

I don't own the greatest shonen manga/anime of all time or Luffy.

This chapter kind of fought me. Like the characters weren't acting in... well, character for a while. Oh, and I also lost power due to snow for a day and a half. Was able to get out to a library on the second day, but still. Regardless, I hope you enjoy it, even if I didn't have the Sanji section at the end of the chapter that I wanted.

Edited 3/12/26. This has been Grammarlied and seen by Hiryo and a few people over on the place that can't be named pointed out some mistakes too. Thanks, Aragorn93 and Cormag81!

Chapter 50: The Status Quo Isn't Our Friend

As the Everlasting Resolve continued its descent to the ocean floor, Robin and Vivi sat in the reading loft in the captain's quarters, both of them silent and sipping tea they had brought down for this purpose. Vivi was currently staring at the bulkhead, while Robin was ostensibly trying to read a book. However, Vivi had noticed that the page she was on hadn't changed since she had opened it.

The two of them had retreated here after Luffy had explained about his past life and everything else, needing time alone to internalize everything.

Not their relationship. Whatever had happened, that had not changed. Robin had made this very clear prior to heading into the ship by giving Luffy a kiss that had nearly made Vivi forget the entire conversation. Vivi had hurriedly added her words to Robin's more physical assertion. That, despite being spiritually much older than her, Vivi didn't care. "Although," she had joked, winking over at Robin, "there's something to be said about the difference between being older and being more mature. I rather doubt you'd ever win any prizes in that particular category, my love."

She tried very, very hard not to preen as Luffy seemed almost to collapse with relief as Vivi used the term 'my love' just as much as he had from Robin's kiss. However, his response at the time had left her somewhat stunned. "Er, if we're just, um, talking about age, you remember me mentioning Cologne and Happosai, and how both of them had a lot more ki than I did? Thing is, I didn't mention how exactly old they were..."

Both women had looked at him, with Vivi wondering why he was mentioning this now, while Robin's eyes had widened in sudden surmise. "Er, well, both of those were at least four hundred years old, maybe more. And they learned how to stop the aging process when they were already old. So, a few dozen years won't exactly matter if you, Robin and Hancock can learn how to use ki, too. Erm, that could be something to look forward to, too."

The idea of living that long had stunned Robin and Vivi alike, but at the time, it had simply been one final blow to their psyches after a series of them. Now, staring at the bulkhead, Vivi wondered what that would be like. She was not so naïve to think that everyone Luffy trained would be able to use ki to that extent. What would it feel like to simply remain the same, to never age after a certain point, while Nami, her best friend, Chopper, Zoro and all the others on the crew or back in Alabasta started to age?

That would be somewhat horrible, I think. I can understand that it will allow us to do even more good for the world, allow us to have more adventures, to see the world change as time goes on, at the very least, but even so.

In actuality, Zoro and Sanji had already started to show signs of ki, in particular their healing ability, which was a direct prerequisite to slowing the aging process. But Vivi didn't know that. Nor would it have invalidated her thoughts.

Indeed, while Happy was certainly... well, happy... to be immortal and continue to live for eternity on his own vices, Cologne would probably have told Luffy that it wasn't all that it was cracked up to be. Living and seeing literal generations of her family come and go, none of them able to reach the heights of martial arts that she had and thus live alongside her for longer than a normal person, had worn on Cologne dramatically.

Vivi was broken out of her maudlin thoughts when Robin asked softly, "Are you certain that knowing about this, that this is his second life, doesn't change anything between you? You told him so, yet I have to admit, knowing his age, and your age, and how inexperienced you still were despite your time and Baroque works, it would make sense for you to feel as if he somehow took advantage of you. It wouldn't be very logical but..."

"No, it wouldn't be very logical at all, and never once did I ever feel that Luffy was leading me on, or trying to influence me or anything like that." Vivi shook her head. "Heck, I don't think he even tried to pass on life lessons or anything of that nature, like you would expect someone who is literally on their second life to be able to." She giggled a little, shaking her head. "How much that has to do with his own lack of life experience in certain areas, particularly romance, I won't say. But no, this does not change anything between Luffy and me, or me and you and Hancock-sama. I told him so earlier, and I will continue to repeat it as many times as he needs to hear it."

She then chuckled dryly, looking over at Robin now, twisting around in her comfy, thickly padded reading chair, bringing her legs up to six to slide them underneath herself. She smiled just a little bit as Robin's eyes trailed down to those legs for a moment, taking a certain thrill in knowing that both Robin and Hancock desired her physically, despite being incredibly gorgeous women themselves. "No, my thought was more about how much **bigger** everything else he

confessed makes everything—" she stumbled to a halt for a second, then shook her head. "Drat it, that's not how I meant to say that. I..."

Robin held up a hand and smiled wryly. "In that, your thoughts and mine are alike. Yes, knowing where Luffy's special abilities and everything else come from is incredibly gratifying, but everything else he told us is so much **bigger** than simply worrying about how his past life might affect our relationship. Other worlds, dimensions being real, gods being real? The idea that this whole world's existence might hinge on Luffy's actions. I will admit that I have read many a novel that conjectures about other dimensions being real, while others are set in fantasy worlds. But the existence of gods? Gods who specifically made an agreement with the gods of our world, in order to send Luffy's soul here to save it? But had they not given their chosen champion any direction?"

Robin snorted, shaking her head. "That seems capricious."

"Which matches the tales of many of the gods I read as a child." Vivi giggled. "Remember what else Luffy said: he couldn't remember most of that conversation any longer, but the one thing that stuck in his head was that the original Luffy was too stupid to live, apparently." She giggled again, and Robin joined her. "With how little common sense Luffy occasionally seems to have, that statement kind of scares me. How much worse could the original have been?"

"But tell me," Vivi went on as soon as she got her giggles under control. "Did you have any idea of this beforehand? I'll admit it caught me completely by surprise, but I saw your eyes light up occasionally in that way they do when you have figured out a clue to something."

Now it was Robin's turn to flush a little happily at how well Vivi could read her. *Yes, yes indeed, I think this for some of us will work out quite well*, she thought, before answering Vivi's question. "I did indeed have a few hints, and I was the one to make Luffy come clean with us now rather than later. Some stories he's mentioned, novels that are no longer in print, which I read in the library of Ohara, some bits and pieces of the training he's done, not matching anything else I'd ever heard of. Not enough to put it all together, but he did once tell me that he had some secrets he wanted to share, just never seemed to have the right time. Come to think of it, I wonder what the others would think about this."

"HAH! It wouldn't even matter to most of them." Vivi laughed, and Robin laughed too.

Both knew that Hancock wouldn't give a damn about it. Indeed, their most egotistical of lovers, albeit admittedly, that was a bit of a toss-up between Luffy and Hancock, if in very different ways, would probably assume that Luffy needed the leg up being on his second life gave him to be worthy of her in the first place.

In fact, I can see her say that very thing, Robin reflected with an internal chuckle.

“Zoro and Sanji would probably both call him a dirty cheat, Laki wouldn’t care, Brook would simply laugh and say it was further proof that there will always be still more in the world they had never seen, Chopper would get all googly eyed,” she counted off her fingers. “Franky, Jinbe and Nami would probably have more nuanced reactions.”

Vivi nodded, suddenly a little more serious. “I agree. And I’m happy that Luffy hasn’t shared it with everyone else. Nami would reject it. It’s a little too big for her. Nami would really, **really** not like knowing she was just a minor character in someone else’s save-the-world story, and would hate the idea of gods and the very idea of fate. Franky would probably be appalled by that last as well. Jinbe... I think he would become even more loyal to Luffy, honestly. Being on the crew of the man whom the gods chose to protect the world would be something out of a fairytale to the Knight of the Sea.”

“The revelation of gods existing doesn’t bother you?” Robin asked, quizzically, as Vivi had stated that as if she didn’t care particularly about gods or fate. “I confess that’s the part of the story that I’m having trouble with. Not their actions, but that gods, or rather goddesses, actually exist at all. That has shaken my worldview a good deal.”

“Ah... I, I also had a thought along those lines, back when my father showed Luffy and me the letter from my ancestor.” As Robin stiffened a little at the mention of that shocking little secret Vivi and Luffy had shared with her back on Amazon Lily, Vivi went on, “At the time, I took something in the letter to mean that all those without the will of D. had fates we could not avoid. Luffy calmed my fears by saying that idea was for people who had given up hope or any ability to think for themselves. That is not a term I would ever think could describe you, my dear.”

Vivi leaned back, smiling gently. “As for the idea of there being gods and so forth out there, that doesn’t bother me. I was raised in Alabasta, anointed in the waters of Osiris, and partook in ceremonies to praise the gods and goddesses of my people, both formal and informally. I already believed in the gods. The gods do not create our fates, merely judge us at the end.”

She reached forward and took Robin’s hands in hers, bringing them up to her lips to kiss the knuckles gently. “If that truly is bothering you, the idea of fate and everything else, I would urge you to look at it similarly. What we do in our lives matters! Every choice we make might not always be our own, because there are always other factors influencing us all. But we are not pawns, puppets of some greater power. The gods will judge us when we die, but we can all live our lives as best we can and go to them proudly on that score.”

Robin breathed in deeply, staring into Vivi's eyes for a moment, then smiled faintly, her own concerns on that banished for now by Vivi's simple faith and words. "Thank you for that, Vivi. I think I will think of it like that going forward."

The older woman then deliberately pulled her hands away, allowing a wry smirk to appear on her face. "So, other than wondering why he isn't more mature..." She waited until Vivi let loose an obligatory snicker before going on. "I confess that I wasn't altogether as interested in Luffy's own life after a certain point as in the world he came up from. I understand his martial arts nuttiness and his Code are both cornerstones of his personality. Knowing about the Cat Fist and the fact that Luffy's curse came with him from his past life was certainly interesting. But it was not as interesting as the world 'Luffy' lived in."

The odd, new name felt odd as it rolled off the tongue. There was also a sense of otherness to saying it aloud that gave the tale they had heard added weight.

"I know! I was thoroughly entranced by his story, but once he finished, it was the descriptions of the world that I kept coming back to. I wanted to know more about that world he was talking about. Skyscrapers, cities of millions of people? The idea that his island nation was only one of a few island nations, that there were continents big enough for multiple large, powerful countries, all of that was amazing."

"Geography, bah. That is but the least of what I want to know." Robin snorted her earlier moment of depressed introspection about gods and being the pawns of such creatures disappearing, her eyes doing that flashing thing that they did as her lips turned into a smile that any painter would have killed to put on canvas. Looking at the older woman, Vivi had a moment to wonder if Robin knew how beautiful she was when she was in full knowledge lust mode as the woman continued.

"I want to know about their governments, about communication, about the knowledge of the natural world that the citizens of this Earth had discovered. I wonder if he has any medical knowledge he could pass on to us and, through us, to Chopper? And of course, the history of that world! The only time he touched on that was when he mentioned how he went from his own nation of Japan to a continental nation named China, and how the two nations had fought a war in the past and didn't really like one another."

"I'm deeply intrigued by the communications and government issues, too. How does diplomacy work in their world? Logistics? I also want to know about parallels between their world and ours," Vivi agreed.

The two of them hadn't really interrupted Luffy's story except for clarification, not wanting to get bogged down in the minutiae. Now, the two women grinned at one another, eagerly anticipating a night full of question-and-answer sessions with their lover/captain. Robin

pushed to her feet and Vivi did the same. "In that case, let us go get him. I don't know how long we were sitting here but it must've been some time."

"Right. Although, another question does come to my mind," Vivi pondered as she stood up. "Which name do you think he prefers? Luffy or Ranma?"

"We could use his original name as a pet name while we are alone," Robin mused. "I wonder if he would like that?"

Looking at the clock on the outer bulkhead of the captain's quarters, the women saw they had only been in alone for an hour. By the time the story had finished, Franky had come out to join Sanji on the bridge. The rest of the crew had been relatively busy while the girls were inside, dealing with falling rocks and strange updrafts that tried to push them into the walls of the crevice they were following down to the bottom of the ocean.

By the time the girls came out, though, they were no longer busy defending the ship. They had reached the bottom of the crevice, and no currents were bothering them. They were still in the crevice for now, but it was still a far easier ride than getting there in the first place.

Sandersonia was still at the wheel, munching happily on some kind of sandwich with apple slices visible between two bits of bread and some kind of jam, practically wiggling in place despite not being in her Zoan form. Outside, Luffy was once more on the deck, duking it out with Sanji, while Franky watched on, gasping and draining several cola bottles, while inserting others into his stomach directly.

Both men were drenched in sweat from the heat that hit both women like a physical force the moment they stepped outside. "What is up with the heat?" Vivi gasped, shaking her head. "I thought it was supposed to be cold down here."

"Nearby volcanoes must be affecting the local heat of the water," Robin replied. "I've read of that before."

Despite the heat making both men sweat, it was clear that Sanji had been pushing himself hard to keep up with Luffy, as evidenced by the raggedness of his breathing and the unsteadiness of his legs. Yet, as Robin and Vivi watched, he performed an excellent midair bounce maneuver. He shifted from Geppo into Soru, then whirling into a kick that nearly took Luffy by surprise. He was still able to almost dodge out of the way, but his shoulder was still caught by the kick, sending him skittering sideways.

The blow didn't hurt much, though, and Luffy grinned as he charged Sanji again. "Nice one!"

“My word, but you two seem in fine form despite the heat,” Robin observed, announcing their presence as the two ladies walked down to the deck from the conning tower via the stairs set onto the side of the conning tower. *I wonder how often we come out of the conning tower from the entrance directly onto the main deck. Amusing that we’ve all developed the habit of heading up to the bridge first.* “Perhaps you should conserve your energy? Who knows what we might run into down here?”

“She’s right!” Sandersonia shouted to be heard from inside. “That giant octopus isn’t the only danger around here, and this close to those volcanoes, I’d like at least a few eyes on them at all times if you don’t mind.”

Hearing the women’s voices, Sanji had already turned away by the time Sandersonia was shouting, and knelt down in front of them, holding out his hand as if he was a knight about to pledge to a queen. “Dear ladies! Thank you so very much for gracing us with your presence once again. Do you want anything, anything at all, be it food, drink, or anything else? I will make it my life’s mission to see it done!”

Luffy looked on at this for a moment, then looked over at Franky. The two of them exchanged nods, with Franky going so far as to wave the little hand airily towards Sanji as if saying ‘be my guest.’

With that, Luffy crossed the intervening distance in a blitz of Soru, merely mortal speed rather than lightning. Despite that, Sanji was still kneeling there as Luffy’s foot slammed down into the back of his bowed head, driving Sanji face-first into the deck with enough force to almost crack the Adam Wood, earning a loud “OY!” from all around them.

“Yer dead, Sanji. So very, very dead. Never turn your back on an enemy, and if you do it because of your Mellorine Madness™, I’m going to break your fingers, then have Marigold force-feed you for an entire day. While cooking in your own kitchen. There are more important things than your flirting with girls.”

It’d come out during their time on Amazon Lily that Marigold was somewhat equivalent to Akane in Luffy’s past life in terms of her cooking ability. That, and the threat of watching her do so in his own kitchen, should’ve been enough in Luffy’s opinion.

He had underestimated Sanji’s enthusiasm. Or perhaps his addiction.

“No, there are not! Never will I forget to treat each woman as the magnificent flower they are. Never will I acknowledge such a vile, repugnant statement, and never will I allow such to occur in my own kitchen!” the cook added it as an afterthought.

Sighing, Vivi used sand to muzzle him for a moment. “Sanji, your dedication is appreciated, but there isn’t anything we need right now. I also fully agree with our Captain

Turning away from a spar is an incredibly disrespectful thing to do, even setting aside that it's a bad habit. Would you have turned away from a real enemy if you saw a pretty woman run past or call out for help?"

With that, Vivi removed the sand muzzle, looking at Sanji expectantly, even as Robin moved over to Luffy's side, leaning into him and kissing him on the neck for a moment, whispering that they wanted to question him about his world, and the moment Sanji was free, he shook his head. "Of course I wouldn't! I'd simply finish the enemy faster, then perform whatever duty the madam in question wished."

"That's all well and good, but one, you don't need other eyes, Sandersonia. You could've asked me to keep a lookout." With that, Eve appeared, pushing herself up out of the deck to one side of the door, waving at the Boa sister, while making the lights that shone forward from the ship shift this way and that, along with several other lights that Franky had installed in the past few hours.

"These lights act like my eyes, and even if they didn't, I could probably take a page from Robin's book and make my own. Admittedly, they probably wouldn't see that far in this darkness, but—" Eve cut herself off, wagging a finger at her captain. "That's beside the point! Torture Sanji as much as you want, Captain, but don't damage me while doing it! I get more of that enough in combat, and then I can do some damage of my own."

Sandersonia grimaced a little. "Sorry, Eve, but I didn't think that you would respond to me, considering I'm not actually part of the crew. I'm just temporarily on loan from my own. And to put it bluntly, I'm still getting used to the idea that you're real."

Eve hadn't been able to appear around Rayleigh, nor could she appear in front of anyone who wasn't a crewmember. But Hancock and a few of the Kuja seemed to have spent enough time aboard ship to become honorary members. Sandersonia was also acting navigator. "As long as you're acting navigator, I can appear in front of you relatively easily."

It still took her a bit of concentration and effort to put ship through the existential dread of doing so, even in Hancock's case but Hancock was well worth it. So was Sandersonia now, as navigator.

"Actually, that's a good point," Luffy said, not apologizing for a moment as his brain was caught on something else. "Would you get anything out of physically training with us?"

All of the Straw Hats there blinked, cocking their head to one side. "Come to think of it, that is a question," Sanji, Franky, Vivi and Robin all stated as one, each in their own way.

Eve also looked bemused for a moment, bringing up a hand to tug at her hair, something she had gotten from Luffy. "I don't know, Captain," she answered, using his title rather than

name for a second. “I, maybe? Maybe if my spirit is like your ki? Maybe the more I train, the more I get out of it? OOOOhhh... Could I get to the point where I’d be able to repair myself? But then again, I’m a spirit. I mean, I’ve got a body, I guess, but it’s made of deadwood and stuff, and I know I can’t heal or grow. It’s more like a stage for just one person.”

