

One Piece: Halfway Broken

(Chapters 104-106)

Novus Peregrine

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Chapter 104: Places to Be

Nojiko stepped through Vivi's Air Door, hoping stepping directly through to Neethrax's Treasure Room wasn't about to get her frozen in a block of ice or, if she was in full dragon form, possibly eaten in a fit of annoyed pique. Unfortunately, it was the only place within the mountain that had made a deep enough instant-impression on Vivi for the other girl to be able to move them to without careful study. For good or ill, the dragoness was at least awake, and in her slightly more human-like form, Nojiko quickly spotting her with a book in hand at an overlarge table. Neethrax's eyes were locked onto the Air Door as Nojiko appeared, and a snort left her after a tense moment, as she saw who it was.

"I suppose that would my own fault, no? I did tell you to come to visit and I imagine the girl with the Door-Door fruit didn't have a deep enough impression of anywhere else in my lair to open a 'door' too. Have her come through as well, small one. I can show her another room to memorize so she isn't opening a door straight to my private rooms."

Nojiko nodded and poked her head back through the Air Door, Vivi joining her a moment later. They'd anticipated that, assuming she didn't try to kill them for daring in the first place, the dragoness might have such a request. Vivi immediately curtsied to the dragon and apologized for their intrusion when she came through. Neethrax waved it off negligently.

"If I were another dragon, I might be enraged, I suppose. As I am a seeker of knowledge, I am merely curious to discover how the Fruit bypasses the protections on this place. A topic for another day, however. Let me show you to The Garden. It should be memorable enough for you to easily portal too, and I will set an incoming alarm to detect your arrival."

The pair agreed, obviously. No need to annoy the incredibly powerful dragon lady who was apparently scary enough to force a deal out of the World Government, instead of them outright killing her for the threat she represented. A few minutes of half-jogging to keep up with her later, as she took them deeper into the mountain, and they were both struck silent at their first view of 'The Garden.'

It was a massive underground dome, easily large enough to have held Neethrax's full dragon form several times over if it were empty. Yet, she certainly couldn't fit in here *now*, as the entire area was *filled* to the brim with verdant greenery of all sorts. Giant ferns were the tamest thing, and sat beside equally giant plum trees, bushes with *rainbow* flowers, and even a set of ficus that appeared to be made entirely of crystal. If that weren't fantastical enough, there was a *stream of ramen* flowing through the room. Neethrax chuckled deeply at their agog expressions.

“Beautiful, is it not? I collect oddities of all sorts, including unique flora from around the world. The Ramen River and a few of the giant fruits are particularly rare, coming from the Boin Archipelago. An island which is, in reality, a massive living plant. One which uses the incredible fruit it grows as a lure for the animal life it eats to sustain itself. Few have ever escaped the false-island, but some past followers of mine managed to do so with the aid of my power, returning with many samples from the depths of the plant.”

Okay, that story wasn’t making them gape any *less*, Neethrax! Though the tone switch with her next words, to one that spoke of great sadness, certainly did the job.

“Others, like the Rainbow Roses of Elysium, are now extinct anywhere but my own garden. Wiped out by...certain events I am bound not to speak of.”

Meaning something related to the Void Century and the events that the World Government so desperately wanted covered up, no doubt. Vivi, ever the diplomat, spoke up to break the moment of sadness with a cheerful voice.

“The Garden is gorgeous! I certainly won’t have any issues memorizing a place in it, and perhaps you could help farther by telling me something of the rarer plants and where they came from? Such as this Elysium and its Rainbow Roses?”

Neethrax blinked, stared at Vivi for a long, considering moment, then grinned with a mouth that contained a terrifying number of sharp teeth, despite her current form.

“Well now, Princess, that seems a fine way to spend an hour or two. Longer even, if that historian of yours wishes to hear a few old stories. After all, I am only bound to not say how they were *lost*. I am perfectly free to tell tales of the amazing places that once were, before the fools destroyed it all in their hubris.”

There was a malicious glee in the dragoness’s eyes that made them shudder, even as she directed them to a bench and began to tell the tale of a long-lost paradise with forest glades of Rainbow flowers and golden fields of a wavy grain that created the most delicious breads you’d ever find. It wasn’t quite how either girl had expected to spend their morning, yet the dragoness had a way with words that drew them both in, painting a picture of a lost paradise that neither could regret hearing the tale of...

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“Luffy! You’re back! Oh, and who is this you have with you? A girlfriend perhaps?”

