
novel
ONE PIECE
HEROINES
Created by Eiichiro Oda
Written by Jun Esaka
Illustrations by Sayaka Suwa
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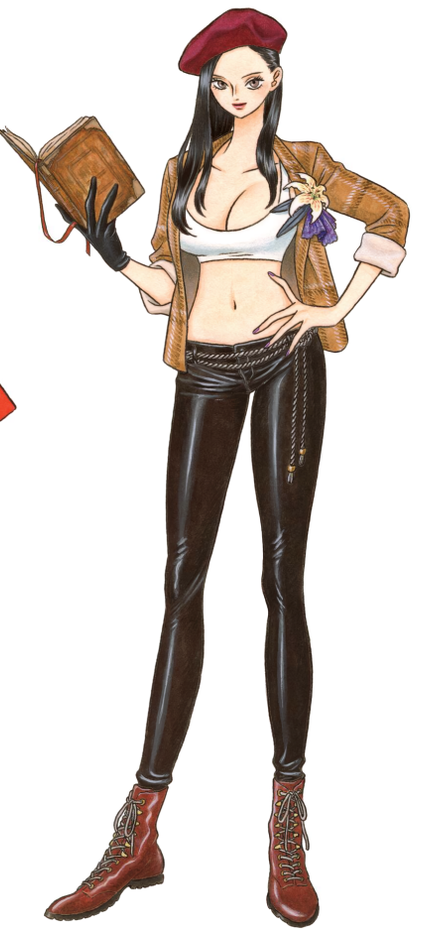

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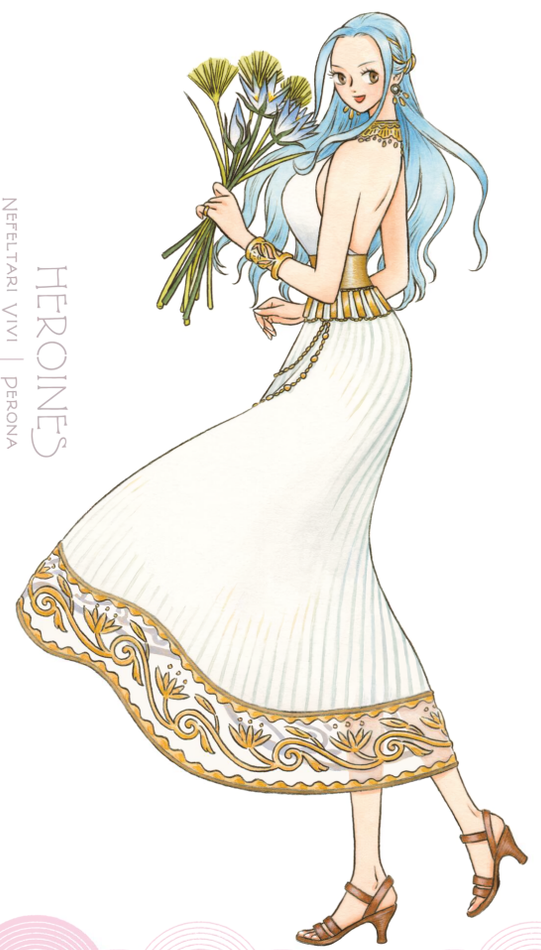
NAMI | NICO ROBIN





HEROINES

NEFELTARI VIVI | PERONA





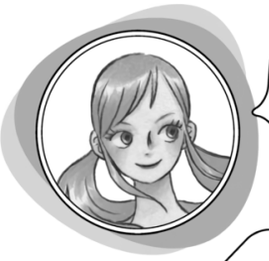
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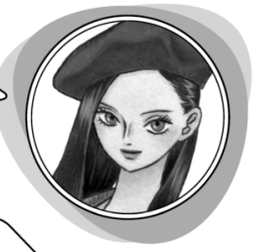
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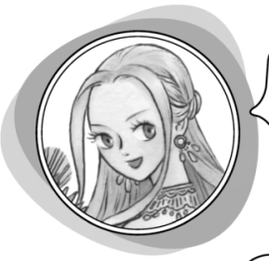
Illustrations by Sayaka Suwa



Nami
Navigator of the Straw Hat Crew

Nico Robin
Archaeologist of the Straw Hat Crew





Nefeltari Vivi
Princess of Alabasta

Perona
Ghost Princess of Muggy Castle



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Don't Let Me Go

Chapter 1

NAMI

The Shoe Must Go On!





"Hey! Do you know where they sell these shoes?"

This question was directed at a man who was seated on a cafe terrace, having a smoke and minding his own business. He saw a hand extended toward his face, holding a pair of high-heeled shoes. Sewed into their arches was a tag with "Lebno Listchaque" embroidered in gold thread.

"Oh, it's just over there, to the right," the man replied. "The name is on the front of the store—you can't…miss it…" The man's voice petered out as he finally caught sight of the woman holding the heels.

His mouth fell open. The end of his cigarette flared a little. The woman standing before him grabbed an ashtray from the table and quickly held it out to catch the ash in its little brown bowl.

"Thanks for the tip," she said with a smile, then dropped the ashtray onto the table and strode away. The man remained frozen in the same position, only his eyes moving to follow the woman as she walked away.

Who was that? he wondered. *An actress? A model? An angel?*

Her back was straight and strong. Her long, wavy hair was such a brilliant orange hue that it almost hurt his eyes, and it shone in the sun like the finest of fruit.

He had no way of knowing that the woman with the orange hair and slender figure was not an actress or a model—and certainly not an angel—but a pirate. This island, with its bevy of high-end shops, was on the frontier of global fashion. Its residents were preoccupied almost completely with becoming style icons, and certainly didn't bother to brush up on the latest bounty posters. Her true identity undetected, Nami the Cat Burglar ignored the stares of open resentment and jealousy as she strolled down the red brick road toward her destination.

Clack, clack, clack.

Dangling from her fingers, the heels of the pumps she carried clicked together with each step she took. The shoes were

extremely chic, embellished with crystal beads speckled across blue satin and boasting bold four-inch heels. On Nami's feet at the moment were simple ankle strap sandals, with heels that were barely an inch tall, if that.

She found the place she was looking for to the right, just as the man had said. Lebno Listchaque was a luxury shoe brand that every fashionable woman knew about, and this was its only retail store. She pushed the glass door open and walked into an empty interior, as the last customers had already cleared out.

All around her were shoes displayed on elegant pedestals, lit up like works of art. Nami paid them no mind, crossing the spacious store to a counter at the back, where she rang the service bell.

"Yes? How may I help you?" asked a woman around Nami's age as she emerged from a door in the back. The woman's hair was styled in precise curls, and she wore cool pink lipstick.

"I'd like to exchange these," Nami announced flatly, placing the pumps on the counter. "They're defective. I bought them here this morning, and after no less than ten minutes, my feet started hurting like crazy. Then I took a closer look, and—see? The interior sole isn't arched to match the shape of a foot. Plus, the top straps don't fully secure at the ankle, and the heel is too open. Was I sold a display pair by mistake?"

"Let me see." The woman carefully picked up the shoes. Based on the work apron she wore over her white shirt, and the leather knife, hammer, and other tools contained in its pocket, she appeared to be a craftsperson from the store's workshop. It seemed she split her time between the workshop and the front desk. On her shirt was a name tag that read "Miucha."

Oh, good, she should be able to clear this up quickly, Nami assumed. *If we can wrap it up soon, I'll have time to go back to that cafe and have a piece of cake,* Nami thought optimistically. But within seconds, Miucha had finished examining the shoes.

"These are not defective shoes," she said.

What? Nami was astounded.

"The interior arch was removed for budgetary reasons. The heel spacing and top fixture are within specifications. I'm sorry, but this is a perfectly representative pair of this model," Miucha said, handing the shoes back to Nami in a perfunctory manner.

Nami was tempted to throw them on the ground in front of the clerk, but her practical side won out. She folded her arms.

“Listen, Miucha. These aren’t just any old shoes. They’re *Lebnos*. Isn’t your entire sales pitch that they’re high heels you can run in?”

A delicate silhouette that elevated a woman’s leg into a work of art, with soles so comfortable and secure that you could run in a pair of four-inch heels—that was the reputation of the Lebno brand, and it was the reason Nami had purchased these heels.

As a sailor, Nami was strictly limited in space for personal belongings. It was difficult to put together a good wardrobe when you knew you’d be rewearing each piece so often. Ordinarily she would never buy pumps with four-inch heels, since there was little chance she’d wear them. But when she found out her ship would be stopping by the island where the world-famous Lebno Listchaque store was located, the urge to have a pair overcame her. She had discarded some of her favorite clothes to make space in her closet, then visited the store by the port and agonized over which pair to buy before finally settling on those royal blue satin heels.

They were like a fine and delicate work of art, the sort of thing a pirate would never be able to wear. When she tried them on, the narrow heels perfectly supported her balance. It felt wonderful.

With this flashy new look on her feet, she felt the need to strut. Nami took a stroll on the deck of her ship. The first to notice—at the speed of sound—was the cook, who emptied his entire vocabulary praising her every quality. The archaeologist told her that they suited her, the ship’s doctor excitedly said they were as sparkly as stars, and the shipwright was impressed with the quality of the satin and crystal beads.

But not every member of the rough-and-tumble Straw Hat Crew recognized the quality of her new shoes. The sniper was aghast when he found out how much they cost, and the musician seemed to be examining the contours of her leg muscles rather than the shoes themselves. As for the captain, he was too distracted by some strange birds flying overhead and the possibility that he could be having those birds for lunch to even notice that Nami had new shoes on.

Really, though, it didn't matter what her crewmates thought. She'd bought the shoes because *she* wanted to wear them.

"What's with the fancy shoes? You can't run in those. And when are you gonna wear them?" the swordsman had teased.

Nami had folded her arms smugly and informed the rube, "You just don't get it. Lebno Listchaque makes high heels you can run in."

Indeed, that was what she'd heard about Lebnos. And yet, not even ten minutes after putting them on, her ankles were screaming with pain! Well, Nami wasn't the kind of person who'd give up and walk away after paying two hundred thousand berries for a defective product, no sir. After getting a little turned around on the island, she'd marched right back to the store to demand satisfaction.

"'Heels you can run in' was our *old* sales pitch," Miucha explained, sticking to the playbook. She wasn't going to budge. "When Lebno was still just a little shoe shop at the edge of town, we made heels you could run in. Each pair was carefully crafted by hand. But now that the company is so much bigger, we'd never keep up with production if we did it the old way. We have to hit our targets, even if it means a decline in comfort."

"Are you sure this is a good way to do that, though? The stitching is well-done, and the satin is very fine—clearly, you're spending time on the parts others can see. But you put no effort into all the other parts."

"That's the direction our head designer has decided upon," Miucha said, shrugging. "Crystal beads on blue satin is a big trend this year. Trends pass quickly, so there's no point taking our time to make a shoe that no one's even going to want to wear next year. People will put up with discomfort in exchange for having the latest style."

It seemed preposterous. If all the shoes were the same quality, then there was no point in returning them. Nami groaned inwardly. She regretted showing off the shoes to the crew. Once they found out she had tried to take the shoes back, they'd just tease her more. She felt infuriated just imagining Zolo's face, mocking her and asking what had happened to those heels she could run in. Nami didn't have time for this song and dance with a poker-faced salesclerk.

“All right, fine. I won’t exchange them. Just take them back.”

“We don’t accept returns,” the clerk replied.

“What?!” If Nami’s brow had furrowed slightly when Miucha said the shoes weren’t defective, that was nothing compared to the look on her face now.

“The receipt didn’t say anything about not taking returns!”

“It doesn’t, but that *is* the policy,” said Miucha. “All sales are final, whether you wear the shoes or not.”

“What are you talking about?” Nami said. “I’m not paying for shoes I can’t wear. You’re going to give me my money back!”

Miucha was impassive. “Look, I’m sorry, but this is how we do business. If you’re not going to wear them, why not give them to a friend?”

“I don’t have any friends who want shoes you can’t run in!”

“Is something the matter?” a man’s voice interrupted, and Miucha promptly straightened up. A tall man in a suit had come through the workshop door. His pressed shirt was absolutely spotless, but the gray undershirt beneath it was a bit soiled around the collar.

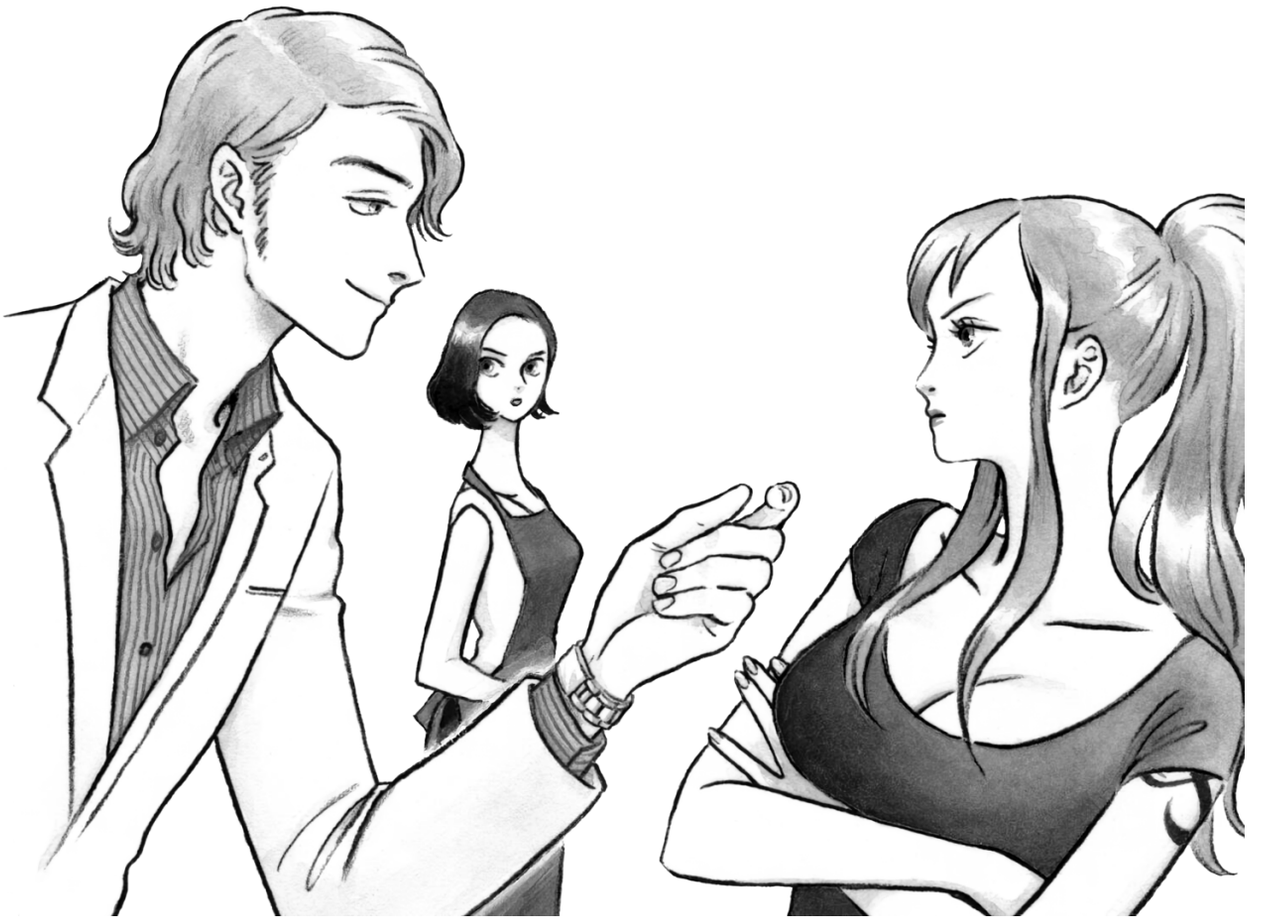
“I’m sorry about the noise, Lebno,” Miucha said to him. “She’s determined to get a return.”

“Lebno? So *you’re* Lebno Listchaque?” Nami said, turning on the man in fury. “Perfect timing. I want to return these pumps! They’re so painful I can barely stand to wear them for more than a minute.”

He didn’t spare a glance at the shoes thrust in front of his face. Instead, he gave her a full-body examination and smirked. “I’m not surprised. These are terrible shoes that happen to look good. But you’re the first to actually come and complain that they’re defective. Most just say, ‘Well, they’re Lebno Listchaques,’ and put up with the pain, or give up and blame themselves for not having strong enough legs.”

Yikes. It was such a stunning admission that Nami could only grimace, a muscle in her cheek twitching. Her anger was replaced with shock—to think that the renowned Lebno Listchaque was such a sleazeball!

“But I suppose you’ll do,” he said, peering at her face. Nami took a creeped-out step backward.



“Uh, what’s that supposed to mean?” she asked.

“It means that we’ll build you a new pair from scratch,” he said. Miucha’s head snapped around to stare at him. “But only if you’ll be my model.”

Lebno didn’t intend to hire Nami as an employee; he just wanted her to walk the runway at a fashion show that night. In exchange for two or three hours of her time, he offered her a pair of proper shoes made to order, and any other Lebno shoes in the shop she cared to take with her. For such an impromptu deal, it was really quite cushy.

“But why me?”

“Because you look good. You have a nice figure, and that gorgeous hair,” Lebno said, reaching out to touch it just as Nami

dodged away and examined the interior of the shop.

There were dazzling flower-print mules and a stunning, sensuous pair of six-inch heels. There were beige and cork pumps with a fringe, clearly designed to be reminiscent of the stately Alabasta Kingdom. Lebno was a horrible man, but his designs were the real deal. On the display floor, each set of shoes had a distinct aesthetic that seemed to tell a unique story. Each pair would be priced at two hundred thousand berries at a minimum. And she could take as many as she wanted. What a steal!

I can't take them all onto the ship with me, she thought, *but I can sell them off before we set sail!*

So Nami changed her tune at once and agreed to model the shoes. Miucha took her to the fitting room to prepare for the show.

"Let's measure your feet, first. That is the most important step when creating shoes, after all," Miucha said.

She knelt next to Nami and took out her measuring tape. At first she was smug and self-assured, but soon recoiled in shock. Nami looked down and noticed that the nail on her right big toe sported a gruesome crack.

"Oh, I was running and stubbed my toe," she explained awkwardly.

Miucha's expression grew even more alarmed. "You stubbed it so hard that *this* happened?"

"Oh, you know how it is. Don't worry, I disinfected it," said Nami, breezily. That sort of thing happened all the time when you were a member of a pirate crew. The bruises, cuts, and scrapes were never-ending.

"Such a shame, when you have such nice legs," Miucha muttered, placing her hand on Nami's ankle. She smoothed the measuring tape over the top of her foot, then measured the sides, the width, and the length of each toe.

Once the measurements were done, Miucha placed a pattern paper under Nami's foot to see how her weight was distributed, then traced the outline with a pen to complete the task.

Nami was reminded of when she was a child, and Belle-mère had taken her measurements. The memory of her mother felt like a warm blanket—the way she would sit and work on her projects while chatting with Nami and Nojiko. Belle-mère's haute couture

clothing was a unique luxury, but as a child Nami didn't understand that, and used to complain about how much of her mother's attention it took.

"What kind of shoes would you like to model at the show, Nami?" Miucha asked, out of the blue. "I'll take any requests."

"Good question," Nami replied slowly, thinking it over. "How about…a lion and sunflower motif?"

"Huh?" Miucha hesitated.

"With buckles that are a combination of a sunflower and a lion's face. You know how the petals of a sunflower kind of look like a lion's mane? And make the lion angry. Its mouth should be open so wide, it looks like its jaw is dislocated."

"O…kay…" Miucha said, clearly taken by surprise.

"Just a thought," Nami said, with a little grin. "But as long as I can walk in them without hurting, I'll take anything."





“Are you ready yet, Nami?” Miucha knocked on the door of the dressing room. Nami called out that she needed a bit more time.

After the foot measuring it was time to try on outfits. Nami had eventually decided on a pair of simple red heels, so Miucha and Nami put together a red and white outfit to match. It was an impromptu selection, but Nami could undoubtedly make it work.

So, shoes you can walk in without pain, Miucha thought. It had been a long time since she’d made shoes based on that concept. She’d go with a wide ankle strap for stability, and use a low-resistance material for the sole. What about material? A shiny enamel? Or would satin impress this crowd more?

Her contemplation of the merits of various materials was interrupted by the emergence of Nami from the dressing room.

“How does it look?” Nami asked.

She was wearing a frilly blouse with an open neckline and bright-red short shorts.

Miucha exhaled. Nami looked perfect from head to toe. The silhouette of her waist with the blouse tucked in, her thighs curving out from her shorts—they were all simply in ideal proportions to one another, like a well-drawn sea chart. Her big, dark eyes seemed at first as innocent and cute as a pet cat’s, until she flashed the occasional bewitching look that made her look as dangerous as a panther.