“Stuff, oy,” Franky grumbled. “Don’t be so dismissive about the work and effort I put into choosing every suuuper material they went into you, Eve-chan~. And if you could fix yourself, what would I do with myself?”

Luffy was about to open his mouth and say more training, but an arm appeared on his chest, a thin-fingered, powerful hand clamping over his mouth for a brief moment as Robin spoke up, giving him a meaningful look. “As fascinating as it is to think on that score, Eve, and I think it might be something you need to pursue with Luffy at a later date, right now, it’s getting a little late in the ship day. Franky, why don’t you take over for Sandersonia? We should be near the bottom of the ocean by this point, right?”

“We are. And so long as Eve can keep an eye on anything coming from those nearby volcanoes, I’m fine with leaving the wheel again,” Sandersonia agreed. “Once we get to the bottom, we should be another half-day away from Fishman Island.”

“In that case, let’s all get some sleep. We will want to be at our best when we arrive at Fishman Island,” Vivi suggested, adding to Robin’s words.

Luffy nodded, his eyes still far away, thinking about what kind of training he could give a veritable spirit, and indeed, if she could get anything out of it. He’d never heard of a ghost being able to get anything out of training, outside of certain mangas anyway but it was a possibility he wanted to think about some more.

However, as they descended from the bridge, his thoughts were interrupted as Robin came up behind him, her arms going around his stomach, her breasts pressing into his back. “We’ve told you both in our different ways that your revelation doesn’t change how we see you or our relationship, Luffy, but that doesn’t mean we don’t have questions for you now that we’ve internalized it. I hope you’re prepared,” she breathed into his ear.

Luffy stumbled, a blush coming to his features. *Flipping hell, Robin can turn on the vamp so easy, it’s insane. And why the hell do I still blush at this kind of thing with everything we’ve done together!?* “You, heh, um, ya wouldn’t be you if you didn’t have questions. Ask away, and I’ll do my best to answer. It has been almost two decades since my last life, so a lot of my memories of it are a little jumbled up, or I’ve simply forgotten them entirely.”

That was just an unavoidable fact. As much as some things had carried over, Ranma’s fear of furry demons being the most prominent, Luffy knew he’d lost a lot of his memories over

time, particularly in his younger years and as a baby. He could no longer recall what city he had been in when he had learned the Neko-Ken. He couldn't remember some of the small adventures he been on or things like the name of the ninja who served the Kunos, what Ukyo's last name was and why Ryoga had chased him to China.

On the other hand, he was somewhat surprised at what had stuck in his mind. A lot of the lessons at Furinkan had somehow. A few of the recipes he'd learned from his mom or Kasumi, scenes from video games and a few other weird oddities. This included some... ecchi-type knowledge from mangas he'd gotten from Daisuke and the other guy whose name he couldn't recall, which he had put to good use during his time with his lovers.

"If you can't remember, you can't remember. But that doesn't mean we won't ask in the first place." Vivi chortled at Luffy's expression, sharing a smile with Robin, before grabbing Luffy by his shirt and tugging him along where he had momentarily stopped to look over his shoulder at Robin. "Now come on, love. The hall is certainly not where I want to have this discussion. Even if Eve will still be able to listen in wherever we are."

"I could, but won't," Eve's voice sounded from one side of them, a mouth appearing there for a moment. "The Captain having a past life is weird, sure, but so is my reincarnating into this ship from my original ship, and how that changed me. That's something that's never happened to another klabautermann."

Eve's voice paused, and then went on in a slightly bemused tone. "Weird. I know that for a fact, like it's as certain as my inability to appear in front of non-crewmembers. WIEEERD. Er, anyway, your stuff isn't all that interesting."

"Still, Eve, I'll ask you to keep it to yourself if you don't mind," Luffy ordered mildly. Eve agreed, then they were by the hatch to the captain's quarters, and Vivi opened the door.

Soon, all three of them were ensconced in the book nook overhang. Robin and Luffy sat on the couch, while Vivi claimed the chair, which she rather liked. Leaning against one of the sofa's corners, Luffy looked at his two present lovers. "Ask away."

To Luffy's mild confusion, few of those questions had anything to do with his past life's romantic entanglements. Vivi asked just enough questions on that score to get a feel for Akane, and, as she put it, "The childhood friend, who came into your life again."

In contrast. Robin was more interested in, "The woman named after a hair care product who you called an Amazon, whose people sound remarkably like our own Hancock's."

From that came the understanding that Luffy's past world had many different languages. This intrigued both women, as different spoken languages were very rare in this world. They

were usually a sign of an island that had been cut off from the rest of the world for a long period of time.

Beyond that, their questions concerned Earth as a whole and Japan in particular, on a level Luffy had to struggle to answer. However, he surprised himself numerous times with his knowledge of the world and, in particular, history. Robin was incredibly satisfied on that score, although the idea of World Wars and some of the weapons he described horrified both women. Not just the scale of the conflict, either, but the idea of a world having so many resources, so much land, and still deciding to go to war about things like religion, different political beliefs, and so forth was appalling.

The various types of governmental structures also fascinated them to a point. Alas, there, unlike when it came to the world wars and so forth, Luffy wasn't nearly as able to help. "Sorry, gals, but I know I never voted for anything, never willingly watched anything about politics, and honestly didn't care who was in charge or anything like that. It isn't like any of them cared about me, either."

The ladies were also fascinated with everything else. With geography, with how the people there navigated the oceans. There being no log poses or need for them surprised Vivi, who had never left the Grand Line, and Robin had to wonder how the Grand Line had then been created. "If it is more normal for a planet to only have two poles anyway. With a sample size of only two, I admit we can't assume but still."

Technology, computers, cell phones, the sheer abundance of glass, concrete and so forth, all of that fascinated both women equally. Vivi, totally entranced, looked at the Industrial Era with some awe, understanding how important it must have been. Industrialization on that score was known in their world, but examples were few and far between because you had to have so many resources on hand in order for it to succeed. With transportation being what it was, that was never a guarantee. It would take several nations working together to create a revolution on that scale, and even then, very, very few islands came close to the industrialization of a place like Japan as Luffy described it, going from the "Mangee Restoration or something" to the Industrial Era.

Even then, Japan had been forced to rely on other islands and the mainland for much of its raw materials. Something Luffy remembered very well as the reason for the Second World War. "Just don't ask me more about what we did in it. I can't remember a lot of it, but what I do remember tells me we were not the good guys."

Which didn't even consider how small Japan was compared to places like America. Both women had a lot of trouble wrapping their minds around the idea of continents, let alone nations that large.

Eventually, the questioning wound down, as more and more questions had become so detailed that Luffy couldn't answer. Indeed, many of them were so detailed that he probably wouldn't have been able to answer even if he still had all of his memories from his past life intact, as they had been when he first arrived in this one.

Receiving no reply other than a shrug and a disinterested gaze from Luffy, Robin acknowledged this point, leaning into Luffy's side, humming thoughtfully, her mind ticking over like a metronome as she went through all she had learned. "Fascinating. Simply fascinating! Some of the weapons you describe, Laki and Franky would both get a thrill out of trying to re-create them, I think. We've already created what you call a rail gun, and I think Franky could do even more with the secondary weapons of our ship, while Laki would greatly enjoy working with all the different types of bullets, yet I do understand that you don't know enough to truly help other than give the pair of them a general idea."

She smirked then, shaking her head. "Hah, and I suppose it stands to reason that your knowledge of medicine would be remarkably slim in comparison to your understanding of warfare. Not only because that is very much in keeping with your personality, but also because you very obviously probably didn't need to go to the doctor all that often."

"Heh, yeah, you're right about that. I won't even apologize for it. Besides, there was the whole problem about whether Tofu had seen Kasumi or even heard her name that day. Even when I left Nerima for good and got so good at the Art to make Cologne back off, I couldn't stop that guy from twisting me into a pretzel at the mere mention of her name," Luffy grumbled.

That pain had stuck with him despite several decades having passed between the incident and now, composed mostly of time in this world to boot. The body and the mind did not forget being twisted into a pretzel very easily. Not unless, of course, they had a Devil Fruit that allowed for such things.

"No devil fruits, no World Government. Your United Nations sounds... Incredibly idiotic, frankly, remarkably naïve in its creation, cynical in its usage and altogether toothless," Vivi murmured, the daughter of a king and representative of an incredibly stable, and well-regarded monarchy. "That isn't to say that I wouldn't prefer that to the World Government, but still. That struck me as the strangest of all things, I think. Well, that, and the fact that there are so many different languages in your world. I can't think of more than three off the top of my head, can you, Robin?"

"Spoken languages? I can think of barely a handful beyond the ones you already mentioned. And I certainly can't speak any of them," Robin admitted ruefully. "I tried to teach myself a few languages from books over the years, but I failed miserably, and I've never run into anyone who speaks another language who is willing to teach me. Even after spending years on

Alabasta, none of them were able or willing to teach me the local language for one reason or another. I know a few phrases, but that's it. I assume you can speak it fluently, Vivi?"

"Yes. I can also speak the language of Marduk, one of our historically best trading partners. As for the others I was thinking of, Laki told me her people had a different language centuries ago, from which only a few phrases and terms still survive. Alabastan was actually the first language I learned, alongside the common tongue. I still maintain that Alabastan is by far a more melodic language, though."

Vivi laughed and, feeling a little impish, went on speaking Alabastan now. "//I also think our poems are far better. In this language, I could tell you, Robin, that your eyes sparkle at times like the stars in the sky and have it rhyme. Or Luffy, that when I gaze upon you and your body, it melts my insides with a heat that only your ardor can quench without feeling too embarrassed.//"

The Alabastan language was low, rolling off the tongue from one word to the next in an almost lyrical manner. From Vivi, it sounded undeniably sexy. Coupled with the look she gave her two lovers, and the way she crossed her legs just so. Luffy found himself standing at attention, without any further stimulation needed. He nearly lunged towards Vivi but found hands pressing him down, locking him into place, even as Robin breathed heavily into his ear. "Oh my! That was incredibly interesting, Vivi. Why ever isn't that language used more often?"

Despite living there for three years as their plans came together, Robin had only heard the local language occasionally in her time in Alabasta. While the World Government didn't use violence or overt force to do away with other languages, it had used soft power for centuries to make those languages disappear on any island that had its own language. That was why only the strongest, most stable islands retained them.

Vivi explained all this, then laughed. "If you think me just making up a few, admittedly somewhat raunchy, sentences are arousing, you should read our poetry. I still remember the first time I felt the urge to, ahem, experiment, and it was because of an ancient poem about two lovers."

"I personally like to act rather than read, thanks. I don't know what you said, but it sounded damn sexy!" Luffy nearly growled, trying to push his way up without hurting Robin's arms, which wound around his body, only to twitch as two of her arms appeared on his thighs. One of them went to work on his belt, while the other stroked his fingers up and down his already hard shaft.

"I agree. I am out of questions, for now anyway. I'm certain I'll think of others in the future, but at present I suddenly have something altogether different on my mind. Vivi?"

Delight bubbling within her, Vivi shook her head, bowing her head almost submissively, her hand darting up to rub along the choker she still wore. Despite her submissive stance, when she spoke, it was once more in Alabastan. Speaking in that language, one, her lovers wouldn't understand, somehow gave Vivi a sense of freedom, which is why she was more brazen with her words than she normally would be. “//I can't think of anything, and I do think that I would dearly like to take a turn riding our Captain into the ground or have him take a turn making me writhe under him, our begins joined in the most intimate way possible, my cavern welcoming his length to the fullest.//”

Both of her listeners shivered, with Luffy actually lifting his hips up a little into Robin's breasts where they had appeared on either side of his thighs, as Robin shook her head beside him, her hair rubbing against the side of his face and neck. “Oh my... I have no idea what you actually said, but I will take it as an agreement. And if it was, get over here and kiss me,” Robin ordered.

“Your wish is my command, my lady,” the Princess giggled. Hopping to her feet, she slid her jean-clad rump onto one of Luffy's thighs, forcing one of Robin's arms to disappear, while also pressing her knee gently against Luffy's shaft even as she leaned in to kiss Robin and the serious talk ended for the night.

OOOOOOO

Despite how much fun they had that night, the trio paid for it the next day, as the first thing that any of them heard upon exiting the captain's quarters was Eve's voice coming from a mouth on one of the bulkheads as they headed up to the kitchen. “Franky complained last night about the noise you three were making, and has already begun plans to take apart the bulkheads around the captain's quarters and add more insulation to the deck between it and the commissary.”

Vivi blushed rosily, all of last night's courage escaping her as she squeaked, while Robin blushed a little bit, holding back a “Fufufu” laugh. It fell to her to answer, though, as Luffy was in much the same boat as Vivi, even if he wasn't quite as red as she was. “If we must, we will apologize. His installation worked incredibly well up to this point. It was just this time that some of the action started in the loft, and we did not move from there for some time. At least three full sessions for all of us, I think.”

“Robin!” both her lovers whined as one, and she laughed outright even as they continued on their way.

All of them were sitting down to breakfast up on the bridge, with Luffy taking over for Franky at the wheel. The two men exchanged looks, with Franky giving Luffy first a thumbs up,

then an eye roll and a nudge in the side, the equivalent of 'I'm happy for you, but stop showing off' in man-speak.

For a time, though, no words were shared around the table other than questions to pass the food, with Sanji doing his usual routine of waiting on the three women hand and foot. Then Sanji noticed Vivi's latest fashion statement: the choker that had yet to leave her neck since she first put it on.

"Vivi-chwan, might I say that that choker brings out the color of your skin most magnificently. It is somewhat odd for you to wear something several days in a row," Sanji observed even as he danced in place, his one visible eye turning into a heart. "Not that anything you wear can make you look any less beautiful, Vivi-chwan!"

"Ah, um, well, my choker is not just a fashion accessory, but rather a statement." Vivi smiled demurely as she looked across the table at Robin, then over her shoulder at Luffy. "I rather think it is going to be part of my daily ensemble now, regardless of whatever else I wear."

It took a moment for that to register. When it did, Sanji's heart eye cracked, his entire face turning to stone, while Franky chortled. He seemed to crumble for a moment in his chair, then he was back to looking more like a human than a shattered statue as he glared at Luffy. "You, you bastard, you, you've—"

At that point, Eve's body appeared out of the table, her feet interspersed between some of the plates. "I'm seeing movement out there!" she reported hastily. "We've left the trench behind, and there's movement in the coral. I'm also seeing a lot of light in the distance."

Sanji huffed and blew on his cigarette for a second, his fingers trembling as he fought down the urge to attack his captain for defiling the Princess as well as Robin and Hancock. *Bastard, how dare you! How dare you live the dream I should have you, you...* Even as his thoughts became quite bloodthirsty, he wagged his free hand in front of Eve's face. "Don't just appear out of the table like that. Appear to one side of us if you please. I realize you don't actually wear shoes, and this entire ship and everything connected to it is technically part of your body, but there still needs to be some manner of propriety at the table."

Eve sneered at that and was about to reply before our attention blinked elsewhere for a second. "Captain, I beg to report something just fired at us. Several cannonballs just crossed our bow and to the sides. I'd estimate they were warning shots."

"I saw them from up here, too," Sandersonia reported from the wheel, her voice coming from one of the internal Den Den Mushi, her words making it clear Eve had been talking to her at the same time. "I can't make out who shot the cannons just yet, although I don't think it's

another ship, not moving through the coral beds as they have to be from the angle of the shots.”

At that, Sanji’s self-restraint broke. He leapt to his feet, charging out onto the deck with a whoop of, “Yes, violence! Glorious, glorious mind-numbing violence! Let me forget what I just learned, please!”

“Is that your equivalent of calling dibs?” Luffy deadpanned as he stood up to follow.

“Hell yes! Do not take this from me, you shitty Captain! I will make certain that every meal I serve you tastes like crap from now until the end of time, or is so spicy you burn your mouth beyond recognition.”

Snickering, Luffy shook his head, as Franky and Robin joined him heading out onto the main deck. This left Vivi, who was in no way a battle junky, to join Sandersonia on the bridge. There, Vivi used her sand powers to steer the wheel even as she moved to watch events through a pair of portholes with Sandersonia.

The nature of the ocean around them and their place within it had changed dramatically after Luffy and the girls had gone to bed. No more were they simply floating downward in a sea of blackness, the only light beyond the Everlasting Resolve’s own, along with the flashes of fire in the darkness from the volcanoes, which loomed above and contributed to the stone walls of the trench. Rather, they were now down at the very bottom of the ocean.

In the light of their lamps and a distant light shining through the coral mountains that surrounded the ship, Luffy could see that the bottom of the ocean here wasn’t rock, but rather sand. There were hundreds of tiny, small fish flying everywhere, and not all matching the same variety that the crew had seen before in the darkness above, all sightless and blind with little feelers that glowed to bring in prey. There were still a lot of those, but there were also dozens of others: brightly colored fish, small darting fish, eel-like things that squiggled just beyond the edge of the bubble, as if they understood what the bubble was, and that moving through it would be bad for them.

All around them, large mountains of coral grew, standing almost like skyscrapers. In the distance, the strange, new light shone around and above the coral like the sun would over a massive forest. Only no forest, even in autumn, would have the same colors as the coral did. Blue, pink, dark purple, yellow, even striations of white coral could be seen, among the more typical red, green and orange, and for a moment, any thought of the incoming violence left Luffy’s mind as he took in the scene with Robin beside him, standing by the hatch leading into the ship.

“My word...” she breathed, shaking her head. “Before I met you, Luffy, I had thought I had seen all that I would ever see in this world. Seeing Sky Island and now this, well, I can only shake my head at how naïve I was making any such assumption.”

Luffy nodded, pulling her into a sideways hug for a moment, simply looking around them, then shaking his head with a laugh. “I know I say it a lot, but damn, I love the Grand Line. I’d say the others would be so jealous they missed this, but they’ll see it eventually when we pass through to the New World anyway.”