Luffy smiled back as Makino beamed at him from behind the bar. Since he had been a somewhat frequent visitor to Alabasta, he’d decided it only made sense to take Vivi to the closest thing he had to ‘home’ himself. With Luffy never having declared loudly and proudly to Garp that he’d be ‘The King of the Pirates,’ he’d spent quite a bit more time around Foosha than the original Luffy would have. Even if he’d gone out of his way to meet Ace and Sabo, he’d never been relegated to the care of Dadan the way the original would have been.

Well, not never. Garp *had* dumped him on Dadan much later, after he’d eaten his Devil Fruit. But he’d spent a lot more time than he otherwise would have with Makino before that. The

result was that Luffy considered Foosha his home, in so much that he considered anywhere but aboard the *Discovery* itself home. Makino, despite knowing she was likely mostly a plant by his father to keep an eye on him, really was a big sister figure. One he was quite certain genuinely cared for him, even if he might well have started out as an assignment for her. He was pleased to see that, despite his absence, she hadn't been pulled out of the village by the Revolutionaries.

"Hey, Makino! It's great to see you're still here! I'd hoped you would be, so I could introduce Vivi here! Yes, she's my girlfriend...well, one of them at least. It's a little bit complicated..."

Makino, who had swept around the bar to hug him, pulled back to look up at him with a giggle.

"My, my, little Luffy has found himself a harem, has he? And here I didn't think you for the type! Well, sit and tell your big sis all about it! Drinks are on the house, of course!"

Luffy sighed in relief that the older woman took his slightly-nervous admission with barely an eyeblink. Smiling, he pulled Vivi to sit at the bar with him as he began to tell Makino about his trip so far. Foosha hadn't been one of their stops back at the East Blue, since it was Garp's hometown and almost certainly had people watching it. On the other hand, that very fact meant that a quick stop now would only sow confusion. The village certainly wouldn't actually be *targeted*. Not while Garp was the Fleet Admiral of the Marines.

As always, Makino was a great listener, gasping and laughing in all the right places as he told her about his crew and adventures so far. Vivi, despite the comparatively humble surroundings, seemed to fit right in with ease. A heady warmth settled into his chest as the day and date went on. Sometimes, it was good to just have a nice day among those that really mattered to you...

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"Ugh! Hina annoyed."

Puffing out smoke from her cigarette, Hina was *doubly* annoyed for just a moment at the way that petulant comment had made her sound like a bit of a bimbo. Thankfully, no one was around to hear it. Equally thankfully, no one by Kaya knew about the doctor's findings regarding Hina's verbal tick. According to the healer, while there *were* signs of that verbal tick having once been enforced by a Devil Fruit, the signs it was *active* had apparently faded. As best Kaya could figure, the verbal tick hadn't been *enforced* for at least a couple of years. Well after the asshole that had placed it on her had died, yes. But by Kaya's best guess it had started to *fade* once that man had died. To the point that it had outright failed without Hina noticing.

Which didn't really help.

She'd had the 'verbal tick' for so long that it was now engrained habit. She *had* tested it, after Kaya had discovered the truth while examining her, and found that she really could use personal pronouns properly. Yet, to her own ear, they sounded *wrong* at this point, to a degree that she'd sheepishly decided not to put the effort into trying to fix the verbal tick. Maybe if she'd still been a Marine, whose authority needed to be respected, she'd have made the effort. As it was, she'd decided not to bother. Sanji and Perona both thought it was cute, anyway. Not that she had

any intention of *ever* letting her lovers know their opinions were part of the reason she hadn't really tried to fix it.

Still, none of that was why she was annoyed.

No, Hina was irritated that she seemed to have hit a roadblock in getting stronger. Oh, she *was* still getting stronger. Gaining access to Haki, something she hadn't been able to do yet as a Marine, had been a major leap forward for her strength, and she'd managed to unlock both Armament and Observation with Luffy and Yamato's help. Yet, seeing the way the others around her were branching out to grow in creative ways, she felt like that wasn't enough. The problem was, she wasn't sure exactly where to focus her efforts.

Aside from Captain Luffy and Yamato, she was by far the best unarmed fighter on the crew. Well, Kaya was a bit of an unknown there, as her own style was *weird* and tended to be frustrating on the rare occasions she could be convinced to spar. Still, without the esoteric spiritual abilities Kaya added to her own unarmed style, Hina thought she was probably better than the younger woman. Even *with* those abilities, Hina would give herself decent odds of winning a straight fight against her. After all, her Devil Fruit meshed just as well with her unarmed style as Kaya's tricks. That was, in fact, why she fought unarmed in the first place, having built her style from the ground up to take advantage of the abilities the Ori Ori no Mi gave her.

