

I don't draw and am a gaijin.

Kizaru's light-based power is weird. That is all.

Sorry this is coming out so late in the month guys. Family came in and happened and then a certain dental emergency occurred. UGHGHHHH. So I wasn't even able to work on the Real HP poll winner. Instead, a chapter of Fate will, hopefully, come out late tonight.

Anyway, portions of this chapter have been edited by Tomon, although not all of it. Still a good sign for the future, folks. Hiryo also has gone over it and helped immensely, since my ability to notice small errors was even worse than normal this time. I also went over most of the chapter with Grammarly. Gilorad and Primordial Vortex also pointed out a few mistakes at the last minute.

And as a minor rant, **why in the HELL has Dragon Naturally Speaking suddenly decided when I say Whitebeard, I mean whip near or White beer?! Just, why!?**

Chapter 42: War of the Best: Lightning Crashes

Far behind the main battle from the pirate's perspective, two of the most powerful combatants on the field had begun duking it out well before the main battle actually began. Garp had completely sidelined Kizaru from the moment he appeared, becoming the most dangerous threat on the field at the time. Then, when Aokiji and the rest of the forward team arrived, Garp had kept Kizaru from linking up with his fellow admiral or the other officers with him.

That had been all right at the time, but now, around an hour after their duel began, Kizaru was not having fun.

"Mah, mah, you truly a~re stron~g, Garp," Kizaru drawled as he watched another blow from his lightspeed-enhanced foot be blocked by the older man before being forced to dodge a punch of his own. The only real advantage, in style, at least, that Kizaru had was that he was willing to use all four of his limbs, whereas Garp was very definitely primarily a fist fighter. Not that it mattered much, as Garp's mastery of Geppo was such that his legs were in use, constantly bouncing him around instead. *And his ab~ility to use that and Soru to keep clo~se is ama~zing. How does Garp kn~ow where I will be when I use my Pika Pika no Mi pow~ers to retreat?*

"Hah! That's what you whippersnappers know! Buddha and the rest of them might've been able to stop my little rampage back on Marineford, but I wasn't really trying at the time!

You, though, you're an actual danger to my grandson and his blood brother, which means I'm going to do my damndest to make sure you just stay right the fuck in punching range. Bwahaha!" Garp bellowed with laughter, grabbing at Kizaru's outstretched arm, but Kizaru shifted the arm back in time, flinging himself around into a roundhouse kick.

Garp blocked it easily, returning a punch not to Kizaru's body but launching it at Kizaru's knee before he could pull his leg back. That forced Kizaru to flash into his full light form for a second, jolting away from Garp, only to find Garp following him, coming out of Soru right in front of his face. Another series of punches came his way that the Light Devil Fruit user could barely block or deflect in time, his limbs black with Busoshoku just as much as his opponents.

Admittedly, Kizaru couldn't use his Pika Pika no Mi's speed to the best advantage this close in. With his light-based Devil Fruit powers, Kizaru was more an artillery piece than a fist fighter. Bending light took a lot of his attention, making him much slower in close-quarter combat than he would've been, say, crossing the distance between Marineford and Impel Down, even if he couldn't quite stop himself at the end of such a long journey without assistance. Kizaru had also developed a style that basically allowed him to shoot his limbs suddenly forward in a straight line at light speed from very close in for brief seconds. Adding so much momentum to punches and kicks could be devastating, hitting the opponent not just like a searing blast of light, but with actual impact well above the speed of anything living in the natural world. Therefore, Kizaru's blows were more about heat and force than light trying to melt through something like a magnifying glass concentrating light.

No, Kizaru really didn't understand the science behind his powers. All he knew about was that his style worked. It made his kicks and punches devastating to most people, even the other admirals when they sparred. If they kept it to a logia only fight, Kizaru never lost. Ice shattered, and Magma could be blasted apart, whereas ice could only reflect, and magma couldn't do anything.

Garp wasn't most people. It was quickly becoming evident that, while he might have lost a few steps in his old age, he was still at the same level as an admiral of the marines, despite having refused that final promotion because, in his words, 'it would be too bothersome'. Kizaru had known that going in, but he had assumed that Garp would be able to tank a lot of his blows due to his mastery of Busoshoku, which was so far above most people's. Yet Garp also could dodge most of his attacks, showing a mastery of Kenbunshoku that was well beyond what Kizaru thought Garp had.

I respect~ed him before this, but I thought that his m~astery of Kenbunshoku was weaker tha~n most other vice admirals. Bu~t it really isn't, Kizaru reflected.

His own Kenbunshoku flaring a warning, Kizaru was barely able to dodge a punch to the chest that might well have cost him ribs, Garp's fist black with Busoshoku. Busy as he was dodging that blow, Kizaru didn't sense the next punch coming fast enough to turn into light or

summon his Busoshoku over the targeted area. The punch smacked into the side of his head, hurling him down towards the distant ocean with a cry of pain. "OWW!!"

That hurt, dammit! I need to get faster when it comes to shifting from a light form to Busoshoku, Kizaru thought, all his normal lazy air leaving him as he reached up to his face for a second. Feeling a bruise already growing across half of his face, he scowled angrily, the bruise slowly swelling enough to cover one of his eyes. *And I'm going to have to compensate for that, too, damn it!*

Then Garp was on him again, battering at Kizaru's defenses, but this time, Kizaru got a little lucky, a low blow catching Garp nearly in the crotch, letting Kizaru gain a few seconds of distance, as Garp shouted, "Really? Come on, Borsalino! We're both men. We don't go for the wedding tackle!"

"Mah, has you'r wedding tackle ever actu~ally caught anything? A~ny fish you didn't have to pa~y to nibble at your lu~re anyway," Kizaru shot back, grinning a little at the joke despite the pain from his face, the scowl on Garp's causing him joy even as he took a second to use his admittedly limited Kenbunshoku to discover what was going on around them.

Kizaru's Kenbunshoku wasn't actually all that limited, but he thought of it as such, because he knew that he couldn't stretch his range as far as Aokiji or Akainu. Unfortunately, his Devil Fruit was no help when it came to this form of Haki. When he was a light particle, Kizaru needed to concentrate on feeling out other light particles in order to see, let alone use it to enhance anything, and it usually enhanced his eyesight.

It also gave him no real control over natural light. He couldn't speed up or slow down natural light in a given area, or shift the natural light coming from the sun away from an area, completely eclipsing an area in darkness.

Yet for a second, as he kept Garp at bay with precise laser strikes towards the head and shoulders, forcing him down and further down towards the ocean, Kizaru could sense Ace and Aokiji fighting out. Beyond that, it seemed as if the other pirates and marines had moved well away from Impel Down, further back along the Tarai Current. But he was confident that the rest of the marines had arrived by this point. Even if the pirates tried to escape the current, a single pirate vessel was not going to get away from nearly the entirety of the marine fleet.

So even as he kept the distance open for a few seconds, barraging Garp with finger-sized laser bolts, Kizaru wasn't worried about the overall battle. No, he was perfectly content to keep Garp just as sidelined as Garp was holding him. *Once the other pirates have been dealt with, one of the other admirals or Sengoku can come to help against Garp. Although what we will do then is anyone's guess.*

OOOOOOO

Deep within the earth below the man-made island of Impel Down, another marine officer was slowly but surely trying to create some order from the chaos that the Straw Hat Pirates and Garp had left behind them. Mozambica was quite battered from his fight with Zoro and his fall through the elevator shaft, but he was still a marine admiral and had survived being crushed beneath the elevator, eventually punching his way free out and up into the elevator shaft, leaving the box mangled behind him. From there, he had heard the battle going on in Blazing Hell and moved to assist.

Luckily, in a way, the escapees had not gone out of their way at any point to free anyone beyond their targets of Ace, Jinbei and Garp. Even better, they had moved on from Blazing Hell after cowing the prisoners with a brutal execution of one of the monsters kept there. So it had taken the prisoners a bit to begin to riot, and when they did, a large portion of the floor's specially garbed guards had fought back.

Fighting here on Blazing Hell and cowing the prisoners had even taken Mozambica, a vice admiral, an hour simply because of the size of the place. Thankfully, he didn't need to make any major examples as he moved around the floor. Simply hurling a few prisoners into their cages with enough force for their bones to break on impact and a few others into the still-boiling cisterns of blood had been enough... for now. *If they act up again, making a dozen examples and then forcing the others to carry the dead bodies of their fellows might cow the rest.*

Seeing a few of the guards finish locking away a dozen prisoners, he raised the communication snail they had brought him to his face. "Domino, I'm done down here." While Luffy had gone out of his way to destroy both the Coms and Video Mushi he spotted, a few of the communication type still remained here on Blazing Hell, and one of them had been handed over to Mozambica when he arrived and started to take charge. The officers in charge of Hannibal's defense position had all lost theirs.

The woman's voice came back, crisp and clear. Despite her own little run-in with the escaping pirates, which she had come clean to him about, and the destruction wrought on Impel Down, the woman seemed to be holding it together. "Good. We won't be able to fully restore order here until we're able to repair the damage done to the various floors, but... pirates strong enough to just, just smash their way through hundreds of tons of rock." Her voice seemed to falter and fall into a mumble for a second despite his earlier thoughts, but Domino came back on task quickly. "I've got at least ten officers reporting from Crimson Hell, along with forty of your marines. They were sent in by Admiral Kizaru when he arrived around... nearly an hour ago now. Seven of our own people on Starvation Hell are working together to check around on that floor. They report zero trouble there but have only one Communication Mushi. I don't have any communication with Frozen Hell or Beast Hell."

"Roger, I'll stop at Beast Hell before heading back up to you, and you can shunt my marines down there once Crimson Hell is fully secured again. That's where the majority of the prisoners are still, right?" Mozambica answered. The prison had a secondary elevator that could be used in emergencies, and it had been what Domino had used to send the marines down to

help on Crimson Hell but Mozambica could use Geppo to make his way up the main elevator shaft.

Domino answered in the affirmative, while also telling Mozambica she wanted to send a team from Blazing Hell down to Frozen Hell right away. "There's been no word from Magellan, and given how Den Den Mushi can't even survive down there, we don't have any video surveillance there as we do through most of Starvation Hell and Crimson Hell. And that worries me the most. Chief Warden Magellan remained in Frozen Hell after ordering Hannyabal back up to Beast Hell to create an ambush force."

Mozambica frowned, thinking, remembering only now that he had been told that before he and his small band of marines had raced into the prison. *Which we probably shouldn't have done! If we had been able to put to sea, simply keep the range open and attack them with cannon fire, or better yet, sink the ship that Domino told me a moment ago was out there? That would've been better than me facing Garp and Straw Hat Luffy and that damn swordsman on my own! We were all too arrogant. We didn't put it all together.* "Fuck. If Magellan fought the prisoners down in Frozen Hell, he could still be down there. I'll divert there now. The cold could almost finish him off before you get any help there!"

Thankfully, searching Frozen Hell for Magellan did not take any time at all. The signs of battle were easy to discern over more than half the floor, and with the giant hole in the ceiling up to Burning Hell, the entire floor was actually a lot warmer than it would normally be. Now, it felt more like an autumn day than the deep of a killing winter.

He found Magellan unconscious and being approached by prisoners armed with makeshift weapons or even the weapons of the guards, many of whom had fallen to their deaths along with the debris made by the hole in the roof, when Garp decided to make his own route to the surface. The inmates all saw Mozambica coming, but Soru allowed him to close before they could retreat.

He smashed into them like a wrecking ball, grabbing several of the largest prisoners from behind and snapping their necks with brutal twists of his hands. Then he took a page from the Garp Book of Crowd Control™ (not really assigned reading, but every officer Mozambica had talked to had a copy of the book of anecdotes and stories) and began using their dead bodies as flails on the other pirates. Several were smashed into so many broken bags of barely held together blood and gore, while the others fled, trying to gain distance. This did not work. Mozambica hounded them until he had slaughtered them all, then made a circuit around the area before returning to Magellan.

The Chief Warden's body was battered black and blue from head to toe, his facial features having been rearranged in a distinctly punch-shaped outline to one side, while the other had the mark of a foot embedded into it. One arm looked to have every bone in it broken from the shoulder down to the pinky, and the rest of him was only a little better. That had all the signs of a beating from Garp, save for the arm, which felt a little excessive for the former hero of

the marines. Mozambica shuddered, thinking for just a second that he had gotten off quite lightly when he had tried to fight Garp, Straw Hat and his two officers.

Fearing to move the man, he confirmed that Magellan was still alive and was quickly put in contact with Muchana, the prison's chief doctor. Muchana, in turn, began to walk the marine officer through a process to check for internal injuries and other things while a stretcher team was routed down to him immediately.

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On the surface of Impel Down, other people had been moving around while Mozambica had started to rebuild the authority of the jailers in Burning Hell. In this case, they were not marines.

Buggy and Clay had both refused Luffy's offer of escape after seeing Kizaru arrive. The two of them, despite not liking one another, were much more at home with the idea of sneaking around rather than trying to fight so many marines. Buggy hadn't liked the idea of fighting a marine admiral or being further indebted to Luffy, while Clay hadn't really liked the chances that he was but the first of many reinforcements. Since then, they had seen Aokiji arrive, along with several other high-ranking marine officers, who seem to have borne that concern out.

Now, staring through a spyglass he had stolen from one of the marine ships still docked at the prison, Buggy's head floated back down to where Clay was, only to pause suddenly, his eyes widening. "Wh... no way!!" the clown head shrieked unheard by any but a nearby gull who twitched away, eying the weird floating thing with concern.

Down below, Clay blinked as Buggy's body twitched suddenly from where it had been sitting. As he watched, it turned, racing away, following his head around the circumference of the docks situated outside the walls of Impel Down. "Hey Buggy-chan, what's going on?" Clay then frowned and smacked his forehead before running after the body, muttering, "Right, how is his body supposed to answer me without the head around? Foolish Bon-chan."

Usopp had not done much, since pushing himself out from the giant hole in the side of his and Alvida's ship he had made when Kizaru had kicked him. Instead, he had taken the time to invade one of the nearby marine ships and find a marine uniform that fit him. A low-ranking one of this time rather than the captain's outfit he had worn before as part of his hoped-for disguise. This way would hopefully be better to blend in.

He was still feeling the effects of the brutal beatdown that Kizaru had given him so quickly, despite being a Zoan type. Usopp's had yet truly to push his regeneration abilities, which as a Zoan was naturally high but had to be trained to really make the most out of. Nevertheless, he had been able to find four more crewmen who had survived Kizaru's arrival by

the simple expedient of having already been knocked out or wounded by the marines. He had then gathered them in one place before continuing to search for Alvida.

He had covered practically half of the circumference of the prison, from where he had started his search, and had not found any more survivors of the pirate crew, let alone Alvida herself, and that was beginning to get to Usopp. "Damn that marine Admiral! He flung us all over the freaking place with his kicks! Why couldn't he have just left us in one place at least," he whined to himself, shuddering a little as he remembered the bisected remains of former crewmen left behind by one of Kizaru's light-based attacks. The pirates in question had been cut completely in half, a portion of their bodies simply seared away by the intense heat of the light passing through them.

"Ahhhhh, and even if I find her, how are we going to get out of here!? I might be able to sneak away as a marine, I don't have a bounty yet and I don't think any of the marine officers saw my face since I transformed so quick. I could sneak away among the marines and act the part of a battered soldier for a bit. Yes, that's the ticket, no one will ever find the great warrior of the sea Usopp when he can't be found, oh, but if they do, they will face the jaws of... but oh god, what if it's that logia ass, ahaahhh I didn't sign up for this! Why couldn't we just get in, get our captain out, and--"

Usopp's monologue, disjointed as it was, broke off as he spotted what could only be called one of the most magnificent rears known to mankind coupled with legs Usopp has seen cause men's minds to turn to jelly splayed out at the far end of one of the wharves, the rear sticking up in the air. The owner of that rear and those legs seemed to be lying half in and half off the wharf, unmoving at present.

"Alvida!" His earlier thoughts quickly tossed aside, Usopp raced forward, only to almost be smacked off of his feet by a blow from something fuzzy hitting him in the side, nearly propelling him into the water. "Oh no, you flashy don't, marine! I don't know what she's doing here, but that ass can only belong to... Usopp?!"

Usopp windmilled his arms for a moment to keep his balance, then froze, his arms outstretched to either side as he teetered on the edge of the wharf for a second, staring at what had hit him, his eyes widening in shock as he looked at the floating head of his captain. "Captain Buggy! You're free!"

In his stunned state, he nearly lost his balance again, but Buggy's head shot forward, grabbing with his teeth onto Usopp's shirt and pulling him backward several steps away from the edge of the wharf before releasing him to stare at Usopp. "Usopp! Alvida, how... I thought she had been captured too, only to try and break out here on the docks, but if both of you are here, did...did you flashy idiots try to rescue me!?"

Usopp grinned, puffing up his exceedingly thin chest for a second as he pointed to himself. "Hell, Captain, you rescued me once, and you took me to the seas! I wasn't about to

leave you in prison if I had a chance of rescuing you... even if it was a small chance,” Usopp added the last sotto voce. He’d had his previous belief in his so-called plan pummeled, mutilated and thrown overboard since arriving at Impel Down, and knew he had been exceptionally stupid to think they had a chance.

His last words went unheard as Buggy began to cry, shaking his head this way and that as a veritable waterfall of tears exploded from his eyes. “Loyalty! Loyalty like that! That is a captain’s true treasure! Almost as important as gold!”

Sweatdropping a little at that last bit, which he felt Buggy should have kept inside, Usopp turned to move towards Alvida, a motion that caused Buggy to become serious again just as his body and Clay arrived at the far end of the wharf. Buggy remained there waiting for his body to catch up, his head snapping back into place on his neck, before he raced forward once more, reaching Alvida, just as Usopp finished pulling her entirely back up onto the wharf, a task that wasn’t very easy at all given how her Sube Sube no Mi. He’d had to tie a rope under her shoulders and pull her back in like that, and even then, it had been tough.

Quickly, the pair of them turned her over, with Clay standing behind as they checked the woman for injuries, noting how she had made no move to wake up or even twitch as the pair worked. “My word, what a gorgeous~ woman! I’ve rarely seen a woman as pretty!”