Shaking his head again, Luffy looked to the side where another series of cannonballs had just come, this time closer to hitting the prow and side of the Everlasting Resolve. “Now, let’s see who wants our attention. Eve, drop anchor. Shooting across our bows like that usually means they want you to stop.” Luffy could see some movement there, but whoever it was, was doing the underwater equivalent of scoot-and-shoot, firing from hiding and moving on. “You sure you want them all when it comes to violence, Sanji? I can already tell that it probably will.”

With his Kenbunshoku, Luffy could tell that they were surrounded despite only one portion of the trap firing on them. But he could also tell that the minds of the people there making up that trap, well, they really weren’t all that powerful. *Honestly, if Sanji hadn’t already called dibs, I’d just use Haoshoku to send them all into Lala land. But they weren’t in a hurry, and dealing with whoever this was would probably give them a good idea of the lay of the land around Fishman Island. I know that Jinbe wasn’t telling us everything when he asked for this meeting, even as open as he was about there being tension between fishmen and humans and his odd frenemy-like relationship with Arlong.*

“Yes, I’m sure. I need to vent my frustrationssss,” Sanji hissed like a snake, glaring over at his captain and Robin. Seeing them hugging one another, his body threatened to turn into stone once again, but he fought through it, his face shifting to almost that of a demon as his teeth sharpened and his eye turned into a bonfire. “And will you stop it with the PDA!”

While he didn’t think sideways hugs like this were PDA, Luffy shrugged, shifting away from Robin for a moment, who settled down into sitting by the door leading into the bridge, a laugh bubbling up from her as she settled one hand on her chin thoughtfully to watch the spectacle. “Fine, fine, I’ll let you have some fun.”

With that, Luffy moved forward, hopping up on top of the rail gun's turret, settling down and turning his head to their port side. There, Luffy was able to tell who was in command of this little group, or rather, the individual whose presence gleamed larger than normal in his Kenbunshoku range.

Despite the water all around them, that range was still incredible. In fact, Luffy could already feel the minds of people ahead of them, well away from the group trying to surround

the Straw Hats. But Luffy couldn't sense anything in particular about the minds themselves. The water around them seemed to interfere with that aspect of his still lightning-enhanced Kenbunshoku.

Honestly, Luffy was kind of happy about that. He didn't really like using his Kenbunshoku to the extent that he could read the minds of those around him like Enel had been able to. He was willing to try using that skill in a fight but not in everyday life. *Not outside of training, anyway. Against old man Rayleigh, we all need every advantage we can get.*

From out behind the coral all around came the giant forms of several sea monsters. All of them were different from one another; some had long necks, others looked almost like sharks. A few of them had fur for some reason, while one of them seemed to have two heads and very laid-back, lazy-looking eyes. The sheer variety in this world's sea monsters always surprised Luffy and now was no different.

Similarly, the group of people on their backs was incredibly diverse, reminding Luffy strongly of Arlong's crew. Fishmen came in literally countless varieties, and a lot of that variety was on show here. Several had more arms than normal, and others had eyes and bodies that reminded Luffy of deep-sea fish. Others looked almost human, except for how scaly they were, with the correct number of arms and legs and even more normal-looking mouths, but their scales or skin color varied tremendously.

Most of them were also taller than a normal human, and broader in the shoulders, with one of them, who wore a cowboy hat of all things and sat ahead of the others on his particular mount, a giraffe-looking critter, looking almost as tall as Jinbe. *Although, if any of them are as tough as Jinbe, I will eat a fugu fish, spikes and all. Without cooking it.*

Even as Luffy mentally lost himself to snickers at the very idea that these people, who all looked like pirates, would be anywhere close to Jinbe's skill in Fishman Karate, let alone his simple strength, the man with the cowboy hat spoke. "You all! I might not recognize all of you from the bounty posters of your crew, but that and the flag you fly are known to us for both good and bad reasons. One of your crew members indeed killed several Tenryubito?"

"Yeah, but if you want to thank him personally, he's not here right now," Luffy shouted back, not bothering to stand up as he looked at the speaker, who was coming upon their ship from the side. "Training comes before diplomacy, like why we're here now, as I want all of my crew ready for the New World. Are you the welcoming party or something?"

"Now, now, you're getting ahead of yourself. After all, to get to the New World, you must be allowed through Fishman Island, and you'll only be getting through if we allow it."

“So, you are the local military, then?” Robin quipped, enjoying the sight of so many frogs lost in wells, not understanding the reality of the world beyond. “Funny, you all don’t seem to be wearing a uniform.”

“Bah! We are the crew of Hody Jones! Out here in the ocean, we of the Fishman District rule. The royal army doesn’t even come out here, human, and you’d best remember that.” The fishman chortled, while the rest of his crew laughed or hooted in derision at the mention of the royal army.

“Oh, I will,” Robin drawled, looking toward Vivi, who frowned a little at that, before shrugging. It wasn’t unusual, after all, for islands to not patrol the waters around them. Fishman District, on the other hand, was a name that had come up in conversations with Jinbe about his crew and his past with Fisher Tiger. Hody Jones, though, was a new name, and Vivi made a note of it.

“You’re far, far away from the surface here, human!” the fishman continued. “Down here, your Devil Fruits make you all weaker, not stronger. And while you all might’ve fought the World Government and killed Tenryubito, your crew also killed Arlong! Killed him, and most of his crew, other than that weakling Hachi! Arlong was a hero to us and you killed him!”

Rolling his eyes, Luffy was going to cut in at that point, but the man kept on speaking, as if he had prepared a speech and wanted to get it all out, his eyes gleaming with the fervor of a true believer as he glared at Luffy and his crew. “You’re also a friend of Whitebeard, who was known as a supporter of that useless fool Neptune. He and his family aren’t nearly as popular as they like to think! Arlong was closer to our hearts than he and the king ever has been. Hells, even the Knight of the Sea bowed to those bastards up on the Red Line! When we should be making war on them, taking our rightful place as masters of all the oceans!”

The fishman pointed dramatically at the Everlasting Resolve as more fishmen came out of hiding places all around them. Whatever the man’s disdain for humanity, he, or perhaps Hody, had known they needed to bring numbers to bear against the Straw Hats. “Now, I ask you, will you serve our captain, Hody Jones, willingly, or will we burst that bubble and enslave you all right here? There is no future where you go free from here. You either leave chained, or you can bow your head and understand your place in the world—”

At that point, Luffy had had enough. “Sanji, go. Franky and I will handle defense. Eve, load the secondary guns and stand by.”

The moment his name left Luffy’s mouth, Sanji kicked off the deck, crossing the distance between the deck and the bubble wall in an eyeblink. Before any of the fishmen could react, he was already out in the water, which began to heat up around his feet as they gleamed with

Diable Jambe. A kick caught one sea monster in the center of the chest, sending it hurtling backward through the water, its riders cascading off of it and charging forward.

“GAH, get him, gut the human!”

“Bite his legs off!”

Before they could close, Sanji was already gone, using a mix of Geppo and Soru to smash into the back of one of the other beasts. Even as that beast wailed in the agony of a broken back, Sanji’s legs crashed out, single kicks or knee strikes enough to send every single fishman there into unconsciousness and off the broken beast’s back.

“Eve, what do you think? Do you want in on this?” Luffy asked, smirking just a little.

“I’d like to Captain. Yet if I fire, these sea monsters and fishmen are going to die,” Eve stated bluntly, her mouth appearing between Luffy’s legs in a somewhat disturbing moment, but Eve had to be careful to not appear visible to any of the surrounding fishmen. That was one sacrosanct rule she couldn’t break. She could not appear to anyone who was not a crew member, or at least an allied and temporarily part of the crew, no matter how hard she tried. “Is that your order?”

“Hmmm... Better not then. We might well be soon within sight of Fishman Island, and if that’s the case, we don’t want the first impression beyond whatever Jinbe’s told them being our wiping out some of their local pirates. Heck, given his talk about the World Government and everything, they might be seen more as freedom fighters.” Luffy gazed out at one group of fishmen swimming towards him, then flicked out several finger bombs in quick succession.

The musket balls crashed into the group one after another with enough force to shatter bone but not go straight through them, as Luffy could have done. Not just because doing so would have killed them all, but also because Luffy still wasn’t certain the coating bubble would survive something hitting it at that speed. “Scum-sucking, Arlong-hero-worshipping freedom fighters, but still...”

Eve’s mouth disappeared with a pout at that, and Luffy turned his attention to another group. However, Franky was already dealing with them. The cyborg had leaped out of the ship and the coating bubble and was now standing in the sand outside. As Luffy watched, his legs shifted, splitting in two. The back portion stabbed deep into the ground, and, with the front creating a stable platform, Franky began to open fire, the knuckles on both hands having clicked open to reveal the weapons within.

“Eve, Robin, keep an eye out to our aft,” Luffy ordered, smirking just a bit. “It seems that Sanji wasn’t the only one feeling a bit anxious.”

Luffy was tempted to join them out in the water to kick ass but figured that he should instead stay and defend the ship. Franky also wasn't moving much, leaving most of the fighting to Sanji. *He probably does need an outlet anyway.*

Twice in the next few minutes, Luffy lashed out with more finger bombs, and once jumped over the side of the ship, landing foot first onto a fishman who had slithered forward along the sand, unseen until he started to climb up the side of the ship. That worthy fell back, his skull possibly fractured as Luffy used his head to kick himself back up to the main deck.

Mostly, though, Luffy just watched, noting how well Sanji was able to get around in the water despite the water slowing him down and the pressure of being so deep down in the water like this pressing down on him. He darted back into the ship's bubble a few times, allowing the surrounding fishmen to recover, but the first two times, the fishmen were in such disarray that they couldn't take advantage.

The third time, though, they did. Most of the wranglers pulled the sea monsters back while those still on monster-back readied cannons, which they used like bazookas even as they lifted them up as if they were as light as pistols. Others joined those charging towards Franky or the ship. One of them, a tiny critter who looked almost like a mascot character, bore straight through some of the coral between his position and the ship, moving so fast it looked almost like he was part industrial shredder.

It didn't matter. Luffy's finger bomb caught the guy right over his tooth-lined, circular mouth, hitting him with enough momentum that his own jump had been stopped in place. He floated away, unconscious and possibly joining the invisible guy in having a destroyed skull.

At the same time, Sanji went back on the attack again, moving too fast for the bazooka-armed fishmen to do more than fire a few desultory shots towards Eve. Again, though, Luffy's finger bomb lashed out, this time from both hands, and those cannonballs exploded on impact with the fast-moving musket balls.

Indeed, so many did that Luffy frowned a bit, his brows furrowing in confusion. "Either I've gotten a lot stronger without realizing it, or these fishy-fellows are using some seriously shoddy iron down here. I wonder which it is?" he mused as he dropped back down to the deck.

"Oh, that was horrible, Luffy." Robin giggled, shaking her head from where she had yet to move, simply watching events all around them, knowing that these idiots were overmatched. "Any more jokes that bad, I'm going to have to punish you."

"Kinky, but that's more Vivi's thing than mine, darling," Luffy answered with a wink her way. *I'm not into pet names normally, but Robin seems to like them occasionally.*

In the distance, Sanji had closed again with the fishmen, who kept on screaming things like, “Damn you, you human! Know your place!” or “We’re going to drown you here in these depths!”

Sanji’s personal favorite was one along the same length he could remember that manta-looking first mate of Arlong’s shouted at him. “Damn you, fall to our Fishman Karate, you inferior air breather! Our strength is like a hundred humans; you all cannot hope to win.”

So says the moron who brought in nearly a hundred fishmen into the fight and is losing against one human, a cyborg, and a shitty captain, Sanji mentally retorted, not willing to waste precious air, letting his sneer and his feet do the talking. Which, in this case, took the form of a kick that caved in the speaker’s chest and hurled him off the sea monster he was on.

That guy seemed to be important to some of the others, who shouted and charged in. “You bastard! Get him!”

Swords flashed, tridents stabbed, and maces whirled, but Sanji’s ability to dodge and move in the water overwhelmed them all despite their so-called natural advantage while in the water. The last two dozen or so fishmen fell, shattered by his kick.

However, Sanji made a mistake. One of the last of the fishmen grabbed his leg, holding him still until he was shaken off while the others tried to attack him. By the time he finished with them, Sanji was out of breath. As Luffy and the others watched, the cook’s hands moved up to grab his throat, his face going blue. He landed on the sand and kicked off, racing back to the ship, but he was too slow, his Geppo in the water, faltering.

Grumbling, Luffy leaped forward, pushing out of the bubble coating. As he hit the water, he felt a moment’s weakness, but that was quickly overcome by the far more familiar feeling of Luffy’s curse. The next instant, the redhead was bouncing forward through the water, landing in front of two fishmen who had played dead among the last group.

They had barely a second to hear her coming through the water and turn before Luffy’s smaller fist smashed one of them in the gills. He instantly went as blue as Sanji was going, while a kick sent the other flying so hard, he crashed into a bit of coral as if shot out of a cannon.

Huh, I wonder if we’re going to get in trouble messing up the coral bed like that? Luffy mused as she grabbed Sanji and turned, racing back to the ship. That wasn’t the only damage done to the coral, but Luffy estimated most of the damage had been done by the fishy fools. *Ehh, probably not. And if there is, we’ll just blame these idiots.*

Soon, soaked to her underwear, Luffy and Sanji were back inside the bubble, breathing in deeply as Luffy landed on the prow. There, Luffy dropped Sanji to the ground, grumbling as

she started to wring out her clothing. "Come on, Sanji. Of all my crew, I'd expect ya to be the one on the most lookout for dirty tricks. Ya got careless at the end."

"Oh fuck you, you Aho-Captain," Sanji growled, coughing and hacking, while also surreptitiously looking up at Luffy's form. While she was more cute than sexy normally, and didn't have the curves, let alone the legs to match any of the single girls on the crew, she was still attractive, and being soaked to the skin made it doubly so. "I still took out most of them, in what, ten minutes. That's way faster than we all did with Arlong's crew way back when..."

"Heh, true. I'm still going to give you an eight out of ten there. Ya let some of 'em past ya, and me, and Franky had to pick up the slack despite your dibs, plus the bit at the end," Luffy stated, noticing where Sanji was looking, but deciding, just this once, not to knock the love cook out. *Robin, Vivi, and I might not have done any public displays of affection, but we've still been kind of rubbing our relationship in his face with how small the crew is on this trip. Laki or some of the Kuja could have diverted his attention, but without them, Sandersonia alone isn't enough. Speaking of...*

"Sandersonia, Eve, get us moving again, please," Luffy ordered, before turning her attention to Sanji, her next words accompanied by the rattle of the anchors being drawn up by Eve. "Feel better?"

"Oh, you have no idea, Luffy!" Sanji murmured, chortling a little to himself as he stood up. Even discovering his cigarette box was soaked through and became useless did nothing to dampen Sanji's good mood. "Violence, glorious violence! The only thing that would've made it better would have been to cook those assholes like so much fish for the glorious mermaids that await us in the distance."

"Oy, Cook-aniki, less of the cannibalism if you please. Fishmen might look like that, but they're thinking people just like you and me. Threatening to cook them like that is a bit much, yeah?" Franky muttered as he pulled himself over the edge. "Did we leave any of them alive, Luffy?"

While Sanji shrugged his shoulders as if he couldn't care less about Franky's opinion, Luffy turned away, nodding. "I think so, yeah..." she frowned then, staring out into the distance, first in one direction, then the other.

Sanji caught that look and asked quickly, "What, are there more incoming?"

"No... but... huh, there is something in the distance. One 'something' is moving." To Luffy's Kenbunshoku, the first mind he felt out there moving was that of a giant, big, or bigger than some of the giants, whose presence Luffy had detected among the Marines. Moreover, there were several other minds slowly entering Luffy's range behind the giant. "It... feels like a

giant, or fishman equivalent, pulling a ship full of other fishmen. Lots of them, but they aren't moving towards us. They're keeping well away from us, in fact and... they're gone, out of my range."

"What is your range again?" Robin inquired as she joined them.

"Around a thousand miles in air thanks to the Goro Goro no Mi, although if I spread my attention that far I have a lot of issues with information overload, unlike freaking Enel who could feel out minds beyond even that. Here in the ocean, it's **way** less than that, like only a hundred or so? Without the Goro Goro no Mi at all, I'd say I'm only sensing around thirty miles. Even when I'm a guy the clarity in that area is way down. I can't read people's minds down here," Luffy muttered in reply, most of her attention on the other thing she could feel. It was well in her range, maybe about twenty miles away on an angle from the starboard of the ship. "There's... there's also... a presence?"

She could feel no spark of intelligence or intellect there, no spark of will, but there was still **something** there. It was a very weird, bizarre feeling, and she couldn't quite put it into words, even as Sanji pushed himself to his feet. "I can feel a few thousand minds there, all jammed into a small area. Huh... feels almost like some kind of small slum, it's that packed in. Or a shanty town. Way more packed than any Alabastan city, or Water 7 was."

"As if my father or family would ever allow there to be a shanty town or similar," Vivi scoffed. "But that's not what's bothering you, is it?"

"No, even with those numbers, I don't think anything there's a threat, not really. But this other presence, it feels... I almost want to call it a ship spirit, but it isn't. I can't figure it out."

"But you say it is vast?" Robin asked, humming thoughtfully. "How big are we talking about?"

"Big. Bigger than the mind that's tugging another ship-full of fishmen along in the opposite direction. If it's a ship spirit, the ship it's inhabiting is **huge**. Way bigger than any ship I've ever seen. It feels as big as two dozen of the biggest Marine battleships all combined into one, in every dimension, not just length, but beam and height."

"Woooo wee... that is a big ship, Luffy. And the first group, you're sure they aren't moving our way?" Franky questioned, one hand combing his hair, while the other hand stroked his chin. "Any watchers left out there?"

"Nope and nope. That group, being tugged along by the giant, is out of my range now. Not that they would matter much," Luffy answered almost absentmindedly. "Eight or nine hundred fishmen would barely be enough to slow us down. But that other thing, I have no idea

what it was!" she suddenly exclaimed, shaking her head and crossing her arms almost angrily. "Damn, but that's going to bother me for a while."

"Now you know how I feel when I can't follow up on an archaeological discovery," Robin chuckled. "Now come, Captain~, we have Fishman Island to get to."

