

I can't draw. Duh.

This was actually the winner of the first medium story poll this month, which I finished after I was done work on *FILFy Teacher*. Despite that, this hasn't been Grammarly-checked either. Sorry guys, RL sucked away this past weekend, both for me and for Tomon. He and Hiryo were able to give it a cursory glance, but undoubtedly there will be small mistakes throughout. I will try to Grammarly the hell out of it over the next few days, so if you are annoyed by small mistakes, wait until this message disappears.

Chapter 30: Three Instead of One

It took about ten minutes to convince Brook that they were serious about taking on the Shichibukai, Gecko Moria, and Brook kept on interrupting his tale by exclamations about how dangerous the man was and how strange the zombies were, slowing the tale down considerably. Worse, Brook's information was based more about observations of the outskirts of the island rather than how the zombies worked or what Moria's powers were beyond the bare minimum. But even so, they had learned a bit, certainly enough to start with.

"So, let me get this straight," Laki said, wanting to rub her forehead and mutter about impossible things being too damn common but refraining. *I can deal with Luffy using the power of Enel. I can get used to this stuff.* "One, shadows can be taken by this Gecko guy, with the abilities and skills of the individual copied into a zombie. Two, salt can remove the shadow from a zombie, returning it to the individual it had been taken from. Three, if a person without a shadow is struck by direct sunlight, they burn to death. Because, why not. Which has forced you and others to remain in the area of the fog or even to live in hiding on his island."

"Heh. Devil Fruits don't have to make sense, I guess," Luffy smirked.

"So sayeth the lightning man," Robin laughed while sprouting several hands on the table, pouring herself some coffee as Sanji was currently doing dishes with Makino. Another mug slid across the table to her from the place set out for Eve, and she inquired, "Tea or coffee, Eve?"

"Tea, please. Caffeine doesn't do anything to me, unfortunately," Eve announced from everywhere. "And tea at least doesn't taste like something cleaned out of the bilges after a month at sea."

"Ouch," Robin murmured while Luffy laughed in agreement. Robin took her coffee about as black as night, with just a hint of sugar added. A simple smell of it was enough to wake a person up from the grave, although the taste of it was most decidedly one that had to acquire over a significant amount of time. Robin drank the stuff with nearly every meal that Sanji didn't make a special drink for. "Still to each their own."

Brook watched as the tea was poured, with Robin making it to a specific standard. Then he watched as somehow the liquid started to disappear from the cup. Looking around, Brook became somewhat nervous, noting that the place set out earlier for a missing crewmate had also been eaten. The crew had mentioned an Eve person being to blame for his earlier issues, and at first, he had simply assumed the person was just using some kind of Devil Fruit themselves., or perhaps they were joking around, and Robin could change her voice and was the reason for his troubles.

But now, with Robin right there and hearing her strike up a conversation and be answered by the invisible person, Brook set aside those assumptions. And the fact he got the impression they weren't explaining on purpose for humor's sake was also putting him on edge. "Ah, ano, everyone, before we go on, could you please finally explain where this Eve person is and why I can't see them? Only, at the moment, it rather sounds like you are addressing a ghost whenever you speak of her!" Brook questioned, looking around once more. "Oh, oh dear, I don't like stories like this!"

"What, the walking skeleton doesn't like the idea of spirits?" Nami quipped, shaking her head. "That seems kind of silly."

"EEEH!!" Brook's teeth began to chatter almost like castanets, the noise of them much louder than they would have been if he had skin and sinew to block it. "So it really is a ghost!"

Feeling quite mischievous at the moment, Eve forced her hand and head to appear from the table, holding back a grimace at the amount of effort this took. Instead she tried to smile as widely as she could, showing all her teeth. "Hello!"

"EYEEAAAH!!!!" Brook's scream was fantastic, and he bolted back out of his chair, tumbling over his chair and crawling for the door. "GHOSSSTTTT!!!"

For a moment, the rest of the crew stared, not at Brook, but at Eve's head, for the Klabautermann had changed dramatically. Her hair was now in short black curls, the color like Robin's but the length like Nami's. Her face was more angular, her eyes red and somewhat smaller in her face than before. The spirit looked both older and tougher, and that face was, like the hair, no longer showing the dichotomy it had before.

The little spirit blinked at them all, then with a grimace disappeared once more, making it clear without words that such a demonstration had been a step too far for her right now.

Shaking his head and mentally approving of the Klabautermann's physical (?) changes since being transferred, Luffy followed Brook quickly, grabbing him by the shoulder and lifting him into the air, carrying him back to the table. "Heh, that went about as well as I could ever have hoped. Still, why exactly are you scared of spirits anyway? You seemed to be okay when talking about Moria's zombies, and like Nami said, you're a talking skeleton. You don't really have much of a leg to stand on, you know?"

"I was not alright when talking about the zombies!" Brook jabbered. "One cannot control what one is afraid of, and I've never liked scary horror stuff or anything to deal with the supernatural. Even zombies freak me out, and I hate having to deal with them, but I've had years to grow used to the idea of them being real! And now you're talking about an actual ghost!"

"No, a spirit," Luffy answered firmly, dropping Brook back into his chair. "There's a difference between a ghost and the spirit. A ghost is a person's soul left behind due to some regret or something like that. Like you when you were wandering the ocean to find your body, Brook. A spirit can be created in a lot of different ways."

"And an old sailor like yourself has heard the legend of the Klabautermann, right?" Franky spoke up, smirking as he sipped at a cola bottle. "I know I did. Mind you, I never saw one before."

"Ah, of course I've heard of them! But I have never seen one, and surely..." Brook started to recover some measure of courage as Franky's words penetrated. "Wait, are you saying that Eve is a Klabautermann! But if, if they exist, then surely one should have formed on the Concert Venue. And wouldn't that mean that this ship is going to sink soon?"

The Concert Venue was the name of the ship Brook had been on, the former ship of the Rumbar Pirates.

"I am not! But if you keep being rude, I'm going to stuff you in the Franky Special Cannon and shoot you out into the fog!" Eve grumbled before mellowing slightly. "Although I can at least understand your concerns since that's the way it's normally supposed to be for my people. And I'm kind of surprised your ship hasn't evolved a Klabautermann too."

"And that ship of yours is actually not in danger o' sinking anytime soon," Franky opined. "I looked it over from the deck, and most of the hull is still super sturdy, whoever built it for ya did a bang-up job. As for a Klabautermann forming, sad to say, Bones-bro, but I think that if a spirit was going to form would have done so back when you had a full crew."

"Regardless of whether or not you've seen one before, Eve is ours," Robin said, patting the side of the dining room affectionately. And she is a valued member of our crew. If you are going to join us, you're going to have to get used to her."

Shakily, Brook sat in his chair once more, looking at Luffy, then around. "I, I do apologize, Miss Eve. I will try to overcome my fear of spirits, at least when it comes to yourself." When Eve accepted his apology Brook went on, looking at Luffy as he sat back down next to Robin, letting his hand rest on her thigh under the table. "But that is the second time you've mentioned wanting me to be part of your crew."

"Yep!" Luffy grinned. "We still need a musician after all. And you're going to bring us to such a great challenge too. So let's get back to talking about these zombies, Moria and what kind of powers you've seen. There's got to be some more in that empty skull of yours, and the more we know, the easier it will be to kick his ass."

Hah, no secret which one of those matters more to you, Luffy, a new crewman or a new challenge, Nami thought, while Makino and Franky had similar feelings. Of the rest, Zoro and Sanji were interested in seeing how they rated against a Shichibukai, while Robin was simply interested in, well, interesting things. And the idea of zombies and fighting Moria sounded interesting. Chopper and Laki were both more concerned about the whole spirits thing than anything else. Although both had calmed down considerably after their initial reaction to Brook, Eve's admonishments were still prevalent in their minds.

Brook slumped in his chair, and water – which looked more like salt water than actual tears – began to flow from his eyes. "W, While I am moved to tears, or would be if I had tear ducts, skull joke! I still maintain I cannot in good conscience..."

At that moment, a shiver went through the ship, and Eve's voice came from every surface and piece of wood around them, so loud it actually hurt. 'Huh, what in the hell!? Where did that come from!?"

"What are you talking about, Eve?" Makino was the first to recover.

"Er, well... um, we seem to have just grounded on an island," Eve began. "A sandbar underneath the ocean anyway, and um, in front of us is what looks like the spookiest freaking island I could ever imagine. I guess Brook's got a point about horror tales and spiritual stuff being a bit... off-putting." The last was added grudgingly, but the fact she said it at all made it clear that the sight Eve was seeing was quite spooky.

Before she had finished, the crew had rushed outside and were now looking at the island. It was shaped like someone had chopped the top half of a large castle city and set it out onto the ocean as an island, complete with a few small towers and crenellations around the edges, just barely visible through the fog. Directly ahead of them, the outer wall of the castle city was shattered and broken, leaving a large concave area slowly leading up to a forest that covered the castle's interior.

For a moment, they all just stared, and then Nami's voice echoed Eve's earlier incredulity.
"Where did that come from!?"

"That's what I said!" Eve's voice came from all around them as per normal, sounding somewhat put out. "Is this going to be a new trend, people repeating what I've said, or forgetting I'm here? Because if so, I don't like it."

"She was more agreeing with you than repeating what you said, Eve, and it'd be hard to ever forget ya, for various reasons," Luffy muttered, staring at the island thoughtfully, tugging at the brim of his hat as he looked up and further up at it. "Laki, can you make out anything from up there?"

Laki had instantly taken to the air, more used to thinking in terms of aerial combat and line of sight than even Luffy, and she was now perched on one side of the main mast. "Um, I can make out a bit more, but the fog is really nasty, Luffy. There looks to be some kind of structure in the center of the island, can't tell how large. And... I think there was movement behind us." Laki opened a window, hopping into the crow's nest where she grabbed up the spyglass there, trying to peer through the fog. "Um, it could be some kind of gate, but I'd have to leave the ship to see more."

"The, there is no need, dear lady. It has been more than a year and a half since I saw this place, but I knew I would find it once more! This is Thriller Bark!"

"Called it," Luffy nodded with a smirk, still taking in the island.

"It's certainly in keeping with the whole zombie motif," Robin agreed, her dark eyes gleaming with the urge to explore.

"Yeah, that's super and all, but what did you mean when you said we had run aground?" Franky asked, moving to the side of the ship.

"We're stuck on some kind of sandbar like I said. We could probably move through it, but I don't know what that would do to my hull or what else is down there," Eve reported, sounding worried.

"Yeah, let's not do that," Sanji and Zoro said as one, standing by the port side safety railing. They glared at one another as they spoke the same words one over the other, but even as the two men fell to bickering, Luffy and the others could tell why they were worried. The water here was brackish and black, even more opaque than normal water would have been under similar conditions."

Luffy opened his mouth and was about to suggest the four men head over the side of the ship to push the ship back out, but Brook suddenly moved, hopping up onto the safety railing, where he bowed grandly to them all, suddenly holding a small sack. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you most profusely for your warm welcome and thoughts. But I still cannot ask you to fight on my behalf. Especially when I can but sneak in and take my shadow myself! It is not only a matter of wanting to keep you all safe. It is also a matter of my own pride as a pirate! After all, what kind of pirate would I be if I asked others to fight in my stead! With that, farewell!"

To the shock of everyone aboard, Brook leaped out over the side, as graceful as a Swan.

"What's he doing!?" Chopper shouted, with Nami and Makino racing to the same bit of railing, staring after Brook in shock. Of course, Brook's grace wasn't why they were all surprised. "If he's going to try to take his shadow back, why is he committing suicide by jumping into the ocean!?"

"Indeed, I rather doubt that his powers make him immune to that common weakness. If anything, I would assume the exact opposite, that he is more susceptible to the impact of the ocean. A mere splash might be enough to send him to the afterlife for real,"

Robin trailed off as everyone there saw Brook's legs begin to move, flashing faster and faster, until they almost disappeared, reminding Luffy of a helicopter's fans or whatever they were called. When Brook touched down on the top of the water and began to literally run across it, his legs churning like a fast paddlewheel.

"...Well, that's new. I wonder how long it will take Brook to learn Geppo," Luffy mused before the reality of what just happened hit him, and he groaned. "Why? Just why?"

"Yeah, seriously, why would he just rush off like that when help was right here?" Chopper asked.

This caused Nami to flinch a bit, remembering how it had taken the Haoshoku to convince her that Luffy was strong enough to free her from Arlong. Without it, she had intended to flee, leave her friends behind in an effort to protect them from her personal boogeyman. *This might be pride, or it might be fear for us.*

Before she could speak though, Makino spoke up giving her own, much less generous opinion. "Many a man has a sense of pride that won't allow him to seek help. His pride insists he does this on his own. It would be like you not going to Doctorine for training even after Dr. Hiriluk died because you wanted to become the best doctor in the world on your own. Foolish, but pride is often like that."

Chopper frowned at that before nodding slowly, not in understanding, although the example she gave was a good one, but rather in acknowledgment.

"Yeah, I'm glad I don't have that kind of stupid ..." Luffy was about to say before pausing, watching as his girlfriend looked at him with a faint smile. *Right, not going there.*

Snickering at that, Laki asked, "What are we going to do, captain?"

"Setting aside Brook's machismo moment, Nami, you looked a little more surprised than just this place coming up on us so quickly should have warranted. Why?" Luffy questioned.

"Mhmm, and I'm sorry, Eve, I really did hear what you said," Nami answered, putting her earlier thoughts to one side. She patted the railgun affectionately in lieu of patting Eve, who still hadn't been able to bring out her body fully once more, only arms and lips. "But I wasn't exclaiming about how we came so close to this island. I mean, this isn't an island at all."

The others all looked at Nami in confusion, while Luffy just crossed his arms, staring ahead of them for a moment as he concentrated on his Kenbunshoku. Even as he did so, he listened to what Nami was saying, knowing it would be worth it.

"There is no way we could've come close to an island without me being aware of it, even through the fog. Any island, especially here on the Grand Line, would impact the weather. And before you ask, that means way more than just being able to create fog. It means minute changes in the weather and the current, which would become more noticeable the closer we are to the island. Even a small island would have a tide going both in and out, and the winds around the island would be changed by whatever mountain formations are on the island. This fog isn't coming from this island, and we aren't near its center yet either."

"Weather Witch has got a point," Zoro muttered. "But if it isn't an island, then what..."

"It's a ship," Franky added, grabbing everyone's attention. While the others had been talking, he had hopped over the side, swimming down to the ship's keel where it was resting on an underwater sand dune. Now he hung over the side of the ship, one arm locked over the safety railing. "I scrapped away some of the sand down there and hit wood. It's not a Water 7 special. We've never made something so huge." He smirked. "And I gotta wonder if this means' Baka-burg's dream has already been accomplished somewhere else."

The others all looked between the navigator and the shipwright, and Laki, who had come down from the crow's nest, asked the obvious question. "Okay, so how is that even possible?"

"Eh, it wouldn't be too difficult to conceive anyway. Building it would be something else since most of the work would have to be done in a drydock, and even Water 7 doesn't have a drydock large enough for this work. Still, you could make a ship able to have a deck segment under the water, with the rest above it. The deeper the water you wanted there, the harder it would be to build it, and the water here isn't sloshing as much as it should, which means the movement Sis Laki saw out there was some kind of dock."

Franky pointed at the 'island' ahead of them. "That would be the center of the ship, the ballast, so to speak, so it doesn't overbalance. If we could see them, the sails would be larger than the Everlasting Resolve, same with its main mast. It isn't a super ship by any means, but it is still damned impressive."

"If that's the case, it has to be the largest ship in the world," Makino murmured. But she wasn't looking ahead of them then instead, she was looking behind them. "And I agree fully with what Franky and Laki. Look, we're trapped."

The rest of the crew turned in the direction she was looking. The fog had begun to lift near the ocean, although it was still as thick as pea soup starting around the Everlasting Resolve's bridge. Still, that allowed them to see behind the ship, and in the distance was an outer wall. In that outer wall was

the mouth of the inlet, composed of two jaws. The mouth looked almost feminine but not quite, had full red lips painted on along with thick white teeth etched out into the stone, closed now.

"That's creepy as hell!" Chopper said, shivering, as Laki did the same. Nami, on the other hand, was just plain worried, never liking the idea of being trapped.

Zoro shrugged, completely nonchalant. "Those teeth don't look nearly thick enough to survive our punch."

Everyone turned to look at the railgun and then around the conning tower at the aft gun before laughing, with Chopper and the others calming down significantly.

"It's a thought," Luffy nodded, patting the railgun affectionately. "But we don't want to reveal the abilities of our ship like that unless we have to."

"What about your Kenbunshoku," Robin asked, looking over at his captain. "Can you sense anything out there?"

Luffy scowled, crossing his arms as he stared out towards the forest and the very distant building Laki had reported. "I can't sense much. Five people, all pretty close together in the main building and one other near the edge of the forest out there, that's about it."

"Which, going by what Brook told us about the zombies, means you can't sense them," Nami winced. "That's not a good sign, captain."

Luffy snorted. "Ya choose the weirdest times ta be formal, Nami. But yeah, you're right about that. Hmm, let's take the time to get Eve free. We'll push her back out away from the sandbar and drop anchor. That way, at least the ship can move if we need it to. After that, I think we'll need to go ashore."

The other men nodded and looked to Franky for instruction while Makino gestured the women to join her. "Come on, let's prepare some salt packets. Brook mentioned that salt was a weakness to the zombies. Pity he didn't give us more information, but that should be enough to let us deal with the riffraff at least."

"Yeah, salt, sunlight, and the sheer number of zombies he mentioned," Nami grumbled. "Why are we doing this again?"

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Absalom stood on the shoreline by the outer moat of *Thriller Bark*, using a spyglass to stare at the enemy ship. The size of the guns on it and the sheer speed that its streamlined lines spoke of interested Absalom, but he was far more interested in the ladies aboard, and he kept his spyglass on them, in awe while the males of the crew dove into the water.

"God! I thought the pirate Empress and her crew had some beauties, but while there aren't as many, they're certainly just as good-looking! I think I found my bride! Or, well, one of them at least will do," he murmured to himself.

"So Lord Absalom is at the point where he's trying to place a bet on multiple girls at once?" Murmured one of his followers, shaking his head. He looked as if he had been middle-aged when he had died, with short, gray-purple hair, his hands and a segment of his chest covered by bandages.

"Can you blame him after what happened with the Kuja pirates? One attempt to sneak in, one royal beatdown, then twenty attempts, twenty rejections." Another zombie answered. This one looked like a punk rocker almost, with green-painted hair, and thin shoulders wearing a biker jacket. He had bandages around the top of his head, elvish ears, and stitches disappearing into his shirt from just below his jaw, which ended in a point that was in turn covered by another set of bandages.