Usopp was the only one who had actually made any kind of study about medicine. When the Buggy Pirates had been stuck in the calm belt for weeks on end, they hadn’t actually had a doctor at the time. But they had medical supplies and doctor books, hoping to find someone to fill the position after they chased down the pirates that Buggy and Alvida both had a vendetta on. So taking care of the various bruises and injuries fell to Usopp.

Blushing faintly at needing to run his hands over Alvida’s chest and stomach, Usopp quickly reported, “She’s in a bad way, Captain. I think something inside of her is bleeding out. She’s way too pale! For the visible injuries. We need to get her some medical help quick, or else.”

“Captain!?” Clay gawked. “What is going on here?”

“These are my two officers, my first mate and chief gunner and bosun,” Buggy said proudly. “They came to Impel Down to free me.”

That caused Clay nearly to cry as Buggy had a moment before, dancing in place to show his appreciation of such loyalty. Buggy had something else to think about, though, and interrupted him quickly, asking, “When you steal someone’s face, does your victim need to be alive? There are a lot of dead marines around here. We could use one of their faces to get one of the medical officers from Impel Down out here.”

Clay nodded and raced away while Buggy began to think, some of his earlier pride in their being there disappearing. "Was it just the two of you? And how did you get here anyway?"

Still looking Alvida over, Usopp answered that it didn't really matter, considering that the ship they'd arrived and hit had been smashed, first by crashing into the docks and then by Usopp's own dinosaur form being kicked back into it by Kizaru. "But I did find four of our crew. I patched them up as best I could, then hid them away elsewhere along the docks. One of them might be awake by this point but I don't know."

"Good. Head back there, start to dress them up as marines..." He paused as Usopp shook his head, telling him that they had already been dressed somewhat like marines. "That's better then, glad to know you thought sneaking in was a better idea than brute force anyway." Usopp sent Buggy a mock glare at that but the clown ignored it. "Then that means maybe we can sneak into the prison again if we have to. Much as I hate the very idea, I'm not about to let Alvida die on us. Not if she really came here with you to rescue me. Loyalty goes both ways, you flashy bastard."

Running along the docks, Clay quickly came upon the body of a marine that had looked like it had always been trampled, but his head was still intact, which allowed Clay to copy it with his copy fruit. The marine was even his own height, although his clothing was a little baggier and bloodier than he would've liked. That would actually make his disguise even better. Quickly disposing of the body by tossing it over the side of the docks into the water, he raced on, heading towards the entryway into Impel Down.

There, he astonishingly found three marines and one medical orderly looking over several dozen other marines laid out next to one another. As Clay watched, one marine in particular was laid on a stretcher and carried back inside by two of the marines. The last one looked up as Clay came around the edge of the outer gate, waving at him. "What ship and what injuries?!"

Clay quickly made up an answer, having seen the names of a few ships as he passed them, reporting that he had only been knocked unconscious as the marine directly in front of him had been squashed by something. He didn't elaborate because he had no idea what had squashed the man whose body Clay had tossed into the ocean, but he didn't have to. The other marines simply nodded and gestured to the wounded. "Then get over here and help!"

Clay obliged before reporting that there were at least a few injured out on the opposite side of Impel Down that couldn't be moved. "One of them looks to be a captain I think, with some internal injuries."

The marine Clay was talking to frowned but shrugged his shoulders at that, acknowledging that he hadn't really known where all of the officers had been during the chaos and letting it slide as Clay began to dress several of the other wounded marines, tearing off semi-clean bits of his own clothing as he did. That act completed plays disguise for the man.

Soon, two other marines had been sent inside, the others patched up and as best they could be and left to rest where they were, and Clay was returning along the docks to the wharf where he had left Usopp and Buggy along with the orderly, carrying several bits of supplies for the man along with two other marines.

One of those marines gasped in shock the instant he caught sight of Alvida, backing away. "Hold on! That's not a..."

That was as far as he got before a dagger slipped into the back of his neck, killing him almost instantly. His fellow lasted barely a second longer, the side of his throat torn open by another dagger before both of their bodies were kicked off of the wharf by Buggy.

The orderly gasped, backing away rapidly, but Buggy shot out one of his hands, grabbing the man by the throat and lifting him up, then carrying him over to where Alvida lay. "Here's the flashy deal. If you don't want to go the same way as your two friends over there, you do whatever you can for Alvida. She lives, you live. If not, you'll be swimming with the fishes without your legs."

Shaking in terror, the orderly nodded, getting to his knees beside the woman, quickly probing her sides, finding the areas where her Devil Fruit had been seemingly burned away by something, his hands flowing over the rest of her curves in a way to cause him to blush given the sheer beauty of the woman. That beauty caused him to forget some of his fear, eager to help the woman live. "Well, I'm going to need to operate on her. I think her appendix must've burst..."

Grimacing, Buggy backed away as Usopp began to help the orderly. The clown moved over to where Clay stood, nodding his head to the other pirate captain.

The younger pirate captain was a little thrown off by how brutally Buggy had dealt with the two marines, both of whom he had spent several minutes working alongside to help their fellows, but Clay knew that Alvida was part of Buggy's crew. *If she had been one of mine, I probably would be just as ruthless. Thankfully, none of my darlings would be so stupid as to try to rescue me from Impel Down! And speaking of...* "Do you have any idea of how we're going to get out of here? Do you think you could send your head far enough away from your body to..."

"Not a chance. Besides, you can see what's going on out there as well as I can." While most of the battle going on, was well beyond their line of sight and had been even when Buggy was using his Devil Fruit to stare through a spyglass into the distance. They could still see fire and ice bursting up from the ocean in the distance. "There's no way that the marines have allowed Straw Hat and the rest of them to escape without a fight, and I don't know about you, but I think that's flashily way above my weight class! No, we're going to have to hide away, keep the orderly with us to take care of Alvida, and look for a chance to sneak out on a relief ship or something after the battle out there dies away."

“Don’t even joke~~! I know I agreed with you about not boarding Luff-chan’s ship since I didn’t want to fight the entire~ navy! Heck, I agree with you about the fight out there being well above my skill. But any marine officer they send with the relief force is almost certainly going to be just as dangerous and have that Kenbunshoku stuff as Kizaru or that other guy who Sword-chan dealt with.”

Buggy caught Clay’s eyes and winced a bit, shrugging his shoulders. “I know it isn’t the best of plans, but it’s the only one we’ve got. And you’d be surprised how much you can miss with that kind of technique. Trust me, the times I was able to get away from my first mate and my captain when I was a cabin boy...” Buggy lost himself in memory for a second before he shook his head, coming back to the here and now rather than those very mixed memories. “So, unless you have a better plan?”

Clay scowled a little, scratching at his cheek, then moving over to make certain that the orderly didn’t have a communication snail in his pockets, rifling through them even as the man began to operate on Alvida. Now completely besotted by the woman’s beauty, he would do anything possible to keep her alive, his eyes almost turning into hearts as he opened up her shirt slowly to get at more of the skin beneath. Thankfully, the man didn’t have a communication snail, and he pulled back, moving back over to Buggy. “In that case, I think once he’s done, we’re going to need to move into some kind of hiding place. Because I think staying out here would be a very stupid idea...”

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Given the importance of Magellan, Mozambica stayed there for around thirty minutes until a group of seven marines and two stretcher-bearers arrived before leaving them to it, racing to head up to Beast Hell. He hadn’t just stayed there guarding Magellan, though. Mozambica had gone about killing a few more of the prisoners from this floor, just to properly cow the rest and had then made certain there was no hole leading further down to Eternal Hell. While the mystery of how the group of escapees made the hole from Frozen Hell down to Eternal Hell, he was extremely thankful that none of the other prisoners from down there had been allowed to escape. Indeed, Magellan seemed to have thought of the same thing and had apparently attacked the closest prisoners to the hole with his venom fruit. Several were dead, others unconscious from the venom.

Once Magellan’s body was secured, Mozambica headed to Beast Hell via the main elevator shaft. Here, the prisoners had rioted soon after Garp had left the area, breaking themselves out of the cages, finishing off many of the downed guards or beasts, and trying to get free. Mozambica ran into one group trying to figure out how to climb the interior of the elevator shaft. Sending them plummeting to their deaths screaming, was, in his opinion, poetic. After that, he used his Kenbunshoku to find where any surviving members of the prison guard were, racing there while also dealing with any prisoners in his way with bursts of air pressure strikes hurling the prisoners everywhere, uncaring if they lived or died so long as they stopped causing trouble.

Soon, he found three exceedingly battered-looking prison guards standing at attention in front of Saldeath, makeshift weapons in hand, a full cell of prisoners behind them. Nearby, puzzle scorpions were chasing several prisoners back into another cell. At the far end of the hallway, two Blugori were fighting it out with still more prisoners who were trying to get past them. That battle ended when Mozambia landed behind the group of prisoners and killed one before knocking the others out with precise kicks and punches. The Blugori instantly pushed forward, pressing the remaining scum into a cell and locking them in.

Looking around, he saw no further trouble in sight, though he could sense that there were a **lot** of little battles happening elsewhere throughout this floor. *Thankfully, we have some measure of order, too.* “Saldeath, so you’re alive. How many of the rest of the stopping force have you been able to bring together?”

“Mozambia. Not many. I take it from your presence that the pirates were not corralled at any point? Letting such a group not only infiltrate us but then escape. This is a dark day for Impel Down.” Saldeath nodded his way, his habitual snappy sense of dress gone. His hat had disappeared, his head was covered instead in a makeshift bandage made out of some other prison guard's shirt and one arm was in a sling. But he still had his trident, although one of the tines was missing, and he seemed to have his faculties at least. “I don’t suppose you have a communication snail on you? Or several? All of ours were killed during the battle.”

“You can have mine. Are any of the Jailer Beasts still alive? If we can find just one of them and send them down to the fifth floor, that should be enough to keep the pirates there from acting out now that I’ve left the area.” Mozambia was quite worried about that, almost as much as what was going on outside the prison.

Saldeath nodded brusquely, taking the communication snail from the taller older man, turning around and racing along the pathways through the various prison cells on Beast Floor. He had brought together six more Blugori and four more battered guards together in a small enclave of order, which was incredible given what he had started with. *If we all aren’t purged for our failures for this day’s business, I will see Saldeath get a commendation for this.*

Near the center of this enclave of control, Mozambia found not one but two of the awakened Zoan types leaning against the walls of a broken jail cell. Unlike Zoro, who had killed Minokoala, Jinbei hadn’t gone out of his way to kill either of his own opponents, simply taking them out of the battle as quickly and efficiently as possible with blows to the head and chest that had been too strong for their durability to deal with. Now, Mozambia watched as Saldeath roused them both by the simple expedient of stabbing them in their nether regions where they lay, jolting them upright. Neither of them looked entirely there, but then neither Minotaurus nor Minozebra ever did.

“You two, head down to the fifth floor and resume your duties there. Head to the hole the prisoners made, tossing any of the prisoners you come upon back into the nearest cell. No need to be gentle about that,” Saldeath ordered.

For a moment, it looked as if the indoctrination the Awakened Zoans had been put under would break. Both of them paused, staring towards the elevator, rather than in the direction the hole in the floor which could take them both down to Starvation Hell could be seen around a few corners in the maze. In response Mozambica moved forward, scowling, his fist turning black with Busoshoku, and that seemed to cow them from whatever murderous impulse to follow the person, who had knocked them out had been going through their heads.

That done, Saldeath turned back to questioning Domino about what else was going on around the prison. "Do you know if any of the doctors are still alive? I have Hannibal here. He is alive but suffering from numerous wounds and extreme electrical shock."

"Actually the pirates, the Straw Hats anyway, left most of the logistical people in peace, which has helped us to get things organized here and down in Crimson Hell already. The Straw Hats and the rest only seemed to fight anyone who came at them, they didn't go out of their way to harm any of us they didn't need to."

The scowl on the communication snail made it clear that Domino didn't really believe what she was saying but said it anyway. Considering the fact that any other pirate crew might well have simply slaughtered every guard or support personnel within the prison and then released all the prisoners, Mozambica could understand why she was speaking that way. He didn't like it either, but it was true.

"At any rate, thanks to marines' Admiral Kizaru sent into the prison, I have medical professionals with stretchers moving down from the first floor to you now. But if you know for a fact Hannibal's alive, I'll divert one of Muchana's chief helpers to you the moment he gets back from retrieving Magellan. Unfortunately, we just don't have enough personnel to do both, and we lost one of our orderlies up on the surface a moment ago somehow," Domino continued.

Mozambica frowned at that minor mystery, wondering how an orderly had disappeared or if this was just a case of communication breaking down. Then he turned his attention to helping Saldeath to corral the prisoners of Beast Hell. After reinstating control over Beast Hell, Mozambica hurried upward to meet up with Domino. She was more knowledgeable about what was going on inside the prison now than he was, but he wasn't interested in the prison any longer and officially put Saldeath in command until Magellan or Hannibal was awake and able to take over. Most of the pirates and other criminals had been locked back into their cages throughout the prison, and with Saldeath leading them and the two awakened Zoans back to Burning Hell, Mozambica was certain they could keep order within the prison despite how many losses they had taken. Beast Hell would still be a flashpoint, as would Crimson Hell, but he stationed most of his surviving marines there to help out.

"Tell me what's been going on outside the prison," he ordered.

Domino frowned, shaking her head, but gave him a quick sitrep. She knew of the arrival of the Whitebeard Pirates right before the Marine Fleet could encircle the lone pirate vessel

that had already been there. That had happened around the time that Mozambica had begun to take control of Burning Hell.

Since then, Domino had seen via the exterior Recorder Mushi that at least one giant officer had died in the initial battle around the prison. Aokiji seemed locked in battle with Ace, but even that battle had moved well out of sight from the prison. The only battle they still had visual knowledge of was the duel going on between Garp and Kizaru. Even that one was moving away from the prison, although in a different direction than the ice floe containing Ace and Aokiji.

Domino even knew about the arrival of the Whitebeard Pirates and the first casualties their appearance caused. That was the last time thing she had heard before the marine's escargatoire had begun to collapse under the weight of the reports all hitting it at once. Because of that, Domino didn't know much about the battle going on right now, more than an hour after it had begun.

Mozambica listened to all of this, his face turning white at how badly this had gone so far for the marines. *I can only pray that Sengoku has some tricks under his sleeve!*

Not knowing precisely how many cards there were indeed up Sengoku's sleeves, Mozambica decided that there was one thing he knew he could do, and he ordered Domino to find him another communication snail, one that could connect to the marines. When she gave it to him, he raced outside, hopping up into the air, not even glancing at the groaning or unconscious form of several marines that had been left by their fellows near the entryway into the prison. Quickly, he took to the air, scanning around with the spyglass, and saw in the distance to one side and well behind the main battle, almost over the horizon even from as high as he currently was, in fact, the flashing of light in the distance.

Cursing volubly, Mozambica used a combination of Geppo and Soru to head in that direction as fast as possible. Luckily for him, as his speed in this manner of transport wasn't all that fast, the fight actually turned back towards the prison, causing him to hold in place, the prison still visible in the distance below and to the right of his current position. There, he bounced higher into the air making certain he was above the plane where the two combatants were currently, before diving down, one fist lined with Busoshoku and a sword similarly coated in his other hand.

Garp felt him coming, as did Kizaru, and both of them reacted accordingly. Kizaru pressed in hard, hampered by the fact that his eye had indeed swollen shut from the one blow Garp had gotten through his defenses cleanly. On the other hand, Garp didn't bother even trying to evade, simply blocking more of Kizaru's blows than he had been a moment ago instead of dodging. Then he turned around and flung a punch out towards Mozambica the instant he came within range, a sudden kick towards one of his legs almost catching Kizaru by surprise at the same time. Mozambica dodged under the blow with a bare centimeter to spare, coming back up with his sword in a slash.

The sword had been taken from the armory of Impel Down and was just a simple cutlass, but it was covered with Busoshoku. So it was a major surprise to Mozambica to see it shatter like glass on Garp's own Busoshoku. *His mastery of Busoshoku can't be that much better than mine, can it!?*

Yet Mozambica was able to dodge back from a punch that would've probably caved in his head if what happened to his sword was any example, and he backed away rapidly as Kizaru lashed out with a kick that forced Garp to block it, backing away.

"As nice as it is to have some backup, I am afraid that this fight isn't going to be one you can really add much to, Mozambica. I appreciate the thought, though," Kizaru drawled, bouncing to one side of Garp as Mozambica did the other, forcing him to use Kenbunshoku to track one while keeping his eyes on the other. That this proved to be Kizaru was just common sense, frankly.

"This isn't the fight you need to be having, sir!" Mozambica said, shaking his head as he backed rapidly away from Garp instead of engaging further.

Hearing that, Garp frowned, turning and charging towards him, trying to stop the man from talking. Whatever he had to say couldn't be good.

Using his Pika Pika powers to bounce off Mozambica's belt buckle, Kizaru flashed between them, getting in a few good strikes now that Garp was trying to concentrate on something else, although none of them actually penetrated Garp's Busoshoku. They succeeded at least in pushing him further away from Mozambica, as he reported what was going on elsewhere. Then Kizaru's attack went wide, and Garp was through, throwing a blow that caught Mozambica in the shoulder, not the chest as he had thought and concentrated his Busoshoku on.

The punch shattered Mozambica's shoulder so badly that bits of bone and sinew burst out of his skin, nearly completely taking his arm off at the shoulder, hurling Mozambica down towards the prison, where he crashed into the top of the outer wall and bounced a few times along its length before falling off to land with a crash into the docks.

Watching that from where they had just finished moving Alvida into a hiding place in a small shack set up alongside the outer wall of the prison, mainly for nails, spare cordage and so forth, Clay shivered while Usopp looked as if he was going to puke. Buggy just nodded, shaking his head from side to side. "Is it any flashy wonder why everyone is scared of him and Whitebeard! The older generation is scary!"

Buggy could still all too easily remember Garp and his former captain fighting it out more than once and remembered one such scene now. And only realized he had actually been describing the scene aloud when Clay and Usopp both gasped in shock.

“Wait, you really were a cabin boy on the pirate Captain’s ship!?” Usopp shouted.
“Damn it, I always thought that was just a story you made up to impress Alvida!”

Simultaneously, Clay quickly asked, “Who won?”

