor of the news.

I snorted derisively, making to ball up and toss said funnies away, but something on the page caught my attention. "Hm?" I righted the comic page and regarded it curiously. "What's this? ‘Sora, Warrior of the Sea’?"
"It's a comic strip the Marines publish in the papers," Sanji explained over his shoulder, shifting over from the stove so that he could start chopping something up. "The tales of the Marine Hero Sora as he travels the seas, fighting crime and evil with the help of his pet seagull and a transforming robot."

"Blech, I CAN TASTE THE propaganda from here," Soundbite spat.

"Not as much as you'd expect, actually..." Robin mused as she turned the page. "Apparently the exploits of young Sora have basis in fact, specifically the exploits of real Marines."

"Really, now?" I said before looking closer at the strip. "Then... the enemy he's fighting... Germa... what is that, an 88?"

"66," Sanji responded, the chopping making his voice sound oddly tight. "Sora's enemy is Germa 66."

"Right, them. They're always who he fights?"

"Not always, but certainly more often than not," Robin shrugged before glancing over. "Why do you ask?"

"Huh..." I held the paper out. "Well, it's just that when I consider the World Government's standard propaganda, and the consistency in using them, plus the fact that apparently these comics are actually real... I dunno, maybe these Germa guys have some basis in reality? And if so..." I rubbed my chin thoughtfully. "I'll need to see about looking into them. With the way the World Government is laying into them, I bet they're pretty strong, but the flanderization means they might not actually be that bad."

SLAM!

All three of us at the table jumped, and we turned to see that Sanji had driven his knife into... no, clean through his cutting board. Damn clean cut too.

The chef exhaled explosively as he eyed the bisected board. "Damn," he muttered.

"Are you alright, Sanji?" Robin asked.

"Yes, Robin-chwan, perfectly fine!" Sanji replied, shooting us a smile. "Sorry, my heart acted up for a second there. I should have known better than to test new peppers while I'm working."

"Eesh. Well, be more careful," I warned him even as I settled back in and got back to reading. "Your hands are your greatest tools, remember? The last thing any of us want is to see you hurt."

"I'll... keep that in mind Cross," Sanji nodded, going back to work.

"...his heart rate's up..." Soundbite muttered.

I responded with a flat look. "The man just ate an ultra-hot pepper and almost lost a finger for it. Would you be calm?"

"Yeah... yeah, fair enough..." the snail muttered, returning his eyes to the paper.

"And either way, come on," I scoffed. "It's Sanji. What could he be hiding?"

As I read on, I made a mental note to have Merry or Franky check the woodwork of the kitchen. It sounded like some stray piece of metal was hammering into the wood like a jackhammer.
"...so, the next thing to cover is the third best idea Franky had for Sunny, the Soldier Dock System," Merry explained to several of the crew. She glanced towards me. "How many of them do you know about, Cross?"

I did a mental review of the ones I knew pre-time skip, and glanced back at Merry. "Well, the first one in the story was Nami's modified Waver, so that's out. The second was a shopping boat with your ghost in it, so unless you've got a twin I don't know about, that's out, too... But I'm guessing the Shark Submarine is still number three?"

Merry grinned. "Sure is, but now that means I can save the other two for a surprise!"

I cocked my eyebrow at her in surprise. "'Two'? Wait, I checked out the helm a while back. Don't the numbers go up to 6? Shouldn't there still be a few more slots open?"

"Yeah, but only 1 through 4 are for vehicular usage," she answered. "5 and 6 are occupied. 5 is the TDWS' bunk, and 6 is Boss'."

"And for the record, I love it!" Boss laughed, pumping his arms. "My own space where I can meditate and develop the Full Shell Style? I couldn't ask for much more!"

"Ahhh, but Boss!" Merry spread her arms wide with a laugh of her own. '"Much more' is exactly what Sunny has to offer!"

"Mm, yeah?" Luffy got out around the chunk of meat he was chewing on, looking over the side.

"Yep! Like over here," she elaborated, stamping her foot in the grass. The result was a sliding panel hidden in the lawn sliding open, revealing a chunk of the Sunny's inner workings. From out of the panel rose and unfolded a machine that looked a lot like one of the cranes from back home.

"This is the contribution I made in case we ever need to run salvage again!" she explained eagerly. "It's not quite as impressive as Masira's monkey, but it and the others I've also hidden will do the job for anything smaller than Big Bro. Oh!" She snapped her fingers in realization. "And they also serve a secondary purpose."

"That being?" I asked, looking over the crane.

Merry grinned as she rapped her knuckles on the railing, causing the crane to snap back and forth with more flexibility than it had any right to have. "Inspired by Franky's older inventions: a fishing rod fit for a king!" She hid a snicker behind her hand. "Sea King, that is!"

"WOO!" Luffy shot his arms up gleefully.

"Oohohohohhh, this will be fun," Boss chuckled, rubbing his fins together.

"Niiiiice..." I nodded with an impressed whistle. "No more starving, eh?"

"And no more running out of room to store stuff either~!" Merry sang. "Observe!"

She proceeded to fit her fingers in a seam in the railing and pry it open, revealing... nothing? Wait...
"It's hollow?" I asked, sticking my head into the void in the wood and looking around.

"Not all of Big Bro, but a lot of his insides, yeah!" Merry nodded in confirmation. "It's so that he'll always have room to grow, see! No more squeezing together when we go over capacity, be it in gold, food, or new friends!"

"You guys really thought of everything," Nami praised, most likely having flashed over at the mere word 'gold'.

"Eeeeyes we did, yes we did!" Merry preened before reaching her arm into the void. "Though for nooow, seeing as we're not actually using the space yet..." She withdrew a metal box with a grin. "It's a great place for stashing snacks!"

"ACK!"

Merry blinked in confusion at the sudden gagging sound that arose, before giving the empty box she was holding a flat look. "Snacks that Luffy just ate."

"For crying out loud, Luffy, we've been over this a hundred times," Chopper moaned in a long-suffering tone, morphing into his Heavy Point, grabbing our gagging captain around his midsection, and dragging him over to the nearest non-grassy part of the deck. "I'm getting way too much practice at the Heimlich maneuver..."

"I'll get the kerosene," Zoro sighed.

"And I'll grab the camera for the scrapbook!" I laughed.

~o~

And finally, to learning that the thoughts I had back in that church were ones that I really, really did need to act upon.

And it was on the eve prior to our next grand endeavor that I found myself doing just that.

~o~

"...Aaaanyway, let's move on! In light of our most recent major fiasco—which will not be elaborated on for both our collective sanity and the safety of those involved—having been only the most recent example in a long line of similar incidents, it has come to my attention that too often do people—myself included, I'm afraid—have a tendency of incurring devastating results by saying exactly the wrong thing at exactly the wrong time. As such, I have resolved to take this time to spread some invaluable knowledge to the world: how to watch what you damn say so that a certain bastard named Murphy doesn't bite you in the ass," Cross's clipped voice dryly informed the world. "I suggest taking notes; I guarantee that life will test you on this later."

"You heard him, Drake," came a cool female voice from one corner of the room.

The Lieutenant Commander scoffed dismissively. "Captain Ain, I'll admit that it's good to keep most of Cross's advice in mind, sure, but why do you feel the need to—"

"Because according to the base's scuttlebutt, you have a disturbing tendency of, to quote the pirate, 'saying the wrong thing at the wrong time'," the black-haired user of the Return-Return Fruit observed dryly. "Now start taking notes. Life might not test you immediately, but I damn well will."

Lieutenant Commander Drake shook his head with a snort as he turned and started to walk away.
"39 last month, correct?" Ain casually asked, raising her hand and illuminating it with a menacing pink glow. "Meaning that there are currently 24 years between you and puberty?"

"Never enough time to spare for note-taking!" Drake said as he immediately pivoted on his heel, cold sweat cascading down his forehead.

"Alright, lesson number one, and this is the most important one. Take this to heart, and you will avoid most fate-tempting situations. And it's this: it can always, always get worse. No matter how bad it is. And one of fate's favorite activities is proving that. A common way of doing so is that it starts raining, but ultimately it's—"

"Context-sensitive?" Soundbite grinned.

"NOT ONE WORD ABOUT THE TALKING SQUIRRELS!... but yes, context-sensitive."

"...you heard that, right? He really just said 'talking squirrels'?" Drake deadpanned.

"I gave up attempting to make any sense of their comments months ago, and besides that, talking animals are the norm for them. Now write," Ain replied just as flatly.

"Damn it..."

-o-

"Moving on, lesson number two: the universe is always listening. I cannot stress this enough. If you think you're safe to tempt fate? You aren't. Even thinking it is a bad idea, and I'm speaking from experience here."

"See the following entries in our logs, which by this point read like the ramblings of a madman: THE CASE OF THE MISSING BRUNCH, the Sandbank Inferno Incident, AND OF COURSE, THE GREAT LOBSTER BLOWOUT!"

"I swear, these waters have more noodles in them than an Olive Gar—!"

"AHE-HE-HEM!"

"Ah... aheh, never mind that. Hm... ah, pardon, viewers, I was planning to go over some other common temptations, but this was rather spur of the moment, so... Soundbite, how about a music corner while I get a list going?"

"Ladies and gentlemen—!"

"NO CONWAY TWITTY!"

"TUNE NAZI! SUCK OFFSPRING AND DIE!"

Vice Admiral Monkey D. Garp winced as he pushed open the door to his old friend and current superior's office and was greeted by a riff of hard metal. "Eesh. I swear, that damn snail's taste in music just never seems to get any better, does it?"

"No, it does not," Sengoku sighed, flexing his hand as a slightly oversized blood pressure cuff was wound around his upper arm. "But nothing he could—" Sengoku choked off his response, cleared his throat, and spoke again. "But it is my personal opinion that whatever ungodly noise he peddles is certainly better than his owner's personal brand of drek. Though..." Sengoku grinned and chuckled, prompting his attending physician to smack his clipboard over his head. "Ow!"
"Sit still, damn you," Sentomaru ordered testily, his gaze never leaving the cuff's gauge. "Otherwise, we will finish this physical on Doctor Vegapunk's operating table, under his supervision. And trust me, his bedside manners are nowhere near as generous as mine are... sir." The last word was tacked on almost as an afterthought.

"Tsk," Sengoku scoffed even as he stilled himself. "I thought you were a bodyguard."

"Bodyguard to the best mind in the world, sir," the sumo-esque man grunted as he jotted something down on his clipboard. "I'm pretty sure that if I didn't pick up a thing or two, then I'd be the one on the slab."

Sengoku harrumphed, conceding the point before changing the subject, his attention back on Garp. "As I was saying, I actually don't mind this latest broadcast; hopefully it'll help keep our own men from saying or doing anything that could potentially trigger any... compromising experiences."

"Pseudoscience," Sentomaru stated dismissively.

"Pseudo-whatsits that's bitten me and my men in the ass more times than I can count," the Vice Admiral countered.

"Oh, yeah, speaking of which," Sentomaru grunted, holding up a pill bottle. "Delivery from Vega —!"

"GAH!" Garp snatched and pocketed the bottle, eyeing his superior sidelong. "Anyway... just wanna check real quick whether or not Buddha-boy here realizes that this is going to be helping the pirates just as much as us, right?"

There was a brief moment of silence, and then a crunching sound filled the room as the armrests of Sengoku's chair splintered under his fingers. Sentomaru's eyes widened as the readings on his device suddenly spiked, and then he turned a murderous glare on Garp. "Take the snail and get out," he spat.

Given the fact that the Vice Admiral obeyed immediately, it seemed that Garp actually had some self-preservation instincts.

Or not, considering that he immediately poked his head back in. "Oh, yeah, now I remember: I came in here because I finally fixed the pagoda you broke. Can I have my snacks now?" he asked.

Sentomaru heaved a mental groan as the pressure cuff exploded off of his patient. 'They don't pay me nearly enough for this job...'—

The sound of shuffling paper echoed through the bar. "Alright, some common examples: 'I'll be right back'—"

"IT TOOK US FIVE HOURS TO find Zoro, and he didn't even start on THE ISLAND WE FOUND HIM ON."

"'Nothing exciting ever happens around here'—"

"GIVE IT TIME..."

"And Soundbite's favorite, 'It's quiet... too quiet...'."
"IT SHOULD never be quiet when I'M AROUND!"

"And I'd like to remind you all that this is by no means an exhaustive list. Not even of the common temptations. Good rule of thumb: if you're wondering if something is tempting fate, don't think that it is, run."

"Words to live by," Bartolomeo nodded sagely before knocking his mug back.

"Ah, c'mon, boss!" one of the Barto Club's newer members scoffed, leaning his chair back on its rear legs with his feet on the table. "Ya don't really believe this load'a hoo-hah, do ya? I mean sure, there's a lot of weird shit on the seas, but this can't possibly be—!"

SNAP!

"—GWAGH!" said mook squawked in shock when his chair suddenly buckled beneath him, sending him tumbling.

Miss Valentine and Mr. 5 eyed him silently before glancing at one another.

"500 says he's stupid enough," Valentine blandly stated.

"Bet he ain't," 5 shrugged back just as blandly.

The mook lay groaning for a moment before shakily raising a finger. "…That doesn't prove anyth —!

CRASH!

"ARGH!" That scream was the last thing the occupants of the bar heard as the floorboards beneath him buckled and dumped him into the basement. "…Fine, so he may have a point…"

"Damn," 5 grunted, snapping his fingers in frustration as he held up a bill to his partner.

"Never bet against the stupid," Goldenweek droned as the older assassin snatched her prize triumphantly. She then shot a surprised look at a yet-unaffected Bartolomeo and Gin. "I'm surprised that none of you East Blue-rs are surprised, though. What happened to being the weakest of the Blues?"

"Lived at the mouth of the Grand Line," Barto raised his hand. "We might have been weak, but we still saw enough to get smart. Not to mention you don't run a criminal gang anywhere and expect to live long by being that stupid."

"Krieg declared that 'Nothing can stop us now!' once we reached the peak of Reverse Mountain," Gin drawled. "Then we ran headfirst into a damn Warlord out for a walk at Reverse Mountain. What Cross is saying isn't stupid, it's fact."

"Straw Hats for us," Valentine toasted with a sigh. "One second we're saying we're in for an easy mission, the next we're picking ourselves up and out of the damn rubble."

"You know, it's not too late for me to give you a tune-up," Goldenweek hummed, her spinning brush causing her fellow ex-Agents to scoot away.

"No emotional castration, Goldenweek," Gin flatly ordered.

"Fine…" the artist sighed in an almost wistful tone.
Suddenly, the SBS' broadcast was interrupted by the "Dot dot dot dot!" of a caller, accompanied soon after by the KA-LICK of the dynamic duo answering.

"Hello and welcome to the SBS! You're live!"

"Uh, h-hello, Mr. Cross. Um, I wanted to share something I said, see if it's tempting fate?"

"Of course, of course. I'm not going to discourage more awareness. So, what was the situation and what did you say?"

"W-Well, I might have, uh, swapped my dad's hair gel for my mom's hair dye, and when I saw the result I might have, uh, said that they'd never figure out it was me."

The silence from the SBS was positively deafening.

"… Well, let me put it like this," Cross finally said. "There's a difference between tempting fate and running up to fate, punching him in the nose, and yelling 'Come and have a go if you think you're hard enough!' You get three guesses which category that falls into, and the first two don't count."

"Also? PUTTING THAT OUT here, on the SUPER PUBLIC SBS, WITHOUT blurring your voice? NOT SMART."

Barto let himself snicker a bit at both his crew's interactions and the sound of the poor kid suddenly freaking out before sobering up. "Ahhright, enough fun and games, let's get to it." He withdrew a notepad and pen from his jacket and held them at the ready. "Whatcha managed to pick up?" He then scowled as he noticed his crewmates staring blankly at the pen and paper. "Hey, I might be a bastard, but that sure as shit don't make me stupid. Now c'mon! Local intel, whatcha got?"

The rest of the officers coughed abashedly before Gin raised his hand. "I've gotten word of three different pirate crews working in the local waters: the White Foam Pirates, led by 'Breaker' Bronson, ฿50 Million; the Meat Shop Pirates, led by Delgado 'The Fridge', ฿22 Million; and, uh, Hyper Force Go, led by 'Prism Champion' Seven Force, worth ฿77 million, natch. That's his actual name, by the way, apparently he got it changed or something."

"So what'd these guys do to earn their ink?" Bartolomeo questioned.

"Well for starters," Gin started counting down on his fingers. "The White Foams and the Meat Shops aren't actually that bad, in spite of the latter's name. The White Foams are surfers, you see, always looking for the next big wave or whatever. They got that big of a bounty slapped on them because they're kind of reckless about it, and they've capsized a few ships by using their own ship as a surfboard or something. The Meat Shops, meanwhile, are poachers who essentially run themselves as an exotic butcher… though from what I hear, they've discovered quite a few new species in their travels."

"Hm…” Barto nodded thoughtfully as he jotted his notes down. "And I take it from the way you put it, the Hyper Force mooks are…?"

"Total bastards," Gin deadpanned. "An example would be how once, Laysan Island had a thriving mining industry based around silver, iron, and copper. Now they don't, because Hyper Force Go showed up one day, looted the mines, the warehouses, and the homes, and then just to be dicks, collapsed the mines behind them. Think a… Super Sentai team, I think it's called? Only bloodthirsty and evil."

"Tch," Barto bit out darkly. "Right… we'll swing around and kick the shit out of them while we're in
"The people in the markets are loose-lipped around kids," Miss Goldenweek hummed around her frothing mug. "The bases in the local waters are G-77-Alpha and G-77-Omega. The similar identifications have put the Marines stationed at them at odds with one another in a feud, always trying to prove who's better. They never deliberately hurt civilians, they're actually decent in that regard from what I gather, but their feuding has caused them to drop the ball. A lot"

"I'll leave them up to Capricorn, then…" Barto shifted his attention to the last of his officers. "And what did you two manage to dig up?"

"Eh, not a lot, to be honest," Valentine waved her hand dismissively. "The usual black-market stuff, though the smuggling's been amped to hell and back thanks to the Marines being more concerned with each other than their jobs." She frowned darkly. "The bad news, however, is that there's a lot of people buying 'Tulip Bulbs.'"

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The captain glanced up in confusion. "And why the heck would I care about that?"

"You'd care," Mr. 5 grunted as he drew a baggie of powder from his coat and dropped it on the table. "When 'Tulip Bulbs' are the newest drug to hit the waters. And with the rate they're coming in, I'd bet money we're looking at the start of a whole new drug ring in this very city. And from the size of the shipments… I'd bet it'll be a damn vicious one too."

"Mrmrgh…" Barto tapped his pen on the notepad a few times before shrugging. "Well, I knew a few pushers back in Loguetown, so before we start smashing heads in a righteous indignation, let's find out if it's actually vicious, okay?"

"Going by how another name for this stuff is 'Grave Bouquet', on account of how it's always a gamble between a hell of a high and death?" Valentine deadpanned. "It's a pretty easy read."

Bartolomeo's pencil promptly snapped between his fingers. "Head-smashing it is!" he cheerfully stated through his shark-toothed grin.

"Alright, then," Mr. 5 grunted, starting to shift his shoulders back and forth. "You wanna get going now, or…?"

"Eh…" The Barto Club's captain actually cooled down at that. "Maybe. I want Lindy on this just in case, so that we can sniff out their stashes. Is Apis still raking in the dough?"

"SPLOOSH!"

The unmistakable sound of something displacing a few hundred gallons of water and a round of cheers and applause sounded from outside. Bartolomeo blinked, then sat back in his chair.

"We'll give 'er a few more minutes," he decided.

"Who'd have thought that putting on a Sea King water show would rake in that much cash?" Gin mused.

"Mohmoo's cuteness is a major factor in the draw," Goldenweek deadpanned. "Trust me, I know."

"But didn't she say he's not actually a Sea King?" Gin grunted.

"Kyahaha! So he can only swallow fishing boats rather than entire battleships? Not much of a difference there!" Valentine chortled. "Especially not to people who've never seen an actual Sea
"King!"

"Fair 'nuff…"

"Aaanyways…" Barto leered viciously. "Seeing as we've got time… HEY, BARKEEP!" he hollered at the, well, barkeep. "We're gonna be cracking a few heads in a few minutes! You got anything for the job?"

The bartender scratched his chin thoughtfully for a moment before drawing out and dropping a baseball bat onto the countertop. "Might I suggest a Winders softball bat? Mostly oak, but the ash twist offers a most admirable stability!"

Barto's turned his ear-to-ear grin on his crewmates, and he spread his arms wide. "Ya just gotta love bars with homey atmospheres!"

-o-

"And that is why you should never wear concentric circles on your shirt, ever," I concluded, nodding my head sagely as I leaned back in my seat, my arms crossed behind my head. "Aaanyway, that brings my seminar on why not to tempt fate to a close. Here's hoping that if nothing else, it serves to remind my crew and me why we should think before opening our mouths. Aside from Luffy, of course, because he's as hopeless as his grandfather that way."

"I AM NOT!" the rubber man yelled through one of my desk's pipes with unnecessary volume. "ANYWAY, GET DOWN HERE, CROSS! WE FOUND A—uh… SOMETHING COOL FLOATING BY THE SHIP!"

I froze and then found myself appreciating that Luffy had actually had the sense to not identify what they found if it was what I think it was, while I still had the SBS running. Maybe he didn't want to be compared to Garp enough to overcome his stupidity? Meh, either way, it was time to go.

"Alright, viewers, that's my cue to call it a day. So, until next time, this is Soundbite—"

"And Jeremiah Cro—WAIT, WHAT?"

"—Of the SBS, signing off," I continued without missing a beat, hanging up the transceiver in its cradle. That done, I shot a grin at a reluctantly smirking Soundbite before punching the key in my desk that connected to the deck. "Lemme take a flying guess: you morons just put a shark in the fishtank and you also found a barrel with a black sail on it?"

"Yeah, we've got it here now," Usopp responded. "Offerings to the sea god, apparently."

"Sea devil, more like," I scoffed darkly. "Tell Luffy and Zoro that there's no food or booze in there for them and then stash it somewhere safe. That being said…" I pushed down the keys I needed so that my voice carried everywhere on the ship. "Nami, if you'd check the air pressure…?"

"…sonnuva bitch ALL HANDS ON DECK! WE'VE GOT AN AIRBORNE MAELSTROM COMING DOWN ON OUR HEADS!"

"On my way, over and out," I saluted, closing my desk up and re-donning my bag and snail.

"GO TIME?" Soundbite queried.

"Big time," I nodded in solemn confirmation. With that, I exited through the trapdoor and roped down to the deck. Merry was already at the helm and running her hands over the controls, and
subsequently preparing the entire Sunny about as fast as the rest of us could working together.

I was still looking around when my attention was snagged…

"Um, Cross?"

By none other than our resident gunner, prompting me to look at Conis. She was currently wearing a dark brown duster jacket over a light gray shirt with a silhouette of a double-headed eagle emblazoned on it, as a pair of rust-colored combat shorts.

"Yeah, what's up?" I asked.

"Well… I'm sorry, I don't mean to doubt you and Nami, but, well…” Conis glanced upward, one hand scratching underneath her beret.

"What my good partner is trying to ask," Su piped up, leaping onto Conis' shoulder and absentmindedly scratching at her orange-bandanna-tied neck with her hind leg. "Is if you're really sure that a storm's coming. I mean, come on!" She waved her paw up at the sky. "There isn't a cloud in the—what are you doing?"

The cloud-fox asked that question in response to my sliding my hood on. Just for the record, I myself was clad in a dark-gray hoodie with a skeleton design spread across my back, the hood itself looking like the top half of a skull. I also had on a pair of black cargo pants, and my equally black shirt had the same cross-moline/cross-bones design that I had on my cap.

I smiled at the fox through the shadow of my hood and hat. "Oooh, I'm just relishing in the fact that you seem to have utterly ignored the lecture I just gave the world."

The world was kind enough to vindicate me via a bolt of lightning suddenly CRACKing down from the sky next to our ship, and the heavens disgorging all they could on us before the flash had even ended.

My smile widened as I regarded the drowned rat currently shivering on our gunner's shoulder. "See?"

"S-S-Sometimes, I really love this ocean," a shivering and murderous Su snarled. "O-Other times, I f-f-find myself wishing I h-had enough dexterity in my paws to flip it off like you humans can."

"If you really wanna piss off the ocean, I suggest you do it the same way that every other pirate, Marine or otherwise does it!" Funkfreed offered as he basked in the gale force winds.

Su blinked at the elephant-sword in confusion. "And that would be…?"

"YO,″ Soundbite drawled.

Su stared flatly at my partner for a second before snapping her attention to me. "I'll settle for mauling Cross."

I blinked in confusion at that. "Wait, wha—?"

Su leaped off Conis' shoulder at me, snarling the whole…

CLENCH!

"ACK!"
And promptly yelped in shock when I snagged her out of the air by her epithet, holding her flailing soggy form a niiice foot away from my face.

"Nice try, but I've been training almost since the first day I arrived to survive this crazy journey. See what that's gotten me, eh?" I said with a triumphant grin.

"Yooooou..." Su snarled darkly.

"Yes, Cross, you can keep a pint-sized fox from mauling you, very admirable," Nami called down from her usual position of command on the quarterdeck.

"Now, if you don't mind?" Merry piped up from the helm she was all but bodily wrestling with to make it cooperate.

"GET BACK TO WORK!" the pair yelled in unison.

A particularly vicious swell and angling of the deck prompted me to toss Su back to Conis, and the both of us set to work, grappling with what lines Merry offered us in an effort to help stabilize Sunny and keep the Grand Line from sending us all for an impromptu swim. Despite Merry and Sunny being capable of handling most Grand Line weather on their own, we had all learned our places in case of bigger storms.

Granted, for all the spontaneity, it wasn't really that bad for Grand Line standards, especially since the new Sunny seemed equipped to handle everything. Waves taller than the Sunny itself? Yep, rode 'em like a veteran cowboy. Lightning striking all around us and nearly hitting us in the process? Absolutely, with only the rubber coverings on the mast tops saving us. Currents hard enough that Merry had to spin out the Soldier Dock System's paddles? You damn well betcha.

An iceberg just as tall and twice as wide as our roaring steed?

That… actually got us to pause in shock and no small amount of fear.

"Uhhh, Merry?" I called up hesitantly, eyeing the wall of ice that was fast bearing down on us. "I think that now might be a really good time to show that trick off!"

"Cross, there's no way we're going to squander the first time we use Sunny's SUPER! secret weapon on something like an Ice-For-Br—uh, I mean, an iceberg," Franky cut in, then grinned. "We dipped into the Dial arsenal to plan for that. Show off the Leo Fangs, Merry!"

"WAY AHEAD OF YOU!" Merry called back with a grin, pulling a lever beside her.

I heard a sound of shifting wood, but nothing seemed to happen, and we just kept growing closer to the iceberg… and closer… and closer!—

KRA-KRACK-KSSSH!

And then everyone aside from Merry and Franky dropped their jaws. Why, you may ask? Because as soon as we made contact with the iceberg, it split in half. Clean in half, by the way. I caught my reflection in the ice as we passed.

"...I completely approve," Leo breathed, stars twinkling in his eyes alongside his fellow apprentices, Luffy, Usopp, and Chopper.

"I don't!" Boss snorted, his chest puffed out indignantly. "I coulda easily totaled that 'berg with a single punch!"
"Cough-compensating-cough," Merry coughed into her fist over the wind.

"BITE ME! NOT YOU!" Boss barked at our helmsgirl before snapping his flipper at an open-mouthed Soundbite.

"What… just happened?" Zoro managed, completely failing to hide his shock.

"I'd say that we've just witnessed what happened to those Axe Dials I stripped off of that obese bastard Eneru had acting as his general…" Robin mused.

"Yep! Franky fit them into Big Bro Sunny's bow!" Merry cackled. "Anything that tries attacking us from the front'll be split clean in two!"

"BOW-CHICKA-BOW-WOW!"

"Nothing but good taste, eh, Soundbite?" Lassoo snickered as he yanked at a rope clenched in his teeth.

"HEY!" Nami barked at us. "If you're not scared of the storm that's still raging around us, I seriously recommend you be scared of me! SO GET TO IT!"

"GETTING TO IT!" we all chorused, rushing back to work.

But that icebreaker was the only really notable occurrence as we rushed to and fro, fighting against mother nature, until finally…

I was standing on Sunny's foredeck when it happened. The storm, it… it didn't so much let up or anything as it just seemed to stop entirely. And the clouds… rather than dissipating, it was as though we suddenly ran headfirst into them. One second we were all clear, the next the fog was suddenly just there, hanging all around us, twisting and coiling and shifting and…

Ladies and gentlemen… the illustrious Florian Triangle.

Nodding to myself as I confirmed that we had entered the ghostly stretch of seas, I looked back down at the lawn-deck, where the rest of the crew was talking amongst themselves with varying degrees of nervousness… including Usopp? Wait, shouldn't Sanji have been busting his—?

…Of course. He never left the crew. He heard about it from Kokoro the same as the rest of us did. He had no reason to be any more negative than—

'…frack,' I winced as the thought ran through my head, but I did my best to keep my cool. So, with as much casualness as I could muster, I leaned on the foredeck's railing and leered down at our sniper. "Oh, Usopp?" I sang.

He stiffened slightly before glaring up at me. "Cross, I am making every attempt to not start freaking out by focusing on how far I've come at this point. I would appreciate if you didn't try to get me freaking out."

Aaand that was the confirmation that I needed to break out my contingency plan. Before that, though… I nodded wordlessly to Usopp, who I think might have been even more shaken by the way I just turned away and started looking out into the fog.

"Soundbite, listen everywhere in your range," I muttered. "Can you hear anything? A ship, larger than the Sunny? Someone singing, a lone someone who by all rights shouldn't be singing? Anything, anything at all?"
The snail shrank in on himself at my tight tone, but nonetheless closed his eyes and focused. After a scant few seconds, however, he opened his eyes and shook his head. "Nada. Silent as THE GRAVE." A small trail of sweat appeared on his shell. "THAT'S... ACTUALLY A BIT TOO literal. This ocean, it's... I KNOW WHAT I SAID BEFORE, BUT IT'S LITERALLY TOO QUIET. THIS PLACE... it's not right."

"My thoughts exactly," I sighed, shaking my head as I looked back at the crew, just in time for Nami to question me.

"So, Cross," she grit out uncertainly, spinning the lightning section of her Clima-Tact in her hand her Eisen Tempo coiled protectively around her. "This place is a ghost ocean, right? So... how do we get out of here?"

I shut my eyes as I considered, my thoughts drifting to the damned barrel resting in our hold, but there was only one response I could give.

"Just... we keep going." I muttered, my eyes sweeping the horizon—or lack thereof—all the while. "We keep on keeping on. We'll get where we need to... eventually."

"What's wrong, Cross?" Luffy piped up from where he was hanging from a line, his head tilted to the side.

I hesitated slightly at the question before shaking my head and turning away. "It's... it's nothing. We just have to keep sailing and get to where we need to, that's... that's all." I started gnawing on my metal-encased thumb as I stared into the more-grey-than-expected abyss. "Just... need to get there. Need to get—"

"Cross."

My heart felt like it was about to burst from my chest when a hand suddenly landed on my shoulder. I spun around and grabbed the limb, ready to blast it clean off with an Impa—!

"Calm down!"

And then, out of the blue, my blood pressure flatlined and I was standing in front of a visibly concerned Robin, my hand tightly clasped around her wrist.

A quick glance to the side revealed that Vivi was there too, watching me just as anxiously. She was currently wearing a light green hooded vest with a white trim over an emerald-scaled tank top, a pair of white jeans along with a green half-skirt, and on her exposed arms she had hung a pair of sashes that were white and bore green snake-like patterns, running from bracelets on her wrists to armlets on her upper arms, just below her shoulders.

I was panting as I stared at Robin, sweat collecting on the back of my neck, and finally I wrenched my grip open and let her go in favor of my own wrist, refusing to meet her gaze. "I... I only just managed to get the words out thanks to my already waning calm. I'm fine. It's just... nerves is all."

Robin tested her fingers before slowly raising her hand to clasp my shoulder again, which once again got a flinch out of me. "I think we both know that's a lie, Cross."

"Robin's right," Vivi nodded, her expression one of pure concern. "You deal with your nerves by laughing it off and making off color jokes that make me want to wring your—!" She trailed off when Robin shot a look at her. "...right, sorry. But still, Cross, this..." She waved her hand at me. "This is out of character."
I sighed, and shook my head. "It's... It's nothing. Nothing you can do about it. We just..." I shook my head firmly. "We just need to get out of here, alright? Just have to do what we need to do and... and get—!" My teeth clamped down on the inside of my cheek, and I shot my crewmates a pleading look. "I... I'll be fine. I—I will be fine."

Vivi and Robin exchanged uncertain looks, but ultimately Robin gave my shoulder a final reassuring squeeze before they both walked away, leaving me alone on the foredeck with Soundbite and Merry, who was too engrossed with her work to pay much attention to me as I started pacing.

In all honesty... Brook not showing up straight out of the gate wasn't my biggest concern. Time was a relative thing, after all, the travel time had shown me that, as had the filler arcs. It didn't mean much that it was taking a little more time for him to show up. Other people might have been worried, but I wasn't. I had complete and total faith that sooner or later that ship would come looming from the fog, bearing our (current) final crewmate, I just... I knew it.

No... no, the reason for my fear was... well, it was the Florian Triangle itself.

Just as he had done so many times before, Oda had failed to fully capture the truth of this location, but for once I wish I didn't have to learn that first hand. Why? Simple: Because the mists of the Triangle were just wrong. Not even evil, which would have somehow been better, just wrong.

You see, sailing on the waters of the Grand Line, I'd come to expect certain standards from the sea; I'd come to expect ever-present motion from the waves and currents and winds tugging at our ship, I'd come to expect cloud banks both big and small and innumerable sizes in between drifting and twisting through the skies, free as only clouds could be, I'd come to expect... life. Pure life.

And the Florian Triangle? The Triangle was as dead as dead could be. The water rose and sank, yes, but it was all a single smooth plane, without any breakage or energy. The air pushed and prodded at us, but it was too devoid of energy to even be a breeze. And the sky... well, the fog choked that out well enough.

The fog, that damn fog... that was the worst of it, let me tell you. That fog was everything wrong with this place, distilled into an ever-present, semi-physical aura. Hanging around us, on us, threading through us, that damn off-color air just seemed to scream the pure sentiment of wrong-wrong-WRONG.

On our way to this place, I had braced myself for the horrors and terrors of Thriller Bark. But now that I was here, in this place, experiencing it firsthand? Now I knew the truth: Thriller Bark wasn't what made the Florian Triangle scary. Thriller Bark was made terrifying by the Triangle itself.

And so it went: for interminable minutes that felt like hours, I paced to and fro on our beloved ship, trying to keep myself from freaking the hell out on account of this... this alien place we were sailing in (not an ocean, never an ocean) wanting to swallow us all.

The worst of it all, the part that really sold how devoid of life this area was, was the sheer silence. Sure, my crew and the Sunny were both making noise, but... but it just wasn't enough. Not in the face of the world seeming to cease to exist beyond the fog, not in the face of the absence of life all around us.

The silence was just so deafening, I swear that I could hear my heart jackhammering in my chest, pounding in my own damn head, louder and louder and louder...

Looking back on it, I don't know what prompted me to do it. Temporary insanity, maybe? Some deeper nerves or instinct I wasn't even aware of? Hell... maybe even my friend on high deciding to
be nice with its intervention for once.

In the end, it doesn’t really matter why I did it, just that I did.

One second I was suffering in silence, and the next…

"Yo-hohoho, Yo-ho-ho-hoooo…"

I suddenly opened my mouth and sang. It was just for a second, a split-second even, but the sound of my own voice was as loud as cannonfire in face of the fog’s oppressive silence, and it shocked me deep enough that I fell silent for a moment. But that noise, in the air of all the un-life I was drowning in, I clung to it like it was driftwood in a storm. And when the shock of it started to fade, I did the only thing I could do.

I sucked in a desperate breath and sang out anew.

"Yo-hohoho, Yo-ho-ho-hoooo… Yo-hohoho, Yo-ho-ho-hoooo…"

I started slightly when a second voice echoed alongside mine in the refrain, but a slight nudge at my shoulder got me to catch sight of Soundbite, who was grinning shakily at me. It was a scared smile, filled with terror and unease, but his presence alone gave me a dash of courage, and helped me forge on.

"Yo-hohoho, Yo-ho-ho-hoooo…” he and I repeated as loud as we dared, our voices ringing clear in the mists. "Yo-hohoho, Yo-ho-ho-hoooo…”

"Gather up all of the crew…”

Soundbite and I snapped our heads around at the third voice that suddenly joined our chorus.

Merry donned a hesitant grin even as she maintained her death grip on the helm. "It's time to ship out Binks' brew…”

My partner and I exchanged a look for before grinning. I then walked over to her, dropped my hand on her shoulder, and joined her in singing.

"Sea-wind blows, To where? Who knows?” we sang together, defying the Triangle the only way we could. "The waves will be our guide!”

"O'er across the ocean's tide…”

This time, I didn’t jump when Robin grasped my shoulder. Rather, I smiled at her and clutched her hand reassuringly as we continued. "Rays of sunshine far and wide—"

"Birds they sing, Of cheerful things, In circles passing by!” Luffy’s eager voice laughed up from the deck.

All four of us started in shock at the sudden interjection, and we turned to look over the railing at the lawn.

Luffy was simply hanging upside down from the rigging, swaying to and fro as he obliviously sang his joy to the world at large. "Bid farewell to weaver's town, Say so long to port renowned—"

He suddenly dropped down to the lawn and slung his arms around Chopper and Usopp's shellshocked shoulders, swaying them back and forth to the tune. "Sing a song, It won't be long!”
The other two corners of the Kiddy Trio exchanged bemused looks for a second before grinning widely and grasping Luffy's shoulders in turn. "Before we're casting off!" they cried out.

I only had to watch the trio for a second before re-donning my grin and picking up alongside them. "Cross the gold and silver seas, A salty spray puts us at ease!"

Robin joined in on the "Day and night," Merry picked up on "To our delight," and Soundbite tied us all together with a nigh-euphoric "THE VOYAGE NEVER ENDS!"

We were about to forge on, oblivious of the bemused looks the rest of the crew were giving all of us, but then…

"Gather up all of the crew," an absolutely angelic voice resonated across the deck, and we all turned to regard Vivi in awe as she swayed back and forth on her feet, her eyes closed in concentration and her hands clasped over her chest as she vocalized. "It's time to ship out Binks' brew! Pirates we, Eternally, Are challenging… the… ah… sea?" Vivi trailed off with a squeak as she suddenly realized that all eyes were on her. "I… ah…"

Vivi started when Nami suddenly rested her arm on her shoulder, and outright gaped when she started singing. "With the waves to rest our heads," Nami recited wistfully, staring into the aether with a dreamy look in her eyes. "Ship beneath us as our beds… Hoisted high, Upon the mast, Our Jolly Roger flies…"

And that, quite simply, was the final straw.

"Somewhere in the endless sky, Stormy winds are blowing wide,"

It was gradual and hesitant at first, with people piping in one after another.

"Waves are dancing, Evening comes—"

Heck, some of our crewmates didn't even know the words to the song, though Soundbite was swift to remedy that with some audio subtitles.

But in the end, no matter how clunky or off-tune we sounded, the end result was utterly unmistakable.

"It's time to sound the druuumms!" This line was sung in unison by everyone.

And that was the whole point: we were singing as a crew, every one of us, all having come to stand together on the lawn, our voices pushing against the silence and fighting back against the Triangle.

"But steady men, and never fear, Tomorrow's skies are always clear!" we sang with a single voice, our words echoing out into and throughout the void. "So pound your feet, And clap your hands Til sunny days return!

I grinned euphorically as I cast my gaze about the deck, taking in everyone's expressions of exhaltation, of… of unity! This was just… it was incredible! Just moments ago, I'd felt like the Grim Reaper himself had had his bony fingers clenched around my throat, but now…

But now…!

My brain suddenly shifted into overdrive as an idea blazed to life, and I dashed past everyone so that I could get into the guy's quarters and wrench open and jump down the hatch to the storage room. Once inside, I started rummaging through the crates we had stocked up. I knew we'd bought one on
There! I beamed eagerly before wrenching the crate open, scooping up a few of the contents and running back up and out onto the deck. In response to everyone's confused looks, I tossed one of the items I was holding at Sanji.

The second the cook caught the paper lantern, his and everyone else's faces lit up with unrestrained joy.

From there... there were no words exchanged, no orders or instructions. Everyone just... just moved! Maybe we were acting on pure instinct, maybe we were so in synch with one another that we didn't need them, I don't know.

All I know is that the next five minutes were filled with motion and mounting excitement. We hung and lit lines of paper lanterns, crate after barrel of provisions and cola and booze were hauled out, Sanji fired up the grill, and someone had the bright idea to haul the piano out of the Aquarium Lounge.

After that, in what felt like no time at all, the Thousand Sunny was as radiant as its name implied, glowing from dozens of paper lanterns fighting back against the oppressive fog around us. Food and drink flowed freely, good times and cheer were held in even the dourest of our crewmates, and above all else?

"YO-HOHOHO, YO-HO-HO-HOOOOO!"

The singular song, nay, the anthem that we were all belting out, that we were displaying as prominently as any army would carry a banner into war.

"YO-HOHOHO, YO-HO-HO-HOOOOO!"

Because that's what our actions really boiled down to: we were fighting for our very lives. The Florian Triangle, it wanted to choke us out with its WRONG, with its un-life, so we were fighting back the only way we had, the only way we could: with life. With so much light and noise and pure life that we could never be snuffed out, a life burning so bright that the mists and all the terror they carried with them couldn't even touch us.

And as I stood by Robin, my hand on her shoulder as she let her fingers fly across the ivory keys in a display of more energy and enthusiasm than I'd ever seen her show, I had a perfect view of that life in its entirety.

"YO-HOHOHO, YO-HO-HO-HOOOOO!"

I could see Conis and Franky plucking and strumming their respective string instruments with glee, matching the song as best they could. I could see Boss, Zoro and Nami knocking back shot after shot from a barrel they'd cracked open, all three of them looking utterly sauced from the way their cheeks were glowing and they were howling with laughter. I could see Vivi giggling as Sanji heaped dish after handmade dish on her, even as she passed off half to a slowly swelling but still gorging Carue. I could see Merry moving her hands about like a conductor, directing the slightly off-key backing vocals of Su, Lassoo, and Funkfreed. I could see the Teenage Dugong Warrior Squad staggering around completely off-balance, having somehow formed an impromptu totem pole on each other's shoulders that had a wildly flailing Leo on top and a struggling Donny on the bottom. I could even see the Kiddy Quartet kicking their legs up in drunken synch, Brook's afro bobbing to the—!

...waaaait a second.
"YO-HOHOHO, YO-HO-HO-HOOOOO!"

My eyes all but popped out of my skull when, yes, the damn walking skeleton actually joined in with the chorus we were belting out, and a quick glance around confirmed that yes, at some point or another a positively titanic vessel had docked alongside our Sunny!

Holy hell, we must have been so caught up in our festivities that he slipped right in.

I was just contemplating how I should handle this development when Brook suddenly split away from the Kiddies and loped over to a nearby barrel, springing onto it with a single bound. It was when he drew a violin and bow from his coat that I had a burst of inspiration.

Moving fast, I signaled at Soundbite and picked up the mic from my transceiver, and a moment later all noise on deck died save for that from two sources: Robin's playing on the piano, which I encouraged with a hasty squeeze of her shoulder, and Brook himself. Hence, everyone's attention was immediately snagged when the skeleton put his bow to the strings and started to play the most beautiful music I'd ever heard from an instrument.

I'm not kidding here, Brook's playing was… it was transcendent. Soundbite had played a few violin pieces before, sure, but they all paled when compared to this. The sheer crispness of the notes, the resonance I felt in my chest, the utter emotion so obviously packed into each and every chord…

And then… he began to sing.

-One minute earlier-

"Don don don don!"

"Heh, Cross seems to be making a habit of starting a new SBS within a couple of hours of the last one," Crocus mused as he dislodged his snail's mic, Laboon having breached as close to the lighthouse as close as he could, as he always did whenever he heard the siren call of his new friends' broadcast.

This broadcast, however, was made different. Instead of an introduction, they were met by the sounds of a piano coming across, no vocals.

Then, all at once, a violin joined in with the piano. Crocus smiled wistfully as he identified the tune, and reached for a bottle of rum. Laboon, meanwhile, was swaying in the waves with just as melancholy of an expression.

"So, that's how you've elected to conquer the ghosts of Florian, is it?" Crocus sighed wistfully as he toasted the bottle. "Good. Good for them. To your good health, my friends…" And with that, he knocked the bottle back.

"Gather up all of the crew, It's time to ship out Binks' brew."

"PFFFT!" CRASH!

The retired doctor then proceeded to sputter out his drink in shock, the bottle slipping from his suddenly lax grasp and smashing to the ground. But Crocus paid it no mind, too occupied with gaping at his snail with wide, shock-filled eyes. Even Laboon, rambunctious as he usually was, fell deathly silent, for fear of accidentally drowning out even so much as a single syllable.

"Wave goodbye, But don't you cry, Our memories remain," the familiar voice crooned, a tone of longing and sadness to it, but sheer joy and euphoria ringing true like clarion. "Our days are but a
passing dream, Everlasting though they seem. Beneath the moon we'll meet again, The wind's our lullaby…"

"…The Revive-Revive Fruit," Crocus breathed in realization, raising a shaking hand to his mouth as tears welled up in his eyes. "The Triangle… This whole time, you've been in the Triangle…"

A few tears slipped down Crocus' face at first, but then…

"HAHAHAHA!" the wizened keeper threw his head back and howled with laughter, slapping his knee uproariously as he wept with glee. "THEY FOUND HIM, LABOON! THOSE KIDS, THOSE ABSOLUTELY INSANE, WONDERFUL KIDS FOUND HIM! HAHAHAHAHAAAAA!"

Laboon remained frozen for another few seconds, still trying to properly process just what he was hearing. Then, rearing his head back—

"BWOOOOOOOOOOOOH!"

He threw his head back and all but blasted the glass out of the lighthouse's windows with his titanic bellow. But unlike so many times before, this wasn't a cry of sorrow, of heartrending misery, but one of joy. It was a cry of love and joy, filled with ecstasy and punctuated by the fountains of tears that cascaded down the relatively young whale's mass, matching his age-old caretaker exactly.

-0-

"So gather up... all of... the..."

The sound of the party on the other side faltered for a few seconds following the solo, an air of uncertainty and hesitation coming across the connection…

"SO GATHER UP ALL OF THE CREW, IT'S TIME TO SHIP OUT BINKS' BREW!" Until Monkey D. Luffy and Jeremiah Cross suddenly chorused as one, pumping as much pure and unmitigated energy into our voices as possible. "SEA-WIND BLOWS, TO WHERE? WHO KNOWS? THE WAVES WILL BE OUR GUIDE!"

And just like that, the rest of the Straw Hats joined in and took the song from the very top as though nothing had happened, the newest addition to the voices joining in with glee.

"O'er across the ocean's tide, Rays of sunshine far and wide, Birds they sing, Of cheerful things, In circles passing by!"

A few miles away from the infamous Triangle, on an island relatively safe for pirates to land upon, one of the most infamous buccaneers of his generation scowled down at his hand, which was trembling at the very thought of that infernal patch of the sea.

"Those damn Straw Hats... they're just more pirates..." X. Drake growled to himself. He then snapped his shivering hand into a tight fist and rammed it into a nearby wall, glaring at nothing as the wood splintered around the point of impact.

"So why do they have to make it so hard to not respect them?!"

-0-

"It's been far too long since we last heard this song," Shanks declared, his crew already moving to set up a party.
"Took him some time, but it looks like Luffy finally managed to snag that musician he was always going on about!" Lucky Roo laughed around the chunk out of meat he was chewing.

"And as usual," Beckman sighed contentedly as he waved his fingers in tune with the, well, tune. "He couldn't have been satisfied with anything short of the best."

"A ROUND FOR OUR UP-AND-COMING RIVALS!" Shanks finally burst out, coercing a round of cheers from his crewmates.

"Bid farewell to weaver's town, Say so long to port renowned! Sing a song, It won't be long, Before we’re casting off! Cross the gold and silver seas, A salty spray puts us at ease, Day and night, To our delight, The voyage never ends!"

-0-

"Gather up all of the crew, It's time to ship out Binks' brew——"

"Pirates, we eternally are challenging the sea," Whitebeard rumbled with a wide grin.

"With the waves to rest our heads," Marco intoned.

"Ship beneath us as our beds," Haruta continued.

"Hoisted high upon the mast, our Jolly Roger flies!" sang the whole Moby Dick, at the same time making a massive toast towards their own flag, which they all would later swear grinned all the wider that night.

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"That does it, now it's official," Rayleigh chuckled, pouring a bottle of rum. "Everything for them is on the house when they finally make it here."

"Hell, I just might pay them to leave some physical proof that they did us the honor of staying here," Shakky sighed with a smile. "This melody is so nostalgic… Somewhere in the endless sky, Stormy winds are blowing by," she sang along with the SBS.

"Waves are dancing, Evening comes," Raleigh hummed, slinging his arm around her shoulders and swaying with her to the music. "It's time to sound the drums…"

"But steady, men, and never fear, Tomorrow's skies are always clear. So pound your feet, And clap your hands, 'Til sunny days return," the two sang together.

-0-

"Yo-hohoho, Yo-ho-ho-hoooo!"

"Yo-hohoho, Yo-ho-ho-hoooo!" Buggy sang right back, chorusing along with his most hated enemies on the six seas as he swung his pickaxe with more vigor than he'd had moments before.

The rest of the work that had been going on in the tunnel halted, the Buggy Pirates staring at their captain in shock.

"C-Captain Buggy, you're actually singing with them?" Cabaji sputtered in shock.

"HAHAHAHA! But of course!" Buggy cackled exuberantly, working with an almost religious fervor and a more honest grin than most of his men had ever seen. "I may hate that damn Straw Hat
with a flashy passion, but not even *that* can start to get in the way of my enjoying a hearty round of Binks' Brew! The finest of pirate songs, and filled with memories of the best, worst..." Buggy's grin twitched viciously. "And absolute *craziest* years of my life, and the *best* parties of my life!

"So, yes, Cabaji!" The clown-themed pirate suddenly swung around and pointed his pickaxe at his crewmate. "I could give a flashy *flip* about the singers! So long as it's that song being sung, then I can't help but sing sing *sing*!"

And with that, the captain returned to work with renewed energy.

The rest of the crew exchanged looks for a moment before rejoining him, both in working...

"*Yo-hohoho, Yo-ho-ho-hoooo!*"

"*Yo-hohoho, Yo-ho-ho-hoooo!*"

And in singing their hearts out.

- - -

In a small camp not far from the beach where a battleship was anchored, three figures knelt beside a campfire, listening to the sound of the snail.

"*Yo-hohoho, Yo-ho-ho-hoooo!*"

"You know, this song isn't half-bad," Tashigi mused to herself, smiling and humming to herself as she held a sausage over the fire.

"Mrph..." Smoker grunted dismissively, wholly ignoring the way his cigar smoke *appeared* to be waving to and fro in time with the music.

The white-furred rabbit-wolf hybrid that was sitting on the other side of the fire across from the pair chuffed blandly, paying neither the Marines nor the song any heed in favor of the marshmallow roasting on the spike at the end of his hammer.

- - -

"*Gather up all of the crew, It's time to ship out Binks' brew. Wave goodbye, But don't you cry, Our memories remain,*" sang out the undersea kingdom's twin princes in synch with the Straw Hats, much to the delight of their big little sister, who was spending the SBS in one of her visits to the throne room rather than her Hard Shell Tower.

"*Our days are but a passing dream, Everlasting though they seem, Beneath the moon we'll meet again, The wind's our lullaby,*" Neptune sighed happily. "Ah, it's moments like this that make me grateful that the Straw Hats provided such an inestimable opportunity, jamon."

Indeed, not long after Enies Lobby, the Ryugu King had elected to spread an ultimatum to all corners of his kingdom in an effort to guarantee that it would reach its recipient. The message was thus: if Vander Decken tried throwing *anything* at his daughter during the SBS, even a *pebble*... then he would see to it that all of the seas surrounding Fishman Island *burned*, and the *Flying Dutchman* and every thrice-damned soul onboard along with them.

Since then, there had been grace periods punctuating the ever-present onslaught of 'gifts' and advances. None long enough to get to the Sea Forest and back, but it was a major improvement, and he’d take it.
"I wasn't sure the Straw Hats actually knew this song, Father. I mean, the only reason we know it is because of Whitebeard," Fukaboshi remarked as he floated alongside his father.

"Hoh hoh hoh hoh!" the Lord of Ryugu Kingdom chortled joyously. "That particular miracle, I believe we can attribute to the new voice whom I can only assume is their newly acquired musician! But! Even so, the Straw Hats remain the epitome of the unexpected, my son, jamon. And their actions right now are all the more proof of that, jamon."

Fukaboshi blinked in confusion, and Neptune lay back in his throne with a look upward that was equal parts wistful and haunted.

"If I remember the geography surrounding Water 7 correctly, the Straw Hat Pirates are currently sailing through an accursed stretch of ocean known as the Florian Triangle. It's a frightening place even for hardened sailors, jamon. I myself dread the mere thought of swimming under it, much less sailing in the ever-present fog that has doubtless driven so many sailors insane in the past, jamon. And rather than succumbing, what do we have the Straw Hats doing?" He spread his arms out wide with a hearty chuckle. "Why, they're fending off all the dread, gloom and doom with a song and a party, jamon! Truly as admirable as Roger and Whitebeard themselves!"

The prince processed that before shaking his head in awe. "They are incredible."

The king nodded, and as he went back to enjoying the music, Fukaboshi subtly snatched up a bottle of sake and swam near the outside of the room. He held it out behind his back and smiled lightly as he felt it leave. "You're always welcome, you know," the prince whispered before swimming back.

The recipient of the drink only responded with a wistful sigh and a smile as he opened the bottle and poured himself a cup.

"Gather up all of the crew, It's time to ship out Binks' brew. Sing a song, and play along for all the oceans wide," the old former guard of the palace sang along beneath his breath, sipping down the brew as he sat so close to his old patrol.

And around the world, in the handful of cemeteries where the undertakers had taken to setting up Transponder Snails both to listen to the SBS themselves and to provide whatever comfort they could to those that rested—for there were many stranger things that they had learned of—it did happen that as some of them looked out among the tombstones…

Perhaps it was merely a trick of the light or dark. But those watchers would swear until the day they died that beside certain markers—markers in the North, West and East Blue, along with several in Paradise—there appeared translucent figures who danced jovially to the sound of the song.

"After all is said and done, You'll end up a skeleton, So spread your tale from dawn 'til dusk upon these foamy seas!"

And so the party went, on and on for who knows how long, until we ran out of energy and quite simply couldn't carry on any longer. Sure, we were sore as hell and tired once it was over, and the hangovers would be apocalyptic, but damn it all, it was worth it.

"Yo-hohoho, Yo-ho-ho-hoooo!"

But you know, for all that the end of the party was a blank-ass blur, I do remember one thing: the
mist. As the party dragged on, the mist came back aboard the Sunny, weaving around us. But... it wasn't a sickly purple, it wasn't not-alive. Rather... it was yellow. A healthy, vibrant yellow that couldn't be anything other than life. And as the party ran on and on, I swear to you, that mist, it looked like people, dozens at once, all partying alongside us. And as we sang, I swear that their voices all joined us in chorus, celebrating our victory over the Florian Triangle.


-0-

"Yohohohohoho! My goodness! I do apologize for so rudely intruding upon your ship, but I couldn't quite help myself! I haven't had so much fun in decades!"

Yeeeaah… fun as the party was, once it came to an end, and the SBS along with it, we still had to address the elephant on the deck, and we'd already handled Funkfreed.

Granted, while everyone was still a little disturbed, they weren't completely freaked out anymore, as evidenced by Usopp not yet wearing his exorcist garb. Kind of understandable, really. I mean, it's not like you can really be that scared of someone after you've celebrated with them like we just had. That was good. Well, for now, best to play things nice and subtle, just to be sure that things didn't—

"Question!" Luffy piped up from where he was sitting cross-legged on the railing, sticking his hand in the air. "Are you a real skeleton?"

I promptly slapped a hand to my face. Really, what had I expected? "Damn it, Luffy."

There was a ripple of shock throughout the crew, but Vivi was swift to plaster a shaky grin on her face and wave her hand dismissively. "N-N-Now Luffy, I-I'm certain that's not the case! I-In spite of the utter bullshit Cross spewed awhile back, the-th-th-dead can't really walk the earth!"

"Y-Y-Yeah, yeah!" Donny nodded frantically, his eyes spinning with panic. "I-It's obviously just a costume! A really really good costume! Right?" The poor dugong snapped his frantic grin on the subject of the conversation. "R-R-Right!?"

"No, I'm a real live skeleton," Brook responded casually, as though he were discussing the weather. "See?" Aaand with that he opened his skull up...

TH-THWUMP!

Aaaand down went Donny and Vivi, foaming at the mouth.

"Although..." Brook mused as he clicked his skull shut again. "I suppose I'm not actually a live skeleton, seeing as I'm currently dead! YOHOHOHOHO!" He nearly busted a rib as he suddenly doubled over with laughter. "SKULL JOKE!"

"HEEHEEHEEHohohoHAAHAHA!" Soundbite joined him in his laughing. "HILARIOUS!"

There was a brief moment of discussion as everyone huddled...

"Question!" Aaaand then, of course, Luffy stuck his hand up like a dumbass again. "Do you poop?"

"DON'T ASK HIM THAT!" Nami roared, her exasperation with the situation apparently hitting an all-time high.
"Yes, I do poop," Brook answered with the utmost sincerity.

"AND DON'T ANSWER IT EITHER!"

"I'm guessing they hurt like hell…" Mikey bowed his head solemnly, before snapping his flippers up so that he was pointing at Brook with a shit-eating grin. "Because they're always bone-dry!"

"YOHOHOHOHO!" Brook laughed as he pointed right back. "SKULL JOKE!"

SLA-SLAM!

"THAT'S WORSE THAN THE LAST ONE!" Raphey roared as she towered above the pair's insensate and smoking forms, then turned towards our captain. "AND YOU—!"

"Oh, please, Raphey, allow me," I deadpanned. "Hey, Luffy, remember how I told you how being stupid was gonna start to hurt?"

"Eh?" Luffy tilted his head to the side in confusion. "Yeah. Why?"

By way of response, I raised my right hand and snapped my fingers.

SLAM! "MMMPH!"

I was then rewarded by the sight of Luffy stumbling around with his head stuck in his chest thanks to a certain elephant slamming his trunk on his head. "Now, that feels good," I sighed contentedly.

"Wow. I like this even more than my usual punches," Nami remarked.

"I'll keep that in mind," I nodded right back.

"Yeah, yeah, it's all fun and games to see Luffy get his just desserts!" Franky bit out nervously as he kept a wary eye on Brook. "But c'mon, can we please focus on the undead guy on the deck?"

"Oh, certainly," Conis said calmly. She then… walked over to Brook, who'd recovered from Raphey's 'disciplining' with admirable swiftness, and gave him a politely shallow bow. "Welcome to the Thousand Sunny, Mister Skeleton, ship and home of the Straw Hat Pirates. My name is Conis, the crew's gunner, and this is my partner Su. Say hello to the nice skeleton, Su."

"Ooooh, honey…" Su moaned, dragging her paw down her muzzle.

"Yohohoho! What a polite talking white fox!" Brook laughed as he doffed his hat in greeting. "I am Brook, gentleman skeleton! Truly, it is a pleasure to meet you all!"

"And it's a pleasure to meet you as well, Mister Brook!" Conis smiled beatifically, clasping his hand and shaking it enthusiastically. She was then broken out of her politeness by a tug on her leg, prompting her to glance down. "Yes, Merry?"

"Conis," the ship-girl started uncertainly. "You… are aware that the living dead aren't normal or common down here… right?"

Conis stared down at Merry a second longer before slooowly returning her gaze to Brook… who'd leaned forwards so that his fleshless face was right in hers.

"Pardon me, young lady," he said with the utmost seriousness. "But may I please see your panties?"

Intriguingly enough, though Conis' expression remained petrified in a polite smile, her antenna-
hairstyle actually twitched. Once, twice…

FWUMP!

Aaaand she'd just keeled forward and was out for the count, pushing up the bubbly alongside our princess and intellectual Dugong.

Lassoo cocked his eyebrow as he poked at the angel with his paw. "You'd think she'd be used to the weirdness after living with talking animals on a daily basis."

"Oh, of course!" Brook laughed lightheartedly as he slapped a hand on his forehead. "I knew I was forgetting something! If you'll excuse me… GOOD GOD YOUR ANIMALS ARE TALKING!" the 'gentleman' skeleton shrieked as he leaped several feet in the air.

"LIKE YOU HAVE ANY ROOM TO FREAK OUT OVER SOMETHING THAT NORMAL!" pretty much… everyone really, roared at him in response.

"Alright, that's it," I groaned, walking over and yanking the skeleton out of the tree he'd inadvertently leaped into and subsequently drawing everyone's attention. "Yes, everyone, skeletons aren't supposed to be alive. On the other hand, animals aren't supposed to talk, either. Also, reindeer shouldn't be part human, guns shouldn't turn into dachshunds, swords shouldn't turn into elephants, ships shouldn't turn into girls, people shouldn't be able to stretch or grow limbs anywhere and everywhere and WHY DO I STILL HAVE TO SPELL THIS OUT WHEN WE'VE TRAVELED ALMOST HALF OF THE FREAKING GRAND LINE?!

I capped off by roaring my exasperation to the high heavens because holy hell how were they still all this thick, especially the two living thanks to damn Devil—oh right, one was halfway senile… now I just made myself sad…

On the other hand, everyone else on the crew was looking very suitably chastised, especially the erstwhile fainted whom I had apparently woken up, and the other Fruit Users.

…well, most of the other Fruit Users, at any rate, Luffy's head was still—

POP! "GAH! AIR!"

Oh, no, never mind, he'd just reached in and pulled his head out. Kinda freaky.

"Whoo, I almost died…" Luffy panted with relief before looking around in confusion. "What'd I miss?"

"Devil Fruit," Zoro deadpanned, pointing at Brook.

"Everyone else on this ship being as dimwitted as you," I deadpanned at the same time.

"Awww…" Luffy sagged for a second, at the news about Brook if I had to guess, before perking up with his usual smile. "Still pretty cool, though! Hey, I've been trying to find a musician since the start! Wanna join my crew?"

"WHAT?!" most of the crew yelled.

"Why, I'd love to!" Brook responded pleasantly.

"WHAAAAAT?!"

"Funkfreed," Nami snarled murderously.

"No no," I waved the elephant down. "I'm actually gonna let this one slide."
"Are you—?"

"THE TDWS FORMALLY PROTESTS THE INCLUSION OF A LIVING SKELETON ON OUR CREW!" Leo barked suddenly, drawing everyone's attention to where the aforementioned quartet of dugongs were all looking with varying degrees of nervousness at Brook. Well, that wouldn't do.

"Did I mention he's a swordsman?" I posed innocently.

"LIKE I WAS SAYING, WELCOME TO THE CREW, BROOK!" Leo exclaimed, shaking the musician's bony hand while two of his fellow apprentices sagged in defeat, and Mikey seemed to perk up.

"Wait!"

The humor of the situation cut off when, of all people, Merry spoke up, her gaze focused on the galleon beside us and… filled with sadness? "The old man, he… he's really sad, but… he says that Brook can't join because…” She slowly turned her sorrowful gaze to Brook. "Because he's already a captain. Captain Brook… of the Rumbar Pirates."

…So, that's how a skeleton can look simultaneously poleaxed and sorrowful. "I… ah, I… y-yes, I suppose that's… I-I-I'm sorry, it's just that for a moment…”

"Rumbar… Rumbar… where have I heard that before?" Soundbite muttered on my shoulder.

I opened my mouth to tell Soundbite to clam it, but then I actually thought.

And then instead, I spoke thusly: "Yohoho and an afro, my friend."

Soundbite's ashen complexion went straight-up white, and he slowly rotated his eyestalks to stare at me with naked, gaping astonishment. "Not possible…"

"A saying from my old world, my friend," I whispered back reverentially. "Oda, the great creator of this world? He never. Ever. Forgets."

Soundbite stared at me a moment longer before slowly looking back at a still babbling Brook. "Cross… C-Can I…? Should I—?"

"Soundbite."

The snail snapped his teeth shut.

"What you see before you is still relatively canon. The words you are thinking of are canonballs."

I grinned viciously.

"Fire at will."

And just like that, Soundbite's grin was back and more savage than ever. "YES, SIR! HEY!" he then proceeded to bark at full volume, capturing everyone's attention. "HOLD EVERYTHING! I JUST FIGURED SOMETHING OUT ABOUT OUR GUEST!"

"Took this long to realize he's a skeleton? Who makes the obligatory 'snails are slow' joke this time?" Su snarked.
"CAN IT, COTTONTAIL!" my partner snapped, glaring at Su with enough force that she actually recoiled. "I realized WHAT he was IN THE MIDDLE OF THE PARTY, but the LAST TIME I SAW anyone THAT HAPPY WAS when my partner here saved Merry. I WASN'T GONNA RUIN THAT."

"Ah… ahem…" Su coughed into her paw abashedly. He looked back at Brook a second later, his eyes wide in shock. "No… I just realized exactly WHO he is. FIFTY YEARS AGO, A CREW LEFT AN ISLAND WHALE AT THE TWIN CAPES, at the start of the Grand Line… before disappearing into oblivion. THE NAME OF THOSE PIRATES?" Soundbite snapped his gaze to the massive galleon beside us. "THE RUMBAR PIRATES!"

The words sent a ripple of shock through the original six East Blue dwellers of our crew. "Wait… Island Whale?" Nami breathed, shock written over her face. "You… You can't be serious!" Usopp managed to get out. But compared to Brook, these reactions were tame. "Whale…" he gasped in shock, staggering back as though he'd been physically struck. "You—? Y-You can't mean—!"

"I DAMN WELL DO!" Soundbite nodded firmly, his gaze never leaving the skeleton. "Fifty years but still going strong. A TRAGIC TALE, BUT ONE I'LL NEVER FORGET! AND ONE THAT CAN ONLY MEAN ONE THING! This man, this Brook… is the last surviving member of the Rumbar Pirates!"

Soundbite then threw his head back and shouted the most shocking truth that the Florian Triangle had ever hid away for all to hear. "HE'S THE LAST OF LABOON'S FRIEEEEENDS!"

Brook staggered back, as though physically struck. "You… you know Laboon…?" he stammered out weakly, apparently incapable of believing his own ears. Or lack thereof, anyway.

…hey, this was actually pretty fun! For now, though…

"Merry," I spoke up, drawing the ship-girl's attention, "Would you mind filling in the rest of the crew about our first adventure in the Grand Line real quick? I'll just need a second."

Merry snapped up a salute with a grin, and while she was holding everyone's attention, I stepped up close to Brook and captured his. And Luffy's, though the rubber-man was only half-listening.

"In case you're still thinking about saying no," I muttered sotto voce, so as to avoid distracting anyone from our helmsgirl. "Let me give you a little background on our crew: we've managed to garner something of a reputation for ironclad loyalty. Anytime anyone hurts one of ours in any way, they pay for it but good. To date, our scorecard has a grand total of the top four names on the East Blue's Most Wanted list, one Warlord of the Seas and the Blue-spanning criminal organization he created, one lightning-Logia bastard with a god-complex, and most recently, the entire Judicial Island of Enies Lobby and the ten battleships that tried to stop us… along with Cipher Pol No. 9, if that means anything to you."
Going by how Brook sucked in a breath he didn't need, I'd say it damn well did.

"Even besides that, most all of us also have a damn decent moral compass that doesn't take much bullshit. Now, we scooped up an 'offering to the sea gods' right before we entered this hell ocean and we still have it in our hold. Tell me, Mister Skeleton..." I shot a grin up at the old man's bony (HA!) visage. "What the hell do you think this crew is going to do when they find out just how naughty the overgrown shadow-lizard's been, hm?"

"NAAAAUGHTYYYY..." Soundbite drawled with a distinctly sadistic overtone.

"...Before I say anything about that... Laboon. He's still—?"

"Waiting at the Twin Capes with Crocus. And you wanna know something else?" I grinned as I patted the bag beside me, drawing his attention to it. "The device in this bag can transmit Soundbite's broadcast to Transponder Snails all around the world simultaneously. And I had it running from the second you started to sing."

Brook started to tremble. "So... So, so long as Crocus has a snail—!"

"My friend," I breathed kindly as I clapped my hand on his shoulder. "Not only is Laboon still waiting for you... but now, for the first time in decades, he and Crocus both know that you're still alive. They know you're coming back."

That tore it. Brook sank to his knees, overcome with emotion, and impossibly, tears started streaming out of his eye sockets.

For a few seconds, he shuddered and gasped breathlessly (though he had no lungs to breathe with, so much damn fun!), garnering our whole crew's attention. After those seconds, however...

"Uh... Uhh... UWAAAAAAAHHH!"

The skeleton let loose a howl of pure emotion, his voice echoing out across the placid waters of the Triangle and all but rending the air itself apart.

William Friedkin could go and suck it. This? This right here was a real exorcism. Right here, right now, we were witnessing fifty years' worth of ghosts and demons and nightmares and the wrong of the Florian Triangle vacating the mind and soul of this... well, poor soul, in a singular wail of pure, undaunted emotion.

It drew everyone's attention, and even once it drew to a close Brook still sobbed for a few more minutes, though these sobs were distinctly joyful rather than agonized. I... honestly don't think that I could imagine how he was feeling, to learn that the entire reason he'd gone through fifty years of purgatorial torture was still there, still waiting for him, justifying the fact that he'd stayed alive.

Finally, he straightened, and despite the lack of clarity in his distinctly inflexible face, it was clear that he was smiling. He made to speak, but then glanced down at Merry, who was looking back at the galleon with a bittersweet grin.

"The old man had a change of heart. 'Popular vote', apparently," she said softly.

Brook looked back at the galleon, a sad fondness evident in his eye sockets. "...You've helped me stay alive for so long. But our struggle is over; you can rest now."

The galleon seemed to literally sag with relief in the water, a tremulous groan shivering its aged timbers.
His task complete, Brook straightened what little of his suit was intact before digging his hand into his jacket and withdrawing a yellowed piece of paper, which he held up before himself with his fingertips, his other hand proudly gripping his collar. "Allow me to introduce myself in a proper manner befitting a gentleman. I stand before you now and as I am as a result of the Revive-Revive Fruit. But in my previous life, I was known as acting captain of the Rumbar Pirates, 'Humming' Brook, worth a bounty of $33 million. The greatest bond shared among the Rumbar Pirates, one and all, was a love, a passion, for music in all its beautiful and wondrous forms. And, not to toot my own horn here—!"

**BRAP!**

He chose that exact moment to let a blast of gas somehow escape his fleshless cheeks, eliciting eager smiles from half our crew and looks of dread and revulsion from the rest.

"—Excuse me, I snagged some beans during that party. But as I was saying, I do not believe it an exaggeration to claim that I was amongst the most, if not the most talented musician amidst my many beloved friends. Now then, that all being said…"

While Luffy practically vibrated with ill-concealed glee, Brook tilted his head to the side in a look of honest curiosity.

"I believe I heard some mention of an opening for a musician on your fine crew?"

"FINALLY!" Luffy whooped, throwing his arms up with a gleeful cackle.

"We got a skeleton~, We got a skeleton~!" Chopper, Usopp and Mikey sang as they spun 'round and round, hand in hand.

"A delicious-looking skeleton…" Lassoo panted eagerly, slobber all but fountaining from his slack maw. The suddenly terrified skeleton shuddered and inched away from the mutt before freezing in confusion when he suddenly found a dugong latched around his leg.

"So, Cross said you're a swordsman, huh?" Leo asked, staring up at the skeleton with eyes full of desperation.

"Hmm? Oh, yes, of course," Brook said, adjusting the grip on his cane and pulling the blade within out by a few inches. "I believe the blade could benefit from a good sharpening, but my skills with it have not faded at all."

"THANK GOODNESS! I was going crazy being that—" He jabbed his flipper at a bored but somehow still-attentive Zoro. "DEMON'S sole living whetstone! Welcome to the grind, bub!"

Brook blinked in surprise before raising his cane in a salute. "I look forward to the chance to refine my skills, good sir!"

"Good for you, really… but still, while I have you, Brook?"

Brook turned his attention towards Nami, and promptly locked up on account of the sheer contrast between her beatific smile and the roiling thunderclouds that framed her.

"I just want you to know," she simpered very politely. "That I remember that little 'see your panties' comment earlier and that every night I will be counting my underwear. If I find that so much as a frill of my tighty-lacey has been disturbed—!"

"Zap'?" Brook guessed weakly.
The Eisen Tempo promptly reverted to an angelic, complimentary white that only served to accent the falseness of her smile. "Now you get it!" Her eyes flicked slightly upward, and she frowned. "Also, the afro is bringing up some unpleasant memories for me, of a..." She shot a glare at an unapologetically whistling Boss. "Manly nature. Any chance you could cut it down a—"

"ABSOLUTELY NOT!" Brook exclaimed, startling Nami and everyone else. The skeleton gingerly ran a hand across his hair. "You see what I've become after dying; it took a year to find my way back to my body, and by that time everything that I once was had withered away. All except for my hair, thanks to the strong roots I have. It's the last evidence of my former life, my former appearance, and if I were to lose it as well..."

The skeleton clenched his fists. "If I lost my hair, Laboon would never recognize me. Until we meet again, I will not allow any harm to come to this afro!"

Nami lowered her staff with a soft sigh. "Alright, I'm sorry. No touching the hair."

Brook nodded gratefully, then rubbed the back of his skull. "Ah, but I believe I should mention... Cross, I believe? He seems to be aware, but I'm currently missing one other part of me that I need before we leave this cursed sea."

"And on that note!" I stated. "If you'll excuse me for a minute, I need to go and grab something real quick." With that, I rapped my fist on the mast and rode up to my radio room. I then moved to the desk, withdrew a piece of tightly rolled paper that I had compiled before we met the Accinos, and returned to the deck before showing it to them.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this scroll contains the strategy I came up with for dealing with the antagonists of our next adventure. And now, in light of recent events..."

I tossed the scroll over my shoulder to where I knew Lassoo and Funkfreed were standing. And going by the _FWOOSH_ and _SHINK_ sounds that erupted a moment later, the plans had been disposed of as the trash they now were.

"Those plans," I chuckled. "Are now completely and _utterly_ obsolete."

Luffy was grinning eagerly, Brook was looking on in confusion, and everyone else was watching with varying degrees of eagerness and apprehension.

"So, now that that strategy is toast, here's the new one. Our first order of business is to go through introductions for our newest crew member, and of course, for me to tell him my secret. Once we've done that, so as to avoid me going against captain's orders, Brook is going to tell us everything he knows about our next destination. After all, it's not really spoilers if he's just elaborating on incomplete intel, hmm?"

Luffy tilted his head to the side, then shrugged in acceptance.

"Right. After he's done, I'm going to fill in the few crucial blanks remaining. And then, using all of that knowledge, we're going to make a plan for doing something that, up until now, not even I was bold enough to try."

I raised my head and showed off a grin that made several members of the crew swallow.

"We're gonna flip the script. Completely. _Utterly._ And when all is said and done..."

I widened my grin to sadistic levels.
"Vivi, I give you my solemn word: I will **proudly** take responsibility for the Wandering Undead Island of Thriller Bark, or at least a goodly chunk of it, *being on fire.*"

**Cross-Brain AN:** Whatever you thought we were planning for Thriller Bark? Rethink it; up until now, we've messed with canon but kept to the main lines. But this time? This time, we're changing everything.
Cross-Brain AN: Just for the record, here's a key for the transitions in this chapter, and all future chapters:

- o- = Scene Change

~o~ = Entering/Exiting Flashback

Two hours of revelations, planning, and preparing later found us standing on the main deck of the Sunny, circled around the barrel we had picked up before we entered the Triangle. I looked around at the crew, my mouth turned up into a smirk. "So, who wants the honors?"

Several of the crew looked positively eager to crack it open; Luffy in particular looked to be a second away from ripping off the top. Then someone spoke.

"If I may?"

All eyes turned to Brook, his bony fingers clenched white-knuckled around his cane—not in fear, not with his expression, but in grim determination.

Even so…

"You sure about that, Brook?" I clarified. "I mean, the last time you did this—!"

"The first time I was presented with such a barrel," Brook interrupted me, his entire being devoid of emotion. "I went through a whirlwind of hope and despair that ultimately left me in a state worse off than my first forty-five years in this hell of fog and terrors. And now, five years later, you present me with another such barrel. And now that I have it before me, in all that it implies…"

In a flash, he was looming over the barrel, his fleshless digits digging into the wood.

"Now I feel more than I have in the past fifty years combined," he all but growled out. "Hope is there, yes, burning bright, along with elation, rage, anticipation, even fear, but above all else? I feel vindication. Because now, after having been violated so many years ago, after failing because of my own weakness, you have given me the opportunity I have longed for. You have given me the opportunity to take it all back. To take back everything that has been stolen from me…"

Brook wrenched his arms up, ripping the top off the barrel.

"WITH MY OWN TWO HANDS!" he roared to the world.

Not even a second later, the flare held within was loosed and roared into the heavens, burning a gaping hole in the mist.

"Alea jacta est…" Donny muttered grimly.

"Eh, that doesn't really make sense," Luffy said, digging his pinkie up his nostril. "'Cause we're not betting anything. We're going to win."
"...OK, I'd expect that kind of confidence from you," an unnerved Vivi said. "But since when do you know Latin?!

"Eh, that's all I know; I remember Benn saying that every time they played a dice game," Luffy said, still picking his nose.

"Shanks' first mate," I tossed out in response to everyone's confused looks, which got 'ah's of understanding. "Still, there's no denying it: you've gotten a lot smarter, Captain."

"Shishishi! Thanks!" Luffy grinned ear-to-ear before tilting his head to the side. "So, now we just... wait?"

"Not that long, captain," Brook grimly answered, his cane briefly spinning before he grabbed the head and planted the tip in the ground. Brief nervous tic aside, he looked ready to go, thanks in no small part to Nami's surprisingly adept needlework restoring his once-tattered suit to its full glory. "Moria is an insatiable demon. None are safe from his greed and gluttony; he will fall upon any new shadows that enter the Triangle with the utmost swiftness. Of that, you can be completely certain."

And damn if Brook wasn't right. I suppose that if any credit were due to the Undead Island, it would be to their sharp awareness and strong work ethic. Because not even fifteen minutes after we unleashed that artificial star, a shadow loomed on the horizon, steadily approaching us with the details slowly becoming more distinct in the haze.

I swallowed heavily as I watched the largest moving object I'd ever seen approach us. An uneasy feeling started to rumble in my stomach as our objective, our opponent loomed over us, but I snapped my hands into trembling fists, and set my jaw in a scowl, burning determination reducing that fear to ash.

Any fear I held, it came from my knowledge of before. Before, Thriller Bark had been one of the closest near misses in Straw Hat history, their victory and their very lives coming down to the wire.

Before, the Straw Hats had stumbled into this hell of darkness and trickery without a clue to what awaited them. Before, the Mysterious Four had held all the cards and were able to run circles around the Straw Hats before they knew what was what.

But this... this wasn't before. This was now.

This was here and now, with a Straw Hat crew that included me and so many others. Now was a Straw Hat crew that was stronger than they'd ever been. Now was a Straw Hat crew that knew precisely what lay before them, in excruciating detail, and knew how to beat every trick, trump, and trap that Moria and his cadre could send at them.

Now... now was a Straw Hat crew with a plan.

~0~

-Two Hours Earlier-

After my dramatic announcement, we had proceeded with a brief round of introductions and explanations, including the explanation of how I knew all that I did. Brook took it rather well.

"Yohohohoho! That's one of the most outrageous stories I've ever heard!" Brook laughed. He then seemed to smile. "And it's one that I'm perfectly prepared to believe. I see that the rest of the crew believes you already, and you already know so much that you shouldn't. Besides, why should I doubt when I'm the living proof of how little the word 'impossible' applies in the Grand Line?"
"Good," I nodded. "That saves some time explaining things. Now, let's get down to business. Brook, start spilling your guts on Thriller Bark."

"Oh, *wait!*" Soundbite cackled, and I grinned alongside him as I pointed at the musician.

"*You don't have guts!*" we chorused.

"YOHOHOHOHO! SKULL JOKE!" Brook cackled, clapping his hands.

"Skull joke!" echoed the Kiddy Trio and TDWS.

"*Really, Cross?*" Nami groaned, slapping a hand to her forehead, a motion that most of the crew imitated, though I was gratified to see Robin hiding her giggling with her downturned hat.

"Oh, come off it, Nami! This?" I pointed at Brook. "This bony bastard's jokes are *golden.* You should try it sometime! No, wait, lemme guess," I smirked as I then pointed at her. "Over your dead body, right?"

"Right," Nami nodded in agreement. "Over my dead—!"

THWACK!

"HOOF!" I wheezed around the cloud-fist that had rammed itself into my gut.

"You done?" she asked dryly, her foot tapping on the deck.

I raised a shaky thumbs-up. "Just about…"

"Good," Zoro said in a bored tone. "Now, can we get back to this Thriller Bark place?"

"Mrph…" I grunted as I righted myself. "Brook, all yours."

"Ah, yes, yes, of course," Brook nodded in agreement, adjusting his collar slightly before standing up straight. "I believe I should start with the most pressing issue at hand. As you'll recall, earlier when I joined the crew, I said that I could not yet leave the Florian Triangle. Trust me when I say that this decision is *not* one I make of my own free will." His empty sockets somehow gained a far off, wistful look. "Oh… to but see the sun shining once more…"

He then shook his head with a scowl. "But. That is not possible. For you see, I am missing an intrinsic—!"

"Necessary," I informed a confused Luffy.

"—part of my being." He shot a glance at me. "Do you have a candle or—?"

"Funkfreed." I looked over at my sword. "Your blade is still pristine from when I polished it earlier today, right?"

"Uh…" the elephant-blade blinked in confusion. "Pretty much, yeah. Why?"

"Hang it behind Brook's head and you'll see."

"If… you say so?" Funkfreed complied, going half-and-half and positioning his nose above and behind Brook's skull, taking care to not touch his afro.

There was a moment of non-understanding from the crew, until Conis snapped her hands to her
mouth with a gasp.

"B-Brook, you don't have a reflection!" she gasped.

The skeleton nodded solemnly, raising his cane up, inching out his blade and staring at the blank metal with sorrow. "Nor do I appear in any photographs taken of me. But both of these supernatural phenomena are mere symptoms of my greater and far more deadly affliction. An affliction that can kill me as dead as dust, in spite of already being so dead for many years."

Nobody even tried to laugh at that.

Brook slammed his cane shut and looked up, slowly sweeping his gaze over the crew. "I have no shadow."

A ripple of shock and, more importantly, confusion ran through the crew.

Brook sighed, crossed his arms behind his back, and started to pace across the lawn. "Allow me to start at the very beginning: As you all know by now, I've been trapped in the Florian Triangle for fifty years. The first forty-five of those were due to a broken rudder and lack of resources with which to fix it. But then, five years ago…" He raised a trembling fist before him. "I stumbled onto an island…"

And so his story went, telling us the highlights of his experience upon Thriller Bark: the nature of the walking dead that inhabited it, the mechanics of the Shadow-Shadow Fruit, including the consequences of sunlight without a shadow, his defeat at the hands of his own shadow-possessed zombie…

When he finished, the mood of the crew was variable. Some were scared, some were revolted, a few were violently eager, and pretty much the whole lot of them were livid. But I wanted to push things just a wee bit further, and so I spoke up.

"Lemme give you all a little context about the wielder of the Shadow-Shadow Fruit," I announced. "The zombies on this island? All of them, every single one has a number somewhere on their body. A serial number, to keep track of when they were produced. Granted, not all of the meat-puppet bodies are active at the same time, a lot are still in cold storage waiting for shadows, but the largest number I saw?" I scowled as I raised my left arm and pointed to my upper limb. "Was right here. And it read 900. And!" I spoke up when a wave of shock and rage emanated from my friends. "Those are just the Zombies. There are still 100 more assorted shadows trapped on that island, including however many more I didn't see from my admittedly limited perspective. So, in all? Over one thousand people around the world don't have shadows. One thousand people haven't seen the sun in years. One thousand people… condemned to fear and darkness."

The waves of palpable outrage radiating from my friends were impressive, yes, but hell if I wasn't gonna try and top it.


And now, more shock than actual anger.

"How," Vivi demanded incredulously.

"Simple." I crossed my arms behind my head in a faux-innocent gesture. "When the shadows were released in the story, we got a few flashes of their owners regaining them." My expression turned thunderous. "One of those owners was a maid. A civilian maid."
I practically heard my blood sing when I felt death itself appear before me again. Oh, yeah, now they all wanted blood.

"Why," Boss snarled murderously, pulping his cigar between his 'fingers'. "Have the Marines not terminated this bastard yet?"

"Because the user of the Shadow-Shadow Fruit is one Gecko Moria." I let that sink in with those of us who were in the know before raising my finger to give that one last crumb. "Once worth ¥320,000,000."

The penny dropped with everyone else, but it was Luffy who really got the message, his face darkening further as he slammed his fist into his palm.

"Warlord," he snarled.

"Mmhmm," I nodded solemnly. "Which makes the presence of even Marine shadows in his repertoire all the more damning. Pirate, civilian, Government… it doesn't who you are or where you're from, Thriller Bark is an equal-opportunity hellhole. And the World Government is perfectly content to let him go about his business, so long as his primary prey of choice is pirates." I swept my gaze over my friends. "Everyone nice and pissed off now?"

Luffy snorted menacingly in response. "We were pissed off enough when he only took one of our friends' shadows, Cross. Now?" Luffy reached over his back and slammed his newly forged and thoroughly reinforced pipe on the deck. "Now we're gonna make that Gecko bastard pay."

"Dearly," concurred several of the crew.

I slowly nodded, smirking. "That's exactly what I wanted to hear. Alright, gimme a bit and I'll outline the new and improved plan of attack I've come up with, but while I'm doing that… Usopp, Sanji, Chopper?"

"Prepare for sodium chloride warfare," Chopper nodded as he plopped down on the grass and started digging a field-lab from his bag.

"Start making Salt Stars," Usopp muttered as he went off to fetch a mortar and pestle.

"Salt-filled lunches to go," Sanji conceded. "I don't approve of using food as a weapon, but if a riceball could literally mean the difference between life and death…" He shook his head with a smoke-filled sigh as he walked towards the pavilion. "Well, I suppose someone'll be eating them either way."

I watched the sniper and cook walk away before a slight nudging at the side of my neck snagged my attention, and I glanced at my colleague, who had a cocked eyestalk.

"Just… wondering, but we are staying OUT OF THE ACTION THIS TIME, RIGHT?" Soundbite asked nervously.

I cocked my eyebrow at that. "What, you scared of a few zombies or something?"

"Mere walking dead? Pshaw! NOT ON YOUR LIFE!" Soundbite puffed out what little chest he had, then shrank in on himself. "It's the salt that has me pissing my shell…"

I started to open my mouth to reassure him, but then I shut it when I realized that the likes of Luffy was going to be flinging the stuff around as well, so… "Okay, justifiable paranoia right there. I'll get you some protection."
"Phew…" Soundbite sighed in relief before eyeing me curiously. "Still haven't answered MY QUESTION, THOUGH."

At that, I shot a smirk at the snail. "Well, where do you think we'll be, hmm?"

That got a smile from Soundbite that was all teeth. "RIGHT IN THE THICK OF IT! Just the way I damn well like it!"

I chuckled and held my fist up so that he could bump his eyes against my knuckles. "You damn well know it."

~0~

Soundbite gave a low whistle, most likely deliberately reverberating the noise to play along with the miniature suit of custom-made medieval armor he was clad in, his eyes peeking through his slightly raised visor. "STILL READY TO get into the thick of it?"

"Mrgrgh…" I grumbled beneath my breath in response as I watched our only escape route slide shut behind us.

To be perfectly honest? Up until we found ourselves looking at the island itself, I wasn't really worried at all. And it wasn't the island itself that changed that; we were strong enough and forearmed enough that I wasn't too worried. It wasn't the jaw-shaped gate that had just shut us off from the rest of the world, either; honestly, if you want to make a disembodied mouth intimidating, you don't give it square white teeth, you make them rotted or sharp, or at least add a few red stains.

No, no, the part that got me worrying?

It was when, mere seconds after entering the snare of Thriller Bark, one of our oldest and yet youngest crewmates suddenly dropped to her knees and clamped a hand over her mouth as she started dry-heaving.

"Merry!" I yelped, hastily running over and kneeling next to her and rubbing her coat-covered back. "Merry, what's wrong, what's—!"

"Stillborn…"

"Eh?" I blinked in confusion. "Wha—?"

"This place…" Merry looked up with tears brimming in the corners of her eyes, her hand clamped firmly over her mouth. "It's… It's stillborn…"

"…bastard."

All eyes turned to look at Franky, who currently seemed to be doing his best impression of an angry Sanji, fire blazing in his eyes.

"It's not enough that he makes a mockery of life with all the people he curses and the zombies he makes," the cyborg snarled, his fists all but groaning from how tightly they were clenched. "But he curses his own ship, too?!"

"Wh-What awe you tawking about?" Carue asked nervously.

"This place…" Merry groaned in response, shuddering and spasming. "It's not… not really a ship. The spirits of ships… t-they're born of the love and care a-and compassion of their crews… b-but
this… this…” She shook her head miserably. "It started as a ship, it was supposed to be one, but… but once it was done, no one showed it any love. No one cared, no one… no one's seen it as a ship. An island, a hell… never a ship. And because of that, Thriller Bark… it… it…” Merry hunched over with, letting out another gut-rattling wretch.

"Marine Battleships and some pirate ships…” Franky ground out, glaring daggers at the Jolly Roger-spangled sail that loomed on high through the mists. "Their ships can be stunted through lack of care, because their crews only see them as vessels of war or transportation or whatever. It's sad, but it's a fact of life, and they're still seen as ships. But whenever a ship this badly neglected ever came through Water 7…” Franky literally snorted a stream of fire. "Iceburg and I had our differences… but between us, we made sure that the bastards who did shit as heinous as this never did it again."

I frowned as I considered that. I had given thought to everything we’d do here except for the island itself; I thought we would just leave it abandoned as it was in the story. But with what Merry and Franky said…

"Alright, everyone, addendum to the plan: try to limit damage to the island proper and the parts that make it seaworthy, and we'll come up with something when the rest of this mess is over. But for the time being, they already know we're here. So, for starters…”

I clapped our brand-new musician on the back. "Brook, you're up."

"Gladly!" Brook nodded back before doffing his hat to the rest of the crew. "Well, my friends, I'm afraid I must be off! Fortune willing, we shall meet again on the other side! But for now!"

He leapt over the edge of the Sunny and, the moment he hit the top of the water, he shot off towards the dark island looming, blurred legs kicking up enough water for a motorboat and a cackle of "YOHOHOHOHOHOHO~!" trailing behind him.

I tried to keep my cool in place as my newest friend disappeared into the distance, but I couldn't help but start gnawing on my metal-encased thumb, which was most likely why Luffy clapped his hand on my shoulder and stuck his carefree grin in my face.

"Mah, don't worry about it!" he chuckled, melting away my worries. "He's following your plan, remember? And it's a good plan! After all, you made it, right?"

I hesitated for a second before matching his smile and nodding right back. "Yeah… yeah, it is a damn good plan."

~o~

"Alright, everyone, first thing you all need to understand about Thriller Bark?" I stated. "It's that this place is run like a nightmare funhouse. All of their tactics, all of their members, all of the abilities that they bring to bear, they're all intended to be used in subterfuge. Tricks, traps, illusions, the whole enchilada. Shadows are an integral part of Thriller Bark, and if we just run in guns blazing?" I slammed my fist into my palm. "This place will shank us clean between our ribs when we're least expecting it."

The crew exchanged uneasy looks at that, but Boss drew attention to himself with a hard snort.

"We get it, this place is gonna be tricky as all get-out," he grumbled as he gnawed on his cigar. "So what're we gonna do about it?"

"Simple…” I patted myself down for a second before withdrawing a stray piece of scrap paper from my pocket and holding it up with both hands. "They want to fight smart, we're going to fight smart
We're going to enter through the front door, and while they think we're falling for their tricks…” I tore the paper in half. "We're going to dismantle their entire operation, piece…” And then into quarters, "By piece," And then into eighths before casting aside the confetti. "Before they even have a chance to realize what's going on."

Everyone started to nod in agreement, until I spoke up again.

"But!" I hastily snapped my finger up. "If we're going to do this right, then everything has to be perfect. No deviations, no getting sidetracked. I'll try making sure no one has a job they can't handle or at least has someone nearby who knows what they're doing, but even so…” I shook my head slowly. "Moria may be the weakest of the Warlords, but he still has as much mastery of his Devil Fruit as Crocodile, and about as much tactical skill. As such, I cannot stress this enough: One slip up, one misstep, and this whole place will fall on us like a ton of bricks. Got it?"

"We've got it, Cross. We'll be as careful as we need to be," Sanji said, and similar sentiments came from the rest of the crew.

I looked Luffy dead in the eyes as I spoke again. "Captain, I'm going to plan things for your part in this the best way that I can. But I need you to try as hard as you can to follow through. You know how much is on the line here, and you remember what happened the last time you gave a Warlord an inch.”

"…I still want to kick Moria's ass," Luffy grumbled.

"You'll have your chance once he's run out of tricks to hide behind," I promised. Thankfully, that seemed to mollify Luffy, and he nodded.

"Alright, then. Now, we'll be starting with taking care of the only living members of Thriller Bark's crew, the Mysterious Four, consisting of Moria and his three subordinates. More specifically, we'll be taking care of the two that actually have Devil Fruits, and who are even close to combat ready. Brook."

"Hm?” the skeleton replied, cocking his head to the side.

"Your first job upon us reaching the island will be to bamboozle the Ghost Princess of Thriller Bark, Perona." I paused for a moment before allowing myself a snicker. "I love the fact that I get the chance to use the word 'bamboozle'."

THWAP!

"Focus on the task at hand, got it," I winced apologetically as Robin's hand disintegrated.

~0~

"Yo-hohoho, Yo-ho-ho-ho~" Brook sang as he strolled through the woods, pausing slightly as he came upon a graveyard before bounding clear into the center of it and raising his voice. "Yo-hohoho, Yo-ho-ho-ho~"

As if on cue, all the graves around him began trembling, and dead hands began to claw their way to freedom. Brook came to a halt in the middle of the cemetery, casting his gaze about as the earth shifted and roiled beneath his feet.

Suddenly, the soil right beneath him split, and a half-rotted hand clamped down upon his shin, and a groaning zombie pulled itself up and out of the earth…
Before suddenly cutting itself off when it caught sight of the bleached white skull mere inches from his face.

"Hello there, mister zombie," Brook hummed politely, tilting his head ever so slightly to the side. "Remember me?"

What little blood the zombie still had in its head shot out of it. "Oh, shi—!

That was as far as the revenant got before Brook crammed his bony fingers down its throat, depositing a tiiiny amount of salt in the zombie's stomach.

Still, that small amount of salt was enough to push all of the shadow right out of the zombie's now truly lifeless jaws.

Then, the second that his leg was freed, Brook blurred around the graveyard, darting to and fro between the graves as the living dead tried to wrench themselves from the earth. By the time Brook came to a halt, all of the zombies were fully free, all standing at the ready…

But after a second, half of them collapsed into true lifelessness, their shadows ripping themselves free of their jaws and soaring away beneath their comrade's horrified gazes.

The surviving zombies only had a second to process what they'd just seen…

"Ahem."

Before a cough caused the embalming fluid in their veins to freeze. They jerkily turned their heads and stared in horror at the skeleton in their midst as he inspected his blade with the utmost casualness.

"I'm only," Brook mused offhandedly, "going to say this once."

He then glanced up from his blade at the zombies, his face a mask of pure, uninhibited murder.

"RUN."

And just like that, the zombies began fleeing as fast as their enhanced bodies would allow, raising the alarm that the scourge of Thriller Bark from five years past had returned to exact his vengeance.

As they ran, the zombies received simultaneous encouragement to flee and discouragement in the usefulness of it, as every other second it seemed that one of their number or another suddenly fell flat as their tendons were shredded, giving them each only a few moments to scream in terror before they were silenced by their ill-gotten souls fleeing their body. More joined the fleeing chase as it progressed through the woods, but their numbers were cut down as quickly as they were built up.

Eventually, the stampede of the once-living disgorged into yet another graveyard opening, scrambling to get away as their recently awakened comrades clawed their way to freedom and joined in the chaos.

Fortunately for them, upon reaching the new graveyard, Brook cut off his pursuit in favor of leaping upon the nearest crypt and slashing his sword out in a grandiose manner. "Accursed zombies of Thriller Bark! I am the dreaded Humming Swordsman, returned from the mists after five long years! There will be no survivors! For I am here! I am here! But soon, you will not be here! The dreaded Humming Swordsman is here for your souls!"

'I will have to ask Cross where he came up with that speech, it even sent shivers down my spine! Oh, but I don't... no, I do have a spine. Botched skull joke,' Brook reflected with a frown, even as the
zombies cowered before him. Which was all well and good, but for his part of the plan to work, he still needed a—!

"Horohorohoro~"

Brook was silently grateful for the Negative Hollow that popped up from the stonework a foot in front of him. After all…

"GYAAAAAAH! GHOOOOOST!" he howled, flinching back and throwing his hands up in terror.

Now he didn't have to fake his shock.

The surrounding zombies all paused in their panic, exchanging shocked looks before staring up at their aggressor in confusion. "You're… afraid of ghosts?" one of them called up incredulously.

Brook exaggerated his panting and chest-clutching as he stared at the cartoonish spectre that was wagging its tongue at him. "Y-Y-Yes! Terrified! Deathly afraid, even—oh, but I'm already—Aheheh, getting off track, sorry. A-a-anyways, i-it was bad enough seeing just zombies the l-l-last time I was here, b-but now—!" Brook kept up his act for a bit before breathing a heavy sigh of relief. "W-W-Well, I suppose it could be worse… t-t-that thing barely looks r-r-real! S-S-So long as I d-don't see a human-looking g-g-ghost, I-I'll still be able to d-defeat you all, and reclaim my shadow!"

The zombies all slowly turned their heads to stare at one another, before slowly turning their heads back so that they could smile malevolently at the skeleton of their nightmares.

Brook immediately, though he actually already had a damned good idea of why they were all so chipper (for moving corpses, at any rate). "Whyyyyy are you all staring at me like that?"

"Horohorohorohoro… I expect…"

Brook's spine went ramrod straight as a high-pitched voice chuckled echoingly behind him. He sloooowly turned on his heel…

And had to squash the surge of victory he felt when he came face to face with a pink-haired gothic Lolita who was clearly floating upside down in the air.

Perona smirked victoriously, entirely unaware of Brook's own sentiments. "They're all smiling because of me," she crooned.

She then snapped her face forwards with a smile that was all teeth. "BOO."

"GYAAAAAAH!" Brook shot his hands in the air, shooting away from the Ghost Princess so fast that he actually left a dust trail hanging in his wake.

Perona righted herself, cocking an eyebrow after the fleeing skeleton before casting an incredulous look at the zombies. "So, that was the Humming Swordsman that's had you all shitting yourselves over skeletons for the past five years? Seriously!?

"Hey, it's not our fault! He's really, really fast!" one of the zombies indignantly protested.

"Yeah!" another piped up. "Maybe if you hadn't slept through that shitshow five years ago, then we wouldn't be down a load a' zombies in the first place!"

"They're right!"

"Lazy princess!"
"Why don'tcha do something useful?!

Perona's head was bowed as the insults kept flowing out from the rapidly revolting (in both senses of the word) zombies, a vein throbbing on her forehead and her teeth grinding together...

"Yer not *that* cute!"

Until *that* particular comment caused her jaw to jerk to the side with a particularly sonorous SNAP!

"SHUT IT!" the suddenly gigantic Perona screeched at the zombies, cowing them all into submission while a few stray Negative Hollows put several down and out for good measure.

The Ghost Princess huffed and puffed as she *marginally* came down from the high of her rage, and turned her nose up in a derisory sniff. "You damn uncute bastards... I was going to have some fun chasing that sissy skeleton all over the woods, but *now*? I think I'll leave him to *you* clowns! Have fun sucking on salt, rot-for-brains!"

And with that, ignoring the panicked protests of her underlings, Perona turned to fly back to her room...

"...On second thought."

Only to spin around and see that the skeleton was back in the midst of the zombies, looking up at her with a blank face.

"You're actually too cute to be scary," he remarked.

Perona blinked, unsure how to react. On the one hand, she didn't like that he wasn't scared, but on the other hand, she could hardly take offense to someone calling her cu—

"Would you mind showing me your panties?"

All movement in the graveyard froze, the zombies staring at Brook in abject horror while Perona...

Perona’s expression remained blank for all of ten seconds.

Then her eyes *sloooowly* rolled up into her head, and a pair of gigantic, orb-shaped hollows appeared hovering at her sides.

"When you die this time..." she hissed malevolently. "There won't be enough left FOR YOU TO COME BACK TO!" The last phrase was screeched furiously, emphasized by the Ghost Princess flinging her cackling Special Hollows at the skeleton.

Said skeleton then proceeded to do the smart thing and vacate the area, not even sparing enough time to purify the remaining zombies. The giant ghosts exploded near him, but the resulting smokescreen only helped him to duck and cover behind a tree, following which he tugged on his jacket and brought a pocket that held a snail close to his jaws.

"The princess is chasing phantoms," he quickly hissed out. "I had to improvise to keep her interested, but she won't be bothering you for awhile."

"Roger roger, *buy all the time you can,*" came the response. He resumed running with a not inconsiderate amount of real fear.

'Even so,' he reflected, glancing over his shoulder at the pursuing Hollow-Woman. 'Cross certainly..."
earned his place as the tactician. Apart from the hiccup on her part, his plan is working perfectly so far!"

"~o~

"Just to confirm..." Vivi started to raise her hand with a grim expression.

"No, Perona is not a legitimate princess," I assured her. "That's just what she likes to call herself."

Vivi heaved a sigh of relief, but it was wiped away by my own scowl. "But unfortunately, it's an apt epithet. Her power comes from the Hollow-Hollow Fruit, which is one of the most dangerous Devil Fruits I've ever seen. It lets the user create 'ghosts', or at least things very much like them. She has a few variations... but the most dangerous are also her most commonplace: her Negative Hollows."

I shuddered fearfully. "If one of those dopey-looking bastards touches you, it'll rob you of all will to live. It only lasts a few minutes at most, sometimes just a few seconds, but considering how she can slam you with one while you're getting bumrushed by a horde of zombies..." I trailed off, the uneasy looks on everyone's faces indicated they got what I was getting at.

"So, what's the weakness, Cross? It's not like she doesn't have one if we got past her in your story," Sanji inquired.

I shook my head with a regretful grimace. "That's the biggest problem, Sanji; I can't be sure that anybody on the crew as we are now has any chance of beating her in a straight-up fight. The only thing I know of that can protect you against the Negative Hollows..."

I turned my regretful look on Usopp. "Is being so pessimistic that they can't sink you any lower."

I turned a regretful look on Usopp. "Is being so pessimistic that they can't sink you any lower."

The sniper froze. "And... you've been boosting my confidence from the day you told us the truth," he breathed in horror.

I sighed again, massaging my face. "Yes, and I realize that the easy way out isn't an option because of that, but if you'd seen what I've seen, what would have happened if I hadn't done everything that I possibly could?" I snorted as I jabbed my thumb downwards. "If I had let it happen anyway just so we'd still have a trump card against Perona, you wouldn't have let me within a half-mile of Sunny, and that's not an exaggeration, meaning that that point is moot. Alright?"

I took in everyone's disconcerted expressions, many of them clearly wondering what could have possibly been that bad. But going off of the fact that a few members of the crew were bowing their heads or looking at me with resigned acceptance, they had figured out what the answer was.

I clapped my hands together to get their attention back. "Anyway, what's done is done, and we're getting off track. The Negative Hollows aren't even what I'm most worried about with Perona's abilities. No, the true threat..." I pointed at my eye. "Is her remote viewing. Perona can see through the eyes of her Hollows, and because they're intangible, she can make a lot of them, and her range is freaking huge..." I moved my finger to point at Soundbite. "We have a voyeur on our hands to match ours. If we want to try and pull any covert operations on Thriller Bark, our first order of business will be to disable Perona."

I tsk'd derisively as I started pacing, my hands folded behind my back. "An act easier said than done, unfortunately. Yet another tool in the Hollow-Hollow Fruit's varied arsenal is that of astral projection; she can leave her body as an intangible, invulnerable ghost herself, and go wherever she damn well chooses while leaving her real body locked up in the depths of Thriller Bark. Basically,
this means that we can't touch it."

"So, if I have this right..." Conis started counting down on her fingers. "We can't hurt her, we can't counter her, can't even touch her..."

"AHA!" Su barked, jabbing her paw at me with a grin. "But she does leave her body, so that means we can still speak with her! You're going to distract her!"

"Or more specifically, I will distract her, is that right?" Brook confirmed.

"More than that, Brook. You're going to go ashore ahead of us, garner as much attention as you can, and the second you see a Hollow, you cement her attention on you so that she doesn't look anywhere else. How you do it is up to you, but if you want my advice? She's got something of a trickster-sadist streak in her. Play on that and let her think she can get a few screams out of you, and you'll have her undivided attention. After that..." I shrugged with a careless smirk. "It just comes down to two simple factors: keep ahead of her at all times and don't let the ghosts touch you."

"I believe I can manage, Cross," Brook nodded confidently. "Because as I'm sure you're aware, I can be very, very fast."

I nodded proudly. "Glad to hear it. Now! The distraction of Thriller Bark's surveillance will be phase one of our plan. Phase two, the infiltration, will begin once we're certain they're in the blind. And for that part..." I held up a quartet of fingers. "The rest of us will be splitting into four teams."

~o~

I took a calming breath as I prepared myself for what was coming before raising my voice so that everyone could hear. "Alright! Perona—and by extension, Thriller Bark—is blind! If we're going, then it's now or never! Everyone ready to rumble?"

"Let's go!" Luffy cheered eagerly.

"Thanks for the seat, Zoro," Chopper said gratefully.

"Mmph," the swordsman grunted, somehow managing to look dangerous despite having what resembled nothing so much as a reindeer plush on his lap.

"We're all good, Cross!" Franky said.

"And we're good here, too," I nodded in confirmation. I then proceeded to rap my fist against the wall. "Let's roll out!"

"You got it!" Merry announced from up top. "Alright everyone, brace yourselves, because we are doing this for the first time ever! Deploying Soldier Dock System, Channels 1 and 2!"

I grinned eagerly as the chamber we were in slowly rotated to the left, the gate of the dock sliding open and exposing us to the light.

"Oh, this is gonna be fuun..." Soundbite squealed.

"From Channel 1!" Merry boasted. "Our Covert Ops deployment vessel..."

There was a jolt as the powered-launch apparatus Franky had installed in the SDS activated, and we were shot out of the berth like a cork from a bottle. The second our grinning white zodiac hit the water, I twisted the throttle and gunned its cola-powered engine so that we steered out and away
from the Sunny.

"In homage to the Whitebeard Pirates, the Mini-Moby Motorboat!" Merry laughed from up top. Her laughter redoubled as a secondary clunk echoed from the opposite side of the Sunny. "And from Channel 2! Our Mass Troop Deployment vessel…"

There was an almighty roar from behind the Sunny, and then our other faithful metal steed shot into view, barely even skimming over the waves, it was moving so fast. Large enough to fit nearly a dozen people and powered by an impressive aircraft-grade propeller latched onto its back and piloted by Franky, the—

"Gator Glider!" Merry cheered eagerly.

—was nothing short of a lean, mean, speed machine. This description was only hammered home by how, even laden down with the vast majority of our crew, the vessel sped into the mists at a speed comparable to a non-Shaving Carue.

Once they were gone, I shot a final farewell salute at Merry before revving the Mini-Moby's motor and piloting my team towards the ghost island's shoreline. I slowed our speed when we actually hit the mists and started actually getting close to the island, and we came to a full halt once we bumped into the lip of the island's 'moat'.

And then, after taking a second to reassure my friends that the current would carry the Mini-Moby straight to the dock proper, we all jumped in.

It wasn't a small fall, that's for damn sure, and it was practically unclimbable from the bottom, but thanks to us willingly jumping into the abyss, we were able to control our falls by sliding down the damp and mossy walls of the crevice.

In my honest opinion, our flawless landing at the bottom was quite the feat of badassery.

I took a second to adjust the brim of my cap before glancing around at the rest of my team. "Alright, everyone good to go?"

Robin smiled confidently as she thumbed her Stetson up. "Of course."

Usopp was adjusting the collar of his cloak uncertainly as he glanced around, but ultimately he settled for plastering a shaky grin on his face as clamped one hand down on top of his new (and admittedly pretty cool) hat and used the other to shoot me a thumbs up. "Good to go!"

Conis beamed sunnily even as she tapped her knuckles against the barrel of the Burn Bazooka that was poking over her shoulder, alongside the rest of the armaments she was packing. "I didn't exactly choose to carry all of this to look pretty."

"We came here to kick ass and chew bubblegum!" Su announced with a flick of her tail. "And considering what that stuff does to my fur? I hate bubblegum."

"All in all, Cross?" Lassoo leered malevolently as he shoved himself off my back and licked his chops in anticipation. "I'd say we're good to go. So, let's go already! I want to see some zombies burn."

I stiffened as I processed that particular tidbit before shooting a look at my mutt. "Lassoo, I don't know how you've hung around Soundbite and I this long without picking up on this particular tidbit, but when it comes to zombies—!"
"GRRR!"

"CANI-BLAST!" Lassoo howled, spinning around and vomiting up a pillar of flames that engulfed the 'poor' Cerberus Zombie that had just showed its head.

"KAI!"/"KAI!"/"YIP!"

I sighed as said Cerberus Zombie switched to writhing around on the ground, attempting to bat out the flames crawling over its necrotized hide.

"Heheh!" Lassoo scratched his paw under his nose proudly. "Fire is and always will be the best solution!"

"Noooot really…” I slapped a hand to my forehead with a sigh. "Because see, the thing is? While it might think that it's feeling pain, it'll soon remember that it actually doesn't."

"Eh?" My dog-gun blinked up at me in confusion. "And what does that matter?"

"It matters," Soundbite explained dryly. "Because once it remembers, not only will the zombie continue to chase us…"

The two-thirds Cerberus chose that exact moment to roll back onto its feet and resume its mismatched snarling, only now it had flames burning all over and within it as well.

"BUT IT WILL DO SO WHILE STILL ON FIRE!!"

"Ah…” Lassoo started backing away from his growling pyrrhic counterpart. "I… see your point."

"Glad to hear it," I sighed despondently, even as I prepared to run like a hellhound was on my heels. Oh, wait, it was. "So, are there any other questions anyone would like to ask?"

"Uh, actually, I have one."

All attention turned to Usopp as he squinted at the Cerberus. "That third head, the yellow one… is that a fox?"

My gut dropped out from within me, the Cerberus briefly looking stricken before it started snarling and growling louder than ever.

I slowly turned my head to pin Usopp with a cyanide-deadly glare. "You. Dumb. Fuck. I just went over this!"

"Aheheh…” The sniper backed away fearfully. "Sorry?"

"Apologize later," Conis sighed in defeat. "For now, unless I miss my guess—?"

"ROOOAAAAR!" the immolating zombie howled in triplicate.

"RUN LIKE HELL, DIPSHTS!" Su yelped.

"DAMN STRAIGHT!" I yelled back, turning on a dime and running like hellfire from the revenant canine.

"Sonnuva-sonnuva-sonnuva—shit!" Lassoo yelped as he scrambled to keep up. "Of all the times for you to send that damn sword somewhere else! And Soundbite, weren't you working on some brand new badass move or something!? Can't you just blow it to damn pieces!?"
"Love to, can't!" Soundbite grimaced, his eyestalks pulling independent 180s. "TOO MANY DIFFERENT TYPES OF FLESH FOR ME TO GET a common frequency! I'D ONLY BE ABLE TO BLAST A bit of the damn THING!"

"Is it just me, or has your Awakened Devil Fruit not been of any help at all since we left Enies Lobby?" Su snapped.

"...I CAN still use GASTRO-PHONY at a distance. HOW WOULD YOU LIKE THE BISCUIT TREATMENT?!" Soundbite snapped. Conis and Su reacted only in confusion, but everyone else winced, and then I turned a glare on the snail.

"And you aren't doing that to the hellhound… why, exactly!?" I demanded.

"...PLEASE HOLD," Soundbite whistled to the side.

Before I could rip a chunk out of the snail's hide—or shell, as it were—the pursuing Cerberus suddenly stumbled in its pursuit, hacking and wheezing. It spent a few seconds like that before all three heads swung into one another and they resumed the pursuit, angrier than ever.

Soundbite blinked in honest shock. "Sonnuva bitch, SCARFACE BACK THERE JUST KNOCKED ITS hearing out of commission!"

I blinked in surprise before refocusing on my running for my life. "I will admit, I probably should have seen that coming." I glanced around, looking for something that I could use to fend off the mutts. Putting them down for good could send out the alert too soon, meaning we had to find some way to escape before—

I smirked as I saw an upcoming tree, and moved a hand to my belt. "That'll work," I muttered, shooting the grappling hook and locking it around the tree branch. "Everyone, after me!"

As Lassoo secured himself on my back, I pulled the cord, reeling myself in and onto the branch as Usopp mirrored me with his own belt and Robin provided makeshift ropes for everyone else. Within seconds, we were safe in the boughs of the perfectly normal (a metal heel to the closest thing I could find resembling an eye confirmed it) tree, with the Cerberus zombie circling angrily below. Ultimately, however, it snorted acridly before turning its back and padding away, presumably to either return to its den or to find someone to put it out, leaving behind a stench of burned fur. Eurgh.

Once we all hopped down and dusted ourselves off, I started to speak, but Soundbite snickering to himself grabbed my attention. "Care to share?"

"N-No no, NOTHING! Y-You just do whatever!" he managed to choke out through his giggling.

I cocked my eyebrow in blatant disbelief. "If… you say so…” I then shrugged the matter off in favor of properly addressing everyone else, starting by gesturing at the woods around us (once I was sure that Soundbite was properly Scrambling us, anyways). "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the haunted woods of Thriller Bark. They're dark, damp, fog-ridden… and absolutely packed to the gills with the living dead."


"One I really wanna get out of as fast as possible…" Usopp gulped as he strangled the staff of Kabuto. "Which way out of here?"

"Soundbite?"
"ROAD'S thataway!" Soundbite indicated with his eyestalks.

"Thanks," I nodded gratefully as I started walking in the direction he indicated. "C'mon, gang!"

I dug my heels into the ground as I registered what I heard. "What just came out of my mouth!?"

"Heeheehee..." Soundbite snickered.

"Sounds like Soundbite's having some fun at your expense!" Lassoo raised his paw to his mouth and chuckled. "Reeheehee—eh!?"

I shot Soundbite a flat look as Lassoo clamped his muzzle shut. "Okay, once is you messing around, twice is a trend. What's the con?"

Soundbite opened his mouth to reply, but before he could say anything a flock of bats shot out of the trees, screeching and flapping. All of us tensed as they flew by—except Usopp, who let out a shriek and practically Shaved into Conis' arms, clutching her neck and shoulders like a life preserver.

Conis blinked at our sniper in surprise. "Uh…?"

"Drop him," Su deadpanned, prompting Conis to do so and unceremoniously drop to Usopp the ground.

"WOW, I DIDN'T EVEN plan that, but it still worked out PERFECTLY!" Soundbite snickered.

"OK, seriously?" I deadpanned, casting a sidelong glare at the snail. "Why are you—"

"HAVE YOU REALLY not noticed our group?!!" Soundbite outright cackled.

I glanced around in confusion for a second before 'ah’ing and realization and pointing everyone out one by one.

"Male Coward—"

"Hey!" Usopp squawked indignantly.

"Female Beauty—"

"Uh… thank you?" Conis leaned away from me with a slightly uncertain look.

"Female Brainiac—"

Robin chuckled, though she was looking at me curiously.

"Male leader..." I pointed at myself before slowly looking down at an incredulous Lassoo. "...and a talking dog," I finished, disbelief evident in my voice. "Sonnuva bitch we're freaking Mystery Incorporated, One Piece Edition."

"HAHAHA! YES!" Soundbite howled maniacally. "And cue tree-assault in THREE, TWO—!"

"...meh."

"HOOHOO—COME AGAIN!?" Soundbite squawked incredulously.

"You heard me, meh," I said dismissively. "This isn't the universe playing merry hell with my sanity; it's me unintentionally making something happen. And honestly? It's actually a little funny."
Soundbite blinked a few times. Then he looked up at nothing. "You gonna take that lying down?" he asked.

A second or so later, a branch spontaneously snapped above me, clattering to the ground so that it was leaning against my torso, shoving its smaller branches at Soundbite's face. Said snail had snapped into his shell, and upon poking his eyestalks back out, looked for a moment, and then narrowed them.

I, however, couldn't help but snicker, given the fact that the branches directly in front of Soundbite's face were suspiciously arranged into what very much resembled a fist with the middle finger raised. "Looks like there's a fine line between driving me crazy and taking orders from a snail."

"Well, screw you too," the snail grumbled.

"Okay, watch it," I chuckled as I started walking towards the road. "Honestly, last thing I need is another close encounter of the electric kind, got it?"

"GURK!" Soundbite thankfully decided to shut himself up as he shot back into his shell, his eyes poking out and glancing at the sky fearfully before he suddenly tensed up. "Uh, Cross? I'm not the only one who should be LOOKING UP."

"Eh?" I glanced at him in confusion. "What are you—?"

"Well, isn't this quite the development?"

"GAH!" I jerked backward and fell on my ass, flinching on account of the freaking vampire bastard that had just dropped out of the branches and who was hanging upside down before me. "For the love of—! We already have someone on our crew who gets her kicks doing that, we don't need anyone else!"

"I'm inclined to agree with our… dubiously beloved tactician," Robin chuckled as she and my friends stepped up beside me, she herself helping me to my feet as they stared up at the squat bat-winged zombie.

"My humblest apologies," the vamp-zombie simpered through his ever-present grin. "My name is Hildon. I am something of the majordomo around these parts. It is an honor to welcome you to our humble horrifying home of Thriller Bark, Straw Hat Pirates."

I took a brief moment to appreciate nobody in our current group having the stupidity to ask how he knew who we were before responding. "Well, that's warmer a welcome than I was expecting," I remarked. "Can't really say I'm surprised you recognize us, though. Fans, huh? Or did you just get our wanted posters?"

"Oh, you've acquired a poster of your own, have you?" Hildon perked up—or down, as it were—eagerly. "How riveting! No, we were completely unaware of that! The News Coos haven't been coming around lately, for some reason. Really…” He tilted his head to the side with a sigh. "It's quite vexing if I'm being honest. What have we ever done to them?"

Coming to a likely conclusion, I sent a silent word of thanks to Coo before refocusing on the zombie as he continued.

"But anyways, yes! Fans!" Hildon nodded eagerly before tilting his head with a despondent frown. "Up until recently, anyways…"
"Recently?" Conis questioned curiously.

"Ah, well, you see..." Hildon crossed his arms over his chest and bowed his head despondently. "Our domicile is quite isolated, you see, and we're quite interconnected around here, so we've only ever had or needed a single Transponder Snail. But a few weeks back..." He spread his wings in dismay. "We were attacked!"

Conis, Su, and Usopp exchanged glances as they heard that, while I blinked in comprehension. A glance at Robin and Soundbite showed that they had come to the same conclusion, and I looked back at Hildon with a well-schooled expression of curiosity. "And... these attackers stole your Transponder Snail?"

"HA! If that were all that they did, we'd probably have just laughed it off, but no such luck! You see, a few weeks back, two different pirate crews joined in an alliance and, without any provocation whatsoever—!"

I only just managed to keep from coughing out a not-so-subtle 'bullshit'.

"—attacked the island without an inkling of remorse or hesitation!" Hildon swung his arm over his eyes in despair. "We didn't do a darned thing to them, and yet they started tearing our humble abode apart at the seams! Even going so far as to steal our only connection to the outside world! Oh, woe is us, woe says I!"

I rolled my eyes at the ham-tastic performance, but stayed silent.

Eventually, Hildon quit his fake blubbering and wiped the non-existent tears from his eyes, grinning widely. "Ah, but now you're here, and you can regale us with marvelous tales of your adventures in person! If you'd be so inclined, anyways."

Now that actually snagged my attention, and Robin's as well if her glance at me was anything to go by. "To confirm, when you say 'us'?"

Without any warning, Hildon dropped from the canopy and flipped around to land on his feet. He then shoved his thumbs in his mouth, blew out a harsh whistle...

And with a clatter of hooves and grinding of wheels, an old-fashioned but well-designed horse-drawn carriage came rolling towards us, drawn by two things that were definitely not traditional horsemen. Seriously, what the *fuck* was sewn onto that second horse's neck!?

"By 'us'," Hildon chuckled in what I bet was meant to be an inviting tone. "I mean the master of the glorious manor where I serve. I refer to the illustrious home of the world's greatest medical mind..." His fangs glinted in the lantern-light. "Doctor Hogback."

"Yeah, because that's not suspicious at all," Lassoo muttered beneath his breath, before jumping with a yip of pain, presumably on account of a hand that was rapidly disintegrating from where it'd sprouted on his backside.

"Lead the way," Robin invited with all the casual ease someone who had the epithet 'Devil Child' should have.

Credit to Hildon, he didn't even twitch, though I suppose already being dead might have had something to do with it. "Please, allow me," he offered politely, swinging the carriage's door open and gesturing for us to step inside.

I climbed in with a nod of thanks and took a seat by the window, and I couldn't help but share a
victorious grin with Robin as she sat next to me.

I wasn't foolish enough to think that everything would certainly be smooth sailing from here, but damn if it didn't feel good for my plan to be going right so far.

~o~

"Alright, here's how things are going to hash out," I said as I held up a single finger. "Team 1, a.k.a. 'Gatecrasher', will be the ones who walk in the front door, pretending to fall for the island's tricks, and when we get deep enough into the heart of it, sabotage. That team will consist of Conis, Su, Robin, Usopp, Lassoo, Soundbite, and myself. And before you say anything, Funkfreed," I added, holding up a reassuring hand to the elephant, "the only reason I won't have you with me is that I have something special in mind for you. You won't be acting as a sword, but you will definitely be right in the thick of the action."

"Works for me!" the elephant saluted with his trunk.

"Incidentally, Cross, I'm curious about something," Brook interjected. "One weapon that merged with a Zoan Devil Fruit is interesting, but two seems to be a pattern, and considering your secret… are you making a habit of collecting them?"

I blinked as the weapons in question looked at me in askance, and I shrugged. "Not intentionally, shit just lines up like that. Though I am happy with the results. And they were the only two Zoan weapons I can remember, so—" I frowned as a certain monstrous slime salamander came to mind. "...Strike that, there was one other, but 'weapon' doesn't begin to describe it, and I'm pretty certain that even 'properly sapient' is a stretch. Aaand that's a long way off besides… Anyway, as I was saying, I don't think I can make a habit of it, so no."

Brook nodded, and I shifted back to what I was saying before. "Anyway, getting back on topic… First of all, Merry, now's the time to forego surprise in favor of strategy; what have we got in the Soldier Dock System?"

A slight air of disappointment brushed across Merry's face, but it was only for a second before she withdrew a pair of blueprints from her coat and laid them out. "Channel 1 is the Mini-Moby Motorboat, designed for covert ops or shopping trips. Carrying capacity is five fully grown humans plus baggage. And Channel 2 is the Gator Glider airboat. The giant fan engine sacrifices subtlety for speed, but it's big enough to load eight fully grown humans plus baggage."

"Perfect. Team 1 will take the Mini-Moby, then; we'll be heading for the island's moat and meeting up with their scout, which should lead us straight to the mansion in the middle of the island that the Mysterious Four use as their base. And once we're there…"

I slowly turned to look at our doctor. "Chopper, I'm going to guess that you can tell us all about one Doctor Hogback, right?"

"Doctor Hogback!?" our doctor squealed ecstatically, stars practically sparkling in his eyes. "Of course I can! He's the Vegapunk of medical science, the absolute most brilliant surgeon the whole world over! He's saved countless lives that many others thought to be completely forfeit! A bonafide genius without par, admired by all doctors bar none! But…" Chopper tilted his head to the side curiously. "One day he just disappeared, without any warning whatsoever. People have been wondering where he's been for years… unless…"

Chopper gasped deeply, and I felt a brief flare of hope in my chest… only for a renewed round of sparkling to dash my hopes to nothing. "Do you know where Doctor Hogback is, Cross? Can I meet
him, can I, can I?"

"Ah…" I rubbed the back of my neck uncomfortably, looking anywhere but at those too-innocent eyes of his. Going by the way that everyone else—even Luffy—was exchanging uneasy looks, they'd put the pieces together, too. Unfortunately, none of the traitors decided to relieve me of the burden of breaking our poor reindeer's heart.

"Chopper… you remember that the Shadow-Shadow fruit works by animating cadavers with stolen shadows, right?" I asked quietly.

"Uh…" The sparkle died in Chopper's eyes in favor of confusion as he slowly nodded. "Yeah? Why, what does that matter?"

"It matters…" I dragged the words out painfully. "Because while the shadows can animate the bodies, they still need said bodies to actually work. They need working joints, connected tendons… basically, they need bodies that are dead, but in proper physical condition nonetheless."

Chopper frowned in confusion. "But… dead bodies decompose. They'd be unsuitable for… for anything!"

"Unless…" I sighed despondently, resigning myself to what I was about to do. "The person my team is targeting were to fix them up; retrofit them with new bones, new muscles, new everything… until they were better in death than they ever were in life."

Chopper 'ah'd and started to nod in agreement before his entire body froze, horrified realization obvious in his eyes. There was a tense silence as he just… stared at me.

"…you're—" he whispered softly, struggling to finish his sentence.

"Wrong?" I asked back, just as softly. "How? Lying? Why?"

Chopper's jaw silently opened and shut, until he swallowed heavily. "…why?" he parroted with a croak.

I grimaced at what I was about to say. "Hogback… was proud of his skills as a surgeon, but he was only ever in it for money. All the patients who came to him for his miraculous skills, he just saw them as annoyances, and looked down on any doctors who actually enjoyed helping others. Moria… he got him onboard by letting him resurrect a dead actress that he had a crush on. That civilian maid who lost her shadow… she's the one who has it. She's his…" I tried to find a term that didn't sound utterly horrible, but… "Let's go with 'personal assistant'."

Silence fell for a full minute as Chopper bowed his head, his body shuddering and shivering uncontrollably. Then, without warning, Chopper raised his head and I recoiled at the glowing cyan pits that his eyes had become.

"Calm down, Cross, I'm in full control this time," Chopper stated, though his tone made everyone shiver. "I should thank you, actually. After all, you've just shown me what's needed to tame the irrational part of my genius: focusing the entirety of my psychosis on a singular target."

"Is… that so…" Merry got out uncomfortably.

"Hogback…" Chopper muttered like a reindeer possessed, apparently ignoring us. "I looked up to him… I respected him… I admired him…" Chopper's hooves clenched and his eyes blazed with unholy fury. "AND I WANT TEN MINUTES ALONE WITH HIM."
I shuddered slightly at the pure murder in his voice, but I managed to steel my nerve enough to respond. "You'll get as long as you want, Chopper," I assured him. "Exact whatever pounds of flesh you want. Just let my team grab him and get him to spill his guts to the world first. He's the weakest of the Mysterious Four, but he still has all the knowledge of the godforsaken place in his head. So long as I can get him talking to the world, then they'll all be screwed to hell and back. After that, his fat ass is all yours. That sound good to you?"

Chopper kept trembling for a bit, his nostrils flaring with snorts of impotent rage, and then he slumped forwards with a defeated sigh, the shadows seeming to melt away from his face and leaving him just looking… drained.

The Zoan-reindeer took a few more calming breaths before looking up, his eyes pleading. "Cross… I-I just… I have to know. Did he… ever really succeed in resurrecting the dead? Was it all… just a lie?"

I slowly closed my eyes as I recalled a specific moment in the arc.

"…In the final showdown against him, you appealed to Cindry, trying to stir her memories. Logic says it shouldn't have worked, that there should have been nothing and nobody in her, but…" A wistful smile crossed my face. "For an instant… her heart beat again. She smiled like she did a thousand times before when she was alive, like she'd never done in death… and she found peace."

I stared off at nothing for a second before morosely focusing on Chopper. "Maybe there is a way to permanently fend off the Reaper, Chopper, maybe there is—!"

"But that's not it," he ground out immediately, his gaze as cold as steel. "What you described… that's not true life. It's not medicine. I'll keep looking for the solution the right way."

I nodded with some relief, and turned to regard the rest of the crew. "Anyway, the short version is that Team 1 will be responsible for meeting Hogback, capturing him, interrogating him, and then putting him out of commission so that he can't assume control of the zombies. Any objections?"

None were forthcoming.

"Perfect. Now, moving on to Team 2…" I grimaced uncomfortably. "Your task will be both more dangerous and more difficult."

~o~

"Well, this is certainly a hospitable welcome," Su deadpanned as she sat in the carriage's empty driver seat, staring at the equally vacant spot where the 'horses' had been.

"Mrgh, it's certainly standard fare for these parts…" I scratched my chin thoughtfully as I eyeballed the gate standing between us and the impressively large manor that stood in the distance. "Though… I don't get why he pulled it. I could have sworn that he only did it in the story because Nami, Chopper and, well…" I nodded at Usopp, who responded with a flat leer. "All chickened out because of that sideshow we rode by earlier."

"Now that doesn't make much sense," Robin hummed to herself. "After all, I didn't think that those zombies we saw earlier were all that frightening. Why, I'd even say they were quite cute."

"Um, Robin?" Conis scratched the back of her head with an uncomfortable grin. "Please don't take this the wrong way, but… that's because your mind is a very dark, scary, and wrong place. No offense."
Robin blinked at her in honest confusion. "Why would I take offense from that?"

A sweatdrop hung from Conis' brow. "Very, very wrong."

"Personally?" Lassoo panted as he licked his chops unabashedly. "All those aged meats just made me hungry."

"You're just wrong in so many ways, full-stop," Su stated flatly.

"If we could get back on topic please?" Usopp whimpered fearfully.

"It's Cross's fault!" Soundbite sang.

"Blow it out your shell," I deadpanned.

"Actually, I'M NOT KIDDING!" my snail leered impishly. "HILDY FLEW OFF cackling to himself over making Jeremiah Cross piss his pants IN TERROR!"

"...oh," I chuckled apologetically. "Ah... whoops? W-Well, if that's all the flighty bastard wants, then I say we get out of here fast, before—!"

CRACK!

We all stiffened fearfully as the sound of the earth splitting open rang out like shattered glass, punctuated by a faint but slowly rising groaning.

"...crap," Usopp whimpered fearfully, leading us all in slowly turning to face the source of the unholy noise.

There was a second or two of stillness as the ground cracked and shuddered, but before long, with a singular heave of movement, I got my first look at the living dead.

My first reaction upon seeing the zombies was to flinch away. Not in terror, mind you; their overall demeanor and superior numbers were rather concerning, sure, but my prior knowledge meant they weren't that scary. Rather, it was on account of a situation much similar to the first (and only, thus far) time I met a fishman: The dark and dismal devil lay in the unshown details.

And the detail of this day was that while Hogback was good, rotting flesh was still rotting. I hadn't seen it before in the horsemen or the denizens of the woods because of the fog and gloom being thicker there, but now? What I was being confronted with wasn't an array of the undead you'd find in normal anime or cartoons, but rather a full-blown horde that had just clawed its way off of the set of The Walking Dead! Missing tracts of skin and flesh, distorted and gaunt features, discolored musculature... and those were just the ones who still looked human. Others just looked... mismatched; too-large limbs, too-small heads, and everything in between.

And there was an army of these things on the island, with these guys the absolute least of their ranks?! I woefully resigned myself to the fact that we were in for a loooong day... Or night, I guess? Ergh, the sooner we got out of this damn fog...

Robin and Conis both snapped into ready positions, Robin crossing her arms and Conis grabbing at the grip of her Blaze Bazooka, only to pause uncertainly. "Ah..." they chorused.

"Yeah, not much we can do against an army of the undead!" I snapped. "Right now, there's only one thing we can do!"
"YEAH!" Soundbite cackled. "And you know what that is?!"

"Run like hell!?" Usopp choked in terror.

"Ye—!" I started to concur.

"NOPE!" Soundbite cut me off with a roar of laughter. "ROCK LIKE HECK!"

"Wait, wha—?" I stiffened as realization hit me upside the head with a crowbar. "Oh, nonono—!

I tried to dissuade the little shit, I really, really did, but barely a second later all anyone or I could do was flinch and pause at the sound of wolves howling in the distance. Wolves that were almost immediately accompanied by a very familiar synth riff.

"IT'S CLOSE TO MIIIIIDNIGHT

SOMETHING EVIL'S LURKING IN THE DARK!"

"Oi vey…" I slapped a hand to my face with a groan. "Soundbite, your taste is officially deader than disco."

"WAIT UNTIL I Rick Roll your wake!" Soundbite chortled without missing so much as a single riff.

"Another off-color reference, I take it?" Robin asked dryly as she warily eyed the yet-paused horde of the undead.

"Eh…" I wavered my hand in a non-committal manner. "Not so much 'off-color' as 'supremely cheesy'…" I pegged my snail with a glare. "And also at the worst possible time."

"If not now, THEN FREAKING WHEN!?!" Soundbite sniffed.

"Preferably at some point when I'm far, far away from here and we're not all in danger of being torn apart!" Usopp snapped irritably.

"NYEH!" Soundbite responded by sticking his tongue out in a veeeery mature manner.

"Ugh," I rolled my eyes in… more exasperation than disgust, really. It wasn't like this was that bad in the grand scheme of things. "Well, at least you've somehow managed to baffle the zombies with your bullshit. Once they snap out of it, though—!"

"Ah… Cross?"

"Hm?" I glanced at Su curiously.

"I… don't think that that's going to be much of a problem," she stated.

"What are… you…?" I trailed off as I looked back at the zombies.

"YOU CLOSE YOUR EYES

AND HOPE THAT THIS IS JUST IMAGINATION!"

I… really didn't want to believe what my eyes were telling me at the moment, but it wasn't like I really had a choice: I couldn't even begin to deny that the cadavers seemed to be all but sniffing the air as the song built to a crescendo.
'Could they?' I wondered. 'Nah, they can't be. That would be too much. It's just not—!'

"What are they doing?" Lassoo asked as the zombies started to move.

"They appear to be… getting into positions…" Conis summarized weakly.

And indeed, it appeared like the zombies were indeed shuffling around, slowly starting to form ranks… and… assemble into a triangle oh you have got to be kidding me.

"DARKNESS FALLS ACROSS THE LAND
THE MIDNIGHT HOUR IS CLOSE AT HAND!"

"Uh… Should we be worried?" Robin asked me quietly as the zombies all stared silently at us.

"Eeeheeheeheeeeee!" Soundbite giggled eagerly, clearly relishing in how what had started out as a mere off-color reference was spiraling beyond anything he could have predicted.

I wanted to respond in a more coherent manner, but the song switching up to Vincent-freaking-Price had killed any chance of that. After all, that meant…

Yup. The instant the voiceover ended (and good God having Vincent Price doing a voiceover for real life was absolutely chilling), the synth picked up again and the zombies began marching in step with the beat, twitching their heads to their right. Then they swung their arms out, shifting to the side and outright headbanging, their legs showing far more dexterity than they really should have. And then they started shuffling and swaying and stepping towards us.

It was right as they did a jumping jack and a slide move when Soundbite began cackling at a level that Price himself would have been proud of. "THIS. IS. PERFECT! HAHAHA! BETTER THAN I could have ever possibly conceived! Ohhh, I love-love-LOVE the Grand Line!"

I felt my hands and legs twitch as the zombies did the classic claw-handed sway. "It certainly is a… unique location."

"I gotta admit," Su whistled with no small amount of awe. "For a bunch of stiffs missing half their asses, these guys can shake what little they have left."

"It's like a Sea King attack…" Usopp muttered as he stared through his fingers. "So horrifying… but you can't look away."

"For the record, if you need a solid surface?" Soundbite whistled in faux innocence. "THE CARRIAGE IS EVER-READY FOR YOUR SKULL!"

I was still for a moment as I watched the still-boogying zombies before slowly turning my head to direct a blank stare at my partner. "And… why would I want to do that?" I asked flatly.

"…eh?" the snail blinked in confusion.

"Well, c'mon, like I said earlier: it's not the universe screwing with me, just you," I stated in a still-casual manner. "These zombies dancing? I kinda remember them doing this in the story, and them knowing this song and dance… is actually quite humorous. Awe-inspiring even."

"That's all well and good, Cross," Robin muttered subtly as she kept an eye on the display. "But if they're distracted, shouldn't we be going?"
I slowly turned my blank stare on her. "Why?" I asked, my tone still under lock and key. "They're not doing anything harmful, and giving the others more time to get in position only helps us."

"I… see…" she nodded hesitantly. "So… we're just going to stand here and watch these… meat-puppets dance?"

"Well," I jerked my head to the side. "You're going to watch them dance. I am going to be doing… something else."

Robin blinked in surprise. "And… that would be…?"

"Robin," I said as I started to work my arms out of my jacket and fold it up, placing a more-and-more eager Soundbite on top of the bundle. "We are currently in the presence of real live zombies dancing to the song 'Thriller' by Michael Jackson. This performance is one of the most iconic performances in my world, even though it was first performed nearly thirty years ago. There is only one thing I can do in this situation."

I shoved my jacket and partner into her arms. "Hold my snail."

As the zombies stomped around to face away from us, I joined in, moving in tandem.

"FIVE SIX SEVEN EIGHT!" I belted out as me and the mass of zombies stomped back. Right after the "EIGHT!" I whirled around, the entire crowd following me. And there it was.

"'CAUSE THIS IS THRILLER!
THRILLER NIGHT!"

It's amazing how easy it was to lead a pack of zombies in a professionally made dance routine. The zombies knew what they were doing, obviously, but I'd never done anything like this before, and to pull them off flawlessly?

Okay, not flawlessly. I got my feet tangled up once or twice on slide shuffles, and the spins always left me a bit disoriented afterward, but I was doing way better than I had any right to. But I had two things working in my favor. As I said, the zombies knew what they were doing, and if I got lost I could quickly catch up. More importantly, though? That song. That song.

"YOU'RE FIGHTING FOR YOUR LIFE INSIDE A KILLER THRILLER
AH!"

All I needed to do was let the song take over. That's all. Somehow, my body knew what moves to make. The mistakes I mentioned earlier were mistakes of execution, not of ignorance. King of fucking Pop indeed.

Finally, one last spin after another stomp backwards put me facing back towards my team, somewhat hunched over, one arm held in front of me and the zombies crouched all around. At that point, there was really only one thing to say.

"EAT YOUR HEART OUT, JACKSON!" I belted out.

The original repetitive synth riffs sounded out again, Vincent Price doing his trademark evil laugh in
the background, and I was all set to shuffle forward, crowd of zombies at my back and wide-eyed crewmates in front…

"GYAGH!"

When I was interrupted by a vicegrip clamping down onto my left ear and nearly tearing it clean off my head with a harsh yank, the music cutting out to the sound of a record scratch.

"You will ever and always find new ways to top yourself, brother mine," Robin grit out as she dragged me towards the blatantly haunted mansion that loomed over us, the zombies behind us too stunned by the development and the sudden stop of the music to do much more than stare.

"I wouldn't—AGH!—expect you of all people to stop—YEOW!—me from having a nice bit—OWOWOW!—of macabre fun, sister dear," I accused as I struggled to keep pace with her.

"There's a fine line between 'fun' and 'overkill,' especially in a situation like this," she replied.

"THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS OVERKILL! There is only 'DEAD' and 'NOT DEAD ENOUGH! HEEHEE—HURK!'" Soundbite was cut off by a newly materialized hand grabbing his tongue.

"I usually handle my many and varied affairs with an open hand," Robin flatly informed him. "But I will become the first person in the world to willingly punch a snail if I have to. Understood?"

"…aheheh…" Soundbite chuckled warily as I took him back and put him back on my shoulder. "Too far, I TAKE IT?"

"Liiiiittle bit," Lassoo pinched the toes of his paw together as he trotted alongside us.

"If it's any consolation?" Conis chuckled sheepishly as she and Usopp scrambled to keep up with our archaeologist. "I thought that you were quite good."

"Thank—ergh!—you," I said around the hand twisting my ear.

"Uhhh…" one of the zombies piped up uneasily, slowly raising its hand. "So…"

That turned out to be a mistake on his part, because it prompted Robin to release my ear and wheel around, shooting a positively lethal glare at the horde that caused them to flinch as one. "We are going ahead to the mansion now."

She narrowed her eyes and slowly crossed her arms over her chest. "Unless any of you would like to stand in our way?"

Almost in unison, the zombies all dove forward… right into the ground, burying their heads and shoulders and leaving their rotting forms sticking up in a grove of bodies.

Robin took a moment before turning around, her anger gone and nary a hint of bemusement betraying the cool satisfaction she displayed. "Good. Now, shall we?" She didn't wait for an answer before resuming her stride.

We were all quick to scramble after her, none of us willing to fall too far behind and risk drawing her wrath.

"She used to be your enemy!?” Conis hissed out of the corner of her mouth with nigh hysterical incredulity.
"Trust me, we liked that particular relationship as much as you'd possibly expect!" I hissed back.

"This really is a horror-house island…" Usopp whimpered miserably as he yanked his hat as far down as he could.

From there on, we continued down the fog-laden path in silence, slowly but steadily approaching the impressive (in scale, if nothing else) manor, nothing stirring from air or ground to disturb our progress. As such, we reached the front doors without any trouble. Or, well, front-archway, but same difference.

I let out a low whistle as we walked into the shadowy tunnel. Gothic house of nightmares or not, I couldn't deny that it had a certain air of unmistakable majesty to it.

I hid a smirk behind my fist. It was gonna be fun to put this place to the—! Heheheh, too close. Don't wanna spoil anything juuuust yet.

Of course, the mystique was kinda ruined by the old well situated next to the door that was being illuminated by a spotlight.

The well's rope started to creak, presumably from Cindry being pulled up by whatever mechanism she was currently hanging from, and I was patiently waiting for her to appear…

"I hear with my little ear, a STIFF hanging in a well!"

When Soundbite decided to pipe up and be… well, Soundbite.

"GAAAH!" Hogback shrieked as he slammed the mansion-door open, staring at us in naked terror. "H-H-HOW DID YOU KNOW!?!"

"Soundbite!" I hissed incredulously.

"Whaaat?" he whined with an ear-to-ear grin. "I can tell that whoever's in the well is wound up tighter than a PERCUSSION BAND, WHY CAN'T I CALL HER A STIFF?"

Hogback and I both twitched (me more discreetly than him) before allowing ourselves to heave sighs of relief.

"Oh, so that's all he meant…” Hogback muttered beneath his breath.

"You're an ass…” I hissed at Soundbite.

"This should not be a surprise to you," he sneered back, completely unrepentant.

Anyway, after a second, Hogback managed to compose himself and adjusted his facemask a bit before pointing his nose in the air. "A-A-Anyways! Welcome, Straw Hat Pirates, to my humble abode!" He spread his hands out in a grandiose manner. "Please allow me to introduce myself! I am —!


Hogback's head bounced as a weight slammed down around his neck. "—geh…"

"Master of medicine, specialist of specialties, most prominently renowned for being a surgeon extraordinaire," our archaeologist continued. "And of course, he's also known as the greatest doctor in the world."
"Ah, no, wait…" Hogback's hands twitched slightly as he tried to reach out to Robin. "That-That's my introduction, y-you can't just—!"

"Though in my opinion?" Robin forged on, wavering her hand in a so-so manner. "I'd say that he's only the second greatest."

"EH!?" Hogback squawked indignantly as he snapped his spine straight. "Second best!? That is totally and utterly preposterous! Who could possibly surpass a genius such as I?!!"

"Hm?" Robin blinked in a manner I could tell was fake, but I seriously doubted Hogback thought she was anything but genuine. "Why, Doctor Vegapunk, of course. After all, he is the smartest man in the world, is he not?"

"VEGAPUNK IS NOTHING BUT A TWO-BIT, HACKSHOP GREASE-MONKEY OF A—GRGGHH…!"

Hogback trailed off into incoherent snarling, his hands strangling the air. This continued for several seconds before he descended into tired huffing. "Give me… a moment…" he wheezed. He then stepped back inside the manor and slid behind the yet-closed half of the doors, out of sight but not so far that we couldn't hear him ranting and snarling under his breath.

I cocked an eyebrow at the display before leaning towards Robin. "Well played."

"You may have a natural talent for invective, but I have plenty of experience on my own," Robin chuckled behind a loose fist. "I imagine that he'll be too flustered to analyze any further manipulations on your part."

"Which will be very—!" I snapped my mouth shut when a profusely sweating Hogback stepped back into sight.

"I… apologize for that little display just now," he choked out bitterly. "I… I acknowledge that you are perfectly entitled to your personal opinions. B-But anyway, I believe we are off-track." He straightened his back with what little dignity he had left. "Yes, I am Doctor Hogback, and this is my manor. And you all are the Straw Hat Pirates, correct?"

"We're a few of them, yeah," I nodded in confirmation. "We went on ahead to check this place out, but our friends are all back on the Sunny waiting to phone back in. Which is…" I made a show of grimacing uncomfortably. "Turning out to be a problem."

"I'd say the fog's playing merry hell WITH ME, but I'd prefer Merry TO THIS!" Soundbite gagged, his tongue lolling out of his mouth.

I withheld a grin as I saw a glint shine in Hogback's glasses. "Is that so? Well, that's just awful, truly awful! Is there anything I can… oh, I know!" He stepped aside and gestured inwards. "Here, why don't you all step inside and enjoy a hot meal on my behalf? And while you're doing that, I'll send my manservant to inform your crew that you're waiting here."

"Are you sure? We wouldn't want you to trouble yourself—!" Conis began in a convincingly demure voice.

"FOSFOSFOSFOS!" Hogback cut her off as he threw his head back and laughed. "Trouble to welcome the most famous, infamous, and entertaining pirates of this generation? Quite the contrary, it's an honor. And besides…” His smile took on an acidic overtone. "My manservant could use the exercise. I swear, all he does is laze around all day, packing on the pounds without a care in the—!"

I tensed up furiously when Hogback suddenly flinched and cut himself off, plastering an apologetic smile on his face as he started to casually rub the back of his head. "I-I'm sorry, I got ahead of
myself again. I *really* shouldn't speak ill of those who... aren't present." Even behind his thick glasses, his glance to the side was unmistakable.

I swallowed heavily as I processed the implications of this development. "*Soundbite!?*" I hissed out of the corner of my mouth.

"**His heart only JUST beat, AND HE'S BARELY BREATHING!!**" Soundbite hissed back in a freaked out tone. "HELL, EVEN HIS body's voice is saying 'not here, not here' over and over! *I ONLY NOTICED WHEN I COULDN'T DENY THE FACTS ANY LONGER!*"

My jaw twitched a bit as I mulled that over, and then I swallowed and stretched a twitchy grin over my face. "Well, either way, thank you very much for the offer, Doctor. I imagine that our own doctor, Chopper, will be overjoyed to hear about your presence here." I let my grin perk up a bit with sadistic humor. "He dug out an old article about your work earlier today, you see. For the past few hours, you've been *all* he can talk about."

Well, at least *one* of those sentences was true.

"FOSFOSFOS! Well, isn't that just *grand!*" Hogback cackled. "I look forward to entertaining all of your friends, and treating you all to each and every last one of the countless splendors that Thriller Bark has to offer! But for now..." He stepped aside and swung his arms inward. "I shall settle for simply entertaining you. Right this way!"

And with that, we all made to file through the door, but we came to a halt when Robin jerked to a stop.

"Robin?" I questioned.

"...Perhaps this island is haunted, because it *felt* like something just grabbed my... *backside."

I felt a cold sense of calm come over me as I heard that, and my suspicions were only confirmed when Hogback discretely slapped his hand to his face. That... that just *reinforced* what I was feeling. "Let's hope that it *is* just the haunting," I said darkly. "Because if anyone really was stupid enough to do that, then I would have no choice but to find whoever was responsible and utterly. Fucking. *Destroy them."

The uncomfortable silence that arose as a result of my 'idle musings' lasted for a second before it was broken by the distinctly *not* subtle sound of hastily retreating footfalls from somewhere nearby.

"...just have to *love* the spooky environment here, hm?" Hogback hummed in a tone of forced calm. "I find that the tricks it plays on one's mind are *quite* refreshing! Now come along, come along, we should be going!"

"Nice bluff," Usopp muttered nervously as he started walking again, glancing over his shoulder as he went.

"Who the hell's bluffing?" I growled back.

We entered the manor in silence, at least, until we were interrupted.

"Doctor Hogback," a disinterested voice echoed from the well. "Should I still come up?"

My frigid rage lightened up a bit at the sight of Hogback starting to squabble with the well, balancing over the edge as he shouted at the zombie within. My mood lightened even further as I considered
matters up to this point.

Our aspect of the plan was going roughly 99% as well as I'd hoped, and in this case, that was more than enough.

Here's hoping that the second team was having just as much luck. Especially considering their target.

~o~

"Team 2, a.k.a. 'Honey Pot', will be the guard force that remains here on the Sunny," I said as I pointed down at the deck. "Their objective will be to deal with the fourth and final member of the Mysterious Four who will inevitably swing by while we're all away."

There was a wave of confusion before Merry raised her hand. "And… how exactly is dealing with an enemy on our home turf more difficult or dangerous than traipsing straight into enemy territory?" she asked.

I crossed my arms and scowled. "Because while Spandam is a scumbag unmatched by anyone short of a World Noble, Absalom is a close second who actually has the brawn to back up his inner bile."

I took in the rest of the crew's incredulous and disgusted looks before starting to tick off on my fingers. "In straight-up combat ability, Absalom is probably the strongest fighter on Thriller Bark. He's the only one who doesn't need Devil Fruit-based trickery to win, and the fact that he's an ability user anyway only heightens his threat level. He's been willingly subjected to countless surgeries under Hogback, giving him skin as thick as an elephant's (present company excluded) for extreme durability as well as a few hundred pounds of gorilla and bear muscle for crazy strength, and not only does he—to reiterate—have a Devil Fruit, he's wily in manipulating it, so while he can come off as an idiot at times, he can be smart when it counts. Oh, and by the by, that Devil Fruit I just mentioned? It's known as the Clear-Clear Fruit."

The tip of Sanji's cigarette burst into flames. "What," he snarled darkly.

I nodded regretfully at him before continuing. "For those of you who are unaware? The Clear-Clear Fruit grants the power of invisibility, to both the user and anything that they're touching, which Absalom usually uses in conjunction with a pair of wrist-mounted bazookas."

Boss ground his teeth in grim thought. "So, basically, not only is there going to be a juggernaut of ruthless strength and implacable resilience on board, but he's an invisible juggernaut too?!"

"And it's somehow accentuated by what he's like on the inside...“ Funkfreed breathed, his eyes wide in sickened realization. "I've been with Spandam for... pretty much my entire life, so you know I speak from experience when I ask how anyone not a Noble could come close!"

I scowled murderously as several... images flashed through my head. "By being a pervert... actually, no," I corrected myself at the incredulous looks I was getting. "That's not really accurate. He's not a pervert..." My hands slowly curled into shaking fists. "He's a predator."

Conis gasped, her and Vivi's eyes widening in horror, while Raphey, Robin, and Nami's faces contorted murderously.

"Care to elaborate on that?" said navigator growled.

"Yeah, because I'm pretty sure I'm missing something here," an obliviously confused Merry added. "What do predators and perverts have to do with each other?"
"…Go figure, she does still have some innocence," Leo muttered.

"Well, I mean, I know about…" The ship-girl made a circle with one hand, and jabbed her index finger in, pulling it back and forth. "But not the whole 'predator' thing."

I grimaced at Merry's comment, but deadpanned, "If I told you guys what I saw him do in the story, Nami's subconscious would electrocute everyone, and I'm pretty sure Sanji would blow the roof off of the pavilion."

"Cross, I built that thing SUPER! tough. A million beris says it'll hold up," Franky scoffed as Nami grudgingly handed Conis her Clima-Tact.

I shrugged, and not-so-discreetly moved as far away from Nami as I could. "He molested Robin onboard while invisible, spied on Nami in the bath, molested her there, and eventually kidnapped her, put her in a chemical-coma, and then had her fitted in a wedding dress and attempted to marry her while she was still knocked out."

**BOOM! CLATTER!**

"Oh, that's what you meant by predator," Merry nodded, before her face twisted into a murderous snarl. "Can I punch him in the coconuts? I'd really like to punch him in the coconuts. Repeatedly."

"That can be arranged. Also, I win, Franky," I deadpanned as I watched Boss and Zoro wrestle a flaming demon to the lawn, only just managing to keep him from smashing our entry ticket to the Land of the Un-Living wide open before we were ready. Above him, a blazing hole smoldered in the pavilion's roof, which was just elevated and crooked enough to show that it had been blown off.

"Shave off a million beris from my debt, Nami," I added, looking back at the navigator who (along with Raphey) was currently making the same attempt to break open the barrel despite being bound in place by several disembodied arms.

"I'll add ten million more if your plan doesn't involve me pulling a Nimbus Tempo on that patchwork bastard," she snarled murderously.

"…that can also be arranged, but it may not do him much damage on its own," I warned.

"**What about twenty in a row?**"

"…more plausible," I admitted. "So, any further questions before I tell you all what I have in mind?"

"Just the one," Merry sighed, staring at the broken pavilion with regret. "When is Franky ever going to learn not to challenge you on shit like this?"

"Since when have you known me to be that smart…" Franky grumbled back.

~o~

Alongside the main entrance of Thriller Bark, a long and tall set of stairs stretched down to a pier. A pier that was very close to a gigantic spider's web. The web's creator was nowhere nearby, as far as anyone looking on could tell, which was good news for the Thousand Sunny, which was stuck in it by the side. Indeed, immobilization aside, the ship seemed to be rather tranquil.

Or so it seemed, until the grass deck suddenly compressed, first in one spot, then another, both in the shape of footprints but with nobody visible. And at the very next moment, every last one of the ship's timbers trembled and groaned, as though the Sunny itself was growling with fury.
The grassy imprints suddenly halted in place, shuffling about a bit like a person looking around before resuming their path across the lawn.

The footprints started to stride towards the doors to the Sunny's sleeping quarters, then, abruptly, halted in place and slowly turned around in a direction facing the Sunny's deckhouse.

The deckhouse whose top was currently emitting a large amount of steam, mind you.

The imprints started moving across the grass again, this times towards the Sunny's aft and this time twice as fast as before. The imprints halted once they reached the steps of the stairs to the upper deck, and were replaced by every other step groaning loudly due to some unseen pressure ascending them two at a time.

When the sourceless footprints stilled, they were directly before the door to what could only be the ship's bathhouse. Then, slowly, the door inside creaked open, and a quiet snort rang out, as though some predatory beast were tasting at the air.

The sight that the slightly opened door revealed was decidedly not a bathhouse. Books lined the shelves, a large desk topped with a map 80% drawn near the window on the other side, and watertight cases protected all sheets of paper in the room so that nary a speck of moisture could touch their fragile contents. Of course, the ladder on the right side of the room made it clear that the bathhouse was very close by.

There was just the slight issue of the giant, armor-clad duck sitting at the bottom of the ladder. 'Slight' being, for once, an appropriate adjective given the quiet snores coming from his mostly motionless body.

There was a brief moment of contemplative silence before the duck was half-shoved, half-nudged aside, and the soft sound of boots and hands on a ladder sounded out a moment later. The boards composing the room's walls seemed to snarl as they creaked and groaned, following the ladder's own creaking as it rose toward the ceiling.

Finally, the creaking stopped and the hatch at the top of the ladder was inched open, the gap between it and the door slowly widening before creaking shut just as slowly. The room the trapdoor opened into was filled to brim with steam, and the vapors slowly but surely coiled around a space in the air that was shaped like a human, but was most distinctly anything but.

The humanoid creature's muzzle turned back and forth as it contemplated its shrouded surroundings, its head lingering as it saw a doorway into a much wider room. It subtly glided over to it, and a pair of large heart-shaped protrusions came out from its eyes and its tongue lolled from its maw as it gazed inside, beholding what lay within.

Or at least, somewhat beholding it, due to the fact that the steam was hiding any exact details from him…

"Mmm… that feels so good…"

But really, the silhouette of a woman with long hair getting her back rubbed by a woman with shorter hair (and they were women, men didn't have hips like that) didn't need that many extra details.

"But of course it does…" the short-haired woman crooned as she rested her chin on her counterpart's shoulder. "After all, you have all this stress pent up inside, it's not good for you~"

"Well, then… think you can help me…" the long-haired figure's head slowly turned to the side.
"Relieve some of this tension?"

"Certainly~"

The nonexistent figure's breathing accelerated, his heart jackhammering in his chest. This… This was just too good to be even remotely true. It was only that eensy-weentsy hint of sneaking suspicion that held the figure back, his long-honed senses staying his base insti—!

Suddenly, something fell from the long-haired woman's grasp.

"Whoops, I dropped the soap. Pardon me~"

Something in the figure's brain snapped like a dry twig. Prudence could go screw itself, no way in hell was he passing up as golden an opportunity as this!

And so, with barely enough restraint to keep himself from roaring, the figure all but pounced into the fog, arms spread wide as he flew at the women with his arms spread wide—

CRACK! "GAH!"

—aaand rammed face first into the far wall of the bathroom.

Absalom hacked and snorted as he clawed his way to his feet, leaning on the wall as he massaged his throbbing snout. "W-What the—?!" he started to wheeze in confusion.

"I believe that the appropriate phrase for this situation," came a serene but smug voice from the doorway. "Would be 'reaping what you have sown'."

Absalom spun around, and saw the two women he had thought were bathing, fully clothed and smirking, plus a child he'd never seen before poking out of a panel in the floor he hadn't noticed, standing in the doorway of the bath waving at him. Before he could react, they slammed shut the (Absalom's eyes widened as he realized he'd missed it in the steam) metal bulkhead of a door, which then proceeded to seal with a very loud clunk.

The porthole in the bulkhead was then filled with the white-haired child's viciously smirking face. "In case you didn't quite pick up on what's going on?" she taunted through the door. She then rammed her fist against the door…

SKRANG!

Which first caused a pair of very thick steel shutters to slam shut over the once-open windows…

SPLOOSH!

And second—and far more distressingly to Absalom—caused just about every water fixture in the room to blow its top and start spraying out water by the gallon-full.

Water that with no place left to go, started to very rapidly fill the suddenly too-small room.

Going Merry bared her teeth as Absalom swept his panicked gaze over the room.

"Hold your fucking breath, pervert."

~0~

"Nami, Vivi, Carue, Merry," I started slowly, looking at them all in turn. "You'll be the ones dealing
with this monster." I hastily raised my hands when they all recoiled in shock. "If you want out, I completely understand and I'll just have the Monsters ambush him, I just want to try and go for the most... subtle and painless method available to us is all."

The crew exchanged uncomfortable glances, and Sanji started to stalk towards me, fuming like a chimney. Nami, though, halted him with a hand on his chest even as she continued to coolly regard me.

"...Considering what I just asked for, we'll hear your plan out before we decide anything, Cross," Nami stated, though the edge lurking in her voice was unmistakable.

I tugged at my collar on account of the Weather Witch's Eisen-aura darkening to a subtle gray around her, but continued. "OK, so basically, my plan hinges around exploiting the two flaws Absalom has, and only Nami and Vivi can successfully use the first flaw to maximum effectiveness. And as for how they'll be doing it..."

I trailed off uncomfortably as I considered what I was about to say before swallowing heavily. "Alright, look. There's no right way to say this delicately, so I'll have to be blunt, but I swear to the both of you, in no way, shape or form will you be in actual, physical danger for even a moment. Got it?"

Our negotiator and navigator exchanged uneasy looks before nodding as one.

I sucked in a stilling breath... and then I whooshed out the only word applicable. "Bait."

I all but panicked at the looks of betrayal that flashed across their faces, and I hastily scrambled to specify. "Or at least! The *general forms of your bodies* will be the bait, while your *actual, corporeal forms* will be well away from Absalom!"

Vivi's heartbroken look broke in favor of confusion, but Nami slapped her hand to her face. "Mirage! You could have just opened with mirage! Damn it, you asshole, you nearly gave me a heart attack!"

I grimaced and nodded in acceptance even as my crewmates all relaxed from the tension that had beset us. "Yeah, you're right, sorry. I was just... really focused on the b-word. But yes, you'll be using a mirage to trick Absalom. And Vivi," I nodded at the princess, "You'll be involved for the dual reasons of your Sovereign's Will probably being of some use in controlling him if anything goes wrong and... well..." I shook my head with a sigh. "Absalom has a hard enough time controlling himself around one woman at a time. So I figure two women at once in a... compromising situation —!"

"His caution goes straight out the window and he'll charge headfirst into whatever trap we lay out for him, blah blah blah, I get the picture," Vivi finished for me, grimacing. "Don't worry, Cross, I did way worse while I was Miss Wednesday. So long as I stay fully clothed around that monster, I'll do what I need to see him get his comeuppance."

"So, uh... what's my part in this?" Merry asked as she raised her hand with a not unfearful look. "Am... I-I'm not going to be in—?"

"I neither know nor want to know if Absalom is willing to or has ever sunk to those levels of inhumanity, so *no*, preceded by a *hell fucking,*" I growled, before allowing myself to smirk at her. "But I do have a couple of questions for you, Merry. Concerning good ol' Sunny, actually."

Merry's face morphed into a mask of confusion. "Uh... yeah, sure? Fire away."
"Well, first off..." I pointed up at our deckhouse, whose library I'd spent ample time in. "The bathroom. I'm assuming it's all caulked up to the nines?"

Merry started to reply and froze when a pair of bodiless hands clamped onto her shoulders, shuddering around her spine.

"For her sake?" Robin smiled in a too-serene manner as the fog around her seemed to darken malevolently. "It had better be."

Merry's rictus smile twitched as she tried to force herself to stay still. "Sealed up tighter than Akainu's molten ass, my mast to God! So, ah... please don't kill me?"

The darkness around Robin evaporated as swiftly as her hands. "For now."

I shook my head at our archaeologist's... somewhat teasing tone before continuing. "Anyway... next, question, how long would it take for you to replace the bathroom's door with a metal bulkhead that, oh, I dunno... even Luffy would have trouble punching through?"

I grinned as I saw the beginnings of a spark form in Merry's eyes. "Not... that long..."

"And I'm once again assuming that you could install a few armored covers over the windows—!"

"And then rig the pump to go into overdrive when I say so and flood the place, turning the entire room into a watery-grave fit to drown Franken-pervert! BRILLIANT!" Merry cackled in realization, jumping and clapping her hands gleefully at the prospect. "You're an absolute genius, Cross! I'll go get the preparations started right away!" And with that, she popped a trapdoor in the deck and dropped into it, laughing all the way.

I nodded contentedly as I turned back to Nami and Vivi. "You two'll project a mirage of yourselves in a... 'compromising' position into the bathroom once it's been filled to the rafters with steam, and once Absalom leaps in, you'll lock him in and take advantage of his second fatal flaw. The one thing that he can't possibly fight."

"His own powers..." Vivi breathed in realization.

"Hell, that'd even take care of a normal person..." Nami muttered into her knuckle before slowly nodding. "This is a really good plan, Cross!

"No need to sound so surprised," I grumbled, turning to Carue. "And just for the record, you can contribute by pretending to sleep at the foot of the ladder, help sell that we're lax and off our guard. I know it's not much, but... well, given the situation, it's not like you'll be anywhere else but a room away from Vivi, right?"

"Damn stwaight!" Carue confirmed.

"Perfect!" I said, clapping my hands together. "Alright, I realize this might be hypocritical given what I said earlier, but still, it's worth saying: So long as we follow this plan and line things up right, with any luck we'll be able to remove Absalom of the Graveyard from play without any real trouble."

~0~

"I am so glad that this thing is holding up," Nami sighed in relief, staring through the porthole at the ferocious lion-faced man who was pounding at the steel door, even as the room continued filling with water.
The source of her boundless relief stemmed from the fact that despite *knowing* that the door was composed of several inches of strong steel, Absalom was still managing to put dents in the only barrier between him and his escape.

"Agreed," Vivi swallowed, rubbing at her neck fearfully and flinching as yet another dent was slammed into the metal. "He's… enraged. If he gets out, it won't matter if we're female or not, he'll rip us to pieces."

"Well he'll have to get through me first!" Carue declared, before recoiling as another punch bent another spot in the door. "Though I hope it doesn't come to that…"

"And it won't, don't worry," Merry assured him, utterly relaxed. "I dug into some of the Wootz steel Franky splurged on to reinforce that door. Even Luffy would take at least five minutes to break through, and this guy doesn't even have two; if my calculations are correct—and considering how they involve Big Bro Sunny, they *are*—then the water will be reaching his knees in five, four, three, two…"

The ferocity in Absalom's face suddenly faltered and he grimaced in discomfort, slumping forward to lean against the door. For a few seconds, he looked like he was beaten.

Then he raised his head, murder in his eyes, and he started pounding anew. The dents he caused were significantly shallower than they were before, but they were *definitely* still there.

Merry's mask of confidence crumbled. "That's… unexpected…"

"Merryy…" Nami grit out, bringing her Eisen Tempo to bear.

"Uh, uh, uh…" Merry hastily counted her fingers a few times as she muttered to herself before snapping her head up. "Reaching his waist… now!"

Absalom flinched again, his muzzle scrunching up in a sign of clear disgust, and he looked to be barely conscious. But *still* the pounding kept going, in spite of the fact that there was no clear progress in harming the door anymore.

"Meeeerrrryyyyy." Vivi's knuckles turned white as she strangled her Lion Cutter's hilts.

"Oh, screw this asshole!" Merry snarled, hastily knocking a panel on the wall open and wrenching the pipes inside around. "I was going to try and keep the pump in one piece, but it looks like we'll be rebuilding it from scratch! Flooding the place now!"

Absalom's eyes widened in panic as a groaning-shuddering sound rocked the bathroom, but before he could react the porthole was obscured by a flood of white foam. When the bubbles cleared, Absalom's drowsy face floated in the water for a moment before a slew of bubbles spurted from his mouth and he sank down and out of sight.

The quartet allowed themselves to sag in relief, the tension draining out of them.

"Thank God…" Nami groaned, wipes the cold sweat from her brow while her clouds fanned her. "Cross wasn't kidding, that bastard was a monster inside and out!"

"Yeah…" Vivi mused, fingerling her necklace as she peered into the porthole. "You know… honestly, looking at this? I wonder if it would even be worth it to have Devil Fruit powers. I mean, all of that power, even as a Logia… but then it becomes totally useless as soon as you fall in water. Isn't that… a bit useless?"
"Say dat again wid a stwaight face da next time you see Wuffy, Wobin and Choppah kick majah ass," Carue snickered into his wing.

Vivi considered that before nodding her head. "Yeah, and Crocodile certainly never suffered from that particular weakness much, either. Point taken."

"Well, trust me on this, weaknesses or not?" Merry snickered as she slowly counted down on her fingers. "I, for one, fully appreciate selling my soul to that little shit-tasting devil. Aaaanyway…" She started fiddling with the pipes again. "The room should be full up by now. I'm gonna shut the water down so that the whole place doesn't burst, and then we can let that patchwork punk stew until he's niieee and dead to the world. Then I'll just drain the place and we can dip into the stash of sea prism cuffs and collars that Enies Lobby and the Accinos so graciously donated to our worthy cause, and —!"

**BOOM!**

The quartet froze when the whole of the deckhouse suddenly shook and, far more distressingly, the already-abused bulkhead suddenly bulged as though Sanji had taken his heel to it.

"What the hell was that?" Nami whispered numbly.

"Cannonfire…" Vivi breathed back, her pupils having shrunk to pinpricks. "That was cannonfire… h-he's still moving!?"

Merry shook her head in frantic denial. "E-Even if he is, I took those bazookas Cross talked about into account! The door is strong enough to take anything he could physically carry!"

**BOOM!**

Nami's gut dropped as there was another explosion, and the door bulged even further. "Did you take into account that his musculature is reinforced…" she whispered numbly. "And he can carry firepower that would blow a normal person's arms off?"

Merry paled. "Uh…"

"Owah that he'd onwy hafta knock da dowah halfway off its hinges befowah it'd have to deaw wid da watah pwessure?" Carue whimpered.

Silence reigned as the ship-girl slowly stumbled backwards fearfully. "No… No, I didn't…" she whispered in terror.

In the heart-pounding silence that followed, the click of metal on metal was like a gunshot.

"**RU—!**" Nami started to scream, shoving as many of her clouds forwards as she could.

Sadly, as swift as her iron clouds were…

**BOOOOM!**

The blast that blew the bulkhead off its hinges and the flood of water that followed were far, far faster. As such, none of the four were ready when the water and the blast struck them, smashing them clean through the opposite window of the deckhouse and launching them out onto the lawn of the deck.

Thankfully, the deck was covered in grass rather than wood, and Nami's subconscious managed to
bend the clouds enough to provide something of a cushion. As such, they weren't hurt from the fall or landing. They were, however, left sputtering from the sudden assault of water on their senses. They had just managed to get their breath and balance back when a most unwelcome thing interrupted them.

"Clever little sneaks."

They looked up to see a very wet, very livid patchwork-man standing on the railing above them. His jaw was that of a lion, his wild golden hair only reinforcing that image, and the left and right thirds of his torso and his arms from the wrists up were covered in different colors of flesh very obviously stitched on, with a pair of bazookas strapped to his forearms. Most unnerving of all? Though his eyes promised murder, his mouth was curled into a smile.

"I thought I felt something off at first…" Absalom of the Graveyard grumbled, his hackles pulled back in a vicious scowl. "Why am I even surprised that someone like Jeremiah Cross knew about me ahead of time? You should be pleased with yourselves, that's the closest that anyone's ever come to beating me since I joined Moria." He clicked his very sharp teeth together. "But the simple fact is that I'm way out of your league now that you've lost the element of surprise. I'm going to take my sweet time with you three, and when I'm done—"

"Quiet."

Absalom faltered, his tongue catching in his mouth as Vivi glared up at him. Then she smiled sweetly, taking on a rather alluring pose. "Mister Absalom, why don't you just calm down and hold still?"

A choked noise tore its way out of Absalom's throat, the rage evident in his tone paradoxical to the way his body slumped forwards, the energy draining from his stance.

"Good, good." Vivi nodded in a faux-endearing manner, a frigid smile on her face. "Now, just for the record… you said the 'three' of us, but that's not quite correct. For you see… there aren't three of us here."

"HEADS AHP!"

Absalom's eyes darted to the side, just in time—

"SUBSAHNIC!"

For him to catch a faceful of armored talon moving almost faster than he could tell what hit him.

"KICK!" Carue quacked furiously as he practically leapt off of Absalom's face, transferring the entirety of his velocity to his target and bouncing him off the Sunny's railing before he fell out of sight.

Nami and Vivi both heaved relieved bursts of laughter, slapping their hands in a victorious high-five.

"Uh… guys?"

And then Merry's quivering voice cut through the mood.

"Merry…" Vivi whispered fearfully. "Please tell me you're not about to point out some minor but highly incriminating detail that means we're not done yet, please."

Merry shook her head regretfully, her eyes filled with terror. "Wish, I could, but… Carue kicked him
overboard, right?"

Nami nodded slowly. "Yeeeaah… why?"

"Well, then… where's the splash?"

Nami and Vivi both froze as they stared at the ship-girl. "What," they whispered in synch.

"Where's the splash?" she repeated. "If we were done, then wouldn't there be an ocean-shattering splash?"

"Uh…” the older women exchanged uncertain glances…

"So… you want a splash, you little brat?"

Before they all stiffened as a by-now far too familiar voice growled out, accompanied by a hand clamping onto the edge of the railing.

"I'LL GIVE YOU A SPLASH!" bellowed the positively deranged Absalom, forcefully shoving his torso back into view as he clawed his way back onto the Sunny—

**BOOM!** "WA-A-A-ACK…"

And then firing one of his bazookas at Carue, causing the unfortunate flash-cooked waterfowl to keel over, out cold and smoking, and leaving the three women alone with the madman. Said madman then turned his guns on them. "WHO'S NEXT?!"

But in contrast to the fear that he had been eagerly and viciously expecting, they had prepared themselves to fight before he'd even finished with Carue. Nami had surrounded herself in clouds, Vivi had started spinning her Lion Cutter, and Merry had hitched a rope ride straight to the helm.

As such, Absalom paused near the railing, scanning over his targets: Nami, wrapped up in her Iron Cloud; Merry, halfway across the ship; and Vivi, in striking range and protected by much more flimsy weapons.

"You," Absalom decided, pointing a clawed digit at Vivi. "You're next."

Before the former princess could in any way deny that, Absalom vanished from sight. Vivi pivoted in place, her eyes wide and shooting to every rustle of grass.

'I can't see him!' she mentally wailed. 'How am I supposed to fight him i—right, I'm an idiot."

"Stop and show yourself!" she barked, and was rewarded by Absalom faceplanting a few feet behind her. A low thudding whip sound drew her attention to the lines, right as a whole mess of rope and pulleys fell on top of the Franken-bastard.

"Gotcha!" Merry crowed as she yanked the lines up, Absalom tangled up in as many hooks and snares as she could manage. "Not so tough when you're hanging up in the air, are ya?!

Absalom's answer was to shoot a snarl and a glare at the helm before jerking his arm, which brought about the click!-**BOOM!** of the bazooka firing, followed milliseconds later by Vivi just barely ducking under the suddenly visible cannonball.

**BOOM!**

"AAAAH!"
A cannonball that, unfortunately, landed immediately behind Vivi before exploding, the blast and shrapnel knocking her off her feet and peppering her with metal shards.

"Ooooww…" Vivi groaned into the dirt, her world still a blur of blaze and pain.

"Vivi!" Nami and Merry howled as she went down, the navigator swinging out her Clima-Tact so that two chunks of black, crackling Eisen Cloud were flanking the strung-up Absalom. "Nimbus Tempo!"

Lightning tore through the struggling chimaera suspended between the two clouds, loosing a bevy of both electrical crackles and a symphony of sizzling meat. The rope, due to the considerable heat drawn from the metal hooks, gave up the ghost about a minute in, dumping their charbroiled assailant on the grass with another loud thump. The sight of a torrent of smoke curling up from his form was a veritable font of hope for the women.

"D-Did we get him?" Merry wondered as she peeked over the railing of the foredeck.

Seemingly in response, the exact source of the smoke became indistinct as Absalom's body faded from sight.

"Gonna take that as a no," Vivi grunted as she hauled herself to her feet, wincing as she picked out slivers of metal from her arms. "In my experience, Paramecia powers that rely on conscious activation don't persist after their user's lost consciousness in a violent manner."

"So… still kicking, got it," Nami said, spinning up her Clima-Tact again. "Let's fix that."

Eisen Cloud flowed out from Nami's defensive shell, wrapping around their still-smoking opponent, quickly flowing into a cross-hatched shell that immediately began turning black.

"Tempest Tempo."

Said crosshatches promptly came alive with lightning, jumping between the lattices to strike and charge every inch of space outlined by the shell. Once again, crackling lightning competed with sizzling on the target, and was also accompanied by a burning smell. Eventually, though, the lightning came to an end, and when Nami withdrew her clouds all that was left was a black form smoking on the circle of dead grass.

To everyone's surprise and—far more pressingly—horror, that form was not Absalom's body, but instead his bazookas and a pile of ash, bits of blue cloth still visible.

"How—!" Vivi began, but was cut off by an invisible fist slamming into the right side of her torso, reaching under her ribs. She immediately hunched over, groaning loudly in pain as she clutched at where her liver was.

Nami tried to respond to the sudden Absalom on her six, she really did, but with most of her Eisen Cloud still wrapped up where the Tempest Tempo had hit she was unable to stop an iron-hard grip from grasping her neck and slamming her into the mainmast.

"I crawled," Absalom growled as he faded back into view, somewhat scorched and now shirtless, but still fully functional. "Had to leave my bazookas behind so you wouldn't notice, and that's one more thing I need to pay you bitches back for." Reaching up with his other hand, he brandished his claws. "I'd say it'd be a shame to mess up that pretty face… but I'd be lying."

"DYNAMIC ENTRY!"
"Wha—" Absalom began, before a pair of rainboots slammed into the side of his head and sent him careening into the pavilion's counter. Growling, he shook his head, looked up, and saw Merry let go of the rope she had swung down to land on his torso.

"MERRY… PUNCH!" the ship-girl announced, rearing back a fist and then slamming it into his crotch, the impact shaking the Sunny from keel to crow's nest.

For a moment, there was silence… which a freaked Merry broke first.

"Uh, s-s-shouldn't you be screaming in pain right now?" she nervously asked.

Absalom's lips pulled back into a murderous leer. "You don't think that I chose to look like this for shits and giggles do you? I've been very thoroughly retrofitted. Among those improvements?"

He snapped his hand up to grab Merry's face, lifted her clean off the ground and then slammed her into the lawn with as much force as he could manage.

"A mental switch," Absalom growled. "For my sense of pain. Looks like something you could really use right now, huh?"

Merry let out a hacking cough, blood spurting from a squashed nose, cut lips, and a nasty scrape on her forehead.

"MERRY!" Vivi and Nami screamed, lashing out at Absalom with clouds and blades respectively, which Absalom was quick to roll out of the way of. Nami hastily ran to cradle Merry, while Vivi interposed herself between them and Absalom, though she was swaying on her feet and barely managing to stay upright.

Still, the Princess tried to take a few swings at the abomination with her Cutters, but she could only growl in frustration as they were easily dodged.

Vivi concentrated for a bit before lashing out again. "Hold sti—!

Before she could finish her command, however, Absalom grabbed the chain of her weapon and gave it a firm tug, nearly taking her off her feet.

"Improvement the second," Absalom snorted, ramming his palm into the side of his head before grabbing the chain with both hands and giving it an almighty yank, dragging Vivi into melee range before she could react.

"Nononono, stop stop STO—!"

THWOCK!

"HURK!" A mouthful of blood forced its way through Vivi's teeth as Absalom buried his fist in almost the same exact spot Sharinguru had not too long ago. Still, even through her renewed haze of pain, she was conscious enough to be aware as the beast-hybrid grabbed the back of her head and forced her to look into his face.

"Detachable eardrums," he growled menacingly. That done, he lashed his arm out and cast Vivi aside like a ragdoll, her uncontrolled tumble terminating when she bodily slammed into the railing, where she lay still with only shuddering breaths to show that she was still kicking.

Absalom turned to face the last of the pirates, who was nowhere to be seen.
"Guess what, asshole?"

Absalom spun around, just catching sight of Nami standing behind him.

**THUNK!**

"**GRK!**"

Before staggering back as she *rammed* the orbless end of a section of her staff into *and through* a juncture of stitches on his chest.

"You're not the only one who can turn invisible," Nami snarled. "Now, let's see if your insides are as tough as your outsides when dealing with a sudden burst of lightning."

"More specifically!"

Absalom snapped his head around to catch sight of Merry painfully leaning against the mast, giving him a bloody grin.

"The amount of voltage a Thunder Dial gives off when *shattered!*" she leered, ramming her fist into the mast.

Before Absalom could react, a pulley swung down from the rigging and *cracked* into the orb at the end of the rod sticking out of his chest.

"Ride the lightning, *asshole!*" Merry cackled in triumph.

That was the last thing Absalom saw—

**ZAP! "YEEEAAARGH!"**

Before his world devolved into light and *pain.*

Merry and Nami both shielded their eyes, the lightning coursing through Absalom lighting up the deck from end to end. It only lasted a few seconds, but at the end of those seconds, the lion-faced man was exhaling smoke, his eyes white as snow and blood oozing out of the cavity in his chest. He keeled forward…

Then, to the women's horror, he ripped out the mangled remains of the Thunder Rod with one hand and rammed the other into his chest, hard enough that they heard a rib break and *felt* the resultant thump echoing in their own chests. Absalom was swaying on his feet now, but full functionality was clearly fast approaching.

"You… are… *dead,*" he growled breathlessly.

The pair stared at him in slack-jawed awe before Merry clapped her hands together.

"Welp," she stated flatly. "I'm done. Done done *done.* We did good, we kicked his ass, we even stopped his heart, but I for one feel like *shit.* How about you guys?"

"I am *very much* regretting the series of decisions that led to this situation…" Vivi wheezed weakly as she stuck her finger in the air.

"Aye don't wike shmewwing dewicioush…" Carue concurred blearily.

"And I just broke my Thunder Dial, so I need to dig out one of my spares before I do any more
serious fighting," Nami concluded, moving to slump against the side of the ship. "Guess you beat us, o King of Graveyards."

Despite all of the pain and anger that was coursing through every fiber of his being, Absalom's sheer confusion kept him from moving. This calm, even graceful surrender had him looking between them for some evidence of a bluff, but none of them were moving or attempting to set up any tricks. They were even closing their eyes.

If only because of what happened several minutes earlier, the last time he let his emotions get the better of a twinge of unease, he elected not to charge in blindly. His mind scanned over the situation: the four in front of him meant what they were saying, their actions made that a safe assumption. But even if they knew they had lost, if the SBS was any indication, the Straw Hats still would have kept fighting until the last breath, so how could the fight be—

Absalom stiffened in realization, recalling the exact reason that he'd come onboard the ship in the first place: to scout out the rest of the crew, which Cross said was still waiting onboard. Which could only mean that his quarry had surrendered because—

SLAM! "AAAGH!"

All at once, Absalom went flying backwards as a kick nailed him right in his snout, his much-abused body slamming against the wall of the ship as he completed his train of thought: they had reinforcements waiting.

It took a moment for Absalom's vision to unfuzz, but once it did, his heart stopped again at the sight of the individual looming before him.

The tall, blond, smoke-chuffing individual looming before him.

"You know, I had a whole bit lined up for this: the Bullshit Bistro, all-you-can-eat buffet, the whole nine yards. But after seeing this?" Sanji took a slow, long drag from his cigarette, and exhaled it just as slowly… right before searing the whiskers from Absalom's muzzle by bursting into flames. "I'm just going to kick your ass inside-out and be done with you."

~o~

"Hang on a second. I have a question, too."

All eyes turned to Sanji, who was still positively fuming, though apparently not explicitly at me. "Why am I not part of Team 2, Cross?" he tersely demanded.

I raised my hands placatingly at the sharp looks everyone pegged me with. "Because, to reiterate, Absalom, for all that he's a monster and has little to no leash on his… I'll be unduly polite and say 'libido', he's still smart. If he sees one of our Monster Trio still onboard, there isn't enough tail in the world to make him stick around longer than he has to. And the entire point of this risk we're undertaking—GAH!"

"'WE'!?" Nami snarled murderously, a veritable typhoon roiling around her as she tried to take my ear off, with Vivi tapping her Cutter in her palm right behind her.

"Owowowow, yes, 'we'!" I yelped in outraged agony. "For Roger's sake, if anything happens to you on the plan that I concocted, how the hell much do you think my life will be worth!?"

Nami's storm deflated with a sound akin to a balloon and Vivi's Lion Cutter vanished behind her back as the two exchanged uncertain looks before Nami released my ear with a sheepish grin.
"Aheh… stress from the oncoming ordeal?"

I pinned the both of them with a glare and a growl as I massaged my aching ear. "In full cognizance of the demon on my shoulder, I bid the both of you to kindly bite me."

"YOU KNOW YOU'VE screwed up when even I give him a pass on using that!" Soundbite snorted.

I maintained my glare on the penitent women for a minute or two longer before continuing. "As I was saying… the point of all this is to make sure that once Absalom comes onboard the Sunny, he doesn't get back onto Thriller Bark before it falls. And for that, we need to make sure that there isn't a single loose thread for him to unravel."

Sanji snorted darkly, and shot me a harsh look. "Answer me this, Cross: am I vital anywhere else in your plan? Truly irreplaceable?"

"Well—! …ah…" I started to answer before reconsidering. Well, when he put it that way…

"Because if that's not the case, Cross," Sanji forged on. "Then I'm not setting a foot off this ship. Because unless you can give me a damn good reason, I'm not willing to take the risk that that monster could turn things against even one more woman in the world."

"Uh…" I glanced away uncertainly as I scratched behind my ear.

"Sanji."

The both of us snapped our attention to Vivi with equal incredulity, as much due to her calm authority as the fact that she'd spoken up at all.

"I know you're angry," Vivi assured him in a tone of barely restrained calm. "But I believe it's safe to say that we—" She gestured at the fuming females of the crew. "Are far angrier. If the bath trap does somehow fail, I doubt he'll be able to handle all of our collective skill sets at once."

"With all due respect, dear Vivi? You just said 'doubt'," Sanji growled. "And that means that there's still a chance that he could actually seriously hurt you all or worse." Before Vivi could respond, Sanji swept his arms out and addressed the crew. "Can I have a show of hands for anyone on this ship who's willing to take the risk of our friends being left to the mercies of someone like that with no backup plan?"

"…I hate to say it, but I have to agree with the cook, Cross," Zoro admitted after a tense moment. "When you look at our track record, our traps work maybe half the time. And if things land on the 'don't', no offense, but I don't know if I'd bet on these four to win against what you just described. They'd have a good chance, sure," he added nonchalantly in response to a few glares. "But speaking as someone who's actually fought a Warlord's top subordinate before, he has a good chance, too. And I'm not willing to take the risk of letting someone like that loose against our crew."

I… honestly couldn't find it in myself to argue against that. Sooo I didn't. "Alright," I conceded with a slow nod. "But… even so, that doesn't change the fact that you need to stay out of sight. Hell, more than out of sight, out of scent due to his enhancements. One whiff of you and Absalom will pull a runner, and then we'll all be in trouble. You'll need somewhere to hide…"

Sanji's dour mood finally broke in favor of a victorious smirk. "Already got that handled." He then jabbed his thumb off the side. "I'm sure Thriller Bark has derelicts drift in all the time, right?"

I followed the digit to the battered wreck of the Rumbar Pirates' old ship. With its higher sides, it
would definitely allow good sight lines from its decks while also concealing Sanji from view. And considering how the old thing reeked to high heaven of mildew, salt and, well, death in general…

I slowly nodded in agreement. "Yeah… Yeah, that oughta do the trick. Alright, you've sold me: go ahead and act as backup if you want, but I hope you'll forgive me for hoping that it doesn't actually come to that."

"Considering how it's our necks on the line?" Nami concurred dryly. "I will second that sentiment with gusto."

"Well, you'll just have to deal with your Prince Charming being an overbearing protector either way," Sanji nodded. "For now, seeing as I doubt you'll need me for much else…"

I felt a chill run down my spine as Sanji smiled with a sadistic glee that should only have ever been directed at a certain giga-giant.

"I'm going to step away for a bit so that I can…" He hissed in a short breath before snarling out the next word. "Practice. Nothing but the finest for our customers here at the Crap Café, you understand."

"Aheheh…" I chuckled uneasily as I leaned back from the semi-demented chef.

"First step of any practice?" Soundbite deadpanned in a nonplussed tone. "NEW MATERIAL. That bit's gotten mouldy."

"Ah…" The menace siphoned out of Sanji as he considered that. "…yeah, fair enough. Anyway, carry on without me." And with that, he turned around and stalked off.

I watched him leap up onto the old derelict before refocusing on the rest of the crew. "Alright, now that that's handled, let's move on to Team 3."

Much later, once we were done with the accursed island that was our next adventure, I would kick myself for not noticing how… wavy Nami had gotten as I said that.

-o-

"Sanji."

The chef spun around suddenly as a stern-looking navigator looked at him, her clouds gray. "Yes, Nami dear? Do you need me back on the Sunny?"

"Not unless you haven't finished the lunchboxes yet," Nami said, shaking her head. "I want you to make me a promise."

"Anything for you, sweet Nami!" the chef sang exuberantly.

"Let us fight."

The chef froze, and Nami moved so that she was directly in front of him, darkening clouds and all, before he could say anything. "You heard what Cross said: if he sees you too soon, he'll run away and spill everything to the rest of Thriller Bark, and that'll spell pandemonium for the rest of us. And knowing you, you'd jump in as soon as he managed to land one hit on us. Which is why I'm here, not just for me, but with Vivi and Merry's support too."

She looked him dead in the eye as she jabbed him in the chest. "Promise us, Sanji: no matter how
much we get hurt, no matter what Absalom does to us, do not intervene unless we acknowledge that he's beaten us, that we need your help. Even if he wasn't the worst kind of pervert, we've been training specifically so that we won't need to rely on the stronger members of the crew to be able to survive every opponent we meet, and this is our chance to find out whether it's been enough. Promise us that you'll let us have that chance."

The chef visibly warred with himself, and it took a full minute before he bowed his head with a weak sigh.

"…You have my word, Nami-swan."

The navigator nodded before returning to the ship. She didn't look back, and so she couldn't see as Sanji's expression contorted into a downright ferocious expression.

'Make that another thing to roast that patchwork bastard alive for: putting me in a situation where I might have to endure them screaming.' He sucked in as deep a drag as he dared from his cancer stick before letting the nicotine-laced fumes roil in his lungs. 'At least there's an upside… when I finally get my feet on this bastard, it's going to be all the more satisfying.'

~o~

For the first time in years, Absalom was truly terrified that he was going to die. He had taken enough damage already that the flaming demon before him made him think that the Grim Reaper itself had come for him. Then, like so many other brainless bastards before him, all he knew was pain.

Sanji's kicks flew without mercy, without hesitation, and shrouded in golden flames, his mind running through images as fast as he kicked. It didn't even take a minute before he reared his leg back for the final blow, his mind's eye coming to focus on a single distinct image:

A mask carved out of iron.

"HELL MEMORIES!"

KRACK-BOOM!

_Literally_ white flames streaked behind the ship's intruder as he flew away and crashed far away from the Thousand Sunny. And with that, the hot, hot flames diminished, leaving the huffing but triumphant Sanji dusting off his hands.

"…Impressive," Merry said dumbly, staring through a telescope at the new flaming cavity in the mouth-shaped gate of Thriller Bark, in which Absalom was very deeply embedded and even more clearly unconscious.

"Is… _that_ what you were practicing?" Vivi asked.

Sanji turned to her, for once not flying into love mode, his expression bleak. "…When I was a kid, I found an encyclopedia on the different identified Devil Fruits in the world. It seemed farfetched, and most of the powers I saw didn't seem worth the curse anyway… except for one. The Clear-Clear Fruit spoke to my very soul. And I made the decision that if I ever found it, I would embrace the curse. To let my anger burn as hot as I wanted to, all I had to do was focus on how much I could have done if I ever had the power of that fruit."

He looked back in the direction of the gate, and his next words were spoken softly.

"The power to disappear…"
What would have happened next might have been a solemn silence, in which the three of them wondered what Sanji could have meant, had Carue not narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

"You just wanted tah be able tah peep just wike he could, didn't ya?"

And just like that, the atmosphere changed, Sanji stiffening as the three females looked at him. He smiled sheepishly. "N-No, no, I had other ideas. There was so much good that I could—NUDE GIR—!

THWACK! THUD!

"I swear, he's completely hopeless," Nami groused, shaking her head and grinding the heel of her palm into her forehead as she and the rest of the women present stood over Sanji's insensate form.

"Incorrigible, utterly incorrigible." Vivi lowered her head and shook it with a sigh, her fists planted on her hips.

Merry, meanwhile, grinned from ear-to-ear as she shrugged in a 'what can you do' manner. "Buuut it's not like we'd have any of them any other way, riight?"

The navigator and princess's dual silences and smiles were more telling than any verbal response they could have given. Nami then turned her smile towards the form of the cook, whose head was steaming but lacking a bump. "Still… Sanji, you saved us. We were… in over our heads—"

"Nami," Vivi interrupted. "This whole affair was an absolute, unmitigated disaster. And to make matters worse, this time we can't even think of blaming it on Cross. This was all on our heads."

"…right…" Nami eventually conceded with a wince. "This was… a disaster… that was our faults…" She then readopted a light smile. "And… you were smart enough to have our backs and be there to pull our asses out of the fire. And that… was not something I would have had a year ago and I… I really appreciate it. So… thank you. A lot."

"UOOOH, NAMI-SWAN!" Sanji roared energetically, poised on the Sunny's railing as he was wreathed in a whole new kind of fire.

"Wight, then," Carue squawked, wincing as the mere act of speaking aggravated his burns. "If dat's evewything, I move dat we waid Choppah's woom and stawt tweating ouw injuwies befoah phase thwee stawts."

"Seconded," Merry nodded, limping towards the room. "Sanji, give me a hand; I may have Chopper's skillset, but I'm fighting to stay conscious. You'll have to put on the bandages."

"Of course, Merry," Sanji nodded, moving to hold the door open as the four of them filed in.

"So, kind of off topic, but… given Cross' luck, who wants to bet that whatever he's doing is blowing up in his face just as much as this blew up in ours?" Vivi mused.

-0-

"And so the guy slaps the soldier clear across his face," I managed to get out through my laughter. "Puts his foot on the table, and proclaims for the whole bar to hear!" I leap to my feet and sweep my arms out in imitation. "I, sir, am a Puritan!"

"FOOOSFOSFOSFOS!" Hogback howled with laughter as he pounded the table, his clearly squashed lungs wheezing desperately. "P-Puritan! A-And after the donkey—! A-And the chandelier
and the—! FOSFOSFOSFOS! T-That's a good one! Truly hilarious!"

I snickered as I came down from the high that a successful joke provided. Well, if Hogback wasn't genuinely laughing, then he was putting on a very good act. Buuut going by the slight rosiness in his cheeks (what little I could see under all that grease, anyway), it was not only genuine, but booze-enforced. Which served to assure me that our ruse was going perfectly.

Currently, we were all sitting comfortably in the dining room, all of us, two enemy sides content in their masquerade of friendliness for the sake of defeating the other when the time was right. Of course, the balance was rather firmly in our favor considering that they didn't know that we knew about their trap, or that we had one of our own.

...oooh, good lordy, I only just realized that we'd gotten ourselves into this kind of situation. Eesh. Well, on the bright side, at least the rabbit-hole didn't go down too deep.

Aaaanyways, getting back on topic… while I was wining and dining Hogback to the best of my abilities (which I'm guessing were pretty good, seeing as he hadn't tried to leave yet and Cindry hadn't commented on how he'd drunk two bottles while my glass was untouched) the rest of my friends were occupied with their own affairs.

Currently, Soundbite had retreated into his shell so as to try and pierce the veil of the fog, Usopp and Lassoo were whiling away the time flicking napkin-footballs across the table at one another (picture perfect field goals every time, of course), Robin was laid out on a plush red velvet fainting couch with her arm draped over her face, claiming she needed a quick nap to recuperate from the island's teeeerrrrrible airs, and Conis and Su were wandering around the border of the room separately, taking in the impressive pieces of art that adorned the room, from paintings to statues to suits of armor to gargoyles. Of course, Cindry had started to get on their case's about insisting on poking every little thing and leaping on every piece of furniture respectively, but she'd dropped it after Conis had stated that Skypieans had a more tactile appreciation for art and Su had said she needed the exercise. These reasons were all, of course, steaming piles of Sea King shite.

In reality, Soundbite and Robin were cooperating in order to properly map out every last inch of the dining room, acquiring its layout, secret passages, and tagging any zombies that could be hiding themselves in plain sight. Conis was aiding in that endeavor via her prodding, giving away the zombie's locations by prodding them and causing them to twitch—which was a good thing, too, because as evidenced by the aforementioned various art, compared to the literal half dozen from canon, we were in the middle of a potential ambush. Su was merely waiting for Soundbite and Robin to give her her objective's location, and Usopp and Lassoo… well, actually, they really were whiling away the time, but mark my words, their game of finger football was vital to our success!

Now it was all just a question of—

"Foxhole acquired," Soundbite hissed in my ear.

—check that, looks like go-time was now-time.

"Do it," I hissed right back, though it wasn't Soundbite I was aiming it at.

Completely by coincidence, Conis chose that moment to sidle up next to a suit of armor, leaning in close to examine it before recoiling with an exaggerated gasp. "Oh, dear! It looks like your suit of armor has a dent in it! Oh, but don't worry, it's outwards! I'm fairly certain I can fix it."

"Please don't," Cindry deadpanned, with what I swear was a hint of long-suffering to her voice.
"No no, really." Conis adopted an *ever* so slightly too-innocent smile as she drew her fist back. "I *insist.*"

And with that, her fist snapped forwards—

**SKRANG!**

—and the armor's chestpiece went *flying*, the arms and helmet hanging in place for a moment before smashing to the ground. *That* was intentional. The chestpiece smashing into and bowling over the next suit over, however? *That* was nothing short of gravy.

"Oops!" Conis gasped dramatically behind her hand, which she was using to hide her wide smile. "Sorry! Don't know my own strength sometimes!"

"I asked you not to." Yeah, now I *really* wasn't imagining the exasperation in Cindry's voice.

"I thought she was out of the clumsy stage by now," Usopp groaned with all the composure of a master liar.

"Poor fool! She's a woman! They *never* leave that stage! Fosfosfosfos!" Hogback wheezed, his blood-alcohol levels likely the reason behind his swaying.

"Very good, sir," Cindry droned before turning to leave the room. "Now, if you'll pardon me, I need to fetch a dustpan."

"Oh no, need to bother yourself, allow me," Robin sighed from her prone position, several arms blossoming on the armor pieces and starting to reassemble them.

"Oh, very nice. You're quite handy to have around."

Everyone paused to stare at Hogback, who was already thunking his forehead against the table. "Damn you, Absalom, you've infected me with your transparent sense of humor…" he grumbled. He then sat up with a groan, kneading his forehead. "Agh, and I'm already starting to get a hangover. We really should see about retiring…"

"Nonsense, sleep is for the weak!" I laughed exuberantly as I hastily refilled his glass. "Here, this'll kill your pain for you! And while you're drinking, I'll tell you all about a bit of fun our crew had a few weeks back involving a chicken, a quesadilla, and a chicken quesadilla."

*That* got the fat hog's attention, and he leaned in eagerly after taking a pull from his glass. "Oooh, tell me *everything!*"

In the midst of me regaling Hogback with yet another tale of our crew's antics (thank Drake and Hawkins for giving me *a lot* of backlog to work with) and Robin noisily redressing the downed suits of armor, a single fact went unnoticed by the inhabitants of the manor.

A member of our party was missing, and more pressingly, they weren't the cause of it.

Eh, not like I could blame them. After all, who'd miss a single snarky ball of fur?

-0-

Hidden away in the depths of the network of tunnels and passages that snaked throughout the manor's walls, a pair of spider-mouse hybrids were conversing idly as they awaited the signal to start their gruesome, morally depraved work with *equally* depraved glee.
"Do you think Master Moria will want any of the animals' shadows? Aside from the Dugongs, they're not really anything special if we take away the Devil Fruit powers," one of the mismatched abominations pondered, tapping its fingers together eagerly as it looked out into the parlor from a well-placed hole. "I mean, Hogback will probably want the doctor as a lab assistant or some such, but apart from that…"

"Honestly, I say it's fifty-fifty," his companion shrugged. "They're not that strong, no, but they're still shadows, and we can never have too many cold bodies. Though…" He adopted a flat look. "Unless I miss my guess, you're asking because you want permission to eat the white rat?"

"It's been so long since I've had fresh meat…" the other zombie moaned, though he was quick to slap his cheeks. "Bah, dreaming won't get me a meal and we're off topic. Where were we?"

"Well, apart from your intended snack," the second arachnid-rodent rolled his eyes. "We have a total of four targets. Nico Robin's Devil Fruit powers mean she'll be a bit tricky, but I imagine with an ample distraction—!

"Liiiiike knocking over a suit of armor to get everyone's attention?"

"Yes, yes, like that," the zombie dismissively replied. "With a distraction like that, we'll be able to completely blindside her and take her out before she has… time to… wait a second…" The mouse trailed off into confusion as his brain caught up with what he was hearing. "Since when do female spider-mice exist?"

"Oh, they don't. 'Cause you see…"

Without warning, the zombie was wrenched around by its nose so that it was face-to-face with a snowy, pinch-eyed mask of fury.

"I'm not a mouse," 'Cottontail' Su hissed. That was the last thing the zombie heard before she shoved her paw into his mouth, forcing him to cough up a writhing mass of black a moment later.

The other zombie could only stare in horror as his friend's newly lifeless husk slumped to the floor of the passage. He started to stumble back before freezing as Su snapped her gaze at him.

"And I sure as hell," she hissed, cracking an eye open for emphasis. "Am no rat."

That was all the poor (for a given definition of the word) zombie's nerves could take. It spun on its many heels and… well, it's hard to say what it tried to do; run maybe, or perhaps even scream for its un-life. Honestly, it didn't matter, because whatever it tried to do, it failed to do it before Su was on him like white was on her, cramming her paw through its gap-toothed smile and liberating its unjustly acquired essence before it could issue so much as a peep.

Su took a moment to regain her breath before glancing into the room her friends were still in. "Snow White to Farmer Jeremiah, this is Snow White calling Farmer Jeremiah. Come in, Farmer Jeremiah."

She grinned impishly as Cross surreptitiously adopted what Soundbite had told her was called the 'Gendo Pose' in order to hide how rigid his smile had become. "This is Farmer Jeremiah kindly asking you to blow it out your ass," he bit out in her ear.

Su spared a moment to snicker to herself. "I've cleared the room of mice, and I'll take care of any others that head this way. Soundbite, any idea how many are left?"

"Too many by half. You really think you CAN TAKE THEM ALL?"
"All at once and head-on?" Su snorted sardonically. "Doubtful. But one at a time, in a labyrinth of secret passages with a living noise detector for a… what was it again?"

"GPS."

"Right, that. Well…" Su allowed a downright sadistic grin to slide across her muzzle. "They never caught me in Upper Yard, and they're as hell not gonna catch me down here. Their hodgepodge asses are mine."

"Heh, fair enough. Good luck to you, Snow White."

"Oh, I'm actually not going to be using that anymore. Call me…" Su slid her bandanna up over her muzzle. "Solid Fox."

"…you've been spending entirely too much time with Soundbite."

"Preposterous! ON AN UNRELATED NOTE, one coming from the left."

Su didn't even hesitate to jump straight up into a passage perpendicular to the one she was in. A second later, a spider-mouse ran nose-first into the long-cool corpses of its comrades.

Before it could even gibber, Su dropped onto its abdomen and snagged its neck in a chokehold. "Shh…" she whispered soothingly, even as she pried its struggling jaws open. "No no, no tears… only dreams now."

"That. That right there is exactly what I'm talking ab—!

"Whoa, heads-up."

-o-

"Hm?" I glanced briefly at my partner's shell before resuming my casual look forward. "What is it?"

"What it is, is that I JUST GOT CONFIRMATION from teams 2, 3 and 4. PHASE TWO COMPLETE WITH… one or two hiccups, but WE'RE GOOD TO GO." He poked his eyestalks out of his shell and glared at Hogback, who totally missed it on account of how hard he was laughing. "LET'S WASTE THESE DICKS."

I hid the bloodthirsty way I was baring my teeth. "Gladly. But first…" I drifted my hand to my side. "Let's cement our credibility. Say, Doctor!" I piped up. Hogback's head snapped up as I slapped a grin on my face and loudly thunked my transceiver on the table. "What would you say to an interview on the world's most popular—!

"And only," Robin commented airily.

"—and only," I conceded with a nod. "An interview on the world's most popular and only talk show? I mean, after all…" I waved my hand at him, wearing a forced but hopefully convincing endearing grin. "You are one of the most famous people in the world, and you've been gone for twelve years! I would be remiss to pass up the chance to get an exclusive with you!"

While Hogback's expression rapidly morphed from one of surprise into one of eagerness, I had to hastily hide a smirk at the way Cindry visibly twitched.

"Doctor Hogback, I'm sorry for speaking out of turn, but the hour has grown quite late," Cindry bit out, a hollow tone of urgency underscoring her point. "If you'll kindly excuse yourself, I'll see that
our guests are moved to…" I grinned even wider as she glared at me with what could have been scorn had it had even a spark of life to go with it. "Appropriate accommodations."

"Oh, now now, no need for that," Hogback waved her off, bubbling with energy as he kept his eyes latched on my gateway to the world. "Don't be so stuffy, Cindry! It's just one little interview. And besides…" I barely kept my disgust off my face as his drunken stupor was suddenly replaced by a smirk of barely hidden malevolence. "What reason has a genius such as I for holding my anonymity, hmm? Why, in fact…" His smirk widened as he started stroking his chin. "I imagine that if I let the world know where I was, we'd get faaar more visitors here at our humble abode. Doesn't that just sound smashing?"

Cindry's eyelid twitched minutely before she settled back in place, staring dead ahead. "Very good, sir," she droned. I was… actually quite surprised by the response. Thanks to my association with Soundbite, I was a bit more familiar with the nuances of the human voice than most. As such, I was able to hear the long-dead undertones of shame lurking in Cindry's voice. Well, looks like either Cindry actually was present in what remained of herself, or… Margarita, I believe? Was present in more than just her scorn for dinnerware.

Well, whatever it was, it wouldn't matter for much longer.

"Well, glad to hear it!" I bared my teeth at Hogback. "Just gimme oooone second…" I hastily patted myself down for a pen and scribbled something down on a napkin, which I pocketed before grabbing at the box's mic, causing my friends in the room to tense in anticipation. "And let's get this party started!"

-o-

"So, bringing this meeting to order," stated a Marine who looked like he hadn't gotten much sleep over the past couple of weeks. "We'll begin with the status reports."

Rear Admiral Brannew blinked blearily as he shuffled through his papers; he had received his 'promotion' to the recently created Straw Hat Anti-Fallout Task Force the day that the new bounties had been released into the Grand Line, for his 'years of faithful service'. He had come to realize over the past several weeks that in reality, it was just an excuse so that they could heap more work on his head. He knew he should have checked that bounty-confirmation order with Sengoku, he just knew it.

But still, he understood the higher-ups' reasoning; with Jeremiah Cross responsible for so much damage already, they needed as much manpower as they could get to catalog it. But that didn't make slogging through report after tedious report any more respectable or enjoyable. In fact, it was bad enough that he was finding a lot more comfort in the SBS broadcasts, which by unspoken agreement usually resulted in a pause to listen (and half the time, a bigger headache than he started with).

But either way, he had a meeting to provide answers for.

"According to compiled reports from the Four Blues and Paradise," Brannew sighed wearily. "Latest numbers say that approximately one-third of our bases have been left completely untouched since the Enies Lobby debacle due to the positive reputations that they've garnered in their nearest civilizations, and are in fact reporting a slow but constant growth in volunteer Marines enlisting into the Navy. Admittedly, we've had more than a few reports of…" He glanced to the side and he coughed into his fist. "Discipline issues with them, particularly in Paradise, but fortunately, the new training grounds in Navarone are fully established and molding those recruits into proper Marines. In fact, washout rates and discipline issues have halved compared to Blackarm Island's old statistics. Spring Island climates leading to calmer temperaments and all that."
Brannew then allowed himself to sag slightly, an action that he would never have performed while handling his duties as a Commodore. "That's the extent of the good news, however. With the number of resignations over the last several weeks combined with combat losses, we've lost 15% of our forces in the Blues, and 20% of our Grand Line forces, and that means the entire Line. 10% of the Blue bases have been overthrown, destroyed, or have defected, along with 8% of the Grand Line bases. A small percentage have even reported that they've ceded their affairs to…" He was silent for a bit before sighing wearily. "Pirate governments."

He waited for the groans that always arose from the news of pirate-islands erecting themselves to die down before continuing. "More problematic than the losses in manpower and bases, though both are severe and will take considerable time to make good, is the loss in warships. Between the attack on Enies Lobby, the actions of the rookies recently dubbed 'Supernovas', the concurrent actions in the New World, and far too many mutinies, latest numbers say that we've lost thirty-seven of our 258 battleships, with another eleven requiring full rebuilds before they can be made seaworthy again. We have suffered similar loss rates in cruisers and unrated warships, though we haven't been able to account for all of them."

A wave of mutterings, before one officer spoke up. "That… doesn't sound so bad?"

Brannew glared down the offending officer, annoyed at both the interruption and the ignorance displayed. "Those losses represent a tremendous loss in our ability to directly control the sea. More importantly, Water 7's decidedly hostile independence has cost us a full fifth of our global shipbuilding capacity. While our ability to build battleships has not diminished, thanks to the decision to build them at Government-run shipyards only, this dramatically hurts our construction of smaller warships that are, if anything, even more vital for sea control. Not to mention it costs us a major source of munitions and maritime supplies. I haven't run the numbers yet on how our reduced capacity will affect replacement of all those ships, but suffice to say that my preliminary estimates are grim."

The glare was extended to the rest of the room. "And before anyone suggests simply building more shipyards, I have here…" Reaching down, Brannew grabbed a massive stack of papers and slammed it onto the podium with a satisfying thud. "Every proposal from existing shipbuilders to expand their yards, including our own." Edging out a clipped sheaf from the stack, he gave it a waggle. "This is the proposal from the Government yards. It would take six years." He then tossed it behind him. "It would also cost the Government over ฿10 Billion, all of which would have to come out of the World Nobles' discretionary fund thanks to that thrice-damned Bege. So that's a non-starter."

The next set comprised almost half the stack. "These are most of the private proposals. They would take anywhere from seven to fifteen years to complete, come with mutually exclusive building rights contracts attached, and we'd need to sign multiple to get the capacity we need. The only point in their favor is that they won't cost us any money we wouldn't be spending anyway." The papers were stacked off to the side.

Reaching down, he pulled out another, thinner sheaf, holding it and its large-font first page up for everyone to see. "Here's the response we received from the Dordon & Sons Shipyards, situated in the New World, when we sent them a contract proposal."

One of the officers squinted at the paper before straightening in his seat, his eyes wide in disbelief. "…ah, sir, is this even anatomically possible?"

"It is if you're a Long-Arm."

"But… there aren't any Long-Arms in the Navy, sir."
Brannew scowled as he crumpled up the paper. "Trust me, they're fully aware of that."

Tossing that proposal with the Government one, Brannew pushed forward the thickest sheaf. "And finally, this is a proposal from Colvos Island to build an entirely new shipyard complex. It would take care of most of our capacity needs, and its location in East Blue means it should be easy to guard. It would take ten years to finish, but under the circumstances, that's damn good time."

"What's the catch?" one of the officers nervously asked.

"Seeing as you apparently took notes during Cross's lecture, you can expect a raise," Brannew nodded approvingly. "The catch, of course, is that they have only half the money they need. The Government would need to provide the rest."

"And we can't afford that," the officer sighed.

"Exactly. So, before we move on, the floor is open for any possible solutions you may have."

Before anybody was forced to offer a suggestion on how to help stop an entire military's shipbuilding infrastructure from imploding, they all were rescued by a sound the world now knew by heart.

"Don don don don!

"Hold your thoughts," Brannew sighed as he reached for the receiver. "We'll spare a couple of minutes to see if this is something more demanding of our attention."

The officers nodded and turned their attention towards the snail.

"—seven, eight, nine O'Leary, ten O'Leary, gooot it! Ah, it's wonderful to see such a rapid response. Hello once again, people of the world! Jeremiah Cross, here as always—"

"Accompanied by Soundbite—"

"Personally welcoming you all... to the one and only SBS."

There was a single second of silence in which all of the Marine officers stiffened. Then Brannew broke it with a slam of his palm on the table.

"Meeting adjourned," he stated. "Half of you start transcribing this, the other half prepare the task force for running damage control. I want our battleships ready to sail within the hour."

The Rear Admiral shoved his seat back from the table as he stood up. "The Voices of Anarchy are speaking another island's eulogy, and I want to us to be there before there's nothing left of the place but ashes."

The other officers all rushed to obey.

Brannew stared after them for a moment before hanging his head and groaning. "Just another wonderful day in the Grand Line..."

-o-

"Today's show is going to be quite the spectacle," I promised my viewers, eagerness roiling in my gut like a live serpent. "And considering our track record, you know that's saying something. To kick off our line-up, we have an interview with an individual whom I'm told the global scientific and medical community is very interested in." I held my mic out to my eagerly awaiting 'guest'. "Care to
introduce yourself?"

"Oooh, yes yes yes, I very much would!" the 'good' doctor declared as he leaned forward into the receiver. "Ah, to imagine that I would be given access to such a wondrous pulpit firsthand, rather than merely calling in! Ah, but enough digression!" He drew himself up to what height he had, his chin raised proudly. "People of the world, I am Doctor Huberto P. Hogback! For those of you who are of less, eh…" He took a moment to think about it before shrugging dismissively. "Educated upbringings, I am—" To what little credit he had, Hogback barely even twitched, and he certainly didn't miss a beat."—one of the most acclaimed doctors the world over! It is an absolute pleasure to be here with you all today!"

I nodded in agreement as he sat back down. Then I slowly rolled my joints in preparation to speak. "To elaborate for those who are unaware, Doctor Hogback has been secluded from the public eye for the past twelve years. This interview will be his first public appearance in that time, and believe me when I tell you that it is my…" I lapsed into silence for a moment, stretching the corners of my mouth wide, putting every last one of my teeth on display. "Utmost honor to elucidate on just what Doctor Hogback has been working on all this time.

"Ah, but first!" I snapped my finger up, causing the doc to blink in confusion. "We're currently in the middle of having dinner, prepared by the Doctor's lovely maid, one Victoria Cindry. Spectacular food, truly, and I'd dearly love some seconds, but ah…" I donned a sheepish grin. "If I might make a humble request of our esteemed hostess?"

The undead maid-née-actress graced me with her usual neutral look. "And what would that be, sir?"

I paused before answering, taking a second to glance around and confirm that my crewmates were all ready; the next phase relied on getting this perfect. But seeing as they were all in position, I spared a final glance between Usopp and the female zombie still standing at Hogback's side before opening my mouth.

"Could I have it served," I said with the utmost casualness. "On a plate?"

As expected, the actress turned to me with her eyes narrowed, opening her mouth to begin a tirade—

—and then slapped a hand to her throat and gagged as she inadvertently swallowed something that flew down her esophagus. Something small, triangular, papery… and chock-full of salt.

In the same moment, Lassoo snapped his head up and spat a pellet of halite straight into the yet-open mouth of the mounted boar head on the wall, which suddenly sprang to life and started gagging as well.

Their writhing didn't last long. Within seconds, Zombies 269 and 400, AKA Buhichuck and Victoria Cindry, both collapsed to the floor as their ill-acquired shadows roiled from their gaping mouths, their second leases on life revoked.

Hogback blinked slowly as he took in what had just occurred. "…Cindry?" he breathed. "CINDR—ARGH!"

The fat hog's scream was cut off by me shooting from my seat and ramming my forearm into his windpipe, pinning him in his chair. Soundbite then leapt into motion. Literally, he jumped off my shoulder and landed squarely on Hogback's baldspot, leering down at the bastard.

"Keep struggling," I snarled tersely. "And your genius brain is as good as jelly."

"Hoo. Hoo. …hoo?" Soundbite's dry-as-plaster laughter trailed off into confusion as he glanced
around the room. I joined him and quickly realized what was wrong: we were still in a dining room, not a battlefield. Which, obviously, wasn't right. Seriously, I knew that cutting off the heads of their chain of command in the room would be effective, but this was a bit much.

"Uh… okay, hang on, gimme a second…” I held up a finger as I tried to think of a decent trigger.

"Lemme guess, they're not moving, huh?" Su's impish and disembodied voice chuckled in the air. "Here, broadcast me, I'll light a fire under their asses."

"You're live!" Soundbite promptly informed her.

"Great! Now, then…” She coughed for a second before raising her voice to a yowl. "BRING IT THE HELL ON, YOU PATHETIC PACK OF PATCHWORK PALAVERS!"

That did the trick: in less than a second, the room all but literally leaped to life. Paintings tore out of their frames (or dragged them with them), half the statues and suits of armor in the room leaped off their pedestals, brandishing their weapons, the gargoyles fell from the chandelier, and much to my consternation, the dining table was flipped when the bearskin rug reared up on its flattened paws and roared. That was disappointing, because honestly, plates or no, that was some damn good ravioli.

Ah, well. At least the spectacle that ensued more than made up for my loss.

And what a spectacle indeed. Ah, how best to put it, how best to put it… eh, simplicity holds its own beauty: My crewmates went Matrix on their revenant-asses.

To elaborate, Lassoo, Usopp, and Conis went back-to-back-to-back, arranging themselves in a triangle and blasting out a barrage of shot after salty shot around the room in a scene straight out of the Wachowski Brothers' vivid imaginations. Pellet after pellet of salt struck home with pinpoint accuracy, systematically and efficiently thinning the zombie horde. Gargoyles dropped out of the air, paintings faceplanted, and lifeless suits of armor bowled over their comrades as their heavy frames reverted to little more than ballistic corpses.

All fairness to the zombies, it wasn't like they were just trying to swarm us. Several of them tried to cover their mouths or slam their jaws shut, but Robin, yet to stir from her nonchalantly reclined position, handled their precautions with ease by blooming dozens of arms across the room that then proceeded to either wrench jaws open, rip hands away or tear helmets off, providing clear targets for our artillery experts, and artillery proper where Lassoo was concerned.

At that point, the zombies came to the understandable conclusion that their only hope really was to swarm us, and more annoyingly, that charging headlong at the people shooting them full of salt was perhaps not the best idea. Instead, they charged for the two people not shooting: me and Robin.

Chalk it up as the latest (and last) in a series of poor un-life choices. More hands sprouting from the floor immediately immobilized the zombies going for Robin (which was most of them) and wrenched their heads around so their mouths were facing Conis and Lassoo's artillery. Wham, bam, salted.

Several, though, were going for me. Thankfully, in order to get to me they had to run by Usopp, and if they thought presenting their sides to him would help, well, they clearly hadn't met Usopp. It was an amazing sight: our sniper was firing as fast as he could pull back his Kabuto, and he was curving his shots, and yet each batch of salt went straight down a zombie's gullet.

Only one zombie actually made it into grabbing range: a red-clad female zombie dragging her painting behind her through the remains of the dinner table, knocking some of it towards me and
somehow leaping up to grab for my face. 

Instead, my hand grabbed her face.

"Impact," I said around my smirk as the zombie flailed. With its usual BANG!, the Impact Dial… blew the entire top half of the zombie's head off.

"Eurgh," I groaned, flailing my gauntlet to try and get some of the gunk off of it before tossing a salt pellet down the thankfully still-intact throat. "Probably should've seen that coming…"

"Also, I FEEL LIKE we're missing something…" Soundbite added thoughtfully.

"GROAAAAR!"

"Right, THAT."

Despite the giant zombie bear rug looming over me, I didn't panic. See, I knew something it didn't. Leaning over, I picked up a little something that had been knocked my way when that painting zombie had come at me.

"Hey, Conis!" I called out, winding back my arm. "Catch!"

The bear rug zombie paused in its attack to watch the salt shaker fly through the air, leaving it wide open when Conis caught, loaded, and fired the shaker from her grenade launcher in one smooth motion. The rug collapsed back into a rug as she put said shaker clean down his maw, accompanied by a shadow wafting up into the sky.

And just like that, the room went silent, the newly freed shadows swirling and roiling about the ceiling in a mass of writhing black before seeming to squeeze their ways out of through cracks. It felt like a full minute before the silence broke.

"… is that all of them?" Usopp asked uneasily, strangling the shaft of his Kabuto.

"LEMMEE CHECK!" Soundbite leered eagerly before addressing the room. "BRING OUT YER DEAD!"

There was a moment of silence, and then a painting zombie pinned under a suit of armor's mass weakly raised its arm. "Ah'm not dead ye—!"

"Off the helmet aaaaaand—!" I called, tossing out a pellet I was carrying. Said pellet bounced off the headgear I was aiming for as intended and—!

"GRK!"

"Nailed it!" I pumped my fist victoriously.

"YOU KEEK A TOUCHDOWN!" Soundbite crowed.

"Yes, yes, all very well and good," Robin sighed as she sat up on her couch, stretching her arms above her head while a different set of the limbs grew along the seam of the door and linked grips, effectively sealing the only way out shut. "In other news, I can confirm that the room is secure. No way in, no way out."

"AND NOBODY HEARD jack shit OF WHAT JUST WENT ON EITHER!" Soundbite informed me with a cackle. "We're free and clear!"
"Glad to hear it!" I smirked, flashing them all a thumbs-up.

"What…"

"Hm?" I turned my attention back to Hogback, who was rapidly starting to purple, and not from how hard I was pressing down on his throat.

"WHAT IN THE NAME OF THE BLEEDING STYX IS GOING ON?!" he… more squeaked than yelled.

I blinked at him before grinning 'pleasantly' and sitting back down in my seat, which Robin had been kind enough to right for me. "Oh, just a little bit of crowd control, that's all. Couldn't have your goons jumping us and interrupting our fun, after all. 'Cause you see, Doctor Hogback…" I spat the name like the insult it was as I leaned my grin on my fist. "We're still going to have that interview, and it is going to be about the work you've been doing while you've been missing… but it's going to be the truth." I jabbed my finger in his face. "The whole truth, the honest truth, the only truth. And sure as heck not the two-bit bullshit you were planning on feeding the world."

And just like that, Hogback's attitude totally reversed, his indignant outrage draining away to pure, bowel-dropping terror. "W-What?" he breathed.

"You heard him, Doctor."

Hogback jumped in his seat, and twisted around to stare up at Robin as she leaned on the back of his seat, smiling down at him like a particularly demonic cat that had just bagged itself a rat.

"You're going to tell the world everything," she purred. "About this island, your endeavors here… and more importantly, about the involvement of your master."

Hogback was sweating like a stuck pig now, but I noticed that he was somewhat calmer. I could tell what he was planning, and that certainly wouldn't do, so I subsequently withdrew the napkin that I'd written on beforehand and held it up for him to read.

'Act like I'm holding up a script, and I'll turn Cindry into mulch.'

Hogback choked as he took in the words, his controlled facade crumbling in favor of shivering and gagging on his own tongue as he tried and failed to produce some kind of response. Finally, with what seemed like half his body's water content coating him in sweat, he gave me a pleading stare. "He will kill me," he managed, in a voice an octave above even his usual high tenor.

I chuckled dryly. "Ohhh, you poor degenerate bastard. You haven't realized yet? He already has."

Hogback tried to form a response to that, but he was too flustered for anything but confused fragments to come out. I casually leaned back in my chair, smirking at him as I gestured around the room.

"Twelve years you've been gone, Hogback," I drawled. "Twelve years, and no one has heard a word from you. And what do you have to show for it, hmm? Who knows where you are, what you've done? Your master may have provided you with the best possible outlet for your talents… but who's hearing about it? How can people praise you for your genius if they think you're dead? You're alone here in the darkness, and if he has his way, that's all you'll ever be. Nobody will ever know about your so-called greatest accomplishments."

The surgeon froze, even his fear stilling as my words sunk into his brain. I could see the conflict in his mind, his duty and loyalty to Moria slamming headlong into and buckling before the might of his
titanic ego's wrath. When I saw that he was starting to tremble and fiddle with his glasses, I knew it was time to push him over the edge.

"Then again," I sighed with a cock of my head. "There's not really much to praise, is there?"

Hogback's focus snapped back to me so fast I swear he must have given himself whiplash.

I leaned forward with a savage grin on my face, gesturing at my mic. "Go on, Hogback, tell them! Tell the world about what you consider the crowning achievement of your career! The mockery of life you've created!"

And as the lens of Hogback's sunglasses fractured under his fingers, I knew that I had won.

"MOCKERY!?!" the depraved physician bellowed as he tore out of his seat, somehow managing to make himself look imposing. "HOW DARE YOU?! I AM THE GREATEST MEDICAL MIND IN ALL THE WORLD! GREATER THAN YOUR MANGY RUG OF A PET, BETTER THAN THAT DRAGON-BRAINED HACK VEGAPUNK, BETTER THAN THAT BUTCHER OF A BRAT TRAFALGAR, OR ANY TWO-BIT BACK ALLEY QUACK WHO EVER SLITHERED OUT OF DRUM ISLAND! I AM… I AM…!"

"SAY IT!" I roared, shooting to my feet and shoving my face in his. "SAY IT, YOU POMPOUS HACK, SAY IT!"

"I AM THE GREATEST DOCTOR WHO EVER LIVED!" he screamed back. "I AM THE DOCTOR THAT CONQUERED DEATH ITSELF!"

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"Yes, you heard me right, I conquered death!" Hogback laughed hysterically. "No... nonono, more than that, I cured death! I revealed it as the worthless disease that it is, and has always been!"

"It is... truly amazing just how far a few choice words can push someone," Marigold breathed as she clenched and unclenched her grip on her naginata. "I have to agree with that Kokoro woman: I am very glad that Cross is on our side."

"Nidhogg only knows what he'd have done to us if he wasn't," Sandersonia muttered back, uneasily twisting her hair through her fingers.

"But... But resurrecting the dead?" Marguerite protested, disbelief coloring her voice. "I-I realize that I've been sheltered living on Amazon Lily all my life, but..." She shook her head in denial. "Even by Grand Line standards, even with what you've told me of Devil Fruits, th-this sounds utterly insane!"

"Which is exactly why Cross had to ambush him nyon," Elder Nyon sighed grimly.

Marguerite and the Gorgon Sisters snapped confused looks at the recently accepted advisor of the Empress of Amazon Lily; a title which here meant that Hancock had stopped throwing Elder Nyon out the windows.

"Care to explain yourself, Granny?" the resident Warlord sniffed imperiously.

...quite as often, at any rate.

The Elder set her jaw with a dismissive tsk. "By starting the interview in his usual informal manner, Cross proved that Hogback's reaction was entirely natural, he proved that this isn't just some stunt.
Insane as this might sound, Hogback is saying what he is of his own volition. This…” She shook her head slowly. "Insane though it might be, this is all very, very real."

"Great serpents above and below…” Marguerite breathed numbly.

"I might have been little better than average in my science class, but my teachers sure as heck managed to cram the scientific method into my skull,” Cross continued coolly, venom bubbling just beneath the surface. "So, Doctor Hogback… care to communicate your results and process?"

"Gladly!" Hogback spat back, arrogance packed into his every word. "It's a simple process, really! And it all begins with my master: the lord of the Undead Isle of Thriller Bark, the man long renowned as the 'Umbral Allfather! The greatest wielder of the Shadow-Shadow Fruit to ever live, Gecko Moria himself!"

Salome suddenly hissed in pain when his mistress's fingers unconsciously crushed his coils beneath their suddenly steely grip.

"…I never did like that pale bastard," Hancock breathed quietly, unaware of how the rest of the women in the room were all on their knees and gasping for air.

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In his home in Bighorn, President Dalton shifted about uncomfortably as his country's surgeon general wrenched a song of tortured glass from the bottle she was strangling.

"Ah, Doctor Kureha, correct me if I'm wrong…” Dalton swallowed hesitantly. "But wasn't Doctor Hogback someone whose skills you acknowledged as equal to yours?"

CRACK!

The bison-human flinched as Kureha's thumb snapped the neck of the bottle clean off.

"Yes," the witch doctor bit out tersely. "He was. I respected him for his abilities as a medical expert and Chopper… Chopper looked up to him as a hero of our practice." She then held her hand out, snatched the cup her Lapahn assistant offered her and poured a glass, snarling all the while. "But I have the distinct impression that his idealized image of the man has been shattered, and that language of his means that mine isn't far from doing the exact same thing."

Before anything further could be said, Cross piped up. "Devil Fruit involvement," he sighed heavily. "Dunno what else I could have been expecting."

"Fosfosfosfos! Yeeees, the abilities granted by the Devils of the Sea are quite incredible, aren't they?" Hogback all but giggled, his temperament lightening as he delved into a topic of passion. "Ah, but I do believe that this is truly an application of abilities to trump all others! For you see, Master Moria has discovered many ways through which he can manipulate the shade… but his most innovative is to liberate others of their umbral selves!"

Kureha and Dalton both tensed as they parsed the meaning of the words.

"He… steals people's shadows…” Dalton breathed.

Kureha ground her teeth as she snapped her fingers, prompting her assistant to dig out a pair of bottles that he handed to both her and the president. "And it somehow ties into this resurrection business. Lovely."
"What you must understand is that shadows are with us our entire lives," Hogback ranted, buried in the depths of his own 'genius'. "Our entire lives are imprinted into them: our personalities, our mindsets, our abilities! They are, in essence, an external copy of our very beings! Astral projections of the soul! And Master Moria, he can coalesce that projection into a corporeal form! On their own, shadows can be implanted into living beings and thus impart the knowledge they've acquired upon the subject, but sooner or later the subject's actual soul rejects the implanted shadow, and forces them out! Ahhh… but what of subjects without souls of their own, hmmm? What of those who are empty inside? When a shadow is implanted into those devoid of the spark of life, that void is filled, and they return to life anew!"

SMASH!

Dalton ignored both the liquor dripping through his fingers and the glass embedded in his palm. "He's stealing shadows…" the normally calm man bit out. "And putting them in corpses."

"That bastard's not resurrecting the dead," Kureha snarled, shooting to her feet, grabbing the snail and punching in the numbers of as many doctors as she knew. "He's animating dead bodies!"

"You're making zombies," Cross stated, his voice as dry as a desert.

"Pfheh," Hogback scoffed dismissively. "Zombies, revenants, the walking-bloody-dead. Whatever you want to call them, the fact remains that I have accomplished what countless other inferior doctors have utterly failed to do: I've breathed life into the un-living!"

"Fascinating, truly fascinating!" Caesar Clown breathed, furiously scribbling in a notebook as he kept his attention cemented on the snail before him. "Ah, I always knew that Doctor Hogback was utterly brilliant in his field, but to think that his genius could have reached such heights over the years!" He threw his gaseous head back and cackled. "SHURORORORORO! This may be my favorite SBS to date!"

"But… hang on a second…" the Straw Hats' gunner spoke up. "We were just assaulted by a host of zombies! And out of all of them, the only one that looked remotely like a human was Cindry, and even she was covered in stitches! But the rest… they were feasibly disguised as hunting trophies, paintings, gargoyles… even the bearskin rug was a zombie! These aren't corpses, they're… Su was right, these are patchwork things!"

"Yet more examples of my unmistakable genius!" Hogback preened. "To merely resurrect individuals into rotting husks would be nothing short of grievous negligence! As such, before Master Moria imparts a new shadow unto a corpse, I perform my due diligence by crafting their bodies into the best states for them to perform their duties! They are truly exemplary samples of creation! Perfection incarnate!"

"Brilliant, brilliant, brilliant!" Caesar repeated extravagantly, pen all but tearing the paper with how fast he was writing. "Ah, it's tragic that he doesn't stand a chance against the Straw Hats, but at least in his final moments as an esteemed doctor, he's imparting some fragments of his genius. Fare thee well, Hogback! The world knows thee too much! SHURORORORO!"

"Wait, their 'duties'?" Cross's gun Lassoo piped up, a snarl slowly seeping into his voice. "Hang on… Moria… controls shadows and they're living through their shadows… son of a bitch, they're not actually alive, they're just puppets! Slaves to Moria, slaves to you!"
"Feh! You act as though free will is some prerequisite for animation. They walk on their own two feet, they speak their minds, they even have their own personalities! They are perfectly alive!"

"An existence without the ability to make one's own choices. Living a life you have no choice but to live." Nico Robin's voice dripped with icy contempt. "Trust me, Hogback. I have the authority here to tell you that that is not living."

"Tch," Hogback glanced away with a harsh scoff. "One person's opinion."

"Corroborated by the actions of another," Cross hissed coolly. "I read magazines, Hogback, I've seen pictures, I know the truth. I know who Cindry really was before you got your hands on her."

"You leave her out of this!" Hogback hissed back, his expression a mask of scorn.

"Heeere we go..." Trafalgar Law chuckled grimly, his fingers tapping out a staccato beat on his blade's hilt.

"Eh?" Shachi glanced at his captain in confusion. "What do you mean, boss?"

"Cross is done building him up, now he's actively winding him up," Law smirked. "And once he's done? Hogback's going to blow his shit, and he's going to do it in front of the whole damn world."

The rest of the Heart Pirates all blinked at him in surprise before slowly turning grins ranging from savage to eager on their slightly freaked snail.

"I really love these guys," Penguin chuckled.

-0-

"This has everything to do with her!" Cross snapped back at the doctor. "You stole her corpse from her grave! You forced a shadow into her, made her body move against her will! I saw pictures of her, saw her smile! But while she was still moving, I never saw her smile even once! Has she smiled even once in the past twelve years!?"

"Shut the hell up!" Hogback snarled.

"Like hell!" Nojiko cheered, pumping her fist in the air. "Come on, Cross, you haven't shut up even once in the past few months, no matter how much anyone's tried to make you! Don't stop now!"

"MAKE THAT MONSTER REGRET EVERY INSTANT OF HIS DISGRACEFUL LIFE!"
Genzo bellowed in outrage.

"Then what about the shadows, huh?" Conis broke in, her scowl showing her to be angrier than the world had ever seen her. "You yourself said that they're integral parts of our beings! There have to be consequences to stealing them! And these zombies... they have serial numbers on them! And the highest I can see is Cindry's! Four hundred! Four hundred people's shadows, unjustly stolen from them! How many more are there? Who did you take them from!?"

"Criminals, of course!" the 'doctor' scoffed, but the tension in his voice was still steadily mounting. "Master Moria is a Warlord, it's his job to hunt the scum of the seas! We acquire the best skills from criminals such as you! From pirates, from Revolutionaries, from—!"

"But you still need to turn in heads to the Marines, and that means you can't take all their shadows!" Cross growled in interruption. "And if they're not all criminals, then you wouldn't have so many after twelve years. No... no, you're getting more on the side! You're not just stealing shadows from the
best criminals, you're stealing them from everyone! You've stolen from the Marines! Hell, you've even stolen from civilians, haven't you, you fat bastard?!

"THOSE WORTHLESS GNATS SHOULD FEEL HONORED FOR CONTRIBUTING TO MY EVERLASTING MASTERPIECE!"

"Whoa!" Genzo and Nojiko reeled back from their snail as it all but exploded in outrage.

"AND WHAT A MASTERPIECE IT IS!" Hogback continued to rant, on the verge of outright frothing. "I'VE CREATED DOZENS, HUNDREDS OF ZOMBIES OVER THE PAST TWELVE YEARS! DO YOU COMPREHEND WHAT I'M SAYING, YOU SIMPLETON?!

"Cross's big mouth is the most dangerous weapon in the world," Chabo stated, wincing as he dug a finger in his ear. "In more ways than one."

-o-

"I'VE CREATED AN ARMY! AN ARMY OF SOLDIERS THAT KNOW NO FEAR, THAT KNOW NO PAIN, KNOW NO DEATH! THE SINGLE MIGHTIEST ARMY ON THE FACE OF THE PLANET! MIGHTIER THAN THE EMPERORS, MIGHTIER THAN THE MARINES, AND ABOVE ALL ELSE, MIGHTIER THAN YOU AND THE RAGTAG BAND OF MISFITS YOU CALL A PIRATE CREW! YOUR FATE WAS SEALED THE MOMENT YOU SET FOOT UPON THESE PROFANE SHORES!"

"Maneuvering exercises, everyone! We need to be ready to turn on a dime! Check the sails! Check the rudder! Check to make sure Attachan is looking for Moria's old poster and anything we have on Hogback!"

"Ah, b-but Rear Admiral Brannew, sir!"

"Hm?" The newly promoted bounty-officer paused in his barking of orders to glance at his subordinate. "Yes, what is it, Master Chief Petty Officer?"

"W-Well, sir…" the officer stammered. "I realize that what Doctor Hogback has done… is doing is…” He scowled grimly. "Morally repugnant… But the point remains that this task force was established for the sole purpose of tracking down the Straw Hat Pirates. We… We don't run maneuvering exercises!"

Brannew was silent for a moment before allowing himself a smirk. "Orders from above our pay grade say different. I just got confirmation from Vice Admiral Garp himself."

"Ah…” The officer blinked in surprise. "W-What? Seriously?"

"Seriously," Brannew nodded, turning his head away in order to hide the vicious smirk that was creeping across his face. "And if anyone comes asking, I have the paperwork to prove it."

'Turnabout is fair play, you old Monkey bastard.' The Rear Admiral then spared a glance at the snail on deck. 'And at least it gives me an excuse to leave the younger Monkey bastard be. That's one island I think I don't mind them burning.'

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"AT THIS POINT, THERE'S ONLY ONE QUESTION THAT REMAINS!" Hogback roared in my face, struggling against the half-dozen arms that were holding him in his seat. "AND THAT QUESTION IS JUST WHAT WE'LL DO TO YOU ONCE WE'VE GROUND YOU INTO THE
MUD LIKE THE PATHETIC SWINE YOU REALLY ARE! WHETHER YOU'LL BE FORCED TO COWER IN DARKNESS FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE WHILE YOUR SHADOW RETURNS MY CINDRY TO ME, OR IF I'LL HAVE THE HONOR OF LAYING YOU DOWN ON MY SLAB SO THAT I CAN RIP OUT YOUR TONGUE AND STUFF IT DOWN THE GULLET OF YOUR PET PEST!"

I blinked slowly, still reeling from the sheer force of the outburst. "...holy shit, dude."

Props to Hogback, I had not seen that rant coming. I mean, I expected a rant, but this? I'd had to both fight back a smirk to keep from giving the game away too early and ensure I didn't have a minor loss of bowel control. Still, we'd already won: he'd dug his own grave and all I'd had to do was hand him a shovel.

Hogback took a minute his breath back before glancing around at us, his face twisted in a rictus snarl. "Now, I believe it's time that you met Master Moria. I can only imagine that your assorted shadows and corpses will be among the most valuable new additions... to... our... why are you all looking at me like that?" he trailed off.

"I believe the more accurate question would be what we're looking at," Robin said in a glacial tone. "In my personal opinion, I'd say... scum."

"Tyrant," Conis spat.

"Moron," Lassoo contributed.

"Monster," Usopp bit out.

"Royally screwed?" I offered thoughtfully.

"Dead man walking," concurred—thaaaat wasn't one of us.

We all sloooowly turned our gazes upward to behold the pink-haired gothic Lolita hovering above us, glaring down at Hogback as though he were a particularly repugnant insect.

"Especially," Perona continued, shaking her head in disgust. "Once Master Moria hears about this particularly monumental fuck-up."

"P-P-P-Perona, I-I—" Hogback stammered, his fingers squashing together and cold sweat cascading down his face.

"Shut the hell up, you stupid, insufferable, arrogant little man," the Ghost Princess coldly interrupted. "You've said and done enough already. Until this moment, I never would have believed it were possible for anyone else in the world to have as big a mouth and as apathetic a view to the consequences of their actions as the hosts of the SBS. But you have now proven me wrong."

"W-W-What are you—!?"

"You just told the world what we've been doing, you monumental idiot!" Perona shrieked, shoving her astral face into Hogback's. "Our situation was already bad enough before you started spilling your guts; not only are the Straw Hat Pirates invading Thriller Bark while we're still licking our wounds from Drake and Hawkins, but the Humming Swordsman just came back at the same time as them, meaning that not only is our usual playbook in the toilet, but they know how to defeat our zombies!"

"Salt, by the way!" I announced with a shit-eating grin. "Or even salt-water! Sea prism stone most
likely cuts it too! The shadow-corpse bond is tenuous at best, and all it takes is a wee little snap to break it!"

"SHUT UP AND WAIT YOUR TURN, YOU RAGING BASTARD!" she roared over her shoulder before resuming her tirade at the now sweat-soaked surgeon. "As I was saying, we've been played! I've been spending the past half hour chasing that perverted asshat all through the stinkin' forest! Your one saving grace is that the Swordsman was dumb enough to snatch up a Transponder Snail somewhere and stick it in his jacket; otherwise, I wouldn't have heard the SBS! Unfortunately, seeing as I'm still too damn late to the party…"

She spread her arms, and a quintet of smiling Negative Hollows coalesced and started swirling about, cackling in their spectral tones as Perona grinned sadistically. "It falls to me to clean up your mess. Honestly? I think the one bright spot in this whole shitfest is that if you survive what Master Moria does to you once he finds out what you've done, you'll owe me until you're on your own slab. Anyway… you've done a lot of damage… buuut I'd bet that the World Government will be able to pardon it if we hand them the Straw Hat Pirates. Now then, NEGATI—eh?"

Perona cut herself off as she glanced down at her quarry, i.e. us. The reason for her distraction was that we were… kiiinda sorta occupied with other affairs at the moment. Affairs concerning the dining room table and its contents, to be precise.

"Lassoo, stop eating all the ravioli!" Usopp objected.

"Why? I don't see any of you willing to eat food off the floor," the dachshund huffed, continuing to gobble down the dislodged pasta.

"Here, Usopp, there's still some mushrooms over here," Conis offered.

"…Have I really never told you even once over the last couple of months that I hate mushrooms?"

"Is there any vanilla ice cream left?" I asked hopefully, scouring the area.

"To your left, Cross," Robin gestured, her many arms already gathering a cup and a pitcher to pour herself a drink.

"Oh, yeah, thanks! Good thing Cindry didn't have an issue with cartons. Oh, and the salad's still pretty intact, too."

"Yay!" Soundbite cheered. "But, ah… THERE'S NOT ANY SALT IN IT from all that fighting, IS THERE?"

I looked over the leaves, frowning in contemplation. "Nah, I think it's safe. But if you'd rather not take the risk, I can just eat it my—"

"STOP IGNORING ME, YOU LOUD-MOUTHED SON OF A—!" Perona started to howl with all the rage of a woman pose—! PFHAHAHAHAHA! Haaaaa, I love how that shit just lines up… anyway, back to work!

"I'd recommend saving your strength, Perona," I interrupted. I then proceeded to grin up at her, and despite herself, she actually seemed nervous at the look on my face. "After all… I don't know how much longer you'll be a fake ghost."

"Wh-Wh-What?" the princess stuttered, her face paling quite nicely.

I widened my grin to sadistic levels. "Did you know," I started tauntingly. "That our whole crew
recently acquired bounties? Epithets, too. Our doctor's particularly proud of his." I then made a show of putting my finger to my ear. "'Spark of Genius', Tony Tony Chopper, status report."

"I~ spy~ with my little eye~" Chopper's demented voice sang as it bounced around the room. "A small room within a massive floor filled with pillars. And in the bed that's in that room, a gothic Lolita lies, utterly dead to the world. My initial diagnosis?"

Soundbite's grin practically split his face in half, and his eyes shone with cyan insanity.

"This should be… FUN."

I had just enough time to see Perona's face completely drain of color before she shot through the walls, shrieking like a positively unearthly banshee.

-0-

"—ONONONONONONO—"

Perona capped off her panicked shrieking as she tore into her room like a bat out of hell, slamming herself through and into her body as fast as she could manage. The impact was forceful enough that she actually tumbled backward on her bed, slamming her back into and plastering herself against the headboard. She panted frantically, darting her gaze to and fro to spot any mad-eyed reindeer preparing to do hell-knows-what to her body.

In her mind, Hogback could go hang for all she cared on account of her panic being wholly justified. After all, she was the only female on the island (with a pulse, anyway) whose location was common knowledge to the likes of Hogback and Absalom. That is, a demented death-obsessed (and she suspected necrophiliac, UGH) surgeon doctor and a superhumanly strong and invisible pervert. Her room was the best hidden and most reinforced, to the point that it would take a barrage of explosives to breach it.

So the idea that an enemy psycho-doctor could be looming over her feeble, innocent body and ready to do who knows what to it? The irony was not lost on the Ghost Princess that the whole situation was her worst nightmare come to life.

Or, then again, her adrenaline-addled mind slowly conceded as she looked around and fully took stock of her room, maybe not.

Because as she looked around at her pink-and-plush-filled room, she slowly came to accept that, at first blush, nothing of hers was disturbed. Not a sheet, not a doll, nothing. It was… totally…

"Horohorohoro…" Perona allowed a relieved chuckle to whoosh out of her, the panicked energy draining from her body. For good measure, she pulled up the nearest plushie she could grab and buried her face in its fluffy top hat with an ecstatic giggle. "It was just a trick… oh, thank God it was just a trick… I'm going to make that big-mouthed bastard pay for almost making me piss myself, but oh my God I'm so happy it was just a tri—!

In that instant, two separate things hit Perona at once.

First, she didn't own any plushies that wore top hats.

And second, a sharp prick in her neck, and a numbing sensation to go with it that killed her nascent panic cold.
"Night-night, princess," taunted Tony Tony Chopper.

As darkness invaded Perona's perception of reality, a final thought managed to run through her head before Morpheus claimed her.

'Why... did it have... to be... the... Straw...?'

-o-

I chuckled grimly as I made a show of examining my armored fingertips. "Remind me, Soundbite: what was it you said back in Alabasta, when I tricked Miss Friday into thinking that a simple mug was a grenade?"

"That would be, you are DA BLUFF MASTAH!" Soundbite chuckled.

"W-What are you talking about!? What did you just do?" Hogback demanded incredulously. "O-Once she gets her hands on your friend—!

"Status update, Cross: sedative injected. Perona is dead to the world. Exactly as you planned," Chopper's voice said, causing Hogback to fall into a wordless wheeze.

"I love hearing those words," I nodded before looking back at Hogback. "We couldn't guarantee that the Hollow-Hollow Fruit wouldn't actually turn her into a real ghost, and besides that, we don't like killing, period. Much more reliable to trick her into returning to her corporeal form and then locking her inside her own flesh, ne?"

"Ge-bwuh-vrgrgh..." I think Hoggy's brain was kinda sorta fried by this point. Good thing we had a way of snapping him back to reality!

"Now, then!" I said, eagerly clapping my hands together. "Real quick tangent here... Chopper, Hogback is directly in front of me. Anything that you'd like to say to him?"

Chopper didn't answer at first, and the silence stretched on, to the point where it actually became kinda sorta uncomfortable.

Astoundingly, Hogback actually had the audacity to swallow heavily and speak up. "Ah... t-t-this is Doctor Chopper, yes? D-Doctor Tony Tony Chopper? I-I've listened to segments on the SBS before, I-I-I really must say, y-y-your work on, on handling the short-term effects of c-c-concussions is revolutionary! M-M-Might I offer you some advice, a-a-about—?"

"'I will remember'."

Hogback choked off when Chopper suddenly spoke up, his voice utterly devoid of emotion.

"'That there is art to medicine as well as science, and that warmth, sympathy, and understanding may outweigh the surgeon's knife or the chemist's drug'. That's only a piece of the oath, Hogback. Only a fragment of the oath that you and I both swore, but I feel like it's particularly pertinent in this specific instance."

"I-I, t-t-that's—!" Hogback tried to stammer out.

"That oath is long and winding, and it has a lot of sections and specifics to it... but in the end, it all boils down to three simple words: Do. No. Harm."

That actually got a snarl out of Hogback, bristling like a startled boar. "Oh, and you're innocent of
breaching medical ethics, you literal rugrat?" he spat. "I tested out a few of your formulae! Your explosives aren't exactly what I'd call 'traditional medicine', and that alter-ego of yours isn't very conducive to an appropriate 'bedside manner' either!"

"Wrong, Hogback," Chopper frigidly countered. "I didn't forget my oath, I found one that takes precedence: my flag. Out here on the sea, we doctors can't afford to be so lax. We need to put preventing harm coming to our friends before undoing it. And in the pursuit of that duty, all bets are off; no limits that cannot be crossed, no actions that will not be undertaken."

"...And what is your rationalization for holding anything against me if you believe that?" Hogback demanded. "If rules are to be trampled upon when necessary, what is your argument against what I've done? Why would you not attempt something just as 'monstrous' yourself!?"

For a long moment, Chopper was silent, and I almost worried that he didn't have an answer.

"Because even as I step beyond my oath, I have others to bring me back."

Hogback squealed in terror as Chopper's voice took on a distinct overtone of madness that was nonetheless appropriately chained and shackled.

"Even in my... shall we say, enhanced state, my crewmates, my friends are the one line I refuse to cross," Chopper continued coldly. "And more importantly, they are the ones who bring me back when I do teeter on that precipice. How long has it been, Hogback, since you could say that? Have you ever been able to say that?"

Hogback spluttered indignantly as he tried to formulate a response.

"Do you recognize the best part of being a pirate doctor, Hogback?" Chopper forged on, his frigid calm thawing into blazing outrage with his every word. "I imagine you do, seeing as you've liberally practiced it over the past twelve years, but let me say it anyway: there are no limitations on how we choose to apply our skills. Be it for good or for ill, our knowledge can be utilized as either a tool or a weapon at our own discretion. But where you chose to abuse your skills, where you maliciously broke your oath on the backs of the innocent people you were supposed to help, I FULLY INTEND TO BREAK MY HIPPOCRATIC OATH CLEAN OVER YOUR HEINOUS CRANIUM THE MOMENT I GET MY HANDS ON YOU!" Our doctor finished in an animalistic roar of fury, his sheer hatred so loud and so prominent that it shook the very walls of the room.

We were stuck in stunned silence until I finally got the wherewithal to shoot a deadly grin at the by now half-dead hog, who was currently trembling in his chair. "I've honestly never heard him this pissed before now. In a word?"

"YOU BE SCROOD, dood!" Soundbite cackled ecstatically.

Hogback's jaw worked itself silently for almost a solid minute before he finally raised his head to give me a dead look. "When Master Moria finds out what you've done," he breathed listlessly. "There will be no force on this planet that will be able to save you."

The fact that I could hear how he barely even believed in that statement? Glorious beyond all words.

I put on a show of thinking intently before shooting another soul-crushing smirk his way. "Then we'll just need to make sure that 'Master Moria' doesn't find out about this, won't we?" I put my finger to my ear before he could respond. "Boys, how we doin'?"
"Just waiting on the guests of honor..." Leo breathed before allowing a grin to slide across his face. "And here they come and here we go."

-o-

"MASTER!"/"MASTER MORIAAA!"/"IT'S TIME TO WAKE UP, MASTER!"

This was the three-part chorus being caterwauled by the diminutive zombies Nin, Bao and Gyoro as they tore into the quintuple-XL sized bedroom that the island's master was sleeping away the night in.

"Master, Master!" the blue samurai, Bao, hollered at the top of his lungs as he hopped in place. "We've got guests! It's time for you to wake up! Wake up!"

"Gotta pop the bubble, gotta pop the bubble!" The yellow bucket-head, Gyoro, spun one arm eagerly as he pointed at Gecko Moria's colossal snot-bubble with the other. "Pop it, Nin, pop it!"

"You got it!" the pinkish archer, Nin, nodded eagerly. He unslung his bow, nocked an arrow and drew it back in a second. "C'mon, Master! Time to wake—!"

It was at that exact moment that everything went wrong.

SLAM!

More specifically, it all started with the double-doors to the room getting slammed shut behind the trio, each zombie snapping their heads around to look.

"Eh—?"/"Wha—?"/"Hu—?"

That was all the three midgets managed to get out before they were frozen, both by shock and by the cold steel they could feel on both the front and back of their necks.

"Medusa Mitigation," Leo intoned, glaring bloody murder at the undead over his crossed arms. Then, in a single surge of strength, he un-crossed his arms—

SHINK!

And sent the trio's craniums flying.

That was the signal for Donny to fling a trio of kunai at the headless corpses from where he'd been standing behind the second door. The knives flew true, and their salt-coated tips slammed into the bottoms of the three's throats.

Donny's face broke out into a grin, and he pumped his fist triumphantly as the trio's shadows escaped their corpses like bats out of hell. "Hell yes!" he crowed. "Haha, how's that for bada—!"

TWANG!

"—Urk…"

Donny's victorious exultations turned into a choked gurgle on account of Nin's body suddenly falling slack, loosing the nocked arrow in the process. The arrow that was still aimed in the general direction of Moria's snot bubble.

All Leo and Donny could do was stare in horror as the arrow flew up-up-up, hanging at the apex of its arc for what felt like an eternity before gravity took hold and flung it down-down-down, right at
the snot bubble—

CLANG! "Sonnuva—!"

And right into a link of the suddenly present chain of Mikey's nunchuk, arresting the arrow's momentum right when its very tip was millimeters away from the dugong's fearfully quivering eye.

Mikey panted furiously for a minute, fighting desperately to get his heart rate under control while also holding the arrow in place and maintaining his Tidal Swim above the Warlord's quivering bubble. Once he was certain that his heart wasn't going to explode, however, the orange-bandanna'd dugong shot a murderous snarl at his fellow students. "And you sons-of-bitches have the gall to call me a fucking idiot!?!"

The bo and katana wielders exchanged uneasy looks before shooting their brother-in-training dual thumbs up.

"Nice catch, Mikey!"

"Yeah, great work!"

"STOP COMPLIMENTING ME AND HELP ME GET THE HELL DOWN! I'M STARTING TO LOSE FEELING IN MY DAMN TAIL!"

While Leo hastily jumped up to help the nunchuk-wielder down, Donny carefully began loading the syringes he had been given as he gave the scene before him a contemplative look. "Thank Sebek that this worked; if he hadn't taken our heads off when he woke up, Cross would have for screwing his plan!"

~o~

"Alright, guys, Team 3, a.k.a. 'Needle', will consist of Chopper and the TDWS," I pointed them all out, causing them to straighten in anticipation. "Your assignments will be crucial to Team 1's success. Specifically, you'll be removing Perona and Gecko Moria himself from the equation."

The dugongs paled in horror. "Ah… come again?" Raphey squeaked fearfully.

"Er… Cross?" Boss cut in. "I may have faith in my boys, but even I'd say that expecting them to beat a Warlord with just Chopper for backup would be a suicide mission. No offense, Chopper."

"Considering how I've seen what the last two Warlords we met did to our crew? None taken," Chopper gulped, looking at me. "Please say that you have just as good a reason for trusting that we can handle this as you do with Team 2."

I smiled calmly. "You guys are not going to be attacking them. You're going to be attacking their unconscious bodies."

Their reaction was half of relief, half of confusion.

I leaned back against the mast as I spread my arms out. "As I said, Perona leaves her body sleeping in her room whenever she goes out on patrol. And similarly, Moria is an absurdly heavy sleeper, to the point where it takes an arrow to his snot bubble (just go with it) to wake him up. You'll be locating the both of them while they're K.O., and then guaranteeing that they stay K.O. Got it?"

Team 3 all exchanged looks before nodding in agreement.
"Perfect. Alright, things start off with our new Musician." I indicated our new skeletal crewmate. "Brook will be entrusted with either Pinkie or the Brain, but not just so that he's always in communication with us. He'll also have a running line between him and Soundbite, meaning that once I get the SBS started, Perona's most likely going to abandon Brook in favor of us. But before that happens, you four—" I pointed at the TDWS. "Are going to sneak into the manor undetected, taking Chopper with you, and locate her body."

"I… don't need to hurt her, do I?" our doctor asked uncomfortably.

"No…" I said, shaking my head and then putting up a finger. "But you're going to do your best to make it sound like you are. Once Perona gets to the dining hall, I'll call you, and you'll put the fear of hell in her so that she shoots back to her body. And once she's back inside?" I slammed my fist into my palm. "You're going to sedate her with the heaviest soporific you've got. So long as her mind's asleep, Perona will be out of commission for the rest of our fight. Got it?"

"Hm…" Chopper scratched his chin in thought before nodding. "Yeah, that works for me."

"Good. Now, for the rest of you…" I said, refocusing on the dugongs. "One of you's going to have to stick with Chopper to deal with the dedicated bear-zombie bodyguard Perona has covering her, but the other three are going to locate Moria and wait in the shadows around him. He's got a dedicated trio of zombies acting as his alarm clock, and I'd bet hard cash that those three are the only ones who ever wake him up. So long as you can take them out without anyone finding out? Moria'll be left to snooze for the entirety of our assault."

Leo and Donny shared shocked looks before giving me a wide-eyed stare.

"That's… a pretty good idea, Cross!" Leo exclaimed.

"Yeah, it's genius!" Donny concurred.

My grin became rigid and I felt a vein start to pulse on my forehead. "And you two sound so surprised about this why, exactly?!

The pair promptly snapped their heads away, whistling very innocently.

"Hm… hey, wait a second…" Mikey mumbled, his head bowed, before snapping his 'fingers'. "I got an idea! If we're gonna be sneaking up on Moria while he's sleeping really, really deep, why not make sure it's an extra deep sleep by sticking him with some of Chopper's drugs too?" He maintained his victorious stance for a second before flushing furiously at the incredulous looks pinning him. "Why the blue hell are you all looking at me like that!?"

That cued another round of hastily averted gazes and overly innocent whistles.

"Eheh… ah, still, if we're doing this…" Chopper sent me a curious look. "Cross, about how big would you say that Moria is? I need it for the dosage."

"Mmm… 25 feet, maybe? Aaaand I have no idea if he's a huge human or a weird giant or what, sooooo…" I shrugged uncertainly.

Chopper's skin promptly paled beneath his fur. "I'll just… go and prepare the Luffy amount then."

Once the Zoan-reindeer wandered off, I regarded the last of our crew, meaning Luffy, Zoro, Franky, Boss and Funkfreed. "Anyways, you guys are Team 4. And trust me, your job's entirely appropriate for your skillset."
"Disciple Purple' reporting in, Cross," Donny informed me. "The three undead alarm clocks have been silenced before they could rouse the Warlord—and credit where it's due, that's thanks to Orange catching the arrow—and the Luffy-grade sedative is applied. I don't know what the hell Moria is, but there's no way he's waking up short of a mortar shell going off in his ear."

"And with confirmation from Team 2, that makes us three for three on the fighters of the Mysterious Four!" I confidently declared. "Thriller Bark has fallen in all but name and army." I then shot a sidelong glance at the Four's barely twitching remainder. "Anything you'd like to say, Hogback?"

For a minute, the man couldn't bring himself to do more than sputter in horror. Then, finally, he looked at me with a pleading expression. "Why are you doing this?" he wheezed. "What did we ever do to you? What… What did we do to deserve this?"

I stared impassively at him for a second before scratching my cheek and chuckling. "What did you do… oooh, where to even start…" I made a show of snapping my fingers in realization. "The beginning. That works. And the beginning here would be a fact Conis pegged onto earlier: Shadows. 'Cause… she's right, see. Shadows are integral to a human being. And losing one, the consequences of it, the symptoms…" I shook my head. "They are deadly. Not immediately, but long-term?"

I was silent for a bit before continuing. "I could tell them to the world… but I won't. Rather…" I pinned Hogback with a cold glare. "I'll let your victims handle that. And yes, you heard me right!" I addressed that at my mic. "Right here, right now, I'm inviting victims of Thriller Bark the world over to share their plight with the world. Just to remind you all, the number to call is 432-782-762. Punch it in now… and let the world know of how unjustly you've been treated all these years."

The room fell silent for the next thirty seconds. During those thirty seconds, I had complete faith that this part of the plan would work. And at the end of those thirty seconds…

"Dot dot dot dot!"

My faith and hopes were vindicated, while what little hopes Hogback had left crumbled.

"Dot dot dot—KA-LICK! Um, hello?" came a somewhat nervous female voice.

"You're live on the SBS," I said with a smirk. "No filter, then?"

"I-I…" The voice's face faltered briefly before she steeled herself quite admirably. "No… no, absolutely not. I've spent too long hiding in the shadows, a-a-and… and I won't stay silent for even one second longer! My name is Margarita, and I am a maid serving in Egana Manor on Torodana Island in the Grand Line. Ten years ago, the ship I was on was attacked by the Moria Pirates, and that monster, Gecko Moria, he… he stole my shadow. I lost consciousness from it, and I didn't wake up until a few days after, but once I did…" The maid's expression grew grim. "My life was a living hell.

"Cross is right: The effects of losing a shadow are horrific. To go without a shadow is unnatural, and there are a lot of consequences. You can't be seen in mirrors, your image doesn't appear in photographs... but worst of all... without a shadow..." Margarita drew in a shuddering breath before forging on. "After the attack, a friend of mine who was with me, she... she stepped out into the morning sun, and before I knew what was happening, before she could even scream, she..." The maid pinched her eyes shut, her face twisted in misery. "S-She burst into flames... and was gone from this world without a trace!"
There was a moment of tense silence punctuated only by Margarita's pained sobbing, until finally I chose to speak up. "If you want, I can—?"

"No!" she protested, even as more tears shone in her eyes. "They... stole my life from me! I need to see this through! I... I need to tell the world of the hell they forced me into! A hell of shadows, of darkness! For ten years, I haven't been able to step into the light for fear of death! For ten years, all I've known is cold and terror. For ten years... I haven't even been able to see the sun..." She paused, audibly panting, and then her angry facade broke into a wide, tearful smile. "Until today. Until a few scant minutes ago, when I saw my reflection in the mirror. When I chose to stand by a candle, and I saw that my shadow had returned! As soon as I realized it, t-the master of the house, he threw a party, a-a-and I can't wait for the dawn, because for the first time in years, I can finally see the sun rise on a new day, and it's all thanks to you!"

"Good for you!" Conis smiled pleasantly.

"Hmm..." Robin, meanwhile, was scratching her chin. "Margarita... you said you're a maid, yes? You wouldn't happen to have a pathological hatred for dishware, would you?"

"...Ah... I got over that a long time ago? Why do you ask?"

"Simply confirming the identity of the zombie who had your shadow," Robin smiled. "She was acting quite psychotic. I imagine you must have been in quite a state back then. I'm glad to hear you've regained some measure of sanity."

"Uh... thank you?"

"Among the first we actually took down, in fact!" I confirmed. "If it's any consolation, either your shadow or what little remained of Cindry's spirit were fighting tooth and nail!"

"Oh, thank you... but concerning Cindry... y-you said her serial number was 400, right? And... and that bastard Hogback, he said... that he'd made even more than that, right?"

"Uh... yes?" Usopp answered.

Margarita's eyes hardened like steel. "...Nobody, not a Marine, not a Revolutionary, not even other pirates deserve the kind of purgatory that I've been forced to endure for the last decade. Straw Hats... please, free them all. Lift Moria's curse. End the evil that is Thriller Bark, once and for all!"

"Mark my words, Margarita: by daybreak, Thriller Bark won't even exist anymore," I stated menacingly, my blood thundering through my veins.

She smiled, tears coming down her face. "Thank you... for everything. KA-LICK!"

"Well, I think that about covers it," I said, preparing to stow my transceiver away again. "If any of you other shadowless would like to add anything more, I'll be broadcasting again for the Straw Hats' traditional victory party in a few hours. Until then, however, we'll be going anonymous. Can't have the Marines ambushing us and all that! But for now... light a candle, pull up a mirror, and wait with bated breath. Because at last, your long night has come to an end!"

And with that triumphant note, I hung up the transceiver and returned it to hanging at my side. I then turned towards Hogback, who was staring at me in horror.

"I know that look," I said with a smirk. "I've seen that look more times than I can count, that 'how the hell could you possibly know about that' look. Yeah... after all that, I imagine you would be wondering how we found out about all of this in the first place, huh? Well, it's simple."
I leaned in and put my grin right in Hogback's terrified face. "Did you honestly think," I whispered. "That the Humming Swordsman returning at this exact point in time, at just the worst possible moment… is a coincidence?"

What little blood Hogback had left evacuated his face. "You… can't be serious…" he choked out.

I couldn't help but chuckle grimly as I stood up and loomed over him. "You took our new musician's shadow, Hogback," I intoned darkly. "You stole everything from him, and he didn't have much left to begin with. And now… we're going to take every little last thing from you."

Yeah, that little revelation was finally too much for Hogback; with a final gargle of horror, he passed out, foam fountaining from his slack maw.

I leaned back in surprise before shooting a bemused look at Robin. "I'm getting better at this, huh?"

"At this point, Cross?" Robin dryly replied. "I wouldn't be surprised if Dragon himself dreaded getting on your bad side."

"…taking that as a compliment!" I said cheerily.

"It was meant as one," she smiled back.

"Ahem?" Lassoo chuffed in an effort to get attention. "If you're done having fun…?"

"Ah, right, right!" I nodded as I got back on track before glancing over at Soundbite. "Alright, let's rumble. Team 4, do you read me?"

"Team 4, 'Smokescreen', in position," came a female voice. "Speaking is Lola, second in command of the Thriller Bark Victim's Association, all of which are armed and ready for combat. We are awaiting your order, Jeremiah Cross."

"Proceed to Phase 3, and commence Operation 'Nightmare Luffy.'" I turned a demonic grin towards the wall that was towards the front of the mansion. I could practically see them now…

-o-

A veritable army decked out in pitchforks, swords, and torches.

A cyborg with a giant pair of nunchucks made from a pair of trees that were currently burning to charcoal.

A three-headed, six-armed demon with nine swords, wreathed in blue fire.

A shell-clad dugong, spinning a nigh-flaming weapon and swimming in the air through a cloud of smoke he was spewing.

And in the center of them all? A giant, muscular, blue-skinned behemoth, clad in a hockey mask, riding an elephant with a sword for its trunk, with one hand holding an oversized sword and the other holding a pipe that had a mechanized blade strapped to the end. With said blade being on fire.

Such was the sight that met the undead army of Thriller Bark when they emerged before the island's main gate, and such was the sight that sent them all running, in absolute, bowel-dropping terror to get as many reinforcements as inhumanly possible.

-o-
"PFFHAHAHAHA!" I cackled ecstatically, bending over in my mirth. "Ohhh, God, that's hilarious! They'd better damn well get pictures of Franken-Luffy before he lets the shadows out, or I swear I'm going to rip their faces off! PFFHAHAHA!"

"I will admit, Cross," Robin chuckled in amusement. "This aspect of your plan, while simplistic, is quite ingenious. With our friends garnering the entirety of the zombies' attention, bar very few, we're left free to roam about the manor as we please."

"But, ah…" Usopp glanced around the corpse-filled room uncertainly. "Why would we want to do that exactly? You, ah… never really said."

"Usopp's right," Conis nodded in agreement. "Shouldn't we head for the front gate immediately, so that we can help our friends fight?"

I promptly sobered up and adopted a scowl. "Because we're in here for a far more pressing matter. Chopper, you're on your way to Hogback's lab, right?"

"I just helped Raphey finish exorcising Perona's bear, so yes. I expect you'll be taking Hogback there so that I can… deal with him?"

"Soundbite?" I asked my snail. "You find what I asked you to?"

"Yeah, I did…" Soundbite winced fearfully. "WISH I HADN'T, THOUGH… but the lab's in a tower, and that thing ain't. HELL OF DETOUR."

"Hrmph…" I rubbed my chin thoughtfully for a second before snapping my fingers in realization. "What about the base of the tower?"

"Huh?" Soundbite blinked in surprise before grinning sheepishly. "AH… YEAH, I'D SAY THAT SHOULD WORK."

"Great," I nodded before regarding our friends. "Guys, get Hogback on his feet and let's get moving. Chopper, we'll meet you at the base of his tower so that we can drop him off."

"And… after that?" Usopp asked uncertainly.

I grinned as I strode to the doors of the room and slowly pushed them open. "We're going to go and terminate the final possible threat remaining on this accursed island once and for all. We're going to go and pay our respects… to Number 900 himself."

Hornet AN: For the benefit of our FFN readers, let me explain a few things: I work a full-time job, and Xomniac and The Patient One are both college students. This often leaves us two hours a day - at best! - to work on this fic. So if you're wondering what's taking so long, this is probably why.

Patient AN: We can only do so much when time will not cooperate. We ask for you to please be patient, and refrain from asking what's taking so long. If there is something more severe than scheduling issues preventing us from updating, we will inform you. Otherwise, however, we ask that you allow us to take the time needed to get our writing to the quality that we pride ourselves on.

Xomniac AN: And even besides all that, there were just sections of this whole thing that just refused to be written. *Shrugs* Shit happens.
Cross-Brain AN: Regardless, however... we've said this before, and we have no doubts that we'll say it again at least once before we're through, but this may be our best work yet.
Chapter 49: The Generals Come Forth! The Grand Battle For Thriller Bark!

Cross-Brain AN: Loyal fans, the good news is that this chapter has several fight scenes that should satisfy those of you who were unhappy about things going perfectly so far. And the bad news is that this is most likely the only update you'll get until April.

Xomniac AN: Unfortunately, this chapter is shorter than we'd hoped, a mere 17K… and while it overjoys me that we consider a literal essay 'mere,' the fact remains that we just couldn't hold off any longer. But hey, you're still getting some action~! Enjoy!

Patient AN: Also, I suppose it's overdue that I got to add something to the A Rare Sentence page. In writing this chapter, I found myself saying, "Xom, you're comparing a giant warthog to a former master swordsman."

The goings-on at Thriller Bark were always unnatural. It was only natural, ironically enough, seeing as the island was populated by sentient paintings and trophies, there were creepers in the crypt, laughing ghosts flitting through the air, and said air was absolutely thick with eldritch fog. Unnatural was synonymous with 'normal' on the island.

But even as relatively unnatural as Thriller Bark was, the sight of a speedo-clad cyborg swinging around a giant pair of flaming oaks linked by a chain to bash down the walking dead as though he were playing a macabre, jumbo-sized game of Whack-A-Mole was a whole new level of 'weird' for the island's ghastly inhabitants.

"C'MON, YOU ROTTIN' ASSHATS!" Franky cackled, hoisting his flaming makeshift nunchaku. "I GOT LOADS MORE WHERE THAT CAME FROM!"

"HEY!" one of the zombies protested indignantly as it poked its head out from behind the XL-sized headstone it'd been hiding behind. "YOU'RE NOT ALLOWED TO BE FREAKIER THAN US! THIS IS OUR TURF! THAT'S OUR RIGHT, YOU BIG METAL BASTARD!"

"Huh? Is that so?" Franky blinked in surprise. "Well, then, if that's the case—!

SLAM!

"GAH!" the zombie howled in shock as both he and the gravestone were smashed into the ground.

"—I DON'T REALLY GIVE A DAMN!" the cyborg roared at the top of his lungs.

Currently, the Straw Hat-led war against the unnatural inhabitants of Thriller Bark was going apace. For all that the zombies outnumbered the living pirates nearly a dozen revenants to a man, the warm-blooded faction of the war vastly out-skilled and/or out-powered most of the zombies. The gap was big enough, on average, to take out the zombies a handful at a time.

However…

"YOU BASTARD!" the smashed zombie roared, peeling himself off of the soil, lumps of stone falling from flesh ignited in several places

Franky frowned grimly as he was forced to take a step back on account of the flattened undead and a half-dozen others surging forward, a veritable tide of dead flesh rushing at him.
The fact remained that for all that the Straw Hats were holding their own against the zombies, neither were they making any progress. After all, the zombies might have been without any noteworthy skills, but they were also without any pain. And without pain, that meant that they had no reason to stop attacking. And not just personally either. Every minute, more and more zombies of all shapes and sizes were arriving from all over the manor and the rest of the island, adding to the bulk of the brawl. Sure, they were salting them all…

"RAAAAGH!" Luffy bellowed, his voice echoing a hundred times over with righteous fury. This fury was thoroughly reinforced by the reverberating roar of the flaming chainsaw that topped his pipe, complemented by the hockey mask he wore, and accentuated by the fact that he was a hulking blue muscleman almost as tall as Moria.

The icing on the cake was the screams of the zombies and their desiccated flesh as they were both rent asunder by the swings of Luffy's nightmarish weapon.

Franky held back a bark of laughter as he watched the zombies literally fall to pieces. And sure, they were managing to incapacitate the zombies in a variety of other ways…

"CHAAAAARGE!"

Franky's grin died as a fresh crowd of zombies literally threw themselves into fray.

…But the unfortunate fact was that for each one they put down, three more and counting took their place. It was just a dozen-to-one now, but sooner or later it'd be two dozen, then three, then however many more until either Moria ran out of zombies or they started losing people, whichever came first.

And not even Luffy was stupid enough to bet on the zombies running out first.

Still, one thought cheered Franky and prompted him to heft his nunchucks again, and that thought was that the zombies weren't the only ones with reinforcements coming.

The Straw Hats had their own people waiting in the manor's wings, and once they were all good and ready they'd be getting reinforcements of their own.

"This is gonna take all night," Franky grumbled. Snorting, he readjusted his nunchucks. "Eh, whatever; Cross and the rest'll be here soon enough."

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"This is taking forever," I groused.

Unfortunately for us all, the process of getting from Point A (the dining room) to Point B (the base of Hogback's tower) was proving to be leagues more complicated than it had any right to be. Seriously, all we had to do was drop off Hogback, who wasn't even struggling due to Conis dragging his unconscious carcass along by the ankle. But there was an… obstacle in the way of that particular endeavor.

"Right up ahead…" Soundbite informed us, his voice brimming with exasperation.

We took the turn he indicated…

"SONNUVABITCH!!"

And our hit-and-miss guide expressed what we were all feeling as we were greeted once again with a dead-end hallway.
"Fifth in as many minutes..." Lassoo chuffed dryly.

"'Easy to navigate', you said, 'know your way around this place like the back of your shell', you said," Usopp commented with a sidelong glance at my partner. "What happened to our self-proclaimed 'god of noise'? And while I'm on it, have you ever even seen the back of your shell?"

"BITE ME!" the snail exploded. "I CAN'T HEAR SHIT WHEN THERE'S NOTHING TO HEAR! These asshats have ghost walking down to an art form. MY MAP IS HIT AND MISS AT BEST. AND BESIDES THAT, I NEED TO BE CAREFUL TO MAKE SURE—!"

"Hey! What's going on here?!"

Soundbite's eye twitched furiously. "That doesn't happen."

We all turned around to behold a quartet of shambling horrors staring at us from the intersection. Three of the patchwork wad-brains were wearing metal buckets on their head and the fourth was sporting... a... orange rubber traffic cone?

"...morbid curiosity here, where the heck did you dig that little piece of headgear up?" I wondered.

The zombies' response to my wholly innocent query was quite rude... namely, they all roared and attempted to charge us.

'Attempted' being the key word here, seeing as Conis, Usopp, and Lassoo promptly dispatched them all with an air of ease bordering on, well... boredom.

"Come on!" Lassoo yipped. "Isn't there anybody more—nope! Nope nope nope! Not saying it!"

"At this point, I'm bored enough that I'd be willing to risk saying it," Robin muttered, before speaking up. "But before we stumble into another dead-end passage, I'd like to try something else."

With that, hands sprouted from the floor, propping up the unconscious Hogback—and then repeatedly bitch-slapping him.

Seriously. There was no other way to describe it. And in fairness, it did the trick; Hogback's head jerked off the floor, wheezing against the napkin gag we'd thought to stuff in his mouth on our way out of the dining room. His expression as he froze under our combined gazes was priceless, too.

"Do try to face this with some dignity," Robin drawled, sprouting another hand on his neck that clamped onto a very specific part of his throat. "Now, I trust you'll recognize that that is your carotid artery I'm holding, yes? Let me be blunt: if we deliver you to Chopper, there is a good possibility you will not survive the encounter with him. However, if we remain in these labyrinthine corridors for five more minutes..."

Hogback did his name proud when he squealed at Robin twisting the flesh she was holding.

"I can guarantee that you will not survive me. So, all of that being said..." Robin's hands sprouted all around the doctor and both shoved and pulled him to his feet so that she could smile frigidly in his face. "Which way to your laboratory, Mister Hogback?"

Hogback shivered in place for a few seconds before hesitantly shuffling past her and back down the way we'd come.

I cocked an eyebrow and leaned in close to Robin as we followed. "Do you think he realizes that anything you could possibly do to him would be a fair sight kinder than whatever it is Chopper's got
up his sleeves?" I whispered.

Robin's response was to chuckle beneath her breath. "Oooh, I'm certain he'll figure it out in due time."

"Well, seeing as we've got time to burn…" Lassoo hummed thoughtfully. "Anybody up for I Spy?"

"Any other day, maybe," Conis sighed with a despondent look as she reloaded her guns with fresh shots of salt. "Right now, I'm too preoccupied worrying about how Su is doing…"

For whatever reason, that set Soundbite off, sniggering like a loon.

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"HEY, WAKE UP!"

THWACK!

"GWAH!" a painting-zombie snorted awake as a hefty weight was slammed into its jaw. That done, it glared bloody murder at its equally lopsided compatriot as it readjusted its top hat. "What was that for?!!"

"Get pissed at me later, you lethargic loitering louts!" the bodybuilder-like zombie snarled, swinging its head back and forth to address the entire hallway and the dozen or so paintings that had just been roused. "Right now, you need to get off your damn wall and get moving, quick!"

"Eh?" another of the paintings blinked in confusion, sleep still clouding its mind. "The heck are you talking about?! What's—?!"

KA-BOOM!

Almost as if in response, a catastrophic explosion rang out in the distance.

"We're being attacked, flat-faces!" the bodybuilder snapped, glancing fearfully towards the site of the explosion. "Full-frontal assault on the manor! It's all hands on deck, even Surprises like you! So, get your flat-asses in motion already!"

"Gah, alright, alright!" the painting yelped, the lot of them hastily hopping their frames off the wall before dragging themselves away.

"So, what, we've got an attack on the front doors? Is it really that bad?!" asked one of them.

"It's worse, damn it!" the bipedal brawler ranted as he led the way. "We've got no chain of command! Nin, Bao, and Gyoro went to wake Master Moria forever ago, but we haven't heard anything from any of them! And from what I've heard, Hogback's insisting that we all steer the hell clear of his dining room so that he can keep the 'guests' he has fooled, Perona and Absalom both just up and disappeared into thin air, and no laughing!"

"Wasn't gonna!" the painting hastily coughed out.

"Anyway…" the musclebuilder shook his head grimly. "Ryuma's trying to take command, but he's also itching to fight, so that's no help. None of the other Generals have anywhere near as much clout as him, Hildon's never had to command so many of us at once, and there's the fact that there's somebody in the damn manor slaughtering us wholesale!"

"Really? How are they doing it?"
"Nobody freaking knows!" The revenant threw his arms up in frustration. "They don't leave any survivors! All we know is that they're hitting them faster than they can react and that for some reason they always leave one zombie standing so that they can realize they're screwed before salting them too! It's totally frustrating!"

"...Uh, how would you know that if they're all purified?"

"Because every site I've been to, most of the zombies look like they just fell in place, but there's always the one zombie that looks terrified. It's not hard to figure out that they watched the rest fall, and had just enough time to panic before they lost their shadow, too!"

"So... you kinda mean like your situation now?"

"Eh? What the hell are you talking about—?"

The zombie froze in his tracks. Then, very slowly, he turned around, and what little blood was in his face left it as he took in the Surprise Zombies he had roused, one and all, lying on the ground, truly lifeless. He started frantically looking around, one musclebound hand over his mouth and the other clenched into a fist, ready to deck whoever tried to—

"Ahem."

A quiet cough came from beneath him, and he looked down to see a frankly adorable little white fox sitting at his feet, looking up at him with its head tilted. He blinked in confusion.

"I'm a little over a foot long, tiny, and I'm far faster than you could ever hope to be," Su flatly stated. "Run."

If there was one good thing to be said about the situation, it was that that particular zombie wouldn't have to live with the shame of being terrified out of his wits by something smaller than one of his fists.

Instead, he chose to spend his final moments running like hell was on his heels, which... technically it was.

When he suddenly felt the rat's claws climbing up his back, the zombie screamed for help...

"BUT NO ONE CAME..."

And then he felt something get shoved down his throat and all was oblivion.

Su eyed the still-cool corpse and hopped off of it before glancing up at the air. "Third time you've used that line. Reference?"

"Ohhh, you're just living what I like to call a..." Soundbite chuckled malevolently. "Genocide Run."

A minor sweatdrop hung from the back of Su's head at that. "Sounds... sinister."

"OHHH, IT IS, IT IS. BUT FOR ONCE, I don't feel like a scumbag FOR LISTENING IN! This is actually kinda fun!"

"Heh, that's for sure!" Su snorted happily as she pounded one paw in the other. "I'm going through these clowns like Robin through Marine bones! It feels nice to be doing this much damage!"
"Enjoy the dream, mon ami, enjoy—EH? Hang on a…" Soundbite trailed off into silence for a second before 'tsk'ing in exasperation. "DAMN IT, THE ZOMBIES ARE COORDINATING A FRONT, GOTTA BREAK THAT UP. You're gonna have to go blind for a bit. SORRY."

"Meh, fine by me, I'm getting good at this," Su waved her tail dismissively, even as she started padding back to the spider-tunnels. "Any parting advice?"

"Nah, you're—OH, WAIT, ONE THING! DID YA NOTICE THAT TOWER FIVE FLOORS UP and six corridors westwards?"

"Eh…" Su swished her tail thoughtfully as she started spelunking the wall's catacombs. "I think so, while I was in the north wing. What about it?"

"Don't go into it, OR ELSE."

"Eh?" Su blinked in surprise, coming to a sudden halt. "Or else' what?" She started to climb again, before suddenly slipping a foot when a flat, droning voice spoke bloody murder in her ear.

"YOU'RE GONNA HAVE A BAD TIME… GOT IT?"

"Aheheh… yeah, got it…" Su shivered fearfully.

"Glad to hear it!" Soundbite said, his smile back in his voice. "Have fun!" And with that, the omnipotent voyeur's trademark electric whine snapped out of place.

The very instant she was out from under the vocal barrel, a mischievous smirk came across Su's muzzle and she made a beeline in a very specific direction. Six corridors west, and five floors up, and with only a few scant spider-mice in the way, she reached her destination no time at all.

Snickering eagerly, she pushed open a trapdoor that led up and into the tower's base - and then blinked in confusion at the hollowed out and, more importantly, web-filled tube of stone.

"The heck…?" she mused as she slowly crawled up into the tower. "What is this place, the den of those rat-rachnids? Why the hell wouldn't Soundbite want me coming here? I mean, psh, c'mon."

She sat on her haunches and shrugged her forelegs with a shake of her head. "With the rate I've been tearing through those ratfinks, I doubt there are even over a dozen left in this manor! C'mon, what's the big deal?"

"I believe that honor…" a silky-smooth voice purred above the cloud fox, causing a shiver to run up her suddenly ramrod-straight spine. "Would belong to me."

Veeeeery slowly, Su tilted her head up and stared headlong into the twitching rictus-grin of the far too literal spider-monkey that was hanging above her by its too-too-too many legs, as well as the dozen-or-so smaller but no less vicious grins that were crawling around it.

"Now, then," Tararan leered venomously. "What were you saying… about my mice?"

The rodent-rachnid hybrids skittering around their boss all tittered malevolently in agreement.

"Uhhh…"

Su was saved from having to answer by an electronic whine heralding her backup's return.

"OK, back in business, YOU MAY RESUME YOUR USUAL WORSHI—!" Soundbite choked off a sentence into his tirade and remained silent for a moment before sighing morosely. "Dare I ask
"WHY?"

"...I wanted the challenge?" Su weakly offered.

"...Ironically? THAT'S THE SAME JUSTIFICATION MOST PEOPLE GIVE FOR THE GENOCIDE RUN."

Su's ear and tail drooped down miserably. "Ooooh fuck me."

Tararan's head all but split in half as he opened his mouth wide, unveiling a pair of twitching mandibles. "Gladly."

And with that, the beast wrenched its limbs free from the walls and allowed several metric tons of flesh and chitin to plummet towards the self-titled powder-fox.

"Yow!" Su yelped as she all but flung herself away from the falling spider-monkey-zombie, which slammed into where she'd been seconds before and kicked up a cloud of dust Skidding to a halt, she spared a half-second to glance over her shoulder before hastily shooting into motion as a titanic spider leg slammed clean through the brick she'd been standing on moments earlier.

"Hahahahaha! That's it, little tunnel rat!" Tararan cackled as he raised and slammed down another one of his legs, Su smoothly flowing around it. "Run! Flee! You cannot escape!" Another leg slammed down, and only a hasty pirouette saved the cloud fox from two superfluous new orifices.

"Wasn't planning to!" Su snarled, finally skidding behind the massive zombie and tensing her legs for a leap. That tension allowed her to jump back when Tararan's massive rear slammed into the stonework, shattering it. "Are you serious?!"

"Monkey monkey! I have no blind spots!" the zombie bragged. "But you are a quick little tunnel rat, aren't you." Raising one of its hands, it snapped its fingers. "Get 'er, boys."

Gritting her teeth, Su jumped back right as a small web stuck itself to the stone, shooting a glare up at the spider-mice infesting the lines above her.

"Right, that's it, I'm sick of being target practice!" she snapped, dodging several more webs before hopping up onto one of the larger—and more importantly, drier-looking—ones attached to the walls. "Time for a counterattack!"

One spider-mouse, too low to the ground, was salted immediately. The rest just cackled at her before shooting more webs. With the lines, it was easy to dodge them; it was much harder to actually get at the damn things. They were hopping around like chinchillas on speed, and despite her lofty words about counterattacks, it was all she could do to stay ahead of their webs.

"Sticky Spider Net!"

And that was without the giga-sized asshole crawling around below her complicating her life!

Bending back on her hind legs in a move that would have done Neo proud, Su watched in slack-jawed amazement as a stream of webbing thicker than she was only just shot past her, sweeping three of the spider-mice with it.

"Right, gotta remember him, too..." she muttered. Then a thought occurred to her, and she eyed the chittering spider-mice above her, then Tararan. "I~de~a~!"
Hopping onto the web she'd identified, she tracked the spider mice readying their attack runs. Just needed to get them in the right spot, and—

"Hey, Tartarface!" she shouted down.

"Monkey monkey! It's Tararan!" the zombie in question snapped.

"Couldn't care less~!" Su sang back, idly spinning around another web. "Look, this has been bugging me this entire time: is that actually your ass you're sporting, or do you just have a plus-sized beetle chewing on your—?"

Any further taunts were killed flat by a wave of killing intent flooding the room and freezing everyone in place.

"You. Are. Dead," Tararan chittered venomously, his mandibles twitching with ill-repressed desire to rip and shred.

Silence fell on the tower, the spider-mice shivering in terror… until said terror was aborted by seven shadows shooting up into the ceiling via Su flicking her paw at their slack jaws.

"Well, didn't quite get what I was planning for, but it's all working out so beautifully that I can't complain," Su sneered, her tail flickering again to bring up a visible gob of salt. "So. Shall we do this properly this time?"

To her surprise and worry, Tararan's furious rictus-snarl melted into a sneer to match her own.

"Yessssss, let's."

Before Su could act, a chittering sound reached her ears, and she spun around to find the three spider-mice that Tararan had inadvertently webbed earlier on her six and puckering up to spit their webs.

"Ah, shit," Su groaned, right before all three hit, wrapping her up in a neat little ball that bounced off the wall and onto the floor. "Owww… Lemme guess… I forgot that spiders don't get stuck in their own webs?"

"Eeheehee, eeheehee!" the spider-mice danced around joyously as they reveled in their victory. Or, basically, over ganging up on a single Cloud Fox without any notable offensive capabilities.

Fingers like steel wrapped around her face and the cloud fox was lifted up and treated to a close-up view of Tararan's open gullet. Needless to say, it was not a pretty sight.

"Dude. Whoever your dentist is, you need to—" Su began, before getting cut off by Tararan dropping her into his mouth and swallowing her wholesale.

"Monkey monkey… ah, blessed silence…" the spider-monkey-zombie sighed as he retracted his mandibles into his maw, the surviving spider-mice dancing around him in joyous exultation. That made the crash when their chieftain suddenly collapsed in a boneless heap all the deeper, his shadow-soul shooting out of his slack jaws.

A second after the astral embodiment escaped, Su hopped out as well, shaking herself down in order to dislodge what webbing remained stuck to her. "Honestly, now…" she sighed despondently.

"Swallowing me whole like that, when my tail's weighing heavy with salt? Unbelievable. I mean, really, apart from my bandanna, I'm nude. Where did he think I was keeping this stuff, up my ass?"

"SOME PEOPLE JUST really aren't smart like that!" Soundbite cackled.
"Eeeyup…” Su sighed, casting a sidelong glance at the remaining spider-mice. Somehow, all three clenched up even more. "Oh, you're still here? Alright, then, who wants the salt first?"

The mice promptly shot away like their abdomens were on fire.

Su gave them a little time to run before allowing a smirk to cross her muzzle. "I might be the first fox anywhere in the history of ever to say this…"

She then shot after the mice in a blur of white.

"But, oh, how I **love** the hunt!"

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"She took down Tararan on her own?!"

That would probably be the only time ever that Hogback and I spoke in perfect unison.

"**IF BY TARARAN you mean the uber-sized double-exterminator package, THEN YUP!**" Soundbite grinned from eyestalk to eyestalk, specifically directing his leer at Hogback. "**Dunno where you got those brains of his, but I SUGGEST GETTING YOUR MONEY BACK! HEEHEEEHEOOHOHOHOHahaha!**"

"Yay, Su!" Conis pumped her fists enthusiastically, a massive grin on her face. "Good for her, I'm happy she's having fun!"

"In a… zombie-filled… haunted manor…" Usopp reiterated slowly.

That earned him an oblivious look from our gunner. "Yes, what's your point?"

Usopp worked his jaw for a second before slumping with a sigh of defeat. "Sometimes I miss the days when the world made sense, I really, really do…"

Hogback, meanwhile, remained frozen, staring back at the snail with a gaping mouth before slowly jerking his eyes forward, his fearful shivering redoubling. "This can't be happening, this can't be happening, this can't be—!"

"Save some of that fear and terror for Chopper, Hoggy," Lassoo chuffed even as he kept his nose pointed in the air, sniffing for any traces of necrotized flesh coming our way. "Seriously, if you thought you were crazy before—?"

"I am **not** crazy!" Hogback snarled, life actually flowing back in him. "I am not and have never been anything less than the absolute **picture** of mental health! It is a legitimate fact proven, by a symposium of scientists the world over that I myself was a part of, that doctors are **incapable** of suffering from the pedestrian affliction recognized as 'going mad'! The word you're looking for in **my** field is 'medical genius'! And you can see the proof of it for yourself, right behind these—"

"I think…”

We all froze as a chilling voice cut in, and watched with varying levels of trepidation as a titan of fur and fury walked out from behind an upcoming doorframe.

"**That your conclusion could use some independent scrutiny,**” a very heavy Heavy Point Chopper growled, glaring syringes into Hogback's by-now sweat-coated spectacles.
"Ugugugugugugugu—GURK!" The surgeon's sputtering was choked off by Chopper's fist clamping down onto the folds of his throat and lifting him into the air.

"Let's see if you still stand by your opinion once I'm through with you, HOGBACK," our crewmate spat in his ex-idol's waxy face.

"Damn, dude..." Soundbite whistled in awe.

"This is the first time I've ever actually used this word," Robin murmured with a slightly taken-aback look. "But ditto."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, he's freaky as all hell, we get that, we already know that from extreme personal experience..."

I glanced to the side and caught sight of the TDWS shifting around uncomfortably, their tails all twitching with ill-repressed eagerness.

"But now that he's got his pincushion, can we go already!?" Leo pleaded desperately.

I shot a slight smirk at the dugongs. "Eager to get to the battlefront, I take it?"

"THERE IS AN ARMY OF ZOMBIES OUT THERE AND WE'RE NOT IN THE MIDDLE OF FIGHTING IT!" Mikey burst out, steam all but howling from where his ears would be. "DO YOU SEE HOW THE NATURAL ORDER IS BEING PERVERTED HERE!?!"

I snickered at the reaction before deciding to do them the favor of jabbing my thumb over my shoulder. "Alright, alright, at ea—!

"THAT'S CONSENT, GOGOGO!"

"—Gwah!?" I transitioned into a yelp of shock when I was nearly bowled over by the quarter's freaking slipstream! It was only Robin’s hasty intervention that prevented me from falling on my ass.

"Tenacious little devils, aren't they?" she chuckled.

I took a moment to get my bearings back on track, a chuckle escaping my lips. "And we wouldn't have them any other way. And speaking of mentally unsound crewmates, hey Chopper!" I was actually quite proud of myself for not flinching when he transitioned a fraction of his glare from Hogback's sweat-soaked face. "Don't mean to break your buzz here, but I think the roll you're on is epic, seriously. I just wanted to let you know... don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Uh..." Lassoo raised a paw uncertainly. "Isn't that kind of... superfluous, considering your whole... 'Spandam episode'?

My grin took on a decidedly blood-laden overtone. "I stand by every word I just said."

Hogback's whimpering intensified as Chopper, Lassoo, and Robin matched my grin, and that was the last I saw before our doctor started dragging him away by his neck, the doors to the lab's stairwell ominously slamming shut behind him.

There was a moment of silence before, naturally...

"ALRIGHT, THEN!"

Soundbite broke it with a bang.
“Break out your parkas, kiddies, BECAUSE OUR NEXT DESTINATION IS NONE OTHER than Freezer 900!”

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The events that would one day be published as the first-and-final war of Thriller Bark continued to rage before the mansion where the masters of the island dwelled. No zombie on Thriller Bark was inactive now; the Generals were being roused, and every other cadaver was assembling to fend off the infamous Straw Hat Pirates.

The fight seemed even as it was; for all that the invaders knew the zombies' weakness, the ones who weren't smart enough to guard their mouths were long since purified, and the remainder were putting up a decent fight. On the other hand, for all that the zombies were impervious to pain, they were quite simply only able to stand against the pirates because of their superior numbers.

Yet, for all of the warring, two figures moved through the crowd, not attempting to strike any combatants. Likewise, none of the combatants attempted to strike them. They moved unimpeded, side-by-side, towards the dead center of the fight. A point where another similarly uninvolved figure was approaching, walking at a perfectly leisurely stroll.

The reason that nobody was attempting to attack either of the noncombatants was simple: neither pirate nor zombie had any desire whatsoever to interfere with three of the most infamous swordsmen known to Thriller Bark, whether they were on the same side or not.

Zoro stayed a few steps back as Brook stood across from the zombie who bore his shadow, regarding him with the most polite of impassiveness. Ryuma, in turn, did nothing besides granting the skeleton the honor of his full attention. For an endless minute, all they did was stare at each other, their lack of eyes doing nothing to ease the tension that was driving all of their allies and enemies alike away from them.

Finally, Ryuma broke the scene when he tilted his head ever so slightly to the side. "Yohoho…one more time, then, old boy?" the past-and-present samurai breathed quietly.

Brook stood still for a few seconds longer before slowly reaching up and drawing the brim of his top hat down over his eyes. "When we last met, my mind was awhirl with emotion. I let my grief and my desperation cloud my intuition as a swordsman. I see now what I could not then: that while you might hold my skills in spirit… in flesh, you far surpass me. And so, I concede any battles I might fight with you…"

The gentleman skeleton raised his head and glared at the samurai with defiant resolve. "But I refuse to end my fight here," he growled, heat flaring in his every word. "Rather, I choose to take the option that was robbed of me so many years ago: I started this fight and I have done all that I can…"

"Meaning that now," Zoro spoke up solemnly, stepping forward as he tied his bandanna around his head. "It's my turn."

Brook's demeanor promptly lightened up, and he gave the closest approximation to a sunny smile he could. "Ah, yes, and for the record, while I appreciate your help, the fact remains that you're my very last hope in the whole wide world for escaping this hell with my pride as a swordsman, so if you lose, I'm going to haunt you until well after you die."

Zoro scoffed as he drew both Kitetsu III and the seriously old, yet equally ready, katana he'd found on the Rumbars' ship. "So, no pressure, then."
"Exactly!"

Zoro rolled his eyes a final time, before turning them on Ryuma. His swords remained at his side, relaxed, and yet his guard was ironclad. Ryuma, for his part, betrayed nothing, and after several tense seconds under Zoro's gaze he tilted his head back and chuckled.

"Yohohoho! I feel like some tremendous predator is sizing me up! It feels almost…" The cadaver tilted his head to his side. "Familiar."

Drawing his sword, Ryuma threw his head back and outright laughed. "Yohohoho! I accept this battle!"

The samurai had scarcely finished speaking before Kitetsu and the old katana swung in, held at just the right length to bisect him at the neck and just below the breastbone, Wado sneaking in at the shoulder level. A black blade, a wavy water pattern decorating it, flashed up, halting the swords.

It could not, however, halt the momentum of Zoro's swing. Despite bracing, Ryuma was sent skidding to the side, though his guard remained raised.

This was a good thing, as Zoro crossed his arms, blades pointed outward with their points nearly touching. "Bull…" he growled, before sprinting forward. "Needles!"

To an outside observer, the sudden flip the swordsman went through as his blades met Ryuma's would have seemed like magic. Zoro, though, saw the truth: the zombie's black blade slipping between his, milliseconds before they would have stabbed him, and spinning. It was, essentially, a judo move with a sword, and as he landed, Zoro felt his respect for both the opponent in front of him and the owner of the shadow fueling said opponent go up a notch.

'Damn, a sword-breaking technique!' he realized just a second too late. Kitetsu rang from the abuse, but held; the uppity-old-timer in his other hand, however… well, suffice to say he went out with a bang.

"Yohohoho!" Ryuma chuckled at the look on Zoro's face. "I'm terribly sorry, I know it's not sporting, but I just have this feeling, you see! My instincts, they're telling me that if I hold anything back against you, then I shall surely perish! Yohohoho~!"

Neither of the combatants noticed Brook clamping his hands on his jawbone to refrain from saying 'But you're already dead.' The inattentiveness on Zoro's part was due to him recalling that Cross mentioned that this zombie came from the New World. Which meant…

"…Does that mean you're going to be using… what was it called… Haki?" Zoro asked with a grimace.

"Haki?" Ryuma parroted, his head tilting to the side. "I've heard rumors, but I'm afraid I cannot use it myself."

Zoro spared a glance over his shoulder at the fight's observer before heaving a sigh. "…I see," he mused, reaching up to Wado. "Well, in that case—!"

"Catch!"
Acting on instinct, Zoro snapped his hand out and easily snatched a sword with a very familiar pair of tusks on its hilt out of the air.

"Sorry to butt in like this," Funkfreed vibrated in his palm. "And I know I'm not exactly the katana you're used to, which is why you're not using Brook's, but I've got a strong will and... and... and c'mon, this is a fight between two master swordsmen! A once-in-a-wielder's lifetime opportunity! I couldn't resist! Please let me fight!"

"My word, that sword is talking!" Ryuma exclaimed.

Ignoring the zombie's outburst, Zoro silently hefted Funkfreed a few times, before slipping back into his original relaxed stance. "Don't transform, or I'll throw you away, even if it kills me."

"Wouldn't even if you paid me..." the Zoan-blade breathed euphorically. "I wouldn't miss this for all the peanuts in the world."

That done, Zoro turned his gaze back to Ryuma. "Alright, thanks for letting me sort this out. Shall we get back to it?"

"Hold a moment," the samurai said, holding out a hand. "After that display, I believe I owe you..." He reached up to grip the collar of his scarf. "A courtesy of my own."

There was an immediate reaction to the samurai grabbing his neckwear, but it wasn't from him, and it wasn't from Zoro or Brook either. Rather...

"OH, CRAP, RUN!"

It was from his fellow zombies, who, content up until now with merely keeping their distance and observing as they fought the enemy pirates, were running away from the fight as though their undead asses were on fire.

"OUTTA THE WAY, OUTTA THE WAY!"

"WATCH YOUR HEADS!"

"RYUMA'S GOING ALL-OUT! HEAD FOR THE FUCKING HILLS!"

Brook whipped his head to-and-fro, watching in confusion as the zombies retreated with extreme prejudice, the rest of the Straw Hats and the Rolling Pirates hot on their tails, leaving nobody else around to witness the fight. "What on earth...?"

"You'll have to forgive them," Ryuma hummed as he tugged his scarf down. The action drew the undivided attention of his opponent, as it unveiled a knot of surgical thread that was taut against his throat. "More than a few of them have been the victims of... unfortunate mishaps whenever I do this."

Zoro tensed as his instincts screamed. "'This' being...?" he grit out.

Ryuma stilled, his lipless grin turning feral. "Why... whenever I go all-out, of course."

And without further ado, Ryuma grabbed a thread of the knot and yanked, pulling it undone and letting the lines loose.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, streams of dark ooze began seeping out of his body. Arms, legs, torso, all bled profusely with something that was clearly not healthy and just as clearly not
Brook's hyoid bounced fearfully as he took in the desecration of his shadow's vessel. "W-What on earth—!?"

"Hahahaha! Ahhhh, yes!" Brook jumped in shock when Ryuma suddenly barked with laughter, swinging his torso left and right in obvious stretching motions. "Oooooh, this feels so good! I haven't felt this light in a long time! Now, then!" He eagerly held his blade up. "Just to be sure…"

The zombie-samurai swung his blade out, and all three of the Straw Hats stiffened in shock and (even a little bit on Zoro's part) fear as their battlefield suddenly became devoid of all traces of fog.

"Ahhh…" Ryuma's sigh as he leaned his forehead against the back of his blade was almost euphoric. "Much better…"

The Straw Hats all stared at the display before them. Then, Funkfreed whispered a single word, in a whisper that was equal parts terrified and exhilarated.

"Lead."

"Indeed…" Ryuma chuckled grimly, cracking his neck back and forth. "A precautionary measure Doctor Hogback implemented in me after the… third, I think? The third time I sliced a tower in half while practicing. Everyone was tired of cleaning up after me, so they decided that I'd be better off weighted down. I'm only ever allowed to truly let loose when I have the need, and for once…"

A glint entered Ryuma's socket as he fell into a positively masterful ready-position.

"I have it…" the revenant breathed.

As Brook's already bone-white complexion grew even paler, Zoro's already eager grin became downright feral, easily matching Ryuma's. "Interesting."

This time, Zoro waited for the attack to come. He wasn't disappointed; Ryuma blurred out of existence. Spinning around, he planted Funkfreed in the ground, black blade slamming into him an instant later. Rearing back, Zoro stabbed forward with Kitetsu, only for Ryuma to vanish again, blurring back into existence behind his opponent.

"Zo—"

That was as far as Brook got before Zoro leaned his head back, catching the black blade on Wado Ichimonji. With his opponent at least briefly locked, he pulled Funkfreed out of the dirt and spun, Kitetsu joining the Zoan blade.

"Hawk Wave!"

Ryuma jumped over the sweeping steel and the razor-sharp wind they created, his sword sliding off of Zoro's and carving a thin line on his cheek. The zombie landed, Zoro swung back upright, and then they charged, blades clashing and locking like a pair of bull elephants in full musth, the shockwave kicking up dirt and dust around them.

"Incredible…" Brook breathed.

"Impressive," Zoro grunted, before glancing at the sword in Ryuma's hands. "Now I recognize that sword: that's the black blade, the dragon-slayer Shusui." His eyes narrowed, seeming to come to a decision. "You're holding my sword."
"Hmm?" Ryuma's socket blinked, and then he stiffened in realization, narrowing it as he angled his Shusui so that it glinted in the battle-light. "Oho… so, this is your sword, is it?"

The shadows of Zoro's bandana seemed to tint pitch-black, and his eyes shone like hot coals in the gloom. "Damn right it is."

"Hmph. Well, if that's the case…" Breaking the lock, Ryuma leaped back, holding his blade in a basic kendo stance. "Come and take it."

With that, some sort of energy, in the kind of light blue of tropical seas and the hottest of flames, flared to life around the zombie. For a moment, the energy was just that: energy, wild and untamed, but then it started to take form. And the form it took…

Brook's jaw nearly dislocated with how low it dropped. "I-I don't believe my eyes…" he whispered.

Was that of a dragon. A 'mere' shade of one, perhaps, but a dragon nonetheless. Specifically, the energy coalesced into a positively colossal eastern dragon, whose bulk remained coiled and writhing in the sky while its head bowed down to earth, bowed down to Ryuma. The swordsman was still visible through the spectre's form, but the abyssal blade, Shusui, was indistinguishable from the titanic obsidian tusk that formed the dragon's underbite.

"One Sword Style," Ryuma(The Dragon) intoned imperiously, the air thrumming with his voice, his voice thrumming with pure power. "Dragon Fang Stance."

Ryuma (The Dragon) raised his blade high (coiled to strike). "Prepare yourself, Roronoa Zoro!"

It didn't take a genius to see the implications, and Zoro was moving even before Ryuma (The Dragon) swung his blade down (lashed out like lightning).

"Dragon (Heaven) Slayer!"

It was a good thing Zoro was moving before the attack was completed, as the strike of the dragon was almost instant. And the impact… well, it wasn't so much an 'impact' born of the corporeal world as it was a force of almost cosmic proportions. A whole tract of earth just… ceased to be.

The fact that a goodly chunk of the forest was missing too was concerning as well, yes, but as Zoro observed the scar on the earth, couldn't help but feel like he was missing something crucial.

"My apologies, swordsman…"

Zoro snapped his attention over to Ryuma(The re-coiled Dragon) and blinked in confusion when he realized the opposing swordsman was staring skyward for some reason.

"But I simply could not help myself…" the samurai(dragon) continued, his tone wistful.

With the undead swordsman apparently not going to attack for the moment, Zoro followed his line of sight. What he saw left him frozen. "No way…" he choked out.

Overcome with his own curiosity, Brook followed his fellow swordsman's gaze, but his befuddlement persisted, head tilted to the side. "What are you all looking at? All I see is a beautiful night sky." He stared skyward a moment longer before a sheen of cold sweat somehow shone on his bony brow. "Wait a second…"

"Habit…" Ryuma(The Dragon) sighed longingly as he watched the swath of stars shining down on
"Such an iron-wrought thing, no?"

"You make a habit of slashing the sky open?" Zoro bit out.

"Forget the sky!" Brook shrieked in terror. "He cut clean through the whole of the Florian!"

"Well, that technique was developed for slaying dragons[-]. It only makes sense that it would be able to reach the sky, no?" Ryuma (The Dragon) chuckled as the fog closed back up again. "I'm quite proud to say that not one of my prey ever survived... and neither shall you."

"Tch!" Zoro grunted as he snapped his attention back to his opponent, who was rearing back for another strike. "108 Caliber Phoenix!"

The attack roared in to strike Ryuma (The Dragon), but aura or not, the samurai (dragon) was just as fast, and neatly sidestepped (weaved around) the razor wind so that it carried on into the distance.

"A bird daring to stand up against a dragon[-]? Foolishness!" Ryuma (The Dragon) scoffed. "Let me show you how it's really done! Dragon (Heaven) Slayer!"

The dragon rent the heavens again, Zoro only just managing to dodge by grace of a frantic dive and roll, and the second he was on his feet he was sprinting towards his opponent. Unfortunately, while closing the distance between him and his opponent was an undeniable necessity, it had the unfortunate side effect of leaving him with a lot of forward momentum that made dodging the next strike all but impossible.

So with dodging unfeasible, the only option left...

"Demon..." Zoro snarled, crossing his arms and blades across his chest, a shadowy cloaked figure shimmering into view behind him. "Oni Giri!"

Was to counter with the best he had.

CLANG!

Zoro barely withheld a sigh of relief even as, for only the second time in his life, the 'best he had' was utterly repelled. Thankfully, his ego was kept from bruising on account of how holding off a heaven-rending strike from a world-class swordsman was far less humiliating than his first experience, but there were two undeniable problems with this minor victory.

First, the recoil of his survival left him wide open. And second, Ryuma (The Dragon) was suddenly directly in his face.

"Dragon[-] topples demon," the zombie (Dragon) intoned grimly. "Fall."

Shusui swung up, the dragon following, and the beast engulfed Zoro, launching him up into the sky as it rent the Florian fog once again. Brook couldn't help but gape in horror as, moments after the dragon swooped back down to earth, a blur of a form plummeted towards the ground like a biological meteor. It was on the way down that the extent of Zoro's damage became apparent.

Small burns and cuts decorated the swordsman's body like a macabre wall pattern, dripping blood that flowed in thin streams. His shirt, naturally, was hanging in tatters, and his pants weren't in good condition, either. It was his eyes, though, that were the worst: they'd rolled up into the back of his head, leaving only the whites visible.
But, just before reaching the ground, a curious thing happened: Zoro's eyes suddenly snapped back into focus, and he flipped in midair, managing to stick a three-point landing before painfully pulling himself to his full height.

"I am getting…" Zoro growled out painfully. "Fucking tired of losing my damn shirts…"

"Oh, my…" Brook gaped in awe.

"Hmph… you're quite impressive," Ryuma(The Dragon) snorted with no small amount of respect.

"And you're annoying," Zoro snarled.

"I beg your pardon?" Ryuma(The Dragon) cocked his brow in confusion.

"You're holding back." Funkfreed called out. "You can say what you want, but Shusui's too proud to lie. He's only holding back because you're not letting him go all-out."

"…is it wrong to want a good battle to last as long as possible?" Ryuma(Dragon) intoned softly.

"It is," Zoro grunted as he slowly fell into his ready-stance, his arms crossed over his chest again. "When I can take it."

Ryuma(The Dragon) stared silently at him before slowly sheathing his blade(drawing back, flames roiling in his maw). "On your head be it."

And with that, he slowly slid his left foot forward, leaning forward onto it while his other shoulder faced his opponent, his hand hovering inches from the hilt(coils writhed and snapped in the sky, muscles, and tendons tensing and untensing like a wave of flesh).

All Brook could do was hold his breath as the tension slowly but steadily ramped into an almost tangible howl, the wind thrashing and clashing between the two swordsmen. Until finally, Ryuma(The Dragon) moved first.

"Dragon (Heaven) [GOD] Slayer."

This time, Brook couldn't see the attack at all, it was so fast. All he saw was a flash of light. And then, when the spots cleared from his vision, the manse of Thriller Bark was illuminated by the veil of moonlight that shone upon it.

This feat was made possible by the fact that an entire hemisphere of Florian mist had been eviscerated in the strike, even taking the topmost parts of the manor's tallest towers along with it.

Brook was not quite as distressed from this development as he would normally be, though, on account of how the manor had been behind Ryuma for the duration of the fight.

As Brook parsed this development, the dust settled and the two fighters became visible again.

There was just an instant of Zoro possessing six arms and three faces, so brief Brook almost believed he'd imagined it, that faded into him merely holding one sword pointed out. And Ryuma…

Well… there was simply no way to sugarcoat matters: the zombie was currently missing about, oh, half his torso. The revenant was barely standing, and Shusui was only just hanging in his remaining outstretched hand.
"Impressive..." Ryuma wheezed, swaying on his feet as he slowly adopted a more at ease stance. His breath was no doubt scarce due to his lacking one of his lungs. "To turn my own attack on me... with interest, no less... masterful... but that form... the Asura, yes? I thought they were... creatures of destruction?"

Zoro chuckled, tinged with his own pain as he removed Wado from his mouth and started sheathing both it and Kitetsu, as well as dropping Funkfreed so he could stand on his own legs. "Common mistake. Two castes of Asura, one good and one bad. Vritra Stance is for offense, while what you just experienced was Varuna Stance."

"Counterattacks and defense... impressive..." Ryuma chuckled breathlessly. "If you have not named that attack yet... might I request... you utilize the term 'Samsara'? I believe..." His empty gaze grew slightly fond. "I have just experienced the truth of it..."

Zoro nodded solemnly. "I will."

"Glad... to hear it... ah, yes..." He held up Shusui. "He is yours, of course. But if I may... say my goodbyes?"

The Pirate Hunter didn't even hesitate to nod solemnly.

Ryuma nodded back before slowly turning his gaze to Brook. "I apologize..." he breathed somberly. "For my transgressions against you. My actions when last we met were... inexcusable."

Brook stared at him for a second before gripping his top hat and bowing his head. "And yet I forgive you anyway," Brook whispered. "In spite of the circumstances..." He slowly raised his head and looked Ryuma in his empty eyes. "I am proud that of all the bodies on this island, my shadow was granted the honor of giving the greatest samurai in the history of Wano, if not the world, a second lease on life."

The Humming Swordsman drew his blade and raised it in salute. "Sir, it has been a privilege."

Ryuma nodded shakily, then turned his gaze away and upward, towards the moon. The samurai regarded the silver disk in silence even as the fog slowly started to encroach on the heavens again, falling to his knees. Twin streams of tears welled from the corpse's empty eyes, glinting in the moonlight.

"After five long years of darkness... to see the heavens one last time..." he whispered.

After a minute more of contemplation, Ryuma slowly turned his attention downward and traced Shusui's blade in the dirt, running it through the by now salt-laden soil of the battlefield. And then, once he was satisfied, he held his grim blade out at arm's length and flipped it in his palm, so that Shusui's tip rested on his stomach.

"Hear my last request," Ryuma spoke up a final time, his voice unwavering and full of strength. "When you reach the shores of Wano, and they see your black blade, tell them this! Both times..."

Ryuma tilted his head back and sucked in a deep breath before bellowing to the heavens.

"I, RYUMA OF WANO, LIVED A GOOD LIFE!"

And with his last vestiges of strength, he shoved his blade up to the hilt in his stomach and jerked it to the side.

Almost exactly as the Florian devoured the final slivers of moonlight, Brook's shadow silently slid...
cleanly from the corpse's side, an aged hand fell from the hilt it had been gripping…

And so Ryuma of Wano died for the second time.

-0-

I stayed frozen at the dance hall's window a moment longer, staring outside in numb shock before slowly turning to face an equally astounded Robin. We both continued to gape before I got my wits about me and snapped my fingers before Soundbite, which shook him out of his own shock and got him to do his duty.

"...So," I choked out. Hesitantly. "Anyone want to explain to me how the hell I just caught sight of a beam of flipping moonlight when this island is supposed to be perpetually covered in fog?"

"Oh, oh, I can answer that, Cross!"

I blinked in befuddlement as I processed the voice I just heard. It sounded half like Disney's mascot mouse and half like what I had heard the one time I let morbid curiosity overcome my good sense and I asked Soundbite to play what he heard of Nami's candlelit dinner with her gold.

Both the combination and the latter were... deeply disturbing.

"And the answer would be...?" I trailed off in dread.

"I was actually a part of it! Suffice to say that Zoro's duel with Ryuma and the conclusion were supremely epic. Ah," Funkfreed blinked in realization. "We won, by the way, just in case I wasn't clear on that."

"YES!" I pumped my fist in triumphant relief. "That's two major birds with one big-ass stone; one of the strongest Zombies on the island's back at peace, and Brook has his shadow back now," I clarified to my confused companions, eliciting grins from them. Then I returned my attention to my conversation. "Aaand going by your euphoric tone, I'm guessing you had fun?

"Literally the most fun I've had in my entire life!" Funkfreed laughed ecstatically. "Put it this way, Cross: That fight more than made up for all the wasted years I spent with Spandam. So... thank you, Cross, for giving me this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

My gut promptly felt like it'd taken a straight-jab dead center. "...aaaand cue the guilt trip that you got that feeling from fighting with Zoro and not me." I dragged my hand down my face with a groan. "Mrgh... Make it up to you in days to come by letting you hardline sword-form even when we aren't in the middle of a fight?"

"Deal!" Funkfreed trumpeted eagerly. "Though for now, I'll remain autonomous a while longer. 'Cause in the end, it really doesn't matter to me whether I'm going at it hybrid or au natural, so long as I can be in the center of the brawl!"

"Yeah, yeah, good for you," Zoro grunted off-handedly, his distraction no doubt stemming from examining his new ally-in-war. "So, anything else you need us to do?"

"Nah, nah," I waved him off dismissively. "Just go ahead and hitch a ride on Funkfreed and head back to the main brawl. Our work isn't done until every zombie on this island has been purified, or at least the vast majority before we wake Moria up so that he can be forcibly put down. I'm working on neutralizing the last major threat on the island, but I'll be heading your way as soon as that's done, so be ready, Funkfreed."
"No problem, Cross!"/"Got it."

"Perfect," I nodded in satisfaction. Once, the call dropped, I grinned from ear to ear and faced my comrades. "Now, then! Where were we exactly?"

"Right about here."

CLONK!

"Gah, what the—!" I flinched as Usopp plopped a… classic yellow-with-black-cross hardhat on my head?

I blinked at both my own headwear and the identical one my sniper was wearing before giving Usopp a funny look. "You carry spare hardhats with you?"

Usopp returned my look with just as much confusion, if not more. "You mean you don't?"

I opened my mouth to answer, and promptly clicked it shut as I found myself lacking a valid answer. "Fair 'nuff… alright, then!" I popped a thumbs-up at my partner and our gunner. "Soundbite, mute. Conis, let 'er rip!"

Soundbite's grin stretched wide, and all noise outside of the hall's borders was promptly eliminated. "WE'RE CLEAR!"

Conis popped us all a thumbs-up before focusing on the control-box in her hand, which had wires leading from it to several bundles that lined the edge of the freezer's vault-like door. "Fire in the—!" Conis was cut off as she pushed the plunger—

KRA-BOOM!

And the door's hinges were blown clean off its frame. The door itself stood a few moments longer. At least, until Lassoo trotted up and poked it with his nose, causing the hunk of metal to keel over with a cavernous moan and a resounding THUNK!

Robin cocked an eyebrow at Conis as she removed her hardhat from her Stetson. "'Hole', I presume?"

Conis smiled beatifically as she handed the control box back to Usopp. "'Haunted mansion', actually!"

"Ah, of course, of course."

"No time for a horse, let's go!" I crowed, tossing my own hat back to Usopp and jogging ahead into the hallway.

I was immediately grateful for the running start because the mere concept of trying to inch my way into the chilling air that filled the hallway was frigid in itself.

"Brrr!" Usopp shivered as he ran after me, rubbing his arms with an almost desperate kind of franticness. "I knew the people who lived here were cold-blooded, but this is ridiculous!"

"Only the best for number 900, Usopp!" I informed him as I kept myself moving, unwilling to give my blood time to freeze. "Moria didn't want to so much as risk his crowning achievement becoming compromised!"

"Yeah, about that…" Lassoo panted, shooting me a quizzical look as he kept pace. "You haven't told
us what this ‘900’ guy is like yet. I mean, you've said before that he's the strongest corpse here, but what separates him from the other zombies? Is he super-enhanced compared to the others, is he a chimera of species, does he have a Devil Fruit, what?”

"Size," Soundbite responded grimly. "HE'S THE STRONGEST THROUGH SHEER size."

"So…” Conis started uncertainly. "He's a giant then?"

I nodded my head to the side, grimacing. "Well, he's giant, I'll give you that much."

That earned me a blink of confusion from the angel. "Uh… why are you putting it like—?"

Conis suddenly cut herself off dead. No gasp, no choked off garble, no nothing. Just… silence.

It was like that for each and every last one of us. One second noise and motion, the next utter stillness, none of us even daring to breathe. Why, you ask? Simple.

Because we'd just entered Freezer No. 900. And what stood, what towered above us was, was… so far beyond normal description.

Up until that point, I'd been content to label Oars as a 'mega-giant', a giant's giant because, well… that was all I really knew him as. But now… now I knew better.

Now I'd seen him in the actual flesh, seen his horns, pillars of pure bone towering above me. Now I'd seen his bulk, this… this… this wall of patchwork flesh stretching out before me and disappearing below. Now I'd seen something once-living whose size could only be measured in units applicable to maps.

Honestly, it was the freezer that really told the true story. It was just… a pit. A pit of darkness and cold and death. There has only ever been one name for any creature that has dwelled in such a pit.

"Titan…” I breathed, my voice equal parts terrified and reverential.

"He was going to fight Kaido…” Robin whispered numbly. "With this?"

It took all I had to shake my head. "Other way around. He needed this to fight Kaido."

Lassoo licked his chops nervously before raising his hackles. "Existential crises later, making sure that this thing never has the chance to wake up now."

"Only one problem with that, Lassoo…” Usopp swallowed heavily. "How the hell do we kill something that's already dead!?"

"Allow me to elucidate!"

I jerked out of my stupefaction as for once I was actually grateful to hear the Sound of Madness. "Chopper," I sighed in relief. "I take it you found Hogback's blueprints for his pièce de résistance?"

"Blueprints nothing, he outlined it perfectly before I could even touch him in an effort to save his own skin." Chopper snorted dismissively, donning a vicious leer. "Not that it did him much good. Eheheheeeeh…"

I allowed a single shiver to travel down my spine before refocusing. "Soooo I take it by the fact that you're calling us, you have a way to make this rotting husk double-dead?"
"Deader than even that. Doesn't matter how big or small the organism; if it suffers the fate I have outlined, not even the mightiest of Devil Fruits could revive it! It's genius genius GENIUS!"

I shot a glare at Soundbite, who leered tauntingly. "Don't look at me~!"

I gave a disgruntled huff and rolled my eyes before glancing skyward. "Aaaand I don't suppose that the method for bringing about this 'fate' of yours is easy and painless for us to complete?"

Chopper's mad ramblings promptly died, and there was a moment of silence before he started chuckling nervously in his own voice. "Eheheh... weeell..."

"Oh, dear..." Robin sighed, though the smile she was wearing told a whole different story.

"Just get it over with," I dragged my hand down my face with a groan.

"Oh, come on, Cross!" Conis piped up with her usual cheer. "We do this, however uncomfortable, and we're all good! How bad—!" Credit to Conis, her hand was clamped over her mouth by the time I turned around, and she even had the wherewithal to chuckle sheepishly as she removed it. "Ah... sorry, forgot for a second there. Doesn't count if you didn't say the whole thing?"

"Yeah, see, here's the thing about that..."

And so Chopper relayed his plan to us. It was a good plan, a detailed plan, a well-thought-out and logical plan... but there was just one problem with it.

A problem that led Conis and me to exchange sickly grimaces and speak the following words as one:

"This is going to suck..."

-0-

"Lightning Bolt Tempo!"

ZAP!

"Kill-stealer!" Boss barked out a laugh as the zombie he'd been about to pummel was suddenly blasted away by a bolt of lightning. "But eh, so long as you're here—" He shot a pumped-up thumbs-up at the shipbound team as they charged onto the battlefield. "Glad to have you!"

"Glad to be here, Boss," Nami snarled through a nearly bestial grin, her crackling and tempestuous halo sending many a zombie running, albeit without much luck.

"Boss, what's the status report so far?" Vivi asked, balancing on Carue's back with one hand while spinning a salt-crusted Lion Cutter in the other.

"Eh, the battle ebbs and flows." Boss glanced at the frontline with an analytical look. "We make pushes and knock 'em down, even manage to salt a few, but then they push back and grab the downed ones away and patch them up so that they can fight again. The main issue here is exhaustion, namely that we get it and they don't. We've been cycling well enough, but..." Boss trailed off for a second, blinking his eyes before pinching the bridge of his nose. "Anyway, yeah, we're, ah... starting to feel ten minutes of straight fighting hitting us... I mean sure, 'Nightmare Luffy' has been helping us hold the line..."

"But I'm not hearing that 'but' in your voice, am I?" Merry questioned despondently (or as despondently as a person could be when bashing one zombie over the skull with another).
"But…" Boss grit out as the blue behemoth leading their charge suddenly jerked to a stop and essentially disintegrated into a geyser of umbral anima. And a mere twenty seconds later, there was their captain, hunched forward on his knees. "It looks like our damn time using him is up, meaning that it's gonna be a slog from here on out." A sweatdrop hung from his shell as the zombies surged forward with a roar. "Soooo that's the bad news—!"

"BUT THERE IS GOOD NEWS!"

KRA-KOOM!

Without warning, the zombie-charge was suddenly blasted apart from the inside out, sending dozens of the undead sprawling and the rest reeling in shock.

"FOR WE!" Leo barked confidently, leading the TDWS in maintaining a group-pose. "ARE HERE!"

"HA!" Boss puffed his chest out as his students glared down the zombies around them. "Looks like I actually might have been speaking too soon! Nice work, boys!"

"Woohoo!" Carue pumped his wing victoriously. "Tidesh turn quick! Owah cavalwy has awwived!"

"What a coincidence…"

Spines froze all along the battlefront as a grim susurrus wafted through the air.

The Teenage Dugong Warrior Squad were particularly petrified, on account of how the voice came from a knight with a three-eyed mask and animalistic gauntlet-claws who'd somehow appeared directly in their midst.

"For you see," the knight hissed menacingly, "We, the General Zombies of Thriller Bark, have also arrived."

Acting fast, the TDWS tried to lash out at their ghastly assailant—

"GAH!"/ "GRK!"/ "ACK!"/ "SONNUVA—!"

And failed when said assailant's arms both split in half and bodily snatched them out of the air by their throats.

"Allow me," the cadaver rasped with a shuddering breath. "To introduce you!"

And with that ominous statement, the knight's torso suddenly spun around like a rotor, whipping the TDWS about like ragdolls and flinging them to separate parts of the battlefield before they could react.

Boss's eye twitched, and it had nothing to do with the renewed surge of heavily armed and even more heavily skilled zombies that was pushing back the Rolling Pirates. "So. I'll be taking four-arms and no-brains."

"Fine by me," Sanji huffed, waving his hand dismissively as he walked away, casually smacking down any zombies that tried to get in his way. "I'll go and find mosshead, dig him out of the flood of bodies he's no doubt going to bury his dumb green ass in."

"Let's see if Cross's advice about my thieving skills can be applied to my mass-pickpocketing routine…” Nami mused as she faded into thin air.
"Triage for me!" Merry cackled as she jogged away as fast as her minor limp allowed. "Time to play mad\textit{ doctor}!"

"Let them eat salt!" Vivi proclaimed with an imperious wave of her hand before smiling sheepishly at Carue. "How does that sound to you?"

"Eh…" Carue waved his wing with a wince. "Good, but aye can't help but feel shome senshe of forebowding fwom it."

"Bah, I'll work on it," Vivi waved her hand dismissively. "For now though, \textit{hiyah}!" And with a kick of her heels, she and her duck shot into the fray. Or at least, over it from the way Carue was kicking off the undead's heads.

Boss, meanwhile, stayed where he was, staring at the approaching three-eyed knight in silence before taking his cigar from his lips. "A few months back," he sighed, smoke whooshing from his muzzle. "I wouldn't have even given you the time of day for hurting my students. Buuut seeing as I'm now certain that they can handle themselves and nothing you clowns can throw at them will actually do jack shit…" He upgraded his dart's motion from pendulum-like swinging to full-blown rotation. "'Man of the Sea' Boss Dugong, Captain of the Straw Hat Pirates' ship guard. You?"

The knight snorted derisively. \\textit{The dead have no need for names.}"

His four arms split anew into an \textit{octet} of bladed limbs.

"Die with the title 'Jorōgumo' etched in your heart."

Boss' eyes fell into a deadpan glare. "Charming."

And with that, any further words were foregone in favor of leaping at one another with the utmost of fury.

-\text{-o-}\text{-}\n
"Hey, Conis," I grunted as I reaffirmed my grip. "You ever get asked, as a kid, what you wanted to be when you grew up?"

"On and off for several years, though not anytime recently," she responded offhandedly, more focused on her footing than me. "Not many on Angel Island wanted to give thought to the future once Eneru took over, and after that…" The angel nodded her head to the side with a shrug. "Well, I found my calling with this crew, so not much reason to think of anything else, you know?"

"Fair enough, fair enough…” I mused. "Me, I got asked that constantly. Go-to for school counselors and parents, really. The answer varied, over the years. At first there were the classic answers."

"Which, for your world, would be…” Conis trailed off expectantly.

"\textit{Firefighters and police officers, both due to the heroism, AND THE ODD CONSTRUCTION WORKER. COOL JOB, SEE.}"

"Ah, I see," Conis nodded in agreement. "Makes sense, I always thought the Cloud Workers looked cool myself."

"Yeah. There was actually a period where I was on an architect kick for a bit. Seemed easy enough, I liked geometry… then I learned how much art was involved and I dropped it like a hot potato. I draw like Luffy, see," I bit out, wiping the sweat from my brow.
"Naturally, naturally."

"Anyway…" I glanced downward before continuing. "After that, there was a bit of a wandering period, but right before I came here, I was actually studying to be an English Major."

That actually drew a blink of surprise from Conis. "Oh, you write?"

"Eh, not anymore. Not much point, ya know?"

"Er…?" she asked.

"Anyway," I pushed on. "The point I was trying to get at is that at no point did I ever envision myself a world-infamous/famous pirate, out having the wildest of adventures on the high seas—!"

"LOOK OUT above."

"—Sonnuva—!" I hastily whipped my gauntlet above my head.

SMASH!

And winced as a frozen bat shattered on my forearm before sending a glare into the darkness above. "And I sure as hell," I concluded. "Never saw myself rappelling down the gullet of a titan's frozen corpse so that I can preemptively kill its brain!"

Conis chuckled in dry amusement as she shifted her bazooka's footing on her back before giving herself more slack with which to keep descending the wall of frozen flesh. "Cross," she scoffed. "I think it's safe to assume that nobody has ever envisioned themselves in any of the situations we've been involved in in the history of ever."

"You mean besides every SUPER-OBSESSED FANBOY AND FANGIRL ever?" Soundbite interjected.


"On it, on it," I waved my mutt off. And with that, we resumed climbing down Oars' throat.

…I…suppose that whole bit deserves, if not outright requires, some context, doesn't it?

See, the primary issue with trying to harm Oars? It wasn't just his sheer size, it was the fact that he was literally built for not just combat, but all-out New World warfare. And apparently, that necessitated a hide that was not only several meters thick, but also as hard as a damn battleship. No wonder Zoro could barely cut the bastard, Mihawk himself would have… alright, he'd probably be able to chop Oars in half lengthwise without even looking up from his morning papers, but my point about Oars being thick in more ways than just his head still stands!

I'd told Chopper how we'd incapacitated the titan in the story, and he was extremely impressed with his original self's genius. But unfortunately, Oars' stupidly massive and quite literal dead weight and our lack of means meant that we couldn't exactly replicate the circumstances. Still, he was able to identify one viable weakness in the corpse's biological blueprint. Speaking of which…

"Hey Chopper!" I called mouthwards. "We're about… ah…"

"25, 30 feet down the throat from the mouth!" Conis offered.

"Yeah, that. We there yet?"
"Ahhh… lemme see, lemme see, what is that in inches, damn chart doesn't have a legend… ah, right! Alright, give it another five feet to be safe and then you should be good!"

"Do we really need to go this far down, Chopper?" I groaned even as I kept giving myself slack to descend. "I mean, we're already inside his throat, what does it matter how deep we go?"

"It matters because you need to be in precisely the exact spot to have a chance of hitting Oars' spinal column anytime soon!" Chopper explained with strained patience. "I don't know what Moria was expecting Oars to fight in the New World, but whatever it was, he had Hogback deck him out to hell and back. Even his throat is reinforced for several meters!"

"And you said he needed this to fight Kaido?" Conis swallowed heavily.

"And we're going up against him ourselves. Fun, no?" I responded dryly.

"What you're looking for is a form of sweet spot," Chopper continued. "An area of the esophagus after Hogback was given the go-ahead to stop reinforcing, but before the esophagus turns away from spine in favor of the stomach… er, command center… you get my point. Anyway, dig too soon and you'll hit reinforced muscle to match his epidermis. Too late, not exactly reinforced muscle, but still a lot of it."

"YEAH, because we wouldn't want ANY MORE TROUBLE THAN WE'VE ALREADY HAD…" Soundbite grumbled. "Like the zipline from hell wasn't fun enough."

"You do better with limited supplies, ass-biter!" Usopp snapped indignantly.

"Forgive me for not exactly having a steady grip on the free-hanging weight of two adults plus baggage," Robin concurred much more calmly, but also far more dryly.

"Thank you for not letting us plummet to our doom!" the four of us chorused with no small amount of desperation.

"A-Anyway, I'm fairly certain we're where you want us," Conis coughed uneasily, glancing… 'up', as it were, at the opposite wall of the cavernous flesh-tube we were in. "I suppose it looks softer than what we were going down before. So, I suppose now…?"

"We start digging," I huffed, hefting a fully gun Lassoo from my back and pointing him 'upwards'. "Congratulations are in order, Conis, we're about to perform the most roughshod and unique lobotomy in the history of medicine."

"I'LL ALERT the folks at GUINNESS."

"Forgive me if I don't exactly seem eager," Conis snorted in an unladylike manner, hefting her own bazooka before knocking her cannon's muzzle against my own. "Cheers, Cross."

"Right back at ya," I grit out as I braced myself. "Alright, firing in three, two—!"

"Cani-Blast!"

"Burn Bazooka!"

FWOOM!

Conis and I both sighed in relief as our guns blasted out twin pillars of flame that combined into an inferno. While the position was more than a bit awkward, at least the heat from the flames did
To alleviate the sub-zero temperatures.

Still, though…

"Chopper, how long do you think it'll take us to dig through?" I asked.

"Erm… well, seeing as there's still several meters of flesh between you and the bone? I IIIII'd get suggest you all get as comfortable as you can manage. Sorry?"

Conis and I both froze in place before we slooowly turned our heads to glance at one another. I then opened my mouth to say something.

"If you suggest I Spy in this place," she whispered solemnly. "I will punch your head from your scrawny shoulders."

"Wasn't gonna say nothin'!" I hedged hastily, glancing away with a whistle.

"Yeah, THE HELL YOU—!"

THWACK!

"YEOW!"

"Shut up, Soundbite," we chorused as one.

"Bastards."

-o-

"Tidal-Swim-Tidal-Swim-TIDAL SWIM DAMN IT A—oh, there we go," Leo blinked in honest surprise as he flipped himself over in midair and actually managed to kill his downward momentum. "Huh… so that's how it's done… surprisingly easy once you get used to it."

"GROAAAAAR!"

Leo blinked and glanced down to a veritable legion of zombies.

"Drawing attention to yourselves like that?" the dugong smirked, drawing his blades. "Tsk, tsk, not smart."

That briefly drew the zombies up short, each looking at each other in confusion. And that opening was enough for Leo to cut his Tidal Swim, dropping to the ground, his blades whirling out and finding the necks of two zombies. Both promptly collapsed like they'd been turned to jelly, shadows flying into the sky.

"Alright," Leo said as he straightened. "Who wants some?" Not waiting for an answer, he jabbed one of his swords at a random zombie. "You. You want some."

Before the poor zombie could in any way deny that it wanted any, Leo was up in his personal space, sword shooting up and through his throat.

That was enough for the rest of the zombies, who to a cadaver decided that discretion was, indeed, the better part of valor.

Or, to put it another way, they ran like children.
Leo, naturally, gave pursuit. Two fell to his blades just after they began to run, and with Rip Tide, the rest weren't going anywhere. The dugong was a blur of shell and steel, each strike unerringly finding a necrotized throat and carving it open. A few zombies, seeing that running was futile, tried to fight back. That was just as futile.

Finally, Leo swung his blades out only to find that he was standing alone on a field of unmoving corpses.

"Huh," he said, lowering one blade and holding the other up for inspection. "Nice. That salt paste of Chopper's is really holding up well. Now, what to do…"

Suddenly, Leo's head whipped around to a seemingly random spot of foliage. "I know you're there!" he called out. "Show yourself!"

The bushes rustled, and a corpse stumbled out. With bottle in hand, dressed in a tattered captain's coat and equally tattered striped pants, and stringy silver hair, he looked the perfect picture of a drunken bum, swords at his hip notwithstanding.

"…And here I was worried." Leo let his shoulders slump with a disappointed sigh. "And you even have swords… bah, screw it, might as well get this over with. Rip Tide." And with that, Leo blurred from sight.

CLANG!

Somehow, that did not end with a salted zombie, but instead Leo's blade getting quite casually knocked away.

"What the heck?!" Leo yelped, hastily recovering from the hit, only to blink in confusion as the zombie merely took another swig of its drink. "O…kay, let's try that again…"

So saying, Leo struck again, tightening his swing, and once again it was casually batted away, the zombie continuing to drink in spite of his liquor continuously draining out. The dugong narrowed his eyes, flippers tightening their grip on his hilts.

"Alright, then…"

Vanishing in another Rip Tide, this time Leo didn't just attack once. Both of his blades blurred in, and while they kept getting batted away, the zombie was staggering backward to keep up the defense. Different angles were tried: head strikes, body strikes from the side, thrusts. All were countered. All forced another step back.

And yet, the damn zombie just kept drinking!

"You drunken bastard… This is a fucking swordfight! A clash of blades and wills! And you clearly have skills, so stop screwing around and take! THIS! SERIOUSLY!" Leo roared, punctuating his final howl by slamming both blades into the zombie's guard. Said guard still stood firm, but the zombie was forced to inch back and was jolted so bad he spilled a splash of his booze on his shirt.

That… actually drew some emotion from the zombie. He paused, casting a sightless glance down at the stain before returning his attention to the bottle, swirling about the remaining booze at eye level.

Without missing a beat, the zombie took another pull of his drink, and then out of nowhere hurled the bottle at Leo with all the force his necrotized muscles could muster. The surprised dugong had the wits to cross his blades in a guard—
"GAH!" Leo flinched in shock and terror as the bottle suddenly exploded in midair for no apparent reason, spraying him with lead and glass and leaving him reeling. He tried to recover, to properly maintain his guard—!

THWACK!

"GUH!" But all he could do was grunt as the air was literally punted from his gut by the pirate, sending him rolling across the field of bodies.

Once Leo's momentum stopped, he flipped himself to his stomach and hung his head with a groan. "Sonnuva bitch, I need to get Shell Body down ASAP..." he wheezed.

"Yar har har... ye have me thanks, bucko..."

Leo snapped his head up, and beheld the fact that his opponent's entire demeanor had pulled a complete 180. Where one moment had stood a lazy and slouched drunkard, there was now an actual pirate, holding his head high with a confident leer and wielding a cutlass in one hand and a smoking pistol in the other.

"Yer harsh tone and yer impressive skills with the blade have served ta finally rouse me from this accursed stupor of mine," the zombie chuckled menacingly. "Finally, for the first time since I woke anew, I actually feel alive! And it's with this very feeling!"

The zombie snapped his blade up and jabbed the tip at Leo.

"That I intend ta send yer shelled arse straight ta Davy Jones Locker!" he roared eagerly. "Prepare yerself, enemy-mine, for ye face the age-old scourge of the six seas, the most infamous lord o' piracy in all o' Paradise's history! Aye, I be he! The one, the only, Captain 'Long' John 'Silvertooth'! YAR HAR HAR!"

Leo stared at the pirate in awe, his mouth agape, until he realized that something didn't quite add up. "Uhhh...?" he trailed off uncomfortably as he gestured at his own teeth.

"ME CORPSE WAS DESECRATED BY THE SALTY DOGS I CALLED A CREW, YE IDJIT!" John roared indignantly. "TRUST ME, WAY BACK WHEN, I HAD TEETH O' SILVER, AND EVERYONE IN THESE WATERS FEARED THEM AS THOUGH THEY BELONGED TO Davy Jones Himself!"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever you say..." Leo pulled himself to his tail, swords at the ready, before slowly donning a smirk. "'Gramps'."

John stilled, his expression sinking into one of murderous rage. "Allow me to educate ye, ye salty cur," he growled. "About how a true pirate FIGHTS!"

And in a blur of movement, the clash was on.

-0-

CRASH!

"Eurgh... Tidal Swim's cool and all, but now I need to figure out how to get rid of the damn cramp..." Mikey groaned, working himself out of the ground. "'Course, I already know how Boss is gonna suggest I do it: Tail-lifts, and a lot of them. That's gonna suck..."
Neither his expression nor his position changed as he drew one of his pistols and fired it to his left, right into the belly of a zombie that'd been reaching for him. His other flipper snapped out one of his nunchucks and effectively knee-capped another undead assailant that had been winding up to stamp on his head.

"Because I."

He flung out his nunchucks to his other side, neatly bisecting a zombie in a cloud of dust and sending both halves flying.

"Hate!"

Charging straight at a line of zombies trying to rush him, he swung his nunchucks like they were made of air, six blows sending six zombies flying, embalming fluid flying.

"TAIL-LIFTS!"

The last zombie in the line tried to run. All that meant was that he was hit in his back instead of chest; he still went flying.

Heaving out a deep sigh, Mikey holstered his pistol and relaxed a bit. "Whoo, I feel better now. If this is why Raphey hits things when she gets mad, I can see why!"

"Ya-ha!"

Mikey frowned and looked up at the strange cry. Up above was a zombie, but not just any zombie. This one had large, bat-like wings stretched over its arms, which were presumably how it was circling overhead.

"Kekekeke! I see you down there, little dugong!" Hildon cackled, continuing to circle. "Soon, I shall return with an army of zombies!"

"Yeeaaah, about that," Mikey slowly drawled, unable to hide the grin that stretched across his face as he realized that the throbbing in a certain area had gone down. "Tidal Swim."

With two powerful kicks of his tail, the dugong shot up into the air, pistol coming out to take a shot at the zombie's mouth once he matched altitude. He never got the chance; Hildon yelped and turned around the second Mikey launched the first Tidal Swim, fleeing for his un-life.

"Hey, get back here!" Mikey snapped, pushing off the air after the zombie. What ensued was one of the more bizarre chase scenes ever: a zombie in a bat costume that somehow allowed him to fly being chased by a manatee-sea turtle hybrid jumping off the air. Of course, as focused as Mikey was on the chase even he couldn't miss that they were heading for the central mansion of Thriller Bark. Any thoughts of cutting off the chase, though, were dashed when Hildon dove for the ground.

"Gotcha!" Mikey shouted, following in a dive of his own.

Both fighters promptly bounced off the ground and into the brush, one after another. As Mikey did so, he grabbed his nunchucks and reared them back, ready for whatever counterattack was coming.

Oh, wait, that's a lie. He certainly wasn't ready for Hildon to jam a machine gun in his face, though any claims that he screamed like a little girl were also lies.
"Rip-Tide-Rip-Tide-Rip-Tide!" Mikey yelped, flinging himself back just as the zombie pulled the trigger. The bullets passed harmlessly to the side of the dugong as he skidded into the nearest clearing, glaring daggers at Hildon as he stepped out of the bush. He would have launched himself at the zombie, but a rustling from the shrubbery caught his attention.

Out of the corner of his eye, Mikey watched as the largest man he'd seen that wasn't a giant stepped out of the foliage. Maybe not as tall as the Franky Family's big shipwreckers, but not far behind, and as wide as he was tall. Despite the rolls of fat, Mikey could make out powerful muscles underneath, an observation helped by some literal holes down to the musculature. And wonder of wonders, this one actually had an expression, albeit one of dopey happiness.

"What took ya so long, damn fatty?" Hildon groused. "And where's the rest of ya?"

"Sorry, Hildon," the big zombie sheepishly apologized. "We got a bit lost."

"Umf!"

That would be another zombie walking up beside the big one and pumping its fist, this one shorter but just as round, with a bright red nose that somehow hadn't decayed at all.

In fact, to Mikey's dismay, more zombies were practically crawling out of the woodwork. Off to his other side was another trio, much smaller and skinnier than the ones to his left. One was hanging upside down from a tree like a monkey, a piece of tape holding its nose together. Another had a forehead that seemed almost too long to be real and gave off a palpable aura of patheticness. And finally, one taller zombie busily tying its thin hair back in a ponytail… and it then kicked up one of its legs near vertical once it was done.

"Ahahahaha!"

Behind came more rustling, and Mikey chanced a look back. These three were near indistinguishable, aside from hairstyle: one blond crewcut, one black mullet, and some… blond… starfish thing. The goggles were a better distinguishing mark, anyway.

"Huh?"

"Huh?!!"

"HUH?!!"

And then finally, one more appeared in front of Hildon in a burst of speed, this one wearing a strange helmet with a grid-like guard over the mouth and a reflective visor. More importantly, the dugong had only barely caught its arrival.

"Ya-ha! Everyone's finally here!" Hildon declared, raising his machinegun high. "You know what to say, boys!"

"WE'LL KILL 'IM!" all the gathered zombies roared.

"DAMN STRAIGHT!" Hildon concurred, blasting a round of bullets into the air.

"Great…" Mikey groaned as he readied his 'chuks, spinning them in anticipation for a fight. "Why do I get the feeling that the others are having an easier time of things?!"
"Nooooriiiii... Arts!" Raphey flipped herself around in midair and managed to stick a beautiful touchdown of a landing, her grin positively massive as she held her arms above her head. "Hahaha! 'Dodging is useless' my tail! I'm going to rub this so hard in those morons' faces! ...when I find them again, at any rate."

"CARVE 'ER UP! TURTLE SOUP, À LA CARTE!"

Raphey snapped around at the sound of the bellow and caught sight of a tattered butcher's outfit and a massive cleaver heading for her suddenly raised sai.

**CLANG!**

She gritted her teeth at the force that slammed between the main blade and one of the side blades, but she managed to maintain her stance before placing both flippers on the sai, and twisting it—

**CHINK!**

Snapping the massive cleaver down the middle. The butcher gaped comically at his broken blade for a couple of seconds. Then, with even more force, he slammed a foot into her belly - and blinked in confusion when it did jack all.

"Vad?" he questioned in an unintelligible language.

"I'm a girl with three brothers," Raphey smirked confidently. "Those three know Shell Body. Me? I'm good with it."

"Not so good with peripheral vision though, huh?"

"Wha—?" Raphey turned her head in confusion, and promptly widened her eyes in shock as she watched a huge zombie with an even huger club lifelessly collapse to reveal her savior: a woman with pink hair and... a great personality, wielding a pair of katana. "Ah... yeah..." Raphey chuckled sheepishly, even as she stabbed her sais into the butcher's leg and flipped him onto the ground, shoving a wad of salt down his throat. "Even with 'good' Shell Body, that would have been... bad. Thanks a lot... uh...?"

"Lola!" the woman greeted amicably, even as she offhandedly decapitated a zombie that tried to jump her. "'Marriage Proposal' Lola, captain of the Rolling Pirates and really grateful for you Straw Hats helping us!"

"Raphey, 'Disciple of the Sea' and Straw Hat ship's guard!" Raphey greeted back with a smile as she crushed a zombie's knee. "Really nice to meet you, and may I say? I love your make-up. Brings out your eyes!"

Lola gasped and smiled eagerly as she removed the arms from a tree-like revenant. "Why, thank you! And personally, I find that your headband really compliments your shell. Just my opinion."

"What, this old thing?" Raphey waved her off with one flipper while holding a struggling zombie at flipper's length with the other. "I've had it for years! Appreciate the compliment!"

"Oh, no trouble, no trouble... oh, hey, real quick!" Lola asked eagerly. "Are you busy right now, by any chance. I mean, besides..." She gestured at the newly dead bodies at her feet.

"No no, not really," Raphey shrugged dismissively as she wiped some embalming fluid from her sais. "My bros can handle themselves, no sweat. Whaddaya need?"
"Eh…" Lola scratched the back of her head uncomfortably. "I've been trying to find my zombie in all this mess, but I haven't been having any luck! My crewmates are all looking for their own and I don't wanna distract them, so I was hoping…?"

"Sure thing!" Raphey popped her an eager thumbs up. "So, what does your deader-half look like?"

"ME."

The two females looked to the source of the voice, which turned out to be—

…No, even the narrators aren't willing to touch this. 'Giant, bipedal, pink warthog in a wedding dress with two swords' is all you're getting for the zombie leader of the mob of beast zombies that emerged to challenge Lola and Raphey.

"AT THIS POINT, I COULDN'T CARE LESS WHO YOU ARE," the zombie-Lola breathed murderously. "YOU ALLIED WITH THE ONES WHO DEFEATED MY PRECIOUS ABSALOM, AND PUT HIM OUT OF MY REACH!"

Lola nervously tensed and untensed her grip on her blades as she turned to face her counterpart. "And you really think that you can take on both of us at once?"

Zombie Lola—Zola, for brevity's sake—snorted darkly, brandishing. "Good point." She glanced over her shoulder at the crowd of animalian zombies. "HIPPO!"

"Front and center, ma'am!" a sharply dressed hippo barked, jogging towards with his shield over his chest as he raised his sword in salute. "An honor to serve with you, General! To strike down the curs who dare to invade our noble home!"

"'Noble' nothing, you half-cooked leatherneck," Raphey growled, scraping her sais together in anticipation. "We're taking each and every last one of you freaks down. En-fucking-garde!"

And so the quartet fell into battle ready positions, glaring daggers at one another as they waited for someone, anyone to snap the tension and kick things off.

Finally, Raphey slumped forward with a defeated sigh. "…actually, on second thought? I know I can't be the first one to say it, so I'm gonna be upfront here and get it off my chest: Lipstick on a pig."

The effect was instantaneous: the entire surrounding battlefield froze, all the zombies staring at the Dugong in shock. And then all of them, save for Zola and Gallant Hippo, ran off screaming in mortal terror.

Hell, even Hippo looked to be seconds away from doing just that, inching away from his partner-in-zombiehood with a terrified expression. "Now you've gone and done it…" he whimpered.

"Eh?" Raphey blinked in confusion. "What, what's wrong? Why are you all acting so—?"

"Yooooou…"

"Erk!" Raphey and Lola both recoiled in shock, the reason being the utterly evil aura that was radiating from Zola.

"YOOOOO BASTAAAAARDS…" the hog-zombie rumbled, her teeth grinding and her tusks glinting with menace. This was accompanied by a glare at the two, her eyes all but literally glowing with bloody murder. "I DON'T EVEN CARE IF I DIE FROM IT, I'LL KILL YOU AAAAAALL!" And with that final roar she charged the pair with all the power and rage of a
runaway Sea Train.

"GAH!" Hippo yelped in shock, hastily running after her. "Zo—! I-I mean Lo—! I mean—! WAIT!"

Raphey swallowed heavily as she steeled herself, the skin on her flippers slowly turning white around her grip on her sais. "Ready to face yourself?" she asked her partner.

Lola barked out a laugh even as her own knuckles turned white on her blades. "When is anyone? There's only one answer to that question!"

SKRANG!

Lola grinned eagerly as she locked blades with her knockoff, the pair butting heads and neither giving ground.

"TRY IT!" she yelled at the top of her lungs. "AND FIND OUT!"

-o-

"Note to self…" Donny rubbed his head's shell with a groan as he shoved his way back onto his tail. "After I get Tidal Swim down pat, start training with Robin to deal with opponents who have more than… two… arms…" Donny trailed off slowly before slapping his flipper to his face with a renewed sigh. "And suddenly that is a threat that is valid in my life. Unbe-freaking-lievable, one day my usual opponents are other dugongs, and now it's like I'm living in a dream!"

"Might wanna make that a nightmare, pintsize," one of the zombies surrounding the dugong leered smugly, pounding his fist as he approached. "Now, enough with the small talk, let's get to the part where we pound your sku—URK!" The zombie cut himself off in a fit of gagging, on account of the end of Donny's bo-staff lodging itself in his throat, and then failed to say anything further due to his own shadow blocking his throat.

"Theeeen again..." Donny slowly let an eager grin spread across his face. "I suppose that dreams are meant to be enjoyed!" And with that, he ripped his staff out of the zombie's throat and spun it into a ready-position. "Bring it on, you rotting, husk-brained bastards! I can kick your decrepit behinds blindfolded!"

The crowd of zombies all snarled and growled viciously at the blatant challenge. "You little—! COME ON, GUYS!" one of them raised his voice to rally the rest. "There's one of him and an army of us! And the best of our best are on their way too! LET'S BEAT HIS SHELL INTO THE DAMN GROUND!"

Donny's eyes narrowed in concentration as the zombies began to charge him, already positioning his staff to prepare for his newly revamped and rebranded Arrows of St. George, taking aim at the frontmost zombies and tensing his lower body for the following movements—

"HAH HAH HAH HAH HAH! NOW, WAIT JUST A MOMENT!"

All of the zombies promptly paused, the expressions on their rotting faces, one and all, screaming sheer terror. Which, given the fact that Donny did not know the voice in question, made him nervous in turn.

"So, little dugong!" the voice laughed over the din of fighting. "You think you can just waddle on down here, with your fancy stick-a-ma-jig, and whack all your enemies into oblivion and then be home in time for soaps and cigars, eh?"
"Uh… I don't smoke—?" Donny began awkwardly.

"WRONG! The battlefield is a very, very violent and deadly place, rife with danger! LEMME SHOW YA SOMETHIN'!"

"RUN!" screamed several of the zombies, separating like the Red Sea before scattering everywhere that wasn't close to Donny. All save for one. He was of average height for a full-grown man, his lips were pulled back in a way that perpetually showed the rotted top row of his teeth, and where his left eye was squinting, his right was wide open… or more likely, lidless. His skin was blackened in places, clearly from burns, and his outfit was a tattered cross between a business suit and a fireman's uniform, with a husk of a helmet hanging on his head and a fireman's ax on his back.

No, wait, in. Donny realized with no small amount of horror that the ax was lodged in the zombie's back, the blade buried right beside his spinal column.

"SO!" the zombie bellowed, strutting forward in an exaggerated saunter. "You're waddlin' along, swingin' your stickie-ma-bob to and fro, not a care in the world as ya slap the shadows outta zombies here and there, WHEN SUDDENLY!" he yelled at the top of his lungs as he came to a stop a few feet before the dugong, jabbing his finger at him. Though the effect was somewhat ruined by him taking a lighter out of his pocket and flicking it open, producing a flame on top. "Ya come upon a simple general zombie takin' a break, breakin' out the ole zippo to have himself a smoke on the ole' puff-puff! You're going to smack him silly too, easy as peaches… when suddenly someone yells 'Look!'" He pointed to the side. "There's Big Mom doin' cartwheels!"

Donny actually briefly followed the finger in confusion before returning his attention to the deranged deceased as he kept talking.

"However! As ya turn ta watch, your stickie-con-carne smacks inta the zombie's hand and WHAPPA!" The zombie actually slapped his own hand into the underside of his fist, sending the lighter flying high into the air. "The zippo's zipped off! But!" The zombie's overbite-ridden grin widened as he popped a finger. "What ya don't know is, that that zombie whose smokes ya just smacked…"

The zombie flung his arms wide. "Was embalmed using lighter fluiiiid!"

The blood fled Donny's face as he heard that little tidbit. "Wait… y-you don't mean—!"

At almost that exact moment, the lighter chose that moment to land. Fortunately, it didn't hit the zombie but rather the ground in front of him.

…un-fortunately, it somehow managed to bounce off said ground and shoot down the zombie's gaping mouth. With an audible GULP! No less.

Both Donny and the Zombie were paralyzed for a moment until the zombie cocked his head to the side. "UH-OH!"

"SHIT!" Donny cursed furiously, diving away in panic.

KA-BOOM!

It was at moments like these that the smartest of the TDWS seriously regretted evolution deciding to steal his species' capacity to retreat into their shells, because the feeling of flames licking off his tail was way too close a call for his comfort.

Once he landed, Donny took a moment to pant and catch his breath. And for that moment, he
allowed himself to dare to hope that maybe, just maybe that crazy-ass zombie had been dumb enough to blow himself to kingdom come.

The second that moment passed, however?

" HAH HAH HAH HAH HAH HAH!"

It was violently shattered.

With horror and terror coursing through his veins, Donny flipped himself to his tail and turned around to behold the flaming husk of a corpse that was slowly but surely shambling towards him, cackling madly all the while.

"As you can see!" the psychotic revenant's voice barked with undeserved authority. "The battlefield is a very dangerous environment! But worry not!" He struck a confident pose, his fist placed firmly over where his heart was, or would have been, if it weren't probably already charcoal. "I, Fire Zombie Bill, shall be the one to show you to safety!"

The zombie's ashen smile widened clean across his face as he reached over his shoulder and grasped the handle of the ax buried in him.

" LEMME SHOW YA SOMETHING!"

And with that, the zombie wrenched—!

CRACK!

The ax came free, and Donny promptly gagged in horror.

Fire Zombie Bill blinked at the disembodied ribcage hanging from his weapon. "Whoops! Need that!" That said, he shoved his ax back over his shoulder and jiggled it around a bit before removing it again, this time sans the extra calcium. "There we go!" Upon noticing Donny's panicked expression, he tilted his head to the side, in a gesture that was probably meant to be comforting but came off more like a predator observing its prey. "Take a chill pill, wouldja? When I was alive, I was many things: a detective, a supervillain, and even a count! But most important of all?"

Bill's grin extended to downright demented levels.

"I WAS... AND STILL AM... A FIRE MARSHAL! HAH HAH HAH HAH HAH HAH!"

Xomniae AN: Eeeeyup. That's right, people. TPO brought it up and we ran with it. We. Went. There. Bow before us!
Cross-Brain AN: Ladies and gentlemen, as we have stated several times in the past, we of the Cross-Brain have busy schedules. As a result of that, we find ourselves unable to put down certain events in the story in favor of progressing the plot line. So...we decided to ask for help from some of our most talented fans, whose works you may have seen in our Omake Collection posted under Superego’s profile.

The following two stories are the result of the selfless dedication of user TheRealEvanSG. Consider these less like omakes, and more like mini-arcs; they are 100% canon. We hope you enjoy, and we are extremely grateful to Evan for bringing them to life.

Omake: The Battle of Kinpaku Island

By TheRealEvanSG

Some two months ago, had Lieutenant Tashigi of the Marines been asked what her weirdest Transponder Snail call had composed of, she would've probably answered something along the lines of, "That one call with the monkey chorus and Garp trying to be a composer in the background."

Now, that list had grown considerably longer. However, that didn't necessarily mean choosing weird Transponder Snail calls had gotten any harder. No, if anything, it had just gotten much, much easier, especially at noon a good two weeks after the Straw Hats had waged war upon Enies Lobby.

The day had started out innocently enough. After she'd retrieved Shigure from a pissed Smoker and tired of throwing many darts into a certain blond's new picture, tacked to her wall, she had finished getting ready for the day and gone out to eat breakfast with the rest of the crew. Then she had trained with her sword some more in a secluded part of the ship, running through the various katas that had been ingrained within her mind from the moment she'd begun swordsmanship. Nobody bothered asking her afterward why pieces of a picture, which appeared to have previously been pinned to a training dummy, were strewn about the floor.

She had been in the middle of a very important discussion with Captain Hina when the Transponder Snail rang.

"Look, Hina," Tashigi sighed wearily, "all I'm saying is that ship metal expenses would be lessened considerably if you would form some cages that we could melt down."

"And as Hina keeps reminding you," the pink-haired woman said stubbornly, shifting through piles of paperwork from the aftermath of Enies Lobby, "it is not Hina's duty to be a human steel quarry."

"But we could pour much more time and money into renewing our troops' training if we didn't have to—"


Both Tashigi and Hina jumped and swiveled around as a certain special Transponder Snail picked up a signal, looking bored out of its mind. The two women turned slowly back to each other, surprise evident in both of their countenances. Hina's eyebrows had shot up, and Tashigi's mouth had involuntarily begun to form an o. For a moment, neither of them moved to pick up the receiver.

"Ophiuchus never said anything about a group call coming today, did he?" Tashigi asked, frowning in thought.
Hina shook her head. "Hina does not recall. It may be someone calling us back about joining, however."

"Puru puru puru puru — ka-lick."

"Kaku of CP9," said the now-familiar voice of Zoro's opponent from the absolute chaos that had recently transpired. "We were told to call this number for work by Cross. I doubt I need to explain who Cross is at this point."

Tashigi and Hina sat staring, dumbfounded, at the snail.

"...Capricorn should be more surprised by this," muttered the pink-haired rebel, "but somehow Capricorn just can't bring herself to be."

"I'm beginning to know the feeling myself..." Tashigi deadpanned. She rose her voice and looked down at the snail. "This is Pisces, with Capricorn listening. So, Kaku, I assume the rest of CP9 is there with you as well?"

"Indeed," came her answer from the other side of the snail. "Blueno, Kalifa, Fukuro, Kumadori, and Jabra are all listening beside me. Lucci is still getting treated for his injuries in his hospital room. We need work to be able to survive, but as Cross predicted, we have been unable to find anyone willing to take us in now that the World Government has... for lack of a better term, 'burned' us. Cross claimed we would be able to find work with you, however. Who exactly are you all?"

Feeling the beginnings of a headache throbbing at the front of her skull, she rubbed her forehead tiredly. "You can think of us as... acquaintances of the Straw Hat Pirates. For safety reasons, we cannot reveal our true identities to you unless you swear your loyalty to our cause."

"Which would be...?"

"Rebuilding the Marines into a force of actual justice and ensuring proper peace for the world as we know it."

Silence reigned on the other end for several moments. At last, Kaku's dry voice came over the receiver.

"I really should've expected this from the Straw Hats by now, shouldn't I have?" groaned Kaku, and Tashigi and Hina could only exchange knowing winces. The ex-assassin's voice grew more distant, as if he had moved away from the receiver, as he said, "Do we all accept this?"

"I'm willing to join," drawled Kalifa, "as long as there's no sexual harassment."

"Any work is good work at this point," grunted Jabra.

"I suppose we never were meant to have peaceful lives," deadpanned Blueno. "I'm in."

Kumadori sniffed. "I'm running out of hair-softening conditioner," he whined. "I'll join as long as I can keep my hair like this."

"Then we're all in agreement except Lucci, who can eat a bag of catnip for all I care at this point," Kaku grunted. "We're in."

"Very well. Where exactly are you?"

"Several islands down from the Sea Train's Blue Station, a Fall Island called Kinpaku Island. We're
"recuperating in Hallow's Bar and Grille."

Tashigi’s eyebrows rose. "That's actually not too far from where we are now. In fact, Capricorn, what island is our Log Pose pointing to?"

Hina glanced at one of said instrument that was currently strapped to her wrist, and then rummaged through the drawers of the desk and withdrew a map. She examined it for a few moments, comparing it with the direction of the Log Pose, and at last relayed, "It appears that Kinpaku Island is next in line for us. It seems like we shall arrive within the next couple of days."

"That... works out surprisingly well. Kaku, we will save our introductions for when we meet you all in person. Sit tight for a while and wait, alright? We'll introduce ourselves as Pisces, Cancer, and Scorpio, who is another of our friends. That's how you'll know it's us."

"Sounds fine to us," Kaku said, the Transponder Snail nodding its head. "We have to wait for Lucci to heal up some more anyway; Doctor's orders says he still can't move."

"Very well, then. We'll meet up in about two days. Good-bye."

"Sayonara." KA-LICK!

The cabin was so soundless a pin drop would've seemed like an elephant's stomp. Tashigi and Hina stared at the Transponder Snail through which they had just signed off on the newest piece of insanity in their lives. When she could at last stand the silence no longer, Tashigi groaned and leaned back in her chair.

"Did we actually just include CP9 in our group?"

Hina's expression was completely flat. "Hina blames it all on you."

"..."

The mooks of the ship didn't bother questioning why the sound of a certain lieutenant's head repeatedly slamming against a wall suddenly started echoing throughout the ship. At this point, it had become such a frequent occurrence that they didn't even have to stock up on Aspirin anymore.

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Hallow's Bar and Grille was not a usual confluence, a word which here means 'a place at which two vastly freaking different parties come together to intensify the world's insanity.' It was a quaint enough bar, built mostly of spruce and stone, with a sharp, v-shaped roof and a stone floor that was often freezing in the mornings. It had been built to resemble times before the average house sported entirely carpeted floors, and before the average restaurant sported comfortable seating. It was, in actuality, more of a bed and breakfast than a bar, although they certainly had a bar at which they served booze, sake, and other various alcohols from all across the Blue Seas and Grand Line. However, the bedrooms offered little more comfort than the seating and the floor, which was likely why despite it being one of two bars on the island, it was often empty except for the old, grizzled bartender.

This was also, however, why it served as the perfect confluence of two vastly freaking different parties for the first time in its career.

Seated at a wooden booth in the far right corner, CP9 (minus Lucci) huddled over cups of the finest sake that Hallow's offered.
"Today's the day that Pisces said they'd be arriving," Blueno said, swirling his sake nervously. "What do you think they're like?"

"Sexual harassers," offered Kalifa flatly.

Jabra snorted. "Is that your answer to everything?"

"Yes. Are you really just realizing that now?"

"...Withdrawn."

"Whoever they are," said Kaku, "I just hope they don't turn us down after all. They still have time, and they might not be as forgiving as the Straw Hats. Our wallets are so empty now we honestly need to do anything we can... Although preferably, if we could use our current skillset, it would be best, of course."

"Agreed." Kumadori nodded, his pink hair waving about the table like thousands of little snakes. It had always creeped out Kaku, but he didn't say anything about it, and instead took a somewhat disturbed sip of his sake.

"Well, then," said a voice that CP9 (minus Lucci) had only heard once before, "that's perfect. Because we happen to have several openings for those willing to do dirty work without a second thought."

CP9 (minus Lucci) swiveled around in their chairs quickly. Jabra moved so fast he almost doused himself in his drink, and he cursed under his breath. When the ex-agents realized who exactly it was standing in front of them, they at first couldn't quite believe their eyes.

"I am Pisces," said Lieutenant Tashigi with an unreadable expression. She motioned to two very familiar people standing beside her - - 'White Hunter' Smoker and 'Ship-Cutter' T-Bone. "These are Cancer and Scorpio. Your new boss will be Scorpio himself, who will be receiving advice from another acquaintance of ours, Aquarius, though she couldn't make it here today due to... complicated matters. She will be helping you, Kalifa, develop your powers, due to the similarities of your Devil Fruits."

"But you... you're Marines," Jabra choked, his wolf eyes widening. "Even I can't create a lie this bad."

"And that's saying something," Kaku muttered.

"Shut up, giraffe!"

"I assure you this is no lie," Tashigi said solemnly. The young woman's eyes were solemn and full of regret. "We do not feel as though justice is being truly served and wish to fix this."

"So, what?" asked Blueno, tilting his head suspiciously. "You all just went vigilante?"

"In a manner of speaking. " T-Bone rubbed his chin. "I suppose that's the most accurate description for us. As I'm sure Pisces mentioned to you, we're an organization affiliated with the Straw Hats, created for the purpose of bringing true justice to the world. However, as we are too heavily tied with the Marines, if we tried to start pulling strings, we would risk being found out and thrown in Impel Down to rot."

Kalifa narrowed her eyes. "And that's where we come in."
"That's right," agreed Smoker, who put two cigars in his mouth and started puffing at them carelessly. "You, who have been completely thrown into the trash by the Marines, have no connections, which is crucial to our plans. Add to that your superb skills as assassins, and it's quite obvious how useful you'd be to us. We would be willing to pay quite handsomely for your services, of course." He blinked. "I never thought I'd be saying those words to assassins..." he said under his breath, only loud enough for Tashigi and T-Bone to hear.

For a few seconds, CP9 (minus Lucci) glanced at themselves, discussing it with just their eyes. They had undergone so many fragile missions together that doing so had become a necessary skill.

"Very well," agreed Kaku. "We'll do your dirty work for you in exchange for reliable sleeping quarters and pay."


"If you'd like, we already have a list of things we need you to do here," Smoker said, withdrawing a folded piece of paper from his white coat. He laid it on the table in the middle of CP9 (minus Lucci) and smoothed it out for them. Kaku quickly picked it up, skimmed over its contents, and failed to hold back a breath of surprise. He then handed it to a curious Kumadori, whose actions were much the same.

"Are you sure about this?" Kaku asked the vigilantes, his eyes wide.

Tashigi nodded solemnly. "You all are the only ones suitable for the job."

"Well, well," Kumadori said, impressed, as he passed the paper to Blueno, "Cross was right after all. It really is like we've hardly left our old job."

"There's just one catch, chapa," Fukuro said, and everyone looked at him, surprised. "We haven't gotten the chance to tell Lucci about all of this yet... and I don't know if he'd like this, chapa."

Tashigi and Smoker exchanged glances, though the agents couldn't quite tell the emotion behind them. However, a second later, T-Bone bowed his head and placed his hand on the sword which hung sheathed at his waist. "Allow me to handle that, if I may," he said, his face tense. "I'm afraid I acted in an unforgivable manner during the unfortunate Enies Lobby affair, and I would like to make this up to Cross and to myself by convincing Lucci to join us."

Even Smoker couldn't hide his surprise at this information. "Really? How do you plan to convince someone as... unpredictable as Lucci, Scorpio?"

"If there's one thing I learned on this fantastic, terrible sea, it's that money is not the greatest persuasion — the sword is."

All of CP9's (minus Lucci's) jaws dropped, as did the other two rebellious Marines'.

"What!?" sputtered Tashigi in disbelief. "You can't be serious! Even Luffy, one of the strongest people this half of the Grand Line, was brought almost to the brink of death by fighting him! You can't possibly expect to —"

"I've been training," growled T-Bone in response, "nearly every second since I joined you, and I redoubled that training after my fight with that dugong. If I haven't improved at least this much, then I don't deserve to be a part of this Zodiac, much less to kill Vergo."

"He's a Zoa," warned Jabra, "and take it from a fellow Zoa: we can take a lot of abuse. If you're
"really going to try this, do not attempt to outlast him."

T-Bone's sharp gaze brought recent memories of steel-willed pirates to mind. "We shall see," he intoned gravelly.

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"Why... won't... you... just... FALL!?" snarled a bloody, exhausted Lucci, swaying on his feet.

Ten feet ahead, an even bloodier and more exhausted T-Bone shook on his own feet. Sheer willpower was the only thing keeping him standing; every bone, muscle, and inch of his body screamed in agony. "I could say... the same to you..." rasped the vice-captain, his voice like that of the dead.

Every spot of ground in a seven-foot radius from the fighters was stained red with blood, peppered with stray Finger Pistol holes like Swiss cheese, and otherwise appeared as though seven World Wars had been waged simultaneously over it.

Three days after the monumental conversation, Lucci finally woke up from his injuries, and was declared healed enough to be dismissed from the hospital. The Zodiac of the Divine paid for his bills, and met with him outside the hospital doors. At this point, they'd told him everything that they'd told the rest of CP9. Lucci had accepted T-Bone's challenge, sure it was going to be an easy win, and they'd chosen the highest hilltop on the island to fight at...

It was too bad for him that Cross's Murphy's Law seminar hadn't yet aired.

Staggering across the bloodied ground in his leopard form like a zombie, Lucci bent his knees and powered into the sky with Moon Walk. Combining it with Shave, he dashed through midair behind T-Bone, roared in pure frustration, and put every ounce of his strength into a Six King Gun. The compressed air shot towards T-Bone with impressive speed, but before it hit him, the Marine turned on a dime and slashed the attack apart.

"This shouldn't be this hard!" howled Lucci, and not even bothering to waste the precious air he had left, he immediately combined Moon Walk with Tempest Kick to create a hailstorm of cutting attacks. The flashes of blue tore through the air, but they did not apparently have sufficient velocity. T-Bone's eyes flicked to each one as he threw powerful slashes of his sword at them, dissipating each one. The movements of his arm were so fast that Lucci's eyes couldn't even follow them.

"Damn it!" the leopard-man snarled, and he kicked off the air at an angle. He flashed into view at T-Bone's side, stabbing rapidly with his finger, and managed to actually get the hits in. Ten, twenty, thirty Finger Pistols slammed into T-Bone's pale skin, bloody and cold, in the space of only four seconds. The force of the brutal attack invoked a heavy dose of Newton's First Law, and T-Bone didn't hit the ground until he was more than fifty feet away. Even then, he bounced hard and rolled several more feet, before finally losing momentum.

Lucci stood, panting, glaring down at the lying form so far away from him.

"Have you finally had enough, T-Bone!?" he said, his eyes narrowed.

The question hung in the breeze, the wind whistling across the hilltop being the only sound save for Lucci's extremely heavy, ragged breathing. Despite the fact that his senses increased fivefold in leopard form, he could not hear anything from T-Bone. Lucci drew in deep, precious breaths. Was the man dead? Had his body finally been pushed past the brink?

There was only one fight in Lucci's entire life that had been quite as tough as this one, and even then,
it nearly surpassed it. The proud opponent to claim that fight was one Monkey D. Luffy, whose strength was simply undeniable. The toughness from that fight had been trying to overpower Luffy, however. Lucci was quite sure if that had come to a battle of endurance, Luffy would've fallen. But that wasn't the case with T-Bone. Two full days and almost two full nights - - that was how long they'd been locked in combat.

Twenty Six King Guns. Two hundred and fifty Tempest Kicks. Four hundred Finger Pistols. No food, no water, and no sleep. All of this had T-Bone endured so far, and it was only this last attack that had finally brought him to his knees. The man had simply refused to give up. Lucci couldn't help but feel a rising amount of respect for him. It was really too bad that T-Bone was now dead - - the ex-CP9 agent would've liked to share a drink with the man who had given him the battle of an eon.

Lucci turned around, making to set off down the hillside and preferably fall unconscious in a bed, when his animal ears picked up an unbelievable sound.

_The crunch of blood-soaked leaves as T-Bone staggered to his feet._

"You..." he rasped, his voice almost too weak to make out. "How are you still alive!?"

T-Bone's voice strained so badly one would've believed it to be the voice of a zombie. "I have a duty... to uphold..." he choked out, slumping into a fighting stance, holding his sword straight out at Lucci. "A good man... will never bow on his word. I... I promised my friends... that I would defeat you, and that... you would enter our group, and that is n-not something... that any simple, physical pain can stop m-me from accomplishing!"

Lucci knew he might not remain conscious himself for another attack. As it was, his vision was starting to swim before his eyes. He had left the hospital the same as he had been before he had ever crossed fists with Monkey D. Luffy, but now he was in ten times more agony than he had been after that fight.

"V-Ver..." croaked Lucci. He drew in a shaky breath, lifted his arms so they were perpendicular to him but parallel to each other, and pointed them directly at T-Bone. "S-Scorpio... we're both on our last l-legs... what do you say to ending this in one final blow?"

"That... is more than fine... with me..." said T-Bone.

The cold wind picked up a little as the opponents allowed a moment's pause. It howled in their ears, the sheer power of their fight filling the countryside with awe, and then the men opened their mouths and shouted in unison.

"GO!"

_ULTIMATE SIX KING GUN!_" roared Lucci, kicking off the ground and flashing through the air at mach speeds.

T-Bone gripped his sword tightly and steeled his protesting muscles. _ONE-SWORD STYLE... SILK SONG!_ His body twisted, his legs moving with a will of their own, and he thrust all his might into one final swing of his arms. His entire body moved as fluidly as a piece of silk flapping in the breeze.

Time itself froze as the attacks clashed in midair.

For several moments, it seemed as though Lucci's shaking arms, firing several unbelievably powerful Six King Guns at once, were pushing over T-Bone's steel-wall strength. A desperate battle cry rumbled up from Lucci's gut as he pushed forward. T-Bone let loose a howl of utter refusal in reply, his feet digging into the red ground. His sword sang a song of will, clear and sharp, high in tone and
unbelievably beautiful, and finally, the blade broke past Lucci's guard and sliced down his chest.

The blood splattering onto the stained grass was indistinguishable from the rest of the hilltop.

Lucci's unwilled transformation back into a human completed itself before he even touched the ground. The thump that his fall made resonated into the air. His eyes, almost fully closed, shone with both frustration and respect.

"That..." rasped Lucci before his consciousness fully faded, "that was... an unbelievable fight. You... are truly a worthy opponent. You would be even if you'd lost."

T-Bone was nearly inaudible. "Th-thank you..."

Sweet unconsciousness tapped Lucci on the shoulder and beckoned for him, but even as he took its hand and his vision faded away, he made out, "S-Scorpio... I'm a man of my word. From this day, forth... I and the rest of CP9 will work faithfully for you."

"I do not doubt it," T-Bone said. He spun his sword, the quick motion flinging the dripping blood off it, and stabbed it into his sheath with finality.

Lucci barked one short laugh, and then unconsciousness claimed him. It wouldn't release its grasp on him for another week to come.

Xomniac AN: Just to head off anyone crying foul over T-Bone overpowering Lucci, let me stop you right there: T-Bone didn't 'overpower' Lucci, he outlasted him. T-Bone was getting batted around left and right, but no matter how hard Lucci hit him, he just wouldn't stay down. Didn't matter that his whole body was practically broken, he just kept getting back up and coming for more. While T-Bone's level wasn't above Lucci's, it managed to remain consistent throughout the whole of the fight, whereas Lucci's eventually flagged and faltered due to his energy running out. And where does T-Bone's sheer resilience and stamina come from you ask? Simple: On the first, he's already been half-dead once thanks to Akainu, so he has practice at hanging on at the edge of death's door, and on the second, he has the souls of his entire flotilla at his back, pushing him on to get Justice.

T-Bone's gonna die one day, just finish on his feet without so much as a word... but he'll be damned if it's even a day before his brothers get their justice.

Patient AN: I will admit that even I found it unrealistic at first, but the above explanation is sufficient for me. I hope that it is so for you.

Cross-Brain AN: And as for those orders that CP9 received from the Masons? Well...let’s just say that Evan was made privy to one of our future plot twists, and it’s one that's going to have significant effect further down the line.

And with that said, let’s move on.

Omake: Warm Front

By TheRealEvanSG

There were many things that could piss off a certain, overheated pirate flag (and pirate) collector. Included in this list were such items as Cross talking, the Hirunos, messing with his children, and those annoying little Brussels sprouts that always seemed to unravel in his throat. None of these rose
to the top, however. No, the thing that pissed Don Accino off as much as possible?

Stealing anything in his flag collection.

To say that Don Accino was steaming while he looked at his notably emptier trophy room was like saying that Nagasaki and Hiroshima had only a little radiation after the war. To be fair, though, the patriarch was literally steaming, literally being a term which here means ‘steam rose from his skin and escaped into the atmosphere due to the pure rage incensing his body.’ His children had done the best they could to distract him from entering the trophy room since the Straw Hats had left with their—and many other crews—flags, but this proved to be a task impossible to uphold longer than a couple days. Now the very floor was threatening to melt into a gooey mess under the enraged Don’s feet.

“Why—did my children—agree to give a quarter—of my collection—away!?” he hissed venomously, steam whistling in the hellishly hot atmosphere around him.

Lil, the sole Accino child brave enough to currently be in the same room as him, observed the molten chaos from her safe perch on a chandelier which hung from the top of the room (how she’d gotten up there in the first place was anyone’s guess). “Because the Straw Hats agreed to royally screw up the wedding?” she reminded him. “Also because Princess Vivi offered you an endless stream of pirates to capture?” The petite girl slurped loudly on a cherry-flavored lollipop as she watched her father’s budding temper tantrum with something between amusement and concern for their house.

Don staggered backward, blinking, like Madam Hiruno had slammed her icy palm into his face at Kizaru-worthy speeds. “Vivi’s deal…” he murmured, his eyes widening. His growing temper had almost caused him to forget about that little detail altogether. The air grew noticeably cooler, as if an Antarctica-sized refrigerator had been opened in a volcano. The floor’s bubbling slowed to a stop as the patriarch of the Accinos considered the idea. “Ah, yes, that… I still haven’t decided whether to accept it, haven’t I?”

“Nope,” said Lil after taking a slight pause to lick her lollipop.

“Hm... it certainly is true that a lot of pirates in the early islands of Paradise really are quite stupid, and would no doubt wage constant war on Alabasta now that the threat of Crocodile retaliating is destroyed… And it is equally true that we’ve been having a disturbing lack of prey to capture lately…”

The blue-haired girl raised her hand helpfully and kicked her legs in midair. “I’ve heard that Alabastans make really good candy!” she added.

Don considered.

And considered.

And considered some more.

 “…This is going to take a lot of Hiruno-antagonizing,” he decided, shrugging his broad shoulders and starting to make his way out of the room. Although the Wedding Incident (capitalized to differentiate it from any other incidents that might happen to occur at weddings) had ended in a net victory for the Accinos, relations between the two bounty hunter families had devolved back into their normal state of affairs, with the one notable difference being that Burrato Hiruno had become the Accinos’ friend. In any case, Don always found that messing with the Hirunos helped calm his mind when it overheated.
“That’s great and all,” said Lil casually, taking another lick of her lollipop, “but if you’re done thinking, can you get me down from here? My apathy is only going to hold my universal little-kid fear of heights back for so long.”

Don froze—shit, he used that word!—erm, halted in his tracks, and slooooowly turned around to glare up at Lil. “And just how did you get up there in the first place, anyway?” he growled in exasperation.

“Wellllll…”

~0~

[Man!] laughed Skipper, cracking open a large bottle of West Blue sake and roughly slapping the freezing surface of the iceberg the four penguins sat on. [I don’t know how Lil always finds out where Don keeps moving the booze around to, but I am not going to question it!]

[And also keep doing whatever she tells you in exchange for the new locations?] Kowalski deadpanned. [Even if it involves tossing us up into the air in a Straw Hats-at-Alabasta style chain to get her to the top of the highest chandelier in the collection room?]

Skipper took a long swig of the bottle. [And that too!] he said, his voice twinging with a hint of drunkenness.

[Uh tust tuh Lil?] suggested a flat-out hammered Rico, his head swimming.

[Sure thing, dude!] cheered Private, thoroughly drunk despite having barely gotten a fourth of the way through his bottle. [To Lil!]

The penguins clinked their bottles of sake against each other. [KANPAI!]

~0~

The Don’s eye twitched. For one moment, he was disturbingly silent, glaring up at his youngest daughter with trembling fists.

“…DAMMIT, LIL, IF YOU WEREN’T MY FAVORITE, I’D MELT YOU!” roared Don.

Unconcernedly, Lil licked her lollipop. “Love you, too, Papa.”

And so it was that a grumbling Accino patriarch stomped out of his enormous flag collection room to look for a ladder, grumbling, “Alright, I don’t even need to antagonize any Hirunos to come to a decision this time. At least in Alabasta I won’t have to retrieve adorable daughters from my chandeliers. But first…” He paused and turned to Lil. “Can you find all your brothers and sisters and have everyone gather in the hall? I want to be sure you’re all on board with that.”

Lil’s hand froze on its way to bring the lollipop up to her outstretched tongue, and then she grinned. “Sure, Papa!” she chirped, and dashed away in a flash. Don Accino watched her run off with a proud smile; she was a beautiful, strong-willed girl, very respecting of her father and yet not afraid to get everyone back on the right track if they happened to stray off of it. She was going to grow up to make an amazing warrior, he knew, but until then, there were things to discuss and preparations to be made.

Once Lil had found where everyone had wandered off to, they all gathered together in the same room where, such a short time ago, Cross and Vivi had stood before the Accinos and negotiated their crew’s freedom. Campacino and Brindo were engaging in some sort of brotherly headlock, with
Brindo desperately attempting to pat out, and Arbell and Salchow were casting ceaseless gooey eyes at each other—not that that was a surprise. Hockera was waxing his hockey stick, and Lil was crunching on what little remained of her lollipop. When Don entered the grand room, they all dropped their current activities and looked up, blinking.

“Hey, Dad,” said Salchow, raising an eyebrow, “what did you call us all here for? Lil said it was something about a discussion for the future.”

Campacino raised an eyebrow. “Is it about Princess Vivi’s deal?”

“And whether we’re accepting it?” added Brindo.

“You kids pick up on things fast,” muttered Don with a fond shake of his head. “Yes, it is. I called you here to hold a vote on this decision. It is a matter that will change our family for years, and after my horrible mistake in assuming that Lil would be fine with marrying Burrato, I want to be sure that every one of you is alright with moving to Alabasta. I personally have decided that it would be far more profitable for our family to hunt in its waters than next to that damned Triangle, and the Straw Hats did do us a favor; but that’s beside the point. What are your thoughts about it?”

His children exchanged glances.

“We’re fine with it,” said Campacino and Brindo in tandem.

Hockera shrugged nonchalantly. “As long as there’s enough space for me to play hockey, it’s alright with me, ke.” He blinked, then raised an eyebrow. “Do you think that there’s such a thing as sand-hockey?”

“It’s the Grand Line,” said Campacino pointedly. “I’d be more surprised if there isn’t sand-hockey.”

Arbell’s arms swooped over Salchow, and he flushed a proud red. “I’m up for living anywhere as long as it’s with my sweetheart!” she cooed, staring lovingly into his eyes while Lil made fake gagging sounds.

“It’s the same with me,” confirmed Salchow. “As long as Arbell-honey’s by my side, I’ll go to the ends of the planet.”

“Then it’s decided,” declared Don with a proud smile, standing tall and throwing his arms out grandly. “Pack everything we have, and let’s set a course… for the desert kingdom, Alabasta!”

---Two Weeks Later---

The Giant Squad was bored.

Boredom was not something that giants knew how to deal with very well. People pointing guns at their faces? Easy; just punch them ‘round the head, ask questions later. Huge walls blocking their path? A simple kick was all it took to send those crumbling to their foundations. But boredom? That was an age-old enemy giant doctors were still trying to cure, with little to no progress in over 900 years.

Why was the Giant Squad bored?

Curiously, despite having been assigned the seemingly monumental task of blocking off all access to and from the famed desert kingdom, Alabasta, no one was trying to enter or leave the thrice-damned country. Anytime anyone who didn’t have a Devil Fruit user as one of their main fighters came anywhere close to sighting the enormous Marines, they turned tail and sailed as fast as they could
away. And even crews of both pirates and civilians alike who did enjoy access to Devil Fruit users seemed to find the task of taking down Marine-affiliated giants far too daunting to even consider. And it seemed as though, currently, Alabasta was entirely self-sufficient, so there was no reason for anyone to leave. Sure, there were your oddball idiots here and there who actually believed they had even a smidgen of a chance and attempted to attack them, but long story short, the Giant Squad was seriously battle-deprived, and a battle-deprived giant is not a happy camper.

“I’M… SO… BORED!” bellowed Vice Admiral Maginot, the usually tranquil giant restless with unused energy. His huge black afro bounced on his head as he stomped the ship in frustration, an action that would have sent any other sea vessel rocking; but ships made for giants were built of sterner stuff.

“Calm down, Maginot,” soothed De Lis, though the only female member of the group was equally antsy if her unconsciously tapping fingers were anything to go by. “I’m sure we’ll get our fight soon enough. And if we don’t, we can always look for some Sea Kings to use as punching bags.”

Vice Admiral Vercingetorix (called Vin by literally everyone who knew him), grunted and took a swig of his most recent bottle of beer. His sharp teeth cut a slight scratch in the thick glass of the bottle as he released it from his lips with a satisfied grunt. “Ah, put a can in it, Maginot,” he snorted at his contemporary’s obvious discomfort. “You’re gonna pop a blood vessel if you let your stupidity take over more than it already has.”

Maginot fixated a glare on Vin that would send any human running for the hills. “What was that, you damned Long-Name!?"

“My name’s not that long!” huffed Vin, who was quite sensitive to jokes about his name.

“When your name’s bigger than you are,” grunted Maginot with a smirk, “there are serious problems. You know, I think you might be compensating for something with it.”

“Why, YOU LITTLE—”

The two giants slammed their heads into each other, growling ferociously, and the gunner, Louis, perked up from swabbing his guns at the sound of a budding fight. His sharklike face was twisted into a wide grin that made it look even more sharklike, his mohawk perking up on his head like a mountain range. As Maginot and Vin began to grapple, pushing their hands against each other in a test to see who could overpower the other, he whooped and hollered, cheering on their fight.

“Yeah, PUSH!” he roared, grinning savagely. “Kick his ass, Vin!”

“DON’T EGG THEM ON!” roared a pissed-off De Lis, slamming her fist into Louis’s nose and knocking him down flat on the ship’s deck. “IN-FIGHTING WON’T HELP SHIT!”

“Saysh da woman who just bwoke mah noshe,” groaned Louis bitterly, picking himself off the floor, disgruntled.

The door to the bathroom opened, and Vice Admiral Lacroix emerged from it, making his way down to the deck and frowning at the two brawling Marines. “Vin, Maginot, what is the meaning of this?” he asked sternly, and the giants in question froze at the sound of his voice.

Vin turned to Lacroix, his face red with Maginot-induced ire. “That bastard was making fun of my name, so I decided to teach him a lesson,” growled the swordsman, casting a dark glare at Maginot.

The other giant shrugged. “I was just bored, and Vin’s easy to rile up, so I riled him up” admitted Maginot.
Lacroix considered the statements. “I see. Vice Admiral Maginot, please refrain from pissing off your fellow Marines to cure your own boredom, and Vin?”

“Yes, sir?” said Vin, somewhat confused as to why the squad’s de facto leader was addressing him when this really wasn’t his fault.

“…Your name is pretty damn long.”

“DAMN IT, LACROIX!”

