

One Piece: Halfway Broken

(Chapters 126 & 127)

Novus Peregrine

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Chapter 126: The Torino Kingdom

Luffy let out a low whistle as he finally laid eyes on the Torino Kingdom Library. Robin hadn't been kidding that there were more works here than even the Frozen Library on Drakestone had held. An entire 'tier' of the giant tree was filled by the library, and since that 'tier' was easily a hundred meters high, there had to be tens of thousands of works within the Torino Kingdom's library. Intellectually, Luffy knew that there had been larger collections in his original world, in places like the Library of Congress. Yet, he'd never personally seen collections like that, which left *this* as easily the greatest single collection of knowledge he'd ever personally witnessed.

The fact that something like forty-five percent of it was apparently dedicated to *just medicine*, and another twenty-five to technology advances, was just as mind boggling. It was *also*, as it happened, part of why Vivi had been able to negotiate access for their crew. Apparently, this Library was *not* common knowledge, not in the way that the Tree of Knowledge or even the Frozen Library had been or still was. Certainly, the fact that it *existed* was known to the World Government, but the *scale* of it most certainly was not. Not yet, at least.

Which was a bit of a problem for the locals, considering recent events.

The Marines hadn't exactly been in a mood to take 'no' for an answer about building a base here, a fact the natives had thankfully cottoned onto immediately. They'd bought *time* by giving ground, not fighting the Marines on the basing issue in exchange for largely being left alone in return. Building facilities and businesses to service Marines on shore leave had farther helped keep anyone from poking too deeply, particularly as it looked to the WG like the locals were being *helpful* by doing so. Something which meant that, for now, the World Government was legitimately ignorant of just *how big* the library here was. Yet the natives were far from stupid. They knew that ignorance wouldn't last forever and were afraid of what might happen to the knowledge here when the realization eventually happened.

Most of it wasn't really at risk, to be honest. The WG was likely to desire to raid rarer knowledge on medicine from the library, and possibly some technical information for things like the native rocket spears. But that much could likely be managed by offering to copy whatever the WG wanted out of the library. There was *some* risk that the WG would just *take*, rather than wait for a copy, but the natives had started quietly copying the rarest texts the moment the deal with the Marines for basing rights happened. It was unlikely that they'd lose *too* much, so long as they were 'friendly' with the powers that be.

The problem was that there *were* more than just medical texts here.

While the natives *didn't* have anything on the Void Century, most of their archive having been gathered *after* that point in history, they did possess a great deal of...less than flattering works, regarding various topics. Journals that described the Celestial Dragons habits, such as slavery. Texts that could teach how to navigate places like the Grand Line, even the New World. Explorer's accounts of finding Poneglyphs, ancient treasures, and dirty little secrets. Details on technologies that the World Government believed only they knew how to perform...except that wasn't the case, as many of the things people like Vegapunk had 'discovered' were really 'rediscoveries' rather than truly new information. Heck, even just within their own specialization of medicine, there were details on everything from cybernetics to combat drugs with the Torino Kingdom library.

The natives were, rightfully, afraid of what the WG would do if they found some of that material.

Enter Vivi, who had *somehow* gotten that truth out of Shanba. Luffy wasn't even going to *ask* how. He was just going to assume some sort of secret diplomatic judo that only those trained in the black arts of politics could have pulled off. *However* she'd gotten it out of Shanba, it had also provided an unexpected opening. While it was, indeed, mostly those with some medical interest who were being allowed to see the Grand Library at first...Robin, Vivi, and Nojiko were *also* included. Specifically, because Vivi had somehow brokered a deal where copies of the texts the locals were worried about losing would be duplicated to both the Alabastian Royal Library and *Neethrax's* personal hoard. The latter ensuring that it would be virtually impossible for the WG to wiped out the knowledge in said books.

That Vivi had *also* wrung concessions out of *Neethrax* for that honor was, again, some sort of political dark art that Luffy was too afraid to ask about.

Regardless, it meant that Himself, Chopper, Kaya, and Sanji were going to be allowed to study the medical sections of the library first. While Robin and Vivi went about arranging copies of the 'dangerous' works. Which, since it just so happened to include the sections of the library *Robin* was most interested in reading, had gotten Vivi a passionate kiss from the older woman that had left her bright red and mentally stun-locked for a good twenty minutes...

Shaking his head and grinning at the memory, Luffy turned to their guide. A native medicine man who'd been quite happy for the chance to talk shop with other healers.

"So, this 'King's Foil' plant that grows here on Torino kingdom has healing properties on its own, but your books say something about a spiritual infusion which none of you have been able to make heads or tails of? That sounds like an *excellent* place to start to me, as Kaya and I both specialize in the more spiritual methods of healing. Perhaps we can draw the proper reaction out of the plant, if you can guide us to any books that have anything to say on the matter?"

Following the now even *more* enthusiastic guide, Luffy mentally noted that this stop might prove an even greater find than expected. He still wanted to find whatever it was that Chopper originally had regarding Zoan Fruit Mastery, but if some of the plants here were spiritually reactive, they might well prove just as interesting to research, and have more practical benefits for the entire crew besides...

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Brook wasn't particularly displeased that he had yet to be allowed on one of the trips to the Torino Library. While there *were* a few things that could be useful for him to look up, the truth was that he had less to gain from a library, any library really, than most of his crewmates. Besides which, he had a particularly fascinating project to work on. One which stemmed from the combination of discovering he could create facsimiles of himself that could play their own 'spiritual instruments,' and learning about Tonal Technology. It was, in fact, frustratingly easier to create the facsimiles than it was to recreate his own muscle and sinew, something he was still struggling to completely master. Though he was making progress on that trick, too.