“SHHH!” Buggy scowled at them both, holding up a finger to his mouth. “Keep it to yourself, dammit. I have tried to keep my head down as much as possible since leaving the Roger Pirates. All I want is to find all the world’s treasures. I don’t have to stand on that higher level!” He waited until the two of them nodded, then went on, shaking his head. “And honestly, most of the time, the island they were fighting on lost. Poor Zumbia.” Buggy seemed to sag. “That little island of hills and stupid woolly animals really didn’t deserve what happened to it. All those bloody patches of wool...”

“So, what you’re saying is we should keep hiding,” Usopp quipped, shivering still.

“For a flashy certainty!”

High above them, Kizaru scowled a little as he blocked several punches from Garp, shaking his head at how Mozambica had been dealt with so easily, hoping the other marine survived at least. He deserved it for telling Kizaru what was going on out there. Orienting himself through the use of the prison far below, Kizaru turned and, without another word, raced away, turning into a single bolt of light in the air as he flew away from Garp before Garp could close with him again. His fight with the former Vice Admiral and hero of the marines had apparently been a sideshow that he could no longer afford to participate in.

Behind him, Garp watched the man go, scowling angrily. “Damn, I’d hoped to keep him here for a bit longer. Still, it was only a matter of time. I couldn’t land a knockout punch any more than he could, and he could always zip away from me, the zoomy ass.” Then he began to laugh, the same booming laugh reverberating around him and down to the prison far below, the laugh that would’ve given courage and put smiles on marine faces and civilians alike, now making those marines awake to hear it shiver in terror.

“Well, I suppose I can go say hi to Edward myself. It might take me a little longer to get there, though. And maybe I can stop by to say hi to a few other... friends... and my ungrateful grandson too...” With another laugh, Garp bounded away after Kizaru.

OOOOOOO

At the same time, Kizaru zoomed off, near the center of the still-spreading battle. The marine's depth still remained mainly unengaged, thanks to the trap the Tarai Current had become. While it had allowed them to bring along the majority of their fleets of ships quickly, most of their vessels had no way of moving without wind or current, not one that would keep their crews in fighting condition anyway. Rowing was possible even on galleons with sufficiently

long paddles or officers like Coby, Helmeppo and Brannew. But most of those officers were gone, and not many captains kept long paddles in their ship's stores.

However, the artillery ships in the center of the formation were finally beginning to make their presence known at this point, despite the cannon smoke wreathing the battle. Instead of aiming their arching fire at specific targets, they were just firing blindly over their fellows in the center. Yet, despite not being able to see their targets, they began to hit some of Whitebeard's heavier ships from his personal division. As those cannonballs fell from on high, they hit segments of the pirate ships that were not thick enough to stop them. No ocean-going vessel could be as protected from above as they were from the sides, which the Whitebeard Pirates had proven in the first few minutes of the fight when they came in from high above thanks to Shiki's Devil Fruit power and now learned themselves.

Even as he was fighting Sengoku and Peter, Whitebeard still had enough attention to sense some of his ships being hit and his sons dying. Growling angrily, he spared a second to wave his bisento around to either side, lashing out with wide blasts of his quake power, which caught the second cannonade midair. The quake power shattered the cannonballs into pieces.

He kept this up even as he fought Peter and Sengoku for several moments. Having been pushed back into the air over his flagship, it was the Moby Dick that paid the price, taking several large slashing attacks from Peter across its deck and then losing most of its castle by a redirected blow from Sengoku. The enlarged golden fist smashed through both deck and the rest of the construction like it was made of thin kindling, reducing Whitebeard's quarters to so much flotsam. "OY! I liked my bunk, you golden fucker!"

Dodging around another attack from Peter, Whitebeard lashed out with the butt end of Murakumogiri, which cracked into the other man's side. It didn't do any damage against Sengoku's Busoshoku, but it did push him directly into an attack from Peter, who instantly turned away, allowing Whitebeard a second to look to where Akainu and Shiki were duking it out, hearing the wild laughter of his former adversary turned erstwhile ally. "Jihahahaha!"

Then his own opponents were on him again, pushing Whitebeard back through the air, lashing out with precise strikes from cutlass, palm and fist, only occasionally using their legs to do anything but keep them in the air. Whitebeard was in much the same position, although he was strong enough to use just one leg to activate Geppo and proved this a second later, lashing out with a kick that Peter blocked at the last second, pushing Whitebeard's kick to one side with a Busoshoku clad palm.

Kong had been knocked away from the battle a moment before and had taken some time to recover from the strike. Now, he charged forward once more, his face grimly determined to take part despite how easily Whitebeard had swatted him aside. "I'm still here, Whitebeard!"

"So?" Whitebeard flipped away, whirling Murakumogiri below him to batter against both of Sengoku's hastily raised arms, black with Busoshoku. Whitebeard was about to concentrate

some of his quake power into Murakumogiri's blade when Peter's own blade came up quickly, flashing forward in a figure eight that most accomplished swordsman of the world would've had trouble blocking. Whitebeard took it on the shaft of Murakumogiri for a second, and for just an instant, they strove against one another before disengaging as Kong tried to get into stabbing range, only to have his blow deflected by the end of the bisento, carrying on past Whitebeard, and almost eating an elbow to the face for his troubles.

Then all three were attacking again, as Peter twirled in place faster than a top, with Sengoku coming in from Whitebeard's back and Kong from above. Murakumogiri's blade met Peter's sword, as Whitebeard twisted, deflecting several punches from Sengoku before matching Kong punch for punch, still grinning even as the trio pressed him hard. *I may be old, but they're going to have to do better to take this old man's head! They haven't even been able to suppress my Kenbunshoku despite it being three against one! No, Peter's going to have to break out that secret of his and...*

Just then, something came through to Whitebeard from his Kenbunshoku. The density of light nearby was shifting in small areas, a surefire sign that Kizaru was about to arrive.

Once, Whitebeard got into a discussion with an extremely hot scientist woman about Kizaru and his Devil Fruit, and she explained that there were various different types of light and that the Pika Pika no Mi didn't actually give Kizaru total control over light, just a certain segment of it. The scientist woman's heavy cleavage had allowed the lecture to stick in Whitebeard's brain. To a certain point, anyway. She had used a lot of technical terms and scientific words that frankly sounded made up to him, which had not stuck in his brain. But he understood that Kizaru could create light but not control all light, the same as someone with gravity could not control the entire planet's gravity or, in Whitebeard's case, natural earthquakes.

No, Whitebeard could not control natural earthquakes. He'd tried once when he was younger, and it had nearly put him into a coma. He could counter them with his own, but not control natural earthquakes.

Anyway, the hot scientist girl had talked Whitebeard through what, in her opinion, a change in the local light density would feel like, and it had astonishingly transferred to Whitebeard's Kenbunshoku, something he had proven in the two run-ins he'd had with the Light Devil Fruit user before this. The dense and formed light of Kizaru's body sort of rode like a ship on the natural light.

Yet, at the same time, he was feeling something even hotter, even more densely packed with potential, coming towards them from the other side. Unlike changing the feel of the natural light around him, though, this felt more like an incoming storm, only condensed.

Whitebeard's grin turned almost evil then as he realized that the brat who had started all this had indeed gotten the Devil Fruit power he had been hinting at over the Den Den Mushi

before all this. *It's going to be amazing to see it in action and to see if he's all that in person, too, or just a brat who got lucky.* "Gururarara!"

As before, even over the sounds of battle that noise echoed across the leagues around them, giving further heart to Whitebeard's crew and causing shivers among the marines. It also annoyed both Sengoku and Peter, who pressed in once more from either side as Kong shouted, "Why are you laughing?! Why, Newgate!?"

Peter simply attacked, his eyes narrowed in speculation as beside him, Sengoku tried to figure out what Whitebeard knew that they didn't. He had felt Kizaru coming a moment before. But only now did Sengoku sense the incoming storm, causing his eyes to widen.

All around them, motes of light glowed like tiny stars in the midday sun, flashing into light-based clones of Kizaru. This drew a shout of delight from the marines, officers and sailors alike who saw them, staring as several disappeared, while others flew forward as if to engage Whitebeard.

"Bah! You're going to have to do better than that, little lightbulb," Whitebeard scoffed, creating an air-pressure attack with a single kick like a Rankyaku, only wider top to bottom. When it struck, most of the light clones in front of him were gone, leaving only one on his left. That one, the real one, was intercepted, although not by Whitebeard.

Instead, Kizaru found his leg being blocked by the foot of someone else, who appeared in midair just as Kizaru did with his Yasakani no Magatama, only the crackle of a lightning bolt giving a hint as to how it had happened. "M~y m~y, and who might yo~u..." Kizaru began before taking in the man's features and matching them to his wanted poster. "Stra~w Ha~t Luffy, without your str~aw ha~t?"

"Ugh, you marines are still calling me that? That's like someone being called Bandanna Jerry! So, he just has to take off the bandanna, and there's no other thing he's famous for? Stupid," Luffy growled, pushing back against Kizaru's leg, grimacing a bit at the strength of the man.

For just a moment, as the bolts of bright light had appeared all around the main area of the battle, the marines within sight had cheered, taking new heart from the earlier show of force from Whitebeard. Now, they stared in shock at the sight of the sudden appearance of a rookie bounty that most of them, despite the concerns of Peter and Sengoku had thought dead long since, taking two of the Shichibukai with him. Neither of them had bothered to tell anyone about their concerns on that score, and now Luffy's appearance shocked their followers immensely, so much that the fight in the immediate vicinity died down as they fell back, and the pirates allowed them, turning to watch the tableau occurring in front of them.

Sengoku scowled, shaking his head as he stared at Luffy in disgust, as Whitebeard began to float down to the top of Moby Dick once more, standing at the prow as he stared up at Luffy

and the others still in midair. Seeing that, Sengoku retreated a little, gesturing Kong to join him as he took a moment to analyze what this could mean for the overall fight and came up with a disastrous realization.

I had known there was a possibility that Garp's grandson might be alive somehow when we learned of Black Leg and Bounty Hunter working together within Impel Down, possibly though suborning Hancock..., which is accurate given what Peter told me, when we regrouped earlier. Yet the lightning fruit was not within my calculations. I thought it to be truly lost. But then again, the Straw Hat brat is a pirate. Why would he tell Hina if he had it? He must've hidden it away, eating it after she and her crew left their ship.

Which is why he didn't use it against Aokiji. He showed the brain of a strategist even then, which makes them all the more dangerous. He will need to die today for world peace just like Whitebeard, but the Supa Supa no Mi powers that Vegapunk's Green Goo gave our troops... it makes them horribly dangerous. Kizaru will be the key to defeating Straw Hat, Sengoku admitted reluctantly.

Whereas Sengoku kept all of his thoughts about Luffy's arrival inside his own head and on the battle, Peter spoke aloud, a snarl forming above his neat goatee. "So, even a marine officer lied to us for this young upstart. I have to wonder why, but it is immaterial. For her part in releasing the Goro Goro no Mi Fruit into a pirate's hands, Hina will be executed after this, along with everyone in her crew. Even if they did not know, the mere chance they did will be enough to have them executed."

And we will need internal scapegoats after we win here, as already, we will have sacrificed a large portion of the marine's strength in this war. She and that Nefertari girl will make excellent martyrs both internally and externally, he added mentally.

Kizaru's thoughts were nowhere near as deep as his superior officers or overall boss. He had heard from Garp that he was helping his grandson and Fire Fist, so he had known that Luffy was alive. The lightning fruit was still a surprise, though. *Lightning versus light? I wonder how this is going to go.* Regardless of anything else, though, Kizaru wasn't about to fall back into his normal lazy way of thinking again. *This Monkey might be just as troublesome as the older version.*

Sensing Luffy was about to strike again, Kizaru flashed away, standing alongside Peter and Sengoku for a moment, reassessing things. As he did, Sengoku leaned in, whispering instructions, to which Kizaru nodded.

Luffy snorted at this, and then looked down towards Whitebeard, waving his hand. "Yo, Grandpa, shouldn't you be lying down somewhere? All this moving around can't be good for yer heart."

For once, all the marines and pirates were united in how they reacted to that line. “You idiot! How can you talk to the strongest man in the world like that!?” shouted many a marine and pirate voice alike, while others chanted, “Oh, he’s dead, dead!” and others roared, “How dare you disrespect Pops like that you asshole!?”

“Gururarara isn’t it customary when you arrive on a rival pirate captain’s vessel to announce yourself, brat?”

“I could say something about like ‘what ship would that be exactly,’ considering your ship doesn’t seem to be around here anymore,” Luffy quipped back.

“But I still have one,” Whitebeard retorted, pointing down at the masts that had been smashed off of his ship earlier, then to where a portion of the prow floated on its own, before pointing down to the larger portion of the wreckage that he was currently standing on. “It’s over there, and over there, and over here, Gururarara. My flag still flies, doesn’t it?”

This was true. While one of the masts of Whitebeard’s flagship had been destroyed, one mast remained standing. On it, Whitebeard’s ensign flew, snapping in the very light breeze that was about as much weather as you got in the Tarai Current.

“Well, in that case, permission to come aboard?” Luffy snorted, landing beside Whitebeard as he stared up to where Sengoku was already starting to grow. Next to him, Kizaru had begun to multiply himself, and Luffy knew instinctively the copies would somehow be more dangerous than the light-mote copies of Kizaru when he arrived. Those had merely been a side effect of his mode of travel. These were made for combat. Meanwhile, Peter had taken the opportunity to reload his pistol with more Seastone bullets. Around them, Marines and pirate officers alike also backed away, turning to watch this in a small bubble of nonviolence in the sea of the larger battle, cannons continuing to pummel their ears from both sides.

“But thank you anyway for arriving as you did,” Luffy added seriously. “It would’ve been really hairy without you and your fleet getting here in time. It’s always nice to see that my brother joined a good crew. Am I right to think that that guy fighting the other Marine Admiral over there is how you did it?”

Whitebeard scoffed, not even bothering to answer that one, as he replied, “You sound as if you think you still would’ve gotten away even without us, brat.”

“We would have,” Luffy answered simply, before turning away from their opponents to stare up at Whitebeard, who turned his own head to look down at the far, far shorter younger man. “I remember a certain dare you gave me way back when we first talked. But I think I proved myself already by this point, don’t you?”

“So you say brat. But you haven’t actually fulfilled that dare yet, have you?” Whitebeard answered, a bubble of anticipation welling up inside him. *This brat, he’s the real deal. Roger... if he can survive this...*

Tension crackled between them for a moment, completely at odds with their previous banter, as Whitebeard Pirate and marine alike stared, shocked at the sight of this rookie standing up against the strongest man in the world. Even those marines who had known how strong Luffy had proven time after time before this, those officers who knew the full story of Water Seven, like Momonga, who had returned to the main battle with the rest of the forward force, were astonished at the sheer confidence that Luffy had in himself to be able to look Whitebeard in the eye as he was doing now.

They had not yet seen anything. The next words out of Luffy’s mouth solidified his growing legend. “You might be strong, you might be my big brother’s Captain, you might be called the Strongest Man in The World. But there is one title you don’t have, one title I am going to take for myself! I’m going to be the Pirate King!”

The battle was spread out far too much for everyone involved to hear that shout, but subtly reinforced with Luffy’s Haoshoku, it reached thousands on both sides of the battlefield. Moreover, those who did hear and lived through the day would never forget the sight of the young man staring unflinchingly up at the world’s strongest man as he declared his dream in front of the powers of the world.

While Sengoku simply ground his teeth and Peter snorted, Kong frowned, as did the listening Kizaru, Akainu and Smoker, both of whom were close enough to hear Luffy’s declaration, even if neither of them had seen him arrive. Now Smoker turned away from his own personal portion of the battle, streaking across the ocean in his smoke form.

As for Shiki, he simply laughed gaily, shouting out about how youngsters always wanted to “Reach for the stars, never realizing how far beyond them that is!”

Akainu snarled angrily, seeing the rookie pirate he had tried to crush at Water Seven making trouble once more, probably behind the disaster they had run into today. But instead of attacking, Akainu retreated, pulling back towards the center area of the Marine formation still locked within the current. As he did, Shiki quickly recovered and chased after him, only to be intercepted by two K9Ms.

Breathing a sigh of relief and moving one of his shoulders that had begun to ache from a blow from Shiki’s devil fruit, Akainu landed on a ship he recognized as a squadron command ship from the special red ensign that flew under its marine flag. Landing, he growled out orders. “Get signal flags out. The escargatoire might be down, damn it, but we can communicate in other ways.” He gave out a series of orders, and as the sailors ran around to obey, he moved to the side of the ship, where he created a stream of magma leading downward into the ocean, his face furrowed in concentration.

However, all that was happening elsewhere. Where Luffy stood and around him, everyone, pirate and marine, just stared in surprise, surprise which deepened as Whitebeard laughed once more, a jolly sound rather than a terrifying one for a moment, as he stamped the blunt end of Murakumogiri into the deck beneath him. And when he spoke, his voice carried a hint of Haoshoku, as well as his own force of personality.

“So, you have the strength of will at least to declare yourself, boy! Strength of dream and will! But if you want it, if you think you can grasp it! Roger left it there. Reach for it, reach for One Piece for all you have, brat, and continue to grow as you sail this ocean. Grow until the foundations of the world tremble, until it changes, until your legend eclipses mine, or forever be in my shadow and never attain the title of Pirate King! Never attain the one treasure, One Piece!”

Those words would have cowed most people, would’ve scared them or would’ve simply made them more thoughtful or more serious. That was the reaction from many, stunned to hear Whitebeard say that One Piece existed like this, something many a pirate, ally, foe and crewmate alike had asked him about before, only to simply be laughed away. To hear that the greatest treasure in the world truly existed and was out there was astonishing.

Luffy simply laughed, thrusting both of his fists into the air as he roared his answer to Whitebeard’s challenge. “That’s the kind of challenge I want! To prove that I am the freest and the strongest man in the world!”

At that point, Peter had just about enough of this upstart, this young brat threatening to throw the balance of the world into turmoil. As Marines and Whitebeard Pirates alike simply stared on, he charged forward, firing several times from his pistol. Seastone bullets every time, spreading them out between his two targets. Dozens of Kizaru holograms also charged forward, while Sengoku took up the rear, bouncing up above the other two lines of advance to come down from on high, his shadow spreading over the wrecked Moby Dick.