“It looks very good,” Miucha said, although it was also clear to her that Nami wasn’t well suited to being a model. She was so perfect that no one would be able to focus on the clothes. With that hair and those legs, who was going to notice the velvet ribbon around her waist that was the highlight of the outfit?

“No problem with the clothes, then,” Miucha confirmed. “Let’s try on the shoes.”

“You were just measuring my feet a few minutes ago,” Nami responded in awe. “They’re not already done, are they?”

“I got a stock pair started while you were trying on the clothes. Give me five minutes. There’s no decorative detailing yet, but you should be able to test the comfort.”

Miucha pulled a half-finished pair of shoes out of a large pocket in her apron and quickly resumed working on them. They were far from complete, but a bit of tightening up the loose stitching with the shoe on Nami’s foot was enough to nearly

complete the upper. After that, she just needed to attach a toplift with heel nails. The kona wood heel could split easily, so she had to be very careful hammering the nails.

"You're good at this," said Nami, watching Miucha do the finishing work on the shoes. "It's very delicate work. I can tell from a glance that the upper is really sturdy. This isn't at all like those horrible pumps you sold me."

"Both made by the same person, however," Miucha reminded her. "It's a difference in time and effort, not skill."

"How long have you been involved with Lebno?" Nami asked.

Crack! The question surprised Miucha so much that she hammered a huge crack into the expensive heel.

"Who told you about that?" she demanded.

"His collar did. I saw your lipstick on it."

It was that rare shade of cool pink. Miucha put a hand to her lips without thinking.

Nami continued, "Is that the reason why you're compromising your own principles to obey his requests?"

"My principles?"

"You *want* to do better, more careful work, and make every pair of shoes as fine as the first ones, don't you?" Nami continued with her line of inquiry.

"I didn't—" Miucha started, but she couldn't deny it. She sighed. "What makes you think that?"

"It's obvious. You're really talented at what you do."

Miucha glanced down at her hands—the palms that always smelled of leather, and the stained prints of her fingertips. She always wore nail polish and perfume to distract from these details, because she was ashamed of them.

"I have friends who are cooks and ship carpenters, and you looked just like them when you took measurements—instinctively reaching for the exact tools and materials that are needed, when I can't even tell the difference between them. I space out for a minute, and you've already completed the job. All of those complex steps, performed as easily as if they're written in your genetic code. It's like magic."

"Wow, that's impressive," Miucha said, before realizing that Nami was complimenting *her*. Her cheeks slowly reddened. *Like magic*. No one had ever spoken about Miucha's talent in that way.

“You’ve got all of this skill, but you’re using it to make these awful shoes. It’s such a waste.”

That idea was new to her, too. Was it really a waste?

Miucha put down the shoe frame and shook her head. “I’m fine with it. It’s Lebno’s decision. The Lebno Listchaque brand wouldn’t exist without him. And if I opposed Lebno…”

“You’d get fired?”

“I don’t think he’d do that. But I don’t think we’d be…together…anymore.”

“And you don’t want to get dumped?” Nami asked, bluntly. Miucha blinked.

“Don’t want to…? I mean, he’s Lebno Listchaque! It’s an incredible honor to be his partner. He’s a world-famous designer, and being his girlfriend means a lot in this industry.”

“But the initials on his ring didn’t seem to belong to you.” Nami showed Miucha a silver ring out of nowhere. Miucha recognized it.

“That’s—”

“I found it earlier. It’s Lebno’s, isn’t it? Will you return it for me?”

It was clear from Nami’s expression that she wanted more information about those initials. She tossed the ring to Miucha, who caught it.

“Lebno has always had multiple girlfriends. It’s not just me. I think I’m his third. But I’m fine with it. He’s Lebno Listchaque! It’s just amazing that I get to be with him, right?”

“Doesn’t it hurt?” Nami asked. Her tone was straightforward, but Miucha knew that Nami pitied her, and that recognition made her feel terrible. “Maybe this is none of my business, Miucha, but is being Lebno’s lover actually doing anything positive for you?”

“It is!” Miucha protested. “My friends are all jealous…”

“And is that worth giving up on who you really are?”

Miucha closed her hand around the ring. Her throat tensed.

“Yes,” she answered.

Someone as beautiful as you wouldn’t understand, Miucha thought. *Ordinary people need some help if they want to achieve a remarkable life. If it means losing out, being true to yourself isn’t worth it at all.*

♔

Ooh, she's so irritating, Miucha thought, in a foul mood as she worked on a piece of fine stitching for the shoes.

The things Nami had said stuck in her craw like a sewing needle, and refused to come loose. It frustrated her that she had no good answer. The more she thought about the interaction, the angrier she got.

"What makes her think she can speak that way to someone she's never met before?" she grumbled. It was infuriating to Miucha that she was at that moment working on shoes for *her*. Her first chance in ages to make a pair of fine, well-crafted shoes, and she couldn't even enjoy the process.

"'Doesn't it hurt?' she asks! She doesn't know the first thing about my life. Ugh!"

Of course it hurt. But she put up with it, because she was an adult and she had to.

It was fine and good for *Nami* to have high ideals—she'd been born pretty, had a great body, and had surely had everything in life handed to her. She'd probably been doted upon as a child, and been given everything she ever wanted. People like her had no idea about the challenges that normal people went through, the patience they had to have when times were tough. People like her foolishly thought they understood everyone's business, and spoke in meaningless platitudes.

Normal people were never allowed to return Lebno's shoes, and normal people didn't get asked to model on the runway for him. They just put up with their painful shoes as they walked between work and home. Sometimes you had to give something up to get what you wanted. Sometimes that meant making shoes you weren't proud of. Or playing nice with a lover who would never commit. Nobody had the right to criticize a person for the sacrifices they made.

I put up with so much BS over the years just to get to where I am, thought Miucha.

"Arrgh! I hate this!" she blurted out.

She needed to stay focused to finish the difficult work, but her concentration was shot. Still, she was a professional, and she

managed to get the shoes done in time.

The result: beautiful bright-red pumps with four-inch heels. Simple, square buckles in the center of each strap held the shoes on at the ankle. It was fairly commonplace, as such things went, but that classic look never went out of style, and Nami's slender ankles would show it off perfectly.

They were distinctive, haute couture heels just for Nami. Miucha had to admit she'd done a good job making them, as frustrating as it had been. She'd become accustomed to churning out pair after pair of awful, cheap shoes, and it was good to know that her skills were still intact. These shoes would hold up, no matter how much Nami ran and jumped.

"Those are some nice shoes," she muttered, tracing the beadwork with a fingertip and admiring her own craft.

These were the kind of shoes she'd gotten into this business to create. But that had been a long time ago. In just a few hours, the shoes would be Nami's to show off.



The night's event was a showcase for the new collections of many of the world's finest brands, and it was being held at a venue close to Lebno's shop.

A long runway bisected the room, on which models with backs as straight as rods passed one another, pausing every so often as they strolled to and fro. World-famous figures were among those in attendance: fashion editors, luxury-brand buyers, actresses, royalty from around the world, and chart-topping pop idols.

Among all of these glamorous celebrities was Miucha, who sat with her legs crossed, pleased with herself. If she were just another employee of the shoe company, she would've been backstage with the other staff. Instead, she was sitting with the exalted guests thanks to the very special position she occupied: Lebno's girlfriend.

She wore a fine dress and accessories rented with company money. Of course, her shoes were Lebno Listchaques. She'd gotten

a first-rate stylist to do her hair. She looked her very best, and she was sitting in the front-row seats, close enough to smell the models' perfume. It was an undeniable thrill to see luxury couture worth millions of berries pass right before her face. And she got to sit next to Lebno, a world-famous designer.

Thinking about how she must look from someone else's perspective filled her with pride and elation. Nami had no right to pity her. What did she know?

I couldn't be happier, she thought.

"I'm excited to see her come out," Lebno murmured, watching a model in a beige coat pass by.

"Hm?" Miucha responded.

"I'm talking about Nami."

The model in the beige coat vanished at the end of the runway. Lebno's gaze followed her all the way to the stage door; he must've really liked that coat.

"I'm so tired of seeing these hideous plebes wearing Lebnos. Only a small handful of true beauties like her are worthy of wearing my brand."

Miucha looked down at her own feet and thought, *What does he think of* me *wearing his shoes?*

"My shoes are dead," Lebno often complained. She couldn't count the number of times he'd said it. The more famous his brand became, the more disillusioned he became. His shoes filled the town. They were everywhere now.

"It used to be that wearing Lebno Listchaques was a sign of being part of an elite group, blessed by my forward-thinking fashion. My shoes sent the message that the person wearing them wasn't one of all the other losers," he would say. "But now everyone's wearing my shoes. Idiots who don't know the first thing about shoes are buying them up slavishly, just because of the Lebno name. It's a nightmare. No one cares about having shoes that are comfortable and excellently designed. As long as there's a Lebno logo on the bottom, they couldn't care less."

Lebno steadily lowered the quality of his shoes. Ironically, it did nothing to slow the sales. It was worth putting up with the pain to earn prestige, Lebno's fans helpfully decided, and so they kept buying expensive shoes that made their feet hurt. Lebno's name was recognized around the world, and he was constantly

putting out new styles. They were disposable shoes, meant to last for one season.

He had learned to compromise, Miucha thought. He had loosened his grip on his pride and decided to focus on business. He was even selling goods to pirates out the back door, to recoup some of the costs of his lavish fashion events. If she wanted to stay at his side, Miucha would have to do the same thing. She had forgotten her childish dream of making shoes that felt good all the time, no matter how long you wore them. Now she followed Lebno Listchaque's lead.

She looked up. The models strolling back and forth in fancy clothing had stony, lifeless expressions that they wore like armor.

In between two brands' showcases, the music faded out, and she heard a little chuckle pass Lebno's lips.

"All these houses are using their most famous models, but we're going to put them all to shame. Nami is better than any of them."

"She *is* unbelievably gorgeous," Miucha muttered. Then, realizing how grumpy she'd sounded, hastened to add, "I can't wait." She turned to face him and smiled, but his attention was glued to the runway. He wouldn't have noticed if she had gotten up and walked away.

"Lebno Listchaque!" called out the master of ceremonies.

Nami would be the first model on the runway. Miucha felt conflicted. She didn't particularly want to see Nami's face at that moment, but she also couldn't help but think about how beautifully Nami would show off those red shoes on the runway.

A classic song started playing. The round spotlight framed Nami as she walked slowly into view.

"*What*?" Lebno gasped.

Miucha held her breath. Lebno's brows were knitted in confusion. Nami was not wearing the clothes they'd fitted her for earlier in the day.

She wore a blue-green cropped tank top and jean shorts. Both were made of ordinary material and were clearly her everyday clothes. She had no makeup on, and her long hair cascaded down her back. It was an utterly careless and casual look, completely unbefitting of a fashion show—except from her ankles down, where Miucha's heels dazzled as shiny and red as candy apples.

Nami lifted her chin, glared at the crowd, and began to walk.

Tak, tak, tak—the sound of her heels cut right through the background music. She strode boldly down the runway, her long legs supported and complemented by Miucha's pumps.

"She's beautiful," Miucha murmured, without thinking.

She was just purely Nami, her gleaming copper hair and her shoulder tattoo her only accessories. Her appearance was simply representative of who she was in the world, like a tree casting its branches toward the sun, or a dazzling spiderweb glistening with the early-morning dew.

Once she reached the end of the short runway, Nami turned around. The audience didn't make a single sound. They held their breath and gazed upon Nami in her supreme confidence.

She wasn't meant to be a model, probably. Everyone's attention was drawn to *her*; no one was paying attention to her clothes or shoes. But she walked like a total natural down that runway, because her shoes were comfortable and her clothes were practical.

Miucha's hands curled into fists.

She was jealous of Nami to her very core, simply full of loathing and frustration and unbearable envy. How could anyone look so strong while dressed so plainly?

Nami finished the last few steps up the runway, then vanished to the side, leaving behind a silent and entranced audience.

I have to go to her, Miucha thought.

Miucha stood up to follow her, but immediately lost her balance.





Oh, that's right, I'm wearing our shoes tonight. Of course I can't even walk!

"What are you doing? You're such a mess," Lebno snapped, but she couldn't care less about him. Miucha removed her shoes and held them as she ran on bare feet toward the dressing room. The staffers she passed in the hallway were too busy with their own work to notice that the woman rushing past them wasn't wearing any shoes.

"Miucha."

It was Nami, standing right there in front of her. Unlike all the tense people rushing around backstage, she was totally relaxed and comfortable.

"Nami, I…" Miucha started.

"I'm sorry," Nami said with a friendly smile. "I had a change of heart right before the show and switched outfits. That dress wasn't bad, but it felt really tight. The whole point was to show off the shoes, so it was actually better this way, right?"

Of course it wasn't better, Miucha thought. But for some reason she couldn't say it. She just exhaled.

"It was kind of a surprise, actually," she said.

Nami was still wearing the same outfit. It was simple and natural and didn't rely on gimmicks to accentuate her looks, and yet she was absolutely stunning.

Belatedly, Miucha realized that it was people like Nami that she had wanted to make shoes for. She had never wanted to make shoes that *looked* beautiful but were horrible to wear. She'd kept on making shoes that she didn't like because she had convinced herself that being Lebno's girlfriend was the most important thing in her life, that as long as she had that, she could be happy. But the truth was, she'd been suffocating for ages.

None of it was Lebno's fault. It was all her own. She'd been trying to decorate herself with things that weren't of her own making. Miucha took a deep breath and made a fateful decision.

"I'm going to quit working for Lebno."

After meeting Nami, she had come to the realization that she hated this version of herself, the version who wasn't able to do what she loved. Prior to that, she had believed that it was necessary to put up with this job she hated and didn't want to do.

“I’m going to be unemployed tomorrow. And my friends won’t be impressed about how I’m going out with Lebno anymore.”

“What’s wrong with that? You don’t need their flattery. It’d be worse if you lost the strength to keep a smile on your face,” Nami said.

Is she ever frightened of anything? Miucha wondered. Nami looked into her eyes and gave her a big smile.

“As long as you’re thankful to be alive and true to yourself, all sorts of wonderful things will come to you,” Nami assured her.

“How can you be so sure?”

“Someone important taught it to me.”

“Who?” Miucha asked.

Nami didn’t answer. She just pulled on Miucha’s arm, drawing her closer, and patted her head like a child. The feeling of her gentle bodily warmth filled Miucha with sudden and unexpected relief. Tears blurred her vision.

“You’ll be fine. You don’t have to work for a first-rate brand. You don’t need to have a famous designer boyfriend. You can be happier than you are now.”

But you don’t know that, Miucha wanted to say, but the only sound she made was a sob. Nami’s hair brushed over Miucha’s cheek—a brilliant, unforgettable curtain of bright orange.

A sound came from deep in Miucha’s chest, as every towering misconception she’d built up, everything she had once believed was of value, crumbled into a satisfying pile of rubble.

Ignoring the suspicious stares of busy staffers passing them in the hallway, Miucha sobbed openly in Nami’s arms. It took an entire ten minutes for her tears to dry and for her to feel calm at last.

Feeling self-conscious, Miucha finally pulled away and sniffled. Her face was bright red. A grown woman, bawling like a child. She felt ashamed of herself.

Miucha reached into her pocket and awkwardly pulled out the key to the stockroom. She held it out to Nami, not meeting her eyes.

“I promised you. Take all the shoes you want,” she said.

“I don’t want any,” Nami said easily. “I prefer a more casual style, and I found something perfect already.”

“Huh?”

“All I want are these red heels you made for me,” Nami replied.

Then why did she do the show? Miucha wondered, gaping, as Nami strode past her and down the long hallway to the door.



No matter how much status you get from fancy shoes and famous lovers, there’s no point if all they do is hurt you. So Miucha decided that it was pointless to hold on to her role as the girlfriend of a famous designer. The day after the show, Miucha announced to Lebno that she was quitting his company. She thought he might try to convince her to stay, but Lebno easily let her go. He told her to contact personnel to wrap things up; she was only his third favorite, after all.

In one move, she lost her two sources of prestige—a job at a top-shelf brand and a romantic connection to a famous designer—but strangely, it didn’t bother her at all. In fact, she just felt relieved not to be arranging gaudy, cheaply built shoes in the storefront display. From now on, she was going to make shoes that were simple, comfortable, and long-lasting.

She would put aside the garish and unrefined baubles she’d been clinging to, and search for a new kind of fashion. The company and the man she left behind didn’t matter to her at all anymore.

But there was one thing that Miucha couldn’t figure out. After the show, all the jewelry and accessories left in the dressing room for the models to wear had gone missing. They were pillaged goods that had been purchased from a pirate fence, so there was no use reporting the theft to the police. Lebno questioned everyone who’d had access to the room, and even subjected them to body searches, but nothing was found. He’d just have to eat the loss.

Where could so much jewelry have gone? The only person they didn’t question was Nami, who had taken off in the middle of the show. But surely there was no way that someone as generous and considerate as Nami could have stolen them. The

whereabouts of those glittering stolen jewels would remain an eternal mystery.

Chapter 2

ROBIN

The Archaeologist's Unscrambled Eggs





Nico Robin leaned against the railing of the ship's deck and watched the bright trail channel they had just sailed through dwindle into the distance.

It had been weeks since she'd left Baltigo. At the next port, she would disembark and take another ship that would deliver her to the Sabaody Archipelago.

"Excuse me, Robin. Would you like some coffee?" called out Bunny Joe, a revolutionary, with a tray holding a steaming mug in his hands. He'd seen her standing alone on the deck, and thought to bring her some refreshment.

"Thank you. I would."

She reached out for the mug, and the two made eye contact. Bunny Joe startled and his muscles tensed. It had been two years since Robin had joined the Revolutionary Army, but even those who thought they had become accustomed to her found Robin's gaze alarmingly powerful at times. Her black eyes were so dark they seemed to absorb all light and sound; when they were fixed upon you, it made you feel like your very soul might be whisked away.



Her hair was as black as her eyes, which were framed by crisp double lids. The bridge of her nose was straight and proud. Altogether, her distinctive features and elegant figure and mannerisms, perfect right down to her fingertips, drew one toward the conclusion that only God could have crafted such a creature.

"Is something the matter?" Robin asked, as Bunny Joe stood there, stock-still and silent.

His eyes flickered to life, as though awakening from a dream, and he replied quickly, "No! Nothing's wrong!" then hurried back inside the ship. He was still holding the tray with the coffee he'd brought for Robin.

What was that all about? she wondered, turning back to the sea.

In this new region they'd reached, the sun seemed to sink earlier than before. The sea before them was so placid that it looked like you could walk on it, and the light of the setting sun touched down on the water like a shining bridge. With each lap of the waves, little orange reflections sparkled and danced.

In the past, she hadn't liked looking at the sea at sunset. It reminded her of the way Ohara had looked, wreathed in flames, when as a child she'd rowed her little boat between the shards of broken ice stretching across the sea, turning back again and again to watch as her homeland burned. Thinking of who and what she had left behind, engulfed in those flames that reached up to the clouds, made her little body shiver as she desperately pushed the boat onward. The way the ice had reflected the raging flames back then was very much like the light of the setting sun on the sea.

Twenty years had passed since then, but it felt like an eternity.

I'm sixteen. I'll do anything, she had said to the leaders of the criminal group she later joined, looking for a place to land. They'd taken her at her word. No matter how painful or demeaning the job, or how dangerous the mission, she'd never felt humiliated. All she needed was a place to belong. As long as she could fulfill her purpose of finding the Ponegliffs, she didn't care what happened to her along the way.

Wherever she went, the world government would sniff her out. She'd survived thus far through betrayal and letting others

bear the brunt of her infamy. But that was over now.

Robin pulled a carefully folded newspaper clipping from her shirt pocket. On it was a picture of her captain, his trademark straw hat held against his chest, observing a moment of silence.

Becoming a part of the Straw Hat Crew had helped Robin realize something: she'd lived on betrayal for twenty years because she'd never had anything to protect. When she met up with the companions that she would never, ever betray, she'd decided to give up on her dream for the first time in her life. She wanted them to survive, even if it meant setting the Ponegliffs aside, and even if it meant that the weapons of the past were brought back to threaten the balance of the world. Now she understood the final motivations of her mother and Saul almost painfully well.

"Robin," said a calm, deep voice behind her. She turned around to see Sabo, wearing a dark-green apron over a plain white shirt, standing at the door to the deck. Hack was behind him.

The second-in-command of the Revolutionary Army…wearing an apron? she thought.

When he noticed the look on her face, Sabo pulled at the strap over his shoulder. "Oh, this? I'm on cooking duty today. Anyway, come with me, Robin. There's something you can help me with."



Sabo took her to the cargo hold, in the very deepest part of the ship. The majority of the weight they carried there consisted of massive stones, but there were also old books and glass items. Everything was dusty, and the whole place had the scent of earth about it.

Koala sat at a desk in the corner of the room, an open book before her. She was grunting and groaning over it, but sat up straight when she noticed Robin, and shot a look at Sabo and Hack.