Hearing Robin say the term 'captain' with such endearment had Sanji shuddering, but her next few words banished such thoughts from his mind, and he whirled in place, shaking off a significant amount of the water soaking his clothing and skin like a dog for a second as he grinned cheerfully. "Robin-swan is correct, Straw Hat-aho! We've got far, far more important things to do right now than wonder about that mystery."

With that, he raced off to go get changed, while Franky headed inside along with Robin. Vivi came out to join Luffy, who made no move to transform back to his male body just yet, just in case she would need to go swimming again. The two of them moved to sit on the prow of the ship, staring forward, as Luffy complained about the mystery of that thing she was still sensing in the distance even now as they were moving further away from it now.

Vivi had a thought on that, "You say it wasn't a ship spirit, but Eve, do ship spirits... I hesitate to ask it this way, but do klabautermann die off if their crew dies or if they are left alone for a significant amount of time after you have begun to form? Could such a disaster stop a klabautermann from forming, but let the, the spiritual energy around?"

Eve appeared out of the deck, her face set in a pout under her marine cap and purple-colored hair, and her arms crossed under her chest. "Why are you asking me? I don't know anything more about my people than anyone else. I've told you time and time again, everything I do is instinctual. I know what I can and can't do, I know what I can and can't figure out, what limits I can and can't press at."

As Vivi and Luffy continued to look at her expectantly, Eve sighed. "Ugh. If you're asking me to guess... I'd have to say no. If a ship has been loved well enough for a klabautermann to appear, it will appear, and if the crew dies, it will still be there, powered further by sadness at their deaths. That's why we're sometimes called the ghosts of dead ships. At least, that's what I think. Maybe if it were abandoned before the spirit fully formed, the process would stop, but even then, the ship spirit's energy would probably dissipate. But those are just guesses."

"Hmm... Still, it's a thought. Not enough to quench my curiosity, but enough to let me set aside the mystery for now."

Vivi had another thought just then, one that had to do with the secret letter that had been passed down through her family, the letter that had survived for so long because someone powerful had somehow created a loop or a knot of Haki within it, which acted almost like

Busoshoku to preserve the note. He had mentioned at the time that the paper had felt incredibly odd to him, and his (currently her) description of this distant ship had brought that to Vivi's mind. *Still, that should be impossible for something so huge, right? Wouldn't it take a commensurately powerful person to do something similar to something so large?*

She might have brought it up, but just then, Fishman Island came into view around the mountain of coral to one side of them. The sight of it drove such thoughts from her mind as she stared not just at the island itself, but at what surrounded it, a view one of the most incredible she had seen. "Wow..." she breathed.

Robin and Sandersonia also stared from within the conning tower, as did Franky and Sanji, who had returned after getting changed. Well, Sanji had. Franky hadn't bothered changing out of his swim trunks and drenched Hawaiian shirt.

The coral forest had faded all around them, leaving the Everlasting Resolve facing into what should have been a cave, the depths and side of which were out of Luffy's Kenbunshoku range, let alone the eyesight of those on the ship. Fishman Island was known as a gateway through the Red Line, set into a tunnel that went below the massive mountain range.

However, that was not at all the case. First and most importantly, there was light. As much light, if diffused by the water, as there would have been on the surface. The light came from giant, stripe-patterned tree roots that looked like those of the Yarukiman Mangroves, with numerous arches on both sides of the area growing up towards the distant top of the tunnel.

These were the roots of the Sun Tree; Eve, whose top was up there somewhere, sticking up out of the ocean or the ocean-level of the Red Line. Franky, Luffy and Sandersonia had asked Rayleigh about it, and he had informed them that the Sun Tree's branches were worked into the walls of the Red Line, sticking out in various places just enough for the branches to soak in the rays, too far removed to give the World Government any more than a vague idea of where Fishman Island was located.

Photosynthesis captured sunlight from on high and transported it deep into the ocean's dark depths, lighting this portion of the ocean. So big were the tree roots that they almost made the sea monsters, Luffy could see moving around them, seem small.

Set among the glowing roots of a mangrove tree was an island surrounded by a giant bubble. It was a small island, far smaller than the tree, perhaps almost the size of Water 7 or less. It sat there, with the bubble half-full of water, the actual island sitting on it.

From this angle, none of the crew could make out much of the island itself, except that it rested on water, and that the outer shell of the bubble had what looked like a hatch of some kind set into it. Luffy wondered internally if that was because the bubble itself was so fragile, or

if it was the exact opposite, that it was so thick that normal ships wouldn't be able to push through it. Not without doing disastrous damage anyway.

After a few moments, Sandersonia, who had also enjoyed the view, as she had only been here a few times before, had the Everlasting Resolve shifting upward instead of going along the bottom of the ocean towards heading upwards towards that entryway.

For this trick, the crew had to get out the sails, something they had never needed to do before, not even when the Everlasting Resolve had been following Gion's ship to Impel Down. Alas, up was not a normal direction for any kind of ship barring submarines, which, despite the coating, the Everlasting Resolve very much was not. However, Luffy and Sanji could create enough wind between them to push the ship along with its sails.

While Sanji, Robin and Luffy handled the sails under Sandersonia's direction and Vivi manned the wheel, Franky released some ballast. As he did, the bubble around the ship shrank noticeably as they began to leave a stream of air bubbles behind them. "This is why you'll need to get a second coating before trying to return to Kuja island," Sandersonia warned as she came out of the bridge.

Given to her by Hancock, Sandersonia had an Eternal Pose that would let them return to Amazon Lily, hidden in a box in one of her pockets. It wasn't going to leave her person, unless she was dead or they returned to her home island. That was a sign of both how serious Sandersonia took her duty to her sister, as well as how rare Eternal Poses to Amazon Lily were. There were only three of them in existence, and the Kuja had long lost the ability to make more.

Nor would any of them ever even think of letting someone else onto their island to make more. Especially, since the majority of people who could make such worked for the Yonko or the World Government. Even now, with their alliance with the Straw Hats being so solid, Sandersonia had refused any idea of giving it to Luffy for safekeeping in his ki space.

"Understandable, after all, air is a finite resource down here. In fact, I wonder if we'll need air tanks or something similar for that journey we will have to bring along further. If it were easy to move from Amazon Lily to here, then I'm certain that your people would be doing so more often," Robin mused.

"True. Thankfully, we won't need to worry about sea monsters. Not with Luffy having Haoshoku like my sister," Sandersonia replied, before turning to head back to the bridge.

"Oh, but if you want to see Vivi do her diplomacy thing, you might want to get in here." The green-haired Kuja snickered. The very idea of a group of pirates needing a diplomatic officer had tickled her fancy a lot over the past few days.

“Actually, we changed her formal title to communications officer while aboard ship, and diplomatic officer when dealing with, well, diplomacy,” Robin stated dryly, her own expression flickering with amusement for a second as she headed up to the bridge with the other woman. “Essentially, when we need to make nice with the locals. If we don’t, then Luffy and the rest of the crew are fully capable of resorting to diplomacy by other means.”

While the real reason behind Robin’s amusement went over her head at that last sentence, Sandersonia simply nodded at that. Sanji and Luffy remained still for a moment, working at the sails, continuing to push the ship up at an angle toward the giant hatch leading into Fishman Island. Soon, though, the ship was level with the hatch and could continue under its normal engines.

The two of them had barely taken down the sails and joined the others on the bridge, when the reason for Sandersonia’s words became apparent by the ringing of the Den Den Mushi. It was set into the same piece by Adam Wood that held the wheel, and Luffy smirked. “Good timing on our part.”

“They probably had us in their spy glasses for a few minutes by this point, but your flag is well enough known that they probably already called in who we are,” Sandersonia explained. “They did that a few times when Hancock-nee-sama led us to the New World before this. In your case, you’ll probably get a more formal welcome than we did.”

“How many people made a fool of themselves, falling over one another to impress Hancock?” Luffy asked with a grin.

“Oh, everyone who met her. Even among people used to mermaids, Nee-sama’s beauty is unmatched,” Sandersonia answered with reflected arrogance. “That included the king and two of his sons who came by to see if the stories matched reality, although they, of course, were ostensibly there to make certain we didn’t make trouble. As if we would have been that stupid.”

Rolling her eyes at that, while internally acknowledging that Sandersonia had a point about how beautiful her sister was, Vivi picked up the speaker portion of the Den Den Mushi and held it to her mouth. “Good afternoon. This is the Straw Hat Pirates' communications officer. We are here to meet with your king, Neptune and Jinbe. Beyond that, some of our crewmen will want to visit your markets but that is all for this trip.”

“Err... Communications officer, we’re not used to pirates of any kind having one of those, but yes, the king told us to be aware you were arriving for a meeting,” a male voice answered from the other side. It was a little gravelly, but pleasant enough for all that and certainly polite. “We’ve already sent a runner to find the Knight of the Sea, wherever he is on the island and word has been sent to the palace via Den Den Mushi. You’ll be allowed to use the entryway,

please, once you're in, wait for one of us to meet with you, to direct you to the proper docks after."

Frowning a little bit at that, Luffy shrugged her shoulders. "Fine by me, I guess. At least it doesn't sound as if they're trying to hide us away or anything like that. If we're to build an alliance with these people, they can't be trying to hide us from their people. You think we should tell them about the pirates we ran into?"

Nodding in agreement, Vivi suited words to action a second later. "Understood. We're making for the hatch now and are perfectly willing to wait on the other side for your local helmsman. Also, be advised that we encountered a group of people professing to speak for a Hody Jones who attacked us. We dealt with them all, but we left them alive where they tried to attack us. Be advised that any further actions by that group will be met with lethal force from now on."

Luffy gave Vivi a thumbs-up for that addition, while a low growl wound around the room from Eve, who knew she'd be the one to deal out the damage in that event.

There was a good deal of cursing on the other end, but eventually the same voice came back. "Um, understood. We will need to talk about local policy when it comes to Hody Jones and his people. They're not exactly pirates, but they're not exactly well-liked either. Just please, don't go looking for any trouble with them. And don't think that they speak for all of us either."

"I'm getting some mixed messages there," Vivi admitted, looking over at the others after replying that her captain would keep that in mind and hanging up. "He didn't outright call them freedom fighters, but I got the impression that it was more because of their actions than because he wasn't sympathetic with that whole spiel about vengeance on the World Government and so forth. If the local government wants to simply maintain the status quo, and this Hody Jones character wants to lash out at the surface dwellers, and that has resonated with the normal people of Fishman Island, we'll need to be aware of it going forward."

Luffy made a face, shaking her head. "I get what you're saying, but I still would prefer to knock them all out with my Haoshoku the next time they try to make trouble. And then stomp in the faces of anyone who thought Arlong was a hero."

Franky looked on, as Sanji and Luffy exchanged grim little smirks at that, with Luffy cracking her knuckles and Sanji lighting a cigarette with what Franky felt was fell intent. When he looked at them in confusion, Luffy blinked and realized he hadn't heard that story before, the only one there who hadn't.

"You saw how Nami was walking on eggshells around Jinbe for a while, right, Franky? Well, she had run-ins with fishman in the past. They took over her island, killed her adopted

mom, threatened to wipe out her village, and only didn't, when they realized how useful her maps could be. He then made her life a living hell for years, at least six, maybe as many as eight years, before she met the rest of the crew. Anyone who thinks that guy was a hero is going to have a big problem with me."

I understand why Jinbe did what he did, why he tried to shield Arlong, and the bonds between crewmen and the leadership of Fisher Tiger. But I for sure don't have that kind of hang-up when it comes to dealing with idiots like that. And if the locals have allowed some kind of cult following or whatever to grow up because they're not willing to vilify someone who fought in the same crew as Fisher Tiger, well, I'm more than willing to be the bad guy here, Luffy thought grimly.

She then smirked just a little, looking around at her crew, while the Everlasting Resolve shifted up to be equal with the entryway into Fishman Island. "So, what are all your plans when we arrive? It's what, barely lunchtime, right, so we can get a lot done today. Sandersonia, I know that you wanted to come with us to meet the king to speak for your sister. Sanji, I don't even have to ask, do I?"

"Supplies then mermaids, mermaids, and supplies, mermaids, **mer~m~aids!**" Sanji sang, dancing in place, with Franky joining him after a brief grin at the rest of the crew. While he technically didn't have the total package anymore to do much with a girl, that didn't mean he was blind; else he wouldn't have liked to hang out with the twins as much. Franky would cheerfully enjoy the sights of Fishman Island but he was here for an entirely different reason, a reason he reminded Luffy and the others of now.

"I'm here to talk with Den, my old master's brother. He'll be the one to do our coating when we leave here for Amazon Lily, and one of the things that my old master told Baka-berg and me to do, if we ever could were to speak about his life to his brother, tell Den everything we've done together, and that Granny Kokoro was still alive and well."

At the mention of the ancient icefish mermaid, Sanji's expression shifted, and he slumped in place, while Luffy shivered. "Ugh, damn it. Every time you mention her, I'm reminded she was supposed to be a mermaid. Thank God, we never saw her transform. Mermaids are supposed to stay young and gorgeous forever."

Sanji nodded firmly, for once united in masculine denial of a dream that needed to be protected with his captain, despite Luffy's current gender, but then an arm appeared on both their shoulders, while a sand hand came up in front of both of them. The next instant, both cook and captain reeled, as the pair of hands slapped them one after another. "So rude, you two," Vivi grumbled, shaking her head. *Men can be so weird sometimes.*

Robin merely chortled, shaking her head, giving the impression she had joined in on the moment more for fun than because she had been truly displeased. "For my part, you know I'm going to go searching for a Poneglyph. I know there is one on Mermaid Island from my readings, but not where."

"I still say that sounds way more interesting than meeting the king. Vivi, I don't suppose—" Luffy began, only to be cut off as Vivi glared at the redhead. Sand began to billow up around her in various sharp, dangerous-looking points, all of which shifted forward to threaten Luffy.

"Don't even think about it! If you try to run off or anything and leave me to do all the negotiations on my own, I'm going to show you precisely how good my control of sand is by thrusting dozens of sand swords down your throat!" Vivi emphasized every few words with a different dagger of sand shifting forward to tap Luffy on the chest, with the final one remaining there and sliding upwards to her throat. "If we were simply passing through, I would be perfectly willing to meet with the king or whatever authority we would need to deal with to do so peaceably on behalf of the crew. But as it is, when we are trying to basically add Fishman Island as a satrap of your growing territory, that is something you very much need to be there for!"

However, while Sanji twirled in place and commented about how amazing Vivi looked when she was being all threatening, Luffy simply smirked at the shorter girl before deciding that it was probably better to play along with the princess in the interest of keeping the peace in the bedroom as she moved over to grab a heated cup of water. "Fine, I get it, I'll make nice with the locals, up to a point anyway."

As she transformed back to his natural body, his tone shifted, indicating the real reason why he wasn't in any hurry to meet with the locals. "But if they really are trying to look the other way or whatever for any reason to pirates who think like Arlong did, I'm not going to let that stand."

Pulling back the sand of the various daggers, Vivi agreed, looking almost demure for a moment. "I'm glad we agree. And on that score, I would never gainsay you, my Captain. I am but your diplomatic officer; I don't make policy."

As the rest of the crew, even Sandersonia, looked at her askance, Vivi giggled, and Luffy rolled his eyes. After a second, she went on more seriously. "Besides, Nami's my friend, and the idea of anyone who would have joined Arlong in hurting her is enough to make my blood boil, too."

Soon after that, the Everlasting Resolve reached the entryway, which opened ahead of them, letting the ship through. Luffy watched as that outer hatch opened, letting them in, then

letting them in again, showing that it wasn't just one thin bubble, but several layers that the hatch had been set into. On the other side, the water lay filling the bottom half of the giant bubble, continuing towards Fishman Island.

On the other side of the entryway, the Everlasting Resolve halted for a moment as someone came down from on high. However, it wasn't one person, but two, and both were known to the Straw Hats and Kuja rep. "Everyone! How are you all doing!" Camie the mermaid shouted, while next to her, Jinbe floated down towards them.

They were both using something that looked like the bubbles from Shabondy Archipelago. The bubble wrapped around their waists, letting them kick or shift through the air like they were in the water.

"Camie-chaaaa~nn!!" Sanji shouted, twirling in place and bowing towards the girl as she alighted on the deck of the Everlasting Resolve. "How are you doing? Can I get you anything to drink or eat? It has been so long since your beauteous visage graced my eyeballs that I could cry."

Luffy held up a card with 5/10 on it, shaking his head. "Sanji, I think you're a little out of practice. Five out of ten, that last line just went to an awful place with those last few words."

As Sanji slumped in place and muttered 'I know' under his breath, Jinbe tried to ignore the cook, reaching out to shake Luffy's hand. "Robin, Franky, Sanji, good to see you all. I have been tasked with bringing you to the Royal Docking Area. The three princes came down to escort you to see their king, and I thought to do introductions and give you all a brief tour before you met with the King."

"That sounds lovely," Robin agreed for them all as Vivi came out onto the deck. She and Jinbe exchanged pleasantries as the large whale shark fishman moved into the bridge to take up position at the wheel.

Soon, the ship was moving around the island, as Camie pointed out several sights close to the shoreline. There were numerous small coves, the first of which she pointed out by saying, "Pirates are allowed to drop anchor there, there and there, you'll see they all have posts where local army officers will have them pay a fee and be watched. Since Whitebeard's flag flew, all the pirates were on their best behavior."

"I met the man," Luffy drawled. "That was undoubtedly a good move on their part."

As was, in his opinion, the fact that those areas were notably set a wide distance from the rest of the island, on a raised bit of coral barely connected by a wide walkway to the rest of the island. However, the next area was of more interest, and Vivi and Sandersonia began to

smile at the sight of dozens of families on a beach. There were a lot of amazing-looking coral slides, swirling eddies and so forth, making it look like a water park, almost, if small in scale.

“Deeper inland, just over those houses, is the shopping district, Coral Hill. That’s where I work at Master Papaag’s shop,” Camie enthused. “There’s also the Mermaid Café, which Madam Shyarly runs.”