Before the other could answer, Absalom murmured, "OH my, one of those two for preference god the chests on them! Yes!"

"Truly, the pervert is strong in this one," muttered another zombie.

"Where did you come up with that line?"

"I just thought it up. Good, right?"

"Accurate at least," snickered the third zombie. This zombie had long hair and a sword at his side, and looked altogether like a merry fellow, wearing a captain's cloak, pantaloons and his chest covered with bandages. Even so, there were three holes visible on his chest, which seemed to let the ale he was drinking come right back out as he drank.

"Shut up all of you and get into the position. You're supposed to be ready to back up the mice in the forest, remember?"

Behind the three talkers, other zombies hidden in the forest moved away without another word. As powerful as they were, General Zombies were not the most talkative sort. That was why, despite being the leader of the general zombies, Absalom kept a few soldier zombies around to talk to normally.

"And what will you be doing, master Absalom?" one of those normal zombies inquired, although the under monstrosity already knew what he would see.

"I'm going to go retrieve my bride."

With that, Absalom disappeared from sight and made his way to a small dingy, which he pushed out silently into the water, heading towards the enemy pirate vessel. *Wait for me, ladies. Your prince has arrived!*

The three zombies behind him all stared at one another, then in unison sighed. "John, Guerrilla why don't you wait here? if we're lucky, Absalom won't just be killed outright."

"Monkey, monkey, take a few of my little followers, John," a voice from the shadows deeper into the forest stated.

This was a chittering noise, and several more zombies appeared. They were far more uniform than the three zombies who had stood with Absalom a moment ago, small, coming up only to knee height. They looked like mice, only with spider legs and rears. Two of them moved to follow Guerrilla, and he, with a put-upon sigh, led the way around the edge of the forest to the back of the island, where most of the ship's boats were kept.

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The ship rocked under them, and Chopper and the ladies of the Straw Hats looked up as there was a grinding noise, and the ship began to go backward. “Eve, is everything alright?”

“Fine, the boys and Luffy, heh, that never gets old, cleared out enough of the sand to let me back out to deeper water. Franky’s guiding them, with the others just pushing. It’s kind of impressive how long they’re all able to hold their breath,” Eve reported.

“Huh, that’s a question. Does Franky need to breathe?” Laki mumbled, not looking up from where she was preparing special salt bullets. Thankfully, Sanji had bought a lot of salt, more than enough to let them create dozens of small salt packets, some of which Laki was adding to her bullets and those that Makino could use in her new dial pistol.

That caused some speculative glances and chuckles while the ship continued to be pushed back and away from the strange central segment of *Thriller Bark*. A splash was accompanied by Sanji and Zoro using Geppo to push themselves out of the water, leaving Luffy and Franky in the water for now. Zoro moved over to drop the anchor a moment later.

A moment later, Luffy and Franky joined them, the shipwright being carried by the currently female Luffy, the larger cyborg’s body blocking Luffy from view. Robin watched as light appeared, and both of them steamed for a second as Luffy used some of his lightning fruit powers to dry the two men, the heat instantly turning Luffy back to his male body. A toss set a still-smoking Franky stumbling to the main deck and into Nami’s mikan trees, causing her to growl as Luffy hopped down beside him.

“Nami, turn the rudder. The anchor will let us swing around a bit,” Luffy ordered.

Nodding, Nami hopped to her feet and moved towards the conning tower. However, as she did, Eve’s voice rang out, “Captain! Intruder!”

As she said this, Makino, who had been leaning against the fore railing gasped, as an invisible arm wound itself around her body, fondling her breast. Instantly, she snarled, throwing her head back, but whatever was there dodged it and moved away rapidly. “That’s no way to treat a lady shitstain!” she snarled. Just because she didn’t curse often didn’t mean that Makino didn’t know how to.

Luffy instantly began to use Kenbunshoku, sending the intruder was a man about the same height as Luffy, but with perhaps slightly broader shoulders, his thoughts centered around feeling up Robin next. With that and being able to sense directly where he was, Luffy intercepted the invisible man even as he leaped forward, his feet leaving the deck.

The blow caught the invisible man right in the gut, and he was hurled backward to smash into the side of the conning tower with a noticeable booming sound. If the ship had been built of anything less than Adam wood, he might well have been smashed straight through and into the tower’s interior rather than just against the side. Instead there was a splatter of blood and a sound like “UGGH!!!” as Luffy’s blow landed, and another deeper groan as the man crashed into the side of the conning tower.

Nor were the other crewmen idle, although Sanji seemed to be frozen in shock, staring. In contrast, Nami headed inside the conning tower when the invisible attacker crashed into it, and her response was near-instant. “Shock Strike!” Nami bellowed, pulling her staff out and aiming for where the sound came from.

The attack slammed into the invisible man's head, visible where his blood had burst out into the air, coming visible as it left his body. Electricity shot through him, causing his outline to be visible for a moment, although this time, there was only a slight grunt of pain from the man.

That was all that Robin needed. Arms appeared all around the body, twisting and pulling at it, as hard and as strong as she could. Yet like Nami's strike, the invisible man's body resisted Robin's attempts greatly, her clutch not doing anything. "His body's so tough!"

Zoro and Franky were about to get involved too when suddenly, Sanji seemed to break out of his stupor and shot forward faster than the other two men. His one visible eye was on fire, as were his feet, the cook having used Diable Jambe, one of his strange ki attacks, and when his foot crashed into the same area where sparks were still flying from Nami attack. There was a howl of agony and the sizzling of flesh as Sanji shouted, "How dare you, how dare you! How dare you feel up Makino-chan like that! How dare you, you bastard, how dare you steal my dream!"

Realizing that he had made a mistake, Absalom tried desperately to get away, pushing Sanji's blows back and lifting himself out of the dent in the conning tower he'd made from Luffy's initial attack. He tried to break contact and disappear, but Sanji was too close, and he couldn't get away without Sanji being able to grab his upper arm. "You won't escape me, you bastard. You will pay for achieving my dream before I could!"

"I don't even know you!" Absalom shouted, blocking another kick feeling as if his arm was going to break. But in grabbing the next kick, he could push Sanji just off-balance enough to stand up. This didn't last for long as Sanji kicked up off his remaining leg, then mule kicked the air where the invisible man had to be given the grip on his leg.

The kick caught the invisible man as he was kicked so hard, he lost several of his teeth and flew across the ship to crash into the safety railing.

"He's still there, Sanji," Luffy observed, smirking and waving one hand to Franky. "You got a bottle of cola with you?"

"Seems a waste, but yeah," Franky pulled out a bottle of cola and tossed it to Luffy, who unerringly tossed it into the invisible man's chest, where it shattered, spreading the dark liquid everywhere even as Franky asked the question that was in everyone's mind. "What's Cookie talking about this guy ruining his dream?"

"No idea." Luffy shrugged ignorance, watching in amusement as Sanji proceeded to stomp a mud hole in the invisible man's back.

Eve's voice murmuring into Luffy's ear, a small mouth having appeared on the rail gun nearby. "He scares me sometimes."

Staring at where Sanji had discarded any attempt of tactics or thought, a battle aura blazing around him thicker and more fiery than any Luffy had seen, Luffy could only nod in agreement. "Yeah, me too right now."

"For daring to touch Makino-chan, peeping girls, for daring to steal my dream, peeping, I will destroy you!" Sanji shouted, his voice barely intelligible he was speaking so fast, and the noise of flesh smashing into flesh being so loud.

None of the girls understood at first that Sanji was angry about something beyond Makino being felt up. But then one of his words or rather shouted sentence reached them where they had gathered nearby, and then, Nami got it. "Oh no."

Robin turned to her, one eyebrow cocked as Nami and Laki did the same. "What?"

"Sanji's dream. The Invisible fruit."

The women around her instantly got it, and Nami and Laki both laughed in incredulity while fighting back shivers. "Seriously!?" Laki snorted. "Oh god, that would have been a nightmare."

However, Absalom was a barely human monster at this point. His durability and endurance were enhanced not just through training but through literal body modifications. While he was being ground down, he wasn't dead yet. "Invisible Cannon!" With that, Absalom thrust out one hand, and there was an explosion, catching the attention of the rest of the crew as it struck Sanji.

But this Sanji had been put through Luffy's hellishly cruel {} tough training and barely staggered. The invisible man's attempts to get over the side and fade failed when a roundhouse kick caught him again in the side of his chest, picking him up and hurling him up and over the railing to splash in the water nearby.

Done meeting out justice, Sanji turned, scowling and shaking his head, wiping away a tear from under his hair. "Alas, for my dreams are tainted forever now, never to return to its pristine state, tainted by this bastard, his eyes having gone before me to that holy land. Still, I wonder..."

By this point, everyone was staring at him, deadpan, and Zoro was just shaking his head, seeing this as the ultimate confirmation of his opinion about Sanji. That the pervert cared more about his perversions than his combat skills. *Oh, I am going to milk this later!*

As for the ladies, several hands appeared on his back, proceeding to slap Sanji upside his head once for every girl aboard ship before Nami and Laki agreed to light some incense to whatever gods that might be.

"Well," Luffy said jovially. "Setting aside Sanji and his weirdness, which we won't visit again, I like my sanity just the way it is, thank you very much."

"Limited quantity, all items must go?" Robin asked, giggling.

"Quite you," Luffy muttered, although he was smirking as he rolled his eyes. *I'm so proud. She's actually using Martial Arts Taunting!* "We need to think about what to do from now on."

"What should we do, captain?" Zoro asked, sweatdropping slightly at Luffy's use of the word sanity even as a joke. *That's got to be a sign of the apocalypse.*

"Right," Nodding at his first mate Luffy turned his attention back to the wider picture, staring out over the now much more distant Forest. "Makino, break out the communication devices. Franky, prepare the ship's boat."

"Do you intend for us to split up?" Robin questioned. "Given what we can surmise is the nature of this place, are you sure that's wise?"

"Wise no, but necessary, unfortunately. Chopper, do you think you could track Brook?" Luffy asked, looking over at the ship's doctor, who had been silent for a while, cheering Sanji on and not understanding the bit about his dream.

Chopper scowled. "What am I, a hunting dog?"

"Nope, but you're the closest one we've got. My Kenbunshoku isn't going to work on him, as we've already discovered. Certainly not at long range. But I think Brook will need our help even if that sack he was carrying was carrying some of our salt supply."

"Gah, that bone bastard! I'll make a soup out of his bones!" Sanji growled, stomping off to check on his supplies incensed someone would steal from his storeroom.

The moment he was gone, Makino turned to the other girls. "If we see him picking up any kind of bizarre fruit, we take it from him instantly, no matter the cost."

"The women of the world will thank us," Nami said with a solemn nod, which went poorly with the giant smirk on her face as Laki and Robin snorted or nodded in agreement.

"Franky, Laki, I want you two to remain with Eve on board the ship. Prepare our broadsides and train our guns on both that mouth back there and the top of the giant mast. If you see any explosions or lightning in the distance, fire. It'll do for both an escape plan and a diversion."

Franky nodded, while Laki also did the same. Frankly, after the Buster call, she felt that she had earned the right to sit out this next adventure.

"Why don't we shoot now?" Eve questioned, a bit of bloody thirsty glee in her voice.

Luffy shook his head. "We're here to find a specific shadow. Burying the zombie would be annoying as hell, especially since we have no idea what happens to the shadow after the zombie it's attached to takes too much damage, which can happen whatever Brook might've said. I'd wager if you flatten a zombie flat or simply dismember them, then the shadow will escape, even if you don't use salt."

"And maybe we can talk Moria into just giving us the shadow in question. After all, we made one hell of a name for ourselves after Water 7 and," Nami broke off as everyone simply looked at her and hung her head, leaning against Robin, who began to pat her head commiseratingly. "Alright, yes, I knew it was as stupid as soon as I said it, don't look at me like that."

"Right. So, Chopper, can you track Brook?"

"Ugh." Chopper scowled but eventually nodded. "If I can find where Brook reached the shore, then yes. Do you want me to go after him alone, captain?"

It was a sign of how far Chopper had come in his own training with the crew that he asked that question rather than quailed at the very idea. There was some nervousness in his body language, but he still looked game enough.

But Luffy shook his head. "Zoro, you go with him." Zoro nodded at that, but he scowled as Luffy went on. "Chopper is in charge of getting you there 'cause we all know you couldn't find your way out of a paper bag, but you're in charge of breaking shit. That way, we can have our second-best fighter out as a flanker if the rest of us run into something."

"You just both insulted me and complemented me in the same breath. It's giving me a headache," Zoro grumbled, moving over to the side of the ship. "I demand a nap when this is over with."

"You already sleep too much as it is, idiot!" Nami shouted, smacking Zoro upside the head, then looking back at the captain. "Does that mean the rest of us are going ashore?"

Once more, the training the crew had been put through, and even more importantly, the mental changes Nami had been forced through thanks to interacting with Luffy. At one point, the mere sight of that island might have made her leery of setting foot on *Thriller Bark*. But no longer.

Luffy nodded, and then Makino returned with the Den Den Mushi communicators. Quickly Zoro, with Chopper on his head, bounced away through the air on the same angel Brook had followed thanks to Nami. Moments later, the ship's small boat was being lowered to the ground.

This boat had also been given the Franky touch instead of being a generic ship's boat. It looked streamlined, a built-up version of the waver that Nami had so enjoyed on the White-White Sea, modified and changed as best Franky and Laki could make it. It was made out of Adam wood, with more space than the original and two small dial-based weapons at the front.

Soon they were at the base of the wrecked segment of the 'castle city segment.'

Looking up at the forest and seeing the darkness beneath its eaves, Nami shivered, which didn't have anything to do with the fact that she was still wearing a bikini top instead of the more durable blouse or jacket of the other girls. "Okay, I am getting some second thoughts now. Can I go back to the boat now?" Nami whined before shaking her head, smacking her face, and pulling out of her dial staff. "No, that is the old Nami talking! Forward! For treasure!"

"One step forward, one step back," Luffy muttered, shaking his head.

Sanji was about to say something about Nami being so courageous when Nami paused, smacking her forehead and turning to Luffy. "By the way, give me a T-shirt."

He frowned, one eyebrow rising, but she held out her hand, and Luffy sighed, reaching into his ki space and pulling out a T-shirt tossing it to her.

That changed what Sanji was going to say, and he shook his head. "No! Why, Nami! Why a T-shirt!?"

"Pervert on your own time," Makino laughed, ruffling his hair like he was a child as she passed him by.

"Why a T-shirt," Sanji muttered once more, not even commenting on the act. Until that is, he looked up and spotted her rear moving away from him, then he was back to normal, shouting out, "Wait for me, ladies!"

By this point, Chopper and Zoro had reached the shore as well, having taken the same line that Brook had, Nami having been able to watch until he was out of sight in the fog and assuming that he couldn't change direction on the water.

Zoro landed easily, on top of the outer wall, then leaped down into the forest with Chopper still on his head, staring this way and that, sniffing the air. "To the right, and then, I think he's skirting around the outer edge of the forest for a bit, following the outer wall."

"The outer edge and to the right got it," Zoro answered before heading straight into the forest.

"Not that way!" Chopper barked, smacking the top of his head. "How could you get that wrong. I literally pointed in that direction."

Zoro looked around, blinking. "Didn't notice," he said, and then, to Chopper's dismay, turned around and went in an entirely different direction than the one Chopper was still pointing.

With a growl, Chopper grabbed Zoro's hair in both of his little limbs and twisted his head around. "That way!" He snarled over Zoro's shouts of pain. "And the more you try to go in a different direction, the more I'm going to pull your hair!"

"You know, it's moments like this that make me wonder if the rest of the crew and I are actually a good influence on you, Chopper," Zoro grumbled, even as he marched in the now correct direction.

"How is that even a question. You're the best worst influences in the Grand Line."

Zoro's laughter rang out, and the two of them continued on around the edge of the forest as Chopper reported they were ashore via the Den Den Mushi.

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Gecko Moria just shook his head at the report from Hildon and Perona's ghosts while Hancock snorted, visibly amused. "It sounds as if your crewman Absalom didn't learn his lesson at all. That's rather sad. Did you not tell him that someone on that crew might have learned Kenbunshoku?"

"Heh, he's always put more emphasis on his desires than his common sense," Moria waved his hand, showing the amount of care he took in even his living crew members while Hogback, his ship's surgeon, and Perona both looked a little more concerned. "Still, we know where he went down into the water, and his followers are already searching for him, yes?"

"Hai, Moria-sama," Perona answered. The ghost princess was sitting next to Hancock, as she normally did during these meetings. She and several of the Kuja pirates had become friendly and had exchanged beauty tips, and Perona had, amusingly, been doing a brisk business with the few female zombies selling bras to the Kujas. They had no access to rubber or silk on their island, and Perona always stole any such she liked the look of even if she wasn't going to use it, so she had quite a lot to trade for money and jewels. "I sent one ghost to circle the place he went down, while the other told his followers about it. They should be able to get him out of the water before he drowns."

A little known, and very strange, fact was that while the sea drained the power of Devil Fruits, if a devil fruit user fell entirely into the water, he entered a kind of stasis for several minutes before expiring. It would let them survive for a time, hopefully enough to get Absalom out of there.

Knowing that, Moria set aside what little care he had in his crew to gesture at Perona and the fat bat. "Continue your report, Hildon, Perona." When Hildon finished speaking, he clapped his hands in delight. "They've already split up. So much for this pirate crew being smart."

The other two Shichibukai both nodded, although Hancock around thoughtfully. "What was their composition?" She asked, staring down at Hildon and Perona. While Perona had pulled her attention away from the crew to keep track of Absalom's sinking body, Hildon had stayed in place, watching from on high.

He huffed and was about to reply that he wasn't under her command when a haughty finger was thrust into his face. As she leaned back, staring down at him so hard, she was actually staring up at the roof above them. "You will answer me now, worm, or we will see how you like being turned to stone!"

Trembling now, Dalton replied, hearing his master laughing at his predicament to one side and knowing there was no help from that quarter. "The first mate, judging from the wanted posters we memorized, went with the Straw Hat's doctor to follow the singing swordsman."

While Moria's good humor faded slightly at the mention of the singing swordsman, Kuma nodded thoughtfully. "The one that the world government wants to take alive? Were we ever told why?"

He looked over at Hancock, who shook her head, as did Gecko Moria a moment later. She had been forced to share the information that Tsuru had given her with her fellow warlords, although this showed that Kuma at least hadn't read it, which was unusual, she reflected. *He always does everything the world government once into, but he wasn't willing to read the report? Strange.*

"The Marines just want him alive, that's all. Reading between the lines and taking into account his bounty is from the Water Seven debacle, the one they blamed on that other rookie."