Regardless, prior to their adventure on Highwater, the ability to play more than one instrument at a time had been little more than an interesting parlor trick. An ability that let him be a 'one man band,' as his Captain had labeled the concept. Admittedly, that was pretty amazing for a musician such as himself, and he'd taken to practicing with the ability as much for fun and to entertain the crew as for any practical reason. Until, that was, they'd come across the existence of Tonal Technology, which could respond to *sound* in a complex manner.

He wouldn't have gotten very far in his ideas of how to use that fact without Luffy and Pagaya's help to better understand the technology side of things. *With* their help he'd created a series of new instruments. The primary was a viola rather than a Violin, the extra size helping to anchor a couple of pieces of Tonal Technology. The secondary instruments were a set of flutes and fiefs that could be easily passed out to his 'orchestra.' In total, they provided a way to set up a resonance frequency between them, that could do two things.

The first, which he was experimenting with now, was to create and guide that mysterious green energy the giant golem had used on Highwater. Once Brook got the music going, as it was now, he could use it to shift the energy into, so far, both a wave of force and a sort of cutting beam. Both gave him something he'd lacked before. Specifically, a ranged option. The fact that the longer and faster he played, the more powerful the building energy got, seeming not to lose too much momentum even when he destroyed something with it...well, it had potential to say the least!

Of course, there was one other thing he'd discovered the Tonal Technology added to the Viola in particular could do. It allowed him to interact with the *strings* he'd seen on living things far more easily. Terrifyingly, he'd discovered that those strings allowed him to treat the people they belonged to like *puppets*. Frankly, the ability was a little bit too much like a ghost story for him! It positively gave him the shivers! Yet, it was also an ability that could save his crew, if the worst came to worse. Determined to use it primarily as a last resort, Brook nevertheless set about practicing with it...

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"Captain! I think I found something. Yes! Look here! There's an entry that sounds a lot like it's talking about Devil Fruit Awakening and its effects on the body!"

Luffy had convinced Chopper and Kaya to help him look through a subsection of work about Devil Fruits, hoping to stumble across whatever it was that had led to Chopper's greater Zoan mastery. Until now, there had been some *interesting* things, but nothing truly enlightening. Which

meant he was quick to respond to Chopper's excited claim, placing a bookmark in the text he had been reading through and moving to look over Chopper's shoulder. Chopper was quick to point to the passage in question with one hove. The work appeared to be a hand-written journal, though thankfully one whose writer had possessed a steady hand.

"See here. It doesn't call it 'Awakening,' but it refers to a 'higher state, which allows a more free-form control over the abilities granted by a Devil Fruit.' If I didn't know anything about Awakened states, I'd assume it was talking about something like my own multiple-forms, gained from a Zoan Fruit that shouldn't be that malleable. But since I *do* know..."

Huh. Luffy had the sudden realization that *this* might actually be what Chopper had found originally, but he hadn't known what the journal was talking about and made different assumptions. In which case, Luffy might need to nudge him onto the path of those assumptions himself. A problem, but hardly a major one, particularly given that Chopper seemed to be *correct*. The journal had a brief, but potentially useful, set of observations regarding changes that seemed very much like an Awakened Devil Fruit in use...

"Good job, Doctor Chopper! This might be just what I need. Though, the fact that it indicates *physical* changes makes me wonder if it might also hold the key you've been looking for regarding shifting forms without a drug. If you could encourage your Devil Fruit to make the physical changes it indicates, you might get some of the malleability even without a proper Awakening."

From the intense look of thought that spread over Chopper's face, Luffy thought he'd managed to put the idea in the little doctor's head, at least. Hopefully that would be enough, assuming that there wasn't some other book entirely that had details more specifically relevant to his situation. Mentally patting himself on the back for hopefully getting Chopper on track, he shook the egotistical self-congratulation off quickly and began to read what the journal had to say in full. Hopefully, it would be helpful in attempting to make his Awakened State more stable...

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Perona had no interest in visiting the ugly, fat, shortie natives of Torino. She had even less interest in their supposed 'Grand Library.' Thankfully, her Mistress hadn't been invited yet either, and she'd gotten to spend some time with her as a result, away from Boytoy Sanji! Sadly, that wasn't what she was doing *today*. Training for the sake of training wasn't really Perona's *thing*. Yet, Mistress Hina expected her to put in a certain amount of training time, and Perona would obey! Doubly so since the more things she figured out how to do with her Hollows, the better she would be able to serve Mistress!

Also, choosing to work on things on her own prevented her from getting sucked into more Hell Training in Haki.

Seriously, that had *suuuuuckkkkeed*. Sure, she could now use Observation pretty decently, her experience with her Devil Fruit having proven surprisingly valuable in learning that part. Yes, it was even nice that she could use *basic* Armament at least, so she could punch some smug Logia in the dick. It was even true that she'd discovered infusing them with Haki made her Hollows a bit more *solid* and able to actually physically interact with the world to a limited degree.

But none of that would *ever* be worth what she'd been put through on Rusukaina. Her clothes had been ruined! She'd had to cut her hair when it got all messed up! She'd had to *wake up before sunrise almost every day!* Hell! It had been *hell!* Only the fact that Mistress Hina seemed to like the abs the training had given Perona, and had rewarded her for being a Good Girl and sticking with it, that made it at all tolerable!

Never again!

No. Playing with her Hollows was *much* better. Which is why she was using her training time on Sixis today to do just that! She was even close to getting close to another breakthrough, she was fairly sure. The trick she'd figured out on Weatheria of absorbing elemental energy with her Hollows, then being able to attack with that energy, was neat and potentially very useful. It was, however, almost entirely a *defensive* trick. One primarily useful against Logia with elemental abilities. Useful, but somewhat niche, in other words.