The problem, of course, was that it meant she didn't have anything, like a weapon or other tool, to focus on for upgrades or updates to her style. Nor has she been able to come up with clever new uses for her Devil Fruit just yet. Oh, she'd managed to improve her usage of it, getting creative with her constructs by using them more fluidly. Yet, she had yet to make any great breakthrough the way several of the crew seemed to be managing.

She didn't like feeling like she might be at the limit of her ability to grow.

Puffing away at her cigarette, Hina let her mind drift. There *had* to be a way to push herself farther, right? What was she missing? What could she add? Slowly, the seeds of an idea began to grow, though she wasn't at all sure it was possible. It *certainly* wasn't the way the Ori Ori no Mi was *intended* to be used. But, then, she'd seen quite a few of the crew stretch their Devil Fruits in ways that didn't seem to match their intended function. Perhaps, all she would need was a bit of a mental trick? Well, that and speaking to Pagaya for some insight, perhaps...

Chapter 105: Onward to Rusukaina

The month and a half that the crew had spent training and learning on Weatheria had been incredibly productive. Everyone had benefited from endurance training at high altitude, most of the crew had directly benefited in some fashion from training in the EWC facility against various forms of New World weather, and the few who hadn't had still made good use of the time by visiting other locations. Nojiko's trio of meetings with Neethrax, for example, had helped her make several breakthroughs with her Crystal-Crystal fruit. Likewise, Pagaya had taken the chance to visit Skypiea, both to see his daughter and talk shop with his fellow Dial engineers about several ideas he'd had. Even the locals were enthusiastic about their stay, with the Weather Wizards claiming the

various sessions in the EWC had produced fascinating data for them to pour over. Enough so that the entire crew had a standing invite to visit for more ‘experiments.’

All in all, Luffy was *extremely* pleased with developments, and happy his initial near writing-off of the island had been corrected quickly and to such spectacular effect. He and several of the crew were certainly going to be taking the locals up on that offer, as the EWC in particular still had a great deal of use to them as a training tool. Yet, as nice as it might have been to stay longer, particularly given how unlikely it would be for the World Government to find them here, they did need to move on. The island had been slowly drifting toward the New World, which conveniently put them part of the way to Rusukaina, yet they still had a good week and a half of sailing to reach the meeting place. Thankfully, with the *Discovery* not being particularly beholden to the vagaries of Paradise at this point, they should still reach their destination in plenty of time.

Though they were, of course, still leaving days earlier than should be required. Paradise or not, it was still the Grand Line, and claiming to be able to truly predict your own fate on this particular sea was a great way of taunting disaster. It was thus with cheerful farewells to the locals that the *Discovery* cast off...into the sky. The island had been skirting the Calm Belt anyway, and there was a nearby section of the White Sea available at the moment to cruise at least part of the distance they needed to cover. No reason to make the WG’s job of finding them any easier than they absolutely needed to. Besides, it would allow them to continue their high-altitude training for a few days longer, and keep them high enough to avoid most of the weirder phenomena that plagued the Line as well.

It was as Nami called out instructions for Dis and the few crew currently assigned to actual ship duties, that Luffy took the chance to check on a part of his System that he had been ignoring for a while. Well, no. He hadn’t been stupid enough to outright *ignore* the Tutorials section again. He had, however, only just skimmed the new features he’d gained from Robin, Yamato and Vivi joining his...harem, he supposed. That hadn’t been *too* much of a surprise, given that the Map feature had unlocked in the first place when he first started dating Nami. Given how low his Karma had been after spending it desperately back at the Archipelago to fight that Elder, he hadn’t particularly trusted the events that had appeared on the map enough to detour for any of them since then. Since Robin and Vivi’s additions to the System had mostly been related to the Map and Event Markers, he’d left things alone until now.

Thankfully, even though he tried never to let the thought of Karma points influence his actions, his balance *had* bounced back somewhat in the months since the battle. It was no where *near* the amount he’d built up in the past, but saving Little East Blue from the Minotaur Pirates and helping Drakestone against the cultists and Thraaxx had pushed things more firmly back into the positive. Enough so that he was willing to trust that the Events labeled on the map were more likely to be advantageous to him and his than disasters waiting to happen.

Investigating the changes once again, Robin’s influence was the most obvious.

Previously, the only markers that had appeared on the map were either general information or temporary Karmic Event markers. Now, in addition to those, little shovel and magnifying glass symbols appeared as well. Exploring a few of such tags that rested in places they’d already been, such as Asuka Island, made it clear what he was seeing. Each of the symbols represented

archaeological or *informational* finds. The old Temple on Asuka, the Frozen Library, and the hidden chamber with the Poneglyph on Alabasta were just three examples of symbols that already had names and brief details. Which meant the large number of *unknown* symbols scattered around every island he'd ever visited were admittedly intriguing.