"Ugh! No, Sabo! And Hack, too! I told you not to tell Robin about this," Koala cried out.

“But you know this is beyond your understanding, Koala,” Sabo responded.

“You could stand to ask her for help. Robin’s here on this ship because she understands and sympathizes with us. She’s on our side,” Hack chimed in.

But Koala was resolute. She puffed out her cheeks and groused, “Then there’s no point! I have to figure this out myself. Also, this is my personal project. It’s not an official task that people are counting on me to do.”

“But you want to figure it out, don’t you?” Sabo asked, pulling out a stone slate from the piles of books to show to Robin. It was etched with a great number of strange symbols, which could have been either art or writing, spaced in even intervals.

“So you’re deciphering the ancient writing,” Robin deduced.

Koala nodded and looked away awkwardly. “I know that it’s an impossible task. It’s not like I’m an expert or anything.”

“Would I be correct in guessing that all of the cargo in this hold was extracted from some kind of ruin or another?” Robin asked, glancing around the room.

“We found this stuff in a crumbling ruin in a conflict zone. We thought it could very easily wind up being destroyed if the fighting went on. So we took custody of the site, and arranged to send these relics to a university that was willing to take them,” Sabo explained.

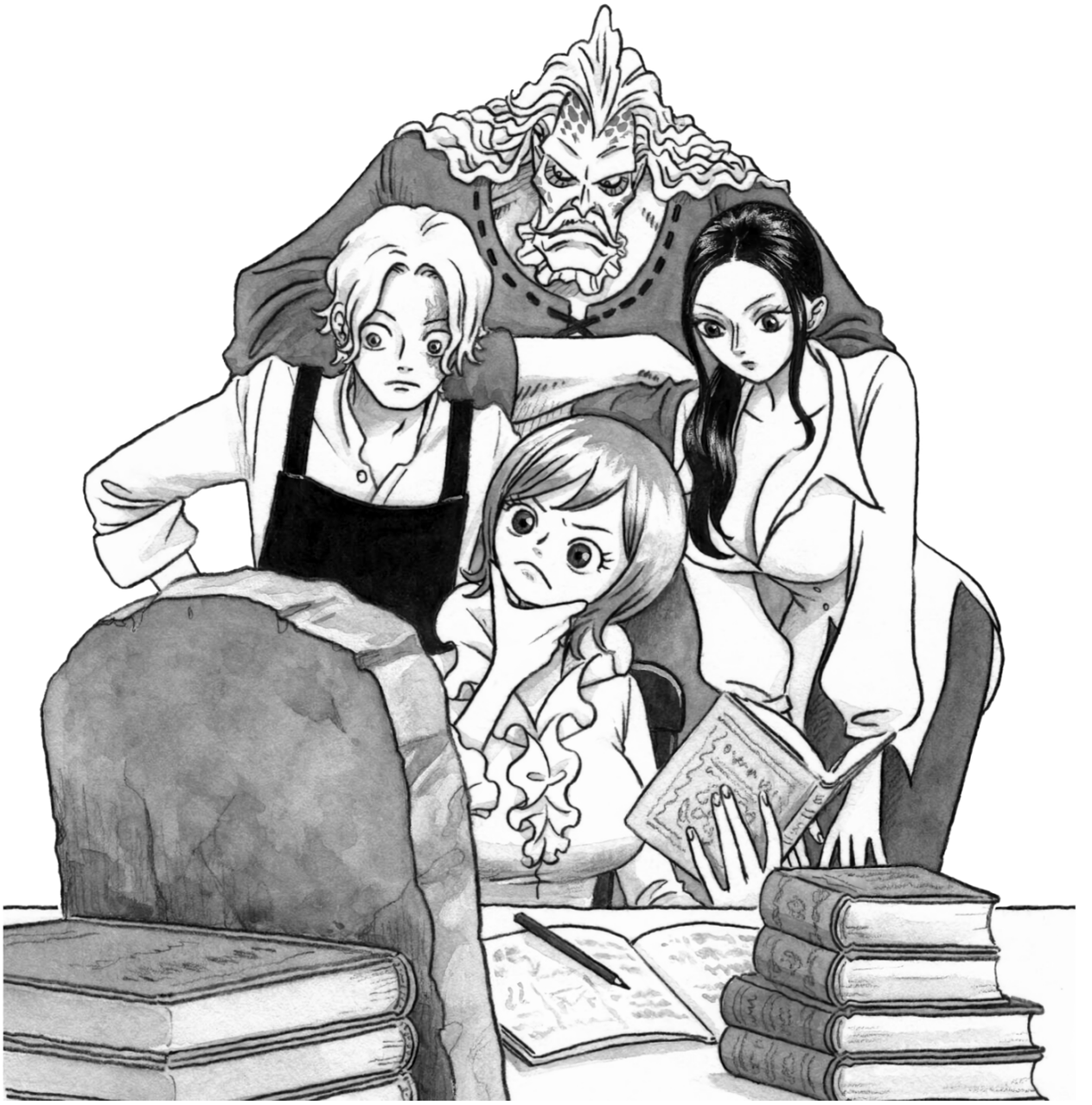
“And we’re including the texts we had at Baltigo in the batch. Better that they be used for scholarly research than remain in the Revolutionary Army’s hands,” added Hack.

“According to local legend, it was the palace ruins of the Eucaly civilization,” Koala said. “We should be arriving at the port tomorrow midday; that’s where the research institute is. In other words, I have until then to figure this out.”

Robin nodded at these explanations and ran a finger along the stone piled up in the cargo hold. The surface was coated with a fine layer of gray dust.

“I’m sorry, Robin,” Koala stammered, casting a look upward. “I know archaeologists don’t look kindly on removing articles from dig sites. Not everyone in the organization was in favor of taking them out of the ground. But—”

“No,” Robin said firmly, cutting her off. “The worst thing that could have happened would have been for the ruins to be destroyed by those who don’t understand their value, and for historical treasures to be lost forever. Your decision guaranteed that these irreplaceable relics would escape the fires of war. Plus…”



She was looking down at the notes on the desk. They were jammed tight with Koala’s handwriting, which Robin had grown very familiar with over the past two years. She had copied down the ancient writing, and it was clear from the nature of the

scribbles that she had been trying every method she could think of to decipher it.

“As an archaeologist, I find it very heartening that you’re so eager to hear the voices of history,” she finished, beaming. Her smile caused Koala to grin ear to ear and laugh sheepishly. Even Sabo and Hack found their expressions softening into smiles.

“Do you know anything about the Eucaly civilization, Robin?” Hack asked.

Robin shook her head. “I’m afraid that I’m mainly familiar with the name,” she said.

It was a small city-state that had existed a few centuries ago, she recalled. The city-state had formed as the result of friction between two major nations surrounding it, and had managed to maintain independence despite several attempted invasions, until it was ultimately absorbed by a neighboring country and vanished. Or so it was said—nothing certain was known about it. Now the former region of the Eucaly was a conflict zone, meaning that research couldn’t be conducted on its historical sites. Knowledge of it was surely fading, even among archaeologists.

“There’s one thing I can say for certain, however,” Robin remarked. “This isn’t a stone slate, but fired clay.”

“What? Really?” Koala said, looking at the slab with wide eyes.

Over time, writing carved into soft clay would dry out and fade away. Information that needed to be stored for a long time would’ve been carved into stone, so she had assumed this material was stone. It was certainly as hard as rock.

“You said that it was excavated from the site of a palace. I think there was likely a fire at the castle. The clay slabs would have been baked in the heat until they turned to ceramic, and they remained intact in the ground until today.”

She traced the surface of the tablet with her long finger. It was wonderfully preserved, a result of being stored underground and not exposed to the air.

“In any case, without any clues it’s going to be difficult to crack this one.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Koala agreed, gloomily. She picked up her notes from the desk. “At first I pored through all of the texts, looking for anything that seemed similar. You never

know; maybe it could help, right? But I didn't find anything, so I tried the next best method."

"You tried examining each distinct figure, trying to guess its meaning from the shape."

"Right. That didn't work at all. The only one I'm sure about is this one."

Koala pointed at a single character right around the center of the tablet:



"I think this character represents a melting snowman reaching out with both arms to plead for help! So maybe this word means 'help,' or perhaps 'ask for help.' How about that?"

"Uh, are you sure?" Sabo asked, peering at the slab. "It looks to me more like a duck that got its head stuck in a hole and is kicking its legs."

"I thought it was an image of a bald mountaintop with two dead trees on the sides," Hack interjected.

Just for good measure, Robin added, "It looks like Chopper's hat to me." This last comment was too much for Koala, who groaned despairingly. Even this one character, the only one she'd felt confident about, was totally ambiguous.

She hung her head and slumped over the desk. "Ugh. I'm not getting anywhere. And I'm so curious about what it says!"

"Oh, if you just want to know what it says, I can tell you that right now," Robin offered.

Koala smacked her hands on the desk and bolted upright. "You can read this?!"

"Didn't you just say it was the first time you'd seen this writing?" Hack asked suspiciously.

"It is. But I know a number of ancient writing systems that are quite similar. I have a guess as to how the grammar works, so I think I can figure it out by instinct."

By instinct? The other three looked at each other, incredulous. How was it possible to read an ancient script you'd never seen

before *by instinct*? Even knowing the fact that Robin was a supremely talented archaeologist, it seemed improbable.

"Wait, there are similar writing systems?" Koala asked, suddenly alert.

"Yes," Robin replied. "I think they likely belong to the same language cluster. If you want me to read it, I can do that right now. Shall I?"

She looked meaningfully at Koala, who abruptly shouted, "No! Not yet. I want to see how far I can get on my own."

Robin had had a feeling she'd say that.

"In that case, may I give you just one hint?"

Sabo, Hack, and Koala all said "Hint?" as one.

"These letters aren't pictographs. They're phonetic."

Human writing systems generally fall into two categories: letters that indicate meaning, and letters that indicate only sound. The characters used in the land of Wano are an elegant type of calligraphic pictograph, in which each unique character takes the form of the thing it represents. For example, the character for "river" is three vertical lines that represent flowing water, and the character for "mountain" is steepled in the middle like a mountain.

Meanwhile, the letters of the Roman alphabet hold no intrinsic meaning. A, B, and C represent sounds used in speech, and for this reason, they are simply phonetic in nature.

It was hard to blame Koala for thinking that the Eucaly script was pictographic. At first glance, the characters seemed like they had been scribbled by a child attempting to depict some real object they were looking at. But ultimately, it was just a coincidence that they looked like images.

"Eucaly's script only represents sound," explained Robin, "So trying to guess its meaning based on how it looks will take you off track."

"Is there a shortcut, then?" Hack asked. Robin lifted a hand to her chin to consider.

"Good question. There are a variety of methods. For example, groups of words that are grammatically modified in the same way are likely to have the same vowel sound, or a similar pronunciation, prior to the modification of the word, so from there it helps to group the characters that are likely to be similar in

sound and fill a grid with both vowels and consonants. What do you say to that?"

What *could* they say?

"I haven't the slightest idea what you are talking about," Hack admitted.

"In short," Robin said, "I'm describing a method of determining the sound of each letter, one by one. If you have a sample of about a thousand patterns, you can often confirm at least one vowel."

"A thousand samples for just one?" Sabo asked, sounding exhausted.

"It seems endless," Hack grumbled.

"Yes," Robin affirmed. "It's a very tedious process."

"So then it's definitely not happening by tomorrow," said Koala, looking as disappointed as a squirrel who'd forgotten where it had buried its acorns. If it required comparing a thousand pieces of text to identify a single vowel, it would be impossible to decipher the message in a single day.

"Yes, that's right—if it were completely distinct from any other language, that is," Robin said cryptically.

Koala looked up, startled.

"The Eucaly civilization flourished just a few centuries ago. That's not enough time for the language to have become completely isolated. Also, if they were part of the World Government, they would have had some interaction with neighboring countries. It's very likely that a similar language has lasted to the present day."

"Um, so that means," Koala muttered, trying to follow what Robin was saying, "if we look for a writing system that's similar to this, and is better understood…"

"It should be easy to figure out. And as I said, I know of some systems that are similar to this one."

"Oh, I get it!" Koala said, breathing a sigh of relief. She looked at the stacks of books in the cargo hold. "And I guess some similar languages have already been deciphered, huh? Somehow I missed that, even after all the history books I looked through. I wonder why."

"Well, the reason is quite simple."

Robin’s arm grew up out of the desk so that her slender fingers could grab the corner of the clay tablet. With a heavy *thunk*, she turned it ninety degrees.

“You have it facing the wrong direction.”

“*Whaaaaaat*?!”



Robin peeked into the hold again just before dinner and found Koala frantically flipping through the piles of books. She was now quite obsessed with finding a language that resembled the Eucaly script.

Robin tried calling her to dinner, but Koala insisted that she would forgo eating in order to keep looking.

“You’ll be more efficient if you take regular breaks,” Robin reminded her.

“Thanks! I know!”

Yet even as she assented, Koala’s eyes continued to roam ceaselessly over the various texts scattered around her. Robin decided it was best not to pull her away, and quietly left the room. She understood exactly the kind of rush Koala was feeling.

When she was on Ohara, Robin had studied language with the same urgency and excitement. The first time she had deciphered an inscription, it felt like the world had opened up before her eyes. With more experience, she was able to discover the grammatical meaning of previously cryptic passages, and the sense of accomplishment she felt then was unparalleled. She could recall the intense feeling of being connected to people across time and space as vividly as if it had happened yesterday.

Figuring out ancient writing was like trying to swim the ocean in the dead of night—groping around in the dark, battling fear and the unknown, hoping that solid ground lay somewhere before you. You came up with hypotheses, tested them, failed, and tried again with that tiny bit of additional knowledge moving you forward inch by inch. The only companion you had on this lonely and perilous journey was the knowledge of your forebears.

Robin’s knowledge of archaeology was not hers alone. The scholars of Ohara and all of those who came before them were part of a single precious heritage. It was a noble tradition that made her proud to be an archaeologist.

Languages that people could no longer read or speak became ancient languages, holding their tongues, the vibrancy of their culture trapped within. But once an archaeologist discovered the method to decipher them, those languages and cultures came back to life with shocking intricacy and elegance. Records of famines, tax receipts, methods of pressing grapes for wine, poems sent to princesses in sandy deserts—you could find anything.

“I wonder how far Koala’s gotten,” Robin murmured to herself, sitting down in the mess hall. The tray before her contained mushrooms sautéed with roast pork and a side of rye bread. The mushrooms were an unfamiliar color, but they were probably a local variety that had been loaded in at their last port of call.

“Aaagh! I can’t do it anymore!” someone shouted.

She looked up to see a man on the other side of the room throwing his spoon down. He pressed his napkin to his mouth, pale and trembling. A large mound of the sautéed mushrooms sat on his plate.

“What’s wrong with him?” she wondered, picking up a slice of mushroom and bringing it to her mouth. She froze instantly; it was unbearably bitter.

The texture of the sauté was perfect. There was just enough bite left to provide a satisfying springiness. But the bitterness that was presumably a natural flavor of this mushroom made it practically inedible.

She refused to spit out her mouthful, and instead took a drink of water to help wash it down. This was surely why the man on the other side of the room had been so distressed and pale. As a matter of fact, many other diners in the mess hall seemed also to be losing the battle of the bitter mushrooms.

“What should I do with this?” she wondered, peering at the mushrooms on her plate.

They clearly weren’t rotten or damaged; they were just bitter. Food was a precious commodity on a ship at sea. She couldn’t simply waste what she’d been given just because it didn’t suit her

palate. But the bitterness was truly unbearable. What to do? She was at a loss.

Just then, Sabo and Hack sat down across from her. Hack met her eye and said gleefully, “Only Robin could handle these sautéed mushrooms with a poker face like that.”

What he said wasn’t true. She was actually suffering quite a bit on the inside.

“They’re a little sharp,” she admitted. Hack threw a look at Sabo, who was sitting next to him.

“What do you want me to say? What’s done is done,” Sabo said, glaring right back at Hack. He sighed and said, “Yes, the mushrooms are bitter. There’s nothing to be done about it.”

Sabo was still wearing the green apron. To wit, he was this evening’s cook, and the culprit who had crafted the offending dish.

For a long voyage you needed a professional cook on board, but for short trips like this, the crew often took turns cooking. Just because Sabo was the chief of staff of the Revolutionary Army didn’t mean he was exempt—if anything, he despised being given special exceptions—so he took part in the routine.

“We got these mushrooms just before we left port, didn’t we?” Robin asked, slicing hers into smaller and smaller pieces.

“Yep. They’re called Rubery Shrooms, apparently. I saw the locals eating them without batting an eye, so there’s probably some way to counteract the bitterness. But however I sliced or diced or soaked them, the flavor stayed the same. Still, you can’t waste a speck of food while out at sea, right?”

“Indeed,” she agreed. She gave up on slicing the mushrooms any smaller, and finally took another bite. The bitter taste was still shockingly strong. “You don’t have to force yourself,” Sabo said helpfully, but she managed to swallow it.

Perhaps the fact that Sabo had cooked it was a silver lining. If someone new had made those mushrooms, the crew would have revolted. But this was the work of a trusted senior officer, so they had no choice but to grin and bear it. Maybe Sabo had known this would happen and had martyred himself by accepting the role of chef of the Rubery Shrooms.

With a quiet sizzle, the oil lamp on the table went out. Sabo added more oil to the reservoir, struck a match, and relit it. The lamp cast a soft orange light on them once again.

Robin rested her spoon on the table and stared at the flame. Behind the yellowing old glass shade, the fire fed on the meager bit of oil absorbed by the wick. The flickering of the flame cast a bewitching light that suited Sabo quite nicely. The fire that had burned Ohara on that awful day had been violent and cruel—and so very, very hot—but seeing the reflection of the lamp's orange light in Sabo's eyes made Robin realize for the first time in her life that the color of fire could be comforting, too.

"Your time on this ship is coming to an end soon," Hack lamented. At the next port, Robin would be switching ships and heading for the Sabaody Archipelago.

Over the course of the evening, Robin slowly and carefully made her way through the entire portion of sautéed Rubery mushrooms, swallowing seven glasses of water to do so.



"Oh, hello." Robin was surprised to run into Sabo and Hack again outside the cargo hold. She was carrying the bread and soup that she'd saved from supper. Hack was holding cut fruit and sparkling water, while Sabo had scones and tea.

The three of them had had the same idea of bringing a snack to Koala, who was working through the dinner hour without any food. They'd run into each other with uncanny timing outside the door.

"Hey, this is perfect," said Sabo, holding out a small basket containing tea and scones to Robin. "You take this to her. If me and Hack are there, she'll refuse it to impress us."

"Indeed," Hack agreed, handing Robin the plate of fruit and water pitcher. She didn't have enough hands to hold it all, so she grew a new one.

"Are you sure you want me to go in?" she asked. Koala was clearly hesitant to ask for deciphering help from Robin, the proper archaeologist. Wouldn't it be better for Sabo and Hack to go in, given that she wouldn't be as proud around them?

But Sabo simply said, “I think it’s better this way. Thanks for doing this, Robin,” and the two of them scurried off down the hall.