Since discovering how Haki interacted with her Hollows on Rusukaina, though, Perona had been working on a modification of the concept. She'd gotten Dials from Pagaya that would allow her to store up and use elemental energy, and either the Captain or Dis could easily fill them with lightning for her. The problem with that, though, was that Perona was *not* a close-range fighter. Her preferred fighting distance with the enemy was 'on the other side of the island like a sensible person,' thank you very much! That meant that she needed to figure out how to *keep* her Hollows filled with energy, something that she hadn't worked out how to do previously. The original trick she'd worked out could only hold the energy for short periods before it just...dissipated, if she didn't use it.

Which led back to her current experimentation with Haki, Hollows, and Dials filled with lightning. She drained the entire dial into the Hollow, infusing it with her Haki as best she could. In theory, since the Haki could interact with Logia elements, it should be able to *hold the energy in*, right? If she could just get it to-

She yelped as, abruptly, the Hollow she was experimenting with *turned into lightning*. Her eyes widened as it started to *glow* increasingly brightly. She quickly commanded the Hollow to fly *away* from her, even as she dove for cover. There was a denotation, with lightning arcing over her head, and she laid perfectly still for a minute, trying to get her heart to stop pounding. Slowly, she gathered the courage to look over the rock she'd taken cover behind.

There was a massive, blackened section of stone in the clearing she'd been using, causing her to gulp.

Still, as she examined the amount of damage that the explosion of lightning had done, part of her was pleased. She *really* needed to figure out how to *contain* that properly so that it only went off when she *wanted it to*. But if she *could* manage to do that, it would be a *fantastic* way for her to do damage from her preferred range of 'not even near the fight!' Success! Or, at least, the potential for future success! She just needed to run more experiments!

She should probably start with a *lot* less lightning than that at first, next time, though...

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Robin was quite pleased with the chance to read some of the rare or dangerous works that the natives of Torino wanted copied. She was, of course, uniquely suited to copying books in the first place. Indeed, this was far from the first time she'd used her Devil Fruit powers to do so. She wouldn't *actually* be manually copying *all of them*, as her Captain could use that marvelous ability of his to get copies. At least so long as it was a print run and he knew what he was getting copies of. Sadly for her quest for knowledge, there were limitations to that ability of his. As near as Luffy himself could figure, what he was gaining had to *exist* somewhere in the first place. Likewise, there was little in the way of description for items he could acquire. Which meant they would need the name of a work that contained information about the Void Century in order to retrieve a copy at all.

There was also, as it happened, a clear limitation on truly unique items. Just as Luffy couldn't acquire a *copy* of a Devil Fruit currently in use, as there was only ever *one*, he couldn't acquire copies of something like Nefertari D. Lili's journal either. Which, as it happened, was why Robin was copying a number of hand-written works from this Library personally, using her powers to do so more efficiently than any normal scribe could have. Since the originals were *literally the only copies*, Luffy could not acquire duplicates the way he could have of a work that had a proper printing run.

Not that Robin minded.

While some of the works were boring, banal, or simply too much about horrid politics instead of knowledge, many of the others contained historical information. Nothing on the Void Century, at least not so far, but quite a few accounts of countries and governments that no longer existed for one reason or another. All of which she devoured quite greedily. Less directly for her personally, but still of interest to her as knowledge was knowledge and thus interesting, were bits and pieces of medical and technical knowledge that Robin found intriguing. She might not know enough to make use of it all, but the details behind the construction of their rocket spears and similar higher-technology weapons was at least moderately interesting. A few of them she even made extra copies of for the more technically minded members of the crew to pour over.

Admittedly, there were some horrifying bits of knowledge among the works too. Like the instructions for something that called 'Greecian Fire,' which seemed to be a sticky gel that would burn even underwater. The locals were apparently unwilling to use it, out of risk of setting the tree they lived in on fire. Quite sensible, really. Yet Robin could certainly see why they were afraid the Marines would learn of it and want the recipe. It would, after all, be horrifyingly effective against wooden ships, due to how hard it would be to put out.

Humming as she finished copying *that* particularly nasty work, she chose a historical account of an island in the western reaches of the South Blue next. One that had only ruins left of its original civilization now. This work had been written when that civilization was still around, and discovering bits about their culture and ways would be an excellent palate cleanser after working through the hand-written journal on Greecian Fire and its effects. Though the fact that the account was in *this* group of works likely meant unfortunate things for how it had ended. With her copied arms and hands retrieving a blank book to copy this new journal, a personal account from an explorer named Dora, Robin cracked it open and started to read...

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Luffy smiled as Vivi snuggled into his side, a book that had been recommended to both of them in his hand while hers turned pages. Vivi was hardly a slow reader, but Luffy's advantages made him significantly faster than her, making it best to leave the turning of the pages to her. It was something that had taken a bit of working out, with them first having tried one or the other of them reading the book aloud. Something that had ended up producing more giggles than it did anything useful, as it turned out neither of them were particularly talented as narrators.

Their current arrangement had been a third attempt, but one which was turning out to work quite nicely. Honestly, Luffy had been surprised, but a bit pleased, when his offer to take Vivi on a date had been met by her with a desire to just...be...together. Apparently, all the diplomatic running around she'd been doing, combined with the physical exertion of training hard, had left her just wanting to *recharge*. Which, while Luffy hadn't really realized it himself, was a balm to his own soul that he hadn't known he needed.