The other pirates in the room all snorted save Kuma, who merely waved his hand to one side. None of them had bought into the World Government's tale there, even without Hancock's insider information. They didn't know the truth, but they certainly didn't believe that another Rookie, Bege, had been able to convince the marines to assault Water 7 and the Straw Hats. "But regardless, they want him alive."

"Hmm... Still, that puts one of the best bounties on his own, and with someone else who I don't think we should touch overmuch," Kuma mused. "Perhaps I should go after him alone?"

"Perhaps you should," Gecko answered, delight in his voice. "That would get you out of my hair, and I think we would all be happier for it."

"No," Hancock announced firmly.

The other two warlords looked at her in some anger, but Hancock ignored them, and she pointed at Kuma. "Wait until we have more information." She then pointed again at Hildon, her haughty demeanor coming back in full force. "Continue worm!"

"I'm not a worm. I'm a bat!" Hildon muttered under his breath before obeying. "They left two other people on board the ship, the one called the Angel of Death, and Franky the cyborg. The rest of

the crew left in one large group to explore the island. Their captain, the Black Leg Sanji, the Devil Child, the Cat Burglar and one other.”

Perona interjected here, holding up a languid hand to halt Hildon. “My ghosts spotted that one. She’s a green-haired woman who wasn’t among the bounty posters. She has two pistols at her side along with a pouch about as large as my hand but doesn’t seem to be armed beyond the pistols.”

For a moment, Hancock frowned at that, but the other two didn’t seem to care one way or another. One unknown pirate wasn’t going to make much of a difference, after all.

“I think we should all stay together here. We might need to use your powers to separate the crew.”

Kuma’s eyebrows rose below his hat. “I assumed that we were supposed to destroy them all, not send them to different parts of the world.”

“Don’t kid with us,” Gecko Moria growled at the Kuma shaking said. “Your power might work like that for some things, but you can still just smack people around the bed. Send them to different aspects of my island ship, and let my forces deal with them one after another.”

“Exactly.” Feeling a shiver of revulsion going down her back for actually agreeing with anything Gecko Moria said. “While my crew handles the two on the ship and any attempt to escape.”

Kuma looked as if he wanted to argue for a moment. But the other two warlords’ logic was so he simply nodded and leaned back, opening the Bible in his hands and reading a bit.

Scowling at his hopes of getting rid of Kuma was dashed, Moria turned to Perona. “Attack the Straw Hats that have made their way into the forest. Let’s see how they deal with your Negative Hollows.”

The large stuffed bear leaned his head in and was about to speak to Perona, but she whirled on him, snarling, “Quiet Kumashi, don’t talk. That’s not cute at all!”

“Harsh as always, aren’t you?” Hogback murmured.

He routinely kept quiet in these meetings for his own safety if nothing else. While not as overt as Absalom, Hogback was a pervert and could barely keep himself in one piece when Hancock was around. The woman was so gorgeous even many of the zombies couldn’t help but react, and more than a few had been petrified by her over the past few days. Still, he had to speak up now. “Would you like me to prepare as well, Moria-sama?”

“Hmm... yes, head down to the mansion now, and tell the Surprise Zombies to be ready. Hopefully, if they get that far, the changes to your cover story will let us trick them into the central hall. That will make this much easier.” Gecko smiled, leaning back as his shadow started to move against the wall. “And you know I am all about making things easier for myself.”

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Just as they reached the end of the rubble leading up into the forest they had seen from the ship, a loud growling noise was heard. None of the crew could figure out where it was coming from but prepared for trouble.

"That noise brings to mind something," Sanji said, lighting up another cigarette and blowing a smoke ring. "The underworld is supposed to be guarded by a giant three-headed dog named a Cerberus, right?"

"That would be kind of cool to see, although Brook didn't say anything about one," Luffy mused with Robin's present nodding agreement, surprising everyone but Luffy. Robin had already confessed to him during one of their cuddle sessions that she actually had a soft spot now not only for children but for animals of all kinds. "Except for ducks. I am fully on board with the former Miss Goldenweek's thoughts on the issue of ducks. They are weird little freaks. And I cannot understand how Vivi was ever a friend with Carue."

When the noise came closer, they noticed it was coming up from behind them, only to just stare as the Cerberus came into view. Because this was very obviously not a living dog. Living dogs did not look like they had been stitched together by a child. This dog did have three heads, but one of them was a wolf's, one of them was some kind of mutt, and the other looked like a fox. The fox wasn't even the same color as the other two heads.

As one, most of the crew waved their hands in front of their faces, their faces either deadpan or disappointed, "No, no, no."

The dog didn't notice their disappointment and began to pick up speed, snarling, yipping and growling. It was a large beast, easily several feet taller than Luffy's head at the shoulders, and it was probably used to being the

The exception was Robin, who looked at it thoughtfully. "While it is not quite the animal I expected, it is still an animal. And it certainly looks large enough for us to hitch a ride, doesn't it?"

Makino paused, lowering her hand from where it had been waving in front of her face, while Nami also looked at the Cerberus speculatively. "You know what, she's right." Robin looked over at Luffy, even as the Cerberus came within range, Sanji and Nami both dodging around it. "I don't suppose you could tame it, could you?"

Luffy laughed, shaking his head as he stepped out from the rest of the crew, holding up a hand, grimacing with effort as he let loose a tiny pulse of Haoshoku. "Stop!"

That tiny pulse was enough, and the charging dog reacted, although not as a single creature. The dog's rear slammed to the ground, skidding forward as the two added heads attempted to force it forward for a brief second, the main head slumping down and whining. A moment later, all three of its heads hit the ground too, before it rolled over onto its back, presenting the dog's belly."

"That was a lot easier than I thought it would be," Nami shook her head. "I was expecting Luffy to have to beat him down for a bit."

"While humans might have their pride, animals only have survival instincts. It obviously was able to tell that Luffy was far too strong for it to beat. Therefore submission was its only recourse," Robin said, moving forward and ruffling the creature's tummy, before snapping her finger in front of its head and making a rolling motion.

Obligingly, the Cerberus shifted itself back onto its feet, although it kept at least two of its heads pointing towards Luffy, even as the other one looked a little blissed out by Robin scratching at his ears. Makino and Nami soon joined her, and soon enough, the dog that had looked so fearsome and terrifying a moment ago was putty in their hands.

"So much for it being a fearsome guard dog. Not," Sanji reflected in a whisper to Luffy, "that I don't see where it's coming from."

"Oh, ya want one of the girls to scratch ya behind your ears, huh?" Luffy grinned and exchanged eye-rolls and elbow jabs with his cook, even as he turned away, staring out into the forest. "Come on, guys. Let's get moving."

It became apparent the instant they reached the forest that this was not a usual forest. For one thing, usual forests didn't have animals that looked like they had been put through some mad scientist's experiment. The first one was a squirrel that looked as large as a raccoon but with the front paws of some kind of cat. The second was a series of trees with faces on them. The fact they talked when they saw the Pirates only added to the surreal nature of it all. "Hahaha, what is this, new fresh meat! Some of them look delicious!"

"And they're not even making for the path! Their hours to play with!" Another tree said, reaching forward with its branches.

"I just heard someone volunteer to become kindling. That's a first," Luffy quipped, reaching down to pick up a stone and flinging it at the speaker. That tree disintegrated as the rock struck, exploding into hundreds of pieces, and Luffy smirked, cracking his knuckles as Sanji tapped 1 foot on the ground, stepping forward's as well. "Anyone else?"

As all the trees shied away, Robin moved over to them, staring at first one, then the other, shaking her head in amusement. "These truly are fascinating. I'm not certain I see the point unless having a shadow in them enables these creatures to do quite a bit more than their forms would suggest. But it is quite interesting."

"Yeah, a real forest of horrors," Nami muttered, shaking her head and not making any move to leave the back of the Cerberus, where she and Makino stayed. "But what was that about a path?"

"A path someone else made Nami," Makino warned. "That doesn't necessarily mean it's going to be safe. Quite the opposite, really."

"Yeah, Sanji and I can just make our own road through this, you know," Luffy said, tapping his own leg as Sanji nodded.

"Perhaps, but perhaps that is not..." Robin paused, as the trees around them, several of whom had faces, suddenly pulled their roots out and raced away, shouting, "three pillars! Tree killers! Run away!"

While the forest was still far too thick and shadowy around them to let them see too far, this allowed the crew to see still more odd zombies. A long wormlike thing with the front half of a wolf. A tiger with the face of a man and the tail of a donkey. A creature that put Robin in mind for manticore, only perhaps the worst looking manticore than she had ever dreamed of. And a... "Is that a unicorn?"

"No." Nami and Makino said as one, very firmly, before Nami went on, deliberately turning away so she didn't have to look at the horrifying insult to all of her childhood dreams. "That thing is as close to a unicorn as Pierre was to a Pegasus!"

Obviously, the creature in question heard them and slumped down, his head kneeling on the ground and his horn, which did indeed look rather sewn on, stuck into the ground the very picture of dejection. "Oh, you hurt its feelings," Robin murmured.

Sanji was nodding his head sagely. "Truly, this place is very good at destroying one's hopes and dreams."

"I think that's only you," Luffy said, as the monsters seemed to take offense at their treatment of unicorn, even though the Cerberus was snickering to itself, a 'snir-snir-snir' sound that oddly reminded Luffy of an American cartoon he had seen his last life.

The monsters, rushing forward, but two of them fell backward, their necks disappearing from shots from Makino's pistols, and then Sanji and Luffy charged forward. They dealt with two monsters by the simple expedient of grabbing them and hurling them over their shoulders and away towards the nearby ocean. "Hope you lot can swim! Well, not really, but it seemed polite to say," Luffy announced with a smirk, pushing up the rim of his hat as he stared at where he had just hurled the unicorn. Then with his smirked widening still further, he moved over to Nami, patting her and Makino on the thighs for a second. "I removed the nightmare girls. It's safe."

At that moment, ghosts began to appear, three of them zooming forward's from out of the forest towards the pirates. One of them impacted Robin, another went through Luffy, and a third was dodged by Sanji only by the skin of his teeth as he whirled away from smacking a strange thing that had been about to take a bite out of his leg.

The effect was instant. Robin collapsed, falling forward onto her face, her hands pounding lightly on the dirt. "I am nothing, I'm not smart, I'm just stupid. Why, why is my world so dark?"

Luffy too had collapsed, slumping to his side, his hands over his face. "Oh, the darkness is closing in. I'll never be strong enough, never be good enough, my old man was right." At that point, his face was pressed into the ground like he was kowtowing, halting his words from being heard, as for some reason, a green light began to appear all around him.

"What just happened!" Nami gasped, staring at the two of them, then up at the hovering ghosts.

Realizing that they really might be in danger here, Makino took charge, firing her pistols up towards the ghosts. Much to her annoyance, the musket balls passed right through them, and she snarled internally, knowing she would have to wait until they were close enough to do any real damage. *If I can! But there is something else we can do.* "Sanji, clear an area around us!"

Instantly, Sanji obeyed, his feet a blur as they sent out Rankyaku strikes all around, clearing the rest of the trees and much of the rest of the debris around them from the short battle that had just occurred. As he did, Sanji barely caught sight of a few figures scuttling away, low down to the ground and desperately getting away from them, proving that Makino's instincts had been correct.

The three ghosts above made a strange noise, dancing in place for a moment. "Hollow, hollow!"

But, instead of continuing to attack, the three ghosts pulled back, disappearing up into the fog above the forest. For a moment, Makino, Nami and Sanji all stared after them, then shook their heads, looking to where Robin was slowly pushing herself upright, a blush of embarrassment on her face that did not go well with her normal calm, controlled expression. “What the hell was that! And what was with the green glow Luffy?”

Luffy grumbled as she pushed himself to his feet, wondering internally if that was what Ryoga had felt when he was learning the Shi Shi Hokodan. *If so, he can damn well keep it!* “I don’t know, all of a sudden like all of my happiness positive feelings were just gone. Couldn’t do anything about it.”

“I felt much the same, I was starting to push through it when the feeling disappeared by itself, but that is most definitely not an experience I would like to feel again,” Robin said, gratefully reaching up to let Luffy pull her to her feet.

His arm went around her waist for a brief hug, then he turned back to the others, leaving his arm there for a moment. “We need to be on the lookout for those things. And good work Makino on thinking of clearing the area around us.”

“I saw the path that the trees had mentioned before. Should we move to it?”

Luffy frowned, thinking, then nodded. “It might be a trap, but we will be going into it with our eyes open, and if we keep an eye out for the ghosts, maybe we can use Busoshoku to disrupt them? Beyond that, having somebody cleared area around us that doesn’t even have stumps or anything like that is a good idea.”

“Agreed,” Sanji murmured, shaking his head. “When I was using Rankyaku, I saw something skittering away, couldn’t make out what it was, but it was fast and stealthy as hell. Low to the ground too, so while clearing the trees out might help, it wouldn’t do as good a job as a path would.”

“Exactly.” With that, Luffy opened up his communicator, warning Laki and Zoro about the ghosts, as well as asking Chopper and Zoro what they had found. The two of them hadn’t seen as many strange zombies at the outer edge of the forest as Luffy and his group had, having come over the outer castle-like walls rather than through the shattered gap. But they had seen a few, although several of them had already been taken out by Brook. Frankie and Laki had the ship fully ready for battle as much as they and Eve could make it, which, thanks to the Klabautermann, was quite a bit more than most people would’ve assumed. They had moved the ship a bit further around the central segment of *Thriller Bark* to enable the Frankie special cannon to turn to aim towards the center of the mass or towards the ‘mouth’ in the outer wall.

Luffy approved of that and then looked around at the others as he signed off. “Makino, Nami, you two keep an eye on the skies. Robin, do your thing. Let’s get a move on.”

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“OH, such a mighty Cerberus,” Hancock drawled, as Hildon reported on what was going on. To one side, Perona sat with her eyes closed, concentrating on her ghosts. She had several of them scattered around the forest, and one taking a message to Hancock’s crew, getting the Kuja Pirates into motion out and around *Thriller Bark*. They would then come in through the currently closed gates, attacking the Straw Hats ship from behind.

The fact that the pirates remaining on the ship seemed to have prepared for that was somewhat concerning. But Hancock had full confidence in her crew to be able to deal with the ship. "And as for the rest, the only thing about that confrontation that went your way was the fact that Perona's ghosts were able to influence them. Have you ever tried them on someone using Busoshoku?"

At first, Perona didn't answer, and the large teddy bear-like zombie behind her leaned forward, a muffled "Perona-sama," coming out a moment later.

That evoked a reaction, the ghost Princess turning quickly in her chair, wagging a finger in front of the bear. "Don't talk! How many times do I have to tell you it's not cute at all." She turned to the others, bowing her head towards Moria. "Master, I've conveyed the message to the Kuja Pirates. They're already on the move. I lost sight of the swordsman and the doctor, though."

With her report given, she looked over to Hancock, a faint blush suffused in your features as she looked at the gorgeous woman, although if that was because of embarrassment or jealousy, no one would ever be able to tell. "And no, I've never tried to use my ghosts on someone who can use Busoshoku. Heck, before you all arrived, I'd never even heard of it."

"Nevermind!" Gecko Moria waved his hand airily. "We'll see what happens for ourselves soon enough. They're going to start running into my general zombies soon, as well as the spider-mice. Perona's ghosts will be much more useful attacking with the other zombies in place, rather than after the fact."

Smirking slightly, Hancock continued to needle Gecko Moria. "I note that you haven't mentioned the Cerberus turning on you for all intents and appearances. I think the shadow you put in that creature is defective. It is just smart enough to not act entirely animal-like, but nowhere near smart enough to actually do anything."

"Are you volunteering your shadow then? I assure you; I have a much better zombie in mind for it than a Cerberus," Moria growled.

Hancock sneered at him, leaning back arrogantly once more. "If you even attempt to steal my shadow or assault any of my followers, I will turn you to stone!"

Kuma raised a hand, getting in between his fellow Shichibukai, not for the first time. "Enough. Let us see how effective your other surprises can be before we start falling out with one another."

"Agreed. Although, you too might want to move to the mansion now just in case your part is actually going to be needed," gecko replied, sneering the words.

His sneer was answered by Hancock, and she shook her head. "Why should either of us move if you are not?"

Scowling, gecko shook his head, leaned back against the wall, and then allowed his shadow out, the creature moving of its own accord to one side of him. "Because I can influence events without even stirring from my seat. Neither of you can say the same," he answered smugly.

Hancock had no answer to that, but she and Kuma still refused to move even as Hogback left. They would only join in when Moria himself was on the move.

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With the Cerberus carrying the ladies and Sanji and Luffy to either side, the group of five Straw Hats made their way into the forest. There, they found a small road, leaning deeper into the island/ship, and after a few moments of debate, decided to follow it. As they did, both Sanji and Luffy were looking around, not trusting the silent forest or its multitude of shadows. Even though it was the middle of the night and foggy, this place was darker than it should be.

And as they went, Luffy continued to use his Kenbunshoku, trying to get a feel for anything beyond the five people he could sense in the mansion, Chopper and Zoro. He could sense where they were easy, although they were at the outer edge of his current range at the moment. He could have opened his senses further if he concentrated more of his attention on that, but Luffy wasn't at the point where he could split his attention between Kenbunshoku, walking, and his sixth sense of danger. Given the nature of the zombies, this was actually a much more important sense than Kenbunshoku at present. *I am still wondering where the cutoff between one style of extrasensory skill ends and where the other begins, but they are different, I know that much.*

With transportation being taken care of by the Cerberus, Robin could concentrate fully on her Hana Hana Devil Fruit powers. She had her arms crossed and was leaning companionably back into Makino, concentrating entirely on her conjured eyes. And it was Robin who spotted the growing trap around them in the woods.

"We have incoming," she murmured, and though low all of them heard it, even the Cerberus reacting, although he reacted by shock rather than surprise before a sweatdrop appeared on all three of his heads as Nami pulled out her staff, the end of which started to spark under her touch. At that, any thought of throwing the girls off or otherwise taking part in what was going to happen left the beast.

"What kind of incoming?" Luffy asked.

"It seems to be two different types of zombies. One of them is somewhat uniform, the other not. The second seems to be heavily armored, mostly in heavy plate armor. Their forms are all over the place, but most are human, with some additional parts. One has arms far longer than a normal human, and another has the lower body of an elephant. That one is the largest I've spotted so far."

"And the uniform one?" Luffy asked, crossing his arms as he turned to look out into the forest. A part of him was just really wishing he could let out with a blast of Haoshoku, but he wanted to save using that power's full strength until he actually met the people here. The same went for his lightning powers. A few lightning blasts into the surrounding forest or one of Enel's overpowered lightning blasts could scorch the entire forest from one end to another. Problem solved. But until they could find the one shadow they wanted, they had to be a little careful of the real estate.