Some of those could very well be more poneglyphs, or other historical sites that might be of considerable value. Certainly to Robin, but also possibly to others, since among the markings that had already been IDed were things like the location where Shichiseiken had been sealed. Visiting some of those locations might well prove of use to them, and Luffy had already marked the idea as something to do after they hit the most useful of the islands he already knew about.

Vivi's addition to the System also involved the map, with two changes reflecting on it. The first was, he suspected, only a side-effect of her Devil Fruit. There were a *lot* more 'Karmic Events' that were marked down as things he could reach in time to take advantage of. In truth, he suspected that those had been present since she ate the Door-Door Fruit, rather than being added after she became his girlfriend. No, her 'unlock' when she'd become his girlfriend was a subtle, but nevertheless *immensely* useful addition. It added popularity and reputation meters *for every island and individual group*. He'd had a vague idea that his System tracked such things, but now it was highlighted in stark numbers. For example, he now *knew* how popular he was on Alabasta, with the various islands recently made part of the Alabastian Alliance, and dozens of other places. Moreover, it seemed to cover quite a few places he'd never even been or heard of. So long as *someone* in his crew had a connection to a group or location, it seemed to be included.

A surprisingly large number of islands in Paradise had at least neutral reactions to him and his, which was nice to know. Less nice to know was just how much the World Government *loathed* him, and some rather concerning things about groups he knew little about. He was *very* uncertain just why most of the Vinsmoke family had a massive hate-boner for their crew, for example. His limited knowledge of One Piece past Fishman Island was apparently biting him in the ass, there. It almost *had* to be something to do with Sanji, but aside from the fact that he had a sister the Rule 34 artists had spammed a bunch of drawings of, Luffy was largely in the dark.

Of more hopeful note was the varying reputations he apparently had with all parties involved in the upcoming summit, with even Hancock's being surprisingly positive. Hardly massively so, but she was at least actually *in* the positive, rather than her being neutral or negatively inclined towards him. His best guess regarding *why* he had a positive value with her was that he'd been attributed with killing multiple Celestial Dragons and essentially leveling the Human Auction House. Given her history with the Celestial Twats, he suspected that was what had earned a level of approval from her. It was only a guess, for now. It was, at least, somewhat reassuring that she might not turn him to stone, though. As for the others that were to be part of the summit, he apparently had 'Respected Status' from both the Revolutionary Army and Whitebeard's Sons, whatever that mean. Jinbe was honestly the closest to true neutral, though edging to the positive side of that neutrality.

Moving on from Vivi, be it because of her comparative power level, or something about Yamato's own nature, her own effect was a bit more than an addition to the Map. She *did* provide an addition to the Map as well, as it happened, but it was only a visual representation of the new

System he was most carefully reading the tutorial for. Specifically, Yamato's own incredible drive to be *stronger*, had created within the System something it referred to as the **Challenge Locator**.

The **Challenge Locator** system, from what he was reading, might well be the most important addition to the System he'd ever gotten. Well, perhaps not as important as the Karma System, given how it had saved them at the Archipelago. Though even that was questionable, as Rayleigh might well have been able to help them at least escape the Elder without Luffy dumping all those Karma points into rolling the dice. The **Challenge Locator**, in a way, was even more important to the future, as its function was literally in the name. It gave Luffy the ability to *find a challenge*. One that would push either him, or a selected crewmate, in ways that would help them grow.

From what he was reading, those ways weren't necessarily straightforward. For example, he suspected if used on Sanji it was just as likely to help the man find a cooking rival as it was to help him find a fight that would push his Haki to the limit. Either way, however, it offered a means to guide both himself and his crew to constantly improve, until they were at the very top of the world and there were no challenges left. If such a thing was even possible.

Pleased that his playing with the new system seemed to indicate that Rusukaina itself would provide a suitable challenge for most of his crew, he determined he'd spend the next several hours attempting to work out the best possible uses for these new additions. They only had a few islands he already knew about left to visit after the summit, after all...

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Their trip through the Grand Line had proceeded smoothly enough, something that was never certain, but which they admittedly had some advantages in accomplishing. They had, for example, stayed on the White Sea for a few days, only descending once the patch of that oddest of 'oceans' they'd initially encountered faded. It might have been possible to avoid any trouble on the Grand Line at all but remaining at high altitude. Yet, there were reasons Luffy hadn't ordered them to do so. So far as they were aware, the *Discovery's* ability to fly was still unknown to the World Government or Marines, and he wasn't particularly eager to give away an advantage by having them spotted flying out in the open.