The swordsman started to stomp across the deck to the de facto leader, his hand inching toward his sword, which was more of a sign of the Giant Squad’s intense boredom than anything else. They might have commonly picked fights among each other, but under normal circumstances, none of them ever picked one with Lacroix, out of respect for his leadership. It was a matter of honor, something giants as a race prided themselves for following extremely well. A giant without honor was like a vertebrate without a spine. As it was, however, Vin’s own boredom fueled his aggravation, which in turn made him think far less than normal, and he made a move to unleash his enormous sword upon the de facto leader. Just as Vice Admiral Lacroix started to coat his fist in Haki to block the oncoming attack, however, a shout from Corse, who was officially the doctor but was currently acting as lookout, froze both giants stiff.

“SHIP SIGHTED ON THE HORIZON, HEADING INTO ALABASTA AT ONE O’CLOCK!” bellowed Corse, his cat-eared hood appearing over the edge of the crow’s nest before the rest of head. “WE MIGHT NOT WANT TO INTERFERE WITH THIS ONE, THOUGH. IT’S THE ACCINOS. WE MIGHT BE BITING OFF MORE THAN WE CAN CHEW.”

“The Accinos?” De Lis repeated. “Aren’t they some of the Marines’ most favored bounty hunters? What are they doing here?”

“I don’t know, but I hope they’re up for a fight!” declared Maginot, cracking his knuckles in anticipation. “I haven’t punched a single person this week, and my fists miss slamming into people’s faces!”

“What should we do, Lacroix?” asked Ostro, the crew’s cook, coming out of the kitchen at Corse’s announcement. His shirt was conspicuously missing again, and although he seemed to be aware of this fact, he was either too bored to care or just simply didn’t. Going by prior knowledge, the other Squad members guessed it was the latter. “Should we attack, or wait for them to make a move?”

“It is strange for the Accinos to have come over here clear from their home near the Florian Triangle,” mused Lacroix, narrowing his eyes at the approaching ship. “How did they make it here? What do you think, De Lis?”

De Lis, the crew’s strategist, rubbed her chin in thought, despite the fact that she didn’t have a beard. “The only answer must be that they came across an Eternal Log Pose pointing to this island. That raises the question, however, as to how exactly they came across such a thing in the first place. If pirates gave it to them, then I would say that the Accinos currently stand a threat to us. This is also the case if they were given one by a member of the Nefertari family or an ambassador of theirs. If they stole it from someone, however, their current alignment would be hard to tell outright.”

“So what would you suggest?”

“Flag them down and demand an explanation as to how they’ve acquired an Eternal Pose to Alabasta,” decided De Lis thoughtfully. She blinked, then added, “And of course, should their intentions be contrary to ours, sink them to Davy Jones’ locker.”
“Bullshit!” groaned Maginot. “Why can’t we just attack them right off the bat!?”

Ostro rolled his eyes. “Because they might be backing us up, or delivering information to us, or any number of other things, Maginot,” he said. “Honestly, if you used half the brain cells you have in that big head of yours, you’d come to the conclusion very easily.”

The bazooka wielder’s eye twitched. “You’re lucky Lacroix said not to fight among ourselves; otherwise you’d be out cold by now.”

“I’d like to see you try to lay me down.”

“I may just take you up on that offer.”

“BOYS!” snapped De Lis, and the two giants jumped into attention. She smiled serenely at them as they grinned fearfully back; they were very conscious of Louis’ broken nose. Pleased with their ceasefire, she nodded. “Good.”

The two let out large breaths of relief… and glared at each other the moment her back was turned to them.

Ronse, the acting helmsman of the crew, changed course to pull up alongside the Accino family ship, their own enormous battleship cutting through the waves like a knife through butter. It took about half an hour for them to reach each other, and by the time they finally did, Ostro had a black eye, Maginot was rubbing his side tenderly, Louis was laughing his ass off, and De Lis’ frustration was so high she was practically steaming. Lacroix chose to ignore the three less mature members of the crew, instead opting to gauge the bounty hunters’ expressions and actions, trying to determine their alignment just by looking at them. Sadly, he had never possessed much skill in this department.

“ACCINO FAMILY!” he bellowed over to their ship once they were within hearing range. “WHAT BRINGS YOU TO THESE WATERS? FOR WHAT PURPOSE HAVE YOU COME HERE?”

Over on the Accino ship, the bounty hunters were gathered at the side of the ship, all save for Hockera, who was currently commanding the helm. Don nodded at Campacino, the signal for him to respond to their interrogators.

“We’re here to claim a pair of high-profile bounties,” the eldest Accino sibling shouted back through a megaphone. “Chaka the Jackal and Pell the Falcon are worth 115 million together.”

“And aside from that,” Brindo continued once said megaphone was passed to him, “the good favor we would gain from the Government by stripping a Revolutionary country of its two Devil Fruit users would likely be even more beneficial for us.”

Lacroix’s eyebrows rose. This… This seemed almost too good to be true. Exchanging surprised glances with his comrades, the mountainous Vice-Admiral raised an eyebrow and leaned out over the railing. “REALLY?” he boomed, his voice rumbling across the waters. “AND HOW HAVE YOU RUN ACROSS AN ETERNAL POSE TO TAKE YOU HERE?”

“Spoke to Marine HQ,” deadpanned the youngest Accino, Lil, upon receiving their megaphone. “Received permission directly from the top, along with the Eternal Pose.”

Stunned short of speech, and more than a little disappointed, the Giant Squad all slumped where they stood.

“Uh… okay…” De Lis managed at last, blinking rapidly. “I suppose you’re free to go past…”
“IT’S MUCH APPRECIATED!” shouted Salchow with a large salute. “BUT NOT AS APPRECIATED AS MY ARBELL-HONEY…”

“Oh, Salchow!” swooned said woman, wrapping him up in a large hug, and the giants’ eyes twitched as one as the couple began smooching heavily, right before everyone’s eyes. Ronse made faux gagging sounds, which prompted Vin into loud snickers.

With no further opposition from the Giant Squad, the bounty hunters freely sailed across the Alabastan waves until they could no longer be seen. Once they were out of the Marines’ vision, the rogue bounty hunters let out a collective breath of relief. They hadn’t expected that to actually work; they’d been sure that the Marine group would see right through their lies and attack them. That would’ve been more than a little annoying, not to mention worrying.

It was smooth sailing the rest of the way into Alabasta. A Sea King rose up to try and chomp on their ship half way, but the Don killed it with a super-heated flurry of punches, and no damage to them was incurred. No one tried to oppose them from landing at Nanohana, either, although they were met with quite a few curious stares; this made sense, though, since no one had been making land at the ports lately. Both Lil and Salchow complained about the heat the entire way to Alubarna, however, and Arbell might have followed suit had Don not bought her some “gorgeous, cultural clothing” before they set off on their trek.

Thanks to the forethought of purchasing some camels, it only took them a day to reach the capital, Alubarna. It was a beautiful city, and even the Don had to admit that his breath was taken away with his first sight of it. He could definitely see why Vivi was so pissed at the Government for depriving her of a peaceful life in a country like this. By one o’clock the day after their meeting with Giant Squadron, the bounty hunter family found themselves staring up at the famous palace of the royal family of Alabasta. By one thirty, they found themselves kneeling in the throne room before the king and his royal guards, Pell and Chaka, as well as men whom the SBS-informed bounty hunters identified as Igaram and Kohza.

“Your royal highness,” said Don Accino respectfully, head bowed before the vaguely amused king. “We come by request of her highness Nefertari Vivi, seeking to become this country’s naval protection.”

King Cobra snorted and sighed. “Kohza,” he groaned, glancing to the young man standing at attention in line with the royal guards and Igaram, “when do you think will people ever learn that they don’t have to be formal with me?”

The aging man heaved his eyes up to the heavens. “That’s what I was afraid of…” He sighed and shook his head. “Stand up, Don Accino of the Accino Family. Everyone in this country is equal, and the King is no exception. There is no need to bow in my presence.” Surprised, but somewhat pleased, the powerful man nodded and rose, his family following suit. Cobra smiled. “That’s better. Now, if Vivi asked you to come here, I trust her decision full-heartedly. You shall be appointed as Alabasta’s official naval forces, and paid accordingly. I must ask, though, why exactly did Vivi choose you?”

Don frowned and sighed. “Well, you see, years ago, I ate a certain Devil Fruit that Vivi was greatly interested in.” At this, King Cobra leaned forward, eyes widening. The bounty hunter nodded, sensing the question in the old man’s gaze. He lifted his arms out, and the temperature in the room increased greatly. Don was a little surprised at just how much easier it was to use his powers in this country; it seemed he could raise temperatures much more quickly in this hot environment. “Your highness, I ate the Hot-Hot Fruit, and was asked to come to Alabasta so that whenever my time is
meant to end, the Devil Fruit might return to its origins.”

“The Rage…” Cobra’s jaw slackened in awe. “I… never thought I’d see another of our missing treasures in my life… And here Vivi already found one…” His features softened, and a proud smile spread across his face, the picture of a father proud of his daughter. “She certainly would’ve made a fantastic queen. Welcome to Alabasta, Don Accino. I am now extremely glad you have stepped foot on our soil.”

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Two days after the meeting between the Accinos and the Giant Squad, Corse sat on the railing of their ship near the figurehead, something itching at the back of his mind. There was something wrong, something he couldn’t quite tell…

“I NEED TO FIGHT SOMETHING!” roared Maginot, and something hard, knuckle-y, and pointedly fist-like struck the pondering giant ’round the back of his head. Corse nearly fell off the ship, but he regained his balance, arms wheeling, legs flailing. With a pissed roar, the punched Marine swiveled around and leaped to his feet, preparing to fire a punch back --

And blinked as that elusive thing suddenly flashed into his mind.

“Ah… D’you think we should call HQ, just in case they might have been lying?” At Maginot’s questioning look, Corse elaborated. “About their reason for coming into Alabasta, I mean.”

All of the other squad members froze on their oversized feet.

“…Dammit!” De Lis howled from the crow’s nest. She smacked her head with an exasperated groan even as she rushed to the nearest Transponder Snail and began dialing Marineford’s number. Her foot tapped impatiently. “Come on, pick up,” she groaned restlessly.

At last, the nervous snail made the relieving katcha and the call went through. A low, carefree voice rang through the on the other end.

“Marine Headquarters, Garp speaking. Get to it and tell me what do you want so I can start the paperwork and forget to fill it out.”

“Ah, Garp!” the strategists breathed, relief evident in her voice. “This is De Lis of the Giant Squadron. Everything’s clear on our end, but just out of curiosity, might the Accinos have ordered an Eternal Pose from HQ for the purpose of hunting several Alabastan bounties?”

The lazy Vice Admiral hummed, and the snail’s eyes went half-lidded. It looked like it was picking its nose without any fingers to do so with. Quite the spectacle indeed. “Hmm, not that I recall. I might’ve slept through it, though. Hold on, let me check.” De Lis rolled her eyes and sighed as the echo of Garp’s footsteps reached her ears alongside the clank of his receiver dropping. After a few minutes of dead air, his voice again filtered through the receiver. “Nope. I just spoke to Sengoku, and I can’t say that they have. Why, did they trick you into letting them into Alabasta or something?” His booming laughter at his joke shook the transceiver, and De Lis’ eye twitching reached a new fervor.

“Um… well…” she ground out, unsure of how to phrase it in a way that didn’t seem bad.

Garp’s laughter froze.

“…You did, didn’t you,” he deadpanned, and De Lis’ awkwardness suddenly transformed into outright fury.

With that outburst, she slammed the receiver back down on the poor snail, which choked and scuttled away as fast as it could move. Which wasn’t that fast at all, since it was a snail.

The ship was silent for several moments; the other Marines had gotten more than enough bruises to know to shut up during a bout of De Lis’ anger. She stood silently, fists clenching and unclenching, and the other giants waited nervously. At last, Lacroix judged her to have calmed down enough to be reasonable. He took a deep breath, opened his mouth, and spoke.

“So, I guess now would be as good a time as ever to revolt, eh?”

Everyone stared at him with wide eyes.

Lacroix glared. “What!? We’ve been talking about mutiny since the fiasco at Enies Lobby. Garp himself won’t care that we let the Accinos into Alabasta, but when he tells the higher-ups what happened, we’ll have everyone breathing down our necks anywhere we go. And let’s be real; the Marines were always suspicious of us revolting from the get-go. We might as well get a jump start on things and go rejoin the Giant Warrior Pirates before shit hits the fan, as a certain blond pirate might say.”

“That… makes a lot of sense,” admitted Ostro. The pot-bellied cook rubbed the side of his backwards baseball cap sheepishly.

“So, then,” Maginot spoke up, raising an eyebrow, “who’s going to issue the declaration of mutiny?”

Silence reigned.

“…Not it!” said many of the Giant Squad at once, with Vin’s voice echoing a tad behind the rest.

“…Shit,” said Vin.

Cross-Brain AN: And there you have it, ladies and gentlemen. Mind you, this won’t be the last time that we post an omake(s) that we requested from a fan, but it will be the last time for a while. For now, we return to the work of the Cross-Brain, and the good news is that we’re making good progress on our next post!

…The bad news is that it’s another omake, but it’s one that we’ve been planning on posting at this point in the story from the start. We think you’ll like it.
Chapter 50: Battles Against The Generals! Thriller Bark Conquered?

Patient AN: Ladies and gentlemen, the following chapter may very well be the finest work of our Superego, without whom we could not have hoped to have made either this or the previous chapter.

Hornet AN: I should hope so, considering this thing’s 50% fight scene.

Cross-Brain AN: Just as a last note, loyal fans? We called the cliffhanger we gave you seven chapters ago cruel beyond all cruelty. But the cliffhanger at the end of this chapter is even crueler.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH—!"

THUNK!

"—AAHoh hey, I'm alive."

Glancing behind him, Leo could see that a tree had arrested his impromptu flight, with nary a scratch on the bark.

"Tough tree…” he remarked. Then the pain in his hind flippers hit. "Ow, fuck! Jeez, this guy hits almost as hard as Zoro!"

"Yaaaar!"

At the sound of that voice, Leo turned his attention back to his limping opponent, crossing his blades in time to catch John's twin sabers. The impact made his swords creak ominously and sent shockwaves down his body. Shockwaves that hit the tree he was still balanced against and promptly blew out the back of the trunk.

"You've… got to be… kidding me!" the dugong ground out as he struggled to hold the zombie at bay.

Seconds passed, neither fighter gaining an advantage. John was too strong for Leo to push back, but the tree gave him something to brace against. However…

'Can't… keep this up… forever…’ Leo thought. 'Dunno what's gonna break first... me... the tree… or my swords... but something's gonna break…’

In the event, the dugong was beaten to the punch by John… flexing. Yes. Flexing his pectoral muscles, where Leo noted were puncture wounds in the corpse.

'So someone turned the bastard into a pin cushion…’ he deduced. 'If they were alive, I'd buy them a drink... and then bury their head in the table! Though...’ Leo narrowed his eyes as he noticed several other distinctly different scars moving. 'Huh, looks like he was shot, too. I wonder if the bullets are still in the holes.'

Strangely enough, it appeared that the bullet holes were opening and closing in time to his… flexing…

'Oh, you can't be serious!'
Hastily pulling his swords back, Leo dropped to the ground, and none too soon. With one final, gargantuan flex, the bullets flew out of their holes to hit the tree.

The dugong had no time to process the sheer insanity of what he'd just witnessed, because finally he had at least something of an opening. From his prone position he stabbed both blades up, aiming for the neck. They didn't reach; Zombie John leaned over, the blades skittering off his voluminous coat, with the tears—

"Okay, that's just not fair," Leo whined at the metal plates now visible under the coat. Further whining was cut off by a frantic roll away from the blades that tore into the soil. Tail catching the ground, he Rip Tided away, back into the trees.

"Okay…” Leo panted as he leaned around the trunk and watched John come about. "So that was probably a one-time thing. I hope. He's still stronger than me, just as fast in melee, and an immortal zombie. With armor." He sighed, hanging his head. "Thank God Soundbite isn't here, because the only possible description of this situation is that it bites." The dugong only allowed himself to remain melancholic for a moment before rapping his hilts over his skull-shell. "Okay, back in the game! Think Leo, think! Weaknesses, what are his weaknesses?"

Turning back to the shambling zombie, he noted with some surprise that it was, in fact, actually shambling, unlike the rest of the cadavers he'd seen that night. Every step dragged the left leg along the ground, despite the apparent functionality of the limb.

"So, slow to pursue. That's… actually pretty useful," Leo noted. "With Rip Tide, I can open the distance easily. Which would be useful if I actually had a ranged attack worth a damn!"

Suddenly, a peripheral glint of light snapped the Dugong out of his outrage, and that allowed a hasty duck to save him from becoming a head shorter. A poor tree that slid off its stump and crashed to the ground in front of him only emphasized the point.

This time, though, Leo attacked instead of defended once his opponent was in melee range. To his frustration, this was no more effective than it been before. Zombie John's defense was ironclad, parries and well-timed sways deflecting the attacks.

"Damn it!" he roared, clashing his blades into a crossed formation. "Cross of the—aghk!"

The ace-attack was aborted by a flap of John's coat slamming into Leo's face. Due to its armored nature, it wasn't unlike being slapped with a two-by-four. Or Nami.

Stumbling back, Leo tried to Rip Tide away again. This time, though, Zombie John reached into his coat and threw several knives that the dugong had to deflect lest he get skewered. Not only did this cut the Rip Tide short, it also drew his swords into an entirely different guard.

"I call this attack 'Boot to the Face'!" the zombie cackled as he did just that.

Treaded soles met dugong face. The soles won, sending Leo flying again. Not very far, though. John, unslinging his coat with the ease of far too much practice, proceeded to catch his opponent in it and wrap the sleeves around his neck.

"A fit punishment for a pirate," the zombie general leered down at his opponent, his foot planted on his shell as he started to pull with all his might. "Wouldn't ya say, matey?"

Due to his position, all Leo could do was scrabble at the cloth wrapping around his neck, which was constricting his neck in ways that were decidedly uncomfortable. The lack of air, while unnerving, was manageable due to both his species' habitat of choice and Boss's own spartan training, but far
more pressing was the fact that if he didn't know any better, he'd swear he could hear his spine creaking.

Unbidden, one of Chopper's more disturbing rants sprang to mind. This one had been concerning various means of execution the Marines used. And from what he remembered, the true cause of death from hanging by the neck wasn't asphyxiation, but rather—!

Leo hastily slammed all of his strength into maintaining his Shell Body, but he could already tell that it was but a momentary reprieve: after all, where his own strength was limited and waning, the revenant's well of strength was fathomless.

But still, bleak as the situation was, Leo didn't panic. Rather, he thought back to his master's lessons, and focused on one rule in particular: That even if the enemy seemed invincible, there was always a weak angle to exploit.

Leo glanced back and forth along the sleeves that threatened to end his life. The knot itself was impenetrable to his flippers, as was the left sleeve... but the right? Oh, now the right was the ticket to life and liberty, tattered and torn as it was, and all Leo had to do was grab at the most off-kilter patch he could find and rip.

The cloth promptly fell apart under his flipper, and a hasty Rip Tide found him far away again, propped up on his swords and wheezing, even as his mind flew a mile an hour.

'That... That sleeve wasn't a coincidence,' Leo thought to himself as he glanced at his opponent. 'Looking back at the earlier clashes... yeah, yeah he definitely has a weaker guard on his right side.' The dugong grimaced as John slowly and calmly put his jacket back on, tutting at the missing sleeve. 'Not that that helps me, considering how a cracked aegis is still an aegis, damn it all...' Hanging his head, he shook it despondently. 'I gotta do the ranged attack, don't I.'

For a few seconds, he just wallowed in the self-pity, and then brushed it aside, standing straight again. Another blur of Rip Tide, and he was positioned to the right of John, who was still as slow as ever.

As the zombie shambled towards him again, Leo raised his swords high and to the right, pointing to the sky parallel with each other. More importantly, he shut his eyes, and listened.

He heard the wind rustling through the trees; John's foot scraping in the dirt and his clothes rustling together; even, in the distance, the sounds of fighting. The sounds washed over him, penetrated deep into his very soul. And, at the edge of the blades, he heard it. The air moving over the blade, making the metal sing.

'So, that's how it works.'

Opening his eyes, he saw that John was now making a beeline for him. Well, as much of a beeline as a rotting corpse with a limp can pull off. Point is, he wasn't deviating at all.

"Gulf...!" he cried out, before bringing his blades down. "Stream!"

Air and steel sang in harmony, twin blades of wind sprang into existence, merging into a singular force of destruction…

SKRANG!

Even as, before Leo's own horrified gaze, his actual blades shattered like so much fine crystal.
Still, as tragic as the turn of fate was, it didn't alter the intensity of his attack. John tried to dodge, he really did, but with a gimpy leg and quite a bit of armor weighing him down, all he managed to evacuate was his torso. His left-hand limbs, however, were hit full force. The arm, while cut to the bone, remained viable; the leg, however... well, for all that Captain John was a world-renowned pirate there were very few pirates, be they dead or alive, world-famous or a nobody, who could fight with just one leg.

Leo stayed wary for a moment, keeping a close eye on the downed pirate for over a minute before finally allowing himself to relax, the tension ebbing out of his being - and with it the adrenaline that was keeping the pain away. "Ow! Owowowooooow, my tail!" he yowled, massaging the aching limb. "I really need to start building up these muscles, because mine are nowhere near strong enough for this shi—!"

"Yar har har... yaaaaar har har haaaaar..."

Leo tensed up as a laugh wafted through the air, and promptly scrambled for any shards of his blades he could grab. "Shitshitshitshi—!"

"Ahhh, cool yer flippers, ya grubby worrywart," John wheezed, waving his hand dismissively. "Ah'm done. Going back to the locker soon enough, of that ye can be assured. I'm just..." He chuckled, his grin widening minutely. "Relieved, I suppose ye could say."

Warily eyeing the immobile corpse, Leo palmed one of the shards and hopped over to the zombie, making sure to (hopefully) stay out of its reach. "What... do you mean by 'relieved'?"

"Yar..." John sighed, tilting his head back to stare into the mists. "...have ye ever heard of me, lad? Have ye ever heard of 'Long' John 'Silverteeth'?"

"Weeell..." Leo winced, glancing to the side.

"Bah, 'tis no surprise," John shrugged carelessly, his empty gaze staring at nothing. "As ye can see, I ain't exactly young. Well, anyway, lemme make it simple for ye: In case ye couldn't already tell, I was a true pirate's pirate when I was alive. I looted, I pillaged, I swashed more buckles than I could count... from Reverse Mountain ta the gates o' Mariejois, I was the scurviest, saltiest, most treacherous sea dog to ever sail..."

John's desiccated lips twisted into a scowl as he started poking at the holes in his torso. "And in the end, it all came back to bite me in the arse when I went so far as to betray me own crew. Robbed 'em blind and stowed the treasure away, where only I knew. I thought I could escape, thought I could live out me golden years in luxury..."

Leo's gaze slowly trailed down to the deceased swashbuckler's sieve of a chest. "But clearly, that didn't happen."

"Arr..." John growled morosely. "One of the most feared men o' me generation, an honest to god demon made flesh... and I was put down by me own mates, like a DAMN DOG!" the pirate suddenly roared furiously, slamming his fist into the ground. "THAT'S NO WAY TO DIE, DAMN IT ALL! THAT NO WAY TA END IT! TA, TA LEAVE THIS LIFE! I WAS SOMEBODY DAMN IT! I WAS FAMOUS, I WAS IMPORTANT, I WAS—! I was... I..." The old pirate slowly trailed off, his voice drawing down into a whisper before he let his head hang in shame. "I... was a pirate's pirate... a man's man... and they didn't even let me die like one..."

Leo's gaze lightened up ever so slightly. "Death in combat."
"The only true and noble way a man can die…" John nodded solemnly, before allowing a leer to cross his face. "Well, that or in bed at the age o' eighty with me 'Long John' in—!"

"Yeahyeahyeah, we all know that one!" Leo hastily cut the pirate off, his face all but glowing.

"Yarharhar!" John cackled in amusement, eventually trailing off into a melancholy sigh. "Arr… anyway… Ye gave me the second death I never got in life, and for that I thank thee… and I've got a few things I'd like to give ye. Not like I'll be takin' them with me anyways, aye?"

"Eh…” Leo glanced to the side at the battle raging a little ways off (and the zombie that flew screaming into the air) before giving the pirate captain a nod. "Alright, but make it fast."

The zombie inclined his head, then jerked it to the side at where his swords had landed. "First off, me blades. They're just a pair o' no-named buggers, but they've got spine and spirit. Feel free ta use mine until ya find some new mates a yer own, savvy?"

"Ah…” Leo glanced at the sabres uncertainly. "Are you… sure they won't—?"

"What, 'mind'? HA!" John barked with a dash of honest humor. "They're pirate blades, lad! They don't give half a damn about who's swingin' them, just that they're in the thick of it. 'Sides, ye've got me blessing, it's fine… and ye'r in the thick of it as is, do ye really have the time to be picky?"

"…fair 'nuff, what else?" Leo waved for the zombie to continue.

"Second," John complied with a grunt, sliding a circlet from his arm and holding it out. "Me treasure. This here mark will guide ya to it. Learned too late that I can't take it with me… but maybe ye can put it ta some good use. Better than letting it rot in some cave, aye?"

The swordless swords-dugong gave the mark a doubtful look, but still accepted it without a word. After all, best to possibly have a lead on the treasure of the century to appease Nami than to wind up empty-handed at the wrong moment.

"Arr, alright, alright, that's good… anyways, last of all…” John grunted as he slowly dragged himself into a sitting position, wincing at the phantom pains that were shooting through his dead nerves. "A final piece of advice. A true pirate… a true man…”

With remarkable speed, his good arm reached into his jacket and withdrew a flintlock pistol. "DIES FIGHTING!" he roared, his voice full of vim and vigor as he squeezed the trigger.

Or tried to, at least. The endeavor failed, due to every last inkling of strength leaving the revenant's body.

Leo smiled lightly as he slowly withdrew his extended and empty flipper to his side. "Knew that from the second I picked up the blade, sir," he whispered with respect.

John wheezed a chuckle around the shard of metal lodged in the back of his throat. "Per… fect…"

And with that, the twice-damned Silver-Toothed Pirate departed from the world again, this time with a smile on his face.

Leo heaved out a massive breath as he wrestled his frayed nerves back under control. Once that was accomplished, however, he took enough time to glance around and confirm that there were no more immediate threats in the area before regretfully turning his gaze to the hilts of his faithful, nameless katanas. He contemplated them for several seconds, then flipped them around and planted them in the earth.
"...At least," he reflected with a quiet whisper. "It was a noble end." He gave the trio of corpses one last glance before waddling off to claim his interim weapons.

Leo hefted the sabres, giving them a few test swings to assure himself of their weight before nodding in satisfaction. He then sheathed the sabres on his back.

Then a flipper rose to his forehead and all but tore away the blue cloth wrapped as a headband. Unfolding it, he then tied the entire cloth over his scalp, slightly shadowing his eyes, and looked towards where the rest of the battle was going on.

"Okay, you two," Leo breathed softly, his eyes hardened into flint and his teeth set in a glower. "Let's go and get ourselves acquainted by killing some fucking zombies."

And with a flex of his tail, he was gone.

-o-

Elsewhere in the forests of Thriller Bark, a battle cry rose above the trees.

"FUNURABA!"

'#77. Strong as hell, but slow,' Mikey noted as he ducked under a meaty tackle that obliterated an innocent tree. 'Alright... let's try multitasking.' Making use of the straight weeks of practice Boss had hammered through his shell, Mikey swiftly spun his left-hand pair of nunchucks into their holster before, in the same move, he drew his left pistol, aimed and fired at the zombie. The bullet sunk in - and to the dugong's dismay, it did exactly jack to stop the juggernaut from ponderously sweeping around for another charge. 'Also really toughohshit!'

The short, red-nosed zombie, emblazoned with the #55, had, while he was dodging, crept under his guard and was now swinging up a nasty-looking uppercut. Mindful of the rotund behemoth behind him, Mikey frantically attempted to lean back while staying anchored to the ground. To his surprise, for once his spine chose to comply, his vertebrae bending just so so that, much like a tongue of seaweed, he swayed back and was left unharmed while an uppercut whooshed harmlessly past his face.

"Huh, so that's how it works," the dugong mused as he turned the sway into a backward handstand flip that took him under another one of the big #77's swipes. Landing from that, he pushed off from the ground—

"Kekekekeke! Now, fucking monkey!"

"Who are you calling a woohee?!!"

And was promptly grabbed by the monkey-like #80 in mid-air.

"Catch MAX!"

"Let go of me, dammit!" Mikey snapped, slamming his head back. Had he tried this even a few days ago, the blow would have met only air, but with his newfound flexibility it instead found its mark with a resounding (and embarrassingly hollow-sounding) CLONK!

The surprisingly strong hands that had gripped him fell away in favor of clutching their owner's skull, and Mikey took the opportunity to Tidal Swim away from the monkey in search of Hildon. The bat-like majordomo, however, had decided to hold discretion as the better part of valor, because he was nowhere to be seen.
Instead, the orange-bandana’d dugong spotted yet another unfamiliar zombie skulking about. This one was solidly built, and seemed… older than the rest, save Hildon. The black mohawk was pretty distinctive, too.

Two facts stuck out to Mikey about the revenant: that his leg was extended for some reason or another, and that there was also some sort of round object flying through the air from him to Mikey. A round, black object that, upon further analysis, once it drew closer, the dugong managed to identify.

'Huh. That's a bomb.' Then the dugong's overworked brain processed that thought. "OH, SHIT, THAT'S A BOMB! TIDAL SWI—!

KA-BOOM!

It was, indeed, a bomb, and one that exploded right in his face at that. Luckily, his new innate flexibility did a good job dissipating the shock wave of the explosion; the worst he got was some mild burns and a forceful expulsion from the sky, and the latter was something he was well acquainted with through his training. Another Tidal Swim killed his momentum, allowing him to touch down in front of the zombie that bore the sigil #47.

"Ahahahahaha!" the zombie cackled, pirouetting on one leg with the other held vertical in the air. "Prepare to be schooled, monsieur!"

"'Monsieur'?" Mikey dubiously parroted before letting his expression fall flat. "Oh, whatever. Just die again already."

A twitch of his flippers, and one of his nunchucks lashed out at the zombie's skull. In response, said zombie… swayed out of the way with impressive flexibility for healthy flesh, let alone necrotized.

"Oh, come on!" Mikey snapped as he pulled back his weapon, pointing an accusatory finger at his opponent. "That's blatant plagiarism!"

"Look who's talking, monsieur!" the zombie snapped back, still in his raised-leg pose. "You're a walking plagiarism yourself! At least we have the guts to admit it!"

"You don't have 'guts', period!" Mikey snarled. "And what in Sebek's name are you—!"

A blur zipped by him, and the dugong glanced to the side to find his back flipper tied to one of the trees.

"Eh?"

In a second, arms, weaker than the Monkey's, latched onto his other flipper. A glance to that side showed the zombie with the large forehead clinging onto it with all his might.

"Eh?!"

"Hey. I think we should teach this punk what happens when someone messes with us on our turf."

"Yeah."

"Great idea!"

"Just punch them already, fucking brothers!" Hildon snapped from a nearby treetop.

"We're not brothers!" the last trio of zombies fired back before turning their glares on the captive
Dugong. "But we can punch him!"

Now panicking slightly, Mikey tugged at the rope. Solidly attached, it didn’t budge. He tried with the zombie clinging to him. That just dragged the zombie on the ground.

A rain of punches precluded any further attempts at escape.

"Kekekekeke," Hildon chuckled as the remainder of his zombie coterie joined him in watching the beatdown. "Ah, I love a plan well executed." Holding up his hands, over a dozen bat-themed cards appeared in his hands. "Too bad I didn't get to use more of my tricks! Ya-ha!"

**BLAM! BLAM! B-BLAM!**

"Don't worry," a battered and bruised Mikey intoned as four bodies dropped away from him, each featuring bullet holes in their necks and shadows soaring into the sky above them. "The fun's not done until one of us rolls out a real showstopper. And so far, you've been lacking!"

Another blur and another bomb was deposited at his feet. Snorting derisively, Mikey gave it a hearty thwack with his tail that punted it into the trees, where it exploded harmlessly in a stream of annoyed bats. "Still lacking."

If he was worried, Hildon didn't show it. Instead, he just kept chuckling, even as Mikey kept a wary eye on the remaining zombies.

"Don't worry, seal."

"I'M A DUGONG, DAMMIT!"

Once again, Hildon threw his hands out, only this time they were loaded with machine guns and bazookas. "I'VE GOT A FEW SHOWSTOPPERS READY TO GO!" The vamp-zombie roared as he opened fire.

Every single weapon fired at once in a hail of bullets and cannonballs. The former were deflected by Mikey's nunchucks, while the latter were simply dodged. Time slowed down as his brain focused solely on evading the projectiles. And it was only due to that that he saw the real attack coming: the big #77 zombie lumbering towards him and the only zombie as yet unaccounted for. Namely, #21, the one with the eyeshield on its helmet, zipping in at a speed that would have impressed Carue. Classic hammer and anvil.

But with the dugong now able to see it coming, he could do something about it. Twisting around and spraying bullets at the 'anvil' of the two, he used his other flipper to snap his nunchucks in just the right way so as to grab the fast zombie around the legs, yanking him to the ground. Another shot from his pistols sufficed to salt the zombie.

"Ya-ha!"

Then a shadow fell over him.

"Give 'em the hammer!" Hildon cackled as #77 slammed into the ground, throwing up a massive cloud of dust.

For a moment, the zombies waited, watching carefully for any sign of life below #77's big belly. When there was nothing, they let out a cheer, joined by several zombie cheerleaders that popped out of the nearby underbrush.
"Rip Tide."

That cheer was then brutally murdered in a back alley by Mikey's smug declaration. Hildon swung his eyes around to find the dugong smirking at him, even as his tail pumped out Tidal Swim after Tidal Swim to keep him airborne.

"I'll admit, I'm not the sharpest tool in the shed," he noted conversationally. "But I've still got enough meat in my noggin to figure some pretty simple things out. And d'you know what I just figured out?" He began swinging his nunchucks into a nice and menacing blur. "I salt you, and this whole setup collapses."

Hildon, sweating furiously, held his ground. For two seconds. Then he turned around and flew away as fast as he could. "I didn't sign up for thiiiiiiiis!" he wailed.

Mikey, idly dodging another punted bomb, gave him a five-second lead before kicking off the air after him.

'Hum, I wonder,' he thought as he pursued the fleeing bat-zombie. 'Is it possible to combine Rip Tide and Tidal Swim? Kick ten times off the air? Have to ask Boss about that…'

The time for idle thoughts was soon over as Mikey came within striking range. His next Tidal Swim was not one of the simple pushes he'd done before; his tail coiled, folding as far as it would go, the muscles in his gut and back getting in on the action. This push wasn't so much a push as it was a rocket going off. Rearing back a flipper, Mikey reached Hildon with just enough time for the majordomo to look panicked before a heavy wooden stick slammed into his face with all of the dugong's momentum behind it.

CRASH!

Or, in layman's terms, Mikey's extra strength Tidal Swim gave the nunchuck hit enough force to send Hildon flying into and through the roof of the manor, the dugong riding the body down to the floor.

At least, until Hildon slammed into it headfirst, throwing the dugong off.

Hildon was quick to jump back to his feet, but going by the way he was stumbling about and his eyeballs were spinning like pinwheels, he was most likely suffering from a severe (if purely psychosomatic) concussion. "Weeelcome to Thriller Bark," he mumbled dizzily. "Weeee hope you enjooooy your sta—!

BLAM!

Hildon's corpse crumbled into a pile of flesh and bones without even a whisper.

"Sorry, bub," Mikey snarled, smoke wafting up from his pistol's muzzle. "We're just passing through."

The dugong slowly stowed his firearm away as Hildon's shadowy soul ascended into the mist and out of sight. A brief glance to the left and right showed him to be alone, and the instant that that was clear, he flopped onto his back, allowing his screaming tail muscles a reprieve.

"Man… I knew we'd be getting stupidly strong here…" Mikey panted warily. "But this… might just kill us first…"

He laid panting for a few moments longer… before allowing a savage smirk to cross his muzzle.
"Sweet Horus I love this crew."

-0-

You know something funny? Wielding a dachshund bazooka that was shooting a continuous stream of fire, alongside an angel with her own bazooka shooting a continuous stream of fire, accompanied by a talking radio-snail and a talking fox and getting radio advice from a talking reindeer doctor, while spelunking in the esophagus of the corpse of a positively titanic giant, with the assistance of many disembodied arms, all in the middle of a massive freezer in a haunted mansion on an island that was converted into giant pirate ship sailing in the scariest sea known to sentient life this side of the Red Line?

Not as much fun as you’d think.

I mean, the experience itself was novel, sure, but that was it, and the novelty wore off fast. I mean, the stench of it all and the awkward position were bad enough, but what I really hated? It was that, in spite of standing a mere foot from a pillar of continuous hellfire, I was still freezing my tailbone off. Not to mention I was possessed by an urge. An urge I was fighting, but I was also about to give in to.

"Are we there yet?" I complained. Not whined, no matter what anyone else says.

"If you're feeling bored FROM THE MONOTONY, I can put on A SOUNDTRACK~" Soundbite offered, the innocent smile he was wearing doing absolutely nothing to mask the golden glints of mischief that his eyes had become.

"Does it have anything to do with the words 'fire', 'blaze' or 'inferno'?" Conis dryly asked.

Those golden glints of mischief immediately looked away, accompanied by an 'innocent' whistle. "...MAYBE?"

"Then kindly shut up," we bit out as one.

"Hmph, spoil—!" Soundbite started to huff, before blinking in confusion. "TURKEY?"

Conis cocked her eyebrow at my partner in confusion. "Is… that a Blue Sea expression, or… ?"

"NO, I MEAN THAT I SMELL TURKEY!" the snail clarified. "ROAST turkey at that!"

I blinked in surprise, but a tentative sniff at the air was all I needed to confirm my partner's words - though only for a second, because the moment I caught whiff of whatever the hell he was sniffing, I had to clamp my hand over my nose with a groan of disgust. Yeah, that smelled like turkey alright… if it was three months old and infested with maggots!

"Oh, what the hell?!" I gagged miserably. Sweet hellfire, like the stench of roasting pork wasn't going to put me off animal flesh for weeks as it was.

"Ergh, that is rank!" Conis concurred, sticking her tongue out miserably. "What, did we hit a patch of gases or something!??"

"Wait, did the smell down there just change?" Chopper eagerly cut in. "Stop firing for a second and check the wall! There's a chance you might have broken through the flesh and reached the spinal column!"

"Wait, really?!" I perked up, hastily letting go of Lassoo's trigger and thus allowing the mutt to shift
back into his hybrid form, at which point he all but collapsed on my shoulder.

"Th… ank… goo… dne… ss…" Lassoo wheezed, his tongue listlessly lolling out of his slack maw. "I'm… gonna… sleep for a few… days…"

"Lassoo?" I asked in concern as he panted against me.

"He's just overheated, Cross," Conis assured me as she waved the smoke off of her bazooka's glowing muzzle. "Keeping that stream up for so long must have been pushing against his limit. You're lucky he's a living weapon; otherwise, you'd have to look out for barrel warping."

"Mmph, makes sense…" I nodded uncertainly as I helped Lassoo into his harness before scrutinizing the wall of the throat 'above' us. I was extremely grateful to see slightly charred bone through the crumbling ash that had once been esophageal flesh. As I was doing so, though, a thought occurred to me. "Ah, Conis? You wouldn't happen to have a spare barrel on you, would you?"

Our gunner gave me an odd look. "Nnnooo, though I'm going to see about talking to Usopp and Franky about fixing that. Why do you ask?"

"I ask because unless Lassoo can find it in himself to hock a few of his high-calibre loogies—"

"Kiss my exhaust vent, slavedriver," my gun growled halfheartedly.

"Then we're going to have to find a way to make our way around this gaping abyss so that you can blast his neck out with your Reject Dial."

Conis paled in horror before hastily slapping a desperate smile on her face. "C-Can we go with a plan C? Or D or… anything that doesn't involve me blowing my shoulder out!?

"Er… alternative solution might be advisable, actually," Chopper commented with new hesitation. "I feel like a bit of a dumbass for only just realizing it, but…Oars' spine is as wide as Conis is tall, and most of that will be pure calcium, even denser than human bone to deal with the stresses of moving at that size. I… am honestly at a loss for just how you're going to sever it."

"Er…" Conis and I exchanged uncertain glances, trying to come up with an answer between us, but… yeah, we had nothing.

Well, thankfully we were saved from having to come up with an answer because someone else did it for us.

"MY TIME TO SHINE!"

I snapped a shocked look over my shoulder. "Soundbite!?"

"You know it!" my partner in madness cackled before glancing upward. "CHOPPER! MY BIOLOGY'S A BIT RUSTY—READ, NON-EXISTENT—but basically speaking, this lug's spine should be one chain of barely interrupted bone, YAH?"

"Eh… it's a bit more complicated than that, but for our purposes, yes."

"PERFECT! And, follow-up question… frozen as this bastard is, HE WON'T CRUMBLE if his spine as a whole ceases to be, AYE?"

"Eeerrr…?" Chopper coughed uncertainly. "I… would not recommend sticking around in there longer than you have to if that were the case, but apart from that… you should be fine? Trust me, this
"Soundbite, what exactly are you planning?" I asked, cautiously winding my line around my arm and slipping my headphones on in preparation for whatever the hell was about to happen. The fact that Conis didn’t even need to be prompted to do the same was not very reassuring.

Soundbite bared his teeth eagerly as he affixed the 'ceiling' of the throat with a smirk. "BRACE YOURSELVES, mes ami. THINGS ARE ABOUT TO GET very, very..."

And just like that, it felt like the air in the throat stopped dead.

"Quiet." Soundbite's maw widened malevolently even as he started to grind his teeth together. It was subtle at first, but bit by bit the surrounding air started to vibrate. No, not just the air. I was vibrating, right down to my bones.

"GASTRO-BLAST," rumbled a legion of the damned.

The screeching that followed was… it was beyond words. It penetrated past the ears, past the brain and rammed straight into the very soul, threatening to shake it loose from its metaphysical housings. And somehow? It managed to actually get louder. And louder and louder and louder until finally—!

CRACK!

The ceiling of mottled white above us splintered like a pane of glass.


I stared at my partner in awe before casting a fearful glance around as tremors started to shake the thrice-dead flesh we were surrounded by. "Sooooundbiiiiite, what the hell did you just do!?"

"Ooooh, ya know," Soundbite leered faux-innocently. "NOTHING TOO BIG… 'cept for shattering this FAT BASTARD'S C1-7! Good luck trying to get him to SO MUCH AS SCRATCH HIS ASS!"

Conis gaped at my snail in awe. "Soundbite, I officially take back every last mean thing I have ever said about you."

"EH!? YOU’VE NEVER said shit about me!"

"Ah…” Conis froze up for a moment before plastering a sheepish grin on her face. "Riiiight, I… never actually said those things aloud, did I? Aheheh… any chance we could just strike the last minute or so from the record?"

"THE HELL WE CAN! What the hell did you—!?"

"Whatever argument you're having," Chopper cut in with no small amount of urgency. "I recommend you do it outside of the zombified super-giant that just got its central structural support neutered. Just a reminder."

As if on cue, Oars' entire body creaked ominously, all of us exchanging nervous glances at the sound of ice cracking.

"Yeaaaaah, probably a good idea," I nervously agreed, our gunner and I already starting to make our way back up our respective lines. "Anything else? Any word from the front lines?"
"No battle updates, I'm afraid, or at least nothing really that pertinent..." the doctor assured us... before causing us all to tense as he switched to a tone of voice that caused Soundbite's grin to widen to utterly mad levels. "But I, on the other hand, have learned something quite interesting from Hogback. Something I think you'll be extremely interested in, Cross..."

"Ah..." I exchanged wary glances with my partner. '"Interested' in what way exactly?"

Somehow, Chopper's grin somehow managed to stretch even wider. "The 'extreme amounts of collateral damage' way."

"...well," I slowly matched Chopper's grin tooth for tooth. "You're right, good doctor. That does sound extremely interesting."

Soundbite swallowed heavily before swiveling his eyestalks to glance at Conis. "Would you believe that there's a curse from CROSS'S WORLD THAT GOES 'May you live in interesting times'?"

Conis swallowed heavily as she glanced between me and my snail's borrowed mouth. "Yes, Soundbite. Yes, I very much would."

-o-

"Ragh! Stand still you little leathery shit!"

"Not on your unlife, blubber-butt!" Raphey taunted casually as she swayed back like a strand of kelp, Gallant Hippo's sword harmlessly swishing through the space she'd occupied. The instant the blade was lodged in the soil, she snapped back up and lashed her sais out, using one to trap the blade in place and the other to stab several holes in the patchwork palaver's hide before it managed to wrench itself free and leap back, putting some distance between it and her. Still, for what little damage Raphey had managed to cause the zombie, she still felt she'd managed to accurately measure the zombie's worth.

And quite frankly, she was not impressed.

The Wild Zombie commander, Gallant Hippo, certainly had power and was fast for his size, but whoever'd gotten their shadow ganked to grant him his sword abilities had no idea how to fight a smaller, nimbler opponent with short weapons.

Sure, the longsword-and-buckler combo was well suited against other swordsmen or someone with a longarm, but if her opponent were still alive he'd have likely passed out from blood loss by now, and that was only if he'd managed to avoid acquiring a nick in his femoral artery.

In short? The female of the TDWS had complete confidence in the fact that she could take him.

THWACK!

"GAGH!"

Then Lola flew past her and Raphey was harshly reminded of the other opponent she was facing, who she felt distinctly less confident about.

"You okay, Lola?" Raphey called out tersely, parrying Gallant's continued assault with one eye while keeping an eye out for her other rampaging opponent with the other.

"I'm not out yet!" came the Lola's only slightly dizzy reply, followed by the sound of someone hocking a loogie. "Ah... though I really need to get off this island soon to see a dentist, 'cause I'm
starting to run outta-!

"RAAAAAAAAGH!!"

"Woahshit!"

Raphey ground her teeth in irritation as Zola suddenly charged by her, murder in the warthog's eyes. Her mortal counterpart only barely got up her blades in time to initiate a lock. Hastily weighing her options in face of the war-hog's (and no way in hell was that a typo) fury, Raphey came to a decision.

"Sorry, bub," she snarled up at her leather-necked opponent, causing him to twitch in irritation. "But I!" She parried his downward swing to the left. "Don't have time!" Another parry, this time to the right. "To play with you!" A 'relatively' simple six-foot dead leap above a leg-high (or tail-high as it were) slash. "ANYMORE!"

"Yooooou!" Gallant Hippo snorted out a nostril-load of steam, his rage spiking to the point where he threw his shield aside and strangled his sword's hilt with both hands. "Play with THIS!" And with that, the zombie lashed out with a titanic overhead strike.

An overhead strike that Raphey met with a defiant smirk. "Gladly."

An inch before the sword met her skull, Raphey snapped her flippers up, sais crossed and offset just so...

**SKRANG!**

So that the oversized blade slipped neatly into the gap between the weapons' prongs and the central shafts of her sais. With her newfound leverage, all it took was a simple twist-and-jerk of her weapons and Gallant Hippo's sword snapped between the weapons like a dry twig.

Gallant Hippo wasted any chance to counter by holding his sword up to his face and staring dumbly at it. Complete with the dropped jaw. Raphey had enough savviness to wait to roll her eyes until after she'd lobbed a lump of salt into the gaping maw, but it didn't diminish the exasperation she felt.

"Well, that was disappointing," she groused. "Seriously, what's a chick gotta do to get a decent fight around—"

"—aaaaaaaaaa—"

The dugong blinked in confusion. "—here? What the—?" All of a sudden, Raphey's instincts blared on high alert. She ducked her head—

"AAAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!"

— and winced sympathetically as Lola flew clean over her and slammed clean into the trunk of an admirably sturdy tree. After sparing her newfound ally a sympathetic glance, Raphey hesitantly turned around and swallowed heavily as she came face to steam-snorting snout with Zola, whose eyes were positively blazing with an unholy rage.

"Oh, the things I do for a good fight," Raphey groaned, slowly raising her sais into a defensive guard. "Hey, pigsticker!"

Zola's unholy rage, originally split between her and Lola, fully shifted onto the dugong, who couldn't help but allow herself a shiver. But even in face of such fury, Raphey said what she needed to say.
"Your warts have some hog on them."

Granted, what she needed to say wasn't exactly the smartest thing to say, but going by how steam practically blasted out of Zola's ears, it had the desired effect.

"Gon' kill you! KIIIILL YOOOOOU!" Zola roared, swinging her blades overhead at Raphey, who responded by raising her sais to meet them in a rehash of the maneuver she'd pulled on Gallant Hippo.

That course of action turned out to be a rather grievous mistake.

Two blades meant half the leverage from each sai, and with Zola abandoning all pretenses of technique and subtlety in favor of berserker rage, victory now came from brute strength rather than skill. And in the end, no matter how disproportionately strong Raphey and her fellow dugongs were, there was no way in hell she could win a direct clash of muscle against someone who outweighed her almost ten times over. As a result...

'Badtimebadtimebadtime!' Raphey mentally chanted as she was forced to backpedal, reduced to ineffectively flailing her sais in an effort to stave off the storm of blades and paying for her head's continued connection to her body with an alarming number of dents. 'Okay, so maybe making all enemies angrier isn't a valid tactic after all, I know this now. Now if only I could actually find a way to survive this fuckup so that I can actually apply it!'

Luckily for the pink-bandana'd dugong, before Zola could either overwhelm her or break her weapons, Lola—battered and bruised like hell but still kicking like a mule—came charging out of nowhere, her own blades lashing out in a flurry of slices and stabs that bit deep into her undead counterparts necrotized flesh. It would have been impressive, if not for one small problem: Zola wasn't stopping.

In fact, the zombie found it in herself to lash one of her swords out and send Lola skidding back a few feet before renewing her onslaught on Raphey's guard.

Still, despite the rain of blows, Raphey still managed to lock eyes with Lola as she stabilized her footing. The pirate captain stared back, an unspoken message passing between them.

'Separate attacks are useless.'

Lola, her footing regained, hastily ran behind Raphey's steady retreat and prepared herself. Then, as Zola raised a sword to cleave Raphey's skull open like a rotten melon, it was met not with a sai but Lola's crossed blades. Gritting her teeth, the dugong took the opportunity to jam snag Zola's sword with her sai and twist her blade anew. Thankfully, for all that the warthog's swords were larger and of better quality than Gallant Hippo' arms, you could only make a sword so strong with conventional steel and the sword swiftly shattered under the longitudinal strain.

Down to one sword, Zola had to actually defend for the first time since the fight began, Lola's twin blades seeking out stitches while Raphey dug a packet of salt out from her shell and prepared it for lobbing, an eager grin on her muzzle.

"Aaaaalright, now hold still, you swine…" she muttered, tracking Zola and Lola's back-and-forth. Zola did not hold still, but luckily she was also rather predictable in her burning rage, so it wasn't long before Raphey got the pattern down. "Just... a bit... Gotcha!" Snapping her flipper out, the dugong let the salt fly. The packet flew true, entering Zola's mouth mid-howl and resulting in the zombie immediately slumping bonelessly to the ground.
"Yes!" the dugong whooped, dashing over to where Lola was catching her breath and raising her flipper. "High-one, sista!"

"Ye—! Ah... wait a second..." Lola's whoop died in her throat mid-handraise. "Uh... Raphey? You... salted her, right? Then... where's my shadow?"

Raphey paused, blinking in confusion. "Eh? The heck are you talking about, it's right... ah..." The blood evacuated her face as she replayed the last few seconds through her mind. "It's... uh... wait a seco—"

"Tusk Coronet!"

Both fighters whirled around just in time to catch a tusk in the side, the sharp bones digging into their flesh as the sheer force of the impact, plus a head-buck from the zombie, sent them both tumbling.

"I've got you now!" Zola crowed, slashing her weapon furiously even as she yanked the salt-packet out from the gap in her teeth where it had gotten caught. "You're gonna pay for insulting me! You'll wish you'd never said that there isn't a blue ribbon big enough to convince anyone to marry me!"

"No one said that!" Raphey snapped as she shakily pushed herself onto her tail. Unfortunately, in the face of the hog's undaunted charge, all Raphey could do was ineffectually fling her sai at the zombie before dodging to the side. The weapon clanged harmlessly off of one of Zola's tusks, but she didn't even try to change course due to her rage being focused entirely on—

"Lola!" Raphey shouted at her comrade in arms, who'd been disarmed in the impact and was, more importantly, standing right in her zombie's path of destruction.

Lola, for her part, could only flinch, clutching at the gaping wound in her side as she watched the impending doom bearing down upon her. Her face twisted up in uncertainty and anguish, but then her eyes set in iron-willed determination and she... anchored her stance and spread her arms wide?!

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU—!? RIP TIDE!" Raphey barked, taking off after the charging warthog. Even as she did so, though, she knew she wouldn't make it. She just knew that she wasn't anywhere near good enough with the move yet to get that much distance in one Rip Tide. Zola would get there first, smear Lola all over the dirt, and then do the same to... Raphey had to do something, something—!

And then, just like that, impact. Pirate and zombie met...

"RAAAAA—WHAAAA!"

And to Raphey's shock, Lola didn't even budge. In fact, the captain had managed to grab hold of her shadow's zombie by the tusks, and was even managing hold it back!

"Raphey!" Lola shouted, freeing one hand to grab her zombie's upper jaw. With a shove, the skull wrenched in half with a loud SNAP! "NOW!"

The dugong, coming out of her Rip Tide, acted instinctively before she could even begin to formulate a question. Her flipper practically blurring, Raphey withdrew another salt packet and, after making sure it was partially open this time, tossed it into Zola's gaping maw.

This time, the warthog properly gagged before slumping in Lola's arms, her umbral soul spilling from her mouth and immediately pooling at the ground beneath Lola.

The pirate captain Shakily let go of the freshly dead corpse, staring at the barely visible imprint she
was casting before sinking to her knees, tears of joy streaming down her face. Slowly, Shakily, as if she couldn't believe it, she ran her fingers over her shadow, her soul, herself. "Straw Hats… I will never, ever be able to repay this debt."

"Yeahyeahyeah, time for that later, now hurry and give me your hands!" Raphey snarled as she rushed over to her ally and grabbed her wrists. "Sweet Sobek, that maneuver was gutsy as all hell, but it sure wasn't smart! We need to get these things bandaged ASAP!"

"Wha-ah!" Lola flinched as she tried to wrench her hands free of the sea mammal's grip. "T-T-That's really not necessary, I'm totally fine, you don't have to-!"

"The hell I don't!" Raphey snapped as she tried to get a look at the pirate's hands. "I mean, seriously! After something like that, your palms must be ripped to-!...shreds?" The dugong trailed off, boggled at the sight of Lola's totally uninjured palms. Heck, they were better than alright, they were... they were pristine! As gleaming and solid-looking as though they were wrought of pure steel, even!

Wait a minute.

"What the—? Powers?! But Cross never said anything about you... but this looks like armo—!...wait... armor... Arname—MMPH!?"

"Shhhhhut up!" Lola hissed desperately as she kept a hand clamped over Raphey's muzzle, her head on a swivel, cold sweat coating her from head to toe. "Don't use that word, don't you dare use that word or any others like it about me! I've worked hard to keep it a secret, but the trees and walls literally have ears, and if anyone finds out about it, my life is forfeit!"

"Mmm-bwah! Thanks..." Raphey gasped in relief as she was released before pinning Lola with a confused glare. "And what the hell do you mean 'forfeit'!? You have H—that! That means you're practically invincible, especially in Paradise, right?"

"Right and wrong!" Lola growled out miserably as she yanked at her pigtails. "Yes, that is fantastically strong in the weaker seas, but that's the problem! That-users outside of the New World stick out like sore thumbs, so if anyone looks into me they'll find my name, and if they find my name, then they find me, and then... then I'm dead!"

"Er..." Raphey tilted her head in confusion. "'They'?

Lola chewed at her lip before hanging her head with a defeated sigh. "My... My family, alright? If word gets back to my family about where I am, then they'll come for me. And then, they'll... they'll..." She lapsed into an uncomfortable silence.

"...that bad?" Raphey asked quietly.

An overtone of horror overcame the pirate captain as she swallowed heavily. "If I never see most of my family again before I die," she said in a slow and deliberate tone of voice. "Then I will die very happy."

Raphey was silent for a few seconds before nodding firmly. "Your secret is safe with me."

Lola sighed in relief, her whole body uncoiling as the tension exited it. "Thank you..."

"Thank us all later," Raphey waved her off as she started to turn towards where the rest of the fighting was taking place. "For now, that's one more shadow down, a load more to go. Let's get back to it!"
"Agreed!" Lola nodded, slamming her palm into her fist.

The two made to move forward, and almost immediately they both slumped down onto the ground, clutching their sides in pain. "After we take a second to fix the fact that we're bleeding out," Raphey grunted.

"Agreed…"

-0-

Glancing back to confirm that the zombie he'd been fighting wasn't in sight, Donny leaped up into the nearest tree, his lack of Tidal Swim doing nothing to slow his ascension.

"And those bastards… teased me… for learning… parkour," Donny huffed in frustration as he balanced on a branch, leaning against the tree trunk while he caught his breath. "But… my rage against them… will be fucking nothing… compared to what I'll do to Cross… if he knew about this ELEVEN-TIMES-DAMNED—!

"SO! Hiding up in a tree, eh?! Thinkin' it's all safe and sound? LEMME SHOW YA SOMETHIN'!"

"Oh fuck me," Donny groaned breathlessly, his expression turning bland at the steady thumps vibrating up the trunk of the tree. Several seconds later, the vibrating stopped, and he deadpanned, "Timber" as his perch slowly tipped forward.

The dugong barely reacted as the tree crashed to the ground, unceremoniously dumping the amphibian onto the unforgiving ground. Snorting, he flipped himself onto his tail to face the grinning, ax-crazy zombie, staff at the ready.

"As you can see!" Bill laughed heartily as he leaned on his ax. "You must be veeeeery careful when you're on the battlefield, because ya never know when a random lumberjack might decide to wander along and decide 'ta break into a musical number straight outta MONTY PYTHON!"

Donny's eye twitched furiously as he tried and failed to parse that statement. "Who the hell is—!?"

"BUUUUUURP!"

"—WAGH!?"

The dugong let out a yelp of terror as he hastily dove to the side to avoid a gout of flame that charbroiled the space he'd been occupying a second ago.

"Urp! Oh, excuse me!" Bill coughed as he smacked his fist against his chest, lit up by the flames peeking out from under his ribcage. "Shouldn'ta eaten' that there West Blue cuisine before fighting! Spicy buggers, it feels like my insides are on fire!"

"THEY ARE ON FIRE, YOU CRAZY SON OF A BITCH!" Donny howled, his patience ground down to almost nothing.

Bill glanced down at himself, blinking in apparent surprise at the flames burning in his midsection. "Huh. Wouldja look at that, so they are. Well, you know what they say! CONSTANT VIGI—!"

"Rip Tide!" Donny snarled out, slamming his tail into the ground and launching himself at the incendiary revenant.

"Ah, jogging!" Bill sniffed primly, his only reaction to his opponent's disappearance being to step
Donny, locked in his blur of speed, didn't notice his target's relocation until he hit his intended destination, by which point it was too late and Donny was sent sprawling tail over teakettle. "They're sneaky buggers, AIN'T THEY!? Never see them until you're SNAPPED UP LIKE A SNAPPER AT A SEA KING BAR MITZ—ah, whoops!" Bill lifted his leg and blinked at the blatant absence of a foot at the end of his leg. "Weeeell, looks like I'm the one on the backstep now! HAH HAH HAH HAH—!

"Oh, will you give it a rest already?!

"—GWAH!?!" Fire Zombie Bill yelped in shock when he was suddenly face-to-face with close to fifty pounds of pissed off dugong swinging his very large and very heavy stick at his head. It took all the speed the General Zombie had to snap his ax up and keep up with the Dugong, fending off blow after blow from the student.

"Let me tell you something, you literal flaming idiot!" Donny snarled in the revenant's face, his adrenaline allowing him to forge through the heat the living pyre was giving off. "You are the most infuriating, reckless, whacked-out nutjob I have ever had the sheer displeasure of fighting, and that is damn well saying something!"

"I'm sorry to hear that, sonny boy!" Bill replied, voice dripping with insincerity. "In fact, that—!

Donny's staff jamming into his throat tragically aborted that line. "I said," the dugong bit out, shoving the General Zombie onto his back. "Give. It. A rest. Because on top of all that stuff I just said?!" The dugong leaped into the air, his staff raised above his head and ready to strike his foe down once and for all via the salt paste on the weapon's tip. "YOU'RE NOT FUNNY!"

"Not… funny…?" Bill parroted as his opponent came down from the sky, sounding bewildered. "Not… funny…"

All at once, a change came over the zombie. Stiff tension drained away, and the underbite grin fell away into a light, flat smile. Languidly standing, his hand shot out, grabbing Donny's staff before he could react.

"What the—GRK!"

And in one fluid motion, the other hand lashed out, flaming fingers searing Donny's flesh as he bodily rammed into the nearest tree.

"Bitch," Fire Zombie Bill's mouth drawled, darkness and murder oozing from every decibel. "I am hilarious. " The zombie's arm then swung out to the side and flung Donny halfway through another tree.

Taking a minute to shake off the pain and dizziness, the dugong groggily pulled himself up. One look at the advancing Bill, his head held low and ax dragging in the ground as he slowly stumped his way towards Donny was all he needed.

"Nope!" he declared. "Rip Tide!"

Blurring from existence, he reappeared behind a nearby tree. Poking his around the trunk, he saw Bill paused several feet away, glancing about.

"Okay…" he sighed in relief. "Right. How am I gonna beat this guy? This super strong… super crazy zombie… with a fire ax…" Groaning, he slumped onto his flippers. "Oh, this is gonna suck. Why couldn't Leo be here? Or hell, Raphey, or even Mikey! They'd be all over this shit!"
"Well, you're right about that."

Only Donny's prone position saved him from the ax biting into his snout. Instead, it sprayed splinters everywhere on its way to cleaving straight through the tree he'd been hiding behind. Slowly, the dugong glanced up at the grinning, flame-wreathed face of the ax-wielding devil himself.

"You don't strike me as the type to enjoy something like this," Bill drawled, raising the ax.

"Shell Body!" Donny hastily yelped, crossing his flippers. And none too soon, the ax screaming down to slam into the iron-hard guard.

Sadly, 'mere' iron turned out to be inadequate to the task. Axe and body collided with a loud clang, the head biting slightly into his flippers. Donny flinched from the trench rent into his limbs, and Bill didn't give him time to counter. Instead, he raised the ax, dugong still attached, and slammed them both into the nearest tree.

"Argh!" Donny yelped, both from the pain of his collision with the tree and the ax head biting an even deeper crevice in his flippers. "Son of a—! Back! Off!"

"Sure." And just like that, a boot planted itself in Donny's sternum and wrenched the ax from his flippers, leaving Donny to slump to the roots, cradling the rent flesh of his arms.

"Argh..." Donny groaned, glancing up in confusion. "Wha-? W-Why did you—?"

"Weeeeell, you see..." 'Bill' replied, swinging his ax up and balancing it behind his neck. "The thing is, at the moment, I'm... a bit at a loss, really. I don't usually have to... ad-lib this much, usually have time to plan my routine..." The zombie's manic grin widened as he took a step towards the prone dugong. "So! What I need you to do... is run."

Donny blinked. "Run?"

"Yes!" Bill swung his ax out and pointed it into the woods. "Run. Flee. Abscond. Whatever verb you want to use, I don't particularly care. Just... do both me and yourself a favor, would you? Be creative about it..." He swung his weapon down so that the blade was hovering right in the middle of Donny's face, madness glinting in his rotted eyes. "Or else."

Donny stared with bald-faced shock at the zombie. He was... giving him a chance to run? Why would—?

The sudden appearance of the zombie after he'd fled the first time popped up in his brain. Right, because he could do that and it looked like he was seriously sadistic. Still, Donny wasn't about to look more time to live in the mouth, however furtive. But how to be creative...?

"What would everyone else do?" he muttered under his breath, internally grateful Bill seemed to be inclined to wait for the moment. Though the way he was running his finger over his ax's blade did not exactly inspire what one would consider 'confidence'.

Unbidden, an image of Leo popped into his head, blades drawn and a determined look in his eyes. "Well if it were me, I'd just chop him up, easy-peasy!"

'...yeah, save that I have neither the tools nor the skills to actually do that, you sword-con.'

An image of Boss popped into his head, chest puffed out and his cigar pointed straight at him. "I'd hit him hard enough to knock his head off his neck!"
'If I could do that, I'd have done it already!'

Boss faded away, to be replaced by Raphey, who was sporting a wide smile and giving him a thumbs-up. "I'd use you as bait and run!"

Donny's expression actually fell flat at that. 'Gee, thanks.'

"Heh, no prob… heeeey wait a minute, I'm a representation of how you view the real me… YOU JACKASS, YOU REALLY THINK I'M THAT MUCH OF A BITCH!? WHEN I GET MY HANDS ON YOU, I'M GONNA—!"

Donny hastily derailed that train of thought in favor of conjuring Mikey into his mind's eye, smiling as though he'd just come up with the best prank of all time. And the idea he proposed was…

Donny blinked in surprise. Of all the things he'd been expecting, it sure as hell wasn't an idea that was… honestly not that terrible.

"SCREW YOU, ASSHOLE!"

Jerking out of his thoughts, Donny snapped his attention up, took a swift survey of his opponent and identified the one point on Bill's body that wasn't on fire: his (presumably) fireproof helmet.

"As Mikey always says, if it's stupid and it works," the intellectual amphibian muttered, moving his tail into position. "Then it's not stupid. Rip Tide!"

Bill sighed as the dugong zipped away. "Spoilsport. Fun while it lasted though. Ah well, plenty of other intruders to—" He paused, his eyes narrowing as he saw Donny throw his staff into the ground and then landed on it, the wood bending alarmingly. "Hmm."

What bends back must return, and so the staff snapped forward, hurling Donny at Bill, the latter of whom raised his ax to block. Instead of getting chopped in half, though, the dugong managed a graceful flip in midair and landed on Bill's helmet.

"RIP TIDE!"

And then kicked off again, soaring off into the forest while simultaneously sending Bill for a loop - which in this case meant twisting his skull around a full 180 degrees.

Bill, for his part, was left stumbling around as he tried to synch his newly disjointed perspective with his body. Or rather, his body stumbled around while his head tried to direct it appropriately.

"No, no, left. Left, you ignoramus! Just reach up and twist me to the left! Nonono, my left! Mmrph, this is why I'm the brains of this operation…"

Far away (but not too far), Donny leaned against a tree, a silly grin on his face. "That worked… I can't believe that worked!" The grin promptly died painfully when he realized he was missing something. "...except that I left my staff behind, damn it, Mikey! Ergh..." He kneaded the bridge of his nose miserably. "Great, just great, that's gonna make this even harder…"

'This' being beating Bill. Not an easy task, even with his staff. The only plan he could think of was drawing the ax-crazy zombie to someone who could actually beat him…

Slow clapping sounded out through the clearing. "Well! I gotta admit, that was creative. Props!"

Buuuut it looked like he wouldn't have time for that. Gulping, Donny angled his head back to stare at
Bill as he loomed over him, preemptively preparing his Shell Body.

"So," the zombie stated, tapping his fingers on the handle of his ax. "Wanna see a magic trick?"

For a brief moment, Donny pondered saying 'no', but one look at the crazed zombie's grin killed that idea stone dead. "Uh... sure?"

A coin flashed into Bill's free hand, an odd silver piece with one side marred by a jagged 'X'. "Got this from an old friend," the zombie informed him, twirling the coin between his bony fingers. "Now, I'm going to make this coin… disappear." And just like that, the coin vanished.

Worse, Donny couldn't tell where it'd gone, and he was pretty good at spotting sleight-of-hand tricks. Then Bill reached for him, and the tension ratcheted up another order of magnitude. He stayed still, eyes, on the ax, as his opponent grasped something at the back of his head…

**WHAM!**

And then Bill pulled Donny's head into his knee.

"GAGH!" Donny wheezed in agony as he reeled back, the pain centered around the chunk of metal he could feel lodged square between his eyes.

"There we go…” Bill drawled as Donny stumbled back, his mind spinning as he tried to grasp at the coin lodged in his freaking skull. "That'll do. Let's mop this up so that I can have some time to plan out a real schtick! But for now?" The blazing revenant's grin widened as he raised his ax above his head. "It's time to cut and run!"

"Grgh... Shell... Body..." Donny mumbled out dizzily.

The axe came down, and bounced off of Donny's skull, the sheer recoil actually wrenching the zombie's arm out of its socket.

The dugong's eyes refocused, and he smirked victoriously at the disarmed zombie. "Steel Hermit variant."

Bill blinked stupidly, taking in both his lack of a limb and Donny's still intact skull and as he did so a change came over the flaming revenant. In an instant, he stood upright again, the light in his eyes changed and he let his jaw jut out to an almost comical level.

"Yeah, that's always a problem!" Bill - the original, comical Bill - stated casually. "Y'go out to chop some wood, you raise your ax, ya miss, and hit your foot!" He paused, thinking. "Or a rock, which knocks your arm off. That could happen, too. Ah well!" He raised his remaining hand in order to shoot Donny a two-fingered salute. "Be right back with my arm and more helpful tips for how to survive a war zone! Hang tight!" And with that, the blazing zombie loped off into the underbrush after his limb.

Donny blinked as he processed the turn of events. 'OK, so the good news is that the... I'm guessing shadow is back in control, meaning I'm no longer dealing with a sadistic psychopath who wants me dead. Instead, I'm dealing with a lunatic who acts like a sadistic psychopath whose antics are going to kill me, unless the original mind takes over first and splits my freaking skull in two! WHAT THE HELL DO I DO-!?" Donny hastily rapped his 'knuckles' against hi shead. 'Alright alright alright, no more freaking out... just... just think, just think. Just think of how the hell I'm supposed to outsmart... that...'

Almost as soon as the train of thought ran through Donny's mind, he slowly turned his head to
observe the flicker of flames that indicated Bill's return.

'Dumbass,' Donny finished, heaving a defeated sigh. 'Well... if Mikey's way worked once, may as well try it again.'

"GEEZE!" the dugong exclaimed at the top of his lungs and with more cured pork than he'd ever risk letting into his voice with Luffy around, just as a newly whole Bill emerged from the underbrush. "This fight is really wearing on!" He ghosted his hand over his shell, ensuring that he garnered Bill's undivided attention. "I'd better have a snack to keep up my energy!"

Moving fast, Donny reached into his shell, pulled something out, and the second his hand was halfway to his mouth, Bill all but blurred over to him and snatched the object out of his flipper.

"Mid-battle snack, huh!?" the zombie barked, looking over the riceball he was holding. "Innocent doodad, ain't it? A nice and yummy treat ta get yer spirits up! LEMME SHOW YA SOMETHING!"

Without further ado, Bill tossed the snack in the air and swallowed it in a single gulp.

"Mm, tasty!" Bill crowed, rubbing his belly. "What was in it?"

"Ooooh, you know, the usual." Donny crossed his fins behind his head as he ever-so-innocently swayed back and forth on his tail. "Rice, a bit of seaweed, some salmon..." A malevolent glint lit up the dugong's eye. "And salt."

The Fire Zombie froze up mid-rub, his eyes shooting wide in shocked realization. "UH-OH!"

BOOM!

"GAH!" Donny leaped back in shock and terror when the zombie's cranium suddenly exploded in a geyser of umbral essence. "What the hell!? Damn it, even in double-death, that bastard just cannot do anything even remotely normal, can he!? Urgh..." The dugong glanced down at the chunks of... being that were sprayed over his shell. "This is gonna take forever to wash out..."

"Hey, he took down Bill!"

"Oh, come on..." Donny groaned, turning to the crowd of zombies that had just walked out of the underbrush with a somewhat-rusty stance for unarmed combat. "Alright, bring it on, you—!"

The zombies surged forward, Donny tensed, ready for combat, and then blinked in surprise as said zombies surged around him, instead going for Bill. Drawing axes, swords, and other sharp instruments, they descended on his body, hacking, and bludgeoning and just ravaging the body until it was little more than a stain on the ground. The dugong could only stare throughout the process.

"Soooo..." Donny drew out at last. "I'm guessing he always acted like that?"

"Yes," one of the zombies spat. "Hopefully, this will make sure he never comes back again... though..." He hung his head with a despondent sob. "I'm really not counting on it. Not after the killer dolphin."

"Or the rabid coyote pack!"

"Or that extreme chili con carne contest!"

"Riiiiight..." Donny muttered, a hefty drop of sweat hanging from his skull "And... what about me?"
"Meh, we don't care," another zombie grunted dismissively. "You're all screwed no matter what we do to you, so we couldn't care less. For now, we're gonna break into the alcohol stores and celebrate that we've *finally* gotten us a reprieve! See ya!"

Donny briefly toyed with the thought of pointing out how logically alcohol wouldn't do much to long-necrotized gray matter, but he reconsidered in light of the fact that, to reiterate, he was speaking to individuals *with* necrotized gray matter in the first place. After all, at the moment, he had far bigger fish to fry.

"Starting with where the *hell* did I leave my staff…" Donny muttered, scratching the back of his skull.

-o-

Boss sighed as he gazed into the fog shrouding Thriller Bark. "Y'know," he mused conversationally. "When I came out into these seas, I expected two things: that I'd grow stronger, and that I'd get a lot of great fights. I've sure as heck gotten the first, can't complain about that, but the second…"

Idly hopping back, he watched as a multi-armed zombie wearing a cracked and triple-eyed mask dove past him, claws swishing through empty air.

"Case in point, there's you," Boss continued reassuringly, waving his cigar at the zombie. "I mean, you're not *bad*. Those extra limbs are an interesting gambit, after all, and you don't see armblades like that often. And heck, compared to those fishmen in Mock Town, or that zipper guy, you're pretty good." He absentmindedly patted a trio of thin red lines in his side. "Hell, you hit me! Not many people can do that, y'know! Now, c'mon." He chomped down on his cigar and pounded his fists together eagerly. "No more playing around! I want to fight you for *real!*"

Despite the mask, Boss had the distinct feeling that his opponent was trying to incinerate him with his glare.

Boss blinked in surprise as the beri finally dropped. "You... actually *were* fighting for real, weren't you?" He dropped his head into a bow. "My sincerest condolences."

"WHY THE HELL ARE YOU PITYING ME!?” the zombie roared, jumping straight for him, blades raised.

Boss' entire demeanor shifted, a vicious glint shining in his eye. "Because you *deserve it*." And with that he swayed under the strike, swung his hook about the zombie and then Rip Tided away, dragging his opponent along for the ride. Upon coming to a halt, Boss gave his rope dart an extra firm yank, accelerating the General Zombie's airspeed to the maximum.

"Squall Pistol," Boss smirked sadistically as he reared his 'finger' back. "Water Spout Shot!"

The self-identified Jorogumo's flight ended with him getting all but impaled on Boss' 'finger'. He only remained in place for a moment, though, as the *second* Boss's brawn overpowered his momentum, the zombie was sent careening back into the nearest tree… and then through it to slam into the one behind it… and then onto the one behind *that* one. Needless to say, beyond a few scant twitches and spasms it *couldn't* have moved even if it wanted to.

Boss observed his opponent's downed form for a few moments before scratching the back of his skull with a defeated sigh. "So disappointing," he groaned. Then he blinked as a dozen gun barrels were shoved in his face. "...well, this is certainly *one* way to make a guy feel special." He glanced around at his newest set of opponents, but stopped and grinned when his gaze happened to go
upward. "Too bad I won't be your dance partner at the moment. Shell Body."

The zombies blinked, their confusion lasting just long enough for a black sphere to land between them—

**BLAM!**

—and detonate, sending solid rock salt scything every which way. Every zombie surrounding Boss was simultaneously shredded and unshadowed, and those who were further away got no reprieve as several hundred pounds of frustrated cyborg slammed into them like a certain prototype train engine.

"Grrragh, I'm starting to get SUPER pissed here!" Franky growled in aggravation as he mowed down line after line of zombies. "This is like the Bridge of Hesitation all over again! Except those bastards had the decency to *stay down* once you hit them enough!" The statement was backed up by how for every zombie Franky knocked down two got up, almost twice as pissed as before.

"No kidding—Typhoon Lash!" Boss barked, the razor wind kneecapping several zombies. That *still* didn't stop them, as the cadavers just swapped to crawling. "Gah, the one time I find a doggedly persistent opponent and they're just annoying. Hey, you're taller than me, any clue how the rest of the fight's going?"

Absently backhanding a zombie trying to sneak up on him, Franky flicked up his sunglasses and looked around. On the one hand, Lola's crew was trying desperately not to get overrun by the zombies, exhaustion and a steady depletion of salt badly hampering their efforts. Hell, even Merry, previously occupied with treating the many wounded, had waded into the fight, using one of the bigger zombies as a club. On the other hand, the rest of the Straw Hats were steadily grinding their way through the horde, though even there, the image of the Bridge of Hesitation continued to assert itself. Vivi was huddled behind Nami's Eisen Cloud, clutching her ribs with a visible wince and even Zoro's meatgrinder impression was fast losing momentum.

"Not good," the cyborg grunted, spinning the nunchaku again to clear some space. "Lola's crew is barely hanging on, and Zoro's group will probably stop advancing soon. Hell, the only reason we haven't been completely buried in bodies is—!"

"BAROOOOO!"

"GUM-GUM STAMP GATLING!"

"Yeah, that."

The 'that' in question was Funkfreed in full elephant mode rampaging through the crowd of zombies, lashing out with nose, leg, and razor-sharp tusk. The elephant was putting on a particularly good showing, most notably through profligate usage of his latest technique—

"PACHY-RIOT!"

Which used the Jet and Water Dials that had been installed in the elephant-sword's hilt to *blast* a stream of high-pressure water out of the Zoan-weapon's nose. Unfortunately, the water wasn't salt-infused due to the combination making Funkfreed nauseous, but even unsalted, the blasts of liquid were sowing immense disarray amidst the zombie's ranks. Honestly, between Funkfreed's mass and the SWAT-levels of liquid being utilized, Luffy riding on the elephant's back and Stamping any zombies he could reach almost seemed like overkill.

…though since no matter what the Straw Hats and their allies did there always seemed to be more of the bastards waiting in the wings, 'overkill' was a completely foreign concept for the situation.
"Dammit, when am I gonna get a good one-on-one match?" Boss groused, lassoing a half-dozen zombies and swinging them out to bowl over a cluster of the undead. "I'm tired of fighting sardines, and the Generals are just trout in comparison! That zipper bastard was decent, but not nearly enough to give me a proper challenge, and besides, that was a month ago!"

"Is this really the time? Weapons Left!" Franky snapped, explosives scorching another pack of zombies to well done.

For a moment, Boss didn't respond as he decapitated the walking dead. "Sorry," he eventually replied with a sigh. "Not the time, I know, I'm just a bit... frustrated is all. I feel like a hamster on a wheel. It doesn't matter how hard I try, I just don't get anywhere."

Franky paused for a second before returning to his bashing with a sigh. "Yeah, well, unless something changes fast we're stuck on wheel with-GAH!" The cyborg was cut off by a zombie popping out of the soil and clamping onto his leg. "Agh, dammit, get off!" he shouted, comically hopping on one foot as he tried to dislodge the stubborn corpse's death grip.

Boss, sighing explosively, moved in front of Franky to cover him. He only had time to get off one Typhoon Lash before an entirely separate vacuum wave flew by and decapitated several fores, followed swiftly by four bodies landing in front of him.

"Let's try this again!" Leo declared, pointing a saber skyward. "HELP! HAS ARRIVED!"

Boss blinked in surprise at the development before swiftly scanning over his students. He took in Leo's borrowed blades, his battered face, and bruised neck. He took in Mikey's own bruises, mixed with shiny burns. He took in the cruelly bandaged, bleeding wound in Raphey's side, and her sai, dented to hell and back. And finally, he took in Donny, his flippers bleeding, his face one big bruise, and his staff nowhere in sight. Not to mention how all four's tails were quivering with sore, exhausted muscles.

Once he was finished taking stock, Boss stood to attention and puffed his chest out firmly. "Boys!" he called out, feeling a twinge of gratification at just how fast the apprentice martial artists snapped to attention. "You all look like shit. Go get patched up by Merry before you all keel over! Especially you, Raphaela. Don't think I don't notice that sucking wound in your side."

"Rip Tide!" all four dugongs yelped, blurring out of existence.

"Ahhh," Boss sighed, allowing himself to sag in relief. "Exerting control over the younger generation, is there no better stress relief?" He then perked up with newfound energy. "Welp—!"

Before he could return to the fight, though, a commotion from the distant mansion caught his attention. He glanced over, and his jaw hit the dirt and his eyes tried to throw themselves out of his head.

And from the way all sounds of combat had just ceased, he wasn't the only one.

-0-

"No. 4 on the list of things I've always wanted to say!" I proclaimed as I stood atop my mount's skull, arms crossed defiantly. "The cavalry has arrived!"

It was immensely gratifying to me to see the entire legion of the dead, the unfeeling immortal army that my crewmates had been fighting, freeze with more horror than they inflicted when they caught sight of me. Or, far more likely, they froze on account of my rather atypical mount. Of course, my crewmates' identical reactions were equally gratifying and far more amusing.
Anyway, I could have urged my mount forward and mowed the enemy down then and there, but hell, where would have been the fun in that? As such, I took the better option.

"ZOMBIES OF THRILLER BARK!" I announced, flinging my arms out wide.

Which is to say, I grandstanded like a champ.

"Allow me to take this opportunity to clear up two misconceptions that you might have! Misconception the first!" I held up a finger for all to see. "You all might think that I am currently riding atop an undead cybernetic Tyrannosaurus Rex! This is categorically false!"

I widened my grin as I raised one of my feet from the skull of the long-dead titan lizard I was riding. "The truth is that I am riding atop an undead cybernetic Tyrannosaurus Rex…"

I rammed my heel into the small of my mount's skull.

"SKREEEEEEOOOOONK!"

And it promptly reared back and let loose both an iconic roar straight out of Spielberg's films and a flesh-searingly intense gout of flames.

"That breathes fire!" I cackled malevolently, Soundbite joining me in howling like the suicidally crazy morons that we were.

Honestly, there really was no other course of action after fusing Hogback's cutting edge technology, Chopper's explosives, the necrotized tissue that had clearly been harvested from Little Garden, and a few million volts. Really, now. If not like that, then how the actual fuck were we supposed to react when we were charging into battle on the back of a zombified, cyborg, Tyrannosaurus Rex, the likes of which would make Harry Dresden eat his heart out - that also breathed fire?!

I have to say, I was very proud of just how brightly Luffy's eyes were lit.

But still, before I could properly assault the enemy with our gamechanger, I really did need to set the mood.

"Misconception the second!" I bellowed out with Soundbite's aid, regathering the zombie's attention to my second raised finger. "Some of you might be optimistic in light of the fact that you are mostly beyond the bounds of mortality! I intend to correct you all from this grievous error in judgment by asking that you consider this one simple question!"

I ground my heel into my ride's skull, prompting it to lower its head and glare at the zombies as it rumbled out a growl, both its organic yellow and mechanical red eyes glowing with pure malice as oil and saliva dripped from its fangs.

"Just how 'deathless'," I leered tauntingly. "Do you really think you are?"

Slowly, ever so slowly, the zombies looked away from the monstrosity before them, and at each other. Two seconds, they exchanged looks. And one second later, they promptly fled for the nearest nonexistent haven.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," I smirked victoriously before raising my fingers and letting loose a resonating SNAP! "CHARGE!"

"SKREEEEEEOOOOOONK!"
And so, as I rode my undead fire-breathing cyborg T-Rex into battle against a zombie hoard, I did the one thing I could do.

...honestly, do I even need to spell it out at this point?

"PFFHAAAAHHAHAAAAHAAAAAAA!"/ "HAHAHAAheeheeheeHOOOOHOOOHAHA!

Didn't think so.

---

Vivi gaped at the scene through a gap in Nami's Eisen cloud.


Honestly, the fact that Conis, Usopp, Robin, and Chopper were using their own specific methods to take down zombies from behind the heels of said T-rex barely even registered.

It was a miracle that anything could have caught the princess' attention at that time, but something most certainly did: a clinking sound caught her, that of glass against stone. Unimportant in the grand scheme of things, but it was there. Curiosity piqued, Vivi glanced down to see a glass bottle rolling her way, some sort of liquid sloshing back and forth in it. Leaning down, she picked it up, popped off the cap, and gave it a sniff. The scent of organ-killing grades of alcohol assaulted her nostrils, and before she knew it Vivi was the bottle to knock a drink back.

Only for a set of deceptively strong fingers to deftly pluck the bottle away.

"You are not developing a habit," Nami flatly stated as she scrutinized the booze.

Spluttering for words, Vivi finally just swung her hands towards Cross' rampage. "He is riding a zombie cyborg T-rex!" she protested weakly.

"That breathes fire."

"CRAM IT, ZORO!" Vivi spared a second to snarl.

Lola snorted as she took advantage of the lull in the zombie's decorum to rendezvous with her allies. "Fair warning, Princess: If something like that bothers you now, you're going to rot your liver out by the time we reach the New World."

"But—!"

"Uh, Vivi?" Carue cut in with a raised wing. "Cwoss is fighting a zombie apocawypse while widing a fiyah-bweathing undead cybowg T-Wex. Ahnd winning. I think yoah awgument is invawid."

Vivi's rant froze in her throat, and after several seconds trying to force it out she slumped over in deispective defeat. "Yeah, alright…" she sobbed.

As the zombies around them fell into desperate panic, Nami was directing her Eisen Tempo to conjure up a credible impression of a porcupine. Except instead of quills, she was bristling with flesh-vaporizing lightning. So... not really like a porcupine at all.

In any case, the sound slowly shook Vivi out of her self-pity, and she glanced up just in time to catch sight of Nami taking a deep draught from the bottle.

"Hey!" Vivi snapped, pinning her ranking officer with a glare. "What the hell happened to not
"I already have a habit and a tolerance, so I'm good," Nami replied with a catty grin, taking another swig without a hint of remorse.

"The hell you-!" Vivi started to protest, before turning contemplative as a thought struck her. "Actually, how high is your tolerance, anyway?"

The navigator graced the Princess with a smug look. "I could down a hundred of these things and not feel a thing."

The princess' lips promptly pursed, her finger wavering for a moment longer before slowly retracting. "Okay, yeah, you're probably in the clear…" She then glanced around at the sheer anarchy raging around them. "So… what do we do now?"

"Eh..." Nami waved her hand side to side. "Not to beat an undead horse but... seriously, cyborg zombie dinosaur. Honestly, at this point, with the way they're going?" She held up a trio of fingers. "I give these dead-heads half an hour, at most."

-o-

In truth, it took us ten minutes to mop things up. Ten minutes of uninterrupted, unmitigated, and utterly undaunted carnage the likes of which I doubt Paradise has ever seen before in all its many years of piracy. But, unbelievable or not, it was simply fact: In ten minutes' time… Thriller Bark fell silent.

Victory was… honestly a bit disturbing, I will freely admit. I mean, it was one thing to wade through a bunch of KO and groaning enemies, but this... well, this time I was literally walking on top of a sea of bodies. Between the smell, the footing, my own mind ranting at me that I was walking on what had once been, for the most part, people, and the various watchers wandering around and stabbing corpses at random, occasionally freeing the shadows of zombies we'd missed… yeah, never had a Straw Hat victory tasted so gruesome.

The ever-present gloom and doom of the Florian's fog wasn't doing us any favors, either, but honestly, that was kind of a positive seeing as we didn't need it anymore. At least that was one aspect of the celebration we weren't missing out on: the sheer joy of victory. The Rolling Pirates were all celebrating, cheering and dancing ecstatically at the retrieval of their umbral counterparts, and the prospect that they once again had the freedom to live in the sun.

I decided to try securing such joy for myself as I moved over to where the rest of the crew was gathered. Soundbite on my shoulder, Lassoo on my back, and the other twenty all gathered in an area reasonably devoid of corpses, with Chopper fussing over everyone.

"Well, Cross… this may have been rough, but if we're comparing this to Enies Lobby, I think you should try flipping the script more often," Nami muttered, slowly flexing her stiff shoulder.

"Yeah!" Luffy nodded eagerly, the motion and exuberant mood making for a weird image when combined with the hockey mask he was still wearing and the chainsaw that was still affixed to the end of his pipe. "This was really fun, Cross! Especially the dinosaur! I get to ride it next!"

"Heh, you look pretty cool too, Luffy!" I grinned at him. "And don't worry," I jerked my head back at where my mount was rooting through the battlefield, looking for anything it could consider to be fresh. "That thing's not shadow-powered, so you'll have ample time to ride it!"

Luffy perked up eagerly—
"We are not taking it with us," Nami blithely ordered.

Aaaand deflated just as fast. "Awww…"

"I still can't believe that there's even the possibility of it coming aboard…" Vivi groaned, dragging a hand down her face.

"Neither can I, and I actually built it!" Chopper agreed.

"Well, even if it's staying here, I know one thing for sure..." Mikey nodded solemnly... before shooting his flipper up with a grin. "I call next ride after Luffy!"

"Wha—!? Hey, no fair, I wanna go next!"

"No, me, me!"

"No way, I'm-!"

"FWEET!"

"GAH!" Everyone flinched when a sharp whistle suddenly pierced the air, and we all traced it back to its impatient and... diminutive source.

"Sorry to kill the mood, but I just gotta know before we really get into the swing of things," Merry groused as she fingered her crunched nose. "Is there anything else on this island that you forgot about in the briefing, Cross? Anything we gotta handle?"

"Eh... I scratched my chin thoughtfully as I cast a glance about the battlefield. "I... don't think so? But I could be wrong seeing as this has been hectic as hell to keep up with, so let's do a quick rundown. Trapped shadows, including those of the Rolling Pirates and our new musician?"

"Restored," Brook confirmed with a tip of his hat.

"And whatever ones aren't will be soon," Boss added, gesturing back at the corpse-stabbing Rolling Pirates.

"AIN'T A LOT LEFT, and those that are still on the island WON'T ESCAPE ME FOR LONG," Soundbite vowed.

"Alright... Certainty of Oars never moving again, shadow or not?"

"It would take more work than Hogback will ever do on a corpse again," Chopper said vindictively before thoughtfully (and normally) tapping his chin in thought. "Not to mention more calcium than I think he could get in a lifetime."

"Absalom?"

"If he's in any state to fight again before we leave this island, I'll eat my Lion Cutters," Vivi said, before wincing and scratching her gut. "One punch from Luffy would have finished him off when Nami, Merry, Carue, and I had done our best. And when Sanji took over... well." She left it at that.

"Perona?"

"Worst case scenario, she'll wake up in a couple of hours; I'll go reinforce the sedative on her once I finish treating the Rolling Pirates," Chopper assured.
"Sounds good. And all that that leaves is—"

"**MASSIVE, MASSIVE TROUBLE!**" Soundbite suddenly screamed, all of us jumping and all of the Rolling Pirates looking around in shock.

"What are you—?" I began.

"What… is this."

And with that, my words died in my throat.

Slowly, fearfully, I turned on my heel and beheld a most terrifying sight.

Paler than his already ghost-white norm, twitching and hyperventilating from sheer rage, and sporting a particularly incensed look in his eye, Warlord of the Seas Gecko Moria stood at the foot of his manor, taking in the absolute *annihilation* of the army he'd been pinning his hopes and dreams on for the past decade.

"Straw… Hats…" he breathed, veins pulsing in his forehead and grotesquely thick neck. "You... You... You..."

All around me, I saw my crew and our allies dive for weapons, prepare their attacks. I also knew that they wouldn't be anywhere near ready in time.

"You…" Moriah snarled, more and more veins springing to life on his form, encroaching even into his eyes as his entire being shaking. "You... YOU... YOU... YOOOO—!"

And then, suddenly, Moriah *twitched* and fell silent.

It was truly a spontaneous thing: one moment Moriah was building into a rant, obviously gearing up to go Blugori-shit on us, the next his entire being just seemed to jerk and he… stopped. His face was still the same, his expression the same, but he was just… frozen.

Then, ever so slowly, he bowed his head, placing his face in his hands, and starting to shake. Slowly at first, but stronger and stronger, until his whole body was vibrating in place.

And then…

"—*hishishishihi…shishishishi*…"

It started. It was… light, at the beginning. Just barely there, just within our range of hearing. I had my *suspicions* about what it was we were hearing, though I really, really wished I was wrong. But I was *forced* to acknowledge the truth when Moriah suddenly flung his head back and *howled* with laughter.

"**KISHISHISHISHISHI! KIIIIIIIIIISHISHISHISHISHISHISHISHIIIIIIIIIII!**"

Because truly, that was what it was: a *howl* of laughter. Gale after gale of *terrifyingly* deranged cackling flew forth from the unhinged warlord, and deeper and deeper did it drive a dagger of fear into my heart.

But none among us was more terrified than Soundbite, who legitimately turned a pasty *white* on my shoulder.

"*No…*" he croaked, horror and terror inundating every syllable as he shivered in place. "*Nonono,*
"This can't be happening, CAN'T BE HAPPENING..."

"What is it, Soundbite?" I hissed out of the corner of my mouth, unwilling to take my eyes off Moriah for even half a second.

My snail swallowed hard, barely capable of getting the words out. "HE FIGURED IT OUT..."

And just like that, I couldn't move. Part of that was from every drop of blood in my veins suddenly transfiguring into liquid nitrogen.

"CROSS!"

But I'm pretty sure the rest was from the jagged thorny vine of a shadow that had burst forth from a gap between corpses and ripped through my side before I knew what was happening.

There... wasn't any pain to it really. Just, one second the vine wasn't there, the next it was. I tried to grab at it, but I was a bit distracted by the mouthful of blood I suddenly coughed up. That was... inconvenient, because it made it difficult to speak.

And... And I had to speak, I know I had to because I needed to tell my friends something important. I needed to tell them to... they had to...

"Run..." I gurgled.

But too late.

Too late because the next second, Gecko Moria snapped his head down so that he was staring at us all with eyes full of malevolent, absolutely soulless rapture.

"Niflheim," he whispered.

That word caused the suddenly too-dark shadows to erupt in motion.

That word set in motion the ultimate nightmare of Thriller Bark.

**Patient AN:** Mm-hmm. That just happened. Moria was a New World veteran capable of matching the apparently invulnerable Kaido before he got lazy. And he just got the power boost he needs to be that threatening again. Will it be too much for the Straw Hats to handle?

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**Put it this way:** this is our cruelest cliffhanger yet. But the one at the end of the next chapter is going to be even worse.
Crossing the Rainbow Mist

Crossing the Rainbow Mist

Cross-Brain AN: The following tale takes place after the Ice Hunter arc but before Thriller Bark.

I'll always remember this particular day. No matter how crazy things got, how close we came to dying, how much I got hurt, how much my actions affected things… quite simply, *nothing* this half of the Red Line could be more memorable than this day.

As per usual with the most extraordinary of our adventures, the day started off unusual, but not too remarkable: I woke up earlier than I normally did, early enough that only the earliest of early birds were awake. Even Soundbite was still asleep. I had taken the opportunity to slip down to the kitchen and fix myself a hot cup of cocoa, and then moved to the roof of my radio room to watch the sunrise.

Everything seemed to be perfectly calm, and one of the better mornings I'd had so far. A comfortable perch on the roof, a nice mug of cocoa, a perfect, beautiful view of the sun rising on the morning mists, painting it every color of the—!

PFFFFT!

"FRACK!" I howled in horror the moment I'd finished spewing my drink, dropping inside my room and running to my desk.

"Mmm, wha…?" Soundbite's eyestalks blearily poked out of his shell as I wrenched the master-board open. "Wha's goin—?!" His question was stifled as I wrenched my transceiver out of its slot and triggered every pipe on the ship. "SONNUVA—!"

BWAAAAAAAAAH!

Whatever my snail was about to say, it was cut off by my blaring my foghorn throughout every square inch of the Thousand Sunny - which, going by the sudden roaring of Sunny's framework, not even he appreciated.

Soundbite remained in post-flinch tension a few seconds longer before cracking his eye open and letting his eyestalks sag in relief. "Ooool thanks Goda it worked. It's official: I LOVE MY AWAKENED ABILITIES!"

"WE DON'T GIVE A DAMN!" the crew roared right back.

"Did I miss the memo? Is it my birthday?" came Usopp's grouchy voice. "Because if it is, I don't find this very damn funny!"

"Ooooh, I don't know," Merry snarled. "Personally, I think I'm gonna be howling with laughter once I start bouncing our third mate's head OFF THE—!"

"CRAM IT, THE FUCKING LOT OF YOU! WE'VE GOT BIGGER FUCKING PROBLEMS THAN YOUR FUCKING BEAUTY SLEEP!"

A stunned silence fell over the ship, which I filled with my desperate panting and wheezing.

"Cross, what's wrong?" Nami asked, both concern and urgency tinging her voice.
Pulling my thoughts together, I swallowed my panic and mustered up what little wits I had left. "Bogey off the port bow," I grit out.

"Alright, let's see what's... eh?" Boss' voice trailed off into confusion. "The heck? Cross, what's wrong with a little morning mist? Heck, I'd say the colors are beautiful... aheh, ya know, in a manly way."

"Wait... oh, God, y-you don't mean... the Rainbow Mist?" Vivi choked in horror, suddenly sounding very awake.

"The one and only." I confirmed "And for those of you who don't know it, lemme give the cliff's notes: what's coming down on us is an eldritch temporal clusterfuck, and if we sail into that thing we're liable to wind up on the wrong side of either the last century or the next one. In short..." I drew a deep breath before bellowing at the top of my lungs, "ALL HANDS ON DECK! NOW, DAMN IT, NOW!"

When the sounds of rapid movement came across the connection, I knew that I didn't need to say more. Stashing the transceiver in its bag and putting it and Soundbite over and on my shoulders respectively, I left my room and rode down to the deck, where everyone was rushing into place, Merry even going so far as to hitch a ride on Carue to get to the helm as fast as possible and Nami looking at the sky and muttering to herself. As the last of our crew filed onto the deck, Nami's... surprisingly calm shout rang out.

"There's an island off the port bow, Merry. Turn the ship ninety degrees south and head for land."

"Aye-aye, turning the ship ninety degrees south and heading for land! Aiming for the cove in the shoreline!" Merry parroted, and Sunny rumbled in agreement as he shifted about. Nami took the opportunity to give me a flat look.

"Cross, were you really in too much of a panic to see that there was an island right there? You could have handled steering Sunny yourself, couldn't you?"

I winced a bit at the reprimand, but I was just as quick to bounce back with a scowl and a jab of my thumb towards the encroaching fog, which I didn't even have to look at to know what it was doing.

"Yes, but I'm not sure I could have handled being chased."

"What?!" Nami barked, darting over to the railing and leaning over the edge.

I followed her at a more sedate pace, and grimaced as I watched the Mist hang on tight to our ship's tail. "I'm not just worried about this thing because of the time-space fuckery it's got going on, Nami," I solemnly informed her. "I'm worried I'm almost convinced that that thing is alive, on some level. This isn't a Paradise menace; this is something that's clawed its way clean across the Red Line."

Nami swallowed fearfully, casting a doubtful glance at the sandbanks of the island's cove as we sailed past them. "B-But... if that thing's alive and chasing us, then how the hell are we supposed to escape it?!"

I grinned as Merry drew in Sunny's sails. "By taking advantage of one of the few ironclad rules of the Grand Line. What happens at sea..."

My grin widened as the Rainbow Mist drifted to a lazy halt at the cove's borderline, curling and swirling maddeningly but advancing no further.

"Stays at sea," I nodded in confirmation. "The Rainbow Mist is a purely maritime menace that preys upon vessels at large, and it can even come into port, but it does not make landfall." I shot a
victorious smirk at Nami. "Good thing the crew had enough forewarning to get us to safety in time, huh?"

"RESPECT!" Soundbite barked.

Nami sighed in defeat, casting a wary glance at the hostile case of crypto-meteorology that was lurking behind us. "Fine, your excuse of it being an emergency stands for using that stupid horn to wake us all up. So!" She clapped her hands together, drawing attention from the whole crew to me. "Any idea how long we'll have to wait here before that damn stuff shoves off?"

"Yeah!" Mikey piped up in agreement. "We had a Sea King hunt planned for noon!"

"I wanna bust some scale-skulls!" Raphey nodded alongside him.

"Eh…" I frowned as I tried to recall an arc I hadn't been a big fan of in the first place. "From what I remember… well, as I said: on some level, the Mist is alive. Chances are it'll only shove off when it's good and ready to. One time it was only in an island's port for about an hour, but… anywhere from an hour to a day."

"Awww!" Luffy groaned, leaning his head back. "C'moon! That fog stuff's pretty and all, but I wanna get back to sailing! Can't we just go through it? What's the big deal?"

"You did hear the words 'eldritch temporal clusterfuck', right!?" Usopp demanded incredulously.

"Er… well, besides the fact that I doubt Luffy knows what those first two words mean—" Conis interjected.

"I don't!" Luffy cheerfully confirmed.

"—I'm a bit curious myself of what the danger is," our gunner continued with a helpless shrug. "I mean… getting lost in time? How does that work?"

"I'm not clear on the mechanics of that place myself," Robin answered, her head bowed and her chin in her hand. "But I do know some of the lore of the Mist, thanks to the existence of a series of books concerning it. According to the books, the Rainbow Mist is meant to act as a gateway of some sorts, transporting to a mythical 'Land of the Gods' known only as Ape's Concert."

"'Land of the Gods'," Su repeated in equal parts eagerness and fear.

"'Land of the Gods!'" Merry giggled ecstatically, all but vibrating in place.

"'Land of the Gods'?" Franky asked doubtfully.

"Land of the Goooods!" Luffy squeed, a massive grin stretching across his face.

"'Davy Jones' Locker', more like," I snorted grimly. "Don't get your hopes up, people: Ape's Concert is nothing more than a dimensionally lost roach motel of a ship's graveyard. That place is a complete and utter—!"

"GOLD MIIIINE!"

"Sonnuvabitch!"/"GAH!" Soundbite and I both yelped when Nami suddenly squealed at earshattering levels and sprouted a very luminous pair of beri-eyes.

"Countless derelict ships from all across time, gathered in one spot, with their cargos intact!" Nami cackled ecstatically, a not-insubstantial line of drool escaping the corner of her lip as she gazed upon
the Mist. "Soooooo much gold! Jewels! Pure *treasuure*! I-I-It must be in the millions! The hundreds of millions! *The billi—*"

"Snap out of it!"

*SLAP!* "YEOW!" Nami flinched as her own palm slammed into her cheek before shooting a grateful look at our resident princess. "Thanks for that."

"Ooooh, don't thank me yet, because I'm not done saving us from your greed yet!" Vivi huffed, grasping our navigator's shoulders and staring her dead in the eyes. "Nami, I actually *met* the author of the Rainbow Mist books, and he told me about his experiences in that place! The reason why you don't hear more about the 'Land of the Gods' is that it's a *trap!* Anyone who enters the place becomes unable to leave it because of space itself keeping them from exiting! Time loses all meaning, because people within the Mist neither age nor grow hungry! The timeless years drive people mad, and they either escape through sheer luck like the author, or they *kill themselves!* Trust me, Nami, when I say that there is *no reliable way* to emerge from Ape's Concert in one piece!"

I bit the inside of my cheek at that. My reaction was on account of the image of a certain tower all but harpooning the Mist coming to mind, but there was no way in hell I was gonna tell—!

"Cross just flinched," Su blithely stated as she examined her paw.

"YOU FURRY LITTLE BI—!" I tried to jump at the fleabag so that I could wring her neck…

"Cross."

"—GAH!"

Buuuut that dream was put on hold by my leg getting snatched out of midair, and our resident witch using an iron cloud hand to plant me in front of her, a neutral expression on her face.

"Given how much treasure is at stake here, I'll make this easy for you: tell us what you know, and I'll stop compounding the interest on your debt."

"I—w-wait, what was that?" I choked as I processed what she had said.

"I'm not going to decrease it, but I'll stop increasing it from now on if you tell us how we can get in, get the treasure, and get out safely," she repeated.

The crew all looked surprised to varying degrees, but I hardly noticed as I considered it. If there was a cap on the debt, then I actually had a chance of paying it off before I started to sport liver spots. Still… was that worth the risk of whatever could be waiting for us in that fog?

"Just for the record, here's where you currently stand," Nami added, handing me a piece of paper. I took one look at the bottom line before crushing the page in my hands.

"RIGHT! LET'S RAID US A TEMPORAL HELLMOUTH!" I barked, spinning to look at Merry. "We need an anchor to the outside to get back. In the story, a villain used a huge tower to bridge our world with Ape's Concert. But seeing how close the Mist is to the shore, we can probably pull it off with Sunny's anchor chain."

"Wonderful!" Nami said sweetly, turning towards the fox. "Su, you'll get a full percent of whatever we find in there."

"Yes!" Su pumped her paw triumphantly.
"I should've known you didn't do that out of the goodness of your heart," Conis sighed.

"Yeah… you want half of my cut?"

"As I was saying, I love you very much, my darling Su!" Conis squealed as she swept her pet up in a hug.

"Hang on just a second," I piped up.

"Cross, the deal is off if you talk us out of this," Nami warned.

"That depends entirely on how much you're willing to risk, Nami," I said seriously. "Even if we have a way out, the place is still more warped than Kizaru's sense of justice! If we're not careful, we could wind up having brunch with our great-grand-descendants! And yes, I know that none of us have kids, that's the degree to which this place is whacked out of its non-existent mind!"

There was a pause.

"WORTH IT!"

I was not surprised in the least when Nami confirmed our choice. Well, if things still went crazy, they couldn't say I didn't warn them.

And so, with that final decision having been made, we started to ready ourselves to delve into the spacio-temporal abyss that was the Rainbow Mist. I could only hope that things wouldn't get too—!

…aaaaah shit. That's it, I'm doing that seminar on tempting fate, come hell, high water, or every Sea King in the Calm Belt! If only so I don't keep getting mixed up in these situations!

-0-

Mist rose around me in every direction, thick as cotton balls. It made keeping my footing difficult; the wood was wet and slippery. Sounds were muted, when there were any to be heard at all. The impaired visibility didn't help things either. Claws dug into my shoulders; Ruatha was not pleased that I kept skidding and sliding across the wrecks. I flicked him on the snout.

"You could always get down and walk by yourself, you know."

"Roh." The claws loosened, although they were replaced by a tail tightening around my arm. I sighed. The dragonet seemed determined to inflict bodily injury upon me; had ever since we'd come to this eerie place.

"Or better yet, you could've stayed on the ship. I don't need your help for this; Ghin would've been more useful, or even Johnny or Yosaku. I mean, what can you do if I fall in? Whine at me?"

"Vii!" My questions were answered by a wing-slap to the face and a pair of sad blue eyes. I spat out a mouthful of scales— Ruatha must be molting or something, because he'd been shedding worse than a longhaired cat heading into summer lately.

Actually, in hindsight, a Devil Fruit user going out alone into what appeared to be a mess of shipwrecks was probably a bad idea. But the mist had risen up so quickly, too thick for Nami to find a way through the oceanic graveyard… We needed boots on the ground. Or water, as it were. So half the crew had split up and was wandering around in search of a path through the derelict hulks, while the other half stayed with Merry. We'd rolled my dice to see who was in which group; this resulted in possibly the worst available combination, as Luffy, Zoro, and I were all on the away
team. But Luffy took off before Nami could demand that we reroll, or even that the explorers be in pairs- which meant that Zoro was now lost and we had two fruit users with no one to rescue us if we fell.

Not that I was going to fall in, bad footing or no.

With Ruatha now pouting and silent, the sound of my footsteps was the only thing to be heard, the hollow thudding of sneakers on wood. And even that was muffled. There was something… off about these mists; the deadened sound was only part of it. Then my hand met my forehead as I remembered- eerie mist, collection of shipwrecks… Ape's Concert. Tabarnak. Great, just great. Not only did we have to find a physical path through the wrecks, we had to figure out how to get back to our own time as well. How were we supposed to do that without a DeLorean?

Plus, weren't we supposed to encounter the Mists after Alabasta, if at all? I groaned and turned my middle finger in the direction of the Fourth Wall. Damn writers and their meddl-

More footsteps, not mine- I wasn't alone. Heavy and metallic, like someone wearing armour. And they were moving fast. What at first looked like yet another broken figurehead approached through the mist, resolving itself into a young man in dark clothes, much taller than me. I caught a glimpse of blond hair as he raced past. Blinking slowly, I followed him with my gaze until he disappeared into an open door on one of the other wrecks. Huh. Wonder where he was going in such a hurry.

Well, to each his own. I shrugged and got back to figuring out where I was and how to get back to the Merry. Or at least, I tried. Not thirty seconds after Blondie scrambled out of sight, there was a tremendous crashing, splintering noise from the same direction he'd come from. It was followed by a great sucking splash. A shadow fell over the wreck I was standing on.

A wall of silver-blue scales rose above me, a massive body tipped in an angular head. Teeth the size of swords dripped salt water as dark eyes scanned the shipwrecks. Barracuda sea king. Merde. My stomach decided to vacate my body via my knees- right at the same moment the sea king saw me.

"Osti d'épais de marde!" I jumped out of the way as that huge head crashed down where I'd been standing. Getting far enough away used most of the charge I had left from sparring with Ghin last night- not that I could hope to fight something like this alone regardless. Okay, maybe Blondie had the right idea.

"Hold on, Ruatha! We're using the Sir Robin maneuver."

"Scra?"

As much as I hated running from a fight, it was the only thing to do. This wasn't a real fight anyway; I was prey, not a combatant. I spun on the ball of my foot and took off in the same direction as Blondie had gone. Hopefully there would be somewhere over there to hide, or a cannon or something. And until I found something like that, discretion was—in this case—the better part of valour.

I didn't expect to see Blondie again; with his longer legs and head start, he should've been well ahead of me, even in the unlikely event that I did end up going in the exact same direction. So you can imagine my surprise when I found him paused on the deck of half a barge. And he must've heard me coming, since he was facing me when I skidded to a stop.

"Nice weather we're having, ain't it? Neverending fog, just gotta love it."
I stared at Blondie, trying to figure out if he was serious. And my crewmates thought I was insane. At least I acknowledged the presence of danger, even if I did end up thumbing my nose at it and jumping in anyway most of the time. "Um… Hello? Earth to tall person? Is the thin air up there shorting out your brain? What in the Nine Hells is a bloody barracuda sea king doing in this part of the Grand Line?"

Blondie's expression mirrored Luffy's 'Are you an idiot?' look with astounding precision. "Hello right back, this is the Grand Line, lady. You know, the stretch of ocean sandwiched between their breeding grounds and packed to the gills with their favorite snack? You can skip a stone and nine times out of ten you'll hit one of them!"

"The tenth just means you missed them!" the snail on his shoulder cackled.

Wait… his snail was… talking? Well, yes, it was a Den-Den Mushi and they were supposed to talk, but that weird voice mashup sure didn't sound like any call I'd ever heard. I stared at the mollusk. Well, there was only one logical explanation for that. I almost winced at the realization that I now automatically put those supreme avatars of BS in the category of logical explanation. Almost. "…I'm guessing the inverte ate a Devil Fruit?"

Both snail and Blondie rolled their eyes. "Finally! Somebody gets it!" Was it just me, or was Blondie somehow expressing both relief and exasperation at the same time?

Well, that aside… "Alright, back to the original question, and let me rephrase it. What's a Sea King doing in this part of the Grand Line chasing you?!"

Blondie pointed at his snail, which tilted its eyestalks in his direction. "It's his fault!" They then glared at one another. "My fault!? Are you nuts?!!"

"YOU JUMPED ON ITS HEAD!!"

"That was an honest mistake, I thought it was a rock! You're the shitstain that chose to comment on its body odor when it glared at us!"

"It's a fish, it's smells fishy! THAT'S JUST A FACT!!"

"But you don't say that to its face!"

"WHAT THE HELL'S WITH the double-standard here!? I've taunted these bastards A THOUSAND TIMES IN THE PAST and you've never complained before!!"

"Those times we were near someone who could kill it dead in a single hit, or at the least we had our partners nearby, you slimy bastard! Learn some timing!"

"THIS FROM YOU!? THAT'S FUCKING RICH, ASSHOLE!"

This bickering… And a talking snail… This seemed familiar. But I could worry about that later. I used the absolute last of the force I had charged up in a stomp that shook the floor. "Guys, focus! Giant man-eating fish monster trying to eat us; blame later, solution now."

Great, now the tall guy and the snail were looking at me like I was an idiot. "Excuse you, this is a coping mechanism!"

"Yeah! Snark takes the edge off THE IMPENDING DOOM! Helps us function better under pressure!!"
"Observe!" Blondie beamed victoriously as he pointed to the side at a… derelict Marine galleon!? "White-hat warship at 3-o-clock! Those things were built to last, so it's better footing than these wrecks! See, progress!"

"NOW STOP DISTRACTING US AND FREAKING RUN FASTER!!"

Normally I wouldn't have taken orders from a snail, but this one had a point. And a galleon… Very stable and relatively lightly armed, usually with demi-culverins and demi-cannon. I doubted an eight-pound demi-culverin shot would do much to the monster following us, but a demi-cannon shot thirty-two pounds; that should do the trick. I scrambled after Blondie and his mouthy passenger. Ruatha's claws dug into my shoulders as I vaulted and climbed. Still…

A tilted mast from another ship made a decent way up, though the angle made it more of a ladder than a bridge. It still beat trying to clamber up the side of the ship by hand with our hanger-on chasing after us, though. Plus, it even gave us access to an open port in the galleon's gun deck, so not only did we not have to waste time finding our way through the ship's corridors, but I could also spin on my heel and pin Blondie and his pet with a glare.

"Forgive me for being a little concerned, Monsieur Escargot!" I growled. "From my perspective, being lost in a place like this with a sea king on my ass is a pretty serious problem. So my being unhappy that the only other people I can find are joking about the impending doom is quite understandable!"

Blondie gave me a way too bemused look as he dropped in alongside me before smirking condescendingly. "Your rookieness on the Grand Line is showing quite clearly."

"And look at all the fucks I give." I made a zero with one hand as I swung my head around and searched for gunpowder and ammo. "My crew may be rookies, but we can handle ourselves well enough. Better than that, even: Captain's gonna be king of the pirates someday. Now… We're gonna need eighteen pounds of black powder for every shot. I hope it's still dry enough to use."

The galleon shook; the sea king was ramming it. Every time I passed a portal or gun port, all I could see was silver-blue scales. It didn't take long to find ammunition at least, even if black powder was still in short supply. I supposed if worst came to worst, I could ask Blondie to beat me up and then use the force to smash the Sea King's face. That might work. Might. I had little confidence in the idea.

"Right. If we don't find any black powder soon, I need you to—!"

After I said that, things got a bit weird because we both spoke at the same time.

"Punch me in the face. The harder, the better."/"Quick, punch my palm, and fast!"

"…eh? Your face? What are you—? Bah, not questioning it, I'm sure you have your reasons, but look, rookie, this is no ordinary gauntlet: I've got a special shell in it known as—!"

"An Impact Dial? Yeah, I know what those do; I basically am an Impact Dial. Among other things." Yep, Blondie was definitely familiar. Where had I heard about a guy with a snail partner and an Impact Dial in his gauntlet? Eh, worry about that later.

There were a few barrels of powder wedged in a corner behind one of the demi-culverins. I yanked one open, but it was wet; practically mud, in fact. Stupid mist… How long had this stuff been here? Opening the other barrels yielded similar results. Merde…

I stared up at Blondie, trying to get a sense of him as a fighter. Tall, kinda skinny… Not a STR build.
Probably INT/CHA from the way he acted. Ladies and gentleman, we have a bard. Still, shouldn't judge based on appearances alone. Luffy was even smaller, after all. "So… It comes down to a question of who can punch harder. What kinda training you got?"

Blondie gave me another flat look—which I was really starting to want to slap off his face—before holding his palm up. "Would I be using this thing if I could hit harder than it could? Hurry the hell up and hit me!"

"COME ON AND SLAM!" His snail crowed, before flinching fearfully as the ship was suddenly rammed head on by our pursuant. "BEFORE WE ALL GET JAMMED!"

I rolled my eyes. "As you wish." Deep breath. Ten punches, hard and fast; kiai on ten. "TAI!" Follow up with a snap kick, turn forty-five degrees for a round kick, then finish with a spinning back kick. I landed back in fighting stance.

"Think that'll be enough? Or should I keep going?" The ship rocked to punctuate my words. Teeth like swords ripped the cover off a nearby gunport.

Blondie shot a fearful glance at the teeth, waved his arm out, and nodded firmly. "Compounded with what I'd taken the time to accumulate since the last time I discharged, I'd say so. Though, ah…" I did not like the way cold sweat started forming on the jackass's brow. "I just realized a flaw with this plan that would have come up no matter who had the energy."

"Flaw…?" How could there be a flaw in the plan- punch each other, smash thing in face, very straightforward. "What kind of flaw? All you need to do is blast that thing in its fugly mug!"

"Yeeeaah…" Blondie nodded slowly. WHAM! Before flinching and scowling as we were rammed again. "And either you or I am supposed to get close enough to touch that ugly face without getting up close and personal with those fangs, how, exactly?!"

I felt the blood drain from my face. "That's… a very good point," I gurgled. "Suggestions before we both get up close and personal with Uncle Davy instead?"

"Uh…" Blondie's eyes scanned over the room desperately, uncertainty obvious as he came up with nothing, nothing, nothi—oh, now that wasn't a look you got when you had nothing.

KEE-RACK!

To reiterate, I seriously hope he didn't have nothing!

"What?" I demanded. "Whatever the hell idea you just got, I don't care how dumb it is! What are you thinking?"

Blondie spared me a hesitant glance before nodding with determination and darting across the deck, where he started clawing at the top of an overturned crate. "I'm gonna answer your question with two of my own," he grunted. "Are you familiar with Garp the Hero…"

CLUNK!

He grinned viciously as the crate's lid came off, and a slew of cannonballs rolled across the wood. "And do you know," he intoned menacingly. "Exactly which law of physics relates to the transfer of
"energy?"

It took me a second to connect the dots, but once they did? I really couldn't keep my jaw from dropping because holy hell that was smart. "Newton's Second and you're a genius."

"Don't sound so surprised!" Blondie barked with laughter.

"Sorry. Not used to anyone else around here having high school science." Note to self, bash head on something for being an idiot. Later.

"Heh, tell me about it," Blondie started to chuckle.

**KRAAAAACK!**

Before flinching as our footing shuddered from a titanic impact. "On second thought, tell me later! For now," He hefted a cannonball off the ground and tossed it to me. "Enough chatting."

"**LET'S GET SLAMMING!**" his snail cackled.

I nodded as I caught the sphere of metal in my hand. "Agreed." I held the cannonball out and away from my shoulder, like an Italian waiter with a pizza tray. "Assume the position."

"Anything for the lovely lady," the smile-happy pirate smirked in agreement, positioning himself next to me, his palm outstretched and hovering next to the munitions. "Now, for maximum impact, the best place to hit would be the innards…"

"Don't fire until you smell the reek of its breath!"

I froze up as I processed both parts of that. "Two things: first, call me a lady again and I'm kicking you in the face, danger or no danger," I glared at him frigidly, before turning a hesitant gaze towards our attacker. "And second, big problem with that plan is that—!"

**WHAM!**

I flinched as the wall of white cracked clean through the actual wooden wall. "That thing is the one Sea King in the world that's not actually opening its mouth to attack! Got one more bright idea?"

"Uhhh…?" That did not fill me with confidence, but before I could actually start to worry?

"**HEY, BIG GROSS AND SLIMY!**"

For once I was semi-relieved by my comrade-in-struggle's shoulder-bound parasite opening its mouth, seeing as it somehow made our assailant pause in the middle of winding up for its next run.

"**Your mama was a barnacle, AND YOUR PAPA WAS A HALF-ROTTED TROUT!**"

This really was a day of firsts, because it was also the first time in my life I was grateful for a Sea King's veins suddenly pulsing with outrage. Although… Did Sea Kings feel rage the same way mammals did? Too bad trying to find out would get me killed. How would you find out, anyway? Was there such a thing as Sea King therapy? I'd have to ask one of the mermaids when I met them, or, well, one mermaid in particu—

"HRRAAAAAAAAAAH!"

—gotta learn to prioritize better.
Well, Sea Kings seemed to understand English, at any rate. Enormous jaws split open, drool running down each sword-length fang. Cable-like tendons tensed all over the aquatic titan's body as it prepared to leap—!

"IMPACT, YOU SLIMY SON OF A—!"

BLAM!

—only it never actually got the chance to leap, on account of my back-up ramming his palm into the cannonball and essentially slapping it down the Sea King's gut…

KA-BLAM!

Where it detonated in a plume of fire and smoke. The Sea King's head snapped back; it let out a roar of surprise. Eyes the size of rowboats spun. Silver scales shining, the great beast twisted around and circled out, preparing for another ramming run. A tiny trickle of blood dripped from the corner of its mouth.

Tabarnak. If it came at us again, there was no time for either of us to charge up more force. What could we—? Time to roll an intimidate check. I snatched up another cannonball and started tossing it from hand to hand, a mad grin lighting up my face. "Sesehiihihihihi! Foooooolish Sea King! You are truly willing to risk our wrath a second time? You shall pay dearly for your transgressions!"

"Indeed!" Going by Blondie's ear-to-ear grin and the way he was holding his palm out towards the not-so-wee beastie, he'd gotten the gist of my idea and was playing along to the hilt. "We have dozens of cannonballs here with us, each ready to give you another world-class case of heartburn-from-hell. So unless you wanna learn what it's like to get fried from the inside out, I suggest that you turn your fishy tail around and swim away right damn now."

The great beast paused, uncertain.

"Basically?" the Transponder Snail bared his teeth in the most menacing expression I'd ever seen a snail make - and then the air rumbled. "RUN."

That proved to be too much for the Sea King. It turned tail and fled, battered ships rocking in its wake. The turning of said tail also happened to whip up some lovely spray that got me full in the face. I dropped the cannonball and took off my glasses to wipe them clean, sagging back against a wall as I did so. Man, could that Sea King move fast.

There was a tense moment of silence as we waited to make sure the damn kaiju was actually gone. And then…

"Just to confirm, we were both totally speaking out of our asses, yes?" Blondie breathed nervously.

"Straight from the large intestine," I agreed.

"Ah, right. Juuust checking. 'Cause honestly?"

A thud sounded beside me. When I put my glasses back on, Blondie and his snail were on the floor. While the mollusk was—for once—silent, Blondie himself seemed to be shaking with some sort of nervous laughter. Or at least, I thought it was laughter. He ran a hand through his hair as he brought himself back under control.

"Pffhhahahahahaha! Oh man, that was a close one! We would've been so screwed!"
"Yeah…" My voice went quiet as I checked to make sure Ruatha was alright. Of course, the little guy hadn't had to do anything but hold onto my shoulder, so he was having a blast. I don't know why I worried. Maybe because this was the third thing in the past week that had tried to eat us? Or maybe higher, if individual velociraptors counted rather than the pack…

Although… At least I'd been able to fight them. The Sea King left me jittery, frustrated. I had half a mind to ask Blondie to spar with me, but considering that scarecrow build of his, I doubted he'd accept. Needed to do something though. As soon as I was sure Ruatha hadn't been injured, I stood up and started pacing. The dragonet rested his chin on my head and hummed a soothing rhythm.

Eye stalks followed me back and forth. "Barnacle-breath's gone, you know. Someone NEEDS TO CHILL OUT!"

"Forgive me for being a little on edge when that thing was just trying to eat us." Deep breaths; I needed to calm down. I imitated Blondie's earlier actions, taking my hat off to run a hand through my hair. It helped; I still wanted to fight something, but the desire was manageable now. Replacing my hat, I sighed. "Sorry about that. Being away from my crew in a place like this… It leaves me on edge. You know what I'm saying, eh?"

"Nnnnnope."

I shot a dry look at the bastard, who was now grinning unabashedly as he remained prone. "Come again?"

"You heard me," Blondie chuckled without remorse. "I'm confident in the fact that the vast majority of my crew can whoop major ass with three out of four limbs tied behind their backs, so I've got no reason to worry about them. And as for me, I'm a confident, combat-seasoned, badass-asskicking —!"

"BULL-SHIIIIIT~!" the snail cut him off in a singsong voice.

"Blow it out your nonexistent ass~!" Blondie sang right back, without even missing a beat. "Anyways, yeah, no, I'm good. This place is a bit freaky, but apart from that…"

I hummed. "Gonna side with the French food there—"

"Kiss my shell, Indiana Nobody."

"—I've marked enough English papers to know bullshit when I hear it. And that sounded like prime bull moose shit. If you're a front line fighter, I'm a Hufflepuff. And it's not that I'm worried about my crew, exactly. They can handle themselves. I just… Something about this place gives me the heebie-jeebies." Plus I didn't like being alone in strange places at the best of times.

For some reason, Blondie stared at me in confusion for a moment before shrugging and jerking his way up into a sitting position, glancing to the side with a grimace as he scratched the back of his head. "Yeah, alright, I guess you've got a point on that last one. If it weren't for this damn fog, I'd have been able to call for help."

"BUT WITH THE MERRY HELL this shit's pulling on my senses?" The snail stuck its tongue out in disgust. "No dice, sistah!"

"Damn. So there's no reception, eh?" I patted absentmindedly at the pocket where Samsung lived before fixing my companion's mouthy mollusk with a flat stare. Seriously, where had I heard about this guy before? Something about his Den-Den was really familiar. "And it's Jones, actually. Go
ahead and laugh."

"MY PLEAS—GRK!" The snail's ear-to-ear grin was interrupted by his owner grabbing his tongue with what looked to be way too much practice.

My dragonet squawked, indignant at being forgotten. I reached up to scratch his mane. "Oh, yeah. This little ball of scales is my dragon, Ruatha. Although he's more of a baby than a fire-breathing terror."

Ruatha started to preen and ruffle his scales proudly…

_BZRRRRRT!

"GAH!" Before a klaxon suddenly blared right behind me and caused me to jump in shock and Ruatha to take a flying leap off my shoulder.

"HOHOHOHOHOheeeheehee!" the mucus-ridden menace cackled unabashedly, even as his owner rolled his eyes in bemusement. "DON'T TRY TO BOGGLE US, you overgrown lizard!"

"Bit harsh, but he does have a point," Blondie sighed with a 'what can you do' shrug. "This is the Grand Line. The lookout for one of our allies has one of you too, and hers is bigger."

I grabbed my dragon as he went to leap up and maul Blondie- or the snail; I wasn't sure which was his first target. "Down, boy. And at the risk of one of my crewmates appearing out of nowhere and braining me- it isn't size that counts, it's what you do with it." Cue a reflexive flinch and nervous stare, just to make sure Nami wasn't nearby. "For example… Ruatha, if you really care that much—Spit!"

"Chee!" A glob of sticky dragon saliva shot at the snarky snail. Of course, as soon as I gave the command, it occurred to me that this could be a bad idea, but too late. The mollusk started it anyways.

Uuuunfortunately, the effect was entirely nullified by the spineless stain cackling even harder. "I'm a snail, dipshit, I'M SLIMY 24/7! YOU MIGHT AS WELL HOCK SLOP AT A PIG!"

"In a way, he just did," Blondie muttered acridly before shaking his head and pasting an ear-to-ear grin on his face. "Aaaanyways… I dunno how the heck you haven't recognized me by my voice yet, but I might as well introduce myself anyways. 'Voice of Anarchy' Jeremiah Cross, bane of the World Government."

He then reached up to his shoulder, plucked his snail off and held it out to me. "And this is my partner in crime, the other 'Voice of Anarchy' and bane of… pretty much anyone with common decency, Soundbite."

"AKA DA GOD A NOIZE!" the snail hollered, emphasizing his point with an air-rending guitar riff - after which he promptly adopted a grimace. "That was not SMART."

_Error 404: Brain not found._ My mind froze, processing everything that had seemed familiar over the last few minutes. With no one at the controls, my hand automatically reached out to pat the snail- because damn, he may have been a loud, annoying little ball of snark, but he was still above all else a little ball, which thereby made him adorable. And hey, Samsung liked pats, so slimey snail-ness was nothing new to me.

"Gah, nononono, wait, don't—!" Sorry Cross, my brain doesn't have enough available RAM to
understand words right now.

CHOMP!

"...put your fingers... near his mouth, dammit..." Cross groaned, dragging his hand down his face.

I was, however, capable of understanding the fact that a surprisingly sharp set of teeth was suddenly clamped onto my hand. Unfortunately, I didn't register what they were connected to in time, so before I knew what I was doing, I reflexively jerked my hand back to free it... aaaand sent the mouthy mollusk flying as a result. Well, with any luck he'd stick on the ceiling... which had a hole in it... tabarnak.

"YOU STUPID LITTLE SLIMESTAIN!" Cross roared as he shot to his feet and started dancing back and forth below the hole, arms spread wide. Thankfully, when physics reasserted itself and the invert that went up came back down, Cross was able to make a successful dive forwards and nab him before he could hit the deck.

The so-called 'Voice of Anarchy' sighed in relief as he stood back up and replaced his snail before pinning his companion with a blistering glare. "Soundbite? One of these days, you're going to need to learn how to weigh the risks and benefits of biting someone a hundred times bigger and stronger than you. *Especially* when we're on footing patchier than Frankenstein's monster!"

"BITE ME," Soundbite rolled his eyes with a scoff, before leering as he tilted his eyes downwards. "Better yet..."

And with that, the snail hopped backwards as much as he could...

CHOMP!

"YEEEEEAAAAARGH!" And *I* was treated to the sight of Cross running in circles like his ass was on fire... which I imagine was what it felt like considering how hard Soundbite was gnawing on him.

And then everything snapped into place. I facepalmed so hard, I actually got a bit of a charge from it. "This Bites..." I whispered. *Osti d'épais de marde*...

"THAT'S MY FUCKING LINE!" Cross roared as he tugged at his partner's shell to no great effect.

"I know... Bloody fu- excuse me, one moment." I spun away from Cross in my as-usual-fruitless search for the Fourth Wall. Up went my middle finger, combined with a bras d'honneur so as to properly express how I felt about this shenanigan. "A crossover? Really?"

Then... "Sesehihiihiihihiihiihiih! Gods above and below! A Crossover... Okay, this is a good one. That pun is worth a crap-tonne of shenanigans." I turned back to Cross and his snail, who'd both paused mid-run and mid-gnaw, respectively, so that they could look at me like- well, like I was crazy. Eh, I was used to that by now.

"So... Hypothetically speaking, if I told you that you were a character in a *One Piece* SI fanfic, and I was a character in a *One Piece* SI fanfic, and our writers were apparently getting together for multiverse-warping shenanigans, how would you react?"

Cross and Soundbite both blinked at me in confusion for a moment before Cross calmly yanked his partner from his ass, replaced him on his shoulder... and then turned his eyes skyward and spread his arms wide. "A crossover!? Are you out of your—!? Oh who the hell am I kidding, of *course* you are... well, just know that this shit *never works!* If we weren't bombing before by dint of being a self-insert in *One Piece*, we're sure as shit hittin' rock bottom now, *jackass!*"
Okay, Johnny and Yosaku were right. Seeing it from this side was freaky. Still, might as well snap him out of it. "Actually—!"

**BANG!**

Something whizzed through the air, cutting between me and Cross. The noise was followed immediately by the splintering thud of a bullet punching a hole through wood.

Cross summarized the situation best.

--o--

"SNIPER, GET DOWN!" I barked with all the tried and true practice of a gamer as I slammed my back into the nearest wall opposite the bullet hole, my heartbeat going through the roof as I processed what the fuck had just happened.

Not far away, Jones dove behind a cannon and hit the dirt. "Of all the—! Why does it have to be ranged?" She pulled a pistol from somewhere along her belt, but made a face at it rather than actually doing anything.

"I don't suppose you're as good with that thing as your namesake?" I called over tentatively.

"Um..." I did not like the way she was glancing upwards. "Let's just put it this way- I am to guns as Zoro is to a GPS. My specialty is unarmed combat."

"Shoot thatta way, MAYBE WE'LL GET LUCKY!" Soundbite snorted as he jerked his eyestalks in the direction of the bullet hole.

"Oh, like you two are much better without your mutt!?"

Soundbite and I exchanged bemused looks and conceded the point with a shrug. "Fair 'nuff..." I mused, before sobering up as I inched towards the cannon's porthole. "Anyway, if you know who I am, you know my position, so if'n you don't mind, I'll be taking point here. And first point of order is to find just where we're being shot at from. Soundbite?"

"READY!" he nodded firmly.

"Alright, then..." I grit my teeth as I clenched and unclenched my fingers in preparation. "This is gonna suuuuck..." And without giving myself enough time to build up any doubt, I swung my arm up—

**BANG! SKRANG!**

"GAH, SON OF A BITCH!" And roared as I snapped my arm back and clutched my hand to my chest, which, besides ringing like a bell, was absolutely killing me. What calibre was that asshat using, 'fuck-you' millimetres!?

Jones shot me a sympathetic wince. "Need me to get another shot out of them?" she hissed.

"No need, twice was enough," Soundbite informed her darkly. "SHE'S—AND IT IS A SHE—about thirty, thirty-five feet that way... AND GOING BY HOW SHE'S ALMOST FIFTY FEET HIGH, I'D SAY SHE'S MADE A CROW'S NEST INTO A SNIPER'S NEST."

"Oh, did she?" A disturbing grin grew across Jones' face. "We'll see about that." So saying, the small blonde made to bolt out of the portal—
"BWAAAAAH!" "GAH, TABARNAK!"

Until I snapped my fingers and Soundbite forced her to stay in place with a point-blank blare.

"Owowowow…" she massaged her ears, wincing mightily, before glaring at me. "The hell was that for!?"

I responded with a decidedly flat glare. "Jones, clear this up for me: your Devil Fruit has something to do with kinetic energy, obviously, and yet you're hiding from our sniper, whose bullets are only lethal because of kinetic energy. So! Are you or are you not legitimately and confidently Luffy-levels of immune to firearms?"

I got an uncomfortable feeling of deja-vu from the way she grinned and rammed her knuckles together. "No idea; never tried it before. But there's gotta be a first time for everything, and I'm still in the mood for a fight."

I took a brief moment to glance heavenwards in exasperation. Someone help me, now I knew how my crewmates felt whenever I did something braindead. "So, you decided to test that little application of your abilities against a sharpshooter who has pinpoint, split-second accuracy and is aiming to kill?"

"Umm…" Jones expression crumbled into a sheepish and somewhat ashen look. "Okay, admittedly not my best idea. You got one better?"

"Yeah," I grunted, turning myself around so that I was facing our enemy, even as I readied my other hand. "You get ready to run, while I get ready for round two." So saying, I jabbed my hand out, just like last time. But unlike last time, this go-around…

"GASTRO-FLASH!" "WHA-BAM!"

I flexed my palm and my partner and I proceeded to blind our assailant's senses. Effectively, too, going by how another shot went off but the actual impact wasn't anywhere near us.

"GET 'EM!" I roared, darting out from behind my cover and running towards the enemy.

Within a few steps, something small and purple shot past me. Huh. Shorty was pretty fast when she wanted to be. And she seemed to be- pounding her fists together as she ran?

"Newton's Second!" CRACK! Wood splintered; there was an ominous creaking noise as the mast began to fall- towards me ohshitshitshit—!

I hastily skidded to a halt and flung my arms up before my face, just as the pillar of timber slammed down on the decks of several ships next to me.

Sadly, life wasn't so convenient as to deposit our shooter at my feet, but the crow's nest did land naught more than a half dozen meters away, so I made the snap decision to leap onto the mast and run along it to the nest. With any luck, our shooter would still be stunned from the—!

CLICK!

—fall sonnuvabitch! I froze on the edge of the crow's nest and snapped my hands up. I briefly considered trying to work out any details concerning our assailant that I could, but my attention was a wee bit distracted by the gun being pointed in my face!

Alright-alright-alright, I just needed to be smart about this, just needed to find an opening, just
needed… to… why was the air starting to screech and howl like a pack of baboo—?

I leapt at the sniper the second they hunched over due to inner-ear-induced nausea and, with only a split second to choose, planted my boot in their face with extreme prejudice. The sound of their nose's cartilage snapping was uncomfortably welcome, as was the sound of the back of their skull smashing against the somewhat rotted wood of the ship.

After 'nudging' the sniper's downed form (read, delivering a hefty, ire-ridden kick to their ribs) to confirm that they were well and truly K.O., I proceeded to do what any sane person in my greaves would do.

"WOO!" I laughed, shooting my fists in the air.

Which, of course, was celebrate.

"Who's a badass?" I whooped as I pointed at Soundbite.

"WE DA BADASS!" Soundbite preened with a flourish.

"And don't you forget it! BOOYAH!" we whooped as we exchanged a high-eye.

"Osti d'épais de marde!" Jones stomped up the mast towards me, rubbing her ears and scowling in a half-decent impression of an angry Zoro. "That was bloody loud. Is everyone still alive over —GYRHK?"

I blinked in confusion as something made her freeze and choke at the sight of the unconscious sniper, and I hastily stepped back as she darted past me to our assailant. Her hat shadowed her face as she crouched down for a better look. Then she spoke again, her voice low. "Um… Cross? I think we have a problem. Does this particular sharpshooter look familiar to you?"

"Jones, all I saw when I got to them was gun." I crossed my arms flatly. "Why, do you recognize them?"

"Yes. And unless your memory sucks arse, you will too." She shot me a flat look before standing up and stepping off to the side.

I took one look… aaaaand promptly froze in the utmost of horror.

"…Soundbite?" I whispered numbly. "Can you connect to Robin?"

"Have you not been—waaaait, wait a second…" Soundbite cut his indignant rebuttal off partway through, a contemplative look coming over his face before he grinned triumphantly. "HA, GOT BRAIN! AND THROUGH HIM… What is it, Cross?" Smugness was swapped for smugness as Robin's voice cut in.

I swallowed heavily, glancing back and forth and rubbing my neck. "…say, Robin," I finally managed to get out. "Hypothetical question for you: say I suddenly came under sniper fire and I managed to KO the sniper before getting a good look at them." I glanced skyward miserably, begging for mercy in light of what I was about to say next. "Then say that said now-KO'd sniper was your mother."

I felt a bolt of utter terror shoot through me at how flat Soundbite's face became. "…my mother. My mother who's been dead since I was a child and whose absence I feel every day like a white-hot knife. That mother."
I tugged on my collar, trying to alleviate the suddenly stifling pressure in whatever way I could. "Let's… say she were present thanks to the fact that time is more twisted than a pretzel here?" I prayed to hell Robin hadn't pegged onto what I was talking about.

"Hypothetically, of course," Robin reiterated dryly.

Fuck. Well, in for a beri…

"Of course…" I whimpered weakly.

There was a pointed silence for a full minute before Robin finally deigned to speak, her voice staying perfectly level the entire time. "Well, in that case, hypothetically speaking, I would be hurt, outraged, and on top of twisting you into a Gordian Knot, I most likely wouldn't speak with you for a straight month."

I restrained a tortured moan as I dragged my clawed hands down my face. "…love these hypotheticals, keeps the brain active!" I said, my voice doing its best impression of Pica's.

"…Mister Jeremiah."

I was frozen for a bit before slapping my hand over my eyes in defeat. "Yes, Robin?" I groaned.

"Did you knock out my mother?"

"Weeeeeell…” I cracked my fingers open and stared miserably at the woman I'd assaulted in pure self-defense.

More specifically… I watched blandly as while Jones checked her condition, her pet chewed on her mohawk.

Or rather… on her mohawk.

"Not your mother."

-0-

"No, Ruatha, bad." I slapped my dragon on the muzzle when I caught him nibbling on Bellemere's hair. "Nami's mom is not for eating."

Oh, Rainbow Mists- if you weren't inspired by Star Trek: Generations, I'd eat my hat. Not far away, Cross was pacing and…

"Oh-God-oh-God-oh-God-oh-Goooooood I'm gonna diiiiiiiie!"

Was essentially all but pissing his tighty-whiteys with how bad he was flipping out, and going by the way the shell on his shoulder was shivering, his partner in noise wasn't far behind.

Unfortunately, warranted as his apparent terror was, it was equal parts distracting and confusing. Aside from a broken nose and being unconscious, Bellemere seemed to be fine. Although she'd probably have a… concussion. Ooooh… alright, let's end this.

I glanced up at the alt-Straw Hat and snapped my fingers. "Cross," I spoke up, trying to grab his attention.

Going by how he snapped his around to stare at me with wide, twitching eyes, I'd succeeded.
I rolled my eyes in exasperation, but still I put on the best air of serenity I could. "I realize you're scared, Cross," I spoke, slowly and methodically. "But please be serious. Nami is not that bad."

Cross scowled at me accusingly. "You are lying," he shot back just as firmly.

"Come on, Cross!" I flung my arms wide in exasperation. "You're overreacting! What's the worst she could do to you?!

Aaaaand there was the 'are you stupid/crazy' look again. "You're kidding, right?" he demanded incredulously.

"It's Nami," I reasserted firmly. Sure, she was a little too liberal with the staff-to-the-head thing sometimes, but not dangerous.

"Yeah, my Nami!" Cross emphasized frantically.

I raised a finger and opened my mouth to reply… aaaaaand then I thought about what he'd just said, and I slowly lowered my finger with a sympathetic wince as I got what he was getting at. "Ooooooh… yeeeeaah, you're fucked." Note to self, keep my Nami far away from any and all rare Dials.

"Ooooooh…" Great, now the poor bastard actually sounded like a wounded animal. …ah fuck it, this was going to suck, but I couldn't just leave him to his fate. No matter how much said fate scared the shit out of me.

So saying—or thinking or… narrating, whichever—I tried to reach out and pat Cross on the shoulder to comfort him, but my hand fell halfway. Nope, couldn't do it. "Well, look on the bright side." I tried to make up for it by sounding as chipper as possible. "At least we're fucked together, right?"

That snapped him out of his panic in favor of pure confusion. Heck, even Soundbite poked his eyestalks out in surprise. "Come again?"

"Weeeell," I waved my hands in a so-so manner. "I did drop the mast she was hiding in, right? And, I mean," I gestured at Bellemere's face helplessly. "Just look at the poor woman! Her face is so beat up, it's impossible to tell if she got hit by one person or, say… two?"

Cross gaped at me as though I were an angel come down to earth. "I would very much like to hug you right now," he breathed reverentially, starting to step oh hell no.

"If you touch me, I will track down that Sea King, chop you up, and feed you to him as chum," I promised him in a solemn whisper.

"Fair 'nuff," Cross transitioned smoothly, stepping past me and walking around to Bellemere's head. "Alright, enough dilly-dallying. Come on, Soundbite's got a bead on the Sunny and I'd rather follow the rotten-wood road while we have the chance."

I glanced down at Bellemere's ankles uncomfortably before shooting my counterpart a pleading look. "You… sure you can't do it on your own?"

Really starting to hate that 'idiot' look. "Me and what muscle tone?" he demanded.

I… really couldn't argue with that, could I? Tabarnak this was going to suck. I crouched down and began the awkward process of getting Bellemere up onto my back. Ruatha was not happy about this, as it meant someone else had his place on my shoulder, but he could walk. "I don't have enough hands. Help me get her arms around my shoulders so I can get a decent grip on her legs without her
falling over backwards."

"On it," Cross nodded, circling around behind me and heaving Bellemere's torso into position before loosely putting her arms around my neck. This was so much easier with conscious people who could hold on under their own power. At least the Marine wasn't that heavy.

"Alright, let's go," I grunted, starting to trudge forwards as I tried to convince myself that I was carrying a sack of potatoes rather than something that would definitely trigger a panic attack.

Keeping pace with Cross as we made our way across the broken ships wasn't exactly the easiest feat to pull off. Stupid tall people and their stupid long legs and doubly stupid uneven and unstable footing. Either way, between my… ahem, 'conservative' stature and my endeavoring to remain upright, I spent a lot of time looking at his back. His very stiff, tense back. Guess he was still worried about Nami's reaction, not that I could rightly blame him.

…screw it, his tenseness was making me tense. Coming to a decision, I jogged for a moment so I could try to comfort him face to face, forcing a small smile into place. "Still freaking out about Nami, eh?"

"Absolutely not in the slightest," Cross ground out around the armored thumb he was gnawing on.

"THANK GOD OUR SHOW is audio only," Soundbite deadpanned, though the fact that he was sweating like a pig didn't really give his words much weight.

"Tell me about it…" I mused for a moment before tilting my head to the side thoughtfully. "Eh, try not to worry, it only makes you suffer twice over. And… if it helps? Look on the bright side."

"We are hauling the concussed body of my volatile, lightning-slinging crewmate's mother," Cross deadpanned. "What possible bright side is there to this situation?"

I made my expression as flat as his. "You only have to deal with one of her as opposed to two at once."

"And just like that, I'm bouncing back!" Cross perked up instantly, his smile radiating hope and positivity.

Meanwhile, back on the Thousand Sunny, Merry, who was standing on the forecastle with Franky, was staring down a spyglass at something off the port quarter. Something that, in hindsight, they really should have seen coming.

"Y'know, I'm getting the distinct impression that Cross was absolutely correct when he said that this place is a temporal clusterfuck," she remarked, her voice pointedly calm.

One bright blue eyebrow arched over Franky's sunglasses. "What makes you say that, sis?" he queried.

Sliding her spyglass shut with a distinct 'snap!', Merry indicated in the direction she'd been looking, a very clear twitch in her jaw. "Because I am sailing right towards us, and there's someone very familiar on my forecastle."

Flicking his sunglasses up and out of the way, Franky followed her gaze towards the horizon, where a familiar sheep-headed caravel was slowly tacking towards them, an equally familiar shock of orange hair visible standing right next to said sheep's-head.
"Huh," Franky slowly blinked in surprise. "So you are."

Funny, I actually did feel better about that. And hey, even if she was and would ever be Nami, she was still my friend and she had notably mellowed out quite a bit since Enies. Hell, who knows, I might just be able to fast-talk my way out of this yet!

…alright, most likely I was just bullshitting myself and we'd still both be crapping thunder for a few hours, but at least a man can dream!

Still, the feeling cleared away the last of the panic and let me think clearly again, and the first thing I noticed was that Jones' shoulders were hunched up. And looking closely, she just seemed tense in general. No idea why though; even if she was willing to stand alongside me against Nami, chances were I'd catch a load more flak than her. So why did she flinch just- aaaaah, and considering the sheer level of pissed at my hug offer earlier…

"You sure you don't want me to try and carry her, Jones?" I offered. "Because you look, well…"

"LIKE SHE'S ABOUT TO HOCK everything from the stomach down?"

"I was trying to be subtle, but…" I shrugged helplessly. "Soundbite can be a blunt ass, but that doesn't necessarily mean he's always wrong."

She winced uncomfortably, but set her jaw and didn't even pause in marching onwards. "It's fine… alright, that's a lie, but don't worry about it. I just… I don't like being touched. But I can handle this." Jones' expression of discomfort turned into- yeaaaaah, that was one of the fakest smiles I'd ever seen. Alright, change the conversation, change the conversation… that'll do it.

"So, 'Newton's Second', eh?" I queried with an inquisitive look. "Lemme guess… Dyna-Dyna Fruit?"

Now Jones visibly perked up, life re-entering her countenance. "Force-Force, actually, but yours is clever. Still, mine's more accurate because it's only physical energy I can deal with. See, I absorb, reflect, and manipulate force- although if I absorb too much, or too quickly, I tend to just sort of 'explode' without control. The force of impact is easiest, but I've started having some success with friction too. I'd demonstrate, but…" She shrugged, jostling Bellemere lightly.

"Oooh, neat!" I grinned eagerly. "Now that is a brilliant and highly exploitable ability! What're your highest and lowest moments with it?"

"HIGHEST FOR ME WAS BLASTING Lucci's feather-rat with mah BASS CANNON!"

Soundbite cackled… before grimacing to the side. "Lowest was when I let a prototype of Phony slap me UPSIDE MY SHELL."

It took a long moment of thought before Jones answered. "Hmmm… Lowest would be blowing myself backwards off a cliff while fighting Eric… the Scythe-bastard?" she clarified at my confused expression. "Back before I knew what my fruit did."

I couldn't help the cheeky grin that spread across my face. "You thought it was—!"

"Yeah yeah, I thought it was Star Wars, get off my ass, I was desperate!" she waved me off with a scowl. "Anyways, highest… Probably blowing up a T-Rex's head when it tried to eat me. Although I don't remember that one very well; you'd have to ask Vivi. I kind of lost consciousness right after."
"Nice!" I barked enthusiastically. "Escaping, surviving, killing and riding a T-Rex are the coolest actions you can perform concerning those things! I only managed one, but you got two at once! Seriously impressive!"

"OH, OH, IDEA!" Soundbite waved his eyestalk eagerly before dropping his voice into a guttural growl. "Once, a T-Rex bit Jones. And in a blood-filled, gore-soaked instant… it was dead."

"Sesehihihihihi!" Jones jerked forward as she giggled ecstatically. "D-Don't make me laugh! Nami really will kill us if I give Bellemere a second lump!"

"Chuck Norris jokes? Really?" I deadpanned as Soundbite and Jones revelled together. "Whatever…" I contemplated what else we could talk about that didn't involve a done-to-death (if admittedly epic) meme. "So… any good movies come out recently?"

"Eh, Disney and Dreamworks have done alright, but that's not really important- although there was a new Star Wars movie supposed to come out about a month after I… left." Jones shot me a curious look. "Really, though? You ask about movies, not how your own story's going? Aren't you the least bit curious?"

I shrugged with a dismissive scoff. "Why ask about the obvious? Good SIs are a once-in-a-blue-moon deal, and the One Piece fanfiction community is both comparatively minuscule and polarized, with fics being either amazing or awful. And the combination of both? The lowest of both sides, bar none. Face facts, we both suck… er, in a literary way, I mean. No offense."

"None taken, and you're a bit off the mark," Jones deadpanned. "Last I saw? This Bites! was pretty popular."

"Oh, yeah?" I shrugged without a care. "Eh, I guess that's nice, then. How many faves does it have? A hundred? Two?"

"Try over two thousand."

I nearly snapped my spine I spun around so fast, but hell if I could give half a damn about that! "Ex-squeeze me!?

"You heard me, Jar-Jar. When I left, you were on the front page in terms of reviews, follows and favorites. Undeniably the most popular SI in the fandom- although I'll agree, that's not necessarily saying much on its own- aaaaand eighth most popular fic overall in terms of favorites. Might be higher by now. Basically?" She freed a hand to give me a thumbs-up. "Congrats, friend, you're officially what's known as an e-celebrity."

I—? But that—! How—? What the fu—!? has encountered a fatal error and has to shut down.

Reboot? Y/N

Y

Reboot accepted. Formulating appropriate response.

"WHAT?!"

Any further responses were cut off by a loud thump on the deck behind us.
My first inkling that something was wrong was how hard and unyielding my bed seemed to be. I like a firm mattress as much as the next guy, but to my sleep-addled subconscious it felt more like a hardwood floor. Not comfy.

My second inkling was that I was asleep in the first place, though my brain was decidedly unhelpful in telling me why that was a problem.

The third and most important was a finger jabbing into my ribs.

With the ease of long practice, I pried my eyes open and sat up, locking my gaze with Robin's brown orbs for a brief second, long enough for the worry in her expression to dim somewhat. It also served to reassure me; the last thing I remembered was seeing Enrico-fucking-Pucci out and about on the street and then…and then…yeah, that blank spot in my memory was all kinds of worrying.

I slowly turned my head around, a sinking pit opening up in my stomach as I took in the derelict ship—a wooden one at that, and massive too—we were on, as well as the multitude of others that were surrounding our perch, and the rainbow-colored mist we were enshrouded in, which was nigglingly familiar. And I dealt with that the way I usually do.

"Well, this definitely isn't Louisiana," I remarked. Unfortunately, that didn't get even a snort out of Robin, which was worrying, since she usually laughs at even my worst jokes.

"No, it's not," she agreed, glancing around. "Are we in the Bermuda Triangle?"

"I doubt it. Contrary to popular belief, the Triangle isn't any more dangerous than the rest of the ocean. Believe me, we've checked," I replied as I stood up, my jeans crackling. Ugh. Salt water. "Unless some rogue Stand user has set up shop there since we last checked." I frowned as I realized that in addition to not knowing where we were, I also had no idea how we'd gotten here. "How did we get here, anyway? I remember seeing Pucci on the street…"

I glanced over to Robin for answers to see her shuffling back and forth on her feet, looking away. Aw, hell, I knew what that expression meant. "I lost it and attacked him, didn't I?" I sighed, rubbing my forehead.

"Yeah, you didn't even use The Catalyst's abilities," Robin replied, her tone readily relaying what she thought about that decision. "And then this fat slob in glasses stepped out of an alley and touched you and you vanished. I almost didn't grab him—he stank, seriously!—but I used my arms to try and lock him and then I blacked out and woke up on this ship a few minutes before you did."

"Ugh, that damn priest must have been there to recruit Stand users. And got one," I groaned, moving my hand away so I could look around again. "Alright, now, where are we—"

I froze as the memory that had been tickling me since I saw that fucking rainbow mist hit me like a thunderbolt. And as someone who's actually been hit by lightning (long story), let me tell you, that was pretty hard.

"Rainbow mist…" I breathed. "Son of a gun…"

"You know where we are, then?" Robin asked hopefully.

"Yeah, I know where we are. We're in your old world."

Those words got the reaction I expected: anger and fear flitting over her face, her fists clenching at
her sides, and her Stand, Pompeii, springing into sight, glaring at me. Thankfully, I knew the remedy for this sort of thing.

I pulled her into a hug.

"Don't worry," I said, stroking her hair, feeling her tense muscles under my other hand. "If I remember correctly, that ice bas—guy's nowhere nearby. More importantly, you're not the same as you were back then. It's okay, we're safe…"

I made soothing noises, continuing my stroking, and slowly I felt the tension ebb out of her. Finally, I felt her push against me, which was the usual signal that she'd had enough.

"Feel better?" I asked as we separated.

"Yeah…" she said softly, brushing at her eyes. "So, now what?"

I grimaced. My rather hazy memories of this arc—thank you… X-Chick, I think it was—indicated there was supposed to be an island here. But all I was seeing were dead ships, as far as the eye could reach.

"I don't know," I answered, frustration leaking into my voice. "What I remember of this part of One Piece is both super hazy and clearly wrong. I simply don't know enough about the Rainbow Mist to know what to do."

Robin nodded grimly. "Then we should probably find somebody and see if they know more."

"Heh," I chuckled. "We'll make a Stand warrior out of you yet. That's exactly what I was thinking." I glanced up at the mast rising above the deck, and pressed a hand to it, The Catalyst manifesting and overlaying its own arm. "And the first step towards that is to find a mast that hasn't been rotted through with seawater."

Stepping up, Robin gave the mast a hearty poke, and then stepped back. After a brief second, the mast creaked and began to fall over, making that classic cartoon falling tree sound before crashing onto a neighboring wreck.

"Yeah, probably a good idea," she drawled.

Getting to other ships was a simple matter of having our Stands pick us up and ferry us over. Navigating the ships themselves was trickier. Salt water and the creatures within it did nasty things to ships, steel, wood, or otherwise, but it was still surprising how bad off many of the wrecks were. I didn't want to think about how long some of these wrecks must have been here to get that bad. After the first time Robin nearly fell through a rotten patch of planking I had The Catalyst out constantly to keep an eye on the chemical composition of the wood.

And that was how, after landing on one of the more intact ships, I sensed something very important.

"Wait," I ordered, stopping Robin in her inspection of this ship's mast. I began to pace over the deck, trying to pinpoint a chemical that was in decidedly short supply around here.

"What did you find?" Robin asked, before glancing up. "And can I climb up the mast?"

"In order, I think I found fresh water, and yes, but be careful," I replied, stopping on a particular piece of deck. I could've used The Catalyst's ability to rot away the wood, but I was on the mood for something a little more visceral.
"Oyoi!"

My Stand's fist crashed into the deck, smashing apart the planking, and I hopped down onto the gun deck below. Another "Oyoi!" brought me down to the hold, which had so far avoided being flooded, my senses pointing me to several barrels.

Picking the nearest one, I pried it open, and in it was water. Water that, once I tasted it, proved to be fresh, if a bit brackish.

"Perfect…" I muttered as I replaced the lid.

"Did you find something?" I heard Robin call down.

"Yeah, we've got water now!" I called back up. "Give me a minute!"

Getting up again was a bit tricky, but there were plenty of footholds. The only problem was when I was trying to climb out of the gun deck. As it turned out, trying to climb off of a slick iron cannon was a bad idea if you didn't want bruised shins.

"Ratchafraszin’…" I muttered as I got back up on the main deck. I glanced up at the mast, seeing Robin staring off into the distance. "You see anything?"

"Yeah, I see a ship that isn't beat to shit!"

"Language!" I halfheartedly shouted up. "Now, let's get you down before something—"

SNAP!

"Yaaaaahhh!"

"Breaks!" I yelped, shifting onto the balls of my feet so I could dive in any direction. I shouldn't have worried, though; a glance up showed her hanging off the mast by the many arms sprouting from it.

"I'm okay!" she reported.

"Yeah, you seem to… have things in hand," I said, grinning.

"Snrk… That was terrible, Lee!" Steadily dropping herself down, she tapped her foot on top of my head before landing. "Terrible!"

"My great sense of humor aside—"

"Ha!"

"—you said you saw an intact ship, right?" I continued.

"Yup," Robin confirmed, dropping to the deck. "Well, mostly intact. The masts are kinda broken."

"We'll go there, then," I decided. "We have water here, but I want to find food, too. That's a lot harder to die from, but also harder to recover from, as well."

"Good," Robin said, sniffing and haughtily raising her nose. "When we are there, you shall cook me the most exquisite banquet you can!"

I stared at her for a few seconds, then shook my head and began chuckling. Oh, this was going to be good. Makes me wish my phone hadn't apparently gotten dunked in saltwater.
Robin, who had just started walking towards the ship, turned around at that, worry creasing her features. "Why are you chuckling?" she asked, her voice wavering.

"You'll see," I said cryptically, waving her forward. "Let's keep moving, okay?"

"Okay..." she said dubiously. We continued on, Robin in the lead, and she kept on glancing behind herself at me. Ah, I love it when I get to do this. And I love it even more when it's due to something that I didn't actually do! Does that make me an asshole?

Hm...

Nah, everyone enjoys a good bit of schadenfreude here and there. And not everyone's an asshole.

Secure in my logic, I went silent and focused on keeping an eye on the rotten decks. Thanks to our Stands carrying us over gaps and Pompeii temporarily patching up a few rotten spots, we made good time, and soon I could see the beached ship Robin had pointed out looming on the fog-shrouded horizon.

Still, we'd need to stop soon and take a break; Robin was beginning to flag. She hid it well, but the little quivers in her legs, particularly her calves, and the sweat running down her neck were obvious tells. We just needed to find a good, solid deck to stop on.

I was still debating where to do that when a loud squawk of "WHAT?!" echoed out over the graveyard, very loud and very close.

"Stay here!" I barked, noting in my peripheral vision Robin slumping to the deck as I dashed over to the side. Whatever this situation, throwing an internationally wanted young girl into the mix was unlikely to be a good thing, and honestly, she seemed relieved to get the rest.

The damn fog, naturally, was still obscuring things as I reached and peered over the side of the ship, but I could make out a pair of silhouettes, one person-shaped and one an amorphous blob that I recognized as one person carrying another. The Catalyst helpfully informed me a second later that the person being carried had a lot of black powder and residue on her person. Interesting.

Unfortunately, that was all the information I could get from here, and I still didn't know who these people were. I'd have to do this the hard way.

Jumping off the deck, I let the Catalyst float me down most of the way before dropping me the last few feet. My arrival was heralded by an audible thunk, and I was treated to two pairs of eyes shooting my way.

My mind quickly ran through the scene. On the right, young blond man, wearing a black cap, jacket, and pants; somewhat tanned, but still obviously of North European descent; bandage over his nose; armor over his forearms and shins; and a checkerboarded... Den-Den Mushi, I think they were called, on his shoulder. He also looked vaguely familiar, even though I'm pretty sure he wasn't anyone I'd ever seen before. On the left, young...

My eyes narrowed as I tried to make out the other figure's gender. Looked vaguely feminine... I'd go with female, until she indicated otherwise. Shorter than Blondie, same taste in dark clothing (black and dark purple), though with a fedora instead of a cap and a splash of red at her neck. Dirty blonde hair, olive skin that looked natural instead of tanned... and a utility belt jammed to the gills with stuff. I counted at least eight pouches, as well as a flintlock pistol and a sai practically touching.

Neither of them looked particularly threatening; both had rather slim builds and only one was even armed. Still, in both JoJo and One Piece, appearance was often a terrible indicator of threat level, so I
didn't drop my guard.

That, and there was a third person in what I'm pretty sure was a Marine uniform being carried on Fedora's shoulders, unmoving and limp. The woman—at least, I'm pretty sure it was a woman—had dark orange hair trimmed down to a buzz cut on the sides, and it was tickling my memory. That hairstyle, and the Marine uniform…

Ah. Bellemere, I'm pretty sure. I guess my memory about time fuckery is accurate.

For whatever reason—whether surprise, my close scrutiny, or something else—neither of them reacted for several seconds. Well, that wouldn't do. These people were our best ticket out of here.

Standing from the crouch I'd been in, I indicated the unconscious woman. "Friend of yours?"

"…Uh, friend of a friend?" Blondie posed.

"Close enough," Fedora nodded.

I hummed thoughtfully. "And is there any reason she's covered in enough gunpowder and gunpowder residue that I can smell it?"

"She's a sniper who just tried to give us EXTRA HOLES IN OUR bodies," the snail scoffed, its voice swapping in pitch, tone and even gender. "NO DOI SHE REEEKS LIKE A ONE-WOMAN ARMY."

I narrowed my eyes at the checkerboarded Den-Den Mushi, which appeared to be talking on its own in some weird radio patchwork. Could they do that? And that sense of familiarity was back and stronger than ever…

"That makes sense," I said slowly, nodding. I plastered a grin on my face, and I clapped my hands together. "So! Since it seems you're both stuck here, too, do either of you know any way to get out of here? We've got some time-sensitive stuff to take care of."

Fedora snorted. "Time-sensitive. Here. Please, tell another one." Her words were accompanied by amused chattering from an overgrown lizard—with wings—scrambling around her ankles. Right, dragons are a thing around here. I mentally raised her threat level a notch.

"Heheh, that's a nice one, Soundbite, rewind his last sentence," Blondie transitioned from laughing to dead serious in a second as he suddenly pointed at me.

There was a brief rewinding noise from the snail before it started to speak in my voice. Okay, seriously, I knew this guy. I swear, it's on the tip of my tongue… "We've got some time-sensitive stuff to take care of."

Blondie tensed up and started to clench and unclench his fists. "You heard what I heard, right?" he asked his companion tersely.

"Yep." Fedora turned to scowl at me. "Tabarnak… I like a good fight as much as the next crazy person, but not when I'm carrying precious cargo."

"Walk 'em out OR ELSE I GET THEM CHUCKIN' EVERYTHING THEY'VE eaten in the last week!" the Den-Den Mushi snarled grimly. "And for the record? I'm not fuckin' exaggerating."

I resisted the urge to sigh. Man, I suck at negotiating. But then, I already knew that. Call in Koichi for diplomacy, call me if you want someone dead. Hell, even Jotaro's better at negotiating than me,
and he has all the emotive capacity of a brick wall!

Anyway, I could probably take them, but I'd rather not kill our only ticket out of here, or piss off the companions they inevitably had. And I still didn't remember who Blondie was despite that nagging recognition. I hate it when that happens!

"Woah, okay, let's not go crazy here," I said, raising my hands in placation. "I don't want to fight, and I wasn't planning on ambushing you guys."

Yet.

"But if it'll make you all feel better… Hey, Robin!"

"Yeah?" Robin called down from the ship above, both Blondie and Fedora exchanging glances, likely at the youth of her voice.

"Come on down, they want to meet you!"

"Aye-aye!"

There was a moment of silence, and then a mast crashed down to the deck several yards away from us, shattering into chunks of rotten wood. Then the wood crumbled into ash, swirling into a vaguely mast-shaped mass, which promptly snapped together into a pristine new mast. Robin skipped down a few seconds later, a happy grin on her face.

"Hi, my name's Robin Fung!" she said in greeting, waving her hand. Behind her, the mast collapsed back into shattered, rotten wood. "Weird name, huh? Blame this guy." That last was accompanied by a thumb jabbed my way.

Fedora's scowl morphed into what could only be called a puzzled glare, her mouth falling open with a hiss. "Son of a—!"

Blondie's reaction, however, was leagues more extreme… and rather amusing, too. Seriously, I didn't even know jaws could go so low, or that a person could survive without a drop of blood in his face.

"R-Robin?" he choked out incredulously.

Aaaaand just like that this wasn't funny anymore. I could see Robin's eyes widening slightly in my peripheral vision, though it was more out of surprise than fear. "Uh… have we met?" she asked.

"Or have you just seen the wanted poster that's been floating around these waters?" I added, barely keeping from snarling. The Catalyst, as it's wont to do when my emotions run high, sprang into view behind me, looming ominously.

Robin opened her mouth, presumably to ask about that, but I raised my hand and she closed it. I wanted to see how they reacted to my words. I tried to watch their eyes, but that was a bit difficult, because they were looking over my… aaaaah, shit, the Mist was making my Stand visible, wasn't it?

"Did I pull an all-nighter without noticing it?" Fedora wondered aloud, reaching one hand under her glasses to rub her eyes. "Because I think I'm hallucinating a modernized version of Red Skull."

…Scratch that, they can fucking see it. What the hell?! Do these two have Observation Haki? Oh, that would be bad news if they did.

"You… have a Stand…" Blondie choked out. Then his expression turned downright sickly as he
snapped his attention back to Robin. "Wait… Stands and—!? Oh, frack me, Bohemian Rhapsody!?!"

"How do you know that name?!!" I snapped almost before he'd finished speaking, the Catalyst flashing out to grab Blondie by the throat and slam him against the nearest hard surface; the deck-edge railing, in this case.

As he gurgled, my mind was awhirl. How did this guy know about Stands, let alone one as specific and short-lived as Bohemian Rhapsody? And—

Wait.

The blond hair. The armored arms and legs, the Den-Den Mushi. Someone who's read JoJo, in a world where that didn't exist.

"—Lee? Lee!"

I blinked, seeing Robin tugging at my arm, looking angry. Then I glanced out, seeing the person I finally recognized starting to turn an unhealthy shade of blue, and Fedora in a fighting stance looking ready to jump into the fray. At a command, the Catalyst released him, letting him drop to the deck, hacking and coughing and clutching a clearly bruised throat.

"Xomniac?"

-o-

"Gagh, I, wha—WHAT!?" I managed to bite out as I got my throat working again. "Sonnuva, how the hell do you know that name!?…wait…" I glanced skyward miserably. "Oh, come on, another self-insert? Dunno how the hell you jiggered things so that we don't suck back home, but I'm still serious about a crossover being a shit gimmick!"

The grizzly-looking mofo who'd just nearly ripped my spine out snorted at that, getting an exasperated sigh from tiny Robin (still trying not to freak out about that), and he took a deep breath, seeming to collect himself.

"I dunno, you didn't seem to think that when you dumped Priscilla and… what's his name, that ice dragon guy from… Dark Souls, was it? Anyway, when you dumped those two in Resuscitatio. And don't even get me started on Franken Fran."

"I WAS ON A SUCCESS HIGH, I ALREADY ACKNOWLEDGED THAT I FUCKED UP!" I roared indignantly at the impudent son of a bitch. Damn it, how long was he going to hold that shitfest over my head, it'd been weeks since we'd even… talked about…

…wait a second.

"CV!?" I squawked, my eyes nearly popping out of my sockets.

Jones looked from me to CV and back again. "So… You know this guy? Do we have to fight him or not? I'm confused."

"You and me both," Robin muttered. "And just so you know, he could totally kick both your asses!"

"In the flesh," fucking CV12Hornet said. He then proceeded to poke Robin in the back of the head. "Also, Robin? Please don't write checks that I have to cash."

My brain stalled and jarred as I tried and failed to to process just what the hell I was seeing. CV.
CV12Hornet. An extremely skilled writer, my best editor. One of my best friends in the whole
—WHY THE HELL AM I STILL SITTING!?

"DUDE!" I laughed elatedly, shooting to my feet and spreading my arms wide. I was promptly
knocked off my feet by the man wrapping me up in a hug, strong arms squeezing the air out of me.

"You're alive, you crazy bastard!" CV crowed. "I told you going into a 'verse with superhuman
baseline durability was a bad idea!"

"And you have a fucking Stand!" I laughed back as I rammed my hands down on his back. "You
went into JoJo and you crawled out the other end in one fucking piece! Holy shit dude, you—!…
you…" I trailed off slowly before leaning back to give my old pal a bemused look. "Yoouou've pulled
a Joseph. Eesh, dude."

"What are you—?" CV began, before scowling. "I'm forty-six, dammit! And I like to think I look
good for my age!"

"SORRY TO TELL YOU, bub, but you look like you're pushing SIXTY!" Soundbite cackled.

"And I think you need to get your eyes checked, Squashy!" Robin interjected, adding a stomp on the
deck for emphasis. "He doesn't look a day over forty-five!"

"Thanks…" CV grumbled.

"YOU WANNA SAY THAT TO MY FACE, shortstack!?" Soundbite snapped his jaws
menacingly.

"Oh, lordy…" I slapped a hand to my face with a groan. "I see where this is going… bah, while
they're ripping each other's heads off—"

Beside us, Robin glared at Soundbite and drew herself to her full 5'5" height. "Yeah, I do! Your
mother was a slug and your father was a hermit crab!"

"—wanna catch up?"

"Ohoh, you wanna dance? Bring it, cause I'm soooo scared of that knife in your face! OH
WAIT, THAT'S YOUR NOSE!"

CV eyed the insult-fest between Soundbite and Robin for a second before shrugging and nodding.
"Sure. D'you want to start, or…?"

"Dude, I've been on these seas for six months, you've been in JoJo for the majority of your life," I
deadpanned. "Who the hell do you think has the more interesting story?"

"Still you," he replied with a smug grin. "I haven't been hanging around a protagonist the whole
time. Just some of the time."

"…fair 'nuff!" I grinned cockily as I started fiddling with my gauntlets. "And if I'm going first, let me
cut off any 'comparing scars' nonsense early, because nothing you've got can top what I've got."

"I seriously doooouooookay, nevermind…"

I revelled in the way my friend recoiled from my unbandaged arm, the vindictive joy pushing me
through the sting of salt on my exposed nerves. "Yeeaaah, like a limb of molten mozzarella! Gooey
and solid in all the wrong places! Touch it."
"How about no? The last time I saw burns that bad, it was on a corpse!"

"C'moooon, touch it!"

"Xom, get that thing away from me!"

"Touch it touch it touch it!"

"I will melt the rest of you from the lungs out, so help me God!"

-0-

I laughed as Cross started chasing his friend around the deck waving… not the most badly scarred hand I'd ever seen, since I used to work for a surgeon, but certainly up there. To be able to meet someone you knew in a place like this, so far from home… Although, this CV person seemed a lot older than I would've expected of someone Cross hung out with on Earth. Maybe he aged differently on his alternate timeline thingy? Oh, the joys of time-warp shenanigans.

Wait… Time-warp shenanigans—I'd come to One Piece about a year after Cross had, if not a little longer. The manga had progressed so much… Should I warn him about Sanji's family?…wait, warn —? Oh, holy hell, Ace. He still thought he was free and clear on that front, he had no idea about the shitstorm waiting for him! Screw it, I know I would've wanted him to warn me, if our situations had been reversed. The more information you had, the better it was for making plans. That was something I'd managed to learn from him.

Something flashed across my peripheral vision as I opened my mouth to speak. No one else noticed, still engaged in their banter. Suspicious, I turned to find whatever-it-was. Were we under attack? But no, all I saw was a ratty scrap of sail that had fallen from a nearby wreck. It had something written on it though. The dripping red text piqued my curiosity; I moved closer to read it.

Go ahead and tell him.

Halfway through reading the note, something flashed across my skin, and I was forced to lean over with a hiss when my forearms began to sting and burn. I almost dropped Bellemere in surprise. Twelve glowing lines of pain, almost as bad as when they'd been fresh. When I looked back, there was a sheet of impossibly sturdy paper lodged in the wood. One edge was lined in red; I was able to read three words before the pervasive moisture caused it to begin crumbling into pulp.

I dare you.

Tabarnak. This was that B.R.O.B. thing, wasn't it? Didn't want me messing with Cross' fate…tch, fine, message received, you omni-everything fuck. Wasn't like it would matter anyways, because knowing Cross, he'd meet whatever challenges were coming head-on and grind them into the dirt. I paused at that thought. Huh. A lot more admiration there than I usually showed for anyone… except maybe Sensei. Hello, not-my-usual-writer.

Still, just in case… I freed one hand for a second to flip the sky off. "Merde! Fine, fine, have it your way. Just quit messing with the scars, my own writer does that enough already. And I may not be able to see you right now, but if I ever do find you… Mon tabarnak j'vais te décalisser la yeule, calice!"

Slamming my foot on the note-mush for good measure, I grit my teeth and forced back the pain. It slowly subsided as I clenched and unclenched my muscles. Deep breaths; force a smile so no one would suspect I'd seen anything unusual.
Even if she wasn't all that heavy, carrying Bellemere was starting to get tiring. I'd really appreciate getting to the ship so I could put her down and stretch out my shoulders; the muscles in my upper back were starting to seize up. Time to get people back on track. But how?

…Yes.

I crept up behind Cross while he was going after CV, my steps quiet on the worn wood. Not that I expected anyone except maybe Soundbite to hear me over the banter that was still in progress. Slipping one hand free, I reached for a famous and much-hated button, crazy grin growing across my face.

BWAAAAAAAAAHH!

The noise hurt my ears something awful, but it was worth it. Everyone jumped, including me; I made sure my leap carried me away from Cross and any possible vengeance. Five pairs of eyes fixed on me; Ruatha let out a reproachful croon of pain.

"Seseshihihihihi! Oh, that was fun. I can't believe I actually got the chance to do it!"

-o-

I recovered first from the incredible noise of the foghorn; the one benefit of being around so many explosions in my twenty-four years in Jojo. "Dang, that's loud," I groused, rubbing my ears. "You okay, Robin?"

"My eaaaars…" she groaned from where she was curled up on the deck. "Gimme a few minutes for the world to stop ringing…"

I nodded, and turned back towards Fedora, who was looking quite pleased with herself. "Soooo. I don't think we were ever introduced and I suppose blowing our eardrums is as good an introduction as any." I held my hand out towards her. "Lee Fung, better known as CV12Hornet in online circles."

She stared at my hand for a moment before awkwardly freeing one of her own to shake it. "Jones. Also an SI, although I don't know what name my writer uses. So… What was that Red Skull thing that grew up behind you earlier? Or was I actually hallucinating again?"

Again? "Don't worry, you're not hallucinating," I explained once we broke the handshake. "This is my Stand, The Catalyst." Said Stand popped into view behind me as I mulled over how to explain this. "Think of it as… a manifested fighting spirit that gives you superpowers. I'm honestly surprised you can see it."

"So, sort of a cross between Haki and a Patronus? Cool." Jones shrugged at my latter words. "Afraid I can't help with the seeing thing, if people normally can't. Between the glasses and the crazy, it's hard for me to tell. Now, since you reacted so well to it, I hope you don't mind me using you as a human shield if anyone else was pissed off by the foghorn. Like I said, I don't like fighting with precious cargo." So saying, she ducked around to put me between her and the rest of the group.

On the plus side, while Robin was rubbing her ears and glaring at Jones, it seemed to be mostly annoyance. Xomniac and Soundbite, on the other hand, looked actually angry.

"And for the record, now that I have a human shield?" she spoke up from behind me. "I see why you guys like doing that!"

"WE KNOW!" Xomniac and Soundbite hollered irritably.
"Sesehiihiihihi!"

"Ugh… alright, moving on," Xom groaned. "You know the story as well as I do… uh, would you prefer CV or Lee?"

I let a grin spread across my face. "Yes."

"…Right." He slapped his hand to his face with a sigh before splitting his fingers and… glancing at Robin? "So, Child Robin. Considering the setting you walked out of, I take it that my guess about Bohemian Rhapsody was right?"

I opened my mouth to respond—

"That's right!"

And then Robin cut in, grabbing my arm and grinning sunnily.

"He tried to save me from the ice guy but kept getting frozen and then this weird arrowhead cut me and it really hurt but it gave me a Stand—" And here Pompeii - a humanoid, vaguely female figure in grey plaster and jagged black volcanic rock, Roman numerals making a clock over its chest - sprang to life and gave a wave. "So I could keep him alive and then he went and kicked the bad guy's a— butt, and then because I had a Stand I was able to stay and not go back into that comic book for weird reasons I don't get and Lee adopted me and it was awesome!"

"What she said," I interjected in the silence that followed before glancing back at Jones. "Also, maybe I should carry Bellemere from now on."

My suggestion earned a scowl, of all things. Despite looking like she could use a break, Jones was glaring like I'd just threatened to kill her dragon. "No. No, I'm good."

Well, alright then. Let her suffer in silence. Arguing with that kind of stubbornness generally got you a boot to the head. At best. "Suit yourself."

Meanwhile…

"Riiiight…" Cross stared at Robin for a second longer before affixing me with a flat glare. "For the record? If my Robin pulls a Joestar and gets a Stand by extension or association or what the hell ever and starts shifting art-styles, I blame you."

"Duly noted," I blandly stated. "Anyway, now that the exposition's out of the way, I hope one of your ships is around so we can sit down and hash out how the hell we're going to get out of here."

"Sunny's over… thattaway," Cross jerked his thumb in the direction his snail indicated. "We're planning on regrouping there so that Chopper… actually, now that I think about it, do I need to clarify him as 'my' Chopper?" he glanced at Jones in askance.

"Nah, I think you're good." She shook her head. "I doubt we'll need to deal with those kinds of hijinks…" Her expression fell flat. "And it's not like your Chopper could be confused with mine by any sane person anyways."

"Uh…?" Robin slowly raised her hand curiously. "If they're the same person, why not?"

"It MIGHT have something to do with the fact that one is NUTTIER THAN A SQUIRREL AND strapped with EXPLOSIVES," Soundbite responded flatly.
"…Withdrawn," Robin muttered, Pompeii shimmering briefly into existence and rubbing its neck nervously behind her.

"Shall we?" I interjected, indicating the direction Cross had pointed.

"Allons-y!" the relatively native pirate proclaimed as he forged on energetically.

~o~

"Ah, mi casa at last!" I laughed in relief, swinging my arms out wide as the beautiful, tri-masted form of my home and steed came into sight through the mists. "It's not su casa, but he'll take you in all the same. Nice, eh?"

Lee didn't say anything for a long moment in favor of staring with furrowed brows at the ship. "…Wasn't the Thousand Sunny supposed to be a brig sloop?" he asked at last.

"That was with a ฿200 million budget. Thanks to me, we had ฿500 million, and a ship-whisperer involved in the construction process." I couldn't help but shoot a cocky grin over my shoulder at Jones. "Top that, rookie."

"That implies a situation where we need Sunny in the first place, asshat," Jones deadpanned.

"…also implies you make it to Water 7 period?" I offered sheepishly.

"As if we won't," Jones rolled her eyes before shifting Bellemere about with a grunt. "Look, quit rubbing your superior experience in my face and help me figure this out; I don't have enough hands to climb while holding a person." Her words were accompanied by what I was pretty sure was the dragon equivalent of a raspberry from Ruatha.

"Right, I thought the Wikipedia page for barques looked familiar…" Lee muttered, ignoring the exchange as he kept looking over Sunny. "Oh, and speaking of hands? Robin just climbed up the side while you two were arguing."

"Wait, what!?" I snapped my attention to him in shock. "Why didn't you—!?"

"Brace," Soundbite droned flatly.

I hastily snapped my headphones over my ears…

"EEEEEEE!"

Just in time to dodge the supersonic shriek that came within milliseconds of rending my eardrums. Prepubescent girls: an aspect of modern life I so did not miss.

Others, however…

"Dick..." Jones ground out as she got a hand free and dug a finger through her ear.

"Yeah, she's got a fantastic set of pipes, doesn't she?" Lee said, a smug grin on his face telling just how much experience he had with this. "Oh, and to answer your question, Xom, I didn't say anything because I try to be fairly hands-off as a parent. Oh, and because I thought it'd be funny."

"HE'S AS BAD AS YOU, PARTNER!" Soundbite cackled.

"And as confusing to boot."
"GRK!" I went ramrod stiff as a specific voice spoke up behind me, and I slowly turned a twitching grin up to the Sunny's railing. "H-Heya, Robin. III'm guessing you have a few questions."

"I'll save the ones for your… friend for a later time," she cast a pointed glance at Lee for a moment before refocusing on me. "Currently, however?" She hefted… an arm up, exposing the fact that her mini-me had latched onto her like a lamprey and was staring at her with particularly twinkly eyes. "I'd very much like an explanation for this."

"Lee, you were right!" Younger Robin giggled ecstatically as she rubbed her cheek against… well, her own arm. "I'm gonna be sooo hoot when I grow up!"

"Told you that brat Mikaela was just jealous!" Lee shot her a thumbs-up.

"Ergh…" I dragged a hand down my face with a groan before jerking my thumb at Jones and her… baggage. "Look, I'll explain things soon enough. For now, mind if I start by trying to explain that to the crew?"

Robin hummed noncommittally for a moment before shrugging and conjuring a makeshift ladder of limbs on Sunny's side. "Pass her here. Best you come on first though, so that you can help me lift her up."

"On it," I saluted, hastily clambering up her limbs and waving down at Jones once I was on deck. "Alright, pass 'er up!"

"Finally." There was a relieved sigh as Jones heaved Bellemere up high enough that Robin could grab her and start passing her up. "Merde… I'm gonna be so stiff tonight. Make sure you watch her head, eh? And get her to Chopper ASAP."

"Yeah, yeah, I got her," I nodded absentmindedly, keeping my head on a swivel even as I hooked my arms under Bellemere's arms. "Now let's hurry up and do this before Nami sees—!"

"Before Nami sees what exactly?"

A loud smack echoed from down on the shore where Lee still was.

"GRK!" I barely kept from fumbling the Marine as I shot a panicked glance over my shoulder at Nami and Vivi, who'd somehow managed to walk up behind me without anyone warning me. I spared snarls at a far too satisfied Soundbite and Robin (the older one I mean, damn this was going to be confusing…) before smiling tersely at the two. "N-Nami! Good timing, great timing really! I-I-I was just going to go and get you! I, ah, j-j-just discovered something in the Mists you'll want to know about!"

"Yeah, funny story about that…" Vivi cocked her eyebrow at me. "See, we found something pretty incredible too."

And with that she stepped aside to reveal… an older woman who looked just like oh bloody hell!

"QUEEN TITI, MA'AM!" I yelped, hastily spinning around to snap her a saluuuuoooh shit. 

THUNK!

I flinched as the meaty thump of flesh and bone striking flesh and bone rang out. "I can explain that."

"GAH! TABARNAK, YOU DROPPED HER RIGHT ON MY HEAD, YOU ASS!"
"I can explain that too."

I tried not to flinch as our navigator leaned to the side to look past me, where Bellemere was sprawled out on the deck in front of a sour-looking Jones, who wasn't rubbing the top of her head only because Ruatha was licking the spot.

"Cross," Nami asked dryly, her eyes slowly narrowing. "Would you care to explain to me why my *once-dead-mother* is lying down there and why she looks like she got kicked in the face?"

"Er…" I rubbed the back of my neck uncomfortably as I tried to look anywhere but at her. "Beeecause someone kicked her in the face?"

"I thought you described your friend as 'eloquent'?” the un-deceased queen of Alabasta asked her daughter with honest curiosity.

"Eh," Vivi waved her hand. "It comes and goes with the tides."

"*Bite me,*" I hissed out of the corner of my mouth, slapping my resident pest’s shell before he could get any bright ideas.

"Would it be too crass to make a concussion joke?" Lee chose that exact time to very helpfully cut in as he climbed up the side. "Because this is, what, the third time she's gotten knocked on the head today?"

"Only the second, you bastard!" I called down acridly, before flinching as Nami's fingers dug furrows into the railing. "Aaaaand that is *so* not helping my case, is it?"

"No. No, it's not." Hands appeared on the rail as Jones heaved herself up. Ruatha came up separately, and a little ways away- dragon must have good instincts for avoiding trouble. Jones sighed. "Anyways, look… Nami, my name is Jones. I know you might not know me, but I just want you to hear me out: Cross might be an idiot—!"

"Oi!"

"—But to be fair, this time this mess isn't *entirely* his fault."

"OI!"

Jones shot a glare at me before looking at Nami regrettfully. "As I was saying… yes, some of it was me, and I'm really sorry about hurting your mother. Feel free to exact your pounds of flesh as needed, just don't hurt us too bad; can't have Soundbite and Ruatha becoming orphans now, can we?"

For the longest time, Nami just stood in place, spinning her Clima-Tact, at her side. Finally, she thunked it in place at her side and heaved a sigh. "I'm… actually *not* going to hurt you two."

It was like some great divinity had chosen to smile upon us, my heart felt so light. "Really?" I breathed euphorically, tears of hope glistening in my eyes.

"You're serious!?" Jones asked in shock.

"Entirely," Nami nodded solemnly, gesturing at her ear. "See, after a recent incident? I have a bit of a hard time working up as much temper as I could before. I'm not exactly happy about this situation, by no stretch of the imagination, but I'm certainly not going to fly off the handle and *maul* the both of you. So yeah, you don't need to worry about me."
I was sitting on Cloud 9, but apparently Jones was a bit more distrustful, if the sheen of sweat on her brow was anything to go by. "And... why doesn't that reassure me? At all?"

"Oh, that's an easy one," Nami's suddenly demonic smile killed my joy cold, and the way she snapped the Eisen-section off her staff and started tossing it up and down in her palm didn't help either. "See, without my temper, I can't really get riled up enough to do shit to you."

Without warning, Nami tossed the tube of metal to the side, and I traced its flight through the air - before locking up in terror as a positively irate Nami snatched it out of the air.

"That's why she's here," my Nami smirked as she walked over to her alternate, carrying Bellemere on her back as she walked around the stormfront that was rapidly expanding behind her double. "I'd wish you good luck... buuuut honestly I really hope that this hurts."

"You." The alt-Nami hissed murderously, a downright deadly look in her eyes as the clouds around her roiled and snapped grimly. "Concussed. My mother."

-0-

White nibbled at the edges of my vision; I felt like I was about to faint. "Parlay?" I offered weakly-not that I really expected anything to come of it. And surprise, surprise, nothing did, unless you count my Nami - my normal, un-altered, still rage-filled Nami - turning her terrifying gaze on me. "You. Concussed. My. Mother," she hissed.

And then... the air exploded.

"YOU IDIOTS!"

A wave of solid cloud slammed into me and Cross before we could say shit, taking us clean off our feet and pinning us to the galley wall with bruising force.

My first reaction? Ow. My second reaction? Owwww. Tabarnak, clouds were not supposed to be this hard. Funny how that was the first thing to go through my head, instead of something like 'oh crap, the Namis have met,' or 'don't cross the streams.' Although it was probably a little late for the latter. I gasped, trying to get my wind back, but apparently Cross got there first.

"N-Nami!" he wheezed frantically, struggling against his binds. "I-I know you're pissed at us, but if you'll just let me explain-!"

"Gag him," the This Bites! Nami instructed mine coolly as she examined her fingernails.

"—MMPH!?" Cross let out a muffled howl as a tendril of iron cloud clamped down over his mouth. This Bites! Vivi—ah, screw it, I'm not doing that forever—TB!Vivi whistled in awe. "Wow, that was actually impressive."

"Gag him," the This Bites! Nami instructed mine coolly as she examined her fingernails.

"—MMPH!?!" Cross let out a muffled howl as a tendril of iron cloud clamped down over his mouth. This Bites! Vivi—ah, screw it, I'm not doing that forever—TB!Vivi whistled in awe. "Wow, that was actually impressive."

Titi tilted her head towards her daughter, her attention never leaving our pinned forms. "Yes, this is quite the impressive display of how unique the Grand Line can be, isn't it?"

"Hm?" TB!Vivi blinked at her mother in confusion before 'ah'ing in understanding. "Oh, no, not that, our Nami has those clouds out 24/7, they're practically her own personal aura. I was talking about her gagging Cross. Smartest thing anyone's ever done in a fight against him by far."

"MMPH MU!" Cross let out a smothered roar at her.
"Language!" Lee laughed up at him.

"MMH MPH!" The anarchy-raiser snapped his glare to his old friend, who only reacted with a smile and wave.

My Nami shot a glance at TB!Nami. "Should I do something about the snail too? Or is it just there for decoration?"

TB!Nami—man, this was confusing—thought for a moment, then waved her off. "Nah, it's fine. Not like it would stick anyways, and without the puppetmaster he's mostly harmless."

"OI!" Soundbite roared indignantly.

"Oh, so you're saying that you know how to break someone's spirit with just a few words?" TB!Nami questioned flatly.

"I—!" Soundbite started to bark before glancing to the side uncertainly. "Alright fine, emotional torture is and always will be CROSS'S FORTE." He then perked up eagerly. "On the other hand, PHYSICAL TORTURE OF THE AUDIAL VARIETY IS MY FORTISSISSIMO!"

"Nice pun," Lee remarked.

"MRPH!" Cross flailed furiously.

"ENOUGH."

All conversation stopped as my Nami's voice lashed out over the deck.

Then, eyes a few millimeters of blood pressure away from glowing red, she advanced on us until she was just out of kicking range. The clouds tightened around us, a promise inherent in their binds. "Jones… I'll give you one chance to tell me who kicked my mother's face in. And I'm warning you now." She snapped her finger over her shoulder to point at where both Robins were watching over the KO'd Marine. "You might be my friend, but that is my mother. So! If I wind up being unhappy with the answer…" Her grip on the metal tube tightened to the point where her knuckles popped.

Nope, not saying anything. I'm not a snitch. Biting my lip, I did my best to avoid Nami's gaze. Hopefully she'd get whatever punishment she had in mind over with quickly and we could move past—!

"It was Jones!"

WHAT.

"MRPH?!" Cross squawked just as incredulously.

"YOU HEARD ME!" Soundbite cackled madly, his eyestalks jabbing in my direction. "SCARFACE HERE decided to punt the Marine dead center! Quite viciously too, I might add!"

Oh, that little… "YOU FOUL, SCHEMING LITTLE TURD OF POND SCUM!" I spat at the slimy shit, straining at him as much as physically possible. "I SHOULD BAKE YOU IN GARLIC BUTTER AND SERVE YOU WITH FRENCH BREAD! AND I HOPE THAT WHEN YOU GET REINCARNATED, IT'S INTO A FUCKING SALT-SHAMMER!"

"Bring it the hell on, you two-faced, TWO-MINDED, HALF-BAKED Impact Dial!" the slimy git leered. "I ain't goin' down for the shit YOU'VE DONE!"
"Half-baked? Oh, we'd see who was half-baked. "When I get out of here, I'm going to shove my 'half-baked' Newton's Second down your goddamn—GAH!"

"GYRK!"

"Oh, will you both just SHUT UP?!!" The clouds tightened even further, also extending to wrap around Soundbite. If my Nami wasn't livid before, she was now. Oops. "I don't care who, but someone better give me a straight answer, or—!"

"Well, I'm no doctor," Lee cut in from where he had moved to examine Bellemere. "But besides the boot to the face, from the bruising and her pupils she took a nasty fall onto her side, and also a bright light in her face. Which of those two does that sound like?"


"And Jones tends to blow up and throw people across the battlefield. So it was both of them. Thank you."

"You're welcome!" Lee cheerfully replied. "So, what're you gonna do—?"

Suddenly, crackling noises filled the air and the atmosphere reeked of ozone.

TB!Nami's eyes shot wide as she shot her hand to her suddenly lighter hip. "Shit! Nonono, wait—!"


Tabarnak. This wasn't gonna be pretty. Sparks began to dance around the iron clouds, blue and white and gold. Tiny zaps of static- like you get from a wool carpet- preceded the incoming storm. I grit my teeth and closed my eyes, bracing myself for pain.

"OKAY, HAPPY-HAPPY-FUNTIME STOPS HERE! SUCK IT!"

No- no pain? "Eh?" I cracked an eye open. Nami- my Nami- was kneeling on the ground, her hands over her ears, looking like she was about to vomit. TB!Nami stood over her, clutching two thirds of a Clima-Tact. The iron clouds receded, dropping me and Cross to the deck with a thud. Not far away, I heard a groan in a vaguely familiar voice. Oh, good, Bellemere was waking up.

Both Namis froze at that sound. They turned in slow unison to look at the red-headed Marine. Cross and I were forgotten in a clatter of heels as the navigators raced across the deck to check on their mother. I let out a sigh of relief at the lack of lightning treatment.

"Bellemere!" The Marine was engulfed in hugs as soon as she made to sit up. Both Namis looked like they might start crying at any moment; Bellemere, for her part, was totally confused.

"N-Nami?" Glancing at the two women hugging her didn't help the Marine's confusion. She reached up to wipe blood from her face, wincing as she touched her nose. "This- This is a dream, right? Because last time I checked, you were three years old, and I'm pretty sure I didn't have twins."

"If it is a dream, I'm not sure I want to wake up." My Nami glanced back at me out of the corner of my eye. "It's almost good enough for me to forgive those idiots for what they did."

"Really?" I couldn't quite keep the eagerness out of my voice. Beside me, Cross sagged in relief. Half a second later, a thrown bottle bounced off my head. Nami smiled.
"Okay, now I can forgive them."

"Ow…” I grumbled, rubbing the spot where the bottle had hit me. Thankfully, both Namis were now focused entirely on their tearful reunion with their mother, leaving only TB!Vivi, who was looking thoughtfully at me, and her mother Titi, who seemed content to just watch with an amused smile on her face.

Actually, Vivi was outright staring at me. And then she was staring at Lee. And then back at me. Creepy…

"So, which one of you is Cross's?" she asked.

Lee shot a confused glance my way, to which I could only shrug. Cross's what? Who knows? Denied an answer from me, he turned back to Vivi, raising a finger. "Uh, Cross's what?"

"Oh, his loved one," she clarified, looking a little sheepish. "Sorry, it's just… everyone else ran off to who knows where because after my…" There was a slight hitch to her voice that was rife with both disbelief and joy. "My mother and Serra - Conis' mother," she clarified at our confused looks. "After they came out of the mist, we all figured out that our loved ones were somehow coming out of the Mists. I was just wondering which of you was Cross's."

"That would probably be me," Lee answered, raising his hand. "I was one of his best friends back, uh… home."

When TB!Vivi looked askance at me, I rolled my eyes with a heavy sigh. "I'm with the other Straw Hats. You know, the crew a dimension to the left and a few months behind?"

The princess opened her mouth, closed it, and frowned. "…I cannot, for the life of me, believe that I'm not questioning that sentence. Now, if you'll excuse me..." A dreamy look came over Vivi's face as she turned towards where her mother was happily helping keep a visibly shellshocked Bellemere stable. "I have to get back to a long overdue reunion."

And with that, she left.

I wanted to question that sentence as I looked out over our two ships, which were slowly starting to fill with recently returned members of separate Straw Hat crews and their often deceased loved ones. But… weird as it was, this still had nothing on -All You Zombies-, so if I could accept that… I sighed and shook my head.

"So… Lee, was it?" I looked over at the by-far-oldest of the three of us. "When did you leave Mother Earth to descend into a realm of madness?"

"Tail end of 2016," he answered, leaning back onto a nearby railing. "Right before I was set to leave on a family New Year's vacation to Los Angeles, if I remember correctly. You?"

"November of the same year."

Lee grinned. "Hey, Xom!" he called out. "D'you want us to- *snrk*"

I frowned in confusion as Lee hastily clamped his hand over his mouth to dampen the amused snort I'd heard. Whatever it was that had provoked that, it had to do with Cross, so I turned around and—

Okay, I have to admit: Cross' comically angry face, accompanied by fingers jabbing at his cloud gag and a lot of angry "Mrph!"s, was definitely something to laugh at.
Still grinning like a loon, Lee said, "Ladies, I don't know how you made those clouds last, and while I think it's hilarious… would you remind removing Cross' gag for him? I want him speaking for this."

"AGREED!" Soundbite chimed in. "He can't appreciate my genius LIKE THIS!"

"Mmph mm—GAH!" Cross yelped as a tendril of Iron Cloud literally slapped the gag off of him. "Oh, thank God! Finally!" The anarchy-lover shot a scathing glare at his crew's navigator. "I want two digits off my debt for that, you… damn…" he trailed off into a smirk as he eyed Bellemere nearby.

TB!Nami, for her part, waved her hand dismissively. "Yeeeah, that's not happening in a million—eh?" She interrupted herself when a hand landed on her shoulder - and then paled when she trailed it back to the very twitchy face of her visibly displeased mother.

"What was that…" Bellemere intoned darkly. "About a 'debt'?

"Meep," TB!Nami squeaked unintelligibly, sounding for all the world like a kid whose hand had been caught in the cookie jar.

"Hehehehe, sucker," Cross chuckled sadistically as he watched a suddenly-lively Bellemere browbeat our navigators before refocusing on our conversation. "Aaaaaanyways, CV, you were saying?"

"How would you like to hear how 2016 went?" he said, grin stretching ear-to-ear.

I blinked in confusion as Cross perked up intently. Why would he be looking forward to that? I mean, sure, it was a crazy year, but- wait a minute. This Bites! was published in 2015. Cross doesn't know anything about that year, and Soundbite most likely wouldn't have cared enough to share with him.

Oh, this was going to be fun.

"And I'll make sure this guy stays accurate and doesn't embellish," I added, a grin of my own spreading over my face.

Cross glanced back and forth between us before heaving a sigh. "I know I'm going to regret this, but… fire away. It can't have been that crazy."

"Oh, very poor choice of words," Lee chided. "Hey, does anyone have any booze handy?"

From the Merry, docked next to the Sunny we were currently on, a bottle came sailing up. From the way Lee hastily crossed his arms over his face, he hadn't been expecting tha- Tabarnak! That… Stand keeps surprising me. In fact, it seems almost automatic. In any case, Lee took the bottle, popped it open, and took a deep gulp from it.

"Terrible," he grumbled, his face a mask of disgust. "Alright. 2016. It all started with this fucking gorilla…"

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Steel clashed against steel, forming a strange, ringing battle music. Anyone not bearing a sword had the good sense to stay well away- even if they were a person usually lacking in good sense. This wasn't a spar; this was a curbstomp, this was a massacre, this was—
This was, Yosaku reflected as he was thrown into the air by a miniature tornado, going very poorly.

He didn't blame Big Bro, really. As a swordsman, he understood what an amazing opportunity it was: a chance to spar with your older self, to learn things from him. But really, was the appropriate reaction to having your opening salvo blocked so effortlessly that you couldn't even tell if your opponent had woken up really to grab two friends who were just minding their own business in the galley and declare it an exercise in teamwork? And then that little girl had charged in, momentarily shocking both Zoros before the battle heated up more than ever.

…Okay, maybe he did blame Big Bro. Just a little.

Further philosophizing was cut short by the imminent impact with the nearest bulkhead. The green hunter wheezed as he landed hard; Johnny came down on his back a second later.

"Is it just me, or are we getting our asses kicked?" he groaned.

"Rhino Cycle!"

Yosaku looked up just in time to see the older Zoro flick two blades up in a quick spinning maneuver that tore lines across the younger Zoro's chest and sent him staggering backwards into a rail. "Nope, it's not just you, Bro. It's you, me, Big Bro, and that weird Li'l Sis with the shinai. We're all getting our asses kicked."

"Well, technically, she's not getting her ass kicked," Johnny pointed out as said shinai-wielding young girl tried to land a thrust on the older Zoro's leg. "He's just letting her flail at him without getting hit." Sure enough, the swordsman sidestepped the blow with almost criminal ease, his focus rooted entirely on his younger counterpart. "Honestly? I know he's trying to be kind, and I get why, but that's pretty insulting as a swordsman."

True enough, the young girl was livid. Her face was red as a tomato as she continued to swing futilely at the man who was ignoring her. The girl's attacks became sloppier and sloppier as her anger took control, until she finally snapped and started screaming as she fought.

"TAKE ME SERIOUSLY, DAMN IT!" Tears welled up at the corners of her eyes, but she didn't let them fall. "YOU MEN- YOU THINK YOU'RE SO TOUGH! THINK GIRLS ARE DELICATE, CAN'T TAKE ANY PAIN! NEWS FLASH! WE HAVE TO GIVE BIRTH TO YOU NUMBSKULLS! THAT HURTS A HELL OF A LOT!"

She paused, panting, before launching back into both her attack and her rant with renewed vigour. And this time, a disproportionately large number of her strikes seemed to be targeting Zoro's groin. "I CAN DO ANYTHING A BOY CAN DO, AND I'LL PROVE IT! YOU THINK YOU'RE SO GREAT BECAUSE YOU'RE TALLER THAN US AND YOU HAVE TESTICLES—LET'S SEE HOW YOU FUNCTION WITHOUT THOSE DELICATE BITS OF ANATOMY! AND WHILE YOU'RE ON THE GROUND WHIMPERING IN PAIN, I'LL GO ON AND BECOME THE WORLD'S GREATEST SWORD-FIGHTER! TAKE THAT, YOU MISOGYNISTIC MOSS—!"

"Kuina, will you SHUT UP ALREADY?" the elder Zoro roared, his swords flashing out—!

"Yosaku!" Johnny yelped, shooting to his feet, sword in hand.

"Right behind you!" Yosaku replied, doing the same.

Their urgency came from the fact that, after pushing away his younger counterpart (read: knocking him into a wall hard enough to rock the ship), Zoro had turned his blades—his very sharp blades—
on the young girl. As they watched, both swords… hooked their blunt edges under her armpits? And lifted her? And—

"Oh, shit!" both swordsmen yelped as the hilt of Wado Ichimonji flashed up and slammed into Kuina’s temple, launching her at them at a pretty respectable clip. And with their own forward momentum, they had no chance to dodge.

As such, Kuina slammed sideways into Johnny, the sudden reverse in momentum carrying both of them into Yosaku behind, and from there into the wall and then a groaning heap on the deck.

"It's not because you're a girl that I'm going easy on you," the insensate swordsmen heard the elder Zoro grind out. "It's because—" Silence, stretching for several seconds. "Because it's really hard to step on ants without killing them."

Johnny and Yosaku gaped, and Kuina looked murderous. It was his younger self, however, who responded, his voice livid.

"You can't even be a year older than I am. How did you get strong enough to earn the right to start talking like Mihawk?!" he snapped.

"I'm still nowhere close to beating him," the older Zoro scoffed, refocusing his attention. "But I doubt that you're too far off from where I am. What's the last island you left?"

"Drum," Yosaku and Johnny groaned in unison.

The older Zoro nodded. "Just a few more months, then. The Grand Line has a tendency to push you past your limits. Over, and over, and over again," he added with the barest hint of exasperation. He considered for a moment, and shrugged. "Then again, I had some help. It's amazing what beating up on another swordsman all the time reveals about your own fighting style."

Johnny and Yosaku had already fainted before their Zoro turned back towards them.

Kuina forced herself to her feet, a teary smile on her face. "I guess… Congratulations, Zoro. You finally got good enough to beat me. But I won't give up! If you've gotten this good, then I just have to get even better! I will prove that girls can be master swordsmen!"

There was more steel in her words than any child that age should be capable of. It made both Zoros flinch. They glanced at each other, questioning. Then, through the sort of mental rapport only possible for identical twins and clones, they came to a decision. The elder Zoro sighed.

"I'm gonna tell her."

"Don't you dare!" the younger Zoro hissed.

"Tell me what?" Kuina asked innocently.

The two Zoros exchanged a stricken look, and came to some sort of mutual agreement. "Nothing," they said in unison and more than a little haste.

Kuina frowned and folded her arms. "You may have improved with your swords, but you're still a terrible liar. Both of you."

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"—but the year went by, and none of the king's wives had a child!" The younger Usopp paused
dramatically before rushing on with his story. His elder counterpart and their mother shot him amused looks.

"Yet when the king came in the next day, the eldest of his wives informed him that he now had a beautiful daughter. He was delighted. But when he asked to see the child, his wives wouldn't let him. It was not a human child that had been born in the nursery that morning, but a small, white kitten. When pressed, his wives told the king that he couldn't see his daughter because it had been foretold that if any man should look upon her before her wedding day, the princess would die a terrible death."

"Many years passed. The feline princess grew up into a beautiful cat under the care of the king's wives. Soon the time came for the wives to seek a husband for their precious daughter. But where would they find a prince willing to wed a cat? It took a year and a day of scouring the land, but finally they found a lad who would do as they asked."

"The prince married the cat, and continued to find excuses to look after her in secret as the wives had done. By this point the king was anxious and restless, having had a daughter for fifteen years without laying eyes on her. He demanded to see the girl, but the prince continued to deny him."

"One day, a watching goddess saw the white cat crying in her room. Full of pity and confusion, the goddess descended to ask what was wrong. The cat princess lamented that she was forever trapped in that room, and could do nothing to help the increasingly harried prince. She loved him, as much as a cat could love a human, and wished she could in some way lessen his burdens."

"Touched by the cat's story, the goddess brought her a magical fruit. One bite, she told the princess, would be enough to turn her into a human girl- albeit one with animal traits, that her prince might still recognize her. The cat princess didn't need to think; she thanked the goddess and immediately took that fateful bite. Seconds later footsteps came stomping down the hall. The goddess vanished as the door opened."

"Imagine the prince's surprise when he opened the door to find not the cat he'd married, but a lovely girl wrapped in white cloth. At first he was enraged, demanding to know what had happened to his precious feline. But the princess wept and told him of what had occurred, pointing out patches of white fur on her shoulders and back that showed what she had been."

"Once over his shock, the prince was delighted. He and the princess spent many days together, getting to know one another in truth and falling in love as humans do. Eventually, the prince brought his beloved to meet her supposed father- and thus, even the king got his happily ever after."

"That was great." The elder Usopp applauded briefly before puffing out his chest. "But wait til you hear mine!"

-0-

[So… this is the Chopper we were supposed to get before Cross showed up,] Leo remarked.

[I'm… honestly kinda disappointed. Is anyone else disappointed?] Raphey said.

"Sorry…" the tiny reindeer hugged the strange stick he was carrying, his ears drooping.

[No, no, don't apologize!] Mikey said, waving his flippers in apology. [We'd have been perfectly fine with you if you'd been on our crew!] That said, he shot a glare at his fellow ship's guards. [Right, guys?]

[Changing the subject away from Mikey's rather sad attempt at intimidation—]
"This?" Chopper plucked at the sleeve of his very odd shirt. "This is my jersey. I play hockey—well, usually I'm the mascot, but I got to be a defenseman one time. It was a lot of fun!" He turned to proudly display the number on his back. "Look! I was number 17!"

Two completely blank stares met the reindeer's nervous gaze. The other two dugongs' faces lit up, each coming to their own conclusion about what the tiny doctor meant. Their voices competed as they simultaneously blurted out their conclusions.

[Hey!] [What is that outfit you're wearing?] Donny finished.

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Two completely blank stares met the reindeer's nervous gaze. The other two dugongs' faces lit up, each coming to their own conclusion about what the tiny doctor meant. Their voices competed as they simultaneously blurted out their conclusions.

[Cool!] Mikey beamed. [Too bad you weren't a goalie though; those masks are freaky awesome!]

[You already know Haki?] Raphey asked, impressed. [How does that work? I thought your crew just left Drum Kingdom.]

"No, no, no! Not Haki, hockey!" The tiny reindeer waved his stick around and pulled a small, heavy black object from beneath his jersey to show them. "It's the national sport of Drum Kingdom, almost everyone plays or watches every chance they get. You need two teams of between eleven and sixteen players, some good ice, and a puck—like this one! And they all have sticks. Now, the point is..." Chopper's voice became gradually higher and higher as he began to explain the rules of this game, his stick swinging ever more erratically as he used it to emphasize his words. More than one of these swings forced passersby to jump or duck, lest they be brained by sturdy wood.

Mikey's eyes followed the stick as if hypnotized. [I am both extremely disappointed and extremely happy with this development.]

"—And because Larry couldn't skate with a scalpel lodged in his sciatic nerve, I got to play defense for a Leafs-Seas game!" Chopper's expression turned into a dark, angry pout. "But we lost... Stupid Seas and their stupid Rocket brothers. They always steal all the glory! The Leafs haven't won the Bighorn Cup in almost fifty years!" This final exclamation was accompanied by a particularly violent swing, which the dugongs were forced to duck.

[...I am no longer disappointed.] Donny whimpered dumbly.

Chopper didn't appear to hear him. In fact, the little reindeer appeared to be searching for something, his eyes lit up with a manic light. "I'm sure we'll win next time though! We have to! Maybe it'll help if I—!"

THWACK!

"Ow!" Chopper yelped, clutching a rising goose egg on his skull. He turned his gaze on the culprit, Donny, who was lowering his bo staff and staring at it in bewilderment. "Why did you do that?!

Shaking his head, Donny said, [Sorry, force of habit. We have to do this to our Chopper all the time, and you were starting to sound like him.]

Chopper stared in something akin to horror at Donny, then slowly creaked his gaze around to a disappointed Mikey putting his nunchucks away. He thought of the latter he was working himself into, how angry he got whenever the thought of the Seas and their thrice-damned Rocket Brothers either beat his Leafs or won another championship. Really, that left him only one possible response.

"...what kind of person did I become!?" he demanded.
"Salutations, colleagues!"

The poor reindeer nearly shifted into Jump Point from sheer surprise at the voice coming from behind him.

[That kind,] the four Dugongs sighed.

It was easy to tell the difference between the two reindeer; the Dugongs' crewmate's hat and pants were identical, but the senior Zoan was topless and hefting a notably larger backpack. The face, though, was the main difference: after all, the younger reindeer certainly didn't go around with a smile that belonged in a Lewis Carroll novel and a look in his eyes that screamed 'I'm going to do violent, bloody SCIENCE to you!'

The hockey-obsessed reindeer clutched his stick to his chest in an attempt to slow his rapidly beating heart. "He-Hello!" Glancing around, the sight of two Zoros scowling at a little girl reminded Chopper of what he'd been doing before he ran into the dugongs. The little doctor smiled nervously at his older self. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to help me look and see if Doctor Hiriluk is around here somewhere?"

"Eh? Oh, I already found him, he's somewhere over that way, but more importantly—!"

THWACK! THUD!

Everyone stared in varying levels of shock and bemusement as Hockey Chopper slammed his hockey stick on his doppelgänger so hard that he knocked him down, a look of fury in his eyes.

"'More importantly'? 'MORE IMPORTANTLY'? WHAT'S MORE IMPORTANT THAN OUR FATHER?!"

"Geh…” Doc Chop's eyes spun blearily for a moment before they blinked back into focus… and then he slapped a hoof to his face with a miserable groan. "When I'm normal, nothing short of my skills being necessary to save someone's life. But when I'm 'sparking out,' as Cross calls it?" The mad-reindeer withdrew a notebook from his backpack and flipped through it for a second before grimacing regretfully. "Apparently the longevity-inducing properties of the Mists. Ergh…” He pinched the bridge of his nose between his hooves. "I should have waited to start getting excited about this place's application to the Panacea Project until after I was back in my lab…"

"WHAT ABOUT UNTIL AFTER WE FOU—wait, you have your own lab?" Hockey Chopper's face lit up, his fear and anger evaporating like non-eldritch mist. "Lucky! I wish I had my own lab; I have to share the galley with Sanji. He keeps getting lettuce in my petri dishes!"

"Oh, I hate when that happens!" Doc Chopper winced sympathetically. "Oh, or what about whenever Luffy eats our nascent protozoa cultures? I have no idea how he can keep mistaking them for bacon!"

"I've found that dying the cultures blue helps prevent that- although all my streptococcus pneumoniae samples still manage to get contaminated with his saliva somehow, but Jones helps me clean things, so with two of us it's easy enough to remove that from the—" Hockey Chopper stopped and shook his head. "Gah, getting sidetracked, not important, sorry for jumping on your back earlier. Now, quick, before we get sidetracked again! Where did you say you saw Doctor Hiriluk?"

"Ah! Come on! Go in the vial, you stupid—!"

Both Choppers turned to see the very familiar backside of Dr. Hiriluk as he dashed along the side of the ship, desperately trying and failing to waft some of the rainbow mist into a test tube.
"Right here, apparently," Doc Chopper deadpanned.

Hooves clattered across the deck. Tears in his eyes, Hockey Chopper launched himself at the lovable quack, wrapping his little arms around Hiriluk's leg. "Doctor! I'm so happy I get to see you again- I missed you so much!" He glanced up at his father's face with a watery smile. "I haven't been this happy in _forever_, not even when the Leafs got to the playoffs!"

"Er, ah, th-thank you?" Hiriluk stammered. Hockey Chopper visibly wilted.

"Did I do something wrong? I'm sorry…" He released his hold on the quack's leg, dropping to the deck and backing off. The little reindeer clutched his stick for comfort.

"No, no, little fellow, it's alright. I was just surprised; I never expected to see a little reindeer person out here." Hiriluk bent down to pat Hockey Chopper on the head. "Let alone two. You know, you and your brother remind me of a little reindeer person I know back home. You two should come visit sometime; I'm sure Tony Tony Chopper would love to meet you."

The two Choppers looked at each other. "But… _I'm_ Tony Tony Chopper."

"So am I."

Doctor Hiriluk stared at them numbly for a moment. "That… That's not possible. There can't be two of the same person- two of the same Devil Fruit. And neither of you are anything like Cho-pper…"

The quack's voice trailed off as he caught sight of the identical hats the reindeer were wearing- hats identical to the one he had given Tony Tony Chopper just recently.

"These mists have some interesting temporal qualities that led to our crews meeting across the barriers of space and time," Doctor Chopper offered. "I was attempting to study their effects on longevity earlier."

"But, but, but…" Hiriluk groped around desperately. "But Chopper isn't a mad scientist. Or a rabid hockey fan."

That earned him a pair of stares partway between flat and curious. "Doctor," Doctor Chopper said slowly, raising an eyebrow. "We're much older than the Chopper you know. We've grown up a lot, and we've adapted with the times." The mad reindeer snorted. "And besides, your Chopper never met Cross."

"Or Jones," Hockey Chopper added, puffing his chest out with pride. "I'll have you know that studying Otherworlders can be quite enlightening."

Hiriluk's eyes took them both in, two reflections of routes that his son had gone before. A scientist and an athlete, both growing into great pirates in their own way. Tears welled up at the corners of his eyes- pride, hope, happiness. Then, slowly, a smile came over his face. "I see… you've grown up so strong."

Both reindeer twitched almost imperceptibly, their eyes taking on an extra shine. There was a brief clatter of hooves as the two Choppers launched themselves at their father figure, clinging to his waist and burying their faces in his jacket. Damp stains spread slowly across the dark fabric. Hiriluk stumbled backwards under the force of the tackle, unable to keep his balance. Eventually, after a few staggered, futile steps, the lovable quack fell into a seated position.

"_We missed you so much!_" the Choppers bawled. Hockey Chopper sniffled and rubbed his nose on Hiriluk's shirt; Doctor Chopper hiccupped.
The lovable quack didn't question them. Of course; even if he didn't know the exact moment of his death, he already knew of his own illness. Doctor Hiriluk patted and hugged both reindeer, rubbing soothing circles on the backs of their heads. "There, there… It's alright. A man only dies when he's forgotten; as long as you remember me, I'll always be with you. I'm so proud of you both."

Twin watery smiles beamed up at him. Off to one side, four amphibious mammals slowly edged away. This was a private affair, not for their eyes. Besides, they wanted to see what their teacher was getting up to, and who—if anyone—had come for him. And maybe them.

-o-

"He raced down the mountain, fleeing from the Thunderbird's lair as though his life depended on it—which it did. But the Thunderbird didn't want Man taking the secret of fire, for fire was the source of his power. Great wings beat the air as the Thunderbird chased Man down the mountain, gaining with every second."

"Just before he was captured, Man raced into the forest. He begged the trees as he ran, pleading with them to hide him from the Thunderbird's wrath. But even were the bird himself not so deadly and frightening, Man was cloaked in fire. His clothes were slowly burning off, his skin turning red and blistering… Ash, oak, maple, elm— one by one, all the trees denied him."

"All except the slender white birch. When Man came to the birch tree, it accepted him under its branches and hid him from the enraged Thunderbird. Man hid there for some time, until all the danger had passed. Eventually, the Thunderbird gave up his hunt and Man was free to make his way back towards his home. He thanked the birch tree as he left."

"The birch was pleased to be of service, though it had suffered mightily in the effort. Its branches were charred and crispy, its bark streaked with soot and blisters. Many moons passed before the birch could once again stand straight and proud as part of the forest, rather than bent with the pain that wracked its trunk. And even once the birch had recovered- and indeed, to this day- the bubbled, darkened lines remained on its bark, a reminder of the service the birch tree rendered towards man."

Whistling, the younger Usopp rubbed nervously at his nose. "That was awesome! A little short, but still… Wow. But I can do you one better! Wait until you hear the story of…"

-o-

A well-aged dugong sat with his back to a wall of the ship. Around the corner, another dugong of similar age sat similarly. At the corner itself was a bottle and two cups.

Such was the position they had been in for several minutes, occasionally filling and draining the cups, neither saying anything or moving to so much as glance at the other. Finally, as one dugong poured the last drops into one of the dishes, the other one broke the silence.

[You have come a long way, Disciple.]

[Mmph,] Boss née Disciple Dugong angled his head to the side ever so slightly. [I suppose I have. I'd say that I'm not the dugong you left on the shores of the Sandora, but we both know that if that weren't true even the day after you left, I'd be a disgrace.]

[No, no, not a disgrace.] the other dugong hummed, tapping a staff of bamboo on his shoulder. [Merely… a disappointment.]

[Heh heh, if you say so…] Sifu balanced his sake cup on the tip of his flipper's finger before glancing to the side, his grip tightening ever so slightly on his staff. [So… up for a bout?]

Disciple, meanwhile, didn't even twitch. [Not a chance. I may have almost fifty years on you, but all but three months of that has been in Alabasta, and in those three months, which have been in Paradise, I have already grown stronger than those fifty combined. You, meanwhile, have lived your entire life off of our shores. If I tried to fight you…] Disciple tapped his unlit cigar on the deck next to himself. [I'd be crushed.]

Then… a slight smirk appeared on the camo-wearing Dugong's muzzle. [So, thank you, but I'll wait to kick your wizened ass in the New World.]

Sifu was silent for a bit before allowing a wide smile to spread across his face. [I officially need to include Wadjet in my prayers,] he breathed reverentially. [For her children have granted me the absolute best student I could have ever conceived, even though I never even asked.]

A small girl, pale as moonlight with crimson eyes, scrambled across the deck, followed by a harried man wearing a dragon jacket. He scooped her up before she could climb onto the rails, earning a loud giggle. "Ghin, stop! Put me down!"

"Not until you stop running off like that! You're gonna fall in the sea and drown if you're not careful, and I won't be jumping in after you again. I do it enough for Don Luffy." Ghin lifted the little girl up onto one of his shoulders; she pouted at him and poked his head.

"Liar. You'd never leave me like that; you're too much of a mother hen." A jab into his shoulder, a tug at his ear, and suddenly the little girl was flipping backwards and away while her caretaker winced and rubbed at the assaulted areas. Something—it looked kind of like guilt—flashed across the man's face.

"Tippy, will you stop that? There are reasons I don't want you running off like you did when we were kids, especially in a place like this!" Ghin ran a hand through his hair, looking for all the world like a worried parent. He grumbled the next bit under his breath. "I'm only twenty-seven, but between you and Jones, I already have grey hairs…"

"Bleh!" The little girl stuck out her tongue. "You've grown up into a grumpy old man, Ghin. I always told you that would happen if you kept worrying so much."

"Argh… You little—! What am I gonna do with you?" Ghin recaptured Tippy, holding her more securely this time. Once he had a secure grip on the squirming girl, he looked around at a loss, as if he actually needed an answer to that question.

"I'll lend you a flipper."

Ghin blinked at the raspy voice, and turned to see a strange creature, an upright manatee with a turtle shell. Another, similar one was behind him, looking his way.

[Oh, Soundbite's nearby, that makes things easi… wait a second, I'm not talking.]

Ghin couldn't comprehend the other one's barking, but he could easily comprehend his shock by the dropped jaw and subsequent dropped cigar.

[Sifu, you can talk?]

[Not easily; I learned to speak human, but it's murder on my throat, so I only do it when I have to,] the first Dugong said, before switching back to words Ghin could understand as he gestured to
Tippy. "I just came in here to ease my worries about my apprentice. I can see her home if you'd like." He emptied a flask of liquid into his throat as soon as he finished, gargling it with a wince. [Damn the human language and damn it hard.]

Ghin and Tippy both blinked in surprise, exchanging doubtful looks for a second before Ghin hesitantly spoke up. "I... thought there wasn't a way out of here? Unless the Mists actually want to let you go, I mean."

"There is always a path," Sifu waved his flipper dismissively, cracking his back slightly as he rose from his seated position. "I just happen to know the right one for this place."

Staring, Ghin turned his head from one amphibious mammal to the other, finally settling his gaze on the one that was a member of the alternate Straw Hat crew. "Can we trust this guy?" he asked with some hesitation.

[Of course you can—...ergh, can't believe I'm actually reduced to wishing for that damn pest's help...!] Boss muttered acridly before settling for giving Ghin his most confident thumbs-up. [I'll let you guys figure this out. Nice seeing you again, Master, and I look forwards to the day we can do this for real.] And with that, he began waddling away.

Ghin and Tippy exchanged dubious glances again before looking at the wall Sifu was behind. "Right, so, how does this work?" the older man queried.

Boss, meanwhile, hadn't gone far before he ran straight into his four apprentices, who were looking as excited as when they had joined the Straw Hats.

[Boss, there you are!] Leo said happily. [So, have you found Sifu yet?]

The senior dugong blinked at his students in surprise. [How'd you know Sifu was the one who came for me?]

[Come on, Boss, who else would you get, that blowhard Lan- I mean, First Mate Dugong?] Mikey scoffed.

[Now c'mon, where is he, where is he!?] Raphey vibrated eagerly. [I wanna jump him, I wanna jump him straight outta the blue, I want the honor of getting pounded by the greatest Kung Fu Dugong to ever kick ass!]

Donny roughly shoved Raphey aside, a pad of paper and a pencil in his hands and a massive grin on his face. [Not before I get my autograph from the greatest staff-user in all Dugong history you're not! Now c'mon, where is he, where is he?!]

Boss cocked an eyebrow at the display before jabbing his 'thumb' over his shoulder. [Right now, he should be—!]

*SPLASH!*

[Gone,] Boss completed smoothly, not even missing a beat. [Eesh, tough luck, you just missed him.]

[Meenbrl...]

Frowning at the odd sound, Boss refocused on his students and found them, to a dugong, slumped over on their flippers, clouds of despondency hanging over them and tears dripping to the wooden deck from their blank eyes.
[…mmmaybe I should have asked him to stay for a bit…] Boss muttered.

[YOU THINK?!] all four of the TDWS suddenly roared. Boss took a nervous step back; their still-

blank but gleaming eyes and eager, toothy grins that totally belied their vocalized anger were just a
tad unnerving in tandem.

'Correction,' Boss silently amended as his students began to advance on him. 'It's very unnerving.'

[We get a chance to meet Sifu Dugong, the most famous fighter of our species, the driving force
behind everything that's happened to us since we started training, outside of the transcending
madness of the New World. And because you didn't consider that we would want to meet him,
we've lost that chance,] Donny intoned, his staff in one flipper and a brace of kunai spread in the
other.

[I was going to fight him,] Raphey droned, one flipper holding a sai in reverse and the other idly
spinning her giga-shuriken. [I was gonna lose, badly, but by the Sandora itself, I was going to be
able to say that I had actually fought with the Sifu Dugong.]

[And now we can't,] Mikey stated in an almost casual tone of voice as he slowly and methodically
loaded his pistol, clicking it shut before drawing out a nunchuk and letting it swing idly. [Because of
you. You bastard.]

[You're about to regret training us so well,] Leo said simply, his tongue brushing along one of his
katana.

At that moment, for the life of him, Boss would not be able to say that it was an entirely irrational
fear that he held from his students.

[…don't suppose it'd help if I said I was sorry?] he offered uncertainly.

[SUFFER!]

[GAH!] Boss howled at the top of his lungs, Rip Tide-ing away from the murderous posse that was
suddenly pursuing him at all speeds. [HOW'S THAT FOR FUCKING GRATITUDE, YOU
PUTRID GUTTERSNIPEs!]

-0-

Banchina cut her sons off with a smile and a gentle cough. They'd been going at this ever since the
crews met, their stories growing steadily more outlandish. "I thought you two were going to tell me
about the Grand Line, not compete to see who knew the most fairy tales."

"But mom, they're not fairy tales!" both Usopps whined indignantly. "And we weren't competing!
Were we?"

The pair looked at each other. Shrugging, the younger rubbed his nose; the elder fiddled with his
wristband. "I was just trying to explain how Devil Fruits work; mom's never seen one."

"And I just wanted to tell her about all the cool plants and animals there are on the Grand Line."

Both snipers grinned sheepishly at their mother. "Sorry… Guess we got a little carried away. There's
just so many cool things to tell you about!"

Laughing, Banchina pulled both of her sons into a tight hug. "Oh, boys… What am I going to do
with you?"

That gave the storytelling snipers pause. Not for long though, as they immediately began talking again. "You could help us decide which legend of Elbaf is coolest?"

"Yeah! And then I could tell you all about the time I defeated a demonic shark fishman who even managed to almost kill Luffy! And Zoro!"

"What?! But Luffy beat Arlong-you're lying! Besides, I can read Luffy's mind and see the future."

"A likely story!"

Banchina rolled her eyes and smiled as the two snipers proceeded to squabble. They segued into stories of their own adventures, so similar and yet so different… She couldn't tell if they were competing with each other to see who had the stranger experiences, or honestly trying to tell her what had happened to them. Either way, she would treasure this moment forever.

-0-

"So… Merry?"

"Yes?" both the ship-girl and the behorned butler said in unison, looking away from their embrace towards their mistress.

"Uh… the young—guh, the shorter one," Kaya doubly corrected herself shyly. "I was just wondering… about this crew that we gave you to. Do you… well, would you have been happier if you'd stayed with me?"

"Uh, Kaya… don't take this the wrong way, but…" Closing her eyes, the caravel sucked in a deep breath and let it out.

"Oh, nothing good ever follows that statement," Merry the butler muttered.

"Look, I'm a ship," Merry stated, opening her eyes. "I exist to carry people and cargo safely across the seas. You would have used me for puttering about that island. Maybe making short trips to neighboring islands if you actually did become a doctor. You'd have loved me and maintained me and I would have been content." At this time, a fire blazed in Merry's eyes. "But being the ship of the Straw Hats? It's been so much better, and I'm not just talking about the journey, which is awesome on its own. My bond with the Straw Hats was and is far stronger than it ever could have been with you; I would have been content to be scrapped rather than…" She shuddered, idly reaching behind her to rub her back before continuing. "Sorry. Ask Franky or my Usopp for that story. My point is, I'm sorry, but fuck no I wouldn't have been happier with you."

The rich girl visibly wilted. "I… I'm sorry," she murmured.

"For what? For asking that? I know you cared for me, and I know what I look like. I don't blame you for asking. For dredging up bad memories? That's not something you could have expected. And if it's for giving me to the Straw Hats…" Merry flashed Kaya what she hoped was a reassuring smile. "Well, if that was a mistake, then that was the best mistake you've ever made."

The last statement made her smile lightly. "What I meant was… for not being able to do any of that for you myself. You were my ship, and I can't do anything for you like they can."

"Miss Kaya," the older Merry sighed, kneeling before his mistress to look her in the eye. "If your ambition is to become a doctor, then that's a grand ambition, and one that you can fulfill in the East
Blue. But the crew that we entrusted Going Merry to is full of individuals with ambitions that only traveling through the most dangerous sea in the world can fulfill. The best thing that you could have done is what you did, and we see the proof before us." He looked back at her. "And I don't believe she holds anything against you."

The ship-girl shook her head, smiling lightly. Somewhere above her, a loosely tied knot came undone with a rasping hiss. A thick line fell to drape itself over the ship-girl's shoulders as still-a-ship Merry vibrated and warmed with approval.

Meanwhile, on the rear deck, a blue-haired cyborg sat rubbing his jaw, an action attributable to the soreness that came from it being dropped for too long a period. The reason for that lay beside him, a green-haired mermaid that he knew well. There was just one tiny difference between her and the one that he had grown up with.

The one beside him wasn't yet used to having legs.

"Razza-frazzin split tail and razza-frazzin center of balance…” a notably younger Kokoro grumbled as she rubbed the tip of her bifurcated appendage. She then glanced up at the cyborg with a hopeful look. "You said ya knew an older me, right? Did she ever gripe about any old tricks to getting this whole 'walkin' business down? I could really use them about now!"

"Er..." Franky scratched his steel-plated cranium uncertainly, trying and failing to parse what he was hearing. "I... don't remember anything like that, sorry... ah, wait!" He hastily rallied his thoughts. "A-Are you really not going to question the fact that you're, ya know, in a 'time hellmouth', or that you're meeting someone who says they know you in the future?! I mean, I know, Grand Line and all that, but even I think this is crazy!"

The mermaid gave him a wry smirk. "Kid, lemme tell you something my older self obviously forgot to let slip: Fishman Island is literally the gateway to the New World. In other words, it stands at the very tip of an actual hellmouth. You don't go long living there without becoming at least a little familiar with the craziest that the world has to offer. I mean, sure," She waved her hand dismissively. "I wasn't expecting anything like this when I went out on my morning swim, but all things considered? Not as bad as it could be. Ya get me?"

Franky blinked in surprise, and then slowly nodded. "Yeah... I guess that's a good point," he mumbled. Then, thinking about the version he knew, he glanced down at the bare fins meant to support the mermaid. "You know, Granny Kokoro never said anything about it, but I never saw her without shoes that were pointed at the ends. Maybe that could help?"

Before the mermaid could respond, a door opened from the kitchen, and the subsequent assault of noise drowned out any chance of hearing anything else.

"But I wanna show you the—!

"Gah! No spoilers!" Two rubber captains bounced out of the galley. The one in the fore had his hands clapped over his ears, which seemed to be doing little to drown out the voice of his loud, eager counterpart.

"We have a submarine, though!" TB!Luffy chased 12!Luffy into the rigging as the latter struggled to escape. The younger captain was still trying to keep his ears covered, so the sight was even more comical than it already would naturally have been.

"Don't tell me! I don't wanna know what happens next- it's not a good adventure that way! Besides, future things are Jones's job!"
As the pair continued on their swinging path through the rigging, a young woman came out on deck and followed them with her gaze. She was smiling, nearly silent, although the air around her was filled with the sound of quiet giggling at the Luffys' antics.

TB!Luffy thought for a minute before his face lit up with demonic malice. "Oh! Okay then— how about something that's already happened instead? Sabo's alive!"

His counterpart paused to shoot him a flat look. "Well, duh. I knew that. Sabo met everybody in Loguetown, and he calls Jones all the time to talk about sneaky ninja spy stuff." 12!Luffy’s face took on a similar demonic light to TB!Luffy. "Wait… did your crew not meet him? Shishishishishi! Wanna know what he's like?"

"Eh?" TB!Luffy shrugged and picked his nose. "Why? That's your Sabo, not mine. They're prob'ly different anyway. But wait till I tell you about the special comm system Franky built for Cross!"

"I SAID NO SPOILERS!"

"IT'S NOT A SPOILER IF CROSS ISN'T ON YOUR CREW!"

And so the Luffys resumed their awkward chase, through the rigging and over every possible surface of the ship, much to the amusement of the young woman watching them. Although for some reason, she also had tears in her eyes. Happy tears, but tears nonetheless.

"Do you think we should tell him that our Sunny is completely unique and almost guaranteed to be different than what he'll be getting?" Franky asked.

"No way," came another voice, and they looked over to see Sanji emerging from the kitchen as well, laden with bags of ingredients and with a young girl beside him. "That rubber moron puts us through hell all hours of the day. I say we let him suffer. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to get a look at the dream kitchen that I'll have someday. Reiju, you coming?"

"Of course," the girl responded coolly.

-o-

"…seriously? Seriously!?" I gagged in disbelief. "Ye gods, did the whole nation collectively dump their IQ for 24 hours or something?!"

"I WEEP for the past, present, future, OR WHATEVER TIME THAT IS TO US," Soundbite groaned. "Ya think you-know-who can make us THE VOICES OF ANARCHY WHEN YOU FINALLY GET BACK HOME, TOO?"

"Doubt it," I scoffed, but I hastily reworded matters as I actually thought about it. "…alright, I think it's capable of it, but I doubt it will. If we tried pulling what we do here back home, the ones running the show might break out the nukes. We could literally cause the end of the world."

"…you're trying to threaten me WITH A GOOD TIME, WHY, exactly?"

I shot him a flat look. "So you're saying you want to be at ground zero of the technological equivalent of a Raigo?"

And that turned him white. "GOOD TIME GO bye-bye, shutting up now."

"I'm not sure if it's reassuring or disturbing that your standards for chaos stop at 'fuck the world'," Lee dryly stated. "But yes, I was screaming the whole time as the election proceeded. And then
Carrie Fisher died as one final 'fuck you' from 2016.

"WHAT?! PRINCESS LEIA'S DEAD?!!" Jones fell over backwards in shock. "When—? How—? Crisse de calice de tabarnak d'osti de sacrament de trouvvierge!"

Lee sighed and bowed his head, suddenly looking far older than forty-six. "Yeah… it was in December. And while I remember something about her being strangled with her own bra, I don't think that's what actually happened."

"*Her own quote ON HOW SHE WANTED to go,*" Soundbite sighed regrettfully. "**TRUTH IS… yeah, all signs point to heart attack.**"

"Ah, geeze…" I grimaced, rubbing the back of my neck with regret. "Well, that's all kinds of sucky right there isn't it? Moment of silence, then?"

"**EVEN I'LL SHUT UP FOR THAT,**" my partner in anarchy nodded solemnly.

And so we all bowed our heads, adopting a respectful silence for the great actress…

"Ohhhh yeah, veeeeeeery nice. But I see your 'flying island' - which I still call bullshit on, by the way - and raise you… The homeland of the dragons! And this one's not even on the Grand Line! Whaddaya say to THAT?!"

"Aaaaand of course, One Piece won't accept no broodin' bullshit from no one," I sighed as we were interrupted a mere seven seconds later. I twisted around in place to eye the source of the noise. "Okay, what's this little sideshow about?"

The source, as it turned out, were the two Namis butting heads - literally, they were pressing their foreheads together - as they pointed at a set of maps and tried to incinerate the other with looks alone. Sitting cross-legged on the deck next to them was Bellemere, who was looking mighty amused by the whole display.

"I say that that's impressive for something that nature made," TB!Nami hummed, a 'content' grin on her face as she unraveled yet another chart with an air of triumph. "But let's see you pull out anything showing a manmade island that rivals Water 7."

"Water—is that a giant fountain?" 12!Nami asked, her smug calm slipping just enough to betray a flash of awe before she hastily recomposed herself. "Wow… that is **impressive**… but… I'm not sure it beats Clockwork Island," she finished, producing her own chart.

TB!Nami's jaw all but slammed into the deck as she ogled the chart. "How… bwa… I might not know architecture, but I know that that has got to be structurally impossible," she managed to get out.

"I won't deny that, I still don't understand how it works," 12!Nami grinned wide enough to put the Cheshire to shame. "But I assure you that it is completely real!"

"Riiiiight…" TB!Nami stated as she examined the map. Then she frowned, jabbing a finger on a specific spot. "What is that?"

"… That's a whale," 12!Nami deadpanned, giving her counterpart her best 'You're a fucking idiot' glare.

"Okay… And why is there a whale in your ocean?" TB!Nami leaned in a little closer. "Scratch that, why are there a bunch of whales in your ocean?"
"Because whales live in the ocean?" 12!Nami stated as if it was the most obvious thing in the world, and to be fair, it was pretty close to it. "Why, what do you put in your open waters?"

TB!Nami promptly clammed up, but she couldn't stop her younger self from glancing at the map of Water 7.

"Doodles," she said, a grin widening on her face. "And not just any doodles, those fantastic animal doodles we made when we were eight."

"I have seen every single one of these animals!" TB!Nami protested just a little too loudly, her cheeks flushing indignantly.

"Really?" Bellemere perked up with a grin that was equal parts eager and teasing. "Can I see?"

I could practically see Nami's eyes defaulting to blue. "Uh…"

"Is it just me," Lee remarked as TB!Nami frantically tried to politely say no to her own mother. Needless to say, all she succeeded in doing was flail about. "Or are they not only arguing over stylistic differences, they're arguing over stylistic differences that don't even remotely affect the quality of their maps?"

Apparently so, and seeing my Nami this completely flustered was quite the treat.

There was a tremendous… bouncing thud a second later as a pair of Luffy's fell from the rigging, one having tackled the other. 12!Luffy clapped both hands over my Luffy's mouth, glaring at his counterpart with comical anger. "Shut up already! I said no spoilers!"

"Mrph mmm mph—!

CHOMP!

"YOW!"

My Luffy had bitten 12!Luffy's hand in order to break free, which did nothing to make their squabbling any quieter or less funny. He then turned the tables on his younger counterpart, tackling him across the deck. The pair were about to roll into the duelling Zoros when a quiet voice cleared her throat.

"Ahem."

I blinked as a familiar figure stepped onto the deck, but my surprise didn't last long; her showing up made just as much sense as Ace or Sabo.

"Luffy and Luffy, weren't you two about to tell me about the giant whale that ate your ship?" Makino asked.

"OH, YEAH!" Spoilers and violence forgotten, two rubber captains bounced over to the barkeeper with eager grins on their faces. Makino wandered over to the rail and sat down; the Luffys followed her like ducklings and flopped on either side of her to tell stories about Laboon.

"Heh. Nice to have someone who knows just what to say to calm Luffy down," I remarked.

"While I'm inclined to agree, Cross…"

"Hm?" I glanced up and noticed both Robins wandering by our group, both keeping an eye on the meeting of the Monkeys.
"I was rather expecting Ace, or that second brother you mentioned," older Robin hummed inquisitively as she analyzed Makino. "Who is she?"

"Huh? Oh, her! Her name's Makino," I explained with a careless wave. "She's a bartender from Luffy's hometown, closest thing to a mother all three of them had growing up. One of the kindest people I ever saw in the story, to boot."

Robin nodded, a wistful… but for some reason melancholic smile on her lips? What the—?

"Hey, older me?" young Robin piped up, drawing all attention. "If everyone's family is showing up…" She dipped her head uncertainly. "Does that mean that our mother could be here, too?"

I realized the significance of Adult Robin's smile as it dropped and her eyes widened at the possibility, looking suddenly nervous.

"Yeah, Olvia is probably around here," I piped up with a casual wave of my hand. "And knowing our luck and her skill? I'd be willing to bet that she is currently—!"

CLICK!

I grimaced miserably as I sloooowly raised my arms over my head, only just fighting my instinct to glare over my shoulder at the white-haired… woman I knew was right there. "…standing right behind me with a gun to my head. Seriously, what is with you Nicos and threatening interdimensional immigrants?!"

"Must be your winning personality!" Lee called out, looking thoroughly unperturbed at my mortal peril. The jackass. Seriously, I was gonna find a way to make him—!

THWACK! "GAH!"

"Enough talk," Nico Olvia snarled in a notably unhinged tone as she shoved the barrel of the gun she'd pistol-whipped me with into my neck. "Here's what's going to happen: I'm going to take that ship—" And here she jerked her head towards the Merry aw hell no. "And whatever supplies are on it. But before that…" I felt the iron barrel press into my neck. "Who the hell are you, and how did you detect me?"

"Robin?" I called out, my tone indicating barely restrained outrage. "Either Robin? Would one of you mind getting your deranged mother off of me? You know, before I abandon what few self-preservation instincts I have and do something that will get you really mad at me?"

"Eh, Lee's got this," the younger Robin said nonchalantly as she walked up to us. For a long moment, she stared up at Olvia.

"Uh, hello? Gun to my head?!” I demanded. "Lee, get off your ass and get your damn kid to help me!"

"Like she said, I've got this," Lee replied, still grinning like the smug bastard he was. "See, Olvia, you pull that trigger, and two things are going to happen." I blinked as The Catalyst sprang into being. "First, your gun is going to explode in your hand, filling it with metal and wood fragments. And then, I'm going to light your lungs on fire from the inside." His grin widened a few molars. "Believe me, it's not a pleasant way to go, chocking on smoke like that."

Everyone stared at Lee; even Olvia and adult Robin were staring at him in naked—! Oh, wait a second.
"THWACK!" "GAH!" Olvia grunted in shock as I rammed my elbow into her gut, followed by my reaching over my shoulder, grabbing her arm and flipping her over my shoulder onto the lawn, the impact jarring the gun loose from her hand in the process.

"God bless Zoro for kicking my ass on a daily basis," I sighed in relief, before glaring bloody murder at Lee's smugly grinning ass. "And damn you for taking the convoluted route, asshat!"

"Dontcha mean Uncle Asshat?" he smirked back with a tilt of his head. "And besides, I meant every word; you were in no danger, and I know you get off on that sort of thing."

"Phrasing!" both Robins called out, before glancing at each other and giggling.

I scowled at both the reaction and his little self-entitling before grunting as I was forced to fight against a furiously scrabbling Olvia's attempts to free herself. "Hilarious! Now if one of you two would help bring your paranoid bitch of a mother back to reality!?"

"Er…" Robin the Tyke frowned nervously, most likely realizing the severity of the situation as she knelt before her mother and waved her hand in her face to no great effect. "I'd like to, but… what's wrong with her? Does… Does she not remember me, remember us or—?"

"No, I highly doubt that…" the Older Robin reassured her younger counterpart, albeit with an uncomfortable frown. "If I had to guess, going by the situation we're in and the situation she's been in for who knows how long now, I'd say… she's probably gone into an extreme survival mode. Essentially, she's imposed a form of tunnel-vision on herself that blocks out all else but her mission and her survival instincts."

I frowned sympathetically, even as I redoubled my grip on Olvia's arm. "Personal experience?"

My Robin gave a terse nod before allowing herself a calming breath. "And due to that experience, I know that it's going to take something very jarring to—"

BWAAAAAAAAAAH!

I blinked blearily as my head slowly stopped ringing, and I became aware of Lee saying… something that was indiscernible to me due to the fact that even if my skull no longer felt like a bell, my ears were still putting up a decent act. "WHAT?"

He rolled his eyes and ticked off his fingers for a second before repeating himself, just as my hearing cleared up, at least to the point where I could parse his words. "I said, 'One of these days, Xom, you're going to need to learn to keep your fucking mouth shut'."

"WHAT DID I DO?!" I snap—er, make that roared, my volume control was still a bit shot.

"Sesehihihihi!" a suddenly-present Jones snickered at my side. "For once, it's actually not his fault. And just so you're aware? I've always wanted to do that."

Lee and I made to respond, but then trailed off with a tired sigh and defeated groan, respectively.

"You don't have a good response to that statement either?" Lee said, shaking his head.

"Not a one," I shrugged dejectedly.

"And if we're all quite done," Young Robin groaned as she rubbed her ears. "Can we get back to helping my mom?"
"If you mean 'help me put them in an early grave', I'd appreciate it," Olvia groaned into the lawn.

I blinked as I considered that little statement before getting off of the proto-Revolutionary's back. "I think she's sane again. Though I won't apologize for the consequences if I get another gun in my face."

"You think?" Young Robin said, skeptically eyeing her mother as she stood. "I think I want a second opinion. Lee?"

"Hmm…" the man hummed, stroking his beard. "Even odds either way, I'd say. That's the sanity rate of everyone else I've ever met who's like this."

I noticed Young Robin's eyes tear up and her lip quiver, and I stepped aside just as Olvia got the presence of mind to blink in confusion as she parsed what had been said. "Wait… 'mom?' Who are you—?"

"MOMMY!"

The woman then had to brace as the younger Robin slammed into her midsection, gripping tight and sobbing into her shirt. Olvia blinked a couple of times, before the older Robin knelt beside her, face in shadows.

"To be as brief as possible, time does whatever it wants here. Space is the same. Her name is Nico Robin. She is your daughter," she said quietly, before raising her head, unshed tears glistening in her eyes. "As am I."

Olivia took in the figure before her, as well as the one crying in her arms, and the identical features and voice to hers. It was only a few seconds before she pulled the other woman into an embrace, holding both versions of her daughter close to her and sobbing in bittersweet joy with them.

Honestly, it was almost enough to bring tears to my eyes, but Lee was walking over to me, looking concerned.

"Yeah, she needed this," he said, his concern not slipping a bit. "And… I'm kinda worried about that. How many people will want to bring their loved ones with them, or stay behind to help?" He sighed, running his fingers through his hair. "I know I'd have trouble resisting."

"Under 'normal' circumstances, as much as that word applies in a situation like this, I might be, but there are two big reasons why we don't have to worry about that. First, there's a certain bastard looking out for me, and I doubt it would let its fun end because of something like a paradox."

Lee looked like he'd bitten into a lemon, and I smiled lightly as I continued. "And second, as much as it must be nice for them to be with the ones they're meeting here…" I jabbed my thumb over my shoulder. "They'll still want to go back to the ones they have waiting outside of the mist. Really, when it comes down to it, do you think even one person here would be willing to subject their younger selves to missing out on the happiest years of their lives?"

"… Point," he conceded, a smile creeping onto his face. "I know Shizuka would never let Robin stay here and make her lose her pranking buddy. She'd probably spontaneously appear just to drag her back."

As I made to respond, something landed on the rail beside me with a heavy thud, making me jump back in surprise as I turned to face them. Brown fur, black and white feathers, a familiar spotted jacket—
I had Lassoo aimed at the otter and vulture that had just appeared beside me in under a second, and they made it abundantly clear that the feeling was mutual: Miss Friday's machine gun was armed and ready, and Mister Thirteen's shell-blades were drawn and tense. And then, for a few long minutes… none of us moved. Which was… definitely different. And it wasn't the only thing off, either.

There was something not right here, and with the barrier between dimensions currently being made of Swiss cheese… I raised Lassoo up into a resting position as I took a better look at the animals that had landed beside me.

"You're… not our Unluckies, are you?" I divined.

"Eh? What was your first clue?" The otter held up a sign as he spoke in a very Canadian accent, his words echoed by immaculate handwriting. It seemed to be his usual method of communication, judging by the way hearing his new voice caused him to start, tail fluffing out. His vulture companion hissed and puffed up her feathers.

"Besides the fact that our versions of you two ditched those digs and upped their arsenals two islands ago?" I shrugged as I let Lassoo drop to the ground. "You're not exuding an aura of pure murderous intent."

"Going by how you sound…" Soundbite mused. "Different birthplaces?"

"That depends. Aboot where're yours from?" This time Mister Thirteen was halfway through writing his sign when he remembered he didn't need it. Capping his pen with a snap, the otter folded his arms with a scowl.

I grimaced as I yanked my collar to the side and indicated the 'souvenirs' our Friday had left me in Alabasta. "Kuraigana. Trust me, it shows."

That got some actual emotion out of the furry fricks. Namely, they jerked hard, their glasses going askew enough to reveal how they were staring at us in naked shock. "…How the ever-loving fuck do ya hosers still have your skin?" the otter asked numbly.

Soundbite, of course, responded with a taunting snap of his maw. "Why don'tcha try your luck and find out, EH?"

That got them bristling and hastily snapping their eyepieces back into place. "Don't mock my accent, ya hoser! Or I'll slit ya like a helpless bedlamer!" The otter's eyes flashed dangerously. "And I always get my man- even if he's just a snail."

"Not the last four times I checked," I smirked tauntingly. Because really, why miss the chance to sling some shit at my worst nightmares?

"AND THOSE WERE THE KILL.0 MODELS! Do you really wanna test THE LUCK OF THE VANILLA?" my companion concurred.

"Why, you little—!" Thirteen snarled, starting to go for his blades.

I spread my arms invitingly, one of them straying down towards Lassoo. "Bring it on, you wannabe-Moun—!"

"OYOI!"

WHAM! CRASH!
"…did anybody get the flavor of that Sea King?" I moaned blearily.

"**Rubber BABY buggy** bumpers I think I'm gonna be siiick," Soundbite slurred.

"It's sad enough that you railroaded your versions of those two into anything resembling nemeses, Xom," Lee's somewhat muffled voice came from behind me. "Maybe avoid repeating the mistake?"

"In my defense, mine were evil son-bitches from the word go…” I got out as my vision cleared enough to see the Catalyst pulling back a fist, the other cradling its face. Sonnuva bitch must have punched me in the head.

Jones, meanwhile, came over to stand by the Unluckies, fingers buried in feathers and fur. She was *petting them*?! What gives? And then she started crooning at them as if they were a pair of cats or something- those were tiny assassins, not pets! "Shh, calm down. It's okay. Cross is just an idiot; he didn't mean to offend you. And the snail's just a baby and doesn't know any better."

"…Fine." Mister Thirteen put his blades away with a huff and leaned into Jones' hand. Miss Friday wasn't nearly as affectionate, standing stiff as she fixed me with a beady glare. But at least she had put her gun away.

"Before you guys get into a glaring contest," chuffed Lassoo, changing to his full Zoan form from where I had dropped him nearby. "How about some alternative entertainment? Pretty sure Sanji has some fresh crayfish he could cook up for you, if you want."

Mister Thirteen and Miss Friday looked at each other, then back to Lassoo. The vulture fluffed her feathers. "Would he have steak and eggs too?" she asked after a long moment, her voice creaking like pines in a high wind.

"Of course."

"Then we accept." The pair hopped down off the rail and followed after Lassoo as the dog-gun lumbered off towards the galley.

---

After the Unluckies left with Lassoo, I silently excused myself from Cross and Lee's presence. I needed a walk, needed to clear my head. Why? I wasn't sure, exactly. Just that, despite my antics with the foghorn, I was suddenly *not* in the best of moods. I think maybe I was a little jealous…As everyone was reuniting with their loved ones all over the Thousand Sunny, a heavy was feeling growing in my chest. It distracted me. I didn't notice someone was approaching me until I'd practically walked into them, twisting out of the way at the last moment when I caught a glimpse of pale blue hair.

"Sorry, your highness."

"Actually, Jones, you're just who I was looking for." The princess smiled at me. Oh. Not my Vivi, then. "Look, I know you're probably not too pleased with me- and after spending ten minutes with the version of me you've had to deal with, I understand completely- but I was wondering if you'd consent to a friendly spar. No powers, no Ruatha or Carue- just our weapons."

That- actually sounded like a lot of fun. Still, while my Vivi had been getting better as of late, I was slow to trust anyone who shared her face, at least in terms of motivations relating to myself. "Sounds great, but why?"

TB!Vivi's eye twitched; her fingers tightened around chains I could've sworn she wasn't holding a
moment before. "Because, to reiterate, I just met with your version of myself in all her suicidally naïve glory, and as a result I have an incredible amount of frustration with that girl, and I'm guessing you do too. This way, we can work off some of the shared tension and my newfound self-loathing before one or both of us does something we regret that will most likely land me in intensive psychotherapy with my Chopper for a month."

Well, that was a pretty good reason. I nodded and shifted back into a fighting stance. "Sure, then. Let's go."

"Excellent." And just like that Vivi was racing towards me, her Lion Cutters starting to spin. I automatically blocked her first strike as I rotated into a round kick, only to have the chain wrap around my forearm. The blade itself continued around and drew a shallow line across my clavicle, carried by its momentum. And while I got in a decent kick at Vivi's side, making her wheeze and stagger, this left me in a very bad position.

Namely, I was trapped.

Bringing my foot back down and planting it, I heaved back on the chain with all my might. This brought Vivi flying towards me. Normally, having my opponent's center of balance would've been a good thing. But before I could do anything with it, I saw a second chain swinging around towards me- and my tug had given the princess' attack extra momentum. I scrambled to draw one of my sais and get it up to block; it was ripped out of my hand a second later, flung across the deck by whipping chains.

"You're strong," Vivi said as she regained her balance. "But slow." The princess spun her second Lion Cutter at me again, forcing me to duck at the last second. I barely made it; the strike clipped the brim of my hat and knocked it off my head.

"And you're quick, but if I get a hit in… TAI!" My abrupt switch from speaking to a kiai startled Vivi into taking a step back. This wasn't great for me, since her weapons gave her a longer reach, but it didn't matter much- her Lion Cutter may have trapped my arm, but that meant she couldn't go very far from me either, not unless she wanted to give up that potential advantage.

Of course, I didn't just kiai; that would've been stupid. As Vivi was stepping back, I drove in with a three-level punch- face, throat, sternum. The princess dodged the first two, but the third caught her. Even as she wheezed, though, she took the opportunity to entangle my free arm with her second Lion Cutter. I growled. This close in, I couldn't get off a decent kick, and now mobility in my arms was severely limited. Damn flail weapons… How was I supposed to counter their ability to wrap around everything? I'd never learned techniques for that.

Well, there was nothing to lose by screwing up here- that's what sparring was for. So I dropped my weight and rolled backwards, shoving my feet up into Vivi's stomach as I fell. The princess coughed and flipped over me with the force of my throw, as had so many sparring partners in the past- and then kept going with a dancer's grace, coming to her feet with a slight stagger, her face an inch from the mast. Then she reversed, rolling back towards me to plant a foot on my stomach before I could get up. It didn't hurt, but it left me in a very awkward position.

"Yield?" she asked, stepping to the side to let me breathe and answer. My crazy grin appeared with a hissed inhalation.

"Sesehihihihihi! Not even close!" It hurt my shoulders- they weren't supposed to bend quite that way, especially under pressure- but I heaved on the chains again, forcing Vivi to roll down and across. I used the momentum to twist to my feet. The princess came up with me.
A flick of Vivi's wrist freed one of my arms, plus her corresponding Lion Cutter. The princess sliced down on an angle as I drove in with a reverse punch; the chain wrapped around my shoulder, bruising, while the blade stung my lower back. Once more, my punch made Vivi wheeze and stagger. I pivoted on one leg, heaving on my still-trapped arm, desperate to get the princess into position for a good kick. Only, I'd forgotten that doing so only gave her more momentum to use in her own attacks. Cold metal wrapped twice around my throat, the blade coming to rest at my spine with another slight sting.

"How about now?" Vivi's voice was practically right in my ear. I reached up stiffly to tug at the chain around my neck. No slack whatsoever, although it wasn't exactly tight either.

"Fine. I yield."

Steel links unwound from my windpipe. Vivi stepped back, looking slightly worn and ruffled, but quite pleased. "Thank you for that. I feel somewhat better now…" she trailed off before sighing despondently. "For all that wanting to merely throttle my duplicate is an improvement over wanting to scalp her, but still, thank you."

"No problem." I examined the shallow cuts I'd gained, but none of them were in need of immediate attention. Satisfied, I turned and raised an eyebrow at the princess. "Now, if you don't mind me asking- why didn't you use that Sovereign Will thing on me the first time? You could've made me surrender immediately."

"Two reasons." Vivi brushed a few loose hairs back into place. "One, I did say no powers- that goes for me as much as for you, even if mine aren't from a Devil Fruit. And two… No, I couldn't have. Sovereign Will requires that you respect me in order for it to work, and seeing the version of me you've had to put up with, I highly doubt that's the case."

"Well, in that case, you'd be wrong." I retrieved my lost sai, slipping it back into place beside its mate. Vivi shot me an incredulous look.

"You respe- how? I was only with her for ten minutes and she was acting like- just how?"

I shrugged. "After some of the people I've known, it takes a lot to lose my respect. And even if I don't agree with her, I understand at least part of where she's coming from. It hurts a little, but I'm used to it. Plus I know you're one of the strongest versions of yourself- emotionally, as well as combat-wise- to exist in the multiverse, so I might do what you said even without Sovereign Will. Might- I don't like taking orders. Buuut anyways…" Here I let my grin take over again. "Up for a round two? I'd like to play around a bit, see if I can figure out some counters to your Lion Cutters. I've never had a chance to fight someone who uses flail-type weapons before. Plus I've been in the mood for a good fight or six ever since a certain armoured idiot and I got chased across the wild blue yonder by the giant Nemo slayer."

Vivi hesitated before shaking her head with a smile. "As much as I would like to oblige, I should probably be getting back to my mother. I left her with my counterpart in the hopes that it would help the latter adjust, but…"

"Understood. I hope you enjoy the rest of your visit with your mom." I bowed- and then automatically snapped a salute when I straightened. Since the first motion was Japanese in style, and the second British, I assume I looked rather silly. Vivi certainly thought so, stifling a giggle at my actions.

"Thank you, Jones. And I hope you enjoy getting to see your…" She trailed off, uncertain. I waved her off.
"Don't worry about me. Just having everyone together like this is enough. Interesting, fun, makes my friends happy- what more could I ask for?"

"If you're sure." Vivi stared at me briefly before making her way back towards wherever she'd left Nefertari Titi and my own princess.

Happy and loose after my bout with Vivi, I wandered over and flopped down back near Cross and Lee, where they were looking over the various scenes with contented smiles. Watching them together made me frown as I came to a slow realization. "Hey… If you're both here… When's the third member of the Cross-Brain showing up? Shouldn't he be around somewhere?"

Both turned to look at me- Cross with shock, Lee with amusement.

"Well—"

"Third?! Cross-Brain?! What?!"

Grin now even wider, Lee waved his hand. "No, go ahead, Xom, get it out of your system."

"Where do I even start!" he sputtered, eyes wide in shock. "The fact that I actually have a second friend as good as you, or the fact that we've actually managed to stick together long enough that we've actually got a group name going!? Are… we sure we're not talking about some freaky adjacent Earth me or some—GAH!"

Cross suddenly started clawing at his skull with a growl of agony.

"I don't think that's ever going to get—YOW!" Lee blinked, rubbing his temples.

Then, just as swiftly as their fits came over them, my seniors swiftly relaxed, albeit with far-off looks in their eyes.

"…two things," Cross deadpanned, his eyelid twitching menacingly. "First, one day I will find a way to shove that omni-everything bastard's mobius loop of a skull inside his fourth-dimensional ass. And second… I, one of the biggest Leeroy Jenkins in the history of fiction, have a cowriter named The Patient One. I've been on these seas almost a year, and I think that's insane."

"Seconded, and I've heard MORE INSANITY SINCE I MET YOU than most people ever do," Soundbite said in the same tone.

"Yes, you do have a cowriter named The Patient One. And he milks that name for all the puns he can produce," Lee stated, just as flat. "As for BROB, if I ever find that asshole I'm going to give him a FOOF enema. Still…” The older Stand-user rubbed his chin contemplatively. "Assuming his plans went through, he was inserted into Yu-Gi-Oh!, and I wish him good luck."

"Oh." I felt a twinge of disappointment. It would've been awesome to meet three of the greatest fanatic writers from when I'd been reading. About to apologize for bringing it up, I froze as the disappointment was followed up by another, stranger sensation. It felt like someone was standing behind me, close; I could feel warmth at my back. And arms… Like someone was hugging me from behind. Except it didn't make me feel anxious, for once. Instead I felt protected. Wanted. The feeling faded slowly, leaving me confused… and wishing a little for its return.

"One more thing," Lee continued, holding up a finger. "We have how many favorites and reviews?!"

"IS IT over 9000?!" Soundbite chortled.

Cross wound up to dopeslap his partner's shell…
"Eh, with enough time..." I grinned as I waved my hand back and forth.

And **there** was the pole-axed look I'd been looking for. "That popular?!" he choked out, and I noticed Lee being equally attentive.

"Put it this way," I spread my arms demonstratively. "You're the *Sword of Shannara* of the One Piece fandom!" I waited and... jack squat. I matched their blank looks with one of my own. "Seriously? I thought you guys were readers."

"We are!" Cross protested before coughing sheepishly. "Just... not in this case, you know?"

"Ditto, though in my defense the world I was punted into was divergent enough that I doubt it had that book either," Lee shrugged indifferently. "So what's the significance of that reference exactly?"

"Well—!" I started to explain.

"**Massively popular novel that proved that THE FANTASY GENRE HAD WORTH beyond Tolkien's Lord of the Rings,**" Soundbite fell silent for a bit... before scowling irritably at our dumbstruck looks. "**HEY, I CAN LISTEN AND GET USEFUL INTEL OFF THE INTERWEBS! I don't do it often, sure, **BUT IT HAPPENS!**"

"Yeah, once in a blue moon when pigs spontaneously grow wings and **fly** over Satan skating to work," Lee snarked.

"**AS I SAID, not often,**" the little pest shrugged, inasmuch as he could. "**OH, AND BY THE WAY? The scouts are all COMING BACK.**"

"**GIVE IT A REST ALREADY!**" Boss's voice roared out of nowhere. I looked around, and saw him coming to a stop on a far side of the ship. The TDWS appeared a moment later—and I dreaded to ask what in the world Boss had done, because he and they were effectively re-enacting Jurassic World's raptor scene, only those four were glaring him down with the kind of sadistic anticipation that I'd only seen in the story before the crew starting beating down Oars while he was stuck.

"I'd suggest begging for mercy, Boss!" Cross called over with an ill-hidden snicker.

"**A REAL MAN NEVER BEGS FOR HIS OWN LIFE!**" the wizened dugong roared indignantly.

**SHINK!**

He then froze as he found Leo's blade stuck clean in the middle of his face. "He does, however," he amended calmly. "Know when to perform a tactical retreat." And with that, the Dugongs fell into the water, kicking up a frothing mess around the Sunny and Merry the Younger.

"Fare thee well, Boss," Cross saluted the poor bastard sarcastically.

"**I AIN'T DEAD YET, YOU SONNUVA—GAH!**"

"No, but you will be soon enough..." Cross snickered, watching the bash go on for a bit...

**BOOM!**

Before glancing up with interest as a few of the wrecks in the distance started to shift, some from explosions and others from sliding apart. "Ah, looks like Chopper and Zoro are on their way back."

"Guess they must have found Hiruluk and Kuina," I deduced. "Wonder if Johnny and Yosaku are
"Oh, so you dropped in early enough to pick up the cleaver twins?" Cross asked with interest. "Huh, bit cliché, but I don't doubt you're making it work. Good for you."

"Actually…" I leaned back against a rail and tilted my hat back out of my eyes, the standard 'cowboy about to tell a tall tale' pose. "I dropped in just before the Baratie. Have you not seen Ghin wandering around? Between his overprotectiveness, and Johnny and Yosaku's… being themselves, it was like getting an older brother and two younger ones in the space of a few days…"

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High above, the rigging bounced as two silvery foxes chased each other along the lines, snapping playfully. Chattering calls sounded as the mother-daughter pair bounded along the ropes. Meanwhile on the deck, a slightly more grounded reunion was going on- only slightly more grounded, seeing as the young women getting to know each other were a pair of literal angels.

"AHAHAHAHAHA!" Conis wiped tears of mirth from her eyes. "I can't believe Father managed to do that to your wedding cake!"

Serra smiled beatifically as she tapped the tip of her parasol on the lawn. "Really, dear, is it so much harder to believe than what you told me about him blowing up the bathroom when he refused to call a handyman?"

"…No, I guess not." The younger angel shook her head with a bright smile. "It's Father; I shouldn't be surprised. He'll knock his own beard off one of these days."

The older angel chuckled. "Even so, if he ever decides to bake you a cake, ensure that he remembers the difference between cinnamon and cumin."

An indignant squawk interrupted the pair's story exchanging; not far away, two more women were glaring at each other so intensely it almost seemed they had lightning crackling in between them.

The redhead took a challenging step forward as she snarled at her white-haired opponent. "What did you just call me?"

"You heard me, Government Dog. There's no such thing as an ex-marine," the taller woman sneered. "We're lucky these mists are impenetrable to normal acts of time and space, otherwise you'd turn us all in."

"My daughters are on these ships, you Void-hunting bitch! How dare you suggest I would do anything to harm them! GRAH!" Bellemere bellowed furiously as she swung a wild punch at Olvia; the archaeologist slid around the blow, a dark glint in her eyes promising pain.

The sight dragged a pair of exasperated sighs from Conis and Serra. On the opposite side of the irate pair, another woman had the same reaction. Nefertari Titi shook her head as if she were regarding a pair of naughty toddlers before sending a significant glance Serra's way. The elder angel rose, shooting her daughter an apologetic look. "Just a minute, Love. Let me see if I can get those two to pipe down."

Serra approached Bellemere and Olvia with her hands raised, a sign of peace. They paused in their squabbling to frown at her as she came closer. "Ladies, this is supposed to be a happy day. Please stop fighting- you'll worry your daughters."

The response was… less than peaceful.
"Shove it, ya filthy pirate!" Bellemere shot an obscene gesture Serra's way. "I don't wanna hear about worrying family from some floozy who took off when her daughter was barely out of her diapers."

"That's the one thing we can agree on," Olvia sniffed. "At least my only crimes were being literate and having my own opinion."

Well, that was just—! Serra struggled to hold onto her temper. Opposite her, Titi sighed again and rolled her eyes. The queen approached Bellemere from behind as the ex-marine turned to snarl something at Olvia, motioning discreetly to Serra as she did so. The angel nodded and moved so she was slightly behind the archaeologist.

"There's a reason you're not supposed to hunt those stones, you—!"

**THUNK!**

Skull met skull as Titi and Serra slammed the combatants' heads together, the argument dying a brutal death as Bellemere and Olvia both keeled over with pained gurgles, their blank eyes indicating a distinct lack of consciousness.

Titi turned to Serra with a smile and granted her a graceful bow. "Thank you for your assistance, ma'am."

"No problem, Love." The angel grinned and dusted off her hands. "Honestly? It was just like being back on the Jackson. It feels like we have to solve a problem that way every hour on the hour."

Titi hid a snicker behind her hand as she righted herself, an impish glint in her eye. "Funny, I was about to say the same, only in regards to the last Reverie I attended."

Serra's grin widened as she held her elbow out to the queen. "Oooh, please do tell."

Titi eagerly hooked her arm with the pirate's and the pair started to walk off…

"Mrgh…" Bellemere groaned as she started to sit up, rubbing the latest goosebump she'd accrued. "This is why I hated the damn Royal postings…"

**THWACK!**

Though not before the handle of Serra's parasol accidentally swung into the Marine's cranium, dropping her like a sack of potatoes.

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"Other me, can you pass the garlic?" 12!Sanji called over as he rifled through the Sunny's cabinets, making a face as he processed what he'd just said. "Never thought something like that'd be coming out of my mouth…"

"Sure thing. And me neither." The twin cooks were just finishing up dinner, their older/younger sister sitting on a stool watching them. TB!Sanji had just tossed 12!Sanji a garlic bulb when the door creaked open behind them. Heavy boots thudded against wood.

"Hey… Older, less shitty Shit Cook, can I talk to you for a bit?" Ghin leaned against the counter beside TB!Sanji. Both cooks huffed- their domain was sacred, couldn't the war dog at least wash his hands before he touched everything? But the elder nodded as he carefully tossed an immense Caesar salad.
"Sure, I guess. What about?"

"Jones said you were the one who saved me, in versions where she wasn’t there. Mostly just wanted to say thanks, on behalf of the me from your world. Although… I’m kinda surprised not to see him here."

"Ah, don’t worry about it," TB!Sanji waved him off indifferently as he flipped the contents of a frying pan. "He’s doing well enough for himself—found his own shittier captain to serve. Though last I heard, he was pissed at the guy for stealing his credit over punching out a Celestial Dragon."

A dark grin crossed Ghin’s face; he managed to tilt his head at just the right angle to make his headband shadow his eyes. "That so? Good. Those bastards have it coming, and more. If I could take out every last one of ’em… Although I guess that means yours is one step ahead of me. Figures." The older pirate let out a huff of laughter. "Ah, well, I’m sure I’ll catch up soon enough."

Pushing off the counter, Ghin wandered back out of the galley. He waved over his shoulder before slamming the door; 12!Sanji shook his head, but said nothing.

Reiju smiled at the sight. "You’ve made some good friends, Sanji. Both of you. You’re happy here, aren’t you? More than you could’ve been at home?"

The Sanjis looked at each other. "This is home," they said in unison. "This, and the Baratie. Nowhere else."

"Oh. That’s good. I’m proud." Hopping off her stool, Reiju was at the counter before either of her brothers could blink. "You were always too good of a person for Father; these pirates deserve you more. And you’re even a decent cook now."

The little princess reached out and absconded with a small spoonful of pudding before skipping out of the room. Both Sanjis stared at her, aghast.

"Reiju, wait! That’s for dessert!"

"You’re supposed to eat your vegetables first, you little—!" The cooks both gave up the fight with defeated sighs as they shook their heads. It was no use; Reiju wasn’t going to listen. She never had. But she loved them, in her own strange way, and even after all these years, they still loved her too.

"Alright, we should probably start moving these out; they’ll be kicking a party off any second now." TB!Sanji suggested.

"Tsh, damn right," 12!Sanji nodded sagely. "I can already hear Luffy shouting at the top of his lungs: ‘Sanji, food!’"

"Did someone say ‘food’?" both Luffys said in unison, one at the door and the other at a porthole. The Sanjis rolled their eyes as they picked up various dishes and brought them out on deck.

"Yeah, yeah, we’re coming. Keep your hats on."

"We always do! What’s that got to do with food?"

Someone—likely the Choppers and Usopp—had dragged a bunch of tables together on the deck to use as a buffet. The Sanji’s set their precious burdens down, then turned in unison and punted their captains across the Sunny when the Luffys tried to jump on the food.

"Wait until the ladies have a chance!" TB!Sanji shouted.

"And preferably everyone else too!" was 12!Sanji’s addition.
To their credit, both Luffys backed off and waited until the food was placed on the tables before quite literally diving in... though thankfully, by that point the Sanjis were prepared and the duo slammed face-first into their boots, prompting the quartet to fall into a brawl.

Reiju stood to the side, watching the exchange with a raised eyebrow. "Well, this is certainly a new sight."

"Not for me it isn't," Makino giggled to herself. "Luffy and his brothers fought all the time."

Reiju's expression fell flat. "So did Sanji and his," she muttered melancholically, before she donned a fond smile. "I'm talking about the fact that he's actually holding his own."

Makino blinked at the young girl in surprise, but she swiftly gave her a kind smile. "Well, as nice as that is, I'm afraid it won't last long if he's standing between Luffy and food, so let's get some while we can. Shall we?"

"No need, I saw this coming a mile off," Reiju waved the bartender to the side. "I hid a stockpile of food while Sanji and Sanji were cooking. Care to have some?"

Makino took one look at the throng of people surrounding the small banquet before following the young girl with a beaming smile. "I'd love some, thank you."

The two headed for the kitchen, but paused as they saw the crew's ship-girl emerge with a large bowl filled with what looked very much like a trifle.

"Hey, how come she gets dessert first?" Reiju questioned, drawing everyone's attention. Most of the TB!crew just gave a glance before going back to what they were doing, but most of the rest seemed indignant.

"She has a point," 12!Sanji said. "I can understand serving the ladies first, but—"

"It's not a dessert, it just looks like one," Franky grunted as he piled a plate high, holding it out of reach of his crew by dint of his outweighing most of the crew by half. "And it's not even edible unless you were born a ship, so unless you want your stomach pumped, keep away from—"

"Fos?" A white dragon hatchling jumped up on Merry's shoulder and shoved his muzzle into her dish. The ship-girl let out a squawk of surprise. Ruatha was gone before she could do anything to him, tumbling down and across the deck while his scales turned a sickly shade of green. An instant later, the dragonet was retching over the side. "GYACH! Krastov! Hyech, hyech!"

"...Merry's food," Franky groaned as the dragon began coughing, prompting Jones and both Choppers to rush over, one in alarm, one in exasperation, and one in exasperated alarm.

"What is it, poison?" Reiju asked.

"Assorted cloth, oil, and pitch," TB!Sanji deadpanned. "Like Franky said, gourmet for a ship-girl, inedible for anyone else."

Reiju and everyone who wasn't of the TB!crew blanched, and Sanji turned to his counterpart. "...OK, even I have to draw the line here. How do you make something that looks and smells so delicious out of cloth and oil?"

"With a lot of practice and help from some of the world's best shipwrights," TB!Sanji responded with a miserable grimace.
"And he has had a lot of practice!" Merry hummed happily as she started to suck down her distinctly unappetizing confection.

Mikey promptly shoved his plate back into place with a distinctly green hue to his face. "Aaand just like that I've lost my appetite."

"Speak for youse~elf!" Robin the Younger grinned as food was piled higher and higher on her plate, Pompeii's patchwork arms reaching out to grab Mikey's discarded plate.

"Wait, wha—WHAT THE HELL!?" Franky blurted out as he noticed that not only was the tyke skimping off the top of his plate, but so too was a certain meteorological tentacle, belonging to a certain navigator. "Aww, c'mon, you too, Big Sis?! Don't you girls have first come first served privileges!?!"

"What can I say?" TB!Nami grinned as her Eisen Tempo piled her food into her hands. "Somehow, it just tastes better when it carries the spice of theft! Aaaall the sweeter!"

"I'll eat to that," Robin the Elder hummed pleasantly.

"That's the ide-HEY!" TB!Nami barked as she noticed an autonomous limb swiping food from her own plate.

"All's fair when you're a pi~ra~te," Elder Robin sang cheekily.

"Why, you—!"

A short ways away, Nico Olvia was watching with no small amount of bemusement as an indignant cyborg tried to fend off the thieving efforts of both her younger daughter and a meteorological-controlling navigator, who herself was duelling with the thieving hands of her older daughter.

The rebellious archaeologist watched the exhibition for a few seconds longer before slowly tilting her head to the side in confusion. "How the hell am I seeing this while I'm still sober?"

"My thoughts exactly!"

Olvia's blaring instincts prompted her to spin on her heel, bringing her face to face with…the label of a bottle? Her unasked question was answered when she noticed that said bottle was being held up next to the grinning and flushed face of a certain mohawk-bearing Marine.

"Bellemere," she greeted coolly, confirming with a glance that the angel and queen nearby had their attention on her before glancing back at the Marine. "I see you managed to find where they keep the liquor?"

"Not like it was hidden anyways!" Bellemere snickered before shaking the bottle in a tempting manner. "More importantly, seeing as you were just griping about being too sober, wanna fix it?"

Olvia gave the Marine a look of sheer disbelief. "I thought your opinion of me was that I was a, and I quote, 'Void-hunting bitch'."

"Oh you most definitely are, no question!" Bellemere agreed wholeheartedly, her smile wavering an inch. "Which makes it all the more important that I get you drinking!"

The Oharan's eye twitched as she tried to process just what she was hearing. "I beg your pardon?"

The Marine's grin took on a taunting overtone as she shoved it in her rival's face. "No way in hell
can I let myself fail in a contest of livers against a reckless idiot like you. We Marines have pride!"

Olvia cocked her eyebrow in a decidedly unimpressed manner. "And?"

Bellemere's smile changed to a grimace as she glanced in the direction of the 'peacemakers' that had broken them up, and who were still eyeing them even now. "Aaaaand I've already had three concussions today. This seems like a good way to avoid a fourth while still trying to show your scrawny ass up."

Olvia's eye twitched yet again, only a lot more violently. Her eyes flicked from Bellemere to Titi and Serra, and then to the display at the buffet table; her daughters were still using their powers to snatch up food, and thoroughly enjoying it. She took a moment to appreciate the smiles that they had before turning back to the Marine, and accepting the bottle.

"Fine, then. But all bets are off if either Robin asks me for something," she said.

Bellemere's smirk widened tauntingly. "That's the one thing I can respect about you. Now put up or shut up, or are you too chicken-shit of a bookworm to—?"

Olvia cut her off by snatching the bottle out of Bellemere's hand, knocking it back and draining it of its contents in a matter of seconds a few decisive gulps. Once she was finished, she pinned the Marine with a firm glare as she shook the bottle out. "You're looking at the results of spending the better part of half a decade on the run, bitch."

Bellemere blinked at her in surprise for a moment, but she swiftly rallied in favor of donning an ecstatic grin as she raised her own bottle in a toast. "Now we're talkin'! Let's have us some fun!"

As it became clear that there was no danger of them acting up, Titi and Serra were able to relax and focus on more enjoyable things- namely, their daughters and the defense of their dinner. Titi and Serra both turned their attention to the buffet table, their daughters coming up alongside them. Smiling, the elder angel picked up a set of chopsticks along with her dinner. "Oh! I know a delightful party game we can play with these!"

"Really?" Titi picked up her own set, staring at them questioningly. "I've never heard of such a thing. How do you play?"

"Like this!" Serra promptly stuck the chopsticks up her nose, settling the other ends on her lower lip to create a bizarrely stretched smile. Conis blinked at her in shock for a moment before dissolving into a giggling mess as she grabbed up another pair of wood and started to imitate her mother.

TB!Vivi glanced at her counterpart with a sly smile. "Come on, Mother; we do it all the time." So saying, the elder princess retrieved her own utensils and stuck them up her nose. Titi stared a little longer, then shrugged.

"Well, I suppose it can't do any harm." Much to the horror of her younger daughter, the queen joined in as well. And was soon having a lot of fun, dancing around with chopsticks in her nose, arm in arm with the others. 12!Vivi stared as if the other women had all grown extra heads.

"You… wha… Mother!" she yelped indignantly, "I realize that my alternate might have grown… uncouth in her exile—!"

"I'd like to politely tell you to shove it, other me!" TB!Vivi grit out through her rictus grin, a vein prominently throbbing on her brow.

"But we're still civilized, so could you… please not do that? It's undignified, and it looks painful."
"Of course we can talk about something more ladylike if that's what you'd like, dear. So... Are there any cute pirate boys either of you have your eye on? Hmm?"

"Ah! I think I stabbed myself in the sinus!" 12!Vivi yelped as she hastily jabbed a chopstick at her nose. Her eyes were wide and her face was flushed red. "How do you fit these in without doing serious injury?"

"Or are you still waiting for that nice boy back home? What was his name again?"

Frantically looking around for an out, her eyes alighted on Cross and Lee, who so far had been standing back, away from the carnage and looking thoroughly amused by the whole scene. "Uh, would either of you like me to get something for you?" she desperately asked.

Cross' only response was to raise his Vision Dial and snap a picture, while Lee- was suddenly holding a full plate of food?! What?! But ho- oh, right. "Stands are precisely as bullshit as advertised, aren't they?" Cross asked offhandedly.

"B-rank speed is very nice," commented Lee as he took a bite. His face immediately lit up. "Oh my God, this is so good..."

Upon seeing a number of women with chopsticks up their noses, the Usoppes and Choppers let out little yelps of glee. Soon there was a pair of snipers dancing around arm in arm, wooden utensils on proud display. The Choppers were slightly slower to join in, although that was only because they paused to show Hiriluk how to shove his chopsticks up his nose without hurting himself. Banchina didn't rise to join the dance, but even she had chopsticks up her nose almost as soon as her sons did. She'd probably learned it from her husband.

"Alright Big Bro!" Johnny and Yosaku raced in a second later, taking their places on either side of the linked Usoppes to form a chopstick kick line.

Fuming, the Sanjis glared around at the spreading epidemic, unable to decide who to kick first. "What's wrong with you shitheads? Can't you just sit down and eat like civilized people for once in your shitty lives?!"

"Big Sis Serra started it!" Johnny yelped, a small leap dragging his end of the kick line further from the irate cooks. Both Sanjis froze, unable to comprehend the idea of an angelic woman being the leader of the so-called 'shitheads.'

Smiling, Reiju snuck up behind her brothers, making them jump when she announced her presence with a cough. "Relax, Sanji. It's all in good fun- enjoy it." So saying, the tiny blonde girl snatched her own pair of chopsticks off the buffet table and stuffed them up her nose. Both Sanjis were too flabbergasted to do anything.

Off to one side, the Zoros leaned back against a rail, Kuina sitting in between them. No one, not even the Luffys, dared try and steal from the little girl's plate while she was under the fond eyes of the twin swordsmen. Munching thoughtfully on a carrot, Kuina looked from one Zoro to the other. "You've come a long way since we were little. I'm proud, even if you still have a long way to go."

"Of course. I couldn't just let—!"
"It wouldn't have felt right to—!"

Both Zoros stopped suddenly when they realized they were talking at the same time, their ears turned slightly red. When neither of them resumed speaking immediately, Kuina smiled. "I know. That's why I'm especially glad it was you."

"It's still not right…" 12!Zoro grumbled. "You should've been here the whole time, giving the shit cook hell with me."

TB!Zoro nodded. "Even if we fulfill your dream too, it still doesn't… We'll never know how strong you could've been, whether you could've made World's Strongest Swordsman."

"Hey! If either of you can, I can too!" Kuina's eyes flashed. "You know what I think? I think that when you die, you'll find your versions of me waiting for you. I'll keep training in the afterlife so when we meet again, we can have our duel. Even if I can't be the greatest swordsman in this world, I'll be the greatest in the next one."

The Zoros each placed a hand on one of Kuina's shoulders, chuckling. "We'll see. After all, to earn that title—"

"You'll still have to beat us."

With both Zoros thus distracted and Ghin off somewhere with Tippy, there was no one to tell either Sanji off for wolf-whistling when an unfamiliar—and rather attractive—woman appeared in the midst of the chaos. Not that she paid them much attention at first. Smiling broadly, the newcomer waved at Kaya and Merry, who were off on one of the rails. "Thanks for letting me borrow the shoes, Hun. They fit great, and it sure helps my balance."

"Don't mention it." Kaya smiled. "And they look lovely on you."

"Who's that?" 12!Sanji breathed to his counterpart. "She's gorgeous!"

"No idea." The smoke from TB!Sanji's cigarette morphed into little hearts. "So, she's not on your crew, then?"

"I thought she was on yours. Must be someone's older sister or something."

The newcomer finally seemed to notice that the cooks were talking about her- and she didn't mind one bit. Sauntering over, she slung her arms over both their shoulders and hung between the Sanjis with a slight giggle. "Aww… Are you boys staring at my butt?"

"No!"

"Yes!"

"Well, at least one of you's honest. Go right ahead; I'm kinda proud of it, and just looking don't hurt anyone." The woman winked, causing both Sanjis to flush bright red. "And don't worry; I'm nobody's sister, so you won't have to worry about any angry brothers getting on your ass."

"But if you're not someone's sister," 12!Sanji wondered. "And you look too young to be anyone's mother… Who are you?"

"Name's Kokoro. Apparently I'm here for Franky; my future self raised him or something. Interesting boy."
TB!Sanji paled noticeably. He froze as Kokoro continued to hug and giggle. "I am… so conflicted right now…"

"Really?" his counterpart mumbled dazedly. "Why's that?"

"Trust me when I say, you don't want to know." And with that, he slunk off back to the food table, muttering something about a man's dream and dugongs.

"IF YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT ME, SANJI, I'M A LITTLE BUSY AT THE MOMENT!" roared a ballistic seal-turtle hybrid as he shot across the deck, snagging a few strips of meat from the buffet table before blurring out of sight again. A moment later, the TDWS came into view; despite their ever-murderous appearance, they were panting a little.

"Dang it… we're slowing down," Leo growled.

"The hell we are. Hit the caffeine!" Mikey declared, shooting forward and snagging a mound of chocolate from the table, scarfing it down, and vanishing.

"Damn it, for once the nunchuk numbskull's right!" Raphey snapped, grabbing a sugary treat of her own off the table. "Sugar for energy, GO!" And with that, the dugong shoved the pastry down her throat and also blurred out of sight.

Donny and Leo hesitated with their own choices of 'food', glancing at each other uneasily. "…this is gonna suck later, isn't it?" Donny deduced miserably.

"Yeah…” Leo nodded grimly. "But at the least, we're gonna make him suffer first, so bottoms up!"

With that, they each downed a can of the unholy brainchild of Franky's cola and Chopper's adrenaline serums that they had simply named 'Monster.' A second later, the pair seemed to start vibrating in place. From the perspective of everyone else that is; Donny and Leo had a very different view. Namely, from what I could get out of their insensate mumblings after the fact? To them, the world suddenly froze. Even sound- while they could understand each other perfectly, everything else seemed like a low, senseless roar. And when they moved, they didn't blur away from the viewing parties; they simply vanished.

-o-

"Thank goodness we only had two cans of that stuff," Franky muttered, eyeing the starry-eyed Luffys who were staring at where the two Dugongs had been a moment before, then picking up the cans and surreptitiously heading for Chopper's lab.

"I'll second that," I nodded, flashing back to the last time Luffy had gotten ahold of an adrenaline-inducing solution and promptly shuddering in bowel-voiding horror.

So… much… goulash...

A thud beside me drew me out of my thoughts; Jones had returned, vaulting over her Luffy's arm to land beside me. Ruatha was perched on her shoulder once more, looking no worse for wear despite what he'd tried eating. Little dragon must have a stomach of iron. The dragon mother sat down and portioned out food for her hatchling before getting started on her own dinner. A soft smile, much different from her earlier grins, grew on her face.

"It's nice to see everyone so happy. I'm glad… This will at least give everyone a little closure." Her voice was quiet, and a little… sad?
It took a second for things to ping for me, but once they did I adjusted my place in my seat so that I could lean forwards and get a clean look at her. "Hey… Jones?" I started tentatively. "I… geeze, can't believe we forgot, but… do you… want to slip out real quick? Just, I dunno, do a quick circuit of the place? With Soundbite's range, I'm sure it wouldn't be that hard to find-?"

"No point." Jones shook her head promptly, her expression unchanged. "There wouldn't be anyone out there."

"Hey, come on-!" I started to assure her.

"Really, they're not," she pressed on, a slightly melancholic smile coming across her lips. "If anyone I used to know was coming, we'd know by now. My friends weren't exactly masters of stealth, and Great-Grandpa… Imagine Garp, but German. I haven't heard or seen any signs of anyone. They're not out there."

I did my best to hide a grimace as I considered who she had and, more specifically, hadn't included in her list of possibles. "Ah, geeze, Jones…"

"I-It's fine, Cross, really," she assured me, a renewed kind of energy coming into her smile. "For a while I was… resigned to the idea that maybe no one was coming for me at all. But I've been thinking about it, and I think… I know better now."

"Seriously?" I perked up eagerly, casting surreptitious glances left and right. "Well that's great! Who is it? Is it someone he-?"

Out of the blue I was cut off… by Jones poking me in the dead center of my forehead?

"You, moron," she snickered, her tone indicating that she meant that both with and without the comma. "I think it was supposed to be you. Weird, I know, we- we'd never met before- but it's the only explanation I can think of for…" She trailed off, waving a hand at the two crews surrounding us with joyful chaos.

I blinked at her numbly before running my hand through my hair with an exasperated laugh. "Ah, geeze, Jones… way to put pressure on a guy…" But, just as swiftly, I gave her a wide grin. "But hell, way to make him feel special too. And seeing as that's the case!" I clapped my hands and rubbed them together. "Seeing as that's the case, I might as well act the part by asking the essential question!" I leaned in to give her an inquisitive smile. "How's life on the Blue Seas been treating you?"

"Like a goddamn chew toy," she answered swiftly, not even a hint of hesitation in her voice. "Everything seems to be out to eat me, all my plans get flipped on their side, even fights that should be easy aren't what I thought they'd be… But maudit, I'm having so much fun." She broke off for a moment, staring into space. "I could've died a number of times already- could die tomorrow, for all I know. But you know what?" Here, her mad grin returned with a vengeance. "If I do, I'm taking the whole fucking Grand Line down with me."

-o-

I slammed my fist into my palm to emphasize my words, releasing a small, harmless shockwave from the impact. Ruatha chirped in agreement.

Beside us, Cross was… oddly silent for a long moment. His expression blank as he stared at me, and I could tell that… something was churning in his head.
Finally, he folded his hands on the table, and pinned me with a hard look. "Jones," he stated firmly. "I want you to do me a favor, alright?"

"Eh?" I cocked my head to the side in confusion, Ruatha following my example. "Sure. What is it?"

"Keep going. No matter what, no matter how hard it is, no matter how much it hurts… you keep going, alright? Because… you can make it, understand? I can see in you the exact same kind of guts that are in me. The exact same will to succeed. And I want you to know… when you reach the top? When you hit the top of the world… we'll be there. We'll be there, waiting to welcome you with open arms… because you have earned it. And because we know that you can make it."

Whaaaa…? My brain momentarily ceased all function. No one had ever… The next thing I knew, Ruatha was tumbling off of my shoulder as I launched myself forwards. I collided with Cross in a hug that probably would've been painful without my fruit, clinging to him for all I was worth. Tears welled up in the corners of my eyes; I hid my face against his shoulder so no one would see them. "Thank you… Just, thank you…"

I felt another body press against my back, arms wrapping around the both of us. A thick beard tickled the top of my head. Lee. He didn't say anything; he just hugged.

And then there was a third presence as well, though not physical, as the warmth from earlier returned. An invisible force that made me feel safe… What I would give to be able to find the source. It felt like… love?

I don't know how long the… four? of us were in that position, but when Cross and Lee pulled back, I saw pretty much everyone looking at us. Some in shock, some in confusion, and some in approval. And of the ones in the third category, the two Luffys were the most notable with their D-shaped grins. A second later, they moved in unison, raising a pair of mugs. Within seconds, everyone onboard had joined them. The captains were clearly on the same wavelength at this point, as they spoke in unison as well:

"To the craziness of the Grand Line that brought us here, to the best meat we've ever had—"

I wanted to feel exasperated at that, but with two Sanjis in the kitchen? Yeah, it was worth mentioning. Especially the bacon.

"—And to our friends from another world, and all their shenanigans!"

Suddenly, Lee had a mug in his hand, and was holding out another pair towards us via Stand. Which was still freaky, by the way, but it didn't stop us from taking the mugs.

"KANPAI!" both Luffys declared in unison.

"KANPAI!" was the unanimous response from everyone surrounding us.

Cross and I exchanged bemused looks, before we both grinned from ear to ear and slammed our mugs together.

"KANPAI!"

Cross-Brain AN: Now, for clarity's sake: Jones, Ruatha, and the alternate Straw Hats are from another One Piece SI called Twelve Red Lines. Its author, Vikingr, graciously collaborated with us on this chapter, and we would like to extend our thanks.

Vikingr AN: As I would like to extend a great many thanks to the Senpais for allowing me to
work with them. I'd never collaborated with anyone on a fic before; this was a good learning experience and a lot of fun.

Xomniac AN: For the record, Cross's words at the end? They're exactly why we chose to write this omake, because upon reading the first few chapters of *Twelve Red Lines*... well hell, we just knew it to be true. We might be the up-and-coming kings, but that doesn't mean we can't go ahead and name our heir.

Hornet AN: As for Lee, as you might have guessed he's from a JoJo SI of my own that's currently still in the planning stages.

Patient AN: The same goes for the Yu-Gi-Oh! SI mentioned above. Now you have something else to look forward to when we go on our hiatus. Oh, yes, and one more thing: regarding the canonicity of this omake? Think of it like Omatsuri: a couple of lasting effects, but unlikely to be mentioned again in the story.
Chapter 51: Nightmare Finales! A Devil Falls To The Pirate King's Dream!

Xomniac AN: Sorry for the massive delay, people, this just didn't wanna be written! And hey, look: posted from France! Woot!

Patient AN: Credit to the Ego for the planning of the chapter-long fight. Credit to the Superego for the writing of the chapter-long fight. And... well... I guess I may have helped some, too?

Hornet AN: We apologize for the relatively short length, but we refuse to stretch the chapter, and honestly, I think you'd all prefer getting the chapter ASAP.

My first thought upon waking was 'Owwwww...'. My second was... non-printable because of the stream of omni-offensive profanity that spewed from my metaphorical mouth, a sliver of it actually managing to claw its way out of my throat. It was only with my third thought that my brain decided to get its shit together and 'helpfully' inform me that I was still alive. My natural response to that, of course, was to stir and attempt to sit up, only to feel a familiar pair of hooves still my movement.

"Easy, easy," Chopper said in a somewhat loud but definitely fear-choked whisper. "I just finished packing and bandaging that wound in your side, I'd rather you not spill your intestines all over the ground... again."

SMASH!

The Spark of Genius cast a fearful glance up and to the side as the sound of something getting smashed somewhere else rang out. "Also, really don't want you inadvertently provoking the shadow-wielding psychopath."

I followed his gaze up to a solid wall of dirt, then further up to a roiling mass of black. Right. Moria. Awakening. And in other news, owwwww son-of-a-biiiiiiitch! I curled up, trembling from the mother of all gut-burns, and it was several seconds before it subsided enough to crack an eye open at Chopper. "What'd I miss?" I whispered back.

Chopper let out a miserable snort and shook his head as he started working on an injured Rolling Pirate, one that I couldn't help but notice was practically cut to ribbons, and much more importantly, one of a whole hell of a lot of them that were lying around us in the... trench? Yeah, I think it was a trench, earth was ripped up around us but it was still a—

Right, Chopper speaking, focus. Though, there was something odd about the dirt...

"Not much," the reindeer grit out as he worked on patching the allied pirate up. "It's just that, ah... h-he basically made every shadow around us become... tangible at the same time. After that..." He shook his head. "Yeah, I don't know the exact specifics and I doubt anyone could follow it. Just, one second there was absolute chaos and the next the ground was ripped up and Moria was stalking around attacking anyone he could find!"

"And we haven't run yet why, exactly?"

"Because of that."

I followed the doctor's hoof, found he was pointing at the mass of black that extended above the dirt...
wall's edge, and paled as I realized that it wasn't just writhing black, it was a shadowy and fully mobile thorn hedge, one that would have made even Maleficent herself applaud.

And it was then that I realized something else, something that had been bugging me and made my stomach practically fall out of my ass. The trench was too bright. There was no shadow.

"…that's a damn good reason."

As another thunderous smash sounded out, noticeably further away than the first one, I turned to look at my partner, who was shivering within his shell. "Soundbite?"

"Come out, come out, wherever you are~!"

I shivered at the distinctly unhinged voice that washed over me, rife with sadistic glee. "Ooookay, did not need to hear that."

"Wasn't me…"

You can damn well be sure that I stiffened at that little whisper. "I beg your pardon?"

Soundbite poked his quivering eyestalks out of his shell to give me a panicked look. "IT'S THE SHADOWS… THE SHADOWS THEMSELVES are speaking with him!"

Well, that was a thing. "Okay, so, before I go completely catatonic from totally justified mind-rending terror…" I blinked, realizing I didn't actually know what Moria was doing. "Actually, hang on. What is he doing, exactly?"

Chopper hesitated briefly, but then hung his head with a weary groan. "Well, seeing as your guts aren't in any danger of falling out right this moment and no one else is going to keel over if I don't get to them immediately… it'll be easier if I just show you."

And with that, the Zoan-doctor helped me get to my feet—not an easy feat given how it felt like I had a freaking red-hot rod through my side—and helped me make my way up the slope of our trench. Once at the top, we peeked over the edge and beheld… well, hell.

It's… hard to come up with a better name for it, really. Imagine the war-torn fields of No Man's Land that arose in World War One: barren plains crisscrossed with trenches and blown all to hell and back. What I saw was that cranked to a 100: the trenches were less purposeful structures and more gouges that had been ripped open in the earth, and the eviscerated remains of the long-deceased covered practically every square inch of the scarred ground.

And what better to complete an image of hell than a devil stalking the field of the damned?

It was a little hard to tell what Moria's exact mental state was at the moment, seeing as his back was to me, but going by how his foot was encased in a colossal spiked boot made of shadow that he was using to stomp one of the trenches flat, it wasn't hard to guess the gist. The fact that he was twitching like a tweaker and laughing like a loon was also kinda a hint.

Aaaand then there was the song:

"All the little bugs Hiding in their holes~ Should come out to play!" Moria crooned in the wispy Voice of the Legion he'd adopted, before suddenly snarling as he tripled the rate at which he was smashing his shadow-encased foot into the ground. "OR ELSE I'LL TURN YOU ALL TO PASTE AND BE DONE WITH YOU!"
I gurgled miserably under my breath at the display of literally insane violence. "And nobody's tried to put him down yet why, exactly?"

"Weeeell…” Chopper dragged out with a grimace. "First off…”

"SKREEEEEEOOOONK!"

Chopper was cut off by a very sudden and familiar roar splitting the air, prompting both us and Moria to snap our heads around.

Turns out that either Chopper was an even better surgeon than we thought or Franky was better with his designs, but either way the end result was the same: A fire-belching robotic Tyrannosaurus Rex that was back on its taloned feet, barreling towards Moria like a runaway sea train.

CHOMP!

And that then proceeded to sink its fangs into Moria's neck like a rabid Sea King.

For an intense and… somewhat confusing minute, I felt hope at the sight of a fellow… human? Let's go with 'sapient' being, being devoured by the king of all lizards.

"Useless…” Soundbite whispered in terror.

And then that hope was cruelly extinguished by 'Moria's' pitch-black head suddenly rotating a full 180 degrees to unveil the rabidly grinning face of a Doppleman, which let loose an ethereal cackle as it grabbed the instantly panicked cyber-dino's throat and held it in place.

"He keeps doing that," Chopper gulped, shivering in place. "And then… there's the others.”

Before I could question what he meant by 'others', I was answered by two other shadow-men rising from the shade around the dino-borg's feet. The trio of umbral marauders all howled with maddened glee and raised their unnaturally taloned hands. And then…

"SKREEOOOOOR RRRGghghhhhr…."

"KISHISHISHISHISHI!"

"Oh, fucking hell!” Gagging, I ducked my head back into the trench, fighting to keep my bile in check. I'd heard the words 'ripped limb from limb' plenty of times over the years, but no way did I ever expect to actually see it in action! "How the hell is he doing that?!"

"A complete psychotic break for starters, but I'm fairly certain the fact that he was almost certainly a sociopath of the highest order to begin with doesn't help," Chopper droned in a dead voice muffled by the dirt he'd buried his face in.

"No, I mean literally!” I hissed frantically. "Moria only ever showed the ability to produce a single Doppleman out of his own shadow! Even if he could make more than one, they'd have to be smaller from division of resources! How does he have more than one of that thing that are at full size!?”

"Devil Fruits are bullshit, Awakened Devil Fruits make mere bullshit their bitch?” Soundbite replied in my voice.

"What are you—ah,” I finished lamely as I recalled exactly how this whole shitshow had started. "You're… certain he—?"
"Beyond the MACRO-UMBRAKINESIS HE'S SLINGING, YOU MEAN?" my partner in slime snarked. He then shuddered and lowered his eyestalks. "I... I heard it happen. And lemme tell you, ON TOP OF WHAT WE ALREADY DID TO HIM?"

"Come out, little buggy-bugs!" Moria's voice floated through the air. "COME OUT SO THAT I CAN RIP YOUR SKIN OFF WITH MY FINGERS!"

Soundbite shivered in terror. "In case it isn't obvious, he's gone chair-leg savaging, carpet gnawing, baying-at-the-moon bonkers."

"Fucking... I groaned, dragging my hand down my face. That done, I shoved my mind into gear. "Alright, first things first: roll call, who's still conscious and who's down for the count?"

"Vivi, Carue, Merry, the TDWS, and most of Lola's crew all went down with you in the opening attack," Chopper answered with a grimace. "I treated them first, but they already took too much damage in the fights before this; they won't be waking up anytime soon. Conis got hit pretty hard, too; I'm pretty sure that Su's the only thing keeping her awake at this point."

"Franky has plenty of fight left, but he's out of cola," Soundbite picked up. "Lassoo and Funkfreed are playing dead in their weapon forms at different spots, which is the only THING THEY CAN DO SEEING AS THEY'RE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE KILLING FIELD!"

"The rest of us are ready to fight," Robin's voice came in softly. "Unfortunately, however, everyone aside from Usopp and myself are dealing with varying degrees of weariness from the fights up until this point, especially Luffy, Zoro, and Nami."

I grimaced miserably as I ran the numbers. That was half of our crew out of commission, and while we still had the Monster Trio and Boss, it did a fat lot of good for us when Moria had a serious face killzone going on around him.

Still, priorities. "Alright... not necessarily good, but it's better than nobody..." I sighed heavily, flinching at the sound of Moria smashing another trench flat. "Next, before we do jack—!

"Hmm... what's this~?"

I froze as Moria suddenly spoke up, a distinct tone of menace undercutting his otherwise serene (if insane) query.

"None of the bugs want to come out and play? Well, if that's how it is..."

A slight rustling noise drew my attention, and my gut froze when I noticed the thorn hedge keeping us penned in beginning to shift.

"I'LL JUST SQUASH YOU FLAT RIGHT NOW!"

"We need to move, now!" Not waiting for a response, I grabbed Chopper and began sprinting down the trench. "Before he floods the trenches with thorns and turns us all into slurry!"

"Wait, Cross, if I move these guys—"

The reindeer-man cut himself off with a choked gurgle when the tip of a thorny vine began to poke through the soil of one of the trench walls.

"That is a great plan and I will get right on it!" Chopper yelped, suddenly shifting into Heavy Point.
"HEY, MORIA, HEADS UP!" Reaching into his pouch, he grabbed and flung a vial at the rabid Warlord. "CHERRY BLOSSOM!"

A glance over the edge showed Moria turning a bloodshot glare on the vial. "Pest," he rumbled dismissively, a Doppleman popping up to swat the glass—

FWOOSH!

"GWAH!"

Only to yelp in shock when a pink haze suddenly consumed him and a lot of the field.

"HAZE!" Chopper concluded victoriously, standing proud for a second. After that second, he promptly shrank back down and shot me a frantic look. "Alright, he's distracted. Now what do we do!? We're still trapped!"

"Uh…" I erred uncertainly as I drew a raging blank. Damn it, I must have been woozier than I thought; I usually only got bitten in the ass on the second step ahead, not the first!

"THE MANOR!"

"Wha—?" I jumped when Soundbite suddenly barked.

"EVERYONE INTO THE MANOR!" he ordered. "IT'S A TOTAL MAZE IN THERE! WITH ANY LUCK, WE CAN LOSE him in the corridors!"

"But won't we get pretty lost, too?" Luffy pointed out.

"I knew it, it IS the apocalypse!" Usopp sobbed miserably.

"JUST TRUST ME, DAMN IT! I know what I'm doing!"

"Alright, good enough for me! Come on guys, let's do what he says!"

"I really wish you'd stop pinballing and make up your mind about whether or not the world is ending, Luffy…" Nami groaned wearily.

"Enough, let's just go before Moria stops bothering to aim!" I cut in.

"But what about everyone who's hurt!?" Chopper demanded, casting a desperate gaze over his patients.

"We leave them, and they'll be fine!" I hastily added when Chopper's eyes flashed blue. "Because Moria's looking for a fight, he wants live targets! So long as he knows the 'bugs' are in his manor, he'll ignore everyone else to focus on us, alright?"

The cyan faded, but the way Chopper was biting his lip made it clear that he was still uncomfortable with the plan. Nonetheless, he ran with me as I made a beeline through the fog, stumbling over corpses and writhing shadows as I headed for the haunted mansion. I detoured just enough to follow Soundbite's directions to where Lassoo and Funkfreed lay, strapping them on my back as I ran. As a result, I fell far behind Chopper and the rest of the crew, leaving none of them in sight when I crossed the mansion's threshold.

"And nine… ten… TWELVE… and the rest of the Rolling Pirates arrrrrre CLEAR! NOW, SOMEONE TAKE A POTSHOT TO LURE HIM TO US!" Soundbite barked.
"We can't see anything through this fog!" came several voices. A pause…

"...This is the first time in my life that I'm resenting being such a good marksman," Usopp moaned. "Alright, alright... Special Attack: NOVA STAR!"

FWA-BANG! A blast of insanely bright light, coupled with an ear-shattering explosion of noise, penetrated the pink haze.

"GYAGH!" Moria howled irately, his silhouette flailing about. "YOU MISERABLE BASTARDS! I'LL RIP YOUR SPINES OUT THROUGH YOUR—!

Suddenly, the threat was cut short, Soundbite making a face. "I LIKE PROFANITY AS MUCH AS THE NEXT GUY, BUT even I have my limits," he deadpanned. "And by the way, doesn't that attack literally TRANSLATE TO 'STAR STAR'?"

"LESS SNARK, MORE STRATEGY!" Usopp shot back. "We need to figure out some way to finish him, before—!

"So, infesting my humble abode, are you?" I came to a screeching halt as Moria's voice suddenly rolled over me like a wave of tar. "Well, if you want to play... THEN LET'S PLAY!"

I twitched as the Warlord's voice suddenly took on an unmistakably homicidal tone. "Uh... are there suddenly more of him?"

"By my count?" Soundbite replied flatly. "About a dozen more TO BE SPECIFIC, ALL PURE SHADOW."

"FEE FI FO FUM!" the chorus of the deranged cackled. "READY OR NOT, YOU'RE ALL DEAD!"

"I hate ruined rhymes," someone muttered.

"I hate the fact that even though I'd already resigned myself to an odd death the second I joined this crew, this tops everything I could have possibly imagined," Nami deadpanned.

Before anyone could pitch in with more snark, Soundbite suddenly barked "EVERYONE, DUCK!" I didn't question it, immediately throwing myself to the floor.

SMASH!

And a good fucking thing, too, as I felt something ruffle my hair before smashing into the other wall of the dining room. I chanced a glance up, catching a glimpse of a spiral spear the size of a large tree sitting on a pile of shattered wood and plaster that promptly unfolded into one of the Doppelmen, which then proceeded to turn around and split in half at its too-too wide mou

"NOPE," I summarized, promptly spinning on my heel and running like—oh, I'm sorry, I mean because hell was right on my ass. And going by the plethora of screams I could hear echoing through the halls of the manor, I wasn't the only one being chased.

After sprinting a dozen or so meters down the hallway, I caught sight of an upcoming intersection. I tried to decide on which path to take—

"HANG A LEFT and then duck behind the SUIT OF ARMOR!"
When my partner's hasty hiss directed me to a side of the passage I was currently traveling. I followed his instructions, and the wall proceeded to—why was I even surprised? Of course the haunted mansion had secret passageways built into it for normal people, not just the spider-mice. I ducked inside and closed the 'door' behind me, leaning against it with my heart pounding in my chest as I awaited either my salvation or my inevitable demise.

Thankfully, the continued shaking of the ground from the Doppelman's stomps indicated that the umbral homunculus had passed me by and that I was safe for however long I could keep dodging it.

"That was too close, thanks for that, Soundbite," I sighed in relief, before affixing my partner with a confused look. "But... how did you do that exactly?"

"Ah, t-that's right..." Conis bit out, Soundbite's bleary look communicating her effort to stay conscious. "Weren't you... having a hard time mapping out the manor? Because of... uh..."

"Because of the zombies being so damned silent, right?!" Su prompted, no small amount of desperation in her voice.

"Y-Yes, that..."

"New move of mine I JUST WORKED OUT," Soundbite informed us tightly, his expression one of pure concentration. "BY BOUNCING SOUNDS OFF OF OBJECTS, I CAN GET A GOODLY MAP OF MY SURROUNDINGS. Trying to ping the whole of my radius wouldn't fly, but I can manage for just the manor."

"Gastro-Sonar, got it," I nodded in understanding, before frowning as a thought struck me. "But... wait, why are you only using this now? Why not before?"

"Before, I could only THROW MY VOICE SOMEWHERE AND THAT WAS THAT. BUT NOW, I CAN TELL WHERE I CAN AND CAN'T raise a racket and build a map based off of that—!"

"—thanks to your Awakening!" I divined before scowling acridly. "Okay, seriously!? Soundbite, if this is what Awakened Devil Fruits can do, why the hell didn't you do anything like this at Enies Lobby?!"

"BECAUSE I WAS HALF-DEAD IN MY SHELL THEN, AND I AIN'T FEELING SO HOT NOW EITHER!" my snail snapped back with just as much venom. "DO YOU KNOW MUCH energy it takes to piledrive reality?! I'VE TRIED PRACTICING MY ABILITIES BEFORE, AND EVERY TIME IT ALMOST WIPES ME OUT IN TWO MINUTES!"

I winced as the sound of splintering wood and shattering rock echoed throughout the manse, and promptly used it to rally my indignation. "Doesn't seem to be a problem for him!"

"Some 'God of Noise' you are when you're the only one on equal ground with Moria and you're as helpless as the rest of us!" Su barked furiously, though I think a load of her temper came from the way Conis was groaning.

I jumped enough that I actually fell down as what sounded very much like a freaking sonic boom split the air. I glanced at my shoulder intent on asking about it, only to immediately come to the correct conclusion. Scarlet skin instead of gray and a more ferocious expression than any snail had the right to have on their face? It wasn't hard to figure out that I had just heard Soundbite's composure snap. And then he exploded in a rant.
"Equal grounds?! Equal grounds?! I am a freaking snail! Do you really think I haven't been trying to check my powers more after I awakened?! After cross got scarred for life once, my body's just not built to channel that much energy at once! My limbs grow with the more I prize, but they're still low!"

"E-even awakened?" Chopper asked hesitantly, obviously as off-kilter as I was from my partner's sudden outburst.

"Especially—aw akene q! It's god-tier reality warning and you can't use hat without god-tier energy!" Soundbite fired back, turning his gaze in Moria's general direction. "EVEN MORIA IS PUSHING IT, DOING THIS MUCH RIGHT AFTER HE AWAKENED! He might be hopped up on rage and adrenaline, but take it from me: that shit doesn't last forever! Even if I had ten times my energy, I wouldn't have been able to use this much power for more than ten minutes before—"

Soundbite's tirade abruptly ceased, the rage on his face fading as both his eyes and mine widened in realization.

"Before burnout," we breathed in realization.

I promptly broke out in a massive grin as I high-eyed my partner-in-slime. "And that is why we stick together!"

"That and you wipe my ass!"

"W-W-Wait, let me see if I've got this right..." Usopp stammered hopefully. "S-S-So we don't need to beat him? We just need to outlast him?"

"Bingo," I confirmed. "He can only last so long the way he is, and with his sanity shot, he won't see his crash coming until it whacks him upside the head. All we have to do is wait for his energy levels to flatline—!"

"Where the hell are you bastards?"

I flinched as the manor shook around us from the force of the bellow, a worrying amount of dust falling on my head and prompting me to start scrambling down the cranny we were stuffed into.

"...which could take awhile, during which time he could still find us all and grind us into paste, so I think we'd better burn the candle at both ends by giving him a push," I continued. "In pursuit of that goal, our first order of business is to figure out what exactly Moria can do now. Right off the bat, the most obvious thing is that he's not just capable of controlling his own shadow anymore, but others around him."

"Well, if it's any comfort, I don't think he can control our shadows!" Brook commented, with at least a hint of positivity. "He's passed me close by once or twice, but he hasn't taken the opportunity to parade me out and torture me for his amusement." Above us, Moria let loose another deranged cackle. "And I don't think he's quite mad enough to willingly pass up that opportunity."

I nodded in agreement. "Makes sense. He always needed a big pair of scissors and a particularly bright light to steal someone's shadow, he couldn't just take it without effort, so controlling them must
still be out of his wheelhouse even now."

"But wait…" Nami interjected. "Shouldn't he still be able to tell where we are from the places he can't control, like with Soundbite's sonar?"

"DOUBT IT," Soundbite interjected. "HIS RANGE JUST SKYROCKETED TO WAY BEYOND what he normally operates with. It'd be like trying to pick a half-dozen specific dots out of AN ABSTRACT PAINTING. Trust me, learning how to handle that much awareness isn't something you do fast, EVEN WITH A CLEAR HEAD. JUST LOOK AT ME: I've had a mile- long range for months now, and I still miss things."

"Still, I assume we're not going to just push our luck and stay where we are?" Sanji asked dryly.

"If you've been sitting still like an idiot this whole time, then you deserve whatever comes to you, swirly," Zoro snorted.

"...Note to self: come up with a technique that imitates a meat grinder after we're out of this mess," Sanji grumbled.

"Ugh. Those two morons aside, what's the strategy here, Cross?" Nami asked. "Waiting him out is suicide, but so is confronting him head-on, and it's going to be next to impossible to pull a sneak attack if the shadows literally have eyes and ears."

"Not as hard as you'd think, actually…"

"Robin?" I queried.

"I think that Moria has less control over the shadows than we previously assumed," our archaeologist clarified. "He's consciously controlling the shadows he's immediately aware of, certainly, but when he's not paying attention, I believe his powers are tapping into his subconscious."

I blinked in confusion. "The hell? What led you to that—?"

I feel like I should have been used to having my question answered before I finished asking it by now. Maybe I was overthinking… but then again, how the hell could I have expected the secret passageway I was in to let out into a crowd of shades? To be specific, I found myself standing dumbstruck in a lightly bustling crowd of effigies made of shadow, half-people as corporeal as wisps of smoke. An experimental whiff of my hand minimally disrupted one, but it re-coalesced just as swiftly without even a hint of acknowledgment.

I shuddered, pulling back my hand. "I retract the question."

"Why the hell AM I GETTING AN ADDAMS FAMILY REUNION VIBE?" Soundbite swallowed nervously.

"Greetings, dearest brother."

"GAH!" Soundbite and I yelped in sync, nearing jumping out of our respective shell and skin as we wheeled around to face… Robin, reclining on an overstuffed armchair, swirling a goblet of champagne?!

"I see you've walked into my parlor," she smirked.
"Withdrawn. TOTALLY WITHDRAWN," Soundbite shivered.

I spared a moment to nod in agreement before casting a look at Robin's drink. "Tell me, creepiest sister, do you really think it's wise to be drinking in this situation?"

"Considering how I'm fairly certain I'm down three fingers for the rest of the fight?" she remarked, holding up the hand not holding the goblet and displaying a trio of bandaged and bloodied digits.

I winced sympathetically. "Carry on."

"...I'm going to get started on that meat grinder technique now, actually," Sanji said, his voice as calm as a fresh, unmarked minefield.

"Duly noted," Lola grunted in understanding. "But back to the matter at hand, this helps us how, exactly?"

"Well, I, uh—Eh?" My stream-of-consciousness brainstorming was strangled in its crib by a sudden shuffling of motion. Turning around, I was treated to the sight of the umbral assembly parting clean down the middle. "What the heck?"

"Well, now," Robin mused, standing from her seat to peer over the crowd. "It would appear that we have a guest of honor."

"Do we, now…?" I wondered. Curious, I tentatively edged my way through the crowd, passing through several shades before finally making it into the cleared path. Indeed, there was a procession marching down the aisle, with one figure in particular surrounded by others.

A… familiar figure…

A familiar figure with an unmistakable smile!

I watched, dumbstruck, as the smiling shadow was led past me. "Holy… that's… that's Gold Roger."

"What?!!" Robin reeled in surprise.

"QUE!?!" Soundbite concurred.

"WHAT?!!" piped up… preeetty much everyone else.

"THE PIRATE KING?! AAAAAAWESEOOOME!!" Luffy exclaimed. "WHERE IS HE? WHERE ARE YOU?! I WANNA MEET HIM, I WANNA MEET HIM!!"

"Ah, no no!" I hastily clarified. "Not the real Roger, just… a copy, an imitation, a fake that the shadows are drawing from Moria's memory."

"How the actual… wasn't Roger before Moria's time?" Franky asked.

"For the most part, yeah…" I nodded slowly. "Moria never actually met Roger, but he was present for his last day alive."

"Interesting…" Robin cupped her chin thoughtfully. "So we're standing in the middle of a shadow theatre that's recreating Moria's memory of Gold Roger's Execution…"

"His powers must have been able to pick it out of his head at random because of how broken his psyche is, and I doubt that this is the only scene like it that's going on at the moment," I added, tacking on a sympathetic wince as a thought occurred to me. "Eesh, with how his brain is right now,
"Your stunned silence is either very reassuring or an indicator of doom, Cross. Mind doing us all a favor by not leaving us in suspense?" Boss demanded.

"Oh, sure, kill my coping mechanism," I scoffed before smirking. "But fine. I just came up with a plan. Just two questions first. Franky, have you refilled yet?"

"Soundbite led me to the kitchen as soon as we got to the manor, Cross."

"Just making sure. Other question: does anyone have any objections to preying on a mentally infirm person's trauma?"

The responses ran the gamut from "No," "Nah," and "Nope," to "Fuck this bastard but good."

I steepled my fingers with a malevolent grin. "Excellent."

"BOOM!"

We all glanced up nervously as the room suddenly shook, dust falling from the ceiling.

"Might want to RUSH IT, CROSS. Moria's tired enough of looking for things that move THAT NOW HE'S ATTACKING THINGS THAT DON'T."

"Rushing," I confirmed with a wince. "Here's what we'll do…"

---

Gecko Moria, Warlord of the Sea and currently mad as a hatter, snarled and muttered like a scorned ex-boyfriend, his berserk but widespread awareness amplifying his senses and keeping his search for someone, anyone he could attack. Unfortunately for him, nothing was forthcoming. The only bodies he came across were the purified corpses of his zombie army, which did very little to help his mentality, his already frayed sanity unraveling at a pace that would have terrified most telepaths.

Lashing out at another wall, punching a Doppelman-shaped hole through it like a macabre cartoon, his frustration made itself known in an enraged roar.

"Where the unholy Aesir ARE THOSE PESTS?!"

Before his rant could pick up speed, however, a flash of movement in the corner of Moria's bloodshot vision caught his attention. Grinning malevolently and moving with a swiftness his mass didn't do a thing to belie, he spun around, swung up a shade-wreathed arm—!

"CAPTAIN! HELP!"

And froze when a voice echoed from somewhere far off. It came to him loud and… well alright, the voice wasn't that clear, but… through the haze of his rage, he thought it sounded familiar.

"Ơ̕̕ H̶̴ ̷ G̵ ƠƠ̧̧ is… is that you?"

"C-CAPTAIN!" the voice wailed, becoming clearer and clearer with every word. "Y-YOU HAVE TO SAVE US CAPTAIN! H-HE'S TOO STRONG! WE'RE BEING—AGH!"
"NO!" Moria cried desperately as the unmistakable voice of $\text{OH}_G \text{O} \text{D} \text{N}_{O} \text{I}$, his navigator, cried out in agony. "Nonono, this can't be happening… hang on, $\text{OH}_G \text{O} \text{D} \text{N}_{O} \text{I}! I'm on my way!"

All thoughts of infamous rookies/monsters/beasts and purified zombies/army/comrades fled his mind as he rushed down the halls of the manor, his subconscious plunging him into the nightmare he had never awakened from… and yet, his eyes refused to close, even as they piped reminders of that tragedy straight to his brain. There on one side as he ran… a group of tatters that bore his cook $\text{E}_H \text{P}_Z \text{ME}!$’s symbol. Over there, the shattered remains of a familiar helmet and stave, which $\text{H}_E \text{J}_L \text{N}_G \text{U}_S$ would never have parted with unless he wa—-!

And those swords… those giant swords, shattered and strewn about like trash, they could only belong to $\text{M}_J \text{M}_J \text{m}_m \text{m}_j \text{m}_y$, one of his strongest fighters. But if all these precious items were here, then… then…

"No… my precious crew… my precious crew…" Moria breathed, tears of rage and agony trickling from his eyes, even as he moved even faster towards the one he knew/hoped/prayed was yet alive.

Time lost all meaning as he ran for what felt like hours/days/years, and the world blurred into a dull obscurity around him. The terrified captain sucked in massive gulps of air as panic sank its claws into his heart, the frigid air stabbing into his lungs like a knife. It was cold, so cold, he could barely feel anything at all… save for the blood.

Moria choked out a horrified gasp as he waded forwards, the putrid liquid sticking to his feet. Blood, blood everywhere, a lake, an ocean, extending as far as he could see. There was no horizon, for the crimson of the setting sun melded perfectly with the soiled earth. The only thing interrupting the liquid death/life/death, proving that there was actually ground beneath it… were the physical remains. Piles of bodies, dozens of them, each higher than the last and each mangled worse than the one before. Crushed, ripped apart, decapitated, slaughtered… the only thing that couldn't be found in this hellscape was the merest sliver of mercy.

"Cap…tain…"

But in spite of all the death, there was still one fragment of life remaining. A single mangled hand, belonging to a single mangled body, shakily reaching out to grasp at something, anything.

"No!" Moria gasped, falling to his knees and grabbing the survivor's hand. That voice, their face… he could barely believe the state his first mate was in. "No, nonono… $\text{Cap} \text{ain} \text{ain} \text{ain} \text{ain} \text{ain} \text{ain}$, why~ $\text{z}^\infty$, $\text{Cap} \text{ain} \text{ain} \text{ain} \text{ain} \text{ain} \text{ain}$, why~ $\text{z}^\infty$, stay with me! Y-You can't—! E-Everyone else is… y-y-you can't—!"

"Cap… tain…" $\text{Cap} \text{ain} \text{ain} \text{ain} \text{ain} \text{ain} \text{ain}$ panted, blank eyes staring past Moria. "You… have… to run… he's… coming…"

"Who?!" Moria demanded desperately, shaking his first mate as much as he dared. "Who's coming? Who did this to you? W-Who did this to my crew?!"

"ME."

Moria froze as the world suddenly fell dark. But not because of the sun completing its descent. Rather, darkness fell because everything was shrouded in the deepest, most tar-like shadow Moria had ever seen.

Slowly, so slowly, the pirate turned his shaking head skyward… and beheld a mountain, a devil, $\text{THE}$ Devil, silhouetted against the crimson expanses of heaven.
In the face of such might, what else could Moria do but shiver and tremble in terror, gasping for air. "Ah… a-ah…"

"HM?" the Devil's head shifted slightly, as though it had only just now taken notice of him. "OH, A LITTLE BUG CRAWLING IN THE MUD." The devil shifted, and Moria's world was engulfed by a hand. "BETTER CRUSH IT."

That was all Moria's shattered mind could handle. With a shriek of terror, the shell of a pirate turned and made to run as fast as he could, scrambling on the slick ground—!

"NOW!" BANG!

"GAH!" Said shell then howled and threw his hands up in agony when the world suddenly exploded into pure light and heat and PAIN!

-0-

Time on target, a concept Conis had told us about once while maintaining her arsenal. Basically, it was firing a barrage of ranged attacks of different types in such a way that they all hit at once. From what she'd described, it was something that usually took a lot of practice.

As it turns out, blind desperation worked in a pinch, as evidenced by the slew of attacks that pierced the air at once. To summarize, the horde consisted of…

"LIGHTNING BOLT TEMPO!"
A tangle of crackling electrical tendrils;

"BURN BAZOOKA!"
A pillar of hyper-heated and iridescent air;

"GASTRO-CANI COMBO: BASS MORTAR!"
A second pillar of hyper-heated air, only this one was surrounded by a shimmer of dangerously vibrating air.

"108-CALIBER PHOENIX!"
A wave of razor-keen air.

"ULTRA SPECIAL ATTACK: FLOCKING FIREBIRD STAR!"
And finally, a half-dozen blazing bird-shaped infernos.

That half the attacks were fire-based helped, too. In any case, every one of them struck Moria clean in the middle of his face, eliciting a howl of pain and rage liberally tinged with fear and, more importantly, sending the Warlord staggering back, and resulting in his teetering on the very edge of Freezer 900's cavernous interior.

Unfortunately, Moria chose then to show just why he'd been selected to be a Warlord by exhibiting enough wherewithal to hold his balance when he hit the freezer's railing, in spite of the clear agony written on his features. Still, that was something that could easily be rectified.

"Robin!" I ordered hastily.
"Cien Fleur!" Robin exclaimed, crossing her arms.

Arms sprouted like ivy all around Moria, grabbing at the pale bastard's body and doing their best to either push or pull him off the edge of the abyss. Unfortunately, the instant the hands made contact with Moria, everything once again went to pot.

"RAAAAAAAAGH!" Namely, he appeared to snap for a second time if that was possible, throwing his head back and howling to the heavens as the shadows exploded in a torrent of jet-black madness.

"DODGE!" Soundbite warned me.

"Sonnuva—!" I only just managed to duck under a pillar of shadow that came way too close to knocking my block off for comfort—!

"GAH!" "AGH!" "GRGH!"

But apparently, they came even closer for several others.

I spun around in panic, watching with naked horror as several of our crewmates and allies were batted around like rodents; Usopp was slammed into the ceiling and spit up a mouthful of blood, Conis was laid out flat by a knock to her temple that had Su frantically shaking her shoulder, and the Rolling Pirates that were still with us were bowled over by a stampede of shade.

But the worst part was catching sight of what looked for all the world like a many-fingered claw lancing at a Brain-Point Chopper, whose mind had stalled in panic.

"Shell Body: Hermit Sta—GAH!"

And then, just like that, Boss was standing before Chopper, his arms spread wide defensively… and the spears punching through his shell.

"T-To protect your comrades…" the dugong coughed out, blood spurting around his gritted teeth. "Even at the cost of your own body… that… is the greatest… of all… Man's… Gugh…" That was as far as Boss got before collapsing as the spears retracted from his shell and removed any support his limp body had left.

I could only stare at the display in numb shock, trying and failing to work out what I should react to first—!

"Look out!"

"Gah!" I grunted in shock when I was suddenly shoved from behind. I turned around to see what the deal was, and my blood froze.

Robin coughed in pain as she swayed on her feet, trying to stem the flow of blood that was flowing around the spike of shadow that had rammed through her side. She grimaced briefly before giving me a shaky grin. "Look on… the bright side… now we… match…” That was all she managed to get out before collapsing against the corridor's wall.

My next course of action became as clear as my vision was RED.

"PACHY-CHARGE!" I roared at the top of my lungs as I ripped Funkfreed from his scabbard and stabbed him at the rampaging Warlord, intent on treating him to a faceful of stampeding ivory and steel.

And going by the simultaneous roars that erupted from behind me?

"GUM-GUM JET BAZOOKA!"

"FLAMBÉ SHOT!"

"CLOVEN ROSEO METEL!"

"SUPER! STRONG RIGHT!"

"AUBADE COUP DROIT!"

I was so not the only one pissed off at that. Specifically, Luffy, Sanji, Franky, Brook, and Chopper all rammed their respective limbs into Moria's gut at the same time that Funkfreed gored him.

Time seemed to freeze for a moment as the Warlord was bombarded by our attacks, his face a mask of agony and outrage. And then time resumed and the pale bastard was sent flying as he so justly deserved. He shot out over the edge of the freezer's pit and even went so far as to slam into and stick to Oars' horn for a second before peeling off and plummeting into the darkness of the abyss that lay below us.

I panted heavily as I stood on the edge of the freezer, combing the pit for any signs of life or movement before heaving a sigh of relief as all remained quiet. "If that didn't kill that bastard, then at least it bought us some breathing room."

"He had better still be alive; he's done too much to get off that easily," Zoro snarled, shades of Asura flickering around him as he nursed a quilt of slashes layered across his body. "Not even Aokiji did this much damage to our crew."

"Only because he wasn't really trying to kill us," Chopper bit out as he knelt beside Robin, hastily working to patch her up. "The one advantage of fighting somebody fit for a mental ward: they don't actually aim when they fire. If he did, I wouldn't have to put in half as much effort as I am now."

Robin gave her current caretaker a bemused (if dizzy from blood loss) look. "Feeling a bit jaded, I take it?"

"Put it this way: I'm starting to see why Doctorine's tolerance for alcohol is so high," Chopper grumbled acridly as he stitched her up. "And you shouldn't be awake for this, so—" Without further ado, the Human Zoa jabbed a needle in her neck. It was a credit to how far his aptitude with chemicals had progressed that Robin blacked out with barely even a press of the plunger.

"Ergh, well at least she's getting taken care of, and everyone else doesn't look to be in too critical a condition, so..." Lola grit out as she nursed a particularly nasty-looking bruise to her face. "While we have a moment of peace, would you mind explaining what the hell that freak show was while we were luring that bastard here!?"

I shuddered in agreement, inching away from the shadows nearest me. The Captain of the Rolling Pirates definitely had a point there; if ever there had been a case of a plan working too well, then that was it by far!

See, the plan itself had been simple enough: Soundbite called out to Moria with a voice that was incredibly generic, thus allowing Moria to mistake it for that of one of his old crewmates, Moria follows the voice into Oars's freezer while getting enmeshed in his shadow theatre and regressing to the loss of his crew, and finally, upon catching sight of Oars and flipping out, we beat the tar out of him. Easy, right?
Yeah, turns out we got leagues more than we bargained for where the shadow aspect of our plan was concerned. To be specific, we sure as hell didn't expect Moria's sick, twisted mind to vomit out a scene yanked straight from Resident Evil! I still swear that there was texture to that ocean of… I don't even wanna imagine what he thought he was wading through.

"Got me beat," I said, shaking my head. "I know that Kaido wiped his crew out, sure, but even for an Emperor I don't see how he could have possibly created a scene straight out of hell like that!"

"Unless I miss my guess, I imagine that that scene never actually occurred in reality."

We all looked at Brook in surprise as he observed Oars' corpse with an even more inscrutable expression than usual.

"W-Wait, you mean that Moria just imagined that whole thing?" Nami asked in disbelief. "But wasn't he supposed to be remembering the day his crew died?"

"And that's exactly what he did," Brook nodded morosely. "He reproduced not how that scene actually occurred, but the memory he is in possession of today. A memory that has been corrupted with his every recollection of the event, degrading over time until it is little more than a fleeting nightmare he dares not consider for even a moment. I'm quite familiar with the phenomenon…" He bowed his head sadly. "The final battle I fought with my crew suffered a very similar fate."

We all shared a moment of silence as we considered the implications of that particular statement before Luffy raised a questioning hand. "Sooo… if you know that, do you know what that creepy stuff he was saying was too?"

We all held our breaths as Brook raised his head. "I," he stated with great import and portentousness. "Have no earthly idea."

My head and most everyone else's heads bounced slightly as they jerked downwards. "Oooof course not," I sighed.

"Yeah, well… whatever it was, I can definitely say that it was creepy as all hell." Nami's Eisen Tempo hugged her as she shuddered. "I could barely even tell what he was saying, his voice was so garbled."

"Except… that wasn't HIS voice…"

I glanced at Soundbite in surprise, both at the fact that he'd spoken up after staying quiet for so long and on account of how his expression was ungodly wan. "You know what that was?"

Soundbite swayed his eyes noncommittally. "I CAN GUESS… like I said, the shadows WEREN'T SPEAKING IN HIS VOICE. And going by their words…" Soundbite grimaced, his face descending into the utmost of ashenness he was capable of. "I-I THINK HE WAS TRYING TO CALL OUT HIS CREWMATES' NAMES... but instead, all he could say were... were..."

Chopper's eyes widened as he made the connection. "All he could identify his old crew by…" he whispered in horror. "Was… their final words…"

Zoro snorted and shook his head. "He's barely even a person anymore. He's just a husk, every bit of substance he had utterly consumed by that one day." I did my best to ignore the tone of familiarity his voice held.

"Yeah, well, he's a husk that could still kill us if that didn't take him out," I quite reasonably pointed out. "Anyone want to place any bets on that?"
Silence for a few seconds, then Nami spoke up. "If someone placed that bet, I'd actually feel sorry for taking their money." Another pause as everyone, myself included, stared at her in shock. She shuffled back and forth on her feet, looking sheepish. "I mean, I'd still take the money, and I'd only feel sorry for maybe ten seconds…"

Ah, that was the Nami I knew.

"Point is, we need a plan for if—or knowing our luck and how hard-headed most all Warlords are, when—he climbs out of that pit," I continued, indicating said gaping void. "Now, I don't have any ideas off the top of my head, but with a little brainstorming, I'm sure that—!

"Uh, Cross?" I heard Luffy's voice echo from towards the pit what.

I snapped around to catch sight of my captain crouching on the railing and peering into the chasm, his head tilted to the side curiously. "Was the dark down there always so… uh, y'know, dark?"

With no small amount of trepidation, I inched over next to Luffy, leaned over the railing… aaand promptly choked on my spit as I found myself staring into the kind of absolute abyss that loves to stare back.

"Ahhh, sonnuva—!

"HVERGELMIR!"

And just like that, before any of us could so much as twitch, the abyss broke the staring contest by, for all means and purposes, puking itself in our faces. In the space of a second, we were all devoured by the unholy bastard spawn of a riptide and a tidal wave, composed entirely of shadows.

It was hectic, absolutely out of control, nauseating even in spite of the fact that my stomach was bone dry… Basically? Soundbite had been right about one thing, way back when: spin cycle sucks.

After what felt like both an instant and an eternity, our unwelcome ride concluded with all of us—if the chorus of groans and cries of surprise around me being anything to go by—being unceremoniously dumped on our asses… somewhere. I would have looked around and confirmed where we were, but I had one pressing bit of business to handle first.

"BLARGHRL! Urk…" I wiped my mouth off with a bone-deep shudder. "I officially hate this island…"

"Get in line…" Brook gurgled as he worked his way into a sitting position, his calcium cheekbones somehow managing to look green. The fact that Chopper jostled him in his rush to get to our downed comrades didn't do him any favors either.

"Ugh…" Nami shook her head miserably as she recovered from her own gastrointestinal distress before warily glancing around. "Where… are we?"

"Erm…" Lola swung her head around and blinked in surprise. "It looks like… we're back outside? In the courtyard, even? What the…?"

I quickly surveyed our environs myself and realized that she was right: we'd landed in the very same enclosure that the crew had fought Oars in in the story. The place hadn't been ripped a new one by a rampaging titan, but it was hard to mistake the place, what with Perona's Garden hanging above us and the mast that propelled this maritime hellhole looming so close.

"Whoa…" Franky breathed, craning his head back as he tried and failed to spy the top of the mast. Then his face contorted into a scowl. "He went to this much effort, and still neglected it after it was
"Of course he didn't care for it," I tsked darkly. "After all, what 'king' pays a second thought to their carriage when they think their throne lies right around the bend?"

The cyborg clenched his jaw, metal creaking. "When I get my hands on that bastard's slimy neck, I swear I'm going to—!

"Shut up, Franky," Zoro ordered, not even looking at him.

"You son of a—!" Franky jerked towards the swordsman.

"He means shut up and listen, Franky," Sanji interrupted him, glaring intensely into the air.

We all hushed up, trying to listen for whatever it was they were talking about. It took some straining, but we found it. And I almost wished we didn't; the chorus of whispers that was echoing from the shadows was so much ice in our veins.

"Oh, now that's just disturbing," Nami muttered, shuddering as if the temperature had dropped twenty degrees.

"W-What's it saying?" Chopper swallowed heavily.

"Er…" I strained my ears, slowly starting to make it out. "I… think it's just one word, over and over again. Sounds like… 'Draugr'?" It took all of two seconds for that to sink in, following which I stiffened and exchanged a panicked look with Soundbite. "Ohshit."

"Draugr… I think I recognize that," Brook tapped his jaw thoughtfully. "Isn't that a creature out of Norse mythology? The 'again walk—'…ah." Aaand that was when the beri dropped like a supersonic meteor.

Though the sound of groaning and pounding feet that suddenly rose up was also a source of concern.

"Uhh… guuuuys?" Luffy asked slowly, a rare hint of uncertainty in his voice.

Soundbite shuddered with a grimace. "Well, we're officially a few hundred steps closer to burnout, AT THE COST OF A FEW HUNDRED MORE THINGS FOR US TO FIGHT!"

"But how!?" Brook demanded, strangling his sword's hilt. "We couldn't have missed that many!"

"That's because they're NOT ZOMBIES, THEY'RE DRAUGR!" my snail clarified. "REMEMBER WHEN I SAID his range skyrocketed? RATHER THAN INFUSING THEM WITH LIVE SOULS, he's just shoved them full of inert shadows AND IS USING THEM TO PLAY PUPPETMASTER. TO PUT IT ANOTHER WAY… they're literal meat-puppets."

And as the horde of undead came into view, I could see the difference. It was subtle, all things considered. Like a sledgehammer to the face, which was particularly pertinent in that most of these rotting bastards looked like they'd suffered just that.

See, where before the zombies had at least been acting like relatively normal if malformed humans, now they were far more similar to the classical Romero zombie. Their movements were stiff, jerky…the perfect picture of shambling corpses.

But what really sold it was their faces. The zombies, they were undead, sure, but at least they'd had souls; stolen souls, imperfect substitutes for life, but they had emotional range, to an extent. But the
creatures that were swarming towards us now, these, these draugr… empty, hollow rage and nothing more. If ever there was an example of unlife upon this island, we were staring them down right this moment.

"So, feeding them salt won't do any good anymore?" Sanji growled.

"Probably not, there's no tenuous bond to snap. BUT WORTH A TRY anyway, before we resort to PLAN B… OR A, SEEING AS THIS IS US WE'RE TALKING ABOUT."

"No sooner said than done," Brook stated, running towards the draugr and slashing faster than I could see. Some of the corpses turned and tried to grasp after him as he weaved through their ranks, but they didn't even come close to the skeleton's speed. A few seconds later, arms, legs, and heads severed off of a good chunk of the mob, but they hardly even slowed down. And more to the point, they were right on top of us.

"GO-TO TACTICS it is! Cross, PUT ME ON FUNKFREED!"

I nodded, picking the snail off my shoulder and planting him on the elephant-blade's crossguard. He took a second to properly anchor himself to the flat of the blade, and then screwed his eyes up in concentration.

"GET READY, 'CAUSE this is gonna tickle! GASTRO-PACHY COMBO!"

I was forced to strengthen my grip on Funkfreed's hilt when his blade suddenly started to vibrate, the sharp metal becoming fuzzy to the eye.

" TREBLE BLADE!"

Even in the face of the oncoming horde, I couldn't help but grin like a maniac at the fact that I was currently holding a frikin vibroblade in my hands. I... think at that point something just clicked in my head because my grin widened malevolently as my adrenaline shot through the roof. "Alright, you undead rotting mooks," I hissed, slowly raising my left hand over my shoulder. "I know you can't understand me anymore and I don't care. Because I'm gonna say what needs to be said, no matter what."

I grabbed Lassoo's grip and wrenched him into position, spreading my arms and weapons wide in invitation, accompanied by an absolutely mad cackle. "PREPARE TO DIE THRICE, YOU ZOMBIE BASTARDS! PFHAHAHAAAAAAA!"

Lassoo punctuated that point with a salvo of baseballs that exploded in the mass of zombies, blowing massive holes in their ranks. And then the wave of zombies hit us. The front line promptly melted away like snow in a spring rain, only to be followed by another line. And then another. And another.

In most ways, it was Alubarna or the Bridge of Hesitation all over again: a frantic defense not only against an enemy that outnumbered us but also against our own exhaustion and injuries, thankfully mitigated by the fact that we were individually superior to all of said opponents. In that last respect, I was actually better off than before; between Lassoo blasting chunks out of the horde as they approached and Soundbite and Funkfreed's combination practically disintegrating any zombies it hit, my partners and I were probably accounting for the most draugr of any of us.

Unfortunately, the one way it was different from those fights was rather important: namely, the draugr just didn't. Stop. Coming. Seriously, these guys were persistent past even the regular zombies, because those didn't have their limbs or severed torsos try to keep crawling after us. They also didn't break, and probably would never break. Even the age-old method of decapitation didn't help. That
just left a headless body shambling towards us and a head snapping its jaws on the ground that we had to avoid.

Surprisingly enough, Nami actually seemed to be having the easiest time out of all of us, for all that one could have an easy time in the midst of a zombie horde. She was still hard-pressed to pay attention to where all the undead were striking from, of course, but her Eisen Tempo was doing a frighteningly admirable job of keeping them all at bay. If ever there was any doubt that Nami made a habit of holding back the full extent of her Clima-Tact's power, the charred and blackened corpses her lightning left in its wake did a good job of laying that doubt to rest.

But even Nami's style of attack, effective though it was, meant she had to fight three battles we all had to fight: against the walking dead, against our exhaustion and pain, and against the severed limbs and heads that littered the ground like so many land mines. And lemme tell ya, having to watch your every step was exhausting. The only solution seemed to be to destroy the bodies entirely, and actually destroying a human body is miles harder than it has any right to be!

…That would sound so wrong out of context.

Anyway, the result of it all was that we very quickly had to start giving ground, lest the zombie horde trip us up and then overrun us. We had no margin: lose one fighter, and our entire defense crumbled. Whiiiiich would mean all of our wounded were dead meat. So yeah, noooo pressure.

"SERIOUSLY?" Lola yelled as a freshly decapitated draugr kept walking towards her, hastily kicking it in the chest in order to give herself some breathing room, which was just as swiftly filled by a de-limbed draugr from behind. "We're chopping these things to pieces and they're not stopping!"

"I say we go back to anti-zombie plan number one," Franky growled, bashing away one corpse before rearing back his head—

"Fresh… FIRE!"

And spewing flames at the disassembled corpses. They kept moving, of course, but unlike with the shadow-zombies it was clear that the flames were doing their job. The wrecked bodies fell apart even faster under the flames. And yes, they were falling apart, whole chunks of flesh falling off at a time before we even touched them, I could see it now that my blood had cooled enough for my vision to clear.

"I think he's right," I said, glancing at the cannon balanced on my shoulder as I shifted him forwards. "Lassoo, Plaster-Palm Combo!"

My cannon chuffed in agreement before vomiting forth a spray of viscous tar that coated the fore portion of the horde, which he then followed up with a lick of flame that lit up the fuel. The entire front line of zombies lit afire and began to crumble away, and the zombies stepping over them also befall the same fate.

I paused in surprise as I watched the conflagration spread with an almost disturbing efficiency. "Huh. Fire's working a lot better than it did before," I remarked as I dove back into the fray, Funkfreed quite literally shaking entire sections of the horde to pieces while Lassoo's bulk doubled as both a hefty shield and a brutal club.

"I actually have a theory on that," Chopper cut in via Soundbite. "I can't confirm without seeing things, but Moria's almost certainly pushing the corpses too hard. Without the pseudo-soul of a stolen shadow, all of these corpses are just that: corpses long past any prime they might have had."
And now that they're dead again, rigor mortis is setting in and they're becoming stiff. Basically, by puppeting the bodies like this, Moria is literally making his army fight itself to pieces!

"Well, that's... great..." Zoro grunted as he quartered another shambling husk. "Still... way too many... of these... things...!"

"You know we're in deep shit," Nami grunted as she wrenched her staff back and forth in an effort to dislodge it from the ribcage she'd accidentally rammed it through. "When our battle-hungry first mate is complaining about the fight."

"Don't you dare keel over yet, Mosshead," Sanji growled. After me and Nami, he was probably doing the best of us all, treating the zombies like so many soccer balls. Though the fact that he had been using Diable Jambe from the start might have had something to do with it, too. "We fall, the girls die horrible, messy deaths."

"And why should I," Zoro snorted aggressively as he tore through another throng of draugr. "Care if your prissy ass gets torn apart?"

"'Cause then they'll get the rest of the crew, too!" Luffy provided with the utmost gravity he was capable of.

"...damn it," our swordsman snarled as he redoubled his aggressive efforts.

Almost immediately, however, a diving draugr nearly bowled him over before being kicked off, and everyone shut up in favor of dodging or knocking out of the air the many draugr that had decided dive-bombing us was a great idea. And the worst part of it was that it actually was a great idea, splitting our attention even more ways.

As I descended back into the unconscious flow of the fight, I was considering what the hell Moria was thinking. Swamping us in numbers would work, yes, what with all the corpses he had available, but it would be a slow process. Even the dive-bombing draugr were unlikely to speed up the process, too. With how utterly deranged Moria was now, I seriously doubted he had the patience for that. No, this was a distraction while he got something big pulled together, and I was really not looking forward to that.

On the other hand, maybe the draugr horde would take us out fast after all, judging from the groans coming from behind us oh son of a—!

"Fuck! We've—"

"Been flanked, we know!" Lola bit out as she cast a venomous glance over her shoulder. "If we turn away, these... draugr will overwhelm us!"

"They're going to overwhelm us anyway if we don't deal with the flankers!" I snapped. "Lassoo, can you—?"

"Belay that, Cross!"

I gave a shaky grin as a Heavy Pointed Chopper waded into the thankfully thin line of draugr behind us, sending bodies flying with every sweep of his arms. With that immediate concern taken care of, I could share the thought I'd had earlier.

"Heads up, everyone!" I called out. "I think Moria's planning something big, and this is just a distraction!"
"Warn us again when you've got some kind of IDEA what we need to watch out for!"

I winced as Chopper snapped at me; this situation must have really been getting to him.

"He has a point, though; there's not much to plan on if you just say 'something… big…'" Lassoo's voice took on a whimper as he seemed to realize something. "Unless by 'big' you mean 'titan'."

The meaning sunk in fast for me, and I wasn't the only one. Every eye darted towards the manor to find… nothing. Any relief we felt was short-lived, mostly because the draugr took advantage of our distractedness to push a full-court press that sent us scrambling back, but also because of a thought that followed shortly on the heels of the first.

"So… we got a plan… for when that thing… does come out…?" Sanji huffed and puffed.

"No, but—"

Suddenly, Funkfreed went through air instead of necrotized flesh, and yes, that did feel different, vibroblade or not. I barely had time to process that the draugr had just stopped when—

**KRASH-BOOM!**

…Okay. Oars had been scary enough when he was just an immobile mountain of meat locked in a freezer. Him bursting out of Thriller Bark's manor like some demented parody of the Kool-Aid Man? Utterly terrifying. And that was *before* I got a good look at the changes to his appearance.

For starters, there was no *life* in his eyes or his movements. His eyes were black holes in his skull, his jaw hung limply from its sockets, and his body was both stiff and fluid in unnatural ways, as though he had bones in all the wrong places. By contrast, the roiling mass of *black* in his belly snaking up and around and all over, leaving no doubt that Moria was still in the damn driver's seat, was barely a footnote.

And then his gaze fell on us, and it all coalesced into one horrific whole, for as much as he lacked life, this thing that had once been Oars' corpse still had all the hallmarks of intelligence. Like, y'know, scanning his surroundings and picking a target. Namely us.

"**JO...TUN...**" the behemoth rumbled, slowly but *definitely* starting to trudge its way towards us.

"Mister Cross," Brook said in a voice that would have been calm if not for how he was shaking in his boots. "I believe this is the part where you either come up with an outstanding plan to deal with this monster or you lose a large measure of your credibility as a tactician."

"I get it, I get it, I'm working on it," I responded, wiping away the sweat from my brow as I ran through the situation.

One second to review: Oars, titanic giant—whoops, I mean *gigantic titan*—standing there and being puppeted by Moria. Capable of flattening us effortlessly if we gave him an inch, but going by his current state, undoubtedly hindered by the apparent frailty of draugr in general and the spinal damage we'd inflicted… and the ice too, if the way tracts of his skin were cracking were anything to go by. So, he wouldn't last long. Our goal wasn't to beat him to pieces, it was to accelerate how soon *Moria* caused the corpse to tear itself apart.

Another second as Oars wound up a fist: in the story, it took a whole-crew combination attack to just get him down… including that 'Pirate Emperor' thing, good thing I'd butterflied *that* abomination away—FOCUS! How did they get one up on him?
Yet another second as it came flying, even as I started to run like hell: they brought him down, beat his face in (to little effect), failed attempt at the Pirate Emperor, then the thing with Luffy's weakness to meat, and after that—eureka moment.

Fourth second as I took a flying leap, bracing myself and flinching as the shockwave from the literal megaton punch smacked me in the gut, mentally running through the eight fighters we had and their capabilities, and confirming one: "Chopper, are you good to use a Rumble Ball?"

"Wha—maybe? I took one in the freezer; I can take one more without going berserk, but I won't be able to control what form I change to!"

And that was five seconds as I landed and rolled into a ready position. "That'll do, just cycle through them as fast as you can. Here's the plan, everyone: Gum-Gum, Waver, Sky Walk, Jumping Point, and Bone Skinny, it doesn't matter how you do it, just get up on that thing's body, make sure it knows where you are and keep moving. It's literally all brawn and no brains, so it won't hesitate to bash itself to pieces with its full power! And everyone else—" I took aim with Lassoo. "Go for its feet!"

"RIGHT!" everyone shouted as they sprung into action.

"CANI-CANNON BARRAGE!" I pulled the trigger, and explosive baseballs bracketed one of the feet, tearing off flesh in chunks, while Zoro, Franky, and Lola went to town on the other limb.

Meanwhile, our more acrobatic combatants started shooting around the undead titan like demented fleas: Chopper and Brook leaped into the air, landing gracefully on the Jotun's arm and darting for the torso. Luffy grabbed the other arm and rocketed up, reaching out at the apex of his arc to grab one of the horns. Sanji kicked off the air itself, positioning himself opposite Luffy, and Nami rode her Waver up its legs.

And then, all at once, they lashed out. Two feet, one at the end of a stretched leg and the other blazing, slammed into opposite temples. Hoof and blade carved into the chest, leaving deep trenches behind. And I could hear the lightning crawling up its back.

The giant, of course, reacted immediately, but poorly, by trying to simultaneously slap its chest, stomp one foot, and scratch its back at the same time. The massive overextension of muscles and the strain on the already-stressed tendons must have been massive, but the boom of the open palm hitting the chest and the resultant air-pressure was… less than encouraging.

But never mind that! Oars was shifting its foot! Opportunity!

"CANI-SLICK!"

Black oil sprayed out of Lassoo's muzzle, coating the ground beneath the Jotun's colossal foot, and I could only pray that the ground team got my idea.

"STRONG HAMMER!"

I shouldn't have worried. Franky immediately slammed his fist into the back of the Jotun's ankle. There was an almighty snap as something important broke, and more importantly, the foot slid forward on the slick, losing any remaining grip it had.

Five figures darted off the body as it suddenly described a 180-degree turn, flailing limbs demolishing more of the manor as it crashed onto the back of its neck - right on the spot where we'd powderized a few vertebra.
We weren't done, of course. High above the body, a foot fit for a giant ballooned into existence before rising even higher into the air. For a brief moment, it hung there, and then it came crashing down, slamming into the titan's chest to a chorus of snapping bone.

Still, the titan attempted to rise, only for a black and red meteor to streak out of the sky and slam into the Jotun's forehead in a burst of flame. Bone shattered, shortly drowned out by the colossal skull impacting the packed earth below.

And still, the damn thing was trying to get up! Despite the massive footprint in its chest, despite one leg not working at all, despite everything above its shoulders looking like it was made of so much jelly, it attempted to lift itself on its arms. And yet, it was clear to everyone that it wasn't going to last much longer. Just needed one… last… damn… push!

"HEY, MORIA!" Soundbite roared, his jaw set in a murderous scowl. "HOW'S THIS FOR A LITTLE DITTY! GASTRO-NATION!"

Without warning, the air was suddenly filled with the most skull-churning, gut-shredding grindcore I'd ever heard. On its own it was pretty bad. "AAAAAAAAARGH!"

But going by how the shadows around us suddenly screamed and Oars' corpse started to writhe like it was undergoing an exorcism? I think there was more going on than what I was hearing.

"Gastro-Nation?" I asked quietly, warily eyeing Soundbite as he ground his teeth, a look of intense concentration on his face.

"For 'domination'," he grit out. "It's a triple-threat assault. FIRST LAYER IS TO MUTE THE AREA. YOU THINK WHAT YOU'RE HEARING IS LOUD? IT'S UP TO ELEVEN IN THERE. Second is that there's some Phony mixed in to stir the guts. But third? Ohohoh..." He shook his head slowly as a distinctly vindictive tone entered his voice. "THIRD IS WHEN I MAKE HIS BRAIN AND SKULL VIBRATE JUST SO. In the simplest of terms, it feels like his gray matter is grinding itself to paste from the inside out." Soundbite's grin grew absolutely satanic. "NEAT, RIGHT?"

"That's one word for it..." I muttered under my breath. I was silent for a bit before giving him an accusatory glance. "...you're gonna be blowing chunks because of this, aren't you?"

"Somebody get me a bucket..." he moaned queasily, letting his eyestalks hang. And despite quickly perking up, he still looked rather green. "OR COTTONTAIL'S TAIL."

"Somebody help me, I'm actually considering it," Su said offhandedly with no small amount of deserved awe as she watched Oars' corpse literally shake itself to pieces in its agonized convulsions. Massive chunks of flesh were sloughing off and shattering into chunks, though thankfully the flailing arms weren't producing oh for the love of—!

"DUCK!" I yelped as one of Oars' fingers soared towards us. Following my own advice, I threw myself to the ground, feeling a cold wind of a stupidly close miss brush my everything, followed by a loud crash. "Victory has never sucked so hard," I groused.

"Stupid giant... why couldn't Moria have used a sea king or something else that would be tasty?" Luffy grumbled as he got out from under the finger he's been slammed with.

"Wow, that nearly took your head off," Su blandly remarked.
"Get your LAST LICKS in, COTTONTAIL," Soundbite moaned. "'Cause I'm about to go MUTE. HURP!"

I repositioned my partner so that he was free to hock his lunch anywhere but on me as I watched the end of the body that had once been Oars the Titan. And what an end it was: simply put, the corpse gave up the ghost by just… literally falling apart at the seams. Every joint, every single one came undone, and just as soon as it had started thrashing, the being fell still. There was simply nothing left that it could possibly move. It… wasn't even a corpse, really. Just a pile of rotting, freezer-burned meat.

"I-Is it over?"

Hey, I knew that quavering voice! I turned around to find Usopp, leaning heavily on a tree branch, walking towards us. "Hey, you sure you're healthy enough to be walking around?"

"He's fine!" Chopper called out. "He wasn't hit as badly as everyone else, and if he didn't think he could handle it he wouldn't be doing it. That's just who he is."

I thought over that and then shrugged. If our doctor said so…

"Well, then, to answer your question, probably," I explained, indicating the mountain of flesh. "That was Moria's big trump card, and it's gone. Soundbite also rattled Moria's bell in the process." I frowned. "Though, Oars went down pretty easy compared to canon. But then again, Moria was overestressing it, and we'd already damaged it pretty badly, so I guess that makes sense?"

"Cross," Nami started testily as her halo started to darken. "If you are actually complaining about us having an easy time taking down a multi-story goliath, then so help me—!"

"I'm not complaining!" I hastily assured her. "Just… with our luck, if things turn out easier than expected, wouldn't you want to try and think of anything you might have missed?"

"Kill… you…"

"Gurk…" I choked, going ramrod straight. "Like, for example, a certain raging bastard still somehow having the strength to remain conscious?!

Nobody had a response to that, on account of how they'd all apparently turned to stare at the renewed threat in gape-mouthed horror, and the second I joined them I completely understood why.

Bloodshot eyes completely rolled up in their sockets, a topographical map of bulging veins, pink foam dribbling from both corners of his mouth, and all tied together by the kind of shivering you only ever saw in the most hardcore of junkies and the kind of looks you only ever get by going through a meat grinder besides? Yeah, I think it's safe to say that we were currently witnessing Gecko Moria at the all-time lowest point in his life.

If he were anyone else, I'd probably find this kind of tenacity admirable. Given who he was, what he'd done and what he was most likely planning to do to us, however…

"Kill… you…" Moria gargled through all the blood and whatever other fluids were clogging his throat. "Kill… you…"

Yeah, not my idea of fun.

"Okay…" I breathed sotto voce as I delicately raised Lassoo's barrel. "Everybody, he's still stalling out from pure rage. No sudden movements, nothing to set him off. Just get ready to take him out all
at once, very, very—!

"Kill… you… Kill… kill… kill…"

Ooooh that vocal devolution was not a good sign.

**CR-CR-CRACK!**

Nor Moria's teeth cracking in his mouth from just how hard he was clenching them. "**KILL YOU ALL! NIIIDHOOOOOOGG!**"

The yell to attack was on the tip of my tongue when a mass of blackness that I barely recognized as a Doppelman erupted between Moria and us. I braced myself for an assault from the ragged simulacrum, but rather than attack us, the shady demon instead started clawing at the ground, ripping out handful after handful of… of…

"Uh… guys…" Luffy asked slowly, his voice rife with confusion. "How come the shadow's eating other shadows?"

As much as the very idea sounds utterly ludicrous… indeed, the Doppelman was shredding what shadows it could get its ragged claws on, tearing them out by the talonful and shoving them down its gaping gullet. I honestly couldn't comprehend the action until I noticed the thing starting to swell, and suddenly everything clicked into place like the gears of a freaking **doomsday device**.

"No… no fucking way…" I drew out in breathless terror, already starting to inch away on trembling legs. *Fuck* adrenaline rushes, if what I thought was happening was actually happening—!

"Cross! Talk! NOW!" Nami snapped, her panicked voice managing to ground me in reality.

"M-Moria once showed that he could manipulate reality, actual flesh, via manipulating the shape of someone's shadow!" I babbled. "How he warped it was harmless enough, but they still had the same general mass. B-But now, his own shadow, i-it's taking in extra mass from the shadows! A- And that name, Nidhogg…"

I gulped audibly, trying and failing to clear the ash that had filled my mouth.

"That's the name of… a dragon…" I finally croaked, staring at the gradually distending gut of the shadow demon in horror. "The dragon… of the end of the world."

It took all of two seconds for that to sink in, and as Doppelman began devouring a straight-up stream of shadows from the earth and both it and its caster really started to swell up, everyone recoiled in horror.

"Cross," Nami whispered with rapidly mounting dread. "Are you trying to say that Moria's going to turn himself into a dragon!?

I shook my head, slowly at first but accelerating as my panic really started to hit its stride. "I think he's going to damn well try," I hissed, spinning around and throwing Funkfreed. "*And I'm not planning on sticking around to find out!*" I was halfway up the elephant's back before he'd even fully transformed, and he was stamping his legs impatiently as was.

"Hey, Cross, wait a—!" Luffy started to protest.

"LUFFY!" Chopper barked. He was carrying Robin, Conis, and a frantic Su on his shoulders, the latter two clearly still unable to move. "We can stay here and fight Moria or we can get our friends
somewhere safe, but if we try and do both then someone's going to get hurt in a way I won't be able to fix!"

That brought Luffy up short. The rubber man cast a final glance at the Asgard-sized blimp that Moria had become before gritting his teeth, shooting an arm out to snag Boss and booking it like Garp was on his ass. "EVERYONE RUN!"

"Don't have to tell me twice!" Funkfreed brayed as he stampeded after our captain as fast as he could, Franky and Lola grabbing their way onto the sword's bulk as he passed.

And so, for the first time in the crew's history, the Straw Hat Pirates began retreating from the battlefield, hauling ass and hauling our friends' asses besides. What we would do once we got them to safety was still up in the air, but it was better than leaving them where they could easily be trampled in the pummeling, no matter who was on the receiving end. For now, I was just glad that the attack took so much setup because it was buying us the time we needed to put distance between ourselves and the doubly mad Warlord.

Which was a damn good thing, because looking over my shoulder, I could scarcely believe how rapidly the situation had devolved: Moria and his shadow were both massively gorged, and the shadow's suction had grown to the point where, judging by how trails of shadow were lancing through the air to its maw, it was devouring the very same thorn hedge Moria had used to pen us all in. That was both encouraging, and a reason for yet more panic.

Still, either way, the build-up meant we had time. I just hoped we had enough.

"Uh, guys?" Franky shouted warily. "Don't wanna start any panic or nuthin', but that shadow-puppet thing just stopped eating!"

I started to turn in my seat to look back—

**KRNCHRRRCH!**

And then I snapped my head forward and kept my eyes locked firmly dead ahead, because there was no way in hell that I was going to so much as glance at the source of that… that… ergh, even the mere thought brings me inches from tossing my entire digestive tract.

The closest approximation I can think of would be a meat grinder. A titanic, *industrial-grade* meat grinder. Snapping, crunching, squishing, ripping, grinding, all these sounds and more sounded through the air, and each was more flesh-filled than the noise ever had any right to be.

However, just as soon as the *noises* started, they stopped dead, leaving behind a far-too-still silence that permeated the air as thickly as the Florian's fog.

If only it could have lasted.

"**GROOOOOOAAAAAAAAARGH!**"

"GAH!"

I let loose a yelp of both shock and pain as I was literally *slapped* upside the back of my head by a *wall* of pure sound and air pressure. So strong was the force of the bellow that we were all sent tumbling due to our mere proximity, not even Funkfreed's massive bulk capable of doing keeping him upright. The sound of shattering glass echoed in my ringing ears, the shards thankfully going nowhere near us. Instead, we were engulfed in wind-blown grit and ballistic bits of dead flesh, and I'm honestly unsure what was worse.
Lemme tell you, regaining your wits only to find yourself lying face down in a pile of desiccated human flesh and feeling like you've been worked over by the mob? Not an experience you want to have twice in one day, or at all. And yet, here I was having undergone that very same experience twice in the span of hours.

"Hate… this… island…" I moaned as I sat up and clutched my throbbing skull.

"You, me, and everyone who's been living on it for any amount of time," Lola tsked, wincing as she pushed herself to her feet.

"Contemplate burning this hellhole down later…" Nami grit out as she used a wall to claw her way to her feet, her clouds hastily patting down any dirt or rubble that the blast might have caked on her. "Figure out what just happened now. Did… did Moria really just—?"

"GROOOOARGH!"

We all froze as another roar echoed behind us. It was quieter, thankfully, but in all honesty? The lowered volume just made things worse. After all, higher volume leaves a bigger impact, but lower volume has all the details.

The gorey, echoing, twisted details.

In a moment of foolish thoughtlessness, I glanced over my shoulder in an effort to catch sight of our enemy—

"HURGH!"

And just as swiftly I snapped my head back, hunched forwards and clamped my hand over my mouth in order to arrest a second helping of bile. I-I hadn't actually seen Moria's form in that glance, the dust and fog were still hanging too thick for that, but I'd seen its silhouette, and that was enough. Sweet Lucifer's hellfire, it was more than enough for a lifetime.

As it turns out, I'd been both right and wrong in my assumption. Right in that Moria had obviously tried to turn himself into a dragon, but wrong in that he'd failed. At least, I considered it a failure, because the silhouette of the thing I could see in the distance, roaring and thrashing and demolishing section after section of the manor with its every careless movement? That… that was absolutely no dragon.

It was stretched, twisted, warped in ways I can't even begin to conceive of, and at its core, the very core of its being, this thing was every kind of wrong possible, but the one thing I absolutely refused to call it besides human was 'dragon'. Because this thing… this was another beast entirely, and I… I don't rightly know what.

Chopper was curled up on his knees, heaving violently as he clamped his hooves over his nose. "I-I-I can't even… I don't…the trauma he just put his body through! How is he still alive… t-this is just… just…"

"You know what?" I heard Lola say with a strained but flat voice. "I've done a lot of crazy shit on these oceans, done a lot of crazy shit today for this crew. But no way in hell am I fighting that."

I winced and turned my head to reply, and then I froze up as I noticed something crucial. "That's… actually a very good and very viable idea because that thing ate the thorn hedge!"

"What!?" most everyone yelped in shock, spinning around to confirm that, yes, the writhing wall of shadows was gone and the route to the forest and freedom was indeed free and clear.
"I have never been more thankful for an enemy getting high on rage in my entire life," Lassoo breathed reverentially.

"And I never thought I'd say this, but same here," Zoro grunted, yanking Conis onto his shoulder. "Now come on, everyone grab a body with a pulse and let's get out of here!"

Everyone gave signs of assent, and we started moving accordingly—

"Go on without me."

When a very familiar voice caused everyone to freeze, and turn to see our captain tossing his hat behind him and crouching down. Nami's clouds caught it automatically as Luffy's body turned red and began steaming.

"The plan all along was for me to kick Moria's ass, and I owe him that even more after what he's done to us," our captain spoke in a tone that didn't allow for even a hint of protest. "I'll finish him off. You guys go on and get back."

I exchanged hasty looks with my fellow officers before we all gave Luffy firm looks of our own. "We'll fall back to the treeline," I conceded. "But no way are we leaving you alone."

Luffy nodded with a steam-filled snort. "Good enough. Now, get moving. Franky!" He turned a side-glare on our shipwright.

"Right! Gimme a second, aaaand… there!" Said shipwright shifted around a bit in place before procuring a writhing bundle of darkness from… somewhere. "75 shadows, right up the old address! All yours, Luffy!" And with that, he tossed the umbral bundle at and into our captain, who hunched forwards with a groan.

As Luffy transformed and Moria remained occupied with wrecking his own domain, I couldn't help but feel a slight inklung of curiosity. Sure, I knew that we'd kept a cache of shadows in reserve for this exact sort of situation, but I hadn't known Franky had been hanging onto them this whole time. I guess I'd kind of assumed he'd lost them at some point. After all…

"Where… exactly were you keeping those shadows?" I asked slowly as I gave his wardrobe, or rather lack thereof, a once-over.

Franky grinned. "Oh, I kept them in my—!

"On second thought, never mind, I really don't wanna—!

"GrrrrRRRAAAAGH! HEY! MORIA!"

Our collective attention was suddenly arrested by a very pissed and now very big and very blue Luffy shooting forward, skidding to a halt in front of the smoky shadow that was once Moria—no, that was Nidhogg now—and bellowing in outrage.

Then, Luffy sucked in a chest-expanding whoosh of air…

"I AM THE MAN WHO WILL BECOME THE PIRATE KING!"

And shook us all to our very souls with a bellow that was accompanied… not so much by a — statement of fact, but more like a divine mandate. And while it inspired awe in most of us, others reacted a bit more… viscerally.
"GRR... GRAAAAAAGH!" roared the unholy love child of Smaug and Tim Curry, head flung back.

Outrage that Luffy weathered with ease, glaring at the wyrm with neither fear nor hesitation, but simply primal disgust. "I'm going to be the Pirate King," Luffy repeated frigidly, with all the finality of declaring that the sky was blue. "And not you. It'll never be you. You can't be the Pirate King, because besides the fact it's gonna be me?"

Luffy crossed his arms and stared down the monster.

"You're not actually a pirate."

I swear you could have sliced the following tension and silence both with a rusty spoon. But of course, like all tense silences, it was born only to be broken. In this case?

"GROOOOOOOOOOOAAAAARGH!"

By another ear-rending pseudo-draconian roar that, while it didn't send us all sprawling, still hit us like a semi-physical wave and left us all clutching our ears in agony.

All, of course, save Luffy, whose entirely sane reaction was to blur forwards, reel his arm back—

"GUM-GUM JET PISTOL!" CRUNCH!

And extend his fist into Nidhogg's jaw, sending the wyrm reeling. While the monstrosity was still reorienting itself, Luffy charged past its bulk and disappeared into the dust, heading into the manor's ruins. And once Nidhogg recovered, it ignored us in favor of giving chase with as much speed as its bloated, mangled frame could manage.

For a few seconds, we stared silently in the direction the two had gone. Then I felt a jab in my shoulder and I glanced over to Funkfreed.

"One night and I've gone from having a lifetime of no combat to almost too much," he breathed. "It's official: even if I don't survive this, I made the right choice joining the Straw Hat Pirates."

"We get it, we get it," Lassoo chuffed as he started wandering around and grabbing the TDWS onto his back. "Now less talking, more hauling!"

And so we all set about gathering up our fallen comrades from where we'd left them without a moment's hesitation. Well, actually some hesitation.

"Hey, does anyone have any idea what the hell Luffy was on about?" Franky asked, wincing as he heaved Carue onto his back.

"Hell if I know, but I imagine he's going to break it down for Moria in the same breath he breaks his face," I replied, before nearly face-planting as their blows shook the ship again. "In the meantime, let's get a little more distance, shall we? Being on the same island as this shitshow's gonna be bad enough, I am not intent on experiencing ground zero!"

-0-

Monkey D. Luffy winces as he ducks under a grasping claw, eyeing his right arm, recently returned from a meeting with Nidhogg's soft core. Even with seventy-five shadows strengthening his rubber body's natural toughness, thin tracks of blood crisscross the limb.
Another claw comes in, and he hops back, rearing back one leg. "GUM-GUM JET STAMP!" he roars, one sandal-clad foot slamming into Nidhogg and pushing it back. This limb, too, comes back bloody, the sandal reduced to so many straw scraps. The beast roars in pain and rage, and somewhere in his heart he understands the unspoken question.

"Pirates sail the seas for a reason!" he yells, hopping over an overhead smash. As he winds back a fist, he continues to speak. "They sail for freedom! They sail for their dreams! I've run into a lot of people who called themselves pirates until now, but they had some kind of reason that kept them going, even if it was something stupid like money or power! You can't eat money, you can't eat power, and they don't help you get friends!"

The blow lands, pain stinging the limb like all the other blows. He ignores this, for he can take it, and his opponent is the one coming off the worst. That the shadows now grasp the limb is far more of a problem. He only has time for an exclaimed "OH—!" before Nidhogg slams into him and doesn't stop. The shadows lick at his chest and gut and vest, stinging like so many mosquitoes, and the two crash into the manor, wood and plaster and even stone giving way under their far stronger bodies. This is too much for the much-abused building, and the walls give way, collapsing the structure on top of their heads.

But even this doesn't stop Nidhogg, and it outraces the destruction, throwing him through the far wall. It shows no sign of stopping. He must stop it.

His sandals clap together, his muscles tense, and he roars: "GUM-GUM JET SPEAR!" A spearhead, formed by clasped toes, slams into Nidhogg's midsection, breaking its weakened grip and sending it flying back into the still-settling wreckage of the manor. For a moment, he takes his chance to catch his breath—and with a sudden pulse, he nearly loses control, his chest swelling up as the umbral souls empowering him attempt to return to their rightful place.

Time to end this.

Setting his feet, he pumps his fists in front of him, waiting for Nidhogg to reappear. And the shadow beast does not disappoint, erupting from the manorial wreckage roaring its defiance and accompanied by a plume of splinters and rock dust. With no regard to thought or strategy, it charges head-on at him.

It is perhaps the worst thing it could do.

"GUM-GUM JET GATLING!"

This time, it is not a single blow that the shadows can grasp and tear. It is not a single blow that Nidhogg's form, long past caring about damage, can simply shrug off. It is a barrage, fast and unrelenting and offering no purchase.

It is with the one hundred and seventy-third blow that the inevitable happens: he freezes, slumping to his knees, veins rising all over his body... and in a burst of the darkest of black, seventy-five shadows flee the body of Monkey D. Luffy, his skin reverting back to the usual bronze. He doesn't move. He can't.

And Nidhogg is in no better shape. The great beast writhes on the ground, roaring—or perhaps screaming—in pain and rage and grief and a hundred other emotions. Through his exhaustion, he eyes the great mast looming above him, and knows that he will need to draw it up that towering trunk.

But he is tired, so tired. His muscles ache with strain and lactic acid, his heart gallops like a panicked
horse, lungs vainly trying to suck in enough oxygen. His very soul and will quiver with exhaustion, and a dozen different wounds sting him with pain.

And yet.

And yet every time his mind screams 'Fall!', he cannot. For he sees the monster in front of him, and he sees the smiles of his crew, his friends, and he knows down to his bones that he cannot let the two meet.

He will not fall. Only when the monster of shadow and hate falls, and not a second before. And it must fall soon, otherwise the decision becomes not his.

"BUT YOU!" he roars, briefly glancing up. "You don't care about any of that! All you want is the throne, and for what?!" Standing to his feet, he pins it with the best glare he has. "For revenge?! Because you lost your friends?! You don't even remember them! You're just sailing because of your pain! Because you don't know what else to do! And you're making everyone else hurt too, just because! You're not a pirate! You're not even a person! You're a shadow! A ghost! YOU DIED WITH YOUR CREW!"

Astoundingly, Nidhogg falls silent. A creature that roared and spat and snarled for its entire existence, that was always roiling and twitching and moving, freezes, utterly quiet. For several seconds that may actually be an eternity, the two stare at each other, and then he shuffles one foot back.

That movement provokes the beast, Nidhogg flipping to its feet and charging forward, still utterly silent. He stretches his arms up, grasping a spar and soaring into the sky as the rubber pulls back. Below, Nidhogg skids to a halt, reverses, and grasps the mast with its claws, beginning to climb. It climbs steadily, but slowly; he climbs in bursts, each taking him further up the mast. Blades of shadow shoot up, seeking to impale him, but swinging in the air as he does allows him to avoid all but minor nicks.

Within minutes, he has reached the top of the mast, the fog encompassing all even at this atmosphere and Nidhogg two spars down but rising fast. Gritting his teeth, he bites into his thumb, and blows. His arm swells, the air flowing into his chest and then his other arm as he continues to blow. Within seconds, both arms are fit for a giant, and he cuts the flow in favor of taking a colossal breath into his chest, ribs stretching to fit. Sandaled feet grasp the mast and muscles in the back and chest flex, spinning him around into a tightly wound spring.

"GUUUUUM-GUUUUUM—!"

And then Nidhogg is there, faster than he had any right to be. Shadow skitters off the massive arms, merely adding to the thin lines already present, but umbral jaws find purchase in his gut.

"Gah!"

Air hisses out from the punctured torso, and he knows he must act now. And thankfully, his opponent is right there. Two massive arms pump, smashing into Nidhogg from above, dislodging him and sending him spiraling towards the ground far below.

"GIAAAAANT STOOOORM!"

And he follows, screaming, spinning like a top. Each fist is a meteor with the weight of a mountain, and they fall like a monsoon rain, swift and unrelenting. The fists are too large to receive damage, and in any case, Nidhogg is now utterly senseless, unable to counterattack.
The torment is only ended when it is squashed between titanic fist and the small landmass floating on the sea. Dark shadows and a small dot in black and blue and bronze and red fly away, signifying to all one thing:

This fight is over.

-o-

K-K-K- KRACK!

"Sonnuvabitch!" I yelped, cartwheeling my arms in panic as the flipping island shattered beneath us.

I mean, it was to be expected of course after the cataclysmic beatdown we'd just seen Luffy deliver, of course, but it was another entirely to feel the very earth tremble beneath your feet. And then it was a tier all of its own when you and everyone around you had to scramble to stay together as massive rents and cracks ripped the earth apart, and seawater sloshed up and sprayed us in drenching, salty gouts.

Thankfully, the devastation was as swift as it was brutal, and as soon as it was over, we were left panting in shock, wet, dumbstruck… but alive.

Zoro huffed heavily as he stared at the crack before glancing at me. "Is this… going to be a regular thing?" he managed to get out.

I shook my head, a slight jerk in the motion. "Not until New World, that's for damn sure."

*That* got me a heck of a lot of attention, several people opening their mouths to speak at once—

"Wait…" Usopp cut in, hand shading his eyes. "Is that… Luffy?"

When they were all silenced by that query, and followed his line of vision.

And indeed, right there in the sky, sailing on the breeze of his own rapidly exhaling breath...


Was our captain, and the winner of this long and arduous fight, Monkey D. 'That Freaking GLORIOUS Straw Hat' Luffy!

"Oh, yeah, forgot he tends to do that…" I commented weakly. I paused briefly, tilting my head. "Somebody should catch him before he falls in the drink, huh?"

"I got this," Chopper said, weary but fond. Shifting to Heavy Point, he stepped forward, and then right, and then forward again, just in time for him to catch Luffy against his chest. His head leaned down, several curious hums coming from him, and then he turned around with a sunny grin. "Alright, he's not going to keel over immediately or bleed out anytime soon, so I hope you don't mind if I take a moment to celebrate the fact that we fucking survived that!"

I allowed a massive sigh of relief to exit my lungs, now that we were safe at last from that monster that Moria had somehow become. And out the corner of my eye I could see everyone else—Zoro, Sanji, Nami, Franky, Brook, Lola, Usopp, Lassoo, and Funkfreed—doing the same. But it couldn't be that simple; the second I began thinking about the whole fight with a perfectly clear head, my blood ran cold as I realized that there was something I had overlooked.

"Hold everything, guys."
"Not that tone, please not that tone, not now of all times, Cross," Usopp moaned, he and everyone else immediately on their guard.

"Sorry, Usopp, but I have to," I said, Lassoo and Funkfreed moving back towards me as I scanned around. "Thinking over the situation, all of the zombies were purified. All of the Mysterious Three were taken out. All of our allies were present and accounted for. And the mansion was a long way away from the graveyard, isolated from all the noise we were making. I wasn't able to spare enough thought for this until now with Moria's Awakened rampage, but thinking about it now?"

I turned so that I was facing everyone.

"If we sedated him—which we did—who or what woke him up from it?"

I registered the looks of horrified realization come onto my friends' faces... but just barely. My senses managed to process that at the same time that they processed a dark shadow looming behind me, the sound of fabric leaving flesh, and a soft, almost gentle voice, speaking a single word.

"Me."

I barely had enough time to start panicking when I felt something touch my head. Then everything went dark.

Cross-Brain AN: Some things simply cannot change...

Hornet AN: On a lighter note, when Moria was hit by the Nova Star, he was going to say "Rip your spines out through your nostrils." How that's anatomically possible will be left as an exercise to you, dear reader.
Chapter 52: The Nightmare Is Finished? A New Dawn In The Florian!

Cross-Brain AN: Before we move to the conclusion of Thriller Bark, we have a few things that we would like to say to our fans.

To those who edit our TV Tropes pages, thank you; it means a lot to us that you give us so much. To recognize a few: PutotyraNoZarus, Eddy1215, euan112358, Gaby007, ThePoarter, lilyofthevalley, Hujwernoo, darkhabit, NXTangl, JD2K, and The Sinful. Thank you all.

Next, to those of you who leave anonymous guest reviews on FFN. First, those of you who ask questions: if you want us to answer them, please spend a few minutes creating an account so that we can actually respond. Second, those of you trying to bring politics in, or who have more recently called for... 'removing' the dugong characters, if you can't be arsed to face any possibility of a response, we're just going to keep deleting them. Or, to put it shortly: kindly get fucked.

Patient AN: For the record, I don't approve of the language... but the frustration is no less with me.

Xomniac AN: And for my record, I've got some even harsher language! I'm the one with the account, I have to field that braindead crap first! If you wanna flame, either grow the pair needed to do it with an account I can report, or shut UP.

Cross-Brain AN: And now, brace for flying hammers. Specifically, mason hammers.

For once in my time on the Blue Seas, my senses returned to me faster than I expected. Unfortunately, it didn't do much good with my subconscious DOSed trying to figure out what was going on. A few key facts slowly became apparent: I was lying on a rough, uneven surface. There was a rancid stink in the air, like rotting pork, and there was noise coming from nearby. Voices... they sounded like my crew. What was going—?


Kuma.

My eyes snapped open, and I leapt to my feet and looked around the area, taking in everything I could. It was still dark... still foggy, even. We were still in the Florian Triangle. The next thing I noticed was some of my crew nearby. In ten words or less... they all looked like utter shit. To elaborate, everyone looked like they'd been personally worked over by Impel Down's finest, sporting almost uniform expressions of pain, though thankfully not agony.

To name but a few: Conis was cradling her cranium, a bloody bandage indicating she'd most likely gotten a second scar to go along with the one Ohm had given her. Boss was steadily burning through a cigar as he leaned against some rubble, his flipper pressed to the near shirt of white wrapped around his torso. And Merry... well, I knew it wasn't right to laugh at another's pain, but damn it, you watch a tyke like her gnawing at a cast-covered arm and say it's not funny as hell! Lassoo and Funkfreed snickering nearby was just further support for that theory.

Moving on, the TDWS and Carue were bandaged up from head to toe, and Robin and Vivi weren't shy for them either; I noticed that the latter was glaring at her necklace, and I winced as I wisely
elected to leave that particular hornet's nest the hell alone. And Chopper was lying on his back; from what I could tell, he was regaining his breath from treating so many so fast, hooves twitching spastically from overuse.

Then… there was Luffy, on his feet and grinning like a loon. My panic calmed briefly as I confirmed that my captain was safe, and then it shot right back up as I realized that Luffy was bouncing around after all of that, as though he hadn't taken any damage.

And as I ran towards them, my panic shot through the roof as I realized something else: so was I.

Luffy perked up as he caught sight of me. "Hey, Cross! You're up too? That's great!"

"It's also, to repeat, impossible…" Chopper groaned.

" Seriously, I expect this kind of physics-ignoring weirdness from Luffy, but you too, Cross?" Usopp moaned as he poked at his nose.

"Bah, who cares?" Luffy laughed. "Woohoo, this is awesome!"

"NOT EVEN CLOSE, LUFFY!" I roared, injecting as much terror and desperation into my voice as I could manage.

The good mood flew out of him as he and everyone else conscious looked at me with alarm and concern, and I made to look at my partner—

"CROSS."

—and instead shot a glare at a newly awakened and very irate Sanji. "I fucked up and I know it, crap cook, but me facing the music can wait until after we save that noble idiot's life! And in pursuit of that, Soundbite!"

I waited for a reply. After a few seconds of silence, I began glancing around, patting down my clothes with mounting panic. "Soundbite? Soundbite!?"

"I'm here… further OUT…"

My relief at my partner speaking up was weak; I hadn't heard him this exhausted since Navarone.

"…Is he there? Is he alive?" I asked softly.

"For now… but hurry, they need BLOOD, PRONTO," his voices warped and warbled. "HEAD STRAIGHT left from where you are."

"Sonnuva—!" I'd barely taken two steps when Soundbite's words sunk in, and I felt a chill like Brook's post-time skip swordplay.

"What," I said slowly. "in the name of Roger do you mean by 'THEY'?"

Rather than wait for an answer, I swung my head around, took a hasty headcount, and promptly felt my brain crash when I realized who was missing.

"ROCKET US, NOW!" I roared, grabbing Chopper's scruff with one hand and reaching out to Luffy with the other. He didn't hesitate to grab the nearest anchor, and a few seconds later we landed in the right location.
...I thought I had seen the worst when Moria awakened, but no. Even with the nightmares of the Shadow-Shadow Fruit annihilated, Thriller Bark still had one last scene ripped straight out of hell to torture us with. And here it was.

A barren crater of ground, stripped of all life, the soil straight out of a drought-ravaged wasteland, and smothered in blood. The crusted substance cracked beneath my feet, long since dried, and spread throughout the entire crater, more than one human body seemed able to hold. And in the very center stood a single figure, immediately recognizable.

"Z… ZORO!" Luffy screamed.

Chopper blearily took in the scene. Then his eyes snapped open, showing off bloodshot sclera, and he flipped down and dug a flask out of his bag marked with a skull and the label "LAST RESORT". He chugged the entire thing before tossing it aside and snapping into his Walk Point, sprinting over to Zoro with an expression that was equal parts furious and horrified.

"What happened here?"

"Nothing… absolutely—"

"DON'T GIVE ME THAT SHIT!" I roared, grabbing what was left of his shirt with both hands and ignoring the shout of protest Chopper let out. "You've just endured every last bit of punishment that Luffy has over the past who knows how long but we can deal with your suicidal honor code later because you can take it, NOW WHERE THE HELL'S THE OTHER IDIOT?!"

"H… Here…"

I gagged as a raw and barely audible voice floated over to me, and I hastily shoved our fine-shredded swordsman off to our doctor before running in the direction of the voice. I rounded a stray block of rubble, and stopped dead in shock, barely capable of understanding what I was seeing. Finally, I managed to choke out a single word.

"Nami…"

Our navigator lifted her head what few inches she could manage, her expression flushing with relief, and somehow found the gall to direct a bloody glare at me. "Took… your damn time…" she wheezed. "You always have… to sleep in, don't you?"

I… I couldn't say anything. How could I in the face of the horrific tableau before me?! I'd seen a lot of bad shit during my time as a pirate, I'd experienced bad shit aplenty! But the sight of Nami, one of my closest friends, the one who'd always managed to come out of almost every last one of our escapades squeaky clean, looking like she'd been put through a titanic paper shredder? It was… just overwhelming.

Nami was propped up against the rubble, leaning into it without a hint of energy and for good reason. Her legs and her face looked like sandpaper had been rubbed over them, and her arms… her right arm was relatively unmarred, but her left looked like it had been mauled by some kind of a rabid feline, it was such a mess, a segment of her Clima-Tact held so tightly in her fist that I think some of the knuckles were dislocated. And going by the blood-caked state of her right hand's fingers, well…

And it was crazy that she could even move her head; the rest of her body was limp and almost gray, removing any doubt—if there was any considering the maroon and red trail towards her—that there was more blood outside her body than in it. She was on the brink of death, and somehow still had the
strength, strength I'd never even suspected her to have, to keep on living.

"Did you… see that idiot?" She gave her head a minuscule jerk in the direction of Zoro, her lips twisting into a broken but still catty sneer. "Seriously… I told him posing was… a stupid gimmick but he… just wouldn't budge… But then again, I—ack!" She coughed and wheezed, a mouthful of blood and I don't even want to know bubbling out of her throat. "I-I guess I'm no better, huh… every one of us, a big ol' idiot… Do you… think it's in the water, or…?"

My legs gave out under me, bringing me to my knees just in time for my throat to finally respond to my will and choke out a single word.

"Why?"

"Couldn't stop her… could only watch…"

I followed the direction of the voice to a branch hanging overhead. Soundbite was there, sagging in his shell from grief and fatigue, his eyestalks drooping and barely open.

"S-Soundbite, what—!?"

"Don't… get mad at him…" Nami coughed, staring up at my partner with a weak smile on her face. "He tried… to stop us… but we… wouldn't listen. It's not like… he tried to do something… as stupid as us…" Don't ask me how, but the damn madwoman somehow managed to make a smile on the edge of death look sunny. "He was… pretty damn brave. Stayed with us… through the whole thing… even though he was scared… out of his mind. He… actually might have even… saved my life… a few times…"

"I… you…" I sputtered. Those sputters died shortly thereafter when I noticed that Nami's eyes were starting to lose focus.

"I-In fact…" she slurried, her head starting to sway back and forth. "After what… he did…" She chuckled, a wet noise that was equal parts bittersweet and delirious. "You don't… owe me… anything now. Heheh… I-In fact…"

Nami slipped to the side, and I only just managed to grab her in time to hear her breathe out one last thing before she slipped into oblivion.

"I owe you one, friend…"

-o-

"Alright, you metal-limbed bastard, start spilling your guts or I'll spill them mys—ACK!" Sanji's burgeoning rant was headed off at the pass by a brief cyan glare from our doctor, who was in the middle of stabilizing the crew. Instead, he settled for glowering at me with as much heat as he could muster, and given what he could do, I was sweating like a pig for a variety of reasons.

After discovering that little… scene, we'd relocated everyone into the most stable section of the ruined manor we could find. We then spent several minutes waiting with bated breath and raging questions as we waited for Chopper to finish properly stabilizing our semi-eviScerated friends. It had been touch and go for a while, but thanks to some help from the Rolling Pirates, it looked like things would be fine.

Chopper had mended Zoro and Nami's abundance of injuries as fast as he could, desperate enough that he even recruited Merry's skillset and Robin's arms to help. The two of them sped matters along considerably, and he had their much-needed transfusions up and running in a matter of minutes. It
was a very tense few minutes, but as Chopper measured the progress, he informed us that there was no immediate danger to anyone anymore. Which meant that while his attention turned back to handling everyone else, everyone else's attention immediately turned back to me.

Attention I met with a miserable groan as I continued to pace, as I'd been doing since we arrived. "OK, first of all, yes, I forgot that he was supposed to show up. I thought I'd managed to head his presence off a while back, but clearly I was mistaken. I overlooked the possibility that the World Government could send him because of the SBS or for some other reason, in which case I fully accept the blame. On a related note, I need to double-check something as soon as we're done here, because if he was here why I think he was…" I lapsed into silence for a second, gnawing on my thumb, before shaking my head and moving on.

"Second of all, in this case? Even if I had mentioned the possibility of his presence, it wouldn't have made any difference; you all saw what he did, some of you more than the rest." I shot a pointed glance at Sanji, which got him strangling his lighter so hard I think its casing cracked. "So you've probably figured out that against Bartholomew Kuma, the only thing we could have done at this time was put our heads between our legs and kiss our asses goodbye. Crocodile and Moria are the only Warlords alive who are even close to our level. The rest are just that powerful, and Kuma's in the upper tier even for them." I sighed tiredly and rubbed my face. "Make no mistake, it's the fact that individuals like Kuma are part of the Warlords that they're viable counterweight to the Marines and Emperors."