"They look like strange crosses between spiders and mice, only as large as dogs. And they are extremely stealthy. I've only caught a glimpse of two of them. I'm simply inferring from that that there might be more," Robin grimaced, looking through her mind's eye at a few of her conjured eyes throughout the forest. One of them caught movement, but as soon as she tried to concentrate on it, the movement was gone. "Very stealthy."

"Hmm..." Luffy looked around, frowning and shaking his head. "Let's just keep on. If they attack, we'll deal with them. But we don't want to give Robin's abilities on that level away just yet."

Moments later, the path through the forest they were following shrank a bit, and Luffy exchanged a glance with Sanji, who nodded. Looking over at the girls, Luffy saw that Makino and Robin were also tense, while Nami was concentrating on the Cerberus at the moment. But she caught Luffy's eyes when he looked over at her, nodding.

When the attack came, the Straw Hats were ready for it. Although it took different forms.

The first attack came from Luffy's side of the group. There was a tramping of hooves, and two large zombies rushed out of the forest on Luffy's side of the trail. And as Robin had said, the creatures who came out of the forest were very much a mixed bag.

One of them was the elephant-bodied one that Robin had reported, who bore the number '889' on his gold-colored armor, his arms massive and looking wider than Luffy was, with a sword taller than Nami, and a beard to match. Another looked like the zombie version of a sad minotaur wearing purple armor and wielding a pike, the number '831' on his chest.

A zombie with the number '847' barely visible on his arm stalked forward, armed with a longsword and shield. He was also covered with armor from head to toe and if not for the two short spears thrust into his chest, there was almost no sign of his being a zombie.

This one launched itself forward, flashing towards Luffy with a Soru-like technique, the pike thrusting forward several dozen times quickly with a speed that was around where Zoro had been when they arrived in Alabasta. The other one barreled forward, while the larger zombie was much slower, but moved with a certain unstoppable air.

Luffy dashed to meet them, which seemed to all three zombies aback, the attack from the armored one going over his head. Getting in close, Luffy's punch shattered the elephantine man's shield as well as the arm under it. Despite what would have been a crippling injury to a human, the zombie didn't seem to even feel it, his sword flashing around in a slash faster than a creature his size should have. Again though, this didn't matter to Luffy much, who leaped up over the strike, allowing the hit from the pike wielder to smack into his side.

While he wasn't using his Busoshoku, Luffy's durability was more than high enough to stop the strike from penetrating his skin. Instead, the pike's tips acted almost like a blunt object, pushing him through the air to where he smacked into a tree.

There, Luffy came under attack from the spider-mice. Two of them shot out webs towards him before Luffy even knew they were there, but Luffy hadn't intended to stay there and had already kicked off the tree, flashing forward towards the armored zombies. A Rankyaku behind him sliced seven trees and a few spider-mice in half before Luffy engaged the two armored zombies once more, staying in the air now, bouncing around the two zombies as several more joined them.

"Would you like me to remove their helmets, Luffy?" Robin inquired politely.

"No thanks," Luffy said, dodging a blow from one of the armored zombies, grabbing his outstretched arm, then twisting around, flipping up and over him, and literally tearing his arm armor

and all off from the shoulder. "I want to see what these zombies can do, although I gotta say, so far, I'm not impressed."

"Astonishing! Such strength!" bellowed another zombie. "But you are no match for us, the general zombies!"

"Your shadow will make a fine zombie for Lord Moria!" Another bellowed, bringing around a massive hammer followed by more swords, axes and other weapons going through the space Luffy had previously occupied.

Luffy hopped up and off the guy he had been standing on as several blades flashed through where he had been standing a moment ago.

He landed to one side of them, smirking slightly even as the arm in his hand began to twitch. "Meh, I think you lot would need a lot more hands-on-deck to be much of a threat. Get it?"

For a moment, the battle fell silent, and then Robin, Sanji, Nami and Makino just said, "**NO.**"

This caused Luffy to nod and toss aside the arm. "Yeah, that wasn't my best work."

Shaking off their odd paralysis, the battle resumed once more. "Capture him for Master Moria!"

"Slay him for that horrible joke!" shouted still more of the attackers.

The next second, Luffy caught the sword of one of the zombies, pulling it out of the undead monster's hand with ease, kicking the creature away. He then hurled it like a throwing dagger towards one of the other zombies with such strength that the sword pommel - he couldn't quite get the spin right - slammed into the zombie with such force that he was hurled several dozen feet backward to crash into the ground. "You're not strong enough to take my shadow."

That infuriated the general zombies so much they didn't notice that Robin was using her eyes and hands to deal with the mice-spiders that should have accompanied them into the attack from this side. There were five of them, and they became easier to spot as Luffy, and the general zombies smashed down trees and wrecked the surrounding area.

On the other side, Makino and Nami were helping Sanji with the attackers coming from that direction. This hadn't been an overt assault like the one that Luffy was facing. Instead, several spider-mice crept up on Sanji as he kept watch for further attacks from that side. One of them moved stealthily in front of him, launching towards the women and catching his attention.

"W, what!? How dare you, you bastard mice! I'll squish you!"

But that one had been a feint, and two more launched themselves for his back while he was in midair. "Darn it, Sanji, don't let your chivalrous nature blind you," Makino grumped even as she fired. Musket rounds from her pistols caught both of the spider-mice in the air, hurling them backward but otherwise not doing much damage.

The hits stopped the spider-mice from attacking Sanji just long enough so that when their webbing shot out, Sanji was able to dodge. He bounced up and around in a parabola in the air, using a mix of Gepo and Soru to get behind them.

Two kicks sent the small spider-mice flying, but landing, Sanji had to deal with two more. They had created a trap along the ground in several places, which caught his legs. Sanji stared down, trying to pull his legs up, but spider silk was tough stuff and held him in place for a moment. Another spider-mouse launched itself at his back, with more spiderwebs trailing behind it while others charged the girls on the Cerberus. "Cheecheche!"

"Oh no, you don't!" Nami shouted, jumping clear of the Cerberus' back. One end of her staff smacked into one of the spider-mice making for the Cerberus, shocking it, while her other hand, which had an armored gauntlet, smacked into the side of the one trying to wrap up Sanji. "Impact strike!"

Nami's staff-based impact dial, much like the one remaining in her right bracer, had absorbed several dozen strikes from numerous training partners up to this point for months. The strike from the Impact Dial didn't so much as hurt the zombie mouse-spider thing. Instead, it imploded like a bag filled with rotten vegetables hit by a hammer. Rotten bits and pieces of zombie flew everywhere, although thankfully only away from Nami. "Oh, yuck!"

Sanji stared at the debris, then across at one more spider mouse, who had been about to leap towards him, and as the spider mouse quickly retreated, Sanji nodded ruefully. "Yeah, little guy, I probably would be retreating to. How many impacts have those things absorbed?!"

Then he turned to Nami, bowing grandly from the waist even as he tore his legs out of the spider silk. "Nami-chwan, your help fills me with joy! And thank you most profusely for aiming that impact away from me. Being covered by zombie gore is not my idea of a fun time."

Nami snickered at that, nodding her head. "Heh, it wouldn't be a treat for the rest of us either, Sanji. Just remember I've got that dial around if you think about trying to flirt with the enemy," she said, before patting his shoulder, and turning her attention to where Makino and Robin were working together to fend off several more spider-mice that had been trying to come up from behind them.

The spider-mice were tiny and quick, blending into the darkness of the forest so well that even with Robin's eyes all around them now, helping to call the shots, Makino's shots were still missing several. The ones attacking the other side had thankfully been forced out into the open, but the area around Sanji was still too dark and cluttered.

At that point, another issue was added to the battle, causing Makino to curse. "Ghosts incoming!"

The ghosts that they had been attacked by earlier appeared once more, bringing friends. "Hollow, hollow, hollow!"

Sanji was hit first, with Nami and Robin struck next. Makino kicked up and off the Cerberus, flipping over the attacking ghosts. Midair, she pulled out two more muskets, firing at the ghosts with Busoshoku infused musket balls as they came close. It took a lot out of her, and the Busoshoku wouldn't last long, but they lasted long enough to pop two of the ghosts. This saved Robin, but Nami was targeted by one of the others and joined Sanji in becoming depressed. "Crap!"

"I want to be a fish and swim away from my sorrows," Sanji moaned, on his knees on the ground. "I can't be strong or cook, and as for the ladies..."

"No, no more money, I'm not worth it," Nami mumbled, leaning against the side of the Cerberus. "I, I want to become a nun, and leave behind all my worldly possessions."

"Oh, I am not going to let either of them forget this," Robin murmured before thanking Makino even as she started to conjure up hands to go with the hundreds of eyes she had already spread over the area.

"Hehehe, nope! Nami, the nun, Hehehehe," Makino shook her head even as she dropped her used pistols and took out two more.

On the other side of the battle, Luffy used Geppo and Soru to simply dance among them, lashing out occasionally but only when he could destroy weapons or tear apart limbs. Otherwise, the zombies would just ignore any damage he did.

They're good, Luffy reflected, even as he dodged one lance thrust up towards his face, smacking his hand off of it and so that he launched himself backward and through several more attacks, lashing out and down against another general zombie, whose sword shattered under his strike. *Very good.*

The so-called general zombies worked together in a way that he hadn't expected from zombies, had speed, skill and toughness well beyond what he had thought he would face from Brook's description. *I suppose the locals never bothered with sending their best after a single skeleton swordsman.*

But like a lot of his opponents, Luffy's aerial style seemed to be confusing the hell out of the zombies. They just couldn't deal with it, and indeed many of them had shoulders that really didn't help them to attack an opponent that was above their heads. Beyond that, they simply weren't strong or fast enough to make the few blows that landed matter to Luffy.

Heck, he thought as one blow got through on his leg, *they're not even good enough to make me use Tekkai!* That blow sent him a little way to the side, which he used to dodge around the sword thrust, grabbing the arm, then pivoting, hurling that man into several others, before sighing, and beginning to tear off helmets. "Right, this is boring now."

At that point, the ghosts had arrived, and Luffy twitched, staring back the way they came and saw the dozen ghosts, half of whom attacked him. Thinking quickly Luffy pulled out his Busoshoku. The ghosts heading his way smacked into his body, and though the impact oddly smashed Luffy off his feet, and he felt a momentary dip in his emotions, the ghosts couldn't quite penetrate. In return the three ghosts attacking him seemed to shatter on impact. "Hell yes! Busoshoku for the win!"

Thus freed from the worries of the ghosts, Luffy turned his attention to dumping salt down the faces of the general zombies whose helmets he had removed. Three of the zombies, a fate man wearing armor that looked like he burst out of an iron maiden complete with spiked neck guard, a yellow-armored man with a slightly smaller claymore and a head with two spikes, and a blue-armored man wielding an axe went down to the salt.

Seeing this, the others recoiled, shouting out, "they've got salt!"

"They know the deadly secret!"

"Retreat, retreat!"

"Robin, Makino, support!" Luffy snarled, leaping forward and using Soru to get ahead of the retreating zombies, of which there were still seven. "You're not going anywhere!"

Stuck between the two straw hats on the Cerberus and Luffy in front of them, the remaining general zombies attacked with all they could. But Luffy, his fun gone with the ghosts, wasn't holding his strength back anymore. "Break, break, you undead assholes!" He cackled, launching one of them into the air with a strike to the chest that shattered the steel armor like it was porcelain. His next blow popped one of the zombie's heads like a ripe melon. Another lost its four legs to a Rankyaku.

Robin and Makino both concentrated most of their efforts on removing helmets. All the zombies tried their best to defend themselves from the salt. But a second later, another, duller Rankyaku hurled them away, opening their defenses for the two women.

The last general zombie still standing went down to a kick from a furious Sanji, which shattered his helmet and removed his head in one fell swoop, and Sanji stood there his chest heaving. "Damn these things, and those damn ghosts too!"

"Oh, don't feel bad, Sanji. I'm certain you would have made a perfectly handsome fish," Makino quipped.

"Gah, no, **no!** I refuse. That didn't happen. I could never have looked so uncool in front of the ladies. It's a lie!" Sanji yelled, causing the others to laugh.

Luffy, however, had his mind on other things. "Robin, use your powers to find the heads of these zombies. I want to make certain that none of them can be put together again."

"Agreed." With that, Robin began to sprout arms throughout the battleground while Luffy contacted the others on the Den Den Mushi.

"Huh. Good to know about the ghosts, captain. We haven't seen any of those yet, but they sound troublesome to deal with, way more than the creature zombies we've seen so far." Zoro answered before smirking, an expression shown on the Den Den Mushi. "You're going to have to tell me what they did to the Aho-cook."

"Oh fuck you, Marimo! As if you would've been able to do anything!" Sanji screamed from where he was pulling out a cigarette.

"Heh, I didn't see it at the time, but Robin and Makino did," Luffy answered, then changed the subject before Sanji could have a conniption.

What about you and Laki, Franky?"

"Meh, not feeling too super about our odds against those ghosts, Luffy. Neither of us can use Busoshoku, after all. Still, maybe air or fire attacks would work," Franky mused. "Do you want us to do anything just yet?"

"Nah, but keep an ear out just in case," Luffy answered. *Although, I wonder if Eve could touch them with her human form? She's a spirit, so... maybe?*

"What can you tell us about those spider-mice?" Chopper's voice asked, the Den Den Mushi changing as he spoke, as it had when Franky had spoken after Zoro.

"They're tricky little blighters," Sanji admitted, taking a calming drag from his second cigarette since they landed on the island. For some reason, some sixth sense was telling him he was going to need the nicotine. "They snuck up on me and would've had me several times if not for Makino Nami and Robin backing me up."

"They can't take many hits, but yeah, they are stealthy as hell," Nami added, needing to nearly shout the words to be heard, as she didn't have her own Den Den Mushi. "Watch your back!"

"Yeah. I think we need to start clearing this forest Zoro, Sanji. Lash out with a few attacks any time you hear anything."

"What about those people you sensed in the forest?" Makino questioned quickly.

Scowling, Luffy nodded, then concentrated for a moment, using his Kenbunshoku. "They've mostly all gathered in one spot well away from us and to the northeast. Zoro's to the west, moving around the forest still. You haven't caught up with Brook yet?" *And I still can't pick him out from random animals, damn it. And the zombies just... aren't there either!* "And oh, you have to be kidding!"

"What!?" came from several throats, and Luffy shook his head. "Sorry, just annoyed. That asshole with the invisibility fruit is still alive. Someone must have fished him out of the water. He's unconscious but alive."

"Ohoho...." Sanji chuckled darkly. "Excellent. I can keep taking my revenge on him."

Everyone sweatdropped at that, and Luffy ended the conversation over the Den Den Mushi, warning both the other groups to be on the lookout for the spider-mice. The Zombies themselves weren't much of a threat without them if they were unable to attack from ambush.

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Chopper scowled as he once more tugged on Zoro's hair, pulling him aback away from the direction he was going. "Darn it, come on. Just because we stopped to talk to the others is no reason for you to just forget the direction we were going."

"Gah, damn it, fine, just stop pulling at my hair, Chopper!" Zoro grumbled, then frowned. "Why the hell does that even still hurt after all the toughness training we've been put under?"

At that, Chopper lost his angry grimace, and he cocked his head to one side. "Huh, I don't know, really. Maybe because the toughness training doesn't make you any less sensitive?"

The two of them talked about that for a time, while Zoro sliced at any of the weird face-trees they saw. There were several of them now, the things having retreated from the portion of the forest Luffy and company had passed through. But eventually they were left behind as the two continued around the perimeter of the forest between it and the castle-like outer wall.

About ten minutes after the last of the weird zombies and the trees with faces disappeared, there was a rustling behind them, and Zoro found himself twisting around before he could even register he was doing it, lashing out with a sword strike.

The small creature behind him, some kind of large spider mouse thing, the same kind that Luffy and the others had reported. The sword strike cut it in half, while Chopper leaped up off of Zoro's head,

his fist flashing out into a second that was leaping towards them, sending it flying through the air as Chopper assumed his Heavy Point form. The third nearly got Chopper, but a quick thrust from Zoro's second sword impacted the creature through the head from the side, skewering it.

But despite being skewered, this was a zombie, and the creature simply snickered, twisting so its ass was towards him, firing a bolt of spider silk towards Chopper.

"Gah, that's so gross!" Chopper shouted as it struck him, while the other two also began to attack, the one that Zoro had cut in had somehow pulled itself together and was now attacking them as well with its spider silk.

"Tatsu Maki!" Zoro shouted, hurling air slashes everywhere, cutting through the spider silk, as well as two more attackers and a large amount of the trees around them. And some rocks too. Even a simple attack like that had been upgraded by the training Zoro had gone through under Luffy's command.

Once in pieces, at least, the shooters in the spider-mice didn't seem to work. Although, as Chopper watched in something like horrified fascination, one of the pieces landed near enough to another that they were able to bounce along to reconnect a second later. They weren't able to move very fast, but it was clear that even chopping zombies to kibbles and bits wasn't enough to truly kill them.

Chopper stared at that, his eyes wide. "That's just freaky. Not only do these zombie creatures not feel pain, they don't seem to be able to feel fear so far, and they can... not regenerate, but reconstitute themselves? Even with their brains chopped into pieces too. I wonder if there's something to learn from this, some kind of brain signal or something that we can learn to use such an ability on a living person?"

"Meh, it's a Devil Fruit. Those things literally fuck with natural laws. I doubt there's anything you can learn from them." Zoro looked around the woods. "Chopper, get high for a second."

Chopper had a brief moment to say, "You realize that that could be taken in a lot of different ways especially when you're talking to the ship's doctor right?" before gulping as Zoro crouched down, his swords held to either side of him like twin horns. A haze of some kind of energy was forming all around him, creating what looked like a cross between some kind of ghostly form, and a manta ray.

Quickly Chopper did as Zoro had requested, using Geppo to hop back up into the air, hovering there for a moment. His legs began to feel the strain as he watched Zoro shouted out "Enbima Yonezu Oni Giri!" annihilating the forest all around them and directly in front of him as if he had just plowed a rode through it.

"That'll do," Zoro nod in satisfaction as he slipped his swords back into his scabbards, patting their hilts companionably.

But as Chopper landed, he saw Zoro's hand twitching slightly, as if he was searching for the third a sword that should be by his side. "What did you do that for?"

"I like to see our enemies coming," Zoro answered quickly before turning at the sound of wood being scrapped against wood.