Descending back to the 'Blue Sea' had slowed their travel a bit, even the *Discovery* not being as fast in water as in flight, and forcing them to deal with a few weather events. Yet, they'd reached the southern Calm Belt with very little real issue, and taken to the air again there to avoid the nesting Sea Kings. It was only once they got within a day of Rusukaina that they'd dropped back to the ocean and leaned on his and Yamato's Conqueror's Haki to scare off the Sea Kings off. Which Luffy presumed was likely how some of the more powerful crews like Shanks' were able to cross the calm belt relatively unmolested. Alternatively, he supposed, they might just kill enough of the giant Sea Kings to scare the others off. Though that seemed suboptimal. No matter how strong your crew was, your *ship* could still be battered apart from below if you weren't careful.

Regardless, spending an entire day under his and Yamato's Conqueror's Haki had also proven to be both good training for the crew in resisting it...and the final push required for Zoro and Kuina to both unlock it. The fact that *both* of them had done so nearly simultaneously had taken

Luffy by surprise. He'd had some loose idea that Zoro had the ability, based on what little future knowledge he had left, but he'd possessed no knowledge that Kuina had the potential as well. Something that added yet more evidence to his mind that the idea you were 'born with it' was most likely bullshit. His own suspicion was that it took a specific *personality* to unlock the third form of Haki, and people had historically mistaken that for an inborn trait.

Haki in general was, for all intents and purpose, an exercise in being so willful you told reality that *it* was wrong and to fuck off with its supposed 'limits.' But, while normal Haki told reality where to get bent regarding *you*, Conqueror's seemed to take that reality bending one extra step farther and tell *someone else's* reality to get bent. Essentially changing how reality interacted with *them* instead of how it interacted with you. It was something which required more than pure will, since it inherently required you to believe that *your* purpose for their reality was more important than their own. A king's disposition, as some described it, saying that *your* vision was more important than some serf's free will and self-determination.

In truth, it was probably not a great sign of an entirely healthy personality if you could use it.

It was a theory Luffy both tried not to think about, while also still doing his best to simultaneously never forget, resisting the temptation to *misuse* it that came with the understanding. One way or another, and assuming he was even right in his personal thoughts on the subject, both Zoro and Kuina had proven to have whatever it was that let someone unlock Conqueror's Haki. Which was going to be an extra fly in the ointment which made him grateful they were arriving several days early. The last thing they needed was for their lack of *control* over it to cause one of the other powerful parties that would be present for the summit to get offended when they let it slip.

Time to give his minions a crash course in how to control Conqueror's Haki so they didn't cause a diplomatic incident. Somehow, he didn't think that sentence was one 'normal' pirates ever needed to contemplate...

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Rusukaina was both satisfyingly useful and frustratingly useless.

Four days of constantly using the island to challenge the crew, particularly Kuina and Zoro, who were tasked to try dominating the weaker creatures here over and over until they passed out, had produced fantastic results. The variety of types and strengths of enemies, as well as the fact the animals here could *legitimately hurt* them, had caused quite a few of the crew to rapidly sharpen up their Haki usage. Sparring just wasn't the same, as they inherently knew and instinctively *believed* that their fellow crewmates wouldn't kill them. The knowledge that many of the beasts here *would* and *could* put them in the ground and devour their remains? It made a noticeable difference in speed of progression.

The *frustrating* part was that Yamato and Luffy couldn't say the same for *themselves*.

They *could* sense that, deep in the interior of the island, there were a couple of presences that might at least be able to give them a decent challenge. There were, however, at most, only three such that they could sense. Even that was most likely being a bit overgenerous to one of the

presences, the fact it felt *odder* than the others being the primary reason for giving it the benefit of the doubt. None of the three had bothered to come out and challenge them, likely seeing their staying on the edges of the island as respect for their territory. Stuck to staying by the coast to protect both their crewmates and the *Discovery*, they couldn't go to investigate. Something which left them largely unable to see to any of their own training, despite how well the rest of the crew was doing.

Heck, even Pagaya was actively testing his Crystal Mech against the local wildlife, with pretty decent results. He'd even managed to unlock fits and starts of Armament...mostly because he was *pissed* at the beasts for managing to do a significant amount of damage to his baby, despite how tough it was by normal standards and how good he'd gotten with Observation. He hadn't previously found much motivation to be better with Armament, so Luffy was happy he was at least making breakthroughs with *some* use of it. It was just annoying that he, himself, wasn't getting much out of the island so far.