Whitebeard blocked the Seastone bullets coming towards him with his weapon, deflecting them the deck or high up into the air, causing Sengoku to pull up short and dodge around several of the light clones that Kizaru had created. Peter followed in his initial assault, coming in to go sword to pike with Whitebeard again, then ducking up underneath a blow from Whitebeard’s pike, slashing at the Yonko’s leg, causing him to grimace as he couldn’t quite move his leg out of the way fast enough, a sudden twinge from the wound on his chest causing him to slow down for a second.

However, this did not stop him from launching a full quake and Haoshoku enhanced Busoshoku punch to Peter’s face.

If it had been one or the other of any of those three, the punch would simply have smacked Peter away, causing little damage beyond a slight bruise, perhaps. Nevertheless, all three at once overcame Peter’s own Busoshoku, knocking out several teeth and almost breaking

his jaw as he was hurled off the side of the Moby Dick. He had to struggle to get his feet under him and spent several seconds bouncing in midair, gaining distance for a second as he reached up to his mouth, feeling where his teeth had been a moment ago, his eyes wide before narrowing in fury, blood trickling out of his mouth.

Showing no sign of the strain he put himself under just a moment ago to dodge the blow to his leg and retaliate, Whitebeard laughed again, pointing the tip of Murakumogiri towards Peter. "Gururarara I'm about as old as dirt, so it's no wonder that I've lost a step, but what's your excuse for having your teeth fall out like that, Peter?"

At that, Peter seemed to lose it, roaring as he placed both of his hands on the hilt of his sword, charging in and wielding overhand for a moment in a series of lightning-fast strikes, pushing him away from Sengoku's next planned attack in his fury. "You will pay for that, Newgate!"

From where they had engaged nearby, Luffy and Kizaru both blinked, with Kizaru muttering, "M~y word, I did not think that one of the Gorosei would be so easily provoked."

"I guess vanity is a thing for even the most powerful," Luffy answered with a shrug. Then, the two of them turned back to their own battle, lashing out with feet and fists, respectively.

With that, Luffy and Kizaru were off, bouncing around the area using Geppo and Soru to start. Both of them were a little leery of how their Devil Fruits would react to one another, and so began by testing one another's Kenbunshoku, while Luffy kept Kizaru from interfering with the fight going on nearby between the blonde guy who looked like some kind of government official, Buddha and Kong.

Luffy recognize both of the officers, and Kizaru and Akainu, from descriptions that his grandfather had given him of his annoying higher ups over the years. The blonde guy, though? He was a complete unknown to Luffy. Even stranger, something about him set Luffy's sixth sense off, as compared to his Kenbunshoku like nobody's business. Like he had a monster inside him just waiting to be released. The guy was dangerous, with a capital D.

Then between one second and the next, as Luffy dealt with another round of light created clones, he was forced to dodge a blade of pure laser focused light, as Kizaru intoned "Ama no Murakumo!"

Luffy couldn't dodge the second stab, surprised that it was a stab rather than a slash, and quickly shifted into his lightning form, letting the sword passed through him. That stung a lot, **far** more than the previous exchange of kicks had when Luffy first arrived on the scene.

I have to assume that the light that Kizaru is putting out is somehow trying to direct my lightning? Weird! It kind of makes me think I should've probably paid more attention in science

classes back in my old life. Then again, what kind of science class would it be where you would experiment with what happens when a laser beam hits a lightning bolt? If we had experiments like that, maybe I would've paid more attention!

Still, Luffy had a very high pain tolerance and responded with a point-blank, "El Thor!"

This was the same kind of large-scale attack that Enel had been so fond of. The blast of lightning came down from above, completely eclipsing Kizaru's body, and then continued on, hitting and searing entirely through a marine vessel, killing many of its crew instantly, and turning the rest of the wreckage into burning piles of wood and melting metal.

As the attack dissipated, Kizaru appeared, scowling in annoyance, looking a little ruffled but other than that not having taken much damage. "We~ll well, that was~n't pleasant."

In fact, it had hurt like blazes, but Kizaru had been able to bear through it, and reconstitute himself after. *Such an attack won't kill me, but enough of them might take me out of the fight by just being too dang painful to work through. I suppose I should not have expected anything less from the Goro Goro no Mi.*

"You ain't seen nothing yet, Yellow Monkey!" With that, Luffy disappeared from sight, closing the distance quickly, only for his body to stop well away from Kizaru, only his hands appearing out of a flicker of lightning to either side of Kizaru, as an electric discharge appeared between them.

"Mah, m~ah. Don't get to~o far ahead of yourself, hmm?" Kizaru easily saw the attack coming and his hands flashed out, twin swords of concentrated light in either hand. The points deflected the bolts of electricity along the arc of the blade down towards the ocean below. "You shouldn't underestima~te me, you know?"

The next instant, a lightspeed kick came Luffy's way, and Luffy shifted to Busoshoku to take it, returning a blow of his own that came flying in from Kizaru's blindside. "Underestimating you, hell, all I'm interested in is kicking your ass! That seems a fitting step for the next Pirate King."

Kizaru barely dodged out of the way, the punch flashing right before his face, missing his nose by a bare whisker. Since he was already in lightspeed form, he couldn't quickly change to his flesh and blood form and then coat himself in Haki to take that hit like Luffy just had.

Busoshoku and logia, or element type transformations were thought to be utterly incompatible with one another. The Armor-type Haki literally forced a Devil Fruit user's body to solidify, and thus could not be used in conjunction with a logia attack. This was true defensively too, as if the will of the user overwhelmed the Devil Fruit at the point of contact. So even if Kizaru was in his lightspeed form, a Busoshoku clad fist would hit him as if he was in his flesh and blood body.

Kizaru flew into the air, before pausing, turning around and shouting out a new attack, "Yasakani no Magatama!" Crossing his arms in front of him, he used both hands to fire a torrent of deadly light particles, the attacks going in every direction.

Grimacing, Luffy changed back into his lightning form, concentrating, and gesturing to either side. Around him, several lightning clones, like the ones Kizaru had used several times now, appeared for a second before disappearing, his attention flagging as each one was struck by the light. They dissipated his clones, and when hit him, again hurt Luffy more than a little, but he bore through it, closing it hard.

"Yata no Kagami," Kizaru intoned slowly, a beam of light appearing between his hands, flashing past Luffy's current position down to a pirate ship, where it bounced off of the wood there almost like it was a mirror. Kizaru's own body followed the light, and he appeared there a second later, landing down into the vessel. Kizaru couldn't use this technique to travel long distances, but short range, any surface reflected enough light for him to use and there were a lot of marine galleons, both already wrecked and sinking slowly, or locked in combat with pirate ships like the one he had landed on to use.

Barely taking a second to let his body solidify into his flesh-and-blood form, Kizaru launched several more bolts up towards Luffy, the bolts becoming clones midway toward their target before spreading out, attacking Luffy from every direction.

"Try something new, you ass!" Luffy flashed forward faster than the clones could move, changing his direction so quickly they couldn't keep up, and a wide-angle attack blasted them out of existence, while destroying yet another marine vessel to the side of where he had previously been.

A lightspeed assisted Busoshoku stamp shattered the hull of the pirate vessel Kizaru was standing on, making it look as if it had been cracked in two by an auger, before he launched himself upwards, meeting Luffy's downward plunge. The light beam sword in his hand again, deflecting a lightning blade coming out of Luffy's own hands. "Oh~oh, so scary, you're flattery..."

That took Luffy a second to work out, but he simply snorted. "Imitate this!" Then to the astonishment of Kizaru, the rest of Luffy's body shifted into his human form, then almost instantly into Busoshoku. A punch came his way that Kizaru barely sensed in time to block with his own Busoshoku.

For a second, the two traded blows, light against lightning on one side, with lightning slowly losing, the blade shifting along the pattern of the saber in Kizaru's hand rather than trying to cut through. Luffy's other attacks were not doing anything either, his Busoshoku not being able to get through Kizaru's.

Several strikes passed, but then Luffy shifted to the side and got in a kick underneath one of the admiral's arms, almost right underneath the armpit. Kizaru hadn't seen it coming,

and had only armored up his own fist, face and chest, not his side, wanting, like Luffy, to conserve some of his inner willpower, knowing that this would not be a quick battle. This cost him now, and Kizaru was hurled away by the Haki clad foot of his opponent.

Luffy shifted back into his fully human form, bouncing in place for second as he watched Kizaru zip with another use of the mirror technique. Flashing over to a nearby pirate vessel, Kizaru landed, stood, cracked his neck and looked up at Luffy. "Amaterasu!" A blast of intense light came from him, blinding everyone in the vicinity, and indeed, many who were not actually looking in his direction were similarly blinded thanks to how bright it truly was. A moment later, another light speed attack slashed downward, cutting the ship in half.

But Luffy had sensed that attack coming, closing his eyes and turning into his lightning form, which allowed him to zip forward, dodging most of the next few attacks from Kizaru, a fusillade of laser blasts coming his way. Already, Kizaru's inability to bend his light-based attacks was proving a weakness Luffy could exploit.

This time, Luffy had a very specific goal in mind. He evaded Kizaru's attacks, moving forward from where he had previously been near Whitebeard, deeper into the marine formation, heading largely leftward at the moment.

There, he lashed out to either side of him, creating almost a dozen giant lightning wolves. "Lightning Wolf Pack!"

Two of them charged forward towards where the bolts of laser light were still coming from. Another leaped towards where Kong had just rejoined the battle near Whitebeard after getting thrown away for a second time. The guy was persistent in trying to take part, but was very obviously out of his depth. Several more dove down into the marine formation.

One even raced towards where some steam had begun to build up near the center of the unengaged portion of the marine fleet. A huge ball of magma lanced out, intercepting the wolf and both disappeared. The heat generated by the lightning wolf turned the magma into ash, but the ball of magma still absorbed the wolf's energy.

Hissing in annoyance, Kizaru launched several large-scale laser strikes, each blast bursting out from his body and forming into a wide beam of energy. Needing to travel in a straight line could only hit so many of the wolves, though, and even those dodged around making it more difficult for him. Five of the wolves were well out of his line of sight over the horizon.

Despite the best the regular marines could do to fire up at them, all five slammed into marine ships, bursting them apart with the power of the lightning they contained, burning wood, men and metal alike. Two had hit smaller sloops and even had enough contained electricity to continue on to hit two more ships.

Enel was a fucking moron! Luffy reflected, not for the first time, and with a certain amount of glee. He had yet to really launch any truly Enel-scale attacks, but he hadn't needed to just yet. The lightning wolves, about the same size as Luffy, had within them contained the electrical potential of some of those larger attacks. Luffy's control of the devil fruit was just that much better, he didn't rely entirely on sheer size, but the density of the energy within his attacks made them far deadlier. *Which allows me to also make them a little more unpredictable, sending them off on different paths, and that clone trick lets me even import some orders to them too.*

In a way, the wolves, or any other shape he imparted to his lightning, made them just a differently shaped clones of Luffy. They could then be given very simple orders, such as 'dodge around,' or 'hit that ship.' Moreover, just like in the fight with Kuma, it worked very well here.

Using his mirror technique again, Kizaru got in directly underneath Luffy, then zoomed upwards in a lightspeed ray. Hundreds of clones appeared as he did, coming in at Luffy from every angle, creating an almost web of first light, then clones as they closed.

Luffy grimaced, and then shifted entirely into his Busoshoku, charging one set of the clones. At the last second, he suddenly shifted targets. Coming out of his Busoshoku and shifting from human into a lightning bolt, he zoomed to the side of where he had been about to hit the enclosing clone wave.

The clones struck his lightning body, tugging and pulling at it dissipating as they did, and causing Luffy an intense amount of pain, almost enough for him to lose control of his devil fruit for a second. But then he was through them, and when Kizaru appeared, Luffy was already gone, zooming away in his lightning form, bouncing to one side, and then lashing out with another large-scale attack. This time the attack took the shape of an eastern style dragon, he roared, "Soaring Dragon Bolt!" as he sent it forward.

The attack flashed forward, essentially eating the clones before Kizaru could close again. He did, but Luffy dodged around his punch, his own Kenbunshoku up to the task of keeping track of Kizaru whenever he was in physical form. *It looks as if my devil fruit helps me more with Kenbunshoku than his does for sure. And maybe with general intelligence too.*

A laser sword came down on his head, but Luffy was already gone, shifting to the side, a roundhouse blow coming in towards Kizaru's blindside towards his head. Kizaru however covered himself with Busoshoku, and twisted his head around, headbutting the blow almost, causing Luffy's hand to be flung away for a second and overbalancing him, opening Luffy up to a shoulder charge at light speed acceleration.

Luffy grunted as he took it, Haki striving against Haki for a moment, hurling them both down into one of the marine vessels, where they slammed into the ship with an impact equal to one of Garp's Fists of Love. The ship heaved and the twosome found themselves embedded in a deck two down from the main deck, but neither combatant cared. Fist meet fist, foot

intercepted foot, as they battled it out for a moment. Needing to shift his human body into Busoshoku right before impact slowed Kizaru's attacks somewhat but gave them even more hitting power against someone who was using Busoshoku themselves.

Grunting in pain, Luffy spat a gob of blood to the side even as he blocked another strike returning it with his own. Before this, Luffy only had supposition, but now he was certain. *Kizaru's Busoshoku's well above my own. I can shift into, and out of Busoshoku, and into my lightning form faster, but staying in our physical body doesn't give me any advantage. This guy might've been probing me... ugh... earlier, but he's for sure giving it his all now. Well, as much as he can and not wipe out his own forces, anyway.*

The two of them exchanged several more blows there in the bowels of the marine vessel. The sound and force of the impacts hammered the senses of the marines around them, sending many to their knees or simply off of their feet entirely even as they began to abandon ship.

Another blow came in from Kizaru's blindside, catching him completely off guard, and he grimaced. He hadn't even sensed that coming, and now like Luffy had a moment ago, he was forced to understand something about his opponent. *While I am in my human body, Luffy's Kenbunshoku is suppressing mine!*

This was indeed the case. Even when Luffy himself was in his normal body or even clad in Busoshoku, the Goro Goro no Mi still gave him a massive advantage when it came to Kenbunshoku. He could literally sense the electrical impulses in Kizaru's mind as he concentrated on it. Like other Kenbunshoku users, Kizaru fought back, his influence almost pressing out against Luffy's own Observation Haki like two weather fronts meeting and unlike with Busoshoku, his immense training and experience could not overcome Luffy's 'natural' advantage.

As his back was smashed into a bulkhead behind him, the fight had basically progressed deeper into the marine vessel starting from the hole that their impact had made. Kizaru launched an attack from his head. Just his head disappeared into a lightspeed laser, coming forward and slamming into Luffy, hurling Luffy backwards and causing him to cry out in pain although not from the impact, which his Busoshoku could mostly absorb. Rather it was the heat of the laser beam that caused him pain, getting underneath his Armor Haki almost.

Then Kizaru appeared once more physically, flipping up and over Luffy out of the hole, launching down several hundred strikes. He tried not to hit the marines who were abandoning ship, but he also didn't go out of his way not to, and one of them cried out in agony as a laser beam found him through his hips, searing in from one side to the other. Kizaru ignored him, covering the entire ship in prickly small needles of light.

Shaking his head and grimacing, Luffy shifted back into his lightning form, flashing upward, grunting in even more pain as two bolts of laser he couldn't dodge passed through his

lightning form body, before lashing out with one of his own. A second lightning dragon appearing along one arm and traveling towards Kizaru, enlarging as it went, eating many of the attacks coming from Kizaru even as the admiral enlarged the light-based beams he was sending Luffy's way. "Lightning Hammer!"

"Oh m~y, you truly are dangerous," Kizaru drawled even as he zoomed to the side using his eight-fold mirror move again to try to get out of the range of the dragon. The lightning construct shifted around following him until he dissipated with another large-scale attack of his own following up by another clone attack towards Luffy.

Nevertheless, Luffy had recovered from his momentary pain a moment ago, and now flashed his hands out in either direction, lashing out with whips of lightning that carved through the light clones. While the lightning whips diverted from their course upon impact by quite a bit thanks to the energy of the light contained in each clone, they could still dissipate the clones since they were not solid construct. He then launched himself forward, still swinging the lightning whips, causing Kizaru to flick out his swords again, light sword and lightning whips dueling for a second before Luffy allowed the technique to dissipate since they weren't doing him much good, and launched himself forward, fists flashing into lightning bolts.

At first, Kizaru just simply waited for the lightning to hit, knowing it wouldn't damage him and readying an attack of his own. Then, he watched in disbelief as Luffy's fists appeared, clad first physically, then clad in Busoshoku, right before impact.

He grunted in pain, feeling something inside of him break on that impact, even as he called up his own Busoshoku, hurled away from Luffy for a second. *Blast it! He can still surprise me even though I know his Observation is oppressing mine! No wonder he was able to survive against Kuma-kun and the others.*

Kizaru had some questions about that, and if he saw Hancock at some point during this battle, he would be asking those questions of her and demanding some answers. Right now, he had his hands full with this rookie, who was most decidedly not fighting him like a rookie. *Style, adaptability, a logia fruit on the same level as my own and at least two types of Haki.* Kizaru hadn't read the report on Luffy from Hina and couldn't remember offhand if he had Haoshoku, but it was academic at this moment.

No, we made a mistake thinking that Luffy was a rookie pirate at all. Even as far back as his fight with crocodile, he was most decidedly not anything like a rookie. And of course, Kuma probably did face some kind of treason from Moria. I still think that aspect of Hancock's report at least is accurate.

For a moment, Kizaru lost himself in thoughts of the time he had spent with Kuma, Vegapunk and Sentomaru on Vegapunk's island, as Kuma was transformed into a Pacifista and his daughter was cured of the disease ravaging her body. At that time, Kizaru had actually befriended the Shichibukai to be as well as his daughter, but in the years since, that friendship

had been strained, both due to distance, and the fact that a lot of Kuma's actions as Shichibukai had been to enlarge and enhance his reputation and simply completely baffling to Kizaru.