Everything had been going for so long, at such high intensity, that the chance to just *snuggle and read* with one of the girls was soothing. The fact that he'd been an avid reader in his first life and still enjoyed it in this one didn't hurt. Nor did the fact that the Torino Kingdom's Grand Library had a modest but *extremely* robust section of actual sci-fi works. Ones that were popular enough to explain, a bit, how even someone like the idiot savant that had been original Luffy could have been familiar with Robots, mecha, and cyborgs. Where exactly such advanced ideas had come from was still a minor mystery that made Luffy assume ancient tech levels had been much higher than now, but it was at least a partial explanation.

Besides, *MechBattle:The Forbidden Stomp* was quite well-written. Excellent combat scenes, and even a decent romantic subplot that Vivi seemed quite into. Which, given that it was some sort of unholy love dodecahedrane that seemed to be learning towards a harem ending with at least a few girls and the main protagonist, had some interesting parallels. Maybe he really should have paid attention to this world's fiction works sooner? He'd gotten a bit too wrapped up in the awesome things he could do and never bothered, but it might have provided him a bit more warning about how different the relationships here could be...

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Yamato had never quite realized before just how much useful information was in books.

That wasn't to say she'd never read books before, of course. Oden had been quite clear that understanding of a wide variety of topics was a goal that all should seek. That, while it was foolish to try and know *everything*, it was equally critical to be well educated in many things. He could not have rebuilt Kuri the way he had without a broad knowledge base, after all, and his personal journal extolled the virtues of knowledge fairly often as a predicable result.

In seeking to be like him, Yamato had at least attempted to consume books on many topics, though she was just as often unable to make sense of them as she was able to learn properly. Master Luffy had, when she'd explained her problems understanding such to him as one of the reasons she thought *he* was more worthy of being like Oden than she was, listened intently. Then he'd proven she was right, if not quite in the way she'd thought, by explaining that Yamato was

simply what he called a 'kinetic learner.' She, according to him, learned more by *doing things* than by reading. Which admittedly did seem correct to her, when she thought about it.

Her Master had, however, also explained to her that this meant she could still get a lot out of certain types of books. Books, for example, that talked about (sometimes even showed pictures of!) ways to perform various combat techniques. He'd walked her through a number of such books, on topics as diverse as combat to cooking, and Yamato had been startled by how much of a difference the alternate perspective had made. By focusing on a book that taught cooking *techniques*, rather than recipes with fancy language, she'd gained quite a bit in the skill of making basic things. Nothing like Sanji, of course, though the chef himself had been happy to show her things that the book failed to properly get across.

Even Sanji admitted that the tea she made was quite good, and she'd gotten 'rave reviews' of the snacks she made to go with it.

The same sort of thing held true for a weird mishmash of skills. Not all things could be adapted to be learned 'kinetically,' but enough could be that Yamato had finally been somewhat pleased how well she was able to broaden her base of knowledge like Oden had advised. Pagaya and Luffy had even helped her learn some basic skills in building things. Which, even if it wasn't quite the same as being a Master Stonemason like Oden had been, was close enough for Yamato to be happy with.

Now, with this Grand Library to access, she had found not information on combat or cooking, but books that detailed techniques for *drawing* and *painting*. There weren't all that many such in the library, and fewer of them were the type that had practical exercises in them than she would have preferred, but even just a half dozen new books on the topic was a major thing! She was learning new ways to create different effects on canvas just from the current thick text, which had a quite detailed description of how to practice different brush strokes!

It was just the thing she needed to get better at her hobby, and she wondered who she should test her skills on by painting. Hmm, she hadn't done a proper nude of Vivi yet, which was a shame. All of the Master's lovers should be properly immortalized so, shouldn't they? Well, she would just have to convince Vivi to sit for such a painting while Yamato tried out these new tricks! Even if she wasn't *properly* one of Master's lovers yet, she would be soon enough!

Hmmm, though that one interesting book that had been wedged behind the shelf was also something to consider. Yamato wasn't entirely sure why you would want to use *paint* as *clothes*, but she supposed she could see some benefits? It would be lighter to move around in and not risk tearing, after all. Not to mention that Nami certainly seemed to think showing off her body was a nice thing to do for their Master. Oh! Maybe Kaya could do something spiritually with the paints to give them benefits?!

Perhaps instead of a portrait, she'd paint one of those bunny uniforms on Vivi, and see how Master liked it? That way she could save a full, proper painting of her for after she was Master's lover properly...

... ..

“No, you need a sharper motion than you used for those Peacock slashers of yours. Here, move your wrist like this.”

Vivi did her best not to blush as Hancock clinically moved her wrist and hand, correcting the way Vivi had been moving them as she practiced with her new weapon. The fact that they were both in Alabasta and Hancock had happily donned the ‘dancer’ outfits, which were somewhat popular for the heat of the desert, wasn’t helping her composure. She did have to admit that the wardrobe choice worked, though. Not just in the sense of making Hancock even hotter, but in the sense that the clothes were easy to move in for training. Something that was proving even more important with the urumi she was learning to use than it had been for her Peacock Slashers.

Hancock stepped back, and Vivi took a deep breath to center herself, before running through the drill the older woman had assigned her again. This time complete with the sharper wrist motion that Hancock had demonstrated. There was a noticeable speed and control difference as she flicked the flexible, whip-like blade sideways halfway through the kata, sheering right through a melon that had been set up for just such purpose. It wasn’t exactly a tough target to slice through, having been picked more for the value of testing Vivi’s accuracy with the shift in motion...which until now had failed to connect.

The new weapon was a final concession to the fact that her Peacock Slashers had run as far as they could and come up short.