“Mermaids, mermaids,” Sanji whispered like a mantra under his breath, as he presented a hastily made but still exquisite-looking cold beverage to Camie. “Might we take it alright with a name like that, the café has mermaids working there?”

“Oh, of course,” Camie laughed. “I used to work there, but I was a bit too clumsy. They work there like this.” She gestured down to herself, where her bottom half was held up in the air by a bubble wrapped around her middle. “And bring in a lot of business. I could have introduced you to a few of the workers if we had gone the other way. All the unattached mermaids live in Mermaid Cove, but that’s around the island in the other direction.”

“Turn us around!” Sanji shouted, leaping towards the conning tower and nearly ripping the hatch leading into the bridge off its hinges. “Turn us around right now, Jinbe! Mermaids, Mermaid Cove!”

While mildly tempted to agree to that sentiment, Luffy simply laughed, shaking his head. “None of that, Sanji. You’ll be able to see the sights later.”

Oblivious to the fact that Sanji was now clinging to Jinbe, shaking the far larger man as he pleaded with him, Camie continued, talking more about Papaag’s shop than anything else. She also pointed out the upper district, where the richer fishmen, merfolk and attached mermaids lived, while also pointing out several stalls visible on the beach, which sold good food.

As she wound down, Robin asked the younger girl what she and Hachi had been up to since Zoro and Sanji had rescued her from her kidnappers at the Human Auction House. Camie replied that she and Hachi had eventually gotten back to Fishman Island, where they had, with some help from Madam Shyarly, who Camie seemed to hold in high regard, started up their own Takoyaki stand. That idea still bothered Luffy a bit, but he didn’t say anything.

“We had just gotten it up off the ground when Jinbe arrived back, and soon after, rumors about Whitebeard’s death began to arrive. There aren’t many people here who get newspapers, for um,…” Camie chuckled a bit wanly, gesturing up and around past the bubble protecting the island, “obvious reasons. But those who did started telling everyone about what the World Government was reporting about the clash you all and the Whitebeard Crew had with the

Marines. Um... then the princess's interview arrived... and still more rumors and talks began all around the island."

She shivered a bit, looking over her shoulder toward the conning tower. "Without Sir Jinbe being here, there'd be a lot more chaos and confusion, even with as strong as the Royal Army is. But he and his crew have done a lot to keep things calm, along with the princes. Still, there's a lot of worry about what will happen when pirates start to come in again. There haven't been any since we got back, but that's not going to last."

While Vivi catalogued all that, Luffy latched onto one thing that interested him more than the fact that Fishman Island needed his flag to help stabilize and protect it. "Huh? Really?" He turned and shouted towards the conning tower. "Oy, Jinbe, were there any signs of the other Supernovas? I mean, we ran into Bonney, but she had her own reasons to still be in the Archipelago."

Jinbe answered back, still steering the ship forward along the coastline to what amounted to the back of the island from the entryway. "Hoh? That sounds like a tale. But no. By the time I arrived, the Supernovas were already through. Prince Fukaboshi, the oldest of the three princes, actually met with one of them, and he can tell you about him, while Captain Kid stormed through weeks before I got back here. Whitebeard was still alive then, so he made no trouble. As for the other two, we only have a rumor of a strange ship bypassing the entryway at one point soon after my crew and I arrived back. Whoever that was made no trouble and left quickly."

Luffy frowned a little. "Robin, remind me to ask Rayleigh about any rumors that mention the Supernovas." *I really hope Mr. Tattooed Skank comes through on those White Den Den Mushi. I like Amazon Lily, but we really need to be able to get news and, more importantly, real information more often.*

He had said this loudly enough for Jinbe to hear, and the man chuckled, still ignoring Sanji, who had moved away from him to once more wait on hand and foot on Camie. "Indeed, we here on Fishman Island know that refrain well. King Neptune does have a few contacts elsewhere, but if he has any information on the Supernovas, he hasn't shared it with me. You could ask him yourself when you meet him, of course."

Luffy grunted at that, while Robin informed Jinbe that their whole crew wasn't going to be there for that meeting. "We have our own goals to be here currently. The only two who will be there are Luffy and our dear princess."

While that surprised Jinbe, Camie was happy and promised to show Sanji and the others around as best she could. Sanji responded to this with twirls and a small plate of incredibly well-made canapes.

Moments later, Luffy and the others looked on, as the ship pulled into one of the two docks situated there. It was a highly decorative area, with numerous uniformed folks around, no shops and little actual activity, but it was close to several rich areas and had long, wide paths leading towards where Camie had indicated the shopping district was.

There was already a ship, of a sort, waiting in the other dock. In this case,, it was a living ship in the form of a long, eel-like creature, on top of which sat a series of open seats and a large, covered structure that looked almost like a small house.

In the open seats stood three young men, all of them merfolk. They all had the fishtails that set them apart from fishmen, yet for all of that, their upper bodies still looked more human than most fishmen.

The one in the middle, who sat with his eyes closed and his hands set in a triangle in his lap, as the *Everlasting Resolve* slowed to a stop, was the largest and oldest-looking of the three. Looking almost like he could be as tall as Garp standing on Jinbe's shoulders, he was broad-shouldered, with heavily muscled arms and a thin waist, and a dark blue cloth of some kind tied around his waist by a long blue sash that then seemed to arch up over his shoulders. Blue was definitely his color, given the color of his hair and the scales of his tail, while he also had a series of gills set into his shoulders, and a trident in his hand, as long as any pike.

The other two were not nearly as impressive looking. Worse, Luffy couldn't detect any hint of Haki from any of the three, which was somewhat disappointing. One of them was short, at least in relation to the other man, being only the size of Luffy standing on Sanji's shoulders, maybe around sixteen feet or so. He was rotund, with thin arms, a green cloth around his center wrapped by a yellow cloth that, like his brother's, wound up and around his shoulders, and seemed to have been given a second helping in the ears area.

For some reason, he also wore a hat that looked like either a colorful skull cap or a snow hat; Luffy wasn't certain which. His face, unlike the serious expression on the larger man, was set into an eternal grin, the size of which reminded Luffy of Kokoro, no matter how hard he tried to steer clear of remembering her. He also had what looked like a longsword made for his size strapped to his back.

The other man was only a foot or so taller than the rotund one, but was also the only one of the three wearing something that could be called a shirt. In this case, that meant a white doublet with circular, built-up shoulders. He looked vaguely like an oarfish, almost like their mode of transportation in a way, with a tail that made up at least held his body length, thin arms, and an orange sash tying the shirt closed around his middle. He had pink hair done in some strange, ribbonlike fashion, and his ear quota seemed to have gone entirely to his shorter

brother, as he barely had an ear to speak of to break up the smoothness of his head. Twin swords rested, tied to his waist, one to a side.

All three turned to look at the Everlasting Resolve as it came up alongside the dock, and were waving at the pirates as Eve, unseen, dropped the anchors. "A-hooray, hello! You would be the Strat Hats, yes? Sir Jinbe speaks highly of you all, Mambo!"

"Indeed, Tralalala~, he did. He and our father have been talking about you and the idea of using your flag in place of Yonko Whitebeard's, Tralalala~," the one with the shirt added to the fat one's words, both of them speaking almost as if they could break out in song at any moment, if in two different manners. "We wanted to meet you and get your measure before you met with our father, Fo~so~le~do~!"

"Greetings," the older, taller brother intoned, his voice formal and stern in comparison to his two brothers. "We are the sons of King Neptune. I am Fukaboshi, this is Manboshi," he patted the shortest one on the shoulder, before doing the same with the thinner one, "and this is Ryuboshi."

With that, he shifted forward, moving with fluidity and speed despite not having one of the strange bubble contraptions around his waist, shifting forward and off his perch on the eel's back as easily as if his sharklike tail were a pair of normal legs. Luffy matched him, followed by Vivi, who took the lead, curtsying. "Greetings, Prince Fukaboshi. I am Vivi, diplomatic officer of the Straw Hats. This is indeed my Captain—"

"Luffy. Just Luffy. Please don't call me that Lightning King moniker. It's cool but too chunni. As for Straw Hat..." Luffy grinned, tipping his hat up. It was on his head at present, as it usually was, unless a fight was on the offering or they were inside. In those cases, the hat went into his ki space. "That's fine, but also kind of lame. We've also got a representative of the Kuja Pirates with us. In the future, Vivi will be able to speak for the whole alliance, but for now, Hancock wanted her own rep here."

"And to also acquire certain purchases the Kuja had made in the past via messenger," Sandersonia added, as that was just as important. Some of those were to be kept secret from any man, and some... just from Luffy, the thought of which was almost enough to cause Sandersonia to both want to blush and giggle at the same time. "I will do so after meeting with the king."

"Of course." Fukaboshi bowed his head lightly to them, even as he held out a hand to Luffy.

Luffy took it in his own, feeling Fukaboshi's far larger hand clasping over his own. But if he thought that Luffy would be thrown by how much larger Fukaboshi's hand was than Luffy's

forearm, he would have been surprised. That surprise was compounded a second later as Luffy's small hand gripped a portion of Fukaboshi's palm. Firmly. Firmly enough to make it clear to the trained eldest prince of the Ryugu Kingdom that Luffy was notably a good deal stronger than he was.

Releasing the grip, Fukaboshi gestured up to the eel. "Please, come with us. If your fellows wish to be dropped off, we can do so at Gyoncorde Plaza, which gives them easy access to every shopping district, not just the high-end area. Also, to get to Ryugu Palace, you must take to the skies, and your ship doesn't have a bubbly coral ring to do so. I have also been asked to pass a message on to you."

"Jinbe mentioned you meeting one of the Supernova... huh, should I still consider myself one of them? I might be young, but I doubt anyone's gonna call me a rookie pirate at this point," Luffy mused, as he followed.

The others all did the same, with Robin being the last off the ship, leaving Eve instructions to "Do your unseen best to make certain no one comes along and messes with our ship, please."

The answering cackle had been both endearing, coming from the young spirit girl, and gratifying.

For Robin, anyway. Manboshi shivered, shaking his head as he looked around. "Gah, wha, what was that, a hu rey? Someone just cackled like a madwoman, mambo."

Robin smiled as she created dozens of legs to carry her up and over to the eel's back like a pair of extra-sturdy stilts. She landed next to Vivi, the two women sharing a small seat at the back of the open area nearest the covered house-like construct. "Mah, that is strange. Perhaps you heard a ghost?"

Manboshi and, surprisingly, Fukaboshi both shivered at that, while Luffy and the other Straw Hats exchanged amused looks. A moment later, they were up in the air, slowly circling over the island.

As they went, Fukaboshi asked Luffy a few martial arts-type questions and a few questions about his adventures up to this point, all of which Luffy answered easily. Learning from those stories how dangerous the Everlasting Resolve was, Fukaboshi and Ryuboshi looked at one another in speculation then over to the ship's carpenter. "This would be work that you did, Franky? You introduced yourself as the shipwright of your crew, correct? Could we perhaps purchase your services for a time?"

"At this point, I'd be more inclined to leave you with some super designs than agree to do any more work or stay here for any length of time." Franky shook his head. "Sorry, but I got a

lot to do back on Amazon Lily as it is. Which isn't even mentioning all the training that this slave driver," he hooked a large thumb towards Luffy, "is making us do."

"I'm not apologizing," Luffy laughed, shaking his head.

"Far be it for any of us to downplay the importance of training," Fukaboshi agreed with his own little chuckle. "Still, regardless of how well your conversation with my father goes, we will probably be purchasing some supplies from you. The Whitebeard flag has still worked to some extent, as his crew is still largely intact. But none of the division commanders cause as much existential dread or fear as Whitebeard's own name. That may change in the future, but it might not, and we have dealt with at least four instances in the past week alone of pirates from Paradise making trouble. Only one New World Pirate made trouble, thankfully, which Jinbe dealt with, but there are also local issues, some of which have been festering for a good while. Perhaps if we had better ships..."

He trailed off as his brothers both placed a hand on his shoulder, looking as if they were commiserating with him about something. Luffy got the impression it was a family thing and didn't press, though he did mention the group of fishmen they dealt with outside.

"Hody Jones and his group are known to us. The man, he was the one to discover the pirate who slew Queen Otohime and took it hard. We have looked the other way ever since then because we understand his anger and rage, and, admittedly, sometimes they deal with pirates who would disrupt the island's peace before they even arrive here."

"Jinbe told us of how the old Queen died, and you have my sympathies, but is letting such a divisive group alone truly in the best interests of your kingdom?" Vivi asked delicately, frowning just a little bit. "I know a thing about wanting to take a soft hand on patriots who might be acting from love of your country rather than loyalty to the royal family, but this group talked about overthrowing your government and waging war on the surface dwellers."

"Not only is that disruptive in the extreme for you, it's also exceptionally stupid. You and your folks might have a lot of advantages down here on the bottom of the ocean, but if you made offensive war, most of those advantages would evaporate," Robin added, more prosaically. "If someone like him took over your kingdom, it would lead to ruin in the long term. Might it not be better to simply deal with him and the fallout from doing so now?"

"As I told you," Fukaboshi said, his tone going stiff. "We have left him alone because he is not a real true threat. Admittedly, since Whitebeard's death they have been making more trouble for the Royal Army, a far cry from actually doing any true harm to our nation. Whereas if we clamp down on them, we would be accused of jumping at shadows at best, and at worst, of outright racism against fishmen, who make up the majority of his followers."

“And what if I told ya that to use my flag, I’d want to demand that you move against them? Because from where I’m standing, they disdain humans and want to put us all in chains. That’s something I take a little personally,” Luffy said grimly, not looking over to where Sandersonia was scowling angrily, her hands clenching and unclenching.

“Now, now, this is the time for such conversations. Simply take in the sights, and set aside this serious conversation for when you meet with King Neptune. He is the one who will be making policy here, and any agreements with you or the Kuja,” Jinbe interjected, shaking his head slightly. “As for you, Fukaboshi, remember that I was the one who asked Luffy to loan us his flag to protect our island. I know full well how strong he and his people are. They can be a major help in the future, the larger issue that you and your family are dealing with at present.”

Fukaboshi subsided, as did Luffy after a few seconds staring at one another. Luffy wasn’t certain why the prince was so recalcitrant or what the larger issue he and his family were dealing with at present. On this score and thought it was only partially because they understood where Hody Jones was coming from. Regardless, he set that aside for now and did indeed take in the sights for a few moments.

At that moment Fukaboshi spoke, bringing Luffy’s attention back to him, “By the way, I was asked by a pirate who stopped in here more than a week and a half ago to pass on a message to you. He was most respectful as he moved through our territory, and even helped put down another pirate crew that tried to make trouble at the time. He requested to speak with us in particular to pass on this message to you. His name was Priest Urouge.”

“One of the other Supernovas,” Luffy agreed, frowning just a little bit. “I’m guessing that guessing we’d have to pass through here wouldn’t exactly be a great leap of logic, but I have no idea what kind of message Urouge’d leave for us—” Luffy’s voice cut off as Fukaboshi pulled out a communication snail.

“This communication snail has a direct line to one in his presence. I was told that he would like you to call him when you all are in the New World, however long that takes. Urouge told me, and I quote, ‘I owe you a vengeance you took in my name, without even knowing of it. And anyone who stands against the Tenryubito and their perfidy has a friend in me.’”

“That is a remarkably open-ended thing for any kind of pirate to say. Most pirates would take it personally if someone else claimed a revenge that they thought their own,” Robin murmured. “Still, perhaps priest Urouge is a priest first, pirate second.”

Luffy nodded at that, trying to remember what he knew about the other supernova, which was scant little. Then something occurred to him. “Isn’t he a Sky Islander?”

Sandersonia nodded, along with Sanji. “A Birkan, to be specific,” Sandersonia added.

All the Straw Hats who had been in Sky Island exchanged glances. “Well, that might explain it.”

Fukaboshi looked at them all in confusion, but none were willing to elaborate, and the conversation turned back to Fishman Island. The two other brothers started waving, as the eel began descending in preparation for letting Robin, Franky and Sanji off, and the people below them seemed to recognize the eel and who might be on it.

“EEE, it’s the princes! Manboshi is so cheerful, I love it!”

“Fukaboshi-sama! I want to make you smile one day!” a young female voice shouted.

This was followed by several older voices. “Ooh, it’s Boss Jinbe! Boss!”

“Sir Jinbe! With the Knight of the Sea here, no pirates or slavers will ever make trouble.”

“Osu, the greatest living master of Fishman Karate. I hope that he takes some time off his duties with the Royal Army and his crew to stop by the dojo.”

“Heh, it seems as if you’re more popular with the oldsters and especially the men, Jinbe. Are the mermaids immune to your charm?” Sanji asked with a chuckle, while Luffy murmured ‘dojo’ under his breath, and Vivi began to make sand manacles around his ankles, sending her sand beneath the chairs to do so.

“Shut it, Sanji,” Jinbe retorted, while Ryuboshi and Manboshi chortled, and Fukaboshi smiled just a bit at someone teasing the formidable pirate.

“So, this dojo, any chance we could stop by for a bit?” Luffy asked until a small, feminine hand gripped his shoulder from behind.

“Moh, Luffy! You know we have more important things to do than you and Jinbe wailing on one another again,” Vivi said, her tone poison-sweet as her hand turned into sand, shifting to clasp Luffy’s neck.

“Er, right,” Luffy agreed, holding his hands up placatingly. “I was talking about going there later, not right now.”

“Oh?” Is that why your legs tensed up in preparation for a jump?” Vivi asked, still so sweet she could cause death by sugar overdose.

Caught out, Luffy subsided, while the others there took a turn laughing at his misfortune until Jinbe agreed they could have a spar sometime while they were here. The two of them had fought several times on Amazon Lily before Jinbe left, and both had come to respect one another’s devotion to the Art, something that Jinbe and Luffy shared with Zoro more than any other member of the crew.

The eel settled down in place in a currently empty plaza. There were only a dozen men and women, fishmen and merfolk alike, scattered around the plaza, but it was somewhat empty besides that, despite being lined by four or five-story dwellings in nearly every direction. The place was lined with currently closed food stalls and restaurants.