Out of the rubble from one side of the smashed forest several zombies pushed themselves out. These zombies were different than the spider mites and the creatures that Chopper and Zoro had seen before. For one thing, all of these were generally speaking humanoid in shape. A few might have different lower bodies, or more arms, but they were still generally speaking humanoid. For another, they were armored, wearing what looked like plate mail from legs on up. There were five of them in all.

The only one whose number Zoro could see was drinking from a bottle, the wine spurting out of three holes in his chest. He was also the only one not wearing armor, and had two swords at his side. Another had a beard sticking out from under a helmet, his eyes invisible in the darkness of the helmet, which was green, matching his plate mail armor. The third moved almost like a wild beast, crouching down low to the ground, long spikes coming out of his gauntlets trailing after him as did his purple cloak, his head small and round on his shoulders.

The fourth moved more like a human but also looked more like an animal, with the head of a badger stuck on a body that was massive and thick looking almost like a sphere. He wielded a huge hammer and had an orange clock covering the bandages wrapped around most of his head and neck along with his shoulders.

The last was easily the most normal looking. Save for his upper chest being bare enough to show his bandages, he was fully armored, his eyes invisible in the dark of his helmet. In one hand he held a massive sword and in his other hand he held a small circular shield.

Zoro looked on in interest, a smirk on his face as he reached up, and began to place his bandanna over his head. "Well now, this looks more like a challenge than those little spider mice things."

"We will see if you're as happy about that after we defeat you and take your shadow to Master Moria!" Shouted one of the zombies, charging forwards. He led with his sword, a zweihander which had quite a bit more range than Zoro's two katana, but Zoro still blocked it, deflecting it upwards with his greater strength, his other sword thrusting out. That strike blasted into the zombie's armor, hurling him backwards in a welter of shattered steel into two more, slowing their own advance as Zoro twisted around, slashing out at two others.

"Chopper! Keep an eye out for those spider things. I want to keep this fight clean!"

"You're fighting zombies, how in the world do you think it's going to be clean! I can even imagine what kind of germs they..." That was as far as Chopper got before another armored zombie started attacking him in company with several, far stranger monsters.

He was almost instantly forced to use his Guard Point, a sword flashing at him before he could block it, hammering into his side and hurling him backwards, but doing no damage in his guard point. He rolled, shifting onto his feet and changing into his Speed Form, darting forward, bouncing around the two monsters then transforming into his heavy point right before he throughout the punch, catching the zombie and shattering some of its chest armor, hurling him backward as Zoro had a moment before.

One of the monsters darted forwards, a strange zebra-kangaroo thing with large boxing gloves zooming forward, throwing a punch at Chopper. But to Chopper, the thing was telegraphing it's attacks so much it might have instead been moving in slow motion.

He batted both strikes to either side, then lashed out with a punch of his own, folding the zombie in half, then grabbing its outstretched arm and hurling it away over the forest. A swift duck and another punch removed the head from the odd Tararan-armed koala-headed thing that looked more like a child's toy than a real creature. "Don't underestimate me you bastards!"

For his part, Zoro had already cut one zombie entirely in half, and now turned his attention on another, his katanas flashing down to crash into the raised sword of his opponent, slicing straight through and into the creature's head, his sword coated with Busoshoku. Armor or zombie it didn't matter at that point, the undead monsters fell to pieces.

How long the fight lasted, Zoro couldn't tell but soon, the last of the armored zombies went down, and Zoro smirked as he kicked the head of one of the zombies away, looking all around them at the wreckage of the forest they'd made. "Well that was fun."

Chopper however had not come through the fight as well as Zoro had, he was cut in numerous places, and one of his fists was throbbing. Still, he was a Zoan, and Chopper knew that within five minutes, maybe less, he'd be back to normal. "They mistimed it," he muttered, looking around them.

"What do you mean?"

"If the spider mice had attacked the same time as that group of zombies, we would've been in a much worse position."

Zoro nodded thoughtfully at Chopper's point and watched as the Doctor looked around the battlefield. "Wait! Over there." Zoro followed Chopper, and they found three zombie mice spiders in a small area, all of them dead, whereas the rest of the zombies, even sliced into bits, were still groaning, muttering about how they would come after the two the moment they could.

"Brook must have done this and then raced on before they could ambush him. They er, reset the ambush I guess, for us."

"And none of those ghosts the others reported either, thankfully." Zoro grimaced, not looking forward to meeting those things. "Let's move on before they arrive. We're following this trail, right?" Zoro questioned, pointing between two random trees.

"No, you doofus!" Chopper shouted, smashing him upside the head with a Heavy Gong blow before shifting into his normal body and hopping up onto Zoro's shoulders as the swordsman rubbed his head in annoyance. "Honestly, what is wrong with your sense of direction, I don't understand it at all!" A few sniffs, a few tugs of the hair, and they were off once more.

Neither of them noticed they were still being followed, as, despite his size, the leader of the capture corps was quite stealthy. Not as much as his smaller servants, but still pretty good at disappearing. "H, he's too strong!" Tararan muttered, staring at the battlefield shivering a little. While being cut to ribbons like that didn't hurt, zombies didn't feel anything, it would certainly stop him from completing his missed mission for Master Moria, and that was unacceptable. Even worse was the fact they seemed to have some salt and had used it on both his own followers. the general zombies and the animal zombies.

"We need to gather more of our fellows," He hissed to the others. "We've already lost more than half our number today, but I want all of the remainder here, right? And you two," he added, looking over at the Risky brothers, two small animal zombies that looked like a chipmunk and squirrel, but were actually two of the fastest zombies in Master Moria's service. "Head back and find Mistress Perona. We'll need more ghosts here too."

The two Straw Hats remained ignorant of their shadows as they moved forward, eventually coming to a back area of *Thriller Bark*. This zone seemed to be done up in a strange Alice and Wonderland kind of theme, but they didn't seem to be dealing with any more attackers. There were several zombies around though, many of whom matched the theme of the area, being more animal-like, 'cute' types than in the forest. All of them had been slain by salt however, but looking around, Chopper felt there might have been a dozen or more who had been able to retreat, fleeing the salt-carrying Brook. he was only judging that by the amount of damage done to the area, but it seemed accurate.

More importantly, they finally spotted Brook. A few more zombies lay around him, their forms unresponsive, clear evidence that he had exorcised them as he had the others.

However, it was just as obvious as they came closer that the singing swordsman was now on the backfoot against his current enemy. This was a taller zombie, one wearing a long Japanese kimono in white and gray. Around his head he wore a bandage covering one eye socket, while the rest of his face looked more skull-like than most zombies. He had short-cropped white hair, broad shoulders, and wielded a large katana, its blade gleaming black in the lights of the forest and the moon above.

Zoro's eyes locked on it like a lodestone, interest flaring in him as he spotted it. More than that, he felt its will, a will that had been dormant or perhaps even hiding, rouse itself for a moment as they came closer. as if the spirit within yearned to be wielded by a living hand worthy of it once more.

As the two pirates came closer, Brook was smashed to the ground, and the zombie swordsman stood behind him, grabbing his Afro. "I warned you did I not Yohohoho, that the next time you came here, showed your face to me again, I would remove this! Did you think I was joking?"

"Please no! If you are my shadow, you know what that Afro means! That it is a promise given form! If I don't have it, how can I show my face in front of Laboon again!"

"Yohohoho. It is nothing more than an affectation. Nor am I your shadow any longer, I refuse to even connect myself to such a weakling again! And if I need to remove this dream of yours to make you understand how weak you are, then so be it. I obviously can't kill you, else I to would fade, yet I refuse to let you continue duping yourself into thinking you could ever regain what you have lost!"

That was as far as the samurai got before he was forced to pull his sword back into a guard position across his body to block a slash from Zoro. The blow lifted him off of his feet, hurling him backward, where he skidded, kicking up dirt and loam. But his arm and blade hadn't moved at all, having perfectly blocked Zoro's attack despite the surprise and strength of the strike.

Looking in the direction the blow came from, the samurai zombie snarled. "And who are you to interrupt the end of an honorable duel?" Yet even as he spoke, he too became aware of Zoro, his own swordsman's soul recognizing a true challenge in him.

Brook stared between Chopper and Zoro, before Zoro stepped over him, cracking his neck this way and that. "My name is Roronoa Zoro, first mate of the Straw Hats. My captain decided this guy is going to join our crew, so I can't have you kill him. And who are you?"

"Hmmm, I wonder, is that pity then, to step in and save the weakling now that he has fallen?" The zombie questioned, twitching so that his sword was out to one side, the two swordsmen now circling one another. "As for my name, when I was alive, I was called Shimotsuki Ryuma, samurai of Wano country."

"Ho, Wano is it? Now I want to fight you even more!" Zoro smirked.

"Yohohoho. And yet, you did not answer my question."

"Pity? No, not really. He fought you and lost, that isn't going to change just because I stepped in. It will just become a reason for him to get stronger. But as a crewmate, I am obliged to make certain he still has the will to do so, which he wouldn't if you removed the ability to keep his promise to Laboon."

"Somewhat admirable I suppose, and I note you seem to know of this whale, so perhaps I will let it slide." Ryuma said, chuckling. "And now, the real reason you wish to fight me? I can see it in you, the interest in your eyes."

Zoro shrugged. "What kind of swordsman would I be if I didn't want to challenge someone strong? Besides, I'm a Santoryu user, and that sword of yours looks like a masterpiece."

"Three swords? Yohohoho!" The samurai zombie chuckled, shaking his head from side to side although he never took his eyes off Zoro. "That sounds more like some kind of circus show rather than a sword style. Still, yes, your eyes do not deceive you. This is the Meito, Shusui, one of the 21 Great Swords."

"Excellent!" Zoro grinned like a shark, reaching up and pulling his bandanna into place over his hair, before pulling out his swords, Wado Ichimonji and Sandai Kitetsu, smirking at the other man samurai. "I've felt somewhat off-balance ever since Yubashiri was destroyed."

"You are the first opponent since I came alive once more, Yohohoho, for a given value anyway, who has seen its quality. And I can feel the strength of you, it is like I am standing in front of a raging beast. It makes this body of mine quake with anticipation."

Chopper watched on as Zoro smirked, and then, the two swordsmen disappeared to his senses completely. He could barely hear the aftershocks as they traded blows, before they reappeared once more. The swordsman's blade had been smashed aside by both of Zoro's, and then they were twirling around again into contact.

Hard! Zoro thought. He's fast, and he seems to be anticipating me, reading my moves almost like he's got Kenbunshoku but not quite as good. And that sword of his, it's so tough... Zoro could feel the spirits of his blades crying out in pain at each strike. Whatever else, the Wano samurai's blade was made of even better material than Wado or the cursed sword.

Or it would be, if not for Luffy's training. With that Zoro backstepped several times, gaining some distance quickly. Before Ryuma could follow, Zoro's swords gleamed black suddenly.

Ryuma stared at him, then at his swords. "What magic is this? It is bringing memories, memories of things I saw. Abilities I might once have possessed before I became a zombie."

"This is Busoshoku. My will made manifest." Zoro crouched down, ready to charge forward once more. Try not to die."

"Let us see then whether or not your will is stronger than my blade!" The samurai charged forwards, shifting his style into a thrusting's file, the same that Brook had been using earlier against him. "Gavotte Bond En Avant!"

"Ushi Bari!" Zoro bellowed back, racing forward, his swords held like a bull's horns.

The two of them clashed, with Zoro's swords taking the brunt of it, and Zoro grimaced, the blow even heavier and stronger than one of Rob Lucci's punches. But it was the samurai fell backwards, his assault pushed away and over Zoro's shoulder where it crashed into a set of staircases leading upward to what looked like a giant tower set in the center of the island portion of *Thriller Bark*. the staircases and the bridge came apart under his attack, the stone looking like Swiss cheese for just a moment before it started to collapse.

Zoro then twisted around, bringing his swords up and over, to smash into the black blade once more, driving the samurai to his knees. The samurai grimaced, putting his second hand on the hilt on holding his sword there with both hands as Zoro bore down on him, a fierce look of determination in his face.

Then, Ryuma suddenly was pushing up and off Zoro's blades, getting some distance and going for a slash towards Zoro's midriff, but it was blocked to by Zoro's sword, his other one coming around in another arc, forcing the swordsman away, smashing him to one side and through several trees despite the fact Ryuma was able to get his blade between the attack and his own body once more.

The trees came apart before the swordsman hit them, his sword thrusting backwards below one of his hands, making continuous thrusts shattering the trees as easily as he had the stone of the staircase. Once more when he hit the ground he skidded, halting as he stared across the battlefield towards Zoro, who was looking back at him, still holding his blades in front of him in a cross pattern.

"You're good," Zoro announced simply.

Standing to his full height the undead samurai readied his sword. "You are better methinks. Perhaps you can bring out the spirit of this Shusui, in a way that I have not been able to in this second life of mine. Yohohoho, truly, it is a moment like this when I realize how low the ceiling is as a zombie. And yet, I will not yield."

"I was never going to ask you to. A swordsman who yields to aught but the heavens is not a swordsman at all."

"Well said!" The two of them stared at one another for a moment, knowing this next pass would be the last.

Meanwhile, Brook laid there nearby, simply staring in shock. "How, how is this possible. How is that swordsman so strong?"

"We train a lot," Chopper snorted. "And I think when it comes to willpower, not a one of my crew's ever going to lose," he added proudly, throwing his shoulders back.

It was at that point that Tararan and his spider mice struck. A large web shot from Tararan grabbed onto Chopper, pulling tight all around his arms and legs. He tried to transform, into his Heavy Point, and that allowed him to break free, bursting him out of the spider silk. But as he did, another one had leaped towards his face. "AHHH, get it off me!!!"

More of the webbing went around his mouth and nose, and still more was tied over his arms, holding him in place, pulling him this way and that.

Zoro heard this, and turned away, as Ryuma launched himself forward, while two more mice made for Zoro. One of them was skewered by his sword then torn apart, while the other one got around his legs, pulling them out from under him from behind, having crept close when Zoro was concentrating entirely on the Ryuma. Zoro crashed to the ground, but shouted out Tekkai as the swordsman strike went home.

He was hurled off of his feet, and rolled, grunting with pain at a broken rib, but Tekkai had saved him. Unfortunately, before he could get to his feet, a ghost went through him. His will taken from him for a moment, Zoro slumped, barely keeping hold of his swords as they and he were covered with webbing. "I, I want my next life to be as a caterpillar, flying free from everything..."

"Hollow Hollow!" the ghost chortled, before moving on to deal with the still fighting Chopper. In turn, the doctor was taken, and the ghost moved over to Tararan. "Remember to bring the doctor to me! that little cutie can keep me company until we have to turn him over to the marines. Hollow, hollow, hollow!" Perona's voice came from the ghost as she chortled, hidden away elsewhere, very, very grateful, as the battle in the mansion began, that she was more useful at long range like this.

What response Tararan might have made was interrupted as Ryuma strode over to him, His blade suddenly appearing in between the Tararan's eyes. "You dare to interrupt an honorable duel! I should carve you into tripe for this Tararan!"

"We're acting under Master Moria's orders!" Tararan said, terrified for his un-life for a moment. There was something bloodthirsty and demanding in Ryuma just then, even more than a general zombie like him should've been able to do.

For a moment, watching this through her ghost Perona wondered if Ryuma was going to attack him, directly going against Master Moria's orders. But it was not to be. He simply hissed in annoyance, taking a step back, and staring down at where Zoro was now completely trussed up. The Spider mice had rearranged his body while he was under the effect of Perona's ghost, and now though he continued to thrash, his arms were at his side, unable to get enough leverage to bring his strength to bear on the nearly foot-thick cocoon of spider strings around him.

"Curse it! I suppose that we will learn never learn who would've won now, despite my words earlier." He paused however, staring at Zoro, who had at those words stopped fighting to turn and glare in his direction, even though the rest of his body was completely bundled up. "I can still feel your eyes on me, Roronoa Zoro. Perhaps, even with your shadow claimed by the master, you will seek me out? Good. Yohohoho! I would enjoy another fight."

With that, he turned away, glaring angrily at the Afro sticking out of another one of the cocoons. Brook had attempted to rise whether to get away or help, even Brook didn't know. "What of that's one? What will happen to it?"

Here Perona spoke up, grateful that the moment of violence had passed. Here, anyway. Elsewhere, Perona could feel her ghosts being dissipated at an alarming rate in the mansion, and even hear a thunderous crashing sound. "He'll simply be put on ice, kept restrained so that Master Moria can keep using his shadow in you."

Again, the samurai looked almost as if he wanted to argue, wanted to go against Master Moria's orders. But he didn't. He simply huffed, and turned away, his back ramrod straight, his hand around his sword throbbing. "Another time, Zoro."

Behind him, Tararan nearly collapsed from released tension, and began to order the Risky Brothers to take Chopper to Perona, while Tararan would deposit the others, first Zoro with the Master, and then Brook in the ice chamber.

While this was all going on, several people were watching this with interest. "Wow, that swordsman was so strong. I want him to marry me."

"I know Captain (although I doubt he'd have you) that almost looked like he was going to win."

"Oy, it sounded like you said something really rude there for a moment," the first voice, a female one asked angrily.

"But he was so close! You have to wonder if Tararan hadn't interfered..." A second male voice spoke up, perhaps to save his fellow from the upcoming moment of female anger. "And that was only two of the that crew, I wonder what the others are up to in the mansion?"

"Who knows. But send the word out to Old Man Spoil. I want the mansion watched, and I want a few of the rest of the crew to meet us here. Something about this, something about this is making my new world senses tingle! Like a change on the horizon. We might just have a chance to be free of these bastards!"

"Aye, captain!" both men answered quickly.

Furtive footsteps carried them away, and only the captain's voice was left she watched Tararan and the swordsman before staring out over the forest. "Now, where did those crashes come from?"

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The trip through the forest continued, and three times Robin reported that they were still being followed. Whenever the followers got close, Sanji and Luffy let loose with that Rankyaku, which turned the trees struck into so much shrapnel. But now, the spider-mice stayed silent, retreating quickly.

Eventually, they broke out of the forest, finding themselves in a wide area that had been turned into a cemetery. In the distance on the other side of the cemetery was a large mansion, the same one that Laki had been able to see from the Everlasting Resolve's crow's nest.

Nami shook her head as she stared at the cemetery. "No, this isn't suspicious at all!"

The others also snickered, shaking their heads. "Robin, make certain to watch our backs, Sanji, be ready to take to the sky." With that, Luffy patted the Cerberus and moved forward, putting several yards between him and the rest of his crew. Once the others began following him slowly, Luffy clapping his hands together hard, creating a booming noise like a cannon going off. "All right, come on, let's get this over with. None of us are scared of zombies any longer, and the whole scary house mansion thing doesn't quite do it for us either. So why don't you all just come out now and get your asses kicked so we can move on."