Kizaru wasn't certain any longer that at this point he would've said he was friends with Kuma, but at one point they had been, and it had pained Kizaru to learn of Kuma's demise at the hands of Luffy and the Straw Hat Crew. *At the time, I honestly put more weight on the betrayal from Gecko Moria for his death. Knowing Gecko Moria, I know that betrayal probably happened, but I am not so certain it actually mattered at all. Straw Hat is well beyond the normal Shichibukai's level. The only one I would give even a chance of beating him at this point is Mihawk.*

That was the last thought he could make on anything beyond the immediate battle as another large-scale attack from Luffy roared in his direction, a lightning blast that once more looked like a dragon, although this one was a European version. Luffy liked shaped lightning assaults since he could give them specific orders. Crossing the intervening distance, barely a few hundred yards, forming and shaping before striking at Kizaru, only to be blasted apart by his laser power.

Luffy had ridden just behind that attack and now reformed into his human body behind Kizaru, launching another attack from there, forcing Kizaru to turn. Blocking that attack with his leg, Kizaru launching a fist towards Luffy's face, which was caught and redirected before Kizaru did the same to a flesh and blood hand that had come out of a bolt of lightning before being covered with Busoshoku.

That sight caused Kizaru to grimace. There were a few things from this fight that were starting to get to Kizaru in this fight. One, the fact that Luffy was incredibly good at Kenbunshoku, far better than he should've been, which made Kizaru wonder how that was.

And second, he was also far faster at switching from his lightning form to a Busoshoku clad normal body than Kizaru. On top of that, Luffy's reaction time was equal to Kizaru's, which was just crazy. "How is it that you are better at me at that?" Kizaru asked as the two of them exchanged punches in Busoshoku, then lightspeed strikes against lightning clad blows.

"As if I'd give an enemy like you any kind of a leg up. Besides, you've had how many more years than me to get good at this? It isn't my fault you're slow!" Luffy taunted.

This worked, as Kizaru lost some of his normal lazy air, closing hard, launching out a series of laser shotgun blasts at close range.

The two of them became locked once more in a series of exchanges, punch, high kick low kick, elbow, knee, headbutt. All of them were blocked, all of them accompanied by the raging power of lightning and light respectively, giving out so much power that more than a few marine ships near the center of the unengaged portion of their fleet on the waters below lost their masts to redirected laser or lightning blasts, locked in a constantly tilting stalemate.

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Back with the rest of the Straw Hats, Laki bounced along above the ship, nearly forty stories above the crow's nest. This, coupled with the sight of her newest rifle variant, allowed her to see the edge of the battle, calling out directions down to Nami and the rest on the bridge so they stayed within sight of it from her position but well away from the actual fighting. They had to stay close like this, so Jinbei and his passengers could find them and just in case they had to zoom in and link up with Hancock if the Kuja Pirates and Franky could not escape the marines on their own.

Laki saw that the battle on this side of the current was still going the way of the pirates in terms of ships, but from the area of the conflict she could see, it seemed like the fighting between the officers was slowly turning against the Whitebeard Pirates. From this far away she couldn't make out any details, but it looked weirdly like a lot of the marine officers had suddenly received a power up of some kind. That was weird, but Laki reminded herself that while they were allied with Whitebeard, the Straw Hats had their orders. *And it isn't like we could make that big a difference on a battlefield as large as this one.*

The very idea made her shiver, both with interest and in fear at the monsters that could be found here on the Blue Sea. *Come what may, we've already made one hell of a splash. I am going to seriously have to up my game from now on. No way we are going to be considered rookies now. Even if we're not the type of pirates to cause trouble, that is going to bring us a lot of attention. Heh, maybe Franky and I should just take a few weeks building a lab on Amazon Lily. I bet those Kuja have some ideas, and I haven't had the opportunity to look into rotating barrels just yet. That's got a lot of possibilities. If I incorporate that with the idea of a pistol, make something like those handguns that Makino likes...*

Laki's thoughts broke off, the smile such thoughts put on the weapon designer's face falling off as she saw something through her rifle sight, something moving out past the last two dueling ships. The marine vessel of the pair had been taking a pounding, having lost its paddle wheel early, but its officers had led an attack on the pirate vessel. The small battle had turned in the pirate's favor when another few Whitebeard Officers arrived. But now, one of them, a huge man with a tan, had just lost his arm from the elbow, the blood visible in a fountain even from where Laki was hovering, to two newcomers to that small segment of the battle.

Instead of finishing him off, though, the pair did not stay to help the marines further. Instead, they flew on, moving roughly in Laki's direction. *Are they coming toward us?*

Slinging her rifle and pulling out her Den Den Mushi, Laki spoke into it quickly. "Hey, first mate, we've got trouble. There are two... I honestly don't know what they are... I can't make out many details, but they seem to be all dressed in white, and they are certainly no friends of Whitebeard. They just tore off the arm of a big guy who must have been one of his chief officers. They're using Geppo extremely well in conjunction with that speed technique, and they're coming our way."

“Wait, we’re way over the horizon from anyone near to sea level. How the hell... Kenbunshoku, fuck. And they’re coming this way for a reason,” Nami muttered, having also heard like everyone else Laki’s report. “Why? Our captain’s out there in the main fight, and they have to know that Ace is somewhere else, too. Why come after us now?”

“Could they be maybe following Jinbei back to us?” Sanji asked, shrugging his shoulders and glancing over at Zoro. “Just because he’s swimming in the ocean doesn’t mean someone with Kenbunshoku couldn’t pick him out from among the monsters down there. And taking out a former Shichibukai... well, that would make sense to anyone. Especially if they might have seen what happened on Gion-chwan’s ship.”

Contrary to what would normally have happened, Zoro did not jump at the chance to taunt Sanji. Instead, he simply twitched, using a lot of his self-control to keep from snapping at all of them, not just Sanji, his hands flexing on the barely-passable-as metal-filings swords that were at his side currently. While he trusted Makino, and to a lesser extent Brook, going so long without his real swords at his side was beginning to get to the green-haired first mate, made worse by the fact he had been forced to wait here like this for someone else to get them back for him.

After a second, he had enough self-control to reply. “It’s possible, but whatever they are after, we have our orders. Nami, Laki, shift our course a bit further away, let’s see if we can get entirely around the left flank, come at it from behind the marine’s line, such as it is, but remain out of sight. Just like the captain said, we’re going to have to trust Hancock’s Kenbunshoku to help her and Frankie link up with us.

“And the rest of the lovelies on her crew, Sword Baka! Ahhhh, if only I was competent enough to use Kenbunshoku myself, I could rush to Hancock-chwan’s aid even now, like a knight rushing to the aid of a princess!” Sanji moaned, unaware of the relationship between Luffy and Hancock, new and untried as it had been before the infiltration mission began.

Unaware of the irony in Sanji’s statement, given a certain blue-haired girl’s involvement in the fight on the Kuja ship, Nami shook her head. “Honestly, I’m probably the one who is closest to getting Kenbunshoku and even I’m not that close.”

“True. I could wish I had made as much progress in that area as with Busoshoku, but Luffy was right, Busoshoku was an immediate help for me,” Robin hummed thoughtfully. “Eve, how are you holding up? Are you still feeling pain from the hits Kizaru landed on us?”

Eve’s head appeared to one side of her, followed by an arm, which she used to throw a quick salute. “I’m good. Luffy left us with enough of a charge to last us at least half a day at this speed. Shorter, obviously, at any faster speed, but still. All the fires in the deck have been out for a while, although I’m still feeling some phantom pains from the destruction of the dial cannon. I’ve got the tertiary guns loaded just in case, but remember, I can’t hit anything higher than our own main deck.”

“Thank you, dear,” Robin said, honestly not having even thought of that.

“Those two white guard fellows are still coming! They’ve left the last of the battle behind by leagues now, and if anything, they are picking up speed,” Laki reported.

Sanji scowled, but before he could say anything, Nami ordered Perona, “Send out a few ghosts their way, see if you can surprise them and what their reaction to the ghosts is.”

Nodding at that, Zoro ordered Sanji to head out onto the deck with him. After a brief scuffle about following the first mate’s orders, which was ended when Nami asked him to go outside, the pair of main combatants headed down onto the main deck, followed by Chopper.

Before Perona’s ghosts could reach the incoming enemies, there was a loud splash as Jinbei exploded out of the water near the side of the ship, causing Chopper and Sanji to scream like little girls for a second before landing, with Makino and Brook slowly falling off of his back. At that, Zoro’s tenseness faded, and he laughed, “Oh, that was hilarious! I’m going to remind you of this, Swirly Brow.”

“Shut up, Aho!” Sanji barked back, still holding his chest as Chopper shifted to his small form and rolled into hiding behind the wrecked, remains of the as-yet unused middlemost turret.

Hitting the deck in a heap as he fell off of Jinbei’s shoulder, Brook gasped, opening his mouth, and a fish came out, followed by a smaller one flopping out of his Afro, as he said, “I saw my life flash through my eyes several times and the sequel wasn’t as good as the first. But then again, do I still have a life at all? Skull joke...”

“A very weak one, I feel,” Makino said, sliding out of Jinbei’s hold with far more dignity. She thanked Jinbei with a smile, before turning to find Zoro right beside her, holding out his hands demanding.

“Give!” the swordsman ordered.

“Hey Shitty Marimo! You don’t get to speak to the lovely Makino-chan like that!” Sanji growled, moving over to get into Zoro’s face.

But before he could, Zoro solemnly took the swords that Makino offered him, bowing his head in thanks to her. Tossing the edgeless bars of metal that dared to call themselves swords, his hands clenching onto their hilts as his eyes closed, connecting to the wills of the swords.

Wado Ichimonji was first, and for a second, Zoro felt the inhuman nature of the spirit within. Wado was still like a wide, slow river, uncaring of the passage of time but accepting each wielder in turn as their own individual. It was not happy or sad or anything like that to be

reunited with him after so long. It simply accepted both Zoro wielding it and its purpose as a blade.

Once the blade that was the physical sign of the promise that Zoro had given to Kuina was strapped in place, the cursed sword, Sendai Kitetsu was next. Unlike Wado, Zoro did not need to search for the spirit of Kitetsu. Instead, it roused instantly at his touch and it was angry. The spirit of the blade almost rejected Zoro, the hilt trying to turn in his hand, but Zoro held on, grimly staring at the blade as he pulled it out of its sheath, going through a series of cuts with it to one side.

Eventually, despite still feeling overwhelming bloodlust from the sword, Zoro tamed the demonic spirit again. He also got the impression that this would be the last time the sword would willingly bend to him if he misplaced it. If Zoro lost it again, he would have proven unworthy of the cursed blade.

The third blade, the black blade, Shusui that he had taken from the zombie samurai from samurai country, was another matter altogether. This blade had a slight amount of contempt for Zoro for losing it, but willingly allowed him to reclaim it, and had a delight in being used by someone with ambition of his own, not a puppet of another like the zombie had become. Yet, at the same time, Zoro could sense that all of that were just surface thoughts. There was a... deeper sense to this sword's spirit than even Wado Ichimonji. That was all he could sense, nothing about its deeper personality, if such a term could be used on such spirits.

As Zoro was getting reacquainted with his blades, Jinbei spoke to the others. "Something is moving through the water after us. I tried to throw whomever it is off, but I believe it was another Fishman, one that is going mad with all the blood that is pouring into the ocean around here. I hope that it will not have followed us all the way out here, but..." He shook his head sadly, gesturing over his shoulder. "I've had several of the whale sharks pop up occasionally, then report via sonar to me about what is going on elsewhere, not just where the Everlasting Resolve was. Casualties are starting to escalate among the Whitebeard Pirates. They reported several of the Whitebeard ships have been sunk, although the Whitebeard Pirates still seem to have the advantage. As we were passing through their lines, we had to surface several times to let Makino breathe, and I saw one of the remaining giant vice admirals die. I have no idea who, but I saw the body hit the ocean and sink like a stone, or perhaps like a Devil Fruit user. It caused quite the wave."

"So, do you know who could have followed you via Kenbunshoku out here? Laki reported two people coming our way a moment ago," Chopper said, having regained control of himself.

"No. I did not notice anyone watching us while I was retrieving Brook and Makino. Can you—"

Jinbei's words cut off as the water to one side of the ship exploded. The ship rocked from those explosions, then rocked again as something hit the ship's outer hull and the conning tower. The next second, Nami reported via Eve, "We're getting hit by finger bombs, folks! We're going evasive!"

Even as they began to evade, Eve reflected that Finger bombs were kind of a powered-down railgun. The user took a small thing, in this case nails or pennies, and accelerated them via flicking them forward with all his might. It was a crazy kind of attack, one that sort of defied what people in the oceans beyond the Grand Line might have thought of as natural laws. But Luffy had made extreme use of it against the Buster Call back in Water 7 and Eve had no desire to test the Adam Wood of her construction against them, not even after having stood up to Kizaru's attacks. *Even if they don't do any damage, those attacks hurt like blazes!*

The ship surged forward, moving faster than before on a zigzag course even as more strikes flashed in from well outside the range of all but the primary gun aboard the Everlasting Resolve. These ranging strikes didn't have nearly enough power to bother the Adam wood that made up the Everlasting Resolve, but the sounds of the hits caused all of the individuals on the main deck to flinch. The crow's nest and the smoke stack took several hits too, but even there, the Adam wood was strong enough to take them.

With his swords at his side, Zoro was feeling centered once more, calm, composed and eager to give his blades a workout. Whatever threat this was, they would face it. "Perona, any report?" he shouted up towards the crow's nest. "Give us some more info on those two."

Perona stuck her head out from the bottom of the hatch leading into the crow's nest, her hair in disarray and her eyes wide. One of the finger bombs had gone right through the windows in the crow's nest from one side to the other, nearly hitting her where she lay out on a bed there. If she had been standing up, the thick rivet that the attackers were using would have killed her.

"My first wave just reached them, but they knew the danger of my negative hollow, and the fuckers dispatched them easily, strikes with Busoshoku and condensed air pressure attacks. I was riding one of the hollows, too!"

She paused as the ship took more hits from the insanely fast-moving rivets before going on when she was certain those below on the main deck could hear her again. "Laki was right. There are only two of them. Both are really taller, although one of them is much taller than the other one. They're dressed in white, white suits, white jackets over it, with black ties and masks providing a splash of color. One has weird double-jointed arms and seems to be the source of most of the finger bombs since he was using both hands. The other guy was only using one. The double-jointed guy has a mask with a beard that looks kind of like a sunflower. The other guy's mask is painted red, and his hair is like a weird octopus thing."

As Perona spoke, three more accurate finger bombs crashed into the ship, doing no damage. But then the vessel rocked from something else, and Nami reported, "That was from below! There's something below hitting the ship."

Eve's voice from a small mouth that had appeared on the side of the main turret trailed off as the eyes she'd left in place continued to report. "It's some kind of fishman! I pushed my head out to see, and he looks a little weird, even for fishmen... both in overall looks and in clothing. I mean, I don't have much in the way of a fashion sense but this guy is dressed really weird, like a little boy, but not, and a fighter but not?"

"He's also chomping on... oh, that's disgusting! He just took a big bite out of one of the passing whale shark!" Eve shouted before a half-eaten whale shark was hurled up in the air, streaming blood, its fin half-eaten away. The fish would've landed on the deck if not for Sanji kicking it away.

Grimacing, Jinbei shook his head. "I will deal with the threat from below. Whoever it is, is possibly maddened by the blood in the water. I hope I can talk some sense into him, but..." With that, Jinbei shrugged and hopped up over the gunwales, slipping into the water below feet first.

Instantly, he heard laughter, turning to find himself facing a young-looking merman who had shoulder-length blond hair and a face that looked almost feminine, despite his battle hungry expression. Somehow he had a white baseball cap with horns coming out of it on his head even under the water, a mark on the center of his hat shaped like a dark fighting fish giving Jinbei more of a sign, though he didn't need it, of this youth's particular ancestry. A long sleeved shirt with a giraffe-like design on it was splattered with blood, and his legs and stiletto shoes too up to the bottom of ridiculously short blue shorts...

"Kyayaha, there you are, oh Knight of the Sea! Hehehe, I've been looking forward to this for a long time! You and your sanctimonious sense of honor, I want to tear it away, to show the monster beneath, the monster that's in us all!"

At the site of the merman, Jinbei's eyes narrowed. "You, I remember you. You're one of Doflamingo's subordinates. Not a direct one, but through one of his officers, I believe."

"That's right! And you've sat on your throne of a warlord station for too long!" the other Fishman shouted, charging forward through the water with the speed that only a fishman could match and only a mermaid exceed. "You're soft, and I'm going to present your corpse to my captain! Kyayaha!"

Jinbei would probably have refused to fight the youth or done his level best to try to talk the younger fishman out of the battle. Fishmen should not be killing Fishmen, after all. However, it had been a very long day, and this youngster's attitude was annoying him. To say

nothing about how he was even now chewing on some of the whale sharks that he had hurled up onto the ship. "If you wish a lesson in true fishman karate, then I will oblige you!"

Up above, Zoro ordered Sanji to follow him into the air, heading towards the incoming attackers, hoping to intercept them well short of the ship, which, with its Franky cannon destroyed and Luffy not around, didn't really have any anti-air kind of weapons. As Eve had warned, the tertiary guns couldn't be elevated to shoot that far upward.

With all three of his swords back in his possession, Zoro braced himself in midair for a second, his arms growing as he used his Ni Gorilla Haki technique to heighten his strength further for a few seconds. Then he lashed out, all three blades. "108 Pound Phoenix Cannon!"

The blazing, hurricane-cutting wind power lashed out, covering almost a league in diameter. Each few hundred feet shaped the wind into a different color, the edges resembling a saw blade, the sound of tearing air loud in their ears.

The attack was fit to cut a galleon in half but as dangerous as the attack should have been, the two it was launched at responded easily. Some kind of air pressure attack of their own completely deadened the force of Zoro's in a given area, and they burst through it.

Sanji had charged forward right behind Zoro's attack. Seeing these two in person, the cook decided that they must be some kind of Cipher Pol unit. With that, Sanji went for a serious attack right off the bat. Spinning in place, his legs moved so fast that the air around him began to heat up, setting his legs on fire below the knee in one of his battle aura-assisted attacks, much like Zoro's own Ni Gorilla attack of a moment ago. "Diable Jambe!"

With that, Sanji leaped forward, launching a kick at the smaller of the two attackers.