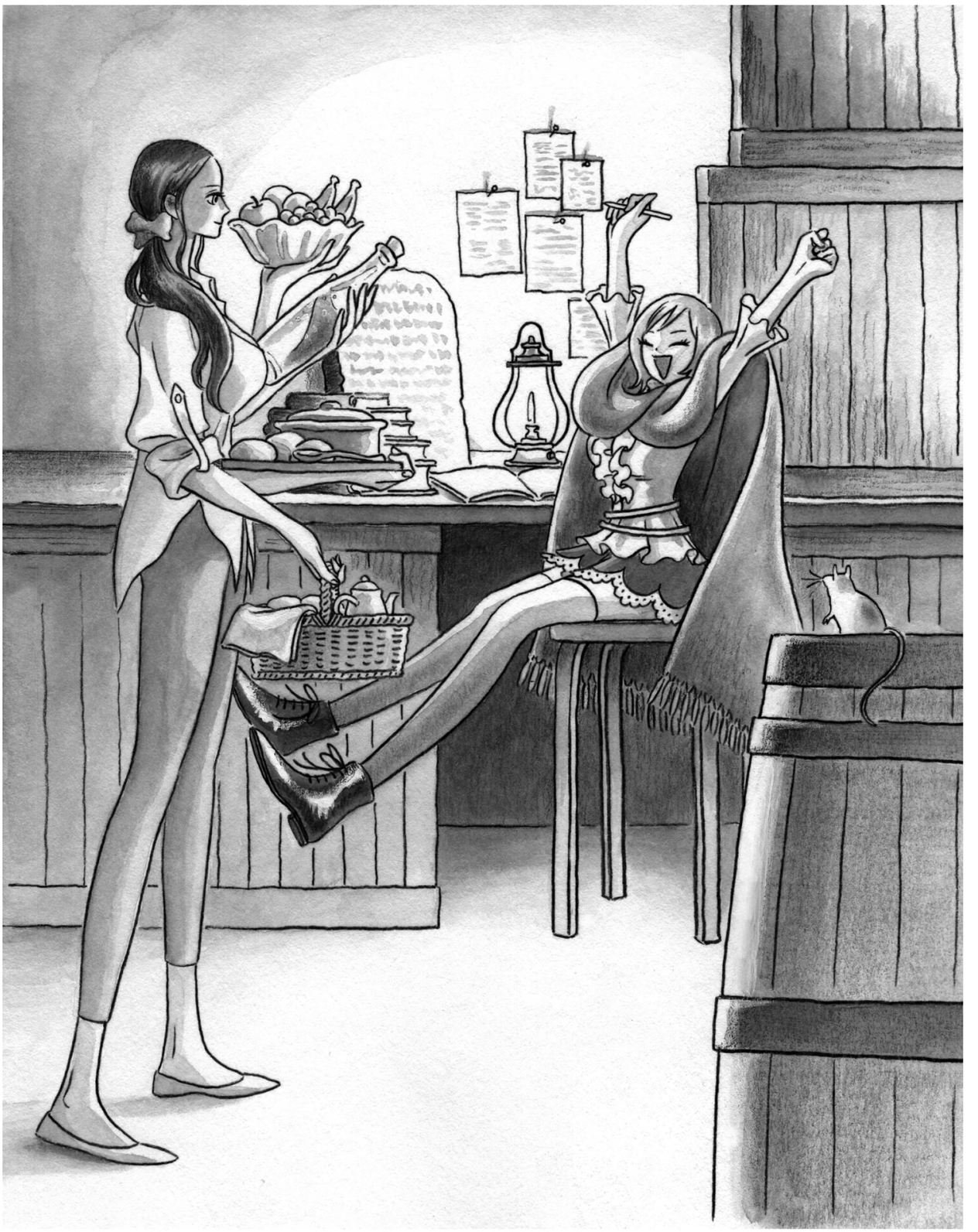
She had a tray with bread and soup, a glass bowl of fruit, a pitcher of sparkling water, scones, and a pot of black tea. It was far more than just a snack. Just when Robin went to knock on the cargo hold door, she heard a voice crying out inside.

“*Found it*!” Koala shouted, from the other side of the door. It sounded like she’d just made some progress on her task. She sounded so happy, in fact, that Robin couldn’t help but laugh out loud.

“I’m guessing that something good just happened?” she asked quietly, opening the door. A book with blue binding was open in front of Koala.

“Robin, look! I found it!” she exclaimed. “Look, right here!”

She was pointing at a block of text that did indeed look very similar to the Eucaly script. According to the caption beneath it, the language was Soncrucian. It was the first script Robin had thought of when she’d noticed that Eucaly looked familiar to her.



“I haven’t figured it out yet, but I’ve finally taken the first step forward!” Koala bubbled, brimming with delight. She seemed close to levitating off the ground.

“You worked so hard for it,” Robin said, smiling. She reached out and caressed Koala’s cheeks where bags were forming below her eyes. “I’ve brought you some food. I think now you ought to take a break.”

A sound coming from the table in the middle of the room drew Koala’s attention, and she noticed the soup, fruit, and scones that Robin had just set down.

“Oh, yay! Thank you, Robin!” She leapt up and hugged Robin, her stomach simultaneously emitting a loud and insistent growl of hunger.

Robin sat across from Koala while she carefully scooped bites of cabbage from the soup bowl. Koala, the fish-man karate assistant instructor and Revolutionary Army officer, despite her lofty titles, was just a regular girl. The way she brought a small chunk of bread up to her mouth reminded Robin of a squirrel chewing on an acorn, and it made her smile.

Koala noticed the gesture and asked, “What is it?”

“Nothing,” Robin murmured. “So why did you decide you wanted to decipher those ancient runes?”

“What? Well, I was just dusting things off before we loaded them up, and I happened to pick up this clay tablet, and…” Koala pointed at the center of the tablet, which had been shunted off to the edge of the table to make room.

“See there? You can see a spot where they made a mistake and rewrote it.”

Sure enough, there was a mark where one letter had been written incorrectly and then rubbed out. The writer could have filled in the spot with clay and rewritten it, but the scribe who had written this was clearly too lazy for that.

“Seeing this little detail made me realize that this writing didn’t just appear in the present moment. A person who actually existed wrote it. At first I was just thinking of this tablet as a precious object to be handled carefully and transported. But now…” Koala traced the tablet’s letters with her finger and exhaled.

“Whoever wrote this had information they wanted to convey enough that they went to the trouble of putting it into physical

form. Yet this clay tablet has been buried in the earth for centuries, unread by anyone. For some reason, I just wanted to read it, right away."

"Why did you feel that way?" asked Robin.

"Hmmm," Koala murmured. "I'm not sure. But it seemed painful to me that these words weren't being seen."

Robin nodded knowingly and examined the writing on the tablet. The person who had written these words was lucky—through a miraculous combination of factors, their words had survived to the present day and found Koala, just the kind of person who would fervently want to know what they said.

Even though Robin was sure that she wouldn't be able to eat it all, Koala actually finished every last bit of the food, and wasted no time in doing it.

"Whew, now I'm stuffed," she said, sounding a bit pained. Maybe it had been too much.

"I suppose you didn't need quite that much food," Robin replied.

"Maybe not. Sabo and Hack think I eat as much as they do."

"You knew it was from them?"

Koala laughed. "Of course. I saw Hack buying this fruit when we were docked, and only the person in charge of food has access to the scones. They gave it to me even though what I'm doing isn't for the benefit of the army. They're both too soft on their comrades."

Robin gave her a look and chuckled. Koala was too sharp not to notice the ways that Sabo and Hack favored her.

Having finished her meal, Koala returned to the desk. "All right, time to read!"

"You're quite close to deciphering the text at this point. Soncrucian already has a complete phoneme grid, after all," Robin pointed out.

"Huh?" Koala blinked with surprise.

Robin grabbed the book with the blue cover and flipped through it for a moment. "Ah, here we are," she said.

The page contained a table of modern writing and Soncrucian characters, as well as how to decipher them.

"Oh, wow!" Koala exclaimed, staring at the page before her.

In the chart, the character  looked very similar to  in Eucaly. It was apparently pronounced “zgu.” The Soncrucian sound was identical to the one symbolized by the Eucaly character, and the chart was close enough that you could read the two characters and their pronunciation side by side.

“Amazing. This pretty much tells you exactly how it sounds. Now I’ll just have to decipher the grammar.”

“I don’t think you even need to do that. When the Eucaly civilization was at its peak, it was already under the umbrella of the World Government.”

“Really? In that case…”

If the Eucaly were already under the government’s banner, then even if their script was different, their spoken language would have been unified with the common tongue. Of course, language evolves over time, but a gap of just a few centuries was close enough that you could get a good sense of the meaning. After all, both Robin and Koala were speaking that unified language.

Looking skeptical, Koala examined the clay tablet once more. Following the grid, she sounded out the letters one at a time.

“ must be S, and  is E, I think. So that means this is…S-E-S-A-M-E and W-H-E-A-T!”

She could read it. And it made sense, too. Kind of.

“Sesame and wheat…?” Koala was taken aback. “What could it mean? A receipt, maybe? Or a list of crops to be used in a ritual of some kind?”

“No, I don’t think so,” said Robin, touching the stacks of stone stored in the hold. The stones had fine white dust stuck to their surfaces.

I think I know, she thought. “See how the sand on all of these excavated pieces from the ruins is white? Lands where there’s a lot of limestone in the soil can’t support tall trees. So a large structure like a palace would have been built with stone rather than wood.”

“I see,” Koala murmured, then looked up. “Huh? But these clay tablets hardened when there was a fire at the palace…”

“Right,” Robin continued. “And it’s hard to imagine a palace of stone burning for long. If the temperature of the fire was hot enough to bake this clay, the tablet must have been somewhere very close to its source. For instance, say, in a kitchen.”

Koala blinked rapidly. She looked back and forth between the language grid and the tablet. “Are you saying that this is a cookbook?”



Breakfast the following morning was a raucous affair.

“I’ll have seconds, Koala!” requested an eager voice.

“Me, too!” called out a second.

“Wait, wait! Not so fast!”

A huge line of people waited for Koala to ladle out more soup from a large pot on the stove. Hack was on baking duty, wearing an oven mitt that was too cutesy by far for his imposing looks. He pulled a metal tray from the oven and hurriedly handed out fresh pieces of toast to those in line. People packed the cramped mess hall; even Dragon, who had holed up in his chamber for the last few days, waited in line with an empty cup in his hand.

Koala’s Rubery mushroom and egg soup was a massive hit.

The mushrooms’ bitter taste, so prominent in the previous night’s sauté, was completely gone, and all agreed that they would happily eat multiple servings of the mushroom soup.

“Keep toasting that bread, Hack! It’s perfect with the soup,” said Koala.

The revolutionaries, who were normally so stoic and hardworking, were at ease this morning, basking in the comforting glow of the warm, delicious meal.

“The flavor of the mushrooms is completely different. How did you cook them, Koala?” asked Bunny Joe.

She gave him a mischievous grin.

“It’s a trade secret!”

From the kitchen, Robin observed Koala’s frantic service with a smile on her lips. As it happened, that clay tablet had contained a recipe for soup. It was the Eucaly palace specialty, an egg soup with plenty of Rubery Shrooms. The mushrooms were naturally very bitter—to the point that they could numb your tongue if eaten raw—but after being boiled for two hours, they became

mild and rich. Koala had been skeptical as she followed the recipe's steps, but her culinary success was obvious from the reaction in the mess hall.



Without realizing it, Koala had learned a local recipe from the Eucaly civilization. It had crossed hundreds of years to get here.

One of the diners in the hall, feeling blissful after his meal, took his dish back to the kitchen. When he saw Robin at the washing station, he remarked, "You're doing the dishes again, Robin? Stop it right now! We'll get a scolding if we let you."

"Just give that to me."

She grew a hand from the shelf nearest to where the man was standing and snatched the dish from him, then grew more limbs as necessary to relay it to the sink.

Even Sabo's name was included on the ship's chore list, but Nico Robin's was excluded. She had asked to be included, but Sabo had steadfastly refused, claiming that they couldn't have Robin, "the Light of the Revolution," doing menial tasks. But she didn't like the idea of being the only one on the ship without work. Since they wouldn't assign her a duty, she had taken matters into her own hands.

Robin's ability to grow hands from any surface made her extremely efficient at chores. Cleaning high places was a cinch for her, and she could get the dishes washed very quickly. The cook on the *Thousand Sunny* absolutely refused to allow any women to wash dishes, so it was a talent that she rarely got to exercise.

"I'll help," Sabo said, walking into the kitchen.

“I’m fine. I’ve already got all the hands I need,” Robin replied.

“But you’ll get tired. They’re still all *your* hands,” he retorted. Refusing to take no for an answer, Sabo grabbed a cloth from one of Robin’s many hands and began to wipe the wet plates and cups.

“Thank you,” she said.

The pair split the task. When she stopped to consider it, Robin thought that washing dishes next to the second-in-command of the Revolutionary Army was quite a strange and remarkable experience. She wondered if Sabo had really come into the kitchen to help her with dishes. Maybe he had something else to say to her, and had tracked her down here in order to relay the message.

He put some dry plates back on the shelf and cast a baleful eye at the mess hall. “They could barely gag down the sauté I worked so hard on last night,” he said sarcastically.

Robin chuckled softly. “It didn’t taste very good.”

“Fair.”

It wasn’t Sabo’s fault that the dish had been spectacularly bitter. Without a recipe, who would have guessed that if you boiled the mushrooms for two hours the bitterness went away?

Sabo closed the door to the cupboard with an audible thump.

“Listen,” he started. “It’s about Luffy…”

So that’s what he wants to talk about, Robin thought. She turned to look at Sabo, though she kept scrubbing plates in the sudsy water.

“I know,” she said. “I won’t tell him that I met you here.”

“Er, it’s not that.”

Luffy didn’t know that Sabo was still alive. She thought perhaps he would demand her silence. Instead, Sabo looked her in the eyes and said gravely, “I’m entrusting him to you.”

She stopped scrubbing. “Are you sure that’s what you want?”

Surely he would rather protect Luffy himself, rather than having someone else do it. Robin would be boarding another ship at the next port, but if Sabo went with her, he could meet up with Luffy at the Sabaody Archipelago too.

“I’m a revolutionary and he’s a pirate,” said Sabo. “It doesn’t make sense for us to travel on the same ship when we have different goals. As long as we’re both at sea, we’ll meet again someday, guaranteed. I’m fine waiting until then.”

Despite what he said, it was obvious that Sabo was eager to see Luffy again, as soon as possible. He had a problem with always looking out for others—he did it compulsively.

"Just watch out for Luffy, okay?" he pleaded. "I know he's a handful."

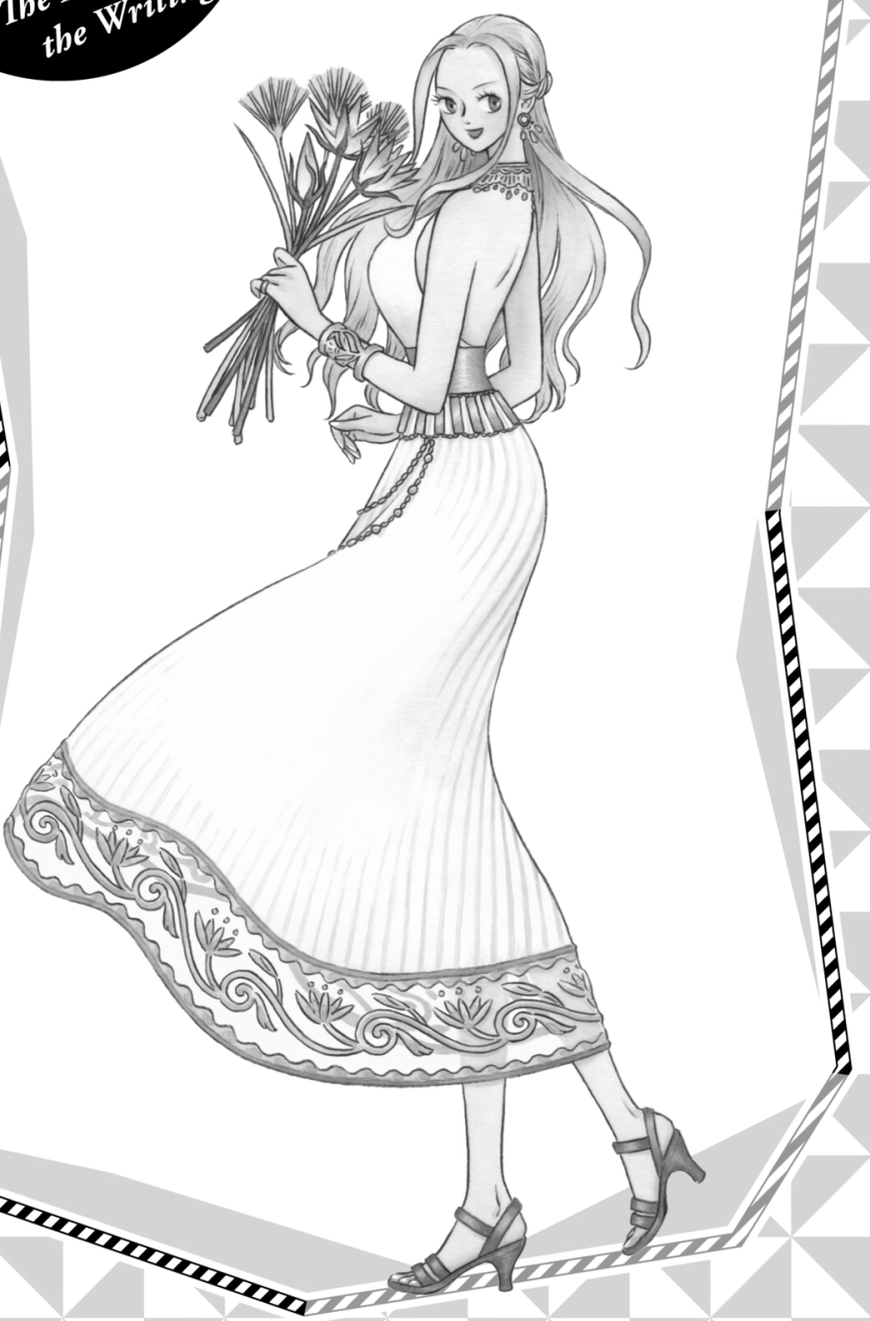
"I will," Robin said, casting a glance out the kitchen window. The slice of sea she could see from there was both narrow and endless, stretching into oblivion.

At the next port, she would part ways with the Revolutionary Army and continue on to Sabaody, until she found the place where she truly belonged, after the journey of a lifetime. Her reunion with the Straw Hat Crew was close at hand.

Chapter 3

VIVI

The Blue Rose and the Writingale





Vivi's bedchamber in the palace was so simple and unadorned you would never have guessed it belonged to a princess. She had an ordinary bed with no canopy over it and plain linen curtains on the windows. About the only decoration she had was a small bouquet of fresh flowers in a vase. There were no massive chandeliers or deluxe wardrobes, as you'd expect in a princess's chambers, and yet this room was consistently the most glamorous and lively room in the palace, for the simple reason that Vivi was there.

Terracotta, the palace steward, had asked a maid to bring up a pot of tea, but the maid hesitated outside the room for a moment, peering through a crack in the door. She could see Vivi sitting at her desk, her hair falling down her back, the dark blue of a deep spring on a moonlit night. Her hair naturally curled at the ends and fluttered softly in the breeze from the window. From her slender shoulders to her tiny waist, every part of her figure was fragile and feminine.

"Princess, I've brought your tea," the maid said from the hallway. Vivi spun around, turning her eyes—which were as round and black as an ermine's—toward the maid.

"Thank you," she said. "Would you set it down over there?"

The maid bowed and set the teapot down on the table Vivi had indicated. She realized the scent of the tea wafting up through the tea cozy was the same type of tea she herself always drank. Vivi was royalty, and one would have expected she'd drink fancier stuff, but like her father, this princess refused to pamper or indulge herself.

Her desk was covered with back issues of a periodical, the *World Economic News*, and old history books. She was surely studying up on world history and politics for the upcoming Reverie. Alabasta's peace and prosperity were vitally connected to Princess Vivi's ability to forge constructive ties with the leaders of

other countries. Despite her frail and delicate appearance, her love for her kingdom was fierce and powerful.

In truth, Vivi's mind was almost constantly occupied by thoughts about her homeland; she rarely focused on anything else. Born into a royal family, she could easily have afforded to relax and distract herself with luxuries from time to time instead. *That's what* I *would do, anyway,* the maid thought wryly, silently withdrawing toward the door.

She was about to leave the room when she stopped for a moment. On the wall next to the door, there was a strange new painting she hadn't seen before.

What is that? she wondered.

"Bad" didn't even begin to describe it. The picture looked like a collection of camel eyelashes arranged in a haphazard mess. It was impossible to know what it was supposed to depict.

"Your Highness, what is this?" the maid asked.

Vivi turned around, delighted. "Oh, that? It's a portrait of me. One of the children in town drew it for me."

"Huh?" The maid was quizzical. *That's supposed to be a face?!*

Now that she looked at it again, the wobbly outline did seem to just barely represent a human face. The two warped circles were probably eyes. The curves growing out of the shoulders kind of looked like ears... Or were they arms? Or legs?

"Isn't it wonderful?" Vivi enthused. "I find it quite avant-garde."

"Yes, quite..." The maid leaned closer, trying to get a better look at it. *Hmmm. Maybe Karoo would have done a better job.*





Click.

The sound of a clock hand progressing forward vibrated beneath Koza's feet, followed by three deafening bells.

"Three o'clock," he muttered, leaning on the railing of the observation deck.

With the exception of the palace, this little tower atop the domed roof of the clock tower was the highest point in the city. The clock tower loomed over the city; below, Koza could see the

sun-dried brick buildings of Alubarna's packed streets crowded shoulder to shoulder.

Here and there in the sandy city, people hurried about their business. Old women kneaded dough for *kunafa* at their street stalls, young men pulled carts piled high with vegetables, and children ran from alley to alley with dogs nipping at their heels. Traders and merchants lined the market, their colorful carpets and textiles forming a mosaic on the ground. It was another peaceful day in the kingdom.

Beneath Koza's feet, the clock hand ticked forward again: It was now 3:01. The door behind him flew open suddenly and hit his back.

"Whoa! You startled me," Koza said, turning around.

A little boy wearing a wrap around his head stared up at him.

"What are you doing here, Koza? This place is off-limits!" the boy exclaimed.

"I could ask the same of you, Fata," Koza replied. "How did you get up here?"

"The door was unlocked," Fata pouted, then jabbed a finger at Koza. "But *you* were already here!"

"*I'm* allowed," Koza retorted.