Despite all attempts to modify them to be more deadly, the simple truth was that no amount of special materials or fancy tricks had been able to give them the sort of punch Vivi needed for high-end combat on the Grand Line. They *had* paired somewhat well with her Air Doors, and she fully intended to keep a few of them around for some of the tricks they’d figured out, but the truth remained that they’d fallen short. Luffy discovering that Hancock of all people was, in fact, an expert with the urumi had been something of a relief. They suited Vivi’s high-mobility style, could still be used with her Air Doors, and could hit *far* harder.

“Good! Now you just need to practice doing the same thing while in motion. Come, you will try to hit me as best you can. I will strike back only with my hands, no Haki. But you shall remove a piece of clothing for every time I am able to touch you. The *defense* of weaving the urumi around you should be near absolute. You will learn, or you will walk back to the palace naked.”

Vivi flushed, and she couldn’t have told anyone, in that exact moment, if it was with embarrassment or arousal, even on pain of death. Which probably meant it was both? The only downside of this little arrangement was that Hancock had *ideas* about how best to motivate someone she was teaching. The fact that she was a surprisingly good instructor didn’t change the fact that Vivi had ended up needing to employ her stealth skills to sneak back into the palace nude three times this week already. A fact that had made her *very* aware she apparently had an exhibitionist streak she was not previously aware of.

Personally, Vivi blamed Nami for developing it. She was *nearly* sure it hadn’t been a thing before meeting the older girl and hearing her go into great detail about some of her *adventures* with their dashing Captain...

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Luffy's form fought him, but only lightly. Which, frankly, was one *hell* of an improvement over even a week ago, before Chopper had first found that book in the Torino Kingdom library. While not all of what had been contained within that book had helped him, the shifting nature of his Devil Fruit making purely biological markers somewhat irrelevant, many of the observations had been *valuable*. It had been doubly valuable as the observations had been made regarding a *Zoan* user who had 'Awakened.'

Those observations had led Luffy to the realization that a significant part of his struggle had been his own attempt to direct the final form. He was *used* to the shapeshifting ability of his Devil Fruit, and had never considered that the 'Awakened Form' might have a 'default setting.' Observations in the journal that the Zoan who had 'unlocked new abilities' took on an 'entirely new form' had given him a hint, however, and he'd spent much of the week meditating on it.

It hadn't actually taken more than an hour to find the 'default form.'

No, what had taken time was the fact that even *starting* to assume that form came with an overflowing *instinct* that had nearly overwhelmed him on the first attempt. Careful, cautious attempts to adjust since then had slowly allowed him to wrangle control of the instincts, piece by piece, until he finally managed to fully retain his focus through a complete shift. Something which had just finally occurred bare minutes ago. An achievement that had also been marked by his system ticking over from 100 points of Mastery...to 101. Something he'd learned years ago marked a skill that had been taken *beyond* Mastery. A feat that was apparently required for *properly* controlling an Awakened Devil Fruit Form, rather than the hashed brute forcing he'd been doing before.

As to his form itself...he was a lightning wolf, or fox, or perhaps dog.

In truth, the form was *inherently* unstable, hence why it was still shifting about even now, including through a couple of odd choices like tanuki, bear, and panther. Though it *did* appear to prefer canine forms over others, and he could keep it to a vague canine form more easily than any other. Most importantly of all, however, was that it *wasn't a creature of flesh and blood*. When he said 'lightning wolf,' he meant the body was fully *formed out of lightning*, in a way that was more reminiscent of a Logia form than a Zoan.

Though, come to think of it, he recalled that Marco the Pheonix took a form of pure fire at times. Perhaps the powerful second in command to Whitebeard had also achieved the Awakened state? It would certainly explain why no one had ever questioned his power or position, even if he apparently lacked a desire to lead. It might legitimately be worth trying to connect with the Whitebeard Remnants to ask the man about it. Their pissing match with Big Mom had *mostly* resolved by now, as far as he knew. What had once been Whitebeard's territory had shrunk considerably, but it had ended up being *Shanks* that had picked up the majority of the islands lost, rather than Big Mom. The Whitebeard's Sons had willingly ceded territory to him so they could focus on kicking Big Mom out of the territory she threatened.

Regardless, that was a thought for later. For now, Luffy needed to focus on what he was learning from this experience.

The biggest two takeaways were obvious. First, that a great deal of his trouble had been caused by unknowingly attempting to *skip steps*. He'd been trying to force out Awakened level abilities and attacks, through his Non-Awakened combat forms. Something that he now instinctively new was *possible*, but much harder than doing the same in his 'true' Awakened form. Second, and related to that instinctive knowledge, was that 'Awakening' was a bit literal. There wasn't *quite* a 'mind' to the Devil Fruit, but there was now a deep well of instinctive knowledge and understanding. One that was telling him all sorts of interesting things about what he could *do* in this state.

Such as the fact that he could now control far more than just lightning and sound.

Grinning a very canine grin, Luffy summoned up a ball of *plasma*. In theory, he'd known all along that lightning was a form of plasma. Yet never before had been able to summon up what was, for all intents and purposes, a *giant fireball*, that he could warp and meld in much the same way he'd seen Ace cause his fire to flow. Not quite having figured out how to speak yet in this form, he still mentally whispered to himself as he launched his first ever *fireball* out over the ocean.

*'I didn't ask how big the room is, Dungeon Master. I said **I cast FIREBALL!**'*

Chapter 127: Viewpoints

Fleet Admiral Garp was looking forward to his chance to 'retire' into training Marines. Seriously, trying to ride herd on the clusterfuck of an organization that the Marines was? That had been bad enough. Dealing with the Celestial Twats and their demands on top of that was so much worse. Something that had him glaring at Kong as the Commander-in-Chief stared back and him impassively.