Well, hopefully that would end soon, given that the Summit they were here for was due to start in two days, and he'd just sensed multiple powerful presences out to sea. It seemed that Rayleigh and Hancock were arriving together. Which probably made a degree of sense, given their past association, and was certainly a relief to Luffy, who was still a bit wary of Hancock, despite his System insisting she was positively inclined toward him...

Chapter 106: Meetings

Luffy did his best to act natural, echoes of Han Solo insisting Chewie 'fly casual' ringing in the back of his mind despite how long ago his first life had been now. He'd lived over a decade in this reality, yet sometimes still found quotes no one else would understand floating to the surface of his thoughts. Core memories of a past life, he supposed.

In this case, it was a decent enough distraction, which helped put him at ease as Rayleigh and Hancock landed on the island in a jolly boat. With them were two other women, who Luffy suspected to be her sisters, given their slightly unusual appearances. Those appearances weren't nearly as *exaggerated* as he'd once seen on a screen, though one was still towering and stocky while the other really did have a larger-than-usual head. Though neither to the point that it honestly detracted too badly from their looks.

Not that Luffy had found himself able to do much more than glance their way, or Rayleigh's either, despite the older man's understated aura of power. No, despite his best efforts, he locked onto Hancock and...well, he could now attest that it was no exaggeration when she was called 'The Most Beautiful Women in the World.' Tall, slender, with gorgeously lustrous and flowing black hair, not to mention 'vast tracts of land' as another old movie might have said it. She was the very imagine of a classic beauty, flawless in a way that Luffy suspected only a Devil Fruit allowed for.

Yet, for all that she admittedly captured attention with just her appearance, he didn't find himself so enthralled that he made a fool out of himself. A quick, appreciative glance at her in totality, from ankles to eyebrows, then locking onto her face to meet her eyes, seemed to actually please her. Thankful for perhaps the millionth time for the Empathy perk allowing him to read

people's moods, he relaxed a little as Hancock's aura went from stern, to preening, to approval in a short span. Apparently, she appreciated being *appreciated*, as it were. But approved even more that he hadn't gotten lost in her beauty.

Thankfully, he'd carefully chosen Kuina and Robin as the two to come down with him, and both of them had enough self-control that they mirrored him. Even if he noted with some slight, absent amusement that *both* of them had felt a mild spike of lust when they saw her. That wasn't too much of a shock with Robin, given that he knew she swung both ways. But Kuina was entirely straight so far as he was aware, which said a lot about just how *extraordinary* the Pirate Empress's looks truly were.

"Empress Hancock, it is good to finally meet you. Rayleigh, it's good to see you in person again."

Luffy wasn't much for formality, but didn't have a clue if Hancock was. Thankfully, sticking to professionalism seemed to be the right move as the former Warlord nodded, even if Rayleigh snorted. It was Hancock who spoke.

"Monkey D. Luffy. I admit I've wanted to meet you since news of the battle at the Archipelago. Is it true you killed several of the Celestial Dragons?"

Straight to the point, huh? Well, he could handle that. Best stick to the complete truth, given Rayleigh might well have relayed the details already.

"Intentionally? We wiped out Cipher Pol Nine and I personally killed one of the Gorōsei with Rayleigh and Yamato's assistance. The Celestial Twats died mostly by accident. The result of being too close to four people with monstrously strong Conqueror's Haki clashing too close to them. They were, as expected, simply too weak willed to survive that."

Boa Hancock's lips curved into a vicious little smile at his description...even as a tightly controlled burst of Conqueror's Haki shot out at Luffy specifically. He batted it aside negligently with a burst of his own, getting an immediate nod of approval from the Empress.

"I see. A pity they did not properly suffer, but dying in terror is sufficient. Allow me to introduce my sisters, Marigold and Sandersonia..."

Introductions flowed, and Luffy tried not to give away how relieved he felt that he and his had apparently made a good impression on the infamously temperamental woman.

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Following the arrival of and first meeting with Boa Hancock and Rayleigh, it turned out that they had arrived early to set up a meeting site of sorts at the only place on the island the beasts didn't bother. It apparently emitted a type of pollen they didn't like, reminding Luffy of the Daft Green plants that had been on Merveille. Though thankfully not poisonous to humans, in this case. More of Hancock's Kuja crew had come ashore and, under the protection of the three sisters, set up a stone round table and chairs for the upcoming summit.