"I guess we were sort of getting spoiled with arrogant bastards," Vivi said with a ferocious grimace as she kneaded the bridge of her nose. "That's the kind of power that Warlords are expected to have; if Crocodile's pride hadn't driven him to sorely underestimate Luffy, we never would have beaten him."

Sanji continued to fume, clearly not satisfied with my explanation. "Even if I accepted that, I would have expected you to tell us that it would put Zoro and Nami-swan in this much danger!"

"It was only Zoro in the story!" I shot back, glancing in a brief panic to make sure no Rolling Pirates were in earshot before continuing. "The metal bastard came for Luffy's head, but when Zoro stepped in to take his place, Kuma fed him Luffy's pain, expecting him to die from it. Naturally, he didn't because he's that freaking tough! BUT, going by how I feel light as a feather, apparently Kuma was after my head too! That doesn't really surprise me, given how my head could kickstart a small nation's economy, but Nami going through this!?!" I jabbed my finger at our comatose navigator, packing all my incredulity into the motion. "Trust me, I'm as confused as you are! And for once, things are flipped because while I don't have the answers we need or want, he does!"

I turned my eyes onto the gastropod who was currently guzzling his second bottle of liquid lozenge, and Sanji as well as everyone else in earshot joined me. He eyed us for a second, spat the emptied bottle out, and met our questioning gazes. "Yo."

Ignoring that wince, Sanji painfully shoved himself to his feet and loomed over my partner, cigarette tearing between his teeth. "Everything you saw, snail, or I might actually carry out one of my threats."

I warily side-eyed Sanji. "Not endorsing the death threat…" I hedged. "But I'll second the urgency."

Soundbite took a second to glance around and take in everyone's anxious expressions before slumping forward, his eyestalks hanging heavy with sorrow. "ALRIGHT, HERE'S WHAT"
After Kuma showed up out of nowhere and pulled a 'think of the rabbits' on Luffy and Cross, Lola recognized him and asked what he was doing here. He said that they—that is, the World Government—had lost contact with Moria and he came to see what was wrong—" 

"—and then he said that while he had the chance, he was here for Luffy and Cross's heads. I MUST NOT HAVE BEEN A PRIORITY THOUGH, HE JUST FLICKED ME OFF YOUR SHOULDER LIKE I WAS SO MUCH LINT. SWEAR THAT BASTARD CRACKED MY—! Ugh… Anyways..." Soundbite cast a pitying glance at my other two partners, who were both nursing some hearty bruises to both flesh and ego. "Lasso and Funkfreed charged him and got blown away first."

"Felt like I got shot out of a freaking cannon for once…" Lasso moaned from under his paws, clamped to his head.

"What the hell was that bastard packing?" Funkfreed demanded, an icepack pressed to his forehead with his trunk.

"The Paw-Paw Fruit, one of the most ludicrously jailbroken Devil Fruits I've had the displeasure of witnessing." I explained grimly. "It gives the user paw pads on the palms of their hands that have the power to repel or deflect—or more specifically, 'push'—anything that they touch. And that means anything, from projectiles to air to more abstract concepts like, well…" I gestured between Luffy and myself. "Pain and fatigue. And the force of his pushes are often disproportionately powerful, too."

"Tsk, so that's why you and Luffy had my tranquilizers in you. That explains how he woke Moria…" Chopper grumbled as he held a pair of blood-filled vials up to his… eyes…

I briefly contemplated whether or not I was suicidal enough to ask when he'd drawn our blood, but I just as swiftly snapped my attention back to Soundbite. "So, those two got slammed and then… I'm guessing he laid down the ultimatum?"

"What's that mean?" asked… Luffy, worryingly enough, considering the amount of seriousness in his voice.

"That individual, Bartholomew Kuma, was it?" Brook spoke up, his head bowed solemnly. "He gave us all a choice to make: we could let him take the two of you unmolested, or we could refuse and suffer for standing in his way. Naturally, not a one of us hesitated to oppose him with every fiber of our beings… even though I myself no longer have any fibers to speak of! YOHO—! Ah, wait a moment…" The musician tilted his head quizzically. "Do skeletons have fibers? I forget… tentative skull joke."

"Robin?"

THWACK! "YEOW!"

"Thank you."

"After that is when things get… fuzzy." Keratin rubbed fur, a pained grimace on Chopper's face. "I think I might have gotten desperate enough to take a third Rumble Ball."

"No, that's the concussion talking," Usopp clarified. "You're fuzzy on the details because there aren't any."
Chopper's chin-scratching stopped in favor of shooting our sniper a blank look. "Aren't any what?"

After a moment of staring, Usopp sighed and turned back to the rest of us. "Anyways, Kuma must have thought that the surroundings weren't wrecked enough, because he used some big airblast attack to flatten everything and everyone that was left standing near him. That's the last thing I remember."

"LUCKY YOU, long-nose," Soundbite groaned, shuddering.

"And how exactly did you stay conscious?" Franky cut in. "You may have a thick shell, but it's not thicker than my super metal body, and I got knocked out right away, too."

Soundbite frowned in thought. "Short version, I tried a new technique, IT WORKED, BUT FYI, THAT TONIC WAS ONLY TEMPORARY. My throat still feels like I've been gargling gravel. I CAN TALK SHOP, OR I CAN TELL YOU ABOUT THE HELL I JUST WENT THROUGH. WHICH WOULD YOU RATHER SUFFER?"

I briefly entertained the easier notion, but... "Proceed."

"Well..." Soundbite slowly turned his gaze as he stared off into oblivion.

~o~

"Now suffer the Ursa Shock."

FWOOM.

The Ursa Shock was a technique steeped in contradictions; while an incredibly destructive attack, it was both simple and relatively silent in its execution. And yet, in spite of this simplicity and hushed delivery, it was made deadly and massively loud due to the sheer scale of the assault. A singular blast of air and wind, but the tsunami-sized quantity of air pressure resulted in widespread destruction, and thus a cacophony of demolished and collapsing debris.

Trees and stone, architecture and nature alike, none were capable of withstanding the full, unmitigated fury that was the Ursa Shock.

When the howling winds died down, they left utter silence in their wake. Nothing stood much above chest height. Anything that had was now sprawled out on the ground, and anything that was once intact was now irrevocably annihilated.

Most people, in the aftermath of such destruction, would have been left gaping as they experienced any of a variety of emotions, from terror to awe to satisfaction at a job well done. Assuming they were still conscious, of course.

As he witnessed the devastation he had wrought with his bare bear hands, Bartholomew Kuma felt none of these things.

Instead, the Tyrant merely shifted his massive bulk with his head, systematically scanning his environs with cold efficiency for any signs of life. A glance downwards confirmed that the first of his primary targets that he'd acquired, the 'Voice of Anarchy' Jeremiah Cross, was still where he'd left him after successfully removing his involvement from the situation's equation: pinned in place beneath his boot, incapable of being shifted even an inch by any on the island, much less the meager blast the Warlord had unleashed.
Satisfied that any potential interfering elements had been dealt with, Kuma reached down, hefted his target by the back of his jacket, and strode into the debris. His secondary target, tracked through the maelstrom by the systems crammed into his head, was still right where he'd left him.

Reaching the calculated location, Kuma dislodged a slab of debris and beheld the slumbering form of his other target, Monkey D. 'Straw Hat' Luffy. The titanic entity reached down towards the rubber man—

**WARNING!**

And froze as his sensors and Haki both blared out a warning of imminent danger. In accordance with the warning, Kuma erected a minimal, non-hardened barrier of Armament Haki over his body, a precaution that was very much overkill in the waters of Paradise.

"**IMPERIAL LION'S ANTHEM!**"

**SLASH!**

"Gh..." Kuma's mind and processors alike reeled when a disproportionately strong attack was registered slamming into his chest, actually forcing the naval bioweapon to take a step back for balance. No critical damage arose from the assault, obviously, but it was with no small amount of silent respect that Kuma observed the opening rent in his shirt, and the infinitesimally small scratch in the [CLASSIFIED]-alloy plating that lay beneath.

Not a trace of this respect showed on Kuma's face as he turned to observe his assailant—just cold apathy. "Roronoa Zoro," he calmly stated. "Your power exceeds that which has been previously observed. I shall inform my superiors that your threat level is to be re-evaluated."

The swordsman didn't respond, too busy glaring daggers at the expanse of metal he'd exposed. "A Marine cyborg. As soon as I save Cross's ass, I am going to kill him."

Formulating a strategy based around the new information he had analyzed, as well as the information on the swordsman's intent and ability he'd gleaned through his reacting Observation, Kuma spoke the words he knew he would incite the desired reaction. "That is false. Monkey D. Luffy and Jeremiah Cross shall both meet their ends at the hands of the Marine's executioners."

An inferno of outrage flared into existence in the swordsman's eyes, and he roared, pouncing on the Warlord. "LIKE HELL, YOU BASTARD! ONI—!"

Kuma snapped his arm up, interposing his insensate captive between himself and his assailant.

Zoro choked, aborting his attack and rolling past Kuma to avoid bisecting Cross. "Sonnuva—!"

That was as far as he got before Kuma stepped forwards and shoved his chest. A shove that sent Zoro skipping across the debris and desperately gasping for breath, ribs creaking ominously.

Finally, the green haired swordsman collided painfully with a raised rock, his lungs still gasping for air and the lack of oxygen leaving his vision hazy. Even in his condition the swordsman did have enough of his wits about him to flip himself onto his hands and knees and react appropriately when he caught sight of the light building in Kuma's gaping maw. That is to say, pale dramatically. "Oh, you have got to be—!"

Rather than finish that thought, Zoro bodily heaved himself away, not particularly caring where he landed so long as it was somewhere that qualified as 'not remotely close to the starting point original position'. And it was a good thing he did too, because a second later—
"Ping! KABOOM!"

"Gah!"

—he was sent sprawling by the thermoluminescent reaction that erupted from whatever the hell was stuffed in the Warlord's throat.

Beaten, bruised, wounds from fighting Ryuuma throbbing painfully, and now partially flash-fried all over, all Zoro could do was wheeze in pain as he lay prone on the uneven ground, eyeing the melted remains of the rock he'd been lying against moments earlier. "What..." he bit out. "The hell are you?"


"On second thought, save it," Zoro interrupted, growling with effort as he painstakingly forced himself into a kneeling position. "Cross'll just tell me everything important about your tin can of an ass later."

Kuma took a moment to delete that comment from his memory before replying. "Again, that is incorrect." To emphasize the point, the cyborg hefted his captive again. "Jeremiah Cross and Monkey D. Luffy will be coming with me, and you will never see them again."

Zoro bit out a sharp tsk at that, and then was silent for a long moment, hands balling into fists. "The reason you're taking them... it's because the World Government wants blood, is that right? It wants heads to roll?"

Kuma slowly bowed his head, deepening the shadows cast by his hat. "...that is correct."

"...then in that case, how about a trade." The swordsman met Kuma's glowing gaze dead on, without a trace of hesitation or weakness. "My head for theirs. I'm not worth as much as them, and their faces might be more infamous... but..." He rammed his fist into his chest, his teeth grit with pride and determination. "I am the man who will be the strongest swordsman in the world. Given time, I'll kill a Warlord with nothing but my blade, and my name will be known the world over, more than both of those idiots combined! That has to be worth something to you! That has to be worth their lives!"

Kuma remained impassive throughout the speech, and for a little longer after it was finished. "Your claims bear merit, and I am amenable to what you propose... save for an error you have made."

Zoro tensed furiously. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Kuma's held up a single finger on his free hand. "One life in exchange for one life. It does not matter how much acclaim any one person might hold, the fact remains: one does not equal two. You may take the place of Jeremiah Cross, or you may take that of Monkey D. Luffy." Kuma bowed his head, glasses shining from the shadow of his hat. "But you are not worth both. Choose."

For one of the few instances in Zoro's life, his very core was stricken with doubt and hesitancy, and true fear etched itself across his face.

"Tsk. What the hell are you so worried about, mosshead? Sounds easy enough to me."

Both Zoro and Kuma turned their attention to a clearly exhausted Sanji, who was working his way over to them with a scowl on his face.
"You take the shitty captain," he coughed out painfully. "And I'll take the shitty bigmouth. It's not that hard. It's gonna suck like hell, of course, but hey…" The cook shot a bloody grin at his rival. "The things we do for this crew, right?"

"You—!" Zoro started to protest.

"Hey, leadbelly!" Sanji shouted, ignoring the first mate in favor of striding up to the Warlord. "You want a second head? You got one. I'll admit, I'm not as infamous as the rest of these clowns, and my dream… well, compared to them, some might even call it lacklustre…" He jabbed his thumb at his chest. "But damn it all, I've got some worth in me, and if ever there was a time to use it, it's now." He cast a wistful glance back at Luffy's body. "Sorry, Captain… guess you're gonna need a new—"

"MORON!"

~o~

WHAM!

"GAH!" Sanji winced as Luffy brought his fist crashing down on top of his skull. "Sonnuva—! What the hell do you think you're—grk?!" Any protests the cook were about to make were cut off by our captain grabbing his collar and dragging him face to face.

"If you ever do anything that boneheaded again, then I'll kick your ass inside out! GOT IT?!!" Luffy snarled

"YOU'RE THE LAST PERSON I WANT TO HEAR THAT FROM!" Sanji roared right back.

Luffy… actually blinked in confusion at that. "So, wait, you'll still do it again?"

"Me and every other person on this damn crew! Right, everyone?!"

There was a general rumble of agreement from everyone present, which I myself was a part of. "He's gotcha there, Luffy," I noted.

Luffy eyed us all before slumping in defeat. "Awww… that always worked when Sabo and Ace did it…"

"Probably because they were, ah… more… mature?" Vivi offered tentatively.

Luffy slumped even further. "That's the one thing everyone's always said I can't be…"

Vivi palm promptly met her forehead before any of us could strike ours to the back.

"Anyway," Su cut in, focusing on our chef. "Sanji, if you were laying your neck on the line, why didn't you go through… that instead of Nami?"

"Zoro stopped you, right?" I posited. "I mean, even with that ultimatum, God knows he's bone-headed enough to try."

Sanji grimaced and slowly looked away. "Ah…"

"RIGHT POSITION…" Soundbite cut in with a downcast look of his own. "But… WRONG RANKING."

~o~
"Sorry, captain… guess you're gonna need a new—"

**KRRRR- ZAP!**

"*GRK!*" Sanji shuddered in agony, his every muscle locking up from the live current invading his body. "What… the…!"

That was all he managed to get out before his tenderized frame gave up the ghost, and he collapsed into a boneless heap. Zoro could only blink at the spectacle in shock. "The hell—?!"

"Sorry, Sanji…"

Both Zoro and Kuma—one incredulous and one impassive—stared as 'Weather Witch' Nami hobbled up to them, Eisen cloud wrapped around her bleeding right leg and her body leaning heavily on her Clima Tact as she limped her way across the shattered stone. "But just this once…" she huffed painfully. "The knight in shining armor… is going to have to step aside… for the big bad witch."

"You—! How the hell are you still standing!?!" Zoro demanded. The navigator rapped her knuckles on her Eisen cloud, which momentarily broke the strong front she was putting up with a full-body shudder of pain. "My Eisen Tempo. I froze up too long to shield anyone else, and I still got hit pretty bad… but it was enough to keep me going. Meaning that now…" She glared at the Warlord with fierce determination. "I'm available to do my job."

"And what the hell—*gugh,*" Zoro coughed as his body was wracked with tremors. "Do… you think *that* is!?"

"Easy," Nami growled, her tone brooking no compromise. "I'm the second mate of the Straw Hat Pirates, ranking right below you. If it's *anybody*’s business to be offering up their lives for this crew, then it's just as much mine as it is yours! SO COME ON!" This last bit was roared at Kuma, the arm not holding her Clima-Tact gesticulating wildly. "Take me too! I'm the second mate of the Straw Hat Pirates, I'm one of the groundbreaking rookies of this generation and *damn it!* A fire blazed in Nami's eyes. "I'm the best Navigator in all of Paradise, and I was going to map every inch of this godforsaken world with my own two hands. I'm one of the best… so if you swap me for him?" She jabbed a finger at Cross. "Then congratulations on the bargain, because you won't lose a single damn thing."

For a long moment, Zoro stared at her in disbelief before frowning solemnly. "You're not backing down about this," he said more than asked. Nami responded with a defiant nod. "I've been in this position before. I've been here…" Her hand ghosted over the tattoo on her shoulder, drawing a grimace from her. "And I am not losing someone again."

Zoro regarded for a moment longer before slowly shifting his glare back to Kuma. "Me for the rubber-brain," he repeated.

"And me for the loudmouth," Nami concurred. "What do you say, Kuma? Deal or no deal? Though either way…" An offshoot of her clouds started to crackle and darken. "They are not leaving this island."
"Now show us you have some honor," Zoro growled, throwing his swords at his feet.

The Warlord stared at them, his shielded eyes and perpetually frowning mouth giving away no hint of his feelings. Finally, once more, he sighed.

"If I were to lay a hand on either of them now, I would be put to shame."

The first and second mates relaxed marginally.

"However."

And just like that the tension rammed right back to maximum.

"As you have both pointed out, for all that you have dreams, you are worth significantly less than your crewmates. As such, you will make up the difference yourselves…" The shadows around Kuma seemed to deepen into pitch-black darkness. *By venturing into the depths of Hell.*

Before either of the crew's officers could ask what he meant, Kuma raised his captive in one hand, and pressed his other to Cross's back. A large pink sphere with dots floating above it, resembling a pawprint, ballooned out of him and came to a rest in the air before them; it was almost as tall as Kuma himself.

"What the hell did you just do?!

"Do not worry. I simply repelled the pain and fatigue that Jeremiah Cross has accumulated over the last twenty-four hours," the Warlord calmly answered. "If you are prepared to take their places, then you will take them in their entirety. With the pain that the two of you have taken already, you will die excruciating deaths from taking in your crewmates' as well. Observe for yourselves." And before the other pirates could react, he ghosted his hand through the orb, withdrew a pair of softball-sized bubbles of the energy, and lobbed them at the mates.

Nami and Zoro grit their teeth, mustering up every ounce of resolve they had in preparation to weather whatever was about to strike them.

The moment that the bubbles entered their bodies, their resolves *shattered.*

"YEEEEAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!"

A full five minutes later, Kuma loomed over the pair's twitching forms, his expression still resembling a stone wall.

"Do you still want it?" Kuma asked softly.

Nami ignored him in favor of hacking up a mouthful of blood. "How… the hell is *that*… what Cross was feeling?" she wheezed hoarsely.

"*Huff… huff*… the freaking hell we've all just gone through… he got a hole in his side… he's probably gotten used to his limbs while we aren't… all those other *health issues* he has…" Zoro bit out. "Take your pick."

"Argh…" Nami winced as she slowly inched herself into a sitting position. "I don't suppose… you'd be up for a trade?"

"Ah, yes, I suppose I should show you your captain's as well," Kuma mused. So saying, he walked over to where Luffy was, replaced Cross with him, and then started to push out another bubble of
distilled suffering. And then he kept pushing, and pushing, and pushing.

Zoro's eye twitched as he beheld an orb that was bigger than Kuma. "Better not."

The only response Nami could muster was a squeak of agonized terror.

The swordsman let out a tired tsk and shook his head. "Whatever… hey, bear bastard," he said, a glare directed at the Warlord. "We'll do it. Just… let us change the place we do it, alright?" He grunted when Nami looked at him in confusion. "Don't wanna hit anyone by accident while we're…"

The navigator shuddered as she conceded the point, and slowly, painstakingly made her way to her feet, a shaky tendril of clouds moving to offer a hand to the swordsman. "Let's just get this over with before my nerves give out."

And so the two started to walk off into the woods…

~o~

The snail was tearing up by this point, fighting to stay focused. "I, AH, I SPOKE UP THEN. DIDN'T TRY TO STOP THEM, NO POINT IN IT, but… in the end, I, ah… got them to take me with them… COULDN'T JUST… LEAVE THEM ALONE, AFTER ALL. SO THEY… PUT ME on that branch… and I watched. THEY PUSHED INTO THEIR BALLS, and… and…" He started shivering in place, staring at nothing.

"What happened after that?" I asked, as gently but firmly as I could.

Soundbite jerked out of whatever hell he'd been revisiting, allowing himself a massive—if redundant—snort before powering on. "It, uh… n-not much, really. KUMA… H-HE SAW THAT they were still alive, and then, uh… h-he left, easy. YOU GUYS… YOU ALL WOKE UP A BIT AFTER THAT, A-AND HERE WE ARE."

Soundbite was silent after that, probably resting his voice, and nobody spoke, letting the magnitude of what had happened sink in. But it didn't last more than a couple of seconds before Chopper set another bottle of liquid lozenge beside him and moved back towards Nami and Zoro.

"Soundbite, can you give me some specifics on what they went through?" he asked grimly. "I'm sorry, but the more information I have, the better and faster I can make their treatment go."

Soundbite shuddered, but before I could stop him he snatched up the bottle and took a swift chug before spitting it out. I only just managed to catch it before it hit the ground. "The external wounds, they… they did it to themselves. THEY WERE FLAILING ON THE GROUND, SLAMMING INTO ANYTHING NEARBY. Internals though… I-I don't know, I think some was sheer overexertion, but… OTHERS SOUNDED LIKE THEY JUST OPENED SPONTANEOUSLY."

Chopper frowned, tapping intently at his temple. "I recall reading about a few cases of injuries appearing after dreams due to the dreamer suffering intense pain in the middle of the fantasy… perhaps this is the same phenomena, the mind making the fantasy real due to the transference of pain being so accurate?" Closing his eyes, he exhaled, and the madness eased from his still-tense frame. "Alright, that'll help, but… what about the more…" He glanced at Nami, or more specifically her mummified arm.
Soundbite shook his head. "ZORO… he was hurt bad, BUT EVEN THROUGH THE PAIN, THE AGONY, HE COULD PUSH THROUGH IT! AFTER ALL, HE'S ZORO!" For a second, he wore a confident grin, and then the look shattered. "...BUT NAMI... she wasn't that strong. She was crying and crying, literally ripping herself to shreds... THEN SHE STARTED... TO GO FOR HER OWN THROAT. I-I couldn't do anything... so I did THE ONLY THING I could. I SHOUTED MYSELF hoarse for hours, I KEPT TELLING HER SHE WASN'T ALONE, that she could make it through this. I JUST... I COULDN'T LET HER GO THROUGH IT ALONE..."

Soundbite could barely keep swallowing as he finished, tears streaming down his eyestalks. I reached out and patted his shell, as did Sanji and several others.

"You did good, Soundbite," I murmured, and everyone else echoed my words. We watched as he slowly calmed down, the tension that had been present the whole time draining out of him. Then he smiled thankfully and retreated into his shell, asleep in a second. Sanji turned to me, clearly gathering his thoughts, and then, finally, he huffed out a sigh.

"...I'm not misguided enough to keep blaming you now that I know all of the facts, Cross," he said quietly. "But this kind of oversight... the two of them almost died. Even if you knew that we couldn't do anything to change this part of the future... we could have at least changed what came next."

"I get it, and you know that I'm already beating myself up to hell and back for this—"

"Cross."

Luffy's voice ended my babbling almost before it started, the rubber man frowning seriously at me. "You did the best that you could. The only one to blame for this is the World Government. And you already know that Nami doesn't blame you. Zoro won't either. We still beat Thriller Bark, we still beat Moria, and we're all still alive. Don't beat yourself up." He turned to Sanji sternly. "And don't tell him he needs to."

"I'm not." Sanji huffed out a cloud of smoke as he looked me in the eye. "I just want to make sure that we don't end up blindsided like that again. Just... from now on, make sure your plans have a fail-safe for the worst-case scenario, no matter how unlikely it is. That's all I'm asking."

"I..." I searched for a response before finally nodding sadly. "I'll do my best. Though, just to reiterate, in this case there was no viable fail-safe. Going up against Kuma... can't win, can't run. Fighting him's as hopeless as fighting Mihawk again, and Mihawk we can try and run from if he doesn't care enough."

"Just gimme a few years..."

Chopper snapped into his Heavy Point and rammed a needle in Zoro's chest in almost a single move. "I am not," he growled out with as the swordsman slipped back under. "Dealing with him conscious. For three more hours. Any complaints?"

"Nope!" Funkfreed hastily saluted.

"Not a one!" Conis shook her head vigorously.

"TAKE THE WOMAN, SPARE OUR WORTHLESS LIVES!" Mikey wept as he shoved Raphey in front of him—
"ASSHOLE!" *WHAM!*

—only for her to spin around and clock him something fierce.

"When I'm done with you—!" the pink-bandanna'd dugong swore furiously, ramming flipper into flat—

*THWOCK!* "GAH!"

Before yelping in shock when a needle rammed into her neck.

"I believe I heard something earlier," Chopper grinned a very *twitchy* grin at her. "About *sucking side wounds*?"

Due to how fast she paled, it was hard to tell whether Raphey went down due the drugs in her system or the sheer fear that flooded her brain. Personally? I give it fifty-fifty.

"*Now…*" He *sloooowly* rotated his head around so that he could eye the rest of us, faint traces of cyan madness just *waiting* to be unleashed. "*Does anyone else have something they want looked at?*"

"Ah, C-Carue! Get me a ride back to Big Bro Sunny, I've got to make sure he's OK!" Merry yelped, swinging onto the duck's back, who shot off like a bullet.

"HEY, THAT'S MY DUCK! GET BACK HERE!" Vivi shouted, sprinting after the pair as fast as her own bandages allowed. Which, considering how he was a supersonic duck, was pretty admirably fast.

"Uh, wh-why don't we start looting the manor? Get a *niiice* and sizeable horde going so we can *appease* Nami once she's up?" Donny suggested in a panicked voice. He waited for a response…

"All in favor? Guys?"

Before finally realizing his fellow pupils had already ditched him, a dust cloud indicating their route, and he zipped off after them.

"Welp!" Boss stretched energetically, wholly *ignoring* the swathe of bandages wrapped around his chest. "I'm not going to let something as trivial as a hole in my chest—or several—slow me down. Time to get right back to training." He then snapped a flipper up, nonchalantly catching a syringe-dart out of the air moments before it struck his neck. "Sorry, *Doctor*, but my schedule trumps your ord—*GRRK!*"

Unfortunately, his gloating left him open to the *second* syringe that found itself lodged in his flipper.

"Whale… barnacles…" *THUD!*

Aaaaand that was him down.

"…Well, then. With your permission, Doctor, I believe I'll go investigate the mouth-gate to see if Absalom is still there," Robin said with a cool smile that fooled absolutely no one, walking off into the forest at a slightly too-brisk clip. Sanji glanced between her retreating form and the unconscious Nami presided over by Chopper, sighed, and followed after Robin into the woods.

"Franky, you know the way to the kitchen, yes? Could you lead me there?" Brook asked, actually sounding entirely casual. Either he really wasn't scared (probably foolish enough to think that
Chopper didn't have a way to down him at a moment's notice) or he was just… really good… at hiding his… no, he was just an idiot. "It's just that I'm parched you see. Why, you could even say that I'm—!

"Yeah yeah, bone dry, hilarious, let's go!" And then they were gone.

"Hey, Luffy! I think I just saw a ghost! You wanna go ghost hunting? Let's go ghost hunting!!" Usopp exclaimed, dragging Luffy along with him… or at least, his arm, which was presently stretching out while Luffy stared curiously after Usopp. Now, he was obviously oblivious.

"Eh? What are you talking about, Usopp?" Luffy asked with honest curiosity. "All the ghosts on the island were fakes, remember? There aren't any real ones… here, anyways. How come you're lying? And why's everyone so scared of Cho—?"

"JUST GET OVER HERE ALREADY!"

"WAH!" Luffy yelped when he was suddenly jerked out of his seated position by a particularly hard yank.

I watched after them with a bit of amusement before glancing to my side. The transceiver was still there, thank goodness; no matter what our crew had done, I wouldn't have put it past Kuma to abscond with it. I made to lift the flap—

TH-TH-TH-TH-TH-THUNK!

And then my hand froze as half a dozen scalpels embedded themselves in said bag, tracing around my fingers in such a way that twitching a millimeter would draw blood. Veeeery slowly, I turned my head, and beheld a pair of pure cyan eyes glaring back at me.

"Jeremiah Cross," Chopper intoned darkly. "I have been pushed to my limits even more than Enies over the last several hours, and this is pushing me even more. As soon as I finish restocking my supplies, I am going to sedate myself and spend the next few days sleeping off my exhaustion. So, while I have the chance, I am giving you a doctor's order: do not do anything that would invite the chance of the Marines sending someone to track us down and finish us off before I wake up, or I will tear your limbs out of their sockets and have Sanji prepare them FOR MY DINNER. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal," I squeaked. Once he turned away from me, I frowned as I considered what to do; doctor's orders aside, with Soundbite out cold, I wouldn't be making any broadcasts or calls anytime soon. I looked over the few that were still left, and nodded as I decided on a plan of action.

"Hey, Conis, could you teach me how to shoot… basically anything that's a sane caliber for people to carry? I'm not planning on using a pistol anytime soon, but I'd be more comfortable if I could hold one without having to worry about a case of leadfoot."

"Oh? Sure thing, Cross," Conis smiled, unstrapping one of her spare pistols and handing it to me.

"What about us, Cross?" Lassoo asked, some indignation in his voice.

"You two are going to be working on something else entirely. And the same goes for you, Su," I ordered, my serious tone causing all three of them to straighten. "I want you to go through what's left of the manor, every nook and cranny, and then comb over the island itself. If by some miracle we missed any zombies, salt them and free them. But more importantly, keep your eyes, ears, noses, and anything else you have available open for the Mysterious Four. If you find any of them, report back
to the Sunny; none of them should be combat ready if they're still here, but I think we can all agree we don't need to deal with another sneak attack. Got it?"

"You can count on us, Cross!" Funkfreed saluted proudly.

Su, meanwhile, grinned widely before jumping onto Lassoo's back and jabbing a paw forward. "Mush, faithful steed!" she sang.

"This 'faithful steed' is gonna chew your tail off..." Lassoo grumbled, but he still started trotting off in the indicated direction, Funkfreed following close behind.

That done, Conis and I both headed off in the general direction of the Sunny. Going by how neither of us wound up taking an anesthetic-aided dirt nap after a few steps, I'm fairly certain that Chopper begrudgingly approved.

-Three Hours Later-

Sunny, once again decked out in paper lanterns to shine like his namesake, fairly glowed in the dreary fog of the Florian Triangle. Part of my mind dwelled on that part as I secured my headphones and took aim at the bull's-eye again. In canon, Thriller Bark had wound up sailing out of the Florian Triangle by sheer dumb luck courtesy of Oars-Luffy messing with the sailing, which of course hadn't happened here. I grimaced at that; sure, we still had the Log Pose, but I didn't fancy staying in this dead sea any longer than we needed to. And after the literal nightmares of this island, I was seriously aching ready to see the sun again. Hell, I'd even take the moon and the stars if they were available, just so long as it meant I wasn't being strangled anymore. And I knew I wasn't the only one with this opinion either.

I fired twice, frowning slightly as I took in the placements of my bullets: an improvement from an hour ago, but a long shot from perfect. Like my plans, it seemed. Sure, I had spared the time to discreetly sneak another glance at Luffy's (read: Ace's) Vivre Card before coming back to the Sunny, and it was as whole as ever... but Kuma still came.

Even if forewarning wouldn't have made a difference, and even if it hadn't been due to the SBS, I should have figured he was going to come, and I should have acted on it. Maybe then Zoro and Nami...

I shook my head, refocusing my body on shooting while I let my mind focus on matters to come. The past was the past, and it sucked, but that was it. Instead of wallowing, I had to focus on what was pertinent: that we'd be seeing Kuma again sooner rather than later, and that I needed to start thinking about what I'd do when that time—

THWACK!

"Yeow!" I yelped, clapping a hand to the new lump I had growing on the back of my head. Damn it, note to self, start wearing my hat more religiously, but for now—! "What the hell was that for!?" I snapped at an irritatingly pleasant Conis, who even had the gall to keep her hand in a post-chop position.

"'That', as you call it, was what we White Berets tend to do when our trainees fail to properly focus when they're in the middle of training," Conis sunnily answered, her smile never wavering. "I hope you honestly don't think I'm going to cut you any slack just because you're only doing this as a 'just-in-case' skill. I won't have you disgracing me as a White Beret—!"

I frowned in protest. "But I—!"
"Mother—!" I clapped my free hand over my throbbing brow.

"Now, Cross," Conis admonished, shaking her finger at me as though she were disciplining a child. "Unless whatever you're thinking about is liable to kill us all in the next few minutes if you don't think about it, then I'm sure you can take a break, even if just for a bit!" Her pleasant demeanor then crumbled into worried fretting. "...uuuunless whatever it is you're thinking about actually could kill us all if you don't think about it, in which case please carry on thinking about it post haste. Could it?"

I spent a few seconds gaping in awe of her emotional 180... "Pft!" Before hiding a chuckle behind my fist, my tension slipping out along with it. "No... no, you're right, a few minutes won't be the death of us..." I raised my pistol back into a ready position, and focused intently on my target. "So, I'll just have to use it making sure that it'll be the death of someone else!"

Conis smiled anew, stepping back and giving me a thumbs up. "Clear!"

**BL-BL-BLAM!**

I set the gun down and waited with bated breath as Conis stepped up to inspect the target, cupping her chin as she looked over it. A second later, she nodded. "Three hits... two on the outermost circle and... one just grazing the bullseye? Not bad at all, Cross!"

"Tsk, speak for yourself..." I let out a frustrated sigh, scratching the back of my neck. "Come on, I habitually hit ten for ten with a two-ton cannon, shouldn't my aim with a markedly lower caliber weapon be better?"

"Hweehwee, you hit jack, loudmouth."

I cast a disgruntled glance over my shoulder as our search party returned, Lassoo leading them with an annoying smirk on his muzzle. "Something you wanna add to the conversation, howlitzer?"

"Just that you're glossing over my part in your prior bouts of applied firepower," Lassoo sniffed haughtily. "You point me in the right directions and hold me steady, while I do the itty-bitty work! Alone? You can't hit a target worth spit! Hweehwee—!"

"Wanna see how well I can plant my boot between your legs?" I asked flatly, tapping the toe of my greave on the lawn.

"—YIP!" I was subsequently treated to the unique sight of a dog trying to cross its hindlegs in desperate panic. "I'll be good, I'll be good!"

"Anyway," Funkfreed cut in, drawing my attention away from the mutt. "We couldn't find Moria or any of his lackeys. The rest of the crew even helped us out, but... it looks like they're truly gone."

"And all of the zombies have been purified, too," Lola added as she came up onto the deck, waving in greeting. "The only shadows left on this island are all in their proper places. Though..." She scowled irritably. "I'm of two minds about the fact that our tormentors aren't here anymore. Any ideas where they've gotten off to?"

"Hrmph..." I cupped my chin in thought. "If I had to guess? Kuma must have taken them with him when he left. Hogback's got a lot to answer for, and heinous though he might be, Moria is still a Warlord, and the other two's Devil Fruits are useful besides, so—"
"No… that's not… RIGHT…"

"Soundbite?" I asked in surprise, snapping my attention over to the barrel where my snail had been snoozing. Now, however, he was clearly newly awakened and blinking blearily at us. "What do you mean?"

"Forgot until now, but…" Soundbite loosed a jaw-cracking yawn before continuing. "KUMA DIDN'T TAKE MORIA. He took Hogback, yeah… but that's it. I HEARD HIM SEARCHING AFTER… THAT, BUT HE COULDN'T FIND HIM. ABSALOM TOO… and Perona for that matter. Hogback was arrested nice and clean, but the rest of THE MYSTERIOUS FOUR… THEY'RE JUST GONE…"

"Cross?" Su eyed me warily.

"I…" I frowned in thought. "I don't know. Normally, I'd guess they did the same thing they did in the story: take the backup ship that they had stashed here and sail away to regroup, but…" I shook my head slowly. "With Moria in the state he was in, and without Hogback around… I… honestly don't have a clue…"

"So they're just… gone?" Lola confirmed slowly. She shook her head in awe as she took it all in. "I… just don't know how to feel about that. To think that everything, well, evil about this place could just disappear like that. It almost doesn't seem real, you know?"

"Well…" Soundbite offered slowly. "I think I can give you ONE EXPLANATION…"

"Oh, yeah?" Su sneered. "What's—gah!"

Our powderfox's exclamation didn't need an explanation, as we were all made aware of a slight bit of misinformation. Despite our expectations, we actually weren't in the Florian Triangle anymore. Or rather, going by how some fog still hung over the island's sky, we were on the very edge of it. While half of the island was still shrouded in fog, a look the east made it impossible to think we weren't outside the Triangle.

After all, the first light of day shining over us couldn't happen in that dead fog.

"It's the sunrise," Conis breathed.

"And there's your explanation…"

"Soundbite?" I blinked at him in surprise.

My partner responded with a wry grin before starting to speak.

"If we shadows have offended,

Think but this, and all is mended—

That you have but slumbered here

While these visions did appear.

And this weak and idle theme,

No more yielding but a dream."
We were all silent for a bit as we mulled it over. After chasing a few thoughts down their rabbit holes, I decided to give him a flat look as I scooped him onto my shoulder. "... OK, that's nice, but seriously."

"**Fucked IF I know!**" Soundbite shrugged unashamedly.

"Also, wasn't there another line after that last one?" Funkfreed queried.

"**Oh, shut up and let it RHYME.**"

I chuckled at the exchange, and then perked up as a thought occurred to me. "Ooh, now that I think about it, if ever there were a time—!" I turned in the direction of the manor... and slumped in disappointment when the horizon remained frustratingly silent. "Aww..."

"What did you think was going to happen?" Conis tilted her head expectantly.

"Zoro and Nami would wake up and then Zoro and Luffy would start raising a ruckus. Come on, the timing would have been perfect!"

"Yeah, too perfect!" Lola snorted in amusement as she finally tore her gaze away from the rising sun. "Come on, that'd be clichéd as anything! What, do you think this is some comic or something?"

We Straw Hats all considered that statement for a moment, before leaving Lola as the confused odd-woman-out as we all collapsed into fits of mad laughter.

-0-

"So... how bad is it?" Nami asked, her voice almost cracking.

I flinched, glancing away from her as I tried to think of the right thing to say.

An hour or two after the sun had risen and dispelled the last of the shadows that were haunting Thriller Bark, our crew had all regrouped in the manor's ruins where Chopper had been tending to our crewmates. We'd been partway through discussing whatever the hell our next step was supposed to be, but we'd been interrupted by more pressing matters. Namely that, thanks to Chopper's improved IQ and medical skills and their very slightly lessened injuries (relatively speaking), Nami and Zoro had woken up far sooner than I'd expected. This, quite predictably, resulted in a pause in our discussions in favor of handling that particular ball of worms.

Currently, everyone was occupied with their own affairs. Chopper, for his part, had apparently conked himself out the moment the sun had risen, and was snoozing away in Nami's lap.

Conis was running long-overdue maintenance on her arsenal, triaging what could and couldn't be salvaged while Su lent a paw where needed. Usopp and Franky had excused themselves to go start working on... some project or other.

Sanji had run off to where the Rolling Pirates had started stockpiling supplies, in order to prepare the battery of dishes most everyone would need once they realized just how hungry they were. Leo, Mikey and Donny were all in the midst of committing what I was silently defining as an involved form of suicide by practicing their... artistic stylings on the still-sedated forms of Raphey and Boss.

And everyone else, well... they were all occupied with watching the little 'show' that was going on in the background.
Hence, that left me in the nominally uncomfortable situation of having to speak with Nami, who was currently fingerling the bloodied bandage that covered her left shoulder.

For those of you who have a hard time remembering, that would be the shoulder where Nami's tattoo was located.

Or, to put it another way, that was the arm that Nami's free right hand had been able to claw into while she was trapped in the throes of my agony.

"It's not... completely ruined, if that's what you're worried about," I attempted to reassure her. "For the most part, it's fine."

Nami's fragile expression wavered as she ran her fingers through Chopper's fur. "But the part that isn't?"

I flinched, glancing to the side as I cursed just how damned sharp she was. "...you ripped off one of the pinwheel's larger arms. Not the one with the tangerine on it, don't worry!" I hastily reassured her when she suddenly flinched. "...but still. Ah, but! Fret not, I took the time to ask around the Rolling Pirates, and there's a tattoo artist ready and waiting. Just give them the design, and it'll be good as new—!"

"'For the most part.' I flinched as Nami brought up the one thing I hoped she wouldn't. "That's what you're not saying, right?"

I scratched the back of my neck with a pained grimace, because... well, she really wasn't wrong. Besides tearing the hide off her shoulder, Nami had also left her own mark on her skin below her shoulder too. Nothing crippling, thank goodness, but... well, no matter what world you're from, bloody claw marks just do not scar well.

I was wrenched out of my thoughts by Nami heaving a massive sigh and clapping her hands together. "Well!" she announced with a sunny expression. "Guess that's that. Damn, and I had a rough enough time getting it on the first time, now this is just going to suck."

I blinked dumbly at our navigator. "Uh... seriously? That's your reaction?!"

Nami shot a catty grin at me. "What, did you expect me to break down or something because my tattoo got a little ripped up? Especially after you just told me that you've already found a way for me to fix it? Psh, come on, Cross, there's no way your opinion of me is that low!" Sticking her tongue out at me, she continued, "I think I actually am hurt, hurt beyond all belief! Big meanie~!"

"Ah, well... what about the—?"

"Scars? Come on, Cross..." She heaved an exaggerated sigh as she raised her shoulders in a shrug of defeat. "Your memory must be some kind of sieve or something. Remember this?" She held her palm up to me and pointed out a... pale line on her...

"Oooh, right, forgot about that," I said, grabbing my own hand in sympathetic throbbing.

"Yup~" Nami sang casually. "As you can see, I'm thoroughly familiar with how the pirate life can leave you marked. It's totally fine, no need to worry about me! After all!" She grabbed her non-injured bicep and flexed it proudly. "I'm the infamous Weather Witch, a world-class scrooge and Second Mate of the Straw Hat Pirates! Nothing can bring me down!"

"Uh, well... if you're—?"
"You realize you just spouted that shit in front of someone WHO CAN READ YOUR HEART RATE LIKE A BOOK, RIGHT?" Soundbite flatly stated.

And just like that I re-tensed as Nami suddenly flinched. "Soundbite, you little—!

"I-It's alright, Cross," Nami reassured me, looking away as a few key parts of her visage crumbled—a twitching eye here, a trembling cheek there, all very hesitant—and betrayed her true feelings. "Fine, so I was affected by what I went through, who the hell wouldn't be? That was… Kuma wasn't kidding when he said he'd put us through hell. But!" Nami took a very slow and deliberate breath before looking me dead in the eye, true steel gleaming in her gaze. "As bad as that was, it still doesn't compare to eight straight years sitting in that damn room wishing for death. I'm used to it, I'll deal with it in my own time, and for the moment I. Am. Fine. Alright?"

I glanced back at Soundbite, who was frowning but didn't say anything. Ultimately, I decided that if I could trust her with my life, I might as well put a little faith in her now. "Well… alright, if you say so. But if you need to talk or anything—!

"Then I should clamp your maw shut and make you listen to me for a change? Can do!" Nami snickered into her fist.

I glanced away with a scowl. "Well, you don't need to say it quite like that…"

"Still, while we're talking about how each of us is feeling…" I looked back to Nami and caught her scrutinizing me intently. "How about you? Are you feeling alright?"

"Um… pretty much, yeah?" I asked more than anything. "Better than I have in a while, which you of all people should know better than anyone."

"Well, I only ask because…" Nami slowly turned her head to cast a flat glare at the madness going on in the background. "Well, if you're feeling alright, how come you're not putting on the same show that our beloved captain is?"

I glanced in the same direction, taking in the sight of Luffy leaning over Zoro's bed and Zoro leaning up towards him, both of them butting heads and shouting their lungs out at each other. It seemed like even Luffy didn't need to be told not to aggravate Zoro's wounds by way of percussive maintenance (though that may have only been because of how Chopper's snoring kept spiking whenever he started to move), but at the same time, he wasn't taking what his first mate had done lying down.

"Yeeeeeaaah, I guess I can understand your confusion…" I muttered, scratching my head. "I mean, if you want me to shout at you for being an idiot I can, but… honestly, I'm satisfied with just calling you guys idiots. Which, by the way, you are."

"Hey, we saved your—!" Nami started to snap—

CLONK!

"Ow!" she yelped, cradling the spot where I'd chopped her noggin.

"You willingly walked into massive-ass bubbles of pure pain while already on the verge of death!" I snapped, shaking my finger at her. "That is the textbook definition of the word stupid!"
"Nami growled bloody murder at me, before glancing away, mouth drawn into a surprisingly cute pout. "If it's stupid and it works—"

CLONK!

"That only applies when we do it, moron!" I shouted as I shook my hand out. Damn, and I thought Luffy had a tough skull.

"DO YOU REALIZE HOW INSANELY HYPOCRITICAL YOU SOUND RIGHT NOW!?"
Nami roared in my face, teeth in full-on shark mode.

"PIRATE, Bitch, whatcha gonna do!?" I roared right back.

Nami sucked in a deep breath to continue yelling. Then her mouth closed as she finally noticed the shit-eating grin I was sporting. "...you're just screwing with me, aren't you?"

"Pheheheh, kinda!" I chortled, casually leaning back and stretching my arms above my head. "I mean, I am pissed at you for doing something so, to repeat, bone-dead stupid, but I'd do it myself in a heartbeat, so as you said, guess that makes me a bit of a hypocrite, too. That's life, neh?"

Nami glared furiously at me. But at the continued ruckus from the rest of the crew she heaved a sigh of defeat and looked back towards the rest of our crew with a goofy grin playing across her face. "Hypocrites, idiots, mannerless savages, and uncouth barbarians. We are one diverse bunch of bastards, aren't we?"

"Don't forget the monsters, demons, and assorted spectrum of psychotics!" I added.

Aaand that broke the camel's back.

"Snkrt..."

The sudden snort from Nami was enough to get me to look at her in surprise.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!

And then she flung herself onto her back, flailing around as she howled like an absolute lunatic.

All commotion around us came to a screeching halt as Nami's howling caught the attention of the rest of the crew, all of them staring in awe at the once-in-a-blue-moon sight of Nami almost literally busting every stitch she had to bust.

Luffy finally broke the awed silence by suddenly giggling like the crazy bastard he was. "Shishishishish! FINALLY!" He threw his hands up victoriously. "Everyone's alright and everyone's happy!"

"Hey, I'm not done—!"

Luffy didn't lose a beat as he 'poked' (read: shoved) Zoro back onto his back, still grinning like a loon. "We're! All! Happy! So, now there's only one thing left to do!"

Everyone slowly exchanged eager looks as we all figured out where he was going with this, and as one we all shouted what we were all thinking.

"LET'S PARTY!"

"PARTY!" Boss and Raphey roared in agreement, snapping clean out of their drug-induced
slumbers, all amped and ready to rock before blinking as they noticed one another's faces.

"Uhhh… B-Boss? Y-You've got a little somethin' on your…” Raphey gestured weakly at her teacher's face.

"Y-Yeah, you too, it's, ah…” Boss's eye twitched as he pointed back at his student.

There was silence as the two dugongs stared at one another, and then the air started crackling around them as they snapped their heads around to glare at their fellow dugongs—who, it should be noted, froze into pale-eyed statues the instant their compatriots awoke—with murder literally glowing in their eyes.

"Tell me, Boss," Raphey hissed in a low voice, slowly grinding her sais against one another, the action drawing sparks. "Is it a Man's Romance to kick the ever-loving shit out of one's comrades for screwing around with a person while they're asleep?"

"Why, yes, Raphey," Boss stated in a far too serene tone as he somehow managed to crack nonexistent knuckles in his flippers, one after another, each as loud as a gunshot. "Yes, it very much is."

The increasingly terrified Dugongs slowly inched back as much as their tails would allow. "Please tell me one of you guys has a plan…” Mikey whimpered. "Because I've got jack…"

"Can't think," Donny barely managed to get out. "Too scared. Regretting so much."

Leo, meanwhile, seemed only mildly nervous in the face of his fellow disciple and master's fury. "Don't worry guys,” he calmly said. "I have a plan."

Mikey and Donny glanced back at him with newfound hope gleaming in their eyes. "Really?"

"Yes," Leo nodded firmly, his demeanor astonishingly still calm. "You really think that I would go along with something this barnacle-brained if I didn't have a reason to think we would get away with it?"

"Get away with it?” Boss snarled. "How in Sebek's name do you think you're going to get away with this?"

"Well, Boss," Leo said, turning to look in a very particular direction. "Are you really mad enough that you're willing to take what will happen to you if you aggravate our injuries?"

The other Dugongs followed his eyes, and Mikey and Donny smirked while Raphey and Boss stiffened as they saw their snoozing doctor.

"Actually, he left a message for me in case of something like this happening."

The Dugongs' attention turned towards Merry, who had a flat look on her face. "He said, and I quote, 'If any of these morons provoke each other just because they think I'll magically intervene, the only help they'll get is me patching them up once I've woken up.'"

Raphey and Boss's anger returned in full force while the other three gulped. "Please tell me you have a backup plan, Leo," Mikey squeaked.

"Of course I do,” Leo said, notably more nervous but still possessing enough wits to slowly drag his new cutlasses out of their sheathes and position himself behind his fellow students. "Now, listen carefully. I need you both to look dead ahead."
The two snapped their gazes forward, meeting their compatriots enraged glares without flinching. "Steel your backs, draw your weapons."

They drew their weapons and held them with pride, ready to fight to the death.

"And no matter what, don't you worry for even a moment!" Leo lowered his stance and tensed in preparation. "Because no matter what… I will definitely enjoy two more seconds of sweet sweet life!"

"RIG—!" Donny and Mikey started to nod, aaaand then the words fully registered in their minds. "Wait, wha—!?"

SLAM!

Leo rammed his hilts of his blades into his fellow students' backs, launching them at their comrades even as he ran the other way as fast as he could. "EVERY DUGONG FOR HIMSEEEELF!" he wailed in a tearful panic. "I'LL REMEMBER YOUR SACRIFICE!"

WHAM! CRACK!

Leo was way off, Raphey and Boss didn't even need half a second to bat Mikey and Donny through the nearest walls before charging after him. "TAKE YOUR BEATING LIKE A MAN, YOU BASTAAAAARD!" was the enraged howl that trailed after them.

We all stared after the dust trail that the trio left in their wake. And that just wouldn't do, would it?

"PARTY!" I shouted energetically.

"PARTY!" everyone cheered anew, though this time with a bit less enthusiasm overall.

"Eh?" Usopp blinked as he and Franky walked back up to us, layered with soot but otherwise looking pretty darned content with themselves. "What's going on?"

"PARTY!" Luffy whooped eagerly.

"We heard you the first time, Cross!" the Risky Brothers cut in as they poked their heads into the room, drawing our attention to the hustle and bustle of the Rolling Pirates setting up what promised to be one helluva party.

"Alright, I'll lead the way to the kitchen!" one of them said before charging off in that direction.

"Alright, I'll start setting up tables!" the other said as he went off in his own direction with just as much energy.

"ALRIGHT! Ah, wait!" Luffy paused mid-charge, swinging his head left and right. "Who was going to the kitchen again!?"

"That one!" Vivi hastily answered, pointing at the one that had gone after the tables. She sighed in relief as he charged after him. "Carue, you go after him and keep him occupied. I'll go and warn Sanji to batten down the hatches."

"Aye-aye!" Carue saluted before heading after him, with Vivi departing at a far more sedate pace.

"I need to retrieve my violin!" Brook yelped in realization, scrambling frantically out the room.
"And I think I saw an intact piano somewhere around here, if you’d prefer," Robin added as she too began to wander off.

"Oh, that's better! Lead the way!"

"Hey! Franky! Usopp!" Merry shouted to the newcomers. "I've got an idea! Let's shoot up some fireworks! That'll be really fun!"

"Uh…” Usopp and Franky exchanged perplexed looks before the sniper slowly raised a finger. "You do realize that it's the middle of the morning, right?"

"Then we'll just have to make our fireworks all the brighter!" Merry decided.

Franky considered that for a moment before shrugging. "Eh, always did appreciate a good challenge. Come on, let's get to it!"

I grinned as everyone began heading their own way, and was about to join them myself, only to eat a sudden jab to my side. I doubled over with a woof of pain, and shot a glare at a still-giggling Nami instead. "The hell—GRK!?" I was cut off by the navigator grabbing my collar and dragging me face to face.

"First off, that was for being inconsiderate enough to make me laugh, because my everything hurts right now," she grit out, her smile clearly pained. "And second, this is the best chance you're going to get to collect Merry and Vivi, duck out, and contact the Masons, so make the most of it!"

After only a few seconds of spinning its wheels, my brain decided that that was a great idea. So decided, I nodded and marched off, and a glance at my shoulder rewarded me with Soundbite nodding to confirm that he'd already called for our co-conspirators. I had just made it out the door when a thought occurred to me. "By the way, now that you've recovered, what was that new technique you mentioned earlier?"

"OH!" Soundbite perked up. "GASTRO-BARRIER, a literal wall of noise. I JUST WRAP MYSELF UP IN A SPHERE OF POLARIZED SOUND, and it DIVERTS most of whatever damage comes my way. It's a WORK IN PROGRESS." He frowned. "Case in point: I COULDN'T SPEAK UP UNTIL THE END OF THINGS BECAUSE WHEN I USE IT, it eats up so much energy I black out."

"Real useful there, slimeball," Su drawled as she trotted past us.

"AHH, SHADDAP!" Soundbite shot back.


"ARE YOU SERIOUS!?" my partner snapped.

"What?" I blinked at him in surprise, pointing at the piece of furniture I was referring to. "It goes well with the wallpaper, that's all I'm saying."

The gastropod swung his eyes to where I was gesturing, then swung a flat stare back. "I can't tell if you're A SMART ALECK OR JUST really freaking stupid."

"Yes," I answered as I exited the ruined manor. "Now, back to business—"

"Cross?"
I paused mid-step, taking a moment to shove down my frustrations at being interrupted, and turned back towards the voice. "What is it, Lola?"

I must not have managed to keep as much of the annoyance I felt out of my eyes as I'd intended, if the way the Captain flinched was anything to go by. "Ah, if this is a bad time—!"

I let out a hiss of exasperation and pinched the bridge of my nose, forcing myself to relax before addressing her again. "Sorry, sorry, I was just looking forwards to… something. But, in retrospect, I realize we've got a surplus of time on our hands right now, so I can talk. What's up?"

Lola perked up visibly at the reassurance and gave me her best grin. "Well, first off—"

"No, I won't marry you," I deadpanned, with… actually quite a bit of desperation in my voice, I'm not ashamed to admit.

"REJECTION NUMBER 4460!" chorused every Rolling Pirate in earshot, a call that echoed throughout the castle as it bounced from person to person.

"Well, it was worth a try," Lola shrugged before grinning anew. "Anyway… I actually wanted to ask for your advice on something. Assuming that the kings of insane plans don't mind hearing mine out?"

"Ma'am, you misconstrue us horribly! Luffy is the grand supreme overlord of insanity." So saying, I swept my hat off and fell into a mock-bow. "We are his humble generals. But still," I smirked as I straightened up and put my hat back on my skull. "You have our undivided attention."

"Heheh, fair enough," Lola chuckled in amusement before glancing away at the crowd of her crewmates. "Alright, I'll cut to the quick of it: Before today, I never really had a really solid plan in mind for what I'd do when I got my shadow back, because it all seemed so far off. Best I had was get us all a ship and hopefully burn this place to the ground before running for the hills. But… your talk on the SBS, the one that punted this whole thing off? It… inspired me." A grin slowly spread on her face. "In particular, that last line you said to the maid really spoke to me: 'By daybreak, Thriller Bark won't even exist anymore'. And it got me thinking…"

Those words really got my blood going. I leaned in, intent on whatever she had to say.

"Now that Moria and his lackeys have disappeared and the zombies are all gone, and like your little buddy said, with the rising sun the curse of this island is gone too… Well." She gestured eagerly at the ruins of the manor around us. "Just look at this place! I may have spent the better part of my stay here in the forest, and I may have hated every second of it, but now that we're in the sun again? Somehow, I actually think that this emptied out 'hell of shadows' doesn't seem like that bad of a place. And besides that… it's still completely seaworthy."

Suddenly, she threw her head back and barked out a harsh laugh. "I never would have even considered this before, but you Straw Hats… after meeting you, fighting with you? I feel like doing something crazy. As soon as my men have recovered and I get their OK, which I don't doubt I'll get? We're going to change up this whole island, from the ground up, and when we're through…"

Lola's grin was at the same time absolutely massive and incredibly vindictive. "We are going to spit and piss on the grave of Moria's dream in the most poetic way we can think of. We're going to take this prison of nightmares and darkness… and we're going to change it. We'll take this hell, and turn it into a heaven!" She spun around to face me and spread her arms wide with a mad cackle. "Feast your eyes, Jeremiah Cross, because you're looking at the future site of the biggest, boldest, and above all else brightest pirate haven this world has ever seen! And that's a promise on my pride as Captain
'Marriage Proposal' Lola!

If my blood was racing before, it was positively **singing** as she finished, my mind flashing over the sheer **awesome** of what I had inspired. Destroying the enemy's base was all well and good, but **stealing it**? **Defiling it by redeeming it**!?! I couldn't quite bring myself to do more than gape and grin at what was going on. I mean, the possibilities of having an entire island like this in the hands of an ally were **endless**. Of course, it'd be hard as hell for a single crew to pull off, no doubt, but—!

…but then… I had access to more means beyond my own crew, didn't I?

My lips slowly twisting into a maddened grin, I raised my hand and clapped it down on her shoulder. "Lola, your idea is a work of pure genius. But I think I can help you make it even **better**." I stepped away and gestured for her to follow. "Come with me. I'd like to continue this in private, if we could."

Lola blinked at me in surprise before shrugging and following.

We walked for a minute or two, exiting out into the marginally clear— if rubble-strewn—courtyard of the ruins. Directed by Soundbite, we easily located the spot where Merry and Vivi had sequestered themselves. And going by how Merry was vibrating on the stone she'd pulled up and Vivi had her hands folded before her mouth in thought…

"I take it you heard all that?" I confirmed.

Vivi hummed in affirmation. "It's… certainly feasible. Places like Mock Town fall into hives of scum and villainy because of a lack of any central authority, but with the Rolling Pirates and whatever other survivors of Moria who join them running things…" She shrugged. "Plus, I can already tell you want to get Goat involved in this, so yes, I can see this place remaining respectable. What worries me are the resources, though…"

"Oh oh oh, that's **easy**!" Merry hopped in place eagerly as she waved her hand in the air like a toddler on caffeine. "She can use the wrecks! There are **loads** of sunken brothers and sisters in Thriller Bark's bottom! Some of them are rotten through, sure, but others were way way hardier, and their timbers and bodies are still good to go! Plus, I bet Ox can get **him** to spare some muscle and skill to help with it, and Sagittarius probably has **loads** of surplus he can funnel on the sly; we've got all we need!"

"Now, now, let's not get ahead of ourselves, we still need one last piece," I said, waving the hyperactive ship-girl down. Once Merry was down from 'ADHD chipmunk' to 'sugar high', I turned a serious face to Lola. "Captain Lola, from what I've seen thus far, I know for a fact that I can trust you. Implicitly, even. And with that in mind, I'd like to make you a proposition. **And not that kind.**"

"Damn," Lola swore, snapping her fingers. "Alright. You have my undivided attention."

"I would like to invite you into a…" I splayed my fingers against one another as I sought the right word. "Mutually beneficial alliance, of sorts, with our crew. An alliance that incorporates several other notable individuals, all on the down low, as you have no doubt gathered by now. Should you accept, not only would we be able to grant you the substantial resources you would require to accelerate the construction of your haven by a matter of…" I glanced questioningly at my co-conspirators.

"Years," Vivi offered.

"Decade to decades, easy," Merry corrected.

"But in the process!" I continued, starting to pace side to side. "We would also provide you with the
extra manpower and liquid assets you would need to crew, govern, and maintain this behemoth of a paradise you envision. But of far more importance…” I tossed a mysterious grin her way. "You would be part of something greater than either yourself or this new haven of yours. An undertaking, titanic in scale and scope, and extremely discreet in nature. And one whose goals, I believe, you would be quite amenable to. And all that would be required for you to join this alliance…”

I offered my hand out to her.

"Would be for you to say yes."

"...I'm caught somewhere between seeing this coming a mile off and being utterly blindsided," Lola breathed as she stared at my hand. She then snapped a cautious stare at me. "Last time I accepted a free lunch, I walked right into hell itself. What's the catch?"

"Broad strokes would be that you help us in every capacity that a place like what you're envisioning has to offer, details will be specified once you join," Vivi returned smoothly, her gaze focused on her nails.

"And just in case you had any doubts, hopefully our presence here should make it clear that your closest confidants can be made aware of this arrangement," Merry sang, kicking her legs against her seat.

"Exploding offer, by the way," I warned her. "Technically goes bye-bye only when we leave the island, but the sooner you can—?"

"I am very interested, Cross," Lola interrupted. "And I'm certain that any investment involving you guys is going to pay off big time. So…” She grabbed my hand and shook it firmly. "Yes, I'll join. Now, about those details?"

I smiled, and wandered over to a nearby couple chunks of rubble, where I sat down and placed Soundbite before me. "Knucker, if you don't mind?"

"Dialing now…" the snail confirmed, and a few seconds later…

"Pisces," came a low voice.

"Ophiuchus," I responded. "I and mine are still alive—" I winced as the new scar in my side reminded me of its presence by throbbing painfully. "—Albeit pretty badly tenderized all around. Details later, but for now, I've got big news, on the scale of Sagittarius. Contact everyone who's available and call me back, and if Goat is occupied, tell him it's priority one. But stick to codenames until I say otherwise."

The line was silent for a moment.

"I'll be back in a minute. KA-LICK!"

There was a second of silence after Soundbite hung up, a second that Lola spent glancing around at my crewmates. "And you guys would be…?"

"Copperhead," Vivi offered.

"Cottonmouth~" Merry sang. "And Nami's Callie and Zoro's Sidewinder. You'll be learning a lot more soon, hope you've got a good memory!"

Lola nodded slowly in understanding. "And Luffy is…?"
"Uninvolved, but aware of our existence, as is the whole of the crew," I answered. "If they ask or really need to know we tell them, but…"

"They're focused on the adventure," Lola continued slowly. "While you deal with the wider world."

"That's about the LONG AND SKINNY OF—PURU PURU PURU PURU!—IT!" Soundbite agreed, interspersed with the ringing. "Wow, that was quick! LET'S GET THIS—PURU PURU PURU PURU!—party started! KA-LICK! And you are live!"

"Ladies, gentlemen, and assorted dregs of society!" I grandiosely proclaimed. "Ophiuchus checking in here, with Knucker, Copperhead and Cottonmouth at my side. Glad you all could make it, and I am just as glad to confirm for you all that yes, we managed to kick Moria's hide. The SBS is currently delayed on doctor's orders in order to minimize the chances of the Marines coming calling for us while we're at a location they can readily access, but apart from that, we came out clean. So! Now that that's out of the way, who's present at the moment?"

"I'm standing in for Cancer while he's off handling certain affairs," Tashigi explained. "Capricorn is occupied with her present assignment, which is apparently quite urgent, Sagittarius is on vacation for his anniversary, and both halves of Ox are occupied with their project."

"Leaving Pisces, Aquarius, and myself on the side of the Divine," T-Bone wheezed. "And Rooster and Monkey on the side of the Damned, with Goat present as well as per your request."

"And authority matters aside, this had better be important; you made me walk away from a—! From some very important matters, and I'm iffy about letting P—! My second call the shots on it!" Foxy growled.

"Worth it for all involved, not to worry," I assured him. "For the sake of not watching our words for too long, I'll get straight to the point: I've found a new candidate for the Damned, and she's standing next to me right now."

"Well, of course, Heaven forbid we actually recruit anyone notable without your help," Apoo groaned good-naturedly.

"Chalk another one up for the Straw Hats! Haha!" Bartolomeo cackled.

"I resent those implications!" Tashigi petulantly protested. "Heck, I'll even have you know that Cancer and I have recruited a new possible addition to the Cleaners."

"Only possible?" Merry asked 'innocently'.

Soundbite ground 'his' teeth for a second before slumping. "…we're still convincing the stubborn little bastard, shut up."

"As much as I'd love to use this to torment you, are you sure we can trust whoever this is? Where did you recruit him from?" I asked.

Tashigi snapped 'her' eyes up, but not soon enough to hide the gleam of murder in them. "It's a very long story, weirder than some of the shit your crew has done, and I've already had to tell it twice, and one of those times was tastefully redacted to hell and back. I'll give you the quick version after we deal with why you called in the first place. So! Who are we considering for membership here?"

Taking that cue as it was presented, I nodded to Lola, and she stepped up and announced herself. "'Marriage Proposal' Lola, Captain of the Rolling Pirates. My crew and I have been Moria's prisoners for the last three years, and are now free again thanks to the Straw Hat Pirates. I've chosen to claim
Thriller Bark for my own now that Moria's curse is gone, and I intend to transform it from a hell to all sailors into a haven for all pirates, where they can dock, resupply, and overall enjoy themselves to their hearts' content. It's… it'll be a hard endeavor, I know, but—"

"Full approval!" Apoo, Bartolomeo, and Foxy all shouted at once.

"No more going to Mock Town~!" Foxy sang joyously.

"No more dealing with those assholes~!" Apoo sang in the same tone.

"This is gonna be sweet!" Bartolomeo cackled in finale.

"Sagittarius-grade', he said…" Tashigi grumbled, before sighing. "Alright, how much has Cross told you about us?"

"Only that you have the resources to sponsor my efforts, that the scope of your undertaking is literally global, and I think that if I couldn't figure out that this is a one-way street, I would be way too stupid to be a part of this," Lola answered, ticking the points off on her fingers.

"Then allow me to be more specific," Tsuru cut in. "We are a secret organization known as the New World Masons, assembled largely as a result of the efforts of Jeremiah Cross. Law enforcers and outlaws alike comprise our forces, allied for the same purpose: destroying the World Government and creating a world of freedom for all in its place, whether the 'all' refers to civilians or those pirates who aren't utterly amoral monstrosities… whose existence we few keepers of the peace have come to acknowledge."

Lola's eyes went wide as she took that news in. For several seconds, she was silent. Then her eyes hardened, and she nodded.

"I owe my life to the Straw Hat Pirates, and I've lived with a boot on my neck for the past three years," the Rolling Pirate Captain stated firmly. "Safe to say that the idea of a world of freedom is a damn appealing goal to me. If I accept, what do you expect of me?"

"Off the top of my head, the duties that would be expected of you would be simple enough," the elderly Vice Admiral explained. "Setting up a pirate haven as you are, you will be expected to screen any pirates that come through, identifying potential recruits for the future as well as any pirates that would be best off arrested, and passing the knowledge on to us associated with justice. Discreetly, of course, so as to avoid losing the faith of your clientele. We will also expect for the law enforcers among our number to be able to take refuge on your island if necessary, incognito of course. And naturally, you are expected to inform all subordinates you have that you can trust and swear them to secrecy. There may be other requirements, but those are the immediate ones."

Lola didn't hesitate before nodding this time. "That sounds reasonable. Alright, I accept."

"Excellent. Your codename will be 'RABBIT','" Soundbite piped in, his grin ear-to-ear.

Lola slowly nodded in acceptance, while I sent him a curious look. "I don't mind that, but why?"

"BECAUSE HER NAME IS LOLA!" Soundbite snickered.

I hung my head with a tortured groan while a chorus of palm-flesh meeting face echoed across the connection, accompanied by a general rumble of "Don't ask…"

Moving past the maddening in-joke, we proceeded to inform Lola of the current leadership roster, as well as the secret of my success. As we did so, she started gnawing on her thumb with a look of
intense thought, her face screwed up in concentration. And then, when we were done…

Lola raised her head to look at me, her face… no, her entire body blank, devoid of any tells. "What, exactly," she asked in a voice as blank as the rest of her. "Do you know about me?"

As off-putting as the sudden shift was, I was still able to just shrug as I responded.

"Not a lot; Nami befriended your shadow's zombie in the story, and you by extension, and you gave her a Vivre Card that belonged to your mother, saying she was a powerful pirate in the New World. The only candidate we knew of at the time was Big Mom, so there was a lot of speculation that you were talking about her, but… eh." I waved my hand dismissively. "There are bound to be countless others, so wishful thinking, right?"

Lola's blank expression quivered, her fists clenching and unclenching as sweat shone on her brow. Finally, she heaved a weary sigh and seemed to slouch in place. "You all have trusted me… so I'm going to trust you when I tell you that you're wrong. That's not wishful thinking in the least."

The air practically shattered it froze so fast.

"You're not serious…" Tashigi breathed, eyes wide in shock.

"No, I'm as serious as a heart attack," Lola said, shaking her head. "I apologize for not doing so sooner, but now that you all have introduced yourselves to me, I shall do the same in full: My name is Charlotte Lola. I am the 23rd daughter of the Charlotte Family. The 23rd daughter of the only woman amongst the Four Emperors of the New World, and the ruler of the archipelago of Totland. I am the daughter… of Charlotte 'Big Mom' Linlin."

Dead. Silence.

Apoo was the first to react.

"Apa… You are not a guy who does things in halves, huh, Cross?" he swallowed heavily.

"No shit…" I breathed right back, barely able to keep my jaw functioning.

On the side of the Divine, meanwhile, Tsuru was the first to recover, and eyed Lola with intense gravity. "Under any other circumstances I would question your loyalty, and rightly so… but giving up a piece of Charlotte Linlin's soul, which the Marines have literally killed to try and obtain for the past three decades, to an outsider without asking for anything in return is enough to arrest my suspicions. Nevertheless, I must insist you share your story with us. A necessity, you understand; the last thing we need is for any nasty surprises to rear their heads down the line."

Lola sighed irritably, though thankfully it didn't appear to be directed at the Vice Admiral. "I left home for love… and a bit of self-preservation. A prince from another kingdom fell in love with me, and Mama was ready to give me away for the sake of the alliance that the marriage would seal; it's a common practice in our family, but I've never liked it. I left in the dead of the night…"

Lola scowled darkly, though there was definitely an undertone of terror in her expression, too. "And I've worked to keep my head down since then to make sure that those psychotic bastards I called siblings don't come looking for me. And trust me, that's not an exaggeration. My brothers and sisters are some of the strongest pirates in all the New World, and while I might love my mother, she fosters ruthlessness and violence in our upbringing." The New Worlde sighed wistfully as she gazed into the half-mist laden sky. "She wouldn't seriously harm her own blood, but if they ever found out where I, a traitor to the family was…"
She shuddered before violently shaking her head. "From the time I left until the time I was captured by Moria, I've been laying low in Paradise looking for a husband. None but those who've been with me since the New World know my full name, and none have used it since we crossed into Paradise. Until our operations move into the New World—"

"Not for awhile, I can tell you that much," T-Bone coughed.

"—then I don't see my identity coming into play much." Lola scowled and slapped a hand to her forehead. "Though I'll have to not advertise on the SBS lest they recognize my voice and come looking, damn it…"

There was a few seconds of silence as everyone digested the tale we'd just heard. And theeeeen…

"BWAAAAAAH!"

"GAH!" Lola, Vivi and I all flinched in shock when both Merry and Soundbite suddenly started bawling their eyes out.

"The hell—?!" I questioned incredulously.

"Th-That's so saaaad!" Merry wailed, Franky's influence shining through as she wiped away at her tears and copious snot. "Having to abandon your own f-f-family to find lo-o-ove… don't give up, Big Sis Lola!"

"Riiight…" I saw a sweatdrop bloom on Vivi's head as she glanced at Soundbite. "And as for you —?"

"BLAME THE HIJACKERS!" the gastropod snarled through his tears.

"To think such t-t-tragedies could actually occur," Tashigi wept, lip quivering. "Oh, you poor woman! Pirate or not, nobody deserves such a fate!"

"IT'S JUST LIKE ONE OF MY NANNA'S ROMANCE NO-O-OVELS!" bawled… Bartolomeo!?

"Ye gods of the sea, Bartolomeo, pull yourself together," Foxy muttered uncomfortably.

"Have you no pride as a man!?" Apoo demanded.

"Oooh, I dunno." An eager grin slowly slid across Lola's face, and she slowly sauntered her way up to Soundbite. "I quite like men who are sensitive! It's a good quality to have! You know… in a hush —?"

"BRO-TO-BRO ALERT: HELLS NO!" Soundbite squawked in panic.

Lola's widened, and she tried to wave Soundbite off. "Hey, wait a—!"

"Hells no."

"Not happening!"

"THE SEA IS MY ONLY MISTRESS!"

"…sonnuva!" Lola spat.

"HEY, RISKIES!" I called towards the party that was happening a little ways away. "REJECTIONS 4461 THROUGH 4463, ALL AT THE SAME TIME!" The party roared with
laughter and a sudden burst of energy in response.

"Damn it, you little bastard, that was the closest I've gotten in years!" Lola snarled at my snail.

"**Sorry, bro-code. Didn't have a choice!**" my partner sneered in response.

"Slimy piece of—!"

"**And I thought we were getting good headway on serious business...**" T-Bone sighed wistfully.

"**Quite,**" Tsuru tersely bit out, her tone dry but… matronly? Nevertheless, it served to quiet the sobbers, and she then turned her attention on Lola, her gaze somewhat softening? What the…?

"**Lola... you truly believe that your mother wouldn't wish you ill?**"

"Eh? I don't believe it, I know it," Lola blinked, clearly confused by the question. "We're her children. Charlotte Linlin is a very dangerous pirate, I know that better than anyone, but she'd never harm us, her children. It's a fact."

Tsuru gnawed on her lip for a second before lowering her gaze. "...two years ago, the Marines received an SOS message from within the boundaries of the Totland Archipelago. The sender identified herself as one Charlotte Macarron, the—"

"27th daughter, one of my younger sisters when I left, though I don't doubt Mother's had more!" Lola completed in a rush. "She was also one of the kinder and saner of my siblings! She sent out an SOS!? Why?"

"**Essentially, the same as you: Macarron desired to leave the Charlotte Family and your mother's crew, and she was even willing to defect to the Marines to see it through.**"

"Macarron..." Lola pinched the bridge of her nose, the following words tight. "She was always sweet, but never too bright. If she used an SOS, that means my family picked up on it too. She never made it, did she?"

"**I regret to inform you that that is the case,**" Tsuru nodded solemnly. "**I was part of the detachment that sought her out at the edge of your mother's territory. We found her charred remains exactly where she said she'd wait for us.**"

"Charred..." Lola repeated before scowling furiously. "Opera or Oven, one of those bastards."

"**Unfortunately... that is not the case.**"

The New Worlder blinked in surprise. "...eh? What do you—?"

"**We did not just find her charred remains, Captain Lola.**" Tsuru gazed dead into the Charlotte daughter's eyes through my snail's. "**We found her remains in the middle of a tract of land that had been incinerated. Not just her, but everything around her for fifteen metres was reduced to ash.**"

"What?" Lola blinked again. "Wait, but that's not right, none of my siblings are capable of that level of destruction. The only thing in the Charlotte Family that could do that would be—!!" And just like that Lola paled, her face going white as a sheet. "P-P-Prometheus..." she breathed weakly. "B-But he could only—! Th-That would mean—!!"

"**Prometheus would only utilize its powers in such a manner on Charlotte Linlin's explicit orders,**" Tsuru finished gravely. "**I am sorry, Lola, but the facts cannot be changed: Your mother**
murdered her own daughter, your sister, in cold blood. And I have no doubt in my mind that if given the chance, she would do the same to you in an instant."

Silence fell, in which I could see that my partner and my co-conspirators were coming to a similar conclusion regarding Big Mom that I was. To be specific? Even if we somehow unintentionally butterflied away Luffy declaring war against her as he did in canon, I was going to be waving this little tidbit and whatever else I could in front of him to guarantee that her little culinary wonderland burned.

A sudden scream interrupted my murderous thoughts, as did the sudden sound of stone crumbling. Lola had ignored the swords on her back in favor of slamming her fist into—

CRASH!

—strike that, through the nearest stone wall. It crumbled to pieces, but she remained in place, her face shadowed and her shoulders heaving with every furious, shuddering breath she took.

"…Upon further thought, we certainly don't need to focus so much on serious business," T-Bone said quietly.

"No!" Lola bit out as she snapped her head around, glaring daggers at the Captain through my snail. "No, I'll have time to mourn and rage and swear vengeance later. Right now…" She took a deeper, more calming breath, dragging a hand down her face as she fought quite admirably to suppress her rage. "Vice Admiral Tsuru, I thank you for informing me and relieving me of my misconceptions. Now, back to business."

"Indeed," Foxy cut in. "I see now why I, specifically, was called here; I have no shortage of manpower under my command, and conveniently enough, I find myself in sudden and dire need of a large-scale punishment duty."

There was silence as everyone digested that, before Tashigi spoke up. "Um, is there anything we should know about—"

"Oh, nothing, just a mutiny," Foxy informed us with a casual—if twitchy—grin.

"That doesn't sound like nothing!" Merry yelped in panic.

"Ah, no, let me clarify. It was a mutiny, that was an utter INSULT to proper mutinies on all six oceans! Who posts a notice that they're going to mutiny THREE DAYS IN ADVANCE?!"

Lola blinked in surprise, shocked clean out of her earlier dark thoughts. "Er… are you sure that these guys aren't, too, ah… well, are you sure that they'd be of use here? Or… anywhere?"

"Actually, they're perfect for it," Foxy huffed with a shake of his head. "They didn't put up the notice because they're idiots; they put it up because their sense of protocol and decorum is through the roof. It's not intellect that they lack but common sense. So putting them to work in construction along with whatever other shipwrights and craftsmen I can spare, which is a substantial number? You ought to make quite a lot of headway in very little time."

"And tack on the resources that Navarone and Water 7 oughta be able to funnel your way too, with enough time? Fuhget about it!" Apoo cackled eagerly. "Your place'll be up and spitting in the face of the Marines in no time, apapapa—!"

"If it even lasts a day, that is…"
"Eh?" I blinked in surprise, me and everyone else present all turning our attention on Vivi, the princess's head bowed in deep thought. "What do you mean?"

"Well…" This was serious, she was worrying at her thumbnail. "I'm sorry that this only occurred to me now, but… even with the resources to build the haven Lola's proposing, what about the way to protect it? I mean, think about it: the only reason that the Marines haven't levelled Mock Town by now is that, as we've pointed out, it is a hellhole that's rotting into the ground and not worth the gunpowder it'd take to level it. Also, the pirates would just throw it back up anyway. The joys of the cheap wooden buildings.

"An organized, well-fortified haven, on the other hand?" She shook her head in denial. "Even if it didn't come from hijacking one of the Warlords' home islands, the World Government wouldn't take the founding of such a place lying down, and secrecy isn't an option as that would defeat the purpose of a haven. Am I wrong?"

There was a moment of silence as we all pondered that, followed by all of us groaning in concert.

"Damn it…" Lola sagged in frustration.

"Come on…" Merry growled as she yanked her hood down over her face.

"Seriously!?" Bartolomeo groaned miserably. "I wanted a new watering hole that was actually worth a damn! Is that so much to ask for!?"

"In this world? Apparently so," T-Bone groused.

"So, what, this whole thing is dead in the water until we can get a fleet or something to protect this place, or…?" Apoo trailed off uncertainly.

"OH, IT WON'T BE A PROBLEM!"

I blinked in confusion, glancing down at my snail. "You have an idea?"

"IDEA SHIT, I GOT A SOLUTION!" he grinned eagerly. "The defense of this place will STAY THE SAME AS IT'S ALWAYS BEEN, but better! WE'VE JUST GOTTA strike a deal with THE FLORIAN TRIANGLE, TO KEEP THE ISLAND safe."

"…What," was the general response.

"I second that emotion, this is the first I've heard of this," I said, staring down at the invertebrate with a complete lack of understanding. "Care to share?"

"YEEEEAAAH, SEE, HERE'S THE THING," Soundbite swung his eyestalks side to side in a would-be gesture of innocence. "Remember how I woke up once dawn broke? I didn't wake up at dawn, I WOKE UP AN HOUR EARLIER. BUT I DIDN'T TELL YA because I recently met and was chatting up A NEW FRIEND OF MINE!"

"And… that friend would be…?" Merry slowly queried, hesitation clear on her face.

Soundbite glanced over his shell, towards the fog of the Florian that was still hanging over half the island, and started whistling a few notes, that almost sounded like—?

"Is that… Binks' Brew?" I questioned incredulously. "What are you—?"

"YEAAAAAAARGH!"
"Wha—GAH!" I was almost bowled clean over by our tyke-sized helmsgirl suddenly pulling a facehugger and latching onto my face with a screech of terror. "SONNUVA—GET! OFF! OF! GAH!" I wrenched her off my head and held her flailing form at arms length. "What the hell, brat!?"

"B-B-B-BIG! BIIIIIG!" she shrieked in response, flailing her arm frantically in the fog's general direction. I saw Vivi staring in the same direction, a petrified look on her face that looked… familiar? Oh, yeah, I'd seen her look like that back when we saw the Skypieans when they… were…

Dreading that I knew exactly what I would see, I slowly turned around, faced the mist…

And there they were.

"…Cross, please tell me this is another trick of the light, please," Vivi whimpered fearfully, looking to be two seconds away from falling to her knees.

"I only wish…" I whispered breathlessly, not daring to move even a muscle. "And for those of you who aren't here to see? We're currently staring up at a trio of, ah, silhouettes who are staring down at us with glowing red eyes. And when I say up…" I forced myself to swallow, a futile action with a bone-dry mouth. "Thriller Bark is about the size of a gnat compared to them. Making us gnats on a gnat's ass."

"Holy shit…" Tashigi breathed, terror infecting her voice even over a hundred miles away.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Soundbite had the nerve to purr in Rod freaking Serling's cool and collected monotone, his teeth never shifting from their mysterious yet impish grin. "Allow me to introduce you all to the three thirds that compose the Florian Triangle's tripartite consciousness. An entity that is several in its aetherial bodies, yet singular in its overmind. The undisputed lords of all that lies within their boundaries. What you gaze upon… are the Obelisks of the Florian." The snail's smile took on a lot more of his usual shit-eating gleam. "FOR THE RECORD, I SUGGEST YOU ALL SAY HI. AFTER ALL…"

The fog-enshrouded horizon suddenly seemed to ripple and writhe, and the humans present all shuddered as the wind picked up into a light gale that sounded almost like a moan.

"They just did! HEEHEEHEE hooohoo hoo HAAHAHAAAA!"

After a few stunned seconds, Vivi, ever the diplomat, hesitantly raised an arm and waved to the Obelisks.

A moment later, she proceeded to faint as one of the Obelisks suddenly sprouted a limb-analog and mirrored the action.

"…Soundbite. Speak," I managed to choke out as I fought to keep my terror energizing rather than debilitating. "Fast."

"Funny you should mention speaking," the little demon chuckled. "REMEMBER THE LAST TIME I heard something speak WHEN I HAD NO EARTHLY RIGHT TO?"

I choked out some kind of noise as I made the connection. "You're hearing them through the Voice of All Things…"

"Hmmph… I suppose that I should have seen that ability coming back to the fore where this crew is involved…" Tsuru muttered.
"EEEXACTLY!" Soundbite nodded proudly. "See, while I was sleeping off my exhaustion, the Triangle slipped its way into MY DREAMS—!

"BAAAAAH!"

I jumped when a bleat suddenly erupted from Merry, who I was still holding by her hood… and who was now staring dead ahead stiff as a board? Wait a second… I tapped her cheek and adopted a deadpan expression when her whole body swung in my grip. "Aaaand Merry's just pulled a fainting goat on us. Apparently she draws the line at eldritch abominations—"

The winds howled again.

"—Sorry, eldritch… gentle-abominations?"

Aaaand now it was a whistle.

"Eldritch gentle-abominations being capable of infiltrating our dreams."

Foxy 'surreptitiously' coughed out a laugh.

"Oh, like you wouldn't do the same thing?" I snapped irritably as I laid Merry out to sleep her terror off.

From the wet spluttering sound that came over the connection, that shut him up.

"AAAANYWAYS," Soundbite rolled his eyes with a snicker of amusement. "THEY GOT IN MY HEAD, woke me up, and I was chatting them up FOR AN HOUR BEFORE THE SUN ROSE. I WAS PLANNING ON SAYING SOMETHING LATER, BUT THIS JUST MAKES THINGS EASIER! Neat, huh?"

"Can… Can we get back to the deal you were mentioning earlier?" Lola asked weakly. "These… things, these Obelisks, the Triangle as a whole, it'll… protect the island?"

"UH-HUH!" Soundbite nodded firmly. "AND MORE! SEE, BEFORE, THE FLORIAN NEVER MOVED from where it is because it didn't feel like it, and as such MORIA KEPT THRILLER BARK FLOATING within the triangle's confines. BUT TAKE THE DEAL, AND THE FLORIAN WILL FOLLOW THE ISLAND WHEREVER IT SHALL FLOAT, obscuring it from any who might seek to DO IT HARM! Neat, HUH?"

Lola took a second to mull that over before glancing warily up at the Obelisks. "And… what would they want in return?"

"THAT'S THE EASIEST PART OF ALL: JACK SHIT YOU WON'T ALREADY BE DOING!"

"Uh, come again?" Barty questioned incredulously.

"It's all about how the Florian itself works, see?" Soundbite raised his eyestalks in a proud manner. "See, there's a bit of a misconception about the Triangle we all hold: it's NOT evil or dead. RATHER… THE FLORIAN TRIANGLE IS A MIRROR, REFLECTING THAT WHICH IT HOLDS."

"Come again, again?" Barty requested. "Clearer this time?"

"ALRIGHT, LOOK, IT'S LIKE THIS!" Soundbite rolled his eyes with a huff. "THE TRIANGLE
Way back when it was first found, people were afraid of it because it looked creepy, AND SO IT REFLECTED AN AURA OF TERROR AND, EVENTUALLY, DEATH. AND WHEN MORIA SET UP SHOP AND CREATED THE HORROR HOUSE OF THRILLER BARK, the Florian reflected the darkness and terror being exuded, and was locked in the state that it's held for the past ten years. AND IF YOU JUST LEFT, ITS REPUTATION WOULD KEEP IT LOCKED THAT WAY FOR ALL TIME... BUUUUUT..." Soundbite leant his head towards me with a conspiratorial grin. "WE ALREADY KNOW HOW TO CHANGE IT. WANT ME TO SHOW YA?"

I tried to respond, but found that I couldn't due to the words dying the second they left my mouth. Actually… that wasn't the only sound that died: all sound in the courtyard slammed to a dead halt, and was promptly replaced by a barrage of sound.

"Gather up all of the crew!

It's time to ship out Binks' brew!

Sea wind blows. To where?

Who knows?

*The waves will be our guide!*"

The noise from the party going on a short distance away suddenly became the only thing that we could hear. And as it filled the air, I was treated to the most surreal sight that I had seen in all my life: The Obelisks of the Florian, the *second* most powerful eldritch beings I'd ever met in my life (so help me God, I actually have to make that distinction) had all shifted in color.

Or rather, the *entire* Florian Triangle had shifted along the color spectrum. The horizon encompassing fog rippled, and gradually but swiftly (somehow), it shifted from a bruised, eery purple, to a bright and radiant yellow. A yellow I recognized, even: it was the same shade the fog had turned to when our crew had started singing Binks' Brew while we were sailing through it!

Before our dumbstruck eyes, tendrils of the mist snaked down into the courtyard and metamorphosed, taking the forms of... of *people*, dozens of them, dancing and celebrating and having an all around good time. It was, it was surreal.

"Ugh... what's with the noi—WAAAAAaahuh?"

I glanced to the side and grinned cheekily at the sight of a newly reawakened Merry and Vivi gaping up at the sky. "Enjoying the show?"

"Are you?!" Merry retorted, jabbing her finger at the Triangle.

Following where she was indicating, I found that she was right: I most definitely hadn't been. For you see, not only had the Obelisk's palette changed in such away that their 'bodies' were yellow and their eyes were a light blue and shaped like happy, upside down U's, but they were also moving, swaying side to side almost as if—

"They're dancing..." Vivi breathed in awe.

"I'll say it again," Soundbite whispered reverentially. "THE FLORIAN IS A MIRROR. IF IT IS SHOWN FEAR, IT WILL REFLECT NOTHING BUT FEAR. BUT OFFER IT A HEART FULL OF SONG AND GOOD WILL, offer it cheer and joy and LIFE... AND IT WILL REFLECT
"And that's what we'll be doing…" Lola breathed, staring up at the dancing entities with newfound respect. "So long as we keep our haven bright and full of life, then it'll stay with us and protect us so that it can stay the same way…"

She then frowned in concern. "But… even if the Florian does stay this way, bright and cheerful, that doesn't mean it'll be pleasant. My crew and I, we've just spent three years locked in its sunless shadows. Even without the fog's gloom, I…" She grimaced and clutched at her sleeve. "I don't know if I can willingly go back to that."

The winds sang and whistled eagerly in response.

"Easily fixed," Soundbite said, waving his eyestalk dismissively. "LOOK UP!"

And indeed, those of us present did just that, and were treated to the sight of the fog centered directly overhead of the island receding to give way to an unobstructed view of the sky.

"Like I said, the Florian has perfect control of itself. YOUR SUNRISES AND SETS WILL ALWAYS BE A BIT BLURRY, AND THE HORIZON'S A NO-GO IF YOU WANNA STAY SAFE, BUT APART FROM THAT? You'll never miss the sky again… UNLESS THERE'S A STORM OR SOMETHING, AT WHICH POINT YOU'RE SHIT OUT OF LUCK."

And just like that, Lola's face lit up, a grin stretching from ear to ear. "If that's the case, then I couldn't be happier to accept! Even Mama is unnerved by the Triangle, I won't have to worry about keeping my head down anymore! This is going to be great!"

Going by the way the Obelisks waved and whistled, I'd say they agreed with gusto.

"Well, I, for one, am glad that this matter has been settled," T-Bone sighed in relief. "Now, seeing as the matter of our latest base of operations no longer has any obvious issues to address, shall we move on to other matters? We have managed to assemble quite the agenda since our last meeting."

"Actually, before we move onto that other crap!" Bartolomeo butted in. "I wanna stay in the here and now for a bit! You can't possibly tell me that I'm the only one here who wants to know the story of the Straw Hats beating Moria!"

That drew a wince out of all of us present.

"Don't sound so eager, Barty," Merry warned him somberly. "This run around? The ass-whipping ratio was way skewed out of our favor."

That little proclamation cast a gloomy pallor over our fellow Masons.

"Do you… actually want to talk about this?" Tashigi asked in a gentle voice.

I clicked my tongue as I clamped a hand down on my suddenly throbbing side. "Want to? I'd rather forget this day ever happened. But… we'll tell you anyways. Let's start at the beginning, with our plan…"

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"And… that was pretty much it," I concluded with a defeated sigh. "We woke up a few hours ago and we've only just managed to piece ourselves together enough to start throwing a victory party. So… yeah, not the most fun 24 hours of my life, I can tell you that much. Word to the wise, if
anyone sees Moria? Shoot first, ask questions never. The world will be better once we're certain he's out of it."

"Apapa... I can't even imagine it..." Apoo said, incredulity and awe in his voice. "To pull off everything you did and then take down a monster like that... Kidd's an asshole, but damn if he wasn't right: your crew is the gold standard for this generation of pirates."

"Fancy words," Merry winced as she cradled her cast. "Doesn't stop the fact that we all feel like we were used as kickballs."

"You say gold standard, I have a few other choice words..." Vivi agreed, gripping her abdomen's scar.

"Well, at least you all managed to survive. It is better to survive, even in pain, so that one might live to fight again."

"You're the last person I wanna hear that from, WAX-FACE!" Soundbite snorted.

"If we may proceed," Tsuru cut in, quieting any further commentary. "Jeremiah Cross, I've heard many rumors over the years pertaining to the Warlord Bartholomew Kuma, but I am afraid that they are just that: rumors. Whatever truth there is pertaining to him or whatever contract he holds with the World Government, it is held at the highest levels of confidence. All I know for certain pertaining to the man is his previous affiliation with the Revolutionary Army—"

"Not relevant right now," I cut in, what with Vivi and Merry gaping at me.

"And his Devil Fruit. Can you shed any light upon his true nature?"

I grumbled uncertainly, scratching at the back of my head. "Can't help you with much, I'm afraid, he was still a major mystery when I left, along with Vegapunk himself."

"Who is jealously guarded by the World Government, above any Marine's head, blast..." Tsuru tsked. "I would have liked to know how far his modifications go..."

"Now that I can tell you!" I informed her. "But it's not good news. To call Kuma a cyborg like Franky would be grossly inaccurate, because not only is Kuma leagues more advanced than Franky... he's more machine, too."

I bowed my head solemnly. "Back in my world, we had a word for what's happening: Kuma's being cannibalized by his upgrades. Piece by piece, the man known as 'The Tyrant' Bartholomew Kuma is being devoured by technology. Flesh and blood, replaced by metal and oil. And his brain... literally hardwired into complete and total loyalty to the World Government. In another month or two, Bartholomew Kuma will be dead; all that will be left in his place is a Devil Fruit-empowered android that will follow the World Government's every command. The ultimate soldier of justice: PX-0, the original Pacifista."

There was a horrified silence as everyone processed that little tidbit. And then, Tashigi swallowed heavily and spoke with a voice full of dread. "The... original Pacifista?"

I nodded grimly. "He's the prototype. The first of an entire program of unstoppable, unkillable soldiers meant to uphold justice without hesitation or remorse, all molded in Kuma's image. They're not easy to make, mind you; to my knowledge, the budget for building one is the same as a Marine battleship, so the damage and fallout from Enies Lobby may have cut down on their numbers..."
My fingers curled into fists as memories of fire and hell wafted through my mind. "They still found the money to build two dozen, and you know as well as I do that they'll acquire however much they need to make more. Mark my words: the future is plated in metal, and it is marching forward every day."

Another span of silence. "So... what you're telling us," Foxy bit out uncomfortably. "Is that the World Government is modifying other humans the same way that they're modifying Kuma, turning them into—?"

"Thankfully, no," I said with a sigh of relief. "From what I remember of what Sentomaru said when he took a few out for a test drive? Kuma was the only upgraded human. The rest were all built around corpses. Makes sense, really," I sneered derisively. "After all, you know what they say: Dead men tell no tales... nor do they ask any questions."

Going by the way Soundbite's face twisted up, I'm guessing he was showing Tashigi's expression now. "I'd... I'd really like nothing more than to move on from this right this instant, but... but before we do..." She took a calming breath before giving me a hard look. "Why didn't you mention this sooner, Cross? We might not have anyone in Vegapunk's labs, but scuttlebutt still exists, and we could have tried keeping an ear out for missing corpses, to estimate how many Pacifistas have been generated. This isn't exactly a bad thing, but... I just have to know, Cross: why wait until now to tell us about them?"

I found myself left completely flat-footed by the question. I thought as hard as I could about it, plumbing my mind for an answer, and unfortunately, there was only one response I could give. On that was weak, even to me, and yet terrifying. "I... hadn't really thought about it until now."

Tashigi heaved a weary sigh. "Cross—!"

"Or, rather..." I grimaced as I brought a hand up to tap furtively at my temple. "I forgot about them."

And if that didn't damn well freeze the air solid.

"C-Cross," Vivi breathed in horror. "Are you trying to tell me that—?"

"No no, not that bad!" I quickly assured her. "I remember the plot of the story just fine, that's easy, but... well..." I glanced away sheepishly. "Vivi, it's been almost a year since I last read the source material. I can remember the plot with ease, but details... are you telling me that any of you can recall the exact wording of a page from a book you read a week ago?"

"Quite easily, yes," a voice offered from my shoulder. "Beat it, ya photographic-memoried freak o' nature."

"Everyone has a photographic memory, Jeremiah Cross. The difference is how quickly the photos degrade," Tsuru said, and I could hear the smirk in her voice. As could everyone else, judging by the snickers.

"I have a foghorn and I'm not afraid to use it," I growled, bringing that little episode to a close.

"In all seriousness, Cross, I think our newest Cleaner may be able to help... if Cancer can convince him to come with us," Tashigi grumbled, before shaking her head. "His abilities are a bit... esoteric, and you're not gonna have a fun time experiencing them, but if anyone can help literally refresh your memories? Next to someone with a mind-based Devil Fruit, it'd be him."

"Uh, excuse me?" Lola said, raising her hand. "What do you mean by Cleaners?"
We cannot risk the knowledge of our organization spreading to hostile ears, so the few among our number capable of hypnosis or otherwise brainwashing have been tasked with ensuring that no such leaks occur by wiping the minds of any who should learn of us without being truly loyal to the cause, but who would also be best kept alive," Tsuru explained. "And on a related note, I am grateful that you suggested forming such a group, Mister Cross. Were it not for your suggestion that I be a bit more innovative with my ability, I would have had to do something quite regretful a week ago."

"Oh?" I leaned forward. "Care to share, Vice Admiral?"

"I would." Tsuru rolled her neck slightly before continuing. "A week ago, I was approached by another Marine who had discovered our existence much like I had, and asked to join our ranks. This Marine was Vice Admiral Komei, one of my success stories; he didn't show much promise when he was recruited, but I allowed his commission to go through for his dedication, if nothing else, and he has more than repaid that faith over time. He's an honorable man, decent even, and a strong proponent for the strength of the common man; through ingenious tactics and his own rigorous training, he's downed even the most powerful ability users who have the misfortune of making an enemy of him."

"A genius tactician, eh? Sounds like a Marine after my own heart," Foxy whistled admirably.

"A genius, a powerhouse, and an all-around incredible leader! Vice Admiral Komei, aka 'White Feather' Komei, is one of the most respected Marines alive!" Tashigi gushed ecstatically, sounding on the verge of outright squeeing. "You mean to tell me he's a Mason now!?!"

"Hmph, not in this lifetime. I wiped his memory and sent him on his way almost as soon as he made the proposition," Tsuru snorted dryly.

"…eh?" Tashigi blinked dumbly, her smile frozen in place.

"Why would you—?! Ooooh…" Foxy grimaced in realization. "Right, a tactician I would like, meaning… intellect combined with an enormous survival instinct?"

"Exactly, mister Fox."

"Someone wanna speak English for us normal yahoos!?" Bartolomeo demanded.

"It means," Foxy said. "That he's essentially a very big, very smart rat. If we'd let him into our ranks, he would have been loyal for a time, and then if he ever got a hint that the New World Masons would be going under, he'd jump ship and sell everyone else out to save his own skin. Not out of malice, but simply because it'd be the smartest move to make."

"Precisely," Tsuru nodded regretfully. "I told Komei as much, and he did not deny that it was a likely scenario. Still, he was very gracious in my rejection, and willingly subjected himself to the memory wipe. He walked away unscathed, and life continues on as normal, though now I have my eye on him, and I also suspect that this will not be the last time I see him. Hopefully the Tone Dial he recorded for himself in the future will prevent any… untoward incidents."

I sighed, as did a few others. It was unfortunate, but, well, we couldn't count on everything going our way.

"That really is disappointing, though," Tashigi wept miserably. "His membership would have helped us grow our numbers much faster. So many recruits look up to him, especially since he got to where he is without relying on a Devil Fruit."

"I seriously resent those implications…" Merry grumbled petulantly.
"We know, Merry," Vivi said sympathetically, before looking back at Soundbite. "Any other recruitments that we should know about?"

"Well, one of our more ambitious plans has been to plant a mole within the walls of Impel Down," T-Bone sighed in a tone that did not foreshadow anything good. "Unfortunately, it seems to be as difficult for anyone aside from incoming prisoners to get into the gaol as it is to get out of it; the institution is not, strictly speaking, in the World Government's chain of command, but rather self-polices and handpicks its recruits with rigorous discipline. We cannot truly 'infiltrate' them as they are a closed system, and as such there is nowhere we can feasibly enter. For the time being, I am afraid the walls of Impel Down are sacrosanct."

"Regretful, but…" I sighed in defeat. "That's life, I suppose. We'll just have to approach from another angle once we really have to."

"A 'Get out of Jail Free' card would have been nice, though…" Apoo sighed longingly.

"Mm, quite," Tsuru hummed in a disapproving tone. "Still, while we're speaking of Impel Down, there's something you should know. Something that Jonathan has recently discovered, and is investigating with the aid of the Blackarm Instructors."

"The Black—?" I sat up straighter as I made the connection. "You mean the Marines who explicitly stone-walled Jonathan's offer to join us because they rightfully hate pirates more than the average good Marine?!"

"It's that serious."

"Ulp." I tugged nervously at my collar. "And this discovery would be…?"

Tsuru's gaze became steely. "There are prisoners missing."

"… er…" I glanced away sheepishly. "If you mean from Impel Down, I can—"

"I'm interested in that and will be addressing that later, but no," Tsuru shook her head in denial. "I mean there are prisoners missing from Justice itself."

I turned that phrase over in my head every which way I could, but no, there wasn't a single way that sounded good. "Explain. Now."

Instead of addressing me, the Vice-Admiral turned her attention to my crewmate. "Princess Nefertari. I trust you'll recall the incident involving Prince Calidin of Thoulosa a year ago, in the Kingdom of Kazlok, the South Blue?"

"Ergh, I wish I didn't. I always knew there was something wrong with that little monster's head…" Vivi shook her head in disgust before eyeing the rest of us. "For those of you not in the know, Calidin was a disturbed product of royal inbreeding who was high on the line of succession for Thoulosa's throne. And when I say disturbed, I mean 'missing pets and terrified servants' disturbed. But as a royal, it was all tolerated and swept under the rug… until one day he snapped and went on a broad-daylight spree in the neighboring kingdom, Kozlak. Now, obviously the bastard was arrested by the World Government, but the Kingdom of Thoulosa raised a stink about wanting him back. It was a front page sensation for days—!" Vivi suddenly choked off, her eyes wide in terrified realization. "Until… Until suddenly it just stopped. Any mention of Calidin disappeared…"

"As did Calidin himself, in person and paperwork alike," Tsuru completed with the utmost solemnity. "The mad prince of Thoulosa fell off the face of the seas."
"And… you're sure he wasn't discretely shipped off to Impel Down or…?" Merry offered uneasily.

"Corpses and prisoners alike leave traces, but here there are none," Tsuru replied. "Without any warning, the prince vanished and with him the entire scandal. And he is far from the only one."

Lola swallowed heavily, cold sweat gleaming on her brow. "H-How many?"

The elderly Vice-Admiral's lips twisted in a grimace. "The better question is 'how long', and the answer… is centuries. Over the course of the World Government's existence, there have arisen many individuals like Calidin: sensitive prisoners and criminals, who could not be executed or imprisoned through normal means without blowback or due to some form of extenuating circumstances. Some of these individuals were of political importance, others were 'mentally disturbed', and would have been threats in both general population and solitary confinement alike… and of course, more than a few earned the personal ire of the World Nobles. What they all share in common is that once their incidents reached peak complexity, they vanished into the aether, never to be heard from again."

"...I'll repeat," Vivi whispered in horror. "How many?"

"Since the start of this Age… several hundred, without a trace."

"And… no leads, whatsoever? Nothing!?" Bartolomeo choked out.

Tsuru slowly closed her eyes. "There is one thing. A single word, in a scant few locations, but… I doubt it to be random."

"And that would be…?"

"...Darkness."

"...the one fruit that could explain it, and we know for a fact that it's impossible. Perfect." I clawed my hand down my face with an angry sigh. Then I looked up again as a thought occurred to me. "Wait a second, what about CP9? This seems like something they'd do."

"A reasonable assumption, but sadly one I have already exhausted," Scorpio interjected with a shake of his head. "I have already asked Lucci, the oldest of the current generation, about those who vanished during his tenure as an agent, but he knows not a thing about any of them. It is possible he simply wasn't involved, but…"

"No, I get it, Soldier of Justice, if anyone would have been involved…" I hummed in thought. "If things were different I'd finger Aegis 0, but they're exclusively at the World Noble's beck and call, so they'd only fit if all the prisoners pissa them off, but that's not the case…" I clapped my hands with a firm nod. "Right, this is definitely a deep rabbit hole, and I'd rather know where it leads rather than wait for something to leap out and gnaw at us. You'll keep us informed if you learn anything?"

"Of course," Tsuru nodded.

"AND MOVING RIGHT ALONG!" Soundbite piped up eagerly. "BONEMEAL! YA MENTIONED TALKING TO LUCCI! I take it that means our favorite band of unscrupulous assassins NOW WORK FOR US?"

T-Bone's mouth twisted into a self-satisfied grin. "After a fashion, yes. They contacted us two weeks after Enies Lobby, and most of them accepted the offer at the outset. Rob Lucci was a bit more difficult, but after some… persuasion on my part, he willingly swore his loyalty to us. However, the moniker of CP9 is obsolete; they now call themselves 'Jormungandr.'"
Soundbite's eye and grin both twitched slightly. "As in the Asgardian serpent of Ragnarok fabled to, what was it again… OH RIGHT! POISON THE HEAVENS?"

"They are not subtle about their opinion of us, are they?" Merry smirked.

"Actually, that name was my suggestion as their new commanding officer."

I blinked in surprise before adopting a flat expression I prayed got through to T-Bone intact. "Come again?"

"I have personally assigned the agents of Jormungandr to act as a, ah, precaution, if you will," T-Bone explained succinctly. "Should any of us or, heavens forbid, all of us wholesale, abandon our mission and turn our backs on our morals, they will see to it that we do not live to see many days past our betrayal."

"WHY THE HELL WOULD YOU DO SOMETHING LIKE THAT!?" Bartolomeo yelped in panic.

"APAPA! I'M WITH THE HOOLIGAN, WHAT THE HELL, T-BONE!?" Apoo wailed.

"It's nothing personal, you dunces," the dilapidated Captain huffed with a weary roll of his eyes. "And in case you didn't quite grasp my meaning, they're hanging over my head too."

Tashigi's eyes widened in realization. "You… set up a Damocles Sword contingency?"

"Precisely," T-Bone nodded. "We are all influential and powerful individuals, and it would be too easy for us to abuse our power. Should that occur, I would prefer that we have someone ready to lay us low rather than allow our good memories to be sullied by our own actions. I trust you all can agree?"

Tsuru snorted rebelliously. "I would have preferred to be informed of such a decision before the blade was swinging over my neck, but, now that it is present, I see no reason to protest it."

"You're kidding, right?!" Foxy whimpered, his face sweating like a stuck pig.

"I, ah, actually get where they're coming from…" Lola rubbed the back of her neck with a wince. "I mean, look at Moria. Before Kaido killed his crew, he was a pirate like us… but then, one bad day turned him into a monster. I don't know about you, but… if I could become like him?" She shuddered heavily. "No. No, I'd rather die first."

The other Damned were silent for a bit before grumbling out their assent.

"Not like it's the first time I've had a gun to my head anyways," Barto grumbled reluctantly. "Still don't like it though."

"Look at it this way: You planning on doing anything really stupid any time soon? And you know the kind of stupid I mean," Apoo asked.

"No?"

"Then ya got nothing to worry about."

"Mrph, I suppose."

T-Bone nodded firmly. "Glad to hear it. That all being said, I assure you all that that is merely their last-resort order. In terms of current operations, well…" The grin T-Bone bore would have sent
most anyone else running for the hills. "Suffice to say that we of the Divine have have assigned them an assignment we found… fitting."

"Allow me to elaborate," Tashigi offered primly.

-I-

"I'm sorry, I must have misheard you." Sengoku whipped his glasses off in order to better stare in disbelief at the World Government—not Marine—officer standing before him. "You're trying to tell me that we have lost all contact, and there is no trace of where they are or where they may be? No snail calls, no notes, no sign of forced entry or exit in their bases? Because that is what you imply when you say that they have disappeared."

It was a true testament to the quality of the World Government's training that the officer showed not even a hint of emotion as he nodded. "I am afraid so, Fleet Admiral, sir."

Sengoku tried to remain calm. He really did.

"HOW IS IT THAT NOT ONE, BUT TWO CIPHER POL UNITS HAVE DISAPPEARED?!"

But ultimately, it was a losing battle, and one that shook more than a few walls in Marine HQ.

Once his indulgence was fulfilled, however, Sengoku pinned the officer with a scathing glare. "I assume that CP1 through CP6 have already been assigned to investigate the disappearances of 7 and 8?"

"Cipher Pol 5, yes," the officer nodded in confirmation. "Cipher Pols 1 through 4, however, are maintaining their current operations, while 6 has been given other orders."

It didn't take a genius to make the leap of logic. "They're being put into hiding?"

"It was deemed prudent, yes," the officer confirmed. "Considering how they were the next to be targeted, we assume that so long as they remain untouched, CP5 will be able to investigate in peace."

Sengoku started to nod in understanding as he conceded that the precautions being taken were valid ones, before freezing as a thought occurred to him. Slowly, he turned an acidic gaze on the officer. "Did anyone," he ground out. "Think to inspect the security of CP6's safehouse before they went to it?"

If the way the officer froze up before bolting out of the room like his ass was on fire was anything to go by, the answer to that question was a resounding no.

"Puru puru puru puru!"

Sengoku turned towards the snail on his desk, who was already sweating and cowering in his shell in the face of his rage. Breathing hard, Sengoku picked up the receiver.

"If you are calling to report that the Cipher Pol 6 unit has disappeared, for the sake of your well-being, I suggest that you hang up now."

"…KA-LICK!"

It was a testament to how much practice Sengoku had acquired over the past few months that he actually managed to keep himself from blowing Marineford's roof off again. "Why the hell did I want this job again…?" he lamented miserably.
"MWAHAHAHAHAHA! Oh, that's just poetic justice if I've ever seen it!" Merry cackled.

"If I didn't think we were all completely insane before," the Lieutenant Junior Grade breathed reverentially, a goofy smile shared on Soundbite's face.

"When this comes to light…" Vivi slowly shook her head with a dumbstruck expression. "Th-There's just no better way to put it: They are going to lose their shit."

"That was our intention with the endeavor, yes," Captain T-Bone chuckled malevolently.

"…Have I said recently that I'm very happy that I'm on your side? Because I am very happy that I'm on your side," Foxy chuckled weakly.

"Who ya talkin' to, Foxy?" Merry leered. "Him, or us?"

"BOTH!" both the fox and the would-be cannibal roared, while the DJ settled for cackling.

"Alright, moving on from this deliciously evil plan," I said with some reluctance. "Does anyone else have any topics they'd like to bring up?"

"Actually, Cross, I have a plan in the works, too," Apoo offered. "A plan to take our rivalry to a whole new dimension!"

"A little late for that, I'm already here," I snarked, and in response to the groans, I added, "Oh, come on, how many people have even been able to make that joke? But fine, what exactly are you talking about?"

"It's simple, really."

All present turned their heads upward at the sound of flapping wings and a new voice. The reactions varied: Vivi and Lola were taken aback, Soundbite's eyes narrowed somewhat, and Merry waved warmly. "Hi, Coo!"

"Coo!?" I myself stuck with exclaiming in shock. "What the hell are you—!?

"We're talking about a head-to-head between the realms of audio and visual," the seagull smirked proudly, a smirk that was directed at my snail. "Long time no see… slimy-crawly."

Soundbite recoiled in shock, letting loose a bark of laughter. "AIN'T EVER GONNA BE LONG ENOUGH, FEATHER-RAT! STILL, THOUGH." He eyed the bird with an appreciative air. "Glad to see you've finally grown a spine under all the fluff."

"Heheh, what can I say?" Coo chuckled as he landed on some rubble, dipping his newsboy cap down. "I'm done being on my best behavior. After all, what's the point when I'm about to undergo a change of profession?"

I jerked my head in shock. "Repeat that!?"

"I've reached my limit on suspense for the day, can we get on with it?" Bartolomeo groused.

Coo's response to that was to look off to the side, his expression darkening. "How much do any of you all know about the Editor in Chief of the World Economic Journal, 'Big News' Morgan?"

I could only shrug helplessly. "Jack all, but going by your tone I'm gonna take a wild guess and say
there's nothing good to know?"

"Well, let me summarize," Coo snapped, beak doing the same. "The bastard is a pompous, overly fluffed hack of an editor who has morning tea with Charlotte 'Big Mom' Linlin, brunch with any number of World Nobles, lunch with the Marine's Propaganda and Public Relations offices, and who prefers that his dinners be any honest and good journalists, spiced with their own integrity, and sautéed and served on a spit."

"Or, to summarize," Vivi offered, looking like she smelled something foul. "He's a headline-seeking gloryhound whose pockets are as wide open as the pit of Enies Lobby. Trust me, it's standard practice amongst the nobility to cross-reference every paper ten times over."

"Alright, he's an ass, we get it," Soundbite muttered.

"Undeniably," Coo nodded right back. "And as such an ass, we News Coos really have no love for him. But, our whole life, he's been our only option for employment, it's how things have always worked for as long as we live, yadda yadda yadda…" He spun his wing for a bit before grinning and pointing a feather at me. "And then you guys come along, and show us all something quite eye-opening: that the times… oh, they are a-changin'."

"So, a number of News Coos decided to look into batting for the other side of the law on the sly," Apoo picked up, his grin back in place. "And they all had the smart idea that, seeing as you're already busy with your own schtick, they oughta try their luck with someone like-minded and like-skilled, but different. I.E., ME! APAPAPA!"

"You're doing pirate radio. Well, we're gonna be printing and publishing pirate papers!" Coo nodded proudly. "A journal that reports the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, no matter what anyone says or how they try and stop us! Ladies and gentlemen…” Coo spread his wings and puffed his chest out. "You're looking at the ace reporter of the brand-spankin' new publication that's going to take the world by storm: the Free Feather Report!"

There was a round of vaguely pleased muttering that prompted Coo to slump over in depression. As a result, Tashigi speaking up caught everyone's attention.

"Um… Apoo? Not that I don't love this idea, because really, having an honest newspaper—and an alternative to Cross—"

"OI!/ "TRAITOR!"

"—would be fantastic, I'm assuming you've actually planned this out?" Tashigi asked.

"Of course I have!" Apoo said, a touch of offense in his tone. "I'm good at planning things for the long term!" His cocky grin remained in place for a few seconds before it faltered somewhat. "Apa… w-when I have to be, anyways… A-And besides, the News Coos themselves had most of the groundwork laid out before they came to me! They just wanted me because my ship's a great mobile base for their paper, and I'm almost as good a rabble-rouser as Cross!"

"Who, by the way, is responsible for us being so prepared in the first place," Coo picked up with a smirk. "See, ever since the SBS got started, a lot of the world's population has been wising up to the fact that 'dumb animals' isn't a very accurate label… in both senses of the word whenever the living snot-bubble is present."

"I WILL give you a Muppet's voice, YOU LIVING DUSTER, don't think I won't."
"Any-ways," the gull continued with a roll of his wing. "Ever since you started raising global opinion of us, we Coos have been getting a lot of generous tips whenever we make our delivery, and we've been saving them up in a communal fund since a little before you burned down Enies Lobby. And considering how we're a literally global organization with a population-wide clientele, well…" The bird's grin spoke volumes.

"Holy shit… and our paychecks are worth how much again!?" Tashigi incredulously demanded.

"In light of this? Nowhere near enough," T-Bone grit out in a long-suffering tone.

"Heheheheh, yeeeaah," Coo nodded proudly. "Couple that with the fact that most of us are completely literate after doing our jobs for so long, along with help putting together the resources thanks to the On Air Pirates and Samson's Transponder Snail Palace, and you have the beginning of an independent pirate newspaper that's gonna match the SBS in both scale and impact!"

"Over a hundred Coos are already on our side," Apoo boasted. "And at the rate things are going, not only will the first issue will be ready to print and publish in a month, two at most, but when we put it out, we'll be leaving the WEJ stripped bare in the process. Like I said: get ready, 'cause this rivalry's going to the next level!"

"…Wow," was all I could get out, and weakly at that. I mean, really, what else could I say? "This is… holy wow… Nicely played, Apoo. Nicely played indeed."

"Apapapa! Gotta keep pace with you somehow! Your captain might be my opponent as a pirate, but when it comes to raising hell, it's you I butt heads with! If you think I'm gonna slack off even an inch, you've got another thing coming!"

"Heheheh!" Coo flicked his cap's brim up, feathers ruffling in pride. "I'm betting that once this picks up, even your loud-mouthed pest won't be able to keep disrespecting us!"

"FAAAAT CHAAAANCE," Soundbite drawled in a sing-song tone. "YOU'VE GRADUATED TO THE TIER ABOVE the rest of the world's feather-rats, I'll give you that. BUT THE ONLY BIRDS I'VE MET AND ACTUALLY LIKED are CARUE'S SQUAD and Terry and Isaiah."

That drew a horrified shudder from the bird. "Oh, don't even mention those two lunatics to me, I oughta peck your eyes out for giving them my name!" Coo groaned. "Ever since I stopped by Navarone, all I can hear is 'Swagger, Bear Glove, Swagger, Bear Glove.' It gives me a headache, it does~"

"And there goes any chance of you CHANGING MY—"

"After all, every News Coo knows that none are greater than the Wing and Hammer flock!"

A pause followed those words. Then, slowly, Soundbite's face split into a grin.

"Congratulations, NOW I like you," he drawled. Then he glanced at me. "SHOULDN'T YOU BE headdesking right now?"

"We have established that I'm having problems remembering details," I said through gritted teeth. "Meaning I have no brain cells to spare. It is taking everything that I have to not do it. Don't push me or I will use your shell as a convenient blunt instrument, both now and in the future."

Soundbite recoiled fearfully before adopting a scowl. "Why do you have to have an excuse that I can't argue with?" he grumbled before looking back at Coo, a curious look in his eyes. "BY THE
"Way, you mentioned that you're working with Samson?"

"Yeah, but he's a silent partner," Coo responded with a dismissive wave of his wing. "He's privy to the details and he's open to providing whatever resources he can, but he doesn't want his name anywhere near it. We don't begrudge him for it."

"That's good enough," Soundbite grinned. "See... my gear's been giving me a few ideas here and there. Specifically, in regards to my cousins..."

---

The most impactful meeting of the New World Masons to date went on for a while longer after that as we hammered out the finer details of the Free Feather Report, the abbreviated version of Tashigi (potentially) recruiting the new Cleaner, and the supply transference and security measures for the pirate haven, including rechristening it. From there, after gathering a status report on the new additions to our number—and between Navarone and Foxy, suffice to say that Lola wouldn't be short on helping hands—the meeting finally came to an end.

Our return to the party was eager, Lola to share the news with her crew, Vivi and Merry to enjoy the party, and me? Well, part of it was the party, but with our newly established bargain with the Triangle, I could start up the SBS after all. But there was one tiny detail I had to hammer out first.

"Excuse me, Cross."

I glanced at my side to see Funkfreed walking past me, snatching Soundbite from my shoulder in the process and with Lassoo on his back. Wait, what?

"We need to work something out, we'll be right back," Lassoo called as they headed into the distance. I stared dumbfoundedly for a few minutes before ultimately shrugging it off; if they didn't want to tell me, I guess it was their business.

It worked out anyway, I reflected as I walked towards the piano, where ivory bones were tickling the ivory keys. This... was something I'd rather do solo.

"Taking requests?" I asked casually as I leaned back on the piano with my elbows, my eyes never leaving the party. Or rather, never leaving the guests of honor who were located on the edge of the party courtesy of one of said guests forcibly keeping the other in place whenever he tried to leave.

"If you can hum it, I can try and fake it," Brook mused, wholly engrossed with his craft. "Who knows, perhaps I'll even recognize that which you wish for."

"Then in that case, how about..." I glanced over my shoulder at him. "What I saw on Kuma Way?"

"Yohoho~" Brook chuckled with honest amusement, his digits never missing so much as a note. "Ahh, but of course you'd know. I'd have joined them, you know, but with how I was pinned by the rubble—"

"No need for excuses, I don't doubt you would have jumped in if you could," I interrupted. "Just... your personal point of view?"

"Ah, well in that case..." Brook's empty gaze grew somewhat far off as he played on automatic. "I can only imagine what it must have looked like once, but to see it again up close, and worse... and yet..." Brook followed my gaze, eyeing my fellow Mates. "They knew. They knew exactly
what they were getting into, even before they took that first taste… and they did it regardless. Such bravery is only witnessed once in a generation, and yet I've seen it more times in the past day than I ever did while I still had my flesh. Truly, what a time to be alive…” His grin widened as he returned his gaze to the ivories, the music gaining a newfound uplifting tone. "And what peerless peers you have. They are both quite incredible, aren't they?"

And as I watched Nami keep Zoro in place next to her, laughing as he grabbed her cheek and stretched her grin out, all while she jabbed her finger in his side, I realized something.

"You're right," I breathed softly, pushing myself off of the piano. "They are incredible. And I'm gonna make sure that I never take that for granted again."

And so I set off. First to speak with Robin and Luffy, and then to go and get what I needed, so that I could do what I needed—needed—to do.

Because after everything those two had done for me, both now and in the past, how could I not return the favor?

-o-

A fair distance into the deep forest of Thriller Bark, far from any prying ears, Cross's three amigos exchanged looks with each other. It was hard to tell what they were thinking, but it was plain to see that they were not, by any stretch of the word, training. And were anyone familiar with them in hearing range, they would immediately know that they were intent on nobody overhearing them. After all, for the first time in months, they were not speaking the human tongue.

[So, what's the deal with this secret meeting?] Lassoo asked cautiously.

[And with you actually lowering yourself to our level to ask me to swipe you without anyone noticing?] Funkfreed concurred, before wincing and scratching the back of his head sheepishly. [Ah, no offense, of course, it's just that I've never actually heard you speak normal before, so—!]

[Desperate—gugh, hold on.] Soundbite shook his head diminutive head, wincing. [Sorry, hard to turn it off. Anyway, desperate times, desperate measures. I…] The snail's expression crumbled sorrowfully. [I… can't risk someone overhearing this, but if I have to keep it to myself I'll freaking pop my shell…]

The two half-animals shared knowing glances.

[You didn't tell them everything.] Funkfreed deduced.

[And it's not light, either.] Lassoo chuffed, settling in for a long talk.

Soundbite nodded solemnly. [Don't get me wrong, Cross is… well, you both know what I mean, of course—]

The Zoans exchanged looks again, but this time they shocked.

[—but… sometimes…] the Noise-snail trailed off, his gaze stretching off for miles. [Sometimes, there's just some shit you can't say to anyone…] He snapped a warning glare up at them. [EVER.]

The animal-weapons raised what limbs they could in surrender, no small amount of fear in the movement due to the air around them suddenly buzzing.

Soundbite let the threat hang in the air before slumping in defeat. [Because if he ever heard this… I'm
almost positive that it would destroy him.]

~o~

And so the two started to walk off into the woods...

"HOLD IT!"

Before a full blown medley of their crew roared out in perfect synch. A kind of synch that could only be achieved by—!

"Soundbite!?" they blurted out, spinning around to catch sight of the omni-vocal snail perched on a stray chunk of rubble.

"YEAH, ME!" he spat, panting heavily from the exertion of crawling from wherever he'd landed. "IN CASE YOU DIDN'T GET THE MEMO, YOU CAN'T KEEP A slimy bastard down!"

"Will you be putting your life on the line as well, 'Voice of Anarchy' Soundbite?" Kuma asked.

"NO!" Zoro barked at Kuma and Soundbite both.

"Soundbite, you can't! If you even brushed that stuff—!" Nami started to plead.

"How stupid do you think I am?!" Soundbite snarled indignantly. "ACTUALLY, DON'T ANSWER THAT. The point is, I know that that shit would kill me. IT'S ALREADY GOING TO DO A NUMBER ON YOU two... AND I WANT TO BE THERE WHEN IT DOES. I want to make a difference, however I can... for once in my life..."

Nami blinked in shock, her expression slowly shifting to pity. "Soundbite..."

"I COULDN'T DO SHIT TO ENERU, ONLY JUST MANAGED TO STOP THE WHITE FEATHER-RAT, and there's jack-all I can do for him now," Soundbite listed off in a dead tone. Then, he slowly lifted his eyestalks and gazed at her in tears. "Don't... don't take this from me... please..."

While Zoro and Kuma stared back at the snail with vaguely pitying dead-eyed expressions, Nami shuffled over to him and pick him up. Wordlessly, she carried him back towards Kuma and Zoro, who were already moving alongside the spheres of pain.

They moved in silence, most of their strength focused on getting their legs to move, and eventually came to an area that had already been mostly flattened from the war against Moria. Zoro stopped, and Kuma positioned the ball of Luffy's pain before him and the one of Cross's alongside it.

Nami hung back, using her Eisen clouds to place Soundbite on a branch within the view of the action, but far off the ground. Then she discarded the majority of her staff, the clouds retreating inside, as she moved back to face her fate with a benign tube of metal clutched in a deathgrip. Kuma regarded them both for a moment.

"...You would truly sacrifice your dreams for their lives?" he asked at last.

"...We're Straw Hats. Any of us would sacrifice our dreams for the rest of us without a second thought if that was what it took..." Nami picked up, hesitating for a bare moment. Then her resolve crystallized.
"But it's not just that. All of us have dreams of changing the world; Chopper's going to invent a true Panacea, Robin's going to uncover the Void Century, Vivi's going to become queen of an entire kingdom! And sure, we're making an impact..." She shook her head. "But Cross is doing so much more. He's doing the impossible, taking a crowbar to a monolith that's been crushing us all for centuries. He's started something incredible... and I can't, in good conscience, let it end here. Too many people depend on him, there's too much weight in his words. He just... he can't die now.

So..."

Nami's mouth slowly lifted into a serene smile. "If the price to pay for him to follow his dream is my atlas, a dream that someone else can and will pick up, and can and will accomplish? Well..." she chuckled self-deprecatingly as she scratched the back of her head with a projected air of nonchalance. "You know how much of a miser I am, right? No way in hell I'd pass up that kinda bargain!"

"As for me," Zoro said, a smirk on his face that was somehow bestial as well as peaceful. "Kuina may be pissed at me... but I made my decision long ago. The World's Greatest Swordsman has already sworn his life to the King of the Pirates."

"Ehhh?" Nami glanced at him with a catty expression. "Is that so? That's not how I remember it. Didn't you once tell me that you swore, and I'm paraphrasing here, that you'd always follow your own ambitions first, and that if Luffy ever got in your way he'd have to, oh what was it again... oh right, end his life on your sword?"

Zoro smirked right back at her. "Have you forgotten, witch? I'm the big bad drunken oni. Who knows what crazy shit I say, right?"

Nami chuckled lightheartedly as she looked back at the ball of agony, newfound life injected into her smile. "A witch and an oni, sacrificing themselves for the King of the Pirates and the Voice of Anarchy..." Her smile twitched ever so slightly. "It's almost like a bad joke..."

"You can take out the almost," Zoro growled as he double-tied his bandanna around his skull. "After all... we both know that the punchline is going to suck."

And so, the Pirate Hunter strode into his captain's suffering, and the Weather Witch followed him into her own ordeal barely a second after.

What followed next will not be described, for the sake of all reading, due to the universally horrific nature of the event.

And yet, for all that what transpired was horrific, for all that it was gruesome and terrifying in every possible regard, it did not leave so much as a trace of an impression upon 'The Tyrant' Bartholomew Kuma.

"Did they know that such banter would comfort them..." the hyper-advanced cyborg mused. "Or was it sheer happenstance? And were they attracted to him because he was a D.... or was such confidence inspired because he's your son...?" He remained silent for a moment before sighing and shaking his head slightly. "In the end, it is not so much the 'how' that matters as what comes of it. The only true question that remains is how far he will be able to continue at his current level."

And with that, the bio-metallic giant fell silent, and continued his vigil.

~0~

Lassoo and Funkfreed stared at the sniveling snail as he came to the end of his story.
[No wonder you couldn't tell Cross that…] Funkfreed breathed. [Or even Luffy, for that matter…]

[If those two ever found out that Zoro and Nami put their dreams of the throne and a new world ahead of their own…] Lassoo muttered, more to himself than anyone.

[If they managed to come out of that without the knowledge completely tearing them apart inside,] Soundbite sniffed woefully. [Then the resulting butting of heads would almost definitely rip the crew in half. I… I can't tell anyone about this, you hear me? If this ever got out…]

[The end of the Straw Hats… and you're trusting us with it?] Funkfreed said incredulously. Soundbite looked up, puzzlement on his face beneath the tears.

[Ummm…] The snail swung his eyes between the two in honest confusion. [No duh? Why wouldn't I? You're Cross's partners, too.]

[In case you haven't noticed, you've been a bit of a little shit to us the whole time we've been on the crew.] Lassoo only managed half of a deadpan, unable to fully hide his disbelief.

[I'm a little shit to everyone on the crew, why would that mean I consider you lesser than anyone else?] the snail questioned in genuine bewilderment.

The two Zoan-weapons locked eyes, a silent exchange passing between them. After a mutual nod they gave the snail reassuring smiles.

[Well, look, it's going to be alright, alright?] Funkfreed softly offered. [Nobody's ever going to hear about this, because you've gotten it off your chest, and we'll never say squat.]

[I mean, come on.] Lassoo chuffed, the vocalization shaking his bulky frame. [You know what we did way back when. If there's anyone who knows a thing or two about keeping mum, it's us. You've done everything right, so now all that's left is to—]

[Let it go?] Soundbite finished with a shaky smile. He bowed his head and chuckled, shaking his eyestalks. [Heh… never thought I'd draw comfort from that earworm, especially after Aokiji…] He held his position for a bit before perking up. [Ah… say, seeing as we've still got some time… wanna go fortify that excuse into an actual fact? I wouldn't mind some feedback on the best frequency to vibrate you at for maximum damage.]

Funkfreed nodded proudly, picking the snail up with his trunk. [You got it… partner.]

And with that, the trio started to make their way out of the depths of the forest they'd ensconced themselves in, but after taking a few steps, Lassoo slowed his pace and lagged behind, sniffing inquisitively at the air.

He kept his nose raised for a few seconds, but ultimately chuffed dismissively and loped back up to his fellow weapon before either of the animals could notice his absence.

Of course he'd noticed their tail, how couldn't he? Even if Soundbite was too absorbed in his grief and self-loathing to pay attention, Lassoo had sniffed them out as soon as they'd started hanging around at eavesdropping distance. But really, it was no problem. After all, if there was one person on the crew the dog-cannon trusted to be circumspect under the right circumstances, then it was definitely this one.

-o-

[Guuuuh, damn it damn it damn it,] a certain peeved gull cursed to himself as he flapped his way
back down onto the island-ship once known as Thriller Bark. [Doing something so rookie as forgetting to deliver the damn paper?!! I know that we're breaking ties with that over-fluffed moron and I know that his rag's barely worth lining my roost with, but still! Bah, with any luck he'll at least gimme a good tip or somethi—WAGH!]

Without any forewarning, the coo was suddenly knocked clean out of the air by something small and furry and fast shooting out of the window of a structure that was still standing, tackling him in midair. The impact knocked the wind out of Coo's sails, and more importantly, the rhythm out of his wings, sending both himself and his attacker plummeting to the earth.

The bird slammed into the ground with a "Woof!" of pain, and the second he got his bearing back he started scrambling desperately to get his wings back in motion.

[Don't.]

[Urgh!] Coo winced when a heavy weight landed on his chest and, more importantly, a paw slapped down onto his neck and held him in place.

[Don't move,] his attacker intoned. [Don't cry out for help, and don't give me any shit, or I swear that I will ground you permanently. Do I make myself clear?]

[Ggh… w-what the hell—? Who are—?] Coo cracked his eye open and tried to twist his head around to get a glance at his attacker. He promptly blinked in shock when he actually recognized both what and who had him pinned. [What the—Cottontail?!]

[In the flesh,] the fox responded coolly, her normally squinting eyes opened enough to pin the newsbird with enough ice to give Fire Fist Ace a nasty case of frostbite.

[Wh-What's the big idea?] the bird squawked indignantly, trying and failing to get some leverage to move. [I've been nothing but helpful to your crew—!]

[And you're going to give us a little more help,] the cloud fox calmly interrupted. [Specifically, you're going to help me, and you're not going to let anyone else on the crew know about it, especially Soundbite. If anyone ever finds out, I will track you down and feed you your own beak. Are we clear?]

Something in Su's tone gave Coo pause, and after a moment he nodded frantically. [Alright, alright, my beak is sealed! Now let me up, damn it!]

The fox quickly acquiesced, stepping off the gull, and immediately began barking out a blue streak when he flapped into the air. [SON OF A—!]

[Oh, calm down, I'm not going anywhere,] Coo groused as he landed on a nearby piece of rubble, well out of Su's reach. [I just want to actually talk to you without giving you the chance to bite my head off if I say anything you don't like. And before you say anything, this isn't just for my sake, I'm actually worried about you.]

Su twitched in place, honestly taken aback at that. [Wh-What? What are you—?]

[You're a Straw Hat Pirate,] Coo snapped impatiently. [For all that you guys love to screw around and be smartasses, you're also almost all genuinely good people. You wouldn't do something like this unless the reason for it was serious, and I'm not doing anything until I know what that reason is. So talk.] The bird's gaze softened, ever so slightly. [What's this about?]

For a second, Su fought a very visible war with herself, her diminutive frame shaking and twitching
as her pride clashed with her pragmatism. Neither won; she slumped, defeated as the weight of the past twenty-four hours crushed both sides wholesale. [My best friend, Conis, is enamored with Cross,] she whispered in a broken tone.

Coo blinked, trying to make sense of the sudden non-sequitur. [That's... ah...? I'm... happy for her? Happy for me too, seeing as it means I win that thousand-to-one betting pool—!]  

[Not romantically, you moron!] Su snarled at the bird, hackles drawing back in a momentary burst of energy. [She admires him in a mostly platonic way and that's it!] And then, as fast as it came, the energy left Su and she shrank in on herself. [Cross... Cross was the entire reason Conis became a pirate. She admires Cross as an inspiration; his tenacity, his intelligence, his will to go forth and venture, she holds them all up as the standards that she aspires to every day.] Su's head drooped as she sighed. [And... she's not alone...]

Coo's eye-feathers shot up as he connected that with the oddly specific threat she'd pinned him with earlier. [You admire Soundbite?]

[How could I not!?] Su demanded incredulously, sounding as though she were on the verge of tears. [He's just a snail, for crying out loud; his physical abilities are jack, he's rock bottom on the food chain, he's barely bigger than my paws, he's not even two years old, and in anyone else's limbs, his powers would be practically useless... and he's still earned every beri of his bounty! He's defiant in the face of the world's dangers, he fights like a wolf even when against a Sea King, and...] She sagged in defeat. [And he never, ever fails to support his partner... no matter what...]

Another piece fell into place for the gull. [This is... about Eneru, isn't it?]

[Cross gave Conis the chance to see the world.] Su whispered tearfully. [Soundbite let me fight. He gave me a voice and a chance to ask for help, when in the past all I could do was suffer in silence, incapable of lifting a paw as my best friend in the whole world died, a little bit more each day. He gave me the courage I needed to leave the only home I've known my whole life, and support Conis as we sail through every kind of hell imaginable. That snail... h-he's more than one of my best friends... he's my hero...]

Coo remained silent, unsure how to respond to such an explanation and not wanting to risk the cloud fox getting angry again. That seemed to be a fool's goal, however, as the fox slowly uncurled and looked at him, cold fury back in her eyes.

[He's my hero... and today, he was made to feel worthless,] she bit out. [Not ten minutes ago, he was brought to tears at the mere memory of what we endured. What he went through? It's never going to leave him. I'm never going to be able to look at him again without remembering how low this day brought him... and I refuse to ever see him that way again if I can help it. But...]

She glanced away, scowl still marring her features. [The fact is that I literally can't help it. I can talk as big a game as I want, but at the end of the day I'm just a small fox with a big mouth, and unlike Soundbite, I can't make that work.]

She kept her position for a bit before slowly looking up at Coo, the scowl now steely with determination. [And that's where you flap in.]

Coo flinched back, more than a bit unnerved by the sheer conviction in the fox's gaze. [And... what do you think I can do to help with that?]

The gaze cooled off as Su sat down on her haunches, her tail lashing back and forth. [You not only work for an organization made to gather information, you're founding one yourself. Your flock is
spread all over the world, and you're going to put each and every last one of them to work, finding me *exactly* what I need to stand a fighting chance in this mad world of ours, and actually make a damn *difference.*]

Coo thought it over for a moment before slowly nodding his acceptance. [And… what they'll be looking for would be…?]

[An old legend. One that my mother told me when I was a kit. One that all foxes, no matter where they're from and despite all the endless variations and mutations, know by heart.]

Su's eyes cracked open, shining from within.

[You're going to find me *everything* you possibly can on the Children of Inari.]

---

I've gotta admit, even after living in this world for somewhere over half a year now and living through the craziest and most unique experiences imaginable? I might not have a dearth of experience in the field of such things, but I'm *certain* that there isn't anything in the world quite like a Straw Hat party, victory or otherwise.

And I'm certain that these parties are unique because nowhere else in the world will you find sights or experiences even remotely similar to what a Straw Hat party has to offer.

Nowhere else will you find a Five-Star East Blue cook from the North Blue fending off a rubber captain from the buffet with kicks capable of shattering concrete, all while lovingly serving whatever female might come by him *and* tossing measured portions of food down the aforementioned captain's mouth whenever the opportunity presented itself.

Nowhere else will you find a tengu-nosed sniper leading whoever he possibly can in seventy unique songs all praising his crew, with a living skeleton providing background music.

Nowhere else could you find a band of martial-arts-practicing dugongs trying to wrestle a sleep-walking scientist that is also a mad doctor into submission, while an artillery-toting angel scrambles with said mad doctor's bag to find something to put him back down.

And *certainly* nowhere else in the world will you find a demon-witch tangling with a monster-oni on a couch on the outskirts of said party. Or, rather, a monster-oni snapping at the demon-witch who was baiting him while wearing a grin befitting a certain gaseous feline.

"Still don't get why you get off scot-free, while Luffy's still riding my ass and calling me an idiot! Him! Calling *me* an idiot!" Zoro groused, scowling furiously into the bottle he was holding with the hand Chopper hadn't triple-bandaged to his chest.

"Well, while I'll admit that Luffy calling you that *is* a bit hypocritical…" Nami grinned cattily as she stretched her threaded fingers above her head, only slightly hampered by the bandages that had been freshly applied to her arm. "I think I can give you an honest and completely logical reason as to why I'm being left alone."

"Why do I get the feeling I'm going to want to cut you?" Zoro grumbled, his scowl twitching into a half-smirk.

Nami's grin grew in both size and innocence as she got on her knees and pushed her head into the First Mate's personal space, the image only emphasized by the halo of pure white shining around her. "Because I am a cute and adorable lamb of innocence, who can do no wrong~" she
practically sang to him.

"I resent that!" Merry called from nearby, not pausing in her consumption of an entire barrel of hot pitch.

Zoro, meanwhile, turned his head to the navigator entirely and butted his forehead with hers, a rictus grin on his face, a vein bulging on his temple and murder gleaming in his eyes. "The shit cook is currently occupied with our idiot captain. What the hell is keeping me from doing what I should have done a long time ago and kicking your ass right here, right now?"

Nami's eyes cracked open and her grin grew malevolent as her halo darkened ominously. "Because if you do, I will fry your smarmy ass into a briquet and use your ashes to fertilize my beloved tangerines."

Zoro's own grin widened significantly as his free hand started to drift towards Wado. "Bring it—!"

"WELL, NOW!"

"GAH!"/"HOLY—!"

My erstwhile superiors promptly almost sent themselves tumbling ass-over-teakettle when I suddenly leapt over the back of the couch they were sitting on and landed between them.

I gave the pair my best winning grin as I watched them scramble to get their composure back. "You two are acting quite lively! Feeling better, I take it?"

My cheeky smile remained in place even as Zoro's hand slapped me upside my head. "Good enough to kick your ass twice over," he growled good-naturedly at me.

And it still didn't change when Nami gave me her own brand of 'attention' in the form of a chop to the skull. "And make it thrice for me!" she laughed, sounding like she was more than a little drunk on the atmosphere.

Amused chuckles sprang from my throat as I received proof that my friends were hale and hearty. Once they subsided, I sent a glance at the bandage on Nami's arm. "So, I take it you got your tattoo touched up?"

Nami hesitated briefly before adopting a light smile as she ghosted her fingers over the bandages. "Ah… yeah, yeah I did. It'll take a week or so for the scars and ink to finish settling, but… yeah." She nodded, before continuing with considerable more conviction. "Yeah, good as new!"

"Great!" I clapped my hands and rubbed them together eagerly. "Well, if that's the case, then what say the three of us celebrate, eh?" And with that, I dug through my bag and withdrew the items I'd temporarily left the party to gather.

It wasn't anything special, really. Just a small bottle of sake and three saucers, perfectly average.

Still, however average the items were, Nami and Zoro took one look at them and froze up, looking like they'd seen a flying purple people eater sprout from the table.

Don't ask me how I know what that looks like. Seriously, South Blue tequila: never again.

"Uh, Cross?" Zoro said, cold sweat shining on his brow. "I, ah, this could be a cultural thing or something, but this is—!"
"Eh?" I hummed idly, my innocent smile not shifting an inch as I filled all three saucers, with plenty of overlap between them. "You say something?"

Zoro fell silent as for once he read between the lines, and Nami picked up the torch in his stead, snapping her head around in frantic desperation. "Cross, I-I don't think Robin would—!"

And then our navigator's words died in her throat when she caught our archaeologist's eye, and her only reaction was to smile knowingly and raise her glass in toast, a motion that Luffy eagerly mirrored with his own frothing mug of… what I really hoped was Cola. Drunk Luffy is not something the world will ever be prepared for.

Nami held her open-mouthed stare for almost a minute, and when she finally returned her gaze to me, I met it with a saucer raised in salute. "Cheers?" I offered.

It took a few minutes before their shock finally grew numb enough that they could respond with any semblance of composure.

"You are serious about this, aren't you?" Nami softly stated.

I could only keep my cheeky grin up for a moment longer, at which point I slowly sobered up. Gazing into my saucer, I traced the bottom of the cup through the clear liquid. "Ever since I came here," I said softly. "You two have stuck by my side. Through thick and thin, hell and high water… through every troubled time, all the heartache and pain. You've only ever doubted me with damn good reason and have never let me down. And then today you put your lives on the line for me… and… and…" I swallowed heavily before saying what I had to. "If you… honestly agreed to do this… this downright crazy thing with me… I would be honored and privileged… and I swear that I will stand by you through every inch of whatever comes next… just as I know you'll stand by me."

Nami stared at me with wide eyes, every gear in her brain visibly turning at full speed in an effort to make sense out of everything I'd just poured out to her. And finally, her expression still dumbstruck, she slowly raised a finger to point at me. "You," she breathed in a low tone, her voice raw with emotion. "Are an insufferable bastard. And you—" She snapped her attention to Zoro. "Are a suicidal moron…"

And then she scooped her saucer up, head shaking. "And God help me, I'm worse than the both of you combined because for the life of me I can't think of anywhere else in the world I'd rather be!" she spat out in a single breath.

Zoro mulled that over for a bit before heaving a sigh of defeat. "Well, you're right about one thing…" The swordsman leaned over and raised his saucer, smirking all the while. "Only someone with a real death wish would agree to try and keep you clowns safe."

I slowly looked between the two, scarcely able to believe it, to believe that they'd actually agreed to this, and when I did, I steeled my gaze and nodded firmly. "OK… OK then. Let's do this. On the count of… ah, screw it!" And with that I knocked my saucer back, my fellow officers doing the same moments after.

We all drained our cups, holding our positions for a few moments…

"GAH!"/"HOLY HELL!"/"URGH!"

Before we all hunched forward as we suddenly experienced the wonderful sensation of having our faces kicked in by a heaping helping of—!

"THAT WAS VODKA, YOU JERK!" Nami and Zoro raged at me together, slamming the back of
my skull at the same time, not that I could notice at the moment!

"Not my fault! Who puts vodka in a sake pitcher!?" I wheezed, massaging my burning throat. "And aren't you two supposed to be our resident anti-drunks?!

"Not against South Blue COMRADE-grade Spirits!" Nami hacked, furiously wiping tears from her eyes.

"Those ice-toting bastards use it to tan Sea King hides!" Zoro choked out.

"Alright, alright, my bad," I conceded, waving him off. "Should I, what, go and get an actual bottle and we try again or—?"

"NO NEED!"

"GAH!"

We all jumped when Luffy suddenly bellowed from the rafters, where he was swinging like the animal that gave him his surname.

"YOU GUYS DID IT!" our captain whooped. "CONGRATS, ALL OF YOU! C'MON! PARTY HARDER!"

We all stared at him and the intensifying celebrations before collapsing bonelessly onto our couch.

"Fuuuuuck that sucked so hard…" I breathed through my still-burning throat, my eyes clenched shut.

"Yeah…" Nami and Zoro nodded in agreement, in much the same state.

I paused for a second as I considered things before tilting my head slightly. "…either of you regret it?"

Even without looking, I could tell that the pair had both adopted shameless smiles. "Nope."

"Yeah…" I could tell, because I'm pretty sure I had one myself. "Me neither."

And that, as they say, was that.

-0-

"Don don don don!"

"Oh, thank goodness," Kaya sighed in relief, laying aside the pen that had been writing her thesis on Devil Fruit-inflicted illnesses as Merry moved to pick up the snail. "I was starting to get worried with the delay."

"Given that they seemed to have all but won when last we heard them, I will admit to sharing the sentiment, Miss Kaya," Merry responded as he dutifully made his way to his master's side with snail in hand—or on-platter, as it were. "But it is Luffy and his comrades. I suspect that they've earned some modicum of faith, no?"

"Just to confirm, when you say Luffy…" Kaya spread her fingers against each other as she raised her gaze heavenward. "You mean the brilliant young man who got lost on his way to the north shore because he thought he was supposed to head in the direction that felt coldest, yes?"

Merry chuckled… well, sheepishly as he scratched the back of his head. "Point taken, m'lady: Faith
with a grain of salt."

"A lot of salt!"

"A big pile of it!"

"The whole shaker!"

Both mistress and servant looked to the window to see the Veggie Trio perched on Usopp's old branch outside.

"One day I'm going to pour syrup on that branch, just to see how you three react…" Merry mused thoughtfully.

"One day!" Pepper laughed.

"But not today!" Carrot snickered.

"Now c'mon, c'mon! Pick up already!" Onion whined.

"Patience, boys," Merry chuckled, removing the receiver from the snail. The sounds that came out removed what tension remained among them; it was easy to pick out the sounds of a party going on in the background.

"—take one down, pass it around, no more bottles of rum on the wall! So, how many of you believe that I actually made it all the way down from a thousand bottles?"

The occupants of the room all glanced at each other.

"No way he did that," Onion finally said. "It'd take him, like, five hours to do that! Even Cross wouldn't talk for five hours straight."

"Well, I don't know about that…" Merry hedged. "Jeremiah Cross does love to talk. But I do agree that singing down from a thousand bottles is unlikely."

"Also, how did you get to five hours, Onion?" Kaya asked.

The boy immediately flushed, not-so-surreptitiously glancing towards his buddies. "W-Well, I saw how long it takes to count to a thousand in a book somewhere—"

"Neeeeerdd!"

"—a-and then I timed one of the verses and did a little math—"

"Neeeeerdd!"

"Well, the answer should be obvious, but for now?" Cross grinned cockily, saving Onion from further embarrassment. "We have more important matters to attend to—WHAAAAH!" Suddenly, the feed was overwhelmed by a choked squawk. "WHAT ARMMPH!" This was followed by the snail the pirate was talking to gagging on its own tongue.

"RISKIES! WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU—mmph?!"

"Got them both gagged!" a foreign voice cackled impishly. "Rolling Pirates, altogether now!"

"START THE SBS!"
"GAAAH!" Cross bellowed, veins bulging on the snail by proxy. "I'M GETTING FREAKING SICK OF PEOPLE DOING THAT TO ME!"

"GET BACK HERE, YOU TWO! TAKE YOUR BEATINGS LIKE MEN!"

"They're gonna get it!" the ex-Usopp pirates sang, Kaya and Merry snickering in agreement.

"Alright, fine. You want to play hard to get? FUNKFREED, PACHY-RIOT!"

The laughter cut off into somewhat confused awe when the snail started transmitting the noise of a lot of rushing, cannoning water all at once.

"…Oh, dear," the five said together.

-o-

"Huh, so Moria actually kicked it?" Charlotte Pudding mused to herself as she stirred a bowlful of chocolate. For the most part, listening to the SBS was just background noise while she laid foundation for a new building she was planning to add to Cacao Island. "Sheesh, and after Crocodile went down, too? Either the Straw Hats are really just that strong… oooor the Paradise Warlords are just a bunch of weak bitches, and Hancock doesn't count because she's in the Calm Belt." She glanced over at her personal homies. "What do you guys think?"

Nitro and Rabiyan glanced at one another, and the returned to grinning blankly at their mistress.

"Little bit of both?" Pudding nodded. "Yeah, you're right, probably a bit of both."

Meanwhile, Cross huffed and puffed with exertion as he came down from his rage-high. "Ugh, I liked those two better when they were stuck in frickin' squirrels… Anyway, where was I?"

"Any chance I could cut in here?"

Pudding blinked, outright staring at the snail. "Was that…? No, it couldn't be, she wouldn't dare. I mean, sure, she was always a bit of an idealistic moron, but even she wouldn't be so—!"

"…Well, that depends. Did you take part in—?"

"Of course I did, do you really think anyone in the world wouldn't?"

"I'll concede that much, IT IS fun," Soundbite said.

"Mmrg… eh, fine, go ahead. Can't be too upset in the face of news like this!" Cross said cheerfully, before blinking. "Oh, but let me lead in first. Ahem… people of the world, in case the fact that we're celebrating here isn't evidence enough, Thriller Bark has fallen and Moria and his cronies have disappeared… which actually isn't as good as it sounds, seeing as we have no idea where the hell they've all assed off to. If anyone sees hide, hair or… well, shadow of them? Call it in to the nearest Marines. Corrupt or not, I feel safe in saying that the whole world wants those monsters locked away."

"Huh, so they couldn't seal the deal?" Pudding pouted cutely, glancing in a mirror to confirm that her mask was as good as ever. "Aw, that's too bad. I guess they really are just a bunch of loud, worthless scum after all. Would have been nice if they could have squirmed a little bit before Mama ground their skulls into paste… ergh, that's revolting!" Pudding shuddered as she took a taste from her bowl. "Ugh, too bitter, needs more sugar…"
"Now, onto more present affairs: See, despite the fact that the denizens of Thriller Bark are all gone, and despite the fact that we... really all but literally raised hell trying to put that shadowy bastard down, the island itself—which, to elaborate, is a massive landmass from the West Blue that Moria converted into a gigantic ship—is still intact, as are all of the seaworthy parts. And as a result of that, one of Moria's more notable prisoners, whose name all of you are very quickly going to come to know, has come up with a crazy brilliant idea. Which we, as a brilliantly crazy crew, have decided to endorse with one hundred percent of whatever rep we might have! And thus, I cede my speaker to her. Rock the world, my friend!"

"With pleasure! Ladies and gentlemen, assorted buccaneers and corsairs across the six seas! My name is Lola, Captain of the Rolling Pirates, former prisoner of Moria, and newly made ally of the Straw Hat Pirates!"

SMASH!

Pudding gaped at the snail with all three of her eyes wide in shock, ignoring the fact that her bowl had slipped through her fingers and sprayed chocolate all over her cute shoes. "That idiot," she breathed in honest, if disgusted, awe. "She actually got away while being that stupid? Holy shit."

"I'm taking this opportunity to deliver an announcement with the world: my crew and I have decided that in order to truly desecrate the memory of Moria's reign upon the island-ship once known as Thriller Bark... here, upon this tainted soil, we will found the single greatest pirate haven this world has ever and hopefully will ever see! A truly free city, beholden to none but those within! A city wholly dedicated to laughter and pleasure and joy for all who have the courage to go out to sea and hoist the black flag in the name of freedom and adventure!"

"Heh... HAHAAHAHAHA!" Pudding threw her head back and cackled madly, her years of culinary expertise allowing her to shriek her sadistic joy while also getting a fresh batch started. "She really is that stupid! And now Mama's gonna grind her and anyone stupid enough to be near her to dust! Ooooh!" Her laughter ceased, an eager glint in her eyes. "And then, when she and the rest of the neanderthals that I call siblings are celebrating afterwards, maybe I can loot their pockets for spare change and—!

"Oh, and if anyone's thinking of swinging by for whatever reason that doesn't involve a good time?" Lola added almost as an afterthought. "Fair warning to you: We're still located in the Florian Triangle."

Pudding froze mid-celebration, even her stirrer stilling in shock. "...eh?"

"It sounds a bit farfetched, I'm aware, but rest assured that we of the Rolling Pirates have found a way to... let's say coexist with the Triangle. As such, those who come here with good intentions will be free to enter, but everyone else?" The way the snail's eyes narrowed menacingly, there was no doubt in Pudding's mind as to who specifically her sister was addressing. "Tough luck."

Pudding didn't need a fully functioning Third Eye to see where this was going, and she showed as much when she cursed furiously and leapt at Nitro. "Congeal, congeal!"

Thankfully, the slimy Jelly Homie immediately did just that, its gooey mass thickening right as Pudding stuffed it in her ears...

"—AAAAAAGGGHHHH!"

And right as a wave of pure rage slapped clean across Cacao Island, shaking the walls of Pudding's recently cooked house and cracking every sugar-glass window in its pane.
Once the assault was over, Pudding slowly dragged Nitro's slime out of her ears, wincing at the
sensation, and stared at the relative destruction around her, this far from Whole Cake Island, in awe,
her mind trying and failing to imagine what ground zero looked like.

"Kudos, Lola..." she breathed to herself. "You just managed to paralyze the whole of Totland
for weeks."

-o-

"From now on, when a pirate ventures into the mists of the Florian Triangle?" Lola proclaimed
proudly. "No longer will they be devoured by the foreboding jaws of Thriller Bark! But rather, they
will be met with open arms and good cheer by the pirate nation of SKELTER BITE!
YEEEAHH!"

"YEEEEAAAAAHH!" the rest of the Rolling Pirates cheered alongside their captain.

"...Well. That's the last time I miss a group meeting," Hina said tightly, a breath away from setting
the tip of her cigarette aflame. "If this isn't what Ophiuchus called about, I'll eat my gloves."

"You think she's going to clue the rest of the world into how they expect to create an effective haven
in that dead, sunless patch of sea?" Fullbody wondered.

"Now, of course, this haven is still a work in progress; it could hardly be anything else when it was
Moria's hell not even a day ago, but we can still promise you all a place to rest without worry of
persecution," Lola continued. "Once we're up and running, we'll take standard payment, but in the
meantime, labor to help make this place what it's meant to be will suffice. For anyone who's alright
with that, it won't be hard to find the place; the Rolling Pirates will have scouts on the lookout for
any ships that take the leap of faith and venture into the fog, and we'll hail anyone without malicious
intent and lead them to the island."

"Guess not," Jango shrugged carelessly. "Makes sense that they would want to keep the secret of
how they're keeping the island safe and hidden... well, a secret!"

"I suppose the finer details are for Masons' ears only," Hina muttered. She then side-eyed her
seconds-in-command. "And no, we are not swinging by there if they ever have a Dance and/or
Karaoke Night!"

"Damn it!" the pair cursed, snapping their fingers in synch.

-o-

"...I still can't get past it!" Namur snapped in exasperation. "How does a group of rookies come out
of nowhere and not only topple two Warlords but recruit entire islands in the process?"

"Maybe he's getting a head start on coming after Red-Hair and me," Whitebeard mused with a
rumbling chuckle. "But it's still impressive that they managed to get anything good out of that
ocean."

"Alright, that's the basics, and hopefully I'll be able to offer more details in a month or two. Now,
back to your regularly scheduled Voices of Anarchy."

"Hmm..."

The septuagenarian Emperor glanced down at his First Division Commander, who'd just hummed
thoughtfully. "Got something on your mind?"
"Yeah..." Marco nodded slowly, a smirk starting to play across his face. "A dilemma, of sorts: Should the name of the bar our representative sets up on Skelter Bite be named as a reference to the crew, or should they choose it themselves?"

All eyes snapped straight to the First Division Commander, everyone present trying to make sense of what he'd just said.

"A... bar?" Haruta repeated blankly.

"Or rather..." Vista picked up as he sported an eager grin. "An embassy, yes?"

The phoenix-man nodded proudly as he pointed at the other Commander. "Hole in one, swordsman."

"Hrm..." Whitebeard leaned back in his seat (not a throne, as he'd emphasized many a time; at this point, he swore his children were doing it on purpose) and scratched at his cannula. "Now that you mention it... it does sound like the Warlords have been getting uppity back in Paradise... and it would have been nice to give Ace more backup during his hunt than just two of our allies..."

"Still whole!" Speed Jiru dutifully informed them all, the Whitebeards' Vivre card catalogue open at his feet. "Along with Whitey and Squard, and still pointing to Paradise! Probably, I dunno, lost their snails or somethin'"

"And those issues could have been rectified if we'd kept an active presence across the Red Line, which a base of operations would facilitate," Marco smoothly concluded. "Plus, another line of income never hurts."

"Mmph," Whitebeard nodded in agreement. "Very well then. Get me a list of volunteers and I'll choose who goes. Can't have all of you running off for a vacation posting at once, now can I?"

While the rest of the crew chuckled good naturedly at the jab, the SBS forged on.

"Thank you very much, Lola," Cross said with exaggerated—though not mocking—politeness. "Now, as much as I'd love to jump right into the victory party, I have a promise to fulfill. All of you former shadowless all over the world... if you'd like to call in and share your stories? Now is the time. The lines are open."

"You know, I have a feeling that if anyone in Marineford is second-guessing that ludicrous bounty," Jozu said. "They won't be for much longer."

"Puru puru puru puru! AAAAND here comes Caller Number One—Puru puru puru puru!" Soundbite sang.

"No time like the present! And you are live!"

"Marine Code 32296, Chief Warrant Officer Ernest Gheilt. May I speak, Jeremiah Cross?"

Any further discussion of embassies was promptly stabbed in the face, all attention going to the snail, which held a carefully neutral expression.

"I won't hang up on someone just because they're a Marine," was all Cross said in response. Gheilt took the silence that followed for the cue that it was.

"I enlisted in the Navy at the earliest opportunity I got, and my iaijutsu helped me advance through the ranks. Two years ago, I was promised a promotion to Ensign and a post in Marineford, but
sailing for the Tub Current to reach it, my ship was caught in a storm, and was blown off course into the Florian Triangle. It goes without saying what happened there... when I came to and realized what had happened, I called my superiors and informed them... and ever since that day, I've been denied my promotion and kept out of sight. Deskwork and chore duty... I kept my rank, my men, and my ship, but I was reduced to nothing more than a glorified grunt that they would rather forget about! I found myself falling into despair... but I've realized since then that there's one good thing that came of it. Being trapped inside all day as I was, what else could I do... but listen to the SBS?"

The snail's face split into a malicious grin.

"Jeremiah Cross, I am here to affirm, completely, your words about the Marines' corruption, and now that you have restored my life and the lives of my men, it is with great pleasure that I announce our collective resignations. If we ever meet, we are at the service of the Straw Hat Pirates. KA-LICK!"

Gheilt hung up abruptly, and it took a moment for Cross to regain his bearings. And then… he smiled.

"Hoo boy," Haruta winced sympathetically.

"That is the sign," Jozu huffed heavily. "Of the start of a very bad day for the World Government."

"That," Cross smirked victoriously. "Is what I would call a sign of today... being a very good day. For aaaaaall sapient-kind."

And so, over the next few hours, the SBS turned out several more shadowless, some anonymous, others undisguised. Tales such as a teenager talking about his parents being able to step into the sun for the first time in as long as he could remember, a pirate crew that swore out of newfound respect to the Straw Hats to live by their standards from then on, a few more Marines announcing their resignations to the world, and Margarita the maid calling in once more, with a party going on in the background that was just as rambunctious as the Straw Hats'… or, alternatively, the one that was being thrown by the Whitebeards themselves, and likely dozens of others the world over at that point.

In the end, it could be said that both statements, oceans apart, were ultimately played out to their logical extremes.

-o-

A few hours later found me sighing as I stared over the Sunny's edge at the open sea; with the party done, our crew decently recovered, the World Government presumably licking its new wounds, and Skelter Bite ready to start forming as it needed to, there was no more reason to put off setting sail for the next adventure. And so I stood on the edge of the King of the Waves, gazing out unto the horizon… even as two of my closest comrades walked up to stand beside me.

"So, Cross," Nami started, leaning on her elbows as she observed the blue skies with a lazy grin. "What's coming up next on the agenda?"

"Heh," Zoro scoffed dismissively as he waved a hand in the air. "Should be obvious already, witch: Everywhere we go, there's a fight ready and waiting for us. Isn't that right, chatterbox?"

I snorted at that. "'Chatterbox', that's a new one!"

"More appropriate for me too~!" Soundbite singsang as Lassoo, who along with Funkfreed had
apparently become his second favorite mount on the crew sometime during the party, wandered behind us.

"But, ah, anyways…” I scratched my chin contemplatively. "To answer your questions… I'll admit, things are going to be a bit… interesting going forwards."

Images started to flit through my mind, one after the other.

An octopus hanging in a cage, followed swiftly by the same cephalopod tearfully begging for forgiveness.

"Some matters will be a bit personal," I grimaced.

Chains and shackles and blood and misery and THEM.

My fingers dug into the railing as I bore a scowl. "Others will require a hell of a lot of control."

An iron mask, daunting and furious, shattering to reveal PFHAHAHAHAH!

I hunched forwards with a barely contained snicker. "There'll be some good times, that's for damn sure!"

And then… and then I sobered up as I thought of him. Thought of Kuma, and everything that had once followed him. "And then… and then there are some parts I'm really gonna need some help figuring out. Important things, that I just can't handle alone."

We stewed in silence after that, until I stood up straight and dusted my hands off with a victorious grin. "Ah, but big fights, Zoro? Sorry, but we're plumb out!"

That got them staring at me incredulously.

"Wha—? Seriously!?" Nami's mouth fell open in shock.

"You're kidding me," Zoro evaluated flatly.

"Eeeeenope!" I popped the P proudly, swinging on my heels as I tugged on a pair of imaginary suspenders. "Thanks to my careful planning and masterful investments, I've successfully wiped out what should have been the ultimate clusterfuck of the century, topping even our little ditty down at Enies Lobby! But now? Poof! As far as my own knowledge and expert opinion is concerned, it's clear skies and smooth sailing from now on apart from one or two iiiity bitty hiccups!" I splayed my hands proudly. "Aaall thanks to me! No money required, I accept payment in the form of everlasting adulation!"

I waited patiently for them to start said adulation… and was awarded with the two bastards exchanging flat looks!

"We're sailing straight into calamity, aren't we?" Nami asked flatly.

"Big time," Zoro nodded with undeserved sagesse. "You go and get Merry to ready Sunny, I'll make sure everyone's at their battlestations."

"OI!" I waved my arms indignantly. "I'm standing right here!"

"Yes, you are," Nami gave me a half-lidded look. "You, who gave a seminar just yesterday about taunting fate, and who just waved the mother of all red capes in fate's face."

I opened my mouth to reply… and promptly spun on my heel and started marching down the deck. "GUNNERY MASTER CONIS! Start inspecting all weapons, doubletime! I want every rifle, pistol, cannon and other such peashooters ready to rumble at a moment's notice!"

"Aye-aye, sir!" Conis saluted instinctively, dashing over to the pavilion and disgorging the ship's arsenal, which she proceeded to inspect with a fine-toothed comb.

"SHIPWRIGHT FRANKY! SNIPER USOPP!" Zoro barked. "Whatever the hell you two were working on before the party started, doubletime it and get it finished ON THE DOUBLE!"

"AYE-AYE!" the two of them said hastily, diving below deck.

"CAPTAIN LUFFY!" Nami roared. "Spit that out, you don't know where it's been!"

"Awww…" Luffy groaned momentarily before spitting out Mikey's head, who waddled off with a shudder and mutters of 'BBQ sauce' and 'last time I ever'.

"Oh, Chef Sanji~!" Perona sing-sang as she stretched out in her lawnchair, which did wonders for the moderately skimpy bikini she was sporting. "A platter of six Wake the Dead tequila shots, on the double please~!"

'RIGHT AWAY, MILADY!' The love cook swooned as he spun up and away into the kitchen.

"PERONA!" I snapped my finger up firmly…

CLANG!

Before all but Shaving across the deck and cuffing the pasty bitch's wrist to her chair with the pair of Sea Prism Stone cuffs I kept in my bag.

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING HERE!?" I roared at the top of my lungs, drawing the attention of anyone who hadn't been watching us before now.

"Uh… Sunbathing? Obviously," she responded calmly, though there was an audible bit of venom, probably due to the cuffs. "What, do you think I decided to show this much skin for your benefit or something?"

"Not what I asked, Ghost Princess," I spat, enough venom in my voice to put down a cobra.

"Looks like we missed one after all," Lassoo growled, his hackles raised in preparation to maul.

"Apparently so," Su said, her calm tone seemingly betrayed by the way her tail was swishing over our arsenal. "Well, there's only one thing to do now."

"Absolutely," Vivi agreed, before turning towards me!? "Cross, start talking."

"THIS IS NOT—grgh, Scramble!" I paused momentarily to snap a glare at Soundbite, and then I nodded gratefully when the buzzing started and Perona blinked in confusion. "Thanks, now where was—? Oh, right, NOT REMOTELY MY FAULT!" I continued to roar irately, this time pointing at the snail. "HE said she was gone, so I thought that either she left with Moria or Kuma blew her away!"

"What?!" Sanji suddenly appeared at my side, a scowl on his face and a platter of shot glasses in his hand. "You were going to leave this sweet young lady to die to another Warlord?"
"NO! Not that kind of... ugh." I ran a hand down my face in exasperation. "Alright, ignoring the 'sweet young lady' bit, I glossed over one other aspect of the Paw-Paw Fruit's power because it wasn't relevant at the time: one of the most creative usages Kuma has for it is pushing himself from place to place, giving the appearance of teleportation."

Sanji simmered down as he understood. "And... he can do it to other people too?"

I nodded, keeping my expression carefully neutral. "That and then some; as far as I can tell, he touches you, and the next thing you know you're waking up three days later on an island you've probably never been to before. His range is insane, spans the Blues themselves... but the bastard's wind up is to ask the victim where they'd like to go for 'vacation' before sending them off to some place that fits the bill."

"...So... he's not a bad guy?" Luffy asked with a frown.

"Eh," I waved my hand in a so-so manner. "I'd more compare him to Mihawk: not a lot of conscience, but not a lot of inclination to hurt innocent people, and fair to those who have earned his respect. Force of nature made humanoid and all that."

"Sounds about right," Zoro muttered before refocusing on me. "But we're getting off track. Whatever was supposed to happen didn't, and she's here now. And that really does automatically make it Cross' fault."

I stammered indignantly as all attention turned back to me, and I scrambled for something to say... and an answer came to me.

"Hey, even if I didn't know she'd be here, there are still some people here who have no excuse!" I swung an accusatory finger at my partner. "Soundbite, how did you not hear her!?"

"Because I took precautions," Perona answered.

We jumped in surprise, and then we turned our eyes towards Soundbite, who was looking similarly surprised.

"I HAD THE scramble UP!!"

"Not on my hollows," Perona said dryly, gesturing to a trio of ghosts hovering above us, the sea prism stone cuffs on the ground beside her. "And don't bother trying; I ruled out your powers as being able to affect them a long time ago. And before you ask about the cuffs..." She gestured to her pigtails. "You only got one of my hands, dumbass. Any woman pirate who doesn't know keep a hairpin on their person at all times and know how to use it is not only not a pirate, but criminally ignorant to boot."

"She has a point," most of the females of our crew admitted, while the remaining three turned towards Nami with pleading eyes.

"Later," our navigator sighed tiredly. Then she did a double take. "Wait a—! You don't even have hair, Raphey!"

"But I have pride!" Raphey vowed tearfully.

"Anyways!" Perona drew attention back to her with an impatient snap. "As I was saying... I took precautions; I snuck into your ship's hold while you were all unconscious, and then I trailed behind you in my astral form. My body halts all functions when my soul leaves it, so there was nothing for the snail to hear; no heartbeat, no breathing, just a corpse until I returned. Then, when we were far
enough out to sea that you couldn't turn back, I came back, came out here, and tried to properly enjoy the first truly beautiful day I've had in over a decade..." she shot me a scathing glare. "Before you decided to so rudely interrupt it."

"Lady," Boss snorted as he slowly cracked his neck side to side. "If that's the worst thing that happens to you today, after all you've done? Then you can count yourself lucky."

Credit to the Goth where it was due, if her one-birdie response was anything to go by, she was either stupidly brave or bravely stupid in the face of Boss's implied wrath.

"...OK, so Soundbite has a good excuse... but what about you?" I demanded, pointing at our resident shipgirl. "Why didn't you hear from Sunny right away that we had someone else onboard?"

Merry opened her mouth—

Mrrrrrr... Only for Sunny to cut in with a soft growl. Merry's eyes widened as her mouth closed.

"...What exactly was that?" Perona asked nervously.

"Aye'd ask if you've nevah been on a ghost ship befoah, but that's an obvious question..." Carue muttered.

"What did he say, sis?" Franky asked.

"He, uh... said..." Merry hemmed and hawed uncertainly before drawing her hood down over her eyes with a self-conscious moan. "That he was following my example..."

"Huh?" was the collective response... until Robin pointedly cleared her throat.

"I believe you're referring to me?" she asked lightly.

Merry nodded miserably. "The last time a surviving member of a criminal group stowed away... she became a beloved crewmate."

...Well, even I couldn't say anything against that. But apparently Perona could.

"Oh, please, I have no interest in joining your band of lucky rookies," she waved her hand with a snooty sniff. "I'm only here because I don't have anywhere else to go, and because you wrecked the only home I've known for years now, you all get to take responsibility!"

Dead silence, fiiiilled with dread.

Perona glanced around in confusion. "What? What is it?"

"That's exactly what Robin said," deadpanned most of those who had been present for her recruiting, with the archaeologist herself chuckling and blushing quite a bit.

Perona's eye twitched, and she mumbled something beneath her breath. I didn't need Soundbite's help to catch the words, 'knew I'd regret this,' before she huffed and folded her arms proudly. "Alright, let me make it clear what I want!" the ghost princess announced in a haughty tone. "Since you uncute but badass bastards seem to be able to get through anything, I want to hitch a ride on your ship until I can find another island where I'd be happy living, and where the Marines can't get to me! That's it! After that, no more piracy! I only ever did it because Moria asked me to, and that blew up in my face spectacularly! As of this moment, I am a guest on your ship and nothing
more! Happy?"

Our reactions were wide and varied, but most prominent of all were Sanji's "MOST DEFINITELY!", Vivi's "Not a chance in—!", Usopp's "THE POWER OF SOGEKING COMPELS YOU! THE POWER OF SOGEKING COMPELS YOU!"…

And of course, the crown of them all… Luffy's "Meh, sure."

That drew a chorus of defeated groans from all of us, and a bout of preening from Perona.

"Glad even a dumbass like you can see reason!" she nodded contentedly, even going so far as to give us all a bastardized curtsy as she remained in her supine position. "I am in your care. Please, take good care of me." I swear, butter wouldn't have melted in that frigid bitch's anywhere at that moment.

"Well, this isn't a cruise ship, honey," Nami cut in, her fierce growl in stark contrast to her completely pleasant demeanor. "If you want passage, you're going to have to work like the rest of the crew."

Perona's response was to glance at our second mate out of the corner of her eye before withdrawing a file from somewhere and beginning to buff her nails. "Did I mention I offloaded Moria's treasure room into this ship's hold while I was leaving? Because I did that. I think it was worth around, oh… 300 million beris?" She drew the file away and started examining her nails. "I don't really need it, so call it a payment for the passage."

"I knew it didn't make any sense for Moria to not have any treasure, stupid, stupid," Donny muttered as he rapped his forehead against his staff, his fellow disciples nodding in defeated agreement.

"Like I said, Sanji, get our passenger those shots she requested," Nami swiftly replied, her expression shifting not an iota.

"Of course, Nami-swan~!"

"That happened with Robin, too," I observed blandly, taking my well-deserved staticky dopeslap on the chin. "And now that I think about it, aren't you supposed to be some kind of a perky goth chick? And don't the goth avoid the sun like acid?"

"Uh, yeah, no duh?" Perona snorted as she squeezed a glob of tanning gunk into her hand. "That's the whole point. Thanks to you getting Moria running and Hogback landing in the Marine's hands, they're going to be after me and Absalom's asses as soon as they can squeeze our descriptions from that fat sack of sweat and slime. And when they start looking, they'll be looking for a pale, pasty goth…" The Ghost Princess's grin widened as she liberally applied the oil to herself. "And not a tanned beach bunny."

"…OK, credit where it's due: that's actually smart." I reluctantly admitted.

"Trickster crew, bigmouth," Perona giggled as she dabbed a stripe of sun-screen down her nose, "I might be a brat, but I'm definitely a brat with a brain."

I took that in, along with everything else… and what I had seen of her before. She was an outright ally last time I saw her, and though I had apparently butterflied that chain of events away, it wasn't unsalvageable. Far from it. For the time being…

"Alright," I said, turning to face everyone else, the look on my face doing enough to reassure them. "I think we can trust her for now; Moria, Hogback, and Absalom may have been incorrigible, but
she isn't. Even if she doesn't join us, I'll be happier knowing where she is rather than playing a
guessing game. Agreed?"

I took the unsatisfied but relatively affirmative rounds of grumbling I got with a nod. "Close enough.
Alright, freak show's over everyone." I swung my arms out. "Dismissed."

And with that, everyone trickled off to return to whatever it was they'd been doing before, though
this time around with a lot more sidelong glares in a certain sunbather's direction.

And that was almost that… except that before Nami could leave, Perona sat up. "Oh, say, hang on a
sec," she requested hastily. "Thanks to you guys' demolition derby through the manor, a lot of my
wardrobe got wrecked and I couldn't grab much in way of changes of clothes. You look like you're
my size, mind if we share?"

"Vivi and Robin all over again…" Nami grumbled as she glanced skywards before nodding
reluctantly. "Fine, you can borrow some clothes until the next town we reach, but that's it!" She then
jabbed her hand at the Ghost Princess. "And no borrowing my jewelry!"

Perona pouted petulantly. "Awww, seriously?" She pointed at Nami's wrist. "Not even that chic
bangle you've got there? It looks really—!"

ZAP!

"GAH!" Perona flinched when a bolt of lightning seared the corner of her chair.

"ESPECIALLY not this," Nami intoned darkly, her Eisen Tempo crackling ominously. "Touch it,
and you'll spend this trip tied to the prow."

Perona snapped her hands up in surrender. "OK, OK, no touch, got it!" The second Nami turned her
back in a huff, she allowed herself to relax with a scowl. "Greedy bitch…"

I blinked in surprise as I followed Nami, honestly taken aback at how steamed she was. "Well, that
was new. You've certainly never threatened us like that before… I take it that that,
I pointed at the
hoop of gold. "Isn't a typical part of the hoard."

Nami stopped short in her tracks, blinking at me in surprise. "Everything you know, and you don't
know what this means to me?"

"I told you before, I'll tell you again: I'm well-informed, not omniscient," I reiterated with a roll of my
eyes. "Seriously, what's so important about it?"

"Eh…" Nami hesitated slightly before shrugging dismissively. "In all honesty, not much…" A grin
grew on Nami's face as she caressed the bangle lightly. "And at the same time, everything."

Nami looked up and smiled brightly at me.

"Nojiko gave it to me, before I left. She said she wanted me to have a way to always remember the
East Blue. Sweet, huh?"

Xomniac AN: Break out the climbing gear, fellas, we done gone and done it again.

Cross-Brain AN: Our apologies in advance, loyal fans, but the next chapter may be a while;
now that the Thriller Bark arc is finished, we have no excuse left not to plan out the final saga
of the first half. We already have the basics, of course… but when it gets started, it's going to
be a continuous chain of whams, and we need to do it right.
Patient AN: There's also the fact that I'm in the midst of job-searching and Superego is in the midst of a week-long family reunion.
Chapter 53: Training And Torment! The Ghost Princess Is Settling In!

Cross-Brain AN: The following arc shall be a unique one: As the Straw Hats enjoy themselves a blissful little bit of shore leave in this mini-saga, so too shall you readers enjoy a break… from Cross! Hit it!

"Hammer."

Tool pressed into his hand, Usopp slipped his goggles down, kneeled in the grass of the Thousand Sunny's pavilion, and carefully maneuvered the hammer to just the right spot. He hoped. Sea prism stone, for all its hardness and the fact that it was a metal, was very brittle fresh from cooling down from forge temperatures. He and Franky, who was watching closely behind him, had found that out the hard way, and neither was very eager to wait for another island where they could heat a forge hot enough to melt the stuff.

Finally locating the spot, he raised the hammer and brought it down, the clay covering the hook cracking and flaking off. Underneath, the stone was pristine, and Usopp breathed a sigh of relief.

"Well, looks good," he reported, straightening up as he wiped his forehead. "Even if the heating function doesn't work, Boss'll be able to brain people just fine."

"It'll super work," Franky stated with all the certainty of most conspiracy theorists. Taking the hook, he slotted a Dial into an open crevice, clicked a panel into place, and tapped it on the anvil, a telltale heat haze rising seconds later. "See?"

Usopp whooped victoriously and pumped his fist. "Finally! Man, this was taking forever!" The tinker-sniper grinned eagerly as he wrung his hands. "The next ones should be super easy now!"

"Don't steal my line, long nose," Franky chuckled in warning, absentmindedly reaching for their cache of weapons. His hands closed on air and sackcloth, and he glanced over at the limp, sad, empty sack. "Hey, Usopp, where are the next ones?"

"Huh?" Usopp glanced over at the bag before snapping his fingers. "Oh, yeah, I decided to wait on getting those because of how tricky I thought it would be to make the materials cooperate."

"Well, you were right, but we've got it now. So, where's—aha!" Franky exclaimed, leaning out of the pavilion and pointing upward.

Usopp followed his finger to the sleeping form of Cross, lying on a few ropes tied between two of Sunny's lines. He frowned. "Hey, Franky, did you consider putting some hammocks on Sunny's masts during the design process?"

"Nope," Franky replied. "But I'm not surprised Cross improvised one anyway. Honestly, I'm amazed that the whole thing hasn't come undone yet."

"And… for curiosity's sake, where's the control panel for those lines?"

A grin slowly came over Franky's face as he jabbed a thumb at a nearby section of paneling. "From what I've managed to get out of Merry's modifications? Third panel from the right, right over there," he said, voice brimming with anticipation.

Usopp nodded, and then eyed Cross snoozing contentedly in his makeshift hammock. He looked back at the hidden controls for the Sunny's lines, and then at the tactician again, an evil grin growing
on his face, joined by an equally evil glint in his eyes and a silent thumbs-up from Franky. Creeping up to the controls, he took a few seconds to examine them and then rapped his knuckles against the panel.

To Usopp's alarm—and a little amusement—Cross was *not* flipped onto the deck by the lines suddenly unraveling as he'd planned. What *did* happen was arguably even better: a pulley came falling out of the sky and did verily smack him right on the forehead. Letting out a cry of pain, Cross clutched his forehead and immediately flailed himself out of his resting place and onto the deck with a meaty thump.

"Sonnuva—what the hell, Merry!?!" he yelped, clutching his forehead.

"NOT IT!" Merry called out from the helm, more amusement than offense in her voice.

"Sorry, Cross!" Usopp called back as he vaulted out of the pavilion, hiding the urge to snicker. "That was me! I was just trying to get the ropes to flip you onto the lawn!"

"Same question!"

"Fastest way to wake you up, and it would have been a soft landing, plus it was going to be, and still was, funny," was the shameless answer. "And now that you're up, I just finished confirming that sea prism stone doesn't interfere with Dials, so I need to borrow your hat and armor so I can upgrade them."

Cross blinked, and then he flipped himself into a sitting position, his annoyance and frustration visibly gone. "Sea prism stone upgrades? That's what you were working on?" he asked.

"What the heck did you expect after that fiasco on Thriller Bark?" Franky replied, slipping his fist's skin off and displaying his new (literal) brass knuckles. "If we had some of this on hand when Moria woke up, it wouldn't have been half the nightmare it was. I doubt that's the last time we'll get blindsided, but thanks to the Accinos and Enies, it *is* the last time we'll be completely unprepared. Any Ability-user that messes with us in the future is gonna be in for a nasty surprise."

"And so will you unless you can explain why you didn't think to consult anyone else about this."

The trio turned to Zoro, who was climbing down the mast, his usual scowl even more pronounced than normal. "I was willing to go with the salt paste because it was a one-time thing and easy to get off. But I'm not going to lace my swords with—"

"Oh, give it a rest, Zoro, we all know how much of a purist you are," Cross stated flatly, waving away the objections.

"And we took that into account," Usopp added, tossing some bottle cap-like objects at the swordsman, who caught them reflexively. "We designed caps to go on the bottom of your hilts. They're not touching the blades, so no problem there, right?"

Zoro looked from the caps to his swords and then to Usopp. Eventually, he nodded in acceptance.

"I'll need to think about practicing pommel strikes..." he muttered. "Haven't done those in ages..." With that, he stalked off, probably to start training. With his back turned towards them, Usopp visibly relaxed.

"Whew... thank goodness that worked, I saw my life flash before my eyes..." Usopp sighed in relief, before turning his eyes to the third mate. "So, Cross?"
"Yeah, yeah, I'll get them to you in a second," he groused, knocking on the mast to bring down a rope. "And for the record? Watch your head."

Usopp swallowed nervously as the tactician shot up and out of sight before glancing around. "Alright, now, where's Nami?"

"Right here," Nami called, emerging from the back of the ship and walking towards him. "What do you need?"

"I need to borrow your Clima-Tact to refit it with sea prism stone."

Nami blinked, glancing at her staff, then back at Usopp. "Not gonna question it, I'll just roll with the good fortune. How long will it take?"

"Two hours to fit the entire staff, or one if I just do the orbs or the rods."

"Just go for the orbs, then," Nami said, handing over the staff. "I'd rather not have it out of reach for longer than I need to, and we're better off leaving some space so that if someone other than me needs to grab it, they don't get conked out."

"Ditto there!"

CLANG!

"GAH!" Usopp yelped, his heart rate spiking as a mass of armor sailed inches above his head. He immediately turned on Cross as the third mate rode a line back down to the deck, his limbs wrapped in bandages. "What was that for!?"

"Oh, lighten up, it was funny!" the transdimensional traveler said in a god-awful imitation of Usopp's own voice. "But, ah, in all seriousness, I'm with Nami. I'd prefer it if Chopper could actually touch me while he put me back together."

"And if we didn't conk right out whenever he grabbed us, that'd be great," Lassoo added from where he was snoozing in the sun.

"Don't worry, I'll just give him Sea-Stone knuckles along with a few traces on the inside for reinforcement," Usopp assured them. "They won't be anywhere near you."

"Then in that case, do your best!" Funkfreed chimed in.

Light glinted off of Franky's teeth as he flashed them all a thumbs-up. "You can super! count on us!"

"Well, while we're counting on them…" Cross mused thoughtfully, shooting an eager grin at his larger partners. "You guys wanna touch up on me dual-wielding you? It'd be nice to get some input on how to coordinate using the two of you at the same time!… Y'know, outside of pitched combat."

"Wha—Seriously!?" Lassoo barked eagerly, scrambling to his paws and loping up to his wielder with an eager whoof, nearly bowling Cross over in his slobbering enthusiasm. "Hells yes! Let's see some action!"

"WATCH IT, ODIE!" Soundbite gagged as he snapped into his shell. "I CAN TAKE SOME FOREIGN SLIME, NOT A FLOOD!"

"Gah! Alright, alright, down boy!" Cross laughed, holding the dog away by his chest. Once he had some breathing room, he eyed the dog with an appreciative whistle. "Eesh, boy, watch it, you almost
flattened me! Seriously, have you put on weight or something?"

"The better to blast them with!" Lassoo crowed, fangs flashing.

"He's got a point there!" Funkfreed said as he used his trunk to haul his fellow weapon off. "But, ah, first, before we get into it, maybe we should talk a little first so that we can hash things out?"

"Ah… eheh, right…" Lassoo smiled sheepishly, one hind leg going up to scratch at his ear. "Fair 'nuff…"

"LET'S GET TO IT!" Soundbite commanded.

And with that, the quartet moved to a corner of the deck and started to talk.

Franky, meanwhile, had gone back into the pavilion, and as Cross and his partners went to work he'd hauled a large bag out and dropped it on the lawn. "Alright, that's all the Dial-based weapons except for Conis's—"

"And I've already got enough non-Dial weapons of hers outfitted, along with some ammo that I'll be splitting with her," Usopp finished, digging through the bag and handing out the appropriate equipment to everyone as they passed by. "For everyone else, we've got a new pipe for Luffy with the ends reinforced—"

"WOOHOO!" Luffy whooped as he swung by and snatched the pipe out of Usopp's hand. The marksman, to his credit, didn't miss a beat.

"—two pairs of detachable soles for Sanji, four scalpels for Chopper, a butterfly knife for Robin—and I still say it's freaky how good she is with those things, former assassin or not."

"Well, I am from the West Blue," Robin chuckled, spinning the blade through her fingers with terrifying expertise. "And… 'former,' hmm? Cute."

Usopp gulped audibly, tugging at his collar. "R-Right… anyway, the blades for Vivi and Carue's weapons have been tempered, along with Raphey's shuriken and sai, and we've reinforced Mikey's nunchucks and Donny's staff. With all that, we don't have a lot of sea prism stone left unless we wanna cut into the half-dozen pairs of cuffs we have left—"

"Hell to pay if you do!" Cross called over.

"Noted!" Franky shouted back before cocking an eyebrow at his partner-in-forge. "So what else do we need and can we pull it off with what we have left?"

"Uh, let's see…" Usopp muttered. "A few of Donny's Kunai if we can manage it… and we still need something for Brook and Merry. Brook is easy enough, we can just reinforce his sheath, but what about Merry?"

"Easy enough! But first!"

CLONK!

"OW!" Usopp yelped as the ship's helmsgirl dropped out of the rigging and bounced off his head.

"Leggo my Big Bro! Got it?!" she ordered, puffing out her cheeks with an adorable scowl on her face. "It was funny that time, but you could have done something really dangerous! Or stupid! Or stupidly dangerous or dangerously stupid!"
"Noted…" Usopp groaned as he poked at the growing lump rising from his scalp. "Anyway… you were saying?"

"Oh, right!" Merry brightened up. "Yeah, it's easy: just make some sheaths or casings or something for some hooks and pulleys. One or two oughta do, and then I can let Big Bro do the rest!"

Usopp and Franky exchanged looks, then turned back to her. "And what about if you're not on the ship?" the marksman asked.

Merry's expression fell flat, and she cast a pointed glance to the side. "Then someone screwed up, and someone is going to get their ass kicked."

"Love you too, Merry," Cross called back, rolling his eyes at the not-so-subtle warning. "And fair warning, you two? Brook should be indisposed right now, so you'll have to fetch his blade yourselves."

"Indisposed? Doing wha—? OK, stupid question, not like anyone's doing much else today," Franky said. "What kind of training is he doing, then?"

"Eh… well, you already know that Brook was in the Florian Triangle for fifty years before we met him," Cross began, grimacing. "But in all that time, he never tried exploring the limits of the Revive-Revive Fruit. Coming back from the dead granted him a few powers that he hasn't explored, and once he unlocks them he's going to get a major boost in abilities. But it all depends on him getting back to the basics of his power first."

"Aaaand… he's doing that how, exactly?" Merry slowly queried.

Cross's grimace deepened, and he glanced to the side and scratched his cheek. "Weeeell…"

"I am experiencing many conflicted feelings at the moment…"

Brook shivered, shaking the bag he was trussed up in as he uneasily eye-socketed the barrel of water sitting under him.

"Trust me, this isn't my idea of fun either," Chopper groused, furiously scribbling his stream of thoughts into a notebook. "But, as uncomfortable as this idea might be, I can't fault Cross's logic. So unless you'd rather go for meditation or something like that—?"

"Grk!" Brook's jaw set uncomfortably, teeth clicking. "My, ah, my mind is not exactly the kind of place I would like to willingly delve into, no thank you."

"Then this is the best option we have to get the best results in the shortest amount of time… no matter how much I might not like it…" Chopper sighed in conclusion.

"Not exactly having a fun time here either, ya know!" Donny piped up, gritting his teeth as he shifted his grip on the rope that was keeping Brook suspended above the barrel of seawater. "And why is it that you picked me for this, anyway? Half the crew, including all of my bros outrank me in muscle, and Merry, Robin, and even Luffy outrank me on Devil Fruit knowledge on top of that, and none of them were busy last time I checked!"

"Simple, Donny," Chopper stated, locking eyes with the dugong. "Effective five minutes ago, you're my assistant."
Donny's brain froze up, unable to process the reindeer's statement. He just managed to catch himself before he let Brook's rope slip, but he was still left staring blankly at Chopper with his mouth slightly open until the doctor elaborated.

"The crew is taking too many and too serious injuries for me to handle on my own anymore, and while Merry has the skills to help me, she's got muscle memory but not much else," Chopper answered, not looking up from his note-taking. "She'll do for first aid, and nursing with a little training, but I need someone else for a more permanent position, and until further notice that's going to be you, unless you're going to tell me that you don't want it."

Donny blinked several times as he thought it over. He was always the smart one among his siblings and often was the one who told them how to patch up their injuries with the local remedies back in Alabasta. All things considered, he wasn't really opposed to the idea of standing by Chopper, and he was reasonably sure that Boss would allow it (however grudgingly) It was still a big a decision to make, though, and he frowned in contemplation as he weighed the pros and cons.

"And before you ask if you can have more time to think it over, know that I very nearly defaulted to pinning you with a needle of paralytics before dragging you up here; you do not want to live with me if I need to spend a week in sedated sleep again," Chopper added.

Donny snapped his flipper into a salute. "I accept this position with—

GYAH!"

he yelped as his one-handed grip on the rope promptly slipped and he was awarded with a painful rope burn. Immediately, he scrambled to get the rope back under control, earning more rope burns in the process.

"ACK! CAREFUL, CAREFUL!" Brook cried as he jerked downwards and swung precariously over the watery coffin.

"Watch it, we need to be careful about how we do this!" Chopper chastised his newly chosen apprentice.

"And what exactly is 'this'?" came another voice.

The trio all turned their attention to a corner of the quarterdeck, where a previously sun tanning Perona had lifted her sunglasses onto her forehead and was regarding them with a cocked eyebrow. Chopper and Donny exchanged uncertain looks, silently considering how much information they could or should divulge, only for the choice to be taken from their hands when Brook spoke up.

"Per Cross's advice, I am attempting to explore the capabilities of my Devil Fruit powers," he casually explained.

Both hybrids looked at the skeleton in askance, to which he responded with a light shrug, inasmuch as he could manage in his sack. "She's a young girl who had no active part in either parts of my torment, I see no reason for a grudge or secrecy." He then turned back to Perona. "You see, as you've no doubt already guessed, I am as I am thanks to my Devil Fruit: the Revive-Revive Fruit, which, upon my first death, allowed my soul to return to the mortal coil and repossess my fallen body… if in a degraded state."

Perona blinked in legitimate surprise. "…Wow. Somehow, I'm actually still surprised by just how BS Devil Fruits can be," she deadpanned. "But how is dunking you in the water supposed to help you get a better grip on your powers? I don't need to why that doesn't make sense, I hope."

"Simply put, I'm returning to my power's roots," Brook explained. "As you'll recall, I said I returned
to this world as a soul and then repossessed my body. According to Cross, this possession was not permanent, and I am fully capable of returning to my astral state, which could be useful for a variety of reasons. Most of all, disassociating myself from my body and ignoring such limitations as pain or injury to my corporeal form, which should rightly have no effect on me so long as I acknowledge that my skeleton is a mere shell. A convenient and dear shell, but just a shell.

However…"

Brook's jaw twisted into as much of a grimace as it could manage. "Returning to my astral form is not as easy as it would sound. It has been fifty years since I returned from the afterlife, fifty years since I regained my body…"

Perona's expression fell into a deadpan. "And… you forgot how."

"Less that I forgot, more that I never knew that I could return to my soul state in the first place, in addition to not thinking there was any advantage to such a 'devolution', as I initially viewed it," Brook shrugged.

"Hence, this undertaking," Chopper spoke up, tapping the barrel. "Cross suggested this as an alternative to long hours of meditation, and as much as I don't like it, I agree with the train of thought: By slowly dunking Brook into the water, his instincts as a Devil Fruit user will make him desperate to escape, but his restraints will leave him only one possible means of doing so. In essence, we're going to be scaring him from… his… body…" Suddenly, Chopper turned his full attention to the ship's guest. "Unless you have any better ideas?"

The self-titled Ghost Princess snorted derisively as she flicked her sunglasses back down and leaned back into her chair, snapping her reflector board open. "None I'm going to share with you, furball."

"What!?" the doctor yelped in honest shock. "But we just—!"

"Lemme take a flying guess at her next words," Donny interrupted as he affixed the stowaway with a cold glare. "'Pirate', right?"

"You really struck gold with blubber-butt, Doc Hatchet," Perona sang, a smirk clear despite the reflector in the way. "He's already smarter than you."

Chopper glared at her for a second longer before snapping his head away with a harsh click of his tongue. "We're beginning the experiment. Donny, lower him in. Just a half-foot, we'll start easy."

"Aye," the purple-marked Dugong nodded, loosening his grip and slowly allowing his rope to slip through his flippers. Brook tensed as he lowered closer to the barrel. Water soaked into the fabric, and then through, engulfing his bony feet and prompting him to squirm.

"Anything?" Chopper called up with no small amount of concern.

"Ah…" Brook flinched uneasily as he shifted about. "A bit uncomfortable, and I'm trying my best to… to go up, as it were, but, well…"

"If you want to stop—"

"No, no, I can continue," Brook assured him.

"Alright then…" Chopper nodded slowly before glancing at his assistant. "Donny, another half-!

"For the sake of my being able to relax without your pathetic whimpering, let me give you some advice."
"Wha—**GAH!**" Chopper yelped when a foot was suddenly planted in his back, sending him sprawling him to the ground to be swiftly pinned.

Perona sniffed haughtily as she ground her heel into the Zoan's spine, casting a dispassionate glare at the skeleton. "The key to separation? You just need to **let go,** numbskull. And on that note…" An unearthly cackling aura suddenly bloomed in her palm. "Good luck because you're gonna need it. **NEGATIVE HOLLOW!**"

It would be untrue to say that Donny didn't have the reflexes to dodge out of the way of the speeding specter. However, the fact that he was holding a rope that was keeping his crewmate out of hot water—or water, period, as it were—caused him to hesitate for a moment. And that moment was all the time he had.

Donny moaned and fell to his 'knees' as the specter passed through him. "I wish someone would just cook me into a—!"

**SPLASH!**

"**GAH!**" Water splashed onto Donny's body, knocking him out of his depression with a flash of horror. "**BROOK!**" Donny cried, staring in horror at the water sloshing from the barrel.

"**BROOK, NO!**" Chopper yelled, snapping into his Heavy Point—which was actually unnecessary as Perona had already stepped back as soon as she'd cast out her Negative Hollow—rushing over to the barrel and plunging his hand into the water, in spite of how it took a good chunk from his stamina. "Shit-shit-shit-shit—!"

"Hurry, Chopper! You have to get me out before I drown!" Brook pleaded desperately as he hovered over Chopper's shoulder.

"I'm trying, I'm trying!"

"Please, I can't hold my breath!"

"You don't have any breath to hold, numbskull. More than usual, even," Perona deadpanned, casting a dispassionate glare over her reflector.

"Eh?" Brook blinked in confusion, turning to stare at the Ghost Princess. "What are… you…?" He blinked again (even though he lacked eyelids), and turned back to his crewmates, who were staring at him in shock. "Ah… why are you looking at me like that?"

Chopper, devoid of words as he was, could only weakly point his finger into the barrel.

Tilting his head in confusion, Brook followed the Zoan's finger and stared into the water. Beneath the water's surface, a skeleton was slumped lifelessly. And reflected in the water's surface was—!

"AH! A ghost!" Brook recoiled with a shriek of terror. Then, just as swiftly, he calmed down as realization struck him. "Oh, wait, that's me. AH! I'm dead! Oh, wait, that's not new… OH! A cute woman!" The spectral pirate grinned eagerly at Perona. "Say, could you show me your—?"

"Could someone give Grampa his body back before he goes completely senile?" Perona demanded impatiently.

"But… isn't his brain already dead?" Donny questioned weakly.

"Yohohoho! That was funny! I think I'll call it a Skull Joke!" Brook chortled before jerking back in
shock. "AH! A talking animal! Oh, wait, you're my crewmate… AH! Where am—!?"

Moving fast, Chopper shot his fist into the barrel, yanked the skeleton's afro out and effectively slapped the spirit upside his astral head with his own skull.

Brook yelped in shock, his skull vibrating slightly, his mood quickly ratcheting down to a relieved sigh. "Ah… ack… wow… that was… hoo…" the newly re-undead skeleton sighed in relief. "Well, at least I'm back to normal."

"Uhh… For… a given measure of the term anyways…" Donny hedged uneasily.

"Huh? What are youuuWAAAAGH!" Brook's question devolved into a terrified shriek when he suddenly realized he was missing his body, and was in fact just a talking head in Chopper's shaky hands. "I'VE BEEN DECORPITATED!"

"And yet, much to my misery, you are still very much alive and still very noisy," Perona grumbled irritably. "Looks like loudmouth was right: You're just a soul, you don't need your body… well, you still do for now, until you manage to get ahold of yourself in astral form."

His breath back, Chopper slowly turned a wary but pleading look to the girl. "Do… could you please tell us what just happened… Ghost Princess?"

Perona blinked at the usage of her title, but then leaned back in her chair with a careless wave of her hand. "Eh… it's no big deal, really. It's just that going astral can be really disconcerting. Without your body, your mind gets set loose or something and you can lose track of yourself pretty fast. You just need to make sure you've got a good sense of self before you try, otherwise?" She shrugged carelessly. "You'll devolve into a will-o-the-wisp and scatter into dust on the aetherial wind."

Chopper and Donny both shuddered fearfully at the Goth's sheer nonchalance at some serious existential horror, but Brook… Brook's gaze, however expressionless, softened somewhat as he regarded the Hollow-girl. "Personal experience, I take it?"

Going by how Perona's body locked up in frigid fury, that was the wrong thing to say. "Get out. Of my light," she grit out through a scowl that had twisted her face, and a trio of cackling Negative Hollows slowly started to orbit around her hand. "Or I will make you idiots wish you were never even conceived, let alone born."

For a moment, the trio stood stock still. As it turned out, that was a moment too long.

Perona snarled murderously, her eyes rolling up into blankness. "You asked for it."

-0-

From her position on the quarterdeck, Merry was well-positioned to both monitor the sea ahead and catch the first screams wafting up from the main deck below. Curious, she quickly confirmed that she could leave the helm at least briefly, and left the wheel to go poke her head over the railing.

She was thus just in time to see Donny, carrying a sloshing barrel of water, and Chopper, carrying Brook's still-undead head, run below her in a panic, all three screaming their, ah, heads off. The cackling, grinning specters heading after them answered the question forming in her mind before it was asked. She blinked a couple of times before sighing fondly and leaning against the stand holding the wheel up.

"This crew never ceases to amaze, do they, Big Bro?"
A soft purring vibrated beneath her fingers and feet, causing her smile to grow. She made to head back to the helm, only for a familiar sound to cause her to head significantly faster in the opposite direction.

"Puru puru puru puru! AW, dang it!" Soundbite groused, his ringing drawing the ire of everyone else under the tree he and Cross were under. "For once, THEIR TIMING—Puru puru puru puru!—bites."

"Well, if you really wanna split hairs, you're the only one who really needs to go," Lassoo snorted dismissively. "I've got an idea for a new attack I'd like to try out."

"I've… got one, too, actually," Funkfreed said tentatively. "And I think you'll like it, Cross."

"BLOW IT OUT YOUR TAILPIPE, flea-bag, I've got something up my—Puru puru puru puru!—shell too, and you'll wanna hear it SEEING AS IT—Puru puru puru puru!—INVOLVES YOU LUGS! THE SNAIL STAYS!"

The tactician glanced between his partners, visibly hesitating. "I… suppose I could skip one call…?"

And that was when Merry decided to intervene. "Orrrr you could rely on someone else for a change!" she called down in a 'what an idiot' kind of tone.

The quartet all blinked and looked up at her in surprise. "Huh?" Cross questioned. "What are you —?"

"It's easy: Soundbite can shunt the call over to Brain and I'll handle them! If your input's critical, Soundbite can still hear me if he needs to. If not, no harm lost! Easy, right?"

"Hmm…" Merry watched as Cross visibly chewed on his cheek. After a moment of thought, he looked up at Merry. "Anything well-and-truly critical—"

"Five alarm call-out, on the double!" Merry agreed, saluting. "…I'm being literal, I can trigger five alarms at once from the lounge."

"…eh, alright, fine then," Cross sighed, snapping his fingers. "Soundbite, can you—?"

"PATCHED THROUGH—Puru puru—klack!—NOW, TO BRAIN IN THE LOUNGE! HAVE FUN, GIVE 'EM HELL!"

"Got it! See ya!" Merry said with a grin, giving them all a final wave before kicking open a trapdoor right below her and dropping into one of the many boltholes she'd installed in her Big Bro.

As Merry clambered through her personal passageway, she reveled in the sense of sheer exclusivity she always felt when she used them. The network stretched everywhere throughout the ship, but they were damn small; Chopper's antlers and the Dugongs' blubber meant that even they couldn't enter, leaving only the shipgirl and Su at the right size and physical capability to properly navigate them. It wasn't purely hers, true, but Merry could think of worse comrades to share her network with (She liked Robin well enough, loved her even, but if that woman's incessant patting of her head resulted in a bald spot…) than the cloud fox.

After a minute of travel, Merry emerged into the Aquarium Lounge. Once she confirmed that the room was indeed empty of any of her crewmates, and in fact of any living thing besides herself, Brain, and the large octopus lounging in an upturned helmet at the bottom of the tank, she sealed the room with a quick knock on the wall and loped up to the ringing chubby snail sitting on one of the
tables.

She had just been reaching for the receiver when she paused and, after a moment of thought, adopted a devilish grin that she quickly banished in favor of her cutest look possible. It was with this cute look that she clicked Brain’s button. "You’ve reached Minnie's Maid Service Manor! How may I help you, Master?"

"Bwuh—!? Er, ah, I-I-am so sorry, I think I have the wrong number—!"

"MWHAHAHAHAHA!" Merry burst out cackling at the poleaxed expression the snail was wearing by proxy. "Now I see why Cross does this so often, it's hi-i-ilarious! MWHAHAHAHAHA!"

Brain’s gobsmacked look suddenly swapped to deadpan. "And now you see why I wanted you to be the first on the line instead of me."

"HAHA—eh?" Merry's laughter cut off in a confused blink. "Wait, Tashigi? But if I didn’t prank you, then who—?"

"Ah, t-this is Lieu—geh, force of habit… Seaman First Class 'Ironfist' Fullbody. I, ah… I actually ran into your crew back in the East Blue. Do you… remember me?"

Merry’s grin creaked into wooden brittleness, and her fingernails started to dig into the table’s veneer. "You mean do I remember the raging asshole who tried to sink me on a whim in order to impress the bimbo he was carting around? Even though my crew didn’t have a single bounty to its name at the time?" The shipgirl’s grin started twitching murderously. "I think I might have a vague recollection of you."

"…I never thought I’d be un-happy to be remembered," Fullbody gulped audibly, glancing very nervously to the side.

"We’ll discuss this later, Seaman," Lieutenant Junior-Grade Tashigi frigidly informed him. "Alright, moving on from what was even less funny than I expected, Cottonmouth, is Ophiuchus there?"

"Indisposed with training, along with Knucker and pretty much everyone else except Callie." Merry informed her. "I mean, I could get them if you need them, but—"

"It… depends," Tashigi said hesitantly. "This is a status report for the most part, though there is one thing I’d like to get his input on if possible, just to see if he knows anything about it."

"Priorities first, what may or may not need his know-how?" Merry inquired.

"Ah, ahem! That’s actually why I’m here!" Fullbody offered. "As you’ll recall, my superior, Captain ‘Black Cage’ Hina, wasn’t available for the last meeting of the Masons that was convened. The reason for that, and the reason why I’m here now instead of her, is that at the moment, Captain Hina and the rest of the Black Cage Formation are on an assignment in the East Blue, investigating something rather… disturbing."

The shipgirl cocked her eyebrow. "In what way, exactly?"

"Picowana Island," the Seaman started solemnly. "Up until, as near as we can estimate, a month ago, it was an uninhabited tropical island. No valuable resources, no notable native species, just jungle and not much else of interest. And then, a month ago, somebody or something destroyed it."

Merry couldn’t help but swallow slightly, a sheen of cold sweat coming into being on the back of her neck. "…care to, ah, clarify that statement a bit?"
"The island itself is still there, if that's what you're asking, the physical rock has not been touched... but that's essentially all that remains." Fullbody's gaze became somewhat haunted. "It was... I'm honestly at a loss to describe it. The entire island, the whole of the jungle, was savaged. Trees were uprooted, crushed, sliced to pieces, the animals were all ripped to shreds in every way imaginable, blood was everywhere, and that was the conventional damage. Some tracts of land were burnt to cinders, there were dozens of animal skeletons that looked like they'd been picked clean, and there were even several swamps of literal poison bubbling away! The carnage, it was just..." Fullbody slowly shook his head. "It was absolute in ways I've never seen before."

"Holy hell..." Merry breathed softly.

"We wanted to ask Cross if he knew anything about this," Tashigi picked up, voice solemn. "We know this isn't technically Mason business, but we—the Marines, that is—have no idea what caused or could have caused that kind of destruction, and we want to find it before it can do so again on another island or, God forbid, one that's actually inhabited."

"No, I understand, and I'm sure Cross would too..." Merry slowly nodded before transitioning to a shake. "But... while I'll pass this on to Cross, I'm afraid he won't have anything to contribute."

Tashigi grimaced unhappily. "You're sure about that?"

Merry let out a slight 'bah' of apology. "Cross said our next destination was the Sabaody Archipelago, and that as far as he knows, we're not due for any more big fights for awhile. I'm pretty sure that if he knew anything about this, he'd have said. So, either this is something totally new or, more likely, it's something that came up outside of his Straw Hat-centric scope of knowledge. And if that really is the case..."

"He'll have jack to tell us, right, right," Tashigi nodded reluctantly before heaving a sigh. "Damn, and I was just getting used to getting anything other than a few vague, unsatisfying answers out of him... bah!" She shook her head and nodded again, this time with determination blazing in her eyes. "Whatever! We did fine without Cross in the past and we'll be fine now! We Marines have our pride too, you know!"

"Aye-aye, Lieutenant!" Fullbody concurred eagerly.

"You go, four-eyes!" Merry pumped her fist encouragingly.

Tashigi maintained her prideful expression for a minute or so. Then, she blinked in honest surprise. "Wait... so... you're not going to point out some eensy weensy flaw in my logic or jab another hole in my uniform and let all the air out of my renewed confidence and pride in my flag?"

"Uhhh... nnnoooo?"

"...I've gotta call while Cross is away more often, I don't think I've ever been on the line with you guys for so long without wanting to stab something before."

Merry kept her smile in place even as she mentally pinned a note to tell Cross to haul the hell back on his heckling of the Lieutenant, lest he earn himself a semi-justified shanking when next the two met in person.

"Woo, I-I'm actually feeling quite good right now," Tashigi breathed euphorically. "Alright, what else were we gonna talk about?"

"Uh... general status update, ma'am?" Fullbody asked, a slight twitch in the corner of his mouth.
"Ah, right, right!" Tashigi nodded confidently. "Cottonmouth, do you want to get a pen and paper or...?"

"Nah, 'sfine," Merry waved her off. "Robin's memory supersedes Vivi's, my mind's a steel trap."

"Right, well, it's all basic stuff anyway. First off, Ox and Goat have both deployed men and supplies to Skelter Bite; Ox's have already landed thanks to their proximity and are greatly contributing to construction efforts as we speak, go giants, and we've made sure that Goat's men are aware of Marine patrol routes on the way, so weather permitting they should arrive within the next three weeks," Tashigi summarized. "According to Rabbit, Skelter Bite will be open for business in a little over a month. Nowhere near the peak it'll reach in a few years, but they'll certainly be able to accept patrons."

"Sounds great!" Merry chirped happily. "Maybe we'll even be able to visit before we hit up Sabaody! What else?"

"Next on the agenda... word from Navarone," the lieutenant continued. "Their first batch of recruits just shipped out for assignment. The majority will be bolstering bases up and down Paradise, no surprise there, but we did get lucky. Two dozen or so, all loyal to us, have been split between the West and South Blues. They'll work on getting us footholds in the Blues. It'll be awhile before we have anything as major as an actual base turned to us, but it's still a start."

"This all sounds great!" Merry pumped her fist victoriously... before hesitantly lowering it as she caught sight of the dark look on Brain's face. "Or... not?"

"No, no, that news is great, but the news that's coming up is notably less so," Tashigi sighed grimly. "There have been rumors coming down from Marineford," Fullbody pitched in. "Bege's raid on Fort Lumose hamstrung our budget, to be certain, but apparently the higher ups are still finding funding from somewhere because they're amassing the money for an undertaking whose true form we can only guess at but whose bones are... already uncomfortable in nature."

"Have you ever heard of 'privateers', Merry?" Tashigi asked.

Merry's expression devolved into an offended scowl. "The proper name for those salty bastards would be 'low-priced scum who dip their flags in tar', thank you very much," she stated in a voice that would have given a yeti frostbite.

"You pirates never cease to amaze with how much pride you take in being criminals," Tashigi sighed, though her true feelings were clear in her light smile. But she was quick to sober up. "Anyway. The reason I bring them up is that from what I hear, funds are being pooled to hire them. Now, mind you, the Marines have hired privateers in the past, to help bolster security in particularly rough waters, but this..." She shook her head uncertainly. "I've never heard of the numbers that are being tossed around, and certainly never from Headquarters. We'll get back to you when we have something more concrete, but for now—"

"Enemy movement on the horizon, most likely something Cross isn't aware of, got it," Merry confirmed. "I'll pass it along ASAP."

"Well, that's everything really important on our end, what about you?" Fullbody asked. "Anything on the Straw Hats' mobile stormfront that we should be aware of?"

Merry opened her mouth to reply—

SMASH!
—and only just managed to dodge biting her tongue off when the ship was suddenly rocked by a massive impact, followed swiftly by the sounds of a small-scale war erupting out on deck. The only reason she didn't go on full alert and instead skipped straight to exasperation was that amidst the sounds of battle she could hear the usual insults between the two usual suspects being bandied about, punctuated by the snide commentary of their new arrival.

"Well, I was going to say that it’s been business as usual lately, but it looks like Perona just decided to incite a riot or something. Other than that, no, nothing critical."

Brain's mouth opened with a look of panic, but it just as swiftly clamped shut as though someone had slapped a hand over his mouth, and his expression swapped to Tashigi's deadpan. "Low-hanging fruit, Merry, and I'm not rising to it. Just make sure she's either out of the way when you dump her or decent if she stays, got it?"

"Aye-aye, mon ami!" Merry saluted in a chipper tone. "Cottonmouth, over and out!"

"Pisces, same. KA-LICK!" And with that, Brain gave her a final condescending glare before retreating into his shell with a defiant snore.

The ship-girl fondly rolled her eyes at the snail's grating personality before spinning on her heel and grinning eagerly as she rammed her fist into her palm.

And really, who could blame her for being enthusiastic?

It was time for her to bear witness to whatever new insanity her crew had fallen into! An endeavor she charged into with open glee.

-o-

Robin watched the ongoing brawl between the crew's usual suspects with scarcely hidden glee and amusement, her amusement especially intensified due to the addition of an unusual but not unwelcome element in the fight.

It was almost admirable, honestly: every other day, barring exceptional circumstances, Zoro and Sanji fell into brawls like clockwork, and every other day they somehow always managed to keep their clashes as fresh as the first time she saw it. Truly, there was an art to it.

Why, even their banter still managed to remain current and engaging for all those observing!

"What the hell were you thinking, you two-bit fry cook!? Tossing out my weights!? I'm gonna peel the flesh cleaner off your bones than you could ever hope!" Zoro roared.

"Go ahead and try, your slices are gonna be as rough and shoddy as they ever are!" Sanji scoffed with forced casualness. "And you should be thanking me! Not only is it an honor for a seaweed-wrapped gorilla like yourself to give up your room for a cute and charming princess, but you needed to up your game anyways! You call these things weights? More like—!" Sanji hopped back, hefted a gong-sized ring of metal on his foot and flung it at the first mate. "Paperweights!"

Zoro ducked the impromptu discus with an infuriated snort. "If even one of these goes overboard, I'll replace it with your corpse, you bastard!"

"Hey!"

That exclamation originated from the aforementioned 'unusual element', prompting Robin to switch over to where Mikey and Leo were dueling, Mikey having only just managed to dodge the ballistic
"Watch it, I'm on your side!" Mikey protested, finishing a good octave higher as he caught one of Leo's sabres in the chains of his nunchucks.

"Why are you helping him anyways?" Leo questioned, entirely casual as he pressed down with enough strength to make his fellow disciple strain. "Pick up an interest in cooking or something?"

"Not by choice!" Mikey sobbed as he shoved the blade back and retaliated with a wide sweep of his clubs. "Bastard said that if he didn't find a sous chef, he'd cut down on how many mouths he had to feed and pick up some spare ingredients at the same time!"

Zoro paused in his slashes to grace first Mikey, and then Sanji with a flat look. "You really scraped the bottom of the barrel for a protégé," he dryly stated.

"Not a lot of options to work with, and in his defense, I wasn't completely joking," Sanji grumbled.

"I can't tell either way, so like hell am I taking any chances! So do me a favor and lay down and die before I get turned into lunch!" Mikey howled as he renewed his onslaught.

Robin's gaze slid away again, this time to the last bit of entertainment: Raphey blocking an onslaught of punches from Boss, a look of intense concentration on her face much akin to Nami writing a map or Chopper with a medical mystery or Luffy trying to think at all.

"You sure I can't take a break to watch this?" she grunted, the question costing her a half inch of ground.

"You're the one who wanted to practice counters," Boss replied, his own concentration failing to waver. "If you want, we can do the Nori Arts training you also requested instead."

"On second thought, I love practicing counters!" Raphey hastily backpedalled. "In fact, I—yow!"

That last exclamation was due to one of Boss' punches finally slipping through and clocking the female dugong right on the snout. She flopped backward, clutching the injured body part as she let out a string of expletives, while Boss frowned in thought.

"Hmm, this isn't working as well as I thought," he mused to himself. "Take ten, Raphey. I'll try and think of a better training method."

"Yay..." the female martial artist bemoaned as she let herself go limp.

Robin chuckled at the exchange, reveling in the fact that she didn't have to hide her amusement anymore. Honestly, the only thing better than being free to laugh free—

"What's the context for this tête-à-tête, my dear devious... damn, can't think of a good D-word."

Robin's smile widened eagerly. Indeed, the only thing better than laughing free was laughing with friends. Case in point, she turned her smile on the white-haired friend that had strolled up next to her. "Damsel, perhaps?"

Merry snorted derisively, her smirk not shifting an inch. "Not on your damned life." She then shifted her attention back to her clashing crewmates. "And you haven't actually answered my question."

Robin chuckled as she returned her attention to the main attraction, observing with keen interest as Sanji actually managed to backflip off of the flat of Zoro's new blade. "On the surface, it's quite
simple really: Sanji and his shanghaied sous chef emptied the crow's nest of all of Zoro's training equipment, and our first mate… took offense, if you will. Most likely because he and his living training dummy—"

"I RESENT THAT!" Leo roared as he shot by, in hot pursuit of a fleeing Mikey.

"—were ejected in the same movement."

Merry blinked in surprise before tilting her head in a confused motion. "That's… new. Usually they butt heads when they cross paths, they don't actually antagonize the other. Why would Sanji go out of his way to provoke him?"

*That* got a frown out of the archaeologist, the circumstances of the situation serving to sober her up. "Because he himself was provoked."

Merry looked up at her in shock. "By who?"

Robin opened her mouth to answer—

"Well, I *would* say me, but I resent the wording. 'Provoke' is such an *uncute* way of putting it."

—and instead closed it just as fast as her answer floated by.

Merry huffed and frowned up at Perona. "Shoulda guessed… well, how would *you* put it, then?"

Perona smiled beatifically as she ever so casually flipped onto her back. "Why, I just asked that gallant knight in shining armor if he'd be so nice as to clear the ugly troll's junk out of his cave so that I could have a room all to myself!" She folded her fingers under her chin as she tilted her head to the side. "Is that so wrong?"

"I'M GONNA MAKE YOU INTO A REAL GHOST, YOU LITTLE—!" That was as much as Zoro managed to get out before Sanji shut him up with a boot sole that had to be blocked.

"I'LL BE DONE WITH THIS MOSS-RIDDEN MENACE SOON ENOUGH, MY PULCHRITUDINOUS POLTERGEIST PRINCESS!" Sanji whooped as he erupted into a full blown amorous inferno.

Robin cocked her eyebrow at the moniker, glancing up at the phantasm. "Your idea as well, I take it?"

Perona didn't seem to hear her, content to hum a chipper tune to herself as she walked away on the air, spinning her parasol on her shoulder.

Merry whistled herself, a low, appreciative tone. "And I thought *we* had issues…"

Robin's frown deepened as she watched the Ghost Princess wander off. "Yes, but most of us have a handle on our neuroses, whereas she's making herself into an active threat." She and Merry both turned her eyes towards Cross, who currently occupied with looking his cannon over while Usopp talked with his sword, gesturing animatedly at the pachy-blade's sheath.

"Well, threat or not, whatever Cross foresaw was enough to give her a chance. I mean, once he got over the shock, he didn't even hesitate," Merry reflected. "But… how do we get to the point where she's our ally, let alone our friend?"

Robin pushed off the mast she'd been leaning on and cracked her neck in anticipation. "Simple
enough: we fix her."

Merry snorted in amusement as she started to wander back towards the helm. "*You* want to make
someone on this ship sane? Good luck to ya."

"Do recall, Merry," Robin chuckled confidently. "I'm a Straw Hat. We don't rely on just any luck…"
And with that, she started to walk towards Cross. "We make our own."

Cross didn't look up as the archaeologist approached him, more engrossed with shifting Lassoo
around on his shoulder and trying out different grips and positions for the dog-cannon. "Something
tells me you're not here to spar," he mused as he shifted the weapon's weight around.

Robin hummed in confirmation as she came to a halt behind him, facing opposite him with his right
scapula knocking against hers so she could keep an eye on the soon-to-be topic of their conversation.
"I believe our guest is in need of some attention," she started without preamble.

Cross smirked as there was a spike in the clash of rubber on steel. "Sanji's got *that* covered in
spades."

Robin smirked right back at the quip. "*Female* attention."

That got Cross to pause and glance dubiously over his shoulder. "…are you *sure* she swings that
—?"

Robin didn't even bother to grace him with her unimpressed deadpan. "She needs a friend, Cross."

"Ah, heh, right, right…" Cross coughed, a blush dusting his cheeks. "And… yes, I can see how
that'd be an issue… Vivi sure doesn't like her because of how she's been throwing that 'Princess'
moniker around, and Conis considers her a bit too creepy to handle… what about yourself?"

Robin clicked her tongue in amusement. "I'm afraid that she finds *me* a bit creepy."

Cross snorted. "Of course… moving on, Raphey's not interested in someone who can't throw a
punch to save their life, and Perona's opinion on 'cuteness' runs counter to Merry, which leaves…"
The Voice of Anarchy trailed off into a grimace. "Yikes."

"You see my dilemma," the Devil Child sighed. "Any thoughts on how to create an opening?"

"Hmm…" Cross glanced upward, tap-tap-tapping a thoughtful beat against his cannon's barrel before
snapping his fingers. "One: she had time to sneak aboard at her leisure, so that means she probably
brought *some* of her possessions on board, with which she'll be filling her new room. If you can find
a giant bear somewhere onboard? *That's* your opening." He poked his thumb towards the snail that
was on top of his sword's head, nodding along with whatever it was Usopp and Funkfreed were
talking about. "Want any help with it?"

"Thank you but no," Robin allowed herself a smirk as she crossed her arms. "I believe I'll be able to
handle myself. *Ojos Fleur.*"

Robin filtered rapid-fire through her rapidly blooming viewpoints, analyzing them at a glance before
moving on.

'No, no, good blackmail material but no, no, still looking forward to Luffy finding that, need
remember to warn Sanji that the dill has gone bad, no, no—oom, black lace.'

"Feeling confident today, your majesty?"
"OUT!"

Robin chuckled as she withdrew the eye before the Cutter could make an eyepatch necessary. 'She's getting faster, good for her. Now, where was I... ah yes. No, no, n-wait... ah, there you are.'

The flower-woman harrumphed with grudging respect as she returned to herself. "Credit where it's due, for all that she's a brat she does indeed have a brain. It's hidden in a compartment in the crow's nest."

"Smart, hidden in the place she's already taking over," Cross nodded in agreement. "Now all you need to do is get the witch to pity the princess."

Yet another liberty her friends had granted her: Robin could smile with honest eagerness whenever she chose, a fact she indulged in as she flipped her newly acquired knife out and ghosted her fingers just over the blade. "I love a good challenge," she purred eagerly.

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Ensconced within the Thousand Sunny's aft-cabin library, Nami was hunched over a table, slowly and intently drawing her fountain pen over the sketch lines of a new map. This one was of Jaya—and briefly, she lamented how behind she'd gotten with her maps—and it was really quite astonishing how obvious it was that half the island had just been... chopped off. Yeah, yeah, eliminate the impossible and all that, but it was the Grand fucking Line, for Aeolus' sake!

Shaking her head, Nami dispelled the thought rather than descend into another rant over the stupidity of the common person, which was pleasantly easy these days, and refocused on her inking.

"KYAAAAAAA!"

"SONNUVA—!"

Nami snarled venomously as she recovered from her heart nearly jumping clean out of her chest on account of a sudden feminine scream shattering her concentration. Her rage originated from the fact that the shriek had caused her hand to spasm from shock and tear a long line of ink across the paper before she'd flung the pen against the—

She blinked. Actually, make that through the wall, with almost a quarter of the pen lodged in the—

"Huh," she remarked, glancing down at her arms and flexing them. "All that work with Donny is actually paying off..."

She then scowled as she clamped her hand into a fist. "The better to give someone a piece of my mind and actually have it stick for once!"

So saying, Nami stomped out of the library to find out what catastrophe had resulted in such a scream and, more importantly, ruined her map. And while 'life-size teddy bear stuck in the rigging' wasn't even on the list of possible reasons, Nami wasn't much surprised; it was positively mundane compared to the typical Grand Line insanity.

What did surprise her, however, was the sight of a very frantic and, more importantly, very corporeal Perona trying and failing to scramble her way up the lines after said bear. And by 'failing', Nami was honestly unsure how she'd managed to tie herself up that way without any help. Were she of a more liberal disposition, she'd say that Perona had somehow managed to truss herself up like a cured ham prepped for shipment.
"—prepped for shipment!"

That drew her gaze back down to the deck, where a small crowd of crewmembers was busy snickering up at Perona's attempts to get at the bear, with more than a few bills swapping hands. "And you guys aren't helping... why?"

"Hey, she said she could handle it," Franky said, a touch defensively. "And none of us want to find out what getting hit with those Negative Hollows Cross mentioned feels like."

"Spoiler alert: it sucks!" Donny concurred with a frantic nod.

"AGREED!" Chopper and—Brook's head? Apparently? Eesh, this crew—piped up fearfully.

"That still—ERGH!—stands!" Perona snarled viciously as she yanked at the lines pinning her leg behind her back. "I'll—GRAH!—dance on each of your graves before I let you—SONNUVA!—TOUCH MY BEAR—WAGH!"

The Ghost Princess's tirade devolved into a terrified shriek when the lines suddenly unwound and unceremoniously dumped the hollow-girl clean overboard.

"WHOA, WATCH IT!"

Or rather, nearly dumped her overboard, thanks to Nami being close enough to dash over and grab her wrist before she could hit the drink.

The navigator wheezed with exertion as she braced her foot against the bulwark in an effort to keep her balance. "You really take that 'let them eat cake' stuff to heart, I take it?!" she grit out.

"You freaking—!" Perona snarled venomously, a Hollow bubbling into existence in her palm. "Let me go, you uncute—!"

SPLASH!

Her protests, Hollow, and composure all died at once as a spray of sea foam blasted her. "PULL ME UP! PULL ME UP!"

"As you wish, your highness," Nami ground out with all the snark she could muster. With one final yank, the navigator hauled her load up, grabbed her other arm, and then yanked her up and over the side and onto the deck, where Perona immediately began kissing the lawn.

"I never thought I'd be so happy to be back on your crummy—!"

"AHEM!" Merry 'subtly' intoned from where she was standing on the foredeck's railing. "Er, I mean delightfully cute ship again?" Perona hastily corrected.

"Better~!" Merry sang as she returned to her duties.

"Yeah, well..." Nami huffed as she got her breath back in her, not used to exerting that much of her strength. "If you pull anything that stupid again, you'll be taking the express route off our 'cute ship'. Seriously, what the hell were you thinking!?!"

Perona got to her feet. It looked like she then tried to jump back to the lines again, but she didn't have the strength for it, her body almost entirely devoid of energy due to her struggles. The end result was that she staggered on her feet as she looked back up at where her bear was caught in the line, her expression more anguished than angered. "I-I couldn't—! I had to—! I-I need to get Bearsy, I need
Nami rolled her eyes in exasperation, pointedly ignoring the Princess' melodrama. "Ergh, if you want that ratty thing so bad then I can just get it for you. Hang tight."

"Wha—*NO*!" Perona spat viciously. "Don't you dare touch my—!"

"Oh, do you ever shut the hell up?" Nami groaned more to herself than anything, ignoring the Hollow-girl in favor of clambering her way up the Sunny's rigging. The navigator might not have had the muscle of the rest of the crew, nor anywhere near as much experience working ship lines, but she was still familiar with the workings; you had to be to properly direct a ship. As such, it was child's play to reach the threadbare bear—Nami took a second to slap herself upside the head for the mental pun—unwind it from its bonds, and drop back down to the deck. "There, done. You happy n—?"

"BEARSY!" THWACK!

"GAH!" Nami grunted in shock when she was suddenly bodychecked into the ground. She raised her head with a snarl the second she had her bearings back. "What the hell is your—!?" Said snarl died in her throat when she actually saw Perona.

The guest on the ship was on her knees, trembling miserably, hunched over the ragged bundle of cloth that was almost twice as big as she was, a millimeter away from breaking out into full-blown sobs as she ran her fingers along the tears in his cloth. "No… no, Bearsy… n-not again… p-please, not again… B…Bearsy…"

Nami's jaw worked up and down at the display, trying and failing to come up with a proper reaction to what she was seeing. Finally, her heartstrings twisted in just such a way that she knew she didn't have any other option. She slowly got to her feet, inched her way over to the Princess, and tapped her on the shoulder. "Hey…"

Perona jerked Bearsy away and snarled at the Straw Hat. "Don't you fucking dare—!"

"I can sew… *him* up for you."

And just like that, Perona froze in place, blinking tearfully at the pirate. "Y-You… wait, wha—?"

"I was the first woman on this crew of psychotics," Nami continued in a placating tone. "If I didn't know my way around a needle and thread, we'd have been buck naked in days. I can stitch Bearsy up for you and get him good as new. And… he's hollow, right?"

Perona sniffled, nodding jerkily.

"Then I can probably turn him inside out somewhat, store all his mass inside himself. That way, you can carry him around with you without any problems and you won't have to worry about losing him." Nami smiled kindly as she rested her hand on the ex-pirate's shoulder. "Does that sound good? Is that alright with you?"

A weak hiccup was followed by an almost inaudible mumble from the ghost girl.

"Alright, then," Nami said, taking Perona's hand and slowly helping her to her feet. "Come on, we'll go to the women's room. It's where I keep my supplies and we'll have some privacy there."

As they started to make their way across the deck, Nami subtly glanced over her shoulder to glare at her crew, and instead blinked in surprise to find that they'd all long since dispersed, with only Robin
looking even remotely in their direction. Upon noticing Nami's gaze, the archaeologist simply smiled and winked before walking away.

Briefly, Nami considered puzzling out whatever was going through crewmate's head, but she just as swiftly dismissed the notion with a shudder. She wanted to keep what little sanity she had left, thank you very much!

Perona was silent as they entered the ship and settled in the women's room, sitting on the bed and practically strangling Bearsy as Nami retrieved her sewing kit. She considered putting him on her desk, but once she realized how white-knuckled Perona's grip on the bear was, she instead conceded to laying him out on her bed instead, with the Hollow-girl reluctantly swapping her grip on the deflated doll for a pillow that she hugged to her chest.

After a few minutes of examining the damage, Nami retrieved a soft brown thread that matched the animal's coat and began threading the needle through the first tear. As she continued sewing, she turned the bear's appearance and condition over before coughing politely. "So… Bearsy, you said his name was?"

Perona made a slight sound in the affirmative.

Nami nodded. She looked the bear over again before glancing at the Ghost Princess. "So… he's… a bit of a creepy little guy, huh?"

Good news, bad news: Good news, that actually got a new reaction out of Perona. Bad news? Said reaction was a vicious twitch and an even more vicious scowl. "Bearsy isn't creepy, he's cute," she bit out.

"Sorry!" Nami hastily placated. Really, what else could she say to that? The girl looked ready to bite her head off. "I didn't mean anything by it, there's nothing wrong with it. Some people like creepy —!"

"He's not creepy he's CUTE!" Perona suddenly roared out of the blue, her face a rictus of rage.

"Okay okay, he's cute, he's cute!" Nami nodded rapidly, keeping a wary eye on the astral matter that was starting to bubble from Perona's body. "You're right, I'm wrong. He's very cute."

Perona stayed frozen in place, chest heaving as she slowly came down from her outburst, re-burying her face in her pillow. "He's cute," she repeated weakly, though at this point Nami wasn't entirely certain who Perona was speaking to. "Bearsy is cute, he has to be cute. He has to be… He… creepy… creepy has to be cute… because… if he isn't…" She lapsed into silence, shuddering and clutching the pillow like a life preserver.

Nami kept a wary eye on Perona, but she kept working in diligent silence for the next few minutes, carefully removing what traces of flesh remained in Bearsy and stitching up the more obvious rips in his fabric and pelt.

After she finished resecuring the bear's arm, Nami cast a tentative glance towards Perona. "I… I really am sorry, you know," she tried softly. "What I said was insensitive, and I should have known better. I…" Nami faltered slightly, but after a moment's debate she made her decision. "I know… how important something like Bearsy can be."

A derisive snort sounded out, and Nami was suddenly doubly thankful for what Kalifa had put her through, because if Perona had snorted like that in front of the old Nami, she'd have had her head ripped off.
As it was she calmed herself down with a slow, methodical breath before nodding her head at a nearby dresser. "The top drawer, there's a false back."

Perona eyed her doubtfully but nevertheless complied; she got up, worked the drawer open and jimmed open the back. And what she found within made her tilt her head in confusion. "Uh… what… is…" She held up the tiny shirt she'd found and looked over the design on its chest. "Is this supposed to be a sunflower or—?"

"It's a lion," Nami replied softly, her fingers continuing their work even as her voice was quivered with emotion. "We… my family… we didn't have a lot… of anything except love and tangerines, really. That shirt, it used to be my sister's before she outgrew it. My mother redesigned it for me, and…" Nami shook her head with a sardonic chuckle. "Brat that I was, we got in a fight over it. I was an idiot, I said such stupid things and then…"

Nami was forced to come to a stop as her shivers became too much, her fingers bunching up the bear's pelt. "And then… Arlong and his crew came and took over my village. And I had… barely enough time to apologize to my mother before…" Nami lapsed into silence as she shook her head; some pain was too deep-seated for anything to wash away.

"…Go figure," Perona finally responded, gently returning the shirt to its place. "And here I was thinking you were an idiot for wanting to get rich all the time."

Nami turned to look at Perona, whose face had darkened some as she looked to the side. She didn't elaborate, and after a few moments, Nami returned to her repairs, the silence far more comfortable. Finally, as she moved to the last tear, the ghost princess sighed.

"I was born the youngest daughter of a wealthy family," she said without preamble. "Four older sisters, and five older brothers. Nice and uniform, just the way my parents liked it. I had anything I wanted…" Perona's face twisted up in a scowl. "Except anyone who actually cared about me, all because of what I liked."

Nami glanced at her in polite askance.

Perona narrowed her eyes scornfully as she twisted up the sheets in her fists. "While my sisters all dressed up in their ugly dresses and played with their ugly dolls… I liked cute things. I liked cute dresses, cute dolls… but everyone else hated them. They said they were ugly, that they were creepy…" The pinkette raised her hands and gazed longingly at the Hollows that swirled up around her, cackling and giggling obliviously as they lavished brainless praise on their Princess. "And then I ate my fruit, met my friends… and things became so much worse."

Perona curled in on herself as her friends hovered around her, laughing as they raised their arms in a facsimile of a hug, though they kept well away from actually touching her. "They moved my room to the lowest basement… took Bearsy away and…" She trailed off listlessly for a moment, her gaze far off. "Said that I would only get to come out if I got rid of the creepy toys… that it was a shame because I was so cute…" She dug her fingers into her legs. "But… but they just didn't get it. They didn't understand that my friends… my toys, my clothes, everything… they were cute. I chose them because they were cute, I chose them because… because…"

"Because they reminded you of yourself."

Perona glanced at Nami in surprise, but after a second of silence she nodded in tearful confirmation.

Nami shook her head sadly. "Creepy is cute. What others call creepy has to be cute. Bearsy has to be cute, because if he isn't…"
"Then I'm creepy too…" Perona completed weakly, nodding in confirmation. "And nobody loves a creepy haunted freak." the girl then unwound slightly and knocked the back of her head against the wall. "Nobody except the giant twisted bastard who came to town one day, wrecked the mansion, and said he found my powers interesting. Who cares if it was only because I was useful to him? He was the one person in the world who actually cared for me… for me. That's…" Perona let out a cracked chuckle. "That's gotta count for… for something, right?"

Nami seriously doubted that Cross knew any of what she had just learned. But regardless of what he had seen, she now understood a lot more why he had given Perona a vote of confidence. Smiling softly, she finished the final stitch and held out the repaired and minimized bear to its owner. "There's at least one other person who cares about you, Perona," she said.

"BEARSY!" Perona cried, snatching the doll and hugging him to her chest with a joyful sob. "Oh, thank you thank you thank you so much…"

"No problem," Nami nodded with a polite smile before dropping her hand on Perona's shoulder. "And... I did say at least, you know." Her smile grew fond as Perona looked up at her in shock. "I've gotta admit... now that he's not a giant murderbear, Bearsy really does look very cute."

"I... ah..." Perona fumbled around slightly with her words before glancing away with a cough. "Your... mother did good work with that shirt, too. Your... your mom must have loved you a lot."

Nami glanced away. "...More than life itself," she confirmed, a tear slipping down her face. Shaking her head lightly, she turned back towards the ship's guest, a change in subject mercifully jumping out at her as she took in the look of her skin. "Hey, your tanning technique is, ah... kind of impractical, you'll end up looking all lopsided. If you want, I could... teach you, maybe, or...?"

Perona perked up eagerly. "R-Really? That'd be great, thanks! I'll go wait for you near the- ah, by your tangerines!

"Alright, be right there!" Nami waved with a smile, before slumping and sighing to herself as the door closed. After that... well, it looked like her maps would have to wait for yet another day, though damned if she could find it in herself to be resentful of the fa—

Nami sat bolt upright as she realized what had been bothering her the whole time she was working on the bear: the library was soundproof. The door had been closed and the windows shut, so the only way that the sound of Perona's scream could have gotten in was... Cross's... pipe system...

And just like that, everything clicked as she remembered what Robin's new weapon was and how smooth the slits in Bearsy had been. Then there was the fact that Perona couldn't have possibly gotten that tangled or tired in the lines in the time it took her to get there...

She sighed again, shaking her head in exasperation but incapable of hiding her fond smile. "Those devious bastards...

"Those devious bastards..." Nami lamented to herself. "It takes a special kind of sneaky to not only manipulate a person, but make that person not care that they're being manipulated..."

Nami then looked up intently. "Soundbite, do me a favor and tell Robin and Cross that I'm still going to kick their asses for this later."

"Done and done!"

"Thank you~!" Nami singsang as she started to get changed.
"Well, we knew that that was bound to happen," Cross said cheerfully, not pausing in his swinging of Funkfreed in his sword form as Soundbite laughed his non-existent ass off. "Good thing that for once, it wasn't *my* idea, *and* that Nami hardly has a prayer of getting one over on you."

Robin smiled sweetly back at him. "For your sake, Cross, I hope that you are not trying to jinx me," she simpered.

"Maybe," Cross responded. "Or maybe I have the thought in mind that most of the people on this ship have seen *me* humiliated and comically injured more times than I can count, whereas *you* have been all but untouched since Water 7, and *maybe* they'd be interested in a change of pace."

Robin's smile remained fixed even as a sheen of sweat formed on her brow. Wordlessly, she turned away and entered the ship, closing the door behind her. Cross snickered shamelessly, wondering to himself if that was a bluff before resuming his training. Though in his defense, it *was* a bit hard to concentrate due to the show going on at the other end of the deck.

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Raphe panted as she strained her hearing for the telltale sound of rubber stretching, wishing as she did so that it was only something as trivial as Usopp's rubber bands. But *nooo*, Boss *had* to kill two Bananagators with one punch by having Luffy combine his pipework with her reaction training. It wasn't a bad idea… *you* know, other than the fact that it meant she was being hit by a metal pipe with ends as hard as diamonds that was being swung by *literally* the strongest person on the crew.

The only thing that kept her from complaining, loudly and insistently, was the fact that, like all of Boss's training methods, it was actually working, as evidenced by the fact that she managed to block an attack from the side with a sound of clanging metal thanks to one of her sai, following which she locked the pipe in place with her second sai.

This turned out to a supremely *bad* idea when Luffy demonstrated his status as, to reiterate, *strongest person aboard* when he swung his pipe, dugong and all, and launched Raphey tail-over-skullplate into the ship's railing.

"Owww…" the female dugong whimpered, her flippers twitching minutely.

"Shake it off, Raphey!" Boss barked before turning his attention to the matter he himself was currently occupied with. "And as for you, Conis! Put your hips into it! No, not just your hips, put your whole body into it, whole body!"

And there was the other reason why Raphe wasn't complaining: because rather than handling him herself, Boss was occupied with willfully taking a few lumps of his own. He was playing defense against Conis, simultaneously blocking her weapon strikes and offering up a continuous stream of criticism. And *that* was working, too. Even just the glimpses Raphey had managed in between getting her ass handed to her by the, third time's the charm, *strongest person on the crew* showed the angel exhibiting a far tighter and more effective usage of her firearms in melee combat than she'd ever exhibited before.

And Boss wasn't just standing still during this fight either, so as to offer some training to another crewmate at the same time.

"Right snap!"
Conis swung her bazooka around and used it as a barrier to catch the snap punch Boss lashed out at her.

Boss whistled appreciatively. "Niiiice! You're getting good at this, Su!"

"And just in time for the feeling to come back to my legs! I *really* appreciate it!" Conis concurred with a sunny smile.

Su snorted, smirking at her friend from her shoulder perch. "I can't tell if you're being sincere or if you're *finally* learning how to sarcasm. Either's likely with you."

"What can I say, I'm just *really* happy you're getting better with your cold reading!" Conis folded her arms behind her back and started to swing back and forth on her heels. "After all, you've *always* had a bit of an issue with poor judgement…"

Su froze and her fur started to fluff up. "Conis, sweetie… don't. You—!"

Conis' smile didn't waver an inch. "Remember the chicken?"

"Moremoremoremore TELL ME MOOOORE!" Soundbite cackled out of the blue.

"NOOO!" Su wailed miserably.

"YES!" Conis pumped her fists and jumped for joy, her half-ton bazooka bouncing in her grip. "Finally I managed to get one over on you! Hahaha!"

"THAT'S NOT FAIR! I DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT CHICKEN WAS ON, BUT IT WAS ON SOMETHING!" Su yowled as she ground her pawpads into her temple. "YOU CAN'T JUST—Boss is open."

"Wha—?" Said senior dugong blinked in confusion as he was broken out of concentrating on Raphey and Luffy's exchange.

"Sorry, Boss!"

**THWACK!**

"GAH!" Boss yelped as Conis sent him flying as she thwacked him with her bazooka like he was Tiger Woods' golf ball on a 500-yard tee-off.

Any other day, that small victory would have been the end of it.

*This* particular day, Luffy was going a bit overboard in his training, winding his arms up and letting loose on his poor training partner (read: punching bag) with a killer wind-up.

"GUM-GUM HOME—!"

**THWACK! YEEEAAARGH!**

"—run? Eh?" Luffy blinked in surprise as his body stopped rotating. "What was that?"

"A *load* of pain and trouble for me and my bros once he gets back…” Raphey whimpered tearfully as she traced a black dot's course through the air.

"Whoops," Luffy had the good grace to wince and scratch the back of his head with his pipe as he joined her in watching. "Nami was right, I really *should* start paying attention to what I'm doing in a
"Oh, dear…" Conis covered her mouth in shock. "I didn't mean for that to happen! Do you think he'll be okay?"

"Eh?" Raphey blinked as the question drew her out of her terror before waving her flipper with a scoff. "Oh, yeah, sure, he'll be fine. We dugongs are tough and he's stupid strong. So long as he hits the water—"

It was at that moment that something rammed into Boss in midair.

Conis slowly blinked in shock. "…oh, my."

Su, meanwhile, was grinning like a white devil. "This… is an unfortunate situation," she summarized, sounding like she was on the verge of breaking out into mad cackling.

Raphey swallowed heavily in agreement before raising her voice to address the rest of the crew. "Uh, hey, guys? Juuuust for the record, the next time we see a beetle?" She gestured weakly out at the insect that had hit Boss midflight. "That is the current largest that we have ever seen. Just for the record."

Cross gave the display a flat look as he walked up to the group, a sweat-soaked towel slung over his shoulders. "Why do I have a feeling that this is going to get way worse before it gets any better?"

"SO COOOOL!" Luffy finally burst out, stars beaming from his eyes. "I'm gonna go and catch it! Franky! Get a cage ready!" And just like that, before anyone could say or do anything, he shot his fist out and was gone.

Cross rolled his eyes and kept walking with a fond chuckle. "Called it."

**Xomniac AN: And that's all for now, folks!**

**Cross-Brain AN: Those of you who speculated that we were including Strong World? You were right. However, that brings us to an issue that we need to resolve.**

Last time we wrote in a movie, as you recall, we published it as one monster chapter, and unlike last time, we haven't been planning out said chapter for months with only a week or two's worth of finishing touches to put on to make it publishable, so whatever happens, it's going to be a while before we publish it.

So, we have two options: either publish it in two to three chapters, depending on length and plot progression; or publish it all at once. The latter option will take more time, but there won't be any cliffhangers part of the way through; likewise, the former option will seem to come faster, but we'll probably cut off at the best parts of the action. You know we will. But the choice is a difficult one, so what shall we do?

Why… leave it to you, of course. A poll is now open on Xomniac's profile. We will only accept votes cast there, and the poll will remain open until we publish the next chapter, which will cover the Little East Blue filler arc. At that time, the decision of the majority will stand. Until then…

? AN: So. This would have been out last night, but I insisted on looking through it and making a few last-minute suggestions. Apologies for the twelve-hour delay, however unannounced
before this note. I look forward, dear readers, to meeting you all very soon.

Hornet AN: Oh, and for anyone who's been watching the news, Xomniac is currently safe from Hurricane Irma, have no fear.
Chapter 54: Those Nefarious Straw Hats! I'll Protect The Island From You!

Xomniac AN: A little something for the Rare Sentences: "[TPO], think you could edit in Largo strumming or tuning his guitar menacingly?…dear god that's actually a thing in this instance."

"Uhhh…" Sanji blinked slowly, taking in the scene before him as he walked across the deck, fresh from his most recent brawl with Zoro. "Yeeeaah, I got nothing. Someone want to fill me in on what just happened?"

"Oh, we're training!"

Sanji turned his head towards Donny and felt his eye twitch at what he saw.

"Is that Brook's skull?"

"Yep!" Donny nodded in confirmation. "Like I said, training. Got a bit… eh, weird, but, hey." He shrugged dismissively. "Devil Fruits, right?"

The Straw Hats' cook slowly pinched the bridge of his nose as he felt a migraine coming on. "Please tell me that this training didn't end up killing our musician."

"Actually, if we want to be pedantic, I was killed by the first poisoned arrow that struck me. Went clean through my knee! I eventually walked it off, though! I have no idea why so many people make such a big deal out of that kind of injury."

Sanji pointedly ignored the plaintive "Soundbite…" and taunting "STILL NOT ME!" that wafted over from the quarterdeck in favor of cracking his eyes open and taking in the fact that Brook's skull was literally smiling up at him. "Dare I even ask where the rest of you is?"

"My skeleton came apart when I lost my head, so Chopper is reassembling my bones as we speak, and wiring them together for good measure," Brook glibly informed him. "Until then, Donny has been so kind as to grant me mobility! It's actually quite nice!"

"…It's a wonder that I actually find the sight of one of my crewmates carrying a talking skull around to be normal," Sanji deadpanned.

"Oh, I dunno!" Donny piped up, an eager grin slipping across his face. "I think there are some advantages to the situation! Observe!" The dugong proffered the afro'd cranium with dramatic flare. "Alas, poor Yorick!" he declared in a grandiose tone as he gesticulated with his free flipper.

"I knew him, Horatio! A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy!" Soundbite piped up happily.

"Oh, please stop, you're making me blush! Even though I have no cheeks or blood to blush with! YOHOHOHO! SKULL JOKE!" Brook cackled in Donny's palm.

A very prominent sweatdrop bloomed on the back of Sanji's skull as he watched the scene. "This is just morbid."

"You say morbid, I say hilarious!" Donny sniggered as he casually bounced Brook from flipper to flipper. "And Mikey says I don't have a sense of humor! HA!"
"Horohorohorohoro," Perona giggled behind her hand as her spirit floated by, causing Donny and Brook to fearfully glance up. "I have to admit it, that is funny."

"I beg to differ," Vivi huffed as she came up from below deck, clad in a sundress and taking it all in with a flat expression. "At least it was better than the stunt Cross pulled…" Her expression fell even flatter. "Though I'd just like to make it known that I find it deeply disturbing that both times that part has been re-enacted by this crew, it's been with separate, genuine human skulls."

"Noted, my most dearly beloved of princesses!" Sanji sang rapturously before snapping back to serious and jabbing his thumb over his shoulder. "But, ah… seriously, I was more asking about the giant bug that our captain is riding?"

"Captain and captain of the ship's guard, to be specific," Cross offered with a cheery smile as he came over, having changed into a fresh hoodie. "And if that weirds you out, I suggest you not delve further. It's just as weird with context as without, so you're not missing much."

"Delightful," the princess deadpanned. "So, anything to tell us, or—?"

"Hey, don't look at me," Cross raised his hands in casual surrender. "Until we hit the Red Line again, you all are outta luck for spoilers from me."

"Oooh, so the smartass isn't quite so smart anymore?" Perona chuckled tauntingly as she floated in Cross's face. "I'm both disappointed and delighted!"

"Ya ever hear that saying ABOUT KEEPING YOUR TRAP SHUT IF YOU'VE GOT NOTHING TO SAY?" Soundbite sneered at the ghost, before blinking as everyone stared flatly at him. "HEY, WHAT GIVES!?"

"We're just all surprised that you know that phrase, you undercooked hors d'oeuvre," Sanji said.

"OF COURSE I KNOW THAT PHRASE!" Soundbite sniffed indignantly. "I just CHOOSE NOT TO FOLLOW IT."

"Hypocrisy at its finest," Zoro scoffed from across the deck. "So, now what?"

Nobody noticed the impish smirk that flashed across Perona's face, but they did see the angelic expression she adopted. "Well I do hope something is done about that big mean bug soon enough!" she lamented in a pretentious tone of voice. "After all, when you Straw Hats are involved, who knows just what could happen!"

Cross cocked his eyebrow at her as he slowly took a step back. "You do realize that that phrase is like painting a big fat bull's-eye on your face, right?"

To that, Perona just smirked harder. "Mm, I don't think so. I wasn't very specific, after all."

Before Cross could respond to that, the insectoid buzzing that had formed a constant white noise for the past five minutes suddenly picked up in intensity, suddenly joined by grunts of dugong exertion and Luffy's joyous whoops. All eyes turned seaward to find the massive beetle making a beeline for the deck—and more importantly, to fly right over Cross' head.

"And you do realize that I'm intangible right now, right?" Perona shoved her smirk in Cross's face.

The strategist paled in terror. "You little—!"

"HEY, GUYS! NEED SOME HELP UP HERE!" Luffy yelled down at his crew.
And before anyone could react, a rubbery hand shot clean through Perona's chest and latched onto Cross's collar.

Cross stared blankly at the fist for a moment as the arm it was attached to started to go taut before heaving a tired sigh. "Luffy, you might have gotten smarter, but you are still a *dumb* son of a— YARGH!" "WAHOOHOOHOIE!" Cross and Soundbite wailed in unison as they were yanked clear off the deck and up onto the writhing insect's back.

The crew all watched, silent, as the titanic beetle zipped back into the air with a particularly rapid-fire aileron roll.

"Oooh, he is *not* going to like that…" Brook breathed… well, breathlessly.

"Different story for me~!" Perona sang, and before anyone else could say anything, she soared back through the air to the quarterdeck, where she landed in her bikini-clad body and promptly set about hugging her Beary, the cloth only barely muffling a squeal of mirth.

"What's got you all cheery?"

Perona glanced over to where Nami was looking up from her own seat with an expression that was equal parts curious and concerned. Normally, Perona would have just scoffed and dismissed the woman with a flippant comment or an offhanded Negative Hollow, but…

"Oh, I just got Cross to get snagged onto the big buggy up there by your captain." Perona jabbed her thumb upwards with a confident smirk.

Nami glanced up—

"Snrk!"

And promptly had to cover her mouth to suppress a snort of laughter. "Oh, *man*, that's a good one! But, uh…" She then trailed off into a nervous grimace. "I hope you do remember that Cross is a *vindictive* bastard and that he's going to see that you pay dearly for that."

"HA! What do I have to worry about… from…" Perona trailed off, her expression falling flat. Then her face grew slightly ashen, and she chuckled nervously as she slowly pointed towards the main deck. "Uh… I, ah… Imma just… gonna go and stash my body, if that's alright with you."

"You go do that if you think it'll do you any good," Nami chuckled. "Just hope that Cross's landing is a good one, otherwise he's going to be *really*—!"

Out of nowhere, the giant beetle suddenly bucked like it'd been kicked in the face before turning over into a nosedive face-first into the cliffside of a nearby island, really just a spire of rock poking out of the horizon at this distance.

Nami sat up and blinked in surprise. "Huh, wouldja look at that, they found land. Lucky us." She then directed a sympathetic wince at Perona. "Unlucky you."

The Ghost Princess let out a sound not unlike a whimper.

-O-

"Urgh…" Boss groaned as he sat up on his tail, head pounding like the entire Royal Army was using it for marching maneuvers. "Where's the flying Sandora Dragon that body slammed me?"
He glanced to his right, where a familiar giant beetle was sprawled on its back, eyes spinning. Beside the beetle was Cross, lying face-down in the dirt and Soundbite's shell spinning wildly on its back with the snail's eyes sticking out and spinning dizzily. Oh, and Luffy trying to yank his head out of where it'd gotten lodged in the cliff face, naturally.

"Oh, right," he drawled, shaking his head as it all came back to him.

"S'ndb'te…" Cross muttered into the dirt before weakly pushing himself onto his back and spitting out a few strands of grass. "I just want you to know… I both applaud and disdain your idea to blast that thing in the face with a Gastro-Blast."

"I AIN'T THAT proud of myself, either, DON'T WORRY…" Soundbite gurgled as his spinning slowed to a halt.

"Good, good… and just out of curiosity, have you ever wondered what rubber tastes like?"

"Well, now that you mention it…"

"You'll have to get your pound of flesh some other time," Boss cut in as he slowly slid into a fighting position. "Because right now, we're still a bit busy! If a hit that weak took down that big lug, then I'll eat my own flippers!"

"Eh?" Cross tilted his head over to look at boss. "The heck are you—?"

Out of the blue, the giant beetle regained its senses and flipped back to his (and it was definitely a he, if its tone of voice was anything to go by) heavily armored legs with a flanging roar. At the same time, Luffy ripped his head out of the cliff and brought most of it down with him as he loosed a bestial roar all his own.

"NOW I'M FIRED UP!" the rubber-man bellowed. He then donned a viciously eager grin as he raised his fists into a ready position and squared off against his insectoid rival. "Man, you're a really tough beetle! Really cool too!" Luffy's grin slowly doubled in size as he lowered his stance. "And… you really want to keep fighting, don't you?"

The titan-bug hesitated slightly, and then his mandibles curled into a grin and he bucked his head in an insectoid approximate of a nod. He let loose a warbling, eager-sounding cry as he pawed at the ground, his wings literally buzzing with eager, pent-up energy.

Luffy blinked in surprise before glancing at his third mate's partner in confusion. "What'd he say?"

"DAMMIT, CAPTAIN, I'M A MOLLUSK, NOT AN arthropod!"

"And since when has something as trivial as species ever stopped you before?" Cross snorted, having yet to shift from his prone position.

Soundbite, meanwhile, abruptly stopped his spinning and flipped onto his more stable and sticky side, casting a bemused look at his armored cousin. "BEFORE, YOU'D HAVE A POINT. NOT IN THIS CASE. I can't make heads or tails of what he said… OR ANYTHING HE'S SAYING FOR THAT MATTER. I'd say it's all Greek to me, but I know that too!"

Cross blinked in surprise before leaning up into a sitting position. "You… can't translate him? Not even with his Voice?" he said in surprise.

"Oh, well, of course THAT works… but that's like looking at the binary for a piece of digital art!"
"Well, what're those, then?" Luffy asked, almost oblivious to the increasingly annoyed beetle.

"Uhh…" Soundbite's eyestalks crossed inquisitively. "Ignoring the mounting temper at being ignored… you're a good fight, BOTH YOU AND BOSS ARE A LOTTA FUN TO BRAWL WITH, he's looking forwards to grinding you two into the dirt—"

"You're dead," Boss stated as he slammed his flippers' 'knuckles' together, drawing a warning growl and glare from the insect.

"You're gonna fit right in!" Luffy cackled eagerly, gearing up to launch forwards—

"WHOA, RED FLAG ON THAT PLAY!" Soundbite's eyestalks suddenly snapped to attention in alarm as pure fury flashed through his cousin's being. "LUFFY, THIS ISLAND IS THE BUG'S PROUD HOME AND DUTY IN ONE, IT CAN AND INTENDS TO DEFEND THIS PLACE until it's dead and gone! No way in hell you're getting him off this island!"

Luffy and Boss both blinked in surprise at that comment, followed by Luffy sagging despondently as the beetle snorted and nodded in clear agreement. "Aww, really? There's seriously no way?"

"PUT IT THIS WAY: MERRY WOULD HAVE AN EASIER TIME getting you to let her swallow your hat," Soundbite vowed solemnly.

Luffy's eyes darkened for an instant, his hand shooting up to his treasure. Then he sighed in disappointment. "Alright…" Then his bad mood evaporated as he turned back to the beetle with a sunny grin. "Hey, we're not here to hurt anyone or steal anything. If you don't wanna fight anymore —"

That got a particularly irritated-sounding roar and some earthshaking stomping.

"Did you forget the parts about 'FUN TO BRAWL WITH' and 'grind you into the dirt'?" Soundbite deadpanned.

"I'm with him there!" Boss cut in, a few degrees down from snorting out a blast of steam. "Sorry, Captain, but you're just gonna have to get in line, because I've got a reputation to defend! I haven't lost a CQC brawl yet, and this oversized fly ain't gonna break it!"

"WHAT ABOUT literally every fight with the other Mon—?"

"THOSE ARE DRAWS!" Boss snapped without missing a beat. "I ain't gone all-out and beaten those guys to a bloody pulp yet because the costs outweigh the benefits in terms of training and the Sunny couldn't take it. But beetle-boy here?" He grinned fiercely as he rolled his shoulders. "He doesn't have that advantage to him, so I'm not gonna hold back on him!"

"Hey, no fair, you're stealing my fight!" Luffy whined… and then he blinked as something hit him. "Wait… you've fought Sanji and Zoro!? But we haven't fought yet! RAGH!" The rubber-man started stomping and swinging his arms furiously. "C'MON! YOU'RE ONE OF THE STRONGEST AND COOLEST FIGHTERS ON THE CREW! I WANNA FIGHT YOU! AND I WANNA FIGHT THE BEETLE! RAAAAGH, WHO DO I FIGHT FIRST!?"

Said beetle snorted and shook its horn in an unimpressed manner.

"Big boy's got a good point, YOU'RE AN IDIOT," Soundbite deadpanned. "WHY THE HELL
"CAN'T YOU just go battle royale AND BE DONE WITH IT!?"

Beetle, man, and dugong all froze, and a significant look passed between them.

"Y'know, Soundbite..." Boss said, in a voice akin to having seen a unicorn. "That's actually a really good idea."

"WHY DO YOU SOUND SO SURPRISED?!

Cross, meanwhile, snorted and cackled in honest—if still tired—amusement. "Oh, I love when that happens to someone who's not me!"

"Anyway..." Boss slowly cracked his 'knuckles' as he grinned at his soon-to-be opponents. "No more delays. Let's find out... who here's the real strongest Monster in these seas!" The dugong then slammed his tail into the ground, cracking open a decently sized crater around him. "LET'S GO! THREE!"

The beetle threw its horn back and roared, the primal sound requiring no translation.

"ONE!" Luffy cackled, snapping his arm back in such a way that it was clearly angled towards the beetle. "GUM-GUM—!"

"LEAVE HIM ALONE!"

"—GWAGH!?"

Out of nowhere, a three-foot and change tyke in a pastel pink and yellow shirt and shorts along with a Marine cap and coat that were a few sizes too big for her, leapt onto Luffy's back and started going to town on his head with a thick-ended branch. The makeshift club didn't do any damage, obviously, but it did tilt his hat down over his eyes, and in the confusion Luffy's fist went out of his control—THWACK! "GWAGH!"

And slammed clean into his own cheek, sending both himself and his impromptu passenger tumbling in the dirt, though that didn't hinder said passenger from continuing to wail on him in the least.

Cross's eye twitched slightly as he took it all in. "Oh, what fresh hell is this."

Boss cocked his eyebrow at his crew's third mate in surprise, the sudden show having knocked him clean out of his battle lust. "Since when are you this snippy?"

Cross let out a garbled grumble as he scratched at his hat with both heads. "Since our idiot captain batted you onto the giant bug over there, followed by said idiot captain then stretching himself up to said bug, and finally our resident Ghost Princess—who I still need to swear vengeance against, by the way—tricked said idiot captain into dragging me up to said bug, which culminated in our high-fiving a cliff with our bodies. Final count?" The tactician's eyes rolled up in his head and he flopped onto his back in a spread-eagled position. "Blame the idiot captain, leave me to my pain..."

"...It is a wonder that that whole series of events actually makes sense to me," Boss breathed. He then grimaced and knotted his brow. "It also gives me a raging headache and pisses me off for some reason, why the hell am I pissed off?...ah!" The dugong pounded his flipper in his palm in realization. "Sonnuva seahorse! I lost my cigar!"

Soundbite boggled at the dugong. "HOW ADDICTED TO nicotine ARE you?"
"Tchyeah, like you don't eat lettuce almost religiously you little mrgrfrkr…" Boss trailed off into grumbling as he patted down his shell, followed by his perking up joyously as he withdrew one of his cigars. "Got one!" A few more seconds patting, however, got him sagging in dismay. "Don't got my flints and my weapon's back on the Sunny… damn it, anyone got a light?"

"Ah, here you go." There was a flick of metal, and a lighter was held before the Dugong.

"Thanks!" Boss hastily lit his cigar and took a greedy drag, which he snorted out with a contented hum. "Ahhhh yeah, that takes the edge off… thanks for that!" He then took a slower drag, and let the smoke hiss out slowly as he glanced up at the portly, gray-mustachioed old man wearing a boater hat and carrying a pipe who'd offered him the light. "And if you're expecting me to jump in surprise from you showing up like that, you're sorely mistaken."

"Hahaha, no worries, I wouldn't dream of it!" the old man chuckled good-naturedly as he waved the dugong down. "And it wasn't like I intentionally snuck up on you! I just wanted to say hello, and also to confirm something! You four, you're all members of the Straw Hat Pirates, correct?"

"Considering you had enough respect for Soundbite to count him as a crewmate?" Cross said. "I feel like you're nice enough to warrant an honest yes."

"Then in that case, allow me to introduce myself!" the old man laughed as he held his arms out invitingly. "My name is Fabre; I'm the mayor of these parts! Allow me to be the first to welcome you as the honored guests of Kansorn Island!"

"Well, I guess that means we don't have to introduce ourselves," Cross remarked. "But you'll understand if I take your warm welcome with a grain of salt."

"Just say HE'S SUSPICIOUS, DON'T MENTION THE SALT!" Soundbite snapped.

The mayor laughed again, waving a hand. "I understand your concern, but I promise you have nothing to fear from us. I was going to save this for when you reached our humble town, but once we confirmed that it was your ship on the horizon that Boss had buzzed, I decided to come here alone to ease your suspicions. You see, the reason you'll find you're quite welcome here is that most all of this island's inhabitants hail from the East Blue, where your crew originated. And even beyond that, quite a few of us actually hail from islands your original crewmates came from! Throw in your SBS sessions chronicling our exploits and, well…" Fabre beamed proudly. "Suffice to say that much of the island's been set up as a shrine to the Straw Hat Pirates, and everyone on the island is a big fan of your crew!"

"OWOWOWOW! GET OFF OF—!

"NO, YOU GET OFF MY HOME!" CHOMP!

"—AAAARGH! LET GO LET GO LET GO!"

Everyone flinched and turned to watch in half bemusement, half sympathetic pain as Monkey D. Luffy, one of the strongest and most renowned pirates of his generation, ran around screaming his head off in pain as a little girl bit and scratched at his head.

"IIIll'm going to go out on a limb and say that you're going to tack on a 'most' to that last statement of yours?"

Fabre's weary sigh was all the answer the Straw Hats needed.

The beetle's reaction, meanwhile, seemed equal parts exasperated and fond, and it was with
heretofore unseen delicacy that the titan stepped towards the squabbling pair. Then, with the same amount of delicacy, the beetle stretched its leg out, hooked the barbed tip in the back of the girl's shirt and pulled her off of Luffy, leaving her struggling in the air.

"Ah-hah-hah-haooow…" Luffy whined, massaging his bite marks. "Why does stuff that shouldn't hurt me always hurt so much mooore…"

"Because the muse of comedy has Haki," Cross informed his captain.

"Oh, okay then…"

"Yoko!" Fabre spoke up, addressing the girl in a chastising tone. "I know you're not happy with this, but please! Surely you must understand that just attacking a person like that—!"

"I wouldn't ever attack someone like that, but I will attack a pirate like him each and every time!" the newly named Yoko spat venomously, swapping her glaring between Luffy and the mayor. "You and everyone else on the island might have gone crazy, but I haven't! No matter what you or anyone says, pirates are pirates! I won't let them hurt my home, no matter what!"

"We're not gonna hurt your home," Luffy said, much akin to saying that the sky was blue.

"I SAW YOU ATTACKING BOSS!" the girl roared, swinging in the bug's grip.

Luffy and his ship's guard both blinked and glanced at one another in confusion before the dugong slowly raised a flipper.

"Uh… I wanted him to attack me, and I was going to return the—" Boss Dugong started hesitantly, unfortunately missing how the local mayor was desperately chopping his hand across his neck in a plea for silence, which unfortunately came to naught when the rebellious girl interrupted him.

"Not you," Yoko snapped, her anger freezing over as she glared bloody murder at the amphibian pirate.

"Boss… was the name we gave to our large friend here when he came to us," Fabre clarified, drawing a friendly wave from the insect.

"But ever since your stupid show started, everyone's started calling him Boss Kabuto!" Yoko hissed, as though the words were heresy. "It was his name and you stole it! Boss is Boss, and only he can ever be the real Boss! You're just a dumb, smelly, pirate fake!"

Boss-the-Dugong blinked in surprise at the sheer vitriol in her words, and then he closed his eyes solemnly, his cigar bobbing up and down. "Zat so…"

"Hey, you're wrong!"

Three of the present Straw Hats and the local mayor all winced at the sound of one of the few things that could escalate matters worse than Cross opening his mouth: Luffy opening his.

"My Boss is way stronger than your Boss, so that makes him the real Boss!" Luffy stated, accompanied by a foot stomp. "The other dugongs told me how he got his name! Only the strongest person around gets to be called… Boss… wait a second…"

Several confused glances were shared when Luffy suddenly trailed off, his head bowed and his face screwed up in intense thought. Cross, the lone exception to the above, leaned up into a sitting position and gave his captain a half-lidded stare. "Oh, this is bound to be good."
"The strongest fighter is called Boss," Luffy muttered under his breath, grinding his finger into his temple. "And I was gonna fight two other guys named Boss… and I was going to beat them too…"

"OI!" Boss Dugong barked indignantly, with the Kabuto edition giving an annoyed grunt of his own.

Several more seconds passed, and then… "AH!" Luffy's head snapped up in realization, and he pounded his fist in his palm. "When I beat the two of them, I'll be the Boss!"

"That's what he got out of this?" Fabre asked, his tone equal parts amazed and amused.

"A Boss Dugong, a Boss Kabuto and a Boss Monkey; did I stumble into a myth of some sort when I wasn't looking?" Cross questioned with familiar amusement.

"That's 'IF' you beat me, Captain!" Said Boss Dugong shook his fist defiantly at the rubber-man. "You can come at me with all barrels blasting, but I'm not gonna go down without giving you one hell of a fight!"

"And you're not fighting the real Boss at all!" Yoko cut in. If looks could kill, Luffy would have keeled over with a dozen stab wounds in his skull. "He's going to kick your ass so that you leave our island and never come back, but he won't fight you for fun! You might be a brainless thug, but not Boss!"

The beetle let out an offended sound, to which the Straw Hats looked at a frowning Soundbite. "UH… difference of opinion here, he's both as eager as a hound with a scent… and nostalgic as all hell?" Soundbite gave his odd sort-of shrug. "DON'T ASK ME."

"You're wrong, lying, stupid, or some combination of all three!" Yoko snorted. "Boss isn't like that! Right, Boss?" She smiled proudly at the titan bug, only for her face to fall when he failed to meet her gaze. "B-Boss?"

The Kaiser-sized kabuto gave out a lilting, apologetic rumble, gazing at the girl with regretful eyes.

"B-But why?!!" Yoko demanded, anger and a little bit of betrayal coloring her voice. "You've always been by my side, protecting this island from pirates like them—" That last barbed word was accompanied by the girl jabbing her finger at Sunny, which had sailed closer over time. "—and now you want to—!"

Whatever rant Yoko had been working up to died in her throat when Boss Kabuto suddenly perked up and snapped his gaze to the ship. He then dropped the girl from his leg, lifted off, and buzzed a bee—er, beetle—line straight towards the Sunny. And the reason it died became clear when she turned a smug grin on Luffy, Boss Dugong, and Cross.

"Hah, looks like you guys were wrong!" she crowed with way too much eager pride. "Now Boss is gonna go sink your ship, and you're all gonna leave crying, just like all the others!" She glanced back out to sea, where the titan-beetle was circling above the Sunny. "Any second now."

"Ah, do you think he's lost or something?" Luffy asked, head tilted in confusion.

Yoko snapped an affronted look at the rubber-man, ready to yell.

"Nah, there he goes," Boss Dugong interjected.

The girl then snapped her head around with a massive grin as the beetle dive-bombed the ship. "HA!
See, I told—!

Said beetle then merely buzzed the deck of the Sunny before pulling up and soaring straight back towards the island.

Yoko blinked in confusion. "What?"

Within moments, the beetle had returned and had plopped itself right back where it had been previously. And the blue and white trunked fish flopping incongruously from his mouth was both new and utterly impossible to miss. Once it was certain everyone had gotten a look at his prey, Boss Kabuto tossed the fish up into the air before swallowing it all in a single gulp. He then followed this move up by giving them all a cocky grin and pointedly licking his mandibles.

It didn't take long for everyone present to put the pieces together.

"Was that an Elephant Blue-Fin Tuna?" Fabre wondered.

"Did that come from our ship!?" Luffy demanded.

"Did that thing just eat our lunch in front of us to spite us!?" Boss fumed.

"Were those assholes fishing while we fought for dear life!?" Cross raged, his gaze focused more on their own ship.

Yoko didn't say anything. At least, not anything with words. Following the wordless scream of frustration she let loose, the girl stomped off. Boss Kabuto tried to trot after her, but the scathing glare she snapped at him halted the ten-ton insect in his tracks. When she tromped into a cave in the cliffside, he didn't follow.

In fact, he stayed in that position for a solid few minutes before glancing guiltily at the other fighters and warbling regretfully.

"No need to translate that, it's clear he's not that keen on fighting anymore," Boss said, waving his flipper dismissively.

"Actually, that's only half THE EXPLANATION," Soundbite informed him, staring at the titan Kabuto in awe. "That... That big guy, BOSS KABUTO... his Voice, his being, HE'S... HE'S changing..."

"Oh, it's that time already?" Fabre perked up and shot an inquisitive look at Boss K, who grunted and nodded in confirmation. "Huh, the tuna must have pushed you over the edge. Well, if it's a fight you boys want, then you came at the right time! See, Boss Kabuto here? Every month or so, he molts his skin and becomes bigger and stronger than he was before! He's easily twice as big now as he was when he first came to our island! You're going to be literally fighting him at the peak of his strength!"

"So... a delay for a spike in quality?" Boss's grin widened with bloodthirsty eagerness. "Perfect!"

"Wow, you're actually going to evolve!?!" Luffy squeed, stars sparkling in his eyes. "SO COOL!"

"So impossible, more like!" Soundbite sputtered incredulously. "LUFFY, THIS BUG'S GROWING BEFORE MY NON-EXISTENT EARS! Even by Grand Line standards, nothing breaks the rules of biology so blatantly, not like this! Cross, back me up here!"

The Voice of Anarchy in question blinked as he was taken out of his thoughts, having been focused
on other matters from the moment Yoko had yelled. "Eh? Ah... I guess? Sorry, Soundbite, I've got more important things to worry about at the moment."

"LIKE WHAT!?"

Cross directed a glare at his partner before regarding the local mayor with a compassionate expression. "Which parent, how bad, and how long ago?" he asked sadly.

That got the snail choking on his tongue.

Fabre, for his part, blinked in surprise before sighing heavily, his pipe bobbing up and down as he worried at it. "You really are smart..." he mumbled. "Her father, bad, and a few years but to her it might as well have been yesterday. A damn shame, really; he was a good man, both as a father and as a Marine. And she'd already lost her mother before that, so Boss—er, Boss Kabuto is the only family she's got left." The statement drew a regretful warble from the bug.

Cross hung his head and scratched at his nose's bandage, sighing. "Yeah, I figured that last bit... and my words haven't reached her at all?"

The old mayor winced and glanced away sheepishly. "Yyyyes and no. At first, when she heard you say you were a pirate, she took off running. Ours is a small village on a much bigger island, so it's been easy for her to make herself scarce whenever you start to broadcast, and she just won't listen to us when we tell her you're different. The yes... doesn't actually help. See, we insisted she at least listen to one broadcast, she conceded..."

The pirate cocked his eyebrow at the mayor. "And...?"

The mayor coughed into his fist. "You started talking about corruption in the Marines and she took off like a bat out of hell."

Cross slapped his hand to his face with a groan. "I'd say that God hates me, but that's already public knowledge."

"Mm," Fabre nodded. "Either way, I'm quite sorry to tell you this, but it's likely she'll do her level best to make your stay here with us... difficult, to say the least. I apologize for her in advance."

"Fan-frickin'-tastic," Cross groaned as he grabbed the brim of his cap and yanked it down over his eyes. "Why can't this shit ever be easy?"

The old mayor cocked an eyebrow at the pirate. "If... you don't mind my asking, how did you...?"

"The coat and her own condition. If she had anyone left or if the owner were still alive, she'd have let the coat get tattered and worn out like any old family keepsake. But it's unique and irreplaceable, so she maintains it religiously and keeps it immaculate. She, meanwhile, is picking up bruises and scabs that no one looks at, and her other clothes and her hair are getting worn out and dirty because they don't matter as much as the mission. The mission, her father's mission, comes first ever and always while she lets herself slowly fall to pieces. Which—" Cross pushed himself to his feet with a huff, casually dusting off the seat of his pants. "Is where we come in."

Fabre blinked at his island's guest. "Oh? How so?"

Cross smiled impishly as he slammed his fist into his palm. "Simple," he chuckled. "We're the people who help her put the pieces back together." He then blinked and looked down at his hands. "Oh, now there's a thought..." After a moment he shook his head, eyes refocusing. "Eh, we'll see how it goes. For now..." He looked back at Luffy. "So, orders, Captain?"
Luffy grinned as he looked at his third mate's shoulder. "Soundbite, call the Sunny. We're staying here until I get my rematch! It's, ah, what's the word... SHORE LEAVE!" He threw his arms up victoriously. "Tell the crew we've got shore leave!"

"Ah, Straw Hat? Make sure they dock on this side; our village is on the other side of the island, but there are reefs that prevent all but the smallest ships from reaching us from... the..." The mayor trailed off at the looks that the Straw Hats were giving him, but he swiftly recovered once he realized what it was all about. "Ah, my apologies! I'm an old man, I forget things! If the famous Weather Witch asks, tell her I meant no disrespect, alright?"

"Done and done, old man," Soundbite confirmed. "Done and done."

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"It was bad enough that the entire village became fans of a bunch of pirates," a certain young girl muttered murderously as she stomped through the island's labyrinthine caverns. "But Boss... he was the only one I could rely on to help protect the island, and now he's gone over, too... and now... and now..."

Yoko vented her frustration in a singular howl of primal fury as she kicked a nearby wall. She held her ground for a few seconds before she began hopping around in pain, clutching her shoe. "Owowowow OW, dang it!" she cried. After a minute or so, she regained her composure, and made her way to the highest point of the village. Looking down, she shook her head in disgust as the mayor and Boss led the pirates into Little East Blue.

"Those pirates... they may have fooled everyone else, they may have even fooled Boss, but they can't fool me. And I'll prove it to all of them!" she declared triumphantly. "I'll keep track of those criminals and everything they do, and when I tell the mayor what I've seen, he'll have to see sense!"

With that plan in mind, she made her way back to the main level of the village, binoculars in hand as she began looking around for the first pirate to stalk—oh, sorry, observe. "No matter what happens, I will take down these pirates—" She froze briefly before shaking her head and starting again. "I will do my duty and protect this village, even if I have to do it alone."

Soon, the young girl burst out of the trees surrounding the village, though still raised up on the bluffs surrounding the town. From there, she had a good view of the Thousand Sunny as it nosed its way through the reefs that helped defended the town.

"Mark my words, Straw Hat Pirates," she muttered as she crouched down and put her binoculars up to her eyes. "I'll see you run out of the Little East Blue before the day is out! MWAHAHAHAHAHA! MWAHA—GAH!" Yoko cut herself off with a harsh slap to her cheeks. "No, no, no, I'm supposed to be the good guy here, they're the bad guys!" She shook her head firmly, clearing it of all impure thoughts before putting her binoculars up to her eyes. "Right. Lot of targets. Where to start?"

"WHOA, YOU GUYS HAVE A WINDMILL! AWESOOOOOME!"

Yoko blinked in surprise as a blur of red shot across the island's verdant fields, but she promptly swapped her dumbstruck expression for a determined grin.

"Asked and answered," she nodded to herself before jogging after the pirate captain as fast as her young stature allowed. To her chagrin, she wasn't able to keep pace with him, and fell behind quickly, but the fact that she knew exactly where he was heading meant she did little more than frown in annoyance.
She arrived at the village's symbol a minute or so after the rubber captain, who had secured himself
to one of the windmill blades and was riding it around and around. Blinking several times, she tried
and failed to parse how the pirate wasn't falling off when it looked like he was just sitting cross-
legged on the top of the blade.

"How is he…" she began, before shaking her head. "Nonono, more important: what is he—?"

"WOOOOOW!" the pirate captain called down in a clearly awed tone of voice. "You can see the
whole town from here! This is so cool!"

Yoko blinked at the statement before scowling grimly. She then dug a notepad and pencil from her
fath—her coat and started scribbling on it. "'Captain… surveying local geography… for more
efficient pillaging…"

She shoved her pencil behind her ear as she shot a final glare up at the laughing menace. "He'll
probably be up there for awhile, and that dumb blond with the stupid lying snail and that smelly
blubberbutt that were with him looked like they were just a pair of muscleheads, so they probably
won't be doing anything too bad just yet…" She nodded decisively. "So I should make my way to
the shore and follow the rest of them as they come into the village."

Nodding, Yoko was about to do just that when a roaring crashing sound, like a martial artist
unleashed on a lumber store, sounded out from the trees. She flinched at the familiar sound, and any
thought of going down to the shore was tossed out the window.

"Whatever that is," she said through fire screams bangbangbang clenched teeth. "It needs to be
stopped. Now."

Sprinting into the woods, she quickly picked up the trail, not that that was hard. She'd barely gotten
past the tree line before being confronted with a line of stumps and sawdust that terminated in—

"Agh, stupid!" she berated herself, smacking herself a few times. "Muscleheads can be directed!
Stupid stupid stupid!"

Boss Dugong, going to town on the hapless trees surrounding him. And not like a lumberjack, either.
More like a saw mill, not that Yoko'd ever seen one. It was a simple pattern: Boss would chop a tree
down with his bare flippers, the attack somehow tossing said tree in the air, and as it fell he attacked
it even more fiercely, stripping off bark and branches and simultaneously turning the wood into
perfect planks. And judging from a pile of split logs that Yoko had instinctively ducked behind, that
wasn't the only type of wood he was producing.

There was only a single sane conclusion that could be drawn from the dugong's actions.

"FAIRY GODPARENTS!"

Yoko whipped her notepad out and started fiercely scribbling in it. "'Smelly Blubberbutt is…
denuding island… of trees… for spare wood for their ship… and to keep us from rebuilding… after
they take everything…'" Peeking up and grimacing out of disgust, she continued. "'Also super
smelly… chemical warfare, maybe…'"

With that noted down, she left the area, her vendetta against that particular member of the crew
keeping her more focused on defacing her sketch of the dugong rather than where she was going, up
until a familiar voice broke her out of her haze.

"Look, I'm grateful for what you've done, but for the love of syrup, why the cannons?!"
Dreading what she would see, Yoko slowly turned and started jogging towards the façade of Luigia's house—not a mansion no matter how much the old woman insisted otherwise!

Yoko skidded to a halt and stared up in awe.

Correction… it wasn't a façade anymore. It wasn't even a house anymore.

No, Luigia's… dwelling was now a true, sprawling mansion in resplendent brick and glass. From her admittedly hazy memory of the few photographs Luigia had managed to get of the original, it looked mostly accurate.

'Mostly' being the operative term. The two stone turrets sprouting from corners of the mansion and bristling with cannons, Yoko knew she would have remembered from the pictures. She squinted at the structures, but from what she could tell, they looked authentic. And it looked like they were complete, to boot!

Though, the manor itself was still in the process of being constructed, as currently said manor's apparent owner and its apparent builders were clustered around the side of the building, near a gazebo that was halfway completed. And one of the figures was responding to Luigia's protests.

"I'm Franky, super! shipwright extraordinaire! I can build anything!" Yeah, sure! You're the best! You also can't resist putting cannons in every damn thing you build!" the long-nosed sniper, Usopp, shouted in exasperation.

"I'll keep telling you, these guys need better defenses in case the worse kind of pirates show up," said pompadour'd cyborg shipwright stated, not looking up from his work.

"If you want to build us a militia or a garrison or a fortress or whatever, fine, by all means!" Luigia griped, throwing her hands up as she stomped furiously on the pile of planks she'd gotten onto so that she could be at the pirate's height. "But save that for the cove, not the highest hill where my house is!"

"With these cannons!?" Franky boggled at the senior citizen as though she'd gone mad. "This is the best place for it!"

"But—!"

"Sorry, but that's our shipwright for you," the shipgirl helmsgirl, Merry, sighed with a fond tone and smile from where she sat next to the oldest woman on the island, her legs swinging lazily. "Stubborn to the point that not even having his coconuts crushed will change his mind. Buuut, if we really need to, I could go find Robin."

"GAH!" The shipwright crossed his legs with a panicked yelp. "Please don't!"

Luigia cocked her eyebrow at the reaction, and then she hung her head with a sigh. "Oh, never mind. If nothing else, it'll make a nice conversation starter…" Her demeanor then softened as she looked up at her newly acquired manor. "Seriously, though, I just can't thank you brats enough! I mean, to live in a manor, the manor like this… this is literally my dream coming true here!"

Usopp perked up instantly, smiling proudly as he rubbed a finger beneath his nose. "Not a problem! I was a bit iffy at first, but in the end, it was the right thing to do! After all, we need to stick together, we lia—ACK!"

"Shut. IT!" Luigia growled venomously as she clamped her hands over the sniper's mouth.
"And as for us, our reasons are easy too!" Merry raised her hand eagerly. "I just wanted to see my maker's and old mistress's home, and Franky wanted a challenge! His speed made it all a bit anticlimactic, sure, but you can't deny he gets results!"

"Mm, that he does…" Luigia nodded approvingly, before side-eyeing the structure Franky was working on. "Though it does beg the question as to why this is taking so long? What, is it gonna get up and eat people or something?"

"But of course!" Usopp proclaimed, puffing his chest out with grandiose pride. "After all, it's only natural! Gazebos are vicious, bloodthirsty creatures! They're difficult to tame, but once you manage it, they're loyal for life! Neat, huh?"

Yoko stiffened at those words, and hastily scribbled in her notebook. "Planting… vicious attack gazebo… within defenses…"

Luigia, however, merely gave the sniper a decidedly unimpressed look. "Kid, what part of my wrinkly, liver-spotted ass looks like it was born yesterday?"

Usopp flinched before smiling sheepishly. "Ah… so you knew I was lying?"

"He was lying!?" Yoko hissed to herself in shock, pondering the revelation for a second before hastily scribbling out her latest note with a blush on her cheeks.

"Heheh, yeah, that's Usopp for you: Great at telling tales and sniping… not so much at lying convincingly," Merry snickered. She then ignored Usopp's indignant spluttering in favor of shooting a curious look at Franky. "Though there is a good point raised: Why didn't you complete this thing in a flash?"

"What are you, nuts!?!" Franky reeled back from his companion as though she'd blasphemed during a Sunday service. "Merry, please! This is a gazebo! You don't just rush one of these things, it's not right! No, you take your time, you work it with finesse and subtlety. There's a lot of art to making one of these, you know."

"…of course, what was I thinking." The second the cyborg got back to work, Merry spun her finger around her temple with her tongue stuck out the corner of her mouth.

Meanwhile, a ways away, Yoko's brows were practically attempting to merge as she tried to puzzle out why the pirates would be doing something as seemingly altruistic as building an old lady a mansion.

And then it hit her like a bolt from the blue, prompting Yoko to snap her fingers and adopt a disgusted look as she scribbled the realization into her notebook. "Wiling… their way… into Old Lady Luigia's will… to steal her fortune."

Nodding firmly, the young do-gooder moved on from the mansion. She didn't get very far before a scream of terror in a familiar voice assaulted her ears.

"Mendo!" Yoko hissed, sprinting for the dojo.

Yoko wasn't sure what she expected to find at the dojo, though a series of increasingly lurid slaughterhouse visions led her to assume the worst. Worse, a part of her mind—a part she was really trying her best to ignore—was loudly proclaiming that such a scene would be good, since it was a surefire way to convince the mayor.

When she arrived, however, she was rather relieved to see that Mendo was alive. Though
bemusement overpowered that relief, as both he and the Straw Hats’ green-haired swordsman, Zoro if she remembered correctly, were currently all but mummified in bandages, and a pint-sized bipedal reindeer was pacing before them as he stared down the dojo’s students, who were all sitting seiza and regarding him intently.

"Now, let's review," the reindeer—Chopper, that's what his name was!—stated, holding up his hoof. "For a minor closed wound, what's the right treatment?"

One of the boys slowly raised his hand. "Uh… ice on the skin for twenty minutes?" he said tentatively. Chopper frowned, and he hastened to amend. "Uh, I mean, with a cloth between the skin and the ice!"

"Good. And?" Chopper asked, pointing to another apprentice, who froze.

"A-Ah… bind it tight? B-But take it off if it looks like it's doing more harm than good?" he stammered.

"Exactly." The pirate nodded in confirmation. "What else?"

"If you can, prop the injury up so the blood doesn't flow?" another student ventured.

"And what's the most important part?" This time, Chopper turned to glare at his crewmate.

"Rest the injury, don't aggravate it," Zoro said through gritted teeth.

"But what's also an important part of maintaining good health?" So said, the Zoan turned his attention on the other bandage-mummy.

"Uhh…" Mendo glanced away sheepishly as he used what little mobility his plaster-covered arms granted him to scratch at his cheek. "Don't do something stupid like challenging someone way above your weight class in a spar?"

"Or in simpler terms?"

Mendo hung his head in defeat. "Don't be an idiot and get hurt in the first place?"

"Precisely," Chopper nodded, clapping his hooves. "Anyways, that's basic first aid for minor muscle strains, and if you have trouble remembering it, just think RICE: Rest, Immobilization, Cold, Elevation. And what do you do for major muscle strains?"

"Call a doctor," the students said together.

"Preferably one who's sane," the pirate swordsman muttered under his breath.

"Sane doctors don't do well with insane patients," Chopper shot back, his eye twitching slightly as his hoof inched towards his pack. "Wanna see how we deal with the rowdier ones?"

"Shutting up!"

"Huh…" Yoko muttered as she took in one of the pirates apparently teaching the students first aid. Still, it wasn't too hard to divine the purpose to this whole charade: Mendo and the green-haired swordsman must have really gotten into a spar, which was a bit odd for the former, but oh well.

"Testing… our best… defenders…" she quickly scribbled down, though she also noted down the mnemonic that the reindeer had said. Good info was good info, no matter the source (the irony of her avoiding the SBS didn't occur to her). Once she was done, she moved on from the dojo, frowning as
she considered where else the pirates could be.

"The library!" she exclaimed, several nearby villagers sending her odd looks. "They'd want be trying to get all the information they can on us!"

So saying, Yoko turned on her heel and jogged towards the building, scanning around for other pirates as she did so. She was almost to the building when something out of the corner of her eye caught her interest. She slowed to a stop, and for a moment, she considered pretending she hadn't seen what she knew she had. Ultimately, duty overruled sanity, so she gritted her teeth and turned to take in the impossible sight before her.

Despite that determination, she still blinked several times, trying desperately not to believe what she was seeing. But unfortunately, the group of library books that had sprouted human feet and were walking single file into the woods did not vanish in a puff of logic. As such, Yoko had no choice but to sigh, close her eyes and count to ten while silently reminding herself that she was in the Grand Line. She knew about Devil Fruits. She knew about strange things. This was entirely possible.

None of that made her feel any better.

'At least they're not heading towards that smellyhead,' Yoko mused to herself as she followed the waddling books into the woods.

Away from the fake-Boss's impromptu saw mill, as it turned out, was towards a relatively recent addition to the village: the Grove of Unusual Animals. The Marine-girl hastily hid behind one of the trees surrounding the area, and she tried not to frown again (it was starting to give her a headache) at the sight of three of the female pirates standing within the grove. She wasn't able to stop a grimace, though, as she took in the angelic wings on one of them, and the former royal state of the other. How could pirates corrupt even the most wonderful people?

Then again, the image before her provided a decent answer: all three of the pirates were looking over the animals and reacting like any animal lover would, cooing over the cubs, hatchlings, or whatever else they were. The angel and princess were both cuddling the cuter animals, and the giant duck alongside them was preening as he lorded his size over the other birds in the grove's pond.

The source of the walking books, on the other hand, was leaning against a nearby tree with a book in hand. Beside her was a steadily growing stack of books, and through the foliage Yoko spotted a hand sprouted out of the ground on the other side of the tree, out of sight of the other pirates and tickling a pig-pug... pug-pig? A dog-faced piglet. Whatever it was, it had a face that would send even a mother screaming the other direction.

"Ooooh, these little guys are so cute!" the blue-haired ex-princess, Nefertari Vivi, squeed as she held up a turtle-duck and nuzzled its adorable beak. "It's like when Carue was a duckling all over again, all downy and adorable! No offense, Carue."

"None taken!" the duck, Carue apparently, replied. "Ah'm nawt adowable anymoah, but that's just because Ah'm badass now!"

"When you're not acting the coward and panicking, of course," the reading woman, Nico Robin, chuckled in a teasing tone, which drew an angered squawk and a bout of flapping from the duck.

Vivi snickered, most likely at her crewmates' antics, before giving the angel—Conis—a curious look.

"What about Su, Conis? Was she this cute when she was younger?"

"Hm?" Conis glanced up from where she was dangling a foxtail over a fish-tailed cat-fish that was
batting at the fern from within the pond. "Oh! Yes, she was, maybe even more! Just about the most *adorable* little ball of cotton you'd ever seen!" The angel glanced around the glade before puffing her cheeks out. "Now if only Su were around to be properly embarrassed…"

"Oh?" Vivi glanced around, starting in surprise as she noticed what was missing. "Hey, where *is* Su?"

"Oh, I saw her wandering off about… a half hour ago, I think?" Conis shrugged indifferently. "It's fine, she does this all the time. She'll be back when she feels like it. I just hope she's having fun!"

Yoko frowned at the information, and she toyed with the idea of jotting it down, but dismissed the notion with a shake of her head. After all, it was just one fox. What kind of trouble could the dumb animal get into?

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Out on one of the rocky outcroppings that formed the island of Little East Blue's 'mandibles', a seagull was perched on the water-worn stone. Well, a lot of seagulls were perched on the water-worn stone, but this one was unusual. Mostly, it was the fact that it was wearing a trenchcoat, fedora and a pair of too-large sunglasses. Or maybe that it had its beak buried in a newspaper. Still, despite how much it stood out from the rest of the flock, it was still anonymous to the casual eye by dint of its apparel obscuring any distinguishable features.

Then again, it was a seagull. What were 'distinguishing features' for its kind might as well not exist in many other species' eyes.

Regardless, the seagull continued to casually read its newspaper, unflinching as waves broke against the outcropping and lightly misted it with saltwater, and unmoved as a small shadow trotted up from behind him and sat at his side, sending seagulls skyward in a cacophony of caws.

For several minutes, Su pointedly kept her gaze away from the seagull, her attention on the horizon. Suddenly, she asked, "How's the 'catch of the day'?' in a casual tone, as though the two animals had been discussing the weather since her arrival.

The seagull ruffled its feathers slightly, attention still fixed on its paper. "Still 'medium-rare' at this time, but…" The bird glanced at the fox from over the paper. "If the madam allows, the chef can have it as close to 'well done' as possible with time."

If the way the cloud fox snarled and snapped her head around to full on glare at the bird, that was the exact wrong thing to say. "Tell the chef to hurry," she warned him. "Or else my tastes will turn to a more…" She lunged forward and pinned the gull's tail feathers under her paw, so fast he couldn't even flinch. "Avian variety."

The incognito News Coo swallowed heavily and hastily nodded his desperate understanding. "S-S-So noted, I'll inform the chef at once." The second Su let his feathers go, the Coo tossed the paper into the ocean and flapped off as though its tail feathers were on fire.

Su watched the bird fly off before turning away and trotting back to the island-proper, an annoyed sigh escaping her lips. "So hard to find good help these days…"

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Putting thoughts of the fox out of her mind, Yoko pulled out her notebook again and scribbled down the obvious reason the pirates were here. "Scoping out… unusual animals… for poaching… and
black market sale…” After a moment of consideration, she added another note. "Possible… morale boosting… effort…"

Her recon complete, Yoko spared a half-moment to give the animals a determined look, silently vowing that she'd see the adorable animals rescued from the pirate's heinous clutches, before she turned around and made a beeline for the village, intent on discovering what other nefarious schemes the pirates had in store.

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"She's gone," Robin reported. "Honestly, you'd think if she were taking the time to form a vendetta against us she'd also take the time to learn our capabilities. Ah, and just to clarify, she was apparently unfazed by our innocuous behavior. Apparently, we are planning to poach and sell these adorable creatures to the highest bidder."

"Oh, what terrifying fiends we are," Vivi deadpanned.

"Well, we could hardly expect it to be that easy," Conis sighed. "It's times like this that make me miss the lack of overt discrimination that we had on Skypiea."

"Washn't that onwy because of how hawd it was foah anyone down hewe to adapt to sky wahfayah?" Carue asked.

Conis blinked at the duck in confusion. "Uh… I'm sorry, what was that last word, Carue?"

The supersonic duck grumbled something under his breath and then glanced skyward. "Tone it down a nahtch, would ya? And I said 'warfare'."

"Ah, yes. That probably did help, from what I learned in training."

"Either way, we'll leave that mess to the ones who can actually clean it up," Vivi said. "In the meantime…” she stood up and brushed her dress off before walking over to her older crewmate. "Robin, I've been meaning to ask you something for a while."

The archaeologist glanced up from her book and hummed a curious hum. "Hmm?"

"How hard was it for you to learn to read the Poneglyphs?"

Robin blinked twice, her whole body twitching slightly. Slowly, very slowly, she closed her book, eyes staring vaguely in Vivi's direction but really off into the distance. "I… will need a second."

"Ah, i-if that's a bad question—!"

"No, no, nothing like that," Robin assured, pausing to take a deep breath and pull herself together. "It's just, ah…” She gave the princess a sheepish smile. "You are… literally the first person to ask me that. I… I need to think about my answer."

Vivi nodded flashed Robin a sympathetic smile, stepping up to sit next to her. "Please, take your time."

Robin nodded absentmindedly. Her gaze remained unfocused for a bit longer as she mouthing a few calculations, and then she turned her full, somewhat unsettling attention to the princess.

"It took me roughly two years to learn, and that was with my already phenomenal IQ and… plenty of free time. The Void Language is not an easy tongue to learn. The alphabet is incomparable to any
modern lexicon, and their grammar is... circuitous, to say the least, with as much emotional connotation involved in translation as clinical denotation. It's a feat, to say the absolute least."

Vivi nodded slowly, giving the Oharan a contemplative look out the corner of her eye. "Save that that was from first principles with limited reference information, in hiding, and nobody helping you, right?"

Robin nodded her head side to side, humming contemplatively. "Yes, I suppose you have a point there..." She then chuckled and glanced over at Vivi with a curious smile. "But why do you ask? Were you interested in learning the language for yourself?"

Robin's chuckling intensified at that, only to die a swift death when Vivi failed to make a sound. Eyes wide, she grabbed the princess' shoulder.

"This is the part where you tell me that that notion is entirely ridiculous, which it is," Robin said in a tone of voice that was more fearfully desperate than threatening.

Vivi's expression was pointedly neutral at first. Then it changed to solid determination as she fully faced the archaeologist.

"No, it isn't," she whispered solemnly. "You're exactly right. I want you to teach me the language of the Void Century..." Vivi's composure shook slightly, but she a steady inhalation restored it. "And I want you to teach me using the Alubarna Poneglyph."

The inscrutable Nico Robin paled in shock and horror. It wasn't a full-on sheet-white pale, but any shift in her expression was dramatic. The furrows her fingers dug in her book's leather hide spoke volumes, too.

"Vivi, that information—!" she started to protest in a weak voice.

"That information is my heritage," Vivi interrupted in a heated, almost desperate tone of voice, her expression taking on a pleading demeanor. "And I don't just mean my heritage as a person born in this world, I mean me, personally. My ancestors were in the dead center of whatever the hell happened 800 years ago, and they had that stone in our family's crypt. And what was written on it..."

Vivi paused, biting her lip, and shook her head. "My ancestors... they knew. They knew, they had to know what they'd taken custody of, what they dedicated themselves to protecting, until the end of their lives, and even after that." Her gaze returned to Robin, eyes blazing. "And I want to have that knowledge, too. I want to know what was worth the lives of my countrymen. Mine... and yours. I want to know the knowledge of what happened in that lost century, what my ancestors did. I want to know what was so horrific that the government my ancestors helped found decided to kill an entire island to erase it. I..." Vivi trailed off helplessly before bowing her head. "I-I need to know. And I'll do whatever it takes to learn. So, please..."

Nefertari Vivi, Corsair Princess of Alabasta and descendant of one of the Twenty Kings who had founded the World Government, got on her knees and bowed her head before Nico Robin, the Devil Child of Ohara who posed one of the greatest existential threats to said government, and spoke blasphemy.

"Teach me the Void Language," she pleaded. "I beg of you."

Robin did not respond for a few moments. And ultimately, it was neither she nor Vivi who broke the silence.
"Actually… I'd like to know, too."

Devil Child and Corsair Princess both snapped their heads around to stare at…

"Conis?" they chorused in disbelief.

The Skypiean bit her lip and shuffled nervously at the attention, but she still nodded an affirmative. "I'm sorry if this is out of place, but the war that shaped all of Skypiea's culture for the past four hundred years… I thought it was over the vearth, and on my ancestors' part, it was…"

She wrung her hands and looked to the side sadly. "But I talked to the Shandians during the victory party. And the whole reason that they fought for so long was to safeguard the Poneglyph in the Fire of Shandora. I may have only recently learned of the Void Century, but it's as much a part of my life as it has been yours, even if it was for a completely different reason."

Conis stepped forward and looked Robin in the eye, her earlier nervousness gone. "So many people suffered for so long for a single stone… and I want to know why. I want to know what was so important, I want to know why it existed to begin with, I want to know it all. So I'm sorry if this is forward..." Conis bowed as low as she could. "But I have to learn why, and to learn I need your help. So… please…"

Robin didn't move, didn't even blink, just staring incredulously at her two crewmates. This lasted for several seconds… and as those seconds stretched into minutes, Vivi and Conis exchanged looks. Silently coming to an agreement, Conis stood, planning to snap Robin out of her stupor.

Then, all at once, Robin burst out laughing.

"DERESHISHISHISHISHISHISHISHISHISHISHISHISHISHISHISHISHISHISHI! DERESHISHISHISHISHISHISHISHISHISHISHISHISHISHISHISHISHISHISHI!"

And this laugh wasn't like Robin's previous, if still genuine, bouts of laughter. Those, for all their sincerity, were still mild and controlled, easily muffled by a hand and closed jaw. This bout had Robin bent over, both hands clutching her gut and another pair sprouted from the tree she was leaning against holding her up. Tears streamed from her eyes, and if it went on much longer they'd probably be running from her nose. And a six-inch dragonfly could have flown in her mouth with room to spare, let alone a common housefly.

"Dereshishi! Not just one, but two people asking me, of their own free will, to teach them the Void Language for the genuine pursuit of knowledge!" Robin giggled with ecstatic mirth. "And I honestly consider those same two people my friends! Ahh…" She wiped a wistful tear from her eye. "Life as a Straw Hat will never fail to reach new heights."

The would-be students perked up eagerly.

"So does this mean—?" Vivi queried.

Robin nodded at the princess, a hint of steel entering her gaze. "I warn the both of you: if you undertake this task, it will be like nothing you have ever experienced. I will not merely teach you, I will hold you to the standards of Ohara. I will work your eyes until they are little more than shriveled husks and drill your minds as they have never been drilled before. I caution you!" She stared at them with the utmost seriousness. "There will be pop quizzes. Are you truly prepared to live up to the standards of the greatest academic institution in the West Blue, if not the world?"

"Absolutely," Vivi said at once, her being brimming with confidence. Conis took a moment longer to nod firmly.
"Excellent! Then in that case," Robin said, an earnest smile on her face. "Let's begin!"

Without warning, simultaneous impacts to the backs of Vivi and Conis' legs brought the women to their knees, and in the same second they found their arms locked behind their backs and their heads yanked to attention.

"What the—!" Conis exclaimed as Robin's expression contorted into an expression of childish bliss.

"Ohhh, this is going to be so much fun!" Both women straight-up froze with existential dread as Robin actually squeed with enthusiasm, a notebook suddenly in her hand with a pencil in the other scribbling furiously in it. "I just need to jot down what we'll be starting on, and I can update my lesson plan when we get back to the Sunny!"

"H-H-How do you haf a wesson pwan if you nevah thought you'd be teaching anyone?" Carue stammered out.

"Why, I've had this lesson plan since I was a little girl, of course!" Robin replied, a perfectly sunny aura surrounding her as she continued to write. "I've always wanted students of my own, whom I could groom and teach and help mature into wonderful archaeologists! Every young scholar's dream!"

Vivi paled as the pieces all came together. "Oh, dear sweet Horus, we're her dollies," she squeaked. Conis glanced at Carue in terror. "Help!"

The supersonic duck took one look at the humming archaeologist before affixing the newly minted students with a flat look. "Yeeaaah… you two bwought this on yoahselves, and wheah Vivi is concwened, my job descwiption expwicitwy excwudes pwotection fwom tutahs. And on that note!" The pond exploded with displaced water as the duck shot away.

"Traitor..." Vivi sobbed tearfully.

"Lesson one!" Robin suddenly announced, smiling brightly as she flipped the notepad so that her students could see. "Basic forms of the characters. I expect you to pay close enough attention that you'll have no less than half of it done within the next five hours. Perhaps then we can take a break for dinner. Isn't that great?"

So far out in the woods, nobody could hear the girls' pleas for mercy. Well, nobody except a certain cloud fox, who immediately perked up and lost her bad mood upon hearing the sound.

"That sounds like Conis," she mused. "Maybe I should go check on her." As she considered that, her survival instincts fairly screamed at her to stay away. "On second thought, maybe I should go find someone else to bother..."

-o-

"I guess this is supposed to be flattery?" Perona deadpanned, looking at the haircuts and shirts of the four adolescents she and Nami had reluctantly followed into the island's cave system at their... enthusiastic insistence. "This is still the 'attraction' stage, right?"

"I wouldn't know," Nami replied with surprising calm. "I spent most of my adolescence away from teenage boys."

"Lucky."
Nami gave her... she would be generous and term the spirit a 'friend' a flat look. "Because all through puberty, I was a slave in all but chains to the bastard who killed my mother."

Perona had the good grace to cough heavily in her fist and avert her gaze so that she was looking anywhere but at the navigator. "...my condolences?"

The Straw Hat maintained her flat look for a few seconds more before raising her hands in a dismissive shrug. "It's fine, it's fine, you couldn't have known." Perona's guilt alleviated, she turned back to the four boys who, quite admirably, were visibly suppressing their excitement in light of what they'd just heard. "Same for you guys. Now, are we almost where you wanted to show me something?"

The members of the—Nami hid her grimace with expert ease—Orenami Fan Club all perked up at the reminder of why they were there, and picked up their pace. "Just a little farther, Lady Nami! Right around here!"

The four of them rounded another few columns before coming to a stone structure covered by a large sheet. Both women looked with a bit of apprehension as the boys, with a flourish, removed the cloth. Then they blinked.

It was an intricately carved, life-sized statue of Nami, apparently going off of the image on her wanted poster. The sunny but mischievous smile on her face, the tattoo on her shoulder, the revealing clothes, even the Clima-Tact and clouds were all carved with all the skill that the navigator would expect of an artist like Usopp.

"Oooookay, screw attraction, this is obsession..." Perona whistled. She then glanced at the subject of the teenager's 'admiration'. "Hold off on the lightning till I'm out of the line of fire. I don't know how that stuff affects my astral projection, and I don't want to know."

"Mmm..." Nami mused with a slight frown, her Eisen Tempo shifting around and her fingers playing with the other sections of her Clima-Tact.

And then, the cloud stilled and she brought her other hand up to cup her chin as she observed the statue. "To be honest... I don't really mind this. It's actually kind of flattering."

Perona straight up boggled at the pirate, her incredulous "Really!?" syncing up with the teenagers' eager remix.

"Well, sure," Nami nodded kindly, walking up and giving the statue an appreciative once-over. "It's a skillfully rendered version of me at my most badass, why wouldn't I like it? It's so good... you know what?" She clapped her hands and beamed at the nearly swooning fan club. "I think I wouldn't mind autographing this! Free of... of..." Nami trailed off, her mouth working but no sound coming out. Grimacing, she coughed into her fist and held her hand out, a blush staining her cheeks. "Five hundred berries for the autograph. For all four of you."

"Worth every bit!" one of them declared, counting out the bills and laying them in her palm.

"What, no pencil?" Perona snarked.

"Of course not!" another member of the club snorted pridedully. "Lady Nami is the world-class navigator who'll chart the world! She has a writing implement on her at all times!"

Nami smiled and blushed bashfully as she confirmed the words by drawing a pencil from her back pocket. "These boys have my number, alright." And with that, she signed her name on the statue's un-tattooed shoulder with a flourish. She then stepped back so that the fan club could admire it.
"Enjoy, boys!"

And enjoy they did, crowding around the statue and admiring the signature with glee. Nami, for her part, stood back and watched with an inflating sense of pride while Perona floated off, her interest in the ongoing spectacle expended.

"We actually got an autograph from Lady Nami! The Lady Nami!"

"Do you think the island'll have good weather all the time now? I bet it will!"

"I told you guys showing her this would be awesome, I told you!"

"Good thing she didn't find the other one, huh?"

And with that one line, everyone in the cavern froze up.

After a moment, Nami said "'Other one'?", one brow climbing towards her hairline.

The teenager who'd spoken winced miserably. "Whoops…"

"Duuuuuude."

"Yeaaah, about that…" Perona droned.

Seeing the expression on her face, Nami followed the pink-haired woman's gaze to where, tucked into an alcove of the cave, there was another statue. This statue had two main differences from the one on the pedestal: first, it was by all appearances a nude statue, though thankfully without much anatomical detail… and second, the face looked like one of Luffy's paintings.

She honestly wasn't sure which was worse.

"Some fans you've got here," Perona deadpanned.

"Boys?" Nami asked tightly, her Eisen Tempo starting to writhe, though it still maintained its white coloration.

The boys' survival instincts promptly showed their worth, as they immediately fell to their knees, pressed their foreheads to the stone, and began pleading for forgiveness.

"We're so sorry, Lady Nami!"/"We couldn't get it right the first time, so we succumbed to our whims!"/"We swear we didn't mean any offense!"/"Please forgive us!"

Nami glared at them for a few moments longer before turning on her heel with a huff. "Because the final draft is this good, I'll let you off this once. And I expect you to destroy that abomination ASAP."

The teenagers all sighed in relief.

"Thank you most merciful Lady Nami!"/"You are a goddess!"/"We're the luckiest bastards alive!"/"It's a really good thing she didn't find the rest!"

And hello freeze again.

Perona shoved her fingers in her ears with a defeated sigh. "Oh, this is going to be loud."

"DUDE!"
Before the other three teens could lambast their friend, all four were frozen by the reek of ozone suddenly ramming its way into their nostrils.

Shivering in terror, the boys returned their attention to Nami, to find that not only was she trembling and scowling with fury and not only had she deployed her Clima-Tact to its full length, but her Eisen Tempo was looming over them all like a tempest born of hell itself.

"The rest?" Nami repeated in a frigid tone.

"I'd say it was nice knowing you boys, but…" Perona trailed off as she slowly backed out of the zone of fire.

"THE REST!?"

The flickering lights from her clouds served to illuminate another alcove. And this one had at least a dozen statues in it. And while the face improved steadily with each one… every last one of them was nude, with the craftsmanship of the chest and pelvic regions particularly impeccable.

And the instant that Nami comprehended that sight, the boys’ world became light, sound, and pain.

---

Yoko blinked rapidly, trying to get rid of the spots in her eyesight as fast as possible. It had been a long time since she had been on her father's ship, since she had dealt with an assault on her eardrums like a cannon going off beside her. Too long, judging by the fact that her ears were ringing as badly as the first time she remembered, but going by how she could almost feel the latent charge crackling in her clothes, the endurance would have been something of a cold comfort even if she still had it.

"Any comments, Perona?"

Yoko hastily silenced a curse, pressing herself further behind the stalagmite she'd been using as cover as she watched the pirates pass by. The one who'd spoken was the ginger, whose mood was still quite stormy.

The girl took a second to muffle a snicker at her pun before listening in as the ghost girl gave her reply in a faux-pleasant voice.

"…Well, off the top of my head, I wanna say that this isn't normally what they mean by the ‘destruction' stage, but—!" The ghost girl trailed off into a coughing fit as the weather-woman's cloud started to darken. "Ah, I mean, no, no comment."

Yoko's eyes twitched at the exchange, and she waited for the pair to pass before doubling back to check the stretch of cavern she'd evacuated.

Within a minute, she reached the scene of the carnage. She took in the charred, still-groveling forms of the four adolescents. She took in the stretch of cavern that had almost certainly been magnetized from the lightning and the rubble that had once been finely carved stone. She glanced back in the direction of the pirates who were stalking off, obviously responsible for the devastation and clearly devoid of remorse.

And, once she'd taken it all in, she shook her head as she calmly tore the page she'd been working on out of her notebook and threw it away. As much as she hated to admit it, in this case the fact that that cloud woman, Nami, was a pirate didn't matter. What she had done was a fair reaction from any decent member of their gender, and Yoko herself was honestly happy with the results. Even ignoring the fact that the boys had been obsessing over a pirate, that level of interest in anyone was just…
creepy!

Ugh. *Boys.*

-0-

Meanwhile, as they walked out of the cave system, Perona and Nami glanced at one another.

"So," Nami started politely. "How'd you realize she was there?"


The navigator spun her finger in the air. "Air currents. I can't read too much, but a little girl a few feet away is child's play."

"Impressive."

"You too."

-0-

A half hour later, Yoko found herself skulk—*infiltrating!* She was *infiltrating* the less visible parts of the Little East Blue's only and spread-out population center, maintaining her stealth so as to better observe the interlopers in her home.

Yoko was quite pleased with herself, if she was being honest. She'd already gathered copious amounts of evidence against almost all of the pirates, evidence that was *sure* to show everyone just how dangerous these pirates were, and how they needed to get them off their island and sunk to the bottom of the sea *yesterday.*

Still, as good as what Yoko had right now was, she still felt she could do *better.* If she wanted to do this and do it right, she'd need to peg the whole crew, every last one, to a T. She was already well underway, thankfully enough; after all, she'd even managed to start with the cap—!

Every curse her father and his men had ever let slip near her shot through Yoko's mind as she spun around and confirmed her worst suspicions: the windmill's blades were devoid and the Straw Hat's captain was nowhere to be seen. He'd disappeared when she wasn't looking!

"Damn it damn it damn it!" Yoko spat, all notions of subtlety lost as she broke out into a dead run.

She had-had-*had* to find that pirate, and fast! He was the leader of the bunch, so if he decided to start anything on her watch, then it was on *her* conscience!

Her panic only intensified as she failed to find any sign of the pirate, despite running all over the village. The possibility of him going back to his ship was brought up and promptly discarded; no way was the captain going back with all his crew still scattered throughout the village. So, the question was, just where *was*—?

"No! Please! Have mercy upon this poor soul! Please, no more, *no more!*"

Yoko's head snapped towards the Little Baratie's pond as a terrorized scream shot through the air. "Mitsuboshi!" she cursed, panic filling her veins as she ran towards the floating restaurant. Her feet thumped across the bridge to the restaurant, and she *nearly* burst through the front doors, but at the last moment the girl's self-honed sense of stealth and self-preservation kicked in and diverted her to the nearest window. She took a moment to brace herself for a gruesome scene, and then stood to
look through the glass, braced for a scene of carnage such that she hadn't seen since her father's death.

If she hadn't braced herself so much, she would have face-faulted rather than stared in flat disbelief, one eye twitching furiously.

Before Yoko's eyes, in Chef Mitsuboshi's beloved restaurant, said chef was looking rather panicked. The source of that was clear: the captain had apparently gotten tired of the windmill after a short while, and was currently sitting in the middle of the restaurant, clinking together a knife and fork and grinning widely, a large stack of dirty plates already right next to him. The sharp-dressed pirate chef was also there, a hand on Mitsuboshi's shoulder that was as much comforting as it was dragging him along to the kitchen.

"'Eating all of our food'," she growled, carving the words into her notepad. She glanced back up into the restaurant, and flinched.

Easily the most disturbing member of the Straw Hat Pirates, and the only one that everyone else in the village was as ignorant about as she, was also in the restaurant. The angle she was at and the fact that his back was turned hid his skinless face from the girl, thank goodness. All she could see of his deathly form were the bony fingers that held a violin, upon which he was fiddling away a tune that she couldn't quite keep herself from tapping her fingers in rhythm to.

Yet, she was having trouble determining exactly what the point of the song was; it was too upbeat to just be accompaniment for eating…

And then Mitsuboshi and the pirate chef walked back in and put new plates of food before the gorging captain, setting the dishes down to the music's tempo, and things became far too clear to Yoko.

"Employing… mind control… through music…" she bit out as she barely refrained from putting her pencil through her pad. She no sooner finished writing the words down than she sprinted away, with no intention of subjecting herself to that mind control.

She shortly found herself near one of the older settlements on the island, a place known as the Dragon Shrine. The old man who lived there was apparently the brother or cousin or something of the elder from his home, Warship Island, and he offered free history lessons about the place's history and the Millennial Dragons. Yoko had stopped by the shrine a few times in the past, but the only thing she ever remembered was waking up on the floor after sleeping all day.

But seeing a familiar being in front of her, she trudged grimly up to the shrine, wondering what the fake Boss's lackeys were up to. Coming closer, she eyed the four dugongs standing before the old man as he gave his lecture, and settled in to watch whatever nefarious deeds they were committing.

Unfortunately, this also meant she had to listen to the dragon priest, but she was sure she could manage. After all, how bad could he be?

"—and so it was that in the fifth era, Miriola XII replaced his father, Miriola XI, as the high priest of the island. Five years later, his son, Miriola the XIII, was born. Three years later, a fire burned down the east dormitory, which you will recall was built by Jisro VII. Several were killed in the fire, but the most notable lives lost were those of Inzi LII, Kisa XXII, and die filthy pirates, die die die—!"

"SNRK!"

Yoko snapped her head up, ripping herself out of the dream she'd been drifting into. 'For the love of
—!’ the girl cursed silently as she wiped away what little drool she’d let slip. ‘How can a man known as a dragon priest from a place known as Warship Island be so damn boring!?’

Still, in spite of the shame she felt at herself for letting her concentration slip, Yoko felt sufficiently absolved of any wrongdoing by how the dugongs hadn’t moved an inch while she snoozed, and they didn’t look like they were going to move at all anytime soon.

"I see, I see. So that would mean—! Fascinating!" the one in the purple bandanna muttered to himself, his pencil moving so fast that smoke was wafting up from the notepad he was, by all appearances, gleefully taking notes in.

The blue-bandanna wearer, however, seemed to disagree, if the way he was scowling and swinging a pair of wooden boken through a series of elaborate katas was anything to go by. "It… should be… a crime… for something… to be… this boring!" he grit out.

And as for the final pair…

"Zzzz…"

The other two dugongs were leaning against one another, skullplates knocking together as they blatantly and openly snored. Though… 'blatantly' was a bit of an understatement. In truth, their mouths were hanging open and literally overflowing with drool.

And if the birds that were bathing in said basins of saliva were anything to go by, they’d been that way for awhile.

Yoko stared at the scene for a few seconds longer, but that short time was enough for the Sandman to start ensnaring her mind again. Now that she was paying attention she could feel it coming, and so she slapped her cheeks a couple of times before turning on her heel and bolting away until the shrine was no longer in earshot. She looked down at the page of notes she had scribbled—

"'The cat in the hat smells like a rat that's way too—' Oh for the love of—!"

—and expressed her exasperation at the nonsensical content by tearing it to pieces. She shook her head in dismissal; the worst that those blubber-butts could do with whatever they were getting out of that history lesson was lull innocent civilians to sleep, and she doubted that any pirates would have any reason to be that patient or subtle, and that went double for pirates as destructive as these.

One more skim of her notes brought a smile to her face as she saw how close her endeavor was to fruition; despite the two hiccups, she had enough evidence that she was sure they would run the pirates out of their town. Her mind filling with increasingly vindictive fantasies, Yoko resumed her run back towards town, intent on finding the… final… pirate…

Yoko suddenly halted in her tracks, a horrified realization sinking into the pit of her stomach. She’d run through the entire crew, she’d seen each and every last one of them, gotten dirt on them all… except for one.

The one she hated the most for insulting her father's service, the one who was the entire reason that the entire village and even Boss had been brainwashed into thinking that any pirates could be considered good people: The Voice of Anarchy, Jeremiah Cross himself.

And if she’d already run through the whole crew, then that could only leave the blonde guy she’d completely dismissed as a harmless musclehead. It was with that thought that she remembered that said man was also famous for always having a talking snail on his shoulder!
"STUPID, STUPID, STUPID!" Yoko raged, slamming her notebook against her face repeatedly. She then spun on her heel, ready to go looking for him, only to fall flat on her face out of dizziness. Dizziness, perhaps, that came from too many blows to the head?

"Stupiiiiid…" she groaned.

The young girl spent the next minute or so getting her head re-centered. That done, she slowly climbed to her feet and began to look, picking up speed as fast as she went, and straining her eyes and ears while trying to narrow down the search a bit. She'd checked the library, the dojo, the windmill, the Mini-Baratie, so where else—?

"HONK-HONK!"

Ah, right. A talking, very loud snail.

Yoko immediately made tracks towards the source of the noise, bracing herself for whatever horrors she might behold…

And was forced to fight down a blisteringly strong urge to cuss out a blue storm when all she 'beheld' was the sight of the blond pirate, the loud mouth who was shattering the world, Jeremiah Cross… sitting at the table of a local café, with his snail on the tabletop across from him, a dog devouring a steak at his feet, and an elephant of all things sitting to the side and digging its trunk through a bowl of fruit.

Now, it should be clarified that the reason for Yoko's outrage? It wasn't entirely because of the pirate's apparently peaceful demeanor; it played a part, sure, but the lion's share of her fury came from the pirate's location for relaxation itself. The café he was offering patronage to was known as the 153’s Pride. It was named after the 153rd Marine Branch of Shell Island, and it was run by a Marine who'd left active duty and come to live out his glory years in the Little East Blue.

So, basically, the pirate was sitting at a café whose flag-adorned wall blatantly announced the establishment's affiliation, and the owner, who was one of Yoko's best friends on the island besides Boss, was standing next to said pirate's table, clearly ready to take his order, though he was looking at the snail with clear confusion.

"I think," Jeremiah Cross informed the owner, an eyebrow cocked at his snail. "That that translates to him wanting a hard-boiled egg, which we will not be having as I will not be paying for anything more than lettuce for this joker."

"FINE BY ME," the snail grumbled, rolling his eyes. "FOR SOME REASON, that gag wasn't as fresh as it could have been."

"Heheh, of course," the elderly Marine chuckled kindly. "So, to confirm… lettuce for the snail, French toast, sausages and hot chocolate for you?"

"And another rib-eye for me!" the dog barked eagerly, lapping up the last of the juices on his plate.

"And an even bigger hole in my pocket for me…" the pirate lamented. "Least I'm not in debt anymore…"

"Don't worry, son, you won't be with me either," the old Marine reassured the pirate. "And before you protest, one of the first things your captain did after going to sea was doing good by the 153rd. As far as I'm concerned, any Straw Hat who eats here has had their tab paid ten times over…" He then grimaced reluctantly. "So long as that Straw Hat isn't Luffy himself, I mean. I'm generous, but I
don't want to be bankrupted, either."

"Yeah, that's more than fair," Cross replied, waving the owner off. "In that case, thanks, the order
you gave me will be just fine."

"Alright, I'll get right on that. You boys hang tight!" And with that, the old Marine went back into
his establishment.

Once the old man was gone, the elephant chuckled and glanced over at the happily panting hound.
"Eesh, you want to slow down there, Lassoo? You're starting to match Luffy steak for steak in terms
of appetite!"

"HAHA! He's right, you know!" Soundbite cackled. "We might be loaded, but the saying is
'FAT CAT', NOT 'FAT DOG'!"

"Stick and stones might break my bones, but I'll eat them and your words any day!" Lassoo shot
back at his fellow animals. "This diet isn't anything new, it's normal for me! And just so we're clear
here, I'm not fat, I'm hefty!"

"Hmm..." Cross hummed thoughtfully, rubbing his chin. "I don't think you're wrong... but I also
think Funkfreed and Soundbite have a point, too."

"I'M NOT FAT, I'M HEFTY!" the dog barked.

"What happened to 'eating our words', huh?" the elephant asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Alright, alright, I was agreeing with you!" Cross backpedaled with an untroubled smile, warding off
the angry mutt with his hands. "I was..." He leaned back in his seat and looked at his dog, an
apparently thoughtful look on his face as he gave the canine a once over. "Just looking at it from
another angle is all."

The dog, Lassoo, raised an eyebrow at Cross before laying down with a dismissive wuff.

As she watched the scene, Yoko, for the life of her, couldn't divine the nefarious purpose behind
Cross's actions. He had to be up to something; he was wearing armor on his arms and legs, for crying
out loud! And besides that, he was punching his right palm with his left fist, repeatedly. That
screamed 'itching for a fight', but he wasn't doing anything active.

But this was Jeremiah Cross, Voice of Anarchy. He was the Plan Guy. She could concede
that some of the pirates were not immediately doing nefarious things, but not him! Even that talk of
'another angle' was no help. What other angle?

When the answer did come to her, her spine suddenly felt like it'd been replaced by a chunk of ice.
"He's operating at such a higher level..." she breathed, despair coloring her voice. "That I can't figure out his plan!" That despair was promptly chased away by renewed determination.
"Well, fine! Sooner or later he's going to enact his plan! I just need to follow him, and react when I
need to!"

As it turned out, however, that point in time would arrive sooner than Yoko expected. Or rather, it
would arrive immediately.

Without warning, the snail, Soundbite, snapped its eyestalks to attention, an alert look suddenly on
his face. Barely a second later, Cross glanced at him with his own serious expression, and slipped his
earphones over his head. After a few seconds of listening, the pirate's expression darkened and he
turned his gaze to his suddenly attentive pets. "Gear up," he ordered sharply.
To Yoko's shock, the dog and elephant transformed before her very eyes; the dog morphed into a titanic cannon that was only slightly larger than his original mass, while the elephant shrank into a somewhat ornate saber. And then, to her terror, Cross picked them both up, slinging the dog-cannon into a strap on his back and slotting the blade into a sheath that was on his back as well, angled opposite the cannon, and then placed his snail on his shoulder.

And finally, to her horror, the pirate started walking towards the door of the café. Before she even knew what she was doing, Yoko found herself running full tilt at the pirate. She couldn't let him harm anyone, she couldn't lose anyone again, she couldn't—!

Cross leaned his head into the storefront. "Hey, old man!"

The slide onto her ass, a result of trying to stop fast and hide on wet grass, would probably result in grass stains. Yoko didn't care. She just strained her ears to listen.

"Yeah? What's up, kid?" she heard the owner call out.

"I, ah," Cross glanced over his shoulder before continuing. "I'm gonna need you to put my order on hold for a bit. Just 'til I get back is all."

"Eh? You goin' somewhere?"

"Just for a bit," Cross assured him. "I've got some business I've got to take care of real quick of is all. It's…" Cross glanced to the side, his finger tapping on his thigh. Yoko wasn't any expert on reading people, but even she could tell when someone was lying out their ass. "It's nothing serious, should just take a second or two. Just hold off on the cooking until I get back, alright?"

"If you say so."

"Thanks!" And with that, the Straw Hat drew back from the establishment and Yoko hid herself even further behind her vantage point, prepared to bolt or scream as was appropriate as he… started walking away from the town and towards the shore!?

"What the…?" Yoko breathed to herself. The Marine girl glanced around uncertainly, weighing her options. After all, for all that she was something of a fanatic, Yoko was not stupid enough to be ignorant of the risks of a young girl like her running after a pirate—especially one as dangerous as Jeremiah Cross—all on her own.

But… But if the alternative was to just stand by and do nothing, to watch as a pirate ran rampant, on her island, again…

Yoko sent a silent prayer for forgiveness to her father before sneaking after the pirate.

Thankfully, the local topography worked in the girl's favor. The short cliffs that were arrayed between the town and the shore allowed the girl to stagger out her observation without any risk of being spotted or losing sight of her quarry. And once the pursuer and pursued hit the tree line, it only got easier.

However, it was much to Yoko's surprise that her quarry defied her expectations, in that rather than heading straight for the shore, the pirate suddenly stopped in the middle of the woods for no apparent reason. Cross glanced at his snail, the pair speaking too softly for Yoko to hear. Once they finished, the pirate leaned himself against a tree, his head bowed, cap tilted down to shadow his eyes, and arms crossed over his chest. He didn't move from that position, and Yoko didn't move from where she was watching him, trying to figure out what he was doing. Waiting for something, obviously… but what?
It was a minute more before she got her answer. Cross looked up from his position and raised an arm in a wave. "¡Eh! ¡Buenos días! ¿Qué pasa?" Despite the call being in Cross's voice, Yoko didn't see his lips move until after the call went out. Straining her ears, she caught the exchange that followed:

"I hope you didn't provoke them right away."

"Give me a little credit! All I did was GREET THEM."

Before Yoko could start to puzzle anything out, she got her answer: Footfalls, and lots of them, approaching their position.

Yoko tensed as a large group of sombrero-clad men in western outfits filtered through the trunks, led by a comparatively short luchador clad in a sombrero that was as wide as he was and a decorated poncho. All of them looked mean and were packing heat, and it didn't take long for Yoko to come to the correct conclusion. For all that, however, Cross neither flinched nor spoke. The luchador did, however.

"You… You're Jeremiah Cross, right?" the luchador questioned, giving the blond pirate a onceover. "Third mate of the Straw Hat Pirates?"

"Pfheheh, yup!" Cross grinned brightly as he thumbed up the brim of his cap. "And seeing as you already know me, it's only fair you return the favor, no?"

The other pirate chewed his lip briefly, before nodding. "Corto." He nodded his head at the mariachi-outfitted men with him. "Vice Captain of the Amigo Pirates." The newly named Corto glanced around hesitantly for a second before looking back at the armored pirate. "The ship we saw on the coast when we landed, it was yours, sí? Meaning… the rest of your crew is on this island as well?"

"Yep," Cross casually answered. "Just stopped by for a bit of shore leave on our way to Sabaody before we hopped the Line. It's a nice place, nice people. Pretty sizeable too, I'm sure they could handle catering two crews at once."

Yoko bristled viciously at whatever the hell the Straw Hat was getting at, but when the larger pirate shook his head with a dismissive grunt she shoved it down. "Nah, we're here on business, not pleasure. We've got a job to do, and it's here on this island."

One of Cross' eyebrows shifted up. "Oh? 'Zat so? Anything we could help you with? Y'know…" He tilted his head to the side slightly. "Help you get on your way without any problems?"

Corto paused, visibly weighing his options before slowly nodding. "Well… if you're offering… You seen a giant beetle anywhere 'round here?"

Yoko's whole world froze, but even through her nascent panic, she still saw Cross' jaw twitch slightly, and she also heard Corto continue.

"We're not gonna hurt it or nothin', no se preocupe," the luchador assured the Straw Hat with a smile that almost managed to look sincere. "It's just that it's, ah… it's lost is all. Its owners lost track of it awhile back, and we're just lookin' to get it back to where it rightly belongs. So, think you can help us out?"

Cross didn't answer immediately, his arms crossed and head bowed. After a moment, he looked up and tapped his chin thoughtfully. "Hmmm, beetle, beetle… you mean a big ol' bug, about…" He held his hands apart in demonstration. "Ten tons heavy, armored to the nines, with a massive-ass horn in the middle of it's face?"
"Yeah, that's the one! You seen it?"

Yoko did her utmost best to burn a hole through Cross's skull, and she was certain she would have succeeded—

"Nope!" Cross chirped, a pleasant smile on his face. "Sorry, can't help you!

If it weren't for Cross saying that, throwing both the foreigner and the local way off their game. The luchador sagged with disappointment. "So… you haven't seen it?"

"Oh no, I did see it," Cross clarified, his smile unflinching and his tone of voice as pleasant as ever as he raised his arms in a helpless shrug. "But I forget the details of it, and am thus incapable of helping you. So~rry~"

Apparently Corto was smarter than he looked, because from his visible fury he clearly smelled the rat that was all over Cross. "Listen, you—!"

"No, you listen."

The tension that Yoko had been feeling since entering the forest abruptly intensified as Cross's expression suddenly sobered up and he stood from the tree he'd been leaning against, his face taking on the visage of the bloodthirsty pirate she knew he really was.

"If you know what's good for you," Cross warned the Amigo's First Mate. "I'd suggest you and your pack of banditos forget about that beetle. Monster-hunting is a dangerous sport, you see. Very…” He rolled his fingers in the air. "Very treacherous. It's just, you never know just what beastie might get in your way and decide to tear a strip out of your hide…” Cross cocked his head to the side with a tight smile, and slid an inch of his sword's blade out of its hilt, so that it could glint in the light. "If you catch my drift."

Corto tensed at the move, eyeing the other pirate before him in disbelief and, to Yoko's surprise, more than a little trepidation. "You… You really think that we're scared of you?" he grit out. "That an overhyped, big-mouthed wannabe like you can beat us?"

The Straw Hat gave the Amigo Pirates a onceover before snapping his head down with a derisive snort. "No no nooo, that's not right. See, what I think is that you're little more than a fat bully who's never once in his life had the guts to pick a fight with someone who could actually defend themselves."

Then, before Corto could react, Cross stepped forwards and shoved the tips of his fingers in the larger man's chest, forcing him to take a step back.

"What I know," Cross bit out venomously. "Is that I can kick your tub of lard ass right back to the shoreline and clean off this island. And something tells me that somewhere in that fat skull you're hiding behind that mask which you are disgracing by wearing, you have just enough brain cells to know that if you try and do anything to me, one way or the other, you'll be spending your next few siestas sipping your horchata through a wired jaw."

"SO!" Cross barked, taking a step back from the Amigos. "I'm going to tell you this once, and only once, before I get madder than I already am: do the smart thing. Forget you ever heard about that beetle…"

Out of the blue, Cross lashed his left arm out, slamming his fist into a nearby tree—
And causing everyone nearby to jump when the bark splintered readily, creating a wide crater that was almost deep enough to compromise the tree's stability.

"And get the hell off this island," Cross finished coldly. "Before I throw your ass off it."

The Amigo Pirates all glowered ferociously. Corto especially looked to be supremely ticked off, and so close to taking a swing at Cross. But in a show of restraint atypical for people his build, the large pirate's only response was a derisive snort before he spun on his heel and marched off. His underlings glanced between him and Cross for a moment before electing it better to follow their First Mate's lead than take their chances with the Straw Hat.

A minute after the last of them had disappeared into the tree line, Cross spoke again. "Soundbite, warn the rest of the crew. The first mate looked to have half a brain, but if a captain who's so cocky he doesn't lead from the front doesn't come back to try a better assault, I'll eat a biscuit."

"YUCK," Soundbite gagged.

"Oh, yeah, and you should probably warn the village, too."

"...was that last part to me?"

Yoko stiffened.

"Nah..." Cross nonchalantly replied, to the point of digging a finger into his ear. "That last part was to the person who failed to consider that listening to the SBS would give knowledge about our fighting abilities." He then glanced straight towards Yoko and her hiding spot. "Like, say, the fact that Soundbite can hear everything that goes on within a one-mile radius, even if it's no louder than a heartbeat?"

Yoko abruptly remembered that all of those animals had been talking throughout her vigil, which she knew was the snail's doing...

"Or the fact that I could smell her a few meters away?" the dog-cannon added.

A dog-cannon. A dog... and of course it would have the nose of a freaking bloodhound!

"You're really not good at the whole clandestine thing, are you?" the sword finished flatly.

Her face red as a brick, Yoko finally hit her limit for how much bullshit she could handle, turning on her heel and bolting for the town, heedless of any attempt at stealth.

As soon as she was out of earshot, Cross grimaced at his primary partner. "III'm gonna guess that all could have sounded better?"

"Liiiiittle bit, yeah," Soundbite snarked. He then glanced aside. "BUT, MOVING ON FROM THAT..." The snail flicked his eyestalks at the mutilated tree. "WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT?"

Cross dismissed Yoko as well in favor of ghosting his fingers over the crater he'd made in the tree. "Me acting out a hunch that I'm actually surprised paid off..."

"OKAY, LEMME TRY AGAIN: since WHEN could you do that?"
"If my hunch is right?" Cross grinned eagerly as he turned and started to walk back towards Little East Blue. "Probably for awhile now."

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The mood inside the Xibalba was at once impatient and reluctant.

On the one hand, Captain Largo was still enjoying his siesta, and everyone had had the consequences of interrupting said siesta thoroughly impressed upon them long ago, which left them waiting for him to wake up on his own. On the other hand, they weren't exactly delivering good news, either, and every instant that they lingered on the island's shores after being told, explicitly at that, to get the hell out by one of the last crews anyone on the Grand Line wanted to piss off was an instant closer to them all getting their asses kicked seven ways from Sunday.

So great was their trepidation that Corto was actually entertaining the idea of suffering his brother's wrath if it meant they got off the island sooner, but the decision was taken out of his hands when Largo's snoring suddenly snapped off in a harsh snort.

For a full minute, the inside of the Xibalba was frozen, nobody breathing, nobody even twitching.

And then every one of the Amigo Pirates save for one flinched, as that 'one' lifted his head just enough for a single eye to glare out from under his sombrero at the person who acted as his First Mate.

"I believe," Largo intoned. "I told you… to go out and get me that beetle. And that unless you had a love for pain, you had better not even consider the idea of returning without it. This leaves two options. Either that beetle is both invisible and utterly silent, in which case mis disculpas… or you are just itching for me to introduce you to a whole new world of agony. So. Tell me."

Shivers wracked the pirates as Largo slowly rose from his resting position, looming over his brother and towering over the rest, and gave him a lazy yet no less lethal glare.

"Which is it," he inquired frigidly.

It was a credit to Corto that he managed to refrain from dying on the spot of heart failure, or even show terror to his older and seriously dangerous brother. Instead, he swallowed minutely (both saliva and his nerves) and met his brother's gaze. "We have a problem. Recovering the beetle has been rendered impossible."

"This had better be the best explanation of your life," Largo sneered.

The heavyset luchador swallowed uncomfortably, still looking his brother in the eye even as his mask became increasingly muggy. "We are landed," he whispered in a hoarse tone. "Directly beside the Mil Soleado."

Those words actually got Largo to pause, and it was to the Amigos' immense relief that their captain slowly sank into a sitting position on his bed. "The Straw Hat Pirates," he confirmed. "You're sure."

Corto nodded with almost frantic desperation. "Completamente! I spoke with Jeremiah Cross himself, and he made it clear, in no uncertain terms, that we weren't welcome on this island! The beetle is here, sí, but the Straw Hats are protecting it! And before you say it, sí, I could have absolutamente punched the little weasel's head off his shoulders, but then I'd have gotten the whole crew down on our heads! I might be afraid of failing our employers, and I might be terrified of failing you, hermano… but one thing I absolutely am not is estupido enough to anger the pirates who invaded Enies Lobby and lived to tell of it!"
By the end of his diatribe, Corto was panting and staring at his brother in outright terror, silently begging him, begging him, to do the right thing, and for once, let them just walk away.

And for a few glorious seconds, as Largo was thoughtfully silent, Corto felt hope that that would happen.

Finally, Largo spoke. "You are right about one thing, hermano… To tangle with the Straw Hats is to court disaster."

Corto let the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding slowly leak out of his nostrils, relief flooding his being.

"But."

And just like that, all that hope and relief turned to dread and bile.

Largo slowly rose from his bed and cast his gaze out over his crew. "We will go through with our mission nevertheless."

Terror overrode his survival instinct—or more accurately, half his survival instinct drop-kicked the other half—and Corto did the unthinkable and grasped his brother's shoulders to shake him furiously. "¿Estás completamente loco? I repeat! Straw Hats! Enies Lobby! We have one Devil Fruit, yours, and not only do they have almost half a dozen of their own, but their unpowered members have managed to take out almost a dozen total ability users on their own! They will chew us up and spit us out before you can even ask '¿Quieres leche con tu horchata?'! Hermano, I respect you and I fear you, and I will die for you… but not like this, man! Not like—"

"Corto."

The larger pirate froze under his older brother's half-lidded stare. It was a stare that he'd seen many times as they'd grown up together and had thankfully seen less and less as the years had gone by. It was a stare that screamed—

"Are you done?"

Yeah, that, only a lot less politely.

"I… think so?" Corto hesitantly squeaked, before reasoning that yes, he was indeed done. "Yeah, I'm done."

"Thank you," Largo deadpanned. "Now, you all listen to me, and you all listen good."

Every last sombrero-clad man nodded, facing their captain with complete and terrified attention. Largo graced them with a flat gaze before he spoke again.

"The Straw Hats are strong. Stronger than most crews, and undoubtedly stronger than us. I acknowledge this, sí. They are also insane, insanely lucky, and all around some of the most dangerous pendejos to sail the Grand Line. This too, I acknowledge…” Largo nodded slowly, before giving them all a chilling glare. "But you all must acknowledge this: that if there is one man who the Straw Hats are not stronger than, it is the man whose patronage we seek. Whose favor we have garnered."

The tall bandito started to pace back and forth. "That man is not merely a New World veteran. He was a contemporary, a rival, of the Pirate King, Gold Roger. He was feared by Marines and Pirates
alike the world over, and he clawed his way out of the blackest pits of Impel Down itself, a feat never accomplished before, or after. That man…” Largo let loose a grim chuckle. "He is, without a doubt in my mind, the single strongest human being in all of Paraíso. And we are working with him. Do you truly believe that rookies like the Straw Hats, no matter how strong, can stand up to him?"

"Yeah, sure, they'd fall before him of course, hermano!" Corto agreed before grimacing as he tugged at the collar of his poncho. "But we aren't him! We're just… us!"

"Sí, sí, we're us…” Largo grinned venomously as he jabbed a thumb to his side, indicating a crate stored in the corner of the room. "And in case your memory fails you, we have in our possession the trump card our benefactor left us. A means through which our victory shall be confirmed. In light of this detail… do you still think we have any chances of defeat?"

Corto looked aside, thinking furiously. A good amount of the crew's fear melted away in favor of confusion and amplified respect for their captain. There were some, however, who were still nervous.

"Ah, but of course…” Largo spoke up again, apparently noticing the hesitation. "I am not without mercy. Should anyone still harbor any doubts as to the chances of our victory, feel free to speak up, and I shall hear you out as I would any other."

A moment of silence, and then…

"Ah, w-well—!

BANG!

A mariachi-themed pirate in the back of the room crumbled with a cry of pain as a ball of lead tore through his knee. Nobody saw this on account of the fact that all eyes in the room were glued to the pistol that Largo had drawn and fired near-instantly.

"Anyone else?" he queried, his voice cool enough to give a polar bear frostbite.

Dead silence.

The man spun his gun back into its holster.

"Didn't think so."

-o-

Yoko's breath came in ragged gasps as she sprinted back into town. She had to warn them all… not just about the Straw Hats and their nefarious plans, but also the far more imminent threat of these new poncho guys.

It was disappointingly easy for her to locate the mayor, considering that he was in the village helping set up a party to celebrate the presence of the Straw Hats. Well, she'd see to it that that didn't last. She quickly came up to the portly man, and spent a few moments catching her breath.

"Yoko?" Fabre asked in confusion. "What's wrong?"

What the girl tried to say was something along the lines of, "I've got proof the Straw Hats are actually hostile, and there's another pirate crew that's trying to kidnap Boss!" What actually came out on account of her lack of breath was "Proof-Straw-host-pirate-kidnap-Boss!"
The town's mayor blinked in surprise before slowly heaving out a sigh as he brought a hand up to massage the bridge of his nose. "Yoko, I know you don't like them, but I thought the Straw Hats made it very clear that they have no intentions on kidnapping—!"

"Not the Straw Hats, someone else!" Yoko snapped, oxygen finally refueling her lungs. "The Straw Hats are evil pirates, but there are other pirates that just came to the island looking for Boss!"

Fabre's relaxed demeanor vanished in an instant. For a brief moment, he looked panicked, before covering it up by attacking his pipe. "Blast it all… they just had to show up when he began molting."

Any thoughts Yoko might've had of a continued rant fled once she processed that statement. "Wh-What? But that wasn't supposed to be for—!"

"Dooon't worry about it."

'I… am getting very tired of all this mood whiplash,' was the incongruous thought Yoko had as that voice brought her anger back to life at full cylinders. Spinning around, she glared bloody murder at Jeremiah Cross as he approached, weapons crossed on his back and a casual grin on his face.

"There's a pirate crew coming up, sure, and they look to be utter bastards, sure," the pirate continued, waving his hand dismissively. "But we'll handle them. Although…" He then gave Yoko a flat look. "I'm guessing none of that is going to make you hate us any less, am I right?"

Yoko initially confirmed the accusation in a nonverbal manner by flushing furiously and sputtering. It took a moment for the actual words to come out. "You… You bastard! Idiot! Murdering, bloodthirsty… shiitake!" Admittedly, her true feelings were a bit garbled due to her not having even hit puberty yet, but at least she was trying.

Cross blinked before slowly tilting his head in confusion. "I'm… a homicidal mushroom that's delicious with noodles?" he asked in honest, bemused confusion.

"Never call someone a word you don't understand, KID. That's Insults 201," Soundbite helpfully informed the Marine child.

"What, it's not 101?"

"NUH-UH!" Soundbite shook his head with a shit-eating grin. "101 DEALS WITH sentence structure, run-on sentences and the like. I COULD GET YOU A COURSE CATALOG IF YOU —?"

"WILL YOU TWO BE FUCKING SERIOUS FOR ONE SECOND!?!" Yoko practically screamed, several veins bulging in cross patterns on her brow.

"Language, young lady," the pair deadpanned at her, before breaking down into uncontrolled snickers. "Nah, we're just fucking with you," Cross chuckled.

Fuming impotently, Yoko whirled around to glare up at Fabre. Her mood did not improve when she saw that he too was muffling chuckles. "Mayor Fabre," she grit out. "I have evidence of the fact that the Straw Hats are no less the same scum than every other pirate alive! They are not good people because good pirates don't exist!"

Fabre's good cheer evaporated at the announcement. "Yoko…"

"And she decides to tell him this in front of the very pirates she's denouncing?" Soundbite stage whispered to his partner.
Cross could only shrug in response. "It's probably desperation. She's not thinking straight and all that, you know?"

"Fair point. YOU'VE DONE SOME STUPID THINGS YOURSELF."

"I choose to take that as a compliment."

"EVIDENCE!" Yoko furiously repeated in an effort to retrieve the attention she'd lost, jabbing her notepad at Fabre, who eyed the paper with no small amount of dread. "Evidence, right here, that every last one of these pirates is up to absolutely no good!" She flipped the pad open to the first page. "My first piece of evidence, pertaining to their Captain, is that he was—!"

"Surveying the local geography for more efficient pillaging."

"Surveying the—Wha?!" Yoko boggled at Cross in shock when he answered before she could. "Don't worry, you're not that predictable," the pirate assured her with an impish grin. "But you ARE kinda careless!" his snail snickered.

"Soundbite was listening in on you talking out loud while you were writing," Lassoo informed her. "Don't take offense, he does it to all of us."

"Th-This just proves my point!" Yoko jabbed a finger at the uniquely packed quartet. "They're not denying my point, they—!"

"Actually, I am denying your point, based on a supremely relevant fact that renders your suppositions null and void," Cross smirked as he folded his arms behind his head. "It's simple enough: Luffy doesn't know how to pronounce even half the words you had written down on that page, much less their meanings."

The girl swore she pulled something with how hard her eyelid twitched. "You're telling me," she grit out. "That your excuse is that your captain is too stupid to be evil!?"

"It's a good excuse!" Cross protested with almost honestly affronted indignation.

"Er... one that I can confirm," Fabre cut in, weathering the betrayed look she gave him. "Straw Hat Luffy has a good heart and a healthy appetite, but I wouldn't exactly call him... ah, well..."

"To reiterate: the excuse that Luffy's too stupid to do something is a valid excuse," Cross said.


"We're not here to cause trouble," Cross droned.

"YES, YOU ARE!"

"We've never killed ANYONE," Soundbite added.

"LIKE I BELIEVE THAT!"

"Your name is Yoko," Funkfreed piped up.

"NO, IT'S NOT!" Yoko roared, before grimacing and slapping a hand to her face. "Dang it."
"Yoko, you really need to try listening a little more," Fabre pleaded.

"No, you need to listen to me!" Yoko protested, rapping her finger on her pad. "He might have an excuse for that instance of his captain's actions, but I have dozens of pieces of evidence! He can't explain them all!"

"Oh, you would be surprised," Cross hummed pleasantly, his mouth never shifting from the smirk that had been there the whole conversation.

Sighing, Fabre gave his town's guest a long-suffering look. "I am so sorry," he apologized.

"Don't be, I'm having the time of my life!" Cross laughed, waving his hand in a gesture that was both dismissive and good-natured. "Trust me, I've heard worse, and once this is all over, it'll be good for a laugh."

"You won't be laughing once I'm done with you!" Yoko swore, flipping to the next page in her pad. "Second instance of nefarious wrongdoings!"

And so it went: Yoko ran down her list of dastardly deeds and nascent plans of varying levels of notoriety…

"The smelly blubber-butt faker that calls itself Boss has been denuding the island!"

"You're planning on poaching the Unusual Animals!"

"Your captain's eating all our food and that… that skeleton is using his music to control people's minds!"

And every time, Cross and his compatriots had answer after answer to reply with, all delivered with varying but invariably elevated levels of teasing snark.

"It's called a training exercise. Maybe you've heard of them? If this boggles you, know that normal people split mere bricks for training. It's just that Boss—Boss Dugong, I mean—has higher standards than most when it comes to his strength."

"Yeah, because we haven't seen way more unusual animals during our journey. Oh wait. Hwee hwee hwee!"

"TRUST ME, that's nothing new. Luffy tries to eat everything he can get his teeth on. BUT, AH, WE ARE GOOD FOR IT. just to clarify. AND AS FOR BROOK… huh, interesting trivia. He says he was helping that cook, Mitsuboshi, keep pace with Sanji. Apparently it's an old trick used by SHIP'S MUSICIANS THE WORLD OVER!"

Suffice to say that by the time Yoko had reached the bottom of her list, she had truly bypassed 'infuriated'… and was more than a little desperate, to boot.

"Mrgrgh…" Yoko grumbled furiously as she flipped to another page in her book. "T-T-Then what abooooout… ah, the sniper, the cyborg and the girl?!" The glare this time was challenging. "They're building—well, they built a mansion for Miss Luigia! They're obviously trying to wile their way into her will so that they can steal her fortune! What do you have to say to that?"

That actually got a change of expression out of Cross. He boggled at the girl for a moment before slowly exchanging wide-eyed looks with his snail. "I… am honestly stumped," he admitted in a blank tone. "Congratulations on accomplishing that. Seriously, I… am kind of at a loss for how to respond."

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"That's where we differ…" Fabre groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Yoko, up until today, Luigia lived in a shack that had a mock-up of a mansion nailed to it. You acknowledge that, yes?"

"Uh… yeah, why?" Yoko nodded in confusion, pointedly ignoring Cross's outburst of "Wait, we've met two loonies with the same delusion!"

"Great. So tell me this!" Fabre swept his hands out in frustration. "What fortune!?"

Yoko sucked in a breath to respond as she raised a finger… then bent her finger and let out a choked gurgle as that one week the old woman had eaten nothing but miso soup forced its way into her conscious mind. "Gugh…"

"Yoko," Fabre said kindly, kneeling before the girl and grasping her shoulders in his large hands. "I understand your pain; I knew your father well, and I miss him, too. And I will admit without reservation that most pirates are the same kind of monsters that took him from us. Even the Straw Hats admit it!"

"True that; we're an exception, not the norm, and we know it," Cross piped up, and his voice was no longer playful.

"But even so!" Fabre forged on. "You cannot continue denying the truth! The truth that we have all accepted, that the world itself has accepted!" The mayor pointed at the pirate. "The Straw Hats are not just good pirates, they're good people. Yoko, please, I am begging you… enough is enough. Just in this one instance, for this one crew… please, see reason and acknowledge that these are the last people in the world that we need to be protected from! For your own sake, if nothing else!"

A tense silence fell over the small gathering, everyone's breath held in tense anticipation of the girl's answer.

Finally, with tears welling in her eyes, Yoko gave a dry sniffle and began to shake. "Dad… Dad would never forgive me if I collaborated with criminals," she whispered as tears slowly dripped down her cheeks. "It… It goes against everything the Marines stand for."

For a long moment, Cross just looked at her, apparently considering something, before glancing up at Fabre, expression questioning. Once the older man nodded hesitantly, he spoke.

"Yoko, you need to understand that when you heard my broadcast, you heard it out of context," Cross gently stated. "I wasn't talking about how the Marines are corrupt, I was talking about how there is corruption in the Marines. Being a Marine doesn't automatically make someone good, even if it should… just like being a pirate doesn't automatically make someone bad, even if it should. Underneath the black and white, we're still human. " When he saw how Yoko was considering a response, but also that she looked thoughtful instead of hostile, he pre-empted the words. "Consider: Would your father want you to carry on with this vendetta, or would he want you to reconsider in the face of evidence?"

Okay, now the attention was hostile. "You never knew my father," she spat with surprising venom. "So don't you dare say you—!"

"No, I didn't know your father," Cross cut in. "But I do know Marines like him, Marines who would sacrifice everything for the sake of the ones they swore to protect, for the sake of the spirit of their oaths, not just the word. And I know that all of them would tell you to think, not blindly follow. That's all I want you to do: listen to what your eyes and ears are telling you, and draw your own conclusions."
Yoko's body shuddered as her gaze fell to the ground, indecision and hesitation literally wracking her body. Finally, she looked up at Cross, and he was gratified to see a glint of reason in her eyes, but he could only wince at the far more prominent haze of deep-seated pain that clouded her gaze. "Even if what you say about the Marines is true," she whispered harshly, tears gleaming in her eyes. "I will never trust a pirate."

A swift chomp on his cheek silenced an aggravated grumble, and instead Cross settled for a conciliatory waving of his hands. "Mah mah, that's fine," he chuckled tightly, barely masking the disappointment in his voice. "I'm pretty sure you'll be singing a different tune when we cast off to leave. Everyone does. But for now, you're entitled to whatever you want to think."

Yoko… didn't respond to that. Couldn't, really, and as a result an uncomfortable silence settled onto the small group.

Thankfully, Fabre was unburdened with any serious thoughts, and thus quickly clapped his hands to break the silence. "I!' he announced in an almost grandiose tone. "Have just realized that I am famished, and I'm almost completely certain that neither of you two have had much to eat all day, either. And if there is one thing that I've learned in my meager career as a politician, it's that talking about important matters on an empty stomach is an idea that's destined for disaster. What say we all go to the Mini-Baratie and treat ourselves to what little Luffy hasn't gorged himself upon, hm?"

Yoko twitched slightly at that, but wiped her eyes clear with a petulant grumble. "Food's always your answer to everything… 'ts why you're so… big."

Fabre let out a jolly chuckle as he patted the girl on the back and slowly led her towards the island's premiere restaurant. "Yes, I suppose that's true, isn't it? But if anything, I'd like to think that my girth is a testament to my success rate! And as such, I take pride in it!"

"Eh, makes sense to me," Cross commented, his arms folded behind his head as he walked alongside the two. "I mean, I've been on over a dozen islands and I've certainly seen and heard people take pride in weirder things."

"Heheh, if that ain't the damn truth!" Soundbite chortled in agreement with his partner in prime. "SERIOUSLY, THIS ONE TIME—!

Yoko and Fabre both looked at the snail in confusion when it suddenly belted out a sharp violin-sting, which in turn drew a scowl from Cross. "Are you fucking—!?"

"USOPP, EXPLOSIVE ORDNANCE! INTERCEPT NOW!"

"FIRE MAIN CANNON!"

KABOOM!

"—GYAH!"

Before she swapped to a shriek of shock as the air suddenly ripped itself apart in a blast of air pressure and fire a few meters away.

Yoko's hearing cleared before her vision un-blurred, just in time to hear the current bane of her existence roaring in the air.

"Hey! You just stole my shtick, you metal asshat!" Cross roared towards the newly built mansion
overlooking the village, which currently had a plume of smoke rising from it.

"What the heck are you talking about, Cross?" the pirate's shipwright's voice asked in honest bewilderment.

"What am I talking about? You just stole number three on my list of things I want to say!" Cross fumed as he tapped his foot in irritation. "I had it all lined up for when we pulled out *that* trick! It was going to be all badass and awesome and you just stole it!"

"Are you really comparing that to a standard turret!?" Franky asked, his tone now offended.

"Of course not, but what I'm *pissed* about is you stealing the line! It's the principle of the matter, man, the principle! And you—"

"What's going on, Cross?"

"…We're not done with this," Cross growled at nothing before rolling with his captain's sudden presence. "A group of fakers are here to kidnap Boss the beetle. I gave their crew and first mate a chance to run, but apparently their captain is determined to carry out their mission or die trying."

Luffy frowned, tossing the bone he'd been picking his teeth with into the air and swallowing it in a single chomp. "Need any help?" he asked seriously.

Cross blinked at his captain in surprise before frowning in thought. After a moment, he nodded, slowly and hesitantly at first but picking up speed. "I… think I can take them."

"Then they're all yours."

The tactician shot his captain a thumbs up, and walked forward to put himself between the smoke cloud rising over the lower reaches of the island and the village. "Keep everyone back," Cross called over his shoulder to Fabre. "These idiots might fire full blast and the last thing anyone wants or needs is to get caught in the crossfire."

"Hey, wait, what do you think you're—!?" Yoko started to belt out—in indignance? Confusion? Not concern… right?—before she was cut off by a hand landing on her head.

"Just shut up!"

Yoko looked up in confusion, and could do nothing but blink dumbly as she stared right into Straw Hat Luffy's dumb, but somehow still *proud*, smile.

"Shut up and watch!" Luffy chuckled before turning his beaming expression towards his third mate. "This is gonna be *so cool!!*

Yoko blinked, trying and failing to reconcile what she was seeing with what she knew, *knew* to be *fact* about pirates. All she could do was default to following Luffy's gaze, which fell on Cross glaring bloody murder at the swiftly clearing cloud.

When the cloud finally cleared, the girl swore she felt her blood freeze in her veins.

Over fifty pirates, all arrayed before the village, all dressed like mariachi, all packing sizable firearms that they had at the ready and were visibly ready to use. And then there were the two at the front of the horde; she recognized the heavyweight luchador, Corto, who had now unveiled a pair of large-bore *Gatling guns* of all things he was dual-wielding without any apparent strain, and then there was *him*. 
She could only assume that the tallest pirate around was the Captain of these 'Amigo Pirates', but that
man… *that man*. The look in the tall man's lazy eyes, his coldness… for whatever reason, the
man's lack of a weapon made him all the more menacing.

And now, this man, this… this *monster* had come to Yoko's island, set his sights on her village, set
his sights on Boss—!

Yoko's breath hitched as the thought tore through her like a bolt of lightning. 'Boss! Oh, no, he's still
_in his chrysalis, he's still evolving! They could find him, they could take him away! T-They'll take
everything… I'll lose e-everything ag—!'

"I thought I made myself damn clear to your first mate!"

Once again, Yoko was wrenched out of her spiraling thoughts by the voice of a pirate, and she
returned to reality to the sight of Cross unwaveringly glaring down the horde.

"I told you all, _explicitly_, to pack up and hit the horizon," Cross stated, his voice packed with steel.
"You mind telling me just _why_ the hell you decided to do something so asinine as to attack the
village we're _blatantly_ protecting!?!"

The tall man blinked slowly before staring down his nose at Cross. "Yes, I _do_ mind, _tu patético
insecto._"

Cross's whole being _twitched_, his jaw setting in a downright vicious smirk that was emphasized by a
throbhing vein just below his right eye.

"Oh, this should be good," Fabre said with obvious relish, prompting Yoko to throw him a brief but
incredulous glare.

Either ignorant or entirely dismissive of Cross's ire, the tall man turned his gaze just pass the most
wanted of the Straw Hats and almost gave Yoko a heart attack when he looked at her…
no, _above_ her.

"You," he spoke in a dry tone, staring at the pirate at Yoko's side. "You are the _capitan_ of the Straw
Hat Pirates, 'Straw Hat' Luffy, _sí?_"

Luffy raised his hand in response, his expression blank. "Yo."

"Hmph," the other captain sniffed disdainfully, raising his admittedly impressive nose. "Let me be as
clear as possible, so that even one as imbecilic as _you_ might understand: I am Largo, captain of the
Amigo Pirates. My crew and I are here to retrieve the giant beetle we _know_ to be on this island. If
you hand it over without trouble, then we will only _masacrar_ some of the people on this island, and
leave your ship in a salvageable condition. Try to resist, however…"

Largo's smirk turned vicious as his stout brother raised his arms and spun his weapons' barrels
menacingly. He himself hefted his guitar and strummed a few tunes, Yoko flinching at the discordant
sound that the instrument produced.

"And we shall turn this place into an _isla de los muertos._" Then he frowned, eyeing the guitar, and
began tuning and testing it, though on the same discordant chords.

There was a tense pause as that murderous sentence hung in the air, broken only by the menacing
vibrations of Largo's guitar as he tuned it. Then the person most capable of the job broke the silence.

"When I met your brother, I expected his captain to be just as stupid, if not worse," Cross growled
out through a rictus smile. "But I damn well didn't expect you to be suicidal."

That actually drew a reaction from Largo, though it was merely an annoyed snort and a roll of his eyes. "Cállate, mestizo. I'm talking to your capitán. I won't lower myself to address a parásito like you."

The number of veins bulging on Cross outright tripled. "Arrogant piece of—!" he ground out through his increasingly tight scowl, but Largo ignored him in favor of Luffy.

"Oh, definitely good," Fabre stated, now outright grinning. "Kinda wish I had some popcorn."

This time, Yoko found herself nodding along. 'Yeah, if these two groups can break each other…'

The Straw Hat captain, meanwhile, silently returned the flat look before bowing his head. "This island is Boss's precious home, that he cares about more than anything. You're not going to take him from it."

The spike of terror she felt as Largo's gaze hardened squashed Yoko's conflicted flare of agreement. "So you have decided to fight us, then? A pointless sacrifice…" He then smirked slightly as he bowed his head and plucked a string on his guitar. "But then, you Straw Hats are reputed to be a band of noble fools."

"Nope." Luffy shook his head in denial.

Largo glanced up in honest surprise. "¿Perdón?"

The Straw Hat tilted his head slightly, looking at the tall mariachi in a matter-of-fact manner. "I'm not gonna fight you."

The reaction was instantaneous, everyone in the vicinity staring at Luffy in shock and confusion.

"What!?" Yoko and Fabre belted out.

"¿Qué?" Largo queried incredulously, his composure broken. "Completas idiota, did you or did you not just tell me you would not let us take the beetle? Do you think we'll just leave you alone because… what, you asked nicely?"

Luffy's response was a half-lidded deadpan. "Geez… everyone calls me an idiot, but you're the one who isn't listening to what I'm saying." The Rubber-Man pointed at himself. "I said that I'm not gonna fight you, 'cause I'm not." He then pointed forward. "Cross is."

There would have been dead silence, if not for the sour note Largo suddenly struck. "What," he spat.

"Well, duh," Luffy shrugged as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Cross told you guys to get lost or else and you didn't listen to him. So now Cross is gonna kick your asses."

Largo glanced at Cross, giving him a onceover before returning his flat look to Luffy "…you realize that we are going to rip him into a millón pieces, sí?"

"Nope." That flat response actually caused an outbreak of raised veins on the other captain's forehead. "'Cause Cross is stronger than all of you and he's gonna kick your asses." Luffy turned a massive grin on his third mate. "Right, Cross?"

Cross's look of cold fury faded as he returned his captain's grin and slammed his fist into his palm. "They won't know what hit 'em, captain!" He then turned back towards the Amigos and cracked his
neck, his smirk taking on a near-manic tone. "You heard the man!"

At this point, Fabre, no longer looking eager, leaned in close to Luffy. "Uh, are you sure Cross can take them?" he whispered nervously. "I mean, no offense to Cross, but isn't he…?"

The look Luffy shot him should not have made the mayor feel stupid. There ought to have been a law of the universe against it. "Of course?" he said, sounding confused that it was even a question. "He's my crewmate. No way he'll lose."

Yoko glanced between the two in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

Fabre gave the girl an uncertain glance. "Well… you see, Yoko, while Cross might have the highest bounty of the Straw Hats, that's only for the verbal threat he presents. In terms of combat, he's admitted himself he's one of their weakest. Him alone against that many pirates…?" The mayor gnawed on his thumb in worry. "I… actually don't know if he'll be alright."

"Man, you guys really are idiots…" Luffy sighed with a tinge of annoyance. "I just told you, didn't I? He'll be fine. They won't beat him." He grinned with honest eagerness. "Just shut up and watch! This is gonna be awesome!"

Upon hearing those words, Yoko could do naught but clamp her mouth shut and stare at the slowly brewing fight. For all that she was outwardly quiet, however, her mind was in chaos as she tried to resolve the tripartite conflict raging in her head.

"Oh no!" wailed a Yoko, dressed in a full Marine uniform that actually fit her small frame. "He's gonna get massacred! And then there's gonna be no one between these assholes and our town! No way we can count on the rest of the Straw Hats fighting them, not with their captain like this!"

"Yessssss…" another Marine-Yoko cackled, rubbing her hands gleefully as the bloodstains on her uniform gleamed radiant crimson. "He's gonna get massacred! And he's a Straw Hat! He's going to take so many of those filthy pirates down with him!"

The last Yoko just stood there, silently gaping at the conflict still paused outside of her head. This Yoko was essentially identical to the one standing in the real world, save that she had no coat, no burden. This Yoko wasn't a Marine… just a normal girl. "He's going to be killed," she whispered. "I… I don't want him to be killed…"

"Traitors!" Justice!Yoko howled right as Marine!Yoko fired off a "MORONS!" of her own. The two immediately locked gazes, and then jumped each other, biting, scratching, and pulling at hair. The third Yoko merely continued to stare.

Out in the real world, Yoko whimpered, "I am… conflicted…"

Meanwhile, Largo proudly jutted his chin out as he looked down on his opposition. "I expected more from the infamous Straw Hat Pirates," the captain sighed lazily, sparing Cross only the barest of glances. "I come ashore expecting the fight of my life, and I find that the only one who's even going to put up a fight is some spineless smartass of a pendejo who only got his bounty for talking."

The Amigo's captain swept his arm out to indicate his men, his face never losing its condescending expression. "You do realize that we are not playing around, sí? These aren't your usual fun and games, hombre. You Straw Hats, you might play at being piratas… But we are the artículo genuino. We are actually going to kill you, in cold blood."

Cross couldn't help but scoff derisively at that. "Men both better and worse than you in every way have been trying and failing to do just that for almost a year. And with more men, too. But hey, if
you insist…” With that, he tucked one arm behind his back and raised the other with his palm up, tweaking his fingers towards himself. "Come test your luck."

Largo snorted, raising his hand and snapping his fingers. "Men. Kill this gusano."

As one, the Amigo pirates roared and charged the lone man and his weapons, rattling their sabers and muskets like noisemakers. Cross, for his part, just stood there, even when the musket-wielding mariachis brought their weapons down and fired from the hip.

After all, not only was firing from the hip a decidedly inaccurate endeavor, but Cross only needed a second to draw his sword from his side, and Funkfreed only needed half a second to shift into his hybrid form and encircle his wielder, deflecting the few on-the-mark slugs.

"Pachy-Shield!" Cross called out as Funkfreed unwound and hovered at his side, grinning proudly. "Neat, no?"

"Coward!" one of the pirates shouted. "Put down your Devil Fruit weapons and face us like a man!"

For a moment, there was silence. And then… and then Funkfreed returned to his natural form and Cross smiled the smile that toppled governments. "Sure," he said, before planting Funkfreed blade-first into the ground and tossing Lassoo, who was in his gun-form, at one of the Amigos charging him. Said Amigo reflexively caught the cannon—and was promptly thrown backwards and into his comrades by the gun's weight.

That brought the pirates up short, their charge screeching to a halt as they all stared at their groaning comrades pinned under the gun-dog.

"Hey! Idiotas!" Corto barked. "The hell are you doing, he's right there!"

Their first mate's shout brought them out of their paralysis and almost got them charging Cross again, except that the blonde caused them all to freeze again by strolling up to one of the Amigos—one who outweighed him two-to-one—and grabbing him by the throat.

"See, a funny thing happened while I've been wielding Lassoo. You know, my dog-cannon?" Cross stated conversationally, even as the Amigo he was holding by the throat gurgled and scrabbled ineffectually at Cross' armored fingers. And that scrabbling only intensified as he was slowly lifted off his feet by Cross's single, apparently scrawny arm. "As you'll all recall, he's a living weapon. This is important because as it would so happen, as time has passed on our journey, he's gotten heavier. I'd say he's even heavier now than he was when he was serving Baroque Works, let alone after we lightened him."

The gun-dog in question promptly snapped into his hybrid form, teeth gnashing. "YOU ARE CALLING ME FAT!" he bellowed indignantly, all while ignoring the pirate he was still crushing with his mass.

"DO WE REALLY GOTTA DO THIS NOW?!!" Soundbite snapped, as much amused as he was annoyed.

"The point being, I've been wielding two tons of gun-dog exactly like I wielded a half-ton. Or, in layman's terms… I might not have realized it until now, but over time? I've. Gotten. Stronger." Cross' grin turned positively feral at the sudden looks of fear that produced. "So, yeah. I'm not what my crew would call 'Monster Trio' material, by any means, but I'm strong enough to swing around a literal two-ton cannon like it's nothing. And that means… I'm more than strong enough to take care of you mooks." He cracked his neck side to side. "Sucks for you, don't it?"
"Will someone just kill him already!" Corto belted out in a tone that was a decibel short of a scream.

That was the cue for the Amigos to shake their paralysis and charge the Straw Hat. Considering they surrounded him on three sides, the conclusion should've been a no-brainer.

Unfortunately, they failed to consider that Lassoo and Funkfreed were their own thinking beings. Hence, nobody saw it coming when Funkfreed joined his fellow weapon in adopting his hybrid form and the pair plowed into the rear of the crowd, sending Amigos afight and the front crowd around Cross looking over their shoulders instead of at their opponent.

The smiling man in question eagerly took advantage of that fact by throwing the poor bastard still held in his hand hard enough to bowl over a good third of the crowd he hit, the front line collapsing in an unconscious heap and the rear struggling to rise. Almost immediately after, Cross whirled around and planted his fist square in the nose of the Amigo behind him, cartilage crumpling under the metal and the pirate also flying into and bowling over his comrades. That left just one cluster of Amigos left both standing and un-distracted by rampaging Zoan weapons.

To their credit, they immediately tried to close to melee range. Key word being "tried", because Cross immediately counter-charged them. The first Amigo took an armored elbow to the noggin and dropped like he was made of wet cardboard. The next took an uppercut to the gut. The third took Cross's shin between his legs.

And so it went, until that group of Amigos was no more than a carpet of groaning carcasses. Cross took the moment of calm to catch his breath, which was coming in ragged gasps.

"DOOOOOODGE! Blade, top-down."

Spinning, Cross brought his arm up in time to catch a sword on his gauntlet, and followed it with the toe of his armored boot meeting his opponent's chin. That also gave him a good look at Funkfreed and Lassoo chasing the remaining Amigos still on his feet right at him. The ones in front had looks of hope, as if they thought that Cross would be easier to beat than the elephant and dog at their heels.

Morons.

The Straw Hat merely grinned wider and raised his fists, before pausing and looking down.

"You know what?" he mused as he crouched down and grabbed one of the unconscious Amigos by his ankle. "I'm going to try something. Something I never thought I'd get to do but that I've always wanted to." And with that, he hefted the unconscious Amigo and charged again.

Unfortunately, limp bodies, as it turned out, didn't make very good bludgeoning weapons. After the third Amigo took three hits and several steps back to put down (not to mention nearly got Cross brained three times by flailing limbs), Cross mentally shrugged and tossed a body at his opponents for the second time that day. Much like the first time, it succeeded in knocking over the front lines, at which point the people running up behind them tripped over their downed comrades and wound up piling into a spectacular traffic jam.

And that wasn't the worst of it. Cross winced in sympathy as Lassoo and Funkfreed eagerly joined in on the scrum. "Okay, now I feel a little sorry for them," he said.

He then turned to eye the Amigo's Captain and First Mate, both of whom were watching the scene with poorly disguised disgust and fear, respectively. "Though whether that's because they're all pathetic or because they have exceedingly poor leadership, that remains up for debate."

"You're going to pay for that, gringo."
Both partners glanced at the tall captain indifferently, who, judging from the deathly calm expression on his face and the way he was strangling his guitar's neck, had bypassed the "steaming rage" stage entirely.

"Is he talking about his bad leadership, or me beating up all his men?" Cross muttered.

"Does it matter?" Soundbite shot back. "LET'S JUST KICK THIS INTO high gear." His eyestalks shifted back up to Corto, and the snail ostentatiously cleared his throat. "YOU DIPSHITS CALL THAT AN INSULT!? THIS is an insult! ¡Tu padre era un chupacabra y tu madre era su merienda de medianoche!"

Lassoo promptly collapsed into a fit of giggles, crushing the last few conscious Amigos. "HWEEHWEEHWEEHWEEHWEE!"

"NOBODY SAYS THAT ABOUT MY MOTHER!" the large first mate bellowed, and before Largo could say anything to stop him, the luchador charged the tactician.

Cross immediately sobered up and blew out a sharp whistle. In response, Funkfreed and Lassoo abandoned their mauling and leapt at their partner, shifting into their weapon forms mid-flight so that Cross could catch them and brandish them against his opponent.

If Soundbite's intent in insulting Corto was to make the first mate forgo his Gatling guns in a blind rage, it worked perfectly. Instead, the man first tried to bash Cross' skull in with one of the guns, and when the Straw Hat fluidly leaned away from the blow, Corto tossed one of them aside, massive swinging cannon strikes mixed in with surprisingly fluid jabs.

This worked only somewhat better, because while Corto had power in spades, rage had badly deteriorated his form, and he was nowhere near as nimble as Cross to begin with. The Straw Hat made sure to stay in the gun's arcs rather than face the jabs, and after the first two gun swings sailed wide, Cross slipped under one of his opponent's thick arms and spun Lassoo's butt into Corto's side.

Insulating fat and a thick, padded shirt under the poncho mitigated the impact, but it was more Cross' one-handed grip on the dog-gun and a lack of proper momentum that kept Corto from outright having the wind knocked out of him. As it was, the blow 'merely' rattled his whole body. Teeth grinding, Corto wrapped his right arm around Lassoo and brought the gun in his left hand down on Cross' skull. Funkfreed promptly met it on the flat, the elephant-sword hastily flipped into a reverse grip.

Stalemate.

Well, for two seconds before Cross introduced his knee to Corto's gut. This time, the padding wasn't enough; there was too much force concentrated on a small point right above the man's diaphragm. Corto's breath whooshed out of him, and he slumped over, arms slackening. Miracle of miracles, he stayed standing. He was just getting his breath back when he felt a cannon muzzle ram into his back.

"Lemme introduce you to the latest tool in my mutt's arsenal. Cani-Blank!" he heard Cross intone. There was a click of a trigger—!

And nothing happened.

Nobody spoke. Nobody moved. The only sound was a gull flying overhead, cawing for food. Only when the gull was gone did anyone move, and Cross pulling his index finger against the trigger again only barely qualified as 'movement'.
Once again, there was a click, but nothing came out of the big gun's muzzle. Cross, his face utterly devoid of emotion, simply clicked again. And then again.

By now, Corto had his breath back, and he clenched his fists. 'I've got you now.' He tensed, and all of a sudden he spun around, shoving his now-spinning gun's barrel into his opponent's face—!

"Time out!"

And could only freeze in dumbfounded shock. Said opponent had his hands in a T-shape and an expression of total seriousness. Then, while Corto was still frozen, he turned and held out his dog-gun, and all of a sudden Usopp was at his side, with Merry hanging on his back.

In less than a second, the pair had a panel open in the cannon's side and were fussing over the mechanical innards, arguing and fiddling about in hushed tones and tossing out more than a few rude gestures, before finally the ship-girl just slammed the panel shut and gave the cannon a harsh rap. Somehow, that, of all things, served to satisfy the pair, and Usopp gave Cross a thumbs-up before zipping away again.

Cross nodded in satisfaction, then smiled at Corto in a manner most unkind. "Time-in!" he chirped, before jerking forward, jamming Lassoo's muzzle into Corto's gut and pulling the trigger.

FWOOM!

"GUH!" Corto let out a whoof of pain he was blasted off his feet, and could only groan in pain once his back slammed into the ground. He blinked blearily at the sky. "What the hell just hit me…?"

"Apparently, a cannon shell of air."

Corto choked on his tongue as the last face he wanted to see at the moment loomed over him. "A-Ah, is that—?"

"Why the hell did you give him time do whatever he wanted, idiota?" Largo questioned in a tone that was harsh and flat at the same time.

"A-Ahhh…" Corto's mind flatlined as he tried to come up with a response, and the only thing he could respond with was, "…Straw Hat bullshit?"

"…hurry up and kill this cabrón and maybe I'll let you get away with that pathetic excuse."

Hastily nodding, Corto noted that he'd landed next to his other Gatling gun. It was a mistake he would gleefully take advantage of.

"Alright, pendejo," he declared as he picked up himself and his other gun. "Now we—"

"CANI-BLAST!"

"Yow!" Corto yelped as he dove away from the pillar of flame that nearly cooked him. And not medium rare, either. Turning that tumble into a roll, he sprang up and pulled the triggers on his guns. After a brief few milliseconds to warm up, bullets flew out of ten barrels of death.

Ten barrels of death that did absolutely nothing against Funkfreed's Pachy-Shield. Nor the cannon muzzle that poked out of the snake-like folds.

But this time Corto was fighting smart, and he'd already been moving even as he'd opened fire. Flames and blast and the tremendous recoil of his weapons buffeted him, but he continued to stay
one step ahead of the explosive shells that lashed out. Unfortunately for the luchador, however, he couldn't keep firing forever on account of the sudden searing against his knuckles.

The luchador snapped his barrage off with a hissed "¡Mierda!" There was only one thing to do: stop firing and let his gun's glowing barrels cool before they set off the ammo or melted. And that had been exactly what Cross was waiting for.

All of a sudden, Funkfreed's serpentine coils vanished, and Cross had drawn back his arm, the elephant-sword's tip pointed right at him.

"Pachy-Charge!" the Straw Hat declared, and Corto almost wet himself at the sight of a dozen tons of bladed elephant shooting at him at breakneck speeds.

Still, no one could say the man lacked courage. The luchador held his ground as the massive blade shot towards, and then, at the last possible second, he slid out of the way.

'Now's my chance!'

This was, indeed, Corto's chance. His only chance. The Pachy-Charge pulled back as fast as it shot out, and while Corto didn't know how long that was, he was gambling that it'd be enough to get close before his opponent could reform the Pachy-Shield. So he ran. He ran like he'd never run before. Faster even than when his grandmother had made her famous tamales for the neighborhood kids and he had to run there before she ran out. And…

He made it. Cross had just pulled Funkfreed back into sword form when Corto skidded to a halt in front of the Straw Hat, guns aimed. The luchador had to frantically bat away an explosive baseball, but one of the guns was still aimed. It would have to be enough. Corto pulled the trigger, the guns spun up—!

And then, with a loud, ominous grinding sound, came to a halt, and stayed halted no matter how many times he pulled the trigger. Which was many times. Glaring at his own gun, Corto demanded, "Are you fucking with me?!

"Somebody is!"

Before Corto could react, hands grabbed the collar of his poncho, and then his head was pulled in for a meeting with Cross' skull. Oooor at least, a meeting with the iron plate in Cross's hat.

*THWACK!*

Everyone watching, even Largo, winced as the two fighters staggered back. Corto was clutching his nose, blood flowing freely between his fingers. Cross looked mildly dazed, but otherwise was in far better shape.

"I have several questions," Yoko stated flatly during this short lull. "Where's the fat bastard getting all that ammo?! And how did his gun just… jam like that?! People aren't that lucky!"

"I'm not really an expert on combat…" Fabre demurred.

"I dunno," Luffy shrugged.

"Estoy rodeado de idiotas," Largo growled, grinding his palm into his forehead before raising his voice. "Corto, if that bastard isn't dead in the next minute, Lo juro por Dios—!"

"Quítate de encima, hijo de un—!" Corto growled under his breath, shaking his head to clear away
the latent dizziness. Once that was done, he pinned Cross with a furious glare. "Alright you *pequeño bastardo*, let's—!

"Hey, I know how to end this!"

He was cut off by Cross suddenly laughing in amusement, and he and everyone present watched, puzzled, as Cross suddenly tossed his weapon-partners away and took off his jacket, waving it off to his side. That puzzlement lasted as long as it took for Cross to open his mouth.

"Toro, to—! Oh, no, wait, my apologies!" Cross slapped a hand to his face with *almost* honest regret before resuming the motion, his grin positively shit-eating. "Allow me to be more appropriate: *fatso, fatso!*"

Corto straight-up saw red. "THIS IS ALL MUSCLE, YOU BASTARD!" he howled, stomping his foot for emphasis.

Cross lowered his head, letting the shadow of his cap emphasize the smirk he was wearing. "Prove it, meathead."

And that was all he could take. Pawing at the ground and snorting like the bull he wasn't *supposed* to be, Corto charged straight at Cross, bellowing in inarticulate rage. Cross, for his part, neatly sidestepped the charging luchador, jacket flapping as Corto passed through it.

"*Olé!*" Cross proclaimed, the pronouncement ratcheting Corto's fury up another notch.

Seeing as the first charge hadn't worked, the natural response was to wheel around and charge again. Equally natural was Cross sidestepping Corto again.

"*Olé!*" And that was *another* roar.

And, of course, that simply meant Corto began gearing up for a *third* charge.

Largo was just about to tell his absolute *imbecile* of a brother to take this seriously when he noticed that Cross wasn't tensing up to dodge again. Fabre and Yoko missed this, but Luffy also spotted the change, and his grin widened even more as he leaned forward.

Corto, of course, was way too far gone to notice anything of the sort. All he noticed was that that damn *thing* wasn't moving. Good. Now he could trample it underfoot and finally *end* its bleating—

Was that a snail in front of his face?

*SPLAT!*

The luchador stumbled in shock when the ball of slime slammed into the middle of his face, and before he could truly set about wiping it off?

"*OLÉ, BIOTCH!*"

And Corto's whole world became *pain.*

"The wheels on the bus go 'round and 'round…" he gurgled through a mouthful of bloody foam, all his brain was capable of as it tried to cope with a fair amount of his skeleton fracturing at once.

The issue was only compounded when, after retrieving Soundbite from his face, Cross planted his boot on Corto's chest with a cry of victory, shaking his clasped hands in the air in a self-congratulatory manner. "And the crowd! Goes! *Wild!* Raaah, raaah!"
"And that's another stunning victory for Jeremiah Cross and Soundbite of the Straw Hat Pirates!" Soundbite proclaimed in a grandiose tone. "Tell me son, anything you wanna say to your ADORING MASSES?"

"Well for starters I'd like to thank the Academy, as well as offer them my most sincere apologies. I did not mean to ram that antique car into the side of the building, I was aiming for the Dairy Queen next door! Furthermore—!"

Thnk.

"Ghgrk…" Cross trailed off into a gurgle, his eye twitching frantically. "S-Son… of a…"

"CROSS!" Soundbite yelped.

Luffy perked his head up in concern. "Cross, are you alright?"

"Uh… aeh… that's, uh… that's up for debate…" Cross grimaced weakly as he stumbled back from Corto, actively working to keep his feet under himself. "How, uh… how bad does this look to you guys?"

And with that he turned around. Perfect way to show off the dagger lodged in his back.

"Ooooh, yeah, that'll hurt," Luffy winced sympathetically.

"Son of a—!" Fabre gasped.

And Yoko… Yoko shocked herself when she jerked forwards and screamed out a panicked "CROSS!"

"What, not 'pirate bastard'!?" Cross chuckled. "Hear that, Soundbite? We're making progress!"

"You realize that you're a special kind of TWISTED, right!?" Soundbite frantically demanded.

"Hmph."

Soundbite winced at the sound of a derisive snort before turning his eyestalks to glare bloody murder over his friend's shoulder. "AND THEN THERE'S YOU, WHO REDEFINES THE FUCKING WORD!"

" Cállate, bichos," Largo stated indifferently, another dagger twirling in his fingers. "In the end, your owner's loud mouth was truly the only formidable weapon he had. One knife thrown into his back and it's already over; I think I'll enjoy living like a king once I turn his head in for a bounty. But for now…" He leered viciously at the onlooking civilians. "I'll settle for taking that damn beetle."

And with that, the Amigo's captain stepped forward, intent on claiming his prize.

"Pfff… are you… kidding me…"

And froze when Cross suddenly started to chuckle. The tall man shot a glare at the world-infamous loudmouth. "You're still not done?!"

Cross ignored him in favor of continuing to laugh, chuckle escalating to full-on cackle. More, his footing had stabilized. "Pfff… Pffhahahaha! Are you… kidding me?" The Straw Hat smiled malevolently at the enemy captain. "You absolute idiot. Buddy, I ate several million volts of lightning because I wouldn't stop verbally defending my personal beliefs!"
Cross then spread his arms wide. "So when I'm standing here… defending a village of innocent civilians, kind and generous people who welcomed us with open arms, from raging bastards like you and your brother, what the hell…" There was a furious scowl on Cross' face as he reached over his shoulder and grasped the handle of the dagger in his back. "MAKES YOU THINK THAT A LITTLE PIECE OF METAL IS GONNA MAKE ME EVEN FLINCH!?" And with the final word, Cross tore the dagger from his back with a somewhat impressive spray of blood and tossed it away. He then pinned Largo with a furious glare. "What else you got?"

"Cabron!" Largo cussed, scowling at Cross in open outrage.

"YOU'RE NO RAY OF SUNSHINE EITHER, JACKASS!" Soundbite snarled.

"And a liiiitle bit overenthusiastic to boot," Lassoo scoffed, rubbing one of his toes under his nose.

"Yeah, one tiny dagger?" Funkfreed chimed in. "If it were something me-sized, I'd be worried… but it wasn't, so I'm not."

"Shishishi! Kick his ass, Cross!" Luffy cheered from the sidelines.

"Forget kicking his ass!" Fabre roared, jabbing his pipe at the pirate. "Shove your boot so far up there that he's choking on the leather!"

Yoko only hesitated a bare second before Girl!Yoko slammed Marine and Justice's skulls together and joined in. "Get these pirates offa our island!" she shouted, shooting her fists in the air.

Sighing at the enthusiastic cheers, Largo stepped over to the prone form of his brother and leaned over him, his back obscuring whatever it was he was doing. To the shock of the onlookers, Corto shot up with a nasal yelp, a hand clamped over his neck.

"What the hell—?" Cross breathed in shock while Corto began cursing up a storm.

"Mierda, eso duele como un—GAH!"

Said cursing quickly devolved into a strangled yelp when he noticed his brother glaring down at him.

"That," Largo scowled. "Was patético. And I'm already going to kick your ass once we're done here. Help me kill these shits and maybe you'll be able to walk again in a week, rather than a month."

"Sí, señor…" Corto wheezed, shakily pushing himself to his feet. And in a further surprise to the onlookers, in little to no time at all he managed to steady his footing. Still, the luchador looked to be in bad shape.

Cross, meanwhile, hastily shook off his surprise in favor of re-brandishing his partners and shifting back into a combat stance, heedless of the blood dripping down his back. For a second, no one moved. And then Corto silently charged Cross, Gatling guns brandished but not firing.

"Really?" Cross sighed. "I'd cite the definition of insanity, but…" Ducking under a wild swing, Cross planted Funkfreed and used the sword as a platform to swing around and plant his foot in Corto's gut. Apparently, though, the luchador was expecting that, because he didn't get the wind knocked out of him, and instead aimed one of his guns at Cross.

"Shit!" Cross bit out. He tried to counter whatever was coming, he really did, but his earlier kicked left him half-sprawled on the ground with one hand occupied using Funkfreed to hold himself up. The best he could do was put Lassoo in between himself and some of the gun barrels.
But what came out of one of the barrels was not a bullet.

**KA-BOOM!**

Instead, it was some sort of explosive, flame and smoke engulfing the combatants.

"Cross!" Yoko and Fabre shouted. Luffy said nothing, but his fingers dug into the skin of his arms.

Then Corto staggered out, scorched and covered in soot, and Cross tumbled out the other way, coughing and burnt himself, but more stunned than injured. The audience breathed sighs of relief. Relief that was short-lived as Largo suddenly began ostentatiously clearing his throat. To the disgust of the onlookers, Largo then spat out a glob of saliva and mucus… that suddenly bloomed into a wide net that lofted up to envelop Cross.

"Devil Fruit!" Fabre hissed.

Cross, thankfully, saw it coming, giving him a chance to—stand up and punch the net? The confusion only intensified when the net suddenly… unraveled, for lack of a better word, into a glob of snot that landed on his coat and covered his gauntlet.

"That," Cross blandly stated as he waved the mucus off. "Is disgusting,"

"¡¿Qué diablos?!" Largo spat, his face set in a murderous scowl. "How the hell did you do that!?!"

The tactician adopted a smirk as he held his fist up and flipped his middle finger at Largo, flashing his armor's off-color knuckles in the process. "We've run into Devil Fruit users on pretty much literally every island we've hit since we entered the Grand Line! Did you really think we wouldn't wise up and grab some sea prism stone!?"

"Very well," Largo growled. "Then we'll just have to make sure you can't use it! Corto!"

"On it, hermano!" Corto replied, firing another explosive shell at Cross. This was met by one of Lassoo's own explosives, resulting in another, larger blast.

The two settled into a brief exchange of artillery, one that Corto came off the worse for. Lassoo simply had a greater rate of fire with his baseballs than Corto's banged-up Gatlings, and the luchador was soon driven back lest he get blown up again.

Worse, the exchange didn't distract Cross as much as he'd hoped; while Lassoo managed his own aiming, for the most part, Cross kept Largo in his peripheral vision, and so when the captain upended a can of oil in his mouth and tossed a match in, the Straw Hat was ready. A net made of fire flashed out… and splashed harmlessly against Funkfreed's ballistic steel hide.

"Y'all realize you're just using a knock-off of the Munch-Munch Fruit, RIGHT?!" Soundbite chortled tauntingly.

"And you realize that you can't keep this up forever, así?" Largo shot back. "Sooner or later—!"

"I'll have to go on the offensive or lose stamina and slip up and die, yes, yes," Cross dismissively replied. "You want offense?" He grinned malevolently as he held both his cannon and blade at the ready, Lassoo baring his fangs and Funkfreed rearing up to his full height. "Here's some offense: Pachy-Cani Combo: Superhot Hell Riot!"