“This is the Gyoncorde Plaza, the center of the city in... better times. These days, it’s mostly the center of our island’s nightlife, bar the Mermaid Café. I will set up a line of credit at the restaurants here for you all while you’re staying, but for now, it’s also the center of the pedestrian paths. You’ll see signs for any place you wish to go, and the people will help you so long as you are respectful.”

“Fa-fa-fa, there are only a handful of other crews here at present, so you might get stared at by kids and rude folk, but please ignore it~,” Ryuboshi sang/said. “And if anyone causes trouble, find a local army officer, Tra-la-la, try not to solve it yourself~.”

“We can only promise to do so if there is one nearby. We are not the type of people to turn the other cheek,” Robin quipped, standing up after giving Vivi a final sideways hug. As the princes all grumbled a bit, she and the others jumped out, lowering themselves easily to the ground in various ways, before moving off quickly, waving farewell to their now-glum captain and giggling communications officer.

“Would you like us to go with you to find this Poneglyph of yours, Robin-swan? It is no trouble at all. Indeed, spending more time with you would be just as good as spending time with Camie and meeting other mermaids,” Sanji flirted mildly, turning from where Camie had just finished explaining the use of her bubble coral.

“No, I’m fine, Sanji. Go off and have some fun with Camie, explore to your heart’s content. I know I will be doing the same,” Robin chortled, shaking her head.

Without even looking in Franky’s direction to see if he wanted to go with them, Sanji twirled back towards Camie. “In that case, my lady, where would you like to go first? You are the native, and I put myself entirely into your capable hands.”

“Hehehe, leave it to me!” Camie puffed herself up as she spoke, which, in Sanji’s opinion, did some very interesting things to her chest. “We can go over to the Mermaid Café tonight for dinner, but before that, we can go all over the shopping district and the swimming areas,”

With that, Camie and Sanji moved off, leaving Franky to scratch at his hair for a second, the sound like someone running a finger over pins for a moment. “Eesh, I’m still getting used to how he just ignores us guys whenever the womenfolk are around. No wonder sword-bro likes ragging on Curly-brows so much.”

He turned around only to find Robin had also walked off, leaving him on his own. "OY." Shaking his head and muttering about antisocial crewmen, Franky moved off, heading over to a group of fishmen who were taking in a catch of fish from another group, their ship, a grouper the size of Fukaboshi, held in the air by another one of the coral-created bubbles. "Oy, you lot look like men of the sea."

"What would be your first clue, stranger?" one of them asked, turning from his work. "Who's asking?"

"A ssuuuuper shipwright," Franky shouted back, taking up his celebratory stance for a second before going on as the men all stared at him. "But seriously. Do any of you know a man named Den? Or can give me directions to where I'd go for a bubble coating job?"

Meanwhile, Robin walked down the street away from the others, observing everything and taking in all the sights and sounds. Soon she was away from Gyoncorde Plaza, which she had quickly realized was one of the richer areas of the island. From there, like in Water 7, she was able to make her way down into more normal areas of the city.

Even here, though, Fishman Island was nice. Very well ordered, with lots of happy people around. The sheer multiplicity of forms on hand was certainly unusual, but Robin quickly got used to it. Jinbe had informed them all about how genetics and so on worked for merfolk and fishmen and Robin understood.

However, soon Robin, ever perceptive, began to see small signs of trouble, or perhaps disunity among the locals. That had been hinted at with the group that had tried to flex their nonexistent muscles at the Straw Hats. Looking up from a map of the island she'd bought and her small, meticulously kept notebook, Robin saw what looked like a pirate mark. It looked like a circular sun with a decapitated, crossed-out human outline within. She hadn't seen that mark on any of the group that ambushed them out in the ocean, but she hadn't been looking at the time.

That sign speaks of a deep, deep hatred. I thought that Whitebeard's name had made it so that there was little trouble here on Fishman Island for at least eight or nine years. If that flag is still in use, then that time has only allowed their hatred to fester. Not a good sign. The height of irrationality, in fact.

Admittedly, some of those scrawled marks had been painted over; others had not. There were also many looks Robin's way. Carefully covered looks, to be sure, but those looks were not very friendly from various alleyways and a few scattered businesses.

Robin wasn't worried, supremely confident in her own abilities. Of course most of those abilities relied on observation, so she quickly noted those looks and the various conversations

she overheard. While up near the plaza and on thoroughfares, those conversations were upbeat and even prideful, smiles and nods sent the way of roaming Royal Army Guards; down here, where there were more such, the conversations were more furtive, more worried-sounding.

Some of those conversations were worried about the general peace of the island. Those conversations that a quickly summoned ear listened to were debating about the need to reach out to one of the Yonko to protect them. Jinbe's plan to use the Straw Hat Flag also seemed to be known, or at least the rumor of it, and everyone seemed to have an idea about it.

"Upstart," was a phrase often used, "Unproven," another. However, some wondered how much of Whitebeard's War had been caused by the Straw Hats, and Luffy's moniker of the Lightning King was on a lot of tongues.

But so too was the name Hody Jones. "Hody's forces are stronger than you think," one drunkard whispered to a shopkeeper, drinking from a gourd of something even though it was barely afternoon. "He's got thousands, **thousands** of men in the Fishman Quarter. The whole place is under Hody's control now that he's brought in Hyouzou the swordsman."

Not being Zoro, the idea of a swordsman among potential enemies didn't excite Robin, and as the man fell into a rant, she moved on. Other names, however, reached her ears: names of officers and skill sets. A lot were answered with derision, with the mantra that the princes and the Royal Army were too strong for Hody and his pirates to fight. That seemed to be the thinking of a lot of folks, but there was still an undercurrent of worry about him, and about another name that was mentioned. The name Decken was mentioned not as a worry, though, but as a vile curse, as if he were indeed a danger but not because of his strength.

"That damn Decken," one man muttered, staring at something in the sky. If there was something there, Robin's eyes couldn't discern it. "He's at it again. Damn sneaky pervert!"

Still, all in all, there was too much tension for Robin to ignore, as much as she would have liked to. Yet that did not change her priorities. *After I find the Poneglyph, I will set about gathering more active intelligence here. I think that the royal family is not as in touch with the common folk as they might think, but first things first.*

As she thought of the Poneglyph and looked at her notes, Robin was once more reminded of the conversation she and Hancock had with Vivi and Luffy the morning after they had returned to Amazon Lily. That first night had been devoted to Hancock, of course, but in the morning light, Vivi and Luffy had enough time to talk to them both about the message Nefertiti D. Lili had left her family.

Admittedly, none of what had been written down had been of amazing import to Robin. She had long known there was a mystery about how the World Government formed, that it was

more a collection of countries brought together by a stronger power. Why else would so many royal families be moved to Mary Geoise, leaving the running of their nations to World Government-appointed bureaucrats?

On the other hand, learning that for certain was gratifying, and I would have loved to read the words directly from a woman who was there at the time. And her reasoning for randomly casting the Poneglyphs into the wind! That thought was part grumble, part sigh of frustration. Robin knew intellectually that Lili had done it to hurt the World Government and was pleased with it. The idea of the Gorosei having even one of the Rio Poneglyphs, let alone something like Pluton, was horrific. But still... Couldn't she at least have left some kind of clue as to a pattern or something!?

Silencing such thoughts as the whining they truly were, Robin continued on, shaking her head, *No big secrets, but some interesting clues to more about the Void Century. Concentrate on that, Robin, not your annoyance with Lili's actions.*

She continued walking for a time, heading through what looked like an industrial district. The sight of some of those complexes had Robin cocking her head in confusion. *I didn't realize that Fishman Island produced anything on an industrial scale.* Shrugging at that, she moved on her way for a time, seeing the sights as she headed towards a bus stop that would take her to her destination. As she went, though, she saw a few carts of some kind, each of them marked with another pirate flag.

The flag was a skull with thick red lips, the skull wearing a tricorne hat and a big tongue with what looked like a pink, fluffy cloud, and several candy canes crossed behind, rather than the more normal crossbones. For some reason, a fir tree was growing out of the candy cane on one side. But despite the image's overall cutesy nature, there was no doubting whose mark it was.

The Big Mom Pirates? Here? Shaking her head and deciding she couldn't entirely ignore this, Robin moved over to a group of merfolk working to load up one of the carts. "Excuse me, but might I ask what the carts are for?"

One of the men answered without even turning to look at Robin. "Sweets. Fishman Island's main industry is selling sweets. The Big Mom pirates wanted a full shipload of it to sample and paid in good silver."

"I see, thank you." *Well, at least she paid for them rather than demanded them, but the fact that the Big Mom pirates are here is not a good thing. I will need to report that to Sanji and Franky at the least. I don't want to interrupt the meeting with the king for this, but the rest of the crew needs to know.*

Her preoccupation with that thought did not mean that Robin missed the sound of shouts and screams to one side of her route. Cocking an eyebrow, she turned in that direction, shifting through a small alleyway and out into a larger street, where a group of toughs was crowding several mermaids and two merfolk, the merfolk standing in front of the mermaids protectively.

“What did you just say! Don’t forget that it’s humans who have been praying on us for so long! And now you’re saying we should turn to someone else to protect us, just like we did with Whitebeard? Only this time, you want to rely on an entirely unknown pirate! Who cares if he’s the Lightning King? Devil Fruit powers mean nothing at the bottom of the sea! We should be preying upon the humans, not asking one of them to use his flag to save us! Weakness like that is just asking for death.”

“Whitebeard’s dead!” another of the toughs shouted. “Killed by the World Government, and now you think that someone else’s name is going to do the same job to save us all out to protect us from pirates and the predations of the World Government alike? You’re living in a dream!”

With that, he lashed out with a punch that caught one of the defending mermen in the center of his stomach, causing him to double over. “Hody Jones, his name alone, his vision for the future is the only one we should be following! Death to anyone who wants peace with those damn humans! Hate them, hate the humans and feel our fury!”

One of the defending mermen rushed forward, a spinning tail-slap catching the attacker in the leg, upending him, and then a push to the chest sent him into one of his fellows. “Never! The Queen didn’t want war; she wanted peace, and she wanted everyone to live side by side! That’s why I’m proud to have put my name on that initiative! I’ll never take it back. You and yours, all you are, are ghosts, specters of Fishman District who have never been preyed on personally by humans or anything else! All it is, is just reflected hatred.”

“What was that, you little twerp! You think you can talk to us like that? The Royal Army’s not around here to save you. They’re never around to save you!” one of the other gangsters shouted. With that, he and his fellows made to surge forward, but Robin had heard enough.

As the three mermaids and the two merfolk watched in open-mouthed shock, dozens of hands and arms appeared on the attacking fishmen, clutching all of them to the ground. As screams abounded, she shook her head and continued walking. *“How cruel.” Yes, I definitely think that there is a lot of tension here. Still, if it comes to violence, Luffy and the boys can handle it, and if it’s just a matter of demanding outright action against Hody, Vivi can deal with it.*

Shifting off, she occasionally asked a few questions at shops as she passed by. Eventually, she was directed to a bus stop two blocks away from a shop selling some kind of glazed meat on skewers. She took one, finding them tasty, then cocked her head at something the owner had said. "I'm sorry, you say that the forest is a place many go to pay respects? For whom?"

"Queen Otohime's grave is there. Apparently, she told the king that that was where she wanted to be buried. It's a little way out of the way, but quiet, reflective, and well, it just seems to fit Otohime quite well," the fishman answered.

"Queen Otohime, yes, Jinbe mentioned her," Robin murmured, nodding. "She wished for peace between the surface dwellers and aquatic folk, correct?"

"That's right. Otohime's death caused a lot of turmoil at the time, what with Fisher Tiger's death happening only a short time before, and that turmoil allowed many pirates to start making trouble. But then Whitebeard came in, and with his name, he ended all the violence. The pirates and local troublemakers were both too terrified to start making trouble so long as his flag flew here."

"Now, well, they started to make trouble almost the moment word got out that Whitebeard died," the man answered with a shake of his head. "The Royal Army tries to keep order as best it can, but the troublemakers always scurry away out to the ocean, or fort up in Fishman District. Clearing them out of there would be a literal war, and no one wants to do that."

By the sound of his voice, the merchant wasn't certain he agreed with that policy even as he understood the reasoning behind it. He then smiled at Robin, gesturing a thumb over his shoulder to a small plaque behind him. It looked like some kind of form, with the merchant's name signed at the bottom. "The rest of us, though, we all remember the Queen, and her message of peace. I'll never look back on that moment, on writing my name down on that piece of paper with anything but pride, despite how it all ended, with her being shot by that damned random pirate."

Robin scowled just a little bit at that. Jinbe had told her a good deal about Otohime, about her hopes for the future, how charismatic she had been, how caring, how her dream of peace between humans and fish-folk had driven her. Even now, that dream was alive and well, but dented and challenged by time and events since.

Personally, Robin thought Otohime had perhaps been a bit too naïve, and that peace like she wanted would never occur so long as the Tenryubito still wanted mermaid slaves, so long as other groups out there would take advantage of others. Against such folk who looked down on others as lesser for the crime of existing, Robin would show no mercy. But Robin could respect

the Queen and was quite impressed by the following she still had among the inhabitants of Fishman Island to this day.

Moments later, she stared up at the descending eel, blinking in surprise and wonder. “My word, is that what they call public transportation around here? Amazing. It definitely does not match my image at all, but it is still fascinating.”

With a head pat, Robin informed the eel creature where she wanted to go, then stepped through the bubble that surrounded its middle, covering a series of small seats set there, where she settled down, smiling wider as it took to the sky, flying through the air just as easily as it would water. *I realize that I could probably get much the same view if I were using Geppo, but sitting and simply enjoying the sights like this makes it all the better.*

Shaking her head, Robin decided to make better use of her time for a moment. *Those two trailing me didn’t do anything, nor did I recognize them, but the Big Mom flag is worrisome on its own.* With that, she took out a Den Den Mushi from her back, bringing the microphone to her lips after dialing a pair of numbers on its simple surface. “Sanji, Franky. I have some news you need to be aware of. We aren’t alone here...”

OOOOOOO

Robin was not alone in noticing that there was more than one crew here to meet with the locals. Behind her, several pirates who had been trailing after her watched as Nico Robin left the area.

One looked like someone had fused a human and a giant egg into one, while the other was a strange lion-man, though his form looked more cutesy than fierce. “This is unusual-souer,” the egg-shaped man murmured. “Nico Robin being here implies the Straw Hats as a whole are on Fishman Island. That crew of rookies is a troublesome lot.”

“Gao, why don’t we just take her out, Tamago? She’s all alone up there, Grrr,” the lion man muttered.

The aptly named Tamago shook his head. “No, Pekoms, that would be foolish. That woman’s reputation is that of an incredibly slippery lady. Starting a fight like that on the back foot would be a very bad idea-soir. I will take no action against her unless Commander Smoothie orders it.”

“Are you serious? She’s just a Paradise Pirate! Sure, her Devil Fruit powers might be difficult to deal with, but we’re here to make trouble, right, Grrr?” the man apparently named Pekoms exclaimed.

“Non,” the egg-like man shot back harshly. “We are here to pressure the locals into joining up with Momma, now that Sir Whitebeard is dead.” Tamago lifted his tea cup off his head, holding it to his chest for a moment in a sign of respect before taking a sip of his tea. “If we can make trouble with the Straw Hats, that is serving a purpose, perhaps. But I will not make a leap to that without orders, soir.”

OOOOOOO

Unfortunately, Tamago might not get the chance to do that. Elsewhere, two parties were making plans to make trouble. One of them was represented by a man who hid himself in the shadows like one born to them, his presence hidden so well that only the finest of Kenbunshoku users would be able to discern his presence. This was a member of the vaunted CP-4, the Unseen. It was their job to move completely unseen, doing nothing on their own, simply observing, recording and reporting.

This the agent in question did now. “CP-4, reporting,” he whispered, his voice barely above a scratchy sound in the background of the city, not going further than even a yard away from the man. No name was given either. CP-4 operated under complete anonymity. Indeed, any thought of being an individual with a name had been beaten out of him early on his Kenbunshoku-dodging training. “The Big Mom Pirates are not willing to jump straight into conflict with the targets. They will need to be goaded.”

“Acknowledged,” another voice answered, a member of CP-7, the group of Cipher Poles that was most involved in the logistics and organizing of the other Ciphers. One of them had been assigned to this mission to coordinate the other CP agents sent on this mission. “Agent Green, instigate your disaster. Agent Orange move in on the target, but wait for the signal to begin. Agent Eyes, remain in place. Recite our objectives.”

A moment later, four voices joined the chief’s voice in reciting their orders while here on Fishman Island. All were male, although one voice sounded deeper and more powerful than the others. “One. We must remain hidden. No hint of our involvement can be discovered. Two. Do what we can to undermine the Ryugu Royal Family. Three. Bring the Big Mom Pirates and the Straw Hats Pirates into conflict. They must not be allowed to create good relations. Four. Observe and record all events.”

“Good,” the Organizer said. “Now, go.”

Out in the ocean, a crew of merchants, weapons merchants in this case, hoping to soon arrive at Fishman Island to sell their wares, trembled and stared at the man who had suddenly appeared among them and killed their captain and first mate. None of them were stupid and knew that the first part of that mantra meant for them all. Before any of them could move,

though, the man, a masked man clad all in white, moved. The coating burst, and moments later, all of them began to die, grasping at their throats, their screams unheard by anyone.

The man who had caused this disaster had a bubble around his own head as he stood at the wheel, driving it forward into the coral near the Fishman District. To anyone who found it, it would seem as if the ship's coating had failed. The weapons within, though, would still find willing hands very quickly indeed.

OOOOOOO

Within the Fishman District, hidden in the shadows of the massive ship, Noah, the other group looking to make trouble deliberated, or rather raged. "Three hundred of us, and they took us all out like we were nothing! Even though they were just humans, they smashed us all like we were babes in arms!"