Sanji's first attack was blocked, and his second redirected. The man's arms were indeed incredibly long, having not one but two elbow joints separated by a middle length, making them almost as long as Sanji's legs. On his third attack, he found his one leg being caught before being pulled into a stab by the other man, who had just pulled a sword out from inside his voluminous cloak. Having been using more finger bombs directed Zoro's way, the man lashed out now at Sanji's shoulder, which he hurriedly dodged, but the one he had been attacking blocked his next strike easily, a sword of his own flicking out, adding still more to the man's reach despite being a short sword rather than the habitual cutlass or katana.

Then Zoro was there, growling, "If you are a swordsman, your business is with me!"

Two of his blades intercepted the blow meant for Sanji, and then he twisted in, Wado seeking the other man's chest, all three blades and the one in his opponent's hand coated with Busoshoku. The strength of the blow nearly smashed the man out of the air, but he rolled with it, bringing his blade up again to block another strike from Zoro. Then the taller one with the red mask lashed out with his own, larger blade before dancing out of the way as his fellow lashed

out with a kick that nearly broke Zoro's forearm before he could coat it with Busoshoku, followed by one to the head that Zoro barely blocked, while Red Mask used Soru to get above his fellow, coming down into an attack on Sanji.

For a few moments, all four of them exchanged blows, punches, kicks, sword strikes and the occasional pistol shot. Both of these men seemed to have pistols from North Blue, the revolvers that were Makino's prized possession. However, it was their teamwork that was really getting in the way. Zoro's level of Busoshoku was equal to the pair, as he had already drawn blood on the long-armed man, cutting his lower leg enough to draw some blood. Zoro's Busoshoku had overwhelmed the WeeGee agents at the point of attack.

Sanji had also gotten in a few hits. While it was clear the pair had Kenbunshoku to find the ship this far out from the fight, they also didn't seem good enough with it in close combat to let them just overwhelm the pair of front-line fighters from the Straw Hat Crew. Nevertheless, they had also gotten in a few of their own hits. Both Zoro and Sanji were sporting more injuries than their opponents by this point, since neither was good enough with Busoshoku to hold it over their whole bodies for long periods of time and had both decided separately to conserve what they had.

As Sanji's kick was blocked by Red Mask, he quickly pulled back out of stabbing range of Long Arms, and several of Perona's hollows dropped on them from above. Before they could touch the attackers, though, most were dissipated quickly by Long Arms as Red Mask held Zoro and Sanji off alone for a few seconds. The five remaining ghosts were all dodged as they floated in to attack, with one of the hollows missing its target and almost impacting Zoro, who growled out, "Pull back, Perona! If they get past us, start using your hollows again. We can't afford to dodge them and fight these bastards at the same time!"

The surviving negative hollows retreated, joined by several others. Soon, they created a barrier, almost a wall rising from the ocean to a point several hundred yards above the combatants' heads between them and the Everlasting Resolve. Their cries of, "hallow, hallow, hallow," filled the air combining with the noise of the fight to create a massive cacophony.

Because of this noise, Laki was able to close without either of the two attackers seeing her, and just as Long Arms landed a strong kick on Sanji, the follow-on blow was redirected to block a strike from a plasma blade that would've hit the man in the chest. He instantly backed off as his fellow twisted from where he had been fighting Zoro, a pistol appearing in his hand again from his long sleeves.

Red Mask tracked Laki for a few seconds before he had to divert his attention back to Zoro, who was practically furious at being ignored for even those few seconds. But the man kept on fighting Zoro one blade against three, showing both a mastery of the sword and of Busoshoku as his blade was not being torn to pieces by Zoro's.

He's not as good as Gion, but he is damn good with Busoshoku! And he's got more tricks up his sleeve than she does, Zoro thought as he watched the pistol disappear up a sleeve, and another one be pulled out from underneath his coat right before Red Mask fired at him again, forcing Zoro to deflect the bullets.

Meanwhile, the other one had retreated a little, watching Laki. Then Sanji closed with him again.

This time, Long Arms seemed to have analyzed Sanji's attack. Every time his leg came up, the man shifted his attack to Sanji's leg, attacking his knee, thigh and lower leg, forcing Sanji to concentrate on keeping his Busoshoku up under the repeated blows. Then Sanji felt something move behind him, and the man whom Zoro had been fighting whirled, lashing out with a punch that might well have caved the back of Sanji's head in. *Fuck were they maneuvering us to set this up!?*

Sanji desperately blocked the blow as Long Arms leaped up and over him as well as his teammate, landing and blocking a blow from Zoro's sword, shifting down and under it to lash out with a punch that unloaded like a spring. The blow took Zoro in the center of his chest, hurling him backward, hitting before Zoro could raise his Busoshoku to match. This was followed by a dozen Rankyaku made from Long Arm's flashing, double-jointed arms, each twitch creating a small Rankyaku shot. Zoro blocked them all with his sword but could not fight the imparted momentum from the previous hit and these, which added up quickly, pushing him back towards the ship.

Hastily, Perona ordered the hollows to get out of his way, creating a hole in the wall, which both of the attackers exploited, using Soru to get away from Sanji and Laki. Zoro got in a cut on Red Mask as he came too close which hit him right in the side to send him staggering down towards the ocean, with Perona's hollows following from every direction. But Long Arms continued his charge towards the ship.

There, Makino had recovered from her trip with Jinbei, and she raised a musket to her shoulder, firing at the incoming white-clad man. By her side, Chopper waited, holding several more muskets. Brook was there too but still lay supine, not having recovered from his dip in the water just yet. While he had not needed to breathe like Makino had, which had slowed Jinbei down a lot, being underwater had seemingly drained Brook, almost to the point he had died a second and final time despite his joking.

Long Arms dodged, and that was enough for Zoro. "Seventy-two Pound Cannon!"

The smaller, less destructive attack was easier to aim when Zoro didn't add in Shusui's attack and faster to get off, too. It worked this time, forcing Long Arms to dodge backward, which in turn allowed Zoro to close. The man's small sword came out, blocking then riposting, before Wado flashed in, nearly taking the man across the eyes, gauging a chunk out of his mask.

For the first time in the fight, one of the attackers let loose a sound, a hiss of anger this time, and then his hand flashed, almost looking like Luffy's speed technique that could be so devastating when sparring with him. But instead of actual speed, it was as if Long Arm's arms had suddenly begun to just vibrate wildly, randomly, making it impossible to know where the blow would come from. Zoro tried, but he couldn't figure it out and took a palm blow to his thigh that practically deadened his leg, causing his Geppo to fail.

[illegible]

Instead of taking advantage of Zoro's weakness, Long Arms returned his sword to his side and then fired off multiple finger bombs, shotgun style towards the ship from one hand and more aimed bursts from his other hand towards Sanji, who had been pressing his fellow.

Or so it seemed, anyway. When Sanji was forced to pull back, Red Mask shifted his attention to Laki with a suddenness that took both Sanji and his target by surprise, and a single finger gun cracked into her, breaking ribs and hurling her out of the sky towards the Resolve as Red Mask charged after her.

“That is no way to treat a lady, you bastard!” Sanji howled, racing after him, fury stamped on his features and adding speed to his Geppo, so much so it looked like he was also using Soru. Whatever it was, Sanji caught Red Mask attacking him from above. Red Mask twisted, though, launching a dagger not toward Sanji but toward Zoro.

This attack failed, as Zoro had just turned Long Arms so that he could push him back towards his fellow and saw the glint of light on the metal dagger before Long Arms dodged out of the way. Shusui shattered the dagger, and then Zoro whirled into his Oni Giri attack. Long Arms couldn't quite dodge all the slices, and although his skin was covered in Busoshoku enough that the attack didn't hurt him at all, his clothing was sliced in several sections, leaving strands of ribbon behind, and removing several hidden weapons strapped here and there. This one another noise, a loud TSK from Long Arms, before he fired another round of shotgun-style finger guns straight at Zoro from barely an extra arm's length away.

As Zoro's swords flashed, Makino and Chopper looked back up towards the enemy from where they had both dived behind the main gun, watching as Red Mask charged towards them, occasionally firing his pistol towards Sanji.

With Sanji preoccupied with saving Laki from a watery grave, Red Mask charged forward, launching attacks one way with his pistol and the other with finger guns, keeping Zoro too distracted to press his advantage on Long Arms and making Makino and Chopper keep their heads down.

He landed on the aft of the odd-looking vessel for a brief second, putting him well away from the green-haired woman and the Zoan. There, he paused, looking around for a second to

spot the hatch leading into the conning tower. Before he could leap toward it, though, he tripped over a rope, faceplanting spectacularly.

What?! How? For the first time in a long while, the CP0 member named Gismonda found himself astonished. *That, that rope was not there a moment ago! Someone with an invisibility or chameleon Devil Fruit? I sensed... actually, my Kenbunshoku seems to be going haywire aboard this ship.*

As Red Mask pushed himself to his feet, a massive fist made of hundreds of smaller hands and arms clad in Busoshoku formed up and out from the main deck slamming into the man with punishing force and hurling him off the side of the ship. Even so, the man had muttered a single word. “Tekkai.”

Seeing this through one of her conjured eyes outside the conning tower, Robin grimaced. *My word, I had thought perhaps Sanji and Zoro were tired from their exertions up to this point, and these were simple CP agents. Yet this one just took an attack coated in Busoshoku, and only with his own Tekkai. Plus that manner of dress and their masks... I thought it but a rumor, a secret Cipher even more dangerous than CP9...*

Red Mask tried to get back aboard the ship but then had to duck under a furious kick from Sanji. His Kenbunshoku still scrambled for some reason from being near the pirate ship, he didn’t see Chopper’s punch coming until the last second, raising a hand to block the massive blow. This opened him up to one from Sanji, but another mutter of “Tekkai” caused both Sanji’s blow and another one from Chopper to bounce off. Then his hands flashed out, a single finger pointing.

Sanji grimaced as his Busoshoku was overcome at a tiny point, like someone had just jabbed a needle through it, which was the case. The Shigan that Red Mask had just launched was indeed covered with Busoshoku, and as both Sanji and Zoro had proven, Haki could be broken by more power to a point.

Blood began to flow freely from his leg as Red Mask landed two more strikes right below his knee, but when Sanji started to lose altitude and Red Mask moved to take advantage before pausing and retreating.

Above them Long Arms was nearly smashed out of the sky by a blow from an attack from Zoro. “Rengoku Oni Giri!”

His weapon shattering despite a covering of Busoshoku, Long Arms let out a cry of mixed annoyance and actual injury as his arms took several cuts, but they were shallow, like large paper cuts with each strike. His defensive Haki gave him an edge, and he moved away from the strike, having sensed it was coming but not able to avoid it.

Taking advantage of this, Chopper moved to Sanji's side, whipping out a bandage, quite literally. Sanji yelped as the bandage wrapped around his leg before being tied off. "GAH! What happened to being gentle with your patients, Chopper!? That hurt!"

"Expediency unless you want me to take more time and for those two to be able to come at us again," Chopper retorted.

Zoro dropped down to join them, grimacing a bit. He'd taken several palm strikes and one cut from Long Arms. Long Arms had also broken out the other Rokushiki just like Red Mask, and Zoro was bleeding around a finger-sized hole in his upper side. "These bastards are tough! Maybe not as strong individually as Gion, but they fight dirty and their teamwork's a killer."

"So you say after letting the pair break off to meet up again, Marimo," Sanji snorted, lighting up a new cigarette, wincing as his accumulated wounds began to make themselves known, not just the holes in his leg.

"Hah! At least I was winning against my single opponent. You might've gotten your ass kicked by yours except for Chopper helping."

"Gentlemen, FOCUS!" Makino hissed from behind them, where she stood at the gunwales of the ship.

Above them, the pair of white-clad Government assassins began to circle the ship, forcing the group of primary defenders to shift for a second before the two met up directly above the vessel. Then, one of them spoke for the first time in the battle. And when Red Mask spoke, his voice boomed out, heard by all of the Straw Hats. "Presence of Nico Robin confirmed."

"Excellent." Long Arms answered, taking a pair of daggers from the other assassin, who then pulled out his cutlass once more. "By order of the Gorosei, the Ghost of Ohara will not live to see another day."

Robin shivered in fear from where she sat on the bridge, but admittedly, while the two Cipher agents were proving to be exceptionally dangerous, both Zoro and Sanji had taken debilitating hits, while even Long Arms had taken what amounted to minor injuries, her fear had little to do with their current attackers. *No, that phrase makes it sound as if the pair of them have been given direct orders to kill me. And recently, from a Gorosei... if one of the Five Saints is here, then this battle is going to go from power structure shattering to apocalyptic in very short order.*

At the wheel, Nami grimaced. "Why do I think we're in for a pounding? And not the fun kind?"

Laki, who had just pulled herself into the bridge after Sanji had set her down on the deck, looked at the orangette in shock and censor. "Not the time, girl."

"Yep, knew it as soon as I said it," Nami whined before scowling as the water seemed to heave from some kind of battle going on below them. "What should we do?"

"Wait and keep moving around the battle towards the back of it like Zoro said," Robin answered, none of her normal teasing tone audible in her voice. "Those two are dangerous, and I doubt even Makino's Busoshoku tricks would be enough to let her fight them. We wait, keep our distance, get Brook back on his feet, and hope that the boys can defeat them or hold them off in the air or that Jinbei finishes his own fight down below."

Outside, Zoro and Sanji charged forward. They tried to separate to come at the pair of attackers from different directions, hoping to break up their teamwork, but the pair continued to hover close by as they had at the beginning of the game, just waiting for the pirates to come to them.

Chopper didn't join them. Instead, Chopper shifted to his Brain Point form, analyzing both of them for weaknesses.

To his astonishment, they seemed to sense this. Long Arms turned in his direction while Red Mask dealt with Sanji and Zoro at the same time, fighting both of them for a few seconds as his fellow lashed out towards Chopper with a Rankyaku.

Chopper instantly shifted into his guard point, taking the hit despite it having cutting force behind it with ease, then launched himself up into the air to join the fight. "Their faces! They are out of practice using Busoshoku on their faces!"

"Nice!" Sanji and Zoro shouted before Zoro winced as a dozen Rankyaku lashed out towards Sanji before both turned on him. "But next time, whisper it in our freaking ears, don't just shout it where they can hear you!"

Chopper whimpered a bit but charged forward, determined to do his part even as the two assassins glanced at one another. It was time to change their strategy...

OOOOOOO

After more than twenty minutes, Akainu smiled, grateful for the time that the two cyborgs had bought him. One of them was down now, and the other one was being pressed back hard, losing a hand to a spinning slashing attack from Shiki.

Yet they had done their job. Akainu's work was done, and around him, a large portion of the depth of the Marine force that had yet to be engaged were also ready to finally join the battle. Not all, as Akainu had settled down on a ship around a fourth of the way back from the

front of the conflict, where the marine vessels in the center of the current had been chewed up by the superior numbers of pirates at the point of conflict for several rows. But the rest, nearly eighty ships in total had split, moving out from the center of the current through sheer brute force. Now, they were formed into two rows to either side of Akainu's position, each of them three to a side as an island began to rise from the ocean depth.

Steam continually poured off it as the island, completely created by Akainu via his devil fruit, which he continued to use to pour magma down into it. In this manner, he was essentially creating an island from the top down rather than the bottom up as was normal.

In a way, having an island like this, once it cooled anyway, to fight on would help the officers on both sides. More the pirates than the higher-ranking marines, honestly, as everyone Commodore and above had to have a mastery of the Rokushiki. Whereas it was rarer among the pirates. But that was not Akainu's purpose, which became quickly apparent now as little changes in the current solidified, the entire nature of the current changing.

No longer was it simply flowing towards Impel Down from the Gates of Justice at Marineford. Instead, it moved around the island, creating a fast eddy for a time before it broke into tinier, slower eddies, creating a wider area where the current could carry ships, almost like a river becoming a delta near the ocean.

Carried by the current, the prepared rows of the Marine forces sailed forward, engaging the pirates at last. Few of those ships had officers on them still at this point, but bosuns, gunnery officers and sergeants knew their business. The ships all had furled their sails in preparation for battle, paddles had been put away, and now, helmsman turned their ships first shifting out and away from one another, then bringing the galleons about to engage with their broadsides as they came within range of the enemy pirate ships. Within half an hour, all the ships had moved forward, creating what amounted to two fan-shaped formations stuck between the center of the battle and the two flanks to either side of the Tarai current, sticking into those flanks.

The sheer volume of fire slowly began to turn the tide of the ship-to-ship contest in all three areas of the battlefield. On the right side, this wasn't as noticeable, but several ships from the fifteenth division, one of the divisions on that flank, were singled out by a dozen marine galleons. On the left flank, only a few pirate vessels found themselves outnumbered, having mostly finished off the marine vessels there, the battle having become one of officer versus officer.

However, it was in the center where the majority of the marine vessels concentrated their fire. There, nearly a dozen pirate vessels near the center of the action, which had been damaged already, were smashed into wreckage within moments. This shifted the overall balance of power there.

This battle was far from over. And now, it was time for the pirates to feel the sting of being on the receiving end of combined firepower from a vastly numerically superior foe.

OOOOOOO

Well away from Whitebeard or the ongoing battles between the admirals, Shiki or Luffy, Diamond Jozu dispatched his own opponent for a moment, sending the last vice admiral facing him toward the ocean missing half his face from a punch. Given some breathing space, he gazed around the battle, growling as one of his sub officers spoke to him through a Den Den Mushi. "... On both sides! The added cannon fire is doing hell on our formation, such as it is. We've got a whole squad that was cut off before this thanks to the marine officers, and we've lost eleven ships at least so far. We're still winning on the left flank thanks to Blenheim keeping a firm reign on our ships, but, Jozu, your own ships and that of Pops? They're taking a tremendous pounding in the center! And Marco can't be everywhere on the right flank. He's fighting that flaming fucktard Doflamingo but..."

Jozu cut them off, shaking his head. "I can see it."

With the change to the current, far too many marine ships had now begun to move forward, shifting the whole dynamic of the fight. Fewer pirate officers could engage marine officers while also defending against attacks from other vessels, especially those juiced up on that green gunk that seemed to give them all the powers of the metal fruit. The current was still too thin to allow them to envelop the pirate line on the flanks, but instead, they were punching through it, almost completely separating the two flanks from the battle in the current itself where Whitebeard was fighting it out with one of the five elders and Sengoku.