Fire and water blasted out of Lassoo's maw and Funkfreed's trunk respectively, meeting at a somewhat equidistant point between the three combatants. Upon contact, the water reacted as it
usually did when sprayed on fire that hot: it immediately vaporized in a massive, spreading cloud of steam.

A cloud of steam that Cross ran headlong into.

"Come and get me!" his disembodied voice jeered. Said jeer was followed up by a barrage of explosives and a ballistic elephant-blade that withdrew as swiftly as it shot out. "Or I'll just take you down from here!"

Grinding his teeth, Largo shouted into the mist, "Find him, hermano! I don't care how, but find him!"

"Already on it!"

'Already on it', in this case, meant that Corto had run into the haze with absolute recklessness and was blindly swinging his Gatlings through the mist. Not a smart way to search, but in fairness to the man whatever Largo had done to him couldn't completely erase the concussion he'd sustained, and did absolutely nothing for the 200% strength rage coursing through his veins.

After a few exhausting minutes, Corto slumped over, panting, and felt someone tall and skinny press against his back.

"Ah, hermano, good," he panted. "Just you wait, I'll find him, and when I do—!"

"Well, in that case, congrats! You found me!"

Nearly shrieking in surprise, Corto jumped up and spun around, Gatling swinging around with him. It struck, right in Cross' palm, and when he tried to move the weapon he found he couldn't. "You little—!"

"Hold that thought," Cross's voice leered before he cleared his throat and started speaking again… in Corto's voice. "Hermano, I found him! Get him!"

Corto paled in realization, but before he could react a grid of dark lines became visible through the mist—

SNKT! "AAAAAARGH!"

And the luchador howled in agony as a net of piano-wire sliced into his body.

"What the—!" Largo's voice called out in confusion.

"IDIOTA!" Corto roared, his pain fuelling his indignant rage to unparalleled heights. "YOU HAVE THE GALL TO CALL ME AN IMBÉCIL!? WHO'S THE RETARDAR THAT USED HIS EARS AGAINST THE FUCKING 'GOD OF NOISE', EH!?"

"But wait, there's more!"

Corto spun towards the source of the voice, intent on inflicting pain, and then he paled as he realized that all that was visible through the fog was Cross's arm and two glowing dots where his eyes would be.

"Ay caramba…" the luchador whimpered, right before Cross brought Lassoo down on his head with as much force and momentum as he could muster.

CRUNCH!
And that was all the luchador could take, collapsing back into the sweet embrace of oblivion.

"And then there was one," Cross's voice wafted out of the murk, practically looming over Largo.

Largo immediately spat out another net, this one green and studded with both sharp thorns and red flowers. Unfortunately, another combined gout of water and fire lashed out, incinerating the net and enveloping more real estate in obscuring steam. By now, Largo's confidence and anger alike had vanished, his head on a swivel as he tried to catch a glimpse of something, anything.

"Do you even realize how screwed you are?"

Largo lashed his arm out at the voice that sneered behind him, but all that accomplished was to disturb some of the steam.

"I see right through you, Captain Largo of the Amigo Pirates. Corto's not used to having to fight someone who can fight back, but you?" That voice chuckled disdainfully. "Oh, you're not used to fighting at all."

The tall captain muttered out curse after curse as he tore his gun out of its holster and fired one, two, three blind shots into the mist—

CLANG!

—before crying out in pain and shock when the gun was suddenly smacked out of his hand.

"You're not a bully, you're an armchair commander. A commissar. You sit back and relax while everyone does your bidding for you, and if ever things get out of hand, then you just stand up, flash your powers and smack down whoever's in your way, and all goes right back to normal. Well guess what, hombre?"

Desperation ruling his mind, no matter how much he tried to deny it, Largo lashed out a reckless punch. He then hissed in pain and panic when his fist was suddenly crushed in a grip of metal and he felt a significant portion of his stamina just vanish.

Cross loomed out of the swiftly fading mist, glaring viciously at the bandito. "Today," he announced. "The only one getting smacked is you. And you're not gonna get back up from it either."

Largo tried to wrench his fist free, but it was an exercise in futility. Still, he found the courage somewhere to sneer in Cross's face. "You think a rinky-dink punch from you will do anything to me? I train with Corto! I might be thin, but I've got a body of steel!"

"Good for you," Cross snarked, before grinning as he reeled his right arm back, his fingers splayed and palm on display. "But how do you think you'll handle the force of a punch from Corto..." Cross's grin became downright sadistic. "Combined with every single time I've punched my fist into my palm, full-strength, over the last few hours?"

The blood shot straight out of Largo's face.

"I gave you one chance to walk away. You should have taken it." And with that final line, Cross slammed his palm into Largo's gut. "IMPACT!"

BWONG!

In a final blast of pure force, Largo was blown clean off his feet, flying almost halfway across the field before he was lodged through a tree down to his waist.
Cross scoffed as he adjusted the brim of his cap. "Tsk tsk… say, if you ever come after us again, do me a favor." He flipped the brim up with his thumb, unveiling a cocky smirk.

"Try and give me an actual challenge."

That final line was punctuated by the tree giving out the ghost and collapsing completely, giving Largo a final thump on the head on the way down.

And with that, Cross allowed himself to relax, his body un-tensing and one hand flashing to the bleeding wound in his back. It didn't seem to be life-threatening or anything, it just hurt without the adrenaline rush; and all his movement hadn't done his torn muscles any favors either.

"YOU OKAY?"

He flashed his partner a somewhat weak smile. "Not batting at a hundred, but I don't think I'm going to keel over anytime soon."

A moment's silence, and…

"MEH," Soundbite shrugged inasmuch as he could. "I'll take it."

"Hey, what about me?" Lassoo whined. "I took that bomb point-blank! I've suffered way more than you!"

"Yeah, if you call scorch marks and burned fur suffering…" Funkfreed muttered under his breath.

Straightening somewhat, Cross chuckled and began to walk back over to his audience, the slight hitch in his walk almost unnoticeable.

Luffy met him with a proud grin, punctuated by a finger scratching under his nose. "Heheh, you got badass, Cross!"

That drew a derisive snort from Cross. "Luffy, on the last island, you managed to pancake a shadow-dragon into the dirt. Compared to you? I am not hot shit! I am just a perfectly decent Paradise Pirate!" He then grinned proudly, his thumb jabbed towards himself. "And honestly, that's badass enough for me!"

"Shishishi! Well, so long as you're happy!" Luffy laughed. He then sobered up and tilted his head thoughtfully. "Though… I did see one or two places you slipped up. Mind if I give you some tips?"

"Luffy giving tips…" Cross chuckled, shaking his head. "What is the world coming to? But hell, you're the one who's got the highest kicks-to-ass ratio of the whole crew! Hit me with your best—!"

"LOOK OUT!" Yoko suddenly shrieked, genuine panic and concern written across her face.

"MEXICAN INQUISITION!" Soundbite swiftly added.

Cross spat out a curse and spun around. "Damn it, shoulda seen this coming!"

In all fairness, Cross probably couldn't have foreseen both of the Amigo brothers charging him with weapons drawn and their eyes rolled into their heads in signs of pure berserker rage, with how banged up they were. Cross braced himself for the oncoming clash, wincing as the motion pulled against his stab wound—!

WHAM!
And then he could only stare in dumbfounded shock when Corto was suddenly blasted into Largo on account of a white-and-gold pommel slamming into the stouter man's cheek with all the force of a cannonball.

For a moment longer, Cross stared dumbly at the now completely—and more importantly, effortlessly—pummeled bodies who'd once been his opponents. He then turned an indignant eye on the source of said pommel strike.

"I had that handled!" he protested in an almost whiny tone.

Zoro blinked at the lower-ranked mate in surprise. "What, were these guys important or something? Sorry, I was just looking for some training dummies I could practice my pommel strikes on, and they looked like they were convenient. Still..." He jabbed his thumb over his shoulder. "You gonna have a problem with it if I take them on too? Repetition and all that, you know."

"Take..." Cross followed the direction Zoro was indicating, and paled when he saw the Amigo Pirates' mooks all staggering to their feet. "What... What the hell?! The captain and first mate I can buy, barely, but I know that I put them down! How the hell are they still—?!"

"Dunno, don't care," Zoro grunted indifferently. "Come on, can I take them or—?" He suddenly cut himself off and scowled skywards. "Ah, damn it. Too late."

"Say wha—ah hell..." Cross groaned, looking up himself. Those dark clouds had most definitely not been there two minutes prior.

"Hey, boys!"

The sound of fingers snapping accompanied the cheerful greeting.

KER-ZAP!

And then came a shower of lightning that struck down every last one of the Amigos.

"How're things?" Nami continued pleasantly as she walked up to her friends, as though she hadn't deep fried several dozen enemy combatants at once.

"You... sonnuva... killstealer!" Cross blurted in offense. "I had dibs on those S.O.B.s!"

"And I needed the practice!" Zoro scowled.

Nami glanced between the two before waving them off with a sheepish smile. "Ohhh man, sorry, sorry! I didn't mean to jam you up, really! I just thought I was taking out some trash is all, honest mistake... But..." She stuck her tongue out, her Eisen Tempo swirling into an aura most angelic. "You'll forgive me because I'm so cute, right?"

Cross and Zoro exchanged flat looks, before bringing their fists down on top of her skull. "Not on your life," they deadpanned.

"OW!" the navigator yowled, clutching at the growing lump on her skull and sticking her tongue out further as she glowered at the other two officers. "YOU MADE ME BITE MY TONGUE, ASSHOLES!"

"Bitch!"

"Grinch!"
"Morons!"

"Can't we all agree YOU'RE ALL JUST TERRIBLE PEOPLE?"

"SLIMEBALL!"

"And they completely ignore the bleeding wound," Fabre sighed indulgently. "That's the Straw Hats for you. I'd better go find that doctor of theirs…"

A few feet away from the bickering, Yoko could only stare on in shock. She stared at the leaders of the Amigo Pirates, who'd essentially been swatted like pests; she stared at the small army of pirates that had been deep-fried in moments; she boggled at the trio—quartet if you counted the snail—of pirates who were lobbing insults at one another all while sporting massively teasing smiles.

And finally, the girl could only fall back on her ass as her grasp on reality flatlined.

"Wh-What are you people?" the Marine girl stammered weakly.

"Shishishi! It's obvious, isn't it?"

The thump of someone sitting next to her drew Yoko's gaze, and she beheld Monkey D. Luffy shooting a wide smile at her. "We're the Straw Hat Pirates!"

"B-but… but!" Yoko sputtered incredulously, waving her hands frantically. "T-That's not… not right! Pirates, they… they aren't like that! They're not like you! They-they don't protect people, they aren't cool or awesome or… or nice! Pirates are… they're…"

Luffy's smile slowly fell into a frown, and he glanced at the tenderized brothers. "You think pirates are meant to be like them, right?"

Yoko bit her lip, but she slowly nodded in agreement.

"Well… yeah, I know what you mean," Luffy said, his arms crossed and head nodding. "I don't like it, and I always say those guys are fakers, but… I'm dumb, but not that dumb. I know that most pirates are like that. I know that to the rest of the world, we're not really traditional pirates, y'know? It's stupid, but it's the truth."

Luffy took off his hat and looked at it, smiling wistfully. "But… I made a promise, see? I promised, on this hat, that I'd become the King of the Pirates. The one who gave it to me is the greatest man I've ever known, he saved my life when I was a kid… and he was the strongest pirate I've ever met."

Yoko gaped in stunned disbelief as Luffy looked back at her with a grin on his face. "I'm never gonna break this promise. I am going to become the King of the Pirates… but I'm not going to change to do it. I'm not going to let the world change me so that I can achieve my dream. I won't let the world change my dream. So, if the world says that my dream is wrong, impossible?" He pumped his fists with a confident nod. "Then I guess I'll have to change the world to fit my dream!"

Though Yoko's jaw still hung open, it was now a case of awe rather than disbelief that was the cause. "Wh-What are you talking about?"

"The way I see it?" Luffy said as he shoved his hat down. "While I become Pirate King, I'm gonna do one traditionally pirate-y thing." He shot Yoko a massive grin that was full of pure steel. "I'm going to steal the word 'pirate'." Upon seeing Yoko's look of confusion, he elaborated. "Well… not the word… the… the idea? Concept! I'm gonna take the concept of pirates for myself, and change it! People like me, people who just want to see what the sea have to offer, we'll be the real pirates. And
all those assholes just in it for the treasure and other stupid stuff like that, they'll be the fakes, playing around at things they don't understand. How does that sound?"

"...you're weird," was the only thing Yoko could finally muster.

"Duh!" Luffy laughed uproariously. "I mean, c'mon! What's the fun in being normal? You know what I'm talking about, right? I mean, you're friends with a really cool giant beetle!"

Yoko's expression wavered slightly at the reminder of the last time she'd seen Boss, but ultimately she decided to just look away and try to get her thoughts in order.

Seeing her confusion, Luffy frowned thoughtfully before nodding his head at Cross, who was now snorting and butting heads with Zoro, while Nami off to the side consumed by giggles. "If you're still having a hard time getting it... I dunno, maybe talk to Cross? He's really smart, and he's always talking about morals and stuff on the SBS. He'd know more about it than me."

Yoko looked towards them just as Zoro scoffed at Cross. "Didn't you say you were happy with how badass you were?"

"I did and I am! But that!?" Cross stabbed his finger at the carnage arrayed behind them. "Shit like that makes me feel inferior! And also, this is when you guys show up!?" Growling wordlessly, he swung his arms out. "I was going up alone against several dozen bastards here!"

"Eh, it wasn't that big a deal, you had it handled," Zoro waved him off.

Cross's eye twitched as he spun around and gestured at the bleeding wound in his back. "I got shanked!"

"Like I said, no big deal," the swordsman rolled his eyes.

"Didn't you even boast that it wasn't that big a deal?" Nami asked with a thoughtful frown.

"It is the principle of the matter!"

"...Since when do you have principles?"

"Now see here—!

"AHEM!"

"GRK!" Cross froze mid finger-jab, his face paling dramatically as he slowly turned to see that Fabre had just returned with a glaring Chopper in tow. "Aheh... hiya Chopper... how's tricks?"

The human-reindeer cocked his eyebrow in an unimpressed manner. "What's this I hear about you getting, oh, what's the word you used... shanked?"

"Ah..." Cross waved his hands defensively as cold sweat coated his brow. "I-It was nothing, really! So very shallow, barely even a scratch, I swear—!"

Chopper jabbed his hoof downward, his glare unwavering. "On your knees, shirt and jacket off. Now."

"Yessir," Cross yelped, swiftly following the orders.

Chopper gave the stab wound a single look before redoubling his glare at his patient. "Cross, you're savvy, you know stereotypes and tropes and such, right?"
"…right?"

"So you know how absolutely boneheaded it is to remove a penetrating object from a stab wound, right?"

Cross swallowed heavily, positively refusing to meet Chopper's accusing gaze. "Twisting the knife would cause more damage and I was moving around too much to be sure it wouldn't?"

"Nice story," Chopper crossed his hooves firmly. "What's the truth?"

The streams of cold sweat intensified further. "...Half intimidation factor, half adrenaline is both a steroid and an anesthetic."

Chopper snorted as he laid down his bag and started getting out his tools. "Well, if that's the case, then I'm sure you'll be able to go without my anesthetics for a bit."

"Wait, say wha—GAH YOU FURRY LITTLE BASTARD!" Cross howled as Chopper started to sew him up without warning or painkillers.

"Oh, suck it up, you took a dagger to the back, this is a sliver of metal, plus I need to ration out how much anesthesia I use with how fast you guys are burning through my supplies," Chopper said, rolling his eyes as he continued to work. "Meanwhile, let's focus on more important matters! You know, like how it's absolutely incredible that that thing didn't hit anything more important? Like your aorta. Or spine. Or a kidney. Or your lungs. Or liver. Or—!

"Alright, I get it, there's a lot of important shit in my torso and I should stop blocking things with it, get off my—BACK!" Cross yelped at a particularly harsh tug.

"Unless you're going to get more armor, you probably should," Nami admitted.

"Psh, wishful thinking," Cross grumbled. "I might have just realized I'm stronger than I thought I was, but no way in hell am I strong enough to lug around a full suit of the stuff."

"Awww, that's too bad," Nami teased. "After all, isn't wearing a suit of armor a—?"

"MAN'S ROMANCE!"

"GO, BOSS, GO!"

"GAH!" Nami reeled in shock when Boss and his merry band of nitwits suddenly put on their usual show. "Where the hell did you all come from!?"

"I was summoned!" Boss shot a thumbs-up at her (somehow), a sparkling smile decorating his mug. For a moment, an illusion of a bowl cut and black, bushy, caterpillar-like eyebrows superimposed themselves over Boss' face.

And then, thankfully, it was gone.

There was a haunted expression on Cross's face as he clamped a hand over his eyes. "This ocean is going to kill me before we hit the damn Red Line again…"

"Like how this crew's shenanigans and blatant disregard for their own health is rapidly killing my childish sense of wonder and amazement?" Chopper asked flatly as he finished tying a knot in Cross's stitching. "Because I am far too intimate with you people's innards for comfort. Done, by the way. And I swear, if I check this again later and find it split—!"
"Hey, don't insult me! I am not Zoro!" Cross glared over his shoulder in offense.

"Bite me," said green-hair snorted.

Cross responded by holding out a leering Soundbite. "Don't tempt me. I will use this."

Soundbite opened his mouth—

"Arghghggrgh…"

And then shut it just as swift with a blink of confusion. "UHHH… that wasn't me?"

"No, it was him," Zoro said, jabbing a thumb towards Corto. Following his gaze, Chopper's eyes widened; the luchador was shuddering on the ground, gurgling on the blood and foam that was shoving its way out of his throat.

"What did you do to him!?" the reindeer demanded, rushing over to the large pirate's side and starting to look him over.

"I did jack shit!" Cross growled. "Damn it, I knew them getting up was suspicious. I think they all dosed themselves with something to keep fighting, but Corto's ODing because his brother of the year gave him an extra dose earlier so that he could walk off a Gastro-Blast!"

"Damn damn damn damn..." the doctor cursed, intently looking the pirate over. "Fever, low blood pressure... Cross, did you see where he was injected?"

"Uh... he grabbed his neck when he first got up."

Chopper gently tilted Corto's head back and forth, and his eyes widened in shock when he beheld a visibly growing discoloration on his neck. "What on... this rash looks like toxic shock syndrome, only it's on steroids! What the hell did he take?!"

"Going by how they all managed to get up after Cross kicked their asses? Something stupidly effective that doesn't like to be double-dosed?" Nami hesitantly offered.

Chopper's eyes darted about in frantic thought. "Shit shit shit shit, and I can't give him an antibiotic if I don't know what that was..." Suddenly, he clicked his hooves. "Ah! I can still see the infection spreading, meaning it hasn't had time to circulate yet! Still dangerous though..." Chopper eyed Corto for a moment before shrugging. "Meh, he can survive losing a pint or two."

"A pint or two of wha—HURK!" Yoko's question promptly died in her throat as Chopper suddenly withdrew an empty and very large syringe from his pack and jammed it in Corto's neck. Slowly, he pulled the plunger out, along with a considerable amount of the luchador's blood.

"Alright..." Chopper nodded with a relieved smile as he observed that not only had the luchador's seizure abated, but his rash had stopped spreading. "That seems to have done it, now let's see just.... What... the hell..." Chopper's jaw slowly dropped in shock and horror as he held the syringe up to eye-level and watched as the blood held within visibly shifted its coloration.

"Ah, holy hell..." Cross brought his fist to his mouth with a sickly moan. "That just can not be right."

Chopper stared for a moment longer before scowling in utter fury. He then marched up to one of the less fried Amigo mooks, grabbed their collar and wrenched them up to stare into his infuriated eyes. "Who gave you this drug!?" he snarled. "You bastards aren't smart enough to have made it on your own! Who gave it to you?! Who gave you this—this poison!?"
The Amigo pirate gurgled in terror, visibly struggling to stay conscious. "I-It… b-but that's not… i-it was… h-he told us—!"

"A NAME!"

Shivering like mad, the pirate stammered out a single word. "I-I-In… di… go…" And with that, the pirate's eyes rolled up into his head and he collapsed entirely.

"Useless!" Chopper swore. Dropping the pirate, the doctor went still for a solid minute. When he turned back to Cross, the cyan anger was still there, just… buried. "Please tell me you know this 'Indigo'."

"If this is the shit he's peddling?" Cross scowled down at Corto's ravaged body. "I wish I did, if only so I could let you dissect his most assuredly twisted ass." He shook his head. "The only guy I know of who could come up with something like this has a totally different name, didn't use aliases from what I saw, is on the wrong side of the Red Line, and is more into weapons than boosters anyway. Sorry."

"Tsk…" The human-Zoan ground his hoof into his temple before heaving a deep sigh and glancing at the onlooking mayor. "I need help hauling these morons back to their vessel, where I can make sure none of them are going to get melted from the inside out before we send them on their way. Could you spare a few of your townsfolk or…?"

"Oh, no, that's perfectly fine!" Fabre nodded hastily. "I think we have a few carts we can use, too! We'll fetch them right away for you."

"I'll come with you," Chopper nodded morosely, following the mayor back into the town.

The rest of the Straw Hats could only watch as their doctor walked off in silence, his shoulders slumped and speaking of considerable stress. Once he was out of sight, though, the captain of their ship's guard heaved a massive sigh and clapped his flippers together. "Well!" he announced in a lamenting tone. "Not that this hasn't been fun, but I've worn my flippers raw splitting trees all day, and I wanna put that practice to practical use. Either someone gives me a good fight, or—!"

"CAREFUL WHAT YOU wish for, blubber-brain," Soundbite snickered.

The dugong glanced at the mollusk in confusion—

"GWOOOOOGH!"

And then grinned in absolute elation as an insectoid war cry warbled out, and a massive shadow shot over the meadow. Before the onlookers' eyes, Boss Kabuto, even larger than he'd been when the Straw Hats had first laid eyes on him, landed on a nearby hill, roaring and snorting as he pawed at the ground and swung his beady eyes around in search of a good brawl.

"HE CAME THIS WAY BECAUSE he smelled a load of strangers AND HE WANTS TO TEST OUT HIS NEW UPGRADES…"

Boss Kabuto's gaze latched onto the downed Amigo Pirates, and as soon as he processed that there was no fun to be had, he slumped with a disappointed warble.

"AND that SHOULD REQUIRE NO TRANSLATION."

"Boss!" Yoko cried, running forward and embracing her friend's horn. "You're looking great! But you shed so early, are you alright?"
The beetle grunted reassuringly, though his demeanor was tense. It didn't take Yoko long to realize, and she looked down. "I'm sorry about earlier, Boss. I was... I was being stupid."

Boss slowly blinked, and then began rubbing her gently with a couple of feelers. Before long, Yoko was laughing uncontrollably. "HAHAHAHA! S-S-Stop it, Boss, that t-tickles! A-And!" She shoved the feeler away with a tearful smile. "I-I still have to say something important..."

The feelers pulled back, and Boss followed, his expression one of confusion. "I... I'm sorry for being prejudiced," she apologized sincerely, soothingly rubbing his carapace. "The Straw Hats... they were right, I was wrong. About... a lot of things. The most important thing being that not all pirates are bad." She glanced over her shoulder and gave the Straw Hats a sad smile. "Especially not these ones."

"Don't worry about it," Nami cut in, waving off her concerns with a kind smile. "Many of our crew members used to feel the same way, myself included."

Yoko nodded in acknowledgement. "Yeah, I was wrong about you guys..." Then, sloooowly, she allowed a wide grin to spread over her face. "But there was one thing I wasn't wrong about!"

And with that, she spun back around and used Boss-K's horn to make him look her in her eager eyes. "My best badass bug-friend in the whole wide world can still kick the asses of your rubber brained idiot and your smelly blubberbutt, at the same time and with every single last handicap you can think of, all without breaking a sweat! Isn't that right, Boss?!"

Boss Kabuto only hesitated long enough to give his best friend a look of shock before rearing up on his hind-legs and roaring his defiance to the high heavens.

"THAT'S A FIGHTING ROAR RIGHT THERE!" Boss Dugong cackled euphorically, unwinding his rope-dart and spinning it into a blur.

"GO, BOSS, GO!" The TDWS cheered as one from a safe distance.

"FINALLY!" Luffy whooped, shooting to his feet and windmilling his arm just as fast as his aquatic Boss. "I'M STUFFED, I'M PISSED AND I'M READY TO BRAWL! LET'S DO IT!"

"Back the hell up!" Zoro called out, leading the charge away from the prepping fighters. "These three aren't going to stop until this whole field's a crater!"

"And it's going to be glorious!" Nami cheered, beri signs flashing in her eyes even as she used her Eisen Cloud to cart away the fallen Amigo Pirates in a... less than gentle manner. "All three fighters are local celebrities, and this is the prize fight of the decade! I'M GOING TO CLEAN UP WHAT PROFIT THIS TOWN HAS TO OFFER! FIVE PERCENT OF THE HAUL TO WHOEVER HELPS ME WITH THE BETTING!"

"AYE, MA'AM!" the TDWS barked, hot on Nami's heels as she charged into town.

Yoko was no exception to the general evacuation, and she only paused as she ran to glance up at Cross. "You think... that we're... far enough yet?"

The tactician opened his mouth, before almost choking on his tongue as an earth-shattering impact, an ear-shattering roar, and a skin-blasting blast of blazing air washed over them. "Signs point to nope!" He glanced over his shoulder with a cocked eyebrow. "And just for the record, your badass beetle breathes fire? I am officially jealous."

"Hey, what's going on?! Are you idiots stressing your—?! IS THAT THE GIANT BEETLE YOU
"Oh, that's nice!" Cross sighed with an honestly relieved smile as a euphoric squeal sounded out. "Chopper's been so serious lately, it's a relief to know he's still got some kid in him, you know?"

"Heh, if you say so! And you didn't see Boss's fire before? Yeah, he's awe—wait, what?" Yoko glanced at the fight, and then did a double take as she saw what her friend was doing, a massive grin splitting her face. "Whoa, that's new! It was just fireballs before, not an actual flamethrower! Boss is even more awesome now!" Said grin slipped as she started to lag behind. "Or... not if I wind up getting roasted by it..."

"Can't have that, can we? Alley-oop!"

"Say wha—WAGH!" Yoko yelped as she suddenly found herself getting scooped onto the pirate's back. "Watch it, you stinking pirate bast—ah..."

Cross, meanwhile, just barked out a laugh. "Make me, you stuck-up Marine brat!"

Yoko blinked in surprise before snickering right back. "Swashbuckling ne'er-do-well! Ah, but, before you reply," she hastily cut him off with a sheepish grin. "While an insult back-and-forth would be fun, your captain said something about you, uh, being smart and knowing a lot about how the world works and stuff?"

Cross immediately perked up, adopting a truly devilish grin. "Ooooh, a chance to corrupt the mind of the youthful, ignorant and innocent?"

"TIS AS GOOD AS OUR BIRTHDAY! WOOHOOHOO!" Soundbite chortled in agreement.

Yoko swallowed heavily as her face drained of blood. "I suddenly regret absolutely everything ever."

"Too late!" Lassoo and Funkfreed laughed from where they were bringing up the rear.

Cross started to nod, before suddenly casting a glare over his shoulder at Funkfreed. "And we're not riding you why exactly?!

"...yooooou never asked?"

"If you make me, so help me, ivory farm—!"

"Up and at 'em!"

"WHOAI!" Yoko could only gape in shock as she suddenly found the pirate she'd been foisted on himself foisted onto the back of his elephant sword. She blinked slowly before gracing Cross with a goofy grin. "...I take it back: you guys aren't weird. You're fun!"

"All that and more, little lady!" Cross swept his hat off in a mock-bow before giving her a toothy smirk. "Now... where would you like me to start?"

And so, with a brawl for the ages as the backdrop, another soldier in the war against immorality and injustice was slowly and surely forged.

A world away, a large and imperious man puffed on a cigar, his eyes scanning over the dominion he
had claimed for himself. The dominion that would be the vehicle of his conquest… and his vengeance.

At the sound of farting rubber behind him, said man cocked an eyebrow but didn't look away from his view. "Something you need to tell me, Doctor?" the Imperious Man rumbled.

"Piro piro piro," a high-pitched voice chuckled behind him. "Oh, nothing too critical, I assure you. I just thought I'd inform you that I've just gotten a report: the Amigo Pirates have been soundly defeated."

"...the who?"

"Piro piro, I'm not surprised you don't remember them." The Laughing Man grinned as he crossed his arms behind his head, his shoes flatulating quite loudly as he shifted his weight from side to side. "They were the crew that applied to be our 51st Division. You set them the condition of retrieving an old prototype of the Kaen Kabuto line that managed to escape a few years back. Long obsolete by now, but it would have been nice to dissect it, see how time affected its evolution. But, ah well."

The Imperious Man was silent for a few seconds before scratching his head and grunting. "Ah, right, I remember 'dem now. Eh, no big loss, they were just intended to be cannon fodder anyway. Still, so long as we have an opening…” The man reached a hand into his jacket and held a sheet of paper he held out over his shoulder. "Send an invitation to them. They've quieted down recently, but they did raise some impressive hell in a short amount of time. They'll fill in our ranks quite nicely."

"Piro piro~! As you order, Captain!" the Laughing Man sang as he snatched up the paper. The Imperious Man glanced back at the laugher. "What's got you in such a good mood?"

"Two things, sir!" The Laughing Man donned a massive grin as he held up a gloved finger. "First, even though they were total failures, the plant I had in the Amigo's crew has sent me back some excellent data on a project I've been working on!"

"Which would be?"

"Behold!" The Laughing Man proffered his hand, displaying a pair of vials that contained a viscous, reddish-orange solution. "Booster IQ, or BIQ for short. Basically IQ Serum for the common footsoldier. Heals wounds, replenishes stamina, the whole nine yards. In essence, a supersoldier elixir!"

"Hmmm…” The Imperious Man took a long drag from his cigar before side-eyeing the Laughing Man. "And I take it the reason you had yet to tell me about it is that it's still incomplete? And you used these… Amiibo Pirates or whatever as lab rats?"

"PIRO PIRO PIRO PIRO PIRO!" the Laughing Man cackled, eagerly tossing the vials in the air and juggling them about. "The morons never suspected a thing! Bought my spiel about it being 'a sign of our allegiance and trust' hook line and sinker and didn't even ask for change! Ahh, but for all that they were weak idiots, at least they gave us some valuable data!" The Laughing Man's grin then became downright savage as he clutched the vials. "In more ways than one."

The Imperious Man snorted out a cloud of smoke. "How could a bunch of weaklings who couldn't even capture a single obsolete beetle be good as anything other than warm bodies?"

"Why," the Laughing Man sneered as he replaced the vials in his pockets. "Precisely because it wasn't the beetle that defeated them."
"Oh? Then what did?"

"Who, sir, not what. And in this case'..." The Laughing Man withdrew a sheet of paper from his lab coat and held it out to the Imperious Man, displaying the picture printed upon it to him.

The picture of a widely smiling kid.

"The 'who'," the Laughing Man chuckled grimly. "Was none other than the Straw Hat Pirates."

The air around the Imperious Man suddenly tensed as he stared at the bounty held before him, and it was with slow and deliberate movement that he grasped said paper and for himself. "Is 'zat so?" he asked in the rumble that was his version of quiet.

"I'm completely certain," the Laughing Man nodded politely. "In fact, it was the Voice of Anarchy himself who personally dealt with the lot of them. Hard to mistake that voice when it's throwing out taunts, you know."

The Imperious Man tuned out the Laughing Man's words, instead focusing all his attention on the bounty. On a single aspect of the picture.

An aspect that had been burned into his mind on that fateful day twenty-two years past.

"That... damn... smile," the Imperious Man snarled, the paper crumpling in his grip.

"Pi~ro pi~ro," the Laughing Man sang, swinging back and forth on his flatulent heels. "I take it this means we're taking a detour after we reintroduce ourselves to the good soldiers of Marineford?"

The Imperious Man exhaled a malevolent rumble of smoke, his mouth set in a deep scowl. "You've got that damn right, Doctor."

"PIRO PIRO! Wonderful!" the Laughing Man sang gleefully as he clapped his hands together. "I'll go and prepare that which I can for the festivities! If we don't sink them outright, then they'll make wonderful whetstones for my creations! See you later~!" And with that, the Laughing Man turned to swagger off.

"Hold it."

Before suddenly freezing in place, cold sweat coating his body as existential terror filled his body.

"Relax, relax, you're not in trouble," the Imperious Man waved his hand dismissively, causing the Laughing Man to relax. "I'm just curious is all. You haven't been miming your responses lately, Doctor. Why is that?"

And just like that the Laughing Man tensed up again, but for a completely different reason, as his tense smile revealed. "Forgive me, sir, if I've been a bit serious lately. But I've quite simply had no other choice but to double down and focus on my work. After all..." The Laughing Man's hands snapped into trembling fists, his teeth starting to grind against one another. "At the cusp of the unveiling of my twenty-year masterpiece, I'm at risk of getting shown up by a little pirate brat who hasn't been on the sea for more than a year, and who hasn't even reached the age of majority! Why do you think I came up with BIQ, hm!? I need to prove that that little furry rat doesn't have shit on me! I—ah...piro piro piro..."

The Laughing Man trailed off into a grim chuckle, a hand hiding his murderous grin. "My apologies, sir, I lost my composure for a moment. But. Rest assured, my mind is still as on-task as ever. And if you do indeed miss my dancing, well. Rest assured, you will see it once more in this lifetime. I shall..."
dance anew. Oh yes, I shall dance…"

The Laughing Man spun around, his face the mask of insanity that spewed forth maddened laughter, a pair of viridian flames dancing in the palms of his hands. "I SHALL DANCE IN THE PHOSPHOROUS-CHARRED ASHES OF THE ACCURSED EAST BLUE! PIRO PIRO PIRO PIRO!"

The Imperious Man adopted an evil smile of his own as he watched the mad doctor. "That's an excellent answer, Doctor…"

The Imperious Man then turned to face his dominion and spread his arms wide with a raucous roar. "A MOST EXCELLENT ANSWER INDEED! JIHAAHAHA! JIIIIHAHAHAHAHAAAAA!"

"...and as we left, his last word to us was congratulating us for beating him at his own game. Last I heard, the base got rid of any lingering budget problems thanks to relocating a nearby training grounds to inside the base. They certainly had the room for it, from what I saw."

Cross sat up from his reclined position against one of the barrels set up to be loaded onto the Sunny, a soft smile on his face. "But anyways, yeah. Decent Marines are those kinds of people, and anyone who puts their life on the line like that has my respect."

Yoko nodded slowly, her expression carefully neutral; the differentiation between good and decent Marines was even more eye-opening for her than the way Cross had fought off the Amigo Pirates, and the countless examples he had cited of the nicer sorts of pirates like Whitebeard and Shanks, and the wicked Marines like Nezumi and Onigumo…

Her image of her father remained as untarnished as it had always been. Improved, even, seeing how he'd managed to stay moral and uncorrupt in a world like this, but the fact remained: beyond him, her black and white view of the world had been forced into color.

"Wow…" she breathed softly, her mind awhirl as she contemplated the new information she'd been granted. She then glanced up at Cross as a thought struck her. "But, wait… I'm just a kid. A kid who spent the whole day trying to get you and your friends kicked off this island! Why… Why tell me all this? Why… spare me a second thought?"

Cross blinked at her in surprise before quirking up a smile, standing and adjusting his cap. "That, little lady," he chuckled. "Is a question whose answer is entirely up to you."

Yoko frowned thoughtfully, but before she could ask anything further Cross had already walked off, intent on doing one last round through his crewmates before they set off.

His first stop was the most prominent feature to be found on the beach: a titan-sized beetle that the crew's human-reindeer doctor was keeping drugged into drowsiness. Once he was close, Cross looked over the makeshift barrel-turned-IV that Chopper and Donny were making use of. "Lemme guess… you never thought you'd wind up in a situation like this, am I right?"

Chopper sighed, shaking his head with a wry smile. "Well, while I never could have foreseen having to use my new Cherry Blossom Slumber on my captain, a kung-fu fighting dugong, and a giant beetle because they were at risk of splitting the island or each other's heads in half, I'm not complaining. At least Project Panacea's gotten a lot more data out of the deal!" He then graced Cross with an honest smile. "Plus, in between the heart-pounding, life-threatening situations, it's been really fun too!"
"PLUS THE TERRIFYING STUFF IS FUN TOO!" Soundbite laughed, though he just as swiftly waved his eyestalk dismissively. "Yeah yeah, I know, different opinions. By the way, on the bash brothers, didn't you give them a chance to CALL IT OFF?"

"Whether you were listening to me when it happened or not, you should know that they wouldn't, and didn't." Chopper responded with a roll of his eyes, tugging the mega-sized needle he was using out of a chink in Boss-K's armor and giving his carapace a final pat farewell. "Anyways, I estimate this one won't have his dose wear off until we're past the horizon, even though his immune system is insane, and I have our own crazies chained up in my office and drugged to the gills. So we should be good to go."

Boss-K warbled morosely as he shifted in place, trying and failing to get his dizzied legs under himself. "Gwowowoooooot fair, I just wanted a… good…” Boss trailed off, blinking in surprise on account of how he'd actually started talking, in a deep voice. "What the—!?"

"Finally!" Cross shot a look at his partner out the corner of his eye. "Nice choice for Andre, but still, took you long enough, didn't it?"

"LICK MY SLIMY ASS, it took me hours to get a start on just WHAT HE WAS SAYING!" Soundbite tsked sharply.

"I'm with the wild-tongued wonder," Chopper concurred. "SASSY! YOU'RE LEARNING!"

The reindeer-human flashed a sign at Soundbite with his hoof before continuing. "Boss's dialect, whatever it is, is as foreign to me as it is to him. For once, I can only understand one of an animal's voices."

"Well, I for one am perfectly happy with the results!" Boss Kabuto rumbled happily, rubbing a leg beneath his horn. "I'm still a bit sore that I can't finish one of the best fights of my life, but this is a close second!"

"Hmm…” Chopper frowned inquisitively as he looked the titan-sized beetle over. "Yeah, speaking about that, you were going at it pretty rough. Boss and Luffy are no pushovers, and you look good, but are you sure you're alright?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm perfectly fine," Boss said dismissively, tapping a leg to the underside of his thorax. "I've gone through way worse in the past. They're tough, sure, but a couple of lightweights like them aren't going to cause me any kind of permanent damage. When I was younger, I'd have been food. But now, after all this time…” Boss bobbed his head side to side. "Way I am now… probably take a hit from an Alpha or something to really ding my shell."

Chopper's frown deepened. "And… you know that how exactly? And what's an 'Alpha' for that matter?"

Boss froze in place, staring at nothing. "U-Uhhhh…"

"UNASKED QUESTION, BIG BOY: WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU FROM?" Soundbite unabashedly queried. "SERIOUSLY, YOU'RE GRAND LINE-NATIVE, that much is clear, but you're completely out of synch with this island's ecosystem! Everything else has East Blue as a BASELINE, BUT YOU'RE WAY ABOVE THAT LINE!"

"Final count," Cross brought up the rear, though his tone was far more cordial. "How…
"I... ah... I..." Boss blinked dimly, bringing a leg to his armored brow. "I-It was so long ago, but I... I remember, I... I-I fell. I fell, to the island. From high up... farther than I could ever fly, going either way?"

Chopper and Cross exchanged surprised looks. "A... sky island, you mean?" Cross clarified. "An island made of clouds?"

Boss rumbled uncomfortably and shook his head, his gaze slowly turning skyward. "No... it was... it was normal. There was earth, there were trees, there were... there were..." The beetle's voice hitched, his mandibles clicking together.

"...other... animals?" Chopper offered warily.

Boss warbled again, this time mournfully, and it was with no small amount of alarm that the pirates watched the beetle's eyes slowly cloud over. "So many..." he whispered. "So many... always fighting... never stop, can't rest, can't stop. Stopping means dead. Weak means starving. Means dead. Have to fight... have to live..." Boss suddenly hunched over, chittering furiously as his wings fluttered and spasmed beneath his shell in obvious panic. "Have to... have to run... have to have to... can't stay, can't... Had to leave... had to leave madness... had to leave the... had to leave the..."

At that point, the beetle's newfound eloquence vanished, replaced by the feral rumblings as he sunk into what all present could tell was a PTSD flashback. It was only allowed to last for a couple of seconds before Chopper managed to replace Boss's IV and put him back under.

"I think I'll let him drain the barrel," Chopper stated sadly.

"Smart move," Cross nodded before glancing at his partner. "What was he saying at the end?"

"Same thing, over and over. COULDN'T GIVE YOU A DIRECT TRANSLATION, SO I think IT WAS A NAME. Closest I can give you..." Soundbite gave Cross an honestly morbid look. "He was saying 'Realm Ruled by Power', over and over again. AND I DON'T THINK YOU NEED ME TO TELL YOU THAT HE WAS TERRIFIED OF THE PLACE."

"Completely traumatized," Chopper shook his head sadly. "I shudder to think what could have scared someone like him so bad it's still fresh in his mind, even now."

"Easy money says we'll be finding out soon, little guy."

All three of them looked up in surprise as someone made their presence known.

"Sanji?" Chopper asked.

The cook blew out a cloud of smoke before gesturing at the other blond on the crew. "Walk and talk, Cross."

Perplexed, the tactician followed the chef away from the reindeer and beetle. His perplexion grew when the chef led him to where Zoro and Nami were relaxing and drinking as the TDWS loaded the supplies. Before Zoro could open his mouth with a customary insult, Sanji spoke.

"It's obvious that you don't know about any of what's going on here, Cross," he said sternly. "But whether you saw it or not, this world is still part of the story you read, and while I was growing up, I learned way more about comic book plotlines than I ever wanted to."
Zoro remained silent, while Cross and Soundbite both seemed bewildered. Naturally, it was Nami who leaned forwards and spoke up. "What are you saying, Sanji?"

"I'm saying that it's no coincidence that we wound up here just in time to keep this place from being blown off the map and that beetle from being spirited away to who-knows-where," Sanji huffed around his cancer-stick. "This is just a preview for us; I'd bet my best shoes that whoever this 'Indigo' is, we're going to be running into him soon. And I'd bet just as much that he and whoever he's with is no pushover if he could hire an entire pirate crew to act as mercenaries. More importantly, that beetle isn't normal even by Grand Line standards, and when you couple that with those faulty steroids that the Amigo Pirates had—"

"Indigo was behind Boss Kabuto, too," Cross finished, frowning. "And if you add that to the PTSD, Boss wasn't the only monster he created…"

"In short, Cross," Sanji finished. "If you don't have a plan, you need to make one."

The first and second mates both contemplated that for a second before turning their own gazes on the tactician.

Cross stared at Sanji, and it was several seconds before he spoke. "I'll admit that that's good reasoning, Sanji, but there are two problems with that assumption. First, Oda acquired the nickname of 'Goda' and the phrase 'Goda never forgets' for his brilliance in the form of long-term plots. Things like meeting Brook and happening to have befriended Laboon, or meeting Oimo and Kashi and happening to have befriended Dorry and Broggy, or whatever Lola's Vivre Card will do for us in Totland. Pft, hell!" Cross shrugged casually. "Easy money says that one day, the fact that you're a North Blue native'll rear its head in more ways than just familiarity with the tale of Noland."

Sanji's jaw tightened to the point that he almost sliced his cigarette in half, the back of his neck suddenly soaked in cold sweat. "Looking forward to it," he mumbled.

"But anyway, that's beside the point. The more important implication, for me, is that all of this just screams 'New World' to me. I mean, seriously…” Cross waved his hand at the slumbering beetle. "An island full of that? And a normal island in the sky at that? Apart from Upper Yard, I can only see that happening on the other side of the Line. The story didn't show much beyond a few islands, but what it did show? There's a reason this half of the reason of the Grand Line is called 'Paradise'."

Sanji frowned, clearly not satisfied.

"There's just one problem with that theory, Cross."

Everyone looked at Zoro, who had his arms folded and was staring with narrowed eyes at Cross. "Everything you know is based off of a world where you never existed, where the SBS never existed. In this world, we've been letting the entire world know about our adventures for months. We can't assume that we haven't given anyone that side of the Red Line any ideas with everything you've broadcast. Just look at Chopper."

"…fair point," Cross nodded his head in concession. "But there's also a counterpoint—!"

"And I know it!" Soundbite piped up swiftly. "LEMME SUMMARIZE WHAT YOU'RE TELLING US: Something could go down somewhere in some way at some point in time, SO WE NEED TO LOOK SHARP!" The snail adopted a flat look. "I trust you see the issue?"

Sanji and Zoro's faces reddened, and the former lit a cigarette while the latter took another swig of
sake in attempts to shake off the blunt statement of the issue with their points.

"Yeah, I see the problem, too," Nami sighed, shaking her head. "We do know just how hard it is to fight a ghost-enemy."

"I could give you a few pointers if you want~!" came a sing-song ethereal voice above their heads. Cross's response was to flash the faux-princess a specific finger. "Keep moving, phantom bitch, I'll deal with you in a moment."

"Right!" Perona yelped, shooting off into the distance.

Nami watched her go with a cocked eyebrow, then gave Cross a chastising look. "She's not that bad, you know."

"Mountain! Faceplant!"

"Alright, alright," the navigator said, her hands raised in surrender. "Just don't hurt her, okay?"

"Hurt? Oh, no, never." Cross grinned as he splayed his fingers against one another. "Majorly inconvenience, however? Pfheheheh…"

Nami shook her head, then turned her head in the direction of the Dugongs, who were just finishing up. "Alright, looks like we're just about ready to go. Soundbite, who else is out on the island besides Chopper?"

The snail took a moment to concentrate before answering. "Just Vivi, Robin, and Conis, AND THEY'RE ALL HEADING THIS WAY with their respective partners. PLUS, CHOPPER'S FINISHING UP WITH BOSS TOO."

"Perfect!" Nami got to her feet and dusted her hands off. "Let's get going, then."

"Ah, just one second," Cross said, then looked at his partner. "Connect me to Fabre and Yoko."

Soundbite didn't question it, nor did anyone else. As soon as the snail nodded, Cross spoke a few soft sentences before chopping his hand across his neck. No sooner was that done than the pirates boarded their ship.

As he passed by Robin, Cross couldn't help but notice how there was a slight… no, a visible spring to her step. "What's got you so happy?"

Robin's response was to beam in the most childish, endearing, and un-Robin-ish manner possible, which almost incited a straight up heart attack from the poor bastard and his partners. "Oh, I've just finally achieved one of my most cherished dreams. …er, well…” She tapped a finger to her chin. "Not the one you're thinking of, a cherished childhood dream. But still, very near and dear! I'd love to stay and talk, but I'm afraid I have things I must attend to, so if you'll excuse me~!" And with that, she was gone as fast as she'd come.

Cross stared after her in slack-jawed horror before slowly turning his gaze on Conis and Vivi, and at the dead look in their eyes he suddenly understood on a primal level what a thousand-yard stare was. "…dare I even consider asking?"

Su and Carue gave their partners comforting pats on their shoulders before glancing at Cross. "You really don't want to know,"
Cross nodded in understanding, but before he could say anything further a sharp whistle cut across the deck, snagging his attention.

"ALRIGHT, YOU BUMS!" Nami shouted from where she stood positioned next to Merry and the helm. "MUSCLEMEN, WEIGH ANCHOR! THE REST OF YOU, I WANT THOSE TOPSAILS AND FORESAILS DOWN TWO MINUTES AGO! WE'RE BURNING FOAM FOR SABAODY, THEN FISHMAN ISLAND!"

"AYE-AYE, MA'AM!" most of the Straw Hats crew chorused.

"And I'm still our communications officer why, exactly?" Cross muttered to himself.

"WHAT WAS THAT!?"

"YOU HEARD THE WOMAN! WEIGH ANCHOR, DROP MAST! LET'S GO GO GO!"

And so the Straw Hats leapt to action, maneuvering their vessel up and out through the island's reefs…

"HEEEFY! STRAW HATS!"

But they all paused when a voice suddenly sounded out, and some quick maneuvering allowed them to see that the whole of the island's population was arrayed on the shore, waving them farewell, but none more animatedly than Yoko, the girl seated on a still-bleary Boss's back and waving her arms like a girl possessed.

"THANKS SO MUCH FOR EVERYTHING YOU DID FOR US!" she called out. "WE'LL NEVER FORGET IT! AND… I KNOW WHAT I'M GOING TO DO WITH WHAT YOU TOLD ME! I'M GOING TO DO MY FATHER PROUD! I'M GOING TO FIGHT FOR JUSTICE! HONEST, TRUE JUSTICE! BUT…"

Yoko smiled from ear-to-ear and crossed her arms over her chest, which puffed out in pride. "TILL STILL BE A MARINE, AND YOU'LL STILL BE PIRATES! THAT MEANS THAT IF WE CROSS PATHS, I'LL BE ARRESTING YOUR ASSES IN A HEARTBEAT, SO WATCH YOUR BACKS!"

In response, Cross plastered on a cocky smirk and signaled for Soundbite to amp him. "YOU'RE GONNA HAVE TO MOVE FAST TO DO THAT, SHORTSTACK! THERE'S A WHOLE WORLD OUT THERE THAT'S GOT AN INTEREST IN OUR HEADS!" He then turned and pointed at the horizon. "WHAT SAY WE GO MEET THEM!?"

"YEAH!"

And with that final resounding cry, the Thousand Sunny and the Straw Hat Pirates departed from the Little East Blue.

Though, it should be noted that before they truly departed, Cross ambled up to the Ghost Princess's astral form and smirked up at her. "Just for the record," he purred in a too-innocent tone. "I'm not going to torture you by holding my vengeance over your head the whole time we're together."

"Oh-thank-God!" Perona allowed the non-breath she'd been holding to whoosh out. "You're serious?!

"Eeyup!" And then suddenly, Cross's grin lost all of its innocence. "I'm gonna have it right here,
right now."

"Oh, well, that's al—WHAT!"

But before Perona could say anything else...

**BOOM!**

An explosion of discolored smoke erupted from the Sunny's crow's nest. Perona stared up at the structure in blatant horror, choked noises crawling out of her throat. "Did you just... bomb my body?!" she squeaked.

"Bribed Merry to plant it!" Cross thumbed his non-existent suspenders as he swayed back and forth on his feet. "And... technically yes? I used a specific bomb, as it was."

That was when the pieces fit together. "You. Stinkbombed. My body," Perona wheezed in horror. "And my room is not only airtight, but I don't mind wearing a gasmask to sleep to boot!" Cross walked off, laughing all the while. "Enjoy, Ghosty!"

Perona was an inch away from draining every bit of happiness from that insufferable young man, but somehow, she retained enough mental capacity to realize that that would lead to a cycle of revenge. And getting involved with one of those with the Voices of Anarchy was not something she had any desire to do.

...And ultimately, that reasoning wasn't quite enough to keep her from sending a Negative Hollow rocketing his way.

Or at least, she tried sending a Negative Hollow at him, but she found that she... just couldn't find the will to do it. She just... couldn't draw up the sheer 'will to terrorize' she needed to do the deed.

Perona stared in horror at her hand, the implications sinking, before she slowly drifted away with a haunted look on her face. "I need to get the hell off this ship as soon as possible..." she muttered to herself.

**-ONE WEEK LATER-**

"Captain, land ho! Kansorn Island is coming up on the port side!" called down the watchman.

"Very good," the captain rasped, approaching the edge of the ship to observe the island. His eyes narrowed almost immediately, picking something out of the air a moment before the watchman identified it.

"Captain, incoming! Gigantic Hercules beetle heading straight for us... with a girl in a Marine uniform on its back? And... I think the beetle has our symbol painted on its flank?!" he added questioningly.

"Typical Ophiuchus: no shortage of help, no chance of normalcy," remarked one of the grunts.

"Indeed," Captain T-Bone agreed as he stood to his full height, his men clearing a large spot on the deck to allow the beetle to land.

The courtesy turned out to be unnecessary, however, as the beetle instead buzzed clean over the deck before circling around to hover in front of the deck, snorting and bucking its horn in defiance. The girl riding the mega-insect showed just as much nerve as she stood upon the beetle's back, folded her
arms and fixed the Marines with a severe stare. Not quite a glare, but certainly far from inviting.

"State your business here!" the girl called out. "And I'm warning you, don't just take our markings for granted. If you're anything less than perfectly polite..."

The beetle snorted out a gout of flame from its horn, punctuating the point.

The display cowed most of the Marines, who lowered their weapons and stepped well back from the not-quite-hostile megafauna, while others drew their arms and prepared for combat.

Captain T-Bone did none of these things, and instead stepped forwards to regard the girl and her beetle with an even gaze. "Your name is Yoko, yes?" he rasped out over the buzz of the beetle's wings. "Daughter of Captain Ryudo? And your friend would be Boss Kabuto, correct?"

The pair of them gave no visible reaction, and after a moment, T-Bone continued. "My name is T-Bone. Captain 'Ship-Cutter' T-Bone. I'm here on a personal recommendation from a..." T-Bone hesitated slightly before sighing with a defeated smile. "From a friend of mine."

"And I should care why exactly?" Yoko questioned neutrally.

T-Bone allowed what little mouth he had left to quirk up into a smirk. "Because I think you know this friend of mine. One... Ophiuchus?"

It took all of three seconds for that knowledge to process, following which Yoko and Boss's jaws promptly dropped open. "Holy shit," the girl breathed.

"And that's proof enough for me that you've met the man in person," the Captain chuckled good-naturedly, a sunny demeanor shining through his gaunt visage. "Now, if you no longer suspect me...?"

"Ah!" Yoko gasped, hastily dropping to her knees and slapping Boss's shell, which in turn got the beetle dropping down onto the ship's deck. "I-I'm so sorry, Mister Captain T-Bone sir, t-t-that was, I-I-I was just trying to—!"

"Fahahaha, it's fine, it's fine!" the good Captain waved off the child's pleas, his smile unwavering the whole while. "I understand, I myself have recently come around to the same line of thought you hold, I can hardly fault you for exhibiting some measure of caution. But, for now!" T-Bone clapped his hands together. "We have business to attend to. I'm led to understand that your island's leader is one Mayor Fabre, yes?"

"A-Ah, yeah, that's right, but... Why do you ask?"

"Why, because I'd like to meet him of course!" the gaunt Marine laughed pleasantly. "And, more importantly, I have a proposition for him—and you, for that matter—that I believe you will find to be mutually beneficial."

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In short order, the ship was docked, and Yoko and Boss had informed Fabre of the situation. The mayor promptly welcomed the Captain publicly, leaving his men to shore leave while leading him on a tour. Almost immediately, Fabre led him to Boss's burrow, where the beetle and Yoko already waited. Leaning against a tree, the portly man cautiously regarded the captain.

"I don't know what I was expecting when he told the two of us as he left that he'd be sending long-term help our way and to trust anyone who knew that name, but the fact that he told us with utmost
seriousness not to repeat it to anyone we didn't trust with our lives made me expect something much more… under the table, I suppose," he stated.

"I assure you, our work requires the utmost secrecy, and simply the knowledge of our existence is dangerous," T-Bone responded gravely, shaking his head. "And in any event, that's hardly relevant to why I am here; apart from my reference point, this is strictly Marine business. When I said mutually beneficial, I was referring to the terms of this island and the Navy as… well, not a whole, but a large amount, at least."

"How so?" Yoko tilted her head questioningly. "I mean, it's a small island with not a lot of people, it doesn't have any natural resources, it's far from patrol… routes…" The girl blushed and shrunk in on herself as the mayor and Marine looked at her in surprise. "I, uh… I looked up the criteria for Marine bases. I hoped I could put in a petition for the Little East Blue, but… yeah."

"Heh," T-Bone nodded with a kindly chuckle. "You are indeed as smart as Cross claimed."

Yoko's blush deepened even further.

"In any case," T-Bone continued. "It is, in fact, exactly because of your island's qualities, which Cross listed to me, that I believe the Little East Blue would be perfect for what I have in mind. A small island out of the way of patrols is indeed not a terribly convenient location for a base…” He smiled, his melted skin pulling taut across his skull. "But it is the ideal location for a way station."

That got the island's natives gaping in shock.

"You... want to turn the Little East Blue into a Marine vacation spot?" Fabre confirmed in an amazed tone.

"An idyllic island in the hell of the Grand Line, with absolutely no environmental issues and a perfectly normal populace? But of course!" T-Bone nodded. "Weary Marines will come by the battleship to relax and take in the taste of the East Blue..."

"And only an absolute moron would think to attack an island with a half-dozen battleships at a time floating in its port! A-And even then they'd be met with a wall of blue!" Yoko finished in an eager rush. "Little East Blue wouldn't ever have to worry about pirates again!"

"Precisely," T-Bone confirmed. "All we would require would be a good number of Eternal Poses we can put to use, and those can be fashioned with all due swiftness. Unless I'm ill-informed, so long as you agree, you'll see your first visitors within the month."

"You're damn right we'll agree!" Fabre cheered, before standing up and shaking T-Bone's hand. "Thank you so much, Captain, this is beyond anything we could have ever imagined!"

"Yeah!" Yoko nodded eagerly, a motion that Boss mirrored. "There'll be loads and loads of Marines here all the time and—!" Yoko's cheer suddenly died mid-word, and her previous enthusiasm slowly drained out of her. "And they'll... all be able to meet... Boss..."

Boss glanced up at his friend, warbling inquisitively.

Yoko's head drooped for a long moment, before she looked back up to the Marine captain. "We can't go through with it," she said sadly. "If we did, other Marines would see Boss, they'd see how strong he is..." The girl splayed her fingers out against the beetle's shell. "And they'd take him away, wouldn't they? To use against other pirates?"

T-Bone pressed his non-existent lips together and nodded solemnly, a sad look in his eyes. "That is
the most likely scenario, yes."

Fabre stiffened at the admission, and Yoko sighed sadly. Her head drooped again, brow coming to rest against Boss' horn, which drew another concerned warble from the beetle. "Thank you for your offer, Captain," Yoko mumbled despondently. "But... if it's a choice between my dream and Boss, then... there just isn't a choice."

"...and what if I told you that I could give you both at once, no choice needed?"

Yoko snapped her head around so fast she came within a half-inch of whiplash. "R-Really!?"

Nodding, T-Bone began to pace, a finger held up in a clear sign of an impending lecture. "It is true that under normal circumstances, the Navy may express an interest in the unusual nature of your friend, and take him away to research him. However, there are times when Marine Headquarters makes allowances that subvert typical ordinances. These allowances are in respect to..." The Marine waved his hand airily. "Shall we say, eccentric officers and their oddities. Examples include being permitted to wear a helmet and cape over a standard uniform, using a non-standard issue weapon, or being able to recruit a former pirate..."

The gaunt Marine smiled at the local guardians. "Or a giant beetle." All present could only gape as T-Bone continued. "Though, of course, recruiting one such as Boss Kabuto would be exceedingly difficult without also happening to have someone who was capable of working with him. Someone who knew him well."

At this point, Yoko was practically vibrating with joy, and Boss had his best grin on his face.

Fabre, however, was chewing on his pipe, clearly deep in thought. "Captain T-Bone... I have no doubt that you can train her well, and that Boss will be more than enough to protect her in the meantime. And believe me, I know better than anyone that Yoko is more than willing to protect and serve but..." Growling in frustration, he threw his hands up. "But she's still only a child! Would your superiors honestly be able to accept this?"

T-Bone's mood visibly darkened, and his head tilted down just enough for his helmet to shadow his eyes. "There is a... specific clause in the Navy's procedural rules. This clause allows minors to enlist in the Navy... provided they have seen a loved one die before their eyes." He paused, a cold silence hanging over the group. "It is known... as the 'Bloody Tragedy' clause."

A breath hissed past Yoko's teeth, some of them biting into her lip hard enough to draw blood. "...that clause," she breathed. "It's supposed to breed indoc—uh, brainwashed soldiers who'll kill without asking any questions, isn't it?"

"It was penned by the most ruthless Marine alive today, Admiral 'Akainu' Sakazuki, to forge ruthless, vengeance-thirsty killers out of war-torn orphans," T-Bone confirmed with a ferocious glower. "As such, I feel it is only fitting to apply that policy in the pursuit of bringing about a kind, honorable, decent Marine." The glower turned to Yoko, softening into a mere stern gaze in the process. "I do warn you, I will not go easy on you because of your age, or your partner. Your training will be harsh, rigorous and thorough. I was trained in the methods of a strictly traditional branch of Marine culture, and I will put you through the same gauntlet through which I once walked. Are you truly, honestly willing to follow in the footsteps of the countless others who came before you?"

For either an eternity or several seconds, Yoko kicked the idea around in her head. Finally, she looked up at Boss, looked him in the eye, and when he smiled down at her, she smiled back, and as one they smiled at the Captain.
"We're in," she said, Boss warbling in agreement.

Fabre promptly heaved out a heavy breath. Walking over to Yoko, he patted the girl on the back. "I honestly can't say that this is what your father would want," he stated. "But I can tell you that he'd be proud. As am I."

"And I," T-Bone concurred. "There will be more pomp and circumstance…" The Marine winced as a thought struck him. "And paperwork… at a later date. But at the moment?" The skeletal man held his hand out to the girl. "Allow me to be the first to welcome you to the illustrious ranks of the Marines…" His grin widened noticeably. "Seagirl Recruit Yoko."

Yoko outright squealed with joy, leaping up to hug Boss's horn as he warbled just as happily.

"I suppose I'll leave you two to become acquainted," Fabre said, turning to walk away. "I need to inform the rest of the village of the way things will be from now on anyway."

"My second-in-command is Warrant Officer Knalf, he will assist you with spreading the word," T-Bone called after him. Once the mayor was off, he turned back to Yoko and Boss, looking serious as a heart attack. That sobered up the two in a hurry. "Now that you're in my chain of command, however informally, there is another matter to attend to—"

"Puru puru puru puru!"

T-Bone's face twitched minutely, and he quickly retrieved a ringing snail from his jacket. Just as he was about to pick it up, though, he hesitated, and then looked at Yoko. "And that would actually be it. As you will be joining me as my protégé, you are entitled to certain… privileges. But I caution you, this is not for the faint of—"

"Sign me up," Yoko said firmly. "I've spent my whole life blindly chasing an ideal, and you can damn well bet I'm willing to fight to make that ideal into reality. I don't know what Cross is mixed up in, but if it's the right kind of pirates and the right kind of Marines, then I definitely want in."

T-Bone smiled wryly. "Glad to hear it, except for one detail. Mixed up in? Hardly… he's the founder."

The captain hid a smirk as the girl's jaw dropped briefly, only for her to click it shut and mutter about how that made too much sense.

The smirk fell from his face almost as soon as he picked up the receiver; his codename had barely crossed his lips before the snail adopted a dead-serious expression, and Black Cage Hina's voice sounded out in the same tone as a death knell.

"We have a situation."

A Crisis of World-Shattering Proportions

"Close to a dozen islands annihilated in less than a month, all in the East Blue, and recently islands with civilians have started getting hit as well. Whoever's doing this—and I am confident that they are a who—they're only getting started."

"I think it goes without saying that the threat being presented is all too dangerous and all too real."

An Odyssey into the Pits of Pandæmonium
"This place is insane… that's not a generalization, I'M BEING LITERAL! THIS WHOLE PLACE HAS LOST ITS MIND ON A PRIMAL LEVEL! Everything we've seen, everything we've experienced, it's all trumped by THE SHEER MADNESS OF THIS HELLHOLE!"

"Damn… whoever's doing this has to be some seriously special brand of twisted."

All orchestrated by an Old Threat intruding upon the New Age

"You actually think you can hurt me? Jihahaha! Oh, this oughta be good for a laugh. Go right ahead… give me your best shot."

"Well, at least we ain't going into this shitshow alone, right? All for one, one for all!"

With Salvation and Devastation hanging in the balance, it's All Hands on Deck

"Looks like the Straw Hats have entered the building…"

"Which means that sanity can exit stage left! Kyahahaha!"

"Hehahaha! Ain't that the fuckin' truth right there!"

"No matter what might come, we won't back down until the job is done and it's done right!"

One Rallying Cry can be heard on the Killing Ground: No Retreat, No Surrender

"…Captain. I can give you a hundred and one different plans, right here, right now, but only you can tell us what direction we're headed. Only you can tell us our destination. So… what's the play?"

"…I want to make him pay."

"Then we'll make him pay."

"Everybody watch their backs. Something tells me that we're venturing into something this world has never seen before."

In this War for the Right to Live, the only Law that reigns is Survival of the Fittest

"So. Final count, it's us two, a loud-mouthed third mate tactician with his partners and a first mate swordsman, against fifty of the strongest captains in Paradise, along with the top fighters in their crews. Close to five hundred pirates against two."

The Name of this Hell where the Only Options are to Fight or Die is…

"…bring it on."

STRONG WORLD

"In the end, no matter who rises or who falls, the facts remain the same. All this…"

"A dozen. TWO DOZEN. FIFTY, A HUNDRED, TWO HUNDRED… Sonnuyabitch, I THINK THE WHOLE DAMN ISLAND WANTS TO TRY ITS LUCK!"

"Cross, do you have a plan?"

"Well, Luffy, considering how we're surrounded on all sides, vastly outnumbered, and have no way
out and no hopes of backup or rescue… yeah, I think I have one."

"What is it?"

K-CHK!

"How does 'make a stand' sound to you?"

"IT SOUNDS GREAT! BRING IT ON!"

"Is nothing but a prelude of the days to come."

Xomniac AN: Shoutout to TPO's beloved Vikingr, her factoid about musicians keeping the pace on ships helped us give Brook something to do in this chapter! Kudos, most brilliant writer!
Chapter 55 - Strong World Pt. 1

Cross-Brain AN: Yes, everyone, Part 1 only. We apologize profusely to those of you who voted that we publish this all at once; we hate going back on our word. But with the massive delay that the holiday season brought for us, which had a few people wondering about our well-being, we want to show you all that we're making progress.

…That, and if this installment is any indication, the full Strong World is going to be around 100k. Even we have to draw the line somewhere for absurdly long chapters.

Anyway, we have the entirety of Strong World planned out; it will not be too long before we publish the next part as long as real life cooperates with us. Once more, our apologies for keeping you waiting, and for keeping you waiting longer for what comes next. But Part 2 will not take as long as this.

With that said, time to get this show on the road! But first, a word from one of our members.

Hornet AN: One word for y'all: psych!

Cross-Brain AN: Have fun chewing on that until we publish Part 3!

On a normal day, the docks of Marineford would be buzzing with activity as battleships and other Marine vessels sailed in and out of the docks, directed with clockwork precision by the harbor masters. Countless throngs of the Marines' elite would be bustling about, their every action done in some way to maintain the Justice that protected the peaceful lives of civilians the world over.

As such, the days where Marineford fell utterly silent were both vanishingly rare and the kind of day that led every Marine to fear their headquarters falling so silent.

This burnt orange, twilight-hued day was very much one of those days.

"Well," Vice Admiral Monkey D. Garp said through a grim smile, a muscle twitching in his jaw and his gaze directed skyward. "At least Senny can't blame this one on me."

Despite being veritably surrounded by other Marines, it was doubtful that very many heard what he said. Their attention was skyward, gaping astonishment and existential terror written on their faces.

The source of this reaction was the sight of one of Marineford's indomitable, insurmountable fleets of battleships, the very symbol of the Navy's strength, floating listlessly through the air as if the multi-kiloton galleons had the density of cloud vapor.

As swiftly as the spectacle and the awed silence had descended upon Marine Headquarters, a raid siren finally howling out over the island shattered it. Every last one of the gathered troops sprung to action, if only to scramble to find something to do about this inexplicable event taking place above them.

As the soldiers scurried around him like so many rats, Garp snorted derisively. "Tch. The new generation's reaction time is shit."

"Cut them a break, Garp."

The Vice Admiral didn't look, instead watching out the corner of his eye as his sole acknowledged
superior stepped up alongside him, looking up into the sky just like him.

"This generation has seen wonders and horrors aplenty over their lifetimes," Sengoku grimly stated. "But none have ever seen madness such as this. None but us."

"Madness…" Garp muttered, before he tsked and lowered his head. "Yeah, that's really the only way to describe this. There's only one man powerful enough and mad enough to do such a thing—"

A sharp inhalation cut Garp off, his gaze snapping back up but even higher than before.

"Tch…" Sengoku spat as he followed his friend's gaze.

Their reactions were due to a far bigger issue than a few floating battleships suddenly intruding onto the moment, freezing the entire island in its tracks again.

In fact, one could very reasonably call the new issue island-sized. And that was no metaphor; a titanic flying island that had somehow been retrofitted to serve as a ship that had just flown clean over the summit of Marineford, essentially buzzing the very office of the Fleet Admiral himself.

Sengoku could only glare in furious trepidation at the island-vessel soaring over the weightless battleships, its every motion a sneering taunt directed straight at him. "Damn it all… and so yet another threat comes crawling out of the woodwork. This one hailing from the age of Roger himself."

"Twenty years of silence, and he picks now of all times to show his face again?" Garp growled, ignorant of the way his old friend twitched at his words. "One of Roger's own rivals, and the only man to ever manage to escape from the depths of Impel Down…"

The fabled Hero of the Marines glared daggers at the island-ship. Glared at the golden-maned titan he knew was standing on the rear of the vessel, whose condescending smirk he could all but feel in the very depth of his being.

"You haven't missed a step, have you?" Garp shouted up at the island. "Shiki, the Golden Lion!"

"Jihahahahaaaaa!"

Both Fleet Admiral and Vice Admiral stiffened at the deep, heavily accented voice that suddenly echoed out over Marineford from the island-ship, freezing many a soldier in their tracks.

"The hell—?" Garp breathed.

"Myyyy myyyy..." gloated the voice, a voice that had last sounded in Marineford twenty-five years prior, bringing as much terror now as it had back then. "What's this now? I must say, Marineford, I'm quite disappointed! I step out for but a decade or two, and already you've forgotten my name? I come back and find that the fight that once made you all so fearsome has withered up into nothing, and that you're concentrating on worthless small fry? That just won't do, you know! After all... I haven't exactly been resting on my laurels for the last twenty years, see; I have big plans, and it's finally time to put them into action. Finally time for the world to remember the sheer power of the Golden Lion Pirates! Ah... but hey, don't just take my word for it..."

Garp and Sengoku tensed as the air suddenly felt greasy, with a hint of ozone. "Here it comes!" Garp bellowed out.

"How about I offer you a taste... OF WHAT'S TO COME!"

Two seconds passed following that announcement. Then, all at once, gravity reasserted itself upon
the ten floating battleships. The vessels, sailors and all, plunged downward; some fell into Marineford's bay, the waves from the titanic impacts swamping the shores of the island and dragging countless more doomed soldiers beneath the surface. Others crashed on the land itself, crushing buildings or impacting on the edges of the island before crumpling into splinters.

One vessel careened headlong at the central pagoda of the island, but a swift backhand from the Marine Hero sent the impromptu projectile harmlessly tumbling away. Harmless for the island, mind, not the poor souls who had been trapped on the ship.

Garp spared a second to mourn for the waste of life before glaring at Shiki's retreating vessel, which had left the swath of devastation it had wrought far behind in favor of absconding to the heavens. "Damn it all… why couldn't the son of a bitch just keep quiet and remain a legend?" Garp growled. "What's he been up to? Has he been preparing all this time, just so that he could take his revenge?"

"JIJIHAHAHAHAHAHA…"

The laughter echoing over the harbor as the island-ship soared upward, already out of range and soon out of sight, answered Garp's rhetorical question very well.

Once the ship was well out of sight, Garp let out an aggravated sigh and reached up to scratch the back of his head. "Bastard… Well, no matter what he's up to, standing around isn't going to put out any fires. I'm gonna head down, start coordinating search and rescue, repairs, shit like that. At least get us into a half decent state of affairs before some pirate or whatever gets any bright ideas."

"When you're done with that, Garp, report to me immediately," Sengoku said around the hand massaging his forehead. "As soon as I get a double-dose of my stress medication, I want you to be exactly where I can see you at all times."

"Eh?" Garp blinked at his superior in surprise. "And why the hell's that?"

"Because he gloated."

Garp blinked again. "Uh… come again?"

"Shiki," Sengoku elaborated, his gaze still affixed on the horizon. "Just now, he didn't just attack us like he normally would have. He gloated first. In all our years of fighting him, not once has Shiki ever taken the time to grandstand like he did just now. So… what's changed? What, after twenty long years…" Sengoku's head slowly turned to glance over his shoulder. "Is different?"

Garp followed his old friend's gaze in confusion…

"SHIT!" / "DAMN IT, GARP!"

And forced Sengoku to violently restrain him once he realized that Sengoku had been looking at a Transponder Snail.

"YOU CAN'T JUST GO BARRELING OFF, YOU TITANIC IDIOT!" Sengoku bellowed furiously, very pointedly not using his Devil Fruit abilities in wrestling Garp to the ground to keep him from bolting out the doors and most likely clean off the island.

"THE HELL I CAN'T, BASTARD!" Garp howled."THAT ARROGANT SON OF A BITCH CAN'T STAND THE IDEA OF SOMEONE ELSE IN THE SPOTLIGHT! HE'S STARTING A PISSING MATCH WITH THE STRAW HAT PIRATES! HE'S GOING AFTER MY GRANDSON!"
Several floors down from the ongoing madness, Vice Admiral Tsuru gazed mournfully out over the devastated landscape of Marineford. After a few seconds, her gaze shifted, casting a regretful glance at her snoozing Transponder Snail and silently lamenting that it would be many tense hours of lockdown before she'd be able to place a critical call without getting caught.

For the time being, she made a mental note to utilize Monkey's connections to ensure every Mason in both Zodiacs had a White Transponder Snail on hand as soon as possible. She then dialed the number of her surrogate sister, Vice Admiral Gion, to begin mustering as many forces as possible to salvage the drowning Marines; as a Devil Fruit user, there was only so much that the old woman could do herself.

Once that was done, and before she walked out to begin the long night's work, Tsuru cast a final glance out at the sun-baked horizon.

"This," she whispered to herself. "Is going to be an ordeal the likes of which the world has never before seen."

And so with those words did the ordeal begin. And with it… an odyssey.

The Cross-Brain Presents…

Based on the hit-series by Eiichiro Oda…

An adaptation of the blockbuster movie…

For your enjoyment…

STRONG WORLD

Flying… floating… drifting… looking… looking… looking… looking down… looking in…

"Gwegh!"

I woke up with a snort, shooting up in my bed in shock. Slowly, I looked left and right, blinking numbly as I got my bearings, before raising my hands before my eyes to give my fingers a quick test.

Once I was sure they worked, I shook my head blearily. "Frickin' weird double-O.B.E. dreams…” I groused before flopping back. I then blinked as I saw Merry's face looking down on me. With a wide grin that showed only teeth and malice.

"Time to wake up, Cross…” she crooned ever so gently, her tone of voice entirely discordant with her facial expression.

I blinked slowly before settling in with a sigh. "Still such weird dreams…”

"THE HELL IT IS!"

My eyes shot open at the sudden roar. "Wait, wha—?!"

THWACK!

"GAH!" I shot up with a howl of agony as a small but heavy mass cannonballed into my stomach. Moving fast, I grabbed her head and tugged her cheeks out with my thumbs. "You little brat!" I wheezed. "What the hell do you have to say for yourself!?"
"Yoah fingersh tashte like shyrup," Merry mumbled out, smiling unabashedly all the while. "You should weally avoid dwinking cola before going to shweep, messhesh your shleep schedule up shomeshing fierche."

"Duly noted," I snarled menacingly, leaning in close so that we were eye to eye. "Now, any last words before I drown you in the fishtank?"

"Actually, I have three that will change your mind."

"Eh?" I glanced to the side, boggling in confusion at the sight of Nami, Zoro and Vivi all standing in my room, with Soundbite snickering in Zoro's palm…

Puru puru puru puru!

And ringing.

"Call for you," Zoro deadpanned.

My stare held for a moment longer, and then I shot Merry a flat glare. "You got lucky, brat."

Her oh so mature response was to stick her tongue out with a cocky "Bleeereeh".

I snorted and let her go, before rummaging around for some clean... er, for some clothes that didn't smell too bad. "Pick it up, would ya?" I requested.

Vivi rolled her eyes with a weary sigh. "Ever the height of decorum, Cross."

"Piss off, it's not like there's video." Once Soundbite's expression morphed from cockiness to that of whoever'd called, however, I took on a cocky grin of my own. "Hello, you've reached Marine Base G-5's cafeteria; our specialty today is poultry carved in the likenesses of the Straw Hat Pirates. Would you like to purchase Going Merry's head or Roronoa Zoro's?"

The named laughed and flashed me the finger respectively.

"...I am... conflicted," Tashigi deadpanned.

"Save your morbid fantasies for later, Pisces," Hina said, her voice as hard as steel. "Members of the New World Masons, Divine and Damned alike..." The Marine's expression darkened noticeably. And it was pretty dark beforehand. "We have a situation."

My whole room tensed up instantly, and I hastily slipped on the closest clothes I could grab before planting my ass in my chair, everyone else settling in on the floor or against the wall.

"How bad?" I asked.

"Bad enough that everyone save Aquarius is present, and the only reason we're not waiting for her any longer is that we can't afford to," she answered. "I trust you've all been informed of the destruction of Picowana Island?"

I waited out the sounds of affirmation from everyone before speaking up myself. "Merry told us, yeah. Uninhabited island in the East Blue that got shredded down to the bedrock... and that I know nothing about." I grimaced in dread. "It's happened again, hasn't it?"

Hina nodded, her eyes closing in memory. "We've confirmed eight islands over the past month, with the five most recent destroyed within the past week," she said. "Tikoshi Island, the Isle of Peridox, the Bullion Atoll, Etonori Island, and Rendion Island. All levelled completely and utterly."
I could feel my teeth grinding at the revelation, but before I could say anything, I noticed our navigator had suddenly turned an ashen gray. "Nami? What's wrong?" I asked. "You know those islands or something?"

Nami nodded jerkily, slowly turning her horrified gaze towards us. "Etonori… and Rendion," she breathed. "Th-Those islands… they… they were inhabited."

We all stiffened at the news, the implication as obvious as a sledgehammer to the face.

Barto in particular hissed in a breath. "Capricorn, don't tell me—!

Hina's eyes squeezed even tighter together, her jaw visibly clenching. "…no survivors. I personally combed every square inch of both the islands and any wreckage left, but…" She shook her head. "We were lucky to even find remains that were intact, when we found them at all. I… seriously doubt we missed anything alive in that carnage."

A grave silence hung over us all as we digested that information.

"…Damn…" Lola swallowed heavily. "That… t-that's just…"

"Inexcusable!" T-Bone barked, his fists audibly slamming on a surface. "Such a senseless, grievous waste of life… and there are no clues to who or what is committing these atrocities!?"

Hina shook her—and by extension, Soundbite's—head. "Unfortunately, no. There are no traces, no identifying signs, nothing to tie the attacks to anyone. Yet the attacks have two consistencies that show that they are a pattern rather than a simple calamity. The first is the exceptionally thorough destruction." There was a pause, and her jaw clenched even tighter.

"And the second is an exception in the devastation. On Etonori and Rendion, every trace of civilization was wiped away, except for the docks and the nearby warehouses. Those were left intact."

"And unless I miss my guess…" Foxy spoke up, an uncharacteristically grim glower on his face. "Those warehouses were empty, weren't they?"

While Soundbite nodded, Merry tilted her head in confusion. "Er… empty docks?" she asked. "What's so important about that?"

"Because under normal circumstances, that shouldn't be the case," Dorry rumbled. "Any town with any sort of ongoing trade should have something in the warehouses, or something sitting on the docks ready to be moved there."

"But for the warehouses to be completely empty and the docks untouched, even after such devastation…" Broggy trailed off, letting everyone come to the obvious conclusion.

"Pirates…" Vivi said, her hands clenched into trembling fists. "The warehouses were spared during the carnage and then looted after the fact."

"Same tactics my crew used back in the old days," Foxy confirmed. "Less destruction and more looting, obviously, but still the same basic premise."

"In summary," Jonathan said. "We have a group of pirates—a word I only use because it means seafaring criminal," he hastily added when every one of us buccaneers present scowled at the implication. "Who are scouring islands down to the bedrock, and who have recently escalated to
attacking civilians and stealing everything of worth in the process, with no evidence of the attacks stopping any time soon. Worse, it appears that they're only beginning." Jonathan let out a weary sigh and shook his head. "I think it goes without saying that this is a threat we need to take very seriously."

For a long moment, the only sound was the creaking of the Sunny around us.

Finally, Vivi groaned and began to massage the bridge of her nose. "Anubis and Osiris below, I thought I'd left this kind of madness behind in Baroque Works…"

"Hell of a lot of trouble for a smash and grab, though, isn't it?" Zoro muttered to himself.

"Unfortunately, Capricorn must agree with Sidewinder," Hina stated. "But only on the first half of his statement. It was a lot of trouble… but Capricorn does not think the looting was the goal."

The mood darkened significantly as the statement sunk in.

"…what are you saying, Capricorn?" Tashigi breathed weakly.

"I think you know exactly what I mean. All of you," Hina explained, Soundbite's teeth grinding furiously on a cigarette he didn't have. "I will add that the ships in those ports escaped complete destruction by virtue of being underwater when the destruction began."

Silence, for all of a second, and then, there was thunder.

"They were aiming for the civilians," Nami growled, a dark malevolence in her eye, voice, and the pitch-black, streaked-with-lightning Eisen Cloud filling the room with the stench of ozone. "Their goal was to destroy the islands, and the looting was just a bonus."

"Like a few other islands I'm sure all of us could name," Smoker rumbled murderously.

As impossible as it seemed, the mood darkened even further at the reminder. "Bastards," Tashigi spat, her eyes gleaming venomously.

"Damn…" Apoo shook his head in disbelief. "I've clashed with some psychopaths before, but whoever's doing this has to be some seriously special brand of twisted."

SLAM! "ENOUGH!"

We—that is, we Straw Hats—all jumped at the impact that suddenly shook the room, and our attention was dragged over to Merry, her clenched fist planted against the wall and indignant rage wracking her small frame.

"Enough," she repeated, flames flickering in her eyes. Literally. "Enough talking about what these bastards did, enough speculating about what they're going to do. It's too late to save the dead, and the future doesn't matter because we are going to stop these bastards before they strike again. What matters here is the present: what's being done right now?"

Hina's response was to huff and glance aside. "At the moment, Capricorn and her men are analyzing the affected islands to see if we can turn up any more clues to a trail or culprits. Headquarters, meanwhile, has acknowledged the gravity of the threat, and made it the Navy’s top priority; any available battleships on this side of the Red Line are making all speed for the East Blue as we speak. But…" The energy seemed to drain Hina, and her gaze became downcast. "Even with all these resources… Capricorn… Capricorn has her doubts."
Another bout of uncomfortable silence fell over the room, but this one was swiftly filled by a harsh clap, and going by the fangs Soundbite was sporting, it looked like it was Bartolomeo who'd delivered it.

"Well, at least we ain't going into this shitshow alone, right?" he proudly declared. "All for one, one for all!"

"Huh?" T-Bone blinked in surprise. "Rooster, what are you—?"

"It's obvious, ain't it?" Barto snorted. "C'mon, I might be a bloodthirsty, booze-swilling, ship-bumping pirate, but the East Blue's still my turf too, ya know! I've still got the rest of my boys there, family! I'm not just gonna leave 'em out 'ta dry! I'll call 'em, get them to put their ears to the ground. Anybody doesn't feel like sharing with you white hats, they'll share with us!"

"Same here!" Foxy nodded in agreement. "I've got feelers all up and down Paradise, I'll reach out and see if they can turn anything up!"

"And we'll shake some trees too!" Dorry chimed. "Not only is Water 7 a major trade hub even with the blockade up, but we've had giants streaming in to join the crew! Something like this isn't easy to set up, so if there've been any rumblings over the past few years, we'll find out!"

"No matter what might come, we won't back down until the job is done and it's done right!" Broggy concurred, a loud thump indicating he'd pounded his chest. "That's the Giant Warrior way!"

"You… you all…" Tashigi breathed, moisture building in her eyes.

"What, you're surprised? Didn't expect this of us? APAPAPA!" Apoo cackled. "Of course you didn't! And why's that? Because we're pirates! We don't play by the rules, so you never know what we'll do! Apapapa!"

While there was a general rumble of agreement and support, I was less focused on what was being said and more on my crewmates. Or rather, on my crewmates' faces. Merry, Nami, Zoro… they all looked somewhat mollified by the support everyone else was giving, but even I could see the tension hidden below the surface. The worry.

And seeing that… I knew there was only one thing I could do.

"Chin up, Marine," I said with the utmost seriousness. "We've got a job to do."

Everyone turned to me in surprise. "I actually meant to talk to you about cutting down on the taunting," Merry breathed, a tinge of awe coloring her voice. "And you're doing it already."

"Did someone replace Ophiuchus's brain when we weren't looking?" Smoker said without a hint of jest.

"Oh, come on!" I snapped. "I will admit, shamelessly, that I love messing with people as much as Soundbite does—"

"You wi~sh," Soundbite sang tauntingly.

"—but you all know that I'm completely capable of turning serious if the situation demands it." I shook my head. "And believe me, the less often that happens, the better. You wouldn't—" I cut myself off, but then grimaced and turned to glare at my slyly grinning snail; there really wasn't a better way to phrase it. "Alright, fine. Say it."
"You wouldn't like me when I'm angry," Soundbite intoned.

"Yeah, that," I nodded at him before adopting a vicious grin. "And whoever's pulling this shit? They'll like us all even less when Sunny comes roaring over the horizon."

If my words hadn't before, that sentence locked everyone's attention on me.

"Cross, what—!?" Vivi started to splutter.

Started, because my raised hand shut her up. "Look," I said placatingly. "I know I'm not the captain, I know I technically can't make that call, but the East Blue is the home of a quarter of our crew, it's our alma mater, and damn it all, this is the exact kind of shit the Straw Hat Pirates do not let fly!" I punctuated my statement by slamming my fist on my desk… an action I sorely regretted, considering I hadn't put my gauntlets on. Still, even as I resisted the urge to curl up in a ball in favor of cradling my hand, I continued on. "I bet anything that if we bring this up to Luffy, he'll be all for it. From there… it's just a matter of sailing north, hopping the Calm Belt, and raising ten different kinds of hell until we're finished."

My crewmates exchanged looks of uncertainty, thought, and most of all, hope.

Still…

"But… what about our journey, Cross?" Nami asked hesitantly. "You really think we can just… start over?"

…oh, like hell I was letting that pass by me.

"Hmm…" I made a show of humming to myself, clapping my hands and tapping my index fingers against my chin in thought. "Yessss, I suppose that would be an issue, wouldn't it? Now if only, if only we were veterans of Paradise, experienced enough in these waters that we could travel these seas in basically no time at all, with no trouble whatsoever! And what a boon it would be if we just so happened to know some people whose ships can magically cross the Calm Belt at their leisure, without so much as a spot of trouble!" I stuck my grinning face in Soundbite's, raising my hand in a conspiratorial manner. "Hint-hint!" I stage-whispered.

"Cross is back~!" the whole of the Zodiac of the Damned sang-laughed.

"Asshole," Nami sighed, shaking her head.

"Should have seen that coming," Vivi snickered in response, which got our navigator shooting a half-hearted half-glare at both her and our guffawing helmsgirl.

"Mrrrgh… well, at least I'm not entirely on the receiving end for once…" Tashigi grinned, though one corner of her mouth was periodically twitching.

"Cross," Jonathan sternly interjected. "I hope you have an idea for how to get there other than using the Marines' sea prism stone hulls. Every ship in Paradise is under tight watch and it would be a nightmare explaining a missing one, at least until after this crisis is resolved. I'm not saying you can't rely on us, we won't hesitate if it's the only option. But if you do, it's going to be a lot of potential trouble; in the worst case, one of us may even have to go public with our rebellion."

"I have a couple of alternatives lined up, don't worry," I assured everyone. "Rooster, fill… Cobra or Anaconda in on the situation, whoever's available. We may need their help."

"Oh, no need for that."
The sudden shift in Bartolomeo's tone made everyone else wince in anticipation.

"Gimme a second," a gruff voice suddenly grunted.

SLAM-SLAM-SLAM-SLAM! "GAH!"

Followed shortly by the sound of Bartolomeo getting a four-man round of 'concussive maintenance' performed on him.

"I DIDN'T EVEN GET STARTED YET, PISSWHISKEY!" Barto roared at his first mate.

"I've got a lot of bars I like back there, asshole, you're not starting ever until this is over and done with!" Gin growled right back.

"...Fine," Barto snorted. "Asshole. Anyway, Cross, our crew got friendly with the Calm Belt's Sea Kings during the sack of Enies—long story, don't ask, still hammering out details on the whole thing—and I'm sure we could get you through the Calm Belt and back. Where do we meet up?"

"Well, let's not get ahead of ourselves," I said. "We need to tell the rest of the crew first."

"And figure out where the hell we are, too," Nami interjected.

I winced. "And... that, yeah."

"Fair 'nuff. We'll wait for your call. So unless anyone else's got something to say...?" Barto glanced left and right.

"Just this," Smoker said, glaring at everyone on the call. "Everybody watch their backs. Something tells me that we're venturing into something this world has never seen before."

There was a general rumble of agreement as everyone checked out to attend to their assigned tasks.

"See you on the flipside, Straw Hats," Barto saluted before he too departed, leaving us alone.

My confidants and I exchanged looks before letting out a myriad of sighs and groans and slumps to the nearest hard surface.

"So, we're facing an ocean-threatening disaster by genocidal pirates, completely and utterly outside of Cross's foresight," Merry summarized. "On a scale of Whiskey Peak to Enies Lobby, how much of a problem does that make this?"

"My guess?" I said around my molars gnawing on my cheek. "Thriller 2, Rotting Boogaloo."


"Let's just get this over with. At least there'll be a decent fight out of it," Zoro said as he climbed out, my other adjutants on his trail.

Before following him, I made a stop by my desk. "All hands on deck, emergency meeting," I said into my pipes. I was about to head out for real when a thought occurred to me and I moved back to the comms. "And when I say emergency, I mean worldwide emergency, not we're-out-of-prime-cuts emergency, so move your ass!" Then I headed out, the sound of doors opening echoing below the ladder I used to descend. Not ten seconds after I touched the deck, everyone was out with all eyes on me.
"Bad news from the rest of the world, Captain, and with your permission, we'd like to get the entire crew working on it," I said.

"Uh… how bad exactly?" Luffy queried.

"Bad," was all Zoro said.

That drew a surprised look from our captain, before he slapped on his dead-serious face and nodded at me.

Permission granted, I clapped my hands to get everyone's attention. "Alright, everyone, listen up! As of today, we've learned that the East Blue is officially in crisis mode. As we speak, islands are being levelled one by one." As I spoke, I began pacing back and forth. "Close to a dozen islands annihilated over the last month, all in the East Blue, and recently the islands have begun having people on them. Whoever's doing this—and I am confident that they are a who—they're only getting started."

The rest of the crew stared at me in horror.

"East Blue…" Usopp wheezed. "H-Have they hit—?"

"None of ours," Merry quickly assured him.

"Not yet," Nami pointed out.

Apparently, that did little to reassure our sniper. "Kaya…"

Sanji, meanwhile, glanced aside, no doubt thinking of his family at the Baratie. And going by the way Luffy tilted his hat down to shadow the newly born scowl on his face, he had some names in mind, too.

I gave everyone a moment to stew on that, and then raised a placating hand. "The Navy is looking into matters as we speak, giving the matter their full attention," I explained, before slowly looking at Luffy. "But the fact is, I seriously doubt anyone is satisfied with just that. Captain, I have a way of getting us through the Calm Belt and back, and as far as I'm aware we won't be missing anything truly critical if we were to take a detour. But… this is still a decision you, as the captain, need to make."

In an instant, the crew snapped into serious mode. All attention turned to our captain, and everybody waited in patient silence as he mulled matters over. Luffy didn't even need a minute before he looked straight up at us.

"Nami," he ordered firmly, steel glinting in his eyes. "Set a course. We're going back, to the East Blue!"

The mood shifted into bloodthirsty, edge-of-the-blade anticipation; I would have grinned if the cause was less grim, but at the moment all I could manage was to grit my teeth in determination. "Alright, first things first: Let's find out just where the… hell… we oh what the fuuuuuuck…"

Why did I trail off like that? Well, the absolutely ludicrous sight above me that had everyone staring in wide-eyed confusion probably had something to do with it.

Somewhere in the back of my stunned mind, I reached a simple conclusion.

Apparently, Paradise had absolutely no intention of letting the New World top its madness without
For all its insanity, the Grand Line was still a vast ocean; some areas made the worst parts of the Blues look tranquil, while others would have been right at home in said Blues, and could be even considered normal. One such island, Barcanallia Island, was equal parts forest and town, unremarkable in all aspects, with a simple economy based on the crops and game the inhabitants could bring in.

Islands such as this were truly ideal locations, whether to kick up your feet and relax in peace, or to get some time away from the prying eyes of either the public or one's superiors.

"Hmmmph…"

Case in point.

"How vexing…" exhaled the frowning frame of Captain T-Bone over the sound of a whetstone grinding the edge of his blade.

Seagirl Recruit Yoko winced, both in response to her superior's exhalation, and in response to the trio of ridiculously overpowered ex-assassins kicking her mega-sized insectoid best friend into the ground.

And all without using their Zoan forms, at that!

"Sorry, Captain, Boss still isn't used to fighting anyone close to his level, let alone three at once," Yoko apologized, glancing back at him from the fight that was going on and then blinking. "Oh, sorry, did you mean your sword?"

"No, neither the blade nor the brawl is what is troubling me, Yoko," the Captain sighed, continuing to grind at the whetstone. "What troubles me is the exact same issue that has been troubling you for the past week."

Yoko's mood visibly dropped at the reminder. "The Straw Hats."

"Indeed," T-Bone nodded solemnly. "Any period of silence from Jeremiah Cross is worrying in and of itself, but given the circumstances of the silence this time around…"

"I-I'm sure they're alright!" the young girl hastily stated, though her expression made it clear that she was as much trying to raise her own spirits as his. "I-I mean, I know that last SBS sounded pretty bad and… and sure, they got their asses kicked pretty hard, but—!…but… ah…” Yoko slowly lowered her head, a miserable grimace on her face. "I'll stop talking now, sir."

T-Bone sighed and shook his head, his focus back on his attempt to distract himself. The Straw Hats would bounce back… surely they would.

Yoko, for her part, returned her attention to Boss, which did a lot more to distract her than T-Bone's whetstone did him. She had learned of CP9's existence from Cross, but the full story of what was now Jormungandr only became known to her when she witnessed the most terrifying man she'd ever seen bring a report to T-Bone regarding CP4. Said man was among the three Zoans sparring with her close friend, whose scarred carapace was growing even more scarred from the barrages, his horns, feelers, and fire struggling to keep up with the limber assassins.

Yoko winced as a blade of wind put a particularly large dent into her friend's side. His next molting
was going to be something to witness.

And once again, this was without using their Devil Fruit powers. She thanked her lucky stars three
times a day that they were on her side… or at least that Lucci considered the hell T-Bone would give
him more trouble than knocking her block off would be worth.

Yoko shivered and chased that particularly dismal thought away, and instead cast a despairing glance
skyward. "To think, I'm actually starting to miss that damn suicidal idiot lightening the mood with his
insanity," she groaned. Then she gained a thoughtful expression. "Damn it, Cross, where the hell are
you?"

T-Bone let out another sigh before sheathing his newly sharpened sword and rising to his feet.
"While I share your concerns, Seagirl, our duties yet remain. For the moment, we must concentrate
on the task at hand. That being said, where is… ah, there's Knalf."

The Warrant Officer jogged up to his commanding officer and hastily skidded to a halt before giving
him a salute and breathless report. "Captain T-Bone! Situation in the town square! You're going to
want to see this immediately, sir!"

The two Marines exchanged a concerned look, and then Yoko blew out a sharp whistle.
Immediately, the brawl ceased, Boss splitting off from his opponents to fly over to her… while his
erstwhile opponents vanished into the shadows.

Yoko shuddered at the sight. "Said it before, saying it again: so creepy."

"You could learn to do it as well, you know," T-Bone remarked, a slight smirk tugging at his mouth.
The 180 was immediate. "Then in that case, so cool!" Yoko cheered. "But for now!" The girl
clambered up onto Boss Kabuto's back and slapped at his shell. "I'll settle for the express! Let's go-
go-go!"

The colossal beetle immediately zoomed off, leaving T-Bone to shake his head in amusement before
jogging after them.

The source of Knalf's urgency was obvious once they reached the town's square. The locals had all
congregated around a pair of rather unexpected sights in their town. The first was mundane enough:
a large projection screen that had most definitely not been present a few minutes prior. The second,
however, was far more unusual: a large, person-sized crate made of metal just randomly sitting in the
town's square.

"Ooookay…" Yoko said as she walked around the crate, one hand scratching under her cap. "Thiiiis
isn't something you see every day…"

"Where did these items come from, Officer?" Captain T-Bone queried.

"Uh… I actually think they've been here for awhile now, sir. See this?" The Warrant Officer
indicated several pieces of splintered, shattered scattered around the screen and crate. "If I remember
right, there were some wooden crates here when we docked yesterday. We've asked around, and
apparently they were first seen here all of three days ago. However, nobody can seem to recall
who left them there, just that they were left lying around, and then they suddenly burst open a few
minutes ago! That screen unfolded, and the other crate… well, exposed the other crate. The metal
one, I mean."

"Hrm…" T-Bone scratched his chin, looking the box over. "And I take it you haven't had any luck
opening it?"
"Can't even move it!" Knalf huffed in exasperation. "The damn thing's been bolted to the ground!"

"Oh, but we can look into it! There's an opening here, see?" Yoko piped up, pointing out the small opening, on the side facing the screen. Her report made, the girl stood on her tiptoes to try and peer into the slot. "Now, let's see just what's going on in this—GAH!" The second she got a look inside, Yoko jerked back and fell on her ass in shock.

"Seagirl Yoko! Are you alright?" one of the nearby soldiers asked, helping the shell-shocked girl sit up straight.

"Uh… kinda-sorta?" she said, fumbling to re-straighten her cap. "I, uh… you know that saying, about looking into the abyss and all that?"

"Yes…?" T-Bone tentatively said.

Yoko looked up at him, eyes wild. "Well, I don't know if it's the abyss in there, but something sure looked back at me!"

"You mean there's someone in there!?"

"Er, no, I don't think so!" Yoko clarified. "Like I said, some-thing. I'm pretty certain it wasn't human. Ah, hey, you!" She pointed at the soldier holding her up. "Help me up, would you? I need another look."

The Marine hastily complied, giving Yoko a literal hand up so that she could peer into the crate again.

"Yup, definitely something! A familiar something!" Yoko reported. "There's a Transponder Snail in here!"

"…you're serious," T-Bone deadpanned.

"I do my best to act professional and I've been staring at snails for a week, I'm both serious and certain!" was the answer, accompanied by an imperious sniff. That lasted all of two seconds before Yoko glanced away with a sheepish expression. "Thooough I'll admit, I had no idea they could get this big!"

T-Bone narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "Wait, big—? Are you saying that it fills the entire crate?"

"Um…" Yoko looked back into the crate and nodded in confirmation. "Yup! He is a big sucker! And…" She took a tentative whiff of the air and promptly reeled back. "Whoo, he certainly smells like he's been in here for awhile! But why—?"

FLASH!

"GAH!" Yoko howled as she fell back again, clawing at her eyes. "AGAIN? SERIOUSLY!?!"

"Compose yourself, Seagirl!"

"Grgh, s-sorry sir," Yoko grumbled, blinking her eyes in an effort to rid herself of the spots plaguing her vision. "Just got surprised, is all. What hit me?"

"That is a question we'd all like an answer to."

In lieu of questioning her superior, Yoko followed his gaze once her vision cleared up. The light was still coming from the box, and she turned around to find that the container—or rather the
Transponder Snail within—was projecting an image onto the projector screen that had accompanied it.

The image displayed on the screen was unlike anything that most of those watching had ever seen or experienced. Visual Snails were rarely used to begin with, but for those that did use them, there was a certain expectation: if the snail sending the transmission wasn't stationary, then its movements were no faster than expected from an average human. And, of course, that meant that one could expect to see no significant and abrupt change in elevation.

This broadcast blew all of those expectations out of the water; the projector screen was showing a bird's eye view of a lush jungle, bobbing and weaving of the viewpoint enough to threaten the watchers with dizziness or loss of lunch. Then the view began closing in on the jungle, the point of view coming to rest in a branch of one of the treetops, before surveying the surrounding area.

Then, as the view peered down into a small pond beneath the tree, the audience received the answer to the first question on their minds. The reflection in the water showed a dark-colored bird of prey with what looked like a mane of gold around its neck—a golden eagle, as muttered by a local birdwatcher (“I keep telling you, it's 'Ornithologist'!” "Shut it, Jerry!") in the audience. The eagle wore a peculiar harness around its torso, which kept a Transponder Snail in a glass case attached to its chest.

While that answered one question, several still remained, but no more answers seemed to be forthcoming; from what the audience could see, it seemed to just be giving a good perspective on nature. The lush trees, the serene pool, the blossoming plants, the sounds of wildlife… though said sounds made it seem like there were rather ferocious animals out there. And they were growing louder, with crashing sounds coming across the connection.

Then, all at once, the foliage began shaking, which intensified for a few moments before it split apart, and out ran—

"RUUUUN!"

"LUFFY!" Yoko cried, jerking forward.

And indeed, it was the captain of the Straw Hat Pirates in all his glory. His tarnished, bedraggled and mud-caked glory, mind you. Sure, his outfit was a bit different than most knew, having swapped out his red vest for a blue one and donned an aviator's cap beneath his eponymous hat, but it was definitely him.

And yet, also, unlike his usual cheerful self, Luffy was wearing a somewhat panicked look as he shot out from the underbrush and ran across the clearing as though hell were on his ass.

"They're right behind us!" the world-famous pirate shouted over his shoulder.

Seconds later, he received a response in the form of a blur shooting out of the section of jungle he'd emerged from—

SLAM! "GAH!"

And slamming into a nearby tree, where the blur coalesced into a physical and… rather irritable form. "Yeah, like I hadn't noticed!"

[Boss D!] Boss Kabuto warbled in shock.

They were two-for-two on Straw Hat sightings, as the impromptu projectile indeed turned out to be
the captain of the Straw Hat's Dugong-composed guard. The amphibious Boss had also undergone a fashion makeover, with a leather, fang-embossed fedora ("It's called an aussie—!" "No one wants to hear it, ya damn hat-lover!" "That's 'millinophile' to you!" "I SAID CRAM IT!") on his skull in place of his usual bandanna, which he'd tied around his neck to act as a camo neckerchief. He'd also put on a leathery vest and equipped a pair of crocodile-scaled leather bracers.

"Argh, damn bastards hit like Sea Kings!" Boss Dugong growled, shoving himself out of the tree trunk he'd been slammed into and rubbing his skullplate irritably.

"And they've got the attitude to match!"

"THEY'RE NOT LETTING UP!"

"Cross," T-Bone said with narrowed eyes, not particularly surprised at the third and final person that charged into the clearing and skidded to a halt; animals speaking was a tell-tale sign that the Voices of Anarchy weren't far away.

The third and apparently final member of the group was particularly disheveled, his eyes frantic and his head on a swivel. He'd tied his hoodie around his waist, turned his cap around so that it was facing backwards, and had donned a black tank top that featured the outline of a black horse rearing up in front of a pair of golden scales that had the words 'BLACK' and 'FAMINE' placed in its left and right dishes, respectively.

"Eesh, they look like they've gone through hell…" Yoko winced sympathetically.

"But the question is, just where the hell is that hell?!

"THEN WE GOTTA KEEP RUNNING!" Luffy shouted over his shoulder, waving his arm for his crew to follow and jogging in place with obvious impatience.

"YEAH, THAT'S GONNA BE HARD, REAL HARD! WE'RE coming up on THE EDGE AGAIN!" Soundbite announced through a terrified grimace.

"Son of a bitch, again!?" Boss growled, dragging his flippers down his face. "At least tell me there's somewhere to land this time, I'm still feeling the burn from the last near miss!"

Yoko exchanged confused looks with T-Bone and mouthed the word 'land?', to which the Captain could only respond with a confused shake of his head.

Meanwhile, Soundbite glanced side to side frantically before nodding in confirmation. "We're good!"

"Then let's go!" Boss shouted out, charging after Luffy.

"After you, Captain!" Cross shouted, following after his crewmates as well.

Luffy, at this point, was already deep in the surrounding underbrush. "COME ON!" he roared
All of a sudden, the viewpoint lurched as the video-snail's mount took off from its perch and soared after the Straw Hats. The shift in perspective allowed the viewers to watch the Straw Hats charge straight towards a shockingly sudden cutoff in the landscape that lead clean into the void.

"Are they seriously going to jump off a cliff!??" one of the island's civilians demanded.

"This would not be anywhere even close to the craziest thing the Straw Hats have ever done," Yoko deadpanned in response.

"HERE WE GO!" Luffy roared as he jumped over the edge.

Boss punched the air as he jumped after his captain. "LET'S DO THIS!"

"THIS IS GONNA SUCK SO HARD!" Cross wailed from the rear.

Once the pirates leapt, the snail soared over the edge after them, and everyone watching was struck dumb.

"…I stand corrected," Yoko breathed, her eyes glued to the screen. "This? This takes the cake."

"No kidding… Freaking hell, no one told me that Devil Fruits were such great tools for real estate," another Marine muttered. T-Bone made a mental note to pursue that line of thought later.

But for now, he was a little too awestruck by the fact that the Straw Hats were jumping off of not only a cliff, but an island, and that they were falling towards neither the ocean, nor the clouds… but instead yet another island that they could see was floating in the heavens. One island amongst many, even! And it wasn’t a group of sky islands composed of island-clouds, oh no; it was all dirt and stone and lots of lush jungle, simply levitating in the air.

And that was all that the watchers needed to see to understand exactly what was going on, and what had happened with the Straw Hats over the last week.

"They're… trapped in the sky…" a Marine breathed in disbelief.

"It's like there's a whole other world, just… floating up there!" a civilian concurred.

Captain T-Bone frowned in thought, orders to his men on his lips, when he stiffened in realization and hastily grabbed the hilt of his sword. "Sorry about this," he hissed apologetically before whipping his blade out—

CRACK! "Gwowowooooh…"

—and downing Boss Kabuto with a single smooth swing that struck the back of all the titan-beetle's legs at once.

"BOSS!" Yoko cried in panic, hastily running up to her friend and clutching his horn comfortably. "Oh my—Captain, why on earth would you do that!?"

"For his own good, Seagirl," T-Bone sighed regretfully. "Look at your friend. What do you see?"

"I—I—! He's…" Yoko looked into her large friend's eyes, and audibly swallowed at the haunted look in them. "He… was about to bolt, wasn't he?"

"And most likely leave a trail of destruction in his wake, yes," T-Bone nodded. "I'm sorry, Seagirl, but I did what I had to do, for his sake as much as ours."
"Oh, no… I remember this…" Yoko breathed in terror. "Boss… h-he was like this back when I first met him, afraid, panicking… b-but why—?! Damn it, could this get any worse!?!"

"Oh, holy shit!"

Yoko jumped at the sudden cry, and looked around. Most of the rest of the audience was doing the same, and soon zeroed in on the man scanning the sky with binoculars.

"What is wrong with you, Jerry? This isn't the time for—"

"Transponder Snails have a limited range, idiot! Adult-Audios might be able to go worldwide, but Visuals can only go so far! That means that that floating archipelago and the Straw Hats are somewhere close by!"

"No, it doesn't… there's another option."

A soft yet scared voice redirected everyone's attention once more.

"Yoko?" T-Bone asked his young subordinate, concern written on his features.

The young Marine tugged nervously at her collar at all the attention. "There's one way a Transponder Snail can hit way above its own weight class, remember?"

T-Bone's already gaunt expression paled as he put the remaining pieces together.

"And we know who has it," Yoko continued dully. "And he wouldn't use it to just broadcast this to one island. Unless I'm way off the mark…" The girl trailed off in favor of watching the the Straw Hats plummet towards the impossible canopy floating below them.

"That bastard is putting this show on for the world," T-Bone finished with a disgusted glower, turning on his heel and marching off. "Knalf, Yoko, gather the troops and return to the ship. Headquarters will be calling with our marching orders any second, and I have news to share with them…" He shot a grim look at his insectoid subordinate, who was still shuddering and warbling in terror.

"News with disturbing implications."

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"Geez, this is nuts! Easily the craziest shit Luffy's ever gotten involved in, no question."

"What about the time him and the other two monsters fell down that rabbit hole and swore they found a land of fairy tales and wonder?"

"First, we proved they just got high off the shroom-spores they kicked up when they fell. And second—!"

\textit{WHAM!}

"GAH!"

"SECOND, YOU BASTARDS HAD BETTER GET BACK TO WORK BEFORE I POUND YOUR SKULLS INTO YOUR CHESTS!"

"YES, DADAN!"
Dadan snorted furiously as two of her mooks employees canned the chattering and got back to serving the sudden rush of customers her newborn bar was experiencing.

"They are right, you know."

The bandit queen sighed and slapped a hand to her face. "Et tu, Makino?"

The kindly barkeeper gave her new friend a smile, though that didn't slow the stream of refreshments. "Well, in all fairness, this is pretty high on the scale of madness that Luffy has been involved in, no?"

"Mmph... yeah, that's for damn sure," Dadan grunted in acknowledgement. Her eyes drifted up to the impromptu screen she'd set up in her bar, Luffy and friends still freefalling. "Still, that's no excuse for those morons to squander good business!"

"Speaking of which..." Mayor Woop Slap turned in his chair to eye the metal crate from which the show was projecting. "Where did you get that Visual Snail, anyway? Odd enough that one showed up in our village, but I don't see how you could have gotten one!"

"Oh, it's not ours!" Dogra piped up while he swung by the bar to pick up another tray of drinks. "We, uh, found it in the main plaza of Goa Kingdom. It wasn't doing them any good, sooo—!

"Say no more!" Woop Slap yelped almost desperately. And luckily for him, Jeremiah Cross chose that moment to say something, effectively aborting any more incriminating comments.

"SOUNDBYTE!" Cross shouted, so as to be heard over the wind rushing around him. "HOW'S IT LOOKING DOWN THERE?!"

"Uhhh..." The snail crossed its eyes as it stared down—up?—at the ground. "Good news, it sounds pretty calm, SO MAYBE WE CAN CATCH OUR—!

"BWOOOOH! BWOOOOH!"

The bar-goers jumped in shock when... some kind of horn-like sound bellowed out.

"What on earth—?!" Makino wondered.

"NOT A-FREAKING-GAIN!" Soundbite wailed mournfully. "THEY JUST raised the alarm, WE'RE FALLING INTO A MEATGRINDER!"

"Tcheh! Well, at least things won't be boring!" Boss growled. One flipper slammed into the other, and he flipped into an upright position. "Alright, Cross, I'll help slow you down and—!"

"FWOOM!"

"—GAHAHAHAHAHAaaaah!"

 Abruptly and without any apparent catalyst, the Dugong was blasted away from his crewmates by a fat load of nothing. The watchers blinked dumbly, including the ones on the screen. Cross snapped out of it first.
"OH, YOU HAVE GOT TO BE KIDDING ME!" Cross screamed, flailing his arms in terror at the fast-approaching foliage. "LUUUUFFYYYY!"

"HANG ON!" The Rubber-Man angled himself so that he was positioned below the anarchist. "ALRIGHT, GUM-GUM!"

"They're going to crash!" Woop Slap exclaimed.

"We're talking about Luffy here, old man. You know, the rubber man?" Magra drawled.

"And the human being who isn't rubber?!

Magra cocked an eyebrow at the mayor. "Aren't you the one always harping on about how the Straw Hats should just hurry up and bite the big one?!"

"…fair point. LET HIM SPLAT, LUFFY!"

"Mayor!" Makino exclaimed, scandalized. Thankfully, Luffy chose that moment to do what he did best and directly counteract the wishes of those who wished him and his ill.

"BALLOON!"

Mere meters from the unforgiving ground, Luffy's body distended to a massive size. When Cross slammed into him, rather than ending up flatter than a pancake, he simply sank into Luffy's inflated flesh.

…and then he kept sinking, deeper and deeper.

"Uh… didn't something like this happen with Ace?" Mogra questioned nervously.

Dadan's only response was to slap a hand to her face.

Apparently Cross had caught on by as well, as his flailing only intensified within the folds of his captain's body. "EXH'LE! EXH'LE! L'FFY, YU HAF TO—!"

BOING!

"—EAAAAARGH!"

"…That almost looks like fun," someone muttered.

The view followed Cross as he flew into the air. The onlookers watched as he flailed a hand in his belt, which once he managed to do so shot out a grappling hook that lodged in a nearby branch, and altered Cross's flightpath.

"…Where does he get those wonderful toys?"

"Prolly the long-nose sniper guy and the cyborg, remember?"

"Oh, right."

The new flight path took Cross up through the foliage, and when he hit the peak of his arc, he grabbed onto a nearby vine, detached his grapple and swung even further. Two more vines later, he finally let go and landed on a particularly thick tree branch.

Well… 'landed' was a bit of a misnomer. He still had a notable amount of velocity left over from his
flight, and so when he touched down he was forced to keep running in an effort to bleed out his momentum, lest he wipe out entirely.

It was through no small feat of balance and quick reflexes that Cross managed to stay upright through his little run, jumping over several gaps between the branches. Eventually, however, Cross's luck ran out: the trail of branches suddenly broke off into a sharp drop, and Cross still had momentum to burn.

The world-infamous pirate tried his best to brake himself, and he almost managed it, too, arms cartwheeling as he desperately tried to balance at the edge of the precipice. However, it was not enough: the panic in Cross's eyes was obvious as he lost his balance, started to pitch forward—

**CHOMP!** "GRK!"

And suddenly, that fate ceased to be as Cross's cannon leapt off his back, assumed his hybrid-form, and sank his teeth into the seat of Cross's pants, holding his master just shy of the drop.

Soundbite—who'd been shivering in terror on his partner's shoulder—allowed himself to relax, his eyestalks drooping in relief. "**Hooooly SHIT** that was cl—MRPH!?"

"Shhhh!" Cross hushed furiously, one finger pressed to his lips while his other hand clamped Soundbite's mouth shut. In response to his snail's confused look, Cross slowly used his free finger to point downwards.

The snail looked in the direction his friend indicated and stiffened in terror.

The bar collectively blinked in surprise, minds a-whirl trying to figure out what could cause such a reaction.

"Well, looks like something's got Cross spooked," Magra stage-whispered.

"Yeah, but what?" Dogra replied.

As if on cue, the Visual Snail's view panned down to the jungle floor, revealing that the object of the pirates' terror was—!

Dadan blinked in disbelief. "That kid gives the Marines a verbal black eye every week with a grin…" she said slowly. "And yet he's absolutely terrified of a bunny rabbit?"

"In all fairness, it's, uh… a very big bunny?" Makino tried.

And indeed, it was quite the large rabbit, at least as large as a human being, but size aside the critter appeared to be your average, everyday rabbit, with its white fur flecked with brown spots that rippled as it hopped about the jungle floor.

"Hey, c'mon, rabbits are tough little things!" one of their Gray Terminal customers shouted. "Seriously, Dan, you really don't remember that cat that got gutted by one a few years back?"

Dadan was about to respond, but before she could, the sound of trees cracking and the earth shattering belted out across the connection.

In short order, the wall of foliage suddenly split apart and disgorged something that looked like the unholy union of a bull elephant and a wild boar. The beast was moving at full speed, squealing in fury, trees flying with every swing of its tusks.
And yet, Cross was looking at it with an expression of horror, not terror. It was a subtle difference, but it was a difference. "That stupid hunk of pork," he miserably whimpered.

For one more blissful second, the bar was completely confused about Cross's anxiety.

And then the rabbit's head snapped up and all hell broke loose. It was as if they'd blinked, and then the rabbit's foot was carrying the boar down to the ground, head-first. The resulting impact made everyone wince, and the rabbit followed that up by repeatedly hopping up and down on the boar's head with great speed and force, which only made things worse.

While it was doing that, some poor soul with a somewhat weaker stomach glanced away, and instead saw a massive pawprint smashed into the bark of a nearby tree, and it all came together.

"He… He must have jumped and pushed off the tree!" the bandit gurgled. "And then…"

With a final crunch, the boar's head lost all cohesion and was reduced to the consistency of a thick gravy, oozing out from under the rabbit's hind paws and giving the brown spots on its coat a whole new level of uncomfortable context. Only then did the rabbit stop hopping, though it did throw in one last kick to the boar's unmoving carcass.

"Yeah, that."

In the wake of the boar's untimely and gruesome demise, the jungle was silent… up until a twig suddenly snapped and both the killer rabbit and Visual Snail whipped their heads up to stare at Cross, who'd frozen mid-retreat, one eye twitching furiously.

"Oh, come on…" Cross whispered in disbelief. "You cannot think I'm a better meal than pork purée down there!"

Apparently the rabbit disagreed, and quite strenuously, given how the monster-rodent's jaw suddenly unhinged to unveil a set of teeth worthy of a bear trap, accompanied by an air-shaking roar.

Soundbite's eyestalks hung mournfully. "Here we go again…"

"Less talking, more BOOK IT!" Lassoo howled in terror, leaping onto his partner-in-chief's back as Cross turned and did just that, just barely de-assing before the rabbit's feet utterly pulped the wood.

"I AM REALLY GETTING SICK AND TIRED OF GETTING ATTACKED BY KILLER RODENTS!" Cross wailed. Splinters flew around him, the rabbit hot on his heels and plowing through everything in its path.

"Technically speaking, IT'S ONLY EVER BEEN the one, hasn't it?"

"Four times by the otter," Cross snarled, throwing up four fingers, followed by his thumb two seconds later. "Once by the pigeon—which is essentially a rat with wings, so I'm counting it—"

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Elsewhere in the Grand Line, Hattori was struck with a sudden urge to murder someone.

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"—and now a rabbit!" The pirate jabbed a final finger skyward. "That's six! That means I can count it on two hands! It's too much, I tell you, too much!"
Makino could feel the sweatdrop hanging on the side of her head. "That boy has the most horrible luck with small animals, doesn't he?"

"Betcha he earned every one of those confrontations!" Mayor Woop Slap sniffed proudly.

"Now, Mayor—!"

"Achoo!" Cross sneezed mid-leap, precariously landing on the next branch in the canopy he'd been aiming for. "Guh, of all the times for someone to talk about me—WORGH!" The scream was accompanied by a hasty duck under the rabbit's teeth, which instead clamped onto the nearest trunk and tore out a chunk you could've carved a chair out of.

Woop Slap shot Makino a triumphant grin, to which the bartendress could only respond with a sigh and weary roll of her eyes.

"UWAAAAAAH!"

At that familiar cry, any further argument was dropped in favor of going back to the screen. "Luffy!"

Cross snapped his gaze downward, past the rest of the canopy's branches to the jungle floor below. "Captain!"

To the onlookers' shock, Luffy ran up beneath the Voices of Anarchy, pursued by a crocodilian… entity. The massive reptile was particularly squat, looking as though it had been squashed flat, but it was still large enough to casually bite off the Lord of the Coast's head.

For the moment, however, the beast appeared to be content with nomming Luffy's head instead.

"CRAP-CRAP-CRAP-CRA—! Oh, hey, you guys are still alive!" Luffy's… swearing, for lack of a better word, cut off mid-word and he shot a careless smile up at his friends as he zipped past. "That's nice! How's it going, Cross?"

"That idiot…" Dadan groaned, the base of her palm grinding into her forehead.

Apparently Cross was of the same opinion. "You dumb son of a—GRK!" Cross only narrowly threw himself forward and out of reach of his pursuer's snapping jaws. "Getting chased by a killer rabbit! You!?"

"Giant crocodile!" Luffy jerked his thumb over his shoulder, chuckling. "It looks really weird, too!"

"That's because aside from being flat, THAT THING'S A CAIMAN!" Soundbite blandly informed him.

"Huh, really?" Luffy sent a curious look over his shoulder before scratching his head with an apologetic chuckle. "Shishishi! Whoops, my bad!"

"Don't you morons think you're kind of missing the point here?!" Cross snapped.

"Hmph… Well, this is nostalgic, isn't it?" Dadan said calmly.

"Indeed. Brings me back to the days when those brats challenged all the beasts around here, and then almost losing their heads for it," Dogra responded with equal calmness.

"Mmm… But…" Makino chimed in, but unable to hide a clear tone of unnerve in her voice. "This seems… worse than Mt. Corvo, doesn't it? I mean…"
"You're right," Dadan grunted in agreement, swirling her bottle. "There's something wrong with that place. Something… off."

"GRAORGH!"

The caiman flung its head back and bellowed, stomping forward through the underbrush. It was joined by a loud skittering sound, a centipede the size of the Lord of the Coast and colored a lurid red bursting out of the trees in an attempt to shove aside the massive caiman still in pursuit.

'Tried' being the key word.

Even as several bandits fainted, traumatic memories of normal-sized centipedes leaping to their minds, the pursuing caiman twisted its head and slammed its jaws down on the centipede's carapace, shattering the insect's shell in a single decisive blow. Then, without breaking its stride, the gator swung its head to the side in an almost dismissive manner, casting aside the broken insect.

At the sight of that, Dadan growled slammed her bottle on the bar. "And that's what's wrong. The rabbit didn't try and eat the boar, and the gator didn't try to eat the bug. These… These things, these monsters… they're not fighting to eat, like normal animals."

"They're fighting simply to fight, is what you're getting at," Mayor Woop Slap snarled, his knuckles white and trembling around the head of his cane.

With that lovely revelation, a grim silence fell over the bar as they watched the chase rage on.

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"How much deep-fried alligator meat could that beast give us? Owner Zeff, you think we could mail order that stuff if there's anything left of it when the Straw Hats are done and Sanji fillets it?" Carne asked.

"It would be a waste of good ingredients if we didn't try, though chances are that Straw Hat'll just eat it all like usual," Zeff replied, frowning. "Maybe I'll write up a request and hand it off to the News Coo when it shows up. But meanwhile—"

"Back to work, got it!" the chef yelped, busying himself with the meal tickets.

Meanwhile, on the screen, the Straw Hats were making no progress away from their pursuers. Considering that fact, the question on the minds of the patrons and chefs was why the strongest rookie pirate of their generation, the man who had smashed Don Krieg's armor like glass, wasn't fighting the beast at all.

Case in point, one steak-eating patron, who said, "The meat-loving monkey should be smashing that thing into the ground and eating its corpse." To emphasize the point, he drove his knife into his steak.

"Yeah, you're right," another nearby customer agreed. "So what's stopping him?"

With the foliage suddenly bursting open, the question was shelved, and everyone watched a familiar dugong to drop onto a branch above Cross.

"ALRIGHT!" the amphibian bellowed, pounding his 'knuckles' "Sorry for the delay, but I'm here now! Let's kick some tail and get moving!"

"Boss! Are we glad to see—!"
"FWOOM!"

The watchers' eyes twitched as Boss suddenly flew away again.

"...OK, that's just not fair," Lassoo huffed.

"Sonnuva—ah, damn it!" Cross cursed, both on account of his backup being blasted and the fact that there was an upcoming turn in the foliage. "Luffy, I'm heading right!"

"Eh? Ah, man, and I've gotta go left! Ah, well!" The captain laughed as he sped up to keep ahead of his reptilian pursuer. "I'll try and lose this guy! Good luck, Cross!"

"Same to you, Captain!"

And with that the pirates split apart, with the Visual Snail's mount choosing once more to follow Cross through the canopy.

For a long minute, the chase remained as tense as ever, with Cross running and leaping from branch to branch, and the killer rabbit pulping a path through said branches.

Then, inevitably, Cross missed a step, his boot hitting a patch of moss instead of bark. He sprawled forward, luckily landing on a particularly overgrown branch but unluckily in an undignified heap.

Or would have, if he hadn't turned his landing into a roll, from which he popped into a kneeling position and took aim at the mega-lagomorph, prompting it to freeze up barely a meter away.

The air was electric, the entire restaurant holding its breath in anticipation for whatever was to come. Breathing slowed, sweat rolled...

And then a twig softly snapped in the distance and the combatants moved.

The rabbit leapt forwards, Cross fired—

"Kero." THWAP!

And then something blurry shot out of the air, slamming into the rabbit and knocking it out of the screen, before retracting both itself and the rabbit up at the same blur-inducing speed.

As one, Baratie blinked in befuddlement.

Cross was right there with them, blinking in confusion as Lassoo's round exploded in the distance. Soundbite, however, did not join him. He was staring upward, and shaking in terror under his shell.

"Crooooss..." he whispered miserably.

The terrified tone shook Cross out of his confusion, and scrunched his eyes shut as he slowly craned his head back. "This is gonna suck, this is gonna suck, this is gonna—Guh..." One could almost see Cross's stomach dropping out from him when he cracked his eyes open and actually go a look at the enemy. "...damn it."

The view slowly followed Cross' gaze, revealing that perched high above them was a frog. It was green with a black discoloration on its back, titanic in size, and menacing in appearance. Kicking rabbit legs hung outside of its lips, demonstrating quite clearly that Cross had only a few seconds before he had his place on the food chain reevaluated.

"Hey, Patty, whaddaya think you'd make of that one?" one of the cooks called out.
"Legs are obvious, check for eggs! Now hurry up and get over here! Table six's order is up!" the larger chef ordered.

Meanwhile, the time Cross had before his evolutionary re-evaluation shortened considerably as the frog gave the rabbit a final munch. It then swallowed the rabbit whole, its gaze staying on Cross as its chest distended with a sonorous "kero".

Cross's eye twitched furiously. "Ah, shi—!

THWACK!

"—GAH!" the pirate grunted in exertion as he only just managed to leap away from the blur of a tongue that smashed into where he'd been moments before.

Unlike before, however, Cross's immediate response was to heft Lassoo and aim it at the frog. "I don't normally go for frog legs, but just this once! CANI-CANNON!"

B-B-BLAM!

The gun spat out a trio of cannonballs at the titan-amphibian, and they would have neatly roasted the beast.

"Orekekek."

If only they didn't suddenly detonate well away from the target.

Even worse, this was not the result of the frog's own actions. Instead, the restaurant was treated to the revelation that the dark discoloration on the amphibian's back… wasn't a discoloration after all.

As their customers recoiled in no small amount of terror and horror, one of the Baratie's chefs shot a questioning look at their comrades. "Hey, Carne, how do you think you'd—?"

"HIT IT WITH A STICK!" the shorter chef cried out from beneath the pot he was cowering under.

Cross was right there with him, gurgling in horror at the clicking, chitin-covered entity that was resting on the frog's back, claws snapping and tail waving. "I thought that it was supposed to be in the scorpion's nature to kill the frog!"

"Nature over nurture… or would it be THE OTHER WAY AROUND?" Soundbite wondered, right before his pupils suddenly dilated. "EITHER WAY, AM-SCRAY!"

"IGH-RAY!" Cross belted out, spinning on his heel and dashing away before the frog's tongue could snap him up.

The frog responded with a ruthless, bone-rattling "KERO!", leaping up to grasp another branch and lashing its tongue out in pursuit.

What followed was essentially a remix on Cross's prior escape. Granted, due to its mass, the frog wasn't quite as fast or maneuverable as the rabbit had been, but its lightning-fast tongue more than made up for it. And while it served for a perfectly stationary target in between its tree-to-tree leaps, the scorpion it was illogically symbiotic with acted as the perfect shield by blocking any retaliation Cross attempted.

"Is this what the Straw Hats have been up to for the last week?" one of the patrons incredulously demanded. "How the heck are they still going strong in this mess?"
"Well, Luffy and the Dugong are monsters, obviously," Zeff blandly informed the customer as he set his dish down. "Also, your soup's ready."

"Ah, thank you!" The patron picked up his spoon before pausing as a thought hit him. "But, uh… that explains those two, but isn't Cross, well, normal?"

Zeff graced his patron with a flat look. "Sir, I can serve you your soup or I can serve you the knowledge of the universe. Which would you prefer?"

"Uhh…"

"Translation, he doesn't have a clue either!" Patty helpfully provided as he passed by.

"Listen, you—!"

"GAAAAAAAAH!"

"Oh, come on, again!?" Zeff snapped his head around to stare at the screen, where Luffy had popped up running from the same direction that Cross was. And behind him was a literal fish out of water. Or, well, octopus. Giant octopus. That had somehow adapted to land. And was clearly only having so much trouble pasting Luffy with its flying tentacles because he was made of rubber.

"GO FALL OFF THE EDGE, LAND SQUID!"

"TAKOYAKI, NOT CALAMARI, MORON!"

"WHA—?! Oh, hey, Cross, what's chasing you?" Luffy asked pleasantly.

"Giant frog and scorpion," Cross casually answered, punctuating the point with another scorpion-blocked blast. "I see you're having much better luck with edible species. Try not to lose that one to something, would you? I'm in the mood for seafood once we get a reprieve!"

"You got it!" Luffy shouted back, literally twisted his head around to keep talking as the two crewmates passed one another. "I'll try and handle it real quick and find you again!"

"Same to you!" Cross waved back, before hastily snapping his arm down before the Frog could manage to snap him up. He then glanced upward. "And Boss should be swinging by to be blasted away again in three, two—!"

SMASH! "RAAAAGH!"

Cross snapped his head around and blinked in surprise at the distant sound of impotent fury and trees being bowled over. "Ooor not. Huh, looks like he's decided to be proactive."

"Yeah, how's that. AND MEANWHILE, YOU SHOULD decide to duck!"

"Wha—GAH!" The pirate hastily fell into a baseball slide under a low-hanging branch before pushing himself to his feet. He then almost took a tumble when instead of coming out on more branches, he instead stumbled onto an almost floor-like crossroads of several dozen vines.

Cross blinked at the turn of events, then barked out a relieved laugh and ran out to the center of the makeshift clearing. Turning around, he shot the frog-scorpion combo a taunting smirk. "Come and get me, rubber-belly!"

The frog narrowed its eyes and skidded to a halt, before glancing over its shoulder at its passenger.
"Keroro."

"Orekek," the scorpion clicked in response. The arachnid crawled down off the frog's back, its eight dexterous limbs affording it a much better hold on the vines than its counterpart. That alone throttled Cross's bravado quite effectively, but his growing anger transformed into incredulity when the frog then proceeded to bop down onto the scorpion's back, croaking without a care in the world.

"But... that's not fair," Cross whined plaintively.

From the screeching chitter and roaring croak the pair let out before charging at him, they officially could not give a damn.

We need not repeat the stream of expletives that Cross belted out during his hasty retreat. What does bear saying, however, is that Cross ran across the 'clearing' of vines in an attempt to escape the scorpion, which kept up a swift barrage of tail-strikes and claw-snaps to in an effort to catch up the pirate.

"And I thought that Cross was just being melodramatic after that surfing fiasco, but no. Sanity is truly dead," Patty said, shaking his head wearily but still working at his station.

"It was dead before even I was born, Patty," Zeff scoffed, his eyes trained on the cook's hands with a satisfied look. "This may be on the stranger side, but it's still no big deal for the Grand Line. The only question is if the Straw Hats are crazy enough to make it through it, and that's something they've answered many times over."

"Case in point," deadpanned several chefs as Cross, cornered against a tree with tongue, tail, and claws poised to strike him, drew his elephant-sword and let loose a flurry of stabs at the beasts, fast enough for the sword to blur.

The beasts flinched at the attack, and then blinked in confusion as absolutely nothing happened to them.

The scorpion's demeanor shifted in just the right manner to suggest a sadistic grin in Cross' direction, and it was to everyone's surprise when Cross returned the expression with just as much bloody glee.

For its own part, the frog lacked its partner's enthusiasm and was glancing around in clear hesitation. Then its eyes shot wide in terror, prompting it to slap its webbed feet on the scorpion's shell.

"Kero! Keroro!"

The scorpion ignored its partner in favor of crawling closer to Cross, chittering furiously all the while. "Orekekeke—!"

Crrr...

"Ore?" The scorpion paused in confusion at the sudden creaking sound. It glanced to and fro, try to locate the source. It found it. And then it turned back to Cross and locked up in terror at the pirate's widening grin, and how he had his sword positioned blade-first over a single, innocent, perfectly innocuous vine.

Somehow, the scorpion's pitch-black chitin paled, while the frog slapped a foot to its face with a piteous "Kero..."

Cross, naturally, showed no care for the frog's plight, and simply drove his sword through the vine.

CRA-CRASH!
This caused the vines under the creatures to give way, sending the symbiotic pair tumbling out of the canopy and down to the jungle floor with a crashing thump.

Cross laughed in relief at the sound, and he even leaned over the edge of the branch he was on to flash the pair a… specific gesture. "Two heads might be better than one, but it takes four to reign supreme, you pests!"

"COMING FROM HIM, that's saying something!"

Thankfully for the loudmouths, the pair appeared to be far more concerned with arguing with one another than exacting their vengeance on the pirate, croaking and chittering and motioning furiously at one another.

"Waiter!" one of the Baratie's customers called out in a cultured voice. "I have a quandary!"

"Well, it didn't come from our kitchen! We run a clean ship here!"

Zeff affixed his underlings with a flat look before picking up one of the customer's cleared dishes. "Let me get that for you, sir." He then proceeded to fling the plate towards the kitchen.

THUNK! "OW!"

"Clean the stupid off it, halfwit!" Zeff roared before returning his attention to the customer. "You were saying?"

"Yes, well," the customer adjusted his coat primly. "Those two overgrown specimens of fauna are clearly communicating with one another, yes?"

"Obviously."

"And so too is the most infamous snail the world has ever known present with them, indeed?"

"Of course."

"Well then, my question is obvious!" The patron gestured inquisitively at the screen. "Wherefore can we not comprehend what these creatures are saying to one another?!"

Zeff opened his mouth to respond… and then slowly closed as he realized there was only one accurate response.

"That," he stated tersely. "Is a **very** good question."

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"I remain conflicted about the process of rendering a sword sentient with a Devil Fruit… but I will not deny that I now want to duel against Cross and his elephant," Koshiro mused.

"But it wouldn't be much of a duel 'cause Cross isn't much of a swordsman, right, Master?" one of the old swordmaster's students asked curiously. "I mean, that's why Master Zoro is always training with Leo!"

"You say training, I say he's beating him up…" another student muttered under his breath.

"It is not simply a matter of being a superior swordsman. Any world class swordsman has a close bond with his blade… or hers," he added, glancing in the direction of his daughter's gravestone. "But outright autonomy coupled with so close a bond, let alone carrying the extra strength of an elephant
behind a common saber, as well as the unorthodox actions of Jeremiah Cross himself…"

He trailed off, trusting that the visual would emphasize his point. Said visual being the symbiotic creatures continuing to snap and spit at one another, before finally relenting to glare viciously up at Cross, who was suddenly far less confident than he’d been a moment earlier.

The frog hopped on the scorpion’s back, the scorpion started to skitter its way up the tree's trunk—

"SCREE!"

CRUNCH!

"OREK!/"KERO!"

—And then, a mega-sized stag beetle slammed its mass into the pair and crushed them into the tree, entirely ignoring the way the duo struggled and flailed in the larger pest's grip.

Cross stared down at the ongoing skirmish with no small amount of wariness before casting a doubtful look at Soundbite. "This is not going to end well for us, isn’t it?"

"Signs point to—!"

"SCREE!" The titan-stag interrupted the snail with another ear-grating screech, following which it drew back from the symbiotic pair, just enough so that it could swiftly, disproportionately and utterly crush the two between its equally titanic mandibles. It was only a single strike, but from the spray of bloody foam that jetted from the pair and how they twitched in the larger insect's grip, that one strike was sufficient.

The stag then swung its head to the side, throwing away its insensate prey. That done, beetle cast a hateful glare up at Cross, its vicious intentions clear. The insect tested its legs on the bark of the tree, but the wood cracked and gave way under the insect's mass, so the thing drew back and started chewing at the tree's trunk with its mandibles.

"…yeah, that," the snail finished lamely.

"It's just one thing after another…" Cross miserably moaned, dragging a hand down his face.

As if on cue, a revving noise roared out from the mega-stag, and its mandibles started to tear into the tree's trunk, wood-chips and sawdust flying everywhere.

"THAT WAS AN ADMISSION OF FACT, NOT A TAUNT AT MURPHY!" Cross roared skyward, accompanying the statement with a very violently shaken fist.

"YEAH WELL, po-tay-to—!"

"GWOOAAAARGH!"

SLAM!

Out of the blue, an equally massive kabuto beetle rammed into the stag beetle from the side, nearly bowling the former over and very effectively diverting its attention from Cross. The stag staggered slightly, got its legs under it, and shot a murderous glare on the other insect. Roar was answered with roar, and the two beetles went after each other hammer and tongs.

"…GIANT INSECT INTERRUPT." The snail cocked its eyestalks at the duelling beetles that were
circling below them. "And for the record, I'm getting ticked off at getting interrupted by the world."

"Better you than me," Cross scoffed, rolling his eyes. "And on that note!"

Cross leapt off his branch, sliding down the trunk before leaping off onto one of the beetle's back, vaulting off, and then booking it for dear life on the ground. The video feed turned away from him briefly to show that the two beetles were still busy locking their horns together, despite the brief interruption.

With that established eagle took off and followed after Cross, who soon came into view slumped over slightly with his hands on his knees, panting.

"That… was so unpleasant… on a whole new level…" he bit out before glancing at his partner. "Soundbite, timer?"

"18, 19, 20… huh. I think we'll actually reach half a minute this time… 27, 28, 29, 30, 31—AAAND bogey at 9 o'clock."

"Your fault!" Cross snarled, swinging up Funkfreed at the foliage Soundbite had indicated, obviously prepared to stab on a moment's notice.

"Alright, guys! Betting time!" one of Koshiro's disciples piped up eagerly. "Ten for two on a bird, twenty for five on reptiles! Mammals are all busts, I repeat, mammals are—!"

THWACK! "YEOW!"

"No betting near my daughter, please," Koshiro warned his student, shinai tapping his palm.

"Yes, master…"

"Hey, look, here it comes!"

And indeed, come something did.

Admittedly, compared to the earlier monstrosities that had plagued Cross, a man-sized and relatively normal-looking raccoon wasn't exactly the most imposing of creatures. But considering how the thing was, to reiterate, big enough to bite a person's head off and snarling viciously at Cross, it still managed a palpable aura of menace.

Cross's lips parted into a furious scowl. "Alright, you scummy little fleabag, I have had a hell of a week and I am getting sick and tired of getting chased by monsters I can't kill, so for the sake of my sanity and pride alike, do me a favor and just DIE!"

Cross lunged forward and stabbed with his sword, prompting the elephant-blade to shoot forward. To no one's surprise, most likely not even Cross's, the raccoon deftly slid aside and avoided the attack completely.

What was to everyone's surprise, however, was the fact that the instant the overgrown vermin moved, the screens suddenly went pitch black. The connection was not severed, to be sure, as the snails were all projecting noise. After all…

"GAGH!"

How else would the world have heard Cross getting slashed and the indignant roar of pain he let out
Koshiro adjusted his glasses in shock. "What on earth—?"

"Sonnuva—" Cross's voice bit out painfully. "My eyes! Damn it, what just happened!?"

"No clue!" Soundbite snapped. "The damn thing just moved AND THEN—! Its... FUR... FLASHED... UH-OH."

"Wha— seriously!?" Cross spat. "How does a raccoon get the ability to cause seizures!?"

"When a stripe-rat AND A STROBE LIGHT LOVE EACH OTHER VERY MUCH! NOW RUN FOR IT!"

The sound of someone running, followed by something much heavier, sounded out, heading away from the snail. The screen itself remained frustratingly blank for a full minute.

"...Well, the upgrade didn't last long," one of the students muttered.

"Well, it could have been worse," Koshiro mused, a worried frown marring his features. "If the snail had actually managed to keep its eyes open, people could have actually gotten seizures."

Fortunately, as the sounds began to grow louder again, the vision began to return. This time, it was a bit blurrier and tunneled; probably the snail narrowing its eyes to avoid the raccoon's flashing fur. But it was clear enough to see the raccoon behind a veil of green a distance away pursuing Cross. The eagle took flight in search of another view where it would be less vulnerable to the raccoon, and as a result, got a good look at a sudden change in the scenery.

Specifically, the screen displayed a ragged and very large patch of brown and gray wasteland ahead in Cross and his pursuer's path, sticking out like the scar it was among the green of the jungle. Burned and scorched grass dotted the ground, trees of varying states of burned stuck out at odd angles, and ash covering everything. Cross broke through the treeline and ran across the ashes, a scowl visible on his features.

"More fire-spitters. Perfect. I thought we managed to ditch them three islands back!"

"WELL THEY'RE NOT NEARBY, AT LEAST! KEEP GOING, maybe flash-mob will have to slow down!"

"He's not the only one," Cross spat as he charged forward. "I've been training to take hits and give hits, but freaking parkour is not in my repertoire!" Cross's expression then became slightly contemplative, and he took a shell out of his pocket and spoke into it. "Note to self, start learning parkour."

"LEARN FAST! UPCOMING LOG!"

Cross reacted fast to the news, leaping up onto the oncoming arboreal obstacle. He then took a nasty dive when his boot slipped on the ash on said log.

Thankfully, Cross turned that tumble into another roll, his hound-cannon ready on his shoulder, although some distraction came from the presence of another living thing there.

"...that place is weird," one of the students flatly stated.

And indeed, the man-sized, slimy-skinned lizard grinding a stick into a bundle of them and blinking
at Cross in bemused surprise was a perfect example of the island's weirdness.

Before the two could react to one another, the raccoon—which was no longer moving fast enough for its fur to be an issue—leapt onto the log with a nigh-rabid snarl. In response, the lizard redoubled its stick-grinding with an almost panicked fervor.

Cross's response, meanwhile, was far more... 'appropriate', for lack of a better word. "CANIBLAST!"

Lassoo fired a pillar of superheated air, the blast traveling notably faster than Funkfreed had. The raccoon was unable to dodge; it had enough time for a panicked look before the blast struck, reducing it to a charred husk. Still twitching, but not long for the world of the living. The only question was whether it would die from its new injuries or be burned alive by the embers that were steadily building into a greater fire.

The answer, as it turned out, was to be impaled on an elephant's bladed trunk and flung back a few meters.

Cross nodded firmly before turning back to the lizard, clear anticipation of a fight written on his face. Instead, he blinked in confusion, because the lizard's attention was not on him. Instead, the reptile was staring at the raccoon's charred and still-warm corpse. It was kind of disturbing really, how the thing was staring. Something that was like hunger but wasn't... obsession dancing in its eyes.

The confusion was cleared up when Soundbite—pale and shivering in terror—swallowed heavily and spoke up. "Crooooss, remember how I said the flamers weren't NEARBY EARLIER?" Message delivered, the snail ducked back into his shell. "ADDENDUM."

"...Oh, no, it's a salamander," said another of the students, wincing in anticipation.

Cross's face twisted up, initially into a scowl, but it then into a grimace. "Don't. You. Fucking—!"

To nobody's surprise, the Voice of Anarchy fell on deaf ears. The salamander just smiled malevolently and pounced for the smoldering raccoon.

Suddenly, the eagle carrying the visual snail swooped up and away and out of the sight of the salamander. Still, the sudden FWOOOSH of something igniting was a bit of a giveaway.

The viewpoint briefly soared through an un-scorched section of the jungle, followed by the sound of crashing and searing, and seconds later a familiar form sprinted out of the underbrush.

"I! HATE! THESE! ISLANDS!" Cross and Soundbite bellowed together, closely pursued by the salamander, who'd somehow surrounded its body with what appeared to be a secondary phantom composed wholly of flames that was easily five times its actual size.

"...So, master? Do we have to aspire to be swordsmen that could face that sort of stuff if we're going to train here?"

Koshiro could only groan and slap his hand to his forehead. "This. This is why I don't like you children listening to the more rambunctious broadcasts."

"But we're not listening, we're watching!"

Koshiro groaned further.

-o-
"Commander Jonathan, unless I'm mistaken, you seem to be enjoying Cross's torment despite this meaning that our best allies are indisposed and out of the picture."

"Hardly indisposed, Henrick," Jonathan hummed, playfully flipping a black pawn between his fingers. "The Straw Hats may be scattered amidst the outskirts of their enemy's base, but they're still there. And I believe the Straw Hats have demonstrated more than once that challenging them on your turf and terms… is a very poor idea."

The Vice Admiral's smirk widened. "Though I will gladly admit that given what happened when we learned that the hard way, seeing them run around like this is more than a little cathartic."

The Ensign took a moment to turn that over in his head. And then he smirked. "Permission to requisition popcorn from the kitchen?" he asked with a perfectly straight face.

"Ensign, I order you to bring up the whole car with all the fixings," Drake said, a massive smile on his face.

Henrick didn't need any more prompting, exiting the room as fast as his legs could carry him. Jonathan, meanwhile, turned his attention back to the flaming lizard pursuing Cross, his mind running through the options he had at his disposal.

Cross's gauntlets were powerful weapons, but they only worked in close combat, and that was hardly practical against an opponent covered in fire. Soundbite's abilities should work, theoretically, but since he hadn't already employed them, odds were that the creatures were either unaffected by the weaker attacks, the stronger attacks had too low of a payoff for the energy they consumed, or some combination thereof. Lassoo's ammunition focused on fire, combustion, flammables, and a smokescreen, meaning that the dog could at best inconvenience the salamander and more likely simply make the problem worse.

That left Funkfreed; a near-sonic elephant should do wonders in terms of shortening the salamander's lifespan, though the incendiary second skin and the ongoing pursuit made targeting the creature understandably difficult. But perhaps that Pachy-Riot he'd used could—?

"HEY BACKUP LONG NOSE, YOU WANNA help out by giving this schmuck a good spritzing OR WHAT!? I THINK HE COULD USE A DRINK!" Soundbite demanded in a biting tone.

"Yeah, well, so could I!" Funkfreed shot back in a somewhat raspy voice. "We've been out here for a week straight, and it's been three days since the last non-swamp body of water! I'm parched!"

"And seeing as the only water I have on me is my drinking water and it needs to last until we find another body of clean water, that's not happening!" Cross huffed.

Jonathan frowned, slotting that last bit of information into an increasingly distressing picture. Obviously, they were getting more than enough food, even if it was bush meat. But going that long with minimal water while constantly expending energy? And for that matter, going that long without rest? Something was missing…

On-screen, Cross had made it to another clearing, this one particularly massive, at which point he abruptly stopped running. The viewpoint swung around to show the source of his hesitation, a monstrous bear with black and white fur and a gargantuan, absolutely irate praying mantis brawling in the center. The bird flew back, showing that even the salamander had paused at the sight of this clash.
"Another brawl between Alphas," Lassoo snorted.

"Of all the times!" Cross groaned. The salamander regaining enough wits to roar at him was just salt in the wound.

"HALF-SHELL STYLE!"

"Not what I meant by something missing, but not unwelcome," Jonathan muttered.

At Boss's roar, the mega-salamander stopped and looked around in confusion, freezing up when a large shadow fell over it. Slowly, it inclined its gaze upward.

"BELUGA!" the dugong bellowed—

WHAM!

And smashed the incendiary amphibian flat with the large, scale-armored creature he'd brought with him.

"PILEDRIVER!" Boss finished, landing with his arms raised in victory. "And THAT is how a MAN does it!"

"GO, BOSS, GO!" Soundbite, Lassoo, and Funkfreed cheered.

Cross was a lot more restrained with his thanks, being bent over sucking wind, but he still had enough energy to shoot his crewmate a grateful thumbs-up. "Thanks for the save, Boss… huh." The tactician examined the twitching scaled behemoth. "Is that thing what kept blowing you away? What is that, a… pangolin or something?"

Boss snorted and gave the scaled body another smack. "Hole in one. Stupid thing was using its tail like a pair of bellows and blasting me with air bullets. Annoying as heck, but I got it in the end."

"What kind of warped circumstances would lead a pangolin to develop that kind of ability?" Drake asked, only for his expression to fall flat. "Right, the kind where the Straw Hat are involved. My bad."

"Well, at least, that's most of us back together…" Cross nodded in weary gratefulness. "Now we just need to find Luffy, who is…?" He sent an inquisitive glance Soundbite's way.

The snail's response was to adopt a flat expression and jerk his eyes over Cross's shoulder.

"Hey, guys!"

And there was Luffy, sitting next to the carcass of the octopus that had been chasing him, smiling and waving without a care in the world. Boss and Cross could only stare, blinking.

"…well, that's convenient," Boss muttered before raising his voice. "Hey, Luffy! You alright?"

"Shishishi, yeah, I'm fine!" Luffy chuckled, sliding off of the corpse and walking up to them. "And look, I didn't lose the octopus either, so we can eat once I deal with these guys!" The rubber-man then tilted his head inquisitively. "What about you guys? You holding up?"

"GROOOAAAAR!"

Luffy's smile slammed into a scowl as the large panda-esque creature finished off the mantis with an earth-shaking suplex, and loosed a bone-rattling howl towards the pirates. "Actually, give me a
second, I need to deal with this guy really fast."

Boss grinned and slammed his flipper into his palm. "Right there with you, Captain!"

"You two… go ahead…" Cross waved them off, still trying to get his breath back. "I'm just… gonna stay here… start cutting up the octopus… have a heart attack… or ten…"

"Right! Come on, Boss!" Luffy roared, shooting off with the dugong hot on his tail.

"Go get him, captain!" Cross yelled after his captain, raising a shaky thumbs-up… and then his eyes rolled up in his head and he collapsed to the ground with a pitiful moan.

"One of the highest bounties in history, everyone," remarked Cormac, shaking his head. "Honestly, for all his impossible knowledge, he's not a fighter like Boss and the Monster Trio. I still don't get why the Government isn't sending someone who can just stomp them all flat, at least to take Cross's head."

"Because they can't."

Drake and Cormac snapped their heads to their superior, who was leaning back in his chair with a frown.

"Baroque Works. Navarone. Enies Lobby. Thriller Bark," Jonathan listed, punctuating each name with a spin of the white king he was holding. "The Straw Hat Pirates have challenged armies of hundreds, even thousands, with mere dozens on their side. Sometimes not even that. And consistently, they've walked away victorious with nothing but a few new scars at worst. Including myself, they've personally crossed paths with three Vice Admirals and survived, including the legendary Garp. The Government can't send anyone who can 'stomp them all flat', because at this point I'm not sure they have anybody who can."

"And the reason they don't drop an Admiral on their collective skulls?" Drake inquired.

"Aside from the fact that Akainu is on the other side of the Red Line and the other two, while powerful, do whatever they damn well please?" Jonathan dryly replied. Leaning back again, he folded his arms before him. "Aside from that, either result ends badly for the Government: if they send an Admiral and he wins, then it looks excessive and smacks of weakness. And if by some remote chance the Admiral loses…"

"Then the Warlords turn on us and they and the Emperors fall on us like a ton of bricks, right, right…" Cormac tugged nervously at his collar. "I… honestly don't know which is more likely to occur."

"The Straw Hats do not have the capability to defeat an Admiral in direct and fair combat, even if they have most likely incorporated sea prism stone into their arsenals by now," Jonathan stated. "But that's not to say the Straw Hats aren't skilled and dangerous. Besides the other two corners of the Big Three, I doubt anyone this side of the Red Line can match the Straw Hats."

THWACK! "GROOOAAAAR!"

"…Addendum," the returning Henrick blandly as the giga-panda knocked Luffy and Boss away, the eagle flapping furiously to keep the viewpoint level with them.

"Give it a moment," Jonathan prompted.

And indeed, as the Vice Admiral had divined, the pirates managed to catch themselves on a bent
"Okay, credit where it's due," Boss muttered, rubbing his jaw. "That thing is definitely the local boss for a reason."

"Yeah, well, we don't have time to deal with him!" Luffy snorted, his face a rictus of impatient fury. The Rubber-Man shifted his footing so that he was higher up on the palm tree's trunk. "I'll go high, you go low!"

"Right!" Boss confirmed the order with a nod and a pound of his 'knuckles'. "Pull!"

Luffy didn't so much 'pull' as 'released', letting his arm unwind and allowing the palm tree they were perched on to snap upright. As a result of their positions, Luffy was sent flying almost straight upwards, whereas Boss was shot directly at the charging bear.

The bear responded with another blood-curdling howl, extending its double-jointed arms in an effort to bat the dugong into its slavering jaws.

And it was without even a hint of hesitation that Boss literally swam through the air, pumping his tail to dodge around the bear's claws and get up close to the mega-mammal's torso.

"Full-Shell Style!" Boss huffed, grabbing hold of the bear's chest-fur. "Water Spout Throw!" And with a spin that by all rights had nowhere near enough leverage to work, Boss threw the bear skyward, right into Luffy and his ballistic path.

Luffy, who, at this moment, was rapidly unwinding his torso and limbs to let loose with his pipe. Though rather than the ascending bear, Luffy snapped his furious attention to something past the beast. "CROSS! BATTER UP!"

The snail's view panned downward to show Cross working on slicing into the octopus. Grumbling unprintable words, Cross turned away from the cephalopod, shook his hands clean and dropped into a kneeling position, catching his very eager cannon on his shoulder.

"—meat-huffing slave-driving idiot-savant son of a-CANI-CANNON!" he bellowed.

The hound-gun belted out one of its signature baseball bombs skyward, the projectile shooting past the enemy monster, and instead at Luffy...

"GUUUUUM-GUUUUUM!" Luffy roared, slamming his pipe into the ball with full force, sending it flying even faster in the direction of the bear. "GRAND SLAM!"

The baseball flew true, striking its target and sinking so deep into the bear's stomach that its back bulged out. The monster kept its position for a second… two seconds… and then it shot back down to the earth, smashing out a large crater in the clearing's stonework—

KA- BOOOOOM!

And meeting its end from a fiery explosion that detonated almost literally in its gut.

[…Ouch,] Terry winced. [Still, that was proper Bear Glove.]

He paused for a moment, waiting for the customary reaction. His west-eye moved until he was looking at Isaiah…'s empty perch.
The sudden squawk he let out drew the officers’ attention, and Jonathan blinked in surprise. "That's strange. Did any of you see Isaiah fly off?"

The officers shook their heads.

-o-

"Alright, guys, soup's on!" I called out over my shoulder. I then patted Lassoo's barrel, at which he cut off the stream of fire he'd been using to charbroil the land-borne octopus carcass. "Come and get it while it's—!"

POP!

I shivered in disgust at the pustule of blood and… who knows what else that swelled up and popped in the crevasse I'd carved into the beast's rubbery flesh.

"Still utterly revolting in every way," I concluded lamely. "Urgh, sonnuva… have I mentioned I miss Sanji yet?"

"Five times," Boss 'helpfully' informed me as he stripped the bark off a large branch he'd retrieved.

Funkfreed nodded in agreement, rummaging his trunk around in the jungle so he could pick up some grub for himself. "I think the loudest was when that possum we ate gave you diarrhea."

I sent a questioning glance towards my sword. "Which one? The one with the ballistic needles or the one that swallowed Boss?"

"Needles," everyone else chorused flatly.

The memory popped up in my brain, in all its… let's say 'glory'. I grimaced. "Riiiiiight…"

I had little choice but to start eating as soon as the others came within grabbing range; Luffy may have started cutting back recently, forgoing his typical mannerisms seeing as we didn't have time for it while we were in a place like this—which was ironic, since this place was a mirror of where he'd learned it—but the constant fighting and subsequent constant need to replenish his stamina meant that that was only so much help.

Lassoo and Boss, on the other hand, had no such restraint, which meant that it was either nix the revulsion or go hungry. And I wasn't stupid enough to listen to my tongue more than my stomach. At least Funkfreed was content to eat the foliage instead.

Still, I didn't have that much time to 'enjoy' my meal, due to the second mouth on my body scowling and glancing aside. "Hey guys, just a quick heads up, BUT TRY AND MAKE YOURSELVES LOOK NICE. WE'VE GOT AN AUDIENCE AGAIN."

I found myself grimacing for a reason besides how it felt like I was chewing on a burnt tire. Yay. "Ugh, don't tell me, the eagle's back?" A glance aside confirmed that, yes, our avian stalker and Soundbite's peeping-tom cousin were back and watching us.

"Yeee-pah," Soundbite popped the word sourly. "Even when we've lost our GATEWAY TO THE WORLD, WE'RE STILL the number one show IN THE BLUE SEAS!" He glanced aside and spat in disgust. "How comforting."

I narrowed my eyes at our antagonist's cronies. "Yeah, well, apologies to our dear viewers, but surprisingly, quality takes a noticeable drop when you're watching a cheap knock-off. Observe."
So saying, I showed the eagle my own bird.

"Betcha I could bash that thing's brains out from here," Boss grumbled, a rock tossed between his flippers.

"Don't," Luffy ordered around his meat. "We don't need them calling for backup like last time."

"...feh." Grumbling under his breath, Boss tossed the rock into the underbrush, prompting something to run off with a panicked yelp.

We all froze up at the burst of motion, snapping panicked looks at Soundbite. He scrunched up his face intently for a moment before sagging in relief. "SCAVENGER, not a scout. We're good."

We all joined him in relief, though said relief was tempered by our continued circumstances.

"Christ on a blazing pikestaff, this place is killing me..." I groaned. "When are we going to be able to stop?"

"When we find wherever the Sunny landed," Boss replied. "Once that's done, we'll find the others and find whichever island his base is on. And when we get there, we'll show him why... why no one... no one..." Boss trailed off, his expression unchanging, but the way his fists were clenching made it obvious what he was thinking about.

I shook my head with a sympathetic sigh. "I know, Boss, I know. That bastard already messed with us... but once we get everyone back together and find him?"

"I'll turn him inside out and punt him straight into Gramps' lap!" Luffy finished with a particularly bloodthirsty snarl.

"...that, yes," I nodded in agreement, not willing to remark on my captain's uncharacteristic viciousness. Instead, I went back to trying to choke down my current mouthful of 'meat'—an endeavor in and of itself—while warily eyeing the jungle around us. "Anyways... seeing as we've got a minute to breathe until the rest of the bastards catch up to us, might as well ask the stupid question: you guys still going strong?"

"Yeah... but it's weird that we are," Boss said with a frown. "I mean sure, I've practiced harsh training on a regular basis for the past few decades, and Luffy's just a damn monster—!

"Th'nks, Bssh!" Luffy mumbled, adding a thumbs-up.

"—but even after how strong I've gotten since joining up with you guys, it doesn't make sense. A solid week of guerilla tactics against beasts that I will freely admit match me in raw strength, never stopping to rest for more than an hour until they catch up to us, and only raw meat and whatever water we can find keeping us going..."

Boss's frown deepened and he waved his meat at me. "I'm not complaining that I'm not getting tired, it's both useful and badass, but I know my limits, and I should have passed them days ago. And you and your boys should have too, for that matter."

Lassoo looked up from his meal with a thoughtful chuff. "Shellhead's got a point. I'm running low on fumes for my Cani-Blaze, sure, but apart from that? I've coughed up almost a hundred bombs non-stop over the past few days, and I still don't feel empty. That's... not normal."
"Hmm…" I looked at Luffy, who from his expression was thinking the same thing. Something was off all right, but what was it? Sighing, I forced down another mouthful of octopus to keep up my strength… and then I swallowed again when something occurred to me.

"Guys?" I mumbled. "Not to alarm you, but, uh… I think we've been drugged."

Of course, everyone else reacted with the utmost poise and oh who the hell am I kidding, everyone who wasn't Luffy spat out what they were chewing and belted out a panicked "WHAT?!!"

Luffy was a lot calmer, taking the time to finish chewing and swallow before responding. "Whaddaya mean, Cross?"

"Well I mean, think about it! This place." I swung my arms out, indicating our surroundings. "It's not natural, right? And I don't just mean the whole floating in the sky bit, I'm talking about the actual environment. The animals. I mean, look at the gauntlet we've run: all carnivores, all the time, omnivores at best, but no pure herbivores anywhere. This kind of trainwreck of a food-chain doesn't come into being on its own, right?"

"Trainwreck nothing, these islands are an asylum!"

I looked at my shoulder in surprise. "Soundbite?"

The snail grimaced. "This place is insane… that's not a generalization, I'M BEING LITERAL! THIS WHOLE PLACE HAS LOST ITS MIND ON A PRIMAL LEVEL! Everything we've seen, everything we've experienced, it's all trumped by THE SHEER MADNESS OF THIS HELLHOLE! I MEAN… you know how I haven't been able to translate these things FROM DAY ONE?"

"It has contributed to diplomatic tensions, yes," Lassoo agreed, snickering.

THWAP!

"YIPE!"

Said smirk was promptly wiped off his muzzle when Funkfreed smacked him with his trunk.

"Not like we have much room to talk either, Snoopy," the other Zoan-weapon groused. "None of us can make heads or tails of what that damn thing is saying."

"YEAH, WELL, THAT'S FOR A DAMN GOOD REASON!" Soundbite replied. "The reason we can't make heads or tails of these guys is because THEY'RE EVOLVING! NOT JUST INDIVIDUALLY, BUT AS SPECIES! SOME OF THE THINGS WE'VE FOUGHT, THEY COULDN'T HAVE BEEN MORE THAN A MONTH OLD! Maybe less!"

"Woah, so those were the babies?!!" Luffy sat up in surprise. "But they were so tough!"

"No, Captain, what Cross is saying is that those things were the adults, it's just that they grow up really fast and have kids fast too!" Boss clarified. "Which… explains us not getting what they're saying. They're evolving so fast that their… er…" Boss spun his flipper, searching for the words. "Let's say 'communication skills', have grown way beyond what we recognize."

Soundbite nodded at the dugong. "BINGO. AND REALLY, THAT'S THE STICKY BIT. 'CAUSE AFTER ALL… we've seen this before, remember?"
Luffy's eyes widened in recognition. "Wait, you mean—?!

"Shshsh!" I hissed, shooting a scathing glance at our ever-present watchers.

Thankfully, Luffy got the message and he rethought what he was about to say. "You mean that the same guys who made… him who he was made these things too?"

"It fits what he said. An island in the sky that's not a sky island, animals more vicious than you can imagine…" I slowly looked at the islands listing through the sky above us with new eyes. "A 'realm ruled by power'. A world where the strong devour the weak without pity."

Boss tsked darkly, eyeing the carcasses of our downed opponents. "Strong World… yeah, that's a damn better name for this place than 'Merveille', that's for damn sure."

"Cross," Funkfreed interjected. "We're getting off topic: what did you mean that we've been drugged?"

"Remember the bastards who came to get him?" I asked the elephant. "They said that 'Indigo' was the one who gave them the experimental drugs that pushed their bodies above and beyond their limits." I pointed down at our meal. "Sound familiar?"

"So…" Luffy frowned and tilted his head almost a perfect 90 degrees to the side, the gears almost visibly turning in his head. "You think this Indigo guy is working for that bastard, and he's been using his mystery drugs to turn animals into the things we're fighting?"

"Precisely." I pointed at him. "Indigo doses the animals, the animals become titanic murder-monsters. The poison that makes them monsters stays in their bodies, we kill and eat them and get that stuff in our bodies, letting us keep fighting for a week straight without worrying about sleep." I looked down at my hand and clenched and unclenched my fist. "Thankfully, it looks like whatever Indigo's been giving these things is better than what he was giving the Amigos, so I don't… think we're gonna wind up like those guys. But just to be safe, let's not have any kids until Chopper's given us a once over. Agreed?"

Most everyone else nodded with no small amount of trepidation, but Luffy was still frowning in confusion.

"You still don't understand something, captain?" I asked.

Luffy made to answer, and then we all felt a spike of terror shoot through us when he snapped his attention to the side.

"So what you guys are saying is the reason we're all stronger is because we ate the animals that had that Indigo guy's mystery drugs in them, right?" Luffy said slowly, his eyes steadily scanning the treeline.

"Yeeaaah," I slowly drew out my confirmation, glancing around to try and find whatever had Luffy so on edge. "It's probably how Funkfreed's been keeping up too: blood from the animals seeping into the ground, and then the plants. "

"Alright…" Luffy nodded in understanding. "Then I've got another question." He glanced at us with dead seriousness. "If that worked for us, wouldn't it work for the animals too?"

Soundbite and I slowly exchanged questioning looks. "Uhhh… maaaybe?" I hedged.

"THAT… DOES MAKE SENSE," Soundbite confirmed with a jerky nod. "*Kinda like a
perversion of biomagnification, WITH THE TOXINS HELPING THE ANIMALS… for a given definition of 'help,' anyways."

"It'd definitely enforce the whole 'survival of the fittest' theme this place has going for it," Boss mused, cupping his chin in thought. "The strongest animals would eat the most, and thus become even stronger as they horde the toxins, making them the… undisputable… alphas…” The captain of our ship's guard slowly trailed off as he turned his gaze on the trio of beasties we'd just downed.

Lassoo and Funkfreed both broke into cold sweat as they reached the same conclusion we were all achieving.

"Alphas," Funkfreed whispered quietly. "Like the ones we've been running into over the past week. That the other animals have been driving us into."

"And whose corpses we've had to leave mostly intact when the other animals chased us away?" Lassoo whimpered.

"They wanted us to take down the strongest animals around for them," Luffy stated as he slowly stood up, his hand tilting his hat down so that it shadowed his eyes. "So that they could get their jaws on the mystery drugs for themselves."

"And now," I picked up, slowly joining Luffy in standing up, Lassoo and Funkfreed hastily ran to my side and shifted so that I could hold them and brandish them at the jungle, which I was suddenly very wary of. "After a week of running around and killing alphas and who knows how many other beasts, they've gotten their fangs on a motherlode of toxin all at once. They've all become significantly stronger. Strong enough to kill any alphas they want on their own."

I swallowed heavily, clenching my weapons as tight as possible in an effort to keep myself from shaking. "Strong enough that they don't need us anymore."

"And because they've been trained to think that eating something gives you its strength…” Boss grunted, idly spinning his hook in his flipper. "There's no way in hell that they're going to let prime cuts like us walk away without tearing strips from our hides."

Soundbite slowly closed his eyes with a pitiful moan. "How'd you figure out they were RIGHT outside the edge of my hearing, CAP'N?"

"The jungle was too quiet," Luffy grimly answered. "They were pulling back to charge us all at once as soon as they were ready…"

"And they're ready," Soundbite sighed as the sound of snapping trees echoed from not far away. "This is gonna suck…"

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"I actually feel sort of sorry for them at this point," a blue-haired swordswoman sighed as she practiced her slashes.

"Kyuu," chimed her on-looking companion.

"Soundbite?" Cross asked without looking at his partner.

"A dozen. TWO DOZEN. FIFTY, A HUNDRED, TWO HUNDRED…” The snail's naturally ashen complexion slowly became paler and paler. "Sonnuva RED DOG, I THINK THE WHOLE DAMN ISLAND WANTS TO TRY ITS LUCK!"
Monkey D. Luffy, meanwhile, squared his stance and shifted around so that he and his tactician were back to back. "Cross, do you have a plan?"

Cross licked his lips, nervously twirling his sword in his palm. "Well, Luffy, considering how we're surrounded on all sides, vastly outnumbered, and have no way out and no hope of backup or rescue... yeah, I think I have one."

Boss slowly sucked in a deep breath, calmly reducing what was left of his cigar to ashes before flicking away the remaining stub. "What is it?"

K-CHK!

"How does 'make a stand' sound to you?" Cross asked grimly.

"IT SOUNDS GREAT!" Luffy flung his arms out with a massive roar, eyes blazing with primal fury. "BRING IT ON!"

"Well, at least they've still got their 'never say die' attitude," Tashigi rolled her eyes, half wearily and half fondly.

"Lieutenant Tashigi."

Said swordswoman looked back towards the grunt who owned the visual snail they were currently making use of—something about it helping with lookout duty—as he approached.

"Our destination is on the horizon; we'll be there in an hour or less."

"Thank you, Petty Officer," Tashigi said, and then turned to her newer recruit. "Popora, could you inform Commodore Smoker that we're nearly to Navarone? I need to alert Vice Admiral Jonathan to our arrival."

The hybrid creature snorted, but still scampered off into the ship.

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The thriving town of St. Poplar was enjoying a massive shake-up in their normal routine. The pirate crew that had arrived a day before to resupply—regulars on the island, well-known for being good customers—had leapt at the opportunity that the sudden broadcast presented; in less than an hour, a full-scale festival had sprouted up around the screen.

And like all good festivals, everything had a somewhat overlarge price tag.

"Oh, sweet Christmas!" 'Silver Fox' Foxy cackled, wringing his hands together. "Some of ze Straw Hats' strongest and most infamous members getting in an all-out brawl with an army of mutant superanimals?! We're going to make a mint!"

"On top of the mint we've already made, you mean!" Porche agreed, poring over the laboriously organized cash box. "We haven't made this much since the Mock Island Massacre!"

A trail of drool slipped out of Foxy's mouth at the memory of that debacle. "Soooo many drunk idiots thinking they could outmuscle us! And every one of them completely wrong! Oh, may the world never run short on suckers!"

"Hey, you!"

The shout snapped Foxy out of his daydream, and he shot a stink eye at the local thug who was
pointing a gun at him and his aide. "Case in point… hey, lazy-eyes, you want our hard-earned money, which we earned through honest swindling?" The pirate stepped aside and gestured forwards politely. "Then please, by all means."

The thug gave Foxy a confused look before leering and starting to dash forwards. "Weak-ass piece of—!"

"Slow-Slow Beam," Foxy drawled, freezing the would-be robber in place. Porche followed up ten seconds later by tossing the now empty money-box at the man's head, upon which Foxy froze the box as well.

"Have fun with that, dingus," the Silver Fox called over his shoulder with a wave and a chuckle. As he walked towards the screening area, he started wringing his hands again, fighting the urge to cackle. "Now, time to see the one-sided beat—!"

"Captain, we've got a problem!" Pickles shouted frantically as he jogged up to his shorter superior.

"Oh, come on, don't tell me the three stooges and change already beat them all!" Foxy snarled, shoving past his subordinate. "I know they're ludicrously powerful, but even for them there's a limit!"

"Ah, no, the problem's not really with the fight itself…" Pickles grunted as he hustled after his boss. "But, well…"

"ARGH!"

Foxy could only gape in horror at the screen, which showed a soaring, rapidly moving view of the airborne archipelago with no Straw Hats.

"It's the fact… that the bird isn't sticking around… to watch it…" the tackle-master finished weakly.

"THE SECOND THAT SKINNY TWERP GETS HIS BOX BACK, I'M RIPPING HIM A NEW ONE FOR ALL THE WORLD TO HEAR!" Foxy roared.

"Hey hey hey, it's not his fault, that's not fair!" Pickles hastily defended their incognito superior.

"The betting on that blowout was going to fund our commission to Water 7 to build the Brass Fox," Foxy snarled in an almost rabid tone, teeth audibly grinding. "You know, the ship that Hamburg was going to be in charge of and that was going to have our own custom booby-trapped Groggy Ring on its deck?"

"I'LL DICE THEM INTO BITE-SIZED PIECES!" Pickles howled, ripping his sabers from their sheaths.

"Boss, Pickles, knock it off," Porche cut in. "Think about it for a minute. This broadcast is obviously meant to show off the Straw Hats struggling to the world. If it's leaving those three right as it's getting good, either it's going to show some of the other Straw Hats—"

"Or it's going to show the big man himself getting a status report," Foxy finished, his irritation ebbing away and his grin returning. "Either way, more of a show… and still something that can be bet on! Someone hurry up and set those odds!"

"You ever think the Boss might be taking this a bit far?" Capote hissed to the crew's announcer.

"You haven't seen the treasure tax that our big boss's treasurer and second mate slapped him with…" Itomimizu sorrowfully replied.
"Oh, cherry blossoms!" Porche squealed in delight.

Attention returned to the screen, where the eagle was currently soaring over a lovely land filled with the cherry blossoms of springtime and where a different variety of monsters was swarming and raging. At the same time, a distant sound drifted across the connection. It took a moment to identify, but the more that the eagle flew, the more it sounded like Soundbite was nearby given the sonorous music blaring out. And alongside it was screaming…

"NAAAMI-SWAAAN! ROBIN DEEEAR! PRINCEEEEES VIVIIIII! WHERE ARE YOU, MY LOVELIES?!

"EVERYOOOONE! WE'RE HEEEEEERE! RIGHT HEEEEEERE!"

"FOR THE LOVE OF ALL THINGS HOLY, WILL YOU TWO MORONS STOP GIVING AWAY OUR LOCATION?!!"

"ARF ARF A-ARF ARF!"

"WHY DID I HAVE TO BE STUCK WITH THE SUICIDAL IDIOTS!?"

The eagle finally came into view of the source: Sanji, his face mostly hidden by a large hat and… medical mask; Conis, Tone Dials in both hands blaring out music for all to hear; another one of the Dugongs, Mikey by the color of his bandana; and a very miserable-looking Usopp who was making just as much noise with his exasperated sobs.

"Perfect!" Foxy exclaimed in joy.

"MIKEY, YOU CANNOT TELL ME THAT AFTER ALL YOUR TRAINING WITH BOSS, YOU'RE STILL THIS STUPID!"

The Dugong paused his bellowing, glared at Usopp, and flailed his flippers in a somehow significant pattern before resuming his bellowing. The sniper blinked and pulled a book out of his bag, flipping through the pages and muttering. Several people in the audience, meanwhile, just looked confused, lacking a translation.

"I'm pretty sure that he just said 'I don't care, this is fun.'"

Attention turned towards Foxy, who shrugged. "I don't know a lot of sign language, but I've seen that phrase more than enough times over the years."

Usopp's eyes twitched as he found the translation, clearly fighting the urge to throw the book at the dugong.

"FUN?!!" he screamed.

And right on cue, the foliage at the edge of the clearing parted, and in charged… a green giraffe.

"…OK, seriously. Why would anyone ever try to make a giraffe into a killing machine? It was stupid enough the first time," Sanji shook his head.

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Elsewhere in the Grand Line, Kaku was struck with a sudden urge to murder someone.

He then blinked in surprise when something poked him in the shoulder, and turned to find Hattori offering him a flask of… something or other.
"You too, huh?" the long-nosed assassin deadpanned, and then sighed in defeat when the pigeon nodded. "Alright, hit me."

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Predictably, the giraffe was only the vanguard of the mob of animals that the pirates' noisemaking attracted. From all around, a stream of beasts emerged: a gigantic caterpillar, a massive blue tiger with two tails and six legs, a swarm of small bulls that bore a resemblance to tikis, a giant and menacing squirrel, a king-sized boar with porcupine quills over its entire body...if anyone watching was disappointed about not witnessing a massive free-for-all, this was a good consolation prize.

Besides, they kinda were getting a massive free-for-all. Sanji, upon seeing the stampede, dove straight at the small bulls, sending the creatures flying alongside a musical accompaniment of sung beef recipes. That prompted the bulls to put aside their differences and gang up on the chef, though the steady flight of more of the bulls clearly indicated how well that strategy was working.

Conis and Mikey, meanwhile, pulled out weapons that were very much not what the viewers were used to. After all, nobody had heard of Conis using a piece of wood the size of a small cannon in a manner much akin to a staff, nor were nunchucks usually constructed out of bones.

The lack of special effects from Usopp, situated behind the above two plinking away at the quilled boar, merely emphasized the oddness.

"Where's the kaboom?" Pickles complained. "Come on, we know those two are bristling with explosive goodies! Why aren't they using them?"

"Do you know how fast ammo runs out in a sustained firefight?" Porche shot back. "I do. I do the accounting after every battle. You never have enough. Honestly, if they still had any ammo past day one I'll eat my makeup kit."

"Then why's Usopp still shooting?"

"Because he's shooting rocks, dingus," Foxy deadpanned. "You look closely, you can see them shattering on that porcupine boar thing. He doesn't need gunpowder, and you can just pick decent rocks for shooting off of the ground. That slingshot'll keep shooting until something breaks, and from what we know of his work that's a long ways off."

On screen, Mikey dodged out of the way of the caterpillar, before kicking off the air and landing on its head. To the surprise of everyone, he then swung his nunchucks down and around the insect's body, grunted happily after an experimental tug, and then used his tail to slap it into motion.

To the surprise of no one, that just pissed it off, and the caterpillar began thrashing about, trying to dislodge its impromptu mount.

The boar, meanwhile, seemed to have tired of getting shot at, as it shrugged off one last rock to the face before pawing the ground and charging straight at Usopp. One last rock failed to slow it down, and everyone expected Usopp to beat feet away.

So you can imagine the reaction to him planting Kabuto in the dirt and standing his ground.

"Is he crazy?!" Porsche yelped, bug-eyed.

"Has the fear finally snapped his mind like a twig?!" Foxy demanded.

Pickles shook his head. "Nah, he's gonna do something really cool! I know it!"
Usopp continued to stand his ground as the boar drew ever closer. In fact, he wasn't moving at all. The festival atmosphere evaporated in favor of tense silence as everyone in the square watched the feed, and mothers covered the eyes of their children. Were they about to see this broadcast turn into a snuff film? And why wasn't Usopp doing anything?!

The boar was about five feet from Usopp when the camera suddenly panned up. Protests died on the audience's tongues at the sight of Conis falling out of the sky, her log-like weapon grinding into the windpipe of the blue tiger, the creature trying and failing to dislodge her with its tails. With a grunt of exertion, the Skypiean flipped in mid-air, the tiger going along for the ride until it belly flopped right onto the charging boar.

There was a moment where the only sounds were the background battle noises, and then both creatures squealed in pain, a good octave or two higher than their initial voices. Given one had been squashed under two tons of squirrel and the other had gotten a bellyful of porcupine quills, this was an entirely appropriate reaction. The tiger promptly clambered off the boar, and both beat a hasty retreat, leaving behind a still-frozen Usopp and a panting Conis.

"Oh, good..." she groaned. "I wasn't... sure that'd... work... ow... gonna need to ask Sanji for another massage tonight..." Straightening, she turned towards Usopp. "Usopp, the beasts are gone."

The Foxy trio exchanged confused glances, but shouting from the square drew them back to the show in time to see Usopp keel backward, which showed exactly why he hadn't dodged: his eyes were wide, tearing, and bloodshot, and his entire expression radiated terror.

"Oh, I have I-Don't-Want-To-Be-On-This-Island-Anymore Disease again," he whimpered. "And this time it's fatal."

"You were saying something?" Foxy queried, one eyebrow raised as he looked sidelong at Pickles. A gaping, poleaxed Pickles.

Meanwhile, the camera panned back up to take in the entire battlefield. Mikey was still riding the caterpillar, and the clearing was now noticeably larger with shattered trees strewn about. Bulls were still flying from where Sanji was fighting. And Su... had just smugly strutted into the picture with the giant squirrel lying in an insensate, twitching heap behind her?!! What?

As if sensing the patent disbelief of the distant audience, the cloud fox turned to the camera and stuck her tongue out at it.

"How..." Porche breathed.

"Guess that confirms Cross's hypothesis of the drugs being intended for animal consumption..." Foxy half-whimpered.

"You mean that now she's—?" Pickles began, only to flail his arms.

"Uh-huh..."

After another few seconds of open-mouthed gaping, by some unspoken agreement, the audience collectively decided to forget that had ever happened. At least, that happened with the Foxy trio. Besides, much more interesting things were going on elsewhere on the screen. Sanji, for instance, kicking an opening through the pile of bulls that had been around him, before delivering a "Party Manners Kick Course!" right to the center of the caterpillar as it bounded over him, still trying to dislodge the stubborn dugong on its back.

The massive insect promptly collapsed into a quivering heap, Mikey rolling off and pumping his
flippers, at which point Sanji kicked him upside the head. Conis, dragging Usopp behind her, joined the two a few seconds later, and the audience promptly relaxed.

"Wait. Where'd the giraffe go?"

"BAROOOOO!"

The audience tensed right back up as the giraffe barged back in on the fight, bellowing and stomping.

"Huh, smart," Porche muttered. "Let them wear each other out and then ambush."

"Ssh!" Pickles hissed.

The Straw Hats onscreen tensed up, ready to fight… and then Usopp stood up and stepped in front of them, a confident smirk on his face.

"Great, now what's he doing?" Porche groaned.

"He has a plan, I just know it!" Pickles barked.

Foxy rolled his eyes. "Like the last time?"

Apparently, the Straw Hats agreed if Su's eye-rolling and Sanji's growled "What are you doing, shit-sniper?" were anything to go by.

Usopp, for his part, just told them, "Don't worry, guys, I got this."

The giraffe, for its part, demonstrated its utter contempt for Usopp's bravado by letting out a snort that managed to sound derisive before charging. In response, Usopp braced himself and cupped his hands at his side. Many a facepalm echoed out at that.

"He's not seriously gonna…" Foxy groaned between his hands.

"He's gonna do it! He's gonna do it!"

"Take this!" Usopp declared. "Super Mega Ultra Turtle Destruction Wave: Version Omega!"

To the shock of everyone, at those words, a blue glow built up in Usopp's cupped hands. And 'everyone' included the giraffe. Its eyes widened, and it immediately hit the brakes and reversed course back into the underbrush.

Usopp held his pose and expression until the giraffe was not only out of sight but out of audible range before slumping in relief. He recovered a few seconds later, and grinned, bringing his hand forward and revealing what he had in it.

"A Lamp Dial," Conis said, her expression growing into a smile. "Impressive innovation, Usopp!"

"Well, what can I say?" the sniper said, smugly rubbing his finger beneath his nose. "I'm the greatest liar this side of the Grand Line! No man nor beast can outsmart me when push comes to shove!"

"And thus, the Straw Hats remind us that even in a realm of brute force, trickery is still a force to be reckoned with," Foxy crooned, scribbling down in a notebook.

Mikey suddenly either had a seizure or sign-languaged another sentence. "'Any chance you could teach me that sleight of hand later? That's what he said," Sanji said, pointing to the dugong and
dispelling the confusion.

"Once we're back with the others and out of this nightmare, sure," Usopp said.

"Oh, yes, the others," Conis said, fishing around in her outfit. Sanji's eye began to morph into a heart and Mikey grinned eagerly, and Usopp's grin fell away, eyes twinkling with pure malice.

"Oh, like hell are you three bringing this place down on us again!" he snapped.

Usopp grabbed something out of his bag and vanished. The viewers blinked as a blur shot around the Straw Hats, blocking them from view. Seconds later, the view cleared, revealing Conis, Sanji, and Mikey fumbling with their faces, which were now covered from upper lip to neck in something gray and shiny; Usopp materialized beside the eagle, nodding in satisfaction as he dropped a pair of shells into his bag. He then turned directly towards the camera, holding up a roll of the same material that his crewmates were now struggling with.

"Duct tape, ladies and gentlemen. The all-purpose tool, and excellent for shutting up noisy crewmates when you're looking for a little peace and quiet."

"…Porche?" Foxy deadpanned.

"Already leaving, Boss," Porche responded, heading for the nearest hardware store just as the camera's view started to soar away from the Straw Hats again.

-0-

"Come on, come on…"

"Your Highness, you're going to gnaw clean through your thumb at this rate," Igaram chided.

"My daughter and her friends are trapped in a bioweapons lab several miles in the sky that is being maintained by one of the most infamous members of the Old Guard to ever live," Cobra Nefertari grit out, teeth still working at his nail. "If you think I'm going to calm down before I know she's perfectly safe, you're out of your mind."

"AAAAGH! SOMEONE HELP ME ALREADY!"

Chaka slapped a hand to his face with a groan at the familiar voice. "Uh-oh." In front of him, Cobra gripped the handles of his chair hard enough for them to creak.

As the eagle swooped down onto a moderately forested island with an autumn climate, the Alabastians couldn't help but feel tense. It was with no small amount of relief to the royals that the camera soon found a path torn through the brown-leaved trees, liberally decorated with fallen animals.

"Well, at least whoever she's stuck with is clearly strong enough to protect her, right?" Pell weakly pointed out.

"YOU LAZY BASTARDS! GET OFF YOUR ASSES AND MAKE THIS THING STOP!" Vivi yelled.

"'LAZY' MY THREE-POINTED CHIN, 'YOUR MAJESTY! WE'VE GOT OUR HANDS FULL, AND THAT'S WITH ROBIN HELPING US!"

"You just had to say it…" Chaka groaned as the creaking resumed.
The eagle's view finally reached the Straw Hats. And naturally, the scene it showed was an odd one. Vivi had her lion cutters latched in the jowls of a massive blood-red bronco as a makeshift bridle. Her arm wound around one chain while the other arm moved her hair out of her eyes, letting her look back at her crewmates with a growing blush and sheepish expression. Suddenly, Carue materialized a short distance away and began charging towards the bronco, which promptly skipped out of the frame, at which point the camera turned away.

From where the duck had come was a gargantuan banana-yellow serpent. Arms blossomed and wilted all over its body, though Nico Robin herself was nowhere to be seen at first. As the eagle came above the serpent, they saw her struggling within the serpent's grasp, countless arms blooming from all over her body to keep the coils from constricting her. On the outside sprinted Franky, his hair draping down in front of his face; Donny, who had kunai in flipper and seemed to be carving nicks all over the serpent's body; and… another figure in a peculiar outfit.

He had legs clad in black with dress shoes and a sword in one hand. The rest was hidden beneath a fukaamigasa hat with strips of fabric hanging down and covering him from crown to waist. Even the hand wielding the sword that produced more nicks on the serpent wasn't visible.

"That's their musician, I would assume," Kohza said.

The view circled around the serpent for several moments, much to Cobra's ire. When it finally turned back towards his daughter, she wasn't having much better of a time, gritting her teeth while Carue darted among the bronco's legs, apparently looking for an opportunity.

"SORRY IF I'M BEING A BIT SNAPPY, BUT I'M ABOUT TEN SECONDS AWAY FROM GETTING MY NECK SNAPPED!" Vivi shrieked.

"Yeah, and we're trying not to get pumped full of the acid this thing is using as venom here!" Franky snapped back. "So excuse us if we're a little preoccupied right now!" The camera switched back to the snake in time to see Franky punch it and Donny carve another chunk out of its hide, drawing a pained hiss from the beast that seemed to come from everywhere. "Sonuva- where is this thing's head?!"

"Yohohoho! I think that's what this entity's evolution was going for!" the apparent musician laughed as he zipped by. His voice was somewhat muffled by his headgear, but only enough to obfuscate his voice a little. Otherwise, he was perfectly audible. "Never fear, though! I have a plan! All I need is... aha, my flute!"

"Uh..." The three guards all exchanged confused looks, while Kohza looked thoughtful. Cobra was... less restrained.

"WHAT THE DEVIL IS A FLUTE GOING TO DO?!" he demanded of the screen.

"STOP SCREWING AROUND AND HELP, BROOK!" Franky and Vivi roared and screeched, respectively.

"I say! What hostility!"

"Brook," Nico Robin ground out through what sounded like gritted teeth. "I'm going to assume you have a good plan here. Implement it, now, before this thing breaks any more of my arms, or I shall strip the flesh from your bones piece by piece and use it to wallpaper my library."

"A creative threat... but I don't—GRK!" The musician was cut off by what they assumed was a hand sprouting on his body and grabbing his throat.
"I will find a way."

"R-Right..." Brook gurgled. "Plan now... joke later..."

A moment later, a low, haunting melody rang out, one that was almost familiar to the gathered Alabastans.

"I've heard that song before..." Cobra muttered, furrowing his brow in thought.

"So have I," Pell added. "But where...?"

On screen, the snake froze, before beginning to undulate. After about half a minute, something poked out of the mass of snake. Something scaly, and diamond-shaped, with a forked tongue poking out of it.

"Ah, now I remember!" Igaram exclaimed, plopping his fist in his palm. "It's similar to the snake-charming song the priests of Apophis play during their snake festival!"

Cobra raised an eyebrow. "You mean the deathly boring snake festival that ten generations of Nefertaris have begged out of going to?"

"Er..."

"I was thinking more of the street performers, myself," Kohza stated.

"Your Majesty, look!"

On screen, the head of the snake was now blatantly obvious, as was the somewhat glazed look in its eyes. But that's not what drew everyone's attention. No, that was reserved for Nico Robin, who had stepped into the visual snail's eyesight and had donned a scowl of... anger wasn't the right word. Aggravation? Regardless, the expression was vindictive as hell when she crossed her arms.

"Sesenta Fleur: Tie."

The gathered Alabastans collectively winced as the music cut off and arms sprouted all along the snake's long neck. Each arm reached down, grasped the snake, and then twisted just so. In no time at all, the head had been stuffed through several loops in the neck to make a neat bowline knot, tying the neck—and much of the body—of the snake into a loop.

The snake, now free of the song, attempted to untie itself, but the knot was too tight and it was entirely limited to yanking its head back. And Franky grabbing it right below the knot, well away from the head, didn't help.

"I am SUPER! done with all of this!" he declared, hefting the snake. "So just... ah, whatever. I'm out of one-liners!" And with that, he gave it an experimental twirl and then slung the loop—no, the lasso—towards the bucking bronco. It neatly settled around the horse's neck, prompting it to stop and stare at the impromptu rope.

That pause proved fatal. Vivi took the opportunity to unsling her Lion cutters and then whip the blade into its eye. The horse whinnied in pain, bucked, threw Franky off the snake... and threw the snake up for the blur that was Carue to grab it. A few seconds later, the horse was neatly hogtied on its side, unable to move.

The Alabastians all sagged in relief as the fighting concluded, a motion that the Straw Hats all imitated.
"Son... of a bitch..." Franky wheezed, bent over and puffing like a steam train. "That... totally... suuuucked..."

"Indeed..." Robin concurred, wincing as she rolled her shoulders. "Not to beat a dead horse—" Vivi dope-slapped her, the archaeologist barely flinching. "But I am very much coming to despise these islands. All in agreement?"

Donny moved his flippers in what almost seemed to be a pattern.

"Ah, yes, I suppose that you all have good reason to have long despised these islands. My apologies." Robin shook her head with a sigh. "Anyway... all in favor of a ten-minute break before continuing our trek?"

"Aye!/ "ARF!" was the unanimous reply.

"Glad to know I don't have to break anyone's shins with their own tibia." Robin sank to the ground with a gratified groan. The archaeologist then glanced at the musician. "Still, while we have a second... Brook, do you need any help removing that basket from your head?"

"Wait, basket? What bas—?" Chaka cut himself off mid-sentence, one eye twitching viciously. "You mean that that's not a hat!!"

"What else bould—ahem, mah, mah, MAH!" Igaram coughed. "What else would you expect of a Straw Hat?"

"Hm?" the named-again Brook asked, pointing at himself in confusion before snapping his fingers. "Oh! No, no need for that; I believe that I'll keep it for the time being. I quite like it! Snazzy, no?"

"Arf arf," Donny deadpanned, which Carue responded to with a snicker and a high-flipper/wing.

"Oh, yes, he is definitely a Straw Hat," Pell deadpanned.

"Indeed," Cobra sighed in relief before giving his retainers a firm nod. "Now, Chaka, I believe you were giving a report?"

"Wha—Your Highness?!" the jackal-man started in confusion. "But what about—?"

"Vivi is as safe as she can be in this situation," Cobra sighed wearily. "She has others of the crew alongside her and she can take care of herself. I am unhappy that she's in such danger, yes, but such is inevitable with any pirate crew, most of all the Straw Hats. The unknown factor is what worried me most; with her status confirmed, I need to return to our present business. Now, what news do you have, Chaka?"

The jackal-man was only a little slow in nodding withdrawing the papers he'd been reading from his jacket. "Alright, where was I... we've covered the blockade status, or lack thereof... no new reports from the Revolutionaries... ah, here we are. The Accinos have reported a strange trend in pirate movements over the last week."

"Rell—mah, mah, MAH!—really? I haven't heard about any pirate attacks recently," Igaram said.

"Exactly the Don's point," Chaka nodded at the captain. "While the blockade keeps out most of the pirate riff-raff, there's always a few who are foolish enough to run it and attack us. Except that recently, they haven't been doing that. In fact..." The general tapped the paper suspiciously. "According to the Accinos, there haven't been pirate attacks up a very large swathe of the Grand Line, period. For some reason, those who fly the black flag have been falling oddly silent recently."
One or two is a coincidence, but this many at once…”

"Hm… a good point..." Cobra scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Chaka, do we know when these anomalies started?"

"Um… about a week ago, Your Majesty," Chaka informed him.

Cobra nodded at that and then frowned. "Wait, that time frame… isn’t that—?" he muttered darkly, glancing at the screen. He barely held back a curse when he saw that the viewpoint had moved on.

-0-

[Well, at least now we know why the hell we couldn't find that island no matter how hard we looked,] First Mate Dugong muttered darkly as he scrutinized the ocean visible between the floating islands. [We were looking in the wrong damn place. Captain, want us to hit the surf again?]

[Don't bother,] Captain Dugong snorted dismissively. [The bastard's taken advantage of one of the greatest blind spots in all life: nobody ever bothers to look up. We'd just be getting a fat lot of nothing.]

[Meaning…] First Mate groaned and kneaded his snout. [That we can only do the same thing we ever do in these situations: suck it up and wait for the Straw Hats to kick ass and take names. Right?]

[Trust me, I enjoy sitting on the sidelines as much as you, but if I can suck it up, so can you. Now shush!] Captain snapped his flipper up to silence any retorts from his second. [The bird's starting to circle again.]

The landscape the bird was circling this time was a land of whites, greys, and muted greens; of snow blanketing the landscape, broken only by the occasional boulder and the taller of the conifers that dominated the visible flora. And dead center in the camera view was a short line of people, a line that included a sight that caused a deep, yawning pit to open up in Captain Dugong’s stomach.

See, the group consisted of Zoro, Merry, Chopper in his reindeer form, and Leo all but swimming through the loose powder. *And Zoro was leading.*

[Oh, don't tell me…] the Kung Fu dugong chieftain groaned.

"This is getting ridiculous…" Merry grit out over the howling wind, furiously rubbing at her arms under the furskin cloak she was wearing. *How the hell can a blizzard last a week straight!? I'm freezing my pitch, here!"

"It's not that odd," Chopper pointed out. The reindeer was unchanged in appearance, seemingly impervious to the cold and blinding snowfall. *Sometimes, we'd have month-long blizzards on Drum Island. You learn to stock up enough food and fuel.*

[Personally, I'm more concerned with the reason why we're still stuck in this hellhole in the first place!] Leo snarled through chattering teeth.

"The dugong's got a point! Remind me why we let Zoro lead the way!?" Merry snapped.

[The ship-girl can speak dugong now?] First Mate remarked.

[She had Boss, the brats, the reindeer, and the snail on her for months! Makes sense that she'd pick up second language or two, don't it?] another member of the crew barked up.
"We already tried letting you three lead, remember?" Zoro said with a roll of his eyes. "But if any of you want to give it another try, go right ahead. I'm sure it'll work out great for you."

"Gladly!" Leo declared, leaping ahead of the swordsman and jabbing his blade into the wall of snow. "Now! Onwards! To home and to—!...I just stabbed something in the side, didn't I?"

The Great Kung Fu Fleet, as one, slapped their flippers to their faces.

Leo had, indeed, stabbed something in the side. The snow rumbled and then fell off in chunks, revealing a massive brown yak with horns the size of trees. And from the expression on its face, it was pissed, a conclusion only reinforced by the angry bellow it let out. Leo hastily removed his sword. The yak proceeded to bat him aside with a single contemptuous flick of his head.

"WHYYYYyyyy—!" FWUMP!

"...Right. That's why." Merry sighed and slapped a hand to her face. "Aaaand he just landed in a nest of those ice-raven things, didn't he?"

The sound of tinkling and windy caws rang out, alongside a miserable [A-HA-HA-AAAAAGH!]

[This place just gets better and better…] First Mate muttered sarcastically.

"Chopper, go save the shellhead. Merry, help me kill dinner," Zoro matter-of-factly ordered. "And once that's done, you can all stop your bellyaching. I'm positive I know the way out of here."

The doctor and helmsgirl stared at their erstwhile superior for a few seconds before exchanging flat looks.

"Chopper?"

"Yes, Merry?"

"Are we going to die here?"

"Ignoring that I'm built for this kind of weather, we have a 72% chance of freezing, 22% of starving, aaand 6% of actually getting out. So, barring a serious amount of good luck… yes, Merry. Yes, we are."


"ALRIGHT, LISTEN, YOU TWO—!"

The eagle chose that moment to fly away. Or maybe it just didn't want to stick around in the blizzard any longer than it had to.

[...And now I remember the reason why we don't often mind sucking it up and waiting on the Straw Hats,] First Mate remarked.

-0-

"Well, at least Chopper's doing alright, right? …right?"

Dr. Kureha wasn't scowling, but nor was she smirking, and that made Dalton want to jump out of his fur. He had enough composure to hide the fear, particularly after his extended exposure to the doctor.
Though the non-zero percent chance the physician could smell fear played a part as well.

"He's doing all right, certainly," she said at last, prompting Dalton to relax a smidgen. "But that's not particularly comforting at the moment. Honestly, Dalton, they've been struggling for their lives against mutated animals in a floating archipelago for the past week. Try to be a little less insensitive, would you?"

Dalton would have responded to that, were it not for a large paw clamping down over his mouth. The president of the Sakura Kingdom shot the doctor's assistant a grateful look for the save, which the lapahn responded to with a soft grunt of acknowledgement. The bison-man turned back to the screen, which was heading back towards a jungle climate. All present wondered if they were heading back to the first group to start the pattern over.

Instead, the eagle soared over to a volcano with a lake in its crater, and not far from it, a large trench that ended within the forest. And at the end of that…

"So, that's the Thousand Sunny," Kureha said, sounding genuinely impressed. "And it's in the same area as the loudmouths and the captain. Well, looks like fortune is still smiling on them. But why's the bird heading there now?"

[BEAT IT, YOU FEATHERY BASTARD! I'LL USE YOUR WINGS TO DUST THE DAMN PANTRY!]

"There we go," Dalton nodded sagely as the bird hastily banked away from the angry barking. "The Straw Hats are as lucky as ever: one of the dugongs managed to stay behind. The… girl, I believe? Raphey?"

"Yeah, that's the one," Kureha nodded in confirmation.

And indeed it was. The pink-bandanna'd dugong was standing on the ship's railing, shaking an oversized shuriken at the bird, the bird quite disinclined to press the matter. It circled around, not coming any closer, leaving the dugong to snort before turning her attention back… to…

"What," Kureha and Dalton deadpanned.

To a pink-haired gothic lolita with a slight tan sprawled out on a lounge chair, apparently out cold, whose face Raphey was in the process of rubbing clean with a wet cloth.

"…They mentioned this on Thriller Bark…" said Kureha, slowly. "Perona. She stuck around with the Straw Hats after the fact?"

"Well, they kept Nico Robin on," Dalton reasoned. "And at least it looks like they're friends or close to it, right?"

On-screen Raphey finished her work and nodded firmly. She then uncapped a marker and went to work on the recently cleaned face, grumbling audibly. As Dalton kneaded the bridge of his nose, Kureha looked to her assistant, who began signing out the dugong's growling:

{I want to go out and get some action in, but I'm the last guard on the ship,} she muttered. {And of course, Boss will hand me my shell on a platter if I shirk my duty. So, here I am, reduced to experimenting with graffiti on our unconscious 'guest' until someone else shows up… next lion I see is going to get carved in half.}

She paused in her grumbling as a subtle growl came across the connection, and coughed awkwardly. {No offense meant, Sunny.}
Apparently, that was enough for the bird, as it chose to wheel up and away from the ship and start flapping away, towards the largest island that lorded over all the archipelago.

"That was all of the Straw Hats, wasn't it?" Dalton asked his surgeon general, while absently counting down on his fingers.

"No, we're still missing two people," Kureha answered, scowling. "Their navigator… and the raging bastard who separated them all in the first place."

-N-0-

"Nami's alone in that floating purgatory?!” Genzo raged, his sword rattling in his sheath from how hard he was gripping it.

"In all fairness, she isn't the same sneak-thief who left us so long ago…” Nojiko tried, though the real measure of her faith was the teeth gnawing at her knuckles.

"Well, I mean, the bird's probably heading her way now, right?" Chabo posed with more confidence.

Said confidence faltered when the eagle broke through a cloudbank to behold a massively ornate complex perched upon the summit of the archipelago.

Nojiko's teeth broke her skin. "Alright, my little sister is being held alone in the main base of one of the most infamous pirates in history. This officially cannot get any worse," she growled around her knuckle.

Before the village's tense, watchful eyes, the eagle swung through the snow-bound ramparts of the compound, displaying a number of ornate lions and far too many well-armed soldiers for comfort.

Finally, the visual-snail's gaze fell upon what appeared to be a greenhouse built into the side of one of the buildings, and the eagle soared towards it. The avian alighted on a specific panel, which swung inward and allowed it to land in the rafters. Which, judging from the large nests, scattered feathers, and handful of other eagles present, was the aviary. The eagle pecked at its chest, and the view suddenly changed to a rapidly shifting array of colors as the harness spiraled down. Nojiko and Genzo barely managed to keep their eyes open through it while the rest of the village had to look away. When it finally subsided, the snail seemed to have settled on a lawn chair next to a swimming pool… where a very familiar figure was emerging, clad in a dripping-wet string bikini.

"…I am so conflicted," Genzo groaned, grinding his palm into his forehead. "She's safe, that's good. She's not in chains, that's even better. But she's half-naked for the whole damn world to see, which almost makes me wish she was in critical condition!"

Despite herself, Nojiko couldn't help but laugh, though it was mostly due to the dual relief of her sister being alright, and the fact that Nami had a trio of metal batons in a holster strapped to her thigh. Wherever Nami was, she might have been alone, but she wasn't defenseless.

Said laughter redoubled when Nami paused in toweling herself off and shot an acrid glare at the snail. Reaching down, she threw her towel over the gastropod's carrying case. "You wanna see something, look at that. Bastards."

"Thank goodness, she's safe and still fighting," Nojiko sighed in relief.

"Course she is, you two are Bellemere's girls," Doctor Nako snorted. "No way either of you could ever be anything less than hard as nails."
Nojiko smiled at the compliment, but before she could respond-

"Awww, no, let the assholes have their show. These creeps haven't seen a real woman in who knows how long, remember?"

A shockingly familiar voice left a stunned Nojiko and Genzo gaping in shock at each other.

"Was that—?" Nojiko began.

The answer was given when the visual snail knocked itself against the side of its case, dislodging the towel and showing the world that Perona was floating upside down and over Nami, her arms folded behind her head.

"How the hell—!?” Genzo started to demand.

"Cross… did say she had some kind of ghost Devil Fruit, right?" Nojiko offered. "Though why she's with Nami…"

"Perona." Nami casually looked up at Perona. "Any luck?"

The ghost-girl scowled, huffed, and flipped herself into a sitting position. "Same as yesterday: none. They've got this place locked down tight and all corridors watched. That little pest—" Here Perona pointed at the world's viewpoint. "Has a lot of family backing it up. Sorry."

"Mmph, not your fault…" Nami began to pick up her clothes, but stopped with a shirt held halfway up. She then shot a doubtful look up at the ghost girl. "Perona… I know I've said this before, but I've got to say it again: you don't have to stay here. This isn't your fight."

"Wow, she's being generous?" Chabo said in surprise. "I'd say when pigs fly, but we've already seen that happe—OWOWOW!"

"Got anything else you want to say about my sister, you little brat!?" Nojiko asked as she ground her knuckles into the sides of the boy's skull.

The astral girl huffed out a breath. "And I've already told you—!"

**PA-DA-DA-DAAAA!**

Everyone jumped and both Perona and Nami grimaced at the blast of brass music that suddenly came out of nowhere.

"Oh, God, not again…" the spectre growled, clawing her fingers down her face.

Nami, meanwhile, just sighed, shook her head, and finished drying her hair before slipping the shirt on.

Once the clothing was on, the two turned toward the other side of the room, where three silhouettes were visible behind a screen. As the initial fanfare died down and an upbeat song began, the screen flopped down, and three figures were revealed: a gorilla—yes, gorilla—clad in red and pink; a clown-like man in a lab coat with blue hair; and a grinning man with a mane of golden hair, part of a steering wheel protruding from his skull, and swords serving as his legs from the knees down.

And they were all dancing.

"And there is how it could get worse. They're the moronic sort of pirates," Genzo snarled.
The routine lasted for a solid half minute, ending with a dramatic pose towards Nami. The navigator gave the trio a scathing look before looking away. "The clown missed a step three seconds in and was off-sync for the rest of it."

"He wha—DR. INDIGO, YOU MORON!" the sword-legged man roared, naked terror flashing across the clown's face as the larger man lunged for his throat. "WE'VE PRACTICED THAT ROUTINE A HUNDRED TIMES, HOW IS IT THAT SOMEONE WHO NEVER DID IT BEFORE DID IT BETTER… than…" The wheel-head shot an acrid glare over his shoulder at an unrepentant Nami. "You're just screwing with me, aren't you?"

"Br-r-r-illiant deduction, genius," Perona drawled.

Glowering, the man released the clown, who began gasping for breath.

"…Sorry," the wheel-head muttered.

"N-No problem, Captain," Indigo choked out, forcing a grin. "F-Far be it for me to take offense over a good joke."

Nodding, the identified captain turned back to Nami, schooling his expression into a grin that was clearly meant to be warm but only came across as sleazy.

"Come now, baby girl," he crooned, stalking towards her. He barely got a foot before a rumble of thunder made him visibly reconsider the move, the storminess of Nami's Eisen cloud mirrored in her face.

Genzo blinked in surprise. "Wow, didn't even see her draw."

"Touch me, and I will turn your wrinkly hide into charcoal," Nami acridly stated.

The captain backed off with a semi-impressed snort. The gorilla, on the other hand, outright roared at her, inches away from pouncing into a very electric situation.

"Scarlet, control yourself!" Indigo chided with a hard chop on the ape's neck. The harlequin didn't flinch when the gorilla turned on him, and instead calmly proffered it a banana. "Here, eat this instead. You get angry when you're hungry."

"OOK!" Scarlet grunted happily and grabbed the banana before messily chowing down on the fruit.

"I thought monkeys were supposed to eat meat," said one of the child villagers.

"Not actually a monkey. And that place ain't exactly what I'd call a bastion of natural evolution anyway," Doctor Nako pointed out.

"Upped Scarlet's dosage again, Doctor?" the wheel-headed man grunted inquisitively.

"Indeed, and with most spectacular results!" Indigo gave his boss a thumbs-up and a smile that had far too many teeth. "Ever since I started injecting the serum into bananas and feeding him with as many as I could, Scarlet's aggression has tripled! Ah, yes, on a related matter, Captain, I require some men to come to my lab and help me dispose of… ah… er…"

"A body?" Nami dryly provided.

The clown tilted his head thoughtfully. "…I suppose that bodies do indeed compose a significant fraction of the mass, yes… Let me put it to you this way: they will require mops."
"And there go my last reservations about Nami having a bounty that large," Genzo muttered. "Thank the heavens that she's grown so strong."

Meanwhile, the captain shook his head indulgently and refocused on Nami, who met his gaze with a frigid glare. "Aaaaanyway... the reason I'm here is the same as always, babygirl: to give you yet another chance to do the right thing and join my crew. You know..." The man's grin widened around his cigar. "A crew that can properly make use of your talents?"

Nojiko flushed with rage, Arlong's evil grin flashing in her mind's eye.

Apparently, Nami had the same feeling, her demeanor becoming positively glacial as she scowled at the lion-like man. "Word to the wise, the last bastard who used that wording got buried in his own castle. And my answer's the same one I've been giving all last week: piss off." And with that, she wheeled around and marched off, Perona floating alongside her and flipping the wheel-man off as she went.

The captain wasn't deterred in the least, however, as shown when he puffed out his chest. "Awww, don't be like that, baby girl! Here, lemme sweeten the deal for you with a little insider info: whenever anyone joins my crew? I give them one wish I accomplish without fail..." His grin widened menacingly. "And I never go back on my word."

"There's no way she'll believe that again," said several people in the village.

Apparently, that was a sentiment Perona shared, as she sneered viciously at the large man. "What part of 'go choke on your own ego' don't you get, you putrid—!?"

"You mean it?"

Perona twitched in place and shot a disbelieving look back at Nami, who'd stopped dead. "Nami, what—!?"

"If I join," Nami said slowly, still looking away from the man. "You'll fulfill my wish, no matter what it is?"

"But of course," the man sneered.

"Don't do it, sis," Nojiko hissed.

"...Fulfill my wish first and then I'll join," Nami tersely said. "And don't worry, it's an easy one."

"Deal!" the lion-man barked proudly. "What is it?"

The orange-haired navigator turned and displayed an utterly innocent smile that froze the blood of everyone watching.

"Oh, crap," Nojiko, Genzo, and Perona uttered in synch for an entirely different reason than before.

"Kill yourself." Nami politely requested.

For a good four seconds, the only sound was the quiet lapping of the swimming pool. And then...

"JIJIHAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!" the captain laughed hysterically. That lasted for exactly eight seconds. Then he literally flew forward, his right hand closing around her neck.

"NAMI!" Nojiko cried. Genzo would have been right there with her, if not for Nako tackled him and ramming a needle into his neck, putting him out like a light.
"Alright, listen here, baby—!" the captain started to growl before cutting himself off when he saw Nami's eyes. Saw the way that she was glaring defiantly at him, even as she struggled in his grip. "...You really aren't afraid of me, are you?"

"I... grew up... with evil... and I've... faced death... with a smile," Nami wheezed out in a biting tone. "You're... nothing... new..."

The captain frowned at that, and then he released her, letting her drop to the ground and get her breath back.

"I underestimated you," he admitted, a note of respect in his voice. But it was gone when he spoke again. "But you'll change your tune sooner or later... Miss Navigator. You'll change it soon enough. After all..." He sneered and lifted his chin. "Nobody denies Golden Lion Shiki. Nobody."

Unaware that her entire village was experiencing a substantial increase of respect for her, something none of them had thought possible, Nami maintained her glare until the legendary pirate and his lackeys turned their attention away from her.

Perona immediately took advantage of the diverted attention, swooping down to Nami's side with a concerned look on her face. "You alright?"

"I'll be better once this place has burned to the ground," Nami coughed, wincing and rubbing her throat. Her expression then turned melancholy as she turned to the frost-encrusted windows. "And... once I see my friends again..."

"Nami..." Genzo wheezed out through his drug-induced haze.

"This is even worse than her being in chains..." Nojiko shook her head mournfully. "This can't be happening... the Straw Hats have had bad luck before, but they've never gone a whole week without the situation improving!"

-ONE WEEK AGO-

... Sorry, loyal readers. That's where we leave off for now. We'll have the next installment as soon as we can.
"The Thousand Sunny is directly beneath us, Captain."

"Excellent," drawled Shiki at the report from one of his navigators, turning his gaze to the screen. "Feh. A bunch of rookies from the East Blue, of all places, becoming the most infamous crew in the world? The Navy has definitely gone to the dogs." A malevolent grin spread over his face. "But all of that's about to change. It's time—hmm?"

Shiki frowned at the image of Straw Hat Luffy on the viewscreen, which was eagerly waving up at him. For a moment, he considered this sight, and then with a flick of his wrist lowered the island ship enough that he was within the range of their snail. It was only just that he, of all pirates, give condemned men a final meal before their execution, no?

"Yeeesss?" he drawled.

"A cyclone is coming. Turn your ship ninety degrees to port," a female voice ordered.

Shiki blinked in surprise, then turned his gaze down to the navigation pit below him. "Navigator?" he asked.

"No, sir, our readings detect no such thing," one researcher said apologetically.

"The readings on the barometer are normal as well," another said, donning a smug expression. "I'm afraid their navigator is grossly mistaken."

"You actually think that's even possible?" a lazy yet threatening voice grunted in response. "You morons don't have a witch reading the air. But hey, if you want to die, we won't stop you. Have fun with that."

"Sir, they're turning their ship to nine o'clock!" another of the meteorologists called out.

"A-AND I SEE WHY! SIR, WE'VE GOT INCOMING!" one of the soldiers on deck cried out in terror.

"IT'S COMING IN FAST!"

Shiki turned his eyes to the front of his ship, and he gaped in surprise. "A beehive wig?!"

"THAT'S A WATERSPOUT!" Dr. Indigo snapped, slapping his captain upside the head.

-0-

"They've gone out of my range," Soundbite informed us, his gaze on the floating island-battleship above us.

"But they are turning to follow us, so at least they're not that stupid," Nami sighed in relief.

"I'd hope not, especially considering what they're sailing on!" Merry called down as she wrestled with Sunny's helm.

Usopp's reaction to that little tidbit was fairly representative. "Wait, that thing's actually a ship!?!" he
yelped in shock.

"Oh, yeah, nothing like Thriller Bark!" Merry confirmed. "The core might have once been an island, but it's all ship now. And she is old, proud, and powerful. Really, really powerful." Then she winced. "And really loud, too. She really likes being in charge and making sure everyone knows it, apparently."

I frowned thoughtfully while I wrestled with a particularly stubborn line. "And… does that tell you anything about who's running it?"

Merry tilted her head to the side with an uncertain frown. "Mmrgh… maybe, maybe not… A ship's attitude speaks to itself, its builder and its original crew, with influences from all who come after, but…" She shook her head remorsefully. "Sorry, she's too far to ask, and even then, somebody as grand and proud as that won't consider talking to a caravel or a barque like Big Bro. That's all I got."

"So, be wary if they don't just fly off," Sanji summarized, snorting derisively. "Which, considering the last guy we met who had a flying ship, is pretty obvious."

"That's for later if we don't sink to the damn ocean floor! For now, cyclone at 3 o'clock!" Nami roared at us over the now-howling winds.

"CYCLONE AT 3, AYE!" Merry barked in response, hastily yanking the wheel. "SOMEONE GET AHOLD OF THE MAINSAIL, WOULD YOU!?"

"I'LL GET RIGHT—ARGH!—ON IT!" I yelped, grabbing the line in question. Said line immediately tried to tug me off my feet, and I threw a pleading look around. "COULD I GET SOME HELP HERE?" Then, my gaze sharpened as I realized a very important discrepancy. "AND WHERE THE HELL'S PERONA!?"

"With you in spirit~," her astral form sang as it floated past, upside down without a care in the world, tongue stuck out in a way that would have been cute if I wasn't fighting for my life at the moment. "Isn't that enough?"

"I would prefer to have you in BODY!" The last word was emphasized both on account of my spiking temper and the pulley that suddenly tore itself free that I had to duck…

THWACK!

"AGH!"

Though Mikey was less lucky. Still, better a Dugong overboard than a man or hammer.

"And what good would that do, exactly?" Perona asked, half her attention on her fingernails. "My seafaring amounts to the unnatural calm of the Florian Triangle and the rigging and sails of Thriller Bark, and I never handled that. You can rage at me all you want, but if I actually tried to help you, I'd just be getting in the way. So of course you forgive me, riight?" She capped it all off with a bat of her eyelashes.

"Does this answer your question?" I snarled, working a hand free to shot her a specific gesture. The quarrel might have gone on longer had Nami's voice not cracked through.

"Cross, less argument, more movement! And Perona!" She swung around and snarled, paralyzing the smirking spectre. "If you don't have anything good to do while we're in a storm like this, stay out of the way!"
Perona huffed, but returned to silently floating above our heads, while I returned to manning the line, Mikey giving me a hand—er, flipper with it once he got back.

Despite how routine it had become for our crew to go to war against the elements of the Grand Line, combating the ocean's spontaneous meteorological blitz never became any less demanding; lesser crews would have sunk within moments, and I suspect that even some of the more experienced pros in the ocean would have had trouble.

But with the combined might of our camaraderie and Nami's nigh-upon divine instinct for all things meteorological, we managed to pull through.

Once the storm passed, we were all left exhausted and sprawled bonelessly across the deck. But we were alive, and that was what mattered. Though there was something else…

Namely, the island still hanging impossibly high above our heads. "They're still not coming back down?" Luffy said, his head tilted in confusion.

"Maybe they realized Soundbite was down here and didn't want anything to do with him," Usopp snidely suggested.

"LICK MY SLIMY ASS!"

"That's… actually probably not that far off," Conis pointed out.

Slowly, Soundbite turned his eyestalks on her, visibly twitching. "Et tu, boom babe?!"

"Well, you do have an incredibly large range for eavesdropping," the Skypiean hastily explained. "And while we might be used to it and others ignore it, maybe whoever's up there just appreciates their privacy?"

"Privacy, SHMIVA—eh? UH-OH, MAN—! OVER… uh…” Soundbite's exclamation trailed off into a shocked gurgle. "C-CORRECTION! Incoming!"

All eyes turned upward, and then the majority of our jaws fell in the opposite direction. There was indeed a man coming down, but it looked far too controlled to be free-fall.

"He's flying?!!" Luffy exclaimed.

"Devil Fruit," several people said, though that didn't diminish the shock or awe.

As the man came closer, his form became clearer, and he was one of the more eccentric characters we'd met on the Grand Line thus far: his messy golden hair extended down to his knees and parted around what looked like part of a steering wheel lodged in his skull, and he had swords for legs from the knees down. He was also grinning and smoking a cigar, easily the most mundane parts of his appearance.

Of course, that wasn't what had jaws dropping all around deck. This close, it was very clear that his descent was controlled, and the moment that he landed on the pavilion's roof…

"PA-DA-DA-DAAAA!"

A brass fanfare blared out from Soundbite's direction, prompting just about the entire crew to jump out of their skins. The unknown pirate, for his part, briefly looked surprised, and then, out of the crazy blue hell, he began dancing, of all things.
… and then Franky and Chopper (in Heavy Point) jumped onto the pavilion and began dancing right
beside him, because *why the hell not.*

Quite frankly, I wasn't sure how to react as the music played and two of our crew commenced a
dance number alongside this stranger that fell from the sky, moving in perfect sync and stepping
down flawlessly from their impromptu stage, continuing the dance until the soundtrack finished off
and they ended with mirroring poses.

After a moment, the applause started.

"So this is what it's like to be on the outside of that…" I muttered to Robin.

"Then I suppose I won't have need to hold back the next time you pull such a stunt, hm?" she
hummed 'innocently'.

I had a retort for that, I honestly did, but a sudden interruption made sure it would stay unsaid.
"JIHAHAHAHAHAHA!" the strange pirate laughed joyfully as he hopped down onto the deck, a
strong hint of Jamaica in his voice.

"Jihahahaha… that was impressive. How did you know that song, little snail?"

Soundbite shrugged, still grinning ear to ear. "NO CLUE! I hear a lot, and when you touched
down, something just clicked. IT JUST FELT RIGHT!"

"Happens more often than you'd think… for better or, more often, worse," I sighed mournfully.

"JIHAHAHAHAHA!" he laughed again. "I knew I was getting into *something* when I decided to
come meet the famous Straw Hat Pirates in person, but I never expected *that.*"

He paused, looked over the crew, and he opened his mouth to speak again.

"I want his legs."

Then all eyes turned toward Leo, who clapped a flipper to his mouth, apparently not meaning to say
that out loud.

"I love this day. Anyone else love this day?" Mikey breathed reverentially, his muzzle stuck in a
positively shit-eating grin.

"Yuup~!" Donny and Raphey both sighed rapturously.

"Jihahahahaha," the man chuckled, extending his legs forward to give a better view of the double-
edged swords. "You've got a good eye, dugong. Oto and Kogarashi are famous blades that have
fought well with me for decades. I used to wield them normally, but you can't be an old pirate
without sacrificing a few things along the way. Ahh, but don't be fooled!" The man's grin widened
proudly. "Just because I'm wielding them in a non-traditional manner doesn't mean I can't *use*
them in the proper fashion! Observe!"

Putting up his fists in a boxing stance, the man lifted one sword-foot and let loose a few side kicks.
Kicks that blurred from sight, and were accompanied by a metallic whistling sound. Eyes widened or
sparkled all-around at the sight.

But he wasn't done yet. Bringing his sword-foot down again, the man lifted the other and then spun a
roundhouse kick… and then ended up spinning on his sword tip, shaving grass from the deck and
leaving him dizzy, wobbling, and then on the deck once he stopped.
I couldn't help but chuckle as I held out a hand to the old man. "I'd make a crack about sea legs, but I'm guessing it'd be in bad taste?"

"Jihaha!" our guest laughed, taking my hand to pull himself up, clapping me on the shoulder as he went. "You're about twenty years too late, my friend. But you do have the gist of it: when you're capable of traversing the heavens like me, it can be a bit of a chore to get used to being back on the ground. Ah, but anyway, getting back on task!"

He stood tall and raised his head proudly. "I obviously know who all of you are, so allow me to introduce myself. Captain Shiki 'The Golden Lion', a fellow pirate! Now, then, first things first! I believe the one who warned me and my crew about that cyclone was your crew's navigator, Nami, yes? Which one of you lovely ladies might that be?"

"That would be me," Nami said, raising her hand.

"Ah. So I have you to thank, baby doll," he drawled.

The air around our navigator immediately rumbled and began to smell of ozone.

"Watch it, old man," Nami warned him in an irritated tone. A good chunk of the guys standing behind her immediately started chopping their hands across their throats. Shiki chuckled again, raising his hands in mock surrender.

"Too far?" Everyone not in Nami's line of view nodded frantically. "Well, either way, thank you for the warning."

Nami narrowed her eyes suspiciously, but she let her clouds fade back to white with a dismissive grunt.

"Ah, moving on, could we address the elephant in the room?" Vivi asked.

"Hello, Funkfreed," half the crew deadpanned politely. Yeah, we'd worn that phrase out damn quick.

"I WAS TALKING ABOUT THE FLYING ISLAND-SHIP!" Vivi snapped, jabbing her finger at the structure in question.

The elephant-sword dropped his head mock-mournfully. "Nobody ever wants to talk to Funkfreed…"

"Can't imagine why! Hwee hwee hwee—!" THWACK! "YIPE!"

"Ah, well, you see—GAH!" Shiki reeled in surprise as he looked up, and the reason became clear when Perona, already floating between the wheel-headed man and his flying ship, flew down a bit. The ghostly goth glanced up from her pointless nail filing, apathy written all over her face. "Can I help you?"

"M-M-My fairy godmother?!" he exclaimed.

An awkward silence fell in which some of the crew visibly considered dope-slapping the older pirate. I should know, I was one of them.

"…No," Perona said blandly, before disappearing back into the crow's nest.

"Damn, that would have been convenient," the lion-man snapped his fingers with a tsk.
"...Aaaanyway," Carue coughed into his wing. "Didn't we already say it was flying because of a Devil Fruit?"

"A-Ah, yes. The Float-Float Fruit, to be precise," Shiki explained, his composure returning as he stepped towards a barbell that Zoro had discarded on the deck. "I can manipulate the gravity of any object I touch, no matter how large or small. I'll give you an example."

He touched the weight, straightened, and then gestured.

Living on the Grand Line, you see a lot of things flying through the air, typically because of some storm or other tossing everything not tied down this way and that. But usually, a **fifty-pound barbell** wasn't on that list of items, and it most **definitely** never just floated through the air like some sort of soap bubble!

"Wow," Conis breathed in awe, pushing at the barbell with a finger and causing it to spin lazily before looking up at the ship. "And you can levitate something that big... constantly?"

"Not even that hard, angel!" Shiki replied. "I don't need to 'levitate it' at all! Once I tell something to float, it floats until I tell it to stop floating! Doesn't matter if it's a pebble or a mountain; if I'm involved, it doesn't fall without my permission!"

"Th-That, that's really..." Usopp gagged in shock.

"That's how those kind of Paramecia work," I spoke up, drawing everyone's attention. "From what I can tell, with any fruit that deals with manipulating things, they only wear off when the user wills it or gets knocked out. Though..." I turned back to Shiki. "To manipulate that much mass is impressive. I'm guessing that required a lot of practice to pull off."

"Naturally," Shiki responded with a grin. "But I'm no rookie pirate, Jeremiah Cross. I may have spent the last two decades in hiding since my last grand hurrah, but I've been on these seas since the days of the late King of the Pirates. Why..." His grin widened to display incredible pride. "I'll have you know I even traded blows with Roger more than once!"

My eyes shot wide in shock. "Holy—seriously!?"

"Ooooh yes!" Shiki nodded. "If you think Whitebeard was the only one to come out of that era, you're nuts. Now, granted, I didn't exactly come out of it—" He tapped one of his 'legs' in the lawn. "Unscathed, but I still got out, and in the pirate world, that's good enough for me!" He then glanced at the rest of the crew. "You may now lavish me with praise, if you so wish."

The Kiddie Trio and TDWS promptly complied. "SO COOL!" Heck, most of the crew looked decidedly impressed with the man.

"My, to think we would encounter such a famous pirate..." Robin muttered in awe.

"You've heard of him?" I inquired with a cocked eyebrow.

Robin's response was to give me a flat look. "Unfortunately, no. I was... otherwise occupied twenty years ago, as you'll recall." I hastily glanced away with a sheepish cough. "And meanwhile, I believe I should be saying the same to you, no?"

"Ehh..." I tapped my temple, but I quickly had to admit defeat. "I... think I remember something about him? Maybe? Best I've got is that he's telling the truth about knowing Roger. He wasn't... front and center, if you get my point?"
"Either way, it takes a special kind of strength to lose a leg and keep going strong, let alone two
legs," Sanji said, looking with grim admiration at the stumps where the swords were lodged.
"Though I guess it's not that big of a deal if he can fly."

"Um…" Conis spoke up tentatively, raising a hand. "If you met the Roger Pirates… is there any
chance you might have met my mother, Serra?"

The cheering stopped and Shiki's face snapped into a more serious expression the next moment, all
of his attention upon Conis.

"S-Sorry, it's just…" Under Shiki's intense gaze, our gunner nervously glanced aside. "I don't
remember that much of her, and I only just learned that she was a member of his crew, so… i-if you
know anything, would you… well, mind…"

For a long moment, Shiki was silent, and then he looked away with a heavy, smoke-filled sigh.

"…Roger had no shortage of respect from me, but I was not friends with the man," Shiki said,
raising a hand to his skull beside the steering wheel. "This was the result of my last clash with him."

An uncomfortable silence fell, but a smirk grew on Shiki's face. "That said, even with the abnormal
being normal on this ocean, it's hard to forget a Sky Island native. The finer details escape me, but I
distinctly remember how she fought. She was a pillar of strength, she possessed a bottomless
stockpile of artifices to employ, and she never backed down…" The lion-man winced and rubbed
her jaw. "And now that I think about it, she had freakish good aim with a bottle of rum, too."

Conis rubbed the back of her head, and a few others on the crew snickered, but she smiled gratefully.
"Thank you, sir."

Shiki raised his chin with a wide grin that had a hint of… something in it? I 'unno. "Happy to help!
Anything for a child of Roger's crew!" he boasted.

"Well, in that case, how about something for the kit of a pet of a member of Roger's crew, eh?" Su
piped up in her characteristically impish tone, most of us bracing for snark. "If you can make
anything fly, think you could take Carue for a spin? Ya know, make him into a real duck?
Tseeheeeheeeheee!

"Ah, shaddap, Su," Carue squawked, rolling his eyes. Then, with a frown, he looked back at Shiki.
"Though aye wouldn't say 'no'…"

"Jiihahaha! No can do, it doesn't work on animals!" Shiki replied, waving his hand. "I can make
myself float, but that's about it."

"That's awesome!" Luffy gasped, eyes sparkling. And then they lit up in an entirely different light.
"Oh, oh! I know, make me fly! I wanna fly!"

"Yeah! Yeah!" Usopp and Chopper eagerly agreed.

Shiki belted out a deep belly-laugh. "Sorry, my friends, but that includes humans."

"Oh." Luffy's expression promptly dropped into a sulky pout. "In that case, that's lame."

"Boo, boo," Usopp and Chopper chorused in agreement.

"Sorry to disappoint," Shiki said, taking a seat at the pavilion. "But there are sights in my hideout that
I think you'd enjoy." His smile faded, and he looked to Luffy. "I might offer to take you there as a
sign of my gratitude, but I feel as though it may be better served another way. From what I've heard on your show, you all are from the East Blue, yes? I hate to inform you of this, but recent scuttlebutt has said that the Navy is mobilizing to deal with a mysterious threat in your native ocean. It sounds like your homes are in deep trouble."

Aaaand that killed the mood right dead.

"We're aware," I nodded solemnly. "We had just decided to set a course back there when you came along."

"'Zat so?" the pirate said, raising a brow. "So close to the halfway point, and you're turning back now?"

Luffy lowered his hat over his eyes and smiled in the way he only did when he was about to say something wise.

"The adventure and the One Piece aren't going anywhere," he said confidently. "We made it this far once, we can do it again. It's not like we can just keep going when we know that our homes are in danger like that."

"…Quite impressive," Shiki said quietly, getting to his… er, supports. Then he raised his head with his grin as strong as ever. "That settles it, then! You saved my home, and so it is only right that I return the favor!" The man tapped one of his blades in the grass. "I'll use my Float powers to take you there. It'll be easy, I've been using the trick to avoid the Marines even before I went into hiding. And it'll be faster than whatever plan you had."

"Seriously? Awesome!" Luffy pumped his fists with a cheer, an emotion that was shared throughout our crew.

Shiki chuckled at our rejoicing, and I noticed some of the crew stiffen a bit at the twinkle of mischief that entered his eyes. And for good reason, seeing as I myself took a reflexive step back. "That said, I do have one condition for doing this. And before you say anything!" A raised hand, and our objections died in our throats. "I honestly doubt you'll mind."

He turned toward me, his grin growing. "I've been out of the world's spotlight for almost twenty years now. Two whole decades! And in my eyes that… is just not right. If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to speak to the world! Anonymously, sadly, I'm not quite ready for the Marines to come after me yet and I don't want them to know where my base is, but…" Shiki let out a despondent sigh. "I just want to say something, after these many long years. Is there any way that could be possible?"

I blinked in surprise… and then my partner and I slowly adopted our trademark Marines-are-about-to-have-a-bad-day grins. "I think," I chuckled, patting a hand on the weapon of mass-anarchy hanging at my side. "That that can be arranged."

"THEN WE HAVE AN ACCORD!" Shiki bellowed in a most grandiose tone, sweeping a hand skyward. "LET US BE OFF!"

And with that, the Thousand Sunny creaked, and shuddered, and then with one almighty lurch the ship went still. Utterly, impossibly still, outside the services of a drydock. Immediately, everyone dashed to the side, myself included, and stared down at the blue sea. The blue sea that we were rapidly rising from, as Sunny flew in a manner that not even Merry had managed to achieve.

I stared down at the sea falling away below us in awe for a second longer before shooting a grin at my partner-in-shell.
"Soundbite, old buddy," I said with an eager grin. "I think that we're in for one of our most glorious adventures yet!"

-0-

"Don don don don! Don don don don!"

"Guuuuugh…"

One of the four strongest pirates alive groaned piteously, sitting up despite the Sea King rampaging in his skull. "How the hell does that big-mouth brat always manage to time his show to when I'm most hungover?!"

"Because you're always hungover, Captain," Beckmann deadpanned.

Shanks blinked dumbly. "I am not!" he protested after a moment.

"Right, sorry. You're only usually hungover," Benn revised, still dry as dust.

"Damn straight, now someone pick that up!" Red-Haired Shanks ordered. "And get me some vodka!"

"You sure you wanna do that, cap'n?" Yasopp called. Behind him Roo took aim at their snail with a well-aimed Sea King bone. "Every time you drink while Cross is talking, you just spit it back up three seconds later!"

Shanks' ever so mature response was to transfer the weight of the bottle to his jaw so he could perform the ever-important task of flipping his sniper off and keep drinking. One of the first tricks he'd learned after becoming handicapped and he hadn't once regretted it.

When they dislodged the snail, the song coming across the connection was an upbeat tune with thumping percussion, blaring horns, and an odd sound similar to a guitar. Lyrics emerged after a few seconds.

"SONO CHI NO SADAME!...JOOOOOOO-JO!"

"...The fate of that blood'? Is this some kind of epic ballad or something?" Yasopp wondered.

"Couldn't be," Rockstar shook his head. "No way that someone named 'Jojo' could be that impressive."

"And that was Sono Chi no Sadame, by... well, someone you'll all never meet anyways," came Cross's voice. "I'll talk more about that another time; for now..." The anarchist's expression slowly twisted into an absolutely vicious grin. "Welcome back to the SBS."

'Oh crap' was the reaction of most of the Red-Haired Pirates'. Their captain, meanwhile...

"PFFFT! GAH, DAMMIT!" Shanks roared indignantly, vodka dripping from his chin. "THAT'S IT! WHEN LUFFY HOPS THE LINE, I'M GOING TO BE THERE TO MEET HIM JUST SO THAT I CAN GIVE THAT BRAT A PIECE OF MY MIND! AND A PIECE OF MY FOOT UP HIS—!"

"HA!"

A sudden bark of laughter cut through Shanks' rage.
"YOU THOUGHT IT WAS CROSS WHO STARTED THE SBS!" the trademark bevy of voices cackled. "BUT IT WAS ME, DIO—er, SOUNDBYTE!"

"YOU SLIMY LITTLE SON OF A… pffhehehe. Alright, fine, that was a good one," Cross admitted.

"…Oh yeah. Come hellfire or high tide, we're meeting them when they surface in the New World, and I am going to have words with the Voices of Anarchy," Shanks glowered, sitting back down and chugging the bottle.

"Does it technically count if it was in his voice?" Benn asked, frowning.

Shanks twitched at the thought before snapping his fingers at Rockstar. "The Wano Reserve we filched off of one of Kaido's boats. Now."

The rookie got up and began sorting through the bottles that littered the beach, grumbling all the while. When he walked by Roo, though, he stopped and shot the other pirate a curious look. "Hey, mind if I ask you something? Besides that first question, I mean."

"Spoilsport…" Roo grumbled into his fresh hunk of meat. "But yeah, go ahead."

"How come the captain's always like… well…" Rockstar nodded his head at Shanks. "I mean, he's one of the Four freaking Emperors! I'm not saying he should be another monster like the fatass or the beast, but—!"

"Why ain't he more respectable like the old man?" Roo finished, smirking. "Easy, really. Think about it: The Cap'n is one of the most powerful, most infamous pirates in the whole wide world. One of the four people in the world that the World Government absolutely, totally, completely can't control. One of the closest things they have to equals. And he acts like…"

Roo flailed his hands about, trying to find the words, prompting Rockstar to nod in understanding.

"Well, you know what he acts like. And you know what he told me, a few years back? 'Every second someone like me is the worst nightmare of the World Government, the Elder Bastards die a little bit more inside'."

"…holy hell, that's brilliant," Rockstar breathed in awe.

THWACK!

Then he winced when an empty vodka bottle thumped against his head. "I HEARD YOU AND I'M STILL WAITING FOR MY SAKE!"

"Also, the captain's still a natural stinking drunk!" Roo cackled.

THUNK!

"YEOW!" the fatso yelped as a rifle stock slammed over his skull.

"Shut up so we can listen to the rookie," Benn ordered.

"And he's a raging jackass…” Roo muttered.

THUNK!

"GAH, RIGHT ON THE OTHER LUMP!"
"Well, ladies and gentlemen, today is a rather special day on the SBS, as we happen to have a guest here!" Cross informed the word in his usual animated tone. "They're going anonymous for the time being, but they're doing a huge favor for us and all they asked for an interview on here, so let's get started!"

"Hello, people of the world. It's quite a pleasure to to speak to all of you, one that I've wanted for quite a long time now," came the dual voices that Soundbite used for anonymity. "I'm keeping most of myself to myself for now, but it should go without saying that I am a pirate. A captain of a fine crew that has every intention of shaking up the world."

"Well, that doesn't narrow it down very much, that could be any of those starry-eyed rookies," someone piped up.

"So, getting right into the interview, we've got our questions lined up. Primero: What makes you special enough to be able to shake up the world that much?" Cross inquired.

"Weeeell," the guest speaker drawled with a wide grin. A grin that made Shanks sit up and take notice. "I have spent several years mastering my Devil Fruit powers, which are by themselves enough that I hardly need to try against most opponents. Ah, but I am not complacent; I am a master swordsman as well, and my blades are of the highest quality. I am confident that between these two masteries, no adversary in my path will be a threat."

"Well, while I'm sure that your skills in both those areas is impressive, you'll forgive me if I have my doubts about the idea of one pirate crew taking on the Marine organization… well, one crew that's not ours, anyway!"

"Careful, Jeremiah Cross. Don't get too big of a head."

"Yeah, but think about how useless the Marines will feel the next time they take a swing at us and miss when we're showing that kind of attitude!" Cross shamelessly chortled. "Anyway, let's see, next question… what's your philosophy, what keeps you going through everything the sea spits out at you?"

"My philosophy?" the interviewee grunted, the snail's teeth gnashing in a way that indicated chewing on a cigar, as Boss had often shown. "Well… in difficult times, I have two sayings that I always come back to. First, you can't rush perfection; I'm as strong as I am because I took the time to refine my skills. And as much as I love massive payoffs, I've learned again and again that they take endless preparation to pull it off. Be it weeks, months, or even years, it can be hard to put in the necessary time and effort, to not leap for the payoff the first chance you get. But it's worth. It is always worth it."

"Admirable. Most folks don't have that kind of self-control. And the second?"

"Second is that you can't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs. It may sound a bit mercenary, but if you want to reach for the top? You won't make it there without a great deal of agony. Whether the pain comes from simple adversity, a failed experiment in growing stronger, or plain old misfortune, patience is not the only price that you must pay for success. Sometimes things turn out ugly even when you get the result you wanted. Again, though, I find that it is always worth it."

"Definitely an admirable worldview, and one we're all familiar with. I'm impressed."
"Oh stop, you're making me blush!"

"Huh, sounds like Luffy and his crew have run into a pretty impressive pirate!" someone piped up.

"Yeah…" Shanks rubbed his chin, a troubled frown on his face. "But for some reason he's also pretty familiar…"

That sobered up the rest of the Red-Haired Pirates real quick.

"And on this crew…" another grunt slowly clarified. "That's… usually a bad sign, ain't it?"

"Yeah, but… c'mon, it can't always be that bad, right?" someone else asked.

"Mmph… maybe…" Shanks grunted noncommittally.

"Well, moving on to more material things, I must say your swords are most impressive!"

"Ha! Your crew just won't get off my back about them, eh? Don't you already have plenty of impressive blades already?"

"Yeah, but except for Funkfreed, they're all katana. I don't even know what yours are. HEY, ZORO, BLADE ID!"

"Skillful to Great Grade, now clam it and let me train!" the 'rookie' crew's first mate shouted back.

"Not what I—ugh, never mind..." Cross grunted with a roll of his eyes. "But anyway, yeah, a new pair of Greats is impressive. Especially seeing as I've never seen a matched set before."

"Yes, well—!"

"BUT IT LOOKS LIKE THIS ISN'T ONE OF THOSE TIMES!" Shanks barked, shooting to his feet and dashing over to the snail so he could hastily punch in the SBS's number. "Damn it damn it damn i—!

"How bad, Shanks?!" Yasopp inquired nervously.

""Raging bastard who gave Roger and Garp the fights of their lives' bad!" Shanks growled. "The only cigar-smoking asshole I remember to wield both an impressive Devil Fruit and a matched pair of Graded Swords—!"

"Shiki the Golden Lion?!" Benn roared incredulously. Then he ground a the heel of his palm into his forehead. "Luffy, how could you possibly be that unluck—?

THWACK!

Roo cackled as he smashed the remains of his Sea King ribs over his superior's head. "HA! Payback, asshole! Ah, but no, I do realize that this is serious, so—!"

SMASH!

Roo fell silent as he, Yasopp, and Benn looked back up at Shanks, who had just crushed the bottle he was holding with widened eyes. His mouth moved wordlessly, those capable of reading lips seeing the words 'wanted to for a long time now' form before Shanks redoubled his attempts to type in his protégé's number… which really only impeded him, fingers stabbing into all the buttons but the right ones.
"—and so I've wielded these blades ever since, and they've never let me down."

"Huh. Quite the story, but I shouldn't be surprised considering how Zoro got his swords."

"GUESS IT'S JUST A thing for the BEST—Dot dot dot dot!—SWORDSMEN! Ooh, a call-in!"

"Thank goodness," Shanks breathed in relief.

"Heh, maybe someone looking for advice from a professional pirate?"

"And just what are you implying with that, hmm?" Cross scoffed in good humor before picking up. "Alright, caller, who here do you want to talk to?"

"SHIKI, YOU GET THE HELL AWAY FROM THEM RIGHT THE HELL NOW!" Shanks roared at the top of his lungs. "IF YOU TOUCH EVEN A HAIR ON LUFFY'S HEAD, I SWEAR I WILL—!"

"The world, Jeremiah Cross," came a voice that was decidedly not Shanks.

"GAAAAH!" the Emperor raged, slamming the receiver down hard enough to almost knock out the poor snail. "ONE FREAKING SECOND TOO LATE!"

"I will get straight to the point: I am Vice Admiral Tsuru of Marine Headquarters, and I would like to borrow the services of your SBS to send forth a warning regarding a significant threat that the Navy has been made aware of within the past two days. Will you permit this?"

"NO!" the Red-Haired Pirates bellowed as one.

"Eh… I'll allow it," the snail uttered with a shrug. "Just keep it clean. I'm the only one allowed to spew propaganda around here."

Shanks threw his hand up in frustration, spinning around and stomping away. "THE ONE TIME WE WANT HIM TO BE AN IRREVERENT ASSHOLE!"

"Captain, we can call in once he's—" one of the grunts began.

"No, don't bother," Shanks sighed, pulling up another bottle. "I really shouldn't be directly interfering in Luffy's journey. Besides, it's not like the Straw Hats haven't taken on impossible odds before."

Toning out the broadcast of the snail, Shanks took a long drink, and then wiped off his mouth, before blinking at the nervous and slightly incredulous looks his crew was giving him.

"So… we wait?" Yasopp asked.

"We wait," Shanks nodded. "We'll see if the Golden Lion has bitten off more than he can chew by challenging them. And if he hasn't?"

Without warning, the better part of the crew nearly fainted as a blast of Haki billowed out from Shanks, his glare on the no-longer-conscious snail.

"Then he'll wish that he had."

-ONE MINUTE EARLIER-

"Fleet Admiral Sengoku."
Said man and Garp both turned to face their old friend, the speaker, who had just entered the room with a sterner look on her face than usual, a snail in her hand. Sengoku took a moment to sigh in discontent at her impersonal address before responding. "Yes, Vice Admiral Tsuru?"

"Will you permit me to call in to the SBS?" The elderly Vice-Admiral pointed at the snail the other two Marines were listening to. "I would like to use Jeremiah Cross's range to spread the warning about Shiki. And to potentially warn them about the threat to their lives as well; the better prepared they are, the bigger the strip they might take out of Shiki's hide."

The Fleet Admiral's growing scowl faded into surprise. He went back to frowning a moment later, but nodded. "Do it. The brat's show can finally do something good."

Tsuru nodded, dialing the number carefully. 

"—JUST A thing for the BEST—Dot dot dot dot!—SWORDSMEN! Ooh, a call-in!"

"Heh, maybe someone looking for advice from a professional pirate?"

"And just what are you implying with that, hmm?" Cross scoffed in good humor before picking up. "Alright, caller, who here do you want to talk to?"

"The world, Jeremiah Cross," Tsuru stated in a no-nonsense voice. "I will get straight to the point: I am Vice Admiral Tsuru of Marine Headquarters, and I would like to borrow the services of your SBS to send forth a warning regarding a significant threat that the Navy has been made aware of within the past two days. Will you permit this?"

"Eh… I'll allow it," Cross said nonchalantly. "Just keep it clean. I'm the only one allowed to spew propaganda around here. Mind giving me a second here?"

"Sure, sure, go right ahead."

"You were saying?"

"Thank you," Tsuru said neutrally. "People of the world, I am here to make two warnings of the utmost importance: first, to all peoples living in the East Blue, we advise you to exercise the most extreme amount of caution possible. Over the course of the past month, several islands have been razed in totality, all living creatures on said islands slaughtered with extreme prejudice. The most recent attacks have annihilated civilian settlements and left no survivors. Recent evidence also suggests that there is a hostile force directing these attacks, so all civilians are urged to report any suspicious activity they notice to their local Marines immediately and without fail. That is all."

"Geez…" Cross shook his head, a scowl on his face. "Well, that's just horrible in all kinds of ways. And the other thing?"

"The second warning, perhaps even more critical, concerns the whole world. One of the most infamous pirates in history has resumed activity: Shiki the Golden Lion. He is one of the most dangerous men alive, a ruthless warmonger, one of the greatest rivals of the late Gold Roger, and the only man to ever escape from Impel Down. He is empowered by the Float-Float Fruit, enabling him to levitate himself as well as anything he touches other than animals. And we have reason to believe that he… is…"

Tsuru trailed off, about to say 'responsible for the attacks in the East Blue', but she sighed and grimaced as she registered that the snail's expression had gradually become more and more horrified over the course of her words.
"...he's standing right next to you, Jeremiah Cross, isn't he?" she groaned, kneaded her brow.

"Guilty as charged, Wrinkles~" sang the no-longer blurred voice, which had just taken on a new undertone of malice.

"YOU! GUM-GUM—WAAAAAAA!" came Luffy's sudden bellow, followed by an equally sudden scream of surprise that was echoed by the rest of his crew.

"DAMMIT, LUFFY!" Garp roared. "HOW DID YOU LET YOURSELF GET TAKEN IN BY SHIKI?!"

Sengoku, for his part, just had his forehead slumped on his table. It almost sounded like he was sobbing in exasperation as the one good, if reluctant, hope he had of the situation resolving itself without issue evaporated.

-ONE MINUTE EARLIER-

"Eh, I'll allow it," Cross shrugged indifferently. "Just keep it clean. I'm the only one allowed to spew propaganda around here." He then shot an apologetic look at the crew's guest. "Mind giving me a second here?"

"Sure, sure, go right ahead," Shiki waved him off airily before wandering away. His grin then widened as the Straw Hat's captain came up to him with an inquisitive look. "Can I help you?"

"Well," Luffy scratched the back of his head with uncharacteristic hesitation. "I know you said that wheel messed with your head, and that you weren't really friends, but... uh... do you... remember anything about Roger at all? What he was like and stuff?"

The guest captain's mood swiftly sobered up, and he glanced away. "...he was a great man. Strong, stalwart. Truly a pirate to be admired in every way."

"So cool!" Luffy grinned ecstactically.

Shiki bowed his head as his expression slowly darkened. "...he was also a damned fool, who refused to grasp the world when he had it in the palm of his hand."

"Huh?!" the rubber-man boggled at Shiki for a second before frowning and bringing a hand to his head in thought. "Wait... why does that sound...?"

"What the—? HEY, GUYS!" Usopp suddenly shouted, snapping Luffy out of his thoughts as he garnered everyone's attention. "TH-THERE'S... THERE ARE ISLANDS UP AHEAD!"

"At almost four thousand meters in the air and without a Cumulo Regalis in sight?! You're kidding!" Nami said incredulously, joining the rest of the crew at the Sunny's sides, Perona shadowing her in her astral form, having vehemently denied any idea of getting anywhere near a several thousand meter drop in person.

But no matter how impossible it should have been, none could deny the facts: That the Straw Hat's ship was floating straight towards an archipelago of totally normal islands, bearing a variety of climates and ecosystems... save that they were floating in the sky. And not a single Cumulo Regalis around.

"Woooah..." Usopp and Chopper breathed in gape-mouthed awe.

"I don't believe my eyes!" Brook exclaimed in shock. "My non-existent eyes! YOHOHO! SKULL
"I'm gonna go and get a Vision Dial! Otherwise the guys back on the Fleet'll never believe this!" Raphey barked excitedly, Rip Tide-ing into the Sunny.

"What is this place?" Luffy asked, voice uncharacteristically soft and quiet.

The shadows upon Shiki's face grew deeper and darker, even as his grin grew wider. "That, my fellow pirate, would be the Hidden Land in the Clouds known as Merveille. My glorious hideout."

"Huh?!" Luffy and his crew all snapped their heads around to stare at the wheel-headed man in confusion. "But you said you were taking us to the East—!"

Shiki suddenly snapped his hand up, silencing everyone and allowing them to hear what was being said by their tactician's snail.

"The second warning," Vice Admiral Tsuru declared solemnly, "Perhaps even more critical, concerns the world as a whole. One of the most infamous pirates in history has resumed activity: Shiki the Golden Lion."

Some of the crew stiffened, but most barely reacted; they were some of the most infamous pirates in history, after all. Yet for some reason, Luffy in particular had a frown on his face. Shiki, for his part, just kept grinning and looking ahead. And as the Vice Admiral spoke, listing the other pirate's characteristics, Shiki's grin grew ever wider while Luffy's frown deepened into an out and out scowl, until finally…

"...he's standing right next to you, Jeremiah Cross, isn't he?" Tsuru groaned.

Shiki shot a vicious leer at the source of the Marine's voice. "Guilty as charged, Wrinkles~"

"YOU!" Luffy suddenly roared at the top of his lungs, his face etched into a rictus of fury as he snapped his arm way back. "GUM-GUM—WAAAAAAA!" The attack, before it could be launched, was transformed into a panicked cry when the Thousand Sunny suddenly rocketed straight into the airborne archipelago, throwing the Straw Hats clean off their feet.

Once they adjusted to the momentum, the stronger members of the crew got to their feet, looking around in an attempt to spot their apparent latest threat…

"I find myself curious, Straw Hat!"

And led everyone in glaring up at the mast upon which Shiki had perched himself, visibly basking in his own superiority with an arrogant leer on his face.

"You somehow suspected me when you had no right to!" the Golden Lion chuckled darkly. "How did that happen?"

"I remembered you from Shanks' stories!" Luffy snarled viciously, dropping into a fight-ready position. "And he said that you were the most evil, hateful bastard of a tyrant that he ever met!"

"Sticks and stones, my boy!" Shiki guffawed. "The words of none will ever hurt me! Not yours, not your third mate's, and certainly not that Red-Haired brat's either! JIHAHAHA!"

"BUT MY PIPE SURE AS HELL WILL!" the rubber-man roared, brandishing said implement— "LUFFY, NO!"
—only to stumble when Cross hastily grabbed his captain's arm. "Cross, what—!?"

"I want to knock his block off as much as you do, but if you neutralize his powers for even a second, we're gonna hit the ocean like it was pavement!" Cross explained in a panic.

"Listen to the boy, Straw Hat!" Shiki called down, accompanied by a belly-deep laugh. "I'm not quite done with you yet, it'd be inconvenient to have to pick your remains up off the seafloor!"

"I THOUGHT I DITCHED THAT GAG IN SKYPIEA! I'M NINETEEN!"

"And look at how much I care!" Shiki boisterously replied, throwing his arms out wide. "And while I'm at it, let me humbly welcome you all to the Island of Merveille, as my honored guests! I am quite certain that you will find it to be a most wonderful home for adventurers such as yourselves… once you've settled in."

"Yooooou…" Luffy growled from the pit of his stomach.

"Oh, fret not, I won't be in your hair much longer!" Shiki waved his hand dismissively. "I'll just take what I decided to acquire while I was among you and be on my way! First off!" He shot his hand down towards the crew—

"GWAH!"

And suddenly jerked Cross clean off the deck by the strap of his transceiver's bag, the Third Mate yelping in surprise. Cross wasn't hanging for long, however, for as soon as Shiki had a good grip on the transceiver within, he cut the strap with a swing of his leg, letting him drop back down to the deck.

"This most interesting of gadgets, which I will make far better use of then you ever could," Shiki sneered as he spun the transceiver upon his finger, before shooting a titanically evil eye down at the Straw Hats. "And for the second… MY NEW NAVIGATOR!" Without warning the gold-maned captain shot forwards and pounced on Nami.

The navigator tried to snap out her Clima-Tact, but before she could even twitch, Shiki snapped his arm forward and an autonomous rope shot flew out of his sleeve. The living binding wound itself around Nami, both pinning her arms to her chest so she couldn't grab her weapon and gagging her screams of protest as the larger man slung her over his shoulder like a sack of flour.

The Golden Lion took a victorious tug from his cigar, floating himself and his captive skywards with a victorious leer on his face. "And with that," he gloated. "I shall be taking my leave."

"LIKE HELL ARE YOU GETTING AWAY WITH NAMI-SWAN! SKY WALK!" Sanji roared, leaping up and running on the air toward Shiki as though he were climbing stairs.

"TIDAL SWIM!" concurred the dugongs sans Raphey, swimming through the air after Sanji, weapons at ready. Shiki turned back towards them, his eyes widening in surprise. Then he chuckled.

"So you can fly as well? Impressive. But unfortunately, you're a few decades too young to try challenging me!"

With that, Shiki tossed his captive up into the air, where she came to a rest about five hundred feet above. The four aerial fighters didn't respond, instead bracing themselves on the air and then pushing off one last time at Shiki. And then, when they were close enough, Shiki flipped himself upside down and began spinning like a top. A razor-edged top.
Sanji, gritting his teeth, immediately went high. With a cry of "Nori Arts!", the dugongs swayed under the blades, at which point Shiki stopped spinning and brought his knees down on Donny and Leo, sending them falling back to the deck, dazed.

That didn't stop either Sanji or Mikey, who pushed off again to try and sandwich Shiki between them. Shiki didn't move, and for a moment it looked like they might actually get them. But at the last minute he soared up and between them, leaving Sanji, unable to react in time, to kick Mikey square in the nose.

"Oh shit!" Sanji yelped as Mikey soared towards the ground to join his fellow dugongs.

"JIHAHAHAHAHA!"

Flames roared in Sanji's eyes as he spun around and shot a glare at Shiki. "You think this is _funny_, shit-lion?"

Shiki straightened, wiping a tear from his eye. "You kicked your own crewmate in the snout! Of course that's funny! And you must've seen the look on his face." Shiki grinned wider, and then burst out laughing again. "Jihahahaha—whoa!"

That exclamation was due to a flying shard of razor air nearly taking his head off; as it is, he had enough time to hastily swoop over it, which was where Sanji met him, leg cocked back.

"Eat this!" the cook declared. "Mouton!"

The kick lashed out, and Shiki simply floated above it, legs drawn in. And given the nature of the Mouton, Sanji was left horribly exposed when Shiki began stabbing with his sword-legs as fast as he could. Especially since Sanji didn't—couldn't—bring his hands up, for fear of getting them slashed up.

And so, when Sanji, too, came crashing out of the sky, he looked like he'd gone charging through a patch of sawgrass.

"Well, that was fun," Shiki chuckled as he buffed his nails on his jacket, offhandedly floating up to grab Nami again. "But! As I was saying earlier... goodbye." And with that, the Golden Lion snapped his fingers dismissively.

And to everyone's horror, gravity reasserted itself upon the Thousand Sunny, sending the Straw Hats careening down towards the ocean far below.

"YOU SON OF A—!" Luffy roared, reeling up to shoot his arm at Shiki even as he freefell.

"WELCOME TO MERVEILLE!" Shiki cackled back. "MIND THE DROP!" He punctuated the last word with a sweep of his hand.

Luffy hesitated slightly at the action before stiffening in both shock and horror as he became acutely aware of the fact that the Thousand Sunny, his own ship, was _swinging around towards him and his crew!_ "LOOK OUT!" The rubber-man shot his arms out and _tried_ to grab as many of his crewmates as he could, but he only managed to grasp Cross and Boss before the Sunny's keel slammed into the whole crew at once with the force of a battering ram, a Sea King, and a Sea Train all rolled into one. More than enough force to send the Straw Hats flying to the far ends of the archipelago in several discrete clumps. The Sunny getting tossed onto another island with as much care as a broken toy merely added insult to injury.

As his captive began flailing and screaming muffled obscenities at him, Shiki turned his focus off the
distant Straw Hats and to his ill-acquired transceiver. "In case you all didn't get the memo," Shiki leered at the world. "The Straw Hat Broadcasting Station is now signing off. Permanently. JIHAHAHA!" And with a final cackle he slammed the mic down and shut the world off.

Slowly, the Golden Lion's laughter subsided into a contented sigh. He patted his latest acquisitions, prompting one of them to shout more muffled obscenities into her gag. "Ahhh, this has been a good day… I guess there's only one question left now, hm?" At those words, Shiki's mood pulled a 180 in the form of a frigid glare directed over his shoulder.

More precisely, directed at the astral form of Perona, half-formed Negative Hollows flanking a raised hand, just waiting for the order. And as much as she wanted to, she couldn't give that order. For she'd seen that glare before, so many times before, and it sent shivers through her entire body.

She'd seen it in the eyes of Moria… and she knew what awaited her if she tried to defy him.

And so, it was with a final apologetic look at Nami that Perona bowed her head in submission and let her Hollows fade away.

Shiki's demeanor became 'pleasant' once more. "That's what I thought. Now keep up. I wouldn't want you to miss out on the tour." He turned his gaze to the murderous woman over his shoulder, completely unfazed by her rage. "After all… it's the last home you'll ever know."

If Nami was angry before, those words caused her eyes, visible only to Perona, to shine with pure, venomous hatred. And it was at that moment that the ghost-girl knew, without a single doubt, that Shiki the Golden Lion had just made a fatal mistake. Maybe even literally.

-THE PRESENT-

The sound of farting footsteps drew Nami out of her reminiscing. Dr. Indigo came into view shortly after, and despite their feelings for the man (read: burning hate), the two prisoners found themselves more than a little intrigued by the massive wooden birdcage he was carrying over his head.

"Captain Shiki!" the clown proclaimed. "We've had another evolutionary breakthrough! A new species! Take a look at this fella!"

Indigo sat the cage down, and Nami and Perona shifted to look at its captive. The creature in the cage resembled a duck, but it had a red comb on its head reminiscent of a rooster or turkey and long tail feathers more appropriate for a peacock. What struck Nami the most were its eyes; putting the pieces together on the local fauna was pretty straightforward, but unlike what she'd expected this fowl didn't seem aggressive at all. Hell, it didn't even have the tension most non-aggressive animals had. It just looked… utterly innocent, somehow.

"HUH?! A guitar?" Shiki gaped at the fowl.

"ARE YOU BLIND, IT'S A BIRD!" Indigo barked, slapping his captain.

The clown, the lion, and the gorilla then struck a pose, and the girls were about to turn away when the cage opened and the duck within squawked and spread its wings. In the space of a second, it flew up, draped itself on top of Shiki—

"QUAAAA!" ZZZT!

And then dropped a barrage of lightning on the trio with a perfectly content quack.
"HOROHOROHORO!" Perona and an entourage of her Negative Hollows cackled as the trio's skeletons flickered in and out of view.

"HA!" Nami barked, doubling over. "Oh man, the only thing I regret about this is that I didn't get the chance to do it myself sooner!"

The merriment was short-lived, however, because as soon as Shiki got his bearings back, he grabbed the obliviously happy duck by its jowls.

"Stupid guitar!" he roared, tossing the bird at Scarlet, who then backhanded it with a snarl. It slammed into a nearby tree, snapping it in half, but surprisingly, the duck appeared to be more scared than actually harmed. Still, that didn't keep Nami from being concerned.

"Hey, lay off!" Nami snapped, rushing over to the duck, huddling protectively. Shiki either didn't hear her or didn't care, more concerned with glaring daggers at his scientist.

"So, that was the evolution?" he bit out waspishly as he brushed some charred ashes off of his shoulders.

"Correct," Indigo weakly confirmed. Reaching up with shaking arms, he snapped his fingers under his nose a few times and inhaled the resulting emerald sparks. Almost immediately, he perked up, the shaking gone. "He's evolved to discharge bursts of electricity! And that was actually him being friendly, you should see what he's like when exposed to stress!"

Nami and Perona exchanged befuddled looks, then went back to the duck as it staggered back to its feet and cowered timidly behind them. "Evolved?" Nami asked cautiously. "What do you mean?"

"Eh? What's that?" The Straw Hats' navigator had to fight the urge to hurl as Shiki shot a taunting leer her way. "You want to know? Well... you'll find out as soon as you join my crew, so I guess I might as well tell you now."

Shiki nodded his head at the aggressively natured and colored gorilla flanking him. "Throughout the history of this island, the native animals have evolved in a strange, rapid manner, untouched by the outside world. This development is all thanks to a plant called IQ. Over the years, the plant has found its way into the ecosystem of Merveille, and the chemicals present in said plant manipulate the animals' physical growth to not only adapt to their surroundings, but to aggressively overcome them. Once we realized its effect... Shiki's grin took on a particularly vicious undertone. "I had every last IQ plant on the entire island harvested for my own usage."

"And after 20 years of experimentation, I've made the breakthrough of the century!" Indigo proclaimed giddily, leaping in front of his captain, producing and proffering a test tube full of green pills and a small container of green liquid. "The synthesized distillation of the IQ plant's potent powers. A drug that is pure evolution in chemical form: SIQ!" The mad doctor tossed the vials up, juggling them hand to hand with a confident smirk. "With a single injection, we can turn any animal into a perfect fighting machine, their astounding strength only matched by their boundless aggression. And the more we give them, the more violent they get! You've never seen such savage animals!"

"Huh..." Perona tilted her head thoughtfully before shrugging indifferently. "That makes sense to me."

"No, it doesn't! That's horrifying!" Nami snapped at her companion before shooting a scowl at Indigo. "And also familiar. You're the same Indigo who gave the Amigo Pirates that poison they injected themselves with, aren't you?"
Indigo blinked in surprise, still juggling, and then his smile became particularly sadistic. "Ah, yes, now I remember! Yours was the crew that laid low that pack of lab-rats! I must thank you for the data, it was quite the boon!"

"Keep your damn thanks!" the navigator spat. "What the hell did you do, give them the same poison you're giving the animals?!

"Psh, hardly," Indigo scoffed. "While SIQ works well on animals, the effects are depressingly reduced on humans. Barely any aggression whatsoever because of a long-induced immunity to adrenaline, pah! Hence, I used those hapless fools to test out my latest innovation!" The clown flicked his wrist, adding a third vial, filled with reddish-orange liquid, to his juggling. "BIQ! Booster IQ for the human soul! Still some bugs to work out, but still better than anything that shaggy rug of a quack you call a doctor could whip up!"

Nami let out a sharp 'tsk' and glared the doctor right in his eyes. "You only wish you were half as skilled as Chopper, you damned hack."

Indigo's jolly mood promptly evaporated into a blistering glare. His fists wrapped around the vials he held, the glass creaking under the strain. Slowly, though, he let himself relax, his glare relaxing into a bloodthirsty smile. "Well, we'll be finding out soon enough, won't we?"

A cold chill swept over Nami and Perona, both of them stiffening. "What are you talking about?" the navigator quietly but furiously demanded.

"Weeeell—!"

"You'll understand our ultimate goal soon enough," Shiki cut in, roughly shoving Indigo out of the way. "As long as you join my crew, that is."

"Are you deaf?!" Nami snapped back, her hand twitching towards her Clima-Tact. "I already told you, I'll never—!"

"You will!"

Shiki's sudden roar shut Nami's protests down cold. He had a glint in his eye that gave the impression he knew something that she didn't. And more importantly, that pushing him any further would be supremely detrimental to her continued health.

"Not only will you join my crew," the leonine pirate said, chin jutted out. "You'll grovel for your chance to do it. You'll get down on your hands and knees and beg. And once we've got that sad scene out of the way, I'll tell you everything you ever wanted to hear. Just make sure to remember: I'm always willing to grant a favor for one of my own crew. Ji… JIHAHAHA!"

Behind Shiki, Scarlet began beating his chest. "OO-OOK!"

"Er… are you pounding your chest to impress the girl?" Indigo questioned.

Scarlet nodded with an affirmative grunt.

"THEY'RE HAVING A SERIOUS CONVERSATION, YOU DIRTY APE!"

"EH?!" Shiki said, turning back to Scarlet. "I just thought you were my grandma for a second there."

"DOES EVERYONE IN YOUR STINKING FAMILY LOOK LIKE A GORILLA, OR WHAT?!" Indigo demanded, chopping his boss on the head.
Shiki rounded on his resident doctor, a snarl on his lips. "You damn mad scien—!"

"OOK!" SLAM!

Any further action was aborted by Scarlet bringing down a far stronger chop on his captain's head that the pirate's head into and through the floor.

"CAPTAIN!" Indigo yelped in horror before rounding on the overly juiced ape. "Damn it, Scarlet, I've told you not to do that! Unlike me, you actually have upper body strength, you could seriously —!

"OOK!" Scarlet barked again, raising his fist in preparation to slug the doctor.

Said doctor hastily became far more pleasant in demeanor, reaching into his pocket and offering a yellow… 'fruit' to the ape. "Banana?"

That offer didn't please Scarlet much, give the way snarled and drew his hackles back.

"Plus four more if you eat it in my lab!" Indigo hastily tacked on.

"OO-OO A-AH!" the gorilla hooted joyfully, snatching the chemical-loaded banana from the doctor's hand and loping out of the greenhouse.

About a second after the ape left, Shiki let out a pained groan and pushed his way to his knees.

"Damn stupid monkey… grargh." Shiki rubbed his temple, drawing a wince before shooting a glare at Indigo. "You can still control him, right?"

"I'll up the dosage of mood stabilizers in his next batch of SIQ-nanas, don't worry," Indigo assured his captain.

If anything, that darkened Shiki's mood further.

"Mood stabilizers that I can dispel at a whim!" the doctor hastily amended.

Shiki nodded with a dismissive snort. "Better."

"You bastards are despicable," Nami spat.

Surprisingly, instead of immediately responding, Indigo and Shiki shared a significant look. "Shall we, Captain?" the doctor grinned.

"Absolutely, Doctor," Shiki grinned back, locking arms and posing with the mad scientist.

"Pi~ra~te!"

Rumbling thunder drowned out Nami's snarl as she snapped out her Clima-Tact, though she stopped just short of actually attacking.

Indigo leapt a full meter back from the incensed navigator. "Okay, might have pushed that one a bit far!" the doctor admitted with a whimper.

Shiki barely reacted at all, simply turning away. "I'll give you some more time to think about it. For the time being, I have business to attend to regarding my master plan. I'll be back once I've got everything in motion. And then… you will join my crew."

With that ominous proclamation, Shiki headed for the exit. Indigo composed himself and made to
follow, but then slapped his forehead and stopped dead in his tracks. "Gah! Almost forgot!" He turned around and jabbed a finger at the duck that was cowering behind their thundering prisoner. "You, with me! I need to find out the source of your bioelectricity so that I can put it in something less disappointing!"

"Quaaa!" the duck-peacock wailed fearfully, hiding further behind Nami.

Nami's mood darkened further, and she threw her arm out to shield the literal thunderbird. "Back. Off." Perona promptly backed her up by hovering over the clouds, a trio of Mini Hollows orbiting above her hand.

Indigo scoffed at the girls and started to reach into his jacket. "Okay, you two. Back away from the bird, before I—!"

"Leave it."

Indigo started at the order before boggling at the man who'd given it. "B-But Captain, the bird, the research—!"

"Leave. It," Shiki bit out, accompanied by a dark glare that got Indigo breaking out in cold sweat. "If it'll tide her over for a second longer, you can put it off for a few more hours."

"Bite me, bastard," Nami shot back at him.

"You do realize you're just pissing her off more and more with your every word, right?" Perona called at the Golden Lion's back as he finally walked out, his doctor trailing behind.

"It'll make her inevitable groveling aaaall the sweeter. Enjoy the pool, Miss Navigator!" Shiki called back without so much as a glance back, his final words punctuated by the room's doors slamming back shut.

"Ass," Perona groused

Nami let out a weary sigh, letting her Eisen Tempo recede into her Clima-Tact, which she resheathed in her holster. "Ass that's holding this whole archipelago in the air through will alone and who can kill us with a flick of his wrist."

The ghost-girl deflated at the reminder of the severity of their situation. "Point…" Straightening up, she swung around so that she was fully facing Nami, concern written all over her face. "Are you alright, by the way? He got you good earlier."

The navigator winced and rubbed her neck at the reminder. "I'll live. Believe it or not, I've gone through worse. I'll be fine…” Nami said, before glancing out the window with a frown. "It's the others I'm worried about."

"Even knowing how strong they are?"

Nami nodded solemnly. "That should tell you just how worried I am."

Perona nodded sadly in agreement before shrugging. "Yeah, well, we can worry about them later. Right now, let's concentrate on getting you out, alright?"

This was met by a thankful smile, and then Nami before looked towards the duck creature she'd defended, who was watching them with a curious and gentle gaze. "I don't suppose you know any good ways out of here?" she asked in a joking tone.
The duck blinked and tilted its head in confusion. "Qua?"

An expression of horror slowly came over the navigator. "… God help me, I'm a grown woman who
talks to animals and expects them to talk back."

"Horohorohorohoro…" Perona chortled. "Don't feel too bad, I got used to all of my animal zombies
talking back."

Nami slowly turned a flat glare on the Hollow-girl. "Perona, how in the hell is that meant to make me
feel better?" And with that she stomped off, muttering mutinously under her breath.

"Wha—? Hey, come back!" Perona protested, hastily floating after Nami. "It was a joke, a jo—!"

"Sh!"

Silence fell at the glance Nami over her shoulder, a finger at her lips. Any questions Perona had died
were answered by surreptitious glance at the snail mounted in the wall, one that had been tracking
their every move.

"I can worry about my friends as much as I want because I've found a way out," Nami hissed under
her breath. "We are getting out of here now."

Perona made sure that her face was turned away from the snail before grinning in relief and joy.
"You want me to take a couple of extra minutes to leave a little surprise behind for them?"

Nami's expression would have sent the devil himself running for the hills. "Do you even have
to ask."

-0-

"Usopp, a fair warning," Conis said in ill-concealed irritation as she tried to rub away the lingering
stinging in her jaw. "I've been made aware of some rather interesting punishments since I started
studying with Robin, so I'd advise against pulling that off again."

"I'll spare the time to worry about that threat when we're back on the Sunny, back on the sea, and
back on our way to the East Blue," Usopp responded, his tone cold enough that Conis's anger faded
in favor of surprise. "Meanwhile, I'm more afraid of the monsters who actually want to kill me, so
don't get any ideas about drawing them to us just because you want to find the others."

Mikey, who had made exactly no progress at freeing himself, paused to angrily flail his flippers.
Sanji, unfortunately, was busy working through bindings that Usopp had made twice as strong as the
others', and so was unavailable to translate.

Frowning in thought, Usopp said, "I caught the word 'idea' in there, so I assume you were asking if I
had any better ones?" The Dugong nodded, and Usopp huffed before turning back to the cliff they
were walking towards, everyone else following.

"With a good couple of hours of peace and quiet, I was able to get my head together. So besides
remembering that our homes are in danger and we've lost a week getting there, I realized that all of
these islands are floating, but their altitude is constant. We can assume that the rest of the crew has
been as busy getting chased everywhere as we have over the last week, including having to jump off
of a few islands. And most of them can't use Moonwalk to get back up again."

As they stepped up to the edge of the cliff, he gestured around them. "So, they're probably all
heading in the same direction: down. Meaning all we have to do is head for the bottom island and
find a safe place to wait for the others; maybe they're even already there. Once we've done that, Sanji, if you want to fly back up and see if you can track down the ones who aren't, be my guest."

Sanji stared at Usopp in silence before tilting his hat down over his eyes with an aggravated but defeated growl.

"Glad to hear it," Usopp sighed in relief. "Now, Conis? Help me scout out a place down there where we can set up camp." So saying, the sniper pulled down his goggles and peered over the edge at the island below them. Conis joined him a second later, her goggles also pulled up. Scant seconds later, they spoke together.

"Whoa, there's a village down there!" / "What? That looks like a village!"

After several more seconds, the two removed their goggles and turned back toward their companions. "I'm not positive, but I think that the people there might be natives," Conis informed them. "From the way their village is set up, it looks like the local beasts are being kept at bay by a thick barrier of trees. If we want to establish a base anywhere, I think that's our best bet."

"Which makes things easier, and some of the rest of the crew may already be there waiting for us," Usopp added, reaching over his back and fiddling with the pack he was carrying.

With one final pull…

"Mmm-mmph—GAH! Finally!"

Sanji got the tape off his mouth, and glanced surreptitiously around for any sign of visual snails nearby. "Damn it, Usopp… if it weren't for that reminder about the East Blue, I'd kick you off this cliff. But for now… Conis, dear, would you like me to carry you down?" he asked, swooning as he often did.

Conis… actually considered the situation and the alternatives. And upon doing so…

"…Alright. And, sorry about this, I normally wouldn't do this to you, but given the circumstances…"

The gunner glanced over her shoulder at her onlooking fox. "Su, if he tries anything, make him look like his wanted poster."

"Tseeheeheeheeheehee!" the cloud-fox sniggered as the angel gingerly placed herself in Sanji's arms, bridal-style. Sanji's attention then turned towards Mikey, who had positioned himself at the edge of the cliff and was currently posing in such a way that implied he planned to make the dive an impressive thing.

For a few seconds, Sanji and Usopp watched him stand there, unmoving. And then, at the end of those few seconds, Sanji made his displeasure at being kept waiting clear by booting the Dugong off the cliff.

To Mikey's credit, he recovered his graceful form after a mere split second of falling. Sanji eyed the falling amphibian for a few more seconds before jumping off himself, and Usopp spared the time to double-check the device on his back before following suit.

The sniper only let himself fall for a few seconds before he yanked his ripcord, and with a bellow of "USOPP SKYGLIDER!", his chute unfurled and yanked him above his freefalling crewmates.

[Aaaaand here comes our final contestant in the high dive, the greatest of the Teenage Dugong Warrior Squad, Mikey!] Mikey barked as he accelerated towards the lake down below. [Even after a disastrous start, the diver has managed to recover, and is about to perform an utterly perfect straight
dive with perfect posture, discipline and—OH OCEANUS ALMIGHTY MY SNOUT IS ON FIRE!

Sanji, Conis and Su all blinked in confusion when Mikey's dive pose suddenly collapsed into a flailing mess, the dugong wailing in misery behind the flippers clawing at his nose. Said flailing persisted up until the dugong unceremoniously face-planted into the lake.

"Well… guess the village really is protected," Sanji decided.

"Ye—wait…" Conis' eyes widened in shocked realization and snapped to her friend. "What about Su!"

The fox scoffed and snapped her tail indifferently. "Su su—KAI!" Su's nonchalance shattered into an agonized howl and she practically flung herself from Conis' shoulder, writhing and squirming against an intangible torment.

"SU!" Conis exclaimed. Without thinking, she practically flung herself after her friend, grabbing the fox tight in her arms to try and keep her as still as possible so that she didn't hurt herself.

It took a full second for Conis to realize that in moving to save Su, she'd inadvertently thrown herself clean out of Sanji's arms. And because of how hard she'd pushed herself, she was well below him, too far for him to catch up and catch her in time.

That poor decision was followed up with the supreme mistake of gazing downwards. On the one hand, Conis knew that while it was definitely going to hurt like hell, the impact with the lake below wouldn't kill her; on the other hand, some reptilian part of her hindbrain took one look at the drop below her and triggered every panic reflex her body had.

And on any other day, all those panic reflexes would have done was tempt her to scream, or threaten to send her into unconsciousness. Neither actually happened, because over the past week, all of the SIQ-infected flesh and foliage she'd consumed had grown a brand-spanking-new reflex in her body.

A reflex that killed Conis' shriek in her throat when she was suddenly jerked to a halt by something yanking her up by her shoulder-blades and stopping her momentum dead.

Conis started to look around in confusion, but the first turn of her head provided the answer. Though that still left her with the glaring question of how the hell her wings—her cute but physically useless vestigial wings—had grown to five times their original size and were now letting her glide gracefully instead of drop like a less-aerodynamic stone. Naturally, her mind stalled for a solid thirty seconds as it tried to even contextualize what the optic nerve was sending it. 'I—how—what the—!?'

THROB!

The far more angelic angel paled as she suddenly became aware of something else. Namely, the fact that her entire back felt like it was on fire. And in response to that pain, her suddenly useful wings lost that usefulness, and her plunge downward abruptly resumed.

Sanji saw the whole thing, all three seconds of it. When Conis resumed falling above him, he shook off his shock enough to kick against the air and let her fall back into his arms.

And that was the end of the excitement; Sanji exercised his Sky Walk to slow his descent and land reasonably gently on the pier below. Su barely lasted that long before resuming her squirming, paws clamped tightly over her nose. Usopp was still a ways up, descending at a controlled pace with his parachute. Mikey was floating belly-up in the pool, at least ensuring that he would not drown. Though from the moans he was producing, he probably didn't think that was a good thing.
For now, though, Sanji was concerned with far more pressing matters. "Conis!" he lamented, cradling the angel protectively. "Are you alright, my dear, sweet, beloved—!"

"Sanji, please don't take this the wrong way, but for the love of Gan Fall, please shut the hell up," Conis hissed in a strained tone, her entire body twitching in distress. "I think I just pulled a million muscles all at once and it is taking every fiber of my being not to scream bloody murder."

"Ah… right, sorry," Sanji winced sympathetically. He then glanced down at her wings. "Speaking of which, not that your wings aren't lovelier than those of a dove or—!" CLICK! The compliment died in his throat at the feel of a gun barrel pressing into his gut. "Right, focusing. What the heck is going on?!"

"I… think I can help you with that."

Sanji and Conis turned to see a somewhat older woman walking up to them. She wore a simple dress and had feathers on her arms from the wrists almost to the shoulder. Then, after a moment, Sanji let himself sag. "Please tell me you're a friend, because we have been through a hell like you wouldn't believe."

The woman smiled comfortingly. "Hordes upon hordes of monsters and beasts, each more titanic than the last?"

Realizing his mistake, Sanji winced. "Riiight… don't suppose you could help us understand the situation we're in?"

The local nodded and moved to give Sanji a hand with his yet-incapacitated burden. "Right this way, I'll help you all get settled in. Though…" She winced and shot a fearful glance towards the village. "We will have to be a bit careful. Even behind the Daft Greens, nowhere is truly safe here."

Sanji narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "Because of a certain lion-headed bastard by the name of Shiki?" The woman's grimace was answer enough. "Oh yeah, we definitely have a lot to talk about."

And with that, the woman helped Sanji carry Conis into the village… leaving Mikey gurgling face-up in the lake. [Someone kiiiilllll meeee…]

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"Donny, don't you think that if Boss were here, he would have you Tidal Swimming alongside us for training instead of resting?" Robin posed, not even looking up from the journal she was writing in.

{Oh, shut up. We've all earned a little rest after a straight week of monsters,} the Dugong grumpily signed back.

"Mmm, yes, a good point," Robin conceded.

The two, along with Franky and Brook, were perched on the back of what Franky called a "Crawley-Davidson" and which everyone else called "a giant-ass crawdad with wheels and steering". This left Carue, with Vivi slumped on his back, running alongside the improvised vehicle, something the duck didn't mind despite being at the tail end of a week of non-stop running for his life.

"Hey, it looks like there's something up ahead!" Brook exclaimed, pointing in the direction of a small mountain. Upon closer inspection, a cluster of buildings around the top of the mountain and an Asian-style palace at its peak made themselves known.
"Is that a town?" Franky asked in some surprise.

"Looks like it," Vivi said, perking up. "Maybe we can get some answers there. Carue—WAAAGH!"

The sudden scream was a result of Carue suddenly skidding to an uneven halt, coming within an inch of losing his balance and a wailing quack leaking out between the feathers suddenly clamped over his beak. At the same time, Crawley-Davidson reared up, leaping backward by several meters and nearly bucking its passengers off in the process.

Well, nearly bucking most of them off; Donny fell off immediately, his flippers too busy grinding against his face. Brook fell off mostly, hanging on only by a leg, while Franky kept a firm hold on his handlebars and Robin sprouted a few extra arms to keep herself in place. Shortly after the crawdad stopped bucking, Carue made his way back to the group, Donny in tow.

"I think I bit my tongue… not that I have a tongue," Brook commented weakly.

"DAGH!" Franky grunted in annoyance, whacking the crawfish on the head. "Motorcycles don't jump backward, stupid!"

{Urgh, don't blame him,} Donny shakily signed, one flipper still grinding against his nostrils. {There's some kind of stench in the air around that place, it smells like what Devil Fruits taste like. It must be how they keep those monsters away! It's taking everything I have not to bolt as it is!}

"A rotten smell?" Vivi asked, taking a sniff as she dismounted from Carue. "Huh, I think I can smell something… and that does make a lot of sense. Something like that would be the only thing capable of keeping monsters like the ones we've been seeing from attacking."

Carue squawked in miserable agreement. Looking around and spying one of the many cacti that surrounded them, he dashed over, clawed an arm off and stuck his beak into the juicy inside with a relieved quack.

[GIMME!] Donny barked, leapfrogging off the duck's head and grabbing a cactus branch of his own to plug his muzzle with. [Oh, thank Gooood. Ergh, but I can still smell it a bit…]

"Quaaaa..." Carue moaned in agreement.

"But we're in the middle of the desert," Franky protested. "Where could a smell—!"

"Unless my nose deceives me, I think it's coming from those odd trees over there!" Brook said, pointing out a wall of off-color shrubbery. "Though of course—!"

"Yeah yeah, no nose, we get it, come on already," Franky grumbled, yanking the skeleton free of their twitchy mount's saddle and dragging him along by the leg. All the while, the cyborg grumbled mutinously under his breath. "Stupid trees, stupid smell, stupid instincts and inferior building materials, give me good old-fashioned metal and I could make something ten times better in a damn heartbeat..."

Vivi eyed her cactus-snorting mount and how he was still shaky on his webbed feet before hanging her head with a sigh. "Guess we're walking. Don't suppose anyone has any ideas on how to pass the time?"

"Recite the entirety of the review sheet I gave you the day before we met Shiki," Robin immediately stated, still yet to look up from her journal.
Vivi paled at the suggestion and snapped a shaky grin at the rest of her friends. "Anyone else have any suggestions?"

The princess paled even further when the crew's archaeologist slammed her journal shut with a too-loud slam and a menacing gleam in her eye. "I don't recall saying that that was a suggestion, Your Highness."

"A-Ah, just a minute," Vivi said hastily. "The stones' indestructibility was determined four years after the founding of the World Government…"

"And she's off," Franky sighed. "You ever feel lucky to not have a woman jamming you up?"

"Honestly, I just feel lucky every time I talk to living people instead of the voices in my head," Brook replied in a perfectly pleasant tone of voice.

The cyborg shot a doubtful look over his shoulder. "We have really got to stick some books about psychology in front of Chopper sometime."

"For all the good that they'd do me! It's quite impossible to treat senility, after all, and I'm twenty years past the pale on that! Yohohoho!"

"See, it's things like that really don't inspire confidence."

-o-

"How much longer until we get there?" Zoro grunted inquisitively, stubbornly not looking down at their 'guide'. A word he used only under extreme duress, mind you; it didn't matter what anyone else said, that tundra had been moving under their feet, damn it!

Said 'guide' scanned their surroundings before giving him a nod. "Don't worry, we're really really close! Just a few more minutes down this river and we'll be at my home!" Xiao confidently stated, the precious flower she was cradling in her hands nodding alongside her.

Zoro grunted again but gave no further response to the girl sitting before him. Chopper sat behind him, looming over them both and keeping a tentative eye on the girl; he had given her treatment for cold and shock, but the feathers on her arms and the unusual biology they signified kept him anxious.

Looking over all of them from up on the mammoth's back was Merry, a rope wound around each of her arms and tied to the tusks of the pachyderm they were using as a mount as the nearest and easiest thing to a bridle they could assemble on such short notice. And behind her, Leo was as close to kneeling as a creature with a legless lower body could be, taking advantage of their current peace to meditate.

"Glad to hear it, because we've been out of that winter wasteland for for hours and I swear I've still got hoarfrost in crevices I didn't know I had until now!" Merry lamented, wincing as she rolled her neck. "I don't care if I almost drown from it, I need a hot bath stat!" And with that, she snapped her reigns and urged the mammoth to a faster pace.

Xiao looked up in panic at the sudden acceleration. "Ah, no, wait! You can't do that, we can't ride this thing anymore! We need to walk from here on out!"

Merry looked down in confusion at the feathered girl. "The heck are you talking about? Why wouldn't we ride this wooly lug all the way? I mean, there's nothing in our way! It's clean sailing all the—!"
"BAROOOOOOH!"

"—UWAH!?"

All of a sudden their mount not only stopped dead in its tracks but actually bucked forward in a blind panic, launching its riders from its back. Free of its restraints, the mammoth turned tail and stampeded its way back towards its natural habitat as fast as its bulky mass allowed.

"Argh, sonnuva—!" Zoro winced as he sat up, rubbing the back of his skull. The swordsman shot an accusatory glare at the crew's helmsgirl. "What the heck, Merry?! What happened to 'clean sailing', huh?!

"Uwah, nonono, it wasn't her fault!" Xiao hastily reassured him, waving her free hand desperately. "It's my fault! I didn't think to tell you guys about the barrier sooner, I'm really sorry!"

The three-swords master looked at her with a confused grunt. "'Barrier'? What are you—?"

"Ughhhh…"

A miserable moan from Chopper drew Zoro and Merry's attention. The human-reindeer had a pained grimace on his face as he clamped his hands over his nose.

"She must be talking about the smell…" Chopper choked out, disgust clogging his every word. "It feels like someone shoved red hot pokers up my nostrils it hurts so much…"

"Uh-huh," Xiao nodded, bearing an apologetic expression. "They're called Daft Greens; they're trees that smell really bad, so they drive all the scary monsters away from the village. In fact, they stink so bad that they drive animals away before they even see them!" She paused after that statement, thoughtfully cocking her head. "…Oh, yeah, and they're poisonous, too."

"MENTION THAT FIRST!" the Straw Hats all roared at once.

"Ah, n-not right away I mean!" the girl hastily explained. "Th-The thing is, they're—! I-I mean that they, w-well…" Xiao trailed off and bowed her head mournfully, holding the flower she was carrying to her chest. "It… It's complicated, alright?"

The anger the Straw Hats felt melted away at the sudden shift in her demeanor, and after some swift and silent communication, elected to let the matter drop.

"Well!" Merry clapped her hands. "If we can smell those things, then that means that we're a stone's throw away! Come on, guys! Let's suck in our guts and hop to it, yeah?"

"Hmph. "Right!" "…"

Two of the three answers were as expected, but the third had Merry looking around in confusion. "Eh? Where the heck's Leo?"

"Uh…" Leaning around merry, Xiao quickly spotted and pointed out the dugong. "Ah, there he is!" She let out a whistle. "And he's still holding that pose!"

"That is some pretty impressive meditation," Zoro said sincerely. He waited for a few seconds and then nodded. "Didn't react to me saying that, very impressive meditation."

"Unless you're willing to carry him to the village, you'll still need to snap him out of it," Merry huffed, leaning over the Dugong and poking him repeatedly in the cheek. "Because in case you've
forgotten, he's your punching bag, so if you seriously expect me to be the one to haul his blubbery ass, you've got another thing—!

_Squish._

Merry froze as she realized she'd missed in her poking, and instead of putting her finger in the amphibian's jowl, she'd put it in his _eye_ instead. "Ah… whoops?"

[GAH!]

Leo suddenly shot up with a pained shriek, clutching his face in agony. [MY EYE! AGH! MY NOOOOSE!] A second after that, his flippers move to his nose, before shoving his snarling face in Merry's bemused one. [YOU LITTLE BRAT, WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT FOR!? I WAS TRYING TO ESCAPE THIS DAMN STENCH AND NOW I'M SUFFERING WORSE THAN EVER! I DEMAND COMPENSATION, YOU HEAR ME!? COM-PEN—!]

"We've found somewhere where we should be absolutely safe from those monsters for a while," Merry calmly said.

[—pleasure doing business with you, which way did you say this safe haven where I could sleep for a thousand years was?] Leo cleanly segued.

Merry chuckled in childlike amusement at the reversal before turning on her heel and heading right past Leo. More specifically, right back the way they came.

"…I was wondering how much of Zoro rubbed off on her," Chopper muttered.

Proving that she had very good hearing, Merry froze, spun on her heel, and stormed past them in the correct direction, her face red and expression daring anyone to comment. That didn't stop Leo and Chopper from snickering behind the appendages that were already clamped over their noses. She stopped before Zoro for a moment so that she could shoot a rabid snarl at him, and continued on without looking back.

The first mate blinked after her in confusion before looking back at the rest of the crew. "Someone wanna tell me what that was about?"

"I'll tell you later…" Chopper sighed with a wave of his hoof as he walked past, and then glanced aside. "Or maybe never…” he muttered under his breath. "Yeah, never's better."

Zoro just shrugged and followed after them, Leo bringing up the rear.

[You think some of the rest of the crew will be there?] the Dugong asked.

"Let's hope so," Chopper said fervently. "The sooner we're all back together, the better."

-One Hour Later-

"Not quite what I had in mind.] Leo and Chopper deadpanned as the usual two-thirds of the Monster Trio got into another spar. An unrestrained spar, mind you, thanks to the majority of the crew—minus Mikey and Usopp, who'd elected to stay behind and keep resting—having relocated to a hill a good distance away from the village to keep themselves away from Shiki's prying, invertebrate-borne eyes.

"Well, at least the last week is keeping them from pushing themselves too hard," Merry said, shaking her head. An explosion of utterly innocent earth drew a slight twitch from her gaze. "…to a point,
anyway.”

Chopper sighed, turning his attention back to the chemistry set he'd set up between his legs. "I'll worry about them later; for now, I need to work this out." Holding up a triple-sealed test tube, he scrutinized the verdant twig resting inside. "If Daft Green is the only defense against those animals, then it's best I make sure we don't get poisoned in the process. Though…” The human-reindeer's frown deepened as he put down the test tube and held up a beaker, this one containing a unique pink flower. "I'd really prefer it if I had a larger sample size of the cure…”

"Ah, Chopper?" Conis said, tentatively poking him in the shoulder. "Sorry for bothering you, but if you have the time, would you mind taking a look at, well…” She flapped her larger than normal wings for emphasis. "Me?"

"Are you currently in agonizing pain and/or dying?" the reindeer absently asked without looking up from his work.

Said work was promptly interrupted by a white paw clamping down on the vial of daft green, and a snarling vulpine muzzle in his face. [Rethink that prognosis, doc.] Su hissed. [Before I shove this devil-stick clean into your brain.]

Chopper shivered at the cloud fox's tone, before sagging with a defeated sigh. "I… I'm sorry, Conis, that just slipped out…” He started to knead the bridge of his nose, wincing. "This last week has been… hard."

"I know, I know, it's… well, not fine, but I understand," Conis soothed, rubbing the doctor's back. "It's not even that I'm worried they're dangerous or anything like that, they're just kind of in the way right now. I just really wish I knew how to make my wings smaller and compact like they were befо—"

FWUMP!

As fast as they had grown, her wings shrank back to their original cosmetic form, and Conis staggered, almost losing her balance. Everyone blinked in confusion.

"…Psychosomatic trigger, got it," Conis said flatly.

"When this mess is over, we will need to look into that," Chopper groused, shaking his head. "But for now…” He held up the beaker and tube again, superimposing one over the other. "I need to figure out how the IQ serves to neutralize the Daft Green's miasma. Seriously, it can't be that… hard… if…” Chopper eyes widened in realization, his voice slowly trailing off into silence.

"Chopper?" Conis asked gently after a few moments.

"I am a Luffy-grade moron," the human-reindeer breathed.

[Well, yeah, but what does that have to do with—WAH!] Thrown off when Chopper suddenly shifted into his Walk Point and shot off like a cloven bullet, the fox blinked after him and then looked up at her human in confusion. [The heck was that about?]

Conis sighed as she picked her old friend up. "I wish I knew, Su, I wish I knew…”

-o-

"—and so, much like other languages, small marks can make all the difference in the symbol's pronunciation and meaning, as can the variations of the arches forming—"
"That will do for now," Robin interrupted as they reached the entrance to the fortress. The princess sagged slightly in relief, an honest smile on both of their faces; for all that Robin was scarily strict, both of them were happy about the learning.

That did nothing to ease the worries of their companions that Robin might try to rope them into it as well if they made the mistake of showing an iota of interest. Which, in all honesty, all three of them did possess. When Robin knocked at the door of the fortress, though, they all shoved that interest down as deep as they could.

Their wait was brief; the door opened about a foot, and a thuggish individual showed his face, took one look at them, and made to slam it in their faces. He didn't get far; Robin had arms blooming on his body, bending his fingers backwards and covering his mouth before he could so much as twitch. Her move to open the door wider proved superfluous, as a second thug yanked it open, brandishing a large sword at her. The others readied themselves, Robin herself growing several arms over him and Vivi opening her mouth, but a sound of splattering liquid, not unlike blood being spilled, prompted both of them to wait.

At the same time as that noise reached them, they saw the thugs' expressions go wide in shock and panic. Then, just as quickly, all emotion left their faces and their bodies slumped where they stood, nearly falling over from the new slackness.

It was obvious to any experienced eye that someone had just taken them out from behind. But Robin and Vivi recognized much more than that, causing a smirk to crawl over the elder's face, and a grimace over the younger's.

"Well, now, this is a pleasant surprise," Robin said calmly. "I suppose I should have realized that we would be crossing paths again soon, but I did not expect it to be under these circumstances."

"Likewise," came an even voice from behind the thugs. "But it's good to see that you haven't lost your touch, Miss All Sunday."

The voice's owner stepped past the mindless thugs and came into view. Franky and Brook both blinked at the girl before them, dressed in a fancy, white, tomboyish outfit, but Donny put together the pieces immediately from the use of the codename and, much more glaringly, the palette and paintbrush she was carrying. Paying them no mind, the girl cocked an eyebrow at Vivi.

"You could stand to be faster on the draw, Miss Wednesday," she said blandly.

"Nice to see you too, Miss Goldenweek," Vivi bit out, doing her level best to obliterate the diminutive assassin with her glare. "Dare I ask what you're doing here?"

"Right this way," Goldenweek hummed serenely in response, waving the Straw Hats inside, though not before she took out her paintbrush again and scribbled symbols on the backs of the men's heads.

Robin cocked an eyebrow at the symbols as she passed. "Forgetful Fuchsia, if I'm not mistaken?"

"Amnestic Aubergine," the painter corrected. "I've been getting a lot of practice with it lately, and it never ceases to be a good thing. It would be inconvenient if anyone finds out you're here."

"At least there's some benefit to working with you…" Vivi sighed in reluctant approval.

While Robin and Vivi walked in, Franky, Brook and Donny all hung back and exchanged confused glances.

"You ever feel like a heaping heck of a lot of context just went right over your head?" Franky asked.
"Well, to be fair, I am half a century behind the times!" Brook noted. "But yes, I felt that as well."

[Honestly, I say we just go with what you said earlier: women,/ Donny sighed, shrugging helplessly.

[Just shaddup and follow us, already,] Carue called back from further down the hall, prompting the trio to scramble after everyone else.

The building that they entered was a three story hall filled with bars and sturdy wooden tables. Light came from the many elegant lanterns hanging from the ceilings, creating a homey, classic tavern-type atmosphere. This picture was only enhanced by the rambunctious groups of men—most of them looking like well-dressed thugs—drinking and laughing at the tables. Young women clad in pink outfits with feathers on their arms moved between tables and took the men's orders or delivered food and drink.

Overall, it seemed like an ordinary banquet hall with an only slightly extraordinary clientele and staff. Though Robin's keen eyes noticed that Eternal Poses bearing the name 'Merveille' were on every table.

"What is this place…?" Vivi asked quietly, sticking to the shadows in an attempt to keep her distinctive hair from being noticed.

"Hell," Goldenweek answered. She then paused and glanced back at the frozen-in-shock Straw Hats. "That's what you call a gathering place of demons, yes?" She shrugged and started walking again. "Almost there."

The assassin led the group through the upper level of the hall, until they finally reached a booth tucked away in a corner, mostly out of sight of the room's general population.

"Got them," Goldenweek announced as she slipped into the booth, idly grabbing a rice-cracker off the table. "You were right, they were close enough to find this place. It was a good call. Very surprising."

"Well, what can I say?" a familiar voice sneered from the shadows, causing Vivi to stiffen in shock. "I'm all about being a contourarian kinda guy."

"Contrarian."

"That too!"

"Wait, you're—!?" the princess gasped.

"Well, well, well…" a cool and comported drawl interrupted her. "The Straw Hats have entered the building…"

"Which means that sanity can exit stage left! Kyahahaha!" a far more chipper and manic voice laughed.

"Hehahaha!" the familiar voice cackled, and its owner drew the cover from the lamp's table to reveal a spike-toothed smirk. "Ain't that the truth!?"

The newly uncovered light source revealed more than that, of course. It allowed the Straw Hats to take in their impromptu hosts in all their uncharacteristically well-dressed glory: the Barto Club pirates themselves, or at least their top brass.

Mr. S's outfit was hardly any different from how Robin and Vivi remembered, the only difference
being the absence of his codename plastered all over. Miss Valentine was wearing a wider bottomed
dress than they had last seen her in, patterned elegantly in yellow and black. The other young girl
was wearing a black, ankle-length cheongsam with a golden dragon embroidered into it. And lastly,
the gaunt man that none of them knew by sight was wearing a three-piece suit that clearly had not
been tailored well.

The captain wore a yellow-and-orange pinstriped suit with ankle-length tails, a bolo tie with a silver
clasp and inset lapis stone, and a dark red shirt. He was the only one that all of them recognized, and
that was only because they knew the sharp-toothed grin and green hair—vaguely resembling a
rooster's comb—from his wanted poster. The only surprise they found, given what little they knew of
him, was that he was staying remarkably calm for meeting his idols in person, and was even
displaying his usual bravado.

Bartolomeo nodded at the princess with a cocky smirk. "Glad to see you're still in one piece,
Copperhead."

Vivi blinked in surprise, then pulled up a seat and collapsed into it with a weary sigh. "Glad to be in
one piece, Rooster," she groaned. "This place has been doing its level best to rip us apart at every
turn…"

"Huh?!” Franky glanced in confusion between the princess and the other pirate. "You saying you
guys know each other or something?"

"Somewhat," Robin provided in her usual mysterious tone. "He's a friend of a friend of Cross's. I
imagine I don't need to tell you to not mention this to anyone else, yes?"

"Uh… yeah, if you say so, I guess," Franky shrugged.

"Yohohoho, whatever you say! Though if I could receive some compensation for my discre—
URK!" Brook choked as a hand took hold of his jawbone. "On ffeitn' ffort, Ah'nng 'ood!"

Donny barked something out, waving a flipper in front of his muzzle.

"'I'm perfectly content being a pugilistic scholar, leave me out of your shadow-politicking.' That's
what he said," the other girl provided politely. She then smiled and waved in greeting. "By the way,
I'm Apis. Nice to meet you all!"

"Gin," the gaunt man provided, grimacing as he tugged at the collar of his suit. "Don't worry about
not knowing me, you all joined way after I met your captain."

"While with others, their acquaintance with our crew was more…” Robin spun her hand
thoughtfully. "Let's go with recent."


"Oh, come on, don't be like that. It almost sounds like you hold a grudge," Five drawled grumpily.

"Yeah!" Valentine leaned forward and smirked impishly, resting her chin in the propped up palm of
her hand. "You shouldn't address your superiors so glibly, Miss Wednesday!"

Thunk!

Both assassins recoiled in shock when Vivi suddenly sank the tip of one of her Lion Cutters into the
tabletop with a twitching grin. "First off, you will address me as Princess Nefertari Vivi," Vivi grit
out. "Secondly, apart from the fact that I never truly considered myself to be a member of your
organization, I'd like to remind the both of you that I can and will cut you."

"And third..." The ex-assassins stiffened as they felt a sensation they were far too familiar with by half. "I believe that if we're going by our old positions, I would count as your superior, no?"

"Barty—!" Valentine whimpered plaintively around the hand that lightly gripping her windpipe, eyes locked on the knife Robin was smoothly flipping around her hand.

"Don't look at me, you dipshits dug this hole, you can dig yourselves out," Bartolomeo grunted, visibly more interested in the finger he was using to dig through his ear. Pulling it out, he smirked at the rest of the Straw Hats who were unfamiliar with him, taking the chance to polish his nails on his jacket. "And as for me, I'm 'Black Bart' Bartolomeo. Worth ¥350 Million, one of the most infamous rookies on the sea—" He flashed a pointy grin at the Straw Hats. "And a personal friend of Monkey D. Luffy and Jeremiah—!"

THUNK! "YEOW!"

Barty abruptly transitioned into a cry of pain due to the fork Goldenweek sank into his leg without even looking at him. "WHAT THE HELL, BRAT, I WASN'T EVEN FLIPPING OUT!" he roared at his diminutive crewmate.

"No, you were just being an ass," Goldenweek hummed around her cracker.

"You little—!" Barto snarled, reaching for her throat.

"Rooster," Vivi emphasized with a slap of her hand on the table, getting the captain's attention back on her. "What the hell is this place, and what the hell are you doing here?!"

Barty shot one last side glare at his underling before donning a cocky smirk and raising his arms to gesture at the room of criminals and villains around them. "Ain't it obvious, Princess? This here's one of the many gathering spots the great pirate, 'Golden Lion' Shiki, has set up in his hideout of Merveille for the fifty other pirate crews he's recruited to join in a grand alliance, which he's personally heading up. And as for me? Weeeell..." Barto leaned back, arms sprawled behind his chair, and proudly raised his chin. "You're speaking to the newly recruited commander of his 51st division, thank you very much."

Vivi's eyes widened in shock. "You infiltrated his ranks?"

"Not like I had much of a fucking choice!" Barty snarled, leaning forward on his elbow. "He's Shiki! The man fought Roger, for cripes' sake. When he says you're his new commander, you damn well act as his commander! And, well..." He winced and glanced aside, rubbing the back of his neck. "I thought it'd be a good way to try and find you guys and get some intel for the Masons, ya know?"

"Well, you're sitting in front of another Mason now, so what do you know?" Vivi pressed.

Bartolomeo's face darkened, and Gin spoke up.

"If Shiki didn't have a complete ban on bringing snails into this place, we'd have every alarm bell ringing," the old Demon of the East said grimly. "But even if he's loose-lipped about his plans to anyone here, he's got enough brains to take that precaution. Any snail comes into Merveille, he locks it down tight. Total communications blackout. That's the only reason..." Gin slammed his fist on the table with a grim glare. "The only reason the East Blue isn't being evacuated as fast as possible."

The reactions to that particular tidbit were as expected: pallor, rage, and hatred.
"Shiki's behind the attacks on the East Blue—" Franky began, his lips twitching into a scowl.

Robin's eyes narrowed dangerously. "—and he's been using these monsters to pull it off—"

"—and now he's gathered all of these crews together to form a traditional army to make matters even worse," Brook finished, teeth audibly grinding.

"More than just that," Vivi snarled, and Valentine and even Goldenweek edging away from the livid princess despite the fact she was gnawing on her thumb. "This kind of an army… his sights are set higher than just the East Blue, aren't they?"

"'First the East Blue, and then the world'," Apis repeated grimly into her juice. "That's what he said when he recruited us. And with his powers keeping his army out of anyone's reach until they start attacking, and those beasts acting as a vanguard to break any forces that oppose him, there's nothing anyone down there can do about it."

"But the Lion made two big mistakes," Bartolomeo cut in, his grin as savage as ever. "The first was not noticing that our crew was from the East Blue. All he saw was us attacking a Celestial Dragon and getting away with it. And the second mistake?"

He threw back his head and cackled. "HEHAHAHAHAHAHA! He was actually braindead stupid enough to not only declare war on the Straw Hat Pirates by stealing one of their own, he brought them to this place himself! Oh, sure, he's a monster in combat, no denying that, but my money's still on you guys."

"Naturally, he's going to regret challenging us. But before that, we need to find the rest of the crew," Brook said, most likely poking up a finger behind the shades of his 'hat'. "As you all have access to the video feeds of the archipelago, would you know of our compatriots' current locations?"

"Kinda yes, kinda no," Valentine sigh explosively as she sank down in her seat. "We've been given a frontrow seat to the pummelings you've all been giving and taking, yes, but you're all moving way too fast for us to pin down. One day or even minute you're in one biome, the next you've shoved off to another. Trying to go based off of the feeds would just mean we end up where your friends were and nothing more."

"But thankfully," Five picked up in his usual drawl. "We've managed to find a different solution we think will work just as well."

"And that's where I come in! YO!" Barto barked, hand raised. "CAN I GET SOME DAMN SERVICE OVER HERE?!

A passing young woman with a red ponytail and the same feathered arms as the rest of the 'wait staff' looked over at the call, and began making her way towards them. "Greetings folks, my name's Ever and I'll be your waitress. How may I help you this fine evening?" she asked with a smile.

Vivi cocked an eyebrow. "Impressive. It took me years to learn how to hide that kind of hate that well."

Ever responded with a more honest smile and her fingers in a v-sign. "Thanks, and don't worry, it's directed more at my 'employers' and the words, not you guys. Barty and his guys have literally been the nicest folks we've met around here in years. It's just a bit hard to turn it off sometimes. Seriously, how can I help?"

Standing, Brook leaned in close to the waitress. "Well, first," he said, looking her up and down. "Would you mind showing me your panties?"
A vein popped to life on Ever's forehead, and she leaped elegantly into the air. "NO WAY, CREEP!" she snapped, slamming an axe kick down on Brook's head that slammed him to the ground and dislodged the basket he had been wearing.

"Ohhh… you kicked my face off," Brook moaned, raising his head.

"Yeah, and I'll damn well do it again if you try… something… like… that…"

Ever's eyes widened as she got a good look at Brook's face, a feeling that was reflected by the majority of the Barto Club.

"But then!" Brook continued with rising mirth. "It's not like I have a face to begin with! YOHOHOHO!" He then blinked—somehow—in confusion when he realized that a good fifteen-foot radius had gone dead silent. "Uh… is everything alright?"

The only response he got was Goldenweek's rice cracker falling from her slack jaws.

"Brook, have you looked in the mirror anytime within the last 50 years?" Franky deadpanned.

"Hm? A mirror? Why? Is there something wrong with my face?" Brook asked, picking up a glass and looking into his reflection. He stared for a second before recoiling in horror. "UWAH! OH DEAR GOD NO!"

{What, is something wrong?} Donny signed in concern.

"Oh, it's terrible, just terrible!" Brook pointed at his eye-holes. "I'm starting to go yellow around my orbital sockets! Now how will I get all the hot young skeletons to love me?!"

WHAM!

Vivi, Franky, Carue, and Donny all face-planted out of their seats. Robin remained more composed, but her palm still met her face, though that didn't muffle the fond chuckle.

"What," Gin managed, eyes wide.

"In," Mr. 5 continued, in much the same condition.

"The," Miss Valentine picked up.

"Actual," Apis squeaked.

"Everloving!" Ever choked out.

"SHIT?!" Goldenweek shrieked at full blast.

Bartolomeo snapped his fingers. "AHEM!" he coughed, all eyes turning back to him. "As funny as this is to watch, Ever, I need you to fill these guys in on the local safe places."

"Wha—? Captain, are you seriously not going to react to—?" Apis started to protest.

Rolling his eyes, Bartolomeo crossed his fingers, and the words "DEVIL FRUIT" traced themselves on the table in big block letters. "Anyway…" Giving Apis and his other two ability-using officers one last disdainful look, which got them blushing and looking every which way but at him, he turned to the waitress. "Ever, we didn't call you here just for more drinks. Tell these guys what you told us."

The feather-armed young woman blinked in surprise at the request, then coughed into her fist and
hastily comported herself. "W-Well, as you most likely noticed on your way here, the only areas safe from Shiki's modified monsters are the ones protected by barriers of Daft Green trees. Besides here, I only know of two places where the Daft Greens are planted: Shiki's palace, which is where your friend Nami is—"

"Saving that for once we've got everyone back together," Vivi cut in.

"—and my home village. It's at the lowest point of the archipelago, so that Shiki can literally reign over everyone. Your friends have been moving down and towards the main island this entire time, so they should find it sooner or later. We haven't seen them yet, mind…" Ever pointed out several projections on the wall, which displayed a perfectly normal village, save for the feathers on everyone's arms. "But then, the surveillance on our home isn't exactly subtle. I'm certain that if they are there, they're just staying out of sight of the snails."

Vivi frowned in both confusion and concern. "Wait, you mean to say that Shiki's maintaining surveillance on your village? Why?"

Ever shrugged helplessly. "Beats me. The only people Shiki's left back home are the children and elderly. Some of us think he's showing us a mercy by letting us keep an eye on our loved ones, but… well. You've met him."

"That I have…" the princess muttered in agreement, eyes darting back and forth in thought. She considered for a minute longer before shaking her head and standing up. "Well, I guess I'll go ahead and check out that village; with Carue, I can get there and back faster than the rest of you. I'll find out what I can while I'm there."

{I'll go with you.} Donny signed as he waddled to her side. {I've been without my siblings and master for a week and for some Set-damned reason I miss them. Sooo I'd rather see if any of them have found their way to the village than stay here, sitting on my tail and twiddling my flippers…} His expression then fell flat. {And so help me, if you ever tell any of them I said that I missed them, I will stab you.}

"Noted," Vivi chuckled.

"We'll stay here, then, gather more intel and try to put together a plan while we wait for you to get back," Franky said.

"You have fun out there, try not to get eaten on the way," Robin added, a winning smile on her face. "After all, you will be riding around out there on a tasty duck, so the chances of you being swallowed alive are quite substantial. But still, happy thoughts, right?"

Vivi smiled back innocently. "Robin, I'll keep thinking happy thoughts while you soak your head."

"Oh, come now, surely you don't mean—!" SPLASH! "—blurgh!?"

Blinking stupidly, Robin tracked her hand as it put down the now-empty glass that it had just splashed in her face.

[Aaaaand I'm out. Move it, blubber-butt.] Carue quacked, walking away with Vivi and Donny following close behind.

Robin stared after the princess, frowning slightly, before shaking her head with a bemused smile, gratefully accepting a small towel from Ever. "Mmm… so, new outfits?" she asked, clearly looking for a way to change the subject.
"Eh, it's a momentous occasion for the Golden Ass," Barto shrugged. "After nightfall, all the crews are going to join Shiki at his palace for an allegiance ceremony, and he wants everyone to look their best."

"I could do without it," Gin grumbled, uncomfortably shifting around in his ill-fitting outfit. "I just grabbed the first thing I saw in his tailor's quarters that looked right. Didn't bother to get it fitted…"

"We can get you some too, if you want!" Ever offered eagerly. "The tailor is so overloaded with orders that he won't notice if I slipped a few extra orders in. Though…" She frowned in concern, tapping her chin thoughtfully. "We'd still need the measurements for the rest of your crewmates, so, I guess that's a—"

"Here you go."

Ever blinked in surprise at the disembodied hand currently offering her a folded up piece of paper, but she took it in stride, unfolded it, and then nearly fell over in shock when she read what was written on it. "What the—!? These are measurements for your entire crew! How and why on earth do you have these on hand!?"

Robin's response was a very wide, very disturbing grin, accompanied by an equally disturbing chuckle. "Weeeeell—"

"On second thought, I don't wanna know!" the feather-armed woman frantically pleaded off. "I-I'll just go ahead and get this to the tailor, so that you all can look your best as you kick Shiki's ass! Good luck to you all!"

But before the waitress could properly skedaddle, however, a mook rushed up to the table with a panicked expression. "B-Boss Bart! We've got a major problem!" the pirate hissed out, his eyes darting this way and that as if to spot hidden watchers.

In response, Bart scoffed and started picking his nose again, sending his underling an unimpressed look. "Buddy, we're balls deep in enemy territory and under the heel of one of the worst pirates in living memory. How the hell could shit get any worse?"

Unnoticed by anyone else at the table, Robin brought her hand to her face, then several more.

"I, uh, well…" The underling glanced surreptitiously at Ever before leaning over the table to his captain and hissing something in Barto's ear as quietly as he could.

For his part, Bart nodded and grunted in understanding at the information. Then, all at once, he stiffened as though struck by lightning.

"SHIKI'S GOING TO DO WHAT!?!?"

The sound of flatulence rose from rubber soles with each step Dr. Indigo took towards the pool room. The not-so-good doctor intended to surreptitiously gather some data about the bird that he had left with the prisoner—er, new recruit. After all, just because he couldn't take it away by his captain's orders didn't mean he couldn't still observe it. It wouldn't be particularly productive observation, not when he was looking to build a better killing machine and those women only saw a probably-cute animal, but at least he would find out what the creature did when left to its own devices with constant human contact.

Upon entering the room, his grinning face scanned the room in search of the peaducken (name
pending). Unfortunately, it was nowhere to be seen. Nor, as he took in the entirety of the room, was
the former Straw Hat. Paling beneath his makeup, his eyes turned toward the pool—

"Horo horo horo horo horo horo horo horo..."

And then snapped upward at the familiar haunting laughter of the other 'prisoner'. His pallor
intensified when he did not see a young tanning goth girl, but instead three large, orb-shaped specters
with childlike eyes and mouths. Well, except for the part where the mouths were grinning in blatant,
naked malice.

"Thanks for being such wonderful hosts," came Perona's taunting voice from the specters. "But we've
overstayed our welcome, so we're heading out now. But here's a parting gift for you. TRIPLE
SPECIAL HOLLOW!"

Indigo barely had time to even begin deploying his fumes for Chemical Juggling before the specters
completely swamped him. Only the sheer size of the palace kept anyone else from hearing the
massive detonation that followed a moment later.

-o-

"Clowns and mad scientists like blowing up, right?" Perona snarked, fighting not to burst into
laughter. She waited for someone else to do so in her place and sagged despondently when she
realized that no one was around to do so.

"Maaan," she groused, spinning the spectral rendition of her parasol on her shoulder. "It really sucks
not having an entourage around to laugh at my jokes anymore." The astral 'princess' cast a glare up
and through the lake she was floating beside. "Where the heck are they? It's not that far from the
drain to the castle, shouldn't they have been here by now?"

Sighing, Perona mentally gave it another minute and went back to taking in the landscape around
her. She glanced at the coral coating the bed of the lake she was floating beside—a lake that defied
gravity by essentially being a vertical wall—but she'd been examining that for most of the time she'd
been waiting. She glanced down, towards the target island, with its caldera lake, green canopy, and
the Thousand Sunny visible at the end of the scar in the jungle it had left, but it wasn't a very visually
appealing island.

With little other choice, she turned back to the coral, and the gap Nami was supposed to come out of.
Thankfully, a few more seconds the duck and the Straw Hat flew out of the hole, shooting straight
for the edge of the lake. Perona flew up out of the way and heard a splash followed by the gasp of
someone inhaling after a long time holding their breath. In seconds, she was beside Nami, flying
down alongside the navigator, who was clinging to her plummeting mount's back.

"Enjoy the swim?" Perona shouted over the rushing wind.

"Shi—hugh!—Shiki's got almost a mile of plumbing under his monument to his own ego, and my
mount took three wrong turns in a row!" Nami shouted back, coughing up a lungful of water
halfway through. "If I weren't such a good swimmer, I'd have drowned twice over!"

"Yeah, well, you're in luck, because you can recover and dry off once we get back to the Sunny!"
Perona said, beamed ecstatically as she pointed up. Or down, rather, seeing as she was floating
downward head first. "Shiki must not be paying attention to where he lets the islands float, because
we're falling straight towards your ship!"

"Really!?" Nami gasped happily. "Oh, man, that's great! Hey, duck!" She tapped the back of her
mount's head. "Pull up! We're close to... my... uh, duck? Duck!" She rapped his head hard, and paled when he failed to even twitch. "Ooooh crap."

Perona righted herself, sending Nami a look of concern. "What's wrong?"

The navigator cursed colorfully under her breath as she tried to shake her mount awake. "Damn damn damn! I'm a good swimmer, but ducky here isn't! He must have conked out after the last turn!"

"Ooooh... yikes," the zombie princess winced sympathetically. "Well, look on the bright side: At least your landing won't be too hard."

"Huh?" Nami blinked at Perona in confusion. "What are you—?

SPLASH!

"—BLURGH!?"

"That's what I'm talking about," Perona giggled to herself as she stopped just short of the water-filled caldera, while Nami and her ride slammed face-first into it. Once the giggling subsided, the ghost girl peered through the water. "Wow, I'm honestly surprised! Even after a fall that high, it looks like she's gonna be okay."

Perona's schadenfreude-enforced smirk faded fast, her pallid demeanor lightening even further as a group of very large beasts, partly shadowed by the surface of the water, heading straight for Nami. "She'll... probably be okay?" she hesitantly corrected.

KRZZZZZZZT!

The sudden explosion of lightning, and the accompanying flash of light, prompted Perona to wince and shield her eyes. When she lowered her hand, the aquatic beasts surfaced, and Perona readied Negative Hollows almost reflexively before recognizing that that shock had done all that was needed; they were no longer among the living. She stared for a few moments at the corpses, and then the duck emerged from the water, perched on what remained of the least fortunate of the attackers, merely a skeleton, and squawked triumphantly.

"That was a shock," Perona most certainly did not say. What she did do was grin and pump her fists triumphantly. "But now Nami's definitely okay!"

The fresh bravado lasted long enough for both she and the duck looked around, and their jaws dropped in horror at the sight of her body floating nearby. Face-down. "Maybe, maybe okay," Perona choked out.

The duck, to his credit, reacted instantly. In a matter of seconds, he had flown over to Nami, taken her in his talons, and carried her to the shore, her limbs skimming the water as he flew.

Perona followed. By the time she caught up, the duck had placed Nami down on the rock and was pacing nervously, then gingerly poked her with his beak. She stirred slightly, and the duck let out a squawk of joy. Then, in a move that was an inadvisable but not unsound leap of logic, he began pecking her much more insistently and forcefully.

"CUT THAT OUT!" Nami roared, sending the duck flying almost to the other end of the crater with her punch.

"Okay, yeah, you're okay," Perona slumped with a relieved sigh.
"Almost—ugh—wasn't..." Nami hacked miserably, massaging her throat. "What the heck happened?...and why do I smell toast, of all things?"

Slowly, Perona pointed her finger at the paradoxically sheepish duck. "Yellow bill boy here saved your bacon by frying the things coming up to munch on you. Your fault for not being naturally resistant to electricity."

The navigator snapped a paralyzing glare at the electro-fowl, freezing him in place. Tersely, "On the one hand, I really feel like knocking your bill into your brain for almost killing me twice in a row."

The duck flinched and began waving its wings about, quacking frantically. That quacking shifted into a squawk of surprise when Nami threw her arms around his neck and brought him into a hug.

"On the other hand, I am so freaking happy to be out of that hellhole, and it's all thanks to you!" Nami laughed in relief. "So thank you soooo much!"

The duck smiled widely and, with a pleased squawk, returned the affection and hug.

After a few minutes, Nami let go, and she turned her smile on Perona, only this time with more of an edge to the expression. "And now that we're out... you said that this is the island the Sunny is on?"

"More than that, this is the mountain your ship's on!" Perona replied with an equally vicious grin. "It's this way, on the slope! Come on, let's go! I want to get back in my body as soon as possible."

And with that, the astral girl swooped off and over the lip of the caldera, with the duck carrying Nami close behind.

The second the duck crested the edge and Nami laid eyes on the Thousand Sunny, her face lit up with joy and relief. Jumping off the duck's back, she took off down the mountain, though she slowed her careening run at the explosions that blossomed in the forest to her left. And she stopped completely, just in sight of the Sunny, when a handful of familiar figures came out of the forest, heading for the other side. They abruptly came to a halt as they saw the familiar form of their ship.

One of them fell to his knees, his hands raised in triumph—

"HAAAA-LLELUJA! HAAAA-LLELUJA! HALLELUJAH! HALLELUJAH! HALLE-E-ELUJA!"

With the loudest of them on his shoulder providing a very loud but undeniably beautiful soundtrack.

"And here I thought that that snail didn't have any good taste at all," Perona muttered.

"I should care more about that, but honestly, I'm a little preoccupied with the fact that they're actually here! LUFFY! CROSS! BOSS!" Nami shouted in joy, waving her arms over her head.

The trio snapped their heads in her direction, and even from so far away, Nami still knew that they were all beaming with just as much exuberance. "Nami!" Cross's voice laughed in relief, the blond collapsing onto his ass as the energy seemed to drain out of him. "Oh maaan, you have no idea how stupidly relieved I am to see you again!"

As if on cue, the omnipresent sounds of roaring animals and snapping foliage suddenly intensified, and before anyone could react three massive, bearded scorpions, with carapaces in blue-black, grey-black, and red-black, shoved aside some trees, claws clacking. Then, not ten feet from that group, a massive, scarred, rotund lion with short stubby legs and sharp, not-stubby-at-all fangs bowled over some more trees, flopping onto its feet and roaring. And on the other side, a massive toad with a grey, pebbly hide that just screamed durable came crashing out of the canopy, accompanied by a
loud croak.

By contrast, the oversized komodo dragon that barreled in five seconds later was almost normal. Except there was crazed look in its eyes that it shared with the other five animals, and the drool dripping out of its mouth caused hissing smoke to rise above where it dripped onto the forest floor.

Regardless, all six took one look at the humans in the clearing, intensified their respective noises, and then dipped their heads and charged.

Cross moaned and let his head hang. "…these bastards, not so much."

"Uuuurgh…" Boss groaned, falling onto his flippers. "Normally, I'd show off some more machismo and help you with dusting our lunch… but at this point, we're exhausted and you look fresh, any chance you could fry them for us?"

The smirk Nami adopted would have sent any sane being diving off the edge of the island. Less painful that way. "Oh, you have no idea," she purred, assembling her Clima-Tact as fast as blinking and deploying a mass of iron cloud. That mass of strands quickly bunched up into a ball behind Nami. "You're going to want to get out of the way, because this one's brand new! Divine—!

"GrrrrRRRRAGH! ENOUGH!"

Nami halted mid-attack at Luffy's incensed bellow. She wasn't the only one, either. The cavalcade of monstrosities, so eager two seconds before, all hit the brakes, some tumbling as their legs locked up and the front runners shoved forward by the beasts behind running into them.

Having known the rubber man for as long as she had, Nami could tell the yell was more out of frustration boiling over than actual anger. Not unexpected, considering what they must have been going through over the last week, but why would he ask her to stop? One blast and they'd have some peace and—

"WE'VE BEEN CHASED ALL OVER THESE ISLANDS FOR DAYS!" Luffy roared, glaring hellfire at the oncoming beasts as he marched towards them with his fist strangling his pipe. "WE'VE FINALLY FOUND OUR FRIENDS, OUR HOME, AND WE BEAT ALL OF YOU! YOU LOST, WE WON! NOW GET IT THROUGH YOUR HEADS, AND LEAVE!"

Luffy took one more step toward the small horde, causing them to try and frantically backpedal.

"US!"

Another step—no, a stomp, this one shattering the earth beneath the captain's feet.

"ALONE!"

Luffy's roar hit its peak on that final word, and the air rippled. A wave of force slammed clean into Nami, stealing the breath from her lungs and sending her stumbling back. It... It was like the few times Vivi had accidentally snared her while practicing her Sovereign's Will, but at the same time... at the same time it was so much more. If it weren't for her staff, she would have fallen to her knees or even collapsed outright as the hazy image of a gargantuan beast imposed itself—crushed itself—into her mind's eye.

After a minute, the pressure eased enough for her to stand upright and look around. What she saw sent a chill over her body; Perona was nowhere to be seen, the duck had collapsed out cold beside her with foam coming out of his slack beak, Cross was slumped over and barely supporting himself on Boss, Soundbite's shell foaming on his shoulder... and most importantly, the three giant scorpions...
and their entourage were collapsed on the ground, dead to the world with more foam practically flowing from their mouths.

It took a few seconds, but Nami's mind eventually rebooted, and threw up a seemingly random memory. A memory of everyone sharing their tales of battle from Enies Lobby once they'd returned to Water Seven.

A memory of Cross sharing his knowledge of Kings and Conquerors.

*That* memory shook the last of the weakness out of her legs, and she sprinted down the slope to regroup with her friends as fast as possible. "Cross!" she gasped out when she arrived, swapping her gaze between the tactician and her captain. "Was that—!?"

"AH!" Luffy yelped, recoiling in shock at the sight of his crewmates' haggard expressions. "What the—!? Did I do that to you guys!? I'm so—!"

"Luffy!" Cross interrupted in a choked voice, visibly fighting to keep his head on straight and his gaze at least somewhat on target. "That feeling, w-whatever you felt just now, the anger, the rage, I-I don't know, I don't care, y-you, you need to… you need to remember it. Hold onto it. Th-Th-That feeling. Because what you just did…” Cross's dizzied expression slowly grew into a massive, mad grin. "That was a boot… clean through the door… of the Conqueror's throne room."

"*Hail TO THE KING baby…*" Soundbite gurgled through his own foam.

"Yeah, that was really cool and awesome and manly, and I *really* want to see you learn to get it under control…" Boss wheezed, shaking his head in an attempt to clear the fog from his mind. "Just, don't practice it too close to us, until you're a heck of a lot better at controlling your range, would you? Feels like someone reached through my shell to clock my skull."

Luffy flinched, visibly unsure how to respond. Nami was more than a little shaken herself, but she gathered herself together enough to fall back on what never failed to distract Luffy.

"Hey, Luffy? How do you think those things taste?"

The rubber-man's face lit up, and he charged over to the nearest scorpion. Cross shot her a relieved smile, especially now that he could stand on solid legs, which she returned.

"It'll be nice to enjoy a meal *without* worrying about something charging at us partway through," Boss nodded in agreement, cracking his neck back and forth in an effort to unstiffen his too-worn muscles.

"Food later, rest now," Lasso suddenly wheezed, shoving himself off of his wielder's back and flopping to the ground in a boneless heap, his tongue lolling out of his maw. "Cross, drop us off on the Sunny before you do anything else, would you? I've got dire urge to whiz on a tree…"

Cross chuckled at the request, and drew his sword and cast it aside. "I'm gonna go out on a limb and say you feel the same way."

The elephant-sword grew to his full size and then promptly tumbled onto his side, a relieved bray coming from his trunk. "Ohh, you have no idea. First, I'mma drink all the water I can handle. Then, eat as much untainted grass as I can stomach," Funkfreed said in tearful relief.

"Right up that way," Nami jabbed her thumb over her shoulder, up the mountainside. "There's a whole caldera up there filled with fresh water, you can gorge until you burst."
"Halle-frickin'-lujah!" Funkfreed cried, somehow finding the strength to right himself and charge up the mountain far faster than anything his size had the right to move.

"Ah, wait! Soundbite, if you could—?" Nami pointed after the elephant, and was rewarded with a crackle of static. "Funkfreed, on your way back down, grab the knocked-out duck! He's a friend of mine, and if it weren't for him, Shiki'd still have me!"

She got a wordless trumpet and a wave of the pachyderm's trunk for acknowledgement.

Nami nodded gratefully, then began looking around. "Now, where did Perona go?"

A scream like a banshee followed by a familiar astral form shooting from the crow's nest answered that. "YOOOOOU!"

Nami shook her head as she made tracks for the Sunny, her mind filling in the details long before Perona's livid and graffiti-covered form floated down to meet her.

"Is it too much to ask that I might rightfully punish someone for violating my body while I was out of it?" she furiously demanded.

"Hey, you go right ahead and rip their psyche apart for all I care," Nami said placatingly, hands raised in surrender. "Just make sure they're breathing once you're finished."

"No promises," Perona snarled, shooting off in a blind and Hollow-shrouded rage.

Nami stared after her before slowly pinching the bridge of her nose. "Dare I even ask who stayed here and watched over her body?"

"That'd be this blubber-arsed moron right here, ma'am," Boss stated flatly as he Rip Tide'd to her side, holding a slack and soaking Raphey by her tail. "Found her cowering in the fishtank."

"Don't let her get me, I don't wanna be a sea cucumbe-e-er…" Raphey wept.

Boss rolled his eyes. Tiredly, "I am too hungry and too sober for this shit. Tell you what." The dugong stabbed his cigar towards the insensate beasts. "De-meat the two scorpions our captain isn't on in less than half an hour and I won't toss your ass to your rightful comeuppance."

"Yessir, Master Boss sir!" Raphey barked, saluting while still upside-down.

"Get to it," Boss nodded, tossing her away. But before she could Riptide, he snapped his fingers, prompting her to turn her head. "And Raphey."

"S-Sir?"

Boss took a long, slow drag before breathing out a cloud of smoke. "…well done. You did your squad proud. Keep it up."

Raphey immediately beamed. "Yes sir!" And with that she soared away to perform her task.

Nami let the green, brown and pink blur leave her sight before side-eyeing the older amphibian. "…I assume you meant the guard duty and not the graffiti?" Nami deadpanned.

Boss smirked and tilted the brim of his hat down. "Said what I meant, meant what I said. Take it how you will."

For a long while, Nami remained in that deadpan, sidelong expression. And then, out of the blue, she
collapsed to her knees and dragged the dugong into a tight hug, burying her face in his skullplate.

"I missed you crazy bastards so damn much…" Nami sobbed into his hat.

Boss, frozen in surprise, let himself relax and returned the hug. "There there. Wasn't much fun without you either, ma'am," he replied, patting her shoulder comfortingly.

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Hearing those words and seeing Nami so relieved felt like getting stabbed in the heart with a knife made out of solid guilt. I couldn't hide the grimace that came over my face; it was just lucky that Soundbite was the only one who noticed it, although the slightly scared look on his face told me all I needed to know about my expression.

"Later, once this mess is over," I said quietly, making every attempt to mask the reminder of what was yet to come with the current situation and the implications thereof: Nami back, and Shiki yet to pay. It helped that it wasn't long before Nami broke the hug with Boss and came over to grab me up instead.

Memories of the same situation on another sky island ending with a tongue shoved down my throat made me twitch involuntarily, but I dismissed the sentiment just as fast and returned the hug with gusto.

"I am going to plant my greave in whatever the Monsters leave intact," I swore quietly.

"And Chopper and I will be right there alongside you backing you up," Nami chuckled back. "Monsters and Demons, I know, I know… but still…" Nami released me and stepped back, her expression deadly serious. "Cross, I have so much that I need to tell you."

I jabbed my thumb over at our future dinner, my good mood suddenly turned somber. "Lemme guess, Indigo is Shiki's quack and this place is his bio-weapons lab?"

Our navigator blinked slowly, and the energy visibly drained out of her. "…not as much to tell you as I thought," she murmured lamely.

"We can compare notes later. For now, you go ahead, grab some new clothes and relax," I said, pointing her to the Sunny. Right as she turned away, though, a thought occurred to me and I graced her with a flat look. "And no baring your midriff; I'm almost positive the bastard ripped a cape off of Little Garden to make this place, and I don't want to have to save your ginger ass a second time from whatever pathogens places like this can cough up."

Nami paused, turned around me, and matched my flat look with one of her own. "I really hope that Tashigi managed to recruit that Cleaner, because your memory clearly needs it. You got sick from Little Garden, Cross, not me."

"Uh-huh." I donned a smirk as I gestured at her stomach. "By the way, nice tick marks. Oh wait!"

Nami raised her finger, opened her mouth to ask what the hell I was talking about… and snapped it shut with an aggravated hiss as the penny dropped. "You win this one, big mouth. You win this one."

"Pfheheheh," I chuckled, folding my arms behind my head. "What can I say, eh? I'm on a hot streak lately!"

"DAMN—Puru puru puru puru!—STRAIGHT! YO!" Soundbite agreed, while also starting in
"And let's keep that streak rolling!" I chuckled in relief. I popped Soundbite off my shoulder and held him before me. "Freaking finally, I've been waiting for them to call. At least they didn't do it when we were being watched."

"I hear that," Nami nodded sympathetically. "But still, let's hurry this up before Shiki decides to come snooping, right? Because I don't doubt—!"

"No!" I cut in, sticking my raised finger in her face.

"Wha—!? Cross!"

"No," I repeated firmly, jabbing my finger past her at the Sunny. "Clothes. Shower. Bed. Now. And if you don't take the time to rest and relax, so help me."

"Or what?" Nami scoffed incredulously. "You'll send me to bed without dessert?"

"Or else," I repeated back at her with a malevolent grin. "I enlist Robin and Vivi's help and while you're asleep they give you a haircut that would make Bellemere proud."

Nami blinked, then paled and snapped her hands to her scalp. "You wouldn't."

A venomous smile on my face, I leaned in as close as I could. "Try me."

The sight of Nami running with her tail between her legs felt so good, almost as good as seeing the Sunny again after… that week. "Winning. Streak," I repeated.

"…Interesting threat there, Cross."

My smirk twitched harshly. "Aaaand winning streak over. Damn you, snail."

"**CUT ME A BREAK! DO YOU REALIZE** how annoying that **RINGING GETS** after the first few seconds?!" Soundbite groused, rolling his eyes. "**AND DON'T WORRY, I MADE DOUBLY SURE** no feather-rats **hauling my peeping cousins were anywhere nearby.**"

"He's got a point, you know. The ringing does get annoying," Tashigi oh so helpfully pointed out. "Anyway, Cross, to answer what I'm sure is your first question here, it took so long for me to call you because for some reason, the Navy is monitoring all Transponder Snails like they're a lab experiment that might blow up. Some of the officers think the brass are paranoid about how far Shiki's stretched his influence over the years. But hey, who knows, maybe they're just concerned that with all the anarchy you've spread, you have some contacts inside the Navy itself. And they're not wrong, really." That last was said with a slight smile.

It didn't last. "Anyway, I had to wait until we reached Sagittarius to be safe; he's had a White Transponder Snail secretly on hand for years in case of an emergency. So I couldn't contact you safely until now."

I nodded in acceptance of the explanation, and took over the conversation.

"Just as well that you didn't get a chance until now. we've been on the run for the last week, and we only just found where the Sunny landed. Shiki took us to his base, an archipelago held in the sky by his powers, and it's filled with an army of hyper-mutated bioweapon animals that he and his crewmate Dr. Indigo—think Caesar Clown, both in genius and lack of conscience—have created. These things look like they've crawled out of the New World and Soundbite says they're only getting
stronger every second, if he lets these things loose, it'll be a bloodbath."

"Yeah, well, whatever you're imagining, reality is going to be a million times worse."

I frowned in confusion. "Know something I don't?"

"Oh-hoh, trust me, you know it as well as I do," Tashigi grimaced. "Think about it, Cross, imagine it: the result of all those animals set loose at once, whipped into a frenzy at the same time, and then set loose on a location, most any location. What would be the result?"

I frowned in thought, turning the pieces over. And then I almost puked as my body tried to react in so many fucking ways at once. "So... what you're telling me is that not only did Shiki personally attack one of our crew, he's personally attacking our sea of origin as well?"

I heard teeth grinding as Tashigi slowly nodded in confirmation. "For what it's worth, while it is personal, Aquarius doesn't think it's personal with you specifically. According to her, Shiki got that wheel he has stuck in his head when he last clashed with Roger, with his entire fleet backing him to take on Roger's lone Oro Jackson. Shiki lost, utterly, and has hated Roger ever since for destroying his dreams of world domination. More specifically, he hated how he was beaten by a man—"

"—from the weakest, most worthless of all the Blues," I finished. "Which also explains why he came after us, the big-shot rookies from the East who are following almost exactly in Roger's footsteps. He wants to both stamp out the source of his hatred at the source and get the victory he thinks was rightfully his twenty years ago. I hate to say it, but it makes sense. Sense through a twisted lens, but sense."

"Yeah? Well that 'sense' is going to justify dropping killer rabbits on the East Blue, and unlike you, most civilians aren't quite so good at running."

"Hey, I wasn't trying to—!" That was as far as I got before what she'd said really hit me, and my eyes widened into an incredulous stare. "Tashigi... how the hell did you know that I almost got my head ripped off by a rabbit this morning?"

Soundbite's expression flattened into a glower. "Zero for two, I thought you would have put the pieces together already, Cross. Shiki is using your transceiver to broadcast what's going on with your crew all over the world; he delivered Visual Transponder Snails to all across the Blues and the Grand Line; as of noon today, everyone is watching."

My jaw dropped in horror. "Sonnuva— that pompous old tyrant got more viewers than me!?"

"...Please tell me someone else is listening to you right now, Cross," Tashigi said with absolutely no emotion. "Because I need to hear someone punching you for getting your priorities out of line. I need to hear you in pain."

"Coping, woman, focus. Also, you saw what I was going through. Imagine that over an entire week, non-fucking-stop," I retorted acridly, massaging the bridge of my nose as I tried to consider the implausible. "Hold on a second!" I damn near shouted in my panic. "Does that mean that the world knows about Brook?"

"Cross, this is not the—"

"I AM SERIOUS, TASHIGI!" I roared. Soundbite recoiled in shock, but I plowed. "Tell me: does the world know that Brook's a skeleton or not!?"
"That he's a wha—!? Gah, how does this even… um, not quite? He was wearing a weird hat that looked like a jellyfish; we were craning our eyes, but the strips hanging down made it impossible to see who he was. The world knows his name, his voice, and that he's a swordsman, but they didn't get a glimpse of anything underneath."

I sighed in relief. "OK, that's workable… makes things harder, but workable." With the only potential pitfall of our crew being broadcast dealt with, I turned my attention back to the call. "Just let it be known that Brook's connection to us, or at least the fact that he's… 'living-impaired', so to speak, cannot become public knowledge, either now or anytime soon. Moving back to the matter at hand, I assume the Masons are working on this?"

Curiosity and other emotions I couldn't identify warred on Tashigi's face, and eventually she let out a defeated sigh. "I'll save it for after this mess is done. And yes, but there's not much we can do outside of what we're doing already. The Divine is mobilizing against the threat along with the rest of the Navy, and the Damned are out of contact because like I said, communications are under tight watch. The rest of the Masons will be getting White Snails of their own as soon as we can manage it. Actually, if you could contact Monkey once you get the transceiver back, that would make things easier."

"Alright, good enough for now," I growled tiredly, rubbing aching temples. "Alright, we'll stay the course, regroup with our crew. Luckily, Nami managed to break out of Shiki's hold; without her, this entire place is at the mercy of the Grand Line's storms, so that'll delay things. Once we're all back together, we'll do our best to kick Shiki's teeth in, and then you guys can pick up the pieces. And probably make sure these animals don't fall into the wrong hands, too."

"Heh, acting as the Straw Hats' cleanup crew. When have I heard that one before?" Tashigi chuckled, donning an actual grin. "Alright, we'll leave this up to you. And Cross?"

"Mm?"

"...I'm happy you haven't lost your head yet." KA-LICK.

I cocked my eyebrow at Soundbite as he blinked back to his usual self. "Well… call me crazy, but I think I'm growing on her!"

"You've always been crazy," Soundbite retorted. "If you'd prefer, I'LL CALL YOU mad or deranged or insane or unbalanced—"

"Alright, nix on the thesaurus," I waved him off. "And lay off the 'unbalanced', would you? Considering the footing… hits a bit close to home."

"YEAH, FINE," Soundbite nodded in agreement. He then cocked his eyestalks. "AAAAANYWAYS, I'M STARTING TO GET STARVED. LET'S SEE WHEN DINNER'S…whu-oh."

I snapped a nervous look down at my suddenly pale snail. "Whu-oh? What's whu-oh?"

"Well, see… the thing is? Those beasties may not be waking up yet—"

"GRRRR-RAAFF!"

"BUT OTHERS CAN STILL FIND US!!"

Another monster stormed into the clearing just as Soundbite snapped back into the dubious safety of his shell, drooling like a waterfall as it looked around at the unconscious beasts, and then us.
"I thought Saint Bernards were supposed to be friendly!" Raphey yelped, darting away from the scorpion she'd been carving up.

"YEAH, AND THEY'RE ALSO SUPPOSED TO BE IN THE MOUNTAINS with a barrel of whiskey AROUND THEIR NECKS, bothering YODELING AUSTRIANS, SO TODAY'S JUST A DAY OF FIRSTS!"

"I've got this one!" Nami called, stepping to the edge of the deck, a fresh jacket on her shoulders. "It'll be easier for me to relax when I've blown off some stress," she added, looking in my direction. I opened my mouth to argue, but didn't get any further before help came from another source.

"Not before me," Perona cut in, swooping in front of Nami in a freshly cleaned astral form. "You'll still get your pound of flesh from Shiki, whereas I seem to have been robbed of mine, so I'm taking this consolation prize… even if it is such a cute doggy." That last degenerated into a crooning tone, and a thoughtful expression blooming on her face. "Actually… on second thought…"

Before any of us could question what she was on about, the ghost-princess flew past us all and came to hover in front of the Serial Bernard, smiling beatifically at the slavering, snarling beast. "Hello there, cutie!" she cooed in an endearing and cutesy voice. "You look like a really nice boy, and I'd love-love-love to keep you as a pet, but only if you promise to calm down, m'kay?"

"GROWF!" The giant dog wasn't exactly 'm'kay' with that, if the way it growled and tried to nom on her astral form was any indication.

Perona's expression fell pointedly blank and she raised a hand. "Alright, let's try this again. Negative Hollow."

One of said Hollows shot from her hand, zooming through the monstrous dog's head and out the back of its neck before returning to Perona. For a moment, it remained frozen mid-snarl, and then it fell to the ground. And at that moment, I found out the hard way that monstrous or not, you can't look in the eyes of a genuinely miserable, crying dog and not have it hurt on some level unless you're completely lacking a heart.

Apparently, that included Perona, because she just said, "Bad dog," and threw a heartless glare at the poor mutt. "Do you understand what happened there? You attacked me, and now you're sad. If you make me unhappy, then I make you sad again. Understand?" She shook her finger in the dog's face. "Don't attack me again."

The Bernard blinked a couple of times, shaking off the momentary existential despair before getting back on its feet. This time it was cautious and wary, but, inevitably, it raised its hackles and started snarling again—

"Negative Hollow."

And then a second dose of existential despair brought it back to whimpering.

"Don't. Attack. Me. Again," Perona reiterated in a truly dark tone, leaning in close to the dog to give it a scathing glare. "Or else you'll get three at once next time, and I promise you that you'll never feel as bad as that will make you. Choose: Be nice, or be miserable."

This time, the poor beast let out a positive-sounding whine through its whimpering, and when it regained its composure, its comportment shifted. The Bernard didn't entirely back down, but it didn't attack or make any overt moves towards Perona, either.
And apparently, that was exactly what the hollow-girl wanted. Immediately upon receiving the reaction, Perona's demeanor lightened and she smiled beatifically. "Good boy. Here you go!"

Another Hollow shot from Perona's hand and, before it could turn tail and run for the hills, through the dog in less than a second. I briefly considered lambasting her for animal abuse, because even on a monster like that there was a limit, but then I actually got a look at the Hollow itself: Rather than smiling and laughing brainlessly it was… sobbing.

Obviously, that meant something important, but I had no time to connect the dots before something else unprecedented snagged all my attention: the Saint Bernard reacting to the Hollow… with pure and unabated joy. All of a sudden the large dog perked up and started barking eagerly, like it was a completely normal—if ridiculously overgrown—canine. It was panting and letting out happy "WOOF!"s and shaking its tail into a blur, and it was even jumping side to side like it couldn't wait to play!

Perona, meanwhile, took the shift in demeanor in stride and whistled sharply, catching the dog's attention. "That's it, that's a good boy! Come here, boy, come here!"

The Bernard immediately leaped to her and started acting friendly in an attempt to show her its affection, nuzzling and licking at Perona's astral form and whining when the efforts proved futile. Perona smiled at the dog, and I noticed her flicking her hand behind her back. In response, the still-weeping Hollow that had been looping around above passed through the Bernard a few more times, and it ratcheted right back up to rapturous.

"Don't worry, boy, doooon't worry," Perona soothed. "I'll be right back, I promise."

And with that, the ghost princess flew back up to the crow’s nest to retrieve her body, and a minute later, she strolled up to the once-rabid beast in her physical form without a care in the world. And the dog actually continued to act happy, nuzzling and snuffling at her like she was its lifelong owner, and she in turn she showered it with petting and affection.

"…What… What just happened?" I asked weakly.

"Perona, what did you do!?" If Nami's tone was anything to go by, she was just as gobsmacked as I was.

The hollow-girl cast a smirk over her shoulder at us. "Oh, so Know-It-All Cross doesn't know all after all? Lo, how the tables have—!"

"So help me, woman," I growled, raising my knuckles.

"Alright, alright," Perona said airily. "Well, seeing as I'm such a benevolent princess, I guess I'll tell you: my powers work just the way that the name says." She spun her arm and a few of her more normal-looking ghosts began spinning around her arm. "The ghosts I make are called Hollows because they're empty shells that are made to be filled."

One of her smiling goons popped up and wagged its tongue at me. "Negative Hollows are devoid of positive emotion, and when they pass through someone, they fill that hollow with the positivity of their prey, thus leaving the targets as utterly helpless wrecks." The smiling buffoon was joined by a sobbing counterpoint that rubbed at its eyes as it wept. "Positive Hollows, meanwhile, are the opposite: No negative emotion, so they drain all the sadness and misery someone has and leave them feeling like they're in heaven."

Perona smiled as she scratched the obliviously happy Bernard behind the ears. "And by combining
those two elements at the same time, negativity to bad behavior and positivity to good… well, I think you can see what I'm getting at."

"I GET THAT YOU'RE A BLOODY SOCIOPATH!" Lassoo howled from Sunny's deck, his expression one of purest panic. "USING THAT BASTARD PAVLOV'S METHODS ON ONE OF MY OWN KIND?! I SHOULD BURN YOU ALIVE, YOU CRUEL WITCH!"

"Cruel, but effective~!" Perona sang back, still scratching. "And don't worry your pretty little heads, this method only works on ani— on simple animals, the ones that aren't on par with human intelligence. Like this big old dummy right here!" she cooed as she intensified her scratching to the dog's delight. "Yes you are, yes you are, you're a big dummy, yes you are!"

Boss's eye twitched as he watched the titan-dog come apart under Perona's fingers. "Yeeeaah… those ghosts of yours ain't the only things that are 'hollow', lady."

Something clicked in my mind at those words, and I slowly pointed my finger at her as metaphorical light bulb went off. "Hollow… your Special Hollows hollow out pockets in the air, voids, and then you collapse them… they're not explosives, they're implosives, aren't they!"

Perona paused in her scratching. Briefly, of course. "Of course you knew already, it couldn't be more than the basic concept that you didn't know…" she sighed, rolling her eyes.

"No, I'm just that smart!" I informed her in a perfectly chipper tone of why the hell was I even born… "Somebody step on me, I need to get back to my place in the pecking order: lower than the dirt on the bottom of everyone's boots…" I mumbled into the earth with my pointless, useless bresweet mother of mercy! "GAH WHAT THE FUCK DID I JUST SAY!?" I yelped, snapping up and onto my ass.

"PERONA!" Nami roared over the sound of the ghost-princess's cackling.

"HORO HORO HORO!" Perona cackled ecstatically at my existential misery. "HE WAS ASKING FOR IT, SUE ME! HORO HORO HORO!"

"YOOOOOU—!"

Not wanting to get another Negative Hollow to the face, I unfortunately had to settle for strangling the air instead of Perona's neck

"Tell me in complete honesty that you wouldn't do the same thing if our places were switched, and I'll apologize," she challenged with a taunting smirk.

I opened my mouth to rebut her, I tried, oh dear lord did I try to rebut her, but when my voice got tangled up in my throat the third time in a row I gave up. "At least I don't need to torture people into being friends with me…" I attempted.

"Wow, what a comeback," Perona sneered, rolling her eyes. "Cutting, witty, sophisticated."

"GUYS, STOP PICKING ON CROSS! IT'S TIME TO EAT!"

My jaw dropped and I sank to my knees as my captain 'helpfully' came to my rescue. "Saved in a battle of wits by my witless captain… how could I have fallen so low?"

"Should I start playing the world's smallest violin?" Soundbite asked snidely.

"I've been away from witty repartee and intelligent conversation for a week, let me have my
"melodramatics!" I snapped as I clambered back to my feet. "Ugh, anyway…" I sobered up real fast as I collected up all the bits of news I had heard over the past hour. "Guys, we need to talk while we eat. I've got news… and none of it's good."

Everyone else exchanged worried looks at my tone. It was Nami who responded first with an assured nod. "We'll eat, you can tell us your news while we eat, and then once the duck's back on his feet—!"

"Oh, you mean Billy?" Luffy asked.

Nami looked at him in surprise. "Bil—? Wait, he's awake?"

"Nah!" Luffy grinned. "I just think that's a good name for him!"

The navigator contemplated opened her mouth to respond, but then closed it and shook her head in defeat. "I… it's a decent name, I suppose."

"FOR SOME REASON IT FITS, but for the life of me I can't understand why…I mean, yeah, HE HAS A BILL, BUT MORE THAN THAT…" Soundbite trailed off, deep in thought.

"Anyway," Nami continued. "Once Billy gets up, we can get his help flying us around looking for our friends."

Everyone exchanged nods. And then we began dining on roughly prepared drugged predator meat for what I sincerely hoped was the last time. At this point, I'd give anything to sink my teeth into Sanji's cooking even one. More. Time…

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"NAMI-SWAAAAAN! PERONA-CHERIEEEE!!"

Alright, almost anything. Because seriously, what good was food in my stomach when I felt like tossing it.

To make a long story short, we'd eventually managed to find our way to the village. And Billy wasn't the only duck that arrived there when we did.

It'd been a hell of a reunion, everyone happy to see everyone else, stories were swapped, and even a few ideas and thoughts shared here or there.

But, as always, the good times eventually devolved into quiet sobriety, and it was with a solemn tone that I brought together all the disparate details everyone had gathered over the course of their ordeals, and I put together the pieces of the horrific tableau Shiki had concocted over the past two decades. It took some time to tell everything, to make sure that everyone understood properly, but eventually?

"That's about the long and short of it," I solemnly concluded, taking in everyone's reactions. Over the course of my explanation, some of our crew had relaxed and settled in a bit, such as Usopp tinkering away on a project Funkfreed and I had gone over with him, Chopper working meticulously on some sort of formula he was currently obsessing over, or Sanji exulting his two most recently returned beauties.

But nevertheless, the reactions were still there: disgust, horror, terror, and of course, complete, world-shaking rage.

Luffy slammed his fists together. "I'm going to kick Shiki's head in!" he declared.
"Soon enough, Luffy," Zoro growled, his thumb repetitively stroking the hilt of Kitetsu the Third. "But unless we want a repeat of what happened back on the Sunny—!"

"I told you, he caught me when I wasn't ready and I was hungry!"

"—we need to get everyone back together first," Zoro looked over at Vivi. "How long do you think it'll take for the others to get here?"

"With Franky's… shall we say, improvised methods of transportation?" the blue-haired princess rolled her eyes. "I'd say an hour or two. But if you want me to get there in the shortest amount of time possible?" Vivi jabbed her thumb at Carue, who'd seated himself against a tree and was guzzling a freshly refilled water barrel. "Carue needs time to rest. He's been going nonstop all day, and it won't do us any good if he just up and collapses on me. On the plus side, he'll be good to go in about an hour."

"Mmph, acceptable…" Zoro grunted.

"Although…" Vivi winced as a thought struck her. "In retrospect, it might be a little longer coming here, seeing as we'll have to account for the likelihood that we'll be bringing back someone from Barto's crew too."

I frowned in confusion. "Yeah, that's… something I still don't get. Bartolomeo, he's… he's from Loguetown, the East Blue. Hell, I think most of his goons are too! Why would Shiki invite him, even considering how ruthless he was before I gave him a talking to?"

Slowly, Vivi turned a disbelieving look on me. "…Cross, Bartolomeo has green hair in a mohawk teeth that suggest he has a fishman somewhere in his recent ancestry, and he's the fifth most wanted rookie on the seas. If I didn't know him and you'd asked me where he was from, I would have guessed any Blue except the East."

I turned that over in my head. "That… makes a lot of sense, yes," I admitted. With that settled, I clapped my hands, getting everyone's attention. "ALRIGHT! Any other points to bring up, any questions, anything like that?"

"I have one," Su said, raising a paw. "If this SIQ stuff is supposed to be so volatile for animals, then why hasn't it affected any of us as bad as it affects them? I mean, I'm not complaining that I can bench press your scrawny ass without breaking a sweat, even if that's not saying much—"

"If I were to make you into a scarf and wear you, would I become as clever as you imagine yourself to be?" I asked airily.

"—but I'd still like some sort of explanation, if that's… not too much trouble?" Su shrugged helplessly. "I mean, this does affect a lot of us, after all."

"I can explain that," Chopper piped up, not taking his eyes from the chemistry set he was still tinkering with. "I kept and analyzed the few samples of the prototype BIQ that the Amigos didn't ingest long enough for me to form an antivenom. Not a perfect defense against its cousin, but the inoculations you all got seem to be doing their jobs."

The pause that followed that announcement was legendary. I'm pretty sure empires had died in that kind of pause. Some of them had probably committed suicide as a final desperate means of escape. Finally, Zoro voiced the question on all of our minds. "…What inoculations?"

Chopper blinked and looked up from his work, honest confusion written all over his face. "I don't understand the question," he said with the utmost sincerity.
"Never mind, you just answered it…” I groaned, pinching the bridge of my nose.

"Changing the subject, I have a question too," Merry said, waving her hand frantically. "If we're all here and Robin, Franky, and Brook are at that banquet hall, who's guarding Big Bro?"

"Perona's literal guard dog and the rest of her new pets," Boss gruffly answered around the cigar he was chowing on. "Raphey and I would have stayed behind to do it, but between captain's orders, her promising that they would guard the ship with their lives, and Sunny reassuring us himself that he'd be fine, we're better off here, planning for sending this place back to the blue—MMPH!"

It would have been amusing to see Boss getting dogpiled by his apprentices so they could slap their flippers over his muzzle, but there was nothing funny about the way Conis had started shivering at his words. After a moment, during which several hissed whispers and a slap upside the skullplate were exchanged, Boss shook off his fellow dugongs. "Sorry, Conis," he said.

"I-It's fine, just a bad memory," she said casually, the shudders now down to the occasional twitch. "It's not the same anyway; we're attacking a tyrant and sending this island where it truly belongs."

"Aye have a questhion, too," Carue squawked from his resting place. "Who's the wowwywowt you fwew in on?" He nodded his head over at Billy, who'd spent our entire time here cowering behind Nami.

"Billy, as Luffy named him, is one of Indigo's new breakthroughs, but he's not hostile like the rest of the creatures on these islands," I provided. "He helped Nami get out of Shiki's base and he seems loyal. And apparently, he makes up for his lack of any physical offensive skills with bioelectric shocks."

"Macro-bioelectric shocks," Perona corrected as she buffed the nails on one hand, the other holding Bearsy tight, having refused to leave the doll behind on the Sunny after being separated from him for so long. "He's got some ridiculously powerful voltage on him, he took down a half-dozen monsters in one full-powered blast without breaking a sweat. Even if they were immersed in water at the time, you can't deny that's impressive."

"Huh… weww, you'we gaht my wespect," the supersonic duck offered his wing to the electric one. "Aye'm Cawue, nice to meet you!"

Billy's response was to let out a panicked squawk and hide even further behind Nami, bumping against her Waver folded across her back, a piece of equipment she'd refused to leave behind when we left the Sunny.

Carue blinked in confusion and glanced at Soundbite. "Ahhh…?"

Soundbite huffed and shook his head. "HE'S CLAMMED UP EVER SINCE he woke up and we explained MY POWERS TO HIM. Scared totally quackless. I HAVEN'T EVEN BEEN ABLE TO CHOOSE A GOOD VOICE FOR HIM!"

"Eesh, poah guy…” Carue winced in sympathy

"Poor guy we can deal with later," I cut in. "Alright, anyone or anything else?"

Silence.

"Right then," I nodded. "Everyone rest up, recover your energy and get ready to rumble. And make sure you stay the hell out of the way of the POV of any mobile snails. Soundbite's warning them to stay out of our way, but that's no guarantee, so be careful. With any luck, we'll be back on the seas
tomorrow and Shiki's head'll be on a spit." I swung my arms out. "Dis-missed!"

With that, everyone broke ranks, meandering about to get to wherever it was they needed to go.

I myself was on my way to speak with Zoro and Nami, but before I could even take two steps their way, I was grabbed on the shoulder and dragged the other way, courtesy of—

"Vivi!?" I sputtered incredulously, stumbling to keep up with her. "The hell are you—?"

"We need to talk," she interrupted. And going by how little argument her tone brooked… Well, the only sensible thing to do was what I actually did, which was right myself and follow her. "Lead the way."

-o-

Upon dismissal, Mikey, Donny, Raphey, Leo, and Boss had headed to the lakeside where prying eyes were less likely to see. The four siblings exchanged glances, the same feelings in all of their hearts but the same pride on all of their faces.

"So… hell of a week we've had, huh?" Leo asked casually.

Donny shrugged indifferently. "It was… meh, informative."

"Meh, it was no biggie!" Mikey scoffed, folding his flippers behind his head. "I could do it all again in my sleep."

"Pfheh, or you could just sleep outright for all I care," Raphey sneered his way. "I've spent a week doing nothing but sitting on my ass, I could use some action! Heck, bring on Shiki right now, I'm sure I could stuff that wheel of his right up his-!"

"Ahem."

All four of the TDWS fell silent and turned to Boss, who had raised raised a flipper. "Boys, it seems I've neglected to teach you a little lesson about reunions." A smirk spread on his face, but an unmistakably warm one. "Real men don't hold back their tears."

There was a second where the TDWS maintained their composure, kept up their stoic and uncaring facades…

And then the four fell into a group hug, sobbing and clasping each other tight.

"I thought I was gonna die a hundred times ove-e-eer!" Leo cried in despair.

"I was so scared without you guys at my back!" Donny wailed.

"I missed all of you crazy bastards getting on my back about my jokes and giving me lumps for them!" Mikey whined through his snot. "Even Raphey, and she hits like a sledgehamme-e-er!"

"I was so bo-o-oored!" Raphey whined. "All I could do was sit around and—! Wait, what did you say about my flippers!? Come here, you dingus!"

"ARGH! HELP ME! HELP MEEE!"

Boss snickered as he watched his students interact. It was truly a testament to just how much they’d missed one another that all Raphey was doing was grabbing up her brother in a headlock and noogie-ing the shine out of his shell. Normally, Mikey would be sporting several lumps and a
veritable map of bruises for that sort of comment, and Donny and Leo would be right there sharing the pain seeing as they would have been what she was clobbering him against. But instead, all of this was undergone with more tears, less venom... and unrelenting smiles.

"Heheh..." Boss chuckled proudly as he blew out a ring of smoke. "Moments like these... guess there really is hope for us smarter entities after all."

-o-

While the Straw Hats wandered off to prepare for the upcoming battle, and as the village around them ran through its daily activities, one person was conspicuous in her inactivity. As soon as Cross had told everyone to break, Perona had parked herself against one of the outer huts and began examining her nails. After all, she wasn't a part of the Straw Hats, this wasn't her fight, she could leave anytime she wanted to, and more to the point, she had no interest in trying to tackle Shiki, not after the scene in Nami's old gilded jail cell.

Of course, there was one problem with this: boredom. There was only so much nail-examining Perona could do, because Raphey, not being familiar with nails at all, had left them alone in her graffiti-writing rampage. Aside from needing a trim after a week unattended, they were pretty much exactly as they were before this whole mess. So the ghost-girl looked up again in search of something to do, and found it in the form of a red-haired, frog-faced little girl, just... staring at her, right in the middle of the road without even trying to hide herself.

That immediately pricked a nerve, and Perona graced the girl with an annoyed glare. When that failed to stop the staring, Perona resorted to her fallback method: scathing commentary.

"What do you want, brat? Fair warning, if you just want to gawk at the creepy girl, you have ten seconds to leave before I—!"

"Huh? Of course not!" Xiao said, shaking her head frantically like it was the most ridiculous idea in the world. "I'm not looking at you 'cause you're creepy, I'm looking because you're cute!"

"...huh?" Perona said lamely. If there was anything she'd expected, it sure as heck wasn't that. "Uh... what... are you talking about? I mean, don't you keep fainting whenever you see something scary? 'Scary' being somewhat loosely defined here, after seeing the girl go halfway comatose upon seeing Luffy's group arrive. And that only because that meant meeting more than four new people at once.

"Uh... w-well yeah, of course I just get really scared when I see something that's big and weird and could eat me alive oh my god I'm gonna dieee-!" Hyperventilating, the girl swayed on her feet, but managed to catch herself and calm down, and then shoot a sunny smile at Perona. "Ah! Ah, b-b-but you're not scary at all! You're really cute and pretty!"

Perona remained thoroughly poleaxed for a while longer before she finally managed to settle on a reaction, one that had protected her many a time before: disdain. And yet...

"...you don't know what you're talking about, kid," she muttered halfheartedly.

"Nuh-uh, it's true! Your makeup's all funny and nice like a panda—!" Perona's hand twitched, whether to summon a Negative Hollow or smack the insensitive little brat upside her head, not even she knew. "And your hair is really really pretty! It's pink like the sakura trees up in the Spring Zone, and your ponytails look a lot like my big sister's only there're two of them, so they're even better!"

Still, reflexive twitch aside, poor Perona found herself completely at a loss for words. Half of her,
one that had allowed her to survive on her own for years, wanted to vehemently deny the compliment, tear down the brat, and move on with her life. But a new, louder half wanted to just take the damn compliments already. And maybe hug the girl and never let go.

"I—ah… t-that…" she stammered, eyes flicking back and forth to find some way out of this. Reflexively, her hand twitched to conjure a Negative Hollow…

"Eeee! Ohmigod what is that, is it a ghost, he's so cuuuute, can I hug him, I wanna hug him!"

Now she had a little girl practically leaping for one of her Negative Hollows. A little girl that she could admit, at least to herself, wasn't nearly annoying enough to deserve a Negative Hollow. So she hastily dissolved the ghost, Xiao passing through where it used to be before sprawling in the dirt.

"Aowwww…" Xiao whined, pushing herself on her knees and whimpering as she rubbed the spot on her forehead she'd smacked on the ground.

Seeing this—seeing Xiao's gleeful enthusiasm 180 so quickly—stirred something in Perona. Kneeling down, she conjured up a Mini Hollow in one palm and used the other hand to poke the girl in the shoulder blade. "Hey, kid."

Xiao looked up, saw the hollow, and immediately lit up, eyes wide and shining with happy tears. Perona grinned. "Here, play with this one instead," she said.

For a second, Xiao didn't move. Then she took a deep breath…

"EEEE! Thankyouthankyouthankyou!"

And simultaneously nearly blew out Perona's eardrums and nearly knocked the wind out of her with a head-tackle-hug, before carefully scooping up the Mini Hollow in her hands and running off a ways.

Perona, once she recovered, returned back to leaning against the wall, but this time she had something to watch: a little girl, playing with one of her Hollows. And the smile hadn't left the ghost-girl's lips the entire time.

-0-

Brushing aside the curtain used as a door out of the way, I stepped into the house Vivi had ducked into, finding her staring out the window off into nothing. "So, what's up?"

"Something… isn't right here, Cross," she said, turning around to show a deep frown on her face. "I've been trying to figure it out since I found out about this village from Barto, but nothing makes sense."

"We're on a fucked up remix of Moreau's Island a few miles in the sky, nothing makes sense here," I shrugged. I then snapped my hands up in defense as Vivi glared hellfire at me. "Alright, alright, complete and utter seriousness. Can you blame me for wanting to lighten the mood after the week we've had?"

Vivi briefly maintained the glare, but then she sighed, shook her head, and started pacing. "I'm not talking about the typical Grand Line insanity, Cross, I'm talking about Shiki. I've tried putting myself in his shoes: say I've just escaped from Impel Down, I've created an immense biolaboratory in the sky so that I can create an army of living super-weapons and unleash them on the East Blue in the name of my vengeance…"
She stopped and spread her arms, indicating the house around us. "And then I steal all the adults in a nearby village and use them for slave labor? It doesn't make sense."

I blinked in confusion. "Well, why not? He's a raging bastard who sees people as tools, how does this not fit?"

"Well, what I'm wondering is why the village is even here in the first place."

Soundbite cocked an eyestalk. "What do you mean?"

The princess waved a hand at one of the landmasses floating by above us. "Shiki's already demonstrated to us that his control over his powers are immense. When he was scooping up islands for his top secret world in the sky, why take an island with a village on it?"

"Beeeeecause it had the IQ plants he needed?" I asked more than said, almost positive that wasn't the right answer.

"Then why not just take the IQ plants and call it a day?" Vivi countered. "Why not just crush the village and everyone in it once he had what he needed? He obviously doesn't need their help tending for the IQ, seeing as he's doing it himself."

"Well…” I frowned as an inkling of doubt wormed its way into my head. "As you said, slave labor, right? Again, we know people are just tools to him."

"That's just it, Cross! He sees people as tools, and he already has his own crew gobbling his every word. Why not make them wait on him hand and foot? Why outsource? I doubt he'd go the extra mile for their sakes."

"Maybe…” I glanced aside and scratched my temple thoughtfully, the doubt building in my mind. "Maybe he has them doing dangerous jobs? Ones that could get them killed, and he wants his crew around for the East Blue's destruction?"

"But he could still use his own crew for that," she refuted. "As he's demonstrated, people are expendable to him. All he'd have to do is go down to the Blue Seas, flash his identity, and he'd have people tripping over themselves to join his crew."

"That's…” I hesitated, trying to find a proper answer. Mostly because I did not like where this was going.

"And even beyond that!" Vivi forged on, shifting into a lecturing tone as she went. "When you consider the purpose of this place, when you consider Shiki's ambition, slave labor is an unnecessary luxury. After all, keeping slaves is expensive; even when they're sorely mistreated, you need to provide food, shelter, and even administer medical care if you're intent on maintaining the ones you already have."

I gave the princess a funny look.

She rolled her eyes impatiently. "Paper for my economy teacher on how slavery is a drain on a nation."

"Ah, of course…” I 'ah'd in understanding before frowning in confusion. "But… I do see your point. It's… an anomaly."

"Save that Shiki is intelligent," Vivi rebutted. "He wouldn't allow for an anomaly like this…”
I frowned grimly. "Without some kind of justification, right. Alright, alright…" I started to pace in opposition to the princess. "Alright, let's take it from the top. I'm Shiki, megalomaniac extraordinaire. I've taken a village and am using the adults as slave labor… why exactly?"

"If you just wanted the slaves, it'd be easier to snatch them up from the sea, you know," Vivi pointed out. "Seeing as you've already shown how easy it is to do that."

"But instead I go to the trouble of taking an entire village, both those I want to enslave and those I leave behind… why leave them behind?" I splayed my hands in confusion. "Once I have the slaves, why not kill the rest?"

"Hostages, maybe?" Vivi glanced back and pointed a finger pistol at my head. "Do what I say or I'll kill everyone you love."

I considered that, slowly raising a finger pistol of my own. "Or maybe the reverse: Do what I say or I'll kill mommy and daddy."

Vivi frowned as she lowered her hand. "So the slaves are hostage in order to control the village?"

"He is monitoring the village intently," I reasoned. "More so than his own base if what Nami told us is accurate."

Vivi hummed thoughtfully and started pacing again. "So it loops right back around to the start: somehow, the village is important to him. Important enough to keep it around…"

"Important enough to make sure it's kept in the same state, unaltered," I specified as I joined her, gnawing on my thumb's armor. "If he just wanted the people, he could have easily stuck them in a camp or compound he could watch but he didn't. He doesn't want anyone leaving, he wants the whole of the village, all of the people, to stay here."

"But why keep a community functioning in the midst of the army you're building?" Vivi wondered, shaking her head.

I started to nod in agreement, before pausing as something niggled in my head. "…wait… that's… not right."

Vivi looked at me with confusion etched on her face. "Huh?"

"You said it yourself," I pressed, swiftly building up a head of steam as my mind started to churn. "These things aren't an army, that's the pirates he's recruiting. These things are weapons, super-weapons."

"What difference does it make?"


"What, what is it?" Vivi pressed.

"B-Back in my world," I rubbed my neck, sweat streaming down my neck as my mind dredged up the relevant memories. "My people developed super-weapons of our own, weapons of mass destruction, bombs powerful enough to wipe out everything for miles around them."
"Like what Shiki's doing here," the princess nodded slowly in agreement. "But why—?"

"We didn't deploy them straight away, we tested them first, proved their might." I rubbed my hand over my mouth, my horror with the situation rapidly mounting. "And the best way to demonstrate the power of a weapon of that scale, a weapon meant to destroy everything around it…" I slowly turned around, staring in the direction of the village, the very real, very populated village. "Was to construct mock-ups of towns… and blow them away."

Vivi's face turned ashen, her gaze slowly turning back the way we'd came. "A proof of concept…"

"He's going to sic his monsters on this village as an example of what they're capable of," I summarized grimly.

Vivi bolted for the treeline, grabbing me as she passed. "We need to evacuate everyone, now!"

"Little bit late for that…"

We both froze at Soundbite's grim announcement. "What? Why?!"

"Because there are people at the Daft Greens now."

Vivi and I started sprinting again before Soundbite finished speaking—

"WAIT! FALSE ALARM!"

—and then faceplanted as he said that.

"Sorry, I PANICKED at actually HEARING PEOPLE THERE," Soundbite quickly explained. "But it sounds like SOME OF THE OTHER NATIVES HAVE COME HOME."

For a moment, we felt good, because we thought we had some time. But then that good feeling was brutally murdered by fridge logic kicking in.

"Because people fall farther when they're dropped FROM AS HIGH AS POSSIBLE," Soundbite whimpered, voicing our thought. "SHIKI wants to give them A SPARK OF HOPE BEFORE HE MURDERS THEM ALL."

"Alright, we don't have any time to waste," I barked, getting back to my feet. "Call ahead, get everyone working to evacuate the village, now!"

I don't think either of us ever ran faster in our entire lives than we did on that dark, darkening day. -o-

A frantic, energy and desperation-filled quarter hour later, Vivi and I met back up in the once-lively village's center, and even though I couldn't see them, I could hear the rest of the crew running through the village's streets, just as frantic as we were.

"Everybody's safe?" Vivi asked, her head on a constant swivel.

"WE STASHED EVERYONE WE COULD FIND in a bunker they had in case of stampedes!" Soundbite informed her, his eyestalks crossed and eyes clenched shut as he concentrated his hearing on the village. "It's built like a brick SO IT SHOULDN'T BREAK TO ANYTHING SHORT OF A MORTAR STRIKE, and no animal around here is ridiculous enough for that."
I fought my temper down to a growl, rather than the snarl I felt like uttering. "Is Carue rested up enough for the trip to the gathering hall?"

Vivi let loose the whistle so summon him. "In all honesty I'd prefer to give him another hour, if I could work it, but given the circumstances? I think we can make it a half hour coming and going if he really pushes it."

I nodded. "Good. Make sure they're prepped for war when they get here. The second we're back together, we bring a war with this golden-plated bastard's doorstep."

Vivi nodded, her face as stormy as the cyclone we'd dodged the accursed day we'd met our 'host'. "I'm looking forward to it. I swear, I am going to bury my Lion Cutters so deep down his—!" And then out of the blue, Vivi's tirade stopped dead and she paled, staring past me… and up.

Soundbite had fallen silent as well.

In spite of how hard my heart was jackhammering in my chest, I slowly, deliberately took and released a deep breath, and then I gave Vivi a piercing look. "Get out of here now," I whispered solemnly. "Get everyone else, get back here as fast as you can. We'll be fine." I cut her protest off with a raised hand. "Just get on the duck and go."

Vivi's face twisted, agony and outrage playing merry hell on her features, but ultimately she settled for a sharp nod, and when Carue dashed by she grabbed onto his reins and swung up onto his saddle, vanishing in a blur the second she was properly settled.

Once she was gone, I waited patiently for everyone else to come to the square, with Luffy leading the charge, his face utterly apoplectic.

"Cross—!" he growled.

I nodded sadly. "I know, Luffy, I know…" I turned around and stared upwards with subdued resignation.

Stared up at Shiki, who smirked down at us with all the pomp and pride he had to spare.

I also noted that there was a glass case hovering beside him that contained a snail watching us with a lazy sort of attentiveness, but I had a pretty damn good idea what that was about as well.

"HE JUST… HE JUST DROPPED OUT OF A CLOUD… from a mile up…" Soundbite whispered miserably. "I didn't… I-I JUST COULDN'T…"

"It's fine, it's fine," I soothed. "It wasn't your fault, you couldn't have known." I then looked back up at Shiki, suddenly feeling the full weight of the past week on my shoulders all at once. "Soundbite's been misdirecting the surveillance snails the whole time we were here. How did you know where we were?" I called up.

"Call it… an act of divine providence," Shiki replied with a voice that was just pure egotistical conceit. Said sneer then dropped into a scowl that had the balls to look insulted. "But, moving on to more pressing matters... Honestly, Straw Hats, you disappoint me! I thought you'd be better guests!"

I twitched as I felt something stir in my gut, and a ripple went through our crew.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Luffy growled out, his voice a downright murderous rumble.

"Isn't it obvious, Captain Luffy!?” Shiki spread his arms, indicating the whole of his dominion. "Think about what has happened! I graciously invite you into my home! I let you partake in vistas
you could never have seen before in your miserable lives and entertained you to the best of my ability! I have shown you every possible courtesy that a host is due to afford his honored guests! And how do you repay my most gracious treatment?"

The air around Shiki seemed to darken as he folded his arms, and stared at us with contempt. "You steal. My. Property," he rumbled.

My gut lurched, and our crew shifted and stiffened further.

"What," Luffy spat, his entire body coiled like a spring and his pipe—uncapped and devoid of seastone—groaning in his grip.

Shiki slowly uncrossed one of his arms and pointed at our group. "My navigator."

Nami flinched back in disgust and horror, her Eisen Tempo falling around her and crackling and rumbling like a meteorological shroud.

Shiki's finger shifted to the side. "And my guinea pig."

Billy let out a panicked squawk and retreated back around the building he'd been cowering behind.

"Both my rightful property, both stolen by you," Shiki said pompously, jutting his chin out at us. "And both very valuable. I think I'm due some compensation. So tell me…"

Shiki's face twisted into an arrogant, despicable, disgustingly mad grin.

"How do you plan on repaying me, hm?"

My gut roared, and I finally managed to place what I was feeling: Down and out, unadulterated, murderous rage.

And going by the chorus of weapons unsheathing that sang around me? I was far from the only one.

"BY BREAKING YOU IN HALF!" Luffy roared at the top of his lungs, slamming his fist into the ground and shattering it beneath his feet, but prudently refraining from boosting his blood flow just yet.

And Shiki? He just kept grinning, laughing, and looking down on us in every conceivable way.

"You… You actually think you can hurt me? Ji… JIHAHAHAHAHA!" Shiki threw his head back and roared with laughter, a deep, belly-shaking, utterly evil laugh. "Oh, this oughta be good for a laugh. Go right ahead…” He spread his arms, inviting us, begging us to do it. "Give me your best shot."

And that was just what we did.

Cross-Brain AN: If any of you haven't watched JoJo's Bizarre Adventure? Watch it; Oda has been referencing it all through the Whole Cake Island arc, and all three of the Cross-Brain's Freudian Trio recommend it.

Also, you know how we apologized with last chapter's cliffhanger? Weeeell… this time it's just because we enjoy it.

Hornet AN: This was my idea, by the way, so… sorry, not sorry.
Patient AN: But hey, at least we didn't leave the cliffhanger after the fight scene, right?
Attention, loyal fans. We of the Cross-Brain have a most momentous announcement: we have finally reached the top five of all One Piece fics. In celebration of this, we are doing two things. Firstly, we are releasing the preview for the third part of Strong World. Here you are:

Cross-Brain AN: For anyone who was honestly upset about the cliffhanger? Come now, we all knew that that battle would be a curb-stomp, and not in the Straw Hats' favor. This… is just the logical conclusion.

"Gum-Gum Homerun!"

"Typhoon Lash!"

"WATCH YOUR HEAD!"

"Jihahaha! Is that the best you—?!

"LIGHTNING BOLT TEMPO!"

**KEE-RACK!** "—GRAH!? Urgh… ack… alright… credit where it was due. That stung a bit. And more than that, it pissed me off. So… congratulations, Straw Hats, you've made me decide to do the one thing I haven't had to do in twenty years."

"SHUT THE HELL UP, YOU SHITTY GOLDEN BASTARD! SKY WALK! MOUTON—! GAH!? WHAT THE— LET ME GO YOU PIECE OF—!?"

**CRUNCH!**

"GAAAAagh!"

"I... am going to give you the courtesy... of actually putting some effort into crushing you all down into the size of a pebble. Honestly now, you should all feel honored..."

A rumble, a heave, the earth itself crying out in tortured rage and agony.

"The last time I used this technique, it was to take care of a particularly stubborn member of Linlin's brood. Lion's Threat: Earth Bind."

"What the—ohfuckme EVERYONE MOVE, NOW!"

"No! Nonono! Guys! GUYS! GET OUT OF THERE!"

"DAMN IT, IT'S TOO THICK!"

"I CAN'T BREAK OUT!"

"OH NOOOO!"

"SHIKIIII! GET BACK HERE!"

"How about... NOT ON YOUR LIFE, BRAT! NOW DO THE WORLD A FAVOR, AND LET THE EARTH SWALLOW YOU AND YOUR DREAMS WITHOUT EVEN A TRACE! JIHAHAHA!"
"JIJIHAHAHA!"

"No... no... this... t-this can't..."

"Face reality, Miss Navigator. It has and it is. Now... I suggest you think real hard about my proposal... and about what you really want right now."

"You... you..."

"Think. Hard."

"...whatever I want?"

"Apart from that little stunt you pulled back in my palace? Yes."

"...alright. You leave the East Blue alone... and let my friends go."

"That's two wishes, Miss Navigator."

"Yeah, well... I'm a greedy bitch. And if my skills weren't worth that much, I wouldn't still be standing here. So now, you choose. Take it. Or. Leave it."

"...You drive a hard bargain. But your skills are not impressive enough to make me abandon twenty years of preparation. I will give you my word that I will not attack your home island, and I will even be generous and extend that promise to the rest of your former crew. But the rest of the East Blue... it burned my dreams twenty years ago, and now it burns in turn. Not even you can stop that."

A grind of teeth, pure frustration and rage. "F-Fine. Fine. You have a deal. Now let's go, a-and you'll let my crew go, right?"

"Heh. Exactly right. Buuuut, I would not have my newest crewmate thinking me without mercy. Or at least, completely without mercy. Here. I trust you know what to do with this?"

"I... yeah. Yeah I do. Alright, just-just give me a second."

CLI—

SLAP! "—AKE UP, CROSS!"

"GAH!"

I sat up in response to that rude awakening, rubbing my stinging cheeks. "Ugh... Vivi, I'm not Usopp, and I'm not dying of hypothermia, what the heaaaargh?" my grumpy demand trailed off into a groan as the rest of me started to straight up throb.

"Oi, don't remind me of that, especially not now," a nasally voice—Usopp's I think, though the ringing and doppler effect in my ears made that hard to tell—grumbled from nearby.

"Under normal circumstances, I'd be interested in hearing that story, but right now we have bigger questions to handle," came a cooler female voice from beside me.

I blinked and looked towards the voice, the blur that was its source slowly coming into focus. "Robin...?"

"Namely," Robin continued, her slightly fuzzy arm pointing over my shoulder. "Can you tell us what we just pulled you out of?"
Still dizzy as all get-out, I turned my head to follow her finger, and was confronted with the awe-inspiring sight of a *titanic* spiral-pillar… of…

I clenched my eyes shut and clapped a hand to my throbbing forehead with a groan as it *all* came rushing back to me at once. "*Ohdamnitalltohell…*" I whispered beneath my breath.

When I reopened my eyes, I was finally able to take notice of details that had escaped me just moments before.

I became aware of the *annihilated* and yet-smoldering ruins that were all that were left of the village. Of just how deep of a crater we were in the bottom of. Of the rest of my friends being slowly, painstakingly drawn out of the pillar we'd all been *entombed* in…

And I became painfully, *agonizingly* aware of who was missing.

The last of the cobwebs faded from my mind and the jumbled pieces of being utterly flattened pieced together in my mind, and I looked at Robin in despair.

"Shiki?" I croaked. "Nami?"

"They were long gone long before we got here," Franky's voice said from a short distance away. "We found out about his plans to level the village a second after Vivi left, and by that point we couldn't catch up in time to tell her. We spent long enough there to put a plan together with Bartolomeo, but the second we saw Shiki about to face you guys, we were gone. We met Vivi halfway, and when we actually got here…"

"What the hell *happened?!*" Vivi cut in, gripping my shoulder and shaking me firmly. Her face was flashing with a myriad of emotions, but dizzy as I still was, I couldn't even begin to process them. "I-I thought you said, I thought—!"

"We weren't ready."

It said a *damn* lot that it was *Luffy* who growled that out in complete and utter seriousness.

"We underestimated him, we were all still tired, and we got our asses kicked because of it," Luffy bluntly summarized.

"It didn't help that he provoked us the way he did," Sanji literally fumed as he burned his way through his second cigarette since we'd woken up. "Objectifying Nami-swan and making himself seem like the *victim*… I want to explode just thinking about it. *Grrrrgh,*" he massaged his forehead with a growl. "Which, in retrospect is definitely what he was going for."

"An-zzr-d it sure as he-kchh-ll didn't help that he went s-**zz**-traight for Soundbite first," Su provided, her voice shaky and staticky on account of the spiderweb cracks that were decorating the checkerboard shell on her back.

I momentarily glanced at my shoulder once I realized that Soundbite wasn't there anymore, but I then relaxed as I realized that if our non-human crewmates were still talking, it meant he wasn't in critical condition.

"I'll patch him up as soon as my body lets me," Chopper sighed from nearby, no doubt having noticed my confirm. "I knew I was pushing myself too hard… and if I try anything else now, I don't
know if my body will be able to keep up as long as I need it to."

"If Soundbite isn't in any danger, then that's fine," Luffy said, his hat shadowing his eyes as he surveyed the mountain, the ruins, and the state of his crew. "But Shiki is going to pay for this. Guards."

"Sir!" the five Dugongs saluted immediately.

"Take Merry and go ahead of us to the Sunny. As soon as we're ready to fight, we're going to Coup de Burst straight up to Shiki's palace. Make sure he's ready."

"Aye-a-zzt!-ye!" four of them reported, Boss already moving to grab Merry.

"A-Actually..." The elder Dugong paused when Donny spoke up, his expression clearly hesitant.

"I, uh..." Donny slowly withdrew a seashell from behind his back, a gold and somewhat ornate one. "I was look-krcht!-ng around once I got out and found th-zzt!-is. I... think it's a Tone Dial, but... I don't remember us hav-eeng!-ing one like this. Do... do you guys think...?"

The discomfort on his face slowly transmitted to the rest of us, and we all stared at the shell with dread.

"Should... Should we listen to it?" Conis asked uncertainly.

"It could just be another attempt by Shiki to make us go out of our minds again," Vivi reasoned, slipping out one of her Cutters. "Maybe we should...?"

"Here, give it to me," Robin prompted, materializing an arm in front of Donny and gesturing invitingly. "I'll listen to it myself, and if it's not worth our time, I'll crush it immediately."

Donny glanced at Luffy, but once our captain nodded, he handed off the Dial to her and she swiftly conveyed it out of earshot.

Robin closed her eyes in concentration, and a second later, they snapped open as she became deathly pale. "It's not Shiki."

"Are you—?"

"It's not Shiki," she repeated, pure desperation etched on her face as she caught the Dial she'd tossed back at herself and played it for us all to hear.

"Please forgive me for not being able to say farewell to you all directly."

And our hearts all practically stopped as we heard Nami's voice came from the shell, sounding more defeated and downtrodden then I'd ever heard her before.

And that 'stop' turned into outright freezing for me as she continued to speak, her every word just making... everything so very, very much worse.

~o~

With a grimace, eyes closed, Nami allowed the Tone Dial to fall from her grasp and settle on the altered earth below.

"Very good," Shiki sneered. "Now, let us be going. The ceremony will begin soon."
Nami so wanted to pin the bastard to the nearest intact wall, be it with her glare or her Eisen Tempo or even a physical bolt of lightning... but at the moment, she just didn't have that option. As such, she settled for dredging up her memories of Arlong and giving the lion-bastard the least-obviously stiff nod she could manage. "Fine, let's go."

And so Nami started to march off in the direction the Shiki indicated—

"Wait."

And then froze as a very familiar voice spoke up, and both she and Shiki both turned their heads to face the source: a grim and gaunt goth, with her head bowed low and her expression shadowed by the... well, shadow of her umbrella.

"Perona?!" Nami gasped even as Shiki tilted his head curiously.

"So, you managed to survive the onslaught, hm?" the Float-human questioned. "What, are you looking for a round two or something? Fair warning," he started orbiting a trio of stones above his palm. "I won't be quite so merciful with you as I was with my navigator's old crew."

Nami was about to either protest the threat or ask Perona what the hell she was thinking... and then, that unasked question was answered in the absolute last possible way she expected.

"Will you allow me to join your crew?"

The navigator's brain stalled as the incongruent words hit her ears. "...what?" she whispered numbly.

Shiki, meanwhile, was nowhere near as phased. "Join me?" He huffed out a cloud of smoke contemplatively. "I will admit that your abilities are intriguing. But honestly now, do you really expect me to believe that you too would so easily betray your crewmates? After you helped your friend... lose her way earlier at that?"

"N-No! No!" Nami hastily protested, shaking her head at her 'captain' in denial before running to Perona's side, reaching out to her in desperation. "Perona, please, you don't have to—!"

SLAP!

Nami's words died in her throat, the cold and almost impersonal look that the Goth faced her with stunning her silent even more efficiently than the forceful strike that had knocked her hand away.

"Have to?" Perona repeated, her face and tone as expressionless as a statue. "Of course I do. I told you, remember? I am not, have never been, and never will be a part of your crew. The only reason I got on your ship was to find somewhere new I could live in luxury, and what do you know, I found it. Hell, I found my way on to the only hunk of rock that's not going to be burning in a week. Really, the only thing you should be asking is why I wouldn't want to join Shiki's crew, when the Straw Hats mean absolutely nothing to me."

"B-But..." Nami whispered numbly, her mind still playing catch-up. "Y-You're my friend..."

"Horo!" the ghost princess barked out a harsh laugh. "'Friend'?! Remind me, have I ever, even once, addressed you as my friend? Hm? Have I?"

The navigator tried to answer... but nothing came out.

"Thought not. And just to clarify things, let me tell you exactly why I hung out with you, even when I didn't think of you as a friend," Perona leaned in close putting her scowl an inch from Nami's face.
"You. Were. Convenient. A means to an end. And it would have been too much trouble to let you die while I was travelling with that crew. But now, I don't need them anymore, so now I don't need you. So, in short?"

Perona straightened up and adopted a most pleasant and innocent expression. "Thank you ever so much for helping me find a new home where I can live the rest of my days in peace and comfort," And then, just like that, all emotion died from her face in an instant. "Now please, leave me the hell alone."

Shiki moved over to look down at Perona, the goth meeting his gaze with neither flinch nor hesitation. He stared for several seconds… and finally, his face split into a grin.

"That was cold, girly," he sneered. "And I love it. Perona, was it? Welcome to my crew. You'll excuse me if I put your wish on hold until later. Now, if that's all, let's be going."

Perona nodded curtly and followed after him, making a point of bumping into Nami in the process. The navigator flinched, clutching at the struck shoulder as she followed with a sad and sour expression.

Shiki glanced at her inquisitively, eyeing the gauze wrapping the joint. "By the way, Miss Navigator, I noticed that you've been wearing that bandage all week. Did you contract that serious of an injury? I can have one of my doctors take a look at it."

Nami flinched again, her nails biting even harder into her shoulder. "No, it's not injured. It's just… not time yet."

Shiki cocked an eyebrow at the answer, but shrugged dismissively. "Whatever you say, Miss Navigator. Aaaanyways, you both go ahead and get started on heading back, yeah? I'll be right behind you."

The women looked at him curiously for a moment, but ultimately shrugged it off and started trudging away in silence.

Once they were past the intact section of the village and out of sight, Shiki's ever-present grin gained a particularly violent sneer. "Should have thought things through a little bit longer, Miss Navigator," he whispered gleefully.

And so, with an almost dismissive flick of his hand, he smiled as he watched a blast of earth erupt from where he'd torn the doors clean off the villagers' bunker.

Shiki chuckled to himself as he took to the air. "After all," he said to himself. "Can't have a proper bloodbath without the slaughter."

A minute later, the Golden Lion landed by his new crewmates with a victorious dusting of his palms. "Alright, all good. Let's go!"

And so they went, Shiki hauling up a chunk of earth to transport them to their new home.