Waving his hand to quiet the histrionic speaker, Hody Jones looked over at one of his other officers. Hody was a large man, if not nearly as large as merfolk or fishmen could grow, at nearly eleven feet. His legs and arms were both muscular and showed off by the shorts and open short-sleeve blood red shirt he wore. He had his flag's mark, the mark of the New Fishman Pirates, on his right side, paired with a long scar on his left. A great white fishman, his glare was known to freeze others on the spot, coupled with a mouth full of sharp, triangular teeth that Arlong would have approved of. Long black, curly hair topped Hody's head, while his left arm showed the tattoo of the Arlong Pirates' Jolly Roger near the wrist and several circular designs above it, ending with two skulls. On the same hand, he had spikes protruding from under his skin around his wrist.

"How are Zeo and Daruma doing?" he demanded, his tone deep, almost sepulchral, his accent like the deceased Arlong, marking him as another child of the Fishman District.

"Zeo's gonna live, that's about all our docs can say, Dosun," Dosun, one of Hody's officers, stated as he crossed his powerfully muscled arms. Bigger and wider than Hody, he was a hammerhead shark fishman, known for his brutality. But there was no doubt as to who was in charge here. "The miracle drug will hopefully have him up on his feet soon, but one of his eyes was pulped. As for Daruma, his skull was completely shattered. Hammond and the rest kept his body alive somehow, but his brain's more salsa than solid. Those bastard humans!"

"Damn it, we should have had some of our real squads out there, not just the snatchers, Zeo and Daruma. Now those blasted Straw Hats are in a meeting with the weakling Neptune and that bastard Jinbe, much," another fishman, a squid fishman named Ikaros, growled.

"We weren't showing our real strength for a reason, Ikaros. We want to lull the Royal Army into a false sense of security. The snatchers should have been enough against measly

humans, but it appears this group's reputation isn't completely made out of hot air," Hody muttered. "The question now is, what to do about it. We still don't have enough weapons to go around, even if we've got our hands on the miracle drug, and Decken's still out doing his own thing, blast him."

"Decken's independence ain't the problem, Dosun," Dosun muttered. "Its Jinbe and his crew. With them and the Royal Army, we just haven't been able to create as much chaos as we should be. Worse, boss, there are a lot of people saying that Straw Hat is Whitebeard's successor, that using his flag is just sensible. His anti-World Government stance is also bringing in a lot of favor that should be going to us, Dosun."

"Yeah, we might not be in a perfect position, but we need to do something now, before the situation gets worse for us, much," Icarus growled.

"Hmm..." Hody murmured, before a shout had him looking towards the door leading into the meeting hall that doubled as his crew's home base.

"Boss, you won't believe what we just found!"

Moments later, Hody Jones stared down into the wrecked hull of a recently crashed ship. It was obvious what had happened by just looking around, but more importantly than the fact that some idiot's coating had finally broken, giving the humans the deaths they so richly deserved was what was in the hold. Guns. Handheld cannons. Muskets. Pistols. Spears. All manner of weapons and lots of them.

Hody smiled. "Get this lot back to Fishman District and distributed. I want us ready to move by this evening." He turned to Ikaros. "You, get a few messengers out searching for Decken. With or without him, we're moving, but his help would make this all the easier. The time has come to sweep the weakness of Neptune aside and for the war against the humans to begin."

OOOOOOO

"You're in for a treat. Few visitors are ever allowed to see the palace so easily." Fukaboshi smiled as the eel carried them high into the sky of Fishman Island.

Luffy, Sandersonia and Vivi look up. Luffy had been aware of a few dozen minds well above the regular plane of the island. Only now did he realize that this meant they were outside the island's primary bubble. Instead, there was a much smaller bubble set directly on top of the bubble containing Fishman Island. It was connected to the main bubble not by a simple hatch but by a long tube, longer than the eel, which floated up to the entryway.

The group waited there as Ryuboshi called in. As he did, Manboshi pressed a button, and the bubble surrounding the middle of the eel spread, shifting to cover its back where they were all sitting. “Mambo, this way, you all will be able to keep on breathing and won’t become wet while we swim to the palace. Most of the palace is also underwater and will need to be prepared for us before arrive, a hu-rey!”

The tunnel popped them out near the bottom of the small bubble, which, like the larger one below, was filled with water. In this case, completely. A central island floated there, surrounded by a series of smaller islands, all of them connected by the sprawling palace, significant segments of which looked as if they were built to resemble a gold, red, and green-scaled oriental dragon curling its body this way and that. Around the edge of the palace was now a smaller bubble, which had started somewhere within and pushed out all the water, leaving air behind.

The eel thing shifted forward into a docking area that now resembled the top of a scuba tank. A gangway was quickly extended, and Fukaboshi and his brothers led the three guests across.

As they went, the princess and the pirate looked around at the architecture. Vivi loved the architecture, while Luffy just thought it was extremely impressive and Sandersonia honestly liked the colors, seeing a lot of the same mix of colors here as in the palace back on Amazon Lily.

The King awaiting the four of them was equally impressive, if only in size, as Luffy again could not detect any hint of Haki in him. Despite that, he was indeed huge, at least twice as tall as Fukaboshi. He sat on a large cushion, his shoulders were even larger and wider than the princes, and he had a full bushy orange beard that completely obscured his mouth and a thin red nose poking up over it. A chain of gold could barely be seen underneath that massive hair, while on top of his head, a crown gleamed, the same gold as both the chain and a trident which leaned against his throne, larger than that of Fukaboshi but of the same design.

“Father, might I present Princess Vivi of Alabasta, diplomatic and communications officer for the Straw Hat Pirates, and her captain, Straw Hat Luffy, the Lightning King. With them is Lady Sandersonia, sister to Empress Boa Hancock,” Fukaboshi said, waving his hand towards the three surface dwellers.

Having been coached by Vivi on what to do, Luffy simply nodded his head while Vivi dipped into a full curtsy, her skirt flaring out around her. “You’ll have to be respectful but not at all servile,” Vivi had instructed that morning before they left their quarters. The fact she had been naked as a jay bird except for her choker and Robin’s hands around her middle had meant Luffy had hung on her every word. “Formality will be the name of the game for a little bit as we go back and forth. Nobles had their own way of doing business but pirates like you don’t need to play the full

game, so to speak. You'll be able to get away with being blunt, so long as you're not rude, and you've got me for the gladhanding and formal bits."

This Vivi did now, her tone carrying crisp and clear, once more showing that Vivi's voice had been trained from a young age as another tool. "Your most gracious Majesty, greetings. I will be doing the majority of the trade negotiations and formal talks, but my captain is here to have the final say in any agreements we might reach in adding your realm to our territory as Jinbe has asked of us."

The king had blanched a bit, looking more than a bit shifty at the mention of Hancock, and Sandersonia had smirked just a bit. Now he looked at Vivi, the memory of his embarrassing himself, along with around half the men of Fishman Island, pushed to the side for a second, seemingly surprised by her words and actions. "Ahem, well, that is, quite a bit more formal than I expected, jamon. Or need right now. Contracts and so forth can come later, right now, I just want to get a feel for your captain before agreeing to replace Whitebeard's flag with yours, jamon. Come, come sit! Pull up some chairs, jamon."

Vivi did not need to note the sighing exasperation of the two advisors standing to either side of the King that his decision to go off script wasn't exactly unusual. She obeyed though, creating two sand chairs for herself in Luffy, equal to that of the king. Both advisor's eyes narrowed at that, but Vivi knew this had to be a meeting of equals.

With that done, Vivi, shifting her thinking to be more like if they were meeting her father rather than a normal king, spoke up once more. "That's a broad statement which can cover a great deal of ground Neptune." The chuckle this won from the king and the hisses from his advisors meant Vivi was on the right track. "It could be used to describe simply looking into our eyes as you get an impression of us, to a formal conflict against one of your champions to see how strong we are."

She smiled winsomely, gesturing to her captain with an airy wave. "I would recommend not going down that last route. Even when Luffy plays nice, he plays rough. His idea of training me, for example, was to shout dodge as he launched air pressure attacks or lightning at me and expect me to get out of the way as best I could. It was effective, but unpleasant."

The king laughed as did his sons and Jinbe, while the ministers simply sighed. Soon, a series of cushions were pushed around for Jinbe to one side, while Fukaboshi joined his father and his two brothers stood to act as guards to either side of a hallway leading deeper into the palace.

While Jinbe had been asked to join the Straw Hats Crew, that joining was based off what would be happening in this conversation, so he wasn't going to sit side-by-side with them just yet.

"Hahaha, that does sound harsh indeed, jamon. But no, no, none of that, jamon. Simply tell me of yourself, your adventures. And..."

Here, the smile slid off Neptune's face, and he leaned forward, his eyes and posture exerting a pressure that was just below that of Haki, surprising Luffy a little bit. "Tell me how my friend died, jamon. Edward was a man I had occasion to drink with when I was younger, to adventure with, and to whom I became indebted to the moment he declared my island part of his domain out of simple friendship with me, jamon. I didn't prompt that, I didn't ask for his help, but he did it anyway, jamon."

"So, telling you how he passed away, and explain how we're going to be able to do the same thing?" Luffy guessed, speaking up now, glancing over to Vivi. "Before that, though, Sandersonia?"

"Hello again, your Majesty," Sandersonia intoned, hiding a smirk as all three older men in front of her flushed a bit, embarrassed memories roaring back in. Fukaboshi was the only one of the Royal House, who hadn't been turned into a simpleton by Hancock's beauty the times the Kuja had passed through to the New World, and the last time all three, both the ministers and king, had been turned to stone for a time.

Added to that memory was that, like Luffy, Sandersonia had Kenbunshoku. Thus, she wasn't exactly impressed by what she was sensing from the king or any of the others. They were tough, certainly easily beyond normal Paradise standards, but that was Paradise standards. They would be able to beat most of the Kuja pirates, but all of them at the same time. Sandersonia on her own could beat all four royals, without resorting to her Zoan form. "I am here to make certain any tribute agreements made with your people also include my folk, as we of Amazon Lily have allied ourselves to the Lightning King and the Straw Hats."

"Hah, allied, is it, jamon" Neptune hummed, bouncing back from his embarrassment and giving Luffy a wink. "Is that what they call it these days? Is it true you and Hancock are involved with one another, jamon?"

"Yep," Luffy agreed with a smirk, "but that doesn't mean I speak for the Kuja. Hancock would turn me into stone, and not in the fun way, if she heard I tried that."

While Vivi rolled her eyes, Neptune and his sons all laughed, or in the case of Fukaboshi, chuckled. He didn't seem the type to burst out into laughter. The two advisors, though, looked more appalled than before. "Your Majesty!"

"Fine, fine. Now, tell me the tale of Whitebeard, jamon" the king practically demanded as he stopped chuckling his deep-set blue eyes locked on Luffy. "Tell me of Whitebeard's War, of how Edward fell, and what you did."

Nodding and becoming serious himself Luffy did so. He briefly explained the plan to break into Impel Down and how the Marines had interrupted that plan by showing up in such large

numbers, then the way Whitebeard had shown up from the sky with his whole fleet. How Newgate had held off Sengoku and Saint Peter Ju Shepherd, one of the five Gorosei, for most of the battle, along with Kong and assorted other officers.

At that, Neptune blinked wide in shock, as news of that hadn't been shared just yet, nor would it; and Luffy warned, "Keep that to yourself for now. We've got plans to release that and a lot of other information about what went on later, but at the moment, I'd like you to keep that a secret."

"Of course, jamon" the king said, still looking a little stunned. "I, I had heard rumors when I was younger and traveling the world that the World Government was controlled by five super-important, powerful men from the shadows. To hear it confirmed is astonishing, jamon."

"Well, yeah, it's not only confirmed by the fucker was deadly," Luffy grumbled, shaking his head. "I honestly don't think even now I could fight that, that worm guy one-on-one with any hope of winning. My Lightning didn't do much, his fruit was Awakened, and his skills with Haki made mine look like that of a child. It was horrifying."

Even with the training he'd gotten from Rayleigh, Luffy knew that fight would have been beyond him, if only in terms of sheer endurance. Luffy wouldn't have been able to hurt Peter enough to put him down on his own, not with his regenerative abilities.

"Anyway, I'm uncertain if they requested Peter join them, or if that was simply the only way to add a fighter strong enough to make up the loss of fighters from when Gramps went on a rampage and put a half dozen rear admirals in traction. Heh, on top of the damage my crew and I did to the Shichibukai." Luffy smirked just a little bit of that. "Regardless, I dueled with first Kizaru, then Akainu. My brother, Ace, pinned down Aokiji, who was actually the first of the three admirals to arrive on the battlefield."

"Indeed, jamon. The idea of Edward seeking out Shiki is surprising if obviously effective. I wonder what he promised him in return, jamon?" Neptune murmured, stroking one hand through his large beard reflectingly. "I don't need a blow by blow. Now, how did the fight end, jamon?"

"I killed Akainu in installments," Luffy's smirk widened. "I took out one of his arms. Turns out that lightning is a good deal hotter than magma. Then, when he and Kizaru tried to interfere with the main fight, Hancock finished the job after I tore apart his other arm. I also practically crippled Kizaru, forcing him to retreat around the same time Hancock and I had to pull back. Hancock was wounded, and I was nearly keeling over with exhaustion... and pain. Lots of that too."

Neptune and Fukaboshi exchanged glances with one another and one of the ministers. All four of them knew his simple statements covered a great deal of blood-soaked territory, but the image that they painted was still worrisome, even with Jinbe having told them all a bit about his own part in the battle.

“By then, Newgate had sustained a lot of injuries. That old wound of his, the one from Roger, it apparently was really taking it out of him from the first. Still, he went out in style. Whitebeard created a chasm in the earth that the ocean took hours to fill up which killed Peter. At the same time, my Gramps crippled Sengoku enough he was apparently forced to retire.”

Luffy shook his head then, while Neptune stared, his eyes flicking over to Jinbe, who had not mentioned Luffy’s familial relations before this. “As for Whitebeard, he went out like a boss, above and beyond killing that elder. His words, shouting about how he hoped his family would remember him, about One Piece being real, about how, someday soon, the World Government would pay for its crimes. Those stuck with everyone who heard them.”

“That is just like Edward, jamon. Both to make a grandiose gesture, and to remind his family to live well even after he passed. Family was by far the most important thing to Edward, his dream, jamon. Roger was always about adventure and seeing the entire world from what I remember,” Neptune murmured, shaking his head. “I’ve raised several sake cups in his memory since, but I’m going to have to raise another one tonight, jamon.”

“I will join you your Majesty,” Jinbe announced, shaking his head. “I had heard all of this before, of course, but still. The memory of that man, it’s going to last lifetimes. Whitebeard is going to be as big a legend as Gold Roger became in the future.”

“And I mean to step into his shoes.” Luffy steered the conversation back to the here and now. “My brother and the other division commanders are going to do their best for sure, and that phoenix guy can possibly grow to have as big a legend as Whitebeard... my brother might be able to as well, though don’t tell him I said so. But I mean for my name to be even bigger than any of theirs.”

Luffy let his eyes flick to all the merfolk across from him, then back to Neptune. “So now you know what I did in that war. Broke into Impel Down, beat up several vice admirals, killed Admiral Akainu, nearly killed Kizaru. And left lots and lots of dead marines behind me. So, I think you know I’ve got the power to back up my boasting, even if I’m not as peaceable as Whitebeard was in his old age.”

Lightning flickered all around Luffy, causing the two advisors to take a step back and several guards to finger their weapons. Lightning copies of Luffy appeared all around the room for a moment before disappearing, as he continued to stare at the king, show of force done for now. “Now, I talked to Jinbe, I asked him to join my crew. His dream’s a big one, big enough to mean

he'll fit right in with the rest of us, on the crew of the man who will be the Pirate King. Part of his agreeing to become part of my crew is to use my name and flag to protect Fishman Island. I'm willing to do it if you'll agree."

"Of course, we can't actually station any forces here, and Luffy's name isn't nearly as well-known as Whitebeard's just yet. For the short term, his name won't serve to protect your island as well as it has been protected in the past on its own," Vivi interjected, cutting in smoothly, her tone much more formal than her lover's. "Instead, at first the most help we will give you directly is in a training program for your soldiers. One that would get them all up to New World status eventually and might be able to waken some measure of Haki in them. I myself have begun to exhibit some Kenbunshoku after not even half a month of training."

That roused some interest in Fukaboshi and his watching brothers, and Sandersonia added her own words. "Further, my own people have numerous tricks, some of which are as good as your Fishman Karate we could train you in. We will do so in return for favorable trade deals."

Neptune chortled, shaking his head and winking at Luffy. "Standing beside you, hah, I say it again, you lucky dog!"

"My king! This is a serious conversation, please," groaned one of the advisors, shifting forward a little. He was a human-sized cat-fish merman, who looked much older than the king, and far more serious, just like the other guy, who looked more like a seahorse. "Now, I understand that Luffy has already added two islands to his name, but your Island, princess is well known to have a very large and well-maintained military force, whose size dwarfs our own, much like your islands size dwarfs ours. Your island, Lady Sandersonia, is incredibly hard to get to it the best of times. And we have no wish to become some kind of armed camp. Tell us more about how you can truly help us defend ourselves."

Vivi nodded, and began to explain some of the training, while also mentioning some of Franky and Laki's abilities with ships and guns. "Of course, beyond a certain point, we would need to have some recompense. What exactly would you offer in return? Further, we are talking about this as if you have already agreed to using our flag. Have you done so?"

"Any such agreement will need to be made after what you offer has proven itself," the minister stated. "Your captain is unproven and—"

"Crippled the Marine Admiral Akainu, letting him in a position where Hancock-sama could finish him off," Vivi cut him off ruthlessly before very ostentatiously counting points off her fingers.

"Beat Kizaru and forced him to retreat. Killed Crocodile after less than two months on the Grand Line. Slew Bartholomew Kuma and Gecko Moria. Turned Hancock-sama into an ally. Fought off a full Buster Call on the island of Water 7. Broke into Impel Down. Is already being called a Yonko-level pirate. Am I missing anything?"

“Survived my gramp’s training, and my connection to Dragon,” Luffy reminded Vivi. “Heh.”

“So, I believe we can say that my captain is not in any way unproven. We have the strength for our flag to protect your island and can serve as a conduit between you and the Revolutionary Army. Have we not shown our character in this discussion as you wished us to, Your Majesty?” Vivi asked, directing her words toward Neptune who flinched a little.