Sanji took that as a cue to start preparing food for the same, setting up an additional set of more mundane tables in the clearing and making a buffet that he planned to keep stocked for the

duration. The Kuja were quite appreciative of his cooking, and for a moment Luffy thought Sanji might cause an *incident* with how puppy-like they were in curiosity about him. Thankfully, Hina proved to be on top of it, reigning Sanji in by means Luffy didn't want to know about. Though Hina also proved to be the source of the only real friction that had popped up so far. Apparently, she had Hancock had met before, while Hina was still a Marine, and the pair didn't exactly like each other. It at least wasn't full blown hatred, but it was enough that they'd verbally sniped at each other a bit.

Luffy himself, aside from keeping an eye on his crew, ended up spending most of the day with Rayleigh, along with Yamato. The older man wanted to get a proper feel for exactly where the two of them actually were...and the resulting sparring was a firm reminder that, while powerful, neither of them were quite on the level with the true monsters of the world just yet. Rayleigh easily handled them, rather roughly at that, one-on-one. Though they were able to at least make him sweat a bit when they fought against him together. Once he was satisfied, he showed them what he'd done to make himself dangerous to the Elder back at the Archipelago.

The answer was Infusion.

Both Luffy and Yamato had been aware of the concept, at least regarding Armament Haki. They had, in fact, both been fully capable of using it with Armament already. What neither of them had known was that you could extend the same trick, with considerably more difficulty and effort mind you, to Conqueror's Haki. Doing so caused black lighting to appear around whatever you infused, be it fist, club or blade. Or, if you were Rayleigh, who had taken the trick to the extreme, the lightning could be controlled and reinfused repeatedly back into you. Something which created a deeply unnatural darkness around the man when he demonstrated, making it finally click for Luffy just why he'd been given the moniker of the 'Dark King.'

The application of the trick provided an *immense* boost of power, far beyond even what infusion with Armament could do for you, and apparently it was the trick to hurting other Haki masters and regenerators alike. Yamato, in particular, was excited, as her attempts to hurt her father with Haki had always failed. Rayleigh admitted that he wasn't surprised by that, claiming that the only time Kaidou was known to ever be injured was when taking on someone who could infused Conqueror's Haki.

Specifically, his ability to do so is why Shanks was able to turn Kaidou back, keeping him away from Whitebeard's War.

That knowledge, for some rather obvious reasons, caused Yamato to instantly throw herself into training. Though neither she nor Luffy had managed to get the trick of it down in the mere two days they'd had before the Summit began. Luffy, in particular, wasn't given as much of a chance to make his own attempts, as he met with Jinbe when the Fishman arrived the next day. As well as meeting again with Hancock to feel her out about what she was looking for from the Summit.

Not that the answer there was a particular surprise.

Both Hancock and Jinbe were seeking ways to protect their respective islands, now that they no longer had agreements in place with the World Government. Jinbe was, for the moment, in the more awkward spot, as 'Whitebeard's Sons' and Big Mom were effectively warring over the territory closest to Fishman Island. The only saving grace for the fishman, for the time being, was

that Garp was keeping the Marines out of it. Apparently up to and including putting out a strongly worded 'travel advisory' for the Celestial Twats. He couldn't actually *stop* them from visiting Fishman Island if they wanted to, that wasn't within his authority. But he could *discourage* it as 'unsafe.'

Surprisingly, with several of the bubble-brained idiots having died violently recently, the majority were apparently listening...somewhat, at least. Their self-absorbed view of reality had been threatened just enough for them to be wary of ignoring advice not to travel to a specific place. Though Jinbe admitted such likely wouldn't last much longer. Even when Whitebeard had claimed the island, there had been a trickle of Celestial Dragon visitors that came through from time to time. It was simply too exotic a local, too close to the Holy Land, to avoid their attention entirely. Something which was, of course, part of the problem in the first place.

Amazon Lily, on the other hand, was still unmolested for the moment. With Hancock not having done anything but fail to respond to the Marineford battle summons, and Garp not caring enough to make an issue of that, the island wasn't yet under direct threat. Unfortunately, that was unlikely to hold up in the long term for two reasons. The first was that the Kuja Pirates were one of the oldest pirate crews in existence, being one of the *only* crews still around that pre-dated even Whitebeard, having been around even in the days of the Rocks Pirates. They predated every single one of the current Yonko, and had been considered a serious power in their own right for the entirety of their existence. A natural consequence of every single member of their crew being capable of using Haki. Worse, despite the fact that only a small fraction of the Kuja tribe were part of the Kuja Pirates, *every* Kuja was labeled a pirate by the World Government.