*And thank you, whatever deity is listening that Hancock seems to have made some kind of alliance with Straw Hats. I'm not going to question it, because her involvement would have already turned the tide on the left flank entirely against us. Jozu knew that very, **very** few pirates among the Whitebeard crew would've been immune to her Mellow Mellow powers. As it is, she's tied up at least a few of their ships and has kept that witch Tsuru out of the fight entirely along with a few of their other officers.*

Still, it was very clear that even considering how well they were still doing on the left flank, the battle had shifted badly. "I'm going to go advise Pops. You're in charge here. Try to see if we can back away from the advancing marine ships, concentrate fire on a few of them of time. Get the 6th's bombards to do counter battery fire on theirs, take them out before they can start to add still more firepower to the interior of our lines."

With that, Diamond Jozu left his officer there, leaping back up into the air and away, heading towards where Whitebeard fought.

OOOOOOO

Neither Luffy nor Kizaru had much presence of mind to notice what was going on below, still locked in their seesawing battle. However, as the battle below turned against the pirates thanks to Akainu's actions, they were interrupted by a shout from one side and below as smoke billowed out from one of the marine ships towards the confrontation. "Straw Hat! You're mine!"

Kizaru and Luffy locked blades for second, both of them having formed lightning blade and laser blade respectively. But a second later they turned to stare at a column of smoke coming towards them. The form of Smoker soon appeared riding the smoke upwards, one fist holding his new jutte. "In the name of justice, I will stop your rampage here!"

Luffy and Kizaru looked at one another, and Kizaru shrugged, before taking advantage of Luffy's momentary distraction to get in a cut towards Luffy's shoulder. Luffy's Busoshoku held, although the heat from the laser sword caused him to hiss in pain. He ducked under a blast of light, then had to roll to avoid the newly arrived Smoker's jutte heading towards his chest. A Buso-clad kick caught the smoke and Smoker grunted, flinging himself to the side, but bouncing in place, showing that he had at least practiced his Geppo and general durability since the last time Luffy had seen him.

Then Smoker's eyes widened as Luffy leg flicked around into a roundhouse kick, launching a disk of lightning in every direction. "Spinning Saw Bolt!"

Smoker's logia form helped against the lightning, but then Luffy was in his face, slamming a Busoshoku clad palm into Smoker's forehead flipping him end over end. Luffy couldn't follow up, instead kicking out at Kizaru who had closed with them quickly, his own kick being blocked by Luffy's, causing the pirate to grimace at the pain of using Busoshoku once more to block a strike from a light based kick. *FUCK that heat is nasty!*

"Yasakani no Magatama," Kizaru intoned solemnly, launching the attack almost from point blank range, hundreds of cross shaped laser blasts bursting out for a minute in every direction. Luffy grimaced, but shifted back into his lightning form, taking the hits and the pain that came with them rather than try to tank them in Busoshoku. *The pain this way might be deeper and longer lasting but it isn't as powerful.*

The same light-based attack tour through Smokers smoky body, causing no pain as it had to Luffy. Then the Jutte was flashing around, coming for Luffy's head. He ducked underneath it, coming back up and grabbing Smoker's arm with a still-Haki infused hand, his fist coming up into Smoker's jaw, breaking it and hurling him upwards, almost unconscious from that single blow. "GUUUH!!"

H, how!? Smoker thought muzzily, trying to keep his bearings even as blood poured out of his mouth and his jaw wouldn't respond to his commands. How is a fucking rookie so strong?! How has he gotten even stronger since Alabasta!? I, I can't...

Luffy followed up, ducking under attack from Kizaru, then zigging around him and up towards the commodore, blasting into him from behind with both hands covered in Busoshoku. The double strike hit Smoker just as he transformed into smoke, but before he could shift his consciousness elsewhere through the smoke.

“ARRGHH!!!” Smokers attempt to do so ended in a howl of pain.

The blow hurled him down towards Kizaru, who shifted into light form bar one hand, which grabbed at Smoker’s weapon pulling it out of the other marines hand even as Kizaru let his body continue its fall towards the ships below. “Than~k you for your help, Smok-ku~n,” he drawled, before flashing upward.

Luffy hadn’t even a second to react before he dodged around again for a blow from Kizaru. But having gotten used to the almost linear nature of Kizaru’s laser-based attacks that allowed him to dodge the multiple attacks, using his own mobility to better advantage and flash down towards where Smoker was about to crash into the ocean, his body not responding at all to his commands. “Damn that was cold, dude. You marines all seem to lose any sense of camaraderie when you hit the higher ranks.”

Shifting into his normal body, Luffy grabbed Smoker’s arm, slowing his dissent before he could hit the water, then tossed it up towards a nearby marine vessel, shaking his head even as he had to dodge several more light-based attacks from above.

Luffy tried, he really tried, but he couldn’t stop himself from one last taunt of his old enemy. “Nice try Smoker, you’ve at least learned some tricks. But not enough to hang with me. I’ve moved on to the professionals, you’re still in the JV--”

His taunt cut off as he was forced to ducked to one side as Kizaru flew down, almost impacting the water himself for a second, before turning back into his normal body, and using Geppo to bounce there for second, then charging forwards, light sword in one hand, and the stolen weapon in the other.

“And you just made my day far more complicated!” Luffy grumbled, even as several marine vessels began to fire at him. But if Kizaru thought that this would dissuade Luffy, he was wrong. *Here’s hoping that that weapon still only has a tip of Seastone and not a shaft.*

Luffy ducked to one side, keeping his human form for a second, making Kizaru blink in surprise, his Kenbunshoku fully suppressed for a full twenty seconds as Luffy caught Kizaru’s stolen weapon right behind the tip. Just as Luffy had hoped, it was only the tip of the large jutte that was made of Seastone. The rest of it was metal, and like Enel before him, Luffy had experimented a lot with using his lightning Devil Fruit to melt and mold metal. Or in this case, simply turn it molten.

One moment, the jutte was a dangerous weapon against any Devil Fruit user, the next, the tip that made it so dangerous fell down into the ocean, just as the nearby marine vessels found the range. Cannonballs passed through both Luffy and Kizaru for a few seconds before they were back up over the fleet, doing no damage to either. Once again, in midair the pair began hammering at one another, the momentary distraction dealt with.

Below them, Hina had also been moving towards the battle. Landing on the ship that Smoker had been tossed onto, the pink-haired marine captain grimaced a little, feeling the wounds in her leg and shoulder from her battle with Stone Mace Stephenson. Shaking the pain off, she stared down at her friend, then up towards where Luffy began to use another series of lightning attacks at Kizaru, forcing the admiral back.

In the distance, she could also see the faint specs of two other monsters out there. One seemed to be lashing out with massive fists of magma or fire, whereas the other attacked with equally large air pressure assaults, condensed and constructed like lions or large piercing attacks. However, Hina didn't care so much about that, knowing Akainu would probably win that fight eventually, and had already turned the tide of the fight with his current redirection trick. *That, and Akainu isn't my favorite person, she admitted internally. In fact, he's at the center of the problem facing me right now.*

For several seconds, Hina stared up to where Luffy was fighting it out with Admiral Kizaru, showing proof with every strike that he had hidden some of his abilities from her and not only the fact he had somehow obtained the Goro Goro no Mi for himself. Inside, Hina she felt a good deal of anger at that, anger at Luffy and for not telling her everything. Which was, frankly, idiotic. Even Hina knew that. Theirs had been an alliance of convenience of the time, no matter how much they had gotten along both before and after the war against Enel and his enforcers. *Frankly, given how I betrayed him, how I kept to my oath over that friendship save in the matter of his curse, I can't say that he was wrong to do so.*

But what does this mean for me, what does this mean for my crew such as it is? Will my higher-ups believe me when I say I had no idea he had the Goro Goro no Mi? Or not? And... come to think of it, how did he infiltrate Impel Down in the first place? Oh... that is not a good thought...

For a moment, Hina leaned against the starboard gunwale of the marine ship she'd landed on, watching as several sailors tried to rouse Smoker. One of them with some medical training reported that he had several broken ribs, and maybe a dislocated back from the strike Luffy had laid him out with, but could perhaps be returned to duty eventually.

Yet even as she nodded, Hina's mind was elsewhere, thinking. Thinking about her treatment, since coming back from Sky Island, about the actions of the marines and the World Government. Not just here in this mad scheme to pull Whitebeard into a war, which had gone so disastrously wrong, but since she had given that report. Hina thought, and then, Hina decided, turning and leaping away back towards her own ship, leaving behind Smoker, and...

more. Sometimes, loyalty and an oath is not enough. A captain must think of herself and her crew. And I will not allow myself or them to become scapegoats. Now, how to get out of here is the question...

OOOOOOO

Back in the same direction where Hina was currently moving, the battle had become a bloody affair of back-and-forth dueling between the vessels of the two sides on the ocean surface and an almost separate battle going on between the higher-ranking officers. Even beneath the waves, a battle had been going on earlier, but there at least, the battle had ended in a victory for Doflamingo's crew. Dellinger had slain Namur before racing off after catching sight of Jinbei.

That was the main theme here. Whereas on the left flank, the Whitebeard Pirates had retained a good deal of their organization, and their officers were, generally speaking, able to hold the line against the marine officers, on the right, the warlord Doflamingo and his officers had begun to turn the tide. Too many of Whitebeard's division commanders had been pulled into duels with their counterparts in the center, a problem made worse when Komil, Kadar and the majority of the officers assigned to the forward team joined the main battle.

While Doflamingo found his own actions deflected or absorbed by Marco, Diamante, Baby 5, Lao G were free to make trouble for the Whitebeard Pirates. Baby 5 instantly began a running fight with Speed Jiru and a few of his officers, doing her best to smash their ships as much as avoid them. The ship the Doflamingo Pirates had arrived in had already been basically demolished by the Whitebeard Pirates return fire while Doflamingo was away.

For his part, Diamante had already beaten one division commander, killing him and his two top captains. By the time the marine reinforcements arrived, he was in the process of pushing another back. While nearby, Lao G ran roughshod through the Whitebeard crews. Like Baby 5, he was concentrating more on crowd control, smashing several of their ships. In this way, he and Baby 5 were actually doing the most to help the marine cause in the main battle.

However, this chaotic battle was about to get even more chaotic.

OOOOOOO

Garp had taken a while to reach the main conflict, just because of the distance that the battle was from Impel Down. He estimated at least forty-five minutes to an hour had elapsed since he left the area around Impel Down, and only now did he begin to see the outskirts of the battle ahead of him.

Those outskirts consisted of hundreds of thin string whips appearing in midair, cutting towards Marco, who dodged or burned his way through them, before turning into his Phoenix form and flying straight towards where the string came from. Moving closer, Garp ran into some

of the random webs of string that must've been left behind after Doflamingo and Marco moved through this particular area, ignoring them as his strength allowed him to bull rush through.

As he moved closer, both sides of the conflict became aware of him.

"Garp! It's Garp the Fist! We're saved!" were a few of the shouts that came from many of the marines, some of whom had not heard or even forgotten about the fact that Garp had gone AWOL and assaulted other marine officers a few weeks ago. Other marines though who remembered that particular disaster quailed, staring up at the former hero of the marines in shock and fear.

"Garp! It's Garp!" shouted many of the pirates in concern, a **lot** of it. Despite having relatively good relationship with Whitebeard, Garp was still a monster of the marines, and the news of his 'resignation' had not escaped Marineford.

Garp ignored the peons, only attacking one of the pirate vessels when it shot cannons up his way. He grabbed both of them out of the air, and lazily lobbed them back down. A droll comment of, "You can have these back," added insult to quite a bit of injury as the cannonballs slammed into the vessels side and aft castle, shattering the deck there and destroying most of the crew quarters under the aft castle.

Two of the commodores that had fought Garp back when he went crazy on Marineford had charged forward to engage him, but now stopped when they saw that. "Wait, Admiral Garp! Does this mean that you're..."

"Back on the side of the WeeGee just because my grandson seems to have pulled a trick on us all? AHAHAHHAAHHAHAHAH!" Garp guffawed. Still laughing, Garp disappeared from the sight of most of the people around him, flashing forward with a mastery of Soru that the two lower-ranking officers could barely hope to track, let alone match.

Before either could move or even flinch Garp grabbed both of their heads in his large hands squeezing so hard that any attempt to use their devil fruit powers, both Zoan type, faded as they howled in pain, reaching up to his wrists, trying to break his grip. "No."

With that, he hurled both of them down towards two separate marine vessels, neither commodore able to control their dissent before they slammed into the ships middle, shattering the decks they hit and embedding themselves into not the main deck, but nearly into the bottom of the hull, several down into the ship, causing the mainmast to slowly start to crack and crumble as its base was badly damaged on one of them. The other mainmast stayed upright, but since the mast of the first went sideways as it came down and slammed into the side of the second ship, that merely meant there was not so much insult to grievous injury on the second ship as on the first.

One of the other pirate vessels had been about to fire at Garp, one of the ones that had been separated from its division commander Speed Jiru and loaded for antiair combat. Now, the officer in charge of the ship paused, then ordered the guns to turn their attention towards Diamante instead to help Atmos.

Charging deeper into the battle, Garp decided to take on one of the other oldsters he could see first, an old pirate named Lao G he had once tangled with decades ago before the guy had apparently hooked up with Doflamingo and been protected by his status as a warlord. Before Lao G could even turn his direction, a fist cracked into the back of his head, hurling him down into the ship he had been about to attack with a cry of pain. "ARRGGH!!"

Lao G was made of stern stuff, and he was able to get his feet under him before he hit, rolling as he did, only to find himself face to face with Garp, who had followed him down with another burst of Soru. "Yo, Lao G. Goodbye, Lao G," Garp said.

The next instant, a fist caught Lao G in the center of the chest with all the strength of a dozen cannons. Brittle bones cracked and his equally old stomach ruptured, and Lao G was hurled up and off of the pirate vessel.

Within seconds he was caught in a web of string, and gently sent on his way through the string by Doflamingo, who scowled in both concern and anger at Garp as he turned his attention towards him oh and away from Marco, although he tried hard not to show it, instead laughing a bit. "Fufufu, I never took you to be the type to go after small fry when bigger fish were available, Garp."

While he tried to sound as if he was making light of the hero of the marine's arrival, Doflamingo's thoughts about Garp were pretty much the same as about Whitebeard. *This world doesn't need the shadows of these old men cast over us any longer! The new age will rise once both of them are in the grave! I just... didn't think I would be called upon to put one of them there. This could be very bad.*

Bouncing off of the deck of the ship Lao Gi had been on, Garp ascended up into the air towards where Doflamingo was. Seeing this, Diamante quickly regrouped with his captain, leaving behind his former opponent bleeding from a number of cuts on his side. At his side, his sword seemed to waver in the wind of a nearby explosion, its blade whipping this way and that.

Marco held back for a moment, shifting into the air so he could watch both Garp and Doflamingo at the same time, cracking his neck from side to side as his hands formed into talons for a moment, before going back to normal. "Yo, Garp-san. If you're here to have a drinking contest with Pops again, your timing kind of sucks."

Garp chuckled at that, shaking his head. "Good times those. Made all the better by the horrified looks in everyone's faces whenever I arrived on the Moby Dick! I still remember your response to it and how you fell on your ass when I came aboard."

"You were traveling by riding on a cannonball! That's not exactly normal, even for you Garp," Marco shot back, somewhat affronted.

"I lost a bet, what can you do?" Garp answered with a laugh, then became serious again. "Don't make the mistake of thinking I'm on your side beyond this fight, Marco. But my grandson... Well, let's just say that he was right when he said blood was thicker, and since he is involved in this fight somewhere, and that brat Ace is already freed and causing hell for Kuzan, I figure I might as well do my part."

"Family? Such a simple thing to fight for and such a silly reason to die. Your time has come and gone, Garp the Fist. Just like Whitebeard," Doflamingo taunted, hoping to goad Garp into attacking in a manner he could predict, uncertain how well his own abilities would match up against Garp, especially after seeing his easy dispatch of Lao G.

Just then, two of the marine vessels, whose crews had worked tirelessly to pull their cannons up from the gun deck and onto the main deck where they could be elevated to fire into the air, fired up towards the forms of Garp and Marco. "Get them! Get the traitor and the Phoenix!"

In reply, Marco simply shifted into his Phoenix form, letting the cannonballs pass through him, while Garp used Tekkai for a brief second. The grape shot rounds and even two cannonballs, which had been somehow accurately aimed at him despite the elevation needed, bounced off his body. One had hit his foot, the other his shoulder respectively, but neither had made him even flinch.

"Still, not bad shots," he acknowledged, before raising a fist. "In the future though, choose your targets better."

He then brought his fist down, sending an air pressure attack down towards both ships so powerful that it almost looked as if it had been Haoshoku assisted rather than a simple air pressure attack. "Windy Fist of Punishment!"

A few marines on deck hurled themselves overboard, willing to dare the no-longer calm waters of the Calm Belt rather than face this. They were the smart ones.

Garp's attack hit before a nearby vice admiral could try to intervene, and both ships practically came apart at the seam. To the others around them it looked as if they were cans of beer crushed under the foot of a giant, crushed down into the ocean for second as bits of wood, people, and metal flew everywhere before the pressure receded.

"Oy, Flamingo, You want to repeat that line about my being past my prime? I mean it's true, but you really should be able to match where I am now before making that kind o' comment, you know?" Garp said, smirking a little as Marco did the same, making for Diamante.

Doflamingo's last thought before he was embroiled in a battle against the hero of the marines, one of the strongest of the previous generation was, *mistakes have been made*, as well as wondering if he could perhaps get out of this somehow. *Whatever the outcome of this battle, it won't matter if I'm not alive to take advantage of it!*

OOOOOOO

Elsewhere, another warlord was thinking in much the same terms. However, unlike Doflamingo, Blackbeard had entered this fight hoping to take advantage of it from the start, and had seized on his opportunity.

After dispatching several of the Whitebeard vessels on the right flank that tried to fight him, Blackbeard and his helmsman Lafitte, the only member of his crew still alive, had pushed away from the battle, circling around it almost like the Everlasting Resolve was, but an entirely different direction. Whereas the Everlasting Resolve was trying to get behind and to the northwest of the battle, Blackbeard shifted around to the southeast then made for Impel Down.