"Ugh, speak for yourself," Nami muttered, shaking her head. "This place is still creepy as hell, even if it isn't scary!"

"Creepy, yes, but quite fascinating. The zombies are a fascinating subject entirely on their own," Robin answered, patting the Cerberus. "Technically, this creature we are riding should be a corpse, and quite smelly, which everything within him rotting or being eaten by maggots. And yet Cerberus is here, acting and moving like a living creature, and he doesn't even smell much more than a normal dog."

"Still disturbing, Robin, honestly!" Nami shook her head resignedly. "You really need to work on your sense of humor. If that is what it is."

At that point, the zombies in the various graves burst out, shouting, "Don't underestimate us!"

"Don't underestimate zombies!"

"Don't look down on zombies, you bastards!"

"The undead are strong!"

"Fear the night!"

"Fear the zombie night!" At that, the entire, several hundred zombies, began to do a dance, as to of them pulled out a disco ball and set it up from the top of the large mausoleum. It began to sparkle with reflected light as music began to play from the mausoleum as the zombies went into a choreographed movement to a song. The movements were just raising their hands in fists or twisting them from the wrist, but the fact they all sang and moved was still impressive, as was the amount of light coming off the disco ball.

"Encircle the enemy, not a single pirate will get out alive! everybody round and round and turn and die, Zombie night! It's zombie night!"

When the music finished playing, the zombies were surprised to see that instead of being scared or taking the time to run away (there were spider-mice waiting for them if they had), the straw hat pirates had instead stayed put. Indeed, from somewhere, they had pulled out a set of chairs and a table, setting it up with Luffy in the middle, Robin to one side of him, with Makino at the far end and Sanji and Nami to his other side, with Cerberus at their back.

When the song ended, the Straw Hats all clapped politely, and then Luffy began. "Now, while the motif of a cemetery and a disco ball is a bit jarring, I have to give you put props for the music ball and the choreography. I know that is really hard, especially with the numbers you all are working with. I'll take a single point off for not wearing matching clothing. Nine out of ten."

With that, he held out a sign with the number nine as Makino began. "The song itself is a little childish, but it fits with you all being zombies. The moves themselves, generally speaking, were plain and stiff but again, you have a theme, and you stuck with it. I approve of that, so I won't comment on not having matching clothing. But I think the moves were still a bit too stiff even so. Therefore, I'm going to give you an eight out of ten."

By this point, all the zombies were staring, some of them even nodding, and a few were shuffling their feet, scratching at the back of the heads as they tried not to look pleased.

Robin went next, but she began by holding the score six out of ten which brought the zombies down with a thump.

"I'm sorry to say, but while Luffy might appreciate the choreography, I agree more with Makino that the song is childish and honestly quite silly. The music itself surprised me, and the disco ball. A prop like that is hard to set up, and you did it quickly. But I believe that you could've done better. I didn't get a sense of you in this music or the movements. Are you scavengers of the dead out to eat our yummy brains? Are you a group of chorus line castoffs trying to have fun? I just can't tell. Six out of ten."

"Did you just use the word yummy?" Nami whispered causing Robin to bite back a giggle.

All of them were feeling upbeat by this point. Really, the zombies weren't a threat to them in a group like this, not even the spider-mice. These zombies, who had neither the armor, nor the weapons or even surprise on their side, wouldn't prove any different. Better, all of the crew knew that if Luffy wanted to get serious, even a Shichibukai wouldn't be able to stand against him. It certainly wouldn't be simple, but it was simply a fight rather than insurmountable problem.

Sanji spoke up then, shaking his head with a sigh. "While I agree with some of the points my colleagues made, I think I fall more on Luffy's side of things. I like the dichotomy of the disco ball, music and cemetery. That's quite fun. But I'm afraid that I am taking away points simply because you have no ladies among you. What is a chorus line without the ladies, huh? Seven out of ten."

That caused many of the zombies to nod, sigh or look away. One of them even muttered, "Hah! You try to find enough women sailors to make up a chorus line, I dare you. We just met some, but they sure aren't the type to do that, let alone join us zombies willingly."

Nami frowned for a moment at that, as did Robin. But then, remembering her part in this little joke, Nami set her own score card down, smiling winsomely at the zombies, several of whom gasped, grabbing at their chests, hearts in their eyes as she did.

"I'm going to give you eight out of ten. Like Sanji, I think the jarring displacement of the disco ball and the cemetery actually worked as a whole unified whole. It's a personal preference thing, but I am always happy to see dichotomies like that. The song might be a little simple, but it, and the gnashing of your teeth did give me a sense of fear, of you all having fun hunting people down. Good work, and I'm interested to see where you go from here."

"Well, there you have it, folks!" Luffy said, standing up and moving around the table, heading towards the distant mansion. "Good luck on your next riff, and we wish you luck in the future."

“Don’t take it as criticism. Constructive comments are often necessary to make you better.”

With that, Robin followed her captain, both of them joined by Makino as they slowly walked through the cemetery.

“Invite me to your next concert!” Nami said, taking Sanji’s arm. While Sanji’s visible eye turned into a heart and she had to pull him along, Nami waved at the zombies, who were all shouting in delight at the great scores they had gotten from everyone bar Robin.

Some of them were even thanking the pirates, and one of them came up to Luffy and shook his hand before turning back and celebrating with the others, exchanging high fives and fist bumps. The pirates all linked up and, leaving Cerberus behind, made their way through the cemetery, still smiling and nodding at the zombies while Nami and Makino began to have to fight back a bad case of the giggles.

The pirate crew was about halfway to the mansion through the cemetery before the penny dropped. “Hey, wait a minute, weren’t we supposed to...”

“Those bastards, they tricked us!”

“Is this part where we run,” Nami asked, grinning slightly. *Hahaha, I can’t believe that worked!*

“Yep!” Luffy grinned as the girls took off, racing away towards the mansion while he and Sanji prepared themselves.

Now enraged and humiliated, the zombies charged forward, snarling and screaming. “Don’t let them get to the border!”

“Get them!”

“Don’t let them reach the safe zone!”

“You bastards, you’ll pay for tricking us!”

“Oh, get over it!” Luffy barked back, laughing wildly now as the zombies all around charged them. A Rankyaku sent several of them flying, and Luffy leaped into the air after them, pummeling them down into the ground. “You tricked yourselves!”

“Anti-Manner Kick Course! You will never touch the ladies as long as I live!” Sanji shouted, flipping himself onto his hands and lashing out with a series of kicks in every direction.

Robin crossed her arms, and dozens, then hundreds of hands appeared, grabbing at the zombies, twisting and breaking many of the attacking zombies. Others were simply stuck in place for a moment, allowing Makino or Nami to deal with them. Lightning started to crash down out of tiny clouds scattered around the area, the fog making it easy for Nami to manipulate the weather. Makino had decided to change her guns to simply tossing bits of salt at any zombie who came close, of which there were very few.

Moments later, the battle was over, and Luffy was bouncing several zombie heads into the air like they were juggling balls. “So, what are we learned?”

"Don't get in the straw hats way," they droned, and Luffy smiled, then set the heads down without messing with them further.

"All right. Now, let's go see who's in the mansion, shall we?"

"Dammit! They're going to get into the barrier," one of the zombie heads grumbled.

"Shut up!" shouted another voice. "We're not supposed to tell anyone about..."

"Tell anyone about what?" Luffy said, suddenly in the face of the zombie who had been attempting to not speak, one hand holding a tiny bag of salt.

Faced with the threat of his un-life ending, the zombie began to speak faster and faster. "The mansion, it's been given over to a doctor named Hogback. The doctor came here to experiment on zombies to discover if there was anything medically related he could learn from them! We're supposed to keep people away. Master Moria made a deal with him. Please don't salt me!"

"And this Dr. hogback, he's just here to study zombies? I believe I recognize that name. He's actually a very well-known doctor. Chopper has two or perhaps three of his books," Robin mused.

Luffy blinked at that, then looked over at Robin. "So, this could actually be on the up and up?"

Robin shrugged her shoulders. "Who knows. This is the Grand Line, and the abnormal is normal here. But even so, I would question what to Gecko Moria gets out of letting him just stay here and study the zombies."

"Then we'll ask him when we get there," Luffy said with a shrug, before sticking out his arm. Robin smiled and linked her arm with his as they moved off.

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Gecko Moria tried. He tried so very hard not to feel the stares from Kuma or respond to the startlingly merry laughter of Hancock. He just stared straight ahead out the window, trying desperately to ignore them.

Eventually, Hancock turned away from where she and Kuma and Moria had all been able to look down on the action in the cemetery, having moved from the massive tower/mast to the keep which had become the central mansion of the isle. "Oh, I quite enjoyed that," Boa laughed again, much more quietly than her earlier raucous laughter. "These pirates have both a sense of humor and a sense of style. Who would have thought to turn things around like that on your zombies? Although the fact the zombies began that whole scene in the first place..."

"I, I've been trying to train them out of that, but for some reason they all have this proclivity to either overact or not take things seriously. Even now, when so many of their allies in the forest have been taken out," Moria muttered, grinding his teeth. *Bad enough so many of my zombies are affected by the slut's beauty, now they have to make me a laughingstock in front of her!*

"Setting aside the humor of the situation," It said something about the scene they just watched that even Kuma had a very faint but still discernable jocular tone to his voice, "We should head down. I rather doubt that Hogback's tale will slow these pirates down. They are far too intelligent to be taken in by such foolishness."

"True." Sobering somewhat, Boa nodded. *Still, it's a pity. These pirates have amused me thus far. If I could, I would simply retreat to my ship and let Moria face them alone. But I cannot.* "Come, we should begin our assault on these pirates just as my Kuja take their ship."

Snorting at that and hoping the Kuja bitches wouldn't find it so simple, Moria nodded, leading the way down to the mansion façade. It really wasn't a mansion after all, just the front portion of one. the rest shifted into a keep, which then became the bottommost floors of the tower leading up to where Moria and most of his living crew members resided. Although, the majority of its height wasn't made up of living quarters. No, the majority of the tower was made of diverse freezers, where corpses taken from around the Grand Line were kept, numbered and waiting for appropriate shadows.

"Do you want me to come with you, Master Moria?"

Glancing over at Perona, Moria shook his head. "Send this colored ghost with us, but otherwise stay at range. Your ghosts have proven extremely effective at this point, and I want to keep you away from the front lines to better use them."

Perona nodded, and elsewhere in her room went back to cuddling with the thoroughly tied up Chopper, who's muttering had subsided by this point. He had been delivered already, while Tararan was still making his way back to the tower, being far slower than the two Risky Brothers. But Moria knew that the Pirate Hunter's shadow would be his soon, and that let him be more sanguine about the utter uselessness of his other zombies. *After all, exchanging a hundred pawns for a true queen is a trade I will readily make. And now to add still more to my tally, including, hopefully, one empress too...*
Kishishishi.

oooooooo

After leaving the cemetery behind, the Straw Hats reached the outer wall of the mansion. Crossing under the threshold, they stepped over a line of salt on the ground. Luffy looked at it quizzically, then around at the others, all of whom shrugged. Brook hadn't said anything about a salt line being some kind of defense against zombies, but it was possible. Possible enough for Luffy to not want to just bash in the doors and get the party started right away, anyway.

They reached the door, and a zombie opened it. It was very clearly a zombie, there were stitches around her neck and shoulders and elbows, and yet, **she** was the first female zombie they'd seen, causing everyone to pause before Sanji bowed. "Madam, we are the straw hat pirates and are exploring this island searching for a man who is supposed to be here. Could you a find it in your heart to discover if the master of the mano is willing to see us?"

Damn, he's such a harmless, flirtatious horndog most of the time, it's hard to remember that Sanji actually does have some game, Nami reflected, a thought the others watching this were also thinking.

The woman blinked, having opened her mouth to say something, and now she was staring at Sanji strangely. She then nodded, pushing the door open for them. "Pl, please come in. Master hogback is willing to see you."

Robin gazed after her, then exchanged a glance with Luffy, shaking her head. "I do not know what to think about this right now."

"Heh, it's like discovering vampire-based romance books for me." At Robin's confused looks, Luffy leaned in, whispering into her ear. "Vampires are supposed to be romantic for some reason, but the problem with that idea is, vampires are undead and need blood to live because their own doesn't do anything. No blood flow, no ahem, fun time."

Giggling, Robin nodded. "Indeed. Even zombies like these wouldn't be as good as the living thing for more reasons than I care to count right now."

"Meh, gives me material for whoever decided to bring back a female zombie, anyway," Luffy chuckled.

The two of them followed the others forward deeper into the mansion and through a doorway into a massive dining room. The door opened before they reached it, and a somewhat obese man stood there. He wore an ensemble of mesh shirt, thick purple-fur cloak, and pants, which just became utterly frightening on him given his obese body. He had extremely thin arms and legs, so thin they looked as if they couldn't support his body, with a nose like a knife, sharp vampiric teeth, and pointed ears. He had a scar in a semi-circle above his eye and to the side which stretched down to his moth, and a black tattoo made of two slashed and two swirls side by side on his collarbone.

Thank you, Cindry. Thank you! Please, my dear guests, come inside. You've arrived just in time for a meal."

Luffy blinked as he took in the man, and for a moment, he thought that maybe Robin's comments about vampires a moment ago had just sort of conjured this guy into being because he definitely had a bit of the whole movie vampire motif going for him right now. But after a moment's consideration and dreaming of putting Robin into a princess outfit didn't equate to anything occurring, he decided that no, the guy wasn't a particularly overfed vampire. Luffy could also sense him through his Kenbunshoku for one thing, which was kind of a relief after all of the zombies and everything that had happened on the way here.

"You would be Doctor hogback then?" Robin asked quizzically cocking her head to one side.

"I am indeed! Have you heard of me, my dear?" Hogback asked, bowing from the waist towards the Pirates, even as he gestured grandly for them to enter the dining hall. "Shelly, can you please put out some food for our guests?"

Inside, the dining hall was a two-story room. To the left of the main entryway, stairs led upwards to a series of doorways on a second-story overhang and two doors on the same floor as they entered. One of which was underneath the stairs, the other on the opposite side. In the center of the room was a long table, ornately carved, with its feet looking like claws, set on top of a massive polar bear pelt with several candelabras scattered along the table's length. A large fireplace was on the far wall from the entryway, with several paintings hanging around and above it, matching a few others on the two side walls. All in all, it looked creepy but tasteful.

It even looked peaceful, until that is Cindry began to attack them all and Hogback. She had moved to the side where a small cart waited loaded with food. But instead of moving it towards the table, Cindry had pulled some of the plates from underneath and turned, flinging them at the pirates and Hogback. "All plates should cease to exist!"

"Gah, what the, Cindry-chan, wait, wait!" Hogback panicked, ducking while the pirate crew dodged or smashed the plates out of the way. "Wait, wait, gah!" At that, Hogback fell back, having taken a plate to the head.

"My lady, if you do not wish to use plates, perhaps bowls would be better?" Sanji inquired politely even as he dodged several more plates hurled his way, only kicking out once to protect Nami, who scowled a bit, having already been about to smash the same plate herself.

"Bowls... yes, bowls are better." Cindry calmed down and turned away, staring at the food that had fallen from on top of the plates.

"Right, right, we don't need plates at all," Hogback whimpered, getting to his feet slowly. "You, um, you must excuse Cindry. She has a phobia for plates that comes to the fore occasionally. I've been trying to work her through the trauma, but it is a constant battle."

"Rigggghhtt...." Luffy muttered, shaking his head with a sweatdrop appearing on his head.

"So we can safely say eccentricity comes with being a zombie now, right?" Nami murmured, to nods from all around her.

Setting aside the oddity that had just occurred, Robin addressed Hogback politely. "I have not personally read any of your books, but our doctor has two of them and seems to be something of a fan of yours. I have to ask you, however, meeting you like this, in the *Thriller Bark*, the land controlled by gecko Moria, is an oddity."

"Fosfosfos, indeed! I can see where that could be a bit peculiar. But you see, the zombies, they are a fascinating subject! They have told me quite a bit more about human regeneration than I would've ever learned otherwise. Indeed, I believe my latest work was published while I was on this island." Hogback explained as he moved to sit down at the front of the table. "Eventually, I hope to be able to take my research on the zombie's regeneration and durability and use my knowledge to help living people."

"A laudable goal, if that is, we believe you." In one sentence, Robin's voice went from pleasant to caustic as the straw hats made no move to sit down, looking between hogback and their surroundings. "However, after dealing with several attacks so far, I do not believe that is the whole tale. Moreover, I believe we have already run into many examples of your so-called experiments."

Hogback stared at her, then smiled slightly, stepping back two steps from the table. "Yes, I suppose that assuming you wouldn't be suspicious of me was a bit too much. Still, you have at least stepped into my parlor!"

"Now!" Shouted another voice, this one coming from the hunting trophy above the fireplace, the face of the wild boar there suddenly twisting, as he pulled out a sword and shield and left out from the picture. Nor was it alone. to the Straw Hat's disbelief, the pictures all around the room did the same. "Surprise Zombies, attack!"

The zombies all closed quickly as the pirates spread out to gain some fighting room, but if they expected to take the pirates by surprise, they were sadly mistaken.

"Heat dial!" Nami shouted, bringing up her staff around to slash into and through one of the paintings, this one being that of an elderly man in a frilly outfit and an ancient looking rapier. The heat dial instantly blazed out, a tiny dagger of plasma. Even though the zombie was flexible enough to twist out of the way, the edge of the plasma blade set it alight.

There was an immediate scream, as the zombie twisted away, rolling around on the ground, trying desperately to put out the fire. "AAAGHhh, aaaa, fire, fire, help me!"

"Fire, that woman used fire!" shouted another painting, this one a woman with a disturbingly deep voice. "Using fire like that, they're not human!"

"How dare you do that to Wally the Wacko! Why would anyone play with fire, that, that's against the rules!" shouted the pig trophy. "Get her!"

"What part about pirate is hard to understand!?" Nami shouted, twisting around and lashing out with the other end of her staff, the lightning portion. Again, there was a sizzle, and the next zombie to attack her twisted away with a shriek, hands patting desperately at the burning portions of its, well, Nami wasn't certain what to call the flesh of the zombies attacking them. Flesh like the zombies outside, or canvas since they had been part of paintings before attacking.

"Ochenta Fleur, Casse-Gueule (Jaw Breaker)!" Robin said calmly. Several of the zombies grew four or more hands, which grabbed at jaws above and below. An instant later, they were pulled open, more hands appeared, and tiny bits of salt were flung into their mouths.

Instantly, the zombies lost all motion, as the shadows left them, causing further shrieks of dismay. "Wh, what the hell is up with this pirate crew!"