"No fair! Grown-ups always say that!" the boy wailed. Koza noticed that his knees were dark and dusty—he must have crawled in through a vent.



Fata was the son of a family that ran a pub Koza often visited. He was a little scamp who'd just had his eighth birthday the month prior. He often played pranks on the customers at the bar, and got pounded by his father in exchange for his mischief. When Koza's father Toh-toh visited from Yuba, he said, "Fata is just like you were at that age," much to Koza's indignation.

"What are you doing up here all alone?" Koza demanded.

"I like to draw. You can see all of Alubarna from up here."

Fata pulled a crumpled-up piece of paper from his pocket. It was papyrus, a material made from pressed and woven reeds. Paper made from wood was a rarity in arid Alabasta, so to write or draw, people wrote on papyrus with pens made from whittled hawk feathers.

"But you don't *have* to come up here to draw."

“So? I get more inspiration when I’m up high,” Fata shot back cheekily, and plopped down on the floor. He took an ink bottle from his pocket and pulled out the stopper. After sticking the end of his quill pen into the ink, he started drawing on the papyrus without any preparation.

“I’m telling you, you’re not supposed to be up here,” Koza grumbled, casting a glance at the city of Alubarna below.

The truth was that he couldn’t scold Fata that harshly. When he was a boy, Koza had declared this spot the secret base of the Sand-Sand Band, and had snuck up here with his friends on many occasions. What was it about forbidden places that made them so tempting to infiltrate?

A lukewarm breeze from below ruffled his hair. Koza wiped a thin layer of sand from his glasses and squinted toward the distance, past the city walls. People thought of deserts as being flat and uniform, but the sand took on many colors and patterns depending on the angle of the light; the shadows behind the rocks were faded reddish brown, the sun was white, and the tops of the dunes were a pale orange while the feet were darker. Crossing this spectrum of color was a trail of footprints from a caravan of camels making their way across the sand.

In Alabasta, time moved like sand, trickling slowly through one’s fingers. At the moment, Koza’s job was protecting this sense of peace. Princess Vivi would momentarily be leaving with King Cobra for Marijoa. Igaram, Chaka, and Pell would accompany them. While they were gone, Koza would remain behind to keep Alabasta safe.

It wouldn’t just be Koza, of course. Backing him up was the royal army, and his old companions from the Rebel Army. Still, protecting an entire nation was a considerable task—a burden that Vivi and Cobra constantly shouldered.

“Hey,” Fata said from the floor. “You’re pretty cool, Koza.”

“Huh?” Koza grunted.

“Everyone loves you,” the boy replied simply.

“What is this about?” Koza frowned, suspicious. Fata peered curiously directly into his eyes.

“Have you ever loved anyone?” he asked.

After a silence that lasted most of a minute, Koza finally croaked, “That’s a good question.”

What does he mean by that? Love? What a question, Koza thought.

Fata let out a dramatic sigh, then cast his gaze on the palace that loomed beyond the distant plaza.

“For the first time in my life,” he said, “I’ve fallen in love with a woman, it seems.”

After an even longer silence, Koza simply said, “Oh.”

At the age of eight, he already had a crush. Who could it be? Salma, the girl who worked at the flower shop? She was Fata’s age. Or maybe it was Jasmine, the inn-keeper’s daughter.

“It’s a love fraught with challenges,” Fata opined. “She’s a beautiful flower beyond my reach.”

“Oh, so it’s Vivi,” Koza guessed.

“How did you know?!”

If a person spoke about an out-of-reach flower in Alabasta, it was obvious they were talking about the princess. Unlike most people, however, Koza knew the princess quite well. They’d played together as young children.

“You must swear absolute secrecy,” Fata demanded.

“Who would I tell?”

“I don’t know! Just promise me!”

“Fine, fine. But why Vivi?” Koza asked. “She’s a princess.”

Fata looked at the ground bashfully and murmured, “Many reasons…”

“Like what?”

“Last week,” the boy replied, “I was sitting down in the plaza and drawing a picture of Princess Vivi. I was looking at a picture of her in the newspaper. You know how I’m really good at drawing, right?”

This was not quite true. Koza glanced down at the papyrus held between Fata’s hands and saw a series of blobs and scribbles. Whatever he was drawing, it wasn’t good.

“It was the best drawing I’ve ever made,” Fata went on. “I was really happy about it, and then the real Princess Vivi walked by. She was with Terracotta. Amazing coincidence, right? So I ran after her and gave Vivi the drawing. She was really happy about it. Ever since, I can’t get that smile out of my head. Whether my eyes are open or closed, she’s all I can think about. Remembering her smile

makes my heart feel like it's about to burst. It goes *boom-boom-boom*... Is that love, Koza?"

Why are you asking me*?* he thought. Unable to come up with any wise advice for the young boy, Koza pretended to be distracted by a passing bird. Setting aside the question of what love was, Fata faced some considerable obstacles: Vivi was *much* older than he was, and she was also a princess. But to Koza, claiming age or status as an impediment to love felt uncalled-for, somehow.

Fata went on, "So I was thinking, what does Princess Vivi like? Alabasta. So I decided to draw a picture of Alubarna and give it to her next."

"You'd better do it quickly, then," Koza muttered. A second bird joined the first he was observing. "Vivi's leaving for Marijoa soon."

"What?!" Fata was shocked.

The upcoming Reverie had been all over the papers for ages, but Fata clearly hadn't been paying attention. He hopped to his feet and grabbed Koza, looking panicked.

"What's Marijoa?! Where is that? Is it far?!"

"It is," Koza responded truthfully.

The boy's face visibly paled.

"Oh no. I shouldn't be sitting around, procrastinating on this drawing."

"It's not like you'll be separated for life," Koza reminded him. "Once the Reverie is over, she'll be coming right back."

"But it hurts not to be able to see her. What do you think I should do, Koza?!"

"Just calm down. You can't stop her from going to the Reverie," Koza said flatly.

Fata gave him a sidelong look. "I'm guessing you've never loved anyone, then. If you're really in love, you can't just sit still. I have to do something to tell Princess Vivi I love her, before she leaves for that...Verevie thing."

"Well then, you'd better do it," Koza advised.

"But I don't know what to do!" Fata snapped, clinging to Koza's trousers. "Help me think of something. Like, maybe there's some way I can meet with Princess Vivi."

"I dunno," Koza replied. "Maybe just keep hanging around here and you'll run into her again."

“Just hoping for something isn’t a real plan,” said Fata. “Oh! I know! Could I sneak into her bedroom in the middle of the night?”

“Chaka and Pell would toss you right out of the palace, you idiot,” Koza said.

“Then what should I do?!”

How should I know? thought Koza. “Write her a letter or something,” he suggested. But Fata did not seem convinced.

“That won’t work. She’s not going to read it. Letters arrive at the palace every day from countries all over the world. I bet she even gets proposals from suitors trying to win her hand. My letter would get buried in all that.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” Koza said with annoyance. For all of Fata’s high-minded rhetoric about love, he didn’t know the first thing about Vivi. “She’ll make sure to read it.”

Koza knew from experience that Vivi didn’t ignore even the smallest of voices. Sadly, he couldn’t claim the same attribute: Two years ago, when Vivi had tried to shout to him over the rumbling of cannons and smoke as the Rebel Army invaded Alubarna, Koza hadn’t heard her.

If the situation had been reversed, Vivi would have stopped and listened. Vivi always heard and paid attention, no matter how quiet the voice was. She faced every problem that arose, whether it was a minor matter or something big that required help from others, and she did so with the utmost sincerity. She’d been like that ever since they were kids.

“Really?” Fata seemed hopeful again. “Would the princess really read my letter?”

“Trust me, she will.”

Fata was dubious, but with Koza’s encouragement, he turned his attention back to the papyrus on the floor. He’d already drawn the city (supposedly), but there was plenty of space left to write a message as well.

The boy dipped his quill into the ink, then traced his chin with the soft end of the feather thoughtfully. He gazed into the distance, sighed heavily, and murmured, “Love is tough.”

Good luck with that, kid, Koza thought.

With much grunting and hemming and hawing, Fata finished his letter fifteen minutes later.

"Read it, Koza," he demanded, holding the letter out.

"Why would you want me to read that?" Koza asked incredulously.

"I need an adult opinion!"

He's a demanding kid, Koza grumbled to himself, and took the sheet of papyrus from the boy. The letters were rounded and lopsided on the rough surface.

To my beautiful blue rose... The first line sent Koza into a coughing fit.

"What's this 'blue rose' business?" he asked.

"It's Princess Vivi. I've only seen roses in books, but they're really beautiful, right?"

Koza had never seen a rose in person, either. Delicate flowers didn't grow in Alabasta's harsh climate. He didn't think that sounded like Vivi. If anything, she was more like a cactus flower, blooming proud and strong with minimal sustenance.

"Hey, what do you think? Does it truly express my feelings?" the boy asked hopefully. His gaze was piercing. Koza mumbled and glanced down at the rest of the letter.

Princess Vivi, when I think of you, my heart won't stop pounding. You are my oasis. It seems I have fallen in love with you... And so on and so forth.

"Yeah, it seems fine," Koza muttered, and held the letter out for the boy to take, just as a gust of wind blew up. It ripped the papyrus right out of his outstretched hand.

"Ah!" Koza grunted. He lunged for it, but it was already too late. The letter zigzagged in the wind and then started to flutter slowly down toward the plaza.

"My letter!" screamed Fata, reaching over the railing. Koza grabbed him by the back of his collar before he could fall, then tucked him under his arm and rushed for the ground level as quickly as he could.

I can't let anyone else pick up that letter, he thought with a sudden urgency. *Gotta get there first!*

He bounded down the shaded spiral steps, skipping three at a time, and launched down the last eight all at once. The momentum of his heavy landing carried him through the double

wooden doors and out into the plaza. Unfortunately, he was too late.

A crowd had gathered in the plaza, and they were passing around Fata's love letter as though it were a breaking news report.



"*Mmmm*!" Vivi stretched and closed the half-read book in her hands. The clock told her she'd been studying for several hours now. It was a good time to take a break and open up the windows for some fresh air. But when she did so, the breeze was so lovely that it sapped any inclination she had to get back to work.

She'd been inside so much lately. It would be nice to get outside and see the people of Alabasta again. *Maybe I should go for a walk in the city,* she thought.



Koza stared at the crowd in the plaza with shock.

"Who could have written such a letter? It looks like a child's handwriting," someone wondered.

"Well, I can't blame them for falling in love with Princess Vivi. She's a lovely woman in every way," said another.

"'When I think of you, my heart won't stop pounding.' How romantic!"

"We need to give this back to the person who wrote it. I'm sure they're looking for it now."

The people looking for the letter writer had good intentions, but for Fata, this was a living hell. The secret love he'd been nurturing in his heart was now on embarrassing display for all to read.

"What are you gonna do, Koza?" Fata whispered, grabbing at Koza with tears in his eyes. "You have to fix this! It's your fault!"

"*My* fault?!"

“You let my letter fly away!”

He was right; Koza couldn’t argue with that. Just as Fata said, he’d let it slip from his fingers. So, how to fix it? He slowed his breath and folded his arms to think. Fortunately, the boy hadn’t signed his name on the letter. If he could just retrieve it without any fuss, he could preserve Fata’s honor.

“Koza! Come quick, there’s something going on!” exclaimed a well-built woman who had noticed him standing there. It was Mari the carpet seller, who loved to chat. Fata quickly hid behind Koza’s legs.

Mari continued, “A love letter just fell into the plaza! Can you believe it? And it’s addressed to Princess Vivi!”

Her eyes were sparkling with delight. “You know Her Highness, don’t you, Koza? Who do you think wrote this?”

“I-I don’t know, but whoever it was, they probably did it as a joke—”

“Not at all! There’s real passion in these words!” Mari said, with an overabundance of confidence. Behind her, the letter was being passed from hand to hand. Members of the crowd were examining the handwriting and the grammar in an attempt to identify the writer.

“It could be someone who works at the palace,” one of them speculated. “Pell and Chaka are both bachelors. You can’t rule them out!”

“Don’t be silly,” someone responded. “No adult writes like this. It’s obviously a child.”

“Probably one who lives around here,” the speculation continued. “What if it’s Fata?”

The mention of his name caused Fata to jump in alarm. He pulled his hands into the ends of his sleeves to hide the ink stains on his fingers.

Koza grimaced and scanned the gathering crowd. How could he get that letter back?

“I know! Let’s post the letter up on display and ask anyone who comes by to see if they recognize the writing!” proposed Mari, much to Koza’s indignation.

“No, that’s really not neces—” he started.

“*I* think it’s a great idea. Everyone will be able to see it here!” someone exclaimed, drowning out Koza’s attempt to dissuade

Mari.

It was too late. Another bystander chimed in, “So it’s a plan. Let’s post it publicly. I’m sure whoever lost it really wants it back.”

“We’ll make signs so that it’s highly visible,” another voiced piped up. “They’ll say, ‘Over here to see a love letter to Princess Vivi that someone lost!’”

“Kozaaaa,” Fata whined, gripping Koza’s calves with hands like pincers. “I’m so embarrassed, I’ll have to move away. *Do* something!”

What can I do? Koza thought frantically. *How can I fix this?* He looked around the plaza desperately. If he didn’t stop them somehow, these well-meaning townspeople were going to carry out their ill-considered plan. The letter would be displayed in the most public place in Alubarna, and it would only be a matter of time until someone realized that Fata was the one who wrote it.

“I wonder who could have done it,” a bystander puzzled. “Who would write this letter?”

“I-it…it was *me*!” Koza shouted in desperation.

The plaza became deathly silent. Curious gazes from the crowd were all focused on him. Koza swallowed hard. He slowly made his way to the center of the plaza. Fata was clinging to his pants, so the boy came along too, as an appendage.

Mari acted as the representative of the crowd, inquiring, “Koza, *you’re* the one who wrote that letter?”

It wasn’t me, he wanted to say, but the words stuck in his throat. Instead, he glanced down and saw Fata’s teary, pleading eyes.

Koza bit his lip. *Don’t look at me like that!* he thought silently. *I’ll handle this.*

“That’s right,” he said out loud. “*I* wrote it.”

Mari gasped. The crowd went still again. As the message slowly sank in, people started to understand the implications and broke out in shrieks and shouts.

“*Koza*?!” they called out.

“You wrote a *love letter*?!” they screamed.

“To *Princess Vivi*?!” they persisted.

As the onetime leader of the Rebel Army, Koza was a celebrity in Alabasta. He had conveyed this celebrity into a position of responsibility, leading the process of rebuilding the city after the

war. In recognition of his contributions and talent, the king had designated him minister of the environment. For such a person to be writing love letters to the beautiful and beloved princess of the realm would be a matter of great interest to all Alabastans.

Within moments, he was trapped in a storm of rapid-fire questions.

“Ahhh, yes, you practically grew up with her, didn’t you? Did you always love her? Or did your friendship more recently grow into romance?”

“Do Farafra and your old Sand-Sand Band comrades know?”

“When will you give her this letter? Can you do it on your own? Shall I go with you?”

“Er…no thank you,” he said, rolling his eyes and awkwardly avoiding their gazes. Mari clapped a hand on his shoulder and beamed at him.

“I’m amazed,” she crowed. “To think that *you*, of all people, are in love with the princess.”

“It’s not what you think!” he shouted reactively. She blanched.

“What?” she said curiously. “You’re not?”

“I-I mean… I’m not *not*…”

He didn’t even know what he was saying anymore. He wanted to simply turn away from all this and flee. Exhausted, Koza turned to the man holding the letter.

“At any rate, you heard what I said,” Koza reminded him, “so I’ll take that back. It’s very important to me.”

“Oh… Er, right,” the man said. “Sorry about the fuss…”

“It’s fine. It’s my fault for losing my grip on it,” he said lifelessly, and snatched the letter back.

Ugh. It felt like he had just made things worse. But at least he’d gotten Fata’s letter back. Case closed. Time to move on from this and forget it ever happened.

Recovering his poise, Koza turned to address the crowd of curious onlookers.

“I want you all to forget you ever saw this letter. Don’t tell anyone else about it. Most importantly, do *not* tell Princess Vivi.”

“What’s that about Vivi?” said the king.



Please let me have misheard that, Koza prayed silently, then turned to catch sight of the figure of King Cobra as he strolled slowly into the plaza. Chaka and Pell were at his side.

Nope, he thought. *This gets worse.* “K-King Cobra!” he said. “I, um…”



“Your Majesty! Koza wrote a love letter! To Princess Vivi!” Mari exclaimed jubilantly, cutting him off.

“What’s that?” the king asked. “Koza?”

“To Princess Vivi?” Chaka startled.

“No!” Pell exclaimed.

Chaka and Pell were both taken aback. They seemed to think it was impossible.

Cobra, meanwhile, wore a terrifyingly blank expression. He simply said, “I see,” without so much as a raised eyebrow, then demanded quietly, “Show me.”

A shiver ran up Koza’s spine. How could the man’s tone of voice be so gentle and calm, and at the same time so steely and

commanding? Koza reflexively handed over the letter that he'd just gone to such humiliating extremes to retrieve. Beads of cold sweat ran down the back of his neck. King Cobra took the letter and began to read it in silence.

Chaka and Pell, reading over the king's shoulder, looked at one another and murmured together, "Blue rose!"

King Cobra's expression did not change. He scanned the letter with a sternness that was rare for him, even with official business.

Why? Why did he show up now? Koza groaned, inwardly. *How did this happen?*

"Koza," the king said, looking up as he finished the letter. "Certainly you must understand what it means to marry into the royal family. Are you prepared for the responsibilities that would entail?"

A stretch of silence ensued. Koza took back the letter without a word.

If he said he *was* prepared, that would only confuse this situation more, and if he said he *wasn't*, it would be akin to stating that he was willing to shirk the duties of the royal family. If he told the truth, Fata would be devastated. There was no good option.

When Koza could not break his silence, Pell grew impatient and strode forward to ask the pivotal question: "Koza, what are your feelings toward Princess Vivi?"

My feelings *for her?* Koza pondered. *I've never even thought about it that way.*

Vivi was his childhood friend. She'd been a play partner and a rival since they were little, and a close member of the Sand-Sand Band. Since he'd moved to Yuba with his father, they hadn't met nearly as often, and during the matter with Crocodile, they had even stood on opposite sides of the conflict, but he had never once doubted her love for Alabasta.

As a companion, and as the princess of the kingdom, Koza had nothing but heartfelt respect for Vivi's earnest and dedicated character. It was his hope that he would continue to protect Alabasta alongside Vivi far into the future. But... He stared down at the sheet of papyrus in his hands. All of that was a different matter from if he would ever call her "a beautiful blue rose." The problem was, the emotions described in that letter were not his own.

Okay, this is awkward, Koza thought, panicking slightly. *How can I escape? How could I describe how I really feel about Vivi?*

"Answer the question, Koza," Cobra insisted.

Koza faltered before the king's fierce glare. Pell and Cobra were looking at him as though he were an enemy of the crown. Amid this intense atmosphere, a lighthearted voice cut through: "Father! What are you doing here?"

The star of the moment had arrived. Princess Nefeltari Vivi was standing at the entrance to the plaza with her companion, Karoo.

"Your Highness, what a wonderful surprise," Mari blurted out. "I haven't seen you much lately."

"It's good to see you too, Miss Mari," Vivi responded. "I've been busy preparing for the Reverie, but I'm getting tired of being cooped up in my room, so I decided to read out in the fresh air for once."

Vivi lifted her arm to show the book she was carrying, completely unaware that she had been at the center of a recent controversy involving a love letter addressed to her. By her side, Karoo added a cheerful "*Quack!*"

How to explain the letter to Vivi? Should they tell her at all? Should they stay silent? No one in the crowd was immediately certain what to do—except for Koza. With a look of relief, he strode across the plaza, toward Vivi.

"Oh! Koza, what's up?" Vivi asked him.

"Took you long enough to get here."

"Huh?! What's that supposed to—" she started to ask, taken aback when Koza pushed the letter into her hand.

"This is for you."

Fata's mouth gaped. Whispers began to circulate through the plaza.

"Koza gave the letter to her!" they muttered.

"Right in front of the king! What a daring move," they marveled.

Vivi looked at the sheet of papyrus with curiosity. "What is this, a letter?"

"Read it," Koza directed. "Now, please."

"K-Koza! What are you thinking?!" hissed Fata, who had come back to his senses and resumed pulling on Koza's leg. However,

Vivi was already perusing the letter. Her suspicious expression gradually softened as she read further. When she reached the end, Vivi carefully rolled up the papyrus sheet, lifted her head, and said, “Thank you, Koza. Where is Fata, the boy who wrote this letter?”



It was another typical day in the sandy city of Alabasta, with the sunlight beating down so crisp and sharp, it felt like you could reach out and grab it.

“*Haaa…*” Fata exhaled heavily as he slurped grape juice from a ceramic goblet. “Love can be so complicated.”

“Isn’t that the truth,” Koza said, sounding somewhat blasé, as he popped a pastry into his mouth.