And as they rose to the air, Nami cast a final, mournful glance towards the monument her crew had been made into, and could only pray that everyone would understand the message she had left them.

~o~

A picture of grinding teeth, bleeding palms, and eyes reflecting every force of nature imaginable defined our crew as we heard the tape out.
Some of us had more volatile reactions than others: Chopper was twitching on his hooves, eyes flickering in and out of cyan madness, Conis had blood dripping from where her nails had pierced her palms, and where Vivi's face was dead to the world, absent of all reaction, I could see something swirling in the back of her mind, but I just didn't have it in me to parse it right now.

Because in the end, no matter how well we hid it or overtly we showed it, one fact was certain: we were suffering as we listened.

"That's why..." Nami's voice choked out. "That's why I'm begging you to forgive me for—"

"WHAT THE HELL IS THIS!?"

Everyone else flinched as Luffy let out a sudden, livid bellow, drowning out whatever the hell else Nami had been about to say.

And I... I didn't begrudge him. Because I... I just... I just couldn't. I-I literally couldn't.

For a few seconds Luffy just stood there, snorting and growling in artificlately as he glared bloody murder at the offending Dial. Until finally, something just snapped behind his eyes and he spun on his heels, marching off as murderous growls clawed their way from his throat.

Franky cast a worried look after Luffy, but ultimately he just shook his head and pointed at Robin. "Hey, play that again."

And that was when I snapped. "Do it without me," I hissed, fighting to keep my tone under control.

Usopp looked at me in surprise. "But, Cross, she was saying something at the end—!"

"I've heard enough," I bit out sharply, snapping a glare around and daring anyone to dispute me.

If anybody wanted to, I didn't give them a chance. I just snatched Soundbite off of Su's back, slapped him onto my shoulder and stalked off, my teeth grinding like a chainsaw.

I just... it just... I could barely even think I was so... so...

No words. None. None.

We'd lost. Lost again. Lost so. Fucking. Badly.

And he hadn't even been trying. He ripped us apart.

Humiliated us. Laughed at us, like we were trash.

And then Nami.

Not only had he taken her...

But her voice was there. Summarizing it, emphasizing it.

Hammering. It. In.

Hammering in the fact that I had...

That we had...

That we'd...
We—!

"FUCK!"

**SMASH!**

I huffed and snarled as I came down from the peak of my *unholy* rage. My chest heaved and my throat ached from the roar I'd let loose, but I barely noticed I yanked my foot out from the chunk of wall I'd demolished.

Soundbite eyed me warily, even if he was still a bit dizzy. "*That help? At all?*

I snorted derisively, my fingers twitching and jerking in my gauntlets. "No. And you know damn well the only thing that'll—!"

"**GRAGH!**"

**S-SMASH!**

I was cut off by a second roar of fury being let loose... but *two* smashes rang out at the same time.

One was obvious, with Luffy withdrawing his arm from the rubble he'd just created... but the other was something of a surprise.

I looked at Zoro, standing in front of a *mutilated* track of land with all three of his swords drawn. His fists strangling Shusui and Kitetsu, his teeth grinding into Wado, his body trembling with energy and emotion just waiting to be unleashed. Our eyes met...

And I realized that no, no this wasn't a surprise at all. Rather, it was the only possible outcome.

And as the energy slowly drained from my body, and *some* of the edge on my emotions dulled, I knew there was only one way this could be done.

I huffed as I took my hat off and started to wipe at the coldsweat building on my brow with my forearm. "...Captain."

Luffy snapped an immolating glare at me out the corner of his eye. A glare I met without flinching.

"...I'm the tactician," I stated seriously. "My job is to make the plans. And I can do that. I can give you a hundred and one different plans, right here, right now, but only you can tell us what direction we're headed. Only you can tell us our destination. So," I spread my arms out wide, indicating... everything around us. Everything that had happened. "What's the play?"

Luffy continued to stare at me... and without looking away, he slowly raised his hand and pointed at the island looming so high above us. "...I want," he whispered, honest to God murder in his voice. "To make him pay."

"Alright, then that's what we'll do..." I nodded slowly, the motion gaining momentum as I jammed my hat back into place, right way forwards, as I met his glare with just as much heat. "We'll make him pay."

Zoro snorted in agreement, finishing tying his bandana on with an almost whip-like *crack!*. "Then let's get it done."

We made to go back to the crew—
And we all came to a dead halt as all of a sudden, an utterly anomalous blast of air struck us full force.

We all blinked in surprise at that, but I just as swiftly brushed it off and walked back over to our crew.

Nobody looked at us as we returned, because they were more concerned with staring at the epicenter of the wave of air pressure.

Staring at Princess Nefertari Vivi.

I gave her a once-over: hunched forwards, hand clamped against her mouth, eyes screwed shut… until they suddenly flew open, and I met the pure, merciless steel in her gaze

"…So," I asked as she straightened up and started looking at her hands in a whole new light. "How did it taste?"

Vivi clenched and unclenched her hands for a second, testing everything out as though to guarantee they still functioned properly. Until finally, she snapped them into fists with a determined nod.

"Delicious," she declared with pride.

There you have it. And now, the second part. As of now, we are announcing another contest. An art contest. The requirement: take your favorite scene from This Bites! and draw it out. Because we know that you cannot rush perfection, the deadline for this contest will be the story's third anniversary: September 19, 2018.

We will name three grand prize winners. The Freudian Trio will select the art they like best, the Neurofeedback will select the art they like best, and you our loyal fans will select their favorite.

For as momentous an occasion as this, the prizes are great. The three grand prize winners will be granted a one-year-long backstage pass to our story as well as a one-month comprehensive backstage pass. This reward is beyond anything we have given before, even to our patrons: for the duration of that time, you will have unlimited access to our plans for the future as well as the present (with one exception that the Cross-Brain is keeping to ourselves regardless of anything). Choices may not be duplicated.

Additionally, each member of the Cross-Brain will also select one runner-up who, along with the runner-up among the fans, will receive a one-month backstage pass, six questions about our future plans, and previews for the story until the time skip. Again, choices may not be duplicated.

Any other pieces of art that do not win either of the above prizes but still impress the Cross-Brain will win three chapter previews and three questions about our future plans. We of the Cross-Brain will notify anyone who publishes such art in a timely manner following their publishing of it.

Now, the rules are as follows:

*You must submit your entry to our email address, j.cross.brain@gmail.com. Write "Top 5 Art Contest Submission" in the subject line, and include your name/username, which site we post our story on that you follow most, and a description of which moment in the story your art submission
portrays.
**If you submit a second entry, it must have the subject "Top 5 Art Contest Submission 2", and so on with each successive number.
*You may commission the art from someone else as long as you give full credit to them and, if they desire, share the prize with them.
*You may not cut and paste images from other pieces of One Piece art. Tracing is acceptable.
*You may submit as many entries as you wish, but you may not stack a runner-up prize upon a grand prize, nor may you win any of the three prizes more than once. Art commissioned by the same artist that drew another piece of art submitted by another contestant is acceptable.
*No NSFW entries. We can't stop you from commissioning such artwork, but we will not allow it as a contest entry.
*Sketches are permitted but discouraged; keep in mind that they will be considered alongside the best a person can make in the next six and a half months.
Chapter 57 - Strong World Pt. 3

Cross-Brain AN: For anyone who was honestly upset about the cliffhanger? Come now, we all knew that that battle would be a curb-stomp, and not in the Straw Hats' favor. This... is just the logical conclusion.

"Gum-Gum Homerun!"

"Typhoon Lash!"

"WATCH YOUR HEAD!"

"Jihahahaha! Is that the best you—?!"

"LIGHTNING BOLT TEMPO!"

**KEE-RACK!**

"—GRAH!!? Urgh... ack... alright... credit where it's due. That stung a bit. And more than that, it's pissed me off. So... congratulations, Straw Hats, you've made me decide to do the one thing I haven't had to do in twenty years."

"SHUT THE HELL UP, YOU SHITTY GOLDEN BASTARD! SKY WALK! MOUTON—! GAH!? WHAT THE— LET ME GO, YOU PIECE OF—!?"

**CRUNCH!**

"GAAAAAGH!"

"I... am going to give you the courtesy... of actually putting some effort into crushing you all down into the size of a pebble. Honestly, you all should feel honored..."

A rumble, a heave, the earth itself crying out in tortured rage and agony.

"The last time I used this technique, it was to take care of a particularly stubborn member of Linlin's brood. Lion's Threat: Earth Bind."

"What the—ohfuckme EVERYONE MOVE, NOW!"

"No! Nonono! Guys! GUYS! GET OUT OF THERE!"

"DAMN IT, IT'S TOO THICK!"

"I CAN'T BREAK OUT!"

"OH, NOOOO!"

"SHIKIIII! GET BACK HERE!"

"How about... NOT ON YOUR LIFE, BRAT! NOW DO THE WORLD A FAVOR AND LET THE EARTH SWALLOW YOU AND YOUR DREAMS WITHOUT EVEN A TRACE! JIHAHAHA! JIIIIIIHAHAHA!"

"No... no... this... t-this can't..."
"Face reality, Miss Navigator. It has and it is. Now… I suggest you think real hard about my proposal… and about what you really want right now."

"You… you…"

"Think. Hard."

"…whatever I want?"

"Apart from that little stunt you pulled back in my palace? Yes."

"…alright. You leave the East Blue alone… and let my friends go."

"That's two wishes, Miss Navigator."

"Yeah, well… I'm a greedy bitch. And if my skills weren't worth that much, I wouldn't still be standing here. So now, you choose. Take it. Or. Leave it."

"…You drive a hard bargain. But your skills are not impressive enough to make me abandon twenty years of preparation. I will give you my word that I will not attack your home island, and I will even be generous and extend that promise to the rest of your former crew. But the rest of the East Blue… it burned my dreams twenty years ago, and now it burns in turn. Not even you can stop that."

Grinding teeth, pure frustration and rage. "F-Fine. Fine. You have a deal. Now let's go, a-and you'll let my crew go, right?"

"Heh. Exactly right. Buuuut, I would not have my newest crewmate think me without mercy. Or at least, completely without mercy. Here. I trust you know what to do with this?"

"I… yeah. Yeah, I do. Alright, just-just give me a second."

CLI—

SLAP! "—AKE UP, CROSS!"

"GAH!"

I shot upright, rubbing my stinging cheeks. "Ugh… Vivi, I'm not Usopp, and I'm not dying of hypothermia, what the heaaaadgh?" My grumpy demand trailed off into a pained groan as the rest of me lodged their complaints all at once.

"Oi, don't remind me of that, especially not now," a nasally voice—Usopp's I think, though the ringing and doppler effect in my ears made that hard to tell—grumbled from nearby.

"Under normal circumstances, I'd want to hear that story, but right now we have bigger questions to handle," came a cooler female voice from beside me.

I blinked and looked towards the voice, the blur that was its source slowly coming into focus. "Robin…?"

"The same," Robin answer, her slightly fuzzy arm pointing over my shoulder. "Can you tell us what we just pulled you out of?"

Still dizzy as all get-out, I turned my head to follow her finger, and was confronted with the awe-inspiring sight of a titanic spiral pillar… of…
I clenched my eyes shut and clapped a hand to my throbbing forehead as it all came rushing back to me at once. "Ohdamnitallohell..." I hissed under my breath.

When I reopened my eyes, I was finally able to see the details that had escaped me just moments before.

I could see the annihilated and still-smoldering ruins that were all that was left of the village.

Of how deep of a crater we were in the bottom of.

Of the rest of my friends being slowly, painstakingly drawn out of the pillar we'd all been entombed in.

And I became painfully, agonizingly aware of who was missing.

The last of the cobwebs faded from my mind, the last pieces of the utter clownstomping we'd been handed slotted into places, and I looked at Robin in despair.

"Shiki?" I croaked. "Nami?"

"They were long gone long before we got here," Franky's voice said from a short distance away. "We found out about his plans to level the village a second after Vivi left, and by then we couldn't catch up in time to tell her. We took the time to put a plan together with Bartolomeo, but the second we saw Shiki about to face you guys, we were gone. We met Vivi halfway, and when we actually got here..."

"What the hell happened?!" Vivi cut in, gripping my shoulder and shaking me. Her expression cycled through emotion after emotion, and dizzy as I still was, I had no chance to process them. "I-I thought you said, I thought—!"

"We weren't ready."

It said a damn lot that it was Luffy who growled out what we were all thinking.

"We underestimated him, we were all still tired, and we got our asses kicked because of it," Luffy bluntly summarized.

"It didn't help that he provoked us the way he did," Sanji literally fumed as he burned his way through his second cigarette since we'd woken up. "Objectifying Nami-swan and making himself out to be the victim... I want to explode just thinking about it. Grrrgh." Growling, he massaged his forehead. "Which, in retrospect, is exactly what he was going for."

"An-zzt-d it sure as he-kchk-ll didn't help that he went s-bzz-traight for Soundbite first," Su provided, her voice shaky and staticky. Soundbite was on her back, spiderweb cracks decorating his shell.

I did a bit of a double take at seeing Soundbite somewhere other than on my shoulder, but the fact that our non-human crew members were talking told me it wasn't serious and kept me calm.

"I'll patch him up as soon as my body lets me," Chopper sighed from nearby, no doubt having noticed all the looking about I'd done. "I knew I was pushing myself too hard... and if I try anything else now, I don't know if my body will be able to keep up as long as I need it to."

"If Soundbite isn't in any danger, then that's fine," Luffy said, his hat shadowing his eyes as he surveyed the mountain, the ruins, and the state of his crew. "But Shiki is going to pay for this. Guards."
"Sir!" the five Dugongs saluted immediately.

"Take Merry and go ahead of us to the Sunny. As soon as we're ready to fight, we're going to Coup de Burst straight up to Shiki's palace. Make sure he's ready."

"Aye-a-zzt!-ye!" four of them barked, Boss already moving to grab Merry. The elder Dugong paused, though, when Donny spoke up, his expression clearly hesitant.

"A-Actually… I, uh…" Donny slowly withdrew a seashell from behind his back, a gold and somewhat ornate one. "I-I was look-krcht!-ng around once I got out and found th-zzt!-is. I… think it's a Tone Dial, but… I don't remember us hav-eeng!-ing one like this. Do… Do you guys think…?"

The discomfort on his face slowly transmitted to the rest of us and we all stared at the shell with something approaching existential dread.

"Should… Should we listen to it?" Conis asked uncertainly.

"It could just be another attempt by Shiki to make us go out of our minds again," Vivi reasoned, slipping out one of her Cutters. "Maybe we should…?"

"Here, give it to me," Robin prompted, materializing an arm in front of Donny and gesturing invitingly. "I'll listen to it myself, and if it's not worth our time, I'll crush it immediately."

Donny glanced at Luffy. Our captain nodded, and the dugong handed off the Dial to her, new arms swiftly carrying it out of earshot.

Robin closed her eyes in concentration, and a second later, they snapped open, framed by a suddenly deathly pale face. "It's not Shiki."

"Are you—?"

"It's not Shiki," she repeated, purely desperate… I don't even know what emotion that was etched on her face. The Dial soared back out of the bushes, and she caught it and played it in one smooth motion.

"Please forgive me for not being able to say farewell to you all directly."

Our hearts all practically stopped at Nami's voice coming from the shell, sounding more defeated and downtrodden then I'd ever heard her before.

And that 'stop' went outright frozen for me as she continued to speak, her every word just making… everything so very, very much worse.

~o~

With a grimace, eyes closed, Nami allowed the Tone Dial to fall from her grasp and settle on the altered earth below.

"Very good," Shiki sneered. "Now, let us be going. The ceremony will begin soon."

Nami so wanted to pin the bastard to the nearest intact wall, be it with her glare or her Eisen Tempo or even a physical bolt of lightning, but at the moment, that wasn't an option. As such, she settled for dredging up her memories of Arlong and giving the lion-bastard the least-obviously stiff nod she could manage. "Fine, let's go."

And so Nami started to march off in the direction the Shiki indicated—
"Wait."

And then froze as a very familiar voice spoke up, and both she and Shiki both turned their heads to face the source: a grim and gaunt goth, with her head bowed low and her expression shadowed by the… well, shadow of her umbrella.

"Perona?" Nami gasped even as Shiki tilted his head curiously.

"So, you managed to survive the onslaught, hm?" the Float-human questioned. "What, are you looking for a round two or something? Fair warning." Three stones lifted off the ground to orbit above his palm. "I won't be quite so merciful with you as I was with my navigator's old crew."

Nami was about to either protest the threat or ask Perona what the hell she was thinking, but before she could do either…

"Will you allow me to join your crew?"

The navigator's brain stalled as the incongruent words hit her ears. "…what?" she whispered numbly.

Shiki, meanwhile, took the question much better. "Join me?" He leaned back in thought, a cloud of smoke spilling out his mouth. "Hmm… well, your abilities are genuinely intriguing. But do you really expect me to believe that you too would so easily betray your crewmates? After you helped your friend… lose her way earlier at that?"

"N-No! No!" Nami hastily protested, shaking her head at her 'captain' before running to Perona's side, reaching out to her in desperation. "Perona, please, you don't have to—!"

SLAP!

Nami's words died in her throat, the cold and almost impersonal look that the Goth had showed her doing an even better job than the forceful strike that had knocked her hand away.

"'Have to'?" Perona repeated, her face and tone as expressionless as a statue. "Of course I do. I told you, remember? I am not, have never been, and never will be a part of your crew. The only reason I got on your ship was to find somewhere new I could live in luxury, and what do you know, I found it. Hell, I found my way on to the only hunk of rock that's not going to be burning in a week. Really, the only thing you should be asking is why I wouldn't want to join Shiki's crew, when the Straw Hats mean absolutely nothing to me."

"B-But…" Nami whispered numbly, her mind still playing catch-up. "Y-You're my friend…"

"Horo!" the ghost princess barked out a harsh laugh. "'Friend'?! Remind me, have I ever, even once, addressed you as my friend? Hm? Have I?"

The navigator tried to answer… but nothing came out.

"Thought not. And just to clarify things, let me tell you exactly why I hung out with you, even when I didn't think of you as a friend." Perona leaned in close, putting her scowl an inch from Nami's face. "You. Were. Convenient. A means to an end. And it would have been too much trouble to let you die while I was travelling with that crew. But now, I don't need them anymore, so now I don't need you. So, in short?"

Perona straightened up and adopted a most pleasant and innocent expression. "Thank you ever so much for helping me find a new home where I can live the rest of my days in peace and comfort."
And then, just like that, all emotion fled. "Now please, leave me the hell alone."

Through it all, Shiki didn't move, not even when Perona looked him dead in the eye. He stared for several seconds, neither wavering, until finally, his face split into a grin.

"That was cold, girly," he remarked. "And I love it. Perona, was it? Welcome to my crew. You'll excuse me if I put your wish on hold until later. Now, if that's all, let's be going."

Perona nodded curtly and followed after him, making a point of bumping into Nami in the process. The navigator flinched and clutched at the struck shoulder as if it'd been hit much harder as she followed with a sad, sour expression on her face.

The action drew an inquisitive glance from Shiki, one that fell on the gauze wrapping the joint. "By the way, Miss Navigator, I noticed that you've been wearing that bandage all week. Did you contract that serious of an injury? I can have one of my doctors take a look at it."

Nami flinched again, her nails biting even harder into her shoulder. "No, it's not injured. It's just… not time yet."

Shiki cocked an eyebrow at the answer, but shrugged dismissively. "Whatever you say, Miss Navigator. Aaaanyways, you both go ahead, yeah? I'll be right behind you."

From their expressions, both women wanted to know why Shiki wanted to stay behind. But neither wanted to test their new captain's patience, and so trudged away.

Once they were past the intact section of the village and out of sight, Shiki's ever-present grin gained a particularly violent edge. "Should have thought things through a little bit longer, Miss Navigator," he whispered gleefully.

And so, with an almost dismissive flick of his hand, a veritable blast of earth erupted in front of the door to the bunker, which he'd torn open earlier.

Chuckling to himself, Shiki took to the air. "After all," he said. "Can't have a proper bloodbath without the slaughter."

A minute later, the Golden Lion landed next to his new crewmates. "Alright, all good. Let's go!"

So they went, Shiki hauling up a chunk of earth to transport them to their new home.

And as they rose to the air, Nami cast a final, mournful glance towards the monument her crew had been made into, and could only pray that everyone would understand the message she had left them.

~o~

A picture of grinding teeth, bleeding palms, and eyes reflecting every force of nature imaginable defined our crew as we listened to the tape.

Some of our reactions were more volatile than others: Chopper was twitching on his hooves, eyes flickering in and out of cyan madness; Conis had blood dripping from between her clenched fingers; and where Vivi's face was dead to the world, absent of all reaction, I could sense something swirling in the back of her mind, roiling off of her.

What that was, I didn't know. My mind was… busy.

"That's why..." Nami's voice choked out. "That's why I'm begging you to forgive me for—"
"WHAT THE HELL IS THIS!?"

Everyone else flinched at the sudden, livid bellow Luffy let out, drowning out whatever the hell else Nami had been about to say.

And I… I didn't begrudge him. Because I… I just… I just couldn't. I-I literally couldn't.

For a few seconds Luffy just stood there, snorting and growling as he glared bloody murder at the offending Dial. Until finally, something just snapped behind his eyes and he spun on his heels, marching off.

Franky cast a worried look after Luffy, but then he shook his head and pointed at Robin. "Hey, play that again."

And that was when I snapped. "Do it without me," I hissed, fighting to keep my tone under control.

Usopp looked at me in surprise. "But, Cross, she was saying something at the end—!"

"I've heard enough," I bit out, daring anyone to dispute me.

If anybody wanted to, I didn't give them a chance. I just snatched Soundbite off of Su's back, slapped him onto my shoulder and stalked off, my teeth grinding like a chainsaw.

I just… it just… I couldn't even think I was so… so…

No words. None. None. None.

We'd lost. Lost again. Lost so. Fucking. Badly.

And he hadn't even been trying. He ripped us apart.

Humiliated us. Laughed at us, like we were trash.

And then Nami.

Not only had he taken her…

But her voice was there. Summarizing it, emphasizing it.

Hammering. It. In.

Hammering in the fact that I had…

That we had…

That we'd…

We—!

"FUCK!"

SMASH!

I huffed and snarled as I came down from the peak of my unholy rage. My chest heaved and my throat ached from the roar I'd let loose, but I barely noticed as I yanked my foot out from the chunk of wall I'd demolished.
Soundbite eyed me warily, if still a bit dizzily. "That help? At all?"

I snorted derisively, my fingers twitching and jerking in my gauntlets. "No. And you know damn well the only thing that'll—!"

"GRAH!

**S-SMASH!**

I was cut off by a second roar of fury, one that was accompanied by two simultaneous crashes.

One source was obvious, Luffy withdrawing his arm from the rubble he'd just created, but the other was something of a surprise.

I looked at Zoro, standing in front of a mutilated track of land with all three of his swords drawn. His fists were strangling Shusui and Kitetsu, his teeth grinding into Wado, his body trembling with energy and emotions just waiting to be unleashed. Our eyes met…

And I realized that no, this wasn't a surprise. Rather, it was the only possible outcome.

And as the energy slowly drained from my body, and some of the edge on my emotions dulled, I knew there was only one way this could be done.

I huffed, taking my hat off to wipe the sweat from my brow. "…Captain."

Luffy snapped an immolating glare at me out the corner of his eye. A glare I met without flinching.

"...I'm the tactician," I stated. "My job is to make the plans. And I can do that. I can give you a hundred and one different plans, right here, right now, but only you can tell us what direction we're headed. Only you can tell us our destination. So," I spread my arms out wide, indicating… everything around us. Everything that had happened. "What's the play?"

Luffy continued to stare at me, and without looking away, he slowly raised his hand and pointed at the island looming so high above us. "...I want," he whispered, honest to God murder in his voice. "To make him pay."

"Alright, then that's what we'll do…" I nodded slowly, the motion gaining momentum as I jammed my hat back into place, right way forward. "We'll make him pay."

Zoro snorted in agreement, finishing the knot of his bandana with an almost whip-like crack!. "Then let's get it done."

We made to go back to the crew—

**FWOOM!**

And we all came to a dead halt at the sudden, and utterly incongruous, blast of air that hit us. A surprise, yes, but when nothing else happened we all brushed it off and continued on our way.

Nobody looked at us as we returned, because they were more concerned with the epicenter of the wave of air pressure.

With Princess Nefertari Vivi.

I gave her a once-over: hunched forward, hand clamped against her mouth, eyes screwed shut. Then
suddenly they flew open, and I met the merciless steel in her gaze.

"...So," I asked as she straightened up and examined her hands in a whole new light. "How did it taste?"

Vivi clenched and unclenched her hands, as if to see if they still functioned properly. Satisfied, she snapped them into fists, giving me a determined nod.

"Delicious," she proudly declared.

Luffy's only response to that was a grave nod, following which he slowly panned his gaze over his crew, meeting their eyes one by one. He found exactly what he wanted and expected to see, and turned to face the continent that reigned over them all.


"Right," was our unanimous reply.

And that was all there was to be said on the matter.

-o-

Shiki the Golden Lion was on cloud nine in all but puffy white water. He had utterly devastated the crew of rookies that somehow thought that they stood a chance against him, conveniently ignoring the injuries that were loudly voicing their displeasure at existence. He had his armies together, his macabre masterpiece was complete, and in only a matter of hours, his revenge, twenty years in the works, would begin. No force in Paradise could stop him now.

His eyes scanned over the crews as they shuffled in and kneeled, grinning as he took in each of the faces. All of them were veteran Paradise pirates save for one rookie crew. That they were formidable fighters was a given, but even a New World veteran like him couldn't help but be impressed at the act of getting away with attacking a Celestial Dragon. Nobody had ever done that publicly before, and when he thought back to his equally unprecedented feat of escaping from Impel Down… well, an exception had to be made.

As the crews continued to file in, he gave a cursory scan of his monitors. His newest recruit, Perona, was lying in a four-poster bed that matched the decorations of her luxurious pink and black room, her face pulled wide in a grin as she rolled around, trying to get comfortable. The village was completely in ruins; only the visual snail watching had survived the carnage. The beasts were as savage as ever, and the ceremonial hall was filling up. Perfect.

Shiki observed as the last of the crews, the Barto Club Pirates, passed him with respectful nods that the captain somehow managed to make look crass. But he brushed it off; for allies as valuable as him, he was willing to overlook some eccentricities.

More importantly, now… now was the start of the age of his glorious—!

Shiki's grin dropped into an irritated glower as something caught his eye on another of the monitors: an incongruous lump of red on one of the Daft Green trees. The pieces put themselves together in his mind as fast as blinking.

"Damn it all," he growled to himself, striding down from his throne in an irritated huff, the underlings in the immediate area quailing away.

*SQUEEK, SQUONK SQUEEK SQU-WONK!*
Even the heavily bandaged Doctor Indigo stopped short, after running all the way to see him. The imposing clown shifted uncomfortably on his rubbery shoes, his eyes darting back and forth in the gap in the gauze that was all but his second face. Finally, he lifted his finger up, took a deep breath—

"Don't bother, I'm already aware," Shiki said before Indigo could get the words out, gliding past him.

The chemist blinked, eyes tracking his commander as he stalked off. Once Shiki was out of sight, and with no retaliation coming, the doctor mentally shrugged and squeaked off to finish his preparations for the main event.

Unseen to anyone, on her screen, Perona's rolling had escalated into tossing and turning, and then into an outright fit. The ghost-ruler was shaking her head and rapping her knuckles against her skull, eyes scrunched shut and teeth grinding, rocking back and forth on crossed legs. She even appeared to be speaking, snarling at first, then screaming, but the lack of audio made it impossible to tell what. Comfort, at this point, was out of the question.

Finally, Perona's body snapped ramrod straight, muscles trembling as she loosed what could only be a blood-curdling shriek. White swirled into the video, and a second later, it snapped to static.

-o-

While Nami wasn't sure she'd ever truly forgive Kalifa for what she'd done to her crew, she had to admit that she owed the assassin at least one. If it weren't for the soap-based change in demeanor the assassin had inadvertently inflicted, it would be close to impossible for her to use her iron clouds to strap bundles of dynamite to the odious Daft Green trees surrounding the palace without slowing her Waver. Such was her pace that she had less than a minute's work left before she'd be able to take out Shiki's sole defense against his own creations with just one zap of lightning.

The only impediment to her work was the rancid smell of the trees. She had brought along a makeshift gas mask in the form of a wet cloth tied around the bottom of her face, but it had long since proven utterly inadequate for the task. But she'd be done soon, and then—

"Aaaaghh…"

A tortured groan crawled out of Nami's throat, her mind struggling to process what the hell had just happened to her. One second she'd been speeding along on her Waver, preparing the last touches to bring Shiki's world crashing down around his head, and the next—now—she was lying face-down in the snow, her entire body screaming in pain. Obviously, something had happened in between, but damn if she knew what.

Moving slowly in an attempt to avoid aggravating her injuries any further, Nami pushed herself to her hands and knees and tried to find her Waver so that she could get back to work—!

"…ah," Nami squeaked out, her brain stalling at the utterly impossible sight before her eyes.

Her Waver, Nami's Waver, her means of transportation, of tearing free across the waves without pause or hesitation, had just been destroyed.

Well, that was probably something of an exaggeration; the body was mostly intact, but the whole front wheel and the steering mechanism were straight-up gone. Ripped out of their frame, and a good chunk of the prow of her Waver with it. It wasn't irreparable damage, but that didn't help her when she needed it right this minute.
"Wh-What the hell…?" Nami breathed, weakly reaching out to her devastated possession. "How did this—?"

"You have been insulting me without pause for seven days now, Miss Navigator."

Nami's blood, and all the rest of her, froze. It was with an almost corpse-like stiffness that she craned her head upward and stared evil in the eye.

"And the most infuriating part is these little stunts," Shiki continued, his deceptively calm tone betrayed a twitching, too-tight smile. "This is pushing my tolerance to the breaking point. I am a very patient man, Miss Navigator. And trust me…"

Trailing off, Shiki raised his hand and snapped his fingers.

**SMASH!**

A jaw rose from the earth and crunched down on the Waver's hull. Nami's heart twisted as the fangs did their work, grinding the craft into an unrecognizable mass of splinters. At least the glimpses she kept seeing of the bulb holding the Jet Dial gave her hope that her precious possession was salvageable.

But with Shiki still looming over her and a few twitches away from snapping and gutting Nami like a trout, that hope was small and not terribly comforting.

"Trust me, Miss Navigator," Shiki grimly repeated. "You do not want to see a very patient man lose that patience. So." The lion-man cracked his knuckles, one by one, his glare never leaving the younger woman. "Why don't you go ahead and tell me… just what the hell you think you were doing. And then, maybe, I won't break your legs, hm?"

Nami remained on her knees a little longer, letting the promise of pain and most likely death Shiki had delivered sink in. She considered what would happen to her if she did what she really, really wanted to do.

And then, she got to her feet, Clima-Tact still in hand and forming a crackling boa around her neck, and did exactly what she really, really wanted to do.

"What I was doing," Nami croaked, eyes drawn in grim determination. "And what I'm still planning on doing… is sending your twisted dreams crashing and burning to the bottom of the sea, where they belong, and then I'm going back to my crew." The final word was emphasized by a stray bolt of lightning from her Eisen Tempo charring a chunk out of a nearby Daft Green.

Shiki huffed irritably at the decidedly un-satisfactory answer and raised his hand. But before he could gesture and mutilate his 'wayward' crewmate, he noticed something. Due to the intensification of Nami's lightning, she was better illuminated in the evening gloom, and Shiki's eyes were able to discern something new about her: her shoulder was no longer bandaged. And even with anger clouding his vision, Shiki found himself curious about the newly exposed flesh. Or rather, what that flesh bore.

Shiki vaguely knew of the tattoo on her shoulder. It was prominently displayed on her wanted poster, and he thought he may have caught her mentioning the motivation behind it on the SBS once or twice. But now, the once-simple pinwheel-and-tangerine combination had been dramatically changed. While the original tattoo was still in place, the ink that formed one of the larger arms of the pinwheel now coursed down her arm, covering a mess of deep, deep scars that he only saw so quickly thanks to his experience on the seas.
And the picture that the ink formed was one of a writhing, swirling storm. Tongues of lightning, wind, and clouds swirled among a multitude of dark-blue to grey-black spiral maelstroms, tinged and outlined in electric-yellow, coursing all the way down to her elbow.

The Golden Lion slowly turned his gaze back to her eyes. Eyes filled with something he dreaded recognizing. "You seem to have fully embraced your epithet, Weather Witch," he observed.

A flicker of eyes followed his stare, and then it was back to glaring at him. "My new tattoo, you mean?"

"Yesss," he drew out. "I can understand covering up such nasty scarring as that with something more… personal, I suppose… but I can't help but feel this goes beyond that. Or am I wrong?"

Nami's head bowed slightly, her bangs casting a shadow over her eyes. "…My mother. She… She was a Marine. Wonderful, kind, loving… and the strongest, bravest woman I've ever known. And I owe everything of who I am… to her. But recently… I decided… I'm going to take a little bit more… like the greedy pirate I am."

Nami's eyes snapped up, and Shiki could no longer downplay or deny the unmitigated fury crackling in her gaze. "I'm not just satisfied with her will to live anymore…" she breathed. "I'm taking up her will to fight. This tattoo represents my decision: From here on out, I am going to live the way she lived… and die the way she died. Never back down, and never surrender…"

The Weather Witch lashed her Clima-Tact out, and a barrage of lightning charred a line of blackened earth between herself and the Golden Lion.

"Not when everything you hold dear is on the line," she whispered, as much to herself as her enemy. "And especially not to someone like you."

For a solid minute, Shiki blankly stared at Nami before his face hardened into a mask of fury, his teeth bared in a snarl. "I severely underestimated you," he growled. "I crush the rest of your crew, I hold the lives of everyone dear to you in my hands, I overpower you in every conceivable way. And yet. You still fight. You never stopped fighting. It's clear that I've wasted my time trying to sway one with such a will. One such as you will never break, will never bow. Admirable, in a way. Truly strong female pirates are a rare thing nowadays. But still, a pity… If only you were the slightest bit weaker."

The Golden Lion's arm snapped skyward, and Nami could only watch in horror as a small mountain of dirt and rock ripped itself from the firmament and gathered into a hovering ball, grinding against itself until it was shaped into a single massive cone of stone, the point aimed directly at Nami.

"If only you'd broken like a good little girl," he rumbled, regret mixing with fury. "You might have lived a little longer."

Faced with her own impending doom, Nami's breath hitched, and for the briefest of moments, her mind reverted to her old mindset: a voice in the back of her skull screaming bloody murder at her to run, keep running and never stop, never look back, preserve her life.

And the moment Nami located where that voice was, she wrung its neck without a second thought.

The Weather Witch bared her teeth and spread her stance, spinning her Clima-Tact into a blur at her side. Her Eisen Tempo, all of it, began to glow.

"Never. Again," she swore, as much to herself as Shiki. "Now fry, you son of a—WHU-OAH!"
A sudden rush of... of *something* barreled through Nami's torso, comparable to what she assumed Luffy felt when someone punched him in the gut. Something you felt, but that didn't hurt. The force broke Nami's stance and concentration, loosening her grip on the Clima-Tact. It was a lapse of mere seconds.

"*You're mine.*"

But unfortunately, as the pirate looming over her showed, those few seconds were the difference between life and death.

"*Imperial Lion Talon,*" Shiki declared, and a sound of rushing earth reached her ears. She brought up her arms and staff to guard, praying she'd survive to counterattack, but though she heard a massive impact, she felt no pain.

"*Hooooorooooo... miiiissed meeeee...*"

Oh, and her own voice was drifting through the air, something that made her blink in shock. And that was before she saw what looked for all the world like a floating bedsheet with concentric gray circles for eyes hovering right where Shiki's attack had ripped into the earth.

"*Toooo sloooow, toooo sloooow,*" the bedsheet-thing taunted before drifting away.

"What the—*YOU LITTLE BITCH!*" Shiki roared, shooting into the air with an orbital belt of stone spikes. "*YOU THINK YOU CAN JUST RUN AWAY FROM ME!? YOU GO WHERE I SAY YOU GO! GET BACK HERE!*"

And before Nami could fully shake off her shock, Shiki the Golden Lion was out of sight, gallivanting off after the entity that despite looking nothing like her—!

The pieces clicked together, and Nami sucked in a ragged gasp. '*Stole the attention on me, looked like a ghost—!*'

"*Perona?*"

An all-too-physical force slammed into her from behind, knocking her down to the ground hard enough to stun.

In those moments of stunned confusion, Nami found herself manhandled onto her back, staring up at a visage she barely recognized. Long, unstyled pink hair hung all around a face caked with running makeup, a ragged cloak draped around her as a makeshift defense against the Daft Green. Her eyes were wide, vessels peeking in at the corners, and her lips were spread to show teeth audibly grinding together. Perhaps most worryingly, the cloak and the flesh alike were rippling with half-formed Hollow bodies, roiling and twisting over each other.

"*P-Perona?*" the navigator repeated, confusion warring with concern.

"*Why?*" the Hollow-girl gasped in a—ironically—hollow tone.

When after a few seconds the non-sequitur failed to get a follow-up, Nami swallowed uncomfortably. "*Wh-What are you—?*

Suddenly and without warning, something *snapped* behind Perona's eyes, and Nami came to the sobering conclusion that she may have fucked up.

"*WHY!?!*" Perona outright shrieked at banshee-levels of volume, raising her fist and trying to slam it
down on Nami's head. Of course, coming from an unathletic teenager half Nami's size, it was
comically easy to block, but the next blows compensated by volume. "WHY, WHY, WHY!?" she
screched, over and over again, each word punctuated by another attack.

"Wha—Perona!" Nami yelped, squirming uncomfortably under the feeble punches. "What the hell
are you—!?"

"WHY!?" Another ear-rending wail, only this time Perona raised her arms into the air, a roiling,
screaming ball of malformed ectoplasm materializing between her clawed fingers.

The Straw Hat's eyes shot wide open in panic, and it was only years of cat-thievery that granted
Nami the dexterity she needed to squirm out from under her aggressor and slip away. And none too
soon, as the Hollow-whatever literally splashed against where she'd been barely a second later.

"What the hell, Perona!" Nami demanded, opening her mouth to lambast the ghost girl for the
blatant attempt on her life. The tirade promptly died in her throat when Perona conjured three more
of the Hollow-things.

"WHYYYY!?"

Nami dove for the nearest Daft Green, biting back a curse. The ecto-manace's grasping, wailing
embrace fell on bare ground, while meanwhile the sheer stench of the tree, combined with her terror
and confusion, shaved away the last of Nami's patience.

"Why what!?" she demanded, her voice dripping with frustration.

"WHY DOES IT HURT SO BAD?" Perona shrieked back, and with that admission everything
seemed to freeze.

Slowly, fearful of another attack, Nami stepped out from behind her cover and beheld Perona
standing still, eyes wide and staring at nothing and a hand clutching her collar in a white-knuckled
grip.

"Why does it hurt?" Perona repeated, her voice raspy from her earlier shrieking. It was unclear if she
was talking to or talking at Nami. "Why do I feel so bad? Why does it feel like I just got stabbed, like
I want to throw up, like I want to scream and scream and scream and never stop?"

"Perona…"

Nami took a hesitant step towards the Hollow-girl, but Perona snapped her gaze up, locking the
navigator in place. Only this time, it wasn't fear of the rage in her eyes.

This time, it was because she recognized the abject terror tearing at the Ghost Princess's soul.

"Oh, Perona…" Nami breathed, sympathy flooding her voice.

"Why, why… WHY!?" And then, out of nowhere, Perona let out an agonized shriek and collapsed
to her knees, clutching her head. "WHY DID IT HURT WHEN I TOLD YOU TO GO AWAY?! WHY
DOES IT HURT WHenever I THINK ABOUT HOW YOU LOOKED AT ME?! WHY DID IT HURT
When I realized that Shiki only found us because one of his Snails saw my Hollow playing with Xiao!"

More Hollows bubbled out from Perona's body—and yes, 'bubbled' was indeed the right word.
Some were happy and giggling, others sad, or angry, or wearing expressions that couldn't even be
identified. And Nami knew how to read expressions.
"WHY DID I GO OUT OF MY WAY TO TELL THE VILLAGERS TO GET OUT OF THE BUNKER BEFORE SHIKI COULD KILL THEM ALL!?” the girl sobbed, terror wracking her slim frame. "WHY DID I LEAVE THE LAP OF LUXURY AND SECURITY, LEAVE EVERYTHING I'VE EVER WANTED, TO STEAL SHIKI'S ATTENTION AWAY FROM YOU!!"

The Hollows bubbling from Perona suddenly swelled and Nami had a mere second in which to yelped and dive back behind the Daft Greens before the Hollows exploded off of Perona. By some miracle, none of them passed through Nami's hiding spot.

"WHY DID IT HURT WHEN I THOUGHT ABOUT HOW YOU WERE GOING TO DIE?" Perona wailed. "WHY DID I RISK MY LIFE TO COME OUT HERE AND SAVE YOU?"

Risking a peek around the vines, Nami gaped. The Hollows were now flowing out of Perona in outright streams, forming currents of ghosts that giggled and sobbed and made all sorts of other noises as they circled around her.

"WHY DO I CARE ABOUT YOU GETTING KILLED?"

It was like a bomb went off in Nami's mind. She wasn't getting Hollowed because Perona wasn't letting that happen. Even in the throes of a panic-fueled meltdown, she didn't want to hurt Nami.

Then, all of a sudden, the Hollows dispersed, Perona going from shouting down to a broken croak, her head cradled in her hands.

"Why… Why does it hurt… like when they took away Bearsy… and he stopped playing with me…?” she wept weakly. "Why do I care… about something that… that isn't me?"

This was the opportunity she'd been waiting for. Nami exited her shelter and walked up to Perona, her mind's eye reflecting a dusty road on her home island and a phantom pain in the long-healed scar on her shoulder. She didn't have her captain's hat, but she knew what to do.

"Because."

Nami sank to her knees in front of Perona and gently drew the girl into a hug, pressing the Hollow-teen's face into her shoulder.

"We're friends."

And with that, the last vestiges of Perona's composure imploded, and she wept into Nami's shoulder with abandon, clinging to her like she was her last lifeline left in the world. A comparison that was a bit too close to reality for comfort, but there it was.

After several minutes, Perona's coughing sobs subsided into wet sniffling.

"I know exactly how you feel, Perona," Nami whispered comfortingly. "I know what you're going through. I know how scary it is. And I promise, I'll help you understand it all. But… we'll do it later. For right now…” The navigator leaned back and gave Perona a conspiratorial smirk. "Think you're feeling good enough to help me blast these Daft Greens to kingdom come, and Shiki's reign of terror along with them?"

"I'm thinking…” interrupted a most unwelcome voice, accompanied by the most unwelcome occurrence of a steel collar flying out of nowhere and clamping shut on Perona's neck. She immediately collapsed with barely a panicked wheeze, once more leaving Nami standing alone against the monster.
"Not," Shiki finished, his wide grin twitching some. "Perona, baby, you lied to my face. You told me that you had no attachment to the Straw Hat Pirates."

The Hollow-girl didn't respond, too busy trembling on the ground in a fetal position.

Satisfied, Shiki turned back to Nami, savoring the trembling the navigator was unable to… suppress… wait a minute. That wasn't fear.

Shiki's sadistic, furious grin grew even more as he put the pieces together.

"You know something, girls?" he remarked, one hand already gesturing and forming constructs out of the snow. "The logical side of my mind is practically screaming that I should just kill you now myself. It would be so easy, just a quick couple of slashes and it would be done. But no… as much as I should do that, that's too fast and too merciful when you've forced me to expend this much of my energy! After all, there's quite a bit of tradition in piracy! Every crime has its punishment! And the crime here, whose punishment is very well-known…"

Cackling madly, Shiki shot his hands forward.

"IS MUTINY!"

Before either woman could react, the snow rose up, wrapped around them, and formed icy shackles around their wrists—

SNAP!

"ARGH!/YEARGH!"

And then the women screamed in agony when the chains wrenched their arms out—nearly to the point of dislocating their shoulders—and bound them spread-eagled against opposite sides of the nearest Daft Green trunk.

"You two will remain in these bindings for what little remains of your lives. I'm going to leave you here and soon some of my men will be here to keep an eye on you while you succumb to the cold." Shiki removed a gasmask from his jacket and slipped it over his face. He then rammed the nearest Daft Green with his fist, causing the off-color vegetation to let loose a wispy cloud of green spores.

Spores that Nami and Perona couldn't help but inhale, that caused their hacking and wheezing to intensify as green bruises started to spread on their skin.

"And the Daft Green, whose potency you really shouldn't have underestimated." Shiki's sneer was obvious, even beneath his mask. "You will die slowly and painfully. And when the life leaves your eyes, I am going to broadcast your lifeless visages to the entire world. Your loved ones will sob… and the Navy will realize how much of a favor I am doing for them. They'll realize how much better things will be when the world is under my control."

"G-g-grrghk…" Nami choked out around her panicking respiratory system, shooting a bloodthirsty and bloodshot glare at the Golden Lion. "You… won't… win."

"Ahhh, but don't you see?" Shiki the Golden Lion spread his arms, indicating the white-washed hell around them. "I already have…"

He then floated in close and shoved his gasmask right up to her face.

"Baby, Girl."
Snarling, Nami attempted to lunge at Shiki, which in practice meant she tried to bite his nose off, but Shiki merely floated away and then back to his palace, cackling all the way.

Her vision increasingly blurry, the navigator stared after him, until finally she no longer had the energy to hold up her head. "...he's dead once Luffy gets his hands on him..." she whispered to herself.

"But... what about... us?" Perona asked weakly.

To that... Nami had no response. She could only let her eyes slide shut in defeat, hoping beyond all hope that they'd come for her soon.

...no. No, not hoping, not hope.

They would come. She knew they would.

They'd come, because... because they had to.

They had to...

-o-

Near the highest point of Marineford, the Fleet Admiral sat sequestered in his office. He had sent out all of the necessary orders, and mobilization was going as fast as it could be managed. That left him only one thing to do.

"Shouldn't this be the part where you give a grand speech to inspire the Navy to defend the East Blue with their lives?" Tsuru asked quietly, sitting across from the Fleet Admiral alongside Garp.

"If I could do so without sounding hollow, I would," Sengoku replied, equal parts tired and bitter as he poured cups of sake for the three of them. "But *Onigumo's* words are still fresh in the world's memory. This may be the most righteous cause that the Marines have taken up in years, but there is no good way left to say 'serve Justice' or 'fulfill your duty' without sounding callous."

Tsuru's expression softened the slightest amount.

"What about, eh..." Garp swirled his cup, frowning in thought. "I 'unno, talk about how we already beat him twenty years ago—!"

"And then, less than two years into his sentence in the until-then *inescapable* gaol, he broke out, picked right back up where he left off and put us in the position we're in today," Sengoku smoothly finished.

Garp briefly mulled that over before wincing sympathetically. "Eesh, when you put it that way, hand me the—"

Wordlessly, Sengoku handed the Vice Admiral the bottle, which Garp began chugging.

While Garp conducted that assault on his liver, Tsuru leaned back and reflected on the orders that the Navy had executed over the past week. Briefly, *briefly*, she toyed with throwing it back in Sengoku's face, but just as quickly dismissed the notion. Both because she recognized how callous it would be, given the situation, and because as much as she hated to admit it, she knew that the Fleet Admiral's orders were the right ones.

The entire week after the Straw Hats had been defeated for the first time, there was little that the
Navy could do. The location of Shiki's base was unknown but for the fact that it was hidden somewhere in the sky, out of the Navy's reach. And with everything that had happened to the Navy during and since the disaster at Enies Lobby, they simply didn't have the resources to spare to seek out such a place, let alone destroy it.

And since they only put the pieces of the enemy's plan together earlier that day, that meant their only option was to start evacuating civilians where they could and batten down the hatches where they couldn't. Anything else meant leaving entire islands undefended, or stringing out the entire Navy to be defeated in detail. At least this plan meant they could concentrate their forces and maybe launch a counterattack.

Another idea flitted through her mind, namely that this might be an opportunity to gently probe her friends about the possibility of joining the Masons. But that notion was dismissed as well, if only because such a tactic was guaranteed to leave an irrevocably bad taste in her mouth.

Which meant she was back to waiting for something to change. At least the wait proved brief.

"Don don—Puru—KA-LICK!"

After a moment's silence, Sengoku asked wearily, "It's time?"

"Yes sir, the snails just started ringing," the soldier on the other end confirmed, the snail mirroring his grave expression. "Your orders?"

"Put them on the screens," Sengoku groaned tiredly, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Whatever comes to pass, we will not be ignorant of the threat we face."

The snail nodded in confirmation before the other side hung up.

With one final, colossal gulp, Garp drained the last of the sake and carelessly tossed the bottle aside. "Well, let's go out and face the music," he growled.

And with that, the three stood up and moved to Marineford's highest balcony, looking down over HQ's main plaza. More specifically, they were looking down at the trio of titanic screens that had been erected on the masts of the warships in harbor, and watched along with the rest of Marineford's standing forces for the broadcast about to play for the whole.

It wasn't long before the screens lit up and the broadcast began. On screen was a swiftly moving shot that soared above the churning sea. The snail was moving fast, headed for a tower of stone that pierced the clouds, and upon reaching said pillar, the view panned around the pillar as it circled upward.

Upon the pillar, a thriving torrent of humanity, easily numbering in the thousands, was climbing the tower via a path winding around the stone. And from the generally rough appearance, the weapons they carried, and just the demeanor of strength and malice they all shared, there was only one conclusion that could be drawn.

"Pirates," Tsuru bit out, her wrinkled knuckles whitening on the balcony railing. "A traditional army, to go with the bioweapons he's already bred. That bastard... he's truly hellbent on world domination, isn't he?"

"And he's put together the perfect team for it, too," Garp groused, leaning forward. "I recognize some of these faces. 'Blueblood' Bourgeois Benjamin, worth $68 Million, Captain of the Esquire Pirates. Tre 'Triple-Tap' Timothy, $75 Million, Captain of the Dead-Eye Pirates. Avery 'Big Ben' Everie, $85 Million, Captain of the Nevermore Pirates." Garp growled, eyes narrowing. "And they
all have their crews with them. Not a person there below $50 Million, and not a crew with less than a hundred members. He's gotten nearly all of Paradise's criminal underworld under his flag!

The analysis, good as it was, missed one detail, a detail that nearly had Sengoku glowing. "The way they're wearing their coats," he ground out, the balcony slowly splintering under his fingers. "That's not coincidence, is it?"

"Considering how they're all wearing the same thing and the last time I saw Bourgeois he was wearing an actual royal cape?" Tsuru remarked. "Not a chance in hell."

The only response Sengoku had for that was a grunt of annoyance.

-o-

Apparently done taking in the rising army, the camera view suddenly ceased its circling and instead swung upward, breaking through the cloud cover and giving the world a view of the bottoms of the floating biomes that composed Merveille.

Even in this view, the looming shadow of the central fortress, upon which Shiki's palace was housed, dominated. One by one, crew by crew, the army of pirates marched up and into the central palace, entering via what appeared to be some sort of dock carved into the bottom of the island, which connected the island to the pillar.

The view flew up, around and over the edge of the island, providing the world with a head-on view of Shiki's golden palace, which was only emphasized by the camera swooping straight down the middle of the palace.

"Tsk, damn bastard," Red-Leg Zeff bit out. Though his scowling gaze was focused on the video screen, his hands didn't stop in their work. "Taunting us this much, this is insufferable… Salt!" Zeff snapped his hand up and caught the shaker that flew at him, laid out a layer of the preservative on the lunch he'd prepared, then boxed it up and passed it on to be stored with the other lunches he'd completed. "He never showed off like this before, but now that he has an audience, he's putting on a show for the whole damn world! That damn—Powder!"

Zeff held his hand out again, and he nodded when something was slapped into his palm… before glowering as he realized what he'd been handed.

"I SAID POWDER, NOT PEPPER!" Zeff roared, flinging the grinder back at the hapless cook who'd tossed it at him. Hissing irritably, he went to work cleaning out the gun he'd almost seasoned. "Morons."

The proper container came into his grasp, along with an excuse. "Sorry, Owner Zeff! We've never mixed cooking and fighting this much before!"

Zeff harrumphed but gave no more chastisement; after all, this was the first time in eight years that he'd had to work on preparing food and weapons simultaneously himself. But people needed to eat and those monster-things needed to eat lead when they inevitably came for them.

The remainder of the chefs in the Baratie may not have been going at the masterful speed that their boss was, but with clear evidence of war on the horizon, they were at least efficiently preparing boxed lunches and weapons. And not just for themselves. With how widespread the Baratie's reputation was, the whole crew expected an influx of refugees.

"I swear," Zeff growled to himself as he continued his work. "If anything, that golden bastard's taste has rotted over the past twenty years, and it was already garbage back then."
Meanwhile, the snail's point-of-view had parked itself on a vantage point that gave the world a top-down view of the palace's front facade. After a minute to take it in, the view abruptly shifted, the screen suddenly displaying what could only be a grand throne room in the Wano style, bordered on all sides by paper walls.

"What the—!" Patty squawked in confusion.

Zeff, meanwhile, just gave the sight a disinterested grunt. "Must have shifted the broadcast to a different Vis-snail. Keep working."

"R-Right," Patty nodded shakily, resuming his work but never taking an eye off the screen.

The chef's attention to the screen intensified when the doors to the chamber slid open, and a number of imposing, jacketed individuals filed in. One by one, the pirates sat themselves on opposite ends of the room behind lap-tables that bore saucers, waiting for their host to arrive.

That scene triggered something in Zeff's memory, and he paused in his work when it came to him, his scowl deepening. And if that wasn't enough, his thoughts were also voiced by one of the ex-pirates on staff. "Is that… a sake ceremony? Why the hell—?"

"He thinks he's already won," Zeff interrupted, his gaze back on the rifle he had been checking over. "This is his victory lap. Showing every step of his conquest in detail, while we all sit back and watch while he takes the world all for himself. It'd almost be impressive, if he didn't make one colossal mistake."

All the cooks paused and looked at their head chef in confusion. "Uh, chief?" Carne raised a finger hesitantly. "I don't know if you've noticed, but he's got the whole damn Blue by the throat. We're all pretty damn licked."

"Yeah!" Patty nodded in agreement. "What's the mistake?!"

K-CHK!

Zeff shot a glare at his men out the corner of his eye, placing down the firearm he'd just cocked. "He gave us a warning, you idiots. That means that even if we're going down, we're taking as many of his hellbeasts down with us as we can. Right, men?!"

The answer was instant and unanimous.

"AYE-AYE, CHEF ZEFF!" the Baratie roared as one, before returning to their work with an almost possessed fervor.

Zeff nodded at his boys' enthusiasm before getting back to his own task.

But not before a brief pause. A pause brought about by Zeff contemplating the second mistake that Shiki had made.

Or… at least, he hoped it was a mistake that Shiki had made that would come back to bite him in the ass.

He really, really hoped so. For all of the East Blue's sake, if not the world's.

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"Hurry! The caves are this way!"
Dashing ahead, Carrot, Pepper, and Onion very loudly led their parents and the rest of the inhabitants of Syrup Village to the hiding places on the island that they had identified while playing with the captain over the years. And they had sought out even more after the clash with the Black Cat Pirates, ensuring that they knew of every good hiding place that they could use in the unlikely case of another pirate attack. And if their parents had wondered about the practicality of such a thing before, they would never breathe a word against it after this day.

And speaking of impractical acts…

"I… I think the captain would understand if we stopped yelling about pirates coming after this," Onion said, furiously swiping at the fog that had misted up his glasses.

His companions looked at him, both with expressions of guilt on their faces.

"It's not the same as it was before… I'm scared. This…" Onion shook his head, unwilling to meet his friends' eyes. "This is what it's like to be facing a real pirate invasion."

"…You're right. The captain would understand," Pepper sighed, grinding the heel of his palm into his forehead.

"W-We'll find something else to—!" Carrot began.

"STOP TALKING NONSENSE!"

All three boys practically jumped out of their skin as Kaya—who'd been at their sides through the whole ordeal, in spite of Merry's fervent protests—shouted at them, the look on her face bringing back uncomfortable memories from when she'd faced down Kuro.

"Don't even think about stopping!" Kaya demanded. "And even if you do, then I'll just start doing it instead!"

"B-But Kaya!" Onion protested, his lip trembling miserably. "I-If we keep going—!"

"Boys," the heiress interrupted, dropping to her knees in front of them and putting her hands on the shoulders of the two on the outside, accompanied by a kind smile. "Stop. Think. You're forgetting why you do that. Why you always tell everyone that pirates are coming, and why it's a good thing."

The boys blinked incredulously. "A good…?" Carrot sniffed deeply, rubbing at his eyes.

"Whaddaya mean?"

Kaya cocked her head to the side. "If you don't tell everyone that pirates are coming," she explained patiently. "Then how will they know when Usopp comes home?"

The Veggies froze in shock at Kaya's gentle reminder, and after a second to process it they teared up.

Kaya spread her arms further and drew the children into a hug, letting them cry into her shirt. "There there, it's alright, it's going to be alright."

The remaining villagers passing around them each spared an understanding glance as they hurried toward their shelters. Kaya, for her part, smiled down at the boys.

SLAM!

Until a noise made her snap up a glare at the image projected by the Transponder Snail the villagers had brought with them, so that they could keep a watch on the proceedings.
The pirates on screen had finished filing into the meeting room and had taken their seats, forming two lines, one of twenty-five and the other of twenty-six. All of them were perfectly motionless and patient, the image of surprising professional courtesy.

As such, the noise that had drawn Kaya's attention was the sound of the room's paper doors slamming open, and Shiki the Golden Lion showing himself in all of his glory.

Kaya looked at the face of the man who aimed to destroy her entire world, and her mind flashed back to what she saw on the face of the man she'd trusted for three years who shattered her heart and aimed to kill her, and then of the man she trusted for three days who had repaid that trust a thousand times over from what little she knew of him. With those thoughts in mind, she steeled her nerves and spoke:

"No matter what happens, don't forget this: That man…" Her lips twisted into a hateful sneer. "That monster is no pirate at all!"

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All across the East Blue, panic, terror, and some measure of anger gripped the hearts of its citizens, and though he could not see it himself, Shiki knew it, and savored it. So many people hiding and huddling… it would only make it that much sweeter when they died. The fools who thought that they could escape on the seas he would handle himself. One touch to the hull under the cover of night, and the next thing they knew their precious shelter would be flotsam on the surface of his island, at the mercy of his living weapons.

And for those fools who dared to fight back… well. Go after them first to give them some illusion of saving their ocean that he could crush, or last to undermine what they were fighting for? Decisions, decisions…

Regardless, with how low his estimation of the sea was, he figured that there was, at best, one island that would resist him to their dying breaths.

Said island was currently in the process of vindicating those expectations, though neither the inhabitants nor Shiki knew it.

"Y'know, after that Straw Hat kid clobbered Arlong," Genzo growled as he sharpened his cutlass. "I'd hoped we could take all the weapons we'd stockpiled to fight him and just let them collect dust. So much for that idea. Asshole."

"It's not like the rest of us are any happier about it," Nojiko sourly responded, checking over one of the components of the old Marine-issue rifle she was reassembling. "But if we have a choice this time, between dying on our terms or his…" Cranking the bolt back, she grimly smiled as the weapon chambered a bullet with a final CLICK! "Then I choose ours."

Genzo grunted in agreement at the statement.

"MY COMRADES!"

And then Shiki's almighty bellow interrupted what he was going to say and drew everyone's attention to the screen. The would-be pirate lord was grinning from ear to ear, his arms spread wide and his chest puffed out as he lorded himself over the assembled pirates, who returned carefully restrained respect.

Taking the cigar from his mouth and waving it about, Shiki's grin took on a savage edge. "I would like to thank you all for joining me here tonight! Know that your presence here is the ultimate
Placing the cigar back in his jaws, the Golden Lion took a heavy drag, his expression gaining a morose quality. "Now, I will not lie to you, I do not expect this to be an easy task. Even with the weapons at our disposal, and our own considerable strength, world conquest is no laughing matter. Even by our most hopeful estimates, it will take anywhere from one year to two to properly bring the world to heel, and I can guarantee you that there will be casualties. Not all of you here will live to see our glorious future come to fruition.

"BUT! What I can also promise is that no matter how long it takes, be it a year, be it two, or even be it two hundred, we! Will! Stand! VICTORIOUS!" Shiki shot his fist into the air. "WE ARE THE GOLDEN LION PIRATES, AND THIS WORLD SHALL KNEEL BEFORE US!"

With hate burning in their chests, the villagers of Cocoyashi watched the other pirates raise their fists into the air and roar their agreement, from the depths of their blackened, tar-stained hearts.

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"Ah… but, do note one little thing." Out of the blue, Shiki's entire demeanor shifted, his head bowed and shadows falling over his eyes. "While under my command, I will allow you to commit any evil, perpetrate any blasphemy, and indulge in whatever atrocities you so desire… save for one. One single, simple act… whose sentence is immediate execution. This act…"

Shiki slowly raised his head, and gave each and every captain before him a glare that spoke of nothing but the purest of murder.

"Is mutiny," he rumbled, his voice a murderous growl. "If any of you betray me, at any point, for whatever reason, then my judgement will be instant and merciless." Shiki then quirked up a grin. "So try and keep on my good side, yeah?"

The captains all chuckled, but with an underlying nervousness that made it clear that the message had been received, read, and then framed on the metaphorical wall. With underlines. In permanent marker.

[Hmph,] Captain Dugong snorted derisively. [I can't even respect that about him. If any of my crew tried something like that, I'd give them a chance to explain themselves before I tied them to the anchor chain and—]

[Captain, with all due respect, I still have nightmares from the last time you brainstormed punishments that would let you outdo Boss. Please shut up,] pleaded one of the many onlooking Dugongs.

[Or, if you have to think aloud, at least muse on what we'll do to them instead,] First Mate Dugong griped.

Captain Dugong winced at the admonishment, chuckling as he scratched the back of his head. [Ah… aheheh, fair 'nuff. Sorry, just got a lot of time on my flippers to think, you know? Not used to the sea being this calm.]

[Yeah, that's fair…] First Mate glanced out over the calm blue waters. [This place… it's nice. The commute's hell, obviously, but we should come back here sometime if we ever want to relax.]

Captain sobered up at that suggestion and repeatedly tapped the butt of his naginata on the deck.
[Sounds good, but don't forget, we can only do that if this ocean's still standing after this mess. That's why we came here in the first place, remember?]

First Mate nodded back. [I remember, Captain. I remember.]

It was a difficult purpose to forget. Following the almost global identification of Shiki's primary target, the Dugongs of the Great Kung-Fu Fleet had unanimously voted to make a detour in their voyage down the Grand Line. Crossing the Calm Belt hadn't been easy due to the lack of currents to coast off of and the surplus of Sea Kings, but they'd managed. Now the Dugongs were floating as close to the dead center of the East Blue as they could manage, ready to deploy to wherever they were needed.

As such, all the Dugongs could do now was wait and watch the Vis-Snail they'd filched off a passing battleship and stuck in a waterproofed box. It was tense waiting and the whole fleet was raring to go, but it was the best that they could do, given the circumstances.

"Now!"

Though, as Shiki's imperious bark garnered the Dugongs' attention again, odds were good that they'd get their wish sooner rather than later.

"I hope you all don't mind," Shiki drawled, his entire demeanor utterly nonchalant. "But before we properly start our campaign, there is a little indulgence of my own I'd like to satisfy." Shiki took his cigar from his mouth and waved it about in a lecturing manner. "For years now, one ocean in particular in our world has been nothing short of an utter embarrassment to the rest of the world."

The Golden Lion's expression shifted into an out and out scowl of the purest disgust. "This pathetic, worthless puddle of water of which I speak has never once failed to produce anything but disgusting and reprehensible pieces of filth, and any time someone of note crawls their way out of the mire and manages to survive for more than a day, they show themselves to be the ultimate disgrace to our kind."

"For the sake of piracy and pirates everywhere, this ocean must be exterminated, and the shame it has brought on the rest of the world through its existence properly cleansed... with blood."

Shiki concluded by flinging his arms out wide, his eyes bugged out in sheer, bloodshot insanity. "PEOPLE!" he roared. "AS OF THIS MOMENT, WE SET SAIL FOR THE REPREHENSIBLE SEA OF SCHEMES! WE SAIL TO LAY WASTE TO THE EAST BLUE!"

[Not if we can help it, bastard.] Captain Dugong growled, a sentiment echoed by the rest of his tribe hard enough to shake the ships.

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"So," Raoul, bartender and owner of the Gold Roger Bar, stated casually as he polished his old, well-experienced shotgun. "Guess this is it then, eh?"

"You know it, old man," Gambia grunted, knocking back the dregs of the bottle of tequila in his hand before reaching over the bar for another bottle. "If that asshat wants to rip apart the ocean where it all began, then he's gonna start with the town where it began, which is here. And when he gets here?" The gangbanger leered murderously and tapped the butt of his gun on the bar. "He's gonna get the bonafide Loguetown welcome! ISN'T THAT RIGHT, BOYS?"

"YEAH!" the gathered members of the Barto club soared, some of them firing off their pistols.
"Oi, oi!" Raoul shouted. "No shooting in the bar, we've been over this a million times already!"

"And you're gonna do it a million times more!" one of the gangbangers jeered back.

Sighing, Raoul reached over and deftly plucked a fresh bottle of tequila and placed it just out of reach of Gambia. "Control your men," he ordered.

"Yeah, yeah…" Gambia grumbled, standing and turning around. "KNOCK IT OFF ALREADY, YOU IDIOTS! YOU'RE WASTING POWDER AND BULLETS!"

Sheepishly, the men settled down and stowed their weapons, at which point Gambia nearly knocked over the bottle in his haste to grab it and pop the cork off. Taking a quick hit off the bottle, he sighed contentedly and nodded respectfully at the bartender. "Seriously, though, thanks for letting us clear your stocks, old man."

"Eh, well, you know what they say," the old man shrugged indifferently.

Gambia cocked an eyebrow curiously.

"First off," Raoul held up a bottle and took his own swig from it. "You can't take it with you. And second, if you're going down…" His smirk became an outright malevolent grin as he held up his shotgun and pumped it forcefully. "Go down swinging!"

"YEAH!" Gambia immediately roared along with a forceful fist pump, a gesture that his boys eagerly mimicked. "WE'LL SHOW THAT BASTARD WHAT WE'RE WORTH!"

"Not that I need to remind you."

And then suddenly the good mood died hard and fast, and everyone in the bar shot glares at the image being projected by the snail the Barto Club had… appropriated from the town square.

Shiki's chin was raised proudly as he tapped his finger on the lip of the saucer he was holding while his bandaged science officer poured out the sake. "But the East Blue is the most defenseless and strategically expendable of the six seas. It'll be mourned, but there's nothing that'll be missed. So, be as thorough with your carnage as you like!"

"GONNA HAVE A HARD TIME RIDING THAT HIGH HORSE OF YOURS WITH ALL THE LEAD I'M GOING TO PUMP INTO YOUR ASS, YOU POMPOUS SHIT!" Raoul belted out, the rest of his 'patrons' cheering and roaring in agreement.

Heedless of—or more likely relishing in—the sheer amounts of pure hate being directed at him the world over, Golden Lion Shiki raised his saucer high, an honest grin on his face. "This is the birth of the Golden Lion Pirates!" he declared with—what else—pride.

"YEEEEAAAHH!" the other captains echoed, both in action and volume.

There was a moment of relative quiet, presumably from the pirates waiting for Shiki to drink his sake, when suddenly a new voice piped up.

"Y'know, so long as we're in such a celebratory mood…"

A very familiar voice. The eyes of the snail on Merveille snapped around and showcased a face that nobody in the bar could mistake.

"I-Is that…?" Raoul gaped in shock.
Gambia reeled so hard he almost fell out of his seat. "BOSS!"

"I'd like to toast ta' something else," 'Black Bart' Bartolomeo politely requested, idly swirling his sake. "If'n you don't mind."

Raoul blinked in shock before slowly adopting a grin. "Well, looks like we might have a chance of seeing tomorrow after all. And you all know what that means, right?"

"Hell yeah!" Gambia cackled, pounding his fist on the countertop. "Pass the popcorn and prep the sake!"

"Well, that, yeah… buuut it also means that you all have to pay your tab after all."

"WHAAAAAAAT?! SHIT-SHIT-SHIT!" Gambia leapt from his stool with a panicked yelp. "QUIT DRINKING, YOU SHITS, WE HAVE TO ACTUALLY PAY FOR THAT!"

"Heheheheh," the bartender chuckled, switching from polishing his shotgun to polishing a mug instead. "Ahhh, impressive as you younguns might be, looks like the old guard's still got some tricks of our own!"

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Shiki stared at the rookie in mild irritation, but the sheer satisfaction from finally bringing his plan to fruition overpowered it. It was a most momentous occasion, and he had at least waited until he, Shiki, had said his piece. He exhaled briefly, but managed to crack a smile as he gestured for him to go ahead.

Bartolomeo nodded in acknowledgment, and raised his saucer high as he started to speak. "I wanna make a toast…" he started solemnly. "To an ocean. An ocean that has a reputation of weakness."

Wait a minute.

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Dadan's jaw slowly dropped she divined where the rookie was most likely going with this. "Hooooly shit, is he actually—!?"

Whatever question the mountain boss was about to ask, it choked off when the broadcast suddenly changed, showing the well-guarded front courtyard of the palace… and blaring a heart-pounding fanfare.

"I-Is that…?" Dogra breathed in awe.

For a second, guards located below the snail just milled about their business as usual, but suddenly they started to react to something and pointed towards the sky. The snail was quick to follow their line of sight, glancing up at a sky that was mostly covered by clouds, but still had a gap that allowed the full moon to shine through.

A full moon that was silhouetting—!

"The Thousand Sunny!" Magra gawked in shock.

"THAT'S LUFFY!" Dadan shot to her feet with a cackle and a roar. "HE'S STILL KICKING!"

"WE'RE NOT LICKED YET, YOU SON OF A BITCH!"
The bar paused in shock at the outburst. Not the language, that was tame by Mount Corvo's standards, but the source on the other hand?

"Makino!" Woop Slap gaped at the usually demure young woman.

"Cram it, geezer!" Makino growled at the mayor, fire blazing in her eyes. "I'm a bartender, of course I know how to swear! Now shut up and cheer!" She then refocused her rage at the screen. "COME ON, LUFFY! PUNT THAT ARROGANT BASTARD'S HEAD OFF!"

They gaped for a second longer... and then, they all joined in with a roar.

But even over the music and the shouts of encouragement, they could all still hear Bartolomeo speaking.

"An ocean that has a reputation for a lack of power, lack of wealth, lack of resources... but at the same time, its people are rich."

-0-

"I raise my toast to an ocean of people who are powerful, not in body or mind or whatever, but who are powerful in heart!"

"So somehow those crazy bastards actually managed to get their ship to fly on its own, huh?" Crocodile mused to himself as he watched the Straw Hats' ship descend on the compound. "I wish I could even start to be surprised by that."

Crocodile also wished that he wasn't watching the display, but it wasn't like he or anyone else on Level 6 had much say in the matter. Shiki had spared no expense in ensuring that the world would see his moment of triumph, to the point that he had even used his powers to deliver a crate to the very bottom of Impel Down, planting a video Transponder Snail there and forcing the prisoners that the Government was attempting to erase from time to watch the Golden Lion's show. Forcing them to watch as the Golden Lion succeeded where they had all failed.

The feat had gotten in Magellan's craw, too, seeing as Shiki had triple-locked it in a sea prism stone box and even managed to remotely bolt it to the floor such that none of the staff could access or even move it, so the guards had no choice but to let the prisoners watch.

A 'privilege' that none of the prisoners were exactly enthused about, if the way they were all raging in their cells was anything to go by.

Still, in spite of the commotion going on outside of his cell, Crocodile still had a perfect view of the Thousand Sunny crashing down into the courtyard. The impact destroyed the front gate and carved a huge trench into the ground, as well as kicking the guards into an absolute frenzy.

And before they could do much more than that, a series of almost simultaneous detonations and an indcipherable blur that sent anyone who came in contact with it flying came out of nowhere. The guard force was wiped out in less than a second.

Crocodile's eyes widened in recognition. "Really now?" he muttered to himself. "So even you..."

If the Straw Hats were surprised or put off by the guards' annihilation, they didn't show it. Instead, they dismounted from their parked ship and strode over the guards' bodies, silhouetted by the remaining smoke.

That's not to say they went entirely without greeting, however. Once they reached the very front
door of the castle, they found them to be wide open. A pair of individuals were standing on the
threshold: a dark-skinned man wearing a trenchcoat, and a blonde woman in a yellow-and-black
dress.

"HEY, LEATHERNECK, WEREN'T THOSE TWO YOURS BEFORE YOU GOT
PINCHED?" the somehow thoroughly inebriated voice of Vasco Shot echoed throughout Level 6.

"At least my soldiers are all still alive, you moronic lush," Crocodile snorted in response, ensuring his
voice was carried to its destination. A goal that was accomplished if the slurried swearing that ensued
was anything to go by.

Still, whatever previous animosity the ex-Officer Agents might have once held against those who
had taken down Baroque Works, it was clearly long gone now. The pair of Ability-users bowed
to the Straw Hats, bending at the waist and displaying the utmost courtesy and decorum.

"Straw Hats. We've been expecting you," Mister 5 drawled. "Welcome to the Imperial Golden Lion
Palace."

"We've prepared a more… appropriate wardrobe for your soiree," Miss Valentine purred, giggles
following her words. "If you'll follow us, please?"

For the first time in over a week, Crocodile laughed.

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"An ocean of people who, no matter what, will always stand shoulder to shoulder for the sake of the
person next to them, be they family or neighbor, be they criminal, civilian, or even the damn
Marines, and never give in!"

The shadows and distant images of the Straw Hats marched silently through the hallways of the
palace, the view swapping from snail to snail to follow them as they passed an indoor garden, and
over to a side room where they each parted one of the doors, revealing a large dressing room. A
dressing room with one side filled with a variety of suits and other such formal outfits - and the other
with a Marine-grade armory.

"Right in here. I believe you will find the accommodations to your liking," 5 nodded.

"Please don't take long, our most g-gracious host will be expecting your arrival anyt-time now,"
Valentine said, visibly struggling to keep herself from cackling.

The citizens of Gray Terminal, however, had no such reservations and were hooting and hollering as
they watched the Straw Hats file into the changing room. Originally, they'd been busy ransacking the
manors that Goa's nobles had abandoned in their haste to evacuate the East Blue.

But now that it looked like there was even a chance they would live to see tomorrow? They were far
more eager to cheer on the prodigal son of the slums, whose cheeky grin they could all remember…
and whose old 'I.O.U.' slips suddenly seemed leagues more valid.

As the Straw Hats started to outfit themselves in their newly provided attire, it was made blatantly
obvious that Soundbite was in full control of what his visually inclined cousins did and didn't show.
This fact was clarified by how the broadcast only showed brief flashes of the Straw Hats as they
pulled on their new gear—

A trenchcoat's lapels yanked firmly into place.
A helmet slammed into place, polished metal gleaming in the torch light.

A tie cinched up to perfection.

A boot slamming into the ground, hard enough to crack the floorboards.

An ornate peaked cap adjusted by the tip of its brim, the golden skull emblazoned in its peak leering malevolently.

Gauntlets snapped into place, fingers stretching out to their fullest before snapping into a fist.

"I raise my toast to an ocean of people who will never back down and never surrender, no matter how much shit the world tries to pile on them!"

—And as they prepped their newly acquired weaponry—

The lever on a rifle ratcheted back, chambering a new round.

A pair of pistols spun into their holsters.

A break-action shotgun snapping shut on its freshly loaded shells.

A magnificent katana sliding into its snow-white sheath.

And finally, met with a roar of rabid approval, a massive rotary cannon hefted, and its barrel spun up with a mechanized roar.

—Until finally, finally, at long last... they were ready.

The world cheered as the Straw Hats marched out, ready for war.

-o-

"I raise my toast to an ocean whose spirit and legend can never be snuffed out, no matter what you or anyone ever does or says! I raise my toast to the Blue of Hopes and Dreams!"

The camera's eyes gave no clear view of the Straw Hats as they were led through the palace, immaculately chosen angles and distances blocking any clear view of them and giving nothing away save that they had swiftly changed into formal black outfits, and were all packing varying amounts of heat, from heavy rifles to outright bazookas, with Going Merry's form—clear from her size—carrying what looked to be twice her body mass in pure gun.

"Hoooooly hell," Helmeppo wheezed in a numb voice, his eyes bugging out over his visor. "I don't think I've seen that much firepower in a warship's armory, much less on people!"

"I-I'm pretty sure carrying that many firearms without the proper permits guarantees five consecutive life sentences, doesn't it?" Coby questioned weakly, his brain trying and failing to make sense of what his eyes were showing him.

"Seven if it's determined they were held with intent to fire, minimum," Tsuru clarified, her eyelid twitching furiously. "And that's only if, by some miracle, the offenders can sell out enough names to miss the death penalty."

"What the hell, Luffy?!" Coby questioned incredulously under his breath. "I know you're mad, but —!"
"Ohohoh, my cute little grandson is more than pissed, brat," Garp chuckled through his rictus grin, idly scratching at the veins that bulged on his neck and betrayed his true feelings. "That bastard took one of Luffy's crew. If Shiki's still alive by the end of this... well, it won't be because Luffy intended it that way, I'll tell you that much."

"Get our fleet mobilized, I want us sailing according to that Pose within the hour!"

The two apprentices and the two veterans turned toward their superior, who was currently glaring at the receiver as if it'd just insulted his mother.

"We know where they are?!” Coby exclaimed. "But I thought—?!"

"Aegis 0 just delivered an eternal pose to Merveille, or at least the pillar it's currently anchored itself at," Garp answered, grunting in exertion as he hauled himself out of his seat and cracked his back. "Turns out they've been sitting on the damn thing for days now, and they only just decided to hand it over."

"What?!" Helmeppo squawked, boggling at his mentor. "Shiki's been a clear and present threat for a week, why didn't they give it to us before?!"

"Because," Tsuru sniffed dryly. "It was only today that a World Noble offhandedly ordered them to 'help those worthless insects'—that's us, mind you—'do the jobs we so generously pay them for'."

"And apparently they consider handing us that pose to be help enough," Sengoku grumbled under his breath. "Because we're sailing to that battlefield alone."

"U-Understood, sir," the rookies nodded respectfully, and prepared to depart as well.

The Marines proceeded in silence for a bit until the usual suspect inevitably broke it.

"...You do realize you're just gonna be—?" Garp began.

"I know we're Straw Hat's clean-up crew again and I don't give a damn!" Sengoku barked. "Even if we're just eating their scraps, even if we only manage to accomplish the least amount of good, I couldn't care less! This is a battle for the fate of the world, a battle that will never be forgotten, no matter what might come to pass! I will not let history show that when push came to shove, all we could do was sit on our asses and watch!"

The watchers processed this. Then Garp's face split into a malicious grin as he cracked his knuckles. "Well, when you put it that way, count me in. Let's get going."

"S-Sir!" Coby and Helmeppo saluted, following their superior out. Tsuru lingered behind, silently looking at Sengoku. Sengoku looked back.

"...Does it still seem hollow?"

"It's hard for me to say at this stage."

A pause.

"...Justice will still be served. But what will the world think?"

"They'll side with the Straw Hats for saving that ocean, I'm sure."

Another pause.
"And what do you say about all of this?"

"...I have had to think more about what I call Justice over the past few months."

"Then we feel the same way."

"Do we? I'm not so sure... but I regret that."

Silence fell once more. Then Vice Admiral Tsuru left for her own ship and Sengoku followed, leaving the room empty.

Much later, when the pair of them thought back on that conversation, neither one was quite able to recall who said what.

-o-

"I RAISE MY TOAST!" 'Black Bart' Bartolomeo roared, raising his saucer high above his head.

SMASH!

Before utterly horrifying the other captains present, who could do naught more than gape in equal parts awe and horror at the mohawk-toting maniac who'd just spiked his saucer between his feet.

"TO THE EAST BLUE!" he howled loud enough to shake the rafters of heaven.

Despite the ample warning given by the entire speech, Shiki's eyes flew wide open, every vein on his brow bulging in complete outrage. Angry beyond words or even noises, he drew a pistol and aimed right at the pirate's shark-toothed smile. The gun fired, the bullet flew... and then the lead ball deformed against thin air, falling to floor with a ping that everyone heard.

"HEHAHAHAHAHAHA! You really are a moron, wheel-boy," Bartolomeo taunted, his head thrown back and the air flashing a mere inch in front of his face. "Not only do you try to shoot a guy who ate the Barrier-Barrier Fruit..."

And then Barto snapped his head back into place with a roaring cackle, his tongue lolling from his fang-toothed mouth and both his middle fingers sticking straight up. "But you're stupid enough to recruit one of the only two primo badass captains of this generation to come from the East-fucking-Blue!"

"You..." Shiki rumbled, the veins down his arm bulging murderously, the wooden panelling of his pistol splintering within his grasp. "Do you even realize what the hell you're doing, you suicidal bastard? Do you really think that a pathetic little mongrel like yourself can even last two seconds AGAINST SOMEONE LIKE ME!?" The last few words were roared, the palace creaking ominously around the pirates' heads as though it were liable to rip itself apart any moment.

"Who, me? Alone?" Barto cocked his eyebrow inquisitively, not even looking at Shiki in favor of buffing his nails on his coat. "Psh, nah, I know when to pick my fights. You'd squash me, easy." He then shot a spike-toothed leer at the Golden Lion. "So it's a damn good thing I didn't come alone, ain't it?"

Precisely on cue, the unmistakable sounds of a beatdown filtered into the throne room, from right outside the chamber. And from the familiar screams of panic and pain, Shiki knew that it wasn't his men handing out the beatdown.

"Reinforcements, I take it?" the veteran growled, though calm slowly returned to him. He had armies
waiting on all sides of the room, just waiting for a cue to break down the walls. No force would allow this scum and anyone fool enough to follow him to make it out of this alive.

"Hehahaha… you've got it backwards, Shiki," that damnable rookie sneered, slowly walking out of his place in line and positioning himself so that he was directly opposite Shiki, leering up at him without shame or fear. "My crew and I? We're the back-up dancers for this shindig. But them? Hehaha… they're the real main event. I mean seriously!"

Barto flung his arms wide as he stepped aside, the mad grin that had been on his face since the toast spreading even wider. "Just check out their grand entrance!"

Suddenly, the sounds of the beatdown stopped dead, and all the lights outside the throne room seemed to come on at once, harshly illuminating the exterior of the sliding doors.

A whisper of flying steel sang out, drawing everyone's attention to one of the screen walls. In an instant, slashes crisscrossed the entire left half of the wall, the screens holding for only a second before the sheer wind pressure blasted them out of their frames.

A number of the assembled captains shifted where they were sitting, glancing towards the display of force with vague interest.

Seconds later, with the sound of a bomb going off, the other half neatly disintegrated, the paper and wood shattering like glass struck by a hammer. Barely had the shreds from the devastated wall started to fall when a pillar of hellfire erupted and reduced the fragments to ash and cinders.

The captains gazed towards the carnage with restrained curiosity, scrutinizing the smokescreen for the perpetrators.

And then, all at once, they showed themselves.

-o-

"You know, in the earlier days of our training, I often questioned how practical it was to be dressed professionally when we were out on the job," Blueno drawled.

"I remember that, and they always gave us plenty of plausible answers," Kalifa said. "Covering more of your form leaves less opportunity to drop a trace of yourself."

"While at the same time testing you to ensure that you can execute without staining yourself," Kumadori brought up. "There is also the fact that the World Government would never have any employees of significance dressed otherwise while on the job."

"And the fact that limiting our mobility is supposed to give us constant training, in life and on the job," Kaku continued. "All valid reasons… and none of them the real one."

"The real reason," stated Rob Lucci with a bloodthirsty smirk. "Is that it's just so much more satisfying to hand someone their head if you look good doing it."

"Ain't that the truth," Jabra snickered. "Pity that this is probably the last time we'll see the Straw Hats like this, though."

"Either way, there is a fact we cannot deny…" Hattori cooed as he scribbled on a pad of paper, eyeing the Straw Hats as they strode from the smoke.

From 'Sniper King' Usopp's extravagant suit of samurai armor to 'Devil Child' Nico Robin's
functional cowboy-trenchcoat combo, and all the spic-and-span suits worn by everyone else in between…

"Those bastards clean up damn good."

-o-

"Hey, what the heck!?" 'Winch Green' Yonji, youngest son of the Vinsmoke line, barked indignantly, strangling one of the vis-snail's eyestalks. "The hell's wrong with the image, you spineless lump of slime?!

The reason for the ultimate human's ire was that while most of the Straw Hats were depicted in picture-perfect clarity, there were two whose faces were hidden from the world.

One was for a normal enough reason: one of the central figures in the crowd, standing next to Roronoa Zoro, was a chain smoker. So much so that any shots of his face were obscured by the haze of smoke he kept exhaling like a chimney. Unfortunate, but such was life.

The other obscurity, however, was far less forgivable: for whatever reason, the face of the tallest of the crew was rendered entirely inscrutable by a blur of static and warped color that prevented any details whatsoever from being made out.

"You! Stupid! Piece! Of—!" Yonji snarled, yanking harder and harder on the eyestalk, and undoubtedly preparing to yank even harder than that.

"Give it a rest, Yonji," his elder blue-hued brother, Niji, drawled from nearby. "This snail isn't the one in control of the broadcast. The camera must be crossing its vision in regards to that one. It's an old trick that usually takes years to train a snail to do, but the loud mouth one must be capable of it instead."

"I'm more interested in the smoker…" the blazing red elder, Ichiji, smirked as he eyed the fume-shrouded pirate. "Looks like he's a blond… probably that 'Sanji' they have on their crew. Heh, remind you guys of anyone?"

"No, and it doesn't remind you of anyone, either."

"Yes, father," the boys all immediately said, their heads bowed respectfully.

Even the unswerving loyalty of his perfect soldiers didn't prevent a derisive snort from Judge Vinsmoke. Not even their actions could soothe the inferno that had been pricked in the back of his skull. "That is not him," he growled, speaking as much to himself as to the soldiers present in his throne room. "It is a different Sanji, and not that worthless waste of time and flesh. As it is, I've already made it clear to the World Government that I want that embarrassment to our name wiped from the maps. We will speak no more of this."

"Yes, father," the heirs of the Germa repeated.

"As you say, my lord," the lone heiress demurred politely, even as, in the back of her mind, she harbored far less charitable sentiments.

'Wrong again, father,' Reiju thought with her dryest venom, her bile hidden behind a long-perfected mask of obedience. 'You were wrong about him before and you're wrong now.'

But when she looked back at the smoked-out face of her brother—her baby brother, alive and well and thriving—her mask softened into genuine compassion.
"That's right, Sanji,' she silently praised him. *Tell the world your name... and don't ever let them forget you again!*

-o-

Furthest to the right from the viewers' perspective, Princess Nefertari Vivi rode sidesaddle on her loyal friend, whose helmet, chest plate, greaves, and wing armor made him the very picture of a war mount. And Vivi herself was clad in a purple and black V-neck blouse, black jacket, and black pants, a look of tranquil determination on her face.

Rebecca the gladiator stared at the unflinching form on the screen as she confronted one of the most infamous men in history, a man that even the tyrant Doflamingo feared to clash with, if the way Dressrosa's defenses were being raised was anything to go by.

She'd craved the sight of Vivi's face for several months, with how much her words and actions had affected her, and while she had seen the wanted poster, it wasn't quite what she was looking for.

Now, as she stared at the desert princess as she was at that very moment on the other side of the world, she found herself searching for an answer to a question she had harbored for so long.

Then, all at once, she stiffened and her eyes widened. The look in the princess's eyes crystallized something that had been stirring in Rebecca's mind from the very first SBS, from the very first words Vivi had uttered in defiance to the judgment of the entire world.

And now that Rebecca knew what it was she was feeling, she grabbed it with both hands and vowed she would never let it slip from her grasp again.

She slowly rose, discarding the wagers that she had picked up, and walked off toward the armory.

That day would later be noted as the last time that any of the gladiators saw fear on Rebecca's face. The last time she would let Diamante see fear in her eyes.

-o-

"Dear father, what kind of glasses are those?" Shirahoshi questioned as she took in the image in the town square. "The one that Boss Dugong is wearing?"

"Hmm?" King Neptune hummed, leaning in to see more closely. All five Dugongs in front of the Straw Hats' party were still naked from the 'waist' down, but wore suit coats, bandanas in their usual colors, and neckerchiefs or bowties around their necks. The TDWS all wore round sunglasses as well, evoking the image of yakuza soldiers, but Boss was different. In addition to the bandolier around his torso and the cigar in his jowls, he was wearing...

"Ah, those are triangle shades, dear, jamon. Designed more for appearance than for practicality, jamon. I hope you're not asking because you want a pair?"

"Oh!" Shirahoshi gasped, bringing her hands to her mouth. "No, no, I was just curious about them. I hadn't seen them before."

"They're not common, your highness," the Minister of the Left said, stroking his beard thoughtfully. "Though I do recall one child from a decade or so ago who was quite taken with them. He was a loud and boisterous kid with a good heart, but he kept trying to form something of a gang and he kept going on about the surface as well."

"I heard rumors that he tamed an orangutan sea king and rode off for the surface; he hasn't been
heard from since," the Minister of the Right added.

Shirahoshi nodded in understanding, though her brow furrowed in thought. "Ah… Minister, what is an orangutan?"

"This may take a while, jamon," Neptune chuckled lightly as his left and right hands scrambled for answers.

-o-

"…Laki?"

"Yes, Wiper?"

"I'd like to take you up on that offer you made a few weeks ago to design a set of formal clothes."

"I told you so!" Aisa sang.

"You, however, are still not going anywhere near a ship flying a Jolly Roger."

"Sea King balls!"

"AISA!"

"Phhhbt!"

"Heheheh…"

"YOU TOO! I KNOW WHERE SHE PICKS IT UP!"

Apart from the banter, the source of this change in mindset for the Shandian was the image of the Straw Hats' gunner on the screen. White dress shirt and red tie, a white scarf that reached down to her thighs on both sides, and the rest of her in black: black shoes, black pants, black coat, and even the white beret they'd last seen her in swapped out for a black model.

And with Su completing the image by curling around her neck and toting a black fedora all her own…

"You go, gangsta girl…” Aisa breathed reverently, stars twinkling in her eyes.

-o-

"HAHAHAHAHAHA! Oh, that's just awesome," Paulie laughed, gesturing at the figure beside Conis. Even with all that they knew of the Straw Hat Pirates, the most famous of them on the island of Water 7 was Going Merry, the autonomous ship whom the crew had given a new life even when Galley-La's best couldn't fix her.

And currently, said ship was standing in the form that new life had given her: a young girl with white hair, clad in a black overcoat over a red shirt and a decorated peaked cap. Her face bore a quiet smile that held a clear tone of malice, and perhaps most notably, she was the one hauling the rotary cannon, a weapon both twice as tall and thick around her as she was, not counting the ammo drum, with absolutely no effort.

"How can something be so adorable and so badass at the same time?" Oimo snickered in agreement. "Those idiots are in for it now."
"Just like Enies Lobby all over again," Kashi laughed in agreement, fist-bumping his partner.

That good cheer only lasted until their captains' fists cracked down on their skulls.

"BACK TO WORK!"/ "WE'LL TELL YOU WHAT HAPPENS LATER!"

"BASTARDS!"

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Not far from the end of Paradise, the two Marines whose actions had ultimately led to the founding of the New World Masons observed the lineup of the Straw Hat Pirates, their eyes falling on one figure in particular. Directly beside Nefertari Vivi and Carue stood the Voices of Anarchy and their partners.

Jeremiah Cross wore his gauntlets, greaves, and cap, along with a brown shirt with a wide collar and a loose tie colored a darker brown, framed by an open jacket and pants that were a shade darker still. He carried the sword Funkfreed in his right hand, the snarling Lassoo on his back, and Soundbite on his shoulder, a pair of sunglasses doing nothing to hide the glare he was burning over the shades or the fangs he was baring.

And as for Cross himself?

"Commodore Smoker… meaning no disrespect, I've found myself wishing often over the past few months that Cross could be a little more like… well…"

"Like me?" Smoker asked quietly.

"Y-Yes, sir."

"So have I," the Commodore admitted. "I've hated his smartassery since the first time we talked in Loguetown, and I kept thinking to myself that it would be so much easier to tolerate that someone like him helped us form the New World Masons if he were more serious."

The both of them looked back at Cross. His hat was tilted to shadow the upper part of his face, but they could see his eyes. And they were cold. Utterly devoid of humor, of enjoyment, of eagerness… of mercy. The last time Cross had faced down a man that he actually hated enough to murder, he hadn't once lost his witty, if sadistic, sense of humor.

He had long since lost that now. When the two Marines looked at their ally… their friend, who had opened their eyes to the truth, all they saw was a cold-blooded pirate who wouldn't hesitate to reduce any enemy in his path to a ravaged corpse.

"And what do you think now, Tashigi?"

The Lieutenant looked between Cross and Roronoa Zoro, whose eyes gleamed with even more promised murder.

"I really want him to start cracking jokes again…" she swallowed fearfully.

Smoker nodded tersely in agreement. "We'll just have to wait and see once this is all done, then. Right now, I'm more concerned with someone else: where the hell is Straw—?"

Before the Commodore could complete the question, the Straw Hats all parted and formed two rows before the gaping hole in the wall. And in the middle of them all…
Smoker's cigars dropped to the ground, forgotten as the two Marines gaped at just what they were seeing.

"Oh. My. God," Tashigi breathed, voicing at the same time her own thoughts, Smoker's, and the world's.

-0-

On the other side of the world, for the second time that month, the Totland Archipelago was completely paralyzed.

Only five individuals in the whole stretch of sea were left conscious. Four were the Big Mom Pirates' Sweet Commanders, who, at the epicenter of the event, had all fallen to their knees, with Katakuri only just managing to land in a three-point position and keep himself mostly upright via liberal application of Mochi supports as their mother and captain's rage billowed throughout the palace.

The fifth was the source of the event herself: the Emperor of the Seas known as Charlotte 'Big Mom' Linlin, whose mood had just pulled a complete 180.

Just moments earlier, she had been perfectly jovial as she enjoyed a casual tea party with her beloved family, enjoying many a treat while watching the old coot Shiki flail about in Paradise, and totally ignorant of her children and underlings subtly constructing bunkers and shelters all along the archipelago behind her back.

And then, out of the blue, her mood had flipped. Now Linlin was furious, the air itself rippling around her as she flooded her domain with her presence, and crushed everyone within her grasp. Crushed their very beings with the image of a giant, a colossus, a titan, large enough to blot out the very sun, arms outreached from horizon to horizon and threatening to smother the world.

And the source of this outrage was the picture being projected on a screen by a Transponder Snail that only barely remained half-conscious by Katakuri's sparse efforts.

While twenty-one of the Straw Hat Pirates stood on either side of a self-formed corridor, their captain was the last to enter the room, the light from behind him showing him only as a silhouette for a moment. A straw hat, a billowing coat…

And seeing that silhouette, only one thought came across Charlotte Linlin's mind.

One thought crossed the mind of every member of the old generation in the world.

One thought.

One face.

One smile.

One name.

"ROOOGEEEER..." Big Mom breathed murderously.

-0-

Shiki ruthlessly quashed the vision that his mind's eye forced upon him at seeing the form of that straw hat-wearing pirate. He refused to see the resemblance to his former rival. Roger was dead, gone, no more. And no matter how much the world insisted that this man was his successor, he
refused to believe that he would lose with his superior forces to a man from the East Blue. Not now, and never again. *Never again.*

'And yet, here they are,' a traitorous part of his mind supplied.

He schooled his angered expression into one of dull interest, lighting a new cigar. "So, you want another round. Color me surprised."

The Straw Hat Pirates calmly entered the room, marching between the commanders of the Golden Lion Pirates, who continued to observe them with vague interest. Behind them, Barto strolled up to his own subordinates, who nodded at him, before descending into hushed conversation.

"You're planning on attacking the East Blue," Straw Hat Luffy stated quietly, his hat shadowing his eyes.

"Finally caught on to that, did you?" Shiki scoffed.

The crew paused as they reached the middle of the room, and Luffy raised his head to show one furious eye. "And Nami, she's OK?"

The Golden Lion's grin took on a special kind of evil. "Sure, she's doing peachy!"

The assembled attendants snickered at the apparent joke. Shiki was quick to join them.

The Straw Hats, meanwhile, were just as quick to bristle. In particular, Cross and Zoro tensed up as though they'd been delivered electric shocks, their eyes gleaming with untold emotion in the shadows of their headwear.

"Jihahahahaha!" Shiki, however, was blind to the shift, be it through casual ignorance or his own will. "You sure put up a dangerous front. But you don't think this motley crew of yours is going to walk out of here alive, do you?" So saying, he raised his hand and snapped his fingers.

On cue, the remaining screen walls in the room fell, kicked down by the pirates on the other sides. It was quickly apparent that the Straw Hats were woefully outnumbered; hundreds of armed and sharp-dressed pirates filled the left and right side of both stories of the room. A small army, armed to the teeth and all focused on the one, single crew that stood opposed to them.

The Straw Hats' sole reaction was to give the soldiers the most cursory of glances before dismissing them.

"I figured only one of you would be naïve enough to believe that she could sacrifice herself to save her home. But now you're rushing in here, an entire suicide squad," Shiki drawled, puffing on his cigar. "Well, I suppose it's just for the best. If I can't toast my new alliance with sake, then I shall just have to baptize it in your blood."

"You're as dumb as you look," Luffy bit out, wiping the smile from Shiki's face. "Nami would never sacrifice herself, idiot. She joined your crew… *so she could attack from the inside!*

As the captain raised his voice, the rest of the crew raised their weapons, cocking them and holding them at the ready. Rifles, blunderbusses, shotguns, cannons, all manner of high-power firearms, aimed in every direction around them.

"Now prepare yourself, Shiki the Golden Lion!" Luffy roared, taking a floor-shaking stomp in Shiki's direction. "We won't lose the same fight twice!"
Apparently, that was the cue for every Straw Hat with a ranged weapon—and at this moment, that meant every last one of them—to open up on everyone else in the room. Most of the pirates in the first ragged row had no time to react before they were enveloped in bullet hell. And those that did have time to react were either met with another weapon as they dodged or else had their cover demolished by the heavier artillery.

Ten seconds in, and already a quarter of the pirates in the room were down with bullet, shrapnel, or explosive wounds. And not only was the bullet hell not letting up, the complete and utter grim silence with which the Straw Hats were working just made things *worse*. It made some of the pirates long for them to say something. *Anything.*

"MWAHAHAHAHA! Entire crew is *babies!*"

"Go home to mommy! YOHOHOHOHOHOHO!"

On second thought, 'anything' did not include Merry and Brook cackling and taunting them. They could really do without that.

Witnessing the devastation and also seeing that the incensed rubber man out for his head was emptying his clip at an almost possessed pace, Shiki knew that there was only one smart option at the moment.

"Captain—!" one of the Golden Lion's lackies exclaimed, hastily running up to his captain.

"Right…" Shiki growled, turning to walk behind his throne.

WHOOSH! KRASH!

But he froze and snapped his attention back to the chaos when the *utterly inconceivable* occurred.

-o-

I could and most definitely would have continued my onslaught for as long as Lassoo would let me, but I cut myself off when everyone else started to click empty around me.

"Gngh, I'm out of ammo," Franky grunted, tossing the two bazookas he was using at Merry, who promptly shoved them into her jacket. The rest of the crew followed suit, the caravel-girl giggling ecstatically at the sheer amount of firepower she had housed within her hull.

"Never seems to be enough bullets to take 'em all down," Sanji quipped as he cast his gaze around the rest of the room, which was slowly starting to get its wits back together.

"Speak for yourself, hombre," Lassoo growled, morphing to his semi-form on my shoulder so he could shoot a smirk at our cook. "I've still got bombs for days."

"Ditto on that point, howlitzer," Merry giggled, knocking loose her steaming cannon's empty drum and just as swiftly fitting in a fresh replacement. "I've got a belly full of red hot lead and I intend to *share.*"

"Sorry, Sanji, but they do have a point," Conis smiled at the Monster as she slotted in a fresh Flavor Dial. "We experienced gunners do tend to carry spares. Ah, by the way, Merry—?"

"Here ya go!" The ship-girl withdrew a large bundled object from her hold and tossed it to the angel.

"Aaaaand the dugong makes four!" Mikey snickered, earnestly spinning his pistols about his flippers.
"Don't you feel foolish!"

"Oh, cram it," Sanji huffed out in a weary cloud of smoke.

"Enough," Luffy growled, cutting off the chatter. We all snapped to attention. "Cross?"

I nodded at my captain before scanning over our crewmates one by one. "Usopp, Chopper. You're our best trackers, find Nami and get her back in fighting condition."

"On it!" Usopp snapped into a salute as he finished shrugging off the heaviest pieces of his armor.

"And then Indigo?" Chopper questioned in a tight tone, thumbing his facemask over his nose.

"And then Indigo, right," I nodded before moving on to one of our larger and smaller crewmates respectively. "Merry, Carue. Work together, go nuts through this place, take anything that's shiny and isn't nailed down."

"WOOHOO! IMMA BE A LOOTER!" Merry cackled, leaping onto Carue's back as Vivi slid off, and almost flattening the poor duck on account of how she was still toting the one-ton cannon.

"Oh gaaaaawd…" Carue wheezed, but despite his quaking knees, I could tell that he was still good for it.

"Robin," I glanced at our grim archaeologist. "Think you can—?"

"— Find whatever information Shiki's accumulated over the years and appropriate it for ourselves?" Robin smirked as she tilted her hat down over her eyes. "I think I can do something along those lines, yes."

"Fantastic," I nodded gratefully. And then I turned towards our most recent powerhouse, who was clenching and unclenching her hand. "Everyone else, fuck things up. And Vivi… think you're feeling up to bringing down the heavens?"

Vivi brought her hand up to stare at it before slowly looking up at me. "No…" she breathed. Then, before I could ask what she meant, her other hand combed through her hair and tugged out her hair tie, shaking her long blue mane free. Something crystallized in Vivi's eyes, and a miniature vortex spun into existence in the palm of her hand.

"I'd rather raise the roof."

And with that the Princess shoved her cyclone-bearing hand heavenward and clenched her fingers into a fist, crushing the vortex in her palm.

"RA'S WRATH!"

I whistled as our party was suddenly encircled by a roaring pillar of air that shot up, into and clean through the ceiling, blasting the roof apart with contemptuous ease. The glare Shiki shot Vivi's way through the clearing smoke was almost as impressive.

=o=

The throne room of Alubarna Palace was dead silent as the occupants all stared at the princess's display of might.

"She did it…" Cobra whispered, tears of so many emotions welling up in his eyes.
"My sincerest apologies, Shiki the Golden Lion," Vivi curtsied politely as the smoke dissipated, her gaze never once breaking with her enemy. "Did I forget to mention that I'm a Logia now?"

"She looks just like her mother," Pell breathed, pride in his voice.

"Right down to the 'repent or suffer' look," Chaka concurred.

"Heheheh, please," Accino chuckled with a wave of his cigars. "I was married once as well. You mean 'repent and suffer less'."

Cobra slowly allowed a vicious grin to come across his face. "The only difference," he stated proudly. "Is that Shiki has long since made his choice."

-0-

OK, now the way Shiki was glowering was impressive. If looks could kill, Vivi would have been a greasy smear on the floor, Logia or no Logia.

"SHIKI!"

Still, it didn't last long before Luffy made a beeline for Shiki and prompted the bastard to make a run for it. Gritting my teeth, I went after my captain, Zoro right beside me. And a good thing, too, because Scarlet and Indigo popped up out of nowhere right behind Luffy, the bandaged clown brandishing an oversized sabre and the gorilla sporting a pair of brass knuckles I just bet were laced with sea prism stone.

They turned to face us, and it wasn't hard to imagine them tearing into Luffy's unprotected back otherwise. I raised Funkfreed—

"OUT OF THE WAY, MORONS!"

—And then hurled myself out of the way when Soundbite blared a train horn in my ear and an annoyingly familiar voice shouted behind us. Zoro followed a split second later, but Indigo and Scarlet were slower on the uptake, which meant that Barto, a shimmering cow catcher projected a half foot in front of him, practically ran them over in his haste to… follow Luffy?!

I shook the dizziness of the dodge from my head before shooting a glare at Barto's retreating back. "Damn it all, Barty, what the hell do you think you're playing at?!" I grumbled to myself.

-0-

"WAIT UP, STRAW HAT!"

Luffy turned his furious gaze over his shoulder, prepared to slam his fist into whoever had dared to try attacking him while he was after Shiki. He aborted the attack, however, when his pursuer didn't make any aggressive moves. And… something else…

"Who—?" Luffy started to call back before jerking as his memory was jogged by the other pirate's bobbing mohawk. "Ah, you're that Barty guy, right? The one we met in Loguetown? What're you doing here?"

"Wh-What do you think?" Bartolomeo stammered, huffing as he tried to keep up with Luffy's insane pace. "I-I'm coming with you! I'm gonna help you k-kick Shiki's ass!"

Luffy's curiosity faded into annoyance, and he snorted and snapped his head forward. "I don't need
your help! Go back and help the others!"

"Wh-What!?!" Barto squawked, cold sweat breaking out over his brow. "Th-That's not—! Y-You can't—! Nnngh!" 'Black Bart' clawed his fingers down his face. "J-Just listen to—!"

"I don't need to!" Luffy barked impatiently, starting to increase his pace. "This bastard threatened our home and stole our crewmate! This is my fight! So stay out of—!"

"WILL YOU SHUT THE FUCK UP AND LISTEN TO ME, YOU DUMB BASTARD!?"

More out of surprise than actual fear, Luffy looked back at Bartolomeo, whose expression had morphed into a full-on scowl.

"I set out to sea because of you, Straw Hat!" the fang-toothed pirate bellowed proudly, his jaw set with ineffable determination. "I've followed your crew's journey every step of the way, even before the SBS! I know how you do things, I know that Shiki declared war on you the moment he hurt one of your crewmates, and I'm not going to stand in your way. BUT!"

Barto put on a burst of speed, actually managing to catch up to and run alongside Luffy, glaring dead ahead after Shiki. "The East Blue is my home too!" he declared. "I've got my boys there, my family! And I'm not just going to sit back on my ass when I can actually make a difference! I'm going to fight for them, tooth and nail, no matter what you or anyone else has to say about it! And if you don't like it... then you can get the fuck out of my way!"

Bartolomeo winced at insulting his idol like that, but it seemed to cement Luffy's attention on him. He was silent for a few moments, glaring at his fellow East Blue captain.

"How do you fight?"

Accurately interpreting the meaning of Luffy's question, Bartolomeo grinned as he locked eyes with him. "Good old fisticuffs crossed with my Barrier powers. I can hit anyone, but they can't hit me back."

Luffy nodded and refocused his attention ahead. "Alright. Let's go, Black Bart!"

Bart's leer stretched from ear to ear. "Right there with you, Straw Hat!"

-o-

I stared after Bartolomeo and Luffy, automatically climbing to my feet. I hadn't expected that, but with my annoyance ebbing I could admit that Barto was the best candidate to actually help Luffy against Shiki. This wasn't a bad thing, not at all, no matter how much the petty side of me wanted to say otherwise for getting a train horn blasted in my ear.

"What was that about?" Zoro grunted, massaging the spot on his thigh where Barto had clipped him.

"Barto's living his dream right now," I answered. "Don't worry about it, he'll either be a net help for Luffy or Luffy will knock him out before he makes too big a nuisance of himself. Either way, we should probably focus on our own situation."

Zoro snorted, slowly turning to look over his shoulder. "Yeah, speaking of which..."

As Zoro said, 'our situation' was, ah, not optimal, so to speak. I don't know how many pirates were in the room with us, but it was at least a few dozen, and these weren't the grunts that we'd mowed down earlier. No, these guys were all staring at us without any fear, without any hesitation, with total
certainty in not only their own victories, but their having the strength to achieve said victories.

All that, coupled with the jackets they had slung over their shoulders, and I'm fairly certain that these were all captains, every last one of them.

"Soundbite, headcount?" I muttered out the corner of my mouth.

"FIfty of these guys out in the front," he answered. "And, uh, don't panic, but we didn't get every one of the grunts. 'Nother four hundred and fifty behind them."

I clicked my tongue in a sharp tsk. "So," I sighed out loud. "Final count, it's us two, a loud-mouthed third mate tactician with his partners and a first mate swordsman, against fifty of the strongest captains in paradise, along with the top fighters in their crews. Close to five hundred pirates against two."

"I think we can take them," Zoro said as he retrieved and brandished his unsheathed Wado Ichimonji. "Do you think we can take them?"

"You always think we can take them," I groused, though that didn't stop an eager grin. It was this grin that I turned on the captains surrounding us. "So? What are you guys waiting for? An engraved invitation?"

That did it. One graybeard stood, drew his sword, and pointed it at us. "Get those little pests!" he barked. "Kill them all!"

Immediately, the crowd surged towards us, the larger part breaking for Zoro and a smaller but still significant chunk going for me. I grinned and hefted my partners. After the last week… I needed this.

Hefting Lassoo, I pulled the trigger as fast as I could, baseball bombs soaring over the heads of the frontline to thin out the crowd to the rear. Adding to the carnage was Soundbite pitching in with the Bass Cannon every time a bomb went off, creating veritable walls of sound that turned anything in their path to jelly. Gunfire rang out, but a swift swing of Funkfreed had him wrapped around me, the bullets pinging off his steel hide prompting the pirates to mostly abandon their guns.

Still, about twenty bombs later, the leading two captains were almost on me with the rest of the horde only reeling. One was a full-bearded fellow with a brown coat trimmed in fur and a painful-looking X-shaped scar on his forehead carrying a massive iron club, while the other was an aged woman, her black hair done up in a long pigtail and her Chinese-style dress torn at the waist to expose an armored breastplate, brandishing cutlass and dagger.

Both were also in the danger zone of Lassoo's baseball bombs. And neither of them were concerned as they charged toward me, the looks on their faces clearly expecting me to go down in a matter of seconds so that they could move along. If I were a little less incensed, I'd probably be grateful that the misconception that my voice was the only dangerous part about me had lasted this long.

I dedicated myself to disabusing them of that notion with an almost savage glee.


Funkfreed withdrew to his blade form, which made the captains pick up speed, but they were given pause by water spraying down the length of his blade from his hilt, courtesy of his old Water Dial. A moment later, his new Cool Dial flash-froze the water into a secondary blade of pure ice.

"Cani-Pyro!"
Lassoo followed suit, reverting into his cannon mode. He then coughed out a measured stream of gas that he swiftly ignited. Said flames coalesced into a controlled pillar of blue flames, easily as long and as thick as Lassoo was.

Preparations complete, I hefted up my partners and greeted the captains with a savage smirk.

"Beast Blitz," I chuckled grimly. "Bring it."

They were only too happy to comply.

The woman's blades not only froze over almost immediately upon slamming into my own, but the ice glued her hands to her own weapons and Funkfreed's edge, while Lassoo's blowtorch went through scarfase's club like it was made of butter. The looks on their faces were priceless.

"GASTRO-nation."

And then Soundbite rang their skulls like church bells and put them right out of the fight. Good timing, too, because the rest of the crowd had arrived. This was no time for subtlety or fancy tactics. Instead, I simply waded into the fight, swinging Lassoo and Funkfreed around equal parts calculated intent and reckless abandon. With the temperature effects they were running, that was still enough to clear large swaths of pirates.

It was incredibly satisfying.

But it just. Wasn't. Enough.

Gritting my teeth, I tossed aside Funkfreed and Lassoo—who promptly swapped to their hybrid forms and took up the charge on their own—and punched one of the non-captains in a pinstriped suit square in the nose. That he crumpled like a sack of flour was so much more satisfying than using my partners.

And while Zoro and I were tearing through these guys, no one could ever accuse them of being stupid. Weak and as coordinated as drunken monkeys on a waxed floor, but not stupid. The nearest captain, one wearing a blue shirt and sporting fish-like fins behind his ears, charged me, clearly intent on grappling me, shouting, "Everyone, dogpile him! It's just that dumbass bigmouth Cross!"

I waited until he came close, then grabbed his hands as he made to strangle me. His eyes widened slightly when I didn't crumple immediately. And then I squeezed, his wrists crumpling beneath my fingers like empty soda cans.

-o-

"Brutal," Kid sneered appreciatively, his fingers twitching with potential violence just itching to be released as he observed the beatdown.

"Oh, God help me..." Killer dragged his fingers down his mask, groaning miserably as he contemplated the inevitable meeting of the two pirates and the fallout that would come of it.

-o-

"Wh-What?!" the captain gasped in shock and pain, staring numbly at his destroyed hands. Then I yanked his arms down and rammed my knee into his chin, dropping him to the ground.

"... 'just Cross'?" I chuckled with deceptive, icy calm as I made a show of dusting my hands off. "Ohhh nonono... let me explain something to you lot."
Several pirates, non-captains, tried to bum-rush me. A punch here, an elbow there, a dodge to let one fellow sprawl painfully against a wooden support beam. I helped him along to dreamland by planting my boot against the back of his head, and I was sorely tempted to give him a half dozen more for good measure.

"Now… this might come as a bit of a shock to some people, but the truth is?" I gestured at myself with a smile. "I… am an angry person. It's true, I am, I am a very angry person. Bit new to me too, seeing as it only really started up since I came to the Grand Line, but, well…" I shrugged as I shattered the jaw of someone trying to sneak up on me with a backhand. "There it is.

"Normally, this doesn't really show because I channel my anger constructively, I let it out through my words as I slowly but surely tear the World Government down, piece by piece. But see, for the past week?" I ducked as another pirate swung a bulky arm at my head. I then snagged said limb in a crushing grip and wrenched the limb around my assailant's back. "I haven't been able to do that."

I ratcheted up the pressure on my captive's arm as I spoke. "I haven't been able to do that, because for the past week, my crew and I have been trapped in a primordial hellhole, fighting for our lives against monsters that outweighed us fifty to one apiece, courtesy of an arrogant bastard who decided to ignore my every warning, my every repeated message concerning the sanctity of our crew, and made the fan-fucking-tastic life choice of fucking with me and mine in a most glorious manner. As such?"

"SNAP!"

My captive howled in agony and I let him drop to the ground as he lost all resistance in his shoulder.

"I am," I smiled politely, holding my fingertips less than an inch apart. "Just the slightest, tiniest bit, somewhat pent up."

Another captain joined into the fray, resplendent in a white uniform trimmed in gold with an impressively tall hat. He also had gray skin, black pits for eyes, sharp claws and teeth… oh, and also had a good three feet on me, height-wise. That's probably why he thought it would be a good idea to jump at me from the second floor like some panther on the hunt or something.

"Now, I'm no fool." I tugged down my hat and grinned, even as the rabid pirate descended on me. "I know for a fact that I can't even lay so much as a scratch upon Shiki, no matter how much I want to. I can't even touch him." I then snapped a glare up at the pirate. "But you."

Before dead-eyes could react, I snapped my metal-clad fists out and snagged the captain by the lapels of his oh so nice jacket, snatching him clean out of the air and holding him nice and high off the ground where all he could do was scrabble and squirm at and in my literal steel grip.

"You all who decided to join him, to stay allied with his flag, even after he, at the risk of repeating myself, fucked with me and mine, in a very public, impossible to ignore manner," I hissed venomously, grinning up at my victim-to-be. "You, I can touch. You… I can break. But still, just in case, just in case this all sailed clean over your dumb little heads… let me make this as easy for you as I can possibly make it…"

Spinning around, I shifted my grip and then slammed the captain into the floor, turning it into splinters and shaking the whole room.

I then, very slowly, very deliberately, turned at my heel and regarded the pirates who had all frozen in place like the disgusting scum they were, scowling with pure malice as I slowly cracked my knuckles, one by one, ensuring that they could all hear it.
"Daddy needs to express some rage," I rumbled grimly.

Ahhhhhh. That’s the stuff. And the fact that the rest of the crowd around me—and it was a pretty sizeable crowd, still—was taking a fearful step back, terror written on every square millimeter of their faces, was the gourmet icing on this delicious cake. Then I blinked.

"Huh. This must be what Shiki feels like all the time. Explains a lot, really." I turned back to the crowd, who all took another step back. "Now, who wants some?" Not waiting for an answer, I pointed at a pirate at random. "You. You want some."

"Oh, God—GRK!"

That choking noise? That would be me holding him up by his throat, Funkfreed covering me while I made my point. "Don't bother," I chortled, sheer madness gleaming in my eyes. "My captain already punted him off his throne. Wanna guess who spat in his face first?!"

-o-

Mr. 5 eyed the sharp metal whirlwind that was Roronoa Zoro's position as he strolled into the chaotic mess that had once been Shiki's throne room. "My my, this is really turning out to be quite the party," he remarked, catching a sword-armed pirate with his foot. Which exploded.

"Kyahahaha!" Miss Valentina cackled, floating above the chaos. "And me without my banana! I feel so underdressed!"

One eyebrow rose above 5's sunglasses. "Why would you need a banana at a party?"

"You always take a banana to a party!" Valentine replied as she came crashing down on some poor fool who happened to be under her.

A muscle in 5's cheek twitched. "…alright, let's try again: What good is a banana at a party?"

"Excellent source of potassium!" Sanji answered as he skidded past, surfing on a pirate whose head he had under his heel.

"Thank you~!" Valentine called after him.

"Why do I even bother…" 5 shrugged with a defeated sigh.

Suddenly, a knot of pirates exploded. Literally. Both former Baroque Works agents glanced to the site of the explosion, and were thoroughly unsurprised to see Cross there, dog-gun retrieved and smoking on his shoulder. They were surprised to see 'Thief Lord' Ernesto Barbarossa among the fallen pirates, blood dribbling out of his ears. Taking a moment to catch an attacking pirate and explode his hand in his face, Mr. 5 sighed and turned to his partner.

"…Miss Valentine, what was that you were saying a couple of months ago, before we met the Kuja Pirates?" he asked in a tight, if conversational tone.

"I was saying that we need to let go of our grudge against the Straw Hats because of how much their stupid luck has rubbed off on us," the woman said, more focused on the display than the pirate fruitlessly trying to cut through her umbrella, the poor bastard entirely unaware that the parasol was, in reality, entirely steel down to the last fiber and was only portable due to currently weighing a mere fraction of its normal weight.

"That's what I thought," 5 nodded. "I'm starting to agree wholeheartedly with that."
Valentine hummed as she snapped her parasol shut, allowing her attacker to overcompensate with his next swing, and then brained him with the full weight of her weapon of choice, which hit like a ton of... well, anything. "That's good."

"That said," 5 plowed on. "I still want my shot at wringing Cross's scrawny neck."

"Oh, now that's an entirely different kettle of fish," Valentine scoffed, jabbing her umbrella's tip in the bigmouth's general direction. "You take everything above the waist, I call everything below."

"I heard that."

The two of them stiffened as Cross side-eyed them, the literally murderous look in his eyes freezing them where they stood.

"I'm only going to say this once: if anyone who is not on my crew attacks me right here, right now, I will not be held responsible if they don't survive it," his voice informed them, right in their ears, in a perfectly conversational tone of voice.

The two Devil Fruit users looked at each other. Then they proceeded to walk—not run, of course not, why would they run, they didn't need to run, not from him of all people—away without another word.

-o-

"..."

Something tried to pierce the hazy shade of Nami's mind.

"...i..."

Something tickled her senses, attempting to bring herself back to consciousness.

"...a...i..."

Something was pushing and pulling at her. She couldn't be sure if it was physical or mental.

"...ami...Nami..."

Her name. Someone was calling her name. That was the push she needed to stir into consciousness.

"Nami... Nami?"

She didn't recognize the voice. It sounded young, more male than female, and concerned. She also processed the fact that something was prodding at her face.

"Nami? Nami, please wake up, please wake up! I'm sorry! So so sorry! I'll do anything you say, I won't ever run away again, so please! Please!"

The prodding suddenly became a straight up jackhammer.

"WAKE U—!" SLAM!

"CUT IT OUT, YOU STUPID DUCK!" Nami shrieked as she slammed an uppercut into Billy's beak, knocking him off of her.

A second later, however, Nami nearly collapsed as the extra energy granted to her by her adrenaline
cut out, leaving her right back at death's door. Her mind reeled from the green haze choking it, but her analytical mind was still capable of discerning three facts about her situation.

First, she had been cut loose of the bindings that Shiki had strung her up with, and she was laid out in the snow a good dozen metres away from the Daft Green grove.

Second, Perona was free as well, lying in the snow next to her, but was still incoherent on account of the green bruises that had mottled her face.

And third, most important of all…

"Billy…?" Nami wheezed through her too-tight throat, blinking at the red-yellow blur she could vaguely recognize as her avian friend.

"Nami!" the electric avian squawked in relief, flapping over her ecstatically. "You're alright! Oh thank heck, I was so worried! I-I'm so so so sorry that I flew away earlier, I-I-I was just so scared, and-and-and look!"

Billy held up his shaking wings, and Nami blinked at the large metal orb he seemed to be holding. "I-Is that… my Jet Dial?" Nami coughed in confusion.

"I-It was the b-biggest piece I could find and-and-and I'm so sorry I wasn't there to help and, a-and…" Tears welled in Billy's eyes as he bowed his head. "Please… p-please, y-you're my-my first friend… m-only friend… s-so please, don't hate me…" the duck sobbed, rubbing at his eyes. "D-Don't hate me for running! D-Don't be mad, p-please don't be—GWAK!"

Billy was choked off by Nami throwing her arms around his neck and hanging onto him for dear life. "Y-You came…" the redhead sobbed into his plumage. "A-And if you're talking… th-then that means the others came too… you're here, you're all here…"

Billy returned the embrace with similar relief, smiling at the forgiveness she gave so easily. Though concern returned immediately upon seeing her slump to the ground, struggling to breathe.

"N-Nami! What's going—?"

"The poison," Nami croaked weakly, shaking her head. "Billy… B-Back in the trees, the fuses… on the dynamite. Y-You need to ignite them, h-hurry…"

"W-What?!" Billy squawked with a panicked flap. "B-But if I do, th-then the Daft Greens! The others!"

"That's the plan," Nami breathed. "Shiki won't know what hit him…"

Billy stared at Nami in horror, but she shook her head. "Worry about us after… we need to—"

"Idiot."

Duck and witch started as a soft hiss suddenly came from nearby, and their attention turned toward the huffing, scowling form of Perona, who was clawing at her collar.

"Get… this… off. I'll… trigger… the bombs…" she panted.

Nami processed that and looked at Billy, who frowned as he looked at the collar.

"I-I dunno if I can…" Billy muttered noncommittally, nosing at the keyhole.
"Bring her—*hurk,*" Nami heaved as her throat seized up on her. Grimacing with effort, she rifled her hand through her hair and withdrew a hairpin. "Bring her here, q-quick…"

Billy hastily complied, taking Perona into his talons and bringing her over to Nami. She put the pin in the lock and had it off in seconds. Black humor played across her face.

"Well… at least now I can say that I c-could literally pick locks on my deathbed," she chuckled.

"And *I'm*… supposed to be the one… with a morbid sense of humor," Perona wheezed, raising her hand. Slowly, strugglingly, a cluster of Mini Hollows spilled out and flew toward the trees.

Nami watched with grim satisfaction, and in a few moments more, when the only obstacle preventing Shiki from falling victim to his own monsters perished in fire, that smile widened into a visage of outright malice.

Billy swallowed heavily as he watched the Daft Greens burn, but then his trepidation became outright terror when he heard the incensed howls of his 'brethren' in the distance. "Sh-Sh-Shouldn't we be running or something…?" he quacked fearfully.

"Nah…" Nami shook her head with a delirious snicker. "No need… I'm hurt, remember? We don't need to run…"

Billy was *about* to protest that particular decision, but before he could say much of anything, he was silenced.

Silenced by the sight of a thirty-foot tall stag striding through the burning gap in the trees and plodding its way towards them. With a forest of spear-sharp antlers protruding from its brow, the beast's stature was emphasized even further, and coupled with the rows of razor-sharp teeth in its maw and the positively evil glint in its eyes… Billy was under no illusions as to what his 'cousin's' intentions were.

The duck gulped, and out of pure instinct he snapped his wings out, preparing to take to the skies but then he steeled himself and extended his tail as well, electricity crackling around him.

"Don't bother."

Billy hesitated at Nami's soft wheeze, but elected to ignore what he knew was the result of delirium, continuing to charge himself up.

"Don't bother, Billy," Nami repeated just as airily. "I'm hurt… and that means…"

Billy grit his teeth, about to unleash his energy—

"*CHERRY BLOSSOM BLAST!* "EXPLODING STAR!" **KA-BOOOOOOM!**

And then he flinched in shock as a series of explosions enveloped the deer, followed swiftly by a gorilla-like figure skidding to a halt beside them, the familiar long-nosed form of another Straw Hat coming up quickly behind him. Both were panting with relief and satisfaction.

"Y'know… that deer looked a *lot* like my birth father…" Chopper mused as he walked up to them, gaze on the staggered, smoking stag. "And all things considered? I honestly think that I might have enjoyed that way too much."

"Considering how I'm planning on decking my own dad when I meet him before hugging him? I think your reaction was downright *healthy,/* Usopp snorted in return.
"You're... You're here," Billy said dumbly. "You-You guys actually came! I thought she was delirious!"

"Oh, she is," the reindeer responded with a roll of his eyes, fishing a pair of vials out of his backpack and tossing one to the sniper. "Faith in her crew or not, she wouldn't be staying still instead of running when she couldn't fight back if she were thinking straight. Drink this, Nami. You too, Perona."

At Chopper's gesturing, Usopp held the vial to Nami's mouth while he held the other one up to Perona's. Two assisted swallows later and the two snapped up into sitting positions, hacking and wheezing in renewed agony.

"You conscious now?" Chopper asked tersely.

"What the hell did you just make me drink!?" Nami demanded viciously, the agony in her chest the only thing preventing her from ripping his scrawny—!

"GRK!" Like that.

"Taking that as a yes," Chopper said dismissively, getting his chemicals in order. "What I just gave you was an energy booster to accelerate the progress of the secondhand IQ you ate at the Sunny through your immune system. Bitter taste, better cure..." He then frowned grimly. "Except it isn't a cure, just a stopgap measure. Daft Fever is vicious enough over a prolonged period of time from secondhand inhalation, and you just got it from the source. We need to get the pure cure, and the only way to manufacture it is from IQ plants, and the only place on the whole island I can get those..."

All present recoiled a bit as Chopper's eyes glowed cyan. "Is Indigo's laboratory."

Usopp nodded in understanding, tapping his Kabuto on his shoulder. "Need any help getting there?"

"I—"

"N-No!" Nami interrupted with a wheezing cough. "I need you to do something else for me!" Before Usopp could question what that was, she pointed out the nearby wreckage.

"AAAGH!" Usopp squawked in panic, snapping over to and cradling the metal orb desperately.

"THE WAVER!? WHAT HAPPENED TO IT?!

"Shiki happened," Nami snarled savagely before allowing her expression to soften. "But I think the Jet Dial is still intact, so maybe we can salvage something from it. Just... Just get it back to the Sunny, alright?"

Usopp hesitated for a scarce moment before nodding and taking the metal shell into his hands. "No promises about finding my way back to you guys before this is over, but I'll be back in the fight as soon as I've dropped this off."


The sniper saluted proudly before grabbing onto the metal orb, and blurring out of sight.

The doctor then glanced at Billy. "And what about you? Feel up to helping?"

Billy hesitated slightly at the question, but only for a moment before he steeled his beak and nodded. "You take Perona, I'll carry Nami."

The human-reindeer nodded and promptly got to work. It took some effort to properly situate Nami
on the duck's back, loop her arms around his neck so that she could hold on, and then finally get moving…

But once they started running, it wasn't a moment too soon because barely a second later…

"GROOOOAAAAR!"

The world itself howled havoc and set loose the everythings of war.

-o-

"Ho. Ly. Shit."

"RIKA!"

"Come on, Mom!" the young girl protested, incredulously flailing her arms at the screen. "If anything warrants swearing like a sailor, it's the end of the world! And that!" So said, she pointed at the screen.

At the devastation raging through the Golden Lion's compound. Dozens of monstrosities of varying size but equal viciousness and savagery, tearing through the walls of buildings and ripping through the assembled troops with absolute abandon. Insectoid, mammalian, avian, even some amphibian-aquatic monstrosities that had decided to venture out of their comfort zone in their desire to join the carnage. "That," Rika repeated firmly. "Is pretty much a scene right out of the end of the world right there. And it's also what's going to come down on our heads if Luffy and his friends lose! So if that doesn't warrant some swearing, I don't know what does!"

Ririka frowned heavily at her daughter's frustratingly valid reasoning, and ultimately decided to save scolding her about it for when the Straw Hats succeeded in saving them again. She wouldn't allow herself to believe that they could lose; there was too much at stake. "Normally, I'd be right there with you, Ririka."

Mother, daughter, and patrons turned to see Commander Ripper coming towards them, an uncharacteristically savage grin on his face. "But to be perfectly honest? This has got to be the most beautiful show of poetic justice that I've ever seen. When I think back of what it was like to be under Morgan's axe… for the sake of keeping our island and ocean safe from that, I'm overlooking any support that the base shows towards Luffy or any of his allies for the rest of the day."

Ririka's eyes widened as she made that connection: a tyrant enforcing his will upon what he saw as his dominion. They were once again relying on Luffy to save them from an awful fate, this time before it even began. And with that in mind, with that realization of how much it meant to them in particular that the fight worked in their favor…

She sighed and smiled lightly. "I seem to have gone temporarily deaf. It should be better by tomorrow."

Ripper smirked while Rika grinned.

-o-
Sanji thudded to the floor, grimacing in pain and frustration, one hand on a cut in his upper arm oozing blood. At least his opponents weren't in any hurry to attack him, either. Silver linings.

Surrounding him were five human-sized monsters in animal form. But for all that they were human-sized, they were a damn sight tougher than anything running around in the jungle. The wolf pacing around was blindingly fast; kicking the cobra opposite it was like kicking a metal cactus; the hare sitting well back kept pelting him with projectiles; and the steel-feathered falcon and nausea-inducing bat circling overhead were a consistent nuisance. Especially the bat. It was too bad there weren't any real recipes that featured bat.

Not to say that this had been entirely one-sided. The wolf, for one, was walking with a pronounced limp, to say nothing of their considerable caution. That meant one thing.

"Time to kick it up a notch," Sanji muttered, beginning his spin. His foot scraped on the wood, and soon bloomed with immense, crackling heat. The alphas around him all took a nervous move back, the fear of fire still ingrained in their instincts. So when Sanji leaned towards the wolf and the rabbit behind it, both flinched back, which left them completely out of position when Sanji instead took a flying leap towards the cobra, blazing foot held out.

The cobra, eyes wide, tried to slither out of the way, but it wasn't fast enough. What saved it were the falcon and bat launching metal-hard feathers and an ultrasonic scream respectively. Sanji flinched under the assault, slowing.

"You're…" he growled, planting his hand and pivoting. "Annoying!"

That pivot swung his blazing leg around and right into the bat's face. With a squawk of agony, the bat went tumbling back and hit the wall, slumping to the floor.

Sanji let himself go limp as the falcon dove at him, the bird passing over him and his foot coming up to meet it. Another squawk, a burst of feathers, and then the falcon bounded off the ceiling and plopped onto the floor, too. The remaining animals warily eyed Sanji, especially when he stood and flashed them a smirk.

"Who wants to be served next?"

As if on cue, one of the walls suddenly burst to pieces, a mid-sized crocodile with a raccoon and a scorpion on its back trotting in. The scorpion promptly launched a glob of venom at the cook, who dodged it, only to be met by a sudden raccoon dive to the face.

"Wargh!"

Only a hasty jump back saved Sanji from more than a few face scratches, and it didn't stop the rock that smacked right into his ribs. Worse, out the corner of his eye, he could see the two fliers starting to stir.

'This… could be bad,' he mentally admitted.

"Hey, Sanji, you look like you could use a hand."

Sanji glanced towards the door, where Gin was leaning against the frame, smiling like the devil.

"If you've got nothing better to do," Sanji grunted.

Now, with two fighters in the room, the animals were once again frozen, eyeing each as they tried to figure out what to do. That meant Gin had plenty of time to spin his tonfa. Time enough that they
started sparkling and crackling, until the weapons were twin blurs of radiant light.

"Primum Imperium," Gin intoned, before rushing the crocodile.

Slow as it was, the crocodile probably wouldn't have been able to dodge the blow, and it didn't even try, trusting in its protective armor. That armor, sadly, was not built to withstand a massive iron ball slamming into it, nor to stop the load of electricity that followed. With a snapping noise and a keening wail, the crocodile twitched and flailed and then fell still, the smell of charred keratin filling the room.

"Who's next?" Gin asked, scanning the room.

Sanji, meanwhile, had started moving as soon as said the name of his attack. Spinning around, he raised his foot in an axe-kick that he brought down on the still-surprised cobra sitting behind him. The blow obliterated the tatami mat and left the cobra stunned. The next five ensured that it would stay that way.

Swaying out of the way of the wolf, Sanji spun and planted his non-fire leg right into its soft underbelly. With a yipe, the wolf tumbled out of the fight, at least for now. A rock, following in its wake, was obliterated with a single kick. The two fliers tried to stay at range, but injured as they were, Sanji had no problem Moon Walking up to them.

"Premiere Hachis Hash!"

The double-kick landed square on the falcon, pitching it away again. Evading another kicked rock, Sanji touched down, right as the wolf dove for him again. The dive was promptly halted by a flaming boot to the face.

The poor abused wolf went down with a piteous whine, and Sanji turned his attention to his last two annoyances: the rabbit and the hawk.

ZZT!

In his peripheral vision, he could see Gin finish off the raccoon with just the edge of his weapons' electrical field. The last two alphas evidently saw that, too; the rabbit kicked a hole in the wall and bolted through, the falcon following shortly behind.

"Should we go after them?" Gin asked.

"Nah, waste of energy," Sanji waved a hand dismissively, his other hand occupied with lighting up a new cigarette. "Let them run off and either raise hell or get crushed elsewhere, I don't care. I only fought them because they cornered me. More importantly…" Sanji eyed Gin's weapons appreciatively. "Nice technique. Let me guess, magnets in the orbs?"

"Heh!" The dead-eyed man smirked and nodded in confirmation. "Good eye, yeah. It just came to me. Amazing what you can do when you really buckle down, huh?"

"Tell me about it…" the cook chuckled as he shook the lingering smoke from his leg. He then frowned thoughtfully. "The name's got me curious, though. Primum, where have I heard that before…?"

"The Primum Mobile, from Dante's Paradiso," the gaunt man explained with a sage nod. "It's the layer of heaven where angels reside."

Sanji's curly eyebrow quirked. "I thought your epithet was 'Man-Demon'—?"
"Yeah, I completely flipped my image the first chance I got once I broke ranks with Krieg," Gin snarled, scowling. After a deep breath, though, he shot his old friend a cocky smirk. "Anyway. You're now looking at the man known as the 'Empyrean Envoy', worth ¥80 Million."

The Straw Hat's eyes shot wide in shock. "Okay, I know what that one means, and you'll excuse me if I have a hard time believing the Marines would actually give that to you of their own free will."

"Weeeell," Gin's grin slowly darkened tauntingly. "In all fairness, I did have some help in getting it to stick."


Gin slowly cracked his neck back and forth. "Do you know what the first thing angels say is whenever they appear?"

"Er…"

"They always say 'be not afraid'. And the reason they say that, it's not to be comforting…"

Gin tilted his head at just the right angle so that his grin was at peak malevolence.

"It's because angels, in their truest forms, are fucking terrifying."

"… well, I'm sold," Sanji declared. He then turned an evil eye out of the room. "But now that that's cleared up… want to go and help me put the fear of both those above and below in these bastards?"

Gin matched the grin tooth for tooth as he slowly started to spin up a fresh charge. "I thought you'd never ask."

-o-

Dr. Indigo was a genius. No how much they hated how he used his surplus IQ, nobody could deny that fact. So when he heard the commands that Jeremiah Cross gave to the Straw Hat Pirates and failed to stop Luffy (and 'Black Bart' Bartolomeo, the damn traitor) from pursuing his captain, he knew there was really only one thing that a genius like him could do: flee the center of the chaos and ensure that if he had to fight, it would be on his terms, on his ground, and most importantly, in a way that ensured that no Human Zoans were getting their grubby paws on his precious research.

So Dr. Indigo had arrived at his laboratory mere minutes after the Straw Hats' invasion commenced, and had spent that time ensuring that all of his most valuable devices and notes were sealed away. He might have worried if their navigator was still up and about, but nobody else would have the skills to get through his security. After everything was secured, he finally got around to unwinding the bandages from his head and reapplying his makeup.

The Hollow-girl's parting shot had destroyed much of his hair and left more than a little bruising on his face, leaving his appearance different than he was used to. This and the fact that they were invading the East Blue, vindicating his ingenuity to the world, inspired the doctor to redesign his appearance. White was the base as before, but several black markings adorned it.

His reasoning behind donning it was that he thought it would make him look more dangerous. He was right. With his makeup applied, he parked himself on the railing of the second level of his lab to wait for the Straw Hats' inevitable invasion. With his preparations complete, his wait was brief.
The doors swung open, and Indigo scowled, then grinned as he saw the very object of his ire before him. And with one of his most ingenious test subjects and the two other objects of ire in his life following behind him to boot! Today was actually looking up after all!

"Tony Tony Chopper. I've been expecting you," he said, chemicals brimming in his palms and ready to form into his Chemical Juggling at a moment's notice.

"Indigo," the Zoan growled ferally, glaring bloody murder up at the other 'doctor'. He paused, passing Perona's barely conscious frame off to Billy before straightening a touch. "Going for the Juggalo look?"

Indigo blinked, glancing into a nearby mirror. "I wasn't aware that this was a style… But then again, one does tend to miss a few developments when secluded from the world for twenty years."

Chopper snorted. "I only heard about it from Cross. It's appropriate, really; he described it as the 'Insane Clown' look, and that just sums you up perfectly."

Indigo's anger returned, earning Chopper a glare, but the mad doctor reeled it in enough to change the subject to what he knew would enrage Chopper the most. "I assume that you're here because you've found the sad state of your crewmates. The IQ plants are the only cure for Daft Green poisoning, but unfortunately for you…" Indigo flipped a vial of pink liquid into the palm of his hand. "The only sample of the antidote in existence at the moment is right here…" His grin widened maniacally as he crushed the vial in his grip, letting the liquid drip out from between his fingers. "And now it's gone. It took a great deal of research for me to figure out how to make it, so obviously an ignoramus like you doesn't have even a ghost of a prayer of—!"

"I already have the formula."

Indigo froze as Chopper took out a pair of vials that bubbled with milky white liquid. Indigo's eyes widened in shock and fury; he knew that appearance, it was his precise brew of antidote. All that was missing was the key ingredient of IQ that would stabilize the concoction and turn it pink.

"Warmth. Sympathy. Understanding," Chopper recited frigidly, ignoring Indigo in favor of the batch of curing IQ plants that the clown doctor had left out as a taunt, and which Chopper was now walking towards. "Hogback only considered the surgeon's knife, and you only consider the chemist's drug. You've forgotten what it means to be a doctor… if you ever were one."

Chopper spared Indigo a scathing look.

"Can you think of how I managed to reproduce the antidote with only a few hours of preparation, only missing the key ingredient?" he asked quietly.

"YOU COULDN'T HAVE!" Indigo screamed in denial, his already strained restraint snapping like a twig. "I'VE STUDIED THESE ISLANDS INSIDE AND OUT FOR THE LAST TWENTY YEARS, THERE'S NOTHING THAT COULD HAVE LET YOU FIGURE IT OUT THIS FAST!"

"Oh, but there is," Chopper corrected, tossing a handful of the plants into a mortar and grinding them up. "One thing that you overlooked. One thing that would have let you figure out all that you needed to in less than a day, the same way that I did."

Indigo silently fumed as Chopper raised his head and glared straight into his eyes.

"The natives have been fighting off Daft Green for years. All I needed was to ask how they did it, and while their means weren't the most efficient or the most effective, they were enough. What I've
made here, it was only possible by perfecting what the inhabitants of Merveille spent generations constructing." Without looking, Chopper poured the ground up IQ plants into his vials, swirled them slightly, and held them up to his eye as the concoctions turned the proper healthy pink. "All thanks to the intelligence and diligence of the very people you enslaved."

Indigo didn't move for several moments. Taking the opportunity for what it was, Chopper hurried back to his patients and carefully coerced the antidote down their throats.

The second the mixture hit the girls' digestive tracts, they started heaving and coughing, feeling as though their innards were being run through by rusty nails, but the fact that they could move or breathe at all, combined with the steady disappearance of their ruddy green bruises, proved just how effective the doctor's cure was.

Nami blinked and gazed unsteadily at her crewmate as the haze cleared from her mind. "Ch-Chopper —? What's—?"

"Stay still," the human-Zoan ordered. "The antidote is working, but it still needs to clear the toxins out of your system. Just let it work and you'll be fine in a matter of minutes."

"B-But what about—?!" Nami cut herself off with a choked gurgle as she noticed Indigo over Chopper's shoulder. "Ah. I see. Right, I-I'll just leave it to you, then." Nami quickly got into a sitting position on Billy's back and helped position the still-dizzy Perona across the giga-duck's back. "Stay safe!"

Perona shook her head in confusion. "Wait, wha—? What's going—?"

Before she could get any further, Billy spread his wings and shot out of the lab.

"WAAAAAH!"

Satisfied that his friends were safe, Chopper turned to face Indigo, slipping a gas mask from his pack and positioning it over his face. And not a moment too soon, as Indigo finally managed to reorient his thoughts, and in a bad way.

"...You... You honestly think," Indigo snarled, his face twisting as flaming bubbles of chemicals started forming around him. "That you can waltz in here and challenge my mastery straight to my face?!"

A look of honest confusion flashed across Chopper's face. "Well, yeah? I mean, I'm a Straw Hat. It's what we do."

Something snapped within Indigo and, screaming wordlessly, he launched every single one of the nitroglycerin bubbles he'd generated at the furry blasphemer in an attempt to obliterate it. They certainly did a good job obliterating the far wall in blossoms of fire, smoke, and shock.

Panting, the clown felt his rage recede, and warily eyed the site of the explosion. As much as he wished otherwise, there was no way that would be enough to take down a Straw Hat.

"Nitroglycerin. Used to reduce heart pressure, but also a powerful contact explosive."

'Sometimes,' Indigo mentally growled. 'I hate being right.'

Turning, the mad doctor put Chopper out of his peripheral vision and into his main. To his aggravation, the Zoan was entirely unscathed from the explosion, and calmly pulling on some gloves at that.
"How—?" Indigo managed to choke out through his fury.

"You're smart, figure it out," was the terse reply.

The rage boiled up again, threatening to overtake him. But Indigo shoved it down with the ease of experience. He could not win this fight in a blinding rage; that wasn't his style. He needed calm analysis, and some space. Which decided his next move.

Reaching into one of the many pockets of his voluminous lab coat, Indigo pulled out what looked like the unholy offspring of a horse syringe and one of those newfangled revolver pistols, the cylinder loaded with a variety of color-filled vials. With most of his gasses likely defeated by that gas mask, the acids were his best chance at doing away with the pest before him. As such, the malevolent doctor spun the cylinder to the vial loaded with hydrofluoric acid and, without a moment's hesitation, plunged the syringe into his veins and injected the payload.

Immediately in response to the infusion, Indigo's tattoos shifted so that they were entirely transparent, and Indigo called up more chemical balls, half more nitroglycerin, and half the hydrofluoric acid he'd prepared. The acid was launched at Chopper, and Indigo took some satisfaction from the look of shock that produced on what he could see of the fuzzball's face. The nitroglycerin, meanwhile, took out the wall behind him, and he jumped through the new hole, landing on one of the bridges connecting the towers of Shiki's palace.

Then a masked reindeer bounded onto the other side, still unscathed.

"Hydrofluoric acid," the Zoan recited, casually tossing a vial up and down in the palm of his hand. "A powerful acid, and an equally powerful contact poison. Treatment is calcium glutamate for the skin and calcium chlorate for the internals."

"Piropiropiro!" Indigo laughed mirthlessly. "You certainly know your chemicals! And I'll bet you have a treatment for almost any poison I have!" The doctor spread his arms eagerly, syringe spinning in one hand and a ring of Chemical balls spinning to life in the palm of the other. "Let's see if you missed anything!"

Chopper was moving even before the balls lashed out, and they sprayed a bewildering array of substances over the area. More acid, as well as honey and oil, sprayed in all directions, the latter igniting when nitroglycerin and other chemicals burst in explosions or gouts of flame or crackling electricity.

And all the while, that damn furball kept naming off every chemical he used!

"Hydrochloric acid. Less toxic, but no less corrosive. Wash with water immediately."

"Oil. Slick, and flammable, but otherwise not dangerous."

"Sulfur. Irritant, pain aggravator, and sensory inhibitor."

"Strontium. Explosive, radioactive, and prone to generating electrical currents. Recommend good pair of running shoes."

"Honey. Sticky. Very tasty."

Growling, Indigo kept up the barrage, and drew a baton from a hidden pocket. This opponent would require something more... hands-on. A quick sniff confirmed that the substance spread over it was still there. Turning back to his barrage, he watched, waited... and then moved. Chopper, who had been focused on evading the chemicals, didn't notice Indigo switching to melee until the baton
cracked in the side of the head, sending him pitching onto the bridge.

The Zoan immediately tried to rise, but it was unsteady. "Aconitine," he heard Chopper growl.

"Got it in one, piropiropiro!" Indigo cackled. Mentally, he switched chemicals again, stripes turning white. "I'm sure you can feel the stinging, see the blurred vision! Now, decisions, decisions…" Indigo hummed thoughtfully, looking up into the sky. "What should I kill you with… Oh, silly me, I've already decided! Mass Jugg—!"

"Heavy Gong."

A fist the size of his own head slammed into Indigo's chest with an ominous cracking sound. The clown's eyes bulged, right before the laws of physics reasserted themselves and sent him crashing into the wall at the other end of the bridge. The chemical ball, now with no one to hold it up, splashed onto the bridge, Chopper hopping over the spot to stalk up to Indigo. The clown was digging himself out of the splintered wood when he arrived, confusion written all over his features.

"H-How…" he wheezed through grit teeth.

"Paoniflorin," Chopper explained, holding up a small vial of pills as he calmly marched forwards. "It has a detoxifying effect on aconitine."

"Th-That's… I've never heard of that!" Indigo protested.

"You wouldn't have, being twenty years out of date," Chopper replied coldly, exchanging the vial for a far more volatile form of ammunition. "It's only ever gone through animal trials. But, well, I was an animal at the time, and my teacher does have a reputation of being something of a crazy old witch, so I probably won't suffer serious side effects."

Growling, Indigo raised his hand to continue Chemical Juggling and then yelped in pain as a hoof came down on the appendage.

"You've lost, Indigo," Chopper stated, as if discussing the weather. "You lost because of short-sightedness, because you shut yourself away from the world, and above all else…" Chopper leaned forward and met Indigo's gaze with his own cyan glare. "Because you're simply not as good at either medicine or combat as I am."

Once again, something snapped within Indigo. "I will not," he growled. "Be looked down upon by some stripling pirate doctor barely out of medical school! Mass Juggling!"

A massive, pale-blue ball burst into existence above the two, and for the first time Chopper showed panic, especially when Indigo grabbed his hoof.

"Piropiropiro!" he cackled, a madness all his own glimmering in his eyes. "Time for us to enjoy a nice cyanide bath! Come, let us venture into the great beyond together! Piropiropiro!"

And then, it fell.

Immediately, the initial effects made themselves known: dizziness, headache, pounding heart and sucking lungs. Gritting his teeth, Chopper shifted to human form and plunged a hand into his bag, pulling out a syringe that he jammed into his arm, pressing the plunger.

After a few seconds, the symptoms receded, and Chopper heaved a sigh of relief. His eyes turned towards Indigo, who was visibly wrestling with his own symptoms. For a moment, Chopper considered his options, and then sighed.
Kneeling down, he retrieved a canister with a mask and another syringe. This was not missed by Indigo.

"Wh-What are you doing?" the clown groaned.

"Treating you, obviously," Chopper replied, shaking his head with a grimace in an effort to clear it. "You might be a bastard, but I'm still a doctor."

"N-No. No!" Indigo roared. "I refuse to—"

A cloven hoof slammed into a specific pressure point—read: Indigo's temple—and the other pirate's protests ended. "That's better," Chopper sighed. "Especially since I have to use the less pleasant antidote."

He was left to work quietly for a bit, stabilizing the mad chemist and then injecting him with a paralyzing agent. Then he hefted Indigo onto his shoulder and carried him back to his lab.

"Funny," a familiar voice remarked as he went. "I thought you'd be carrying back a mangled mess of bones and tissue like whatever you did to Hogback. And that you'd be just as raving now as you were back then to boot."

Chopper exhaled heavily, sparing the grinning specter beside him a glance. "Hogback was a hero of mine, and I let my anger overtake me when I got my hands on him. The kind of hatred you feel for someone you used to look up to… it's so much worse than someone that you always knew was a monster."

He shook his head as he dropped Indigo onto the floor of his lab. "If he's a half-decent scientist, his laboratory should be strong enough to withstand the fall of Merveille. The Marines will handle the rest. But so long as you're here, you think you'd be willing to help me get past—"

"Sorry, furball, I've got bigger things to worry about than 'science'," Perona air-quoted impishly. "But hey, since you saved my life, I'll tell your old ship to head your way; she's as good at lockpicking as Nami, right?"

Chopper exhaled and nodded. "Alright, thanks."

With a final grin, the Hollow flew off, and Chopper stalked past the fallen Indigo toward the most secured looking door he could find.

"Alright, now let's see..." Chopper spun a scalpel in his hand contemplatively. "How does that old saying go... ah, yes!" The reindeer's eyes flashed eagerly. "How much IQ could a reindeer store if a reindeer could store IQ?"

-0-

Elsewhere on the Grand Line, Miss Merry Christmas sneezed.

And she wasn't the only one, either.

-0-

"WAHCHOO! Urgh, damn allergies..."

Usopp sniffled and rubbed at his nose as he ran down the halls of Merveille. He could do this because he wasn't going as fast as he could; after all, for the moment he was looking for another
Straw Hat, or at least another Barto Clubber, to attach himself to. Idly, he reran just how tightly he'd secured the ex-Waver's Jet Dial in his workshop through his head. At least Nami was unlikely to do anything to him once this was all over.

Skidding slightly as he took a corner, he gritted his teeth at the distinct lack of combat sounds in his immediate environs. Why was it that the one time he wanted to run towards the fighting, he couldn't find any?! There were, like, ten thousand pirates in here, and over twenty combined Straw Hats and Barto Clubbers! That he hadn't found something was mindboggling!

Another corner, and this time Usopp skidded to a halt, his mind going back to Cross' lecture on tempting fate. Definitely one he'd be applying a little more from now on, since there was a pack of about a dozen pirates blocking his way. The only way, besides going back. Who designed this place?!

"Hey, it's one of the Straw Hats!" one of the pirates barked, and to Usopp's delight, most of them looked nervous.

"Don't worry, it's their sniper, the weak one!" another pirate added. "We can take him!"

One eyebrow twitched. Okay, being underestimated was nice, but were the insults really necessary? Regardless, Usopp plunged his hands in his pockets, getting a nice, gratifying flinch from the pirates.

"Oh, really?" he said levelly. "Do you really think you can take me?"

"Hell yeah!" replied that pirate, the rest of the mooks responding with a cheer.

Sighing, the sniper dove to the floor and rolled left, and none too soon. Bullets from the pirates tore gouges into the wooden floorboards. With the melee pirates now closing in on him, Usopp finished his roll in a crouch and brought his hands to his sides, cupped.

"Usopp Ultra…"

The pirates immediately all came to a screeching halt, visibly torn between running away or finishing their charge.

"Mega…"

"Come on, you cowards!" the talkative pirate screeched. "It's a bluff, you know that! And that isn't even the same move!"

One last hesitant glance, and the pirates resumed their charge. Usopp smirked.

"Turtle Wave!"

The sniper thrust his hands out. And the hapless pirates had just enough time to get a whiff of gas before the Flame Dial in one hand ignited the emissions of the Flavor Dial in the other. The result? Instant flamethrower, and a lot of charred goons running back the way they came. Right, in fact, towards the gun-armed pirates that had hung behind, a fact that did not escape said pirates.

"Wait, stop!" the cry arose, too late before their comrades were among them and also lighting them on fire. And, by extension, igniting the gunpowder in their weapons. The resulting explosions were a bad time… well, except for Usopp.

"Don't forget to stop, drop, and roll!" the sniper taunted, diving back into the fray a few seconds
later, hammer lashing out and dropping the pirates to the floorboards.

Once the disparate outlaws were all laid out, Usopp raised his hammer high with a whoop of victory. "EAT IT! NONE STAND BEFORE THE KING OF SNIPERS, AT LONG RANGE OR SHORT! HAHA—!"

"THERE HE IS!"

"GET HIM!"

"Oh crap there's more of you guys!?" Usopp's face contorted in shock as he caught sight of the mob rounding the corner and charging his way. Spinning on his heel, Usopp beat feet in the other direction, this time at full speed. Unfortunately, going around the first corner found himself blocked by a wall of solid muscle. Solid muscle that was cracking her knuckles.

"Gotcha!" the female pirate crowed, pulling back one meaty fist.

Instead of screaming or running, though, Usopp reached into another pouch and pulled out a long stick, one end of which quickly unfolded into the empty frame of a large black hammer. Ducking under the punch, he swung the inflatable hammer right at the bruiser's ribcage.

"Usopp Kinetic Pound!"

Said bruiser had just enough time to smirk as the hammer hit her ribs.

And then the Impact Dial attached to the frying pan face went off.

The sound of snapping bone sounded out, accompanied by a "GLURGH!" as the bruiser coughed up blood. Momentum asserted itself, and the bruiser went soaring down the hall, through one of the flimsy rice paper doors, and out of sight.

Simultaneously, the recoil of the Impact Dial shredded the frame and sent the frying pan it laid on right into the one behind it, with the results that both went careening behind Usopp to the tune of squawks of pain. Catching the Dial in his hands, Usopp turned around and smirked at the pile of groaning bodies that had been his pursuers.

"All according to plan!" he crowed, adjusting his goggles as he palmed a Vision Dial and aimed it at himself as he assumed a very cool po—

BLAM!

"Right, crowd chasing and shooting at me, preen later, run now!"

This chase persisted, stretching through several more buildings of the compound. Not only did no one pop in front of him to cut him off, and not only were these pirates lighter on their feet than the last bunch, but he was running out of tricks; caltrops and stars alike only took out some of his pursuers and slowed down the rest.

"G-g-g-grrrrgh—!" Usopp snarled to himself as he ran, his breath wheezing through his tightly clenched teeth. "What does a guy need to do to get some decent, sane help around here!?"

"Well, if you're actually ASKING FOR IT…"

Briefly, Usopp entertained the idea of flipping off the snail and continuing on his way. Then a bullet nearly took his bandana off.
"Yes, yes, I'm asking for it!" the sniper pleaded. "And I don't give a damn just how suggestive that sounds or how you can twist it, I'm that desperate, so just help me already!"

"ALRIGHT, YOU JUST HAVE TO HIT UP UP DOWN DOWN LEFT RIGHT LEFT RIGHT B A START."

"WHAT THE HELL DOES THAT MEAN, YOU LITTLE—?!"

"Eh, I'm just screwing WITH YA. Take the next left."

Nearly running past it, Usopp careened around the corner, only to be confronted by a completely unmistakeable dead end. He opened his mouth to roast the stupid snail—

"I RECOMMEND ducking."

Before throwing himself to the floor, joined by the sound of his pursuers skidding around the same corner behind him.

**KRAK-THOOM!**

That sound was utterly engulfed by the sound of thunder, and for days afterward Usopp would swear he felt a sizzle on his butt. At least his goggles prevented him from getting temporarily blinded. After a few seconds, the sniper slowly eased up and looked behind him. Surrounding a scorched hole in the far wall were his pursuers, strewn on the floor and twitching with lingering... static!? What on earth—?

"Usopp! Are you alright?"

And then he heard a familiar voice and it all made sense.

"You have no idea how happy I am to see you, Conis!" Usopp half-sobbed. It took an effort of will, but he managed to avoid clutching her leg, at least. Instead, he just hung on to the arm she gave him for dear life. "For a second there, I thought that damn snail had rung my bell for good!"

"Naaah, Soundbite wouldn't off you like that!" Su waved her paw dismissively. "He'd make sure there were far more bells and whistles on the ordeal. But anyway, you take care of Conis for me for a second, would you? I've got a little errand I need to run before we get out of here."

So saying, Su leapt off of Conis's shoulder and scampered off, taking the time to hop-stomp on a few stirring mooks as she went.

For several seconds, the two just stared, and then Usopp looked back at Conis. "So! Blitz Bazooka's working out like we hoped?"

The angel-gunner promptly brightened up and nodded eagerly as she showed off the second bazooka she was wielding in an underslung fashion with her left hand, mirroring the Burn Bazooka she had in her right. "Very well, yes! The charge time takes some getting used to, but your idea of swapping the Flavor-Flame combination for a Cloud-Thunder pair worked wonders! Ah, but more importantly..." She cast an analytical gaze over her unwitting opponents. "Any idea for your headcount so far, Usopp?"

"Huh? Uh..." The sniper's face scrunched up in thought. "Let's see... there were a few dozen in that first group—"

"Graaaahhhhhhhhh!"
Both looked up to see a ragged, gaunt man brandishing a flaming sword charging straight at them. Up went Kabuto, up went Conis' bazookas—

**CLANG!**

And then Usopp and Conis jumped back in surprise when, of all things, an *anvil* slammed through the ceiling and fell on the man's head, burying him in the floorboards up to his shoulders.

"*I really wanted to keep that anvil, too…*" came Merry's whining voice through the hole.

"*Twiage is twiage, Mewwy,*" Carue sighed in response.

"Ugrggrghhh," the man groaned, somehow still alive.

"Did… that just happen?" Conis wondered.

"Let's not question it…" Usopp replied, shaking his head. "Now, where were we… oh, right, body counts."

"Ah, yes," Conis said with a serene smile, patting her weapon. "A few dozen, you said? Impressive, though I think I have the advantage. This bazooka has taken down at least a hundred pirates every time I've fired it."

Usopp froze for a moment, then rallied. "You don't say? And how many times was that?"

-o-

The squawk of disbelief and sob of inadequacy at the answer echoed all the way in the courtyard, where another brawl was going on between the Golden Lion Pirates, the beasts of Merveille, and the TDWS.

"Did anyone hear that?" Mikey idly queried. Tightening the grip his nunchucks had on the massive snake he was currently sitting on the back of, he hopped off, flipped, and piledrived the snake straight into the dirt.

"Yeah. Sounds like the noises Leo makes whenever Zoro forces him into a spar," Donny replied. Planting his staff, he spun around in place, smacking his tail off the faces of every pirate in a radius the length of his body.

"YOU'RE THE LAST PERSON I WANNA HEAR THAT FROM, MR. 'GOT PRESS-GANGED BY THE MAD DOCTOR!'" Leo roared, his anger transferring into his blades, which launched two wind-slashes that carved a swath through the pirates and downed a giant, saber-toothed jaguar that had been roaming the perimeter of the brawl.

A sharp-fanged, demonic-looking grey kangaroo took that opportunity to leap at Leo, only to eat a sai each to the arm and chest. Raphe slammed into it a moment later, smashing it into the ground and grabbing her weapons back simultaneously.

"Watch your back, idiot!" she snapped, hopping off the kangaroo. As she blocked the swords of four separate pirates, the beast shakily got back to its feet, only to get smashed on the skull by Donny's staff.

"Pot, kettle!" the purple-clad dugong shot back.

"That's different, Leo got careless, I'm just being a good teammate!"
"Yeah, well—ack! Shell Body!"

Donny soared into the crowd, propelled there by a kick from the kangaroo. That was the last thing it did, as Leo swipe its hamstrings with his swords as he passed, joining Mikey and Raphey as they charged into the crowd after their teammate, tossing about any pirate with bad enough luck to be in their way.

Not that Donny especially needed the help. His staff was a blur, striking faces, necks, thighs, and all sorts of other soft spots. Already, he had a dead zone around him marked by bruised, unconscious bodies, and the pirates were calling up those of their number with guns.

It was those gun-wielding pirates that the remaining dugongs slammed into like falling anchors, Mikey even pulling out his pistols and shooting up a knot of rifle-armed pirates. As such, he was the first one to notice the new problem.

BOOM!

"Nori Arts!" he frantically yelped, swaying out of the way of a cannonball that had been ready to take his head off. "Look out, guys, someone got the bright idea to wheel in a cannon!" He glanced in that direction again. "Correction: someone got the bright idea to wheel in a lot of cannons!"

"Dammit!" Leo cursed. "Alright, I'm the fastest, so I'll see if I can go get at the gun crews! Can you guys hold on by yourselves?"

"Um…" Raphey said nervously, her head tilted up. "I don't think we're gonna have to…"

The other three Dugongs followed their sister's gaze. A moment later, all four of them were in the middle of a Rip Tide, and not a second too soon.

While nothing was going to upstage the Straw Hats' grand invasion of the Golden Lion's palace, the sight of a group of mismatched, SIQ-gorged birds that had clearly been tamed from the archipelago's mutant menagerie carrying a galleon-sized ship over the palace was a close second.

Even more so if one were to see that the ones conducting the birds were a young girl that was communing with them without saying a word and the rhinoceros-sized dragon she was riding, whose glare alone was enough to show why the birds were going against their fighting instincts.

Of course, this was leaving aside that there were several others who sailed onboard that ship that were just as scary as the dragon, if not scarier. The birds anxiously awaited word from the tamer below that they were free to fly away and never look back.

The reason that the Dugongs fled was not due to the birds, the girl, or the dragon. Rather, it was the fact that there was a galleon hovering above them, and it seemed as though it was about to—

KA-BOOOOM!

Fall. And many a hapless man and beast never knew what hit them.

The TDWS all winced as they recovered from the shockwave of the dropped vessel.

"Sooooon of a…" Mikey cursed and coughed in the same breath, waving his flipper in front of his muzzle in an effort to get rid of the kicked up smoke. "Did we just get upstaged?"

"That's what you're focusing on?" Donny groaned incredulously, shooting a glare at his brother through his teary-eyed vision.
"Nah, not really," Raphey assured Mikey. "They're arriving late in the game, after we already kicked things off. They're building off of us and all that, see?" The female Dugong pointed at the ship in demonstration.

Her stance then became a bit more rigid when the girl and the dragon she was riding took off from the deck of the galleon and landed in front of a group of nearby soldiers that had been stunned into silence by the ship's appearance.

"Lindy," the girl stated calmly, arms crossed as she regarded the soldiers with something akin to boredom. "These men planned on burning down the East Blue. Your home and mine. Kindly cut loose."

"With inappropriate amounts of pleasure, milady," her dragon purred in a deep, rich and rolling voice.

After that, things got… violent.

"… Okay, that's just not fair," Mikey whimpered in despair.

Neither Leo nor Raphey nor even Donny objected to Mikey's assessment of the situation. How could they when they had to compete with an actual, honest-to-Sebek dragon?

"We're just awesome that way, sorry."

The Dugongs jumped and looked at the girl who, at some point during the chaos, had dismounted the dragon and had walked up to the Dugongs. She rubbed her head sheepishly.

"Sorry, still not used to talking to animals verbally; I usually use my Whisper-Whisper Fruit to talk straight to their minds," she explained before beaming and rocking back and forth on her heels.

"Anyway, I'm Apis, lookout of the Barto Club Pirates! I met with one of you earlier… Donny?"

"We got that you were on our side when you said that Shiki threatened your home," Raphey snorted. "Nice entrance, though."

"Heheh, thanks!" Apis smiled eagerly as she rubbed her finger beneath her nose. "But really, it was all Lindy. He's been having a lot of fun ever since he reincarnated and we joined Barty and everyone else!"

"RUN, YOU LITTLE MORSELS! RUN FOR YOUR LIVES AND MY AMUSEMENT! OM NOM NOM NOM!" the dragon in question chortled as it chased after a horde of fleeing… everyone, to be honest, wings flapping like he was a titanic, green and furry chicken with a long neck. So, not like a chicken at all, really.

Apis' smile twitched slightly as she watched the display. "…maaaaybe a little too much fun."

"Y'think!?" Donny snapped incredulously.

"In all fairness, he did just reincarnate after plodding along in his old body for the past few centuries, so I think he's a bit high on his youth right now…" Apis reasoned.

The dugongs all stared blankly at her before sagging in defeat.

"It says a lot about the past few months that we don't even question that sentence, doesn't it?" Leo sighed.
"Yuuup," his siblings all groaned in agreement.

-O-

Nefertari Vivi was on cloud nine as she marched down the corridors of Merveille like she owned the place. And she did. The only person who could threaten her was Shiki, and he was busy being chased by Luffy and Bartolomeo.

With that in mind, as well as the lack of enemies nearby, she was mostly ignoring her surroundings in favor of practice with her powers. This took the form of swirling wind around her fingers, which was surprisingly hard. Working with so little air, getting it to go where she wanted instead of the wind's natural tendency to do what it wanted. But she was making progress as she passed another cross corridor, creating rudimentary shapes with the air, and she glanced down the corridor.

"Oh, that's a cannon," she remarked - and her eyes had just enough time to widen in recognition right before said cannon fired and the cannonball took her head off.

For a moment, her headless body stood there, air visibly swirling above her neck. Then the air re-coalesced back into her head, and she gave it a hearty shake.

"So that's what that feels like..." she muttered, her mind still spinning a bit as her gray matter reformed from gas. Turning her gaze down the corridor, she stepped towards the cannon and its crew, who had just finished frantically loading another cannonball and its powder charge. "Oh, no, none of that."

Holding up her hand, air swirled around it, wrapping around her arm.

"Sekhmet's Might!"

At the call, a massive gust of wind burst forth, picking up and hurling the cannon off of its carriage, also bowling over the pirates surrounding it. That the cannon then went off, blowing a hole in the wall, was salt in the wound.

The pirates took one look at the Logia now advancing towards them, and then at their wrecked cannon, and as one turned on their heels and sprinted the other way.

"Hmm, disappointing," Vivi noted, though she still followed them at a slow walk.

A few minutes of such walking turned up the same group of pirates, but joined by a good dozen of their fellows, all armed with a musket and brace of pistols.

"There she is!" one of the pirates, dressed a little more fancily than the others, shouted. "Fire!"

A hail of gunfire tore down the corridor, with a similar result to shooting a shoebox. Well, a self-repairing shoebox. Made of sand. That was alive and kicking nine kinds of—you know what, let's just say not really a shoebox at all.

"You do realize that I'm a Logia," Vivi pointed out slowly, her head tilted questioningly. "So unless you're packing seastone ammunition, you're just waving a fan in a sandstorm, correct?"

The only response from the pirates was to pull out their pistols and keep shooting.

Rolling her eyes, Vivi twisted up another wind, intoned "Sekhmet's Might", and launched it downrange. Six pirates were hurled about, and the wind blasted a sizable hole in the wall. That still left quite a few pirates, albeit very nervous ones.
"Hmm…” Vivi hummed, tapping her chin thoughtfully. "Could use a bit better area of effect.”

Grinning, she produced a pair of miniature twisters in the palms of her hands. "Time to practice! And thank you ever so much for volunteering! I assure you, your contributions will be noted…” Her expression took on a feral quality. "Posthumously, of course."

If the way the goons all bolted was anything to go by, they were not keen on that idea.

Vivi cocked her eyebrow as she watched the dust settle behind the terrified goons. "Was that too much?"

After a moment of consideration, her grin took on an impish quality.

"Naaah!"

And with that, the hunt was on.

-o-

In a tunnel network beneath the palace parallel to the plumbing, one of Indigo's more recent creations bounded down the hall with an annoyed, somewhat afraid expression on her face.

A skeleton was sprinting after the beastie with an angry, very determined expression on its face. Or at least, it would have had one if it had a face in the first place.

"YOHOOHO! META SKULL JOKE!"

"WILL YOU SHUT UP AND RUN FASTER, YOU SENILE OLD COOT!"

Bringing up the rear was a pompadour-touting cyborg, who was glaring after them with a livid expression.

…Let's back up a bit.

The mutated doe, which Indigo had altered at his captain's request a few weeks back to evolve more for speed than aggression, was running because Franky and Brook had specifically tried to capture it, because strapped to its chest in a well-secured harness was Cross's Snail Transceiver along with a vis-snail. And the moment that they had tried to seize it, the doe bounded off through a twisting labyrinth of earth, air, and water that only the Float-Float Fruit could have created. Shiki had chosen speed over bulk to ensure that the creature would be easier to control than his simian majordomo, but at the same time impossible to defeat, or at the very least, to catch.

Franky fell behind quickly as the chase continued, Brook maintaining pace for some time thanks to the unnatural lightness of his form, even allowing him to follow the doe across water. Ultimately, however, he met his match when the doe came across a lengthy chasm, blurred from view the moment she reached the edge, and reappeared on the other side a few moments later. Brook skidded to a halt, gritting his teeth as he observed the length of the gap, and the fact that it led right back to the blue sea. The doe faced him with a look that could only be the smuggest of satisfaction before bounding out of sight of the pirates.

"…Cross will not be pleased with this development, will he?" Brook mused uncertainly.

"This whole place will cave in on itself when Luffy beats Shiki, we'll get the transceiver back after that," Franky growled back, before turning around and trudging off towards the battle. "Come on; if we can't get the snail's box, we need to be out there helping the others against the rest of those monsters." A far more eager smirk flashed across the cyborg's mug. "And I've got just the plan for
that."

-o-

The doe bounded on for another few minutes until it was sure that it had left the pirates in the dust, whereupon it slowed down to regain some stamina. She also took the opportunity to scan the surrounding landscape for a stream; Indigo's stamina enhancements were effective, but they sucked up water like nobody's business.

Finally locating the scent of fresh water off in the distance, the doe leisurely trotted in that direction, though she kept all her senses on high alert in case the pirates had found some way across the chasm. She only let down her guard when she reached the actual stream; the only signs of life were a flock of mundane seagulls sitting on the surrounding branches. The doe shuddered. Both Shiki and Indigo had had words about the fact that seagulls seemed blithely oblivious to the "rules" of Merveille. Very loud, very angry words.

Whatever. The doe bent down to drink. They were just seagulls, after all.

[Mine?]

The doe jerked her head up, ready to—oh. Just a seagull on the rocks next to her. Wearing a cute little hat, too. Bah, pointless. Back to drinking.

[Mine!]

This time, when the doe looked up, the seagull had produced… a french fry? Held in its wings. All her instincts blared at her that she was in danger, but it was a french fry.

[Mine.]

Slowly, and with great trepidation, the doe looked back up at the tree-bound gulls. Every single one of them had its eyes on that french fry. Her gaze whipped back to the seagull next to her, expression screaming 'Don't you dare'.

The gull tossed the fry right at her.

Immediately, the doe was swamped by what seemed like every seagull on the Grand Line, all pecking and flapping and trying to land on her. Despite the ensuing confusion, she did notice when the weight of the transceiver on her chest suddenly vanished. Snorting, the doe shook off the last few seagulls and tore after the speck of white she could see flying away as fast as it could manage into a patch of forest. Why a seagull wanted the thing The Alpha had given her to keep was beyond her, but given the consequences of failing that psychotic ape, she was not letting it get away with it.

Of course, there was one small problem with that idea: the gull could simply climb above the trees, while the doe had to slow down to avoid slamming into said trees. And yet, it simply didn't climb out of sight and fly away. The answer to this conundrum was obvious: it was taunting her. It had to be!

The gull glanced over its shoulder down at her, and then waggled its tail feathers in a way that was somehow smug. Oh yeah. It was taunting her.

Snorting angrily again, the doe picked up speed. Screw hitting a tree, this was officially personal, she would plow through them if she had to! And even better, the trees were thinning out! Once she was out of this stupid forest, she could bound off one of the trees, get some altitude, and take down that stupid seagull!
Bursting out of the trees, the doe prepared to execute her plan… only to hit a bit of a snag. A "pirate mosh pit" kind of snag. And she was currently sitting in midair.

[I don't wanna be venisooooon!]

-0-

Flying high above, Coo smirked at a plan well executed. That deer wasn't going to be a problem anymore. Now, he just needed to get the transceiver to Cross, and—

Wait. What the heck was that whistling—?

Snapping his head up, Coo let out a squawk of panic at the eagle diving towards him talons-first, and immediately dove for the ground. That action probably saved his life; the eagle slamming into his neck from behind and driving him into the ground probably would've snapped his spine otherwise. Even then, both impacts served to knock Coo for a loop, and gave the bird of prey the time it needed to completely pin him to the ground with a single foot.

[A merry chase you led us on,] he heard the eagle gloat from on high. [But now, your flight is at an end.]

[Could you be any more clichéd?] Coo grumbled, only to grunt as the eagle ground his beak a little deeper into the dirt.

[Right, if that's how you're going to be, down to business, then,] the eagle sighed as it examined the talons on his free foot. [Hand over the transceiver, and I will ensure that you are dead before stripping the flesh from your bones.]

[Nice threat. But I'm afraid you've been outfoxed.]

Out the corner of his eye, Coo saw the eagle gain a hilariously surprised expression, whereupon he was knocked off the newsbird in a pained squawk and flurry of feathers. Sitting up, Coo watched the featherhole tumble for a bit in the dirt, before he was suddenly pummeled into the ground by a blur of white slamming into the eagle, again and again and again, until the pompous hat-topper was little more than a twitching pile of broken bones and feathers.

Her job done, Coo's savior strolled up to him with her head held high and her tail waving daintily behind her. Her swagger faltered as Coo cuffed her upside the head with his wing.

[I could've done without the awful one-liner,] he groused, brushing the dirt from his wings before glancing up at Su. [But thanks for the save. Though, how did you know to get here?]

[You're welcome,] Su rolled her eyes with a derisive snort, rubbing her ear. [And for your information, the slimeball directed me this way to get his box back; you actually saved me a lot of trouble on that front.]

The two animals fell silent for a moment, both of them processing the fact that they were speaking in their native tongues, and then looked up expectantly.

"Head for the throne room, BUT TAKE YOUR TIME," the Voice of Audio-God said grimly but distractedly. "CROSS AND I have never been THIS MAD BEFORE." And then he was gone.

Coo cocked his eyebrow. [Well, that makes sense…] He then glanced at Su out the corner of his eye. [And convenient for you, I expect?]
Su shot her own clench-eyed glare at the gull, before sighing and scratching at her ear. [Alright, I suppose that's... mostly fair, but!] She snapped her head up and jabbed her paw in Coo's breast. [Let's be clear here! I can be dickish, and I was dickish in how I asked you for help, I'll admit—!] [But that doesn't mean you're actually a dick, of course!] Coo nodded without missing a beat. [Don't worry, I get it. You'd just gone through hell when last we first talked, you were impatient when you talked to Windy, it's fine. Besides, you saved my tail feathers just now, so I'd say our tabs are about even right now, ya know?]

Su pawed despairingly at her muzzle. [Saved them while you were helping us out, so…] [Let's, not get bogged down in that particular morass, alright?] Coo waved her off. [And... while I did decide to help you guys out while I was around, I flapped my way up here for another reason.]

The cloud fox's ear twitched slightly and she snapped as shocked a look as her pinched eyes allowed at the gull. [Wait, you mean—?]

[Hmm... the News Coo wavered his wing uncertainly. [We dug up something. Whether or not it's useful, or even all that actionable, well…]

[I'm a Straw Hat, remember? We've gone off of worse.] Su scoffed. [Gimme gimme, quickie!]

[Well, alright.] Coo sighed in defeat. [Just don't say I didn't warn you when you don't like it.]

And so Coo told her what he knew, and Su did indeed not like it.

-o-

"My, my, Shiki, you've been quite busy," Robin purred, thumbing through one of the many folders that she had found in the Golden Lion's library. "I do believe that Cross is going to be immensely pleased with these reports on the Blues' Marine bases. With any luck, some turnover of the chains of command will be… beneficial, to say the least."

It did make sense that Shiki would ensure that there was no threat to his military might in those oceans; forewarned was forearmed, as Cross himself had demonstrated many a time now, and Robin had a vested interest in making sure that her foster brother was well-armed indeed. And the details in the folders she read promised to be quite useful to him and his.

"Now let's see…" Robin hummed to herself as she cast a thoughtful gaze around the ornate bed chamber her myriad hands were in the process of ransacking, flinging books left and right and ripping boards from the walls. "If I were a megalomaniacal self-zealot intent on world conquest…"

She trailed off for a moment before smirking and thumbing the brim of her hat. "Correction: if I were Crocodile, where would I hide my log of information on—GAH!"

The archaeologist cut herself off with a pained yelp as she snapped her original hand to her left eye, which was clenched shut on account of the rivulets of blood streaming from the eyelid. "Now I remember why I stopped using Ojos Fleur in full scale theatres…" she groaned to herself, blooming another eye on her palm to see the damage. She frowned slightly; bloodshot and crimson, most likely a popped vessel, but she'd had worse and healed from it, even if this would take a bit of time.

With that done, she reordered her thoughts and focused on what had just happened. Robin took a swift inventory of her remote eyes, closing them as she went for her own peace of mind. In the end, all eyes were accounted for... except for…

"The one I had… on this room's outer wall…" Robin groaned, dragging her hand down her face.
"Oh, this is going to hurt, isn't it?"

"OOK!" CRASH!

Robin was proven right—much to her chagrin—by a massive hairy palm crashing through one wall pancaking her against the wall opposite, leaving her with more than a dozen bones fractured and half as many outright broken. Chopper would not be pleased with her, and it said a lot about both her faith in her crew and their doctor's prowess (and temper) that that was the first worry that came to her mind.

Or maybe it was just the concussion jumbling up her priorities.

Either way, when her senses returned to her, she found herself gripped tightly in the giant fist of a gorilla clad in red clothing, holding her very high off the ground.

The first instinct of Robin's scrambled mind was to rip her captor apart with a multitude of arms. She barely managed to keep this instinct under control due to the height; she may have the means to slow her fall with her Wing technique, but that technique needed more focus and less risk of being ambushed while she recovered than she had at the moment.

As she ran through her other options, her eyes fell on the gorilla. And upon seeing the look in its eyes, she did the only thing she could at the moment:

"Someone… get this damn dirty ape… off of me!" she shouted, shoving as hard as she could against the iron grip she was in, with as many arms as she could comfortably muster.

"Grrrr," the gorilla growled menacingly, the other hand pulling back to do… something to her.

"Ahem."

Pirate and gorilla turned to witness a very specific aquatic mammal perched on the larger mammal's shoulder, nonchalantly smoking a cigar and giving the ape a flat look.

"You heard the lady. Let her go," Boss said calmly.

Predictably, the gorilla turned his ire on the dugong, instantly swatting his free hand down on the martial artist amphibian.

Less predictably, the gorilla's palm halted directly before the dugong, whose flipper had stopped the larger beast's hand in its path. Said Dugong now had a vein popping on his forehead.

"Let me clarify something for you, simian," the martial artist drawled. "What I just said? That wasn't a request. SQUALL PISTOL!"

In the space of a second, Boss pulled back his flipper and jabbed it forward again.

CRUNCH!

"OOGRAAAAAAAAHH!" Scarlet howled, flinging his captive aside in favor of cradling his broken hand. Boss immediately dove down, catching Robin in his flippers and setting her back down into the room she had been looking over before.

"Thank you, Boss," Robin said.

"Don't thank me yet," Boss said as he glowered past his friend's shoulder. "Find whatever you were
looking for and then get the hell out of dodge. This isn't going to be a one-stop shot; I don't know how much SIQ he's had, but it's gotta be a massive overdose."

The archaeologist blinked in confusion. "How can you be so sure?"

The dugong pointed his flipper without a twitch of his expression. "Because while we Grand Line animals are freakishly tough, that is not typical of any natural evolution I'm aware of."

Robin followed Boss's flipper with her eyes, one of which started twitching when she saw the, to reiterate, very unnatural occurrence which Boss was speaking of. Namely, the fact that the gorilla's hand was pulsating before her eyes, the shattered bones within shifting and restructuring themselves back into their proper shape.

Robin nodded, shoving her hat down. "Right. You have fun with that."

"Ohohohoooh, believe me…" Boss tilted his head just so, letting a vicious glint bounce off of the point of his glasses. "I intend to."

The gorilla, meanwhile, howled and pounded its chest before ignoring Robin entirely as she escaped to bring his palm down on the floor. As he had intended to bring it down on Boss' head, this prompted a slow, stupid blink of confusion.

"Nori Arts," Boss intoned, reaching for something behind his back.

Snarling, Scarlet brought his palms up again, and slammed them down repeatedly.

"Nori Arts, Nori Arts, Nori Arts."

And Boss merely swayed out of the way of each one of the room-shaking slaps. After the fourth, he flicked his flippers, sending something blurring towards his simian opponent.

That something was his blazing rope-dart, which slammed into Scarlet's gut with about as much force as a Diable Jambe. Between the heat and the impact, for a brief second all the gorilla could do was hunch over wheezing in pain.

It was a second Boss took full advantage of, looping the rope around Scarlet's neck and then jumping onto one of the roof beams.

"Rip Tide," the dugong intoned, blurring out of sight, but up. "Shell Body."

Reinforced dugong smashed through the roof like so much sugar glass, carrying Boss onto the roof and yanking Scarlet along by the neck. For a moment, the two hung in the air.

"TIDAL SWIM!"

Before Boss flipped in mid-air and kicked off with all his might. Once again, massive forces carried Scarlet along for the ride, neck first, and when Boss landed, another flick of his flippers unlooped the gorilla and sent him hurtling towards one of the towers… towering above the palace. And then into the tower.

"Hmm, that should be enough," Boss muttered, eyeing the impact point. The rubble there shuddered. "Or not. Sebek's Scale-Rotted Tail, that SIQ is—"

Boss' words died in his throat as the top-half of the tower shuddered, and then rose. And with the pink shirt Scarlet wore standing out in the blizzard-wrapped gloom, the cause was pretty damn
obvious.

"You've gotta be kidding me…"

With a shout of "ORA!", Scarlet hurled the chunk of tower like a javelin at Boss, who knew immediately that he had no chance of blocking or deflecting it. And dodging would leave him open.

Time to think a little laterally.

"Typhoon Lash!" Boss roared, spinning on his flippers before unleashing the attack from his tail. It worked like a charm, neatly slicing the tower in two, at which point Boss hooked his rope dart around the top half and went along for the ride.

Whereupon Scarlet peeked over the side.

"Okay, so you're not a complete meathead…" Boss muttered. Tugging his rope dart again, he swung around, aiming his free flipper for the gorilla's unprotected back. "Squall Pistol!"

"Ook!"

WHAM!

The Squall Pistol landed, sending Scarlet staggering back clutching his face. The punch Boss took in return sent him reeling, a fifty-piece marching band practicing in his skull.

"Note to self…" he groaned, shaking his head. "Don't take hits unless you have Shell Body on. And maybe not even then…"

The last of the cobwebs cleared, and Boss turned back to Scarlet, who was also up and about—and gaping in panic?

The dugong looked behind just as the pillar slammed into the central dome of Shiki's palace. "SHELL BODY!" Boss squawked, and a good thing, too, as the sudden stop hurled him into the side of the building. Scarlet, too, actually, which gave Boss an excellent view of what a gorilla ass looked like.

Grumbling, Boss pulled himself out of the wall, and glanced up at his opponent. "Hmm, attack or reposition…" he mused. Below him, the pillar shifted. "Right, reposition it is!"

Spinning the head of his rope dart, he hurled it up, grasping one of the ledges, and then yanked himself up to land softly on the roof of the dome. No sooner had he landed than the dome shook.

"Whoa! Rip Tide!"

Blurring away, he saw, through the haze of the technique, a massive gorilla fist punch through where he'd once been, followed shortly by the rest of the beast, still no worse for the wear. That called for a change in strategy.

"Let's see how you like ranged combat!" Boss barked as he came out of his Rip Tide. "Typhoon Lash!"

Super-sharp wind gusted out, Scarlet dodging by a slim margin. Another followed, that dodged as well, and Scarlet decided that he didn't like being shot at. Roaring, he charged Boss, who simply Rip Tided out of the way and repeated the process.

This dance repeated two more times until Scarlet dodged another Typhoon Lash. This time, he was
met with a rope dart to the face. Repeatedly.

"Got your dodging pattern down, ape!" Boss crowed, repeatedly swinging his rope dart. "You're not escaping this!"

Suddenly, the dart stopped. And wouldn't budge no matter how much Boss tugged on it. That Scarlet was gripping the hook despite the flesh of his hand audibly sizzling probably had something to do with that.

"Uh-oh," Boss muttered, which was as far as he got before Scarlet gave the rope dart an almighty yank.

A hasty Typhoon Lash cut the rope—he could retrieve the hook when he didn't have a 500-lb gorilla trying to bash his face in—but by the time he was done, a massive fist was heading for his face. And he had neither the time for a Tidal Swim nor the leverage for a Nori Arts.

"This is going to hurt… Shell Body!"

The fist struck home, slamming Boss into the surface of the dome. Sensing blood, Scarlet didn't let up, slapping and punching the same spot repeatedly. Each shook the dome, and caused a spider-web of cracks to grow ever-larger.

Unfortunately, he didn't notice Boss simply roll out of the way of the blows. So the Squall Pistol that hit him in the chin came right out of nowhere.

Grimacing, Boss watched the gorilla go down again, simply waiting for it to get back up. Even with Shell Body, that had hurt, though nothing that would stop him from putting down this ape. Especially if…

Yes, it was taking longer for Scarlet to get up. Quite a bit longer.

"Like I thought, SIQ regeneration can be used up," Boss remarked. "And without that… well. You're strong. Stronger than me, even. But there's more to combat than just strength." Boss shifted his stance, drawing his arms together at his side. "And I'm superior in every other way."

Shaking his head, Scarlet narrowed his beady eyes at Boss before roaring and charging.


Deep within Scarlet's simian brain, he recognized that his opponent wasn't dodging. A small part screamed that this was a trap. The rest just wanted to get this pest out of the way. So he kept charging.

"Full Shell Style: Six Oceans Gun!"

Wrapped up in all six styles, it was child's play for Boss to first weave between Scarlet's crashing fists, and then deliver the Six Oceans Gun straight to his chest.

Bones shattered and organs pulped under the force, the momentum sending Scarlet hurling through the air. SIQ-fueled regeneration went to work, patching up the damage, but it was overtaxed by the rest of the fight, and running out of raw materials to work with anyway. Then that whole point was rendered moot when Scarlet hit the remaining tower. That was a level of damage the weakened regeneration simply couldn't cope with.

Back on the dome, Boss eyed his handiwork, and when after a minute Scarlet didn't budge, let out a
sigh of relief and sagged in pain, particularly his left flipper. Flexing tentatively, he winced as he felt his bones rub together just out of alignment. Annoying, but maybe he could subtly fix it while no one was—

CRACK!

"SON OF A BARNACLE-LATHERED BUOY!" Boss howled, clutching his shoulder in agony. "WHAT THE HELL—?!"

"Take better care of yourself, shitty blubberbutt," Sanji interrupted, idly tapping the boot he'd used to kick the dugong's shoulder back into place. "It'd be a damn shame if the only decent sparring partner I had on the ship was the mosshead."

Boss grit his teeth together before slowly looking at the nonchalant smoker and his gaunt companion behind him. His jowls slowly twisted into a wry smirk.

"...Will do, Sanji. So... how many idiots do we have left to smash into pieces?"

"Not enough to make it our main priority anymore," the gaunt man responded, fingerling the heavy-looking tonfa he was carrying. "Guess now we turn to the loot, pillage, and plundering part."

Boss exhaled in what was almost a snort, but nodded. "Fine by me; I'm satisfied after that fight."

"Except that I'm not," Sanji snorted out a cloud of smoke, glaring daggers at the downed ape. "You did a pretty good job, but that damn thing dared to lay a hand on a woman! You should have beaten the gorilla way worse."

"Oh, yeah?" Boss cocked his brow at the cook. "Well, he's certainly not going anywhere. Go ahead, finish what I started."

"I'll do just that," Sanji huffed, eyeing the downed Ape still embedded in the remaining tower. Once he had calculated the appropriate amount of punishment to dole out, he hauled his leg back... and kicked a rock that tapped off of Scarlet's skull.

"Now he's had it," the cook declared with a satisfied nod. "Now come on, let's help our helmsgirl steal everything that's not nailed down!" And with that, Sanji ran off.

Boss blinked after his crewmate before slowly looking up at Gin. "Just confirming, seeing as there was a big chunk of time before I met the band of mental patients I decided to shack up with..." He pointed at Sanji's retreating back. "Was he always this crazy?"

"You'll need to be more specific," Gin deadpanned. "About women, or in general?"

"Both."

"Well, in that case... no. When I first met Sanji..." A smirk slowly spread across Gin's face. "Honestly? I think it was just bubbling below the surface back then."

Boss donned a smirk of his own. "Good."

"Good?"

"Good." Boss started to waddle off with a contented nod. "Means he's finally being honest with himself."

-o-
Though there were far more than 88 nutcases who had attacked the roaring, rampaging sword-wielders that had come after the highest authority in the palace, the fallen bodies, the many homeless limbs, and the streaks and puddles of blood dying the room red would have given even a certain Black Mamba a run for her money. Were Soundbite less incensed, he may have even pointed it out. Unfortunately, that furious rage was still there. And so were the enemies who somehow thought that they would succeed where hundreds before had failed to take down the two Straw Hats tearing them to shreds. Adding to the misfortune was the not unsound logic that led them to keep trying: no matter how powerful they were, they could only handle so many bodies, both at once and over time.

And while that was unsound logic against most of the Straw Hats, despite rumor to the contrary the crew was still mostly composed of humans. As such, Cross's stamina was wearing thin, and Zoro…

"GRK!"

Zoro grunted in pain as another tremor wracked his body, creating a split-second opening that a particularly persistent spearman shoved his weapon into. Thankfully, it was with the butt of the weapon, which allowed Zoro to dive right back in instead of fall to his knees clutching the new hole in his gut, but the slip-up was blatantly obvious.

"KEEPING A STRONG FACE AND ACTING LIKE nothing's wrong is fine when the carnage is done. NOT WHEN WE'RE STILL CREATING GROUND ZERO!"

"BITE ME!" Zoro shot back. Calling up the aura of Asura, he waded into the crowd, the flickering illusion carving through everyone in his path.

"AND AS FOR my personal armchair…"

"Kiss!" Cross snarled, braining and burning an overeager mook with Lassoo's smoking muzzle. "My!" He then caught another enforcer's blade with Funkfreed's tusks and used the lock to drag the enemy into a bone-fracturing headbutt. "Ass!" The final word was punctuated by Cross flinging Funkfreed and Lassoo at his opponents. The two weapon animals transitioned in midair into a rime-tusked elephant and a flame-spitting hound, respectively, smashing into the Golden Lions' frontlines and smashing them quite thoroughly, giving Cross the space and time he needed to catch his breath.

Time he took to shoot an offended, if slightly dizzy look at Soundbite. "I'll have you know that I am in peak physical condition, and that we are doing perfectly fine at breaking these bastards all on our —!

BOOOM!

Cross's boasting died quickly when perhaps the worst possible scenario introduced itself into the fight. See, while Vivi blowing the roof off the palace did achieve the desired effect of intimidation by expressed fury, that left the fighters within vulnerable to attacks from above. And in this case, said attack took the form of one of Shiki's more fortuitous recruits.

Said recruit was gray-skinned, bald, and slender, with a moustache that was halfway between imperial and horseshoe, gray beard stubbles, a black and purple vest, a red sash, blue pants, pointed black shoes, clawed knuckle dusters on his hands, and a scowl on his face.

Ah, yes, and he also happened to be forty-five feet tall.

"Motherfu—!" Zoro growled.

"MOVE ASIDE!" the giant roared, stomping through the crowd, heedless of the allied pirates he
crushed underfoot. "I'LL SHOW YOU THE TRUE MIGHT OF THE GRAND LINE!"

The pirates who weren't stepped on may not have had sense enough to stop fighting a losing battle, but they at least had enough self-preservation instincts to not get in the way of someone who was tower ing above them. This good sense backfired hard when Cross and Zoro batted the retreating pirates aside like lint, leaving the area around them clear of obstacles.

"Still not worried?" Soundbite asked flatly.

The first and third mates exchanged glances.

"Like hell," they answered.

Zoro crossed Kitetsu and Shusui in an X before him, flats facing outward. Cross ran toward him, jumping onto the blades. The swordsman's muscles bulged, and with a roar he uncrossed his arms and flung Cross upward - away from the giant, instead impacting high up on one of the room's undamaged pillars. Cross reached out, metal-encased fingers digging into the wood of the pillar.

The giant sneered, betraying his brawn to brains ratio; as fast as Cross was going, either the pillar or his arm should have broken. With great hypocrisy, he bellowed, "YOUR BRAINS ARE AS SMALL AS YOU ARE! YOU MISSED! NOW YOU DIE!"

Then he simply swung his blade-enhanced fist at the smaller pirate, and Cross leapt again to avoid the blow. Landing on the giant's arm, he ran up, reared back his right hand, and slammed his palm into the giant's face with all the force he could muster—

"IMPACT!"

—along with all the force he had just absorbed.

The giant reeled, stunned but still on his feet and not liable to go down anytime soon.

"And just for kicks—!" Cross snarled, flexing his palm again and firing half a dozen more blasts of kinetic force in the giant's face.

That was more than the giant could take, his head snapping back from the sheer impact, his knees buckling under him. Like some titanic tree that Paul Bunyan had taken an axe to, the giant tilted back and collapsed, shaking the entire building on impact.

"Tch," Zoro scoffed dismissively as he walked up to the downed opponent. "Still worried about this wimp?"

"...y'know, I WOULD SAY I wasn't and never was..." Soundbite sighed, slumping his eyestalks in resigned defeat. "IF ONLY I COULDN'T HEAR THE FACT THAT HE'S STILL Awake."

Cross and Zoro snapped incredulous looks at the snail. "What!?

"GRARGH!"

The giant cut off any response Soundbite could have made by suddenly shooting back to his feet and batting Cross and Zoro aside with a single, almost offhanded sweep of his arm.

"CROSS!" the Zoan-Weapons cried in concern, breaking off from their assaults at the sight of their wielder being sent flying.
Cross grimaced, eyes clenching in preparation for the impact that was to come, but what actually came was most unexpected. He slammed hard into something, yes, but it was something that was soft like a cloud, and yet, at the same time, somehow as firm as iron. And it was massive - and moving to set him back on his feet. He realized exactly what was going on long before he set eyes on the one controlling the clouds, who was standing at the exit of the room where Shiki had departed.

"You morons," the Straw Hats' second mate scoffed with a shake of her head, not even sparing the pair a glance as she casually observed the room. "Remind me, who's supposed to be saving who here?"

"I dunno," the third mate responded with a frown that didn't quite seem convincing as he tried to push himself out of the cloud, though the 'footing' wasn't giving him any luck, and most likely not by chance. "We're here to rescue someone who's going to catch absolute hell for being a bonehead once we're free and clear. What about you?"

"A pair of jackasses with no sense between them." Nami finally turned her head to the pair to give them a catty grin. "Sounds like we both have horrible jobs, doesn't it?"

"Not as bad as them," the first mate snorted, gesturing to the giant and the remaining mooks, who were getting their footing and nerve back. "And if you're here to save us, how about finishing this?"

"The bloodthirsty Pirate Hunter conceding a group of opponents to the elegant Weather Witch?" she purred, her expression taking on an especially malevolent gleam. "Oh, how the mighty have fallen."

"The ones that fell ain't the mighty ones, and more than 80% ARE ALREADY DOWN. YOU'RE JUST Sweeping away THE SCRAPS," Soundbite snarked.

"Snark later, zap now!" Cross demanded, staring at the pirates who were aiming their guns at them.

"I have something else in mind, actually," Nami said, spinning a portion of her Clima-Tact at her side. "Let's see if this worked…" She snapped her arm up and flung a Cool Ball skyward.

"GLACIAL TEMPO!"

The giant was not getting back up this time. Not with a hailstone as big as his head squatting on his skull. Not skipping a beat, Nami made a few more movements with her staff.

"And now," Nami hummed to herself, spinning her full Clima-Tact at her side and causing a new offshoot of her Eisen aura to split off and form a sphere of clouds, the clouds roiling and churning. "A weather forecast for all listeners! Exercise extreme caution in today's ventures, as a wind god has been sighted roaming the environs of Merveille! This deity is extremely dangerous, and has been noted to have a penchant for loosing holy hellstorms of pure wind. If by some chance you manage to attract this deity's gaze, then in this weather woman's professional opinion…"

Nami's face became a mask of frigid fury as she jabbed her staff at the rapidly panicking pirates.

"You are royally f*cked," she declared. "Divine Tempo: Aeolus' Ire!"

The ball of clouds split open, and a gust of wind blasted out from its cradle. A gust so strong, it was like the divine bent to Nami's will: the entire back half of the main hall was blown clean off its foundation, and the pirates along with it. It didn't matter how big or small they were, how tired or fresh, all were swept aside as though some greater entity had just decided to brush them aside like so much dust.
The male officers of the Straw Hats could only gape at the devastation wrought by their compatriot. So engrossed were they, in fact, that they barely even reacted as Nami's Eisen Tempo retracted and deposited them on the splintered ground.

"Ahhh, the power rush," Nami practically shivered as she balanced her staff across her shoulders, tapping her fingers along its length. "I'll never get tired of it, you hear me? Never."

Cross, never one to be left speechless for long, rebooted his brain first. "I can imagine how you feel… but at the same time, I don't think everyone is going to be so appreciative."

"WATCH OUT FOR YOUR CREW WHEN YOU'RE DOING AN AOE LIKE THAT, WITCH!"

"Case in point," Cross said as Lassoo and Funkfreed burst free of the rubble that was once the remainder of the room, literal steel in the glares that they fixed on Nami.

"Oh, come on, it's not like you two aren't literally as tough as nails," Nami shamelessly purred.

The beast-weapons promptly reversed to being perfectly cordial, blushing and scratching the backs of their heads.

"Aw, shucks," Lassoo chuckled.

"Well, when ya put it like that," Funkfreed giggled.

"Morons, the both of you," Soundbite rolled his eyes.

"Morons or not, you can't deny they're still pretty damn useful," Cross reprimanded with a light grin, picking up his newly reverted weapons and sheathing them on his back and side. He then glanced back at Nami. "And as pissed as I still am at you for your bullshit… I can't deny it's good to have you back, too."

Nami blinked at Cross before shaking her head and waving him off. "I'll deal with whatever the hell you're talking about later. For now…" She jerked her thumb over her shoulder, a particularly demonic grin spreading over her face. "Mind following me and helping me utterly ruin what little of Shiki's day has been left intact?"

The way that Cross and Zoro grinned back was answer enough.

-o-

Shiki flew down the halls of Merveille, occasionally dodging a rubber fist or busting a hole in the wall or floor or ceiling to fly around a shimmering barrier that boxed him in. Contrary to appearances, he wasn't really running away. The confined corridors of his palace simply didn't provide the most advantageous battlefield against the Straw Hat brat and his unexpected companion. The barriers were a constant reminder of that. Out in the open, though? Well. Then they would die.

The one fly in the ointment was that he did have a few other loose ends to tie up before killing those two, and they were doing a good job at sticking to his tail like glue. What he needed was a diversion…

A grin spread on Shiki's face as he recalled a certain gambit he'd used on Garp more than once back in the day. Yes, it would do nicely, especially since his pursuers definitely took after the Hero in temperament.

And so, picking up speed, Shiki shot out of the palace and immediately ducked behind a corner
before stripping off his jacket. A simple application of the Float-Float fruit, and the jacket shot off deep into the floating islands, well away from both his hiding spot and where he needed to go.

After a few seconds later, stomping feet and voices rewarded him.

"Damn! Where did he go?"

"There! Floating off way over there!" A pause. "Wait, how are we gonna follow him?"

"Lemme try something…"

Curious despite himself, Shiki glanced around his hiding spot to see Straw Hat and Sharktooth jumping after his coat on platforms made from shimmering barrier. Perfect.

"Puru puru puru puru!"

"OF ALL THE TIMES!" Shiki hissed, withdrawing a snail from his pocket and pointing it at the nearby wall. One of his skilled navigators appeared on the view, looking rather nervous.

"Navigation to Captain Shiki! Come in, Captain! It's urgent!"

"It had better be, or else your head's going to part ways with your body!" Shiki snapped.

The navigator cowered fearfully. "Sir, we need to turn toward the east! A storm is coming!"

"Oh, that's just what I needed…" Shiki grumbled, giving an offhand gesture of acknowledgement before making to terminate the connection. Then he paused, and turned a more attentive eye on his navigator. "By the way, while I have you, what's the damage thus far?"

The gulp he got wasn't reassuring. At all. "Ah… with all due respect, I don't think I can say anything good, Captain. All of the Straw Hats are still going strong, the prisoners have escaped, Dr. Indigo and Scarlet have both been defeated, the snail transceiver has been stolen, and the Daft Green barrier has been destroyed. And the palace… the cyborg and the skeleton hijacked a group of the monsters and have them strung up like… like motorcycles! They're tearing the whole palace apart!"

Murder sang in Shiki's heart. But he could still salvage everything that he needed to. First, however, he had revenge to deal with.

"Where is the witch?" he growled.

"A-A-Ah… sh-she's in the throne room with Jeremiah Cross and Roronoa Zoro, but they look like they'll be moving on any moment!"

"Moving on to the next world, that is," Shiki snarled, terminating the connection and flying back the way he came as fast as he could, barely sparing enough attention to heed his navigator's request to redirect the islands to the east.

The Golden Lion scanned the flaming wreckage of his palace—his palace, that he had spent twenty years constructing, twenty years planning, preparing—at searching for hide, hair or otherwise of any of the blaspheming bastards who were wrecking the monument to his greatness, but he came up snake eyes, and instead came upon the half-collapsed husk of the throne room first.

A husk filled with utterly defeated pirates, at that.

Shiki's already trench-deep scowl twitched violently as he took in the supposedly 'best and deadliest' pirates in all of Paradise, the pirates he had personally chosen to act as his soldiers, to represent him,
laid low by a band of pathetic, worthless, East Blue weaklings.

"You. Incompetent. Scum," Shiki hissed, if only for his own benefit. Then, without a trace of concern, he shot his arm out to the side, gathered up a goodly mass of the fallen snow, and coalesced it into a snarling lion's head hovering above the hall.

"I will burn the East Blue," the Golden Lion swore imperiously, as though delivering a mandate. "I will conquer the world! And I will let nothing slow my path! Not trash like them…" Pure madness shone in Shiki's eyes as he dropped his arm, and the lion dropped with it. "AND NOT TRASH LIKE YOU!"

The leonine flurry roared Shiki's fury to the world as it descended, intent on shredding each and every last one of the traitors who had so stupidly forfeited their right to live by sullying his reputation with defeat.

And the construct would have achieved its goal, too, had Shiki's age-old instincts not suddenly blared to life, prompting him to snap his arm out and backhand some kind of explosive ordinance away from him, halting the Lion's descent in the process.

Quite unfortunately for Shiki's fraying-to-nonexistent temper, he didn't have to wonder where the projectile had come from.

"We'd really prefer if you didn't do that, if you don't mind!"

Shiki snapped his attention down towards the source of that voice, and indeed, it was exactly who he expected: the annoyance, Jeremiah Cross and his pest pet, the captain's mutt, Roronoa Zoro… and her.

Before he could deal with the traitor, however, Cross's ever-present leer quirked up into a direct taunt. "It might sound counterintuitive, but the thing is? Our crew prefers to leave our enemies alive. Let you bastards stew in your failure, see? So!" He spread his arms invitingly, his mutt-cannon weighing heavy on his arm. "If you could do us all the massive favor of shoving off?"

"Or just lay down and die, if you don't mind," Nami invited with a frigid smile. "That'd be great."

To make a very long if simple story short, something in the back of Shiki's mind snapped.

"You first," he rumbled, and his lion redirected itself at the Straw Hat officers.

It was close, so so close to chomping down on them and ripping them to shreds, but alas, not close enough.

"GUM-BARRIER CANNONBALL!"

Because he had to suddenly rip apart the snow golem in order to throw up a snow barrier to stop the ballistic rubber man that was flying at him. And then, before he could crush the persistent little brat, a cackling ball of shimmering energy barrier plowed through the snow like it wasn't even there, hitting him full body and jarring every bone in his body.

Momentum transferred, Shiki hit the ground and skidded, the impact giving him something to focus on. And none too soon.

"GEAR SECOND! GUM-GUM JET AXE!"

He got his wits back just in time to shoot away from a red-skinned, steaming Luffy, or more
accurately, his sandalled foot, which neatly obliterated the section of ground where Shiki's head had been a half second before.

Floating upright again, Shiki scowled mightily when he found that Luffy and Barto had put themselves in between him and that traitor, their intent clear.

"Fine," he bit out. "You want to die first? I can oblige that."

Luffy glared right back. But when he opened his mouth, it wasn't to Shiki.

"Cross."

"Keep ripping the place, snatch everything not nailed down, rip up what is, then set the place to blow and GTFO?" the loudmouth ventured.

"Go."

"Goin'!"

And with that, the three mates hightailed it out of there. Shiki didn't pursue. So he would be doing things out of order. Whatever. He could take out his frustrations on the two people who had oh-so-kindly put themselves in his way. Slowly, he began to float higher into the air.

-o-

'Black Bart' Bartolomeo, for the first time since Luffy and company had arrived on Merveille, felt nervous. The reason was that slide maneuver Shiki had pulled off to evade Luffy-senpai's Gum-Gum Jet Axe. If he could pull of something like that on a dime… well, Barto knew he wouldn't be matching that maneuver on his barriers even on his own. Supporting Luffy on top of that? Hopeless.

"That's a problem, Luffy," he pointed out as Shiki continued to rise.

"Yeah, I need a better platform," Luffy agreed.

High above, Shiki flicked his leg, an air slash flying down towards them. It splashed off of Barto's barrier, Luffy responding with a Jet Pistol. Unfortunately, the punch didn't reach Shiki before it started to arc down.

"Jihahahahahaha!" Shiki cackled. "Too bad, boys!"

Gritting his teeth, Barto jumped up and onto his barrier, then pushed off, cancelled the first, and jumped to a new one. He repeated this the many times it took to get to Shiki's height - at which point Shiki merely floated above the haymaker Barto threw and then floated down and slammed his knee right into Barto's gut. Stunned, the pirate ragdolled down until he hit the ground hard enough to embed his silhouette in it.

"Well, that didn't work…" he groaned, scratching his mohawk miserably.

"COME DOWN HERE, BASTARD!" Luffy roared, glaring hellfire at the object of his ire.

Surprisingly, however, it was not Shiki who responded.

"Hey, ah… do-do you think I could lend a hand?"

Luffy blinked clean out of his Jet-enhanced state as a brand new voice interrupted his train of thought, and he looked up to discover a familiar entity perched on a nearby eave.
"Billy?" the rubber-man gaped.

The electro-fowl glanced skyward at Shiki before looking back at Luffy with a shaky but determined frown. "I-I ran away with Nami, I-I ran away at the village… and if I run away now, I know I'm never stop! S-So I'm not running away anymore!"

Billy hopped down next to Luffy and extended his wing, staring upward in fierce defiance. "I'm not running away from my fears any more… I'm charging headlong at them! Though, uh…" Billy shot a shaky sidelong grin at the rubber man. "I don't quite have the firepower for that. Think you could help me out with that?"

It only took Luffy a second to make his decision, and once he did he grinned eagerly and hopped on Billy's back. "Hell yeah!"

Bartolomeo, however, was notably more resigned in his enthusiasm as he gave the duck a once-over. "Eh…" he tentatively raised a finger. "Don't suppose you've got some spare seats on ya or somethin'?"

"Or you could always take your own ride."

Barto spun around at the voice behind him, then blinked slowly, wondering how the hell two tons of dragon had snuck up on all of them. He gave the dragon a once-over before doing the same to the duck, and ultimately, he came to a simple conclusion:

"Mine's bigger."


"Message received, getting on the fucking dragon!" Barto crowed, doing just that. Luffy hopped onto Billy's back, and then they were soaring into the sky after Shiki.

And they weren't the only ones who took to the skies; with phrases such as 'your master will prove who is really the strongest' and 'TLL DEAFEN YOU AT MINIMUM, and this time there's jack all YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT' ringing in their ears, every last one of the Golden Lion's golden eagles took to the increasingly stormy skies, they and their snails submitting to the Voice of Anarchy and ensuring that Shiki got exactly what he wanted: all the world watching him.

-o-

"Well, it looks like his monopoly on aerial combat just expired," Helmeppo said with a smirk.

"Feeling bold, Helmeppo?" Garp asked with a hint of warning.

"Either Shiki loses or the East Blue dies. I'm not going to apologize for hoping that it's the first one that happens," the apprentice responded.

Garp considered that… and shrugged. "Eh, fair enough."

On screen, Barto and Luffy and their respective mounts closed in with Shiki, the odd duck-like bird soaring ahead. The feed abruptly switched to one closer to the action, allowing the Marines to watch as Luffy threw himself off Billy, fist reared back. Naturally, Shiki lazily floated above the punch - at which point Luffy spun in mid-air and, with a cry of "GUM-GUM SPEAR!", launched his clapped-together feet into Shiki's gut.

Oh, and then Shiki was squashed against a barely-visible barrier. All present winced.
Billy snatched Luffy out of the sky a moment later, leaving Shiki to try and slice up Barto instead. The attack, however, splashed against a new barrier, and with that the combatants were on the move again.

"Ah, Vice Admiral?"

Garp and Helmeppo looked at Coby, who was staring at the screen in confusion.

"With how much experience Shiki has… he has to have Haki, right?" he asked hesitantly. "So, why isn't he using it against Luffy and Black Bart? That attack Luffy did, the kick to the gut… either Observation or Armament Haki would've countered that move. So… does he not have it?"

"He does, but it doesn't matter."

All eyes turned towards a grim-faced Sengoku. "Everything that this man is doing, he's doing because of his lingering grudge against Roger, his shame from losing to a man from the weakest sea in the world. Now the man who is increasingly considered his successor has stepped up against him… and he's only in Paradise. The Golden Lion has long since missed his chance, in his mind, to use Haki to beat the Straw Hats."

The two apprentices looked confused, and Garp took over.

"There are only two reasons that someone proficient in Haki would use it against someone who can't use it themselves: their opponent is so far beneath them there's no point in dragging out the fight, or their opponent is too strong to win without going all-out. Shiki has had too many chances to snuff out the Straw Hats at this point; now that it's come to the crunch, the entire world is watching him, and Luffy has surpassed any expectations he had. If he went all-out at this point, he might win in deed, but in spirit it'd be a complete defeat. He'd never forgive himself if he resorted to Haki to win against a couple of rookies from the weakest sea, so he's left with his wits and his Devil Fruit."

The Vice Admiral grinned wryly. "And something tells me that that's just not going to be enough to beat my stupid grandson."

Sengoku sighed, removing his glasses and massaging the bridge of his nose, eyes squeezed shut. "So, I'm reduced to hoping that the Straw Hat Pirates, who have caused me more stress than anyone in my life, will be able defeat Golden Lion Shiki and prevent a massacre in the East Blue. I am—"

"Conflicted?"

Opening his eyes to give Garp a glare, Sengoku said flatly, "Too old for this shit…and conflicted, yes."

Garp chuckled to himself. "Well, I won't deny that I wish it was us handing him his head like the good old days… but if this is the only way, then there's only one thing for me to do."

Sengoku knew that he should have turned around and not given Garp another look for the rest of the night. Unfortunately, as the image of the snail was in one place, it left him vulnerable to the sight just within his peripheral vision: Garp raising a large foam finger with "East Blue #1" written on it and his two apprentices doing the same.

He groaned even as they began cheering like cheerleaders. He groaned more as the image of Garp in a cheerleading outfit crossed his mind. That would be taking the place of Akainu taking over for him as Fleet Admiral in the 'screaming nightmares' rotation.

-o-
The current maneuvering phase only lasted a few minutes, but that was long enough to take the combatants into the outer islands of Merveille. And Shiki wasted no time demonstrating why he'd taken the fight out there.

He came to a stop, and threw both hands out to the side. Barto and Luffy had only the barest of warnings—the sounds of splintering wood and rock—before a hail of stone shrapnel and splintered tree trunks shot off the nearest islands like the world's largest shotguns. Bartolomeo immediately threw up a barrier to halt the trees, but his attempts to curve it around were agonizingly slow. So, Lindy and Billy did the only thing that would save them.

They went vertical.

Unfortunately, being neither psychic nor experienced to the point of near-psychicness with each other, they went in different directions. Billy flew down, Lindy flew up.

Which was what Shiki wanted the whole time. The speed with which he dove for Billy meant nothing else.

"Shit! Lindy, dive dive dive!" Barto roared the minute he saw that. Luffy, of course, tried to counter with a Gum-Gum Gatling, but Shiki once again smoothly flowed out of the way of the attacks and stuck out one leg, dive-bombing the Straw Hat. Billy dodged - and then Shiki borrowed Luffy's earlier trick by spinning and launching an air slash back up at his opponent.

That splashed against a barrier. But this time, Shiki didn't get angry. He instead spun again, and launched another air slash at Barto. With his barrier still protecting Luffy, and Lindy already committed to the dive and unable to easily pull out, it seemed like he would take the full brunt of the attack.

But it was not to be. Gritting his teeth, Barto jumped off Lindy's back at just the right angle to let the slash carve a nasty gash in his side rather than slit his belly open. Diving down, he reared back his own fist. Shiki evaded, of course, which was when Barto rematerialized his barrier and jumped off of it, planting his fist in Shiki's cheek right as Luffy, red and steaming again, slammed his foot into Shiki's ribs.

The Golden Lion, staggered, fell several feet. But it was not long before he again caught himself and soared around to go on the attack again, large rocks ripping themselves off a nearby island to orbit around him. Luffy didn't wait, tapping Billy to charge straight at him, leaving Barto behind to get back on Lindy.

The past and present of the Pirate Age rumbled towards each other like armored knights in a joust, closing at frankly painful velocities. But a direct clash was not to be. The ring of rocks orbiting around Shiki suddenly switched to shooting themselves straight at Luffy. And while Luffy himself, with his rubber body, could weather an attack like that no problem, Billy was made of much less ductile flesh.

"GUM-GUM JET GATLING!" Luffy roared. His fists lashed out and smashed the rocks into gravel that harmlessly brushed off of both him and his mount.

And then Luffy spun around, just in time to take a sword to the gut, grunting in pain.

"End of the line, brat!" Shiki roared, bringing his other leg around to chop Luffy's head off. Instead, Luffy caught his opponent's leg, and to the Golden Lion's dismay, the grip was ironclad.

Luffy's other hand, meanwhile, was shot behind him. "Gum-Gum…"
Frantically, Shiki slid his other leg-blade out of Luffy.

"Jet Bullet!"

"Comin' through!"

Too late. Luffy's fist hit Shiki square in the nose, and half a second later, Barto slammed into him from behind, cow-catcher-shaped barrier raised once again. The Golden Lion shot off into the distance.

"A third of the Supernovas, the first Pirate King, the next one too, and the birthplace of all three crews that once and currently are puntng your tail! Not bad for the 'weakest sea', huh!?" Barto shouted after him.

Perhaps fortunately for Shiki, the time it took him to recover from the blow and regain his wits prevented him from hearing Bartolomeo's taunt. When he had his head straight again, he didn't go on the offensive, or start another gambit. All that had gotten him were two wounds—albeit serious ones—and a collection of contusions for himself.

'What am I doing trading punches with them?' he mentally demanded. Some need to prove his superiority? Raw rage that needed to be expressed?

Well, whatever the reason, he was done with it. Now, he would be fighting smarter.

The facts were thus: close combat devolved into mutual exchanges, something the rookies were... better suited to handle. Because there were two of them, and for no other reasons. Black Bart was covering Straw Hat; he needed to get both at once. And Straw Hat kept charging after him.

Shiki glanced down at the island below. Perfect.

Drawing on the power of the Float-Float fruit, Shiki fired off more impromptu projectiles at the pair. They missed or were blocked, but that wasn't the point. The point was that Straw Hat and that stupid pea-duck were now flying straight at him again. Surreptitiously lowering one hand, Shiki levitated a large ball of water out of the small lake below him. And then, when Straw Hat was close enough, he sped it up.

The look on Straw Hat's face when the water engulfed him was a soothing balm to his embittered soul. As was the shocked yelp Black Bart let out. Granted, the bubble barrier the traitor had managed to create around the two of them, preventing them from immediately drowning, was annoying, but from the water-leaking cracks, that would not last long.

"Jihaha... JIIIIHAAHAHAHAAAA!" he cackled, floating his way around the ball of water as he basked in the glory of his victory, the glory of the brats' defeat! "You think you can come here to my island, my kingdom, and do whatever you want, hmmmm!? You brats! You rookies! YOU FAKE PIRATES!"

Shiki's already present smirk widened as the brats froze in their panicking, their attention locking onto him. That had gotten their attention something fierce.

"You actually listening for once?" he asked mockingly. "Good, then open up your ears!" Shiki swept his arms out wide. "Let me educate you on just how the world truly works!"

-0-

"It's really quite simple, you know. So simple even a pair of total morons like you can understand:
"the strong rule over the weak!" Shiki raised his palm before his face, fingers clenching and unclenching menacingly. "We in the world who have power, we who stand head and shoulders above the weak, are granted this ability because we are worthy! Because we are inherently better than our lessers! To take what we want, when we want, solely because we want it and because we have the ability to take it! This is our right! The right of the worthy!" Shiki's hand snapped into a fist. "THE RIGHT OF THE STRONG!"

A murderous growl erupted from X. Drake's throat as he snapped his titan-sized jaws at the screen, positively itching to tear his fangs into the real thing rather than a simple simulacrum.

Because right then, in that moment, there was truly nothing Drake desired more than to devour the monster who so thoroughly reminded him of the other monster that had slaughtered the first family he knew in his life.

Or perhaps more accurately, he wanted to slaughter the monster that reminded him of his first family, full-stop.

Bottom line… Drake wanted Shiki dead.

And he wasn't alone.

-o-

"And as for the weak?" Shiki's leer turned sadistic. "The only right they have is to be crushed beneath the might of the strong! To serve at the beck and call of the ones whom they have no right to stand against, whom they should face with the utmost reverence by having the utter benevolence to allow them to set foot upon their dominion day by day… and then to perish as soon as it would benefit the strong ones best! The world is full of weaklings who will never amount to anything, a waste of space and breath for those who can make so much better use of it. The only worthwhile thing they can do with their existence is serving and nourishing the strong!"

"That son of a bitch…"

A good number of incredulous eyes turned toward the punk-like speaker. He met them with a scoff.

"You honestly think I can put up with this? Please!" He waved his hand dismissively. "I'm no hypocrite, I agree with what he said about strength. I don't have a problem with killing. I don't have a problem with pillaging and burning. It's how I live my life, and it's how I'm going to reach for One Piece."

Kid glared bloody murder at the screen.

"But… blind reverence? And this chickenshit having the utter gall to demand it?" Kid's fist split the wood of the table. "Fuck that. I want enemies, or I want loyalty, and both ways, that shit's earned. This asshole? He wants a flock of sheep." Loudly clearing his throat, Kid spat the resulting loogie right onto the screen. "Makes me fucking pissed off that I'm lumped in with him."

-o-

"And the strongest of all in the world? Why, there's no doubt about it!" Shiki flung his arms wide with a mad cackle. "It is us pirates! We, who fly our own flags and allow no limitations to hinder us! We, who cast off the shackles of the world, and are nations unto ourselves! There should be no doubts, no misgivings! We pirates, we conquer storms that send the meek fleeing for the shores! We defy all who stand in our way, be they beast or man!"
Shiki soared above the bubble, his face a rictus of rage as he glared down towards the world below. "WE FACE ALL DANGERS WITHOUT HESITATION! WE SAIL BEYOND THE HORIZONS THAT THE MEEK DARE NOT CROSS! THERE CAN BE NO DOUBT ABOUT IT!" Shiki shot his finger downward. "I TELL YOU NOW THE TRUTH I TOLD THAT FOOL ROGER, ALL THOSE YEARS AGO: THE SEA BELONGS TO US, AND US ALONE! AND I, AS KING OF THE PIRATES, WILL BE THE STRONGEST MAN IN THE WORLD! THE OCEAN WILL BELONG TO ME! JIHAHAHAHAHA!

"Twenty years of isolation has clearly not done the man's sanity any favors," the greatest swordsman in the world dryly stated, one hand reaching for a glass of wine. "Honestly… a veteran of the New World should know better than to assume he could actually get away with something like this."

"You know, up until that last line, I was actually prepared to agree with every word he said," the youngest of the Four Emperors concurred, a jug of sake in hand. "But you've got the right of it, Hawk-Eyes. He's completely lost it."

"He lost it when the captain died by a hand that wasn't his, brat, if not long before that," the Dark King groaned into his cup. "The world's just seeing it on display for the first time."

The three men exchanged looks, the same emotions between them, and drank deeply from their respective vessels.

"So, are you ready to set out, then?" Mihawk posed, cracking his neck in preparation.

"SHUT UP, SHIKI!"

Their attention redirected at the screen as an infuriated roar shook dust loose from the rafters.

"…Not yet. We'll see this fight to the end first," Shanks said firmly.

"I expected nothing less," the swordsman sighed. "You still hold the hope that your protégé can triumph over one such as Shiki?"

"You just said it yourself: his pride has inflated to the level of insanity."

The younger superhumans turned to the older, who was studiously observing the fight.

"He has the willpower, the potential, and he's not alone. All of that gives him a chance against Shiki."

-0-

It happened all at once. Rather than collapsing, Barto dropped his barrier of his own free will, so that at the exact same time, Luffy could throw a punch at Shiki - and to the shock of everyone watching, his hand managed to shoot out of the bubble, grab Shiki's collar and haul himself out of the aquatic prison, laying a punch on his opponent. There wasn't much force behind it, but the Golden Lion's face still twisted in pure, incandescent rage. Well, more so than before.

"Accursed brat!" Shiki roared, bringing up one of his legs. Counterintuitively, Luffy simply let go, and then punched the empty air to his left. Those few viewers with training in the Six Powers recognized the half-assed Moon Walk for what it was; everyone else was simply left gobsmacked by Luffy punching the air to dodge. This included Shiki.

That was when Barto and his dragon blindsided him.
Rookie and legend slammed together, Barto's barrier shimmering between them as Lindy gave him the velocity he needed to knock Shiki out of the sky. Gathering his wits, the veteran slipped out from under Barto, only to catch Luffy's sandal blasting him in the face.

Stars burst in his eyes as he flew back, taking the time that he needed to regain his sight. He turned his gaze back on them. And then his vision faded again as a blinding, crackling blur seared across his vision.

"A VALKYRIE?!” he exclaimed, open-mouthed.

"Not far off, you bastard."

With Nami's voice in his ears, Shiki snapped back to furious. "What have you done, witch?!!"

"Tonight's weather forecast for Merveille is showers, thunderstorms, and cyclones, with a 100% chance of the entire archipelago falling back to the sea where it belongs, drowning and crushing every last monster that the last twenty years have spawned. This could have been avoided had a certain lion-bastard realized that his navigator was being held at gunpoint to lie to him and lead his base into certain destruction. And now, here's Straw Hat Luffy with the news."

"YOU'VE LOST, SHIKI!!" Luffy roared, slamming his knuckles together.

"You only wish," Shiki drawled, spreading his hands. At first, it seemed as though nothing was happening. Then Nami spoke up again.

"You... You're lowering the islands?" she gasped in horror.

"And you call me an idiot," he responded with cold smugness. "My powers will uphold these islands until the day I die... but I will admit that if too much force from the Grand Line's weather struck an island and sent it falling, my weapons would perish. But thanks to your warning, we are now at an altitude that should ensure that at least the strongest of them will survive. Any further advice, baby girl?"

"... Luffy? Break him."

Roronoa Zoro and Jeremiah Cross's voices spoke alongside Nami's for the final words, and their captain raised his head with a ferocious scowl.

"You were wrong, Shiki," Luffy said firmly.

Shiki's entire being twitched at the accusation, and he shot a positively evil look at the other pirate. "Care to run that by me again?" he rumbled, a vein pulsating on the side of his neck.

Straw Hat shook his head in disgust. "You've had your head in the clouds for so long that you've forgotten all about the sea. It actually shows just how stupid you are: you can fly and you don't even realize the most important thing in the world. You talk about strength like it's everything, but it's nothing compared to freedom. You say that the ocean belongs to you? Belongs to pirates!?"

Luffy flung his arm out in denial. "YOU'RE WRONG! THE OCEAN... IT BELONGS TO EVERYONE! There's nothing standing in the way of sailing from your home to the end of the world; you're free to go wherever you want to go. No matter what comes our way, no matter how much it hurts, we can still sail on! THE POINT OF BEING A PIRATE ISN'T TO BE STRONG!"
Luffy spread his arms and bared his teeth in bestial defiance. "PIRATES ARE FREE! THAT'S WHY I'LL BECOME THE KING OF THE PIRATES! SO THAT I CAN BE THE FREEST MAN IN THE WORLD! ME! NOT YOU!"

In the relatively new secondary commander's office in the fortress of Navarone, an imposing violet-haired man let out a low growl in response to the rookie's words. The words that, almost against his will, cracked ever so slightly through the cloud of hatred that the Kid Pirates had cast over him, and allowed him to look upon the rubber kid with something other than loathing.

But it was only hearing him say those feelings of the sea, the feelings that he himself agreed with, that caused 'non-loathing' to grow into what he was barely able to consider respect.

Behind him, his most loyal lieutenants had softer expressions as they too observed the fight between the two pirates.

"...he's... different, isn't he?" the woman mused. She rolled her eyes as her comrades snapped accusatory looks at her. "He's still a pirate, I'm not denying that, but..." She jerked her chin at the screen. "If nothing else, this Straw Hat Luffy, he's certainly shown he's nothing like Kid or Shiki, hasn't he?"

A tense silence fell. Then her superior let out a lengthy sigh before inclining his head the slightest amount.

Just as slightly, the corners of Ain's mouth turned upward.

"You... YOOOUUU!"

Apparently, however, not everyone was of the same opinion.

-0-

"YOU! LITTLE! BRAAAT!" Shiki all but literally erupted, raw fury blazing from his person, glaring at the rookie with unbridled hate. "YOU'RE AS DELUSIONAL AS ROGER WAS! But you know what? That's perfectly alright! THIS IS MY WORLD! A WORLD WHERE MIGHT MAKES RIGHT! WHERE STRENGTH MEANS EVERYTHING! YOU WANT TO PROVE ME WRONG?!"

Shiki put his arms out to his sides, a grimace of pain coming over his face. The reason why became clear a moment later as blood erupted from his lower half where his knees once were, the stumps no longer stopped. Then, just as suddenly, the blood flew back where it came from. Shiki hardly heeded this, more focused on the trade-off of leaving him legless once more; without a flinch, his hands reached out and closed around the newly freed hilts of Oto and Kogarashi for the first time in twenty years.

"THEN LET OUR CAUSES FACE ONE ANOTHER HEAD ON!" he roared.

"My freedom," Luffy snarled, pumping his legs and causing steam to course over his body as he swung his pipe out viciously.

"My strength," Shiki growled, effortlessly taking on one of his old fighting stances.

"I'LL PROVE ITS RIGHT!"

And with that, the two shot at each other, each swinging their weapons.
Right from the start Luffy was driven back, Shiki hooking the pipe out of the way with one of the swords and nearly taking Luffy's head off with the other. Only a frantic duck prevented the latter, and only an ironclad grip prevented Shiki from twisting the pipe out of his opponent's fingers barely a second later. Out of position, Luffy had to have Billy outright fly off to avoid the follow-up flurry of stabs. He still had to add a few thin cuts to the balance sheet.

Circling around, this time Luffy went on the offensive, swinging his pipe in a wide arc at Shiki's head. Shiki's swords flashed up, one neatly pushing the pipe out of the way and the other stabbing for Luffy's throat. Another frantic dodge saved his life, though the cut on his neck was still dangerously close to the all-important blood vessels.

"Jihahahaha, too bad!" Shiki cackled. "A sheet of paper more, and you'd have been dead!"

"Yeah, well, I'm still here!" Luffy roared. But he didn't order Billy in again. Instead he pulled back, to where Barto had unsuccessfully been circling for an opening. Shiki, for his part, let him, either confident in his chances or unwilling to risk hopping on the close-combat pain train again. Or a bit of both.

"This isn't working," Luffy grumbled.

"Well, I've got a new move to try out," Barto replied. "Should be able to brute-force through his guard. If you can get him to loosen his grip on his swords…"

Both pirates grimaced in thought. Then, Luffy blinked as something occurred to him.

"Hey, he's probably using his power on those swords in case he drops 'em or something, right?"

Barto frowned, turning that over. "Yeah, probably. Why?"

For the first time since the fight had started, Straw Hat Luffy smiled. It was not a nice smile.

"One loosened grip coming right up!" Luffy declared, tapping Billy and charging forward again, pipe raised high.

"The same thing again? How primitive!" Shiki scoffed, bringing up his swords in preparation for the attack.

Once again, Luffy's straightforward haymaker was brushed aside by Shiki, just on a different spot on the pipe. But this time, Luffy adeptly spun the pipe so that the other end tapped Shiki's other sword.

And suddenly, Shiki flinched and nearly fumbled the hilts out of his hands.

-o-

Back on the Sunny, the rest of the crew, who had by now finished their work and reconvened on the ship to watch the fight, had mixed feelings about the maneuver.

"LUFFY DID WHAT!? HE DOES REALIZE THAT ONE BRUSH WITH SHIKI AND WE'D HAVE FACEPLANTED ON THE OCEAN, RIGHT?!"

But with every iota of their attention trained on the brawl, and with the noise of the storm around them, none of the Straw Hats noticed that for a good while now, Soundbite's eyes had been blanked out, and static sang in the air.

-o-
Shiki stared at his swords. They'd gotten… heavy. Heavier than they'd been since Impel Do—

Sea prism stone! How had he forgotten that the brat's pipe was reinforced with sea prism stone!?

"Yo, Shiki!"

Glancing up, Shiki beheld a gleaming, barrier-made sword - the size of a galleon's mainmast and three times as wide. And it didn't hide the shit-eating grin on Barto's face.

"Take this! Barrier-Barrier Buster!"

With a heave of his arm, Barto sent the barrier-sword hurtling down. Shiki crossed his swords and caught the blade on them, intending to deflect it out of the way. But they were heavier than they'd been in twenty years. The weight distribution was entirely off.

"Gah!"

The result was that the massive cleaver knocked the swords clean out of Shiki's hands, also opening up a nasty gash in his left shoulder.

As he watched his beloved companions plummet down through the clouds to the sea below, Golden Lion Shiki felt… numb. For a little while, at least. Pretty soon it was overtaken by blinding rage. And then… then it passed from blinding back into numb. Oh, the anger was still there, but it was ice in his veins instead of magma.

So it was with calm and forethought that he executed his next move. He stretched his power further than he had since lifting Merveille into the sky, pulling four specific islands closer to him. From the Winter Island, he drew the snow that fell and compacted there. From the Summer Island, he drew sand hot enough to burn and rock the color of a setting sun. From the Fall Island, he drew scraps of leaves and wood, ignited by the lightning that witch had summoned. And finally, from the Spring Island, he drew air, and the cherry blossoms that wafted within.

And these elements, drawn from the four seasons, shaped themselves before the East rookies' eyes into lions of snow and sand and fire and air, nothing at all like the beast Shiki had summoned earlier to squash the witch.

"Celestial Emperors: Elemental Lions," he intoned, before jabbing his finger at Straw Hat and Black Bart. "Kill."

Luffy and Barto and their mounts all tensed up as the lions charged at them. The Wind Lion arrived first, splashing against and then around Barto's barrier. As Luffy prodded Billy to take the rear position, Barto shifted his barrier against the Sand and Ice Lions, wincing as they butted heads with his barrier. The Fire Lion followed that by breathing a gout of flame that also harmlessly splashed against his barrier, allowing the other two Lions to flow around his barrier.

"Luffy, you've got incoming!" Barto barked.

"I know, but the Wind Lion's run off, and—!"

Both rookies froze as a terrible thought came to them.

"Taking a few moments to think about it, I realized that I've been doing this all wrong," Shiki said with an icy smirk. "If I'm going to crush you brats… I need to crush your spirits first!"

"The Sunny!" Luffy cried out in horror, spurring Billy on. Barto would have followed had the Fire
Lion not again thrown a fireball at him, and it didn't matter. Luffy's attempt to disengage was met by a rain of projectiles that forced Billy to hurriedly change course.

"Go ahead and see if you can stop them. But as soon as you turn your backs, I'll shishkebab you," Shiki drawled, curled javelins of rain and earth floating around him.

"Hey, dumbass? You're supposed to learn from your enemies' mistakes."

The grin fell off of Shiki's face as Boss Dugong's voice reached him.

"Forewarned is forearmed, and in case you forgot, the rest of us are still in fighting shape. Three Sword Style: 108 Caliber Phoenix!"

"Coup de Vent!"

"Aperitif!"

"Typhoon Lash!"

"Sekhmet's Might!"

Two wind cannons erupted from the Thousand Sunny, tearing through the form of the wind lion and leaving it to disperse. Two smaller ones followed, the remaining Lions having enough forewarning to dodge... right into a bracket pattern of explosives that tore the Sand Lion to shreds and batted the Ice Lion around like a rock in a tumble drier.

Assured that his crew could take care of themselves, the panic melted from Luffy's face, leaving behind only the icy rage that had held him the entire fight. "I'm not going to let you threaten my crew again," he said evenly.

Shiki's only response was to hurl the projectiles of earth and rain that he'd collected. But instead of hitting, or harmlessly flying by, they instead hit Barto's barrier - and the Fire Lion still plastered to the front of it. The earth, of course, was no harm to it, but that much water put out its flame with a hiss of steam.

"Ewps..." Barto drawled, shoving a finger up his nose.

Roaring in frustration, Shiki pulled more ammunition from the islands and from the sky, throwing it indiscriminately at the two rookies so determined to vex him. And to Shiki's delight, some of them actually hit, drawing blood as they stabbed in. How? Their mounts were flying slower, and the fighters were less nimble in dodging and deflecting; Barto often moved his barrier off himself and in front of Luffy to his own detriment. Grinning, Shiki upped the tempo, only to have his opponents duck behind an extra-large barrier and charge straight at him.

Rolling his eyes, he merely floated out of the way, only for the barrier to vanish and then appear right in front of him, too close to dodge. The collision was painful, and disorienting, and the kick that thundered into his kidneys even more so.

Whirling around, Shiki did one thing he almost never did: he grabbed Luffy by the leg, yanked him in, and punched him in the face. It didn't cause much injury, but it allowed Shiki to claw for distance.

"We're wearing him down!" Barto declared as Lindy flew up next to Billy and Luffy. "Heh. Good thing he didn't think to just, y'know, wrap up the Sunny in rock or tilt it into the ocean or something. Or heck, he's touched it before, he could—"
Suddenly, a low, grinding rumble caught their attention, and the two pirates looked around for the source.

"What the heck?" Luffy wondered. "It's like Cross' stomach after he's eaten a biscuit."

"Uh, Luffy?"

Drawn by the uncharacteristic tone of fear in his usually cocky voice, Luffy looked where Barto was looking. His immediate conclusion?

Yeah, fear was the appropriate response to someone—almost certainly Shiki—ripping an entire mountain out of a nearby island.

"JIHAHAHAHAHA!" Shiki laughed, obviously at the very dregs of his sanity, drawing the pirates' attention back to him. "LET'S SEE YOU TRY BLOCKING THIS!"

Luffy grimly eyed the massive mound of stone now flying towards them with deceptive speed. "Can you block this?" he asked Barto.

Barto also eyed the stone, trying to ignore the headache driving railroad spikes into his skull. "Yeah, I can," he reluctantly groaned. "But I'm probably going to be useless after."

"...Thirty seconds." Once again, Luffy bit his thumb. "Gear Third!"

Gritting his teeth, Barto threw up the widest, thickest barrier he could. The sheet of light then folded in on itself and doubled the thickness of the barrier, heedless of the railroad spikes in the caster's brain upgrading to steam-driven piles.

Then the barrier folded in on itself again, making it four times as thick.

And once more, for a barrier eightfold stronger than any Bartolomeo had ever produced.

"Barrier... Barrier..." Barto groaned in agony, before roaring and throwing his arms wide, which expanded the blockade to the size of a small fortress. "BASTION!"

The agony was all but literally blinding, and that was before the rock actually hit. Beyond the headache, Bartolomeo's arms were what supported his barriers, were the physical connection. And under such a strain... they snapped, in multiple spots. Combined with the headache, it was a wonder Barto didn't pass out on the spot.

Instead, his arms and the barrier fell, the mountain falling to the ocean in shattered pieces. "FINISH HIM!" he roared.

Luffy's arm inflated, the air this time travelling down his body, into his foot. This required him to hop onto one foot, and use his hands to direct Billy to soar at Shiki... and also do something the duck hadn't done in the fight yet.

"GUUUUM-GUUUUM...!"

"I refuse!" Shiki howled as Billy weaved between the projectiles he haphazardly flung at the rookie. "I refuse I refuse I REFUSE! YOU CAN'T WIN! GRAGH!" The Golden Lion clawed his hand forwards, throwing a chunk of rock in all but effigy. "YOU ARE ALL NOTHING! YOU! YOUR DREAMS! YOUR OCEAN! ALL OF IT, WORTHLESS! DESTINY, FATE, DREAMS!? PAH! ALL DIRT! THE ONLY THING THAT MATTERS IN THIS WORLD! RAAAAAGH!!" An entire cliff tore itself from the coast of Merveille and started splintering as it shot
itself skyward. "ALL WORTHLESS IN THE FACE OF POWER!"

For all that there was a variety of projectiles, however, they meant naught when they couldn't hit their mark. The majority were inaccurate enough as it was, but the few accurate projectiles were easy for Billy to dodge.

Meanwhile Luffy, grunting with exertion, sent his foot into the sky, piercing through the clouds.

And given how the battle was taking place in the middle of a cyclone…

**KEE-RACK!**

There was only one logical outcome.

"HOLY—!" Bartolomeo flinched away as a full-blown *lightning-bolt* struck Luffy's foot, the astral light dancing over his idol and illuminating him in the darkened sky.

But where Barto was shocked into silence by the display, Shiki only got louder.

"JI—JIHAHAHAHAAAA!!" Shiki roared in hysterical joy, his face the picture of madness at the spectacle before him. "DO YOU SEE, STRAW HAT!? EVEN THE GODS REJECT YOU, THEY SMITE YOU DOWN! THIS IS MY VICTORY! MY STRONG WORLD! ALL MINE TO RULE! ME, AND ME ALONE!!"

"No. Not you. Never you."

Shiki twitched as *his* voice whispered harshly in his ear, but before he could respond—

"Don't you remember, Golden Lion Shiki? Remember the last time Luffy fought God?"

The synapses fired in Shiki's brain, and horror set in. "No…"

"GIIIAAANT!" Luffy's voice echoed throughout the heavens.

"No—!"

"Yes."

"THOOOOR!"

"Nononono—!"

"Yes, yes, and forever yes. The gods haven't rejected Luffy, you braggart. They. Reject. You. This is the end."

"NOOOOOOO!" Shiki wailed, desperation, terror and denial mixing in equal parts in his voice as he threw as much stone, as much power, as much of his Strong World as he could manage at Luffy. He dug deep, he threw it all…

"AAAAAAXE!"

And it was all for nothing, as the judgement came down.

Shiki stared in horror as the titanic limb descended on him, wreathed in light and energy. The attack couldn't have lasted more than five seconds, but to the Golden Lion it was an eternity of hell. For in that eternity, he could not stop hearing, and he could not stop seeing.
"SHIKI!" Straw Hat Luffy's voice roared out, divine fury lacing his every word. Shiki's eyes widened as the axe fell, but not because of the actual attack.

"STAY AWAY FROM MY CREW!"

"No... you can't... you can't do this to me!" Shiki howled, screaming at the heavens in desperation. "YOU CAN'T DO THIS TO ME!"

"AND STAY AWAY!"

"NOT AGAIN, DAMN IT!" The Golden Lion wailed, shoving as much earth forwards as he could, trying to block what was coming, what he knew was there, to shield himself from the reality. "I CAN'T LOSE TO YOU AGAIN! NOT TO YOU! YOU CAN'T DO THIS TO ME! YOU CAAAANT!"

But no matter how he tried to block it, how he tried to deny it... his desperation just wasn't enough.

"FROM THE EAST BLUE!"

Stone shattered, his will shattered, he shattered.

And so did Shiki the Golden Lion lose, once more, to a man from the East Blue.

And as he lost, as the light of the divine judgement burst through his defenses and laid him low, the entire world bore witness as the Golden Lion's wrath, his despair, his misery, the totality of his being manifested itself in one final scream, cursing the name of the one who had somehow, against all odds, bested him all those years ago.

The name that had started everything.

"ROOOOOOOGEEEEEER!"

And then, with his pride conquered, everything fell.

-0-

It would be a surprise to nobody that the Straw Hat Pirates had set up a plan in the eventuality—inevitability, in all honesty—that Merveille would fall toward the sea. The moment that the palace was emptied of valuables and enemies and set to explode, they had returned to their beloved ship, strung the biggest piece of cloth in the palace that they could find to it, and braced themselves.

To be blunt, 'having the ground pulled out from under you' was an idiom for a very good reason.

"That parachute had better work!" Sanji yelled out in more than a little panic as gravity reclaimed its hold on the land, dragging it and everything upon it back toward the sea below.

"What, you don't have confidence in my ability to sail us through hell and high water?" Merry sardonically called out from the helm.

"My lack of confidence is in the only thing keeping us from dropping like a stone," Sanji clarified, shooting a nasty look at their makeshift parachute.

"Ah c'mon!" Cross cackled with a careless wave of his hand as he yanked hard on a line that kept Shiki's flag secure. "If there's one thing we can take confidence in, it's how much effort Shiki would have put into reinforcing his own ugly-ass symbol!"
"Personally?" Merry added. "I'm not exactly enthused about Big Bro going through that scare that Cross put me through after Skypiea!"

"I said I was sorry!" Cross spread his arms in a show of innocence, though his shit-eating grin said otherwise.

*Mrrrr*

The tactician flinched as the ship growled. "OK, fine, ya called my bluff, but in my defense—!"

"He's not talking about you!" Merry cut him off with a shocked look. "Sunny just said that Perona isn't onboard!"

"WHAT?!" Nami yelled, shooting a look back at the land that they were slowly sliding off of before running to the side. "WE HAVE TO—!"

"IT'S TOO LATE, NAMI!" Usopp interrupted, both verbally and physically as he Shaved behind her and grabbed her forearm. "WE'RE ALREADY FALLING, THERE'S NO TIME LEFT TO GO BACK!"

Nami made no attempt to struggle, the cold truth of Usopp's words persuading her against her will. A moment later, a firm hand grabbed Nami's shoulder, and she looked at Zoro's unflinching expression.

"She can take care of herself," he said.

Nami cast a tortured look for the shore, and for an agonizing minute it seemed like she'd actually fight to disembark the ship.

And then she snapped her head away and marched back to the center of the Sunny, eyes screwed shut. "BRACE FOR—!"

"Hold it!" Cross cut in. He then readopted his shit-eating grin as he brought his mic up to his mouth. "Well, loyal viewers, there you have it. One week ago, Shiki the Golden Lion, former rival of the Pirate King himself, attacked our crew, stole one of our crewmates, and threatened our home sea, the East Blue. And not even he managed to get away with it; by the efforts of my captain, Straw Hat Luffy, and another rookie from the East Blue, Black Bart Bartolomeo, Shiki and his twenty-year plan are going down in flames. With the East Blue and our crew safe and sound, it's time to head back to the sea of adventure, and you can also look forwards to the SBS resuming its regular broadcasting once we've managed to get some well-needed R&R! But for now, this is Jeremiah Cross!"

"And Soundbite!"

"SIGNING OFF!" Cross and his snail crowed in concert as he slammed the connection shut, jabbing his finger at Merry. "ALRIGHT, HIT IT!"

"YOU HEARD HIM!" Gin roared from the deck of the galleon parked next to the Sunny. "WE CAME, WE SAW, WE KICKED THEIR ASSES! NOW LET'S GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE! CREW!"

"EVERYONE!" Nami concurred in the same breath.

"SET SAIL!"

With that, the sails of the Thousand Sunny and the Cannibal unfurled, and the rushing wind of their
descent seized on them immediately. In short order, the ships tipped over the edge of the island, and for the next several seconds, they were free-falling.

*Hirahirahira—FWUMP!*

And then, as a final insult to the Golden Lion, the fall of the two crews that ended him and his ambitions was arrested thanks to the flags that they had stolen from Shiki’s flagship. And as the aftershock of the snap wore off, both crews got to their feet and turned their attention back toward the falling islands.

"Where are they?" Usopp muttered. "Come on, Luffy, come on…"

"Barto, I swear to hell, if you actually *died* to that bastard—!" Gin snarled around the thumb he was chewing on.

Despite themselves, most of the Straw Hats and Barto Club were holding their breath.

"*THERE!* HERE THEY COME!"

Then, barely visible in the distance, a speck of yellow appeared, which slowly grew into the familiar forms of Billy and Lindy. And on their backs, exhausted from their ordeal but still very much alive, was the slumped and groaning Bartolomeo and the panting and shrunked but grinning Monkey D. Luffy.

"Hey guys! I'm alive!" the miniaturized rubber man greeted as exuberantly as his shrunken vocal cords would allow.

"Why do you say that like it's a *good* thing, dumbass…” Barto groaned, his limbs swinging lifelessly at his side. "I swear to heck, my arms feel like they're gonna fall off, so if you guys could be *real* gentle about getting me—WA-AAAAAGH!" Barto cut himself off in a pained and panicked yelp as Lindy bodily bucked his captain from his back.

The Barrier-man spent a second writhing in utter agony from the impact before shooting a scathing glare at the dragon. "*Fucking fuckstupid fucking fuck why the fuck would you fucking fuck that!?*" he hissed viciously.

"Well, that demonstrates the flexibility of that word…” Robin muttered.

Lindy's response was to flash a cocky smirk. "Cause I felt like it," he rumbled without a hint of remorse.

Barto's responding slew of profanity was without a hint of censor.

A round of laughter echoed across the two ships, relief and good humor lightening everyone's spirits —

"Wait, what about the villagers?!

Until Vivi's exclamation killed the mood hard and prompted them all to turn back toward the falling island. Thankfully, it wasn't long before more silhouettes came into view, not unlike a flock of birds in appearance. Amazingly, it was by all appearances the villagers, gliding on the air with the feathers on their arms.

"…How?" Carue asked through a dropped beak, his tone weak.
"I should be surprised by this. I really should. But after a few weeks with you guys, I'm not," Perona shrugged her shoulders with a defeated sigh.

"Agreed," Robin nodded in, well, agreement.

"I wonder if I'll be able to do that with my new wi—ERK!" Conis started to muse as she fluttered her wings before yelping as a large, gorilla-esque hand grabbed the once-vestigial limb.

"Not until we've recovered from this mess," Chopper firmly stated.

"Y-Yes, Doctor!"

"He does raise a good point," Su said, flopping onto the deck as she kneaded her paws into her temples. "Now that the fight's over, I just wanna sleep…" She cracked an eye and glared at their current interloper. "But first, care to explain what you think you're doing, Ghost Princess?"

Those who hadn't already realized who the second speaker was turned towards the floating form of the lolita.

"Perona!" Nami gasped in relief, running up to the ghost with tears in her eyes. "Oh thank God, you're still alright! Look, just tell us where you are, and, ah—Billy!" The navigator waved at the electro-duck. "Billy, get ready to fly, we're going back for—!"

"Ah, actually?"

Nami was interrupted by Perona, who'd floated before Nami and was wearing an… actually contented smile.

"I'd… really prefer if you didn't do that? Please?" the Ghost Princess asked politely.


"And I'd prefer you not do that, because… well, as fun as our time together has been…" Perona's smile became slightly sheepish as she floated back, off the edge of the ship, and in the direction of the falling Merveille. "I'd really rather not leave."

The navigator's mind flat-out stalled as she tried to process just what on earth she was hearing. "Perona?" she breathed.

"Horohoho… what, did you already forget?" Perona tucked a lock of hair behind her ear in an almost shy manner. "I never planned on joining your crew to begin with, remember? And, don't get me wrong, after the past few weeks, I can definitely understand how it could have happened, how in another life, maybe… and even now I probably wouldn't mind…" The spirit trailed off for a moment before shaking her head with a wry chuckle. "But… But no. No, I have other plans in mind now. So… Sorry. But I won't be coming back."

Perona then turned towards Luffy, and curtsied, tugging her skirt out in an overly cutesy display of deference. "And as such, thank you, Straw Hat Luffy. You had no reason to trust me, no reason to let me stay on your ship… but you did anyway. You showed me unconditional kindness where every time before someone wanted something from me, and I honestly can't thank you enough for that. And, when the day comes that you're crowned as King… I'd very much like to be there to see it."

"Shishishi!" the newly restored rubber man chuckled. "Mah, no problem!"
Perona nodded gratefully. She then turned towards Nami with a tearful smile. "And Nami…" She shook her head with a hiccup. "God, where do I even start? Thank you for being my friend, Nami. You-You aren't just the first friend I've ever had, you're the best I could have asked for. And I am… going to miss you so much."

"You're…" Nami rubbed the tears from her eyes with a heavy sniff. "Y-You're sure you don't want to come with us? W-We could let you keep the crow's nest if you want!"

"Veto!" Zoro and Cross interjected.

"Horohorohoro!" Perona chuckled. "I'm sure, Nami. But as it is, I have different arrangements in mind. A palace perfectly empty for me to move into… and a load of cute new pets just begging for my love."

Nami blinked in confusion. And then Perona pointed skyward, Nami looked up, and promptly paled as she caught sight of the trio of giga-birds circling on high.

"Peronaaaa," Nami breathed numbly. "What exactly were you doing during the raid?"

"Ohhh, this and that, this and that," Perona giggled with her more normal impishness. Her expression then softened kindly. "Goodbye, Na—ah!"

Perona jerked back in shock as Nami lunged forwards and threw her arms around the ghost in the closest approximation to a hug she could manage. Once she got her wits about her, however, the Ghost Princess returned the hug in the same capacity.

"We would have raised hell together, wouldn't we?" Perona whispered through her tears.

Nami hiccuped a laugh of her own, drawing in even closer to the ghost…

"We still could," she breathed in her ear.

Perona blinked in surprised confusion, but before she could do or say anything, Nami hissed a string of numbers in her ear before drawing back, a smirk and a finger on her lips.

The Ghost Princess blinked a bit more. She then readopted her smile and nodded.

"Goodbye, Straw Hats," Perona breathed in farewell. "Till we meet again."

And with that, the Ghost Princess… dissolved, her astral form collapsing into motes of ectoplasm and wafting back to the plummeting island.

Chopper let out a sigh as he kneaded his brow. "I would have appreciated a chance to make sure my treatment was working. Well… alright, let's see what the damage is this time, Luffy," he said, fond exasperation in his face as he retrieved Luffy and laid him down on the grassy deck. "Nami, you're next."

"Right," the navigator nodded fearlessly, directing her attention to the rest of her crew, and then slumping down. "It looks like we won't be navigating anywhere until we touch back down… I think I'm just going to take a little rest."

"Heheh, trust me, I think we could all use some rest," came a new voice from beside the Sunny. A quick look revealed one of the last people either of the crews ever expected.

"Ever?" several voices inquired.
"Who?" was the question that several more asked.

"Ah, she was one of the slaves working at one of Shiki's bases," Robin explained with honest surprise.

"Yeah, one of the slaves who went free with all the rest!" Valentine gaped in confusion. "Ever, shouldn't you be back with your family!?"

"Oh, I went back to them alright!" Ever nodded in confirmation, beaming with unbridled positivity. "Found them after our village was wrecked, had the whole tearful reunion bit, very dramatic..." She smirked confidently as she cocked her head to the side. "Aaaand then I joined the bandwagon a lot of others were hopping on."

"And by 'bandwagon', you mean...?" Goldenweek trailed off curiously.

"Weeeeell," the winged-woman pointed up at the sky. "You see everyone splitting off here and there?"

The pirates looked up and saw that, indeed, while there were plenty of citizens of Merveille circling above the island, waiting for it to land in the ocean, clusters were splitting off and starting to flap away.

"Seeeee, we were all trapped on that island under Shiki's rule for twenty years," Ever explained, grimacing. "Meaning that some people, like me, have never actually had the chance to live free. So now that Shiki's gone? A lot of people just want to leave, see the world, and never look back. People like me. And while most folks are winging it on their own... weell..." She smirked as she folded her arms behind her head. "I thought that I'd save myself the effort and hitch a ride."

"Wait, you want to join us!?" Donny sputtered in shock.

"Them, specifically," Ever said, jerking her thumb at the Cannibal with a flat look. "No offense to you guys, but you all are a whole 'nother brand of crazy that I don't feel like dealing with. I'll settle for 'relatively deranged', thank you very much."

"Preach it, sister," Goldenweek deadpanned as she held out her knuckles to the feathered woman, who promptly bumped them with her own and a grin.

"You've got spirit, Ever," Bartolomeo rasped, pinning Ever with a serious look. "But can you actually fight? I run this crew like I ran Loguetown: I can't let you join if you're going to be dead weight when it comes to combat. Everyone on this crew needs to be able to hold their own against the other monsters of the Grand Line."

Ever returned Bartolomeo's gaze evenly for a few moments. Then she flapped her arms, flipped herself in the air and brought one leg down in an axe kick aimed straight at his skull.

SKRANG!

She winced as it made contact with a barrier instead, and withdrew her leg with a pained flex.

"Fffucking hell, I think that broke my heel, you bastard," she grumbled with half-hearted acid.

"There's a reason I say that they're indestructible, seeing as it took Shiki using mountains to break them, and even then, my arms are what broke first," Barto snorted with a snaggle-toothed scowl, which he shoved in Ever's face. "And besides that, how the hell do you think that attacking me while I'm exhausted and nursing two broken arms would do anything to convince me that you were
"capable of lasting in a real fight on this ocean?"

The Merveillan shook out her foot a bit more before looking at Bartolomeo with a pleasant smile. "Oh, no, I attacked because I knew you'd be able to put it up, even while looking like some of the nastier beasties back home had chewed you up and spat you out."

"And if I couldn't?"

Ever rolled her eyes dismissively. "Well then you'd hardly be worth following, wouldn't you?"

Bartolomeo processed that with a carefully blank face.

"...heh... hehahaha... HEHAHAHAHAHA!"

Then he started laughing. It only lasted a few seconds before a spasm of pain cut him off, but the message was clear even before he shot Ever a grin.

"That's good enough for me!" he said. "You'll have to carve your place out amongst our band of bozos by hook, crook, and whatever other cheap shots you can throw, and if someone pisses you off or something then don't bother coming crying to me, but other than that?" He shrugged, wincing his way through the pain. "Welcome aboard, Ever."

Amongst the Straw Hats, Sanji chewed on his cigarette doubtfully as he leaned in close to Robin. "Nnnooot to tell somebody how to live their life, but... she

Robin let a playful smile play across her face. "Counterpoint," she purred. "She's a young girl whose entire life experience comes from serving as a waitress in a pirate bar. I think she'll be just fine." She patted Sanji on the cheek as she walked off. "It's cute of you to act so concerned, though."

Sanji's head hung with a groan. "On the one hand, I love being touched by a beautiful woman. On the other, even I can't just brush off being stepped on that badly..."

"If you've gotten over that by tomorrow, Sanji, I need to talk to you about something," Cross said, tilting his hat over his eyes as he reclined on the grassy lawn, armor shed beside him. "You too, Donny."

"Huh? Uh... OK?" the Dugong in question agreed before returning to resting with his siblings.

"HEY, LOOK! IT'S THE MARINES!" Apis called.

All eyes turned downward, where a fleet of battleships could be seen turned toward where the ruins of Merveille were settling.

"Oh, this should be good," Barto leered viciously. "What do you say to a little taunting about beating them to the—?"

"No."
All eyes snapped toward the supine rubber man, who had a firm frown on his face.

"What do you mean, 'no'?"

"They came here to stop Shiki. They came here to fight for the East Blue. They came here to fight for the same reason that we were fighting." Luffy closed his eyes. "We would have been on the same side. Why would we make fun of them for wanting to help save our home?"

"…There he goes making way too much sense again," Usopp heaved his shoulders in a sigh. "But hey, if they leave us alone, then—!"

**BOOM!**

All attention snapped back down below, and Usopp brought down his goggles to see what happened.

"…Kind of anticlimactic. Yes, they're firing at us, but we're still too high for their cannonballs to reach us," he said.

"**MEEHHH, and we're not close enough for me to taunt anyone anyway,**" Soundbite crossed his eyestalks in consternation. "**SOOO FRUSTRATING!**"

"Eh, I don't mind it," Merry yawned, idly steering the Sunny with a few stray taps on the woodwork. "We've kicked enough ass and torn apart enough psyche for tonight. Let's just enjoy the trip down…" She hopped up onto the nearest railing and leaned back on her palms as she gazed out at the horizon, a lazy smile on her face. "Man… never thought I'd ever be lucky enough to see this again."

Everyone else stilled at the musing, and the crews all wandered over to gaze over the edge and off into the distance.

"This is impressive," Mr. 5 whistled, eyeing the ocean below. "I guess you see this all the time, Miss Valentine?"

"Hmm," Valentine giggled, leaning on her umbrella. "This a whole different scale, Mr. 5."

With that, the two crews eased into relaxation. Which, for the Straw Hats, soon turned into rest, which just as quickly turned into straight out collapsing so that they could sleep off the fatigue of the last week and the final fight against Shiki. This, in turn, led to no small amount of panic from their erstwhile travel companions.

As ever and always, not a quiet moment on the deck of the Thousand Sunny.

---

A few hours later, on an uninhabited island not far from the ruins of Merveille, a bloodied, legless form cracked open a bloodshot eye. Ragged gasps tore out of his throat as consciousness rudely intruded. Memories of recent events coalesced in his mind, and as he felt the stumps where his legs once were, now bereft of his precious swords, hatred crystallized in his heart.

"Monkey D. Luffy," he snarled, forcing himself upright. "I've lost everything to another rookie from the East Blue… no."

A mirthless smile came over his face. "No… I still have my powers. That's all I need. I'll take the time I need to clean my wounds."
He turned his gaze upward. "I'll fly to the White-White Sea, nobody will be able to find me there. I'll form a new plan, new weapons, a new army… and next time, I'll break his spirit first. I'll find his home, and I'll slaughter those he cares about most! Ji… JIHAHAHA! JIHAHAHAHAHA!!" Shiki threw his head back and roared with laughter, heedless of the blood he was hurling with every guffaw. "I HAVEN'T LOST YET! I'LL HAVE MY REVENGE! I'LL BE BACK! DO YOU HEAR ME!? I'LL BE—!"

"You shall not, cretin."

**CRACK!**

A Haki-enforced heel slammed into his skull, sending Shiki back into blissful unconsciousness. A red and white serpent bound him in its coils before moving back toward its master, who had a Transponder Snail out and in her palm.

"Fleet Admiral Sengoku, I have located the fallen form of Shiki the Golden Lion," Pirate Empress Boa Hancock announced with a prim sniff. "And quite fortunately for your Government's reputation, he is still alive; you may retrieve him and do with him whatever you will."

The line was silent for a few moments, the snail's expression slightly wide-eyed. Then…

"…I am grateful for your assistance, Boa Hancock. But I thought you generally made it a rule to not care about anything outside the Calm Belt?"

Hancock tossed her hair dismissively. "I decided to make an exception."

"That's the best I'm getting out of you, isn't it?" Sengoku sighed, grimacing. He forged on before she could reply. "And if I asked you to extend that 'exception' to the Straw Hats?"

**KA-LICK!**

Hancock smirked as she pressed her finger into the receiver's cradle. "I suspect that that will suffice as answer enough."

"Honestly, some men, they just can't be satisfied with what they get, can they?" Marguerite sighed wistfully.

"Indeed, indeed," Marigold snickered before giving her sibling a contemplative look. "Though… I am curious, sister. Why did you decide to intervene, when we never have before?"

"Did you not hear me, Mari?" Hancock raised her chin as she strutted past her larger sibling, Salome at her heels. "I decided to make an exception. But, quite unlike what Sengoku believes, I did not make this exception for the sake of this," she sneered as she snapped a kick across her captive's jaw. "Pathetic wretch. Rather…"

Boa Hancock turned her gaze skyward, smiling fondly as she recalled the sight of a pair of ships gliding into the sunset as she had seen a time ago.

"I made an exception," she breathed warmly. "For the sake of an exceptional man."

**Cross-Brain AN:** Our sincerest apologies, ladies and gentlemen, but we will be ending the chapter here. We intended to finish Strong World with this, but the aftermath is shaping up to be much longer than we expected. But you can't be too mad as us since we got all of the action out of the way first, right? In any case, it shouldn't take too much longer for us to finish up
part 4, which will be the final part before we move to the last pre-time skip saga.

Also, here's a tidbit: hidden in this chapter are expies to the original work that we, the Cross-Brain, will be working on during our hiatus! Locate them if you can, and look forward to our work!

Patient AN: And if you were wondering about Hornet's AN from part 1? We were referring to Perona joining the crew. Don't get us wrong, Ego and I both wanted her to join... but at this point, we need to be very selective about whom we add to the crew, and Perona just doesn't add enough. We do have other plans for her, though... and you've probably already guessed what they are.

Ah, yes, and one more important matter: credit for the analyzation of Indigo's Chemical Juggling and the mechanics of the subsequent fight scene belongs to the love of my life, the amazing Vikingr.
Chapter 58 - Strong World Aftermath

Cross-Brain AN: We were going for a double, but with the unexpected and very well done omake posted by storysmith112358 on SpaceBattles… LET'S CALL IT A SECOND TRIPLE-TAP!

…

Though unfortunately, we already have plans made for Sabaody and the events leading up to it, such that we're not able to change things and make it fit into the story.

Patient AN: On another note, remember when we said you probably already know what we have planned for Perona? Well… we thought of something else while writing this chapter. Let's see if any of you guessed it.

If Shiki'd had any brainpower to spare for the Straw Hats the day after his defeat, he would have been livid to see that, quite unlike Alabasta or Enies Lobby, the full force of his assembled armies hadn't managed to inflict enough damage and fatigue to keep the Straw Hats down past a good night's rest. With two exceptions: Bartolomeo was still recovering and would be without use of his arms for the foreseeable future, and Luffy was under doctor's orders to take it easy, but that was it.

That meant that when the sun rose the next morning, there were now two infamous ships with two infamous crews sailing alongside each other toward the end of Paradise, with two individuals from Merveille sticking around. Heaven help whoever got in their way, because no earthly power was going to.

On the Cannibal, Ever was having trouble establishing her place in the Barto Club for lack of specialty. It wasn't a huge deal, of course, her crewmates were perfectly welcoming, but… well, it was a rare individual who was happy to live the pirate life as a grunt.

Meanwhile, on the Thousand Sunny, the situation was being handled a bit more smoothly.

"No, you are not going back, do you hear me?" Nami ground out, her foot tapping impatiently on the lawn. "You are parking your feathery ass right here and staying with us, got it?"

… Relatively more smoothly.

"B-B-But!" the electro-duck blubbered, flapping his wings uselessly. "I-I'm a coward, I'm ham-beaked, I've never left Merveille, I don't know most of you! I-I'd just weigh you down, g-get you in trouble and—!"

CLONK!

Billy ducked his head with a pained whimper, wings nursing the fresh lump growing on his skull. "Awawah…"

"Billy," Nami stated, leaning in close to the fowl's head. "You might have run at first, but that doesn't matter because then you came back. You came back, you helped us when we really needed it, and you even helped Luffy beat Shiki. Heck, I'd go as far as to say you're one of the biggest reasons we won."

"Also, having more emergency food supplies won't hurt," Sanji added as he strolled by, a fresh bag
of food on his shoulders.

ZZT!

And then down he went, smoking from more than just his mouth with a bag of deep-fried supplies on his shoulder.

"Ignore that idiot," Nami sighed, not missing a beat. "The point is, you came back to help, so all of those things you listed? They're irrelevant, as far as I care. So you're going nowhere, got it?"

"Quaaa..." Billy squirmed uncertainly. "And... if I actually wanted to go?"

Nami donned a catty grin. "Then I'd shanghai you, regardless of whether you wanted to stay or not. After all, we are still pirates!"

Billy stewed that over for a second before giving her a shaky grin. "Then in that case... I suppose I might as well go along with you, huh?"

"Got it in one!" Nami chuckled in agreement, reaching out to ruffle his comb. "Now, if I let you go, are you going to go flapping for the horizon?"

"Nah, I won't."

"Good," the navigator nodded, removing the cloud she'd been using to pin Billy's tail and waving for him to follow her. "Now c'mon, let's see about getting you a cool saddle like Carue, alright? I've even got an idea or two for it."

"Okay!" The duck perked up eagerly, waddling after his new best friend.

Nami, however, was obviously in no hurry to go, and took a second to glance around the deck before reluctantly heading out into plain view. While most of her crewmates were out and about and treating her like normal, having apparently had the patience to hear her message through to the end, Nami had yet to locate the three dunderheads who, as far as she could tell, hadn't. But as reluctant as she was to face that particular firing squad, she couldn't very well leave her newest friend (her own animal companion! It was taking all she had to keep from bursting out into ecstatic squees!) twisting in the wind either.

As such, she set out across the deck and strode, with confidence, to the Sunny's pavilion, already a center of activity. Once they'd all rested up, Merry had unloaded the prodigious amount of loot that she'd filched from Shiki's palace. While the vast majority was mundane odds and ends of varying usefulness that Merry had stolen in the throes of a thieving spree that Nami recognized from her own youth, there was a sizable pile of gold—another 100 million at face value, probably more once appraised—and a massive cache of weapons that Usopp, Lassoo, Mikey, Franky, and Merry were excitedly poring over. Conis was standing off to the side, mostly succeeding in concealing her own excitement.

"Enjoying yourselves, I take it?" Nami chuckled.

"Soooo tempted to dry-hump!" Lassoo panted eagerly as he nuzzled up against a particularly large-bore rifle.

"Do it and I'll neuter you!" Usopp snapped, jabbing a wrench at the hound.

"Down boys, don't make me separate you," Conis chided, her hands continuing to polish her recently modified bazooka.
"Take it as a yes," Franky chuckled, nodding at Nami. "So, anything we can help you with, Big Sis?"

"Mm-hm!" Nami hummed, jabbing her thumb at Billy. "Seeing as I've gotten myself a mount to match Carue, I'm going to need a saddle, too. Insulated against electricity and heat, of course. Aaaand while I'm talking mounts…” She grimaced uncomfortably. "My Waver. How likely…?"

"Well, I could rebuild it, but it'd take a lot of time and effort, we'd have start from scratch… a better option would be another idea of mine, putting the two projects together," Usopp suggested, looking at Nami with a glint and a grin. "I've been working on the plans for Carue anyway, and I think that you'll really like them. That work for you?"

Nami glanced back at Billy, and nodded when he nodded. "That's fine, do it… after I examine every last page of the blueprints."

Usopp ground his palm into his forehead. "Why can you not let that go?" Usopp groused. "And by the way, this time, make sure you actually pay me upfront before I get more than halfway through this thing!"

"I'll take it into consideration," Nami muttered, before casting her eyes over the rest of the assembled arsenal. "So… any stand-out pieces in all this hardware? Besides the obvious, I mean," she added, raising an eyebrow at the sight of Merry cuddling the rotary gun she'd yet to let go of. Actually, she had yet to change out of the outfit she'd donned as they charged the palace, too. From the way she'd tossed it right back on after it was washed, where everyone else stored theirs away, chances were it would be replacing her raincoat and leggings as her normal attire.

"The obvious is all we need!" Merry squeed, hefting the massive hunk of metal above her head. "Do you know what this is? This is the M66 JINGO rotary cannon. It is one of the top firearms in all the six seas, and it's going to be my new main weapon, eeee!"

"Uhhh… seriously?" Nami questioned incredulously. "I mean, that thing's twice your size, isn't it?"

Merry's expression flattened. "You do see me holding it above my head like it was made of cardboard, right?"

"Aheh, r-right…"

"It is actually the perfect weapon for her, sis," Franky interjected with a big grin. "She can handle the firepower without flinching, and with a few mods from yours truly, it'll be a hell of a blunt instrument for cracking skulls too. Cool, huh?"

"Mm… well—wait," Nami cut herself off mid-sentence, narrowing her eyes accusingly at the rotary gun's ammo drum. The very large ammo drum. "I might not know a lot about guns, but what I do know is that guns only take ammunition that works for them. And I'm guessing that a gun like that does not pack normal ammunition. How many beris does a cannon like that suck down?"

Cold sweat suddenly glistened on Merry's forehead complete with an inability to meet Nami's gaze. "Uhhhh… I-I don't—"

"Let's see," Conis tapped her chin thoughtfully, completely missing the panicked look Merry snapped at her. "From what I remember, the M66 JINGO weighs one hundred fifty kilograms and fires twenty-thousand beri, custom-tooled cartridges at ten thousand rounds per minute. So by my calculations…” The angel counted down on her fingers before nodding. "It costs forty million beris to fire this weapon for twelve seconds."
One silent second later, Conis blanched as she realized what she'd just said. "Ooooh dear."

"RAAAAGH!" Nami loosed a possessed howl, grabbing the gun from Merry's hands with her Eisen Tempo and hauling back to throw it as far as she could manage. "DIE, EVIL THING!"

"MINEMINEMINEMINEMINEMINEMIHHIIIHHHE!" Merry declared, grabbing back the cannon from the cloud's clutches and shoving it inside her coat the moment that she had it in her grip again. She then began running around the deck. A prudent move considering that Nami was after her, iron hands outstretched and grasping furiously.

"GIVE ME THAT METAL MONSTER SO THAT I CAN DROWN IT, RIGHT THE HELL NOW!" Nami screeched.

"NOT ON YOUR LIFE, BITCH!" the ship-girl shot back. "YOU'RE NOT TAKING MY TICKET TO BADASSITUDE!"

"AND YOU'RE NOT GOING TO USE SOMETHING THAT'LL EAT THROUGH OUR COFFERS FASTER THAN LUFFY AT AN ALL-YOU-CAN-EAT BUFFET!" the navigator-cum-treasurer spat. "WE ONLY MISSED THE POORHOUSE ON WATER SEVEN THANKS TO CROSS'S KNOWLEDGE, I'M NOT LETTING YOU LAND US IN THERE WITH THAT THING!"

"OK, FIRST OF ALL, THAT SIMILE IS COMPLETE NONSENSE AND YOU KNOW IT, OUR CAPTAIN IS INSTANTANEOUS WHILE MY GUN WOULD TAKE MINUTES! AND SECOND, YOU TOUCH ME, I'LL SCREAM BAD TOUCH!"

"YOU CAN DENT METAL WITH YOUR FISTS, PEOPLE WILL BELIEVE THAT WHEN PIGS FLY!"

"GRAAAAHH—hang on, damn it!" Planting her feet, Merry spun around and raised her hands, both women skidding to a halt. "Listen! The gun's expensive, yes—!"

"Diiiiie—!" Nami rumbled, madness gleaming in her eyes.

"BUT!" the ship-girl continued in a panic. "It won't actually affect us for ages! None of them will! I filched Shiki's entire magazine, he had a dozen drums of rounds for this beast!"

The navigator paused in her fury, frowning questioningly. "And how long do you expect that to last?"

"Um… so long as I'm measured and cautious in my use—!"

"Give."

"Hey!" Merry bristled indignantly, before hanging her head with a defeated groan. "Alright, so I might see where you're coming from…" She then snapped her head up with big, watery—

CLONK!

"OW!" Merry yelped. Cradling her new goose egg, she nodded frantically. "Alright, alright, I legitimately promise that I will ration the ammo I have and keep my eyes and ears peeled for any opportunity to steal more, and if we do need to buy more, it comes out of my share. But if we run into another bastard like Shiki, all bets are off. Deal?"

Nami turned that over in her mind.
“…Fine,” she sighed, her gaze sharpening intently. "But we are hammering things out right here, right now."

Merry readied a sarcastic retort, only to transition into a shit-eating grin. "Yeah, I don't think that's gonna be happening anytime soon. Shoulda watched your volume, girly."

It took Nami five seconds to process that statement, two to pale, and one to slap a hand to her face. "They are right behind me, aren't they?"

"Face the music, IT'LL JUST BE EASIER ON EVERYONE."

"Me included~" Merry sang as she rocked back and forth on her heels, a slightly crooked halo above her head.

Sighing, Nami turned to face the expected sight: her captain, flanked by the first mate on one side and the third (plus Soundbite) on the other, all standing behind her, arms crossed and expressions livid. But rather than cower, she simply matched them expression for expression.

"Before you take a strip out of my hide out of some misguided sense of injured pride, let me ask the four of you one question," she said before any of them could open their mouths. "Did you listen to the entire message I left on the Tone Dial? Including the part that only someone who was with us on Thriller Bark would understand?"

The quartet paused, glancing uncomfortably between themselves.

"Not even the so-called 'god', huh?" Nami sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Didn't think so. If you had bothered to listen to the whole thing, you would know that the last thing I said was, 'That's why I'm begging you to forgive me for doing something stupid and reckless again, and expecting it to turn out like last time.'"

She pulled back, observing the dumbfounded looks on her fellow mates' faces. "You. Complete. And utter. Idiots. Luffy's reaction is no big surprise, I half-expected it from him. But I expected more sense from you three."

"There's just one problem with that, Nami."

The five of them turned back toward Merry, who was looking at them with a fond smirk.

"Would you have spared enough time for sense if you were in their shoes and Nojiko was in yours? Or, hell!" she asked innocently. "Did you think for even a second when you hauled off and pinched me?"

Nami raised her finger and opened her mouth, and held that pose for a second before snapping her mouth shut "You… make a very annoying, annoyingly accurate point."

"I learned from the be~est~!" Merry sang as she walked off, proudly tugging on the lapels of her greatcoat as she went. The three mates and captain turned back to each other, no one speaking for a few moments.

"…Call it even and never let it happen again?" Cross suggested, tilting the brim of his hat down to cover his eyes.

"Fine by me," Nami said, smiling pleasantly.

"Agreed," Zoro nodded, his brow twitching furiously.
"Sorry?" Luffy said.

"**Aaand moving RIGHT along,**" Soundbite chirped.

"In inadvertent aid of that," interjected Donny, sliding up beside Cross. "Two questions for you two. First off, just for the record, what's Billy's voice?"

Cross rolled his eyes, but didn't seem too exasperated this time. "I'd complain, but it actually fits him. Carue got his voice from Donald Duck, Billy got his from Donald's nephews: Huey, Dewey, and Louie."

"**EVEN I don't know WHICH ONE IT IS!**" Soundbite snickered.

"Triplet nephews, if you didn't catch it," Cross clarified.

Donny nodded in understanding. "Makes sense. Other question: what was that about needing to talk to Sanji and me?"

Cross snapped his fingers and headed for the kitchen, gesturing for Donny to follow. "Right, thanks for reminding me. Do you still have the outfit from that psycho you fought on Thriller Bark?"

Donny twitched viciously. "Only because I can't burn the damn thing and our penny-pinching witch —!"

"Bite me!" Nami threw over her shoulder.

"—Won't let me toss it in the ocean like I wanted to," he finished.

"Perfect, and convenient for you seeing as we'll be getting rid of it as soon as Sanji gets something for me."

With much more enthusiasm, Donny followed Cross into the kitchen.

---

Not far away, Robin knelt beside her flower garden with a warm smile, tending to a week's worth of neglect. Her fellow academic knelt beside her, hooves sifting through the soil of a long and vacant pot, packing in the IQ plants he had retrieved from Indigo's laboratory.

"So, what did you get?" the reindeer asked curiously, jotting down a few notes on the miraculous plant in his notebook.

"Mm, nothing truly earth-shattering, sadly," Robin sighed, shaking her head. "Some evidence on corrupt bases, names of moles, leaks, and even some particularly virtuous Marines. Quite useful for Cross. But the most I could find otherwise was some history of the island and of Shiki himself." She scratched at a bandage on her cheek, drawing a pained grimace. "The payoff was only barely worth the pain."

She leaned down to take a closer look at the flower. "I take it that your endeavor was far more successful?"

Chopper grinned sunnily as he nodded. "Way more! Indigo's notes along with what I put together from what I saw on Merveille has given me so many ideas that I don't know where to start! The obvious first step would be actually using these plants, manufacturing serums of my own… ah, without the horrendous side-effects, of course."
"Of course," Robin chuckled. "Beyond that…" The doctor tapped his hoof to his chin, humming in thought. "Painful as it was, that fight did give me one or two ideas on my own brand of chemical warfare. With the right combinations…” Chopper trailed off into a wide grin. "But honestly? What I'm looking forward to the most is the sheer insight that this experience has given me on biological manipulation, both in concrete and analyzed evidence, and my own…” The reindeer cut off into a frown. "I'm going to define it as a 'revelation', but I want to clarify that I mean that in a strictly philosophical manner, not a spiritual one."

"I wouldn't assume anything else from you, good doctor," the archaeologist replied, giving him a contemplative look. "Though tell me, what does this new experience add up to?"

Chopper snapped his eyes up, a glimmer shining in his eyes. Not the familiar glimmer of madness, mind, the glimmer of academic ambition. "A dissertation," he whispered reverently. "A paper on Zoan morphology specifically, and biological auto-manipulation through biofeedback in general! The first of its kind, it's going to be revolutionary! I'm not going to rewrite the biology textbooks, I'll be inspiring entirely new ones! Eeheehee~!" Descending into giggles, the Zoan started eagerly wiggling in place.

Robin smiled as well at his enthusiasm, not having the heart to bring him down by pointing out that it may be better to keep that information to themselves for now. He was young and impulsive, not an idiot, so he'd undoubtedly figure it out himself. But as the hairs on the back of her neck suddenly shifted ever so slightly, she realized that bringing someone off of a euphoric high was unavoidable.

"If there is any assistance I could lend when you start, I'd be glad to, Chopper," Robin said warmly, getting to her feet. "If you could excuse me for just a moment? I need to take care of something."

"Mmhmm, sure, sure," Chopper waved her off, not even looking up from the notebook he was fervently scribbling in. "I can handle this on my own, don't worry."

Robin made to leave, but paused and frowned as a thought occurred, and she tapped him on the shoulder with a new arm to get his attention. "The last time I left you alone with potentially hazardous research, there were almost… consequences. This time, please make sure you don't conduct any research without someone nearby? If only for my sake?"

Chopper blinked up at her, confused, but then the penny dropped and he glanced down at his notebook, grimacing uncomfortably before stuffing it away in his knapsack. "I'll be careful. And… Robin?" The grateful smile he sent her way would've melted the heart of a lesser woman. "Thank you. Truly."

Robin nodded, making to slip away, but paused again as another thought occurred to her. "By the way, you never did say what happened to Indigo."

Chopper's eyes flashed cyan as he snarled, "I guarantee you that the bastard is rotting. Whether he's doing it in Hell or Impel Down I couldn't tell you, but either way?" He shook his head. "The world's a better place for it."

-o-

Dr. Indigo's mind was a blur as he marched between a pair of guards. A cloth was wrapped around his eyes and handcuffs that he wagered were made of sea prism stone held his arms behind his back. He could have broken free in a moment, he had enough chemicals on hand. But he knew too little. His genius mind was sure of only three things about his present situation: he had been captured; he
was being kept alive, at least for the moment; and he wasn't in the presence of Marines. The last of those he could discern by the fact that he had not been informed of his crimes the moment his captors saw that he was lucid. He had been ordered to walk and not speak, and with no alternative, he did so, finding as he did that his captors had taken his favorite shoes as well.

More light streamed through his blindfold, and he felt a gentle hand lift a corner. The face he could see was framed by blonde hair and had eyes the color of glass. She was smiling pleasantly, but the moment she spoke, Indigo identified the same sadism that his captain held.

"You have been spared from perishing along with your captain and the rest of your crew due to your expertise. From this point forward, you are in the employment of the World Government. You will be provided with adequate room and board and all the resources that you need to continue your research. Everything you have discovered to this point and everything that you discover from this point on is forfeit to the Government. Resistance and retaliation will be punished."

Indigo took a few moments to respond. Said response started with a twisting sneer, but the scathing retort transformed into a gasp of pain by the bullet that pierced his shoulder.

"Do not misunderstand, Doctor Indigo: you do not have a choice in this matter, and you are forbidden to die until the World Government can make no further use of you. And do not think that that ensures your safety from punishment. You know as well as anyone that even if we can't kill you…"

"AAAAAAHHH!" Indigo screamed in agony as no fewer than a dozen holes turned his left arm into swiss cheese.

"It's quite surprising what a person can live through. Now, why don't you make this easy on yourself? I'd like nothing more than to keep shooting you full of holes, but the less we have to spend on patching you up, the better."

Indigo had thought that he knew the meaning of hatred when he was upstaged by an adolescent reindeer who was only intelligent because of his Devil Fruit. But this was nothing short of his worst nightmare: he had all the resources that he needed to accelerate his research beyond how he could dream of… and all of it was forfeit to the Government. His brilliance would fade into the Government's dominion, reinforcing *their* imperialism rather than proving his genius.

But he had his captain's patience. He would read his situation and consider the details. And he would listen to what his senses told him; his pride in his abilities remained strong, but he wouldn't pick another fight that he couldn't win.

"By your command," Indigo mumbled with a hint of steel. He winced again as that steel earned him another blow into his side, then the blindfold fell back over his face.

"Good. But try to get rid of that little shadow of defiance in your eyes. It's not healthy to consider resisting, you know."

A blow hit him from behind, sending him through a pair of steel doors and flat onto his face. The doors closed behind him, and as his handcuffs were removed he heard a derisive snort.

"She just can't keep her hands to herself," an androgynous voice growled, before *actually* growling in annoyance. "Hogback, get to patching him up!"

"Yes, sir," squeaked a much more familiar voice. Indigo used his good arm to rip away the blindfold just in time for a pair of hands to help him to his feet. He immediately identified the face of Doctor
Hogback, one of the few medical geniuses in the world that he could accept as an equal; he lacked the chemical mastery that Indigo possessed, but his surgical abilities were far superior to the clown's.

"Welcome to the grind," the surgeon muttered as he led Indigo to his operating table. "I think you and I will get along swimmingly."

The badly hidden message made Indigo smile briefly, but it faded when lying down on the table let him see the other man in the room. He resembled a sumo wrestler, clad in red and with a massive battle axe on his back.

"Welcome to the World Government's research and development laboratory," he said unsmilingly. "My name is Sentomaru, your officer, enforcer, bodyguard—" The word was sneered out as though it was vile in his mouth. "—If necessary, which I hope it isn't… and executioner." The sneer turned into a smirk. "If it comes to it, which I hope it does."

His smirk faded and he continued speaking, sounding as though he were reciting a script.

"You will receive your first set of orders as soon as you are fit to work; upon reception, you have twelve hours to submit a report of the resources you require to do your work, including an explanation for each component, and the amount of time you require to complete it. Dr. Vegapunk will review your report and verify it before your requests are granted. Any attempt to falsify any part of the report will be punished.

"You will be monitored at all times," he continued, gesturing to the Visual Transponder Snails in every corner of the room. "If your progress does not match your estimations, you will be punished. You will be provided with your own laboratory and all of the necessities for your life. You may submit requests for luxuries if you maintain your progress. Finally, you are not permitted to leave your laboratory alone without express permission from myself or another authority. Failure to follow any of these rules will result in punishment."

Sentomaru glared at Indigo as Hogback began patching up his arm. "Any questions, Doctor Indigo?"

The clown pressed his lips together, and was privately relieved that Sentomaru didn't bash him for that show of discontent. It seemed he was no happier about this arrangement than his captives. That was a small mercy, at least.

"Will I be working alone or with others?" he asked at last.

"Hmph, an actually reasonable question," Sentomaru grunted. "You will be working with Hogback often. You can also expect to be acquainted with this lab's mechanical expert, Ratchet. To head off any complaints about his more luxurious conditions, he was enlisted, not arrested. Aside from that, you may request assistants if you deem it necessary. But any attempts to use them as guinea pigs will be met with…" Sentomaru tapped his knuckle against the blade of his axe. "Severe punishment."

Not ideal, but not unreasonable. At least the Government knew that one could not expect a genius to provide superior work under inferior conditions.

"…No further questions."

Sentomaru nodded and exited the room.

"I hear you're a genius who's good at long-term planning," Hogback whispered.

"Likewise," Indigo whispered back.
"They won't keep our genius chained up forever," they breathed in unison.

SLAM!

Hogback leapt back from the table with a shriek when Sentomaru's battleaxe buried itself between the two doctors.

"Did I mention that those feeds are live and your watchers can read lips?"

'But they can hold us for a hell of a long time…' the pair mentally groaned.

-o-

Off the stern of the Thousand Sunny, the winds swirled and surged in ways that were completely unnatural. Typically speaking, this was a perfectly normal state of affairs on the Straw Hats' ship, given how they were A. In the Grand Line and B. Navigated by a woman the world was 95% convinced was an actual, real-life witch. Not that the crew was more than slightly less skeptical on that front.

This time, though, the source was not Nami, nor the Grand Line. Instead, Nefertari Vivi sat on the railing of the aftmost balcony, her legs dangling out over the waves and her gaze focused on something only she could see. The 'checked out' look she was projecting was only reinforced by the way her hands were moving, drifting to and fro as though she were conducting an orchestra. In a dream, granted, but that was a good comparison, the princess's fingers were waving and gesturing to some tune that only she could hear.

But for all that the gestures made no apparent sense, there was in fact a method to the illogical actions, or at least, a purpose: for every twitch of Vivi's fingers, the air swirled in response, coiling around Vivi's fingers and body like thread from a divine, invisible loom. Strands of invisible currents of conflicting heat and cold responded to her every movement, extending into everything around her. A twitch of her fingers could cause a refreshing breeze on a summer afternoon. A casual wave of her hand could blow someone's hat off. An offhand wave of her arm could knock someone over.

And that was while she was barely even trying, merely twitching her powers in the slightest of ways.

"Alright…” Vivi breathed, her eyes narrowing as she returned to reality. "Now, how far can I—?"

Something cold touched Vivi's arm, and she gasped as debilitating fatigue washed over her, as though she had just tried a hundred meter dash against Carue and Usopp. That was all she had time to properly process before her entire world went spinning and she was slammed into the deck, gasping in pain from her arm being wrenched behind her back, compounded by someone else's arm clenching tight against her throat and coming a few psi away from entirely cutting off her airway.

The entire scenario was completed by a sensation that Vivi had grown far too familiar with over the years, that of a blade pressing against her thro—!

"What the hell, Robin!?” Vivi wheezed.

"The hell, Princess Nefertari, is a practice commonly known as a 'reality check'," Robin responded frigidly, not budging from her kneeling position on the small of Vivi's back. "You've been playing with your abilities ever since we woke up, and it has come to the point where even I could feel the winds moving. And while I can personally understand that you would want to experiment with them…"

The Demon Child chuckled wryly and shook her head before sobering up. "This experimentation inevitably leads an ability user to think that they're invincible, a god, until they get a reality check,
somehow, that reminds them that they. Are. Human. The message doesn't sink in as well for some as it does for others, but it happens to every Paramecia, it happens to every Zoan…"

Vivi's expression had frozen in shock one sentence into Robin's lecture, and by the final word, she had gone completely limp in Robin's grasp. "But… But not Logia…" she whispered hoarsely. "Logias… never dissuade themselves of that notion… Can't be dissuaded, and they go their whole lives thinking of themselves as gods—"

"Until someone forces a reality check on them. Until someone reminds them that they're still as normal and human as anyone else," Robin completed smoothly, removing her knife from Vivi's neck and standing off of her, allowing the princess to flip onto her back and stare up at her. Up at the hand that Robin had extended to her, as well as a kind smile.

"I worked with Crocodile for four years. I spoke with Eneru for ten minutes. And through that, I know how bad Logias can get, and I know that I will not let you become like them, Vivi. Any time your mind gets lost in your powers, I will do my best to remind you that you are mortal and draw you back. I promise."

As she stared at Robin's hand, Vivi's eyes watered up, and she lunged at it as though it were a lifeline, pulling herself up and wrapping her other arm tightly around her crewmate, sobbing into her shoulder.

"…thank you. Sincerely, thank you, Robin," Vivi wept, her body wracked with terrified sobs.

Robin nodded, patiently rubbing her crewmate's back. "I could be an optimist and assume you won't need another reminder, but realistically? One day you're going to go stark raving mad and try and wipe out some kingdom or other with a superstorm you whip up with your bare hands. And when that happens—!

Vivi pulled back and gave Robin a teary smile. "You'll be right there to stick a knife in my back."

Robin's expression flattened and she tapped the butt of her knife against the princess's forehead, and not gently at that. "No, I'll be there to smack some sense into you. Really, please, try and do me the courtesy of listening better."

Vivi smiled sheepishly.

"And really… if you ever need any help with handling your powers, just ask," Robin gently assured her. "My first few days with a power were intensely disorienting, and I would have given anything for some help…" the archaeologist grimaced and shuddered in disgust. "Especially with the taste…"

"Oh, Ra, don't even mention 'taste' to me!" Vivi gagged, facing herself out towards the ocean and slapping a hand over her mouth as she kept from heaving. "I've eaten a variety of cuisine over the years, and a lot didn't agree with me, but that was… was…"

"Rest assured, that will be the most horrific taste you will ever know in your entire life," Robin gagged, idly rubbing her thumb over her throat. "To this day, I can't get the taste of fertilizer composed of human feces, human ash, and actual humans out of my mind."

"Yeah? Well, I honestly think that eating it so small made mine worse," Vivi hung her head with a tortured groan. "That aril was smaller than my fingernail, but the second it hit my tongue, it was like the air from a thousand-thousand compacted balls of swamp gas expanded into being inside my mouth all at once. And I can still taste every one of them!"

Robin shook her head with a weary chuckle. "To reiterate, I do know how it's like. As do
many others on this crew."

Vivi sobered up slowly, and her gaze turned pensive as she looked down at her hands. "Yeah. But, you know… I understand a lot more now," the princess said.

"Understand?" Robin queried, leaning on the railing.

"…I don't think you can imagine the power rush that being a Logia gives you, Robin," Vivi explained, watching her palms and fingers fade in and out of gusting air. "Even I can't fully understand it. To come apart at the seams on a whim, to split your senses everywhere just like that, become untouchable… it's unfathomable. And… the sensation..." Her eyes turned heavensward, gazing into the deep blue of the sky. "I can feel… pretty much every breeze around us for several metres, without focusing, and the only real reason I didn't feel you coming was that I wasn't actually trying. And while, I'll admit, I might be biased because of how broad of a spectrum 'wind' is…"

Her fists coalesced and clenched. "What Crocodile and Eneru became is inexcusable, but if they were feeling the same way that I was, the way that I am, feeling so… so connected to the world like this, a connection that's going to be there for the rest of my life… I can see where it came from. So, again." Vivi looked Robin dead in the eye, this time with her usual steel. "Thank you for reminding me that I'm not invincible, Robin. I needed that. And, seeing as you've volunteered yourself for this?" Vivi gave her tutor a smirk. "I'll be relying on you to keep me humble when I need it. I warn you, that is a full-time job."

Robin returned the smirk with a perfectly serene grin. "Oh, I'm sure the rest of the crew won't mind helping as well. Especially if you're going to be even more of an airhead."

"HAHAHAHEEHEEHEEOOHOOOHOOOHOOO!"

Soundbite's laughter echoed around them. Neither woman reacted to it.

Or, well, bodily reacted to it, as Vivi's eye was twitching furiously.

"...on the one hand," she ground out, her voice set to snap. "I could be responsible and only use my abilities in the most dire and critical of situations. On the other, we're Straw Hats. So thank you, Nico Robin." Vivi extended a clawed hand into the air. "For so kindly volunteering."

"Oh?" Robin cocked her brow in honest amusement. "And what, precisely, have I just —GYAERGH!"

Said amusement died a moment later as she suddenly choked on her own spit, her eyes bugging out as she vacillated between flushing and paling. Unconsciously, one hand darted down, clawing at her pants.

The reason for this was that Vivi had cut her off mid-sentence by yanking her hand upwards with a tangible burst of air. The princess then smirked and began primly examining her nails. "To act as my guinea pig. How does 'Divine Touch' sound for a name?"

Where once Vivi's eye had been twitching, Robin's everything was spasming, jaw working soundlessly. Once she managed to get some motor control back, the archaeologist pinned her student with a downright hellish glare. "…juvenile pranks, princess?" she hissed like a woman possessed. "Really?"

A shrug. "I consider it a step in the right direction. You?"
Robin jerked her head forward so that she was nose to nose with Vivi, lips split in a snarl and her voice on par with the Blue Pheasant’s. It was an image somewhat ruined by the fact that she was still fiddling with the waistband of her pants.

"What you just did is a crime that the laws of Ohara considered punishable by death."

"NEEEEER—!"

Robin snapped her hand into a fist.

"—GYERGH!"

"As such…” she continued, heedless of the interruption. "I consider it carte blanche. You have no idea of the pandora’s box you’ve just opened."

Vivi raised her chin proudly. "Bring it."

The twitching intensified, before she suddenly stilled to a nigh corpse-like state and pinched her eyes shut, a rictus smile on her face. "I trust that you’ve finished your homework, your highness?" the words crawled their way from Robin's lips.

Vivi's confidence faded into the wind even faster than she did, shrieking in horror as she rushed to find her notebook.

Robin stared after her with a satisfied smirk, before reverting to a pained grimace. "The sheer amount of agony and nonsense I go through for my friends…” she groaned to herself.

And so it was that the world-infamous Demon Child made her way back to her quarters, waddling as she fiddled with her waistband.

-o-

Two of the most seasoned Marines in the Navy stood beside each other with identical looks of satisfaction as they watched another detachment of their troops return from Merveille. Serving as the Straw Hat Pirates' cleanup crew again or not, they could hardly help the good mood that only seeing fifty of the most infamous crews this half of the Grand Line trudging onboard in chains could produce.

Shiki himself was already en route to Impel Down thanks to the unexpected but welcome help of Boa Hancock, and those of his crew who had survived were being collected as well. Those not present were presumed dead from the fall of the islands, but were noted just in case.

Perhaps the best part of it was precisely why they were able to set foot on the land where hundreds of beasts still dwelled, collect all of the criminals, and be on their way. The Elder Stars themselves were pleased with the new development, and though Sengoku felt a twinge of annoyance, he had little doubt that the benefits would far outweigh the costs…

~o~

"You up for this, Sengoku?" Garp asked, cracking his knuckles as he faced down the beasts lined up on the edge of the newly-settled coast of the island, or ‘archipelago’ as it were, given how the impact with the ocean had been decidedly unkind to the island. It was a veritable menagerie of Merveille's beasts: big, small, fast, slow, armored, flying, all these and so many more ready and waiting for the Marines to make landfall so that they could enjoy themselves a fresh meal.
"I am in severe need of a way to relieve my stress, and this serves as a perfect excuse," the Fleet Admiral responded, his fingers drumming over a borrowed shinai; his skill with such a weapon left something to be desired, but as he was expected both to take things easy and to take out the survivors among Shiki's monsters, he needed something that would strain his body a bit less.

"Then let's get to it!" Garp laughed to himself, marching forward as he pounded his knuckles together. The monsters on the shore snarled at them, clearly ready to pounce, soar, charge, or dive at them to tear them apart.

"Horohorohorohorohoro…"

Or at the least, they were until a round of aetherial laughter halted Sengoku and Garp in place. Not out of any kind of terror, of course, but because of how in response to the laugh, the monsters on the shore all suddenly stilled, the beasts all falling quiet as they looked around with varying degrees of nervousness and admiration.

Both men looked straight up. And both men saw a familiar face.

"You… Perona. You were one of Moria's subordinates. Then you joined the Straw Hat Pirates."

"Past tense, Fleet Admiral," the specter said, floating on her back. "I cut my losses when the Straw Hats beat Moria and talked them into letting me sail with them until I could find somewhere else that I could live in luxury. And with that tyrant gone, I decided to take over his palace and help myself to all of the adorable pets that I could ever want!"

Several Marines sweatdropped as they watched the beasts on the shore swoon loyally in Perona's direction. Garp and Sengoku's eyes narrowed, however.

"Nice story, brat. But you don't think that your 'pets' are going to be able to slow Garp and I down, do you?" Sengoku demanded.

"Of course not!" Perona giggled. "If I did, I wouldn't be here to negotiate, would I?"

The top-ranked Marines exchanged wary glances before glaring at her. "Negotiate what, brat?" Garp asked.

Perona smiled impishly. "The Government was left with no choice but to strip my former master Moria of his Warlord title thanks to what Jeremiah Cross revealed on the SBS. And last time I checked, you still haven't filled that slot. Sooo~ I'm putting my name in for consideration."

The Vice and Fleet Admirals both stiffened, and a chorus of whispers and shouts filtered in from the nearby battleships.

They were all silenced when Sengoku took a stomp forward, the deck of his ship splintering beneath his boot. "And why should we consider your application—you, a no-name, no-bounty minion, and associate of the Straw Hat Pirates—for a position in what is literally the most exclusive taskforce in the whole of the World Government instead of swatting you?" Sengoku demanded, two seconds away from blinding the insolent spectre, heart condition be damned.

"Well, let's see here…" Perona crooned, holding up a finger as she dropped into a sitting position. "Well, normally I'd save the best for last, but since you asked nicely: Unlike the ones that you had to fire thanks to the Straw Hats, and some of the ones you still have on the roster, I don't have any ambitions. I just want to live my life in luxury and safety." She laced her fingers beneath her chin and smiled in a cutesy way. "Isn't that just wonderful?"
The grind of Sengoku's teeth was answer enough.

Still smiling cutely, Perona moved on, holding up a second finger. "Moving right along to reason number two, you may be able to swat my pets. You may somehow be able to fight off my powers. But you don't have to; it would be more convenient for all of us if they were on your side. Less trouble, less fuss, less men fed to beasts who were literally bred to eat them. I don't know about you, but that sounds like the most logical military decision, no?"

Once more the lack of response was deafening, the subordinate officers cautiously—not nervously, never nervously—eyeing their bestial opponents and then their own men.

Up came the third finger. "I have all of the captains and most of the crews of everyone who was stupid enough to follow Shiki here with me, in the palace, and I'll gladly hand them over if you accept. And really, at this point, can you afford anything less than live captures, if you really want to save face?"

By this point, Sengoku's might as well have been carved from stone.

A fourth finger joined its brethren. "My powers could help you with that stress relief that you just mentioned."

This time, Sengoku actually did blind Perona for a moment. "Never."

"Okayokayokay!" Perona reeled back, waving her hands in frantic panic. The light faded, and the panic did as well, the ghost-girl levelling a flat glare at the Admiral of the Marine Fleets. "Alright, no more screwing around. You want serious, let's be dead serious: You, if we're being completely honest, can't afford someone other than me in the position at this point. Not after two lemons in a row."

As Perona shifted into a reclining position, she let a playful smirk spread on her face. "So, shall I continue listing reasons, or have I made my point?"

Sengoku's eyes twitched, leaving Garp to stare up at the ghost. "Let's say, for the sake of argument and nothing more, that you get the title. What are you expecting in return?" the Hero asked, growling.

Perona's smile didn't budge, though she did move her hands so that her fingers were splayed against one another. "Oh, not much beyond what comes pre-packaged with the Warlord position: immunity to the law as long as I don't terrorize civilians, like my predecessors have oh so frequently and flagrantly flaunted in the past; no Marines set foot on this island without my express permission; and no attempts to take any of my pets, or samples of the IQ plant." Her gaze sharpened at that last stipulation. "Shiki almost levelled the East Blue with his serum, I'm not letting that genie uncork itself if I can help it."

Her eyes suddenly widened, and she snapped her fingers. "Oh, and I also want a promise that you won't make me do anything that takes me more than a few nautical miles away from my island for the first three months. I just got this kingdom, after all, and I need some time to properly build it up. Plus..." She grimaced, letting her head loll back. "In case you've forgotten, I've spent the majority of my life in a support position. I can be as much of a threat as my... colleagues, but I need a little time to get there first. As it is, I'm no good to you on the front lines."

Again, Sengoku's eye twitched, but he also began to seriously consider the offer. And the more he thought about it, the better it seemed. Only one potential issue.
"How are you controlling them?" Sengoku asked as he nodded his head at the monsters, the 'Can they slip their leash?' floating unspoken.

"Horohorohoro. That's quite simple, Fleet Admiral." Perona snapped her fingers and one of the many boars in the crowd trotted up in the wake of a sobbing Hollow, snuffling at the floating ectoplasm with clear eagerness. "A combination of the carrot…"

The hollow shot through the boar, the porcine beast letting out a contented squeal and rolling over to expose its belly. A belly that Perona floated over to and began 'scratching', to the clear delight of the porcine titan.

Perona's expression then flipped to cold. "And the stick." Holding up her hand, she summoned a cackling Negative Hollow. Immediately, the entire crowd of creatures flinched back, besides the gleefully oblivious hog below her.

The Ghost Princess produced another Positive Hollow and started rotating the pair of them around her raised hand. "Euphoria as incentive to behave. Anguish as punishment for disobedience. Shiki and Indigo made them strong, tough, and fast… but they're just like your grandson when it comes to brains, Vice Admiral Garp: meatheads who are only smart when it comes to fighting."

Garp's expression shifted to that of a man who dearly wanted to object but knew he had no leg to stand on.

With a wave of her hand, Perona dismissed the hollows. "Some of them are still a little rebellious, sure, probably the smarter ones. But I've yet to meet a beastie who hasn't reacted to one of my Hollows. When you can control how much or how little joy they feel at a time, it's easy to bring even the proudest, mightiest beast to heel. I wouldn't advise letting them leave Merveille's shores anytime soon, not without me around, but apart from that?" She raised a finger. "One month, and every biological weapon on this island, without exception, will be at my beck and call."

Sengoku remained silent for several moments. He could already tell that this brat was going to be a pain to handle, but that was about the only negative that he could see. He'd had a headache all week, and while he could fight off those beasts and the ghost girl, a chance to not fight them and still arrest fifty of the biggest problems in Paradise was a much more appealing option. And if she was honest about her motivations—which he believed she was, from what he knew and from her stipulation regarding the IQ plants—then it may be that she would be more like Mihawk than Hancock. And if worse came to worst, the beasts were landlocked now, no threat to anyone…

Suppressing a sigh, Sengoku withdrew a Transponder Snail from his coat and dialed a number that few in the world knew.

"Marine Code 95000, Fleet Admiral Sengoku," the Fleet Admiral recited, throwing a scathing glare at the arrogantly triumphant phantom. "I have found a replacement for Moria."

"We are listening," a stern older voice prompted as Perona grinned from ear to ear.

~o~

"This is far from the ideal outcome," the Fleet Admiral mused, his frown not as deep as usual. "But I will admit that I never expected this much to go right for us."

"Mmph, for a given value of the word 'much', anyway…" Garp shrugged. "Seriously, what exactly did we get out of this? A bunch of mega-sized beasts, who can't really make much difference against the Emperors? A roadblock-island that's not in a critical position? A brat with half-
developed powers, who's only now going to start trying? Seems like we're just warming a seat to me."

"Mmph…" Sengoku nodded his head to the side ever so slightly. "I'll admit, this isn't the best choice possible, but there was one extenuating factor that pushed my hand."

The world-famous Hero allowed himself a snicker. "What, shoring up the ranks of the Warlords from five to six?"

Sengoku's jaw twitched at the stab of guilt that ran him through, but he otherwise maintained his composure. "No. Something even worse: Gender equality."

For a moment, the only sounds to be heard were the lapping of waves, the jingle of chains as the defeated walked into the hands of Justice…

And then Garp looked over at Sengoku with a bemused expression. "Come again?"

"Don't. Laugh," Sengoku ordered tersely, pinching the bridge of his nose. "You have no right to. You don't have to deal with the monthly demands from the Marine Women's Rights Association. And it was either find another female Warlord or sign their petition to canonize Captain Bellemere, and I refuse to let a pirate's mother become a saint."

"Indeed, he didn't have much choice," a nearby Transponder Snail piped up in Tsuru's cool drawl. "Enough people hate him without throwing more on the pile."

"Status update," the Fleet Admiral ordered, entirely ignoring the jab. "The last of the now-defunct Golden Lion Pirates have been pacified and placed in chains," Tsuru smoothly replied. "We'll still need time to transport them from the center of the archipelago, but we should be ready to depart in no more than an hour."

"Aww, already?"

Sengoku twitched viciously, refusing to give the spectre he knew was floating above him the benefit of his glare.

"And here I was getting used to your horrifically un-cute battleships sullying my horizon. Ah well!" She waved her hand as she 'flopped' down in front of Sengoku in a prone position, an arm tucked under her head. "Don't let the currents whip you on the way out, would you?"

Sengoku shot a sharp scowl at the newly inducted Warlord. "Don't forget that these warships could just as easily return, only in the capacity of a Buster Call instead. As you yourself said, two lemons in a row. I won't be merciful on the third."

Perona clicked her tongue in a chiding manner even as she floated well away from the Marine. "Touchy touchy. And you're sure I can't ameliorate our new-forged relationship a bit? Or rather…"

She smirked as a weeping Hollow peeked out over her shoulder, ignoring the way Sengoku's expression darkened. "Your mood? Why, who knows! It might even help out that little bum ticker you're sporting."

The Fleet Admiral stiffened, and Perona flinched as the air suddenly grew heavy around her, apparent even to her astral form.

"How the hell did you—!?" Sengoku growled.
"Shiki found out, he was gloating the entire way back to the castle!" Perona yelped in an entirely dignified and not-at-all panicked way. "B-But seriously, you already know how bad stress is for someone in your position! M-My Positive Hollows could help, even just—!"

"You had a ten ton hellbeast dancing to your tune after less than a day," Sengoku interrupted, his voice absolutely frigid. "If you bring even one of your ghosts within a five-foot radius of me, you'll be cooling your heels with Crocodile before the day is out."

"That's not how it—aw, screw it," Perona grumbled, flicking her hand to dispel the Hollow. "If you want to turn me down when I'm offering you a miracle stress-reliever out of the goodness of my heart, I'll take my charity elsewhere."

Turning to leave, Perona looked back over her shoulder and smirked in a way that made Sengoku know that what she was about to say was going to make him snap, and he sagaciously turned on his heel and entered his cabin, the door slamming behind him.

The princess sighed, and her eyes slid to Garp. "One day, he's going to have to realize that not everyone who calls himself a pirate is untrustworthy."

"Tch, and you expect me to believe you for a second?" Garp asked flatly, his gaze never leaving the marching line of prisoners. "C'mon, the first thing out of your mouth was a lie."

"E-Excuse me?!" the ghost princess stammered in equal parts terror and indignation.

Garp looked up at her, and at that moment, Perona became acutely aware of exactly who she was talking to. After all, only so many people could manage to look so terrifying with barely any effort. "You honestly expect me to believe that after two months on the same ship as my grandson, you didn't fall in love with them the same way that everyone else to join their crew did?"

Perona opened her mouth to object, but when she thought about it, Garp was right. On both counts. Her expression paled.

Garp, for his part, just chuckled. "That's what I thought. Don't worry, I won't tell anyo—"

"You promise?"

"GAH!" Garp flinched back from Perona, who was suddenly up in his face, her expression totally blank.

"You really, truly promise that you'll never tell anyone, no matter what?"

The Vice Admiral took a moment to regain his wits, and then he gave a wry grin. "How deep is it?"

Perona looked away. "...I abandoned Moria for convenience. I tried doing the same thing to the Straw Hats... but Shiki wasn't the only one who underestimated them. I'd put my life on the line... for any of them."

As far as she could see, somehow, nobody was paying attention to the two of them. Silver lining, that.

"I won't tell anyone," Garp said with the utmost seriousness. "But you had better put on a damn good act if you don't want anyone else to figure it out."

"Oh, I think I can manage that," Perona said softly as she flew back. "Because I have something I really want to tell you."
"And what would that—?"

"Get," Perona cut in, her face gradually screwing up in rage. "The hell. AWAY. FROM MY ISLAND!"

The final word was shrieked out at the top of Perona's lungs. And far more importantly, a veritable geyser of howling ectoplasm erupting from the specter punctuated it.

Garp stared up at the aetherial pillar in mildly respectful silence.

"Well, I think we can safely say that she does have the sheer power to stand among the rest of the Warlords," Tsuru drawled tonelessly.

"Tcheh, don't gloat just yet, hag," Garp smirked. "That went perfectly according to my plan."

"Bullshit."

"Prove it, you wrinkly—whoa!" The Hero ducked his head with a yelp, narrowly missing getting pegged by some kind of Hollow with a twisted face. "Okay, yeah, she's serious about us leaving, HEY!" Garp roared, waving his hand at the nearest battleships in what was the height of military procedure. "WE'VE OVERSTAYED OUR WELCOME AND WE'VE STILL GOT A HELL OF A MESS TO CLEAN UP BACK AT HQ! TELL THE TROOPS STILL ON THE ISLAND TO DOUBLE-TIME IT! LOCK 'EM DOWN AND GET READY TO SHOVE OFF!"

"First smart thing I've heard all day," Tsuru said, rolling her eyes in an exaggerated fashion.

"What was that?!

"Aye-aye, sir. KA-LICK!"

"Yeah, that's what I thought."

-o-

"—RAGING, HALFWIT PIECE OF WAGH!"

THUD!

"Oooowww..." Perona groaned into the ground, trying to retooth her stripped mental gears. "What the hell just—? Eh?" The Ghost Princess snapped her head up and looked around, blinking in surprise as she realized she was in—

"The palace?!" she sputtered incredulously. "Holy hell, did I just rage so hard I snapped back into my body?" Perona mulled over the thus far unprecedented occurrence before groaning and hanging her head. "I really need to start putting some effort into figuring out exactly what my powers are capable of."

"Cro-roak?"/ "Cr-ch-chrk!"

A concerned round of noises from below her caught Perona's attention, and she shot a reassuring smile at what she'd fallen off of. "It's okay, Hopper, Stinger. I'm fine, just fine. You two worry about yourselves, alright? That mean ol' bastard Cross led you two through a real ringer."

The mega-sized frog and scorpion smiled and chittered gratefully as they settled down to rest.

Once they weren't looking, however, Perona's smile faded, taking a look around at the
reason why she'd been sleeping on her new friends' backs.

While it was indeed her dream come true to move into a castle all her own and live her life in luxury, there was one major obstacle to that goal: A life of luxury required a luxurious castle, and for all that she appreciated the Straw Hats' efforts in ejecting her new home's previous tenants, she wished they could have left at least two consecutive walls standing!

In the simplest terms possible, Shiki's once-gilded fortress was a shell of its former self, with over half its structures collapsed in on themselves from structural damage, and the rest a stiff breeze away from joining them. It would take a lot of hard, dedicated work to make the compound habitable once more, and Perona had absolutely jack all idea how to go about even starting said work.

"I did not think this through, did I?" she groaned to herself, dragging her hands down her face.

"Having some issues with your new home, dearie?"

"WAGH!" Perona yelped at the sound of another human voice. She spun to face her interlopers, Hollows reflexively roiling from her body. And then they just as swiftly dissipated when she actually saw the interlopers. She needed a further second for her brain to process what her eyes were showing, and she blinked in confusion at the newcomers.

The very familiar newcomers.

"Y-You're—!"

"PANDA!"

"Grk!"

Perona's breath whooshed out of her when a large weight slammed into her midsection and dropped her on her ass. The newly appointed Warlord blinked incredulously at the enthusiastic bundle of smiles and feathers hanging off her neck. "X-Xiao!? W-what are you doing here!?" She then turned her incredulous gaze on the crowd of Merveillean natives watching over her. "W-What are any of you doing here? And how did you sneak up on me?!"

"To answer your last question, we didn't, darling," Xiao's grandmother informed her with an endearing smile. "We just walked up while you were asleep. We were quite concerned, actually, we couldn't wake you up. It was like—!"

"Yes, yes, dead to the world, sleeping like a corpse, I've heard them all before," Perona reflexively interrupted. "B-But that still doesn't explain why you're all here! I thought you'd all be halfway to a new island by now!"

"This island was our home first," Xiao's mother firmly replied. "We've spent the last twenty years dreaming of the day that Shiki would leave us in peace and we could return to our lives here. And while yes, we originally intended to live in our village, that is…" She grimaced uncomfortably, glancing at the nearby monsters. "No longer quite so feasible…"

"So we decided to come here and live with you instead!" Xiao jumped in with all the eagerness and obnoxiousness of a kid on Christmas morning. "Can we can we can we?"

Perona's brain immediately flatlined at the request. "You—bu—wha—STOP BOUNCING!" she barked, irritation boiling over.

Xiao stilled. As did a particularly acrobatic tiger and small kangaroo in the background.
"Not you two!" Perona snapped at them. When they went back to… whatever they were doing, she redirected her attention to the villagers. "A-And what's she talking about?"

"Well," said the old woman who had spoken before. "First, it can't be understated just how grateful we are to you for warning us of what Shiki planned to do to us. If it weren't for your intervention, we'd all be long dead. So, helping you out however we can manage is the least we can do."

"And considering that both your new palace and our old village have been destroyed, putting the two of them together would make things better and easier for all of us," Xiao's mother reasoned. "Our people have a knack for architecture; those beasts caused regular accidents even before Shiki invaded, even with the Daft Green protecting us. We had to learn to rebuild quickly and efficiently. Unfortunately, we'd just be putting up shields, not anything we can use to fight back."

"And conversely, you have the ability to fight back against the most terrifying enemies but don't seem to have worked a day in your life," the old woman wryly observed.

Perona pouted. "Can't argue with that…" she grumbled.

"In short, we'll help rebuild the palace for you—stripping out all of the lions, of course—and in return." The elderly woman smirked impishly as she leaned over and jabbed Perona in the forehead. "You act the way that a monarch should and keep us safe."

"And-and-and!" Xiao waved her arms eagerly, a blinding smile on your face. "You can make all the monsters nice and cuddly, like these guys, right?" She gestured at the snoozing symbiotic pair, and kept going before anyone could object. "If you make all the monsters nice, then that means that we don't need the smelly Daft Greens anymore, and no one gets sick anymore! Right? Right?"

That actually took Xiao's family by surprise, and they exchanged shocked looks.

"Uhh…"

"Told you she was smarter than she acts," Granny smugly stated.

But the young Merveillean wasn't quite done yet. "Oh, oh! And also you've gotta be the bestest big sister ever while Ever's away on her adventures!"

Aaaand that line made Perona's brain flatline. Again.

Granny slapped a hand to her face. "Then again…"

"Xiao!" her mother gasped in a scolding tone. "Miss Perona, I am so—!"

It took Perona a second to reboot her brain again, and she was still decidedly flustered. "A-ah, no that's…" Her demeanor slowly shifted into a tearful smile. "That, ah, t-that sounds great, actually. I…"

To the surprise of all present, Perona leaned forward, and when she leaned her forehead against Xiao's, they couldn't help the fond smiles that crept onto their faces.

"I've… always wanted a real sister," Perona laughed weakly, tears of joy streaming down her cheeks.

And so began the reign of Hellbeast Queen ("Princess! I am a PRINCESS!") Perona, Grand Marshal of Merveille and Warlord of the Seas.
"Goldenweek. Do you have a second?"

The woman in question glanced up from her paint mixing to see the top of Merry's head. Shifting down revealed the whole of the ship-girl, and the odd mix of disgust, annoyance, and 'how the hell do I word this' on her face.

The ex-assassin took a second to gauge her interest in whatever nonsense the Straw Hat was about to pull her into before sighing in defeat. 'Well, at least this will be interesting…' she silently groaned, putting down her stirrer before turning to fully face the shipgirl. "I have a few minutes, what do you need?"

Merry glanced at the slightly larger Cannibal coasting alongside the Thousand Sunny, grimaced, and then said, "I know you can change people's minds with your paints, and I need you to do that for me now. Specifically, I need you to give the Cannibal an…" She let out a tortured groan and clawed her hand down her face. "Attitude adjustment. Regarding Big Bro Sunny."

Goldenweek stared at the shipgirl some more, took a second to close her eyes, take a deep calming breath, pray to Apollo that this was just a fume-dream… aaaand no such luck, damn. "An… attitude adjustment." Merry nodded. "For a ship."

"Look, who's the literal ship whisperer here?" Merry replied, teeth grinding ever so slightly as she pointed to herself. "Yeah, me. So when I say that whatever part of Cannibal that makes her want to, ah…" The girl's expression screwed up in projectile-vomit levels of disgust. "Practice docking with Sunny for hours on end needs to be lobotomized, I mean it."

From the somewhat crazed look in Merry's eyes, she meant every word she'd just said, no matter how much she despised it, and really, it wasn't the weirdest thing she'd had to deal with since meeting the Straw Hats and then joining Barto's crew. Certainly in the top ten, though.

Her conviction, though, was shaken when she took a look at the Cannibal and made a quick calculation for how much paint an 'attitude adjustment' would probably take. Not to mention the work…

"Is this really necessary?" she asked warily, dreading the answer even as she spoke the words.

Merry's eye twitched viciously, a broken smile creeping onto her face. "Well, I'd get a restraining order if I could, but I don't think the courts would rule in either of our favors if we showed up asking for one," Merry responded in deadpan. "Yes, this is really necessary."

The painter sighed, pinching her nose to try and stave off the budding migraine. She then held out her hand. "If I do this, you owe me whatever I use up, plus interest when we get to Sabaody."

"I'll buy you an auction house-worth of art when we get there if that's what it takes, just spay your damn tub!" Merry hastily agreed, shaking the other girl's hand.

"I'll hold you to that," Goldenweek said, turning her flat gaze on her crew's galleon. "Now, let's see… what design should I go with for this?"

"Oh thank Triton…" Merry sagged as she let the tension flow out of her. "So, how long do you think this will take?"

Goldenweek cocked an eyebrow at her. "I'm a hired artist. That means that this will take as long as it takes."
Aaaand the tension was back as a cold feeling crept down Merry's spine. "…meaning?"

The ex-assassin cocked her head to the side just so as she turned to fully face the shipgirl. "Meaning that if you want to accelerate the time table on this project, it'll cost you extra."

The cold feeling evolved into a sickly pallor. "I should have gotten Vivi to help me deal with you," Merry gurgled mournfully.

Goldenweek shrugged dismissively and started sketching in her notebook. "In all fairness, it sounds like the Princess has interfered with this quite a bit already."

Out the corner of her eye, the painter noticed something amazing. Goldenweek knew, academically, that people's faces could turn different colors based on their emotions, but this was the first time she'd seen a person flip through so many at once. The shade of scarlet she settled upon at the end was particularly striking, she'd have to see about replicating it down the li—

"MILLE MILLIONS DE MILLE MILLIARDS DE MILLES SABORDS!"

Goldenweek flinched as Merry suddenly erupted in a fit of cursing, rolling her eyes and digging a finger into her ear. "And that's Cross," she groused to herself.

That comment caused Merry's blue streak to darken considerably, which in turn caused Goldenweek to quirk up the tiniest of smiles.

Yes, this job was annoying, aggravating, life-threatening, and utter hell on her painting…

But damn it all if it wasn't the most enjoyable gig she'd had in a long time.

-0-

"No way you can do this," I said, arms crossed in an X. "No. Way. You are a crazy bastard without many limits, this I know, but even you still have some."

"Watch and learn, Cross," Luffy said with uncharacteristic smugness, his own arms crossed and his chest puffed out. Then he banged his silverware on the small table on deck and destroyed any semblance of decorum he'd erected. "Hey, Sanji, hurry it up!"

"Dammit, Luffy!" Sanji barked as he backed out of the Cannibal's kitchen holding a covered platter. "If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times: you can't rush good meat! Especially not when you're dealing with substandard working conditions, damn bunch of hapless…" The last line was grumbled under his breath and accompanied by a disgusted look behind him.

Oh, chance! "By the way, pop trivia, Sanji: did you know that Valentine is most likely the cook for the Barto Club?" I inquired 'innocently'.

"She is!" one of the watching pirates around us confirmed.

Sanji stopped moving, his visible eye wide and his teeth grinding against each other more. Amusingly, it took him a few seconds to get his legs working. "Shut up, Cross," he grumbled, which was really begging for a response.

"Nice comeback, swirly," I smirked.

"INTELLIGENT, witty, sophisticated," Soundbite concurred in much the same tone(s).
I sighed in contentment as Sanji bounced a light kick off my skull. It was good to be home! Well, on a ship sailing alongside our home, but close enough.

The sound of Sanji slamming the tray down drew me out of my thoughts. "Alright, captain..." He withdrew the cover with a flourish, unveiling a quartet of completely identical slices of meat. "One Meatlover's Mystery Platter, exactly as you requested..." He glanced aside and hid a cough behind his fist. "Down to the stupid name."

"Yum!" Stars shone in Luffy's eyes as he clashed his silverware together. "This is gonna be good! Watch and learn, Cross!"

"Just a sec, Captain," I requested before loosing a whistle at the crowd of Barto-mooks assembled around us. "Alright, boys! Last call! Betting is now closing!" Hands shot out with the bills, and I nodded gratefully. "Thank ye, thank ye-"

"Hey, weren't you just calling your captain crazy?" one of said mooks in the back called out.

I shrugged dismissively. "Hey, just because he's nuts doesn't mean I'm ever gonna bet against him." I flashed out a cocky smirk as I shoved the money in my jacket. "Just means I'll pocket the money of all you idiots who do. Betting closed, get started Luffy!" I ordered before anyone could protest.

Then I blinked, because the meat was gone and Luffy had just swallowed. I took a second to process that before slapping my forehead. "Right, what the hell else was I expecting..." I peeked through my fingers at my uncharacteristically (almost unnaturally, really, I was truly tempted to check for Bentham) thoughtful captain. "Sooo...?"

Luffy held his finger up in an ironic demand for patience, head tilted in deep thought. "Just gimme a sec..." Finally, he slammed his palms on the table and nodded. "Alright! So that's guinea pig roasted with peppers, crocodile marinated in lemon, sassafras, and garlic, hickory-smoked alligator tail, and grilled rattlesnake with salt! Right?"

Sanji tsk'd, lighting a fresh cigarette. "Captain, you're a gluttonous, no-brain foodhole..." Suddenly, the cancer stick ashed all at once, and Sanji heaved out a cloud of smoke the size of his head. "But damn it all, you're right."

"Yes!" I crowed victoriously as the hapless mooks around us all groaned in despair - and then switched to boggling at my captain in shock. "And how the hell?"

Luffy's only response was an oblivious grin as he scratched a finger under his nose. "Shishishi! I 'unno! I just noticed that I could pick out how it all tasted and thought it was cool! Oh, hey!" He perked up and pounded his fist in his palm in that special way that guaranteed a headache. "Maybe it was that IQ stuff on Merveille! It could have made my tongue get way stronger and stuff, right?"

Luffy nodded with total confidence. "Yeah, that's gotta be it."

Soundbite leaned in slightly, his eyestalk cocked. "SHOOOOULD WE TELL HIM that's not how EVOLUTION WORKS?"

"Best we not," I muttered back. "If we tell him it's wrong, chances are it could stop working, and that'd just make him sad." I frowned in concern. "But still, I hope there aren't actually any adverse side-effects from—!"

"ANYWAY!" Luffy suddenly belted out, throwing up his fists. "That was barely an appetizer! Sanji! Get me more!"

Sanji's brow twitched slightly as he plastered a stiff grin on his face. "What's the magic word, cap-?"
"More~ more~ moooore~!" Luffy started singing to a beat of banged silverware, grin never leaving his face.

"WILL YOU CRAM IT, MORON!"

**WHAM!**

His head, on the other hand, went on an all-expenses-paid vacation away from the rest of his body as Sanji kicked it a good half-mile off the port side off the ship.

"—Yeah, no, he's completely fine."

"Idiot..." Sanji muttered to himself, shaking his head, before snapping a glare at the nearby mooks, who all flinched back in terror. "Well?! The hell are you waiting for, idiots? He said he wanted more, so go and get him more! I left fifty more plates in the kitchen, and if the first one's not out here by the time he's back, so help me!"

Apparently Gin had the Club's men trained well, because they did not need to be told twice, and by the time Luffy's still-grinning head snapped back into place, the first crewmate was running out of the kitchen, a double-wide platter of... something's ribs. I'll be honest, we murdered a lot of animals on our way out of Merveille, and the majority of the carcasses we hauled back to our ships were not intact.

Either way, the point is that it was big, cooked to perfection and slathered in barbecue sauce, and positively mouth-watering. Maybe I could get some bef—?

"Mmm!" Luffy mumbled around the mouthful of meat and bone he was chewing on. "Thish ish good!"

I sighed in despair as the de-fooded mook hastily ran back into the kitchen, watching the cavalcade of trays march towards Luffy's unforgiving maw. "Oooof course, what was I... thinking..." I frowned as I stared at the scene before me, my brain niggling at me. Luffy and Sanji on a ship that wasn't the crew's, Luffy gorging himself while Sanji looked on in resignation... why did this all feel so familiar? It was almost as though I'd seen this scene somewhere before, but... only almost. Something was missing... but what could it possibly be?

"INCOMING!"

I blinked as Soundbite's sudden squawk snapped me from my thoughts. "Wait, wha—?"

*SPLASH! "MOOOOOO!"

My reaction was split down the middle as I stared up at the figure looming over us. On the one hand, the thought 'Oh, so that's what was missing' was prominent. But on the other, what came out of my mouth was—

"I thought we weren't going to meet your leathery hide until two years from now?" I asked incredulously.

Mohmoo didn't respond, for his own pair of reasons. A small part of it was that Soundbite couldn't translate purely aquatic creatures, of course, but for the most part, I think the terrified look he was sending Luffy and Sanji's way and the steady stream of cow pies he was dropping had a lot more to do with it.

And Mohmoo and I weren't the only ones who remembered the past.
"Hey, isn't that…?" Sanji tilted his head inquisitively.

Luffy was… a lot less reassuring. Specifically, the familiar glint in his eyes as he stared at the sea monster. "Wooah, I remember you! You were that sea cow on Arlong's crew!" Aaaand then his mouth overflowed into a straight-up waterfall. "I always regretted not getting to taste you!"

Mohmoo had already been sweating like a stuck pig before Luffy said that. Now? He looked to be a light breeze away from straight up fainting.

I weighed my options: On the one hand, something that big would probably have enough meat left over for me to actually get a bite in, unlike the previous platters, and it wasn't exactly like Mohmoo was critical to the future, so…

But… on the other hand…

"Gah, damn my bleeding heart," I groused before clearing my throat. "Hey, guys—BWAGH!"

That sudden exclamation was due to something dropping out of nowhere right on top of my head, driving me face-first into the decking. And since my mouth was open…

"Agh! Blech! Someone get me some mouthwash!" I spat as I resisted the urge to wipe my tongue with something. God damn it, had these bastards never washed their shoes in their li—?! Ah, right, ruffians and mongrels one and all, of course they hadn't… ARGH! "GROSS!" I heaved in disgust, shooting a venomous glare at who-the-hell-ever had just stomped me. "Ahh, what the hell you little—!?"

Then I froze, because it wasn't every day you saw a girl who couldn't be more than ten drop-kick Sanji right in the face. Aaand then basically bitch-slap Luffy with something wrapped up in a towel-

"OW!"

-correction: slapped Luffy with something apparently made of Seastone, from Luffy's pained yelp. She then leapt onto the railing and interposed herself between my crewmates and the sea monster, her arms spread wide.

"You're not touching a single scale on his head!" she barked.

For a moment, silence—aside from the girl's panting—reigned.

Until the usual suspect spoke up, of course.

"So, you want a share?" Luffy tilted his head in askance, ignoring the lump throbbing on his brow.

CLONK!

"OW!" Luffy yelped, grabbing the new lump he'd just received.

"HELL NO I DON'T WANT A SHARE!" the girl shrieked. "THE WHOLE POINT OF THIS IS THAT I DON'T WANT YOU EATING MOHMOO AT ALL! YOU MEAN BASTARDS ARE SCARING HIM! LEAVE HIM ALONE!"

Sanji blinked before waving his hand placatingly, a perfectly pleasant smile on his face. "Now now, don't you worry about a thing. I know all the humane slaughter methods, and I can put the cow down painlessly. The meat tastes better that way, anyway. It'll be the most delicious—!"

THWACK!
"GAH, SONNUVA—!" Sanji swore, hopping back with his hands clutching his shin where the girl had nailed him.

"ARE YOU IDIOTS DEAF!?" she demanded, waving her arms about. "I DON'T WANNA EAT HIM! AND I'M NOT GOING TO LET YOU EAT HIM EITHER! GOT IT!"

"Aaaw…" Luffy sagged in disappointment, even with a second lump. "You're sure? Not even a little bit?"

"HELL NO!" the girl shouted, arms crossed. "With a stomach like yours, 'a little' would be over half of him!"

"Well, yeah! He can still live with that much, right?"

"IDIOT!"

I frowned as I watched a prepubescent girl *wail* on my multi-hundred-million captain, literally brow-beating him with whatever she was holding. As I watched, I discerned a few facts about the girl.

First, the conical hat she was supporting was strikingly familiar to me. That was pretty obvious, though, it was a rather unforgettable piece of headwear. Second, there was something about the fervor with which she was defending the sea cow, something… personal? Well, either way, third, and most important of all, was that she'd covered up the seastone she was wielding to stop Luffy, making it likely that she was a Fruit user, too.

So, Fruit user, weird hat, protective attitude in regards to animals… "This seems familiar…" I muttered, scratching my finger against my temple. "Or rather, she seems familiar… but why is that…?" I frowned as I contemplated the situation. "Is she someone I should know about, or could she be somebody completely original—?

My train of thought was jarred by a *heavy* weight thumping down behind me, and a hot snort washing over my head. "I doubt it," a voice that both terrified and annoyed me to no end crooned smoothly. "Reality, after all, can only handle one of me."

I slowly turned a glare on Soundbite, my head twitching every inch of the way. "…Soundbite? Remind me to kill you later."

"IF I HAD A HUNDRED BERI for every time YOU SAID THAT, my shell would be GOLD-PLATED."

Bracing myself for whatever new migraine I was in for, I turned around, looked up towards the source of the voice… and then *kept* looking up at the *motherf—!*

I flinched at the facefull of irritated air that hit my face. …correction. A *fuck-mothering dragon*. With wings and scales and, well, *everything*. A… rather *familiar*-looking dragon, at that, that successfully stirred… at least half of my memories. But, really, only half, because reality wasn't *quite* as faithful to my memory as I expected. In fact…

"Uh…" I slowly, tentatively stuck up a finger. "Okay, first… Ryu, right?" I pointed my thumb over my shoulder, indicating the still-rampaging girl. "Making that Apis, wielder of the Whisper-Whisper fruit?"

The dragon snorted again, though from the new smirk, I think he was just amused this time. "You've got the name of my lady right, Jeremiah Cross, but as for me, we-hell…" A flash of fang as he
cocked his head. "I've had many names over the years, and while you're right that Ryu was the name I held during my previous life, I am now known as Lindwyrm, or Lindy for simplicity."

I nodded slowly, filing that name away in the 'do not forget, ever' folder before raising a second finger. "Second, no offense meant to you, but… have you…” I gestured weakly at him. "Had some work done? Because unless my memory's shoddy, aren't Millenial Dragons supposed to have more fur and feathers than scales?" And indeed, Lindy looked less like a Millenial Dragon, wyvern-esque with feathered wings and a furry mane, and much more like a traditional, knight-in-shining-armor dragon, with scales and leathery membranous wings.

"Huh? Hey, yeah!" Luffy perked up, eyeing the dragon curiously. "You're bigger than when we fought Shiki too!"

And judging by the way Apis suddenly abandoned her assault on my crewmates in favor of looking over her once-old friend in awe, that was double proof that my memory wasn't failing me.

"Wow. Looks like our experiment worked," she mused, rubbing her hands over the hardened flesh.

"Indeed," Lindy rumbled proudly, one leg also rubbing against the scales as he shook himself down. "Aaaaah, as though the new body wasn't good enough, I feel several centuries younger to boot! New places to see, new foes to fight, and all in my absolute prime! What a time to be alive!"

I momentarily mulled over that statement, and I was positively thunderstruck when the words and the implications thereof resonated with a vaguely faded memory of Soul Eater of all things. More specifically—

"IS YOUR BODY DE-VOLVING?!" Soundbite voiced my very thoughts in a shocked yelp.

"Eh?" Luffy blinked at us in confusion. "Devolve? Like, what, evolution the other way? But wouldn't that make him weaker?"

"Ooh, ten points to the rubber-brain, he's actually managed to grasp basic logic!" Lindy sneered condescendingly, before throwing his head back and preening as the light glittered off his newly grown scales. "Allow me to enlighten your feeble, mortal minds with my eternal—!"

THWACK!

The dragon flinched and went silent as a pair of seastone cuffs bounced off his snout, and he glanced down at the young girl who was staring up at him, expression unimpressed, fists on her hips and her foot tapping impatiently.

Lindy stared blankly at her for a second before rolling his eyes with a huff. "Long story short, my kind's bodies have evolved in a more lax direction ever since we got better at hiding ourselves and avoiding attention. But back in the day, when we were at our prime, we had all the perks: iron-hard scales, claws like swords, entirely autonomous wings, the whooole kit and kaboodle of the apex predators. And normally, it's quite impossible to turn back the hands of time and bring back what once was… but, well." He leered viciously. "You all found a delicious way of fixing that, didn't you?"

Sanji near bit through his cigarette he clenched his jaw so hard. "The SIQ…" he muttered to himself.

"Yup!" Apis cheerfully answered. "During the fighting, I found where Shiki was keeping the stuff and grabbed a dozen vials of it, and let Lindy eat them all!"

"And as you know, that poison's prime directive is to push a body to the absolute maximum," Lindy
nodded, tapping his claw against his scaled temple. "It just so happens that my maximum came and went several evolutionary generations ago. So instead of turning the clock forward, it's doing the smart thing and rolling me back. I'd say about, oooh…" He craned his neck in thought. "By this time tomorrow, I'll be back in my prime. Why, I might even go out and feast on a knight or two, just for kicks! Oooh, so many possibi—!"

"Ahem?" Apis coughed into her fist, staring up at Lindy with one eye open.

The dragon lapsed into silence again, rolling his eyes. "Yes, Mom. The point is that I'm looking forward to getting back into peak physical condition, yes."

"Meh, still not impressed."

All activity just died as all eyes turned to Soundbite, most in horror, including mine.

"Ex-cuse me?"

And one in sheer incredulity. An expression I'd never expected to see on a dragon and that I never wanted to be subjected to again.

"COME ON, don't pretend it's not obvious!" Soundbite sneered. "WHEN IT COMES TO DRAGONS, THERE'S ONE TRAIT THAT MAKES OR BREAKS the species. And so long as you don't have a fire in your belly, YOU'RE NOTHING BUT A BIG SCALY DODO! HOHOHOHOHOHEEHEEHEE—!"

SNORF!

"ACKACKACKACKACK!"/"SONNUVA!"

Lindy craned his neck back, a smug smile on his face as Soundbite choked on the massive cloud of smoke he'd just blown in my partner's face.

"Give it time," he said before nodding at Apis. "Well, If you have things in hand, milady, I believe sleep will help accelerate the process. If you need me, I'll be dreaming of captaining my own pirate ship, much like this one, only far better."

Apis started to nod before pausing thoughtfully. "Just out of curiosity that I know I'm going to regret… but how, exactly, would your ship be better?"

Lindy lifted his chin in a proud preen. "It would have dragons, of course." He then tilted his head in thought. "Also blackjack." Another tilt another way. "And hors d'oeuvres."

Apis' expression fell flat at the last point. "You mean hookers?"

A look that would have been bemused if the dragon weren't smirking came over Lindy's face.

"That's what I said, isn't it?"

And with that, he flapped off to do God-knows-what God-knows-where. Me? I was too busy also choking on the sizeable cloud of smoke I'd caught the tail end of. First time in a while I'd regretted being Soundbite's choice of perch.

"Sometimes it scares me to think of what our relationship would have been like if the captain hadn't convinced us to leave with him…" Apis muttered. She then turned back to us with a bit of a sheepish expression. "Anyway, ah… what were we talking about before this?"
"The sea cow," I wheezed out, trying to massage the smoke from my throat.

"Ah, right, thanks. AS I WAS SAYING," she snapped, glaring at Luffy and Sanji. "LEAVE MOHMOO ALONE OR I'LL FEED YOU TWO TO LINDY! GOT IT?"

"M-Miss Apis, was it?" Sanji said, getting his wits together. "In our defense, we've met him before… and not under the best circumstances."

"What are you even—?!"

"Wha—Mohmoo?! What are you doing here?"

Right on cue and interrupting Apis, we all turned to see Nami standing by the Sunny's railing, looking over at the cow in shock.

Said cow wasn't doing much better, head half underwater as he loosed a warbling, mournful moo.

"Huh?" Apis said, looking concerned. "What's he apologizing for? Mohmoo, what—?"

"Right before I joined the crew," I forced out, glancing aside with a grimace. "Luffy earned his first bounty by defeating 'Saw-Tooth' Arlong, a fishman pirate who had taken over an archipelago in the East Blue. Mohmoo was under his command, and while I'm pretty sure it was either not by his choice or he didn't know any better, Mohmoo was still involved in a lot of carnage. He… He hurt a lot of people."

Mohmoo moo'd again, and from the way he was nodding his head, it wasn't anything to refute my words.

Apis looked conflicted as she looked between us, Mohmoo, and Nami. The navigator was still looking at Mohmoo, more from shock and surprise than anything.

"I don't know about Luffy and Sanji, but Mohmoo definitely owed Nami an apology for what happened last time," I concluded.

I took the glare Nami shot my way on the chin. "I can speak for myself, thank you very much, Cross," she bit out. That done, she turned back to Mohmoo, gaze softening. "And what I want to say… is that I can already tell Mohmoo's sorry enough for what he did. I've put what happened back then behind me. I can forgive him, especially for crimes that weren't his."

I gracefully hid my flinch at Nami's words, and instead focused on… well, Apis focusing on whatever Mohmoo was saying. She then nodded and addressed Nami. "Mohmoo says that he's really sorry for what he did, and that he'll try and do whatever he can to make it up to you."

For a few tense seconds, Nami stared at the sea cow before nodding slowly, and even cracking a small smile. "Good enough."

Mohmoo closed his eyes in grateful relief before sinking back below the surface.

"…So, we can't eat him?"

OK, now Nami looked peeved. "Sanji?"

"Coming up, Nami-swan," the chef sighed, a well-placed boot upside our captain's ass sent Luffy flying straight back to the Sunny and into the tender (HA!) mercies of Nami's Eisen Tempo.

I stared after our captain for a second before tilting my head contemplatively. "Ya know," I mused to
myself. "I only just realized, I came on to this ship for something completely different and I just got swept up in all this madness." I tilted my head even further. "Now, what the heck was it…?"

"Assassins at 5 o'clock," Soundbite flatly announced.

"RIGHT!" I barked, spinning on my heel and schooling my expression as I came face-to-face with 5 and Valentine's smirking forms.

"Gotta admit, Cross: you really are scary when you're mad," Mr. 5 said. "Last time I saw that cold an expression, it was on Mr. 1."

"But now that you've had your revenge, it's only fair that we get ours, too," Valentine chirped acridly, somehow making the act of spinning her parasol menacing. "Just a few weeks in traction to make up for all the hell you put us through on Little Garden and killing our chances at a quiet retirement—"

Valentine froze when a breeze brushed along her neck and resolved into a slender hand, a face that was the picture of serenity coalescing behind her shoulder in the next moment.

"Now, I'm sure I misheard you, Valentine," Vivi crooned, her fingers flexing tightly on the assassin's throat. "You couldn't have just said that you were upset about my family and my kingdom retaliating for the farce that got me my bounty just because it made you more likely to be arrested for… what was it? Ah, yes, attempting to destroy my country?"

"N-Nothing of the sort, Miss Wed—GRK! P-P-Princess Nefertari Vivi!" Valentine said in a voice higher-pitched than Chopper's as Vivi pinched down on her windpipe.

"Good," Vivi intoned. "Because otherwise, I would have had to take my very justified revenge. I'd suggest you keep giving me reason to put it off. Now, if you'll excuse me—" Vivi's once-serene face turned fearful with impressive speed. "I can't let Robin find me."

And the wind-woman dissipated, leaving us standing around in gape-mouthed astonishment. I took advantage of the pause to retrieve a pack I had brought onboard for this exact reason.

"Now, I do understand your grudge," I said, rummaging in the pack. "So, if I'm going to have you not wring my neck, you'll need some… incentive." Pulling out a bundle colored black, gold, and bright red, I handed it over to 5. "For you, a highly durable fireman's outfit."

"And for you, Valentine, some gourmet chocolate."

Valentine took the platter, eyeing it suspiciously, and glanced over to her partner. He had pulled out the jacket of the outfit and slipped it on, and to her eyes it looked just a bit small. Small enough that it was likely his usual coat underneath that was causing the problem. Still eyeing it suspiciously, she peeled back the cover. Looked like chocolate. She picked one up. Felt like chocolate. A sniff. Smelled like chocolate. She popped it in her mouth.

"Bliss."

"Oh, my God, this is the best chocolate I've ever tasted…" she moaned, swaying on her feet as she all but melted.

"And this jacket is a perfect fit," 5 added, actually emoting as he flexed and admired his own profile.

They glanced at each other, something passing between them.
Aaand then I doubled over as two powerful fists rammed square into my gut.

"Now we're even," the assassins gloated together.

"Yeah, I'll take it…" I woofed out, staggering in an attempt to stay on my feet.

"But you're not off the hook yet!" Valentine interjected, crossing her arms and straightening her back so that she was looming over me… kinda.

" Eh, he is with me," 5 said, having already turned to walk away. "You wanna go down this rabbit hole, that's your problem. Me? I'm good. See ya." Waving his hand over his shoulder, he ambled off.

Valentine glowered after him before focusing on me. "Alright, Cross, if we're going to be stuck together for who knows how long, then you're going to talk. How do you know so much stuff that you clearly shouldn't!?!" She leaned in and stared me right in the eye. "How?"

I blinked at the reaction. "…you really want to know?" I slowly allowed myself to don a taunting smirk, and I relished how that alone put her on the back foot. "Alright, fine. I'll tell you." I stepped back and crossed my arm behind my back as I wistfully glanced skyward. "It all started fifty years ago to… no, wait, a week ago, fifty years a week ago."

-o-

[GRAH! DAMNED WORTHLESS FEATHER-RAT PIECES OF—!] Unheard even to Soundbite, invective flowed in a steady stream from Su's mouth as she bashed her head against the walls of one of the few places on the Sunny that was soundproof. Her request on Thriller Bark had been fulfilled, and quickly. The News Coo network had pieced together a description that said where to find the Children of Inari, and consequently the power she needed to stand with the rest of the Straw Hats.

And this was frustrating to the cloud fox because, as she really should have expected from her smart-alecky species, it wasn't straightforward in the least. Not only was it in the form of a riddle, said riddle even lacked the basic decency to be written in only one language!

[Oh, suuuuuch a clear message!" Su snarled to herself. ['Delve unto the heart of the Eternal Firstborn, and there shall the pilgrim find their destination: Cradle of the Children of Inari and Grave of Blessed Tamamo, Kitsune ni Mitsukerareru Kakure!' GAAAAAH!] Screaming wordlessly, the cloud fox smacked her head against the bulkhead. [Damn the yokai foxes of Wano and damn their moonspeak! 'Oh, we think it means Village That Can Be Found by a Fox', yeah, no shit, Coo! If these are instructions for a pilgrimage, then shouldn't they be fucking clear!?]

Rolling from back to front to back to front, furiously scratching her head, the fox continued ranting out of sight and earshot of anyone who could have detected her. [That SIQ boost'll help me bounce heads, but is that enough? NO! If I can't reshape geography at this point, the best I can do is run, hide, and support from behind the front lines! I want to be the one who makes people run! I want to be stronger! I want to be useful! Is that too much to ask? DAMN IT ALL RIGHT TO—!]

CLUNK!

"GWAH!" Su yelped as the tunnel suddenly opened up beneath her, dropping her into the open air and also back into range of Soundbite's auditory capabilities. The cloud fox hastily flexed her limber muscles, trying to spin her torso to land with grace. But much to her surprise, rather than the leg-
rattling impact with the floor she anticipated, she landed much sooner than she'd expected, and much higher up too.

And on a... broad platform...

"Hey, Franky," Su smirked in her cockiest voice, raising her paw in a salute. "Thanks for the catch."

"Heh, no problem," Franky nodded back, tossing the fox onto the clearest table in the factory. "Lemme guess, Little Sis's tunnels aren't as stable as she thinks?"

"Eh," the fox shrugged indifferently. "Nah, I think the problem is I stepped on a latch-trigger by accident. These things happen. But enough about who was snooping through which pantry looking for a snack." She glanced around the workshop. "What about you, tin can? What brings you belowdecks?"

"You really wanna know? C'mere, c'mere, I'll show ya!" he said eagerly, turning towards one of the nearby workbenches. Su promptly hopped across the tables to clamber onto the larger pirate's shoulder.

Su expected some kind of a weapon on the table, a gadget, a gizmo, but instead, to her surprise, sitting there was a living, breathing Transponder Snail, there in the mucus and shell. Or, well, half a shell, given how the thing's rig was splayed out on the table. But, more surprisingly than that, she didn't recognize it as one of the three that were supposed to be on the ship.

"Is...?" Su sniffed the air. "Is she one of the Barto's?"

"Nope," Franky answered. "She's actually ours. Meet our newest snail, who I nabbed from the clutches of Shiki's palace! Cross and Soundbite named her Gif, and she took to it." He waved at the gastropod. "Say hi, Gif!"

The snail smiled and waved her eyestalk cheerily in response. "(゚▽゚)"

Su blinked in surprise. "Eh? What the-? Hey, Soundbite, how come you're not translating for your cuz?"

"'Cause she's my cuz in more ways than you think!" Soundbite informed her from the next ship over. "FUN FACT FOR YA: VID SNAILS DON'T HAVE a vocal language!"

Su's tail shot out in shock. "Vid—? You mean that this new slimeball is a Visual Transponder Snail!?"

"(￣＾￣)ゞ" Gif's eyestalk saluted in confirmation.

"RIGHT ON THE MONEY!" Soundbite agreed. "Gif's my opposite, all about the eyes. AND WHERE HER SPECIES IS CONCERNED, IT'S ALL ABOUT FACIAL EXPRESSIONS. I can't translate because there's jack-all for me TO translate, but she gets the point across well enough. AIN'T THAT RIGHT, LOOKY-LOO?"

"(ง'̀-'́)ง" the snail beamed.

"And that's not all! FRANKY, WHAT'S TONIGHT'S FEATURED PRIZE?"

"Oh, only adding a SUPER amount of insult to all the injuries we already gave Shiki," the cyborg grinned in a way that Su hadn't seen since Enies. "Cross and Soundbite have already worked out the way Shiki bounced video feeds from snail to snail: the transceiver can hook up to more than one
snail at once, but it's up to the first one to connect if anyone else gets in, so Gif just kept reaching out to the right snails and sending their feeds instead of hers. But, with Soundbite and Gif running two specialties at once, and Shiki's worldwide delivery of all those visual snails—"

"He just set the stage to upgrade the SBS to be aural and visual from now on?" Su finished, gaping.

"BINGO!" Soundbite cheered.

"(o◕‿◕o)" Gif’s eyes glimmered in agreement.

"AND WITH WHAT WE GOT THE SUPER—!"

The cyborg snapped into his trademark pose. "SUPER!"

"IRON MAN working on, oohohohoooh," the verbal snail trailed off into a malevolent chuckle.

"Oh, and make sure SANJI doesn't find out. NO WAY IN HELL IS HE DITCHING HIS POSTER WHILE I CAN HELP IT! Ain't that right, sistah from another shell?"

"\(^{(*)^{(*)}}\)" said sister saluted in agreement.

"You are so mean," Su snickered behind her paw.

Said paw then hid her muzzle as it dropped into a frown. 'And tenacious, ' she morosely thought to herself. 'And determined. And you refuse to let yourself be squashed…'

The cloud fox's hackles split in a snarl. 'And I swear... I swear, to Blessed Tamamo, to Inari themself... I will come far enough to stand at your side!"

-o-

"...And so, while the Civil War didn't start out over slavery, Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation made it about slavery. Make sense?" I concluded.

"Hm... yeah, when you put it that way, I understand perfectly," Valentine nodded in complete understanding before popping up her finger. "Just one question, however..." The assassin's expression twisted in aggravation. "WHAT DID ANY OF THAT HAVE TO DO WITH YOUR UNHOLY KNOWLEDGE?!!"

I blinked and stared at her in the picture-perfect image of obliviousness. "Oh, jack all, I was just jabbering random nonsense. What on earth made you think any of that had anything to do with my knowing that you dream of being a chocolatier one day?"

"√¡$δ£¥αηεigailx̅jήξ�εξ closures" Valentine's response was... less than coherent.

"If it's any consolation?" my personal parasite blandly piped up. "From the sound of things, THIS MORON FAILED HISTORY CLASS."

I snapped a glare at the mucus stain. "I've been away from home for nearly a year, I'm just happy I got even some of the names right!"

Incoherent outburst over, Valentine settled for just glowering at us, and I schooled my expression into a more serious one.
"Dropping the joking, the real explanation is going to be even more taxing on your sanity than what I just did, and I'm not planning to spread it beyond my crew, the leaders of the Masons, and their most trusted allies." I jabbed my thumb towards the last place I'd seen the other captain Supernova. "If Barty wants to tell you, fine. But you of all people should understand discretion; you're still not even using your real name."

Valentine's eyes narrowed briefly. Then, just as quickly, she schooled her expression into a pleasant smile. "Alright, Cross, I can't argue with that. I'll keep what little sanity I've got left and I'll bug Barty if I decide I need to know. Thanks for the chocolate."

And with that, she walked away. I blinked in surprise and glanced at Soundbite, who was even more surprised.

"SHE WAS SINCERE," the snail explained. "They're not usually that understanding."

I shrugged and began making my way back toward the Sunny. "I guess it was gonna happen sooner or later."

While I walked back, though, I caught sight of Bartolomeo himself hobbling onto the deck, his arms mummified in slings, plaster and bandages, while a crescent-shaped barrier behind his shoulders formed an arm of translucent energy at either end.

"Doing alright, Barty?" I asked, coming to a stop as I looked him over.

"Yeah," he grunted, flinching as he accidentally tried to shift his real arms and instead used the left-hand side of his barrier-substitutes to scratch at his jaw. "Probably gonna be using my powers as a literal crutch for a month or two, but nothing I can't handle. Marines back home hit harder than that gilded asshole."

I smiled and nodded proudly. "Good to hear. Thanks for everything; we and the entire East Blue owe you big time."

Bartolomeo's head bowed, shadows from his hair hiding his expression, and I suddenly felt a sinking feeling.

"Yeah... you know, I really couldn't enjoy being right there beside you guys through that mess, because the whole time, I kept thinking about Gambia and the rest of my boys back in Loguetown," he said. "Shiki the Golden Lion... yeah, I think I might even give Gin the credit he's due; I could punch out a dozen of those bastards, and it wouldn't be as satisfying as watching Shiki fall out of the sky."

My eye twitched slightly as a possibility niggled at my mind. "Yeeeaaah, that sentiment isn't going to last five minutes when we hit Sabaody," I muttered.

"But now," Bartolomeo continued, seeming to not hear me. "Now that he's gone, the East Blue is safe, and I'm here... sailing to the end of the first half of the Grand Line with you guys..."

The big lug started trembling and I at first worried he was in pain, but then that feeling from earlier returned, twice as strong, and I simply sighed as I clamped my earphones over my head in resignation. Just in time, too, because a second later the barrier on his back formed two arms that shot up into the sky with hands making horns out of their index and pinky fingers. "THAT WAS SO AWESOME!" he cackled madly, tongue lolling out like the stereotypical rockstar he so resembled. "I got to—And then they were—I was right there with Luffy-senpai! Riding Lindy, and—I helped! My crew, your crew, all of us, side by side, and I got to—YEEEEEEE!
He ran, his limp seemingly forgotten, right to the edge of the railing, his barriers grabbing it as he thrust his head to the horizon. "I can't believe I was actually lucky enough to do that, and now… now I'm sailing alongside you guys right to the end of the first half! It's a dream come true, it's as good as finding the One Piece myself!"

"OK, Captain," Gin cut in, walking over from where he'd been passing orders to some of the club's mooks, a grimace on his face. "I think you might be overreacting a little—"

"LIKE HELL I AM!" Barty shrieked in euphoria. "Just look! The Thousand Sunny is beside us, and so many amazing people with so many amazing talents are onboard! Luffy-senpai and the way he makes friends with anyone! Zoro-senpai and his insane strength! Nami-senpai and her weather witch magic! Usopp-senpai and his sniper skills! Sanji-senpai and his delicious food! Cross-senpai and his plans for everything! Soundbite-senpai and his voice for Lindy!"

I exchanged looks with Soundbite, and going by the weird distortion of sound coming from my shoulder, he had braced himself for what I was planning. A few glances around deck found the upper brass of the Barto Club and Sanji looking at me with deadpan expressions as they moved to protect their ears.

"Merry-senpai and her weird appetite! Chopper-senpai and his dangerous insanity! Vivi-senpai and her new airheadedness! Carue-senpai and his voice! Lassoo-senpai and his loyalty! Oh, Boss-senpai, he's so strong and so disciplined! The TDWS, I wish half my minions were as good as they are! Robin-senpai, she's so mysterious! Conis-senpai is so nice but so dangerous! Funkfreed-senpai is an elephant, a damn elephant! Franky-senpai is such a cool robot! Brook-senpai is a skeleton!"

He trembled once more and his voice nearly doubled in volume.

"I LOVE EVERYTHING ABOUT THE STRAW HAT PIRATES!"

BWAAAAAAAAAH!

"...except for that stupid horn," Bartolomeo growled through clenched teeth.

"Well, I still love it," I said cheekily.

"We know," everyone in earshot growled. Probably not nearly as angry as they would have been if I hadn't given them some actual warning, and especially seeing as this time it wasn't even halfway my fault.

"Though at least it snapped our captain out of his blubbering," Goldenweek mused.

And that, too.

-o-

The world over, people celebrated the downfall of Golden Lion Shiki. It didn't matter if they were prince or pauper, or even Marine or Pirate, the Golden Lion had been an existential threat to all, and now that he was laid low, the world was (relatively) safe once more. Nary a person in the world could be found without celebration.

But just because this was the case for 'the world' did not mean it was the case for those above it. And far above the world, in the hallowed halls of Holy Mariejois, news that had the masses cheering brought only grimness to the faces of the men to whom the world belonged.

"It is bad enough that the Straw Hats were demonizing the Government for the world to see," the
scarred old man groused as he irritably tapped a finger on his cane. "But Shiki's resurgence… we knew from the start that nothing good could come of it."

"We have some consolation that the remnants of his army are under our control, as well as a new Warlord to safeguard that devilish IQ plant," the tallest of them sighed heavily, stroking a hand down his beard. "But that's cold comfort when the Straw Hats have literally saved the world while the entire world bore witness, and the Marines were left powerless."

"Even when the Navy and Government aren't in the crosshairs, the SBS continues to undermine us."

A pause fell in which the other four turned to eye the youngest among them, who was pinching the bridge of his nose in irritation. "To the extent that even I am coming to understand that, reputation be damned, we need the Straw Hats out of the picture for good," he growled impatiently.

"They cannot avoid passing through Sabaody," the sword-wielder stated, tapping his own forehead. "We have roughly a month before they arrive. Defenses are already in place; they shall not make it there alive. We will make sure of it."

"And the Navy will rebuild itself to be stronger than ever. On the note of which…" the prominently mustached member trailed off, unhooking their Transponder Snail's mic and selecting a number.

"Puru puru puru puru! Puru puru puru puru! Puru puru—KA-LICK! What?"

The ambient temperature in the room flatlined as the five men simultaneously levelled glares at the snail. "Would you care to try that again, Sakazuki?" the cane-holder asked in a dead tone of voice.

The snail's eyes widened, and inhaled and exhaled slowly. "My apologies, sirs," he responded with a measure of respect. "My mission is going well. I have three battalions organized and undergoing training in Marine protocols so they can properly coordinate with each other and Marine forces in battle. And I still have over a dozen islands to visit."

"Acceptable progress," the sword-wielder nodded, eyeing a short segment of his blade before slamming the sheath shut with a definitive click! "Maintain it."

"Understood, sirs. KA-LICK!"

-0-

"Puru puru puru puru!"

I was snapped out of my idle wandering by the sudden ringing from my shoulder. I glanced at the caller ID, and then did a double take at the unfamiliar number. My eyes narrowed a bit, and I looked up, finding some satisfaction in seeing my confidants making their way towards me. Or three of them, at least; based on the tone in which Robin had snarled at me when I'd tried to talk to her, I didn't expect to see Vivi for the rest of the day… or week. Hell, I'd be surprised if she let herself stay corporeal for more than a minute at a time!

But anyway, after a moment's thought, I nodded my head towards Barto too, and going by the way his head snapped towards me, the snail had gotten my attention as I wanted. Barto, though, grimaced and indicated his casts with his barrier-limbs, so I decided to cut him a break. I pointed everyone else towards the Sunny's lounge, and we all made our way inside in a… relatively orderly fashion, if you ignored Merry bouncing off Zoro's head as she dropped down from the rafters.

There were a few Club members hanging out in the lounge—
"BEAT IT, BUMS!" Barto's projected voice barked.

—but suffice to say they cleared out real quick.

"Right, I'll be quick," I opened, pointing down at my bag. "Did any of you give out Soundbite's number recently? Because unless Samson is calling, I don't know who this is."

"Oh!" Nami perked up with a smile, her Eisen aura waving happily. "It must be Perona! I left her the number before she left, after she mentioned raising hell together."

There was a brief ripple of surprise from all of us, but no overt shock. Most likely everyone else had been expecting something like this. I definitely was, with a farewell like I'd seen. But…

Before I could voice my thoughts, however, Soundbite beat me to it. "Yeah, well—Puru puru puru puru!—DO I ANSWER OR—Puru puru puru puru!—NOT? She doesn't seem—Puru puru puru puru!—THE TYPE!"

"We'll see. May I?" Nami asked, plucking up the speaker before I could answer. "Bellemere's Tangerine Orchard."

"…Is this Soundbite screwing with me?" a heavily-mascara'd face that could only be Perona's grumbled.

"We're sorry, you seem to be mistaking us FOR A CREW WHERE ANYONE is sane."

"Sorry, Perona, couldn't resist," Nami snickered behind her fist. Then her expression softened into patient concern. "How are you doing?"

"Mmph…" Perona groaned before beaming. "Couldn't be better! The villagers who stayed have accepted me as their new princess, and they're rebuilding the palace, too! They're… really good at building stuff," she added, a slight sweatdrop on her forehead.

"And I have so many wonderful pets… I couldn't be happier." She then frowned in complete seriousness. "Well… unless you had something in mind? It was fun the couple of times I got to share in you guys wreaking havoc. Scary, sure, but fun. So I'd be up for doing it some more if that's what you were offering."

Nami looked at me in askance, but I waved her off. This was her dog and pony show, I wouldn't get in the way of it. Our navigator hesitated briefly, but ultimately she put on a determined face and nodded at Soundbite. "I was. But it's a little more complicated than that. Before I go any further, I'd like to know one thing, Perona: how much do you value freedom?"

The line was silent for a few moments, Perona looking down in thought. And then, when she looked up, her expression was one of passionate purpose.

"The freedom to be who I am without being attacked for it is the whole reason that I couldn't betray you guys," Perona hotly reminded us. Then she smirked. "But if you're talking about freedom from the law, to do whatever you want? Weeel… I'm not about to try harming any civilians, not when I'm in my own personal heaven. But I wouldn't say no to helping knock the Government down a few pegs."

Alright, that was enough for me. "And what about helping to tear it completely apart?" I cut in.

Perona's smirk faded at once, her eyes snapping wide. "…You're serious. There's no way in hell someone like you would joke about something like that."
"Brilliant deduction," I drawled.

"But more than that, you're being serious, and that's never a good sign, you're dangerous enough when you're happy," Perona elaborated, her expression becoming slightly fearful. "I... what exactly are you asking of me?"

"You're already an ally of our crew, Perona," Nami interjected, silencing me with a sidelong look. "We're just wondering if you'd like to take that alliance a little deeper. But it's only if you're willing; if you decide to join, there's no backing out of this."

Silence. Then Perona shook her head. "Why am I surprised...?" she sighed, glancing upward. "You know, even a day ago, I would have told you 'thanks, but no thanks, now don't let the door hit you on the way out'. But... it's thanks to you guys that I've even got a door to slam in the first place..." Perona put on a kindly smile. "Including actual friends. So... what the hell, if you all can put your lives on the line, why can't I? It's the least I can do."

"Shall we, then?" Merry asked, clapping her hands.

"Right," Nami said, her expression and Eisen both taking on stormy qualities. "Here's the basic premise..."

In short order, we gave Perona a brief overview of the Masons and their goals.

"...so yeah," Nami nodded with finality as she finished her explanation. "This is deadly serious. I have to ask again: are you sure about this?"

The only response Perona had to give was a derisive snort. "My life is already on the line if the Government finds out I'm your ally at all. Considering you guys' track record, I'm all for backing the long odds that mean I'll never have to worry about anything threatening my kingdom again. Friends included, of course." She flashed a cocky grin. "Plus, contacts with other pirates and even Marines? That is an offer I can't refuse."

"Good enough for me," I nodded. When everyone else nodded too, Soundbite closed his eyes and concentrated.

"Time to meet the crew. DIALING..."

Soundbite's mug shifted to Tashigi's cool expression. "Pisces."

"Ophiuchus," I returned. "I've got another Rabbit situation."

A short exhale of breath came from the other end. "Why am I surprised? Stand by. KA-LICK!"

"She'll be back in a minute," Merry said. "Meanwhile, might want to start thinking of your codename. Pirates use the Eastern Zodiac; your choices are Rat, Tiger, Horse, Dog, and Pig."

"Hmm... Puru puru puru puru!" Soundbite's contemplative expression flickered back to himself. "Hold that thought, Perona. KA-LICK!"

Aaand hel-lo a scathing glower. "Another Rabbit situation, Cross? Really?"

I chuckled and raised my hands defensively, but luckily I wasn't the one who had to respond.

"To be fair, Capricorn, this one was all on me," Nami said, eyeing me smugly.
alright, *something* about the way she said that bugged me.

"Something you wanna say?" I asked tightly.

Nami's smug look took on a pointed, catty edge. "My one, your three," she singsang. "Watch your back, because I'll catch up soon enough."

I jerked towards her, fingers twitching in my gauntlets. "Alright, listen here—!"

Nami loosed a grim chuckle of her own as her Eisen Tempo started to crackle. "Bring it, you—!"

"Grit your teeth."

"Huh?"/"Wha—?"

**CLONK!**

Nami and I clutched our throbbing foreheads. "*Ooooww...*"

"You done?" Zoro asked impatiently as he dusted his hands off.

"I'm good," Nami groaned.

"Sorry, got caught up," I waved him off, rubbing my aching forehead. "So, who have we got here?"

"Skeleton crew, as you'd expect after the sheer insanity you and Shiki unleashed," Tashigi sighed, most likely mourning all the hours of sleep I'd cost her. "Me, Capricorn and Aquarius are all we have for the Divine."

"And I," Foxy piped in. "Appear to be the only Damned who's free. Most likely because my crew isn't doing anything they can't handle themselves. So, new member, you said?"

"Right on the money, Goat," I nodded. "Our proposed new recruit as been briefed on the basics of the situation. I'll let her speak for herself. If you would?"

"Thank you kindly," Perona preened impishly. "'Ghost Princess' Perona here, former subordinate to Gecko Moria, newly crowned ruler of the sovereign land of Merveille and all of the magnificent beasts that dwell there..." And out of the blue the girl's expression became downright sadistic. "And the newest member of the Seven Warlords of the Sea."

"COME AGAIN?!" demanded half the call, including everyone on our side. Myself included, I'm not ashamed to admit, because *what the high holy hell!?*

Nami was the first of us to recover, and she flashed a victorious grin my way. "HA! First Warlord!"

And that got me out of my own shock as my pride pricked up. "Wanna say that to my—?"

"Do I need to separate you two?" Merry interrupted, though her tone of voice said she was more amused than anything.

I ground my teeth at the smug look Nami was still wearing, but I still had enough self-control to know when to clam it.

"Just in case any of you are dubious, I witnessed her inauguration myself," Tsuru spoke up, her expression the picture of weariness. "She floated up to Garp and Sengoku and made them an offer that they couldn't refuse. And while one in your position would be a welcome addition to our ranks,
Perona..." The Vice Admiral narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "I would like to inquire why you would choose to put your life on the line for a world of freedom."

"I have to go through this again?" Perona groused. "Ugh... fine. I tried leaving the Straw Hats behind in Merveille, but I'd gotten too attached... especially to Nami, maybe the first real friend I've ever had. I was free to be who I wanted to be, and they didn't throw me off when I stowed away; I'd gladly fight for something like that." She paused before shrugging dismissively. "And besides, if the Government found out that I was loyal to the Straw Hats, I'd lose everything anyway; putting it all on the line to make sure I can live in peace forever is enough motivation for me."

"Hm..." Tsuru hummed before glancing up at me. "Ophiuchus. Do you trust her?"

Rubbing my jaw, I turned over the idea. "...a few weeks back, I'd have hesitated," I admitted, throwing up a hand to stop Nami's inevitable protest. "But, after all we've been through... she came back to fight when she had every right to run. I'll back her... although..." I shot a flat look at Nami. "I want to make it clear that when this shit hits the Rabbit-shaped fan, I am not taking the fall. Capiche?"

Nami flinched and nodded. "I'll take the blowback from that powderkeg on the chin, yeah..."

"That will suffice, then," Tsuru nodded. "Let us clarify what is expected of you: once you have properly established yourself, you will be expected to use the influence of your new title to assist us where necessary and possible without raising suspicion. We will also expect Merveille to be available for asylum for our forces when we need it. If this is acceptable, then we welcome you to the New World Masons. Have you chosen a codename?"

"Easily, yes!" Perona perked up eagerly. "Out of what's available, I'm going with the cutest: Puppy."

Silence fell for several seconds.

"We have had to deal with eccentricities before," Hina pointed out. "Hina thinks that tweaking a codename is the least thus far."

"Agreed," the rest of the Divine concurred.

"No problems here!" Foxy agreed, before glancing aside with a glower. "Though I'd sure like to make my name sound better..."

"Great! So, who all am I talking to right... now... huh?"

"What is it?" I asked.

"Sorry, a weird bird just flew past me. It's perching on my tiger-pony."

And then a familiar, suave, infuriating voice came across the connection:

"I'm on another horse."

"...Perona?" I snarled through the crimson haze that had suddenly invaded my mind, not helped by the rest of my co-conspirators looking fit to bust a stitch laughing, most likely at my expression. "Could I trouble you to blow him up?"

"I make things implode, not explode, remember?" she crooned, clearly reading the anger I imagine was all but radiating off of me.
"Perona just kill the fucking bird," I demanded.

Tragically, the laughter that echoed through the room told me that that just wasn't happening today.

-o-

Unsurprisingly, and much to my sanity's regret, Isaiah didn't end up dead. But the rest of the call was honestly pretty uneventful, unless you count the way Perona had seemed rather terrified at learning Tsuru was involved. I also confided a… tastefully edited version of what I saw of her in the story. I couldn't mention Mihawk, after all, or they wouldn't let me get away with not telling them the rest. I managed to jab about Zoro getting lost and ending up on the same island as she did, and that was enough for everyone.

But it was a reminder for me. When the call had ended, I was the first one out of the lounge. I went straight to Luffy and asked to see Ace's Vivre Card. Much to my relief, it was still whole and unburning. One worry still down, but enough left. And there was no way I was going to let those worries go unaddressed even one second longer. As such, I retrieved as much paper as I could carry from the library, then shot back up to my sound room and started writing.

"What's going on, Cross?" Funkfreed asked, looking over my shoulder. Not really that hard a feat, but still.

"I've put this off for too long," I muttered. "I may have stopped the war, but the crew still isn't ready for the New World. There's a plan already made to fix that…"

"Buuuuut..." Lassoo asked slowly, grimacing in anticipation.

I scowled as I ran my fingers through my hair. "But. They aren't going to like it. I can't tell them about it yet. The most I can do is start preparing for it, and I need to get started on that now. Because one way or another…"

I stood up, put the sign I had just finished on the hatch to my room, and settled at my desk as I began writing the first of many letters.

Writing, even as my friends were kept out by the words 'CRITICAL PLANNING IN PROGRESS. DO NOT DISTURB. NO EXCEPTIONS.'


Cross-Brain AN: And that's Strong World done at long last. As a little tidbit for all of you, there will be no more additions to the Straw Hats now that Billy has joined until after the timeskip.

Patient AN: Also, while I'm normally the one responsible for keeping things in character, we owe the faithfulness of the portrayal as Alucard from Hellsing Abridged to one of our most valued fans and one of our translation team, TheATS.

Oh, did we not mention that before? We've extended an offer to some of our loyal fans who are fluent in languages other than English to translate our story into those languages; thus far, we have Spanish and German translations in the works. All members of the translation teams receive backstage passes, and if any patrons happen to join our P-a-t-r-e-o-n that only discovered our story because of the translation, our translators get a cut of anything that they pledge.
Oh, yes, and one more thing: for anyone who doesn't read our Author's Notes, let this be a reason to kick yourself. Our theory on why Shiki never became relevant again in canon is that he never made it back to Impel Down. Not because he drowned, no, that would be far too anticlimactic. No... he crashed down as he did here, but when he regained consciousness, his pride got the better of him, and rather than live with the shame of losing to another rookie—a nobody—from the East Blue, he turned Oto and Kogarashi on himself, and so he met his end. In this story, he lost his blades and was brought into captivity. And we're not ones to let such a notable villain fade into the aether; the Straw Hats haven't seen the last of Shiki...
Chapter 59

Cross-Brain AN: If you haven't been keeping up with the One Piece manga, stop reading this story until you have caught up, because Oda's brilliance must take precedence over ours; we are the fans, he is the master. And Chapter 908 has demonstrated that with particular effectiveness.

And if you have…well, then, you must have noticed that the last several arcs and chapters have been a roller coaster of whams that completely redefined the story over and over again. While we may only dream of being anywhere close to Oda's level of brilliance, we have confidence enough to say this now that we've reached the final saga before our hiatus:

**Buckle up, because from now until we hit the time-skip, it's going to be a wild and crazy ride.**

I honestly don't know why I expected that sign to make any difference in the amount of time I had to plan. I was a Straw Hat sailing the Grand Line for crying out loud. Did I really think that this crew would be able to let me have that kind of peace and quiet for more than a day or two? Indeed, it was halfway through the second day that things came to a head, and I couldn't deny that it was my own fault…

~o~

My sleep-deprived neurons suddenly flared to life, and I stiffened and cast aside the page I was working on as a realization most horrific blared through my mind.

"Son of a BITCH!" I roared, slamming open every pipe I had available. "GUYS!"

"GAH!"/"Holy mother—!"/"What the hell is it, Cross?!" several angry voices demanded.

"I can't believe we've gone this long without thinking about it!" I lamented, admittedly pumping more drama into my voice than was strictly necessary. "We got back one of our crewmates when she had been stolen, we defeated a tyrant who threatened us and almost destroyed our home sea, and we all came out of it in one piece, right?"

"Yeeaaaah?" Goldenweek drew out, the raised eyebrow plainly audible.

"And we all have a clean bill of health, right, Chopper?"

"Aside from Bartolomeo's broken arms and that examination I need to perform on Conis's wings at some point, yeah, but—"

"So, then, let me ask you something: Why haven't we thrown a victory party yet?!"

The following silence was deafening.

I nodded solemnly. "Thought so. Allow me to tender my ultimatum: Our ships had better be festooned with lights and pumping with cheer and music in exactly three seconds, or else we all officially fail at life. GOGOGO!"

My already present grin grew to banana-esque proportions as the ships below us erupted into a
crazed flurry of activity. "Dontcha just love the madness of this crew?" I asked Soundbite.

"THERE IS A SORT OF TIMELESS quality to it, yes," the snail agreed.

"But there's always room for improvement," I grinned, punching another pipe. "Franky, is Gif's rig ready?"

"Eh… about 90%," Franky said distractedly. "Still working on how to balance mobility and cola storage. It's functional, but a full tank will only get you an hour."

"Push it up to two and that'll be enough! Let her rip!" I ordered, grinning.

"You crazy son—ah, make that 'bastard'," Franky amended with an audible chuckle. "Fine, she'll be out in time for the fun."

"Glad to hear it!" I nodded proudly, closing the pipe before smirking at Soundbite. "Sooo, ready to go down and watch the rest of the crew get totally wasted?"

"I'M OFFENDED YOU EVEN ASK!" the achromatic gastropod cackled. "Oooh, do you think someone'll fall overboard? I HOPE WE SEE SOMEONE FALL OVERBOARD!"

-0-

"ALRIGHT! TIME FOR THE USOPP ANTHEM NUMBER ONE-TWO-SEVEN! OOO —WAGH!"

SPASH!

"YAY!" Soundbite cheered ecstatically as the party-goers scrambled to avoid the collapse of Usopp's table-tower. "I did, I DID SEE SOMEONE fall overboard!"

"SHUT THE HELL UP AND HELP ME BACK UP, YOU IDIOTS!" Usopp howled.

"WE'LL GET RIGHT ON IT AS SOON AS WE FIND SOMEONE SOBER TO HELP US!" I assured him before snickering into my cola. "Like that's going to happen anytime soon…"

Yeah, the thing about victory parties? The closer the brush with death, the crazier the rager. And seeing as we'd just walked off the edge of the reaper's scythe, none but the most hardcore non-alcoholics, like myself, could be defined as even 'not sloshed'.

"WOOHOOHOOHOO!" Vivi cackled as she passed me by atop a throne of hands, a cyclone of confetti spinning above her. "YES! BOW TO THE QUEEN OF THE SKIES! HAHAAHA!"

…and even then there were, shall we say, one or two new converts to the bottle. Who I imagined would be sorely regretting their new life choice in the morning, admittedly, but for now, a fun time was a fun time.

"HEY! WILL SOMEONE HELP ALREADY!? I THINK MOHMOO'S STARTING TO RECOGNIZE ME!"

Huh, that could be an interesting sight… bah, he'd been treading water long enough.

I snapped my fingers at Mikey, pointedly not looking as he did who-knows-what to a punch bowl. "Oi, you. Get the longnose out before we need to find some scrub to replace him."
"I'm busy," he deadpanned in response, his flipper's 'middle finger' flashing over his shoulder. His demeanor changed real fast when my fingers clamped down over his skull plate, though.

"That wasn't," I grit out, my shoulder tensing in preparation. "A freaking REQUEST!" The last word was belted out as I hauled off and fastballed the amphibian martial artist.

"YOU DI-HI-HIIIIC—!" SLAM! "GAH!"

Mikey's panicked howl cut out into a pained yelp as he bounced off the mainmast and plummeted into the drink.

"WIMP!" Boss proclaimed, mockingly toasting his fallen apprentice.

"You're one to talk," came a cool young voice. Boss turned around to see Merry with a smile of pure concentrated malice on her face, sitting on one side of a nearby table with a mug in her hand and a second cup opposite hers.

"Our crew has gone through all kinds of hell, and yet they all seem to wimp out when I challenge anyone to my kind of drinking contest," the shipgirl sighed mournfully, punctuating the statement with a deep slurp of her… 'brew', to be polite.

"Yeeeaah…" Boss drew out nervously, a heavy sweatdrop hanging from his shell. "That's because what we chug only kills livers. Yours kills, period."

"Wi~imp," Merry sang right back, shaking her mug.

I was going to snicker at that, but the fire that ignited in Boss's eyes dropped a stone in the pit of my stomach. "Well, when you put it like that—!

he leered, reaching for the free mug's handle.

THUNK! "GWAH!"/"HOLY MOTHER—!"

Only started, mind you, on account of a bonesaw spontaneously burying its blade in said mug's lip.

"In the spirit of the party and what we're celebrating, all I can deliver is a fair warning," Chopper said, strolling up and wrenching the saw free with far too practiced ease. "But what I can promise is the willingness, authority, and capability to sedate the both of you so that you miss the rest of it if you force me to do so."

Boss, eyes wide, slowly backed away from the table while Merry sighed in disappointment. "All work and no play, doc," she whined.

"Your 'play' guarantees more work for me. Deal with it," Chopper retorted before trotting off. Merry and Boss stared after him, making absolutely sure he was gone before chugging their cups.

I sighed and leaned against the nearest mast, though there was a smirk playing across my face. "Ah, moments like these need to be memorialized. Pity that I left my Vision Dial upstairs."

"Don't worry about it, Cross, we've got you covered."

"Eh? What're you—WAH!" I jerked in shock away from Franky. The natural response to something like an RC chopper buzzing in my fa—Waaait, this world's tech base isn't anywhere near that high, how the hell—?

My train of thought skipped a track when I noticed a second fact about the so-called chopper: while the thing did have a fully-functional rotor assembly, it was not helicopter-shaped. Instead, it was
bulbous… and had eyes!?

"GIF!?" Soundbite voiced for me.

"(✧∇✧)"

The vis-snail waved her eye-stalk eagerly, her expression gleeful. Quite logical, of course, seeing as her shell was suspended by an attached rotor that allowed her to hover.

"You two wanted a rig that would let her switch to any angle SUPER fast, right?" a grinning and flexing Franky stated. Gif flitted around him, eyeballing him appreciatively and, if the flashes coming from the corner of her rig were anything to go by, snapping a few shots.

"If Shiki got one thing right, it's that the best way to do that is defying gravity! YEAH-YAH!" The cyborg snapped into his trademark pose, prompting a flurry of orbiting shots from Gif. "AM I THE MOST SUPER SHIPWRIGHT IN THE WORLD OR WHAT!?"

"Meeeh," Soundbite said with an ostentatious and dismissive roll of his eyes, though he never stopped tracking his cousin's rig. "I'M GONNA HAVE TO go with OR WHAT! WHERE'S THE CHARIOT OF THE DIVINE, HUH!?"

*That* snapped Franky back to serious, and he held up a finger and proudly jutted out his chin. "Two reasons! First off… I don't particularly like you. As a crewmate, I trust you with my life, but you're also a raging jackass."

"That's fair," Soundbite conceded.

"(︶ - ︶) " Gif nodded in agreement.

"No argument from me!" I added.

"Though you assholes don't need to agree THAT fast…" Soundbite groused.

"And second!" Franky popped his second finger, along with a smirk. "Look me in the eyes and tell me you want to give Cross an easy way to ditch you."

For a few moments, Soundbite just blinked at Franky. And then…

"YOUR LOGIC IS IRREFUTABLE AND I AM NOT ABOVE ADMITTING MY OWN MISTAKES."

"Right…"

And as for me…

"Hey, wait, don't I get a say in this or—?"

"HEY, EVERYONE!" came a voice from above, neatly directing everyone's attention away from my protest.

"This isn't over…" I grumbled under my breath. "In fact, I think I'll look into getting my own way of flying!"

"With blackjack and hookers?" Soundbite needled.
I could either ignore that, throw it back in his face, ooor just build on it. "Aaaand dragons, don't forget the dragons," I nodded sagely.

"THANK YOU!" Lindy barked from the Cannibal.

"If you want to beat that, you've got your work cut out for you," Merry laughed, pointing up at… Conis standing on the edge of the mainsail's boom!? Oh lordy…

Before anyone could say or do anything, the visibly tipsy angel leaped off the mast and snapped her wings out to full length. Conis closed her eyes and let the wind guide her, and for a time, she just soared peacefully, curving around back toward the ship when she went over the water. It was actually all quite impressive. At least, up until she narrowly missed the main mast's main mass (try saying that three times fast) and wound up flying face-first into the sail like a bird into a window.

"Oooooh."

I joined the general chorus of sympathetic groans as she slowly peeled off the cloth. Seriously, I'd been whipped by that monster in more than one storm, that thing was not as soft as it looked. I tensed to wince again when Conis peeled off enough to start falling to the deck, but that actually turned out to not be necessary.

"Woop! Watch it now!" Ever chided as she swooped in, catching Conis a few scant feet from the deck despite wincing under our gunner's weight. She then gave the other angel a catty grin. "Eesh, careful there, sis! Don't you know better than to drink and fly?"

"First off, allow me to call bullshit on that aque—ach—on zat," Conis slurred through a drunken giggle. "You haven't been flying any longer than me. And second…" She raised her nose with a proud sniff. "Excuuuuuse me for not knowing how to use a body part I haven't had for more than a week."

"And haven't tested yet," Chopper frowned, walking up to her and taking hold of one of her wings. "Though it looks like you got the hang of it pretty quickly…"

"Yep!" Conis chirped, head bobbing in a disturbingly bird-like manner. "It wash a looot of fun! I think I'm really gonna like flying! Weeee!"

The human-Zoan rolled his eyes with a disgruntled huff. "Yeah well, from what I just saw? That's not happening anytime soon." In support of that point, he tugged on her wing. "See, the difference between your wings and Ever's? Ever's are on her arms, with muscles she's been developing her entire life, meaning that they're strong enough to lift and support her weight. Your wings, however, are attached to freshly grown, undeveloped muscles. Nowhere near strong enough to let you fly. Sorry."

Conis blinked blearily as her alcohol-added mind processed the information. Then she turned a tearful gaze on our doctor. "R-Really?"

Panic flashed over Chopper's face at that expression. "Ah, well! In a couple of years, with training and exercise, they'll probably be strong enough. But, uh, for now, like you already saw, you can glide, at least."

"Exschelshior!" she cheered, throwing her arms up.

I exchanged looks with Soundbite, but before anything else could be said, Ever hauled Conis to her feet. "Alright, softie, I'd say you've had about enough. Hey, you two!" The Merveillean snapped her fingers at a pair of her Barto Club men and handed the Skypiean off to them. "Take her to her room,
tuck her in. Got it?"

"Eh?" one of the two grunted in a decidedly disgruntled tone. "And why should we do that, ya rook?"

Ever’s perfectly cordial smile twitched ever so slightly, but shouted voices drowned out whatever she had been going to say.

"AND I'M TELLING YOU, IT'S GIF! GUH!"

"THAT DON'T MAKE NO SENSE, YA SCRUM! TOTALLY GOES AGAINST ALL GRAMMATICAL WHOSITS! IT'S! PRONOUNCED JIF! JUH!"

"BARNACLE-BRAINED BUFFOON!"

"SEAWEED-SUCKING SHITEBIRD!"

More specifically, a rapidly-devolving argument between a nearby pair of mooks, snarling in one another's faces over—

"Are… they arguing about how to pronounce Gif's name?" Franky asked incredulously.

"∑(O_O ; )" the heli-snail in question boggled, just as incredulously.

"WE AIN'T TALKIN' 'BOUT A CAN OF PEANUT BUTTER HERE!" the first mook shouted.

My eyes narrowed as I connected the dots, looking to the increasingly bemused people surrounding me and the snail on my shoulder, who was visibly fighting the urge to burst out laughing. "You little shit."

And that was the limit. "HOOHOOHOOHHEEHEEHEE!" Soundbite roared, not even trying to deny his culpability. "THROUGH ME, THE ARGUMENT IS IMMO-O-ORTAL! HAHAAHAAA!"

"Ooooh, not as immortal as all that," Ever countered.

SLAM!

Right as she slammed the mooks' skulls together, sending them on an express vacation to dreamland. "See? It just died." She then turned to the first pair, having yet to lose her sunny disposition. "Sorry, got distracted. What were you saying, boys?"

"Right away, Miss Ever!" they yelped, grabbing Conis and making tracks for the female Straw Hats' room.

Ever nodded in satisfaction, and after a glance towards Sanji to find him staring a hole through the two—and more importantly, that they noticed the attention—she relaxed and turned back to… scanning the party?

"Keeping an eye on things?" I inquired.

"Mm, what can I say, old habits die hard," she mused, her eyes continuing their search. "Shiki was an ass and I sure as hell didn't like being eye-candy in his bar, but damn if it wasn't the best place to learn how to handle a rowdy crowd. I'm just making sure that nothing… oh damn it," she cursed out of the blue, stalking away.

I followed the direction she'd been looking and promptly winced in understanding. After all, I
doubted there were many things more concerning than the sight of a buzzed dragon making his way
toward the casks from which the lifeblood of the party—read: the booze—was flowing. "Ooooh
boy," I groaned.

"She 'gon get EAAATEEEN," Soundbite sang before glancing up at Gif. "GET A GOOD SHOT of
the gore, wouldya?"

"( --o)" she whimpered, visibly nowhere near as eager as her cousin.

"He's joking, Gif," Franky snorted. "Just watch." That said, I didn't miss the slight click that came
from his wrist.

Reluctantly, she watched, as did the rest of us, as Ever swooped to interpose herself between the
dragon and the cask, both her stance and demeanor making her intentions very clear. Lindy regarded
her with a chuff as he drew nearer. "Move it, chicken wings. I've already had my fill of fresh meat,
let daddy drink his medicine in peace."

"Yeeaaaah," Ever drawled, giving the dragon's wobbly stance a dry once-over. "Thing is? I'm pretty
sure you've had enough 'medicine' for a week straight, and the last thing any of us needs is to find
out what happens when you go nuts pouring more fuel on your sparking fire. I'm cutting you off.
Now go back to your quarters and sleep it off. Now."

Lindwyrm blinked, once, twice, before busting out into a deck-shaking chortle. "Oh, oh this is rich!
The cute little birdy's standing up to the big bad dragon? Such a classic storyline, almost cliché
even!" Then, just as swiftly, the dragon's good cheer died and he gave the Merveillean a flat glare.
"Get out of my way before I make you an appetizer."

"Hmm…" Ever made a show of tilting her head in thought, finger on her chin. "Let me think about
that. No." And before the dragon could appropriately react, Ever flapped her wings to vertically spin
in place and crack an ax-kick down on Lindy's snout.

For a second, both of them stood there, frozen, and then they both recoiled, howling in pain.

"You rotted oversized lizard!" Ever bit off, hopping on one foot and clutching the other.

Lindy's howl was more of a wordless snarl, talons clawing at the bruised scales of his snout. Still, he
recovered first, spinning in a horizontal manner so that he could try and swat Ever with his tail.
Thankfully for her, the rookie pirate had already recovered enough to flap—and thus flip—over the
limb.

The victory was short-lived though, a massive reptilian claw batting her to the deck. Before she
could recover, the beast rolled her aside with a thrust of his claws, turning eagerly back toward the
casks—and then recoiling at the newcomer standing in his way.

"Well, haven't you made quite the scene," Apis bit out, her fingers drumming on her crossed
forearms.

"Uhhh," Lindy dragged out, sobering up very fast. "III can explain?"

"Roost," the whisper-girl all but snarled. "Before I scale your sorry hide. NOW."

"…doing-this-because-I-want-to-not-because-you-told-me-to!" And with that brave blurt, Lindy
leaped back onto the Cannibal and all but clawed his way through the largest hatch.