The second reason was, in its own way, more terrible than the first. Though it was one that Hancock didn't outright explain, for some fairly obvious reasons. Reading between the lines of some of her statements, and knowing a bit about her past he really shouldn't, it was readily apparent that the Kuja were *targeted*. An entire island with a strong tendency to produce stunningly beautiful women? Women who *always* had female children, who kept up the pattern of beauty? It had been no accident that Boa Hancock and her sisters had been kidnapped at a young age and sold to the World Nobles. Kuja were *prized slaves* to an extent even exotic races like Mermaids and Mink were not. After all, if you could 'breed' Kuja, you could produce more generations of beautiful slaves from the first one you captured. A disgusting idea, and one that helped explain *why* the Kuja Pirates existed at all. They, along with the Calm Belt, had been the traditional defense against being preyed on by those in power for centuries.

Unfortunately for the Kuja, the seastone coating method that had been invented by Vegapunk to let Marine ships move through the Calm belt meant that one of those deterrents was no longer as functional. It had been that fact which led to Boa Hancock becoming a Warlord, in exchange for a treaty that protected Amazon Lily. With the Warlord system now defunct, however, it was only her strength and that of Kuja as a whole that was holding the powers at bay. The Marines, weakened as they currently were, likely wouldn't make an issue yet. But that would change with time and Hancock was looking for acceptable allies to help safeguard her home.

Of course, before they could do more than discuss some basics, they needed the final two members of the Summit to arrive. Something which didn't occur until the morning it was scheduled to start. When that final set of arrivals came, it came with a major surprise for Luffy...

... ..

Luffy blinked, surprised as he felt a familiar presence entering the range of his Observation. With so many Haki users on the island, or in the waters nearby, he'd kept his Observation pulled in for politeness sake. Something which seemed to be the unspoken norm amount those powerful or skilled enough to blanket whole islands with it. As a result, it was only when that presence stepped onto the island itself that he noticed them, and his shock froze him...for a second or two.

Then he blinked away from where he'd been training with Yamato and Rayleigh, disappearing in a bolt of lightning that made the older man curse as it sent spots dancing in his eyes.

Those closer to shore, aboard either the Kuja vessel or the *Discovery*, were witness to a more alarming sight as the same bolt of lightning shifted back into Luffy and *tackled* the blonde-haired man in a tux and top hat. Jozu, who had arrived on the same ship, was the only one who didn't tense at the action, the Whitebeard pirate's laugh going a long way to preventing the rest who witnessed the apparent 'attack' to hesitate. Which was a good thing, most of them realized a moment later, as both the blonde and Luffy were laughing.

"Sabo! Why didn't you tell me that *you* were coming to this! I didn't figure Dragon thought it was important enough to let go of his second in command while fighting for the West Blue!"

Seeing the huge smiles on both men's faces, those who had tensed, thinking Luffy had broken the peace agreement for the Summit, finally relaxed. The blonde, now known to everyone in hearing range as 'Sabo,' was quick to reply.

"I wasn't sure I was going to be able to get away, Luffy. It was going to be Koala who came, if I couldn't. But the Marines have pulled back from the latest round of fighting over the Kano Kingdom. With the Happs Navy finally deciding to side with us, Kizaru decided it wasn't worth trying to take it back, *again*. Things are stabilizing a bit for now, as the Marines and the Revolutionary Army both lick our wounds. In the meantime, making potential agreements elsewhere, ones which might well inconvenience their ability to pull more ships into the West Blue, was seen as important enough to send me."

Luffy nodded. It made a degree of sense, at least considering what little information was coming out of the West Blue these days. Depending on who you asked or what reports you listened too, the Revolutionaries currently controlled anywhere between twenty-five and sixty percent of the West Blue. Based on what few islands Luffy knew *for sure* had been taken, he personally guessed it was somewhere around forty to fifty percent. Likely all the Revolutionary Army could realistically hold with their comparative size versus the Marines.

With things in the North Blue seeming to be *cooling* under Kuzan, the Revolutionaries had to be worried that the Marines would shift more of their combat power to the West Blue. Anything that had the potential to *complicate* life for the Marines was therefore likely of interest to them, and any agreement between two former Warlords, the Whitebeard fleet remnants, and Luffy's crew, had the potential to do just that. Personally, Luffy doubted whatever agreements they came to would be *actively* disruptive. Yet merely the *potential* to be so would 'keep the Marines honest,' as it were.

Forcing them to keep more of their fleet deployed in Paradise and the New World than they likely wanted at the moment.

“Well, I want to hear all about it! At least as much as you’re allowed to say. Later, though. For now, you and Jozu were the last to arrive. So I suspect we’re going to be getting started soon.”

Sabo nodded at that and the two brothers-by-choice parted for the time being. It was time that the Summit that had been called get properly underway...

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