It was the middle of the day, and the pub was nearly empty. Behind the counter, Fata’s father was roasting some coffee beans.

“She turned me down, but I don’t regret loving Princess Vivi. I guess this is just one of those—whaddaya call ’em?—bittersweet moments.”

“You got it, Fata. That’s exactly right. Failure makes people stronger,” Chaka agreed earnestly.

Pell poured some tea from an *ibrik* and grinned. “I’m sure there will come a day when you’re proud of the fact that you expressed your feelings to Her Highness.”

“Yeah, I think so too,” Fata murmured stoically, and tossed back the rest of his grape juice.

Koza, Chaka, and Pell, the three main figures guarding the domain, sat around and listened to the young boy lament being spurned by a princess. The unlikeliness of this situation was completely lost on Fata’s eight-year-old mind.

“By the way, Koza,” Fata said, “how did you know that Princess Vivi would recognize my handwriting?”

“You dummy,” Koza laughed, ruffling Fata’s hair. “You’re way too young to understand the nuances of love.”



“Where is Fata, the boy who wrote this letter?” Vivi had asked.

The crowd around her had seemed stunned. Of course, they’d all assumed that Koza had written it—he had assumed responsibility, after all.

“Er, Your Highness…it was Koza who wrote that,” Pell pointed out in a helpful tone of voice. But Vivi just shook her head.

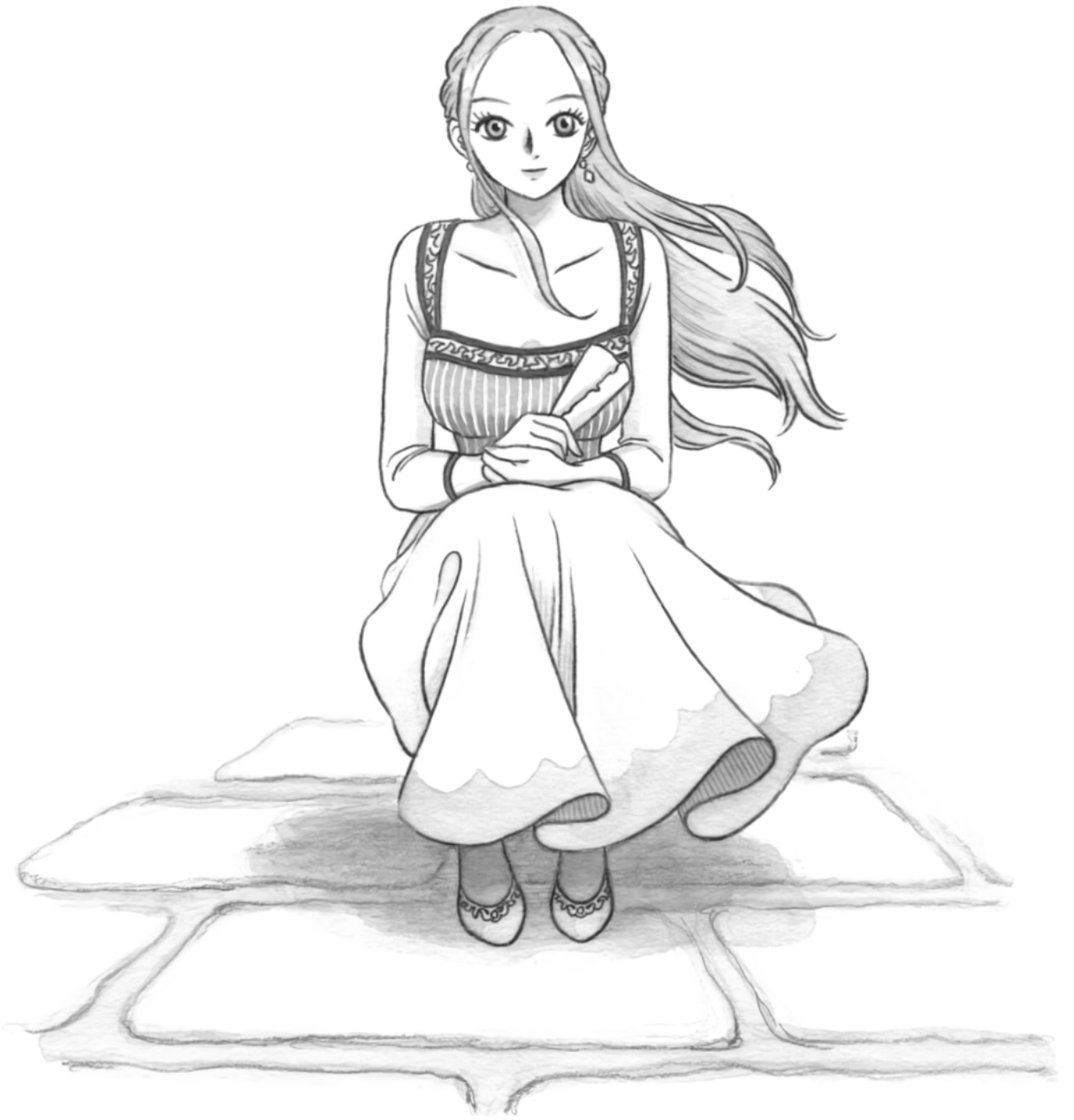
“No, it wasn’t,” she responded. “This is Fata’s hand-writing. He wrote me a letter before, with a drawing of me, so I recognize it. Koza’s handwriting is completely different.”

Yes. That’s the kind of person she is, Koza thought to himself, smiling inwardly. She didn’t need to love him to understand exactly who he was. After all, they’d known each other since they were kids.

As for Fata, once he was in the presence of Vivi herself, he froze up. Only when Koza nudged him forward with his foot did Fata hesitantly step toward her.

“Your Highness, um…” Fata began. It took many moments for Fata to quaveringly utter the words, “I love you,” but Vivi knelt down to meet him at eye level and waited patiently for them to come. And after he had summoned all of his courage to tell her his truth, she gave him a very sincere and thoughtful answer. It just wasn’t the answer Fata was hoping to hear.

“I’ve noticed that the princess has been gloomier as of late. She doesn’t seem to have much of an appetite,” a maid said idly to her friend.



The palace courtyard was full of maids and cooks and servants on their breaks, whiling away the time with gossip and chat.

The maid's companion pounced on this piece of gossip. "Do you think it has something to do with the love letter?!"

"What?!" her friend reacted strongly, upping the ante. "You think what's ailing Princess Vivi is...*lovesickness*?!"

Excited shrieks rang out through the courtyard, as the young maids tended to gravitate toward exciting and scandalous gossip. And so, what began as merely "Do you think so?" hypotheticals extended sneakily into the realm of known facts.

“I’m jealous of Her Highness. Koza seems so honest, and dedicated, and intelligent, and principled, and handsome, and…”

“Really? If I were to pick one, I’d go with Pell. He’s so kind and gentle.”

“I’ve got to go for Chaka! He’s so sincere and no-nonsense, and the power in that gaze of his! Oooh, it gives me the shivers!”

Vivi, who had no idea the sort of gossip that was being traded about her, was again sitting at the desk in her room, her eyes gliding over the pages of a book open before her, taking in none of the information. She was preoccupied—not thinking about Koza, but about the letter Fata had written her.

“Hmmm,” she sighed, resting her cheek on her fist.

Behind her, a familiar voice asked, “What are you sighing about?”

She spun around to see Koza, standing in the open doorway.

“Nothing. None of your business, at least.”

“What’s that mark up on the wall there? Did you take something down?” Koza said, walking into the room at a look from Vivi. He was nearly the only person in the world aside from her father who would dare to stroll right into the princess’s bedchamber. As he passed, the earthy scent of coffee wafted through the room. It was the special blend Fata’s father made.

“I had put up a picture from Fata,” Vivi replied. “He drew a picture of me.”

“You threw it away?” Koza asked.

“Of course not! I’ve stored it in a safe place.”

“But why’d you take it down?” Koza persisted.

“Because…” Vivi’s expression clouded, and she clenched the back of the chair with both hands. “I feel bad about what I did to Fata. It was very sweet that he wrote me that letter, but I of course don’t reciprocate his feelings, and I worry that might have hurt him. So I felt guilty about keeping it up on the wall, and I took it down. Even though it was a lovely drawing.”

Koza noticed a small hole in the wall where Vivi had pinned the drawing up with a tack.

“You haven’t changed a bit,” Koza remarked, exasperated and pleased. “Why take this so seriously? How can you run Alabasta if you’re fretting over a little boy who says he likes you? At the

Reverie you'll be dealing with powerful figures from all over the world."

"Hmm," Vivi sighed again. "You're right."

She understood what he was saying, but her heart was still conflicted. Vivi found it difficult to compartmentalize things that were important to her—to abandon them, or admit they were out of her control and stop worrying. She wanted *every single person* in the kingdom to be happy, and hated the thought of any of them suffering even slightly. It was an honest, deeply felt emotion.

Vivi frowned, mulling this over, while Koza smiled wryly to himself. She just had no idea, he realized, that even if the boy's romance hadn't panned out, he was already blessed simply to live in a kingdom where the princess cared about her people as much as Vivi did.

Chapter 4

PERONA

Nightmare of the Drifting Barrel





The Muggy Kingdom had once been a flourishing nation, but now it lay in ruins. Darkened homes lay ransacked and collapsed, as though trampled by giants, and even what remained of the castle seemed ready to crumble and sink into oblivion at a moment's notice. The cracked cobblestones were covered over with moss.

It was a silent kingdom, broken walls holding back its words. Not even rustling leaves or the cries of wild animals interrupted its long silence. Yes, the ruins of Muggy Kingdom were shrouded in silence *almost* every single night—except for this one, when a pair of noisy travelers made their way through the rubble, bringing the din of their quarreling with them.

"You were on grocery duty last week. Why didn't you buy me cocoa?!" one sniped at the other.

"I can't buy something that's not there," her companion shot back irritably. "I asked at every store in town, so you should be thanking me! If you want it so bad, go search for it yourself."

"You know it's not that simple! It takes ages just to get to the closest village, and that place is tiny!"

Perona and Zolo continued bickering as they walked on from Muggy Castle, where they were staying as unauthorized guests for the time being. A pair of humandrills loped a few paces ahead of them. About fifteen minutes prior, Perona had been relaxing in her room when a humandrill had come knocking on the window. The creature gestured for her to follow and tugged on her sleeve until she was outside the castle. There she happened across Zolo, being escorted the same way; the humandrills had something to show them, apparently.

They crossed through the ruins of the kingdom and exited the forest at the seaside.

"Okay, so what are we supposed to be looking at?" Perona demanded. The humandrills pointed insistently out beyond the

water, where a large barrel was bobbing in the waves. It was wound in rope, and something that looked like a flag was tied to it.

"Someone's barrel drifting?" Zolo asked, squinting.

"Maybe there's cocoa inside of it!" Perona exclaimed.



Cocoa was Perona's favorite drink, but it was very hard to find on Gloom Island, and she was getting quite cranky about it.

"People fill those barrels with offerings to the god of the sea. You think you're gonna find cocoa powder in there?"

"Hey, it could happen. If I were the god of the sea, I'd bestow my favor on whoever offered me some fine cocoa!" she said.

In fact, alcoholic beverages and preserved foods were far more common cargo for these barrels. But Perona considered the possibility that the person who had set this barrel adrift had a more refined palate, and had placed something tastier inside.

“Anyway, we gotta get out there and see what’s in that barrel!” Perona said excitedly. Then, almost immediately, a certain realization put a damper on her excitement: *I don’t want to go out into the open water!*

The sea did not take kindly to those with Devil Fruit powers like Perona. Being submerged in water made her vulnerable and weak. Perona’s Devil Fruit powers allowed her to float in the air, so potentially she could fly out to the barrel without getting wet, but the thought of even floating above the surface of the water made her feel terrified.

On the other hand… Perona glanced over at Zolo. He had been training hard, and had a collection of cuts and slices to show for it. It would be cruel to insist that he dive into the salty seawater to get the barrel.

Fine. I guess I’ll go, she thought, steeling herself for the experience. She was about to float up into the air when he grabbed her arm and yanked her back down.

“I’ll go,” he said, and immediately set off, sloshing through the waves. It looked so natural that she found herself just watching him go.

Then she came back to her senses and called out, “What are you doing? It’ll get in your wounds!”

“No, it won’t,” he called, without looking back.

“Liar!”

“Just wait there,” Zolo snapped, his back still turned to her. He dove into the water and began to swim out from the shore.

Perona made a disgusted face. “He *wants* to get seawater in his cuts, doesn’t he?”

Zolo’s sword fighting mentor Mihawk didn’t hold back from thrashing Zolo mercilessly during their training sessions. In addition to his usual collection of cuts and slashes, Zolo had obtained more wounds when he and Perona had crash-landed at the castle recently. But Zolo never seemed to pay much attention to the condition of his body.

He's driven by an overriding desire to be stronger for them, Perona decided, thinking of Monkey D. Luffy and the Straw Hat Crew, the rest of whom were in hiding. She gazed at Zolo, swimming back to shore with the barrel in tow.

All for his crewmates, eh?

Perona didn't have a heart of stone; there were some people she did care for. For instance, Gecko Moria, Warlord of the Sea. Sure, she'd tried to flee and leave him behind during the attack on Thriller Bark—but at the very least, she respected him, and had hoped she could be useful to his cause. She'd bawled when reading the newspaper article about his death, and felt devastated. If she found out that he was somehow still alive, she'd pack up her things and fly to him at once.

Perona had been with Moria from the moment he first recruited her at the tender age of eleven. But Moria wasn't really her "crewmate." At least, not in the way that Zolo and his crewmates were. What did it really mean to be crewmates, anyway?

"Hey, snap out of it! You're totally spacing out," Zolo called from somewhere overhead, startling Perona from her momentary daze. He went on, "It's not as heavy as it looks. Might actually be empty."

He hauled the barrel out of the water and thumped it down on the shore. Up close, it looked ancient; it had probably been adrift for a very long time. The flag attached to it was entirely faded, and the metal fixtures were all rusted over.

Perona immediately started working on unfastening the lid. The humandrills looked on with great curiosity and excitement.

"Horo horo horo!" Perona laughed expectantly. Silently, she prayed: *Let there be cocoa powder inside!* But despite her buoyant hopes, after seeing the barrel's contents she made a face and let out a disappointed groan. Despite the size of the barrel, the only objects within were three bottles of red wine.

"Who would put something so *boring* in there?!" she said, trembling with rage. "Wine isn't the slightest bit charming! If someone was going to the trouble of putting a beverage in this barrel, it should have been cocoa."

For his part, Zolo wrinkled his nose and said, "Oh, it's *booze*?" Normally he loved to drink, but Mihawk had forbidden him from

having any alcohol until he gained the skill to infuse his sword with Haki power.

"Our navigator says wine that's been rocked in the waves is particularly good," he observed dispassionately. Still, he scooped up all three bottles. "I bet Hawk-Eye would like this wine. Back to the castle."

He turned on his heels and started to hike away with big, confident strides. Perona reached out and grabbed him by the back of the shirt.

"That's not the way to the castle!" she admonished him.



Zolo's lack of direction was astounding. It seemed to be inversely proportional to his skill with swords. You could tell him the kitchen was on the first floor, and he'd start climbing the stairs. It could take him an entire hour of walking around the castle to get to his own room. At first Perona had trailed behind him, making sure he didn't get himself into trouble, but he never remembered any of her directions, and he moved around with unbelievable energy. Exhausted, she had gradually stopped bothering to follow him.

But if Perona was walking beside him, Zolo could get back home safely. They went down the shadowy path side by side on their way back to Muggy Castle's dark ruins.

What a wasted effort, Perona fumed. *No cocoa, just some stupid bottles of wine!*

She decided she'd go with Zolo to give Mihawk his prize and call it a night, making her way toward Mihawk's chamber. Then she stopped. She had noticed that the bottles in Zolo's hand were covered in a thick layer of dust.

"Shouldn't you give it a little taste test first? You know how fussy he is about his wine," she suggested.

"Yeah, I guess it could have gotten spoiled, floating around in the water," Zolo agreed.

The two of them headed to the dining room. Perona set out two wine glasses, pulled a cork, and started pouring.

“I wish this were hot cocoa,” she grumbled longingly, and took a sip. Perona’s already round eyes widened suddenly in surprise when she tasted the drink.

“What? What is it?” Zolo asked, but she wasn’t going to answer. She couldn’t open her mouth and risk letting the bliss slip away.

The wine was shockingly tasty. Her tongue was thrilled with the interplay of delicate juiciness, soft sourness, and a fringe of bitterness, all of it pleasingly commingled in her mouth. A complex aroma reached her nose, with notes of black and red currants and ripe cherries combined into one, and after a long tail of flavor, a whiff of white rose at the very end.

Perona exhaled slowly. Her eyes popped open again and sparkled. “This wine is…*supergood*!”

“Now you’re exaggerating. It can’t be *that* great,” Zolo grumbled.

Perona picked up her glass and drank the rest of it in one go, then promptly started pouring herself a second.

“Hey,” Zolo interjected, “weren’t we just testing it?”

“Who cares?” she responded breezily. “There are three bottles. We can take a little.”

“Well, you shouldn’t just be chugging wine without having something to eat,” he grumbled, then walked out of the dining room without a glance at Perona. Not being allowed to drink any of the wine had perhaps made Zolo less than enthusiastic about watching Perona enjoy it.

“Buzzkill,” Perona muttered. She placed an elbow on the table and rested her cheek on her hand. She stared at the way the light passed through the wine for a while. It was a very dark red, but whenever the light caught it, the liquid got a bit lighter, like a piece of hard candy that had been sucked almost all the way through. She spun the stem of the glass in her fingers, spreading a mysterious aroma of fruit and smoke.

Even if you were abstaining, you could still enjoy the color and scent of this wine, Perona thought. Or maybe those things didn’t mean anything unless you could actually taste it for yourself.

Perona rolled her eyes. Zolo should just learn that Haki stuff already, or whatever it was. Then he’d be allowed to drink, and they could share some wine together.

“Here, eat.” His arm reached over her shoulder and dropped a plate onto the table in front of her with a loud thunk. It was a strange dish of melon slices layered over thin pieces of ham.

“What is this?” Perona asked. Zolo looked offended.

“It’s food. We didn’t have any snacks to go with booze, so I made it for you.”

Ah, so he had gone off to the kitchen. She’d thought he had just wandered away. Not fully comprehending her sense of relief that Zolo hadn’t left her alone for the evening, Perona turned her attention to the food on the plate.

“Melon and ham. I’ve never seen this combination before. How did you come up with the idea?”

“Just eat it, all right?” Zolo instructed. “All I did was slice them, so it should be as good as whatever our cook could have made.”

Perona wasn’t sure what to expect as she popped the first bite into her mouth, but the snack was surprisingly good. The saltiness of the ham and sweetness of the melon went together well. The ham practically melted in her mouth; surely that was because the slices were astonishingly thin and beautiful. Well on his way to becoming the greatest swordsman in the world, Zolo was already a master food slicer.

“Oooh, I know what we should do!” Perona said, as an idea formed in her mind. “We should use one of these bottles to make sangria!”

“What are you talking about?” Zolo asked.

“You and Mihawk are both good at using your blades, right? You can cut the fruit into perfect pieces!”

“You do realize that when I’m training with swords, it’s not for cutting fruit, right?”

“But it’ll be so delicious!” Perona cooed. “Oooh, I can’t wait!”

She ignored his protestations and downed the rest of the wine, letting out a very satisfied sigh.

She lowered the light in the room so the moonlight could gradually infuse the fragile wine glass. It was gloomy and dark, just the way she liked it.

“Horo horo horo… Oh, what a perfect night,” she giggled.

She gazed up at the moon through the window and smiled to herself. Maybe the alcohol was getting to her—she felt a bit warmer than usual. Just floating around the room, in no particular

direction, was highly entertaining. The stain on the wine bottle's label started to look a little bit like a profile of Hawk-Eye Mihawk to her. "Du-heh!" she guffawed.

Zolo started practicing with his swords on the other side of the room. She commented that it seemed far too late in the day to start training again, but according to him, this was just some light exercise before bed. How he could call it "light" when he was wielding those tremendously heavy blades was beyond her understanding.

It really wasn't half bad, having Zolo in her sight. The wine, it seemed, tasted a bit nicer when someone else was in the room. What *was* this strange feeling, Perona wondered? It felt like a very simple and comfortable pleasure, like a perfect cup of warm milk, or a cute pair of newly-broken-in shoes.

"It's strange..." she muttered to herself. Zolo had sensitive ears, and he turned toward her quizzically. "Wha—?" he panted.

"Nothing!" she exclaimed, letting herself flop down to the floor. It was dark and cool, and felt nice on her warm skin.