"Aaagh…" Ever ground out, trying to knead the throb from her forehead as she got back to her feet.
"Remind me again, exactly what it is that makes him listen to you so easily? I thought your power was talking to animals, not controlling them."

"My power is reading their minds and letting them read mine when I allow it," Apis corrected, pinching the bridge of her nose. "From there… just use your imagination."

"Egh, whatever," Ever nodded, casting a glance at the barrels. "At least I managed to save the booze."

"You've managed a hell of a lot more than that."

Ever blinked in shock as she suddenly found an arm slung around her shoulder. "Wha—huh?" she very intelligently said, she and Apis both turn to their smirking captain.

"Care to explain what you were doing butting heads with half the crew?" the infamous Black Bart snidely inquired.

Ever swallowed and self-consciously shrank into herself. "Ah… just making sure the party stays on the up and up, captain? Not letting jerks ruin everyone else's fun and… all that?"

"Hmm… and you think that you have a better grip on 'fun' than the rest of us? A little brawl here and there is pretty common for us—" Bartolomeo continued.

"And for other crews like yours, but I know the difference," Ever insisted.

Bartolomeo kept staring at her with that trolling smirk for what seemed an eternity. Then his smile widened and became more genuine.

"That settles it, then! From now on, you're our MC!"

"I… uh… what?" was Ever's very intelligent response.

"You know how to keep the party at the right level and you're a decent match for almost everyone on this crew," Barty elaborated. "Coolheaded and wild parties don't often mix, but you've got it down. So you'll be our Mistress of Ceremonies, in charge of knocking heads when there are heads to be knocked. Got a problem with that?"

I could see the gears churning in Ever's head, and it wasn't long before she gave a small, sly smile and a nod. "Nothing I'm not used to already, Captain."

"Then let's hear it for our new MC!" Barty cheered, shaking Apis and Ever's shoulders as the crew responded in kind. When the cheering died down, the captain turned back to the newly promoted officer, his grin suddenly far more rictus-like in nature. "Now, how about getting me the strongest stuff that we've got?"

Ever's expression flattened. "I saw you chugging your vodka earlier and I can smell your breath, I'm not going to make you an exception just because you're—"

"I just used my real arms instead of my barriers to grab you and Apis," Bartolomeo ground out, his held expression not twitching an inch.

"…one bottle, and then you're seeing the Straw Hats' doctor again."

"I will not be GENTLE!" Chopper called out, emphasizing the declaration by snapping a length of gauze taut.
Ever rolled her eyes fondly as her captain cowered, reveling in her newfound power. And then her newfound responsibility suddenly reared its head—

"HEY, THOSE ARE MY CHIPS!" *SMASH!*

"HANDS OFF MY HAT, ASSWIPE!" *CRUNCH!*

"HOW DARE YOU RIP OFF MY HAIRCUT!?" *KEE-RASH!*

—in the form of three fights started almost on top of one another.

The Merveillean's eye twitched viciously at the sight. "Right, no way in hell am I dealing with this alone. HEY, PERVERTED SKELETON!" she belted out.

"You called?" Brook answered without hesitation, looking up from his piano.

"You know any slow, relaxing songs that can cool these idiots' raging adrenaline?" Ever asked.

Brook tilted his skull in thought and promptly nodded with a grin—er, with his mandible tilting into a grin besides the natural one his skull always had. "I have *just* the piece!"

Predictably, his ivory fingers tickled the ivory keys to ring out the familiar opening chords of Binks' Brew. Equally predictably, the thugs stopped fighting before Ever could even consider berating Brook for his taste in music.

"Hey, guys! Let's put Shiki's gift to better use!"

All attention turned to Luffy, who was holding up the yellow Tone Dial that still contained Nami's farewell. Or at least, it *once* did, before Luffy erased it with a double-click of the Dial's button and tossed it over to the musician. "Take it away, Brook!"

"YOHOHO!" Brook cackled victoriously, reaching up to catch the Dial. "A NEW SONG, BORN OF A NEW GENERATION! ALL TOGETHER NOW!"

And it was slow and clunky in coming about, and most *definitely* beyond off-key for the first few verses of its performance… but in the end?

"~YO-HO-HO-HO, YO-HO-HO-HOOO!~"

It was a song that shook the very waters around us.

~0~

…Yeah, it was a fantastic party, stretching on into the night. But as obligatory as the celebration was, it delayed my planning for a while yet after it ended.

See, at some point in the party, the crew had asked me if I really needed all hours of the day to plan with our destination still a few weeks away. When I grudgingly responded in the negative, I no longer had sufficient reason to excuse myself from meals, training, or fighting off the Grand Line's storms. Nor, more blatantly, did I have any reason to put off the debut of the new SBS and let the world share in a whole new level of insanity.

After all, the Straw Hat Pirates and the Barto Club were still sailing amicably with each other.

…Well, as amicably as the most insane crew of their generation and their most fanatic fan and his crew could sail. The antics between the two crews were nutty enough on their own, but with the two
of them sailing near enough that anyone with sufficiently superhuman strength—read, almost all of them—could leap from deck to deck on a whim, it had taken things to a new level. The new developments from Merveille still sinking in were the cherry on top.

I think the worst of the antics may have been when we discovered what happens when you multiply a moron by an even bigger moron…

-o-

"WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING STEALING MY FOOD, YOU DAMN BRAT?!!"

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!

"FU**ING HELL! DUCK!"

KRA-BOOM!

Despite it being the middle of the night, I couldn't just turn over and pretend that that much noise was just a dream. In short order, I was shuffling down to the kitchen. I wondered for a moment why I was able to walk inside so easily, without even opening the door myself. Then I realized that a wall had been blown out.

I gave no regard to this as I filled a mug of cola for myself and walked out. I didn't get very far before the sight of Luffy and Barty being chased by Merry, Franky, and Usopp stopped me in my tracks.

"What."

"Luffy found the camera obscura of Garp in the fake fridge. Bartolomeo, meanwhile, blew out the wall."

I glanced at my dark-haired sister beside me, who had an empty mug in her hand. I looked back at the chase, down to her mug, and then to my mug. Then I set my mug down on the nearest counter.

"I am too tired to properly enjoy this, cola boost or no cola boost. I'm going back to bed."

"I don't blame you in the least, Cross."

-o-

But of course, even that paled in comparison to what we shared with the rest of the world. With the new visual component to the SBS courtesy of our one-snail camera crew, we were getting more calls and coverage than ever before.

Vivi and Robin's ongoing feud—the origin of which Soundbite naturally blasted to the world—was no small source of comic relief, even more than the typical antics. But more blatantly, we had the capability now for visual programs like cooking shows with Sanji and Valentine, medical discussions with Chopper, and workouts with Zoro, which were nice, sane ways of sharing good information with the rest of the world that would help improve our PR even more.

…If you thought that I wasn't being sarcastic when I said 'sane' there, shame on you. Between a female co-host that always wanted to do desserts and Sanji keeping his face masked by esoteric cooking gear—giving the excuse that he wasn't going to take the risk of Gif having found a way to superimpose his wanted poster's face (not an unfair accusation, the vis-snail was definitely looking
into it)—the cooking shows had a healthy bit of insanity in them. Chopper's medical discussions *would* have been sane if he didn't have the tendency to slip into Spark mode every now and then, which was a funny sort of scary, and always necessitated someone on hand to 'bring him to his senses', as it were, before he did anything 'untowards' on camera.

Out of everything we were showing, however? The most 'popular' program we were putting on was the absolute *last* one I wanted to be showing.

-o-

I let out a tired groan as I craned my neck back, staring up at the crow's nest I unfortunately *knew* Gif to be in. "Remind me again why the high holy hee-haw I'm introducing what I'm pretty sure qualifies as *frickin' softcore video pornography* to the world? Let alone focusing it on the bloodthirsty beast who's got all the sex drive of his *frickin' swords*?!

I did not know, nor did I have any desire to know, exactly what Gif was broadcasting to the world. But I could imagine. And believe you me, that was bad enough.

"Two reasons," Vivi primly informed me as she settled in on the couch that had been set up in front of the Barto Club's own broadcast-snail, taking in the display on the screen I was *refusing* to look at.

I slapped a hand to my face. "Why do I feel like both of them will make me regret asking?" I groaned between my fingers.

"First," Vivi explained, her gaze never leaving the screen. "Zoro's one of the stronger members of the crew, so broadcasting his exercise routine will be sure to benefit others seeking such strength, and intimidate our enemies by showing just how out of their league he is."

I parted my fingers ever so slightly to actually *look* at Vivi. "Acceptable… meaning that number two's the problem. What is it?"

"Oh, that's easy!" Conis grinned brightly from her own place on the couch. "The second is that Zoro is… ah, what's the word…" She tilted her head thoughtfully before snapping her fingers. "Ah yes, he's 'ripped' and women the world over will tune in religiously to catch even a glimpse of his sweat-soaked abdominals." She glanced at the feed. "As will other swordsmen around the world who will decide to step up their training to stand any chance against him."

I shut my fingers and clawed my hands down my face. "Yeeaaah, there's both the regret that I was expecting *and* the reason why that moron accepted this in the first place…" I glanced skyward miserably. "Remind me, how could this get any worse?"

"DOT DOT DOT DOT!" Soundbite suddenly blared, shooting the bastard child of a grimace and a smirk at me. "Ask and ye shall *receive.*"

I *knew* I was going to regret this, but…

I gingerly picked up the transceiver mic as though it were diseased. "Yes?" I queried.

"*Uh, so, ah, do you think you could tell your first mate about how olive oil, like, helps develop—!*"

CL-SLAM! I don't know what rattled my transceiver first, the mic slamming back into its cradle or the finger I almost broke against the blacklist button.

"Oh, yeah, now I remember!" I grit out through my twitching smile. "It can get *worse* by how I've had to *blacklist half of my female viewership at this point! That's how it can get worse!*"
"I still say you're overreacting," Robin mused, idly glancing up from the book she was reading from a lawn chair that was a little too close to the 'show' for comfort. "It's not as though they were the two who accidentally dialed their snail while they were, shall we say—"

"I KNOW WHAT THEY WERE DOING!" I snarled. "And for the record. First, I maintain that it's Soundbite's fault for inspiring their snail to act on its own and connect them—!"

"CAVEAT EMPTOR, BITCH!"

"That means 'buyer's remorse'."

"WHATEVER!"

"And second," I ground out. "I maintain that I don't want to inspire that kind of passion in my viewers, and the, to reiterate—" I shook my finger as I pointed at the crow's nest. "Softcore video pornography that I am inventing against my will is not helping!"

"Whatever, dweeb," Nami scoffed as she passed by me and plopped herself down on the couch. She then cocked an eyebrow in a thoughtful way I did not like. "And, uh, just a thought… you think he'd actually go for that olive oil thing or…?"

"That's it. I never thought I'd find a line, but apparently watching porn on the deck in broad daylight is it. People of the world, I wash my hands of this affair; do not blame me for it. I'm out," I declared without remorse, turning around and marching off in defeat. The only thing I took comfort in was the fact that I wasn't alone in my suffering, as a certain smoke Logia was most definitely going to have his hands full keeping a certain someone else from calling in about this.

-o-

The new captain of the Big Top watched with a carefully neutral expression as Luffy's first mate strained against his weights. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the chief of staff making his way toward the snail, a scowl on his face. Making a decision, she slid out of her chair and over to him, her frictionless skin allowing her to close the distance faster than anyone on board.

Without missing a beat, she wrapped her arms around him, threw him against the nearest wall and slid back into her previous position. All in one fluid, seconds-long motion.

"I want to watch," she said plainly to the incredulous glares shot her way.

Cabaji groaned. Though whether due to exasperation or his budding concussion, none could say.

-o-

'Well, now, it's no wonder that he beat Mr. 1', Bentham mused, watching the sweating swordsman with respect. While the specific goals and exercises were different, he knew well the torturous tedium that one had to endure in order to forge the body into a true fighting machine. He was no slouch in physical strength, but his focus had been on dexterity, flexibility, and speed. It hurt just watching Zoro lift those weights.

"Goodness," Inazuma breathed, half-consciously running her (for the moment) hands along her arms. "The last time I saw someone lifting that much, they were under an overdose of adrenaline hormones."

"Yes, and neither that nor our efforts to remove the resulting stains from the palace drapes ended well, as I'm sure you recall," Ivankov simpered as he (at the moment) tapped his fingers on the arm
of his makeshift throne. "It's quite rare to see anyone willing and able to go to such lengths in the present day. Or rather, it's rare to see their process."

Bentham glanced back at the okama queen, the latter's expression thoughtful. "Hmm… Inazuma, do you think you could fashion us some decent weights out of the stone?"

"Easily, my queen, I'll get to it as soon as the SBS is over," Inazuma nodded, her attention never straying from the broadcast. The reason why became particularly evident when she licked her lips. "My my, just look at them. So well-polished…"

The former Mr. 2 sprouted his own salacious grin. "Indeed, aren't they just—!

"I wonder what kind of whetstone he uses?"

Aaand just like that the mimic's million expressions all fell flat at once. "…you're talking about his swords. Because of course you are."

"Hmph!" the Scissor… person raised their nose in a prim sniff, taking a sip from their ever-present wine glass. "Philistine! I hardly imagine that I'm the only one doing it."

-Cross had certain expectations about how Lieutenant Junior Grade Tashigi would react to the broadcast. Several scenarios played out in his mind, and while the one that was actually happening was one he had considered, it was not one that he honestly expected to happen in this lifetime. Rather, the expectations he put most weight in involved screams of unholy rage, fire, and brimstone.

Allies though they may have been in purpose, Tashigi had never gotten over the way Zoro beat her in Loguetown and learning the reason behind it had only stirred her to push her skills ever-harder. And no matter how much she wanted to deny it, she knew that his methods yielded the results she wanted, so now the blue-haired Marine was rather mindlessly mirroring the Pirate Hunter's workout to the best of her ability with the resources available on Smoker's ship.

And this included being naked from the waist up.

…Well, not completely. There was just a bit of a difference between men and women in this regard. However, she was down to her tight, midriff-baring sports bra, which was about 80% more skin than she'd ever shown on board. Skin that was, also in imitation of her Straw Hat counterpart, now glistening with sweat.

Needless to say, the otherwise-male crew of the Marine ship was very appreciative of this fact, and many had resolved to buy Roronoa Zoro and Jeremiah Cross all the drinks they could ever want, first chance they got.

Those poor, foolish Marines. And not just regarding the negative relationship between the Pirate Hunter's iron liver and their drinking funds.

"Ahem."

The sailors all stiffened as a deep, growly voice announced its presence.

Those poor, foolish Marines had, in their folly, just so happened to forget that their captain preferred his XO above all of the jarheads he had under his command. Combined.

"We can explain?" a hopeful petty officer tried.
Smoker murdered said hope with an excess of sadistic authority and without a hint of remorse. "You can run. Which, frankly, is more than you deserve. Now move."

For all that the Marines were marginally suicidally stupid, they weren't completely suicidal, nor stupid.

Within a minute only one being on the ship aside from Smoker was still watching Tashigi, and Smoker paid no heed to it in favor of musing on the best punishments to offer his men; this watcher, he knew, had no perverse interests.

The creature in question, situated beside her, had taken one look at the sight on the monitors and any doubts about the prudence of joining Smoker died. His purpose further settled in his mind, he had secured a few weights to his hammer and was mirroring the two swordsmen.

Smoker nodded in satisfaction and turned to make good on his promise when a detail of the scene suddenly leaped to mind. He gave it another look and nearly bit clean through his cigar.

"Is she using my jutte as a bar?!" the commodore snarled to himself, trying his damnedest to deny what his eyes were telling him.

But he couldn't... and indeed she was....

For a few seconds more, he just stared, the sight so dumbfounding that he wasn't quite sure what to make of it. Tashigi finally noticed his presence during those seconds, sparing him a glance before returning to her workout.

Then she got another look at him and recoiled in mortal terror. "A-Ah! C-C-Com-Commodore, I can e-e-explain!"

Smoker pinched the bridge of his nose, finally coming to a decision. "It can wait until the end of your set. But not a rep more, understood?"

Tashigi swallowed, fighting the urge to smile in relief. "Y-Yes, sir!"

The wolf-rabbit at the officer's side gave her a flat look and flashed an unflattering sign with his paw.

"You're right, Popora!" Tashigi nodded confidently. "We're lucky for now, but we should still finish! Let's get right back to it!"

Popora blinked, then glared at the spectacles Tashigi had abandoned nearby, one paw dragging down his muzzle in exasperation.

-o-

But even through all of the positive and negative insanity, I took every opportunity I could to plan. Before long, I had everything that I needed for what was to occur on Sabaody, as far as I could recall the details. Which... wasn't as good as I might have liked, but it was enough.

...Meaning that I couldn't put off telling my confidants anymore.

And so it was that two weeks after the fall of Merveille, I lay awake until the moment that Soundbite confirmed that everyone else was asleep. I descended from the crow's nest with all the silence Soundbite could give me and made my way through the depths of the ship. As I reached my destination, I turned to my partner.
"Cottonmouth, Copperhead, Sidewinder, Callie…" I paused, biting my lip before nodding firmly. "Black Mamba." Soundbite boggled at me but nodded. "Come to the aquarium lounge. Do not let anyone else see you leaving."

I settled down on a seemingly random cushion, though I didn't really need to wait that long. Merry emerged from one of her secret passageways about a minute later, and the other four entered shortly afterward, though Robin's presence was surprising to all of them. Herself included.

"May I ask why you're suddenly including me, Cross?" she queried. And while it appeared that she was her usual debonair self, I could see that hint of nerves in her posture.

And unfortunately, my dead serious expression prompted her to let that 'hint' be broadcast to everyone else. "Because you've got the brains and discretion for it, and because you've been eavesdropping on us anyway since day one."

"…I don't know what you mean," she responded. Everyone turned to face her, and I found myself unnerved by just how sincere she appeared. But that wasn't possible, she had to have been listening in, who else could have—

My eyes narrowed and my hand clamped onto my face. "Oh, that complete and everloving jackass. Are you seriously telling me that you weren't eavesdropping on any of our calls?"

And then her sincere confusion vanished, a smile appearing in its place. "No, I was just lying. Of course I was listening in," she said pleasantly.

WHAM!

Robin chuckled as we picked ourselves up from the group face fault, and she gave me a warm smile."I just thought you might appreciate someone lightening the mood."

I blinked in befuddlement. Then, finally, I managed to crack a smile, albeit a shaky one. "Yeah… and I appreciate it, Robin. I needed that." My smile then faded as it had appeared. "But unfortunately, it can't be too light for something like this. Merry, open the…" I grimaced slightly before forcing myself to say the dreaded words that I would see dead some day, so help me Roger! "'Secret planning room of secret secrecy.'"

The effect was immediate: the section of sofa sank into the floor. At the same time, the aquarium wall behind it slowly split apart, the water relocating to the vacant space at the top of the tank. And in the opening left behind was a staircase, hidden beneath the opaque glass that made up the tank's floor.

Robin cocked a brow at the display. "Well, that's certainly cloak and dagger. And seeing as my last employer had an underwater lair hidden below his casino, I should know. How did you arrange this little hideaway?"

"Slipped Merry the request back on Water 7, she arranged the empty space and mechanisms when Franky wasn't watching," I explained, shrugging. "Franky's probably already figured out something’s down here, but he hasn't brought it up yet, so meh. Anyway…” I indicated the stairs, prompting everyone to start walking down them.

At the bottom, we found ourselves in a wide room with mirrors on all sides, as well as four tables; they and their chairs had a futuristic metallic sheen and, at the same time, a plush look to the
cushions. Two of the tables had twelve chairs, each one marked with a sign of the Eastern or Western Zodiac. The third table was plain with several unmarked chairs around it.

My confidants and I headed for the last one, placed at the head of the room. Each had a plaque imbuéd with a jolly roger specific to the crew member as well as a picture of a serpent. The five of them took the seats appropriate to them, and I sat in the chair at the head of the table.

The way back up had already sealed itself behind us, and now skylights opened around the room, allowing moonlight shining into the aquarium and silver-shrouded Lamp Dials to provide light. The entire room was heavily reinforced and soundproofed to hell and back; not even Soundbite could hear anything from the outside in, and vice-versa.

Nami glanced around at the Zodiac-emblazoned tables. "Expecting company? Fair warning, I doubt Ox will be able to fit in their seats."

"Plans have been in the works for a while, and now that Gif is aboard, we can implement them," Merry piped up, her legs swinging off the edge of her seat. "She, Soundbite, and I have been looking over the Transceiver in our spare time. We're hoping we can get two-way video and fill the seats with images of our partners in rebellion. It'll probably still take awhile, but worth it, neh?"

"...Alright, even I have to admit that that's impressive," Robin said, running a hand over the glass.

Zoro nodded, then grunted, casting a disgruntled look around the room. "Same here, but only if this place has a—"

Merry offhandedly knocked her knuckles on the table, and a compartment popped open in front of the swordsman. A bottle-filled compartment.

The green-haired monster grinned eagerly as he fished out a sake jug and took a hit. "Like I said, same here."

A sigh wafted up from Nami, who also shook her head. "Honestly, do you really think this is the best—?"

"Actually."

Everyone looked over at me, and I can't imagine that I was the most reassuring of figures, what with my fingers being folded before my mouth and everything.

"You're all going to want some to process what I'm about to tell you," I solemnly informed them. "There's only one reason that I haven't argued harder against Merry's name for this place, and that's that any conversation that justifies us using this room is going to be too serious to even consider laughing about it."

My co-conspirators all stiffened at that little tidbit, and everyone else joined Zoro in acquiring their own bottles of liquid courage. Well, Nami and Robin did, anyway. An autonomous hand slapped down Merry's attempt at the liquor, but though she groused and scowled, she contented herself with a mug of pitch she pulled from her hold.

Once everyone was settled with their poison of choice, I heaved a tired sigh.

"As you all know, we are coming to the end of the first half of the Grand Line. And I will be perfectly frank with all of you." I glanced between them, staring each person dead in the eye, one after another. "The difficulty spike from Paradise to the New World is as steep as the 20,000-meter journey to and from Fishman Island." I closed my eyes mournfully. "You want the cold, hard truth,
here it is: we are not ready."

I preemptively raised my hand to silence the protests that I knew were coming, but thankfully, for once, that wasn’t necessary.

Not because they didn’t try to say something, mind you, but because before they could open their mouths, said mouths were clamped shut by the hands that sprouted from their shoulders.

"If any of you bite me, I will tie your tongues in knots," Robin warned them all before giving me a solemn nod. "Continue."

I nodded in gratitude before looking around at all of them again, my expression sorrowful. "I don’t like this any more than you do, but you know that I know what I’m talking about."

My eyes drifted to our navigator. "Nami, do you know how to navigate in the New World?" I asked.

Nami glanced at Robin, and once her mouth was free, her brow furrowed in thought. "I… my gut instinct is to just go at it like we usually do, but since you’re asking, I assume you have something different in mind?"

I leaned forward, my gaze unblinking. "Were you aware, I droned tonelessly. "That in the New World, the magnetic poles of islands can spontaneously shift, thus necessitating that all ships carry special, tri-needle log poses?"

The blood draining from her face was answer enough. "B-But, but that would mean…" she choked, staring wide-eyed at the table.

I left her to stew in her thoughts as I looked to our resident Logia.

"Vivi, you may have gotten a reality check from Robin. But people in the New World who can hurt a Logia without sea prism stone are everywhere. I wasn't kidding when I said that Eneru would have been chickenshit down here; even an Emperor's flunkie could swat him like a fly. How many seconds do you think you could last?"

Vivi flinched, biting her thumb, and I moved on.

"Merry, if your life depended on it, would you be able to fight off one of the leviathans that tried to crush us at Enies?"

A restrained snarl and the table suddenly creaking were answer enough to that.

"And you, Zoro…" I made my eyes as pitying as possible, explicitly because I knew it would piss him off. "Do you honestly think that as you are now, you stand even the slightest chance of walking away from another clash with Mihawk?"

That last one was the most unpleasant since I swear he was trying to cut me with his glare alone. But as unpleasant as it was, it was enough, and everyone sat back to reflect in either anger or worry.

"To repeat, we are not ready for the New World," I stated. "We all have different talents that we need to refine and awaken before we stand a chance of lasting five minutes in that place. And doing so will not be fast or easy, nor will it be possible for us to accomplish this like we've conquered all other challenges before: together, as a crew."

At those words, the air of the room froze over despite the intensity of the gazes directed my way. And it said a lot that Robin was staring in just as much cold shock as the rest of them. Silence
reigned for a good minute, and ultimately, I broke it myself.

"I'm overdue in saying this, but here are the cold facts: Bartholomew Kuma is an executive of the Revolutionary Army. I don't know exactly what Dragon's plan is with him, that was yet to be revealed, but I do know that his Pacifista upgrades are nearly complete." I closed my eyes in tired regret. "And before they are completed, he'll ask Vegapunk to grant him one last act of free will. The act he will perform before the final surgery strips away his humanity will be to meet our crew on Sabaody Archipelago…" I spread my hands helplessly. "And use his powers to scatter us all over the world."

I paused for a second, letting everyone chew on that before continuing. "Each of us will end up in the single best place for us to refine our respective skill sets, but the process will not be fast. The Straw Hat Pirates will need to disband for two years' time before we begin the final half of our journey."

There was a minute or so of shocked silence, and then…

"What the hell, Cross!?" Nami demanded, shooting to her feet and slamming her palms on the table. "Why are you only just telling us this now!? And if you give us that 'spoilers' bullshit, I swear to high heaven—!"

"For this exact reason," I coldly shot back, stopping her tirade in its tracks. "Because I knew that bringing up something like this would incense you, or anyone else on this crew who heard it, and you wouldn't even consider thinking straight about these things. You've just forgotten everything that I just told you: We. Need. This training. Without it, we will die."

"C-Cross… come on, you screwed fate when you saved me, can't you do it again now—?" Merry asked pleadingly.

"In the story," I said. "The first threat the Straw Hats had to face after their hiatus was another Shiki-grade maniac, complete with armies, monsters, and xenocidal ambitions. And for all that…" Red eyes swam through my head, and my expression darkened. "That monster is as dumb as a rock compared to Shiki, he trumps him by packing an army bigger than any we've faced before. And despite the fact that the ten Straw Hats in the story completely and utterly curb-stomped that army, they still came within seconds of being creamed by something that would have wiped out the island." I stood up and leaned forward, matching Nami's glare with one of my own. "Do you really want to mess around with something like that, Nami? Want to risk the fate of an entire species on pride? Arrogance, even?!!"

Nami's expression twitched, ever so slightly, and I pounced on the weakness.

"Let me make this real simple for you all: When we arrive in the Ryugu Kingdom, a metric ton of whoopass is going to be unleashed. Make no mistake, that island is destined to host a major curb-stomp." I dropped into my seat with a heavy sigh. "The only question is whether we'll be the ones delivering it… or receiving it. Because trust me, that's what our preparations will decide. And for the record? While matters might, might be ambiguous on Fishman Island, that's just the front porch of the New World. One island in and we'd run face first into an unbeatable foe. A Logia, with no weaknesses and no openings. If we don't fall to the fangs waiting on Ryugu…" I shook my head in despair. "Then we will disappear into the miasma of Punk Hazard. Of this, I am positive."

Nami sank back into her seat, emotions swirling on her face like storm clouds. The rest of the crew was in similar condition, but also eyeing me expectantly.

"Here's another fact for you: My knowledge isn't going to last much longer." That got everyone's
attention but good. "Once everyone gets blasted across the world, until we regroup I am blind. Whatever everyone found, however they found it, they found it themselves. I don't know what happened over those two years any more than I know what happened in the blind periods between islands. Meaning that I can't help you all become stronger anymore. Or at least, I can't help you become anywhere near as strong as you would be on your own."

At that point, faced with everyone's worried expressions, all the energy drained out of my body, leaving me slumped in my chair, one hand sweeping up my forehead. "Make no mistake, I hate that this is what we need to do, but the only way we're going to maximize our potential is with Kuma's help, and we only get one chance to take it. And between my knowledge running out and the effects of the SBS continuing over the next two years even if I don't run a single broadcast, we can't afford anything less than the maximum potential. And not just for our sakes..." I bit my lip. "And... I think you all know that. Have to know it, at this point. Don't you?"

Every last one of them looked down or away. I don't know how long we sat there in complete silence, reflecting on my words. And then the silence finally broke in the worst way possible: with a whimper that I hadn't heard since the aftermath of Enies.

"C-Cross..."

All eyes turned to Merry, who was staring at me with watery eyes. And it was plain to see that it was no act this time; she was horrified to the point of tears.

"I... I don't think I can handle it," she gasped, seeming on the verge of a panic attack. In seconds, the rest of us were holding her in our arms.

"Merry—!" I started weakly, but she cut me off with a frantic, tearful shake of her head.

"Two years... a-alone... without any of you..." she sobbed, hiccuping miserably. "I-It'll be... I-like I sank... w-without anyone else, I-I might as well be... m-might as well—!"

I grimaced, wracking my brain for something to say, but thankfully, someone else beat me to it.

"You're wrong."

Merry blinked, staring at Vivi in bleary despair. "B-But—!"

"Yes. You. Are," the princess emphasized, kneeling down in front of the shipgirl. "Merry. Everything about you is a composite of us, right? Small bits, small pieces, but still us?"

"I-I..." Merry hiccuped again before rubbing her eyes and nodding. "Y-Yeah? Pretty much..."

Vivi nodded and looked up at me. "And in the story," she forged on. "We came out of this... ordeal perfectly fine, right?"

I was going to answer in the affirmative, but I flinched as a small detail popped up. "Sanji... had a bit of a complication that I'm going to help him with, but it was gone within... I think a day, two at most."

The glare Vivi was forming faded, and she nodded before giving our helmsgirl a kind smile. "Merry, you have what you need to make it through this because you have all of us inside you. Because we are always with you. And not just the original crewmates, but the rest of us who wouldn't have been here otherwise... and you have your own strength on top of all of that."

The princess leaned forward and gently folded her arms around Merry, drawing her into a close,
gentle hug that the rest of us quickly joined. "In the words of a surprisingly wise man… shut up and stop worrying already."

"…Shi…shishishi…" Merry chuckled weakly, a warmer smile spreading over her face as she leaned into Vivi, burying her face in the crook of her neck.

The silence lasted, warm, comforting, until Zoro gave me a hard look.

"Whatever you do, Cross, we'll have your back," he stated, and the ladies all nodded in agreement, Merry even turning from her sobbing, ever so slightly, to flash me a tearful smile.

I returned the sentiment with a smile of my own, but I couldn't hide my sadness as I stood up and headed for the stairs. "Yeah, well, we'll see how you all feel in the moment. For now? Rest up. Because soon…"

I paused as I used the obvious switch on the wall to open the door back to the lounge, leaning against the wall. "Soon, we'll be arriving at the last stop in Paradise. And as much as we have to fear from what comes afterward?" My grip on the stair railing tightened. "We're still waltzing into a whole new circle of hell."

-o-

A week had passed since that particularly uplifting meeting, and despite their stated acceptance of what had to be done, more than once I had to answer questions that I already answered. Is there no other way? Can't it wait? Why aren't you telling anyone else? And as much as I wanted to give them an answer that would satisfy them—and me, for that matter—the facts remained stubbornly unchanged.

I had explored every resource that I had, from the Masons to the fledgling newspaper plans, and I had actually managed to map out the locations of all nine of the islands where the crew would be sent… that I knew of. I had ideas for where the rest of our crew would go, myself included, but nothing solid. And the only methods of transportation I knew of that were even remotely close to as subtle or fast as Paw-Paw Airlines were the Glint-Glint Fruit, which was impossible, and whatever Dragon used, which was pointless when Kuma was a Revolutionary anyway.

With the fact that I had prevented the war, there should have been a lot less stress about timing the upcoming situation right. But the fact was that unless things had changed beyond what I could anticipate, Kuma was close to being converted completely into a robot, which meant that we didn't have any room for error; if we missed this window, there wouldn't be another, and we simply didn't have enough time left to put off the next level of our training.

This held especially given that, most likely in spite of whatever interference I tried to run, we'd be ticking off the Celestial Dragons right next to their attack dogs' kennel. If we got cornered there, then there would be no words in existence for how screwed we'd be. It was either slip out or bust.

And as for not telling anyone, well, how was I supposed to bring something like this up!? Luffy had already learned the hard way that he needed to get stronger. Several times, even. But considering what this would entail? No… no, I trusted the crew, but I just couldn't think of a way to even start until the last moment. And though Zoro in particular hated keeping it from Luffy, the fact that neither he nor the other four had any better ideas spoke volumes about the entire situation.

And, unfortunately, a big reason I was keeping it to myself for now was due to the whispers of doubt that had been stirring in my mind since Thriller Bark. I tried to keep them silent, Luffy himself could tell with how often I snuck looks at Ace's perfectly healthy and sea-level Vivre Card, but they just
wouldn't leave me alone. And if by some unholy miracle they turned out to be justified…

I shook my head, dismissing the utterly impossible nightmare in favor of the matter at hand; per Sanji’s advice, I had tried thinking of fail-safes I could use, but the best I could manage was a little project that Merry had taken to working on in every spare moment she'd had since that meeting.

And if nothing else about it was distracting, the magnitude of BS that came from turning a ship into a human was…

-o-

Sanji sighed as he put the finishing touches on the most dangerous meal suitable for human consumption that he had ever prepared, sealing it shut before turning back to the helmsgirl in the kitchen.

"OK…could you run this by me again, because I still don't get it," Sanji said, eye twitching at the orange and gray duffle bag Merry was fiddling with.

"I'm getting supplies from everyone for emergency care packages, which I'm putting together just in case we run into someone like Shiki and wind up separated for an unknown amount of time again," the ex-caravel explained.

"Yeah, I got that part." Sanji sighed out a cloud of smoke so that he could start on another drag, hoping that this would be the lungful that killed his migraine. "A little overblown, I think, but better not to take any chances."

"And it's just a chance, of course, so all we're doing is planning for the worst possible situation. And I'm focusing all of my attention on Luffy first since he's the strongest."

"And while it's the biggest challenge I've had since your diet, I've got it done; it'll stay good for at least three months, and it'll do what it needs to if it comes to that," Sanji responded. "I got that part, too."

"Then what are you confused about?" Merry asked in slightly annoyed confusion.

"That," the chef snorted as he jabbed his cigarette at the bag. "Explain to me again exactly what that is?"

"Ohh," Merry nodded. "OK, it's like this: my raincoat and leggings were… mostly analogous to my hull in my ship form, so it was easiest for me to use it to focus my access to my storage. So, since I've got this new outfit now—" She flicked the brim of her cap proudly. "—I decided to turn my old one into a duffel bag that still has all of the hammerspace access I need, and I can share it with everyone else." She then grimaced in annoyance. "The only problem is that I only had enough fabric to make one bag this size; everyone else could only get these."

She held up one of several coin purses that matched the duffel's coloration; a handful were bigger than the others, but none were particularly large.

"Yeah, I get the theory behind it," Sanji ground out. "But how exactly do they still link to your storage if they're not connected to you anymore? And how did that new coat connect if your old coat is still connected?"

Merry perked up and put up a finger. "Oh, well, that's easy, see—!" And just as swiftly her expression froze. Sanji blandly watched as she dramatically paled and was about to make a snarky comment when her white face contorted into a glower.
"Sanji, I'm warning you right now," she rumbled, her voice resonating like a battleship's timbers. "If this stops working because of you questioning it? I will end you."

So saying, she snatched the box that Sanji had prepared, stashed it in her bag, and slunk out. The chef stared after her before shaking his head and getting back to work.

Honestly, someone needed to talk to that girl. Someone other than him, because he had no idea where to even begin helping her through what was clearly a bad bout of separation anxiety brought about from that whole Strong World mess. Chopper had only just started researching mental health… the dugongs were meatheads… Vivi and Robin were still two focused on their little feud…

In the end, it boiled down to one of two people. Cross was probably the girl's closest friend, while Luffy… well, was Luffy. And with Cross blatantly stressing out over something, that left Luffy as his best option.

Lovely. Well, at least he knew Luffy would prioritize talking to Merry above anything else, including his meat obsession…

Sort of like how Cross had put whatever he was planning above eating for those first couple of days…

Thinking on it, Merry hadn't been having any troubles for the first couple of days… or even the first couple of weeks. It had started a week ago… right around the time that Cross stopped shutting himself up in the crow’s nest every free minute he got.

*And Merry was one of Cross's confidants.*

"Damn it," the chef swore. With a growing sense of dread, he turned back to the fridge and pantry, recipes for bento boxes not unlike what he had just prepared forming in his mind.

-0-

Now we come to the present, two days after that. The first noteworthy occurrence of this day found me hoping all the more that I would somehow run into Tashigi soon, especially since we'd come across the last real threat between us and Sabaody. If the way Nami's clouds were collaborating with Sunny's rigging in an attempt to strangle me was any indication, neither she nor our ship was particularly happy about me forgetting about the Sea Snake Currents. Nor, for that matter, was anyone else.

"JEREMIAH CROSS, THE SECOND THE WIND ISN'T LIABLE TO BLOW ME BACK TO THE WEST BLUE, I'M GOING TO PUT YOU THROUGH THE DECK OF YOUR SHIP!" Valentine shrieked from the deck of the Cannibal, her threat slightly diminished by how she was being used to anchor a good dozen ropes at once.

"GET IN LINE, VALENTINE!" Vivi roared back, her arms swinging in an almost demented dance to shanghai the gales in our ships' vicinity into not sinking us to the sea floor. "AND TRUST ME, IT IS A DAMN LONG ONE!"

"OH, SUE ME, YOU BLUE-HAIRED BIMBO!" I roared right back, absolutely refusing to take this kind of shit. "ONE WEATHER-EVENT THAT SLIPS MY MIND, ONE! IT WAS BARELY EVEN A DAMN PAGE! IF ANYONE SHOULD BE COMPLAINING, IT'S US ABOUT HOW OUR NEW LOGIA IS MORE USELESS THAN—!"

"The schmuck who should be pulling levers instead of running his mouth?" Merry inquired tersely as she steadfastly wrestled with the helm.
"Ugh, right," I grunted, getting back to tugging on whatever Merry identified, a job I'd been assigned after the third time the rigging yanked me off my feet.

It really said a lot about the Straw Hat Pirates, not to mention Paradise in general, that a cluster of apparently autonomous ocean currents that wove and moved like snakes huger than Nola was a freaking footnote in the story. I probably would have spared more time to marvel at the whole thing, sights and experience alike, if it weren't for just how crazy it was being smack-dab in the middle of it.

And the worst part, of course, was that we couldn't just coast our way up one of the tallest serpents and fly away with a Coup de Burst. Doing so would have meant leaving the Barto Club behind, and it wasn't like we could attach them to us and fly away; no matter how much we tried to bind the ships with our Devil Fruit users, Coup de Burst was by design a maneuver that would inflict heavy damage on any ship that tried it unless it was made of Adam wood, and I seriously doubted either Merry or Sunny would have been okay with cracking another ship's keel.

Well, unless it was flying white and blue, but you get the general idea.

Anyway, that was only scratching the surface of the problems sailing alongside a friend had gained us. Too close, we swapped paint, and too far, we'd lose contact up until Sabaody; as it was, it was a struggle even with Soundbite's help. This was definitely one of the greatest tests of our sailing expertise yet!

"Meaning that if Barto says even one word about his granny, I'm going to bash his head in with a —!" I cut my grumbling short with a confused blink. "Waaaait, how do I—?"

"Duck!"

WHAM!

"GAH, MOTHER!" I roared, shooting a particularly vicious glare at Merry while clutching my new pully-made lump. "Watch it, half-pint, I can either help you or throttle you, and there is a thin line between the two!"

"NOT—GUH—ME!" Merry bit out, bodily wrestling with the particularly uncooperative wheel. Her eyes shot wide in terrified realization. "SOMETHING'S WRONG! I CAN'T CONTROL WHERE SUNNY'S GOING! IT'S LIKE HE'S CAUGHT IN A—wuh-oh."

I slammed my forehead into the helm's spokes with a groan, refusing to look behind me as I recognized that tone of voice. "Don't tell me: we're being sucked into a gigantic whirlpool," I sighed.

"Yep," Nami calmly confirmed from her position right behind Sunny's mane.

"Sharp rocks at the bottom?"

"You already did this bit in Drum!" Usopp hollered down from atop the masts.

"If you don't have a solution, cram it and let us have our jokes!" I hollered back.

"I HAVE ONE!"

All eyes fell on Donny, who was gesturing to the Monster Trio and his master. "If two of them can punch a tunnel through a tsunami, what can all four of them do?"

For a long moment, the only sound on board was the creaking of the Sunny and the roar of the whirlpool. And then, as one, everyone turned towards the whirlpool, matching grins on their faces.
"Well, recquiescat in pace and all that rot," Robin remarked, leaning against the railing with infuriating ease. "Cross, make sure you get a Vision Dial shot of this."

"Bitch, please," I scoffed, waving around my already-readied Dial en lieu of my middle finger.

"Come on, boys!" Boss pounded his flippers eagerly, grin stretching from ear to ear. "Whaddaya say we teach the ocean who's in charge?!"

"Right! Let's filet these currents!" Sanji nodded proudly, scraping his heel across the deck and building up a moderate glow in his leg.

"Let's get this over with, you morons are keeping me up with this nonsense." Zoro was far more restrained as he unsheathed his blades and held them at the ready. "Seriously, couldn't you have—?"

"Don't even think about it," Nami and Vivi snarled in synch, the navigator's threat emphasized by a rumble of her own personal thunderhead and the princess's by her sheer force of will.

Zoro flinched at that particularly well-enforced command for all of one second before rolling his eyes and brushing it off. "Like either of you would be able to stop me," he responded.

The veiled message drew dark looks from the crew, but fortunately our captain broke the tension, as he was so very wont to do.

"Hey, guys, hang on a second!" Luffy protested. "We can't do it yet! We have to come up with a name first!"

"SKIP IT!" shot back several of the crew, myself and several of the Barto Club included.

"Just wing it, boys, we've done it before," Boss scoffed, pounding his wrists together as he prepared for his ultimate technique.

Luffy considered it for a moment longer before shrugging indifferently. "Eh, fine." He started swinging his fists. "Gum-Gum…"

"Full-Shell Style…"

"600 Caliber…"

"Flaming…"

And then, as one, the Monster Trio and—oh screw it, the Monster Quartet blasted out their combined attacks at the water. "CANNON!"

The burst of air dwarfed even Franky's Coup de Vent, and no matter how awkward the name may have been, the results were too epic to care: the aquatic serpent's nest fell still around us.

…For all of ten seconds before the waters started to churn again.

"Let's get out of here!" Su demanded in panic.

"Uh…" Nami hesitated as she watched the currents rouse themselves again, and then that hesitation evolved into straight-up terror. "I-I can't see a way out! All the currents lead back here, and we can't sail out fast enough before they drag us right back in! We're trapped!"

"Are you telling me…" I said, my voice low and dangerous. "That we got so caught up in the awesomeness of step one that we forgot to plan out step two? Aren't we smarter than this?"
"Apparently not," Donny sighed regretfully.

"Well, I wouldn't say that," Robin simpered.

"A lifetime of natural training shows through again," Goldenweek added through a rice cracker from under the cover of our pavilion. "Still, it does feel nice to hold our own for once."

"Come again, half-pint?" Vivi tersely queried.

The painter summarily ignored her ex-subordinate in favor of addressing the crewmate sitting next to her. "How's our way out, Apis?"

"Any second now," Apis muttered, biting her thumb as she looked over the roiling waters.

I looked over the edge of the foredeck down at her. "Something you're not telling us?"

"Just need a little more time," the dragon priestess-in-taming muttered.

"Seriously, what are you—?!

"Moooo!"

SPLASH!

"Whoa!" I jerked away from the edge where the erstwhile attack steer of the Arlong Pirates and a sizable group of assorted aqua-animal titans surfaced among the stirring sea snakes, gazing curiously at us.

"Don't need to tell you what we need to do, do we?!" Barto shouted at them, hauling a hefty towline to the prow of the Cannibal.

"I could use a clue!" Mikey shamelessly stated.

THWACK!

"OW! WHY DOES CROSS GET TO JOKE ABOUT THIS AND I DON'T?!!"

"SHUT UP AND GET THE DAMN ROPE, DINGUS!" Boss and Raphey furiously ordered.

"BELAY THAT!" Merry hollered.

The Dugongs froze, while ropes flew from the Cannibal around the sea beasts' necks and Barrier harnesses formed for them to bite on.

"She's right! You guys may be strong, but my friends are bigger and more experienced with the Grand Line's currents!" Apis called.

"Not what I meant!" Merry replied, ignoring the Dugongs' reactions. "Now that you guys have got your way out, we don't have to hold back ours! Furl the sails! Time to activate Channel 0!"

"Oh, yeah, the paddle engines! Alright, secure the sails and stand by to attack the snakes!" Nami ordered, turning her attention fully to the currents.

Everyone on the crew aside from Brook and Billy, thinking back to our first usage of the paddles in the lead-up to the Accino fiasco, either took our places on the sides of the ship or accelerated Merry's efforts to furl the sails.
"Er, pardon my confusion, but, the paddle what-nows?" Brook inquired, even as he too went to work manipulating Sunny's rigging.

"Heheheh," Franky chuckled proudly, thumbing his sunglasses up his nose. "Watch and learn, grandpa. You think you already know why Sunny's the King of the Seas, but the truth is? You've only seen the start of what our ship's got to offer in his arsenal! The Burst was one thing, and this? This is another!"

And with that, our shipwright slammed his forearms together. "HIT IT, LIL' SIS!" he proclaimed.

"HITTING IT, BUT REMEMBER THAT YOU DON'T GIVE ME ORDERS, IRON-SIDES!" Merry cackled, giving one of her helm's levers a sharp yank. "HERE WE GO! THOUSAND SUNNY'S SOLDIER-DOCK SYSTEM, CHANNEL ZERO!"

And with a sound of grinding wood and shifting steel, the gates on the sides of the Sunny opened and allowed the cola-powered paddles that would be the envy of any ship back on earth to deploy, tearing through the currents and keeping even pace with the Cannibal's towing party.

"BEHOLD!" the White Menace pumped her fist victoriously. "THE BANE OF ALL CURRENTS! PADDLE-SUNNY!"

"Oh, my! Oh, my!" Brook gasped, staring over the side at our lion's paws. "This is incredible! Extraordinary! Beyond all words! I—!"

"Can't believe your eyes, but you don't have any, right?" Funkfreed blandly interjected.

Immediately, Brook was on his knees, a cloud of depression over his head. "Funkfreed, you can't just steal my line like that…"

"Either come up with some new material or get a new shtick," the Zoan-weapon dismissively replied.

That show of comedy aside, the Sunny's paddles allowed us to continue onward, a few extra bursts of force here and there giving us the agility we needed to dodge the serpent currents that surfaced around us. The Cannibal was having a slightly less easy time with it; I guess Nami was even better than Sea Kings at current-reading. Or it was just their young age, one or the other.

Then one serpent current came up right in front of us.

And just as fast, a few bursts of flame shot from Conis, Sanji, and I while Zoro and Leo (for the most part) threw in some wind blasts. And given that we were already soaked from the storm, nothing really happened.

"HEY, LUFFY!" Barto called over from the prow of the Cannibal, his shark-toothed grin on full display. "YOUR CREW JUST NEVER RUNS OUT OF CRAZY NEW SHIT IT CAN PULL, DOES IT?"

"NOPE!" Luffy called back, his grin just as wide. "ISN'T IT AWESOME!?"

And with that fantastically rhetorical proclamation, our crews continued through the final stretch of Paradise.

-0-

Have any of you ever visited a place like the Grand Canyon, the Great Barrier Reef, or the Rock of
Gibraltar? A grand and majestic natural edifice, celebrated the world over? And if so, have you visited it more than once? The wonder of what nature can do never really gets old, does it? Never any less incredible, never any less jaw-dropping, never any less magnificent.

So, you can imagine that coming face-to-face with the Red Line for the second time didn't make it any less incredible.

"Hello, old friend," I breathed solemnly, thumbing up the brim of my cap as I stared up and up, trying once more to see what I could not see before, what I still could not see now. And as I stared, the sea breeze licked at me, the salt wormed its way past every bandage, every barrier, into every scar, and made me feel the sting of each and every last one of them, as fresh as the days I got them.

And I reveled in every second of it.

I bared my teeth at the wall. "I've come to visit once again. And oh, the stories I have got for you."

"HEH. 'There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the ways in which you yourself have altered.' Mandela was right..." Soundbite angled his eyestalks back as he preened before the earthen horizon. "NOTHING BEATS A HOMECOMING."

"Tch. You little idiot," Nami huffed, her cloud offhandedly giving one of Soundbite's eyes a minor flick. Her eyes never left the Line, her free hand lightly running over her tattoo. "This isn't even close to a homecoming. This? This is the halfway mark."

For a moment, we were silent. And then...

"To come face to face with such a monstrous monument, that so perfectly exemplifies the might of the eternal adversary we call 'nature', while surrounded by comrades and gearing up to face it..."

"Aaaaand there goes the moment," Nami sighed in defeat, shoulders slumping.

"There's no other words!" Boss continued through the interruption, leaping up and pumping his fist in the air. "IT'S A MAN'S ROMANCE!"

"GO, BOSS, GO!"

"The more things change, the more they stay the same," Vivi hummed in a wistful tone, spinning the mist about her finger.

"At weast thish ish one of thosh times thatsh a good thing!" Carue pointed out.

"No kidding," Merry breathed, staring unblinkingly at the stone. "Between the storm and the fact that I wasn't really lucid last time, I couldn't be happier about the changes."

So, all in all, the moment wasn't so much over as warped around a little. 

...still nice, though.

-o-

"A new perspective... new train of thoughts... new set of emotions..." Goldenweek wheezed through clenched teeth, fingers scrabbling at her side and pupils blown wide. "Need paint. Brown. Lots of it, in so so many different shades... need it now!"

"Aaand we've lost our navigator," 5 grunted in clear dismay.
Goldenweek picked that moment to shuffle away, still in a daze. "I'll go and make sure she doesn't walk off the ship in a stupor," Valentine sighed, striding after the young painter. "Again."

"Wooow… and to think I was living barely even a day's sail away from this…" Apis breathed before looking up at her twice-oldest friend. "Lindy… you've probably seen this more times than you can count, right?"

"A few centuries can wear away some of the shock, milady…" the dragon grumbled, shaking his hide dismissively. "But, at the same time, we Millennial Dragons all agree that there remains a…" He nodded his head, a wry grin splitting his muzzle. "Comfort, I suppose, to see this mass of stone remain constant as the world changes around it. To know there's something else in the world that's eternal, aside from us. Something that, when we're long gone, will still stand proud and unbowed."

Apis smiled fondly and idly ran her fingers across his scales, though without taking her eyes off the colossal stone mass.

"At the same time, though… it's just a really big rock that goes close to space," Lindy added.

"Well, take it in, everyone: as long as Goldenweek is still painting, we're not going anywhere," Bartolomeo said, his grin making it clear that he had no problem with that. He then waved his hand at the neighboring ship. "We've done our share of nutso adventuring up and down the Grand Line. For now, it's the Straw Hats' turn."

"Aye-aye to that, Captain." Gin toasted his flask at the Barrier-Man with a grateful grin. "Aye-aye to that."

-0-

While marveling was all well and good, eventually I left the rest of the crew to sequester myself away in the dining room with a mug of cola; one of the comments made had shaken me and made me remember something that I had wanted to put off until the last minute.

But now, that last minute was here and I couldn't wait any longer. And so here I was, waiting for my opportunity to talk to Luffy.

This was between the captain and myself, after—well, I flinched slightly as I reminded myself of the facts, between the captain and myself and one other, but given the circumstances… Anyway, back on topic. Those who knew about Kuma were smart enough to put the pieces together themselves if they were inclined to, but if they didn't, so much the better. I did not want any bias or pressure in this situation. I made this mess, and I had to fix it.

The minutes ticked by, Soundbite relaying me the crew musing outside over the needle pointing to the seafloor…

"…same problem we had with Skypiea. We know where we need to go, but not how to get there."

"And by 'we,' you mean—wait a second, where did Cross go?" Merry asked, a slight hint of panic in her voice.

I patiently rapped my knuckles on the table.

"Oh, kitchen, got it. Well, if you're listening, could you—?"

This time I tapped my finger.
"Uh... Guess... nooot. Luffy, Cross wants to talk."

I double-tapped my finger.

"Now, Cross wants to talk now."

I heard the rubber man grunt, followed by a pair of giant rubber bands stretching. In no time at all, Luffy stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

"Hey, Cross, what's—" Luffy's expression changed mid-sentence, his face hardening at the sight of my own. "What is it, Cross?"

I didn't answer for a moment, staring at him before taking a deep pull from my mug. And then, my nerves as steeled as they were going to get, I looked him in the eye. "Luffy... your crewmates' happiness is the most important thing to you, right?"

Luffy's brow furrowed in incredulity, but he nodded.

I clenched my jaw slightly. "And does that include allowing them to leave the crew if they wanted to? If they never really wanted to join in the first place?"

"What?!" Luffy shouted. "What are you talking about, Cross, everyone here joined because—oh."

He cut himself off, grimacing again. I could almost see the connections sparking in his mind. "What are you trying to say, Cross?"

I let out a hissing sigh and closed my eyes. "Pardon the wholly necessary vagueness, Captain Luffy, but... in the very near future, an opportunity is going to present itself. An opportunity that will give Vivi the choice that the World Government stripped away from her: stay with our crew..." My expression tightened. "Or return home."

I opened my eyes and locked them with Luffy's. "Captain, I know that none of us would be happy to see her go, but she deserves the chance to choose, free of expectations. I want to tell her that whatever she decides, we'll accept. But a pirate isn't allowed to leave their crew without the captain's consent. So... I'm asking you if I can tell Vivi, when the time comes, that she and Carue have your full permission to leave the crew and return to Alabasta if that's what she wants."

Luffy's straw hat shadowed his eyes, but I could still see his frown. It was a full minute before he looked up again. "When you tell her, tell her that no matter what she chooses, both of them will always have a place on our crew."

I smiled, bittersweet as all else. "Never would have thought different, Captain. Now then!" I clapped my hands together as I shoved off from the table and made for the door. "Let's see about getting ourselves onto the next leg, shall we?"

With that done, I slammed the door open, ducked under the trio of projectiles that were flung at me with cries of "WATCH IT, BASTARD!" and pounded my knuckles together. "BOSS! Front and center!"

The dugong was before me in an instant. "Aye, sir?" the elder amphibian asked expectantly.

I smirked. "Gather your boys and dive, ASAP. You're all going fishing."

Boss perked up, quirking his eyeridge... well, quizzically. "Ohoh? What's the request, light brunch or is the captain in on this feast?"
"Ooooh, big game, my friend, big game."

"Ohoh?" Interest gleamed in Boss's eye, and I prepared to elaborate—

"Hold it."

—when of course Vivi interrupted my fun with a tap on my shoulder.

"Just how necessary, exactly, is this expedition?" she asked primly.

"Let me answer your question with a question," I replied with just as much decorum. "How much do you want to get to Fishman Island without swimming all the way there? And how much do you want to go down in the Shark Submersible and act as bait yourself?"

"Carry on," Vivi replied with an offhand wave.

I chuckled as I turned back to Boss. "Alright, where was I?"

"The point where I was liking this request more and more!" Boss chuffed out a ring of smoke as he eagerly wrung his flippers. "Anything special we should be looking for?"

I spread my hands demonstratively. "Five klicks down and sporting some big—!"

"MEATY CLAWS!"

I felt my jaw twitch and clench at that particular reminder of what was to come. ". . . fangs. Big fangs. And I mean by Sea King standards, got it?"

"Yep! Bo-oys!" The guard promptly assembled behind him, ready and raring to go. "We'll have it up for you in no time, just you see! Heck, want us to slice it up a little for you while we're down there?"

"Gah, nonono!" I waved my hands frantically on account of suddenly having that stuck in my head. "Thanks for bringing that up because no! We don't need it alive, but we do need it intact, got it? Intact."

Boss paused, cigar bobbing slightly. "That... does make things a tad more complicated, doesn't it? But!" He clapped his flippers proudly. "Challenges are what keep life interesting, right, boys?"

"With all due respect, sir?" Raphey replied a strained tone. "Go suck on a gooseneck."

THWACK!

"GAH!"

SPLASH!

"So noted," Boss growled as half his cigar fell to the deck, his knuckles still smoking from punching his disciple clean off the ship. He then cast a glare over his shoulder at the other three. "Anyone else have something they want to say, with all due respect?"

SP-SP-SPLASH!

I smirked, eyeing the trench the dugongs had dug in the lawn. "You've trained them well, Boss."

"Ohohoh, nononooo," Boss said as he casually hopped up onto the balustrade. "I didn't train even a twitch of that into them." He cast a final smirk at me. "They just know better is all."
And with that, he dove off the edge and was gone.

Once the ripples from the Dugongs' descent vanished, I hung my head and brought my hand up to press the knuckles against my forehead. "Of course, all of this is assuming that I haven't changed the world enough so that our future friends aren't trapped in said Sea King's stomach, and with how minor a detail it is and how double-sided our luck can be, that is entirely possible," I muttered to myself. I mulled on that for a second more before slowly starting to massage my face, groaning even more. "Then again, Hanlon's Razor."

"Hm? Hanlon's Razor?" Conis queried innocently from where she was performing her daily maintenance of our armaments. "What's that?"

"YE OLDE APHORISM FROM CROSS'S WORLD," Soundbite explained. "BASICALLY, never attribute to malice WHAT CAN BE ADEQUATELY EXPLAINED THROUGH—!"

KER-SPLASH! "GRO-ROOOAAAAR!"

The snail's explanation was suddenly cut off by—what else—the very subject of our discussion breaking the surface of the waves in all its floppy-eared, buck-toothed 'glory', for lack of a better word, roaring and snarling and thrashing and very noticeably not dead/K.O.!

"Oh, for the love of… HEY, BOSS! WHAT'S THE HOLDUP!" I shouted out over the water, pointedly ignoring the overgrown and undercooked barbeque meal. "IF YOU'VE ALREADY FOUND THE DAMN THING, THEN JUST PUNT ITS SKULL IN AND GET IT OVER WITH!"

"GIVE US A SECOND, WOULD YA!?" Donny shouted as he surfaced right next to the Sunny, nursing a veritable puzzle of bruises. "JUST BECAUSE WE MAKE THIS LOOK EASY DOESN'T MEAN IT'S DAMN EFFORTLESS! Though admittedly we are close. OI!" He directed his focus down into the water. "PULL!"

We all looked down in confusion, the rabbit Sea King actually joining us in the motion—

THWACK! "GRGHK!?"

—and receiving a hefty chunk of reef between his jaws for the trouble.

"Speaking from experience here: that is not a good feeling to have in your teeth," Luffy winced.

"I'm not even going to ask," Franky sighed, prompting several nods of agreement.

"Now for the big finish!" Mikey said eagerly as the TDWS jumped back onboard. Boss, meanwhile, flew out of the water toward the poor, doomed rabbit. Then he began spinning like he was Sanji winding up for a Concassé.

"Half-Shell Style… REEF STOMP!"

And with that final roar, the dugong slammed his aquatic lower half on the rabbit's skull, hard. And with the coral between its jaws?

CRACK!

"Owww," Billy winced, rubbing his beak sympathetically as the rabbit's eyes went white. Its form slumped over in the water as shards of coral and… I'll just be discreet and say calcium crumbled out
of its slackened mouth. "That has gotta hurt."

"That was the plan!" Boss barked as he flipped onto the deck, chest proudly puffed out. "Now, Mikey!" He snapped his 'fingers' and pointed at the groaning aqua-rabbit. "Make 'er blow."

"AYE-AYE, SIR!" the orange-bandana'd dugong proclaimed, leaping at the Sea King with his weapon brandished. "Now, eat my chucks!"

SLAM!

I winced as Mikey rammed said chucks into the Sea King's gut, causing it to double over in agony. "Eesh, don't know what hurt worse, seeing the poor thing getting ready to ralph, or that god-awful quip."

"Oh, piss off, you try coming up with this stuff on the fly," Mikey sniffed as he landed beside me, brushing off his non-existent sleeves.

"Came up with 'Gastro-Blast' within ten seconds of first using it."

"I reiterate: Piss. Off."

I rolled my eyes, but instead of responding I scowled and leaned over the edge of the ship. "HEY! BIG, TOOTHLESS, AND UGLY! WE DON'T WANT YOU, WE WANT YOUR LUNCH! COUGH IT UP AND YOU'LL LIVE TO GUM ANOTHER GALLEON!"

The rabbit froze, its watery eyes turning toward me and narrowing. Then its expression contorted into sweat-dripping nervousness as it presumably eyed the ones behind me. More specifically, the eager lip-licking I could hear from Luffy's position. Grimacing, it stopped holding back and started actively lurching forward in its dry-heaves.

"Uh, Cross?" Sanji said, warily eyeing the Sea King. "Not to doubt you…"

"But you have some serious questions about this whole thing," I finished for him.

"You had the dugongs hunt down a Sea King, apparently for the sole purpose of making it blow chunks." Sanji grimaced, waving his hand at the still-retching beast. "How could whatever this thing possibly ate help us get to Fishman Island?!"

"Simple enough, really," I said with a pleasant smile. "It's not a 'whatever' that ugly over there ate, but a 'whoever'."

Nami snapped her head my direction, confusion written on her features. "Wait, a fishman got eaten by a Sea King?! They'd never go down their gullet alive, it's considered the most embarrassing way to die!"


It took only a moment's thought for Nami and Sanji to both stiffen up in realization.

"You mean…" Nami started slowly.

"It ate—!?" Sanji breathed.

At that instant, the Sea King hocked up its lunch—and all of Sanji's objections died, right there. As did most of his higher brain functions… and my sinuses, god, what did that thing eat, island whale ambergris!?
Anyway, along with the mess was a pair of living creatures. One was star-shaped with a hat and a face. The other was green-haired with a yellow and dark pink (almost red) shirt. And a lower body covered in pink scales. And given the force with which the Sea King spat them out, they were flying directly towards us.

It was one hell of a leap, to be honest. Beautiful, admirable, awe-inspiring—!

Aaand then they both slammed face-first into both of our masts.

"Owwww," Billy said again, draping one wing over his eyes and glancing away as they peeled off. "Shoould someone catch them?"

"YES!" Sanji declared, darting below Keimi and spreading his arms wide.

I took one look at the arrangement and pinched my nose in despair. "Right. Chopper? I'd recommend grabbing whatever treatments for anemia you have on hand."

"WHAT? They need blood?! Why didn't you say so before—?!” Chopper yelped hysterically, scrambling left and right in a panic.

"Not for them," I interrupted, jerking a thumb at Sanji. "For him."

"Eh? What are you—?" Chopper froze, his pupils glowing in realization. "Oooh. Got it."

A second later, our cook's nearest, dearest and most sacred of all wishes, a wish shared by most all of mankind, even, came true: a mermaid, an actual, honest-to-God mermaid literally dropped into his arms.

"GWAH!" SPLAT!

And a starfish splatted onto our pavilion's roof, but who cares about that.

Keimi blinked blearily for a moment, obviously having a harder time shaking off her concussion than our crew. Soon enough, though, her eyes focused enough to lock onto Sanji's face and—her gaze became dreamy!? "You saved me," she crooned, reaching out to caress his face. "How can I ever—?"

Aaand that's as far as things got before the inevitable occurred.

SPLURT!

"GYAGH!"

"Oh, lordy," I winced sympathetically. Seriously, on this crew, you got used to seeing inordinate amounts of blood, but so rarely is it in a situation that is so… ugh. And it didn't help that the three people onboard who shared Sanji's blood type were his rival, a tyke whose blood was probably toxic with her diet, and someone who may or may not weaken Sanji by sharing blood with him.

…No, I don't keep track of everyone's blood types, but the ones who share mine stick out in my mind, especially seeing as I had a one-in-three chance of getting alcoholism, perversion, or who-the-hell-knows from them.

"Moooo?"/"Groargh?"

I snapped a glare at the sea beasts that were sniffing around inquisitively. "Beat it before our chef gets a transfusion and bakes you into surf-based gumbo."
"GRAO!"

That sent them running but good.

"And someone get her a towel already!" I ordered. "We're going to be here awhile."

"Hey, guys, how much longer—HOLY CRAP IS THAT A MERMAID?!"

"A long while," I repeated, resigned.

-o-

Cutting ahead for the sake of sanity, it thankfully didn't take long for Keimi to towel off (and repress that little incident), for Papugg to get his cartilaginous head back on straight, and for everyone on both ships to assemble around our new guests.

It did take us a fair bit to punt off the more ogle-y of the Barto-bastards, even with Gin and Ever's help.

Not that I could really blame them for that, mind you. 'Cause, well… remember how way back on Jaya I deduced that a lot of fishman racism was due to uncanny valley? Well, I can now confirm that, after getting a look at a mermaid that Father Time hadn't gotten his hands on, it worked in reverse for mermaids.

See, I'm not someone who would go all "HEL-LO, NURSE!" at a pretty girl. To be completely frank, I hadn't really understood what it was about the idea of mermaids that made them so much of a man's romance. And I wasn't about to fall head over heels for Keimi, either.

But as before, it made a lot more sense when you weren't seeing it through ink and paper. Keimi was, to be generous, above average in attractiveness and clearly not overly concerned about her looks. But, where in fishmen the tiny details made them just inhuman enough to trigger all the wrong signals, apparently in mermaids those differences triggered all the right ones. Cheekbones, jawline, skin tone, even the glimmer of her scales beautiful beyond any fish I'd seen thus far, making for an overall vision of beauty that, while not remotely justifying Sabaody, did explain a hell of a lot.

Made me wonder what the island itself would be like. Of course, that was still a long way and a heck of a lot of effort away, but hey, a guy could dream.

"Sorry about earlier…" the mermaid said, rubbing her head sheepishly… and also toweling off some the last of the blood on her. "It just felt like I had fallen right into a scene from The Little Mermaid, and I couldn't help myself."

"SO, would that make you ARIEL?" Soundbite snarked.

"Of course! All mermaids dream of being just like Ariel," Keimi sighed wistfully.

"Of course they—! Uh, wait…"" the snail narrowed his eyes in confusion. "CONSIDERING THE HUMAN-MER RELATIONS, WHY THE HELL—? Say, what's the story about, exactly?"

"Oh, it's a wonderful tale of romance and adventure, and love triumphing over the barrier of land and sea!" Keimi crooned.

"But that still doesn't make—"

"I think my favorite bit was when the Sea Kings ripped the evil slave merchants to shreds!"
"…MIGHT be thinking of a different story."

"Mmph. Well, the romance issue is all on him, not you," Franky snorted, jabbing his thumb at a recovering Sanji, which prompted a round of nods from most of us and a flurry of curses from him. "Anyway, nice to meet you, but who the hell are you?" The conk Robin's autonomous arm delivered to the back of his head was ignored.

"And if you don't mind me asking, what kind of mermaid are you?" Conis inquired with innocent curiosity.

"And, just asking for a friend, how long do we need to cook you for maximum savoriness?" Su inquired not so innocently.

THWACK! "YIPE!"

An inquiry that Conis thankfully repaid with a quick swat.

"OH! I'm sorry, I completely forgot!" the mermaid exclaimed, straightening up into the closest semblance of standing she could manage. "My name is Keimi. And no, I don't mind; I'm a kissing gourami mermaid." she bowed politely, an honest grin on her face. "It's very nice to make your acquaintances!"

"Ohoho no, trust me, it's our plea—!" THWACK! "YEARGH! WATCH IT!" Barto snapped at Ever, who simply grinned and made a show of rubbing her knuckles.

"Hi, Keimi! It's nice to meet you!" our captain proclaimed enthusiastically, walking up to her and sticking out his hand. "I'm Luffy!"

The mermaid gasped in surprise. "Oh, wow, is that really your name?"

"Recognition in three, two—" Funkfreed counted down.

"Don't hold your breath," I warned.

"You've got the same name as Straw Hat Luffy!" Keimi 'deduced', eyes sparkling.

The elephant's jaw tipped open, one eye twitching and both staring unblinkingly at the mermaid.

"Actually, I am Straw Hat Luffy!" Luffy clarified, through either unwavering patience or total obliviousness.

"Really? That's so—WHAAA!?"

Remember what I said about understanding the beauty of mermaids? That does not by any means extend to when they make shocked faces that have no right to rival Eneru's yet do.

"…Soundbite," Franky grunted. "That last word in that Razor thing wouldn't happen to be 'stupidity', would it?"

"How ever did you guess?" the snail crooned.

By way of answering, the cyborg directed another question to our guest. "Hey, just wonderin', but how'd you, of all people, get eaten by a Sea King? I thought mermaids were supposed to be the fastest swimmers in the world."

"Hm?" Keimi looked over at him, her shock completely forgotten. "Oh, I was chasing after an
octopus and accidentally swam into the beast's mouth! It's really more common than you'd think, this makes about 20 times that I've been eaten."

"Call it a hunch," Franky remarked in my general direction.

"But, wait..." Keimi said, also turning toward me with wide, sparkling eyes. "A talking snail... that would mean you're Jeremiah Cross and Soundbite?!"

"A pleasure to meet you, I assure you," I said, bowing with as much pomp as I could muster. "Always an honor to meet a loyal fan! Autographs are a thousand beris each." Suddenly, clouds delivered me some shade. Dark, angry clouds. "Ten thousand beris?"

THWACK!

Now I actually did twitch as Robin chopped the back of my head from a few feet away. "Five hundred."

THOCK!

"OOF! FINE, FREE!" I snarled at Vivi, rubbing my side where she'd elbowed me. "JUST STOP HITTING ME!"

TH-WAP!

I growled as I clutched Raphey's sai in my grip. "You have one chance to tell me why."

"Everyone else was doing it?" she tried. The complete unrepentance in her answer lasted long enough for me to haul her off the deck and wound up for a punt. Maybe, if I was pissed enough, I could actually hit the Red Line. Shoot for the horizon and all that! "A-A-And I wanted to remind you that seeing as we're at the Line, our hitchhiker—?!"

I paused and blinked as I considered that factoid. "Huh, good point. Go get him, would you?"

"Oh, yeah, sure—!"

THWACK!

"JACKAAAAASS!" she howled as she arced to the other end of the Sunny.

I dusted off my hands and lowered my foot with a contented smirk. "Well, that was fun. Now, where were we?"

"Oh, fair maiden of the seas~!"

"Of course, how could I forget." I smoothly stepped aside, allowing the Love Hurricane to bluster by unimpeded. I was tempted to try and trip him up, but I abstained on account of not exactly being eager to get my leg ripped off by his momentum.

"To finally meet a mermaid, the fairest jewel of all the oceans, the dream of all mankind! Oh joyous day, oh joyous day!" Sanji cheered, more lovesick than I'd seen him be in weeks. He veritably blurred with excitement, and radiated hearts like an enamored rod of uranium.

Keimi leaned back slightly, eyes wide. "Uh..."

"You get used to him," Merry smoothly offered.
"She's lying," Ever countered.

Any further commentary from the peanut gallery was interrupted by Sanji melting down harder than when he'd gotten into a fight with Zoro not thirty minutes ago, directed at the heavens above. "WHO'RE THE BASTARDS THAT DARE TO COMPARE SUCH FLAWLESS APHRODITES TO THE WRETCHED COWS OF THE SEA!?"

"Those who've seen Granny Kokoro," Su snarked.

"HWEEHWEHWEE! Man, that's just mean!" Lassoo snickered to himself. "True, but mean."

I wasn't honestly sure if he meant the insult to Franky's surrogate mother (not that he wasn't nodding in agreement, mind you) or the PTSD attack that the comment sent Sanji into.

"Oh, oh, are we asking her questions now! My turn, my turn!" I surreptitiously stepped away from Luffy as he raised his hand, casting pointedly unsubtle glances at my more… sensible crewmates. "I'm just wondering, cause you're part fish and everything… how do —?"

"GET HIM!"

"GWAGH!" Luffy was promptly and literally choked off by Nami, Sanji, Conis, and half of the TDWS tackling him and doing their best to tie him into a pretzel.

"Uhh…" Keimi, bless her dangerously naïve heart, tilted her head in innocent confusion. "Are they playing a game?"

"Tsk tsk tsk." Brook shook his head in chastisement, somehow clicking his nonexistent tongue. "Youngsters, so very unrefined. Not a hint of manners in them! Now then!" He spun and addressed Keimi, doffing his top hat with the most proper of decorum. "If you don't mind, milady, might I…" The skeleton trailed off, giving Keimi a slow, deliberate onceover before coughing into his fist. "My apologies, I realize that what I was about to ask was out of line. Let me try again: May I borrow some mone—GRK!?" Brook suddenly choked, clawing at his neck(bones) in panic. "Can't! Breathe!"

I caught sight of Robin leaning in close to Vivi, who was scowling and strangling the air. "How are you accomplishing that when he doesn't have any lungs?"

"Don't know, don't question it and make it stop working," the princess growled back.

Keimi, meanwhile, still showed a considerable nonchalance towards our crew's madness. She blinked at Brook before smiling and reaching over her shoulder to rifle through her bag. "Oh, you need money? Sure, that's the least I can do for you!" She brought her arm back out and flashed a wad of beris?!

"What the—?!" I squawked, but before I could properly react, Barto's forcefield-arm reached past us and swiped the roll of cash from the mermaid's hands.

The captain loosed a low whistle as he thumbed through the bundle. "Holy cow, this is real! Impressive!" Barto then… stuffed the bundle in his back pocket without even missing a beat, because of course.

A roll of her eyes, and Nami promptly tossed the very same bundle back to Keimi. "I think this belongs to you," she drawled.
"Hey, this looks like my money!" Keimi exclaimed in surprise. And then she promptly flipped out. "WAIT, THIS IS MY MONEY!"

"Wha—*how the hell!?*" Barto yowled, patting his pockets down in panicked confusion. "My wallet's gone, too!"

"Idiot tax." Nami waved him off before turning a cocked brow on Keimi. "But still, I am curious: what's a nice girl like you doing with that much money? You're not doing anything… *unsavory* are you?" She leaned in with a sharp grin. "And if you are, can I get in on—*AGH!*"

"Down, girl," I tsked, yanking her back by her ear.

"Oh nonono, it's nothing like *that*, I assure you!" Keimi cut in, waving her hands in denial. "I work at a seafaring restaurant, gathering the ingredients we need. Business has been booming lately, and I've got a lot of extra cash on hand because. We've been expanding into a few different kinds of seafood, but our focus and our biggest hit is still takoyaki."

"A seafaring restaurant?" Sanji perked up, his attention thankfully much less perverse this time, though one of his eyes was *still* a heart. But still, small progress is progress. "Any chance I could get a look at the recipes sometime?"

"Someone talking about food?" Raphey piped in, *of course* choosing that exact moment to rejoin us. In her flippers, she was carrying a large, upside down samurai helmet, within which was a sizeable, wriggling mass of tentacles.

Keimi perked up at the sight, reaching down to rifle through her bag again. "Oh, is that an octopus? That's great, I can show you some of our recipes right now! Just give me somewhere to cook it up and—!

"Whoa, what!?" Raphey yelped, jerking the helmet away from the mermaid. "Cook him!? Are you out of your mind!?"

"Uhh…" Keimi paused, clearly out of her depth. "Am I… missing something?"

"I SHOULD SAY SO!" Soundbite sniffed in the snootiest tone he could muster. "'*Cook him*, the *absolute nerve!* MADAME, I WILL HAVE YOU KNOW THAT THIS FINE gentle-cephalopod is our guest! Who we fished up in our catch a few days ago, but still."

And with that little clarification, the octopus' tentacles took hold of his helmet and flipped it out of Raphey's flippers, centering it on his bulbous brow before gurgling in a particularly chastising tone at Keimi.

"O-Oh!" the mermaid recoiled, her cheeks coloring in embarrassment. "M-My mistake sir, so sorry sir, won't happen again sir! A-Ah, here!" She withdrew a slip of paper from her bag and handed it to the cephalopod. "A coupon for the esteemed marine eatery of Takoyaki—!

"*COUGH–cannibalism–COUGH!*" Pappug 'subtly' coughed into one of his arms.

"Eight…" Keimi lamely concluded, face paling dramatically. "Uh… we… also serve… duck eggs?"

The octopod gave the mermaid a flat glare before snatching the coupon from her hands, stuffing it away in his helmet and waddling his way to the ship's railing.

I shook my head with a weary sigh, giving the octopus an apologetic smile. "Sorry about that. Regardless of the rough ending, we hope you enjoyed your time with us and that you enjoy your
time on Fishman Island, Ambassador Octarius. Give our regards to King Neptune and Shogun Octavio both!"

The glare briefly vanished, and the octopus snapped us all a salute before flipping overboard.

After a moment of silence, Pappug asked the obvious question. "…So, you wound up on good terms with the Shogun of the Surf?"

"Admiring someone who beats you instead of hating them isn't that out of the ordinary," Zoro said knowingly. "Though I still wish I'd gotten the chance to fight them. By the way…" The swordsman cocked his brow at my invertebrate. "When did you learn to speak fish, Soundbite?"

"Meh, getting there, not quite," Soundbite shrugged, though he was grinning. "BELIEVE IT OR NOT, HE'S TALKING ON HIS OWN!"

"Oh, right, I forgot to introduce you!" Keimi picked up the rasta-star and presented him, smiling brightly. "Everyone, this is my pet, Pappug. He's also my master, and a starfish!"

"Nice to meet you!" Pappug waved his arm in greeting.

"…Is anyone else just now realizing that we're really not questioning the fact that we're talking with a naturally speaking starfish right now?" Billy asked slowly.

"Not even top ten on our charts. This week," Apis noted.

"Honestly, I'm more concerned with the master aspect of their relationship," Ever drawled, giving the starfish a onceover.

"As in 'master and apprentice'," Pappug drawled, puffing himself up. "You guys are looking at the head designer of the Criminal fashion line, after all. This fine dear should be and is honored to be under my tutelage!"

Nami blinked in surprise at that. Then her eyes snapped wide in shock and she lurched —"GAH!"/"WATCH IT!"—er, make that shoved her way to the front of the crowd, her Eisen Tempo sending the unfortunates in front of her tumbling. "Wait, I know that name! Criminal is one of the major brands in the fashion world! It's sold up and down the Grand Line! Even a single piece goes for—uh…" She suddenly trailed off, glancing to and fro as her Eisen Tempo huddled around her oh that little bitch. "A-A perfectly normal and reasonable—GYEEP!"

"Noooo, please, don't stop there," Zoro grit out, his teeth set in a twitching grin as he loomed behind her, hand planted on her shoulder.

"Yesss," I hissed out in agreement, patiently tapping my finger on her other shoulder. "Do tell us just how much of our treasure, which we shed blood, sweat, and tears for, you've spent on your wardrobe."

"Ahehehe…eh…" our navigator chuckled nervously, pointedly refusing to meet our gazes. Then her mood reversed and she snapped an accusing finger at Pappug. "Hey, if you want to blame anyone, blame him! It doesn't matter how good he is, his prices are extravagant! That little boneless fleshbag's the one with all our hard-earned gold!"

Pappug had the gall to flip his sunglasses down and raise his nonexistent chin in pride. "The beautiful young witch is right! I am indeed a very sublime starfish! Wealthy, popular, influential… why, I'll even have you know that I am personally acquainted with the beautiful Mermaid Princess Shirahoshi herself!"
A few of my crewmates shot me questioning looks, and I shook my head with the blankest expression possible. None of them were surprised.

"As such!" Pappug forged on, cupping his 'chin'. "You're all probably wondering what someone as important as I am doing here on the surface, working at a lowly Takoyaki stand. Well, you see, the answer is… uh… is…" The starfish trailed off, his expression disturbed as he… looked at my shoulder? "I'm sorry, but is he supposed to be doing that?"

It was at that point that I became aware of what I can only now describe as a sparkling sound coming from my shoulder. Turning to look, I saw Soundbite grinning with demonic ecstasy. Aaand he was staring straight at Pappug with positively manic glee.

Riiiiight…

"Ugh…" I groaned, reaching up to rub my forehead. "For the sake of my sanity, I have to at least try; please don't sing the entire song?"

"NEVER!" the snail dashed my hopes with a single cackling bark. "I'VE WAITED TOO LONG FOR THIS! Oooooooh—!"

"Hold it!" Nami interrupted with a sharp snap of her fingers right in his face. "I'm going to need a little help for this."

And with that, she wrenched herself out of mine and Zoro's hands, marched over to the pavilion, and used her Tempo to wrench out a large wooden trunk marked "Zoro's Secret Stash; You touch this, I touch you!", whose lid she threw open in spite of Zoro's indignant snarl. After several moments of rummaging and clinking glass bottles, she took out a small bottle out and slammed the lid shut.

Nami held the bottle to her eye and scrutinized its faded label. "I don't know what this is, but it has three and a half out of five stars on the label so that's either really good or really bad." She cautiously took a sip. "GAH! It tastes like pistachio ice cream, cough drops, and those 'Skittles' things Soundbite had Sanji try to whip up! And not in a good way."

And it was with that particularly appetizing statement that Nami knocked the bottle back and drained it completely.

"You raging witch-bitch!" Zoro snarled, veins pulsing in his neck.

Nami's oh-so-polite response was to flash him her middle finger. Once she finished off the bottle, she tossed it overboard with a heaving sigh. "Pah! Okay! Now that I'm sufficiently fortified—and can feel sounds—please continue, Soundbite."

Merry tilted her head inquisitively. "I thought your tolerance was best defined as 'ungodly'?"

The infamous Weather Witch donned a catty smile, just filled with innocence. "Yeah, it was. And then I joined this crew and became one of the most feared pirates on the six seas."

"Most feared rookies."

Nami's grin twitched. "Rookies that burned down the World Government's front porch."

"…POINT. ANYWAY, Oooooooh~!"
One last flute riff, and the spectacle was over. I gave Soundbite an annoyed, somewhat mad glare. "You've been planning this for a while, haven't you."

"**OH, you have NO IDEA. Thought I was gonna BURST, SOMETIMES.**"

"Mmph. Well, even so, did you have to sing the *entire* damn song?"

"If he's been waiting since the St. Briss, you should just count yourself lucky that there isn't a second verse," Robin stated.

I sighed and turned back to our guests. "Alright… moving *right* on from this insanity… Keimi, is there anywhere you'd like us to take you, so that you can avoid the Sea Kings? You mentioned a restaurant, right?" I clamped my teeth down on the inside of my cheek. "Takoyaki 8, I think you called it?"

"Huh?" Keimi glanced at me, Luffy, Nami, Sanji, and Brook perking up at the same time. "Oh, yes! That'd be fantastic, thank you! Ah, and I could even give you a discount on our takoyaki! Ah, well, I just work there, but I'm sure my boss would be glad to give you guys a discount!"

"Or for free," Pappug cut in. "That would make more sense."

"GAH! That would make more sense!" Keimi shouted.

"**Takoyaki?**" Luffy parroted, his eyes turning to fried octopus delicacies.

"**Free?**" Nami echoed, her eyes turning to beri symbols.

Zoro, meanwhile, wasn't *quite* so enthusiastic. "Is your store's octopus *really*—" He casually caught Sanji's heel on his forearm. "—that good?"

While Keimi nodded and was about to explain, I decided that there was *no way in heck* I was going to be able to get through this without a damn drink. So, I casually knocked the back of my fist on Franky's gut and fished out a bottle of cola.

"Wha—hey!" the cyborg yelped, slamming his stomach shut. "I'm not your damn fridge!"

I snapped a caustic glare up at him. "No, you're our cooler, so *shut it.*" And with that, I tilted the bottle back before he could object further. After all, I had to do *something* to distract myself while Keimi was speaking. So, I tuned back in…

"—and while all the extra business was really nice, it was kind of hectic for a while with just me, Pappug and Hachin," the mermaid sighed despondently. "It was just too much! For every beri we made, we were losing two more! It almost wasn't any fun anymore…"

And then Keimi's mood flipped and she beamed with pure glee.

"But that all changed when Hacchin hired Kurochin and Chewchin!"

**WHAT.**

I heaved, my drink suddenly shooting down the exact wrong tube as I tried to speak or shout or *I don't know what damn it all!*

"Cross, I have had it up to here with you wasting my cola for spit takes; if you don't swallow that, I'm force-feeding you a biscuit," Franky threatened.
"F-Fuck—grk," I gurgled, hastily forcing the cola back down the right track and shoving the bottle back in his hands. Once my airways were clear, though, I snapped a panicked look at a concerned Keimi. "Wh-What were those names again?" I demanded.

"Huh?" Keimi tilted her head innocently. "You mean Hacchin, Kurochin, and Chewchin?"

Yup. No mistake. Definitely no mistake. And seeing as Zoro, Usopp, Sanji, and Merry had all tensed up at once, snapping wide-eyed looks at me, they'd managed to put the pieces together, too.

They didn't concern me, however. What really, truly terrified me was the combination of the raging typhoon churning behind Nami, and the perfectly, terrifyingly blank expression with which she was staring at absolutely nothing.

Audibly gulping, I tentatively croaked, "Y-You wouldn't happen to be talking about a ray fishman named Kuroobi and a… um… garfish, I think, named Chew?"

The whole time, I was silently pleading for her to say no. To please, please-please-please refute me, even if she was lying—!

"Garfish? No, Chew is a smelt-whiting fishman," Pappug corrected.

FUCK.

"So, you know them?" Keimi perked up.

Okay, okay, this was bad, this was bad, but maybe, just maybe I could still salvage it, with careful planning, the right combination of words—!

A hand crushed my shoulder. "And you're not asking about the octopus?" Zoro said dangerously.

I froze, and then slowly looked at Zoro with a bemused frown. "My mind's a blank," I admitted.

My terror wasn't forgotten for long, however, thanks to my other shoulder getting grabbed and the rest of me getting hauled off almost faster than my feet could follow.

"We need a minute," Nami informed Keimi, her voice nice and even.

"Um… o… kay?" Keimi trailed off. Apparently, even a goldfish-brain like her could read the subtext.

I shivered at that little unspoken ultimatum, but nevertheless followed Nami with minimal complaint as she led me, Billy, and the rest of the East Blue crew around the side of the pavilion. Once there, Merry rapped on one of the pavilion's pillars and brought up the side wall, blocking Keimi and Pappug from view, which Soundbite backed with his own impenetrable wall of blurred noise.

Once we were nice and private, Nami slowly looked at me. "Talk," she calmly ordered.

Well, I wasn't one to pass up that invitation… for better or for worse. "Okay, okay," I jabbered frantically. "I know you're pissed, and you have every right to be, but I can explain—!

Any further explanation was aborted on account of the fist that was suddenly two inches from my face!

"Thanks…" I breathed at Zoro, who was holding Nami back by the wrist. Behind her, I could also see Luffy holding her Clima-Tact, thank God.
"Thank me by explaining instead of saying you will," the swordsman shot back, before turning his eyes to Nami. "You done?"

She nodded mutely.

"Good."

"In all fairness, I think—er, know I deserved that," I shamelessly admitted. "And only that, so I swear to you upfront, I only knew that Hach—tchan was free and I had nothing to do with it."

Nami's already icy frown tightened, now on the verge of an outright scowl. "Talk fast, I'm already figuring out how to slip this."

So I did just that. "Alright, to start, I realize that your sentiments on Hach-tchan and all fishmen are justifiably tainted, but you need to acknowledge that he's a good guy. He probably didn't even want to go through with the Arlong Empire plan, he only did it because the other three were his closest friends, his brothers! His equivalent of me, of Zoro, of Luffy! Hell, his childhood dream was to open a takoyaki stand with—!" I froze in realization, and going by the rainbow of emotions that flashed across Nami's face, she'd made the same leap I did.

Acting fast to forestall the building (metaphorical) hurricane, I ducked my head around the pavilion and waved down Keimi's attention. And I assure you, I did not miss the fact that Nami was glaring holes in the back of my skull the entire time. "Ah, say, you two wouldn't happen to know where a fishman by the name of Arlong is, would you?"

Surprisingly enough, the gourami's expression grew ashen and sprouted an ugly grimace. "Hopefully still rotting in the jail Hachi said he was sent to, if there's any real justice in the world. I actually met him once, you know? When I was younger. Went to the Fishman District on a dare, heard him speaking. The things he said…" She shivered in revulsion. "He… He was a very bad person, and I'm happy he's locked away."

I nodded my thanks and turned back. Nami was visibly more relaxed, but her glare's intensity had barely diminished.

"OK, from the top." I repeated, unwilling to try to fit my other foot down my throat. "I knew about Hatchan; in the story, he was the only one who escaped from the gaol-ship that was carrying Arlong and his men. He went through some convoluted undersea adventure that ended with him quitting piracy and living out his old dream of opening a floating Takoyaki stand."

"And you didn't warn us about that, why?" Nami asked quietly.

I grimaced, and chose my next words very carefully. "Because there was nothing to warn about, because that is all he has been doing. In the story, we only met him because he was captured trying to save Keimi and Pappug from being kidnapped. He was locked up and begging to be set free to help, and… you were surprisingly okay with it. I think the way you put it was that he was…" I oh so carefully cracked open an eye. "Harmless?"

Nami's expression was unreadable for several seconds. Finally, she slipped her arm free of our swordsman and sighed in defeat. "…He's probably the only one who never tried to hurt me without Arlong's orders, and his antics cheered me up sometimes," she muttered absently before looking at me again. "If things happened like that, I can imagine… tolerating him. But if you're going to tell me that I let bygones be bygones just like that—"

"No-hoho-hoo, it pretty much was just tolerating him," I quickly clarified. "You only really forgave
Nami's head snapped up, her eyes wide, and the rest of the East Bluers seemed surprised as well. But that lasted for all of a few seconds before the icy grimace returned. "I guess I can imagine that…" Aaaand there was her hand snapping into a fist and the snarl asking for blood. "But Kuroobi and Chew? They weren't as bad as Arlong, no one ever could have been, but I wouldn't consider saving them."

"Hey, neither would I, Kuroobi was a bastard and Chew a sadist! I'm as shocked, shocked as you are!" I protested. "The way I saw it, Hachi was the only one who got away. And there's no way that I could have changed that, I was either back in my world or stranded on that island until after that went down."

"We've been over this, Cross," Sanji grit out, a factory's worth of smoke chuffing from his mouth. "If something goes differently than what you saw, it's automatically your fault."

I frowned and, for lack of any other options, ducked around the pavilion again. "How did those two start working with you?" I called out to Keimi.

"Kurochin and Chewchin?" she asked, bless her kindly heart. "Oh, that was a couple of months ago. After you started the SBS, business boomed for us; the Davy Back Fight alone had us struggling to keep up with all the orders, but after Enies Lobby, Hacchin decided that we needed more employees, and since Kurochin and Chewchin shared his dream of running a Takoyaki stand, he called Boss Jinbe and asked him to release them to his custody."

"Boss Jinbe dropped them off himself," Pappug continued. "I still remember how furious he looked; he told them that he was letting them all off with a warning, and if he heard a whisper of trouble, he'd have them back in prison before they could say Neptune. I'll admit that in the early days, Hachi had to hold their paroles over their heads, but they love the job enough that there aren't any more problems. Sure, they do tend to provoke fights with humans, but from the grins those humans had when the fists started flying, they were looking for fights just for the hell of it, sooo…"

I sloooowly came back around, expression pointedly blank as I worked out that chain of events. "Okay. So maybe, maybe it was my fault. Slightly. Tangentially." I was silent for a second before knocking my forehead on the wall. "Blame me if you will, but I will not go silently into that good night."

With that, we lapsed into a tense silence blanketed by the Gastro-Scramble. All eyes were on Nami, who was slowly caressing her heavily tattooed left arm. Billy stood beside her, a wing resting over her shoulders. And slowly, the tension bled out of her body.

"…the scared little thief girl that was helpless against those fishmen is dead and gone," Nami said at last, her tone quiet but proud. "I'm strong enough now to face my past. And if they try anything, they're mine."

"Works for me," I nodded thankfully, both for her confidence and the sanctity of my body. "So, if that's everything—?"

"Not so fast, Cross."

I groaned and dragged a hand down my face. "Because of course not." I glanced out the corner of my eye at our chef. "What, Sanji?"

"One other thing I need you to clear up for us first," Sanji replied, arms crossed and a scowl on his
face. "Keimi just mentioned that Jinbe let those two loose. And as I'm sure you of all people remember, Yosaku told us about him way back when; about how a fishman became a Warlord in exchange for releasing—"

"Jinbe 'released' jack squat," I snapped. "He sprung Arlong from Impel Down when he became a Warlord, yes, but entirely because they were crewmates on the Sun Pirates and because they were once brothers in arms, that's it. Hell, when Arlong started hinting at what he was going to do, Jinbe thrashed his ass but good. You wanna know why Arlong tolerated Nezumi? It wasn't because he was worried about the Marines, it was because if Jinbe heard one word about Cocoyashi, the Arlong Empire would have crumbled like a sandcastle in the face of Jinbe's wrath."

"You're sure?" Nami asked.

"I guarantee that when we meet Jinbe, be it today or… later, the first thing he will do upon recognizing you is fall on his knees and beg your forgiveness, not just for himself but for fishmen as a whole. For not killing Arlong when the saw-toothed bastard gave him the chance. That is the kind of fishman he is. And no that's not an opening for you to offer to filet him," I added, also directing a scathing glare at Sanji, who'd been looking just a tad too thoughtful for my liking.

The cook snorted and rolled his eyes, but I could tell he'd done as I asked and dropped his ill-conceived notion.

"Alright, so does anyone else have any chinks they want to poke? With full knowledge that I have every intention to—" I held my hand out and strangled Funkfreed's grip when he dropped into my palm. "—poke back?"

Nobody had anything to say. Imagine that.

"Good." I marched back around the pavilion, signalling that the conversation was over and allowing everyone to disperse, and then promptly conglomerate back around Keimi.

All wasn't as we'd left it, however, as Keimi was facing away from us, apparently speaking into her hand. She turned back around at the sound and I saw she was holding a Baby Transponder Snail with a star-spangled shell. A snail that she'd just put back to sleep and slipped back under Pappug's rasta hat.

"Is everything alright?" she asked, clutching her hands in concern.

"Don't worry about it," Vivi said before anyone else could open their mouths and let out trouble. She then glanced at the starfish. "Did you need to call someone?"

"Hm? Oh! No no," Keimi waved her off, though she looked concerned and was trying to hide it. Poorly. "I just called Chewchin to say that I'm on my way back and bringing some guests. He usually handles to-go orders…" She nervously bit her thumb. "Though, for whatever reason, he did sound a little woozy."

"Puwe cuwiosity, but did you mention who yoah gueshts wewe?" Carue asked dryly, casting a look at the rest of our crew.

"Naaah, I suggested we don't," Pappug answered. "I thought it would make a cool surprise!"

Now that left me and a few others more than a little confused.

Ultimately, Sanji just waved his hand dismissively. "Eh, probably just a long day and a few shitty customers. Happened all the time at the Baratie."
Most everyone else murmured agreement, but… mmph, I don't know, something about that explanation didn't quite sit right with me.

"Anyway…" With that, he went back into a Cat 3 Hurricane and dropped into a bow. "If you would be so kind as to lead the way, Keimi dearest~! It will be our honor to follow you every step of the way! Tail-turn of the way!"

"Heheheh, yeah, honor. Hehahaha—!" THWACK! "GAH!" Barto yelped before snarling at his snickering MC. "YA GET TWO A DAY, EVER! TWO!"

"I shall use them wisely and like clockwork, sir!"

"Gah—!"

"Is everything alright?" Keimi wondered.

"C'mon, Keimi, let's get out of here," Pappug sighed as he plodded towards the railing before any of us could respond.

"Hey, hold it a second, how about some directions to this place before you beat it? We're stuck here until she's done," Valentine cut in, jabbing her thumb at the very deeply engrossed Goldenweek.

"And don't worry about any problems with the Log Pose, just give me some seamarks visible from the sky and I can relay them," Apis added, a notepad ready.

"Actually, I'd also like a word," Ever added. "Do you have any catalogs on hand? And do you deliver?"

"Mmm… fine, but then we're gone," Pappug sighed in defeat. "Whatever their problems are, I'd bet my top-arm that if we stay here even one second longer, we'll be infected by their crazy."

"Don't those things grow back anyway, PATTY?" Soundbite snidely queried.

Pappug's response was to shoot back a cocky smirk. "Yeah, actually, they do! Bet your guy could have used that a while back, huh?"

"WHAT!? YOU LITTLE—!" Soundbite roared, before a snort ruined the image. "Alright, I'll admit, that was actually a pretty good burn, RIGHT CRO—WHU-OH." That was probably due to the thoughtful look I had on my face. "THAT LOOK NEVER MEANS ANYTHING GOOD. WHAT'S CAUGHT IN YOUR BRAINPAN?"

I pursed my lips as I mulled events over. "Something doesn't make sense…"

Nami let out an incredulous tsk. "You mean besides the fact that two of my mother's unrepentant killers are free, along with a third who's on the fence?"

I ignored the crack so as to not lose my train of thought. "Remember how I said we originally ran into Hachi again after he was captured?"

Soundbite cocked an eyestalk. "Yeah, why? We gonna arrive to an empty TAKOYAKI STAND OR SOMETHING?"

I shook my head. "No, you don't get it: that call she made, that was supposed to be the ransom call. And Chew would have said something if anything had happened to Hachi, so…"
"Mmm..." Soundbite crossed his eyestalks in thought. "MMMMAYBE WE GOT HERE EARLY? AND NOW WE'RE gonna ARRIVE TO AN EMPTY STAND?"

"Mmrph." That made sense… "Except… the Macros aren't exactly what you'd call powerhouses." My frown evolved into a scowl as that trio of brainless faces flashed through my head. "In fact, they're cowardly weaklings. They had to hire a gang to kidnap Hachi for them because they couldn't do it themselves. And that was Hachi alone. Even with superior numbers, I just can't see all three of Arlong's lieutenants getting taken all at once. Especially not with Chew's firepower and Kuroobi being a… what, black belt in fishman karate?"

"Yodan, specifically," Nami clarified, jaw clenched. "And with the way he trains, he's probably even higher by now."

"My point being," I continued before she could get started. "He and Chew are almost as strong as Hachi, each. And unlike Hachi, they don't have any qualms about bashing heads in instead of just bashing heads. They wouldn't get taken easily."

"And they wouldn't be taken alone either," Sanji chipped in. "If Takoyaki 8's as famous as those two say it is, then in waters as rough as these, any customers present would be more likely to help their favorite cooks, rather than lose their food."

"Geez, the more we talk about this, the stupider and stupider it sounds like attacking Takoyaki 8 is!" Usopp muttered incredulously. "Why would they even do it?!

"Oh, that's an easy one: Keimi." I jabbed my thumb over my shoulder at our guest. "The thing about the Macro Pirates is that besides being unrepentantly stupid, they're unrepentantly evil. And by that, I mean slave traders. Fishman slave traders."

It took Nami a second, but when it hit, she was the first of the crew to pick her dropped jaw off the floor. "…I may be remembering wrong, Cross, but I have vivid memories of Arlong and his crew going on drunken ragers about how every fishman alive hates slavery with a bloody passion."

"Yeah, well, that makes the Macros race traitors," I growled in disgust. "And believe me, with what I know about their pasts, their actions are even more despicable than you can imagine. Insulting, too." I frowned in thought. "Now that I think about it, I really should get a branding iron ready for when we run into them, there's something on their skins they should not be wearing anymore—"

"Let's put a pin in that," Merry hastily interrupted. "You were making a point?"

"Uh, right, motive, and as I said, it's Keimi." I shook my head sadly. "As you'll recall, the slave trade does exist, and it's actually centered in these waters. It's in the flesh-market that human fantasies take a turn for the worst. And tragically, there's no more valuable fantasy out there than that of the mermaid. It's disgusting, but the fact is that Keimi's worth a literal king's ransom. And when that much money's on the table?"

"People do disgustingly stupid things a stupid number of times, right, right," Nami sighed. I nodded in solemn agreement. "Eeyup. Stupid like attacking Takoyaki 8 over and over again, no matter how many times Hachi beats them up and throws them back to the Sea Kings…" I paused as a thought occurred to me. "Although… with Kuroobi and Chew present, they wouldn't get off so easy anymore, and they'd know that, so they'd stop…"

I cupped my chin as my train of thought accelerated. "Or at least, they'd stop attacking the stand, but they wouldn't give up on Keimi. Instead they'd keep an eye on her at a distance, follow her, waiting
for the perfect moment when she was most vulnerable. And for a mermaid, that means when she's out of the—"

Close to the entire crew stiffened as realization washed over us.

"Oh, sunnova KEIMI WAIT!" I howled in panic, spinning around and reaching for the mermaid.

"Huh?" Keimi blinked and looked our way—

SPLASH!

"KYAH!"

—just as a blur shot out of the waters and snatched Keimi clean off the deck before anyone could react.

It was just so fast; she was there one second, and the next we were left gaping dumbly at where she'd been just a second earlier.

Vivi was the first of us to find her words… or at least some of them. "W-What just—!?"

That got everyone else's brains working.

"KEIMI!" Pappug wailed in mortal terror.

"GUARDS! AFTER THEM!" Nami snapped.

"RIGHT! MOVE IT!" Boss barked, leading the dugongs straight over the edge.

I reached after the dugongs, trying to stop them… "No, wait—!"

SPLASH!

Aaand failing. "Don't," I groaned, letting my arm drop in defeat.

Pappug whirled around, face contorted into a tear-streaked snarl. "Why would you tell them to stop, you heartless—?!
"

"Because there's no point," I groaned, pinching the bridge of my nose in an attempt to ward off the battering ram trying to punch a hole in my skull. "That was a Flying Fish, they're the second-fastest things under the sea. Boss and the TDWS are strong, no doubts about that, but…"

The dugongs chose that point to crawl back onto the deck, and I couldn't help but wince as I took in their state. Their disheveled, urchin-covered state.

"You didn't stand a chance in hell, did you?" I summarized sympathetically.

Mikey stuck his tongue out at me. Or he just stuck his tongue out so he could try and yank off the hermit crab that had latched onto it, either or.

Donny, meanwhile, sagged in place with a tortured groan. "So fast. They left us in their bubbles…"

"I almost had them," Boss snarled as he yanked a particularly clingy urchin from the tip of his cigar. "But then they took a right turn through a reef and left me fighting off a bastard of a barracuda!"

"Well, we're not just letting them take her!" Luffy swore, grinding his fist into his palm. "Cross,
"Where are they taking her?"

"Mmmph," I grunted, wracking my brain for all the details on this mess I would need. "Well, the bastards who use those things, the Flying Fish Riders, have a floating base near here, but!" I cut the crew off before they could leap into action. "Assuming they're working for the Macros, they've got no reason to keep her there. We can double back and kick their teeth in later, but right now, we need to head for the belly of the beast. Pappug, which way to—?"

"Puru puru puru puru! Puru puru puru puru!"

The sudden ringing of Pappug's rasta cap did a good job keeping him from answering, which he responded to by whipping out his baby snail and answering with an irate snarl. "Hachi, this is really not the time—!"

"And this isn't Hachi, so shut the hell up!"

Pappug's face contorted in shock and rage as the snail's face turned to look at us, one eye wide with hate.

"'Bout time. I've been waiting for you chumps for a while now, even set up base here 'cuz I knew that you'd show up eventually... and whaddaya know, my boys go out for a nice and easy dash-and-snatch, and they tell me that the mark's on your tub of all places. Ain't life just funny like that..." The eye flashed with the vilest of malevolence. "Straw Hats."

Never one to drop the ball on matters like this, Luffy grabbed the snail. "Give us Keimi back right now and we'll kick your ass!"

"Uh, Luffy—?" Usopp raised a finger uncertainly.

"If you don't," our captain continued in a low growl. "I'll feed you to the bananagators Boss knows."

That shut us all up right quick. Heck, I think even Duval was a bit taken aback!

Leo actually summarized it best in two words: "Well, shit."

Sadly, apparently not even super serious Luffy could cow stupidity for long, as a second later Duval was right back to scowling and spitting. "Yeah, well, tough nuts. I'm not afraid of you and I'm not letting your piece of tail go without a fight, so you're just gonna have to come and get her."

"You do realize that deliberately PROVOKING US IS both more dangerous than AND MESSIER THAN poking a sleeping dragon in the mouth, RIGHT?" Soundbite summarized incredulously.

"Psh, what do I sound like to you, an idiot?" Duval scoffed. "Course I know that, ain't no one in the world who don't by this point, and I don't doubt that this whole base o' mine is gonna be ruins in a couple of hours."

Several of the crew blinked in confusion.

"But see, thing is?" the gang-leader continued. "One o' you already ruined my life an' forced me into this business to start with, so I'm going all-in to get my revenge. I never wanted to do this, but considerin' what happened the last times someone went after one o' yours, what choice have I got?! Either way, I don't give a damn if you punt me straight to hell, so long as I take the bastard with me!"
Su slowly cocked an eyebrow and leaned in close to Soundbite. "Call me crazy, but am I the only one who's finding this guy's moxie pretty damn respectable?" she muttered.

"I'm sorry to say, but I see where you're coming from," Conis hesitantly agreed.

"But that still leaves a big fat question!" Usopp blurted out. "If you had a problem with one of us that you wanted to fight out, why kidnap Keimi to piss us all off!?!"

I glanced aside, wisely stowing away my opinion that Duval most likely hadn't thought of it until just now.

"Who the hell says that wasn't the plan the entire time?"

Especially wise considering Duval's response!

A resounding "WHAT?!" echoed across the Sunny's deck and from out of Pappug's snail, courtesy of three incredulous voices.

"Yeah, you heard me," Duval stated. "The mermaid is just makin' sure that you guys don't leave me high and dry here. You show up and give me the fight I want, you'll get her back."

"HEY, HANG ON A SECOND!" the snail yelped in panic, its teeth suddenly turning into a miniature, panicked beartrap. "The hell are you talking about, this wasn't part of our deal, you—!"

The cathartic schadenfreude the meaty THWACK that blasted over the connection produced probably would have powered everything on the Sunny that needed powering. For a week.

"I WASN'T PLANNING ON HANDING HER OVER TO YOU SCHLEPS EVEN IF THE STRAW HATS WEREN'T INVOLVED!" Duval roared, pure fury coating his voice. "The Flying Fish Riders are a kidnapping gang only! We do not fucking sell slaves! I was just gonna use her to get a neat sum out of Takoyaki 8 once I kicked you jerks to the curb... but now there's an even better prize on the line! THE HEAD OF THE MAN WHO RUINED MY LIFE! SO! You Straw Hats want her?" The snail's eye bulged to almost cartoonish, vein-popping proportions. "Come and get her!"

And with that, the line disconnected.

For a few seconds, nobody spoke. Then Luffy turned to me, his silent question clear in his gaze. After a moment of thought, I responded thusly:

"This... is a bit different from what I expected, but..." I shrugged. "I'd call it a good change if it gets Keimi out of danger. As for the threat level..." I waved my hand side-to-side. "Duval's a jerk, at the moment, but he's still better than the average hoodlum. Which is to say he's more polite than Barto —"

"OI!"

"—but right now he's royally pissed at us, so he's not being nice. Honestly, I'd say that once this duel goes down, he'll honor his deal and let Keimi go."

"So, they're going to be our friends?" Luffy asked. He pouted in response to the incredulous looks he got. "Hey, it's not that hard to figure out! We've never fought someone who wasn't a total bastard who didn't become our friend, right?"

"That's not—!" Nami started to protest.

"Smoker, Tashigi, Hina, T-Bone, CP9," Merry added.

"Cough-Hachi-cough," I coughed into my fist.

"Aokiji."

Aaand Robin's comment stopped that momentum dead.

"Never," I outright snarled, hands clenching at my side.

"Guess it only counts if we actually win," Luffy grumbled.

"EXCUSE ME!" Pappug shouted. "Can we save whatever you're talking about for after we've rescued Keimi?! We need to get to their base!"

Puru puru puru—KA-LICK!

"WHAT!?" Pappug yowled, slamming his snail's connection open.

"Yeah, sorry to ruin whatever dramatic mood you all mighta had goin', but I'm guessing you guys don't know how to get to my base?"

"Whaaat, in the middle of the Grand Line where compasses don't work and we don't have a compass-beak bird on hand?" I deadpanned. "Nooo, what ever could have given you that idea?"

The other line inhaled and then exhaled in a clear attempt to keep his temper.

"You're lucky you're funny, you little—alright, I just had one of my guys drop off a custom Eternal Pose in the reef where we lost ya. Find it and then get your asses over here, fast. KA-LICK!"

Boss glanced at his students. "Alright, who's got the least crossed vision."

Donny stuck his flipper up. "I'm only seeing one-and-a-half instead of double."

"Good enough. Find the compass."

"Aye sir!" the purple bandana wearer saluted before leaping off the edge.

Well, there was really only one thing to do now.

"Sanji," I said.

"Yeah?" the chef asked.

"Start kindling; 'Iron Mask' Duval is all yours."

Sanji stiffened, smoke already wafting from his form.

-o-

"I can see it! Another five or ten minutes and we'll be there!" Usopp called from atop the crow's nest.

"Got it!" Luffy raised his thumb at the sniper. Then he looked over at Sanji, who'd been throwing practice kicks for the past hour. "You feeling ready, Sanji?"
"GRAH!"

"CRACK!"

Luffy casually ducked under the ballistic training dummy head Sanji had inadvertently launched at him. Our captain blinked at the destruction our cook was unleashing before grinning and raising another thumbs up. "Yeah, Sanji's doing just fine!"

"Mm, nah, no he's not," Zoro grunted dismissively, casually unsheathing Kitetsu. "Here, I'll help him get up to snuff."

And that was my cue to GTFO before the sparks really started to fly. So, I turned my back on the raging blitz that erupted between the terrible twosome and made my way around to the quarterdeck. Honestly, right now I wasn't in my happiest of states so I just wanted to find somewhere nice and secluded so I could be alone for a—

My eye twitched as a contemplative sigh wafted from around the corner, exactly where I was headed. Yeah, now that I think about it, my plan to try and get some alone-time at the Sunny’s patented ‘Alone Time Spot’ might have a flaw or two in its conception.

Well, it wasn't too late, I could always turn around, find some place below decks, fester in my—

"HEY, ARE YOU GUYS FIGHTING? GANGWAY! FULL-SHELL STYLE—!"

Then again, misery (or other such melancholy emotions) does so love company.

As such, I walked around the corner, and winced at who it was leaning on the railing and gazing out at the horizon. Well, I already saw them, sooo…

I leaned next to them with a hearty sigh all my own, not even getting a glance. "So," I started, "You're down in the dumps too?"

"Mm-hm," Nami nodded, her Eisen halo flickering to and fro. "Care to share?"

"Meh, you first."

"Nah, you go right ahead."

"No no—"

"For the love of the Great Mother Snail in the sky that I just made up, EITHER GAG ME, KISS, or one of you start already!" Soundbite demanded.

"Well, in all fairness," I began. "My concerns are a bit selfish: if we're not raining unholy destruction down on the Flying Fish Riders, then I'm not going to be able to say Number Three on my bucket list of lines I absolutely want to say before I die."

"…Wow, you were right, that is selfish," Nami declared, her expression as flat as her tone.

"Heh," I snickered before nodding sympathetically. "Anyway, I'm guessing you're thinking about Hachi?"

"Oh, no, not at all," Nami immediately denied. "I'm repressing that can of worms until the last possible moment."

"Unhealthy, but I have no room to complain," I shrugged. "Go on, what are you thinking about?"
The witch's expression twisted into robotic neutrality. "The fact we're going up against a bunch of slavers that vastly outnumber us and rule the sky and seas."

I waited, and upon a lack of elaboration, I acted on the assumption that she never expected to say that sentence in her life.

"So, you've come to terms with the fact we're all mad?" I needled, a devilish grin on my face.

"No, I did that a long time ago," she waved me off indifferently. "This time… I think I'm coming to terms with the fact that I'm… actually pretty badass?"

"Huh?"

Nami looked at me with a dead serious expression. "Cross, the first thing that ran through my head when I heard we were going up against a gang was 'I hope I can actually get my hands on some before the others take them all down'. And even before that…" She started to count down on her fingers. "First I stood against Fleet Admiral Sengoku on my own terms, then I withstood the attack of a Warlord, and then I went up against a pirate on the same caliber as Gol D. Roger, all without missing a beat."

She turned and stared out at the horizon with a wide-eyed gaze that I now recognized as one of numb surprise. "I… I honestly think I'm finally starting to accept that I'm not normal anymore. I'm the second mate of the Straw Hat Pirates, one of the Thirteen Supernovas, and I'm… actually pretty powerful. And, in the end… I actually think I'm alright with that."

I stood up straighter, surprise written all over my face. "Really now? What, no freaking out about not being a 'normal, sane person' anymore?"

Nami scoffed. "If I were normal, we'd have sunk at Reverse Mountain, and if I was ever sane, this ocean's wrung it out of me." With a rueful chuckle, she shook her head. "But still… I think the real deciding factor of it all… was back on Thriller Bark with Kuma. Because if I was still the person I was when we entered the Line…"

She smiled endearingly at me and placed a hand on my shoulder. "Then I wouldn't have been able to stand up. At the least, Zoro would be dead and at the worst…" Nami shook her head. "So no. No, I'm not normal anymore."

Nami stood up and stamped the butt of her Clima-Tact in the deck, her Eisen Tempo billowing out. "I'm a badass, a mon—…no." She shook her head and donned a proud smirk. "I'm a demon, just like you. And I'm alright with that, because demons…" She turned to gaze out over the horizon, dreamy wistfulness in her eyes. "They're strong enough to protect their friends."

"…Damn straight, Weather Witch," I smiled, turning to gaze alongside her. "Damn straight."

A comfortable silence fell between us, lasting a few minutes until we made our way back to the main deck, where the rest of the crew waited, battle-ready. As we came within firing range of the Flying Fish Riders' base, the riders themselves were plainly obvious, their mounts visible around the edges of the island and ready to duck down or soar up at a moment's notice. And as we drew nearer, Duval himself emerged on his loyal buffalo, iron mask and all.

"Go, Sanji," Luffy calmly ordered.

"Gladly," Sanji declared, taking a running start and then leaping off the edge of the Sunny, spinning through the air before landing on the edge of the base.
Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the TDWS holding up scorecards.

"Where's Keimi?"

"Right over there," Duval grunted, jerking his helmet at the hanging cage in which a bundled form was propped up against the bars.

"Actually, she's in the THIRD HUT TO the right," Soundbite murmured in my ear. "BUT I THINK THEY'RE ON THE UP-AND-UP, THE MACROS ARE ALL HOGTIED TOO; it's just insurance. Kudos to them for the effort, though, METRONOME IN A DUMMY AND DECENT SOUNDPROOFING AND EVERYTHING."

"Mrr, yeah…" I cocked my head in acknowledgement. "Makes sense. Duval's an idiot, believe me, but one thing he's not is stupid…" I slowly hung my head in despair. "Which, actually, describes a disturbing number of people in my life, oy vey…"

Down on the pier, Sanji lit his cigarette and graced Duval with a glower that was noticeably less heated than before. "So, you do have some honor, then," he said. "Alright, one last question before we get to the fighting: why the hell do you want my head so badly?! Look, if I kicked your ass back on Baratie, I'm sorry, but you probably had it—"

"You… don't remember?"

Sanji blinked. "Er, no? Should I?"

A deep, mildly hysterical chuckle, much akin to powdered glass, wafted out of the mask. "Oh, I'm going to enjoy this, Black Leg. You'll scream so hard your mouth splits before you die."

Snorting, Sanji crossed one arm behind his back and used the other to beckon Duval forward. "Yeah yeah, nothing I haven't heard before. Let's get this over with."

"Yes, let's," Duval growled, holding up what looked to be a remote trigger of some kind.

Sanji, recognizing it for what it was, dashed forward. Of course, there was no way possible that he was fast enough to stop a button press, and when several hole-studded cylinders popped up on the sides of the pier he was already changing direction. With a whirr and a click, metal darts shot out of their launchers, Sanji ducking, weaving, and leaping around them. And a good thing, too, because hissing smoke rose wherever they struck.

"Poison," Sanji grunted as he landed, before leaping forward under a barrage of harpoons that Duval had just launched.

"Right you are, Black Leg!" Duval roared. "And you won't—"

"Hey, I remember that smell. He's using that Scorpion poison stuff Crocodile used," Luffy noted from the Sunny.

"Oh, good, I should have some antidote left…" Chopper sighed in relief.

"Tarnation!"

"Concasse!"

Anything else Duval might have said was lost when Sanji's heel nearly consummated a date with his face, instead slamming into his harpoon launcher. Impressively, the thing did not break, though it did
acquire a prominent dent.

Landing on Duval's mount's head, Sanji launched a barrage of kicks. Impressively, Duval blocked or ducked under a majority of them.

"Hurk!"

Less impressively, that still left several to hit him, and they all landed in his gut.

At this pained grunt from its master, the buffalo brayed and shook its head. Footing lost, Sanji flipped off the animal and right onto a trap door that opened the moment he touched it.

"Sky Walk!" Sanji barked, pushing off onto solid ground.

"Good job, Motobaro. Now, run him down!"

Snorting, the big black buffalo Duval was riding pawed at the ground and then charged Sanji. Charged him at speed of ten miles an hour, or thereabouts. Sanji rolled his eyes.

"Really? Oh, well. Poitrine—!"

"Not so fast!"

Eyes widening, Sanji jumped back from another spread of harpoons—just as two more launchers popped up, aiming right at him.

"Hahaha!" Duval cackled. "Midair, no way to run!"

"You think so?" Sanji wryly replied. "Aperitif!"

Razor air lashed out, neatly decapitating one of the launchers. The other survived long enough to fire its darts, but without its brother Sanji twisted in midair, feet rising up in the perfect position to kick the first harpoon of the latest salvo into the rest of them.

Appreciative ohs and ahs rose from the Sunny. Duval was less appreciative, judging from the audible grinding of his teeth.

"So, what else can you do?" Sanji asked.

One remote trigger was discarded, and another took its place.

*KABOOM!*

An explosion engulfed the part of the pier Sanji was standing on, spraying shattered wood every which way. The cook, though, was well above the blast, soaring into the air. With a cry of "Sky Walk!", he shot down, reaching Duval before he could react, and landing a heavy kick on the man's helmet.

The sound of a ringing bell filled the base. Most notably, though, his helmet went flying.

"Fine!" Duval barked. "Take… Take a good look at my scarred face!"

The helmet hitting the planking echoed over the entire base, audible mostly due to the complete and utter *silence* that had descended.

"I've waited for this day… In order to send you to hell, I set out to sea! But finding you has been a
problem, because the face on the wanted poster is different from the face of the person himself!"

Clearly, Duval was winding up for a pretty impressive rant. I almost wish I could have heard it.

"PFFHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAAAAA!" / "HOOHOHHOOHEEEHEEEEHAAHAHA!

Unfortunately for him, I couldn't be made to give half a fuck on account of how I was absolutely, positively busting my gut at the sight of Duval's frickin' brilliant face, PFFHAHAHAHA!

I'M SORRY, BUT EVEN TO THIS DAY I CAN'T THINK OF THAT WONDERFUL, WONDERFUL MOMENT WITHOUT CRACKING UP! PFFHAHAHAHA! IT WAS ALL JUST SO BRILLIANT!

S-Seriously, seriously, you know how up until now I've been giving Oda-sensei a hard time about how his art can't match up to reality? Well, in this case, he got it exactly right! Down to the last detail, Duval's face looked like… like—PFFHAHAHAHA! OH MY GOD HE JUST LOOKED SO! FREAKIN' STUPID! PFFHAHAHAHA!

But ah, ah, before you judge me too harshly for laughing at another man's… unfortunate lot in life… let me claim thusly in my defence:

"MWAAHAHAHAAYA!"

I was so not the only one howling like a maniac.

Seriously, at least I was standing up. Merry had collapsed, she was laughing her ass off so hard. And it wasn't just her!

"YOHOO! YOHOO!

Brook was busy rolling on the deck, pounding his bony knuckles on the grass. "M-My gut—! No, my sides—! Can't breathe—! Oh for the love I'm laughing too hard to think of a good skull joke! YOHOO!"

"HAHAHA!" Boss was wheezing like a chimney, leaning against the railing for support. "A-A duel to the death for honor is a Man's Romance… " He threw his head back, cackling like a Romanian vampire. "BUT THIS IS DEFINITELY A MAN'S NIGHTMARE RIGHT HERE! HAHAHA!"

"GO, BO—AHAAAA!" the cackling pile of blubber and shells that was once our ship's guard howled.

"Wow…" Conis covered her mouth in awe. "They look just like each other!"

"Like two peas in a pod," Zoro calmly agreed.

"Ohh, hon—ey?" Su cut herself off mid-word, glancing off to the side with narrow(er) eyes before hopping off our gunner's shoulder. "Chopper, can I see you for a second?"

"Huh?" The reindeer looked up from… whatever madness he'd been scribbling in his notebook before shrugging and following the fox to who-knows-where.

"Must not laugh, must not laugh, laughing will make daddy oh so cross and start a war!" Vivi repeated to herself, teeth clamped on her thumb's knuckle with almost religious fervor.

"Exshept thish time you won't shtawt a waw, wemembah?"
"…oh, right. HAHAAA! I'M SO SORRY, SANJI, BUT-BUT-BAHAHAHA!"

"-(___)" Gif's eyes flashed gleefully, searing the scene into her memory.

From Sanji's expression, he so wanted to cuss us all out. But given that a handful of the ladies on the crew were laughing just as hard…

"I am conflicted…" he muttered. Then his eyes locked on me and his blank expression became one of undiluted rage. "Conflicted because I don't know whether to murder you now or after I deal with this. Either way, Jeremiah 'Voice of Anarchy' Cross? You are a dead man walking."

"Drag me down to the ninth circle and out through Satan's ass, I couldn't care less, I'm dying happy today! PFHAHAHA!"

"RRRRRAAAGH! YOU DARE!?"

Apparently Sanji wasn't the only one intent on making me suffer today.

"You little pricks! You dare to laugh at my misery!? The hell you bastards brought down on me!?" Duval bellowed, waving his harpoon gun in our general direction. "I was gonna let you go, but now once I'm done with this life-ruining bastard, I—!"

CRUNCH!

"—GWUH!?"

"Shut—!" THWACK! "Up—!" SMACK! "You—!" CRUNCH! "Idiot!" "CONCUSS!" "AND YOU STAY OUT OF THIS, ESCARGOT!"

Panting, Sanji removed his foot from Duval's skull, letting the former mafia boss collapse in an unconscious heap.

"You ever think of changing your hairstyle?!" he snapped. "Growing a beard? Anything?!"

"W'ld… ruin… m' h'ndsome l'ks…" the swollen-faced bandit boss slurried out.

As one, the Flying Fish Rider audience slapped their fists in their palms and gaped in dawning realization.

"Really?! How stupid are—Ugh, forget this," Sanji grumbled, glaring at the downed Duval. "Stay unconscious for a bit. I'll deal with you in a minute." With that, he blurred from the dock, reappearing on the railing to loom over me with a blazing glare. "Any last words, Monsieur dead man?"

I paused in my laughing, thought long and hard, and then I looked Sanji, Black Leg Sanji, third strongest on our crew, dead in the eye and smiled. "I," I announced without shame. "Have been waiting for this since Water 7, and I was not disappointed."

CRACK!

"Pfahaha!" I giggle-cackled as I rolled on the deck from the punt Sanji had delivered unto me. "Pfaha—ow!— hahaha! Argh, damn—pff!—damn it Sanji, did you have to kick me in the ribs?! It hurts when I laugh!"

"Yeah, and I did it because you wouldn't stop laughing!"
"I-I can't help it! This is just so! Fucking! Hilari—!

THWACK!

That one actually made me black out. When I finally came back around, it was to the sound of much rejoicing. It only took a moment for me to connect the dots, though it took a bit longer for me to get back up and see the proof with my own eyes: the Bishōnen Duval flexing before his cheering men while the rest of the crew looked on with varying degrees of interest. Sanji, for his part, was giving the made-over mob boss an odd mixture of boredom and satisfaction.

"Sooo…” I drew his attention with a tentative cough, tugging at my collar when he glared down at me. "Yooou gave him the facelift?"

Sanji's cheek twitched viciously. "I was going to ask you if it would work or if it would kill him, but then I decided that both were acceptable outcomes," he responded darkly.

"Er…” I swallowed heavily. "Right. Acceptable. Let's go with that."

"More importantly… HEY, MORON!" Sanji barked at Duval.

"What? You called me handsome?" he responded, winking at oh that is not considered winking in any part of the multiverse!

If the full-body shudder that ran through our cook was anything to go by, he agreed. "If you don't give us back Keimi right now, I'm still going to kick your ass inside out!" Sanji paused for a second, and then redoubled his scowl. "And your face, too!"

Duval's expression flashed panic, and then snapped right back into a warm smile. "Of course, of course, she's free to go! Honestly, now that I'm so dashing, the whole thing seems foolish!"

"'Now'?!" Donny hissed incredulously.

"Ryota, go get her."

"Right away, Head," one Rider saluted, running for the building in which they were keeping Keimi.

"He's in for a nasty SURPRI-ISE~" Soundbite snickered with a wicked grin.

"Huh?" I glanced at the gastro-ass. "What are you—?"

"AAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!" the Rider suddenly wailed in horror, running back out of the hut. "HEAD, SHE'S GONE!"

"WHAT?!" Duval roared, his handsome features turning fearful. Then they turned ferocious. "Wait, that's also where we were keeping—! Damn it, the Macros!"

He raised his head, and fear promptly replaced his outrage again at the sight of Luffy and Sanji glaring at him. "Y-Y-Young Masters, please don't be angry. Fishmen can't outpace our Flying Fish, we'll track them to Sabaody and get her back. A-And of course, you're free to come with us!"

Soundbite cocked his eyestalk as he smirked at the gangboss. "CONGRATULATIONS, you pass the sincerity test."

All eyes turned back to Soundbite, who rolled his eyestalks before jabbing them at a spot near the building where Keimi had been. "YOU WERE RIGHT, the Macros TRIED TO TAKE HER. That
doesn't mean they succeeded."

"Aye! And we made damn sure of it too!"

All attention turned to one of the base's alleyways where a Heavy Point Chopper was holding Keimi in his arms and had three bound and gagged fishmen beneath his foot, with Su resting contently on his hat!? 

…eh, I wasn't even that surprised at this point. Still…

"Dare I even ask how this came about?"

"Weeeell," Chopper trailed off as he scratched the back of his head sheepishly.

~Ten Minutes Earlier~

Macro warily eyed the blitz still ongoing in the base's bay from the dubious safety of behind a corner. Still, the fight didn't look to be winding down anytime soon. "Come on, come on!" he hissed at his crewmates. "We gotta beat it while they're still busy beating each other's brains out!"

"I told ya we never shoulda messed with these dumbasses!" Gyaro whispered harshly, narrowing his eyes; even narrower than usual, to be clear. "That Duval was always known as a moron even before the whole 'false bounty' thing! This is your fault!"

"And we woulda done so much better going up against Hachi, Kuroobi, and Chew?!!" Macro snarled back, shoving his fanged face in Gyaro's pinched one. "You can stow that 'Goldfish Fencing' malarkey, because we both know that his six would dice your one in seconds!"

"Why you—!"

TH-THWACK!

"OW!" the two yelped in tandem, falling back clutching their aching skulls.

"Cram it, the both of ya," Tansui grumbled through his lantern jaw. "We're out, we're gone. Now c'mon, let's get the merchandise-" He emphasized the word by shrugging the struggling sack in his hands onto his shoulder. "To Sabaody. Once we split the money, we won't have ta deal with each other ever again."

Macro ground his teeth indignantly. "Ergh, the day I get told off by a moron like you... fine, fine!" He threw his hands up in defeat, stomping towards the ocean. "Let's just get back to our ship before anyone—!"

"He-llo, boys."

The fishmen all froze at the voice that suddenly sounded out in front of them, in spite of the open, clear ocean surrounding them. It took a minute for them to consider looking down, at which point they finally saw the small, white, ever-snarky form of the Straw Hats' pet fox.

"Please, please tell me that you're either the special kind of stupid who underestimates harmless-looking critters like me," Su pleaded with brazen glee and grin. "Or that you're desperate enough to try your luck anyway. I really want it to be one of the two."

Before either of the stupid underlings could respond, the desperate captain stomped his foot to loom over the fox.
"You really think you can take all three of us?" Macro scoffed.

The fox tilted her muzzle ever-so-innocently. "All of you?" Su inquired sweetly. "Tempting, truly it is, but naaaah. I'll just be playing second fiddle in this hoedown."

The Macro Pirates all blinked in confusion, but before they could wonder what she was talking about, a shadow fell over the three of them. Acting on their Grand Line-honed instincts, the trio spun around, expecting the worst… and were befuddled to find a mere three-foot silhouette that bore cyan eyes and a biiiig smile instead of the massive behemoth they were expecting.

"He'll be the one beating your skulls like bongo drums," the fox concluded.

"Good eve-ning!" the midget drawled casually.

The two Macros to recognize the silhouette and connect it to the very well-known name and bounty, stared at the silhouette in silence. Stunned, slack-jawed, terrified silence.

The one who wasn't that intelligent, however, chose to remove all doubts in regards to his own intelligence. "And how’s he gonna do—?" Tansui began.

The hulking arowana-fishman's composure crumbled when 'Spark of Genius' Tony Tony Chopper snapped into his Heavy Point, maintaining his grin as he towered over the fishmen and cracked his knuckles with a few idle flexes of his fingers. "You have my thanks, Su," the third of the Demon Trio grinned malevolently. "I've been looking for a chance to brush off my pugilistic capabilities and pair them with my intellect, and you've provided me with the most acceptable targets I could imagine!"

"No-ho-ho, thank you!" Su purred, dropping into a ready stance, her tail waving eagerly. "Now… allow me to start things off by showing these raging bastards my PEARLY WHITES! EAT IT, CHUMPS!"

"AGH—!

We draw a veil over the scenes of indescribable carnage, due to intense ultraviolence, general vulgarity, and the fact that half of the techniques performed by Tony Tony Chopper were illegal in the great state of Texas.

We humbly apologize for the inconvenience.

~Some time later~

SPLASH!

Soaked in freezing cold water, Macro jerked awake with a panicked yelp. "GWAGH! Tansui, you damn—!" At that point, he went quiet, because in addition to the yelp and the awakening, he'd tried to clock his dumbass of a crewmate. Key word being tried, given they were chained to his sides and all that. "What the hell's going on here!?"

It was at this point that the macropharynx fishman noticed two important things. First, when he tried to look around his head knocked back against two other individuals he was back to back with, who he had a sneaking suspicion were his crewmates, which put him in even deeper shit than he'd initially suspected.

And second… second was the ominous weight of a metal collar around his neck. Specifically,
the *watertight* metal collar that he and his boys had whipped up. Made so that when it was locked around another fishman's gills, they wouldn't get any bright ideas about escaping.

Considering what the Macros had used those collars for in the past, the fact that they were wearing them now could only mean they were in the deepest, direst of shit possible.

Keeping his head still, Macro glanced around in growing panic. Then, abruptly, he stopped, finally grasping where he was. It was some sort of brig, unsurprisingly. And there were a few human figures standing just out of the light. His eyes picked up some sort of deformation on one's shoulder, a hat on another one, and an unorthodox-looking staff and an aura hanging around the third—

Oh… oh Oceanus' barnacle-crusted balls, they weren't in deep shit. They'd dug clean through to shit bedrock.

"So," the voice that was the bane of their business drawled ever so casually, the word undercut by the *tink-tink-tink* of his fingers drumming on his elbows. "Do you intend to take what's coming to you with what little dignity you have left, or are you gonna squander that away too?"

"You won't get away with—!" THWACK! "ACK!"

Macro ground his teeth as he ignored the throbbing pain from slamming his head against Gyaro's. "Just get it over with," he demanded.

"Psh," the witch scoffed, the noise accompanied by a wave of ozone. "You only *wish* you were getting off that easy. No, we have something much worse in mind."

The one who had to be the Captain ignored his crewmates' comments in favor of glancing over his shoulder. "So. What do you want us to do with these three?"

For a moment the Macros wondered who the rubbery human was talking to. Then the person came into view, staring at them with an uncharacteristically blank expression, and the three fishmen realized with complete and utter certainty that this time… this time there would be *no* mercy waiting for them.

"You were going to sell me," Keimi stated blandly.

Macro glanced nervously back at his boys. "Uh…"

The mermaid's gaze narrowed into a glare. "Like you've sold dozens of fishmen and women over the *past five years.""

Aaaand just like that Macro felt his already clammy skin drain of blood.

"*In case it wasn't clear, WE FOUND YOUR BOOKS,*" Soundbite said ever so tauntingly.

"Yeeesss, and now that I consider the extent of your crimes..." the big-mouthed pirate stated contemplatively before leaning towards the mermaid. "Oh, Keimi, a thought occurs. You said that Chew and Kuroobi are working at Takoyaki 8 on parole courtesy of Jinbe, correct?"

Keimi glanced at him. "Yes?"

"Which makes Jinbe their parole officer, right?"

"Yes."

The pirate slowly turned his razor-sharp expression on the captives. "Which means, as their
employer, in case of emergencies or them breaking parole… you have Jinbe's snail number, right?"

The Macros all saw the moment that the connection clicked in Keimi's eyes, and they never forgot it. Because right after, a fire lit in the mermaid's eyes. A fire that straight-up murdered the last of their hopes in cold blood.

"…right. Can I borrow Soundbite for a moment?" she asked, her tone as dead as the rock her expression seemed to be hewn from. She didn't even look at Soundbite as she accepted the snail. She was far too busy glaring at the sun symbols burned into the Macros' sorry hides.

"Ohohoh, please, take all the time in the world, I insist," Cross assured her. "Really, I want them to stew in the thought of just what the Knight of the Sea is going to do to them."

By this point, the three fishmen had gone deathly grey, much to the satisfaction of their captors. The witch was looking especially pleased at the sight, but when Cross casually strolled by her she glanced towards him.

"For all that their reactions are proving what you said right, Jinbe seems to have a lot of connections to evil, slaving fishmen," she remarked neutrally.

"Normally I might explain," Cross replied, shrugging. "But since it looks like we'll be meeting him two years sooner than I expected, that story is for him to tell. Now… time for the coup de grâce."

Cross strolled right up to the cage's bars and shoved his grin in their faces. "In any other circumstance I'd call you dead fish walking… but the fact is, nobody you're gonna see any time soon is going to be so merciful as to grant you the release of sweet, sweet death." He took on a few more shiny, malevolent molars. "No… no, you boys are going to live for a very, very long time. Ain't that just spectacular?"

And that was when the screaming started in earnest.

-o-

As we emerged onto the deck, we were met with a crowd of faces absolutely marred with disgust.

"Eesh…" I winced, recoiling slightly from the veritable maelstrom of fury before me. "Dare I ask what got stuck in all of your collective craws?"

"That would be my doing, Cross."

I turned to see Robin, whose visage was the calmest of them all. Which is to say she was spinning her knife like a baton and looked fit to shiv someone. "Upon noticing the sun tattoos that they bore, I got a little… ah…"

"Stabby?" Soundbite provided.

"Blunt but accurate. Naturally, my behavior drew attention, and just as naturally, it led to a bit of…" The spinning stopped, and the knife's structure creaked ominously. "Storytelling. I'm sure you know more than I do on the subject, but as it is, the public record on the Sun Pirates provides some excellent context."

"Forget 'race' traitor, those three are the most disgusting traitors to every kind of decency in existence!" Vivi raged, a minor dust devil blustering up around her.

"Any chance I could talk to Keimi for a few minutes?" Boss grunted, idly bouncing his hook in his
palm. "I have a few questions I'd like to ask her, regarding fishman anatomy. Professional curiosity, you understand."

"Likewise," Chopper and Donny added.

"There'll be no need for that, I assure you," I said, dismissing the threats with wave of my hand. "If Robin already told you about the Sun Pirates, then you'll understand the significance of what we chose as their punishment: we're handing them off to Jinbe himself."

And just like that the mood... well, it didn't lighten, per se, but at least it sharpened, so that was an improvement.

Well, almost everyone sharpened, anyway.

"Ah, you mean we're going to be meeting Jinbe ourselves? As in, the Warlord, Knight of the Sea, and crewmate of Arlong? Today?" Billy clarified. He waddled up to Nami and gave her an uncertain look. "Are... are you sure you want to do that?"

"I... no, not entirely," she admitted after a moment's hesitation, kneading her brow with the butt of her hand. "No matter what Cross says, he still let Arlong loose, I can't just forget that..." She then cracked her eyes open in a forceful glare. "But at the same time, I need to do this. He knew Arlong; in fact, he probably knew him better than anyone alive. Which means that I can look him in the eye and get something I've wanted for eight years."

"And... that would be?" Leo asked.

"The same thing that every survivor wants to know," Conis quietly answered. "An answer for 'why' that isn't just 'hate'."

Nami made a gesture of agreement before turning her attention back to the starfish. "So... how long have we got left?"

"About... an hour or so, I would say," Pappug responded nervously.

"Anyone have a good distraction in the meantime, then?" Nami asked.

"I have one, actually." Sanji said, turning to me with a murderous fire in his eye. "So, Cross, would you mind explaining exactly how keeping that abominable picture intact was, and I quote, 'vital for our future'?!"

A memory of a spherical tank in a hellish auditorium sprang up in my mind, and I matched Sanji's gaze blaze for blaze.

"You really think I would pull something like this just for my own amusement?" I demanded. And even I held my serious expression for a few seconds before busting out snickering! "Alright alright, fine, that was part of it, but the rest of the reason I did it is that the chain of events that came from that poster resulted in Duval and the Flying Fish Riders becoming our allies."

"Mmph," Sanji grunted. "And we needed a group like them on our side because—?"

"Eh..." I spared an uneasy glance towards Keimi and Pappug, one that I knew that Sanji saw, before answering. "Well, we're headed to Sabaody, remember? The place is a nightmare and a half to navigate, and I'd rather have someone who's familiar with us just in case, you know?"

For whatever reason, that answer just seemed to put Sanji even more on edge than he already was,
though if he understood the real reason that was no surprise. "Alright, Cross. I can live with that," he admitted, his anger almost completely gone. Almost, however, in that he was still staring at me. "But at the same time, not telling me about what was actually underneath that guy's mask—"

"—falls under the category of 'harmless', thank you very much," I cheerfully replied, grinning shamelessly. "But in all seriousness, that was the only reason I didn't ping my contacts; I can have them fix your poster any time now!" I smiled winningly (and more than a little fearfully) as I whipped out my Vision Dial and held it up. "Just strike a pose and we'll get started!"

"...Cross, wait."

I rolled my eyes. "No, I won't help you get a white horse and roses blowing in the breeze. That's someone else's schtick and, no offense, no matter how much it kills me to say it, they pull it off better than—!"

"Not that," he interrupted, his expression grim and hesitant, something clearly weighing on his mind. Zoro, the very picture of boredom, scoffed and dug his pinky in his ear. "Cook, if you're not going to get Cross back for the picture, just—"

"Zoro." Against all odds, the swordsman froze under Sanji's gaze. "Just this once? Shut it."

Slowly, Zoro turned around and regarded Sanji with wide eyes. Then, rather than reach for his swords, he instead sat himself against the nearest mast and stared straight at Sanji, giving his rival his full, undivided attention.

Sanji nodded, turning back to the rest of the crew, scanning over everyone before settling on our guests. "Keimi, dear, could you and Pappug give us a few minutes?" he requested in the most polite tone he could manage. Which, considering that he was talking to a freakin' mermaid, was wildly out of character for him.

"Say no more, lots of secret talks going on, we got it," the starfish remarked before Keimi could say anything, patiently leading her back inside. "Besides, I've got some new designs to work on anyway. Have fun with your skullduggery."

"Ooh, you mean the—?" Keimi started to ask, the closing door cutting her off.

Sanji looked my way and chopped his hand across his throat, prompting me to nod at Soundbite.

Once the buzz of static went up, Sanji sighed and bowed his head. With obvious trepidation, he walked over to a barrel and sat down on it with a tortured groan, teeth grinding as he massaged his brow.

"I never planned to bring any of this up again," he lamented, speaking as much to himself as he was to us. "And the only reason that I'm doing it now is that the past keeps taunting me no matter how much I try to stomp it down, over and over again. So, if my choices are keeping my mouth shut or being blindsided..."

He looked up at us and holy hell what the hell was squatting in his soul!? "You all need to understand something," he croaked. "You've all been reading my name wrong this whole time. My name... it's not Sanji. It's San-ji."

A case of the confused mutters broke out on deck, one that included me while I tried to figure out just what wait a—!? "San—? GRK!" I choked in horror, prompting looks of surprise from several others. "Number three... Mister PRINCE YOU'RE THIRD IN THE LINE FOR LEGITIMATE
A round of incredulous inhalations echoed throughout the crew as we all boggled at our crewmate.

Our crewmate who, for his part, took a sharp hit off his cigarette. "Bullseye, Cross… and a million miles off mark, at the exact same time." He exhaled a cloud of smoke before giving us all (even the women) a blistering glare. "Let me clarify first that Sanji is the only name I have; the man who I used to call my father disowned me and made me promise to never use his name again. Not like I'd ever want to; my mother is dead, and I don't have any good memories left of the rest of them that would make me want to say that we were related… except maybe my sister. But the point is…"

His fists clenched, smoke hissing from everywhere on his body.

"I was born to a family of Underworld mercenaries whose power once allowed them to conquer the North Blue," he explained, dragging the words out like they were barbed wire. "A family that has been trying to reclaim that power ever since they lost it and still rules over their own kingdom, complete with the Reverie invitation. I was born under the name…" And here he was wracked by a full-body shudder. "Of Vinsmoke."

Before anyone could say anything, a vacuum of a gasp snapped everyone's attention over to Vivi, who was staring at Sanji in complete stupefaction. "That explains how you moved from the North Blue to the East Blue, even though crossing the Red Line is a costly, difficult, almost impossible move for most civilians!" she babbled. Her eyes then widened as she looked Sanji over. "And now that I think about it… swirly eyebrows, one eye always hidden, suave but a complete mess around women—! You're exactly like your brothers!"

Sanji proceeded to simultaneously yelp in shock and choke on his cigarette. "WARK!?" Before anyone could do anything to help, though, the crazy bastard actually swallowed the damn thing, the better to quickly clear the passageway. "Y-You've met them!?"

Vivi's shock transitioned into a disgusted grimace as she shuddered at the memory. "Somewhat, yes. It was two years ago, at the last Reverie I attended before I went undercover. The entire time, Niji just would not stop hitting on me, and he was just terrible at it! I mean, you might be overblown, but at least you're a romantic! Him?! Eugh," she spat, sticking out her tongue in revulsion. "I swear, it was so painfully obvious that Judge had put him up to the whole thing, he even told me to my face that it was his mission to try and secure a political marriage with me when I asked! If it hadn't been for the risk of war, I would have broken my hand on his jaw…"

Sanji, for his part, looked like he was torn between dying by aneurysm or heart attack. "Why," he choked out. "Out of everyone at the Reverie. Would Judge choose you for a political marriage!? And why would he send Niji to do it!?"

Vivi, gestured at her hair for whatever reason, expression as dry as her homeland. "Your sperm-donor is a real romantic, Sanji, truly he is."

As curious as I was about why her hair made her an attractive marriage prospect to this 'Judge', I had something more important on the brain. There was one thing that really stood out to me from all of these revelations (besides the entire paradigm shift in regards to our cook, of course), and I took the liberty of clapping my armor-covered hand on Vivi's shoulder, who had the good grace to stiffen fearfully.

"So, Sanji," I tersely stated. "Let me guess: you're warning us about them now because they have a lot of destructive force at their beck and call?"
A nod and a grimace. "Judge put all of us through training that Zoro would be proud of from the day we were old enough to understand, and he disowned me because I was the runt of the litter. I don't doubt they've all only gotten stronger since then. And then we have the… armies." Sanji winced on that last one, which got a cocked eyebrow from me.

"Something you're not saying?"

Sanji flinched again, refusing to meet my gaze. "The… name of the Vinsmoke army is… Germa 66."

I practically swallowed my tongue I choked so hard. "Well… alright, better now than whenever I would have tried to approach them for an alliance. But getting back to my point." I emphasized my words with a pointed squeeze of Vivi's shoulder, eliciting a very nervous gulp from her. "To reiterate… Sanji looks exactly like his brothers, and his family is particularly infamous in the upper echelons of this world's nobility… which you were and still are intimately familiar with. So, Your Highness, tell me…"

My face contorted into a rictus of fury, and I sure wasn't the only one giving her the evil eye either.

"Why, in the name of every one of your mange-ridden deities, from Anubis to Wadjet, didn't you think to make the connection and mention this earlier?!"

"I… uh…" The princess shrank back from our collective glares. "It… slipped… my mind?"

I let loose a garbled slew of pejoratives, forcefully suppressing the urge to do something more physical. "Woman, if this weren't the single most critical piece of information I've learned since coming to this god-forsaken puddle and an extremely emotional moment besides, I would be choking a bitch right now!" I swore.

"So noted!" Vivi squeaked, literally breezing out of my grip and cowering behind Sanji. Who, by the way, looked thoroughly volca—uh… wait, no he didn't. He just looked befuddled.

"You… guys do remember what we were talking about, right?" the chef asked incredulously. "I… I lied to you all! My family are all monsters! Shouldn't you all be angry, o-or—!"

"Oh, oh! I recognize this bit!" I cut in, gleefully clapping my hands. "Can I do it, captain? Can I, can I?"

Luffy snickered and shot me a thumbs-up. "Go for it!"

"Joy!"

"Huh? What are you—!?! THWACK! "YEOW!" Sanji winced as I slammed my fist down over his skull.

"Stop being an idiot," I cheerfully informed him. "The past doesn't matter to us, and you came clean on your own. No matter what, you are and always will be our friend and crewmate, so don't you forget it! Got it?"

"Serious, Sanji, I thought you were supposed to be one of the smarter ones here," Usopp tsked.

"You came from a dark place and found your light with the Straw Hat Pirates. It's hardly the first time," Robin agreed.

"In addition, you must think twice when you contemplate using the word 'monster' to describe
people!" Brook chimed with a chastising (not to mention impossible) cluck of his (nonexistent) tongue. "I, for one, find the idea of being compared to the individuals you describe to be quite tasteless! And I don't even have a tongue! YOHOHO!"

"The skeleton's got a point," Franky nodded, jabbing his thumb at our musician. "We really should see about unionizing."

"Sorry, but I agree," Conis offered.

"And, getting back on subject, it's not like any of us were asking you to tell us that you were disowned and abandoned before you found Zeff," Merry added.

"Plus, in the end, at least you told us about this before things became pertinent, rather than when they were knocking down our door." Two guesses who that last bit was directed to, and the first two don't count.

Vivi opened her mouth, but closed it under the weight of everyone's stares.

Meanwhile, Sanji more focused on the first half. "You... really think we'll run into them down the line?" he asked nervously.

"Well..." I winced and wobbled my hand back and forth. "It seems likely? I never saw them myself, but then the story was still ongoing when I left. And what you're describing? A secondary tragic backstory, hidden behind the first? Well, that's just the kind of literary genius Oda would pull, which makes the likelihood of us running into them... not insignificant. Sorry."

Sanji grimaced and massaged his face in tortured resignation before nodding. "On some level, I always knew I'd see them again," he admitted, as much to himself as us. "A man like Judge... he's not the kind to let someone go, no matter what he says about it. Yeah, he'll definitely come..."

And with that, Sanji's hands snapped into tight fists, and the lawn blazed at his feet.

Just like that, our Sanji was back, familiar hellfire blazing in his eye.

"And when he does," he declared. "I swear, it'll be one of the last things him, his sons and his rotten nation do before I grind his world to dust beneath my heel and burn it all to ash."

THWACK!

"DAMN IT, LUFFY, WHAT WAS THAT FOR?!" he roared, actually bursting into flames.

"You said 'I' again!" Luffy chastised, giving him the patented 'you're an idiot' look. "It's 'we', you idiot! We're gonna kick his ass!"

Sanji took that in, the flames dying down. Then, bowing his head, he let out a chuckle. "Yeah... stupid. After Arlong and CP9, you'd think I'd know better." He looked back up, looked at me. "I can fill you in on the details of Germa later, Cross. But for now—?"

"Rush of bad memories, don't want to talk, no worries," I said in understanding. "Now, anyone else have any distractions for us?"

"Well, now that you mention it—!"

CLONK!

"We're good!" Raphey and Donny chorused, surreptitiously placing themselves in front of a
"Then let's hurry up and burn foam for Takoyaki!" I declared, glancing down at my partner. "Soundbite?"

"Yeh yeh."

The everpresent buzzing stopped, and Keimi and Pappug came out of the lounge, the mermaid giving us inquisitive looks and the starfish wandering off as he shuffled through a sheaf of papers.

"All done with your top-secret conversations of secrecy?" Keimi queried.

"Yup!" Luffy confirmed. "And now we're all really hungry! Come ooon!" He started pumping his fists. "I've had to sail with an untouchable octopus for days now! Daaays! Ta-ko-ya-ki! Ta-ko-ya-ki!"

Nami, for her part, gave our captain a long-suffering look before loosing a defeated sigh. "You heard the man: one thing on his mind and one thing only: takoyaki. If you'd be so kind as to lead the way?"

"Mm-hm!" Keimi nodded confidently. "Just stay on my tail, and we'll be there before you know it!"

And with that, the mermaid made her way to the edge of the Sunny, jumped back into the sea, and we were on our way!

(CHOMP!)

…right after we fished our guide out of another Sea King's gullet.

-0-

"Hm, and let's see here, this one's Urouge, the Mad Monk, who—oh, dear Cetus! That-That is just obscene!"

"Interesting reading, Pappug?"

"Gweh!?!" Pappug jumped in shock, flinging the papers he was flipping through to the winds. Or at least, they would have gone to the wind, had a metal-laden trunk not snatched them up before they could be whisked away.

"Well, what do we have here?" Funkfreed cocked an eyebrow as he looked the papers over. "Thinking of practicing the more literal brand of head-hunting?"

"Hmph!" Pappug snorted, pulling off a surprisingly nimble leap and snatching the papers back. "Hardly, I'm designer, not a fighter. But the fact is, knowing the big names is beneficial in any business, and not just for security."

The starfish tapped the poster's image. "You see, clothing is one of the few things that you can count on every sentient being having some interest in. And when the big names with gold by the literal ton come around, I want to be sure that I've got something that they'll want to buy!"

Funkfreed gave the poster Pappug was holding a flat look. "Yes… because he looks so interested in wearing shirts."

Pappug winced as he realized he'd placed Urouge's poster back on top and hastily shuffled the
"Alright, bad example, bad example… ah, but this one works much better!" He held up a new poster for the elephant to see.

"'Surgeon of Death', huh?" Funkfreed scratched his chin contemplatively. "Well, he's one of the more valuable Supernovas, so he probably has the money for it, but do you really think you can interest him, of all people, in fashion?"

"Oh, indubitably!" the designer nodded with confidence. "It will be no mean feat, mind you, but as it is I already have all the tools I require!" He tapped the top of the poster. "This article alone tells me all I need to know in regards to this young man's sense of apparel!" Humming thoughtfully, he began to amble off. "Though, it will take quite a few dives into quite a few libraries. Honestly, I don't know when I last saw a hat from the White City, but—GWAGH!"

The starfish yelped in panic when he was suddenly snatched off his legs and suspended upside down before a furiously intense gaze.

"He's wearing a what from where?!" Funkfreed demanded.

-0-

"…Hey, Cross? You're going to want to see this."

Sighing as I heard Merry's deliberately calm voice that promised nothing but good times beckon, I made my way up onto the bow.

I was pleasantly surprised to see Takoyaki 8 ahead of us. Keimi hadn't been exaggerating, the place was doing incredibly well for itself: it was as big as I assumed the Baratie to be!

I also wasn't surprised to see the Cannibal approaching on the horizon, seeing how complicated even navigating a short distance in Paradise could be, not mentioning how long Goldenweek must have taken.

However, I was completely surprised to see the small craft that was already docked at the floating restaurant. It looked more like a palanquin than a ship, flying a jolly roger with nine serpent heads surrounding a skull, and with a large serpent towering alongside it.

"Ookay, so the Boa sisters took up my recommendation, though I'm guessing only one of them is here," I nodded numbly. "That's… actually convenient, I was hoping to talk to them in person."

"Uh, Cross?" Merry eyed me warily. "What about the other boat?"

I blinked at her in confusion; there was one other craft there, sure, but it was a pretty plain boat. The only remotely noteworthy feature was a small, triangular, all-crimson flag flying from the top. "What about it?"

Soundbite boggled at me, then sighed and slumped in defeat. "Guess that's a SPOT CHECK YOU MISSED… THA..."
Soon enough, we pulled ourselves in to dock next to the adolescent Yuda and stood ready to enter the establishment's door.

Nami was at the front, reaching for the knob… and reaching… and reaching… until finally she looked back at me. "Could you…?"

I nodded, gently pushing her hand away and stepping inside.

And… there they were. Chew and Kuroobi, lieutenants of Saw-Tooth Arlong, tormentors of Cocoyashi Village and the whole Conomi Islands, vicious bastards and bigots both… and currently, very beaten-down looking busboys for their far more successful friend.

And when I say beaten-down, I mean they hadn't even seen me yet. Eesh, how tired were they? … oh, right, there were Koala and Sandersonia chatting like gal pals in the back, with Hachi hanging around them. Yeah, that'd do it.

I raised my fist to cough—

"First an old friend and ex-slave that became a Revolutionary, then a high ranking officer of a Warlord's crew… now all we need is a Marine walking in and this day will be perfect!" I heard the ray mumble sarcastically.

—aaand I promptly paused because no way in hell could I pass up a straight line like that. Glancing around, I spied a Transponder Snail near the despondent ray, and pointed it out to Soundbite, who nodded with a snigger as I walked up to him, the karate-capable fishman so out of it he totally ignored me.

"Hey, Kuroobi," Chew started to respond as he finished bussing. "I've been thinking—"

Whatever he was thinking, it was lost to history when the ray's Snail rang, and he groaned as picked it up. "This is Takoyaki 8, how can I help you," he said, his dull tone emphasizing his tiredness even more.

"You can look up, for starters," I said dryly.

The ex-pirate's head snapped up like he'd been struck by lightning, eyes bulging from their sockets.

"Jeremiah Cross," Kuroobi breathed. Beside him, Chew had already gone rigid with shock and was staring at me just as incredulously.

I noticed everyone else in the room looking towards me, but I kept my focus on the two who were keeping my friend from coming in.

"In the flesh," I responded with a glare, making my displeasure with their very existences very clear. "And while I'm certainly no Marine, I'd like to think that given the situation, I'm a close second. Gotta say, I never expected to see you here."

I was vaguely aware of the sound of someone coming in behind me… Keimi and Pappug based on the sounds of their movements. They didn't get far inside before stopping.

"Uh…" Keimi raised a finger as she took in the room's mood. "I… did tell you all that I was bringing guests, right?"

Chew let out a strangled wheeze, his already clammy countenance becoming… well, clammier.
"...hello? Will someone explain to me what's going on here?" Pappug asked uncomfortably. "Anyone?"

"You're gonna want to take that up with these two," I dryly informed them. "Specifically, the exact details of why they were in prison and have a Warlord as a parole officer in the first place?"

The two started to stammer out an answer—


That they never got that far was most likely due to Nami finally walking behind me, staring down the fishmen with a stormy expression and aura. Billy and the rest of the native East Bluers surrounded her with weapons at the ready. Naturally, Zoro and Sanji were in front.

"N-Nami..." Hachi choked out, his eyes glued on our navigator.

"Hey, half-rate hors-d'oeuvres, remember us?" was Sanji's ever so polite greeting.

"YOU—!" the pair snarled in synch, surging out of their seats—

SLAM!

Or at least, they tried to surge, but only got about a foot each before Hachi shot across the room and rammed their foreheads into the floorboards.

"I am so sorry for my employees' rudeness, and I assure you, these two will apologize for their unapprovable behavior," Hachi stated, shooting scathing glares down at his friends. "Or at least, they will if they have any intention on remaining employed and unincarcerated, do I make myself clear!?"

I winced and glanced away from the display. "Well, this is awkward."

"I agree, I expected our first meeting to be under better circumstances than these."

I turned to meet the tall, green-haired form of Boa Sandersonia. I inclined my head.

"A pleasure nonetheless, Boa Sandersonia," I said formally.

"So, there is some respect for authority there?" Koala mused, coming up beside her.

"I remind you that I'm crewmates with a princess," I responded evenly. "I give royalty as much respect as they deserve." I paused and glanced back up at the amazoness. "Any chance your big sister has stopped kicking small animals yet?"

"She is actually making progress," the Zoan confided with a triumphant grin... one that swiftly crumbled in despair. "She only steps on them now..." She then blinked, glancing back at Koala, who'd mirrored the motion.

"She knows as much as you do," I confirmed.

"Oh, that's a relief," they sighed together.

"But in other news..." Sandersonia said. "Care to explain why, despite your recommendation, there seems to be some bad blood between the fishmen and your crew?"

"Ehh..." I grumbled sotto voce, rubbing the back of my neck. "We ran into them early on as
enemies, and I was only expecting the octopus to be here. He's forgivable, the manta and... smelt-whatever much less so. Point is, this-" I waved my hand at the ongoing display at the front desk. "Is not a good situation."

"And it is about TO GET SO MUCH WORSE!" Soundbite gleefully announced.

I snapped an incredulous look at him. "The hell are you—?"

DING-LING! "Hello there! I'm here to make a mass order, I think we called earlier to confirm —Cross?!" SHING! "RORONOA!"

As Koala and Sandersonia's expressions flattened, I turned towards the door with a sharply rising sense of dread, and bore witness to none other than Lieutenant Junior Grade Tashigi standing right there, blade drawn and murder in her eyes, and a wolf-rabbit thing with a hammer in one paw standing behind her and slapping its other paw to its face.

What. No, seriously, what!?

"...So," I began weakly. "A Revolutionary, a Warlord's sister, and a Marine all walk into a bar with the Straw Hat Pirates."

"...and then what happens?" Keimi asked.

"WELL, WE'RE ABOUT TO FIND OUT, AREN'T WE?!"

Cross-Brain AN: We are evil geniuses and we love it. Though rest assured, that evilness by no means extends to butterflying away the Gaon Cannon. We may have stopped its canon usage, but you have our word on this: we will be using it before Sabaody, and it will be at least as epic as it was in canon.

Patient AN: Oh, and by the way, remember the omake that Storysmith put out alluding to this outcome, and that we said we couldn't change our plans to include? Well... that's because our plans already included them. Remember when we said that Evan's omakes weren't the last ones we'd ask our fans to write for us? We were involved the whole time.

BrokeNZone AN: Hey, I'm gonna let you three finish up this chapter, but first I got a announcement to make... Hello, readers! My name is BrokeNZone, the new Vocal piece of the Cross-Brain, and I've come to join in on the fun. Though I am but an apprentice and understudy to the trio as a writer, that is not the main reason I'm here. So a drum roll, if you please...

Coming soon... from the 'BrokeNZone Audio' Youtube channel is... 'Audio Bites! The Official 'This Bites!' Audiobook.' Now this will be a lengthy endeavour, I'm sure. But the best part is that we will be wanting you, the fans, to help volunteer your voices in making this project a reality. Voice actors, amateur or experienced, are welcome to come audition.

Spoken AN: Auditions for the audiobook will be taking place on Thiscord, the official This Bites! Discord, reachable at invite link tqeby9j. Personally, I'm looking forward to the Lindy audition I'm gonna put forward, "Vaguely New Englandish Sexy Bass" is something I can do passably well, and there's not something I ever saw myself saying.

Cross-Brain AN: A welcome addition he is, and we're looking forward as much as the rest of
you to what comes from his generous efforts.

…And one last note. Just to avoid any complaints, credit to Saphroneth for the first part of the 'indescribable carnage' line used earlier in this chapter.
So, let me set the stage. The canon Straw Hat Pirates (including Merry), Billy, my partners, and myself. Two of our most dangerous allies, that nobody else on the crew had met before, both of whom had connections to the old Sun Pirates, looking on with interest tempered by resigned bemusement. Three ex-Sun and Arlong Pirates, the strongest and only repentant one of which was pinning the other two to the ground. One somewhat ditzy mermaid and a genius designer starfish who looked mostly confused by the whole scene.

And one blue-haired Marine swordswoman glaring at our first mate with her sword drawn, plus her strange maul-toting animal companion. Said first mate looked rather flat-footed, which did not prevent him from drawing Wado halfway out of its sheath. Let’s also not forget that we had three more ex-Sun Pirates on the Sunny, due to whom we would soon meet the past royal knight, present Warlord, and future Straw Hat.

Bottom line? The punchline was neither concise nor particularly funny. Though there were a few laughs to be had before the drama took over.

“Oi!” Hachi shouted, still keeping a firm hand each on Kuroobi and Chew, which left four free to gesticulate and cross in denial. “No swordfighting in the restaurant except during the squinja migration! And I don’t see any black-clad squid around here!”

…wait, what.

“I’m sorry, the what?” Koala asked the unspoken but generally shared question.

“The squinja migration,” Hachi repeated, as if that explained everything. “Every spring and fall, the squinja clans migrate through here on the way in between their hidden villages.”

“…OK, you can’t tell me now that I’m not dreaming,” I said, pinching the bridge of my nose in an unsuccessful attempt to wake up.

Through my fingers, I saw Tashigi visibly pondering something. Whatever it was, though, she soon discarded it in favor of an even tighter combat stance. “I’ll pay whatever damage we cause out of my
own pocket, just let me fight—!

“**Kyuun,**” the rabbit-wolf thing behind her growled before leaping up, slapping his paw upside the back of her head and—

~o~

“**Lieutenant, are you sure about this? You’re not going to have more than pocket change for the rest of the year if you buy all of this,**” a uniformed Marine asked around the package of weights in his arms.

“I need to improve myself to have any chance to achieve my goals,” Tashigi firmly replied, carefully balancing her own packages as her other hand emptied her pockets of cash. “I don’t care what it costs me, I will become strong enough to face him!”

In short order, she led a small group of Marines out of the store, all laden with arms full of exercise gear. In equally short order, they were helping Tashigi pick her own burden up after she tripped on a stray pebble.

~o~

—in the space of a couple of seconds, downloading a burst of memories into… pretty much everyone’s mind’s eye, if the way everyone was reeling back was anything to go by.

“What in the actual—?” I started to ask.

“— **skin you alive,** you walking handbag! How many times have I told you to stop doing that!?”

My attention was snagged by Tashigi, who had just finished snarling at her companion. Which, need I remind you, was something she generally reserved for Zoro. Said companion’s reaction was to blatantly yawn at her, one paw covering its mouth.

“Devil Fruit?” was the obvious question.
Fuming, Tashigi spun around and actually saw just how many people were actually present. Her eyes darted across the crowd before landing on me. “You… don’t recognize him?” she asked carefully.

I took a moment to think about it, then shrugged casually. “I… think you mentioned him to me once before? The wolf-rabbit thing that was being difficult, ri—?”

CLANG!

“GAH!” I yowled, hopping on the leg that didn’t feel like it’d just taken a sledgehammer to the shin. Which wasn’t that far off, judging from the size of the maul the wolf-rabbit thing was holding in his paws, but still! “How the hell did that hurt, you little shit?! I’m wearing at least an inch of armor here!” I demanded.

“Quarter-inch.”

“BITE ME, LONGNOSE!”

The wolf-rabbit’s response was to chuff in a clearly satisfied manner. The smug smirk on his face was a big clue.

“To answer your question,” Tashigi spoke up, drawing a sidelong glare from me. “He didn’t actually hit you. What he did was revive the memory of past pains in your leg, making it feel like you were reliving that pain all over again. Reviving memories is his ability. Though, I should mention that this guy isn’t an Ability-user.”

She swept her hand over the fluffball. “Allow me to introduce Popora, chief of, as he calls it, The Sealed Island. He’s essentially a consultant for the Marines who’s been helping us with his mnemonic abilities…” She scowled at the hybrid creature, who returned the look with a flat stare. “As often as he hinders us with them.”

“Well, it looks to me like this time he decided to help you, seeing as he just showed us all that you’re flat broke,” Hachi cut in, giving her a decidedly unimpressed look.
Tashigi twitched before turning her glare back on Zoro. “Then I’ll clean dishes if that’s what it takes, but no matter what, I am going to split this bastard in—!”

“Language, Tashigi.”

That got Tashigi to freeze right up, before glaring venomously at my snail. “That was a cheap trick, you little shit.”

“It saved your ass last time we met, and this time around as well,” I shot back. “And right now, I’m doing my best to help you out too. Zoro.”

My crewmates parted under the annoyed glare I shot between them, revealing the swordsman mid-cranes stance, clearly trying to sneak out through the crowd. I facepalmed.

“Oh, for the love of—!” I snapped my hand up and pointed at Tashigi. “Just hurry up and fight her seriously, man.”

“Cross—!” “CROSS—!” Zoro and Sanji snapped at me.

“You, shut it,” I ordered Sanji, shrugging off his volcanic expression. “You’re not a swordsman, this doesn’t concern you.”

The cook—and to my brief dismay, his foot—twitched, but that was all, his cigarette visibly shrinking.

“And as for you,” I said, going back to Zoro. “Yes, I know, you’ll crush her like an ant.”

“Hey!”

I ignored that, levelling my hand at the first mate. “Zoro, listen to me: This is all pretty much a protracted ‘dagger’ for her, you understand? This is all a ‘dagger’ for her, and that’s just not fair, not to her and not to…” I hesitated briefly before jerking my head to the side. “Well, to her.”
Zoro scowled, but though it looked like he was about to take a swing at me, by fist or by blade, he didn’t look like he was going to argue either. That would do.

“Look,” I continued, jabbing my thumb over my shoulder at the Marine. “You want this to end? You want her off your back? Give her what she wants. Give her ‘Yoru’. She is begging you for it, she chased you into the damn Grand Line for it, so there’s no problem with it. Once she has that… well, it won’t be closure until she takes your head, but it’ll be better than nothing.”

“… damn it, why did I make the one mistake everyone makes and let you open your mouth?” Zoro growled to himself, kneading the bridge of his nose. He then snapped a scathing glare at Tashigi, which she met and matched. “Alright, fine. You wanted a fight, you have one. You, me, on the Sunny. Now. Chopper, sorry for the mess.”

“Nooo, it’s perfectly fine!” Chopper responded with a smile and visage that was far too pleasant, prompting the rest of the crew to take two steps away from him. “You see, I’m wrapping up my research on the transmogrative properties of Zoan-flesh, and I just found a new project to start on once I’m done!”

Everyone’s caution proved particularly prudent when Chopper snapped into his Human Point, his eyes blazing. “HOW SWORDS APPARENTLY CUT TWENTY POINTS CLEAN OFF THE TOP OF A PERSON’S IQ AND SLAUGHTER SAID PERSON’S SENSE OF SELF-PRESERVATION!” he roared at the top of his lungs, before shooting Zoro a particularly sickly grin. “Oh, but don’t worry, I won’t research you or anything! After all, I can’t rightly use you as a constant, seeing as I suspect that this penalty is accrued for each sword a person wields, THEREBY MAKING YOU AN EXTREME OUTLIER!”

“Ah… you… do realize that I am a sword, right?” Funkfreed spoke up, vibrating nervously in his scabbard.

Chopper waved his hand with a dismissive snort. “Yes, but both your previous and current wielders were suicidal idiots before they got their hands on you, so I consider you to be the exception.”

“Withdrawn,” the elephant sighed.

“Protested!” I interjected.
“Ignored,” Zoro said as he walked by me, Tashigi following. Well, for two seconds before a sharp rap on the floor drew Tashigi’s attention back to Popora, who waved his maul at the fishmen. Tashigi blinked. And then, wincing, remembered why she was here in the first place.

“Right… that does come first.” Tashigi admitted, moving over to the counter. “Er, as I was saying before… all of this, I called to confirm that you had the resources to prepare food for a crew of two hundred twenty-five?”

“Yes, we can handle that… assuming that Hachi here is actually going to let us go sometime today?” Chew snapped, shooting a venomous glare over his shoulder at his boss.

“Hard to say, really.” Hachi glared right back, crossing his free pairs of arms. “Can I actually trust you not to start anything, or am I going to have to tie you to the anchor chain? Again?”

I glanced at Soundbite, the both of us mouthing ‘again!?’. 

“We’ll be good,” the fishmen groused, prompting Hachi to let them up.

“Alright, that’s perfect,” Tashigi sighed in relief, though she didn’t stop tapping her hilt, and glanced back at Popora. “Uh, do you think you could—?”

The wolf-rabbit chuffed and waved his maul with an impatient roll of his eyes.

“Thank you!” she cried in relief, shooting out the door with far too much gleeful anticipation for the asskicking she was about to receive, and Zoro and Chopper marched out after her, each wearing their own brand of weariness.

Chew and Kuroobi warily watched the trio leave before giving Popora a doubtful onceover. “So… I guess the snail will be translating for you?” Kuroobi inquired.

“NOOOT REALLY, Seeing as A. he’s yet to say shit, and B, even if he DOES SAY SOMETHING, I DON’T HAVE A CLUE WHAT HE IS! I WOULDN’T BE PACKING THE KEY TO WHATEVER HIS MOUTH WOULD BE SLINGING!”
“Though I don’t need to understand him to get that he can WRITE.”

“Though I don’t need to understand him to get that he can WRITE.”

“That works, chew,” Chew nodded, pulling out a notepad and holding out. “Here, do you—?” The smelt-whatever was cut off by a piece of paper waving in front of his face. He plucked it away and gave it a quick once-over before heading into the back. Kuroobi made to follow him, but was stopped by one of Hachi’s hands grabbing his fin.

“Chew can get things ready. You are going to go out and get the orders of everyone who stayed on the pirate ship waiting outside,” the octo-chef ordered.

“Actually,” Franky said, raising a hand. “Another fully loaded ship should be here any second now. Friends of ours.”

There was the briefest flash of absolute despair, and then Kuroobi nodded. Double-checking his notepad stock, he bundled them up in his arms and headed out the door, Chew already safely ensconced in the back of the restaurant.

Hachi nodded in satisfaction. Then Nami stepped up to the front of the line and looked him dead in the eyes. “Nyuu… m-may I help you?”

Nami deliberately exhaled, her clouds gray and… clenching, for lack of a better word. “How about you start by telling me everything that you’ve been up to since the last time we saw you?” she calmly requested.

The octopus swallowed, glancing nervously towards his other employees, who’d been standing around on her tail and him on her shoulders, getting more and more confused the entire time. “Ah, K-Keimi, Pappug, could you go in the back and help Chew? J-Just for a bit?”

“You know, crossing paths with the Straw Hats, I was expecting a lot of ridiculous excitement and wacky hijinks. Not secret conversations and deep, emotional drama,” Pappug dryly remarked.

“Buddy, the amount of things the public doesn’t know about us is almost equal to what the World Government doesn’t know in general,” I deadpanned.
“Of course, if you want to listen to an entirely different and much less enjoyable kind of insanity, be our guest,” Robin carelessly offered. Well, it would have been careless if she weren’t cleaning her fingernails with her knife.

Pappug stared at her for a long moment, eye twitching. Then he wheeled around and darted for the kitchen with more than a little fear in his step. Keimi waddled right behind him, shooting a final doubtful glance over her shoulder before the door shut behind them.

The look on Hachi’s face as the door closed was almost begging, but with it closed he had no choice but to face Nami. Four of his hands poked their indexes together while a fifth scratched the back of his head. “W-Well… I g-got away from the M-Marines,” he began weakly. “B-B-But I haven’t been hurting anyone, I-I swear—!”

“Because Arlong isn’t around to tell you to?” Nami finished for him.

“Nyu!?”

“Assume she knows most everything about you,” I glibly informed him. “Y’know, because I know most everything about you?”

Hachi wrung two of his hands, then pointed at a nearby booth with the other four. “Can we… take a seat, maybe? It’s a bit of a long story.”

Nami nodded curtly, walking towards the table. I made to follow, but short wall of cloud stopped me, and she gave me a dismissive wave. “I can handle this on my own. I’m sure that you have other things you want to discuss…” She glanced at Sandersonia and Koala. “With other people, as it were?”

“…good point,” I conceded, turning my attention to the aforementioned two, who looked thoroughly amused with the whole situation.

The rest of the crew, fortunately, had decided to make themselves comfortable while waiting for the food, though they all had their eyes on Nami. Aaand by ‘comfortable’, I mean I really hope Hachi was feeling charitable towards us, because if we had to pay for the ‘fun’ the Kiddie Trio was having with the condiments out of Nami’s horde, she was going to kill us before the New World could!
“So, how have the raids and revolutions been going?” I asked, leading them to a booth of our own. I shot a particularly cheeky smirk at the wide-mouthed Amazon. “And the chief bitch herself for that matter.”

“Hey!”

“How many baby animals has she kicked, again?”

“Oh, no, not what I was going to say,” Sandersonia waved me off before donning a massive (on her, anyway) smirk, “I was just going to correct you in that that’s queen bitch to you, peasant.”

I snickered. “Point. How’s the queen bitch doing, then?”

“…honestly?” Sandersonia relaxed into her seat with a smile. “Happier. Fact of the matter is, before you started the SBS, she was…” She grimaced and shook her head. “We all were frigid. Detached. We… honestly didn’t even truly treat our crewmates as… well, crewmates. Soldiers, yes, but not comrades. They didn’t even know about…” She gestured to her back, which had Koala laying a sympathetic hand on the Kuja’s shoulder.

That drew a small smile back out of Sandersonia, which she then graced me with as well. “But… ever since the SBS started, our world has expanded! Beyond the hate and darkness we lived with for so long, that we suffered under…” She looked out the window and beamed at the Cannibal’s figurehead. “And we found friends and light beyond it all. And our crewmates, well…”

She let out a happy sigh, leaning her chin on her fist. “They don’t know the… details, but they know the ‘Gorgon’s curse’ is really just Devil Fruits and some… scars that we don’t want anyone to see. It might not seem like much, but compared to what we almost did to the last person that found out…”

Koala, Soundbite and I all exchanged wary glances at that little tidbit, and I slowly raised a tentative finger. “Yooou wanna tell us what you did to that person?”

“NO REASON, we just wanna know whether to spring for the GET WELL SOON CARD or the gravestone wreath,” my snail leered.
“H-Hey, hey, no need to get so testy!” Sandersonia waved her hands defensively. “I-I’ll have you know that Marguerite’s spine was perfectly fine! Eh…” She suddenly refused to meet our eyes. “ Eventually…”

Now *that* almost got me out of my seat. “Did you just say *Marguerite*?!”

“Uh…” Sandersonia blinked at me in surprise. “Yes, I did. She was a member of the watch on Amazon Lily, but after—” A coughing fit suddenly overtook her. “A *completely excusable series of unfortunate events*, my sisters and I took her onto the crew-proper. Initially she was only an apprentice, but after she showed some admirable initiative, we gave her her own raiding party, and she’s been doing quite well, so—!”

Sandersonia’s smile froze for a second before she gave me an incredulous stare. “Waaait, you knew her name!? But how— wait!” The amazon leaned forward with an eager grin. “You could only know her name if you knew her from the story! You didn’t just learn about us, you actually come to Ama— MRGH!?” Sandersonia’s scary accurate ramblings devolved into a panicked squawk when I hastily grabbed her *distressingly accurate* tongue.

“*Not where the moron can hear us,*” I hissed, glancing back at Luffy. Thankfully, he was more concerned with trying to shove wasabi up Usopp’s nose than anything else at the moment, so—wait, wasn’t I holding something just—?

*THWAP!*

“*Grk…*” I winced as I got tongue-whipped. “III deserved that.”

“No clap, you liddle bathtard!” Sandersonia hissed, frantically wiping her tongue. “Do you *ever* wash those damn things!? And what in the name of Nidhogg’s rotting tail did you think you were doing to begin with!??”

“I was *thinking* that you were going to blow something I definitely *don’t want blown yet!*” I snapped back. “I can’t let Luffy know he’s going to— *grah!*” I clamped my jaws shut, but judging from the poleaxed expressions on Sandersonia’s and Koala’s faces, I was a *bit* late on that front.

“I’m sorry, I think I had some seafoam in my ears. Did you say *Luffy* was going to Amazon Lily?” Sandersonona demanded incredulously. “As in, alone!?”
“As in, where are the rest of you going to be?!” Koala asked.

Running a hand over my face, I snapped the fingers of my other one. Static promptly filled the air. “Neither of you are going to say a word to Luffy or anyone else… or else I’m going to tell your sisters and your comrades…” I narrowed my eyes menacingly. “About that… and that.”

The pair immediately paled, the utmost of horror flashing over their faces.

“Mum’s the word, just don’t let them know! Hancock would strip my scales from my hide!” Sandersonia squeaked, clamping her hands over her mouth.

“The gunpowder… so much gunpowder…” Koala whimpered, sinking into her seat.

…holy hell, I was just taking a shot in the dark. Noodle incidents and seer status for the win! “Anyway,” I said, relaxing back into my seat as I signaled for Soundbite to drop the blurring. “If you’re done with your traumatic flashbacks, where were we?”

The pair composed themselves with admirable speed, and Koala raised her hand. “It was my turn to answer your question,” the Revolutionary said, smirking. “And for your information, I’ve been dealing with a lot less stress the past few months since I finally got around to deckin you for calling me cuddly.”

I gave her a flat look while Sonia raised an eyebrow. Then I smirked, closed my eyes, and pressed my fingers to my brow. “I’m seeing, I’m seeing… your very first reaction to seeing Hachi again was —!”

“Alright, alright!” Koala’s cheeks flushed and she looked away before continuing. “Aaanyway, we’ve been milking the CP9 operational intel for all that it’s worth, and the way you’ve kept publicizing it with Funkfreed—”

“Oh as he likes to be called, DEEP NOSE.”

“I have told you time and time again, stop calling me that!”
“—has only helped. Your piece on the Caligostan Theocracy was particularly…” Koala hummed thoughtfully. “Poignant.”

I donned a cocky grin. “I take it it was effective?”

“Super effective?”

“Given that our last reports have the ex-congregation sacking the citadel and putting a torch to the ‘holy’ texts?” Koala summarized, her expression falling flat. “Very.” She then perked up, sporting a cocky grin. “Still, destructive tendencies aside? You’ve boosted the Revolutionaries’ membership to the highest it’s had since its conception! We’re still a long ways off from our main goal, but that’s fine. You might have accelerated things, but we were ready to wait however long we needed to see things through, and we’re still ready now.”

Sandersonia stiffened up a bit and suddenly snapped a wary look back at me. “Wait, I thought you two were just—! Jeremiah Cross… how close of an ally are you with the Revolutionary Army?”

The pieces clicked into place in a second, and I felt a smirk grow on my face. “Close enough that I could get a meeting with Dragon in person if I needed to. We’re not involved with each other’s plans… but we are allies.”

“‘Hand-in-hand but not conjoined’, I believe were your exact words?” Koala added, almost impishly.

Sandersonia’s eyes widened, then narrowed, and then went back to normal. I could almost see the gears turning. “Well, in this case, seeing as I’ve been presented with the opportunity… Koala.” She leaned forward, steepling her hands under her chin. “Could you tell me what, precisely, the Revolutionary Army’s end goal is?”

…wait, what? I looked between the two in confusion. “The Revolutionaries’—? What? I thought it was to overthrow the World—?”

“Not… quite?” Koala blinked at me in honest surprise. “I mean, that’s the public image we present, but it’s just that. I’d have thought you of all people would know the details?”

“A little more than halfway through, remember?” I pointed out. “The most detail I’ve seen of the
Revolutionary Army was Robin introducing you guys as the ‘opposition’ to the World Government, the invasion and liberation of Tequila Wolf—didn’t see any details, no clue what the bridge was for,” I pre-empted her question, which drew an annoyed tsk. “—as well as you, Hack, and Sabo helping us bust up Doflamingo’s weapon-smuggling ring, but that’s pretty much it.”

“Wait, Doflamingo has a weapon-smug—Doflamingo is Joker!” Koala hissed incredulously.

“…well, at least you know now,” I said, wincing. “Though, for the record? Take any extra precautions you can for agents infiltrating Dressrossa, and have their missions physically documented in triplicate. Doffy’s packing a memory censor, you’ve…honestly probably lost dozens of agents by now and not even realized it.”

Koala’s face flashed through a rainbow of expressions before finally settling on tortured resignation. Sinking into her seat, she massaged the bridge of her nose. “Anyway…” she bit out. “Getting back on track… I really thought you knew based on what you said when we met you, Cross. We’re not anti-World Government, we’re anti-World Noble.”

She suddenly sat up and stared at me with no small amount of panic. “That-That’s not a problem or anything, is it?” she asked with honest concern.

I only had to think about things for a second before shrugging. “Honestly? At this point, I think it’s all semantics. You’re going top down, we’re climbing bottom up, but in the end it’s the same opponent. For now, I vote we quibble over where we start cutting after everyone’s trussed up for the chopping block. Aye?”

“Aye,” Koala sighed in relief.

“Aaaye…” Sandersonia mused, chin cupped in thought. “I’m going to need to talk with Hancock about this…” she hissed under her breath, something I only heard thanks to Soundbite feeding it to me.

It briefly occurred to me to comment on that and start what I’m pretty sure was a necessary discussion, but the sound of a chair screeching on the floor almost covered up by rumbling thunder demanded my full attention. As it did everyone else, judging from the sudden silence in the room.

I looked over and winced at the sight of Nami looming over a cowed and defensively reeling Hachi.
“Put a pin in catching up until after we’re sure our navigator isn’t going to deep-fry our host?” I requested.

“Oh, you go right ahead, we’ll just keep talking behind your back, most likely about you,” Koala replied with a *perfectly innocent* grin.

I opened my mouth, and clamped it shut with a hissing sigh. “Well, at least you admit it.” It was on that note that I got up to go face the tempest.

“I must have misheard you,” Nami bit out, enough venom to put down a Sea King in her voice. “Did you just say that they *tricked* you into handing over a mermaid to sell into slavery? Are you *serious!*?”

I didn’t even need to look back at the booth to tell that Koala and Sandersonia were looking our way. The screaming of abused wood combined with the kind of ear-scratching hiss you only hear from a snake on the verge of biting your face off were kinda big clues.

“Nyuuuu…” Hachi whimpered, obviously longing for a pot he could disappear into. “I-I did say that they tricked me and I had *no* idea about the slavery thing, right? R-Right!?”

“All eyes turned toward Usopp, who barely flinched. I mean, he still flinched, of course, but not *much.* “I-I mean, I still remember back at Arlong Park, I was trying to distract Arlong with my Rubber Band of Doom bluff, but it worked on him instead… for about thirty seconds straight, even. It was almost awkward. If he could fall for something like *that*…”

Nami kept up her glare for about half a minute, at which point she hung her head in defeat. “Damn it, I wish I didn’t agree with you.”

Hmm… to help Hachi or not to help Hachi… Oh! I could split the difference with one little incident.
“Usopp’s right,” I announced, fighting to suppress a broad grin. “Ask Hachi about the first time he met Zoro.”

Hachi stiffened, and then slumped down with a groan of embarrassment and I think a blush, though it was kind of hard to tell with both his natural pigment and the hands covering his face. “Can we… really not?” he pleaded. “A-Anyway… I really didn’t know about the slavery! I thought they were just a kidnapping gang and—!”

“And that’s somehow supposed to be better,” Nami flatly stated.

“…in my defense, ex-pirate and I only knew her for about half an hour at the time?” he pleaded weakly.

Nami fell into a brooding silence again, and I privately hoped that Nami was reflecting on her years as a thief and the people that she’d had to use to get what she wanted, rather than any of Sanji’s takoyaki recipes. Thankfully, that ‘hope’ was borne out when Nami sank back into her seat with a defeated groan. “…Only because she’s chosen to work for you all this time, for whatever reason,” she conceded.

Looking stricken, Hachi began to raise his hands, only to stop and start wringing them. “I… I know my words mean less to you than dirt, Nami…” he said softly. “But… but I want you to know that I am sorry. For all of it. Every time I go over those days in Cocoyashi, I just want to reach back in time and punch myself until I stop! Being! Stupid!”

Nami’s eyes widened as several of Hachi’s hands clenched into fists, but a second later they unclenched.

“But. I know that I can’t. All I can do now is try and live my life the best I know how, and try and make up for the past. Try and beg for your forgiveness, and the forgiveness of everyone I’ve wronged.”

By this point, Nami’s head was bowed, her Tempo and hairline both shadowing her eyes. “…I’m not just going to give you that,” she said quietly.

“Never expected it!” Hachi hastily replied. “I-I just, I just…”
“You know, I can’t speak for what kind of hell you must have gone through,” a new voice mused thoughtfully. To Nami’s visible surprise, Koala plopped down on the seat next to her, a serene expression on her face. “But Hachi genuinely is trying to turn things around. Has turned things around, really. It’s the only reason that I’m giving him a chance.”

Nami stared at her in complete confusion, and Koala blinked before looking at me.

"Contrary to popular belief, I do have privacy standards,” I drawled before she could open her mouth. “And something like what you went through? That blows right past those standards like there’s a Marine ship on its tail.”

She nodded, turning back to Nami with a somewhat sheepish expression. “Sorry, that probably didn’t make sense. Let me explain.” She twisted in her seat and raised her shirt, flashing the red sun that Fisher Tiger had burned into her flesh. “I assume you know what this mark means?” she asked.

Nami blinked, visibly confused. “I-I missed the explanation on the Sun Pirates that Robin gave the crew earlier, but I know that they were a crew made only of fishmen, that most of the Arlong Pirates were originally on their crew… you were one of them?”

“…The significance of this sun goes beyond the Sun Pirates,” Koala explained softly, a wistful look on her face. “This symbol came to be recognized for hope and light because it was specifically designed to cover up the Hoof of the Flying Dragon…” Koala’s fingers clenched, digging furrows in the counter. “The slavery brand of the World Nobles.”

Nami and everyone else in the crew stiffened, Hachi’s eyes closed as one of his hands drifted up to his forehead, and out the corner of my eye I saw Sandersonia shivering in her seat, hugging herself.

“Fourteen years ago, a well-respected sea bream fishman named Fisher Tiger climbed the Red Line to Mariejois where so many of his fellow fishmen were suffering, and burned the entire city to free the slaves that were imprisoned there,” Koala continued. “All of the fishmen he freed and all of the fishmen loyal to him on Fishman Island came together and formed the Sun Pirates; he used the mark of the sun to cover all of the slave brands, and branded everyone else to sail on the crew to make it clear that they were all equals.”

Koala closed her eyes and took a deep, deliberate breath. “I was one of the slaves that he freed. And three years later, when the Sun Pirates came to an island where I was staying, they agreed to transport me back to my home. It took a lot of work for me to break out of the… conditioning, but Fisher Tiger…”
A wistful smile came over the Revolutionary’s face, her fingers tapping on the counter. “Tiger... he made it clear that I had been freed. And even though I was a human, the rest of the Sun Pirates were nice to me. They reminded me that I was alive, that I no longer needed to be afraid.” She turned a kind smile on Hachi, laying a hand on his shoulder that drew a smile from him in turn. “Hachi was particularly nice. He always made lots of delicious takoyaki, and his antics were hilarious, and they kept everyone smiling and happy.”

Hachi twitched and glanced away, chuckling weakly. “‘Antics’, right…”

Koala chuckled fondly. “They were my friends, my crewmates…” And then, Koala’s good mood was bushwhacked by a dark frown. “Except for Arlong.” Hachi flinched again, this time looking down in shame. “Even back then, he was... dark. Scary. He made it clear that as far as he was concerned, I wasn’t and would never be welcome. I remember him saying that if ‘Big Bro Ti’ hadn’t been around, he wouldn’t be holding himself back as much.”

The mood darkened between them for a few moments. Koala finally looked back at her.

“The point is, the Sun Pirates were the antithesis of slavery, but among them, Arlong was the outlier. And once Fisher Tiger died, Arlong fell away from them and their ideals, and everyone loyal to him went along with it, because without Fisher Tiger, they were lost, and he was one of the last pillars of strength they had. It would take a lot to make me willingly give any of them a chance... but Hatchan has been making the effort.”

Nami sighed. “Okay, so, I already admitted once today that I don’t have as much of a grudge against him as the rest of them... but you can actually understand what it’s like, to have that much pain inside for so long.”

Koala nodded solemnly, her hand tentatively moving to rest on Nami’s shoulder. “I understand, and I don’t expect you to forgive him right away, or anytime soon. Just... keep in mind, Hachi... he’s a good man. Arlong you can hate with all your heart, but leave Hachi on the periphery.”

Nami bit her lip, and her Tempo writhed in time with her inner discord, but when she finally let out a tired sigh, it settled as well. “I... I’ll try. For Hachi.” And then, just like that, her aura was bristling again as her gaze re-sharpened. “But as for those two.”

Much to my surprise, and Hachi’s too for that matter, Koala’s expression became an icy mirror of Nami’s. “Yes, they are a separate matter entirely.”
“HACHI!”

Our eyes turned to the doorway, where Kuroobi was standing with an expression of utter fatigue on his face, and Pappug standing on his shoulder. “We’ve got another few dozen orders, and the dragon that they have onboard wants enough for five fishmen! And on top of that, Mohmoo is with them, along with half a dozen junior sea kings!”

“Nyuu?! They recruited Mohmoo!? I gotta—! Er…” Hachi wilted sheepishly, shooting Nami a tired but sincere smile. “Can we pick this up later?”

“Go on, go on,” Koala waved him off, Nami inclining her head in agreement. Gratefully, Hachi made his way back to the grill, Kuroobi on his heels. The expression probably wouldn’t have been grateful had he heard what Nami muttered under her breath the minute his back was turned:

“Maybe we should just cover one of the fishmen in batter and serve him up. Be easier.”

I mean, I didn’t exactly disagree with the sentiment, but wow, that was a bit much.

With that, the mood turned from somber to awkward, nobody really sure what to say while we waited.

“Hey, uh… Koala?”

Until said Revolutionary turned to our uncharacteristically hesitant captain. And I mean seriously hesitant, like ‘hat literally in hand’ hesitant. Seriously, if he didn’t learn that from Makino or one of his brothers, then I’d eat my hat.

“You said you were pretty high up in the Revolutionaries.” The Rubber Man inquired sheepishly. “So… Does that mean you know Sabo?”

Koala cringed… and then sighed before giving him a defeated smile. “Yes, I do. I’m partnered up with him often, and—!”
“REALLY!?” Luffy cut her off gleefully, suddenly so close to her Koala had to lean perpendicular in her seat to avoid a collision, with no small amount of panic on her face. “TELL ME ABOUT HIM, I WANT TO KNOW WHAT HE’S LIKE NOW!”

“I see the family resemblance…” Koala noted weakly.

“No concern about spoilers, captain?” I asked in surprise.

“The last spoiler about him was that he was alive after I thought he was dead for ten years!” Luffy whispered excitedly. “I was supposed to be there for seven more years before he went his own way, so I need to catch up! Besides, this isn’t about the future, it’s the past, so what does it matter!?”

I blinked several times. Honestly, that was saner than most ‘Luffy logic’ I was used to.

“Actually, I’d like to hear more about him, too,” Sanji added… as he casually kicked our captain off the Revolutionary. “We met Ace in Alabasta, but Luffy having another brother is news to us. Anything to learn how our captain went from a cute, cuddly kid we’re almost certain he once was —”

“Fat chance!” Soundbite ‘subtly’ coughed.

“Bullshit!” I ‘surreptitiously’ agreed.

“—into… well, this,” our cook gestured at our captain’s… everything.

Sighing in fond exasperation as she righted herself, Koala smiled. “Well, the first thing to know is that ever since he got his memory back, he flies off into a gloating session about Luffy every time his name comes up…”

“Shishishi!” Luffy laughed as he pumped his fists happily.

“But anyways, I suppose that for Sabo’s little brother… I can return the favor. Now, let’s see… ah!” Koala snapped her fingers and smiled as she leaned back in her seat and started to reminisce. “I’ll start at the start, with the very first mission we went on together. It all began in the Headquarters of
the Revolutionary Army, nestled in the cliffs of Baltigo…”

And so it went, Koala’s smile never faltering as she proceeded to pass the time with tales of her and Sabo’s varying—and quite frankly, insane even by our standards—adventures. Honestly, how the hell Sabo had managed to get so much mileage out of a corkscrew and a clam shell… well, I suppose I know better than most that some things aren’t meant for the human mind.

This all went on for about ten minutes or so, until storytime was finally brought to a crashing halt… Literally on account of the minor shockwave that suddenly slammed into us, swaying the boat but good.

“Looks like Zoro’s done,” Franky observed, getting to his feet and stomping toward the exit. “Sunny had better have been left pristine, or I swear—!”

“Keep your man-panties on, Iron-Ass, I didn’t touch the Sunny,” Zoro grunted as he stalked in past our shipwright, rolling his shoulder with an expression of immense satisfaction. “Tashigi, however, I touched very thoroughly. And Swirly, if you want to make an issue of that? The first mate spread his arms invitingly. “Bring it on, I welcome it!”

Sanji… actually paused mid-kick and blinked at the swordsman in confusion. “You’re… surprisingly tolerable for once, Mossy.”

“Finally beating Kuina in some capacity felt cathartic as hell, didn’t it?” I half-stated.

“Mmm,” Zoro shrugged as he sunk into a seat. “It wasn’t bad. Put up more of a fight than I expected, but still nothing close to what she could have done at that age if she were still alive. Better than nothing, I guess.”

“And to confirm, Tashigi is…?” Koala began.

“Now listen here, you green-haired, metal-swinging troglodyte!”

“Surprisingly intact,” I commented with a cocked brow as the Marine barged in.
And indeed, Tashigi was in seemingly pristine condition. You know, apart from the fact that she had half her body covered in bandages, with a particularly bloody swathe tied around her waist.

And a bunch more being wrapped around her forehead by Chopper, who was in hybrid form standing on her shoulders.

“First off, I did perfectly fine, thank you very much!” Tashigi hissed as she jabbed her finger at our first mate.

“Hold still, before I fasten this eyepatch on with surgical staples,” Chopper tersely ordered as he tugged a strip of gauze taut over the lieutenant’s left eye. “And be glad that this is only temporary, got it?”

“Second,” Tashigi went on, seemingly ignoring Chopper. “I still want to know where the hell you got the legendary dragon-slaying O Wazomono-Grade sword Shusui—!”

“I re-killed Ryuma’s corpse, which Moria was using as an undead soldier.”

“…oh, how I wish I could actually not believe that,” Tashigi groaned, rubbing her unwrapped temple. “And third! If you’re wielding Shusui, then where the hell’s Yubashiri!?”

Zoro’s normally stoic expression twisted like he was sucking on a lemon and half a grapefruit at once. Otherwise, he didn’t respond.

After a moment, Funkfreed asked, “If you don’t want to tell her, can I do it?” Zoro turned towards me… and slowly nodded. At that, the elephant-sword shifted into his hybrid form to slide from his sheath and curl up on the ground sort of like a snake. A massive snake whose frame could take up half the room, but still.

“It got wrecked on the Bridge of Hesitation,” the hybrid weapon explained, waving his trunk remorsefully. “Not beyond repair, but enough that he had to leave it at a blacksmith on Water 7. I mean, at this point, if you want it that badly, then…” He shrugged helplessly. “I guess it’s all yours?”

Zoro snapped a glare at my sword and opened his mouth, presumably to cuss him out. Instead, after a moment he shut it and glanced down at his waist. He gripped Shusui’s hilt before hissing out a defeated sigh. “…fine, damn it, fine! I’ll give you the ticket the smith gave me. I don’t like it, but
damn it, I owe Yubashiri its right to fight again. And…” The swordsman glanced aside with a scowl… and a blush!? “And… better you than someone else, I guess.”

“God help us I THINK THAT’S THE CLOSEST she’ll ever get to a pr—!”

SHING!

“I SAY NOTHING!” Soundbite yowled, eyestalks twisting to keep an eye on the snow-white blade hovering between him and Zoro.

Grimacing, Tashigi turned away from the byplay, rubbing the back of her head.

“I am conflicted…” I just barely heard her mutter. She raised her voice a few moments later. “Ah… before anything else though, how did a sword of that quality, in…” She grimaced slightly, as though the next words burned her throat. “In hands as skilled as yours, UGH, get—?”

“Some Navy bastard with the Rust-Rust Fruit,” I said.

Aaand just like that both Tashigi and the air in the room stopped, and the Marine slowly turned to look at me, Blair Witch-style.

“Someone in the Navy has the power of the Rust-Rust Fruit…” she intoned, her voice devoid of life. “And he came that close to destroying the legendary Ryo Wazamono-grade Yubashiri with them. Without even a hint of remorse.”

“Um…” I briefly thanked my lucky stars that she wasn’t actually pissed at Zoro or me this time. And because this wasn’t directed at us… “Yes?”

It could have all ended there if Funkfreed didn’t choose to raise his big fat trunk.

“Just so you know? That wasn’t the first Grade-sword Captain Shu’s gotten his hands on, and none of the others had Cross’s forewarning to save them.”

That was apparently a step too far.
I swear that an unholy inferno lit up around the lieutenant, her face becoming a shadowy mask of rage as she strangled Shigure’s hilt.

“I am going to—!”

THWACK!

“—hug a cuddly bunny…” Tashigi slurred mid-sentence, a goofy grin spreading across her face as she bonelessly sank into the nearest seat. This revealed Chopper standing behind her with a dripping needle in his hoof.

“I have gotten far too good at eyeballing a person’s weight so that I can properly sedate them,” he grumbled to himself as he sank into a seat of his own and started massaging his eyes. “I’ve also stitched up far too much small intestine while my own is empty. Where’s the food?”

“Ugh…” Chew groaned, rubbing at his eyes as he came back inside and started reciting something in a long-suffering tome. “We’ll have your orders taken care of as fast as we can, chew. If you would just be patient—”

Chew opened his eyes and stopped speaking as he processed exactly how many glares he was receiving, the sheer amount of ‘not damn welcome’ they conveyed sending him powerwalking backwards back to the kitchen.

“Bunny… bunny-wolf—GAH!”

Tashigi broke the tense mood with an exclamation followed by a grumbled mutter of thanks to her companion, who was tucking a wasabi stem back into his coat. He(?) then pointed at me, and Tashigi did a double-take before smiling. “Oh, right. Cross. We really didn’t expect to run into you again, but it’s fortunate that we did; remember how Popora has mnemonic abilities?”

“Yeeeaah?” I drew out, dreading any brand of interaction with the hammer-happy hybrid.

“Well,” she gestured at his hammer. “If ever you wanted a chance to—and believe me, I am loath to say this—be as nigh-omniscient as you once were, we can give you that refresher you were hoping
The way Tashigi said that was just a little too eager for my liking, but quite frankly, I didn’t care. I would let myself get zapped by Eneru again if it meant remembering the rest of the series. I nodded, kneeling in front of the rabbit-wolf… right as Tashigi got the last word in.

“Oh, and Popora? Feel free to hit him as hard as you possibly can.”

“Kyuuuun.”

“Wait, wha—!?” I snapped my head up right as the hammer swung.

~o~

“You and I will never meet again.”

—“We three sisters were once…”

—“DRAGON IS YOUR DAD!?”

—“STRAW HAT ISN’T A PIECE OF TRASH LIKE YOU!”

—“Weaklings don’t get to choose how they die.”

—“Would you do us the honor of exchanging sake cups?”

—“Thank you, all of you, for loving me!”

Ace mortally wounded, a gaping hole in his torso.
A complete and total silence, encompassing all factions, friend and foe alike.

A Vivre Card burning away into nonexistence.

And then... and then—!

~o~

“MOTHER ALMIGHTY!” I gasped as I lurched back to reality and landed clean on my ass, the surge of images and emotions and-and-and everything that had just hit me taking me completely by surprise. Seriously, I’d been expecting a hell of a lot, but not that much!

With my senses properly rebooted (and believe me, that was an ordeal and a million), I realized that I’d all but curled up, my armored hands clamped around my skull and moisture on my face and chin. Opening my eyes, I saw everyone watching me with undisguised concern.

I really, really shouldn’t have been focusing so much on that part of the manga…

I shook my head and started to get to my feet, but a tapping on my shoulder stopped. Looking up, I realized that it was Popora, who was… crying? Seriously, while the hybrid’s expression maintained the stony impassiveness it had held the entire time I’d known him, he definitely had twin tear tracks coursing down his cheeks.

The wolf-rabbit wiped the tears off and pinched them between his fingers, eyeing them contemplatively before giving me a respectful look.

“Translation, he respects THE TRAUMA YOU JUST relived,” Soundbite informed me.

“Uh… thanks?” I shook my head and pushed my way back to my feet. “It’s— gugh— it’s alright, guys, just a… really bad memory…” I wiped the last of my tears from my eyes and shot a sidelong glare at Tashigi. “It’s not like what you just hit me with is relevant anymore, anyway.”

The Marine had the grace to look away at that. Regrettably, nobody relaxed. Not that I could blame them, I didn’t believe half the shit I was spewing myself. I couldn’t help it, really, not after watching
Wordlessly, Luffy held out the Vivre Card that he had already withdrawn from his hat. Still perfectly intact. I saw it move... parallel to the Red Line? Did that mean he was on Sabaody? Huh, that would be cool, we might actually meet him in person... and that was most definitely not complete and utter desperation coloring my inner monologue.

I nodded in gratitude to Luffy, but his frown only deepened; he could tell as well as I that the difference between what was and what is didn’t help that much...

“Ah... Cross?” Tashigi suddenly spoke up, drawing everyone’s attention to her. “I don’t want to add more bad news to this, but I just remembered some news Aquarius heard that I think you should know.”

The lieutenant’s hesitation contorted, mixing with disgust. “Apparently, someone high up in the Government decided that the best way to punish you for the SBS was to break your spirit. They’ve sent out a powerful task force with Cipher Pol-level intel-gathering skills with one goal: find the homeland of Jeremiah Cross, and unleash the Buster Call upon its shores unless your crew turns itself over.”

The moment that the last syllable left her lips, she ducked her head, shaking with what looked like sobs but did not sound like it. The rest of the crew was making a similarly valiant but futile attempt to hide their own expressions, and Koala and Sandersonia in particular had their faces hidden in their arms, their shoulders shaking heavily. And as for me?

“Pff...”

I honestly couldn’t hold it back for more than a couple of seconds.

“PFFHHAAAAAHAAHAHAAAAHAA!” I cackled, falling back onto the ground and pounding it.

“HEEHEEHEE HOOHOOHOO HOHAHAAAAA!” Soundbite howled in agreement.

That opened the floodgates. As expected, Zoro managed to keep his composure with just some snickering, but pretty much everyone else was laughing his or her head off, most of them unable to stay on their feet. As it was, Koala and Sandersonia looked to be in danger of reducing their tables to
splinters from pounding on them so hard, and almost everyone in the room was a bad breath away from asphyxiating with glee.

And really, who could possibly even begin to blame them!? The mere idea that what could have been such a tragic, ruthless, absolute bottom-barrel tactic was instead a complete and total wild goose chase?! It was hilarious beyond all conceivable description!

“Deresishishishishi!” Robin guffawed into her fist, tears streaming from her eyes. “I never t-thought that the words ‘Buster Call’ could send me into a positive form of hysterics, but once more, this crew—Deresishishishishi!”

“M-Maybe next they’ll try and arrest my ex-father! HAHAHA!” Sanji roared through his laughter, casually catching anything that bounced off the table he was pounding with a fist.

“No, no! They’ll come after mine!” Chopper waved his arms over his head eagerly, a manic grin on his muzzle. “I’ll even lead them right to him, make the introductions myself!”

“No! Conis’s mothHAHAHAAA!” Nami was cut off mid-sentence when she tipped too far back in her seat and toppled over, though that didn’t stop her laughter at all.

“PFHAHAHA HAAA!” I wheezed in a frantic, lung-burning gasp as I threw my arms wide. “Those bastards want to burn my home to the ground!? Well, they’re certainly welcome to try! PFHAHAHAAAA!”

“Uh, please tell me we’re missing something!?”

It was at this point that we all looked up and saw that the full staff of Takoyaki 8 had re-entered the room and were warily eyeing us, Hachi himself looking pretty damn stricken.

“I-I-I echoed the NEWS TO THEM—”

And then a sudden shrieking, cackling gale rocked the building.

“And the Sunny!” Soundbite concluded gleefully. “I THINK VIVI’S GONNA START A
“TYPHOON, SHE'S HOWLING SO HARD!”

“I-I can hear Big Bro’s laughing, too!” Merry wheezed out.

“Um…” Keimi nervously tugged at her collar. “I-I really hope there’s a joke I’m missing here? Because if not, your laughing is… i-is…”


My mirth was a little too much for me to spare a double-take at Bartolomeo’s sudden presence, and instead I staggered over to him so that I could sling my arm around his shoulders and laugh in tandem with him. “GOOSE CHASE, GOOSE CHASE, LOOKING IN THE WRONG PLACE, HAHAHA!” I laughed in agreement with him.

“I-I’ll explain,” Koala chuckled, wiping away as she slowly came down from her own mirth. “See, Cross’s home? It’s not anywhere in the East Blue. Or on the planet. Or the moon, for that matter.”

I slowly came down from my laughter high at that, sending her an annoyed look.

“And as for why I told you that?” she forged on, smiling far-too-innocently at the fishmen. “It’s because no matter who you tell for the rest of your life, no one will believe you. And before you ask, yes, I did get pretty nasty in the Revolutionaries. It shows, don’t it?”

“Actually, what I was going to ask is how that’s supposed to be more unbelievable than anything else the Straw Hats have done,” Kuroobi deadpanned.

“Nyuu, same problem,” Hachi groaned, massaging his head with two hands. “The truth is just one more wild guess out of a million.”

“Yeeaaah, we’re eeevil like that!” Nami giggled drunkenly, still coming off her laugh-high.

“Uh, excuse me. Who are you, that you know Cross’s secret?” Tashigi interjected, cautiously eyeing Koala.
“Koala. Assistant Fishman Karate instructor of the Revolutionary Army and one of their top executives. I was there when he told Dragon the details,” Koala explained, smirking. “In fact, I was the one who knocked his ass out and helped drag him to Dragon. No small feat, mind you.”

“PFT!” Tashigi snorted into her hand, not trying very hard to hide that burst of laughter. I settled for merely rolling my eyes at the exchange. After all, I was mature, I could take it on the chin… Koala’d proven that for damn sure.

“And you’re Tashigi, I believe…” the other half-Mason continued. “Or would ‘Pisces’ be more appropriate?”

Tashigi snapped into a far more guarded stance as Sandersonia practically slithered up to her and smiled lightly… or as lightly as someone like her could manage. “You’re familiar with my sister, Cobra. You can call me Anaconda.”

“MY ANACONDA D—! GYARK!”

“I suffered through the Spongebob song, I’m not suffering through that!” I snarled, doing my damndest to stuff the little pest back in his shell.

Sandersonia cocked an eyebrow at us. “Aaaaanyway…” she dragged out, looking around. “Seeing as no one’s quite done it yet, I feel I should point out that this is quite the unprecedented event. Me, a member of a Warlord’s crew. You-” She nodded at Koala, who smiled and crossed her arms behind her head. “An executive of the Revolutionary Army, and you-” Tashigi stood up a little straighter at the attention. “An officer in the Marines. By all rights, we all should be at one another’s throats, but instead here we stand as the closest of allies.” She bowed her head solemnly. “Truly, on this most momentous of occasions, there is only one viable course of action.”

We all nodded along, at least until we all realized we were missing something. “Uh…” I raised a finger. “And that course of action would be?”

“Getting wasted, obviously!” Sandersonia whooped, pumping her fist.

SLAM!
The deck shook from our collective faceplant. Unfortunately, Sandersonia didn’t wait for our reply, and as I stood I saw only the literal tailend of her as she shot out the door and transformed so she could leap onto the Sunny. “I’ll go and get some booze to get us started!”

“No, wait!” I shouted after her. “My crew doesn’t know there’s—!”

Too late. Sandersonia had already slithered up the side of the Sunny. Cue, of course, a cacophonous mix of shouting, crashing, combat, and… party poppers?

 “…a friendly Zoa here…” I completed with a groan, glancing at Soundbite. “Dare I ask?”

“Everyone else didn’t know WHETHER TO PREPARE FOR WAR OR A PARTY so they prepped for both. NOT LIKE THEY’RE ACTUALLY DOING MUCH TO HER THOUGH, she’s…” Soundbite’s eyes widened in awe. “WOW, SHE’S AN UNDERLING? Sooo glad you stopped me from POTENTIALLY TICKING HER OFF!”

“Ike forewarning would have made any difference? You’re Cross’s partner,” Usopp noted dryly as he headed out towards the Sunny, most likely to stop any further waste of ammunition.

I sighed, exhaling the last of the lingering grief I had. “Well, that was… something. Anyway…” I shot a grateful look at my remaining accomplices. “Thanks, Tashigi, Koala. I needed that.”

While Koala settled for snickering and flashing me a V-sign, Tashigi visibly hesitated, seeming to war with herself for a few seconds. Then she slumped in defeat and smiled back.

“What are friends for, Cross?”

-0-

Credit to Hachi, it was only a couple more minutes before our food was ready, and once we cleaned up the mess from Sandersonia’s little… dive into the liquor cabinet, we kicked out the snake-Zoa and decamped to the Sunny’s pavilion to eat.

What? We all wanted to eat together, and if we tried to pack all of our crews into Takoyaki 8, we’d
probably blow the roof off the place sooner rather than later. Probably not even on purpose. We’d take a lot more care onboard our own boat, which was more sturdy anyway. Hachi had been grateful… right up until Nami insisted that the Takoyaki 8 staff join us.

Verbally, Nami said that she just thought it was fair that Takoyaki 8’s crew all take a load off and share in the feast they’d prepared. And honestly? She did mean that statement. In regards to Keimi and Pappug, anyway. The glare that our navigator directed at the fishmen, however, said in no uncertain terms, ‘You made me stay in hell at your side when I was an inch from death, now suck it up and do the same.’

And so it was that what would have been a return to our casual everyday insanity instead became a delicious feast with two of the relevant parties silently resenting each other’s presence and giving the whole thing a tense (though thankfully hidden, so the affair wasn’t quite as awkward as it could have been) undertone. And with Brook preoccupied with his favorite food and unable to provide the soothing undertones to help ease the tension, I think Nami was fully aware that something was going to give, and it wasn’t going to be pretty. And I’m pretty sure that’s exactly what she wanted: a round two, with at minimum two of the fishmen, and a chance to personally hand them their leathery asses on a silver platter.

Still, for now, most everyone else was blissfully oblivious of the weight hanging heavy in the atmosphere and Nami and the non-standard Takoyaki employees glaring at one another, and Tashigi and I were doing our damnedest to pretend it wasn’t there. It wasn’t really working.

“…So, uh…” I hid a quick grimace in my cup before addressing the Marine sitting across from me. “Tashigi, how’s work going?”

“Er…” Tashigi took one glance at the line of soon-to-be-real lightning that was coursing between Nami and Kuroobi before turning back to me. “W-Well enough. Right now, the fleet’s been working with a taskforce from Headquarters. We’ve been working on sorting out the remnants of the Golden Lion Pirates.”

“Huh?” Luffy looked over and tilted his head in innocent, ignorant confusion. “You’re still taking care of those guys? But wasn’t that weeks ago?”

The lieutenant snapped a flat glare at our captain. “Well, the delays in prosecution might have something to do with our Judicial Island—no matter how bloody and unscrupulous it was revealed to be—being burned to the ground in a raging storm of hellfire.”

“Eh?” Luffy’s head tilted further, his expression becoming doubly confused. “But you guys did that
yourselves.”

Tashigi snarled to herself, the takoyaki stick in her hand snapping into splinters. “Must not punch, must not—!”

“Oh, no, go right ahead, it’s very therapeutic,” I interrupted.

“Wait, wha—?” THWACK! “MMPH!” Luffy mumbled through his heavily-puckered face.

“…wow, that was therapeutic!” Tashigi whistled appreciatively as she opened and closed her fist. “Anyway, yeah, processing has been a little slow lately, and there are a lot of them, so we’ve been pitching in to offer some space as everyone’s shuffled around. Not exactly the safest or easiest job, as you can imagine, but we’re putting a steady stream of them through the Court Ships, so we should be done in about, oh, a week or two? Thereabouts. Honestly, I could care less what we do about those degenerates…” The lieutenant sank into her seat with a blissful, euphoric sigh. “Because there are other parts of this process that I am enamored with…”

Well, it didn’t take a genius to put those toddler-aged puzzle pieces together. “Found some Grade Swords, I take it?” I politely inquired.

“Seven Skillfuls and two Greats so far!” Tashigi outright squeed, clasping her hands and wiggling in her seat like she was talking about her crush… which, admittedly, wasn’t that far off.

“Oh? That so?” I leaned forward, an eager grin on my face. That was actually pretty impressive! “Any particularly interesting ones in the—?”

Then the glorious moment came crashing down with a single noise.

“Tch.”

With that single scoff, the whole deck went still, and the heavy air I’d been so close to successfully ignoring cranked up to new heights.

I slowly rotated in my seat to grace Chew with a perfectly flat look. “Something you want to say,
The smelt-whiting scoffed and turned up his nose (and lips). “Nothing for you if you don’t see it already, idiot.”

My eyes narrowed slightly. “You lost the right to call anybody an idiot the day Arlong Park fell.”

He blinked, and then glared. “Why, because we made the mistake of challenging your crew?”

“No, because you fell for Usopp’s ‘Rubber-Band-of-Doom-flinch-and-run’ trick.”

Chew went crimson, and several others graced him with looks as painfully flat as mine. Including Kuroobi.

“I thought you said he used another smoke bomb,” the ray growled, condescension and rage dripping from every syllable.

“And you’re taking his word over mine!?” Chew snapped.

“USOPP RUBBER BAND OF DOOOOM!”

“GAH!” The fishman snapped his arms over his head with a panicked flinch. After about a second, he lowered them, expression thunderous and pointed anywhere but at Kuroobi and Soundbite. “I hate you, snail.”

“HEEHEEHEE hoohoohoo!”

“Honestly, Chew, I expected that from Hatchan, but you?” Nami asked, a sadistic teasing hint in her voice. It helped that Hachi was once again covering his face with all six of his hands to hide a blush. Or maybe that was a sextuple facepalm. Hard to tell.

Everyone else was still busy trying to stifle their snickers, and for a minute, I thought that that might
be the end of the trouble.

SMASH!

And then Kuroobi put his fist through the barrel he and Chew had been using as a table and we were right back to square one.

“The reason he scoffed was because of the blatant, unashamed hypocrisy you’re showing right now, Jeremiah Cross,” Kuroobi stated in a tone of utter hatred, glaring me dead in the eye.

…he went there. They actually went there. They were actually going to try and—?

Well. Alright, then. On their heads be it.

Moving slowly and calmly, I got out of my seat, slipped Soundbite off my shoulder, and firmly planted him on the table, my eyes never moving from the fishmen. “Would you care to say that to my face, sir?”

“With pleasure,” Kuroobi snarled as he and Chew stood up. Slowly, we each took a step towards each other, then another.

“This isn’t your fight, Cross!” Nami hissed in my ear, even though she was glaring at me from across the deck.

“It wasn’t my fight when this was about your past with them!” I snarled back through grit teeth, and a quick sweep of my eyes to the side passed that message to the rest of the crew. “This? This is an entirely different beast, and it and them are MINE.”

That prompted the crewmates who’d been gearing up for a fight to let go of their weapons and marginally relax, aside from the ones who silently (though not without force) prevented Hachi from stopping his friends. Billy, for his part, had draped his wings over Nami and was holding them there, I assumed at her request to keep her from lashing out. Meaning it was now just me… and them.

The three of us met up in the middle of the lawn, standing barely two feet apart from one another.
The fishmen each towered two heads above me and used that to glare down at me like I was a particularly repugnant insect. Of course, I matched them ire for ire, so the effect was diminished just a tad.

“If you would be so kind as to repeat and elaborate on your statement, please,” I requested.

“I called you a hypocrite, Jeremiah Cross, because of your blatant fraternizing with a Marine when you’ve made it your life’s mission to tear them down,” Kuroobi sneered. “How do you think your adoring public would feel to find your words are as worthless as you are?”

I withheld my urge to roll my eyes at the ludicrously weak blow, and simply settled for crossing my arms and giving him a patiently unimpressed stare. “I hear what you’re saying. You know nothing of my work, and clearly wouldn’t know nuance if it slapped you in your face. My stance has always been that the majority of the Navy’s ranks are rotten and corrupt, and that there’s a sizeable minority of just Marines who actually follow the ideals the organization was founded on. I’ve met the bastards you describe, but I also know Lieutenant Tashigi, who is a true and honest soldier of Justice. Simply put…” I tightened my grip on my forearms and laid down the gauntlet. “There are all kinds of Marines, good and bad. To dismiss the prior because of the existence of the latter is either stupidity or malice.”

“Chew,” Chew derisively spat to the side. “You’re delusional. Bad is bad and good is good. That’s all there is. All there’ll ever be.”

I allowed myself a slight scowl. “That so? Well then…” I pivoted to the side and pointed my thumb at Koala, who was staring the two with naked hostility. “What’s your take on her, then, hm?”

Now that caught them off guard, effectively putting them on the backfoot. “Th-That’s—!” Kuroobi started to protest.

“What’s your take on her, then, hm?”

“An exception?” I queried oh-so-innocently, nodding in agreement. “Aye, true enough, but here’s the thing: You make an exception for her, you open up the floodgates so that not only can the whole of humanity be regarded with the rule…” I stepped up and jabbed the ray fishman in his chest, forcing him to take a step back. “But you allow for this rule to be reflected back on yourself. J’accuse, asshat.”

“She’s an exception because she knows the pain of the fishmen firsthand,” Kuroobi retorted with depressing speed. I guess that his bigotry was as good a mental insulator as my indignant temerity. “She’s not the only one who does, I admit that…” He raised his chin pompously. “But you are most
certainly not in that group.”

I waved him off impatiently. “I’m not, and I admitted as much before the world. But that sure as hell doesn’t mean it’s impossible for me to sympathize with the cause.”

“Oh, you know,” Koala interjected coldly. “The rest of the very much human soldiers of the Revolutionary Army who respect my karate instructor Hack, who’s a brocade perch fishman, and who are always pushing for us to set up a field office on Fishman Island. Just, you know, as an example.”

I was grateful for Koala’s comment, because the shocked and stricken looks the fishmen shot her way were the perfect opening for me. “As has been oh-so-nicely demonstrated, good and bad, however you define it, exist in all places and people, regardless of species. Folks like Hachi and Hack are perfect examples of the goodness in the fishman species…” I scowled as my grip on my temper started to fray. “Whereas there are still more bastards who serve as examples of everything wrong with your people. Bastards like you two.”

“Bastards like Arlong,” Nami snarled from the sidelines, the clouds around her crackling on the edge between cloud and raw electricity. And I’d bet a thousand beri that it was only Billy absorbing some of the voltage that kept it from tipping over that edge.

Chew and Kuroobi tried to glare at her, but the display of meteorological superiority made them decide to refocus their ire on me. And with the current subject at a standstill, I decided to backtrack a bit.

“Since I had to make that clear to you in the first place, I’m guessing that you didn’t catch much of the SBS while you were in the slammer?”

Both of them glowered more.

“Everything we and Arlong did, it was justified by you damned humans, chew!” Chew snapped, slamming a threatening stomp down in my direction. “The abuse, the slavery—!”

“Ahem?”

The long-lipped fishman was cut off as all attention turned towards Keimi, who was staring down
her co-workers (a classification I suspect she was having serious doubts about by this point). “Considering what your old friends the Macros were planning to do to me and have done in the past and how Mister Cross reacted to that, you have less of a leg to stand on than I do.”

“Or,” I butted in as Kuroobi started to open his mouth. “When you take into account the shit you bastards were involved in back on Conomi!”

As you can expect, by this point the both of them were red in the face from indignant fury, but it wasn’t like I was much better either. I was used to fighting ignorance and bigotry via one-sided conversations and tirades. Facing bigotry head-on, face-to-face? This was an entirely different ballpark, and if it hadn’t been for my friends backing me up, I don’t think I would have been able to handle it. As it was, though, I was already getting dangerously—!

“You’ve shown the evidence of how humans can be yourself, Jeremiah Cross!” Oh, hey, there was Kuroobi stomping on the accelerator! “We may not have heard everything that happened in Enies Lobby, but we’ve heard enough! All of those operations, all of those assassins—!”

“Primarily committed against humans!” I cut in, but the ray-man summarily ignored me and plowed on.

“And I think the biggest proof you gave was the one in charge of it all. What was it, Spandam?”

“Oh, piss off!” I swung my hand out, my exasperation rapidly mounting. “Not even you can be stupid enough to think all humans are as bad as that walking waste of dust!”

“There are enough who are, chew,” Chew responded, visibly trembling with outrage. “Enough that both of the most respected heroes of our race died at their hands! Big Bro Tiger, and Queen Otohime!”

…It might have just been the fact that my newly refreshed memories allowed me to see the late queen of Ryugu in all of her benevolence. Or maybe it was the memory of the hatred that tore her away from the world, or maybe it was the pain of the only person in the world who knew that secret. Frankly, it didn’t matter which.

“You bastards are the ones who burned the petition for the Reverie!” Chew all but spat in my face, slamming his finger in my chest hard enough that I was almost definitely going to bruise. “You’re the ones who assassinated Queen Otohime!”
I swear I felt a few wires short-circuit in my brain at the mere thought of being associated with that fucking tragedy, and I showed as much when I split my lips with a snarl. “That’s a lie!”

I was vaguely aware of a clatter coming from where Koala was sitting, and I noted her hastily shoving herself to her feet. “Ah, Cross—!” she tried to intervene.

“Don’t even try and deny it, scum!” Kuroobi shoved his roaring face in mine, Chew matching the motion as the pair cocked their shoulders back, undoubtedly in preparation to rush me. “Hody captured the—!”

**ALRIGHT, THAT FUCKING TEARS IT, YOU WANT TO PLAY—!** “THAT LYING BASTARD HODY JONES WAS THE ONE WHO SHOT OTOHIME IN COLD BLOOD!” I roared at the top of my—!

I knew I’d fucked up the second the words left my mouth, but by that point, considering how the entire damn deck froze, it was a little ‘too little too late’ on that front. I vaguely heard the crashes of anyone carrying anything dropping it, and I barely noticed Keimi, Hachi, and Koala all gaping at me from out the corner of my eye, but the two giants towering over me, paralyzed from pure shock, held my attention. For however long that shock lasted.

I slowly clench my eyes shut with a tortured groan. “Ooo oh, checkmate.”

I braced for the inevitable and… I’ll be frank, probably deserved by this point beatdown that was coming my way—

**SLAM!**

Only for a not-insignificant impact to shake the lawn (though not the boat) beneath me.

“I trust, Jeremiah Cross, that you have strong evidence to support such an accusation?”

My eyes snapped open at the unfamiliar but very stern and very powerful voice that had just rumbled above me. And considering that Kuroobi and Chew looked, if anything, even more stunned…
“…That was Jinbe landing right behind me, wasn’t it?” I inquired tersely.

The pair of them slowly inclined their heads.

“…he’s been here the entire time, hasn’t he?”

“Most of it, but I thought you were on a DECENT ROLL…” Soundbite informed me regretfully before gulping audibly. “DIDN’T SEE THE CRIT COMING…”

I slammed my hand to my face and raked my iron-coated fingers down in despair. “Soundbite, my dear partner in crime… someday—possibly today—you withholding knowledge from me is going to get me killed. And I promise you that if it does…” I cast a sidelong snarl his way. “It will only be after I kill you first.”

“Sooo noted,” the snail whimpered.

“I am waiting, ‘Voice of Anarchy’ Jeremiah Cross. Waiting and recalling the not insignificant size of your bounty.”

I very slowly and very deliberately took a deep breath and let it hiss out. Then I repeated the process, taking full advantage of the fact that Jinbe was a reasonable fishman to get my thoughts back in order. Then, when I’d managed to banish the majority of my panic from my mind and get half an idea of what I was going to say, I turned my back on the two bigots and eyed the infinitely more dangerous individual who was currently pissed with me.

The first thing that met my eyes was a kimono in orange and red with flame patterns dotted all over it, secured by an emerald green obi. The arms were crossed, pale blue fists on the ends of the sleeves, and my eyes darted down to see matching feet in a pair of geta. Then, with as much boldness as I could manage, I raised my eyes to look him in the eyes.

…Let me make one thing perfectly clear: I may have been reckless to the point of seeming suicidal, willing to taunt friends and enemies alike to my possible peril. But don’t think for a second that I’m not still rightfully intimidated when I’m staring up at someone that I knew had at least a chance of taking on our entire crew and winning, most likely without even a scratch. Especially when said someone was four feet taller than me, outweighed me by what I’m pretty sure was a literal metric ton
of pure muscle, was one of the strongest people on the face of the damn planet, and was currently occupied with glaring at me.

And worst of all, more pressing than any threats to my life possibly could have been... was that a bad first impression, specifically one as bad as this one was shaping up to be, could kill any chance of one of our (probably) future crewmates joining our ranks! And that just wasn’t an acceptable outcome.

And so, with a not-insignificant amount of difficulty, I regathered the strength of will I’d previously mustered and set my jaws. I was still scared out of my wits, but I’d been scared when I’d faced down Eneru, and just like back then, I knew exactly what to say. I opened my mouth—

And then another thought struck me, and I snapped my head away from Jinbe to look at my captain instead. “Luffy...” I groaned desperately. Because while I wouldn’t if he didn’t want me to, I really, really, really wanted to! And practically needed to, at this—

“Say whatever you think you need to, Cross.”

Luffy’s response was so fast and sure that it brought me up short. Looking at him, I saw that he had his serious face on. Then, after a moment, he gave me a reassuring smile. Sighing in relief, I smiled back and then returned my gaze to the Warlord, staring straight into his eyes.

“With all due respect, sir...” I started in a cool tone. “What’s more likely? That Otohime just so happened to get shot by a human the same day someone set fire to the petition box, and Hody was so overcome with rage he forgot his orders to not show the shooter...” I glanced aside to run the scene over in my head one more time. “Or that he put the box to the torch like he and the rest of his cronies had been torching other petitioners’ houses and set the whole thing up?”

I could see the hesitation come into Jinbe’s eyes, eclipsing the rage. I made to say something, and then another thought came to mind. Glancing at my partner, I whispered a few words. It would be a long time before he could look back and laugh at the reference:

“Search your feelings. You know it to be true,” Soundbite rumbled in James Earl Jones’ voice.

I nodded in innocent agreement. “The snail has a point. Bluntly worded, but a point.”
“Bastard!” Soundbite hissed incredulously in my ear.

“Bite me!” I sniped back, but I hastily refocused on the Warlord at hand, taking a defiant step forward. “Again, a point: Jinbe, this isn’t a surprise to you. You’ve known Hody for years, and for years you’ve known there’s something wrong with him. And not like Arlong, either. Arlong started off good, relatively anyways, but circumstances pushed him over the edge and that’s tragic.” I shook my head. “But not Hody. From the start, he’s always given you a bad feeling, and something always felt off about that day, about how everything went down. Think back, Jinbe! Remember the truth… or better yet—!” I snapped my fingers and pointed at the whale shark-fishman.

Thankfully, my message was well received, and before anyone could react, Popora had dashed over from halfway across the deck, leapfrogged off my head, and cracked his mallet down on Jinbei’s head, and—!

~o~

“A human came into our kingdom! AND KILLED OUR QUEEN!”

~o~

—And left us all reeling from the surge of images and emotions that had just slammed us, Jinbe in particular clutching his skull with a groan.

“What the hell—?” he started, but I pressed the advantage before he could get any further.

“Look at him, Jinbe!” I demanded, cementing the image of the ‘shooter’ Hody was holding in my mind. “Come on, you’ve been a Warlord for near a decade now, you’ve seen plenty of humans! Does he look anywhere near right to you?!”

“Actually… he looks pretty damn familiar to me!” Sanji spoke up, his eyes blazing furiously. “Atrophied muscles, gaunt skin tone, sunken eyes? Yeah, that’s something I recognize all too well. That man was the textbook definition of starved! If he ate anything over the week before that day, it was gruel! Thin gruel! He was a day from keeling over dead, easy!”

“Hrm, let’s see…” Chopper hummed. “Extreme undernourishment. A slew of symptoms, including extreme weight loss, a bulging belly from edema, skin rashes from vitamin deficiencies, inability to
“Wait, can’t concentrate?!” Usopp squawked incredulously. “But you all must have been nearly a half-mile away from her, maybe even more! A shot like that, you don’t make it by chance! It needs precision, timing, concentration! A crack shot! That guy? He’d have been lucky to hit the broadside of a decrepit sea king!”

“And that’s discounting the biggest issue of all: motive,” Vivi said. “What did a total stranger like him gain from killing the queen?”

“He didn’t need a reason.”

All eyes turned back to Kuroobi and Chew, the former of whom was shivering with rage. “He was a human, he—!”

“Are you going to try to turn this back on racism?” Vivi cut in. “Because there’s a big problem with that if what Cross is saying about Hody is true. Recall, we’ve already proven that all individuals, regardless of species or organization, can have their morality run the gamut from positive to negative. But because the ‘shooter’ was killed upon capture, we’ll never know where on the spectrum he fell. This Hody Jones character, however? From what I’ve gathered from this conversation, his stance has been clear for years.”

She raised her palms up and level, weighing the options in each hand. “All that’s left at this point is to apply Occam’s Razor: who killed the queen, the human with neither the ability nor a clear motive, or the infamous criminal with more than enough capacity and every possible motive? The answer is clear if you ask me.”

I took a moment to bask in just how gloriously on the ball all my crewmates were before picking up the torch to drive things home. Though with how tortured Jinbe was looking, I honestly didn’t want to. But fuck it, if it meant I could make Hody suffer even one second sooner than when we’d plant our boots up his ass, then I’d take it!

“Jinbe,” I spoke up, drawing his attention back down to me. “I know this hurts you like nothing else, and I’m sorry I blurted it out without warning… but you can’t deny the truth. You can’t deny what was missed all those years ago, and you can’t deny what you’ve always known about him. The truth is plain for all here to see: Hody Jones was the one who killed Queen Otohime.”
Painful silence descended on the deck. Then, all at once, every denizen of the deep (and one denizen adjacent) onboard opened their mouths, the same question echoed six times in their expressions, but before they could voice it-

SPLOOSH!

“WAAAGH!”

They were all interrupted as something breached the surface next to the Sunny, the resulting waves knocking about half of us on our asses. Before anyone could ask what the heck had just happened, a different, and far more pressing question was asked. And in a deep, attention-grabbing, and most importantly familiar Australian accent at that:

“How in the name of Oceanus do y’know who killed Queen Otohime!?”

In the time it took us to turn and identify the speaker, he asked another question:

“Wha—and how am I talking!? Wait... oh, no, I’m talking!”

I identified the original owner of the voice just as I identified who’d spoken, and both facts threw me for a loop, leaving me dazed on my feet and gaping like an idiot. “…OK, couple of things,” I choked out, raising my hand to knead my forehead. “First, Soundbite, how the fuck? Second, however the fuck, you’ve grossly misjudged the person you’re giving Bruce’s voice to. And third and most importantly of all, this is getting ridiculous; things cannot possibly line up this well for me! I blurt out one of the biggest secrets of the century, and who else is here to hear me but not only the individual best suited for taking Hody Jones out of the picture, but also the only one who saw it happen!?”

And indeed, it was before my very shocked eyes that none other than… well, the royal megalodon, Megalo, was floating alongside the Thousand Sunny and staring at us in horror, his fins clamped over his titanic maw.

“ALRIGHT, WHO’S THE JACKASS BOTHERING OUR SEA KINGS!?”

The moment was a bit ruined by Barto’s hollering from the deck of the Cannibal, but it was a short ruining.
“A VIP from Fishman Island popping up for a visit for some reason,” I informed him. I hoped Barto would realize he had absolutely no reason to yell…

“WELL, DOES HE HAVE TO BE HERE!?”

But hey, dreams were made to be dashed.

“Seeing as he’s a key piece to an impromptu plan I’ve only just stumbled into, yes!”

“...DAMN. ALRIGHT, JUST KEEP HIM AWAY FROM OUR GUYS, WILL YA!?”

“Will do.” I shot Barto a parting thumbs-up before getting my head back in the game and voicing the first question that came to mind. “And getting back on topic, I’d very much like to reiterate my first point: Soundbite, how!?” I gestured from the snail to Megalo. “He’s a fish! I thought—!?"

“I’ve been practicing FOR MONTHS, and I’ve been on the same ship as a vocal aquidae for THE LAST FEW HOURS,” Soundbite answered, a little snappishly. “AND BESIDES, it’s like LABOON; heck of a lot EASIER when they grow up surrounded by people WHO SPEAK HUMAN. DON’T QUITE HAVE THE LINGO FOR ANYFISH, but domestics are fine for now.”

“?(°Д°≡°Д°)?” Gif queried, snapping her eyestalks back and forth between myself and the gigashark.

“I’m with the heli-snail, who is this and why should we care?” Su asked with a raised brow… as much as she ever raised them, anyways.

“That’s Megalo,” Pappug announced, hopping on the railing. “He’s Princess Shirahoshi’s pet, a retainer for the royal family, and one of my high-end customers. What brings you up here, Megalo? Need a new shirt?”

“Ah-I-ah…” the shark stammered. He shook his head, which seemed to break through whatever block he’d had. “I… I came here to see Hachi, but—!”
Everyone jumped as a pair of panicked howls rang out across the deck, and we all turned to see Hachi and Keimi in the process of completely flipping out.

"THE ROYAL FAMILY’S MONTHLY BANQUET!" the pair wailed.

That comment broke through the gravity of the situation for me; I whistled in awe, leaning towards Pappug. “Wow, you guys have been catering to the Ryugu royal family?”

“Mm-hm!” the starfish nodded proudly. “And we’ve even got you lot to thank for it! One of the royal guards stopped by to eat and listen to the SBS while he was on break, he took some leftovers back with him for later, aaand… well, one thing lead to another. It’s been quite beneficial for us, let me tell you. Although…” He grimaced as he watched his co-workers panic. “There are still a few… barnacles to work out, so to speak?”

“IN ALL THE CONFUSION, WE FORGOT TO PREPARE IT!” Hachi hollered in dismay.


“What are those ingredients?”

Both fishman and mermaid paused in their panic long enough to stare at Sanji and the dugongs.

“What are those ingredients?” Boss repeated. “We may not be as fast as a mermaid, but we can cover a lot more ground with six of us regardless.”

“And I’ll help you on the griddle,” Sanji declared, rolling up his sleeves. “You’ll probably have to make the sauce yourself, though, I probably won’t be able to resist stealing it.”

“Y-You’re guests!” Hachi protested. “I-I couldn’t—!”
“Octopus,” Sanji interrupted. “I’m a chef. I know about rushes. I couldn’t call myself a chef if I let you face that alone.”

“And it’ll endear him to Keimi,” Zoro added.

“And it’ll endear me to—DAMMIT, MOSSHEAD!”

“As for us, the Flying Fish Riders clearly showed us that we need to work on our underwater speed,” Boss picked up as Zoro and Sanji butted heads again, irritably grinding his cigar between his teeth. “This’ll be a good first step.”

“And it’ll get us away from Cross’s latest zany scheme!” Leo added, accompanied by a trio of nods. Hey, I… wasn’t that bad!

“Ah… r-right, right…” Hachi muttered, counting on his fingers. “Right… okay, this can work! Dugongs! Follow Keimi’s orders to a T! We don’t want any poisoned customers!” Hachi ordered with half of his no-longer-flailing hands, while his other half gestured back at Takoyaki 8. “I’ll fire up the grill and give Sanji a crash-course with what ingredients we have! GOGOGO!”

And with that, everyone involved leapt overboard, frantic to cook a feast literally fit for a king and his family. The rest of us watched in bemusement as they all but flew either back into Takoyaki 8 or overboard, slamming the doors and into the surf at breakneck speeds, and that bemusement lingered for a good few seconds.

Then I returned everyone’s attention to the matter at hand with a conspicuous cough. Megalo froze under the sidelong glance I gave him, caught halfway to slipping into the surf. “You are not going anywhere, blubber-ass,” I informed him. “You’re the one who honked that foghorn, and believe you me, that’s something you cannot take back. Now say it for the audience.”

“H-H-How—!?” he stammered, in far more hesitant a tone than I think the original owner of his voice ever took.

“Not relevant and not something I want leaking beyond what’s necessary, and stop trying to change the damn subject,” I ordered.

And then I grimaced and glanced aside uncomfortably as I remembered why this was only coming
up now. And as much as it killed me, I also knew how to break his vow of silence... maybe... hopefully? C’mon, bullshit, don’t fail me now.

Acting based on my gut, I jabbed my el—er, right, he wouldn’t notice that... I jabbed my fist in Jinbe’s side and pointed out the megalodon. “Help me with this logjam, would you?”

The whale-shark-man glanced incredulously down at me, but he went along with it and cleared his throat, eyeing the real shark warily. “Megalo... all these years, you knew?”

“I... I...” Megalo curled in on himself with a tearful whimper, shaking his head miserably. “I saw everything... the whole thing...”

“And you didn’t say anything!?” the Knight of the Sea suddenly roared. “Do you have any idea —!??”

“Ahem?” I coughed, eyeing him intently. “He did tell someone. Which is the exact problem.”

I flinched under Jinbe’s gaze, but it was a short-lived gaze. I could all but see the gears grinding in his head as he made the relevant connections: Megalo to Shirahoshi, and from there the crybaby princess to—!

The titanic Warlord loosed a massively tired groan, apparently overcome with an onset of overwhelming exhaustion. He sank into a sitting position on the lawn, miserably gripping the bridge of his nose. “Oh, damn it, Princess...” he lamented.

“A little exposition for those of us who aren’t Cross would be nice,” Merry cut in.

“I’ll tell you all later,” Koala replied. I shot her a look of gratitude, and the look I got in response made it clear that she was expecting me to fill in the blanks that she couldn’t, which had me waving her off now. After all, at the moment I had bigger fish to—er, you get the idea.

“Megalo,” I said, drawing the shark’s tearful gaze. “I understand why Shirahoshi told you to do what you did, and I even respect it; it’s taken more strength and responsibility than anyone her age should bear to stay silent...” I heaved a sigh of defeat. “But it also doesn’t change the fact that she was wrong.”
“HEY!” Megalo barked at full volume, snarling and displaying more aggression then I think I’d ever seen him show, be it in this life or my prior one. “PRINCESS SHIRAHOSHI WAS FOLLOWING HER MOTHER’S FINAL WISHES!”

“To the detriment of the Ryugu Kingdom!” I countered just as heatedly, emphasizing the point with a slap of my palm on the railing. “Look, I’m not insulting Shirahoshi, Megalo, nor the late queen! Otohime’s last wishes were noble, and it’s incredible that Shirahoshi’s followed them all this time, but both actions were undertaken under the wrong context!”

Fury gave way to confusion, which I took as a sign to continue.

Or at least, I would have if Jinbe’s rumbling growl didn’t cut me off. “If Otohime’s assassination had been a mere one-off. A lone, crazed gunman acting out of his own personal hatred, then letting him fade into anonymity, while ultimately undesirable, would be… Acceptable. Barely, but acceptable… Except…” He looked at me with a sad expression. “Except that this isn’t that, is it?”

I shook my head in confirmation of the denial. “Not with Hody. Hody’s hatred neither started nor ended with Otohime. Rather, she was an obstacle. He…” I hissed out a sigh, dragging my fingers through my hair. “In his own words, as Arlong proclaimed himself to be the rage of the fishmen, Hody Jones has literally become the incarnation of their hatred, the hatred they all hold towards humankind. His only reason for… for literally anything in life is to inflict pain on humanity. And he will stop at nothing to achieve that goal, all costs are acceptable. Even other fishmen, sympathizer or detractor alike. Queen Otohime wasn’t a milestone for him, but a stepping stone. And he’ll step on a hundred more, a thousand more, a million… as many as it takes, so long as it ultimately gets him what he wants. Mark my words: Hody Jones will not stop until he sees the human world set aflame… even if he needs to reduce Fishman Island to ashes to do it.”

I leaned forwards and stared Megalo dead in the eye. “Trying to stop new hatred from being born won’t work, Megalo. Not when we’re still trying to fight the original strain from all those years ago! So please, please…!”

The titanic shark grimaced, visibly tortured by the decision I was forcing on it, and I was honestly a bit regretful for having to force it on him. But, well, to reiterate, I had to force it on him, for everyone’s good.

And finally, Megalo curled in on himself with a tortured groan that I was most thankful for (and damn did it hurt that I was thankful for another sapient’s pain, but desperate times and all that…).
“I—I… a-all these years, and it still d-doesn’t feel real…” he said. “I-I was going for a swim when I heard about the fire, s-so of course I hurried to the Plaza as fast as I could. When I got there, though…” He shook his head. “I-I didn’t know! He was a guard, he was in uniform, I thought he was putting up a perimeter, I thought…”

Megalo went silence for a moment before croaking on. “It was all so fast. I heard the bang, I heard the screams, I looked for the shooter…” His eyes snapped shut, massive tears dribbling down his cheeks. “And… there it was. A gun, in his hands, barrel smoking.” The shark raised his nose and gazed into the heavens. “Then a hole opened up in the ground behind him, and that human was spat out. The guard, he shot him, picked him up and…” He concluded the tale with a massively tired sigh. “And then he showed him to the crowd and everything went straight to Charybdis. That’s when I ran.”

If Jinbe hadn’t already been sitting down, I’m fairly certain his legs would have given out from that confirmation. Silence fell across the deck as the truth sunk in, the masquerade made to engender hate torn away and revealing the truth beneath. The anguish in the whale shark fishman’s expression was plain to see; faced with Megalo’s testimony, he could no longer deny the truth.

…If only his former crewmates were of a similar mind. But nooo, much to my chagrin, Kuroobi and Chew’s hatred was ingrained too deep in them for them to accept such a blow to their worldview without exhausting every possibility first. And so began the chain of events that would eventually lead to what, in the future, my crewmates would affectionately refer to as ‘The Verbal Blitz.’

“Th-The snail must be changing the words up, chew! He’s lying! He must be!”

I could hear the desperation in Chew’s voice, and the fact that he himself doubted his own words helped soften my rage, but only from ‘apocalyptic’ to ‘infernal’. And I wasn’t the only directing their anger towards the two remnants of the Arlong Empire, like, say, everyone on deck. One individual’s ire was particularly pertinent.

“No.”

“Who—?” Kuroobi started.

“I said no,” Pappug repeated, waddling right up to the fishmen, his coworkers, and glaring them dead in the eye. “You may not be able to understand Megalo without Soundbite’s translation, but I can. And I can tell you that all the snail was doing was echoing what Megalo was saying. No matter what you say, I’ll take the word of a retainer to the royal family any day.”
“…You… you sympathize with them, you could just be saying that to—”

Chew fell silent as Pappug, much like Megalo a couple of minutes ago, adopted a look fiercer than I ever imagined possible on his face.

“Don’t you DARE. To insult my loyalty to my kingdom!” he snapped, jabbing his own chest with one of his arms. “I respect the Straw Hats to hell and back, yes, but I would never disgrace the memory of Queen Otohime by helping them lie about her demise!”

Chew’s voice died. Kuroobi picked up the bargaining with a slightly less anger-inducing argument: “But he—! But this—! Jinbe, you can’t believe them! They’re talking about Hody! They don’t know him like we do, they don’t know what they’re talking about!”

“No…”

The pair were stunned into silence by the solemn reply, and they could only gape as the whale-shark fishman slowly rose to his feet, turning to Kuroobi and Chew with a look that was more tired than angry.

“No,” he repeated. “The only ones who don’t know what they’re talking about are you.”

“Huh!?” they chorused.

Jinbe snarled, flashing his fangs. “Let me be clear to the both of you: You weren’t there. You haven’t been back to the kingdom in over a decade, so you have no idea what it’s become like down there.” The Warlord let out a sad huff. “You don’t know Hody, not like me. You haven’t seen what he’s done, the monster he’s turned into. You weren’t at Gyoncorde Plaza, you didn’t see his eyes that day. You didn’t see the hate.”

“Jinbe…” they pleaded desperately. Jinbe turned his back to them… and his face to me.

“Jeremiah Cross. In recent years, pirate ships have been disappearing en route to the island. Initially, I thought it was just the Flying Dutchman and its crew getting up to its old tricks, but now…”
“…if Hody hasn’t reached some kind of agreement with Vander Decken yet?” I responded, my tone dark and quiet; I was still struggling to keep my anger under control. “Then yeah, I’d say it’s most likely him. New ‘recruits’ for the New Fishman Pirates. After all, you can’t fight a revolution without an army.”

“You have a better word than ‘recruits’, don’t you?” Sandersonia murmured, glowering at me over the lip of her mug.

“Yeah. ‘Slaves’,” I grinned madly as I spread my arms wide. “But hey, it’s alright! Let’s forget all about the generations of blood and tears that weigh down those chains and pick ‘em right on up! After all…” my mad grin rotted into a scowl. “They’re just humans.”

That was the extent of how far their bigoted pride could blind them. The ray and smelt-whiting swayed, nearly falling over as horror and disgust wracked their frames. Words fell from their lips that I don’t think they were fully conscious of…

“Why… why would he—!?”

That was the last thing I heard before everything got… blurry.

-o-

Luffy observed the goings-on between his crew, his old enemies, and the Warlord who seemed to be in the middle of it all with some reluctance. This was Cross’s sort of thing, not his, but he knew that he couldn’t say that. Not anymore. Even as he attempted to focus on current situation, his mind wandered to how things had changed.

Cross had been almost a spur-of-the-moment choice for Luffy way back in the East Blue; he and Soundbite were awesome, sure, and they had become even more awesome since then, but Luffy hadn’t planned on inviting anyone else to join his crew before they left for the Grand Line. But when he saw the state that Cross was in, it was easy for him to put the pieces together thanks to his life on Mt. Corvo: whether he was shipwrecked or a runaway, he was lost. And Luffy had seen hope in his eyes when he met him, a hope that felt familiar thanks to his brothers. So he had extended the invitation, despite his crew’s objections, and the conversation that followed confirmed to Luffy that he had made the right choice.
It was only a few weeks later that he learned exactly what was behind the hope in Cross’s eyes. Luffy had known Cross was smart, but the whole ‘other world’ thing put everything in a new perspective. Learning the adventure ahead of time still repulsed him, so he was quick to keep Cross from telling them anything that wasn’t really important. Maybe there would be something, but he didn’t need to think about it too hard, right?

And then he found out that Sabo was alive and Ace would have died. Even after all of this time, the revelations about the two most important people to him before he found his crew shook Luffy to the core. And then he lost to Crocodile and almost died. Twice. He won the third time, but it stuck in his mind how far Crocodile pushed him. And then Vivi had been given a bounty for trying to save her country, and by the same bastards that killed—no… almost killed Sabo. He knew his journey to become the Pirate King wouldn’t be easy, but he had trusted that everything would work out all right.

But Alabasta shook him. He was strong enough to protect his friends from anyone who tried hurting them with weapons or fists, but only barely; he had almost died three times. He needed to get stronger. And even then, he couldn’t hurt the ones who hurt Vivi. But Cross could. The mystery bastard gave Cross the key to using his mystery knowledge to shake the entire world in retaliation. Luffy had let him. He had kept letting him, ignoring whatever spoilers he shared with Zoro, Nami, and Vivi so that he could do what Luffy couldn’t. And at that time, Luffy truly understood just how much power Cross’s knowledge gave him.

And then Cross started bringing others into the crew. Luffy had always planned on having a small crew, only about ten people, but that had changed along with everything else; his crew doubled in size when they left Alabasta and had grown more with every island that they visited, either in crewmates or in allies. Luffy was never mad about it; every single person or animal who joined was awesome, but in the aftermath of Alabasta, he’d had to re-evaluate his plans. He had assigned Cross to make the plans because he was smarter, and while Luffy’s stance on that hadn’t changed since Whiskey Peak, his outlook had. The journey was going to be harder and more out of control than he thought, and he needed to be stronger… and not just in body.

He took Cross’s advice and started practicing with his Devil Fruit before they left for the Sky Island. It was thanks to that that he was able to save Conis and Su from Eneru, which eventually led to her joining his crew. That was proof enough that getting smarter was good despite the headaches thinking too much produced, but he got it hammered home after Navarone, when Cross matched wits with a Vice Admiral and won. Luffy had vowed to himself that day that he would actively try to be smarter… just so that he could potentially pay his grandpa back for all of the hell he put them through. He was a Vice Admiral too, so that would work, right?

The next island only added to his growing proof. Luffy’s anger had been kindled from the moment that he met Foxy, and he chose to beat him at his own game. Wits and traps had allowed a weakling to push Luffy almost as far as Crocodile did in their last match. And then came Admiral Aokiji. Cross’s knowledge was the only thing that actually hurt the admiral, and the admiral’s parting words hurt his crew more than the beatdown he had given them ever could. That had been the final straw;
seeing what a few choice words from an enemy did to his crew, seeing the despair in Robin’s eyes, he did the only thing he could to prepare them against that in the future, and put his trust in Cross to forearm them.

Even with all of that, he almost died in his next big fight. He couldn’t lose… but he did. The words of his friends and crewmates, the reminder that Lucci would hurt the ones he had vowed to protect, spurred him on and allowed him to win, but it had exhausted him to an extent that he hadn’t known since Porchemy’s interrogation. Then there was Merry. Cross had bargained for a miracle to save her, and he got it, but it shouldn’t have come to that in the first place. Cross had done everything he could to forearm them and protect her and it hadn’t been enough. Even knowing the future wasn’t a guarantee that he could change it. Thriller Bark was more proof of that; Cross’s plan went perfectly, and then everything went wrong. Luffy exhausted himself against Moria, leaving him out cold and unable to protect his crew when another Warlord showed up.

Luffy couldn’t hold anything against Zoro, or Nami for that matter; it had sunk in that all of them would give their lives for each other, even though they wouldn’t have to, because they would keep getting stronger and stronger. This time, like the previous times, Luffy’s anger at what had happened and what his crew had to do was swallowed up in the relief that they still won, and they were all still alive. Even after all of this time, he still had that trust that everything would work out all right. Even when he came up against Shiki, someone who fought Roger himself, that was still the case.

But it was only now, seeing Cross’s memory refreshed as he saw what Luffy knew, somehow, to be Ace dying, seeing Cross brought to tears just from the memory, that he made the connection in his mind: Cross felt even more of a burden than he did. Luffy’s job as captain was to protect his crew, and to do that, he was the strongest of them all. He knew that he could protect them from whoever tried to hurt them. Cross didn’t, and yet because of how much he knew about them and their future, he still felt like he had to… and his burden wasn’t limited to just the Straw Hat Pirates, either.

And that was what broke through Luffy’s mind once and for all. He knew that there were still things Cross could do that he couldn’t, and he knew that he only told a select few of the crew his plans because they were good at keeping secrets. But if Luffy being ignorant was forcing an even heavier burden than his on Cross and those crewmates, then he was done with it. He knew well by now that Cross couldn’t spoil the fun of the adventure by telling them about it ahead of time, and if that was the case, then he had no excuse to keep closing his eyes and plugging his ears.

So he watched and he listened as Cross fought and everyone reacted. He saw as a Warlord came onboard and heard him threaten his crewmate. He gave his consent for Cross to say whatever he had to without a second thought. He saw Cross slowly wear down their old enemies. He heard the ones who weren’t on his crew help Cross until their old enemies couldn’t deny the horrible truth anymore. He saw them sink to their knees, broken, and heard them speak words that were hardly coherent.

“Why… why would he—!?”
“Why…”

And then he saw and heard as, for the second time in all the time that he’d known him, Cross well and truly snapped.

“Why… why!? WHYYY!?"

Acting on his instincts and way too much experience with Ace (though this was the first time it actually worked), Luffy snapped his arm out and snagged his tactician by his collar. And not a second too soon either, as literally a second later, Cross roared in primal fury and lunged at the bastard fishmen on the deck, honest-to-goodness murder in every inch of his frame and his gauntlets still reaching for their throats. At the same time, he saw Zoro and Conis silently putting themselves in front of Lassoo and Funkfreed before they could go to their partner’s aid.

Not that they really needed to, seeing as the weapon-Zoans (and how cool was that? Living weapons! His crew was just the best!) weren’t doing anything more serious than just growling and pawing at the deck; they’d probably be a lot harder to stop if Cross actually called them…

“WHY THE HELL DO YOU THINK, YOU BASTARDS!?"

Except there wasn’t any chance of that happening because Cross was still out of his mind. Like, seriously out of it, white eyes and… was that—? Yeah, foam, just a bit, out of the corner of his mouth. Eesh, Luffy didn’t think he’d ever seen Ace…? Oh, no no, now he remembered, it was that time one of the nobles just literally walked over him while they were sneaking through Goa. It didn’t hurt or anything but that didn’t stop Ace from almost ripping the guy’s—

“Woops!” Luffy cursed under his breath and hastily resecured his grip on Cross’s shirt instead of his jacket, on account of Cross almost slipping free of his outer layer. Deciding to avoid any more near misses, Luffy pulled his head out of his memories of the good old days and refocused on the good old present.

“YOU’RE THE ONES WHO FUCKING TOLD HIM TO!” Cross was raging, spittle flying without care or control. “YOU TOLD ALL OF THEM! HODY, DOSUN, ZEO, DARUMA, IKAROS! YOU PREACHED SCRIPTURE AT THEM AND THEY FUCKING FOLLOWED IT TO A T!”
“W—We never told them to—!” the ray-guy tried to protest, reeling back from the human half his size in terror.

“YOU DIDN’T NEED TO!” Cross cut him off, swinging his arms wildly as he did his best to get at their necks. “YOU SPENT THEIR MOST MALLEABLE YEARS TELLING AN ENTIRE FUCKING GENERATION THAT HUMANS WERE THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL, THAT THEY WERE TO BE HATED AND DESPISED, NO MATTER THE COST! WHAT THE HELL ELSE DID YOU EXPECT?! THAT THEY WOULD JUST OH-SO-NICELY APPLY FUCKING NUANCE?! CONSIDER ANYTHING OTHER THAN HATE, EVEN IF IT HURTS THEM OR ANY OTHER FISH-OR-MERFOLK IN THE PROCESS?! MERCY, COMPASSION, COMMON-FUCKING-DECENCY! BECAUSE OF YOU, THOSE WORDS MEAN NOTHING TO THEM! THEY’RE NOT EVEN PEOPLE ANYMORE, JUST WALKING CORPSES FILLED WITH HATE! YOUR HATE!”

Wow, talk about a rant. Briefly, Luffy debated whether to stop this or not. On the one hand, it was going on kinda long. But on the other hand, Cross probably needed to get this off his chest, and all that talk about ‘malleable years’ was actually kinda interesting. Something to ask Cross about later?

“BECAUSE OF YOU WORTHLESS SKIDMARKS, HODY AND THE REST HAVE HURT THOUSANDS, WILL HURT THOUSANDS MORE, BUT NOT BEFORE I TEAR OUT YOUR FUCKING TONGUES AND SHOVE THEM—!”

Oops, okay, maybe it was time to stop things—oh, wait, no, that was Koala’s hand grabbing Cross’ neck. To Luffy’s relief, his third mate immediately choked off into a gurgle and slumped over, unconscious. As a quick shake from Luffy confirmed.

“Phew, thanks, Koala!” the rubber-man grinned at the new friend.

The blonde shrugged casually as she hefted her unconscious ally onto her shoulder. “Not a problem, that was starting to get inappropriate even for this situation. If it’s alright with you, I’m going to take him somewhere quiet, help him cool down before he hurts someone… or himself.”

“Oh, yeah, that’d be great!” Luffy’s grin extended into outright beaming, and he jabbed his thumb towards the Sunny’s rear—er, aft. “Go ahead and use the Aquarium Lounge, I don’t think there’s anyone in there right now.”

“Got it, thanks.” And with that, Koala would have set off… if the repeat offenders on deck didn’t choose to open their mouths one last time.
“Chew…” Chew audibly sighed in relief, wiping a layer of sweat from his forehead and smiling gratefully at Koala. He then walked forwards and made to pat his hand on the Revolutionary’s shoulder. “Thanks for that, Koala. For a second there, chew, I was actually worried about the little —!”

**SMACK!**

And just like that, the tension ratcheted right back up to maximum as Koala batted the smelt-whiting fishman’s hand away and fixed him with a *chilling* look. Not even angry, just cold and emotionless.

“Don’t touch me,” she ordered, and nearly everyone who heard the words shivered from the sheer level of utter *contempt* packed into the sentence. Luffy, though, just watched impassively.

“Buh-I-wha—?!?” Chew sputtered incredulously, trying and failing to find the words for what had just happened.

Kuroobi, however, had no such (or at least less) problems. “What the hell, Koala?!” he demanded, stomping towards the Revolutionary. “It’s been over a decade since we last saw each other, but now you’re snubbing us! Treating us like—like we’re—!”

“Like you’re what?” Koala inquired in her still-placid tone, meeting his panicked gaze with her calm one. “Like you’re enemies? The enemy? Scum of the earth, even? All inaccurate, I assure you. My opinion regarding you two is far below such lofty stations.”

“Why are you saying this, chew?!” Chew demanded. “Koala, we’re your friends!”

Luffy frowned. Why on earth did they think that? It was pretty obvious that she really didn’t like them. The only conclusion he could come to was that they were idiots, so that was at least correctible. As the ambient temperature plummeted even further, he made his move.

“Uh, no, she isn’t,” he said in disdainful confusion.

“What he said. I have *never* been friends with you.” The words were delivered calmly, clearly, and both weathered the stricken looks the fishmen shot her and aborted any attempt to protest Luffy’s
declaration. “You appear confused, so allow me to clarify: you see, I was friends with a ray fishman and a smelt-whiting fishman who were also called Kuroobi and Chew, back when I was younger. But they were Sun Pirates. Good pirates. Good people.”

She shook her head in slow, disappointed denial. “But they’re dead now. They died when Tiger died. And you? You might have their names and their faces, but you’re nothing like them. You’re Arlong Pirates. I wouldn’t be caught dead being friendly with you. And I can’t imagine there’s a single self-respecting person above or below the seas who would be.”

Koala punctuated the lecture’s conclusion by repositioning Cross on shoulder and giving the fishmen a curt nod.

“Have a nice day.”

In the silence that resounded following Koala’s final statement, the closing of the lounge’s door blasted out like a cannonball detonation. Still, awkward as the deck-wide hesitation was, Luffy was actually a little grateful for it. After all, it gave him a chance to catch up with things and actually (ugh) think about everything that had just happened.

“Mm… ngh!” Luffy grimaced as he hastily abandoned that ill-conceived course of action. Seriously, he had no idea why anyone else would do something so dumb like thinking; he’d save using his brain for life and death situations, thank you very much!

Tashigi broke the silence after a minute. “Popora, would reviving that many memories at once have amplified the feelings that he felt from them?”

The strange creature (rabbit-wolf! With a hammer! So cool!) folded his arms in contemplation. Then he shrugged and gestured to the door that had just closed.

“‘Based on that, apparently,’” Tashigi translated, sighing and rubbing her forehead. “I shouldn’t have used up that mood-lifter so soon.”

Luffy’s grimace deepened briefly, but he shook it off; he would need to talk to Cross later, but his third mate was in good hands for now. With that problem done, his eyes scanned over the deck, and immediately fell on the only fishman onboard whom he hadn’t met, and who seemed to be a good guy.
“Anyway, nice to meet you! I'm Monkey D. Luffy, Captain of the Straw Hat Pirates!” he said, extending a hand to said fishman.

Jinbe blinked, not doing anything, which was fine, because Luffy got that reaction a lot. Then he too broke into a smile and returned Luffy's handshake.

“Jinbe, Captain of the Sun Pirates and Warlord of the Seas. It's... honestly a pleasure to meet you, Luffy.”

“Shishishi!” Luffy snickered as his grin extended to its normal, comfortable width. Honestly, all the complicated stuff and big emotions that were flying around could go soak their heads. If the rubberman only knew one thing, it was that today was turning out to be a very good day.

-o-

With everyone’s attention diverted to what could easily be defined as the World Government’s worst nightmare coming to life, nobody paid much mind to the morally defeated fishmen as they stumbled aside, all but dead on their feet.

“How…” Kuroobi choked, images of someone he had last seen as a future member of their crew clashing with the form of their beloved queen; the smiling slave girl with the cold Revolutionary that scorned them; their sobbing captain as he lay dying with their laughing captain as he gloated over bringing another human into chains.

“…How could things have gone so wrong?”

Chew was in complete agreement, still unable to see how preaching their message about the past with humans and the way to treat them had carried over to murdering Otohime. Arlong himself would have led a lynching against anyone on their crew who would have dared to kill a fellow fishman, human sympathizer or no. And a threat to their queen? Arlong would have torn their throat out himself.

So… So for it to be someone who’d worshipped Arlong so thoroughly, who’d held onto his every word, who they remembered so clearly…

“I don’t know,” Chew sighed miserably.
“No?”

Both stiffened at the voice in their ears, and they snapped their heads around to stare at the other, previously neglected half of the Voices of Anarchy.

“You still don’t get it? Well, then…” Soundbite swayed his neck side to side, piping in the neck cracks his body lacked the bones to produce naturally. “WELL THEN, LET ME HELP. Because if I need to listen TO CROSS GO THROUGH EMOTIONAL HELL, SO DO YOU. NOW SHUT UP, NUT UP, AND LISTEN TO how badly you fucked up.”

Both briefly considered going overboard. That was immediately countered with the fact that Jinbe would catch them if they tried. That almost didn’t stop them. Almost. In the end, the two of them decided not to try and were left with no choice but to await whatever the louder of the Voices of Anarchy had in store.

-0-

My first thoughts upon waking up were hastily shoved together, and the general gist was quick to slip out of my mouth: “I’M GONNA KILL THOSE—!”

THWACK!

Waking up for the second time, I was calm enough that I could fake being calm so I could try and get my gauntlets around a certain pair of scaled necks. “Okay, alright, I’ve calmed down, I’m ready to apologize—!”

THWACK!

Waking up for the third time, I reflected on the fact that, OK, so my tone there gave away that I was lying. But I wasn’t lying anymore now, for real. In retrospect, I might have overreacted a bit. “Alright, now I’m calm, you can stop—!”

THWACK!
Fourth time, my ire at the fishmen was… eclipsed. “AND NOW I’M PISSED AGAIN!” I roared.

“That’s what I was looking for. Now we can start to talk,” Koala stated.

I opened my mouth to ask her what she was talking about. Then I noticed I wasn’t on deck anymore. I was in the aquarium lounge, highlighted by the light dancing around the shadows and fish all around me. It really felt like we were underwater. Alone. With nobody else listening…

I slowly pulled myself to my feet and walked up to the aquarium’s glass, staring into the pseudo-depths. Stared at a sight that so many others were familiar with… a sight that was the only sight so many had seen their entire lives. That would be the only sight many would see.

“…they were just children, damn it.”

As she moved to stand next to me, Koala gave me a questioning look.

“Hodi and his bunch,” I clarified, my eyes following the fish as they idly swam about, blissful in their ignorance. “They were… for God’s sakes, they were just children. They… They weren’t always like this. They weren’t always monsters, they weren’t always evil. They… once upon a time, they were children.”

In spite of myself, a wistful smile crossed my face. “Innocent, hopeful, with the whole world spread out before them, nothing impossible to them. They could have done anything. They could have gone on to become builders, to become artists or heroes or… or anything at all. They could have been incredible…” And then, just as swiftly, my smile died and was replaced by a blistering scowl. “But that didn’t happen. That didn’t happen because they were corrupted. That didn’t happen because their futures were stolen away, and their lives were ruined. And because of that… so many others were, too.”

I lapsed into a heavy silence, and Koala was kind enough to simply wait for me to start speaking again.

“She was… she was close, ya know?” I smiled wistfully. “Otohime, I mean. She was so close. People were starting to give her the signatures she needed, she had the document, the Reverie was fast-approaching… if she hadn’t… if she’d gone…” I chuckled as I tried, tried to rub the weariness from my eyes. “Hell, if she’d managed it sooner, if she weren’t being dragged two steps back for every step forward… If just one thing had gone right...”
“You think we’d be equal today,” Koala tiredly summarized, having probably long since thought the same thing.

I felt the sides of my mouth turn upward. Reaching up, I rested one hand on the glass. As expected the fish nearby immediately scattered.

“…no,” I admitted. “I wish, but no. It wouldn’t be that fast; there’d still be racism, still be oppression and inequality. There would still be so much work to do. But... But I think that they’d be here.” I helplessly waved my free hand back at the rest of the world. “Fishmen on islands, walking on the same streets as humans. They’d be separate, yes... but damn it all, it would be a start. It would be the foot in the door for change. A foot in the door for peace and equality and tolerance, a chance for humans and fishmen to talk and know each other. I think that if one thing had been different, then we’d have the chance to start teaching a new generation. I think…”

From out of the depths of the tank, a lone fish swam up to my hand and started glubbing about it curiously. It was so small, so obviously young and... and I couldn’t help but smile at it.

“I think that the children would play together,” I whispered to myself. “Regardless of what poison or ignorance their parents might tell them, the children would play together because they would just be children. They wouldn’t know anything of hate or prejudice, and they’d grow up knowing their parents’ words to be dead wrong. And I think they’d go on to create a future more glorious than any of us could imagine…”

And for a few seconds, a few wonderful, glorious moments, I basked in the image of that wonderful, un-ironic Brave New World...

SLAM!

And then I scowled and rammed my fist against the tank, scaring the fish off.

“…but that didn’t happen. That didn’t happen because one fool, one reckless, hateful fool decided to spew his bile and his poison without a thought for the consequences, and he destroyed a generation because of it. And I…” I grimaced in shame, and it took me a second to muster up the words... but hell, what good was there in denying it. “I hate him for it. I hate him, I hate his senseless corruption... and most of all, I hate what he did. Arlong stole a most beautiful future from us, from the world... and I can never forgive him for that.”
“… heh,” Koala chuckled grimly, clenching and unclenching her hands. “Yeah, I’ll admit, all of this is…it’s…” Her smile became distinctly rictus-like as her fingers snapped into a trembling fist. “I really wish we knew where he was, so that I could have a talk with him. Ah…” She blinked, and looked at me curiously after a second of curious stillness. “But… You weren’t even part of the crew for Arlong Park. In fact, you’ve never met him in person. But you still hate him that much?”

The rush of my rage drained out of me, leaving me empty and exhausted. I turned around and sank onto the lounge sofa, dropping my face into my hands. I was vaguely aware of Koala sitting down next to me as I spoke again. “How could I not? His actions speak for themselves, echoing out and affecting the world, even now that he’s been defeated. I mean…” I waved a hand off into the distance. “Just look at the East Blue.”

Koala grimaced. “Cocoyashi.”

“It’s not even about the adults,” I lamented. “Once again, it comes back to the children. Right now, there’s an entire generation out there that grew up fearing fishmen. And while that was with good reason, the problem is that now that the threat is gone, fear will become hate. And they will apply that hate to all fishmen, because fishmen like Arlong are all they have ever known. And once they grow up and have kids of their own?” I shook my head. “They’ll tell them of the bad old days, of the monsters from the sea that once made mommy and daddy suffer…”

“And then those new kids will fear and hate an entire species, because that was what they were told growing up. Just like Hody,” the Revolutionary sighed.

I yanked the brim of my cap down. No way was I locking eyes with anyone. Not now. “And hell, who knows. Maybe one will decide to become the hero humanity needs, and dedicate himself to exterminating the ‘subhuman monsters’, in the name of peace and justice.” I spun a finger in the air. “Another spoke in the wheel. Hate rolls on unimpeded and we’re back where we started, caked in more blood than before.”

There was another break in the conversation, which Koala ended by giving me a quizzical look. “If you don’t mind me saying so, even with all that, you’re still taking this pretty personally, Cross. Too personally for someone who grew up in a world without fishmen.”

“HA!”

Koala actually recoiled, but I couldn’t blame her, seeing as I’d just barked like a mad seal.
“Yeah, you’re completely right,” I sneered venomously, disgust coating my every word. “There weren’t any fishmen back on Earth. No fishmen, no mermaids, no minks, no nothing. Just us humans. But what does that change? Hate, racism? They’re universal. So we didn’t have any other species to hate, so what? We still had each other. A whole world of nothing but humans, what else would you expect us to do but turn on each other? Skin color, religion, politics, nationality, even sex and sexuality. Throughout history, we’ve found a million and one reasons to divide ourselves into an infinite number of factions, all at each other’s throats at the same time. It’s like no matter where you go… anyone who’s ‘different’ is the ‘enemy’.”

I barely acknowledged Koala’s hand on my shoulder.

I did, however, acknowledge her words: “Who was it?”

I’m… more than a little ashamed and embarrassed to acknowledge that my mind blanked a bit at that statement, and as such I acted on instinct and snarled as I smacked her hand off, shooting up to loom over her, a statue of indignance.

“‘Who was it?’” I repeated, my voice surprisingly steady for the shakes that I had suddenly developed. “I can’t just be a decent person with some fucking empathy? I need to have personally known someone who suffered? Bull! Shit! You don’t need to fucking have bigotry happen to you, or someone you personally know, to know that it’s a stupid, hateful thing that ruins lives! And the fact that that’s lost on so damn many of my fellow humans pisses me off!”

Gritting my teeth, I reigned myself in, despite the effort of will it took. On the other side, Koala exhaled slowly and shook her head.

“Alright, I owe you an apology for that,” she said. “I’ve thought the same for years, I shouldn’t have assumed you weren’t thinking the same way.”

I really, honestly wanted to stay ticked at her, but at the same time, I knew I couldn’t, and so I heaved a heavy sigh and dropped back onto the seat.

“…still,” Koala eventually tried again, drumming her fingers on the cushion. “Even if something like that isn’t your motivation, something is… ah. Let me try again: you tried what you’ve been doing here with the SBS back in your home, but failed?”
I slumped forward and all but cradled my head between my knees in shame. “Actually… the opposite. One thing you need to understand about my home? We were all connected. Everyone could speak at once and say anything they wanted… so as a result, little of worth was ever truly said. If I’d ever spoken up, I’d have been one voice lost among millions, a statistic. I couldn’t ‘fail’ because I never even started. I couldn’t speak up and make people realize just how inherently stupid they were all being, how—how asinine it is to discriminate on the physical, where such differences are ephemeral, when true evil is and always will be a mental construct, and—!” I cut myself off mid-sentence; I’d been building into a lecture… or, more realistically, a rant.

Once I’d calmed down and felt that urge leave, I changed tracks. “But here… I’m the voice. Here, I know that people are actually listening to me, that I’m reaching people…” My head sunk lower as I considered the reality of things. “Even if it’s only because they have to listen to me…”

“And what are you forcing them to listen to?”

I didn’t answer. Didn’t look up. What was there to say?

“Cross, listen to me.” I looked up, just as Koala put her hand on my shoulder again. “Back on Skypiea, when you first proved to the world that you had the kind of guts it takes to do anything close to what you’re doing, you said something that baffled a lot of us. You called yourself ordinary because you stuck up for what you believed in and would try helping someone who needed it. I’m guessing you saw it happen pretty often in your story, but just to be clear. How many times did it happen when the Straw Hats weren’t involved?”

“I, uh… well…” I hesitated slightly at that specification, and I wracked my mind, thanking Popora for the memory refresh. “There was Otohime… King Riku… the Nefertaris… Gan Fall… Dalton—”

“So royalty,” Koala interrupted.

An interruption I barely even noticed. “Oh, yeah, there were the Drum citizens who went to help him out…”

“Oh, yeah, heard about that,” Koala muttered, which brought me out of my thoughts. “But that’s a country that had to learn to stand on its own when its entire government and army bailed on them. They’re not normal, at all. Besides, if you and they were the norm, the Revolutionary Army would have achieved their goals years ago. Hell!” She threw her hands up with a despairing laugh. “One of our executives has the Pump-Pump Fruit, meaning that she can turn an oppressed town full of cowards into a rebel mob just by waving a flag and saying a few words, and she struggles to create a lasting impact. Maybe the norm is for people to be good, but it’s not for them to be brave.”
I had a rebuttal ready, myself, but that wasn’t the point here. Instead, I sat back and waited for her to continue, even as she gazed longingly into the aquarium behind us.

“A year ago,” she reminisced, her tone wistful. “When Hack and I liberated an island, we stayed behind for a week to help oversee the return to stability.” Her face then scrunched up in a mask of disgust. “Over that course of time, the children would throw stones at Hack, call him names, dare each other to touch the creepy fish thing, and then chase each other yelling about infecting them with the fishy diseases. People whispered behind his back, others said it to his face, and at one point the town’s mayor politely asked him to leave because his presence was, and I quote, disturbing the peace.”

She looked forward again and stared at her trembling fists. “The entire time, I wanted nothing more than to bash their brains out, to force them to get on their knees and apologize, for every slight, every glance. I wanted to take out eleven straight years of abuse and misery on the entire island, all at once. But I reined in my temper, because I knew that they weren’t like me. They didn’t know, couldn’t know. No matter how much I hated them for what they did, it wasn’t their fault.”

I was momentarily tempted to give her a comforting hand like she’d tried for me, but before I could, she suddenly perked up, beaming with unchecked glee.

“And then you happened. You, and everything you’ve done.” Stars bloomed in her eyes, and I was forced to actually reel back on account of just how blinding they were. “Three months ago, we liberated an island, we stayed to keep the peace. The children stared… but this time it was in awe. They whispered about how cool Hack was, they asked if they could feel his muscles, he even signed autographs. The people, they were always asking him if he could help out around the town and striking up conversations with him; twice he got asked if he was seeing anyone, once someone actually asked him on a date.”

I really tried to compose myself—yeah, no. I snorted in amusement at the thought of Hack getting propositioned, by a human no less. “Did he go through with it?” I inquired between snickers.

Koala giggled. “You mean after Sabo and I dragged him back when he tried to make a break for it? Four dates and then they broke it off rather than go for long distance, but they still keep in touch. I honestly think that after everything—GWAH!” Palms met cheeks, leaving behind red marks. “Anyway, getting back on track…”

“Really, I think the clincher was when the local schoolteacher came up to him. Came right up to Hack and asked him if he could stand in front of his entire class and tell them about fishmen and Fishman Island… because they were asking so many questions the teacher didn’t have answers to,
and because the teacher wanted to know those answers, too.” Koala craned her head back, tears of bliss shining in her eyes. “And then the parents asked if they could attend the next day, and the parents’ friends, until pretty soon Hack was giving lessons in the local park because that was the only place with enough room for everyone. I’m pretty sure that everyone in that town attended at least once.”

I stared at her, shellshocked, trying to process just the sheer… everything she’d hammered me with. Teaching. In a park. Because the entire town wanted to know. WHAT.

While I tried to process that, Koala stayed lost in the memories before wiping her tears away and turning to lock eyes with me.

“You told us that both sides needed to reach for each other, Cross. Well, guess what? For the first time in living history, humanity is reaching out. The ordinary side of humanity that never experiences half of the madness that we have. And that’s all because of you and your. Big. Mouth.” Each word was emphasized with a shove of her finger into my chest.

Any time else, I’d have been a bit freaked out by how she was almost looming over me with manic glee in her eyes, but at the moment? I was too busy making sure I heard every word.

“You’re not a normal person, Jeremiah Cross. You’re a Straw Hat. You have an earthshaking dream and the guts, power, and friends that you need to get there. You may not be able to fix the generations of hate between humans and fishmen in a day, but that doesn’t mean you can’t do anything. Just think about what you can do, and who you can ask for help. And then… do it. And I assure you, whatever it is you do… will be glorious.”

I smiled as she finished. Honestly, I had been thinking a little too hard about the crew’s upcoming separation to consider much about the slave houses beyond ‘don’t let Keimi get captured’ and ‘Luffy is still going to punch out Charloss either way.’ But having that pointed out to me, I really did have the resources to do something… more…

“More?” I muttered to myself as the pieces clicked together at Mach 10 in my mind. “Try ‘freaking spectacular’.”

“Huh? Cross, did you—OOF!”

I cut off Koala’s words by grabbing her in a hug. With the ideas she had just sparked in my mind, I
had a moral obligation to do no less! “You brilliant, wonderful dropbear, I could just about kiss you right now!” I cheered gleefully.

Before she could react, I let go of her, sprinting for the door to the deck. Halfway there, I heard Koala finally get her wits back about her.

“That’s not much better than ‘cuddly,’ Cross! And what the hell are you talking about!? Hey, get back here!”

I didn’t pay much attention, however, as I was far more focused on enacting the first step in my newest master plan that would well and truly hit the World Government right where it hurt. But, in order to actually go through with this brilliant (if I do say so myself) plan, I needed to take advantage of a window of opportunity that would be closing any second now.

SLAM!

“MEGALO! You beautiful blubbery bastard!” I proclaimed, bringing all conversation on deck to a screeching halt. I noted the bigot-some twosome in particular jumping in surprise and summarily ignored them. I also noticed that Luffy and Jinbe had apparently been chatting; that got filed away for later. For now, there were schemes to be had!

“Quit your moping and get your head in the game!” I declared as I walked to and picked up my slimy partner-in-crime. “I’ve got a malevolent masterplan manifesting, and for it to come to fruition, I need your opinion and expertise regarding politics!”

“He’s BA-ACK!” Soundbite crooned eagerly.

“And don’t you forget it!” I cheered as I slapped him back onto my shoulder.

“Yeah, apparently he bounces back after he gets an idea,” Koala added as she walked out behind me, giving me a wary eye I politely chose to ignore.

Several eager grins and several pale faces met that declaration.
“WELP!” Sandersonia suddenly shot up off her barrel with an overly wide and twitchy grin. “I, ah, I think I’ve overstayed my welcome! Places to be, evil pirates to sink, puppies to get out from under my sister’s foot, things like that!”

“Likewise!” Tashigi yelped, adjusting her bandages to maximize her mobility as she powerwalked (not fled, as she’d later insist) for the railing. “Come on, Popora, we’ve got to pick up the the food so that we can deliver it to the pirates and get back to arresting our men!”

Popora flatly cocked an eyebrow at her.

“YES I KNOW WHAT I JUST SAID JUST HURRY UP AND RUN BEFORE—!”

“Oh captain my captain?” I inquired, snapping of my fingers.

“Shishishi!” said captain snickered as he started wheeling his arms. “You got it!”

“BOOK IT!” Sandersonia wailed, leading Tashigi in an attempted leap over the edge of the Sunny. And seeing as she of all people tried to leap into the sea, I suppose she really was quite terrified of whatever I was cooking up; I was honestly a little flattered she thought so highly of me.

Key word in that action being attempted, mind, on account of Luffy’s arms shooting out and dragging them back onto the deck, no matter how furiously they tried to squirm their way out.

“Now now, quit your squirming, you two,” I chided as I stood over them, tapping my foot impatiently. “For my plan to achieve maximum effectiveness, I’m going to need you both to chip in. Sandersonia, your Warlord-grade strength is a definite must-have for this kind of shindig. Pluuus, I think you’re going to forever hate yourself if you’re not part of this, you’ll love it so much.”

Sandersonia’s struggling ended alongside a positively inquisitive hum. “Mmm?”

“And you, Tashigi, I need your help legalizing this endeavor so that I can better embarrass the military service you’ve pledged your life to. And you can’t refuse because if you do, you’d be leaving a lot of innocent people high and dry to suffer.”
Tashigi hung her head with a defeated groan. “Oooh…”

“Er… Cross?” Koala inquired, slowly edging towards the railing, most likely in an attempt to avoid my scrutiny. “Just wondering, but is there any truly pressing reason you need me around?”

I decided to throw the poor Revolutionary a bone and waved my hand dismissively. “None that I can think of at the moment, no.”

“Great! Later, losers!” Koala cheered, shooting her less fortunate cohorts a parting salute before attempting to bolt.

‘Attempting’ because, on a whim, I changed my mind. “Oh, Nami?”

“Eisen Tempo,” said witch deadpanned, and her cloudy halo shot out—

“GWAH!?”

—and snagged Koala by her ankles, swinging her around to hang in front of me.

“Hiya!” I sang, waving cheerily at her.

“You bastard! You just said you didn’t need me!” Koala yowled, trying—and failing by a good foot—to wring my neck.

“I know, but would you believe I simply enjoy your company?” I inquired with innocent curiosity.

“FUCK YOU!”

“Fine, then I’m just greedy.” I waved her off dismissively as I turned my back on her. “Nami, drop her with the rest.”

“OOF! Son of a—! Uh…” The Revolutionary shrunk in on herself as she looked at her two new and newly leering friends who were very much projecting a desire to wring her neck. “Hi there, losers?”
Megalo, meanwhile, had watched the whole thing with a gaping mouth and twitching eye. That continued for a few seconds more before he tentatively raised his flipper, expression not changing on whit. “So, uh, you said you wanted to talk?”

I attempted to contain myself, truly I did, but when I thought about what was to come, of the truly unprecedented undertaking we were about to undergo—!

“Ah, screw it! I can’t takes it no more!” I cackled, pumping my fist before wheeling on Luffy and dropping to a knee before him, clasping my hands in supplication. “Captain! I’ve got a plan that’ll plant one right up this world’s tailpipe, and I’m itching to let it loose! I can talk with Megalo on the way, but for now, can we get going? Can we can we can we?”

“Well…” Luffy tilted his head. “That depends: What’s there to see at the Sasparilly Archaeos?”

“Uh…” I wracked my brain as I thought up all the defining features of the Archipelago. The most prominent being an unchecked slave market, rampant xenophobia, and… “There’s an amusement park?” I tried. “With a ferris wheel?”

“FERRIS WHEEL!” Luffy threw his arms—“AGH!”/“YEEK!” Along with Sandersonia and Tashigi—up in the air. “Alright, let’s go!” He eagerly grinned at me. “You wanna give the order?”

“HELL YES!” I raised my foot to prop it on the nearest barrel, and as I felt the wood beneath my sole, I called out our heading. “CREW, WEIGH ANCHOR! SET SAIL FOR THE SABAODY ARCHIPELAGO!”

“BELAY THAT!”

Aaand chalk up one more friend showing up, as a familiar bird interrupted us by fluttering down onto the railing and saluting me. “Good to see you as always, Cross.”

“I’d like to say the same, Coo, but you’re kind of ruining my moment here,” I replied, the bulging vein on my forehead visible out of the corner of my eye. “And on a related note, I’m guessing that this is one of the more unfortunate early editions?”

I deliberately ignored the wooden surface under my foot that had shoved the barrel aside as she shuffled away with a blush on her face, muttering about ‘old times’ and ‘force of habit.’
“Mmm, not so much ‘unfortunate’ as ‘inconvenient’,” Coo stated, thoroughly unruffled by my protests. That meant the annoyed frown on his face was due to something else. Great. “At least, as far as you guys go. Now, let’s see… yo, white-hat.” He angled his beak at Tashigi. “I’m assuming you’ve already told these guys about the privateer armada your people have been hiring?”

“Er… yes?” Tashigi carefully confirmed, obviously dreading where this was going as much as we suddenly were. “HQ’s spent a small fortune on those lowlifes, but that just stopped.”

Coo snorted derisively as he tipped his newsie’s cap down. “The reason they ‘stopped’ was that they’ve hired all they needed, and the reason I’m here is that they’ve deployed them all. You all can’t go to Sabaody for the exact reason that nobody on the wrong side of the law is going to Sabaody anytime soon: the Marines have deployed their cutthroats all around the Archipelago, and have effectively blockaded the entire thing. Or, at the least, enough of it that anyone who wants to get around it will wind up sailing straight into the Marine garrison. I hate to break it to you, but you’re not getting anywhere near that island without a fight.”

Complete shock rippled across the deck, and what was left of my earlier euphoria fled for South America.

“Not… part of the plan…” I gurgled weakly. “I know they hate us, me especially, but this bad!”

“Weell, kinda,” Coo hedged. “They’re trying to stop you, yeah, but not ‘you’ specifically. More like ‘you’ in general, if you catch my drift.”

“Pirates,” Robin calmly interrupted, thoughtfully adjusting the brim of her hat. “The rest of the Supernovas. They’re reaching the Red Line at the same time as us.”

“And the last thing anyone sane would want is the most infamous pirates of your generation all in the same place at the same time,” Jinbe nodded sagely. “The Government is already prodding us Warlords to handle you swiftly and decisively, and, no offense, I can’t rightly blame them. The New World is a delicate balancing act of power as-is. The idea of even one of you crossing the Red Line and potentially provoking an Emperor into going to war is quite frightening indeed.”

“Guh…” I moaned nervously under my breath, tugging nervously at my collar. Did it suddenly get hot out here?
“I have a bad feeling in my gut…” Brook whispered to Franky. “Which, considering how I don’t have one, is impressive! YOHO—!”

“Not to ruin your joke, old man, but really not the time,” the cyborg said.

The literal bonehead shrugged casually. “Fair enough, it was a low-hanging one anyways.”

“Well, if that’s how it is, then I suppose there’s nothing we can do about it,” Nami sighed. “We’re in no rush, so we can just find an island where we can hole up, let everyone else bash themselves to pieces against the blockade, and then once the Marines have lost interest—”

“My master plan involves us doubling our net worth, at minimum, and without the Supernovas we can’t pull it off,” I deadpanned.

“I’LL TURN THOSE TURNCOATS TO ASH!” Nami howled furiously. Lightning crashed down in concert with her ire, causing everyone’s hair to stand on end and causing the fishy twosome to leap back in supremely satisfying terror. Still…

“As incredible as that idea sounds, I don’t think it’s a viable one,” I carefully pointed out.

“Cross is right,” Vivi interjected, gnawing on her thumb as she gazed out to sea. “The primary issue here isn’t the blockade, it’s how close we are to Marine Headquarters, Marineford. If we get tied up in one place too long, making too much noise, then they’re liable to send reinforcements. And even ignoring how any set of reinforcements from Marineford would match a Buster Call in strength, Vice Admirals and everything, there’d almost certainly be one addition to the lineup that would mean certain death.”

“…An Admiral.”

I blinked in surprise, because that was the exact reason we needed to be careful. I looked around for who said it, and nearly fell to the deck when I realized that everyone else was looking at Luffy in surprise.

Luffy’s gaze suddenly stared at me from the shadows of his hat, and I instinctively stood to attention. “We can’t just run into this without thinking,” my captain stated gravely. “Cross, can you think of a plan?”
“Um…” I hesitated for a moment, taken aback by the sudden attention, but only for a moment before putting my mind to the problem. Because really, the question was, could I? After all, we needed to not only get ourselves past the blockade, but the rest of the Supernova as well. That meant outright breaking the blockade, and that… that was an entirely different beast.

Luckily, I was saved from having to answer by the clearing of a throat. An avian throat, to be specific.

“Oh, Captain Luffy?” Coo, well, cooed. “This probably isn’t the best place or time to hash out a plan. Which, actually, is why I’m here. So that I can tell you the best time and place.”

“Huh?” Luffy curiously regarded the seagull. “Whaddaya mean?”

“Well see, fact is,” Coo explained. “You’ve done really well, you and your crew, but you’re not the fastest pirate crew in Paradise. That accomplishment goes to the Kid Pirates and their beast of a ship, the Iron Tramp. They ran face first into the blockade, and they tried to break through. Tried and failed, I might add. They raised a hell of a fight, but when the horizon started lighting up, they had to flee.”

Coo donned a cocky smirk. “Which was most fortuitous, because while they were licking their wounds, the Stay Tuned caught up with them, and the Kid Pirates told us of the impending trap… er—” Coo glanced aside with a cough into his wing. “After they stopped attacking us, of course…”

“Of course,” I sighed, dragging my hand down my face. Because if there was any pirate who was going to work out his frustrations on the first schmuck to come within eyesight, it was Kid.

“And so on for every Supernova that came near?” Chopper guessed.

“Not quite,” Coo said. “When my captain (that’s still weird to say, wow) found out about the blockade, the first thing he did was make a call.” And just like that, Coo’s smirk was back in full force. “A call to the only person this side of the Red Line that would be able to provide a place for over a dozen infamous pirates sailing for Sabaody this close to Sabaody while we come up with a plan to get through that blockade.”

He regarded me with a grin, slyly tipping his cap. “I trust you know what the right order is now, Jeremiah Cross?”
It took me a few seconds to put the pieces together, but once I did, I couldn’t keep my jaw properly shut. “You—You can’t really mean—!” I cut that sentence off midway through as I realized that, holy shit, he did! “WOO!” Wheeling around, I jabbed my finger out to sea. “EVERYONE, WEIGH ANCHOR! WE SAIL! FOR SKELTER BITE!”

“BELAY THAT!”

“Oh, what now!?” I snapped, throwing up my hands.

“ME NOW!” Tashigi snarled, shooting to her feet and jabbing me in the chest. “Now you listen to me, you insufferably irresponsible degenerate, and you listen good! I admit that I’m just as much of an outlaw as you, I’m at peace with that, but no matter what, the world still sees a Marine when they look at me! Meaning that if I set foot on a pirate haven, I’m liable to be lynched! Or as you swashbuckling types like to put it, walk the plank!”

“That punishment’s actually fallen out of favor in recent pirate culture due to it being regarded as archaic and ineffective on anyone but Devil Fruit users,” Robin idly noted with a serene smile. “Nowadays, we just shoot people in the street.”

“I realize that you’re his sister, but must you demonstrate it at every occasion?” Conis lamented, her palm alighting on her forehead.

“She’s been at that shtick longer than I’ve been in this world, don’t blame me,” I waved her off.

“SHUT IT!” Tashigi belted out, before crossing her arms and regarding me with the utmost disdain. “You and your crew can go and have fun in your pirate hellhole, but so long as I’m a Marine, I’m not going within a nautical mile of Skelter Bite alive!”

I stared blankly at her, and then I grinned widely, my expression punctuated by the smack of several hands hitting faces.

“Hm, now there’s a thought…” I mused oh so innocently as I strolled over to the other side of the deck.
“OW!”

I then jumped in what was *most definitely and totally genuine* shock as Tashigi yelped, grabbing her foot with a grimace after I brought my steel-clad heel down on her foot... *completely by accident* of course. The injury was honestly pretty negligible... *but* it was enough for my purposes.

“YOU RAGING PIECE OF—! WHAT THE HELL, YOU ASS!?” the Marine raged as she cradled her compacted toes.

“Oooh, that looks *nasty,*” I crooned in a nice and exaggerated voice as I leaned forward and eyeballed her foot. “You’d better keep off it for awhile. Say, Usopp, think you could fashion a pegleg for her? Custom job~”

“Uh... sure?” Usopp draw out, side-eyeing the irate Marine. “Any specifications?”

“Yeah.” At this point, I allowed my underlying malevolence to seep into my grin. “Just make sure it matches her new *eyepatch.*”

*That* statement froze the deck cold, and Tashigi was especially paralyzed, her fury forgotten in favor of horror. “Cross,” she whispered weakly, slowly shaking her head in denial. “Don’t. You. Dare —!”

“CONGRATULATIONS!” I proclaimed at the top of my lungs, grinning like a loon as I clapped my hand on her shoulder. “You may now consider yourself shanghaied! Welcome to the Straw Hat Pirates, Cabin Girl T. A. Shigi!”

“Chuff...”

“Ah, right. And your furry parrot, too,” I deadpanned.

“KYUUUUN!?”

“That’s the best you’re getting, take it or row back to Smokey on your own.”
“Kyu…”

“YOU DESPICABLE SON OF A—!” Tashigi screeched, lunging at me. Seeing as she was limping, I dodged with ease. That didn’t deter her; she just switched targets to hop for the railing. “I’LL GET YOU FOR THIS ONE DAY, CROSS! MY WRATH WILL BE SWIFT, TERRIBLE AND —!”

“Merry?” I requested.

Said shipgirl grinned maniacally and rammed her fist into the nearest mast.

KERWHACK! “GYAGH!”

And in short order, the ‘ex’-Marine was strung up by a few strands of rope wrapped around her uninjured ankle, and in equally short order, Vivi and Conis had positioned themselves beneath said ‘ex’.

“Ladies, if you’d be so kind?” I requested.

“But of course,” Conis serenely stated.

“We’ll see what we can do,” Vivi agreed, before leering at me. “And I hope you know that the only reason we’re helping you with this is that ‘a lot of innocent people suffering’ line you said earlier.”

“I’ll take my licks as they come, the end result’s worth it!” I swore. “Now drop her and get this woman kitted out in some more… appropriate attire.”

“YOU’LL SUFFER FOR THIS, YOU— WAGH!”

And quick as the wind beneath their wings, the duo grabbed our latest ‘recruit’ and spirited her away to the girl’s cabin.
“Well, that’s that, and all without any repercussions whatsoever,” I sang, dusting off my hands. Yeah, I was tempting fate like nothing else, what of it? Who was gonna stop me?

-o-

Elsewhere on the Grand Line, Smoker was struck with a sudden urge to punch someone in the face.

Fortunately for him, he had just come across a grunt who was assembling a collage of revealing pictures of Tashigi.

-o-

“Now…” I eyed the rest of the people on the deck. “Anyone else have a problem with our new destination?”

Sandersonia and Koala had to know that they were high above above our weight classes, so I couldn’t forcibly coerce them like Tashigi. Fortunately, neither of them were Marines, either.

“I’d be very interested in getting a look at Skelter Bite,” Koala said, throwing up her hand. “More than a few potential recruits go pirate before they go Revolutionary!”

“Likewise,” Sandersonia agreed, nodding eagerly. “All those pirates, all that booze! It’s going to be the biggest blowout I’ve ever been to!”

Sadly, however, not all of the reactions were quite so positive, as demonstrated by Jinbe hanging his head with a defeated sigh. “I think it sounds interesting as well, but unfortunately, even if we ignore the stir that a Warlord’s presence would bring, I have a little more that I need to take care of in light of today’s revelations. I still haven’t even gotten to the main reason I came here.” The Warlord’s expression darkened. “Now, if one of you would be so kind as to escort me to the brig?”

“Right, I’ll lead you to them,” Nami offered, getting to her feet and waving a hand for him to follow her. “We’ve got them in one of our spare channels, you can head straight into the ocean once you’ve got them secured.”
Jinbe nodded, and turned his eyes to me. And damn if that didn’t scare no small amount of shit out of me. “Jeremiah Cross… I didn’t expect us to meet like this, but you have my gratitude for what you’ve told me… and for what you’ve done.” I pretty much felt the relief flood off of him as his fangs turned upward in a smile. “Your words have reached the new generation of fishmen and merfolk, and I will endeavor to make sure it keeps reaching them in the future. Thank you for what you’ve done, and for everything that you will undoubtedly do in the future.”

With only the mildest trepidation, I removed my right gauntlet and held out my unarmored hand. “The pleasure is mine, Jinbe.”

He shook my hand with a gentle grip that in no way impeded the impression that he could pulverize me in one second, and then turned to my captain and dropped his hand on the rubber man’s shoulder. “Monkey D. Luffy, you’re every bit as incredible as your brother told me you were. And I swear, I’ll tell you even more stories of your brother’s escapades soon enough…” He donned a massive grin as he crossed his arms proudly. “When I greet you in person on the shores of Fishman Island.”

I instantly froze every muscle in my face at that statement. It was the only thing that kept me from grimacing in dismay at the thought of how we wouldn’t exactly be seeing him again as ‘soon’ as he thought.

Ignorant of my thoughts, Luffy beamed and crossed his arms behind his head. “Shishishi! See you later, Jinbe!”

Jinbe smiled back, the smile remaining even as he followed Nami into the depths of the ship, though it definitely faded not long after.

“Alright, anyone else…” I mused, flexing my fingers as I resecured my gauntlet.

“Yeah, right here!”

“Oh, these guys…” I snapped my hand into a fist as I turned to face the cowed but apparently still willful fishmen with us.

“Cram it, Cross!” Kuroobi snarled, puffing his chest out as proudly as his battered ego would actually allow. “We don’t want to be here any more than you want us to be here, so thank you for shopping at Takoyaki 8 and have a nice—”
“HEY, HACHI!” I yelled, letting my voice carry to the other ships. “WOULD YOU HAPPEN TO BE INTERESTED IN HOCKING TAKOYAKI TO THE MOST PROMINENT PIRATES OF THE GENERATION!?”

“WOULD I!?” came the joyful response, causing Kuroobi and Chew to slump over in depression.

“AND BARTY, YOU’RE COMING TOO, RIGHT?” Soundbite called.

“Like hell I would be missing a chance to check out the new pirate haven! Count me in!” Bartolomeo called back. “YO! SHITBIRDS! GET OFF YOUR ASSES AND HOP TO IT YOU—!”

“Then it’s unanimous,” I grinned. I made to move dramatically again—

“By the way, that jumbo shark there is a friend of yours, right?”

—only for Coo’s slightly nervous tone to bring me up short again.

“Oh, thank you, Coo, I almost forgot. Megalo…” I grinned impishly at the shark, to his wariness. “We need to talk as we sail, but before anything else, important question for you, one in which dozens of lives hang in the balance. …how good are you at puking on cue?”

-o-

While the ships all scrambled to prepare for departure, a few pertinent details went overlooked in the process, as such things are wont to happen.

One of these pertinent details was the fact that while they were waiting to depart, one of the larger and older (but still juvenile) Sea Kings that had been helping to tow the Cannibal had slipped away from his impromptu pack and disappeared into the waves, swimming for the briny deep as fast as his tail could propel him.

Another detail was… weeeell…
Less than Fifteen Minutes Later-

Five ships had long sailed off. Six heads broke the surface and took in that fact.

[DID THOSE RAGING BASTARDS FORGET US!?]

“NOT AGAIN! THIS IS THE THIRD TIME THIS MO-O-OOONTH!”

[Don’t suppose there’s a Man’s Romance about this, is there, Boss?]

[OH, THERE’S GONNA BE A ROMANCE ALRIGHT! MY FLIPPER DOWN THEIR THROATS!]

[GO, BOSS, GO!]

More than Fifteen Minutes Later-

Ten thousand meters below the surface, the royal megalodon returned to his mistress with two uncomfortable missions to accomplish. As per usual, the doors of the Hard Shell Tower cracked open to allow Megalo to slip inside, and he hastily swam up to Princess Shirahoshi’s side as the doors closed behind him, keeping a keen eye out for any ill-timed ‘gifts of the heart’ as he went.

“Megalo, welcome back! How was your trip?” Shirahoshi greeted, hugging him with a smile. That melancholy smile had been the most he ever saw on her face since her mother’s passing and her imprisonment in the tower…until the reprieves brought on by the SBS began. Knowing that he would be alleviating her suffering even more, he resigned himself to the discomfort of the first of his tasks.

[Eventful, and… more than a little maddening.] the titan-shark informed her with a wary (and toothy) smile. [I, uh, also have something for you, Shirahoshi.]

The massive mermaid sat up with a grin, clapping her hands. “I know! The Octavio-endorsed 88 Skewer Special, right? With extra dipping sauce?”
Megalo hesitated for a second, actually feeling a sweatdrop flow off him into the water. [Ah… right, I went out to get the takeout… feels like a lifetime ago, so I kinda—ah, I think I left it back with the rest of the food, with Fukaboshi and your dad. Sorry.]

“Aww, really…?” Shirahoshi slumped onto her hands, her face a mask of disappointment.

[Ah, but-but-but!] Megalo hastily added. [I-I’ll go get it for you, I promise! But before that, I have something you’ll like even better! Just, ah… just gimme a second…] He trailed off into a whimper, and before Shirahoshi could ask what he meant, he wheeled about and swam into the corner where he triggered his gag reflex. With expert control, he emptied the contents of his mostly empty stomach, among which was nestled a large brown bottle.

“Wh-What the…” Shirahoshi blinked in shock as she swam around her wheezing friend, eyeing the bottle in confusion. “What is this, Megalo? Did you eat some flotsam or—?”

[Open it.] the shark wheezed. [Break it if you need to! Hurry!]

With much trepidation, but also absolute faith in her age-old friend, Shirahoshi clutched the bottle between her fingers and began shaking it out. It didn’t take long before a rolled piece of paper came out. It was small, but this wasn’t the first time Shirahoshi had dealt with items meant for people a few scales smaller than herself. As such, it was without too much trouble that Shirahoshi grasped the slip and unfolded it, holding it up to her eye so that she could read the words upon it…

Words that, the moment they registered in the Princess’s brain, sent her scrambling to her Tower’s doors as fast as she could swim. “GUARDS!” she hollered, pounding on the doors desperately. “SEND WORD TO BROTHER FUKABOSHI, I NEED HIM IN HERE IMMEDIATELY! HURRY!”

As Shirahoshi hollered and the Minister of the Right desperately pleaded for her to calm down before anything… untoward could happen, Megalo took the opportunity to reread the message he’d carried in his stomach. A message he knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, would serve to write the pages of history itself.

“To the Beautiful Princess Shirahoshi:

I humbly request that you pass this note to your eldest brother and have him call me at the following
number posthaste. The fate of many lives, fishman and human alike, rest in your hands and his alike. Together, I believe we can change the course of this world forever.

708-632-473

Jeremiah Cross, Tactician of the Straw Hat Pirates

P.S. Feel free to call us whenever you yourself feel like it as well. We’re always happy to lend an ear.”

Spoken AN: I honestly never expected to say this, but we discovered several missing hands during proofreading. Keeping track of Hachi’s choreography was a pain.

Patient AN: What was decidedly not a pain was telling our fans that Cross was going to watch Ace die in this chapter and then watching their reactions. Not a pain for us, anyway.
Chapter 61 - Road to Sabaody Pt. 3

Chapter 61

Cross-Brain AN: We've kept you all waiting for this, we know; real life tends to impede free time and inspiration, and there's only so much we can do on our own. On a related subject, please see the author's note at the end of this chapter.

"Hmm? Why am I under her care, you ask? I don't mind if I share. Keimi's clams, you see, always go right to me!"

"So it's for the food."

"W-Well, that's not entirely—!"

"Oh, oh! And what about how you can speak? We've never seen an animal do that without Soundbite's help before!"

"Ah! Well, that's actually quite the tale indeed! Ohhh~—!"

"Reasoning: hitode = 'starfish', hito desu = 'I am human'. CONCLUSION: HE LEARNED TO TALK PURELY BECAUSE OF A PUN. PUBLISHER'S NOTE: HOW PATHETIC CAN YOU GET?"

"BITE ME, LAND-SLUG, AT LEAST I CAN SWIM!"

"YOU WANNA GO!?"

"What is it with the slimy ones having the biggest mouths…?" I groaned despondently, letting my head thunk back on the barrel I was leaning against, the literally spineless blobs continuing to argue on the counter of the pavilion. Because seriously, I just did not have the energy to deal with him standing upright.

"I know, right?" Hachi chuckled empathetically; his hands continued their work, prepping his cooking tools. "He's gotten us in quite a bit of trouble with it."

"QUIET, LIMB-SLAVES!" said invertebrates barked in a rare show of cooperation.

"And furthermore, NEVER UNDERESTIMATE WILLPOWER!" Pappug pridefully added. "THE WORLD RUNS ON IT!"

"The starfish does have a point there…" I admitted before slamming my head back against the barrel and clutching the sides of my head. "'The starfish has a point… This is not how I envisioned adulthood."

"No, really?" over half the crew demanded from all across the ship.

Aaanyway… as you can see, the atmosphere on the Thousand Sunny had very quickly returned to its usual casualness once we set off for the Florian Triangle. And while the newly mobile slice of Lovecraft-on-Grand-Blue had apparently relocated itself over the past few weeks so that it was far closer to the Red Line than before, we still were unlikely to arrive before nightfall. Which, of course, gave Soundbite and me plenty of time to plan out things we could do upon meeting the other Supernovas. I'd probably only be able to pull off truly wowing a handful of the ones I didn't already
know, but it was still going to be a hell of a good time.

There… really wasn't much to say beyond that. I mean, there's only so many times that I can describe what we get up to on the Grand Line before it gets tedious. Even the fact that we had five other ships (sort of, given two of them were small enough that we could shove them into a storage area in the Takoyaki 8) beside us didn't change a lot; the Barto Club had been with us for a month already, and everyone else was shut away in their own ships. Especially so for Takoyaki 8, seeing as those two were doing the smart thing and not shown fin or scale of their sorry hides.

So, a boring, casual (but not normal) day sailing on the Sunny. And… I glanced at the sun; we'd just passed the one hour mark, so that could only mean one thing.

"Are we there yet?"

Luffy asking whether or not we were there yet. And any other time, that'd be the end of it. But since this was the fifth time he'd asked that question in as many hours?

"RAGH!" KER-CHOW!

That made this the time when Nami's temper went nuclear and she attempted to deep-fry our dumbass of a captain in the clutches of her Eisen Tempo.

See, I don't get why people call our crew insane, we're really quite regimented.

"No, we are not there yet, you brainless twerp!" Nami snarled, wringing Luffy's neck with her meteorological halo. Though, unlike usual, her ire didn't stay long on our captain since our navigational tool could actually talk back this time and made for a more sporting target. "And you! You've been saying we were almost there for hours! Either retract the statement or produce an island. Or else I swear—!"

"Even normal Grand Line geography can't be considered an 'exact science'. And Skelter Bite moves, so forgive me for being a bit off in my estimate this time," Coo said dismissively, utterly ignoring the meteorological ire being aimed at him. "And I'm not that far off, anyway. It should be… just around…" Coo's head shot up, a beak-stretching smile on it. "There! I see it!"

Coo's cry whatever attention on deck hadn't already been drawn by Nami and Luffy's little 'tiff'. Nami was quick to strain her eyes and senses in the direction Coo indicated, with Usopp and Conis only a breath behind her.

"Let's see… oh, yes!" Conis said happily. "Dark purple mist on the horizon! We should be there within the hour!"

"Wait, dark purple?" I said. "I thought that the mists were gold now."

"For the most part, sure," Coo answered. "But if the Obelisks kept the outside looking that inviting, it wouldn't make a great sanctuary, would it? Outside's as scary as usual, so only anyone brave or stupid enough to go in singing that song get through to the gold. You can't get any deeper inside otherwise, and any attempts to do so…" The bird winced and tipped his cap down. "Well, you sailed in the place first."

Nami hissed out a sharp breath before glancing back at Coo. "And how deep into those mists is Skelter Bite going to be?"

"Not too far as long as you know where you're going. Once the vanguard sees us through, it'll only be a few minutes."
Nami nodded, her shoulders lowering in a release of tension. Sanji practically materialized beside her, offering her a drink that she took and practically chugged down. "Alright. In that case, it's time to double-time it. Franky, Merry, Vivi?"

"Right!" Franky and Merry cheered, while Vivi began stretching her arms.

"I'll see what I can do," she said. "Franky, what is the optimal wind force for the rigging systems of the Cannibal and the Sunny, and where on the sails do I need to focus on it to avoid undue stress and any chance of us running into each other?"

"That's… uh…" Franky paused his enthusiastic preparations, then began to trundle to one of the ladders leading belowdecks, scratching his temple. "Lemme get back to you on that… Yo, Nami, d'you mind if I borrow some of your weather charts?"

"You damage them and you're paying in parts, shellhead!" was the distracted reply.

One batch of calculations and compliments directed towards the Sunny later, our negotiator was parked on the quarterdeck, our shipwright and helmsgirl manned the helm, and our friends sailing beside the Sunny had assumed brace positions, complete with Ever, Apis, and Valentine calling out "Brace! Brace! Brace!" in eerie synchronicity. I'm not kidding, it was extremely creepy how in-synch they were.

Anyway, I turned away from that oddity as Franky called out: "Soldier Dock System, Channel 0: Cola Paddle System!"

"Breath of Isis!" added Vivi, much of her upper torso fading into the wind as she shoved her arms forwards into double twisters.

"Double propulsion, Turbo Sunny!" Merry finished with a massive grin, yanking the helm's lever and putting the entire combination into action.

To use an apt simile, the result of the Coup de Burst is a lot like what happens to a soda bottle cap when you shake the bottle too much. And while a couple of powerful paddlewheels along with a sudden gale in our sails wasn't quite as fast, we were definitely burning foam for the horizon, and the bank of clouds that laid upon it.

Beside us, Sandersonia urged her mount "Faster, Orchid!", the poor reptile straining to keep up with the sudden increase in our speed. The strain was evident in her grit teeth, though I got the feeling that it was as much the smug smirk Lindy giving her as it swooped above all of us. Seriously, if those two got it into their heads to hate-breed, I swear…

Thankfully, it was only a few minutes later that the fog of the Florian consumed the horizon. And as we slowed to enter the foreboding mists, which were already curling out towards us in a decidedly unfriendly manner, Brook himself drew his violin and began to play.

"Yohohoho, yohoho-ho~! Yohohoho, yohoho-ho~!"

The skeleton's tones echoed eerily back to us, and slowly the purple mists lost their malice, swirling around us in a circular and far kinder manner. The swirling cloud coalesced into a tunnel deep into the fog, large enough for us to pass through unimpeded and revealing the warm and inviting yellow mist hidden behind the menacing purple. Wiping the half-condensed sweat from her brow, Vivi urged our ships forward again, though much more slowly.

And then our acceleration abruptly halted with an almost cartoonish screech as a very familiar silhouette loomed before us in the mists. And as is stereotypical of such things… it was not
"Soundbite?" I grit out. He needed no further direction, and an air horn blasted out from the other side of the Sunny.

"GAH! What is it, Cross?" Tashigi's voice rang out, very snappishly.

"Stow the attitude, I need to know if there are any of the Divine currently stationed in the Triangle."

"Any of...? No, no there aren't. Because A. it really ruins the reputation of a pirate sanctuary if there are Marines hanging around being friendly, and B. if there were, I wouldn't have been so unwilling to come with you."

"Then why the hell is there a Marine battleship here?!" Zoro demanded, his hand landing heavily on Wado Ichimonji's hilt as he stared down said Marine battleship silhouetted in the mists. I mean, sure, it was a damn rundown battleship, with ragged sails and hanging lines and gouges dotting the hull, but still! Battleship!

However, he was saved from having to actually exert himself—

"Sheathe your blades, Pirate Hunter, I'm not your enemy!"

By, for some reason, Soundbite boosting the officer's voice, a grin suddenly on his face. Granted, the voice sounded slightly familiar, but considering the influx in callers over the last couple of weeks and the fact that all I couldn't see more than a silhouette on the other ship, that didn't help me identify the guy. Then that was all rendered a moot point.

"Former Warrant Officer Ernest Gheilt," the Marine identified himself, his smile audible. "Current Vanguard of the Skelter Bite Phantom Armada. We're some of the Marines you saved from our hellish twilight, and as we promised you back then, I and mine are at your service, Straw Hats."

"Oh, yeah, I remember him," Luffy perked up, pounding his fist into his hand. "He was the first guy that called in during the victory party!"

That finally jogged my memory, and my grin matched Soundbite's when I waved at the ship. "Well, I'll be damned! Good to meet you, Gheilt! Decided to stick it to your old bosses by giving them a bloody nose to match their black eye, I take it?"

"You know it," the man replied, chuckling fondly. "Took some fast talking to get Lola's trust, but you can't fake the pain of not having your shadow. Plus, my ships already looked like they were halfway to sinking, so we just fixed them up a bit while keeping the aesthetic—!"

"The fabled pirate heaven of Skelter Bite gets a ghost fleet to act as a border patrol for the mists, and make sure that the more persistent assholes who actually get it in their skulls to keep trying their luck against the Triangle and potentially ruining other pirates' days get thrown out on their asses!" I completed with an ecstatic giggle. "Brilliant!"

"Yeah, Captain Lola thought so too, both from a strategic standpoint and a thematic one," Gheilt agreed, trailing off into a wistful sigh. "Aaaah, but anyway, you all didn't come here to listen to this old sea dog gush about how good his life is; keep moving forward, you and yours are always free to return to Skelter Bite. The Florian will guide you the rest of the way."

And no sooner did the ex-Marine give that order than did a few notes whistle out from the silhouette; it was a different melody from Binks' Brew, something... deeper, it sounded like. More... emotional, I suppose? Hard to say, I'd have to ask Brook about it later.
Either way, the effects were immediate and highly visible: The golden mist parted like the red sea behind the battleship, the sea actually colored red by the twilight shining through the thinned mists on the other side. The mists behind the Sunny reached down and plumped the sails, allowing Vivi to flop to the deck. It was shortly after that we got our first good look at what the New World Masons had accomplished over the past couple of months.

It was… incredible, I'll be honest. Before the island's renovation, Thriller Bark's looming profile had been a stark monument of terror and oppression, not helped by the fact that the twilit darkness of the Triangle had obscured the true size of the island and the structures that dominated its landscape, making it seem bigger and more threatening.

Skelter Bite, though? While the light did outline how insanely massive Skelter Bite was, the light coming from the island completely upended the connotations that size conveyed. It was massive, yes, but it was the kind of 'massive' that could only be called 'majestic'.

The first thing we noticed was actually the most threatening aspect of the island, the gate: the tooth Absalom had crashed into had been either repainted or replaced with a gold tooth, and the rest of the gate had been remodeled into a massive white skull. Menacing as hell, even with straight white teeth, especially since the eye sockets were angled just right to seem to stare into your soul, though I imagine smaller ships wouldn't fully appreciate the effect. But we were pirates; what was a symbol of terror and destruction for most people was… well, okay, as I said it was still pretty threatening, but it was also a symbol of camaraderie and sanctuary!

Also a good chance to get your teeth knocked out, but hey, some people enjoyed that. Or needed it, considering some of the dental work I'd seen back in Mock Town. Anyway, the symbol was also emblazoned on the sky-shadowing mainsail, which had been altered so that it now featured the usual straight-facing skull. But rather than crossbones behind it, a ring of bones circled around the skull. Actually, looking closer, it wasn't just bones, but a hundred smaller jolly rogers! Nice touch.

And that was all just the front gate and sail. Beyond it? Beyond it laid what I could only describe as a veritable city of lights. No, seriously! An actual city outlined in the blurred light of the setting sun, the dark silhouette of dozens of buildings of as many shapes outlined by the bright lights within dancing across them, and that loud, low buzz that characterized a thriving metropolis just bursting with life. In every conceivable interpretation of the phrase, the contrast was glorious.

And while my first instinct was to give credit to Oda—where it was still ultimately due, of course—I remembered that this setting only existed because of what I had brought about. And damn if that just didn't fill me straight to the brim with pride.

Faced with such a monument to piracy and freedom, I tried to come up with something to mark just how momentous the occasion was—

"WELL, FUCK ME RUNNING, THAT'S ONE BIG-ASS MOTHERFUCKER!"

…aaaaand then Bartolomeo beat me to it and utterly ruined the moment. Because of course.

"Crude though that was, this… is amazing. The Masons were able to do this in just three months!?” Sandersonia demanded, her serpent angling its head to put her near me.

"And you think I'm less amazed than you?" I demanded.

"…Maybe not, but I think we're both less amazed than them,” she remarked, gesturing over my shoulder.
I sighed, not even bothering to look. "Wild guess: Luffy, Usopp, Chopper, Merry, Franky, and Brook all looking at Skelter Bite with starry eyes."

"And every animal on the ship that isn't our 'beloved' ball of slime," Robin confirmed, chuckling. Her tone grew more sincere as she continued. "And who can blame them? Lola's lofty ambition is going to be seen through if it hasn't already."

"It's already night and day compared to Mock Town," Vivi breathed in awe.

"Yesss, this is impressive; it almost makes me happy that you forced me into this," came an aggrieved voice from behind me.

I could have given Tashigi a bone and not poked her... but naaah. "Oh?" I inquired innocently, turning to grace her with my full, perfectly impish smile. "And what's keeping you from being happy, hm?"

"Well, I don't know, maybe it's got something to do with how you FORCED ME INTO THIS! AND BY THIS, I MEAN BOTH THIS OUTFIT AND YOUR CREW!" Tashigi finished in a shriek, gesturing indignantly at her new outfit. Said outfit consisted of the age-old pirate classics: a blue-and-white striped shirt, canvas trousers, and a red bandanna tied around her head. Ah, but what really tied the whole ensemble together were the eyepatch tied around her left eye and the cast made of wood strapped over her leg.

"That is not the appropriate attitude to take if you want a promotion within this organization, CABIN GIRL SHIGI!" Soundbite chided in between blatant sniggers.

I snorted and jabbed a finger at the snail. "Listen to your superior officer, Cabin Girl."

Tashigi's entire head jerked at that comment, and she glared at me with an intensity usually reserved between Sanji and Zoro. "You're going to pay dearly for this indignity, sir," she hissed, her every word dripping with Yuda venom. "I don't know how, I don't know when, but before I leave this mortal plane, I will make you regret this."

…well, there was only one way to reply to that, wasn't there?

"Neat!" I beamed brightly.

"FUCK YOU!" And with that final roar, Tashigi wheeled around and started to stomp off.

"You know he's just doing this because he loves watching you react, right?" Koala casually called after the "ex"-Marine.

"DON'T CARE, STILL GONNA KILL HIM!"

"I tried, you're on your own," the Revolutionary shrugged in defeat.

"I've come to terms with my imminent beatdown. At this point, I interpret half of them as affection. Which, to be frank, is not inaccurate." I hummed happily. "More importantly, no doubt about it now: Skelter Bite is alive and well!"

"And not just in the way you meant!"

I turned to the bow, where Merry and Franky were standing, the former sporting a soft smile on her face as she inspected the upcoming haven with a spyglass.
"Lola's treated her right," the ship-girl clarified. "The damage will still take a long time to heal completely, but the worst is gone. She's going to grow so strong! And the rest of the old timers are enjoying their retirements pretty damn well, too!"

"Eh?" I raised a questioning eyebrow. "Whaddaya mean?"

"Here, check it!" Merry handed her spyglass off to me, and I peered through it at the approaching haven.

A closer look only made me even more admiring of the architecture. Now I could take in the helter-skelter, clearly improvised profusion of architectural styles that didn't seem to follow any… set… hold the phone and the mayo! "Are those… ships?" I asked incredulously.

Not that I needed an answer, because now that I looked it was blatantly obvious that yes, those were old ships that had been repurposed into buildings. Some were still sitting on their keels, others had been stood up on their stems with their prows pointing into the air, and others still had been straight-up flipped upside down so that they were keels-up. And as if the buildings themselves weren't crazy enough, the layout itself was positively insane: the ship-buildings were… well, simply put, they were anywhere and everywhere, stacked on top of one another and strewn about like a titanic child's set of building blocks.

"They fished up the old-timers that sank in the jaws of Thriller Bark, and repurposed them so they can keep supporting us even after they're no longer seaworthy!" Merry sighed blissfully as she all but melted into the Sunny's wheel.

"It's so SUPER!" Franky capped off, slamming his arms into his signature pose. "Now, this is what I expected to see from the biggest ship in Paradise! Of course, if Ice-For-Brains actually manages to make that plan of his work—"

"You haven't been keeping up with our news, have you?" Robin chuckled.

"Giant amateur shipwrights are still amateur shipwrights," Franky clarified, less exuberantly, adjusting his sunglasses far too primly for someone of his stature. "And Ice-For-Brains would have about as much luck teaching them as you're having with your students."

"Hey, Vivi resents that," Conis sniffed with a dismissive flap of her wing.

Vivi retaliated with a snort and a hair-mussing gale. "Bite me, miss 'can't tell squall from squid'."

"*They are very similar characters!*"

Their banter continued in much the same vein, but I tuned them out to think over that little revelation. The implications of Vivi being proficient in the Void language and a Logia coupled with the fact that she would soon have the opportunity to return to Alabasta made me a little dizzy; I still didn't have any solid idea of what Pluton was, but depending on how things went, I might find out sooner than I expected…

But for now, we had a whole different ship to concern ourselves with.

It seemed like the Rolling Pirates had spared no expense in maintaining the fear factor of the defenses. Just as an example? The moment we came within range of the skull that had replaced the front gate, its eyes lit up into blood red spotlights that swept over us, scanning over our ships and our crews.

"WHO DARES TO APPROACH THE IMPREGNABLE BUCCANEER BASTION OF
SKELTERR BITE?” came a double-layered voice. It was actually pretty impressive; whatever rig they were broadcasting from actually managed to ripple the water beneath us.

Unfortunately for them, however…

"YOUR WORST NIGHTMARE, FOOLS,“ a Zuul-possessed Vader rumbled in reply.

"AAGH!"

Well, frankly, we were just better than them.

It was with no small amusement that we watched a pair of very familiar figures leap out of the gate's eye-sockets and plunge into the water below.

"Huh…" Barto looked over the edge of his ship's prow, rubbing his chin. "I take it those are the Risky Brothers who interrupted the SBS awhile back?"

"I ASSURE YOU, this instance of divine justice HAS NOTHING TO DO with that lack of respect for their auditory deity," Soundbite lied shamelessly.

"Okay, seriously!? You two were trying to intimidate us?" Usopp called down, giving the water-treading brothers a disgruntled look. "Us?! We faced way scarier than that last time we were here! Heck, I'm scarier than the two of you!"

"Personally, on behalf of rodents everywhere, I am deeply ashamed in how unskilled your sorry excuse for trickery was," Su sniffed, flicking her tail primly.

"FOR THE LAST TIME, JUST BECAUSE OUR SHADOWS WERE IN SQUIRRELS DOESN'T MEAN THAT WE'RE SQUIRRELS!" the black-masked one hollered furiously as he paddled for the island-ship.

"And come on, we were just having a little fun!" the afro-toter added as he followed his brother's lead, the both of them climbing back up the side of the ring. From the lack of visible footholds, they must have practiced to know how to do it… which really did not help the first one's case. "And it's not like we just did it to you! We put everyone through it! It's tradition!"

"Besides," the first one added. "We still need to keep records of who comes in and out. Black Bart's flag, we recognize, but who are the other two?"

"Takoyaki 8 is mine," Hachi said, stepping forward. "Hachi, ex-pirate and current chef. I'm here to serve Takoyaki to the biggest names of this generation!"

"Ooh, we'll have to stop by when our shift ends!" the other said. "And what about—"

"Boa Sandersonia of the Kuja Pirates, sister of Boa Hancock," the Zoan declared imperiously from her craft. "I am interested in exploring the luxuries that Skelter Bite offers those of my kind."

The Riskies froze in their climb, completely silent. One of them damn near slipped off in his shock and I wasn't exactly eager to let them start panicking when they got their wits back about them, so I took the opportunity to jump into the conversation.

"She has my approval, her sister isn't here, the Government doesn't know she's here, and translation: she wants to get blackout drunk and party with the noobs," I deadpanned, which Sandersonia helpfully backed up by adopting an ear-to-ear grin and flashing a peace sign at the bros.
The brothers glanced nervously at each other, but to my relief, they pulled themselves together rather than panic.

"Very well. You may enter," they said together in impressive synchronicity. "Turn to starboard as you enter to reach the main docks."

The crew dispersed as the gates cranked open, furling the rigging as we pulled into the floating island’s makeshift harbor.

"Oh, and one more thing!" one of the brothers called down as we passed under them. "We're still missing about a half-dozen more Supernovae… Supernovas? Whichever. Point is, you're early!"

"The Coos have found the rest and are bringing them in now," the other brother nodded. "But still, earliest estimate we've got is that we'll have the meeting tomorrow. 'Til then, enjoy the city, drinks are on the house! Nothin' but the best for the Straw Hat Pirates!"

"Oh-hoh? Is that so?" Lindy licked his toothy maw eagerly as he regarded the city with a new light in his eyes. "Well, don't mind if I—!

"I said Straw Hats, scale-ass! You cheapskates still gotta pay!"

Instead of throwing out a derisory comment, Lindy's eyes simply narrowed. He sucked in a deep breath and then exhaled explosively. Literally explosively, given the building-sized fireball that shot from his maw. I turned away as it hit the Risky's skull-booth, but the expected explosion didn't come. Instead, when I turned around, metal shutters had slid down over the openings, the bone around it only mildly scorched.

"Metal shutters!" one of the pirates crowed, rolling it up a little to smack it. "Suck on that, you overgrown lizard!"

"You two have quite the balls to oppose a dragon. I respect that. And if I ever get my claws on you, I'll rip 'em off!"

"And it's comments like that that convinced Captain Lola to let us turn this place into a sea prism stone-enforced bunker!" one of the Riskies cackled. "Do your worst!"

"Oh, he did not just say that…" Usopp groaned, slapping a hand to his face.

Lindy snarled and spread his wings, obviously prepared to do just that—

"Apis Rubber Band of Doom!"

SNAP!

"GYAGH!"

—before he suddenly collapsed onto his muzzle, whimpering in agony as he clutched at his… well, let's just say he got a lot of sympathy from most of the pirates present.

Apis wasn't one of that number, instead spinning her impromptu weapon around her finger with an impressed grin. "Hey, Usopp, you were right, this is an effective weapon. I'll take ten."

"Twenty for me!" Tashigi tacked on with a far too eager grin.

"Lemme think about it…" Usopp whimpered miserably.
In a _not at all_ panicked attempt to take my mind off the rapidly developing situation, I zeroed in on the approaching island. I have to say, now that I could get a closer look at the details it was even more impressive.

More interesting than the architecture, in my opinion, was how drastically they'd altered the island's geography. The last time we'd approached the landmass known as Thriller Bark, the fact that the only building was a mile inland meant that all that was visible from the cove was the topmost towers of Moria's manor. Now, however? It was almost impossible to see the base of Skelter Bite's sail-tower from the harbor, because of the towering skyline of ships blocking our line of sight. Heck, it almost reminded me of sailing into New York!

And the docks only emphasized that; they had been impressively large before, but it clearly hadn't been enough for Lola; she had expanded them out into the harbor itself via a series of floating docks, forming a makeshift port with dozens of ships of all sizes within. It looked like a fully functioning port, even including a host of… surprisingly stable-looking cargo cranes, half of which were unloading crates from the larger docked ships. Crates whose origins I really didn't want to dwell too hard on, but still.

"Mmrrgrgh…" Tashigi grumbled to herself, critically eyeing the black-peaked forest of masts, her fingers clenching and unclenching around Shigure's hilt. "On the one hand, this was all built without any actual legitimate government involvement. Impressive. On the other hand, _pirates_. So… damn… conflicted…"

"Oi." _Thwack._

"Ow!" Tashigi yelped, rubbing the spot on her temple where she'd just been flicked. "The hell—?"

"Tashigi," Zoro cut in, frowning sternly. "If you need to look at anything in this rare and fleeting moment you're actually wearing your glasses—"

"HA!" "All of my hate, slimeball!"

"—You're the most familiar with pirate flags out of all of us," our first mate continued, stuffing a spyglass into her hand. "Give us a who's who, so we _don't_ reenact Jaya if we don't have to."

Tashigi blinked in surprise, and after visibly wrestling with herself for a moment, she raised the spyglass and pointed it toward the collection of ships we were sailing toward.

"Let's see, we already know about Kid and Apoo… hmm, and it looks like there are three other Supernovas too, I can see Law, Bege, and Drake's ships. But it looks like the others haven't—wait a second, is that **Foxy**!?!"

I snapped my eyes over and my jaw dropped. Unmistakable in size and decor, the still cringe-inducingly named Sexy Foxy was anchored ahead of us with what looked to be a smaller cadet ship anchored next to it. Guess our ersatz 'recruitment officer' had decided to expand a bit.

"This shouldn't be as much of a surprise as it is," Usopp muttered. "I mean, it's a pirate haven and he's one of our closer allies. OH!" He perked up eagerly, pounding his fist in his palm. "Maybe Dorry or Broggy will be here, too!"

"Here, lemme…" Merry hummed thoughtfully, tilting her head to the side and cupping her ear for a few seconds before shaking her head with a sad sigh. "Sorry Usopp, nothin' doing. The ladies say there are about a dozen Giants here, yes, but Ogres, no. Still! They're all crewmates of the big guys, so I recommend some padding for all the backslapping you're going to get."
"That means almost all of the Damned are on the same island," Tashigi muttered, ignoring the byplay. "Any bright ideas for how to keep the alliance discreet?"

I shrugged and started to tick off my fingers. "It's a pirate island, so shit happens, I've got Soundbite to muddle any possible eavesdroppers, thanks to the ad-hoc, unregulated construction there's probably upwards of a hundred hidden and unrecorded rooms and passages per building—"

A sound part-way between a grunt and a cough sounded out beside us.

"—And we have Popora, too. Want me to go on?"

She continued staring at me for a moment. Then she sighed and turned back. "Really hate when you're right."

Disembarkment followed soon after, with both cooks staying behind on the Sunny, Hachi to prepare some samplers where Luffy couldn't inhale them and Sanji half to help Hachi prep the food, and half to put the fear of... basically anyone and everyone into those two.

Coo, for his part, gave us all a sardonic doff of his newsie cap. "Well, folks, I'd say it's been fun, but more than a few of you tried to eat me while I was onboard. If you don't mind, I'll be going back to the saner of the big mouths in Paradise, thank you very much!" And with that, he flapped off to rejoin Apoo and his flock.

Over on the Cannibal, most of the Barto Club's mooks and officers were staying put themselves... to run damage control when Goldenweek inevitably got another bout of inspiration. There were a few wary assurances that they'd catch up later, but considering Ever was directing an effort to de-paint the sails as we left, none of us were holding our breath. Gin and Barto especially; Soundbite had gotten some new curses to add to his repertoire when they jumped ship right before the paint started flying.

Anyway, one completely unfairly shot down attempt to ride in on Funkfreed (proooobably shouldn't have tried to take off solo), we set off into the city.

And before anyone asks, yes, we knew that we'd left Keimi and the Dugongs behind. But c'mon, they were professional martial artists with our crew's knack for the insane and impossible. They'd be back, probably in some impossibly awesome manner, so there were maybe five minutes of worrying before the more level-headed of us got that through everyone's skulls. We wouldn't let it happen again, of course, but this time it wouldn't be a problem.

Anyway, back to the point: reviewing Skelter Bite's fantastic transformation!

Though... frankly, 'gruesome' fit the walk to the front gate better. Or, as some would put it...

"Well, this is inviting!" Robin remarked in an outright chipper tone.

"Rooobiiin..." Usopp moaned, dragging his hands down his face.

"Only you, Robin," Vivi lamented, her tired sigh echoing around us. "Only you."

Yup. Only someone like Robin would find a baker's dozen gallows with skeletons swinging from the arms to be 'inviting'.

"Meh. 6/10, NEEDS real skeletons."

"What?" Robin said, head whipping over to Soundbite.
"Yohohoho! Soundbite is quite correct!" Brook, standing next to one of the gallows and staring at the apparently not-corpse hanging from it, declared. Reaching out, he gave it a hard shove, and we all heard the rattle of wood on wood, not bone on bone (do not ask how we all knew that).

Ignoring Robin's disappointed groan at that, I gave a closer look at how the bones were arranged and what was on them. The effigies' arms were spread-eagled, which didn't fit a hanging, but it seemed to be to allow them to hold up what appeared to be tattered and torn pirate flags of several designs. Any confusion about *that* imagery was cleared up by wooden signs hanging around the skeletons' necks, and what was written on said signs.


"Oh, come on, they're *qualifying* crimes now?" Tashigi groaned.

"According to what I've heard so far," Merry said, scrunching her face in concentration. "They don't care so much about the fire as they do the intention and location. That's the gist for all crime around here: when it comes to 'pirate justice', Motivation and Consequence are king. Burn down an uninhabited building, fine; you'll probably get press-ganged into helping with the repairs, but not kicked out. Burn something down in a fight, same thing. Heck, even if you're doing it to try to kill someone, there's no big deal unless someone ends up dead or they're not actually a legitimate asshole that someone else hasn't gotten to first."

"*What* are they punishing, then?" demanded Tashigi, a sentiment that was shared by myself and several others, I am not ashamed to admit.

"Apparently, it depends on how popular the buildings are; the more people wouldn't want them gone, the more dangerous it is. Wrong idea to try proving your stones like these jackasses apparently did; tried to light the alcohol stores on fire." Merry's expression fell flat as she grabbed our first mate's arm without even looking. "Put 'em away, Zoro, they're not even on the island anymore so you can't cut them."

"*You don't know that.*"

"Wait, hang on," Vivi butted in, shoving Zoro aside—

"GAH!" SPLASH!

—and clean into the drink with a particularly forceful gust so that she could get a closer look at the skeleton. "You said they're not here anymore? Then where are they?"

"Uhh…" Merry cocked her head at the skeleton. "I'm getting 'fate worse than death… and then death'."

Barto perked up at that. "Neat!"

Gin, however, was a bit more… *conservative* in his response. Specifically, he yanked Merry up by her hood, glowering. "I'm going to need way more detail before I set one foot in that city, brat!" he demanded.

Merry gave the *other* first mate a flat look. "Put me down, dead eyes, before I break your weak little fingers like breadsticks."

Dead eyes' weak little fingers snapped open, letting the shipgirl drop to the dock and brush herself off.
"Thank you," she said, nodding primly. "Now, to answer your question, nobody on this here walk of shame was executed. They just got their asses kicked based on the severity of their crimes, and then they got tossed out on their asses with a not subtle warning to get out and stay out, while their flags got pinned up here to warn everyone else who comes after them."

"No matter the world you're in, there'll always be terms and conditions… though at least I can make sense of these," I snorted.

"So, what exactly is Lola doing? I mean, blacklisting them wouldn't get them dead, and it hardly strikes me as a fate worse than death, either," Sandersonia wondered, sounding far too interested.

"Actually, I think I can answer that," Tashigi said thoughtfully, a genuine smile on her face for the first time since we set foot here. "Since the outer guards are former Marines, and since I recognize some of these flags from recent arrest records, it's not hard to put things together."

"Kick their asses, take and string up their flags, turn them in," Koala summarized, nodding. "Makes sense; it's effective, final, and guilt free because anyone who commits these crimes is then a common criminal instead of a pirate." She let her expression fall flat. "Though I seriously doubt anyone appreciates the beauty of it beyond 'piss us off and we kick your ass and string your flag up'. Besides Robin, of course."

"Oh, now, that's not true. I'm sure Don Accino feels the same way," Robin said sweetly.

It took an effort of will, but clamping Soundbite's lips shut let me avoid mouthing off. "Don't respond," Lassoo advised, cutting off any other reactions.

"Well, anyway…" Franky hummed, rubbing his chin as he examined another effigy. "If we're going in, we might as well read a few of these, see what we can and can't do in this place. I mean, we're going to piss somebody off, might as well not include the local authorities in that list…"

He paused so that he and about a half-dozen other of the assholes I called my friends turned to give my snail and I looks.

I stayed silent and contented myself with flipping them a pair of birds, while Soundbite rolled his eyestalks. "In the words of every sitcom character in the early '90s and everyone in the Midwest through the rest of the '90s, 'don't go there'."

"I don't even know what a sitcom is or where the Midwest is, but I can already tell that was offensive and clichéd beyond all reason," Vivi deadpanned.

"Anyway," Franky cut in, a little loud. "Let's just read the rules so that we can at least try to avoid ticking our friends off on purpose, alright?"

"Awww!" Luffy groaned, throwing his head back. "Do we really need to read? That's, like, the worst thing anyone can do ever!"

I snapped my gauntlet into a fist. "Hold him down, Robin."

"Gladly, Cross," the assassin-archaeologist sniffed primly as she ran her fingers over her knife's edge.

"A-Ah, Luffy?" Usopp spoke up hastily, eyes darting between his captain and the two of us. "Give it a chance, would you? Maybe some of these stories will be funny!"

"Mmm, yeah, that's true," Luffy conceded, before swiftly perking up. "Yeah, yeah, alright! Go
"Aye-aye captain!" Usopp saluted, zipping over to an effigy holding up a flag that had a bloody bear-trap on it. "Let's see, Lockjaw Pirates, Crime…" Usopp's eagerness died a swift and violent death, his expression dropping into a horrified gape. "Guh… A-Attempted Murder - Unjustified/Unprovoked."

While the rest of us gagged in shock, Luffy's expression merely went blank and he tilted his head to the side. "…well, that's not funny."


"Um…" Merry tapped her temple and quickly winced. "Seems like they got in thanks to a bard who faked it well enough for the lot of them to slip past the Triangle. And because Gheilt and his hadn't gotten here yet and the sea gate was still under construction, it looks like they were able to come in guns blazing…"

"Oh, I can explain that, at least," Koala scowled. "Within days of the SBS broadcast, Big Mom promised a king's ransom to whoever could destroy Skelter Bite and bring back the captain's head."

Everyone matched her scowl, as well as the malicious eagerness that followed when Usopp spoke again.

"Well, here's some good news: looks like they only managed to get a little way into the island before they were sent packing. The last charge here is 'Failed to make Lola break a sweat.'"

…I am not ashamed to admit that it took me a minute to grasp that Lola had singlehandedly curb-stomped that crew. I may have made her one of the Damned's leaders but in the face of… let's be brutally honest here, everything about her, it was incredibly easy to forget that she was a skilled swordsman and pirate captain whose shadow had powered one of the General Zombies, not to mention my newer knowledge that she grew up in the New World. Put all those pieces together and…

"Holy shit, I think the only reason she didn't send them back to her mother in pieces is she didn't want to give Linlin a snack," I mused aloud.

*That* earned me a good number of shocked looks.

"I can't tell what part of that sentence is most disturbing of all…" Lassoo whined, dropping to the ground and covering his eyes with his paws.

"And that… person is one of the strongest pirates in all of the New World? As in, the ocean we're going to next?!" Conis squawked, her wings twitching.

"Oh, I'm sure it won't be *that* bad," Brook said airily.

"Of course it won't. It'll be so much worse," I agreed just as airily.

"Right, so much wor—oh, dear."

"HEY, LOOK AT THIS ONE, THIS ONE LOOKS FUNNY!" Chopper barked from further up the flag line, a hint of hysteria in his voice that was backed by his twitching smile and distinct lack of cyan madness. We obligingly trooped over to the flag and let Carue take a look at it.
"Wet's see hewe… Kojiwo Piwates… foah some weason…" A sweatdrop beaded on the back of his head, and on mine and others'; why the hell was the Jolly Roger chomping down on a big red 'R'? "And the cwime was…" Carue's sweatdrop doubled in size. "Theft."

"Wait, what?" Tashigi demanded. "You mean they're actually punishing that one?"

"Hang on, there's a footnote," Vivi interjected, leaning past her mount's shoulder to squint at the corner of the sign. "It says 'Dumb enough to get caught'."

The 'ex'-Marine slumped over. "Ah. Now that makes more sense. I honestly don't know what I expected at this point."

I wanted to repeat that question to Tashigi's face, but that decision was taken away from me by Nami accidentally jabbing a section of her Eisen Cloud into my side. Instead, I looked at Merry in askance.

By this point, Merry was already tilting her head…

"MWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA AAAA!"

Aaaand then she fell on her back laughing her little head off, which got Luffy snickering along in turn, even though he had no idea why. No more needed to be said on that front.

That was the last one we read as a group, though everyone read the remainder in passing, alternating between exasperation, satisfaction, and amusement. That ended the minute we saw the entrance, which had been… thoroughly remodeled.

See, back when the island was Thriller Bark, the only access to the harbor had been through a break in the seawall that ringed the island. Now, though, the builders of Skelter Bite had used a Marine Battleship to fill that gap. A years-out-of-date, defaced to hell and back battleship, but it still made for a heavily armed, extremely sturdy barbican… and Roger help me there's another word I never thought I'd use in perfect context.

Once we finished picking our jaws up off the ground, our eyes naturally slid to the entrance, which was less imposing but no less eye-catching. A gold-painted arch glinted in the golden mist wafting through the entire island—yeah, that was a thing, forgot to mention that—and framed a tunnel carved through the bow of the battleship. Oh, yeah, and there was also a miniature graveyard parked directly in front. Though when I say 'miniature', I mean there was exactly one unmarked tombstone set behind a grave that had probably been dug last week, illuminated by a lantern hanging on a post next to it, and framed by a pea-soup wall of regular gray fog. Not the golden fog in the rest of the island, regular old cloud.

It was a complete visual non-sequitur that left us blinking in confusion for a solid minute before the freshly dug grave began to slowly shift as if something was climbing out. And, to our incredulous shock, something was climbing out, an ancient, decrepit-looking—

I blinked in surprise. "Wait, haven't I seen this bit before?" I muttered to myself.

Before I could say more or anyone else could actually react, Luffy walked ahead of us, right up to the 'zombie' that was halfway out of the grave and groaning unintelligibly. Luffy stared down at the 'living dead'… and then I burst out laughing as he put his hands on the man's shoulders and head and tried—no, he actually pushed his torso back into the grave, leaving the 'zombie's arms flailing and twitching frantically in the air.

The re-earthing only lasted for a few seconds before the 'zombie' popped back out of the earth,
visibly pissed off rather than the standard slack-jawed zombie expression.

"GAH! DON'T PUT ME BACK IN THE GROUND!" the old man howled. "ARE YOU AN IDIOT?"

"Yes," everyone deadpanned.

The old man's expression fell, and he grimaced in embarrassment. "Right, forgot about that. My bad."

"...It's an old man with serious injuries," Luffy finally observed.

"CAN'T YOU SEE IT'S A ZOMBIE!?" yelled most of the males with us.

"No, I can confirm that it really is an old man WITH SERIOUS INJURIES. HE STILL HAS A PULSE… I… thiiiiink? It's a bit hard to OH THERE IT IS!" Soundbite nodded triumphantly. "SO YEAH, LIVING OLD GUY pretending to be himself next year. MORE OF THE OMINOUS decor?"

The old man shook off his grimace and grinned politely. "Exactly! It's fun on our terms, after all. Now, if I may continue my bit…?"

"Shishishi! Sure thing, old guy!" our captain snickered, hauling the old man the rest of the way out of the grave by his shoulders.

"Ah, thank you," the old man nodded gratefully, taking up his lamp-bearing staff and coughing into his fist. "Now then, back on task… BEWARE!" He threw his arms out, the fog somehow swirling around him ominously. "Whosoever would cross this cem'ry must answer me these questions three, ere the city lights you see."

I turned a leer on Soundbite, who was inches from busting his shell laughing. "Pff… I didn't think sharing some PYTHON BITS during the party WOULD LEAD TO THIS! SURE DON'T REGRET IT, THOUGH!"

I sighed, half-fondly, half-wishing I could justify punting him off the dock. A glance around showed much muttering and shifting about, and that just wouldn't do, now would it. "Alright, guys, settle down, settle down, I've got this." And so saying, I walked up beside the old man and leaned on his tombstone. "Say! Real quick, just before we start on those questions of yours, what!… is your name?"

The old man blinked once, then twice before shaking his head and puffing his chest out. "Spoil, leader of the now-disbanded Thriller Bark Victim's Association! Nice to meet you in person, Jeremiah Cross!"

"Mm-hm, I see, I see…" I mused, examining my metal-clad fingertips oh-so-casually. "Second, what!… is your purpose here?"

Spoil flung his free arm out, visibly preening. "To judge whether or not those who come here are worthy of passage into the grand pirate haven of Skelter Bite!"

"I see, I see," I nodded in agreement, glancing down at the senior citi-zombie. "And finally, what!… is the number that comes after two but before four?"

Spoil scoffed, raising his chin even higher. "Why, three, of course!"
"Correct!" I proclaimed, spreading my arms grandly. "Congratulations, you have answered the questions three! You may pass!" I declared, gesturing at the docks.

"Huzzah!" Spoil cheered, running past our crewmates with some impressive speed for a wrinkly old shrimp like him. I turned back to my bemused crew and companions, smirking all the way.

"We have anywhere from ten minutes to never, and I'm leaning towards the latter. Let's go."

It took a moment for everyone to get over the fact that that had worked, and the walk through the tunnel nearly sent Tashigi sprawling from her improvised peg leg five times, but the view of the city when we emerged from the tunnel...

It was incredible. I could still see the rushed, improvised, totally unplanned nature of the city, landed ships poking above the buildings lining the street in front of us, festooned with gangplanks, rope bridges, and suspended walkways stretching between them. But stretching out in front of us was a long street of properly constructed buildings—mixed in with some of the landed ships, naturally—stretching into the distance, reminiscent of the Vegas Strip or some of the longer streets in Manhattan. Shops lined the ground floors, and above that damn near every window was thrown open, a head or laundry line or improvised balcony sticking out, and bright murals and equally colorful signs covered almost every other square inch. Wooden sidewalks bordered the central street, which in turn was paved. With cobblestones. Somehow, I had the feeling we wouldn't be seeing that anywhere else.

At the end of the street, towering in the distance, was the mainmast, no trace of Moria's mansion left. Instead, about a quarter up the towering wooden pillar, was Oars' skull, pinned to the mast like the world's biggest hunting trophy with the city's Jolly Roger hanging from its tusks. Now that's how you make a statement!

And the people. Architecture is nice, but a city is made by its people, and this wasn't Mock Town, composed of average Joes who just didn't want to put in an honest day's work. Oh, don't get me wrong, there were plenty of those types, spilling out of the bars and sprawled on the street and most noticeable in the stench of piss and stale rum that underlaid everything. But they were a minority; most of the people I saw walking through the streets were the adventurers, the explorers, the truest of pirates found on the seas, or else the kind of honest and not-so-honest folk that always spring up to service them. The colors were garish, the fashions outlandish, giants lacking Giant Warrior colors leaned on the buildings, happily conversing with each other, and fishmen walked openly in the streets with nary a glance nor a hint of tension.

Speaking of those the people servicing these true pirates, they'd clearly been busy. An eel Sea King was strung vertically on one side of the street, hanging from the bowsprit of a frigate dumped on its stern. There was what I could only describe as a ship dealership, selling and displaying everything from longboats to galleons. And... hold up, was that a cage being lugged over the rooftops? One big enough for Boss Kabuto, no less. Wonder what that was for.

Oh, yeah, and cheering crowds and lots of shifting money surrounded no less than three street brawls. Pirates. Gotta love 'em.

So, yeah. It was a chaotic mess, teeming with innovation and improvisation but also constantly on the verge of exploding into complete anarchy, anarchy that would probably level the place if it wasn't sent to Davy Jones' locker first. It was a true pirates' paradise, in other words. And I was loving every minute of it.

And it wasn't just me, either.
"Well, my compliments to the architects!" Sandersonia all but squeed, stars glittering in her eyes.

"Yeah, it's pretty awesome," agreed Zor—wait, what!? There was only one path, and he didn't pass us, so how was he standing in front of us!?

"Where the hell did you come from?!" demanded Tashigi, waving her crutch at him.

"Blame my parents," the first mate deadpanned.

Immediately, every person present gave me an expecting look. Even Luffy!

"No, the story never got to that part of Zoro's backstory, and after the last revelation we got, no way in hell am I digging after it," I deadpanned.

Many sighs of disappointment were had, and I swear I thought I saw Brook discreetly palm a few bills to a grinning Merry.

"Aaand getting back on the subject of impossible geography, I'd just like to announce that I am… conflicted about this situation," Nami muttered, the corner of her mouth twitching erratically between a smile and a scowl. "On the one hand, I can't wait to map this place because it's a brand new and brilliantly intricate locale… but on the other, it's evolving, meaning that mapping it is going to be nearly, if not utterly, impossible…"

"Might help to have someone more familiar with the area helping you out?" announced a somewhat familiar voice.

It took me a minute to locate the speaker: a woman who'd just stepped out of the flow of pirates, bearing a pointed nose, sunglasses, and dark blue hair in dreadlocks dressed in an outfit that I could have sworn I saw Conis wearing the other day. And not two seconds after that, I realized there was only one place I'd seen an icepick like that on someone's face.

"Porche?" I half-asked, half-demanded.

"It's Marcedes while I'm undercover like this," the Foxy executive corrected, lowering her shades ever so slightly to shoot me a wink. "Gotta keep up the masquerade that we're still enemies. But good to see you finally made it. You all took your time getting here, didn't you?"

"Shishishi! Sorry!" Luffy snickered, rubbing his finger under his nose. "We were busy getting takoyaki. We brought enough for everyone, though!"

"Then in that case, everything's forgiven, captain!" Porche saluted before jabbing her thumb over her shoulder at Oars' looming skull. "Anyway, the boss and Lola have been expecting you guys; I've been familiarizing myself with the city for the last few days so I can give you some direction on where to go."

"Ohoh? In that case, where's the best bar?"

Porche stiffened slightly at the sight of Sandersonia, but showed her stones as a Straw Hat, albeit an unofficial branch Straw Hat, by simply pointing the baton she was suddenly holding down main street. "The closer to the front gates you are, the tackier and seedier the booze vendors. I recommend the Esun bar, about three-quarters to the mast and then it's on your right. Look for the crescent moon."

"Thank you~!" Sonia sang, speeding off without so much as a 'catch you later' but with a very large grin on her face. To this day, I still count it a minor miracle that she didn't immediately leap into her
demi-form and start a riot then and there.

"...So, just to confirm, but that was one of the Kuja Pirates' Gorgon Sisters, yes?" Porche asked weakly, her more casual nature displaying itself as she suddenly looked like... well, no offense to him, but like an earlier Usopp.

"Remember the mystery caller who said that their 'superior' was being considered for the Snake seat?" I responded with a grin worthy of the now-departed Zoan.

A full-body shiver wracked Porche.

A sigh, and a lack of any further reaction from Porche, drew my attention back to the rest of the crew, who seemed to be watching Sandersonia go, and Koala, who had her face in her hands. "I'd better go after her before half the people in this place almost bite it throwing themselves at her," she said between her fingers. "If anything will calm people about a Warlord's top subordinate being here, it's a Revolutionary vouching for them. Try not to level the place until I'm a mile offshore!" And with that parting compli-sult (patent pending) she set off after the serpent.

"Hmmm... you know, splitting up does sound like a good idea," Nami offered. "After all, until the meeting starts, this is pretty much shore leave, right, Captain?"

"Sure!" Luffy grinned. "We can worry about getting to Sab... Sab... uh, Cross?"

"Sabaody," I said. "For once, your tongue-tying is understandable. And yeah, we can save the plan for when we get to planning."

"For now," Bartolomeo cut in, wringing his hands with a toothy grin. "We're in a city where the primary forms of currency are booze, broken bones and bitchin' levels of badass!" He pumped his fists in the air, cackling. "Let's party!"

"Just a second," Vivi interrupted, freezing everyone else in place. "Before we scatter, I think we need to decide on a place to meet up when we decide to turn in for the night that's more convenient than the Sunny."

"Mmph—gah! Damn, that's freaky... a-Anyway, I can help with that," Porche offered once her muscles unlocked. "The best inns that Skelter Bite has right now are The Queen's Blessing, Oden's Cottage, and The Lucky Rabbit. Most of our crew has spread out in the first one, but the top brass is at The Lucky Rabbit, and Lola has several suites reserved for you guys."

"And how do we find said inns?" Tashigi inquired, her expression falling flat as she thumbed Zoro. "Besides this one, who's just going to walk into the sea and then out of the closet."

"At least I'll be able to see where I'm going, four—oh, wait."

"I will see you all frogmarched to the gallows."

Porche blinked slowly at the Marine, and only barely covered snort of laughter with her hand. "Oh, sweet Coyote, Pisces, is that you?! The captain is going to love—!"

SHING!

"So getting to the inns, nothing simpler, just follow the signs!" the Foxy squawked. She pointed at the walls, and indeed, there hung three signs featuring a crown, a pagoda and a rabbit, and arrows pointing into the city. "They're the best establishments on the island, so they have the most signs put up, you can't miss them!"
"Because they can afford to publicize the most?" Conis inquired.

"Er..." Porche rubbed the back of her head. "More like because they can afford the best materials to nail their signs in place. Trust me, once someone uses Wootz Steel nails to secure something, it's never coming off. I've been seeing competitors try all week."

"Yeah, well, that's the world of business for you, so cutthroat, a real window into the human—BOOK IT!" Barto suddenly barked, breaking into a mad dash for the nearest passageway, accompanied by the more adventurous pirates among us.

"WOOOOO! I WANNA FIND WHERE THEY KEEP THE MEAT!"

"YOU'LL NEVER TAKE ME ALIVE, PFHAHAHA!"

Which is to say, Luffy and myself.

And we almost made it, too, so close to just disappearing into the crowd and making a clean getaway and exploring the island unimpeded...

"Yeah, no."

"GWAH!/ "ERGH!/ "Noooo!"

But tragically, it was not to be, due to Nami's Eisen Tempo snagging me by my ankle and laying me out flat, Gin somehow getting in front of Barto and clotheslining him, and Zoro thwacking Luffy in the stomach with one of his sheathed swords and kneeling on our captain's back, his sea prism stone hilt-cap pressed firmly against Luffy's head.

"Seeing as you three have somehow managed to forget, allow us to remind you of where you stand in this crew," Nami politely stated as she 'gently' hauled me off the ground by my heel. "For whatever reason, you numbskulls are the highest ranking officers in both our crews. That means that when we officers go to check in at The Lucky Rabbit, you are coming with us. Whether you like it or not."

"And what if we tell you we're not going anywhere with you jagoffs?" Bartolomeo queried as he slowly picked himself off the ground.

"Are you an idiot?" Luffy and I asked together.

Barto took one look at Gin cracking his knuckles and nodded slowly. "Yyyes. Yes, yes I am. Alright!" He clapped his hands and shoved himself to his feet with a Barrier-crutch. "Let's get going and avoid getting our knees broken, aye, boys?"

"Aye!" we two other idiots concurred.

"Nay," two other voices droned, and I bit out a sharp curse when a pair of weights disappeared from my body as Lassoo and Funkfreed jumped ship—which is to say, me.

"No offense, Cross, but we've been in close quarters to you for way too long," Lassoo snorted.

"And if there's any island in the world where two..." Funkfreed rolled his trunk thoughtfully. "Let's be generous and say individuals, like us can just wander around and see the sights without any questions, well..." The elephant-sword's trunk spun in the air, indicating our surroundings. And considering how the Chinese New Year procession touting a stuffed Sea King eel as a pseudo-dragon float passing by, I couldn't deny the point.
I let out an irritated hiss and waved my hand dismissively. "Fine, whatever, fuck off wherever you want." I glanced to Porche. "I'm guessing they can bill any purchases they make by the flag?"

"Aye, though considering your crew’s reputation, you're going to get a ton of freebies before your first bill," she confirmed.

"Then go ahead and get going, you two. Though I swear, if I get even one bill about gold-flaked doggy kibble—!" I descended into a choked gurgle when I saw that they had disappeared without a trace. "Bastards."

"Eh, deal with it. Meanwhile, just so we're clear, as soon as this is done, I'm going looking for the best bar on this island," Zoro chuckled with a smirk as he hauled Luffy back to his feet, though he kept an iron grip on the collar of our captain's vest.

"I'll sniff you out and join you later, then," Chopper piped up. "I've been practicing Doctorine's negotiating techniques, and I could try twisting it a little for bets if anyone wants to try out-drinking you…" His expression flattened. "And, of course, I can practice my concussion treatments on said saps when their crewmates inevitably get it into their heads to try and take their money back by force."

"Sounds like a party!" Nami chirped, beri symbols in place of her eyes. She also let go of me; only the fact that I saw it coming let me avoid a neck-wrecking drop on the head.

"Well, if that's arranged, I believe I'd like to find some of the giants here," Robin waved offhandedly. "Usopp, would you care to join me?"

"R-Robin!? I, uh… s-sure!" Usopp agreed. I gave her a somewhat melancholy smile that she returned before the pair walked off.

And with that, everyone else trickled away from the group, intent on exploring the vast and amazing city of wonders that those of us being frogmarched could only fleetingly appreciate. Despite the tone, I refused to begrudge them a chance to look; no, my ire was reserved for the slave drivers doing the aforementioned frogmarching.

In short order, Vivi had mounted Carue and set off, the last non-officers aside from my partners (Nami had let a quivering and gun-shy Billy go off with Conis and Su) to depart from our group. But when she passed the nearest street corner...

"Oh, and Cross? Don't start any fires!" she called out over her shoulder.

Oh, I couldn't let that go unaddressed, and so I turned and spread my arms wide, walking backwards. "Oh, poor princess, your ignorance is showing! In case you've forgotten, this is a true pirate's city! And so, unlike Mock Town…"

"IF A QUARTER OF THIS PLACE DON'T GO AFLAME EVERY COUPLE O' DAYS, THEN WE'RE ALL DOIN' IT WRONG! AIN'T THAT RIGHT, BOYS?" Soundbite shouted to the surrounding onlookers.

It was a true credit to Vivi's heightened sense of tolerance that even as the not-so-innocent bystanders cheered and laughed in agreement, all she did was smack the back of my head with a harsh breeze.

Still, I was going to make an effort to avoid starting a fire this time, if only because I didn't want to find out the hard way that the Unluckies had somehow found a way inside.

-o-
Not far behind the Straw Hats and their companions was a pirate that could be considered Luffy's equal. Not in the way that the bearer of the Leopard Zoan could, nor in the way that the bearer of the Mochi Paramecia would have one day been and more than likely one day still would. No…

"WHO DARES TO APPROACH THE IMPREGNABLE—!"

"A TICKED OFF BITCH WHO'S GOING TO UNLOAD THREE MORTARS-FULL OF WHOOPASS UP YOUR ASSES UNLESS YOU OPEN UP, AND I MEAN RIGHT NOW!" Jewelry 'Big Eater' Bonney shrieked at the top of her lungs, making a credible attempt to set the tacky skull glaring down at her ship on fire with her eyes.

Equal, in that ordinary pirates would rather jump into a pool full of sharks covered in bloody shreds of meat than risk ticking her off. So immediately following her outburst, the skull's armored eye cover slammed shut to guard their inhabitants.

"Eesh, we thought you were one of the funner Supernovas. What gives?" someone called out from the skull.

"We ran into that blockade a week before your dumb birds found us and the bastards managed to hit our pantry!" Bonney spat, even as she gestured for her crew to sail them in. "You try keeping a positive attitude after seven days and nights of hardtack and salt-dried Sea King!"

"Eesh…" the wince was audible in the other voice. "Well, we'll warn the nearest restaurants you're coming in. Just make sure you bring enough to pay and there'll be no problems."

"I'm taking a big chance coming here instead of to the closest actual island," Bonney growled, more to herself than anyone else. She paced like a caged Sea King, each crack of her knuckles a gunshot ringing through the air. "There damn well better not be, or so help me I'm going to tear a strip clean out of—!"

"The main docks are to starboard and the meeting between the Supernovas is tomorrow," the gatekeepers interrupted, the gate opening while they spoke. Bonney promptly waved her crew forward. They responded with impatient gusto, almost as eager to get quality food as their captain. For a few moments, Bonney allowed herself to relax; it was only as long as it would take to reach the city, then they'd be free to gorge.

Then she noticed some of the ships ahead. One in particular: the Thousand Sunny. Her mood lifted a bit, one corner of her mouth curving upward into a smirk. Well, she wouldn't get a better chance than this to prove that she was superior to Straw Hat in at least one way.

And then she caught sight of something out of the corner of her eye and turned toward the wall. She blinked several times in surprise… then turned back toward the gatehouse and called a warning:

"Uh… just so you guys know, there are dragons flying over the walls."

And indeed, there was a full-blown… flock? Storm? Pack? Whatever of large, green and furry dragons flapping over the island's protective wall and gathering in a circle over the parked ships.

Now, Bonney had sailed Paradise from start to finish, so she'd come to expect a lot from the madhouse of an ocean…

"Huh? The scouting party’s back already?" One of the voices in the gatehouse called out. "Thanks for letting us know!"

But that response was most definitely not one of them. And neither was the telltale click of a Tone
Dial being activated, followed by the strum of violins and a chorus of horns.

"Scouting..." Bonney repeated incredulously, turning back toward the feathered creatures. Then she fished out her spyglass to take a closer look, and her expression sank back into a scowl.

"Dragon-riding dugongs. Are you kidding me?"

"Any chance that this could just be starvation-induced delirium, Captain?" called one of her crewmates.

"Nil," she responded. "And Oriol?"

"I know, I know, I'll scribe everything that I can," the young scholar responded, already heading for his cabin to retrieve his writing materials.

"Lucca, scan the island. If the Straw Hats are here, then their chef is here; with any luck, we can get him to make us a meal."

"Ah, Captain?" said lookout called down from the crow's nest. "The good news is I can see him... and the bad news is that those dragon-riding Dugongs seem to be heading straight for—oh, that explains it. That's Boss and his apprentices... I think the Straw Hats might have lost track of them recently."

Bonney cocked an eyebrow at her crewmate. "The hell makes you say—?"

"LEAVE US BEHIND LIKE A PILE OF CUT OFF BLUBBER, WILL YOU!" screamed Hera after finding another one of Zeus' infidelities, punctuated by blasts of flame and shockwaves of razor-sharp air rolling out from the Thousand Sunny. "CHOKE ON MY BLADES YOU PRETENTIOUS SWIRLY BROWED BASTARD!"

"GO, LEO, GO!" a trio of equally enraged voices shouted in support.

"...educated guess," Lucca finally said.

The Big Eater curled and uncurled her fingers, idly wondering if maybe she wouldn't have been better off not coming to what was obviously some sort of madhouse...

SLAP! SLAP! SLAP!

And then three impacts strong enough to rock the entire ship struck in rapid succession. Bonney spun to the source, somewhere off the stern quarter—and stiffened at the frog Sea King leering at her. Once it saw that it had her attention, however, it flicked its webbed hands in an impatient manner.

"Is... Is that thing communicating with us?" asked another Bonney pirate.

"Yes... and he is saying 'you're holding up the line'," Bonney blandly replied. For a couple of seconds, nobody moved. Then Bonney's smirk returned in full force for the first time in days.

"Oh, yeah. I am definitely going to like it here."

-o-

"Well, it certainly seems like you and your boys are doing nicely," Captain Dugong stated casually, taking a pull from his flask before passing it off to Boss Dugong.

Boss took a swig of his own around an appreciative hum. "Ahhh, Brewer's Seaweed Mix, I'd
forgotten how hooked I was on the stuff." He then nodded in agreement with his old friend. "And yes, yes we have. What was your first clue?"

"The fact that we've all made it this far?" Donny offered as he wound a roll of gauze around a newly forming bruise.

"Followed by the fact that you haven't lost anyone yet?" Raphe added as she cracked her neck and popped her joints.

"Followed by the fact that we all have bounties while you lot don't?" Mikey needled as he loaded fresh shots into his pistols.

Before Captain could reply to the snide remark with one of his own, the conversation was interrupted by Leo slamming onto the decking in front of them, massaging his freshly kicked muzzle.

"Ugghh… aaand then we've got the dragons," he groaned. "What's the story behind them? Also, tag out."

"I'm on it," Raphey casually stated, drawing her shuriken and spinning it up. "PREPARE TO EAT YOUR OWN SHOE LEATHER, YOU BASTAAAARD!" And with that warcry she shot into the air at the amphibians' current foe.

Captain stared up at the renewed aerial duel with a slightly cocked brow. "Call it a feeling…" he mused.

"The dragons… heh, that's quite the story," First Mate chuckled, offhandedly flinging a Blue-Fin Elephant Trout at the pair of dragons roosting on their ship's yardarms. "At the start of that whole Strong World fiasco, we figured out pretty fast that they were after the East Blue. We cut through the Calm Belt to get there in a hurry…" The amphibian unconsciously rubbed a fresh bandage on one flipper. "And we had a couple of close run-ins on the way… but we made it with time to spare. We stole a Visual Snail to keep an eye on the show, but the second we saw you guys come flying in, we knew that we had made that trip for nothing."

"So we decided to make the most of it," Captain picked up, flashing a smile and a thumbs-up at another dragon flapping by. "Looked around for a bit, and came by an island that had rock formations that looked like battleship sails where a whole ton of dragons like the one that other captain… what was it, Black Bart? The one he was riding. Anyway, we actually have you guys to thank for all this: apparently, every millennium the Dragons spend their first new decade of reincarnation having fun and stretching their wings, and your SBS broadcast convinced the entire flock to give the pirate scene a try."

"And since we were Grand Line natives who were insane enough to go through the Calm Belt to try to help defend their nesting grounds, they decided we were crazy enough to satisfy their needs," First Mate finished. "And as insane as they can be sometimes? It's been pretty nice having the Millennials around. I imagine sailing with the Straw Hats is a similar experience."

"BWAHAHAHAHEEHEEHEHOOHOOHOOO!"

All present spared Soundbite's bout of cackling a bare few seconds of attention before shrugging and returning to their business. Said business being briefly interrupted by Raphey careening head-first into Donny's skull, laying them both out flat into a groaning heap on the deck.

Mikey sighed, stood, and began spinning up his nunchucks. "Allllright, seeing as you've twisted my flipper, I'll go ahead and handle him for you, okay?"
"Pray he kills you, or else I will..." Raphey snarled weakly, shaking a flipper at her teammate.

"Gyeep! Uh, uh... HEY, SANJI!" Mikey hollered up at the cook in a blind panic. "I INTENTIONALLY MADE THE LAST BATCH OF TIRAMISU RUNNY TO FUCK WITH RAPHEY!"

"You what!?" both the chef and the female dugong snapped.

"Oh, I immediately regret this decision..." the orange-bandanna'd dugong whimpered.

"Too late," Boss deadpanned, grabbing the back of his apprentice's shell and throwing him to the crew's third strongest before he could run.

"AAAGH!"

Boss casually dusted his flippers off as he returned to his old friend's side. "As you can see, the boys' attitudes haven't changed much."

"Never doubted it. But what about you, Boss?" First Mate inquired. "You and your boys don't even need dragons to fly, you've taken your strength to a completely different level."

"Ah, it's easy to achieve," Boss said dismissively, rubbing off his 'knuckles' on his chest-shell. "All it takes is twelve hours of exercise a day, a steady diet of Sea King livers, dodging the crossfire of your crew's cook and mosshead..." He smirked and pulled a scroll from his shell. "And a government assassin stupid enough to leave an annotated guide to their superhuman abilities laying around!"

That got a laugh from the other two dugongs that Boss joined in on almost immediately. By the end of it Captain Dugong was leaning on the wall and slapping the thick muscles at the base of his tail, and after a bit, he wiped a tear from his eye and heaved a contented sigh. "Ahhh, man have I missed you..." His expression suddenly turned serious, the last of the mirth fleeing. "Missed you enough that I honestly have to ask: this far into the Line, after becoming so strong... any chance you and yours could come back and go the rest of the way with us? You did technically join the Straw Hat crew as a tribute, so there'd be no shame in it."

Boss hummed, and for a short time he seemed to be actually considering it...

"OH GOD THE PAIN!"

CRASH!

And then Mikey slammed through the wall above him. Or, at least, his head did.

"Oooh, don't everyone get up at once for my sake..." the chuck-wielder's muffled voice groaned through the water-soaked wood.

Donny shook his head with a defeated sigh. "Alright, you dolts, seeing as I'm next up to bat, I'm going to do what none of you chumps have been smart enough to do until now."

"Oh, yeah?" Leo intently side-eyed his brother-in-shell. "And just what would that be?"

"Simple: say the three words that will actually give us a chance of victory." Donny jabbed his staff at Sanji, a furious scowl knotting his brows. "RUSH HIS ASS!"

"YEAH!" Leo and Raphey roared, stabbing their weapons in the air.

"YEAH!" a spontaneously revitalized Mikey roared as he shoved his way out of the wall and joined
his squadmates. "WE MAY GO DOWN, BUT WE WILL TAKE HIM DOWN WITH US! CHAAAARGE!"

And with that, the martial-artist dugongs leaped at the ship's cook…

**THWACK! CRACK! CRUNCH!**

And immediately came to regret it.

"THE PAIN! OH SWEET SOBEK THE PAIN!"

"MY SHEEEEELL!"

"WE'RE NOT TAKING HIM WITH US!"

Boss watched the beatdown in silence before slowly donning a fond smile. "Sorry, Chief. Call me a sentimental old barnacle, but… I think we're gonna stay with these landlubbers for a while longer."

"NOT THE FACE! NOT THE FAAAAACE!" There was a crackling sound. "BACK TO THE FACE! BACK TO THE FAAAAACE!"


"Heheheh!" Captain Dugong chuckled, shaking his head. "Ahh, I expected nothing less, but as I said, had to ask."

"Though, if you're not coming back…" First Mate said. "Any chance you could teach us that newfangled Full-Shell Style of yours?"

Boss scoffed and pounded his fist into his palm. "How's this for a compromise: I wail on you with said style until you figure it out for yourself."

"Haaaaa…" Captain Dugong sighed wistfully as he slung his flipper around Boss's shoulders. "I've missed you, you old ass."

"Same here, you second-rate schmuck. Same here."

-0-

"Oooh, kebabs! Hey, can we—?"

"No," we all chorused.

Luffy sagged miserably. "Awww…"

"There, there, Luffy," I said, comfortingly patting his shoulder. "You'll just get the skewers stuck in your throat again anyway."

"But I'm so close to figuring it out!" he whined, giving me the most watery puppy-dog eyes he could manage… which would have been infinitely more effective if I didn't know exactly what he was capable of.

"Er… what, exactly, is he 'so close' to?" Porche asked hesitantly, peering over her sunglasses and shoulder simultaneously.

"How to only eat the meat but none of the vegetables," Nami deadpanned.
Porche stared at the navigator wide-eyed for a moment before hastily looking ahead again. "And to think, I was just starting to wonder what it would be like to be on the main crew. And just like that, now I'm not."

"Huh, wonder why that is?" Luffy questioned innocently.

"Uh, hey now!" I hastily cut in, latching onto the intriguing sight that greeted us around the latest corner. "P-Marcedes, isn't this one of the other inns you mentioned?" It had to be. In a city of shipwrecks, few things stand out quite like a seven-tiered pagoda tower. Admittedly a pagoda made out of flotsam, but still!

"Oh, yeah, Oden's Cottage," Porche answered, tilting her head back to admire it properly. "Don't know too much about it; the Boss has had me focusing on the big picture overview of the city and setting things up for you guys. But it looks about as high-class as you can get in a place like this, and the class of clientele that's come through supports it."

"Mmm… almost certainly themed after Wano," I muttered, though I hastily shook my head at the interested look Zoro sent my way. "But I doubt that the ones I know of from there would be on this side of the Red Line. Though…" I frowned in confusion. "That does beg the question of who did make this place; if it were just some wannabe, they couldn't afford something like this, and the only people with funds who could actually have been to Wano would also have to be from—"

Once again, the Grand Line displayed its impeccable timing by throwing the doors to the inn open and violently expelling two men. A second later, the person who was presumably responsible for said impromptu flight stepped out right behind them.

I took in his visage. If I hadn't had my memory refreshed, odds are good that I would have just nodded politely at the transvestite and moved on. But I had, and so I knew exactly who I was looking at.

"Whoa, hold up!" I hissed, grabbing Luffy and Barto's collars before they could go any further. Nobody objected, and judging by the tension in those of us more… informed, they recognized him, too.

"Alright, I'll give you two a chance to explain now. What was the fight about?" the onnagata demanded, impatiently tapping his geta on the decking.

"He attacked me without any provocation!" the more dignified-looking of the two said, indignantly indicating his more disheveled companion, who was still picking himself up. "All I did was bring up my profession! I'm a lawyer, you see—"

"I am so sorry for jumping to conclusions, sir," the innkeeper apologized humbly to the other patron as he helped the 'innocent' man to his feet, completely ignoring the now-concussed lawyer. "If you want to come back inside, the next round is on the house."

"Heheh, thanks. Knew there was something I liked about you! Sides' the dress, I mean," the other pirate slurred, limping back into the bar.

"It's a kimono!" the innkeeper called after the customer, though he was smiling all the while. The innkeeper's smile stayed in place as he turned his attention to us. Not noticed us, mind you, because I would bet hard cash that he knew we were here before he opened the door. Even odds that he knew where we were the second we set foot on the street.
"Ahhh, the Straw Hat Pirates and the Barto Club Pirates." He smiled and bowed with the utmost Japa—er, Wano politeness. "I've been expecting you."

Luffy blinked in surprise at the greeting, but then he brightened up and oh that idiot he'd better not —! "Hey, I recognize you! You're like Mister Two! What did he say he was… oh right! An o—!

"Shut-him-up-shut-him-up-shut-him-up!" I babbled in a blind panic, blurring my hand across my throat.

"He's shut up," Soundbite confirmed, snickering as he watched Luffy and Barto mime and flail in silence. "THEY BOTH ARE, EVEN. GEEZE, WHAT GOT STUCK in your craw? Do you just not want your name associated WITH SOMEONE'S LIFESTYLE?"

"We've been over that, and we've been over this: I don't tick off anyone who can gut me like a pig unless they actively piss me off first!" I snapped, keeping a wary eye on the innkeeper. Thankfully he still looked amused by the ongoing shenanigans rather than upset, and damn if I didn't want to keep it that way!

"Oh? Is that so?" Nami questioned oh so innocently, her demeanor perfectly laid back, while her Eisen Tempo started to sag towards the decking and—

"My oh my, lightning from below? You are quite clever, aren't you?" the innkeeper chuckled casually. To her credit, Nami barely flinched, but that was enough that Luffy stopped his flailing and gave Soundbite a look that got the snail to flinch and nod in respect.

"Who are you?" Straw Hat Luffy asked, not a hint of his usual irreverence.

"Oh, my manners escape me… though it's a bit disheartening that Ace hasn't told you about me," he replied. None of the annoyance implied by his words showed in his polite expression, and nor when he bowed at around 45 degrees. "I am Izo, manager of Oden's Cottage. It is an honor to meet you, Captain 'Straw Hat' Luffy, and you, Captain 'Black Bart' Bartolomeo."

"He also left out the part where he's the Sixteenth Division Commander of the Whitebeard Pirates," I stated as blandly as I could manage. Everyone present stiffened and stared at the painted man. "And while I'm more inclined to trust you than not, at this point I've pissed off so many people that it's a bit hard to keep track of who does and doesn't want my head. If you could just guarantee I'm not talking to a New World pirate who's got some reason or other to pop my skull…?"

Izo chuckled goodnaturedly. "Believe me, Jeremiah Cross, I know how you feel. But worry not, the Whitebeard Pirates have nothing against either you or the Straw Hats."

I didn't bother to muffle my sigh of relief, and neither did Nami or Porche. Hell, I could even see some of the tension leave Zoro and Gin. Only some mind you, but hey, gotta be realistic.

"Still," Zoro grunted, crossing his arms and giving the kimono-wearing pirate a once-over. "Whether you want to give Cross what's coming to him or not—"

"GO CHoke ON Ichimonji!"

"—what brings a Division Commander out here? I thought that New World pirates didn't bother with Paradise?"

"That is indeed the case with most New World pirates. Which, in fact, is the entire reason I am here," Izo sagely answered. "We established this inn to act as an embassy for the Whitebeard Pirates here in Paradise. Marco founded it a few weeks ago, and I've been… establishing matters, as it were. I have
a couple of weeks left before I trade off with Kingdew." He then stepped up to the inn's entrance and slid the door open, gesturing into the building. "But while I am here, the Captain left specific orders on how to treat your crews if we were to cross paths. Please, come in and we can continue the conversation."

While Luffy and Barto merely shared a momentary glance before shrugging and entering with grins on their faces, the rest of us were far more uneasy, because we could tell that that 'request' wasn't really a request at all. So it was a tense group that entered behind our beloved dumbasses.

The inside was about as clean and polished as a construct of repurposed seacraft with a customer base of pirates could be. It was a spacious area with staircases on the ends, rice paper screens for the doors and windows, and numerous lap tables around the area. A raised bar was off to one side, the better to mix and prepare drinks, and the patron that Izo had invited back in was seated at it.

The center of the room was slightly elevated with another lap table, and a small fountain with a tall bamboo stalk growing out of it was situated in the middle of the table. On top of it all, the clunk of a, what was it… right, the clunk of a shishi-odoshi echoed from the higher levels of the tower, perfectly tying the inn's atmosphere together.

As we walked through the foyer and the patrons respectfully parted before us, it became clear that Izo was leading us to a more isolated room than the foyer. Specifically, he led us over to the back wall, which was lined with… hm, what were they called again—?

"Shōji."

Right, the shōji-covered wall, and slid it aside to reveal a staircase.

"The meeting room is on the fifth floor; six and seven are reserved for the management of the inn, while two through four all hold twelve bedrooms each. If you do not have arrangements elsewhere, I could arrange a generous discount for your stay here," Izo explained, moving his sleeve in front of his mouth to hide his oh so innocent smile.

"Sorry, but The Lucky Rabbit has you beat at 'free'," Nami replied with an equally innocent-looking smile.

Izo paused between steps, but briefly before chuckling again. "Of course, you would naturally have favor with the owner for making this possible in the first place. Well, you can't blame me for trying."

"Just watch me~" Nami sang.

"Heeey, wait a minute," Porche cut in as we started climbing the stairs. "Three floors with twelve rooms each, that's only thirty-six rooms. Isn't that kind of small for a high-class inn?"

"It's a work in progress," Izo replied with a dismissive wave of his hand. "We've prioritized quality over quantity, so the construction takes longer. Once we've added another few floors, we'll move to expanding outward. Probably buy out a few extra lots and build some new locations. We'll see how it goes. For now, you can enjoy the luxuries of our fine establishment for only—"

"We've already bought out a full wing of The Queen's Blessing, sorry," Porche chuckled apologetically.

"…as I was saying, the meeting room is just ahead."

Thankfully, the aura of pure murder that Izo was emitting by that point was enough to ensure that no one but the biggest idiots (read: Luffy and Barto) even showed any mirth at his second strikeout.
About a minute of climbing later found us standing on the fifth floor, a pair of actual, ornate wooden doors greeting us.

Izo stepped up to the doors and grasped the golden rings that served as doorknobs, but didn't open them. Instead, he just stood there, a slight grimace on his face.

"I would like to take this moment to reiterate that I hold no ill will towards any of you. The ones waiting inside merely wish to discuss something with you all, and are aware that if they attempt anything…” Izo waved his hand uncomfortably. "Untoward, then I will deal with them personally. Even so, I would advise against provoking them unnecessarily…” He hung his head with both a tired sigh and a wistful smile. "Beyond the inevitable, at any rate."

I eyed Izo warily, a nasty suspicion sinking into my gut. "And you're reassuring us this much because…?"

The grimace on Izo's face deepened. Great. "Because I have no doubt that someone as well-informed as you is going to recognize who these people are and, more specifically, who they represent."

"What are you—?!" Before I could complete my question, Izo gave the doors a firm push, displaying the extensive meeting room within and, more importantly, the occupants, the sight of which forced me to choke a blue streak dead in my throat. "Oh, you painted bitch."

"Yeah, not inaccurate, I'll accept that.” Wincing, Izo cleared his throat to get the attention of the occupants. I took the opportunity to shove down my first reaction—panic—and actually look at the inhabitants.

Because while I might not have known all of the people in the room, I sure as hell recognized where I had seen all of them. There were four people waiting in the room, and my eyes immediately fell on the two sitting at the central table, currently engaged in arm wrestling. One was a tall man with white hair and a long fur cape, a sword sheathed on his back, horns on his head that I had a sneaking suspicion weren't just decorative, and muscles bulging out from his shirtless frame. The other…

"Is that Elton John?"

I opened my mouth to rebut the snail, but on a second look... mane of golden hair, sunglasses, and a plump body wearing a hot pink suit? I might have been willing to concede Soundbite's point, except for one small detail: he was a freaking lion, claws digging into his opponent's hand to try to get some sort of advantage.

I recognized Pekoms instantly, of course, and though I'd only gotten a few panels of him, it was hard to mistake who Sheepshead was either, as well as the looming implication of who he represented. Of course, the giant belt buckle bearing the horned skull of the Beast Pirates' Jolly Roger also helped.

"GRAH! You fuzzy little cheating shit, you're using fucking Electro! Fight like a fucking man you unshaved pussy!"

"CHE! Except that I'm not a man, I'm a lion, and proud of it! Go get shorn, you wannabe ungulate! If a Headliner like you is complaining about a little bit of static like that, from an unranked pirate like me, then maybe your horned freak of a boss should beg Mama for mercy right now!"

"You are fucking dead you little piece of—!"

The blatant shitslinging on display was just the exclamation point.
Meanwhile, the two other figures in the room were a similar case: the long-legged tea-sipper Baron Tamago, and a woman with an hourglass figure, magenta hair with similar horns to the man, and… not much clothing. Just a cape that went halfway down her back, a pair of gloves, and bare minimum coverings for her chest and waist. But given the brutalist tribal design of what she was wearing, it was pretty obvious who she was affiliated with. And that just added another exclamation point to the situation.

Somehow noticing the way I stiffened up like someone had poured liquid nitrogen down my spine, Porche surreptitiously leaned my way and hissed out the corner of her mouth, "Spill, Cross, who are they?"

"At this moment, death incarnate," I groaned, glancing skyward. So, this was how I died? Crossfire between four New World Pirates against one? Really?!…Ignominious as all hell, but meh, I suppose that my negative karma had to come calling eventually.

If you're wondering how we had enough time for this brief exchange, it was because even after Izo cleared his throat, the New Worlders ignored them in favor of the 'casual'—or as casual as wood splintering beneath their elbows could be—contest.

Frowning in irritation, Izo cleared his throat again, this time more insistently.

"Gnrgh, and your fucking claws too!? I'm going to turn your rancid pelt into my crotch-warmer!"

"Get bent, you halfbreed shit, I'll snap your horns off and use them as toothpicks!"

Again, none of them reacted. Scowling, Izo crossed to the other side of the room and pulled a cord. Now, I may not have had Haki, but that didn't mean I couldn't take a hint that something bad was going to happen. Also, after near to a year with Soundbite on my shoulder, I'd developed more than a few… specific instincts. So when all of my instincts suddenly blared a five-alarm warning all at once, you can bet I slammed my headphones over my ears damn tight.

As it turned out…

BWOOOOOOOOONG!

My instincts were damn right.

Seriously, Big Ben this pagoda was not, but that gong was definitely trying its best to get the whole city vibrating. Since my ears were thankfully protected, I can't say how well it succeeded, though did it feel like my teeth were trying to shake themselves loose from my mouth.

My crewmates, though… well, actually, everyone apparently had enough experience with me to follow my example, even Luffy. Though that wasn't quite as funny as it could have been seeing as he did have his serious face on… geez, I wasn't sure if it was a good thing or not that he recognized the threat those guys represented.

I slipped off my headphones to hear Izo chuckling. "I love this thing."

A cry of "WE KNOW!" echoed throughout the tower.

Soundbite shot Izo a sidelong glare, though the 'threat' was undercut by his smirk. "WHAT EXACTLY IS stopping us from suing you for plagiarism?"

"Why, the fact that any authorities either of us tried to approach would shoot us on sight on sheer principle, of course," Izo smiled back ever so innocently.
"TUSHEE."

"That's 'touché'," Porche corrected.

"Whatever."

A sharp clap sounded out, drawing everyone's attention to Izo. "Now then!" he said, the smile he wore while indicating our party to the gathered pirates decidedly brittle. "Men, lady. Allow me to introduce to you the captains of the Straw Hat and Barto Club Pirates, Monkey D. 'Straw Hat' Luffy and 'Black Bart' Bartolomeo, along with their crew's officers. Straw Hats and Bartos… well, I'll let Cross do the honors."

That put me in the center of attention, attention that I could best describe as 'simmering on the verge of boiling'. In that moment, I silently vowed that before we were done on this island, come hell or high water I would see a Commander of the Whitebeard Pirates brought to his knees!

But for now, I settled for gritting my teeth and pointing out names and faces one by one, starting with the pair I was most familiar with, and from there starting with the… apparently more threatening of the two, if the lion's earlier ranting was anything to go by. "The Long-Legs Man is Baron Tamago —"

"Bonjour." The awkwardly half-crouched half-seated man tipped his… 'hat' politely, staring at us over the lip of his eggshell-pants.

"C'est un peu tard pour ça, mon ami," I blandly replied, and as the Frenchman's eyebrows shot up I pointed at the lion. "And the lion is Pekoms."

"Hey, you brat! You think just because you're hot stuff you can address us so casually!? Show us some respect!" the lion snarled, taking a step towards us. Despite my bravado, I would have taken a step back if he wasn't… well…

I could feel the word 'cute' echo throughout the room, though thankfully a sharp glance at Soundbite kept that feeling from becoming real.

"The two of them are members of the Big Mom Pirates…" I said once the feeling passed. "Which seriously begs the question of 'how in the hell—'?"

"Après—Repeated assurances that we would act within the frontières of this island's laws, that this would be our crew's one and only visit to cette île, and an acceptance of le fait that while we were here we would not set un pied beyond the threshold of this building and that once our task was completed we would depart from the island within the hour, all to be enforced with the threat of either exécution or a fate worse than—midi," Tamago summarized.

"Alright then…" I pointed at the horned goliath. "And as for the other two, the quarter-giant is known as Sheepshead—"

"Hurry it along, you little shit," the white-haired man sneered.

"And the woman… yeah, I've got jack."

To her credit, her only outward reaction was a slight twitch in her cheek. "Ginrummy," she said, and that was that.

"And in case pretty much everything about them didn't make it clear enough for you, they're members of the Beast Pirates. Kaido's crew."
"…So, what you're saying is that we're in the same room as representatives of three of the Four Emperors of the New World," Gin summarized, sounding calm but his body language matching the general mood of we Paradise rookies: quivering in preparation to bolt.

"You oughtta be honored," Sheepshead snorted. "Don't think there's ever been a crew that impressed the Captain enough that he sent someone all the way to Paradise to meet them."

"Bien—Such is the case with maman as well—sûr," Tamago nodded, though if the way his head was angled towards the white-haired brute, said 'agreement' was... begrudging, to say the least. "Pas de—Though, let it be noted that this is just a meeting, and rien de plus. Whatever you give us, we shall give to our superiors and they shall decide what comes next—problème…" He leaned forward. "Dans le Nouveau Monde."

"So, if you wouldn't mind stepping in so we can talk properly…?" Ginrummy prompted.

"I'm… sorry that I have to agree with these individuals," Izo grumbled mutinously, ignoring the glares the less restrained 'diplomats' shot at him. "But it would be for the best. As matters stand, I have something I need to discuss as well. Shall we?"

Izo led the way inside, moving to a side of the table away from the ill-tempered envoys. The rest of our group followed. Porche hesitated a bit before stepping in—

"Hey, hang on, you're one heavy!" Pekoms snarled, trying (and failing) to look menacing by shoving up his sunglasses. "Who's the broad in the hoodie?"

Porche flinched and tugged nervously at her collar. "Uhh—"

"Porche, co-First Mate of the Foxy Pirates. No bounty," Ginrummy listed dismissively, not even giving the Davy Back Fight expert a second glance.

"W-What!?" Porche yelped. "How did you—?!"

"Nobody important, then, got it," Sheepshead interrupted with a bored grunt, and before anyone could react he raised his hand—

SKRANG!

And everyone and everything came to a screeching halt. The most affected was Porche, whose eyes were crossed to stare at the distended center of Luffy's hand, parked a few… let's be honest, nanometers in front of her forehead. As fast as the bulge was there, it immediately snapped back into Luffy's hand, and he let a roughly spherical lump of metal that had moments before been a simple coin drop to the ground, the clink of copper on wood almost deafening in the silence.

"Porche. Go back to your boss," Luffy ordered quietly.

The very pale diva nodded and left so fast I could've sworn she'd learned how to Shave.

"What was that for?" Luffy growled as soon as she was gone, his tone and expression only slightly less hateful than after he'd seen what Eneru had done to me.

Meanwhile, Sheepshead, possessing all of Bellamy's arrogance and the strength to get away with it, all while lacking any of his future redeeming qualities, just leaned back in his seat and scoffed. "Parlor trick from the New World: a paid ticket to the afterlife. What do you care? She's a nobody, her life isn't worth—"
Sheepshead—and everyone else for that matter—shut up and sat up when Luffy's glare crystallized into raw hatred and a hazy, yet somehow world-shaking snarl battered itself against our skulls.

Unfortunately, while we Paradise pirates were left shivering and on the verge of consciousness, the New Worlders were distinctly un-shaken. Externally, anyway. One and all they were staring at Luffy with renewed intensity, and in Izo's case, genuine respect.