“Um, well, I, I wouldn’t say that, jamon,” Neptune waffled. “I, um, well... I would like to, but some of what you’ve done... our kingdom wishes for peace with the surface.”

“A peace that can never exist with the World Government. You would indeed need to cut off any contact with the World Government. But considering how many of your own have been enslaved over the centuries by the Tenryubito, would that be so bad?”

“I, that is a major issue for us, jamon.” Neptune shook his head. “We have always attempted to normalize relations with the World Government, in the interest of forging a lasting peace.”

“No lasting peace can be had with slaver scum,” Luffy growled, with Sandersonia nodding violently in agreement. “If you would prefer to keep on trying to hold out that olive branch, then we’re done here. Sorry Jinbe, but that’s not going to fly with me.”

“No, no, it’s just, well, we would prefer to not be involved in any direct action against them, nor would we be willing to be some kind of stepping off point for that, jamon.” Neptune hemmed and hawed.

Honestly, right now Neptune was wondering what his dead wife would think of all this. While Luffy wasn’t coming off as a war monger or anything similar, his combative stance towards the World Government was far too much like that taken by Fisher Tiger. *Otohime wouldn’t have even liked us needing to use Edward’s flag to protect ourselves even if she would understand the necessity. But where Whitebeard was so strong even the World Government was loathe to move against him, both the World Government and Luffy are far more likely to come to blows.*

“We would also want to make certain that you’re not going to demand too much of us, or change how we rule,” Fukaboshi added to his father’s words.

Wondering idly why Fukaboshi had seemingly gotten away without any verbal tic when his brother and father all had one, Luffy shrugged and gestured to Vivi who instantly spoke up, again counting off points on her fingers. “No slavery, either of fish-folk or humans. No selling any goods or services to the World Government directly, including information. Pirates can come and go so long as they don’t make trouble. You police yourself. We may eventually ask you to send up a lightning rod directly above your island and will need to speak of ways to travel to your aid faster, just in case. But that is all. We, the Straw Hats, that is, are indeed more combative in terms of the World Government, but that is nothing we have done, rather their

own actions towards us have forced our hand. We will not be dragging you and yours into such, just ask you to step aside.”

As Neptune nodded, seemingly still reluctant and somewhat leery of that last bit, Vivi continued. “We would also demand you clamp down on any anti-human sentiment. We were attacked well within the waters the Royal Army should be able to patrol by a group of fishmen pirates who proclaimed that fishmen and merfolk were superior, and then intimidated they would like to put us in chains. That kind of thing will not fly in a realm that flies the Straw Hats Flag.”

Neptune flinched, and the minister tried to speak but Vivi raised an imperious hand, silencing him with a regal glare. The sight of that had Fukaboshi smiling for some reason, but Vivi ignored that as she spoke. “I understand that moving against Hody Jones is fraught, and your sons indicated that they are not a big problem. But small problems can fester, and we have no wish to let them do so.

“At least a third, perhaps as many as half of the fishmen that live in Fishman Island think of him as a freedom fighter, jamon. Not a pirate. Any move against him thus would cause a lot of turmoil,” Neptune warned. “Hopefully your name alone will be enough to curtail them just like Whitebeards did, jamon.”

“That’s stupid,” Luffy said bluntly, interjecting now, and Vivi made no effort to stop him. “If they are anything like the crew that we stomped on our way in, they think Arlong was in the right. Anyone who thinks like that, well they just want to be on top, rather than equalize things. Hate like that, it festers, and it has to be excised, not ignored.”

“I had forgotten. You were the one who killed Arlong, jamon,” Neptune hummed. “There were riots in the street here when that news hit, despite Newgate’s flag still flying over our island. We had a devil of a time for a few weeks after that.”

“Don’t expect me to apologize. Arlong enslaved an entire island in East Blue, wiped out at least one village entirely, and made my navigator’s life fucking miserable. I crushed Arlong and would do it again,” Luffy growled. “Anyone who wants to follow that scum is scum as well, and I will cheerfully act the part of the new broom and sweep clean.”

At that, Jinbe finally spoke up. “Would you be willing to let me take care of the issue instead?”

“Jinbe?” Neptune gawked at the Knight of the Sea. “But, but... you know...”

“I do, your Majesty. But I think that, as much as it would harm people seeing a human like Luffy coming down on Hody, it is time. I’ve had some of my crew keeping an eye on the Fishman District, and they are stewing in their own juices there too much for me to be happy about. Hody’s name is on too many lips there, I fear, and not once has he spoken anything but death to all humans and making war on the surface. I, I had hoped for some hint, some way to thaw his

heart, but Aladine and the others report that he not only hates humans, but holds Otohime in contempt for her stance, that he did well before her death.”

Neptune flinched at that, while Fukaboshi snarled. “Father, please, give us, my brother, Jinbe and I, leave to do this! Between us, we—”

Fukaboshi was interrupted by a loud banging noise somewhere else in the palace accompanied by a shriek of fear. A feminine shriek of fear that had the king and everyone else in the room bar the three outsiders stiffening and turning towards it.

Neptune was the fast, pushing to his feet, shouting, “What happened, jamon! What went wrong?! ARGhhh...” he wheezed suddenly, one hand going to his back. “Ugh, my back...”

With Luffy and his companions looking on, Fukaboshi helped his father sit back down as the heretofore silent advisor hastily raised to the side, grabbing at a Den Den Mushi there. “Door guards, what in the world happened? Why did we just hear the Princess Shirahoshi screaming!”

“Princess?” Vivi asked looking over at Neptune. “Robin passed on rumors that you had a daughter as well, but no one seems to know what she looks like as she hasn’t been seen in public for years.”

“Four years to be precise,” Neptune growled, staring hard at the back of his advisor’s head as that worthy continued to shout into the Den Den Mushi. “What happened, Minister of the Right?”

“Apparently, just a case of horrible luck, Your Majesty. The Princess’s door was open to allow the servants to bring in her food, only for an axe to come through as they were opening the door. She is fine, if understandably shaken.”

“Damn that Vander Decken!” Manboshi growled, slamming his fist into the wall hard enough to cause cracks to appear. His two brothers were no less incensed, fingering their tridents and swords with fell intent. “Will you never cease to pester Shirahoshi, scum!?”

“What is this about?” Luffy asked, frowning a little. “Isn’t Vander Decken a legendary pirate from centuries ago?”

“Princess Shirahoshi is our youngest sibling, and is a fantastic beauty,” Fukaboshi sighed.

“Unfortunately, while on an outing a few years ago, she was spotted by a disreputable fellow named Vander Decken, and yes, the original Vander Decken is his ancestor. He is a bullhead shark fishman who has been pestering her ever since. Mainly by hurling weapons from miles away using a Devil Fruit to home in on her from well beyond the edge of our kingdom?”

At that, Luffy and Vivi both became scowled, and Sandersonia shook her head. "Are you freaking serious right now? This male keeps on threatening your princes, and you can't do anything about it? Are you all truly that powerless?"

"Decken can throw anything he wants at her from **anywhere** he wants at her! The sea is vast, in case that slipped your understanding, we can't simply chase him down!" the minister by the Den Den Mushi barked, only to quail as Sandersonia glared at him.

"We all wish we could, and have tried numerous times each of us," Neptune grumbled, gesturing to his sons. "But every time, he simply retreats into the darkness of the ocean, and we lose the trail almost instantly. The ocean isn't like the land. There are no marks in the grass, no footprints to follow beyond line of sight. We simply can't find him."

"And you never asked anyone from Whitebeard's crew to come by and help? A lot of them had Kenbunshoku, like me. We can find him regardless of whatever trail there is or isn't," Luffy stated with a glare. "There's having pride and then there's gross stupidity!"

Neptune flinched again, while Fukaboshi looked as if he agreed with the statement if not how Luffy had put it.

"I fully agree. In fact, Luffy, perhaps this would do as a perfect gesture of goodwill on our part?" Vivi nearly demanded. "No girl should be kept just locked away in a cage, no matter how much you try to explain it away as being for her own good, particularly not a princess."

"I'm good with that," Luffy stated lazily. "I figure if we start here and make a spiral around the island, I will eventually pick him up. If we do so quickly, he won't be able to pull out of my range."

"Which is?" Jinbe asked politely.

"Underwater around a hundred aquatic miles in a circle around me, I think. Thereabouts, anyway. If we were up in the air, it'd be a lot more than that," Luffy replied.

All of the royals stared at him, hope blooming on their features, while the ministers still looked dubious. "Would, would you really do this to help us, jamon?" Neptune asked, looking as if he was about to cry. "Wi, with that kind of range, it's actually possibly you might catch the fiend!"

"I would yeah." Luffy agreed. "Although, transportation is gonna be your problem."

"Not so," Fukaboshi announced. "Ryuboshi and I will go with you with our ship. It's one of the fastest in the waters. We will do our part and be there to fight Decken and his crew."

“Well, while Luffy’s out doing that, I think I would like to meet your daughter, King Neptune.” With that, Vivi stood up, waving a hand and dissipating the two sand chairs she and Luffy had been using. “One princess to another.”

“I’m afraid I can’t allow that!” the minister by the Den Den Mushi interjected. “The Princess needs to be kept locked under lock and key until Decken is captured. I...”

He trailed off as several giant spikes of sand appeared all around Vivi, then darted forward towards him. Suddenly, one of them was replaced by a Vivi look-alike, and she was standing next to them, wearing a smile that looked almost dangerous. “I insist. I can defend my fellow princess well enough, even if you peoples can’t seem to do so.”

All three of the princes looked away at that, but Neptune shook his head. “We want to, believe me, we want to. But Shirahoshi, well... she hasn’t been the same since her mother died. And when Decken’s depredations began, she just seemed to shrink in on herself. She insisted protecting her twenty-four seven was too much to ask. And, and after Manboshi was nearly killed by a wrecked ship that Decken hurled her way, we agreed.”

“Oh right, Devil Fruit, not just physical power,” Vivi said, before taking back her harsh words. “Still, I think my Devil fruit and admittedly limited Kenbunshoku should let me protect Shirahoshi well enough.”

“I have decent Kenbunshoku myself. I’ll be able to feel out incoming threats and help give you warning,” Sandersonia agreed. *I’ll also be somewhat useless, if Luffy and the princes go after Decken in the ocean and the fight happens there instead of in an air bubble.*

After a few more glances and the ‘Minister of the Right’ arguing against it, Neptune agreed to let the three pirates meet his daughter.

With Neptune in the way, they soon began walking along a small walkway leading to the Princess’ arriving just in time to see another ax flying. Vivi raised a giant hand of sand to catch it, the resulting impact doing literally nothing, not even creating any sound of impact, before the ax fell away as her hand dissipated. Neptune then moved over to the doorway, tapping at it. “Darling daughter, are you all right Shirahoshi-jamon?”

“Father?” a feminine voice, loud, but almost servile sounding came from inside. “I, I’m so sorry I shouted, the door, it was open for just a crack, I swear, I’m sorry!”

“I understand darling-jamon,” Neptune said, his tone making Vivi think of a mix between Igaram’s overprotectiveness and her father’s love for her. “I’m just happy that you’re all right! Both your brothers and I are here, and we wanted to check up on you, jamon.”

"Oh no, you didn't have to do that, I know I'm not worth it or anything," the woman replied, sounding as if she was close to or had been crying.

"None of that my dear, jamon. It isn't your fault that Decken fell in love with your whatever he is. In fact, we have a new ally that says he might be able to help us hunt that fiend down, jamon. But he and his companion would like to meet you. Are you feeling up to it, jamon?" Neptune inquired.

"New, new people!?" the voice on the other side of the massive doors squeaked, putting Luffy in mind of a mousse the size of an elephant. "I, I couldn't possibly! They'll, they'll be mean and I'll all cry and..."

Listening to one side, Vivi's eyes narrowed a little at the amount of sadness, anxiety and insecurity there was in the other woman's voice. *Oh dear.*

She held up a hand stalling Ryuboshi who had been about to speak. "Princess Shirahoshi, my name is Princess Vivi. How do you do?" she introduced herself in as friendly a voice as she possibly could.

For a moment, the voice on the other side of the doors fell silent, and when it spoke, it seemed a little less hesitant and weepy than before, Vivi's presence stunning her. "A, a princess? Y, you're a princess as well? I, I've studied a lot of other islands and things, where, where do you come from? Why are you here? Oh no, is meeting me taking time off of something more important, I'm so sorry!"

"No, I wished to meet you from one princess to another, and maybe make a friend. We princesses should stick together when we can you know." Vivi went on, lowering her voice to an almost conspiratorial whisper. "How are we supposed to know the best kind of gossip if we don't talk to one another, or just have brothers like yours all around?"

At the same time, another object had come spinning in, this time a Dirk of some kind, built for far larger hands than even Neptune's. However, the size of the thing didn't matter at all, as sand erupted up all around the existing dome of metal and stone built to protect the Princess. The thing slapped into that sand, disappearing into its depths and going nowhere, before the sand dissipated, letting it drop down towards the bubble below.

Unaware of that, Shirahoshi responded. "I, gossip, that, but I've always been locked away in here? I don't, I don't know anything. I'm just a, a failure."

All four of the Ryugu family members made to speak up like that, but Vivi beat them to it.

"Please! A failure of a princess would be one who tries to abuse their position, who tries to lord it over others. You're not doing that. You're simply hiding because of this Decken fellow, and I

can fully understand. Your brothers and father explained why they aren't able to hunt the man down as they should, but I would wager that any of them could protect you for a little while, while you're out and about. And I am not without recourse and that area myself. In fact, I've done so twice already."

"Wait, what? H, how, I didn't I didn't hear anything..." the woman stammered to a halt. "W, wouldn't protect me be an inconvenience? M, Manboshi, he, he was hurt and..."

"Mambo! I don't regret it at all, little sister, a hu rey!" Manboshi shouted.

"We all would like for you to live in peace, but if we cannot arrange that, then defending you is a task we all would cheerfully take up," Fukaboshi said, with Neptune and Ryuboshi chiming in.

"As for me, I have a Devil Fruit that allows me to protect myself and others with relative ease," Vivi interjected. "But I am getting tired of talking to a doorway. Might I come in?"

"I... It if my father says it's all right, I I... would rather like to see someone new. And you, you sound nice..." Shirahoshi trailed off.

"I like to think I am," Vivi laughed, and Shirahoshi laughed too, surprising her family members as well as the guards and advisors. Vivi just winked at them, shaking her head internally. *Honestly, Manboshi probably had the right angle to take, keep things lighthearted.*

After a moment, the door slowly started to open, and Vivi slipped inside. A light inside illuminated the area, and Vivi stared upwards, then up some more.

Shirahoshi was massive, not fat, far from it in fact. Her face, despite her overall size, made her look only fourteen or so, yet she was already a gorgeous young woman, with curves in only the right places. She looked a little soft, to be sure, but that was more likely due to her lifestyle than anything else. The mermaid princess had flowing pink hair, a heart-shaped face, and liquid blue eyes.

"My word! I have recently learned about how genetics works among you mermaids in fishmen, but I didn't expect you to be larger than your father," Vivi remarked.

"I, I'm sorry, am I too big?" Shirahoshi asked, hesitancy matching her expression and earlier words, if not her size.

"Not at all, although, if you wish to converse with someone your own size, I can arrange that." With that, Vivi shifted into sand the princess (Alabastan version) summoning sand into her form growing until she was level with Shirahoshi. A second later, the sand form solidified into it looked like a short giant instead of her original body.

Peering in, Luffy blinked whistling. "Vivi hasn't done that before. Color copies of sand sure but not enlarging herself like that. Still, Enel was able to do that with lightning, so it makes sense a solid state logia like sand would let Vivi do more tricks like that."

Shirahoshi stared at the size change, then giggled as Vivi curtsied to her. "Perhaps we should start over. My name is Princess Vivi of Alabasta. And you are?"

"I, I'm Princess Shirahoshi, of Fishman Island. Please to meet you." The princess answered, holding out her hand to the giant sand construct. Vivi's hand gripped her own, then the Princess seemed to gasp, staring at something over her shoulder.

This time, Luffy intercepted it, racing up the side of the dome, he then leapt off it, lashing out with a kick. The kick, even without any Busoshoku, shattered the whirling cannon into a thousand pieces, sending most of them scattering everywhere. A moment later he landed, and Vivi, with a wink at Shirahoshi, slow-clapped.

To that, Luffy took a mocking bow. "For my next trick, I'm going to hunt down whoever threw that and make him disappear."

"I would pay good money to see that trick." Fukaboshi snorted, while Ryuboshi and Manboshi both nodded, adding that they would give that stage show some musical accompaniment.

Her eyes slightly wide, Shirahoshi had watched all this, now smiled tremulously at the newcomer as he waved at her. "Hey, names Luffy. Pirate King to be and problem solver extraordinaire. It looks like you've got a problem, and if you don't mind your brothers and I are going to go off and solve it. I also think that we've proven that with Vivi here, Shirahoshi is perfectly safe."

"Indeed! I think, I think that if my daughter is willing to take a step outside, as long as she's with Vivi, I have no objections," Neptune said. "Further, I think we will put up your flag tomorrow morning. I will want time to prepare our people for that, but I, I have no further objections."

"Excellent. In that case, I want to go shopping. What about you Princess? Would you like to show me the sights? I've only seen your island from the air so far," Vivi wheedled.

Eyes wide and only slowly getting used to the idea that she could be outside and perfectly safe at the same time, Shirahoshi slowly nodded. "I, I would like that, but afterward, there is one specific place I would like to go is, is that all right? I don't want to put you out or, or put you in danger, or..."

"I'm not going to be in danger, and you're not putting me out at all," Vivi soothed, wanting to take the younger girl under her wing. *Good grief, is this what I would have been if my father tried to keep me protected and locked away from the real world all the time? Ugh.*

End Chapter

This didn't cover the Sanji POV I wanted it to, but I realized I was being too mean to him again, so I decided to split that segment off and show him in a better light in the next chapter. He's been getting kicked in these travel chapters since there's only Sandersonia he can really flirt with, and he knows about the trio, so is very much not in a happy place at present. Still, next chapter he'll make an impression on a gorgeous, very leggy lady.