Makino was busy shooting at a few of the zombies coming in from the two doorways, while Luffy dealt with the table and the bear. The table was shattered, and Luffy simply tore the head off the white rug, tossing the head to Robin who didn't bother catching it, simply shooting another bit of salt into its mouth.

Sanji wasn't much help during this brief outbreak of violence, although, to be fair, it wasn't like the rest of the crew needed his help right now. Instead of helping with the pirates, he had launched himself after Hogback, blocking his escape. "Oh no, you don't!"

"Cindry-chan, help me!" Hogback screamed, falling backwards from Sanji. The sudden reversal of the surprise zombies' assault had completely unmanned him, and unlike Perona and Absalom, Hogback wasn't a fighter. "Help me escape!"

The heretofore immobile female zombie to one side of the dining hall instantly began to attack, hurling plates towards Sanji. "All plates should not exist in this world!"

However, before she could Robin trussed her up in hands, smirking slightly over her crossed arms at Hogback. "Why do I think there is more to Cindry-san than meets the eye? You two seem to share some kind of history."

Hogback squealed now as he was lifted off his feet and held in the air by Sanji, who looked at him disgusted. "I am getting the same feeling, and that makes treating Cindry-chan as a mere servant even more infuriating. WhYYY!!"

That was as far as he got before the shadows around the hidden door that Hogback had tried to escape down came alive. Literally this time as it was no zombie that attacked Sanji, rather it was the shadows themselves. Tiny bat-like shadows smashed into Sanji like so many small baseballs, one of them catching him in his face, hence his cry. The others, passed by, trying to attack the rest of the crew, but there was enough space between them that the rest of the crew was able to prepare themselves. Dozens of hands appeared around Robin, while Makino and Nami protected themselves with their weapons, though Makino was forced to use Tekkai to ignore the blows, since her pistols were useless against so many small, fast targets.

Luffy simply smashed them out of the air, scowling. "Okay, this is new, but I have to assume that it means Moria's somewhere around here, right? Don't let Hogback go, Sanji, we've got a lot more questions for him than just about Cindry."

But the shadow bats couldn't be destroyed. Instead, they almost acted like rubber whenever one of the others hit them, then flowing along the floor, intersecting the shadows scattered throughout the baroque dining room. "Shit, we need more light!" Nami shouted, putting action to words as she aimed her Heat dial towards the chunks of wood that were scattered around the room from the table and chairs.

Before she could light up more than a few however, a shadow rose up from the floor behind her. It grabbed at Nami and Makino, who put a bullet through its face, but unlike with the ghosts, when the Busoshoku-imbued bullet passed through the zombie shadow only the area hit was dissipated under the impact. Worse, the shadow flowed back into the hole instantly, no worse for wear.

Nami found herself flying into a wall, but Luffy caught her before she could hit it headfirst, while Makino shouted out, "Tekkai!" once more as the shadow creature tried to crush her.

"Diable Jam!" Sanji bellowed, leaping forward with his legs on fire for the second time that night. Unlike the Busoshoku-infused musket ball, Sanji's kick forced the shadow to dodge, which it did by shattering like glass. Each tiny shadow was still moving under their own power though, and quickly shifted to take on the form of fat bats. These flew through the air in every direction not just striking, but biting down on the straw hats, hanging on.

"Tekkai," Sanji shouted, with Makino doing the same and Nami using another dial that was part of her staff, the Iron Cloud Dial creating a spherical shield in front of her.

Luffy didn't bother protecting himself. He wanted to see if these guys were strong get through his normal endurance, and discovered they weren't, but for some reason each of them weighed more than you would have expected, slowly him down by a tiny bit. Still, so far, this long-range shadow attack wasn't really doing much.

Then suddenly, Luffy's instincts blared, and a bare use of Kenbunshoku showed him why. He shouted out "**EVADE**, everyone!"

The door leading up to the second story of the mansion opened just as more than a dozen of the ghosts which had caused them such confusion appeared there, phasing through the walls all around the doorway. But they were not the threat that had made Luffy's instincts start screaming at him.

Nami had put Sanji and Luffy between her and the attacking shadows as the Iron Cloud began to lose its shape. Now, before she could do anything, a hand gently touched the side of her head. There was a sound like ‘boing’ and Nami disappeared from sight. Yet her body very clearly was still there, being flung to the side, crashing through the outer wall of the keep, hurtling over the island.

Turning in Nami’s direction, Makino raised her pistols, the pistols and her hands gleaming black with Busoshoku as she fired. The giant man who had just attacked Nami simply batted the bullets aside with his free hand, creating still more ‘boing’ sounds then closing before Makino could blink. It wasn’t Soru, nor was it pure speed, but whatever technique it was brought the huge man across the room so fast even Luffy had trouble tracking him.

But track him he did, and before the large man could attack Makino as he had Nami, Luffy was in his face. A point blank Rankyaku was blocked, battered to one side with another ‘boing’ noise. Yet the next blow came in so quickly the big man couldn’t block it, and he staggered back, his jaw stinging even as he blocked the next few blows, dropping his bible and using both hands to do it. “Tsuppari Pad Ho.”

Luffy redirected the man’s hands, his speed slightly greater than the man’s aiming his palms, which looked like those of a cat or bear, maybe, away from him. From the palms of the man’s hands tiny balls of compressed air flew, and when they hit, they exploded with the force of a stick of dynamite.

One such smashed into Sanji where he had been trying to dodge around the attacking ghosts and shadow bats, while Makino cried out as one hit her, but even Makino was tough enough without Tekkai to take such a strike and keep on fighting. Robin too grimaced as one went off right beside her but kept one creating hands to attack the surrounding bats, trusting in Makino to protect her from the ghosts as they came towards her, which the green-haired woman did quite well.

A moment later, the large man retreated just as fast as he had approached, while the ghosts floated up into the air of the room and the bats all reformed into a large shadow, taking the shape of a person for a moment as it stood on the second floor’s balustrade.

Scowling, Luffy grimaced slightly as he flexed his hands. Hitting the large man’s forearms and wrists to redirect his palms had been like smacking metal, and looking at the massive man, Luffy knew this was going to be a hell of a fight. But there was something that needed to be seen to first. “Where did you send Nami, asshole!?”

“Yes!” Sanji shouted, hurling an unconscious Hogback to one side. He had used the cretin to shield himself from one of the newcomer’s explosive attacks once, and the doctor was definitely suffering right now. “Where did you send our lovely Nami-chan! You’ll pay for striking a woman, you bastard.”

Both Makino and Robin also stared at the newcomer grimly, although both were also keeping an eye on the hovering ghosts, listening to them going “Hollow, hollow, hollow,” to themselves.

Before the man could reply, if indeed he would, a new voice cut into the confrontation. “My, my, it is a sign of a well-knit crew to care about one another, but at the moment don’t you think you have more important things to worry about?”

The voice was a bit lower in register than Robin's, alluring if cold, a voice that was decidedly, one could almost say amazingly, feminine. Sanji turned in that direction as if his feet were on a turnstile, only to find himself freezing at the sight of possibly the most gorgeous woman he had ever seen.

The black-haired woman was tall, slender her hair falling well past her waist, while framing her face down to her chin. She had a high forehead over dark brown eyes long eyelashes, and pale skin, with J-cup breasts, a slender waist, and legs that looked perfectly formed, showing off both muscle and poise, in her long qipao, which was cut along both sides at the hip, and tight up top, leaving very little to the imagination. From her ears hung two gold earrings in the shape of snakes, shifting slightly as she moved, a faint, beckoning smile on lips.

Staring at her, Sanji's eyes instantly turned into hearts, and he grabbed at his chest, almost swooning. Luffy too was stunned, his eyes wide and a blush suffusing his features, watching as the black-haired woman slowly sashayed down the stairs, looking at the pirates thoughtfully. Both Makino and Robin were also shocked, although Robin too was blushing faintly. Thanks to her experiments with Luffy in that direction, Robin had come to acknowledge she had a slight bisexual inclination to her. Makino though was fully straight, and she slowly shook off her shock at this exotic, and very much alive, beauty.

Reaching the floor of the dining hall, the woman smiled. "That's good, just stay right there."

"Yes!" Sanji shouted, holding a hand straight above his head like he was volunteering or answering a question in class. "I will not move from this place! No matter what hell becomes, I will stay right here!"

In contrast, Thanks to a hand appearing on his hip and pinching his ass, Luffy was already shaking his head, smacking his cheeks with both hands. *Damn it boyo, you've got a girlfriend, don't go staring at other women!*

But before he could fully through off the impact of her beauty, the woman brought her arms together, creating a heart shape in front of her. "Mero Mero!" From her hands a narrow line of hearts appeared racing forward almost like Foxy's attacks, but on a narrower front.

In this way, Hancock hoped not to hit either of her allies. Although she was much more worried about hitting Kuma than Moria.

Gasping, Makino pushed Sanji out of the way, even as she ducked under the beam aimed at them, the two of them having been the closest. Robin and Luffy too were able to dodge out of the way, but Makino was unable to defend herself on the follow up from the large man, and it was only Luffy's quick defense that forced the larger man's palm strike away. Once more Luffy's next blow got through, shooting out a railgun round on impact, hurling him out of the room and deeper into the mansion through the same wall that held the fireplace.

Twisting around, Luffy launched similar attacks towards the woman, the shadow-man and the ghosts. His eyes blinked wide as the woman shifted her arms into Busoshoku, smacking Luffy's attacks out of the air with a speed that was beyond impressive, although the need to defend herself had halted her own strange attacks. The shadow simply came apart before reforming without any damage apparent beyond a hole in the wall and roof there.

A moment later, the shadow shifted, suddenly replaced with a man. he stood as tall as the first man and then some, with two small horns sticking out from the side of his forehead, and old scars running vertically along the top of his face and again down to his neck. His teeth were pointed, as were his ears, which along with his pale blue skin, red lips and hair gave him an inhuman appearance. He was quite fat, his stubby body dressed in a very gothic, vampire-like style, much like Hogback.

"Kishishishishi! Well, this has been somewhat disappointing so far, despite the mess you all made of my zombies. So many purified or their bodies destroyed. Sad, but this is where your rampage ends."

As he spoke, the doorway the woman had come out of opened once more, and another woman came out, smirking as she flew into the air to join the ghosts above them. She was shorter by quite a bit, seeming younger and shorter than Nami, whereas Hancock looked like she was Robin's age or a bit younger. The girl was dressed in an outfit Luffy identified as Goth Loli, had pink hair, and a face that looked almost doll-like, with long eyelashes wide eyes and pink painted lips. Her shoes were, Ranma was somewhat amused to note, quite big and added several inches to her height.

The large man also returned, pushing through the rubble his passage had created looking none the worse for wear. "Shall I order my ghosts to attack, Master?"

Robin stood up, from where she had pushed Sanji aside, and in a moment all four of the street remaining straw hats staring at the three individuals in front of them.

Moria cackled, before launching his shadow forward. "Yes, Perona, let us finish this." With that the ghosts above and several more attacked from all around the foursome. At the same time, the woman pressed her hands together, and shot out beams of energy.

Sanji was still staring at her, his eyes hearts, but Robin grabbed him around the neck, tossing him to the floor once more as she shouted, "Luffy!"

Luffy stayed still for just a second as his crewmen flung themselves to the floor. Then his legs flicked out, disappearing in the sight of a normal person, lashing out with Rankyaku strikes in every direction. Simultaneously his hands filled with nails, shooting them out with his modified Finger Bomb attack. *They aren't the vorpal blades of the Umi-Sen-Ken, but they will have to do. The vorpal blades are two dangerous to use around allies.*

The overwhelming assault should have forced the three main enemies back, once more halting the woman's strange attacks on the crew responding with her own attacks. They weren't quite Rankyaku, having more in common with the fist-version of the air pressure assault, blunt object rather than cutting force. Yet combined with the woman's speed and her own energy attacks, which Luffy assumed were Devil Fruit based, Luffy's assault was blunted with apparent ease. He didn't see what happened to the nails, too busy continuing his attack, but whatever it was, it had shifted the nails sent at her off their trajectory.

The large black-clad man did the same as he stepped back into the room, his hands redirecting the strikes intended for him while the ghosts retreated through the sides of the dining hall. In contrast, the shadows rose up around the room into a wall that defended Gecko Moria, leaving the things they had been embedded in.

Regardless, while the trio of attackers defended themselves, and the attacks did nothing to the ghosts, the mansion wasn't so Laki. The entire building just sort of burst, like a wooden box containing a grenade. What wasn't outright destroyed in Luffy's sudden assault began to fall, and the Straw Hats raced outside.

Unfortunately, while the three main attackers might have been busy protecting themselves from falling debris, the ghosts had no such need. They simply zoomed forward, and before the pirates could set themselves, Luffy, Robin and Makino were all struck by them. Sanji was able to dodge but couldn't do anything to the ghosts as they swooped through his friends, his Busoshoku-infused blows dissipating only a few as the others continued their attack. "HOLLOW, HOLLOW, HOLLOW! That should do, Master Moria. Despite how strong they are, they have no defense against my ghosts."

Sanji turned in the voice's direction, seeing the pink-haired girl sitting lightly on a tree nearby and shook his head angrily. "Damn it, why does she have to be so cute! Why are we being set upon by one gothic beauty and another legendarily gorgeous woman?! Why!?"

None of his crewmates answered. Robin was mumbling quietly underneath her breath, curled up around herself and bemoaning the fact her whole life was a curse to both her and those around her. Makino was whimpering about being a Christmas cake as she curled up around herself. "Even if I catch up with him, why would he want a woman past her sell-by date?"

However, Luffy, well, Luffy was glowing a vaguely disturbing green, causing Sanji to back away from his captain even as another ghost made a second pass through him. "All is darkness, there is nothing worth living for... I am but an amoeba, I want to die..."

"Keep it up Perona!" came Moria's voice. "Keep their captain out of the game, Kishishishi, and the others will be easy to deal with."

"Gah, get it together you three!" Sanji shouted, staring in mixed fear and dismay at the very feminine attacker.

"Wait... what is that green light..." The black-haired woman and the large man pushed themselves out of the rubble of the mansion, appearing out of the dust and rubble, looking no worse for wear at the moment.

But her warning came too late. Another ghost sped through Luffy's body, and Luffy's martial artist mind recognized he had reached the depression saturation point. "Perfect Shi Shi Hakoden..."

The green glow around Luffy grew so bright it hurt to look at and then became a pillar of green energy before the pillar then expand in a wave of kinetic force towards his enemies. All three of the main attackers stared, their eyes wide, and the woman instantly retreated, barely staying ahead of the green wave. Gecko Moria quickly transferred to one shadow, and then another moving away rapidly as everything behind him exploded.

The large man made the mistake of trying to stand his ground, thrusting his hands forward. "Paw Paw Defense!" For just a moment when his paws first impacted the outer edge of the widening green assault, they stopped it. But only in an area around the man and spreading forward. To either side of him, the ravenous green energy spread, splashing back onto his position.

He got off lightly though. The few remaining zombies outside the mansion or in the nearby forest, or under the rubble, even the rubble was crushed, turning to dust and ash. And the ghosts too were entirely dissipated, including the one which looked like Perona, proving that the woman had also been a kind of ghost, despite her coloring.

As the rest of his crew recovered, Sanji sighed in relief, grateful his captain had sent that attack away from him and the ladies. "Nice shot Luffy!"

"T, thanks," Luffy answered, recovering quicker than the two women now that he had used up his far deeper depression, pushing through a moment of utter emotionlessness as if he had slipped into the Soul of Ice. "I, um, that's not an attack I like using, being depressed ain't for me. But I can use the emotion to power that attack well enough if I don't have time to guard myself with Busoshoku. And it probably told Laki and Franky something's going on. Maybe even Zoro, if he didn't get him and Chopper lost."

Slowly coming out from behind a bit of rubble his shadow had used to protect him from the energy attack, Gecko Moria tried to laugh, although it came out as somewhat forced. "Kishishishishi, you people truly are funny! And quick to adapt as well. I can see why Crocodile had trouble with you. And why the World Government came up with this little plan."

"I see..." Makino stammered as she pushed herself to shaky feet, staring at all three of the main attackers as the gorgeous woman used Soru to come back from where she had fled. The edges of her qipao were somewhat tattered, and she was a bit mussed up, yet even so still looked gorgeous.

In contrast the large man had come off much the worse for his attempt to stand and block the attack. Or rather, his clothes did. His shirt was gone, burnt away in large segments. His hair too had suffered, and segments of his skin too. But this only allowed the metal underneath to be seen. *Good grief, he's a cyborg? Could that be why he's so loyal to the Wee Gee?*

Regardless, Makino knew who he was, as well as the woman, and now having had a moment to gather her thoughts, it was all she could do to not tremble from that knowledge. "S, so, t, this was a trap for us. T, to make us face three Shichibukai at once?"

Sanji cigarette dropped from his mouth, and a slowly recovering Robin stared in horror at that.

"Oh," Hancock cocked her head to one side, a move that was so breathtakingly graceful, that even a very straight Makino felt her heart start to pound for a second. "You know who we are?"

"Pirate Empress, boa Hancock. Shichibukai. Bartholomew Kuma, Shichibukai," Makino announced woodenly, pulling two more pistols out of her ki space the one from South blue, and the one that Laki had made her.

"Kishishishishi! Correct. And now, it is time for this to end." With that, Gecko quixotically stepped back into the still spalling smoke and dust of the mansion's destruction. "Brick Bat!" At that shout his shadow once more burst apart into thousands of tiny bats launching themselves forward. "Perona, your second wave please! But don't target the captain any longer."

Taking this as a cue, a new wave of ghosts dove towards the pirates, steering well clear of Luffy. They didn't seem as self-assured somehow, but they still came on quickly.

The ghosts came in from all directions, but they were dissipated by Rankyaku shots from Sanji and Luffy, while Makino and Robin were able to dodge thanks to the more-open environment. However, the woman's Mero Mero attacks were far more dangerous. None of the Straw Hats wanted to discover what would happen if those strange, heart-shaped beams hit bar Sanji, who was distracted by them as Kuma, looking somewhat annoyed now, launched himself forward.

"Don't let his paws hit you!" Luffy shouted, even as he dodged through a few beams from Hancock, trying to line up a railgun strike at the retreating Moria. Not bothering with accuracy, he simply fired as often as he could. But even while most of Moria's shadow had stayed to attack Luffy, the eel-like man had kept a few by him, and they protected him from the shots that would otherwise have struck him.

Nor was he alone in seeing the shadow-user disappearing. Hancock also saw this and stopped her assault. Instead, she twisted around, pointing towards the retreating eel-like man, her finger thrusting out as she posed, her head thrust so far upwards that her back bowed and she was staring up at the nighttime sky above them. "**MORIA!** We are not here to do your dirty work for you, get back here and fight!"