"Damn it, Kong. The Marines aren't *ready* to pull any sort of offensive. I've managed to patch most of the holes up, but we haven't even gotten back up to the force levels we had before the Marineford disaster. What they are demanding would require *more* than that level of strength."

Kong actually grimaced at that, showing he knew that what Garp said was true. Something he voiced a moment later, before Garp could explode.

"I know that. Thankfully, the Elders know it too. Which is why I said you need to make *an effort*. Frankly, so long as you make a measurable effort on each of the fronts they are demanding, and can succeed in at least *one* of the goals the idiots are throwing a tantrum about, it will be enough to appease them. Which needs to happen, as the Alabastian Alliance has set too strong of a precedent about being able to break away from the World Government."

Garp growled but managed to pull his temper back instead of punching Kong in the bastard's face, if only just barely. Clearly the Commander-in-Chief understood that achieving the entire set of demands was impossible. Unfortunately, even achieving *one* was not exactly a simple task. Mentally, he ran through their list of demands. They wanted the West Blue retaken entirely from the Revolutionaries, Fishman Island, Amazon Lily, and Alabasta forced to submit, and the Germa Kingdom completely eradicated.

On the surface of it, most people would likely think that picking off Fishman Island or Amazon Lily was the easiest. While they were both now openly allied with the Alabastian Alliance, said Alliance was separated from them by significant stretches of ocean. Unfortunately, the involvement of his grandson's crew as effectively a fourth power within that alliance complicated matters, and not just on a personal level. They now had proper confirmation that Princess Vivi Nefatari had eaten the Door Door Fruit and had figured out how to move between distant locations using it.

That critical little detail meant that attacking any single part of that alliance would result in facing the strongest fighters from the *combined* alliance. Hancock alone was damn near on the level of one of the Yonko, and Garp was fairly certain Luffy wasn't far off that mark either. Meaning attacking any part of that conglomerate of powers could potentially result in facing off against multiple Yonko-level opponents at the same time. Something the Marines just flat out weren't ready for, and might well never be.

"It will have to be the Germa Kingdom. It will be costly, but they've lost enough ground to Kuzan that it could be pulled off. That will let us reassert complete control of the North Blue and reassign assets elsewhere."

Kong nodded, legitimately seeming to agree with Garp, which lowered his blood pressure *slightly*. Unfortunately, the bastard had to open his mouth again to raise it a moment later.

"At least token offensives will have to be arranged against the others. Retaking a single island from the revolutionaries and pinching off either Amazon Lily or Fishman Island, perhaps?"

Garp ground his teeth, closed his eyes, and sighed.

"Taking an island from the Revolutionaries should be possible. Amazon Lily or Fishman Island...it would have to be Amazon Lily to have any hope of it working. We don't have enough people who can fight down on Fishman Island to do anything but outright destroy it, and that wouldn't make even the Celestial Twats happy, since they love their mermaids so much. Odds are we'll lose the fight with Amazon Lily, despite it being the best bet. It would have to be a sacrifice play with only a slim chance of turning up lucky."

The nod Kong gave him pissed Garp right the hell off, as it was acknowledgement that *sacrificing* a force of Marines was acceptable to the people remaining above him. Still, there *were* forces that Garp wouldn't exactly *mind* losing. Ones that were too prominent for him to have sent on sacrificial attacks before this.

"Fine. Vegapunk's little project with what's left of Sakazuki can test the waters against Amazon Lily. Kuma and some of the Seraphim will be enough to at least force a strong reaction out and see how serious this alliance between them and the others is. The little fucker might even survive or pull out a win if the Kuja are being standoffish enough and won't allow male fighters to defend their territory."

Kong mulled that over for a moment, then nodded again.

"Acceptable. At minimum it will allow observers to see how strong the prototypes are. Even just Hancock will push them, and if others respond we can collect more data to use against them in

the long run, as well as improve the project. Make it happen, Garp, and don't take too long to produce results."

Garp glowered at the bastard as he took his leave without another word, leaving Garp to figure out how the hell to shuffle their existing assets in a way that this bullshit wouldn't cripple them again. He'd been forced to accept that psycho Aramaki, so he could be put in a position he might not come back from. Meanwhile...Gion and Chaton would likely be enough to take an island or two back from Dragon. Assigning Aramaki and Issho to Kuzan for the Germa issue and making it clear to the icicle that he didn't care if Aramaki came back should be enough extra firepower there. At least with a couple of Vice Admirals to strengthen the line.

Yes, he could make this work. Assuming Kong was right and getting 'one of three' would appease the Twats, at least...

... ..

Hancock sighed, looking out over her domain with a bit of longing in her heart. Luffy hadn't been away for long, and she *had* taken the excuse of training adorable little Vivi to keep in contact with him, getting at least a spar with him each time she worked with Vivi as part of the deal to train her in the first place. Yet, she had to admit that she wanted more. She just wasn't entirely sure how to go about accomplishing that. Perhaps she could use some sort of excuse about needing to examine the special baths again?

"You are showing the signs of Love Sickness, Empress. Though I admit I am surprised how well controlled they are."

Ugh. Elder Nyon was irritatingly perceptive. She had yet to reveal what she'd discovered about the waters of the island to anyone but her sisters, wanting time to mull over exactly what should be done, if anything at all. In truth, aside from now having a better idea how to manage the extreme emotions of her people, she didn't really see any reason to *do* anything about the blessings diluted into the waters of Amazon Lily.

Still, irritating as she could be, Gloriosa's advice was usually good. More to the point, the former Empress, now Elder, had left the island herself due to Love Sickness. Meaning she would likely connect the dots about the blessings and their effects more easily than anyone else on the island, even Sandersonia and Marigold. Given that Hancock was still wrestling with what, if any, changes to make for the Kuja to account for what she has learned...