He had a brief moment of panic when he saw Garp in the air above, but thankfully, Garp hadn't thought to investigate the lone steamship making towards the prison complex, since it skirted well away from the fighting even around Ace and Aokiji. He wasn't using Kenbunshoku at the time, or he might have felt someone of Blackbeard's will, but he didn't.

Now, finally, the prison began to come into sight on the horizon, growing quickly as they closed. "Zehahaha! And there's no way that the surviving prison guards and marines within have been able to put it all back together again. Not after Garp, Straw Hat and the others broke out." He paused, laughing again at the thought of that. Zehahaha. Who would have ever thought that young punk I met in the company of Nico Robin would have the skill and brains to plan and execute something like this! His alliance with Whitebeard I might've seen coming, but his ability to infiltrate Impel Down and then break back out with his brother? No way."

"You sound almost as if you admire him," Lafitte said, looking at his captain in confusion.

"Zehahaha, I do in a way. I think he was hopelessly naïve when we went to fight before he rode the Knock Up Stream, but he was strong even then. He's only gotten stronger. Good. In the days to come after this war is over, the balance of the world is going to shift dramatically. And if Straw Hat survives, the World Government will have to watch out for him too, and maybe be too busy doing that and consolidating their own power to mess with us."

Blackbeard glanced over his shoulder towards the distant center of the battle, unable to sense it with his Kenbunshoku let alone see it given how far over the horizon it was. Nevertheless, he knew Whitebeard was still fighting it out there, and like Doflamingo, he had seen one of the Gorosei come out of where he had been hiding inside the marine fleet. Moreover, Blackbeard had no desire whatsoever to tangle with him. Thus, he had decided not to try to make a play for the quake fruit.

While the fruit would've been amazing to have, he wasn't about to risk the consequences of trying to take Whitebeard's life with a Gorosei right there. *Not unless I want to play the dog of the world government for a while, and if I had wanted to do that, I wouldn't be making towards Impel Down right now.*

No, instead, Blackbeard was going to have to carve out his own little kingdom for a bit, gain strength, numbers and then plan for the future. *But who to carve it out from? Big Mom, Kaido, Whitebeard if he survives this war? Bah, thoughts for another day.*

"Now," he said aloud, as the ship finally bumped against the docs surrounding impel down. "Now, it's time to do some recruiting among the true monsters of this world, Zehahaha. I wager there will be dozens or more within the prison who want a chance at freedom and are willing to join my crew to get it."

OOOOOOO

Buggy frowned, staring at the small steam engine sloop that had just docked at Impel Down, shivering at the sight of the man who had just hopped from the ship to the dock. "Teach..." he hissed, shaking his head, remembering the man from several clashes the Roger Pirates had with the Whitebeard Pirates decades ago when he was still a cabin boy. *No way am I going to tangle with him, especially given what Ace and Luffy said about how Fire Fist was captured in the first place. He's a warlord now... Although I have to wonder, why the hell he's here instead of out there in the fight.*

Buggy didn't know what to make of that but continued to observe the much larger man from a distance with the spyglass, his head hidden among some of the wreckage from the earlier fighting. He watched as Teach and someone else, presumably one of his crewmates, began walking towards the entrance into Impel Down. Then he continued to stare at the ship for a few seconds before an evil little smile appeared on his face. "Well, now, I wonder..."

OOOOOOO

Despite what Jozu might have thought, Whitebeard was well aware of what was going on. Through his Kenbunshoku, he could feel how many of his sons began to die, how many of the marines had begun to change position from where they had been bottled up further along the Tarai Current. He had even seen steam rising over the horizon from his current position where Akainu had created the island that was redirecting the Tarai Current, turning it back into a force multiplier for the marines.

Unfortunately, Whitebeard couldn't do anything about it currently. Kong, Sengoku and Peter were pushing him hard, and although it wasn't very noticeable to most, fighting in midair like they were was a problem on top of everything else. *My damn legs are getting tired from all this freaking Geppo.*

The two officers worked together very well. Kong would zip in and out. Having learned his lesson early on, Kong, the only other man on the field even close to Whitebeard's own age, didn't try to stay in one place and hammer it out with Edward. He left that to Sengoku, who was still in his giant Buddha form. While he had yet to use any of the various special attacks the form gave him for fear of the backlash, instead relying on strength and his equally large staff to meet Whitebeard strength to strength. When Whitebeard couldn't dodge those blows, they took a bit to match for certain, thanks to the Hito Hito no Mi's 'golden aura' an additional golden glow that seemed to give Sengoku's blows even more added weight, somewhat like Whitebeard's own Quake based strikes or Haoshoku assisted blows.

Yet even with that, neither of them would have been as much of a threat if Peter wasn't also pushing Whitebeard hard. He didn't work with the others much bar not hitting them, and occasionally got in their way and vice versa, which had helped Whitebeard out several times. Better, his own Kenbunshoku skill had not been trained to meld with others like all the marines were, and by this point, the quartet's use of Observation Haki was pretty even. But several times he had closed and used his Busoshoku to interrupt Whitebeard's Quake-based attacks.

On the defense, the injuries Whitebeard had caused Peter had disappeared over time. He was the only one of the four that wasn't sporting bruises by this point, the bruises healing quickly even as Whitebeard made more. Even his teeth had grown back. Peter's attacks were also becoming stronger. And more than once Peter's teeth, especially the ones that had grown back, seemed to become pointed almost.

Whitebeard knew what that meant. It was the sign of an Awakened Zoan user with a particularly violent Zoan form that was threatening to break his self-control. What that could be Whitebeard didn't know, but he knew that the Gorosei were supposed to be complete unknowns. Indeed, he knew that most would order the deaths of any civilian, pirate or low-ranking marine or world government official who saw them, who didn't already know who they were. Because of that, and the fact that the tide of the overall battle was turning against Edward's crew, he figured that Peter felt he would be able to get through this without showing off his trump card and being forced to order the execution of any marine below flag rank who saw him.

That, or he knows he can't use that form around allies. Sengoku and Kong at least are important enough to the World Government's vaunted 'balance' that they can't be sacrificed.

Regardless, as much as it galled Whitebeard to admit it, up to this point Peter was clearly holding back. Without using whatever Zoan form he had, Peter was only a threat in conjunction with the others. On his own, Edward would have been able to deal with him easily.

Yet, he wasn't on his own, and together the three were pushing Whitebeard hard enough he couldn't do anything to swing the overall battle in favor of his crew. *Not without sacrificing myself a bit. But what kind of father would I be if I wasn't prepared to do just that!?*

Grinning fiercely, Whitebeard began to gather his Haoshoku and quake powers, pulling back and relying entirely on defense. Blocking a blow from Kong, he ducked under a strike from Sengoku, the giant palm massing through where he had been as he fell through the air several dozen feet, the palm smacking into Peter and sending him flying backwards. Then a stamp from Sengoku's Buddha form was coming down, a shout of, "Dharma Stamp!"

From the bottom of Sengoku's foot rays of golden light flared in every direction, creating a weight, a pressure almost like that of Haoshoku that tore at the senses of those who were caught in it. It was easier to avoid though, and Whitebeard did just that, using Soru to gain distance from Sengoku climbing up higher into the air, well above where Sengoku's head was currently even as Peter and Kong closed in again.

While the distance he gained from that was enough to allow Whitebeard to see more of the battle from on high, it also allowed him to see something else, and as Peter closed in, he ate a Quake-assisted blow from Murakumogiri, which overcame Peter's Busoshoku on his blade, shattering it, and opening him up to a punch from Whitebeard. That sent him into Kong, although that in turn allowed Sengoku to slam his massive staff into Whitebeard's defense, nearly breaking his own weapon before he could cover it with Busoshoku of his own. Even as that blow sent him flying, he began to laugh again. "Gurararara!!"

"Again with that laugh," Peter growled, tossing aside his blade, and fighting all of the instincts that were telling him he needed to resort to his Zoan form to win this battle. *I cannot! There are too many officers, too many important Marines here to silence after the fact, and no oath would keep that secret.*

It went without saying that if it'd only been lower rankers who might be able to see his form, he would've already done so, and then have them all executed or done the task himself afterward. However, from where he was hopping through the air now, Peter knew he was visible from not only his fellow fighters' perspective, but two of the other fleet admirals, and more than a dozen vice admirals, to say nothing of the few volunteers that had been brought into this battle and the pirates. One of them in particular, the swordsmen Issho had just intercepted Diamond Jozu who had apparently been making his way towards where Whitebeard was currently fighting.

"It **is** annoying. What do you know that we don't Whitebeard?" Kong said, speaking up for the first time since Whitebeard had dealt with him so humiliatingly. Since then, he had been grim-faced and determined, pulling his own weight in the fight, but knowing he was the weakest link of the three facing the world-famous pirate.

Sengoku said nothing, simply staring directly above them, and if it'd been possible for a Buddha statue to go white faced, he probably would've been just then. Because high, high above the battlefield, something was coming down, something that proved that Whitebeard wasn't the only one on the pirate side of the battlefield that could truly influence the entirety of the conflict. "DAMN IT! FUCKING MONKEYS!"

At the same time that Akainu had finished creating the island within the Tarai Current, Luffy had become somewhat annoyed by the whole fight with Kizaru. The admiral's previous injuries at the hands of his grandfather had allowed Luffy to batter the man, but he had yet to come up with any injury or attack that could really injure him enough to turn the tide.

Their Devil Fruit powers were too evenly matched, making it a case of 'the bigger attack wins' but both were so fast and good enough with Kenbunshoku that rarely could a large-scale attack land on the actual person rather than a logia clone. Luffy had a lot of different tricks that Kizaru seemingly couldn't use, and his ability to change from lightning form to human form and then almost instantly clad his physical body in Busoshoku, or even a portion of his body into a Haki-assisted punch while the rest of him stayed in lightning form had caught Kizaru by surprise several times.

However, the admiral's own mastery of Busoshoku was such that Luffy just wasn't causing him enough damage with those hits to put him down. And by this point, Kizaru had landed more than enough of his own light-based strikes that Luffy was beginning to feel it. The tugging sensation was painful as all fuck, and enough hits of that nature were starting to take a toll.

Luffy was also aware via his enhanced Kenbunshoku of what was going on elsewhere in the battle. And twice, he had proven that he could conjure up lightning well outside of Kizaru's own range. So even as their personal battle continued, Luffy prepared, taking yet another page from the previous user of the Goro Goro no Mi.

This was not without danger, though, as it took a good bit of his attention away from his own duel. Kizaru began to land more blows, both Haki-infused and light based, pushing Luffy's ki healing skill harder than it had been up to this point.

Kizaru couldn't tell that some of Luffy's attention had shifted elsewhere, instead he put the shift in how their duel was going to the fact that like himself, Luffy could feel that the conflict had turned against the Whitebeard Pirates. They should like to demoralize anyone. That, and Kizaru was certain that he had gotten in at least a few blows which had cracked bones before this. Having broken ribs would slow anyone down, regardless of Haki.

Not having read Hina's report on Luffy, Kizaru had no idea about ki healing. Frankly, despite how much fighting he had seen since the infiltration aspect of this mission had finished, Luffy was still going strong up to this point, although the shift in his concentration was beginning to drain on him, as was the actual work he was doing high, high above where even his own duel was happening.

Luffy grunted a bit as he blocked a blow from Kizaru, armor technique against armor technique, his own starting to fade under the pressure of the other man's. *Fuck, if he keeps pushing me, I won't be able to... oh, wait, heh. That'll work.*

Having sensed two other combatants nearby, at least in terms of their duel so far, Luffy allowed the momentum of Kizaru's next strike to hurl him backward towards where he sensed another duel going on. IN this case the duel was happening between an older guy with swords instead of legs who Luffy had never heard of before. The other guy though, was Luffy recognized as Akainu, the asshat behind the Water Seven debacle.

Righting himself in midair near the older pirate, Luffy ducked under a light speed kick from Kizaru, hammering both of his armored arms into Kizaru's leg, but the man had already shifted, bouncing away and off of a ball of magma that had just passed by on the right.

"Oy!" Shiki growled, causing Luffy to turn slightly to look at the older pirate. "This part of the sky is my battlefield! Get back to your own corner!"

"Am I supposed to take someone who looks like an old lion crossed with a gang boss in his sleepwear seriously? The wooden wheels stuck in your head **is** kind of cool, but it doesn't really work with the rest of your look, or scream 'obey me' ta me," Luffy shot back, shaking his head slightly.

"Ohoho? Nice to know that youngsters can recognize quality when they see it, even if you've got a mouth on you. I suppose I should have expected that after you talked back to Newgate," the older pirate grunted for a second as he lashed out with a strike towards Akainu's chest, which was in turn blocked by a palm from Akainu.

The impact sent reverberations through the air that would've tumbled anyone weaker than Luffy out of the sky, but as it was, the two of them were locked in a stalemate for only a brief second before Luffy, ducking around and through several light based attacks from Kizaru, jumped up and over Shiki's head, taking advantage of a strange force of wind that seemed to flow around the shorter, older man. Akainu barely had time to cover his upper body with Busoshoku as well as his palm before Luffy's foot caught him in the center of the forehead, sending him flying backwards a few feet.

"And now you're trying to horn in on my fight? Don't you have any sense of propriety?" Shiki growled, shaking his head as Luffy hopped to one side of him, bouncing there via Geppo, while across from him, Kizaru took the opportunity to regroup with his fellow admiral.

"Sorry about that, but I need a few seconds to myself to finish off a large-scale attack. And when I say large, I mean battlefield wide," Luffy nearly hissed, staring at the two admirals, even as most of his concentration was elsewhere as he finished gathering the electrical potential high, high above the battlefield. Here in the Calm Belt, where there were no storms or any kind of weather pattern to speak of prior to this battle that was a tall ask, but he had finally finished it, or rather, **them**, and they were slowly being pulled down towards the battlefield via his willpower. "And I figure, seeing as the only old, alive pirates are powerful ones..."

“You think I can hold those too often let you concentrate enough to bring down whatever attack you’re trying?” For a brief second, Shiki stared upward, sensing something at the edge of his Kenbunshoku and coming closer. “Shihahaha, fine! Let this old lion show you some new tricks!”

With that, he launched a series of thousands of Rankyaku-like attacks towards the two admirals, following up by using his Fuwa Fuwa no Mi powers on two Marine ships that he had touched moments before Kizaru pushed Luffy into this area of the battlefield. Both of them were pulled up out of the ocean below and tossed upwards towards the two admirals as shrieking Marines fell everywhere.

The two admirals reacted, turning in either direction using their logia powers to destroy the ships as they came. Yet if you broke something up like that, that didn’t mean that all of Shiki’s control over their levitation faded. It simply meant there were more things floating in the air all around for a few seconds and now Shiki charged forwards towards the two admirals through the debris.

“They’re up to something!” Akainu was no fool and knew that Shiki would have been perfectly happy to keep the two duels separate, not attacking Kizaru at least, unless something else was going on.

Kizaru didn’t hear him over the sound of incoming attacks, but began to fight back all the harder. Yet, he didn’t charge towards his original opponent, but Shiki, figuring that the two of them could hopefully finish off the old pirate then gang up on the younger one.

In this, he had a good idea, but Shiki well understood that if he tried to tangle with both of these admirals close in at the same time, he’d lose quickly. So he kept his distance, leaping down towards the battle below, touching pirate and marine ship alike or just random bits of flotsam, levitating up out of the ocean and hurling them upwards, forming them up into lion shaped monstrous wavelike attacks that came at the two admirals from either side. This is the kind of thing that Akainu had been dealing with all along, and it really didn’t faze him all that much, nor did it phase Kizaru, but it did keep their attention on him for a while, until they, and many others this high up over the battlefield, became aware that something was blotting out the sun above them.

Kizaru stared upwards at a giant, leagues-wide ball of electrical potential, his eyes wide behind his glasses.

This was the same attack that Enel had created to destroy Sky Island. The same one that Luffy had absorbed via Busoshoku and a makeshift lightning rod, descended towards the battlefield. But instead of one, Luffy had gathered as much electrical potential as he could into five, albeit smaller, attacks, spreading them out across the widely dispersed fight to descend upon the navy. That way every front would face at least one such attack, each of which had the potential of blotting out entire flotillas.

Realizing the sheer size of this attack meant that he and the other admirals wouldn't be able to block all of it, Kizaru desperately twisted around, launching himself towards Luffy bouncing off different bits of debris from Shiki to close, blasting out bolts of light as he did from his hands.

Luffy didn't have the concentration to dodge and keep directing his move down towards the marine fleet and so was forced to take these shots. They blasted into him, causing Luffy even more pain as they tore through his body. He hadn't even been able to bring up his Busoshoku or transform into his lightning form, and the pain of the lasers sizzling through his chest and arms nearly made him lose control of the attack he had been gathering. But he kept it coming, and as Kizaru closed, he grinned through blood slick lips. "Missed my heart and head, slowpoke! Let's see how well you do with a **really** big attack!"

Across the entire width of the battlefield, from the embattled Straw Hats and their opponents to Garp and Doflamingo, even Hancock, Tsuru and Vivi, paused their local fights for a brief moment, to stare up at the massive balls of dark cloud that blotted out the sun. "World's END, RAIGO STORM!"

Lightning descended upon the Calm Belt, and once more the entire battle changed.

End Chapter

I would have liked Tomon's opinion on the number of marine vessels moving forward thanks to Akainu's trick, but he didn't get that far when reading the chapter.

Light versus Lightning was just... weird to figure out. Like I found some experiments with guiding lightning via lasers, but what happens when the lightning is a league wide? Or if the lightning dodges under the control of someone?

The Raigos at the end... Kizaru strikes me as someone who forgets the big picture a lot, and this Raffy doesn't.

From here on, it will just be raw combat. The Straw Hats fight is almost as separate from the main battle as what's going on back at Impel Down. A little closer to the main action, Ace and Aokiji are still duking it out. The fight near the back and rear of the fight with the Hancock pirates and Franky will be shown next chapter, while the powers of the world react to Luffy's attack while also still dealing with the greater threat in Whitebeard. And Garp is making Doffy his bi... well... maybe. We'll see. But don't think the WeeGee don't have their own powers either, folks, something that will be shown in no uncertain terms next chapter as well.