Moria just kept running away, letting his shadow attack in his stead.

For his part, Kuma didn't seem bothered by his seeming cowardice. Instead he kept attacking, frowning as Sanji seemed able to dodge or redirect his attacks as Luffy had before inside the now exploded mansion. A Diable Jam infused kick smashed into Kuma's leg, causing him to fall to one knee, and he grimaced at the pain. But when Sanji redirected Kuma's riposting palm strike, this time, Kuma had used his other hand to gather air around his hand, thrusting the paw-shaped bit of air up into Sanji. "Pad Ho!"

At that range, Sanji couldn't dodge, and cried out as he was blasted away, as was Makino, who had been trying to defend against the ghosts, flung off her feet mid-step from the shockwave after it went through Zoro. The next second, Kuma closed with the green-haired woman, and a hand smashed into her chest, hurling her up and off her feet, and away, disappearing from sight. But like Nami, she was still very much there as she traveled blasting through several trees as she rose through the air despite travelling so fast even Luffy couldn't track them.

A moment later, Sanji received the same treatment, aided by a ghost having flown through him a second before. He was still in the near-fetal position when Kuma's paw caught him.

Turning, with a snarl, Luffy sent his next railgun attack towards Kuma, the railgun round blasting the man sideways and off his feet. Staring at Kuma as he slowly pushed himself to his feet, looking only mildly battered from an attack that had torn through a battleship, Luffy growled, "So what the hell kind of power is that? It looked like a compressed air explosion but..."

"Correct. It was indeed an air explosion. I am a Paw man; I ate the Paw Paw fruit."

"And where did you send my crew?"

"Elsewhere on this island. I have no need of killing them personally. Only your head and that of your first mate are truly required," Kuma answered in his monotone voice, then frowned as Luffy charged him, his teeth bared as Busoshoku appeared on his hands and feet.

To one side of this assault, Robin dodged a blast of the odd Mero Mero power Hancock was using. Several hands appeared around the woman, but she burst out of them easily, her strength well beyond that of Robin despite her training, and Robin stumbled back under threat of several shadow bats, before they too faded away, racing off to join their master. This left Robin unable to dodge a blast from Hancock, which turned the black-haired woman into stone.

"Robin!" Luffy roared, zooming forward, anger and rage at the assault on his lover breaking through the strange miasma that looking at Hancock had created in his mind, making him unwilling to truly attack her much. A kick at Soru speed caught Hancock in the side despite her attempt to block it with her arm and she was knocked off her feet, though she rolled with it, grimacing at the pain from it.

Looking around as she straightened up, Hancock scowled as she noticed even Moria's shadow was gone now. "Curse that fool Morial!" she snarled, an expression on her face that should have been ugly on any woman, yet on her looked almost coquettish. "Where has he gone now?"

"It does not matter. You and Moria can hammer out your differences however you wish after Straw Hat Luffy is dead," Kuma announced as if he was talking about the weather.

"Hey, Boa," Luffy snarled, trying to get his temper under control while also using it to burn away the last vestiges of his hormonal response to the woman, standing between her, Kuma, and the statue of Robin. "Got a question."

"It is Hancock to you, fool," Hancock retorted, turning back to stare at the young pirate captain, blinking in surprise despite what she had been told of his abilities as his entire body started to turn Busoshoku-black. In response, her own hands and feet did the same, while Kuma's did not. Instead he simply stepped backwards warily. Like Moria, he didn't have any skill with Haki, although he could resist the impact of most of its forms to a greater or lesser degree. "What is your question?"

"Two questions, actually. One, ya don't seem to like the giant eel-fucker, so what're you doing here? From what I remember being told about ya, you don't normally do more than pay the Wee Gee lip service. And my second is, can your powers be reversed?"

"Tsk." Hancock sighed, but there were some societal mores even among pirates that had to be obeyed. Politeness to another pirate captain at moments like these, before a duel (albeit an uneven one) was one such. That, and she was amused with the nicknames he had come up with. "The, heh, Wee Gee did not give me much choice, although I was able to force them to meet my price to work with Moria. As for my powers, yes, they can be reversed if I desire it."

"Good." Even through his anger Luffy had to fight back a twitch at the word 'desire' coming from Boa Hancock's lips and only did so by turning around to look at his stone girlfriend. lifting Robin's statue up into his arms, moving her over to place her under the remnants of a tree which had been blasted out at the roots earlier.

When Robin was hidden, Luffy turned back, his gaze fierce as he removed his straw hat, which had up until now remained on his head throughout the action. Now he stowed it in his ki space, before taking a stance that allowed him to look at both Shichibukai, who had arrogantly waited for him to finish. "That means after this is over, I can get you to free Robin. That's good enough for me."

"HAH!" Hancock laughed, the sound actually sounding somewhat boisterous instead of condescending. "I have to admit to liking your fire, Luffy. But even with Moria off somewhere, do you truly think you can fight two Shichibukai at once?"

Luffy smirked then, staring back at her confidently, the look for some reason setting Hancock's pulse to racing before he glanced over at Kuma. Then he released the Haoshoku. The wave of **pressure** blasted out smashing into both Shichibukai, who frowned, but were otherwise unaffected, simply becoming grimmer as they stared back at the astonishingly dangerous Rookie.

Suddenly Luffy dashed forward, forcing Hancock to leap backwards and away as his blow smashed into the ground where Hancock stood, before Luffy leaped up and over an attack from Kuma. He dodged the large Shichibukai's hands landing a kick to a shoulder that should have caved in the shoulder. Instead the shoulder bent and flexed, with Kuma hurled sideways, although Luffy's follow up blow was redirected without doing anything.

As Kuma pushed himself to his feet and Hancock began to circle him warily, Luffy answered her question. "We'll just have to see, won't we?" *And if I have to, I'll fry all three of you fuckers to ash to get my crew out of this in one piece.*

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Even as far away as they were, Laki, Franky, and Eve heard the resounding boom from the Perfect Shi-Shi Hokodan and saw the funnel of green energy that exploded in the distance. "What the heck!?" Franky muttered, staring at it. "That's not the color of Luffy's lightning, right?"

"Nope," Laki shook her head, staring in the same direction. "But I'm just going to put it down to Luffy pulling some new trick out of his rear. Which means we need to get ready. Where should we fire first?"

As she spoke, Laki was already moving to the prow-most gun turret, turning it towards the distant mansion. "Your positive one of the masts is up there?"

"Girl, I have been building ships since before you were born, yeah, I'm certain it's there. It has to be, or else not only wouldn't this ship be able to move, but it would also be in danger of capsizing every time the current changed. There needs to be a central balance, see."

"So if I take it out, will we be in danger of capsizing?"

"Maybe, maybe not. Depends on if someone is stupid enough to use the other sails."

Shrugging her shoulders, Laki settled herself into the gunner's seat, and, moments later, fired. At range, the superheated ball of plasma wouldn't have been able to sustain itself, the air it passed through cooling the plasma as it went so it wasn't as good at range as the railgun. But in terms of ship-to-ship combat, despite the size of this *Thriller Bark*, they were quite close to their target, even if she couldn't see it thanks to the darn fog.

Fog which, as she fired, boiled away, leaving a tunnel through the fog to let her see the impact. "Yes. Nice job Franky, got it dead on!"

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Gecko Moria frowned pensively as his shadow returns to him, having been completely dissipated by whatever attack Luffy had used. "That was interesting, but, foolhardy" Gecko snorted, shaking his head at the stupidity of ever fighting someone upfront if you didn't have to. "Really, I wonder how people like Kuma and Hancock ever survive the Grand Line with minds like that. Still... what is that?"

Looking upwards, Moria couldn't see anything for a moment, then there was a booming noise from high above him as something blasted into the top of his tower/mast. "WHAT in the hell was that!"

Down below, while Luffy, Kuma and Hancock and faced off, Luffy grinned.

Still staring upward, Gecko gaped at the amount of rubble tumbling downwards. Everywhere throughout the area around the main tower zombies screamed and flew for their lives, while Gecko quickly manifested his shadow once more, protecting him from the amount of rock and wood tumbling down towards them.

As it was, one of his shoulders was bruised, and he snarled in anger and fury. That fury dissipated somewhat as he heard a voice nearby. "What the heck was that master!?"

He turned do see Tararan and smiled. "Possibly the last gasp of this enemy crew. About time you got here, Tararan! Which cooler did you stick the singing swordsman in?"

"Number 433, master. And I have to tell you master, this first mate, the Pirate Hunter, he was crazy! he destroyed all the General zombies he faced and was about to beat Ryuma!" Tararan jabbered, uncertain how much Mistress Perona had told the master. "

"Excellent! I have just the right shadow in mind. I doubt I'm going to be able to wait on this for their captain's shadow, and I can always exchange them later. Come with me." With that Gecko walked away, heading deeper into the tower and upwards to a special cooler. It is time, to unveil Vault 1! Hildon!"

"M, master! the entire top of the main mast, everything from the rigging on up, it's all gone!" Hildon exclaimed as he appeared out of the fog above, which had finished roiling thanks to the Straw Hat's assault now.

"Bah, who cares! We can always repair it. Tell Perona to order Kumashi, Hippo Gentlemen and the remaining Wild Zombies out to attack the Straw Hats Kuma sent across the island. Then I want you to keep an eye on the main battle, I'll be sending my shadow back down there to... help... in a moment, and when he arrives, you can switch to following the other straw hats. Leave the battle on the ship to the Kuja. As annoying as they are, they can surely take one under-strength ship."

Hildon frowned a bit at that, having noted how well the ship was maneuvering for having only two people aboard. But he still nodded, and he bowed his head, flapped his wings and disappeared upwards. As he went, Moria smiled over at Tararan. "And now, to unveil a zombie I have long hoped to find a shadow worthy of. We're going to Freezer number one, Tararan. Kishishishishi"

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"We have incoming!" Franky shouted, smacking his hand on this side of the gun, causing an almost metallic thump despite the fact that this cannon, unlike the railgun, was made of wood. "The mouth is opening, and I can already see another ship out there coming in."

"Really. So much for me sitting this one out. Did Brooks say anything about..."

"Bones-bro didn't tell us much," Franky said, shaking his head. "He wasn't very super about this whole thing, for the best of intentions sure, but Brook should've put more trust in us."

"No argument there," Laki murmured having twisted the gun turret around now to face towards the entrance. This was done through a pedal-wheel system and was quite smooth for all it reminded Laki of watching Brook's water skimming skill earlier.

She glanced down at the indicators, little valves that would tell her when the air intake for the cannon was full. A second later, it was, and she fired once more.

The Kuja pirates blinked in astonishment as the mouth of the *Thriller Bark* shattered in front of them, almost as if it had been hit by some kind of blazing hammer.

Bits and pieces of shrapnel flew everywhere, but the Kuja were quick to pull out their bows, using their arrows infused with Haki to smash the most dangerous bits aside. "Keep the ship on course," Sandersonia ordered. "Marigold, be ready to lead a boarding party! Everyone else, ready your bows!"

"Right!" Marigold shouted back.

As the Kuja continued to shoot bits of pieces of flotsam out of the air, the pirate vessel moved forward into the now open gap. Being pulled by the snakes it didn't need wind power.

"What the heck? What exactly am I seeing?" Laki demanded staring at the two snakes pulling the enemy ship into the mouth and through into the interior port of *Thriller Bark*.

"I don't know," Franky shook his head racing up to the bridge. "But I'm turning the ship to bring its broadside to bear. Eve, get ready!"

"I'm always ready for this! Let's get that... other pirate scum!" Eve stumbled over her words a bit, but her enthusiasm was unmistakable.

"Right," Laki answered, depressing the gun a little more, as she waited again for the indicators to tell her she could shoot again.

This took a bit longer than it had previously, but it was still ready before the enemy ship could come close enough to throw grapnels. At the same time, the everlasting resolve ship twisted around to bring its tertiary guns to bear. Before they could, the secondary weapon fired once more, this time smashing into the side of the enemy ship as it too turned to bring its broadsides around.

The damage was catastrophic. Ships burned all too easily, and the plasma bolt from the Franky special tore into and through the Kuja pirate's ship, removing much of its prow, only the snake's speed and the fact it had been turning saving the ship from further damage. The ship instantly began sinking, the only saving grace being the Kuja pirates rarely used cannons, and thus had no gunpowder, and the fact most of the crew had already been on the main deck instead of inside the ship.

At the same time their ship took such a horrific pounding, the Kuja were already firing back. Arrows infused with Haki began to slam into the everlasting resolve, but at this range, they lost much of their potency, and everlasting resolve was built out of Adam Wood for a very good reason. One of them tore through the canopy of the masts, despite them being furled, and another one smashed into the crow's nest through a window. The conning tower was also hit through hits window, which Franky frowned at even as he watched the arrow bounce off the bridge's deck.

But that was all the damage they did, something that marigold noticed and cursed. "The hell ship kind of what is that ship made out of!"

"Who cares! Everyone abandon ship!" Sonya shouted. "To the lifeboats for those who can't air jump, and everyone who can, with me!"

The tertiary weapons of the everlasting resolve spoke, under Eve's command, pummeling the remnants of the enemy pirate vessel. But really, to the damage already sustained from that one shot from its other weapon, there was no need. The Kuja pirates ship was doomed, and the last thing Marigold did was to release the two snakes from their halters, letting them pull away, looking a bit panicked at the amount of heat that had passed so near them a moment before.

"Well, whatever pirates that ship belonged to, is having a very bad day," Eve reported with a laugh from a mouth conjured up near Franky at the wheel, taking vindictive pleasure in what was going on. However, she paused as she saw dozen maybe a little more than a dozen female pirates into the air towards them. "Huh? Girls? I thought female pirates were supposed to be rare?"

Franky frowned at the sight too, something about female pirates trying to spark a memory, but he couldn't bring it to mind. Meanwhile, Laki attempted to line up a shot on them, but the pirates in the air scattered quickly and she couldn't depress the turret enough to target the ship's boats coming towards them through the water.

Instead, she exited the gun, cracking her neck this way and that, as she made sure the tie on her long ponytail was in place, before grabbing up her rifle. "Well, she asked looking up at Franky as he exited the bridge. "Looks like our job's not done quite yet."

"Though it isn't super for a man to fight a woman, or even multiple women, yeah, I'm afraid it's time for us to repel borders." He said, even as arrows continued to flash towards them, and this time, they carried a lot more force, while behind them, the Kuja pirates roared and charged.

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Surprisingly, Makino landed near in the same area as Nami, mashing into trees, and rolling to a stop with groans of pain. "Makino, thank goodness! What the hell was that!" the orange-haired woman greeted her older friend, her face showing her fear as she flung herself into a hug.

Makino shakily nodded, hugging the younger woman back before pushing her away gently, looking around cautiously. "That was a Shichibukai. I don't know his exact powers, that kind of thing isn't shared on bounties, but I've seen his picture on bounty posters, from before he became a Shichibukai of course. No doubt he's become even more dangerous since."

"Oh crap." Nami gulped, the implications obvious. "And the woman?"

"That one, is even more obvious," Makino said, before holding out her arms to Nami. "Come on."

Nami blinked, and Makino sighed. Remember, I can use Geppo too. And there's no point in us staying on the ground. Most of the traps and tricks around here seem more oriented to the ground anyway."

"How long do you think it's going to take me to be able to learn to air walk?" Nami grumbled.

"I don't know, how long do you think it's going to take me to learn how to read the wind and waves? Makino replied tartly before calming down slightly, as Nami clung to her, the young woman obviously very shaken up, as Makino was, although she was doing a better job of not showing it. "You were never a strength-type fighter Nami, so you didn't have the grounding that any of the others had. For my part, it took me several years to get to that point. You're still learning faster than I was."

"Enough with a self-deprecating talk," Nami muttered, smacking Makino's chest, wondering if perhaps Makino needed the same kind of intervention that Nami had needed to take her training more seriously. After all, the guy she's after is a Yonko and even in the best of cases, that's going to cause some trouble that Makino will need to be strong enough to handle.

That was for later though. Right now, they had to find the rest of their crew.

There was a booming crashed one side, some distance away from them but still within hearing range of the two women, and they both looked in that direction. "You think that's one of the others?"

"I'm hoping so," Makino said with a nod.

It was indeed, and by the time the two of them had figured out which direction to go in the darkness, which wasn't easy, Sanji was in the air, shouting out their names. "Makino-chwan, Nami-swan! Where are you!?"

"Thank goodness!" Makino said, bouncing in the air beside Sanji. "Are you okay, Sanji?"

"A bit bruised, but most of my injuries have been to my pride my lady, and my wounds disappear into insignificance next to your well-being. Sanji said, bowing towards her despite still bouncing in the air. "That was an unmitigated disaster."

"Right," Nami said, as bullets began to whiz up towards them from a few zombies below them in the forest. "Sanji, you need to get back to Luffy and Robin. As strong as Luffy is, there's no way that he can beat three Shichibukai at once, not even if he breaks out all the stops. Especially if those ghosts join in too."

"I, I agree," Sanji answered, somewhat conflicted. But that would leave the two of you..."

"If you say something chivalrous and pompous right now, I am going to shock you," Nami warned.

"And I'll shoot you the moment my hands are free," Makino growled. "This is no time for that kind of shit, Sanji. And while I know you probably will be useless against Hancock, at least peel off Kuma for a bit to let Luffy concentrate on her and Moria."

Sanji flinched a little, knowing that if he had stayed, his continued reaction to Hancock would have caused trouble. Indeed, even now, Sanji knew if he went back there, he would never be able to fight such a beauty. Yet after a moment, he nodded, then dodged around bullets coming up towards them from the ground. When a tree was hurled in their direction, Sanji lashed out with kick Sanji smashing it to ribbons. "Are you positive the two of you will be all right?"

"Positive, no. But we can't afford to defuse our fighting strength any further than we already have. And the fight that Luffy's fighting is the worst we're going to face."

"Speaking of," Sanji said suddenly, pulling out his communications device. "Use this Nami, check in with the others, while I deal with the local riffraff first before I leave." A second later, Sanji dove down roaring.

A moment later, Makino and Nami listened to Franky shouting out "Can't talk, being boarded!" Before ending the communication. Yet even that was more than Luffy, Robin, and Zoro gave them.

The two women exchanged glances, then looked towards the ship. "We have no idea where Laki and Chopper and Zoro are right now, so, head towards the ship?"

"Head towards the ship," Makino replied with a nod. "And you're going to have to be offense for a while if I'm going to be carrying you my dear."

Nami nodded once and began to twirl her staff as Makino moved towards the distant Everlasting Resolve as close to the trees as she safely could. "I only hope we can join up all together again once this is all done. We've walked into a trap, and I don't think we're strong enough to survive it separated."

End chapter