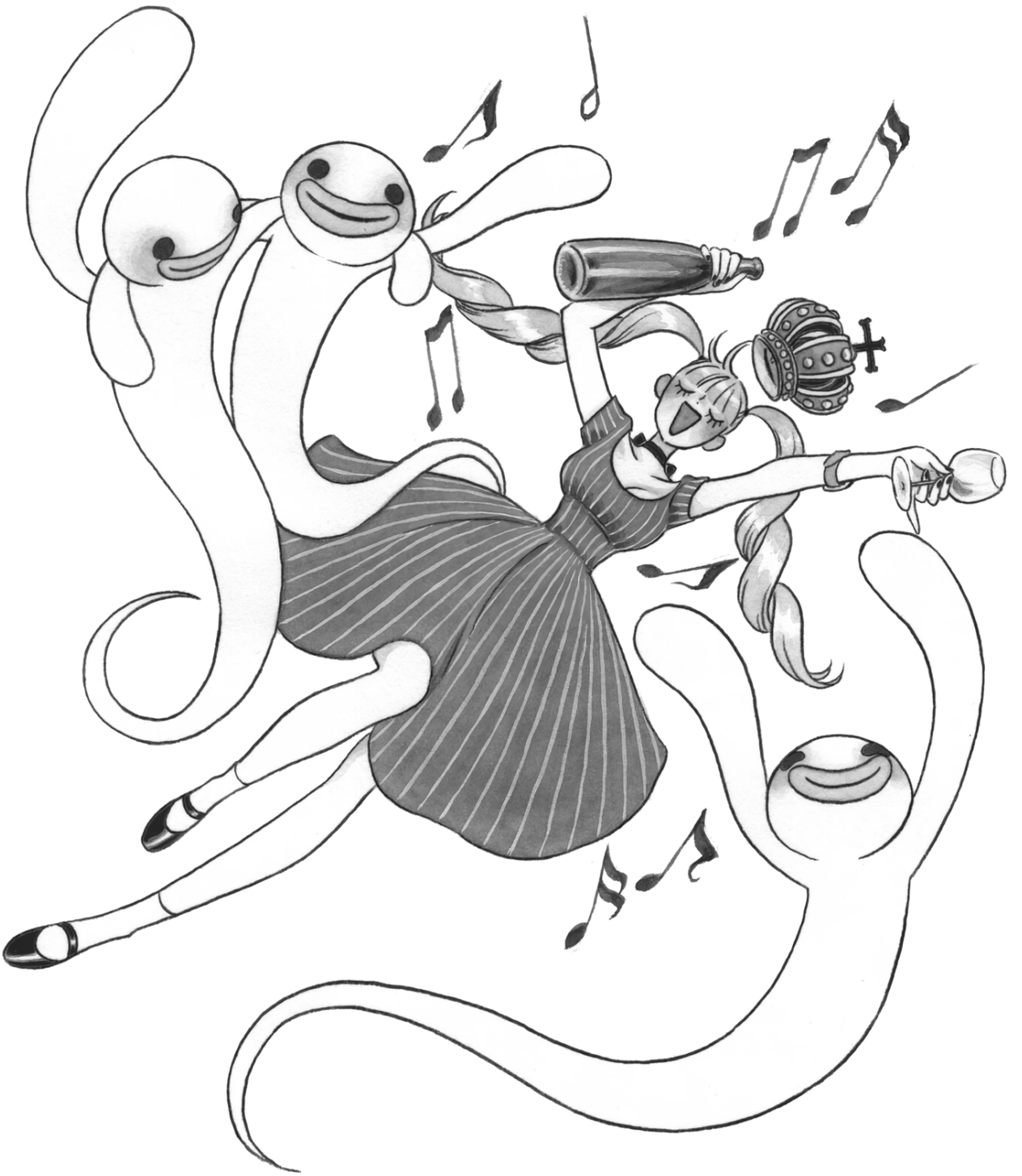
"I'm feeling sooo good right now," she said.

"Yeah, good for you," Zolo replied, gruffly.

"Maybe I should sing a cursing song!" Perona suggested cheerfully. "And then you'll have a really scary night-mare tonight."

"Go for it," said Zolo. "Sing away."

With the chilly floor supporting her back, the blissful Perona began to sing. It was a cursing song, with a gloomy and lonely melody, and lyrics full of dark tidings.



Perona's mood affected the ghosts that accompanied her. Normally they were a pale white, but tonight the ghosts were tinged with red, and wandered through the castle more restlessly than usual. They passed through the walls and floors, and even wandered up to the highest level of the castle, to the room with the best view: Mihawk's bedchamber.

“Don’t enter someone’s room without their permission,” scolded Mihawk, who sat in an armchair reading a book. He swiped at the ghosts that were sidling up next to him.

“Seems that the ghost girl is in quite a good mood tonight,” he sighed.



“*Mmm…buhh…*” Perona groaned, waking up on the couch in the living room the following morning. Though it was difficult, she managed to work her eyelids open, and there-after stared motionlessly at the motes of dust floating through the light streaming from the nearby window. Eventually, she struggled into a sitting position. Someone had placed a blanket over her as she slept.

Glasses and bottles were strewn across the dining table. She had passed out in the midst of enjoying the wine.

“Oooh, but it tasted so good,” she murmured, recalling the flavor as she tidied up the mess. Maybe she should have enjoyed it at a slower pace. After all, the wine was not replaceable. But there were still two more bottles…

Huh? She stopped suddenly. There were *two* empty bottles in her hands, but she thought she’d only had one bottle of wine. No wonder her memory was so fuzzy. The third bottle was nowhere to be seen.

“Where did my wine go?” Perona murmured.

On a sunny day at this hour, she knew there was only one place he’d be. And indeed, Perona located Mihawk’s imposing figure exactly where she expected: out watering the fields.

“Hey, you! Where’d you put the last bottle of wine?!” she screeched.

Mihawk turned around with clear annoyance. “It’s not *your* wine. It’s mine.”

“I found it!” Perona protested.

“It washed up at my castle,” Mihawk answered nonchalantly.

“But…but I found it *first*!” she insisted

“Which is why I gave one each to you and Zolo. The last one belongs to me.”

“Argh,” Perona growled. *He’s so annoying!* she thought. But she didn’t have a good response, and just had to bite her tongue. The sun was shining so strongly today, which only annoyed her more. She’d been in such a rush to find the wine that she’d burst right out the door without a hat, and sunlight was an enemy of hers.

Mihawk took off his straw hat and plopped it onto her head. “It’s going to get hotter still. Just go back to the castle,” he said.

“Shut up, don’t order me around! I can handle a little heat. I’ll even do some work!” she said, rashly, then chose to go to a field farther from Mihawk. They would be planting seeds here soon, and the soil had to be tilled to prepare for it. She’d already turned up the soil yesterday, so it was nice and soft.

Perona crouched down and began picking little stones out of the dirt, muttering as she did so. “How dare he pilfer the wine I found. I was going to make sangria out of that bottle,” she grumbled, forgetting that, in fact, her original idea was to give all three bottles to Mihawk. As she worked, some humandrills came by and crouched next to her. They copied what Perona did, sticking their thick fingers into the dirt to pluck out the tiny rocks.

“Hey! Only the rocks,” Perona warned, noticing that the humandrills were pulling out fallen leaves as well. “Those leaves are full of nutrients. Only take the stones out. All of them, even the tiny ones. They’ll cause the plants to grow stunted.”

The humandrills nodded in comprehension. She turned back to focus on the work, feeling the sweat dripping down her temples. It was hot, but not so hot that she couldn’t deal with it. As long as she had a hat, she was fine.

“*Whew…*” Perona exhaled and looked up at the sun.

She knew that working in a field out in the blazing sun was the last thing a so-called Ghost Princess would do. The problem was, it was kind of *fun.* It was enjoyable to see the crops grow higher and higher, and it felt good to water them and prune the plants. And what was more fulfilling and inspiring than seeing the vegetables you grew yourself on the dinner table?

She used to only linger in dark and dank places. When had she grown to enjoy working out in the dirt and the sunlight so much? This was clearly Mihawk's fault. He had taught her things and shown her experiences that she would never have had back when she was cooped up in the dark, damp castle.

Both Mihawk and Zolo had been strange and baffling people to Perona at first. Being around them wasn't bad, necessarily. But they weren't her friends, and they certainly weren't her companions. So what were they? Housemates?

Well, they were living in the same building now, so that definition was literally correct, but it seemed too vague a description for their relationship. Anyway, none of that really mattered right now. What mattered was preparing the field.

"What are we going to be planting in this field, anyway?" Perona wondered to herself.

"Ook...?" The humandrills just looked at Perona with confusion.

"I guess there's no use asking you guys. *He* was the one who arranged for the seedlings. Probably going to be olive trees to go with his wine, if I had to guess," she decided, and went back to work. The humandrills stared at one another, puzzled, but Perona was too occupied with the dirt below her feet to notice.



Mihawk prepared dinner that night. It was a privilege of living in Muggy Castle to see the world's greatest swordsman working in the kitchen with an apron on. If you ever came across the proud, lonely warrior with his enormous cross blade on his back, walking a desolate path, it would be hard to envision him pulling a roast chicken from the oven and skewering it to test the internal temperature.

The evening's meal was roast fowl and a vegetable sauté, a selection that went well with red wine. The sauté contained plenty of vegetables freshly harvested from the fields. The cuisine at Muggy Castle was notably organic and wholesome.

Mihawk came to the table and poured some wine into his glass, each part of the action pointedly exaggerated.

Ugh, he has to make a show of it! Perona thought. The transparent red liquid danced dazzlingly in the crystal clear glass. Just seeing it brought back the sensation of that enchanting flavor that had danced across her tongue the previous night.

Mihawk noticed Perona staring longingly at the glass and rolled his eyes. “You don’t have to look so pathetic. It’s only a bottle of wine.”

“What?! I don’t look pathetic!”

“Yes, you do,” he said, and brought the glass up to his lips. Then his raptor-like eyes softened subtly and he murmured, “This…is very good wine.”

“Right?!” she boasted, and leaned in closer to Mihawk. “And listen to my suggestion, okay? Stay with me here… Don’t you think this wine would taste even better if we used it to make sangria?!”

“No.” Mihawk’s response was blunt.

“But. Why…?” Perona exclaimed, completely taken aback.

“It’s no good to contaminate fine wine with extraneous additions.”

“But! But adding fruit slices will make it *sweeter* and so *cute*!”

“Not to my taste,” Mihawk replied.

“But *why not*?!” she demanded, getting up in his face.

Mihawk snapped, “Get off of me, you brat,” and shooed her away like a cat.

But Perona persisted. “Why don’t you just try it? A single glass, as a test. You might change your mind and decide that you like it.”



He replied that he wouldn’t, but Perona ignored him and rushed to the kitchen to grab a knife. To make sangria, you mix fruit and sugar with wine. Ideally, it sits overnight to infuse the flavor, but even putting some fruit in wine right before drinking it imparts some of its scent and sweetness.

Peaches, oranges, apples, lemons—Perona carefully peeled and cut them into bite-size pieces. Even though she was being very careful and trying her hardest, they came out looking awkward and chunky. She wasn’t able to slice them as finely as Zolo had sliced the melon the night before.

“That’s not right!” she muttered, chopping away. She tried different shapes and cuts, but none of them looked elegant. And

the more she cut the fruit, the further it got from looking the way she wanted it to.

"*Gah*! I can't cut these right!" Perona exclaimed out loud. Everything was going wrong. At this rate, Mihawk was going to imbibe the entire bottle of wine by himself.

Perona bit her lip and pouted. Just thinking of it brought that delicious, delicate flavor to her tongue once more—the heady aroma that wafted over her the moment she sipped it, the tangy notes of fruit that danced and spun in her mouth. The more she thought of it, the more she realized that she just couldn't give up. She would do anything to have sangria made from that wine!

"That's it. Gentle persuasion is off the table," she resolved. "I'm escalating this to a use of force!"

"Huh? What are you talking about?" demanded Zolo, who had just walked into the kitchen. He had finished his dinner and was bringing his empty plate to the sink. At that moment he noticed Perona's culinary project.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked.

"I'm cutting fruit to make sangria, but I can't do it right," Perona explained.

"What?" He picked up a thin slice of apple from the pile of cut fruit. "Looks like you cut it to me."

"But it's not like the way you do it! The slices need to be cleaner and smoother and finer!"

"What are you trying to accomplish here?"

Perona pouted. "It's *him*! He's so stubborn."

Zolo tossed the piece of apple into his mouth. "Hawk-Eye finished his dinner a while ago. He took the bottle of wine and went back to his room. Anyway, what were you just saying about 'use of force'?"

"Oh, that's right," Perona said, turning her wide, round eyes on Zolo. "I've made up my mind. I'm going to take that wine from Mihawk by force."

Zolo stared at her quizzically.

"Don't even try to stop me!" Perona warned, jabbing a finger at Zolo and at the same time hyping herself up for what she was about to do. She was just about to explode with a head full of steam toward Mihawk's room when Zolo called out, "Wait!"

"What? I just told you not to stop me."

“I’ll go too,” he said.

Perona frowned. “Huh? Why?”

“Because if you challenge him on your own, he’ll just brush you off. You don’t stand a chance.”

“Shut up!” Perona cried, indignantly. “Anyway, I didn’t invite you! We’re not companions!” she exclaimed, outraged, striding up to Zolo. Just then, a skittering sound came from somewhere near the pile of fruit peels in the sink.

Perona turned, distracted by the sound, only to see a massive cockroach, nearly four inches long, waving its antennae around. She shrieked.

“*Aieeeee*!”

All the blood drained from her face. Perona hated cockroaches more than anything else in the world. She stammered, “No, no, no, stay away from me!” She tried to back away, but the roach spread its wings and took flight. “*Aaaaah*! *Nooooooo*!”

Perona was panicking. Of all the things this cockroach could have done, it had decided to fly directly toward her.

I can’t even! If that thing lands on my face, I’m gonna die! I’ve gotta run! she thought, but in her haste and confusion she froze up. Then, right before it landed on her face, the cockroach abruptly split into two pieces.

“Whah…?” she gasped.

The right and left halves of the insect fell to the floor with a crackle. Perona blinked. She couldn’t understand what had just transpired. It had happened in a flash… But, *could* it have been…

“You’re right, I’m not your companion,” Zolo said, sliding his sword into its sheath and smirking. “But we’re close enough that I’m glad to help you out in a pinch. No worries.”



Contrary to Perona’s wishes, Zolo had joined her scheme to take back the wine from Mihawk. Knowing him, he was probably just looking for another opportunity to challenge Mihawk, but she couldn’t deny that his presence was reassuring.

“I can’t believe you were going to confront Hawk-Eye on your own! You’re fearless, aren’t you?” Zolo muttered, as they climbed the spiral staircase to the top floor of the castle.

“Shut up! Don’t talk about me!” she shot back automatically, before realizing that he was right. What she was doing would probably seem totally reckless to a casual observer. She was picking a fight with Hawk-Eye Mihawk, after all.

When Perona had faced Bartholomew Kuma, another one of the Seven Warlords, she had been so overwhelmed by his presence that she had nearly passed out, foaming at the mouth. But with Mihawk, she didn’t hesitate to go up against him with everything she had. Why was that? Interacting with him every day made her forget that he was a Warlord too.

“He’s in there.” Zolo indicated the door to Mihawk’s bedroom. Then he gave Perona a fierce look. “I’m gonna challenge him to a one-on-one duel. Don’t do anything to screw it up.”

So he really was just looking for a fight after all, she thought.

“That’s fine,” she said aloud. “I don’t care about your stupid duel, anyway. All I care about is that wine!”

Strategy meeting over. Tactic: burst straight into the middle of the room. Zolo faced the bedroom door and swung his leg. *Wham!* With a single kick, the door flew open. Mihawk was sitting in the armchair in the center of the room, looking poised. He seemed to have been waiting for them to arrive. As a matter of fact, their foolishly loud conversation in the hallway had been perfectly audible to him.

Resting at Mihawk’s side was a small sword, not the huge cruciform blade he normally used. On the table behind him, however, was the wine bottle, as though on display. It seemed to say: “Come and take me, if you can.”

“You’ve gone mad,” Mihawk chuckled, getting to his feet. “I know you haven’t overestimated your power and fooled yourself into thinking you can actually take my head.”

“I’ve already told you,” Zolo responded, “I’m not stupid or arrogant enough to think I can beat you.”

“Then what is your plan?”

“That should be obvious.” Zolo lowered his weight just a fraction of an inch. “To get some practice!”

He took a flying leap and slashed at Mihawk, who pulled up the nearby sword and, without even drawing it, easily blocked Zolo's blade with the sheath. As the resulting sparks cleared, Zolo was already swinging a second sword diagonally. Mihawk deflected both strikes before finally removing his sword from its sheath.

"Just don't destroy the furniture," he said.

"No guarantees!" Zolo grunted, and charged. His expression was set in a do-or-die grimace, but Mihawk's face was composed, perhaps even pleased.

An exchange of attacks ensued that was so violent it nearly thrashed the room.

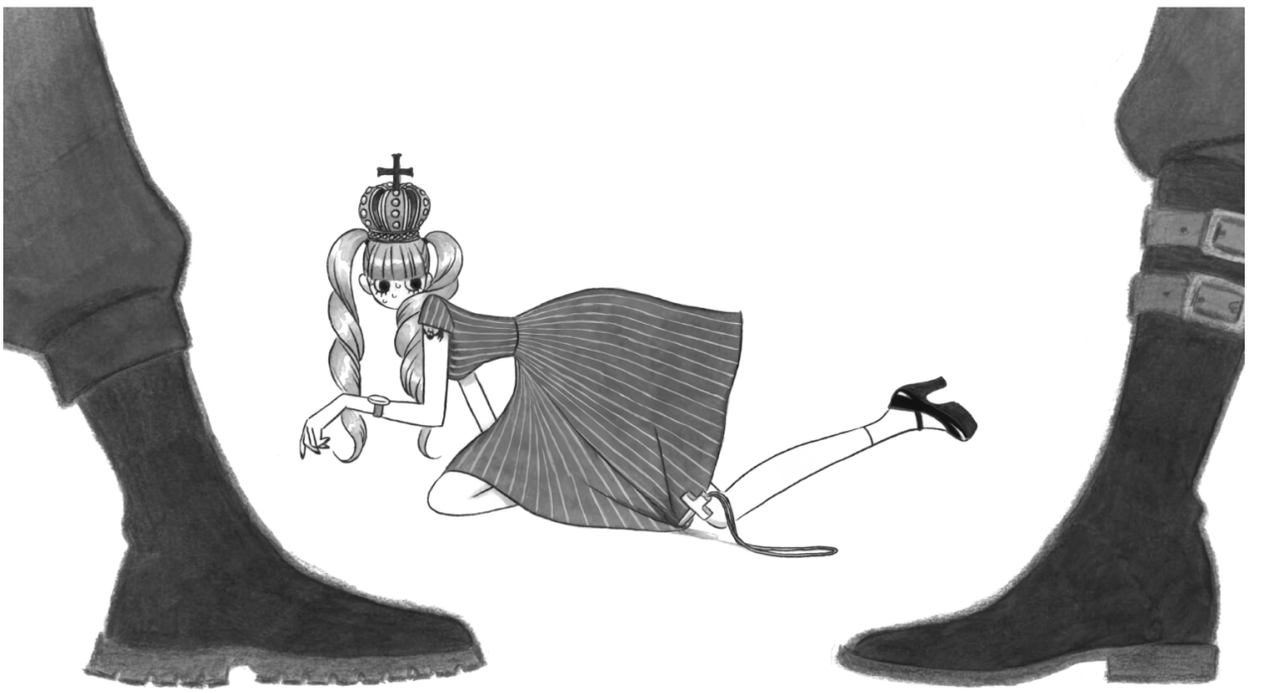
"Horo horo horo," Perona giggled as they fought. "Stupid Hawk-Eye. He's so distracted, he'll have no idea…"

She got down on hands and knees, making herself look as small as she could, and moved along the wall toward the bottle. Normally she would never have lowered herself to crawl around on the ground, but at this point, she would do anything to get the better of Mihawk.

Almost there. The table was just ahead. Five yards, four yards, three yards… When she was two yards away from the prize, the smaller blade came flying toward her.

"*Aaagh*!" She shrieked and jumped. The knife pierced the hem of her dress and stuck into the floor a few millimeters from her knee. She glanced at the two combatants and saw the confident smirk on Mihawk's face, even as he continued to deflect Zolo's furious blows.

"*You*! You knew I was over here?!" She gasped.



“Of course,” Mihawk grinned.

The knife was stuck in deep; no matter how she pulled and tugged, it didn’t budge. She couldn’t move without ripping her dress, but she would rather die than do that.

“Dammit! It won’t come loose!” she fumed.

Meanwhile, Zolo and Mihawk’s duel raged on. A single sword thrust from Zolo scored past Mihawk’s tough defenses, but the older man didn’t lose his poise, rotating his sword and catching both of Zolo’s at the same time. He pushed back hard, catching Zolo off guard and knocking him off his feet.