Sheepshead was especially tense, his jaw and fists clenching and unclenching. Finally, he mastered himself enough to jerk his chin toward the seats. "Just… sit down already," he grit out.

The mood at this point was distinctly electric, but everyone complied, leaving us arrayed across from the New Worlders. For several seconds, there was merely a barrage of tense glares…and the obvious trepidation of our incognito crewmate. Ultimately, the Beasts' other representative broke the silence.

"To get straight to the point: Straw Hat, Black Bart, our captain, Kaido of the Four Emperors, has been thoroughly impressed with the tenacity of your crews. You've challenged the entire world, taken on insurmountable odds, and most impressively of all, you've never failed to get away with it. And trust me, if you know nothing about Kaido, then know that earning his respect in anything at all is…" Ginrummy noticeably stiffened, clearly choosing her words very carefully. "A feat. As such, we have been sent here for a… literally unprecedented purpose."

"Captain Kaido, King of the Beasts and Strongest Creature in the World, has decided to give you worms the honor of a place among the ranks of the Beast Pirates," Sheepshead stated flatly, his tone somehow both dead and hostile simultaneously. "You'll be foot soldiers at first, but given your rate of growth, a few of the other Headliners think you could become one of us in a matter of months with the right training." The horned pirate raised his chin, the better to look imperiously down at us. "This is the biggest honor any Paradiser has ever been given. The fact that you shits aren't already kissing my feet and thanking me for giving you the time of day is insulting enough, but just this once, I'll let it pass."

The room fell silent for a bit as the Beast Pirate's… well, I hate to say anything positive about the raging bastard, but fine, as his admittedly awe-inspiring words sank in. The silence was only broken when Pekoms coughed into his palm.

"It's basically the same with us: In impressing Kaidou, you've impressed Mama, too," Pekoms nodded, looking at least somewhat calmer than before. "Your knack for succeeding against all odds was a big part of it, obviously. But the first thing to know about Mama is that she created Totland in hopes of founding a place where everyone could belong, regardless of species. As such, your seamless unity of all kinds of different people and animals on your crew has warmed her heart."

I subtly shot a questioning look at Izo, who was standing behind the Mom Pirates, and was not surprised when he grimaced and crossed his arms in firm denial.

Ignorant of the exchange, Tamago uncurled from his crouched position to tower above us, and swept his cane out and bowed toward us in a very polite gesture. "Grand—It is our immense honor to inform you that Captain Charlotte 'Big Maman' Linlin, hereby invites the Straw Hat Pirates et les Barto Club Pirates to become Combatants for the Big Mom Pirates—honneur," he announced. "Brilliant—Indeed, you are all un tout petit peu below the weight class of le Nouveau Monde at the moment, but soon enough, with the care and compassion of the great family that is our crew—"

This got Izo grimacing and shaking his head with almost fervent disbelief.

"—you would be counted among the elite of the entire ocean—avenir."
Again, silence fell, the gravity of two of the Emperors' offers weighing on us, and Izo took the moment to step forward and present his two beris.

"Needless to say, you've impressed Pops, too. That much you should know already. But none of us believe that you've changed your mind, or that you will, about sailing under our flag. Even so, many crews have sworn their loyalty to us without taking our flag. We would not ask the same of you, of course… without returning the favor." Izo inclined his head politely. "Captain Edward 'Whitebeard' Newgate, The Strongest Man in the World, has instructed me to offer the both of you an alliance between the Straw Hat Pirates, the Barto Club Pirates, and the Whitebeard Pirates. None greater than the other, simply a pledge of… you might call it 'brotherhood'," he finished with a wry smile.

Almost before Izo finished, all eyes turned expectantly towards our captain. Three envoys of three of the four most powerful pirates in the New World had come to offer us a place amongst them.

Really, as if it could go any other way. Luffy sat with his head bowed almost pensively for a minute or so. Then he raised one hand… and began picking his nose. "No thanks, we're good," he stated in a perfectly bored tone.

"What he said, fuck off," Barty echoed, also digging for gold and sounding just as careless about it.

Nami and Gin both dropped their faces into their hands with tired—but definitely not surprised—sighs, Zoro threw his head and barked out a laugh that was almost arrogant in its victory, and me? I smiled like an idiot and popped a pair of V-signs. "Better luck next time~!" I sang. "Or ne-ve~r!" Soundbite auto-chorused.

As you might expect, that was when things broke into a horrible mess. At least Barty had the foresight to put up a barrier.

CRACK!

Correction: Thank Chaos Barty had the foresight to put up a barrier because otherwise, Sheepshead would have probably taken all of our heads clean off with the gleaming-black punch he'd just thrown at us, his face twisted in a rictus of rage.

"You slavering braindead fuckwits!" he snarled, clawing his Haki-clad fingers into the cracks starting to form in the translucent barrier. "Even if these bastards' offers were ultimately worthless, you just got handed a front-row seat to the Beast Pirates' rise! You were home-fucking-free! But now? Now you're leaving this fucking island in a—!"

CRACK!

That was as far as Sheepshead got before Izo's hand lashed out like a whip and slammed into the side of the towering Beast Pirate's neck, sending him down with nary a gurgle. Though, his head did strike the table at a bit of an angle which resulted in a… regretful occurrence.

"Tch, hotheaded brute's half as impulsive as his captain," Izo tsked to himself, before turning to address Ginrummy with a cocked eyebrow as he held up what had resulted from Sheepshead's fall. "By the way, these grow back, right?"

The other Beast Pirate eyed the fractured horn the Whitebeard was holding and grimaced. "No. No, they do not."

"Tch, serves the bastard right," Pekoms snorted, backing up the statement with a swift boot to the one-horned asshole's side. "Seriously, what did he mean, 'worthless'!? It's Mama who's going to be
Pirate King, not the rabid thing he follows!"

Izo snapped a frigid glare over his shoulder. "Am I going to have to put down two dumb animals in a row?"

Pekoms most likely would have responded with something scathing, were it not for an overly long leg shooting out and slamming the lion-person's face into the floor. "Excusez—let's avoid restarting the age-old argument that's detruit so many islands in the past—nous," Tamago sighed wistfully. "Dieu—let us merely be heureux that he was le seul among us who was so idiot as to believe that this mission was ever intended to succeed, oui—merci?"

"Huh?" Luffy blinked, his deadpan breaking for surprise. "Wait, you guys knew we'd say no?"

"You sank Shiki's flying islands when he tried to get you all to bow, you told Whitebeard that you would never follow another captain, and in general you don't tend to take any nonsense from anyone," Izo summed up in a matter-of-fact tone of voice and with a carefree shrug. "It was rather implied that success would be a miracle, but failure was acceptable." He shot a scathing look at the yet-insensate Beast man. "Though clearly, not everyone managed to read between the lines."

"IIIIn our case, Mama did think you'd bend the knee…" Pekoms raised his finger from beneath Tamago's foot. "But we'll just pin it on you guys, we'll be fine. You all, not so much."

"We wouldn't expect anything less," Gin hissed out irritably, seemingly split between glaring at Pekoms, for obvious reasons, and Barto, for getting him in this situation to begin with.

"But hey, wait," Luffy whined, tilting his head in confusion. "If you all knew we'd say no, then how come you all asked us anyways?"

"Eh, politics," Barto, of all people, answered. "Basically, it's a harmless way of telling the new kid on the block who the big fishes are. They say yes, some new muscle comes into the fold and everyone's happy. They say no, then they'll just bust their kneecaps down the line. Or, well..." He smirked as he buffed his nails on his coat. "Try and bust our caps, anyway. It, ah, never really worked that well against me, if ya catch my drift."

"Oooh…" Luffy nodded sagely… before tilting his head again. "That's really dumb."

Izo shook his head with a chuckle. "Maybe for these two bands of idiots—"

"HEY!" the other Emperors' goons—the ones still conscious, at least—indignantly belted out.

"—but that wasn't Pops' intention in the least. Obviously, we would have loved for you to accept, but we all expected a rejection. After all, if you would go against Shiki, it only makes sense you'd want to go the rest of the way on your own. Still…" Izo smiled politely and gave our captains a deep bow. "In spite of your decision, it is the hope of both myself and the Whitebeard Pirates as a whole that we can remain friends, both now and in the future."

"Even after we Whitebeards soundly trounce the both of you so that we can make him the King of the Pirates."

"Shishishi!" Luffy snickered and swiped his finger under his nose. "Sorry, that's not happening! I mean, from everything I've heard about him, Old Man Whitebeard sounds great and everything, and I'm really grateful to him for everything he's done for Ace, but I'm the one who's going to be King of the Pirates, not him."

"Hell yeah!" Barto agreed. "I might not be nearly so dedicated, but I'm still the same stubborn son of a bitch I've always been. Ain't steppin' down for nobody nowhen no how. Not that golden asshole,
not Luffy, and not that washed up geezer. We're fighting to the bitter end!"

"We shall see," Izo said, his smirk growing larger. "After all, you would need to go through us to get to him, and last time I checked, you never managed to defeat Ace. What was it again…"

"Hundred matches a day a person," I piped up, grinning malevolently as I swung back and forth on my heels. "And Luffy lost every one!"

"HEY, SHUT UP, I WAS TEN!" Luffy's head suddenly shoved itself in my face, his eyes white with outrage. "I'M SEVENTEEN NOW, I COULD TOTALLY KICK BOTH THEIR ASSES!"

"Except that now, they are both twenty," Nami sighed, the look she was giving him equal parts fond and annoyed. "Did you think about that?"

Luffy froze for a solid half-minute in that same expression. "…shut up!" he finally snapped, glaring anywhere but at our navigator.

For her part, Nami shook her head, chuckling fondly, before nodding to Izo. "Well, whatever the future brings, we thank you for your hospitality, Izo, but we should get going now; Lola will be expecting us."

She then walked to the door and slid it aside so that we could exit. immediately, she let out a panicked gurgle and stumbled back several paces. From what I could see, it was likely because someone was standing in the doorway already. And that someone wasn't alone, either.

Even the New World veterans were visibly unnerved by the twin masses of dark purple fog flanking the newcomer, pillar-shaped but otherwise unformed, a pair of glowing red eyes staring out from each. It had much the same intimidation effect as Nami's typical aura of clouds whenever she was upset… only Eisen Tempo sure as hell didn't come with a heaping dose of existential dread!

Also? That newcomer was Lola, visibly pissed off, and it was an open question whether she or the Pillars were the scarier ones. Porche had filled in a few blanks on the way over: the Lockjaw Pirates were not the last to set foot on Skelter Bite, underestimate Lola, and discover the hard way that her shiny new ¥200,000,000 bounty was not something you got collecting bottle caps. The only things that could trigger a starting bounty of more than eight figures were an utterly unprecedented show of chaos, a close relative or ally that was already infamous, or a history in the New World and all the power that that implied. And the newly rechristened 'Mist Maiden' No-Family-Name Lola had ticked all three boxes.

Lola's outfit had also evolved since last we'd seen her: she'd traded in her red jacket for a larger, more ornate captain's overcoat in navy blue, including a pair of golden epaulettes, and her bowler hat had been upgraded to an authoritative but nonetheless badass tricorne. The yellow jumpsuit had also been ditched for a pair of loose navy pants matching the jacket and…

I squinted, almost not believing my eyes. Yeah, that was a bright orange Hawaiian shirt, liberally decorated with pineapples. Okaaaay. At least it wasn't Garp's Water 7 outfit.

My inspection of Lola was hastily aborted when she glared at Baron Tamago, who hastily shot to as tall as the low ceiling would allow and crouched into a somewhat awkward bow. Honestly, all the position really did was emphasize the cold sweat coursing down his nose. "Sacre—a-ah, Lady Lola, so nice of you to grâçe nous with your most belle, radieuse—!"

"You've said your piece," Lola cut him off, her voice positively glacial. "They told you to fuck off, now I'm telling you to do the same. Get off my island."
"—toute de suite—bleu," Tamago squeaked fearfully.

"Yes'm," Pekoms squeaked in agreement, his head halfway sunk into his shivering torso.

Ginrummy was equally swift to shoot to her feet, adjusting her cloak's collar with an uncomfortable cough. "Our, ah, our business is concluded as well. We'll just, uh." Reaching down, she effortlessly hefted Sheepshead's hulking, insensate frame onto her shoulders. "Be going, then. And, we'll, uh… give the Boss your best regards?"

"Yes," Lola intoned frigidly, turning her unblinking stare on the other woman. "You do that."

She stepped aside, allowing the Long Leg Man, the Beast and the unaffiliated, bastard-toting Beauty to… let's not sugarcoat it, they fled, the two Obelisks turning to watch them as they left. It spoke volumes that not one of them slowed or turned back.

Satisfied, Lola turned to Izo. Instantly, her expression and the Obelisks both brightened, Lola bearing a bright smile and the Obelisks looking outright sunny as their bodies shifted to bright yellow and their eyes to a calm blue.

"Izo, I really can't thank you enough for putting up with those… individuals for me. I honestly don't think there's any other establishment on Skelter Bite that could have been capable of supporting the likes of them. You did Skelter Bite a massive favor, and it's one the Skull Mist Pirates won't soon regret."

"Not a problem, Lola, I assure you," Izo smiled in agreement, shaking the captain's hand. "Just keep providing a safe location where decent pirates can call home and we'll be even… although if there were any chance of accelerating our growth?"

"I'll raise the Embassy's priority and cover 20%. That's the most I can offer," Lola said, and from the slight grimace in her expression, she meant it.

"Fifteen is more than enough," Izo said with a grateful smile, earning one in return.

Lola then turned her attention to us, her demeanor still perfectly sunny. "It's nice to see you all again, Straw Hats. I'm sorry about the circumstances under which we've met again, but at least that's a problem that's fleeing straight for a ship out. Anyway, I've already gone ahead and reserved the best rooms at the Lucky Rabbit for you guys to stay in."

"Yeah, we heard. We were just heading there to check in, but these spoilsports here wouldn't let us run off," Bartolomeo groaned. And from the way he was pointedly staring at a ceiling beam, it was a bit hard to tell if he was talking about the spoilsports on our crews or the Emperors'.

Lola smiled and waved him off. "We can talk later, Black Bart, but now that I've verified your presence, I'll call in ahead and let them know you're here while you go out and enjoy the town. Just don't go too wild unless you've got a fortune and are willing to spend it."

That warning didn't do much to slow us down. Or at least, not Barty and Luffy, who charged out of the room without more than a rushed 'thanks' for her and a 'freedom!' towards our more responsible crewmates—or at least, Gin.

The dead-eyed first mate in question rolled his eyes at the eager departure. "Screw it, he doesn't pay me enough for this…" he groused, heading out the door himself. "Mostly because he doesn't pay me at all." He paused in the doorway and glanced over his shoulder at Lola. "You know someplace a sane guy can get a stiff drink in this place?"
"Head back to the entrance of the island, take a right, then it's the second floor of the fourth galleon on your right. Shave and a haircut on the door with the skull nailed to it, and then bitch about your captain like you've never bitched before," Lola answered, a knowing smirk on her face.

Gin cocked an eyebrow at her before shrugging and heading out.

Lola maintained her positive demeanor as he left. And then the minute he turned the corner Lola's demeanor shifted dramatically. The room's atmosphere suddenly pressed in, the Obelisks reverting to darkened pillars.

"Izo," the Mist Maiden intoned, her voice kept pointedly even. "I would like to request the room, please."

The New World Pirate didn't even flinch as he gave Lola a deep bow. "As you wish, Governor-Captain Lola. Enjoy the facilities, try not to ruin them."

"Hold up for a second, pale-face. You have any sake here?" Zoro cut in.

"Realms of sake of which you cannot conceive," the onnagata smoothly answered, gesturing out the door. "Right this way, my good sir, and I'll see about getting you nice and sauced."

Zoro's smirk stretched from ear to ear as he followed the New Worlder. "Finally, someone who speaks my language! Try not to die, you two."

Before I could even think of cussing the bastard out, the sliding door slammed shut, and the air in the room became almost treacle-like as the Obelisks started gradually growing to loom over us.

"Ophiuchus. Callie," Lola stated frigidly, her onyx fingertips tapping out a steady beat on her arms. "It's been awhile. Sit down, why don't you? We have…" Her teeth practically clicked from how hard she set her jaw. "Matters to discuss."

Oh, fuck no.

"Now Rabbit," I said in a calm and even voice as I slowly started to inch my way towards the window. A path which, incidentally, took me right behind Nami, who was thankfully focused entirely on Lola. "I understand that you have some grievances about recent events, and you are indeed justified in every last one of them. But before we do anything rash, I just want to say…" I stabbed a finger at Nami. "IT WAS ALL HER IDEA, I ADVOCATED WE TIE THE PALE BITCH TO THE PROW AND LET HER DROWN!"

"WHAT!?" Nami screeched indignantly, whipping around to stare at me in a mix of betrayal and pants-wetting terror.

"CHEESE IT!" Soundbite belted.

"So long, sucker!" I declared, shooting her a hasty salute before diving headfirst out of the nearest window… which was five stories above the ground. Thank goodness Izo had hung a few lines of paper lanterns around his tower, or else I might have been in trouble.

One improvised zipline later and I had a running start away from Oden's Cottage over, across, and through the nearby rooftops. Not that I needed it; between Nami, Lola, and the Pillars, I wouldn't have made it half as far if they'd had any real inclination to stop me.

"…since when does that ACTUALLY work for us?" Soundbite wondered aloud.
"Since we actually had no reason at all to actually leave that way, seeing as Nami already accepted
the blame," I grunted out, puffing with exertion as I vaulted over an inverted keel.

"OH YEAH, GOOD POINT… then why did we exfiltrate like that?"

"Better question: why wouldn't we?"

"Damn, two good points in a row, you're on a roll."

"Thank you, thank you…" My acknowledgment was a bit offhand, on account of my thoughts
drifting elsewhere, and it didn't take long for Soundbite to notice my pensive expression.

"'Scuse the indignity, BUT you're not thinking that we should have ACCEPTED THOSE TWO
BASTARD AND ONE relatively DECENT OFFERS, ARE YOU?"

"Linlin and Kaido, hell no, they would quite literally eat us alive given the chance," I replied.
"Whitebeard… I'm a little surprised that Luffy turned that down, but not a lot. I might have to think
about working out something with Izo later, once I get permission from Luffy, anyway…" I mulled
that notion over before shaking my head. "But no, what I'm thinking about right now is that of the
Four Emperors, the only one whose representative wasn't there is the one that would want to meet
Luffy the most."

Soundbite blinked in realization. "You're right, that is strange."

"I mean, sure, Shanks promised that he wouldn't meet Luffy again until he was ready to return his
hat. But I refuse to believe that none of his men are here. Shanks could order them not to meet Luffy,
but the Red-Haired Pirates love to party…" Out of ideas, I just shrugged. "And besides, if all three of
the others were sending envoys, I wouldn't expect him to hold back, even if his crew is the smallest
of the four. It's just weird."

What followed were a few seconds of solemn thoughts. And no more than that.

"WHO CARES!? WE GOT A WHOOOOLE ISLAND OF ADVENTURE WAITING FOR
US, BABY! LET'S GET FREAKY!"

I tipped my hat in agreement and picked up speed as a massive smile split my face. "Freaky it is!
Let's start with a little familiar territory! Oh, Tashigi~!"

-o-

It may or may not come as a surprise to you, dear reader, to learn that about a minute or so after most
of the Straw Hats had vacated the area, a round man with a green and white striped shirt and a hunk
of ham in one hand flopped out of a bar directly across from Oden's Cottage, staring blearily at the
sky.

"Woof… for wet-nosed Paradisers, these brats can drink…" the tubba-blubba groaned, punctuating
the statement with a board-rattling belch. He then frowned, scratching at his gut. "'Cept that now I
damn well forgot what I came here for in the first place. What was it, what was it… ergh, come on!"

He scowled as he sat up and rapped his hunk of meat over his own head. "I should know this, I
almost knocked little-bo-bastard's brains out over it on the docks, so what—OH YEAH!" He
suddenly smacked his shank of meat in his palm with a massive grin. "Now I remember! I was
supposed to—!"
The man's train of thought was suddenly and harshly derailed when his nose twitched. Then it twitched again, and again, until finally the fatso's head snapped a clean 90 degrees to the side. "Is that Megaton Lobster I smell boiling?" He answered his own question by allowing a river of drool to pour past his massive smile. "Thank Bacchus, I'm starving over here! COME TO PAPA!"

And so, with that exclamation (and a fresh mouthful of his shank of hog), he set off in search of glutinous satisfaction.

-0-

"The more I see of this place, the more I know Lola couldn't have built anything half as good as this if Galley-La wasn't helping out," Franky tsked, taking in a particularly precarious-looking arrangement of lifeboats that were acting as gondolas… or moving platforms, depending on how impatient the 'pedestrians' were.

"You're telling me," Merry groaned, yanking her cap down over one of her eyes and bracing herself against Franky's head. "I'm getting dizzy just imagining how the pulled this all off. Almost makes me miss being 'just' a ship again, at least then I didn't get migraines."

"Then…" Franky cocked an eyebrow at the tyke riding on his shoulder. "Maybe don't look at the migraine-inducing architecture any more than you have to?"

"Mrgrgh, not a chance," the ship-girl responded with a firm shake of her head. "If they can do this, I want to learn how. I just need to find one that's getting built and I'll figure it out…" She grimaced again as they passed under a pair of pair of propped up, prow-to-prow cutters that were acting as a makeshift arch. "Assuming my orifices don't start leaking gray matter, anyway…"

Franky frowned slightly, then snagged a nearby pedestrian. Said pedestrian turned around, clearly on his guard, but went still at the sight of Franky.

"Yo. Any big buildings around here that are under construction?" he asked.

The pirate blinked again before looking around and pointing. "I think the biggest project that's going on right now is the comedy club. Five, six buildings that way, you'll know it when you see it."

"Thanks," Franky nodded.

"UH! W-Wait, wait, before you go!"

Franky jerked to a stop, the other pirate now holding his wrist and grinning sheepishly up at him. "You're, uh, you're Cyborg Franky, right? My girl's a huge fan of yours, and I mean, like, huge. Is there any chance you could, ya know…?"

Merry hopped off Franky's shoulder and slammed her forearms together above her head. "SUPER!"

"SUPER!" the cyborg swiftly repeated, his wrists ringing proudly as he formed his trademark star.

The surrounding audience for several meters applauded, jeered, mimicked them, or some combination of the three. It was a bit of a surprise that they weren't swarmed a bit more by fans; only a couple minutes' delay later, they were strolling up to a baker's dozen of half-dismantled ships surrounding…

"…Is that one of Oars's bones?" Franky asked, mouth slightly agape.
Merry, meanwhile, couldn't help but giggle. "I guess they wanted to go for structure and humor; that's one of his funny bones."

Franky raised a brow at Merry. "You can tell that just at a glance? I know you soaked up a lot of Chopper's knowledge, but come on."

"Don't forget, Big Bro: I'm a child. And that means that my brain is stuck in the stage where getting and storing new knowledge is easiest."

The shipwright paused at that tidbit.

After a minute, she shrugged. "...plus, again, I am a kid. It stuck in my head 'cause it was funny."

Letting out a wry chuckle, Franky grabbed the back of Merry's coat and placed her back on his shoulders. "Come on, funny-girl. Let's get a closer look at this mess."

Painted on a beached sailboat's skull, a masterful mural depicted a grand amphitheater of bone and wood. The half-circle stands were made out of semi-capsized ships, giant heads looming over the sterns. The mighty bone stood as a massive support column, sails painted with the usual masked duo, Comedy and Tragedy. And at the top was painted a very important announcement:

"'Coming Soon: The Skelter Bite Comedy Club'," Franky read.

"SHOULDN'T BE MORE THAN ANOTHER MONTH OR TWO BEFORE IT'S UP AND RUNNING!"

The two snapped their eyes toward the familiar voice and were rewarded with a grinning bodybuilder with nails in hand coming out from one of the shipwrecks.

"STRAW HATS! GOOD TO SEE YOU AGAIN!" the titanic man bellowed. He slammed a hand down on Franky's shoulder, crunching the decking beneath Franky but not fazing the cyborg in the least.

"Same here, Tilestone, you old fart!" Franky laughed, jabbing a harmless punch into the caulker's iron-tough gut. "I thought you'd only leave Water 7 again in a flaming longboat! How's Ice-For-Brains holding up?"

"DOING WELL! STILL TRYING TO FIND SOMEONE TO REPLACE KALIFA, IT'S TAKING AWHILE!" Tilestone chortled, rubbing the back of his head. "AND HOW COULD I NOT COME OUT HERE? SKELTER BITE IS LIKE A SISTER CITY TO WATER 7, OUR ENDOGOAL MADE MANIFEST! PRETTY MUCH EVERY CARPENTER BACK HOME'S DECIDED TO MAKE A PILGRIMAGE TO THIS PLACE AT LEAST ONCE IN THEIR LIVES, SO THEY CAN TAKE NOTES AND BRING BACK THE EXPERIENCE!" He shook his head with a wistful sigh. "IT'S ONLY TOO BAD YOU GUYS SHOWED UP WHEN YOU DID. KIWI AND MOZU WERE DUE TO TAKE ME AND MY BOYS' PLACE AND HELP WITH STRIPPING SHIPS FOR PARTS A WEEK FROM NOW. THEY'RE GONNA BE CRUSHED THAT THEY JUST MISSED YOU."

"Damn!" Franky tsked, snapping his fingers.

"Aw, don't jump to conclusions, Big Bro," Merry 'consoled' him, though the fact that she was playing with his pompadour kinda ruined the sentiment. "We don't know how long we'll be waiting here before we can break through that blockade, we might still see them."

While Franky pondered that, Merry turned back to Tilestone. "Anyway, we're here looking for a
tour, hoping to get a better idea of your process. Could we watch as you build it?"

"SURE! HECK, IF YOU WANT TO HELP OUT, THAT'D BE EVEN BETTER. WE NEED TO GET THE CENTRAL PILLAR BONE UPRIGHT BEFORE WE BUILD THE REST AROUND IT, AND EVERY HAND HELPS," Tilestone boomed, waving the pair into the construction site.

"Well, alright, then! Let's get to it!" Franky crowed, carrying Merry with him into the field.

As they walked, Merry glanced at Tilestone. "By the way, gray-hair, I was just wondering: what's with the lame name for this place? I mean, it's a comedy club, right? Shouldn't it be something, ya know, punny?"

"MEHHH, IT'S A PLACEHOLDER AT THE MOMENT," Tilestone sighed in despair. "I HAD A FUNNIER NAME IN MIND, BUT LOLA VETOED IT! WHAT'S WRONG WITH 'FUNNY BONE CLUB'?"

"Too generic for one," Franky said dismissively. "That's about as bland as 'comedy club.'"

"Worse, even, because it's so lame and obvious," Merry sniffed primly.

"WELL, THEN WHAT WOULD YOU CALL IT, IF YOU'RE SO FUNNY?"

Merry shrugged indifferently. "The Humorous Humerus, duh."

Franky and Tilestone both froze mid-step. "Poseidon take you, that's actually funny HEY, LISTEN UP!" the latter suddenly boomed out… louder than usual, anyways, thus grabbing the attention of all the workers. "FROM NOW ON, WE'RE CALLING THIS PLACE THE HUMOROUS HUMERUS! ANYONE GOT A PROBLEM WITH THAT?!"

The peals of laughter that erupted from all the listening workers were more than answer enough.

"TRAITORS…" Tilestone scoffed.

"Nice one, little sis," Franky snickered.

"Heheheh!" Merry giggled proudly. "Well, what can I say? We Straw Hats, we—!" She froze midword, blinking thoughtfully before adopting a grin that sent many a worker running. "Ohhh Soundbite~. I know you're listening, so if you please? Tell Cross that I'd like to speak on the SBS, ever so quickly."

"Why?" Cross queried, dread obvious in his disembodied voice.

"Just wanna make an observation is all~," Merry sang in a loose swashbuckler drawl. "Ya don't even have ta' introduce me or nothin', just let me say my piece and I'll let ye be."

A pause, and then… "I hope I don't regret this… You're live, Merry. Say your piece."

"Real quick, I'd just like to point out the fact that we've been funnier in the course of a year than Buggy the Clown has ever been over the course of his whole life."

-o-

"A year? Merry, we've been funnier on the last two islands than that big-nosed freak has ever managed."
"HARSH."

"Tell me I'm wrong."

"The kid—"

"HA!"

"—has a point."

"POSEIDON'S HAIRY BALLS SHE DOES!" Buggy the Clown roared, drawing his chains just a little tighter around the neck of the blugori he was riding on the back of, causing its attempts to loosen the chains to intensify. Its painted face looked back at Buggy—sorta—which only meant—

"OH, SO YOU WANNA STARE AT MY NOSE TOO!? I'LL SHOW YOU!"

THUNK! "GWOOORGH!"

Buggy stabbed a stolen knife into each of the blugori's hands, forcing it to let go of the chains. The blugori did not take it well.

Buggy's anger clouded his judgment in most cases, but prison had a tendency to change a person's perspective. He had come into the Government's gaol with his Muggy cannon shoes and with nobody aware of his Devil Fruit powers, and he was waiting for his opportunity to break out. He had enough clarity of mind to know that with the ruckus he'd already raised, his odds were nonexistent at this point, so he kept both of those advantages safely tucked away.

That was the extent of his rationality, however, since he had still broken out of his cell and was taking out his anger on the nearest victim, and said victim was one of the berserk guards of the prison. Not to mention the fact that whether or not he was trying to escape, he was out of line, meaning that reinforcements were heading his way.

Not that it seemed to matter for this particular blugori. Its thrashing was slowing, bleeding hands scrabbling uselessly at the chain around its neck and breathing slowing into a rattling wheeze. A fierce grin slowly spread across the clown's face, in spite of his burning rage, and he pulled tighter, channeling every drop of his ire into the strength in his arms.

Finally, with one last gurgling wheeze, the Blugori slumped forward, pitching Buggy forward. He rolled, hopped to his feet, and gave the sea gorilla a hard kick in the side.

"And serves you right, you damn monkey!" he spat. "I may not be able to get at that monkey, but you'll do for now. Now—"

Buggy blinked, suddenly aware of the whispers washing over him. All around him, the prisoners of Level 1 stared in awe, each desperately telling their neighbor what they'd just witnessed.

"—beat a Blugori—"

"—beating he'll get! Doesn't he ca—"

"—bleedin' Straw Hats, mate—"

"Ahhhhh…" Buggy breathed, each careless whisper a soothing balm to his much abused ego. "Thank you, thank you!" he called out, bowing to each cell. "You're too ki—!"
"And you know, it makes me wonder if he can do anything right. The guy never managed to land a single clean hit on Luffy when they fought. This despite being skilled with one of the more effective weapons against rubber. Eh, I guess that's funny, at least: his weakness is a living joke," Cross shrugged.

"Well, what do you expect? He wasn't even top three in the East Blue since Kuro was alive all along," Merry scoffed. She then paused for a second before her grin was broadcast around the world. "Oooops, did we forget to mention that? Yeeaaah, total scam, he faked his death and hypnotized ol' Ax-Hand Morgan into taking in an equally hypnotized patsy! Good thing Luffy was able to cover for their incompetence, eh?"

"Actually, Usopp said that on the second SBS. Didn't you hear him say it in person?" Franky asked dryly.

"…WELP! I think that's good enough for us to end on. Ciao! KA-LICK!"

It must be said that the former ruler of Skelter Bite had something in common with Buggy the Clown: he once sailed the New World with a formidable crew, he left the New World, and then he grew weaker, a threat only due to his powers.

Another thing they had in common: if someone were to call them weak, they would get angry. Very angry indeed.

The similarity ceased in that everyone knew that Moria had once been a true threat. Buggy may have been a mere cabin boy, but under a taskmaster like the Dark King, he wouldn't have sailed as far as he did on the Oro Jackson without being able to hold his own without relying on his powers.

It would be a while yet before anyone outside of those who already knew his secret acknowledged this. But the berserk maniac that the Straw Hats' words left standing there, twitching in a very visible warning to 'get the hell away' as eight more blugoris made the very unwise decision to circle him, was about to give Impel Down a taste.

"STRAAAAAW HAAAAAT!"

In the end, Buggy the Clown was recaptured. But the fact that he managed to incapacitate two more blugoris and it took the remaining half-dozen to successfully dogpile him made sure that in less than a day, everyone in the Crimson Hell knew his name.

-o-

"Poke… poke-poke… poke-po—"

Zoro made a grab at the object poking his face with a growl and blinked in confusion when his hand whiffed through thin air. Then he clenched his eyes shut, letting out a miserable groan at the fact that he was conscious again, and as a result, he could now feel the return of the brain-mining dwarf years after he thought he'd banished the little bastard. "What the hell—?"

"Oh good, you're alive. That means you can still hear me calling you an idiot."

Zoro flinched again as the voice from before rammed another chunk of rebar through his head, "Whooo the…!?" He blinked heavily, forcing the haze clear of his vision. It only halfway worked, but it was enough for him to see the blur of brown standing above him. Not to mention give him an excuse to clench his eyes shut again. "Hello, Chopper…" he growled out.

"Hello~, Zoro~," the furry doctor sang far louder than necessary, taking visible delight in the
swordsman's renewed grimace. "I take it you've been having fun?"

"I should have been..." he grimaced, and then he held his tongue. The words 'Cross wasn't kidding about the New World' had nearly slipped out, and he took several seconds to massage his temples, get rid of his migraine, and maybe avoid another slip of the tongue. "Guh... damn it, that guy wasn't kidding... I'm going to need to up my game if that's what they drink in the New World. I only managed to get through three bottles, that's shameful."

"Clearly..." Chopper drawled, visibly unimpressed with his superior's situation. For a single, glorious minute, the infamous Spark of Genius contemplated leaving the swordsman to ride out his hangover. Zoro surely had experience with this sort of situation and it would be a completely unnecessary load off his furry back...

Instead, he heaved a weary sigh and shifted to his Heavy Point, grabbing Zoro by his shoulders and heaving him up to his feet. "Alright, come on, you, come on," he huffed, actively working to hold the mosshead upright. "I can smell a marketplace pretty close by, we'll head over there and I'll see if I can't find something to help you detox."

Zoro grunted and Chopper took that as his sign to go ahead. That or it was an improperly slurred curse, but he could work with either. Shaking his head, the hybrid led the both of them by his nose.

It was not lost on the human-reindeer as he went that his furry, yeti-like form was nothing out of the ordinary. He couldn't help but reflect on how thoroughly it contrasted from what he grew up with. How easily everyone accepted abnormal for normal. And likewise... how he could accept abnormal along with normal.

"You've come a long way from that timid, human-hating reindeer we met in Drum."

It seemed that Zoro was both feeling marginally more coherent and similarly reflective.

Deciding to humor the swordsman, Chopper nodded. "And I'm glad that I have. It... It didn't take long, back in Alabasta, for me to realize that being as strong as the strongest fighters on my island didn't mean a lot once I left. I tried really hard just to keep up. What could I do for Luffy? I helped against Baroque Works, sure... but Luffy's fight against Crocodile?"

The doctor shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose with a tired sigh. "There was a reason I plunged straight into research on Cross's advice when I woke up and almost gutted him. I didn't care what anybody said about me anymore. In order to help you guys... I've become a real monster."

Chopper's muzzle then split in a maddened grin, his eyes flashing cyan. "And I don't regret it. Haven't regretted it even once. I don't need to rely on you guys to save me, so I can focus on saving you when everything's done."

The silence returned for a few moments before the reindeer glanced down at his companion. "What about you? You were with Luffy before I was, so I don't have any room for comparison. How far have you come since you started off?"

Zoro let out a scoffing chuckle. "Put it this way: If someone had told me a year ago that I'd be able to do half of the things I can do now, I wouldn't have listened. Mostly because I didn't think the things I can do now were possible, and because I thought I was more than strong enough. I couldn't cut steel. I couldn't let loose flying slashes. I couldn't harden my muscles to guard against attacks. And I couldn't cut battleships in half. When I met Mihawk in the East Blue, he cut a battleship in half without even trying; I bet he didn't even need both hands to do it."
The swordsman raised his head with a smirk. "But I'm not the man I was then. I'm still nowhere close to Mihawk's level... but at least I'm strong enough to know how strong I am." He paused and then looked Chopper in the eye. "But I'm guessing I've only made it this far thanks to you helping me out every time since Alabasta."

Chopper stopped, resisting the instinct to do his little dance. His resistance crumbled fast, and he almost started dancing. He managed to restrain himself to a quick pump of his fist, but still—

"Although—" Zoro continued, but his continuation was discontinued by a contentious commotion coming from closeby in the form of a pained squawk

The pair fell silent and turned to see a pair of pirates who'd accumulated a small crowd around themselves. The duo was seated around a pair of cups, one rubbing a hand that had a couple of bleeding wounds on it and the other leering at the flinching bleeder.

"Ya think ya can back out now?" the dagger-wielder scoffed, smirking at his 'opponent's' terror. "Pfheh, no chance. Ya took the bet, now let it ride."

"C-Come on, man," the bleeder whimpered miserably, glancing around in search of an escape. An escape that didn't seem likely. "I-I can pay you, I swear, j-just—"

"I'll get everything you have on hand if you die anyway," the man's grin widened malevolently. "Now play."

That was as far as the Straw Hats would let things progress; at Zoro's gesture, Chopper let him down so that they could walk over together.

"What's going on?" Zoro asked, hiding his lingering hangover well.

The threatener cracked a grin at them, either not recognizing them or not caring. "Oh, nothing for you lot to concern yourselves with, just a gentleman's wager. I bet him 1,000,000 that he couldn't figure out which one of these cups was poisoned; he drinks it, he gets the prize. Then he just had to go and get cold feet."

The two Straw Hats turned to the other man, who was looking a little pale. Zoro scoffed. "Got in over your head and now you can't back out?"

"The jackass asked me if I wanted to play a game, he said jack shit about life or death!" the would-be drinker wheezed miserably.

Zoro took one look at the chuckling dagger-holder and rolled his eyes dismissively. The sword-wielder started to walk off...

"Ahem."

And was brought to a halt by someone smaller than him grabbing his shirt and stopping him in place. Glancing back and down, Zoro took one look at Chopper staring up at him with a deadpan expression and turned his attention back to the shmuck and the shark.

"Fine," he sighed, moving over to the cups. As quick as drawing a sword, he took up both cups and drained them. Ignoring (for what little time he could) Chopper's sigh of frustration behind him, as well as the jeers and groans of the onlookers he leered at the dumbstruck men.

"There, both drunk, you're both even. Happy?" he demanded impatiently.
Seeing as the would-be drinker immediately took that as a sign to bolt, yes, yes he was. The other man, however... well, a red face and a brandished dagger didn't leave a lot of room for imagination. "You son of a bitch! You really think you can get away with crossing Torino Red?!"

Zoro frowned, both at the way the newly named 'Torino Red' was holding his dagger (poorly) and at the name itself, pondering it for a second. Then he cocked his eyebrow questioningly. "Torino... I think I've heard of that place before. Isn't it—?"

"A kingdom in the South Blue that I've never been to, yes, now shut up and pay up," Red growled, turning the pointy end his knife towards Zoro... and then behind him. "Or I'll just use your pet's skin instead."

"How did someone like you ever get onto this island?" Zoro asked rhetorically. Rhetorically, because before he'd even finished speaking, Red was flat on his back courtesy of a Heavy Point-ed Chopper laying him down with a single strike, seemingly paralyzed from the pressure point struck.

"I. Am not. A pet," Chopper snarled with a hint of madness. It was gone when he turned back to his smaller form, though annoyance remained. "And as for you, quit making more work for me on your poor liver. Luffy and Cross are enough of a bother as it is."

"Tch, please," Zoro waved his hand dismissively. "As if there's anything this halfrate halfwit could sling that could even faze you."

Chopper rolled his eyes impatiently. "Well, obviously not, but it's still the principle of the matter."

Unfortunately for everyone's sensibilities, however, while the vast majority of Torino Red's body was paralyzed, his mouth was not. "Y-You little—! Once I get my arms working again—" The tirade was suddenly interrupted by a pirates bearing the crest of Skelter Bite grabbing him. "H-hey, HEY! What the hell do you think you're doing?!"

"Skelter Bite does not accept lives being used as collateral under any circumstances," one of them explained, already dragging him away. "We'll determine your punishment shortly, and until then, you'll be staying in our brig."

"YOU—!" Red snapped, and then turned back toward the way he came; his would-be victim had run off, and the two pirates that had stopped him were walking away. Feeling one arm suddenly regain feeling, he reached into his pocket and, without withdrawing the pistol, aimed and pulled the trigger.

The bullet pinged off of a shiny black sword, and he gulped as he saw Zoro looking back at him, not a trace of alcohol-induced fatigue in his glare.

"You're not helping your case," the other Skull Mist Pirate dryly said, confiscating the pistol and using it to clock the man out cold.

Zoro, for his part, sheathed his blade before looking back at Chopper. "I saw a lot of scumbags like that back in my bounty hunting days, so I expected something like that... But how come you didn't see that coming?"

Chopper turned an expression on Zoro that his smallest form's face made unreadable. "Just because I don't need your help doesn't mean I don't like it," he admitted softly.

Zoro paused briefly, looking back down at Chopper. And when Chopper donned a light smile, he smirked right back. "Anytime."
"Thanks," Chopper nodded. "Now come on, I heard they're selling cotton candy this way! I want to buy some and see if anyone's passed out anywhere for—uh." The reindeer's glowing eyes darted back and forth. "Reasons."

Zoro let out a quiet scoff, closer to a laugh, and followed his eager companion.

"Well, while we're on the subject… for reasons, how hard is it to burn a body?" he asked casually.

-WOOOOHOO! BARKEEP! ANOTHER CASK! I'M DOWN TO THREE! HISS-SS-SS-SS!-

Such was the rallying cry that provoked another round of cheers in the Esun bar, where Boa Sandersonia was having the time of her life. Long since shifted into her hybrid form, she was taking up much of the establishment's ground floor. Not that anyone was complaining, seeing as she had raised no objection to the patrons reclining on her lengthy form in place of the seats, nor were any of the patrons or proprietors protesting to her truly hefty—read: titanic—appetite and general good cheer.

The only detriment had been when the more savvy pirates present had realized that she was not only a lieutenant but an immediate relative to a Warlord, but their concerns had been swiftly and soundly dismissed as soon as an executive of the Revolutionary Army spoke up in her favor. After all, the Revolutionaries were outlaws worse than pirates, so her word was good enough for most of them.

And the ones for whom it was not swiftly found themselves unconscious. Or, in the case of one particularly headstrong and, above all else, overconfident rookie…

"WAAA-aaa-AAA-aaa-AAAAAGH! LEEE-mmm-EEE GOOO!"

Making history by attaining the… quite ignoble title of being the first pirate in history to be wrapped in an anaconda-woman's tail and offhandedly spun up and down like a yo-yo.

As it was, however, said Revolutionary was not indulging in the party atmosphere; rather, she was sipping the bar's signature drink, a pleasantly bitter brew with a refreshing finish, silently lamenting something or another. And as the saying goes, misery loves company, hence the presence of another revolutionary alongside her… albeit of a much different sort.

"The Divine have done everything in their power to keep out of the way of the Straw Hats, and keeping our cover is practically a bonus for it. But noo~oo!" Tashigi waved her mug about with a despairing groan. "I spend fifteen minutes in that bigmouth's orbit, and now I've been shanghaied and dropped straight into the middle of whatever madness Cross has in mind!"

"My thoughts exactly," Koala nodded sagely, leaning back on the bar on her elbows. "Honestly, if I thought I could get away with it, I'd call Sabo here instead; he would be overjoyed to be in my position."

Popora gave no verbal response, simply watching the goings-on with a quizzical look.

"I mean, it just never ends with that bastard!" Tashigi lamented, hanging her head in sorrow. "The last time I got close to him, I lost all the men under my command, almost drowned in a flood of wax, and I got stabbed in the stomach! And that's not even mentioning what that frigid bitch Nico Robin did to me in Alubarna!"

"Mmph…" Koala hummed as she picked up a nearby mug, gave it a spin, and contemplated the swirling drink. Making a decision, she glanced back at Tashigi with an impish grin. "And yet, for all..."
that you want to wring his scrawny neck… you don't actually hate him, you're just pissed because it's the principle of the matter. In truth, you want to be here just as much as me and Sandersonia, right?" Koala's grin doubled in size and she let out a bark of laughter as Tashigi's face burned red and she switched from drinking to chugging.

"PAH!" Naturally, said drink didn't last long, and Tashigi heaved a half-hearty, half-weary sigh as she slammed the mug own on the countertop and wiped away the froth. "W-Well, anyway! At least this plan has to have some order in it; he wouldn't be involving Marine expertise and the Ryugu Royal Family if this was just meant to cause widespread chaos, right?…right?"

Her heart sank as Koala and Popora both stared at her with flat expressions, but she shook it off and rallied.

"Well, ex-cuse me for trying to find some kind of sanity in this madness!" she snapped, then turned her attention back to their companion. "And speaking of madness HEY, SONIA! HOW MUCH LONGER ARE YOU GOING TO KEEP PLAYING WITH THE ROOKIES!"

"LIKE I'M PUTTING A TIMER ON IT!" Sandersonia hooted in reply. "I HAVEN'T HAD THE CHANCE TO CUT LOOSE LIKE THIS FOR SEVENTEEN YEARS, AND I'M MILKING IT FOR ALL IT'S WORTH!"

Tashigi dropped her head into her arms, but a quick poke by Koala and a look at the wistful expression on her face had her looking more concerned. "Honestly… between what she's gone through in the past and being by Hancock's side for the past decade… I think she really needs this." Koala's smile then became teasing as she shook a fresh mug at the incognito officer. "Just like I think you really need this!"

Tashigi stared blankly at the alcohol before snatching it away and holding it high. "I shall drink today!" she proclaimed, eyes swirling madly. "In preparation for Cross killing my sanity evermore tomorrow!"

"Hear-hear!"/"Kyu-kyu," Koala and Popora mirrored her with a snicker and a deadpan respectively before the trio all knocked their drinks back as one.

And immediately spat it all back out again.

"Ugh, what is this, moose urine?!" Koala demanded.

"Sorry, ladies," the bartender said apologetically. "I meant to give you the Alabasta Preserve, but I grabbed the Roshwan pale lager stock by mistake."

"THAT'S WORSE THAN MOOSE URINE!" Tashigi snapped before eyeing her old mug. "Give us another round, because I've got to be imagining how bad that was."

"Kyun." CLONK!

"ARGH! THAT WASN'T A REQUEST, YOU FURRY BASTARD!"

-o-

"I mean, it's not like I'm even mad he ran and left me! Lola was incredibly pissed off— with good reason, I'll admit— and I'd already said I was willing to take the blame for—! Er…"

"Whatever it is that Lola was angry at you for that you can't talk about?"
"Yes, thank you, Conis," Nami nodded in relief. "Anyway, I was willing to take the fall, no question, so I can't be mad about that… but honestly, did he really need to be so, so dramatic about it?! I mean, he leapt out the window of a tower for goodness' sake!"

"Are we or are we not talking about the biggest show-off in the world?" Su questioned right back, ever so innocently.

Those on Skelter Bite who knew of the Straw Hat Pirates—which was pretty much everyone, naturally—knew to expect a duck-riding damsel if the crew were in the area. However, they were expecting the one riding it to be blue-haired with hand scythes and riding on a duck capable of running like the wind. They knew of the most recent addition to the Straw Hats from the SBS, of course, but it was still a surprise to see that walking alongside the Straw Hats' angelic gunner and her fox was a duck with a rooster's comb, peacock tail feathers, and a weather witch on his back.

"Can't argue with that…" the weather witch muttered, shaking her head. "Still, he could have shown a little more… I don't know, class?"

"You did say that that Lola lady was really scary, right?" Billy asked timidly. "Maybe he was genuinely scared."

"Mmph…" Nami grunted noncommittally. "Still going to give him grief about it, though."

"And that is entirely within your rights," Conis said soothingly, patting a comforting hand on Nami's shoulder. She then adopted a concerned frown. "Though, just to be certain, you and Lola—?"

"Well, I'm definitely never going to be on her Christmas card list, but I'm not banned from the island either," Nami sighed, hanging her head. "And under the circumstances, that's probably the best I can hope for, so I'm counting it as a win."

"And you're really not on the hunt for Cross so you can wreak your lightning-heavy vengeance on him?" Su asked with far more disappointment than necessary.

That got the fox an irritated, sidelong glare. "For the last time, no. I freely admit that I had that coming and I probably would have done the same thing in his shoes. Can we change the subject now?"

"Sure," Conis replied serenely, also clamping her hand over Su's muzzle. "We don't seem to be heading anywhere in particular or looking for any kind of store. Are you just trying to get a better look at the city for your mapmaking?"

"Mmm," Nami responded. "Half that, yeah. The other half is spending more time with Billy and getting used to riding him with the new saddle."

"It does take some getting used to," Billy contributed, looking back at the saddle and the one riding it. "It doesn't bother me, but I'm glad I got some advice from Carue. Still worried about the Jet boost, though."

"One thing at a time, don't worry," Nami patiently said.

"And here I thought recruiting animals was Cross' job," Su snickered. "I mean, Chopper told me that he as about as responsible as Luffy for bringing him onto the crew."

"Yeah… and that's part of why I kept him from going back in the first place."

Fox, duck, and angel all gave the witch questioning looks.
"I mean, for a while, I honestly wondered how much the 'animal companion' thing was just for show or status," Nami elaborated. "Carue was with Vivi all of her life and trained as a bodyguard, and Su was just a pet before you joined us—no offense."

"None taken; before Strong World, my primary 'tactic' in a fight was to run and find one of you guys to cover my tail, after all," the fox replied, waving said tail dismissively. "But how does that mean this is Cross's fault?"

"Because, fundamentally, we fight the same way," Nami said, running one hand along Billy's feathers. "Way back in Alabasta, when I asked Usopp to build my first Clima-Tact, it was because I knew that we were the weaker members on the crew. We couldn't rely on brute force or Devil Fruit powers, so we had to rely on our brains. Cross was the same way, but his partners have brought his abilities to a whole new dimension."

She smiled ruefully as she rippled her climatological halo. "And even though my weapon has brought me this far, I've realized that it… just isn't enough. Without my Waver and my Clima-Tact, all I've got going for me are agility and a few solid punches. And with my Waver gone… well, I took the same page out of Cross's book he wrote when his baton got wrecked. Not just something I can trust to help me, but someone."

The ginger gave her mount's neck a proud pat. "Someone who's already proven himself a bonafide badass on the frontlines, at that."

Billy blushed and preened at the comments. "Awww, thanks, Nami! I promise I'll do you pro—WACK!"

With a panicked squawk, Billy suddenly jerked to a dead stop, his wings thrown out to stop Conis, too.

"WAH!" Nami yelped, flailing and hastily catching herself. "Hey, what the—!? Billy?! What the hell do you think you're—!?"

**SMASH!**

Confusion gave way to shock when the wall of one of the buildings ahead of her suddenly all-but-detonated, a large mass crashing through clean through one side of the street and into the other, leaving a trail of destruction and debris in its wake. A trail Nami and Conis were only a few steps away from being caught in the middle of.

The very reason why the ladies hadn't been pasted was quaking on his webbed feet, beak chattering in paralyzed terror. "Scary, scary, scary…" he repeated over and over.

Conis blinked several times in an attempt to get her brain to reboot; eventually, she just settled for boggling at Billy. "Was that… I'm sorry, but the last time I saw something like that, Cross said—was that Haki?"

Su immediately shook her head. "Nuh-uh, couldn't be. Cross said that it had to be a directed attack to read it, and that was definitely random! So how the heck—?"

"Scary, scary, sea—" *Clonk! Wack!"

"Owww, thick skull…" Nami winced, waving her hand. "Billy, how'd you do that?"

"I-I, ah…" Billy blinked, shaking the last of the cobwebs free. "I… don't really know. I've just always been able to tell when something dangerous was coming at me. It's the only reason my head's stayed connected to my neck for so long."
Su slapped her paw to her forehead. "Of course! Instincts! You grew up in the Strong World, a hellhole of kill-or-be-killed! Your survival instincts must be honed to a razor-sharp point! Tseeheheee, oh man!" She flicked her tail at the peaduck. "You're just full of surprises, aren't you, zappy?"

Nami smiled and gave Billy's comb a comforting pat. "Why yes, yes he is."

"Ah, sorry for interrupting the moment?" Conis piped up, hesitantly pointing at the settling dust cloud. "But could we maybe try and find out what just—?"

"Oh, come now! Is that really all you have to offer? Surely you have more in you, get up!"

"—GYEEP!" Conis cut herself off, slapping her hands over her mouth. And she wasn't alone in her reaction either: all of the Straw Hats flinched back and gaped as the cause of the hole stepped through onto the street.

Their reactions were well-justified: not only was the perpetrator a behemoth of a man who outweighed them all of them combined, but he was a behemoth who they all recognized very well. A smiling, winged, infamous behemoth.

"Good thing Vivi isn't here," Su muttered weakly.

"Come on, that couldn't really—hm?" the behemoth paused midway across the street, blinking curiously. After a moment, he let out a laugh of recognition and turned to face the women, his smile widening even further. "Well, I'll be! You two! I recognize you! You're members of the Straw Hat pirates, aren't you? HAHAHA! Greetings! Allow me to introduce myself! I am—!

"'Mad Monk' Urouge, of the Fallen Monk Pirates," Nami tersely finished, clenching and unclenching her grip on her reassembled Clima-Tact. "You're very… memorable."

That finally served as the hard reset Conis' brain needed. Of course, that still meant she defaulted to age-old instincts by snapping her hand up behind her head, fingers poking up in a familiar gesture. "Heso, mister Urouge!"

Urouge blinked in surprise at the greeting. Slowly, he mirrored the salute, and then burst into laughter again. "Heso to you as well, young one! Hahahaha, oh my, it's been years since I've shared such a greeting with anyone but my crew! So you truly are from Skypiea! I had honestly wondered!"

"'Mad Monk' Urouge, of the Fallen Monk Pirates," Nami tersely finished, clenching and unclenching her grip on her reassembled Clima-Tact. "You're very… memorable."

"Nothing like that, just enjoying the hospitality of this delightful locale," Urouge chuckled, waving his hand. "It's honestly making me reconsider heading to Sabaody right away, this place has just about everything. What about you? Anyone stupid enough to provoke you yet?"

"You might say that," Nami muttered, shaking her head. "But really, we're just looking around, seeing the sights, discussing the merits of having animals make up nearly a quarter of our crew. Y'know, the usual."

"Ha! Well then, we have ourselves a happy coincidence!" the sky-native monk chortled, turning away and rifling through the pile of rubble he'd created. "I've been looking to emulate your crew in that regard for quite some time now, but I've been unable to find anything suitable. Thought I'd get lucky in this most wonderful of locales, but thus far, no such luck! Nothing's been capable of
keeping up with me, but I'm pretty sure that this time—awww, no!"

The massive boar Urouge had just hauled out of the rubble pile was probably the cause of the dismayed groan and lack of smile on the monk. Not surprising, given that its eyes had rolled up in its head, not to mention the foam leaking out of its mouth.

"Damnation, I could have sworn that he would be the one!" Urouge spat, casually tossing the insensate swine over his shoulder and knocking the facade off a nearby building in the process. He cupped his chin thoughtfully. "This is turning out to be so troublesome… Maybe I should go for a bear, I earnestly think I might do better with a bear… ah!" He pounded a fist into his hand, grin springing back to life. "I know! I heard rumors that someone was showing off a Shaolin Panda somewhere in the north market! Those things are famous for levelling towns when they go on rampages, it should be more than capable of withstanding my might!"

Summarily ignoring the horrified expressions on the Straw Hats present, the most definitely Mad Monk bowed politely to the girls. "It has been a pleasure to meet you fine women, but I have matters I must attend to! Please, enjoy your stay!"

And with that, he strolled off in one direction… while everyone else who saw him took one look at his grin and sprinted in the other.

After she managed to reboot her brain for a third time, Conis stared up at Nami. "Uhhh… w-what are we going to do now, Nami?" she asked.

"What we do every day, Conis," Nami deadpanned.

"…prevent overpowered nimrods from completely annihilating us via the fallout of their insane actions?"

"That's the one. UROUGE, WAIT UP!"

-o-

Pirate city though it was, Skelter Bite was still, at its heart, an island. An island of fertile soil that had previously supported an entire forest. Much of it, along with the manor ruins, had gone into forming the city, but the remainder had been kept to preserve a native timber supply. A handful had even been left within the city itself, large ones with benches built around them in an endeavor to create a few areas of peaceful greenery.

Much to the relief and pleasure of level-headed first mates who were looking for a break from their captains. Such as Gin, currently contemplating the swirling contents of a liquor bottle: gin, natch. Shrugging, he tilted the bottle to his lips and took a deep gulp.

The burn of good liquor had just reached his stomach when all conversation—sorry, griping—in the grove came to a dead stop. Gin looked up from his bottle to behold a silhouette of long, angry hair and arm blades and smooth mask, basking in the light filtered through the golden mist. Killer of the Kid Pirates strode into the grove as if he owned it; mates parted like stalks of wheat in the wind, none willing to test what would make the pirate act on his own name.

Gin, though, had eyes only for the bottle held in Killer's left hand. Even when it became clear that Killer was coming for his spot, and then sat down next to him. For a long moment, the two stared at each other, first mate to first mate, and then Killer's eyes flickered to Gin's gin.

"Emerald City," he said. "Nice."
"You too," Gin replied, nodding towards the bottle of QBB Bourbon Killer held.  

By unspoken agreement, the two mates held up their bottles, the clink of glass on glass ringing out in the grove, to be smothered by a collective sigh of relief and the conversation starting up again. The two paid it no mind, instead upending their bottles and chugging until there was only half of each left.  

And with that, they just sat in friendly silence, escaping from the madness of their captains for a few minutes (and bottles) more.  

-o-  

Even in a place as colorful as Skelter Bite, his hair stood out. That was all she needed to spot him, and from there it was effortless to identify him.  

She had torn through Paradise to find him, to avenge herself on him for what he had done. The promise he had broken, the way he had betrayed her, all that he had stolen from her. She would make him pay. And in a lawless haven for lawless people, the opportunity was before her.  

She stalked after him as he neared the end of the crowd, rod in hand and ready to knock him senseless before he could realize he was being—  

He twisted his head ever so slightly and shot her a shark-toothed smirk over his shoulder. "Long time no see, ginger."  

WHAM!  

Prudently, she waited until after she knocked him senseless and had begun dragging him away before indulging in a breathless stream of curses about the fact that he knew she was there the whole time. Well, that, and his sexual habits, his ancestors ten generations back, and his hair.  

-o-  

"…and so he had to sit there for three weeks with a giant-sized pair of knitting needles and put together two whole battleships' worth of sail canvas so that he could pay for a new coat, plus interest!" Ronse finished, pantomiming the aforementioned needles.  

"Dereshishishishishi!" Robin laughed, a stiff breeze away from simply collapsing to the ground. "Oh, that's dreadful!"  

"Heh…" Lacroix chuckled. "I really can't get over how you laugh just like him. You were really close to him, weren't you?"  

Robin didn't respond at first, still riding out the gales of laughter. The two giants sitting across from her in another one of Skelter Bite's groves, and Usopp next to her, gave her the time, for when she recovered she gave the giants a smile equal parts warm nostalgia and sadness. "He was the only one I ever called a friend before I met the Straw Hats."  

"Though that title's a little less exclusive than it used to be," Usopp snickered, brushing his finger beneath his nose.  

"Hush, you," Robin chided, shoving his shoulder without any heat. The two ex-Vice Admirals looked on with satisfied smirks. Well, Lacroix did, Ronse's mask made it hard to tell.  

"But anyway, hearing all those stories about Saul, I'm honestly surprised that he wasn't from Elbaf,"
Usopp said carefully. "I mean, that kind of tenacity, strength, and honor? It seems like just the kind
of thing Dorry and Broggy would like."

"What he did was not typical of Elbaf giants, Usopp," Robin responded with her typical 'I know far
more than you do' smile. "What he did, I have come to realize, is typical of Ds."

The two Vice Admirals nodded sagely, and Usopp looked up at them.

"Mmm… Moving on, I heard all Vice Admirals have to be powerhouses. Does that come a little
easier to you guys?"

"Heh, we only wish," Ronse scoffed. "The only easy way to get Haki is to be born with it already
awake, and even then, there's training so that you don't get overwhelmed by it. Giant, fishman, mink,
human, doesn't matter what you are, it's never that easy."

"And it's not always the way you want it to be, either," Lacroix added. "I still remember when Saul
unlocked his Observation Haki, and it turned out to be the empathetic parts that came first."

One pair of disembodied hands scribbling notes into a journal and all of her mind focusing on
thanking Saul for helping her even now, Robin asked, "Would you mind telling us a little more about
that? How deeply could Saul understand you, and how did it grow?"

"Well, I'll tell you this," Ronse grumbled to himself. "The lion-headed bastard robbed us blind for the
first couple of weeks until he finally got banned from poker night."

Their laughter renewed itself, followed by Usopp demanding more details on that story.

-o-

Now as isolated as one could be on an island of pirates, at an uninhabited building several… blocks,
for lack of a better term, away from the burgeoning downtown, the redhead watched with a scowl—
and a pipe at the ready—as her captive made a show of stirring. He had let her attack him, after all,
feigning unconsciousness was the logical next step.

She had, of course, taken the precaution of tying him to a chair, constricting him with rope until little
more than his eyes and mouth were still visible. In retrospect, she should have bound the latter, too.

Blearily, Bartolomeo looked up, and regained his usual expression—read, an ear-to-ear beartrap of a
grin—in infuriatingly short order. "Eesh, Ginger, so this is still how you pick up all your guys? No
wonder you're still—"

WHACK.

"Ow. What the hell?!

"That's what I should be saying to you, traitor!"

"Traitor!?!" Barto boggled, staring at his captor in abject confusion. "Bitch, what the hell are you on
about?"

"We made a promise to aim for the top together!" Barto's captor roared in his face, grabbing him by
his collar and hauling him and his seat off the ground. "We said we'd kick all breeds of ass, side by
side, and fucking rule Loguetown! But then all of a sudden, you said you wanted to help Straw Hat
become King of the Pirates! And then you fucking left without even saying shit beforehand!? FUCK
YOU!"

His captor half-dropped, half-tossed Barto to the ground, and began to pace back and forth. Like a
tiger, except this woman was far more dangerous than a tiger. "That was the whole reason I came out
here on these sucking seas in the first place, you know? To do the right thing, to beat the stupid out
of your empty skull, and haul your ass home where it belongs!

"Hey hey HEY! Watch your mouth, skank!" Barto snarled, jerking in his bonds. "Lemme clear one thing up for you! I mighta started sailing with my head up my ass, but I've cleaned the shit out of my ears since then! I still respect the hell out of Luffy, but I'm willing to go beyond him too! I ain't gonna disrespect him by being no scuzzy sycophant! I'm shooting for the throne and the crown, just like he is! I'm gonna give it my all... and in the process, I'll give him the challenge he deserves!"

Barto leaned back in his seat and let out a cocky chuckle. "Aaaaand if I should just so happen to get my mitts on an assload of gold in the process, wеееell... them's the breaks, y'know?"

Barto's captor stared at him, before slapping her hand to her face. "And that's the reason I said 'was'," she sighed.

Black Bart cocked an eyebrow. "Come again?"

The supernova's kidnapper leaned against a nearby crate. "I was going to kick your ass and haul you back home... until I watched you help kick Shiki's teeth in. Like it or not, and I definitely don't... this sea's done you some damn good. At the least, it's given you a spine worth a damn. So... no. No, I'm not hauling you back to Loguetown, not yet anyways. Maybe once you're all good and ready, but until then?" The captor walked up to Barto and jabbed her finger in his chest. "Until then, I'm sticking to your dumb dumbass ass like glue and making sure you don't get your brain bashed out while you're gloating like the dipshit you are! So until we hit the end of this hellhole, we'll be watching each other's backs again like the good old days. Whether you like it or not!"

Barto stared blankly at her, one eyebrow cocked. "In case you went deaf earlier and I didn't notice it, let me repeat: I've already got a first mate."

"Psh, don't try and sell me that shit. Co-captains."

And that sent Barto's expression paper-flat. "Yeeexx ah... fuck that noise." And before his captor could react, he grunted and tore through the ropes, his fingers already crossed to summon a barrier to block the pipe that swung at his skull. Said pipe did not give up, and continued to beat on the barrier, and only gave up when Barto shoved his barrier forward, knocking his kidnapper flat on her ass.

"Ugh..." she groaned, voice slurring. "Best... two out of three... asshole?"

Barto sighed, squatting down to look his childhood friend in the eye. "Ehhh... talk to me again when I can't beat your ass like a drum. But for now..." He looked away, rubbing at the back of his head. "But I guess I do feel kinda bad about leaving you behind in Loguetown, and I wouldn't mind having you watch my ass, so...?"

His old friend weighed briefly her options before letting out a sharp tsk. "You said something about first mate?" she spat, as though the words physically burned

Barto shrugged indifferently, apparently more interested in finding whatever had prompted him to dig his pinky up his nostril. "Meh, fine, whatever. You can fight Dead-Eyes for it; whoever has the most teeth left by the end wins. Take it or leave it.

The old friend ground their teeth murderously. Briefly, before switching to a fond, and above all else, familiar smile. "Well, at least you're just as much of a jackass as ever," she groused, holding out her hand. "Now help me up. And by the way, you owe me a candy bar."

"Meh," Barto scoffed, grinning as he grabbed said hand. "Take it up with Tina. And by the way?"
His old friend screeched at the touch of snot on her hand, and Barto grinned.

"Glad to have you back, Desire."

-0-

"Based on the horror stories I've heard, this is definitely a welcome change from Mock Town," Brook said slowly. "But with such a pirate-heavy population, you can't tell me that you don't have trouble keeping law and order around here."

"Did you awweady fowget the wiving fog? One wook at an Obewisk and nobody would…" Carue trailed off as what he was saying registered. "OK, so mowons wike that awen't unheawd of, but they can't be that common, wight?"

"Both more and less than you'd think, actually," answered their companion, a member of the Skull Mist Pirates that had eagerly volunteered to play tour guide.

"Typically, we get one incident a day or so, generally the really nasty characters who manage to slip their way in. They'll cause some trouble or damages, sure, but just as often they're taken care of pretty quickly. When it's not someone substantially stronger than them getting annoyed at their fun being interrupted, then it's everyone else dog-piling them to squeeze some fun out of the situation."

"Well, no matter the method through which you maintain order, this place still takes my breath away! Which is quite the feat, seeing as I don't have any lungs! YOHOHOHO! Skull—Hey, wait for me!"

But neither Carue nor Vivi deigned to wait for Brook to complete his gag, instead continuing down the island's attraction-packed mainstreet, as they'd been doing since the crew had split up. Their attention remained split between their tour guide and the many sights the main drag offered.

"So basically, honor among thieves isn't out of style, then?" Vivi said in wonder. "Huh, well, I guess that's nice… but you can't tell me that people who set out to define their own law and order are so ready and willing to live under someone else's, even with the leniency only pirates will give."

"You—hoo!—would be surprised, actually!" Brook huffed as he jogged back up to the group, groaning and creaking as he got back into pace. "Oh, my poor old bones… ah, but to answer your question, Vivi, the honor system is more effective than you might think. Take it from an excessively old hand like myself: we pirates might seek freedom from most laws and restrictions, but even we enjoy our peace and quiet when we can get it. And as such, not many will object to a spot of peacekeeping now and then. So long as no one stops them from having honest fun or touches their treasure, everyone's happy!"

"What about booze?" Carue asked.

"...I said 'treasure,' didn't I?" Brook said, tilting his skull in confusion. "Though, now that I think about it, I do suppose that things aren't quite so idyllic as we paint it. After all, with the blockade and the looming threat of the Marines, I can't imagine that everyone's taking things quite so well, hm?"

The trio's guide rolled his eyes and waved his hands placatingly. "Okay, yeah, things are a little on edge, but it's not that bad. Y'see—"

Whatever the justification was, it was lost to the sands of time when a gunshot rang out. Traffic on the wooden sidewalk they were on didn't stop, but all the pedestrians, Straw Hats included, did look over to the other side to see what had just happened. Unfortunately, all they got was a man in a white suit and an impressive beard stepping out from between an alleyway, a smoking gun in hand. He then proceeded to shoot said gun twice into the sidewalk. For some reason.
"Hello?" the man declared in a very British voice. "I just shot somebody, I did it on purpose!"

Nobody stopped. Though it was a close-run thing.

Vivi gaped at the scene in clear confusion. "Er, shouldn't we do something?" she asked weakly.

"Eh, as I said, tensions aren't *that* high, and Benedict over there is a big reason why," the guide explained with a dismissive wave. "He does that every so often as a sort of litmus test for how close to a blowup we are. I'm 65% certain the guy he shot deserved it, anyway."

"Oh, well, if he deserved it then that's alright!" Brook nodded sagely.

"...we're *really* not going to do anything!?!" Vivi incredulously repeated.

"Aye don't see *you* puwwing on my weins that hawd," Carue pointed out, giving her a flat look over his shoulder.

"I—but—that's—! Mrgh..." Vivi slumped over in her saddle. "I never *will* find a spark of sanity in these seas, will I?"

"Come now, your highness, surely you're overreacting," the guide protested, though not with much heat. "Not *everything* here is going tax your grip on reality."

"Indeed!" Brook proclaimed, waving his arm out with a theatrical air. "If you merely open your mind to the wonderful anarcho-culture of we free buccaneers, you will find that we are truly a most wondrous of *oh dear heavens there's a bear in people clothes sitting at a table across the street.*"

The group stopped at once to stare in the direction the skeleton was boggling, and while Carue and the guide both joined him in boggling, all Vivi could muster was a flat deadpan.

"Brook, I'm afraid you're quite mistaken," Vivi sighed ever so tiredly. "That's not a bear in people clothes sitting at a table..." She dropped her face into her hand and pinched the bridge of her nose with a weary sigh. "That's a bear in captain's clothes sitting at a table. And from how the people around him keep acting?"

The princess raised her head, staring pointedly at the pirates surrounding the ursine entity, all raising a toast in the animal's direction. The massive, tricorn-and-eyepatch-wearing lug of fur and muscle responded with an oblivious snarl as it tore into the array of raw salmon laid out before it.

"I don't think it's a gag."

"...okay, full disclosure, I'm drawing a blank," the guide shamelessly admitted.

"...cooould he jahst be a Zoan oah something?" Carue offered.

"*Seeing as he keeps growling for 'more honey' IN FLAWLESS TEDDY-ese, SIGNS POINT TO...*" a disembodied voice casually commented.

"Then... why aren't you translating for him?!" Brook queried, more curious than anything else.

"**Tried. He told me not to bother, says he's gotten by fine so far.**"

"...Alright, my skull's pounding has come as close to 'splitting' as I can bear." Vivi paused, registering her choice of words, and then exacerbated her migraine by slamming her palm into her face. "Soundbite, is Chopper anywhere close by?"
"FRAID NOT, and he's occupied with other things BESIDES."

The princess sucked in a sharp breath—

"Uh… I know a pharmacist nearby who only tests new drugs on his patients one time out of five?" the tour guide hesitantly offered.

—and released it just as swiftly, which all present took as a sign to start walking again.

As they set off again, Brook 'blinked' as a thought occurred to him, and he looked to their guide. "By the by, good sir, it occurs to me that we've yet to ask you your name. Would you care to provide it?"

"I would! Er, or, no, wait, is that wouldn't…?" the guide puzzled over his statement before shaking his head. "Well, whatever the right answer is, the name's Jagger, of the ex-Rolling Pirates! Happy to help!"

"HAHAHAHEEHEEEhooohoohoooo oh my GOOOOD!"

The air suddenly erupted into cackles, prompting both male pirates to look skyward in made to question the reason behind Soundbite's amusement—

"Not. One. Word."

—and then their jaws both slammed shut, and that was that.

"…You suwe you awen't ovewweacting a wittle?" Carue asked.

"…Maybe," Vivi conceded. "But better I get it out of the way now than when the real chaos starts…" Her eye twitched as her hair started waving in a newborn breeze. "Because you know that we haven't even begun yet."

Everyone winced at that, unable to argue… literally.

-o-

If you asked the visitors and inhabitants of Skelter Bite to describe the place, 'noisy' was a good candidate for the most common descriptor. It was only natural: the entire city was positively thrumming with life and good cheer. Pirate cheer, at that. It was no surprise the default volume for the island was set at 'loud' with the knob ripped off.

Only two locations on all of Skelter Bite even approached 'quiet'. The first was the sections of the seawall that were between the wall's cardinal points, where the island's security checkpoints were located…

"WOOHOOOO!"

And the second used to be the very top of Skelter Bite's sky-scraping pillar of a mast, located almost a hundred meters above the observation post that was halfway up the mast. Used to be, on account of that silence being violently shattered by Luffy rocketing up, cheering and hollering the entire way.

"HAHA—ah, whoops!"

At least, until he realized that he'd overshot the top of the mast and grappled himself onto it, grabbing hold of the island's flagpole and holding tight to it.
"Woo! Wow, I almost shot clean off the island! That was close!" Luffy laughed to himself, readjusting his hat as he hauled himself up and onto the flagpole. Then, once his position was properly stabilized (or at least his version of stable: kneeling on the balls of his feet), he gazed down at the shimmering tableau that was Skelter Bite stretched out below him, a breathtaking array of lights and movement, and his smile stretched all the wider.

"Wooow! This place is even cooler than the last time I was here! And I didn't think that was possible!" the rubber-man breathed in awe.

"■■■■■…?"

"Huh?" Luffy looked around for the source of the voice he'd just heard. "What am I doing up here? I just wanted to get a good look at the island. And it's so cool!"

"■■■■■"

"What?! It's really—?!” Luffy started to exclaim eagerly before shaking his head. "Gah, no, wait! Pictionaries!" The rubber-man spun his head around, literally twisting his neck to get a better look around himself. "Who said that? And where are you?"

"■■■."

"Whuh?" The rubber-man released the tension in his neck, letting his head whiz back into place. "Whaddaya mean look—woooaaah…"

The reason why Monkey D. 'Straw Hat' Luffy, of all pirates in the world, trailed off into stunned silence was the looming presence of the largest, most titanic entities he'd ever seen in the history of… of ever! Sure they were only shadowy silhouettes in the foggy wall that ringed Skelter Bite, but still, they were immense! Massive! They were—! They were—!

"Wwooow…" Luffy breathed. "You're so big I don't think even Grandpa could knock you down…" He then screwed his face up in intense thought. "Or… I don't think he could? He's really strong and stuff, so I don't—"

"■■■■■?" one of the sky-encompassing silhouettes 'asked', insomuch as an entity like it could articulate at all.

"Oh, right! We were talking!" Luffy chuckled and blushed, scratching the back of his head. "Sorry, I can be really dumb some… er, most of the time. What were we talking about?"

"■■■."

"WHAT?!" Luffy's head shot up and then back down, his mouth stretched wide in a massive grin. "This is only how much of the island done?! But it's already so cool! Oh man oh man, that's so awesome!" The world-infamous pirate started dancing from foot-to-foot on top of the flagpole, laughing all the way. "I wanna see it, I wanna see it!"

"■■■…"

And just as fast as he got happy, Luffy slumped over, a sad expression on his face. "Awww, really? That long? Mmph, that sucks…" he sighed, giving his precariously swaying perch a hearty kick. "And I really wanted to see—ah!" Luffy perked up instantly almost instantly, pounding his fist in his palm in realization. "I know! I'll just come back once it's done! Then, you guys can all show me the best places to eat at!"
Luffy folded his arms behind his head and nodded with a proud grin. "Of course I'll come back! This place is so amazing already, I can't wait to see it when it's finished! I'll come back and see this island at its best no matter what! That's a promise!"

The Obelisks had no mouths with which to smile, but the way the golden fog swirled around Luffy made it clear that they were as happy as they could be.

-0-

"Well, we didn't find Tashigi, but that's no reason to lose my stride!" I muttered eagerly to myself, wringing my hands as I strolled down a raised walkway made of suspended rowboats, my eyes darting to and fro. "Now, let's see here: I'm young, witty, and I've got an opinion I'm willing to fight to the death for! How can I cause the most trouble in the shortest amount of time?"

A thought occurred to me, a thought that caused a cackle to spill from my lips. "Oh, of course! Should have realized it sooner!" I jabbed my finger forward. "To the nearest public forum! I have flames to fan!"

"WOAH, BELAY THAT! TAKE A RIGHT HERE AND GO DOWN THAT LADDER."

"Huh?" I blinked, glancing at Soundbite in confusion. "What, you have a better idea on how we can start a riot without getting in… too much trouble for it?"

"Business before pleasure, Guy Fawkes," Soundbite snorted with a distinct lack of sympathy for my desire for mayhem. "Somebody wants to talk to you real bad, SO UNLESS YOU WANT TO HEAR A LITTLE DITTY ABOUT INFINITE BOTTLES OF BEER—!"

"Yeah yeah, I'm goin', I'm goin'," I sighed, turning to head for the aforementioned ladder. "This better be worth it though, got it?"

"NO PROMISES, both in regards to how important and/or amusing THIS DETOUR IS, and in regards to whatever state your body will be in afterwards."

"Wonderful."

And with that, I followed Soundbite's directions through the convoluted and improvised passages of Skelter Bite (and let's be honest, they were very improvised. Seriously, I had to balance my way over a toppled mast!) to an isolated, lounge-like area on top of a raised mizzen deck that was acting as a makeshift tower. To my surprise, Lassoo and Funkfreed were already there, lounging about and neatly answering the question of where they had gotten off to. With a curious glance that they did not return, I took a seat beside them.

I didn't need to wait long to learn why I was there, however, as a second later, someone climbed up the other entrance array of rigging.

Someone that I recognized immediately. After all, it was hard to forget an expression that lazy, a sword that long and EVIL-feeling… or a hat that distinctive.

"So, you're finally here. What do you want, Jeremi-ya?" Trafalgar Law warily asked me.

...wait. He asked—?!
"M-Me? But I thought—!?" I sputtered, shooting Soundbite an incredulous look.

"IT'S NOT HIM THAT WANTS TO TALK TO YOU, and it's not me either," Soundbite answered before swivelling his attention to- wait, what. "BLAME THE BIG GUY."

"Come again?"/"Excuse me!?" Law and I chorused in near synch.

"Sorry about the skulduggery, but I wanted to say this in as private a setting as possible," Funkfreed stated, eyeing Law with a look in his eyes that I couldn't place. The surgeon stared for a moment before shrugging indifferently, taking a seat on the couch opposite me.

"All ears, Elephant-ya," he yawned, affecting an air of relaxation.

Funkfreed closed his eyes. "First… I know about what I'm going to tell you because of my previous wielder. More specifically, because of his father."

I immediately sat up straighter. Law's expression sharpened, but his posture remained nonchalant.

"And I'm only telling you this because I heard something on the way over here from Pappug. He mentioned something offhand when he saw your wanted poster, and when I asked him about it, he was completely certain. So, my first question for you, Trafalgar Law…" Funkfreed opened his eyes, and pointed his trunk at Law's head. "Where did you get that hat?"

Law's grip on Kikoku tightened, causing me to tense up in response. But his tone remained even when he answered. "From my parents. It's a reminder of my hometown."

"Flevance," Funkfreed exhaled.

*That* got a reaction from the both of us, though where I stared at the Zoan in mere surprise, Law sat up straight, his eyes alight with shock and cold, *cold* anger. He turned his glare on me, and before I could move, he had the butt of his hell-sword's sheath hovering a few inches from my face. "Jeremi-ya. What is the meaning of this?" he demanded.

"Hey, hey, don't draw that thing on me!" I yelped, throwing my hands up and trying to inch as far back out of dissection range as I could get. "I know as little about where Funkfreed is going with this as you do! Though…" My own eyes narrowed as I connected the dots, and a scowl came over my face that I directed at my largest partner. "On second thought, we've probably reached the same conclusion."

In seconds, Law was on his feet, his Room deployed, and his sword out of its sheath and reared back to strike. After a moment, however, the blue glow faded, I was still in one piece, and he lowered his blade before turning back to Funkfreed. "Talk," he ordered.

Funkfreed shook his head miserably, though not fearfully. "I heard Spandine gloating about it one day when he visited his son. He…" The elephant snorted and rolled his eyes. "Approved of his son keeping a blackbook so long as he kept it under lock and key, somewhere that nobody but him would ever have a reason to be. And in the process, he mentioned one mission that his own squad had run in the past…"

"Spreading the rumor that Amber Lead Syndrome was contagious, along with ensuring that nobody ever researched otherwise, which would inevitably lead to the quarantine of Flevance. And from there, the perfect excuse to massacre the entire country when they tried to fight back against it."

Law's expression had turned steadily more thunderous as the explanation continued. The instant it was over, his eyes darted between Funkfreed, me, and Soundbite in an attempt to detect any
deception. After a full minute of silence, one hoarse word worked out of his throat:

"…Why?"

Up until now, I had thought that Funkfreed had called me here just to try to make Law a Mason way sooner than expected because of the World Government conspiracy behind Flevance. But I was wrong. The next sentence out of his mouth was pretty conclusive evidence.

"Because… the Elder Stars knew that hiding somewhere in the country was a family from the line of D."

Everyone else in the tower froze. Law, of course, was frozen in complete fury, his eyes trembling in rage, and his grip on Kikoku a vice. My partners and I, however, were frozen in total terror at the aura of sheer death he was emanating. Finally, our eyes all darted to the edge of the tower, and without a second of thought, we leapt over it.

**BOOM!**

A prudent move, as I'm pretty sure Law dissected the tower not two seconds later. I don't know what medical practice uses a technique that could do **that**, nor do I wish to. Knowing my luck, Chopper would be all too eager to… demon**strate**.

Brushing myself off from the fall, I stared awkwardly up at the smoking remains. Then a blue haze filled my vision—"GRK!"—and I snapped my hands to my neck, flailing at something I couldn't actually feel that was clamped down on my windpipe and holding me clean off my feet.

"Jeremi-ya..." the Voice of Death growled, and I made sure to keep very still as I was swiveled around in mid-air to face a very angry Trafalgar Law.

It took me a second to put the pieces together, and when I realized that Law was Vader-lifting me with his Tact, I was split between nerding out because how freaking cool was this and flipping out because holy sh*t he was going to either crush my trachea or gut me like a fish. And while all of this was happening, Funkfreed and Lassoo were… inching away fearfully, not that I could really blame them considering whatever the hell Law had done to the tower, and Soundbite…

"H-Hey, Law!" the snail chuckled weakly, poking his eyestalks out of his shell. "**If it's not too much trouble, could you, just real quick, SAY 'CROSS, I AM YOUR—** GRK!" Soundbite's eyestalks abruptly bulged, which was probably a sign that Law had even less patience for his antics than I did.

"I trust," Law continued as though he hadn't been interrupted. "That with your rather impressive knowledge, you're aware that the Op-Op Fruit affords me the ability to murder you without leaving a single trace, as well as frame whoever I fancy for it. So with that in mind, be aware that if any of what I just heard was a lie, this is your chance to apologize. Do so, and your death will be **painless.**"

"For crying out loud, blame the elephant!" I gargled, still clawing at the non-hand holding me up.

The grip on my throat did not let up, but I **did** see Funkfreed getting some of his steel back. "I meant what I said and I said what I meant," the elephant intoned.

"**CAN I AURALLY bitchslap him?**" Soundbite requested.

"Only if he makes another reference like that, unknowing or otherwise," I managed to get out.

Still, despite the wording, it did the trick. After a few moments' thought, Law brought me back and dropped me onto deck-firma.
"...You've known a hell of a lot about everything you shouldn't so far. How much more do you know about me?" he tersely demanded.

I had to take a second to massage my throat, but once I got my breath back, I looked around to ensure nobody else was within range yet, and then I locked my eyes with Law's and spoke firmly.

"Everything... Trafalgar D. Water Law."

Law's already tense demeanor turned even more guarded. "And you learned that name, how?"

I searched my mind for a way to answer that, and one sprung to mind. I wished it was a better answer that was less likely to get my still-functioning organs displayed in twenty different jars, but in for a beri...

"The same way I know that the night he died at the bastard's hands, you were in the chest silenced by the Calm-Calm Fruit."

The Supernova's eyes widened, and it took a few seconds for the shock to wear off. Then he let out a sigh and looked at me again, this time with a hint of curiosity instead of a heap of animosity.

"You're definitely an odd one, Jeremi-ya. You know something that's literally impossible for anyone else to know but you didn't know what your sword just said? You didn't know that the Government did what they did because of... because of my family?" he forced out.

I grimaced, scratching the back of my neck, before heaving a defeated sigh. "...I know about Flevance because I know about you," I admitted. "But I didn't know that the Government's responsibility in that mess ran that deep. I genuinely thought it was simply a tragedy born of paranoia and blind ignorance..." My eyes narrowed. "Though honestly, I really should've seen this particular plot twist coming."

"As should I," Law bit out bitterly. He turned back to Funkfreed, who had resumed his full elephant form as things de-escalated from 'total murder'. "So, was that just something you thought I needed to know as the last survivor of Flevance?"

"More or less," Funkfreed nodded. "I didn't know you were a D... but I guessed it based on what I've learned of them thanks to the Straw Hats, as well as how our luck generally turns."

Law snorted and looked away. "Well, whatever your reason, thanks. So..." He eyed me curiously. "What now?"

Funkfreed's trunk reached over to nudge me forward, and Law turned back to me, expression unreadable. As the full opportunity before me sunk in, I straightened and met his eyes.

"It's no secret that I hate the World Government," I stated. "And it's no surprise that I'm trying to tear them down. What's both—or at least the prior, probably not the latter—is that I've been accumulating forces on our way down the Line to work on it from other angles. Law, I'll be blunt: I've wanted you onboard for months, but I didn't think you'd be open to it until we reached the New World. But..." I tilted my head with a smirk. "If you want a better, more effective means to take down Vergo, Doflamingo, all of his wretched Famiglia, and the whole damned Government with them, then I can and want to give it to you."

I removed my right gauntlet and held out my bandage-wrapped hand. "Our work requires complete secrecy; only the ones we trust in the leadership roster are allowed to know everything, and that's what I'm inviting you into. Now, it won't be fast... but it will be glorious, I can promise you that. And if Doflamingo doesn't die when the time comes... then it will only be because he's worse off."
Law stared at my hand for a few seconds before staring wryly at me. "And should I refuse?"

I smirked lightly. "Then this part of the conversation gets excised from your memory, and you'll have less help from us to reach your goals. Though, considering all the pies that bastard has his fingers in, I seriously doubt that you'll be facing Doflamingo alone either way. In case you haven't noticed?" I spread my arms wide, indicating the whole of Skelter Bite. "My captain, and our crew in general, do not have a track record of 'leaving well enough alone', as some might put it."

Law's eyes closed, and an expression of pain flitted across his visage; it didn't take a genius to figure out who he was thinking about. After a moment, he raised his head.

"...I must be out of my mind to agree to an alliance with you..." Then his somber expression split into a mad, outright demonic grin. "But then again, I am a pirate of the same league as you and your captain, so what the heck? The rest of the world can burn for all I care, but if it means avenging Cora in the process? I couldn't care less."

And with that, he grasped my hand.

"Let's raise some hell, partner."

I matched his grin tooth for tooth before glancing back at my shoulder. "Knucker? Contact the relevant parties on the island and get them to convene at the Lucky Rabbit ASAP. We just caught us a Tiger by the tail."

Patient AN: Ever since I came up with that conspiracy theory behind Flevance, this moment has been the new 'saving Merry' for me, one that I've been looking forward to for months on end.

Cross-Brain AN: With that said, now we move to the part that we wanted to draw your attention to. We don't make a habit of promoting our P-a-t-r-e-o-n page beyond our initial mention because, after all, it's just a bonus for us that comes from writing a story that people love. However, in this instance, we are going to promote it once more due to our circumstances.

Next spring, Xomniac completes his final semester of college. At that time, the three of us will meet in person for the first time... for a much more permanent arrangement. We have already begun saving up money to buy a house together and are relying heavily on that income to help support the effort. So, if you're interested—and able, of course—to help our cause, look up the Cross-Brain on the aforementioned site. In addition to helping us out, you'll also find a host of interesting rewards depending on how much you pledge. For example, at the ten dollar monthly reward, you'd have known about Law joining way back in August.

...Saying that really puts it in perspective. We apologize for how long this took, and we'll strive to get the next one out sooner. We can't promise that we'll succeed... but we can promise that if we don't, it will be worth the wait. We have been saving soooo many things for this arc...
Chapter 62 - Road to Sabaody Pt. 4

Cross-Brain AN: We must say this before we begin: thank you, all of you, who have donated since our last chapter. And thank you to those who have been donating since before our last chapter. It means so much to us, and we hope that this new chapter is everything you hoped for. Thank you for your patience.

SLAM!

"Aaagh, son-of-a…" Apoo groaned, rubbing the new bruise on his double-wide jaw. Though considering he was just punched clean through a table, a single bruise was both a pretty good outcome and the least of his worries.

"HA! You're worth 250,000,000!?" slurred his half-drunk adversary. Really, the opposing pirate captain wasn't that bad of a guy, but a few drinks had brought out a nastier side of him.

"'Soon as I finish wiping the ground with you… I'm gonna—"

Nastier than we're able to adequately describe if we want to keep this story T-rated, hence this extremely well-timed change of subject.

"Yo, Monkey. GOT A SEC?"

Apoo paused in his 'efforts' to right himself, tilting his head at the familiar montage of voices reached his ears.

"Depends," he muttered back under his breath, hiding his mouth in the crook of one of his elbows. "This important?"

"HOW IMPORTANT DO YOU THINK IT IS that we just recruited Tiger? Ophiuchus is calling a general assembly, priority one. QUIT PLAYING WITH THE BUGS AND MOVE YOUR CABOOSE."

Apoo let out a sigh, a grin of resignation on his face. "Damn it, and we were so close to cleaning up on bets too..." he lamented. "Oh, well. OI!" Leaping to his feet, every prior sign of weakness and injury gone like it'd never existed, he gestured at the room. "Change of plans, just rob 'em blind."

And before the bar's patrons could do more than blink stupidly, all the On-Air Pirates in the bar, both obvious and not, fell on them like a pack of starving baby Sea Kings.

"Well, that's what I get for trying to be subtle, I guess," Apoo sighed, as despondent as a guy could be when he was grinning like a loon and offhandedly swatting a guy with a chair from halfway across the room. "Anyway, where are we meeting, Knucker?"

"Head for The—eh? Ah, got it. CORRECTION: head THROUGH The Lucky Rabbit to REACH THE ISLAND'S—HEH!—HEADQUARTERS. Just show up to the front door and The Skull Mists WILL SHOW YOU THE WAY IN."

Apoo grinned, glancing at the reformed building a stone's throw away from his current location. "I'll be right there."
The Lucky Rabbit was more than the nicest inn on the island; it was also the home and homebase of the Skull Mist Pirates. Though they had recycled the location and much of the stone from Moria's manor, it bore no resemblance to what it was before, save only for a few scant pieces of the original architecture.

The rest was a pell mell mess of wood and stone, a jagged and somewhat rounded base the foundation for a veritable garden of towers. Each was uniquely majestic, and the greatest of them sat to the rear, hidden in plain sight.

When the Galley-La shipwrights and giants had first set foot on Skelter Bite, one of their first projects had been to painstakingly hollow out a section of Skelter Bite's main mast and then reinforce it with Adam wood and Wootz steel. The result of this was that hidden in the file storage of The Lucky Rabbit (and by extension, all of Skelter Bite's minarchist government) was a door to a hidden staircase, ascending which would lead one to a large room with the interior of the mast on one side, and Oars's skull on the other, the eye sockets granting aerial access and the ability to watch the entire island sight unseen.

This was the true Headquarters of Skelter Bite, and needless to say, its existence wasn't common knowledge.

Adorning the interior was all that the executives of an island such as this could ever need: a handful of lookout perches with mounted binoculars, a couple of file desks for more confidential paperwork, and a round central table the likes of which you would find in a war room. The most recent addition was a small farm of Transponder Snails, at least three each of black and white and a dozen or so normal ones.

Normally, at any given time there would be around four Skull Mist Pirates taking shifts on lookout duty, paperwork duty, or wiretapping duty as it was so required. Presently, however, many more individuals were coming into the room as the gathered outlaws answered Ophiuchus's call.

Some arrived faster than others—

"Apapa! Big Nose, long time no see!" Apoo saluted.

"Fehfehfeh! Back at you, Little Big Mouth!" Foxy waved back.

—due to already being inside or in close proximity to the inn below. The next ones to arrive, however, took a more… direct route of ascension, their arrivals heralded by a flutter of feathers and a howl of wind, itself accompanied by a panicked yelp.

"Whoa. Nice entrance, Callie," complimented Apoo, who was leaning his chair onto its rear legs, as a spark-shrouded Billy and his cloud-toting mistress came fluttered to a soft landing through one of the eyeholes.

"Copperhead, not so much," Foxy snickered. Vivi, still pulling herself out of the heap her failed attempt to transition back from her aerial form to her physical one had left her in, gave him a rude gesture.

"You try keeping your powers straight when you're nursing a migraine at the same time, Goat," Vivi grumbled, massaging her skull. "Only took the medicine a second before Cross called us all up here." She then cracked an eye open to give him a half-serious glare. "And by the way, in case you forgot? I outrank you, so I can order you to take a long walk off a short pier without using my Will
and you'll still have to do it, so maybe treat me a bit nicer, m'kay?"

Foxy snickered and rubbed his finger under his nose in a manner most cocky. "As if you outranking anyone on the main crew matters that much?"

The room flashed with light, and everyone present instinctively flinched and looked to the source. "Were you just insulting my dear friend, unranked officer Foxy?" Nami deadpanned.

"N-Not a word, Second Mate Nami!" the Silver Fox yelped, nearly tumbling to the floor in his scramble to get into proper saluting form.

"That's what I thought. And Vivi, I've got some of Chopper's medicine on hand if you—need it," Nami hadn't even finished speaking before the container flew out of her hand and over to Vivi. Shaking her head, Nami dismounted Billy and approached the still-seated Apoo.

"Miss Weather Witch," the Long-Arm nodded respectfully, gracing the navigator with his usual ear-to-ear, piano-toothed grin. "Nice handling of your subordinate, it takes some real intimidation to put the fear of you in someone with minimal prompting!"

"Thanks for all the praise, 'Roar of the Seas.' Good to finally meet you in person," Nami nodded back respectfully, extending a hand.

"Oh, the pleasure is mine." His grin gleamed just so as he accepted the handshake.

For five seconds, both of them remained where they were, staring each other in the eyes with smiles on their faces and locked in a handshake. Then they held out their free hands, each one holding a wallet that was not theirs and had not been in their possession five seconds ago.

"I think you and I are going to get along just fine," Nami simpered.

"Oh, yes," Apoo grinned.

"Wait a minute…" Vivi muttered, patting her pockets. Her eyes widened to comical proportions. "Hey! That's my wallet!"

"And mine!" Foxy yelped. "Why the—! I thought you were going to pickpocket each other!?"

"Oh, we did," Nami purred, blatantly fishing another wallet out of Vivi's back pocket. "We just swapped our wallets with yours beforehand. Oldest thief-trick in the book, you see."

Apoo snickered, and Foxy's head met the table while Vivi massaged her brow feverishly. "How the hell even—?" the trickster captain started to groan.

"Only ask if you really want to know."

The subordinate captain's jaw snapped shut with a sharp click, and a haunted expression crept onto his face. "Never. Again."

"My, you can actually learn. That already puts you head and shoulders above Luffy."

"Uh… Nami, do you still want me here?" Billy asked tentatively. "I heard from Carue and Lassoo —"

"If you could go find Zoro and bring him here, then you can go," Nami replied. "Otherwise, we'll never get started."
Billy smiled and nodded before flapping off.

The room fell into a comfortable silence…

*BANG!*

For all of ten seconds.

"Stingy fuckmothering reptile wouldn't let me get in the cool way, swear I'm gonna—" Bartolomeo's grousing cut off as he took in the scene, and his usual toothy grin took hold. "Oh, hey, losers! Ladies!"

"Rooster, a pleasure to meet you at last," Foxy grinned, waving one hand in greeting. "And since you're here in person, I've been wanting to ask something for a while: those barriers of yours, are they capable of reflecting a—SLOW-SLOW BEAM!"

Bartolomeo reacted immediately, throwing up a barrier to block the slowmo photons. Which it did, deflecting them right back at Foxy. Who held up a mirror to deflect them back into the barrier.

"That would be a yes, excellent," Foxy drawled. "Don't suppose you could try trapping that light?"

Barty's annoyance faded into surprise. Then he folded his barrier around the photons and shrunk it down to the size of a baseball. A glowing baseball, just waiting to peg someone with the supernatural rays now held within. One eyebrow rose, and he regarded Foxy with a curious look.

"It pays to know what combination attacks are available between allies, you and Straw Hat showed that well against Shiki," Foxy answered the unspoken question, grinning. After a moment, Bartolomeo matched it.

"You're not wrong," the sharktooth noted, clapping the other pirate on his shoulder (and nearly pitching him into the table in the process) before eyeing the other male Supernova in the room. "Sorry to say that they can't block sound, though."

"Eh, you can't have a perfect combo with every two fruits," Apoo dismissively replied. "As it is, we'll just have to see about coordinating our mischief and mayhem. Anyway, go ahead and pull up a seat, we'll probably be waiting here for a while."

Bartolomeo duly did so, offhandedly tossing the barrier-ball out one of the eyeholes.

"…And what if that beam hits someone?" Nami asked, eyes narrowed.

"Then I will heartily regret not being able to point and laugh," was the shameless answer as Bartolomeo high-fived his neighbor.

There wasn't much great ceremony for most the other arrivals; Billy arrived with Zoro a few minutes later, and for a few seconds it actually looked like he was going to consider staying—

"I was three drinks away from cleaning out the entire bar. You run away now."

—before he took Zoro's snarled advice, minus a few tail feathers.

Lola arrived next, ceding the head seat of the table for the first time since it was built and regarding everyone with a polite nod, and Merry wandered in a few minutes later. 'Wandered' being the operative word, seeing as she was nose-deep in a notebook and muttering furiously to herself even as she planted herself in a chair, completely oblivious to the world. Completely, that is, until the next
arrival made themselves known. Said arrival being somewhat… unexpected.

"Whoooa, this place is cool!"

"LUFFY!?" demanded most of the room. Said rubber man, hanging suspended in front of one of the eye holes, waved.

"Oh, hi, guys! What are you…" The Straw Hat Captain's waving slowly trailed off, his eyes widening in realization. "Ooooh, wait, is this one of those secret meeting things that Cross is in charge of and stuff?"

"I'm afraid so, Luffy. Though we're holding this one because Cross has apparently made another ally. You're welcome to stick around to meet them, if you want," Vivi offered.

Luffy frowned in thought, surprising the Straw Hats, and their surprise grew into concern when his face screwed up and head tilted in a clear sign of him really thinking about it. And then a familiar rumbling sound derailed the train of thought.

"Huuungrryyy…" the Rubber-Man groaned, hanging his head. "Uuugh, nah, I can find out later. I'm gonna check to see if Hachi's got the takoyaki ready—"

"Actually, Luffy, the dining hall downstairs should satisfy you," Lola cut in smoothly, doing her best to not twitch as a rumble of thunder rolled from Nami's direction. "We've been stocking up on meat ever since we found out about the blockade."

She shrugged at the incredulous look the rest of the pirates shot her. "There was an even fifty-fifty chance of the Straw Hats blasting through the blockade, so we thought it best to prepare for the worst."

Luffy's eyes literally lit up, drool seeping from his mouth. "THANKS, LOLA! SEE YOU GUYS LA—"

"WAIT!"

Foxy's shout stopped everyone, and in that brief moment he shot to his feet and scrambled over to the eye Luffy was still hanging from - at which pointed he bowed deep enough to touch his forehead to the floor.

"You saved Porche's life earlier," Foxy choked out. "Thank you for keeping her safe… Captain."

Luffy blinked at the long-nosed sub-Captain in blank confusion. "Eh? You don't need to thank me for that, it was nothing. I was just protecting my crew. I'm sure you'd do the same for all of your guys too."

"Ah…" Foxy's apologetic demeanor broke out in cold sweat, his eyes darting about. "Ahem… all of them, riiggh…"

Thankfully, Luffy wasn't around long enough to catch Foxy's slip, as he'd already let go of his grip and dropped towards the ground like a rubber meteor.

The island's new proprietress frowned as a thought hit her. "Okay, I realize he's hungry and a bit of an idiot, but he had better not—!

Regretfully for Lola, the universe chose that moment to prove that some things were simply inevitable by completing her sentence with a telltale crashing sound.
"Ugghhh," she groaned again, massaging her temples before cracking an eye open at Nami. "Put it on our tab," the redhead sighed out.

"Good, because I just know he slammed through the piece of ceiling we just finished repairing after Kid was through with it."

"Feh, just ask their shipwright to do it; if what I've heard is right, he could have it fixed in the time it takes to blink," Foxy scoffed, taking his seat again.

"Not an exaggeration, I've seen him work miracles in the time I've been sailing with them," Bartolomeo sighed wistfully, stars twinkling in his eyes at the memory. "Anyway," Zoro cut in. "Who are we waiting for besides Cross?"

"Well, I would say Robin, but she's already here in whatever capacity she's always here," deadpanned Merry, still not looking up from her notes. Not even the arm that materialized on top of her head to give everyone a jaunty wave before disintegrating drew a reaction.

"Besides her, the only other Mason on the island I can think of is Pisces, unless Anaconda decides to come too," Vivi noted. "Though, we should start calling the others to see if they're free."

"If they aren't, they had better have damn good excuses, because the loudmouth dragged us out of a good party for this," came a new voice. All present turned to the entrance to see Boa Sandersonia in her hybrid form slither her way in through one of the skull's eye holes, with Tashigi, Koala, and Popora on her back. She shifted back into human form immediately before staring down at the two of them.

"And for the record, that is the first and last time I act like a Yuda Palanquin Bearer without charging for it," she deadpanned in the same tone of voice that had just interrupted.

"Thank you for the ride regardless," Tashigi bit out before drawing Shigure. "But seeing as I feel better and I don't think too many people have seen me, I've had just about enough of this nonsense."

One solid swipe broke the wooden cast around her leg clean in two, and another cut the eyepatch clean from her face. She sighed in relief before limping over to the table and sitting down, an action which Sandersonia mirrored.

"...I'm sorry, but going by who that is, does that mean that the person being considered for the Snake seat is Boa freaking Hancock of the Seven Warlords?!" Foxy demanded.

"And if all goes well, she'll be taking that seat sooner rather than later," Sandersonia confirmed, crossing her arms. "I'll explain to everyone later, but for now, let's just say that there is no love lost between us and the World Government, and my sister's 'leash' is more of a choke chain. Any issues with that?" The round of no's that circled the table could not have come faster. "Didn't think so."

"So, this is the motley crew that Cross has put together so far?" Koala mused, looking over the assembled pirates from her position leaning on the back of Sandersonia's chair. "I am both impressed at what he's managed, and in despair of the idea that you mugs are one of the best hopes the world has for getting out from under the World Government. Well done."

"Yep, we're rude, crude, and completely ragtag." Barto leaned back in his seat, his arms folded behind his head, and his grin widened a few molars. "In other words, we're a shoo-in to win!"

"And as for whoever the heck you are... I'm guessing that you're Tiger?" Apoo asked.
"Ha!" the cap-wearing young woman barked, slapping the table. "No, nono, no. No, my name—not my codename—is Koala." She flashed a sharp grin as she jabbed her thumb at herself. "I'm the Revolutionary Army's contact with the New World Masons, IE you, and Cross was insistent that I join in on this meeting, so this is probably big."

Everyone stiffened at that news, and the tension ratcheted up another notch.

Said tension dissipated a bit when Lola pointedly coughed into her fist. "Aaaalright, and I take it that that's Popora?"

Said hybrid nodded before taking his seat against in a corner of the room, looking around the gathered individuals with a guarded expression and his back to the wall. None were particularly eager to provoke the easily provokable memory manipulator.

"Then that's everyone on the island apart from Cross," she nodded sagely, standing up and heading over to pick up one of the room's Transponder Snails. "So let's see who's available off it."

A few rings later, and Lola quickly informed the remaining Masons of the importance of the meeting—significant, but not world-shatteringly so. The responses were, in general, somewhat mixed.

Dorry was available from Ox, while Broggy focused on coordinating the remaining Giant Warriors on Water 7.

"Sure thing, I'm in! GEGYAGYAGYA!"

Perona expressed her sincerest of apologies, undoubtedly fueled by the paint-stripping glare Lola was giving her the entire time, but swiftly vacated the line.

"That sounds really interesting, Bun—ah! R-Rabbit, I said Rabbit! But, I, uh… Oh, what's that Mister Fluffy? You and Mister Snippy are having a fight? I'll be right there! So sorry, but this is too important, gotta run, send me the minutes!"

Calling Smoker came with an unexpected benefit: "Yeah, I'm here, and so is Capricorn. We've been saddled with holding these jagoffs in formation. We'll try and stay out of your way, but seeing as we actually need to keep our jobs, don't expect any miracle gateways. And as for you, Pisces? I expect a thorough report upon your return."

"With all due respect, sir, you have no idea what the hell I've been through, so bite me," Tashigi snapped.

"…Cross really got you this time, didn't he?"

"Hrumph," Popora grunted in agreement.

"Thought so. Just leave him alive, Tashigi."

"He'll live," she assured him with a frigid smile. "He just won't live well."

And finally…

"I am available to attend," T-Bone wheezed. "However, I regret to inform you that neither Sagittarius nor Aquarius will be joining us; I am currently stationed in Marineford, and it seems that Sengoku has been running inventory on Marine assets, coordinating with the two of them quite intensely. Through that, they are providing cover for my attendance in this meeting, and rest assured, I will relay any important information that is shared."
And with that, the Masons all fell into patient and polite conversation (as much as possible for those involved, anyways), until finally, several additional minutes later, the door finally opened again and with minimal fanfare—only the lesser half of a brass band blasting the air—in walked Jeremiah Cross, Soundbite on his shoulder. He surveyed the gathered individuals—giving a particularly wide grin to Apoo, which the Long Arm mirrored with a grin and a salute of his own—and nodded in satisfaction.

"Alright. Everyone else here already?"

"Everyone else has been here for the last fifteen minutes, Cross," Smoker grunted impatiently. "And since this is too much fanfare even for you, I'm guessing that this is more than just recruiting a new Mason."

"Much more. But first things first." Turning to the last person anyone expected, Cross swept his cap off his head and held it over his heart. "Tashigi, you have my sincerest apologies."

The pirate-suited Marine leaned away from the Voice of Anarchy, eyes narrowed. "…why do the words I've been wanting to hear from you the entire time I've known you fill me with nothing but dread?"

"Because I was wrong."

Tashigi's grimace deepened. "Aand more dread in place of joy. Wrong about what!?"

Cross resecured his cap and dragged the brim down to shadow his eyes. "Remember what I told you about Flevance? For once the old adage was way off; Funkfreed just told me that the actions can't be attributed to stupidity because they were, in fact, straight-up malice."

That slowly sunk in, and the tension grew to a breaking point. Vivi in particular looked ready to stab a bitch, but naturally, it was Tashigi who exploded first.

"They burned the island on purpose?!" she snarled, shooting out of her seat with a hand actively strangling Shigure's hilt. "WHY!?"

"Same reason as last time."

Tashigi's eye twitched furiously. "Oh, for the love of—who did they want to kill this time?!"

Right on cue, the door opened again behind Cross, and the last member to join the meeting stepped inside.

"Me," Trafalgar Law intoned. "Any objections to me grabbing a chair?"

And lo and behold, there were none to be had, and so Law and Cross took their seats, Law settling for a normal one and Cross, at Lola's prompting, circling around to sit at the head of the table.

Once seated, the Surgeon of Death took a cursory glance around the table. "So. These are the people who've assembled to fight the World Government, huh?" With his customary smirk, Law leaned back and rested his feet on the table. "Now I see why you wanted me to join."

While several at the table sputtered, Bartolomeo just cocked a brow and took the mid-par insult in stride. "So, how much of that is for the reaction and how much of your own shit do you really believe?"

"Eh..." Law wobbled his hand. "About even, to be honest."
Barto grinned savagely. "Oh, we are gonna be real good friends."

"For those of us who aren't there to put a face to the voice, who is that and why should we care?" Smoker grunted.

"Like I said, I'll keep your secrets as long as you want me to," Cross breathed without moving his lips.

Law glanced at him in acknowledgment before answering. "'Surgeon of Death' Trafalgar Law, Captain of the Heart Pirates."

"Ahh. We have much to discuss, it seems," T-Bone spoke up.

"Less than you'd think," Law waved his hand dismissively. "Cross told me about his story on the way over here, and he mentioned that he wanted me onboard for months. So I assume you already know about me."

"After a fashion." The grim-faced Captain adopted a vicious scowl. "I was only informed of you because apparently, you have a stronger grudge than I against one Vice Admiral Vergo."

Law slowly moved his feet off of the table, sitting up straight and staring at the snail with narrowed eyes. "...what did he do to you?" Law asked quietly.

T-Bone's scowl deepened into an expression promising outright murder. "He orchestrated the slaughter of my brothers in arms, my entire fleet, for protesting a crusade of senseless violence. Not out of any sense of malice, but exclusively so he could further his own position in the Marines. I survived by sheer luck, and the incident left me scarred in more ways than one; only over the past few months have I begun to heal the disfiguration inflicted upon my mind."

Law's eyes narrowed, almost closing as he took in T-Bone's words.

"...If you get the chance to take his head before I do, it's yours," the pirate conceded. Then, from one second to the next, the shadows over Law's hat deepened, and his eyes became lanterns of death. "But make no mistake: his boss is mine..." Law clicked an inch of his blade from his sheath. "And if anyone touches him before I do—"

"Ahem," Cross, Nami, Merry, and Zoro all coughed heavily into their fists, giving the Heart Pirate Captain a flat stare.

Law considered them for a moment before sighing in defeat. "—aside from Straw Hat-ya..." And just like that his deadly demeanor was back. "Then I will leave you in a state where you will consider death to be the ultimate mercy."

"Quite understood," T-Bone replied.

"I feel the need to re-emphasize, Tiger: the process won't be fast," Cross spoke up, balancing his head on his fist and tapping his fingers on the table.

"Then I'll ask you to elaborate, 'Ophiuchus'," Law coolly responded, turning his pitiless eyes on the Masons' Warden. "You know as well as I do that the only reason I've kept living for the last eleven years is to make Donquixote Doflamingo pay for what he did."

There was a stirring around the table at that little tidbit. Cross cut through it by waving his hands placatingly and heaving a patient sigh.
"Alright, might as well head off the demands for full disclosure before they start. Not like we're not seriously flush for time anyway." The Voice of Anarchy frowned and folded his hands before his face. "Settle in and steel your stomachs, for the biography of the Heavenly Yaksha is not for the faint of heart. This all starts… uhhh…"

Cross had to take a second to grimace and count on his fingers uncertainly; supernatural memory revival aside, he'd never paid particular attention to the time frames, meaning those memories were slightly slower to jump to the fore than the rest.

"Thirty… thr—nono, thirty-one years ago." He frowned grimly once again. "Thirty-one years ago, when the World Noble Donquixote Homing made a most momentous decision, out of the legitimate goodness of his heart… a decision that would inadvertently lead to the misery and suffering of entire nations."

Law's expression was mutinous as I ran through the perils of the life and times of the Donquixote Famiglia, including but not limited to the origin of the demon in pink feathers, his rise to his position of 'Prince of Darkness', his liberal and sadistic application of the Hobby-Hobby Fruit, the fruits of the rest of his executives, and the true nature of the Tragedy of Dressrosa.

Several times over the history lecture, especially when I recapped Corazon's death, I was worried he'd lash out, and after I was done that worry lasted for a straight minute as he sat in too-tense silence. But after that minute, he sagged and sighed. "Alright, Cross… fine. You were right, I was going into this… less than fully cocked. How many more years do you expect that it'll take before we're ready?"

"Two," I immediately answered. "Assuming, of course, that everyone here intends to grow stronger over the entire course of that time."

"Of course," Law replied without hesitation, relaxing a bit more. "Two years… I can wait that much longer. Two years is nothing."

"And that should be ample time for us to plan the assault," Hina nodded in agreement. "However, if that is all we have to discuss in regards to our newest member…" She paused long enough to ensure that it was everything, which I indicated with a nod, before continuing. "What else did you call us together for, Cross?"

"That's something that's better saved for last; it's going to take a lot of discussion to hammer out the details, and the end result?"

If the way everyone watching me shivered at my grin was anything to go by, then I was certainly doing something right.

"Almost certainly more earthshaking than the entire Enies Lobby debacle. So, if anyone else has any business, let's get that out of the way first."

Looks of apprehension and eagerness were exchanged by everyone in the room—including Law, I was privately pleased to admit—and after a few more seconds, T-Bone coughed and spoke.

"Jormungandr reported yesterday that their present assignment is nearly complete; of the eight public Cipher Pols, only CP1 remains. Though really, they needn't have bothered reporting that because Sengoku has made his displeasure with the situation increasingly clear. And on a personal note, my apprentice is improving rather rapidly; she was promoted to Seagirl Apprentice, and Boss
Kabuto has alleviated our concerns regarding his dietary needs by starting to fish for Sea Kings on his own, with an increasing degree of success."

"Things are going well on our end as well!" Dorry laughed eagerly. "The progress of converting Water 7 has accelerated over the last three months, since we have a proof of concept and an extensive guide in what not to do in Skelter Bite. According to Iceburg, what Moria pulled was rough as hell, sure, and the islands are way different, especially since we'll already have a city on ours. But he says it's a big help either way, and he's been telling us where to dig and stuff, so progress is apparently good. I'd say a year, maybe two, and the city should be shipshape! Heh, might even manage to back you up with Dressrosa!"

"Mmm... no offense, but I'm honestly skeptical about that," I lamented. "There are only two ways to cross the Red Line, and I can't see an island-sized ship pulling off either of them."

"I wouldn't be so sure, Cross," Lola said, grinning. "I know a thing or two about coating ships, and one of our active projects is working on a way to submerge all of Skelter Bite. We do want to be able to see Luffy become King in person, after all."

I stared at Lola, blinking dumbly, before hanging my head with a fond sigh. "My apologies, my lingering sanity balked at the idea of an island-ship passing through the Red Line. I've since recalled how much weight the word 'impossible' has now, though."

"Heheh, rookie..." Apoo chuckled, though he quickly sobered up when I shot a look at him, backed up by Soundbite growling from my shoulder. "And, ah, well, b-besides that... we've been having some good luck with setting up the Free Feather Report. Got a printing press and roosts set up on my own ship, and I've gotten in touch with friends of mine up and down the Blues to set up bases for the Report, island and ship-bound alike."

The Roar of the Seas nodded and sat back in his chair, arms double-folded. "The Coos are ready to ditch the WEJ at a moment's notice, but we can't start production quite yet because we need to set up distribution routes and safehouses and stuff. Can't use their old ones without risking the World Government tracking them down and shooting them, after all. But!" He clapped his hands together and started rubbing them—and his extra forearms—together eagerly. "We are making excellent progress. I think we'll be spreading the truth via the written word within the month, two max."

I shot Apoo a thumbs-up. "Should be all kinds of fun," I said. Then I turned to the most senior of the Damned. "Now, judging by your second ship, I take it that you've increased your total crew substantially."

"FEHFEHFEHFEHFEH! Second ship? We're collecting so many crews I'm planning to head over to Water Seven after this to add the Lead Foxy to accompany the Brass! Though..." Foxy hedged, wobbling his hand. "I'll admit, that total's been inflated by the crews that all but threw themselves at our feet to avoid getting recruited by Shiki. They all just knew you guys were going to fight him and wanted no part of that. I'm letting them cool their heels for now, but once a few start making noises about wanting to cut ties or they obviously don't work out, I'll let those ones go. As it is, though, our numbers are quite good, we're approaching an even thousand at a healthy pace."

"Excellent. Your next priority will be increasing quality instead. You've been recruiting the best, so work on making them even better," I said.

Foxy didn't hesitate to nod and smirk.

"Alright. And Cancer, what's the latest statistic for corrupt Marines and fake pirates?"
"Well, to start with the 'fake pirates'—" And man, you could really hear the air quotes there. "Their activity has been decreasing ever since Shiki's defeat. At this point, in the first half of the Grand Line... I can't believe I'm saying this, but they've practically disappeared. Still a few idiots here and there, obviously, but the decrease is ridiculous..."

"'Fake pirates.' Tch." I rolled my eyes as Law made no mystery of his disbelief. "I actually told Bepo there was no way you meant everything that comes out of your mouth, but are you telling me that you really buy that particular brand of shit you spout?"

I snapped a finger up to keep anyone from barking in anger, and instead gave our newest member a flat look. "Tiger, a quick question: who exactly taught you the definition of 'pirate' that you're using?"

Law barely opened his mouth before his jaw snapped shut and his face slowly turned red. What emotion caused it, I couldn't tell you save that it was steadily ticking Doffy's account ever higher.

"Meanwhile," I continued, leaning back in my seat with a chuckle. "Our definition of who a pirate should be comes from Luffy's mentor. You know, the Emperor?"

"KINDA OUTRANKS YER SOURCE~!" Soundbite sang before cocking an eyestalk. "Though, now that I think about it… Seriously, who'd you EXPECT TO FIND ON AN ISLAND LIKE THIS?"

"Weaklings and idealistic morons, with a few people actually worth a damn scattered throughout," he answered without hesitation.

"Harsh!" Lola piped up with an unflinching grin. "And also not entirely untrue, so whatever." She then glanced at the snail. "But still, speaking of how clean we like to keep our streets…?"

"Capricorn informs you that the highers-up do not like that they're having this newfound success thanks in no small part to turncoat Marines and other pirates... but Skelter Bite's tip line has led to so many more arrests that they don't have a choice but bite their tongues. So for now, Capricorn advises you to keep up the good work."

"Though of course," Tashigi added with a frown. "That doesn't mean that anyone else has to know why we're having so much more success, does it?"

"Trust me," Smoker scoffed. "No chance of that ever happening without Long-Arm getting creative with his writing, or us finding the right patsy. Sengoku made it clear to both the troops and that overgrown birdbrain Morgan that if one word of this ever slips out to the world, he'll have him and his source shot where they stand... honestly, it's actually allowed us to patch several leaks." A grimace. "Some of which we really should have caught sooner."

"And for the record, we Marines have fully acknowledged that our shit is not in order, so Capricorn would appreciate it if nobody asked us to elaborate," Hina added, her 'appreciate' coming across loud and clear as 'will make you regret'. "But that aside, Capricorn believes that is everything?"

For a moment, I honestly thought that it was. But then…

"Not quite," Boa Sandersonia suddenly cut, running a hand back over her head. "Not. Not quite. I..." She hissed out a heavy breath, tongue flicking out to taste at the air. "There's something I need to say. Really should say, I guess."

The verdette shook her head slightly and straightened in her seat, her expression flinty and
determined. "The reason that we've been unwilling to commit fully to you all before now is that we thought it was too much of a risk. There were so many lives on the line if it all went wrong, ours and others'. But... the entire time I've been on this island, I've been... pretty much partying. Drinking, unwinding. And that might sound like pure irresponsibility to you, but to me? It is literally the most relaxed I've been in years. The first time in... as long as I can remember that I've ever been able to actually let myself breathe free while I'm on my own.

"And thinking about it, I realize that a big part of why I was able to do that was thanks to you. It's taken this long to sink in, but I get it now: we're allies, we don't have to stand alone. And... I think that, now, even if we are eventually wiped out... it'll have been to stand for something important instead of just being put down like another pirate dog."

Sandersonia ran her hand through her hair again before nodding firmly, baring her fangs. "My sisters are probably going to kick my tail for this later, but you all deserve to know, so here's the truth: My name is Boa Sandersonia, and my sister, Cobra, is Boa Marigold. And our third sister, whose seat of 'Snake' we've been tentatively filling until now... is Boa Hancock, the Pirate Empress, Captain of the Kuja Pirates, and Queen of Amazon Lily."

Silence. And then...

"Called it," Foxy smugly stated.

"You and your damn information network..." Apoo growled, reaching into his pocket and tossing out a sizeable roll. "Here. Take it, you damn bloodsucker."

Grinning, Foxy took the money. He immediately tossed it out the window, a disgusted look on his face. "With actual bills, dammit, not counterfeit!"

"Fucking smartass bloodsucker..."

"Hina misses the days when the world made sense..."

"And people wonder why I blow through a crate of smokes a month."

"You really do need a better hobby, Commodore."

"I don't want to hear it, Captain 'Logistics is seriously considering discontinuing capes entirely'."

"Grk..."

"Best part is that I actually brought 'em in myself," Barto leered, crossing his arms behind his head as he kicked up his feet on the table. "So if we get a Warlord on our side, it's all on me!"

Merry glanced up from her notebook with an oh so innocently cocked eyebrow. "Weren't you destined to be gravel if Cross hadn't changed her mind?"

"... shut up!"

"The height of wit and sophistication as ever, Rooster," Nami chuckled to herself.

Sandersonia blinked numbly. "And... we are just accepting that and moving right along, apparently."

"In case you've forgotten, this operation recruits islands on a regular basis, and technically, they already have a Warlord in their midst," Koala hummed, happily swaying side to side behind the
snake-Zoan. "So, either present an Emperor or move along."

"…"

"Thought so."

"Right, then," I said, letting my mirth show on my face once more. "If that's all that we have, let's get started. And I assure you, what I'm about to say? You are \textit{not} going to be able to shrug off."

I leaned forwards, and my skull-splitting grin prompted everyone else to lean back.

"Let me tell you all about it… my plan to \textit{flip the world.}" A pause. "Again."

Everyone's full attention was on me, waiting with bated breath for me to speak.

"\textit{Puru puru puru puru!}\"

And then a snail rang, drawing scowls and breaking the tension… riiiiight up until they realized that it was Soundbite ringing. Tashigi's ire was the first to fade in favor of guarded curiosity.

"You don't give out Soundbite's number lightly, who is that?" she asked.

"Hopefully, a key contact in my plan," I answered smoothly. "Sorry that I'll have to save explaining for a little while longer, but if this is who I hope it is, I'll need to have a nice, long talk about extraterritorial jurisdiction. Excuse me for a minute, I'd hate to ruin the surprise."

As Soundbite shielded us with noise, I picked up the receiver, but even as I began conversing with the person on the other end, Soundbite made sure I heard Tashigi's muttered remark of fear and incredulity.

"…how is it that he can even make \textit{political jargon} sound terrifying?"

-o-

Several stories below, outside of The Lucky Rabbit, much less earthshaking events were occurring.

"Nyuuu…"

"\textit{Yeah, I get ya,}" Pappug sighed, the snail he was using eyeing the unspeakable carnage in front of him. "\textit{I mean, we're selling a lot, which is great… but it's all going down one gullet. Short-term gain, long-term loss.}\"

"And on top of that, we're probably going to run out before anyone else drops by…"

"\textit{Don't worry about that, Kuroobi and Chew are prepping another batch as we speak.}\"

"Mmm…" Hachi hummed, not particularly reassured.

"\textit{And I sent Keimi off to buy ingredients in town.}\"

"Nyu—" Hachi began to groan.

"\textit{With one of the Skull Mist Pirates as an escort.}\"

"Oh. That's all right, then," Hachi said, relaxing a bit more. For all of two seconds. "Ah! Luffy, wait, that's a plate, not food!"
Seamlessly, Luffy slid the plate out of his mouth… cleaned of every scrap of food, of course. Several more bills, grumbles, and punches traded between the watching crowd that had assembled outside of The Lucky Rabbit; the vast majority of said bills were headed into the register bound to the chest of a comb-touting duck-hybrid.

At the moment, the Straw Hats had all assembled from their various escapades across the newfound pirate utopia to await the return of Cross and their officers, along with any news of the meeting and when it would occur. They'd even been joined by some (or at least, one) of the Barto Club officers while they waited. All of the Straw Hats were in good cheer… though not necessarily all in good health.

"Mmph-mph-mmmph-mph?" Raphe asked… or attempted to ask, anyways. The swath of bandages being tied around her everything had rendered her a little muffled.

"'You're actually fine with Nami making you do that?' That's what she asked," Apis translated offhandedly, far more enraptured with the spectacle/horror show/event that was Luffy continuing his demolition of Hachi's stock.

"Huh?" Billy looked up from his bet-taking in confusion before grinning shyly. "Oh, no no, Nami's not making me do this, I'm just doing it for her is all. I might not have known her long, but I know that this would make her happy!…it… it will make her happy, right?"


"'Only if you've gotten the odds right and turn a profit,' he said."

"He has, he's making money wing over talon," Chopper nodded sagely as he continued binding up his crewmate. The reindeer then cocked his eyebrow at his patients. "Now, what have we all learned today?"

"Mmph-mmph-mmMMPH-mmMPH-mmph..." was the general droning of the mummified TDWS.

"Yes, exactly: 'do not attack people you know to be leagues above your weight class like morons',' Chopper nodded sagely in agreement.

"Actually, what they said was—" Apis began, before hastily coughing into her fist when Chopper shot her a look. "Ah, no, on second thought, you got that exactly right."

"For their sakes, it had better be…" Sanji huffed without looking up from the stand's griddle. At least, until he gave Luffy a curious look. "By the way, Luffy, when you passed by the Headquarters, did Lola tell you when the meeting was going to happen?"

"Mmph-mmph—!" the Rubber-man tried, his mouth clogged by another plate of fried octo-flesh.

"For the record, because he's only monkey-like and not actually a monkey, I can't tell you what he's saying," Apis deadpanned.

Sanji huffed and rolled his eyes and snapped his leg up and rammed his foot into Luffy's distended mouth, collapsing the mass within with a resounding crack.

For a moment, everything froze as everyone stared at Luffy, awaiting his response… and then he swallowed everything that was in his mouth and spat his (uninjured) tongue out. "Grooooss! Sanjii! You know I hate china! It doesn't taste as good as porcelain!"

WHAM!
Even on a place such as Skelter Bite, there was a limit to how much nonsense the denizens could tolerate without face-faulting. Aside from the other Straw Hats, of course.

"Luffy."

"Mm?" Luffy blinked at his cook before chuckling and rubbing the back of his head. "Oh, right! Yeah, I totally forgot to ask, so I have no idea. Sorry!"

"Typical..." the cook groaned in dismay.

Meanwhile, the other, multi-limbed chef was staring at his customer with a vicious twitch in his eye.

"He... He just ate a plate. And he's not even hurt. How in the—!?"

"Well, waste not, as they say," Pappug dryly remarked, sounding visibly distracted.

"Mmph, my one pet peeve might be making sure nobody wastes food but even I find this ridiculous..." Sanji groused, before glancing at the snail the starfish's voice was coming from. "And by the way, Pappug, where are you? We could use an extra set of hands here!"

"Sorry, I'm at my workbench back on Takoyaki 8, working on the finishing touches for this express order. And not the food kind. I'll be there as soon as I'm done."

"Nyu..." Hachi sighed, hanging his head. "Well, if you're doing actual work, then it can't be helped. Just hurry up, and make sure our workers don't slack, alright?"

"You got it. Be there in fifteen, boss."

"Well, at least it won't just be us, then," Sanji pointed out.

"Nyuuu... maybe, but that still doesn't change the fact that it's only Luffy who's eating!" Hachi moaned. "I'd give two arms for just one more customer!"

"Tell you what: Put 'em in your next batch and you have a deal!"

Sanji's eyes widened fractionally, and his cigarette fell out of slack lips to impact in the dirt below, on account of a female voice hitting his eardrums. Meanwhile, Luffy drew a lot of attention by doing the one thing he never did: he stopped eating, glancing up from his plate of takoyaki at the cart's newcomer.

Then, as they were wont to do, the hearts in Sanji's eyes sprang to life and, brandishing his knife, he spun into a boneless pirouette, which prompted Luffy to shrug and go back to his devouring.

"Right away, beautiful la—!"

"Get your head in the game!" Hachi snapped, smacking the love cook upside the head with his ladle.

Rubbing the back of his head, Sanji muttered, "Right, sorry," and went back to work, though he kept stealing glances at the new customer. "So, what can I get you my dear, wonderful, beautiful —?" Sanji's expression faltered ever so slightly as he realized that said new customer was hunched over the cart's counter and sporting a sizeable amount of wrinkles. But nevertheless, he managed to finish ever so smoothly with a respectful "Madam?"

"Well—!"

"Oh, I would say that anything halfway edible would be a safe bet, Sanji," came Robin's cool drawl
as she leaned on the bar near the chef and rested her chin on her palm. "I would suggest that you prepare for her as though you were preparing for Luffy: exceptional appetite, unexceptional taste. Isn't that right... 'Glutton' Jewelry Bonney?"

The crone blinked once, twice, and then threw her head back and laughed, her age melting away to reveal the form of the second female Supernova, as well as the only female captain in their number, the bubblegum-haired, well-pierced 'Glutton' Jewelry Bonney.

"ZAZAZAZAZAZA! Oh, man, the SBS wasn't exaggerating you guys at all! I mean, c'mon, do you know how many asshats can recognize me when I ain't wearing my face?! Nice one! Real nice!" Abruptly, the laughter ended and Bonney favored Sanji and Hachi with a look as serious as a nuclear winter. "But yeah, for reals, I've survived the last week on water, hardtack, and salt pork. I want all the takoyaki you can make as fast as you can make it. Need a little snack to tide me over before really digging into whatever slop is served on this island. So no offense to ya?"

There was a blur of motion, and Hachi flinched back as Bonney slammed her boot-clad heel on the cart's countertop.

"But if I don't like what I get, I'll save you both the trouble of havin' to worry about the blockade by kicking you over the Red Line."

Sanji took that for the challenge that it was, rolling up his sleeves and giving Hachi a wry look. "I'll tell you this, octopus: if you can walk away from this island and say that your stand managed to satisfy or at least tide over the two biggest stomachs of this generation, that'll be all the long-term gain that you need."

Hachi's eyes lit up and his lips split into a grin, even as Luffy and Bonney exchanged their own glances. The crowd shivered in anticipation as fire and lightning flew between the two big eaters' eyes. Sanji chuckled.

"Pappug? Whatever order those two are doing? Tell them to double it."

"Oh, seabiscuits," Pappug groaned; he didn't need to be there, didn't need to see as Hachi and Sanji began stockpiling more takoyaki than they put out, didn't need to observe the audience's eagerness to know how much trouble was coming.

The ship's guards were present to observe the start of the Supernovas' clash, and though Boss stuck around to observe, his four disciples took the opportunity to abscond elsewhere; no small reason for that being that Mikey had 'subtly' voiced (read: fearfully mumbled) his worry that if the cooks ran out of octopoid flesh, they'd be next. And while all of them wanted to shrug the jokester's words off, Sanji's joking remarks about dipping into their 'emergency food supplies' had pushed their survival instincts a little too far, prompting them to quietly head for a less populated setting.

As it turned out, the other side of The Lucky Rabbit's plaza was mercifully deserted, save for a pair of familiar faces.

Or rather...

"THERE YOU ARE! WE'VE BEEN WAITING FOREVEEEEER!"/"Indeed, even my most luxurious feathers were starting to ruffle from laying dormant for so long."

Beaks, as it were.

The Dugongs tried to question their presence, but abandoned the effort after a moment due to their bandages.
"Hello, boys," Isaiah greeted smoothly, sweeping his wing out in a polite wave. "I hope we're not catching you at a bad time, but we have a special delivery."

None of the dugongs said anything, too busy staring at his companion, and the Swagger-tribe South Bird's collected demeanor cracked into a disgruntled scowl.

"Don't ask him. It's not worth it. Please, for the love of sanity and my immaculately chiseled complexion, do not ask him why—"

"I'M GLAD YOU ASKED!" Terry roared in his usual fashion. As opposed to the unusual fashion he was wearing, consisting of two belts of shotgun shells around his chest and a bandanna around his head. "BECAUSE WE'RE HERE INCOGNITO, I'M DOING MY BEST TO BE POWERFULLY SUBTLE! WHILE WE SPEAK, CALL ME HALE CAESAR!"

Attention turned ever so slowly to the other South Bird, whose beak was buried in his wing.

Overcome with curiosity, Mikey yanked down the bandages covering his mouth, because he just had to ask. "And you are?"

"Embarrassed to be seen with him. Obviously."

"Obviously, obviously," the Teenage Dugong Warrior Squad parroted, nodding sagely as though such a statement were the most obvious thing in the world. Which, frankly, was not inaccurate.

"OH, SHUT UP, YOU WEAK-BEAKEDED BLOWHARDS!" 'Caesar' squawked indignantly.

"We don't have beaks," the collectively de-muffled Dugongs deadpanned.

"And I am not weak," Isaiah stated just as flatly, leaning in close to glare at his partner-in-wing. "Would you like me to remind you of that fact?"

"...SO LIKE HE SAID, WE HAVE A DELIVERY FOR YOU! AND BY YOU—" Here Terry jabbed his wing at the Dugongs. Or rather, one of the Dugongs. "I MEAN YOU!"

Leo blinked in surprise, looking around for a second before pointing at his own muzzle. "You… You mean me?"

"Precisely," Isaiah nodded sagely, cocking his brow ever so handsomely. "To confirm, you are the only blade-wielder on your crew without a high-quality blade that matches your skill level, yes?"

"Uhh…" Leo hedged. "I mean, I don't know about Brook's, but—"

"It's lasted for fifty years, I think he's good. Anyway?" Donny cut in, rolling his flipper.

The birds exchanged looks, then began flapping their wings. Their perch, an overturned rowboat converted into a bench, tilted back ever so slightly to reveal a black bundle beneath. Taking the obvious hint, Leo grabbed it and looked it over as the birds re-settled, then unwrapped the package's cover. Then he nearly fumbled what he was holding, a strangled gurgle matching the rest of his siblings' gasps.

"Holy mother of pearl!" Donny hissed.

"No freaking way!" Raphey yelped.

"Th-Those are—! Uh…?" Mikey's shock faded into confusion, head tilted. "Wait, remind me, what were these things called again?"
'Oto…and Kogarashi…' Leo inadvertently answered with a reverential whisper, gently ghosting his flipper over the mirrored triangular blades of the literally legendary swords he was holding. Then, with great reluctance, the sword-dugong tore his gaze away from the weapons he was worshipping to stare at the South Birds in total confusion. "But-But, how!? Luffy and Bartolomeo knocked them out of Shiki's hands! These should still be at the bottom of the sea!"

"Simply a matter of a particularly skilled fisherman looking in the right place," Isaiah said, before grimacing and shuddering. "You'll have to forgive the tardiness of the delivery, but the hilts were nothing short of revolting, new sheaths had to be fashioned—"

"HERE YOU GO!" Terry offered, tossing another bundle at Leo's... well, tail.

"And of course, we had to treat them properly so that they could handle extended bouts of underwater combat without adverse effects," Isaiah concluded with a proud flip of his plumage. "You're welcome."

"A-A-And... what, Jonathan's just giving these to us? To me?!" Leo squawked incredulously, his jaw hanging slack. "I-I mean, if Tashigi finds out that I have these things, she'll—!"

"She was informed of the decision several weeks ago," Isaiah assured him. "She was livid, of course, but a hefty dose of rank-pulling served to cool her temper." The bird then cocked his feather-brow. "Of course, you could always just give them to her—"

"I've had these swords in my flippers for less than five minutes but if you even try and touch them I will kill everyone on this island and then myself," Leo droned emotionlessly, prompting his fellow dugongs to give him a wide berth.

"WELL, I WAS GOING TO ASK IF YOU LIKED THEM, BUT NOW I'M JUST GOING TO FLEE!" Terry squawked, flapping into the air. "I MIGHT BE POWERFUL, BUT I'M SURE NOT STUPID!"

Isaiah nodded his head side to side before joining his fellow avian in the air. "I'm not sure I agree with the last part of that. But for now, farewell and good slicing, Straw Hats! My final gift to you is that you get to watch my glorious tailfeathers ripple in the wind as I depart."

"NEVER FORGET TO EXHIBIT YOUR OVERWHELMING POWEEEEER!"

And with their beaks pointing firmly to the south, the two birds vanished north into the golden mists. The dugongs silently stared after them, until Mikey blew out a snort. "Well, they're still out of their minds."

"Thank you, Captain Obvious," Raphey shot back. "Did you expect anything else?"

Mikey scoffed and folded his flippers. "The Spanish Inquisition, of course."

"NOBODY EXPECTS THE SPANISH INQUISITION!"

"GAAAH!" Mikey screamed, leaping half the height of the inn. Terry, now somehow clad in scarlet robes and perched right above the dugong, nodded in satisfaction before flying off again.

Leo briefly gave his panicking brother in blubber a decidedly unimpressed stare, then turned his reverential gaze back down to the swords, the legends he was holding. He hefted the weapons in his flippers, testing their weight and examining their shapes.
"Well, I certainly won't deny that those beasts are an upgrade over these geezers," Raphey whistled, pulling Leo's now-defunct blades off of his back and replacing them with Oto and Kogarashi's new sheaths. "At least now you'll be able to give us an actual challenge during sparring time."

"After an adjustment period, anyways..." Donny mused, curiously scanning the swords' shape. "You're used to katanas, and those sabers had the same general shape, but... These things are a lot heavier and a lot less flexible. You've got the muscle for it, but do you have the know-how?"

"Mm... at the moment, no... but I think I can figure it out," Leo nodded to himself, tilting the blades side to side and spinning them around in his flippers, getting a feel for the balance. "After all, Boss is all about us learning as much as we can, every second of every day, and it's not like we won't be here for awhile. Really, it shouldn't be too tough. All it takes is a little elbow grease and—!

Leo swiped the right sword, Kogarashi, through the air—SMASH!

And then he and his siblings all froze at the blast of razor sharp wind that flew out from the blade's path, carving a smooth trench in the wall of a nearby ship-building. The dugongs blinked once, twice, and then a newly returned Mikey slowly leaned back in to give the swords a wary once-over.

"Did... you mean to do that?" he asked nervously.

"Noooo... no, I did not," Leo confirmed in just as weak a voice, staring at his new blades with newfound awe. Said awe doubled when he gave the swords a few testing slashes with only a fraction of his strength, and every time a visible ripple of air accompanied the blur of metal. "What in Charybdis...?"

For about a minute more, they stood staring at the blades.

"Maybe it has to do with Shiki?" Donny hypothesized. "I mean, they were part of his body for twenty years, maybe they're still used to flying and stuff?"

"Well, whatever it is, it's awesome!" Mikey crowed.

"Heck yeah!" Raphey concurred, pumping her fists with no small amount of enthusiasm. "You've got a ranged attack now! You're as good as the rest of us!"

"...yeah..." Leo confirmed, nodding slowly as he turned to face them. "So... remind me again. What was it exactly that you said when I first told you I managed to use a razor wind attack?"

The other dugongs' expressions all slowly fell slack, abject terror blooming on their faces.

"I, uh, c-can't rightly recall..." Donny chuckled sheepishly, leading his siblings in ever so subtly inching away from their twitching brother.

"I do believe... your exact words were..." The ground at Leo's tail was shredded by a terse twitch of his blades. "A... fluke was it? That I would be lucky to ever even tread air, much less slice it?"

"I, ah, t-that sounds... maybe a bit familiar..." Raphey hedged, her eyes glancing every which way in search of the best route of escape.

"B-But, uh, h-hey, you know us, right? T-That was just trash talk, yeah?" Mikey pleaded, smiling in that way that shows he clearly wasn't buying what he was selling. "J-Just pokin' fun, no big whoop! Nothing personal, just-just business, right!... right?!"
"Oh, yeah, don't worry. This? This isn't business at all…" Leo's face slowly split in a nice and nasty grin, Oto and Kogarashi positively humming malice. "This is pure, 100% pleasure."

The dugong pupils' pupils all dilated dramatically. "Oh shi—!"

"GULF STREAM!"

"KRA-KOW!

"AAAAGH!"

Back at the takoyaki stand, Bonney's head jerked up, her eyes drawn in a frown at the screams of animal-on-animal carnage she'd just heard. That didn't mean she stopped eating, of course, she just looked up in interest, but the fact that anything had diverted her attention at all was a noteworthy feat.

Luffy, however, shared no such interest. "Eh, it's fine," the rubber-man said around his own takoyaki. "Our crew does this all the time."

"So does everyone else here," Hachi added with a raised finger while the rest remained focused on his grill. "If it gets bad enough, the Skull Mists will handle it."

"Mmm, fair enough…" Bonney nodded her head, absently flexing a skewer between her fingers. Glancing at it as though only just realizing what she was doing, she ran it across her lips to get the last traces of sauce off and then threw it behind her. An action that had unforeseen consequences.

"YEARGH! MY AAAASS! DEAR NEPTUNE, WHO JUST STABBED ME IN THE ASS!?"

The world-infamous glutton blinked in dumb surprise as an orange-bandana'd blur shot past her, howling bloody murder the whole time. "Uh… sorry?"

"Psh, not a problem," Boss waved his flipper dismissively. "If he can't handle keeping up his Iron Shell long enough to block a few inches of wood, then he's got it coming."

"…Oh, fine, whatever, I admit it: you guys are the nuttiest crew this side of the Grand Line. Probably one of the strongest too." Bonney's chewing slowed slightly, her expression becoming thoughtful. "And I haven't even met that loudmouth Cross yet, so that's saying something. He really as crazy as he sounds?"

Luffy gave her an odd look before grinning brightly. "Oh, no way! Cross is way crazier, he just acts nice for everyone else! And he knows a lot of weird stuff too! Ask him anything you want, I bet he can tell you what you want to know! Unless he doesn't know it or something, that's happened too, but eh." And with a lackadaisical shrug, he went back to his chowdown.

Bonney blinked at the rubber-man before nodding slowly and staring up upward, idly chewing on a fresh skewer. "Anything, huh…"

The stick snapped between her viciously grinning teeth.

"Ya know what, Straw Hat? I think I might just take you up on that offer."

-o-

"Well? What do you think?"

I spread my arms invitingly, politely ignoring the looks that everyone was giving me, which were a
healthy blend of stunned, gobsmacked, and flat-out unconscious. Granted, that last one was on account of Nami zapping Foxy when he started getting too loud, but still. As it was, it was pretty cheering to see that even my own crewmates were utterly gobsmacked, with even Zoro's jaw hanging loose. Heck, Vivi was already halfway to comatose as it was, her eyes glossy as they stared at nothing, and her fingers twitching and gesturing in a futile attempt to work out some flaw in my plan based on her own experiences with Crocodile's scheming. Needless to say, the overall silence gratified me to no end.

"I… think that if you're actually serious about this plan… then you should know that charging Enies Lobby to rescue Robin was downright normal by comparison," our three-sword-wielding swordsman finally managed to drag out.

"At the risk of spending the next several weeks being glared at by my lieutenant… I agree with Sidewinder," Smoker said.

"And for once, so do I!" Tashigi snapped, slamming her palms on the table. "Jeremiah Cross, you are insane! This entire scheme is madness! I-It's demented! Deranged! Barmy!"

"Oooh, fancy word."

"SHUT UP, SNAIL!" the Marine snapped at an unrepentant Soundbite without turning her glare from me. "Cross, out of all the plans you've ever devised, this has to easily be the most ludicrous, outrageous, completely unhinged one yet!"

I left that sentence hanging for a bit before leaning back in my seat and folding my arms behind my head. "…and?"

Tashigi's eye twitched viciously, before she collapsed back in her seat with a look of utter defeat. "…and Themis save me but it could actually work."

"She's right. Actually, incredibly right," Nami breathed in awe, her eyes scrunched in intense thought. "I mean, it's risky as all hell and relies on a lot of moving parts, but the basic concept behind this whole thing is…"

"Capricorn questions exactly how much you realize that this will shake the world," Hina demanded, no small amount of panicked awe transmitted through her Transponder Snail's eyes. "As in, literally the entire world. The… The mere implications—!"

"The 'mere implications'," Sandersonia breathed heavily, and I leaned way back. Not only was she panting like an overheated retriever, but her cheeks were flushed and her pupils were blown way wide and oh dear lord I'm fucked. "Have me three seconds away… from leaping clean across this table… and jumping Blondie's—!"

"Okay, naptime."

THUNK!

I heaved a sigh of extreme relief at the sight of Sandersonia collapsed face-first onto the table, snoozing peacefully thanks to the hand Koala had clamped on the Anaconda Zoan's shoulder. "Thanks, Koala. That almost got explicit."

"Yeeeeeah," she said, coughing into her fist and oh shit she was blushing. "Let's just wrap this up quick and avoid giving me any more reasons to be attracted to you, alright? Because you've just laid out the step-by-step instructions for achieving one of my wildest fantasies and I honestly don't know
how much longer I'll be able to hold myself back either."

"Eep."

"My, my, what would Sanji say about two beautiful women swooning over you, dear brother?"

"Unless you have something to contribute, out before I get Soundbite to play you a full marathon of documentaries on how aliens helped shape my home world's history." I waited until a flurry of petals indicated Robin's departure to slump in my chair in defeat. "Gweh… alright, anyone else got anything to add?"

"Apa… actually, I do." Apoo raised a finger. "Why do you need us for this, Cross? I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm all for it, but couldn't you Straw Hats easily do it yourself?"

"Heh, you're actually right about that, Ap-ya," Law waved his hand dismissively. "The Straw Hats could just run this fast and dirty on their own, true… but in case you missed it, this is more than that. Cross is aiming for something that will last beyond the Straw Hat's departure. We're talking about changing society here, meaning it needs to be bigger than 'it's just the Straw Hats again'. For that, we need maximum impact…"

"And for that, we need the Supernovas. All of them," I picked up, slowly giving everyone at the table a hard look. "This is going to be just as earthshaking as Enies Lobby, yes, but only if things are right. Too little preparation, and the gig's a dud. We need every Supernova on this island, on Sabaody, at the same time. Hell, we need every pirate possible on Sabaody. Our best shot at pulling this off is to positively glut the archipelago with more pirates than it's seen in living history. We do that… then we can show the world something truly spectacular. Something that will be branded in the heart and soul of humanity for centuries." I then scowled and sank in my seat. "Which, of course, is all impeded by one. Fucking. Obstacle."

"The blockade…" T-Bone nodded solemnly. "Through which Sabaody is more devoid of pirates than it has ever been in living memory."

"Which is what we'll handle at the meeting," Lola picked up, turning to one of the Skull Mists in the room. "All of the Supernovas have arrived at this point, right?"

The man glanced up in thought, counted on his fingers, and then glanced back. "Basically, yeah. According to the News Coos, Hawkins is the only one not physically on Skelter Bite, and his ship crested the horizon about half an hour ago."

"Perfect," she said, rising from her seat. "Ophiuchus, if there are no more matters to discuss for the time being, I need to make sure that our meeting grounds will be ready."

"Well, I don't have anything else," I said. A quick glance around, and—

"I do want to bring up one more thing," Smoker sighed. "Koala. Your presence here and our organizations' affiliation. Explain."

The temperature in the room dropped a good ten degrees, all centered on Koala. "First off, I don't care how much you're working for the betterment of mankind, if you're not in my chain of command, don't tell me what to do," she flatly responded. "And second, Cross and Dragon are the ones calling the shots here. I met up with the Straw Hats by coincidence before they came here and only followed them into this because I got caught up in their momentum; everyone in the Revolutionary Army is under orders not to interfere with the New World Masons unless the Straw Hats or someone in one of the Zodiads explicitly asks."
"And we will be addressing that later!" Sandersonia hissed intently, snapping back to consciousness out of nowhere so she could look at Koala. "I, uh, actually need to call my sisters back ASAP, so if you don't mind—!" And before anyone could say otherwise, she was out the Headquarters' eyehole in a flash of green.

"...aaand I think we're done," I drawled. "Alright, folks, meeting adjourned. Let's turn in and get some sleep, because tomorrow..." I donnéd a mix of a grin and a grimace. "We're gonna have a real fight on our hands."

~13 Hours Later~

A couple of times in my life, I may have wondered what it was like to try and get some sleep in a place with the moniker 'the city that never sleeps'.

Now, I probably didn't need to wonder anymore, given how my attempt to sleep had been scuttled into spotty tossing and turning by the all-pervasive hum of noise that infiltrated our rooms. Admittedly, it was a bit nostalgic to have the noises of city life back, but still, the night before a big meeting with a bunch of, most likely, less than even-tempered pirates? After spending a solid year adapting to the sounds of a ship at sea? Not quite so pleasant. Thank God my headphones were rated for Soundbite and worse.

But anyway, the night had come and gone and the day had begun, and everyone on the island was anxious to get to the whole reason that we had assembled here to begin with. Specifically, our own crew, who ran the gamut from primped and primed to utterly disheveled—and in one case that wasn't Brook, a zombie straight from the old Thriller Bark. So... perfectly normal morning, then.

"Alright!" Vivi—one of the primped ones, obviously—barked imperiously from the head of our crowd. "Is everyone on their best behavior?"

A chorus of affirmative responses sounded out, I myself donning perfectly respectable and innocent grin, without any hints of mischief whatso—

"Knock it off. All of you, right now."

A round of chuckles burst out from us at that particularly futile warning, and even Vivi had to let out a few giggles.

"Yeah, I know, exercise in futility, still had to try. But nevertheless!" She plastered on a slightly desperate smile. "At the very least please try and avoid making a scene? At least at first?"

"We will not punch anyone not a part of this crew for the first five minutes," Boss solemnly swore with a respectful nod, which his disciples mimicked.

"What he said," Luffy nodded as well.

"...that's the best I'm going to get, isn't it?"

"Eee-YUP," Soundbite confirmed with an utterly shameless grin.

Vivi heaved a sigh that was as put upon as it was fond. After a moment to compose herself, she gestured for us to follow. "Fiiiine, fine. Let's just get this fiasco over with; the sooner we're done, the sooner I can replace the clothes I just know you're all about to ruin."

That was the signal for us to spill on out of the inn section of The Lucky Rabbit and back to the main lobby; we were among the last ones to head out, and none of us were inclined to waste any more
time getting there. I took a few moments to appreciate the vaulted cathedral ceiling—and for that matter, the foresight to retrieve Gif to get pictures of all of this—before heading in the direction of a wide staircase. A gaping passageway led on from there, clearly designed to allow entire crews to pass through with a minimum of shoulder-bumping. And due to the probably intentional placement of the main lobby, it was only a minute or so of walking before the end of the tunnel came into view, letting us out into the ruins of Freezer 900 which the Skull Mist Pirates had repurposed into Skelter Bite's first and finest bar.

The frozen den of thieves, murderers and all-around scum of the earth: Helheim.

(I'd actually pointed out to Lola that in mythology, Helheim was more for anyone who died through means that weren't combat, like kids or the elderly. Lola's ever-so-mature response had been to blow a raspberry at me, which Soundbite naturally found hilarious.)

Truly, the place had to be one of the most unique pieces of architecture I'd seen thus far. Certainly, it was the most compact.

Starting from the outside working in, the first part of the bar's structure to be seen was the outer walkway that ringed the titanic pit that had once held Oars. Originally barren concrete, it had been refurbished with strings of lanterns illuminating the dark, and dozens of tables and countertops had been erected to form a circular dining area, which was currently populated by a vastly colorful (and quite boisterous) cast of characters. And said dining area wasn't constrained to the second dimension either, and extended upward courtesy of two concentric wooden walkways attached to the walls above. All three levels were haphazardly connected via seemingly randomly placed stairs, ladders, rope ladders, ziplines… really, I think you get the gist of transportation on this island by now.

The section of the wall that had been blown out by the freezer's old inhabitant creating his own door had been mostly repaired, but the blatant patch job was mostly irrelevant, covered as it was by industrial-sized beer barrels, all managed and guarded with professional intensity. And I mean seriously professional, as in I've seen Marines who were less well-armed and armored than those guys… which, honestly, considering how Zoro was staring at the barrels with a particularly savage grin, might honestly have been under-kill.

And at the bottom of the shaft, we could see the giant patrons enjoying their time and knocking back entire casks at a time… and looking up at the other clientele for the first time in their lives, I'd wager, which I expect they didn't mind, if only for the sheer novelty of it. And craning my neck and rubbing my eyes to make sure I wasn't hallucinating, I could see an actual Sea King down there, and it seemed to be enjoying itself just as much as the rest of the clientele. Weird, I honestly think I remembered seeing that frog from somewhere…

Ah, but honestly, all of that was nothing but the sideshow to Helheim's main spectacle.

If you thought the Skull Mist Pirates had left the yawning void of the Freezer empty, then you would be sorely mistaken. Because while their stores of booze were on the outside of the freezer… the bar proper was on the inside. Specifically, it was hanging over the abyss of the inside.

Suspected over the freezer's pit by chains and ropes alike was not just a wooden platform, but a veritable spider's web of platforms, structures of wood with tables set upon them suspended at seemingly random intervals throughout the void, and interconnected by everything from gangplanks to tightropes. Some were larger and lower than others, others were smaller and higher, and any combination in between. But easily the largest of all was the platform which held the bar proper: a massive platform hung dead center of the chamber, and taking up almost half the area.
The bar looked… well, like your typical bar, honestly, countertop and wall of alcohol and everything. Saloon-like, even, given how there was a massive mirror, too. Hell, the bar even had a 'second floor' to it, such as it were, thanks to a halo of a wooden walkway suspended over the place and connected to the bottom level by a pair of staircases that wound their way around the bar-platform. I also noticed that on an adjacent platform, Sandersonia and Koala were sitting together.

Now, normally such a massive platform would probably have dozens of tables of varying shapes and sizes on it at a time… but right now? There were only about two dozen smaller tables arranged around the edge of the platform… and one big round table located smack dead center of the entirety of Helheim.

A big table around which were seated ten people—nine captains and one first mate—whose heads I'm dead certain the Marines would burn a dozen islands wholesale for a chance at capturing.

The level of danger that they conveyed varied: Bartolomeo was leaning back in his seat, laughing along with a few of his crewmates seated behind him, Law looked to be half asleep, though the way he was tapping on Kikoku's sheath indicated how alert he was, and 'Mad Monk' Urouge had his head bowed and hands clasped in a bafflingly serene state of prayer.

'The Magician' Basil Hawkins and 'Red Flag' X Drake were more intense, still and silent as the prior arranged and rearranged his cards on strands of what looked to be hay, while the latter sat stiff and tall in his chair, glaring at no one in particular while his fingers tapped impatiently on his mace's hilt. Both were very pointedly neither provoking nor inviting provocation. Capone 'Gang' Bege was very much similar, save for how he was both surrounded by and being waited on by his underlings and was smoking like a chimney. Literally, I think; I swear it was coming from more places than his mouth.

Bonney was eating her way through a 'small' platter of appetizers, displaying the exact table manners (or lack thereof) that her current teenage form implied. Eustass 'Captain' Kid wore an impatient scowl, one hand propping up his chin on a fist and the other occupied by an impromptu game of power-run stabscotch. A spectacle that Apoo was pointedly eyeing as he beat out a rhythm on his too-taut gut to the time Kid was keeping. Interestingly, 'Massacre Soldier' Killer seemed to be tapping out a similar rhythm on his own thigh… with the thresher blades he had strapped to his arms.

…If there was one good thing about this situation, it was that nobody was stupid enough to try and prove their stones by taking the few remaining seats at the Supernovas' table. However, that spectacularly rare show of tact and intelligence from our fellow swashbucklers was also a bit of a double-edged sword, because nearly as soon as we set foot in the titanic chamber, everyone hushed up damn fast as we, the Straw Hat Pirates, probably the most infamous pirates on the entire island, stepped onto the stage.

That's a heady thing, with a lot of expectations behind it, and some of our… less confident crewmates were visibly buckling under it. Hell, I was feeling it; I might be the idol of millions, but that was through a radio connection, not face-to-face, with a few hundred eyes staring at me in anticipation.

But still, as intimidating as a face-to-face audience was? We weren't half as on edge as said audience. Which makes sense: our crew had made a habit of causing incidents on every island we'd been on, ranging in scale from minor riots to outright devastation, and we'd been quiet thus far. They were just waiting for the powderkeg to detonate…

Which, in turn, left us all waiting, tension mounting and choking us out more and more as the atmosphere of the room actually started to turn towards awkward…
"Well. Well. Well. So, you're finally showing your face, eh? You damnable big mouth?"

And then clean out of nowhere, the tension ratcheted up at least five full factors in two sentences. The real surprise, though, was that I wasn't the one who did it!

Rather, that outburst—which became the new center of attention for the chamber—came from one of the only people in the room who actually had the clout to make such a ripple: the only Supernova in the room with a bigger mouth than me, who was gracing me with a sneer utterly impervious to the incredulous looks the rest of the infamous rookies were all shooting him.

"Gotta say, this has been a long time coming." Apoo chuckled, his arms double-crossed across his chest. "Because I have just been waiting for a chance to put you in your place in person!"

There was a brief hush as the sheer audacity of that statement swept over us…and theeeen, of course, that was what prompted the crew to break the silence themselves. A feat that, this time, Raphey decided to perform with a quick clearing of her throat.

"Ssssooo," she asked in a low tone so that her voice didn't carry too far. "III haven't exactly been keeping track of time. Has it been five minutes yet?"

Vivi, of course, slapped a hand to her face with a despairing groan. "Crooooss…" she pleaded, an air of defeat coloring her voice.

It took me a bit more to get my wits back about myself, but once I did, I shot Vivi a completely innocent and casual smile. "Worry not, my dearest princess. I shall promise to handle this with all the grace and subtlety—"

"Oh, just hurry up and cause a scene already!" she finally burst out, a ripple of wind blowing a few stray hairs in front of her snarling face.

Well, if she was asking for it—!

"As you command!" I declared, popping a salute before turning my full attention on the Longarm. I plastered my most indignant scowl on my face, puffed my chest out, and crossed my own arms to mirror his confrontational stance, raising my voice for everyone to hear. "Pshaw, you utter hack! I see how it is; it's not enough that you hijack my show, now you have to steal my lines, too!? I've been waiting months for this! You utter no-talent tosspot of a pisspot!"

"AND WHADDAYA MEAN PUT US IN OUR PLACE!? YOU'VE BEEN STEALING MY MUSIC CORNER! I'LL SHATTER EVERY TOOTH in that bear trap you call a maw!"

And naturally, Soundbite wasn't a beat behind.

"Peh!" Apoo scoffed, shoving himself out of his chair, his arms kinked up in shrugs. "I'd like to see you pompous blowhards even try. Honestly, Jeremiah Cross, the bigger issue I have with you—besides the fact that you are a way overhyped asshat—is the idea that this little slimeball that thinks he knows what music is!"

"Hey, now!" I barked, shaking a finger at Apoo as I marched down the wooden bridge that led to the main platform. "Only I get to call the slimeball a slimeball! You will address him with all the respect that he is due from someone of your standing in the hierarchy of life! Why don't we start at "your majesty" and work our way up?"

"APAPAPA! YOUR MAJESTY!?" The Long-Arm cackled. Swiping his arms out, he came to a stop in front of me, his head held… well, a full head higher than my own, a smirk on his looming face.
"Even if making noise is the only thing he can do, I'd die of shame if I lost in anything to a bottom-feeder like him! Or to a weak-chinned, limp-wristed blond snottag like yourself!"

"PFHAHAHA!" I chortled back, planting my fists on my hips and raising my chin. The better to radiate defiance. "Oh, buddy, you lose to him in everything! Even... nay, especially in terms of looks! After all... I made a show of giving Apoo a decidedly unimpressed onceover. "What self-respecting entity would even think about touching someone who I can only assume is a gangly, trap-jawed, hairless orangutan!"

"WHAT!?" Apoo belted out, pounding out a harsh drumbeat on his chest. "Alright, now you're asking for it, you puny-brained pipsqueak!"

I jerked my chin to the side with an unimpressed tsk. "As if you're much better, you cantankerous ass-faced claptrap!"

"Scurvy-ridden sack of vomit!"

"Barnacle-ENCRUSTED whalefart!"

"Anchor-headed ignoramus!"

"Half-baked... no-good... NINCOMPOOP!"/"Stupid... dimwit... RAGAMUFFIN!"

Tense silence enveloped the bar after that simultaneous outburst. Silence that, on our parts, was maintained the sheer effort both of us had to expend to not burst out laughing at that last exchange. Well, Apoo looked to be as ready to burst as I was, and I would outlast him, by gum I most definitely —

"OR would you prefer 'ninnyhammer'?"

"...pffHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"/"APAPAPAPAPAPAPA!"

Yeeeaah, that was a push too far. We descended so far into full-belly laughter that we almost missed the shock radiating from our audience at the sudden 180. Or maybe it was the fact that we clasped hands after the laughter died down. Hard to tell.

"'Nincompoop! Really, now!' I chortled, wiping a tear from my eye. "What, did you dig that one out of your ma's attic or something?!"

"And what about you, huh!?" Apoo laughed, slinging... well, part of his arm around my shoulders. "I mean, 'ragamuffin'?! I'm at least a foot taller than you!"

"Shall we just agree you're both horrible at this?" Soundbite smugly offered.

"AGREED!" Apoo and I enthusiastically shouted, before I chuckled and held out my fist to the captain. "Ah, but seriously, Apoo, it is great to finally meet you in person!"

"Apapa!" Apoo smiled broadly as he bumped his fist to mine. "Same here, Cross! Same here!"

And apparently that was as much as our audience could take.

"Would someone like to explain to us what the fuck's going on here!?" Kid bellowed, punctuating the demand with a slam of his fist on the table. "I thought you halfwits hated each other's guts!"

"If you would be so kind, I'll take my payment in beris or validated ingots. I'll keep any change, of
My eyes shifted away from Kid to half of the other Supernovas, who were grumpily going through their pockets while Drake had a smugly content look on his face. Still not smiling, but considering the death-mask he was wearing before, 'smug' was a definite improvement. He noticed my gaze and gestured to my bag.

"As if Vegapunk's technology could be hacked that easily or repeatedly," the ex-Rear Admiral deadpanned.

"Apapa, yep! I got in contact with Cross and we set the whoooolie thing up! We've been playing the world for chumps and laughing the entire time!"

"And honestly," I spoke up, scanning over the rest of the gaping onlookers. "If you all could keep it as quiet as possible, we'd really appreciate it. Keep the joke alive and all that. And if you're hurting for motive, think of it this way: So long as people's gobs stay shut, we pirates shall have a cultural secret privy to us, and us alone! How does that sound, eh!?"

And thankfully, that was the final blow in the battle against the mood. The chamber erupted in raucous cheers and laughter, and just like that, the were rolling and flowing again… along with the booze, but eh, not like half of these guys were any more polite sober.

As the mood broke, so too did the cohesion of our crew, and our members casually disseminated across the platform. Everyone pretty much went wherever they pleased, and soon enough our crew was getting acquainted with the rest of the, to appropriate the World Government's designation of us, future 'Worst Generation'.

Luffy, naturally, gravitated towards a free seat on the table so that he could get at all the food available. Though in a surprising show of external awareness, I think he actually sat himself next to Bonney on purpose, if the sparking glares they were trading in-between stuffing their maws was anything to go by.

Chopper ambled over to Law and was chatting quite animatedly with him, and though the spark in his eye was—by this point—no longer alarming, the one that was ever so slightly glimmering in Law’s was. That Zoro and Tashigi were fingering their blades as they hovered around him was also no small cause for alarm.

Interestingly enough, Usopp seemed to be talking with Hawkins about something, quite animatedly at that. Luckily, the Magician seemed more interested in his cards (or at least bored in general) than irritated at our Sniper King, so there was no chance of Usopp's soul getting locked in a voodoo doll. Actually, it looked like they were… trading knickknacks!? Well, I'll be. Either Usopp actually knew his hoodoo or he was a better swindler than I gave him credit for…

And I had to do a double-take to confirm, but it looked like a new redhead had joined the Barto Club when I wasn't looking. She was looking rather beaten up and glaring daggers at Gin… who was just as beat up and glaring right back back. Geez, was she trying to steal the first mate position?

And believe it or not, those were the saner interactions. Others were a bit more… out there.

-o-

"Excuse me. Are you… Capone 'Gang' Bege?"

"'Weather Witch' Nami. What do you want?" the ex-mafia boss politely asked, turning towards the Straw Hat. He took one look at the gleam in her eyes and stumbled back in naked shock; he'd seen a
great many expressions thrown his way over the years, but a lovestruck expression was not one of them.

"#$%^&—grrk!"

Before Bege could decide whether or not it was worth it to try shooting her, she froze, her cloudy aura smacking her on the skull thrice, producing a more... restrained demeanor. Visibly fighting to break free of the restraint, of course, but restrained.

"I apologize for that… ridiculousness, Mr. Bege. I've just been a huge fan of yours since I learned that you pulled off what most thieves only fantasize of doing," Nami explained sweetly. "I mean, robbing Fort Lumose itself—! Tell me, the main vault's door, was it really a Triple Charlieburg Custom, like Fantoma said it was in his biography, or was it the Wincheston Special that Lupin said it was?"

Bege gestured for the half-dozen men surrounding him to stand down, giving his full attention to the thief-witch in front of him. "Neither, actually. It was an Altoce"f New Age with a deadlock modification. Had no choice but to blast the damn thing clean off its hinges. Which, seeing as I had three Captains on my back at the time, was no easy thing, let me tell you."

"Ahhh, the smash-and-grab universal lockpick methodology, I see, I see…" Nami nodded sagely, her clouds miming a fist pounding into a palm. "Not my school of theft, but always a solid plan B, and one I can respect. Although…" She tilted her head. "Now that I think about it, Altoce"f is infamous for using Wootz steel in frankly gratuitous quantities. If I'm not asking too much, how did you get enough firepower in there to do that? I mean, you're obviously stronger than you look at first glance, everyone at this table is, but…?"

Bege actually blinked in surprise at the question, raising a brow at the Weather Witch. "Well, color me surprised. That loud-mouthed friend of yours didn't already tell you about me?"

"Meh," Nami waved her hand dismissively. "Cross may know a lot, but not only does Luffy hate being spoiled on the adventure, that loud-mouth is only loud and knowledgeable, not all-knowing. All he said was… what was it…that you're the best example of a one-man army?"

*That* drew an amused chuckle from Bege, and he nodded in confirmation. "Knowledgeable but not all-knowing indeed; he's not wrong, but that's quite the vague description. Alright, I'll lay it out for you." The mafioso held up his fist and flexed his knuckles, popping open his gunports and letting his cannons' muzzles peek out. "Short version, I'm literally a living fortress. The Castle-Castle Fruit allowed me to get up close unperturbed and alone, blast away with more firepower than anyone could possibly carry on their own, and then send out all of my men to gather the funds and store them inside of me so that I could leave as quick as I came in." Bege puffed out his chest and pounded his heart. "All the gold I took is right here, safe from even the most skilled of thieves or determined of Marines, and here it'll stay!"

"Ahhh, I see…" Nami nodded sagely. *Very* impressive power. It'd explain why I didn't find a wallet on you."

And just like that, everyone in earshot froze in place, Bege's men giving Nami a wide berth as the ex-don pinned her with a frigid, dead-eyed stare. "…excuse me?"

Nami's face and clouds both slowly stilled in dawning realization. "…aaaand that was out loud. *Crap.*"

Bege slowly pushed his seat back from the table and stood to his full height. And though said full
height was not terribly intimidating, his grim demeanor and the shadows cast by his fedora over his eyes cut a thoroughly intimidating figure. "You. Tried to pickpocket. Me. Girl." He emphasized the word with a firm, plank-shaking step in Nami's direction. "Do you have any idea just how many people, more intimidating than you, more powerful than you, I have killed for lesser slights? That I have killed for fun?"

Nami audibly swallowed and took a step back. In the same movement, her clouds loomed forwards and darkened slightly, the stench of ozone filling the air. "In my defense, it was nothing personal, just sheer force of habit?"

The corner of Bege's mouth twitched, ever so slightly. "And also," the Straw Hat navigator babbled as the charge built up in her clouds. "I'd have only taken twenty-five percent from it out of respect for your skills. If you knew me, you'd know just how generous that—"

"…geh."

Train of thought thoroughly derailed, Nami's eyes narrowed in bewildered confusion. "—Uh?"

"Geh… gehgeh…" Confusion the gangsters surrounding Bege shared, their boss shaking in his boots, his head bowed… and then everyone recoiled when he suddenly threw his head back and roared… with laughter. "GEHGEHGEHGEH! Well, shoot me in the street, you've got brass, kid!" He jabbed a finger at Nami. "And I'm not talking about your crew, I'm talking about you, personally! Ain't seen that kind of metal in a brat like you in years! Real shame you're already taken too, otherwise I'd have hired you on the spot! After breaking your knees, obviously, but that'd just be because of formalities, nothing personal!"

"Thank… you?" Nami tried, her clouds swirling into a question mark.

"Ahh..." Bege sank back in his seat with a contended sigh, nodding amicably at Nami. "Still. Just because I can't hire you doesn't mean I can't reward you." The mafioso smirked and held out his hand to the other pirate. "Whaddaya say you 'step inside' for a spell, lemme give you a quick tour of the joint? I'll show you that gold you've dreamed about so much, along with a few other trophies of mine. They've all got some pretty decent war stories to go with 'em, and some of 'em I was even sneaky about getting."

A moment of hesitation, and then Nami donned a cocksure smile, planting her fist on her hip. "Oh? Not worried about inviting a thief into your… everything?"

Taking out a cigar, Bege lit it, inhaled, and blew out a smoke ring before placing it back in his mouth. "Girl, the walls literally have eyes and ears and I know every inch of everything in there like the back of my hand. The mere idea of anyone stealing so much as a spare beri from me is as impossible as it gets on these seas."

Nami's smirk grew by several teeth. "That, sir, sounds like a challenge."

Bege met her smirk tooth for tooth. "That's because it was."

-o-

I sighed as Nami took Bege's hand and vanished (the Castle-Castle Fruit, should have guessed it. Well played, Oda!) and idly clapped my gauntlet on Sanji's shoulder, drawing his attention.

Honestly, I liked Sanji, I really did, but in this instance I needed to stop him before he could make a
move… or open his mouth for that matter, because one wrong word and I'd never hear the end of Soundbite's joking. "It's fine, Sanji. She chose to go through with this, and she can hold her own. And worse comes to worse, I'm fairly certain we can beat him."

"Mmph," the cook grunted around his halfway-blazing cigarette with a half-doubtful, half-rueful glance towards the… suddenly stilled mafioso who was staring off into space? Huh, guess he couldn't split his attention two ways at once. Useful, that. "Still—"

"NYORORO! Oh, is that so, huh?"

Sanji and I both twitched as he was interrupted by a smug, nasally voice that made me flash to the user of the Swamp-Swamp Fruit. As it turned out, I wasn't that far off. A metallic clicking noise drew our attention, and we turned to behold… either a greaser or just a plain greasy guy approaching us. Seriously, the guy had slicked back black hair, a lizardy tongue hanging out of his grinning maw, shades, and was spinning a revolver as big as my forearm around the finger of one of his oversized hands. Overall, it was harder to tell what was greasier: him or his tacky zoot suit!

"And you are?" Sanji asked acerbically, expressing just as much distaste as I felt.

The lizard-tongued mobster drew himself a little straighter as he snapped his gun into a firing position. "The name's Vito. 'Monster Gun' Vito. Capo of Don Bege. You should really educate yourself better, neh, 'Black Leg' Sanji?"

Sanji pinned the mobster with a sidelong glare, accompanied by a cloud of smoke. "You'll have to excuse me if I don't bother learning the name of every two-bit thug with a gun in the Grand Line."

"HEY, YOU KNOW, YOU FIT a trend I've been noticing with epithets!" Soundbite couldn't help but comment, snickering. "PEOPLE DEFINED BY THEIR TOOLS USUALLY ARE TOOLS! HEEHEEHEEhoohoohahaha!"

Vito's grin twitched slightly, and switched back to spinning his gun again. "Yeah, and the smallest pests always yap the loudest. Funny, that."

"OI!" Soundbite… well, yapped.

Still, I couldn't help but snort at the quip. "Alright, you managed to shut him up without getting pissed. For that, you earn some measure of respect. Still, you were saying about what I was saying?"

With a haughty sniff, the mafioso-pirate pretentiously adjusted the lapel of his suit. "Just calling you out on your overconfidence. Our crew is in the same league as yours, so unless you're just counting on luck, how do you figure that you're more likely to win?"

Now that drew a smirk onto my face, which morphed into a pre-emptive wince when I felt the tell-tale breeze of Vivi re-coalescing behind me. "Cross," she warned me, so tersely I could just see her foot tapping away on the planks. "Polite."

Well, if she was asking for it… "Fine, fine…" I huffed. I then took a moment to straighten my jacket, fix my posture so that I was standing straight with my arms folded behind my back and, looking Vito dead in the eye… "You, sir, are an imbecile."

I promptly ate simultaneously slap and kick upside the head from Vivi and Sanji, though they failed to dislodge the shiteating grin I'd adopted, "Not what I meant!" coming from the princess and "Don't disrespect the princess!" from the chef.

Vito, meanwhile, still maintained an impassive—if now slightly strained—façade. "Care to explain
your reasoning, 'Voice of Anarchy'?

Still sporting a grin, I glanced down at my metal-clad fingernails, making a show of examining them. "Tell me, Vito… how familiar are you with the story of the last fortress that the Straw Hats visited and had to break out of?"

Vito twitched, snapping his gun around his finger. "That… was different."

"It really isn't," I retorted, shaking my head. "If it was just a straightforward, conventional slugging match, then yeah, I'd give your boss and your crew good odds. Overwhelming manpower and firepower is a good strategy for 90% of the threats you'll face on the seas." My shit-eating grin widened a few more notches. "We're not in that 90%. We're built to dismantle quantity-over-quality, and we spit in the face of conventional tactics. And captain to captain, as long as you're thinking conventionally, unless your boss has a swordsman of Zoro's caliber or a Seastone arsenal hidden in that castle of his, he's not harming Luffy in a million years. I'm sure he has a few cheap tricks that'll let him put up a fight, but… well, a straight fight between Luffy and a building, or Luffy and an army… who would you put your money on?"

Vito hissed fiercely, his gun windmilling into a blur of, well, gunmetal. Finally, he huffed in an annoyance and brought the gun to a stop. "You make a very irritating…"

Vito paused before letting out another breath, this one a sigh, as he holstered his gun. "Very accurate point. I… suppose it's a good thing the don considers us to be in your crew's debt then, isn't it?"

My eyes flicked in Bege's direction, but quickly returned to Vito. "You don't screw us, we won't screw you. Fair enough?"

"Fairer than a lot of other people would give us, yeah. Now, if'n you'll scuse me…" The mobster turned on his heel and started walking away, grumbling under his breath, "Gotta see a few people about some ideas for 'unconventional' warfare…"

Vivi stepped up beside me, watching the gunslinger go. "Hmm. Opening aside, that was really well-handled, Cross."

I dismissively waved and looked around, immediately spotting someone else staring at me. A much more recognizable and dangerous someone. Who just started walking this way. Because of course. Vivi's wince when she, too, noticed was audible: "Although I'll admit, that is going to be a challenge."

That statement was almost immediately confirmed by the newcomer's opening statement.

"Hey, smartass," Eustass 'Captain' Kid snapped as he marched up to us, shadowed closely by Killer's stoic presence.

Sanji gave the Supernovas a warning glare as he surreptitiously positioned himself in front of Vivi, who herself had the start of a cyclone swirling around herself. "Can we help you?" he asked, though his tone clearly said 'fuck off'.

Kid barely spared the Monster a glance before focusing his full attention on me, giving me a dry onceover. "I never thought I'd say this, but… Cross, do me."

…

…

…
I am not ashamed to admit that my next conscious thought found me firmly pressing one of Killer's gauntlets to my throat, a feeling of overwhelming DESPAIR filling my being.


"I MEANT TELL ME HOW YOU'D BEAT ME, YOU JACKASS!"

Oh. Right. Slowly, I lowered Killer's gauntlet. Then I leapt a good meter away from the Kid Pirates, coughing and straightening my clothes. I pointedly ignored the blush I felt burning on my face. And Soundbite's sitcom-grade cackling. And Sanji, Vivi, and most others in earshot laughing so hard they were crying. Assholes.

"R-Right, right, 'beat you,' of course… ah…" I hesitated as I got my wits back about me, shooting the steaming metal-head a doubtful glance. "You're… sure you want me to do that? Because I won't pull any punches, and you probably won't like what I have to say."

"Do I look like I give two fucks about screwing around the point?" Kid spat… no, he literally spat to the side. "Either whatever you say is dead wrong and I know you can't scratch me worth shit, or you give me something to think about and when I actually come for your dumbass captain's head, I'll have an easier time of it. Either way? I win."

"…tch." No getting out of this, clearly. "Brains to go along with the brawn and shitty attitude. Guess you had to make number two some-how…" Before Kid could go off, I snapped up a finger. "I'll tell you this clean off the bat: Like Bege, when it comes to a straight fight between you and Luffy? My bets are on you losing. Not as badly as Bege… but still a loss."

For a clean minute, Kid's face twisted, rage coursing throughout his entire being. Then, in an impressive display of will he shoved it all to the side. "Explain," he demanded.

And so, with a helpless shrug, I did. "In the simplest terms possible, you suffer from the same failing as Bege: You'd be going up against Luffy, someone who defies all conventional means of assault, with mostly conventional means."

"There is nothing conventional about how I fight!" Kid snapped, emphasizing the point with a menacing stomp.

In lieu of challenging him, I glanced towards Killer and raised an eyebrow. "How often is his go-to an overwhelming surge of might?"

Killer just stared at me for a bit before glancing aside. "…often enough."

I nodded sagely. "And therein lies the problem. Bege relies on conventional military might, and you rely on conventional physical might. But see, where your might is more flexible, it's still limited by the tools you can bring to bear. You can only really hit as hard as what you're hitting them with. And on most people, that's fine, except Luffy isn't 'most people'."

"Mrgh…" Kid growled, audibly gnashing his teeth. "He'll still bleed if I cut him, you know!"

"Only if you can touch him, and he's ridiculously agile, and only so long as he doesn't break the blades. And even if it were just fragments, you'd still need to be able to power through his tolerance for pain. You can ask Gin how well that contest turned out for Don Krieg when he tried using
stakes," I retorted, angling my head towards the Barto Club's first mate.

"You realize I was unconscious for most of that fight, right?"

"Pipe down, character witness."

"Aye aye… loudmouth…"

That pause in the conversation was what was needed for Kid to get his second wind, which he demonstrated with an unimpressed huff and crossed arms. "So, what, you're saying that your captain's invincible or some shit like that?"

Really? That rhetorical gotcha? I demonstrated what I thought of that tactic by mirroring his stance and demeanor. "Hardly. In case you missed it? Luffy's lost before, plenty of times. He lost to Crocodile, he lost to Eneru, and he lost to Shiki. Hell, his opening salvo against Moria was a loss. What sets him apart is that every time he gets beaten down, he—pardon the pun—bounces right back. And while I'm sure you could do the same!" I hastily amended as Kid and Killer both visibly bristled. "The question remains if you could do it more than Luffy, and do it as well or better."

Kid's lemon-sucking expression said it all, and for a minute I thought he'd tear me a new one, but a single swift intervention cut that off at the knees. Surprisingly, it didn't come from us but from Killer! The infamous Massacre Soldier cut off whatever his captain had to say with a swift application of his elbow to Kid's ribs—ah, no, correction, to the nasty scar that looked to encircle Kid's torso. Eesh, I'd heard he'd almost gotten ripped in half, but I didn't think it was that literal!

Kid pinned his first mate with a downright caustic glare, but neither Killer's mask nor demeanor so much as budged, and so the bloodthirsty captain was forced to stand down with a snarl and a glower, but not much else.

I took that opening as my cue to continue.

"I'm not saying that you don't have a will just as strong as Luffy's; Vito made that point himself, none of you would be at this table if you didn't. But when it comes to a straight matchup against Luffy's brawn, it's a high bar to cross—"

"We're IN a high bar, CROSS."

I slapped Soundbite upside his shell, not stopping my speech."—and unfortunately one that you, with your abilities, have to cross. If it's any consolation? You're not alone in this. Bege I already explained, Urouge is a straight-up bruiser, and Drake, while a high-quality Zoan, is certainly no Rob Lucci. And… Barto I give even odds, depending on just how much punishment his barriers can take, if only because they're a hard counter to brute force."

At this point everyone with the title of Supernova was watching me, even if most of them were only doing it out the corners of their eyes.

Kid's glower stayed defiant, and then I wanted the defiance back, because he suddenly turned contemplative. This was followed by my stomach dropping into my shoes at the eagerly vicious grin he adopted a few seconds later.

"So what you're saying…" he leered, malice positively dripping from his every word. "Is that everyone else here could kick your rubber-brained moron's ass?"

The room froze, attention firmly swinging back to me, and not in a way I at all liked. I grimaced, and my eyes slowly turned toward my captain… who was glaring at Kid, an expression that Kid easily
matched. Luffy's eyes turned to meet mine, and as he nodded his consent, I couldn't help but suppress a wince at how much _utter hell_ Kid was going to catch for this later. But still, if Luffy said it was alright…

"First off, I'm not _guaranteeing_ anything against anyone," I warned him tersely. "But… I will admit that yes, just considering powers and abilities, it's people capable of producing more esoteric effects like Law, Apoo, Bonney, or Hawkins who have a better chance against Luffy. Not a guarantee, but certainly nothing he can easily brute-force through. Admittedly, that's not counting skill or will or anything other than abilities, but that's what I've got to work with." I paused, then grinned viciously as a thought struck me. "Honestly, you want a good chance at kicking Luffy's ass? Follow _Foxy's_ example."

I _loved_ how that wiped the smug clean off Kid's bastard face. "That weak-ass little shit—!" he started to snarl.

"—managed to beat nine shades of shit out of Luffy because his powers were something Luffy couldn't punch his way out of," I sneered right back with my most shit-eating grin possible. "Which is a hell of a lot more than I can say about you."

Kid had no answer to that. Instead, he tsked and turned away, plopping into the chair he'd claimed earlier.

And hell, so long as I've got the advantage… "And speaking of who _else_ can kick whose asses," I mused aloud, folding my arms behind my head. "Just considering our crew, you're honestly at a pretty hefty disadvantage. Sanji and Boss are just straight-up physical monsters, Nami's capable of zapping you into a briquette, Vivi you can't even _touch_, even without her gun Merry could twist you into a pretzel—!"

**SLAM!**

I nervously eyed the crushed section of table underneath Kid's fist, the pirate's whole body shaking. He lifted his head, and I felt my stomach drop again at the bloody smile on his face.

"And _how_ is the little tyke, by the way?" he genially asked, raw evil coloring his every word. "Everything alright with her? Her… legs? Her… " Kid's fingers tore up a good chunk of wood as he clawed it down the table. "Neck?"

I blinked in confusion. Her neck? What about her _oh fuck I forgot about her choker_ OH THAT FUCKING BASTARD!

Amidst the cacophony of scraping chairs and smashing glasses and Nami hopping out of Bege doing a creditable imitation of Zeus himself, I barely noticed Killer snapping his hands up in surrender and backing well away from his captain. Guess the Massacre Soldier really _was_ as sensible as he appeared.

"YOU WANNA DIE, YOU PASTY FUCKWIT!?” Barto roared, shooting to his feet and pounding his fists on the table as he glared bloody murder at the unrepentant Supernova.

"OK, Kid, word of advice, you should _really_ rethink what you're saying," Apoo hastily jumped in. He met the other Supernova's glare with a serious expression. "Buddy, the Straw Hats are all around you, all pissed, and they have a lot of friends and good will here. You, meanwhile?"

"There are approximately 1,013,913 words in the English language, and I know several other dialects besides, but I could never string any number of words together to explain just how much I
"want to hit you with a chair," Nico Robin droned in a voice that was dead as a doornail.

"...yeah, that."

Kid, for his part, was entirely unconcerned with what should have been enough concentrated malice to kill him dead on the spot. He even went so fast as to scoff, lean back in his seat and kick his feet up on the table before leering past me. "Oh piss off, every one of you jackasses! Seriously, did piracy become a daycare service when I wasn't looking? In case you didn't notice, it's a daaaaangerous world out there. Little girls shouldn't be playing around with the big boys like us."

All around the bar, Apis, Goldenweek, and Merry's eyes all narrowed. Actually, so did Vivi's.

"I would just like to note," Vivi hissed, her voice little more than a death rattle. "That five minutes. Have come. And gone."

Apis said nothing; she just pointedly raised her hand and snapped her fingers. Barely a second later, the platform shuddered from Lindy ramming into one of the chains supporting it, coiling around the titanic links of metal as he snarled down at us—at Kid—with tongues of flame licking out of the corner of his maw.

"Oh, no, please, allow me," Goldenweek stated in a voice that was somehow extra dead, a veritable rainbow mixing on her palette. "Hold him steady for a minute. I want to see if I can make him cluck like a chicken. Maybe even make him lay the egg stuck up his ass."

"Ohohoh, don't worry..." Merry chuckled dryly, actually causing a minor ripple in the air as she slammed her fists together. "I think I can put him in traction for a bit longer than minute."

And all of this... aaaaactually got Kid to give them an appraising look. There was no sneer, no condescension. Hell, he looked almost... respectful? But... from him? That's just not possible, I must've been reading him wrong, ri—?

"And besides, Captain, you're one to talk."

The appraising look evaporated, Kid suddenly turning an interesting shade of red. Everyone's eyes fell on a pair of figures in a booth a short distance away: a child, boyish in appearance (ruffled and soot-stained), dress (a pair of heavy overalls and a white engineering cap), and voice (rough, but cocky), but still undeniably a girl, and next to her a tall man with a yellow jacket, a wide-brimmed black hat, and an expression similar to Law's typical smirk, a pile of empty plates next to him.

"And you are?" Law drawled, his bored tone belied by his typical smirk and the way his eyes just seemed to shine with glee.

"Adelle Bascūd," the girl answered, matching smirk on her face as she tipped her hat to the other pirate. "Engineer of the Kid Pirates." She gestured to the man sitting at her side, who mirrored the expression and motion. "And this here's my brother and our crew's primary leg-breaker—!

"Shuraiya! I thought I recognized that last name! Is that really you, you raggedy ass?!

I jumped slightly at Koala's exclamation, giving the newly named Shuraiya a surprised look. If the Kill Bill lookalike noticed, he ignored it in favor of barking a laugh and waving in greeting to the Revolutionary. "Koala, you bruiser! You turn pirate too, or are you still hanging with the rest of your troublemakers!"

"Still a Revolutionary, Shuraiya, just here on business, but... 'too'?! Last time I saw you, you were
turning in a particularly nasty bounty to us beaten within an inch of his life! How'd a pirate-hating bounty hunter like you end up going pirate?! With 'Captain' Kid no less?"

The erstwhile bounty hunter's smile dimmed noticeably, going from brilliantly cheeky to just fond remembrance. "True, Kid's a jackass," he nodded lazily.

"Bite me," the punk in question spat.

"But he's also the jackass who sent the man who destroyed our home to Davy Jones' locker, and who brought my sister back to me after eight years of thinking she was dead. So, yeah."

Nobody listening was fooled; that may have been the truth, but it wasn't the whole truth. Buuut none of us Straw Hats, at least, were in any position to protest that. Ah, well.

"Aaanyway," Shuraiya continued, crossing his arms behind his head. "We've got something of a, eh, what's the word…?"

"Mutually beneficial arrangement," Adelle chirped.

"Right, one of those, going with him. We're sticking around with him because we don't have anywhere else to go and so that I can make sure that he doesn't start going after civvies again. And meanwhile, he's keeping us around because I can kick nine kinds of ass without breaking a sweat and without a Devil Fruit—"

"—while Gramps and I are the only ones with the technical knowhow to keep one of the toughest old bitches this side of the Red Line, the Iron Tramp, chugging and sailing," Adelle cut in. "Makes us pretty invaluable, ya know!"

Oh, the way Kid was twitching in his seat with his head bowed was just a dream come true. But truly, it would take a cruel man to kick him when he was at his lowest… so of course, I didn't hesitate to open my mouth. "Wow, Kid," I chided with the closest to honest disappointment I could manage. "I knew you were a lot of awful things—and proud of it—but I thought even you would shy away from hypocrisy."

Every scrap of metal in the room vibrated something fierce, but the punk pirate managed to hold his temper together… what little was left, at any rate. "I do," he snarled through clenched teeth. "The badger is supposed to stay in the engine room where she's actually good at something, and even then I only keep her around because Shuraiya's good enough at what he does that I can tolerate his brat sister staying along!"

"Mm-hm," said 'brat' hummed dispassionately, making a show of examining her fingernails. "You 'tolerate' me, is that right? Well, I'll just have to make sure to remember that the next time we're booking it from a particularly large fleet of Marines and you're yelling at me to, what was it again… 'push her until she's giving us all she's got'?"

"WHY. ARE YOU. HERE!?"

The pint-sized engineer shrugged indifferently. "Well, initially I came looking for you because I needed some more money to buy this new strain of coal I found in town for the Tramp, but I decided to stick around when I heard the direction things were going so that I could watch you crash and burn. So far?" She 'graced' her captain with a radiant smile. "Not disappointed in the least."

Kid's ever-so-mature response was to snarl and fling a bundle of beris at her. "Get. OUT."

The engineer smiled innocently, showing off a gap in her front teeth, and caught the bundle.
"Thanks, Captain!" the engineer chirped, hopping out of her booth and saluting both him and her brother on her way out. "Try and get me some incisors when the shit hits the fan, bro! My sculpture's almost done!"

"You got it, sis!" Shuraiya waved after her, and a few seconds later she was gone.

For a few, glorious moments, silence reigned.

And then, of course, we stuck our noses in.

"Can I have some money too, Captain Kid?" Merry sing-sang in her cutest, most obnoxious voice.

"ALRIGHT!" Killer shouted, hastily clamping a hand on his superior's shoulders and locking him in place before he could erupt out of his chair. "Before somebody ends up disemboweled, can we get back to why we're here? The sooner we're all on our way to Sabaody, the better."

"Agreed!"

"Yes! Very yes!"

That statement was met with unanimous agreement. In moments, all the Supernovas were seated at the central table, exchanging looks along the table, and the rest of the crews were at surrounding tables and booths behind their captains. I myself was leaning against the railing of the bar-platform, alone, watching the proceedings with vague interest.

"Shouldn't you be in there with them?"

Or, well, almost alone. I glanced to the left where Killer stood, and the angle of his helmet suggested he was side-eyeing me while still keeping an eye on his captain.

"After all," the helmeted first mate continued. "You are the 'genius tactician' aren't you? Isn't this where you'd do the most good?"

"Only if there was anything to 'do' to begin with…" I sighed despondently, shaking my head slightly.

"Just watch. THIS IS GONNA GET SO UGLY! And yet so good!" Soundbite snickered.

And before Killer could ask what we meant, the spectacle began in earnest.

"So, I'll just come right out and say it!" Apoo broke the silence with his usually unusual volume, emphasizing it with a clap of his hands. "Who's got any bright ideas about how to tear those privateers a new one?"

"My crew had them running and crying when we fought them," Kid snorted, waving his hand dismissively. "More force is all we'll—"

"Not all of us are as eager to keep ramming our heads into a wall until it breaks," Hawkins dryly cut in as he patiently cut his deck.

"The head or the wall?" Urouge asked, his smile screaming he knew the answer in advance.

"Yes."

A vein pulsed on Kid's head. "Oh, screw—!"
"Well, we could try it anyway. If ya like having an admiral crawling up your ass," Bonney drawled through the mouthful of pork she was chewing, spraying meat everywhere in the process. "That island's how far from Marine Headquarters again?"

"It is an archipelago, not an island, and not even half a day," Bege grunted, though the look he was shooting Bonney as he replied indicated he'd rather be answering with his gun instead.

"Yeah, he should know!" Barto snorted, obnoxiously and nasally at that. "The bastard got sent running 'cause Aokiji almost left his frost-covered boot up his ass! Like how Zephyr almost left him with an actual tail, HA!"

"First off, I made that old geezer bleed for what he did to me, so fuck off!" Kid barked, jabbing a finger at Barto, though the effect was ruined by how his other hand was clutching his scar. "And second, it wasn't Aokiji, it was Kizaru! And I never saw him anyways!"

"So you're not weak, you're just a coward. So noted," Law chuckled dryly, thumbing the bridge of his hat.

"You fucking—!

"As Captain Eustass has already demonstrated, rushing in recklessly promises nothing but failure," Drake interrupted, his tone and demeanor both flat and unimpressed. "What we require, in this instance, is a sound and developed stratagem—"

"Developed by who? You?" Bonney sneered, showing far too many teeth for polite company. "Yeah, didn't work so well for you and witch-boy the last time you swung by this place!"

"At least neither of us is destined to choke on a chicken bone in the next three seconds," Hawkins drawled, eyeing a card he'd just drawn from his deck.

"Eh?" Luffy glanced up from his gorging, which he hadn't even paused in. "Did someone say chi—MRGH! BONE! HELP!"

"Ah, my mistake. I apologize, Captain Monkey."

"YOU DID THAT ON PURPOSE YOU DEAD-EYED ASS!" Barto slammed his barrier-encased fist on the table with a roar.

One straw-blond eyebrow rose. "That destiny would have come to pass with or without my intention. Much like how your own unfortunate countenance was a result of your own natural misfortune."

"OKAY, I MIGHT BE A BIT OF A DUMBASS, BUT EVEN I KNOW WHAT YOU JUST SAID ABOUT MY FACE!"

KA-KLICK! "Sit your ass down and shut the hell up, Black Bart," Bege intoned, a pistol planted dead between Barto's eyes. "Your bullshit is getting us nowhere."

"HEHA!" Barto scoffed, spreading his arms wide—with fingers crossed, I idly noted. "Or what, halfpint?"

CRACK! The answer to that came from Urouge, smile yet ever-present, if a bit bigger, slamming the pillar he'd been toting the entire time down next to the table. "Or, I cave both your heads in and we continue without you. Why don't we just calm down, hm?"
"And who put you in charge here?" Bege sneered scornfully. "I'm the one with the most experience looking at big pictures like this, I should have point."

"Fat chance. I'm the only one who's seen what they have to fight with, and my bounty is the highest here next to his," Kid snorted, gesturing at Luffy, who was still flailing and starting to turn interesting colors. "And nobody sane would put him in charge!"

"You're not wrong about that," Drake said, his eyes narrowing as his hand drifted down towards his mace. "But you're certainly dumber than he is if you think I'll let someone as reckless as you boss me around."

"The fuck did you just say to me?!"

"He said that you're nothing but a dumbass, dumbass!"

"Will you two stop your squabbling already?! I can barely eat you're pissing me off so much!"

"Good. Maybe you could stand to eat a little less."

"YOU WANNA SAY THAT TO MY FACE YOU SON OF A—!?"

"PTOOEY! Woo, that was close, shishishi!"

"Okay, why don't we all calm down and—?"

"Oh, I can calm them down real fast."

"You even touch that sword and I'll drop you where you stand, dead-eyes, I swear to Triton!"

"Just try it, punk-ass! You wanna go? LET'S GO!"

I shook my head as the arguments escalated in that general manner; at this rate, it'd be nightfall before we even had a chance to make any progress. Exactly what I was afraid would happen.

"Damn it all, we're getting nowhere at lightspeed," I groused under my breath. "Everyone's too tense, too wound up, too nervous, and their 'Alpha Dog' personalities mean that nobody's letting themselves show weakness, which is just ratcheting up the tension even higher, and on top of that, that's riling up everyone else in the room and means the Supernovas are even less likely to back down to save face. Damn negative feedback loops... they wouldn't have listened to me even if I'd tried to say anything. Something needs to give sooner rather than later, or else this is going to turn real ugly real fast and—"

"You do know you're talking to yourself, right?" Killer flatly pointed out.

"Easiest way to guarantee intelligent conversation on short notice," I offhandedly retorted, more focused on my own thoughts. "Now if you don't mind, I need to stop our captains from trying to kill each other..." A thought occurred to me. Wait, would that actually... then I grinned as that thought struck gold. "And I think I know how to do it. Just gotta check first, though—!" I snapped my fingers and indicated Lola, who'd been spending the entire fight thus far leaning on her bar taking in the dumpster fire. Soundbite's characteristic whine of static got her attention in a hurry, though.

"Lola, two things real quick. First, to be sure, there's a net under here, right?"

The ex-Charlotte snorted derisively. "What are you, chicken?"

My eye twitched furiously as I got a good grip on the railing. "It's an Oars-tall drop to the bottom and
most everyone in this room is drunk off their ass."

That got another snort, but this one was just amused. "Just messing with you. Yeah, there's a net. A dozen nets, actually, all the way to the bottom and all hugging the rim, and they're reinforced with metal. We just painted them black. Gotta keep the excitement up, see?"

I heaved a sigh of relief, "Smart. Alright, secondly… if things start getting messy in here, how pissed would you be?"

At this, Lola's face fell flat. "Cross, this is, perhaps, among the largest pirate bars in the world. There is nothing in here that can't be replaced. Just let me lay down a few ground rules when things start going down and then have fun."

"Aye-aye ma'am," I concluded, saluting. I then pushed off the railing towards the maelstrom that was the strongest captains in our generation… before pausing as a thought struck me, and I glanced back at Killer. "I'm going to try and stop the bloodbath that's brewing. You can either follow me or stay out of my way."

Killer's mask stared impassively at me before the man himself heaved a sigh and pushed off the railing to join me. "…this had better work."

Out loud, I scoffed. "Around me? Trust me, one way or another it will." Under my breath, meanwhile, I hissed, "Soundbite? On my cue, some appropriate music, please."

"…HOW THE HELL AM I SUPPOSED to know what to play?"

"Ooooh trust me. You'll know."

Before he could say much else, however, I cleared my throat as we reached the edge of the table, as well last the argument. Truly, it was a testament to my influence that all noise stopped when I intervened, but the tension remained and was still mounting, so my mere 'presence' wasn't enough; not alone, anyway. As such, I'd have to make this fast.

With that thought in mind, I gave the Supernovas an expansive grin. "Gentlemen. Bonney. Kid."

"HEY!"/"HA!"

"I know things are tense, and I know you're all on edge. The blockade has us worried. Marine retaliation has us worried. The idea of our journeys being stalled is mortifying, and the idea of defeat even more so than that. It paralyzes us, reduces us to petty squabbling." Slowly, I surreptitiously laid my hands upon the the back of a free chair and scooted it out from under the table. "But! Fret not, my friends! And Kid."

"BITE ME!"

"He wishes..."

"For you see, I have the solution to all our woes and worries within arm's reach. A means through which all our stress will be alleviated, and peace and harmony restored to our ranks. All without any cause for concern whatsoever." I tilted my head to the side, a truly beatific smile on my face. "I have only two words for you all."

And with that, I grabbed the chair and swung it up, around, and smashed it clean across Killer's face in one smooth motion, knocking him ass over teakettle.
"BAR FIIIIIGHT!" I roared, brandishing the splintered remains of the chair for all to see.

For a split second the entire chamber froze—

"HOLD IT!" And then it was right and properly paralyzed by a secondary roar, this one coming from Lola.

Before anyone could think to move, the Captain of the Skelter-Bite pounded her fist on her bar's countertop, and almost immediately in response, sturdy wood paneling fell over the mirror and booze arrayed behind her.

Lola heaved a sigh of relief. "Least I saved the mirror this time…" She then pinned the room with a pointed stare. "Alright, LISTEN UP! Ground rules: no intentional kill shots, no crippling, if someone says uncle then you let them go, and unless you've got something personal against them, no aiming for the staff! Aside from that, feel free to bash each other's heads in."

A final moment, fragile as glass…

Lola swung her arms out impatiently. "GET TO IT!"

And then the world shattered.

Whether by dint of pure reflex, superior readiness, or just the fact that they expected me to pull something like this, Luffy and Barto were the first to react, the latter leaping clean across the table to tackle Kid right in the ribs and onto the floor, and the former kicking the table six feet straight into the air. And, incidentally, hitting about half the Supernovas square on the chin in the process.

"AUGH! LUFFY, YOU IDIOT!"

And lo, as Nami's Eisen Cloud grabbed Luffy and started smashing him into the floor, Trafalgar Law's Room sprang to life, swapping me with him with only just enough time for me to duck under a sturdy-looking whiskey bottle, and all the while the chords of an electric guitar screamed out.

"I don't give a damn 'bout my reputation!
You're living in the past it's a new generation!
A pirate can do what they want to do and that's
What we're gonna do!

An' I don't give a damn 'bout my bad reputation!"

"Good choice," I grunted before grabbing the arm holding the bottle and smashing my armored forehead into the guy's—gal's!—chin with a satisfying crunch. Unfortunately, that didn't bring her down. A fact that I wasted a good second blinking stupidly at, and would've paid for with a shin to the family jewels had her head not suddenly vibrated like a malfunctioning blender.

"INCOMING!"

I spun, just in time to get rugby-tackled right in my chest and driven back. Several elbows to the head and shoulders didn't dissuade the pirate, and the breath whooshed out of my lungs entirely when I got sandwiched between the bar and the pirate. Wheezing, vision swimming, I barely rolled my head away from a punch that splintered the hardwood bar. The next punch I somehow caught in left hand, my right scrabbling for some sort of weapon. My fingers closed around smooth glass, and I brought
a… whiskey bottle? A whiskey bottle around right in time to catch the pirate's arm with it.

**SNAP! "YAAAAARGH!"**

"Sorry, not sorry!" I barked, shoving him back with a foot to the chest and then backhanding him with the bottle. Amazingly, it remained intact, and I gave it an appreciative look. "Huh. Nice glass."

With my back covered, and no enemies charging at me, I could take a moment to catch my breath and get a good look at the fight. On the plus side, it had started a lot easier than the big brawl during the Accino/Hiruno wedding fiasco. On the downside, it had started a lot easier than that brawl, and more importantly, I could barely keep track of anything.

The entirety of Helheim had devolved into a thing of pure chaos, fights spontaneously erupting… pretty much literally everywhere. The central platform I was on alone was a mess of fighting bodies and thrown bottles and chairs and fists. Even the stronger fighters were mostly obscured by the seething mass around them.

Though most is not all. From the localized lightning tornado off to the left, Nami and Vivi had teemed up and were taking out some old frustrations on a hapless Five and Valentine. In the center, an angel, a dinosaur, and an elephant were grappling, the rest of the brawl giving them a wide berth. And then, further down the bar were—

"OH, FOR FUCK'S SAKE, YOU GUYS!" I bellowed at Zoro and Sanji, sword meeting boot again and again. "FOR ONCE IN YOUR LIVES, CAN YOU NOT FIGHT EACH OTHER THE FIRST CHANCE YOU GET?!

"NO WAY IN HELL, CROSS!" the two roared back.

Groaning, I eyed my makeshift weapon. Maybe, just this once—?

"I wouldn't recommend that, Jeremi-ya."

Wait, was that—Yup. There was Trafalgar Law sitting next to me at the bar, sipping at a drink and cool as a cucumber.

"And why not?" I demanded halfheartedly.

"Well, one, that whiskey is garbage I'd only feed to Doflamingo." Law's smirk widened slightly.

"And two, it won't break as fast full."

"Huh," I said, eyeing the bottle a little more appreciatively. "Okay, new question: why aren't you out there?"

Right as I said that, one pirate peeled off from the group, brandishing a pool cue and charging straight at Law as he… *ululated?* Jeeze, I really was the Voice of Anarchy…

"Well, for one, I don't need to be," he chuckled, making his usual gesture to swap a bottle of liquor flying above us with a random pirate. Said pirate followed the bottle's flight path and smashed into the covered liquor shelves, impacting them much like a fly would a windshield, and with just as much effect. "And for another, I prefer… other methods of stress relief."

I tensed sligh—okay, pretty hard at that remark, and it obviously showed, because Law gave me a knowing smirk.

"Okay, you got me," I said, throwing up my hands in faux-defeat. "But c'mon, it's not like I *lied*, ya
know? You saw how tense things were at the table. This…" I indicated the brawl… right as Beppo went careening head-first into the shelf—

SMASH!

…correction, headfirst through the shelf, and stuck up to his waist. The bear's legs kicked and struggled for a bit before he fell slack with an audible groan of defeat. "Oh, bother…"

Following his trajectory (as I fought to refrain from joining Soundbite in his cackling) showed that Gin and the new ginger chick had joined in on the Zoro/Sanji brawl to make it an all-out battle royale, though it wasn't clear who had landed the blow.

I snickered and shook my head before forging on. "As I was saying… this will hopefully allow everyone to blow off all the steam they've been building so we can discuss things like civilized human beings. Or, well, whatever the fuck we are. Because better that they be breaking bones instead of slashing throats, see?"

Law nodded sagely, even as he offhandedly jerked Kikoku's sheath to the side and brained a mook who'd tried to charge us. "Sound plan, Jeremi-ya. Very noble. Truly, I can only find one major flaw."

A sudden pit settled into my stomach. "Er… and what flaw would that be?"

"JEREMIAH CROSS!"

"Ohhh, that flaw," I said with a lot more cheer than I felt. I glanced at the bottle in my hand; suddenly, it felt decidedly inadequate. Especially since Killer's arm blades had just shorn a table in two in midair.

"I…" Killer growled. "Am going to gut you, tear out your intestines, and use them to string up this year's Christmas lights!"

"You're welcome to try." I replied, smirking as I held up my left hand with my fingers in a V. "But I'm afraid you GASTRO-FLASH!"

The Flash Dial went off just fine. The Gastro-half did not. And any hopes that the Flash half would be enough died when Killer just tilted his head.

"Was that supposed to do something?"

"Mother of pearl!" I spat under my breath. The mask. The damn mask had blocked the light from the Flash Dial! And with no sound… "SOUNDBITE!"

"I'M BACK, I'm back! SORRY, HAD TO help Usopp AND GOLDENWEEK DUCK OUT OF THE MELEE because they promised to get me some crunchy green. BUT NOW I'M BACK AND—!" Silence descended—like, literally in our general vicinity—and slowly, Soundbite turned his half-lidded eyestalks towards me. "DARE I ASK WHY?" he deadpanned.

Killer gave me no chance to answer; I only barely caught one of his whatever-the-hells-they-were on the bottle I was holding, and somehow the edge only bit deeply into the glass, instead of clean through it.

"Just help me already!" I yelped, nervously eyeing the other blade as he raised it to gut me!

As if on cue, Killer suddenly staggered in the tell-tale sign of a Gastro-Phony. Astoundingly—and
yet not really to my surprise, given who he was—he didn't go down, and only a hasty dodge (and loss of my trusty bottle) kept me from losing an arm and half my ribcage.

"How the hell is he—?!

"HE'S KID'S ZORO, how do you think!? JUST BOOK IT!" Soundbite snapped.

"Booking!"

Though not on his knees retching, Killer's coordination had still been badly hampered by the Gastro-Phony. It was simplicity itself to simply run around him, but where to go? I took one look at the mosh pit surrounding the still-brawling Funkfreed, Drake, and Urouge and decided that there was no way I was going that way.

"Franky Boxing! ORAORAORAORAORAORAORAORA!"

"Zazazazaza! That's useless! Uselessuselessuselessuselessuselessuseless~!"

Neither, for instance, did I want to be one of the mooks that got too close to Bonney and Franky's punch v. kick duel and got pulped in the process…

"COME ON, CUTIESSSS! GIMME A HUG! IT WON'T HUUURT! FOR LONG!"

And that was the bridges off this place right out, so long as Sandersonia remained on an atmosphere-addled prowl.

"STAIRS!"

Oh, yeah, there was a second floor. And a quick glance confirmed that, while there were a good number of punch-ups going on up on the balconies, it wasn't the free-for-all on the ground floor. There were even people just leaning on the railings watching.

"JASON WANNAE at FIVE O'CLOCK," Soundbite announced.

I risked a glance over my shoulder and nearly let out a very manly scream. Killer was driving hard for me, tossing aside anyone in his way. A glance back at the stairs confirmed that it was going to be a very close call.

"Here goes nothing…” I muttered, throwing myself into a dive.

As I'd hoped, Killer's scythes sailed right above my head, and I grabbed at the steps and scrambled back to my feet, bounding up two at time. Killer, sadly, was not constrained to such mundane things as "stairs", and a single jump had him balancing on the banister next to me, and his legs tensed to get him in front of me.

"Yo, asshat. GASTRO-BLAST: STEREO EDITION!"

And just as his feet left their footholds, a solid wall of sound slammed into Killer, knocking him off-balance at exactly the wrong moment. He plummeted down, and some part of me hoped that he would miss the central platform and fall down onto the nets hard enough to break them.

But when have I ever gotten that lucky?

Sure enough, when I reached that upper balcony, Killer's scythes cut into the wood of the floor and heaved him up so that he could perch on the balustrade like a faceless gargoylie. I glanced behind
him, and bit back a curse. Out of position. Still, there was a simple enough way to fix that.

"Disorient him, but don't let him notice."

"That'll barely THROW HIM OFF."

"That's my problem," I retorted, grabbing two more bottles off a nearby table and brandishing them like short swords.

And none too soon, either. Killer launched himself off the balustrade, shattering it under his feet. I frantically backed pedalled, catching his blades on the bottles. And then again. And again.

It was a whirlwind of steel that I only survived through panicked flailing, Soundbite subtly disorienting Killer so that he was only two steps ahead instead of the ten he'd typically have over me, and Soundbite also tossing in a few light Gastro-Blasts whenever the other pirate got too close to turning me into sashimi.

"Ow! Mother humper!"

Unfortunately, I was getting turned into sashimi anyway, just the slow way. Slashes kept slipping through my improvised guard, nicking my face and arms and chest and shoulders. And the fact that the blades were steadily chipping away at the thick, sturdy bottles added flying glass shards to the bladestorm I was dealing with.

But I was alive and fighting, and Killer was so pissed off and distracted he didn't notice that my backed pedalling had looped us around, so that I was now being pressed back in parallel to the balustrade.

Just. As. Planned.

Clumsily hopping back from another swipe, I risked a glance to my left. Yes! Finally, my ticket out of here!

Of course, my inattention meant I collected another small cut, this one on my neck and entirely too close to the important bits. I only barely turned back in time to catch Killer's other scythe on one of my bottles that, naturally, picked that moment to give up the ghost, spraying me with alcohol and glass shards.

"Fucking—! Soundbite!"

I'd barely gotten past the first syllable of Soundbite's name when Killer stumbled to the ground clutching his head. Good snail. Taking the opportunity, I ditched the remains of my impromptu weapons and sprinted for the balustrade, before launching myself off of it into the open air.

For a long second, I hung there, slowly drifting up and forward. Down below, I could see the brawl paradoxically cleared of most of its fighters, most of the ordinary pirates lying in groaning heaps on the floor being tended to by a mix of doctors from the various pirate crews and what looked like a team hired by the bar, and yet still intensifying. But if you thought about it, it wasn't that strange: with the fodder gone, it was a brawl between the absolute cream of the crop, and they all had endurance to spare.

I only had time for snapshots: Kid and Hawkins smacking straw and metal arms into each other. Koala grabbing Sandersonia by her tail as she passed by and throwing her into the floor in a classic, if massive suplex. Bege trying to batter down Fortress Bartolomeo with raw cannon power.
Oh, and Drake, Funkfreed, and Urouge were still butting heads in the center of the fight. Literally; I winced when Funkfreed reeled back, an Urouge-forehead-shaped dent right above his eyes.

*CLANG!*

No time to wonder what *that* noise was. I'd passed the apex of my jump, and I needed all my concentration for this…

Throwing my arms out, I grabbed the big chandelier hanging over the center platform and held on for dear life. The chandelier swung out, and I took the moment to catch my breath and—

Did a knife just bounce off a wall?

"AH, THAT HAWKINS GUY *threw* *that* your way. *Knocked it off course AND*—"

"YAAAAAAAAARGH!"

Oh, that was Mikey, leaping above the scrum clutching his—!

"MY AAAAASS! *WHY DO PEOPLE KEEP STABBING MY AAAAASS!*?"

"HEEHEEHOOHOOHAHAHA!"

I hastily tried to tune out Soundbite's howling. Not because it wasn't funny, because it was *hilarious* and I was never going to let the chuck-wielder live it down so long as I lived, but because I needed to time this… just… right…

Now!

Right as the chandelier, sent a-swingin' from my desperate leap, reached its apex. I let go, soaring, arms wide.

Good news, my plan worked! I'd escaped and was alive!

Bad news? It worked too well.

Because you see, I escaped and landed, clean astride, the familiar back of an unfamiliar Tyrannosaurus Rex.

I blinked in numb surprise as my brain attempted to process Whiskey-Tango-Foxtrot had just happened… and ultimately, my gut reacted before my brain could catch up, prompting me to shoot my fists in the air with a whoop. "Booyah!" I crowed. "Third time riding a T-Rex overall, *second* time I ride one into battle! I love how those numbers don't match up!" I cackled as I rammed my heels into my mount's side. "Charge, trusty steed!"

*That* prompted said trusty steed to display some impressive dexterity by twisting his head around to *straight-on glare* at me with a baleful eye, backed up by rows of snarling, knife-sized teeth.

"*Or not!*" I cheerfully squeaked, rolling backwards off his back and narrowly missing becoming Drake's snack by the skin of *his* fangs. As it was, I was lucky to land unharmed… until I almost got *unlucky* by way of a punk-rock reject I recognized from Kid's team almost bringing a table down on my head. Then my luck reversed once more thanks to several disembodied arms yanking me aside and dropping me off the edge of the platform. I fell for only a couple of seconds before finding myself on a lower island-table that—most surprisingly—was actually *devoid* of conflict. Then again, given who was actually sitting here, maybe it wasn't so surprising as that.
"Robin. Goldenweek. Foxy," I nodded patiently at the other onlookers, calmly reaching for a cup of —I barely stopped myself from grabbing the cup with a grimace. "Painted the floor green, I see."

"Mm, in my defence, it's muddied," Goldenweek shrugged indifferently as she sipped her own hot leaf-juice. "That way, you can ignore the effects if need be, but most anyone else who sets foot here is going to be finding themselves having an unpleasant time."

"Case in point," Foxy snickered, jabbing his thumb to the side to indicate Hamburg flinging a half-tranquilized would-be interloper off the platform… after stealing his wallet, because of course.

I gave the trickster pirate a flat look… for a bit before shrugging and picking up a crumpet. Had to keep up my energy, after all! "So, how's the brawl going?" I asked.

"Let's see…" Robin closed her eyes with a thoughtful hum. "The TDWS is totem pole-ing to fight against a couple of the Heart Pirates—Sachi and Penguin I believe their names were—Carue is educating Billy on how wings can be used to execute a surprisingly effective chokehold, Chopper is alternating between first aid in Brain Point and first blood in Heavy Point—"

"Conis just BLASTED an entire bridge! IT'S RAININ' CHARRED MEN, WOMEN, AND ASSHOLES, HALLELUJAH!"

"—Lassoo is getting help from Merry to improve his pitch while she's keeping a very active pace with him using her Jingo as a bat, Brook and Lindy are getting pictures of everything, particularly anything below the waistline, aaaand—"

"GEAR THIRD!" THWACK! "RIBBIT!"

"—I do believe that Luffy just dropped down to the giants' section and has started a fist fight with the Sea King, and Boss is not far behind," she concluded with a nod and a deep slurp of her tea.

"Oooh, Triton's going to be cranky about that," Goldenweek actually showed some emotion as she winced sympathetically.

I blinked in surprise and gave the artist a glance. "You know that oversized plate of uncooked legs? What, Mohmoo not enough for you or something?"

"Oh, no, not at all," Goldenweek waved me off with a shake of her head. "Rather he's… a friend, of sorts. It's complicated. Apis will help him explain once things die down."

"GO FOR THE EYES, WHITE ONE! THE EYES! MUHUHAHAHAHAHA!"

"GLADLY! C'MERE, MOOKS!"

"Aaand once she stops RAISING HELL WITH Cottontail's help!"

"That too."

"Sounds like we're going to be here for awhile then," I nodded sagely, grabbing and scarfing down a rice cracker off the table before striding to the edge of the platform. "Well, then, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to do my due diligence and knock a few heads. And with that, I swan-dived towards a table below us—

—and immediately donned a malevolent grin as my fog cleared and shifted my position in midair. "PEOPLE'S ELBOW!" I roared with eager glee.
"FUCK YOUR PEOPLE’S ELBOW!" Someone roared back—

THWACK! "GAH!"

—which was all the warning I got before I was swatted out of the air and sent crashing through a table to crack a different island in half beneath me.

I clawed my way out of the wreckage with a groan, shaking all the kinks out of my bones. I was sore, covered in bruises, and dripping enough wasted food and booze to give Sanji an aneurysm. All in all, all surefire indicators that this was going to be a long brawl.

I immediately launched myself back into the air, aiming for the same table as before. "PEOPLE’S ELBOW 2: THE REVENGENING!"

…And I was going to love every second of it.

Cross-Brain AN: And we hope that this cliffhanger is just what you hoped for, too.

…

…

…

OK, but seriously, we've kept you waiting long enough for this, would you have rather waited another full month at least before seeing anything? As it stands, we're all up late writing this out so we can post before the new year. We'll finish the Road to Sabaody arc with the next chapter… and then? Oh, then things get crazy…
Chapter 63

Xomniac AN: The following 'allosaurus' joke was made on December 2, 2017, well before X Drake's Devil Fruit was actually revealed to be an allosaurus. Said joke was supposed to be in the previous chapter. I'm actually quite pleased with the serendipity of how it turned out.

CV12Hornet AN: Also, for our reviewers, please stop asking if we're alive or assuming the story is dead. I know we spoiled you lot early in the fic's run with fast updates, but the fact is it takes us a couple months to write one of these now. More to the point, if This Bites! dies, we will tell you.

The Patient One AN: We want to be able to make a living purely off of our stories, but the fact is that it's likely to be another year—at the barest, most unrealistically optimistic—before our P-a-t-r-e-o-n income is close to allowing that. As such, we have to dedicate most of our time to work or college, and that doesn't leave us a lot of time or energy for writing.

…Our apologies for the venting; we know that we've been testing your patience, but we are doing all that we can…now, then. Shall we?

It was late afternoon when the tired, sore, but satisfied group of pirates that was the closest we had to our 'best and brightest' (God help us) settled down in the disheveled remains of Helheim. Nary an individual was unscathed, and as much alcohol flowed on bodies as into them.

"Can I say something really quick?"

Several pairs of eyes fell on the orange-bandana'd dugong who'd spoken, an ice pack soothing his skull and a convenient ice block doing the same thing for his tail.

"I just want to correct something I've said in the past: if it's a stupid idea and it works… sometimes, it's still a really stupid idea, Cross."

"Hear hear," deadpanned the entirety of the main bar.

"Not my smartest idea, I'll admit," I mumbled out through the bandages that covered every unarmored inch of my body. Made me dread what I'd be going through soon that had my future self looking like this 24/7. "But it was the fastest way to get everyone to listen without anyone biting anyone's head off. More specifically, my head."

"Do we really look like we need the Voices of Anarchy rattling our skulls right now?" Drake snarled.

"You have a bad track record with TYRANNOSAURUSES," Soundbite chuckled.

"Actually, on closer inspection, I believe him to be an Allosaurus," Robin chimed in halfway across the room, surreptitiously hiding her smile behind her cup.

"I demand the opinion of a proctologist!"

"You mean a paleontologist."
"SOMEONE GET ME A LINGUIST!"

"The reason you want to listen to me," I cut in over the (mercifully) hushed conversation, very happy that my bandages made it easy to hide my smirk. "Is that if this is what we've been driven to after only one week of that blockade, I don't think any of us like the idea of being forced to sit around any longer. So, you want me to take charge of the discussion and actually help us all figure something out, or would you rather we keep ramming our heads against the iron curtain until something—be it them or us—breaks?"

The Supernovas exchanged looks. Finally, Kid snapped his fingers at me, grimacing and clutching the strained digits the next second.

"You get one chance, Cross," he spat.

"That's all I've ever needed," I smirked in response. "Now, let's start by looking at what we know about the blockade. Surgeon of Death."

Law cocked an eyebrow at me.

"Since you have a submarine, I'm going to go out on a limb and say that you're not here with us because of the good service, am I right?"

Law's eyes narrowed slightly, and he nodded. "Right on the money, Cross. Yeah, whoever put together this blockade? They were smart about it. The blockade ships have towed torpedoes attached to their hulls, which makes it hard enough to go under them." His gaze sharpened. "But their 'first line of defence' is an even bigger problem. Anyone here ever heard of Territorial Sea Slugs?"

"THOSE SHELL-LESS SLIME-RAGS!?" Soundbite roared out of nowhere, veins popping up on his eyestalks. "I SHOULD HAVE EXPECTED THEM to be a part of something as underhanded as this!"

"So I take it you've heard of them," I deduced, digging my finger around in my ear to try and get rid of the ringing.

"I have too," Lola scowled, rubbing her chin in thought. "Aquatic cousins of Transponder Snails, they float beneath the waves and convey information on anything that comes past them. Any ship that tries to sail over them gets spotted instantly."

"And trust me on this, they are ARROGANT little shits about how they can suck saltwater without problem, ALWAYS RUBBING IT IN US TRANSPONDERS' EYESTALKS!" Soundbite spat, audibly grinding his teeth. "IF YOU'RE EXPECTING THEM TO LISTEN WHEN I TELL THEM TO CLAM IT, NO DICE."

"Couldn't you just rattle their fluid-based pseudo-skeletons with a Gastro-Phony?" Donny suggested.

"NEEEEERD!…and, no. Some of 'em, easily, BUT NOT ALL OF THEM, WHICH IS THE PROBLEM; the rest would just RAISE THE ALARM ON WHATEVER PART OF THE NET WENT DOWN. They're assholes, but coordinated assholes, I'll give them that."

"The Marines must really be putting their all into this blockade if they have enough of them to encircle the archipelago… and all of this just for little old us? I'm kind of flattered, really," Nami purred.

"So, evading detection is problem one. And Kid, how organized was their formation?"
The punk snorted and looked away. "Half and half, honestly. The first bastards I ran into were run-of-the-mill tar-flags: pretty tough, sure, but nothing dangerous." And then his scowl deepened. "The problem was that they managed to latch onto my ship and hold us up long enough for more ships to show up, only those ones were Marine battleships. They kept up such a hail of lead that even I couldn't clear us a path. We could have broken through, we even managed to sink a few of the privateers and a battleship, but they just. Kept. Coming. And right when they were really starting to piss me off..."

"Kizaru, right, right..." I waved him off, and this time it was without mockery. Seriously, if anyone here knew how little shame there is in booking it from an Admiral, it was our crew.

"I have to admit that I'm curious, Kid," Drake noted. "If memory serves, the ship you hijacked and renamed was originally a limited production Marine steamship, and if you're tolerating a child on your crew I can only assume it's because she knows what she's doing. How did a bunch of privateers hold you up when you had that on your side?"

"Because we were up against tar-flags and we wanted to be thorough, and that bought their reinforcements enough time," Killer growled out. "They were outright insane, shoved their ship in front of ours, kept grappling the Tramp with chains they had fixed to their own deck and around the masts, things like that. And whenever their ships started to give up the ghost, they just boarded their neighbors and kept it up. They did everything possible to slow us down and force us to a halt, no matter the costs, to their ships or themselves."

CRACK!

There was a brief lull in the conversation due to everyone trying to figure out where the sound of pure RAGE and destruction had come from. Everyone outside of my crew, anyway.

"Franky, Merry, I don't think we'll have time to get your complete pounds of flesh this time," I deadpanned without looking.

"You don't know that," came the dual snarls.

"He might not, but I do."

That broke through my feigned apathy, and I looked over to Drake, who was glaring intently at the center of the table through pyramided hands.

"What you don't quite grasp is that nobody likes privateers," the pseudo-saurian explained. "The Marines see them as just another brand of pirate to put down. It is only because of contracts with the World Government and the larger trading companies that privateer ships and fleets other than the Seven Warlords' are allowed to remain operational. If the Marines have been pushed into employing them directly, then it is only because they have a gun to the privateers' heads. Proverbial or literal. These privateers are going to such extreme lengths because they have no other choice. They can either chance death by putting their all into trying to stop us... or guarantee it by failing and earning themselves one-way tickets to Impel Down."

Drake then snarled and glanced aside. "Which, satisfying as it may be, honestly makes our chances worse, because we all know what they say about cornered rats. The privateers will be as dangerous as the battleships."

His piece said, he looked to cede the floor to me, but I waved him on again. "Hey, you seem to be on a roll. If you've got an insider's perspective on this whole thing then the floor is yours."
Drake suspiciously eyed me, but not for long. Instead, he moved his gaze to my immediate superior. "Weather Witch. Your clouds have proven versatile thus far. Could you provide—?"

Almost instantly, the table was swamped with a white mass, one that swiftly shifted from fluffy and formless into a swaying pane of 'water'. Smack in the middle was a miniature collection of trees I recognized as Sabaody, while on the edge was a hazy clump that could only be us.

Drake nodded stoically, high thanks coming from him, and continued on with his explanation. "As stated, the first concern is the Sea Slugs." The cloudy map shifted to display a line of squirming lumps a good distance out from the archipelago. "They won't impede us on their own, but they'll give our enemies first warning of any incoming vessels; by the time we reach the actual blockade, they'll have reinforcements first warning of any incoming vessels; by the time we reach the actual blockade, they'll have reinforcements ready to greet us."

"Hm… troublesome… meaning that by the time we actually start fighting, we're already halfway to getting swamped…" Apoo mused, raising a finger. "Just a thought, but could we spoof the slugs? Ya know, send a small ship somewhere to spook 'em, then when the blockade looks one way we go the other?"

A simple idea, and to my mind a good one, but unfortunately, Drake's response was a firm shake of his head. "Wouldn't work," he stated. "Because the slugs are only meant to act as a 'something here' sort of warning. To actually mobilize the blockade fleet, someone needs to get actual eyes on the target. Something like what you're proposing would either be dismissed as a false positive or raise the alert across the line, but either way, no gaps would open as a result. Which brings us to the fleet itself…"

Drake trailed off as he stared at the freshly cloud-crafted ships, and then he looked back at Nami. "You noticed it too, did you?"

"Of course," Nami replied matter-of-factly. "I'm a navigator worth my salt, I'd have to be blind to not notice."

"Eh? The hell are you talking about?" Bartolomeo demanded, giving the table an incredulous look. "And why'd you only show half the ships and slugs?"

And indeed, he seemed to be right: the lines of both vessels and mollusks seemed to be half-formed, depicting a horseshoe-shaped formation around the archipelago, leaving half the archipelago defended but the other half conspicuously open.

"Because that's exactly how they're arranged," Drake explained slowly, as though talking to a child, but before Barto's hackles could truly get up, he shook his head dismissively. "And before you ask, no, we can't go through the opening. Do I really need to explain why?"

"You only wish everyone else in this room was as smart as you and I," Nami answered in a long-suffering tone.

Drake let out a quiet snort of agreement, which got more than a few bulging veins from the other Supernovas, but thankfully Nami continued before anyone could protest.

"What most of you seem to be missing," our navigator stated, a bit too slowly. "Is that the unprotected side of the island is the northwest approach."

*That* got reactions from more than a few of the Supernovas, though the more clueless ones remained… well, clueless.

"What's the big deal about where the hell the gap is?!" Barto impatiently demanded.
"The Red Line lies on that side of the ocean, dumbass," Bege sighed in resignation, Nami helpfully providing a visual in the form of a mountainous wall of cloud. "And atop it—"

"Mariejois…" I finished with a disgusted grimace. "In all its resplendent, unholy glory. And I'm guessing that the defenses are as impressive as the city itself is ostentatious?"

"Hole in one, Cross," Vivi piped up from the sidelines. "We wouldn't even need to be within sight of the Red Line itself, their mortars are so powerful. All they'd need to do is spot us… and then they'd simply bury us in a rain of hot lead we wouldn't even have a chance of defending ourselves against."

"Alright, alright, so the only way in is to go through," Urouge mused, his ever-present grin becoming slightly strained. "Through the pack of faithless privateers who are selling their souls for the freedom to wreak unmitigated havoc."

"Made all the worse by the fact that those very same privateers have Marines commanding their formation," Hawkins quietly interjected. "Ultimately, we can only choose how we clash with the Government. Either we put ourselves at the mercy of Mariejois' defenses and hope we don't get blown to pieces, or we endeavor to pierce the strength of the blockade they've erected," was the bland summation. "A blockade with a balanced mix of quality and quantity that guarantees that, even if they cannot truly best any of us, they can stall us out until someone who can shows up. Meaning that unless we have someone who can fight an admiral here—"

"There are some, actually," Law airily interrupted, drumming his fingers on his devil-sword's sheath. "Word around the island is that the proprietor of Oden's Cottage is one of Whitebeard's Division Commanders. I doubt he would say no if—"

"No way."

All eyes turned to Luffy, hitherto silent and now glowering at the center of the table. "We didn't come this far just to ask someone for help getting into the New World," he stated in a voice that brooked no argument. "If we can't get there ourselves, we don't deserve it."

…I honestly had to move my gauntlet over my gut to make sure that I hadn't actually been stabbed, because geeze, that one hurt. It was a good thing everyone's focus was more on Luffy… especially Bartolomeo, who was biting his lip with glowing, teary eyes. Thankfully, the rest of the Supernovas seemed to be nodding in agreement, so that made things easier for us.

"…so, if we're doing this on our own," Law began again. "Then what's the plan of action?"

"…Mmrgh…" Bege grumbled. "Although it almost literally sickens me to say it, I must unfortunately agree with Eustass on this matter—"

"Up yours, shortstack!"

"—in that the simplest and most direct approach is most likely the correct one. All of us together have more firepower at our disposal than most people see in their lifetimes. If we concentrate it all into a single point of assault, then we should be able to break through with relative ease."

"FUCK YEAH!" Kid roared. Half the bar promptly joined him, shaking the room with their will to rampage until Bege sharply cleared his throat.

"Except," he growled, angling his fedora down to shade his eyes. "For the fact that every. Single. Time an operation like this goes down, somebody is left holding the bag. And that's more accurate than ever in this case, seeing as if we want to get past that blockade, we'll want somebody to stay back and tie down the privateers and Marines like they'll try and tie us up. I'm guessing nobody
here volunteers for the position."

*That* killed everyone's enthusiasm dead in its tracks, and Helheim lapsed into an uncomfortable silence, nobody willing to look at the others in the eye. I grimaced as I silently admitted that the mobster had a point, and I was just starting to wrack my brain for a solution…

"We're not the only ones heading to this Super Body place, right?"

Only to be preempted by the last person any of us had expected.

"Eh?" I blinked in surprise at Luffy and his curious head tilt. "I, uh, yeah? Saba—*The Archipelago* is the first stop on the only route pirates can take to reach the New World. However many pirates are here on Skelter Bite, it's only a fraction of everyone who wants to get past that blockade."

"Okay," Luffy nodded. "Sooo, if we need to have someone stay behind, then what about all the other pirates that want to go there?"

*That* snapped everyone's attention to Luffy. Most in shock, sure, but others with dawning realization.

"Wait-wait-waaaaait…" Bonney drew out, waving her hands incredulously. "Are you—Is he saying —?!"

"He's… actually right!" Valentine breathed. "Even if we, the Bartos and the Straw Hats, managed to land the 1% of Paradise's scum in Impel Down, that *still* leaves the unwashed masses of the 99%, those below Shiki's standards, out roaming the waters! Weak as heck, no doubt… but when a *lot* of garbage gets piled up in one place at the same time, it can raise a hell of a stink."

*That* split the reactions in the room down the middle: half were eagerly optimistic, with a savage undertone for the schadenfreude of leaving the worst of our profession to hang… but the other half remained tense and doubtful.

The head of these doubters was, of course, the ever-gloomy Bege. "And how, exactly, do you *propose* we assemble said 'garbage' in order to bring about said 'stink'?" he asked through a cloud of smoke.

"The little angry man is right," Urouge nodded, completely ignoring the look of murder said little man shot at him. "It's a perfect solution, true, but I doubt that we can just invite all of them to come together and fight for us, especially if they're just going to be scapegoats. We would need to motivate them somehow, give them a *reason* to charge at a line of Marines, heedless of their own lives."

Another tense moment of disappointment as everyone acknowledged the point made…

"…well, hell, guess it's up to me to save all of our skins. *Again.*"

And another moment of utter shock as everyone's incredulous eyes turned to *Kid* of all people, who glanced at Shuraiya and then back at the rest of us.

"Any of you dumbasses ever heard of the Dead End Race?"

-=0=-

The details poured out from there, and a solid plan took form. Details regarding the rules and regulations (if they could called as much) about the event in question were divulged and elaborated upon, and issues about the prize, the ignition, and the one to be trusted with the prize money were presented and resolved. Of course, the third one required calling in a rather significant debt, as
evidenced by the octopus fishman cowering before our resident Weather Witch.

"A-Anyway, if you don't mind and don't need me for anything else, I'm just going to get back to handing out takoyaki. Does anyone else need anything?"

All of us gathered Supernovas turned our eyes from Hachi, instead looking over each other. Just waiting for someone to raise another objection. God knows there'd been enough of those during this discussion. And with Bonney and Luffy looking ready to gnaw at the table, we could finally, finally bring this discussion to an—

"From you? Nothing. From everyone else, though, I'll take a second of your time."

"Neptune's hairy ballsack, what now?!” Drake of all pirates snapped as all eyes turned to the speaker, Apis, who looked remarkably unfazed by the entire Worst Generation glaring at her for interrupting. That Lindy's head, a smug, toothy grin set in the jaws, was pointedly hovering over her probably had something to do with the lack of anything pointed flying at her head… yet.

"This had better be good, brat," Kid growled. Well, some things never change.

"Let me preface anything else with the fact that I ate the Whisper-Whisper Fruit," Apis announced, meeting Kid's and every other Supernova's eyes. "What that means is that I can mentally communicate with any animal alive. Including ones that even Soundbite can't translate."

Before anyone could question her, a sonorous "CROAK!" sounded out, and conversation in the bar died yet again. Most everyone—the Supernovas included—got up and looked over the nearest edge into the abyss. But rather than the abyss, it was a titanic yellow frog Sea King staring up at us crouched on the floor, his bulbous eyes patiently blinking out of synch.

"Including Sea Kings, as we found out during a little…” She snapped a sidelong glare at her unrepentant and snot-picking captain. "Adventure in the Calm Belt some time back." She then shook her head and nodded her head back towards the edge. "And that's important because down there is the Elder Triton of the Abyssal Court, the closest thing the Sea Kings have to a governing body, who's here as an envoy of one of the Court's Grand Elders, Eternal Okeanos." She cocked an expectant eyebrow. "You all interested in what I—and specifically he—has to say now?"

There was a respectful silence from the assembled captains, up until Hawkins politely cleared his throat. "I believe I speak for all of us when I say that we are most interested in what the honorable Elder has to share," he stated patiently. It really said something that even Kid and Luffy nodded along to that.

Apis looked back down to Triton, and after a brief pause the frog let out another sonorous croak and nodded respectfully. The titanic amphibian then started gesturing with its webbed fingers alongside a series of shorter but no-less rib-rattling croaks.

The Whisper-Girl nodded along to whatever it was the Sea King was saying, and once it finished she addressed the Supernovas again. "Elder Triton thanks you for agreeing to hear him out, and says that his presence here today is to act as a messenger for Eternal Okeanos. And he bears his message here, specifically, because what he has to say is for the ears of any and all who fly the Jolly Roger."

If anyone wasn't interested before, then they were now practically hanging on every word.

"Holy shit," I muttered under my breath.

"Didn't see this coming?" Merry hissed up at me.
"Well…" I shrugged. "I've always known Sea Kings were smarter than they let on and that they had some kind of relation with humanity way back when, but I'm talking Void 'way back'. I expected they'd come into play someday, but…"

"That's a no, then…" Merry donned an ear-to-ear grin. "In-teresting!"

"And what would the Grand Elder's message be?" Drake spoke up.

Apis straightened herself as imperiously as she could… with Lindy looming behind her, of course. "The Abyssal Court is an ancient and proud body, so they, um…" Apis paused, frowning cutely in thought. "Uh, that's a lot of big words… they take a long time to make decisions. The last time they made a decision at all it took a century, give or take a decade. So you can guess what a big deal it is that they have decided, near unanimously, to rearrange their kind's priorities over the past several months."

The Whisper-girl raised her head and swept her gaze over the assembled pirates. "It has been decided, by the Abyssal Court, that the Abyssal Ones—or as we know them, the Sea King species—have more to gain from tolerating the existence of pirate ships upon the surface of their domain, rather than removing them for their transgressions."

There was a rather pregnant pause as that sunk in.

"…Pardon me, but I find that phrasing to be a bit vague. What does that mean, exactly, for us?" Urouge asked.

Apis looked over her shoulder, speaking slowly as though to make sure that she was delivering the correct message. "The Abyssal Ones will no longer attack pirate ships… just on a whim. They're, ah, not completely safe from attack, because some of the Abyssal Ones will still attack; some because they're hungry, some because you've intruded on their territory, some… just they're mean sons of belug—ah, bitches… but they're safer."

There was a murmur of conversation and a great many traded glances among the table. Then, Bonney said, around a mouthful of takoyaki, "Sure, we'll take it."

"Does this mean that we're expected to show the 'Abyssal Ones' the same courtesy?" Law asked carefully.

"Ah…" Apis looked to Triton and then back to Law. "They expect you—us, to leave the younger ones alone, but they never leave the Calm Belts until they can take care of themselves, so in general, best to keep staying out of there like usual." She then shook her head. "Ah, but adults, not really; the Abyssal Ones live by the laws of nature, 'survival of the fittest' and 'might makes right.' Lose a fight, you only have yourself to blame.

"And like I said, while most of the Abyssals will follow the new decree for pirates unless they have some personal reason to attack, there will still be some who want to prove their strength against…" She hesitated, glancing over her shoulder briefly for confirmation before continuing. "Ah… against 'the ones who defy the world.' So, yeah. Might still be some attacks, but, uh, if they attack and then decide to break off and run, I think you can just leave them be, they won't come back."

"So, basically, pirates now have the choice to live and let live with Sea Kings?" Apoo incredulously clarified.

"Basically?" Apis shrugged patiently. "Yeah."

"And I'm guessing they're not interested in telling us why they've decided such a thing?" Hawkins
inquired.

Apis shrugged helplessly was punctuated by the flat and guttural "CR-OAK" that echoed throughout the shaft. "I get a bit of clout because I made a good impression on them and I'm the first non-Abyssal entity to speak with them in centuries, but that's still something they'll take to the deepest trenches, so no."

"Reason or not, I think that that's everything. So, if I can make one more suggestion?"

And with that, the attention came back to me. This time, I tugged the bandages off to show off my grin. "We've got an armistice with the ocean's greatest predators and we've got a plan to bust up that blockade. It'll take another few days before we can actually do it, but we've got it. Am I the only one who thinks that this calls for a celebration?"

One second of silence.

Two.

"PARTY!" Luffy, Barto, Apoo, and Bonney all threw their fists up and roared in synch.

Aaaand boom goes the bar, the entire place roaring into new and, as usual, pretty damn violent life as everyone somehow got their second winds. Bottles flew and booze flowed like water, but thankfully, apart from the 'casual' scuffle here or there, the bar didn't reignite into another brawl. Just… a pirate's version of a good time.

But honestly, I had had enough of that for one day, crazy though it seemed for me to say that; there was only one thing between me and relaxation, and with the sudden crescendo in atmosphere, I was given the prime opportunity to take advantage of it. I moved casually to the edge of the platform, and the nearby Damned watched me in their peripheral vision, Soundbite filtering the exchange that followed to them.

"Apis, I need a quick word with Triton."

The young pirate looked away from where Bartolomeo was grabbing chopsticks and cast a subtle glance over her shoulder into the abyss, wherein the titanic frog loosed a low, easily unnoticed warble. "He's listening."

"If the Sea Kings are allowing that truce for 'the ones who defy the world,' then they should know that we have allies within 'the world' itself, acting to undermine them. We could use a way to extend the same protection they're giving us, to them."

Tashigi stepped up next to me, casting a wary glance down at the frog. "Speaking as one of those allies, I very much agree to wanting a way to keep Sea Kings off our back that doesn't include firing a full salvo, thank you very much."

I was treated to the wonderfully sanity-defying sight of a giga-frog heaving a sigh as it rubbed its head. "'Humans and their politics, always giving me such headaches. And that's after what that squishy one did to me.' That's what he said."

I hastily hid a cough in my fist before hastily locking that train of thought away to rot, where it couldn't get me smushed.

"Anyway, he also says that's doable. If you give him a password, he'll pass it on to Okeanos who'll pass it on to the rest of the Court," Apis continued unbothered. "Do you have anything memorable that comes to mind?"
The second the words 'memorable' and 'Sea King' processed through my brain, something immediately came to mind. "I've got something that should stick in their minds, yeah," I hedged, making doubly sure that my bandages were covering my mouth. I then hissed out two words as low as I could manage, trusting that Soundbite would maintain the secrecy.

"Joy Boy."

Tashigi didn't have the chance to even begin questioning my choice; the instant the second syllable was out of my mouth Triton's eyes bulged and snapped up to stare at me with the same expression Nami had when she found out about those two, and Apis snapped a hand to her head and damn near keeled over. "GAH! What the heck did you just say, Cross?! And whatever you have to say, say it fast because he's seconds away from swallowing you whole!"

"I don't know the details of the promise he made her," I hastily hissed, keeping my gaze firmly locked on Triton's eyes. "All I know is that he made one, that it involves Noah in some way, and that you have remained faithful to it all these years, in spite of the new world that has risen up. Anything else still rests with you and yours. Nobody else can discover his name the way that I did, and nobody unworthy of your trust will learn it from us. To our allies, they will just be words of salvation and nothing more. You have my oath."

We stared at each other for what felt like several eternities on end, the tension ratcheting up with every passing second, neither I, the puny human, or he, the titanic, ship-eating sea monster, giving the other an inch.

And then finally… Triton snapped his head down and started crawling away, determination set in his every movement.

"I'll have all of this back to the Court by the end of the day,'" Apis translated breathlessly, staring at Triton's retreating back with no small amount of trepidation. "Your allies will be given our favor as well, just—" Apis choked mid-sentence, and had to audibly swallow before continuing. "—just know that should he ever suspect you spread his name frivolously… the Eternal Okeanos will… reduce you to so much chum."

That drew an uncertain grimace from me. "Riiight, acknowledged… for the record, what would this 'Okeanos' look like exactly?"

"Black and white stripes."

Now that got me tugging fearfully at my collar. "Ah. The… biggest one I have ever seen in my entire life, who looks like he could and has eaten small islands. Right. We'll, ah…" I coughed into my fist. "We'll be discreet."

"Yeah, you do that," Apis sighed, not even looking up as she climbed onto Lindwyrm's back. "Meanwhile, I'm going to find the strongest thing I can drink without shutting down a kidney in an effort to erase the last few minutes from my memory. While you…" She waved her hand in dismissive surrender. "Well, frankly, until it affects me, I don't care what you do."

"Enjoy~!" Soundbite sang as a way of farewell.

And with that, while she moved to the bar, I began making my way out of Helheim—because Chaos knows that I'd had more than enough madness for the day; case in point, Brook walking past as he pulled Gif out of his skull—along with the half-dozen others on the crew that I think were looking for relaxation over revelry.
Also, well… better to get started on this planning sooner rather than later, right?

"So, everyone had fun?" I asked conversationally, my arms folded behind my head.

"Ohh, yes. I made out like a bandit," Nami hummed with a thoroughly satisfied voice and expression as she fell into step alongside me, looking every bit like a cat who'd sunk her fangs into a juicy canary, which was underlined by the way she kept flipping and snatching a doubloon with one hand.

Soundbite, however, was notably underwhelmed, judging from the dismissive glance he gave the doubloon. "BANDIT MY ASS, the only new money you've got on you IS THAT BERI!"

"Mmhm, you're ri-i-i-ght" the Weather Witch hummed in agreement, her grin widening visibly as she started dancing the coin through her fingers. "All I managed to get was a single beri."

She then turned her head and stared straight at Bege, catching the coin between her two fingers with a massive smile. "Just one. Measly. Spare. Beri." And then her hand flickered and the coin was just flat-out gone.

Bege blinked at Nami… before throwing his head back and outright roaring with laughter, going so far as to tip his hat to Nami in a gesture of what I could only interpret as a gesture of outright deference.

"…you just got us the eternal friendship of the Firetanks, didn't you?" I summarized incredulously.

"Eh," Nami shrugged in a faux-casual manner, her arms folded behind her back as she walked with just a little more swing to her hips. "At minimum, I got the eternal respect of their boss." She shot me an impish grin. "I do good?"

"Dahlin'," I drawled, slinging my arm around her shoulders as I led us out. "You did beautiful."

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It was hard to say if the results of that meeting made things more or less active around Skelter Bite. On the one hand, having a possible way to get to Sabaody, and soon, helped everyone enjoy their forced shore leave a little more, because they now knew it would (with any luck) only be a matter of a few more days.

On the other, with Coo and his flock combing everywhere in a hundred-mile radius for pirate ships, invitations loaded in their saddlebags, Skelter Bite was experiencing a vast influx of clientele, much of which wasn't the kind of pirate we particularly wanted to be with. Lola had taken to spending much of the days at the docks to ensure that anyone who had ill intentions stayed on their ships, and she rarely needed help to keep the thugs in line, either. Hell, some of them didn't even get the chance to reach the docks, the Triangle turning them away outright at its borders.

Well, anyway, if there was one thing that was certain about recent events, it was this: this was going to be a race to remember. And half of the time that I had was spent making sure of that fact, putting in my expertise for all parts of the planning. The main listeners on my part were our resident passenger-capable birds—Chuchun and Billy—and the Dugongs, both those on our crew and off it; collectively, they would allow us a view of the blockade from every possible frontal angle. And the plans had already begun to take shape with a few scouting trips here and there.

And the other half? Well… quite honestly, I could fill a book or two with all of the happenings on Skelter Bite, and I wouldn't even have to remember all of them; with the outrageous and the mundane interchangeable, anyone could conceivably make up a ridiculous story of the happenings
there and even people who'd been on the island would believe it in a heartbeat. But none of what happened or what I imagined happening compared to the main event, so I'll just give a few highlights for the week in-between.

Though, to be sure, it's not as if all that happened during this time was entirely alien…

-O-

SIX DAYS TILL START

The day's surprisingly calm lunch break found my partners and I seated across from our shanghaied cabin girl, at her own request. Or, well, 'partner', at least; Funkfreed was the only one with me, Lassoo and Soundbite hanging out with Paperug, for some reason they didn't deem share-worthy, a few blocks away. No idea why, but meh, Funkfreed's presence was all Tashigi cared about and so it was all I cared about.

And really, I should have expected this meeting; Tashigi was obsessed with swords, and now she had the unique opportunity to speak to one. Funkfreed may not have been legendary—to both their chagrins—but he still possessed the instincts and experience to answer any questions she had.

And the 'spar' (read: daily deathmatch) between Zoro and Sanji in the background was nice ambiance. It helped me try and ignore Tashigi's sparkling, fangirl expression.

I'm serious. I could see the sparkles around her and reflected in her eyes. Freaky as hell, it was.

"Alright, I'm ready!" the Marine declared.

"Er, just so you know…" Funkfreed awkwardly said, trunk rubbing the back of his head. "I may be part elephant, but the part of me that's a sword is also the part that handles reproductive instincts, and —"

"IT'S NOT LIKE THAT!" Taking a deep breath, Tashigi recomposed herself, thankfully minus the sparkles. "I just… I think that it's such a shame that works of art are being used for petty violence. The 50 Skilled Swords, the 21 Great Swords, and the 12 Supreme Swords! They're things of beauty twisted into instruments of destruction. A sword should only be raised to keep the peace! Instead, they're used to perpetuate the cycle of violence that—!"

THWACK!

I flinched at the sound of flesh hitting flesh, but much to my surprise—and Funkfreed's, from the stiff, unnatural positioning of his trunk—it wasn't my pachyderm-sword that had cut off Tashigi's rant, but Tashigi herself, who'd just slammed one fist onto the other, which had been slowly clenching up on the table as her rant had gained steam.

She stayed frozen in that position for about half a minute, her teeth grinding together. Slowly, she forcibly relaxed herself and heaved a weary sigh before turning a determined look on Funkfreed.

"I… apologize for that," she sighed out, bringing her hand up to press against her temples. "I… I know that I was going somewhere wrong, saying what I shouldn't have. Those words, that… philosophy, was born from a black-and-white worldview, an ironclad belief that because we… because I was a Marine, what I believed was 'just'. That because they were pirates and I was a Marine, I had a duty, a… a right to take their swords because I didn't approve of how they were using them. A belief that I now realize is… completely divorced from reality, or at least any sense of honor or decency."
"I'm still going to seek out the named Swords," she continued. "That hasn't changed. But, I will judge their wielders based on their actions and their intents before I judge them by their flags. And when I take their blades, it won't be because I was right 'on principle', but because I was right because I won. And if they should win, well..." Her hand drifted down to rub her thumb on Shigure's guard. "I guess I won't have much reason to complain then, will I?"

We all lapsed into a moment of respectful silence (apart from the clash of Zoro's steel and Sanji's leather) as we processed Tashigi's words and her newfound—or perhaps, newly reforged?—determination.

Ultimately, it was Funkfreed who broke the silence, raising his trunk to his forehead with a chuckle. "Well, I'll be honest with you: I'm really impressed. I wasn't all that pleased when Cross told me about your original philosophy, especially because of my personal perspective... but this? This I can agree with. And I sincerely believe that any blade you manage to win? They'll be lucky to be in the hands of someone as dedicated as you."

The praise drew a gleeful grin from Tashigi, which swiftly evolved into a look of outright elation as she beamed eagerly at Funkfreed. "You mean like how Cross claimed you from Spandam after beating him down? I-I-I realize that that wasn't a swordfight, but then neither Cross nor Spandam were or are good swordsmen—"

"True on both counts, I can attest to that," Funkfreed nodded sagely.

"Wow, nicely done, direct hit. Want me to sharpen you before the next time you stab me in the back?" I deadpanned.

"—so does that mean that you accepted the defeat and Cross's right to wield you because neither of them was a sword-wielder? And how do swords in general interpret it when an actual swordsman is defeated by someone who's not one? Oh, oh, and also, most blade oils aren't that far off in quality, when you get down to it. How do they feel to the sword? And, and—!"

I rolled my eyes and looked away with a chuckle as Tashigi started to build herself a nice head of steam, Funkfreed himself—an entity who easily outweighed a full ten times over no less—leaning away from her with a sheepish grin. In the end, no matter how much I loved tormenting the ditzy swordswoman, she was still a valued friend and colleague, so it was nice to see her so eager and animated.

Whoosh...

"And speaking of ditzes..." I mused to myself, turning my attention to the seat next to me, where Vivi had just breezed(heh) in, and was watching the show of Zoro and Sanji's ongoing spar, it was a spar, they'd been very insistent on that—with a thoughtful frown on her face.

Well, hell, Opportunity, you don't need to knock that hard on my door!

"Hoping for another sighting of beefcake, your highness?" I teased.

Vivi snapped up straight in her seat as her face went red, wind whistling out of her ears. "N-No! I mean, yes, I mean, that'd be nice, but that's not what I'm watching for!" Fanning herself, the princess managed to get herself mostly under control... though the blush still remained. "I was just noticing—and I can't believe I didn't think of this earlier—that those two are incredibly Kismet for each other."

"Ooookay, I've got nothing," I admitted, before blanching as a thought most horrific occurred to me.
"Oh, for the love of all things holy, don't tell me you've joined the ranks of the shippers!"

"Wha—oh, Set no, nonono, never!" Vivi vehemently denied, her face the picture of indignation before turning thoughtful!? "Well, I mean, there was that thing with the olive oil, and logically two is better than—"

"Define the word so that I know whether to knock some sense into you or run!" I hissed frantically.

"R-Right, right," Vivi winced, coughing into her fist self-consciously. At least, that was what I could hear clearly. I dearly hope I simply misheard whatever it was she said under her breath, because otherwise, Kohza was in for a very… subjective wedding night.

"Aheh, ah, anyway, no, it's not anything loving at all. The… exact opposite really. It, uh… doesn't have a direct equivalent in this language, but a good approximation is 'destined loathing'. Though, ah…" She tapped a finger to her chin thoughtfully. "I think I remember Chaka calling it something like 'two souls determined to hatefuck each other in the personality'."

I actually needed a moment to pause and process that. "Really now," I mused, quirking an inquisitive eyebrow as I looked the clashing pair over. "'Hatefucking each other in the personality'…well, I can certainly see it…" I paused as my eye passed over a lonely bowl sitting on the table, and with nary a moment's hesitation I threw up my hands with a barely restrained grin. "But really, guys? In public? Right in front of my salad?"

"My salad," Tashigi snarled out of the blue, snapping right out of her conversation to grab the bowl and hug it close.

Huh, I hadn't even noticed what she'd ordered… well, if she was going to make it this easy for me—Plastering a smile on my face, I started reaching across the table. "Now Tashigi, I prefer to think of it as our sala—!"

THUNK!

"AGH, BITCH!" I howled as I scrabbled at the knife that had just nailed my hand to the table!

"HAHAHAHAHAEEHEEHEEHOHHOOHOOHOO!" Soundbite howled from out of nowhere.

"ROT IN HELL, YOU LITTLE SLIMESTAIN!"

"Wow, two at once," Vivi breathed, her hands covering her mouth as she stared at us with eyes glittering. "Truly this crew is blessed by fate."

"Yup," Funkfreed agreed as he nosed lettuce fronds into his mouth.

"WE'RE ALSO BLESSED WITH A WORLD-CLASS DOCTOR, SO SOMEONE CALL THE FURRY BASTARD ALREADY!"

"Oh, yeah, come to think of it, where did he go?" Funkfreed wondered—THWACK! "GWAH!?"—right before Tashigi uppercut him in the jaw with Shigure's hilt as he went for another mouthful of green.

"NOSE OFF THE SALAD, OR I'M GONNA TURN YOU INTO PIANO KEYS!" the undercover Marine erupted. "I HAVEN'T HAD LEAFY GREENS IN THREE WEEKS, I'M NOT LETTING THIS CHANCE GO!"

"SOMEONE PULL OUT THIS DAMN KNIFE ALREADY!"
Chopper's ears flicked, and he glanced up from his notepad. "Did you hear something?" he wondered.

"Sss-sss-ss!" hissed the large anaconda draped over the examination table he'd commandeered from a local clinic in exchange for a day's work, pinning the diminutive doctor with a gimlet eye as she waved the tip of her tail at her head.

"Oh, right. Sorry, you can change back now."

With as close to a sigh of relief as was physically possible, the snake shifted and morphed back into Sandersonia, squirming in place. "Whew, that's better," she muttered, rolling her arms and other joints. "Don't go full animal very often, it always feels weird to lose and regrow limbs."

"Meanwhile, I've never had any issues with shifting between ungulate and plantigrade anatomy… maybe just because I had more practice growing up? Either way, still interesting," Chopper noted, out loud and on paper. "Alright, and that concludes the physical examination. Now for the rest of the tests." With that, the little doctor ambled over to his knapsack and began rummaging through it.

"Yeah, should've figured there'd be more tests," Sandersonia groused, digging her finger into her newly re-grown ear. "And just what are those other tests, by the way?"

"Now I'm going to be using instruments. Some hard numbers to back up the observations."

Straightening, Chopper turned around and revealed a blood-pressure cuff and two sizeable beakers balanced in his hooves. "For starters, I'm going to be taking your blood pressure, and then I need you to fill these up."

Sandersonia's eyes widened, and she pressed her legs a little tighter together. "With what? And, which I really should have asked sooner, why?" she asked in a strangled voice.

A grin spread over Chopper's face, and the Kuja Pirate's stomach dropped even further. She'd listened to the SBS, so she recognized what it meant when Chopper's eyes literally lit up with scientific glee. "You're doing what I'm telling you to because the data I have been collecting from all across this cobbled-together floating asylum has been pushing me closer and closer to a breakthrough, strand by scale by mucus, and you and your data points are the last pieces of data I require to solidify the theory I've been working on for months. And that will allow me to finally write and publish my treatise on the Psychoreactive Polymorphic Properties of Zoan Devil Fruits and the self-imposed limitations thereof!"

Before the Amazon could reach for the nearest heavy object, however, the spark went out of Chopper's eyes and he switched to his usual gleeful wiggling. "Oooh, it's going to be so great! The first paper of its kind, ever! I'll revolutionize the entire field! The entire paradigm, eheeeheehee!"

Sandersonia blinked in surprise at the abrupt turnaround, and slowly straightened back up to give the young doctor a curious look. "Could you… explain that for me, please? I don't quite understand what you're getting at."

Chopper paused mid-intellectual ecstasy and hastily re-composed himself, putting his tools aside to give the senior pirate his full attention. "It's, ah, kind of complicated… well, let's start with the basic
principles and work our way up. Zoans: what do you know about the 'rules' of our fruits?"

"Uh…" Sandersonia tilted her head curiously. "It's… pretty obvious, isn't it? Besides the usual 'avoid the sea' stuff, Zoans have three forms they can take, animal, demi-animal and hu—er, original, right?"

Chopper cocked his eyebrow. "Is that so?" Without waiting for a response, he took a Rumble Ball from his bag, crunched it up, and shifted rapidly through the four forms it gave him: Arm, Guard, Horn, and then ending with Jumping. "But I'm capable of seven forms. So what does that tell you?"

"…that rules don't apply to the Straw Hats?" Sandersonia tried with a sheepish grin. Said grin melted clean off her face at the distinctly unimpressed look the re-Brain'd reindeer gave her. "But, uh, seriously, you do need chemicals to use those other forms, don't you?"

"And I needed them to achieve my higher mental faculties as well, yes…" Chopper nodded in admission. "But the fact that I am capable of these things at all implies that, at minimum, there is more to Zoans than modern science is aware of. And this fact is supported by the data and observations I've been gathering from all different sorts of Zoans recently."

"Data and observations such as…" the amazon rolled her hand inquisitively.

"Well, among others," Chopper began, flipping back through his notebook. "There's X Drake's distinctly saurian snarling, which the vocal cords and thoracic cavity of a human shouldn't be capable of. The falcon and jackal Zoans we met in Alabasta preen and clean themselves regularly, even in their human forms. Merry almost always acts like a child even though, if we go back to when her blueprints were drawn up, she's technically over twenty years old, combined with her eating habits somehow not wrecking her digestive tract. And that's a trait Lassoo and Funkfreed share; they like to snack on gunpowder and polish, respectively. I haven't even mentioned me yet; my Devil Fruit gave me human intelligence, and I never would have realized any of this if I hadn't realized that first."

He then flipped his book closed and pointed at Sandersonia. "And then we have you, with your foot-long tongue."

Sandersonia blinked in surprise, crossing her eyes to look down at the suddenly frozen tongue in question. "Guhhh…?"

"And then there's this."

"Wha—?" Sandersonia looked back at Chopper—Tunk! "HSSS!"—and promptly reeled away from him with an almost snarling hiss when the reindeer pegged her in the forehead with an ice cube of all things. "WHAT THE HELL, YOU LITTLE FURBALL!? I HATE THE COLD—!"

"—and you prefer it when it's warm, right? And your sister Marigold shares these preferences?"

"YE—ah… y-yes, actually, that's right. How did you—?"

"I deduced as much because your Zoans are reptilian, and thus ectothermic. That is to say, you're cold-blooded." As understanding bloomed across her face, he flipped to a blank page. "Now… when did you notice that your tongue remained serpentine even in human form?"

Sandersonia slowly bowed her head, her hands moving to grip her forearms as a different kind of chill settled across her. "It was… back when we were-running. We got into the habit of using our hybrid forms to smell out enemies. Mmph… those days blur together, but at some point we realized we could still smell them without changing. We also noticed our tongues, but at that point we really couldn't bring ourselves to care."
Chopper buried a grimace at her reaction, and patted her knee. "Due to the stress you were undergoing, your mind blurred the boundaries between you and the snake. And because of that blurring, you're can bring out an aspect of the fruit's power without even thinking about it. Even when you thought it was impossible." His spine straightened, his gaze then flashing analytically. "Would you happen to recall any other elements of you and your sister's abilities that you considered inconsequential up until now?"

"Ah… well…" Sandersonia's tongue flicked nervously, and she sucked it back in. "There… is one thing, but I never…"

Chopper cracked a kind grin at her. "This is science, Sandersonia. There's no such… or at least, there are very few cases of inconsequential data."

The Amazon nodded her head at that, and so closed her eyes in concentration. And right before Chopper's amazed gaze, the amazon shrank in size. It was similar to a Zoan transition, but rather than redonning her verdant scales, Sandersonia remained fully human, save for the fact that she was now in possession of a normal, human stature. A seven-foot tall stature, perhaps, but still within the normal range.

"We… needed to hide a lot while we were running, and being big wasn't particularly helpful," Sandersonia explained with a slight grimace, examining her shrunken hands with equal parts uncertainty and newfound interest. "Night after night, we noticed it was easier for all of us to curl up together. Marigold and I never really thought it was that useful because, well, what good is it to a warrior to become smaller, but if this helps—?"

She stopped speaking then, because the spark in Chopper's eyes had returned, much brighter than before. His hooves were a blur, pen filling page after page.

"Just to confirm," the scientist muttered, almost absentmindedly. "Your primary size, was that—?"

"It's natural," Sandersonia clarified as she reverted to said size. "I've always been this big, we've always assumed that my father had giant's blood somewhere in his ancestry."

"Mmrgh," the reindeer scowled slightly as he flipped back and scratched a few things out. "Which means that you're likely simply transposing your animal state's size onto your human frame. Still interesting, but not quite what I was hoping for…" That done, he resumed filling out new pages. "But, nevertheless, this kind of transformation, combined with your demi-form's measurements, does lend credence to my theory…"

By now more than a little invested in the conversation, Sandersonia leaned forwards curiously. "Finally! What is this illustrious, revolutionary theory, exactly?"

The gleam in Chopper's eyes became almost dangerous. "Carnivorous Zoans, what do you know of them?"

"Vicious sons of bitches, both in the fur and out of it, pretty damn strong to boot," the serpent Zoan answered promptly, even proudly, though it was tinged with annoyance. "I mean, I should know, Marigold and I are Carnivores."

"Then you know that one other aspect of Carnivores is that you're always titanic," Chopper concurred, nodding fervently. "Their demi-forms—your demi-forms—are always exponentially larger than either of your other two forms. A trend that is absent in all other breeds of Zoans, I might add! Up until now, it's been accepted that such a size simply is because 'that's the way things are'…"
He met Sandersonia's gaze with unmitigated glee. "But if my theory is correct, then the surge of instincts and adrenaline that Carnivores acquire from their animal selves, combined with their human mentalities, results in the mass-surge! This could mean that Carnivores could actually be capable of repressing their adrenaline and compressing themselves into far more humanoid states—a feat I have already heard of, no less—or that with the right mentality, non-Carnivores could actually be capable of taking on such frames for themselves! The possibilities are as limitless as they are fascinating!"

"So what's your theory? Get on with it!" Sandersonia hissed eagerly, by now quite literally on the edge of her seat.

Chopper matched her oversized grin tooth for tooth. "Boa Sandersonia, the drug you saw me take a few minutes ago that unlocked my other forms is an invention that I have made great usage of from the time I met the Straw Hat Pirates. It has helped me reach heights of my abilities that I never considered before. My theory…is that from the very beginning, it has been nothing more than a placebo. That-that-that from the very moment I ate my fruit, I was fully capable of achieving every one of my forms and more…and that the same holds true for every Zoan alive!"

The human-reindeer flung his arms out wide with a gleeful cackle. "Think about it, Sandersonia! What if! What if nothing about Zoans comes down to the fruits themselves, but the minds of their wielders! What if every Zoan in existence were capable of using their abilities in ways they never dared imagine, simply because up until then they'd thought those abilities to be unimaginable! The transformation of individual limbs, the manipulation of size in unprecedented manners! Transmogrification! Hybridization! Evolution, from the most constrained of the Devil Fruits to being as flexible as the mightiest and most creative of Paramecia!"

Sandersonia reeled back in her spot, awe written across her features. "That… if you manage to get even a fraction of that out to even a dozen Zoans… y-you could change the world!" The next moment found her sitting back up straight, her expression dimming. "Maybe too much… I mean, Kaidou's Beast Pirates alone are almost exclusively Zoans. And the number of other pirates with them, and Marines… Cross unleashes pandemonium on a regular basis, and if you published this paper of yours… you'll be setting loose an entirely new breed, all of your own making. Are-Are you sure you want to do that?"

Chopper's expression sobered as well, and Sonia almost wished that it hadn't. The human-reindeer's blazed with a quiet, subtle fury. "…I know that some people will abuse this knowledge. All knowledge has been perverted in some way or another throughout the course of history, and I'm not so naïve as to believe that my discovery would be any different. But at the same time, there will always be people who use it for good, too. And if my work can help one person, even just once, in even the slightest way, then this…" He slapped his hoof to the paper. "Will all have been worth it. So yes, Boa Sandersonia, I'm sure and certain. I intend to follow in my crew's footsteps, in my fellow Demons' footsteps, and rock the world something fierce."

Chopper's determined expression then fell flat as he jerked his head at the nearly-forgotten beakers he'd set down. "But I need more data before I can make anything solid out of this, which means that I need to run more tests. So, are you willing to keep going, or do I need to try finding someone else?"

Sandersonia's confidence faltered heavily, and she eyed the glassware warily. "This, ah… will be painless, yes?"

The way the doctor's eyes lit up did absolutely nothing to reassure her. "Oh yes, rest assured, you
wont feel a thing," Chopper intoned. "Trust me. I'm a doctor."

"You do realize that's exactly why I don't trust you, right?!"

-o-

FOUR DAYS TILL START

"Jeremi-ya, I realize that this is almost certainly a ridiculous question, but… when are you going to stop giving your allies incentive to seriously injure you?"

"Well, since we're allies and—nnh—all, maybe I could convince you to—gnn—to perform that immortality surgery on me so at least I don't—MOTHERFUCK!"

"Sorry, hand slipped," Law stated, not sounding sorry in the least. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised you know about that, too."

Silence, for a moment, as Law continued to work. "So, is that a yes or—?" I prompted.

The look Law gave me could have peeled paint. "There is only one person who I respect enough to do that operation for, and he died eleven years ago. No."

Pumping my free hand, I loosed a cry of defeat. "CURSES! Once more the secret to eternal youth has eluded me!"

Law's demeanor went from caustic to deadpan in two seconds flat. "…you only asked me that so you could have an excuse to say that, didn't you?"

"Number 6 on my List Of Things I Want To Say At Least Once In The Right Context™! Seemed like the best opportunity I'd ever get," I chuckled, shamelessly flashing him a V-sign.

That earned me yet another jab in my newly repaired nerves, though since I saw it coming this time I could get away with just gritting my teeth.

All things considered, maybe I would have been better off just keeping my mouth shut, but I had realized a while back that training over the next two years was going to be a complete nightmare with Chopper nowhere nearby and the nerves in my arms still damaged by Eneru's lightning torture… man, that was months ago, wasn't it?

Anyway, along with the gaping hole in my hand (and to think I had been entertaining the idea of letting up on the Marine's poor, fragile nerves. Fat chance now!), I had requested that Law fix the nerves, which was why he was currently restoring damaged connections and… kinda restoring the skin. Law'd told me at the start that he could have made my arms good as new—or even have given me brand-new ones—but I asked him to restrict himself to the barest minimum he could manage instead. Honestly, I didn't mind how gnarly my limbs looked, I even enjoyed the reactions I could get out of people at times; my only real problem was needing to keep them numbed and covered so they didn't feel like they were on fire. And just the nerve work Law was currently performing would cover that nicely.

…right now, though, it just hurt like the dickens. Dulled or not, getting the old nerves worked on hurt, and the rebuilt ones itched like mad. My legs and right arm, at least, were done and so had gotten some sort of cream that soothed it. My left? No such luck.

"So," Law dryly stated as he kept at it, fiddling around in my arm with way too much casual levity for my comfort. "Any other truth bombs you want to drop on me?"
I bit my lip for an entirely new reason. There were a couple… but at least one of them was liable to get Law to try and kill me. I glanced at my arm; then again, he was almost done. Welp, in for a beri and all that.

"Two things," I said, pointedly ignoring the weary sigh that drew from the doctor. "First… Bonney. Keep an eye on her, and if you can, try to be in a position to help her. I don't know much about her backstory, I don't know much for anyone else except for you, really… and Drake, I guess… but she's important. Somehow. Every Supernova must be, it's the only reason I'd know about them, I just know they are. But her more so, and more immediately. Particularly because there's a good chance she's going to run into Blackbeard and Akainu back-to-back… soon. Ish. And when Akainu specifically says that the World Government is in a panic over someone not being where they want them to be, then you'd better believe that's someone I very much want to keep out of their hands. Capiche?"

"How delightfully vague," Law drawled. "And the other."

I… honestly considered whether or not to pull a bait, switch, and abscond on him. Would have been funny, but the idea died as swiftly as it was born. Doing something like that would be potentially lethal and, more importantly, disgraceful to Corazon's memory. I took the time to make doubly sure nobody was nearby before speaking again.

"…Even with my knowledge, I can't claim to have known Donquixote Rocinante as well as you did, Law," I said slowly and deliberately, pausing for a few seconds as I waited for the 'good' doctor to get the flinch in his wrist under control. "But. There's one person left in the world who can. I mentioned before that when Doflamingo killed his father, Rocinante was shattered until he was found by a group of Marines, and joined them because their commander took him under his wing. What I glossed over was that that commander became a new father to Rocinante. Which makes him… the closest thing to a grandfather you have."

I tentatively glanced at Law, finding some comfort in the fact that his expression was only neutral. "I had already planned on recruiting him into the Masons farther down the line. But you're the only one who has any right to use that relationship as leverage. I'm not asking you to, of course!" I hastily amended as the corner of Law's jaw twitched into a subtle scowl. "That's a last resort, nothing more. I'm only telling you this because you have the right to know."

The way Law rolled his eyes was not subtle. "You've made your point on how scared of me you are, Jeremi-ya. Look, in case you've forgotten, I'm pretty numb; there's nothing you can say that would piss me enough to hurt you. So spill, who are you talking about?" he asked impatiently.

"…Sengoku."

Law deliberately snapped his hands away from my arm and slapped his scalpel flat against the table, eyes slightly glazed as he stared at nothing. "Addendum," he ground out slowly.

"Yeeaaah…” I nodded slowly in agreement, scratching my jaw uncomfortably. Thankfully, however, after a few minutes' thought he took a deep, patient breath and resumed his usual, relatively dispassionate demeanor.

He then got back to work, and in a few short, silent minutes, he finished. Law pulled away, his Room falling the next moment. I began applying cream to my arm as he spoke again.

"Does anyone else know about this?"

"…How many spy thrillers have you read or do you think I've read?" I muttered, but I didn't give
him time to take my head off and start using it as a kickball. "Some others in Marineford may know about it, but they'd be old guard who either would have known Rocinante themselves or who were confidants of Sengoku. Apart from them, the only ones who have heard it from me are Smoker, Tashigi, Nami, and Merry... oh, and Robin. It came up after Enies, and I told them not to spread it around."

Law remained quiet for another minute before letting out a quiet sigh. "I'm honestly not sure how to feel about this," he said at last.

"Well, you've got a couple of years to work it out; I seriously doubt that Sengoku will be open enough to talking about Corazon until he's finally avenged."

Law exhaled at that, sounding honestly relieved at the idea. Then he flicked his arm and closed up my limb with... an honestly almost insulting amount of ease. Seriously, I'd like to imagine it would take at least some amount of effort to fix up an injury that could be defined as 'crippling at best'. Still though... I couldn't help but smile gratefully as I flexed my fingers, moving the limb more freely than I ever had in, well, a long time.

"Seriously, Law, thanks for helping me," I said fervently.

"Mmm... I'd say 'don't make a habit out of it', but we both know there's not a chance of that. Just acknowledge that the next time I have to fix this much damage, it'll come with a price tag," he responded, packing away what few tools he'd needed. "Now, if we're done here, I'm going to get away from you as fast as I can so I can avoid getting dragged into your nonsense."

CRASH!

"Damn, too late."

"Hey, Brook," I said casually, not at all perturbed by the fact that my crewmate had just come crashing through the wall with a footprint on his back. "You do realize that one of these days, you're going to provoke someone in such a way that you'll be lucky to come out of it alive, right?"

"Too late by fifty years, Cross!" Brook chortled as he popped himself up, casually dusting himself off. "After all, I'm already dead! YOHOHOHO, SKULL JOKE!"

"What possible circumstance would allow you to say that to anyone, Jeremi-ya?" Law added, completely deadpan.

"The fact that I don't blatantly ask women to show me their underwear."

Law's eye twitched.

"Mnhm," I nodded in agreement. "Still, speaking of which, who'd you piss off this time, old man?"

"Oh, that delightful redhead who recently joined Bartolomeo's crew! His new co-first mate, I believe?" the skeleton chuckled as he re-adjusted his jaw. "Very feisty, she'll go far!"

"Clearly," Law scoffed, giving the both of us exasperated looks. "Well, at least this isn't too crazy by your crew's standards."

Heh, he could say that aga—

"Oh, now I wouldn't say that."
Wait, what?… why was Brook looming over me? Why did his brows look like they were frowning? Why was I seeing a ghostly aura spring up around him?

"You see, Cross, we have a conflict, you and I," Brook stated, starting to pace back and forth. "We are both wielders of a single sword, where Zoro wields three and Leo wields two. All well and good… except for one thing."

Aaaand back to the looming.

"There can be only one, true master of the One-Sword Style upon our ship."

And just like that, he was all smiles again. So to speak.

"As such, I now officially challenge you, Jeremiah 'Voice of Anarchy' Cross, to a sword duel to determine who is truly the one-sword master on the crew! We meet at noon with swords drawn!" He maintained his proud demeanor for a few seconds before his head suddenly snapped to the side, a very familiar gleam in his eye sockets. "Oooh, is that white lace I detect thattaway?" Before I could do literally anything, he was back in the hole he'd made, one leg outside. "If I'm not back in ten minutes, talk to Usopp, he's arranging the bout! Wait for me, my silky darliiiings!"

Aaaand like that he was off.

"… is it too late to get you to put me into a medically induced coma for the rest of the week?" I weakly asked Law. "Or him, for that matter?"

"Sorry, Jeremi-ya," Law sneered, leaning back in his seat with a grin of utter doom. "But while I could do that… I just think this will be more fun to watch."

"Greeeaaat…" I groaned, thunking my head against the table in despair.

-o-

Meanwhile, several blocks away by now, Jewelry Bonney stalked down the streets, eyes narrowed and lips pursed in thought at what she had overheard.

He didn't know. Jeremiah Cross, the man who'd earned one of the biggest bounties in the world solely due to knowing a bunch of things he shouldn't while being completely willing to blare them to the world, didn't know about her, or even most of the other Supernovas for that matter!

Well. He didn't know the important things. He'd have mentioned her association with Kuma, if he'd known, or her ability to get into Mariejois at will. Hmm. Now that she thought about it, she was near the Red Line, maybe she could nip up there for a week and sneak out a cask of that excellent Century Soup they kept stockpiled, and maybe some of the Jewel Me—

Bonney shook her head. No, that wasn't important. What was important was that she was an enigma to Jeremiah fucking Cross—and that, apparently, she was cruising for a showdown with Akainu. And some dude named Blackbeard, but who cared about some nobody she'd never heard of? Regardless, an encounter with an Admiral, that Admiral in particular, was the last thing she wanted.

And there was an out just sitting there, about to be maimed by his own crewmate. Cross had knowledge, and allies; she had leverage. Information he didn't have. Yeah. Yeah, teaming up with the Straw Hats was looking more appealing the longer she thought about it.

But…
"Do I really wanna get hitched to another crew?" she wondered, idly swiping a half dozen meat skewers off a passing food cart and shoving a wad of bills in the face of said cart's owner before he could raise a stink. "I've got a good thing going solo. But… Akainu. Ugh." Scarfing down a hefty chunk of meat, she thought it over again, the familiar chewing helping her think. Sadly, it did not help her actually reach a conclusion. Which only really left one real solution.

"Daaaaahhh!" the pink-haired captain howled, scratching impatiently at her head. "Fuck it, where's the nearest restaurant!? I need to do some serious thinking!"

A flash caught her eye and a scent her nose at the same time, and she turned to notice that she'd inadvertently wandered into the unofficial-official 'Wano District' that had been slowly springing up around the Whitebeards' similarly themed inn, and she'd just come across one of the latest types of stores in the style. Expansive, homey, well-decorated, spic and span. The sign proclaimed "Goya's Noodles!", and looked to be brand new.

"What the heck," Bonney decided, before marching in.

The inside was as quaint and homey as the outside, but most of the tables were vacant… and only a momentary glance was needed to see why.

Sitting at opposite ends of one table in the center were Monkey D. Luffy and freaking Lucky Roux of the Red-Haired Pirates, menus up and hiding each other. Memories of both the time at the takoyaki stand and the bar brawl flashed through her head, and Bonney eagerly sat down at a table that gave a good view of the two.

One put their menu down briefly. Then they put it back up as another put the menu down. Then the inverse. Then they put their menus down and looked toward the kitchen, still not seeing each other. Then they drank their drinks and raised their menus simultaneously.

The entire exchange left Bonney half-collapsed out of her chair, quivering with laughter suppressed only because her guffaws would disturb the hilarious scene in front of her. Her vision narrowed to a tunnel within which the two pirates continued to trade off menus, drinks, and glances towards the kitchen.

Finally, after what might have been thirty seconds or thirty minutes, Bonney felt a tap on her shoulder. Cheeks puffed out, she glanced up at a dead-eyed waiter.

"Your menu, ma'am," he intoned, voice as dead as his eyes.

"Fffffffffffffff—"

Nodding, the waiter placed down the menu and trotted off. Bonney didn't so much as glance at it. Forget the noodles, this was way better!

Ultimately, however, all games had to come to an end sooner or later, and this one came to an end with the arrival of two massive bowls loaded down with noodles being placed in front of the world-famous/infamous gluttons. Luffy and Roux knocked their bowls back, gobbling down the massive amounts of noodles in a span of seconds at the same time, and when they thunked their bowls down, it was impossible for them to miss one another.

Their eyes met, Bonney held her breath intently as their eyes met, eagerly awaiting whatever would come from the meeting…

And then the pair just let out a pair of rafter-shaking belches and sagged in their seats with contented sighs.
"Maaaan, that tasted great!" Luffy chortled, patting his distended stomach in satisfaction. "These Wano-style noodles are delicious! And they're even better over there? I gotta swing by and try them sometimes!" He then tilted his head down and grinned… straight at the Red-Haired Pirate?! "Thanks a lot for bringing me to this place, Roux! It's been awesome hanging out with you again, you always know where to find the best grub!"

"Heheheh! Not even a morsel of a problem!" Roux laughed back, waving his hand dismissively. "What can I say, you remind me of this whiny little runt I used to hang out with, always underfoot and causing a racket and trying to steal my meat from me!…oh wait! That was you! HEHEHEHEHEHEEEH!!" The rotund pirate roared with mirth, pounding the table with his fist.

"Shishishi! Yeah, you always had the best meat back in the day!" Luffy snickered, rubbing a finger beneath his nose and beaming happily. "It's really great to see you again, Roux, and I'm happy to hear that everyone else is doing alright too! I'm really happy that Shanks and Benn and you are having fun in the New World…" Luffy's smile died down to a more honest grin. "And I'm really happy about Yasopp. Thanks a lot for bringing that Tone Dial to Usopp, it meant a lot to him."

"Heheh! Moron!" Roux scoffed, picking up a bottle of soy sauce and casually bouncing it off his junior's head. "As if something like that could be a crumb of a problem! Your sniper is our sniper's kid, how could I not do something like that, eh? I'd, eh, have brought an actual number for the brat to call on, but…"

"Yasopp wants to see him in person like me and Shanks, I get it!" Luffy waved him off. "Usopp know he's getting to him through the SBS, he can wait! Besides…" the Straw Hat captain leaned forwards intently, his smile taking on a distinctly predatory sheen. "It's not like we won't be seeing them soon anyways. We're gonna be past the Red Line before you know it!"

Roux's bravado… noticeably faltered at that declaration. Only for a moment, but he did flinch, and it was almost certainly the cause of the sudden coughing fit the pirate developed as he shoved himself away from the table. "A-Anyway! It's been real fun hanging out with you again, Luffy, but I really gotta bounce. Places to see, meat to eat, jackass's skulls to smack around, you know how it is!"

"Shishi, yeah, alright!" the rubber-man nodded, animatedly waving farewell. "Tell everyone I said hi, and thanks again for hanging out with me this week!"

"And thank you for picking up the tab!" the rotund buccaneer nodded back, shooting his younger friend a salute in farewell. "Seriously, out of everything I've heard of you doing over the SBS, this has to be the bravest thing by far."

Luffy blinked at his old mentor, tilting his head in honest confusion. "Eh? Why? What makes you say—?"

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN HE COVERED THE BILL?!!"

The rubber-man winced sheepishly as a shriek of feminine outrage cracked through the air, without Soundbite's aid. "Uh-oh. I think the receipts just got back to Nami."

"Noooo, you think?" Roux scoffed, thumbing his goggles with a morbid chuckle. "Like I said, you're a brave idiot, Luffy."

"Eh… not that brave," Luffy shrugged, relaxing as he got over the shock of the outburst. "I mean, it's not like lightning can hurt me, remember?"
"HE OWES HOW MUCH?!"

"Excuse me, sir?" the establishment's dead-eyed waiter spoke up as he stepped up to the table, staring past Luffy as he addressed him. "I believe your crewmate would like a word with you, posthaste."

"Eh?" Luffy blinked at him in surprise. "How do you know that?"

"Because I can imagine no other reason for a twister reaching into the sky to have suddenly sprung into existence halfway across the city, sir."

Luffy paled dramatically, prompting a chuckle from Lucky Roux. "You forgot your navigator has more ways to kick ass than just lightning, didn't you?"

"Yup," Luffy nodded jerkily, shoving himself out of his seat. "Uhhh, remember all those times you told me stories about how you could dine and dash without a trace?"

"Need a refresher lesson, kid?"

'FACE ME LIKE A MAN, MONKEY D. LUFFY!'

"Yup!"

"Follow my lead, then," Roux chuckled, bounding out the door without a glance back to see if Luffy was indeed following him.

Bonney sat and stared for a while, once again weighing the pros and cons of approaching the Straw Hats. This time, however, she sighed, "I'll have what they were having, if there's any left."

The waiter nodded and turned away; Bonney shook her head to herself. Allying with them was the right way to go, but at this point, she'd wait until Trafalgar approached her. She had already allied with the Heart Pirates once before anyway, she could count on them to be saner. And perhaps more importantly, not as close to the spotlight.

"Jeeezee…" she groaned, the heels of her palms moving up to rub her eyes. "And to think this shit used to be so fucking easy…" Thankfully, the migraine passed quickly, replaced by an eager smile.

"Zazaza… guess I really can't say it ain't fun though, that's for sure!"

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THREE DAYS TILL START

"Bullshit! This is bullshit!"

"Oh, quit your whining, Cross, and just face your beating like a man."

I felt my face go through some… interesting spasms, and I pressed myself against the walls of the wire-mesh octagonal cage I currently found myself in. It wouldn't let me strangle Franky, and neither would the cyborg's metal neck, but dammit I could try!

"I am going to die!" I snarled—borderline wailed really—as I jabbed a finger at Brook. The skeletal bastard was doing the same thing he'd done since dumping me in this cage: practicing his thrusting techniques. In complete silence.
Oh, no, wait, my mistake, Brook wasn't being silent.

He was humming. The bastard.

"Eh, you're exaggerating," Franky said dismissively. "I'm pretty sure he'll only mostly kill you."

"Indeed!" Brook cheerily added. "I'm sure medical science has come a long way in the last fifty years. Why, I'll bet I could even cut off a limb and dear Chopper could reattach it!"

"That's not how anything works!" I howled.

"Aww, your praise totally doesn't make me happy, you bastard," Chopper said, doing his happy dance.

"WHY ARE YOU SO HAPPY ABOUT THAT?!

"Cross."

I locked eyes with Nami with all the desperation of a starving man given a sumptuous feast. And then that hope crashed and burned from 80,000 feet when I saw her counting out the wad of Berries in her hand.

"Try not to die too quickly, okay?" she said, all smiles and not even glancing at me. "The odds work out best for us if you can last five or six minutes. After that though, feel free to keel over."

"I'LL PUT 5000 ON HIM LASTING FIVE AND A HALF MINUTES!" someone from the crowd shouted.

"Sanji, go take care of that, will you?"

"Of course, Nami-Swan!"

Hands quivering in repressed rage, I turned to Vivi and Carue who were handing out pamphlets!?

"Just a basic bio on the combatants and why they're fighting," the princess hummed patiently, casually floating one of said pamphlets over to someone who waved her down.

We made eye contact. I was promptly greeted by the smuggest, most evil grin I had ever seen on Vivi's face. No help from that quarter, though I suppose surprise should have been my last reaction, given how many bridges I'd burned with her, literally. Maybe Usopp and the dugongs?

They were on the other side of the cage, near Brook, and I had to pray that Brook would follow the rules. Needless to say, my progress was slow and halting, especially when that damn sword swished by. But eventually I got into earshot.

"I say, why do I need to play up my scariness? This is supposed to be a friendly match."

"Because have you seen the looks on Cross' face? Hilarious!" I heard Raphe cackle.

"Now, come on. Swishing your sword around is good, but I think sharpening it would be even better!" Usopp added. "And don't forget to be as threatening as possible once the fight actually starts!"

… Right. They were going to pay. I'm not sure how, but I'm sure there'd be plenty of opportunities during the Dead-End Race.
"Psst!"

A hissed whisper caught my attention, and I turned to find Leo standing a ways from his fellow Dugongs, waving me over. Well, I was desperate, so I walked over and kneeled down. "What is it?"

"Well, since you looked like you were kind of freaking out—"

"Freaking out?" I chuckled. "I'm totally not freaking out right now, because this is me not freaking out! What do I have to freak out over anyway?! Nothing! Because I'm not! I'm just… about two minutes away from getting fucking maimed by a crewmate while the rest of you assholes watch! And play it up! And profit off of it! I'm totally not—yow!"

"Where I come from, that's called freaking out," Leo deadpanned, pulling back one of his swords. "Can you blame me?!"

Leo tilted his head in some bewilderment. "…Cross, you do know we're all just playing this up for a good show, right? If you really want out that bad, just throw Funkfreed against the cage. I can tell you right now that this thing is not rated for an elephant charge. Alternatively, there's a backup plan for Conis to bust open a hole in the cage if things go really bad. All part of the show, of course."

For a long moment, I was silent. And then…

"Let me get this straight," I said, very calmly. "You guys made me think you were going to have Brook eviscerate me… for the sake of a show… that you didn't ask me to participate in?"

The Dugong's bewildered expression flattened. "Two questions. First, would you or would you not try the same thing on any of us?"

I opened my mouth to say, no, of course not! … And then closed it, because that would be a bald-faced lie.

"And second, more importantly… do you really have that little faith in us? If memory serves, you haven't provoked anyone on the crew enough to justify this much payback. Lately."

…guess the TDWS hadn't slept in their hammocks recently, buuut if that's what they thought of me…

Still, in the interest of leaving them still thinking I was innocent, I heaved a sigh of defeat. "Alright, fine. I'm still pissed, but I'll go along with this little charade, and I'll consider not retaliating."

"That's all we ask," Leo sighed in relief. "Good luck out there."

"…and you get to tell that witch I'm taking a clean quarter of the profits for my personal cut, and nothing less."

That got a tortured grimace out of Leo's mug, but he still nodded. "I will go and get a stiff drink and get right on that."

We separated, me back towards my half of the arena and Leo back to the rest of the dugongs. Well, if I was going to do this… might as well do it right. So as I passed Zoro, I made sure to make eye contact with him. Pleading eye contact.

"I'll build character."

Yeah, that's about what I expected. I took a moment to tap my throat, and then, when I heard an
electric whine (and even though I couldn't see him, I just knew that slimy little bastard was wrapped up in this too…) I sucked in a deeeep breath… and let loose.

"ASSHOLES!" I roared, swinging my hands out in as dramatic a manner as I could manage. "YOU'RE ALL ASSHOLES! I HOPE EVERY ONE OF YOU STEPS ON A LEGO AND DIES! BUT HEY!" I flung my arms up in a show of exasperated defeat. "YOU WANT A SHOW BEFORE I GUT YOU ALL LIKE FISH!? FINE BY ME! AND YOU!" I snapped a finger up at Brook, making him pause his posturing. "I HOPE YOU'VE RENEWED YOUR WILL, BECAUSE YOU'RE GOING TO NEED IT AGAIN!" And with that, I thrust my arm out. "SOMEONE GET ME MY SWORD!"

Honestly, pissed though I was, I do have to admit that the roar of approval that erupted from the crowd was undeniably invigorating.

"WELL, WHADDAYA KNOW, FOLKS, LOOKS LIKE THE OTHER HALF OF OUR ENTERTAINMENT FINALLY FOUND HIS BALLS! FIRST TIME FOR EVERYTHING, I GUESS! APAPAPA!"

"AT LEAST WE CAN ALL pretend we're watching a half-decent fight, INSTEAD OF AN OUT-AND-OUT SLAUGHTER! HEEHEEHEEHohohoHAHAHA!"

…the sound of yet more of my 'friends' riling up said crowd, however, put a bit of a damper on the subsequent cheers. Slimy little traitor, siding with my 'nemesis', he'd get his too, I swear to—

A flash in the corner of my vision snapped me out of my morbid thoughts, and I snapped my hand out, snatching Funkfreed mid-air. I gave the elephant-blade a few testing swings before regarding him with a firmly gimlet eye. "Be straight with me, ivory farm, or else I'll be polishing you with salt water for a week: did you have a trunk in this as well?"

The sword's extended silence did not inspire confidence. "I did not say no when they asked for my participation. Does that count?" he carefully posited.

I stared at him for a few seconds more letting out a sharp tsk. "Congratulations. You get deemed a 'bystander'."

"Oh thank you merciful elephant Buddha!"

"…there's an elephant—? No, wait, let me guess: you assume?"

"How'd you know?"

"Pattern recognition."

With that, I returned to my corner and went about making myself look as angry as possible as I limbered up. Which frankly wasn't that hard. Still, thinking about it, maybe I really wouldn't retaliate this time. After all, I had a nice, convenient target right there, didn't I? Brook was going to regret his part in this little charade; I would make sure of it… much as I reasonably could, at any rate. Seriously, half the reason I was so incensed about this display was how asinine it was! It was obvious who was going to win here, especially if we were going sword-on-sword, no matter what abilities mine might bring to the table. But hell, if I was going down, no reason I couldn't and try break a bone or two dozen on the way.

Of course, because the universe hates me, it was right when I'd made that conviction when a freaking bear crashed into the cage.
And not just any old random, average bear either; I'd seen a few of those wandering around the city already (don't ask) and this was not that. This was an 8-foot grizzly that weighed 900 pounds if it was an ounce, wearing a top hat, ascot with little bow tie, and a monocle. A monocle which it promptly removed along with the hat and tossed to a boy at the edge of the crowd before throwing its head back and roaring.

"Uh, he says that he agrees that this is bullshit," the boy translated, pausing as he listened to several more following growfs. "And that to make it more interesting, he declares that this shall be a three-man battle royale." Another growf. "Unless someone wants to make it a two-team tag battle?"

No response from the crowd, despite me trying to telepathically compel someone to take up the offer… which actually raised a serious question in my mind.

"Where the hell is Boss and why isn't he all over this?!" I hissed under my breath.

"Drinking contest with the giant squad," Mikey deadpanned right back via Soundbite. "He's up 2-and-1, so we won't be hearing from him for a while."

Yeah, that would be my luck, wouldn't it…

A few seconds after that hurried conversation, the bear roared again.

"Uh, Sir Bearington has just declared—in light of circumstances—his intentions to tear your heads off your shoulders and shove them up your… I, uh, think I won't translate that part."

And of course he was named Sir Bearington. I don't know what I expected.

"RIGHT!" I shouted to the crowd, my ire re-spiking to incandescent levels as I glared bloody murder at Nami, who actually had the decency to look honestly sorry and chastised. Not that she was actually doing anything to help me, damn witch. "SLIGHT CHANGE OF PLANS: WHEN I GET OUT OF HERE, I AM GOING TO RAIN DOWN SUFFERING ON YOU ALL SO GREAT THAT IT'LL BECOME A STORY TO FRIGHTEN CHILDREN FOR TEN GENERATIONS!" I then jabbed my sword at the bear, a twitching scowl on my face. "RIGHT AFTER I GET THROUGH SKINNING THIS WALKING RUG FOR OUR SHIP'S PARLOR!"

That got another growf from Bearington. This one didn't need translating: it sounded respectful. Lovely. At least I'd have this bear's respect when I was laid up after this whole mess. Yay me.

Shaking my head and forcing a calming snort out through my nostrils, I spun Funkfreed in my grip before falling into a ready stance. "Alright… alright, I'm good," I declared through clenched teeth. "Let's get this over with."

"Agreed," Brook solemnly answered, flourishing his blade in a proud salute.

Bearington growfed and nodded, and we all tensed for the bell—

"Hey, that guy's not a pirate captain, he's really just a bear!"

I turned around, saluting the poor fellow who'd shouted that as he was dogpiled and carried off kicking and screaming. Any sort of delay in this farce was welcome, after all. Alas, it wasn't long before the man was dragged away screaming obscenities. Nami, for her part, sighed and bowed politely at the offended party, "So sorry about that, Captain Bearington."
The bear grunted, shrugging. Yes, shrugging. Because somehow, to me of all people, that was still unbelievable.

Suddenly, the bell rang. Bearington and I whirled around, but there was no Brook about to skewer our asses. Instead, there was Brook, standing on guard but otherwise unperturbed.

"Ah, good," he remarked. "It was tempting to attack while you were distracted, but I—YOWIE!"

"Tsk, missed," I groused as Funkfreed pulled back.

"Honorless cur!" Brook roared, charging my way.

"You mean 'normal pira—' GRK!"

Right, size was deceiving because holy crap the bear was fast; I'd barely gotten the words out and Funkfreed up to block when Bearington swept in, raking the air with his claws. Brook frantically backpedalled, and when he was sufficiently far away I drew Funkfreed up and brought him down on my ursine opponent in an overhead chop.

The bear snorted, bringing his paws up to catch, at which point the elephant-sword transitioned into his hybrid form and brought his full mass to bear. Eyes wide, Bearington barely tumbled out of the way before several tons of elephant crashed onto the floor of the cage.

I had no time to savor that brief victory, because Brook was on me, jabbing relentlessly. Now it was my turn to backpedal, catching most of the stabs on my gauntlets and then the rest on Funkfreed once he'd snapped back. I collected a few nicks for my troubles, but it was better than getting fully skewered.

"Groar!"

"Yow!" I yelped, ducking under a paw swipe from Bearington. I felt my tailbone hit the wall of the cage, at which point I was made aware of a significant flaw in my earlier actions: namely, Bearington and Brook looked ready and willing to gang up on the 'unskilled powerhouse' of our trio. I did not like the look in their eyes, and I didn't miss the glance they sent at each other, either.

I tsked at the situation, and after taking a moment to consider my position, I decided I only had one viable course of option: flipping the script in the only guaranteed way possible. "As much as saying this is a bad idea…" I faux-grumbled to myself, raising my voice just enough so that my opponents could hear me. "I'd just like to point out that at least as long as none of the other Supernovas want to try curb-stomping all three of us at once, this situation cannot possibly get any worse."

"Well, I wouldn't go that far."

Jackpot and bust at the same time. And it really said something that my opponents also turned to look at the speaker.

"I have no interest in 'curb-stomping' you, as you put it," Basil Hawkins intoned from where he stood outside the border of the cage, the rest of the spectators giving him a wide berth. "But one of my crewmates has been looking for an opportunity to cast off his restraints. And as you have so kindly offered…" And with that he made a beckoning gesture.

Two of his robe-wearing crewmates stepped forwards, heaved something they were carrying and… tossed a man-sized Japanese straw doll into the ring? What the heck—?

Before I could voice my confusion, the infamous Magician brushed the edge of his coat back, and
revealed that he had not one but two blades strapped to his side, the second previously hidden by his coat. He withdrew the second blade from his cloth-belt, sheath and all… which just raised further questions, because unless I was seeing things I couldn't think of a reason for a two-handed jian to be locked into a seal-tag covered sheath with what had to be three different kinds of rope!

Before I could question what the hell he was doing—or better yet, demand that he not do it period—the straw-man reeled his arm back and tossed the blade up and over into the cage as well—

*SCHUNK!*

—where it pierced the prone doll square through the back, sheath and all.

"I do hope that you're still eager to fight," Hawkins proclaimed. "Shichiseiken has been quite restless since I shanghaied him."

It didn't take three guesses to figure out who—or rather, what—Hawkins was talking about. After all, I'd grown somewhat used to what cursed swords by what felt like necessity after sailing with Zoro and Sandai Kitetsu for the better part of the last year. Heck, I'd even managed to pick up some kind of whisper from Kikoku whenever it came near me.

So in this instance, with a sword *that* obviously evil? The question wasn't 'is it cursed?', but rather 'how cursed is it?'

The question had barely left the proverbial station when every seal tag on the sheath suddenly burst alight and were incinerated by emerald flames. And the second the tags were ash, cracks splintered up and down the naked sheath before the entire damn thing *burst* off the sword like some kind of hellish verdant firecracker, displaying the sword's bare, malevolent, glowing blade to the world.

The spectacle wasn't slowing down, either; the glow slowly grew brighter and brighter, manifesting from the blade… no, at this point, it was on fire. And the fire was spreading into the scarecrow beneath it. Some part of me had an idea of what was going to happen next. The logical part of me, meanwhile, expected the supernatural flames to, you know, *burn the doll?*

But no. The flames seeped into the scarecrow, the scarecrow caught fire, and then the flames outright *animated* the straw, letting it crawl its way to a kneeling position. The head then snapped upright and the straw that made up the 'face' tore apart, a pair of squinting eyes and a jagged grin stretching from side to side of the head leering at us. And then, as the entire thing pushed itself to its feet, one blazing straw arm reached over its shoulder, grabbing the hilt of the sword and tearing it out of the doll's back. Sword removed, the entire thing rolled its 'muscles' in anticipation.

"You can take consolation in that Shichiseiken has not yet learned how to talk on its own, at least. I do believe that even the Voices of Anarchy would find his tongue to be quite… *caustic,"* Hawkins drawled, one lilt away from *chuckling.* "So then. Who would like to try their luck first, hm?"

The blade-wielding flaming doll 'cackled' in silence as it spun itself into position with a degree of skill I could only describe as the work of a true *master.*

"…Well, this was fun, but I believe I have panties to raid. So long!"

The steel behind Brook neatly fell out of place, leaving a dust trail as the skeleton absconded.

"Gro-rargh!"

The bear wasn't far behind, literally ripping its way through its own section of wall. And the wall beyond *that* for that matter.
…which left me alone with what looked to be an actual blade from Hell.

I grimaced, tightening and re-tightening my grip on my sword’s hilt. "Funkfreed… please tell me that you don’t still want to fight," I said calmly. Said, and definitely did not plead.

"A minute ago, I would have somewhat minded, Cross," Funkfreed returned in the same tone. "Now, though…"

"Run like children?" I prompted, my eyes following every twitch of that glowing green blade.

"Unless you want to try your luck against him in no-sword style. Yes. As in, now!?"

"Go ahead and step back, then. I’ll take this."

I barely glanced at Zoro—who already had all three swords drawn—before leaping through the hole he’d cut and shoving as many warm bodies between me and the stage as I could manage, Funkfreed’s flat offering incentive to anyone too slow to move for good measure.

Zoro ignored us in favor of the Supernova standing beyond the twitchy scarecrow. "Shichiseiken, huh? A sword with a curse so strong that given a half-decent vessel, it can move on its own?"

"That's correct," Hawkins responded. Meanwhile, on stage Shichiseiken twitched in place and repeatedly and impatiently sliced itself back and forth through the air. "The treasure of Asuka Island, possessed with an endless thirst for blood and carnage. It was attempting to become strong enough to bring about a minor apocalypse when I found it, but I thought it interesting enough to take along with me. Honestly, its last wielder seemed rather glad to be rid of the thing." The straw-man tilted his head ponderously. "His name escapes me, however…"

"Sssss…"

"Hm?" he blinked in surprise. "What was-?"

"Sssssaaaagaaaaa…" the doll—or rather, Shichiseiken itself—hissted out, an infernal voice clawing its way from the sword's fleshless throat.

Hawkins grimaced and slapped a hand to his forehead. "Oh wonderful, he's devised a way to communicate. Now he's just going to be insuffera—hm?" His eyes shifted around, casting about for the source of the sudden change in atmosphere.

A sensation that everyone nearby shared. For no reason I could immediately discern, that unholy, literally demonic sword didn't seem all that concerning anymore.

"…what was that name, again?" Zoro asked dangerously, slight blurs forming around his arms and head.

"Saga, I now recall. A retired Marine, I believe? He and his fiancée were in good health—minus a nasty migraine and some inevitable bruising and bone breakage—when I left Asuka if that matters to you," Hawkins nonchalantly answered.

Zoro relaxed and turned his attention back to the possessed scarecrow, with a look of perfect calm and serenity.

And then, with that very same calm and serenity, Zoro started to untie his bandana from his arm.

Yeah, you'd better believe that I and every other Straw Hat watching took that as our collective cue
to scram.

"Apapa, things are getting inte—! Eh? Why's everyone—?

"RUN, YOU IDIOT!"

The shockwave that nearly knocked me off my feet two seconds later both vindicated my decision and made it clear that I needed to run much, much faster.

-o-

"I anticipated—purely the best case scenario, of course—that Skelter Bite would one day become popular enough that even New Worlders would flock to it. But you know, even after the Whitebeard Pirates set up Oden's Cottage, I thought that I'd at least have another couple of years before I needed to worry about that magnitude of collateral damage from a single fight."

Lola's palm slammed onto the table as exclamation to the glare she was already directing our way. "Straw Hats, I thought that only your enemies paid for underestimating you, not your allies."

I glanced around briefly before answering. We were in the lobby of the Lucky Rabbit—the rather crowded lobby—but Soundbite was blurring sound and everyone was very studiously and nervously ignoring us. Ah, the perks of reputation.

"The only reason you're having this much trouble is that the other Supernovas are here at the same time, and we'll all be out of here as soon as our preparations are complete," I said. "Still, in my defense? I jabbed my fingers at the other two occupants of the room. "Blame these jagoffs, they're the ones who dragged me into their bullshit, as I so loudly proclaimed!"

"Not so fast," Zoro scoffed, waving his hand dismissively. "I only got involved because that bastard sword got involved in things. You want someone to blame?" He pointed at the last remaining suspect. "Blame the one who put this mess together to begin with so that the rich could get richer."

"Hey, that's not true!" Nami yelped indignantly, shooting to her feet and sweeping her finger out. "If you want to blame anyone, blame—! Ah..." She faltered as she realized that there was nobody else in the room to point to. At which point she collapsed back in her seat with a groan, her halo hanging dark and heavy over her head. "Crud..." She raised her head and stared at us, her eyes shimmering with tears. "I-It was all going so well until the bear got involved... why, why did the bear have to get involved?"

"That is a phrase I never wanted to hear in this office again, if ever," Lola deadpanned.

"And do you really THINK ANY OF US ARE BUYING THAT?" Soundbite asked with honest incredulity.

"Tch," the navigator snorted, her face instantly drying up. "Worth a shot..." She cast a resigned look at Lola. "Alright, how much do I owe you?"

The governor-captain wordlessly slid a sheaf of papers across her desk to the witch. Said witch flipped to the final page, took one look at the bottom line—

"GYARK!"

And froze up in her seat with a look of total terror, a hand clawing at her chest and her Eisen Tempo abruptly spiking like a hedgehog.
Zoro and I both glanced over her shoulder, and actually winced in sympathy.

"My advice?" Zoro ’comforted’, as much as he could, patting her on the back. "Lie back and think of the prize."

"Hrrrggk..." Nami... uttered pitifully.

"...you know, overall?" I idly noted. "Property damage aside, I'd say this ended pretty well."

"Gggh..."

-o-

TWO DAYS TILL START

Nami stared out over the crowd of assembled pirates. Assembled navigators. This was something she'd dreamed of, ever since the first time she'd dreamed of assembling a true world map: that one day, she could stand in front of an audience and share her findings.

Now, if only it wasn't a bunch of pirates, most of whom hated her and the rest of whom had a schadenfreudic desire to see her fail. But in all fairness, of those who hated her, half felt that way because she'd fleeced their crews over the past week and the other half because they envied just how damn good she was, and those who wanted her to fail only felt that way because it was their best shot at the grand prize too…

But to hell with all of them. She wasn't going to fail. And she knew just how to attack.

"You're all here," she announced, securing their attention with a sharp crack of thunder from her looming halo. "Because this is a race, and the entire point of a race is to reach the finish line in one piece. Something that will not happen if you go the wrong way and end up running face-first into the blockade on your own. That, and you all decided that I was too much of an advantage to the Straw Hats to keep to themselves." And now, to unbalance them. "Good thinking. I'd want to do the same if I were in your shoes."

The rabble all reeled back, shocked. The navigators for the Supernovas and a minority of the rest… they just smirked knowingly, having seen how she was trying to play the rest. Asses.

"But!" Nami forged on, clapping her hands primly. "Seeing as I am where I am, I guess if I have to do this, I'm going to do it right. So I suggest you all sit down, shut up, and listen. Because if on race day you wander off or get in our way?" She tilted her head ever so slightly, a perfectly serene smile on her face. "Then I'll either let the Marines hang your sorry hides from the gallows or kill you myself, m'kay?"

Now that sent a collective shiver through everyone present, and they all shoved their asses a little deeper into their seats, ears wide open.

Her audience properly focused, Nami flicked her wrist and sent white cloud billowing out of her Clima-Tact, forming the same map she'd shown Drake.

"Alright, so here's where we're all starting," Nami declared, tapping the map with the butt of her staff. "And these—" Here she traced several routes, most direct but one winding and snakelike. "Are the potential routes we could take."

No questions came her way, and Nami smiled, tracing a rather straight line to the archipelago. "This is the most direct route to Sabaody from the starting point that also takes proper advantage of
the wind and currents, and it's the most lightly defended spot in the blockade." She promptly smudged the line out of existence. "We will not be using it. The reason being the sheer complexity of that route. That same current that makes it so fast is also incredibly narrow and decidedly vicious. If two ships try to take that route, they're liable to get smashed together. Oh, and did I mention the reefs you need to navigate?"

Several of the assembled navigators visibly winced at that. Her staff shifted, tracing the more serpentine, roundabout route.

"This is the route we're going to be using because, well, it's the one I intend to use." Nami paused to let a smattering of begrudging laughter and grumbles work its way through her audience. "It's not as fast as the direct route, but the current is large enough to hold all of us and, like the direct route it hits a weak spot in the blockade that our scouts have pointed out." The Weather Witch let out a faux-wistful sigh as she regarded the depiction of the blockade line with pity. "Poor privateers, they just don't have the knowledge of currents I do…"

A little muttering broke out at the wistful look on Nami's face, but it died in a hurry when she turned a glare on them. "Oh, and just a reminder? Since we're all going to using this route, that means we'll all be bunched together until we hit the blockade. As such, I have two words of warning for you: if you're gonna come for the king?"

Nami sent a minute bolt of lightning up to the roof. And then the roof-covering bank of clouds everyone had missed until then roared as it disgorged a true bolt of levin, obliterating her makeshift map in an instant.

"Don't miss."

With everyone recovering and reeling, Nami reverted to all smiles again. "And just for the record, the rest of the routes constitute the standard shipping lanes to Sabaody. These were the ones originally suggested, but because they're standard, they also have the tightest defenses, and they're not as fast as the race course, so I chucked them out. Of course, if anyone wants to try their luck off the main race course—and, of course, wants to leave the safety and comfort of the largest pirate fleet since the last time one of the Emperors got in a fleet action—they're free to. I'm sure you'll do fine, just ask the Kid Pirates how well that went for them."

From the shudders through the audience and the way the Kids' navigator looked all to ready and eager to shank anyone who even looked at him, nobody wanted to try that. Re-coalescing her map, Nami waved her hand, flowing lines springing up both on the map's surface and hovering just above.

"Alright, here's the shape of the currents and wind patterns…"

-0-

An hour later, a happy but satisfied Nami watched as the navigators filed out, most cowed and shivering but a select few simply impressed. That… was good. It felt good. Nothing could ruin her mood.

"Uh, N-Nami?"

Scratch that. One thing could ruin her mood, and it'd just showed up. "Hello, Hachi," she said as politely as she could. Which is to say, frigid enough to chill a Sea King, but not caustic.

"Hi," Hachi said weakly, waving the only hand not wringing its companion. "I… I know that I'm one of the last people that you want to see right now—"
"Hachi, I'm being cordial with you entirely because Cross, Keimi, and Koala vouch for you, but that is thin ice to be standing on. Get to the point," she snapped.

The octo-fishman visibly winced, his face twisted in guilt. "...I know that you still haven't forgiven me, and I know why... and I know that I deserve every bit of it."

Nami, mouth open to deliver a blistering tirade at the first part, choked as Hachi fell to his knees and actually prostrated himself before her, his brow pressed to the ground.

"But you also know me," he forged on, his voice sorrowful and pleading. "And you know that I wouldn't be apologizing to you, with everything that I have, everything I'm worth, unless I meant it. Meant it from the bottom of my heart. I am sorry for... for everything that I can apologize for. For everything that the others can't or won't apologize for. And I know... that what we did, we can never take back... but still. But still!" He shook his head miserably. "I just... there has to be more that I can do. Anything that I can do, anything at all..."

The navigator's implacable façade twitched minutely as she processed the proclamation, and after a moment she finally addressed him in an attempt to answer the question burning in the back of her mind. "Why?" she asked quietly, forcing her voice to remain low and calm. "Why does this matter so much to you?"

Hachi's squirming intensified briefly. Then, finally, he sagged. "...because I don't want to be the cause of any more hatred. Because I've always known that what... that what we did wasn't what Big Bro Tiger or Queen Otohime would have wanted, not in a million years. But after everything that had happened, after all we'd lost, I was just so angry, and what Arlong and the guys—my brothers—were saying sounded so right... but they were wrong, I was wrong."

The octo-fishman raised his head and clunked it against the floor with a miserable groan. "I can't live with this, Nami! I can't just let this rot at my soul! So... so I'll give anything I have to if it means clearing my conscience. Anything... to make the pain go away... please..."

And as Hachi lapsed into silence, Nami just stared at him. Stared at the sight of one of her biggest tormentors kneeling before her, miserable and begging for mercy. And for the barest moment... she considered saying no. She considered telling him to shove off, that he could rot and suffer for all she—

And then the image of a leering, spike-nosed monster shot through Nami's mind and she had to actively swallow down a retch.

Instead, she cleared her throat uncomfortably and addressed a different topic. "...Kuroobi and Chew. Why?" She then glanced away from him with a slight scowl. "And get up, would you?"

Hachi hastily pushed himself up, though he still remained on his knees. "I, uh, I—only asked Jinbe to free them because they had the same dream that I did when we were kids, and I needed the extra help. I thought that if they were living their sentences out with me, catering to humans and fishmen both, they could move past their hatred and understand how far we all fell. I never thought for even a second about getting anyone else out."

Hachi then coughed heavily into his fist, wringing his other two pairs of hands. "Also, if it helps about those two, I'm pretty sure that ever since Cross blew up at them, they're at least starting to realize what utter bastards we all were too, so... progress?"

"Mrgh," Nami grumbled. She brought up a hand to massage her forehead, which had been throbbing for a while now. "Alright, look, Hachi. I get that you're making an effort, and I
can… acknowledge that, if nothing else. I'd have to be blind and deaf to deny it…"

She then scowled heavily as her Eisen Tempo darkened to the heaviest, most lightning-choked black it could manage. "But you willingly followed the man who killed my mother and took a leading role in making my life, and my sister's life and dozens of others a living hell. Maybe I will one day find it in my heart to forgive you… but that day is not today, and I doubt it's anytime soon. And I don't know that there's anything else I can ask of you that will change that."

She closed her eyes, reflecting on what she knew and how things stood now.

"But…" Nami's halo lightened slightly and curled around her as she turned away from the fishman, hugging herself slightly. "I will say that I… I am sorry that I can't forgive you. Because who you are now… is someone I would like talking with if I could."

Hachi slowly nodded, his eyes closing in a vain attempt to stop the tears gathering there. "I understand," he mumbled. "I'll… I'll just be going, then." And with that he got to his feet, started to walk away…

"…did any of you ever find him?"

And then froze as the question—so soft and hushed, he almost doubted he'd heard it—hit the back of his head like cannonfire. Hachi blinked several times, digging through his brain to put together what he was being asked, then his eyes closed with a sigh as he composed what he believed to be the correct answer. "…No. Arlong spread word of him, but… we never heard anything back."

Nami grunted slightly, in acknowledgement, if nothing else. "Good enough." She stood in silence for a moment before taking on a more businesslike tone. "Start preparing all of the food you've got; the pre-race party is tomorrow night. The prize money will be loaded onto your ship, so as soon as you've sold out, ship out for Sabaody."

"I will," Hachi nodded, resuming his exit.

"And Hachi?"

The octopus looked back, and Nami managed half of a sincere smile. "Be careful."

Hachi smiled back, and for a moment he honestly felt like maybe… things would be alright.

-o-

ONE DAY TILL START

"WE WERE PREPARED FOR TWO BOTTOMLESS STOMACHS, NOT THREE!"

Hearing Arlong's ex-lieutenants wail, I felt pity for Hachi… and almost felt it for those two too. Otherwise, I was a little preoccupied by the spectacle at hand; the pre-race party had gone into full swing when the sun went down, but it hadn't taken long for the focus to shift to Luffy and Bonney's eating contest.

But as the aforementioned wail pointed out, there was the slight problem of there being one more big eater to compete. And as our misfortune would have it, it was one of Kid's men.

Thank God it wasn't Kid or Killer themselves, but I still didn't fancy the idea of our crew directly clashing against the only crew besides ours to have more than one Supernova. But alas, here we were: straw hat, pink hair, and yellow jacket inhaling platter after platter, leaning towers of plates
piling up around the center of the action, bets trading hands at a breakneck pace, and every skilled chef in a two-mile radius shanghaied into helping.

"You know, I actually think I missed the rush of preparing this much food," Lola mused as she handily spun the last dollop of whipped cream onto a deliciously jiggling pile of chocolate mousse.

"Speak for yourself!" Valentine groused, whipping a beater through a bowl like it owed her money. "How am I supposed to take any notes on your complete mastery of all things chocolate if I'm constantly putting down new plates for these thr—GWAH!?!" she suddenly squawked as a blur shot past her head. She then squawked again in indignation. "HEY, MY EARRINGS!"

"Whoops! Sorry," Luffy said, not sounding sorry in the least as he offhandedly spat the saliva-soaked lemons onto the pile of dirty dishes nearby, leaving the yellow-clad woman positively steamed.

"Why did you even wear those when you knew you'd be serving someone who would try eating food that was made of wood? And looked like it?" Mikey distractedly pointed out, knife blurring to keep afloat in the constant stream of fruits and vegetables that needed chopping.

"Excuse me for only being used to crewmates with half their sanity left, instead none like you guys!" the ex-agent snapped, brandishing a bright-red squeeze bottle. "So unless you want me to serve you up in the next sweet-and-sour dish, cram it and get back to work!"

"What in Sebek's name do you think I'm doing!?" the chuck-wielder demanded, alternating between stirring and dicing ingredients with his flippers and tenderizing meat with his tail.

**THWACK!**

A feat that earned him a shoe upside his head from a passing Sanji.

"OW! Hey, what the hell—!?"

"Less flash, more substance, blubberbutt," the chef scoffed, casually balancing a half-dozen of the prepared dishes on his limbs. "Either work efficiently or become what we're working on."

The Dugong twitched violently, but shifted with only minor grumbling.

"HA!" Valentine cackled, shooting her fist skyward in victory.

"And as for you, Miss Valentine," Sanji continued, his tone rising fifteen degrees and acquiring a half-cup of sugar. "I'd appreciate it if you could try and remain focused as well."

"…eh?" the ex-agent, the dugong and… pretty much everyone else in hearing range uttered in confusion.

"I'm sorry, it's just that you're being a little bit distracting, is all," the Black-Legged cook politely apologized. "If you're not going to be able to keep up with our pace, I'll need you to excuse yourself from this kitchen. Or at least move yourself to a lower priority one? If you don't mind."

"…HA!" Mikey barked, breaking the stunned silence first, though he didn't slow down even an iota.

Despite similar arguments going on up and down the kitchen, the output wasn't slowing down, and the platters stacking up around the contestants was getting to the point you could build a house with them… and Merry and Apis were giving it the ol' college try in the form of three complex igloos.
And despite the arguments and the complaining, morale in the kitchen was surprisingly high. Heck, I even noticed Lola chuckling fondly to herself as she prepared a new batch of ingredients.

"What's so funny?" Soundbite inquired, apparently noticing the same thing.

"HEY, THAT'S MINE!"

"NUH-UH! LE' GO!"

"Pfft! BESIDES THE OBVIOUS, I MEAN," the snail snickered while Luffy and Shuraya paused briefly in their duel so that the yellow-wearing man could try and drag a massive leg of… something out of Luffy's jaws.

"Haaaah…" the corsair-governor sighed wistfully in reply, a slight flourish tingeing her actions now. "I'm feeling nostalgic from this, is all… happier memories of my family, see?"

I gave her a slightly dumbfounded look. "Er… you mean the family you yourself described as, and I quote, 'psychotic bastards'?"

"Mm…" Lola nodded noncommittally. "They were, they are, but at the same time, a lot of them weren't… nurture over nature, see? There were bad times, yeah… but. But they were still my brothers and sisters, and there are several that I miss dearly. Heck, even some of the more monstrous ones I wouldn't mind seeing one last time…"

"Aaaand this all..." I gestured at the barely restrained chaos of the cooking stations. "reminds you of them?"

"Of the good times, without any of the bad," Lola agreed with a light smile. Then the smile vanished, and she shook her head. "Do me a favor, Cross. When you get into a fight with them—"

"Don't you mean 'if'?" I couldn't help but needle.

Lola shot me an unamused look. "When you get into a fight with them," she repeated. "Put me in contact with my mother. If things keep going the way they are at this point, there's something that I want to tell her. Personally."

"…sure, why not. God knows I've always been fond of that last parting shot."

"But, ah, also, more importantly…" She set her utensils down for a moment so that she could give me her full attention, a very conflicted expression on her face. "When you fight my siblings… don't break them too bad? A lot of them are monsters, and there are even a few I wouldn't care if I saw dead, but even among the monsters…"

"They're still your siblings, I get it, I get it," I nodded patiently. "You have my word—"

"—which should make this a good stopping point for you."

"GRK!" I gagged as I was suddenly hauled up by the back of my collar.

"Watching is all well and good, Cross, but when you start distracting the staff, then we have a problem," Sanji huffed tiredly as he tossed away, eliciting an amused chuckle and wave farewell from Lola. Meanwhile, the cook himself heaved an aggrieved sigh and took a deep drag from his cigarette. "Ergh, so hectic… now I see why the one-legged bastard was so crabby all the time. And if this is what it's like now, the All Blue is going to be a nightmare…"
"HA! Looks like you've given someone an existential crisis yet again, CROSS!" Soundbite cackled ecstatically.

"Yip—Erg—!" I winced and rubbed at my neck where Sanji had tossed me out, though luckily not on my ass. "Yippee for me, what do I get when I get ten?"

"HOT FUDGE AND A BOOT upside your ass. NOW LET'S GET SOME DISTANCE, BOTH FROM HIM AND THE SPLASH ZONE, YEAH?"

"Yeah yeah," I grumbled, crossing my arms behind my head and wandering off so that I could see what there was to see.

It should be noted that not everyone was partying quite so rambunctiously. But rivals or not, most of the Supernovas' crews had into a... calmer relationship with each other, if only because of the forced proximity. Still, the only interaction that could be called "calm" was between Drake and Hawkins, who were steadfastly seated in the background, apparently determined to keep their status as the 'only sane ones' of our collective.

And while the others were louder and more active in their interactions, it was heartening to see that they were at least positive interactions. Besides Bonney and Luffy's intense but friendly competition, Killer was actually positioned among the several chefs facilitating the contest—his primary usage was as a living blender, admittedly, but it was a strong show of trust from Sanji. And a little ways away from the cooking area, Zoro, Urouge, and Boss were engaged in a comparatively tame (barrels at a time, how were they not dead I don't even…) drinking contest a short distance away.

Meanwhile, on the non-culinary front, Bege was watching Goldenweek work on a new painting some distance away from us, and from the way he was rolling a coin through his fingers, I think he was seriously considering making a few purchases. At another table, Kid and Apoo were talking animatedly about... something they had written in a pair of notebooks? Well, so long as they were happy—

"Oi, you two!" Soundbite whistled intently, garnering the pair's attention. "I advocate the usage of 'arsehole' myself, IT INJECTS A SENSE OF POSH TO MATTERS!"

"They're comparing notes on expletives, aren't they?" I deadpanned as the two captains grinned intently and started speaking with renewed vigor.

"It's a real learning experience, lemme tell ya!"

Oi... aaanyway... Law and Nami were huddled over a table, intently poring over... coins? For some reason? Really intently too, jewelry loups and everything.

Penguin and Sachi were hashing things out with Barto and his new co-first mate (Desire, I think he'd said?), and from the way they were all gesticulating and posturing I'd say they were either arguing quite aggressively or in the middle of some kind of rap battle. Really, it could be either.

Moving on from the Supernovas, the crews were all getting along pretty well too. At one table, I could spy Bepo speaking and gesticulating quite animatedly, with an eager audience in the form of the Kiddy Trio. Heck, Chopper was even chowing down on cotton-candy while he took liberal notes.

At another table, Hamburg and Gin were putting on an arm-wrestling show. Porche and a few crewmates had formed a cheering squad, Itomimizu MC'd… and Foxy himself took the bets, of course.
I was pleasantly surprised to see Vito holding a conversation with Conis, apparently over their weapons, based on the array of metal odds and ends they had arrayed before them. Quite surprising, but I suppose he wasn't as greasy as his suit made him look... still pretty greasy, though.

And then there was Lassoo... giving Su a ride as she chased after a low-flying Coo?...not even gonna try and ask.

Everyone else was sitting around, drinking, relaxing, chatting... overall, it was all very nice, very pleasant and friendly, very composed—

"Enough of this."

Soundbite filtered the mutter into my ear the same moment that Drake stood up and left; that's all he did, but it wasn't a subtle exit. I watched him go, then looked back at Hawkins, who gave a slight nod in his direction with a roll of his eyes that clearly said, 'deal with this, would you?'

Exhaling, I wandered after Drake, pondering what to do when I caught up with him. Really, if I was being honest, he was one of the biggest wildcard's on the island: a former Rear Admiral, hanging out with pirates, who would then go out of his way to deliberately join Kaido's Beast Pirates? I might not have done the best in Trig back in college, but even I could tell that a few things didn't quite add up with the guy.

But still, standoffish as the guy was, he was one of us, meaning that it was in all of our best interests, that I cool him down from whatever head of hot air he was trying to build up.

As such, I mentally ran over what I knew regarding Oda's SBS had shared of Drake's backstory: grew up idolizing his Marine father, said father turned into a cruel, abusive 'pirate' (though really, 'gang of seafaring bandits' would be more accurate, even by fake-pirate standards) for unknown reasons, though from what glimpses I got of him I'd say that 'too corrupt for even Akainu' was written in a report somewhere. Drake escaped when he was 19, only just slipping free of the Bird Cage, climbed the ranks to Rear Admiral, and then turned pirate... as if resigning himself to fate, the story had said.

All very tragic, but no real help to me. I mean, that left years of in-between details that I could only begin to guess at. And frankly, nothing from what I did know explained why he would have gotten fed up with what was ultimately a pretty tame—

...party. The day the Barrels Pirates died, they were throwing a party.

"Yeah, that'd do it..." I groused, accelerating my pace, because I did not want to leave him in whatever headspace he was currently stewing in.

Thankfully, the dinosaur-human hadn't gone far. I found him sitting alone on a crate a few blocks over from the party... contemplating a bottle of rum.

Okay, this ends now. "You know," I piped up in a particularly flat voice, earning a sidelong glare. "Drinking alone is seriously risky business. Lot more fun when you do it with friends."

I had to suppress a flinch as Drake's gaze sharpened—as in, slit-pupils sharpened—but it wasn't long before he turned his scowl back on the bottle. "'Friends'... tch," he scoffed quietly, offhandedly tossing said bottle over his shoulder. "Do you actually think any of those thugs consider you or each other to be 'friends'? Besides—" He snapped impatiently when I opened my mouth. "The inscrutable exception that is your crew, I mean. Everyone else, once we walk away from this... whatever this all is, they'll be at each other's throats. It's inevitable."
I nodded my head to the side with a dismissive grunt. "Meh, personally I have more faith in them. But, call me an optimist if you must, I can understand where you're coming from."

The Ancient Zoan scowled at me flat out as he crossed his arms... aaaand started tapping a finger on the handle of his mace, so message received there. "So, what, did you simply follow me so you could bring me back and get me to link arms with the rest of the degenerates so that we all get along as one big happy family?"

"Psh, considering how I feel like I need to wash myself every time I hear Kid speak? Hardly," I dismissively replied. "Personally, I'm just aiming for 'tolerate' at the moment. Hence, me following you to at least find out the reason why you decided to bounce." I cocked an eyebrow at him inquiringly. "Soo...?"

The ex-Marine bared and ground his teeth. "You're not going to go away until I give you an answer, are you."

"IIIIS THAT A REAL QUESTION?"

He had nothing to say to that, instead snapping his head away with a sharp tsk. "If you're fishing for some deep emotional reason, there isn't one. I just don't see the 'fun' in watching a bunch of idiots get drunk off their asses in celebration of violence."

My cheek twitched slightly at that ill-hidden venom. No reason, riiiiight...

Still, externally? I settled for heaving a put-upon sigh as I slowly started to scratch the back of my head. "Ehhh... yeah, I get where you're coming from. The kind of parties you're talking about, not that great. Lot of other, less scrupulous people? They'd be doing just that, getting wasted for the sake of themselves, full stop. Hell, Shiki did the same thing, with slaves to boot."

I then put on a fond smile as I glanced back towards the party. "...but see, the difference here? Those sons of bitches only care about their own happiness, damn all else. Pure hedonism. But here—"

"REEEEE!" "YEEEEHAW!"

Drake and I slowly turned our heads to watch as Raphey galloped by on the back of a greased boar, hooting and hollering and—

"GET BACK HERE, YOU LITTLE TROGLODYTE!"

—aaand yes, that was definitely Robin's hat she was waving around, if the archaeologist booking it after her was anything to go by.

"...alright, still pretty hedonistic," I slowly admitted, reluctantly tearing my gaze away from the corner they'd just turned. "But! It's a selfish hedonism. We don't just want ourselves to be happy, we want everyone to be happy."

Drake snorted noncommittally. "And you're confident applying that to most of the other scum assembled as well?"

"I'm confident we're all tolerating one another, and that even Kid's making a positive acquaintance." I shrugged indifferently. "I mean, sure, we're planning to double-cross everyone tomorrow—"

"Tch."

"But, the same goes for everyone else. And yeah, it's over money, not blood and that's a thin line.
Look, put it this way: have you done anything to anyone here worth getting gutted over?" I took his gruff silence… this instance of gruff silence as a no. "Then at least try and trust that nobody here is going to do so at the drop of a hat, alright?"

Still a gruff silence, but the way he inclined his head seemed to be in thought… maybe a slight push…?

"I mean…" I waved my hands slightly as I gathered my thoughts. "The thing is? People being utter bastards like that, full-on betraying someone for no good reason? They exist, sure… but they're certainly not everyone either, you know? Not all pirates, at least?"

My hand slapped to my face in a mirror to Drake's head snapping around to stare at me. "Aaaand I pushed the buck too far. Damn it." I clawed my hand down and met his intense gaze with a bored one of my own. "For the record, if you plan to rip my head off, remember you fall on the 'Luffy can kick your ass' side of the line. Fun fact, he thinks dino-steak is delicious."

Drake continued to stare at me intensely for what felt like a short eternity… and then, he just sagged. "I'm… just going to do away with the bullshit and ask you straight: How much do you know about me?"

I snapped my finger up as I started to concoct the perfect—bah, fuck it. "Enough to let you know that Doflamingo will be getting his sooner or later," I told him, blunt as a sledgehammer, before shrugging. "If you want in, door's open. Feel free to talk to Law about it."

"Though, we'll still be involved, SO THERE'S STILL NO ESCAPING US," Soundbite singsang. Drake's face twisted up in a pained grimace and he pinched his brow in misery. "I need a fucking drink," he ground out miserably.

I… honestly couldn't help but chuckle sheepishly as I rubbed the side of my neck. "I know the feeling, yeah, only I don't drink so it's not so easy…"

We shared a patient moment of silence. In short order, it was broken by a chorus of shouts—victory, defeat, and incredulity alike—from back the way we came.

I glanced over my shoulder with a fond smirk. "Well, sounds like somebody's stomach finally gave out." I nodded my head invitingly. "Want to come along and get plastered while watching stupid people do stupid things?"

"...beats drinking alone," he grumbled, shoving off his makeshift seat and walking alongside me. "Heheheh…" I chuckled, slowly raising my arm. "Drake, my friend, I do believe that this is the start of a—"

"Don't touch me."

"Not there yet?"

"Not even close."

"Fair 'nuff."

"He's smiling!!"
"I am not."
"You're right, you're smirking, and that counts."
"…tch."

And lo, the smirk did not go away.

BR-o-B

DAWN OF THE STARTING DAY

72 Hours Remain

You've met with a terrible fate, haven't you?

…oh, wrong series? My mistake~

DAWN OF THE STARTING DAY

"You… puss-ridden… flea-mangled…"

"Mange-peppered… rabies-carrying…"

"D-Duke Dogstorm! M-Master Catviper! The Transponder Snail just started ringing! The SBS will begin soon!"

Titan-Dog and Mega-Cat alike froze at the call from the Zou's lookout, Bariete. They stood, staring daggers at one another for a moment that felt like an eternity. Then, after a moment, they sagged.

"The truce stands," they sighed, and after waving for their retainers to go and wake up the rest of the nocturnal Minks they set off for the snail.

A one-eyed jaguar mink watched them go, and then looked back at the nearby dog mink that was sagging in relief.

"Soooo," he drawled slowly, cocking his functioning eyebrow. "Any chance that you'll stop with the Cross voodoo dolls, given that he can stop their fighting on a dime?"

And just like that the dog mink's relief evaporated. "When Zunisha grows wings and flies us to the moon," Wanda snarled in response.

"Oh come now, surely the situation hasn't escalated that far!" Pedro scoffed.

"You Musketeers are some real lucky sons of bitches," a passing reindeer mink grumbled, her arms crossed impudently. "One more ball and we could have scored a triple off your lazy —!" THWACK! "GYAH!?!"

"SCORE OFF THIS, TICKS-FOR-BRAIN!" a white-furred rabbit mink snarled as she clung to the Guardian's back and gnawed at her head.

"GET OFF OF ME YOU COTTON-TAILED CLOD!"

Wanda's eye twitched viciously as she turned a baleful eye on the suddenly more reticent Pedro. "I. Am a royal aide," she bit out. "Which means that normally my only duty is to put up with the Duke and Master being at one another's throats. But now, thanks to that loud-mouthed prick, I have to deal
with quarreling from both corps twenty-four seven. When the Straw Hats land here, I will rip his vile tongue out with my mouth."

Pedro started to nod in understanding, before pausing as a thought struck him. "Wait… isn't Carrot an Aide too?"

The glare Wanda shot at him was somehow flat and scathing at the same time, and the jaguar raised his hands in an admission of defeat.

A short while later, the majority of Zou's population were assembled around the communal snail. Cross seemed to be taking his time letting his audience call in, as was evidenced by the fact that he'd decided to put on a musical number, of all things, to avoid dead air.

"Some say that pirates steal and should be feared and hated—" the infamous loud-mouthed buccaneer sang, his voice rife with laughter.

"I say we're victims of bad press; it's all exaggerated
We'd never stab you in the back, we'd never lie or cheat
We're just about the nicest guys you'd ever want to meet!"

"…what the heck even?" Bariete questioned, his tail swishing in agitation.

"Hey, ho, ho!" a wild chorus of voices suddenly crowed out of the blue, all full of cheer and wild glee. "It's one for all for one
And we'll share-and-share-alike with you and love you like a son
We're gentlemen of fortune and that's what we're proud to be
And when you're a professional pirate!"

"Sounds like Cross is putting on a veritable ensemble performance!" Dogstorm chuckled fondly.

"You'll be honest, brave, and free!" a new, but simultaneously familiar voice crowed out.

Catviper blinked in surprise. "Wait a minute… I know that voice, isn't that—?"

"The announcer for the Foxy Pirates, Itomimizu!?” Pedro finished, just as incredulously.

"The soul of decency," the infamous wide-mouth continued.

"You'll be loyal and fair and on the square
And most importantly—!"

"When you're a professional pirate," the chorus cheered once more, as wild as ever. "You're always in the best of companyyy!"

The Duke and Master exchanged bemused looks as the song wound down to a close. "Well, Luffy's certainly proving himself a charismatic one, isn't he?" the hound chuckled.

The feline leered back with a snicker. "Depends on how many of those people at his back want his head, don't it?"
"Well, that was fun!" Cross said cheerfully. "Hell, never thought I'd ever get the chance to sing that song of all things! But! Seeing as I have had that chance, I'd say that means we've had enough time for our viewers to all sign on in! So, for those here, allow me to—!"

"Yo, Cross, have you started up and welcomed people to the SBS yet?" a most definitely unexpected voice cut in with a cackle.

"No, but—DAMMIT, not again!"

"Cut off even by Apoo! Oh, he's never going to live that down!" Carrot snickered into her paw-gauntlets.

"You three-limbed, monkey-faced, piano-toothed c* #&!" a far rougher and less familiar voice roared indignantly, getting cut off at the end of his sentence by the honk of a horn. "I was supposed to do that! We discussed this!"

"This is the sound of me not giving a fuck!" Apoo cackled, following up the taunt with a guitar riff. "In C Minor, I might add."

"And you, snotstain! Why the hell did you censor me but not him!?"

"Only I get to choose who goes blue, DIPWAD!"

"฿%*#&!"

"Lots of guests this time," Catviper observed. "Including that hijacker Apoo, they seem to be in close proximity."

"Did the Straw Hats make even more allies?" Carrot wondered.

"Their tones don't exactly scream 'friendly', though…" Dogstorm muttered thoughtfully.

"Ugh…" Cross made a long-suffering sound that was eminently familiar to all his listeners. "Well, people of the world, as you can already tell, emotions are running high for us. And 'us' doesn't just mean the Straw Hat Pirates this time. Let's set the tone for this whole thing by starting it off hard and fast: For those of you who've been keeping up with our voyages, my crew and I have reached the end of Paradise, which is to say, the first half of the Grand Line. And as such, to reach the other side of the Red Line and voyage forth into the New World, we and all other pirates who share our goal must first pass through the final locale of Paradise for pirates, the world-famous—" It was honestly a miracle that the snail didn't hurt something with the sheer amount of tension Cross packed into the word "—isles known as the Sabaody Archipelago.

"Unfortunately for us, this is easier said than done at the moment. For those of you who aren't following the news in the Grand Line—or at least the scuttlebutt, doubt Big Fop Morgan's been given permission for this piece—the Marines have set up a blockade around Sabaody to bar any pirates from reaching it or the New World on the other side. As you might imagine… we're not happy."

"You're not alone there," Wanda muttered.

"And we're not alone there."
The mink was caught between blushing and snarling in irritation as her words were mirrored.

"As you might have gathered already, we've formed some extremely vague semblance of an alliance with some other big names. We have with us the best, the brightest, the most fearsome, most powerful... and Kid and Apoo are here too, I guess."

"SWEAR TO #^, GONNA KILL YOU!"

"Apapa, yeah, because that joke is so original, you've used it how many times now?"

"I've got a joke about that in mind involving your mother, but I'll refrain from using it because I have class. Unlike you."

"Girls, girls..." an unfamiliar female voice cut in, speaking in a nice and condescending tone.

"You're both annoying bitches, now can we please move this the hell along? I want to get to Sabaody while you all are still young."

"... Right. Sorry about that, dear viewers. You know how it is with pirates. Especially antsy ones. As such, in the interest of ongoing entertainment, let the show go on! Now, in five, four, three—"

To the puzzlement of the gathered minks, Cross went silent... and then, to their surprise, the Visual Transponder Snail they'd snagged not two days prior went live, presenting an image on the chunk of sailcloth they'd rigged as a screen. There, on top of a very large sparrow with a blue-and-white hood and a mad-cap grinning snail seated on his shoulder, was Jeremiah Cross; next to him sat an unfamiliar man in a purple turtleneck, cream pants, and a striped hat. Or at least, he was unfamiliar until people noticed the widest mouth any one of them had seen in a normal-sized human.

"Hello, everybody, this is Jeremiah Cross and Soundbite," the Voice of Anarchy declared, throwing out a jaunty, two-fingered salute that his snail backed up with a snicker, then swept his arm out to indicate the man next to him. "And, with me in this special double edition of the SBS is returning guest and announcer, Itomimizu of the Foxy Pirates!"

"Pleasure to be back, Cross!" Itomimizu declared, waving his arm eagerly at the camera. "I'm happy to be here again, and you can be sure that me, my captain and crew in general are absolutely honored, honored, to be a part of what is surely the largest Dead End Race on record!"

Dogstorm and Catviper exchanged wary glances at that declaration. They'd been in one or two of the races in the past, and one and all they'd tended to end in a particularly... sticky manner.

"What's a Dead End Race?" Carrot wondered.

"An uncommon competition among pirates, an anything-goes race with a massive prize at the end," Dogstorm explained briefly.

"It tends to end about as well as you think it would," Catviper sighed wearily, massaging a migraine out of his brow. "And considering how the Straw Hats are involved, I'd say that the only real question about the fallout for this would be just how many other crews are involved."

"A pleasure to have you here as well! Though the pleasure will be much greater if it ends like the last competition we fought you guys in," Cross snarked, drawing ineffective leers from his companions. "Anyway, we can go into more details for those unaware later, but first, how's about we confirm that this is the largest Dead End Race on record?"

The camera view swung around from Cross and Itomimizu, and the Minks and the world alike gaped at the sight that was unveiled: a bird's-eye view of the sea, and the massive polyglot fleet
spread out on top of it, blanketing the ocean with a cover of more floating wood and metal in one place than most people alive had ever seen. Rounding out the picture was a miniature but still massive storm cell brewing behind the fleet, the winds visibly churning the cloudy heavens on high.

"So…" Pedro dragged out slowly, scratching nervously at his scar. "With that many ships at once…?"

"I do believe the ocean is about to be lit on fire, yes," Wanda answered, her anger suppressed in favor of anticipatory dread tinged with bloody excitement.

"Now, those of you who know what a Dead End Race is, I'm sure you're wondering how we're going to give the ships the starting boost they need," Cross stated with a proud nod. "And for those of you who don't, normally Dead End Races use a convenient mountain river à la Reverse Mountain; the steeper the better. But, considering this is open ocean and there are no convenient mountains nearby… well, we had to come up with a solution on our own."

"A completely insane solution that's liable to kill us all and that personally I still think we're a bit close to…" the bird the humans were sitting on spoke up as it hesitantly stared down at the water below. "But, yeah, a plan if you want to call it that."

"So, standard fare for the Straw Hats then… still wonder what it is, though," Dogstorm mused.

"Yeah, you've really got to wond—whoa!" Carrot reeled back in shock when a stretch of ocean suddenly roiled and churned, a great and foamy cloud of bubbles smashing through the surface all at once. "What the heck was that?!"

"Ah, excellent, that'd be the solution in question getting under motion," Cross explained, his grin becoming distinctly wolfish as he watched the fleet below swiftly scramble into action. "Pop quiz to everyone back home: Who remembers the little climatological cataclysm we ran into earlier in our voyage… known as a Knock-Up Stream?"

Dogstorm and Catviper stiffened and paled in an uncharacteristic show of synchronization as the implications of what was happening struck them. "Uh-oh…" they chorused.

"What's wrong, my lo—hm?" Bariete cut himself off in confusion as he noted something on the screen. "Uh… h-heey… is it just me, or does the ocean behind those ships look a… bit…"

His words and every other ongoing conversation trailed off into stunned silence as out of nowhere, an entire stretch of ocean started to simply… collapse, as it were, water spiralling down towards the seafloor with alarming speed. Accelerating speed, as over the course of a minute, the hole expanded from a meager pit to a massive, yawning chasm that lead straight into a pitch-black abyss, audibly roaring from the sheer intensity of the suction.

The fleet pitched back from the outermost edges of the maelstrom, only their anchors holding the back from the getting sucked in. A scant few did get sucked down into the screaming abyss—or rather, sucked screaming into the abyss—but it seemed to be composed of either the poor bastards whose anchor chains had snapped, or the stupid bastards who hadn't put down an anchor at all.

"WOHOOWOOOO!" Cross crowed, hanging onto Chuchun's plumage for dear life. "Aw, MAN! It's even bigger than last time! It's actually trying to suck us in from the sky! This is AWESOME!"

"Speak for yourself, you're not the one who has to fight against the natural impossibility here!" Chuchun squawked as he flapped his wings with manic vigor.

"Oh, but this is entirely 'natural,' my fine feathered friend, entirely natural! We just brought it about
"through artificial instigation!" Cross snapped a finger up to point at his tertiary co-host. "Care to elaborate for those at home, Itomimizu?"

"Certainly, Cross!" the wide-mouth saluted smartly before addressing the video-snail. "As you might recall from the Straw Hats’ broadcast on the matter, the Knock-Up Stream is a massive geyser that can erupt in the middle of the ocean, sending a pillar of water high enough to reach into the sky! Very convenient for our cause at the moment! But, unfortunately, like all natural disasters extremely unpredictable!

"You see, the Knock-Up Stream is usually initiated when water drains into a subterranean cavern on the ocean bed, and is superheated by geothermal heat! Rather than wait for this sequence of events to play out naturally, however, we instead brought them about ourselves. All it took was some of our more aquatically aligned allies—"

"Shout out to Captain Dugong AND THE GREAT KUNG FU FLEET!" Soundbite cheered.

"—to dive down and set some explosives over a cavern they found themselves, and voila!" Itomimizu swept his arm out over the oceanic abyss. "One Knock Up Stream on demand! First comes the whirlpool…"

And then just as swiftly as it appeared, the maelstrom swirled shut with barely a gurgle, the water splashing back into a calm sea. And yet in spite of this apparent calm, the pirate fleet didn’t relax an inch. Rather, they appeared to be even tenser than before, every inch of rigging drawn sharp and taut and the anchors raised out of the water like they were on fire.

"And then, once the cavern is filled to capacity, the ocean calms down to normal…" Cross picked up, his eagerness ramping up even further. "But not for long."

Catviper let out a choked gurgle as he watched the ocean start to bulge where the maelstrom had once swirled, surface tension straining under the immense amount of pressure rising from below. "And they did this on purpose…?"

"As you can see, the ocean is barely hanging on as the pressure mounts to astronomical levels!" Itomimizu declared in as grandiose a tone as he could achieve. "Any moment now, the pressure will be too much, and the Knock-Up Stream will erupt and reach the heavens in all its glory!"

"But why—" Wanda only got two words out before she clamped her hand over her muzzle.

"Now, some of you may be wondering why we’d be using a force of vertical thrust to accelerate ourselves, when what we need in this instance is lateral thrust instead, right?" Cross queried with an impish grin.

"Teeheehee! He's got your number down pat, Wanda! Teehee—GURK!" Carrot scrambled frantically at the paw her superior had offhandedly clamped around her throat.

"Did you really think now was the right time to push her?" Milky questioned in honest incredulity.

"Gmmph…"

"Well, simply put, it all comes down to a most simple and basic concept of life. What goes up… must come down."

"Unless it's a bounty," Ito interjected.
"Yes, yes, that. ANYWAY!" Cross clapped his hands eagerly. "As we've often repeated, the Knock-Up Stream is a titanic pillar of water, all the water we saw go down the maelstrom, a skyward current of the stuff! And when the initial force of that current ends, it'll all hang in place for a moment... before it all comes crashing back down. And all that water, crashing down in one place? Well, there'll be effects from it. Specifically... A ripple effect."

Wanda tilted her head in confusion. "A ripple effect? What is he—?" A tapping on her wrist drew her attention to Carrot, who was pointing her other paw frantically. Pointing it to the north... of Zunisha...

Wanda's eyes slowly widened as realization fell over her. "They couldn't possibly be that—!"

"Think very carefully about who you're talking about," Pedro deadpanned.

Wanda outright paled in anticipatory terror. "Ooooh, dear..."

-o-

"I'll let that sink in for a minute for those of you who can put the pieces together. For everyone else... well, we've got a bit of time before it happens, so let's go ahead and explain how a Dead End Race works."

"It's really quite simple: GATHER A BUNCH OF PIRATES, dangle a lot of money in front of their noses, AND THEN SEND THEM THROUGH AN OCEANIC OBSTACLE COURSE of deathtraps and SUDDEN BUT INEVITABLE BETRAYALS!"

"Ah, sounds like a pleasant Saturday morning..." Itomimizu sighed.

"Of course, this is a little different from your usual Dead End Race, and I don't just mean the starting boost. Veterans out there, how many of you have heard of a Dead End Race with a pot of ฿8 billion?"

PFFFT!

King Dalton raised an eyebrow at the sputtering witch on the other side of the table. "Huh. You're the last person I expected to be shocked by... pretty much anything on Cross's show, you know."

"Growf," the witch's ogre-rabbit of an assistant nodded in agreement, kindly handing her off a new bottle of booze.

"Go make a cowpie, rawhide-ass!" Kureha hacked, booze still clearing her airways. "I've heard of or seen some ridiculous amounts of money, most of them from my own mouth, but this much from pirates? Seriously, is that an actual king's ransom or something?" She turned her attention on the fourth person in the room. "Well? I'm talking to you, big guy! You are the expert on bounties around here!"

"Bite my blazing incandescent ass, you wi...i... WAH-CHOO!" Don Accino shook the room with his roaring sneeze, glowering at the half-old half-young woman from his spot huddled in front of the fireplace. "I'll help you the second you help me! You're the so-called witch around here, cure this damn co... oh... WAH-CHOO!" A sneeze cut him off again, and he tried to wipe off the new mask of snot, sniffling to clear the airways.

"No chance, glow-pants," Kureha snickered as she gestured for her assistant to get the small giant another blanket. "I'm good, but not even I know how to cure a common cold. You're stuck with it..."
until you can sneeze, sweat and—worst case scenario—puke it out. Sorry, not sorry because you almost barbecued my wayward apprentice."

"Grmph…" the newly minted Alabastian Guardian grumbled.

"Per-haps you shouldn't have come to a Winter Island in… less than appropriate clothing," Dalton mildly stated.

"I ate the Hot-Hot Fruit! I've spent the last three decades of my life living in an iceberg field! The cold has never bothered me… EE… WAH-CHOO!" Another sneeze cut off the burgeoning tirade, and a glower fixed itself on Accino's face.

"…um…" Dalton uncomfortably scratched at his chin. "Have you considered that your old home might have housed something of a 'dry' cold with just ice, whereas a snowy kingdom such as ours is a bit… wetter in nature?"

Accino stewed in place for a few seconds before snapping his head away, pointedly adjusting his sunglasses. "Shut up," he sniffed.

"So anyway, the money…?" Kureha prodded.

"Yeah, you heard me right!" Cross gloated as if in response. "Eight. Billion. Berries. That's nine zeroes. Think about that number. Let it sink in. We had to take some very special precautions to make sure that pot stays safe."

"And sorry, whitehats, we're not telling!"

"Yeah, that'd just be stupid. Anyway, the other main difference?" Cross's grin took on a particularly vicious sheen. "The obstacle here isn't preset traps, or other pirates. At least, mostly not other pirates. Instead, we have a whole blockade of privateers and Marines who have oh-so-kindly volunteered themselves for this duty!"

Accino's frustration slowly disappeared as a grin spread across his face. "Well, well. If this is going to be anything like a routine breakup of Alabasta's blockade, it should make quite a spectacle. Ah, speaking of which…?"

"Ah, right, right. You said you had a list…?"

Accino tossed an envelope to the witch-doctor. "It's been nothing serious so far, but Cobra is determined to take every precaution regarding his health. The Kingdom of Alabasta thanks you for service. For payment and necessary resources, the Royal coffers of Alabasta are open to you."

"Mmm… meh," Kureha scoffed dismissively, waving her hand. "Open, sure, but I won't plunder them too bad. Call it… remembrance for an old quack who never charged too much, I suppose."

"So… free?"

"Now hold your horses there, you walking space heater!"

-o-

The Marines' staffing issue had only somewhat improved since Enies Lobby's destruction, leaving them nowhere near the resources to pull off the blockade on their own. It was widely accepted that that was the sole reason that they had hired so many privateers to blockade Sabaody, but even outnumbered they remained the ones in charge when the situation called for it.
Naturally, however, with the average Marine being overall less capable than the average pirate even in the Grand Line, it required significant force to keep everything running smoothly and discourage any saps from mutiny or desertion. As such, three powerful Marines were in charge, each one individually capable of matching a ship full of privateers or more.

One handled the soldiers. One handled the ships. And one handled the strategies.

The former two were in a constant state of unease around the latter. Not because they were the only Devil Fruit users in the entire fleet, they had long since shown that they didn't need their powers to be strong. Nor because the man outranked them; he was amicable about everything despite his typical scorn towards ability users.

No, what unnerved them was that under their current assignment, they were required to cooperate constantly with someone who had managed to uncover the New World Masons four times already, and neither one was eager to report to the Divine's de facto leader that she'd need to wipe his mind a fifth time because one of them screwed up. He'd been a good sport about it, but Tsuru was starting to get annoyed.

Of course, that worry was presently taking a backseat to a much more immediate one: in the face of Cross's latest announcement, the man who could have passed for a Chinese emperor was completely and utterly unflummoxed, and was even sporting a slight smirk of intrigue.

"Ahhh, so that's your game then, mister Voice of Anarchy," Vice Admiral 'White Feather' Komei mused with an almost fond-sounding chuckle.

Smoker and Hina hid their flinches by clamping their teeth down on their tobacco bundles.

"Now, with all of that explained, back to the ripple effect. Just think for a moment, dear viewers," Cross crooned, nearly rapturous with anticipation as the aquatic bulge towered higher and higher, slowly starting to loom over the masts of even the biggest ships in the assembled fleet which had by now put a decent amount of distance between themselves and the building cataclysm. "Several hundred metric tons of water, slamming down at once into the ocean. That wouldn't really cause a ripple… so much as it would bring about a tsunami."

It took all the self-control Smoker had to keep from ashing his cigar any more than he had to. "He cannot be serious."

Cross dispelled that notion when he flung his arms out with an utterly mad cackle. "A tsunami that we're going to ride straight into the blockade, baby!"

"Harnessing the momentum from a natural disaster for their own causes. Come now, Commodore." Komei hid his chuckle behind his fan. "Shouldn't you, of all people, have been expecting something like this from the Straw Hat Pirates?"

While Smoker twitched at being called out on his skepticism, a ringing alarm sounded out from the broadcast. "IIIIT'S TIIIIIIIME!" Soundbite hollered ecstatically.

"YOU HEARD THE SNAIL, PEOPLE!" Itomimizu roared, pumping his fist into the air as his ride flapped its wings in terror. "BRACE YOURSELVES AND BRACE YOUR SAILS! THE FIRST EVER SKELTER BITE-SABAODY DEAD END RACE IS ABOUT TO BEGIN! ON YOUR MARKS!"

Komei's smirk stayed firmly in place as he snapped his fan aside, glancing towards his current subordinates as he stood from his seat and walked towards the cabin's door. "Captain Hina, if you
would be so kind as to inform the… mercenaries to prepare themselves for combat?

"Of course, sir," she responded, then hesitated as she and Smoker followed him out onto the quarterdeck. "Are there any specific orders you'd like me to communicate?"

"GET SET!"

"Why, isn't it obvious, my dear?" Komei drawled as his eyes scanned the horizon.

KA-BLOOOOOSH!

Smoker and Hina both flinched in shock as a titanic wave of noise smashed over them, originating both from every snail in earshot and from beyond the horizon, and both could do nothing more than gape at the blue tower rising on high, connecting heaven and ocean in a defiance of all logic.

And then, as that tower suddenly halted and started to fall, one word cut through the shock like a cannonball.

"GO!"

"Kindly inform our helping hands," Komei chuckled over the raucous round of roars that sounded out over the SBS, sounding genuinely eager for whatever was to come. "That the game is afoot."

Cross-Brain AN: Now, two things to say here. First, we initially planned on posting a full explanation on the details of the race further up, but it was just too much exposition at once, so we cut it down. We still have the scene written out, however, and will be publishing it at a later date so you can see one of our 'deleted scenes.' Probably more, if we can bring some past ones up.

And second, perhaps more importantly, we know that we said that we would be finishing up the Road to Sabaody this chapter, and because we promised that, we wouldn't not do it unless we had a very good reason...
Chapter 64 - Road to Sabaody Pt. 6

Cross-Brain AN: ...And here is that very good reason.

~Five Days After Enies Lobby's Destruction~

With the many adamant supporters of Absolute Justice assigned to the New World, Sengoku could finally enjoy a semblance of the stress relief that the Marines' medics had ordered despite the continued fallout from Enies Lobby's destruction. But it was soon to be shaken; while many miles away Jeremiah Cross was formally re-founding Marine Integrity into the New World Masons, another conversation of earthshaking potential was going on in the highest of Marineford's pagodas.

With Akainu in pseudo-exile, Kizaru still recovering, and nobody else of their rank available, Aokiji alone was present as the Elder Stars spoke to Sengoku. Given that the Fleet Admiral was almost hyperventilating, the Logia was currently doing what he could to ease Sengoku's nerves. It helped only enough to ensure that he wouldn't be suffering another heart attack while he glowered at the snail.

"Why... in the world... would you suggest we wage war with one of the Four Emperors... when we've just been crippled from tangling with a group of rookies!?” Sengoku incredulously demanded.

"We do not have the resources to attempt a full-scale war with Whitebeard, and if we tried mustering our forces now, I bet my life that half of them would resign instead, whether of their own volition or spurred on by that loud-mouthed brat!"

"Fleet Admiral—" the voice began again.

"I don't give a damn that he's Roger's son! Keeping him imprisoned or trying to execute him will cause more harm than he could produce if he was still at Whitebeard's side! You can't make me agree to—"

"Fleet Admiral Sengoku, stop insulting our intelligence. We know."

The Fleet Admiral fell silent, as much from surprise as the sharpening glare on the line.

"Under no circumstances are we going to allow Roger's son free now that we have him in prison where he belongs," the Elder Star stated without a hint of give, which drew an aggravated scowl from Sengoku. "But we are acutely aware of how much damage has been done, and that we cannot hope to win against Whitebeard as things stand now. We need more time to recover and build our resources."

Sengoku leaned back slowly, his temper cooling a scant few degrees. "Very well. What are your orders?"

"Keeping Whitebeard's followers in a comatose state will deceive Vivre Cards to the state of their health, and we will use a gaol ship to keep them at sea level; the depths of Impel Down would be too conspicuous. We will keep them hidden for however long it takes to build our forces back to the point where we can stand against Whitebeard. Then and only then will we announce the newest Warlord in our ranks, the imprisonment of the Spider and Witch, and the execution of Fire Fist. Until then, no Marine ranked lower than Admiral shall be informed of any of this."

Sengoku sighed, the tension bleeding out of him. "...I apologize for jumping to conclusions," he ground out, barely managing to keep his tone even mildly respectful.
"As you should. However, we will still require a contingency plan."

Sengoku's body tensed again, and he very deliberately limited his response to a simple "Yes?"

"We must be prepared to assemble our forces at a moment's notice. It will only be as a last resort, but should news of their capture somehow reach the ears of any of Whitebeard's allies, we run the risk of allowing Roger's son to slip through our grasp. Provided that you maintain secrecy, we should have nothing to fear."

Sengoku ever-so-slowly relaxed once more and closed his eyes. "...so be it. We'll focus resources on fixing the damage from the Straw Hats' assault. Scrutinize all communications surrounding the gaol ship. And I'll keep our strongest forces rotating near Marineford; in the face of Enies Lobby's destruction, it should raise no suspicion."

"See to it, Fleet Admiral. KA-LICK!" And with that the connection closed.

Sengoku shook his head with a weary huff as he started mentally arranging formations. But first... "Aokiji," he ordered, barely glancing up at the Ice-Man. "Return to the containment of Fire Fist and his allies and maintain their state. Ensure that no harm comes to them and that operational security remains airtight. You have unrestricted authority; do whatever needs to be done."

Aokiji nodded in solemn acceptance and stood to leave. "Yes, sir." He ambled to the office's door, hand poised to let himself out... and paused there, standing silent for a small eternity, before slowly turning his head over his shoulder. "Sir... I feel compelled to ask a question."

Sengoku glanced up from his paperwork, an irritated expression on his face. "Of all the times for you to actually show some life... What?"

"Fleet Admiral, given the circumstances and potential consequences of our actions, I feel compelled to ask..." Aokiji set his jaw. "Should Fire Fist Ace... really die for the crimes of his father?"

Sengoku's fist slammed down onto his desk, his scowl intensifying and his expression contorted viciously. After a moment, he took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, before giving Aokiji, of all people, a thoroughly chilling stare. "Do not lose focus now, Admiral. It is not, nor has it ever been, a matter of whether or not he should die. But rather, Portgas D. Ace must die."

The Fleet Admiral refocused on his work, dismissing the Admiral with a wave. "That is the last I'll hear on the matter. You have your orders, now go."

A chill of frost briefly crept over the office's door-handle, but just as swiftly it passed. "Understood, sir," Aokiji nodded tersely. And with that, he departed and the matter fell dormant in Marineford... though not in the Ice-Man's heart.

-o-

When the Transponder Snail disconnected, the Five Elder Stars exchanged glowering looks.

"It is sickening that we have been brought to this point. Enies Lobby's destruction on its own is nothing; a blow to our pride, a reduction in our resources, but nothing that would necessitate anything but an increase in their bounties. But this problem has become absurd," the youngest of the five sneered.

"It is impossible enough for a transceiver to have survived the purge. Vegapunk despised our orders, but he followed them to the last," the tallest mused as he stroked his beard. "Nothing survived, and the likes of the geniuses capable of designing such a device are few across the world. It would take
recklessness to the point of insanity to entrust such a device to an erstwhile unknown like Jeremiah Cross."

"The boy is reckless to the point of insanity himself," the katana-wielder grumbled, patiently tapping a finger to his temple. "By broadcasting the invasion, he invited us to send our best forces against him to support CP9, knowing that he couldn't match them. Yet they escaped, and he along with that insufferable Spandam have done the unthinkable: they've scarred us. A no-name rookie pirate and one of our own men have torn the veil."

"Our choices are limited," the mustachioed member grumbled as he rubbed his hands in thought. "The talk of freedom will become more and more widespread the longer that he speaks, and this debacle has cost us the chance to eliminate them directly; another broadcast of this magnitude would push us to the point of no return, and martyring them would turn too much of the world against us at once. As satisfying as it would be, Sengoku made the right choice in stopping Admiral Akainu from burning down Water 7."

"The Straw Hats claim that they beat the world." The cane-wielder tapped his oaken staff on the tile. "The only thing that they've done is guarantee that we will fight again. And when we do, no amount of luck or skill will allow them to walk away. Orders will be sent to Akainu in the New World to recruit replenishing forces from every island that he visits, and we will monitor the Straw Hats' journey for anything that we can exploit. We will bide our time, build our resources..."

His demeanor and that of all the Elder Stars darkened significantly. "And when the time comes to put an end to Roger's line and to Edward Newgate, Absolute Justice will become the only justice. As for the whistleblower... for once, Garp's eccentric whim works in our favor. With him proudly accepting the blame, we can issue Jeremiah Cross the highest starting bounty in history. If we're lucky, some random ignoramus with more bullets than brains will make our lives all the easier for base recompense."

"You will forgive me if I find our recent track record in matters of chance to be... less than encouraging..." the blond grumbled despondently.

~Present~

"Remind me, which of us were speaking about fortune so long ago?" the blond Elder Star scoffed as he grimly watched corsairs trade blows with individuals who rated only slightly higher than the black-flags they were fighting.

"Not. Relevant at the moment," the mustachioed Star ground out impatiently.

"Indeed," the sword-bearer nodded sagely, his eyes closed and expression pinched in intense thought. "The question of the hour is how we intend to handle this situation. As it stands, the Straw Hats have a non-negligible chance of passing the blockade. We always knew this maneuver would be a stop-gap measure and that they would pass eventually, but we never predicted they would manage it on the first clash. So... the question stands: should we leave Komei's orders unchanged..."

The gi-clad man cracked an eye open, and regarded the image of the Thousand Sunny and all upon it with the intensity of a Sea King considering its prey.

"Or should we cut our losses here and now, and order Komei to give Straw Hats an opening?"

A contemplative silence stretched out between the five for interminable minutes... until ultimately, three of them shook their heads in denial.
"The time is not right," the tallest stated firmly. "Our resources have recovered and recent events have served to enhance our capabilities, but not to the extent that we need to be truly ready for the war. To attempt our stratagem now would be folly."

"And their reputation aside, this blockade was specifically designed to be capable of facing down the likes of the Supernovas," the mustache-wearer groused. "It would smack of suspicion, not to mention incompetence, if the Straw Hats came through."

"And there is also the matter that they would most likely assist 'Black Bart' Bartolomeo's crew to consider," the cane-wielder mused in an almost idle fashion. "As well as how we can only surmise what alliances have been formed between them in the meantime; open a crack and they would not stop before they'd made it a chasm."

A silence fell.

"…And finally," the youngest started slowly, uncertain of the idea he was about to air. "I'm assuming it's because it's doubtful the blockade could actually stop them if we gave them express orders to?"

The still air of the chamber was shattered by the sound of a single splinter cracking out of an ancient cane. "We," the cane's owner ground out, livid fury tinging his every word. "Are not. Determining the Straw Hats' actions. To be a fait-accompli."

None of the other Elder Stars commented on their comrade's breach of decorum.

Nor on the tinge of uncertainty that had entered his words.

-o-

"AAAAND THEY'RE OFF!" Itomimizu declared as Chuchun banked after the fleet, flapping and banking furiously to try and compensate for the Knock-Up Stream's updraft. Putting up a pair of binoculars, he scanned over the ships. "All ships that didn't sink and managed to surf off the tsunami are off to a fantastic start, but currently, early lead goes to the Barto Club's Cannibal!"

"Heheh, yeah, well, temporarily having three times the sail-to-ship ratio of anyone else will do that," I quipped, eyeing the shimmering barrier Barto had erected on the bow of the Cannibal. It was effective, true, but if the way he was laughing while the rest of his crew scrambled to hang on for dear life and maneuver them properly, he'd be dropping it soon.

"But right on their heels is the Straw Hats' Thousand Sunny!" Itomimizu continued. "And a ways back but gaining is the Kid Pirates' Iron Tramp, belching all kinds of smoke! Looks like the paddle ships are proving themselves as the design of tomorrow!"

"Yeah, but they'll only chug AS FAR AS THEY'VE GOT FUEL AND WORKING PARTS! Good for a burst, NOT SO MUCH FOR LAYING DOWN PURE HURT. CHECK IT," Soundbite gestured his eyestalks downward, where the Tramp and Sunny were indeed stowing their paddles and decelerating. "They've got the leads they wanted, but now they're drawing it out for the long game. STILL NECK-AND-NECK FOR SECOND, BUT EVERYONE ELSE IS STILL IN IT TOO."

"As for everyone else…" Ito nudged Chuchun to swing about and start sweeping over the rest of the fleet as he squinted to get a better look at flags. "Well, looks like most of the frontrunners are made of the Supernovas, as well as a few others such as my very own Silver and Brass Foxes—"
"The former thankfully rechristened from the cringe-inducing name of 'Sexy Foxy,' though I dearly hope you didn't reverse the titles," I cut in, cringing at the name.

"I will have you know that I am now known the world over as Fiendish Foxy!" Foxy smugly cut in. "I may have lost to your monster of a captain, but I still pushed him to the brink! And there's not a thing you can say to me that will belittle—!"

I gave Soundbite a flat look as I chopped my hand across my throat in a request for a moment's peace. "You only got that name by begging the Divine, didn't you?"

I took way too much pleasure in the way Soundbite's facade crumbled. "It was going to be either that or Split-Head Foxy..." he whimpered in utter misery. Said whimpering is what met the viewers' ears as I unpaused the broadcast.

"Sorry for the cut there, everyone; what I said to bring him down was a little too caustic for a public broadcast," I gloated, smirking smugly.

"...as I was saying," Itomimizu continued, his teeth grinding together in a forced grin. "My crew's ships are part of a nice clump about a kilometer behind the Iron Tramp. Another two kilometers behind them is the main mass of pirates, jockeying for position!"

"And behind those scrubs are the wrecks," I cut in, grinning as I buffed my nails on my chest. "Pro tip of the day: combat power is nice and all, but seamanship is just as important! And keep those anchor cables maintained!"

"Right you are, Cross," Ito concurred, nodding sagely. "I'd say we've got about nine pirate crews permanently out of the race and pretty busy trying not to sink on top of the poor bastards caught in the whirlpool."

My grin widened a bit more; honestly, I'd expected more dismastings and collisions right at the start. I wasn't kidding when I referred to the tail-end Charlie's as 'scrubs'; only a few had bounties above even thirty million. I guess Nami's briefing only got through most of the skulls present. Pity.

Still, I'd gotten a nice thrill of schadenfreude with what we did get, and as it stood, we still had more than enough warm bodies to ram into the blockade.

Meanwhile, Itomimizu was still going. "And with the race settled down for now, I'd like to invite my gracious co-host to explain our little starting booster!"

"Gladly," I replied, sweeping my arm out in a grandiose gesture. "Well, as my good viewers may have guessed, there are perks to knowing a weather witch and a wind Logia. It took a bit of practice, but they were able to combine their powers and whip up one hell of a wind. How are you holding up, ladi—ERGH!?

"My commentary was cut off by an invisible force blindsiding Chuchun into a tailspin. "Hey, what was that for!?!"

"To get a word in edgewise here," uttered Vivi. "Until you've experienced getting your arms wrenched out by the entire universe, go suck on a duck egg, Cross. I already have a migraine from this and you're not making it any better!"

"Got you covered, Vivi," Chopper piped up. "Thanks for this, by the way. You're really helping my research."

"Yeah, no pro—wait, what do you mean reasea—?!"

"Vivi and Chopper everyone, doesn't my crew just say the darnedest things?!" I chuckled as I hastily
chopped my hand across my throat to cut the connection. Though I *don't* think we managed to cut
the pink-laced mini-twister that blasted up from the Sunny's deck in time. "Aaaanyway, while Vivi
and Nami are maintaining our momentum, we've got our friends in the Great Kung-Fu Fleet to thank
for the initial starting turbo-booster! Everyone, give those loveable dugongs a hearty round of
applause!"

"Belay that applause, Cross!" my co-commentator waved me down, suddenly intent on the horizon.
"We've just run into our first obstacle!"

I followed his gaze and frowned, as indeed we had.

-o-

Crocus grimaced at the sight of the lone three-masted ship utterly dwarfed by the pirate fleet facing it.
Behind him, Laboon let out a pained warble. Said ship wasn't turning and running; instead, it was
charging in, bowchasers booming.

Closing his eyes, Crocus clasped his hands together. "Lord of the seas, forgive them," he huffed
wearily, saying it more for the sake of saying it than anything else. "For they know not what they
do."

"Yeah, that's a privateer, alright," Itomimizu noted with barely-concealed venom. "Looks like it's
going for the Supernova cluster, which I really don't get. This isn't normal privateer behavior. Every
ture-blood buccaneer hates their guts, but half of that is because the bastards have the survival
instinct of a shark. They wouldn't be charging the strongest of a generation, they'd be going for the
weakest parts of the pack instead."

"Well, from what I've heard, the Marines have decided to provide some… incentive for them to press
the attack," Cross tsked, kneading one of his temples in irritation.

"Guns to their heads?"

"At the bare minimum."

"Hang on, THEY'RE ALMOST in gun range."

Indeed, as Crocus watched, the splashes from the privateer's bow chasers were now landing among
the nearest edge of the Supernova cluster. The fire was also finally provoking a response: one ship,
sporting castle crenulations, a castle Jolly Roger, and some of the biggest cannons Crocus had ever
seen, was tacking from near the center of the ragged formation right to the edges.

More gunfire bloomed from the privateer—and this time one shot rang true, a cannonball smacking
right onto the nose of the ship.

An impact that did absolutely nothing as the cannonball literally *bounced off* the stone-clad prow.

"…OK, I've seen fortified ships before, but I wouldn't expect that kind of no-sell unless it were thanks
to Black Bart's barriers!" Itomimizu exclaimed.

"Well, it only makes sense that someone like Bege would know fortifications! A fact that goes both
ways, as we're about to see!"

And indeed, the pirate ship's two bow chasers did a hell of a lot more than 'nothing' in return as they
blasted out a simultaneous barrage. One cannonball missed, 'merely' tearing a large hole through the
privateers' sails, but the other smacked into its opponent's bow and *kept going* in a stream of burst
seams and flying plankage. The destruction ended about three-quarters down the length of the poor ship, leaving it wallowing in the sea, at which point the pirate ship turned to present its broadside and opened up. Four more cannonballs burst from their barrels, and of them two hit; one dismasting the ship and the other caving in the keel right where it ran up the bow.

The last broadside was just plain overkill; the hapless ship sagged in a great many important places, and a large chunk of the deck was suddenly blurred into obscurity.

"The heck…?" Crocus wondered.

"Aaaand first blood goes to the Firetank Pirates' Nostra Castello!" the Foxy's announcer pronounced. "I don't think those privateers are going to be trying anything anytime soon. I almost feel sorry for them. And yes, folks, that blurring is on Cross' order; trust me, I can see what's behind it and it is not for sensitive stomachs!"

"Yeah, well, no matter the gore or… let's go with 'thoroughness' involved, it looks like that's a pyrrhic victory for the Firetanks," Cross noted sagely. "They got the kill, but now they've fallen a bit behind the pack."

Indeed, despite some furious tacking and maneuvering, the Nostra Castello was visibly a few hundred meters behind the rest of the Supernovas when it returned to the current.

Crocus grinned and nodded with pride. "Yes, this is how a Dead End Race should be, more decisions like this. This is strategy." His grin twitched irritably as a memory niggled at the back of his skull. "Unlike a certain cannonball-happy cabin-boy's ideas I could name."

"Bwoooh…" Laboon warbled, sinking away from the evil aura his caretaker was giving off.

"Actually, Cross, chances are that this was a calculated move," Itomimizu shrewdly noted. "Since that was just a scout for the blockade and it had plenty of time to transmit its location, that means that the Firetank Pirates will have everyone else between them and the front line when the fighting starts. Risky long-term, but smart. We have some time, but get ready, viewers. Things are gonna pick…up…soon? What the—uh, Cross? What is that?"

Crocus blinked clean out of his bad mood as Gif's view swung around to display—"A bird?"

-0-

"Is that a crane or something?" Perona wondered.

"Yeah, yeah, I think that's a crane!" Xiao nodded, full of eager energy. "I remember seeing a bunch of them in a swamplier bit of the Summer Zone! They were really really tall, with legs like tree trunks and their eyes were really glowy and when they saw something they'd zero in on it and then their necks and beaks were super-fast and strong and they managed to break through the shell of a turtle-gator in one hit and—it-was-so-scary—EEP!" The tyke's babbling sputtered out into a panicked gasp as she suddenly swayed on her feet, on the verge of passing out.

"Sooo… new crane mutation in the swamps, got it," Perona chuckled as she patted the child's head. "Granny, could you—?"

"Already recording it," Granny assured her, jotting the observation down in a logbook. "We've also got a particularly coordinated pack of cow-sized gophers in the eastern prairies of the Spring Zone, and something's been leaving carcasses riddled with iron needles in the more ruin-covered sections of the Fall Zone."
"Uuuugh," Perona lamented, sagging into her overstuffed throne as she swept her arm over her eyes. "So much woooork… I thought it was Shiki making the local ecology go nuts! Shouldn't the evolution be calming down without his dosers around anymore?"

"Oh, it has!" Granny noted with a sunny grin. "Now we've only got half a dozen species popping up a week instead of a two dozen! But if you'd rather leave them all to go on a rampage instead and have us go on strike—?"

"I'll tame them, I'll tame them!" Perona yelped, waving her arms in panic. "J-Just let me spend a few more minutes relaxing watching the SBS, alright?!"

"Whatever you say, dear," the old woman simpered with an ill-hidden grin.

"Ooookay, someone wanna explain why two of my cousins ARE BEING TOTED AROUND BY A CRANE OF ALL THINGS at twelve o'clock?" Soundbite sourly queried.

The proof of Soundbite's words was now close enough to confirm: a snow white crane with a harness akin to the one Shiki had equipped to his eagles, two snails within, was flying directly towards them. It perched gracefully on Chuchun's head, avian and gastropod eyes alike alighting on the Voices of Anarchy.

"Jeremiah Cross and Soundbite," an aged and sophisticated voice drawled from the snail next to the gastropod. "Your reputations precede you."

Cross blinked in surprise, and then his expression sharpened. "Vice Admiral Komei," the pirate returned in a respectful tone. "Yours as well. Although, I must say that I'm surprised you'd meet with us in so civil a manner. You do realize your superiors will have your head for not lambasting us before a global audience, right?"

The Marine-channeling snail eyes shifted in such a manner as to indicate the dismissive waving of a hand. "As it so happens, I'm at a point in my career where they, quite frankly, can't make me give a damn. I will show respect where it is due, and I refuse to let my superiors dictate what that might be."

A stunned silence stretched out for a minute, before a pair of dangerous grins spread across the Voices' faces. "Oh, I am definitely going to enjoy matching wits with you, Vice Admiral sir."

Perona's eyebrows shot up nervously. "This… just got dangerous, on so many levels." "Sounds fun!" Xiao chirped. "Depends on your definition of 'fun'…"

-o-

"Well, only if you're comfortable with that risk," the Marine responded, his tone and expression perfectly neutral. "After all, our orders are to prevent passage. We may be disinclined to attack if you move far enough out of cannon range. After all, your odds of success are, shall we say… less than positive? We outnumber you all by quite a bit, and any attempt to run this blockade will have casualties. Quite frankly, running back to whatever hole you might have come from would be preferable to being sunk or imprisoned, no?"

That message sunk in, clearly directed towards every member of the invasion force that it carried to if the way Gif turned around to behold the fleet again was any indication. After several seconds, some of the fleet began to break off from the main group.
"Of course," I cut in frigidly. "That also comes with the caveat that if this breakthrough attempt fails because of too many deserters, whoever survives the defeat is going to hunt them down and murder them in their beds."

At that, most of the ships resumed their heading with almost indecent speed. There were still a handful that branched off, allowed by both sides to depart from the group. Unspoken was that they were the ones too foolish or too cowardly to be of any help anyway.

"Using fear as a tool, Cross? I thought you to be a more sophisticated orator than that," Komei sniffed imperiously.

"First off, glass houses and stones, you weasel," I retorted, rolling my eyes. "Second, and more importantly, it's not exactly like I'm threatening saints here either. Lotta the crowd here's the scum of the seas that not even we acknowledge, and they all know it." Cross paused, glaring balefully at the fleeing pirates. "Or at least, they should know that by now. But hey! If they take offense to that… they can say it to our faces."

That refocused the majority of the yet-hesitant pirates in the pack, and anyone who'd abandoned their posts swiftly got back to work.

Komei let out a sigh that smacked of resignation before donning a more sincere grin. "Applying intimidation in an appropriate manner for proper benefit. Alright, Cross, I will admit: I am impressed. And I hope that you'll continue to show me the skills that have earned you the place of the Straw Hats' world-famous tactician. It will be the first true challenge I've enjoyed in a long while." A feral smirk came onto his pseudo-face. "A challenge I foresee myself overcoming."

I returned his smirk with a grin of my own. "Don't count your Sea Kings just yet, Vice Admiral. Plenty of people have tried to bring us down, and thus far none have succeeded."

"Why, what a coincidence!" Komei exclaimed in an overly grandiose tone. "The same could be said of my own track record when dealing with pirates. So in the end, I suppose there's really only one question left, isn't there?"

"Indeed there is…"

I leaned in to shove my smirk right in the snail's face, and we spoke as one.

"Whose prowess shall prove superior?"

The standoff lasted for about ten seconds before I leaned back with a cheeky grin. "Ten beri says you're gonna lose."

"I'll raise that to life in Impel Down, but best of luck nevertheless, Cross," Komei chuckled casually. "After all, I'd hate to only trounce you once."

And before I could say anything more to that, the crane spread its wings and took off, swooping away and soaring high to circle above us.

"…damn, he got the last word on you," Soundbite whistled in awe. "THAT NEVER HAPPENS."

"Well… may as well let him have that victory, at least," I smirked. "But it'll be his last."

"N-n-not without a fight, anyways…"
"Eh?" I blinked and looked over at Itomimizu in surprise, the pencil-neck quite literally shivering in his seat. "What makes you say that?"

All my co-commentator could muster up was to raise his wobbly finger and gesture at the horizon.

I followed the direction he indicated… and sucked in a sharp breath through my teeth.

"Oh. Right," I bit out tersely. "That… could be a problem."

-o-

The camera panned ahead of the great pirate armada to share in the commentators' vision, and displayed a horizon that had turned black and white with ships. Iceburg and Lulu's eyes widened.

Paulie and Zambai's reactions were… decidedly more operatic.

"HOLY SEA KING BARNACLES, THAT'S A LOT OF SHIPS!" the ex-bounty hunter belted out.

"But what kind?" Iceburg wondered out loud.

Thankfully, the camera view cooperated with his thoughts, zooming in on the approaching armada. From the slowness of said zoom and the continued good picture quality, this was accomplished by Cross and Itomimizu's bird-mount winging closer.

"… How many ships is that?" the latter weakly asked.

"Let's go with a metric shitton and call it a day," Cross replied in an equally wary tone.

"Wasn't this supposed to be a weak spot on the blockade!?"

"Yeah, well… credit to Kid: he's a raging jackass, but he is a Supernova for a damn good reason."

The gathered shipwrights listened with only half an ear; most were busy taking in the various ships gathered. While overall a decidedly heterogeneous mass, some patterns could be discerned.

"Lotta Aberdeen clippers," Paulie noted, intently gnawing on his cigar. "Rest seem to be a mish-mash from every damn shipyard on the planet. Tyne, Boustead, Severnaya, Split—"

"And Water 7," Iceburg noted with an exasperated huff.

Lulu squinted at the screen. "Hmm, now that the Mayor points it out, I'd say he's right. That's the Arniston there, I designed half of the metalwork on that tub myself."

"So, typical privateer ships. They've always preferred whatever merchant ships they happened to have and could stick cannons on," Paulie scoffed, waving his hand. "I don't see what the problem is. Even with how many of these guys there are, these are the Supernovas we're talking about here. They'll go through single-deckers like these like a woodchipper."

"Okay, Itomimizu, you're more familiar with privateers than me, how bad is this?" Cross inquired.

"Preeetty bad," the wide-mouth grimaced nervously. "For starters, privateers carry oversized crews, so boarders are going to be a problem. And more importantly… where the hell are the vereens?"

"… I'm sorry, vereens?"
"Uh, Vereenigde convoy ships. Those are nasty suckers, and privateers love buying them second-hand," the commentator rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "They're not Marine battleships, but they're the closest you're going to find outside of the Navy and the larger national fleets. Something like this, the Marines would shanghai them in a heartbeat."

Paulie flinched back under the weight of the stares on him. "Okay, so I forgot about those guys! Sue me, I don't see any of them on screen!"

"And I take it that not knowing where those things are is a bad thing?"

"You have to ask? But hold that thought. We're about to get a clash!"

And indeed, the screen swung about to display the Cannibal racing into view from the bottom of the screen, Barto's barrier visible as a shimmering middle finger. In response, the line of privateers turned broadside and opened fire. Water spouted around the Cannibal, but any hits simply bounced off a barrier. And shots further afield at the Thousand Sunny and Iron Tramp were equally ineffective; any cannonballs against them were simply hurled back at their senders, where they did hit home.

Still, while all that was relatively straightforward, one question remained in the viewers' minds.

"What the heck is the plan here?" Zambai demanded. "The pirates are just gonna crash right through at this point!"

"Okay, I gotta ask: what is the guys' plan here?" Itomimizu wondered. "None of the Supernovas are firing! Not the Barto Club, not the Kid Pirates, and not even the Straw Hats. Are they going for a melee?"

I slowly turned a thoroughly flat expression on Itomimizu. "Remind me, I have put out how many SBS broadcasts on my crew by now?" I pointed out.

"...Fair point."

Still, I did get where Itomimizu was coming from. The Thousand Sunny, for all his virtues, did not have a big cannon battery, only ten on either side. There was... that, but we were saving that for a bigger target than these guys. The Cannibal and Iron Tramp, on the other hand, had batteries closer to the expected forty that you'd see on ships of that size, so they had fewer excuses. Still, as Capone had so helpfully demonstrated, turning broadside to get in a gunnery duel was an invitation to let everyone pass you; a head-on assault was the best idea.

But still, that didn't explain why they weren't using their bowchasers... unless...

I adopted a deadpan expression as I snapped my fingers and pointed at the Sunny. "Robin, you wouldn't have happened to overhear Luffy and a few of the other Supernovas getting into an argument over something or other before the race started, would you? Something about, oh, I don't know, body counts and bounties?"

"How ever did you guess, Cross?"

I kneaded the bridge of my nose as I waved the connection away. "Aaaand of course they're intentionally getting into a brawl. Because why would we expect sane behavior during a life-or-death bloodsport race, huh?"

"A failure to employ pattern recognition?"
"You realize I could just punt you off this damn bird to your screaming doom, right?"

"UUUUH..." Soundbite's eyes shot back and forth in a momentary panic before snapping to Ito. "SO, latest updates, FRIENDO?"

"Hey, I'm not done, you little—"

"The Cannibal is still in the lead, the Thousand Sunny and Iron Tramp right behind her!" Itomimizu declared, bodily shoving his way in front of me and into Gif's eyeline. "The privateers are still firing and laying down a hail of lead that would be deadly for anyone else, but they're not stopping! Instead, the Supernovas are going for a melee, and damn the cannons!"

I gave Ito a sidelong glare for a second before leaning forwards eagerly. "Aaaaand... Impact!"

CRUNCH!

With an almighty cacophony that we could hear from our perch without Soundbite's help, the Cannibal—Barto's barrier reshaped into a pointed ram at the last second—smashed into a privateer ship, messily splitting it into two ragged halves. Credit where it was due, the privateers tried to leap onto the Cannibal as it passed, but the higher sides meant the attempts were doomed from the start. And throughout the carnage, Barto displayed his 'respect' for the privateers' efforts by planting his foot on the Cannibal's figurehead and throwing his head back and cackling like an absolute lunatic.

The Sunny joined the scrum bare seconds later, his bow-mounted axe dials doing an even better job splitting his ramming target like so much plywood. The privateers had no more luck boarding him, either. The Iron Tramp, on the other hand, was working solely with raw momentum. It smashed up the ship it crashed into, no problem, but the wreckage immediately got tangled up with the steamer and privateers immediately began swarming the ship.

Their reward for such enthusiasm was to face Killer in open combat. Poor bastards. Idly, I waved for Gif to censor that, too. Eurgh, just looking at the results was making me nauseous.

"And it looks like the Iron Tramp is stuck!" Itomimizu forged on, getting a closer look at the carnage with a spyglass. "Not that it's helping the privateers; what Killer's doing to them is illegal to show in 153 of the original 174 member nations of the World Government!"

SQUELCH! "MY SPLLEEEN!"

"Correction, make that 162!"

"Yeah, well, sucks to be them," I gagged, waving my hand uncomfortably. "Now, let's check on... the..." I stared at the hole the Sunny and Cannibal had busted open. Right in front of them was another line of ships, and the privateers in the line they'd just broken through were turning to close in on them from the flanks. "Well, Sea King balls. They got here fast."

Cannon fire erupted behind us, and with a thought, Chuchun whirled around. There, we saw two more fleets, smaller than the ones blocking us but with bigger ships, advancing on the Supernova cluster.

"I take it those are the vereens you mentioned?" I demanded, my mind racing. Where the hell had they come from!?

"Yuupp," Itomimizu replied, popping the P. "And can I just say that this is all bizarrely coordinated for a bunch of privateer scum?"
"Word to the wise from an adrenaline junkie, brother: Don't mess with Vice Admirals on any level, physical or otherwise," I groused as I crossed my arms. "They will find ways to fuck you up."

-o-

"Why, I do believe I might have left something of an impression on the poor boy," Jonathan mused, tapping a white queen against his knee. "I can't begin to imagine what would give you that idea, sir," Drake responded through grit teeth. "Hem-hem?"

Said gritting intensified at the feminine cough behind him, and he held up the tray in his arms with a terse jerk. "Also, would you care for some more tea, Captain Ain?" he ground out in a voice that promised murder.

"That would be lovely, Lieutenant-Commander, thank you," Ain simpered politely, proffering her teacup to him.

Drake reached for the teapot, and completely by accident, knocked it against the table, cracking it.

"Oh, look. It's broken. So easy and fragile to do that to some things. Like some people's necks," the grim-faced Marine growled as he marched out the door. "Pardon me while I go and get more." And with that, he slammed the door shut behind him—

CRACK!

—with excessive force.

"You'll need to get a new door, too!"

"GRARGH!"

Vice Admiral Jonathan turned his focus away from the screen by a few degrees so that he could address the smug Captain. "Just for the record, you do realize you're pushing my second-in-command ever closer to a mental breakdown with your treatment of him, yes?"

"Oh, of course I do, yes. But it's just too much fun to stop," Ain responded with a smirk. "You yourself should know that, Vice Admiral."

"Hmm… fair enough," Jonathan shrugged casually. "Just know that I'd advise you to change your fake cough a bit, please? It sounds like you have a fat toad stuck in your throat."

The captain's hand shot to her neck with an "Eep!" and a blush. "S-so noted sir," she coughed, for real this time.

Jonathan chuckled before turning his full attention back to the race, as well as the strategies being employed by his fellow—if he was being generous—masterminds.

The scene on the screen was undoubtedly a fine strategy on Komei's part: Tangle up the fastest ships—which, naturally, would bear the strongest pirates—and then slam them in the flanks with the largest privateer ships around. And knowing both Komei and what he himself would do, Jonathan was certain that this wasn't even close to the only gambit Komei had planned.

Just as he knew that there was no chance that Cross's own tried and true strategy of applying overwhelming amounts of force with pinpoint accuracy would be so easily overcome.
Honestly, he was torn between wanting his comrade-in-arms' war plan to succeed and wanting to see how his other comrades and their fellow pirates would get out of it.

"But where did they come from?" Itomimizu's demand snapped attention back to the screen's spectacle, where the commentators were watching the approaching rear line with dread. "They couldn't have approached us this fast without someone noticing! Soundbite?"

"Nobody expects attacks from above..." The snail's already present scowl deepened. "But in this case, THERE'S ANOTHER BLIND SIDE. I DON'T KNOW HOW, but they came up from underwater!"

"Tch, of course!" "Coating, how could we have been so blind!"

Soundbite did a double-take and divided his eyestalks, somehow managing to look very indignant with one eye apiece. "EXCUSE ME!? YOU TWO KNEW ABOUT THIS!?"