"With the help of Captain Luffy, Healer Kaya, and Nico Robin, I was able to discover the cause of Love Sickness, Elder. As well as the general cause for heightened emotions in our tribe in general. I am, indeed, experiencing Love Sickness, or so I believe. Yet the understanding of how it works has aided me in mitigating the issue. In truth, I fully intend to pursue Luffy, so I do not see the problem with it. Particularly as his other lovers are most pleasing to the eye and not against it. That, however, does not tell me what to do about the greater revelations. How I should or should not change the Kuja policies to account for them. I believe I am in need of another viewpoint."

The Elder looked surprised, *extremely* so, in fact. Which probably wasn't unexpected, really. She had likely expected Hancock to attempt to deny the accusation, if such it could be

called. Certainly, unless her sisters had talked, which clearly wasn't the case, she would have had no warning on the greater topic.

"I...see. What have you discovered that makes you believe you have answers to our oldest Mysteries? And how could an *outsider* have helped you discover it."

Snorting at that last bit, knowing Nyon was quite prideful about the Kuja, and rightfully so, Hancock still cut through the bullshit quickly.

"It isn't that they were outsiders. It was that Kaya is a spiritualist, descended from the Asuka Island priestesses. Captain Luffy has a great deal of sensitivity to such as well, and both of them were required to get to the bottom of the issue. The discovery went like this..."

The discussion would last for hours, including Hancock producing the notes provided by Luffy and Kaya on the nature of the blessings, as well as Nico Robin's translations. By the end of the evening, the Elder had at least wrapped her head around the revelations, though it would take some time yet for her to offer advice. That was fine. There was no particular rush, given how many generations had survived doing things exactly the way they had always done. Not to mention that the cross-training trips to Alabasta and, hopefully soon also Fishman Island as well, would act as pressure relief valves for the problem anyway.

... ..

Ace's eyebrow twitched. He wasn't sure why, but he was abruptly certain that Luffy had *somehow* gotten another girl interested in him. The lucky bastard had, if Sabo was to be believed, somehow landed both Nico Robin *and* that hot redhead, with signs that the Princess of Alabasta was interested too. Not to mention that Ace was nearly certain what Yamato would be angling for, if she hadn't bluntly gotten it already. Looking around at the complete *lack* of female pirates on the Moby Dick, Ace despaired.

His little brother had *all* the luck!

Well, at least enough of the guys had agreed that Whitebeard's policy of only accepting 'sons' was a little outdated. Admittedly, in many of their cases it was probably for the wrong reasons and he was going to have to ride herd on the fleet to make sure they didn't harass any of the new recruits that were female. But it was still an improvement. Particularly as there were only a handful of them so far, and only Taki and Maki might eventually make the cut for the First Division. Still, the infusion of untapped talent of the female persuasion that Whitebeard would likely have refused had been key to holding their own so far, letting them make up some losses.

Maybe *someday* he'd get either a girlfriend of his own strong enough to keep up...or at least some damn eye-candy for his ship! Pops had at least had those hot nurses of his!

Sighing at the familiar thought, he put it aside easily enough as he looked through the most recent reports from the islands in their territory. Things had mostly stabilized at this point, even if some of the islands they used to control had been more or less gift wrapped for Shanks to take over. Doing so had been far better than letting other territory get absorbed by Big Mom, and condensing their assets had let them push back Linlin's efforts. Personally, he was a bit surprised

that the fat bitch hadn't taken a shot at Fishman Island, even with it flying both his brother's and the Kuja Pirates' flags.

Then again, the Kuja had been around even when Linlin and Pops had both been with the Rocks Pirates. Hell, forget the Rocks Pirates, Shakuyaku had been one of the only people to ever hand his biological father a defeat, and she'd only been the second in command of the Kuja at the time. Even if the reasons for that were...dubious, given the accounts he'd heard and the source he'd heard them from, there was little question that the Kuja were a dangerous unknown. A group that had been around longer than *any* of the Yonko, even Pops before he died, but who'd never tried to seriously wield influence outside their island. The fact that they were doing so *now* might well have made even Big Mom cautious, doubly so if the fat psycho knew where Shakky and Rayleigh had 'retired' too. Which she almost certainly did.

Blinking, Ace frowned as he came across a report of...missing children? From *three* of their islands? What the fuck? Growling as he leafed through the reports, growing more pissed off as he realized it wasn't something *new*, but something they'd missed due to being preoccupied with Big Mom, he did his best not to light the reports on fire. They *would* be getting to the bottom of them, even if he had to go himself.

Missing *kids* from islands under their protection was abso-fucking-lutely *not* okay...

... ..

King Nefertari Cobra would not, necessarily, say that he was entirely happy with life. The course that both his reign and his personal life had charted for the last several years was a rough one. First due to the actions of Crocodile, and then due to his own choices. Ones he did not, *could not*, regret. Truth be told, even the years before that had not been easy for him. His beloved wife's death, as well as the entirely too familiar knowledge of just how far the World Government had fallen, had weighed heavily on his shoulders and soul alike. The line of Nefertari Kings and Queens had known for centuries that many, perhaps even most, of those nations that made up the World Government did not share their values.

In truth, he wasn't the first king of Alabasta that who had wondered what the hell had possessed his ancestors to help put the current government in place. He liked to think that, whatever they had been up against, it must have been so terrible that they agreed to ally with those that were anathema to their own beliefs. Yet, whether that was true or not was something lost in the mystery of the Void Century. Something he now privately hoped that Nico Robin would uncover the secrets of, just so that he could know for sure one way or the other.