Mihawk exhaled briefly then. Zolo didn’t catch that moment of vulnerability—but Perona did.

“Take this! Negative Hollows!” The ghosts Perona unleashed swept toward Mihawk, laughing eerily as they went.

“You got sloppy, Hawk-Eye! Now fall to your knees and regret that you were ever born!” Perona crowed.

But her triumph lasted only a second. Zolo bounced back to his feet quicker than she expected, and lunged for Mihawk—right into the path of her ghosts.

“Ah…” She tried to stop them, but it was too late. The Negative Hollows that Perona had unleashed slid right through Zolo’s torso.

“*Uuurgh*,” he grunted, slumping to his knees. “I’m sorry for walking on the same earth as you. I’m not worthy…”

He leaned forward and pushed his forehead against the ground in despair. As a result, his rear end rose into the air, causing the scabbard attached at his waist to snap upward and strike the standing lamp by the wall. It toppled over and knocked into a nearby bookshelf, sending books tumbling down onto the desk, the vibration of which rocked the wine bottle into an unsteady wobble, then onto its side, where it rolled to the edge of the table, and…

Crash!

“Oops,” they all said in unison.

The final bottle of wine had fallen to the floor and shattered.



If there was a silver lining, it was that the bottle had broken in half around the middle, and the bottom still had some liquid left inside. It wasn’t even half of a single glass, but it was enough to convince them to stop their fight and carefully transport the precious portion of liquid to the dining room.

“Roronoa, pour more gently. The more you disturb the wine, the more the aroma will dissipate,” Mihawk instructed.

“Shaddup,” Zolo retorted. “If you got a problem, pour it yourself, Hawk-Eye!”

“Hey, there’s like a millimeter less wine in my glass than yours!” Perona whined.

The three of them continued to bicker and argue while at the same time taking great pains to savor every last drop of the wine.



Zolo carefully tilted the broken bottle, dripping the remaining contents into a pair of shot glasses. Perona watched his handiwork very closely. Mihawk had taken the fruit she'd left sitting out and cut it again into shot glass–size pieces to make instant sangria shots.

"Now it's gone. This really is the final drop," Perona said wistfully, then picked up the sangria shot. "*Hmmm...* I wish I could've drunk more of it."

"How do you think I feel?" Mihawk said bitterly, glaring at her. He picked up the other shot, which was just wine, no fruit. He also poured sparkling water into Zolo's glass, instructing him to join in their toast.

Perona held up her sangria, allowing the light to pass through it. At the bottom of the beautiful red wine were tiny pieces of fruit cut into perfect squares. She shook the glass, causing the pieces to whirl and dance. She would never, ever have been able to cut fruit into such pristine little shapes.

To Perona, Mihawk and Zolo were just her housemates, coresidents of the castle. They weren't her companions—absolutely not. But they also weren't strangers. When one of them was in trouble, they'd help each other out. They'd share a bottle of wine, and they'd work the fields together. In that sense, it wasn't an entirely empty relationship. Probably not, anyway.

"*Cheers*!"

Red wine, sangria, and sparkling water. The three glasses clinked over their shared table.



There was someone observing the current residents of Muggy Castle desperately scrounging their last sips of wine—from outside the kitchen window, a humandrill looked on at what transpired.

“Oook…”

Once it had observed the three of them toasting their glasses, the humandrill swiftly turned around and returned to its fellows who were waiting in the forest. Every now and then, they went back to check up on Perona and the two men.

“Ook, oo-ook.” (*In a quest to obtain the last bit of wine, Perona lured Zolo into fighting with Mihawk. They caused a ruckus in Mihawk’s bedroom, but they’ve all made up now*.)

The boss humandrill considered this report and raised an eyebrow.

“Oo-hoo-hook, oo-hoo-hook?” (*Has Perona always liked wine that much?*)

“Ook. Ook-ook, oo-oo-ook.” (*She usually loves cocoa. But she can’t get any cocoa here, so she’s been desperate for something tasty to drink.*)

This comment came from a different humandrill and gave the boss pause. It looked even more confused than before.

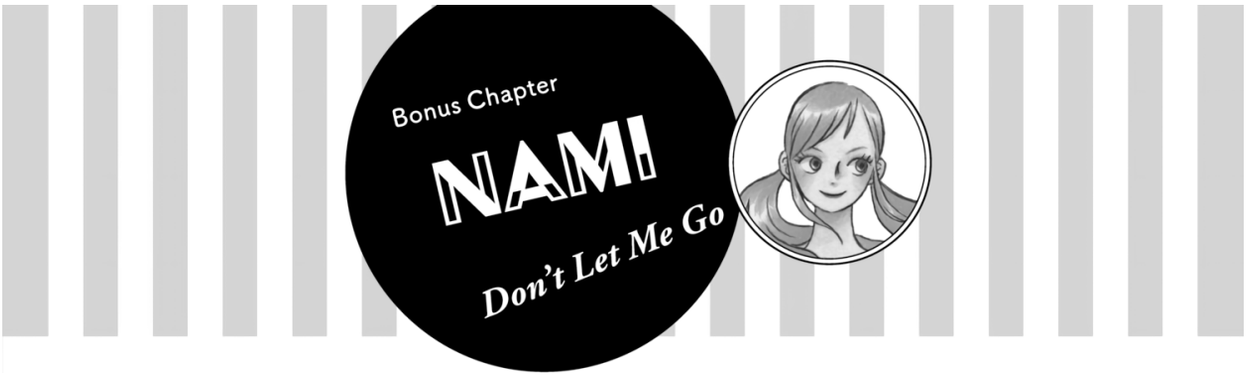
“Ook, ook, ook…” (*But she need only wait a few months and she’ll have plenty of her beloved cocoa. Mihawk is planting cacao trees in the field.*)

“Oo-hoo-hook, ooo-oo-hook.” (*Actually, it seems that Perona is not aware that he is planting cacao.*)

“Ook? Ookook-oo-ook?” (*What? Why wouldn’t Mihawk tell her? Didn’t he get it shipped here just for Perona?*)

The rest of the humandrills felt sheepish in the piercing, demanding gaze of their boss.

“Ooook…” (*We don’t know. He’s a man of few words*.)



Sometimes I still remember seeing that flash of brilliant orange in the middle of the night. I remember the girl who snuck into my bedroom and stole the entire contents of my safe, who held a mysterious finger to her lips when she realized I was awake. I was shocked by how young she looked.

"I'm Nami," she whispered. "Please stay quiet. Don't make a fuss."

What kind of thief introduces herself like that? I thought, but I didn't say it aloud. I was quiet, just like she had asked. Even I understood that a girl my age out by herself burglarizing people's homes was something exceptional. And the fact that she had slipped into my room without me noticing told me she was a pro. I even notice when the cat comes inside.

With remarkable, admirable dexterity, Nami cracked the lock on the safe and quickly stuffed the stacks of cash into a sack. As she was leaving the room, she turned to me and said, "Thanks for keeping quiet," with a smile.

It was the smallest, saddest smile ever, like a tiny bubble rising up from the moss at the bottom of a pond, all the way to the surface, where it breaks.

It's been half a year since I was imprisoned on this ship. This cramped and dusty little room is my entire world now. My only interaction is the single time each day that the pirates come to

give me a meager meal. The rest of my days I stare at the walls and do nothing.

The reason I was abducted is simple: I am beautiful. Being attractive is thought of as a desirable quality. Many people in this world want to have someone like me around to admire. So before I even knew left from right, I was taken from my parents and sold to an industrialist.

He was a young man who praised my beauty every day, and took good care of me. He brought me everything I wanted, spent lavish amounts of money on me, and ultimately depleted his fortune. When he was no longer able to care for me, he killed himself.

The next person to own me was an eccentric old woman. She truly took a shine to me, and cared for me tenderly. Each morning, she'd tell me, "You're so pretty," and she kept me by her side from sunrise to sundown. She looked healthy for her age, but one day she fell ill and quickly passed away.

The old woman's relatives put me up for auction, and the winning bid was from a politician in town. The politician was connected to some pirates, and fed them useful information in exchange for a portion of the pirates' spoils. The townspeople were tariffed into poverty, but the politician's pockets were happily lined. His wealth meant that I was able to live a life of luxury. Then Nami came and stole all of the money he'd saved up. She told the newspapers about how the politician was colluding with the pirates. He was forced out of his job, and had no choice but to let me go.

My next master was the only daughter of a very rich man. Unlike the three before her, she didn't try to keep me to herself. She wanted to show me off to the world. I was represented by a talent agency and modeled for many companies.

In no time at all, my beauty was world-famous. I was in newspaper advertisements and on magazine covers. Many, many people came to the house in hopes of catching a glimpse of me. However, being such a public figure meant that the pirates came for me too. One winter day, the mansion was raided by pirates, and I was stolen. They considered me a valuable treasure, and locked me in a dark room at the bottom of their ship.

My life here has been awful, but this won't last much longer. Eventually someone will purchase me, and I'll be back to my old life. A life of being admired by an owner whom I neither love nor hate. As long as I am beautiful, everyone likes me, and I get anything I want—except for my freedom.

It's not a bad life, I don't think. If there's one thing that I regret, it's that incident with Nami. There were many moments afterward when I wished that I had called out to stop Nami as she left the room that night.

Nami is quite a pretty girl, if not as pretty as me. She shouldn't have had to expose herself to the perils of a life of burglary. If someone took her under their wing, she could live an easy, pampered life. Perhaps my life isn't as exciting as the movies, but at least I don't have to worry about where my next meal is coming from. If you can find yourself a rich owner, they'll give you a fairly luxurious life.

I wish I could see Nami again, but I doubt it'll happen. People who lead those kinds of lives don't tend to last long. It's sad, but she's probably dead in a ditch somewhere.

"Oh, look at this pretty one," a familiar voice interrupts my reverie. "Are you part of the treasure?" I open my eyes, startled.

She's taller than the last time I saw her, and her face is much more mature, but it's clearly her. It's Nami, standing right in front of me. Shocking—just as I thought I'd never see her again, here she is. Her hair is much longer now, and the sight of her pockets bulging with jewels tells me that she hasn't given up on her career as a thief. Unfortunately, she doesn't seem to remember me.

But I remember you, Nami. In the eight years that have passed, I've never forgotten your face.

"If you want to get out, I can help you. What do you say?" Nami asks, peering through the bars. I bob my head a little. Do I want to be outside of this cage? I've never even thought about it before.

Nami takes me out into the open air without any real prompting on my part. Outside of the ship's hull, I finally feel sunlight again. After sitting in the dark for half a year, the blue sky is so brilliant, it hurts my eyes.

She walks with me out of the port and down the main street. It's lined with carts and stalls, where sun-darkened men call out incessantly to passersby to hawk their wares.

"Hey, beautiful!" they say, and I know it's directed at both Nami and me. We pass a fishmonger with a cartful of ice, atop which a massive fish is draped, nearly my own size! I am shocked; the outside world is a mysterious and bizarre place.

Why did Nami bring me to such a place? What is she doing with me? Is she going to keep me for herself? I sneak a look at her face in profile. *Do you want me to be all yours, Nami?*

If she wanted to keep me around, I think I would understand. Being alone is difficult. There are times when you want a companion. *Don't worry, Nami. You and I are alike. We are both beautiful and solitary. I think that we could be wonderful companions.*

"Oh! Robin!" Nami shouts, and rushes forward with glee. "Are you done shopping already?"

"Yes. I went to the bookstore, but unfortunately they're closed today. I just stopped at a store on the way back and bought some coffee beans. Here."

"Oooh! I love that brand too!"

"I know. That's why I picked it. Let's brew a pot when we get back to the ship."

"Yes! I saw Sanji earlier, and he said he was going to bake tarts today."

Oh...so she has many companions already. I am completely taken aback by this realization, and gaze at the other woman, the one she called Robin.

She has a wise expression on her face and a beautiful posture, her back tall and poised. The bridge of her nose is proud and sharp, and she seems to be a bit older than Nami.

Nami smiles and laughs a lot when talking to Robin. Her mannerisms couldn't be more different from the cautious way she held herself so many years ago, as she snuck into my room in the middle of the night to steal the treasure. At some point since that

time, she made friends. At some point, she found others she could laugh and smile with.

Nami says she likes the coffee that Robin bought. They are surely going to go home and drink coffee together. Then they'll eat the tarts that this Sanji person made. Is it just the three of them? Or are there more, many more, who make every day lively and exciting?

I have no companions like that. No one to share my time and feelings with. I've always been alone. I've never had a friend. I don't know a thing about love. I thought Nami was the same way.

After a while, Robin finally notices my presence.

"And who's this?" she asks.

"I found her locked up in the treasure vault of a pirate ship. As I was helping myself to the treasure, I decided to take her with me," Nami says.

"What a beauty. I wonder where she's from."

"I wouldn't know. I'd guess it's a summer island, though."

Nami leans in very close. Her eyes are so large I could drown in them—but then I see myself, right there in the reflection. It's the first time in ages I've seen my own face, and I'm not as pretty as I thought.

Perhaps it was sheer arrogance to think that I was more beautiful than Nami. After living my life in birdcages, I couldn't possibly compare to someone who's known real freedom. I wish I could tell all of the people who ever owned me that beautiful things aren't meant to be put on display. You should set them free, out in the open, where the sun can witness their beauty.

Feeling impatient, I scratch at the bars with my foot. *Let me out, Nami. I want to be free like you.*

"Oh, she's fussing," Nami says. "Maybe she wants to be let out."

Nami's slender fingers push up the door of the birdcage. "There you go. Come on out," she coaxes.

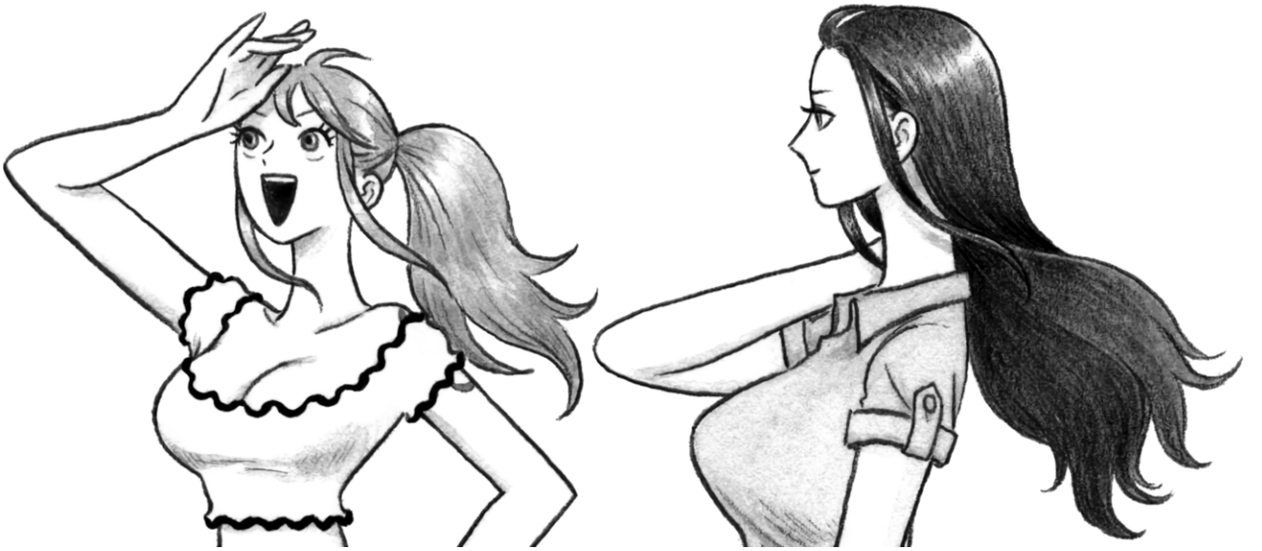
It's been so long since I was outside of this cage that I can't remember when it was. It feels as though I've lived my entire life sitting on this perch, collecting the useless admiration of others. I even thought that the purpose of my wings was to show off the beautiful colors of my feathers—not to help me fly.

Slowly, I spread my wings. They feel a little creaky, but it's surprising how easy and natural it feels to open them wide, even inside the narrow cage. It feels like I could really fly.

I jump out the cage door and beat my wings as hard as I can. My body launches upward, where I catch the wind and start to ascend. In the distance, I can see the water. There is a collection of big ships at the sea's edge. I have never seen the ground from this height before.

Hey, this isn't bad, actually. I've never known the soft sensation of the light or the pleasant caress of the wind before. Glancing downward, I see Nami and Robin looking up at me, waving. They've let my beauty escape, but they don't seem to care at all.

I flap my wings, showing off their brilliant rainbow plumage, and soar toward the endless blue sky above.



Jun Esaka was born February 13 in Kanagawa Prefecture. Blood type O. After graduating from Waseda University, he began working as a writer.



Sayaka Suwa was born in Kagoshima in 1980. She illustrates in pencil, ink, and watercolor. Her illustrations have been featured in a variety of books and magazines, including *One Piece Magazine*.

Eiichiro Oda began his manga career at the age of 17, when his one-shot cowboy manga *Wanted!* won second place in the coveted Tezuka manga awards. Oda went on to work as an assistant to some of the biggest manga artists in the industry, including Nobuhiro Watsuki, before winning the Hop Step Award for new artists. His pirate adventure *One Piece*, which debuted in *Weekly Shonen Jump* magazine in 1997, quickly became one of the most popular manga in Japan.

One Piece: Heroines



Created by Eiichiro Oda

Written by Jun Esaka

Illustrations by Sayaka Suwa

Translation: Stephen Paul
Design: Jimmy Presler
Editor: Megan Bates

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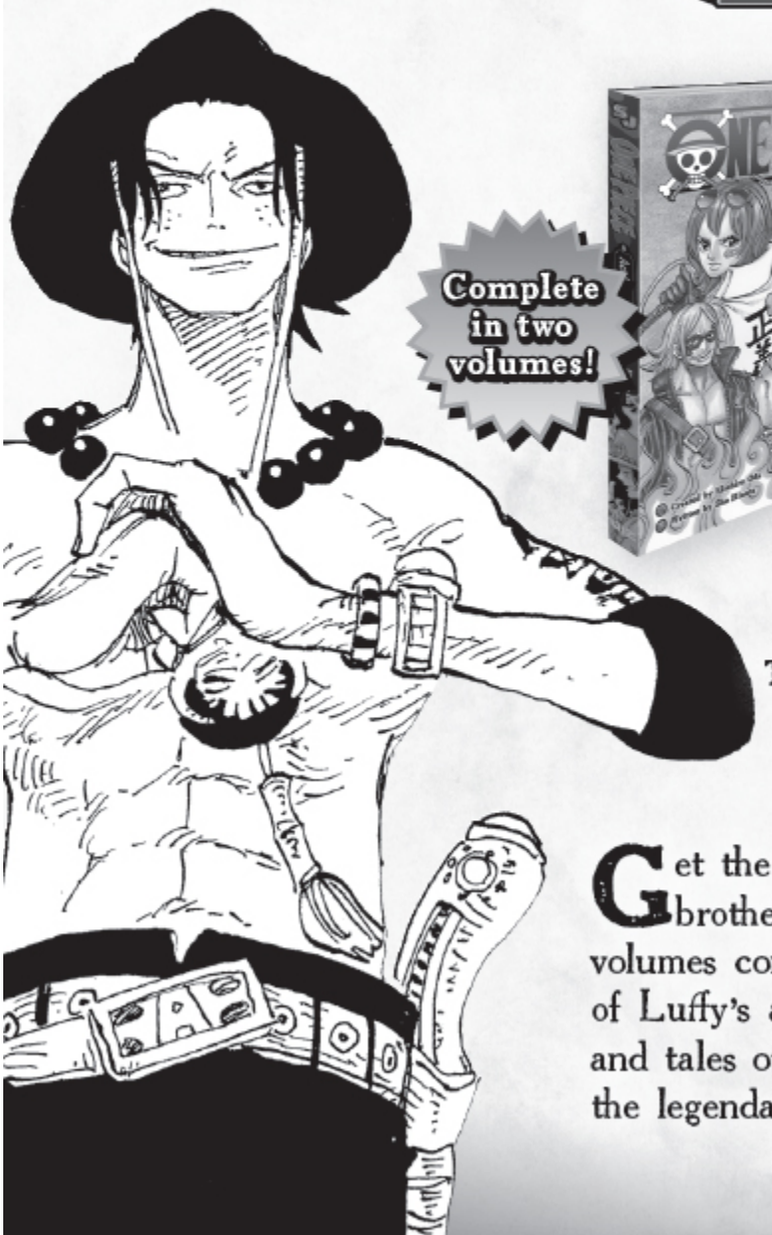


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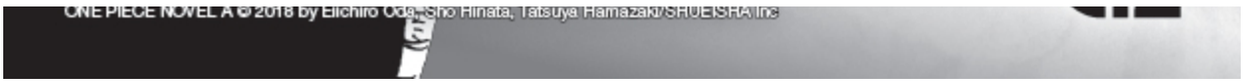
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