"The Captain is not unfamiliar with Sabaody Archipelago, so yes..." Itomimizu groaned, rubbing one temple.

"But for the rest of the world who is, quick notes version: by coating a ship with a special soaplike residue found only in Sabaody, it is entirely possible for any manner of ship to become capable of traveling underwater," Cross lectured, intensely gnawing on his armored thumb. "It's for that entire practice that we pirates have no choice but to sail for Sabaody in the first place! Rrgh, but because we focused so intensely on the blockade line itself, we never considered how they'd exploit what lay behind it, damn it!"

"But we had submarine forces scouting out the blockade all over the past week, how could they have missed so many ships?!" Ito questioned incredulously.

"Because Komei's a genius and if there's one section of sea you survey to hell and back, it's the sections immediately surrounding your organization's Global HQ. He must have hidden ships in every aquatic nook and cranny he could find!" Cross snapped his head to the side with a sharp tsk. "I'd call it brilliant if it weren't in the process of biting us in the ass!"

"Yeeeah, if you say so... ah, but more importantly!" Ito snapped his hand out over the ongoing fighting. "We've got action up and down the line here! The privateers are closing in, and the Supernovas are slowing and bringing out their own cannons!"

Onscreen, the blob of the rest of the Supernova ships, joined by the Silver and Brass Foxies pulling up the rear, let loose with a furious cannonade that quickly blanketed the battlefield in smoke. Remarkably, the privateer ships remained silent, grimly pressing on.

Well. It might have been grim, if it weren't for one teensy, tiny, insignificant little detail.

"Aaaand... everyone but the Firetanks and Drake Pirates are sucking Sea King balls. C'mon, captain, I thought our gunnery crews were better than this! This is an embarrassment to the Foxy Pirates!"

"Heh, chalk one up for actually aiming! You go, Conis, line 'em up and knock 'em down proper when you get the chance!"

"If any gunners under my command got results this bad, I'd bust them down to seaman recruit, then let them work their ways back up to their old ranks just to bust 'em down again," Ain groused, running a hand down her face. "This is just painful to watch."
"You're a very kind person, Ain," Drake drawled as he walked back in, a renewed tea set held in his close-to-too-tight grip. "I'd just demote them and then assign them to potato peeling and shit cleaning between drills."

"Well, then I'd—"

"While I'd love to hear you two get into another argument over who's the bigger hardass," Jonathan cut in with an exaggerated put-upon sigh. "Why don't you take this chance to try and impress me by looking at the vereens and tell me what you see."

The two officers squinted at the privateers, in between broadsides.

"But, ah, still, for the record, I get where you're coming from. I mean, I live with 'Sniper King' Usopp, this pains me on a physical level. I can almost hear him cussing out all these incompetents for how badly they're doing. And no, that's not a request, Soundbite."

"DAMN, AND HE'S GETTING creative too."

Finally, the straddles the Drakes and Firetanks were achieving became hits, two vereens flying to pieces in a matter of seconds. And that finally jarred something loose from the junior officers' brains.

"Huh, did they offload the cannons on the lower gun deck?" Ain noted. "Why would they do that?"

"More speed and more men for boarding, probably," Drake answered, before wincing as another ship disintegrated.

"Still, three of these 'vereens' are so much matchwood, but they're still closing. I'm almost impressed, except for the fact they're planning to go to melee."

"Which doesn't make any sense!" Drake continued, louder. "Gunnery is their advantage, with how badly the pirates are shooting! Why close to melee range with this many high-bounty pirates?"

"… Yeah, I got nothing," Ain admitted, however much it sounded like it hurt her to do so.

"Hold that thought, Cross, let's check in on the lead—OH NEPTUNE'S HAIRY BALLSACK!"

Further tirades were halted in favor of the camera-screen snapping away, forcibly swapping back to the fight at the head of the race. Ain and Drake's eyes widened: each of the three pirate ships now had two privateers crammed up against their sides, men swarming up the sides heedless of the havoc the pirates were wreaking on them.

Then again, the lightning bolts, sprays of metal, and ship-splitting barriers that frequently lashed out to smite ships to the rear were probably excellent incentive to vacate those general areas.

And, naturally, the two ships grappling the Iron Tramp were completely censored out. But there had been a brief glimpse as the camera view changed, and all the Marines present were thoroughly grateful for the censoring.

"Oh, so that's how you match the Straw Hats through sheer brutality…" Drake groaned, covering his mouth.

"You should try experiencing them up close and personal, the smell really pulls it all together," Ain deadpanned.

"That is sick and wrong and I really should not be surprised Kid did it. Please hold for withholding
vomit…"

Silence for a moment. Then…

"Hookay, that's better… Anyway, the leaders are completely tangled up. Everyone's got a privateer ship or two grappled to them and the privateers are going deck to deck just to get at them! And man are they getting creamed for it!"

"Wait, they're just gonna leave it at that?!!" Ain demanded.

"You mean you want to see more of Kid's carnage?!!" the Lieutenant-Commander boggled at her.

"More like I want to see more of the Straw Hats fighting so that we can better model strategies focused on capturing them. I believe that that's a goal that we, as fellow Marines, can agree upon, yes?"

"…let me get back to you on that."

"Which seriously begs the question of just what the hell is the gun the Marines are holding and where can I get it?" Cross forged on, sounding increasingly befuddled at the ongoing brawl. "Because these guys are getting massacred!"

"…What is the leverage we have, by the way?" Drake wondered.

Jonathan just smirked for two seconds, at which point the smirk fell and he squinted at the Thousand Sunny. "Wait, what on earth—?"

"Hey, what the heck are those two doing?!" they heard Cross yelp.

The picture zoomed in, Ain and Drake eagerly leaning forward.

-o-

"I mean, it looks like they're jumping onto one of the privateers grappling the Sunny?" Itomimizu stated questioningly, tilting his head as he watched a pair of dots leap off the, well, sunny ship.

"I can see that!" I snapped. "I'm wondering why!"

-o-

Two minutes ago:

"Coup de… Vent!"

Compressed air blasted out of Franky's inflated forearms, flinging an entire line of privateers clean off the Sunny's sides. Naturally, more climbed up and naturally, Franky tried to charge up again so that he could blast them too, only to run into an increasingly familiar issue.

"This SUPER! Never ends!" Franky groused as his hair flopped in front of his face. "Oi! I need a cola recharge! And more cola storage, note to self; bug the little furry dude about helping me with that later… " he added under his breath.

Arms sprouted from the sides of the ship and started snapping bones, letting Franky step back and grab the bottles of cola that Merry tossed into his hands. As he installed them in his stomach fridge, he took the opportunity to size up the situation.
In short: it was hell. The air stank of gunpowder and piss and fear. Groaning bodies littered the Sunny's decks, and the ships grappling them were charnel houses. And despite that, these assholes just. Kept. Coming! Seriously, it was almost as bad as Enies Lobby had been. The melee fighters even had to rotate in and out of rail-defense duty to keep up their stamina, while Conis, Lassoo, and Usopp kept up suppressing fire and Nami soared over the ships on Billy, raining the wrath of God on the other privateer ships jockeying for position.

**KRAK-THOOM!**

In fact, there was one tree-sized lightning bolt frying another ship now.

"Oi, Merry!" Franky shouted up to the wheel. "You SUPER! Sure we can't just change directions and shake these guys off?"

"Answer hasn't changed since the last two times you asked it!" the ship-girl shouted back. "We lose distance and risk losing the current if we try tha—**there they are!**"

Every gear and joint in Franky's body ground to a halt, and he slowly flipped up his sunglasses to sideglare at her. "Are. You. Sure," he bit out.

"Unless Kid lied to us or was really badly mistaken or their ships are lying beneath them, then aye! *Those be the bastards!*" Merry punctuated her statement both through a snarl and by ramming half a dozen levers in place with a single swing of her arm. "Somebody man the helm, we be engaging in some boarding action against these bilge-suckers!"

"I'm on it!" Chopper shouted, clambering up onto the poop deck and slipping into Merry's place in front of the wheel. "Just don't give me any extra work, I'm already working on three different lists for Boss alone!"

"Say what?!!" The named dugong paused in his repeated punching of a privateer he had trapped under his arm to give the human-reindeer an incredulous look. "Why the hell are you—?!"

"YOU KNOW WHAT YOU DID!"

"Ah… aheh, as you say…"

"Don't worry, we're not the ones who'll need a doctor after this!" Franky shouted back, before joining Merry in jumping off the Sunny and onto the neighboring ship.

-o-

"They… *could* be trying to cut down on the flow of reinforcements," Itomimizu slowly suggested. "They're certainly doing a good job of it."

"Yeeeah…" I muttered as Merry busted out her rotary cannon and hosed down a good chunk of the deck of the ship she was on. "But knowing my crew, there's no way it's something so simple or logical as that."

-o-

Merry quickly stowed her new and newly beloved weapon after she ran through the first ammo belt. It was amazing firing it, as expected, but two things stayed her hand. First, Nami, naturally. She had a few choice comments about *that* she wanted to vocalize, but she withheld them for fear of a certain mollusk screwing her over.
Second, and more importantly, while she and Franky wanted the deck clear, they also wanted the reinforcements to keep coming, so that their targets would actually chance getting within hand-to-hand range rather than cower behind cover. And, thankfully, they were actually climbing up onto the ship right now.

Her eyes narrowed as she glared at the pair of dingy bastards charging them. Charybdis help her, they even looked like the types to abuse their ships. One sallow and gaunt, with a hooked nose and an overall cruel demeanor, and the other big and beefy, with a ridiculous mustache and flowing blonde hair and a generous layer of fat over his admittedly impressive muscles. And both dressed in some of the most impractically fancy Navy-adjacent outfits she'd ever seen. So, frankly, either way, they'd be doing the world a significant favor.

"That them?" Franky asked, striding up next to her.

"Let's confirm," she growled, cupping her hands around her mouth. "OI! Were you two the jackasses who attacked Kid?"

"Who are you calling jackasses, jackasses?!" Mustache roared, charging at them with his fists cocked. Which, in Merry's mind, was close enough to a confession for her.

"Franky, do me a favor…" She raised her free hand and snapped her fingers with a flat expression. "And wreck these bastards."

"WITH PLEASURE!"

Franky proceeded to do just that with extreme gusto, landing a punishing uppercut on the charging bastard and knocking his ass skyward. Then, exchanging a thoroughly malevolent grin with his smaller comrade, he took Merry in one hand and flung her towards the other Marine. The unorthodox maneuver along with Merry's absurd strength took the poor sap aback, leaving him sprawled on the ground. The next moment found Merry heaving him into the air and jumping after him, even as Franky followed suit with a Strong Hammer uppercut.

-0-

"Okay, now what are they doing?!" I snapped, throwing up my hands.

It was an honest question: I had put together what beef they had against these guys, but honestly, a few good shots would have been enough to put them down for the count. But no, they were determined to put on a show, it seemed; they had both sent their opponents flying into the air, and now they were… were…

"Uhh… Ito?" I dragged out uncertainly. "You want to try taking this, buddy? Because I… I just really lack the words."

"Uh, well, it looks like Franky is flipping his guy upside down, while Merry is wrapping her arm around her opponent's neck and, and… uh…" Itomimizu slowly tilted his head. "IIII'm right there with you, Cross. Not a damn clue."

"Incredible!" said another voice beside me.

I whipped my gaze around to Boss, who was now sitting right next to me. If it hadn't been for the logical side of my mind reminding me that he could Moonwalk, I probably would have joined Ito and Chuchun in their yelp of, "WHAT IN THE ACTUAL FUCK?!"

As is, I did still make my opinion of his unprompted appearance known: "WHAT IS ONE OF OUR
"Cross, that isn't important," Boss waved me off way too casually, straightening and pointing down at the fight. "That is what's important! For the first time in a generation… no, two generations, the legendary finishing moves are being performed!"

"Since when in the blue hell are you a wrestling fan!?" I demanded… and then shook my head. "Forget I asked, of course you're a wrestling fan."

In search of a bit more sense, I looked back down to see how the fight below was going: Merry had now flipped the one guy upside-down and released his neck, grabbing his thighs instead and leaving his head resting on her shoulder while she held the rest of his body up. Franky, meanwhile, now had his legs wrapped around his opponent's torso, hands grasping the legs to drive the poor sap into the deck.

"Muscle Buster! Muscle Driver! Only the greatest of men can even attempt such techniques! To see both together—!" He froze, eyes widening. "No… could it be?"

Glancing back at Merry and Franky, I noted that they were still holding their opponents, just in mid-air and streaking towards the deck. Oh, and also lined up perfectly. Nice bit of coordination, there, if it weren't for the intense migraine it was causing me.

"It is!" Boss interrupted, still wide-eyed. "It's the legendary tag-team finishing technique!"

"This is going to hurt, isn't it?" Itomimizu whispered to me.

"It already is…" I growled, massaging my eyes.

"THE MUSCLE DOCKING!"

Down below, we watched Franky piledrive his opponent headfirst into the decking. And simultaneously, Merry landed on his shoulder, driving her opponent's neck straight into her shoulder with a snapping sound that we heard all the way up here. Both of us winced.

…but it really said something about how desensitized I had become that I was able to look away from the grievous injuries to the childishly grinning dugong next to me my full attention. A dugong I was starting to have a sneaking suspicion about.

"…how wasted are you?!"

Boss snickered Shakily and held up a sake gourd that was still dripping. "Parting gift from Izo, straight from Wano. Why do you ask?"

I stared at him flatly for a second before holding my palm up to his. "…Sobering Attack: Impact."

I didn't even twitch as I blasted him clean off Chuchun.

"FOUL!" he yelled as he plummeted towards the ocean, only to get plucked out of the air by a passing Nami and Billy.

"Old man, I kindly request that you tell your sons not to share whatever booze you make in the New World with Paradise rookies anymore," I deadpanned, looking Gif straight in the eyes. Sighing and looking back at where Boss had fallen, I added, "And man am I going to catch complete hell for that later… but damn if it wasn't worth it."
I snapped my eyes back down, and the sight that met my eyes was that of a plume of dust rising from an enemy ship below.

…a ship that looked like someone had taken a bat to it so hard it had split in half.

"Monster," I said dismissively.

"How can you say that so casually?!" Itomimizu demanded before freezing as my words processed.

"Ah, apologies for the interruption, viewers. Why don't we, ah, switch away from the madness for a bit and check in on the mid-line action?"

-0-

The shot glass shattered against the wall, dangerously close to the screen the assembled executives of Dressrosa were using to watch the broadcast. Panting, Senor Pink stomped out of the room, visibly steaming.

"Make sure he pays for that," Trebol noted, not taking his eyes off the broadcast. With the Young Master and a small team of his choosing taking care of business elsewhere, that left him in charge of Dressrosa.

"Er, what was that all about?" Sugar whispered to Pica next to her. The giant man could only shrug indifferently.

On the screen, the view shifted back to the cluster of Supernova ships, locked in a sprawling melee with the privateers engaging them. The Drakes and Firetanks had positioned themselves in the center, blasting away at the privateers and using their fellow pirates to soak up the boarders.

It was a job they were doing very well.

Bodies streamed off every ship and laid in heaps wherever there was space. Shattered hulks dotted the waters behind them. It was a slaughter, not a fight, and yet the privateers just pressed on.

"Huh. So, Cross, how much do you think this setup was deliberate on anyone's parts?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure Drake and Capone planned their positions. The rest… probably serendipity. Hang on, zoom in on the Silver Foxy."

The camera obliged, showing a charnel house and some very good infantry tactics. The Foxies appeared to have been organized into units, and as the Executives watched, one such unit surged onto the sides, letting another fall back to medics near the masts.

More importantly, the captain seemed to be locked in single combat with a sharp-dressed man everyone present recognized.

"Hey, that's Abel Tasman, the business-stealing rat bastard!" Jora squawked indignantly.

"Nihihihi! Maybe they'll knock him off for us!" Machvise chortled, slapping his stomach with glee.

"Huh, who's that?" Cross wondering, sending everyone present scrambling for a notebook to record another thing Jeremiah Cross didn't actually know.

"Abel Tasman, a freelance merchant admiral who runs the Vereenigde merchant convoys I mentioned a while back," Itomimizu elaborated, the casual tone undercut by an acidic scowl. "And
by freelance, I mean 'works privateer when business is short', which is most of the time. The Marines tolerate it because Tasman has pretty much the largest private fleet in the Blues and he's no slouch in a fight himself."

"Well, Foxy's doing pretty well for himself and—whoop, there's Big Pan, flinging him into the air. Does he—No." Cross shook his head as he watched the ill-dressed 'admiral' flail in the air. "No Moonwalk. Glad to know that some things aren't getting picked up by every prick alive."

"A fact that Captain Foxy takes advantage of by nailing him with a Slow-Slow Beam!"

The executives all leaned forward, eyes wide and eager as the business-thief 'flew' through the air in slow motion.

"Big Pan's picking up Foxy and holding him up to Tasman! Foxy's laying down the Nine-Tails Rush from hell into him! And the Slow-Slow Beam has worn off, sending him blasting towards the Jewelry Margherita! Well, I'll be damned, it actually looks like he's going to stick the landing—!"

"Oh, shit, Bonney's right there!"

WHAM!

Experienced pirates all, the Executives did not wince at the fate that befell Tasman. It was a near-run thing, though; even for them, that was gruesome.

"And he slams right into Bonney's head! His back is in an inverted V… aaaaand Bonney hasn't budged! Oh, that's gotta hurt!"

"From the shape his spine is in, I'm not sure he's feeling much of anything!" Cross cackled ecstatically.

It helped that it was a disliked rival getting injured like that.

"That whippersnapper GOT what was coming to him!" Lao G bellowed… probably a bit louder than he intended.

"More than what that opportunistic prick deserved," Baby 5 sniffed petulantly. "Think there's any chance he actually bit it?"

"Looks like a snap between the T6 and T7, meaning…" Diamante analyzed as he squinted at the contorted admiral before scowling irritably. "Damn it, he's still alive!"

A resounding exclamation of "CRAP!" echoed around the room.

"Oh, hey," Cross' decidedly peeved voice interrupted. "Look who finally decided to join the party!"

-o-

"Ah, the rest of the rabble," Komei nodded sagely, casting an idle glance at a nearby clock. "And right on schedule, too. I do so enjoy it when my adversaries are punctual."

"Yes, folks, the stragglers and scrubs in the fleet have finally caught up, and they're laying into the privateers with a vengeance!" Ito explained, out of shot as Gif swung around to display the encroaching fleet. "I can't tell if they hate the privateers, want to one-up the Supernovas, or just really, really want that 8 billion!"

"Probably a combination of all three," Cross reasoned. "The unengaged vereens are using what
broadsides they still have, but I don't think they're gonna stop them. At this rate, most of the pirate force is going to bust clean through the blockade. Ugh..."

"...okay, I'll bite, why do you sound disappointed?" Chuchun asked.

"I'm not disappointed!" the tactician swiftly clarified. "If anything, I'm anxious about what fresh hell is about to fall onto us. Because if I have any decent grasp on Komei's thought process—and I really hope I'm not overestimating my own intelligence when I say I do—this is the part where he abandons the current strategy and moves to Phase 2."

A smirk spread across Komei's face. Yes... Jeremiah Cross did know what he was talking about. Reaching over, the Vice Admiral picked up his Transponder Snail and dialed a number.

"Sir?"

"Execute phases two and three. Simultaneously."

An exhale carried over the line. "Oh, good, I would've suggested that myself, sir. There have been some complications, but if we're launching both phases they're not critical."

Komei cocked a doubtful brow. "I see. Very well, if you think they're not critical, I won't worry."

"We won't disappoint you, Vice Admiral. KA-LICK!"

Komei chuckled as he raised his fan before his mouth. "Your move, Cross."

-o-

Beneath the surface, the Polar Tang's captain observed the battle, dividing his attention between the submarine's own periscope system and the Visual Snail channeling the SBS, eyes scanning for a weak spot with all the observational skills befitting a surgeon. His crew stood by at the ready for any commands... some closer than others.

"So, what's the deal with the captain?" Penguin whispered to his longtime buddy, Shachi. "He's been acting kinda weird ever since we left Skelter Bite."

Shachi nodded. "Yeah. Like, he's been even quieter than usual, hasn't gotten short with Bepo, and hasn't decapitated anyone in a week! Something's definitely up."

"Heck, he's even been humming over the last few days! I think it was that piece that the Straw Hats' snail was blaring for awhile..." Penguin paused, grimacing. "Though, to be fair, that one could be because it's still stuck in his head. Damn little bastard, who cares what color our sub is!?"

"Personally, I think he's thinking about things. And not the usual things. Secret things. Important things."

"Yeah, yeah, that makes sense. So, when're ya gonna ask him?"

Penguin's eyes widened, and he leaned in a little closer. "Are ya crazy?! I'm not asking that! You ask if you're so curious!"

"Me, curious?!!" Shachi shot back. "No way! You're the one who brought it up! I'd like to avoid having my liver and a kidney swapped again, thank you!"

A brief silence fell as they glared at each other. And after a few seconds of said silence, they noticed that it was indeed silent... because they could no longer hear Law humming. One tentative glance
confirmed what they were afraid of: their captain was now standing directly beside them, visibly ticked off and his pet demon (read: his sword) tapping in his palm.

"Well?" he demanded in a voice that brooked no argument.

Gulping audibly, the two pirates shared a nervous glance, until Shachi mustered the courage to speak. "W-We were just wonderin' what was up with you, captain. You just… you've been off on your own lately, thinkin' about things."

"Did… you find a lead on…" Penguin glanced around, and leaned in closer. "*Him?*

Law regarded the two for a long, impassive moment, then glanced outside the viewport of the submarine. "Damn," he sighed, slipping. "I was too late. Your yammering's already attracted the battleship."

Both pirates paled dramatically. "*What* battleship?!" Penguin all but demanded.

"The coated battleship we were trying to slip past until you morons started making noise." Despite his words, Law was sporting an eager smirk. "Ah well. This'll be fun, at least. Brace yourselves, boys, we're about to get hit."

And then the deck rose up and smacked Penguin and Sachi square in the nose.

And if anyone claimed that Law snickered at that particular moment, then they were nothing but a filthy liar.

-o-

X Drake's gaze glided over the battlefield, binoculars in claw and idly ducking and swaying side to side in order to dodge the odd musket-and/or-cannon ball. The battle looked to be going well: The privateers had been breaking on the rock of their fellow Supernovas for some time, and the arrival of the scum they'd gathered up was probably going to be the breaking point. He shifted his gaze east; naturally, the three crews ahead were rapidly chewing their way out, too.

CRA-KOOM!

Drake winced and ripped his binoculars from his face as he tried to blink away the spots in his vision. Yes. *Very* rapidly.

The battle was going well… and yet, he felt uneasy. And he knew why he felt this way too; the Marines hadn't shown up, despite the fact that the privateers had to be veritably *screaming* for help. And he knew, from personal experience no less, that no Marine worth their salt would miss out on a chance to shoot at privateers *and* pirates as massive as this. So the question was… where were they?

Putting his binoculars up again, he scanned the sea. Water, water, ship, water, ship, ship, water bulging, ship—

Wait a minute.

He moved back to that one spot: the water was rising, sloughing off of something. And he knew what that something was.

Stowing his binoculars, he buried his claws in his ship's deck, steadying himself as his battleship swayed beneath his feet. Out the corner of his eye, he saw a Marine battleship breach the water like a colossal whale, incidentally also tossing a yellow submarine out of the water like it was a bathtub
Drake relaxed as his ship stopped swaying, eyeing the other five battleships breaching around them. Surrounded, because of course. Scowling, he walked over to his Transponder Snail and dialed one of the more arrogant pirates surrounding him. Which is to say…

"Bege here."

"Given your track record and typical modus operandi, I'm going to go out on a limb here and assume the Nostra Castello isn't built to tangle with Marine battleships," Drake blandly stated.

"You'd assume right," Bege grunted, unhappy with both the slight and the accuracy of it. Both snail and Drake winced as a battleship opened fire, only for the projectiles to swap with several barrels on said battleship before exploding against the masts. "And while Trafalgar's efforts are appreciated—if self-serving—he can't be six places at once. I'm hoping you have an idea for a valid course of action."

Water bulged again, and before Drake's eyes, three more ships—an old galleon and two more battleships—burst out of the water around three of the battleships. These sported a thick coating of kelp and barnacles rather than the glimmering sheen of a Sabaody coating, and they immediately fell upon their Marine counterparts. And the last two… well, they were busy firing on the now-panicking scrub pirates. A savage grin spread across Drake's face.

"My answer depends on yours. If I were to ask you to provide covering fire while some of us charged that one battleship, would you be capable of it?"

The snail gave an equally savage grin back. "Well, I do have some cast iron cannonballs I can offer at a discount rate…"

Nodding, Drake waited for Bege to tack into position to support the south wing. Which meant he got an excellent view of the surviving vereens abruptly bursting into flames. Glancing behind him, he noted the north wing was also dealing with the sudden onslaught of fireships. He grinned and turned to his sailing master.

"I want a full spread of canvas up the current," he ordered. "This is our chance at the lead spot and I'm not giving it up."

"Aye, captain!"

"Drake, you rotten sewer lizard! You knew that was coming!" Bege roared over the snail, his fury punctuated by his ship's cannons firing at full-bore and trying to sink the blazing boats before they could do the same to him.

"Oh, did I forget to hang up? And to mention the rather obvious trap?" Drake innocently queried. "Anyway, I've got just one word to say to you, Bege. A word that, for the first time in my life, I say with pride." His grin widened as he directed it straight at the castle-ship. "Pi~ra~te."

"YOU SON OF A—!"

KA-LICK!

-o-

"And Drake takes the opportunity to zip ahead!" Itomimizu declared. "Sneaky git, ain't he?"
"Yeah, well, so long as he's not actually firing on our asses, you know what they say," I replied with a rapidly spreading grin. "All's fair in—WHACK!" I was forced to cut myself off mid-sentence on account of nearly being shoved off the side of my ride! And the only thing keeping me from plummeting to my doom was—

"Finish that sentence," Ito prodded, face-encompassing smile twitching as he kept a solid grip on my collar, showing far more upper body strength than I expected from someone like him. "By all means."

"HE SAY NOTHING, NOTHING AT ALL!" Soundbite swore vehemently from inside his shell.

"Listen to the snail, listen to the snail!" I nodded fearfully in agreement.

"Yeah, well—"

B-B-B-BOOM!

Thankfully, the blast of explosives—and my suddenly renewed death glare—prompted Ito to pull me back to safety, and we turned back around to face the ongoing battle.

Our eyes, and Gif's, were all drawn to the line of explosions that had erupted around the three leading ships. Most hit water or the shattered hulks of the privateers around them—and there were still a lot of the assholes trying to press in—but several bounced off of the Iron Tramp's plating, Barto's barriers, and some quick defensive work from my own crew.

It took even less time to find the source: four battleships that had surfaced behind the line of privateers, and seemed to be using them as meatshields while they bombarded from afar. And note that when I say battleships, I mean blue-and-white bonafide Marine battleships. I could see Nami and Billy fly in for an attempted attack run, only for them to hastily abort before someone in a Marine uniform evaded their lightning and nearly skewered them. I guess it couldn't be that easy.

Because behind them… nothing but pure blue sea. We weren't quite there yet… but I could feel the tipping point coming fast. I grinned; that was going to be fun. In the meantime…

"Looks like those weren't all the coated ships the Marines had! We've got four blasting away right at the head of the race! Quite ineffectively, I might add."

"Distance protects them, but it means their accuracy sucks," I agreed. Right as I said that, nearly a dozen privateer ships burst into flames and dove right at the three pirate ships to what I'm sure were apoplectic howls from Merry and Franky. "Yeah, that'll help them. Help them get their asses kicked even harder."

Proving my point, one of the fireships abruptly lurched and then began to sink into the waves, presumably the work of one of the dugongs. Speaking of which…

"Since things seem to be in a holding pattern here, shall we go back to where the real action is?"

"Gladly!" Itomimizu replied, turning the camera view back on the larger melee. And what we saw—

-0-

First Mate Dugong panted, blood dripping down his forehead. He could readily admit that their ongoing battle to clear the three battleships wasn't going terribly well. The fact of the matter was that there were three Marine Captains and only two members of the Great Kung Fu Fleet able to match them, with their Millennial Dragon allies currently being fended off by massed musket fire.
And in his case, "match" was the best he could do.

The dugong shifted his stance and the grip on his spear, mentally growling as the Captain in front of him matched the movement. It shouldn't have been this hard; the Captain was female, not heavily built, and armed with a scarf of all things. A scarf that was somehow deflecting the head of his spear without a scratch and which was smashing wood and flesh with equal devastation! He knew the Grand Line was nuts, but this was insane!

He was still wracking his brains for a solution to the stalemate when he spotted Foxy clamber onto the deck, lugging some sort of wooden contraption. Their eyes met; Foxy cupped his hands around his mouth.

"Get her into the air!"

Well. That was a hell of a lot more doable than beating her.

Planting his tail, First Mate Dugong kicked off into a very low frontal charge, speartip skimming a bare inch above the deck. In fact, he was moving so fast and so low that a hasty thrust from the scarf skimmed right over him, and once he was in range First Mate spun in mid-air, the action bringing his spear around in an upward smash.

Naturally, the scarf blocked it, but if First Mate Dugong was confident in one advantage he held over the Marine, it was his species' tendency towards pure, brute strength. Muscles bulged, cloth failed to stop the swing's movement—

"YOU WON'T BEAT ME, YOU BLUBBERY LITTLE—GW AH!"

—and the result was that the Marine stooge was launched clean off her feet and into the air.

First Mate wasn't done, either. Leaping off a convenient spar, he thrust his spear at her, and though that was blocked, too, without any anchorage she was sent flying down. She tried to wheel around to stick the landing, but she met a slight… issue on the way down.

"SLOW-SLOW BEAM!"

An 'issue' in the form of a concentrated ray of Slow-Slow particles.

Sticking his own landing perfectly, First Mate balefully eyed Foxy as he wheeled some sort of odd contraption into place, a wooden box shaped in an inverse V, sharply sloped and meeting at the top.

"And I did that why…?" First Mate trailed off curiously. Foxy chuckled in reply.

"Waaaait for it…"

The Slow-Slow Beam ended, the Marine fell the last few feet at her previous velocity, legs still spread to stick the landing… and spreading even wider as her legs split the wooden horse.

-o-

I cringed, my hands instinctively shooting downwards.

"Oh, that's cruel!" Itomimizu barked, flinging an arm across his eyes in despair. "It's painful no matter what your gender is! That's just too harsh for most any living being alive!"

That got a sidelong glance out of me. "Including her?"
My co-commentator sobered up almost instantly, sporting a cheeky grin. "Hey, I did say 'most'."

With his opponent on the deck writhing in agony, First Mate Dugong turned a flat stare on Foxy. "And why do you have something like that?"

Foxy slumped over, a cloud of depression hanging over him. "Trust me, that is a long and complicated tale that I don't want to tell and you don't want to know…"

"Er, what does he mean by 'no matter what your gender is'?" one of the Amazons gathered at Amazon Lily's battle arena wondered. And while that was only a single Amazon who happened to be seated in earshot of Hancock's throne, it was a sentiment that rippled throughout the arena.

"Yes, what did he mean?" Hancock speculated aloud. "He implies that not only do men feel excruciating pain in such situations, but they rarely stop to consider what women feel."

"Oh, let it go, the poor dears," Elder Nyon sighed. "I've talked to many men such afflicted over the years and I can only conclude that it is a very… unique pain."

"Mmph, as you say…" Hancock skeptically replied. The reason for her truly placid response was that she was too focused on scanning the screen, an endeavor Marigold was aiding her in.

Noting the distinct lack of acid being spat her way, Nyon glanced back at two of Amazon Lily's three rulers. It didn't take her long to spot their barely hidden concern, at which point she turned back to the show. "I wouldn't overly concern yourselves. Sandersonia is easily one of the most powerful individuals in those waters, and she's in the company of the Straw Hats besides. She'll be perfectly fine."

"Mmph, but if so, then where is she?" Marigold inquired, gnawing on her thumb. "I can't imagine that Sonia would stay out of a fight like this willingly, so…?"

"Maybe that's the exact reason she's not out there in the first place. Probably keeping her out of sight for her own good," Rindo huffed, more focused on trying to reignite her cigarette than the show. "Don't forget, if Lady Sandersonia were out there and not attacking pirates, that would raise a lot of uncomfortable questions, right?"

"Mmph, I suppose," Hancock sighed wearily as she massaged her brow. "Still, I wouldn't be averse to something distracting me from my concern."

"Moving on from that… horrific sight, we—" SKREEONK!

The entire arena flinched back, on account of what sounded like the unholy union of a howler monkey and a sword breaking screaming out of the gathered Transponder Snails.

"You were saying?" Marigold groused, digging a finger through her ear.

"Quiet, Mari," Hancock grumbled, pointedly ignoring both the griping of her sister and the snickering of the reptilian seat that was her partner.

The camera dutifully zoomed in on the northern third of the battleships, and there was just enough
time before the Millennial Dragons swooped in to tear into the reeling ships to see Scratchmen Apoo flash a victory sign before he leapt off to find more opponents.

"And Apoo clears the decks, leaving the ship wide open for the Millennial Dragons! Scratch one battleship!"

"Good work, Apoo! At this rate, just ten more ships and you'll almost be as good... as..."

Cross trailed off mid-insult, and the camera swiftly snapped around to show a sight that stunned viewers worldwide into silence: the two battleships that had gone after the scrubs were now sailing back into the fight... and they'd left a field of shattered wrecks in their wake.

"I can't say the sight of so much scum of the seas floating in pieces doesn't fill me with joy," Hancock said, not sounding joyful at all.

"Sister, you're contradicting yourself again," Marigold said tonelessly.

"Uh, whoops?"

The southern battleship, the one Law had been playing catch and return with, promptly exploded.

"Huh, powder magazine must've gone off," Itomimizu speculated. "And, y'know, the fire ships barely did anything. I think... I think we're actually gonna get through the blockade!"

As one, the assembled Amazons winced. "Did he seriously just say that?" Marigold muttered under her breath.

Cross, it seemed, was no happier about the blatant fate-tempting. "Okay, first, do you have to sound so doubtful about the success of one of my plans?! Especially one where your survival is on the line too! And second, Ito, did you sleep through my broadcast on tempting fate or something!?"

"Actually, yes. The Back Fight we had around the time you toppled Thriller Bark saw me take a baseball to the noggin, so I was sleeping it off. Doctor's orders," Ito shrugged indifferently. "But c'mon, look at the situation! The Marines here are only going to last maybe ten minutes longer. The Marines to the west are probably crumbling as we speak! What could possibly go wrong?"

Wincers were no longer sufficient. Faces met palms in a thunderous roar.

"Idiot," Hancock spat between her fingers. "I don't know why Cross is putting up with him."

"What could possibly go wrong?" Cross repeated, a very sickly grin on his face. Overall, he looked fit to choke a Sea King with his bare hands. "Let's find out, shall we? Head back to the frontrunners, see how they're doing."

The camera swapped once again, and the situation had changed. Somewhat. The Kids, Straw Hats, and Barto Club had cleared out the remaining privateers; X Drake was hot on their heels; and the four battleships were closing in, firing as they went. And right on the prow of the lead ship—

"Hey look, on the battleship! It's an officer!" Ito exclaimed.

"It's a Vice Admiral!" Cross clarified furiously.

Salome let out a squawk of agony as Hancock's clenched fists crushed his coils. "No. That's Strawberry," she spat.

And indeed, it was outright impossible to mistake the long-bearded, long-hatted Vice Admiral as
anyone else, both his swords out and brandished. And his identity was doubly reconfirmed by the cold, emotionless glare he was using to stare out over the assembled ships.

"Yeeesss," Cross drawled, menacingly conversational. "A Vice Admiral on the front lines, and one of the notably worse ones in the ranks at that. 'NOTHING COULD GO WRONG' MY ASS!"

"Meep!"

"SHUT IT, MUPPET! Gugh, on the plus side, with Kid, Luffy, and Barto there we've actually got a halfway decent chance of beating hi—wait, what the hell?!"

As one, the inhabitants of Amazon Lily leaned forward in eager glee.

-o-

The Thousand Sunny rocked again, Koala shoving down the urge to go out on deck and fight for the umpteenth time. At least it wasn't Sandersonia trying to tear her way out of the chains they'd tied her up in down in the cargo hold. Again. That'd gotten old after the first five times, and even New World veterans could get seasick if you tried hard enough.

"Hard time?"

Koala directed a baleful glare at her bespectacled hold-mate. "Pardon me if this sounds harsh, but you're technically on their side, you have a reason not to be out there whipping tale. What do you know?"

"Enough, I think," Tashigi coolly replied as she adjusted her glasses. "How do you think I felt as Cross aired the dirty laundry of Ohara to anyone listening?"

"Kyuuun," Popora deadpanned, slowly starting to lift his hammer.

"Cram it, handbag-to-be!"

"Kyuuugh," the rabbit-wolf scoffed, storing his weapon away.

Koala sighed, relaxing just a tad. "Point taken. Sorry for getting snippy."

"Like I said, I do understand," Tashigi soothed, glancing up at the deck with a light snicker. "Honestly, back when that happened? I had to excuse myself halfway through the interview. If I'd stayed to listen, I'd probably have tried to chop Commodore Smoker's head off."

That got an honest chuckle out of Koala. "Because he's a Logia, right?"

"And a safe target, exactly," Tashigi chuckled into her fist. "As it was, I had to settle for 'merely' gutting a Sea King! Tense situation, but certainly the best dinner I'd had in a long time."

The two women broke down in chuckles at that, and the good humor lasted until they were out of breath and wiping the tears from their eyes.

"Ahh… that was nice. Thanks, Tashigi," Koala said, shooting a sly smile at her compatriot. "You know, you're not bad… for a fishy government dog, anyways."

Tashigi matched her with an overly-exaggerated salute. "Same to you, you black-hat rabble-rouser!"

More chuckles passed between them, then a companionable silence. A silence that was broken by Usopp scrambling down the ladder from the main deck.
"Guys, just wanted to let you know to buckle up tight!" he warned them hastily as he cracked open a wall and started working on the mechanisms hidden within. "Things are about to get—!"

**KRA-KOOM!**

All three of the mismatched individuals flinched as a ship-sized detonation suddenly rocked the Sunny.

"*Hairy...*" Usopp finished with a groan.

The two exchanged a glance. Hairy? After everything they had heard go on outside? Sure, it was *Usopp* saying it, but still…

"Define 'hairy'," Tashigi requested, trepidation coloring her voice.

"'Vice Admiral' hairy. The long beard and towering hat are pretty goofy, but it's still pretty hard to miss the—" Koala shot past the sniper, leaving Usopp standing frozen in place and staring dumbfounded after her. "Coat? What's gotten into her?"

Koala didn't hear the rest of the words; her brain was too full of memories and thoughts and counterstrategies and **UNHOLY RAGE.** One part of the Revolutionary was insisting, *pleading* on repeat that this was a bad idea, that she needed to stay incognito, that throwing in the Revolutionaries' collective lot with the Masons and Straw Hats on a simple whim of vengeance was stupidity of the highest order. The other half was… withholding judgment, to say the least.

She burst onto the deck, head on a swivel, passing over the ongoing battles before alighting on one of the battleships pressing forward.

There. The beard was longer, the uniform different, but **that face.** She knew that face. She'd known it for half of her life. It was only natural, really, that seeing that image in daily nightmares for years on end would do that to a person.

Idly, she became aware that around her, the fighting had stopped, or at least lulled. That only made it easier to stomp up to the helm, and the girl manning it.

"I need a fully grown snail," she demanded without preamble.

To her credit, the ship-girl just raised an eyebrow. "Third deck, a loaner's keeping Pinkie and Brain company. Follow the electric guitars," she said.

Nodding, Koala clambered belowdecks again, quickly finding the larger snail snoozing between the two Baby Transponder snails rocking out to a Tone Dial and dialing a number.

"Kilo Oscar Alpha Lima Alpha six two two," she said immediately. A pause.

"Well, this is a surprise," Monkey D. Dragon grunted. "I thought you were scoping out Skelter Bite?"

"As if you aren't following the SBS and know about the Dead End Race," Koala scoffed, only just managing to keep her tone on the right side of civil. "Or the Vice Admiral leading the charge."

A moment of silence, then a small smirk. "Fine, Koala. As long as you understand that you'll be explaining this to Karasu." His expression hardened. "And that if it comes to it, I will sign the burn notice myself."
"So long as it brings me his head, I'd burn the world itself…" Koala winced as she registered the sheer vitriol in what she'd just said—along with the prospect of a personal meeting with the Revolutionaries' head of discipline—and calmed herself by running her fingers through her hair. "Sorry. And… whatever else happens, thank you, Dragon."

"Just make sure it isn't half-baked, Koala. Make it a fight that he'll never be able to forget."

The grin Koala gave in response would've sent even Luffy running for the hills. "That's the plan, sir."

**KA-LICK!**

Hanging up the snail, Koala took the ladder back up to the deck two at a time, then sprinted down the Sunny past the gathered Straw Hats, up the figurehead, and then jumped off it. Instinctively, her body shifted into the forms of Fishman Karate, and Armament Haki flooded her veins, and as she passed by Nami she kicked off a strand of Eisen cloud for that last bit of speed.

"I have waited ten years for this, you bastard!" Koala screamed as she descended upon a very surprised Vice Admiral Strawberry. "Flaming Axe Kick!"

The Marine barely got his swords up and coated in Haki in time before Koala's kick crashed right into his guard. Both it and the blades held; the bowsprit underneath him, however, did not, and instead splintered into a million pieces. Puffs of Moonwalk kept Strawberry in mid-air, while Koala tucked in her limbs and dove for the ocean.

Any disappointment the SBS' viewers may have felt was short-lived, for bare seconds later Koala burst out of the water as if shot from a cannon. Strawberry, in a masterful display of the Six Powers, blurred from sight in an obvious combination of Moonwalk and Shave. The two met halfway, Koala's fist and Strawberry's sword clashing like angry mountains.

Yes, singular, because Koala's other fist and the pommel of Strawberry's other sword had crashed not into each other but their wielders' cheeks.

Momentum launched the two in different directions: Koala shot back down to the water, tucking her arms in and diving, while Strawberry arced over to one of the neighboring battleships.

He touched down, scanning over the deck and the frightened Marines there. "Clear the deck!" he ordered, sending the sailors scrambling to obey.

This led to a good-sized bubble around Strawberry devoid of Marines when Koala darted up from the water, murder in her eyes and water coating her hands. Her arms blurred, and water droplets rained down on the Vice Admiral with all the impact and velocity of iron hail. But despite impeccable aim, all the projectiles only punched through the deck around him rather than his flesh. In a masterful display of swordsmanship, the Marine weaved through the droplets, each caught on the flat of his blade and smoothly deflected with the barest flick of the wrist.

And then, once the deluge came to an end, Strawberry found Koala right in his guard, one hand cocked back and doubly-wreathed in water.

"Three Thousand Tile—" she intoned.

Strawberry's eyes widened. "Iron Body!" he hastily grit out.

"**TRUE FIST!**"
The punch slammed square into his gut, blowing clean through both the Iron Body and the Haki coating on top. Flesh rippled, and inside tissues and blood vessels ruptured in the wake of the blow. End result, Strawberry hacked up a massive glob of blood; behind him, the shockwave of the punch blew several dozen—'**Hundred and thirteen at once, NEW RECORD!**'—clean into the drink. Suffice to say, Koala's smirk was both well-earned and extremely satisfied.

And then Strawberry's head met hers with the sound of a ringing gong. Her guard crumbled instantly as her mind tried to reboot, an endeavor impeded by the force of the blow smashing her clean through the deck—and from the sound of things, through several more.

Spitting out a mix of blood and spit, Strawberry jumped in after her.

-0-

"Son of a…" I groaned. Coolest thing to happen in the race yet and the grudge match of the decade and we couldn't see it! "Chuchun, is there any way you can get a visual on—?"

"Belay that!" Ito interrupted. "Look at the ship!"

I looked at the ship. Though I don't know why, but—hang on, was the ship shaking?

Before my stunned eyes, I watched as part of the hull burst into splinters, then another further aft, then another, and another, until finally, Strawberry came careening up and out through the deck near the bow and into the foremost, toppling it in a single blow. Naturally, Koala was right on his heels, diving straight for the Vice Admiral and driving her fist towards his face.

I decided to abstain from telling Gif to zoom in; there was only so much gratuitous violence I could show at once!…well, I mean, I'd show all of it if I could, but still, moderation, right?

-0-

Koala was all ready to continue smashing Strawberry's face in when she landed. It didn't matter that he was lying suspiciously still. It didn't matter that her head was ringing like the Fire of Shandora, or that her ribs were rioting at the unjust treatment she'd subjected them to.

It **did** matter when her Observation screamed bloody murder at her though, and she skidded to a halt next to the toppled mast, right at the hairy edge of Strawberry's range.

"I'd just like to go on record and note," the Vice Admiral groaned as he worked his way to his feet, damaged but still annoyingly breathing. "That while I don't know who you are, young lady, I can certainly guess from where your anger towards me stems."

Koala froze in place, her pulse slowing down as she tried to process what she was hearing. "Oh?" she whispered frigidly. "And how's that?"

Strawberry took a moment to crack his head to the side, wincing at the sparks of pain that raced down his neck at the motion. "At a guess, I was responsible for some manner of misfortune that befell a friend, family member, or someone else who was close to you, and now you seek to reap your own justice upon me. Am I close?"

Koala grit her teeth as her blood froze over all the more, shame running down her spine at being read so easily. "You are… not wrong."

The Marine nodded solemnly. "Then you should also know that your quest is futile."
The freezing continued, her veins solidifying all throughout her body as doubt, damnable *doubt* of all things, touched her for the first time. Twenty years and *this* was when she had *second thoughts*!? Already her legs were stiff and unmoving, but it was to her immense shame that her mouth didn't freeze up either. "...I know," she ground out, hardly believing the words dragging out her mouth. "I know that hurting you won't bring him back, but—" 

"You misunderstand."

The freezing intensified to newfound levels as Koala tried, *tried* to process what she'd just heard… but she just couldn't connect the pieces properly. "Ex-*cuse me?*" she breathed, her voice numb.

Strawberry scoffed and dusted off his jacket's epaulets. "Let me explain: you're looking to exact vengeance. Vengeance can only occur when one party has been wronged. That doesn't apply here, as I have *done* nothing wrong." The Vice Admiral drew himself up to his full height, positively towering over Koala's scrawny five-foot-and-change frame.

"Let me make this clear to you, girl," he intoned grimly. "No injustice has been wrought by my hands because I and every other Marine alive *is* Justice. Meaning that whatever I did to whoever it was that you want to avenge, there is no question or doubt to be had. *It was what they deserved."

…aaand. That. Just about did it.

Koala's doubts, the ice in her veins that had kept her locked in place, that had been keeping her brain sluggish and unable to think… in an instant, it melted. Vaporized. Exploded into rage that raced to every corner of her body, burning and searing to her very core. And in that instant, something.

Just.

Snapped.

Unfortunately for Strawberry, however, this mental reversal was completely invisible, so he was unaware of how ill-advised his following action was about to be.

"Still," he grunted, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "I shall do you the favor of at least *humoring* your ill-founded vendetta. Tell me, what was the name of your 'wronged'—?"

CRACK!

That was all Strawberry managed to get out; the instant that his Haki alerted him to an oncoming kick to his torso, Koala's boot *planted* itself in the Vice Admiral's midsection, bending him around her foot for half a second before slamming him into the battleship's deckhouse like a cannonball. His brain had only just started working again when Koala blurred up to him and slammed his torso back into the wall by his collar.

"*His name,*" she snarled savagely, her eyes acting as windows to a soul of *purest hellfire*. *Was FISHER TIGER.*

Those last two words finally achieved that which the past few minutes hadn't: emotion slipped into Strawberry's eyes as the Vice Admiral was *finally* shaken, stricken by fear and *recognition*.

"Y-you're—GRGH!" he gargled out. Or at least, that was all he *was* able to gargle out before Koala slammed him into the wall again, this time wedging him in tight.

"And let me correct you on something, if you don't mind, because you seem to be laboring under a misconception." Koala seethed as she marched away from him. "You seem to think that what I'm
about to do to you, it's exclusively for his sake. But see… that's not true."

Upon reaching the downed foremast, Koala turned around to face Strawberry again. And then, without even looking, she buried her arm in the titanic pillar of wood, clean up to her elbow. With little apparent effort, she dragged the mast across the battleship's deck until it was perfectly lined up with Strawberry's embedded body. A body whose struggling abruptly redoubled; he didn't need Observation to see what was coming next.

"Just so we're perfectly clear," Koala snarled, her blazing temper rapidly infiltrating her voice. "This is for what you did to Big Bro!"

And with that, she heaved her arms, twisted her torso, and in a display of downright herculean strength—

**SMASH!** "GAAARGH!"

—rammed the entire mass of the mast into Strawberry's midsection, wedging him even deeper into the deckhouse wall. A wall which, to the Vice Admiral's misfortune, was proving its Water 7 origins in its hellish sturdiness, merely bending instead of outright buckling.

"This, on the other hand," Koala continued, her tone rising as she hauled the mast back again. "Is not for Big Bro! This is for every sleepless night I stayed up sobbing, crying because I thought he'd died because of me!"

**SMASH!**

"This is for every life ruined by your actions! By your 'Justice'? By the hatred you caused! For every life lost that, for the longest time, I thought were on my head because I! Was too! WEAK!"

**SMASH!**

"This is for making me hate my parents—my own parents!—who I dreamed of seeing for years, all throughout that hell, because of you giving them that fucking choice! BECAUSE YOU MADE THEM COMPLICIT IN YOUR FUCKING BULLSHIT!"

**SMASH!**

Following that last impact, Koala was left panting and unmoving for a bit, her weapon lodged in place. And despite the ringing concussion he was suffering from, Strawberry held a faint hope that that was it. That his opponent had exhausted herself. That maybe, just maybe, it was over.

The mast shifted back again.

And then Koala started dragging her makeshift gavel back, up and up and up along the deck of the battleship, right to the very tip of the bow, where she kept its bloodied end unerringly trained on Strawberry's twitching body.

"But most important of all…" Koala droned, her voice dead and her head bowed. "This… This is for your absolute worst crime of all. What I am about to do to you, I do because of the single, darkest moment you put me through."

Koala raised her head and stared at Strawberry. Stared through the cascade of tears trailing down her face, over her rictus of hurt and rage. "This…" she whispered, to herself if no one else. "Is for that single, horrible instance… where I wore that smile again."
And just like that, all hurt fled her face in favor of volcanic fury, every muscle in her body wound up like a catapult's rope. "This is for making me think, for even an instant, that I would have been better off staying. For making me doubt!" And in a single, explosive burst of movement, every muscle in Koala's body snapped into action as she flung herself and her weapon clean across the deck at breakneck speeds. "MY RIGHT TO BE FREE!"

-o-

Much of the world was left frustrated; personal though the grudge clearly was, they weren't happy with the SBS censoring all of the sound that came from Koala's mouth from the moment she was about to say the name of her loved one, even going so far as to blur her lips to remove the possibility of reading them.

…But of course, they all still bore witness to Vice Admiral Strawberry's complete beatdown.

Namely, while Strawberry vanished out of sight from the impact, his path of flight was visibly obvious on account of the back half of deckhouse he was being hammered into by the man getting blasted clean through the entire structure, wood and metal contorting around the hole in some sick semblance of a sunflower. And while it would have been appropriate for the Vice Admiral to splash down into the waves and sink to Davy Jones' locker, he instead impacted the side of a nearby battleship.

Calling his landing 'lucky', however, would be a grave overstatement on account of the broadside of the battleship caved in like the fist of god had struck it, and left the ship listing at a visibly dangerous angle. As such, determining Vice Admiral Strawberry's final fate was proving to be something of a challenge.

"Iiiii is he still alive?" Itomimizu asked nervously.

"Couldn't tell you. I CAN'T TELL WHAT'S HEARTBEAT and what's rubble! CROSS, ANY IDE—YIPE!"

The good mood snuffed itself out when the camera turned on Cross. Women gasped. Men tensed. Children grabbed for the nearest warm body.

Because you see… Cross' expression was eerily similar to the one he'd worn busting down Shiki's front door.

"Alright, that's it. Sorry, Komei; it's been fun, but I'd say that we've let you have your way for long enough. There's only so much I can take, and you having that particular asshat of a white hat involved in this buggery is a step too far. Captain, permission to direct the ship's path?"

"Do whatever you have to, Cross," Luffy responded. There was a single second of hesitation as Luffy's solemn tone echoed in everyone's ears, Cross's especially, but then it was gone, and Cross spoke again.

"Merry, Franky... it's time we stopped playing nice. Bust out the you-know-what."

"HELL YES," the helmsgirl and shipwright said in bloodthirsty eagerness.

"Word to the wise? I'd tell anyone in front of the Sunny right now to jump ship, ASAP. Because this... is going to get messy."

At Cross's tone, everyone watching felt a mix of dread and excitement. This only grew as the
Thousand Sunny began maneuvering its way through the throng of clashing ships until it was positioned at the forefront of the mob. The lion-headed ship was positioned dead ahead, clean through the center of the privateer fleet, who were clustered together in a clear attempt to fend off whatever attack was coming. Gif’s view slowly zoomed in on the Sunny, focusing on the figurehead.

"You guys are pulling out all the stops to try to keep us from getting our way, to bog us down until we’re all headed down to Fishman Island via the express route. But really, Komei…” The pirate shook his head in mock-dismay. "I'm a bit disappointed. I mean, I'd think that you, of all people, would know better by now than to think it would be so easy. But hey! If you think that you've got the winning hand with this arrangement, so be it! No need to take our word on the matter… we'll just let our actions speak for themselves by showing off our trump card."

And with that, the jaw of the smiling lion dropped… revealing a cannon muzzle within.

-0-

"Oooh, so they're finally using that then, are they?" Iceburg chuckled, rubbing his hands together eagerly. "And for the first time too, it sounds like! Well, certainly no better stage they could have pulled it from, I suppose!"

"Any idea what he's talking about?" Zambai asked, his eyes wide and focused on the cannon.

"Not a clue," Paulie replied, shaking his head "Him, Franky, and Merry kept shooing us away from the bow while we were building that beast. Boss told us he wanted it to be a surprise… Franky told us we'd just get in the way and screw things up."

Zambai gave him a curious look, a member of the construction crew conspicuously unmentioned. "And Merry?"

Paulie's demeanor took on a haunted expression. "Same thing as Franky, just with more…” He shivered in despair. "Creative vocabulary. Seriously, those words should not come out of a kid's mouth…"

"Right, of course… pure curiosity here, but what, specifically—?"

"Will both of you shut it already!"

"Gah!"/"Hey, what the—?!"

Their protests were promptly cut short by Iceburg grabbing their heads and shoving them down so that their conversation they were forced to watch the screen.

Meaning that they were given front row seats to the more than a little unnerving sight of their beloved mayor and boss bouncing in his seat with a toothy grin reminiscent of a child on Christmas morning.

"What we are about to witness…” Iceburg whispered reverentially. "Is one of the greatest triumphs to come out of Water 7 in our generation!"

-0-

The cannon shifted slightly until it was presumably aimed to hit the most ships with… well, whatever it shot. Then… Then the cannon began to glow, killing what was now the forlorn but still alive hope that the Straw Hats were just going to be firing anything in the same ocean as an ordinary cannonball.
"Tremble before the Thousand Sunny's ultimate attack!" Cross proclaimed, eager energy revitalizing his voice as he swung his arm out. "It's time, at long last! Number 3 on my List Of Things I Want To Say At Least Once In The Right Context™!"

Cross swung his hand down and pointed his finger at the horizon, his face positively mad with glee.

"FIRE MAIN CANNON! And by main cannon, of course, I mean… THE GAON CANNON!"

The light in Sunny's maw shrank down to a singular pinprick…

FWOOOOM!

And then, what could only be possibly described as total. Devastation.

It was like everything in front of the Sunny at a fairly wide angle was outright bitch-slapped by the divine all-father of all storms. The larger battleships were either de-masted—no, stripped clean down to the main deck, 650-ton turrets included—or left as totally capsized wrecks. Smaller ships were blown apart into nothing but timbers. And the less said about those people caught directly in the path of the cannon's blast, the better.

Not even those ships on the fringes on the blast were safe, the luckiest of them listing hard and fighting to stay afloat.

The end result of this devastation? A hole, blown clean through the entire line of the blockade and an easy half-dozen ships wide.

The conference room 12B of Marineford remained totally silent for a minute until Chief Petty Officer Helmeppo slowly raised his finger. "Uhhh… Admiral Kizaru, sir? No offense, but… I think you've just been outdone."

The yellow-suited Admiral shrugged indifferently, not taking his eyes off the action. "None taken, that would take more energy than I usually have to use. No shame in being outdone by that."

"Except," Sengoku growled, his drumming fingers starting to cause cracks in the conference table. "When we're being outdone by pirates."

"Huh… yeah, I suppose that's true."

A resounding CRACK! indicated the point where the Admiral of the Fleet's fingers went from causing cracks to five neat holes.

-o-

I took a good half minute to bask in the aftershock of the destruction. Emphasis on shock, considering the looks on… pretty much every single Supernova's face.

Barto's starry-eyed cheering was expected; Bonney's, less so, but in hindsight, not that surprising. Drake looked to be trying to catch flies with his mouth, it was so wide open; Bege, from his drooling expression, was going to be hounding us to get a Gaon Cannon of his own. Urouge and Apoo were on the deck of their ships rolling around, laughing their asses off, and Kid-

"You're muting this, right?" I muttered to Soundbite.

"CAN'T TALK, TAKING NOTES…"
Anyway, where was I… right, Killer was unmoving and not doing anything, and Hawkins was-

"Pffahahahaha! Oh, my transceiver for a Vision Dial!"

Basically pulling an Eneru. Or, well, his version of it anyways. Honestly, his expression was quite
tame, but the fact that his demeanor had shifted at all was worthy of note.

…but the crowning jewel of the reactions had to be, had to be the fact that for one glorious instant
that I was going to absolutely immortalize, Trafalgar Law was staring in dumbstruck awe at the
display, complete with stars in the eyes! He forced his gaze away after a minute, but no, no, no, that
was going to be framed right beside the pictures of Eneru's shock. And Foxy's fear. And Robin's spit
take. Oh, and that nice selfie that I took with Merry back on Water 7…

Alas, however, practicality demanded that I proceed.

"Gif, make absolutely sure that you can duplicate all of those faces for photographs later," I hissed
with a venomous grin.

"(¯ε¯) b" she affirmed.

"And Soundbite," I said in the same tone. "The following message is purely for the other
Supernovas…"

"Ahem?"

I rolled my eyes at the sidelong look Ito was sending at me. "Yes, yes, and Foxy and the other
Skelter Biters… I guess…"

"YOU'RE LIVE!"

I refocused at Soundbite's prompt, and I jabbed my finger forward with glee. "Attention all real
racers! In case you missed it, the blockade's been blown wide open! BURN FOAM FOR SABAODY,
GO GO GO!"

Almost as though Kid was actually listening to me, the Iron Tramp belched smoke again and started
chugging for the gap. Lines darted up into the air and down into the sea from the Great Kung Fu
Fleet, dragons and dugongs alike hauling the massive vessels of our compatriots the right way. Foam
churned from the Polar Tang's propeller, the submarine darting forward with impressive speed.
Everyone else was reduced to just piling on unsafe amounts of sail and achieving whatever passed
for their ship's max speed plus one.

For the most part, though, that was enough. Though nothing the rest of the pirates had done matched
the spectacular shock of the Gaon Cannon, sheer attrition had left the Marines, privateers, and scum-
pirates still afloat in their area unable or unwilling to contest the sprinting true-pirates. The result was
that, while no one could quite match the head start the Sunny had, the aforementioned ships were
gaining and the rest of the racers were very clearly going to make it through the hole. It all came
down to performance on the home stretch, and thus sheer seamanship. Truly, this could best be
defined as being anyone's race!

Well. That's what they all thought, at least. I felt an evil grin try to worm itself onto my face… and
you can damn well bet that I didn't stop it.

"What the—? Uuuuuuh… Itomimizu?" Chuchun gulped heavily, staring over his wing at me with a
rapidly multiplying cold sweat. "Cross has got that insidious look again! You know, the one he gets
every time someone suffers?"
"Huh? What?" Ito blinked at his bird in confusion before blinking at me, and gurgling in utter dismay. "Oh... oh, no. Cross, I don't know what the hell you're thinking... but knock it off right the hell—!

I grinned massively and interrupted him by planting a heavy hand on his shoulder. "Itomimizu, my dear, dear friend. I'd just like to take this opportunity to thank you for helping me compose the most wonderful phrase in all the seas, right up there with 'Pi~ra~te~'. Wanna know what that phrase is?"

Not waiting for an answer, I shoved my maniacal face in his panicked one and hissed like a man possessed a devastating series of words: "All's fair in love, war, and pirate games."

"Catch you on the flipside!" Soundbite crowed with a chorus of cackling.

Itomimizu was already grappling for my throat to throw me out of the air. Or at least he was until I jumped off of Chuchun.

"Wh-Wh-WHAT THE—!?" the pair of them cried out as I free-fell towards the Sunny, a sensation that reminded me unpleasantly of our Strong World safari. But it wasn't like I was unprepared this time; as I neared the Sunny, I pulled a cord at my chest, and the parachute Usopp had made for me—and that I was going to damn well wear everywhere from now on!—deployed, allowing me to glide through the air with all the grace of a feather—

SLAM! "OOF!"

—uuuntil I faceplanted into the mast like a drunken bird, but hey, at least I got back to the Sunny alive.

"Uggghhh... is a knack for dramatic entrances really too much to ask?" I groaned as I stumbled back to my feet, swaying about before shaking off my dizziness in favor of grinning at the Novas looming behind us, their ships looking distinctly... unhappy. "Oh, yeah, them. Better tell them what's up, huh?"

"YEAH, YOU BETTER!" Soundbite snickered. "You'll forgive me if I don't transmit their foul, foul words, but... ON THE PLUS SIDE MY ARSENAL IS RAPIDLY EXPANDING!"

"You mean your vocabulary?" Nami inquired flatly as she and Billy landed back on the Sunny, joined in short order by the TDWS, Boss, and Koala, thus bringing our ranks back to completion.

"TO-MAY-TO, TO-PROFANITY, all the same to me," the snail chirped with a grin. He turned his gaze downward briefly. "Franky, are we LOCKED AND LOADED?"

"Give me three more seconds to get this last barrel into place, and... YES! Start talking, Cross, I'm powering this thing up right away!"

"Gladly," I sneered before addressing the Supernovas with my arms swept out in a perfectly grandiose manner. "Ladies and gentlemen, fellow pirates, buccaneers and assorted ne'er-do-wells, allow me to inform you all exactly what has just happened: A path to Sabaody has been opened, the privateers' doom has been assured, a court-martial of some sort has been made likely for all white-hats involved... and you all? Have been bamboozled."

Now the rear of the Thousand Sunny began glowing again.

"Because, you see, while the Gaon Cannon may have been our trump card for offense, we've got one more for defense. Or more precisely..." I jerked my thumb in the direction of Sunny's aft.
"Escaping? Seriously, no one ever questioned the effing hole on Sunny's rear?"

"WE'VE BEEN DOUBLE-CROSSED!"

"CROSS, YOU SON OF A—!"

"WHAT THE HELL!?"

As the enraged bellows erupted from the Novas and washed over us, I glanced curiously over at Soundbite. "I thought you weren't transmitting them?"

"I'M NOT, that's au natural! HEEHEHEHEHOOHOOHOO!"

"Ah, the wonderful schadenfreude of other people's outrage…" I sighed wistfully before redirecting my smirk at them. "And as for you all! How many times do I have to say it? Pi-ra-te! If you'll excuuuuse us, we're just going to go ahead and take all the money for ourselves! And now… HIT IT, MERRY!"

"WITH PLEASURE!" our helmsgirl cackled as she rammed her foot into the appropriate lever. "BEHOLD, YE SCURVY MAGGOTS! THE TRUE AWE OF THE THOUSAND SUNNY! COUP DE BURST!"

One second, the Thousand Sunny was relatively close to other ships. The next, they had a simply glorious view of our asses as we hightailed it out of dodge! Though I imagine said view was a wee bit distorted from how our escape knocked them all for a loop, but hey, what're you gonna do?

"PFFHAHAHAHAAAA!" I cackled, adrenaline racing both from the flight and from the plan that I just pulled off. Then a thought occurred to me, because there was only one way that Komei couldn't have seen that coming.

"Oh, and by the way, Sengoku?" I snickered. "This is how we got away from Garp at Water 7. If you didn't already know about this, then here's a consolation for us breaking the blockade: it's all Garp's fault, so feel free to beat the rice crackers out of him."

-o-

Captain, Commodore, and Vice Admiral stared blankly at the screen even as the latter offhandedly moved to dial his superior's number.

"Puru puru puru—KA-LICK! Uh, h-hello?"

"This is Vice Admiral Komei, I'm calling to give a status report to the Fleet Admiral."

"Uh, well… he's a bit…"

"GAAAAAAAARP!"

"…Busy at the moment… I can take a message?"

"Ah… no, that's probably for the best. I'll try again later," Komei responded, wincing and hanging up the snail without another word. He let loose a long-suffering sigh and reached up to rub his forehead. "Well, since it seems I have time to formulate a response… what's the best way to phrase what happened here?"

"You mean the way that doesn't see us strung up in front of a court-martial and sent to serve as role
models for the grunts at G-5?" Commodore Smoker clarified in his dispassionate deadpan.

"That's the one, yes."

"…Hina would like to suggest," Hina started slowly, taking the time to pick her words. "That we remind Marine Headquarters that we were told to expect an unruly mob of pirates… and that at the least, Hina heard nothing of a coordinated spear thrust."

"Also emphasize how many pirate crews we did bag and all the privateers we've cleared out of the sea lanes," Smoker added. "Between this and Shiki's little recruiting drive, Paradise is going to be practically pirate-free for months now. To say nothing of the sudden loss of spare military power in the South Blue."

"Mmph, yes, that will suffice," Komei nodded sagely as he stroked his beard. He then heaved another sigh. "Though I suppose that none of that will soothe the burn that this is all, once again, on account of the Straw Hats' actions, and the fact that Sabaody isn't stocked with troops is on account of my hubris…" He shook his head in surrender. "But, that is on me and I shall shoulder the blame as I must. For now, however…"

The genius Vice Admiral hid his smirk behind his fan as he regarded his erstwhile subordinates. "Why don't we take this moment to discuss your recent misdeeds as well, hm? Your, shall we call them… unsanctioned friends?"

The two smokers immediately froze up, exchanging looks of pure shock as they processed the implications they held. And then, as one, they slumped in despair. "Not again…" they moaned.

-o-

I rode the adrenaline high as long as I could, and that went on for a damn long while… but unfortunately, the sobering sight of Sabaody Archipelago's mangroves looming on the horizon, and I found myself falling into a more serious state. Only my confidants knew the main reason. But quite frankly… the other reasons were enough on their own.

"Soundbite, can you deaden your hearing?" I asked quietly. "Huh? Why d'ya asssssSSSS—!"

I winced and gave my partner a wary look when he suddenly trailed off into static. "Too late?"

Soundbite half-withdrawing into his shell and his eyestalks drooping were signs pointing towards 'yes'. "O-O-OH… so, THAT'S what pure despair sounds like… WELL, this is going to haunt my nightmares FOREVER…"

"Let me give you some perspective there: your nightmare, their reality. Be grateful for what little you have to suffer with," Nami said, joining me beside the railing, her eyes closed.

Yeah, that just about killed the mood. The rest of the journey to the giant mangroves was composed in grim silence. So grim, in fact, that I began casting about for a way to lighten things up a little. Have someone start speaking in farts and chicken clucks? Nah, I'd done that twice this month already. Try another comedy sketch? Eh, that needed setup; can't just pull that out of a hat. C'mon, c'mon, there had to be something that—ooooof course.
"Hey, Nami?"

"What?"

"Where should we be going to meet Hachi?"

"Oh, right, we need to—**PICK UP MY TREASURE! EEEE, WE'RE FILTHY RIIIIICH!**"

Everyone onboard jumped at the supersonic squee that suddenly bitch-slapped them without warning. But when they recovered, most of them got stars in their eyes as well, and exclamations filled the air about what all they could and would be buying.

"A statue, a big bronze statue of me!" Luffy cheered, running around like a kid in a toy store.

"Ammo stores," Merry crooned, hunching over her cannon and petting it a wee bit possessively. "Ammo stores for **days! MWAAHAHAHAHAHAAA!**"

"Hmm… saaay, I am technically part of your crew right now, correct?" Tashigi asked, a light growing in her eyes. "Any chance I could take a few million with me and trawl the weapon shops? If Roronoa can have the luck of the devil, then so can I! Hell, I'll drag him along with me if that's what it takes!"

"Some new weights would be nice…" Zoro scratched his chin thoughtfully, completely oblivious to the threat to his autonomy.

"And maybe enough for us to share, to boot!" Boss nodded in sage agreement. "For truly, the image of shirtless monuments of muscle and machismo pumping iron in the grueling hot sun, **is that not the essence of a—!**"

SLAM! "GWAAH!"

Our pet dugong's daily ranting was cut off when the door to the deck below opened right into him. Sandersonia came out, rubbing sections of her arms and legs where the chains had rubbed against her. "Hmph… I concede that there was no way I could feasibly get involved with that beatdown… but damn was that situation one bad lurch away from landing me in some unpleasant flashbacks. I need some skin-on-scale contact; where's Orchid?"

"**PORT SIDE, and trust me, she's been having about as much fun HANGING ONTO SUNNY'S KEEL,**" Soundbite informed her, pre-empting the adolescent Yuda that had surfaced next to Sunny.

Sandersonia pressed her forehead to the Yuda's with a relieved sigh. "Ahhh, that drives the blood pressure back down from panic. And helps me ignore being back here again of all places…" She then paused in realization, and she looked around the deck in confusion. "Hey, I thought I heard Boss on the way up here, but I don't see him anywhere. Did he leave or something?"

"Um…" Koala hummed uncertainly, poking at the door the Zoan had slammed open. "Not… quite." She pulled the door open, revealing the older dugong to have been pancaked into the wall.

Boss let out a wheeze as he coughed up a not-inconsiderate amount of ash and tobacco. "**Medic…**" he rasped.

"LET'S GO, BOSS, LET'S GO!" the TDWS crowed as they carried their teacher off, foisted above the four of them.

"Aheheeh… whoops?" Sandersonia chuckled and scratched her head sheepishly. "Sorry about
"He'll shake it off, don't worry," Zoro waved her off.

"I'll check anyway..." Chopper offered uncertainly, before his gaze suddenly darkened and turned on Koala. "And as for you... don't think I wasn't cataloging all the hits you took fighting Strawberry. You're not going anywhere until I run you through the concussion protocol—our crew's custom protocol, mind you—and patch up the rest."

Sweating profusely, Koala's eyes darted around for an escape, an action that might have been more convincing were her legs not visibly quivering with the effort of holding herself up.

"Fine, fine," she sighed after a couple of minutes, holding up her hands in surrender. "But you're bringing that spare Transponder Snail you've got into the sickbay!"

"If that's what it'll take, then so be it. NOW MARCH."

"Yeah yeah, go make sure she doesn't bite it or something," Nami distractedly said as she leaned over the edge of Sunny's railing and scanning the waters. "Now, where's Takoyaki 8? Where's! My! Mon—!"

SPLASH!

"YOU GUYS WERE SO INCREDIBLE!"

"GWAGH!?"

Nami's impending moneygasm was promptly matched and overwhelmed by a spray of seawater and mermaid limbs colliding with her and taking her straight down to the deck in a tangled heap.

"Why are we even surprised at this point?" Lassoo yawned from where he'd curled up for a nap.

The tangle was quickly undone, but that still left Keimi flopping on top of Nami, her tail slapping the deck with unrestrained glee. "Straw Hats! I'm so happy to see you're safe!" the kissing gourami mermaid squeed, her arms tightening their grip on our weather witch. "You all were like, pow! Wha-bam! And that Muscle Docking thing! So cool! And the way Koala beat up that Vice Admiral, and then and then and then, when the ship went all whoosh!" Keimi threw out her hands, smile wider than ever. "Oh, it was so awesome I thought I was gonna die!"

"She was right at the edge of the blast radius, so she almost really did die," Pappug chimed in as he hauled himself up the side.

"Eaaasy there, Keimi," Vivi soothed, hefting the mermaid up and leaning her against the railing. "Chopper's got his hands full right now, but I've got a few nausea pills left."

"Ah, n-no, I'm fine, really" Keimi chuckled, still grinning as she waved the princess off. "It's just that that was all just! So! AMAZING!"

"It really was," Pappug chuckled before side-eyeing his master/apprentice/whatever. "But, ah, Keimi? It seems to me that you're forgetting that we're not here just to fawn over the Straw Hat, remember?"
"Oh, right! Oopsy!" the verdette mermaid giggled, slapping her hand to her forehead. "I'll go get the stuff, be right back!"

Before any of us could ask what she was talking about, Keimi flipped back over the edge into the sea. And then, before any of us could properly worry about her, she was back on deck, only this time hauling a… frankly rather large crate behind her like it was nothing. Man, credit to mermaids: fighters they might not be, but that sure didn't mean they weren't strong as heck!

After shaking off her fresh coat of water, Keimi gave us all a beaming smile. "We're here with a special delivery for you." She did a double-take when her eyes passed over Nami's beri-signs, but it was only a short pause. "Hachin still has the prize money, and we'll show you to where he is soon enough. But before that, Pappug has something else that he wants to give you first."

That got shocked looks out of all of us, and almost as one we turned to boggle at the smug, sunglasses-wearing starfish.

"You have something you want to give us?" I repeated.

The invertebrate sniffed as he adjusted his shades. "I'd say don't sound so surprised, but I do understand where you're coming from. Still, doesn't change facts…" Pappug bowed his head—well, face—solemnly. "But a few days ago, I heard tell that your crew had something planned for this island… from Sonia and Koala."

I spared a moment to shoot a growling scowl at the visible, suddenly innocently whistling one of the pair of outlaws.

"And the reason that's important is that if even a fraction of what I suspect is true… well." Pappug jerked his shades in such a way to unleash a sharp gleam. "Let's just say that my suspicions were enough to justify me putting in a call to my main branch down on Fishman Island, and the delivery arrived at Skelter Bite just as we were shipping off."

His appendages opened the latches on the box, and after a not-so-subtle double-shove from me and Zoro, Nami came over and peered inside. And our unflappable navigator only needed one look to immediately jerk back and stare at Pappug in awe.

"Holy cow, is this… the Sharktooth line?!" she gaped breathlessly. "The Criminal Brand's brand spanking new, 'so exclusive not even royalty can reserve it' Sharktooth line?! I-I thought this wasn't due to release until two months from now!"

"Ohhh it's not," Keimi answered, both beaming and brimming with pride. "Pappug was coordinating with his designers back home all week to rush out this lot, just for you!"

Nami stepped back, immediately reaching for her wallet. "H-How much—?"

"It's on the house."

The deck froze as Pappug leapt onto the chest, back turned to us and head bowed in a… cliché but nevertheless cool gesture.

"And also, you should know: it's not Sharktooth anymore, I've scrapped that name." Pappug gazed at the approaching mangroves of Sabaody, a look of wistful longing clearly written on his face. "This line… is now called 'Though A Bird Can't Fly'. Because if you're going to do what I think you are… then the publicity that will arise from you wearing my brand while doing it will be more than repayment enough! And besides…” He spun around and raised his… the chin-part of his face high. "I can say with confidence that it is an honor, to me and to the Criminal brand, to have pirates… no,
to have *humans* such as yourselves wearing these clothes!"

What could we say to that? What could we do? Well, stare. Staring seemed to be a pretty good bet.

And then said starfish smirked and tapped his foot on the chest. "Well? What are you waiting for, an invitation? FIRST COME, FIRST SERVED, PIRATES!"

*That* broke the ice like a sledgehammer, and it was a *not* so small mob that… well, *mobbed* the crate of loot.

"Oooh, that looks cool! Gimme gimme!" "No way, I had it fi—!" "I SAID GIMME!" *THWACK!*

"OW! YOU LITTLE TWERP!"

"Hey, this looks *nice*! Say, does it come in green?" "Sorry, no substitutions!"

"Hell yeah, now *this* is what I call metal!" "Psh, you think *that's* metal, sniper-bro? Just you wait, gimme a few minutes to slap together some armor and then you'll all *really* look metal!" "You're making armor? Then I'll take some too!"

"And I hope you guys realize that this isn't *just* for the humans on the crew; I special ordered a few things for your crew's better half, too, from snails to elephants." "Really? Let me at it, then I need to update my regalia!" "Got anything in a 'husky'? I know I look like a 'beagle', but I promise you I'm a 'husky'." "Translation: 'saint bernard'." "SAY THAT TO MY MAW, FLUFFBALL!"

"Hey, this looks neat! Shishishi!" "That's… just a different colored vest, Luffy." "So?" "…I don't have a good response to that."

As the mob proceeded in earnest and knees and elbows were flung about without a care in the world, I stood a few meters back and watched the exchanges with a fond smile. Ah, to see the crew all together like this… man, I just wish it could last forever.

*THUNK.*

But alas, it couldn't. The end—however short, however fleeting—was fast approaching, and it was heralded by Sunny casually drifting into the mangroves and knocking against one of the roots.

I stared up and out at the scenery before me. Man… how many more times can I say it? One more will do, I suppose: *awe-inspiring.*

Surprisingly enough, it was actually the *anime* that got it right, for once: an entire world, encompassed by the mangroves. A horizon, tinted green by flora stretching as far as the eye could see; a sky enclosed by a roof of greenery; the very air itself filled to the bursting with bubbles aplenty. Even the air itself was tinged with the chemical-natural smell of soap.

And then there were the mangroves themselves. Just… *pillars* of pure wood, in every which direction, connecting earth and sky both seamlessly and effortlessly. Even a *single* one of the trees would qualify as a skyscraper… and there were dozens of them, easy.

It was… it was…

"A prison."

I glanced to the side, raising my eyebrow at Pappug as he gazed out at the archipelago, his shades completely masking his emotions. After a moment's silence, I gestured for him to continue.
"I've been where you stand, Cross. Every truly adventurous inhabitant of Fishman Island has," the starfish carried on in that flat tone. "Sabaody Archipelago looks so wonderful, so beautiful. It draws you in, promises you wonderment and excitement..." He bowed his face, still utterly stoic. "And then you just can't leave. The trees, the roots, the leaves... all parts of a titanic, territory-wide cage. Entry is universal, departure is infeasible."

Pappug's expression remained unreadable as he turned to face me. "You think you know what you're up against? You think you know this monster? Then tell me this: how many children a year disappear into Sabaody Archipelago, seeking to experience the delights that Sabaody Park has to offer? How many parents suffer the same fate in search of those same children? And how many others are lured in based on all other manners of false promises and delusions? Well, Jeremiah Cross?" Pappug gave me an intense, searching look over the top of his shades. "Can you answer me that?"

I stared at the starfish with just as much intensity, until, eventually, I bowed my head and lowered the brim of my hat over my eyes. "I don't know those numbers, Pappug. Not a one."

Pappug nodded in sad acceptance and started to look away...

"And really, I don't need to."

Before snapping back to me in shock.

"Because at the end of the day? The numbers don't matter. What matters here is words. And there's only three words I do know for this place. Only three that I need to know."

And with that, I leaped over the edge of the Thousand Sunny...

SQUISH.

And set foot on the Sabaody Archipelago.

As the resin of the soaked ground coated my greaves, I felt the reality come to mind once more. This was the last day that we had together. Our last adventure as the people who we were today.

I couldn't change that fact. Wouldn't, honestly, even if I could.

But just because I couldn't change that, didn't mean I wouldn't change one little thing. And that one little thing... was oh so simple. Mark my words, world...

"The only words I need to know," I growled with utter venom, glaring dead ahead into the heart of evil. "Are not. One. More."

The Straw Hats would begin their years-long hiatus alright... not with a whimper, but a BANG.

**Patient AN:** I wanted to wait until we could post the chapter after this at the same time. But would that be too much? Well... it clearly was, for my co-writers.

**Hornet AN:** Look, I wanted to do the Triple-Tap again, but it's been four months, come on.

**Patient AN:** No, it's been three. So, mistake ID count thus far: Patient: 3, Hornet: 0.

**Xomniac AN:** At least they're picking on each other instead of me XD

**Patient AN:** Oh, yeah. And the fact is that most of the delays were because of Xomniac. So,
direct all of your blame… at the educational system.

Xomniac AN: I always knew not to trust that damn thing!

Cross-Brain AN: But a fair warning, viewers. We acknowledge that Skelter Bite dragged out a bit. But we said in the first part of Road to Sabaody that the rest of the story until the skip would be a roller coaster of emotions.

Rest assured… the next chapter is going to be the last one resembling a breather for a good long while…
"It all started so innocently…"

"I think I just got a good name for you…How do you feel about being called Soundbite?"

"You say you're going to the Grand Line. You say you're going to be King of the Pirates. You say you're going to have the greatest adventure of our entire generation. And before all that... you asked me if I wanted to join your crew. Am I right?"

"Until it started to truly pick up steam, and became a behemoth."

"Helloooo, people of the world, from the North Blue to the South and everywhere in-between! My name is Jeremiah Cross! Chances are you haven't heard of me, buuut that's no surprise, seeing how I haven't been a pirate for long and I don't have a bounty yet!"

"Alright, that's enough, if anyone wants to join in they'll have to do it midway through! For now—!"

"Long live change in any form… because whatever comes after, there is no way it could be worse than what we've got now."

"Heh… keep on hitting me if you want, but there are two things that are going to happen no matter what you do: you're going to fight my captain. And you're going to lose."

"And five, and six, and seven, and eight... hmm-hmm-hmm... alright, that'll do it. Hello, everyone! Jeremiah Cross here, and welcome back to the SBS!"

"GAAAH! I'M GETTING FREAKING SICK OF PEOPLE DOING THAT TO ME!"

"That's it. I never thought I'd find a line, but apparently watching porn on the deck in broad daylight is it. People of the world, I wash my hands of this affair; do not blame me for it. I'm out."
"But, as all tales must… it's time for this one to come to an end."

"Alright, you ancient astral bastards. You wanna play hardball? Let's play fucking hardball. Joining us here today on the Straw Hat Broadcast Station, which is starting right here, right now, we have the man renowned as the Dark King, and one of the strongest pirates alive today: Gol D. Roger's First Mate, Silvers Rayleigh. Mister Silvers, I believe you've got an exclusive tale you'd like to share with the world?"

"Ohohohoh… Cross, you had better believe it. Because this? This has been a long time coming. Finally, after all these years… time to bring things to a head."

"Heh. Speaking of endings, did you know that in another world, so very different from this one, an android spoke about her thoughts on life?"

At the End of an Era, The World slowly begins to Shift and Turn.

Tumbling towards an Uncertain Future, Events Conspire to bring about the Next Age.

The Simplest Gestures forge Alliances…

"If you're that angry, then fine. Take the money you put down, plus interest, and walk away. Or. You can take the other route that promises an even huger payout. And all you have to do is agree to parley, take a seat, and let me do what I do best."

While the Simplest Misunderstandings inspire Confrontation.

"How long, Cross?"

The Forgotten and Unforeseen lay claim to the spotlight…

"Ratchet, little buddy? If you don't mind, be a dear and activate Project Snake Eater."
"No matter what happens, no matter how much this hellish prison throws at me, I won't stop… not until I save my brother! Or my name isn't Byojack World!"

"That android said these words: 'Everything that lives is designed to end. We are perpetually trapped in a never-ending spiral of life and death.' And you know what? That android was right."

While the Stars of the Show step back…

[So… this is where we're going to be spending the next two years, Boss?]

[Yes, Donny. Yes, it is.]

[One question then, Boss.]

[I've got the same one in mind.]

[Well, then, allow me to vocalize it. Ahem… WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT BUCKET OF BOLTS THINKING?]

Legends Rear Their Heads in Reality…

[The Heart of the Eternal Firstborn… this… this is actually it! I found it!]

Be They Divine or Damned.

"TASHI—KRCH!—ELP ME! YOU NEED TO GET M—KRCH!—HELL OUT OF —KRCH!—DAMNED PLACE!"

"Where are you, Cross? Where are you?"
"IT'S—KRCH!—THAN WE THOUGHT! DAMN BASTARDS, SO THIS IS WHAT THEY—KRCH!—HELL! THIS PLACE IS THE SEVENTH HE—KRCH!—HELL OF DARKNESS!"

"Another machine would later go on to follow up the android's words, and say that while life is indeed a spiral of life and death, that life is all about the struggle within this cycle. That machine was also right."

*And Echoes of the Past Sound Out in the Present.*

"I always knew I'd see you in chains, Fire Fist Ace. …just never thought it would be quite like this. But hey, you know what they're saying nowadays; you've got to ask yourself: 'Is this what I call justice? Can I take pride in something like this?' …and at the end of the day, Ace? I think I can."

"But something that should also be known is that some cycles of life and death, of beginnings and ends, are longer than others."

*Former Enemies Forge Alliances…*

"So, it's girls against boys… Thanatos help me, it's elementary school all over again, except I'm wearing my makeup properly and I'm not the only one wearing pink."

"We owe him… and I don't know about the rest of you fuckwits, but I'm not the kind of asshole who likes to go belly-up when I've still got debts to pay!"

"'Two days to retirement?! 'Two days to retirement,' are you fucking kidding me!? First you humiliate my Blugoris, and now this!? You're a dead man, you 'flashy' son of a bitch, you hear me!? The second we get you back in chains, I am going to chop you up, dessicate your pieces in Level 3, broil them in 4, CHILL THEM IN 5, AND THEN FEED YOU TO EVERY ONE OF MY BLUGORI, PIECE BY TWITCHING PIECE!'"

*Alliances Unravel Into Rebellion…*

"MARINES OF THE BLACK CAGE SQUADRON! Take up your arms… and about face. It's
about time we put down some dogs.”

"Time to give the world a makeover that's funky fresh! EVERYONE, EYES ON ME! ONE, TWO, JANGO!"

"I will never again lower myself to fighting beside you...no matter how many unaware of your true nature support you! Even if it should take my final breath, I... WE SHALL HAVE JUSTICE!"

All For One Man.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAACE!"

"For those of us with longer cycles, we often find some solace in the shorter cycles. In watching their fleeting struggles, and how they rally against an ending they know will come all too soon. Watching them live, as we could never live, and die as we could never die."

Are the Changes Good or Bad?

"I never planned on this getting out. I never truly wanted to come back. But since I have no choice anymore... if this is what you really want... THEN SO BE IT! LET'S! GET! FLASHY!"

"It was always my plan to make the world tremble before me, and I'm still gonna do it... One way... OR ANOTHER!"

"So they've really developed it then... a weapon to surpass Pacifistas...!"

Are the Allies and Enemies Set in Stone?

"...He wasn't going to tell us until it was too late for us to say no, was he."

"Fuffuffuffu... I'd nearly accepted that I'd never get this chance, and now it happens at the best possible moment? Jeremiah Cross, I am officially in your debt."
"You're guaranteeing that hundreds, thousands of soldiers are going to die today so that you can execute this man. The world has a right to know why you're doing this. So, convince them—convince me—that this execution is worth the price."

"So we meet again, Monkey D. Luffy. And to think, it would be under circumstances like these. If this is what life holds for me now... I suppose I made the right choice after all."

"But while the struggle within the cycle can often be the most interesting part... sometimes the ending, even one ending, is what changes everything that comes after. The ending is where a single spark... can turn into a firestorm. A blaze, bright enough to illuminate entire worlds."

Will the World hear and listen to what is being said?

"I started to oppose, and will always oppose the World Government... because of their perpetuation of The Most Despicable Lie... and their denial of The Most Glorious Truth."

Question after Question, Answer after Answer.

For Want of a Nail, A Battle might be Won or Lost.

Dozens of Nails, Lost and Found and Lost and Found, a Battle out of sight of the World.

In the End, Who will hold the Final Say?

Is Destiny Ironclad, or will Humanity Grasp the Rudder?

At Long Last, The Final Steps Are Set...

SABAODY REVOLUTION
"Everybody. It's time. Gather everyone together. It starts, and ends, now."

AMAZON TREACHERY

"Monkey D. Luffy, you are guilty of trying to assassinate our empress, the Snake Princess Boa Hancock! Prepare to die!"

IMPEL DOWNFALL

"Ah, Captain Luffy. I've been expecting you. Come, I had some food prepared. Sit and eat for a bit. Enjoy your last meal. Before your execution, I believe we need to talk."

"...yeah, Warden Magellan. We do."

PARAMOUNT WAR

MARINEFORD MISERY

"Will you prevail in upholding the verdict you have laid down, and prove once and for all the immutable might of the World Government's decrees? Or will your illustrious might falter in the face of we that you have deemed 'unjust'?...whatever the case, all shall bear witness to that which occurs today, and none shall deny the truth."

DENOUEMENT

"Normally it's Cross who wants to change the world... but for once, I want to try and change it too. I want to make sure that something like what happened can never happen again, not while I'm still alive! And now, after all this, I know there's no way I could do that alone. So... what do you say? Are you in?"

"What new endings will this one bring about, I wonder? Heh... I'll be honest with you: I haven't the faintest idea. And for the first time in aeons... I can't wait to find out."

This Bites! The First Half
GRAND FINALE
"This is Jeremiah Cross," "AND SOUNDBITE," "Signing off… for what might be the last time."
That first android also said she often thought about possibly meeting the god who designed this spiral of life and death.

She wondered if she'd ever get the chance to kill him.

Heheheh...

I too wonder...

In light of a conclusion like this..."
"You didn't really think you'd get away, did you? An execution was promised today, and I can't let you ever recover. Maybe a lethal injection isn't the best way to end this... but what's done is done. Say goodbye..."
Chapter 65: Introduction

Cross-Brain AN: WARNING, WARNING, and for good measure, WARNING. We get graphic in this chapter. We're getting into some dark subject matter, darker than we've been since Omatsuri. You'll know when to skip ahead when the time comes, but again, because of how many people tend to skip these ANs…WARNING!

"Hey, look! It's really them, it's the Straw Hat Pirates!"

"Sh-Should we run? I don't want to make them mad…"

"You think that they'd give us an autograph?"

"Man, they look so cool! Especially him!"

"Yeah, he's obviously the most handsome of them all!"

"You think I'd be so lucky as to actually touch his glorious shell?"

"Alright, knock it off," I snapped, thwapping my shoulder-pest's 'glorious' shell and bringing the murmuring of the 'crowd' to a dead halt. "You blew it at that last bit."

"Keep dreaming, slimeball~" Su snickered.

"Green-eyed monsters, all of you."

 Granted, we had caught a good few whispers in that vein when we first arrived, and there had been more friendly waves (which were typically returned) than fearful visages and slamming shutters. Though I wager that most of the latter belonged to the ones who were on our bad side just by existing.

But tempting as it was, we didn't dawdle; at this point, the rest of the crew had at least some idea as to my plan for Sabaody, mostly that we needed to have everything ready to go before the rest of the Supernovas caught up with us. And that time was running out fast.

Also, we couldn't put our hard-scammed spending money to work until we actually got said money, so our first stop was still Grove 13. Apparently, the fishmen had finagled an underwater tunnel through the tree roots that was wide enough for Takoyaki 8 to move through, so they had already docked at the Rip-Off Bar. Koala and Sonia didn't want to come onto the archipelago before the situation demanded it, and Tashigi and Popora were waiting for a good chance to slip away and join up with a group of Smoker's Marines that were already on the island. Keimi, was accompanying us in the same simple yet effective disguise she wore in canon, though this time around her fins beneath the shoes were covered by a couple of convincing prosthetics, courtesy of Franky. She could have gotten there faster underwater, but none of us were taking any chances.

'Course, focused as we were on the destination, that didn't mean we couldn't appreciate the sights as we went.

"Wow, this is all so coooool! WOOOAH! Is that a bike in a bubble?! That looks so awesome! Can I borrow it?"
"Aaaand to the surprise of no one, the prize of 'first to cause trouble on the island' goes to
—!"  

THWACK!  "YIPE!"

"Be nice, Su."

"Tell me I'm wrong!"

With that little bit of color commentary, we all watched Luffy latch onto one of the bubble cycles pedaling along above us, much to the surprise of its rider. The surprise intensified when, not waiting for an answer, Luffy grabbed the handlebars and started pedaling, effectively kicking off the original rider with nary an oblivious thought.

Vivi pinched her nose as she kicked up a gust of wind to cushion the guy's fall. Then, just as smoothly, she offered him a small (in size, at least) bundle of bills.

"My apologies for our captain, he just can't help himself sometimes. Will this be enough to cover the costs?" the princess queried with an apologetic smile.

The guy looked between the bike, the bills, and the rest of us. Thankfully for our anonymity, he seemed more focused on the money than our faces; eventually, he shrugged and accepted the wad.

"Thanks for the business, then!" he laughed gratefully before brushing himself off and walking away a tad richer.

Turning away from Vivi's apt display of diplomacy, I looked back up to the bubbles to make sure that no one else was getting in any trouble—and had to double-take at the sight of four other new arrivals enjoying the bubbles as well.

"This is so awesome!" Mikey laughed, backstroking on a bubble as big as he was that, come to think of it, was pretty strong to be supporting his weight. And shockingly enough, his was the tamest form of play.

"But, uh, can't you guys already fly?" Billy wondered.

"THIS IS DIFFERENT!" the dugongs belted out.

"That's just work!" Raphey snickered, grinning like a loon as she spun around inside another bubble.

"Yeah, with Tidal Swim we constantly need to think about it, adjust our posture, our tail-strength, our… bleergh, my head hurts just thinking about it," Donny mock-gagged as he bounced up and down on his own bubble.

"This, though?" Leo hummed peacefully, sitting seiza on his own bubble in an impressive display of stability, considering the unstable perch. "This is totally casual, simple, not a care in the—!"

"Oh, there's a good one! GIMME!"

"—wha—WAAAGH!"

Leo's bubble suddenly vanished out from under him, and his zen-esque spiel transitioned into a panicked squawk, courtesy of one overeager human-reindeer.

A mad grin graced Chopper's face as he examined his newly-acquired research subject via portable microscope, sitting on a bubble of his own. "Oooh, this is truly a most intriguing compound! Elastic and sturdy, possessed of a laudable viscosity yet entirely natural? How fascinating! Oooh, and the disinfectant qualities of the sap are top-notch as well!" He leaned back on his perch and smiled
thoughtfully, the mania leaking out. "Oooh, I should see about visiting some local medical establishments! I can only imagine what kind of applications or advancements the local populace have managed to develop based around the stuff!"

"Same for me!" Usopp laughed as he Shaved from bubble to bubble higher up, close to the altitude where the bubbles naturally popped. "I wonder if they use this stuff for anything else besides those bikes or that coating stuff Cross mentioned!"

"And lo do I make three!" Brook declared from his position upside down from a bubble, a peaceful violin tune accompanying him. "Already am I struck by a most beautiful inspiration! I believe I shall compose a new piece, Ode to a Bubble! Ooooh~!"

"Okay, that's about enough, you three," I called up, waving to get their attention. "There'll be time for sightseeing later, but right now I think Nami's about to break out in hives—"

"I AM NOT!" our navigator snapped. That she suddenly stopped scratching her arms was totally unrelated, of course.

"—so let's not make the unenviable lifechoice of keeping her from her hoard any longer than absolutely necessary, m'kay?"

"Actually, I think it's more for the fact that she doesn't have her Clima-Tact assembled right now," Chopper frowned, indicating the disassembled weapon strapped to our navigator's leg. "It's kind of unhealthy, really, given how much of an extension of her mind her Eisen Tempo's become; it would be like Zoro walking around without his swords."

The clank of Zoro grasping his weapons told us just what he thought of that idea.

"You've got that right..." Nami muttered, actively working to keep her twitching fingers from jerking down to her leg. "I know we need to be incognito at the moment and that a living cloud-limb is beyond conspicuous, but sweet Aeolus do I feel naked right now..."

Zoro, Vivi and I actually stopped in our tracks to boggle at her incredulously.

A simultaneous boggling that she met head-on with a glower. "I dress skimpy but I always wear something!" she snapped, her expression and temper spiking dangerously. "Look, can we just get going? Before I bring out my Tempo for precisely ten seconds you all are not going to enjoy!"

"Yes, ma'am!" saluted the erstwhile bubble-riders, who were now on the ground.

As we started onward again, the bubbles in my line of sight sparked a thought, and I shot a glance Soundbite's way. "Just realized, take a note for Scorpio: the sheepish assassin could be the queen of this island," I muttered.

Soundbite blinked several times. "...I'm caught between LAUGHING and SHUDDERING."

"Just be grateful that she's on our side," Robin said softly, unconsciously rubbing her wrists.

And that was... well, that, mostly. It certainly wasn't the last time we got distracted by the bubbles on the way. But we still managed to keep up a reasonably brisk pace, so Grove 13 came into view not much longer. With it came the view of the Rip-Off Bar, and a surprisingly nice view it was: dingy, but proud and dignified. A marked step up from the rest of the buildings we'd seen on the way, which were... less than well-kept.

Takoyaki 8 was moored down by the 'dock' set up at the root of Mangrove 13, with Kuroobi and
Chew currently manning the boat. Well, I say manning, but honestly it just looked like sulking to me. They looked up as we approached and exchanged looks with each other. Then they turned their backs, making a point to look at anything but us.

"Hachi already stowed away his 0.75% cut. The rest is yours to take," Kuroobi muttered darkly, most likely trusting Soundbite to carry his voice.

"Since we're not welcome here or there, just tell Hachi to get us when you're gone," Chew groused. If the way they were angled towards the edge of their vessel was anything to go by, they were clearly about to jump into the water… buuut…

"Oh, I don't think so," I snapped, an action that Soundbite enforced with a harsh buzzer ringing in front of them. "You two aren't going anywhere; you're getting a front row seat to the show we're putting on later. So plant your asses and hold your tongues."

"…why do you keep dragging us in when we all just want to not see each other ever again?" Kuroobi demanded, however much having to ask me that obviously tore at him.

"Because karma's a bitch and working with Hachi isn't paying it off by half," I deadpanned, not sparing them a glance as I walked past. "Now cram it and sit tight. Before the day is out, me and mine are going to dominate the goal you forsook. And I'd hate for you to miss the opening act on the show that's going to change the whoooole wide world."

And with that, we marched up to the bar and paused in front of the door.

"So," Conis mused, leaning back to gaze up at the mossy sign curiously. "The person we're here to meet… Shakky, right?" I grunted in confirmation. "What's she like?"

"Eeeh…” I scratched my cheek as I tried to come up with the best way to phrase the character that was Shakky. "Well, she's sort of like—"

A sudden snickering from my shoulder killed my hesitation dead, and I immediately pushed the door open.

The Rip-Off Bar was just as nice inside as out: quaint, just dingy enough to give the place some attitude, and a healthy blend of comfort and hardiness. The red sofa on one side of the room was vacant; Hachi and Shakky were both situated at the half-circle bar, having a casually polite conversation about something-or-other, while another customer was seated next to Hachi. …well, I say customer, but from the percussion beat Shakky was idly making with his head and the bartop, something told me he wasn't exactly welcome anymore.

I quickly cleared my throat, getting the conscious pair's attention, and they both beamed eagerly. Or at least, Hachi beamed while Shakky smiled and nodded politely.

"Hey, guys!" Hachi greeted us, three of his arms waving eagerly while the other half gestured at his friend. "I saw your race! So awesome, loved it! I knew you'd be the ones to make it here first, you'd never put down that much treasure without a few tricks up your sleeves! Oh oh oh, but here, let me introduce you to an old friend of mine!"

"So you're finally here," the bartender purred in a voice so smooth it could have pickpocketed Nami. "Welcome, Straw Hats, to both the Sabaody Archipelago and to my one and only Rip-Off Bar. I'm Shakky, the owner of this fine establishment. Pardon the mess, I'm just dealing with a particularly…" She gave her patron an extra hard bounce off the bar before holding him up in place. "Unpleasant cheapskate at the moment."

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"Fifteen percent…" the tenderized mook slurred out miserably. "Is a perfectly acceptable tip…"

THWACK!

"In this bar, it's fifty," Shakky informed him in a desert-dry tone, adding a no-look right cross for good measure. "Now out." And with the briefest flick of her wrist, she flung him straight out the open door, forcing the rest of us to lean, duck or leap out of the way lest we get brained by the poor bastard.

I stayed angled to the side for a bit before finally glancing back at Conis. "So, yeah, she's kind of like that."

"Meep."

"I could learn a few things from this woman," Nami mused with an eager grin.

"MEEP!"

"Conis, you're embarrassing yourself," Su sniffed.

"Oh, is that 'Cottontail' Su I hear snarking in my general vicinity?" Shakky hummed inquisitively, pinning Su in place with a lazy yet somehow intense look. "My, her poster doesn't do her justice. Say, just how attached are you to that tail of yours? I have an old stole I've been dying to patch up, and that looks like it'd do the trick."

"Meep!" the fox yelped, ducking behind Conis's head.

"Shishishi!" Luffy snickered, grinning at the bartender. "Man, you're really funny!" Before I could chastise him for the disrespect, his devil-may-care grin took on an unmistakably sharp edge. "You actually remind me of Shanks and his crew a bit."

Oh. Great. Serious Luffy. Excuse me while we boggle a bit. Shakky, meanwhile, donned a sharp smile of her own. "Ah yes, the ginger-haired twerp. I remember him."

Vivi twitched and inadvertently let out a small gale of terror. "D-Did she just call one of the Four Emperors a twerp?"

"Well, of course I did," the bartender remarked with a fond smile. "I got to know him when he was just a rookie, though I'll admit that he's done pretty well for himself since then." Her smile became significantly more sincere, and she waved her arm out over the bar. "I've got plenty of stories to share with you if you'd care to come in."

"Would I!?" Luffy squeed, all starry-eyed as he zipped up to the bar and planted his ass in the seat. "Tell me tell me tell me!"

And that was the signal for the rest of us. The tension broken, we all streamed into the… surprisingly roomy bar, everyone spreading out and getting comfortable at their leisure. Some people planted their headquarters on the sofas, others seated themselves at tables Shakky indicated for them to fold out, and Hachi, Luffy, Zoro, Nami and I ended up taking the bar.

In short order, the once orderly bar descended into the usual rowdiness, a change that Shakky thankfully accepted with a fond smile. Nami, on the other hand, could only wince at the logical result of a band of rowdy pirates (namely, ours) being crammed into a single, slightly-too-small building. Namely…
"Hey, bet my skullplate is thicker than this table!"

"Not a chance!"

CRACK!

"Well, I'll be damned, cracked clean through. You were right!"

"Gwergh… Yaaaaay..."

Lots of property damage.

Our bursar gave Shakky a long-suffering look that begged forgiveness. "I am so sorry for their… everything," she lamented.

Shakky, however, carelessly waved her off. "Oh, no worries. I'm actually enjoying this, if I'm being honest. The Rip-Off Bar hasn't been quite this rowdy in a long time, and the energy is quite… pleasant. Reminds me of happier days. Why, I might even let you slide on paying for the damages."

"Hey, think your skullplate is harder than this table too?"

"Let's find out!"

The bartender's mouth twitched slightly at one corner. "Might."

Sighing in exasperation, Nami extended her Eisen Cloud to wrangle the responsible dugongs (Mikey and Raphey, big surprise), hanging them before her and the bartender by their tails. The second mate's expression was completely blank as she stared into the amphibians' puny little souls.

"If your antics make a significant dent in the prize money that we just won, I will take it out of your hides. Got it?"

The pair nodded frantically.

"Good." And with that, her clouds flicked out and tossed the dugongs back out so that they could go back to having fun. Less destructive fun.

Once the latter part was confirmed, Nami turned back to our host. "But speaking of the prize money…"

A knock of leather on wood, and a trapdoor clicked open behind Nami. A trapdoor from which a veritable flood of golden light spilled forth, accompanied by the dulcet tones of an angelic choi—no, that was just Soundbite being overdramatic.

"To the victors go the spoils," Shakky said, waving invitingly. "If you'd care to check that everything is well accounted for—?"

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!" And it was with that particularly ear-murdering squee of unadulterated joy that Nami literally backflipped out of her seat, diving head first into the gold below with enough skill to make an Olympian green with envy. Or, more appropriately in this case, Scrooge McDuck. "MINEMINE! AAAAALL MIIMEE!"

Vivi gave the cackling trapdoor a wary once-over. "Just making sure, but humans can't actually spontaneously transform into dragons from excessive greed, right? That's… just mythology, correct?"
Chopper, also staring at the trapdoor, giggled gleefully. "We'll find out soon enough!"

The wind-woman shuddered fearfully, flicking her finger to slam the trapdoor shut. "Joy."

Shakky's positive demeanor returned in full force. "Ah, now this truly reminds me of the good old days."

"You mean the days when you knew Shanks, right? Right?" Luffy cut in, eagerly bouncing on his stool.

"Why yes," the bartender nodded, a slightly wistful glint entering her eyes. "Or, well, not I, personally, but our mutual friend 'the coater'... hmm, half fell into, half was volunteered into playing quartermaster aboard the ship he sailed on. I'm sure he'd love to tell you all about it...though unfortunately..." Shakky's gaze sharpened as her eyes flicked to the side. Towards me. "He's not here at the moment. Honestly, I'm not sure when he'll be back..."

Her lips quirked up into a sly smirk. "Though I believe I recall that he said something along the lines of...not wanting to 'make things too easy for them?"

Neither of my superiors could miss the fact that she was side-eyeing me as she said that, and both glanced at me...or, well, Zoro glanced, Luffy stared with open and innocent curiosity. Anyway, it was easy to see that this was a test of my savviness. And given that I wasn't in the habit of disappointing people...

"Translation," I sighed in a truly put-upon manner, propping my chin up on my fists with an over-exaggerated huff. "The old coot sold himself for shits and giggles, and he expects us to come valiantly smashing through the doors like a rabid pack of Sea Kings." Though I said all this in a deadpan, the effect was slightly ruined by the smirk I wore. "Well, while I certainly do see the appeal of smashing and crashing with wild abandon... meh, not feeling it at the moment. You don't think he'd mind if we let him stew for a little while?"

Shakky muffled a snicker behind one hand. "Neither he nor I would expect anything less. Well!" She straightened and clapped her hands, neatly grabbing everyone's attention. "So long as you're here, know that the Rip-Off Bar is open to the Straw Hat Pirates for whatever it or I can provide..." She cast a half-amused, half-don't-fuck-with-me look at Luffy. "Aside from bottomless free food and booze, of course. I'll allow you a couple of rounds on the house, but I'd go out of business catering to the likes of you."

"Maaaah, but I wouldn't eat that much," Luffy complained mildly, obliviously digging his pinky up in his nostril. "Just 'til I was full."

"And that would bankrupt even the biggest restaurant in the world," Sanji deadpanned.

Shakky chuckled and shook her head. "Anyway, as amusing as dangling food before your hungry captain is..." Her gaze narrowed in on me. "If you don't mind me asking, would it be too terribly impolite for me to inquire about whatever... machinations you might have in store for the archipelago? There are oh so many inquiring minds who are dying to know."

As amusing as she tried to make things sound, though, her question sobered me up damn fast, and prompted me to give the order I'd been dreading giving all fucking day.

"Soundbite. Pump it in."

My snail shuddered miserably but nodded. "ROGER-ROG-ERGH... sorry to do this everyone... but
brace for hell."

And hell was exactly what we heard a moment later.

"—Male. 9 years old. 4 feet 4 inches. 60 pounds. Human. Ginger-haired. Green-eyed. Good potential, should make a few thousand—"

"—escape attempt this week. Need to do something more permanent. "Why dontcha just tear up that leg of hers?" "Cripple the slave, cripple the price." "Nah, man, some people pay more for 'em that way. "Really, now… in that case!" CRACK! "AA—"

"—CAN'T SEPARATE US, YOU HAVE TO BUY HIM TOO!" "I came here for a wench, not a wench's brat. It'd be a waste of my time and money, now and for the rest of his life. Now shut up—" "NOO—!"

"—MMPH! MMMMMMPH!" "Try and scream all you want, it won't make any difference. But y'know, most slavers don't like it when their property makes too much noise, might wanna kick the habit now." "MMM MMMMMMPH!" "Wonder how much you'll go for—"

"—stupid slave, now hold still!" SSSSS! "AAAAAAAA—"

And then… no words. Just periodic cracks, followed by wet squelching sounds and a steady drip, drip. And if you strained your ears, you could maybe, just maybe, hear the sound of whimpering.

Most of the animals curled in on themselves. Nami had returned at some point, and her face was darker than her rumbling clouds. Conis, Robin, Merry, and even Sanji all looked to be in varying stages of a PTSD attack. Hachi's entire body was one of despairing misery, curled over the bar and all six of his hands clamping down on his head, hard. Everyone else, even Shakky, had an expression mixed between disgusted and outraged. Luffy in particular was looking absolutely murderous, his head bowed and his face shadowed by his hat.

Speaking of Shakky, she stayed grimly silent for a straight minute before she finally took a deep, heavy drag of her cigarette and ashed it in a single go. Then, letting the smoke curl out of her tightly grit teeth like a damn demon, she gave Soundbite a glare that would have peeled the scales off a Sea King. "Turn. That. Off," she bit out.

It only took a tight nod from me for Soundbite to clamp his jaws shut, killing the noise and leaving us with a harsh silence.

A silence I filled by slowly grinding my teeth together and rhythmically drumming my fingers on the countertop, which was the only thing keeping me halfway sane. "Let me spell it out for you guys: we have set foot into the slave trade capital of the Grand Line. For who-knows-how-long, people on all sides of the law have disappeared into the dark corners of this archipelago, never to see the sun again. Think what happened to Moria's victims, only three hundred times worse. This archipelago is big. It is beautiful…"

I slammed my hands on the table. "And above all else, it is a trap. And more than that, it is a trap that the World Government is fully aware of and allows to continue functioning with impunity so long as the slavers keep providing them with both product and generous donations in return. This market will not crash any time soon, so long as it is left to its own devices."

I slid off my stool and stood heavily on the floor, grimly cracking my neck to the side.

"I've had two plans in mind for this island for a while now. One of them, I'm putting off for as long
as possible, but the other is going to be set in motion before the day is out."

I paused, gazing over my crewmates one by one.

"I spent most of our stay on Skelter Bite discussing plans and procedures with every contact I have and then some, and there's only a few things left to set up. I'm asking all of you for your help in this, because when the rest of the Supernovas get here, I'm setting my biggest plan yet into motion. We're going to devastate the slave trade." I let out a sharp huff. "True, there's no way we'll be able to completely destroy it, but if the plan works, the damage we do today is something it will never recover from."

I slowly turned to look at Luffy. "So. All that being said..." I spread my arms patiently. "Your orders, Captain?"

The rubber-man turned his murderous eyes my way, and my bravado faltered as I realized that some of that anger actually was towards me.

"All you had to do was tell us, Cross. Did you really think we'd need to hear anything like that to want to stop it?" he demanded.

I felt sweat bead on my face, and I swallowed nervously, resisting the urge to tug at my collar. No sane person would ever want Luffy to be legitimately angry at them. Still, that question demanded an answer and I mustered up enough courage to at least look him in the eyes. "I wasn't trying to... convince anyone, Luffy. I merely sought to appropriately... motivate. And unless I missed my mark?" I paused, and allowed the sensation of pure, malicious intent that permeated the room to wash over us. "I accomplished that in spades."

Luffy kept me pinned for a few more seconds. Then, to my immense relief, he nodded. And it really said a lot about just how much our crew valued Luffy's word when that one, single motion absolutely galvanized the room's atmosphere into something out of this world.

A light cough drew our attention, and we all looked to Shakky, who was back to leaning over her bar... but this time, her stance was more reminiscent of a looming gargoyle.

"For the record," she drawled tersely, obviously recovering from our little 'experience'. "The only reason 'our mutual friend' and I haven't done anything about this mess is that if we did, we'd get the full weight of the Marines crashing down on our heads, and while the rest of these islands might be scum, this bar is our home. But, so long as you think you have any better ideas..."

She gave us all a grin that was as sharp as a knife and ten times as deadly.

"I own properties in every district of this Bacchus-forsaken cesspit, and I have many a person who trusts me and many more who owe me favors, whether they like it or not. Anything you could wish for, I'll happily provide..." Her eyes narrowed slightly. "Provided it goes towards lancing the rot out of this place."

"...anything, you say?" I queried, turning to her with an anticipatory look.

The bartender scoffed but relaxed into an almost smug sense of amusement. "Anything that wouldn't go against the spirit of your crew, wise-ass."

I allowed myself a light chuckle before schooling my expression, while hers remained unchanged despite the gravity of the situation.

"We're going to need a base of operations," I started, speaking and pacing at the same time."As
complete and thorough a map of the archipelago as you can manage, names and locations of both your most trusted informants and the most ruthless slavers you know—"

"—a crack hit squad ready to mobilize, a pot of hot coffee, twelve jammy dodgers and a fez!"

I didn't so much as glance at the snail as I snatched him from my shoulder, slapped him upside-down onto the bar, and spun him like a top.

"YEEAAARRRGH!"/"Wheeeeee!!"

I felt my eyelid twitch at the fact that he was crying out in both fear and enjoyment at once, but what else was I expecting from the slimeball by this point?

Meanwhile, Shakky just nodded and started writing the requested information out… though given how much she was writing and the smirk on her lips, there were going to be some extra 'gifts' added to that care package.

"Aaaanyway," I coughed, looking over my crew. "I've got tentative plans for all of you, but I'm open to other ideas if you've got them. So, to start—"

"Cross… can I help?"

All attention fell on the fishman in the room, who despite wringing his hands looked as determined as the rest of us. "I've been a disgrace to the mark on my forehead for too long," he said, more to himself than us. "This won't make up for everything I've done, but it'll be a start. I'm strong, I'm fast, and I can cover everywhere around and beneath the island where you can't—sorry, most of you can't cover," he corrected, glancing at Boss. "B-But please, is there anything that I can do?"

I took a moment to consider matters—and most definitely made sure to spend that moment trying to ignore the hole Nami was glaring in the side of my head. But, ultimately…

"Yeah, I can think of a few ways that you and your… associates can be of appropriate use," I agreed. "You think you can keep them under control long enough for them to do some good for once?"

"I've been doing that for the last four months, Cross," Hachi nodded, slamming his fists into his palms with… perhaps a bit too much glee. "If they won't play nice, I'll make them."

"Glad to hear it," I nodded gratefully. "Now then, from the top… here's how it's going to go down."

-o-

"B-B-B-But we don't carry that much bronze at a time!"

"Awwww… you're suuuure you don't?"

"Yes! Positive!"

"Maybe if you checked in the back—?"

"We're a market stall, we don't have a back!"

"…what about brass?"

"For the fifth time, sir—!"
While Usopp watched the doomed salesman try to do the impossible and make Luffy see reason, he tried to smile at his captain's familiar and oft-amusing antics. The better to sell the idea he was watching his captain instead of his surroundings. Usually, that was pretty easy. But after what he'd heard... what he knew was happening in the shadows, just out of his sight... well, it was surprisingly difficult.

And it was in pursuit of putting an end to those shadows that Usopp and his crewmates were out and about in Sabaody's tourist district, raising the biggest ruckus they could and getting as many eyes on themselves as they could manage. It was already public knowledge that the Straw Hats were present on Sabaody, so there was no putting a lid on that. But what could be controlled was where people thought they were.

Hence, the ruckus, providing the perfect distraction so that their crewmates could dig into the rotten woodworks of this archipelago undisturbed. And not just a distraction, but observation, too. Cross had told the crew that he wanted as complete a picture of the pseudo-island as he could get, and it was their job to both attract attention and learn about the archipelago's civilian inhabitants in the process.

All three of the 'immature' pirates were playing a part in things. While Luffy was abysmal at being subtle, there was one talent in the espionage family that he excelled in: getting a good read on people. Usopp's eyes were the sharpest on the crew from his sniping abilities and paranoia, and Brook... well, he was no slouch either given how skilled he was at reading his audiences. Although he wasn't being much help in the subtlety department; even with the welding mask and gloves that he had chosen to wear from Pappug's new wardrobe hiding his bare bones, he was still prone to... other tendencies.

"Oh, excuse me, young miss. May I see your panties?"

*BONG!*

"My utmost apologies," Usopp ground out, tapping his hammer in his palm in silent threat. "He's a bit of a troublemaker on our crew. Seriously, you'd think he'd learn after, what is this, the eleventh time now?"

"I'm afraid I've lost track by now! Yohohoho!" Brook chortled.

"Just keep him away from us," the young woman said in disgust, she and the older man with her scowling down at Brook's still prone form as they wandered off.

Brook kept up his chuckling and offhanded demeanor for a few more moments - right up until they turned a corner, at which point his mood darkened. "The father was going for a weapon," he solemnly observed.

Usopp nodded in agreement, sweeping his gaze over the onlooking crowd. "And while others were looking, the locals were too scared and resigned to do anything and the tourists thought whatever they thought was going to happen was funny."

Brook dusted himself off and stood back up, slowly scanning the throngs of people coming and going. "Everyone here is armed in some way, be they civilian or tourist. But where the civilians carry them for self-defense..."

"They're not just expecting something. They're eager for someone to start a fight," Usopp finished.

"I hate this already," Luffy rumbled, now beside them and drumming his fingers on his pipe.
"Everyone around here either can't or won't fight back, or they'll just jump in when a fight starts, and not for the fun reasons."

"AT LEAST THE chain smith hunting is helping you scout out BRONZE STORES FOR MY —AHEH, I MEAN... YOUR STATUE?" Soundbite hastily amended. "SPEAKING OF WHICH, there's another store two groves ahead of you."

In spite of themselves, Brook and Usopp snorted in laughter from the 'slip of the tongue'. However, said amusement died quickly with Luffy's conspicuous absence in the mirth. Something that Soundbite noticed as well, given how fast he snapped back into seriousness.

"But you're right, Cross has noticed something off too," he said. "For some reason, the people native to Sabaody don't like the so-called 'local culture', WHILE THE TOURISTS LEAN INTO IT WITH GLEE... WE'RE DIRECTING THE OTHERS TO FIND OUT MORE, CROSS THINKS IT COULD BE USEFUL."

Silence fell for a moment, save for their footfalls. After a few steps, Brook spoke up:

"You know, even with the experience on my original crew, I must admit that it's odd to be part of a group of pirates that…" He rolled his phalanges slowly, trying to find the right words. "Care so much."

"Mmm..." Usopp rubbed his chin, incapable of properly refuting his crewmate's words. "Would it help for me to point out that we're going to be making out like kings if everything goes right?"

"That does put me on more familiar footing, yes," the skeleton nodded in agreement.

"I only need one reason to do this."

The two pirates turned to see that their captain had doffed his hat and was staring down at it with a grave expression.

"I never wanted to be a hero," Luffy said quietly. "But when I think about what Shanks would do…" He trailed off, his expression contorting into a heavier frown. Then he shoved his hat back on his head and looked up. "Soundbite. Connect me to Cross," Luffy said.

"Roger roger. Yes, Captain?" came the commies' voices, shifting smoothly from one to another.

"Why hasn't Shanks… or Whitebeard, or someone else done this already?" Luffy demanded. "I know how strong they are from meeting their crewmates on Skelter Bite… so why not? They could do it all by themselves if they wanted to and the Government wouldn't be able to stop them."

There was silence for a few seconds before Cross heaved a tired sigh.

"This is an educated guess, not my knowledge, but I'd hypothesize—ah, reckon—that it's because they're on the other side of the Red Line. The Four Emperors rule the New World, and transferring enough manpower to this side to do what we're doing would be painting a target on their backs, both for the other Emperors and the Government, because they wouldn't take this lying down. Not that we're going to give them any choice. But bottom line? They have too much on their plate."

"...and what about Sonia's crew? What about Dad's crew?" Luffy pressed, a slight tinge of frustration tainting his voice.

Cross let out a negative-sounding grunt. "The former lack the power to withstand the consequences, and the latter already have their sights set on the root of the problem. But even then, their forces are
spread thin all over the world, and this is just one region. Forces here means islands that either don't throw off the World Government, or that fall back under it. Slaves out there, slaves here. It's a hard choice, but it's one that has to be made. And with any luck, our actions today will alleviate some of the pressure."

Luffy mulled that information over for a bit, his face reddening some from the influx, before he nodded in acknowledgement. "The past doesn't matter. What matters is now," he reminded himself. "We'll get back to making noise and looking for metal, but where's everyone else, Cross? What are they doing?"

"Right now? They're spread out across the archipelago. Half are still on their original jobs, but I've redirected others based on new information."

"Franky and Merry have made contact with the local criminal underworld, and are getting a better perspective on how things are structured around here. They're en route to meet with the leader of smugglers in the the northern groves, Bomoss, as we speak."

Despite how reliable a business slavery was with the World Government's willful blindness, a surprisingly large number of the island's criminals were not involved in the market. There were several reasons for this, among them the competition in the market, simple disinterest in that side of crime - and the fact that being criminals did not mean that they lacked standards.

"And if anyone alive should know that better than anyone, it's me," the cyborg chuckled, grinning with a hint of malice at the dumbstruck group whose warehouse he had barged into. "After all, I ran crime on Water 7. So finding you guys? Not that hard."

"So now, the only question we need answered at the moment…" Merry mused, swaying back and forth on Franky's shoulder as she idly drummed her fingers on her cannon's barrel. "Is which side of wrong you're on."

That apparently hit a nerve, and the band of thugs in front of the pirates visibly bristled in both body and weaponry.

"You wanna say that again, pipsqueak?" a broad-shouldered bruiser snarled, slamming his fist into his palm.

"Yeah, yeah, say it again!" a scrawnier cutthroat with a dead eye hissed as he flipped a knife in his fingers. "We ain't like those rot-headed newts! And we'll cut anyone who says we are!"

That comment got a confused glance between Merry and Franky. "What do you mean, 'newts'?"

Franky asked.

The thugs got even tenser, and some even looked to be on the verge of attacking…

"It's slang."

Before a rough and accented voice cut through the air, and the criminals all relaxed. They parted ranks, allowing a grizzled, middle-aged man wearing a bush hat of worn leather to walk up. The man gave the Straw Hats a searching look before nodding at his men, who all returned to shifting their ill-gotten crates about like they'd never been interrupted.

The man—the smugglers' leader—returned his focus to the Straw Hats. "It's slang," he repeated. "For slavin' scum, seein' how they keep toadyin' up to the Celestial Dragons. And you best bet your
bottom bubble that there ain't a one of those bleedin' slaver bastards who's a truly green-blooded Sabaoidian, like me and my boys. Us here, we're smugglers, forgers, traffickers. We deal in goods and contraband, we rip people off, yeah... but we do not deal in flesh, and if ever I found out that any of mine did, I'd tie 'em to a bubble and float 'em up until it popped!" The man punctuated his mini-rant by slamming his fist in his palm.

A pause, while the man collected himself, and then he gave the two pirates a respectful nod and tipped his hat to them. "The name's Bomoss, and I'm the leader of the Double Doozen Smugglers. Whereas you two are Merry and Franky o' the Straw Hat Pirates. What can I do you for? If you're lookin' for goods we can get you a decent enough price, but in terms of coatin' we'd need ta outsource, in which case me and mine'll be takin' our own cut of things. Or, maybe..." The smuggler boss's gaze sharpened slightly. "You lookin' to do somethin' a little bit more... local, perhaps?"

The pirates shared another look, and a nod from Franky prompted Merry to stow her gun and respond. "We're here for information. Criminals, smugglers especially, know their cities better than anyone else, and we need to know this archipelago like the back of our hands before the day is over. So, we came to you."

"'Know the archipelago', eh? Sounds simple 'nuff..." The grizzled man gave the pirates a wry smirk. "You Straw Hats... you lot really don't know jack 'bout our home, do ya?" He waved off their nascent protests with an indulgent chuckle. "'Nah, 's alright, 'ts not like most anyone knows or cares past our roots anyways. So, if'n you're askin'..." He waved them over to the side of the warehouse and indicated an empty crate for them to sit at. "Allow me to educate ya."

Taking the cue, the cyborg took a seat and Merry slid off to take her own, he and the ship-girl giving grateful nods to the smuggler.

"We appreciate this," the cyborg politely said. "And for starters, the entire reason we're here is to get answers on what has our tactician stumped: he doesn't get how there could even be a criminal underground we could talk with in a place like this, and I gotta say, I kind of agree with him."

Franky waved his hand around, indicating the warehouse. "We thought you were all slavers here, but instead we're finding out that barely any locals are slavers at all, not even your criminals. But, how are there 'locals' to begin with? And... in terms of 'criminals', how come there are 'police' here too, or a 'government?' Don't the Marines usually run the show on places as small as this?"

"Actually, you got that little tidbit backwards, ya clankin' bloke," Bomoss groused. "First off, those white-hatted arseholes being here's a new thing. Up 'til Roger popped the top on his Era, they left well enough 'lone. 'Fore then, we ran things on our own, for a length o' the word..." He heaved a tired sigh as he scratched the back of his neck. "But really, them bein' here ain't changed things much either way."

He huffed and clapped his hands together. "Roight, let's start at the beginning: everything there is to know about Sabaody comes straight back to its location. Fun fact 'bout this here bundle o' trees: It's literally the single closest island ta Mariejois in all the six seas. And that makes it one of the biggest crossroads in the entire dang world. And an intersea-crossroads means intersea trade.

"You're right that there wasn't ever a native people on these here trees, like a lot of other islands, but that don't mean we ain't got our roots." The smuggler paused to proudly thump his own chest. "Sabaoicians are basically people whose families stuck around hundreds of years ago, makin' money off of everyone else who came through, and then just kept on stickin' 'round makin' a livin' like that 'til today. We stuck 'round long enough that we even started makin' this place ours, and makin' our own rules. It's why we've got our own government an' all that, our own culture. We've got blood from all over the world mixed in here; heck, in case my voice ain't clued you in yet, me da's blood
hails from the deep South."

"Oh, yeah, I'd wondered..." Merry muttered.

"Anyway, like I was sayin': trade. Times were that Sabaody was the biggest tradin' hub in all the world, and to a level, it still is. You wanna pass somethin' from one Blue to another, easy money says it'll land here first before poppin' off to where it should go." The smuggler leader then scowled and chopped his hand to the side. "But back then, slaves weren't our bread and buttah! They were there, yeah, but that was a long time ago, and they were everywhere, so it wasn't nothin' special. 'Least, Sabaody slaves weren't nothin' special..." Another huff, and he glanced away. "'Till some arse-headed bastard got it in his head to up the game, and provide a product nobody else could match or find elsewhere."

"Mermaids..." the pirates darkly concluded.

"Merfolk in general, more like," Moboss nodded. "See, thing you gotta understand, mates? Just like how you'll never find a Sabaodian who's a slaver, you'll never find one of us hatin' on the scalenecks either. And why would we? They're our neighbors, we live right next to the blokes, we know they're just like everyone else! But 'ta everyone else, they're monstahs, and monstahs sell big. And when one blighter started makin' hard gold for scales, a lot of other bastards started doin' the same. And this held steady for a bit... 'till the scalenecks wised up, and stopped makin' themselves easy to catch." The smuggler sighed, and his head fell. "But by that point, the chum was in the water."

"Because the slavers had funds and an appetite for more..." Franky slowly deduced. "They didn't drop the slave trade, they doubled down."

"Damn right they did!" the criminal snarled, slamming his fist on the crate. "When they couldn't make money on scales, they started sellin' flesh by the truckload, and especially to the World Nobles. And when demand for the 'quality product' of our waters started bloatin' up, others came sniffin' around for a cut of things too. Made things right nasty 'round here for a while, true 'nuff..."

Bomoss's scowl deepened. "But things didn't get outright rotten 'til two hundred years ago."

"Two hundred..." Frowning, Merry counted on her fingers before stiffening in realization. "Wait, isn't that when slavery was officially outlawed by the World Government?"

"Yeh. Officially. 'Course, those bastards'll let anything slide for the right ditty, and gold sings nice and pretty." Several snickers echoed out from the warehouse, and Bomoss snapped his head and a paint-peeling glare that direction. "YEAH, I KNOW THAT RHYMED, SHUT IT AND GET BACK TO WORK! Ugh, anyway..." He shook his head. "When the law passed, most other slavers in the world couldn't make themselves worth enough to the Marines to be worth keepin' alive, but the ones squattin' in our groves did. They let their gold sing right in the ears o' the Nobles, and for that, Sabaody became a blind spot. Not just for them, but for the entire damn flesh market. A specialty became a monopoly, or damn close to it." The smuggler spat to the side in disgust. "Now it's not just all goods that come through Sabaody. It's all chains too."

"We Sabaodians, we hate what our home has become with every inch of our bein's..." he sighed, slumping in his seat. "But it ain't like there's much we can do about it. You tourists, you've always had the power. More weapons, more strength, more goods and gold." He waved his hand dismissively. "Heck, even the Marines don't give a darn; if it ain't pirate and has the gold, they don't see a thing. Our home's become a glorified playground, nothin' more. A stagin' ground, meant for everyone else's use to exploit their grimmest vices. Means we can't change how it's used... no matter how much we hate it. All we can do is watch."

"...Let me guess: the local government is just as messed up," deadpanned Franky.
"Hah! Guvner Prefectus and his cronies… yeh, lemme tell you all 'bout them."

-o-

"Robin, Vivi and Koala are infiltrating the Archipelago's government. It'll help us gauge local reactions better, and besides that, it'll give us forewarning if anything interferes with a critical part of my plan's follow-through."

"What you need to understand about Governor Prefectus is that him and his cabinet, they're-they're not bad at their jobs, in fact he's rather good! It's just… at times, he, they…"

"Choose… not to be," Koala completed slowly, her face screwing up in distaste as she looked over the civilized landscape of the 71st Grove through the window.

The bureaucrat the pirates and revolutionary were speaking with, a blonde bespectacled woman with her hair in a messy bun, bit her lip before nodding in defeat.

Sighing in dismay, Vivi let a stack of documents the woman had been working on thump on the desk, grabbing another, even larger stack and scanning through. "Professional incompetents. Eurgh, the worst kind of politicians to deal with because they always make sure to dig in like ticks…"

"Oh, maybe so, maybe so," Robin purred as she leaned on the office's door, ever so casually keeping several unflinching gazes on the surrounding hallways. "But that doesn't mean there aren't advantages as well. After all, meddlers like them make such delightful squealing noises when you take them by the balls and apply just the right amount of pressure."

Vivi paused and looked up at her pseudo-mentor in confusion. "Are… you speaking metaphorically or—?"

"Ladies, I do believe this line of questioning is irrelevant to our current purpose…" Koala interrupted with a hasty cough, glancing in concern at their temporary and rapidly green-ifying ally. "And also, I think you're starting to scare our source."

"But surely she must be used to such topics of conversation," Robin replied, her prior levity gone. "After all, this is the office that processes all the generous donations made to the government of Sabaody by… what did they call it again?"

"Faithful constituents," Vivi dryly read off one of the documents.

"Ah, yes, constituents. That is your business, Is it not, Miss Libia?"

The green melted away to red, and the paper-pusher shoved herself to her feet with a harsh slap of her hands on her desk. "Mrs. Libia," she firmly corrected. "And I will have you know that I have no part in this… this!" she spat, swiping a stack of the papers off her desk and scattering them across the floor. "I'm just the one that the-the bastards above me force the paperwork onto! And what am I supposed to do about it?"

Libia groaned and sank back into her seat, massaging her eyes. "I can have eyes sharper than swords for noticing every inconsistency that comes through. And I can count every single shell company the funds pass through before reaching me. And I could even get the genealogies of the bastards all these bribes are coming from going back to their tenth generation! But what sort of whistleblowing can I do when everyone above my head is corrupt, when they're the ones making me handle their dirty money!?"

She picked up one fluttering paper and regarded it with a defeated expression. "Dirty money that
comes from both above and below, at that. Honestly, it's one thing to receive generous donations that are delivered by courier, at least that's halfway subtle, but it is insulting when payment is delivered by the Marines in order to provide 'financial support' for our government…"

Tossing the paper aside, Libia slumped back in her admittedly very comfy-looking chair, one hand over her eyes. Running said hand down her face, her eyes fell onto a picture on the desk, and began to moisten.

"You know what they call my department?" she said, her voice soft and miserable. "'The Office of Cultural Affairs'. Cultural. This is what the world sees our culture as. What even bastards like Prefectus think it is."

Libia held up the picture for the three outlaws to see, her face a picture of despair. "I have a husband. I have children, born and raised here. And I am genuinely terrified that they will not only think that this is their legacy… but that if nothing is done, they could come to accept it. Happily."

For a long moment, nobody said anything. Then Robin spoke up. "Pardon my curiosity, but aren't you being a tad candid, sharing all this with the three women who, might I remind you, broke into your office not ten minutes ago?"

"And are among the most infamous criminals in the world, I might note," Koala added.

"And who else would you have me discuss this with, hm?" Libia snorted dismissively. "In case you haven't been hearing me, I'll remind you that all of my coworkers are literally a part of the problem."

"All of them?" Vivi repeated. "You can't think of anyone else you'd trust?"

The bureaucrat's expression turned flat. "I haven't exactly raised a petition on the matter, no. That's a 'severance package' I'd rather not collect, if it's all the same to you."

"Well, then, in that case," Koala said, clapping her hands and stepping away from the window to show an eager grin on her face. "I think I know what we'll be looking into next."

"And I think I know where we can get a few leads on where not to start…" Vivi mused, snapping her fingers to alert her crew's leading snail.

-o-

"Tashigi's making contact with men sent from Smoker's fleet and infiltrating the local garrison, under the pretense of acting as reinforcements to help hunt us. When the time comes, she's going to put a hurt on them like nothing they've felt before."

"…got it. I'll move that up on the priority list…mmph, but…" The lieutenant rubbed her chin. "I can't promise it'll be that fast, we don't have that kind of time…alright. Alright, I see where you're coming from, I'll do what I can. Pisces out."

The static faded, and Tashigi nodded and turned back to face the Marines before her, straightening out her outfit for more of that oddly satisfying feeling. The outfit that the Straw Hats had forced her into was securely locked away in the scuzziest closet she could find, only to be removed so that it could be burned at the earliest opportunity. She honestly didn't think she'd been so happy to don her uniform in months.

As for the aforementioned Marines, Smoker had sent a dozen of his men ahead to the island a week prior without notifying anyone. If anyone were to ask, the cover story was that Tashigi had sailed with them to the island for a private mission, taking advantage of the likely once-in-a-lifetime deficit
of pirate presence.

"Alright. Chief Petty Officer Nomaru, report," she ordered. "What are your squad's observations from the past week?"

"Lieutenant." The lead soldier snapped a salute, then nodded. "We've had no issue acquiring information from the local Marines about their daily operations. They've been very cooperative." He frowned. "Actually, they've been too cooperative. I've witnessed inspections and audits on several Marine bases, but I can rightly say this is the first time I've seen one that's been outright eager to accommodate us."

Tashigi matched the soldier's frown, casting her mind back to the mini-crusade she'd directed in the East Blue, and she had to concur with her subordinate: in every base she'd inspected (read: raided), the corrupt Marines had always done their best to rush her out, so that she couldn't find the cracks in their facade. So for a group of Marines she knew couldn't be anything but corrupt to be so forthcoming was… confusing, to say the least. "And? What did you find?"

"Nothing was out of place, Lieutenant. Reassignment forms, arrest documentation, medical records, all organized in perfect compliance with headquarters' policies. Their troops are competently trained and drilled and none of them show any issue. But..." The officer cradled his chin, casting a thoughtful gaze toward the base. "The one discrepancy I did notice is that they seem to be... hyper-focused on subduing pirates."

"They do get every pirate trying to get to the New World coming through here," Tashigi pointed out, for the sake of Devil's Advocacy if nothing else.

"Yes, much like how we got all the ones trying to get to Paradise," Nomaru agreed with a slow nod. "But back in Loguetown, we unilaterally arrested all criminals on the island, like drug-dealers and gangsters, wherever possible. But these Marines... they barely acknowledge the existence of any other kind of outlaw..." His expression darkened. "Especially including the slave trade. Every time that we've asked, we've been met with the same response of—"

"Let me guess," Tashigi interrupted, snapping her hands up. "It was outlawed 200 years ago, there is no slave trade anymore."

"With varying levels of venom, affirmative," Nomaru bit out. "This place does one of the best damn jobs of hiding it I've ever seen, but the fact remains: it's as rotten as a week-old Sea King carcass. Your orders, ma'am?"

Tashigi exhaled sharply, measuring her original assignment against her new priority. After only a moment, she looked back up at Nomaru.

"Nomaru, take Popora and five soldiers of your choice to their central administrative building. Gauge everyone that you can access and determine who among them is trustworthy. You'll have other aid from the Masons to help you. Everyone else, with me."

She drew Shigure, giving the blade a final critical look... and securing her glasses, ignoring an amused chuff from Popora, before sheathing the blade at her hip.

"We're going to give this island the once-over of the century! Agreed?!"

"MA'AM, YES MA'AM!"
As for everyone else, they're sniffing out the slavers from every nook and cranny they could possibly hide in. Chopper is leading Conis, Su and Donny through every back-alley quack and drug-slinger he can find so that he can trace any drugs they might have sold under the table to their buyers…

"Now, doctor," Chopper huffed patiently, slipping his goggles off and examining them for a moment before polishing off a slight stain on the lens. "We're both men of medicine—me more than you, clearly, but still—so why don't we try and achieve a mutually beneficial conclusion without too much hardship, hm? Just give me your records and I won't be forced to resort to… drastic measures to extract the knowledge. In fact, we might even go so far as to compensate you for your time." He replaced his goggles and tilted his mirrored gaze curiously. "Does this sound amenable to you?"

"L-Like hell it is! I-I provide surplus supplies to some v-very powerful people! If they find out I talked—n-no way, I want to live, damn it! I-I'm not telling you anything! So screw off!"

"Hm, have to admire the determination, at least," the human-reindeer remarked. And it really was impressive, what with Donny, perched on a high shelf, holding the back-alley saw-bone's ankles so that he was upside down, his head nearly touching the floor. "But, regrettably, we are on a timetable. Conis? Kindly motivate the man."

"With pleasure," the angelic gunner cheerfully replied. But instead of making any threatening moves, she walked over to a brown paper bag sitting on top of a pile of syringes on a nearby table, opening it up. "Is this your lunch?"


Nodding, Conis peered inside and gave it a sniff. Reaching in, she pulled out a somewhat greasy-looking fried chicken sandwich. "Smells great, where'd you get this?" she asked.

"Er, there's a stand in Grove 21. It's, uh, called the Crazy Chicken, I think?"

"Excellent!" Conis beamed. "I'll have to check it out after this." She took a bite. "Mm, that is good. Alright, Carl, can I call you Carl?"

"Er, that's not my—"

"Great! Here's the deal, Carl." Abruptly, all traces of good cheer vanished from both Conis's expression and posture, replaced by cold indifference. "I spent six years being forced to send innocent people to their deaths at the hands of sadistic psychopaths, unable to so much as weep for them because the tyrant who ruled my island would have vaporized me if I betrayed him. I never got the chance to pay that tyrant back; if I did, I would not hesitate to take his life. And you?" Her lips turned downward in a harsh frown, emphasizing the quiet fury in her eyes. "You're almost worse, aiding and abetting the practice of taking innocent people and putting them in that situation so you can line your own pockets. But I know what you're thinking, and you're right. As a rule, we Straw Hats don't like taking life."

Stepping up to the man, she leaned down, her expression eerily serene.

"So I have a friendly suggestion for you: perhaps you should be worrying less about your employers, who have already made up their minds to kill you later, and worry more about me, who's still mulling over doing it now."

And then… she took another bite of the sandwich.

For several seconds, silence reigned over the clinic, until it was broken by a low whistle from Su.

"Damn, girl!"
"Bullshit, I watch the SBS!" the doctor spat in a sudden bout of courage. "I don't care what you say, do you really expect me to believe that a Straw Hat could murder a complete stranger point-blank? Especially this ditz of all people! You might be n-nuts, b-but unless you're making yourself really nuts, you're nothing but a cowa—!

"Oh well, so much for Plan B," Chopper interrupted, rummaging around in his bag. "Time for Plan C." He straightened, a bottle prominently marked with hazard symbols in hoof, and sighed. "Which really should stand for 'complicated mess', because there's a fifty percent chance that that's how I'll be describing your insides if I use this."

Again, silence hung over the air, though this time the doctor was sweating buckets. Then Chopper turned around, a wide grin on his face and his eyes gleaming with madness.

"Oh, well. For science! Conis, hold him still, and get ready for some thrashing."

"Of course, doctor!" Conis chirped, before looking mournfully at the sandwich. "Oh well, I can get another one." Holding the sandwich in front of the doctor, she mimed him opening his mouth. "Don't worry, this is just to make sure you don't bite your tongue off. Still need you to answer, after all. Now either say what we want, or say ah."

"A… a-ah…"

Conis shrugged with a serene smile. "Well, if you say so—!"

"A-ALRIGHT, ALRIGHT, I'LL TALK, I'LL TALK!" the 'doctor' finally howled, flailing in a state of pure panic. "THEY'RE UNDER THE FLOORBOARDS, BENEATH MY DESK! BENEATH MY DESK! I-JUST LEAVE ME THE HELL ALONE DAMN IT!"

Chopper paused mid-preparation, and both he and Conis smiled brightly at the man. "Now, see, was that truly so hard?" the angel chirped pleasantly.

"Indeed, we're much obliged by your sincerity," Chopper tipped his hat politely, turning to shove said desk aside. "And just in case… Su, if he's lying, eat his testicles."

"WAIT, WHAT?!"

The named cloud fox leapt from her partner's shoulders and sat on her haunches in front of the saw-bone's face, baring her fangs. "That'll be my pleasure."

-o-

"While Sanji is getting help from Mikey and Sandersonia to accomplish the same with their food supplies."

There were a few reasons that Sandersonia had chosen Sanji to accompany despite the latter's lecherous nature. He was still one of the strongest members of the crew, he needed the help with most of the other crew members occupied, he could be counted on to scare away anyone who looked at her the wrong way without her having to risk revealing her identity…

…no, that last one was definitely the most relevant reason at this stage. Everyone knew that not even Sanji's attraction to women could overpower the absolute respect he had for food. And considering the nature of their current assignment, the sheer amount of wasted and unsalvageable food that Sanji was being forced to observe, he was in a very foul mood. Smoke rose from his footsteps and fists as he paced up and down the alley, and he was visibly eager to lash out at the first schmuck who'd be so stupid as to try and provoke him.
The hooded cloak and jeans that hid her form were almost superfluous with everyone actively avoiding the chef and the hellfire-and-brimstone aura he was putting out.

Still, scary as the cook was at the moment, the serpent Zoan couldn't deny feeling some doubt in the back of her mind.

"Are you sure about this plan of yours?" Sandersonia posed.

"Mmph, sure as I can be. However inhumanely the slavers treat their merchandise, they still need them alive. They can only starve them so much before feeding them, and I doubt they'd 'waste' money on buying it fresh, be it the whole meals or just the ingredients," Sanji quietly answered, his teeth audibly grinding on his cigarette. "And even if it's just garbage, that garbage comes from somewhere. All food reaches a mouth, we just need to follow it until then…"

"Hss…" Sandersonia nodded, reluctantly conceding the point. "Okay, but how do we actually follow this trail of yours?"

The cook snorted out a cloud of smoke. "That's the hard part. We need to find the start of the trail, and then we can start running it back, but until then—"

"Hey, Sanji," Mikey suddenly spoke up, intently eyeing one of the ends of the alleyway. "You mentioned garbage?"

"Yeah. What about it?"

Mikey pointed out into the street with his flipper. "See those busboys over there?"

Sanji and Sandersonia both looked over the dugong's shoulder at the men he was indicating. "The ones splitting a wad of cash?" the former queried.

"Last time I saw them," the dugong bit out. "They were walking out of a restaurant carrying trash bags."

The brief moment of silence that encompassed the trio was broken by the harsh FWOOSH! of Sanji's cigarette immolating. "…oh, I am going to enjoy this."

Credit where it was due, said busboys clearly had good survival instincts. They immediately straightened and looked right at the pirates. Unfortunately, their good sense seemed to be lacking; while one of them turned and bolted the other drew a derringer from his pocket and pointed it at them.

The next second, Sanji had Shaved in front of the runner and Mikey had shot the gun out of the other one's hand.

"Hello, morons," Sanji drawled slowly, taking the busboys by their shoulders and slowly but patiently shoving them towards the alley. "Let me make this nice and simple so that the single brain cell you share can keep up. You currently have two choices: answer all of our questions honestly…"

He then shoved them forwards so that they faceplanted in the alley… right at the foot of the titanic serpent-woman that was suddenly looming over them, hissing like a geyser seconds from blowing with her knife-sized fangs bared.

"Or get fed to the lovely lady before you, feet first." Sanji shrugged indifferently as he lit a new cigarette and took a patient drag from it. "Your choice."
"And just so we're clear," Mikey added, snapping his nunchucks taut. "You don't get to choose 'pass out from sheer terror' as a third option."

The two saps' faces were utterly devoid of color. One moved as though to start crawling away, and the chef responded by stomping beside his hand. The busboy pulled back so fast it was like the ground was on fire. Except it was.

"Though if you want to be char-broiled before she eats you, I think that could be arranged," the dugong added, almost as an afterthought.

That pushed them over the edge, and they started screaming out every name, location, and password that they knew.

-o-

"The fishmen are fleshing out the maps we already have with the help of the rest of our guard force."

"And that's the 50s complete," Chew grumbled, pointing at the last location he'd recorded. "You got all of that?"

The purple-wearing dugong nodded before turning around and bouncing off of and into the air.

"IF SHE GETS MAD, IT'S ON YOUR HEAD, NOT MINE!" the fishman called after him before diving back under the waves.

THWACK!

And taking a fist to his skull as soon as he submerged.

"AND WHAT WAS THAT FOR, HACHI, CHEW!?" the smelt-whiting fishman snarled.

The octopus folded his six arms, disappointment written all over him. "In case you haven't noticed, we're doing something amazing here. I haven't felt this good since Fisher Tiger was alive. Unlike when we were with Arlong, I don't need to try and justify what I'm doing. But you! Is it really that hard for you two to bite down on your hatred!?"

The other two fishmen narrowed their eyes at him; a moment later, Kuroobi rolled his with a dismissive scoff. "This isn't about aiding humans, Hachi. Hell, it's not even about aiding the Straw Hats. The way he snarled the name out made the unspoken 'barely' very clear. "I don't like it, but I'm not upset about species."

"Pretty sure we're of the same mind, then, chew," Chew chimed in. "We're upset about putting in all this work to try and do the impossible, chew. Sabaody has thwarted every attempt by the Ryugu Royal Family and the residents of the Fishman District to take it down, so what makes you think that this human's plan will be any different?"

"And before you bring up Enies Lobby, that's another point against all this. The World Government isn't going to let the Straw Hats get away with something like that twice," Kuroobi tacked on. "Seriously, Hachi, you've done some boneheaded things before, but even giving Roronoa Zoro a ride out of Arlong Park after he broke out of the prison and tore our crewmates apart wasn't as stupid as this."

Hachi's face reddened. Hard to say how much of it was anger versus shame. Unfolding his top pair of arms, he started counting off on his fingers. "Alright, first of all, you're a jackass for bringing that up. Second... I'm not privy to all the details, but from what I heard, the Straw Hats have help this
time around. A lot of help. Third, that blockade was the Government's second-best shot against the Straw Hats, and at this point, it's... what was that phrase... matches and razors. And fourth..."

He slammed his knuckles together, looking three seconds away from thumping his employees. Again. "Have you guys already forgotten!? Climbing the Red Line. Burning Mariejois. Freeing every last slave. What Fisher Tiger did was impossible, too. He did it anyway. He didn't care that what he wanted to do was impossible. Neither do the Straw Hats, and neither do I! We're pirates! Ignoring reality and achieving possibility, that is what we aim for flying the Jolly Roger! And if you don't like it, you can both—eh?"

Hachi fell silent, and Chew glanced up in irritation, trying to find the source of the wailing strings vibrating the water. "What's that vermin bleating out now, chew?"

"Sounds like something about... 'fight the power'?
Kuroobi grunted. "Seriously, what does rowing have to do with—?"

"Less questioning the crazy pirates, more getting back to work," Hachi interrupted.

The pair of them scowled, but swam off without complaining.

Once they were out of earshot, Hachi chuckled to himself with a slightly hysteric grin. "Of course, if what I've heard is accurate, I think that we'll all get a good answer once we rendezvous in the 70s..."

-o-

"And lastly, while Carue, Lassoo and Funkfreed are resting up for the real action back at Shakky's, Zoro, Nami, and I are sticking in one place and coordinating things," I finished - before wincing sheepishly at the GLARE I felt hammer into the side of my head. "...or, well, I'm coordinating, Zoro's looking scary, and Nami is..."

"Contemplating murder, yes."

I winced. Riding on Billy's back as we walked provided a constant reassuring presence for our navigator, and the motion and sunlight all around us emphasized a feeling of freedom. Soundbite was even playing some genuinely relaxing music.

But even with that positive atmosphere on top of Kalifa's mind wipe, the fact that Nami was once again drawing a map off of the information that fishmen provided for her was...

...there really are no words to properly express how much I hated putting her through this situation.

"...I don't know how I'll ever pay you back for this, Nami, but—"

CLUNK!

She set the pen down hard on the lapdesk Franky had whipped up for her before turning her head to face me.

"I am gambling over half of our prize money and reliving eight years of excruciating memories to help make sure your plan works, Cross. Remember how I said I 'owed' you, back on Thriller Bark?"

She chopped her hand across her throat. "Yeah, back to zero."

She looked, inhaling and exhaling slowly, before turning back to me a little calmer.

"Just..." she huffed out. "As long as the plan works, it's worth it. It'll make us even richer and far
more importantly, it'll cripple the possibility of another eight-year-old girl going through the kind of hell that I did." She looked back down and raised her pen again. Her voice was dark—and more importantly, low enough for Soundbite to know to not broadcast it—as she put in her last word:

"But sticking me with this on top of the two years off? I don't care how much you think you can punish yourself, you do not want to imagine what I will put you through if your plan fails."

I shivered in existential terror, but shoved that to the back of my mind. "Rest assured, I've planned this out more than any other plan I've made on this crew, and we have allies to tackle it from every angle. Even if there are some unexpected outcomes, we will meet our primary win condition. We won't fail." My gaze sharpened into an outright glare. "We can't fail."

Nami let out another deep breath, visibly reassured. Slowly, I took in our surroundings. We were on the outskirts of the Sabaody Park, and while from the outside it looked like we were just sightseeing, Soundbite was in full surveillance mode in an attempt to map out the kidnapping gangs. Big surprise, but to the damn bastards, the park was one big barrel of fish. Literally, in the case of the merfolk children who came to the surface to fantasize about what they'd never had. And even worse, it seemed like parts of the park itself were designed to facilitate making people disappear among the attractions. Not all of it, thank God… but way too much for comfort.

It was a hefty task, but luckily we'd have help soon enough. We'd placed a call to the newly rechristened Rosy Life Riders, and they were on their way now that the blockade was down. But with how much of a time crunch we were in, we had to rely on what scarce information they could convey in passing and nail down the finer points ourselves.

Of course, between Soundbite's powers and Zoro and Nami's experience before they joined Luffy, that was more than enough to go off of. Which meant I had to ask… "So… anything else, Captain?"

"Mmm… no, that's it. Thanks, Cross."

"Thank you," I nodded back. And with that, Soundbite clicked the connection shut with a clear air of relief, one that I shared. "On the one hand, Luffy's seriousness is going to be an asset today. On the other hand…" I shuddered fearfully. "It never really gets any less terrifying to be on the receiving end of it."

"I think I'll skip feeling that particular feeling, thanks…” Nami responded, shuddering as well.

"Don't count on it, witch. He's not going to be happy with any of us when Kuma shows up again, and we're not surprised about it…” Zoro grumbled.

That got another shudder out of Nami, but it passed quickly. Putting away her writing tools, she leaned back and rolled her wrist. "Alright, I've got the outline of the master map done. Let's stop somewhere for a minute, alright? I need to put down some fine details and then it should be complete, or close to it. And on a related note, how far out are the rest of the Supernovas? Specifically, the one we need."

"Meh, not TOO far," Soundbite frowned. "KID, LAW, and BEGE had real MOTOR POWER on their side, they're all docking right now. From what I can glean from their crews' gossip, the others GAVE UP ON THE PRIZE, so they're taking their sweet time. AAAAND PLOTTING BLOODY VENGEANCE IN THE PROCESS… including our allies, TO AN EXTENT. SOUNDS LIKE THEY'RE STILL TICKED WE SCAMMED THEM OUT OF THEIR DOUGH."

"Sorry, not sorry," Nami and I gloated.
"SO YEAH, WE GOT TIME. THERE'S A CAFE WITH WHAT SOUNDS LIKE A DECENT GRILL up the block, we can plant ourselves there and grab a bite to eat while we plan our next move."

"Meh, you two go ahead and sit if you want," Zoro said, folding his arms behind his head as he started to accelerate his pace. "I'll just keep going and go for a quick walk—" OH GOD NO.

"ALSO, THEY HAVE GOOD BOOZE."

"Up the block, you said?" OH THANK GOD.

"Well, that was lucky…” I sighed under my breath.

"Not really," Soundbite shrugged, staying just as quiet. "I just noticed you were about to flip out and decided to shut him up. Lemme guess, he had a date with disaster?"

"Specifically, a World Noble…” I groaned. "So for now, let's just sit down, shut up, and let me try and downgrade my heart rate from 'jack rabbit' to 'normal'."

Mercifully, I got the moment's reprieve that I needed. A good, solid minute of rest. The hustle and bustle of the people and the bubbling and popping of the resin helped to calm me down. Honestly, as long as I could force myself to ignore the despicable undertone of the place, Sabaody Park was rather nice. Pleasant atmosphere, cheer in the air… the perfect place to relax and forget all about your troubles.

"Oi, you!"

Right up until I felt a hand land on my shoulder. And not a hand I was familiar with; something I oughta know given how pretty much everyone on the crew had grabbed my shoulder at one point or another. I looked at the person who grabbed me, and then I sent a flat glare at my other shoulder.

"And what's your excuse this time?" I deadpanned, ignoring the thug behind me for the moment.

"One malignant jackass splitting off from the generally PISSY MASSES," my gastropodal comrade sighed in dismay. "Didn't notice UNTIL HE WAS RIGHT ON TOP OF US."

Shrugging in acceptance of the excuse, I looked back up at the uninvited interloper with all the deadpan sincerity of a no-nonsense butler. "May I help you?" I inquired, though my tone clearly and precisely said 'fuck off'.

"You're that two-bit idiot on the SBS, Jeremiah Cross, right?"

…do I need to give any more context or exposition here? I don't think I do.

I snapped my hand up to stop any intervention from my fellow officers—you can bet they were already a foot out of their seats by then—as I turned in my seat so that I was halfway turned toward the guy. "Yes, that's me," I nodded… kinda politely. "Can I help you?"

"Yeah, you actually can!" the heavy-set guy nodded forcefully, before cooling off slightly and looking a bit apologetic? "Okay, uh, first, sorry about my tone. Just to be clear, I love the show, listen to every broadcast. Really great!"

"Oh, yeah?" I cocked an eyebrow at him. This all sounded good… so why was I getting such a bad feeling?
Then the guy's expression twisted in a way I just did not like. "But for all that your stuff's good, think could you do the world of decent people a favor and stop talkin' about those damn fish freaks on your show?"

My facial expression fell flat as paper. There it was. "Oh, yeah?" I repeated, my tone bone dry.

"Yeah!" the man nodded, still calm and apparently completely oblivious to my change in demeanor. "Look man, I know people whose kids listen to that show, and you can't just go around filling their heads with nonsense about us being 'equal' with those fish freaks! It just ain't true, and it'll screw them up something bad! That's not right!"

My eye twitched slightly, but that was the only muscle I let slip out of my control. But it was a slip that got most all of the passerby around me backing away, and fast. "Care to explain your reasoning?" I posed calmly and condescendingly.

Aaaand now he was looking at me like I was the idiot. The mind boggles. "I mean, have you ever even seen those freaks? They're all slimy and gross and weird! Total monsters, obviously. No clue how anyone could be stupid enough to actually think they're people—"

Okay, yeah, no, I'm heading this off at the pass, and I did that by shutting him up with a raised hand. "Alright, look Idjit—do you mind if I call you Idjit? I'm going to call you Idjit."

"Hey, what are you—?" Idjit started to protest.

"Listen, Idjit," I forged on, slowly rising from my seat and putting my palms together. "I've heard your arguments, your reasoning, and your logic. Now, allow me, as a fellow gentleman, to give you my calm, measured, perfectly rational response."

Acutely aware of everyone watching me, I patiently slid my right gauntlet off…

**CRACK!**

And cold-clocked the thug square across the jaw with my bandaged fist. Idjit let out a pained gurgle and collapsed like a sack of flour. I was very happy when he did not get back up.

I bit out a sharp tsk as I waved out my fist and gauntlet back on. "Fuck off, asshole," I snarled frigidly. I then turned on my heel and started marching away. "Come on, I want to put some distance between me and that waste of flesh. Before he wakes up and makes me do something drastic."

Nami blinked several times, dumbfounded, before she and Zoro hurried to catch up with me, Billy cowering behind Nami. "That was your calm and 'not drastic' response?" our navigator inquired slowly.

"Believe me," I snarled, flexing my palm and letting a ripple of air blast out of my Impact Dial as I seriously considered doubling back and putting it to use. "If I were pissed, his body would neither be solid nor in one location. Last time I tried talking sense to a couple of stupid bigots who wouldn't hear my words, I snapped. It's an exercise in futility and I am distinctly not in the mood."

"…What happened to the Cross who couldn't stand even killing an otter and a vulture?" Zoro asked.

"Two full-blown wars and a whole lot of ass-whupping later…" I grumbled mutinously. "Plus, with those jag-offs, I was the offended party, so I had the choice of turning the other cheek or not. He was shooting off about people who aren't allowed to say anything in their own defense. Big difference."

After a few more seconds of walking, I felt my body convulse in disgust as we cut through an alley.
"Then again, better him than one of the Nobles. I'm not sure how much I’d be able to hold back in front of one of them if they spouted their nonsense."

"Should I even ask?" Nami sighed.

"Fuhohoho! Your unease is an understatement if I've ever heard one, darling! 'Freak' is downright civil compared to their sky-island high egos. Ooh, I'm seeing red just thinkin' 'bout 'em!"

We all started and turned in unison towards the source of the voice. I had to actively stop myself from gaping at the sight of the person in front of us. Tall and lanky, he was wearing a purple disco outfit with the exposed torso and the stilted shoes and everything. Even had a set of opaque glasses to complement the whole getup.

…all of which I probably would have elaborated on had he not sported the biggest fucking afro I have ever seen. Seriously, the thing was rounder and larger than most globes I saw back in Florida, and I'd been to Universal! Weird color too, one side was auburn red, the other alabast—oh fucking hell was that a Poké Ball?!

"Of all the people here, you Straw Hats should know that words like 'freak' and 'monstah' aren't so much an insult as a mark o' pride to folks like us. No, nonono, ta make all the way out here? Out the Grand Lahne? Freakishly strong is exactly what we need ta be," the stranger said, dancing to his own beat—no, wait, Soundbite was actually pumping a beat into the air, which the stranger was grooving to. Moving his arms around, strutting around us like a prideful bird, spinning around in place every so often with the confidence of someone who'd been doing this kinda stuff for years. We could only gape at him like schoolkids watching Saturday Night Fever for the first time.

"After all," he continued, pointing off into the distance as he… moved his hips in a way that I missed because like hell was I looking down. "In order to truly revel in the chaotic rhythms and aromas of the Grand Line, you gotta choose to get down to the beat of strength, to become so freaky it causes a jam all the way from the Blues, y'know?"

He then proceeded to backflip and moonwalk past us. None of us even reacted beyond watching him as he shuffled to our other side.

"But really now," the 70s escapee lamented, cradling his face in his elbow as grandiosely as he had been thus far. "If anything, it's the bile that those 'high and mighty' spit out that we really take offense about."

Okay, there was something wrong with that sentence, but for the life of me I couldn't figure out what.

"Ah… what do you mean, 'we'?'" Billy asked, raising a wing.

By way of response, the man grinned… and in doing so, showed that his teeth were triangular and sharp and ooooh.

"Most o' the world 'cepted we wah sapient bein's ovah two hundred yeahs ago," he drawled in a flamboyantly Southern accent, the sunlight glimmering off his already radiant spikey smile. "But if you heard the tune o' what those Nobles are playing, they've never swung tah the same beat as the rest of us. It's naht even a mattah of seein' the truth and refusin' tah accept it. They are completely incapable of acknowledgin' us sea folks as anythin’ more than animals."

…you know, I didn't know it was possible to taste disgust until now. I mentally noted the acrid stench of seething rage and hatred emanating from my friends for the future, while taking a moment
to calm myself. Meanwhile, the stranger offered a much friendlier grin, swaggering up to me in a posture eerily similar to Luffy.

"Truth be told, dahlings, I ain't even a full-blooded fishman; half-land, half-sea but all me, baby, y'know what I'm saying? But if you listened to even half of what some of those snot-nosed brats spout off regularly, you'd be wanting to knock them sideways with your elegant steps too! So, to hear you defend us so vigorously, to see you lay that punk out with your elegant moves, it really brings a tear to my eye! Oh!" He shot his finger up in a picture-perfect point. "The courage! Oh!" He swapped his pose so that his other finger was pointing. "The humanity! Oh—!"

"Get to the point before I cut that shrub on your head," Zoro interrupted, undercutting his threat by clicking Wado Ichimonji out of its sheath.

"GWAGH!" Disco-dude staggered away from us, flailing his arms in front of his ridonculous 'do. "I-I-I just wanted a picture with the king cat of cool, man! With Cross, man! N-No need for slice and dice, I'm nice, I'm nice!"

Well, now, if he was offering… I snapped on a wide grin. "It would be my pleasure."

The flamboyant stranger's grin widened as he shot me with a pair of finger pistols. "Alright, groovy, dahlin! Strahke a pose! Oh, heyah." He tossed a shell I near instantly recognized as a Vision Dial to Nami. "Picked up this nifty doodad over in the markets, sweetest thing I ever did find! Just snap a pic and I'll split!"

"Mmm, I don't know…" Nami hemmed and hawed, giving the disco dude an uncertain look. "Something about all this feels… off to me—"

"Did I mention that I always tip my paparazzos most generously?" the dude drawled, flashing a 10K bill between his fingers.

"Cross, if you could move a little bit to your left, please, you're slightly out of the frame," Nami ordered, angling the dial with the intensity of a professional photographer.

I did as the meteorological witch ordered and sidled up to my fan, slinging my arm around his shoulders and donning a nice and massive smile to match his. And to put the finishing touches on it all, we both flashed peace signs to the camera.

"Alright, three, two—!"

"Say 'SOMBRERO-WEARING PINEAPPLE DUCKS'!"

I held my smile even through the twitch of confusion I felt until the flash went off. Then I fixed my partner with a flat glare and an ever flatter utterance of "…what even."

"WAIT, YOU NEVER—!? YOU DON'T REC—!? WELL, long story short, you're missing out," the snail snickered, getting back to bobbing and bopping to the beat he was belting.

"Fuhohoho, I'm inclined to agree with your little buddy," the stranger chuckled. "If I'd've bought that shell that recorded sound, too, I'd keep this song on hand all the time. As is, though… any chance I could get one more favor, Mr. Cross?" Taking the photo from Nami, he held it out to me along with a pencil.

Didn't take a genius to understand the request, and I didn't hesitate to sign out my name.

"Oh, thank you so very kindly. Keep up the anarchy, Mr. Cross, you've got a lot of people calling
your name! Bye-bye, now!"

With that, he dashed away with impressive speed, leapt onto a mangrove root, and backflipped off of it, finishing with a swan dive into the water below. Because of course he did. What else had I been expecting?

"Well, that was refreshing." I grinned, folding my arms behind my head as we walked away. "Seeing as the taste of bile and idiocy's been washed out of our mouths, how's about we go about finding a better place to relax while we wait for the rest of the star players?"

No objections were forthcoming, and so we made our way out to a new grove. But en route, a thought occurred to me and I turned my head towards Soundbite with an apologetic frown.

"Only just realized I should have said this earlier, Soundbite, but…" I shook my head, grimacing. "I'm sorry about making you listen to… all of this. The slave trade, the rampant racism… I mean, I expect you'd hear some manner of shit on a normal island, but this place is… concentrated to say the least. Are you alright?"

Soundbite stared at me with a neutral expression for a minute before heaving a tired sigh.

"Partner, let me remind you of something: THANKS TO THAT PHONE OF YOURS, I CAN HEAR THE WHOLE INTERNET."

I winced. "Ah," I coughed uncomfortably. "So, hate speeches, war documentaries, the worst parts of the gaming community—"

"BEHEADINGS, SNUFF FILMS, 'Kill Yourself' web pages…" he cut in with an unaffected deadpan before double-taking at my face. No surprise since I was boggling at him with no small amount of horror. "Well, I mean, I usually bury that shit under a mountain of memes, but thanks to this place hitting me on both fronts… ANYWAY, IT'LL BE ROUGH ON ME FOR A WHILE, BUT I'M FINE…" He glanced aside with a tired snort. "NOTHING I HAVEN'T SEEN BEFORE, ANYWAYS…"

"(・౪﹏౪・)づ." Gif swooped out of where she'd been snoozing in Nami's hood to comfort her audio counterpart, nuzzling her cousin.

"Oi oi, I DID SAY I WAS FINE, DIDN'T I?" he groused, though he didn't do anything but give her a slightly exhausted glance - right up until his eyestalks sharpened into a harsh glare. "HONESTLY, THE PROBLEM ISN'T HEARING THIS STUFF… IT'S THAT FOR THE FIRST TIME, I'M HEARING IT LIVE. BUT YOU KNOW WHAT? MUCH AS THIS ALL PISSES ME OFF… I'M ALSO HAPPY ABOUT IT. Because for once, for FUCKING once…"

A determined smile spread over his face, so different from his usual expression. "I can actually do something about it."

-o-

A good half hour later, in something of an eerie echo of Brook and Chopper in canon, we found ourselves relaxing on a bench with a decent supply of food and drinks. We were several groves over from Sabaody Park, in the heart of the tourism district, so as to avoid any undue PTSD. But even with our nerves cooled, it was still a massive relief to all of us when Nami laid down the final version of the map.

"Thank goodness that that's over," she sighed in far too much relief as she all but slammed her quill
onto the table. "Alright, the map's as done as I can get it. We can put it to use as soon as I know where to put the X."

"Should be coming right up," Zoro said, then knocked his frothing mug back with a glance my way. "Of course, I did say 'should…'"

I'd rebut that if I could, but sadly, I was too busy vindicating him on my current call.

As is, I spared him a scowl and a quick flip of a certain finger before refocusing on Soundbite, who was silent as he funneled the call he was carrying through my headphones. "So you're saying the answer is still no, no matter how much you offer, really? Ugh, what about if you doubled it, or even quadrupled? We could cover the cost, long enough until—damn it, he really said that?" I pinched the bridge of my nose with a groan. "No no, it's not your fault, I should have seen this coming, I just thought…"

I shook my head and waved my hand dismissively. "No, you know what? It doesn't matter. Look, does he actually have it, he just hasn't—? Perfect, then things are still a go. We've got people on our side who can handle that end of things, so all you have to do is be prepared to mobilize on yours once things go through. And I mean the moment that things go through; we're only going to get one shot at doing things the legal way, understand?"

I waited for the response, and then sighed in relief at the affirmative. "Alright, that's good. So, just to be clear, where will we be—Grove 77, then?" I snapped my fingers and pointed at Nami, prompting her to start scribbling a dozen annotations at once on her map. "No no, that's fine. Perfect even, yeah. Niice and poetic. Alright, we'll meet you there, just be ready to bring…" I winced and tapped my headphone's cup. "Yes, yes, I know, beating a dead Sea King, but ex-cuse me for being worried. After all, this is…"

I relaxed with a slight smile and nodded gratefully. "Yeah, good point. I suppose if anyone would understand, it would be you. Okay, I think that's everything then. With any luck, we'll be seeing one another before the day is out. Give her my best wishes, would you? Alright, godspeed. Cross out."

My good mood evaporated as I tsked and cut the connection, leaning back and massaging my suddenly tired-feeling face. "If I have one complaint about this plan," I groused. "It's the sheer amount of politics that I have to delve into if I want to get anything done. I'm only on the fringes here, but it's just as toxic as it was back in my world."

"Oh, you sweet summer child…" Soundbite crooned in as condescending a tone as he could manage. "It's only gotten WORSE SINCE YOU LEFT."

"I wish that was even remotely surprising," I grumbled, pushing myself to my feet and stretching with a relieved groan. "Alright, where are we on Supernova arrivals?"

"TIGER, ROOSTER, and MONKEY are standing by for your go-ahead… aaaand chatting with Goat for CREATIVE IDEAS ON PAYBACK, MIGHT WANNA SEE ABOUT GIVING THEM THAT CONTINGENCY OF YOURS."

"Over my undead corpse, you're on your own, Cross," Nami scoffed as she crossed her arms ever so primly.

"CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR, grinch," the snail cringed. "I THINK I HEARD BARTY MUSING ON whether Law's Room would keep someone alive if indestructible barriers were PRESSING IN ON ALL SIDES…"
Everyone present blanched except Zoro, who I could just tell was now looking at Barty's barriers as his next challenge.

"ER… as for the rest, HEADCOUNT IS… six. HAWKINS is the only one not here yet, but scuttlebutt—I don't say that word enough—says HE'S ON THE HORIZON."

"In that case, I could go for a few more drinks," Zoro said, getting to his feet as well and starting to walk off.

"Sounds good to me, I could use some booze after this," Nami agreed, remounting Billy and petting his neck. "And I imagine my little buddy here would like some refreshments too, wouldn't you, boy?"

"Can we get some of that good Cola stuff Franky likes so much?" the pea-duck squawked eagerly as we all headed down the street. "I hear you can put ice cream in it, and make it taste really good!"

"Soundbite, find this duck his ice cream parlor," I ordered, pointing down the street with overblown grandeur. "Allons-y, en avant!"

"Ouais ouais, je le fais," Soundbite snickered, crossing his eyestalks for a moment before nodding proudly. "ALRIGHT, GOT ONE! AND GOING BY HOW THEY'RE PLAYING OUR BEST HITS ON REPEAT, I think we can even score us a freebie or—NO!"

I jumped as Soundbite suddenly howled in absolute terror, and I could only stare in confusion as he started flailing on my shoulder. "Soundbite? What the hell's gotten into—?"

Soundbite didn't hear me, too busy babbling the same conversation in two places at once. "Nononono, you have to move, YOU HAVE TO RUN! FUCK, NO, THE OTHER WAY, GET OUT OF HIS LINE OF— DODGE—!"

And then, out of absolutely nowhere, everything we'd been doing stopped, and everything that was to come started…

…blam…

With both a bang and a whimper, at the exact same time.

A single, lone gunshot, far off in the distance. So far it was muted to the point of near nonexistence…

But with the impact it had on all of us, Pluton might as well have fired right next to us.

My breathing and pulse quickened as I pieced together what had happened at what felt like both mach speed and a slug's pace. "No… I choked, ice flooding my veins.

Nami was in much the same state I was, her face near instantly draining of color. "W-Was that—?"

"You know it was," Zoro growled, teeth grinding as he strangled Shusui, looking fit to bare it at a moment's notice. And yet, somehow, he was still the calmest out of all of us, a fact he demonstrated by snorting out a harsh breath. "We'll make them pay, but for now we should—"

And then we heard it.

…blam… blam…
The five of us didn't move for a moment... and then I felt and heard my blood *scream*, and before I knew what I was doing, I was running at top speeds.

I knew that I couldn't save them. I'd known they were dead at the first shot. I knew that, I knew! But... *but*...

GRAH!

-o-

"A *fine* follow-up shot, sir, both of them," complimented an armored knight, he and his company bowing their heads out of both respect and worship.

"Indeed, your greatness. And with that heathen disposed of, shall we resume your schedule?" posed a suited aide, a slate in his hands. "Before you were so rudely interrupted, you were perusing the mortals in the archipelago for worthwhile servants. Then, you said you wished to enjoy your luncheon with Saints Shalria and Charloss at noon in Grove 45, followed soon after by traversing to Grove 1 to—is something the matter, my lord?"

"Silence," Saint Roswald snapped, remaining otherwise motionless and staring at... nothing, with great intensity. But nevertheless, no matter how nonsensical the order and his actions were, the knights and aides silenced themselves one and all, lest they draw their master's ire next.

It would come as a surprise to nobody even remotely familiar with Haki that Saint Roswald had never awakened the ability. But the fact that he, like most of his kind, had a tendency to deliberately block most things from his senses and scorn everything he disapproved of which he could not, meant that the ability would have been lost on him anyway. Likewise, with such immense pride and belief of divinity, he would be more likely to doubt than trust even his own mind's eye when it presented an image of someone attempting to strike him.

As such, it was a mystery whether possessing the ability would be remotely helpful to the World Noble in fending off the uncommon feeling that was suddenly plaguing him: unease. Slowly and deliberately, the Noble turned to look to his left. Nothing out of the ordinary reached his eyes, yet the feeling did not subside. The order to his guards to investigate brushed the inside of his lips... then, he dismissed the notion just as swiftly, looked away and ordered his underlings onward.

His initial notion wasn't unfounded. Even those with unawakened Haki could get the feeling that they were being watched. Indeed, Roswald's familiarity with unease stemmed specifically from the fact that one specific Noble had been watching Roswald quite a bit over the better part of the last decade... and especially the past year.

It was perfectly appropriate, given that while Roswald thought that he was staring at nothing, he was in truth staring at a curtain of distorted air.

A curtain that dispersed the moment that the Noble was out of sight, revealing the livid form of Jeremiah Cross, whose hate-filled eyes Roswald had unknowingly met for those few seconds of uncertainty he'd felt.

The otherworlder's eyes followed Roswald long after the Celestial Dragon had disappeared from sight before turning away. He then approached the corpse and stared down.

Disgust stirred in his mind for the complete waste of potential, the inane waste of life for the crime, the apparently inexcusable crime of—of—!

He hadn't asked. He hadn't asked because he didn't want to know, because *it didn't matter.*
But…for all that he felt in that moment, for all that his everything was blazing and freezing and \textit{thrashing} at the same time…

His face was completely blank as he knelt before the cadaver.

Blank, as he removed one of his gauntlets.

Blank, as he slowly and respectfully closed the victim's eyelids.

Blank, as he straightened and marched back the way he came, donning his armor with curt, sharp, and coldly efficient movements.

Blank… even as he calmly droned the hate-filled instructions that heralded the start of the world's revolution.

"Everybody. It's time. Gather everyone together. It starts, and ends, \textit{now}.”

\textbf{Cross-Brain AN:} The stage is set. The curtain rises with the next chapter. Be prepared.

\textbf{Patient AN:} …And on a lighter note, for anyone who doesn't recognize the expy that got a picture with Cross, look up the ensemble dark horse of the Nintendo GameCube Pokémon games, Miror B. And while you’re at it, help us convince Nintendo to bring him back in a future game.

And on a related note, our immense gratitude to Thiscord users Cyber Josh, Aspiring Shoulder, and hydratiger83 for his characterization; they did most of the work on that section for us, and so we give them the credit where it is most definitely due.

And on another note, I'm just saying this one to obey the rule of three.
Part 2: Initialization

Cross-Brain AN: If we have not said this clearly before, let us do so now: Soundbite can hear the entire Internet *EXCEPT* for what happens in the plot of One Piece, courtesy of B.R.O.B.'s censoring. When he Awakened, he gained access to the soundtracks, nothing more.

We have toyed with the idea of him gaining other supplemental information like the gender-swapped and young pictures from Oda's SBS, but we have no plans of allowing him access to any more of the manga or anime. If it does happen, it will be as Cross's last boon from B.R.O.B. when his knowledge runs out, and even that is unlikely.

Sabaody Archipelago was, as has been demonstrated, a crossroads through which sapient beings of every origin and level of strength passed through. While the civilians on the island had the good sense to leave any big names that came through to their business, they weren't about to uproot their daily lives to do so. Infamous pirate with a multi-million beri bounty in the corner booth? They'd take their usual fish and miso soup a couple of seats down and not think any more of it.

It was an open question whether it was this attitude or the familiar and *mostly* welcome face on the smallest bounty holder that gained the four crews sitting together the locals' uncaring nonchalance.

…of course, it could have also had something to do with the smothering killing intent the pirates were putting out over their drinks.

"Eight. Billion. *Beris.*" Foxy ground out, glaring bloody murder into the center of the table. "Gone. In a *burst.*"

"Those fucks played us like a damn fiddle! 'Anyone's race' my mohawk'd ass!" Barto spat.

Law shifted out of his brooding long enough to cock an eyebrow at his recently acquired compatriot. "Even you, Barto-ya? Shouldn't you be lavishing them with praise over their *brilliant* plan?"

"Fuck praise, *I had 500 Million in that pot!*"
Law blinked at him in surprise. "That's… surprisingly sane for—"

"Now how the hell am I going to buy my fifty-foot tall bronze statue of Luffy, damn it!"

"…so what about you, big-mouth?" Law smoothly transitioned, entirely ignoring Barto's outburst.

Apoo merely raised an eyebrow. "I'm a long-arm, Surgeon. Do the math."

"And yet you're still pissed… why?"

Apoo scoffed as he knocked back his frothing mug. "I might appreciate the beauty of a con, but that doesn't mean I'm happy with them taking my money!"

"Uuuuugh, money, money, money! Is that really all you can bitch about?"

The fact that 'Weather Witch' Nami was able to unironically say those words to anyone as she, Zoro and Billy marched up to the table begged—nay, demanded—one response:

"YOU'RE THE LAST PERSON WE WANT TO HEAR THAT FROM!" all four captains roared.

"Told you they'd take it badly," Zoro blandly stated, digging a finger into his ear.

"And I'm telling you, I don't get what they're getting so worked up about," Nami dismissively replied.

"We're 'worked up' because you're the Straw Hats' rabid gold-sniffing bitch who'd put her firstborn up for collateral if it meant getting better prices," Law grumbled, his statement backed up by the gruff nods of his colleagues.

"'Prices?' What are those?" Nami questioned, deliberately tapping her finger on her chin before grinning cattily. "Ohhhh, you mean those little numbers attached to things? Yeah, these days I just
point at them and say 'send me the bill' and it all sorts itself out. What, that doesn't happen to you?"

If looks could kill, there would've been a new canal through the Red Line and no sign the Weather Witch had even existed.

"Just… get to the damn point," Barto got out through grit teeth.

"Well, if you insist," Nami simpered. Reaching into Billy's saddlebags, she took a sheet of paper out and handed it over to Apoo.

"I dropped by your ship before I came here. They've started mass-producing this map for our purposes. I've still got the original, but just in case, keep this one on hand."

"Awfully presumptuous, thinking we're still going to help you after you just conned us," Apoo said dryly, though he still took the paper.

Nami met his deadpan stare with her own.

"If we gave you back your entry fee with 10% interest, it would still be chump change compared to the kind of payday that we're about to rake in," she blandly told him. "We didn't bother warning you about our trump card because we thought you four would be smart enough to figure that out yourselves."

Two heads slumped over with black clouds of depression hanging over them; Barto, if anything, looked even more thunderous.

"I am going to kill them when I get back to the Cannibal," he snarled. Nobody needed to ask who he was referring to, and several prayers were sent skyward for… basically anyone on his crew with two brain cells to rub together. A list which, frankly, did not encompass much of the Barto Club's roster.

"I can still be angry about you tricking me, you know," Law responded, though his deadpan tone and expression contradicted the words.

"So be angry. As long as you follow the plan, we don't care," Zoro replied just as flatly.
Law sat back with a dismissive shrug, just in time for Foxy and Apoo to recover.

"Y’know what?" Apoo decided, stashing the map in his clothes and grinning at Nami. "The thought of that motherlode is making me feel better. So, what are we waiting for? I'm eager for my payday with a side of 'the Government will never live this down!'"

That killed the Straw Hats' collective good mood; Nami visibly grimaced.

"We're… waiting for Hawkins to get here…" She glanced aside. "And for Cross to be less likely to kill someone."

All four Damned grimaced.

"Why am I even remotely surprised," Foxy sighed. "With that snail listening to everything, it was pretty much inevitable that something would set him off."

"Could even be a good thing," Law muttered as he stretched out his neck. "Jeremi-ya seems to lose his scruples whenever he loses his temper. Not exactly counterproductive for burning down an island."

"It is when we're launching a three-pronged attack from every side of the law to make sure that this sticks," Nami snapped at him, drawing a slight wince and conceding nod from the superior Supernova. "Anyway… Goat, this meeting is for Supernova crews only. So, you're going to be doing something else."

The tone Nami used made Foxy more eager than resentful.

"All ears, Callie," he replied.

Nami pointed to one specific spot on the map. Namely, the one that had a large X on it.

"Gather your entire crew and stake out Grove 77," Nami ordered. "We've hit a little snag trying to
arrange things, so we need a first line of defense until we've got that solved. Pull out every trick you've got and make sure that nobody not on our side gets in or out of this grove until the kinks are worked out. You'll have Lassoo and Funkfreed for backup, they should already be there waiting for you. If you can do it perfectly...I'll waive your tribute money for the next year."

One second Foxy was frozen stiff, then the next everyone blinked and all that was left of him was a small puff of dust that quickly collapsed. Law pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I am a levelheaded and sane person," he groused to himself. "I enjoy being a levelheaded and sane person. But if insanity is the price for being able to break the laws of reality like this...I am conflicted." He cracked an eye open and looked skyward. "Where the hell are you, Cross? I need at least a little sanity back in action."

-o-

I stared blankly at the nearest wall, trying to get my jumbled thoughts in order. I was well aware that I couldn't save everyone. That hadn't been my goal when I came to this world. It hadn't been my goal when I joined the Straw Hats. It hadn't been my goal when I started the SBS. And it wasn't my goal now. The only ones that I had been determined to save at all costs were Merry and Ace, and I had already done both.

But the sightless eyes of that corpse, the bloody bullet wounds... it wasn't a named character, wasn't anyone of any significance. I would never know their name, and there was no grand event to play it up like the soldier who protested Onigumo's tactics in Enies Lobby. The person Roswald killed... was nobody.

That was why it had bothered me so much at the time, and it was still bothering me a bit now. But only a bit. It wasn't the main thing bothering me right this moment.

"YO, WHAT'S GOING THROUGH YOUR HEAD NOW?" Soundbite asked, looking me over.

I blinked and glanced at my shoulder in surprise. "How'd you know I wasn't still stuck on—?" I clamped my teeth down on my cheek at the sudden spike in my temper at the thought. "—on that?"

"Because I'm not an idiot?" the gastropod deadpanned before lightening up a bit. "You went from brooding with a gooey cream filling of head-tearing rage to CONTEMPLATIVE SILENCE, SO I KNOW THAT YOUR TRAIN OF THOUGHT MADE A TRANSFER. Sooo... what's up?"
I let out a grunt of acknowledgement and turned away, back to nothing in particular. "Well, without any sugarcoating bullshit... I'm considering the exact message that I want to send during what we're about to do, and if I have any right to send it."

"Aaaren't you the one who's been blaring THAT FIGHTING SLAVERY IS EVERY PERSON'S DUTY AS A DECENT PERSON TO THE HIGH HEAVENS?"

"Not about that," I snorted dismissively. "I mean the exact motivation, I... basically, I want to take a bit of a cue from a similar revolution that went down. You know," I jabbed my thumb over my shoulder. "Back home?"

Soundbite's eyes immediately lit up with an almost rabid eagerness. "OOOH! I GET IT! WANNA KICK UP WHAT STARTED IN BOSTON and then moved all the way to Yorktown? I CAN DIG IT! Let's turn the world upside down! Long live the red, white and blue! ALREADY GOT THE TUNES FOR IT TOO! AND A ONE, A TWO—!

It was right around when that flute rendition of 'Yankee Doodle' started that I decided enough was enough—

SMACK!

—and chopped him over the shell to shut him up.

"Knock it off, you Dixie-whistling dingus," I chided him, equal parts amused and irritated. "That's not what I was talking about... or, well, not entirely, anyway. You're definitely on the right track. I'm thinking of basing this off the red, white, and blue, yeah... just not that one."

"HUH?" Soundbite blinked at me before shaking his head to stare some more. "I'M SORRY, WHAT?"

I chuckled slightly as I dug through one of my coat's pockets. "Here, maybe this will clear things up a bit." I drew out a patch of fabric and held it in front of Soundbite. "I had Pappug whip this up back on Skelter Bite, before I knew about the clothes. This answer your question?"
My partner took one look at the patch and boggled in shock. The appropriate reaction, really.

Because yes, the flag patch I was holding up was decorated in the red, white, and blue. Except arranged not in the stars and stripes, but rather three equal bars.

"THE…THE FRENCH TRICOLOR!?" the snail queried, confused. "I mean, yeah, there was a REVOLUTION THERE, TOO, BUT NOT QUITE WHAT YOU'D TYPICALLY…Cross, how the heck did you get here?"

"Well…" I answered after a moment. "Remember all the times I've spoken French?"

I did not like the way he suddenly perked up. "OOOOH, YEAH! Water 7 really sticks out in my mind! Wanna do a repeat, refresh my memo—?"

"Finish that sentence and I feed you a salt shaker," I deadpanned, prompting him to recoil into his shell. "Anyway… long unnecessary life story short, I'm a bit of a half-and-half. One American, one French, and I spent a few years growing up in France. So I speak the language and know some of the history."

"NO KIDDIN', YOU MEAN YOU'RE HALF CHEESE-EATING SURRENDER MONKEY!?" Soundbite gasped in an over-exaggerated manner. "I've never mentioned this before, but I've always thought you smelled a bit—!"

"I already threatened you with salt, want to see how I can escalate with 'frog?" I retorted in an almost bored tone.

"…well, I was going to say the lavender fields of Marseille, BUT HEY, IF YOU'RE GOING TO MAKE THAT LEAP," Soundbite whistled in a way that could only have convinced a Tontatta. "BUT ANYWAY, THE FRENCH REVOLUTION… DIDN'T THAT GET REALLY MESSY?"

I nodded in acknowledgement. "In the later days, yes. Hence part of my hesitation."

"THEN WHY NOT 'YANKEE DOODLE' this mother instead?"
"Well, two reasons," I shrugged, raising a finger. "First, because that revolution was external, and about getting freedom from an oppressor. We try to buck the WG entirely from this place without the backing of the Revolutionaries, they'd burn it to the ground. This one, however, was internal. Lots of upheaval and change, yes, but so long as it's targeted it's more on point."

"Alright, I can see that…" Soundbite nodded. "And the second?"

"Well…" I rubbed the back of my neck. "The American Revolution was primarily nationalistic, and I can appreciate that, God knows I've sung the anthem plenty of times. But the French one… you have the web in your head, you know the chant just as well as I do. That? That was, and is, a personal cause, not about your flag but your fellow man. And, well, I've been in Paris on Bastille Day, it matches the Fourth of July in intensity, I know it's no joke. The stars and stripes stand for America, but these…" I tapped the stripes in my hand. "These stand for the human spirit itself. And that, well…"

I chuckled nervously and shook my head. "Maybe I'm just feeling homesick after almost a year off Earth or something, but… but… I want to bring the stripes here. I want to use them for what they stood for, all those years ago. Make sense?"

Before Soundbite could respond, I sighed and ran my fingers through my hair. "As for why I'm hesitating… well, as you mentioned, this all went real sideways real fast in the original take, and we can't really afford for that to happen here. But, beyond that… I mean, I've never really considered France to be a major part of my identity, you know? I know how to speak their language, I've lived there for a while, but… I've always described myself as an American first, if not exclusively. Do I… really have the right to use their flag and ideals for my war?"

For a moment, Soundbite was silent, and then he smiled. An honest one, for once in his slimy life. "I THINK THAT FOR A GUY WHO'S PROVEN HIMSELF TO BLEED RED, WHITE, AND BLUE AS MUCH AS THE NEXT TEXAN… yours can go either way just fine. You lived the life, talk the talk, and know the history. SAY WHAT YOU WILL, but it really is your culture. So whether or not you use it is up to you. BUT PERSONALLY, USING IT FOR A CAUSE LIKE THIS? Any sane person would be proud. I mean… I know I am."

The uncharacteristic support that my partner was showing me left me kind of unnerved, but not enough that I couldn't return his smile. Though was it hoping too much that he wouldn't spoil the moment?

"…if anyone asks, I told a fart joke there and NOBODY ELSE will ever know otherwise, got it?"
...maybe, maybe not. But hey, wouldn't be Soundbite any other way, would it?

"Ah, Cross?"

We both looked up to see Conis in the doorway, greasy paper bag in hand. "Sandwich?" she offered. "I got them at this stand called the Crazy Chicken, they're really good! All the Supernovas think so, too. Though, ah," she scratched the back of her neck warily. "I don't think they'll last or buy you more than a few minutes, and if I go in to restock the room they'll figure out why they're all here, sooo...?"

I pegged onto the implications and hastily stood. "So they're all here, then?"

"Yep!" Su barked, clambering up onto her partner's shoulder. "Hawkins just walked in and started intimidating everyone! I'd say you've got a clean minute before Kid throws the first punch on principle... or at least until Killer stops being able to stop him."

I nodded before giving Soundbite my best smirk. "You ready to do this thing?"

"What, you mean watch you SOMEHOW wrangle a pack of this hemisphere's TOP TEN MOST WANTED INTO DOING WHAT YOU SAY WHILE THEY ALL WANT YOUR HEAD?" the snail shot back. "Hells yeah, man!"

"Don't worry, don't worry," I said, waving my hand. "I'll get to the point faster than their patience runs out."

I pointedly ignored the way that Conis hummed uncertainly behind me. "Su... I'm sorry if I'm being pessimistic here, but... this is going to go bad in less than a minute, isn't it?"

And I really had a hard time ignoring the way Su scoffed with amusement. "Conis, please!...they're gonna shoot the minute they see his face."

And the worst part of all was that I couldn't quite find a way to turn around and deny her.

But we'd conquered impossible odds before. And with so much on the line, I was going to pull out
every stop to make sure that this time was no different.

-G-

Gathering the Supernovas together hadn't been all that hard with the number of News Coos Apoo had on his ship; a few albatross deliveries to the seven crews outside of the know and everyone was gathering in a room set up much like a conference room without a clue as to why.

…Well. The idea was that they had no clue why, but from the muttering filling the room they were all perfectly aware of who had summoned them. That they had complied anyway came down to either respect and/or interest in the Straw Hat Pirates or, and more likely, an interest in severing Jeremiah Cross's head from his shoulders and using it as a kickball.

Either or, they were all in the same place at the same time, and that was what was important. Well, that and the fact that a fight hadn't broken out yet.

"ALRIGHT!" Eustass 'Captain' Kid roared as he kicked in the door to the room he and everyone else had been led to. "LET'S HURRY UP AND GET THIS SHITFEST OVER WITH! I GOT MORE IMPORTANT THINGS TO DO THAN SUCKING YOUR—!"

"Move it, jagoff!"

**THWACK!**

"GAH!"

"You're blocking the door," Bonney groused, taking care to step hard on Kid's sprawled, prone form as the rest of the Supernovas filed in. Killer, kneeling down next to his captain, visibly fought the urge to stab a bitch with every step. At least everyone else kept their hands to themselves.

"Alright, we're all here," Drake announced impatiently, giving voice to the general tension in the room. "Can we move this along already? I have an appointment with a ship-coater and—!"

**SLAM!**
"MOTHER!" "Sonnuva—!" "Credit where it's due, these guys can do drama damn well."

These were the general reactions to the door slamming shut behind the Supernovas, plunging them into darkness. A darkness that was filled with grumbling and cursing until four spotlights illuminated four chairs with their backs turned to the pirates at the opposite end of the room's table.

"Number 2 on my List Of Things I Want To Say At Least Once In The Right Context™," that voice announced in a flat voice. An announcement that was further punctuated by three of the four seats swinging around to reveal 'Straw Hat' Luffy, 'Pirate Hunter' Zoro, and 'Weather Witch' Nami regarding the other Supernovas with uncharacteristic solemnity.

"Oh, bugger me sideways," was the general simultaneous sentiment of the other pirates.

It was then that the fourth and final chair at the end of the table swung around to reveal Jeremiah 'Voice of Anarchy' and 'that two-timing son of a bitch' Cross—and his little snail Soundbite—for once not smirking in favor of an easygoing, almost playful smile. "I suppose you're all wondering why I've gathered you here."

BLAM!

Cross gave Bege a flat look as an equally flat bullet slid off of the sword Zoro had put in its path before it could come close to hitting its target. "Did you really think that would work?" he asked—not demanded—in a tone that was more annoyed than anything.

"No, but it made me feel a lot better," the mafia pirate stated, stowing his smoking pistol. "Them on the other hand..."

C-C-CLICK!

Credit to the Straw Hats, none of them even flinched at all the firearms pointed at them.

"Just so we're clear?" Bonney grit out, tapping her finger on the grip of the shotgun she was toting. "This isn't us declaring war on you, Straw Hats. This is mostly just stress relief."
"Speak for yourself, I want their heads!" Kid snarled, splintering the wooden grip of his own pistol in his palm. "We went along with these jagoffs and they stabbed us in the back!"

"Actually," Drake, one of the few who showed no overt hostility, interjected as he patiently pushed Killer's gun aside. "They didn't quite do that."

"The hell are you—?"

"Kid, if we'd stabbed you in the back, you wouldn't be breathing to complain about it," Cross cut in, giving the second-best Supernova a thoroughly unimpressed stare. "We didn't draw blood and we didn't take lives. At best we scammed you suckers out of your money, at worst we screwed you over, but at no point did we leave you high and dry. Right now, all any of you are doing is bitching about how we managed to pull one over on you, all while conveniently ignoring one eentsy little fact: that each and every one of you would have done exactly the same thing if you could. Go on." Cross spread his arms wide, his grin gaining a bit of an edge. "Tell me, to my face, that I'm wrong."

There was suddenly a lot of pointed looking away and silent scowling going on. Cross's trademark smirk came onto his face.

"That's what I thought. So why don't you all get over yourselves, grab a seat, and let me blow your minds, hm?"

There was another moment of uncomfortable tension as the Captains (plus one) regarded one another, daring someone to make the first move. Unfortunately, it was once again Kid, only this time he seemingly de-escalated by forcefully shoving his pistol back into his coat.

"Fuck. This," he snarled, enough venom to kill a Sea King packed into the two words. "I don't need to sit here and listen to you talk to me like I'm some sort of idiot. You wanna jerk off your ego, do it to someone who gives a damn. But before I go, I'm going to give you a piece of my mind, you son of a—!"

Cross cut off the nascent tirade with a weary (and Soundbite-amplified) sigh. "Oh for the love of—if you're really going to be that pissy about it, here."

THUNK!
Where Cross's interjection had paused Kid, the sight of a massive sack literally bulging with both cash and gold slamming down on the table, in full view of everyone, held by Nami of all pirates, was shocking enough that all anger fled from his face.

"You put down ¥500 million for the race, here's 600 million," Cross announced with a roll of his eyes not at all becoming of the massive amount of money on display. "A net profit of twenty percent. Go on, take it. Stay or leave, it's yours either way. And this goes for all of you: if you're such sore losers, then so be it: we'll have your entry fees delivered back to your ships, plus interest. You can walk away, right here, right now, and it'll be like nothing ever happened. Or."

Cross slowly leaned forward, giving the Supernovas an absolutely chilling stare. "You can take the other route for an even bigger payout. And all you have to do is agree to parley, take a seat, and let me do what I do best."

It did not escape anybody that Nami hadn't raised the slightest objection to Cross's promise to give away over half of the pot that they had just won as a peace offering. Still, if only for pride, most of them hesitated; only Bartolomeo and Apoo took their seats immediately.

But finally, with a snarl of exasperation more befitting some sort of rabid animal, Kid sat down, every inch of his frame screaming discontent. Nobody could get a read on Killer's face, but it seemed like he dearly wanted to issue some kind of threat, even as he followed suit. The remaining Supernovas seemed similarly conflicted, but one by one, they took their seats. The last one to sit down was Drake, who was eyeing the Straw Hats suspiciously.

"If this turns out in the end to be another plot like you wove on Skelter Bite, you'll regret it, Jeremiah Cross."

Cross leaned back in his seat and ever-so-casually folded his hands behind his head. "Two things. First, though I may want to, I can't claim responsibility for that plan. It was a group effort in planning, execution, and benefit. My crew may have taken the pot, but the point was to make it to Sabaody, and all of us are here now. And second, tying into that… if you're insinuating that the reason I gathered you here was to initiate another mutually beneficial plan that will give all of us something we want, but the Straw Hats get the lion's share?"

Cross uncrossed his arms and leaned forward. "Well, of course it is. After all, if you can't find the collective initiative to snake some of the haul for yourselves, then that's hardly our fault." The tactician tilted his head to the side with an innocent stare. "Is that a problem?"
Glances were exchanged, and the silence was as good of an answer as anything else. Cross took that as his cue to smirk even wider.

"Well, then, now that you're all willing to speak like semi-civilized people..." Cross withdrew a Tone Dial from his jacket and clicked it on. "Let's begin."

-o-

"So, this is the... fifth time, you said?" Komei asked, a smirk playing on his lips as a freshly played Tone Dial wafted up and down from his hand.

THWACK!

Lowering her cane, Tsuru groused, "Don't you get smug with me, you weasel. Because trust me, you get smug every time and I'm starting to get sick of it."

"Then maybe get some better security protocols so we don't have to go through this again, hm?" the younger Vice Admiral retorted, rubbing the growing goose egg he was developing.

Tsuru allowed herself a thoroughly nasty smirk as she sat in front of her desk, leaning over to withdraw a form from one of the drawers. A form she slapped in front of the junior officer with a satisfying thump. "That's where you come in. Every step of your investigation and every leak you exploited. In triplicate. Before you leave this office. And yes," she added when Komei glanced down at his wrist. "This is where you've been getting your Carpal Tunnel from. Not so fun to be the smartest man around anymore, is it now?"

All Komei could properly muster up was a mutinous grumble as he took up the pen, set it to paper—

"Don don don don!"

"HA!" And let out a bark of elation as he caught the staff on his forearm mid-swing. "That snot-nosed rookie really is a good luck charm!"

"You can write and watch," Tsuru growled.
"What, you don't want my full attention on analyzing everything he shows us?" Komei smoothly countered.

The elderly Vice Admiral paused. Then, very slowly, she lowered her staff.

"...when you're asking me why I'm making you personally clean out the latrines like a rookie, and you can't remember why, I will simply tell you that you deserve it and I will be right."

Komei scoffed and leaned back in his seat with a cocksure grin. "That sounds like Future Me's problem. He'll have to deal with that himself. Right now, I can't be bothered."

Tsuru's eyes narrowed. One swipe of her staff at the chair later, and she was locking eyes with Komei. "You had better hope that this is one of the brat's longer broadcasts," she uttered before moving to answer the visual snail in the corner, which shortly began to project.

The image coalesced into the familiar form of Sabaody Archipelago, the pleasant sound of popping bubbles filling the room. As for the image... it focused on a group of individuals in nondescript hoodies that hid any identifying features, moving through the island with no haste, but a sense of purpose.

Both Vice Admirals peered at the sight, silently wondering what Cross was up to. Then the view zoomed in closer on one of the figures as they held up their hand, which held... a Dial—a Tone Dial—which he immediately activated with a click.

"Let's begin," the Voice of Anarchy's... well, voice, announced, his tone supremely smug. "First things first: Tell me, what do the Thirteen Supernovas know about the slave trade?"

In an instant, it was as if the entirety of Marineford was dunked in ice water.

Komei almost instantly had a flask out of his coat and in his hand, a haunted look in his eyes. "Please tell me you have more, because this will not be enough."

Tsuru, meanwhile, reached up to massage her newly throbbing temples. "This promises to be the start of a very long, very interesting day..."
As if to confirm their worst fears, a bevy of all-too-familiar voices sounded out from the shell.

~TWO HOURS EARLIER~

The reactions I got to my innocent question were… mooore underwhelming than I'd have thought.

"Of course," Drake exhaled, sounding positively tired as he pinched the bridge of his nose.

"HAHAHA! I should have known it would not be something un-amusing or simple!" Urouge laughed.

"Shoulda seen this coming, huh?" Bonney muttered.

"I actually did!" Apoo snickered, proudly taking bills from a scowling Kid and… an impassive Hawkins?!

"Wait, you mean to say that you didn't?" Bartolomeo demanded. "You, Mr. Everything-Has-Gone-As-I-Have-Foreseen?!

Hawkins merely shrugged. "Honestly, I predicted that he'd be burning this desecrated hive of scum and villainy to cinders. I woefully overshot."

"Yeah, sorry, but no," I cut in, getting everyone's attention again. "I'll admit to the temptation, but the archipelago isn't to blame, just the people involved in this. So yes, moderation. Now, if I may continue?"

Kid flipped me the bird, which I took as a yes.

"Anyway, skipping ahead a bit…" I adjusted my cap slightly. "You're all clearly aware of what the slave trade is and that it's present on this island, so let me reframe the question a bit: Why does it exist?"
"Allow me to specify," I elaborated. "Slavery is one of the grand peaks of moral bankruptcy. It is one of the worst actions one human being can commit against another, depravity in the extreme. Even we, who are regarded as the 'enemies of the world', acknowledge it as nothing short of pure evil that disgusts us one and all. And yet..." I waved my hand, indicating the very island we were on. "It not only exists, but thrives here in Sabaody Archipelago. Can anyone tell me why that is? Why the trade of human flesh still persists?"

Still more confusion, with glances exchanged and muttered speculations passed back and forth. This persisted until Bonney rapped her heel on the table.

"Come on, it's not that complicated, is it?!" the Glutton demanded, though there was a clear hint of uncertainty in her voice. "I mean... slavers, slave owners, they're all evil fucks! It's as easy as that, isn't it?... isn't it?"

Briefly, the room fell quiet...

"Tch. Idiot girl."

Quiet broken by a derisive scoff from Bege of all people.

Bonney, predictably, didn't take the slight well, snapping towards him with a snarl and gnash of her teeth. "The hell you call me, shortstack!?!"

Said shortstack, however, pointedly ignored her ire in favor of taking a slow, hard draw from his cigar and breathing out a hefty plume of smoke, before turning my way. "The answer to your question," he drawled patiently. "Is not morality, though that is a factor. But rather, the reason the slave trade continues on this archipelago can best be answered..." Bege tapped off his cigar's ashes rather harshly. "By money."

I nodded sagely. "To be more specific, it's economics. The age-old concept of supply and demand." I held up my hands like a pair of scales. "Somebody wants something, and somebody else provides that something because they will be rewarded for doing so. The bottom line for any purchase ever. And it applies here as it does any other good."
I held up my right palm. "Slave owners are the source of the demand: they desire slaves for a variety of reasons, which, at the moment, are irrelevant. What is important is that due to the illicit nature of the goods they demand—flesh—the 'value' of their demand is incredibly high, because of all the risks involved in its procurement."

I then raised my left palm. "This high value, meanwhile, is what attracts the suppliers, the slave traders. They deal in this evil practice because of what they stand to gain from the transaction, and their greed smothers all other considerations. Hence, they supply lives without losing a wink of sleep because it benefits them."

I leaned back in my seat and clasped my hands together. "I asked you why the slave trade exists, why slavers sell slaves, and now I'll give you the answer: the trade exists, like all trade exists, because it is profitable. Because by selling lives and liberties to the highest bidder, the traders get their hands on those highest bids."

I let that grim reality sink in for a bit before slowly donning the most vicious grin I could manage. "And it is that very profit," I all but purred. "That will make what I am about to propose all the more appealing."

~o~

It had taken a considerable chunk of a suddenly sharply curtailed budget to ensure that every room in the pagodas of Marineford above a certain size had gotten a snail and screen permanently installed, but with Jeremiah Cross's influence reaching new heights with each broadcast, it was a necessary expense.

It was this new capability that had everyone in Marineford on high alert from the moment that Cross posed his first question. 'Everyone' included the poor souls just looking to relax a bit in the mess hall, which when the Voice of Anarchy announced his point included Vice Admiral Garp, his two apprentices, and his executive officer.

"Ooooh, I think I get it now…” Coby breathed, staring at the screen with a flabbergasted expression.

Garp's expression was neutral, thanks to the throbbing goose egg he'd earned when Cross sicced Sengoku on him. Not an unfamiliar feeling, granted, but it still hurt. "Yeah, I'll admit it's pretty smart," he grumbled out tersely. "Hell, I'm almost halfway impressed with the little shit…”
"Except that you're still pissed at him?" Bogard deadpanned.

"You're damn right I am!" Garp snarled, slamming his fist down on the table. "I don't care how brilliant that plan is, it's my idiot grandson whose delusions he's enabling! Thinking he's a pirate when he should be a hardworking Petty Officer by now, I'll wring both their necks!"

Bogard's already flat, skeptical expression somehow fell even flatter. "You still think Luffy can be a Marine. When literally everyone in this room has orders to shoot him on sight." He punctuated the statement by indicating the mess hall where they were enjoying their lunch, which was practically seething with discontent aimed right at the screen.

"Don't be an idiot!" Garp snorted dismissively. "That little moron's made of rubber, bullets don't do jack against him. Believe me, I've checked."

"…and just like that, so many questions answered and so many new ones raised in a single sentence."

"Still, though… I wonder if anyone thought that they'd try pulling off something this big," Garp frowned, his tone conveying grudging respect. Extremely grudging.

"Yes, yes, I see," Helmeppo nodded along. "Well, at least I know that this little plan of theirs, as brilliant and intricate as it is, can't be any worse than breaking the blockade."

Everyone in earshot looked at him with the most dead of deadpan looks. Well, everyone except for Coby, who was too nice to do that. He just looked at him with pity instead.

"You have no idea what Cross is getting at, do you," Bogard stated more than asked.

"What?! T-That is preposterous! Slanderous! Salubrious!"

Bogard turned his attention to Coby, who was by now resting his face in his palm. "Next time you're by the library, stick a dictionary down his throat, would you?"

"Aye, sir…"
"If what we've realized is right, Helmeppo?" Garp said, fixing his second apprentice with a leer. "The word 'worse' is as much of an understatement here as it was when they attacked Enies Lobby."

"Case in point, sir!" Coby suddenly yelped, directing everyone's attention back to the display.

On screen, the disguised figures were entering a building. The camera made damn sure the entire audience knew that, lingering on the storefront and then the group walking up to it. But by all accounts, it was nothing special, an unassuming and ordinary building—a clothing store, lacking in any particularly distinctive features aside from an eye-searing neon green t-shirt prominently displayed on a storefront mannequin.

As the group pushed open the doors, the camera followed them inside, zooming down to swoop inside the corner of the doorframe and shoot up into the crown of the room. A move which the building's owner totally missed, as he was more focused on the dozen or so 'customers' that had just entered his establishment. Said owner looked at a group that practically radiated 'distrustful crowd' with a distinct lack of unnerve, which in turn set the nerves of all other viewers on edge.

"May I help you?" the shopkeeper asked, addressing them as though he dealt with shadowy figures on a daily basis.

"We were directed here by Mister Drago," the lead figure of the group answered in a measured—and unrecognizable—voice. "Our business is currently shorthanded. We were informed that you provide the disenfranchised with... quality employment?"

As the exchange progressed, the camera scanned over the interior of the building: a sizable space with nicely arranged mannequins and clothes racks with a selection spanning a fair age range and both genders.

The officers watching were meant to abide by the law and stop any wrongdoing that they saw. Here, however... it was very clearly just an ordinary clothing store.

"...Alright, I give up," Helmeppo said. "What dastardly deed is done in this dashery? Designer smuggling?"

Receiving no answer, the young Marine glanced at his best friend and recoiled in surprise at the expression on his face. How had that one sergeant put it? Oh, right, fit to shank a bitch.
Garp grimaced. "Oh, right, I had you helping with that overflow paperwork on the prisoner transfers…"

"You knew!?" the MCPO snapped incredulously.

"Couldn't do anything about it, none of us could," Garp replied, looking like he'd bit into a lemon with a cut in his mouth. "Came from above our heads. And before you say anything, above Sengoku's too."

Coby's face remained a few shades darker than his hair as he turned back to the screen. "Luffy… could this actually happen to…?"

"Uh… for the benefit of those of us who didn't help with that overflow paperwork…" Helmeppo prompted.

The confusion for Helmeppo and everyone else in the room not savvy enough to understand yet promptly evaporated when the owner slid the front counter's top back and opened one of its sides, revealing a hidden staircase to an underground level.

"Oh," said Helmeppo, then again, darkly. "Oh."

"Way too much, kid," Garp sighed, trying to knead away his growing migraine. "Way too much…"

He then glanced aside with a slight scowl. "And way too much of it is going places I can't follow…"

Meanwhile, on the screen, the hooded figures followed the shop owner down the stairs in single file. And as the view followed them, Cross's voiceover resumed.

~0~

"Alright, so the slaver scum stay scum because they're making money hand over fist," Law groused, shooting me a grim look that I'm pretty sure was at least halfway genuine. "What was the point of telling us all this?"
"The first half of this was meant to properly explain that the slave trade is profitable. Now I want to impress on you just how much it's profitable."

"Somehow I doubt you're building up to us getting a slice of that 'demand' pie ourselves."

"Well, you're not entirely wrong, but I'll elaborate in a bit. For now… let me impress on you all just what that 'pie' looks like."

I fished a pamphlet out of my back pocket and held it up for everyone to see. "Let's start with a baseline. This is a pricing list from the Human Auction House, located on Grove 1 of the Archipelago. It says that the starting bid for a single human is ฿500,000. As the Auction House is the single most successful slave store, let's assume their prices to set the standard. This means we can assume that one slave's life is worth ฿500,000."

There were a few grimaces and scowls at the idea of putting a price on a person's life—without them having done something to earn it, I mean—but nobody disagreed with me.

"Now, time for some simple math. Let's assume that one slaver sells on average ten human slaves in one day. That means that that slaver earned their lives' worth ten times over. So at the end of the day, that slaver has ฿5 Million."

A few of the gathered pirates shifted, but it was the shifting of boredom rather than interest. Kid's body language in particular screamed "Get on with it!"

"Next, let's broaden the scope a bit. Let's assume that there are ten slavers on the Sabaody Archipelago, and they all sell ten slaves in a day. Tack on another zero, and collectively that makes ฿50 Million in one place."

A few people perked up at that, but then eyed everyone around them, did the math, and settled down again. But at this point, Bege was starting to look interested.

"And now, let's move this into the fourth dimension a bit: time. See, the thing about scum like the slavers, there are two assumptions you can make about pretty much any of them: they're greedy sons of bitches, and they're paranoid sons of bitches. So! I swung my arms out in a grandiose manner. "What's the last thing a greedy, paranoid piece of shit's gonna do with his money? I'll tell you: let it out of their sight. Rather…"
I leaned forward, grin widening. "These kinds of people, they hoard their money, keeping it in arm's reach at all times, and spending the bare minimum to get what they need, both personally and for their business. Because while buying things with money is fine, for these guys it's more about having it. Make sense?"

While the impatience was still there, a handful of them—most of whom were Damned—nodded in understanding.

"So, as I said, time. Let's assume ten slavers sell ten slaves a day…” I knocked my finger on the table. "And let's assume they still have all the money they've made.” Another knock. "Over the past month.” A third knock. "Let's multiply our original ฿50 Million…” I grinned savagely as I finished. "By thirty."

One by one, everyone did the math in their heads. They ran the numbers, they added it all up, tacked on the zeroes… and one by one, their faces went slack as though they had seen the face of God.

"฿50 Million times thirty," Killer wheezed, knuckles white from how hard he was gripping the table. "That… that's…"


I think Bege summed it up best of all when he let out a sharp wheeze, as though somebody had kicked him clean in the gut.

But still, amusing as this was, we were on a slight time crunch, soooo…

"People, people, please…” I waved my hands placatingly. "I implore you hold your reactions until the very end. After all…” I grinned impishly. "I'm not quite done yet."

The way the other Novas' attention snapped to me, you would have thought I'd just offered them the One Piece.

"For you see, my friends, that number I just laid before you? That 1.5 Billion bounty?" I folded my hands patiently. "That's the lowball estimate.”
I swear to God, in that instant, I think I heard some of their minds break.

"You see, ladies and gentlemen, what you have to remember is that all those variables I was giving you were assumptions made to establish a baseline. In truth, the statistics inflate quite drastically, aided by the fact that Sabaody Archipelago is the world's premiere slave-selling hub. Not the only one, but the main one. And as such… we need to tick some of our variables up a notch."

I popped up one of my fingers. "Variable one: each slave house sells a lot more than a mere ten slaves a day."

A second finger. "Variable two: as this is the primary slave market, there are far more people here to exploit it than just ten slave shops. And of course, we also need to tack on the slave shops' own providers, the kidnapping gangs, who run pretty brisk business all their own."

A third. "Variable three: Sabaody Archipelago has been open for business 24/7/365 for the past two hundred years. And over that timeframe, wealth has built up and up throughout these groves, and I will just bet you that every person getting their hands on that money has been loathe, absolutely loathe to part with it for any reason whatsoever. Money comes in, it doesn't come out, and the numbers just keep. Ticking. Up."

"And lastly," I clapped my hands together as I hit variable four. "The most variable variable is price. As I said, ¥500,000 is the baseline for a human slave. The baseline. Now, I won't lie, chances are that some shops will sell on the cheap, for less than that, maybe even most… but others. Others will inflate their prices, and sell for more. And again, that's just humans. The lowest, the weakest, the simplest. Literally every other species that passes through here in chains goes for a price per head that is a full factor higher than that of humans. Truly sickening… and truly, truly profitable."

"And you're all forgetting one last variable," Nami piped up, transferring attention onto herself and her writhing and flexing Eisen Tempo. "The clients. Dozens of rich people, spread across this entire archipelago, bringing with them enough money to afford these exuberant prices and plenty left over. And of course there's their jewelry and the exotic pieces they wouldn't be caught dead travelling without on their yachts, because of course the rich must present themselves as such. Nothing but dressing and appearances…" Her expression and clouds lit up malevolently at the same time. "But appearances worth millions apiece."

"And it's all easy to just knock over and get," Zoro snorted with a grim smile that just promised pain. "After all, all the power that slavers and slave owners hold come from the fact that they hold the chains. Take those away from them, and compared to anyone in this room, they're nothing but
weaklings. And for once, weaklings who you can actually feel proud about kicking while they're down."

"My fellow apex outlaws," I picked up again, smirking menacingly at my stunned listeners. "I think I've built this up enough. My point of saying all of this is that while we could view these slave houses as hives of scum and villainy that are far worse than any one of us, we could view them another way. Namely, as our very own piggy banks, just waiting to be smashed open. And this archipelago, this horrid, wretched place of nightmares and misery, is the single richest location on this side of the Red Line, bar none. And it is all. All. Ours. For the taking."

~o~

The abhorrent image now being broadcast showed a dark complex reminiscent of a prison beneath the shop. As the shopkeeper calmly led the hooded figures into the corridor between the cell, three thugs rose from a nearby table, their smokes and cards forgotten, their posture at attention. Kinda. They were still just thugs.

But it wasn't this dark scene that had Totland's Sweet Commanders staring at the screen with wide eyes.

"How... has nobody considered this before?" demanded Cracker, his jaw twitching.

"Nobody who had the right balance of 'strong enough to do something about it' and 'too rich and powerful to give a damn about it', I would guess," Katakuri answered, his fingers tapping against his arms in intense thought. "As is, Mama and the Beast have always benefitted too much from slavers' services to even consider the idea."

Charlotte Smoothie snorted in equal parts disgust and sadistic anticipation. "Not the first time that Jeremiah Cross has imposed his worldview on his viewers."

Katakuri hummed and nodded in agreement. "Though the question is why he's sharing this opinion with a bunch of rookies who couldn't... be made to..." And so it was that the ineffable No. 1 of the Big Mom Pirates stiffened, his eyes widening in shocked realization. "...Oh."

Snack glanced at his elder brother with dull curiosity. " Eh? What're you—?"
On screen, the merchant cleared his throat, and the Commanders all fell silent.

"As I'm sure you've been informed, I offer a wide selection of merchandise," the trader announced, gesturing at his 'stock' dismissively as he took a seat behind a desk near the back of the room. "The pieces we have on display are good for menial labor, and if you're looking for a stress reliever we have new shipments in the back that haven't been fully broken yet. A handful of youths and a healthy supply of adult men and women. Base price is 1 million per head, but if you pay in cash or purchase more than fifteen I can arrange for a small discount."

"Hrm..." the leader of the group hummed thoughtfully, visibly tapping his fingers together. Stepping up and down the length of the prison, he examined each slave in their cage. Each slave, in turn, flinched back from the gaze.

The examination finished with the leader in front of the trader's desk. "How about I make you an offer and we go from there?"

"By all means, sir," the trader replied.

~o~

The mood in the room was positively jubilant. Beri signs had replaced eyes all around, and you could practically smell the greed in the room. It smelled like money, naturally. Everything seemed to be going as planned... except...

"Zoro wins, Kid's about to book it," Soundbite subtly informed us, rolling his eyestalks.

Nami scowled and Zoro smirked as our navigator tossed our mosshead a bundle under the table.

And true to Soundbite's words, Kid shoved himself out of his seat and turned for the doors. "Fuck you guys! You brought us here to set us on the slavers? Fine by me! Too bad for you it worked too well, I'm taking that money all for—!"

"Eustass Kid, you walk out that door and I guarantee that you'll be cutting a zero clean off your potential haul, if not all of ours," I snapped, slamming my words into his back like a sledgehammer.
A sledgehammer backed up by every eye in the room suddenly piercing Kid's back and freezing him in place.

*Ever so slowly,* the infamous captain turned his head to glare back at me, the air *rippling* around him with electromagnetic weight. "Say that again?" he growled. 

I almost flinched under the sheer force of his ire, and managed to channel it into a few twitches of my fingers. "There's one more trait to slavers that I neglected to mention and that you're forgetting, Kid," I patiently drawled. "Paranoid. Greedy. *Cowards.* They're rats, all of them. And what do rats do when *one* of them gets caught?"

"They scatter," Killer answered for me, side-eyeing Kid from under his mask. "Face facts, Kid: we've got a lot of bruisers on our crew, maybe second only to Bege even, but we don't have enough people to cover the archipelago. We can hit two, maybe three slave houses at the same time." He slammed his gauntlet down, hard. "And that's what we'll get. Three. Everyone else will hear that slavers are getting hit and go to ground. Instead of a fortune, we'll only get a fraction."

"Which is why we're all here," Law mused, cradling his chin. "If we want to hunt rats, then we need to do it right. Close every escape route, push them into a corner. If we work together… we'll get them all, or at least a hell of a lot."

"So the question becomes, Kid," I drawled, holding up my hand for him to see. "What do you *really* want to walk away with? Will you leave with gold bullion? Or will you let it all turn to gold *sand,* and slip through your fingers?"

Kid's face was as red as his hair when he turned back to me. Sighing explosively, the punk captain slammed back into his seat. "Hurry the hell up, Cross, because I'm this close to throttling you with your own hands."

I set my jaw and planted my palms flat on the table. "So noted. I'll try and keep this short. Nami, if you would?"

At my prompting, Nami withdrew a sheaf of papers from her jacket and slid them down the table. She held up a sheet of her own, showing it to be her map of the archipelago. "What you're holding is as comprehensive a map of Sabaody Archipelago as I could manage on short notice. Each red dot is a slave house. And as you can see…” She scowled at the paper, which looked like it had *chicken pox.*
"Cross was understating things when he said there were more than ten slave houses on this archipelago. Which is a good thing for our wallets, bad for covering the entire place. The truth is, even working together we're probably not going to be able to hit all the slavers before they bolt. But if you follow our plan and we position people and ships the right way, then we can move and clear the shops with maximum efficiency, and thus maximum profits."

"Sounds good to me," Kid said, standing up to leave again, though thankfully much less angrily. "I'll go get my jagoffs ready to go and then you can call me and… blrgh, start telling me where to start busting heads. Maybe cracking skulls will help mine stop pounding, come on, Killer!"

"And of course, while you're busting heads," I tacked in, tapping my fingertips together. "You could see about busting the 'merchandise's' chains open too. Why not, hm?" Maybe he'd take that as a given and we wouldn't have any issues. But more likely…

Kid stopped midstep, slamming his hand to his face with a savage growl. "…It is a mistake to talk to you again, and an even bigger one to ask you this question… but why, exactly, should we care about —?"

My gauntleted fist slamming down on the table was punctuated by Soundbite's Rottweiler-esque snarling. "Watch. Your. Wording."

"…the slaves," he finished tightly, though the door's hinges—no, the room's whole structure was creaking ominously.

Worse, while nobody openly agreed with Kid, I could see a few of our more 'morally dubious' allies side-eyeing me, awaiting an answer. Not that surprising, really, these were pirates we were dealing with, not saints. Hence why I'd come up with an answer long before this.

"I've got a few reasons that would appeal to you, actually. First, the obvious one: snubbing the Navy. "Yeah, that got them paying attention. "As you'll recall, we're right on Marineford's doorstep. In any other circumstances they'd have all three Admirals bringing down the wrath of God on our heads… but this is the one they explicitly can't touch with a ten-foot pole. Their reputation is in the toilet already thanks to yours truly, so if we free the slaves as we go, then we can commit our little 'crime' spree in broad daylight and all they'll be able to do is watch. This'll be front-page news to begin with; how much worse will it be if it's not just pirates freeing slaves, but Marines trying to stop them?"

It clearly took a lot of effort for Kid to not smirk at that, and nobody else tried to suppress the urge.
"Second, rob the dealers of their treasure and they're left broke. Rob them of the slaves too, and they're left with absolutely nothing. It'll dramatically reduce any future profits, but it also means we don't need to watch our backs for vengeance in the form of assassins, hired mercenaries, things like that. This also counts towards the 'kick them while they're down' side of things."

The promise of pain visibly swayed Kid more. Which wouldn't last long with what I was about to say next, but seriously—

"And number three… leaving someone in chains when you have the keys in your hand is a dick move" I declared, tone as dry as Alabasta in a drought. "Are you really telling us it's this hard for you to not be a dick? For, like, not even the whole day, just a few minutes at a time?"

"ALRIGHT, THAT FUCKING—!"

If my gauntlets hadn't had inset sea prism stone, they probably would have snapped my own neck before anyone could do anything. Since they did, though, Luffy had plenty of time to zip over to Kid and grab his arm.

With the dangerous look in his eyes, it came as a surprise what happened next.

"You can also ask them to join your crew."

"…what was that?" Kid demanded, side-eyeing the rubber man.

"You could ask the people you free if they want to join your crew," Luffy repeated. "It's not just normal people who get taken, it's pirates, too. Some might be too strong, but others could have been tricked and then they couldn't get out. A lot of them will probably want to go home, but if you free a pirate and they still want to go back to the sea, after all they've gone through…"

There was a heavy moment as everyone mulled over Luffy's words. From the eager grins that spouted ten seconds later, they agreed. Hell, some of the Supernovas seemed almost more eager about this prospect than the money.

"He has a point," I admitted with a smirk, snapping Kid's irate—though now somewhat restrained—
glare back to me. "Whoever you free is going to look at you as a savior. I know you wouldn't care about a bunch of civvies liking you, but Luffy's right, even pirates can get bagged. Hell, it's even more likely because a bigger bounty and the kind of physical strength and stamina you get at sea both make a person more valuable. And if that muscle's will hasn't broken by the time they're set loose? Well, you won't find a more loyal crewmate, now will you?"

Kid grit and ground his teeth as though the sign of admission were being tortured out of him, and normally I'd revel in that, but I still needed this mutt to work with me on this, so…

"But hey," I shrugged in an exaggerated manner. "If you're that opposed to it, then fine. Just stick with my group during the hunting. You grab the money, I'll break the chains. Hell!" I swept my arms out to indicate the rest of the Supernovas. "We'll all do it. Split our crews up and mix the parties. That way, nobody can pull one over on the others, keeping us all honest. Satisfied?"

Kid stared for a few moments, twitching slightly. Finally, he sighed again, somehow managing to relax while staying just as tense. "I hate you, Jeremiah Cross."

That ticked my temper a bit. Standing, I marched up right in front of him, Luffy stepping aside, and stared him right in the eyes. "And I'm not your biggest fan either. In case you missed it, I don't give you shit for shits and giggles, I do it because while none of us in here are saints, you're a literal monster," I spat. "If I could I'd send you to Davy Jones in a heartbeat, but much like the Marines and Akainu, you're more useful to us breathing."

"You want me to change my tune, give me a damn reason to. But until then, we can either stick together and give the world a right hook that will leave it seeing double for the rest of its days, or you can walk out that door and be on your merry way, not having lost a beri from having associated with me. And it's all entirely, entirely your choice. So you tell me, Eustass 'Captain' Kid…"

I stuck my hand out to the punk metal pirate, still glaring into his eyes.

"Are you in or out?"

~0~

"I'll make this nice and simple," the group's leader announced. "I have two offers I can put on the table: either you can hand us the keys to your earnings and savings, along with the keys to every slave collar in this joint… or I can give you a lifetime supply of chocolate. So tell me, good sir.
Which will it be?

The slaver, up to now thoroughly professional, leveled an unimpressed glare at the speaker, the thugs nearby fingering their weapons. "I don't know what you think you're playing at, but in case you haven't noticed, I'm running a delicate business operation here. I don't welcome jokes in my establishment," he tersely answered.

"Ahhh, but see, this is the Grand Line, and someone like you is good at reading people. So tell me, friend…" The group leader tilted his head. "Do I seem like I'm lying to you?"

The trader stared at his would-be customer for a minute, looking him all over, judging his words and person. And then, his eyes slowly widened in shocked realization.

"…you'll really give me a lifetime supply of chocolate if I ask for it?"

The potential customer gave him a thumbs-up. "Last you 'til the end of your days, guaranteed."

The trader's expression lit up and he let out a bark of shocked laughter. "Then hell, should be pretty obvious, yeah? I'll take it! Give it to me!"

"All too gladly," the hooded figure chuckled as he reached into his coat and held out… one bar of chocolate. The shopkeeper's expression collapsed entirely into even stronger blandness than before.

"…You serious? How do you consider this—?!

KA-CLI-CLI-CLICK!

The trader's words died in his throat as the visitors to his fine establishment produced well over a dozen firearms between them. There were at least two for every guard, and four on the trader himself.

The leading figure shifted his hood just enough to reveal a cheery grin. "Would you like to enjoy your chocolate now, or would you rather take a mulligan?"
"W-W-What the fuck is this?!” the slave trader gibbered, somewhere between furious and terrified.

"Whaaaat, you've never been *robbed at gunpoint* before? My oh my, you have my sincerest congratulations!” the hooded man laughed, applauding. "Truly, your clientele must be outstanding paragons of virtue."

"Y-You little…” the trader snarled. He stepped forward, but hastily reversed direction when four thumbs cocked their guns. "W-Why the hell are you doing this, huh?!

"Weeeell, most first reason I can think of is that you're scum of the earth who deserves to have the worst things imaginable—things that you've done—done unto you, but honestly?"

The trader nearly had a heart attack as the leading man tossed back his hood, revealing the familiar smirking face of Jeremiah Cross, with his damnable pet snail resting on his shoulder.

"Yeah, my identity says it best, huh?” Cross smirked tauntingly.

"Wait, you're—? H-Ha… haha!” The trader suddenly broke out laughing, a wary relief in his voice. "You're b-bluffing! *You're bluffing!* You wouldn't kill me! None of your c-crew would!” The slave trader jerked fully upright and slammed his palms down on his desk, snarling at Cross. "You really t-think I'll ruin myself just because the worst a little twerp like you could do is beat me up!?”

Cross and Soundbite exchanged mischievous stares and malicious smirks. "True, we'd likely just beat you black and blue and leave it at that…” Cross admitted.

And then, without warning, another figure grabbed the trader's head and slammed his face down onto the desk, their other hand drawing a pistol and planting it against the side of his head. The hood slipped off from the motion, revealing the wickedly grinning visage of a pirate that was decidedly *not* a Straw Hat.

"But I don't have any problems putting one through your skull and leaving you for the Sea Kings,” Eustass Kid leered. "Got any doubts about that?"
noticed the trader looking his way, he shrugged casually. "Hey now, what do you want from me? My captain isn't here, and I rather like living. Getting in the way of Kid to save your worthless ass runs counter to my sense of self-preservation."

"COME ON, DOES THIS REALLY SURPRISE YOU?" Soundbite taunted. "I'd say that a lack of empathy is something you of all people SHOULD REAAAALLY EMPATHIZE WITH!"

"What do you want, what do you want?" the trader begged miserably.

Cross's smile turned cold. "Let me be nice and clear here: your life is over. It's your choice whether that statement is literal or metaphorical. Now… we'll be taking all the funds in your coffers and every last one of your victims. If you're still inclined to resist, I should warn you that I wouldn't be able to stop my 'associate' here from tearing you apart if I wanted to. And quite frankly?"

"He doesn't want to," Kid finished, bloodlust radiating from his grin as he increased the pressure he was putting on his victim's skull. "So by all means, give me an excuse."

"Th-th-th-the vault is down the h-h-hallway, last door o-on the right, the keys are right h-here! A-a-and the guards have the keys for the slaves, the stock room is through the side door!" the shopkeeper babbled, the keyring in his hand jingling when he fished it from his belt. Kid snatched the ring, shoved him aside, and kicked him in the ribs while he was down for good measure.

"Haul's all yours, as agreed," Cross nodded. Kid gave the slightest of nods back before stalking to the end of the hallway. One of the thugs had enough common sense to toss Cross his keyring; the other two still hesitated. Cross rolled his eyes and gestured flatly at the rest of the hooded figures still with him. "Did I forget to mention that these guys are from other Supernova crews, i.e. not Straw Hats?"

*That* loosened the hold on their keys right quick.

Cross nodded in polite thanks. "Much obliged." His expression then darkened, a jerk of his head directed at the pirates behind him. "Knock 'em out."

The guards barely had time to look scared before their lights (and more than a few teeth) were punched out.
As tempting as it was, leaving the slave merchant and his lackeys alive was the better thing to do, both morally and pragmatically. It kept the operation's image clean and would spread the tale throughout the slaving community.

All of those considerations damn near went out the window he opened the side door and got a good look at the slaves' 'living' quarters. If their current state of existence could even be called such.

Each and every person in that room was chained to the wall by a bomb collar around their necks. Skin exposed by frayed reject bin clothing oozed blood and other, more unpleasant liquids from weeping sores. But it was the faces that really got to him. Faces painted in despair and hunger in their dark bags and prominent cheekbones, traces of anger and sadness only barely visible. And there were easily dozens of them; as the trader had said, he didn't lack for diversity.

It took a solid minute for him to fight down his anger, and after that minute, he climbed onto a convenient crate, looked all of the slaves over, and spoke.

"As of three minutes ago, this place is OUT! OF! BUSINESS!" he announced, garnering the undivided attention of the EX-slaves in the building. Unsurprisingly, skepticism was the order of the day, but many of the ex-slaves had some life back in their eyes. "I'll say again, all of you are getting out of here. If you think you can get home safe on your own, feel free to bolt. Anyone who can't find their way home, follow the maps we give you. We'll have you out of those chains as soon as we match the keys."

Silence met his declaration, disbelief tinged with hope upon their faces. But as he split the keyrings between the other pirates with him and they began testing keys and keyholes, the realization that they were about to be free began to sink in. Tears welled in their eyes, and with them cries of relief and adulation.

Cross wasted no time once he had the cells open, recalling the organizational process that CP9 had used and finding to his relief that the slaver had a similar labeling system between keys and their chains. One by one, Cross fitted the keys, prisoner after liberated prisoner offering him their heartfelt gratitude.

And this trend would have likely continued, were it not for a major, and unexpected, interruption.

"What the hell is the holdup, Cro—"
Cross couldn't quite bring himself to care that Kid had stopped mid-demand, focused as he was on going through the keys.

"Either shut your mouth and help or shut your mouth and get out, but either way, cram it."

Finally locating the right key, Cross inserted it into the lock. He was thus caught entirely flatfooted when a ripple passed through the air, the lock in his hands, and in fact every lock in the joint, clicking open all at once.

It took Cross half a minute to properly reboot his brain, and by the time he turned around and looked back at Kid, the other pirate was already halfway to the store's exit.

"We're wasting time. Come on," he tossed over his shoulder dismissively.

Cross stared at Kid's back in stunned silence before nodding and snapping up a quick salute. "… Aye-aye, Captain Kid. Lead the way."

And though Kid didn't openly acknowledge either of the gestures, the fact that he actually missed a step spoke volumes.

Once the moment had passed, Cross followed behind him, deftly positioning himself as he walked so that he impeded as few of the escaping freed slaves as possible, even helping a particularly injured man hobble up the stairs.

And as he went, smiling all the way, Cross patted the pocket where he'd stashed his Tone Dial.

~o~

I clicked my Tone Dial again, ending the recording process; that should be more than enough material to get the ball rolling. Now we just needed to start this thing off and it'd be over before the World Government could even process what was happening to it.

As such, with parts assigned and crew combinations roughly hashed out, everyone got up to leave the room. Right in the middle of the door, however, Bonney paused and looked back at me.
"What aren't you telling us here, Cross?" she asked, everyone else freezing themselves. "Look, don't get me wrong here, I'm willing to believe that you're not going to double-cross us this time, and God knows that this is totally in line with something you would pull, but at the same time I can't shake the fact that it isn't. No matter how big what we do today is, no matter how unprecedented… the fact is that it's still too simple. Too… fleeting."

Bege was the next to frown at me. "She's right. Even after we've burned down these slave houses and stolen all of their 'goods', they'll still have their skills and connections, and still have any funds they keep stashed off the archipelago. Some of them have to be prudent enough to store some savings off-island. No matter how much we reduce to ash, it will all be like nothing ever happened a few months from now. So tell us, Cross. What's the real scam here?"

I coughed and tugged at my collar, taking a second to arrange my thoughts…

"…We're not the only ones who'll be doing this."

Only for that to become unnecessary thanks to Luffy, of all people. My captain wore an expression that even I couldn't quite decipher, and when he didn't elaborate, I bowed my head and backed up a bit, which got him to continue.

"Why do pirates bury treasure and use X to mark the spot?" Luffy asked.

Continue into a very weird place that had the Supernovas looking at each other in confusion, but continue nonetheless.

"Why do we wear eyepatches and have hook hands and peg legs? Why do we listen when people call for parley, or a Davy Back Fight?" he forged on. "Why do we fly the Jolly Roger as our flag?" Silence. "None of you know why, do you?" The doubtful looks the other captains wore spoke volumes. "I'll tell you why: It's because all that stuff is just what pirates do. It's who we are, what piracy is. We do all of that stuff because it's how things are done, how things have always been done."

"You're talking about the memetic identity of piracy…" Law mused thoughtfully.

"Chalk up another ingredient for the ANACHRONISM STEW…"
I hid a chuckle in a cough, but sobered up quickly, because Luffy looked confused again. I nodded. Yes, Law was right.

"Anyway, this identity stuff, it's how all pirates define themselves," Luffy continued. "I know there isn't really a pirate code or anything, but this is pretty close. And now..." Luffy tilted his head forward, and the shadows of his hat made his eyes burn. "Now we're going to add one more thing to it all."

In the space of a second it was as though the room was struck by lightning. Luffy gave it no time to settle.

"We're not going to tell the other pirates," Luffy... no, Straw Hat Luffy explained. "Because this can't just be 'our plan.' Instead, we're going to start on our own. When the pirates who are here all learn about this from our crewmates, and when everyone sees it on the SBS, they're going to think 'we can do this too' and do the same thing we do. And then, because it was their idea and it worked so good, they'll do it again. And again. And again. And when the other pirates see that we'll grow our crews, our treasure, and our reputations in a way that the Marines can't attack us for, they'll take their own cut of the meat just like we will."

"And it will keep happening," Nami picked up. "Over and over again, because it's easy and it will work. They're going to learn that this big, vile beast known as slavery bleeds gold, and they won't stop cutting into it until it runs dry."

"This plan becomes a legend," Zoro picked up, drumming his fingers on Shusui's hilt. "The legend spreads around the world, people imitate the legend. The legend fades into obscurity, and the raids become tradition. And even when tradition fades, the habit remains."

"And lo and behold," I chuckled as I spread my arms wide, as though it were all nice and self-evident. "A new dawn on a new world. Simple, no?"

From the awestruck expressions of the Novas, I'd say it was more than simple enough for them.

Bonney slowly sank into a chair, staring off into space. "You're... going to set piracy against slavery..." she all but wheezed.

"And not just slavery, but other reprehensible criminals who are not pirates as well!" Urouge uttered,
"It'll make pirates a *whole* lot of enemies..." Bege wondered, his expression swiftly lighting up as realization struck him. "And when other criminals band together and try to fight back against pirates, they'll hit those *uninvolved* too, and draw vendettas on their backs! Pirates band together to survive, fight even harder against criminals... this isn't just drawing lines in the sand here, it's carving them in stone!"

The mood was quickly rising, vindictive glee filling everyone to the brim...

"But this won't change pirates, you know."

And then of course the mood was popped, though rather than Kid doing it, it was actually Killer who grounded us in reality.

"They'll still loot and pillage, still go after civilians," the masked marauder stated. "And even then, this won't be instant. Five years, ten? The next generation, or the one after? No matter what, easy money says we won't live to see this through."

I let the mood hang heavy for a bit. But only for a bit. "You're right, we won't. But that's not the *point*. Even if this *won't* change everyone, it *will* define us. Define our generation, define those who can adapt and grow, and those who are locked in their ways. In the end, we will be as immortal as Gol D. Roger. And I think that's a goal we can *all* strive for, isn't it?"

The room fell silent once more, but this time it was with an awe and hope that was *truly* positive. Maybe I could pump it up a *little* more...?

"Oh, and have I mentioned the *other* payment to all of you for going along with this plan?" I whistled 'innocently'. "Well, consider it a surprise for later. You're all gonna *love* it."

Aaaand just like that everyone was glaring daggers at me. Even my own crewmates!? Oh come on!

"A *good* surprise!" I clarified, snorting and crossing my arms in disgust. "Eesh, you people, no trust."
"Your last 'surprise' robbed us all blind!" Barto belted out, to the nods and grunts of everyone else once more, including my own crew, seriously?!

"And yet you're still standing here like I promised and—Ugh, forget it," I groaned, waving my hands. "Yeah, you know what, I'm done arguing over this. Let's just move this along to the part where we boot the World Government in the balls, please?"

~o~

Once more, the population of Amazon Lily had clustered inside of the colosseum, and it took Boa Hancock and Boa Marigold every ounce of willpower that they had to keep any semblance of composure. Though their hellish memories roiled just beneath the surface, the reality of one of their wildest dreams before their eyes was stirring too much shock and bliss for them to succumb.

"Even after everything else… I never expected that they'd go this far," Marigold whispered.

"The fact that he has those other rookies nyon helping him is proof enough that he's been planning this one for a long time," Nyon said shrewdly. "Even so… the question nyon is whether it will be enough."

"It must be," Hancock nearly snarled, staring with determination at the screen. "I never expected anyone to do this much damage to those damnable slave traders again, but now that this is before my eyes… I've only dreamed of this happening, and I will not accept the possibility that he fails!"

Hancock's voice was relatively quiet, the passion within notwithstanding. The nearby amazons couldn't hear the words she said, but they could definitely interpret the fury therein. And nobody wondered why considering that they now had a view of the erstwhile slaves in sunlight rather than the dimly lit dungeon. Every scar, every teardrop, every dirt stain, every evidence of the slavers' abuse was plain as day as the dozens of humans—men, women, and children alike—embraced their newfound freedom.

Rather quickly, the screen burst into motion. Many of the more recently captured slaves were quick to bolt without a second thought, undoubtedly running off to either find quick transportation home, or rejoin whatever crews or ships they'd initially been on before getting snatched.

Others, however, who showed more significant and longer-lasting scarring, were nowhere near so eager. Those unfortunate individuals had been imprisoned for so long that either they were too weak
and disoriented to get very far on their own, or the transportation they'd used to get to the archipelago had long since departed. These were the people who were stranded.

But those without recourse actually had one option remaining to them: the maps that had been handed out to them by the pirates. Despite their new freedom, several of them were hesitant, whether from general trust issues or trust issues regarding pirates specifically. Ultimately, though, they had little choice in the matter, so the released slaves used the maps to get their bearings, and started migrating to the destination marked upon them.

As the slaves made their escape, the pirates casually strolled out of the now-defunct shop, idly watching the escapees stream around them.

"So now what, they'll just go from shop to shop, beating up slavers and breaking their chains?" Marigold hissed. "The others will bail like rats, I thought Cross was smarter than that! He said that himself, even!"

"Hold on, Mari nyon," Nyon interrupted before the larger of the Boas could really rile herself up. "What did he say earlier? None of the pirates with him are part of his crew. And in fact, Kid is with them. So, what does this say about how well the other Supernovas took his plan?"

"…good. Very, very good," Marigold reasoned, settling back into her chair.

"Still…" Hancock sigh despondently. "I would greatly appreciate some sign of how well their endeavors are going."

A few seconds ticked by. All three women looked at the screen with frowns.

"Really, nyon he's usually so punctual when someone—"

**KRA-BOOM!**

"—no, never mind, there it is!" Nyon yelped, reeling back.

And indeed, all eyes in the stadium were locked on the screen, thanks to the explosions roaring on it.
Any actual smoke and flame, however, was conspicuous in its absence. The explosions themselves sounded… distant, even.

"Those must have been the other parties," Hancock mused.

"Any of ours?" Kid unknowingly echoed.

The latter pulled out a map, his eyes roving over it quickly, before adopting a demonic grin.

"Not a one," he confirmed with a tone of immense satisfaction. "Gotta love the speed of word of mouth."

The Amazons all boggled in shock at that little revelation. "Wait, what!?" was the Boa sisters' echoed sentiment, but Nyon got ahold of her much more quickly as her eyes widened even further in realization.

"Is… Is he trying to—?" the Elder breathed to herself.

Meanwhile, the more reviled pirate regarded Cross dryly before snapping his head away with a sharp tsk, and an even sharper grin. "Guess you're halfway useful for something after all, you arrogant jagoff."

Cross snickered as he walked off, backhanding Kid's arm as he passed. "Come on, shit-kicker. Let's go and earn our bounties."

That sunk in for a few moments, and a decision that Hancock had been debating for the last few days finally crystallized.

"…Elder Nyon."

"Yes, Snake Princess?"

"Do you still have that number that Sandersonia sent us a few days ago?"
"Why, yes, yes I do. Why? Are you considering the idea of accepting?"

"No… but I am considering the idea of considering."
Jeremiah Cross had, of course, had the good sense to turn on the transceiver's dead zone before he commenced the SBS. Even with all of the Supernovas' crews in place, odds were that any competent slaver could pack up their 'stock' and vanish with only a few minutes' notice. Despite this, there was one loophole that it couldn't prevent: a snail that was on a call with another snail off of the island could listen in to the SBS by proxy.

And so it was that the owner of the Human Auction House was in the middle of a panic attack.

"Oh my god oh my god oh my god they're coming to get me!" Disco wheezed, digging furrows into the top of his desk in an attempt to keep his brain from outright collapsing.

"Nyeh nyeh, calm down, you're overreacting," the voice on the other end of the line droned, noisily snorting up an errant trail of snot.

"OVERREACTING!?” Disco shrieked. "THE STRAW HATS ARE HUNTING SLAVERS AND I RUN THE BIGGEST SLAVE HOUSE ON THIS HELLHOLE! THEY EVEN MENTIONED IT BY NAME! I'M A DEAD MAN, YOU HAVE TO TELL DOFLAMINGO TO—!"

"Nyeh, you'll be twice as dead in ten seconds if you don't shut up," the voice cut in, any trace of
"Good humor gone."

Disco instantly locked his jaw, crushing his panic for what *could* happen to him under the *immediate* threat for his life. "Y-Yes, Master Trebol…” the auctioneer miserably whimpered.

"*Right, that's better. Now, then…*" Trebol huffed, tamping his temper back under control and readopting his carefree leer. "*Although you presume much in thinking you can tell Donquixote Doflamingo what to do, you are right that something needs to be done.*"

And then, just like that, the sticky-human's leer took on a flavor of pure evil. "*In fact, the Young Master foresaw something just like this from the moment the Straw Hats set their eyes on Sabaody. Which is why the Young Master is already handling it.*"

"More specifically, that's why *I'm* here."

Disco jumped and span around to the voice behind him, inside his *locked* office, and *staggered* as he tried to leap away from one of the last people he ever thought he'd see.

"Y-Y-You…!" he wheezed in mortal terror, his brain misfiring as he tried to figure out *what the hell was going on.* "W-What are *you* doing here?!!"

"Oh, you know, not much…"

The malicious smile on the newcomer's face made Disco very grateful for very many things in his life.

First and foremost, that he was an ally, rather than an enemy…

*Of the Donquixote Famiglia.*

"Just taking care of business."
"If Chopper were here, he'd be having a field day with how we're using these bubbles," Nami remarked through slightly gritted teeth.

"We've having enough of a field day without that," Carue returned in a similar tone. "Awso, youw thwee o'quawck."

A quick bolt of lightning lashed out, frying another sap attempting to blow the whistle on the Straw Hats' coup, with perhaps a bit more force than was usual for Nami. Understandable, though, when she recognized the mark on the sap's arm. Some choice comments from Soundbite about the sap's establishment were just gas on the fire.

"Thanks. You've definitely got that right," Nami huffed, swirling her clouds around as she built up a fresh charge. "Honestly, why couldn't these bastards have set up somewhere sane and typical and flat, like a desert, or a plain, instead of this damn labyrinth—Billy, barrel-roll!" The navigator clenched tightly onto her mount as he spun in midair, slashing out the bubble from under another runner, and discharged a blast of voltage into the runner on his way down. "That comes complete with three-dimensional vehicles?! Also, one's going high."

"On it," Carue said, zipping across a half-dozen bubbles to the trunk of the nearest mangrove. In an impressive display of his training, he charged up the trunk and pushed off to body-slam the bubble biker off his ride. "And shtay down! And tah be faiyah—"

"Fair!?!" Nami and Billy squawked in indignant unison, the prior throwing in a concussive blast of wind that cheerfully introduced her target's skull to the nearest building.

"It's not wike 'dese guysh awe vewy conshidewate to begin with, sheesh, wet me finish my sentence," Carue scoffed as he hopped back onto the bubbles.

A few seconds of travel later, another target came into sight. Before anyone could attack, though, a flying fish zoomed in and bodychecked him, sending him tumbling out of view. The Straw Hats halted, staring, giving the rider time to direct his mount into a controlled, slow glide towards them.

"Status update, sirs and ma'am," the rider said, saluting. "Boss Duval and Motobaro have joined your guard force at Grove 77; the rest of us are spread out and awaiting your orders."

"Glad to have you guys on our side this time!" Nami replied with a quick salute of her own. "Tell most of your guys to keep finding and bushwhacking these schmucks as long as you can and keep them inside Soundbite's dead-zone so they can't raise the alarm. We want the element of surprise to last us as long as possible!"

"Aye-aye, ma'am!" the fish rider nodded, before his gaze snapped down to the roots of the mangroves. "Er, for the record, does that include those three guys trying to sneak by down—ah, no, they're running."

"MINE!" Carue quacked, shooting down at the hapless slavers.

"While Carue bounces those stooges off the pavement," Nami said, the ongoing carnage a flicker in her peripheral vision. "You have any updates on how the rest of the teams are doing? The explosions are pretty self-explanatory, and I'd normally ask Soundbite for details, but I'd rather not distract him
any more than absolutely necessary."

"Of course. Let me see..." The Fish Rider withdrew a map from his jacket and gave it a quick scan. "So far, things aren't going bad. Your captain, as well as the Mad Monk and Roar of the Seas are going strong, they'll be done with the 20s Groves pretty soon. But, eh..." The Rider paused, scratching the back of his neck. "The 10s are proving to be a... bit more of a challenge."

-o-

"LOOK OUT!"

It was this panicked cry that allowed a knot of slaver-employed mercenaries to narrowly avoid getting slammed into the wall by the ballistic body of one of their comrades.

Never mind that that would have been a far kinder fate than what the two pirates they were fighting were planning. A fate that one of them experienced almost immediately by way of Bonney ramming her heel into his chin. "Alright, anyone else want some, or are you going to do the smart thing and give yourselves up for a slightly less severe beatdown?!" she demanded, the unconscious sap she'd kicked bouncing off the ceiling and the landing behind her in a crumpled heap.

The mercenaries nervously shifted around before one of them, fumbling behind his back, opened the door that he'd been backed up against. Immediately, he vanished into the dark room beyond, his comrades scrambling in after him. None of the pirates moved to stop them, not even when the last mook slammed the door behind him and the sound of haphazard fortification filtered through.

Bonney sighed in mock-disappointment. "The hard way it is, then. Now... Bepo, right? If you wouldn't mind...?"

"Aye-aye, ma'am!" the polar bear barked, marching up to the door. One firm kick from a mink that had run with Trafalgar Law for eleven years, and neither the door nor the hasty fortifications behind it stood a chance. Bepo took a few steps into the darkness past the door, only to leap back a few seconds later, ducking and covering on the ground to avoid the salvo of bullets that smacked into the far wall. Bepo pulled the broken door shut again and looked at the Supernovas with him, expression apologetic.

"I'd like to report that I think we just chased them into their armory, ma'am," he said.


"No, but it'll make me feel all warm and fuzzy inside to see him bleeding."

"You were supposed to!"

On the other side of the room, Ever rolled her eyes as she brought her heel down on a cage's lock.
"I really hope that the other groups are being a lot more efficient than us right now…"

-o-

Two stoic Supernovas, one with a bored smirk and the other with an impassive scowl, stood before a particularly stubborn slaver.

"Let's make this nice and simple, mister scumbag slaver," Trafalgar Law stated patiently, drumming his fingers on the barrel he was using as a makeshift table.

"Listen here, you worthless shit, my name is—!"

"Irrelevant, because of just how dead you're about to be," X. Drake cut him off.

"See, here's the thing," Law explained. "As you'll recall, we have a third bigshot with us today. And even though he doesn't look like it, he's Black Leg Sanji, of the Straw Hats. This is important because right now, he's outside comforting the mother who we just freed from your gainful employ. And he's comforting her because she just begged us to retrieve her child, her seven-year-old son, who you sold earlier today. Which means that you have all of ten minutes to cooperate with us and give us what we want before Sanji comes in here and kicks you to death. So, for the sake of keeping this brief and moving things along… tell us who your buyer was, would you kindly?"

Law's expression stayed stoically smug for a moment before shifting to annoyance, an expression he directed skyward. "No, I will not get a mustache and a golf club, why would I even want to?… no, I don't care how appropriate or hilarious it would be to hit him with the golf club… what do you mean I would be the one getting hit?!" Scowling, he stood up from the barrel with an annoyed grunt. "Finish up here, would you, Drake? I need to see a snail about an impending saltshaker enema… yes, you heard me, a saltshaker!"

Drake rolled his eyes as Law wandered off before taking his place. "Look, here's the deal: Your books state that you sold the child for 2.5 million. Borderline extortion even if you consider longevity, meaning that whoever you sold to must have been wealthy. Now, normally we'd have already beaten your head in for this, except you don't record your customers' names. But someone like you, I don't doubt you have it somewhere in your head. Now." Drake leaned his head forward just so, so that his now-slit pupils were appropriately shadowed. "Talk."

"C-C-C-Come on, it was just a slave!" the trader whined desperately, somehow managing to combine that and incredulous annoyance in the same breath.

In response, Drake's expression and demeanor returned to calmly impassive. His hand grabbed the slaver's head—

THUNK! "GAAAH!"

—bounced the slaver's face off the top of the barrel between them, cracking its lid clean through.

"That was wood," Drake drawled impatiently, ignoring the slaver's howls as he cradled his shattered nose. "The next one will be metal. Let's try again, before I have to get insistent."

-o-

A simple question: what do you do if your business is being attacked by pirates, and the entirety of the island you're operating on is their target? A simple answer: get off the island. An answer every criminal not under attack grasped and executed. Or, at least, attempted to execute.
See, in their panic, they failed to consider that the simplicity of the solution meant that any competent attackers would have long since thought of it first, and thus set up countermeasures.

"The same story on a different day... but why am I doing this?" Bege wondered aloud. Beneath his feet, the Nostra Castello's cannons aligned with the ships trying to flee from Sabaody's main port. Thus immobilized, his men and a grab-bag assortment of pirates from other crews could and were boarding the ships to question the crews and search for any 'illicit' cargo.

"I mean, really now," Bege continued to monologue. "I have plenty of treasure, a big enough reputation, and a solid crew behind me already. So why am I playing the big damn hero here!?"

"Because you were the one who turned to piracy because 'enough' was never enough, perhaps?" Hawkins mused from the prow of his ship, the Grudgedorf, which was moored next to Bege's fortress-ship. His eyes never left the cards spread on the velvet-covered table before him. "For my part, it appears that Cross's little 'surprise' approaches pricelessness in its value," he added.

Bege huffed out a mouthful of smoke and shook his head.

"Or is it simply because of the debt you acknowledged when they attacked Enies Lobby?"

Again, Bege did not answer the other Supernova, under the pretense of searching for one particular ship name. And then a snail rang inside his headquarters—that is, his quarters inside his head—and suddenly the pretense was no longer a pretense.

He tapped his finger to his ear, Hawkins curiously glancing up. "What?"

"Got a ship for you to look out for," came Drake's dry voice, his expression tense. "Keep an eye out for a royal cruise liner called the Weynsnipe. They spent a lot for just one kid, so they're likely to have plenty more cash onboard."

"Along with the kid, yes yes, I got the implications. I'm not Black Bart, you know..." Bege groused, side-eyeing his companion. "Priority target, the Weynsnipe, a luxury ship. One kid in particular."

Hawkins exhaled in disgust, then got to his feet. "Shall we, then? I believe that one is just ahead, the luxury craft 90 degrees off the port side. It would certainly explain why they've been so dead set on trying to leave before everyone else."

Bege snapped his attention around, noting the garish ship, and promptly scowled as it suddenly dropped full sail and tried to make a break for open waters.

"As I was saying..." the diviner sighed.

"Yeah, that's our target alright. HEY!" A round of blanks aided his shout in getting the attention of his subordinates. And also the attention of the contingent of dugongs that was helping support said subordinates and maintain the aquatic advantage.

As for the Weynsnipe, the people onboard were sent into a panicked frenzy, alright. A frenzy that only accelerated the ship's progress away from the island. Hawkins sighed and snapped the cards in his hands back into their deck.

"If they're this inclined to resist, better to cripple their vessel. Do you have any harpoon weapons in your arsenal?" the Magician inquired.

"Shouldn't you already be able to tell that for yourself?" Bege demanded.
"I realize that I am a measure of what you plebeians would call 'bullshit,' but I am not that level of bullshit," Hawkins huffed, rolling his eyes. He set down his cards and rose to his feet. "Rather, I'm the kind of 'bullshit' who has to tell you to duck so that I don't run the risk of accidentally incinerating you."

"What're you—GAH!"

Bege was given ample warning, as Hawkins had only begun to draw the blade. His panic and haste in hitting the deck were because he, like anyone else on Skelter Bite last week who was not a swordsman, had no desire to be in the crosshairs of a cursed sword that was as dangerous as any Supernova and ten times more bloodthirsty than Kid.

A prudent move, as it turned out. Hawkins' almost dismissive slash with the cursed blade let loose an arc of green fire that not only ripped the Weynsnipe's sail in two but also set what remained of the sail and a good chunk of the ship's mast on fire.

Hawkins resecured the sword in its sheath, which appeared to be one gigantic metal seal tag, then retook his seat as their ships approached the Weynsnipe. "The Dugongs will likely be displeased with this amount of damage," he remarked without a hint of remorse. Then he paused and slowly turned his head to focus toward the ship. "Do you hear those cries?"

Bege looked at the wrecked ship, tilting his head and outright cupping his ear… then he heard it, and his eyes narrowed as he identified what Hawkins meant. They fell into silence until they boarded the ship.

"Alright, who owns this rotten tub?" Bege 'asked' the cowering crew and passengers who'd been cornered on deck—though for all that his tone was calm and even, 'demanded' seemed more accurate for the sheer sense of foreboding his short stature exuded.

Only one person seemed unaffected, and it was that person who stepped forward, everything about him screaming 'pompous.'

"Y-You uncouth, ill-bred ruffians are being an inconvenience! Do you have any idea who I am?! Bah, doesn't matter: relinquish the funds to repair my ship and maybe I will ask the Marines to be lenient with—AAAGH!"

The demonic scarecrow that had just torn at his arm stepped back, leaving behind superficial but bleeding cuts. As Hawkins resumed his normal form, he gathered the blood from his fingertips and let Bege take over scowling at the noble. A scowl only amplified by the cries he could still hear below deck.

"You're going to tell us where the kids are," Bege rumbled—literally rumbled with a voice too big for his small body—as he marched forwards. "And if you do it fast enough, then maybe you'll be able to walk before the end of the century."

"And if you hesitate to comply, you will wish you hadn't," Hawkins picked up, shaking the newly woven straw doll he was holding. "We have our reasons to sack this archipelago without killing anyone, but you would be surprised what you can live through."

So saying, Hawkins stuck a pin stuck through the doll's right arm, and the noble screamed as his corresponding limb tore open and started dripping blood. He grabbed his arm in terror, staring at the pirates with wide eyes.

"I think this is the part where you beg and concede," one of the passengers said helpfully, with no
small amount of guiltless glee. A glee he backed up by directing a suddenly far more amiable expression to the pirates. "For the record, those of us who work for him only work for him, nothing else. So, any chance we could just abandon ship and leave him to your 'mercies'…?"

Bege took a few seconds to gauge their faces before answering.

"Go, then. Take half of what you can carry," he said. He gave Hawkins a look that the other pirate returned; it was apparent to both of them that whichever ones went for their weapons were insincere. With that, the Castle-man took the cigar from his mouth, brandishing the burning tip it at the noble.

"Want some more incentive?"

"ALRIGHT, ALRIGHT!" he screamed, ripping off a jeweled necklace that, upon further examination, was a keyring. The pirate replaced his cigar and took up the ring.

"And?"

"They're below deck, center door then center door again!"

The former don strode off without another word, casually breaking the door off its hinges as he descended into the depths of the ship. Passing through the second door, his face turned to disgust; the door was fortified, as were the walls, while the room itself was a spacious sitting room. There were two clear holes in the fortifications: one crack from the damage above that had crippled the soundproofing, and the other sealed by steel bars. Beyond which was a group of kids.

Every last one had tearstains on their eyes, and it took only a moment to identify the one who had just been added: he was the most terrified of them all, and was chained to the outside of the cage.

Suppressing a sigh, Bege approached the boy and, gently but firmly, raised his head so that his eyes locked with Bege's own.

"Come with me. I'll take you back to your mother," he said softly. The boy trembled, but after a few seconds, his hand hesitantly reached out to take Bege's own. He looked at the other kids, their expressions wary but hopeful. Shock overtook the other emotions when Bege unlocked the chains of the boy beside him and then dropped the keys to the cage and chains within easy reach.

"As for you, you're all free to go. Go to Grove 77 if you don't know your way home from here." Bege jabbed his thumb over his shoulder at the suit-wearing pirates that had entered the room behind him. "And if you need help getting there, just ask some of my guys and they'll do you a solid."

Two of the kids didn't hesitate, bolting out of the room as fast as their legs could carry them, and the rest didn't take long to follow. A few remained until the others had gone, and Bege watched them until the cell was empty. He looked over it carefully, seeing nothing of note, before sending a mental order that had a cannonball flying behind him as he walked out, obliterating the cell.

Miserable sobbing met his re-emergence as the noble watched the children escape, to the disgust of every pirate present. Bege also noticed Hawkins raising a brow at him, almost certainly because of the boy who was still holding the ex-don's hand.

"I guess I've just got a soft spot for kids," Bege shrugged with casual—and not exaggerated—indifference. "Somewhere in getting called 'father' all these years, I've thought about being a real one."

Hawkins watched him lead the boy away, his expression unchanging.
Indeed, totally unchanging. Anyone who implied that the Magician had a look of respect and/or approval at that was nothing more than a soon-to-be-suffering liar.

SLAM!

"AGH, SONNUVA—! HEY, WE GOT A RUNNER!"

Speaking of those destined to suffer…

Hawkins huffed a tired sigh as he flicked a nail at a blind corner, waiting patiently for it to strike the ground—"AAAAGH!"—and secure the runner's foot to the floorboard while he calmly sauntered around the corner.

A second later, one of the Law Pirates—'Penguin', his hat proclaimed—ran up and grabbed ahold of the would-be escapee, using one hand to shove them against the all while the other wiped at his bloody nose. "Ugh, piece of—thanks for that, magic man! Caught this charmer!" He emphasized the words by stomping on the nail, drawing a whimper of pain from his captive. "Trying to sneak out through a porthole with a freakin' slave! Ballsy, gotta give him that."

"Mmm," Hawkins noted. "I imagine our compatriots will find ripping said balls off quite… enjoyable."

"Y-You stupid pirates!" the still-struggling captive howled in both outrage and panic. "Don't you get it!? We've gotten away with this for this long because the law is on our side! Once they get to their ships, the port authority'll shut you down, and if you try fighting back, Marineford is right next door!"

Both pirates fell silent while they processed that statement before Penguin donned a bloodthirsty grin. "Oh, can we tell him? Please tell me we can tell him! I really love how the hope dies in their eyes when we tell them this bit!"

_That_ drew a slight smirk from Hawkins. "Quite." He turned a gimlet eye on the prisoner, causing him to stiffen up. "I believe that you will find," the Supernova drawled emotionlessly. "That the local government is slightly preoccupied."

-0-

"We've finished securing all the corrupt elements and have them detained and awaiting arraignment, ma'am. All that's left is the man up top. Would you like us to finish this?"

"That won't be necessary, captain," Mrs. Libia answered, not breaking her stride through the halls of the Sabaody Regional Government's headquarters. "I'll be dealing with that man myself. For now, have your men maintain the perimeter and keep this quiet for as long as possible. I don't want word one of this to get out until it's too late for anyone to do anything."

"As you say, ma'am. And on a personal note… give him hell."

Libia's hands clenched into fists at her sides. "Seven years' worth, captain. And you can believe I'm going to make him pay for each and every day of it."

It was with those words that Libia reached and shoved open the doors to the building's executive wing, striding into the heart of the local government with a squad of local officers—police officers, mind, not Marines—hot on her heels. The group's march through the offices went wholly unimpeded, thanks to the wing having been swept a few hours earlier, and as such were almost dead silent due to the sheer number of vacancies that had suddenly opened up that day.
'Almost' being the key words here. There was one last source of noise in the office complex: a muffled storm of bellowing, originating from the highest office of all. And it was in the direction of this very bellowing that the party was marching to.

The bellowing was almost loud enough to bother Libia and the officers when they reached the foyer before the head office. Only the governor's secretary remained outside, a professional, calm air around her contrasted mightily by the cold sweat on her neck and trembling frame. Hard to say if it was her boss's anger or Libia's entourage that was more to blame.

"Does he have a weapon?" Libia asked immediately.

The secretary swallowed and shook her head. "He's…" She looked up at the officers. "…never needed one before."

Libia nodded and looked over her shoulder. "Give me a minute, please," she said, receiving a nod from the head officer before stopping her ears, calmly opening the door—

"—HELL DO YOU MEAN 'INDISPOSED!' WHAT IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN THIS!? GET ME THE CAPTAIN NOW, THESE PIRATE SCUM NEED TO BE HANDLED!"

"Maybe so, sir, but that doesn't change the fact that Captain Higuchi isn't available —"

"THE HELL HE ISN'T!" Prefectus roared, slamming his fist right next to the snail's head. "I PAY THAT MAN'S SALARY, HE'S AVAILABLE WHEN I SAY HE'S AVAILABLE!" The governor then snapped his gaze to the side with a sharp tsk. "But if he wants to spit on my years of generosity, then on his head be it, literally. Get me Lieutenant Kalsa at once, and tell him—!"


"Now is not the time, Miss Libio!" Prefectus snapped at her, waving her off without even a glance her way. "And you will address me as Governor! We will have words about your lack of respect at a later date, but for now, get out of my office! And as for you, get me Lieutenant Kalsa and—"

"I believe I can save you some time by informing you that ex-Lieutenant Kalsa is also unavailable," Libia dryly informed the governor.

"…what was that?" the Governor grit out, slowly looking up at her.

"Along with Lieutenants, Sergeants and Corporals Kobayakawa, Daimon, Ooi, Zaveri, Stavish, Tuckerman…" Libia shrugged with feigned indifference. "Basically, everyone in the police force who was in your pocket."

Prefectus sputtered as Libia turned her attention down to the snail. "Officer, I will handle this, I apologize for the disturbance to your work. Please see that everything proceeds as discussed, if you will."

"Aye-aye, ma'am. We'll inform you of any developments as they arise."

"Good man," she nodded, and with that, she hung up.

By now, Prefectus was full-on glaring at Libia, looking fit to erupt. "Miss Libio," he grit out, his words undercut by the grinding of his teeth. "For your gross insubordination, you can consider yourself fired, effective immediately!" Prefectus slapped the side of his snail's shell with a fierce snort. "Dial Oyamada so I can tell him to draw up the paperwork, you—!"
"He won't pick up either, Mr. Prefectus."

The rising rant choked on its own bile when the bureaucrat found his glare being matched venom for venom, with Libia providing some extra toxicity of her own to spare. The fruitlessly ringing snail between them only gave her words more weight.

"You see, the reason you cannot contact Higuchi or Oyamada, is that they have both been arrested on charges of corruption," she coldly explained. "Funnily enough, the same can be said about the majority of the upper echelons of the Government. We had to go very far down the department hierarchies to find acting heads for them. You should really have kept a more open door, Mister Prefectus; if you had, you'd have noticed that there's hardly another soul in the building apart from you."

"You…" Prefectus echoed, his veins visibly pulsing. "I don't know what you think you're playing at, you two-beri number cracker, but you should have kept your head where it belongs, down in your books counting MY MONEY!" He slammed his fist down on his desk. "I'll deal with this mess, and then I'll see you ruined, but for the moment, GET OUT OF MY OFFICE!"

"No, mister Prefectus," Libia said, glaring hellfire at her erstwhile superior.

"What did you just—?!!" Prefectus began. Then he shook himself and, with a visible effort, pulled together a cold, professional demeanor. "Miss Libio, I am warning you for the last time. Get out of my office, or I can't guarantee you'll see tomorrow."

Libia's jaw set firmly, her temper fraying almost to the point of snapping, she nonetheless controlled herself enough to only glare harder. "First," she bit out. "For what I hope will be the final time I ever have to do this, my name. Is. Libia!"

The snarled correction was punctuated by a fist slammed onto the man's desk, and followed up by a thoroughly vicious grin. "And second, I very much do not regret to inform you that you no longer have the authority to do that, mister Prefectus."

"STOP CALLING ME THAT!" the rotund bureaucrat bellowed indignantly. "That's Governor to you, and I have the authority to do what I damn well—!!"

"Actually," Libia cut him off, her grin turning venomous. "As of two hours ago, you aren't, and you most definitely don't."

Prefectus reeled back with a sputter. "W-What are you—?!"

Libia practically tore a document out of her pocket and slapped it—slammed it, really—down on the desk, shoving it forward for Prefectus to boggle at. "Remember when I said we'd confirmed new acting heads for all departments? At noon today, the Sabaody Regional Government conducted an emergency vote of no confidence, and by the final tally every single one of them have no confidence in you."

"No, Mister Prefectus," Libia sniffed primly. "The word you're looking for is 'coup,' and you're on the receiving end of it. OFFICERS!"
To Prefectus's horror, the law enforcement officers that had shadowed Libia marched into the room and flanked the ex-number cruncer.

"Your orders, Acting-Governor Libia?" the lead officer intoned, pointedly ignoring Prefectus' panicked stammering.

The thus-named Acting-Governor jabbed her finger at her inglorious predecessor. "Arrest this man for bribery, corruption, gross incompetence, every one of the myriad crimes he's committed that you can think of, and get him out of my office."

At that, Prefectus seemed to get some composure back and grabbed the rifle hanging on the wall. The officers promptly tackled him to the ground, bound him up with cuffs, and then dragged him out, kicking and screaming. Libia took her seat behind the Governor's desk, triumph written over her features as he was dragged out and the door pulled shut.

…and the moment that it closed, cold fury gave way to cold sweat and hyperventilation.

"WhathaveIdonewhathaveIdonewhathaveIdoneWHATTHEHELLDIDIJUSTDO!?" was the gist of her panicked rambling, and it was all that she could manage to avoid outright screaming the words at the top of her lungs. Two women materializing from the shadows—specifically, one figuratively melting out of the shadows and the other literally coalescing and materializing from thin air—before her was only slightly calming.

"You're doing perfectly fine, Mrs. Libia, there's nothing to panic about," Vivi reassured the bureaucrat. 

"Nothing to panic about!?" Libia wheezed. "I just confessed to a coup, I'm practically the only one still in this building, that fat bastard threatened to have me killed, and I just usurped a position that I'm not even remotely cut out for! I cannot keep this job!"

"And you don't need to," Robin pointed out, her 'sunny' disposition intact. "Or at least, not for very long. You only need to stay the course until the World Government is no longer able to interfere; in all likelihood, you'll be back to your previous position in a week, tops."

"And what if the World Government sends CP9 after me in the meantime!? Your crew was the ones who proved they're real and that the Government will send them out without a second thought!" the panicking bureaucrat bemoaned.

"They were also the ones who destroyed them, and they and I can and will do it again if we must," Robin calmly replied, filing her nails on the blade of her butterfly knife. "Any assassins that make it this far will meet their match against us. You'll never notice the knife ten inches from your neck, or the bullet narrowly grazing your—"

"Robin, stop speaking," Vivi groaned, pinching the bridge of her nose as she waited for Libia's latest bout of hyperventilation to die down. Once her breathing evened out—and she was certain Robin's tongue was properly glued to the roof of her mouth—Vivi waved her arms as placatingly as she could manage. "And Libia, I promise you, without any incongruous morbid rambling—"

Vivi pointedly ignored the disembodied dope-slap she received at that comment.

"—that we will keep you as safe as we can until we're gone. By that point, all the blame for this will lie on our shoulders, and you'll be nice and forgotten." Vivi's gaze then sharpened intently. "But before all that, we need to do the thing that was the entire reason we put you in that chair in the first place, so if you don't mind…?"
Libia took a few seconds to gulp down calm some more, then nodded, this time with only a slight shake. "I… alright, alright, fine. Let's do this, then. What do you need from me?"

The Corsair Princess unfurled a document from her pocket and laid it out on the desk, proffering a pen to the Acting-Governor as she indicated a line at the bottom.

"All you need to do is sign at the X."

Libia nodded shakily, accepted the pen and laid it to the paper. And then she froze, slowly looking up at the pirates with an expression laden with doubt.

"Can… I just note the irony, and perhaps more importantly the hypocrisy, of booting out my predecessor based on how frequently he accepted backroom deals and bribery, only to turn around and get in bed with pirates the literal second I take his seat?" she asked.

Robin cleared her throat and gave Vivi a look. Muttering darkly, the princess dismissed the command. "You do yourself a disservice by forgetting the context, Mrs. Libia," Robin stated. "Your predecessor accepted those deals for personal gain and actively ruined the lives of those he was obliged to protect. In comparison, what are potential outcomes for this as they pertain to you?"

Libia swallowed heavily and tugged at her collar, eyeing the paper like it was a venomous snake. "At worst? Execution or assassination. And not fast, either."

"And what potential personal gain do you stand to achieve from this transaction?"

"Well…" Libia glanced about uncertainly. "…chances are I'll get some new and less corrupt management now, and my job won't leave me wanting to bash my head in after I clock out…"

"You knew the stakes when we explained the plan," Vivi picked up, laying a comforting hand on the woman's shoulder. "You knew that there would be high personal risk, and negligible accolades in return for those risks. And yet you still went through with it. Why?"

Libia clenched her eyes shut, visibly trembling. But when she opened them, they blazed with the same fire that had gotten her recruited for this endeavor in the first place. "…because this will make the lives of others better. Because I personally believe in the righteousness of this cause. Because it's the right thing to do."

Vivi pushed the paper forward. "Sign here, here, and here."

This time, when Libia put her pen to the paper, she didn't put it down until the document was filled out in full. Vivi didn't waste a second waiting for the ink to dry, instead swiftly blasting the document with some warm air to lock the signatures in place before ripping the paper away and literally storming off through the building to get the document in front of a notary.

With the deed now done and her adrenaline spent, Libia slumped bonelessly in her seat, her mind awhirl as she processed once more what the hell she had just done. And in her state of semi-panic, she grasped onto one niggling doubt in particular and glanced Robin's way. "So you're sure the Marines won't try and kill me?" she whimpered.

Robin's response was to chuckle in a way that was both encouraging and yet entirely not. "Oh, you can rest assured, Acting-Governor; the Marines will find themselves even more preoccupied than they already were very soon."

-o-
"Those damned Straw Hats and their damned charisma have ruined my damned business!" a broken and bruised slaver raved, nearly wrenching his arm out of the sling it was in in the process. "They wrecked my store! Stole my merchandise! Stole all my hard-earned money! You need to get it back, damn it! What the hell do I pay you bastards for?"

It should have been a surprise that the one acting as a sympathetic ear and shoulder to this man was blatantly clad in a Marine uniform, and especially since they were standing in a storefront with bloodstained chains and busted cages strewn about.

Tragically, to the inhabitants of Sabaody, it was anything but.

Just as it wasn't a surprise that while the commander of the Marine squad took notes on the destitute slaver's testimony, the rest of his squad stood guard around the store, ignoring all the blatant evidence strewn about with professional skill.

The commander nodded wordlessly through the testimony, right up until he heard the slaver's comment regarding his financing. At that point, the pencil snapped in the Marine's fingers and he fixed the slaver with a scathing glare. "The better question is, how do you intend to pay us now if you don't have any money left, HM?" the commander pointedly asked.

The slaver's ire swiftly melted into panic, the man stammering for a moment before affixing a fearful smile on his face. "W-Well, when I say they stole all my money, I-I only mean they stole what I had on hand! I-I still have plenty of funds s-stashed away offshore, I swear!" The slaver's cold sweat redoubled as the Marine's glare did the same. "A-A-And the funds they stole from me are all yours too, once you recover it, on top of my monthly payments!" A scowl spread over his face. "Just make sure you get my merchandise back to me so I can make up for the loss! Money I lose is money you lose too, you know!"

Grunting dismissively, the commander stored his notebook and turned to leave. "Yeah yeah, we'll see what we can do. It's not like you're the only one who got hit, you know." And with that he walked away, deliberately avoiding any eye contact with the evidence lying under his feet.

Once more, this total and purposeful ignorance was nothing that the inhabitants had not seen before.

"Hey, what are you all doing? That man is a slaver, we need to arrest—ow!"

"Shut up and take your cut, rookie."

A recently transferred Marine who had not yet been exposed to the corruption of his base having their illicit practices forced upon him. This was also nothing that the inhabitants had not seen before.

"...you two... you're actually going to—!? What the hell is wrong with you guys? Put your hands behind your back, you're—"

Ka-click-click-click-click.

Without a word or even a second glance, the commander walked on, ignoring his entourage as they drew and cocked their weapons, aiming straight at the man who had spoken up. All nothing even remotely new to the inhabitants, who had seen every step of this play out before.

But what happened next?

"KAMA-ITACHI!" SHINNG!

Yeah, that was new. One of the Marines sheathed her sword as she stepped over the firing squad
she'd just cut down, and stood alongside the Marine who had been about to be shot, adjusting the surgical mask she was wearing. A small group of other Marines approached from outside the store, their apparent lack of attention discarded in favor of deadly focus.

"Nobody threatens my men but me," the masked Marine intoned venomously. "And speaking of; men, arrest these stains."

The Marines saluted, then got to work, grabbing and shackling their corrupt brethren before they had a chance to recover. Two of the men split off to grab and subdue the commander of the Marines, forcing him to his knees in spite of his protests, while two more shoved the slaver down alongside him.

"Rgh, what are you even doing!? This is how things work around here!" the commander spat, struggling against the men holding him. "You think you'll be rewarded for this?! Newsflash, the Government doesn't care what these scum do as long as they pay through the nose for it, not one man in the entire garrison doesn't know that! You'll have your cut just like the rest of us if you stand down!" He then deepened his scowl with a vicious snort. "And if you don't, you can take it up with the Public Employment Security Office. Marines quit without warning every day, and they're always taking new applicants."

The masked Marine slowly turned to face him, the glare of the sun reflecting off her glasses. "Oh, is that so, commander?"

Before the corrupt Marine could respond, she reached up and removed her mask, revealing a face that every last one of the Sabaody garrison had memorized as a possible threat to their well-being and pocketbooks. This was someone who couldn't be swayed by any amount of money; as baffling as it was to the Sabaody Marines, she put her life on the line for altruism. And worst of all, she was good at it, too.

"No, no, don't stop there, you were on a roll," the recently dubbed 'Inquisitor' Tashigi said. "These backstreet deals, these applicants you mentioned… Tell me more."

The commander's jaw worked fruitlessly for a long moment before he clicked it shut. "Well, we're right fucked, aren't we?" he squeaked.

"As they like to say in Alabasta," one of the soldiers holding him chuckled grimly. "'Right in the down under.'"

"An understatement, if I have anything to say about it," Tashigi added, tapping Shigure's sheath in her palm. "But before all that, there's actually one other thing I want from you." She jabbed the tip of her sheath at the slaver. "The information to access your offshore bank accounts. You're going to tell me all of it."

While the commander's expression contorted in confusion at the distinctly off-character demand from the poster child for Marine integrity, the slaver had no such context, and as such just struggled harder.

"Y-You bitch! I'm not telling you a damn thing! That money is all I have left in the world! You call yourselves defenders of justice?! I-I won't give into this coercion! This-This brutality!"

Tashigi's gaze narrowed into a vicious glare. "Shocking how those accusations can come to mean not a damn thing depending on the subject." She thencocked her lips into a fiendish smirk. "And for the record, did I say 'tell'? I meant show. Take him out, Popora."
"KYUN!"

THWACK!

And neither of the criminals knew anything more.

-o-

Tashigi nodded proudly while her men dragged off the dazed and woozy Marines and slaver, all of whom would be having a rather difficult time remembering the exact details of what had just happened to them. But for all that Tashigi was pleased, there was still one thing she was fuzzy on, prompting her to direct a doubtful look at her even fuzzier subordinate.

"That was very well done, as usual, but…" She tilted her head at Popora. "Why did you hit the Marines too?"

"Kyuuuuun," the rabbit-wolf sighed in a patient yet put-upon manner as he took out a notepad and scribbled something down. He then folded his ear-wings upon themselves as he showed Tashigi what he'd written—

"THEY HAD HOW MUCH MONEY!?"

—the better to weather Tashigi's shocked shriek.

One of Tashigi's men glanced over her shoulder at the sum and whistled. "Little fella must have dug out their own cuts of the take, too. Gotta admit, no matter what we say about it, crime really does pay, huh, ma'am?"

It took Tashigi a few seconds to recover, but once she did, she gained a savage grin of her own. "Well! In that case, I say we double down on what we were already planning, and pay all that out alongside the slavers' funds into the Divine's warchest." She slammed her fist into her palm with a determined nod. "Come on, men! Time for us to implement a new income tax."

The marines and wolf-dog all exchanged doubtful looks for a moment before waving their hands/paws in so-so gestures. "Meeeh…"/"Kyuuuuun…"

Tashigi's head snapped around with a snarl, an inch of Shigure's steel clicking out of its sheath. "What was that?"

"N-NOTHING, LIEUTENANT TASHIGI, MA'AM!"/"Hmmph…"

"That's what I thought! Now, move out!"

-o-

It made things a little more convenient with Gif and Soundbite jointly handling the SBS this time around, as it meant that Soundbite could focus on censoring the more secretive aspects of our conversation. Something that was especially vital when taking a breather. A Straw Hat-themed dive bar was good for security purposes, but when we had passionate enough fans to try reading lips and memorizing every whisper that came from them, the location lost a few points for being so blatantly fan-oriented.

"So, Pisces has started her end of things," I said, smirking but moving my lips as little as possible, feeling for all the world like a villainous mastermind. Which, let's be honest here, I kind of was by this point. Pity that I didn't have Lassoo with me; would have loved to complete the image by
menacingly stroking my pet, but what can you do.

Well, I’d also need a better locale, because Straw Hat-themed or not, a dive bar was certainly not the best of locations in which to plot and enact master schemes of world-changing proportions. But hey, I was a pirate on a budget I didn't have much choice. Plus, again, it was a Straw Hat-themed dive and the owner was kind enough to let me use a table to plan while Kid moved on to hit other slave houses. I didn't exactly have room to be ungrateful. He was oddly familiar too, for a reason I couldn't quite place, but eh, it would come to me.

"And now let's see where we are…" I mused, counting down on my fingers. "Marines are about to get reamed, Vivi and Robin have stuck a stick of dynamite up this place's tailpipe and secured us the last hyper-critical piece we needed, we've hit a pretty high critical mass on the number of slaves we've freed, at least half of the pirates that have made it to the archipelago are getting in on the act… yeah, we're making good time here. Anyone need anything while I'm here?"

"Well, so long as you're asking…" Soundbite piped Urouge's inquiring voice in to me. "Is there any reason that we're not going after the Human Auction House, Cross? You said yourself that it's the biggest one, so—?"

"Yes, I did, and that's a major reason why we're not touching that place with a mile-long pole, because it's even bigger than you think," I snapped, spinning my finger to signal Soundbite to send my voice to all our allies. "We might have all thirteen Supernovas working together on this crusade of ours, but the Auction House is backed by one Warlord, and we Straw Hats have already taken out the only two Warlords on the roster who weren't New World-level strong. But hey!" I made sure my shrug was audible in my voice. "If you think you have a chance of fighting off Donquixote Doflamingo, take your shot. Sure, it's a toss-up on whether or not he'll give a damn, but I'm not planning on poking a dragon, even if he is occupied with other things."

I let the sheer gravity of that statement sink in… aaaand then I smirked.

"Oooor at least, I'm leaving it until we're running out of here like our rudders are on fire, once everything else is on fire behind us."

A collection of groans, both good-natured and goodly exasperated, rang out.

"One of these days, Cross, maybe I'll stop assuming that you have any good sense about who you provoke," Conis mused thoughtfully.

"You'll neeeever find out," Soundbite sneered.

"But for now, I'm about to give you all a big hint about which way my attitudes lean in that regard," I chuckled, pushing myself up from my table. "I'm going to polish off one last ploy I've got in store before we move on to the main event and blow literally everything up until now clean out of the water!"

"Ohoho, is that so? Do tell more, deary!"

I jumped and spun around in shock. The remark had come from one of the many characters hanging around the bar. A word that, in most cases, simply referred to the colorful individuals that were a dime a dozen in this world, and especially in this ocean.

The white-clad chemist woman—who either had tall, black, spiky hair or a hat that resembled the same and was wearing a pair of thick, tinted goggles—peering over from a nearby table where she was mixing several vials of pink liquid was not one of those cases.
"Ohohoh, do pardon my little interruption, Mister Cross," she crooned in a dulcet voice that brought to mind a thousand violins... being played by Luffy. "But I would love to know how you plan to outdo yourself with this!"

She swept herself up from her seat and spun about in a grandiose manner.

"First, gathering all of the most innn-famous pirates in this generation together and pointing them at the slavers—the nasty little slavers. Then you start robbing them of their resources and funds, which inspires other pirates to rob them of their resources and funds as well, box them in so that they can't leave the island, and manipulate the Marines and government to box them up in prison on top of that. And when it goes to court—"

She suddenly spun around and struck a pose. "AHAAHAHA! They'll be smashed with the hammer of their own justice! It's brilliant, brilliant, BRILLIANT, I tell you! Genius, I say!"

A particularly exuberant gesture knocked over some of her vials, sending them crashing onto the floor. Nothing happened beyond a mess, which was strange because I could have sworn something was supposed to explode in this situation, and I could definitely hear the sounds of a detonation somewhere... oh, no, wait, that was just a spare vestige of sanity left in my head, my mistake.

"...THIS IS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL THING EVER IN THE HISTORY OF EVER," Soundbite mumbled, adding onto my suffering.

"...silly me, got carried away there," the chemist simpered in an entirely too fake tone. "But anyway! Tell me what you're doing next! I need to hear your words!"

I fended off the creepy vibes she was radiating and returned to smirking menacingly. "Now, now, you'll have your answer along with everyone else before the day is out. Within the next couple of hours, even. No offense, but I'm not trusting anyone else with a preview of the midshow-showstopper for multiple reasons." I blinked as I ran what I'd just said through my head. "'Midshow-showstopper,' no, that's no good, I can do better than that..."

"HALFTIME H-BOMB?" Soundbite piped in.

"Ah, that works, thanks!"

The woman frowned but cast her arm over her forehead with an exaggeratedly put-upon sigh. "Oh, very well... all the best plans go awry if anything gets leaked, after all." She settled slowly back down in her seat, then looked at me again. "Incidentally, though, I'm a frequent patron of this bar. Any chance I could get a snapshot with you so I can prove that I met one of the Straw Hats in person?"

"Innocent question, you ever wonder WHAT TINNITUS SOUNDS LIKE!?"

"Sorry, sorry, two of the Straw Hats in person," she hastily revised before clapping her hands expectantly. "Now then, BARTENDER!"

"Uh, yeah, folks?" answered the suspiciously familiar bodybuilder-esque bartender, setting down a tray before us. "Anything I can help you with? Food? Drink? I offer a mean back rub if you've got the time!"

"Later, bartender, later," the chemist waved her hand dismissively, and before either of us could properly react, she'd tossed him a camera and draped her arm around my shoulders as she struck an
extremely ostentatious pose. "For now, immortalize this moment, if you would please!"

I gave her a doubtful look before shrugging and donning my own grin as I flashed the camera a peace sign.

One flash and photograph signing later and I was turning around, all ready to book it—!

"Now then, darling…"

"HYERK!"

When out of the blue, the lady swung her arms around my neck and all but draped herself off of me with a way too toothy smile.

"Would you care to hear how else I can think of immortalizing this beautiful moment?"

Yeah, you can imagine that that froze me up but good.

In all fairness, the woman before me wasn’t ancient like the counterpart she was giving me flashbacks of; I’d say she wasn’t any older than 30 on the outside, and even quite attractive under the lab gear she was wearing. Unfortunately, I wasn’t in much of a position to be slowed down by crazy stalkers (emphasis on crazy) today of all days and now of all times, and the flashes of what she could look like in my mind’s eye weren’t doing me any favors either.

So, acting on a whim that I hoped was well-founded, I plastered a shaky smile on my face as I reached behind me to a skull that was on display as part of a 3D jolly roger and grabbed one of its incisors.

"Actually," I chuckled semi-hysterically. "I’d rather immortalize this moment by pulling this lever!"

That got her blinking behind her goggles. "What lever—?"

THUNK!

"AAAAHHH! WRONG LEveeeeee…!"

I was immensely grateful that upon yanking the tooth, the floor directly in front of me fell out from under the stalker scientist and sent her plummeting out of sight. I slumped forward and wiped my forehead with a sigh of relief. "Noooope, I’m pretty sure that was definitely the right lever."

I paused as a thought occurred to me, and I looked up curiously. "…why do you even have that lever?" I posed to the barkeep, immediately regretting my wording when my partner started busting another nonexistent rib.

The bartender scoffed and looked at me like I'd lost… even more of my mind. "Uh, hello? Episode 76, Usopp’s lecture on—"

"The theory, implementation, and advantages of trapdoors, right right right, now I remember!" I chuckled, slapping my forehead in realization. "Well, as long as it works! Anyway, it's been fun and thanks for letting me hang out, but I've got to bounce! Halftime H-Bombs don't set themselves up, you know?"

"Oh, before you go!" He knelt down and brought up a steaming tray of oh damn it now it hits me. "Care to try some of the house special, my spinach puffs?"

I deliberately allowed all emotion to drain from my face as Soundbite's howling crescendoed to the
point where he *actually* keeled clean off my shoulder.

The man tilted his head in confusion. "IIIIs that a no?"

-o-

"Razza-frazzin' Cross, razza-frazzin' Sabaody, razza-frazzin'—!"

"Somethin' eatin' at you, daaarlin'?" a feline-looking individual sneered over his tuna casserole. "Is yer humble pie a wee little bit raw?"

"No no, it's the perfect temperat—RAGH!" the shirtless but jacket-wearing woman sitting across from the Mink snarled. Winding up like a fastball pitcher, she bounced her glass off his goggles, which did absolutely nothing to stop his cackling. "Kindly choke on a furball, hubby dear."

The cat-mink—A.K.A. Lindbergh, Commander of the Revolutionary Army's Southern Armies—chuckled and waved her off. "Ahhh, come on, Betty Boop—!"

The woman—A.K.A. Belo Betty, Commander of the East Army—twitched and shot a scathing glower at the screen the SBS was playing on. "One more thing to stuff that slimy pest down his owner's throat for…"

"Oh pish posh, come on, now!" Lindbergh scoffed, waving his hand but smiling ear to ear. "Tell ol' 'dear and darlin' Lindy—the cat one, not the badass lizardy one—your problems! Psh, come on, it's almost like you're, I 'unno, jealous of Cross or something! Zizizi!"

"…" Betty remained pointedly silent at that comment, glancing away from her cohort, her teeth digging into her lower lip.

Even behind his goggles, the widening of Lindbergh's eyes was plainly obvious. "…oh dear lordy, you are. The fact that it's entirely to our benefit is immaterial because he's a normie who's managing to blow your ability out of the water, isn't it?"

Betty still didn't say a word, but the way she guiltily glanced down at the table spoke volumes.

The feline mink's grin took on a more sincere air as he leaned across the table to place a comforting hand on Betty's arm. "Well, then, as your beloved friend, companion, and fake fiancée for the sake of this dinner…"

The Pump-Woman glanced up at her friend …

Who suddenly slammed back into his seat, *howling* with mirth with a fuzzy finger pointed at her."

ALLOW ME TO LAUGH EVEN HARDER! ZIZIZIZIIZIIII!

"I WILL DROWN YOU IN THE SOUP, YOU MANGY—!"

With it being the Baratie and an arguing 'couple,' nobody was all that disturbed when Betty shot halfway across the table and did her level best to try and throttle her chortling 'friend.' Of course, it may have also had something to do with them having a VIP room to themselves.

The only witness to their fight was Zeff, who had taken it upon himself to deliver the dining cart with their orders personally. And even then he didn't actually see anything so much as he beheld his two incognito patrons sitting comfortably in their seats, slightly disheveled and a few (thankfully empty) plates rattling to a halt between them. He took one look at the *completely comfortable and innocent* 'couple' and barely kept from rolling his eyes.
"Everything alright in here?" he asked politely. As polite as Zeff ever was, anyway.

Lindbergh coughed and polished his knuckles on his jacket, grinning all the while. "Oh yes, everything's fine, the food is resplendent, my good man!" he crooned, pitching his voice into the most exaggerated, hoity-toity, and fake tone he could manage.

"Yeah. It's swell," Betty grit out in agreement, her twitching face clearly the result of a nervous tic, and not her heartfelt desire to stab something. Or one, as it were.

The head chef allowed himself a slight smirk as he pushed his cart forward. "Well, in that case, allow me to recommend our famous chili." Zeff's smirk deepened with a hint of an edge. "Local critics have rated it with five red flags."

The Revolutionaries' distracted animosity instantly vanished as they both snapped their full attention to Zeff. Lindbergh cocked his head to the side. "Maybe side it with some red lobster legs, hm?" he inquired piercingly, actually sounding serious for the first time that day.

Betty ground her cigarette in her jaws as she nodded in agreement with the cat-mink. "Yeah, and could you cook them here for us? We're particularly fond of dropping them in the pot and listening to them squeal."

The tension in the room ratcheted up for a good minute, until Zeff smirked and gave them a nod.

"I'll see what I can do. In the meantime, enjoy your meal," he said before exiting the room.

Settling back into place, the two Revolutionaries fell into companionable silence for a minute, Lindbergh taking a bite of one of the best hamburgers he'd ever had while Betty sipped spoonful after delectable spoonful of ajoblanco.

But, as was par for the course for the more… influential people on the high seas, such peace simply could not be left to stand for long. Case in point…

"Not going straight for the marzipan?" the literal cat-person snickered, shooting his ally yet another cocky smirk.

"This is much harder to come across," Betty retorted, pointedly ignoring the jab in favor of the flavor of her soup, though not without eyeing the dessert platter nearby. "But you know, I figured it was only a matter of time before that happened."

"Oh, agreed on that front," Lindbergh nodded sagely. "Grand Line veterans are never pushovers, and the word on the street is really foggy about where and why Red Leg decided to pull out, sooo yeah, let's step lightly." He took a final bite to finish his first burger and then leaned back in his seat. "But anyway, where were we…"

Lindbergh snickered at Betty's prior emotional stormcloud snapping back into place. "Ah, right, your complete and utter upstaging! But, ah, seriously…" he coughed, his voice going down to the closest thing to sympathy he could manage. "Look, he's a rabble-rouser and kind of pushing on your schtick, I get that, but it's not that bad! I mean, c'mon… It's not like he's…" Lindbergh blew out a scoff as he rolled his hand dismissively. "I dunno, actually getting in front of a crowd and trying to start a riot."

"Attention, people of Sabaody Archipelago!"

The pair froze, and slowly turned their attention to the display, which now showed Jeremiah Cross… standing on a pile of crates… in front of a crowd.
Lindbergh slowly blinked and tilted his head. "...huh, would you look at that."

Both individuals present were now acutely aware of the steady spike in blood pressure one of them was now experiencing. The other, for his part, simply chose to ignore any semblance of good sense.

Which is to say, Lindbergh looked back at Betty with a _perfectly innocent_ smile. "...ya know, maybe if you ask _really_ nice, he could give you some tips or—?"

"THAT DOES IT!"

A blind man could have seen this result coming, yet Lindbergh made no attempt to dodge as Betty _threw_ herself clean across the table—expertly avoiding the remaining food upon it in the process—and tackled him to the ground.

"Oh, _honey_, here upon the carpet! You're a beast, a savage—OW, WATCH THE WHISKERS, YOU TWO-BIT SOAPBOX PREACHER!"

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The upper brass of the Government and Navy had anticipated that the Straw Hats would cause some damage to the Sabaody slave trade, but the sheer scale of the operation was far beyond even their worst-case scenarios.

Even so, the broadcast image of Cross literally _standing_ on a soapbox (or, well, a soapbox on top of a sizeable mountain of crates, barrels and other random debris) with a large, ever-growing, and eagerly attentive crowd around him should _not_ have come as a surprise.

The thrice-damned _snail_ munching on a spinach puff, on the other hand…

Cross took a second to clear his throat and redouble his nerves before starting again.

"People of Sabaody Archipelago!" he announced, speaking in a calm and measured voice that was highly amplified by the _distinctly_ unamused snail on his shoulder. "Allow me to _do away with the preamble_ by getting straight to the point: You all know who I am! You all know why I'm _here_, you know what my allies and I are doing… and you all probably know why I'm _speaking to you now_, and what I _want_ to ask of you."

The crowd shifted in distinct discomfort, Cross' words heading into an area that was at once familiar and uncomfortable

Sensing how the mood was turning, Cross held up a placating hand. "I know _why_ many of you are going to say no to what I ask. Why many of you have said no to endeavors like this in the past, and why none of you have ever tried this for yourselves. You'll say no, and you'll turn away… because it's not your problem."

Much of the crowd looked like they wanted to just walk away. But whether by reputation, inertia, or even a pricked conscience, none acted on that desire.

And Cross's next words ensured they would _stay_ that way.

"And _I_ get it!" the Anarchist reassured the crowd, earnest and _honest_ compassion in his voice. "I understand! You all agree with us, agree with our cause, agree with what we're _fighting for_, but you have your own lives. Your own worries, your own hopes and dreams, your own _lives_. And if you help with this, if you stick your necks out and involve yourselves with
this problem, then it will be your lives on the line, and you will be next. And I understand this, and I sympathize, truly I do…"

The crowd tensed, everyone knowing that there was a 'but' in there. And indeed, as Cross bowed his head and tipped the brim of his cap down, he didn't disappoint.

"But… the truth of the matter is that this is your problem, and it has been for a long time. And I'm not just talking about the soul-crushing guilt of seeing this evil eat away at your homes every damn day and not being able to do a thing about it, oh no! What I'm talking about is the fear you all live in, day after day, that this problem will eventually, inevitably come and involve you!"

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"You can lock your doors, you can bar your windows, you can be as vigilant and as well-armed as you like, but each and every one of you lives in fear of the day where for one second, one instant you'll let down your guard… and lose everything. And it doesn't just have to be you. A friend, a family member, even an acquaintance. Any time, anywhere, so long as this threat exists, everything you know is in mortal danger. Just one glance away, just one moment… and it will be gone."

Cross's shrug was transmitted worldwide by way of his broadcast, as was his sorrowful grimace. "And you know that it will be the moment you look away, because no one else is looking for you. Everyone else is too concerned with their own lives, and those who are supposed to be watching for you refuse to do so, either because they've been given explicit orders not to, because they're benefitting from it, or they couldn't be made to give a damn either way."

In a bar in Loguetown, a brace of uniformed Navy officers off-duty had their mugs snatched from their hands. They looked up, two seconds from tearing whoever had interfered with their drinking a new orifice, only to choke up when they saw that it was the bartender himself giving them a level glare.

"The tap. Is closed," he all but snarled, and with his hand under the countertop, it was very clear that this wasn't up for debate.

The Marines reeled back at the amount of venom in the once kindly man's voice, and in the process noticed just how much unwelcome attention they were receiving the other patrons. Glares, snarls, they ran the gamut of unkindly expressions.

"H-Hey!" the least senior of the group of soldiers tried to protest, desperately looking around for any form of support. "C-C'mon guys, are you seriously—? Look, even if Cross isn't ly—er, I-I mean… what I'm getting at is that you know us, we're not like those guys! We're not with them!"

"Oh, really?" another patron sneered, not even bothering to look their way. "In case you've all forgotten, you're wearing their colors. So, you tell us… how, exactly, are you not with them?"

The rookie made to protest, but was silenced by one of his seniors dropping a hand on his shoulder. The new recruit took one look at the head shake the older Marine shook gave, and didn't protest when the squad shuffled out of the bar and down the street.

By now, the officers of the Loguetown garrison could only ignore the increasingly hostile attitude among the civilian population. They had done nothing to earn it and were well aware of that fact;
Smoker and Tashigi had been particular about ensuring trustworthy officers were left in charge of Loguetown, even if they weren't Masons… yet.

Yet, it was increasingly clear that Cross was breaking the world's faith in the entire Navy. And there wasn't much they could do to address it besides hunkering down and doing their jobs right.

A line was being drawn in the sand. And sooner rather than later, it would come time to pick a side.

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"So yes. No matter how much you try and turn away from it, this evil is your problem. But now, a different issue presents itself." Cross spread his hands out, gesturing to the crowd. "'How can I possibly help? How can I make a difference? After all, we're just civilians; no skills, no strength, while they have weapons and they can fight. No chance at all…''"

The pirate's eyes sharpened, and his expression grew more severe.

"Well, let me tell you, you are dead. WRONG!" The last word roared, even by his elevated volume's standards, and the heat behind it struck a chord in all those watching. "These people might be stronger, might be better armed, but I'll tell you what, they're not better motivated. These people, they fight for greed. They fight for wealth, personal gain, and nothing else. But you…"

Cross's eyes flashed over the audience as he stepped forward, alighting with particular attention on every hand that bore a wedding band and every child that lingered with their parents. And he could see the fire beginning to form in the eyes that looked back at him.

"You all fight for something far more important than that!" Cross pumped his fist heavenward, charging his voice—and their spirits—even more. "You fight for your lives! You fight for friends and family, for those who were lost and those you could still lose. And most important of all, you fight for your HOME! For two hundred years, Sabaody Archipelago has been forced to suffer under the cancer of slavery! For two hundred years has the home you built, with blood, sweat, and tears been stolen from you, twisted into a living nightmare for all who pass through it!"

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"For two hundred years, any traces of your past relations with your aquatic neighbors have been ground into the dirt and abused, and you've had to watch in silence, for fear of being ridiculed, or worse, attacked for defending them! Well I'm asking you, here and now, are you willing to live like that for even one second more? I SAY, NO!"

The denizens of the deep, of all ages, heard to the ongoing speech. It did not escape them that a large force of royal guards had gathered around the area, probably to prevent any outbreak of violence.

With a certain whale-shark fishman present to organize things, it was a stout impediment to any trouble from Cross's speech.

"This is your home, these are your lives, and they. ARE NOT. WELCOME! Here and now, it is time to make a stand! Time to cast off the chains of fear, of doubt, and put these bastards in their place! Time to stand strong, stand firm, and say, once and for all, NO!"

And the Warlord's presence served to deter other forms of obstructions as well, something that came
in handy when he suddenly stiffened and glowered at a perfectly innocuous patch of ground.

Innocuous, anyway, until he planted a sandal on said patch of ground's throat and pressed hard enough to damn near crush its windpipe, prompting the patch to drop its camouflage and scramble frantically for an escape.

"I-I-I let you discover—hork!" Zeo's protest was cut off by more pressure and Jinbei's bone-rattling snarl. "I-I mean… I just wanted to sneak some free concessions?"

Jinbei scoffed and took his sandal off the wobbegong fishman so that he could grab him by his throat instead, hauling him back into a stance that had Zeo scrambling all the more desperately.

"If you're that desperate to watch your pathetic perversions of my crew's hopes and dreams burn to the ground," Jinbei bit out. "Then you can go back to Hody and do so…"

Jinbei flung his arm out, sending Zeo flying way up and far out of sight.

"BACK IN THE PIT YOU CRAWLED OUT OF!"

"Aaaand… aww, no twinkle, la-ti-do~!" groaned Ryuboshi, though he smiled the whole time.

"I've really gotta stop you from listening to Soundbite's 'Happy Fun Time Copyright Infringement Hour.' It's giving you unrealistic expectations, akkamanbo~!" chortled Manboshi, grinning just as much.

-o-

"Will it be dangerous? Yes. Will people be hurt? Undoubtedly. Will some of you give your lives for this?… I won't lie; there is every chance of it. After all…"

Most of the world winced as Cross slid one of his gauntlets off and unwound his bandages enough to flash his bare arm, reviving some very disturbing memories for the people who'd heard him acquiring it live.

"I've felt it firsthand," Cross nodded solemnly as he rewound his bandages. "I've stared death in the face more than once, and I've rarely come away from it unscathed. It hurt when I got these scars, and they can still hurt sometimes. I've been lucky, and some of you may not be."

The rabble rouser's eyes then shone, not with the grave, solemn light of defiance from before, but rather the blaze of absolutely righteous fury that had made him famous. "But in the same breath, I guarantee, I GUARANTEE!" Cross roared once more. "That if you shy away now… if you back down now… then now and forever, you will regret it. Every time you see someone in chains, someone suffering under the yoke of slavery, you will come back to this moment and find yourself asking—" Cross pointed straight at both his audiences. "'Could I have done something? Could I have stopped that? Could I have made a difference?' And it. Will. Haunt you."

"You might die if you fight… BUT I TELL YOU THIS!" Cross bellowed, the moment emphasized as if by divine intervention via a ray of sunlight bouncing off the bubbles and giving him a celestial spotlight. "HERE AND NOW, I TELL YOU, IT IS BETTER TO DIE! If you must choose, then rather than live forevermore on your knees as a slave, then it is better to die on your feet! Die kicking and screaming, fighting to the last, for that which you believe in!"
Across the world, the vid-snails flashed new images from across the Archipelago.

"And so here I stand. Begging. Pleading. For one thing. For just. One. Thing."

The Corsair Princess stalked through the archipelago, a concentration scowl on her face. A forceful thrust of her palm and a firing line of mercenaries flew into the drink. A crushed mini-twister in her palm and a large ship trying to draw a bead on her crumbled beneath a cyclone. And a blade clean through her back and out her chest didn't even warrant a glance, merely a snap of her fingers that bounced the would-be stabber off the nearest wall with a nasty crunch of bone.

"Fight. Here and now, please help us. Please…fight."

The White Menace was in the process guaranteeing herself a future lecture on ammo conservation, cackling and taunting all the while. The only break in her blasting was when a would-be rogue tried to sneak up on her, which prompted her to stop just long enough to swing around and utterly brain the sneak with her gun's still-rotating barrel.

"Fight for liberty: your own and those who've lost it!"

The Cyborg stood with a ferocious grimace, his wide stance intercepting every bullet aimed at the newly freed people behind him, then blowing flames from his lips once the shooting ceased. He flexed, letting the few bullets that had sunk in fall to the ground before rearing back his right hand and slamming the shooters to the ground with a Strong Right.

"Fight for equality, so that you may never be crushed again!"

The Devil Child held a man bound by a dozen arms, two of his fingers already clearly broken and slave after slave being freed behind her thanks to other arms unlocking their restraints, one way or another.

"Fight for brotherhood—for fraternity—because when one of us suffers in chains, we all suffer as one!"

The Sniper King crouched on a bubble bike at the highest point he could manage, a frown of concentration plastered on his face as he fired off Star after Star, supporting his allies on all sides from the best position he could be.

"FIGHT!" I screamed, I demanded, I begged the crowd, hoping against all hope— inches away from outright kneeling and praying—that they would listen, that they would please, please listen. "FIGHT! SO THAT THESE RIGHTS MAY NEVER BE STRIPPED FROM YOU, OR ANYONE ELSE, EVER AGAIN!"

I expected the silence that followed; righteous mobs needed buildup, more than just the one speech. I waited, not letting my expression give an inch, as the seconds ticked on… and on. All I needed was one person to start yelling from within the crowd to get things going, someone to take the first step. And I really didn't want to use Soundbite to fake it, because with my reputation there was a good chance I could get called on it… but damn it, if there was no other choice…

As it approached a full minute of silence, my resolve started to waver, and I was about to twitch my finger for Soundbite to spark things off…
When I heard it.

"LIBERTY! EQUALITY! FRATERNITY!"

I had no other response than to sag in relief. I had him. Just one person, yelling at the top of his lungs. Hell, the guy literally rose above the crowd, presumably standing on a crate or something as he echoed my (honestly off the seat of my pants, got a bit caught up in the moment there) chant.

Then, just as I knew… or at least had hoped would happen…

"L…Liberty… LIBERTY! LIBERTY! EQUALITY! FRATERNITY!"

"LIBERTY! EQUALITY! FRATERNITY!"

"LIBERTY! EQUALITY! FRATERNITY!"

The whole crowd started to join in: thousands, literally thousands of people cheering and chanting, pumping their fists as the flames of revolution ignited in their souls. It was that sight, that blessed, awe-inspiring sight, that finally allowed me to let a smile of bloody euphoria plaster itself on my face. Now, after months of running a pirate-protest (protest-pirate? Whichever) radio show and leading the world in raging against the global-scale machine, I thought I knew what a rush was. But this?

This was a feeling that I had never even come close to knowing until now.

And hell, I wouldn't have even gotten this far if it wasn't for… huh, who did I owe this all to, anyhow? Because for all that I had faith in the human spirit, I doubt it was any normal person who'd be able to stand up like that.

So, using the cover of the crowd's ignited fervor, I worked my way through the throngs toward the spot Soundbite had identified as the start of it all. The individual responsible, as it turned out, was a familiar face. Well… not for me, but the grizzled mug giving me a toothy grin and his bush hat rung some damn familiar bells.

"Jeremiah Cross, you are without a doubt the craziest son of a Sea King this half o' the Red Line," the old timer chuckled, thumbing the brim of his hat. "But heeeeell if you're the only one! Y'know, if it weren't for those two friends of yours talkin' to my crew and me earlier, I may not have bothered to give you a split second a' my time!"

"Two friends…" I repeated, trailing off as I ran the possibilities through my head. Then I blinked in surprise. "So you are Bomoss then?"

"Damn straight," he answered, his grin showing more teeth than humor now as he clapped a hand on my snail-free shoulder. "We might be scumbag criminals, but it hurts to admit that it took you and yours to help remind us that this is our home too. Even we've got standards, and damn it, when the day comes that a tourist is making sense like that… well, I figure that if overthrowin' this order needs to come from where nobody expects?" He cackled and thumped his fist against his chest. "Then that's where it'll come from!"

I chuckled at that before nodding in agreement, smacking my right hand on his shoulder. "And you can be sure we're all grateful for it, Bomoss. Welcome to the fight!"

Bomoss nodded gratefully at the gesture, then… looked at my arm in surprise? No, wait, not my arm, my shoulder, my patch. "A fight it looks like you've already labeled, huh?" he said more than asked, pointing out the tricolor I was wearing. "That doesn't look none too random, but it ain't no flag I've
ever seen before. Wassit mean?"

I briefly hesitated to answer—both because I wasn't expecting the question and because I needed a tic to put an answer together—but once I had my response straight, I pointed at the colors. "Blue, the Liberty of the ocean, vast and unrestrained; white, the Equality of living under the same sky, free and clear; and red, the Fraternity of sharing the same blood, no matter who or what you are or where you're from."

Bomoss gave the patch an intent onceover before nodding proudly. "Oh yeah, that's a roight beaut of a symbol right theyah! And if you don't mind," he chuckled and waved his hand, the gesture bringing a few ruffians closer to him through the crowd. A few whispers to them had their expressions snapping to slasher grins, and he laughed as they all darted off. "I think we'll be taking it for ourselves! Get ready to see a lot more of those colors around, mate!"

"Hooooo, BOY! LOOKS LIKE I'VE gotta start putting some TDs together!" Soundbite crowed.

"Take whatever lyrics he throws at you with a few grains of salt ready to pelt him in the face," I deadpanned.

"NYEEEEEH!" Soundbite whined obnoxiously. "Aaaanyway, I'm gonna go ahead and start barking out the marching orders to GET THIS PARTY TRAIN A-ROLL—gyeep!" The snail suddenly cut himself off with a choked gurgle, eyes suddenly wide in a very unhelpful combo of shock and terror. "Uhhh, sorry, passengers, a slight change of plans: the 10:30 express to revolution WILL BE EXPERIENCING A DELAY DUE TO THE TRACKS BEING obstructed."

I gave Soundbite a side-long deadpan look. "What in the hell are you babbling ab—?"

"ATTENTION CITIZENS OF SABAODY!"

My head bounced, both from the sheer volume of the voice that blasted over the crowd, and the sizeable sweatdrop I was suddenly sporting. "Yeah, no, nevermind, I see what you're saying. Give me a second to get an eye on things…" I looked around real quick, searching for some sort of vantage point I could find to look over the suddenly tentative crowd. And then my eyes fell on Bomoss.

"Hey, old-timer, how strong are you?"

"Eh? I'm pretty tough, but what's it matter to—GAH! HEY, WATCH IT!"

Well, good-news-bad-news time: Good news, I could now mark 'clambering up and over someone so that I could stand on their shoulders' off my bucket list, sooo that was a plus, though Bomoss swearing and cursing under me kind of ruined the moment a bit. Probably didn't help that I'd planted my foot on his hat to keep my balance, I'll admit…

Bad news? The crowd had been stopped in its tracks by a fucking firing line. And I don't mean a firing line of mercs, that would have been easy to steamroll. No… I mean a line of white and blue. Marines, stretched across the root we were on and blocking the paths to other groves. They didn't have their guns leveled at anyone, no, but the sight of a full squadron of Marines in shoulder arms position was intimidating enough to do the job.

And the jagoff of a commander in the front with a bullhorn wasn't helping things either.

"CITIZENS OF SABAODY!" Jagoff bellowed, regarding the crowd with an almost bored intensity.
"You are currently violating Section 2101 of Title 18 of the W.G Public Ordinance Code! This is an unlawful and unruly gathering! Mass rioting is punishable by incarceration and 15 years in prison, and we have authorization to use lethal force if you refuse to comply! By order of Fleet Admiral Sengoku, disperse immediately! I repeat, disperse immediately!"

"Ssssonnuva—!" I cursed under my breath. "How the hell did they get here so fast!? That battleship Komei left behind to guard this place is nowhere nearby!"

"Sssssstarting to think that those INSIGNIFICANT FISHING BOATS I HEARD DOCKING a grove away WEREN'T as insignificant as I originally thought..." Soundbite coughed uncomfortably. "ON A MARGINALLY RELATED NOTE, WE'RE FUCKED AREN'T WE?"

"As they say in Alabasta—!" Bomoss grumbled from beneath me.

"There is no way they'd actually fire into a crowd..." I muttered to myself.

"Do you have any bloomin' idea how many other crowds have said those exact words before shite went tits up?!" the smuggler I was using as a makeshift ladder demanded. "Look, you daft gob, in case you haven't noticed, this is about to get real bloody real fast, so let's get out of here fast before —!"

"No, you don't get it!" I interrupted, my brow furrowed in intense thought and disbelief. "I mean there is literally no chance on this planet that Sengoku would have given those orders, or that he would let anyone stupid enough to claim he did within a mile radius of this archipelago. The Marines' reputation is running on a shoestring budget as it is, and this entire shitshow is nothing short of sociopolitical suicide! They can't even afford to touch Paradise's Public Enemies numbers one through fourteen when we're right on their front porch, so they shouldn't even be able to sneeze in the direction of civvies! Why the hell are they—?"

My brain froze as everything I knew hit me at once and the pieces clicked together, which prompted me to sloooowly don a vicious grin.

"...oh. Oooooohohohohoh, so that's how it is..." I chuckled, nodding with grim respect. "Well, I'll be damned, that is either the cleverest or stupidest thing they could have done, and for the life of me I can't tell which..."

"Care to share, mate?"

"DITTO, I CAN HEAR A LOT OF THINGS but not if you don't actually say it!"

I looked at my companions and told them what I had realized. They matched my expression as it sunk in.

"Ya know, I think that lot's closer to stupid because you're the one who's closer to clever," Bomoss chuckled. "Aight, I'll spread the word around, keep morale up and all. Oh, and while you're handling those gobs, maybe GET OFF ME HEAD!"

"GAH!" I yelped in shock on account of that particular exclamation being punctuated by Bomoss shrugging me off his shoulders and onto the cold, unforgiving—well, actually the ground was soft and moist because of the moss, but still!

Bomoss was perhaps a tad too smug about that, but since he was spreading the word and the march wasn't losing any intensity or people despite being ground to a halt, I could let it go.
"Citizens!" the lead jagoff repeated. "I repeat, disperse at once and return to your homes! We are authorized to use lethal force if you continue with your noncompliant—GUH!" Jagoff's tirade collapsed into a gurgle of shock, probably due to the niiice and shocking sight of me walking out of the crowd and straight up to him.

I kept my face neutral as I walked right up to him, completely unfazed by the many, many soldiers who all wanted me dead, as well as the many, many weapons they were ready to kill me with. They couldn't miss if they tried, and I couldn't escape if I wanted to.

Yet still, they were more scared of me then I was of them.

"...well?" I asked patiently, Soundbite doing me the favor of bouncing my voice to the rest of the surrounding onlookers. "I'm showing noncompliance, I'm a wanted criminal, and you have the permission to use lethal force. So... force me."

The Marines collective composure started to crack, and most visibly at that; here a little trembling, there a little sweating, and everywhere a decided lack of gunshots.

The commander was a particularly nervous example, taking a shaky step forwards and pressing the barrel of his flintlock pistol between my eyes. "You are outnumbered," he grit out, doing a rather impressive job of keeping the shudder in his voice hidden. "Outgunned, and way out of your league. Surrender, now."

I narrowed my eyes at him and pressed my head against the barrel of his gun as I made a single request.

"Make me."

That took the wind out of the commander's sails, and both his eyes and gun started to shake furiously.

I immediately plastered a pleasant grin on my face. "Here, let me help you with that." And before the Marine could react, I snatched his pistol out of his grip, pressed it to the side of my temple and pulled the trigger—

CLICK.

—with absolutely no result, as the suddenly deathly silent crowd all heard.

My expression once more utterly unimpressed, I shoved the weapon back in his hands, forcing him to stumble back and scramble to avoid fumbling it. "A word of advice," I commented dryly, my every word—and likely the crowd behind me—sending the line of Marines into terrified retreat. "The next time you point a weapon at someone and try to tell them what to do? Find the balls to load your guns."

And with that, I ignored the panicked babbling of the worthless boob so that I could turn back to the crowd and pump my fist in the air. "PEOPLE OF SABAODY!" I bellowed, Soundbite ramping my voice up once more.

I then leaned forwards and donned the absolute best slasher grin I could manage.

"Let's go wreck some shit."

Aaaaaaand that just about did it. The crowd bellowed their furious agreement back at me, and as one, stampeded through the now-defunct firing line. As they went, not one person touched any of the
Marines. After all, why would they? It wasn't like they were a threat to anyone anymore.

I chuckled and thumbed the brim of my cap as the mob raged past us, and I shot a smug look at Soundbite. "Well! I don't know about you, but I think that went well."

Soundbite's only response was to just laaaaaugh and laugh.

-o-

"Where in the hell did they get a cannon?" muttered a sharp-dressed redhead in blue and red as bullets pinged off the overturned cart he was using for cover.

While the Supernovas were doing most of the damage to the slave economy of Sabaody, there had been a great many other pirate crews present on the archipelago, either awaiting a coating job or equally blocked from leaving the place by the blockade to keep pirates out. The Phoenix Pirates, led by this man, were of the latter persuasion. With the conclusion of the previous SBS, they had been gung-ho about returning to Fishman Island and, from there, the New World. But the minute that the SBS revealed what the Supernovas were up to, they jumped at the chance to repay the Straw Hats for helping them and strike a good payday in the process.

Like many others, however, they were finding that slavers could defend themselves surprisingly well given a little warning.

The slave house had only a single entrance, and they'd heavily barricaded that entrance as well as the front wall. Every slaver inside had a gun, and while their fire was more enthusiastic than accurate, in confined quarters, enthusiasm counted more.

And they had a cannon. A cannon that roared and shredded another wagon nearby, sending his crew scurrying for new cover.

"Pretty sure it's a wooden cannon, Cap'n," muttered his crewmate Jiro, also huddled behind the wagon. "Certainly got no shortage of powder and bullets."

Puzzle bit out a curse. He was good with a chain, good enough to catch bullets on the links. But dozens? In a narrow cone? No way in hell.

"Right. Well, I'm open to ideas about how to take it out," he said.

Then he heard the chanting.

"What in the sweet…" he muttered, lifting his head up and looking down the street. His eyes widened, and he paled slightly. That was a mob. No pitchforks, but plenty of torches, and frankly the diverse array of sharp and blunt objects they were carrying weren't much better. "Oh, boy."

"Maybe they're here for the slavers?" Jiro offered.

"Maybe. Still, tell the rest of the crew to get ready to bug out if that crowd goes for us."

Jiro nodded and scampered away, crouched low, as Puzzle continued to watch the crowd.

The wait as the crowd came closer was agonizing. Minutes felt like hours. But only a couple of buildings away, the front began to jog right towards them. Puzzle tensed… and then the crowd veered hard left and went straight at the slaving house.

"Oh, no…" Puzzle breathed, eyes wide at what was about to happen.
The cannon roared, and so did every gun in the store. The entire front rank of the mob melted.

…And then the rest were pressing up against the wall and the open door, hammers and crowbars and a few hand axes going to work. Another volley rang out, and more people fell, but the ones behind simply grabbed up the tools and went back at it.

There was also an almighty bang and screams of pain from inside.

"The cannon!" Puzzle realized, shooting to his feet. "Men! Attack!"

Not waiting for a reply, Puzzle dove towards the shop, the crowd parting in his wake, and he let out a roar of exertion as he lashed his chain into the barricade with the force of a sea train at full speed.

It was all over in a matter of minutes. Vicious, hectic, and exceedingly brutal minutes, but minutes. After all, without their artillery emplacement to keep their attackers off their backs, the mercs were still nothing but slaver scum, and thus no match for real pirates.

Once matters had mostly settled down and he had a chance to catch his breath, Puzzle stepped aside and stared in bewilderment. The crowd of civilians, of all things, was in the process of ransacking the store, stealing everything that wasn't nailed down, applying crowbars to the stuff that was, and freeing any slaves they could find.

"Someone want to tell me what I'm looking at here?" he asked nobody in particular, not really expecting an answer.

Hence why he jumped almost a foot in the air when the thin air gave him one. "THAT, MY FRIEND, WAS THE START OF THE SLAVE INDUSTRY'S BAD DAY GETTING EVEN WORSE. Oh, and don't worry, those injuries look worse than they are. TURNS OUT THAT FACING DOWN A CHARGING MOB throws your aim off something fierce! Who knew, right?"

Puzzle took a second to process that before shaking his head dismissively. "So the explanation is 'act of Straw Hats, just roll with it,' got it. Well, if that's everything—"

"YEAH YEAH, RETURN TO YOUR USUAL LOOT—EH? … crap. Alright, return to your usual looting if you want to, but if you can, maybe see about swinging back towards our staging grounds at Grove 77. THINGS ARE STARTING TO GET… TENSE THERE."

-o-

'Fiendish' Foxy had not been this fatigued since his mano a mano with Luffy, and his crew was starting to feel the strain as well.

The combat itself wasn't the problem, not really. Under normal circumstances, his crew could handle it just fine. But fighting and supervising a timid, unkempt, and not in the least fit to fight sea of individuals? That put a hamper on their abilities.

As such, they had opened the book on war tactics and acted accordingly.

On one side of the Foxy Pirates' captain were the escaped slaves. It was, simultaneously, both a very inspirational and very depressing sight. The grove's landscape had been transformed into a sea of both hastily erected tents and huddled, frightened bodies. There were a few dozen appropriately trained pirates and miscellaneous volunteers milling through the crowd, providing what comfort they could to the recently emancipated souls. On its own, the situation would have been difficult enough to deal with, given just how many people needed help, as well as the sheer variety and intensity of
their injuries and traumas...

**KRA-KOOM!**

Foxy winced, scowling as he shifted his head the other way. But then, the situation was even **worse** than that, wasn't it...

Erected on Foxy's other side was a massive wall of debris. Anything they could get their hands on. Stone, dirt, wood, metal, they'd even dismantled a few buildings. Small ports had been cut in the barricade to allow the pirates to fire out without getting winged by a bullet, and a few small mortars that Foxy had... *appropriated* back when he'd been in the Blues were helping keep the Marines' heads down. The fact that Cross's weapon-hound was scampering back and forth across the top of the barricade and blasting out a few choice lobs of his own helped, too.

Further out beyond *that*, on the other side of the root to the nearest grove, the Marines had pulled out their shovels and dug in, creating a full trench line with a two-foot berm in front. Rifle-armed soldiers manned the line, and they'd hauled up a few cannons to take potshots at the barricade. Not many—Sandersonia, Koala, Duval, and Funkfreen's collective efforts had them moving after every shot—but enough to keep the pirates' heads down.

The closest thing to a break that the captain had was providing a sitrep with the newly arrived commander of the whole operation... who, regretfully, hadn't brought much with him in the way of reinforcements.

"Foxy, how are things looking?" Cross started immediately, while his slimier half's attention was... basically anywhere within his mile-radius that wasn't *there* at the moment, but given the situation, that could be excused. More importantly...

"Not good, Cross," Foxy huffed, gesturing for Cross to walk with him as they continued his patrol along the perimeter. "As you can see, we're holding things together, tending to the ex-slaves' injuries, trying to keep them calm—"

**BOOM!**

The Slow-Man flinched as another cannon shot landed, demolishing part of the barricade. However, Foxy noticed that while Cross *did* react to the explosion, it was by glaring at the blast with what could only be described as *contempt*. At this point, he wasn't sure if it was from confidence, foolishness, or both.

"...probably both," Foxy muttered.

"**WHAT WAS THAT?**"

"Nothing, just thinking out loud," Foxy waved him off. "But as I was saying, *that* isn't helping with the whole 'keeping the peace' thing. There are a lot of Marines and mercenaries lined up out there. So far, they haven't made any serious pushes that we haven't been able to push back; your allies and weapons have been useful on that front."

"Hi Cross, bye Cross!" Lassoo barked as he leapt past above them, the aforementioned tactician giving him a casual salute in passing.

"Anyway, all they've been doing is lobbing fire and such, a lot of saber rattling and warning shots, but they haven't *actually* broken out their heavy artillery yet. The threat to either the civilians or the merchandise—depending on who you ask—is keeping them in place. But—!"
Foxy winced at a sudden bout of shouting from the camp. It was hastily shushed down, but the fact that it had happened at all...

The split-headed captain groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Cross, it took me a bit to figure out why they're focusing their efforts on only one bridge to this grove, but breaking the barricade is only their second priority. They're trying to get the civilians scared, and it's working. The idea of fighting the Marines themselves is getting spread about. And we both know how badly that would end, this close to Marineford."

Foxy began grinding his teeth, half out of terror and half out of sheer frustration.

"You may have dismissed the unarmed jackasses as no threat—and you're right, the slavers' mercenaries are only really a threat now that they're coordinating with the Marines—but if people start to riot, if the Marines can muster up even a half-baked excuse—!"

"I know, Foxy, I know," Cross cut in, silencing him with a raised hand. "Just... just keep it peaceful."

Foxy was about to snap back with a snide remark (what the hell did he think Foxy was here for?) before he noticed the look on Cross's face.

Now he, like many others across the world, had seen many different expressions from the rabble-rouser's visage, from incensed rage to mad grins to genuine sorrow...

But that look—the look of raw, determined resolve—was none of those.

Faced with that look, Foxy's retort died in his throat.

"...I hope that this 'out' of yours is as good as you think it is, Cross."

That solemn expression didn't shift an inch. "As good, if not better, Foxy. Now go."

Foxy nodded slowly, reassured by Cross's composure, and returned to the fray, a beam sword of slowmo photons materializing in his hand. As soon as his line of sight was beyond Cross's, the latter allowed his desperation to show, raking his steel-clad fingers through his hair.

"Vivi, please tell me that things are on track, because we're running out of time."

"Everything on our end is finished, and we've regrouped at the Government Building to escort Libia. We've caught a ride with a few Flying Fish Riders to reach you faster, so we'll be there in minutes," Vivi responded, sounding like she was gnawing on her thumb. "And I just heard from them; communications are cut off now, of course, but as soon as they're ready, you'll be the first to know. But in terms of getting here, their route is proving... troublesome."

Cross slapped his palm to his forehead with a groaning growl. "Because getting from there to here is no cakewalk, even for them, right, damn it..."

"In all fairness to them, you did kind of pull the trigger on this out of the blue—"

"Are you really starting this with me?!!"

"Just commenting. Anyway, all I can suggest is that you stall for a little longer. I'm sorry, Cross."

"Ggrgrghh..." Cross continued rubbing his scalp even as he signaled for Soundbite to drop the feed. "OK... alright, maybe if I flank them and draw attention to myself, I can divert their attention for
a few minutes. If I take Lassoo and Funkfreed, might even be able to keep them occupied long enough for—"

"Oh, hey, we're going somewhere?" Funkfreed's high-pitched question was a welcome surprise as the elephant clambered/slithered over the barricade, soon joined by a panting and eager Lassoo.

"Want us to help? Chaos knows you've got a bad habit of biting off more than you can chew."

The droll offer made by a returning Koala, however, was less welcome, especially when backed up by Sandersonia's presence.

"What the—I thought you two were supposed to be on the front lines keeping those bastards back!" Cross hissed incredulously.

The anaconda-woman blinked in surprise. "I… thought you called us back?" Her gaze narrowed suspiciously. "At… the same time that all their raiding parties got called back… and the cannons on both sides are stopping…"

As silence fell on the whole of Grove 77 in the lull of the battle, Cross and those near him all turned their focus on the shamelessly grinning culprit.

"WHAAAAAT, FORGOT ABOUT ME ALREADY?!" Soundbite sing-sang, shamelessly swaying back and forth. "I'm more than a pretty face, you know! YOU NEEDED a plan, I've got a plan! AND YOU NEED A DISTRACTION AND TO KEEP PEOPLE CALM, well, I'm giving you both at once. AND TRUST ME, IT WILL BE EPI-C!"

"Somehow I don't think a show of force is going to help us much right n—!" Cross started.

"WE'RE NOT THE DISTRACTION, dingus, I JUST NEEDED TO SHUT THIS PLACE UP LONG ENOUGH…" Soundbite's grin widened enough to mirror his partner's typical countenance. "To let everyone hear THIS."

The moment the snail's voice died, everyone—literally everyone in the Grove—heard… a drumroll. A relatively short, common drumroll that ended in a firm strike. Then it repeated itself, and again, and again.

Following the noise showed that the drumming was coming from Brook of all skeletons, his lack of flesh still masked by his welding mask but his afro plenty distinctive.

"Gotta give him credit, one rendition AND BONEJANGLES IS ALREADY PLAYING IT PERFECT!" Soundbite grinned.

Cross, though…

The Voice of Anarchy, while he had originally looked skyward in panic, now wore an expression of pure, unadulterated joy. A wide grin adorned his face, though for once it held no malice; only unbridled jubilance at the blaring of the anthem.

Then, in a voice that was barely louder than a breath…

Cross sang the lyrics of a song unknown to any realm in the world, yet one that with a ubiquitous message.

"Do you hear the people sing?"
Koala looked at Cross in confusion…

"Singing a song of angry men?"

…before he carried on the next segment of the chorus.

Her eyes lit up like a lighthouse in a raging storm, and without a second thought, she took up the next line.

"It is the music of a people who will not be slaves again!"

At this point, Sandersonia had caught on. With memories of relief, hope, and joy stirring in her heart from the day she was set free, she raised her own voice to join in the song.

"When the beating of your heart, echoes the beating of the drums…"

The three of them crescendoed, with or without Gastro-Amplification, and echoed throughout the grove:

"THERE IS A LIFE ABOUT TO START WHEN TOMORROW COMES!"

And then, out of the blue, a fourth voice chimed in. A child's voice.

"W-Will you join…" One of the nearby refugees, a girl who couldn't be older than ten stammered out the words, likely barely even understanding what she was saying. "In our crusade?"

"Who will be strong and stand with me?" This, however, was stated with far more force and confidence by a man with heavily bandaged wrists, who was standing up and sporting the grin of a man possessed.

And on and on it went, the song bouncing from person to person and gaining more force as it went.

"Beyond the barricade," came from a shaken but recovering couple leaning against one another, while "Is there a world you long to see?" was sung by a woman cradling her child.

And it was at that point, when the mood swelled to an absolute peak, that Cross snapped out a series of gestures. With one hand, he snapped at Koala and pointed to the top of the barricade, prompting her to clamber on up to where everyone could see her. With the other, he pointed at a makeshift flag that had just been painted with the Tricolor and gestured for it to be tossed to him.

The instant it was in his hands, he threw it up to Koala who caught it and started waving it to the cheers of all who could see her. "THEN JOIN IN THE FIGHT!" she roared, leading the eruption of sound that echoed across the grove. "THAT WILL GIVE YOU THE RIGHT TO BE FREE!"

It was at that point that the refugees truly took heart, as nearly a dozen across the camp picked up instruments and joined in, raising their tunes and voices to the chorus.

From there… everyone drew breath as one, and the Archipelago sang.

-0-

"He's at it again," Zoro muttered, failing to hide a smirk.

"Yeeep. Damn cheeky sonnuva…" Jewelry Bonney trailed off into a frown, a frown born of memories that flashed through her mind. After a moment of thought, she glanced around her. Her company was her own crew, whom she trusted; the Straw Hats, who would not judge; the Heart
Pirates, who were allied with the Straw Hats and previously allied with her crew; and the crowd that they were leading on to Grove 77, who were already singing.

The Glutton breathed in deeply… and joined in the chorus:

"DO YOU HEAR THE PEOPLE SING?  
SINGING A SONG OF ANGRY MEN?"

IT IS THE MUSIC OF A PEOPLE

WHO WILL NOT BE SLAVES AGAIN!"

-0-

"Really, given everything I know about the bastard, I should've seen something like this coming," Apoo sighed, giving a defeated shrug.

"Yeeaaah, Cross does a lot of things like this. It is the first time he's done something this big, though!" Luffy replied with a slight, proud smile on his face.

"I'll say!" Urouge guffawed, clapping his massive hands together in a raucous show of appreciation. "The man may disdain the divine, but he can certainly deliver a good sermon all his own when freedom enters the picture!"

'In more ways than one,' Apoo dryly thought, slyly pushing his glasses up his nose. But that bit of snark was quickly dismissed in favor of joining the following chorus:

"WHEN THE BEATING OF YOUR HEART,  
ECHOES THE BEATING OF THE DRUMS,  
THERE IS A LIFE ABOUT TO START  
WHEN TOMORROW COMES!"

As the singing continued, Luffy's expression slowly fell and turned solemn as he refocused on his current surroundings. Namely, he eyed the chains the freed slaves were carrying; he'd have broken them if he could, but with bombs strapped around their necks and time something of a luxury, he'd just had an easier time knocking out the walls around their shackles wholesale. Sure, they'd all be able to get their collars off with the lockpicks waiting at their destination, but then…

As the gears in the rubbery mind started to turn (for once), he slowly beamed as an idea came to him.

"Hm?" Apoo grunted at a tap on his arm. He turned to see Luffy facing him with his trademark grin, but the Long-Arm swore he saw a bit of joyous glee in there.

"Hey, long-arm guy? Big monk guy?" The other two Supernovas felt chills go down their spines as Straw Hat's grin became an almost eerie parody of his tactician's trademark expression. "III've got an ideeeeeaaaa~~~"

In that moment, neither Apoo nor Urouge were sure they'd ever grinned wider in their lives.

-0-

As the anthem continued on, the air still singing strong with the voices of thousands crying out for
freedom, Cross dropped his voice from the chorus and took a bit to catch his breath.

During that pause, he shot a proud smile at my brilliant partner. "You know, I don't say this often enough, but good job, Soundbite."

"Yeah yeah, I'm brilliant, yadda yadda," the snail grunted, his perturbed grimace a stark contrast to his earlier eagerness. "Just one problem. Inspirational this may be—!"

KRA-KOOM!

Cross and his fellow revolutionaries, all flinched as another chunk of the barricade was suddenly blown to matchsticks. And while the singing never stopped, the hiccup in harmony was palpable, as was the waver that infected the lyrics to follow.

Soundbite snorted furiously as he watched the roused Foxies scramble to patch the hole and evacuate any injured. "**BUT DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN this isn't, and Markus we ain't. Panic's stopped, MARINES NOT. WE BOUGHT TIME, NOT VICTORY. GOT ANYTHING ELSE UP YOUR SLEEVE?**"

Cross ground his teeth, searching his companions for an idea. Nothing came. A little desperate, he turned to Koala. "You're the one who's got experience with warzones, any ideas?"

Koala bit out a sharp tsk as she cast her gaze towards the No Man's Land. "How much longer do you need?"

"**UNTIL WE GET—Puru puru puru puru!**" Ringing cut Soundbite off, and Cross nearly ripped the receiver off he grabbed it so fast.

"Hello?" he demanded.

There was a short pause as the answer echoed in Cross's headphones. To the immense comfort of everyone watching, he heaved out a sigh of contentment, his entire body sagging with pure relief.

"No, no, don't worry about it, everything's fine. Hell…"

Hearts all around were positively buoyed when Cross's countenance returned to its familiar demonic status.

"You're exactly on time. Soundbite!" Cross snapped his attention around, staring straight at—straight through—the barricade. "Call the Marines. I've got only one thing to say to them."

-o-

"'Parley!? Jeremiah fucking Cross tells you that he wants to parley, and you actually listen to the shit!? Fuck's sake, if you can be this dumb and still get a damn coat, then maybe I should try my hand at this whole 'Marine' shit. Bet I'd be a Vice Admiral by the end of the week!"

Marine Commander Aihara glared at the mercenary commander, Tora. "We are in a stalemate with one of the worst pirate crews in history and half of this island is already burning. And there are hostages in that grove that need rescuing. I will take whatever victory I can get at this point."

"Hostages? You actually buy that shit?"

"Frankly, I'm not paid enough to care either way."
The battleground had fallen silent as the commander emerged from the barricade, a seasoned mercenary beside him. The pair paced forward, and Jeremiah Cross came to meet them, his arms and legs bare of armor as he entered no man's land, and a snail—the snail—on his shoulder. The pirate was flanked by two figures, both rendered unidentifiable by the Anonymous Cloaks™ they were wearing. Granted, one of them was literally three times taller than the other two, and the other's frame was distinctly feminine, but otherwise, they were totally obscured.

The two groups walked until they were about ten paces apart, coming to a mutual stop. Tora took an ostentatious step forward but immediately retracted it when Cross shot a glance at him.

"So," Cross said, his trademark grin never wavering. "I'm curious what you're going to concede to get us to give up. Better be something good, because we can keep this up all day and you've still got an archipelago to subdue."

The Marine commander glared at Cross, clearly unimpressed. "There will be no concessions. There will be no terms accepted other than immediate and unconditional surrender. Decline, and we will move upon your…" He glanced at the improvised—and by now rather battered—barricade. "Woodworks, and slaughter you all to a man. If you bend the knee, however, then you will possibly prolong your worthless lives for a few more days."

"Or, to put it another, more accurate way," the mercenary chuckled as he unslung an axe from his back and tapped its haft in his palm. "You lot can repent, give us our merchandise back and bow your necks to the white-hat here…" Said white-hat grunted in irritation at the moniker. "And maybe you'll suffer less. Least," the merc let out a grim chuckle as he danced his fingers across his axe's blade. "It'll hurt less than what my boys and I are planning to do to you."

Cross's 'impressed' whistling was expected, but still annoying. "Well, I'll give you lot a little credit for sticking to your guns. Sadly, I'm afraid you've misjudged things… quite a bit," the criminal responded, pointing at the pair. "See, you're not here to tell us to leave, we're here to tell you to leave. After all…"

The Voice of Anarchy then plastered a vicious grin onto his face.

"...you can't touch us anymore."

A silence fell over the war—er, battle-torn grounds. Aihara and Tora, struck dumb by the pirate's audacious statement, could only stand frozen.

Then Aihara did what any sane man would have done and scoffed.

"What are you talking about, you insolent thug? Though we very much wish you were, you don't seem to be a ghost."

"Har har, dickweed," Cross flippantly replied, with a flip of his hand no less. "No, I mean that the land that we now stand on is no longer under the World Government's jurisdiction. So unless you want the ones who do have authority here to take exception to your continued existence, I'd very much advise you all to, step. Off."

"...excuse me? I thought you were intelligent, not blind and deaf. Our name is the World Government. If I don't have the jurisdiction to arrest you, who does?"

Cross simply grinned the grin that razed islands. "Oh, that's simple."

_SPLOOOSH! SKRANG!_
The Marine started as two pillars of water shot out on either side of the root, a pair of projectiles accompanying them. They slammed into the ground before Cross in an X, at which point the 'law-keepers' recognized them.

Tridents.

"Them."

**SPLASH!**

A moment later, the waters next to the roots burst open again, only this time instead of disgorging weapons, they disgorged the weapons' *bearers*, who landed right next to their tridents and brandished them without a drop of wasted time or energy. Still drenched and no less intimidating for it, two muscular fishmen—bedecked in very heavy shell-clad helmets and pauldrons—stood before Jeremiah Cross, leveling their polearms at the 'unwelcome' parties.

"You are trespassing on the property of the Ryugu Kingdom," one of the fishmen growled, his expression remarkably calm for the sheer *rage* in his voice. "Vacate the premises immediately or we will remove you by *force.*"

Aihara gritted his teeth, and opened his mouth to politely ask what in the name of the Elder Stars' sweet almighty beards the fishman thought he was talking about.

The merc didn't give him the chance by posing the same question. "Oh yeah, fish-fuck? You and what army?" Albeit in a cruder fashion.

Neither did the suddenly grinning fishman who'd delivered the ultimatum. "Oh, I was really hoping you'd ask." And then he snapped his webbed fingers.

Cross, who was by now running out of cheek to stretch, spun a bundle out of his belt and unfurled an *umbrella* of all things, leaning it on his shoulder as he flashed them a shaka sign. "Surf's up, brah!"

"What are you—?!"

**KRA-SPLASH!**

"WAGH!"

A moment later, the waters next to the mangrove root erupted—literally *erupted*, in a practically *volcanic* manner—and then crashed down, blinding and drenching everyone who hadn't prepared for the event.

It was also only these individuals who were prepared for the sight that everyone beheld when the salty sheets of rain finally stopped falling.

Where once there had been still water, now there sat two massive galleons, encrusted all over with sea life ranging from barnacles to sixty-foot kelp fronds to the *biggest* starfish any of them had seen. In stark contrast to the limp, tattered sails that clearly weren't designed to catch the wind, the unmistakable flag of the Ryugu Kingdom—a cyan flag bearing a vertical conch shell superimposed over a crossed harpoon and trident—flapped proudly in the wind.

Oh, and the rails were lined with uniformly armored fishmen, and in place of broadside cannons, the ships were bristling with harpoon guns. Very, very large harpoon guns. Very, very large harpoon guns aimed *right at them.*
And it wasn't just the ships that were teeming with fishmen soldiers. The original pair on the root had been joined by at least two dozen other equally armored knights, the lot of them forming a wrought-iron wall of interlocked shields that was interspersed by their protruding lances. The only real break was the one right in front of Cross, allowing the Marine and merc to maintain an unbroken line of sight with the pirate's rapturous smile.

"So, boys, tell me," Cross inquired ever so politely, closing his umbrella with a deft spin of his wrist. "Is this enough of an army for you?"

"One last time," the first of the fishman soldiers repeated, a smirk both visible on his face and audible in his voice. "You are trespassing on the property of the Ryugu Kingdom. Vacate the premises immediately or we will remove you, by force."

The suddenly self-conscious merc let out a nervous chuckle as he slowly slid one of his feet back, glancing towards the Marine. "...ehhh... I still get paid for this, right?"

The Marine shot the merc an irritated glance before exhaling explosively and glaring even harder at the fishmen, with a decidedly unamused expression. "Soldiers of Ryugu Kingdom, allow me to make it clear to you that you are in the process of making a very grave mistake. I don't know what you think that that—" He pointed at Cross, who returned the gesture with a jaunty wave. "—terrorist told or promised you, but the actions you are taking are illegal. If this is a declaration of secession, it's the most foolish thing that I've ever seen. And I can assure you, no matter what his broadcast might have you think of the World Government's current state..." Aihara's expression darkened as his hand fell hard on his sword's hilt. "We most certainly still have the strength required to put down one nation that's committing a capital crime."

"Save that in this instance, the only so-called capital crime I see being committed here, sirrah, would be the international incident you and that lout with you would perpetrate, were you to take one step more!"

"And believe you me, punishing you all for committing said incident would be one of my fondest memories for years to come if you actually went through with it. So I implore you: test your luck and give me half a reason."

And now the attention turned to two specific fishmen—no, mermen moving towards them. One of them was an elderly catfish merman, clad in a top hat and purple robe with his tail slithering behind him, a horned cane helping him along. The other was easily twice their size, held aloft with a bubble ring around his waist but also using an ornate trident as a makeshift walking staff to push himself forward. He had long and untamed blue hair and wore little, only a purple skirt-like garment and a cyan sash that seemed to defy gravity to wrap around his back and above his shoulders. The lack of clothing only served to emphasize every inch of his muscular frame.

Aihara and Tora did not recognize these two individuals, nor did they care to fit the pieces together. But there was a justifiable sense of intimidation emanating from them.

Cross, on the other hand, actually bowed his head in respect, even doffing his hat at the pair. "Ah, Honorable Minister of the Left, and Your Highness, Prince Fukaboshi. A pleasure to make your acquaintance; your reputations precede you. Welcome to the Sabaody Archipelago."

While the Marine and merc boggled at the newly identified nobles in abject shock, Prince Fukaboshi returned Cross's greeting with a smirk and a nod, while the Minister let out a good-natured laugh and tipped his top hat. "And a fond hello to you as well, Jeremiah Cross! A pleasure to be here, both on the Archipelago and the SBS! But, if you'll pardon me for but a moment, I just need to put some affairs in order, and then we can discuss matters in earnest. Speaking of which..." The Minister
turned to the sopping-wet pair, and his kindly mood evaporated in an instant. "You two. As the good soldier already informed you, you are trespassing on sovereign soil of the Ryugu Kingdom territory. Leave now or face the consequences."

Aihara grit his teeth as the dual irritations of a fish-person speaking back to him and being spoken back to at all piqued his ire. "Are you truly trying to say before the world that Fishman Island—no, that the Ryugu Kingdom is invading Sabaody Archipelago? Because that would mean the invasion of an allied territory, and thus tantamount to a declaration of war. If that is the case, you can be assured that the World Government will involve itself. And you don't want that."

"Pft," the Minister scoffed, waving his staff dismissively. "Hardly, hardly, my good man. Really now, invading an island? Why ever would we do that? We've already plans to seek the rights to claim an uninhabited one at the next Reverie. As it stands, you've misunderstood me quite badly. We are not claiming that the Archipelago itself as the territory of our nation. Rather…" The Minister tapped his cane on the root, nodding his head back towards the mangrove tree behind him. "Merely this single district, Grove 77. This grove, specifically, bears the sovereign soil of the Ryugu Kingdom, and thus no longer falls under your jurisdiction."

Tora's face twisted up in confusion even as Aihara's expression darkened still further. "Wait a tic, sovereign soil, where have I—?" The appropriate neurons flared in his brain, and his face lit up in honest panic. "W-Wait a second, doesn't that usually mean a—!"

"Yes, Yes, it does."

It was with that declaration that Prince Fukaboshi planted the butt of his trident in the ground, drawing himself upright so that he could stare down at the humans. "As of one o'clock today, Grove 77 has been designated as the grounds for an embassy of the Ryugu Kingdom. The first embassy that our kingdom has ever opened on the surface, as a matter of fact. You should feel very honored, Commander. You're witnessing a momentous occasion."

Aihara's cheek twitched with the effort needed to suppress a curse. "Save that you can't open an embassy on another country's grounds without their explicit approval, and I know for a fact that there's as much a chance of Governor Prefectus actually approving this as—!

"You will find, Commander," a positively frigid voice cut in, causing Aihara to instinctively snap to attention. "That Ex-Governor Prefectus is unable to decide so much as the color of his own clothes at the moment, much less matters of international policy."

With a mounting sense of dread, Aihara and Tora slowly turned to look behind them. Both froze up; they didn't recognize the woman in the center, but distressingly, she was wearing the governor's ceremonial badge, and perhaps more distressingly, she was flanked by Nefertari Vivi and Nico Robin of the Straw Hat Pirates, along with a host of Sabaody law enforcement officers.

"And since he's currently under arrest for embezzlement, corruption, and a shocking amount of bribery, from a source we are very intently investigating…" the woman wearing the badge hummed, making a show of examining her fingernails. "You'll find that he won't be making any such decisions for the rest of his life. As such, the government of the Sabaody Archipelago—which has recently undergone a re-evaluation of its own—has elected me, Governess Amati Libia, to act in his stead. And it was I, with all the rights and privileges that my office affords me, who approved the Ryugu Kingdom's acquisition of this grove." She tilted her head in such a way that her glasses flashed. "Will that be a problem, Commander?"

Aihara's jaw-twitch intensified. "Are you… completely certain that that is a course of action you would like to take, Governess?"
"Oh, absolutely," Libia stated, her voice as blunt as a hammer as she breezed past the Marine. "I and much of my current cabinet are of the opinion that it was long past time that we renewed our relations with our fishmen neighbors, relations that we have neglected for far, far too long a time."

It was with that proclamation that she halted in front of the Fishmen Royalty and dropped into a polite bow. "I can only hope that this will be the first step on the long road to peace, Your Highness."

"That is a sentiment that the whole of the Ryugu Kingdom, my father and myself in particular reflect, Governor. And congratulations on your… election," Fukaboshi chuckled as he inclined his head in turn.

"No thanks required, I just hope I do a better job than my predecessor. Not that that's a high bar, but still. Speaking of which…” Straightening up, Libia turned her attention to the Minister of the Left and held out a laminated, notarized, and long-since dried document that at least looked very official. "Keep this well-protected. Normally, we'd have more fanfare for this, but given the circumstances, this will have to suffice."

And with that, without changing either of their deadly serious expressions, 'Devil Child' Nico Robin drew out and popped a champagne popper, while 'Corsair Princess' Nefertari Vivi blew a party blower. A curly one. With streamers.

"SNRK!" And since Cross was suddenly biting into his knuckles to keep from cackling while his snail was silently howling, yes, that had actually just happened.

…Aihara was beginning to really hope that he woke up soon.

"I am not getting paid enough for this shit…" the merc muttered, unknowingly echoing his misery.

But still, just in case that wasn't in the cards... "You should be aware, Governess," Aihara ground out, in spite of how it felt like he was chewing glass to get it out. "That the World Government had several… agreements in place with your predecessor. Agreements that I would very much advise you take into consideration before you make any further… uneducated decisions."

"Oh, is that so?" the freshly minted Governess mused, glancing at the commander with intense disinterest. "Well, then, that sounds like something you'll want to take up with my successors."

Aihara felt the shudder that wracked his body in his soul.

"Successors… plural?!" he yelped.

"Indeed," Libia hummed, casually taking off her glasses to polish one of the lenses. "You see, we citizens of Sabaody have taken the chance to review our government's history, and quite frankly, we've found our prior governors to be somewhat…" She let out a slight hiss as she pushed her glasses back onto her nose. "Lacking. In a number of areas. As such, we decided that a change was in order. Come the end of the week, we'll be dissolving the current government and calling a… what was the term? Oh, yes, constitutional convention so we can set up a proper constitutional democracy. Anything the World Government wishes to discuss, they can take it up with the council of civilians that will be elected in my stead. Is that clear, soldier?"

"Yes… ma'am…" Aihara snarled out, his nerves ratcheting even higher as another option to get out of this with even half a chance of keeping his job evaporated. But, not being one to admit defeat without a hell of a good reason, he kept trying, this time with the Minister of the Left. "Even so. This. Changes. Nothing. You still have no right to refuse us passage or to harbor these criminals and their
Aihara felt the nascent temperature drop twenty degrees, but he pushed through with his statement. "This grove may belong to your kingdom, but your kingdom bel—"

He snapped his teeth shut as the temperature hit freezing around him and hastily reworded his sentence. "—is a part of the World Government, meaning that they are still within our jurisdiction. If you still refuse to stand aside, we will be forced to file a report stating your secession, and as I stated before you know as well as I that the consequences to such a course of action would be dire, to say the least."

"And I believe," the Minister of the Left intoned, frigid as the polar seas. "That you could use a refresher course on the very laws you and yours supposedly enforce."

"What are you—?!

"Ahem, if I may?" Nefertari Vivi coughed into her fist. "If you don't mind, kindly refer to the World Government Foreign Policy, 25th Amendment, Article 7, Section 5, Subsection 62… 12th revision. A piece of legislature more commonly known as the Drake Doctrine."

Aihara twitched in confusion. For some reason, that name struck a chord in him, but for the life of him, he couldn't—

"To paraphrase for the sake of those not well-versed in legalese," the Corsair Princess sniffed primly. "'In the event that a member nation of the World Government proves to be too remote, too inhospitable, or lacks the proper infrastructure to support a proper Marine presence, that nation will be granted the right to maintain its own standing forces and handle matters of a judicial nature as the ruling body deems fit.' End paraphrase. This law is followed by a list of nations that fall under the aegis of the Doctrine…"

"At the very top of which," the Minister of the Left sniffed imperiously. "Is the Ryugu Kingdom."

"B-But what does that—?!

"Oh, but isn't it?" the Minister all but sneered at the Marine. "After all, the quick and dirty summary of that legislation is 'you're on your own, handle matters as best you can,' so here we are, handling them." The catfish merman punctuated his ire with a sharp rap of his staff on the ground. "For the past two hundred years has the World Government made their stance on your jurisdiction in our Kingdom explicitly clear for all to know. All instances of crime, from disturbing the peace to kidnapping to murder, fall to the Ryugu Kingdom's monarchy to solve and punish. All authority has been ceded to our administration and oversight, and at last we are exercising that right to its fullest, even if that should be verging on the definition of abuse."

"And as such!" the Minister all but roared, as much as his elderly voice allowed. "By the authority vested in me by his Majesty King Neptune, I declare that so long as they remain under our aegis that you and yours will not touch one hair on the heads of these pirates—nay, these heroes!—or those poor unfortunate souls they have rescued from their wretched fates! And that! Is! Final!"

All Aihara could manage was a wheezing gurgle as his last hopes all burned to cinders before his eyes.

"Now now, Minister, there's no need to be quite so harsh on the poor fellow."

Aihara's gaze snapped up to Prince Fukaboshi. He knew he shouldn't put too much stock in the
seemingly placating tone of his voice, he knew that there was another shoe waiting to fall, but damn it, if he had even an inkling of hope left then—!

"After all, he's merely acting according to the law," the Prince said in the same calm tone. "If he wishes to reclaim his organization's authority in our nation's borders, then it's quite simple: all the Marines have to do is establish a base of authority on Fishman Island and fully man it while maintaining peace and order in our home. Simple, no?"

And lo did the good Marine learn what hope sounded like when it died. "B-B-But that-that would take years to establish!" he babbled weakly. "And the p-p-price of upkeep alone—!"

"I'm sorry? Am I hearing this right?" And of course, that was when Jeremiah-fucking-Cross piped in, his ear ostentatiously cupped. "Sir, sir, are you implying that the World Government puts a price on the safety and wellbeing of its citizens? Did I hear that correctly? And if so, can I quote you on that?…oh, wait."

And in that moment… the Marine swore that it was not a man smiling at him, but the incarnation of Chaos itself.

"We're live."

After that, Aihara suffered a brief moment of confusion where he couldn't tell if the pounding in his ears was his jack-hammering heart or the gavel of his court-martial…

And then everything went black.

-o-

The Minister of the Left fumbled his monocle in surprise when the Marine Commander suddenly collapsed like a puppet with his strings cut.

"Mister Cross," he said, turning to me. "Please don't take this the wrong way, but… you scare me."

"None taken, I think I just scared myself a bit," I replied, just as surprised. "I mean, this is only the second time that I've done that."

I realized—too late if the looks almost everyone was giving me were anything to go by—that saying it had happened before probably wasn't reassuring.

"So…" The merc broke the awkward silence with an even more awkward cough. "I'm just gonna…" He jabbed his thumb over his shoulder with a shaky smile. "Go and get my boys and, uh, tell everyone else that we should all, ah… find somewhere else to work? Far, far away from here and all your very pointy spears, yeah?"

I schooled my expression into a look of patient disdain as I pointed at the Marine. "Take him with you and tell his men what's going on, and maybe we won't hunt your asses down for the years of blood on your hands. Deal?"

"Right, right, I will definitely do that!" the merc nodded, tossing the Marine over his shoulder. "Well! Happy trails to ya!" And with that, he booked it but good.

I nodded in satisfaction, then gave a glance up at Gif, hiding in the folds of Sonia's hood. In full awareness that the entire world was watching, I swept my arm to my waist and gave the merman towering above me a proper bow.
"Your Highness, your presence honors us all," I declared in as formal and proper a tone I could manage. "From the bottom of my heart, thank you for coming here."

To say that... pretty much everyone around me was left surprised would be an understatement, and I couldn't blame any of them.

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"Hahaha! So, this is your answer, then? My oh my, you really are something special, you brats! The both of you! No... more like the whole lot of you, even the ones you roped into this! So youthful and determined... determined to make the rest of us oldtimers look like absolute fools!" Rayleigh thumped the back of his head against his cell's wall, chuckling. "Haaa, and all I wanted was to make those kiddos sweat a bit! So this is karma? I don't think I care for it! Hahaha!"

'Dark King' Rayleigh continued laughing, even as he sat chained and shackled in the depths of the Human Auction House. Normally there'd be no reason for laughter in a place as hellish as that, but today was an exception. Once more, the retired pirate congratulated himself on having the foresight to smuggle in a baby snail with him when he decided to try and make the Straw Hats' arrival more 'interesting.'

He also resolved to thank Shanks for helping him circumvent Cross's localized transmission embargo when he'd figured out why his snail was being suspiciously quiet. After all, he'd have hated to miss even an instant of what he was seeing. Especially this!

"Ahh... and to think, you actually do have a concept of respect in that hellish brain of yours!" Rayleigh whistled. "I wonder, if you'd had a chance to meet the old King, would you have bowed to him too?" He fell silent as he contemplated such a meeting... before throwing his head back and laughing even louder. "HAHAHA! Oh, who am I kidding?! You'd have something positively nefarious in mind, and he'd both know it and be looking forward to it! HAHAH—!

"SHUT IT!" KLANG!

Rayleigh's jaw snapped shut and his mouth twisted into a scowl, glaring at the one who'd slammed his cage's bars, even as he subtly shoved his snail further into his coat. "Hey, what gives? You told everyone to stop screaming and crying, and I'm doing neither."

Disco's already ugly grimace deepened into an even uglier scowl. "Yeah, well I'm telling you to stop laughing now, too! Either you stay silent..."

Rayleigh couldn't help but crack a smirk and lean forwards towards his 'captor.' "Or what, I'll get the lash?"

There was a brief pause, and then the star-spectacled man's face twisted into a smile all his own. "No," he sneered venomously. "Someone else will. And you'll watch."

That killed Rayleigh's smirk dead, and he scowled at the slave trader, barely keeping himself from tugging his collar free of the wall. "Try that and I will do things to you that haven't been done to another human being in almost twenty years," he intoned, his voice dripping with a darkness that had left many a hardened pirate (as well as a certain red-nosed cabin boy) with nightmares 'til the end of their days.

So he was quite shocked when Disco merely threw his head back and laughed, chuckling and spinning his cane with nary a care in the world as he turned and walked away. "Promises, promises, Rexy, old dog. Promises... and nothing more."
The old man watched him go, all good humor drained from his face. Over the course of his stay, Rayleigh had become well acquainted with Disco's personality: a typical dirty coward, who only had power and confidence as long as whoever he was fighting couldn't fight back.

For the auction house's owner to be that aggressive and confident with all that the Straw Hats were pulling off, with all he had to know by now the Straw Hats had pulled off… something was wrong.

No, more than just wrong… in the deepest part of his gut, the Dark King could tell that something was very, very wrong.

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"C-Cross…" Vivi stammered out, Robin staring at me in wide-eyed shock.

"Holy… is he really—?" Koala breathed, Sandersonia nodding in numb agreement.

But perhaps the most stunned was Fukaboshi, who was staring at me in naked surprise. "This… Jeremiah Cross, this is hardly necessary," he finally managed to get out.

"I-I must agree, Mister Jeremiah!" the Minister of the Left blustered, wringing his cane in shock. "One as distinguished as yourself need hardly humble yourself in such a manner, least of all for a matter as trivial as this!"

"And yet, I insist that it is," I, well, insisted, keeping my head lowered. "Your Highness, what you are doing here today… there just aren't words for it. What is happening here today, what will happen here today, none of it would be possible if it weren't for your bravery and integrity. Our actions here today—your actions—will reshape the history of both our species. Today is a day that will live on in the memories of all sapient species on this planet for generations to come, and for that, I can't even begin to thank you enough."

And with that, I straightened up and gave Fukaboshi a watery smile as I placed my hand on his arm. "I… can't even begin to describe how proud Otohime would be of you, Fukaboshi."

That got twin jerks of shock from the Fishmen nobles, and even the soldiers within earshot recoiled at my comment, but just as quickly, Fukaboshi recovered and gave a tearful smile of his own. "I don't know how you can claim such familiarity, but I thank you nevertheless."

"Indeed, indeed!" the Minister's whiskers flapped a bit with how fast he nodded his head. "And dare I say, our dearly departed Queen would have been overjoyed to make your acquaintance as well!"

"PFHAHAAAAHA!" Alright, I kinda regret making everyone reel in shock when I burst out laughing at that comment, but come on—! "Oh, heeeell no!" I wheezed, still giggling madly. "Oh, nono, nooo, Otohime would have utterly despised me with every fiber of her being!"

"What?! But that's utterly—!"

"Dude," I scoffed, wiping a tear from my eye. "In case you missed it, I'm a reckless firebrand who starts wars around the world with my words and who advocates harsh, violent resistance, and whose hands are soaked in blood, whether through skulls I've personally cracked or by proxy. If we'd ever met, Otohime would have slapped me so hard her wrist would have shattered, and I'd be in more pain than her because of it! Seriously, I respect her to hell and back and we might have had the same goals, but our means are totally opposite and you know she would never let me hear the end of it."

Everyone stared as that sunk in.
Then something happened that I had never seen in the story: Prince Fukaboshi threw his head back and busted a stitch laughing.

"FUHOHOHOHOHO!"

"Y-Your Highness!" the Minister blustered helplessly.

"Oh, come off it, Minister, he has us there!" Fukaboshi chuckled, slapping a hand down on the old timer's back and nearly laying him out flat in the process. "We both know that Mother wouldn't have abided by his methods, and she'd have given us all hell for giving him the time of day too, even as she hung onto his every word! If she were still alive, we'd all be stuck listening to the SBS in the basement for fear that she might find us!"

The Minister weighed his Prince's words before glancing aside with an uneasy cough. "I, ah, believe we have other matters to attend to, my prince…?"

"Quite right, quite right," I nodded in agreement, turning around and gesturing for everyone to follow me back towards the barricade. "I'd tell your soldiers to hold their positions, in case anybody gets it in their head to pull something… unwise. As for the rest of us, well…"

Soundbite answered for me by shooting a smirk at Fukaboshi. "Let's get this guy in front of a crowd!" he hooted.

"As the snail says, let's move!" And with that, I marched back to Grove 77, the rest of the party following along.

As we went, Vivi walked up and side-eyed me. "This is the second time in two weeks that you've shown another royal of my standing more respect than you've ever shown me," she muttered in annoyance.

"I haven't had to see them preening in front of a mirror in their underwear," I blithely answered.

"EXCUSE ME!?" Vivi hiss-snarled, staring at me in equal parts rage and embarrassed horror.

"You should really remember to lock the room door more often, Princess, it can get horribly drafty in there, you know," Robin hummed ever so casually as we both strode past our suddenly frozen crewmate. "Also, I don't recommend something that sheer and lacy for everyday wear."

…man, after so much seriousness, the sound of Vivi's tortured moan of embarrassment was like sweet, sweet music to my ears.

-o-

Kuroobi, Hachi, and Chew saw every moment of Cross's interaction with the authorities of their kingdom—Prince Fukaboshi himself, in the flesh, forging an alliance that was built to last for a very long time. All three of them were gaping openly, but while for Hachi it was from joy and awe, the other two had the same question on repeat in their minds:

"What is my life right now?"

-o-

You know, it never ceases to amaze me how potent the power of sound can be when applied appropriately. The latest example soon to come as Fukaboshi pushed off of the ground to float atop a pile of crates remarkably similar to the one I'd used earlier.
All it took was Soundbite amplifying the sound of the Prince's trident knocking against the crates for the crowd's hushed but deafening muttering to cease.

Fukaboshi paused and took a moment to properly clear his throat before addressing the crowd properly. "Greetings, everyone," he declared, keeping his voice at a nice and even tone and pace. "I'd like to start by apologizing for bothering you all. I'm aware that you all have been through a horrendous amount of trauma and that your only desire at the moment is to rest. As such, I'll do my best to keep this brief: My name is Prince Fukaboshi, eldest son of King Neptune of the Ryugu Kingdom on Fishman Island. I stand before you now to declare that from this point forward, the seventy-seventh grove of Sabaody Archipelago is now an embassy for our kingdom..." He thumped his fist to his heart. "And as such, will stand as a sanctuary for those who have been afflicted by the slave trade. Slavery has long been a scourge on both our peoples, so you can rest assured that we of the Ryugu Kingdom will spare no expense to see it combatted, in whatever means we may. And in pursuit of that goal..."

Fukaboshi turned to the side, and gestured behind him at the galleons that he'd arrived on and with. "These ships you see before you are crewed by the finest soldiers my kingdom has to offer, and are capable of making not only the trip to Fishman Island, but also to all four of the Blue Seas with ease! Soon, we will begin taking names and destinations, and from there we will guarantee you safe passage to the oceans you call your homes!" The prince paused and bowed his head sorrowfully. "Regrettably, it is simply not feasible for us to return you all home at once, so many of you will have to wait for subsequent ships to make the voyage... but no matter how long it takes, I give you my word that I, mine, and ours will make certain that every last one of you is returned home!

"Many of my kind are personally familiar with the devastation that slavery can bring upon a person and the ones that are left behind. Rest assured, we will provide all of the resources that are needed for you to return to your lives as the best that you can be, physically and mentally. I promise this with the hope that it will be the beginning of many positive relations between humans, fishfolk, and merfolk, as was the desire of my late mother, Queen Otohime. In her memory, and on my honor as a prince, I swear to you that we will not rest, and we will not falter! We will see to it that none who set foot on our soil need ever feel the sting of the whip or the chill of chains ever again! THIS!" He thrust his trident skyward. "I SWEAR!!"

That was when the skies over Grove 77 erupted, a shower of leaves falling upon our heads as the cheers and applause of the free and the proud quite literally shook the heavens. Honestly, if it weren't for Soundbite's intervention, I and a few others might very well have ended up deaf. But maan... to see so many people literally jumping with joy, clutching one another with and crying tears of relief... to see such a pure and honest expression of adulation and jubilation...

Yeah. Yeah, I think I'd gladly go deaf for that.

But Fukaboshi wasn't done quite yet, and he announced that by repeatedly thumping his trident against the crates. No real silence, but the roar went from deafening to 'present,' so that was enough. "Finally, I would like to address the ones responsible for bringing so many people to freedom. Those who were brave enough to take the first steps today! Even if your motives were not humanitarian, your actions were still without compare, and thus we would see you rewarded for them. Minister?"

The Minister of the Left carefully slithered his way up onto the crates next to his Prince, and
withdrew a decorated briefcase from the folds of his robes. He then withdrew a small blue booklet made of metal from within, holding it up for all to see.

"As our show of thanks, all pirates present here today will be the first to receive these royal passports, known as the Broken Chain Passports, notarized by King Neptune himself," the Minister announced. "As you all know, the only way that ones such as yourselves may continue your voyage into the New World is to first pass through our island. And for the longest time, such voyages have been unregulated. The result is a perilous voyage through the depths of the Grand Line, which many do not survive, and as a result of the lack of oversight on those who would come to our island, all too often are our waters frequented by criminals who would do us harm. It is the intention of these passports to alleviate matters on both ends of the situation.

"This passport will allow us to keep track of those who would seek entry to our Kingdom, for the document will be a sign that you possess the favor of the Ryugu Royal Family! Holding it both guarantees and facilitates your passage to our kingdom on Fishman Island; presenting this passport at our embassy will authorize you access to an expert ship coater, as well as the services of a personal guide to escort you to our kingdom by the securest routes available, free of charge. This will also facilitate your stay on our island. Room and board and food of the highest quality will be available for you at a discount of 70%. So long as they keep within the country's laws, this passport guarantees the holder and their crew the VIP treatment for the entirety of their stay.

"And how might one come to possess such a wondrous boon, you might wonder? Well, regrettably, that will involve a rather lengthy and exorbitantly expensive screening process, to make sure that your backgrounds are clear enough for us to allow you entry… But…” He grinned almost maliciously as started to idly twirl one of his moustache's long whiskers. "Were a crew to present… evidence of their good will towards our Kingdom… a token such as, say… a set of broken chains… then I do believe something could be done to expedite the bureaucratic process, shall we say.

"And so, to all those present here today, who might still wish to earn themselves a few extra copies of the Passport, as well as those watching and listening beyond the horizon…" The Minister chuffed and tipped the brim of his hat down ever so slightly. "Well, now, legally it would be ill-advised for me to issue a truly pro-pirate statement on behalf of the Ryugu Kingdom… but as a merman, and a man with pride besides, I will say this…” The old man suddenly swept his cane out and pumped his fist in the air. "GO OUT THERE AND GIVE THEM THE WHAT-FOR, LADS!"

That proclamation initiated a whole new round of cheers, and while it was less deafening than when the whole Grove did it, our fellow buccaneers made up for it by sheer raucousness and liberal use of their firearms.

Man, it would have been awesome to just keep standing there before the crowds, next to the semi-aquatic heroes who'd helped turn my madcap plan into the madcap reality we were living in and just soaking up the praise!

"Hey, you guys, you gotta come check this out!” YOINK!

"GWAH!”/ "Woahwoahwoah, watch what you're pulling on!”
…but some things never truly change, and I'd never have it any other way. Of course, a certain merman prince might have a different opinion of being yanked off our high horses (high pile? Whatever) by an all-too-familiar rubbery arm, despite the Minister of the Left's protests as he attempted to slither after us.

"I don't suppose you could try and stop him!?" Fukaboshi shouted, completely failing to gain any purchase in the ground with his trident.

"Lemme check," I groused as I was dragged across the mossy ground by my boot. "Hey, Luffy, think you could let us go?"

"No way, no way, shishishi! Explaining or letting you guys walk would be too slow, this is faster!"

The best I could offer Fukaboshi was a shrug to tell him that I'd at least tried.

"Could you at least explain where you're taking us while you're dragging us, please?!!" the prince demanded, really showing off his negotiation skills there.

"Something really really cool!" Luffy unhelpfully answered. "See, I had this idea…"

That little proclamation had me and Fukaboshi exchanging looks.

"I feel like I should be screaming in terror," Fukaboshi bit out in a deceptively calm voice. "It's the oddest thing."

"I feel like I should be screaming in terror," Fukaboshi bit out in a deceptively calm voice. "It's the oddest thing."

I tugged the brim of my cap down over my eyes. "It's Luffy thinking, I'm pretty sure that's your primal instincts warning you that this is all against the laws of the universe."

Sadly, nothing more was forthcoming from my captain. Not until he skidded to a halt right in front of one of the massive roots. Fukaboshi and I had no time to catch their breath. The gathered Supernovas demanded our attention, as did the lit torches they carried. Torches they were carrying around a pit they were pouring what looked to be pitch into.

"C'mon, c'mon!" Luffy eagerly cried, hopping up to his spot around the pit and grabbing up a torch of his own oh god why. "They're almost done! You gotta take a look before they light it!"

"Alright, now I'm terrified," I muttered, working my way to my feet and trudging after my captain, Fukaboshi a step—er, tail-length behind.

Reaching the edge, we looked in, and gasped, eyes wide. There, in the pit and soaked in pitch, was a small mountain of chains and slave collars. My eyes darted from the chains to the torches, and suddenly everything made sense.

"You're burning them!" Fukaboshi breathed in awe, eyes wide. "You're burning the chains!"

"Do-Do you guys realize the symbolism of this?!!" I wheezed, running my fingers through my hair. "Burning the literal instruments of oppression!?"

"Do you take us for fools, Jeremiah Cross?" Hawkins drawled. "Because any fool could see the symbolism."

"Point of order, a fool did," Drake huffed, casting a sidelong glance at a snickering Luffy. "After all, he's the one who suggested this to begin with."

"Which is the strong point of this," Nami added, staring wistfully into the flames of her torch. "If
even Luffy can see the meaning of this, then everyone will. It'll be a physical symbol of everything we've done here, something that nobody will be able to ignore."

"Well, until it burns out, at least, but eh, it'll be pretty till then," Bonney shrugged in a 'what can you do' manner.

That snapped Fukaboshi out of his trance, and he chopped his arm down in denial. "That will not happen. I'll make arrangements to keep it burning eternally, see to it myself if I have to. But this… rest assured, I'll see to it that this site becomes a historical monument. I will not let it die."

That got looks of honest surprise from the Supernovas, and I do believe that, in that instant, a lot of respect was earned all at once. Once the moment passed, Bege reached inside himself and plucked out two more torches, holding them out to us. "Prince, if you'll do the honors," he grunted.

For a moment, the two of us reached for the flames, ready to accept them, but in the next, we exchanged a look. An understanding passed between us… and we lowered our arms.

"Naaaah," I drawled, crossing my arms behind my head. "Personally, I think we'll sit this one out if you don't mind."

"Indeed, indeed," Fukaboshi nodded in agreement. He raised his hand, the impending protest dying in the Supernovas' throats. "Cross had his moment of glory earlier when he orchestrated this masterpiece, and I had mine not five minutes ago. This… This gesture, this moment?" He swept his hand out over the pit, and the evil they were all prepared to burn. "This, I offer to you. To the Thirteen Supernovas, who brought about this earthshaking paradigm shift; for your part, and for all that you have done… this is yours, and yours alone."

There was a moment of stunned silence… and of course, it was broken by Luffy snickering and rubbing a finger under his nose. "Shishishi! Told you guys he was cool!"

"You never even met him before today, Monkey brains," Killer grumbled, even as he tossed a bundle of bills towards a too-smug Nami.

"Eh, I had a good feeling about it! Anyway!" Luffy started eagerly waving his torch around. "Let's do it!

Another round of nods, and the pirates raised their arms to—

"Woah, wait, hold up!"

All eyes turned to me catching Luffy's wrist, various levels of annoyance on their faces. "What?" Kid snapped.

"This just occurred to me, but we're burning the collars," I hissed. Sweet lightning, how had they overlooked this? How had I overlooked this!?... right, adrenaline rush at the sheer beauty of it. "You do remember they've all got explosive charges in them, right?! And we're lighting them on fire."

That got everyone yanking their flames back nice and fast, except for Barto, who just scoffed and waved me off. "You seriously think that didn't occur to me, Cross?" the mohawk'd captain demanded. "They're bomb collars, those things use small charges to sever the spine, not TNT! So it'll be small rolling explosions rather than one big one, no big—eh?" He blinked at the blank, accusing stares he was getting. "Whaaaat? I like explosions! But whatever, if you you want to really overly safe…"

A wave of his hand, and a shimmering barrier spread out over the pit, with a far smaller hole in the
"There, ya pansy. Perfectly safe."

"Pansy?! That shrapnel could have shredded us into chunky salsa you—!"

"You're overreacting," Zoro replied, rolling his eyes. "That would've just torn us up a bit, Chopper could have patched us back together no problem."

"SAY THAT AGAIN YOU BLITHERING TROGLO—!"

"If I may," Fukaboshi interjected with a raised hand before Chopper could fight his way out of our gunner's grasp and really made things interesting. "I believe that now that all protests have been addressed…?" A moment of silence, and he nodded. "Then I shall do a christening. To the Flames of Liberation: may they burn eternally as a symbol of our defiance!"

"AYE!" And with that cry, the Supernovas raised their arms and cast the torches into the pit…

KRA-KOOM! FWOOSH!

And the rest, as they say, was history.

-o-

Unseen to all, standing just a few paces behind the captains—behind one obliviously smiling captain in particular—was a woman casually taking a drag from her cigarette.

The moment the Supernovas—this new, mad, absolutely incredible generation of pirates—threw in their torches, she flicked in her smoldering stub right alongside them.

"That one's for you," Shakky chuckled wistfully, watching the smoke rise to the heavens. "You damn Gold fool…"

And with that, she turned around and walked away. She lit up another cigarette, calmly blowing out smoke to join the pillar, and her voice softly joined in the new chorus that had risen from the masses around her.

"Will you give all you can give,  
So that our banner may advance?  
Some will fall and some will live,  
Will you stand up and take your chance?"

Beyond the horizon  
Your freedom awaits you at last!"

-o-

"DO YOU HEAR THE PEOPLE SING?  
SINGING A SONG OF ANGRY MEN?"

IT IS THE MUSIC OF A PEOPLE
"WHO WILL NOT BE SLAVES AGAIN!"

"WHEN THE BEATING OF YOUR HEART,

"ECHOES THE BEATING OF THE DRUMS,

"THERE IS A LIFE ABOUT TO START

"WHEN TOMORROW COMES!"

Much as I wanted to join the swelling chorus that would surely echo in this place's memory for generations to come, I had to turn away for a bit. Stepping a short distance away from the main glut of the crowd, I leered down at my partner.

"What is so important that you have to drag me away from the celebration?" I 'hissed,' making my consternation sound genuine, but really, it was taking all my discipline to muffle my smile. If everything up until had been the climax of my plan, then this was without a doubt the coup de grâce, and I intended to play it perfectly.

"This is IMPORTANT, CROSS!" Soundbite whined piteously, before re-donning his cocky smirk. "YOU WILL NEVER GUESS WHO FOLLOWED US ALL THE WAY HERE HOPING FOR AN up close and deadly visit!"

I heaved a weary sigh, slapping a hand to my face. "Oh great, a vendetta-seeker? Soundbite, that's a long list, if you want me to guess, I need a clue."

"HEEHEEHEHEhoohoohoo, FAIR 'NUFF!" the gastropod cackled. "HERE'S A CLUE: WE LAST SAW THEM in the land of sand!"

My facepalm slowly transitioned to pinching my nose. "…swear to God, if Croc or Daz Bonez got out—!

"Eesh, that would be nasty, BUT NOPE! Also, wrong side of the law."

"Then who—?!" I recoiled as I affected an expression of terror. Not that hard, with all the memories I could draw from. "Oh, crap, tell me it's not Smoker, because that could be a real—!

"YEEEAAAH, TRUST ME, I'M AWARE, I've been keeping a non-existent ear out for ANY REPORTS OF KILLER SMOG…" Soundbite grimaced and glanced aside before eagerly perking up. "But we're in luck, 'cause not a peep on that front! For now, we're only being shadowed by his four-eyed flunky!"

"Tashigi?" I blinked in surprise before cradling my chin thoughtfully. "Alright, not as much of a threat… but still pretty skilled and definitely still bearing a grudge against us…” I paused and looked at my partner in 'confusion.' "Wait, how come we haven't heard reports of her hauling pirates in by the crew-ful? Even if you were redirecting people around her, or her around us, she'd still be on the hunt, wouldn't she?"

"OH SHE IS, SHE IS!" Soundbite nodded eagerly, looking like he was seconds away from busting into joyful hysterics. "IT'S JUST THAT SHE'S… distracted by other prey. We leave behind a looooot of scraps, dontcha know!"

"Scraps? What are you—OH!" I slammed my fist in my palm. "Oooh, so that's… what you…"
And then I trailed off once more, as my face slowly underwent a metamorphosis of realization. "Oh. Oooooh, ohohoh!"

"CROOOOOSS?" Soundbite drew out.

"Pfffhohohohoooh..." I chuckled menacingly, not exaggerating that in the least. "Oh. Yes! Oh, that! Is! Good! Brilliance, even, sheer brilliance, right at its finest!"

"Oh lordy lordy, you've got a plan," the snail moaned.

"Don't sound so scared!"

"THE LAST TIME YOU HAD AN IDEA, THIS HAPPENED!" he sniped, waving his eyes out to indicate... well, the entire archipelago. "I HAVE EVERY RIGHT TO BE SCARED!"

I briefly considered that before shrugging. "...point. Anyway, you willing to help me with this idea or do I need a snail with balls? Or at least, balls bigger than yours."

"NO SUCH SNAIL EXISTS!" he snapped. Then he blinked and rolled his eyestalks.

"Hmph. Guess I have no choice but to handle it myself."

"Thank you for your sacrifice. Now!" I snapped my fingers and proudly pointed out into the groves. "Connect me to Tashigi, on the double!"

"ROGER ROGER! One call coming up, featuring Jeremiah Cross aaaaaas?"

I sneered as I thumbed out the collar of my jacket. "Himself, naturally."

"Say wha—?!...I seriously hope you know WHAT YOU'RE DOING..."

"That makes two of us, now ring."

And as Soundbite rung, I revelled in the anticipation of the display I was about to put on. After all, as far as the world knew, Tashigi and were still enemies. I was the cocky manipulator, she the hapless but idealistic Marine...

And it was with that very dynamic that I intended to hammer the final nail into the World Government's coffin.

But of course, for an effective dance...

"KA-LICK!"

One needs an equally able partner.

"This is Lieutenant Tashigi, busy in the middle of somethin—HEY, WATCH IT!" A clang of steel obscured her voice, presumably to put down some idiot stupid enough to think this conversation was even half an opening. "Sorry about that, I'm clear now. Anyways, who is this?"

"Why, this would be Third Mate Jeremiah Cross, currently in the middle of celebrating an overwhelming victory on the part of piracy," I all but purred, sweeping my arm across my chest in a nice and mocking show of a bow. "Good evening, Lieutenant, long-time no infuriate! How's the blood pressure?"

"SPIKING NOW THAT I'M SPEAKING TO YOU, YOU POMPOUS BLOWHARD!" Tashigi
roared, Soundbite's veins nearly pulsing. "WHY ARE YOU CALLING ME, YOU BASTARD SON OF A BITCH?!"

"Noooww now, let's all calm down, Lieutenant, no need to bring Akainu or his mother into this…" I said placatingly, making a show of examining my gauntlet's nails, which must have broadcasted quite well if Tashigi's feral snarling was anything to go by. "But as for the why, well…" I shrugged ever so innocently. "I missed you is all!"

"HA!"

"But I dididid," I whined in my most petulant of tones. "I mean, I put on this most wonderful of song and dances, spun the world on its ear, and at my hour of glory… you don't even RSVP? I feel so betrayed my dear, why… I don't even have the words. Standing a man up like this at his peak, it's just…" I choked back a nice and fake sob as I made doe eyes at Soundbite, who looked fit to choke on his own tongue. "Be honest with me: is there another pirate? Is he… Is he more infuriating than me?"

The act was dropped in favor of biting my knuckles as Tashigi made noises that shouldn't have been producible by a human throat. No, seriously, I don't doubt that somewhere nearby, Chopper was taking notes and muttering as he amended some thesis of his.

-o-

"…can hatefucking be verbal? Because I'm pretty sure that this counts at this point," Nami muttered, staring at Brain in a mix of horrified awe and disgusted fascination.

Apoo chortled, filling in for Vivi who was too busy leaning against a thoroughly hysterical Merry. "Clearly, you haven't been listening to Law and Kid snipe at each other over the past two weeks. It's sickening, bizarre, probably banned in most of the World… and kind of awe-inspiring to watch, if I'm being honest."

Robin promptly tossed him a Tone Dial. "Get me a recording, would you?"

"For research, I'm guessing?"

"…mostly blackmail, but Chopper greatly appreciates any contributions to his research."

-o-

"But, ah…" I picked up once Tashigi finally ran out of air. "For real, where were you, Lieutenant? I wouldn't think you one to miss a nice little meet-up like this without good reason!"

"Oh, you gave me PLENTY of reasons, you smug prick, and you know it!" Tashigi snorted, actually puffing out a cloud of steam. "The entire time you and your fellow scum have been running rampant through the archipelago, you've been leaving your scraps behind! And as much as I would love, and I mean love to see you chained, shackled and nailed to the wall—"

I exchanged a very wary look with Soundbite. "Not even touching that one…" I stage-whispered.

"—the fact remains that we can't leave the monsters you leave destitute free to do as they please, either! We've been stuck with dozens of arrests, countless counts of accessory to these crimes, trails miles long leading off into the Blues themselves…" Tashigi's outrage slowly contorted into an expression of pride. "You pirates might have your 'victory' right now, if you can call it that, but we Marines have our own, too! We'll see the evils of slavery rooted out of this world, once and for all! Us, and not you!"
I took a moment to let that statement sink in, and then tsked dismissively and turned my head away. "Pardon me if I don't exactly hold my breath. After all, didn't you and yours already make that promise two hundred years ago?"

"FUCK YOU!"

"Sorry, not interested," I shot back, before moving on to the main event. "Especially since I doubt you'll be in much of a position to do anything for much longer. Come now, how long do you think you can keep this up, Tashigi? How much more can you do before Marineford slaps you silly with a cease-and-desist order and tell you to get back to hunting us before they boot you down to Chore Boy?"

"HA! Your lies are as see-through as your so-called 'integrity,' 'Cross!" Tashigi snapped, Soundbite leaning forward and transmitting the tiniest grin she was wearing under her scowl, as she ramped up for her finale. "There is no possible way that such a thing would ever happen, because the Marines and World Government are utter bastions of truth, integrity and morality! Never in a million years would they condone the villainy of slavery! As bad as you are, the priority is obvious: the slaver scum will be dealt with, in totality, and that's a promise! Each and every last one that you pirates 'discover' and put out of business, we'll arrest and convict them all!"

Just a bit more, just a bit—!

Soundbite's eyestalks snapped upright, as Tashigi herself snapped to attention. "I STAKE THE VERY PRIDE OF THE NAVY ON THIS VOW!"

And there it was. There. It. Was. At long last… checkmate.

I shivered, literally shivered as the sensation of victory washed over me, before re-donning the demon's mask so that I could bring it on home.

"Do you, now?" I crooned. "Well, then, so be it. Let's hope that your precious Navy still has enough pride left to put up at all! Especially since…" I swept my arm out at the world and grinned. "Well. Now that the entire world has heard your vow, it now holds each and every one of you to account! Put your money where your mouth is, Lieutenant… or lose it all forevermore!"

"In case you didn't notice," Soundbite sneered. "YOU'RE PRESENTING FROM THE OTHER END OF THE SPECTRUM… ON CANDID SNAIL."

A moment of silence, a heartbeat that stretched for an eternity… and theeeen—

"JEREMIAH FUCKING CROSS, YOU SON OF A—!

I cut her off with a lackadaisical swipe of my hand across my throat… though the echoes that bounced through the archipelago weren't halted in the least.

The deed all nice and done, I shot a final smirk up at the overwatching Gif.

"Well, I think that that just about does it," I preened. "Guess there are still enough Marines who can be trusted to do the right thing in the world, so I can trust that this market is condemned to the shadows where it belongs. If it can operate at all after this. So, from all of us here at the SBS, see you next time! This is Jeremiah Cross—"

"—and SOUNDBITE!"

"Signing off."
Once I thumbed the cradle and the broadcast was properly cut off, my partner's grin fell into a grimace. "…you know the World Government is going to kill her FOR THAT, RIGHT?"

"Oh, they will certainly wish they could, that's for sure, and they might even try…" I admitted. "But we've just shoved the spotlight directly onto the good Lieutenant and chained it in place. In one fell swoop, she's become the public figurehead of integrity in the Navy, and as such a hero to the public. If she gets so much as a nosebleed under suspicious circumstances…” I sneered as I sloooowly dragged my thumb across my throat. "Then every whisper of corruption becomes ratified and the noose around the Marines neck twists aaaaall the tighter. And as such, they're left with only two options."

"PLAY NICE…” Soundbite summarized with a nod of his own. "OR FOLD."

"Preeeeecisely," I nodded, securing the mic in its cradle and turning to walk back to the party, only to pause.

For you see, behind me stood every Supernova who wasn't part of my crew or the Masons, all of them staring at me with unreadable expressions.

"...Alright, seriously, Cross," Eustass Kid said at last. "How in the hell did you pull that off?!"

I stepped forward and casually swung my arm over his shoulder, pointedly ignoring the snarling glare that hammered into the side of my head.

"Ahhhh, Eustass, Eustass, Eustass… you mind if I call you Eustass?" I ignored the litany of curses that streamed out. "Let me tell you something interesting: before today, I never thought I'd be saying this, but… One day…” I chuckled—honestly chuckled—as I poked his chest. "I just might trust you all enough to tell you."

And then, before he could snag and wring my neck, I darted away from him, past the rest of the captains and spun around to give them all a smile as I swayed back on my heels.

"Just be waa~aa~aarned! If—and that is a very big 'if,' mind you—that day should come…”

I swung my arms out wide, and let them behold the sheer everything that had come to pass, that was happening, and still had yet to be.

"You will all look back on this day… as nothing but a footnote."

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