All of that said, he had to admit he was happier with life now than he could remember being ever before. Even, much to his private shame, when his one true love had still lived.

At least some of that could be laid at the feet on his new concubine, who he might not love to the extent he had Titi, but who he had certainly grown to *care for*. The fact that she had just recently been confirmed to be pregnant was certainly a delight, even if they had yet to share that information with even his daughter. It would be safer for her future little brother or sister to be unknown as long as physically possible, and Mikita was still early enough in her pregnancy to hide it for some time yet.

In truth, however, by far the bulk of what had reenergized him was the Alabastian Alliance and the truly ridiculous degree his daughter had somehow made it grow. Never, in the wild dreams of his youth, had he believed it might be *genuinely possible* to throw off the corrupt yoke of the World Government. In truth, even when he'd first barred them from shipping through Alabasta's waters, he had done so mostly as a diplomatic stalling tactic. Something he had hoped would make them seriously reconsider the declaration of his daughter and the Heroes of Alabasta as *pirates*, of all things.

Now, however, the movement that had grown from that original stalling tactic? It was genuinely powerful enough that, at least in the wake of the disaster for the Marines that had been the Whitebeard War, they were able to produce a strong enough showing that the World Government was no longer able to force them back into the fold. Not without crippling themselves, anyway. Something which, with them not even fully recovered, might well spell their outright end as an organization.

The time that had been bought by the Marines disarray post Whitebeard had allowed Alabasta to gain allies and train up their forces. Their army now had an elite corps made of those capable of using the six powers, and a growing number of officers who could use at least one form of Haki as well. In addition, of course, to a great deal of Dial-and-Crystal-based weaponry for the more common soldier that could elevate them above the rank and file of even the Grand Line Marine units.

Then, of course, there were the Devil Fruit users.

One of whom he was watching practice in *extreme* secrecy, with disbelief still written on his face.

After all, he suspected no one other than Monkey D. Luffy could and would have somehow acquired the *Gura Gura no Mi* and then simply *handed it over to an ally*. Certainly, even a moderate amount of testing had proven that it was Edward Newgate himself who had truly made the fruit as formidable as it had been. In the hands of its new wielder, it was not yet even a tenth as potent. Yet, they had picked a soldier who was both immensely loyal *and* possessed raw talent with Haki, indicting he might someday have the ability to reach at least half of Whitebeard's legendary strength. Which, of course, didn't account for the very reason this training was being hidden so completely.

After all, the World Government would be *very* unhappy to see it pop up again outside their control. More importantly, however? Assuming its user could manage to mimic even a portion of Whitebeard's feats on first deployment? It would also *terrify* them. Something which he hoped would, when the World Government eventually recovered and inevitably tried to force them back into line, convince them that *it wasn't worth the cost*.

If it would be enough? He had no idea. But he certainly appreciated that his daughter's taste in men was legitimately giving him and his people a chance to find out. The taste of freedom was sweet, and he did not intend for his country to give it up again without a fight...

... ..

Vinsmoke Reiju tapped the reports from her own secret assets in the Marines with a carefully manicured nail. It was clear from the movements that her people were detecting that, despite her father's insane hopes, the Germa Kingdom was doomed. The Marines needed a win, and with the loss of Yonji proving they weren't unstoppable even with their Raid Suits, Germa was going to be it. The Revolutionaries simply had too much momentum behind them to break easily, and the loss of just one or two islands under Dragon's control wouldn't be a big enough victory. Meanwhile, the Alabastian Alliance and its allies *would* seem like a tempting target...if you didn't know about Fleet Admiral Garp's connection to the Strawhat Captain.

Garp was unlikely to choose to truly press hard somewhere that would bring him up against said grandson. His *son* was one thing, since Dragon had openly rebelled. From every single scrap of information Reiju had been able to gather on her little brother's captain though, the World Government had genuinely fucked up there. Monkey D. Luffy had been a completely legitimate bounty hunter, on track to possibly be recruited by the Marines with a complete crew of powerful tagalongs. Only for someone high up the chain of command to completely fuck it up by trying to force him into the Warlords as a Pirate instead. All because of an unimportant non-entity like *Crocodile*, of all people.

An idiotic waste and one that had *cost* both the Marines and World Government dearly, and one that Garp had to be royally pissed off about.

No, it was Germa that would be the main thrust of the Marine's efforts, despite the fact that there was shifting going on elsewhere as well. Which, frankly, was fine with her. Her family were monsters, herself included, even if not willingly so. While the World Government and Marines were no better, at least them wiping out the Germa Kingdom would do *some* good by removing one imperialistic war machine from the seas.

Still, there *were* innocents to consider.

Not the soldiers, of course. Her father's army of clones were fanatically loyal. Programmed robots more than people, in most ways that mattered. Yet there *were* more than just soldiers and their family that made up the Germa Kingdom. Handmaidens, Cosette and her cooking staff, the medical staff...not the scientific staff. They were just as much monsters as Judge was. The others, though, were certainly innocent enough and did not deserve to get wrapped up in Germa's punishment by the World Government.

The problem, of course, was how to prevent that.

There was only so much she could disobey her father. Yet...her eyes turned to a bounty poster that might now have a proper picture, but still read 'Alive,' rather than 'Dead or Alive.' There was *one* person who might be inclined to help. Possibly. At least if it meant spitting in Vinsmoke Judge's eye one last time. Better yet, he had allies that could take in the refugees she was thinking of. There wouldn't be that many of them, and they would be easy enough to hide among a population as large as Alabasta's.

The question was how to get in contact with her little brother, and if she really wanted to risk him getting involved...

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